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Abstract

This thesis investigates some developments in English poetry brought about by the rapid influx of translated work from Eastern and Central Europe (especially Poland, Hungary and former Yugoslavia) in the period following the Second World War. As well as providing models for many English poets at the level of technique and motif, this work served as catalyst in wider poetical and political debates, especially concerning literalism in translation, issues of persona arising from pseudo-translation, and propriety of response when dealing with atrocity. 'How dare we now be anything but numb?', asks Donald Davie in his 'Rejoinder to a Critic'; examples from Eastern European poetry in translation have been one of the means through which certain modern poets have negotiated a tentative response to that question. The individual chapters of this thesis offer close readings of poets including Ted Hughes, Charles Simic, Tom Paulin, Donald Davie, and Patrick McGuinness, as well as in-depth analyses of two long poems, Ken Smith's *Fox Running* and Richard Berengarten's *In a Time of Drought*. The work of each poet is contextualised, drawing out latent Eastern European connotations and connections. Each close reading illuminates a particular broader issue: the turn to folklore and myth (in Smith and Berengarten), contested definitions of the surreal (in Simic), and the 'right to speak' on behalf of (or in the voice of) certain groups or on certain occasions (in Davie). Propriety of response and poetic responsibility are examined in a discussion of several English poets' treatment of the Bosnian war, while the chapter on Hughes explores literal translation and the mechanics of influence. Considering these poems in this context expands our sense of the period and of the poems themselves, as well as allowing us to posit a common source for several distinct features of postwar poetry.

The Eastern European Context of Poetry in English after 1950

John Clegg

Ph.D. Thesis Submitted for Examination

Department of English Studies
Durham University

2013

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Introduction: The Eastern European Translation Market

Eastern European poetry arrived into English over a startlingly short period of time. In 1972, the poet Peter Porter revised one of Martial's epigrams on the follies of poetic fashion:

...nor am I yet well-fledged
in the Eastern European Translation Market,
whose bloody fables tickle liberal tongues;
despite this I make my claim to be a poet.¹

The rush of translations Porter was satirising had been a phenomenon for a decade or so when this poem was written. Before that, the 'Eastern European Translation Market' did exist, but on a vastly reduced scale, and its survey of Eastern and Central European poetry was cursory at best. As Adam Czerniawski notes, 'as late as the sixth decade of the twentieth century, writing about Polish poetry in English translation would have been an easy task: the subject could have been dismissed in a sentence, stating that the few translations available, mainly in obscure publications, had deservedly passed unnoticed.'²

The earliest anthology of Polish poetry in English was edited and translated in 1827 by Sir John Bowring. In the Preface, Bowring identifies a new era of internationalism in literature: 'One fact is singularly illustrative of the improvement of our age...it is, that our sympathies have broken through the narrow walls in which they had been so long imprisoned.'³ The first Polish anthology published in the USA was Paul Soboleski's 1881 *Poets and Poetry of Poland*, which used Bowring's existing translations where available: it also provided a brief overview of later Polish romanticism, including poems by Mickiewicz and Słowacki translated by the American politician Thomas Dunn

¹ From Peter Porter 'After Martial: II.lxxxvi', in *Collected Poems 1961-1981 Volume 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999. p242. Bohn's literal translation of the same passage runs: 'because nowhere in my writings, as in those of the Greeks, are to be found echoing verses, and the handsome Attis does not dictate to me a soft and enervated Galliambic strain; I am not on that account, Classicus, so very bad a poet.' (*Martial: Epigrams Book II*, Bohn's Classical Library 1897).

² Adam Czerniawski, 'Polish Poetry', *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 206.

³ John Bowring (ed. and trans.), *Specimens of the Polish Poets: with notes and observations on the literature of Poland* (London: Rowland Hunter, 1827), p. 19.

English (author of the ballad ‘Don’t you remember sweet Alice, Ben Bolt’).⁴ There was also a small-press 1944 anthology of Polish poetry, perhaps intended as catering for the pre-war influx of Polish refugees learning English, which in any case does not seem to have reached a wide market.⁵ These three volumes, all published under relatively small imprints, were the only anthologies of Polish verse in English translation available up to the early 1960s.

Out of the ‘Three Bards’ of Polish romanticism (Adam Mickiewicz, Zygmunt Krasiński, and Juliusz Słowacki), only Mickiewicz (1798-1855) had been published in a single volume in English by 1950. A 1911 selection was sold in both the UK and the USA,⁶ and in both countries there were several translations of individual long poems and sequences.⁷ A 1923 selection of Mickiewicz, translated by Frank H. Fortey, declares on its title page that it has been ‘Published under the auspices of the Polish government’, and seems to have been part of a propaganda campaign on behalf of the newly created Polish state.⁸ Even after these publications, Mickiewicz was not widely known among English readers: in the preface to an Eliza Orzeszko novel, C.S. De Soissons writes:

...who has ever heard, in Great Britain, of Adam Michiewicz the great Polish poet, who, critics declare, can be placed in the same category with Homer, Virgil, Dante, Tasso, Klopstock, Camoens, and Milton?⁹

Other than Mickiewicz, almost no Polish poets were translated in individual volumes. Juliusz Przyemski, whose reputation has not survived in Poland or England, had a long dramatic poem translated in 1863 by the anonymous ‘A.M.M.’, but the great (and unclassifiable) Cyprian Norwid remained untranslated until the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰

⁴ *Poets and Poetry of Poland*, ed. Paul Soboleski (Chicago: Knight & Leonard, 1881).

⁵ *A Polish Anthology*, ed. T. M. Filip (London: Duckworth, 1944 / 1947).

⁶ *Mickiewicz: The National Poet of Poland*, trans. Monica Mary Gardner (London: J.M. Dent and sons / New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1911).

⁷ i.e., M.A. Biggs’ translations of *Pan Tadeusz* and *Konrad Wallenrod* (1885/1882), G.R. Noyes’ translation of *Pan Tadeusz* (1917), D.P. Radin’s translation of *Dziady* (as *Forefather’s Eve*, 1925), Edna Worthley Underwood’s translation of *Sonnets from the Crimea* (1917).

⁸ Adam Mickiewicz, *Gems of Polish Poetry: Selections from Mickiewicz*, trans. Frank H. Fortey, intro. Roman Dyboski (Warsaw: Polish Editorial Agency, 1923).

⁹ Orzeszko, Eliza: *An Obscure Apostle*, trans. C.S. De Soissons (London: Greening & Co., 1899), p. i.

¹⁰ Colonel J. Przyemski, *Wanda: A Dramatic Poem*, trans. ‘A.M.M.’ (London: Whittingham and Wilkins, 1863).

Despite this fairly meagre selection, there were far more works translated from Polish than from any other Eastern European language. The increased prestige of Polish literature may have been due, in part, to the success in English of several Polish novelists: *Quo Vadis* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, especially, which was an English bestseller in 1898.¹¹ Josef Kraszewski's novels *The Jew*, *Iermola*, *Countess Cosel*, and *The Polish Princess* were published in New York and London and went into several editions.¹² Władysław Stanisław Reymont's novel *Chłopi* (translated as *The Peasants*) sold very well in America when it was released in 1924.¹³ (Sienkiewicz and Reymont were both Nobel laureates, and therefore reached an unusually large audience; nonetheless, Sienkiewicz's novels were bestsellers before the award.)

After Polish, the Eastern European poetry best represented in English translation was probably Czech. Here, the early emphasis was largely on mythological verse and folk poetry. The earliest anthology was, again, edited and translated by Sir John Bowring in 1832 (his *Cheskian Anthology*).¹⁴ Thomas Capek and Anna Vostrovsky, in a 1918 bibliography of Czech literature in translation, attack Bowring and subsequent Victorian translators: Flora Kopta's *Bohemian Legends and Other Poems* (1896) is described as 'not a satisfying work', and the pseudonymous Talvj is discovered to have plagiarised her selection of Czech poetry from Paul J. Safarik's *Geschichte der slavischen Sprache und Literatur nach allen Mundarten*.¹⁵ Capek and Vostrovsky suggest that 'the credit for worthily introducing Bohemian poetry into English belongs to an Englishman, P. Selver'.¹⁶ Selver's *Anthology of Modern Bohemian Poetry*

¹¹ Troy J. Bassett and Christian M. Water, 'Booksellers and bestsellers – British bookselling as documented by *The Bookman*, 1891 to 1906', *Book History*, 4 (2001), p. 205-36.

¹² *The Jew*, trans. Martha Ward Carey (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1891). *Iermola*, trans. Martha Ward Carey (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1891). *Countess Cosel*, trans. S.C. de Soissons (London: Downey, 1901). *The Polish Princess*, trans. Meta de Vere (New York: G. Munro, 1889).

¹³ Leon Orłowski (ed.), *Reymont w Ameryce: List do Wojciecha Morawskiego*, trans. Michael Mikoś and David Mulroy (Warsaw: PIW, 1970).

¹⁴ John Bowring (ed. and trans.), *Cheskian Anthology, being a History of the Poetical Literature of Bohemia, with Translated Specimens* (London: Rowland Hunter, 1832).

¹⁵ Thomas Capek and Anna Vostrovsky, *Bohemian (Cech) Biography: A finding list of writings in English relating to Bohemia and the Cechs* (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1918), p. 49. Flora Kopta, *Bohemian Legends and Other Poems* (New York: William Jenkins 1896).

¹⁶ Thomas Capek and Anna Vostrovsky, *Bohemian (Cech) Biography: A finding list of writings in English relating to Bohemia and the Cechs* (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1918), p. 49.

was published in England in 1912.¹⁷ (After the war, Selver's book was reissued as *Modern Czech Poetry*, but did not sell well enough to go into a second edition.)¹⁸ Its introduction provides an excellent overview of 19th century Czech poetry, and also displays the historical context in which the translation is being produced:

Such is, in its broadest outlines, the Czech poetry of recent years. It is the poetry of a nation that has been labouring under a heavy yoke, but whose bonds have at length been shattered. And in the verse is heard the exultant cry of freedom, the vigorous utterance of young and lusty spirits.¹⁹

Almost no Czech poets were published in single-author volumes. In 1916, the Tolstoy scholar and translator Leo Weiner translated *Magdalen* by Josef Machar, but this publication seems to have been almost unique.²⁰ Other Eastern European languages were even more poorly represented. Michael Holman, in the *Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, can find no translated Bulgarian poetry (except for a scatter of folk-songs in learned journals) until 1953, and noted that the occasional translations of novels 'owe[d] their existence to British public interest in Bulgaria stimulated by political rather than purely literary concerns'.²¹ Nor can George Szirtes find a single Victorian translation from Hungarian besides the indomitable John Bowring's *Poetry of the Magyars* (1830).²² The only pre-1950 Romanian translations were of folk-songs.²³

In summary, then, Eastern European poetry before 1950 had been translated sparsely or not at all. The publications tended to be from minor presses and rarely went into second editions. The translations themselves were often

¹⁷ Paul Selver (ed. and trans.), *An Anthology of Modern Bohemian Poetry* (London: Henry J. Drane, 1912).

¹⁸ Paul Selver (ed. and trans.), *Modern Czech Poetry* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., 1920).

¹⁹ Paul Selver (ed. and trans.), *An Anthology of Modern Bohemian Poetry* (London: Henry J. Drane, 1912), p. 20.

²⁰ J.S. Machar, *Magdalen*, trans. Leo Weiner (New York: M. Kennerley, 1916).

²¹ Michael Holman, 'Bulgarian', *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 193.

²² George Szirtes, 'Hungarian', *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 205. Szirtes does not mention that Bowring also translated a single-author selection of Alexander Petőfi in 1866.

²³ Two such anthologies are cited in Dennis Deletant, 'Romanian', *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 216.

inadequate, especially in the Bowring books and those which borrowed from them. (Arthur Coleman notes a widely-acknowledged ‘grave... inadequacy in Bowring’s knowledge of Polish, Serbian and Czech’.)²⁴ In some cases, especially in US publications, the translations were given as prose cribs underneath the original-language text, suggesting that the intended market was expatriate speakers. In other cases, as with the Fortey-Mickiewicz translation, the intention of the publishers seems to have been to legitimise a new regime, or to quickly cash in on a brief upsurge of interest when a little-known country featured in newspapers. (The 1912 outbreak of war in the Balkans, in particular, seems to have provoked a minor wave of publications.)²⁵ Anthropological concerns, especially those stimulated by Parry and Lord’s seminal work on oral composition (published later as *The Singer of Tales*), also accounted for a number of publications, especially translations of oral material.²⁶ These tended to be confined to specialist journals, in particular the *Slavonic Review*.

This, then, was the situation in 1950. Two decades later, the landscape had changed remarkably. Among Penguin’s ‘Modern European Poets’ series, the most heavily publicised and best selling translation series of the time, almost half of the 34 poets in translation were Eastern European; there were more translations from Polish than from Italian or French, and more translations from Czech than from Spanish or Portuguese. In the Carcanet translation list, the proportions were smaller, but there were still several Eastern European poets published for the first time, and Michael Hamburger’s important anthology of East German poetry.²⁷ Several bestselling anthologies had been released; *Postwar Polish Poetry*, edited by Czesław Miłosz, ran into several editions, as did George Theiner’s *New Writing in Czechoslovakia*.²⁸ These anthologies were very different from their earlier counterparts: they were published by larger

²⁴ Arthur Prudden Coleman, ‘John Bowring and the Poetry of the Slavs’, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 84 / 3 (1941), p. 432.

²⁵ For examples and commentary see e.g. Michael Holman, ‘Bulgarian’, *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 194.

²⁶ Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1960.

²⁷ Michael Hamburger (ed.), *East German Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1972).

²⁸ Czesław Miłosz (ed. and intro.), *Postwar Polish Poetry*, 3rd edn., Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1983. George Theiner (ed. and trans.), *New Writing in Czechoslovakia* (London: Penguin, 1971).

presses, and the translators were largely noted English-language poets themselves, in some cases very prominent poets.

There was another important difference between these translations and those which had been published previously. Before 1950, translators tended to be either academics or expatriates. Post-1950, there was a large rise in dual-translator volumes: one bilingual translator producing a so-called ‘literal version’, and an English or American poet who worked from this version to produce a final publishable text. This allowed poets to work as translators with no knowledge of the original language. Meanwhile, an earlier form of translation, in which the poems were printed in their original language with a prose crib underneath in a smaller font, fell into almost complete disuse as a means of translating Eastern European poetry. (Penguin retained this format for many of their other translations, however.)²⁹ This seems to represent a shift in the intended audience for these books: after 1950, a volume of Eastern European poetry which also included the originals was extremely rare, suggesting the market had moved from expatriate speakers of the original language towards a wider, monolingual native English audience.

What was responsible for this boom in translations? Adam Czerniawski has identified three reasons (although his remarks are specifically about Polish poetry, they also applicable to translations from other Eastern European languages):

[Firstly,]... the British intellectuals, critics and poets, cosily safe in liberal Britain, became mesmerised by the courage of intellectuals and writers behind the Iron Curtain. Secondly, the large Polish expatriate community provided translators: Czesław Miłosz, Bogdan Czaykowski, Adam Czerniawski, Jan Darowski, Andrzej Busza and Stanisław Barańczak. But most importantly, good poetry flourished in postwar Poland.³⁰

Czerniawski’s final reason can be addressed quickly. While it is hard to disagree with his assessment of the quality of postwar Polish poetry, Czerniawski himself has written that ‘it is in the nineteenth century that Polish poetry boasts some of

²⁹ i.e., Leonard Forster (ed. and trans.), *The Penguin Book of German Verse* (London: Penguin, 1957).

³⁰ Adam Czerniawski, ‘Polish Poetry’, *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 206.

its greatest achievements, in the work of Mickiewicz, Słowacki and Norwid'.³¹ The translation boom cannot be explained simply by appealing to the quality of the poets concerned without addressing why it had not occurred earlier.

The second reason Czerniawski identifies is undoubtedly an important factor. There were for the first time large expatriate Eastern European communities in Britain, refugees from both the Second World War and the Communist regimes established in its aftermath. The 1951 census saw the Polish population more than tripling, from 44,642 in 1931 to 162,339.³² Even a list as comprehensive as Czerniawski's catalogue of Polish expatriates omits important names such as Jerzy Peterkiewicz, anthologist and translator of *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry*.³³ There were also over 20,000 new Hungarian immigrants by 1960, among them George Gömöri, János Csokits, John (János) Rety, Miklós Vajda and George Szirtes. Charles Simic's family had fled from Yugoslavia to Chicago; Ewald Osers came from Prague, narrowly escaping Auschwitz.

These communities did not just provide translators. Vajda, Peterkiewicz, Miłosz, Czerniawski and Osers all compiled early influential anthologies. Many (even most) of the names mentioned so far were or are poets in their own right, and the friendships they developed in poetry communities allowed early translations of Eastern European poetry wide circulation prior to publication. Csokits was sending Ted Hughes translations of János Pilinszky's literal versions from as early as 1961, and translations of Zbigniew Herbert and Miłosz had also been made and distributed around this time.³⁴ Certain critics who increased awareness of Eastern European poetry in English were themselves refugees, most notably George Steiner. John Rety worked as poetry editor for the *Morning Star*, and ran a popular series of Sunday evening poetry readings in Kentish Town.³⁵ Csokits and Osers worked for the BBC. These expatriate communities may similarly have been part of the market envisaged for early Eastern European

³¹ Adam Czerniawski, 'Polish Poetry in the West, or the Canon that Fired Late', in *Firing the Canon: Essays Mainly On Poetry* (London: Salt, 2010), p. 18. Hereafter Czerniawski *Polish Poetry*.

³² Colin Holmes, *John Bull's Island: Immigration and British Society 1871-1971* (London: Macmillan, 1988).

³³ Jerzy Peterkiewicz and Burns Singer (ed.), *Five Centuries of Polish Poetry: 1450-1950* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960).

³⁴ János Csokits, 'János Pilinszky's "Desert of Love" – A Note', *Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (University of Iowa Press: Iowa City, 1989), p. 18.

³⁵ Anon., 'John Rety', obituary, *Daily Telegraph* (1 March 2010).

poetry anthologies, although later introductions explicitly provide context for native British audiences.

The first reason Czerniawski gives for the success of Polish poets (and, by extension, other Eastern Europeans) in the West is more controversial. It is certainly the case that the Second World War and the Cold War had brought the English-speaking world into much closer contact with Eastern Europe. Neville Chamberlain had been able, without embarrassment, to call Czechoslovakia in the 1930s a ‘far-away country... [of which] we know nothing’, but by 1960 this was simply untrue.³⁶ The interest shown by the British reading public in conditions of life under a totalitarian dictatorship was clearly a postwar phenomenon: the entire concept of totalitarianism was a postwar one, popularised largely by novelists (especially *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Darkness at Noon* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*)³⁷ and non-fiction writers, especially Hannah Arendt. It is hard to gauge the extent to which this interest affected the reception of Eastern European poets in the UK; there is evidence both for and against its importance.

The series of BBC Third Programme broadcasts by Al Alvarez in 1961-4, later collected and published as *Under Pressure*, introduce Eastern European writers to an English audience by placing them in a political context.³⁸ The sections on Eastern European writers insist on a model of poetry as political action: comparing the situation of Polish authors with three American authors, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Alvarez writes how

...the psychic explosion [in Poland] took place within the nation itself. It was a factual breakdown, deliberately induced by another nation [...] But the violence and horror of the experience is no less extreme for it being objectively *there*, outside. The artists have to come to terms with it, contain it and in some degree regulate their understanding of ordinary life by it.

(Alvarez *UP* p. 28.)

³⁶ Quoted in David Faber, *Munich: The 1938 Appeasement Crisis* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2008), p. 375.

³⁷ *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, by George Orwell, was first published in 1949. *Darkness at Noon*, by Arthur Koestler, was first published in 1940. *One Day in the Life...*, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, was first published in English translation in 1963.

³⁸ Al Alvarez, *Under Pressure: The Writer and Society in Eastern Europe* (London: Penguin, 1965). Hereafter Alvarez *UP*.

American authors, Alvarez argues, are best understood outside of society: the 'great reservoirs of feeling' they embody are 'shut off from more-or-less normal life' (Alvarez *UP* 28). The Eastern European situation is precisely reversed; as it is the country itself which is undergoing a 'breakdown', the writer becomes a voice of sanity, impossible to apprehend outside of his or her political situation. This is not quite the same as Czerniawski's contention that the English-language intelligentsia had been 'mesmerised by the courage of...writers behind the iron curtain'; what is found 'mesmerising' by Alvarez is the interplay of response between the writer and the world. (A summary of his thesis might be that Eastern European writers managed to externalise their psychoses in insane political systems.)

If Czerniawski's thesis is correct, we might expect publications to track public awareness of the various Soviet satellite states. Such a correlation is visible, though only barely. Two important Czech anthologies were published three years after the brutal suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968.³⁹ (Miroslav Holub, however, by far the most visible Czech poet, had been published in the Penguin Modern European Poets series in 1967.) Marin Sorescu's first appearance in English coincides with a period of violent suppression by the Romanian regime. The Hungarian Uprising in 1956, however, did not create an upsurge in published Hungarian translations; most translations were published in the mid-70s, a comparatively quiet and peaceful decade in modern Hungarian history. (There is an important opposing factor: state censorship increased during particularly turbulent periods, making it harder for writers to produce or publish anything.)

Many, perhaps most, of the Eastern European poets who became popular with English audiences were not treated especially badly by the regimes they wrote under. Miłosz's books were banned after his defection, but Zbigniew Herbert served on the board of the Polish Literary Association although he was

³⁹ These were: Ewald Osers and George Theiner (ed. and trans.), *Three Czech Poets (Vítězslav Nezval, Antonín Bartušek, Josef Hanzlík)* (London: Penguin, 1971), and George Theiner (ed. and trans.), *New Writing in Czechoslovakia* (London: Penguin, 1971).

well-known as an anti-communist.⁴⁰ (Although his work was often not approved for publication in Poland, in 1984 a *Selected Poems* was released to mark his fiftieth birthday with a print run of 20000 copies.⁴¹ He was also allowed to travel extensively outside Poland in the period 1976-1980.) Vasko Popa and Tadeusz Różewicz were not suppressed, and although Sorescu's plays were censored he continued to publish poetry without substantial interference.⁴² To some extent, the popularity of these writers (both in the West and in their own countries) insulated them from ill-treatment: more marginal figures, including János Pilinszky and Peter Huchel, were treated more aggressively, and prevented from publishing for long periods. The converse is also true: the very real 'courage' displayed by Pilinszky and Huchel did not turn their volumes of poetry into bestsellers.

A variation on Czerniawski's claim is that the British intelligentsia promoted Eastern European poetry in order to vicariously experience repression and state control, validating particular views about poetry and extremity. This idea is expressed in the Peter Porter poem with which this chapter opened (the 'bloody fables' are implicitly dismissed, as only able to 'tickle liberal tongues'). Donald Davie has made a more serious version of this accusation, which will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

There are other factors partially responsible for the boom in Eastern European translations after 1960. One of these is the creation, after the war, of several international poetry festivals. We have already discussed how important an English-speaking London network of poets and translators was to the translation boom; international poetry festivals furthered this networking, by bringing important poets in different languages into contact with one another. The most important of these festivals were the annual Poetry International readings at the South Bank centre in London, founded by Ted Hughes in the late 1960s: it was at one of these events that the Hungarian poet Sandor Weöres met

⁴⁰ In a 1984 interview, he dated his loss of faith in the system to 'September 20, 1939. When I came into contact with the Soviets in Lwów, as a boy'. John and Bogdana Carpenter, 'Conversation on Writing Poetry: An Interview with Zbigniew Herbert', *The Manhattan Review* 3 / 2 (1984/5).

⁴¹ Henryk Rogacki, 'A Letter from Warsaw', trans. and adapted Michael and Alexandra Parker, *PN Review* 50 (12 / 6). (1986), p. 6.

⁴² Anon., 'Marin Sorescu', Poetry Foundation biography, last accessed 26 November 2012, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/marin-sorescu>>.

his eventual translator Edwin Morgan, and here that Charles Simic met both Alexander Ristović and Vasko Popa, both of whom he ended up translating. The Cambridge Poetry Festival, founded by Richard Berengarten, ran intermittently from 1975 – 1987, and provided a platform for poets including Różewicz, Pilinszky, Holub, Popa and Miodrag Pavlović.⁴³ These international festivals were encouraged by Soviet authorities, who viewed literary success, even of modestly subversive material, as a powerful commodity. (Ted Hughes, in a letter to Michael Schmidt, noted that ‘any appreciation in the West has immediate and real influence for good on the freedom of an Iron Curtain writer (not so much in Russia)’.)⁴⁴

The magazine founded by Hughes and Weissbort, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, deserves consideration as a factor in its own right. Founded in 1965, it served as a focal point for the translation boom, and forced Hughes, Weissbort and their circle to gather more material and commission more translations than otherwise would have been the case. ‘In the end, as the boom neared its peak’, Hughes writes, ‘almost every poet we knew [was] busy with translation’.⁴⁵ In the same editorial, Hughes describes how the magazine came into being:

What finally overwhelmed us into publishing our first issue was the translated work of a group of poets who seemed to us revelatory. A little earlier, Al Alvarez had brought back from Eastern Europe poems by Miroslav Holub (Czechoslovakia) and Zbigniew Herbert (Poland). About the same time, Daniel Weissbort found poems by Vasko Popa (Serbia) and Yehuda Amichai (Israel). I came across poems by János Pilinszky (Hungary).

(Hughes: *MPT* 1982 p. 206.)

⁴³ For a good summary of this festival’s importance in the reception of these poets, see Mick Gowar, ‘Richard Berengarten and the Cambridge Poetry Festival’, *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (Cambridge: Salt, 2011), p. 387-396. A sample programme for a single year is available from Richard Berengarten, ‘The Cambridge Poetry Festival 1975’, Richard Berengarten personal website, last accessed 27 November 2012, <<http://www.berengarten.com/site/Cambridge-Poetry-Festival.html>>.

⁴⁴ Ted Hughes, letter to Michael Schmidt dated September 22 1975, Carcanet Archives, John Rylands Library, Manchester, CPA/2/1/39.

⁴⁵ Ted Hughes, ‘Introduction’, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 44 (1982). Reprinted in Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 205. Hereafter Hughes: *MPT* 1982.

One of the factors responsible for the boom in translated Eastern European poetry, then, is that this poetry was particularly to the taste of Hughes, Weissbort and Alvarez, who were particularly well-placed to promote it and publish it. (The first chapter of this thesis will examine common ground in the work of Hughes and Pilinszky.) In Alvarez's 1999 memoir, he describes his role in the running of the Penguin Modern European Poets series:

[Tony Godwin, a commissioning editor at Penguin] brought me in as advisory editor to beef up a newish project called Penguin Modern European Poets. At that point the series had published two famous dead poets, Rilke and Lorca, two fashionable Frenchmen, Apollinaire and Prévert, the Italian Nobel Prize winner Quasimodo, and one Russian, Yevtushenko, who was always in the news. Godwin thought this choice too conservative. If there was interesting poetry being written behind the Iron Curtain, it was Penguin's duty to make it available. The first three poets published under my aegis were Herbert, Holub and Vasco Popa. I helped with the choice for 12 years and a further 22 volumes, until the accountants decided that enough was enough.⁴⁶

It should also be noted that Hughes and Weissbort promoted a particular style of translation, whose 'first ideal...[was] literalness', and that many Eastern European writers were arguably very well-served by such a style.⁴⁷ This idea deserves further examination.

The various explanations of the post-1950 boom in translations we have examined so far all ascribe it to external or sociological factors. There is another recurring explanation, focusing on an internal factor or quality of the poetry itself: its so-called 'translatability'.⁴⁸ In his introduction to *Postwar Polish Poetry*, for instance, Miłosz writes that the 'unusually large number of Herbert's poems in this anthology is due to the fact that they translate exceptionally well,

⁴⁶ Al Alvarez, *Where Did It All Go Right?* (London: Richard Cohen, 1999), p. 229. As noted earlier, thirty-four poets were published in total, some in multiple-author volumes.

⁴⁷ Ted Hughes, 'Editorial', *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 3 (1967). Reprinted in Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 200.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin's concerns about this term (in German, 'Übersetzbarkeit'), as I understand them, are well outside the domain of this thesis (see Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p. 27). For a brief summary of the theoretical issues raised by this concept, and a more common-sense examination of the idea and its attendant complications, see Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (London: Penguin, 1980), particularly Chapter 12, 'Minds and Thoughts', pp. 369-390.

because of their intellectual structure.⁴⁹ Czerniawski, describing Różewicz, notes a widely-held view that ‘he is more impressive in English than in Polish on the grounds that English syntax and vocabulary are a better instrument to achieve...[starkness and precision] than the cumbersome and florid Polish.’⁵⁰ Among poets describing their own work, the sentiment is rarer. Holub, in an interview with Suzanne O’Shea, described his belief that ‘one must write with a sense for the translation’: ‘I will continue to have a sense for the sound, the possibility of rhythm in the language of translation’.⁵¹ Writing to Weissbort, he described how his syntax had ‘become even in Czech sort of English related’.⁵²

Exactly what is meant by ‘translatability’ is open for debate. Miłosz’s citation of Herbert’s ‘intellectual structure’ recalls Ezra Pound’s division of poetry into *melopœia*, *phanœpia* and *logopœia*, corresponding more or less to music, imagery and play of connotation: *melopœia*, Pound notes, is untranslatable, *phanœpia* is translatable, and while *logopœia* ‘does not translate’, ‘the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase’.⁵³ (W.H. Auden’s two categories of poetry, ‘Ariel’ and ‘Prospero’, correspond to *melopœia* and *logopœia*, and he makes a similar point about the translatability of each.)⁵⁴ Miłosz seems to suggest it is Herbert’s ‘attitude of mind’ which (as translator) he is able to bring across into English. ‘Translatability’, then, may simply mean a reduced emphasis on effects of sound and an increased emphasis on imagery and intellectual structure. This seems a fair categorisation of several Eastern European poets, especially Różewicz and Holub. (However, other poets, including Pilinszky, Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Ferenc Juhász, do make extensive use of patterning and interplay of sound.) ‘Translatability’ may even, as with Holub, be part of a poet’s deliberate practice: the process of translation can be conceived as an additional stage in publication, more analogous to typesetting or printing than the creation of a new poem. In the letter to Weissbort quoted above,

⁴⁹ Czesław Miłosz (ed. and intro.), *Postwar Polish Poetry*, 3rd edn., Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1983, Introduction, p. 8.

⁵⁰ Adam Czerniawski, ‘Introduction’ to Tadeusz Różewicz, *They Came to See a Poet: Selected Poems*, trans. Adam Czerniawski, p. 28.

⁵¹ Suzanne O’Shea, ‘Interview with Miroslav Holub’, *Poetry Ireland Review* 30 (1990), p. 69

⁵² Quoted in Daniel Weissbort (ed.), *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War of Eastern and Central Europe* (London: Anvil, 1991), p. 106. Hereafter Weissbort: *Survival*.

⁵³ Ezra Pound, ‘How to Read’, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 25.

⁵⁴ W.H. Auden, ‘Robert Frost’, *The Dyer’s Hand and other essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 337-353.

Holub goes on to describe how he ‘sometimes had in mind that this or that poem might first appear in translation and had the translatability and transfer, I mean geographical transfer, first in mind’ (Holub, quoted in Weissbort: *Survival* p. 106). (This idea of writing for geographical transfer is by no means confined to Eastern European poets. Stephen Owen, in his important essay on the subject, identifies a version of the conception among several young Chinese poets of his own acquaintance, particularly Bei Dao: ‘they must also engage in the peculiar act of imagining a world poetry and placing themselves within it’.)⁵⁵

George Szirtes offers an alternative approach to ‘translatability’, focusing on a particular sort of poetic difficulty (in a taxonomy of difficulty he has borrowed from George Steiner):

The second difficulty is *Tactical*. Here the poet is deliberately withholding something for political or personal reasons, a withholding that we may at the same time find teasing and pleasurable. The Kremlin Mountaineer in Mandelstam is Stalin. The István Vas poem, Pest Elegy, celebrates the Hungarian capital after destruction. It appears to be about the Second World War but is really about the 1956 uprising. Although this could not be proved by specific reference to the text it was, nevertheless, understood by many readers to be the case. Poetry in Eastern Europe before the fall of the Iron Curtain was popular partly because it aroused precisely this kind of complicity. [...] Tactical value is a kind of crisis value. Once the crisis goes away so too does a considerable part of the readership.⁵⁶

This sort of tactical difficulty, while it may require the explanation of cultural allusions with which the reader is unfamiliar, is eminently translatable. Again, however, this practice of deliberate withholding is not something all Eastern European poets have in common. As Szirtes correctly notes, no single factor accounts for the boom in Eastern European translations; there was rather a synthesis of all the factors discussed above.

Several of the more prominent poets who were published during this boom have remained in print. Miłosz, Herbert and Holub all have widely available posthumous *Collected Poems* from large publishing houses (Penguin,

⁵⁵ Stephen Owen, ‘The Anxiety of Global Influence: What is World Poetry?’, *New Republic* (19 November 1990), p. 28.

⁵⁶ George Szirtes, ‘Possessing the Line’, 2007 StAnza Lecture, last accessed 18 January 2012, <http://www.stanzapoetry.org/stanza07_archive/lecture07.htm>.

Atlantic and Bloodaxe respectively). Following her 1996 Nobel Prize, translations of Szymborska's individual volumes are published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. (This is almost unique: even at the height of the translation boom, Eastern European poets were generally only published in selections.) Anvil Press, under the direction of Peter Jay, has kept many important poets in print, including Popa, Różewicz and Peter Huchel. But there is no contemporary equivalent of the Penguin Modern European Poets or Carcanet Translation series, and while some anthologies of contemporary Eastern European poetry are still published (for instance Rod Mengham's *Altered State*), their impact is much less noticeable.⁵⁷ Besides Szymborska and Tomáš Šalamun, there are few poets from Eastern European countries writing today who have much influence on mainstream English poetry. The boom in translation did not last much longer than two decades. Writing in 1976 to Michael Schmidt, Ted Hughes noted his 'feeling the boom has past – the market isn't there anymore according to my oracle at Harper's'.⁵⁸ A better end-date might be 1991, marking the publication of Daniel Weissbort's anthology *The Poetry of Survival*. Although the anthology was compiled before the Berlin Wall had come down, it still had the feeling of a retrospective anthology (a 'good-old-days anthology', as Weissbort ironically terms it in an interview with Yehuda Amichai).⁵⁹

So far I have been using 'Eastern European poetry' as though the term is uncontroversial shorthand for a particular way of writing. As I will continue to use the term throughout this thesis, it is worth taking a moment to address its potentially distorting effect.

The central charge against the term is similar to that brought by Robert Rehder against the terms of received periodisation in his seminal essay, 'Periodisation and the Theory of Literary History': that they falsify by forcing us to consider very different authors only in terms of one another.⁶⁰ Polish, Serbo-Croat and Hungarian (to take three examples) are widely different languages: each is far more divergent from the others than, for example, English from French. Each has a similarly distinct literary history: Serbo-Croat, for instance,

⁵⁷ Rod Mengham (ed.), *Altered State: The New Polish Poetry* (Todmorden: Arc, 2003).

⁵⁸ Ted Hughes, letter to Michael Schmidt dated May 12 1976, Carcanet Archives, John Rylands Library, Manchester, CPA/2/1/39.

⁵⁹ Daniel Weissbort, interview with Yehuda Amichai, in Weissbort: *Survival* p. 306.

⁶⁰ Robert Rehder, 'Periodisation and the Theory of Literary History', *Colloquium Helveticum: Cahiers Suisses de Littérature Comparée* 22 (1995), 117-136

was only codified in 1818, and therefore its relationship with folk literature is very different to that of other languages. (Consideration of this relationship is essential when examining, for instance, the work of Popa.) Polish has a literary heritage stretching back to the fifteenth century, influenced by English and other European writers. Hungarian, while having a long literary heritage, is part of a very small language family (Finno-Ugric): this has led to a relatively isolated literature, with less two-way traffic with the rest of Europe.

The most prominent poets of these countries, similarly, are extremely distinct from one another. The poetry of Miłosz and Różewicz is united only by a shared refusal of certain lyric forms. (In Poland itself, Różewicz and Herbert are commonly treated as writers at opposite ends of the poetic spectrum.)⁶¹ Popa's work has more in common with the poetry of Ted Hughes than with his Eastern European contemporaries, and Weöres, in his Protean shifts in form, technique and subject-matter is different again. These poets did not identify themselves as part of a single 'movement'. Is there any reason, besides wilful ignorance, to group them together? (Nobody ever talks about 'Western European' poetry as if it was a single, unified genre.)

I suggest that what makes the label a potentially useful one is rather to do with translation and reception. Modern Polish and Hungarian poetry may be worlds apart in literary terms, but both, as we have seen, arrived in England in the same decade, following a previous history of almost total neglect. On arrival, they were routinely lumped together in reviews and elsewhere. In the introduction to Popa's *Selected Poems*, Hughes identifies Popa as 'one of a generation of East European poets'.⁶² Later, János Pilinszky is added to the same roster in almost the same words: 'He recognisably belongs to that generation of East European poets which includes Herbert, Holub and Popa...'⁶³ Hughes writes elsewhere that '[Holub, Herbert, Popa, Amichai and Pilinszky] impressed us as a totally new phenomenon' (Hughes: *MPT* 1982 p. 206). Holub, Herbert and Popa were also grouped together on a 1977 Open University course on modern European poetry convened by Edwin Morgan (*Czerniawski Polish*

⁶¹ Stanisław Barańczak, 'Zbigniew Herbert and the Critics', *The Polish Review* 30 / 2 (1985), p. 128.

⁶² Vasko Popa, *Selected Poems*, trans. Anne Pennington, intro. Ted Hughes (London: Anvil 1997), p. 9.

⁶³ János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*, trans. János Csokits and Ted Hughes, intro. Ted Hughes (Manchester: Carcanet, 1976), p. 7.

Poetry pp. 12-13). Although all three poets are very different, English audiences were led to apprehend them as part of a single, recognisable ‘generation’. This fact, I believe, is crucial for assessing the influence of these poets on English poetry. Misapprehension, and even mistranslation, may well form part of the study of influence.

A conscious decision has been made to exclude Russian poetry from this study. The influence of Mandelstam, Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva alone on English poetry has been vast; to have done justice to the important relationships and correspondences would have required a greatly reduced coverage of the other Eastern European material. Their translation history is, moreover, very different; at no point were they perceived as a bloc, and they were brought into English gradually over a period before and after the Second World War. Although Hughes has described *Dr Zhivago* as ‘the carrier wave of the whole poetry translation phenomenon’ (Hughes: *MPT* 1982 p202), the mechanics of translation and apprehension with regards to Russian poetry differed very substantially from that of the poetry produced in the Soviet satellites.

The term ‘Eastern European poetry’, therefore, is used throughout this thesis in its historic sense, meaning those poets from Eastern and Central European countries who were translated into English for the first time in the second half of the twentieth century. This thesis will examine the influence of these poets on poetry written in English after 1950.

A working definition of influence is elusive, and to say that one author or text is influenced by another seems to cover a wide range of possible relationships. It can include straightforward borrowing, for instance of a technical device, a stanza form or an image, sometimes only in a single poem (for example, Byron’s borrowing of the *ottava rima* from J.H. Frere’s *Whistlecraft*). At the other end of the spectrum are the lifelong relationships described by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*: ‘Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroad; only this is my subject here’.⁶⁴ There are even hostile relationships of influence: hoaxes, parodies and pastiches.

⁶⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), p. 11. Hereafter Bloom *Anxiety*.

The approach I will take in this thesis treats consideration of influence as a narrative practice. By this definition, what it means when we say that precursor A is an influence on text B is that a compelling story can be constructed out of the relationship between the two texts. This story can be constructed by or within the text itself; in W.H. Auden's *Letter to Lord Byron*, the poem's central subject is the way in which it has been influenced and modified by its eponymous precursor. (In the same way, Paul Muldoon's '7, Middagh Street' constructs a narrative around an examination of its own relationship with Auden and others.) This narrative can also be constructed in critical works: in *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom envisages the relationship of influence as an 'agon' (Greek ἀγών, meaning struggle or contest), divisible into six strategies ('ratios') by which the 'ephebe' (young poet) can come to terms with his or her predecessor. It is suggested that these six strategies represent the developmental process of a young poet. The 'truth' or 'falsehood' of his case studies, I would suggest, should be assessed with the same criteria we use for a work of fiction.

When we say that the influence of one text on another is any compelling story that can be constructed out of their relationship, the obviously problematic word is 'compelling'. In my opinion it is unavoidable. To search for non-subjective criteria by which a critical account might be assessed is a constant temptation in the study of literature. At its root is a fundamental doubt in the entire project of fiction or poetry, both of which are necessarily subjective. As Bloom notes, 'there are not interpretations but only misinterpretations, so all criticism is prose poetry' (Bloom *Anxiety* 95).

This thesis will examine the influence of certain Eastern European poets in translation on certain English poets after 1950. Part of this analysis will be historical, dealing with issues of publication and reception. The larger part will be critical, and my aim here will be to construct narratives describing the relationship between two poems or poetic *oeuvres*. These narratives will be grounded in fact (for instance, I will make the commonsense assumption that poems can only be influenced by work known to their creators at the time of composition).⁶⁵ I hope, as narratives, they will illuminate certain historical

⁶⁵ E.g., that a work in the present cannot influence a work in the past. Strictly, if we are interested solely in the creation of 'compelling narratives', there is no reason why this should not be the

questions (for instance, the reaction of the British intelligentsia to totalitarianism), and certain philosophical or moral questions (especially concerning the obligations faced by writers in confronting atrocities outside their own experience). However, it is first and foremost as narratives that these chapters will have to be judged. I have delayed critical generalisation until the conclusion, focusing instead on the particulars of individual relationships.

The first chapter of this thesis will discuss the influence of János Pilinszky's poetry on Ted Hughes. Hughes produced a volume of Pilinszky translations in collaboration with János Csokits. The chapter closely examines Hughes' poetic practice in creating these translations, using this as a starting point for a wider discussion about Hughes' imagery, motifs and philosophical worldview, and Pilinszky's influence on these aspects.

The second chapter examines the work of the American poet Charles Simic, himself a refugee from former Yugoslavia, in light of what William Logan has contentiously termed his '*Mitteleuropa* surrealism'.⁶⁶ The chapter teases out the relationships between Simic and two poets he has translated: Popa and Aleksandar Ristović. Although the other poets covered in this thesis are all based in Britain or Northern Ireland, Simic deserves the exception; as well as his own work being particularly influential for contemporary British poets, his activities as translator, anthologist and commentator has brought many Eastern European poets (including Ivan Lalić, Tomaž Šalamun, Stavko Janevski and Radmila Lazic) to the attention of English audiences.

The third chapter discusses how, for several Irish writers, the political situation in Eastern Europe was seen as analogous to the situation of Ireland itself, and how this analogy gave poets cover to broach controversial domestic themes (especially concerning occupation by a foreign power). Tom Paulin's 'Where Art is a Midwife' is given a detailed analysis, alongside poems by Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson.

The fourth chapter provides a close reading of Richard Berengarten's long poem *In a Time of Drought*, an Eastern European 'translation' without an original text. The interplay of allusions to both Eastern European and English

case. I suggest that Jorge Luis Borges' famous short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, gives an example of this kind of influence, although performed in a work of fiction.

⁶⁶ William Logan, *Desperate Measures* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida 2002), p. 118.

folklore is analysed, with a view to describing how Berengarten creates his unusual synthesis. (Berengarten is better known in the English poetry world under his previous surname, Richard Burns.)

The fifth chapter looks at how the example of certain Eastern European poets altered English conceptions of the poet's public role. The chapter focuses on the neglected English poet Ken Smith, and examines how an idea of the poet as trickster or Holy Fool influences *Fox Running*, Smith's most important poem. The chapter argues that this idea in Smith can be traced back to his reading of Zbigniew Herbert and Miroslav Holub.

The sixth chapter analyses how the British poetry establishment reacted to the outbreak of the Bosnian war in 1992, both in terms of translation (including Chris Agee's important anthology *Scar on the Stone*)⁶⁷ and original verse. Questions of how poetry should or can respond to atrocity feed into the seventh chapter, analysing the antagonistic reaction of Donald Davie and Miłosz to many of the poetic trends described in the earlier chapters. Davie's own work is examined to establish what he means by 'poetic witness'.

Finally, an in-depth discussion of Christopher Reid's invented Eastern European poet, Katerina Brac, brings together ideas of 'witness' and translation, offering a new angle on these complex questions. The conclusion of this thesis examines several threads which run through much of the material discussed: the emergence of new methods of translation following the Second World War, the corresponding rise of the pseudo-translation (or translation without original) as a poetic form, and the means through which poetry can or should respond to and confront atrocities (partially responsible, I will argue, for a turn towards translation among several postwar poets). Finally, a recent sequence by Patrick McGuinness, drawing together these themes, is discussed.

⁶⁷ Chris Agee (ed.), *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998).

‘Cold wind still blowing’: Ted Hughes and János Pilinszky

In 1974, two years before Carcanet published Ted Hughes’ translations of János Pilinszky, Hughes wrote to his co-translator János Csokits asking for ‘a scatter of hints’ on certain aspects of Pilinszky and his work for the Introduction he was preparing. He had been working on the main body of translations that would end up in the *Selected Poems* for the first few months of 1974, although many dated back substantially earlier.⁶⁸ (Csokits had first provided Hughes with literal versions of Pilinszky in 1961.)⁶⁹

What is interesting about this letter is how much information Hughes demands. He asks Csokits to provide everything he knows on:

- (1) The atmosphere & temper, the texture, of his Hungarian. What’s distinctive about its physical qualities.
- (2) Oddities of special bias of his vocabulary, his grammatical usage, his inventions – if any.
- (3) Any traceable antecedents in Hungarian literature – in style, in subject matter.
- (4) His Catholicism.
- (...)
- (6) His relationship to other Hungarian writers of his generation - & slightly before & after.
- (...)
- (12) Anything else connected with him no matter how remotely.⁷⁰

As Reid writes, ‘In the event, Csokits felt unable to supply answers to TH’s questions, being reluctant to approach Pilinszky himself, who was under the constant watch of censors and informers at home in Hungary.’⁷¹ So the final introduction to the book was written without this additional information.

This letter highlights the gaps in Hughes’ knowledge of Pilinszky. These gaps are not surprising; Hughes spoke no Hungarian and Pilinszky spoke no English, and besides a few French translations Hughes had no experience of

⁶⁸ Ted Hughes, letter to János Csokits dated 12 February 1974, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 346.

⁶⁹ János Csokits, ‘János Pilinszky’s “Desert of Love” – A Note’, *Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (University of Iowa Press: Iowa City, 1989), p. 18. Hereafter Weissbort: *Translating Poetry*.

⁷⁰ Ted Hughes, letter to János Csokits dated 28 May 1974, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 350-351. Points 5-11 cover biographical issues.

⁷¹ Christopher Reid (ed.), *Letters of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), footnote to p. 351.

Pilinszky's work except through Csokits' literal versions. More surprising is the fact that Hughes worked on his own translations without ever attempting to close these gaps, and only sent this letter when he needed material for his Introduction. It is surely unusual for a translator of poetry to admit no knowledge of his subject's 'atmosphere', 'temper' and 'texture' of language, grammatical oddities, or bias in vocabulary.

Weissbort notes that Hughes did not believe any translator, even one authentically bilingual, had the capacity to bring across an original's 'unique verbal texture'.⁷² He quotes an editorial from *Modern Poetry in Translation*: 'we found the closest thing to [the original] in translations made by poets whose first language was not English, or by scholars who did not regard themselves as poets'.⁷³ To capture what made a poem unique in its own language was impossible by deliberate effort, but this texture could be brought across by other means, of which literal transcription was Hughes' preferred ideal. (He reserved special praise for William Bleek's Victorian transcriptions of aboriginal mythology, *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore*, and his selection for *The Rattle Bag* included several semi-literal versions including Sumerian and Navajo transcriptions from Jerome Rothenberg and Louis Watchman respectively (Weissbort: *Translation: Theory and Practice* p. 522)).⁷⁴ Another excerpt from a *Modern Poetry in Translation* editorial makes clear the strength of Hughes' opinion on this point:

...we [editors] feel more strongly than ever that the first ideal is literalness, insofar as the original is what we are curious about. The very oddity and struggling dumbness of word-for-word versions is what makes our own imagination jump. A man who has something really serious to say in a language of which he only knows a few words, manages to say it far more convincingly and effectively than any interpreter, and in translated poetry it is the first-

⁷² Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (eds.), *Translation: Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 522. Hereafter Weissbort: *Translation: Theory and Practice*.

⁷³ Ted Hughes, 'Introduction', *Modern Poetry in Translation Yearbook* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983). Quoted in Weissbort: *Translation: Theory and Practice*, p. 522.

⁷⁴ Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney (eds.), *The Rattle Bag* (London: Faber and Faber 1982), p. 356-7 (Rothenberg), p. 455-6 (Watchman).

hand contact – however fumbled and broken – with that man and his seriousness which we want.⁷⁵

Anything less, Hughes argues in an earlier editorial, is nothing more than ‘the record of the effect of one poet’s imagination on another’ (Hughes: *Selected Translations* p. 200). This idea of translation being a ‘record of an effect’, however, is often used in descriptions of Hughes’ own translations. Feinstein, for instance, writes in her introduction to *After Pushkin* that ‘it is something of a mystery...that Hughes’ version of “The Prophet”, which adheres fairly closely to [the literal version], nevertheless has the unmistakable vehemence of Hughes...’⁷⁶ Weissbort, Hughes’ strongest co-defender of literalism, notes how Hughes’ translations are ‘paradoxically...unmistakeably “Hughesian”.’⁷⁷ In part, this may be due to Hughes’ choice of which texts to translate (and he certainly selects Pushkin at his most vehement and declamatory, avoiding the satirical and humorous side altogether). But note the shared ‘unmistakeable’ in both Weissbort and Feinstein’s estimations.

Hughes’ translation of ‘The Prayer of Van Gogh’ makes an unusually large number of revisions to Csokits’ literal version. No lines are retained exactly from one version to the other, although the only alteration to line 5 is a change from ‘By night’ to ‘at night’, and the only alterations in lines 9 and 10 are ‘have lived’ and ‘have dwelt’ to ‘lived’ and ‘dwelt’. Similarly, line 3 contains no other changes but a slight shift in word order: the slightly facetious-sounding ‘birds again’ becomes ‘again birds’.

Line 6’s ‘Vályogfal’, which Csokits translates as ‘wall of adobe’,⁷⁸ is slightly more troublesome for Hughes. ‘Adobe’ is clearly the dictionary definition of *vályog*, but it is unusual in English and has an immediate, unhelpful connotation of South America. Hughes experiments with ‘baked mud’ (a literal translation of adobe). It is presumably the connotations of cookery that led him to discard this

⁷⁵ Ted Hughes, ‘Editorial’, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 3 (1967). Reprinted in Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 200. Hereafter Hughes: *Selected Translations*.

⁷⁶ Elaine Feinstein (ed), *After Pushkin: A Bicentenary Celebration* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 12.

⁷⁷ Daniel Weissbort, ‘Introduction’, Hughes: *Selected Translations* pvii

⁷⁸ In fact, Csokits initially translated it as ‘abode’, which confused Hughes’ first draft (he translated the sentence as ‘the yellow walls of the room’) – but this typo was corrected by the translation’s second draft.

and replace it with the final ‘dry mud’, which is less precise than the original. The detail is important, as it is the only point in the poem (besides the title) which suggests its location in the rural slums of Arles.

The first two lines depart the furthest from the literal versions, and here it is important to examine the notes on the poem Csokits sent to Hughes. Csokits’ rendering of the first line is ‘Defeat suffered in the fields’, but he notes that the primary denotation of the word is ‘the end of a battle’ (literally ‘battle-ending’). ‘Defeat’ is a secondary meaning; Csokits believes Pilinszky uses the word to retain ‘the atmosphere of the first meaning’ (e.g., connotations of the primary meaning and denotations of the secondary) (Weissbort: *Translating Poetry* p. 27).⁷⁹ Csokits’ literal here attaches a verb, ‘suffered’, which the original lacks. Hughes makes the defeat ‘humbling’, and removes Csokits’ ‘suffered’. The adjective, perhaps, makes the defeat seem closer, and so vaguely retains the sense in the word ‘csatavesztés’ of aftermath: but it is also an imposition of Hughes’ own poetic sense. ‘Humbling’ is an appropriate word in the context of prayer. It also personalises the suffering and introduces the poem’s protagonist three lines before Pilinszky’s original: who else but Van Gogh is humbled by the defeat? This is, finally, a definite decision: the more personalised ‘humbling’ replaces ‘crushing’ from the first two drafts. (‘Crushing defeat’ is a cliché, and the violent adjective suggests the battle itself, not its aftermath.)

The problem the translator faces in line 1 is largely one of connotations, but the connotations of different languages rarely mesh exactly. The sticking-point in line 2 is much more substantial – ‘Honfoglalás’, which Csokits calls ‘untranslatable’.

Translated literally “honfoglalás” would mean “countryoccupation” or “countryoccupying”. It is employed only for the conquest by Hungarians of their present country. The event took place in 896, after Christ. I don’t think, here, that Pilinszky wants to have any reference to this matter – he simply uses the word instead of conquest, or campaign, etc.

(Weissbort: *Translating Poetry* p. 27-28)

⁷⁹ All transcriptions from Csokits are my own.

The word is as charged with meaning as ‘Anschluss’ would be to a German poet, not in connotation alone but also straight denotation. Hughes wisely follows Csokits’ advice, and avoids any direct reference to the particular occupation (it would be impossible, in any case, except by leaving *honfoglalás* untranslated and including a footnote). This line clearly gave him substantial trouble, as it changes widely from draft to draft. The first attempt, ‘Occupying of the air’, was presumably rejected as imprecise: ‘occupying’ does not necessarily mean military occupation. In the second draft, he arrives at ‘The air claimed by invaders’, which he then changes to ‘seized’, and finally arrives at ‘held’. Again, Hughes has encouraged a slight warp in meaning: ‘held’ is considerably more tentative than ‘occupation’. Arguably a primary consideration here was sound: ‘held’ chimes with ‘fields’, and its h echoes ‘humbling’.

The change in line 7 is the only one to bring in a deliberately British idiom. Csokits’ ‘end of the garden’ becomes ‘far end of the garden’ in Hughes’ first draft, and finally ‘bottom of the garden’, more homely and natural-sounding than ‘end’, hinting at the home Van Gogh will be excluded from in the final stanza. Several points in Hughes’ translations are tailored for a British audience, deliberately de-emphasising his subject’s foreignness. The change of ‘adobe’ into the more concrete and familiar ‘dry mud’ has already been mentioned. A fine example of this sort of change is in Hughes’ translation of Pushkin’s ‘The Prophet’, where ‘desert/wilderness’ (a concept familiar enough to a Russian audience, but quite abstract to an English one) is translated as ‘stones’.⁸⁰ The exact denotation changes, but the concreteness of the image for the intended audience remains.

The last of the poem’s cruxes is the final two lines. Csokits’ literal has ‘the roof, which had me covered up. / My God, how you used to cover me in the past’, and also includes this important explanatory note:

The word Pilinszky uses in the last two lines is the one usually employed for someone covering up someone – such as a mother covering (tuck in) her child in the bed, etc. He speaks here like a sulking child dissatisfied with the parental service.

⁸⁰ Ted Hughes, ‘The Prophet’, in Elaine Feinstein (ed), *After Pushkin: A Bicentenary Celebration* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 26.

(Weissbort: *Translating Poetry* p. 30)

To capture this sense, Hughes makes the penultimate line a little more startling than the original: ‘the roof which tucked me in safely’. This is toned down from his earlier attempt at the line: ‘the roof which tucked me in like a mother’. The source for this simile is clearly the note, rather than the literal version, and Hughes’ second draft extends it into the final line: ‘Ah God, then you covered me up like a mother’. Here, the problem again is with connotation. ‘Tuck me in’ is far too domestic in English, and while it is an obvious metaphor when applied to a roof, applied to God it becomes anthropomorphic to a ludicrous degree. But ‘covered me up’ simply does not share this connotation of a parent covering a child. In the end, all Hughes can do is hope that the sense of ‘tuck me in’ is carried from one line to the next, helped by the repetition of ‘safely’. (In the original version, it is the verb which repeats, and there is no adverb; the poem’s final word is ‘régén’, which Hughes translates as ‘then’ and Csokits as ‘in the past’.)

‘On the Wall of a KZ-Lager’ bears an immediate resemblance to ‘The Prayer of Van Gogh’, consisting as it does of three four-line stanzas, and although it is arguably the more complex of the two poems it appears to have gone more easily into English. The rhymes in the second and fourth lines of each stanza have been lost, with the effect described by Csokits: ‘without the softening effect [of metre and rhyme] the impact of some of these poems can be very painful; they sound harsher and Pilinszky’s view of the world appears grimmer than in Hungarian’ (Weissbort: *Translating Poetry* p. 11).⁸¹

‘On the Wall of a KZ-Lager’ is unquestionably one of the grimmest of the poems, and demands a brief prose précis. The speaking voice seems to be that of a guard, rather than a victim, but from the title onwards there is ambiguity (the message on the wall might have been scrawled there, as in Dan Pagis’s poem ‘Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car’). The ‘you’ being addressed, then, are the victims of the Holocaust. The concentration camp becomes a focal point of the universe, itself unmoveable (‘But now it is you who stay’) from which everything else is trying to tear itself (‘each thing strives to be free of you’). In

⁸¹ Equally, however, the rhyming translations of Pilinszky into English by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri are arguably not grim enough.

the final three lines, the victims, somehow ‘enriched’ and transformed by their experience (the idea is set up earlier with line 8’s ‘mutated’), achieve the paradoxical conditions of blind sight and speechless testament, a testament which recalls Pilinszky’s most famous comment on his own work. ‘I would like to write as if I had remained silent.’⁸²

Between Csokits’ literal version and Hughes’ final draft, only line 11 has remained unchanged. (Although the tenses in this line were revised several times, the central word ‘enriched’ remains in place from the first draft.) The only change in line 7 is ‘it’ into ‘they’ (necessary after the alteration of Csokits’ ‘all things’ into Hughes’ more solid ‘every thing’). The title, also, has remained unchanged from literal to print, and this is not as trivial as it appears. In the volume’s early publication history, it was conceived as a joint translation with John Bákti, and Bákti rendered the title as ‘For the Walls of a Concentration Camp’.⁸³ ‘For’, rather than ‘on’, is a straightforward error, but ‘Concentration Camp’ for ‘KZ Lager’ is a deliberate decision. The German is unfamiliar to many English readers, and it is vital for the poem’s effect that the readers know where it takes place. The advantage of using the German is to make the location more precise (concentration camps have existed throughout the twentieth century) and, perhaps, more personal, perhaps bringing the poet’s own experience of the actual camps into focus. Subsequent translators have tended to follow Hughes’ lead on this.⁸⁴

Hughes’ most substantial changes to Csokits’ literal occur in the first stanza, in which three lines which were originally a single sentence each become individual sentences. These sentences without predicates, accumulating and clarifying, are a common feature of Hughes’ own poetry during this period (e.g., ‘The Gatekeeper’, first published in 1978 in *Cave Birds*).⁸⁵ Hughes also removes the repetition, mentioned specifically by Csokits in his notes as a formal concern (‘this way there is progression as in the original’) (Weissbort: *Translating Poetry*

⁸² János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*, trans. János Csokits and Ted Hughes, intro. Ted Hughes (Manchester: Carcanet, 1976), p. 10. Hereafter Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*.

⁸³ Ted Hughes, letter to Michael Schmidt dated June 22 1973, Carcanet Archives, John Rylands Library, Manchester, CPA/2/1/39.

⁸⁴ See, for instance: János Pilinszky, ‘On the Wall of a KZ Lager’, trans. Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri, *Poetry (Chicago)* (March 2008), p. 45.

⁸⁵ Ted Hughes, ‘The Gatekeeper’, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 428-9. Hereafter Hughes: *Collected Poems*.

p. 21). While the Hungarian moves from ‘*egyet.../ egyetlen*’, and Csokits progresses from ‘this place’ (line 2) to ‘this single place’ (line 3), Hughes moves from ‘this is your place’ to ‘Just this single spot’. ‘Spot’ for *place*, like ‘bottom of the garden’ in ‘The Prayer of Van Gogh’, has a hint of English colloquialism about it. In this case, it allows a deliberate effect not possible in the original: ‘spot’ retains both its primary meaning of ‘place’, and its secondary meaning of ‘speck’, emphasising the camp’s tininess and geographical insignificance. There are also faint, appropriate connotations of *Macbeth*.

In the fifth line, the only important change is ‘fleeing’ to ‘evades’. ‘Evades’ is more militaristic (*evasive manoeuvres*), and avoids an uncomfortable internal rhyme with ‘free’ in the seventh line. Hughes’ first draft of this line rendered it as ‘the countryside has abandoned you’, probably discarded because it did not retain the original’s idea of an ongoing evasion. Csokits noted that the motif was repeated from another Pilinszky poem, ‘Harabach 1944’ (Pilinszky: *Selected Poems* p. 20): Hughes translates the relevant line as ‘The villages stay clear of them’ (marching prisoners). Villages are much easier to anthropomorphise than countryside, and an easy first reading of this line is simply ‘The villagers stay clear of them’. The subsequent line, ‘The gateways withdraw’, again employs a military register.

In the sixth line, the articles in the original list (‘Whether a house, a mill or a poplar’) have been lost, and the line has become simply ‘House, mill, poplar’. This is much more Hughesian: compare, for instance, a similar list in ‘Crow’s Vanity’ (‘Mistings of civilisation towers gardens’), or ‘Lineage’ (‘Blood / Grubs, crusts’), both published around the same time as the translation.⁸⁶ The technique is employed elsewhere in Hughes’ other Pilinszky translations: ‘Stone, tree, house’ (‘Enough’) and ‘altar, shrine, handshake’ (‘Straight Labyrinth’). ‘Apocrypha’, where the translation is almost entirely Csokits’, includes the definite articles: ‘The night, the cold, the pit.’⁸⁷

The seventh line seems to have given Hughes some trouble. Csokits described the ‘grappling’ (his own literal translation) as a ‘slow, painful, hesitant tussling’, which Hughes first rendered as ‘scuffle’ and then as ‘toils to be free of you’. His final choice, ‘strives to be free of you’, chimes with the v-sound in ‘evades’,

⁸⁶ ‘Crow’s Vanity’, ‘Lineage’, Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 230, p. 218.

⁸⁷ ‘Enough’, ‘Straight Labyrinth’, ‘Apocrypha’, Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 59, p. 60, p. 38.

although it renders the struggle in much less physical terms than the Hungarian. (Striving to be free could simply mean the same thing as *evades*, and it does not retain the original's image of wrestling.) This line, in Hughes' translation, has a somewhat different sense to the original.

The changes in line 9 also alter the poem's sense. 'Now it is you who wont give way' becomes 'Now it is you who stay', linking back to the poem's first line (which is not a feature of the original Hungarian). Csokits offered 'won't budge' as an alternative: Wilmer and Gömöri's 2008 translation uses the cliché 'won't give up'. 'Stay' is quite different to all of these. In Hughes' version, there is no sense of resistance at all. Other translations make the blind sight and the speechless testament into something achieved or fought for, while Hughes allows them to be simply conferred on the victims. Hughes' changes to line 7 and 9 both pull in the same direction, making the victims ('you', in the poem's voice) more passive. The importance of this change will be assessed in the section covering Pilinszky's influence on Hughes.

The change from 'keep us in sight' to 'continue to watch us' in line 10 seems largely cosmetic, and the change in the final line ('you accuse us' to 'you testify against us') was actually suggested by Csokits, who rejected it as 'too technical'. This is a case where Hughes' superior knowledge of English comes into play: 'you testify against us' has just as strong a Biblical connotation as a judicial one.

In summary, the changes Hughes makes from Csokit's literals fall into several categories. There are the simple cosmetic changes, rendering Csokits' 'odd English' (Hughes' own description) into more standard English (Weissbort: *Translating Poetry* p11). Then there are changes which replace an adequate translation with a more British idiom (such as 'bottom of the garden' in 'The Prayer of Van Gogh' and 'Just this single spot' in 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'), or clarify an unfamiliar word for English readers ('adobe' into 'dry mud'). Other changes play with the connotations of words to create effects unavailable in Hungarian, or vary synonyms to create (or avoid) effects in the poem's sound. Some changes seem typically Hughesian (most notably the sixth line of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'). The rarest changes are deliberate shifts in the sense of a poem (for instance, the ones described in the final two stanzas of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'), which could be charitably interpreted as a focusing of attention on

original's crucial points. These changes certainly do not invalidate Hughes' opinions on literalness in translation: as he points out in a *Modern Poetry in Translation* editorial, 'literalness can only be a deliberate tendency, not a dogma' (Hughes: *Selected Translations* p200).

What Hughes brought to Pilinszky (in English) can be described straightforwardly. It is harder to gauge the influence of Pilinszky on Hughes' own work. The relationship between the two poets developed and deepened over a long period: as Hughes wrote to Csokits in 1974, 'I've lived with some of his poems for 7 or 8 years & they are still as interesting & still seem as good as ever.'⁸⁸ Hughes' relationship with this poetry is especially strange, given that he came to Pilinszky at least partially through his own words. (Paul Muldoon has called translation 'the closest form of reading we have'.)⁸⁹ A special complication is that one of Hughes' reasons for translating Pilinszky is the fact that Pilinszky's work was already perceived as having shared concerns: as Csokits writes, 'there must have existed sufficient common ground for the two poets to find each other's personal universe so attractive that both wanted to make an attempt at translating the other's works' (Weissbort: *Translating Poetry*, p. 10). (Pilinszky died before he could begin his translation of Hughes' Crow cycle.) Those elements of Hughes which most resemble Pilinszky may well have been what convinced Hughes to make his translations in the first place. As Renato Poggiolo writes, 'what moves the genuine translator is not a mimetic urge, but an elective affinity: the attraction of a content so appealing that he can identify it with a content of his own, thus enabling him to control the latter through a form which, though not inborn, is at least congenial to him'.⁹⁰ We can therefore make only the most tentative examination of the one poet's influence on the other.

A starting point is to examine exactly where Csokits' 'common ground' lies between the two poets. Here, Hughes' Introduction to Pilinszky's *Selected Poems* provides much useful material. On Pilinszky's style:

⁸⁸ Ted Hughes, letter to János Csokits dated 12 February 1974, *Hughes: Letters*, p. 346.

⁸⁹ Becky Lang, 'Muldoon mulls over nature, candy bars' (interview with Paul Muldoon), *The Minnesota Daily* (29 November 2007), last accessed 27 February 2010, <<http://www.mndaily.com/2007/11/29/muldoon-mulls-over-nature-candy-bars>>.

⁹⁰ Renato Poggiolo, *The Spirit of the Letter: Essays in European Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 359.

Something elliptical in the connections, freakishly home-made, abrupt. It would not be going too far to say there is a primitive element in the way it grasps its subject.

(Pilinszky: *Selected Poems* p. 8)

On Pilinszky's use of religious motifs:

The poems are nothing if not part of an appeal to God, but it is a God who seems not to exist. Or who exists, if at all, only as he exists for the stones. Not Godlessness, but the immanence of a God altogether different from what dogmatic Christianity has ever imagined. A God of absences and negative attributes, quite comfortless. A God in whose creation the camps and modern physics are equally at home.

(Pilinszky: *Selected Poems* p. 11)

On Pilinszky's 'mysticism':

...his mystically intense feeling for the pathos of the sensual world (...) an ecstasy, a fever of negated love, a vast inner exposure.

(Pilinszky: *Selected Poems* p. 13)

Each of these descriptions could be applied just as aptly to the Hughesian style. 'Elliptical...connections', 'primitive element', 'vast inner exposure' would for some critics summarise much of Hughes' output. As well as these points, there are common elements of tone and diction. For example, compare the first line of Hughes' 'Rain' with a line from Pilinszky's 'The Prayer of Van Gogh':

Rain. Floods. Frost. And after frost, rain. (Hughes)

Birds, the sun, and again birds. (Pilinszky)

Some later lines in that poem also seem shaped by Pilinszky. 'The brimming world and the pouring sky / Are the only places / For them to be' echoes the opening of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager': 'In the whole universe, this is your place. / Just this single spot.'

Finally, Pilinszky and Hughes often seem to share their catalogue of images and symbols, especially those drawn from the natural world. Both have early poems about acrobats and trapeze artists.⁹¹ Both are bird-lovers and bird-watchers (Pilinszky has a special fascination with chickens which rivals Hughes' famous crow obsession), and also write regularly about cattle, maggots and fish. Here, certainly, it is a matter of shared concern rather than influence: Hughes' personal bestiary had been laid out from *The Hawk in the Rain*, long before he had encountered Pilinszky's work.

In the case of extreme fellow-feeling between two poets, influence behaves unusually. A standard model of influence has the influencer expanding the scope of the influenced, allowing them to examine subject matter or avenues of approach which they would otherwise have overlooked. (For example, Vasko Popa's myth cycle poems have a straightforwardly direct influence on the form of *Crow*.) But when two poets begin as close as Hughes and Pilinszky, the process is subtler, and involves the accentuation of features already latent in the work of the poet being influenced. The practice of translation, especially, may allow a poet to regularise or make a habit of certain tropes his own work already touches on. This will be examined in two case studies, one of a fairly simple motif and the other of a broader philosophical concern.

We have already studied the arresting central image of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager': 'The countryside evades you. / (...) / Each thing strives to be free of you / As if it were mutating in nothingness'. This idea of some part of the world fleeing or struggling against the poet recurs throughout Pilinszky's work. It can be used to express revulsion, as in 'Harbach 1944' (describing a column of men marching through the countryside, apparently towards a concentration camp):

The villages stay clear of them,
the gateways withdraw.
The distance, that has come to meet them,
reels away back.

(Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 20)

⁹¹ 'Acrobats', Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 72-3. 'Trapeze and Parallel Bars', Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 18.

It can also, in slightly different form, provide an objective correlative for loss:

...my life starts to slip softly
like a crumbling sand-pit.

(‘Sin’, Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 24)

In very different form it can even express joy:

...Through all those rooms
the same wash of music
as though the barefoot sea were roaming
among their walls.

(‘Impromptu’, Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 35)

What unites these extracts is the idea of flow, especially the flow of unexpected or under-described objects (as in a cryptic line from ‘Epilogue’, ‘Remember? It’s streaming down’. Pilinszky: *Selected*, p. 46). Pilinszky has two visions of hell, absolute stasis or absolute change (e.g. chaos), and these form the twin poles his poetry veers between. (‘The Desert of Love’, Hughes’ and Csokits’ favourite of their translations, is an example of Pilinszky’s vision of hellish stasis, especially its final couplet: ‘Years are passing. And years. And hope / is like a tin-cup toppled into the straw.’) This flow is often embodied in images of birds, fish or wind: in Pilinszky’s ‘Revelation VIII.7.’, God sees ‘the burning heaven / and against it birds flying’ (Pilinszky: *Selected*, p. 37). (The birds are not in the original Bible verse, from which the poem as a whole departs substantially.) These birds also make an appearance in the second line of ‘The Prayer of Van Gogh’, whose image of a roof tucking the poet in like a duvet is another minor instance of an unexpected flow. Perhaps the starkest expression of the flow motif is in the quatrain ‘Cold Wind’: that poem’s description of a post-apocalyptic, ‘unpeopled’ landscape ends with the line ‘Cold wind still blowing’ (Pilinszky: *Selected* p. 43).

Hughes' early poetry makes use of similar images, not as a repeated trope but as an occasional effect. For instance, the title poem of 'The Hawk in the Rain', in its closing evocation of a falling hawk, describes how 'the ponderous shires crash on him, / The horizon trap[s] him'. Earlier, the same poem describes 'the streaming air' (which is contrasted with the hawk's stillness). Neither of these are exact analogues to Pilinszky's motif, but they are nonetheless in a similar vein. The word 'streaming', incidentally, is employed several times in the Pilinszky translations (i.e. 'Epilogue' and 'Frankfurt 1945', which summarises the flow motif as 'the streaming world': Pilinszky: *Selected*, p. 46, p. 34).

Nevertheless, early use of this device in Hughes is sparing. Furthermore, it often appears to serve simply as a way of introducing motion into the poem, from line to line as much as from image to image. Hughes only sporadically uses narrative or argument as engines to drive his poems forward; more often they take the form of a sustained cascade of images, where the main movement is the movement from image to image. Here, the trope of flowing can be used to inject forward momentum, as for instance in 'November', where it is combined with a piece of literal narrative movement: 'I ran, and in the rushing wood // Shattered by a black owl leaned' (Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 81).

The ultimate expression of Hughes' flowing motif in its early form is 'Wind', from his first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 36). The final two lines ('Seeing the window tremble to come in, / Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons') would certainly not be at all out of place in Pilinszky, and neither would the image of the fields 'quivering', another of Pilinszky's dominant adjectival verbs (i.e., 'the net / of the quivering stars', 'the shivering / mob of my nights', 'shivering / makes the love of loves even firier').⁹² Nonetheless, despite initial similarities, Hughes does not use the trope in at all the same way as Pilinszky. The poem turns out to be a nest of competing metaphors. The wind is an anthropomorphised scytheman ('wind wielded / Blade-light, luminous and emerald') who is described as 'stampeding', the house is a ship lost at sea (line 1), the hills are a tent 'strain[ing] its guyrope', 'the skyline a grimace', and so on. Flow in Pilinszky does not work like this at all. When 'the distance.../ reels away back' in 'Harbach 1944' it does not occur

⁹² 'Trapeze and Parallel Bars', 'Sin', 'Complaint', Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 18, p. 24, p. 27.

in the form of a metaphor, which is after all a way of making something imaginable. Rather it is precisely, intensely and deliberately unimaginable. Other lines in 'Wind' ('The winds stampeding the fields under the window') use the Pilinszkyian rush as a sound-effect, comparable to the poem's 'booming hills' and 'crashing' woods.

This is not in any way to denigrate the achievement of 'Wind', an early masterpiece. Instead, it is to demonstrate that there is delineation in the use of this trope between early Hughes and Pilinszky, with Hughes tending to employ it as an effect. For Pilinszky, on the other hand, the idea of flow (and utter stasis as a counterpart) is an important element of his world-vision, comparable to Yeats' gyres.

After Hughes began to work seriously on his translations of Pilinszky, which seems to have been shortly after the publication of *Crow*, his use of the motif changes. It is worth examining several poems to illustrate this. Here, for instance, is the final stanza of 'Heptonstall Old Church', part of the *Remains of Elmet* sequence:

The valleys went out.
The moorlands broke loose.

(Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 490)

As Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts note in *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, 'the elation of Hughes's response...to the moorland's liberation here recedes to an undertone of the menace derived from the powerful images of disintegration and decay'.⁹³ This is Pilinszky's flow motif in its most primal form, which has an almost exact analogue in 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager': compare 'The countryside evades you' (or '...is fleeing you', in Csokits' first literal) with 'The moorlands broke loose'. Gifford and Roberts are correct to note that there is a pervading sense of disintegration and decay, and this is capped perfectly by the two final lines, which would not have been possible without Pilinszky's example.

⁹³ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 241. Hereafter *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*.

In fact, the whole sequence, with its repeated images of prisons, Messiahs and even a 'golden holocaust', is heavily indebted to Pilinszky.⁹⁴

Orts (1978) is also full of images of prisons and fugitives: the narrator's blood is 'a prisoner in my darkness', an unnamed 'you' has 'bolted' and 'flee[s] / helpless as grass' (Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 402-3, p. 397). Here, the flow has stopped completely:

Everything is waiting.
The tree stilled in tree – swells in waiting.
The river stilled in flow – in away-flow push.

('33', Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 403)

The 'away-flow push', the straining to be free, paradoxically discovers an image of flow in stasis. A polarity is set up, between the tree which 'swells in waiting' and the river which is desperate to push free. The image of the waiting tree is also found in Pilinszky's 'Apocrypha', which Hughes called 'Pilinszky's ultimate statement': 'at the dead of night I speak as the tree: / Do you know the drifting of the years / the years over the crumpled fields?' (Pilinszky: *Selected Poems* p38).⁹⁵ 'Apocrypha' also ends with a paradox, similar to the river pushing its own flow, an empty riverbed which manages to 'trickle':

And instead of tears, the wrinkles on the faces
trickling, the empty ditch trickles down.

(Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 40)

Both are images of flow which arises from its reverse: one in a river which is frozen in time, the other in a ditch which has dried up.

We have discussed how in early poems Hughes often uses a variant of the flow motif simply to produce movement. The evolution of this motif under the influence of Pilinszky expands these possibilities greatly, as evinced in 'Night Arrival of Sea-Trout' (from *River*, 1983):

⁹⁴ See, particularly, 'Football at Slack', Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p.475

⁹⁵ Hughes' comment is in his 'Introduction' to Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 14.

Through the dew's mist, the oak's mass
Comes plunging, tossing dark antlers.

(Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 662)

In an image like 'the rushing wood' (from 'November'), the movement is produced by a fairly obvious effect, which sometimes feels clumsy and overdone. Here, the movement has been transferred entirely to the metaphor, and something as static as an oak (compare the second line of the extract from *Orts*, above) is suddenly filled with animation. Though this line does not sound a great deal like Pilinszky (and is, in fact, immediately recognisable as Hughes), it would have been impossible without Pilinszky's example, allowing Hughes' sense of drive and movement to develop. It is impossible, of course, to study how Hughes would have developed without Pilinszky's influence. Nonetheless, we can say for certain that following his translations of the poet, Hughes began to pay much closer attention to his own tropes of flowing; and that as they developed, they developed largely along Pilinszkyian lines.

So much for flow. The second case study concerns an apparent shift in Hughes' worldview or 'philosophy', which seems to move from pessimism into apparent nihilism at some point during the 1970s. Again, it is impossible to measure Pilinszky's influence here exactly. A central difficulty is biographical: Hughes was first exposed to Pilinszky's poetry shortly before Sylvia Plath's suicide, and began the serious work of translation shortly after the suicide of Assia Wevill, who also killed Hughes' four-year-old daughter. Both Plath and Wevill died from gas inhalation in circumstances hauntingly reminiscent of the Holocaust, a subject which Plath's poetry often returns to. More broadly, there was a very real fear of nuclear apocalypse and a nagging fear of environmental apocalypse. Hughes' bleakness, this is to say, was not a pose. Again, too, there is the problem of cause and effect: it is possible that Hughes picked up a more nihilistic outlook from Pilinszky, but it is equally possible that one reason Pilinszky appealed to Hughes was a pre-existing, shared nihilism. There is also a third problem: we have already seen in our discussion of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager' that Hughes' translations occasionally emphasise Pilinszky's nihilism (the

victims are rendered more passive than they appear in the original). The influence may cut both ways. Much of what follows, therefore, is speculation.

A useful delineation between pessimism and nihilism is to say that pessimism is a tendency, while nihilism is a philosophical stance.⁹⁶ A philosophical pessimism, such as Schopenhauer's, is usually distinguished from nihilism by admitting artistic or moral 'modes of transcendence' which can provide a life with meaning or purpose.⁹⁷ Pessimism accentuates the worst, while nihilism diagnoses meaninglessness. To be pessimistic is not to hold a falsifiable belief about the world. It is rather a particular sensitivity to certain aspects of the world. Nihilism in any sphere (politics, epistemology, morality), on the other hand, does make claims about the world; it claims that discourse in this sphere is (semi-, largely or entirely) meaningless.

A condition of total meaninglessness is impossible in poetry. Even the obscurest language-acts communicate inexorably, and a belief in complete and inevitable meaninglessness would compel one to silence (a logic followed by several young German writers in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust).⁹⁸ Pilinszky and Hughes both believe in a transcendent nihilism, but the form of transcendence is different to that of Schopenhauer, who lays down a prescription anyone can follow. The poets' nihilism is closer to the faith of Kierkegaard, depending as it does on a 'miracle' to achieve transcendence. As Hughes writes in his Introduction,

Though the Christian culture has been stripped off so brutally, and the true condition of the animal exposed in its ugliness, and words have lost their meaning – yet out of that rise the poems, whose words are manifestly crammed with meaning. Something has been said which belies neither the reality nor the silence. More than that, the reality has been redeemed. The very symbols of the horror are the very things he has redeemed. They are not redeemed in any religious sense. They are redeemed, precariously, in some all-too-human sense, somewhere in the pulsing mammalian nervous system, by a feat of

⁹⁶ Pessimism is defined by the Collins English Dictionary as 'the tendency to expect the worst and see the worst in all things'.

⁹⁷ Robert Wicks, 'Arthur Schopenhauer', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, last accessed 02/05/2013, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/schopenhauer/>>.

⁹⁸ George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Penguin 1969), p. 73.

human consecration: a provisional, last-ditch ‘miracle’ which we recognise, here, as poetic.

(Pilinszky: *Selected Poems*, p. 12)

Once again, Hughes seems to diagnose himself. But this description could not apply to the poetry of *The Hawk in the Rain* or *Lupercal*, with its easy faculty for words, apt image and sound effects. Hughes’ early metaphor for poetic creation is ‘The Thought-Fox’, a fairly straightforward image of the Muse as a ‘body that is bold to come // across clearings’ (Hughes: *Collected Poems* p. 21). The poet’s role is simply to sit and wait as the fox ‘enters the dark hole of the head’, and to call this a ‘feat of human consecration’ would be ludicrous.

By *Crow*, Hughes’ poetry has entered a new phase. ‘Littleblood’ presents a very different vision of the muse:

Grown so wise grown so terrible
Sucking death’s mouldy tits.

Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, o littleblood.

(Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 258)

Keith Sagar, in his reconstruction of *Crow*’s overarching narrative, describes how Hughes intended ‘Littleblood’ to be a ‘magical song’ given to Crow by ‘the ghost of an Eskimo hunter’, which contains ‘a helpful spirit, a power’.⁹⁹ This is different again from Pilinszky’s ‘feat of human consecration’, but is evolving closer towards it. Littleblood is not an innocent embodiment of nature like the thought-fox; he or she or it is a cosmic fugitive, ‘hiding from the mountains in the mountains/ Wounded by stars and leaking shadow’. Sagar identifies her (dubiously) with the White Goddess, and she certainly retains the Goddess’s fearful aspect.¹⁰⁰ Hughes gives no reason for turning towards the Thought-Fox, whose poems come as gifts or ‘its own business’. But Crow commands

⁹⁹ Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 178-179. Hereafter Sagar: *Laughter*.

¹⁰⁰ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 222.

Littleblood to sing out of necessity. ‘Littleblood’ takes the form of an invocation, while ‘The Thought-Fox’ is pure description.

Hughes’ idea of the Muse continues to evolve past *Crow*. The epilogue poems of *Gaudete* open with another invocation, this time questioning:

What will you make of half a man
Half a face
A ripped edge

(...)

His talents
The deprivations of escape

How will you correct
The veteran of negatives
And the survivor of cease?

(Hughes: *Collected Poems*, p. 357)

Whatever is being addressed here is left unimagined. Only the impossibility of the subject-matter is described. The final question is surely meant to seem unanswerable. It is at this point that Hughes’ vision of poetic creation is closest to Pilinszky: all that can allow him to continue writing, to ‘make’ anything of the ‘ripped edge’, is the ‘provisional, last-ditch “miracle”’. Sagar writes

The more affirmative, the more radiant with meaning, a work is going to be, the more essential that its starting point is Nothing, the silence of Cordelia, so that it cannot be said that the affirmative meanings have been smuggled in with loaded language, that anything has been left unquestioned, that the negatives have not been fully acknowledged. Pilinszky has taken the route Hughes started out on in *Crow*.

(Sagar: *Laughter*, p. 129)

‘The veteran of negatives / And the survivor of cease’ might be Pilinszky himself. At this point, the concerns of the two poets are almost entirely shared.

All that 'What will you make of half a man' addresses, in the end, is the Truth, the God Hughes identified in his Introduction 'in whose Creation the camps and modern physics are equally at home'. This is the only being with the capacity to 'correct', and yet he is completely silent. Hughes' addresses to the Muse have moved from description to invocation to desperate prayer.

This is a linguistic nihilism containing an implicit possibility of transcendence, and as Hughes engages with Pilinszky's work it is this vision of the world he moves closer towards. (Paul Bentley links *Gaudete* to Pilinszky by citing a 'distrust of language'.)¹⁰¹ Although this shift cannot be attributed straightforwardly to the influence of Pilinszky, his influence deserves to be recognised as one factor among others.

¹⁰¹ Paul Bentley, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (London: Longman, 1998), p. 76.

‘Another pair of eyes’: Charles Simic and the ‘inward light’ of Vasko Popa and Aleksandr Ristović

As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, ‘Eastern European poetry’ is a contentious term, arguably useful only in the context of the reception history of a generation of poets in the English-speaking world. Attempts to summarise what poets as diverse as Herbert, Holub, Popa and Miłosz have in common are likely to fall drastically short. When such definitions are attempted, however, they can be informative when considered in light of this reception history: even a distorted reading of literary texts can be influential (and, indeed, translation is in itself a kind of distortion). This chapter will examine one such critical misreading and its impact on the apprehension and reception of Charles Simic. It will also examine Simic’s work in the light of two poets he has brought into English, Vasko Popa and Aleksandr Ristović.

Reviewing Simic’s *Walking the Black Cat* (1996), William Logan writes:

Mitteleuropa surrealism isn’t what it was when the Balkans, the Orthodox Church, and the Ottoman Empire brooded in the background. [...] Fanciful, mild-mannered (you’re in danger of stubbing your toe on the meaning), the poems in *Walking the Black Cat* often sound like translations, or merely like translators. (Many American surrealists seem to know the originals only in translation—why shouldn’t they sound like translators?)¹⁰²

Beside Kafka (who is hardly relevant in the context of ‘the Balkans, the Orthodox Church, and the Ottoman Empire’), Logan does not specify which authors he has in mind as embodiments of ‘*Mitteleuropa* surrealism’. But the term ‘surreal’ is familiar in descriptions both of Simic and of other Eastern European poets. Simic’s Poetry Foundation profile describes his ‘surreal, metaphysical bent’ (as if the two adjectives are synonymous); Vernon Young, in a 1981 review of Simic’s *Classic Ballroom Dances*, describes his ‘transpos[ition] of historical actuality into a surreal key’.¹⁰³ References to the ‘humour, violence

¹⁰² William Logan, *Desperate Measures* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 118.

¹⁰³ Anon., ‘Charles Simic’, Poetry Foundation biography, last accessed 2 November 2012, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/charles-simic>>. Vernon Young, ‘Review: *Classic Ballroom Dances*’, *Hudson Review* 28 / 1 (1981), p. 141.

and surrealism' of named or unnamed Eastern European poets have been a commonplace of reviewers since the 1960s.¹⁰⁴

The word 'surrealist' can be of some use in identifying those writers under Communism who did not subscribe to the state-approved model of Soviet realism (although these doctrines had been largely abandoned in Yugoslavia, Simic's country of origin, since 1948, following the decline in relations between Stalin and Marshal Tito). More widely, however, overuse has rendered the word almost meaningless in describing any poets except the immediate inheritors of Breton, Aragon and Arp. Simic himself has rejected it as a description of his own work: in an interview with J.M. Spalding, he notes that he is 'a hard-nosed realist. Surrealism means nothing in a country like ours where supposedly millions of Americans took joyrides in UFOs.'¹⁰⁵ 'Surreal', in much of the critical discourse surrounding contemporary American poetry, has become a generic term for any poetry occasionally indulging fantasies or dreams: James Wright and Donald Justice have both been identified as domestic surrealists, as well as Elizabeth Bishop (for poems like '12'O'Clock News').¹⁰⁶ As Mark Ford has noted, certain Surrealist techniques had been employed by 1960s poetic coteries as distinct as the Beats, the New York School and the Deep Image group (including Robert Bly and W.S. Merwin); the fact that so many different poets were drawing inspiration, however slight, from the tradition of Breton and Arp may have contributed to the term's overuse.¹⁰⁷

This overuse has prevented proper critical analysis of Simic's relations with a genuine Surrealist inheritance, and discrimination between the authentic Surrealist influence on his work and the influence of the Serbo-Croat authors he has translated. Running the two together, as in Logan's dismissal of 'Mittleuropa surrealism', stifles appreciation of how particular authors have shaped Simic's work, as well as running all Eastern European poets together into a false homogeneity. It is worth analysing these debts in some detail.

¹⁰⁴ i.e. Phil Estes, 'New Model for Surrealism', review of *Destruction Myth* by Mathias Svalina, *New Letters* 76 / 3 (2010), p. 165.

¹⁰⁵ J.M. Spalding, 'Interview: Charles Simic', *The Cortland Review* 4, last accessed 2 November 2012, <<http://www.cortlandreview.com/issuefour/interview4.htm>>.

¹⁰⁶ See, for instance, Dana Gioia, 'James Tate and American Surrealism', *Denver Quarterly* 32 / 3 (1998), p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ Mark Ford, 'Charles Simic', *A Driftwood Altar: Essays and Reviews* (London: Waywiser, 2005), p. 234.

The central influence on Simic's early to mid-stage poetry is the Serbian poet Vasko Popa. This relationship is complicated by the fact that Simic was also Popa's American translator, and these translations had brought him his first major publication (*The Little Box*, 1970) and his first award (PEN award for translation, 1971). Popa was the first Serbian poet to receive attention in the USA, and unlike French or German, Serbo-Croat is accessible to very few English-speaking readers. (It is also hard for a monolingual English speaker to read phonetically. Besides a single poem at the beginning of Anne Pennington's translation of *Earth Erect* [1973], no English translation has included parallel text.)¹⁰⁸ The reader has no information about the poetry beyond what the translator provides.

The kinship between the two poets, then, is unusual, and this is reflected in Simic's work at the level of the individual poem. 'Stone', from Simic's first collection *Dismantling the Silence* (1971), has a lot in common with Popa's *White Pebble* sequence (included in *The Little Box*, 1970).¹⁰⁹ The opening of 'Stone', 'Go inside a stone / That would be my way' recalls *White Pebble*'s title poem: 'It holds each thing / In its passionate inner embrace', down to Simic's unpunctuated line-break (all Popa's line-breaks are unpunctuated). Simic's 'I have seen sparks fly out / When two stones are rubbed / So perhaps it is not dark inside after all' is an image from Popa's 'The Secret of the Pebble' in much more banal phrasing: 'Is the pebble pregnant / Will it give birth to a stone / Or a beast or a streak of lightning'. (The choice of *streak* is excellent; the lightning is appropriately frozen in time, as befits the offspring of a stone. Anne Pennington also uses the word.)

The similarities continue. Simic's description of the pebble's 'strange writings, the star charts / On the inner walls' imagines the pebble as an alien spaceship; Popa's 'It listens to itself / Among the worlds a world' ('Dream of the Pebble') imagines the pebble as an alien planet. The pebble is turned audible by both poets: Popa has it 'listen [...] to itself', while Simic describes how 'within, it must be cool and quiet'. 'What happens to the pebble / Did the heights devour

¹⁰⁸ Vasko Popa, *Earth Erect*, trans. Anne Pennington (London: Anvil, 1973), p. 12.

¹⁰⁹ Charles Simic, 'Stone', *Selected Poems 1963-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 6. Hereafter Simic: *Selected*. Vasko Popa, 'White Pebble', *Homage to the Lame Wolf*, ed. and trans. Charles Simic (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1987), pp. 19-26. Hereafter Popa: *Lame Wolf*.

it / Did it change into a bird’, asks Popa. Simic similarly offers suggestions on what might have happened to his Stone: ‘...a cow steps on its full weight (...) / (...) a child throws it in a river’.

These are surely intended as deliberate correspondences, but it is hard to understand what Simic intends by writing a poem which meshes so absolutely with a sequence whose translation he has just published. In fact, ‘Stone’ suffers considerably in comparison with *White Pebble*: one of Popa’s strengths is the impersonality of his images (Simic picks up on this in a description of Popa’s poetic style, writing ‘the usual drama of the Self is completely absent’)¹¹⁰, and all Simic adds to Popa’s pebble is a couple of unnecessary sentences in the first person (‘I am happy to be a stone’, ‘I have seen sparks fly out...’).

Later, with Simic’s ‘Drawing the Triangle’, the relationship between his poetry and Popa’s has become more intriguing. ‘Drawing the Triangle’ is one of a number of poems on Euclid’s axioms in the 1982 book *Austerities*.¹¹¹ It is quoted here in its entirety:

I reserve the triangle
For the wee hours,
The chigger-sized hours.

I like how it starts out
And never gets there.
I like how it starts out.

In the meantime, the bedroom window
Reflecting the owlsh aspect
Of the face and the interior.

One hopes for tangents
Surreptitiously in attendance
Despite the rigors of the absolute.

The fact that ‘Drawing the Triangle’ is part of a long sequence, Popa’s defining organisational feature, reminds us again whose territory we are on, and indeed, in

¹¹⁰ Charles Simic, ‘Introduction’, Popa: *Lame Wolf* p. 9. Hereafter Simic: *Lame Wolf* introduction.

¹¹¹ These include ‘Midpoint’ and ‘Drawn to Perspective’, both in Simic: *Selected*, p. 51, p. 52.

Popa's 1968 sequence *The Yawn of Yawns* we find 'Prudent Triangle' (or, in Anne Pennington's translation, 'A Wise Triangle').¹¹² Again, aspects of 'Drawing the Triangle' seem to find direct analogues: Simic writes 'We hope for tangents / Surreptitiously in attendance', while Popa describes how

Once upon a time there was a triangle
 It had three sides
 The fourth it kept hidden
 In its burning centre

Simic himself draws our attention to the parallels between the two poems. His own translation of 'Prudent Triangle' was published in the 1987 volume *Homage to the Lame Wolf*, in which he writes in his introduction:

What sets him apart is what I can only call his "classicism". *One might be reading Euclid on the triangle here.* He is so deadpan. The usual drama of the Self is completely absent. The archetypal forms that emerge are employed for cognitive ends. Popa meditates on myth. He talks to it, and it talks back.

(Simic: *Lame Wolf* introduction, p. 9. My italics.)

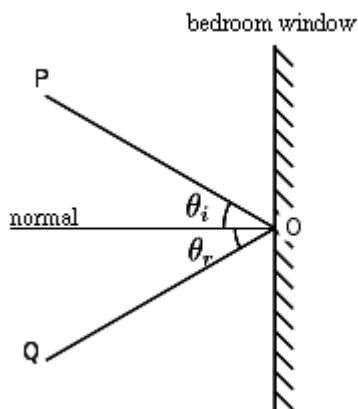
Given that Simic's Euclid poems were probably, at this point, his best known work (apart from his earlier Object poems), it is hard to take the reference to Euclid as anything other than a direct nudge to the reader in the know. Still, 'Drawing the Triangle' is a distinct advance on 'Stone'. 'Drawing the Triangle' and 'Prudent Triangle' share an image, but not a theme: Popa is interested in the mechanics of storytelling (all the poems in *The Yawn of Yawns* begin with 'once upon a time'), while Simic's poem focuses on the 'drama of the Self' which Popa excludes (Simic: *Lame Wolf* introduction, p. 9).

Simic's English is characterised by its accommodation of non-poetic, often archaic-sounding turns of phrase. 'Wee hours' is an example: it is slightly outdated slang, coined by Robert Burns but in an American context perhaps first recalling Sinatra's 1955 LP *In the Wee Small Hours*. In the next line, however,

¹¹² Popa: *Lame Wolf*, p. 76-77. Alternative translation: Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. Anne Pennington and Francis Jones (London: Anvil, 1997), p. 120. Hereafter Popa: Pennington.

the cliché is brought startlingly to life, as the ‘wee hours’ become the ‘chigger-sized hours’. The phrase, as well as introducing the memorable image of hours as bloodsuckers, reminds us of the New York ‘fleabag hotels’¹¹³ which housed Simic between 1958 and 1964 and serve as the location of many of his other poems.

The psychic territory Simic stakes out in ‘Drawing the Triangle’ is also extremely familiar. Simic is unquestionably the modern poet who has written the most extensively on insomnia, in essays including ‘My Insomnia and I’, ‘Time Channel’ and ‘On Dreams’, his autobiography *A Fly in the Soup*, aphorism collections including ‘Some Assembly Required’, and recurrently throughout his poetry (including his 1992 volume, *Hotel Insomnia*).¹¹⁴ It is not at all surprising to find the poet drawing triangles unable to sleep, and unlike ‘Stone’ the image is recognisably Simic’s own. ‘Owlish’, with its obvious nocturnal connotations, further strengthens the image.



The second stanza enacts itself, ‘start[ing] out / But never get[ting] there’, by repeating its first line as its final line, and contrasting the eternal triangle to the ‘chigger’-like hours sucking the narrator’s lifeblood. By the final stanza, this emotional import of this image has been reversed, and it is the triangle which is bound to the ‘rigors of the absolute’, ‘rigors’ subtly invoking

rigor mortis (as well as supplying a deferred rhyme with ‘chigger’). Eternal recurrence, the poem argues, is indistinguishable from inevitable death, and the only escape from either is the possibility of ‘tangents / surreptitiously in attendance’. The third stanza interrupts the image of the triangle, giving ‘tangents’ an ambiguity (allowing it to apply to both the triangle and the

¹¹³ Charles Simic, ‘New York Days, 1958-1964’, *Orphan Factory: Essays and Memoirs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 9. Hereafter Simic: *Orphan Factory*.

¹¹⁴ ‘My Insomnia and I’, ‘Time Channel’, ‘On Dreams’, Simic: *Orphan Factory*, pp. 48-50, pp. 70-72, pp. 63-65. Charles Simic, *A Fly in the Soup: Memoirs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992).

narrator). This ambiguity is increased by the subtle shoehorning in of geometrical terms in non-geometric contexts: ‘aspect’, ‘face’, ‘interior’. Similarly, the verb ‘reflecting’ invokes geometry: specular reflection in a mirrored surface (see illustration) creates a triangle.

This use of geometric terms to create a physically and psychically realised landscape is found throughout Simic’s Euclid sequence. ‘My old poems on Geometry [...] are my attempt to read between Euclid’s lines’, he writes.¹¹⁵ Geometric terms become objective correlatives, as in the final lines of ‘Drawn to Perspective’, where the narrator observes in a street scene ‘The couple about to embrace / At the vanishing point’.¹¹⁶ (In the lexis of art criticism, the definite article is unnecessary for *vanishing point*, and permits another ambiguity. ‘The vanishing point’ also refers to the full stop or ‘point’ at the poem’s end.)

This reading of ‘Drawing the Triangle’ offers some immediate points of contact with Popa’s ‘Prudent Triangle’. ‘Prudent Triangle’ suggests an eternal cycle through repetition:

And again it climbed each day
To its three peaks
And admired its center
While at night it rested
In one of its angles

These lines repeat the same daily routine as the second verse paragraph. In both poems, the cycle of day and night becomes as unbreakable as a geometric laws, while in both cases leaving open the possibility of something ‘hidden’ or ‘surreptitiously in attendance’.

Nonetheless, there are far more differences between the two poems than similarities (as is not the case with ‘Stone’ and *White Pebble*). The unbreakable laws which ‘Prudent Triangle’ illuminates are not the fact of death but the eternal recurrence of myth or mythical tropes, Popa’s central preoccupation, for which the triangle is an extreme metonym: the sparsest myth imaginable. The triangle is

¹¹⁵ Charles Simic, notebook excerpt, *The Poet’s Notebook: Excerpts from the Notebooks of Contemporary American Poets*, ed. Stephen Kuuisto, Deborah Tall, David Weiss (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 270.

¹¹⁶ Simic: *Selected*, p. 52.

bound by mythical constraints, although the myth it creates for itself is extremely boring: the final lines of *The Yawn of Yawns*' title poem, which close the sequence, are

Once upon a time there was a yawn
Boring as any yawn
And it still seems to go on and on

(Popa: *Lame Wolf*, p. 82)

Popa's triangle, too, goes on and on. 'Prudent Triangle' finishes in an arbitrary position; the routine may as well repeat again, and we are back exactly where we began. 'Drawing the Triangle' does not pre-empt its own conclusion in this way. It draws its structure from argument rather than myth, and one reaches the end with the feeling that a new conclusion has been negotiated, and an analogy has been created between the geometric and the human.

In the later poem 'The Chair' (from *Hotel Insomnia*, 1992), Simic continues and extends the 'tangent' of 'Drawing the Triangle'.

So the wind turned the pages,
Whispering the glorious proofs.

The sun set over the golden roofs.
Everywhere the shadows lengthened,
But Euclid kept quiet about that.¹¹⁷

Here, in contrast to 'Drawing the Triangle's geometrical terminology taking on anthropomorphic resonance, a poetic cliché is able to draw power from the register of geometry. The 'golden section', first codified in Euclid's *Elements*, is 'the natural division of roughly 8:13 that we find forming patterns everywhere [...] a weird corollary of our physical law'; through Simic's hint towards this geometric law, the commonplace image of roofs golden in the sunset becomes part of a transposition of Euclid into real-world terms, in which the chair of the

¹¹⁷ Simic: *Selected*, p. 101.

title is ‘a student of Euclid’ and the wind ‘turn[s] the pages’.¹¹⁸ In its eight lines with a line-break between lines five and six, the poem itself enacts the division of the golden ratio.

By this point, Simic’s negotiation with Popa is taking place almost entirely on his own terms. ‘This chair was once a student of Euclid’ is only faintly reminiscent of Popa’s fabular openings. (It even contains a subdued pun; ‘chair’, in context, may suggest the academic metonym for ‘professor’.) The setting of ‘The Chair’ is clearly an abandoned schoolhouse in the real world; Popa’s triangle, and the other inhabitants of his ‘Yawn of Yawns’ sequence, exist only in geometrical or mathematical space. (Abandoned or empty buildings are a recurring trope throughout Simic’s work, finding its most precise formulation in the two-line poem ‘My Secret Identity Is’: ‘The room is empty / And the window is open’.)¹¹⁹ Popa, indeed, has his own poem called ‘Chair’, part of an early sequence not translated by Simic: its protagonist is not an actual chair but the chair’s Platonic form, dreaming of a ‘dance / In the moonlight of the skull’.¹²⁰ Arguably the influence of Popa on Simic’s work is most discernible at the level of diction: both poets employ an uncomplicated syntax and a sparse, restricted vocabulary, features of Popa which are not restricted to Simic’s own translations.¹²¹

Popa’s ‘trick’, Simic suggests, ‘is to be literal-minded in the face of multiple metaphors’ (Simic: *Lame Wolf* introduction, p. 7). (This is, incidentally, a reasonable summary of the strategy or technique mislabelled ‘surrealism’ by Logan, Young and others.) It is a ‘trick’ which is also much-used in Simic’s early work (most prominently ‘Stone’), and hardly present at all in ‘The Chair’. The metaphorical image of a chair ‘reading’ the book which has been left on it is exhausted by the end of the first line, and indeed the second line corrects it into non-metaphorical reality: ‘The book of his laws lay on its seat’.

¹¹⁸ Don Paterson, *Reading Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 490-1.

¹¹⁹ Charles Simic, ‘My Secret Identity Is’, *The World Doesn’t End* (London: Harcourt and Brace, 1985), p. 74. For other examples of the trope, see i.e. ‘The White Room’, ‘William and Cynthia’, ‘Wooden Church’ and many others in Simic: *Selected Poems*, p. 65, p. 78, p. 151.

¹²⁰ ‘Chair’, Popa: Pennington, p. 32.

¹²¹ For comparison, here is Anne Pennington’s translation of the verse paragraph of ‘Prudent Triangle’ discussed above (translated as ‘A Wise Triangle’): ‘And again by day it would climb / To its three vertices / And admire its centre / And by night it would rest / In one of its three angles’. Popa: Pennington, p. 120.

A more important influence on Simic's later poetry is a less familiar Yugoslavian poet Aleksandr Ristović. His influence, and the complexity of the interplay between his work and authentic Surrealist elements, is well demonstrated in Simic's 'Cold Blue Tinge', quoted here in its entirety:

The pink-cheeked Jesus
Thumbtacked above
The cold gas stove,
And the boy sitting on the piss pot
Blowing soap bubbles
For the black kitten to catch.

Very peaceful, except
There's a faint moan
From the next room.
His mother's asking
For some more pills,
But there's no reply.
The bubbles are quiet,
And the kitten is sleepy.

All his brothers and sisters
Have been drowned.
He'll have a long life, though,
Catching mice for the baker,
And the undertaker.

(Simic: *Selected* p. 56)

Goran Mijuk reads 'Cold Blue Tinge' as a poem about a crisis of faith: 'Simic's reference to Jesus, who is overseeing the scene, suggests that the saviour is neither able to change the fate of the kid nor the kitten. The cold that dominates the room is a metaphor for the inability to change things.'¹²² This seems initially plausible, until we notice there is no 'cold dominat[ing] the room'; this is inferred solely from the title, the 'cold gas stove', and the overall

¹²² Goran Mijuk, *Orphan of Silence*, Ph.D. thesis (Freibourg: Univeristé de Fribourg, 2002), p. 128.

bleakness of the scene. Even this bleakness is inferred: all the narrator lets us know of his own attitude is that he finds the scene presented in the first verse paragraph ‘very peaceful’.

The poem is neither as sparse nor as bleak as Mijuk suggests. It is not without its humour: Simic’s preoccupation with botched crucifixions, as witnessed in ‘Popular Mechanics’, ‘Late Call’ and ‘The Voice at 3am’ (Simic: *Selected Poems*, p. 66, p. 118, p. 128), suggests ‘thumbtacked’ should be read as a black joke. ‘Pink-cheeked’ perhaps implies that Christ has not lost a lot of blood from this ordeal. The narrator’s one interpolation, ‘very peaceful’, has a sardonic, darkly humorous tone, possibly also present in the poem’s antepenultimate line. There is humour, too, in the intermittent, faux-naïve rhyming: stove/above, no reply/sleepy, baker/undertaker. The last rhyme-pair, the only audible rhyme if the poem is read aloud, has the rhythm of a punchline, although at first glance the final line also appears faux-naïve, a heavy-handed attempt to shoehorn in an explicit macabre reference which the rest of the poem only hints at.

Some sort of humour also seems to be at work in the thirteenth line, ‘The bubbles are quiet’. This is the most openly Surrealist moment in the poem, holding within it the implicit possibility of noisy bubbles. Between the poems’ first appearance in *Weather Forecast for Utopia and Vicinity* (1983) and its most recent version in *Selected Poems 1963-2003* (2004), the line has been tightened to push this interpretation a little more to the forefront: it originally read ‘The bubbles make no noise’.¹²³ (Writing about Popa and Surrealism, Simic notes how his images often ‘start as descriptions and then proceed to withhold the usual attributes of the thing being described’. Simic: *Lame Wolf* introduction, p. 10). It is in this line that the poem’s sinister connotative background moves into the ascendant. The non-replies of the bubbles and the kitten are recorded, but the boy, the one character who might be expected to answer his groaning mother, has vanished, as if the silence of the bubbles has managed to drown out the child.

In 1928, André Breton and Louis Aragon published their manifesto ‘The Invention of Hysteria’, which marked the beginning of the Surrealist obsession

¹²³ Charles Simic, ‘Cold Blue Tinge’, *Weather Forecast for Utopia and Vicinity* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1983), p. 13.

with this condition. ‘Hysteria is the greatest poetic discovery of the latter part of the century’, Breton writes, noting that

Hysteria is a more or less irreducible mental state characterized by a subversion of the relations between the subject and the ethical universe by which the subject feels determined in practice, outside any system of delirium. [...] Hysteria is not a pathological phenomenon and can in every respect be considered a supreme vehicle of expression.¹²⁴

Two aspects of the poem pick up on this Surrealist idea; the first is the image of the mother in the ‘next room’, heavily medicated on pills and apparently unable to move. This detail is one of only two which locate the poem in the twentieth century (the other is the reference to thumbtacks), and hysterical women, medicated and placed half out of sight, are a regular trope of Surrealist artwork. The mother’s condition, of course, is not specified, but Surrealism informs at least the mood at this point. (It is interesting to note how much of T.S. Eliot’s 1915 prose poem ‘Hysteria’ calls to mind Simic, down to the level of the ‘ancient waiter’ – one of Simic’s most common archetypes – and the laughing woman shaking her breasts, a motif repeated exactly in Simic’s ‘Outside a Dirtroad Trailer’.)¹²⁵

The second aspect of the poem which picks up on a Surrealist conception of hysteria is the poem’s ‘ethical universe’ as a whole. Note that Breton does not require that the hysteric’s ‘ethical universe’ be especially bleak, just that there is a ‘subversion of relations’ between that ethical universe and the subject. An ‘ethical universe by which the subject feels determined’ is another way of describing fate, and the idea of subverting relations between fate and oneself is deeply relevant in relation to ‘Cold Blue Tinge’. Fate is certainly a central subject: the kitten’s apparently innocent playing with the bubbles is actually training, for her future ‘catching mice’. (In the original version of this poem, the

¹²⁴ André Breton and Louis Aragon, *La Révolution Surréaliste* XI (1928). Translated by and quoted in Jean-Michel Rabaté, ‘Loving Freud Madly: Surrealism between Hysterical and Paranoid Modernism’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 25 / 3-4 (2002), p. 64.

¹²⁵ ‘Outside a Dirtroad Trailer’. Simic: *Selected*, p. 67. The line reads ‘She kept giggling and shaking her huge breasts’. T.S. Eliot, ‘Hysteria’, *Collected Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 32.

boy was blowing soap bubbles simply ‘For the black kitten’; Simic’s revision allows ‘catch’ to echo between the sixth and penultimate lines.)

It is this ‘subversion of relations’ which allows the boy to vanish after the first stanza. The guardians of her ‘ethical universe’ desert the mother one by one, firstly the ‘pink-cheeked Jesus’ (who, as Mijuk notes, is cheerily unable to intervene), then the boy, her pills, and lastly the kitten itself, which moves on to the ‘baker / And the undertaker’. There is one final revision between the earlier and later versions of this poem: the 1983 version has ‘Catching mice *from* the baker’ (my italics), leaving open the idea that the cat still belongs to the mother, an interpretation cut off by Simic’s alteration.

The poem, then, contains three Surrealist elements; the absurd caricature of the crucifixion in the thumbtacked Jesus, the quiet bubbles, and the hints of hysteria in the treatment of the mother, which links back to some of Surrealism’s theoretical grounding. However, the dominant influence is that of the Serbian poet Aleksandar Ristović, whom Simic first encountered in Belgrade one year before ‘Cold Blue Tinge’ was published, and whom Simic subsequently translated.¹²⁶ The reaction was immediate:

Once in a long while one comes across a poet who strikes one as being absolutely original. One reads a few poems and is struck by the oddness of their vision and convinced of their authenticity. (...) From that day on, another pair of eyes has cunningly joined our own. The poetry of Aleksandar Ristović has had that effect on me.

(Simic: Ristović introduction, p. ix)

The influence of Ristović on ‘Cold Blue Tinge’ and some of Simic’s other poetry from this period is visible on two levels; an alteration in Simic’s treatment of images, and the borrowing of a ‘painterly’ quality and a deep historical consciousness which roots the poem first and foremost in medieval and Renaissance art. Further examination of Simic’s introduction to his selected Ristović translations allows us to study this change as it develops.

Simic writes that ‘Ristović is as much at home in rural Serbia as Robert Frost is in New England countryside’ (Simic: Ristović introduction, p. x). ‘Cold

¹²⁶ Charles Simic, ‘Introduction’, Aleksandar Ristović, *Devil’s Lunch* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. ix. Hereafter Simic: Ristović Introduction.

Blue Tinge' is one of several Simic poems where we can't be certain about the location, although a European setting is arguably hinted at. (An independent baker is far more likely to be European than American; most of the bakers in the States had been consolidated into large firms by the 1920s.) We are well outside Simic's most characteristic poetic landscape, the back alleyways and seedy diners of 1950s New York. The 1950s vernacular borrowed from in 'Drawing the Triangle', and elsewhere in Simic's earlier work, is absent; the only slang in the poem is 'piss pot' (lavatories, and excretion in general, are obsessions of Ristović).¹²⁷

More interesting are the comparisons Simic finds to describe Ristović. Robert Frost is the only poet mentioned in the introduction; every other point of reference is a visual artist, including Vermeer, El Greco, and the anonymous artists of medieval woodcuts. Describing the manipulation of light in Ristović's poetry, he writes:

Such light exists nowhere in nature and what we are seeing in these painters [Vermeer and El Greco], and in such poets as Ristović, may be the glow of that inward light, the very same one that makes our dreams discernible at night.

(Simic: Ristović introduction, p. *xi*)

This brings to mind the mysterious, disembodied 'Cold Blue Tinge' of Simic's title. 'Tinge' is an unusual word, midway between the painterly *tint* and the painful *twinge*, and no single object in the poem obviously possesses it. This is surely an example of Ristović's influence over Simic's apprehension of the scene he describes: the colour has become an 'inward light' radiating from almost everything in the poem and contributing to a rising sense of inertia and dread.

Another comparison of Simic's is also revealing: 'his poems remind me of medieval woodcuts illustrating proverbs on dangers and delights of the Seven Deadly Sins' (Simic: Ristović introduction, p. *x*). Again, while the comparison is apt for Ristović (especially his extended sequence 'Whores'), it is also

¹²⁷ See, for instance: 'Privy', 'Monastic Privy', 'Lavatory Theatre', 'Discreet Lavatory' and others. Aleksandar Ristović, *Devil's Lunch*, trans. and intro. Charles Simic (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 26, p. 27, p. 28, p. 29.

appropriate for ‘Cold Blue Tinge’.¹²⁸ Bubbles have been a standard image for human frailty and the brevity of existence since the 16th century: ‘The image of the child blowing bubbles was common in engravings from the 17th century and was often shown with the inscription “Who will escape?” The expression “homo est bulla” – “man is but a bubble” - was also well-known at the time.’¹²⁹ Many paintings and engravings from the Renaissance onwards depict a kitten playing with these bubbles (and suggest a possible second level of symbolism at work in the poem, given the association between cats and the devil which persisted into the 19th century).

There is a final passage of Simic’s introduction to *Devil’s Lunch* which informs our reading of ‘Cold Blue Tinge’: ‘For Ristović we are always tottering between good and evil, matter and spirit, and that he finds pretty funny’ (Simic: Ristović introduction p. xi). He goes on to quote Russell Edson: ‘The sense of the funny is the true sense of the tragic’. Both of these are as relevant to ‘Cold Blue Tinge’ as they are to Ristović. In the poem’s sequence of pairs, we can identify the same ‘tottering’ that Simic picks up on in Ristović. This bisection is the central formal feature of the poem: the first verse paragraph divides with an ‘and’ directly in the middle, placing Jesus in opposition to the boy, the second verse paragraph closes with the opposition between the bubbles and the kitten, and in the final verse paragraph the ‘and’ places into opposition the baker and the undertaker. All three pairs can be loosely represented as matter versus spirit, or substantial versus insubstantial: the unreal Jesus (‘pink-cheeked’ and so escaping the titular ‘cold blue tinge’) and the vividly realistic child, the fragile ‘quiet’ bubble and the long-lived kitten, the material trade of the baker versus the spiritual trade of the undertaker. We lurch or totter from one to the other, a movement which is formally enacted by the savagely ironised final rhyme.

‘Cold Blue Tinge’, then, synthesises elements from French surrealism and Aleksandar Ristović, as he appears in Simic’s translation. This synthesis is both an act of interpretation and a dialogue with these sources. ‘All great poetry is the contemplation of a few essential images’, Simic writes (Simic: Ristović introduction px), and the differences in approach between the Eastern European

¹²⁸ ‘Whores’. Aleksandar Ristović, *Devil’s Lunch*, trans. and intro. Charles Simic (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 85-90.

¹²⁹ Anon., factsheet for ‘L’Umana Fragilitá’ by Salvator Rosa, 1656. Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum 2005

authors he has translated and the Surrealists allow him to separate two different conceptualisations of this contemplation. (The Surrealists share with Ristović, Popa and Simic the idea of the *image* as the central unit or organising principle of the poem, as opposed to, for example, the argument, the narrative or the sentence.)

Ted Hughes writes, in his introduction to the Penguin Modern European Poets edition of Vasko Popa's *Selected Poems*, that Popa's work marks the shift 'from literary surrealism to the far older and deeper thing, the surrealism of folklore'.¹³⁰ This idea of a continuum between 'movement' Surrealism (the tradition of Breton and Arp) and folkloric art and literature is a surprisingly late one: the earliest reference I can find is Lawrence Durrell discussing a Karaghiósis play in 1945, noting that 'what our surrealist friends might call "the triumph over causality" is considerably older than Breton – and indeed is an integral part of all peasant art.'¹³¹ (Durrell takes his qualified definition of surrealism from Hugo Münsterberg's 1916 discussion of cinema.¹³² As a definition, it is far from precise: Surrealism in both its folk and 'movement' forms might be better conceived of as an extension of causality into previously neglected areas. As Münsterberg notes, 'while the moving pictures are lifted above the world of space and time and causality and are freed from its bounds, they are certainly not without law'.) The distinction between a literary and a folk surrealism certainly applies to Ristović as much as Popa (Ristović's poetry first appeared in English only after Hughes' death), and, I would argue, to Simic's own work also.

Simic's poetry borrows both images and riddling forms from folklore. His early 'object' poems, for instance, resemble the Serbo-Croat riddles compiled by Vasko Popa in his anthology of Yugoslavian folklore *The Golden Apple*.¹³³ 'The Chicken Without a Head' (Simic: *Selected Poems*, p. 20) is a close

¹³⁰ Ted Hughes, 'Vasko Popa', *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 226.

¹³¹ Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell* (London: Faber and Faber, 1945), p. 53.

¹³² Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1916), p. 175. Münsterberg uses the phrase to describe the effect of scene changes.

¹³³ Vasko Popa (ed.), *The Golden Apple*, 2nd edn., trans. and ed. Andrew Harvey and Anne Pennington (London: Anvil, 2010). For Simic's Object poems, see i.e. 'My Shoes', 'Fork', 'Watermelons'. Simic: *Selected Poems*, p. 5, p. 9, p. 15.

cousin of the folktale type categorised by Antti Arne as a ‘tale of lying’;¹³⁴ indeed, its central image of ‘the chicken...run[ning] a maze [...] / A serving fork stuck in its back’ is closely related to the opening of ‘The Ditmars Tale of Wonders’ in Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*, ‘I saw two roasted fowls flying’.¹³⁵ Similarly, Simic’s ‘catalogue’ poems (for instance, the much-anthologised ‘Bestiary for the Fingers of My Right Hand’: Simic: *Selected Poems* p7) have obvious aspects in common with children’s songs and counting rhymes. The clearest formal feature shared by Simic, Ristović and Popa, the ‘plain style’ minimalism (first used as a description of Simic’s work in a hostile 1986 review by Anthony Libby, and subsequently by Simic himself in the blurb of his *Selected Poems*),¹³⁶ is also a stylistic trope of folkloric literature, albeit arising as much out of necessity as deliberate invention.

Mark Ford suggests that one factor distinguishing Simic’s work from the Yugoslavian poets he translated is that his ‘minimalism [...] is of a particularly impure kind’.¹³⁷ (Earlier in the essay, however, he has described Simic’s poetry as possessing an ‘almost Whitmanesque expansiveness’, which sounds less like an impure minimalism and more like its exact opposite.) This impurity is surely a result of Simic’s unusual linguistic history, and indeed Ford suggests as much: ‘It is perhaps a typical immigrant paradox that the major poetic influences on Simic’s evolution into an American poet were not American’. Few important poets have come to the language they would end up writing in as late as Simic, and learning a language late will almost inevitably lead to idiosyncrasies of language and tone. Many of Simic’s most characteristic effects seem to proceed from a strange insensitivity to connotation; it is hard to imagine another American poet of his generation using ‘smooched’, ‘mosey away’ or ‘conk’ (as a synonym for *nose*) in a non-parodic context (Simic: *Selected*, p. 122, p. 137, p. 74).

Throughout his career, Simic’s poetry has been pulled in two directions: on the one hand, towards bricolage and chaos (taking the form of arbitrarily

¹³⁴ Quoted in Joseph Campbell, ‘Appendix #2: The Types of Story’, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Complete Fairy Tales* (Abingdon: Routledge 2002), p. 753.

¹³⁵ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Complete Fairy Tales* (Abingdon: Routledge 2002), p. 584.

¹³⁶ Anthony Libby, ‘Gloomy Runes and Loony Spoons: Review of Dave Smith and Charles Simic’, *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, January 12th 1986.

¹³⁷ Mark Ford, ‘Charles Simic’, *A Driftwood Altar: Essays and Reviews* (London: Waywiser, 2005), p. 234.

juxtaposed images), and on the other towards an extreme aesthetic sparseness and smoothness. Popa represents one extreme, while Ristović, whose guiding spirit is surely Hieronymous Bosch, arguably represents the other. (A detail from Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* has been used to illustrate the cover of *Devil's Lunch*.) What these two poles have in common is the possibility of a drastically simplified and curtailed syntax, a feature they share with what I have been describing as 'movement' Surrealism and most folkloric texts.

It may seem odd to identify restricted syntax as an artistic opportunity. The interplay of syntax and connotation, and the use of syntax to create fine gradations of meaning or ambiguity, are some of the most effective poetic techniques available. Donald Davie has described syntax as 'the very nerve of poetry'.¹³⁸ A writer who voluntarily hobbles his or her syntax, it might be argued, is as hopeless as a writer who voluntarily hobbles his or her sound.

Indeed, there are many effects Simic's poetry is incapable of. We have seen in our discussion of 'Cold Blue Tinge' how Simic's plain syntax can contribute towards the creation of unsettling ambiguities. When Simic writes 'But there's no reply. / The bubbles are quiet', he invokes a terrifying causality between the two statements, drawing out our apprehension of the boy's disappearance so that it dawns on us with the same slowness that it must dawn on the mother. The trick is magnificent, but Simic's poetics would not be able to achieve the reverse effect, in which possible alternative interpretations are navigated carefully between. Where he tries for such an effect, as in the final lines of 'In Midsummer Quiet' (Simic: *Selected*, p. 58), it is often simply disorienting:

Resuming, farther on,
Intermittently,
By the barn
Where the first stars are –
In quotation marks,
As it were – O phantom

Bird!

¹³⁸ Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse and Articulate Energy* (Manchester: Carcanet 2006), p. 217.

Dreaming of my own puzzles
And mazes.

The reader will almost inevitably mistake what is ‘in quotation marks’ for the stars, rather than the birdsong, and will try and connect ‘Dreaming’ with the whippoorwill itself. These ambiguities are not productive of meaning in the same way as the examples discussed from ‘Cold Blue Tinge’. Rather, they come across as merely confused.

A restricted syntax, however, is capable of achieving effects that would not be possible through other means. Most crucially to Simic’s own purpose, it can be used to create a sense of accumulation, image by image and often line by line. This sense is deepened through Simic’s idiosyncratic punctuation: his initial capitals for lines (again, like the slang he favours, vaguely archaic and out-of-date), and most obviously his commas, often appearing at the line-ends in places where they are grammatically unnecessary. As in Emily Dickinson, each line feels like a unit, and at its best a syllogistic inevitability can emerge, which would remain off-limits to a more complex syntax. Simic’s occasional use of a rhyming couplet to conclude his poem has the air of a *quod erat demonstrandum* (as in ‘Cold Blue Tinge’, but also ‘The Clocks of the Dead’, ‘The White Room’ and others: Simic: *Selected*, p. 79, p. 107).

Simic’s Euclid poems, then, arise from concerns at the centre of his practice, and indeed represent that practice in microcosm. How can logic, geometry and causality be imposed on what he has described elsewhere as our ‘rickety world’ (Simic: *Selected*, p. 90)? ‘Movement’ surrealists reject such an imposition entirely, and causality in their poems and artworks is correspondingly oblique or non-existent. Simic follows the route of Popa and Ristović, which Hughes was correct to identify as ‘the surrealism of folklore’: a greatly reduced causality, similar to that found in folk literature, for which Simic’s stripped-down syntax serves as scaffolding.

‘Invisible reference’: Tom Paulin, Seamus Heaney, Ciaran Carson and the Eastern Europeans

In ‘Plate Glass’, the third of the four-poem sequence ‘Jefferson’s Virginia’, Tom Paulin describes the translator’s predicament:

The Swedish poet
is reading his new work.
It’s not a problem for me –
a team of nine men
has glossed his typescripts
into wried English.
Like bodyguards in cheapo suits
they must stick around
at this seminar on the private life.¹³⁹

The poem is essentially a meditation on the ways in which translations can fail. The verb ‘glossed’ implies a slavishly useless word-for-word production, both in its primary denotation of *notation* and its secondary denotation of *polish*. (The echo between ‘glossed’ and the title’s plate ‘glass’ brings the secondary meaning into focus.) Like plate glass, the ‘gloss’ is both transparent and impermeable, and represents a particular sort of translation Paulin objects to: the ‘form of translationese which always runs with a fake, smooth facility’ he identifies in a review of Peter Levi.¹⁴⁰ ‘Wried’, an archaic word meaning *twisted* or *wrung*, is more troublesome. It undermines the surface smoothness of ‘glossed’ to proffer another type of mistranslation: the style of translation, perhaps, which Paulin himself comes closest to. Lowell, in his introduction to *Imitations*, writes of how he has ‘been reckless with literal meaning... dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered metre and intent’, and Ian Samsom is correct to diagnose the same impulse in his review of Paulin’s collected translations, *The Road to Inver*.¹⁴¹ Finally, ‘Anglish’ (a so-called ‘English linguistic purism’,

¹³⁹ Tom Paulin, ‘Jefferson’s Virginia’, *Fivemiletown* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 21.

¹⁴⁰ Tom Paulin, ‘Risks’, *London Review of Books* 7 / 14, 1 August 1985, p. 23.

¹⁴¹ Ian Samsom, ‘Inimitable Imitations’, *The Guardian*, 18 December 2004.

displaying itself as a strong preference for Germanic-origin over French-origin words), suggests a third type of mistranslation.¹⁴²

A too-smooth ‘gloss’, a too-warped ‘wried’ and a too-eccentric ‘English’ are all failures of different sorts, a point driven home by the ‘team of nine men’. But the poem’s last three lines shift in tone from the ridiculous to the faintly threatening, as the translators become intruders on ‘the private life’. An immediate, obvious association is with secret policemen and surveillance states. The ‘typescripts’ (suggesting *transcripts*), ‘cheapo suits’ and ‘team’ all carry undertones of interrogation, and even the ‘plate glass’ faintly suggests an interrogation cell’s glass partition. I suggest this association is deliberate, and intended to remind us of the political significance of translation. And almost certainly the poet Paulin has in mind, in this case, is not Swedish but Polish.

The literature of Eastern and Central Europe has had a substantial, if oblique, impact on Paulin’s poetry. It is most visible at a thematic level, informing Paulin’s choice and treatment of subject-matter. The most substantial shared concern is the intersection of poetry and the state, and the different (sometimes conflicting) responsibilities of the poet and the citizen.

Zbigniew Herbert is a particularly important influence in this context. ‘Plate Glass’, for instance, may have been partially inspired by Herbert’s poem ‘On Translating Poetry’. This poem, which imagines the translator as ‘an awkward bumble-bee’ attempting to squeeze into the centre of the flower, ‘where the scent and sweetness are’, shares with ‘Plate Glass’ a deep scepticism about the possibility of translation, and the idea that a poem’s central core is necessarily private. In Paulin’s piece, as we have seen, the translators are faintly sinister. Herbert’s bee is not remotely sinister, rather coming across like a character in one of Aesop’s fables, ‘very proud / and loudly buzzing: / I have been inside’.¹⁴³ Furthermore, Herbert’s bee, although he may not ‘penetrate / from the cups of flowers / to their roots’, at least performs the valuable service of pollinating other flowers. ‘For the Polish poet’, Paulin has written, ‘translation is

¹⁴² The word was coined facetiously by Paul Jennings, *I Was Joking of Course* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1968).

¹⁴³ Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). These translations, along with others by Czesław Miłosz and Peter Dale Scott, are those used by Paulin in his chapters on Zbigniew Herbert in *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber and Faber 1992), pp. 204-217.

an essential part of the struggle to achieve “conscience”¹⁴⁴. Herbert’s bee sees translation as a struggle in itself (‘still he perseveres’), while Paulin’s narrator brushes aside the difficulties with ‘It’s not a problem for me’. (Herbert was not a translator, and at the time of writing ‘On Translating Poetry’ had never been translated, whereas Paulin is one of the leading translators among contemporary Irish poets.)

This is a substantial catalogue of differences between the two poems, which should not distract from their crucial shared territory. Both poets depict the act of translation as something inherently ridiculous, because inherently impossible: the bodyguards ‘*must* stick around’ (and so undermine) ‘the seminar on the private life’, while once the bee has ‘knock[ed] his head / against the yellow pistil’, Herbert writes, ‘here already is the end’.

The word ‘seminar’ in ‘Plate Glass’ is likely to remind us of one of Paulin’s most famous poems, ‘Where Art is a Midwife’ (first printed in *The Strange Museum*, 1980).¹⁴⁵ The inspiration for this poem was an anecdote related to Paulin by an unnamed Polish poet:

In Poland writers are regarded as the embodiments and custodians of the national conscience, and this necessarily means they must face or try to elude the censor (some years ago a Polish poet and translator informed me that censors have to attend regular practical criticism classes in order to spot symbolism, ambiguity, subversive irony etc.)

(Paulin: *Ireland*, p. 212)

On first reading, the resulting poem appears to make no use of the devices mentioned. The poem’s irony seems gentle, not ‘subversive’, as both the writer and the likely reader operate in societies free from totalitarian censorship, and ‘symbolism’, except in the examples which the lecturer provides, seems non-existent.

This reading is too cursory. As Paulin writes in his essay on translation,

¹⁴⁴ Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1984), p. 213. Hereafter Paulin: *Ireland*.

¹⁴⁵ Tom Paulin, *Selected Poems 1972-1990* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 35.

During the last ten years, many Irish poets have been translated into Polish and this is partly because Poles see an analogy between their country's fate and Ireland's. Although this analogy seems vulnerable at certain points [...], it means that a translation of any Irish poem has an invisible reference to the idea of being dominated by a foreign power. To translate and publish an Irish poem in Poland is therefore to make a statement which is both political and aesthetic.

(Paulin: *Ireland*, p. 214)

'Where Art is a Midwife' works by turning this 'invisible reference' on its head, and in doing so reveals the 'certain points' at which the analogy turns 'vulnerable'. The poem's title is taken from Auden's *New Year Letter*:

Art is not life, and cannot be
A midwife to society...¹⁴⁶

Paulin subtly disentangles the two clauses. The censors require classes in practical criticism *because* 'art is not life'. The state, which believes in the political potency of art, can create competent censors only by creating competent (and therefore dangerous) readers: the underlying irony is that the act of censorship itself is what makes art 'a midwife to society'. If we read the poem's final lines as being spoken by the lecturer, we must picture the seminar group he is addressing as unresponsive and silent, a silence which implies either incomprehension or complicity in subversion. The identification of the censors with the censored has been set up early on, when the censors are described as 'on day-release'. The full name of the 'town of Z-' may have been struck through, but we are instantly able to place it in Eastern Europe, the poem's self-censorship revealing as much as it conceals. The confusion in 'third decade of March' perhaps hints towards *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the most famous work describing a censor who is also a revolutionary: 'To begin with, he did not know with any certainty that this *was* 1984...it was never possible nowadays to pin down any date within a year or two'.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ W.H. Auden, *New Year's Letter*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 201.

¹⁴⁷ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. London: Penguin 1955. p9

But ‘third decade of March’ also seems to be a reference to the decimal timekeeping imposed during the French Revolution, and such an odd allusion should alert us again to the fact that there is more going on in the poem than meets the eye.¹⁴⁸ Paulin is often extremely self-critical, and Edna Longley is mistaken to assert that he ‘cannot temper the extremist techniques of satire for the purposes of inward dissection’.¹⁴⁹ In fact, through the dubious exegeses of the lecturer/narrator, Paulin seems to subvert a subsequent poem in the same collection, ‘The Other Voice’.¹⁵⁰ (This is a repeated technique of Paulin’s. ‘A Written Answer’, for instance, undermines ‘The Book of Juniper’, and similarly employs a very unreliable narrator.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, other parts of ‘The Other Voice’ make reference to different poems in *The Strange Museum*, especially ‘Trotsky in Finland’.)

The first unnamed poem in ‘Where Art is a Midwife’ bears a very strong resemblance to the third section of ‘The Other Voice’. The poem described over two lines in ‘Where Art is a Midwife’ contains ‘lost gardens’, ‘wine’ and ‘subtle shade’; within four lines, ‘The Other Voice’ has mentioned ‘dreams of gardens’, ‘a glass of wine’ and ‘pungent shade’. A ‘subtle voice’ (the ‘other voice’ of the title) appears in the poem’s sixth section. ‘Sonnets sing of the old order’ echoes in ‘Life, my dear, is a fixed order’. Furthermore, ‘The Other Voice’ continues Paulin’s engagement with the extract from *New Year Letter*:

What does a poem serve?
 Only the pure circle of itself.
 Now, between two coasts,

 The servants of the state
 Doze to the drum of engines.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn., definition of ‘decade’, 2b: ‘A period of ten days, substituted for a week in the French Republican calendar of 1793.’

¹⁴⁹ Edna Longley, ‘Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland’, *The Crane Bag* 9 / 1 (1985), p. 30.

¹⁵⁰ Tom Paulin, *The Strange Museum* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 42-47.

¹⁵¹ Gareth Reeves, ‘Tom Paulin: Writing from the Edges’, *Essays on Modern Irish Literature*, ed. John Strachan and Alison O’Malley-Younger (Tyne and Wear: University of Sunderland Press, 2007), p. 139-140.

¹⁵² Tom Paulin, ‘The Other Voice’, *The Strange Museum* (London: Faber and Faber 1980), p. 45.

The lecturer/narrator condemns the poem as ‘formal and bourgeois’, as well as implicitly subversive. In fact, however, ‘The Other Voice’ disowns the possibility of a political poetry; the narrator calls this sort of poetry a ‘parody of song’. The narrator of ‘Where Art is a Midwife’ is attacking a poem which openly refutes his own reading of it; rather than being ‘subtle’ (i.e. potentially subversive), the shade in the garden is unsubtly ‘pungent’, and in any case this section of ‘The Other Voice’ apparently comes down on the side of a poetical quietism, in which the poem has no responsibility to anything but ‘the pure circle of itself’. (The attitude is the polar opposite of the one Paulin attributes to Polish poets, the ‘embodiments and custodians of the national conscience’.) The poem’s irony extends into self-criticism, without drawing an explicit parallel between the unnamed Eastern European country and Paulin’s own situation in Northern Ireland.

The second poem discussed in the censors’ seminar is also identifiable. ‘The poem about a bear’ which is simultaneously ‘not a poem about a bear’ is almost certainly Kipling’s ‘The Truce of the Bear’, in which the untrustworthy bear Adam-Zad is a very thinly veiled allegory for Russia.¹⁵³ The poem was routinely employed as anti-Communist propaganda by the UK and the USA throughout the fifties and sixties.¹⁵⁴ (Paulin has written on the use of Kipling as propaganda by Loyalist shipyard workers in 1980s Belfast.)¹⁵⁵

The choice of such an obvious piece of propaganda as an illustration of symbolism is telling: ‘Where Art is a Midwife’ obviously takes the side of the dissident poet against the Soviet censor, but also subtly critiques alignments of politics and literature nearer to home. ‘The types of ambiguity / Are as numerous as the enemies // Of the state’ is surely a reference to James Jesus Angleton, the CIA’s director of counter-intelligence and an important McCarthyite, who was an early champion of Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and founded (at Harvard) the literary journal *Furioso*. (Intelligence and counter-intelligence are fascinations of Paulin: he has written extensively, for instance, on John Le Carré. Angleton had resigned around the time that the poem was being composed, and

¹⁵³ Rudyard Kipling, ‘The Truce of the Bear’, *The Five Nations* (London: Methuen, 1913), p. 44-48.

¹⁵⁴ See, i.e.: Anon., ‘Communists: News of Adam-Zad’, *Time* magazine LV / 1 (1950).

¹⁵⁵ Tom Paulin, *Crusoe’s Secret: The Aesthetics of Dissent* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 264.

was much in the news.) The link between censorship and competent criticism, Paulin seems to suggest, is not one-way; a censor must be trained in criticism, but equally this implies that any critic is qualified to become a censor. If, in response to the poem's final question, we can answer that we 'understand', we are at risk of changing places with the questioner. The poem enacts this process in its curiously shifting voice. We begin in a gentle, teasing third-person, which somewhere before the penultimate stanza has transformed into the first-person voice of the lecturer, a voice not at all dissimilar to Paulin's own. The web of allusions requires the reader to interrogate the poem in the same way as a censor. The poem complicates the differences between criticism and censorship, not to say the differences between poetry and propaganda ('The Other Voice' and 'The Truce of the Bear').

Of the Irish poets writing during the boom in Eastern European poetry in translation, Paulin's poetic response is perhaps the most sustained. The response of Seamus Heaney to this wave of translations has been most noticeable in his criticism, particularly the essays and lectures collected in *The Government of the Tongue*.¹⁵⁶ As Justin Quinn has noted, in his essay entitled 'Seamus Heaney and Eastern Europe', Heaney's 'position as one of the most important and publicly acclaimed poets in the anglophone world made his advocacy of these poets [Mandelstam, Brodsky, Miłosz, Herbert and Holub] extremely significant'.¹⁵⁷ The essay discusses in detail Heaney's shifting critical engagement with these poets, an engagement Quinn describes as 'paradoxically, both profound and superficial': profound because Heaney identifies the Slavic poets as moral exemplars, superficial because, for a poet so centrally concerned with etymology and the role of language in national consciousness, his speculations on 'how [these poets] sounded in the original' are often facile (Quinn: 'Heaney and Eastern Europe' p93-4). Heaney himself has described how these poets affected him, in an interview with Dennis O'Driscoll:

¹⁵⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988). Hereafter: Heaney: *Government*.

¹⁵⁷ Justin Quinn, 'Heaney and Eastern Europe', *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, ed. Bernard O'Donoghue (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 92-93. Hereafter Quinn: 'Heaney and Eastern Europe'.

Eastern-European poetry – or rather what I know of it from the Penguin Modern European Poets series – was at one and the same time a *viaticum* and a *vade mecum*. It was nurture, but it was also injunction: it enjoined you to be true to poetry as a solitary calling, not to desert the poet, to hold on at the crossroads where truth and beauty intersect.¹⁵⁸

It is interesting to contrast Heaney's description of Eastern European poetry as a *viaticum* – the Eucharist administered as part of the last rites, its name deriving from the Latin for *provisions for a journey* – with Paulin's metaphor for the same poetry. 'It proffers a basic ration of the Word, like a piece of bread and chocolate in wartime', Paulin suggests in the Introduction to *The Faber Book of Political Verse*.¹⁵⁹ A *viaticum* may be a 'basic ration'; but its importance derives from its ritual context, rather than the sustenance it offers. Describing his initial reaction to Miłosz's poetry, Heaney notes the centrality of this context to his own judgement with remarkable candour:

It counted for much that this poem ['Incantation'] was written by somebody who had resisted the Nazi occupation of Poland and had broken from the ranks of the People's Republic after the war and paid for the principle and pain of all that with a lifetime of exile and self-scrutiny. The poem, in fact, is a bonus accruing to a life lived in the aftermath of right and hurtful decisions, and it elicits the admiration of English-speaking readers because of this extra-literary consideration.

(Heaney: *Government*, p. 38)

The ideals developed here, as Quinn notes, would never be applied by Heaney to a poet writing in English. The very idea of 'extra-literary consideration' is attacked, in Heaney's T.S. Eliot lecture on Sylvia Plath: 'I do not in fact see how poetry can survive as a category of human consciousness if it does not put poetic considerations first' (Heaney: *Government* 166). The contradiction goes unacknowledged; both passages even note that they are speaking 'in fact'. (Clare Cavanagh, in an early examination of Heaney's Eastern European influences, suggests that Heaney might apply these ideals to *himself*: that 'the opposition

¹⁵⁸ Dennis O'Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber 2008), p. 297. Hereafter O'Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*.

¹⁵⁹ Tom Paulin (ed.), *The Faber Book of Political Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 52.

[between ‘Song’ and ‘Suffering’]...haunts Heaney’s writing from early on’. This perhaps makes more sense of what has provoked Heaney into this contradiction, but does not resolve it.)¹⁶⁰

By 2008, this conflict has not been resolved, but it has been smoothed over somewhat. Miłosz’s ‘intellect wasn’t forced to choose between “perfection of the life or of the work” – it was forced to meld them’, Heaney suggests to O’Driscoll (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 301). (This is a little closer to his earlier position on Plath: ‘It was precisely those “intense personal needs” which gave her works its unprecedented pitch and scald’ (Heaney: *Government*, p. 168).) Heaney’s introduction to Miłosz’s 2004 *Selected Poems*, similarly, noted that Miłosz’s ‘credibility was and remains the thing’, but also praises the poetry for its ‘grievous force’.¹⁶¹ Although the influence of ‘Eastern European exemplars’ on Heaney’s own work is largely dismissed in *Stepping Stones* (‘I would tend to “colour in”, whereas they were very much for the black and white line drawing’: O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones* p298), a partial exception is made for Miłosz. In the course of the interview, Heaney mentions four Miłosz poems as ‘essential’ to him: ‘Child of Europe’, ‘*Oeconomia Divinia*’, ‘What Once Was Great’ and ‘Blacksmith Shop’ (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 301, p. 303).¹⁶²

Indeed, ‘Blacksmith Shop’, first published in Miłosz’s 1993 collection *Provinces* and translated by Robert Hass, may have been influenced by Heaney.¹⁶³ ‘The Forge’, from *Door into the Dark*, has many compelling parallels:¹⁶⁴

...bent into a horseshoe,
Thrown in a bucket of water, sizzle, steam.

¹⁶⁰ Clare Cavanagh, ‘From the Republic of Conscience: Seamus Heaney and Eastern European Poetry’, *Harvard Review* 6 (1994), p. 107.

¹⁶¹ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Door Stands Open’, introduction to Czesław Miłosz, *Selected Poems 1931 – 2004* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. xiii. Note, incidentally, the title Heaney has chosen for this introduction, and its relevance to the first line of a poem (‘The Forge’) which will be discussed in the next paragraph: ‘All I know is a door into the dark’.

¹⁶² Although it goes unmentioned in *Stepping Stones*, it is hard to believe that the poet who wrote *Death of a Naturalist* would not have also been drawn to Miłosz’s ‘Diary of a Naturalist’, also in the Ecco Press volume to which Heaney described himself as ‘in thrall’ (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 301).

¹⁶³ Czesław Miłosz, ‘Blacksmith Shop’, *Provinces*, trans. Czesław Miłosz and Robert Hass (Manchester: Carcanet 1993), p. 1.

¹⁶⁴ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Forge’, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber 1998), p. 19). Hereafter Heaney: *OG*.

(‘Blacksmith’s Shop’)

The unpredictable fantail of sparks,
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.

(‘The Forge’)

Both sonnets draw subdued parallels between the work of the blacksmith and the work of the poet; both feature catalogues of evocative ironmongery lying in grass outside the forge (Heaney’s ‘old axles and iron hoops’, Miłosz’s ‘ploughshares, sledge runners, harrows waiting for repair’), far more characteristic of Heaney’s work than Miłosz’s up to that point. Both poems foreground the ‘bellows’ (Heaney in his poem’s last line, Miłosz in his first). ‘Blacksmith Shop’ was written shortly after Miłosz had stayed with Heaney, who had introduced him at a poetry reading at Harvard in 1992 (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 301).

But while I think it very likely that Heaney’s ‘The Forge’ was the primary influence on ‘Blacksmith Shop’, the final two lines of Miłosz’s poem are an important influence on Heaney’s subsequent work: ‘I stare and stare. It seems I was called for this: / To glorify things just because they are’. Heaney has offered an extensive reading of these lines in *Stepping Stones*:

The line is from a poem, so it has the free-floating status of poetic utterance, and you have to take it in relation to Miłosz’s philosophical convictions, his observation, for example, that the ideal occupation for a poet is the contemplation of the word *is*. It’s all of a piece with his impulse to contemplate the ‘motionless point’. But it obviously represents only one side of what he knows and feels, [...] only one side in the quarrel with himself that gives rise to the poetry.

(O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 304)

If ‘Blacksmith Shop’ is, as Heaney convincingly argues, an expression of Miłosz’s ‘philosophical convictions’, his own poem ‘Postscript’, from *The Spirit Level* (1996), must also count as Miłoszian (Heaney: *OG*, p. 444). As with ‘Blacksmith Shop’, the penultimate lines of ‘Postscript’ find the poet turning into

a ‘motionless point’: ‘You are neither here nor there, / A hurry through which known and strange things pass...’. The rush of abstract nouns in the final four lines of the poem recalls Heaney’s comments on Miłosz’s ‘Incantation’: ‘The poem was, for example, full of abstractions...these unabashed abstract nouns and conceptually aerated adjectives should have been altogether out of the question’ (Heaney: *Government*, p. 37). In an interview with Steven Ratiner, Heaney has linked the increased turn towards such ‘conceptually aerated’ language in his own poetry with the death of his parents: ‘Now in one moment there is life, now there is not life [...] It gives you a lack of shyness opposite words like “spirit”, “soul”, “life”, whatever. So that is the turn, the crisis, the emboldening of language towards the ineffable areas’.¹⁶⁵ I suggest that, while Heaney’s personal circumstances no doubt accounted for this ‘turn’, it was in part the example of Miłosz that showed him how such abstractions could be accommodated in poetry.

Heaney composed ‘Postscript’ quickly, while ‘completely absorbed in writing one of the last of the Oxford lectures’ (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 366). This lecture is likely to have been the one on Sylvia Plath (‘The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps’), which quotes in its entirety Miłosz’s ‘Ars Poetica?’. Parts of ‘Ars Poetica?’ again bring to mind the conclusion of ‘Postscript’:

You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings which come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

(Heaney: *OG*, p. 444)

The purpose of poetry is to remind us
How difficult it is to remain just one person,
For our house is open, there are no keys in our doors,
And invisible guests come in and out at will.

(‘Ars Poetica?’. Czesław Miłosz. Quoted in Heaney: *Government*, p. 167)

¹⁶⁵ Steven Ratiner, ‘Seamus Heaney: The Words Worth Saying’, interview with Seamus Heaney, *Christian Science Monitor* (7 October 1992), p. 16-17.

The ‘known and strange things’ which pass through the poet of ‘Postscript’ recall an earlier line of ‘Ars Poetica?’: Miłosz’s definition of poetry as ‘a thing brought forth which we didn’t know we had in us’. Similarly, Heaney’s ‘You are neither here nor there’ parallels Miłosz’s reminder of ‘how difficult it is to remain just one person’. There are other parallels: ‘come at the car sideways’ / ‘come in and out at will’, ‘blow it open’ / ‘our house is open’.

And yet ‘Ars Poetica?’, in the end, is a poem composed predominantly of abstractions, with only two concrete images (‘as if a tiger had come out / and stood in the light / lashing his tail’, and the poem-as-house metaphor in the quotation above) over its 36 lines. Heaney, even at his most ‘ineffable’, is still provoked into poetry by particular objects or events; as he notes, his tendency is to ‘colour in’. (The ‘big soft buffetings’ of ‘Postscript’ may amount to a heart-opening epiphany, but they are still realistically depicted gusts of wind ‘which come at the car sideways’.) Heaney has described some of the poems in *The Haw Lantern* as possessing a ‘plainspoken, translated feel’, with a ‘provenance [...] likely to be found in the Penguin Modern European Poets series’ (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 293), but even at their most gnomic these poems are still dependent for their effect on the precise handling of image and word. A man crosses a frontier ‘as if [he’d] passed from behind a waterfall / on the black current of a tarmac road’ (‘From the Frontier of Writing’. In Heaney: *OG*, p. 297); an inhabitant of ‘the Canton of Expectation’ ‘yearn[s] for hammerblows on clinkered planks, / the uncompromised report of driven thole-pins’ (‘From the Canton of Expectation’. In Heaney: *OG*, p. 320). Ian Hamilton, in a largely negative review of *The Haw Lantern*, picked up on both its Eastern European flavour and its essential parity with the rest of Heaney’s work:

There are signs, too, that Heaney has set himself to learn from the oblique, clandestine parables and allegories which poets of Eastern Europe use to fox the censors. I am not sure that he has a light enough touch for modes like these (and in any case does their ‘lightness’ not thrive on necessity?)¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Ian Hamilton, ‘Excusez-moi’, *London Review of Books*, 9 / 17 (1 October 1987), p. 11.

‘Lightness’, here, is surely the antithesis of Heaney’s much-vaunted ‘verbal richness’ which Hamilton identifies elsewhere in the review.

Heaney has suggested that these poems (‘From the Frontier of Writing’, ‘From the Republic of Conscience’, ‘From the Canton of Expectation’), as well as the much earlier ‘The Unacknowledged Legislator’s Dream’, were ‘conceived [...] as translations of an imaginary original’ (O’Driscoll: *Stepping Stones*, p. 181).¹⁶⁷ It is hard to know what to make of this statement. Heaney was an enthusiastic early critic of Christopher Reid’s *Katerina Brac* (a text which will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis), which takes to the extreme the idea of translation without an original, and which had been published two years before *The Haw Lantern*.¹⁶⁸ It may be that Heaney was simply using Reid’s concept to reflect on the ‘plainspoken, translated feel’ of his own work in *The Haw Lantern*. It can be argued, however, that considering the poems in this way makes them more interesting texts, and allows them to expand on Paulin’s concept of the ‘invisible reference’ (‘a translation of any Irish poem has an invisible reference to the idea of being dominated by a foreign power’. Paulin: *Ireland*, p. 214).

What is the supposed language of these poems’ ‘imaginary originals’? (This question is not as ridiculous as it might initially appear; there are several ‘translations’ of this sort which do have an identifiable original language, most notably the ‘Romanian’ ‘City of Lost Walks’ by Patrick McGuinness, discussed in the Conclusion to this thesis.) It seems clear that the imaginary place-names in the titles of the poems are all variations on or aspects of Ireland. ‘Frontier’ and ‘republic’ are both extremely connotative words for an Irish poet in the context of the Troubles, and the idea of a ‘canton’ (which blurs the division between a county and a separate sovereign state) is no less so.¹⁶⁹ Throughout the poems, the Irishness of the imaginary setting is made explicit:

Once a year we gathered in a field
Of dance platforms and tents where children sang
Songs they had learned by rote in the old language.

¹⁶⁷ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Unacknowledged Legislator’s Dream’, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 56

¹⁶⁸ Christopher Reid, *Katerina Brac* (London: Faber and Faber 1985).

¹⁶⁹ The Swiss cantons functioned as sovereign states historically and constitutionally. There may also be an echo of ‘cantred’, an early term for the Baronies of Ireland.

An auctioneer who had fought in the brotherhood
 Enumerated the humiliations
 We always took for granted, but not even he,
 I think, considered this a call to action.
 Iron mouthed loudspeakers shook the air
 Yet nobody felt blamed. He had confirmed us.

(‘From the Canton of Expectation’. In Heaney: *OG*, p. 319)

There are felicities of language here (‘enumerated the humiliations’), as well as subdued puns (‘confirmed’, with its secondary meaning of *received into Catholicism*). There is also a gentle, rueful irony: the fact that the enumeration is carried out by an ‘auctioneer’ turns the catalogue of ‘humiliations’ he proffers into something faintly ridiculous. (It is perhaps also worth noting that the ‘iron mouthed loudspeaker’ is a central feature of one of Reid’s *Katerina Brac* poems mentioned by Heaney, ‘Tin Lily’.) But far more prominent throughout the poem are the tropes of rural Ireland which Heaney has made his own; the ‘old language’, the ‘auctioneer’ (presumably of cattle; Heaney’s ‘Ancestral Photograph’ describes the replacement of cattle dealers by auctioneers), the ‘usual harassment / by militiamen on overtime at roadblocks’ described in the continuation of the quoted passage. The closest reference in tone and imagery may be the Gaelic *feis* described in Flann O’Brien’s *An Béal Bocht* (The Poor Mouth), though this holds up the scene of ‘dance platforms’, ‘tents’ and ‘the old language’ to more sustained ridicule than Heaney.¹⁷⁰

Yet the imagined original language can hardly be Heaney’s own Irished English; or can it? It is possible to read these poems as an expansion of Paulin’s idea of the ‘invisible reference’ between Irish and Polish poetry, treating them as a re-enactment of the experience of this reference for an English audience: in other words, an English-language re-creation of how a translated Irish poem appears in Poland. This reading offers an answer to Hamilton’s criticism that Heaney’s ‘parables and allegories’ in *The Haw Lantern*, unlike those of the Eastern European poets he has been influenced by, are not motivated by ‘necessity’; rather than a simple imitation, Heaney’s poetry becomes a

¹⁷⁰ Flann O’Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, trans. Patrick Power (London: Picador, 1973), p. 51-61.

commentary on those allegories, and the further allegory or ‘invisible reference’ identified by Paulin. This reading accounts, too, for Hamilton’s diagnosis of a lack of ‘lightness’ in these pieces; lines like ‘the uncompromised report of driven thole-pins’ can be read as deliberate exaggerations of Heaney’s technique, distortions of the sort which translation invariably produces. Similarly, an image in ‘From the Frontier of Writing’, ‘the black current of a tarmac road’, references and reworks an image from one of Heaney’s most famous poems, ‘The Graubelle Man’, whose eponymous bog body, ‘poured / in tar’, ‘seems to weep // the black river of himself’ (Heaney: *OG*, p. 115).

Distortions of translation, and unusual commonalities of historical experience, are two preoccupations of Ciaran Carson, another Irish poet whose work has several points of contact with Eastern Europe. (Matthew Reynolds has called Carson ‘the most polyglot of poets writing in, or in connection with, English’.)¹⁷¹ Carson, like Paulin, is fascinated by intelligence work, espionage and totalitarian systems of surveillance; Neal Alexander notes how his work often imagines Belfast as ‘an extensive carceral system of regulation and control predicated upon the ubiquity of surveillance and the insertion of individual civilian subjects into a fixed and segmented space’, and how in result ‘paranoia becomes a common reflex for many of Carson’s characters and a dominant note in the poems themselves’.¹⁷² The conclusion of an early poem, ‘Turn Again’, is typical: ‘Someone asks me for directions, and I think again. I turn into / A side street to try to throw off my shadow, and history is changed’.¹⁷³ (‘Turn into’ is a pun. The poem describes a map of proposed but non-existent Belfast streets, and this becomes a metaphor for the evasions and elisions of historical memory: ‘Today’s plan is already yesterday’s – the streets that were there are gone. / And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons.’)

But what Mark Ford describes as Carson’s ‘almost Joycean passion for specifics’ short-circuits any sustained ‘invisible reference’ to the Eastern European occupations in these early poems: ‘Eighties Belfast [is] presented with

¹⁷¹ Matthew Reynolds, ‘Jamming up the flax machine’, *London Review of Books* 25 / 9 (8 May 2003), p. 31.

¹⁷² Neal Alexander, *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing*, Liverpool English Texts and Studies 58 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), p. 102-103. Hereafter Alexander: *Space, Place, Writing*.

¹⁷³ Ciaran Carson, ‘Turn Again’, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Books, 2008), p. 125. Hereafter Carson: *Collected*.

the deadpan accuracy of a documentary'.¹⁷⁴ This changed with Carson's 2003 collection *Breaking News*, which also represented his most sustained formal departure from the long lines of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, a technique influenced heavily by C.K. Williams and Paul Muldoon. The lines of *Breaking News* are often only one or two words long, and largely unpunctuated, bearing a strong formal resemblance to the work of Tadeusz Różewicz. Furthermore, while the emphasis is still on the telling detail (a bombmaker's 'Marigold rubber gloves', a 'black flip- / top police / notebook': Carson: *Collected*, p. 454, p. 453), there is less of the intense localism and Irish folklore that characterised the earlier collections. The geography has become more expansive: 'The War Correspondent', for instance, is a sequence of found poems based on the dispatches of William Howard Russell from the Crimea (Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 470-485). In 'Exile', this expansive geography explicitly links Belfast with a vanished Eastern Europe:

night
after night

I walk

the smouldering
dark streets

Sevastopol
Crimea

Inkerman
Odessa

Balkan
Lucknow

Belfast
is many

places then

¹⁷⁴ Mark Ford, 'Sssnnnwhuffffll', *London Review of Books* 11 / 2 (19 January 1989), p. 14.

as now

all lie

in ruins

(‘Exile’, Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 466)

The selection of names (Sevastopol, Crimea, Inkerman, Odessa, Balkan, Lucknow) are street names in the West Falls district of Belfast, Carson’s ‘smouldering / dark streets’. (A similar list of street names – ‘Baklava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street’ – occurs in a much earlier poem by Carson, ‘Belfast Confetti’ (Carson: *Collected*, p. 93). ‘Exile’ foregrounds these street-names by placing them on individual lines.) Each is also an incomplete metaphor for Belfast: Sevastopol, Odessa and Lucknow were besieged and occupied, the parallels between Belfast and ‘Crimea’ are a constant trope in *Breaking News*, and the connotations of sectarianism and nationalisms in tension offered by ‘Balkan’ are also apt. But the syntax resists these metaphors: the initial impulse is to read ‘Belfast’ as a continuation of the list of place names, and ‘then / as now’, despite forming an apparent single clause, is broken over two lines. (‘...as now’, furthermore, chimes weirdly with ‘Lucknow’ four lines previously.) The suggestion that ‘all lie’ (e.g., that none of these parallels with Belfast are to be trusted) undermines the catalogue altogether, before resolving itself into ‘all lie / in ruins’.

The poem continues: ‘and / it is // as much / as I can do // to save / even one // from oblivion’. The slight hope is undermined by the uneasy par rhyme (even one / oblivion), which draws us back to the title: Carson is exiled from the history commemorated in the street names of the fragmented and ‘smouldering’ city. In another poem in *Breaking News*, ‘The Forgotten City’ (Carson: *Collected*, p. 461), the residents of suburban Belfast are ‘cut off [...] from the stream of / bulletins’ at the same time as being ‘closely surrounded / and almost touched by the famous and familiar’ (the ‘troubled zone’). Inhabitants of central Belfast, Carson suggests in ‘Exile’, are in the same position with regards to their city’s historical context and positioning.

Carson's 2008 collection *For All We Know* was a dramatic confirmation of the thematic broadening and experimentation with Eastern European motifs visible in *Breaking News*. A narrative develops over two sections, each consisting of 35 quasi-sonnets with duplicated titles. 'Gabriel', Carson's protagonist, describes his relationship with a woman called 'Nina' or 'Miranda': the names, like many details in the poem, seem permanently in flux. Although this relationship apparently began in Belfast in the 1970s ('We were in the Ulster milk bar I think they blew up back / in the Seventies'. Carson: *Collected*, p. 502), many of Gabriel's most vivid recollections are of time spent with (or away from) Nina in various European cities: Paris, Dresden and East Berlin. It is strongly hinted that both are involved with intelligence work; Jason Jones has described the sequence as consisting of 'cloak and dagger poems of false identities, of betrayals and assassinations'.¹⁷⁵ The penultimate poem describes Nina's death in a car accident in the French city of Nevers, the event whose 'staggered repeats' Gabriel seems fated to revisit continuously. The place-name recalls Carson's earlier sonnet sequence, *The Twelfth of Never*. Names, like many other minor details in *For All We Know*, are constantly significant: the collection's title is drawn from a song by Nina Simone, while Nina's alias / alter ego 'Miranda' has obvious Shakespearean parallels. David Lindley notes that 'memory for [Shakespeare's] Miranda, peering backward across the "abysm of time", is a guarantor of fixity, its certainty set against the delusion of dreams', a theme which recurs and is subverted by her namesake throughout *For All We Know*. The name's etymological relationship with *mirror*, in a sequence so obsessed with doubles and double lives, is also appropriate.¹⁷⁶

Most early reviewers of *For All We Know* picked up on one passage from 'The Shadow' as central to the sequence's concerns:

You know how you know when someone's telling lies? you said. They
Get their story right every time, down to the last word.

Whereas when they tell the truth it's never the same twice. They

¹⁷⁵ Jason Jones, 'Review of Ciaran Carson: *For All We Know*', *Bookslut* (July 2008), last accessed 20 September 2012, <http://www.bookslut.com/poetry/2008_07_013113.php>.

¹⁷⁶ David Lindley, 'Introduction', William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 12.

Reformulate. The day in question and whatever passed

Between them and the other can be seen in so many ways,
The way they sometimes ask themselves if it happened at all.

(‘The Shadow’. In Carson: *Collected*, p. 508)

Nina has learnt this, it turns out, from a conversation with an ex-Stasi interrogator over a beer in East Berlin. Carson’s own source may be the 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), in which the opening scene depicts a Stasi college of the sort Carson’s poem later describes (‘I learned that early on in their school before I became / interrogator’):

WIESLER: Do you notice anything about his statement?

STUDENT: It’s the same as at the beginning.

WIESLER: Exactly the same. Word for word. People who tell the truth can reformulate things, and they do.¹⁷⁷

Other poems in the sequence hint at other scenes from the film, and possibly Anna Funder’s 2003 *Stasiland*.¹⁷⁸ In ‘The Fetch’, during the interrogation of an unnamed prisoner, ‘they’ (presumably the Stasi) ‘take // a swab of his sweat from the vinyl chair in which he sat’, a genuine Stasi practice which allowed escaping prisoners to be tracked by dogs (and which is described in *Das Leben der Anderen* immediately after the dialogue quoted above). One poem, ‘Corrigendum’, seems to describe the entire film in précis: ‘I put what you call a bug in all of their light switches, / said the Stasi man, to entrap the couple by their words. // Their names had been put forward as what you call dissenters, / so I listened to all they had to say to each other’ (Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 512). In ‘Zugzwang’, ‘the puzzle women piece together the shredded files’ (Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 537). (‘Puzzle women’ are employed by the German government to reconstruct files which were shredded immediately after the collapse of the GDR.)

¹⁷⁷ *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), dir. Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006.

¹⁷⁸ Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta Books, 2003).

All these references develop the concept of truth in reformulation, the central theme of the sequence. The sweat sample, a memory in scent of the unlucky prisoner, is an embedded example of the recurring trope of memorable perfumes (in particular, the ironically-named *Je Reviens*: Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 514, p. 535, p. 542, p. 563, p. 585 etc.)¹⁷⁹ The puzzle women reconstruct attempted erasures of history, while the ‘Stasi man’ in ‘Corrigendum’ turns out to be, perhaps, a false memory himself: ‘When I came to the next day and tried to make sense of it / all the pages were blank and I never saw him again’.

Many poems in the sequence are reformulations themselves. Words and titles shift meanings: in the first poem entitled ‘The Fetch’, for example, *fetch* is an archaic term for *doppelgänger*, while the second poem with that title uses the word in a different sense, to mean the distance a wave has travelled. Some poems pick up on motifs and themes from Carson’s other collections: ‘The helicopter hovering on its down-swash of noise’ (‘Revolution’. Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 549) is familiar from several poems in *Breaking News* (i.e. ‘Spin Cycle’, ‘Minus’. Carson: *Collected Poems*, p. 456, p. 462).

One poem, ‘Peace’, takes these reformulations still further (Carson: *Collected*, p. 533):

Back then you wouldn’t know from one day to the next what might
happen next. Everything was, as it were, provisional,

slipping from the unforeseeable into tomorrow
even as the jittery present became history.

What kinds of times are these, you’d say, when a conversation
is deemed a crime because it includes so much that is said?

The last two lines of the quoted passage are a fairly close translation of Paul Celan’s ‘Ein Blatt, baumlos’ [A leaf, treeless], ignoring Celan’s lineation (and

¹⁷⁹ Ironic because Nina wears it on her trip to Nevers, from which she will not return. Resonant or self-referential product names are a recurring trope of the sequence. See, for instance, the name of shops in ‘Pas De Deux’: ‘Second Time Round’, ‘Double Exposure’, ‘Déjà Vu’, ‘Second Début’ (Carson: *Collected*, p. 551)

with the addition of ‘you’d say’).¹⁸⁰ But ‘Ein Blatt, baumlos’ is in itself a reformulation and response to a famous passage in a late poem of Bertolt Brecht, ‘An die Nachgeborenen’ [To those born later]:

Was sind das für Zeiten, wo
Ein Gespräch über Bäume fast ein Verbrechen ist
Weil es ein Schweigen über so viele Untaten einschließt!

[‘What kind of times are these, when / A talk about trees is almost a crime / Because it implies silence about so many horrors?’]¹⁸¹

Carson’s version deliberately ironises Celan’s reworking, by making it a part of a ‘conversation’ in itself (‘you’d say’); there is a subdued implication that Celan’s poem is necessarily part of a conversation, whether it wants to be or not. The question asked by both Brecht and Celan, ‘What kind of times are these’, is undercut by Carson’s opening stanzas: the ‘jittery present’ seems scarcely to exist at all, ‘slipping’ directly ‘from the unforeseeable into tomorrow’. While Celan’s poem is haunted by the Holocaust (the ‘tree, leafless’, unable to be rendered explicitly), Carson’s poem locates itself among the complexities and ambiguities of the Irish peace process; the word ‘provisional’, in this context, connotes both the ‘Provisional Government of all Ireland’ tentatively established during the Easter Rising of 1916, and the Provisional IRA. Carson has also made an important change in his appropriation of Celan: for Celan’s ‘a conversation / is almost a crime’, Carson has ‘a conversation / is deemed a crime’. Celan’s poem exists within (and is, indeed, a legislator for) a stable moral framework, however hard particular moral judgements may be to reckon within that framework; Carson’s moral terrain is shifting, ‘jittery’ and legalistic. ‘Whom can we prosecute when no-one is left fit to speak?’, the poem’s protagonist wonders. This ambiguous morality of peace and reconstruction is paralleled with the sequence’s other background reconstruction, the German reunification after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The ‘invisible reference’ here is a longstanding trope of

¹⁸⁰ ‘Was sind das für Zeiten, / wo ein Gespräch / beinah ein Verbrechen ist / weil es soviel Gesagtes / mit einschließt?’ In Michael Hamburger’s translation, the passage runs: ‘What times are these / when a conversation / is almost a crime / because it includes / so much made explicit?’

¹⁸¹ Translation by John Willett. Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913-1956*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 318. Leeder, in *After Brecht: A Celebration* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2006) improves ‘talk’ to ‘conversation’ but otherwise leaves the translation unchanged.

Carson's; parallels with the Belfast 'Peace Walls' and the Berlin Wall have been continuously fruitful for him. (We have already seen how Neal Alexander notes Carson's fascination with 'segmented spaces': these become the 'Velcro Celtic Twilight Zone', in one of Carson's memorable formulations. ('D: Letters from the Alphabet'. In Carson: *Collected*, p. 287.))

Paulin, Heaney and Carson all engage with a vision of Eastern Europe mediated through Eastern European poetry in translation. The 'invisible reference' identified by Paulin, the 'idea of being dominated by a foreign power' held in common between the two poetries, allows them more leeway in this engagement than their English counterparts. In 'Where Art is a Midwife', Paulin employs it to interrogate ideas of censorship and interpretation. Heaney's 'imaginary translations', meanwhile, examine and recreate the effect of this 'invisible reference' for an English-speaking audience. The concept similarly gives Carson licence to appropriate Celan's lines on the Holocaust, and to draw parallels between the Irish peace process and German reunification which English poets might resist. (James Fenton's 'A German Requiem' offers an example of how tentatively and reservedly English poets have approached these issues. Fenton's reference to a 'priest-hole' suggests a parallel between persecutions of Catholics in England and the Holocaust, but the poem withdraws from this analogy almost instantly and, perhaps advisedly, does not pursue it.)¹⁸²

Given these imaginative links, it is perhaps surprising that so few Irish poets have translated or made versions of Eastern European poetry. (The Romanian poet Marin Sorescu is a rare exception; Sorescu, though, had a particular affinity for Ireland, and visited often.¹⁸³ His translators into English, as usual working from literal versions, include Paul Muldoon, Seamus Heaney, and John F. Deane.)¹⁸⁴ This may be in part due to the need for translations of Irish Gaelic material, and the tendency for such material to dominate the translation lists of Irish publishing houses. Interest in Eastern European poets among Irish

¹⁸² James Fenton, 'A German Requiem', *The Memory of War and Children in Exile: Poems 1968-1983* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 18.

¹⁸³ John Fairleigh, 'Introduction', *Sorescu's Choice: Young Romanian Poets* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2002).

¹⁸⁴ Muldoon's translations of Sorescu are included in *When the Tunnels Meet*, ed. John Fairleigh (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1996). Heaney's are included in *The Biggest Egg in the World* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1987). John F. Deane has translated Sorescu's *The Youth of Don Quixote* (Dublin: Dedalus, 1987).

poets arose fairly late. Heaney's first encounter with the work of Miłosz, described in *The Government of the Tongue*, was as late as the early 1980s (Heaney: *Government*, p. 38). Part of the reason for this may be due to the relative dearth of Eastern and Central European refugees in Ireland in the 1950s and 60s, as compared to London (see Introduction to this thesis). Furthermore, in his introduction to *The Poetry of Survival*, Daniel Weissbort identified an 'inertness' in the English literary scene 'as it seemed to us' (e.g., certain poets who began writing in the 50s). (A similar quality is identified by Alvarez in his important 1962 essay, 'The New Poetry, or Beyond the Gentility Principle'.)¹⁸⁵ A similar diagnosis of Irish poetry at the time would have been near-impossible; there is far more continuity between (for instance) Heaney and Patrick Kavanagh or Louis MacNeice than between (for instance) Hughes and Auden or Spender. However, explanations which focus on a single factor to explain broad trends in literature will inevitably be reductive.

¹⁸⁵ Al Alvarez, 'Introduction: The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle', *The New Poetry*, ed. Al Alvarez (London: Penguin, 1962), pp. 1-15.

‘Translating’ Folklore: Richard Berengarten’s *In a Time of Drought*

Richard Berengarten’s *In a Time of Drought* consists of a seven-part poetic sequence, itself the second part of Berengarten’s ‘Balkan Trilogy’, and a large amount of supplementary material.¹⁸⁶ (The postscript, glossary and notes take up almost a third of the book.) In its use of the poetic sequence as an organising principle, as well as its creation of ‘myth-worlds of universal significance’, it has a close affinity with the work of Vasko Popa.¹⁸⁷ The second part of *In a Time of Drought* is actually dedicated to Popa. Francis Jones has also drawn connections between Berengarten and the Bosnian poet Mak Dizdar, specifically through their employment of what he terms ‘existentialist cosmologies’ and their employment of Slavic folklore (Jones, 289).

The redemptive power of folklore and its limitations are, in fact, the central themes of *In a Time of Drought*. Berengarten has called the sequence a ‘response to the events between 1989 and 2001 in Yugoslavia’ (Berengarten *ITD* 73): unlike Book 1 of the Balkan Trilogy, *The Blue Butterfly*, this response is not limited to a historical and personal account but actually enacts a ceremony of healing and reconciliation, reaching its climax in Part 6 (‘For Dodola (ii)’), in lines inviting the pre-Christian Slavic rain god Perun to

Pull the rain down cleanse purify
Fields where our premature dead now lie¹⁸⁸

‘Cleanse’ and ‘purify’ have medical connotations, as well as political and religious ones, and the poem makes much of this interplay. The poem calls on an absent doctor just as it calls on an absent god and goddess (‘where is the doctor trained or inclined / To cut out the cancers that rot the mind’: Berengarten *ITD* 18), searches for an ‘antidote or remedy’ (Berengarten *ITD* 19), and names the rainmaiden herself as a ‘heal[er]’ (Berengarten *ITD* 58). The poem not only

¹⁸⁶ Richard Berengarten, *In a Time of Drought* (Cambridge: Salt, 2008). Hereafter Berengarten *ITD*.

¹⁸⁷ Francis Jones, ‘In a Balkan Light: Richard Berengarten and the South Slav Cultural Space’, *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (Cambridge: Salt, 2011), p. 289. Hereafter Jones: *Balkan Light*. Two of Popa’s most famous sequences, *Wolf Salt* and *Secondary Heaven*, are also made up of seven sections, each consisting of seven poems.

¹⁸⁸ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 54.

interrogates and searches for these absent figures, it invokes them ('Come dance and bring down gentle rain': Berengarten *ITD* 59). The poet has himself advocated the presence of the 'vatic and shamanic' in poetry: in *In a Time of Drought*, these elements find their most explicit realisation.¹⁸⁹

Poems which take the form of invocations raise several questions. Does the poet literally believe in the presence they invoke? If so, does the reader need to share this belief in order to find value in the poem? If the poet does not, what status are we to give to the poem as utterance? Some poetic invocations, such as those in Dizdar's *Stone Sleeper*, seem to demand that we posit an implied speaker, the truthfulness or sincerity of whose words can be called into question. Other poetic invocations must necessarily be taken on trust: when we read 'The Envoy of Mr Cogito', we may accuse Herbert of being insincere *as a poet*, but we do not imagine we are reading a monologue by a man who believes in a book which understands language.¹⁹⁰ Auden described how 'poetry makes nothing happen', a position he accepted not out of political quietism, but because to do otherwise would set up a non-poetic standard of efficacy by which a poem could be judged.¹⁹¹ Does a poem in the form of an invocation inevitably include such a standard? (The participants of an authentic rainmaking ritual will judge its success or failure on whether it produces rain, not on the aesthetic properties of its components.)

Berengarten's sequence of invocations is doubly complicated by its unusual cultural and linguistic status. It is not, in any common sense of the word, a translation, but it does attempt translation's etymological 'bringing across' of Slavic folkloric material into an English folkloric context. Berengarten's predecessors in this area do not come easily to mind: perhaps the closest is Edward Fitzgerald, whose version of Omar Khayyam is essentially an English recreation of the English idea of an Oriental philosopher in a distinct English vernacular idiom ('O, take the Cash in Hand and leave the Rest').¹⁹² This process

¹⁸⁹ Richard Berengarten, 'A little further? Twelve propositions', Richard Berengarten's personal website, last accessed 26 September 2011, <<http://www.berengarten.com/site/A-little-further.html>>. Hereafter Berengarten: Propositions.

¹⁹⁰ Zbigniew Herbert, 'The Envoy of Mr Cogito', *Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 79.

¹⁹¹ W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 247-249

¹⁹² However, Fitzgerald, although several quatrains were entirely his own invention, worked in general from an existent source.

of ‘translating’ culture, describing Slavic folklore in English terms while still retaining enough Slavic signifiers to make Berengarten’s ‘myth-world’ recognisably foreign, will be the focus of this chapter.

Berengarten’s ‘translation’ is partially made possible by certain shared properties of the Slavic and English folkloric heritage. (The poem’s Slavic context is described at length in the ‘Glossary and Notes’ section at the end of *In a Time of Drought*.) These include an identification of Dodola, or rainmaiden (a young girl dressed in leaves who plays the central role in Slavic rainmaking ceremonies),¹⁹³ with the Anglo-Irish Queen of May, as well as the identification of the Balkan St. George’s Day (or ‘Spring Lord’s Holiday’) with the English Mayday. (Both days mark the beginning of spring, and many customs are shared between them. Berengarten lists some Slavic St. George’s Day ((or St. George’s Eve)) observances: ‘young people swinging on swings till late at night; lighting and leaping over bonfires; morning picnic outings in the woods; collecting flowers and herbs, making wreaths and decorations for gateposts and roofs...singing, dancing and feasting, especially on roast lamb.’ ((Berengarten *ITD*, p. 97)). All of these customs are shared with English mayday celebrations.) Berengarten claims the Slavic St. George has retained aspects of the pagan storm god Perun: the poem finds parallels in the English figure of the Green Man, and by extension the Green Knight of *Sir Gawain*. (The Slavic St. George is represented as mounted on a green horse, called Zelenko, and this aspect of him recurs throughout *In a Time of Drought*, especially Part 2, ‘For the Green Rider’.) The ceremonies described in Part 4, ‘For the Burners of Fires’, parallels Bonfire Night celebrations which will be familiar to any English reader (as Francis Jones notes. Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 296).

A similar anglicisation of form and technique has been possible, owing to the relatively unsophisticated nature of the original Slavic material. Berengarten writes:

In their simplicity of style, their ‘naïve’ and ‘intimate’ vocabulary and their obvious, unsophisticated rhymes, many of these songs are reminiscent of children’s jingles all over the world. Shortly before his death in 2000, E. D. Goy, the last teacher of Serbo-

¹⁹³ ‘Dodola’ and ‘Peperuga’ are interchangeable within the poem, being more or less central and Northern Slav variants of the same celebrant (Berengarten *ITD*, p.79).

Croatian language and literature at Cambridge University, told me that the Balkan rainmaking songs reminded him of children's jingles in the British Isles.¹⁹⁴

Some sections of *In a Time of Drought* retain this simplicity more than others. In general, the more political sections ('For the Green Rider' and 'For the Burners of Fires') are the least similar to children's songs, both in vocabulary ('long-lingering poisons', 'estuaries fill with silt': Berengarten *ITD*, p. 17, p. 19), rhyme-words ('unloaded / eroded', 'inclined / mind', 'uniforms / lightning-storms': Berengarten *ITD*, p. 19, p. 18, p. 33) and complexity of syntax and argument ('And history lies and lets the dead lie / Who were not in their prophecy': Berengarten *ITD*, p. 38). Other sections, especially 'For the Queen of May' and 'For Dodola (i)', do indeed employ vocabulary, rhyme and syntax which would not be out of place in the songs they are inspired by, or their English equivalents. Moreover, metrically *In a Time of Drought* employs the accentual metre used by many English nursery rhymes, a four-stress line with a varying number of unstressed syllables, moving closer to accentual-syllabic iambic hexameter at moments of political tension (for instance, the first poem in 'For the Burners of Fires': Berengarten *ITD*, p. 33).

The poem also features elements of linguistic anglicisation. The refrain 'oj dodo, oj dodole' (common to many Slavic rainmaking songs: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 82) is rendered throughout 'For Dodola (i)' as 'Hey Dodie Dodie Day', a change which suspends the refrain productively between sense and nonsense: we are aware of the genuine meaning (given in the Notes section as well as the quotations which open the book), but also reminded unavoidably of the Elizabethan English refrains 'Hey nonny nonny no' or 'Hey diddle diddle dee'. This valence allows these refrains to appear both timeless and unfamiliar. There are also occasional echoes of other English sources. '*In rain fire and storm the world was begun*', for instance, calls to mind the final verse of Feste's song from *Twelfth Night* (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 63). (These sources will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.)

There is also, however, a contrary pull, away from anglicisation. Jones suggests that 'in Berengarten's work, as with Ted Hughes, there is a sliding scale

¹⁹⁴ Richard Berengarten (as Richard Burns), 'Dodola and Peperuda', *Poetry Review*, London. 96 / 1 (2006), p. 72. Hereafter Berengarten 'Dodola'.

between verse that is “translated from”, “inspired by” and “imbued with” the foreign’ (Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 297). This continuum applies not only to Berengarten’s individual poems, but also to *In a Time of Drought*’s individual lines, motifs and formal devices. Foreign words are often left unanglicised, and there is no consistency in their presentation: ‘Gospodar’ (the Serbian and Bosnian word for *Lord*) is italicised, but ‘Peperuga’ and its variants (the Eastern Slavic group of names for the rainmaiden, also *butterfly*) is not. Jones notes that the poems ‘seem to me, as a translator, to read like perfect verse translations’ (Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 297). What appear to be deliberately included artefacts of translation remind us of the difficulties of bringing over culture and folklore, as much as language, from a foreign context. These artefacts include clumsy word-ordering or forced rhyme, for example ‘Raise again from rubble and ash / Homes no fires or bombs will trash’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 16). The refrain of ‘For the Green Rider’ sounds especially like a translation, one which would not be out of place in Vasko Popa’s collection of Serbo-Croat folk literature *The Golden Apple*.¹⁹⁵

*A rider went out with his hounds
Went out among the fields
He has saddled his horse Zelenko*¹⁹⁶

The repetition and plain diction contribute to this effect, along with an unusual sequencing of tenses: a shift from the perfect into the pluperfect, creating the effect of a horseman travelling through time as well as space. The poem’s vocabulary choices similarly create this effect of translation: in standard English, the horseman in charge of the hounds is the huntsman, and ‘rider’ is reserved for the hunt followers. The most prominent moment of estrangement is the obviously non-English name Zelenko.

These contradictory impulses are embodied in the poem’s patterning of sounds. The most prominent feature of this patterning is the heavy use of *pr*-sounds, often foregrounded by arresting choices of vocabulary (‘premature’, ‘Prince or President’, ‘prophecy’, ‘sparrowhawk’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 54, p. 36,

¹⁹⁵ Vasko Popa (ed.), *The Golden Apple*, 2nd edn., trans. and ed. Andrew Harvey and Anne Pennington (London: Anvil, 2010).

¹⁹⁶ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 13-19.

p. 38, p. 63).¹⁹⁷ This patterning subtly weaves the name of Perun, as well as the butterfly/rainmaiden Peperuga, throughout the poem. Weaving is, in fact, the poem's model for poetry itself: 'For the Queen of May' asks 'Who'll stitch fresh patterns into this world' (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 68). (In the previous poem of the section, the dialect word for streams, *burns*, is perhaps intended to prefigure this reference to authorship. Berengarten originally published *In a Time of Drought* under the name Richard Burns.) The varying refrain of 'For the Girls and Boys' makes the interplay of *pr*- sounds most explicit. Each refrain features four lines, interweaving plant names with Peperuga and Peperona (variant names for the rainmaiden), and culminating in 'Dodie Day'. Almost every other line of these refrains includes *pr*- words: 'primrose', 'pimpernel', 'parsley', 'pepper', 'pear', as well as 'match to paper', 'prince and pauper' and 'piper'. The effect, as in the poem's culminating sequence 'For the Queen of May', is to intertwine Perun with the entire natural world, and simultaneously to intertwine rainmaking with the act of naming, itself a metonym for poetic creation. Berengarten's model here may well have been Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, in which the syllables of Offa's name are similarly interwoven among his invocations. In the postscript 'Arijana's Thread', Berengarten describes his initial work on *In a Time of Drought* as 'plaiting or weaving' (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 77).

The link between poetry, naming and weaving is established early on, in the sixth poem of 'For Dodola (i)':

And who'll sew kingcups onto our river
Death-cleanser and life-giver

Who'll thread lilies into the stream
For the souls we'd recall if we could and redeem¹⁹⁸

The motif is summed up in the subtle pun on 'sew' and 'sow', with their attendant connotations of medical care and agricultural fertility (both also present in the description of the river as 'death-cleanser and life-giver'). The river, with

¹⁹⁷ Out of context it is obviously hard to judge how surprising these words are. To take just one example, in 'Fields where our premature dead now lie' (Berengarten *ITD* 54) the adjective is startlingly unexpected.

¹⁹⁸ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 8.

the kingcups and lilies stitched into it, becomes metonymous with the poetic line itself, and its duties of healing, naming and remembrance. Later in the sequence, this same motif will metamorphose into the blood-flow, as well as hope itself: ‘spur hope to pulse and race again’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 44). Note how this line is also packed with *pr*- sounds.

These repeated *pr*- sounds are an important moment of ‘bringing over’, in which a pre-Christian Slavic god, almost unnamed in the poem (he is mentioned in ‘For Dodola (i)’, and euphemised elsewhere as ‘Rain Lord’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 4, p. 53), becomes embodied in the sounds and syllables of the English language. Not all of the sequence’s invocatory powers are this direct. The Serbo-Croat names for kingcups and lilies, *djurdjevsko cvece* and *djurdjevak/djurdjica* respectively, are both etymologically related to St. George, and, therefore, to Berengarten’s conception of Perun, but this Serbian language subtext, as well as several others, would obviously be entirely inaccessible to the average English reader without explanation. As with the footnotes of ‘The Waste Land’, the extended endnotes must be treated as integral to the poem. (There are some cases in which foreign-language connotations *are* accessible to the English reader without endnotes. ‘The modern Greek, Vlach [...], Bulgarian and Romanian words for “poppy” are in some cases identical or very similar to the words for “rainmaiden”’ ((Berengarten *ITD*, p. 91)), and due to the similarity in English between ‘poppy’ and ‘Peperuna’, this identification is retained in ‘For the Girls and Boys’.) This collocation of the entirely foreign and the entirely anglicised (the embodiment of Perun in both English sound-patterns and Slavic flower-names) is representative of the wider balancing act being performed by *In a Time of Drought*.

This balancing act has implications for Berengarten’s theoretical conceptions of poetry, poetics and translation. Berengarten has talked at length about his desire to achieve and define a ‘universal poetry’, which he describes using terms laid down by Michel Deguy in his 2001 essay ‘De la poésie aujourd’hui’ (‘About poetry today’):

Deguy’s challenge to us is to risk the formulation not just of a *pragmatics of poetry* but a *theory of poetics* – a *universal poetics*. This is also why I prefer to avoid the English terms *global* and *globalisation*. I prefer to turn to the older, more fertile and less

emotively jangling term *universal*. Doesn't doing this immediately jolt our positions from pragmatics right over into theory, to the quest for a *universal poetics*? And doesn't a universal poetics need to be based on *poetic universals*? To search for and attempt to test and establish *poetic universals*, in order to formulate a universal poetics, then, is how I interpret Michel Deguy's singular, extraordinary challenge.¹⁹⁹

In a Time of Drought could be read as challenging the very idea of a 'poetic universal'. Many of its effects are strenuously local. Berengarten, describing the poem, has spoken of its 'public cosmology', but politically as well as through folkloric contexts it is strongly anchored in time and place.²⁰⁰ (Incidentally, if Berengarten is using 'cosmology' in its standard sense it is difficult to work out which sections of the poem he is referring to.) Berengarten flags these points of anchorage throughout the endnotes: a reference to 'libraries gone up in smoke', which would otherwise serve as a reasonably 'universal' motif, is linked to two particular devastations in Belgrade and Sarajevo (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 87). The poem's agricultural references may be pre-industrial (no tractors or combine harvesters, but plenty of ploughshares and threshing floors), but the military hardware is strictly contemporary: 'Who'll wash away from ditches and holes / Toxins that gnaw into bodies and souls?' (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 17). (This particular reference is probably to the use of shells containing BZ gas by the Serbian forces against Bosnian civilians at Srebrenica, but it might also refer to the contamination of the Bosnian countryside around the Potoci chemical weapons facility.)

The elements of translation in the poem, identified by Jones and others, similarly complicate the 'search for [...] *poetic universals*'. The German philologist Friedrich Schleiermacher argued in an 1813 lecture that there were only two different methods of translation: 'either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves

¹⁹⁹ Richard Berengarten, 'Pour toi (Frayed Strands)', adapted version of presentation to the Conference Une Poétique Mondiale De La Poésie?, La Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 13th May 2002, Richard Berengarten's personal website, last accessed 29 November 2011, <<http://www.berengarten.com/site/Pour-toi.html>>. Hereafter Berengarten 'Pour Toi'.

²⁰⁰ Personal communication from Berengarten to Francis Jones. Quoted in Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 297.

the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him'.²⁰¹ These two methods of translation are entirely opposed: 'one or the other must be followed as closely as possible, and (...) a highly unreliable result would proceed from any mixture, so it is to be feared that [the original] author and reader would not meet at all' (Schleirmacher, p. 207). Schleirmacher's preferred method is the first. Lawrence Venuti, similarly, has argued that all 'domesticising' translation is an act of 'violence' against the original language (and the 'linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text').²⁰² *In a Time of Drought*, like other 'translations' without originals (a surprisingly large genre, including Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac* and the 'City of Lost Walks' section in Patrick McGuinness's *Jilted City*), succeeds in evading the objections of Schleirmacher and Venuti by peacefully domesticising the foreign. (There is no 'original' author for the sequence to bypass, nor a single original language which the sequence could violate.) But this domesticisation, or 'strange familiarity' (Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 297), is contingent on local, rather than universal, poetic values.

Deguy's original essay goes some way towards resolving these contradictions between Berengarten's poetic theory and his practice. The 'poetic universals' Deguy tentatively puts forward are extremely broad:

Je vais choisir, parmi vingt itinéraires possibles, un qui passe par trois points - que j'appelle de l'*imagination*, ou pensée par figures et mouvement, de l'*union* (ou hésitation, selon Paul Valéry) du son et des sens ; de la *nomination* ou (béné)dictio de ce qui est, ou périphrase. [I'll choose, among twenty possible paths, one which goes through three points - which I name the point of *imagination*, or thinking by figures and movement; of *union* (or hesitation, according to Paul Valéry) of sound and meanings; of *nomination* (naming) or (bene)dictio of what there is, or periphrasis.]²⁰³

²⁰¹ Friedrich Schleirmacher, 'On the different methods of translating', trans. André Lefevre, in *Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 207. Hereafter Schleirmacher.

²⁰² Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation as cultural politics: regimes of domestication in English', *Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 546-557. Venuti does note that his 'extravagant but pointed metaphor' will 'undoubtedly cheapen [actual] violent action, trivialising its serious physical and psychological costs, its brutal materiality' (Venuti, p. 456 - 7). I do not agree with his subsequent claim that the gains from considering translation through a metaphor of violence necessarily outweigh this trivialisation.

²⁰³ Michel Deguy, 'De la poésie aujourd'hui', *Des poètes Français contemporains*, ed. Michel Deguy, Robert Davreu and Hédi Kaddour (Paris: adpf, 2001), p. 13. (Translation by Françoise Davreu.)

In a Time of Drought, as we have seen, is a sequence preoccupied with the act of naming. ‘For Dodola (i)’ consists entirely of questions introduced by ‘who’, as do all the poems (except the last) of ‘For the Green Rider’, all of ‘For Dodola (ii)’ and all of ‘For the Queen of May’. Each of these sections focuses on the titles, duties and responsibilities bound up in the name Dodola or Peperuna. The more political sections also constantly return to the power of naming:

And call him Prince or President
To send him where his cronies went²⁰⁴

Not ‘And send him...’, but ‘To send him...’, as if the name itself has the inherent capacity to dispatch the dictator into the bonfire. Other poems reverse this motif, in the tragedy of the dead ‘lost in shadow’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 28), who are nameless and so remain forever beyond the poet’s powers of redemption (‘For souls we’d recall if we could and redeem’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 8). (This redemptive naming is identical to the punning ‘(béné)diction’ approved by Deguy.)

The sequence’s final section, ‘For the Queen of May’, is particularly centred on naming. Each poem consists almost entirely of a list of names, first of birds and subsequently of mammals, sea-creatures and insects, fish, flowers, natural phenomena, and natural complexities (‘harmonies too full for words’, including petals, fish-scales, branches and butterfly-wing pigmentation: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 69). Each of these lists concludes with a plea to Dodola to ‘watch over’ or ‘guard’ what has been named. (We will return later to this idea of guardianship.) Dodola is described as a ‘teller of spring’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 69), a neat ambiguity: ‘teller’ includes both *foreteller* and the secondary connotation of reckoning or enumeration, as in *bank teller*. The obvious reference of this section is to the act of naming in Genesis 2:19, and indeed this is made nearly explicit in the sequence’s concluding refrain, with ‘creatures’ etymologically connoting *creation*:

Follow my lead in the dance one to seven
And I’ll climb you a tree that towers to heaven

²⁰⁴ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 36.

*And I'll name you the creatures from millions to one
Alive on this earth under stars moon and sun*²⁰⁵

The only note of discord is a vague hint in the second line. The reference is probably to the mythical Balkan ‘World Tree’ (*Világfa* in Hungarian),²⁰⁶ which grows from the centre of the world and supports the heavens, but an obvious secondary connotation is the Tower of Babel, perhaps the most inappropriate motif imaginable for a ‘universal poetry’. Whether this is oversight on Berengarten’s part, or a genuine moment of doubt in Deguy’s ‘(béné)diction’, is a matter of judgement for the reader. Certainly, this suggestion has been entirely muted by the refrain’s final couplet.

Deguy’s other suggestions for poetic universals may also have inspired *In a Time of Drought*. His unusual definition of imagination, ‘thinking by figures and movement’, contains a pun which works in both French and English: a secondary meaning of ‘figure’ is *dance pattern*. As in the example above, the refrains of ‘For the Queen of May’ describe a long, complicated dance. This ‘dance-step with no cheating tricks’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 68) is also, like ‘Green Grow the Rushes-O’, a counting rhyme, embodying a third meaning of ‘figures’. The dance motif is central to both Dodola-folklore and *In a Time of Drought*. In ‘For the Dancers’, life itself becomes a dance: ‘Between the bride and the bridegroom / Between the nursery-cot and tomb / ... / *Dance for the Green Rider*’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 49). The central dance is, of course, the rain-dance: ‘Dance for the clouds to send down rain’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 7). Dancing, naming and weaving are all transformed into aspects of poetry itself. Berengarten has made these connections explicit in ‘Rain and Dust’, a long essay describing the composition of *In a Time of Drought*, in which poetic creation is metaphorised in terms of dance (‘the mind’s heuristic leaps and plunges’).²⁰⁷ (In other passages, a register of weaving and stitching is used: ‘this material...wields

²⁰⁵ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 69.

²⁰⁶ However, this is not mentioned in the copious endnotes. Berengarten identifies the Dodola as a ‘living embodiment of a tree’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 101) as well as a rainmaiden, but his ‘small wet...tree spirit’ can hardly be imagined as ‘tower[ing]... to heaven’.

²⁰⁷ Richard Berengarten (writing as Richard Burns), ‘Rain and Dust’, *Studia Mythologica Slavica* XI (2008), pp. 217-236, at p. 218. Hereafter Berengarten ‘Rain’.

tiny hooks and needles’, ‘They spin and weave constantly new, but always recognisable patterns’: Berengarten ‘Rain’, p. 219.)

‘Rain and Dust’ also offers Berengarten’s own defence of ‘universal poetics’ against a poetic practice apparently reliant on local folklore. This defence relies on a Jungian reading of the Balkan rainmaking customs:

During composition of the first drafts, I set about finding out as much as I could about the rain-making practices and songs. More than once I was astonished to find that images which had been cropping up spontaneously in my own mind during composition turned out to belong to *the sources themselves* [...] My current understanding of this kind of “correspondence” is that, in certain kinds of “deep” poetic composition, mythological patterns well up through individual consciousness with a force that a poet learns to trust, follow and be bound by.²⁰⁸

These ‘mythological patterns’, proved universal by their appearance in Berengarten’s imagination before he had encountered them in literature, are Jungian archetypes. (Interestingly, the metaphors Berengarten uses to describe this appearance are themselves pertinent to the themes of *In a Time of Drought*: ‘cropping up’ and ‘well[ing] up’.) Berengarten claims to have worked ‘*in the service of an archetype*’ (italics in original: Berengarten ‘Rain’, p. 219). Berengarten’s view of his own achievement is similar to that of Răzvan Voncu, who writes that ‘despite being a contemporary English poet, Berengarten succeeds in forgetting about “himself” and plunging into the depths of the material itself’.²⁰⁹

While Berengarten’s account of his personal creative process is beyond dispute, Jungian archetypal analysis is too vague to provide much insight into the particular means by which *In a Time of Drought* transmutes Balkan folklore into English. (It is much more helpful for examining the ‘typological parallels’ between Balkan rainmaking practices and much older rituals conjectured from Minoan and Mycenaean art: Berengarten ‘Rain’, p. 231.) Jones suggests this transmuting element of Berengarten’s practice echoes Vasko Popa, ‘whose poetics exposed the atavistic and universal just beneath the surface of folk belief’

²⁰⁸ Berengarten ‘Rain’, p. 218-9.

²⁰⁹ Răzvan Voncu, ‘A Poet Like a Tree: Comments on the Poetry of Richard Berengarten’, trans. Simona Drăgan, *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (Cambridge: Salt 2011), pp. 64-5.

(Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 297), but Popa employed the folk belief of his native Serbia rather than a foreign country, and most of his folkloric references were familiar to his native audience. (It would be more accurate to say that Popa's work exposed the core of folk belief and mythological thought-patterns beneath the surface of twentieth-century existence.) Many of Popa's referents are simply *not* universal, hence the extensive notes provided by Jones as a postscript to his translation of the poems (with Anne Pennington).²¹⁰

In a Time of Drought contains its own model for the act of cultural and folkloric transmutation: the blending of pagan and Christian folklore in the rainmaking rituals, a blending which is shared by many English and Slavic rural customs. (The Slavic customs may also have contained elements of Islam. Berengarten quotes Sir Arthur Evans writing in 1875 about a 'rain-producing rite' in which 'villagers, both Christian and Mahometan, with a local Bey at the head' prayed at and poured wine over an ancient shrine to Jupiter (Berengarten 'Rain', p. 230.))²¹¹ This blending is most pronounced in the fifth section of the sequence, 'For the Dancers'. The second poem in this section invites these 'dancers' to

Cut a pine branch	prune a rod
Beat out the demons	call up God
Strip an ash-bough	peel a wand
Whip out our ghosts to back-of-beyond	
Find a hazel-fork	dowse for a well
Flush out the dead	clean out hell ²¹²

In this passage, most of the elements of pre-Christian Slavic folklore we have already discussed are visible. In the first line, *Perun* is echoed in 'prune'. The obsession with naming characteristic of both *In a Time of Drought* and early

²¹⁰ Francis Jones, endnotes to Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. Anne Pennington and Francis Jones (London: Anvil, 1997), pp. 397-418.

²¹¹ *In a Time of Drought* contains a single brief reference to Islam: 'Come beat your breasts / you dervishes / And purge us of our anguishes' (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 48). It's hard to know what to make of this; the dervishes are arguably no more than a cursory Orientalist stage property, and any possible theme of conciliation between Christian and Islamic beliefs is not picked up on. This is especially odd given the poem's context and stated aims.

²¹² Berengarten *ITD*, p. 44.

religion is displayed in the tree-names. Pre-Christian practices of dowsing are referenced, as well as a pre-Christian ‘wand’. The passage also plays with the Serbo-Croat language, as we have seen elsewhere, with a pun on ‘ash’: as Berengarten notes, ‘The Serbo-Croat name of the tree is *jasen*. The Croatian village of *Jasenica* was the site of an Ustaša (fascist) concentration camp during the second world war.’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 81.) When the reader becomes aware of this, the ‘ghosts’ in the subsequent line become the camp’s victims, and verbs like ‘strip’ and ‘whip’ take on an uncomfortable resonance. ‘Back-of-beyond’, in its common usage as ‘out of the way, off the main route’, becomes the hidden corner of Croatian countryside to which the victims were despatched. As in the St. George puns in the Serbo-Croat flower names, this hidden meaning is inaccessible to most English readers and dependent on the sequence’s endnotes for its apprehension.

Running in parallel to the Slavic folklore, and its sinister political valences, is a register of Christianity: ‘demons’, ‘God’ and ‘hell’. Christ, in early Christian theology, was supposed to have ‘flush[ed] out the dead’ and ‘clean[ed] out hell’ after his crucifixion. Christ also cast out demons during his ministry, an idea which seems to be the unspoken subtext of ‘beat out’, ‘flush out’, ‘clean out’ and ‘whip out’. But these demons have a far more physical presence than their Biblical counterparts. As the poem continues, the image of the whip recurs, this time linked to the storm-god Perun: ‘Dance on though whips of lightning crack / On the hill’s flank...’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 47). This passage, one of the most vivid in the sequence, draws together Perun and Christ in his capacity as the harrower of hell; one gets the sense, as during the rite witnessed by Sir Arthur Evans, of the Christian beliefs as a thin veneer over paganism. The third poem of the ‘For the Dancers’ similarly conflates Christian ‘monasteries’ with ‘scattered cairns and standing stones’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 45).

The previous section, ‘For the Burners of Fires’, also employs clear Christian imagery:

Till the living awake and those who once claimed
To own truth itself are rattled and named

And false prophets fall and they in their turn

Crumble like leaves and in bonfires burn²¹³

The reference is to Matthew 7:15: ‘Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves’.²¹⁴ These ‘false prophets’ have already been identified as the petty Balkan tyrants being burnt in effigy (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 38). Here, these ‘bonfires’ become a reversed judgement day, a moment in which ‘the living’ (not the dead) awaken, and the act of ‘naming’ is transformed from salvation to accusation. In *Revelation*, those names not listed in the Book of Life are cast into eternal flames: in this poem, it is those who *are* named who ‘crumble like leaves and in bonfires burn’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 39). The nameless corpses, however, are not saved, but ‘fade faceless from memory’. Here, the dynamic of influence is reversed: rather than Christianity being a façade for a durable paganism, as in ‘For the Dancers’, there is a core of Christian beliefs being modified in a pagan context.

These examples illustrate a process which is analogous to the way in which *In a Time of Drought* takes on and transmutes both English and Slavic folklore. In the poem’s more political sections, the core being modified is undoubtedly Slavic. There are references to particular episodes in Serbian history (‘skulls immured in bloodied walls’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 45), contemporary political evils (‘mines’ and ‘toxins’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 17), and unfamiliar professions (‘woodman or ranger / or *Gospodar* and ancient honour-revenger’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 58). ‘Blood-feud[s]’ and ‘blood quarrel[s]’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 46) are not likely to register as lived experience for English readers. More generally, sustained passages paint a picture of history which English readers are unlikely to identify with, in which borders are permanently in flux and the transition from peace to war is commonplace and unremarkable (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 19). These sections include the occasional item of Slavic vocabulary (‘*Gospodar*’), and other word choices arguably influenced by Eastern European poetry in translation: I suspect the archaic adjective in Berengarten’s ‘louring stormclouds’ picks up on Ivan V. Lalić’s ‘louring plain’.²¹⁵ (Berengarten has identified Lalić as an important influence on *In a Time of Drought*, and the

²¹³ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 39.

²¹⁴ *King James Bible*, last accessed 19 June 2012, <www.biblestudytools.com>.

²¹⁵ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 47. Ivan V. Lalić, ‘Horse’, *A Rusty Needle*, trans. Francis Jones (London: Anvil 1996), p65.

sixth section of the sequence is dedicated to his memory.) In these parts of the sequence, the English elements are not foregrounded and exist at the level of suggestion. The fire-building and effigies described in ‘For the Burners of Fires’ may evoke images of Bonfire Night and Guy Fawkes in many English readers, but these are a cosmetic veneer over complicated pagan fire ceremonies involving fire-leaping and dancing, taking place not in November but ‘on the brink of spring’ (e.g. St. George’s Day: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 34). The occasional examples of slangy or contemporary diction (‘forget it’, ‘leaders are scum’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 38) may remind English readers of the (English) tabloid press, but again these associations are a veneer: the propaganda being confronted and reworked is far more sinister and insidious.

In other sections, the positions of Slavic and English folklore are reversed. We have already seen how the sequence’s opening poem, ‘For Dodola (i)’, transforms the invocation ‘oj dodo, oj dodole’ into ‘Hey Dodie Dodie Day’, recalling the nonsense refrains of English folksongs. Similarly, the description of harvesting bears comparison with William Blake’s ‘To Autumn’: Berengarten invites ‘Dodie Day’ to ‘Bless our work and hard endeavour // To bring in golden summer treasure’, while Blake describes how the spirit of Autumn ‘o’er the bleak / Hills fled from our sight; but left his golden load.’²¹⁶ Other sections recollect English nursery rhymes, picking up on E.D. Goy’s suggestion that these are the English language’s closest analogy to the Balkan rainmaking songs (Berengarten ‘Dodola’, p. 72). The title of Section 3, ‘For the Girls and Boys’, immediately calls up the English nursery rhyme ‘Girls and Boys come out to Play’.²¹⁷ Much of this section’s diction and content is similarly drawn from nursery rhymes, especially the presentation of childish love:

And see the one with the haughty stare
She will be mine one day I swear

And as long as I swing her I’ll sing her praise
For the sun and stars and the nights and days²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 7. William Blake, ‘To Autumn’, *Collected Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin, 1977), p22

²¹⁷ Iona and Peter Opie (eds.), *Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 58

²¹⁸ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 25.

Compare this with, for instance, ‘Billy, Billy’ from *Mother Goose*: “‘Billy, Billy come and play / While the sun shines as bright as day’ // ‘Yes, my Polly, so I will / For I love to please you still.’”²¹⁹ A line in ‘For Dodola (i)’, describing ‘growing gardens’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 4), reminds us of the nursery rhyme question ‘how does your garden grow?’²²⁰ (The nursery rhyme answer recalls the catalogues of flowers in ‘For the Girls and Boys’ and ‘For the Queen of May’.) This air of Victorian childhood is reinforced when we are told of Dodola’s ‘blouse’, ‘petticoat’ and ‘girdle’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 29, p. 33). We encounter a ‘pauper’ where, were we to be reading the poem in a Slavic context, we might expect a peasant instead (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 9). Elsewhere, in one of two non-rhyming poems in ‘For Dodola (i)’, Dodola is invited to gather ‘windflowers and bluebells from the spinney’ to ‘bind into her hair’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 6); this recalls Christina Rossetti’s nursery rhyme, ‘Twist me a crown of wind-flowers’, and ‘spinney’ similarly belongs to the register of Victorian fairy-stories.²²¹ (The *spin* in ‘spinney’ also hints at the motif of weaving which will come to dominate the sequence.) ‘Who shall wear shoots of grasses and corn / The fairest young woman that ever was born’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 3) recalls the Queen’s question in ‘Snow White’: ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall / Who in this land is fairest of all?’²²² The ‘wolf’ and ‘brown bear’ in ‘For the Queen of May’ (Berengarten *ITD* 64) even seem closer to their fairytale counterparts than the authentic fauna of the poem’s Slavic setting. (This is due in part to the catalogue of animals they appear in; it is unlikely that anyone whose livelihood was seriously threatened by wolves would list them alongside ‘squirrel shrew hedgehog’.)

In these sections (‘For Dodola (i)’, ‘For the Girls and Boys’, ‘For the Queen of May’), the sequence’s Slavic content serves as veneer over a deep core of Englishness. The repeated question in ‘For the Queen of May’, linking together its catalogues of the natural world, is ‘Who’ll guard them’ (i.e., these plants and creatures), a question answered each time by a description of Dodola (‘girl dressed in leaves’, ‘willowy girl’, ‘girl dressed in quilted green cloth’:

²¹⁹ Blanche Fisher White (ed.), *The Real Mother Goose* (New York: Scholastic, 1994), p. 89.

²²⁰ ‘Mary, Mary quite contrary’, Iona and Peter Opie (eds.), *Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 27.

²²¹ Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, ed. R.W. Crump (London: Penguin Classics 2005), p. 235.

²²² Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Complete Fairy Tales* (Abingdon: Routledge 2002), p. 213.

Berengarten *ITD*, p. 63, p. 64, p. 65). But the Dodola of folklore is not primarily a guardian of the natural world; in the Slavic pantheon, this role of protector is taken by the nature goddess Lada (diminutive Ladaritsa or Ladarica), whose connection with the Dodola ceremony is tenuous at best (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 86-7). ('For Dodola (i)' explicitly names Ladaritsa as a 'guardian of cornfields': Berengarten *ITD*, p. 4.)

This discrepancy helps to enable the blurring of English and Slavic folklores. Although there are no English rainmaking ceremonies, English folklore does contain a remnant pagan nature guardian: the 'Green Man', identified by Lady Raglan in 1939 as a feature of British church architecture.²²³ This deity or woodland spirit seems closely related to 'Jack in the Green', a celebrant in Old English mayday customs, who himself is bizarrely reminiscent of Dodola: although Jack in the Green is always male, the costumes of the two are almost identical (see illustration, following page).

²²³ Lady Raglan, 'The Green Man in Church Architecture', *Folklore* 50 / 1 (1939), pp. 45-57.



Left, Dodola, Western Serbia 1957. Right, Jack of the Green, Kensington 1976²²⁴

We have examined how in some sections of the sequence the parallels between English and Slavic folklore are downplayed and the Slavic context is explicitly foregrounded, while in other sections the dynamic is reversed: the poet deliberately alters and distorts the Slavic folkloric material to highlight its connections with the English context in which it is being presented. (Berengarten himself notes that in some ways *In a Time of Drought* is a ‘traditionally and very English...poem’: Berengarten *ITD*, p. 77). This dual nature is integral to the success of the sequence as a whole. It provides a means for Berengarten to engage not only with the ‘shamanic and vatic’ responsibilities of poetry, but also with the wider responsibilities of a translator towards the material he brings across.²²⁵

²²⁴ Dodola: National Ethnographic Museum, Belgrade. Jack of the Green: Wikimedia creative commons

²²⁵ Berengarten: Propositions.

Viewed in the wider context of Eastern European translations and their influence, Berengarten may seem an exceptional case. ‘On and off for nearly a decade’, he wrote in 1993, ‘all aspects of my work and consciousness have been ineradicably marked by Yugoslavia’.²²⁶ He has spoken at the Belgrade October Writers’ Meeting and (with Daša Marić) translated the Serbo-Croat poets Oskar Davičo and Tin Ujević into English.²²⁷ During his long stay in Yugoslavia, he met and befriended most of the leading Yugoslavian poets, including Vasko Popa, Miodrag Pavlović and Ivan Lalić (Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 291). His involvement with Eastern European literature and politics, then, is far deeper than any other writer covered in this thesis with the possible exception of Charles Simic. However, the issues raised by *In a Time of Drought* are representative of the difficulties facing many other authors interested in this material.

The first and most important of these issues involves the distortion inherent in all translation. In Berengarten’s case, since there is no original language or poem, this distortion occurs entirely on the level of culture and context. *In a Time of Drought* can be read as a sequence of variations on this theme: seven experiments in ‘translating’ folklore from a Slavic context into an English one. The difficulties raised by these experiments are particularly relevant to readers of the Eastern European poets who make greatest use of folklore, Vasko Popa and Mak Dizdar, as well as the translators of these poets. Charles Simic’s translations of Popa in *Homage to the Lamé Wolf*, for instance, make much of the interplay between mythical and religious vocabulary and his own domestic American idiom:

You can make me out of ashes
The trash of my belly laughs
Out of what’s left of my boredom

²²⁶ Richard Berengarten writing as Richard Burns, ‘A Living Embroidery: English Teaching and Cultural Contacts in Yugoslavia’, *North Dakota Quarterly*, 61 / 1 (1993), ed. Richard Burns and Stephen C. Markovich, p. 4.

²²⁷ For a good summary of his activities in this field, see Zdeněk Křivský, ‘Language Teaching and Poetry through the Iron Curtain: Richard Berengarten in Czechoslovakia / The Czech Republic’, *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (Cambridge: Salt 2011), p397-402

You can doll-face²²⁸

For comparison, Anne Pennington's translation has 'débris of my guffawing' for 'trash of my belly laughs', and 'gorgeous' for Simic's 'doll-face'.²²⁹ 'As a translator', Simic writes, 'one is left with one option: For each idiom in the original, one assumes, there's an idiomatic equivalent in English. There usually is, but it takes years sometimes to remember them.'²³⁰ This is a feint, leaving the word 'equivalent' to carry the whole weight of the unmade argument. *In a Time of Drought* can be read productively as an exploration of the proper nature of this poetic equivalence, drawn between idioms, cultures and folklores. This essay has suggested several moments in the sequence in which this exploration achieves tentative conclusions or resolutions. Rather than prescribing a particular method, the poem highlights what is lost, gained and enabled through various approaches: the two methods of translation described by Schleirmacher, in various degrees and permutations. The possibility of 'translating' folklore itself allows the poet to present the apex of 'domesticisation'. Schleirmacher's preferred method of 'leav[ing] the author in peace...and mov[ing] the reader toward him' (Schleirmacher, p. 207) is embodied in lines which draw attention to their own cultural and linguistic borderline status. Summarising the division I have suggested, I would place 'For Dodola (i)', 'For the Girls and Boys' and 'For the Queen of May' into the former category, and 'For the Green Rider', 'For the Burners of Fires', 'For the Dancers' and 'For Dodola (ii)' into the latter.

The second issue raised by Berengarten concerns the moral dilemmas inherent in any poetic response to atrocity, an issue which will be examined more substantially in the penultimate and final chapters of this thesis. 'A response', as we have seen, is Berengarten's own description of how he conceived *In a Time of Drought* (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 73). At first glance, it seems a startlingly obtuse one: the war is not even hinted at until the sixth poem ('Who'll braid peonies into the brook / One for each soul Death took': Berengarten *ITD*, p. 8), and throughout the sequence it occurs almost entirely in the background. In 'For the

²²⁸ Vasko Popa. *Homage to the Lame Wolf*. Trans. and intro. Charles Simic. Field Translation Series 12. Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press 1987. p63

²²⁹ Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. Anne Pennington and Francis Jones (London: Anvil, 1997), p. 101.

²³⁰ Charles Simic, 'Introduction' to Vasko Popa, *Homage to the Lame Wolf*, ed. and trans. Charles Simic (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1987), p. 14.

Queen of May’, it is only visible in a single line: ‘Foal in the field amid beehives and graves’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 64). Only occasionally, as in the third poem of ‘For the Dancers’, does an entire poem provide a sustained examination of the realities of war (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 45).

This strategy is perhaps the single most successful choice made during the poem’s conception. As we read, atrocities occur out of the corner of our eye, and our attention continually shifts focus between the conflict and the day-to-day realities of rural and village life. (One reader has suggested that the organising principle in ‘For Dodola (i)’, the repeated question of ‘Whose daughter?’, represents very well the rivalry between mothers in small villages, competing vicariously through their daughters.)²³¹ The horrors of war have insinuated themselves into the rhythm of rural existence: ‘For the Green Rider’ calls the ‘mines / planted in paths between orchards and vines’ the ‘last harvest’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 17), and compares the process of reconciliation to threshing, ploughing and weeding (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 14, p. 15).

This sidelining partially releases Berengarten from a charge often levelled at those who write about atrocities: that he is appropriating intense suffering for his own poetical ends, and taking upon himself the right to speak for the dead. As we have seen, a central aspect of the poem’s ‘cosmology’ (Jones: *Balkan Light*, p. 289) is that no-one has this right: when confronted by ‘battleworn / Spirits’, corpses which are ‘Straining for speech yet making no sound’, rather than attempting to ventriloquise for them the poet calls for them to be ‘drum[med] away’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 57). Vasko Popa implies a similar conclusion in ‘Be Seeing You’, quoted here in its entirety:

After the third evening round
In the yard of the concentration camp
We disperse to our quarters

We know that before dawn
One of us will be taken out and shot

We smile like conspirators
And whisper to each other

²³¹ Jo Rooum, email to the author, 12 November 2011.

Be seeing you

We don't say when or where

We've given up the old ways

We know what we mean²³²

The silence Popa advocates differs from Berengarten's, in that it is the silence of a participant: 'we know what we mean', and by implication no-one else can. (Popa was imprisoned in the German concentration camp at Bečkerek during the Second World War, having fought as a partisan.) In the poem's transcendent final lines, the prisoners achieve a shared consciousness in which they become 'conspirators', and towards which the poet can necessarily only gesture.

The silence Berengarten insists on for his victims may be enforced partially for these reasons. A more central motive, though, is that silence is viewed as a necessary precondition of reconciliation. This silence involves not only turning away from the victims, but from history itself:

History lies and leaves us to die

And history leaves and gives leave to lie²³³

The lines are ambiguous, but both possible readings are equally shocking. History may 'lie' in the sense of being fixed and unchangeable, in which case the second line seems to suggest that some events are so terrible they can create an ahistorical void around them. (George Steiner suggests something similar in 'A Kind of Survivor': 'There may be minutes or millenia...in which [God] does not see man, in which he is looking *the other way* [...] When God's back parts are towards man, history is Belsen.')

²³⁴ Alternatively, history may 'lie' in the sense of *telling untruths*, in which case historical understanding is always entirely meaningless and indeed 'leaves us to die'. (The poet has suggested this earlier, in Section 2, 'For the Green Rider': 'What antidote or remedy / Cures or comes

²³² Vasko Popa, 'Be Seeing You', *Collected Poems*, trans. Anne Pennington and Francis Jones (London: Anvil, 1997), p. 277.

²³³ Berengarten *ITD*, p. 39.

²³⁴ George Steiner, 'A Kind of Survivor', *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), p. 121-122

from history?’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 19). An historical amnesia this absolute, consistently described by the poet in terms of a ‘cleansing’ (as in the effect of the rainstorms which the sequence invokes), is an astonishing thing for a non-participant to call for: the right to speak on behalf of the victims is problematic enough, and it is surely more problematic still to offer this sort of rehabilitatory forgetfulness and forgiveness on their behalf. It is here that Berengarten’s project, perhaps finding licence in the ‘universal poetics’ of Michel Deguy, takes its greatest political risk.

What redeems the sequence from a crude and unappealing political naïveté is, I suggest, its folkloric double-nature, and the cynical edge this perhaps conceals. An invitation to ‘let old enemies all be blessed’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 59) is obviously not pragmatic or helpful in the extraordinarily sensitive context of Balkan post-war reconciliation. The final line of the poem in which this invitation occurs, however, suggests awareness of the way this nursery rhyme idealism may, in the words of Derek Mahon, ‘perpetuate / the barbarous cycle’: ‘And shall we begin all over again?’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 59).²³⁵ These occasional, subversive asides are moments of doubt not just in the possibility of reconciliation, but in Berengarten’s entire project of a ‘universal poetics’. This doubt is integral to the sequence: the questions (‘Where is the girl...?’) which make up the substantial part of *In a Time of Drought* are left unanswered, and there is a faint and non-insistent implication that the answer is ‘Nowhere’: that the children who could have dissolved the ‘bitter blood quarrel’ are dead, ‘felled for nothing’ (Berengarten *ITD*, p. 46, p. 43). This is borne out most by the title of the sequence (Voncu writes that ‘what concerns the poet is the spiritual drought of the world we live in’).²³⁶ It is also hinted at in an ‘Editorial Note’ preceding the first section of the sequence (Berengarten *ITD*, p. *xi*), which reminds us that the Dodola ceremonies did not persist beyond the last years of the twentieth century.

²³⁵ Derek Mahon, ‘Last of the Fire Kings’, *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2011), p. 63-64.

²³⁶ Răzvan Voncu, ‘A Poet Like a Tree: Comments on the Poetry of Richard Berengarten’, trans. Simona Drăgan, *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (Cambridge: Salt 2011), p. 65.

Poet as Trickster: Ken Smith, *Fox Running*, and the Eastern Europeans

There is a complicated relationship between Ken Smith's poetic project, some of the protagonists of Ken Smith's poems, and the Trickster archetype. In this chapter, following a preliminary analysis of these relationships, some suggestions will be offered as to how it may have been informed, or made possible, by the example of several Eastern European poets, and also discuss the ways in which it diverges from these models. To begin it is necessary to remind ourselves of the key features of the Trickster archetype, and how this archetype may be relevant to poetry in general and Eastern European poetry in particular.

Trickster characters have been identified in almost every mythological system, including many too far apart in time or space to have influenced each other directly, suggesting the character may represent something fundamental either in our unconscious minds (or Jung's concept of the collective unconscious),²³⁷ or the mechanisms by which we construct compelling stories. Examples of the character include Loki, Prometheus, Brer Rabbit and the Coyote tricksters of some Native American myth systems. What unites and defines them is the disruptive role they play in the stories in which they feature, and their status outside the recognised moral systems of these stories. They are associated with lying, cheating, theft and wandering from place to place (a suspicious activity in a time of small isolated settlements, where enforcement of moral norms is largely dependent on strong community ties). The Trickster figure 'embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are hopelessly entwined. He represents the paradoxical category of sacred amorality.'²³⁸

Christianity, of course, contains no such category, and the co-option of many of Trickster's characteristics by the Christian Devil marginalised the Trickster as a literary trope up to the twentieth century.²³⁹ Tricksters persisted,

²³⁷ Bettina L. Knapp, *A Jungian Approach to Literature* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. xi-xii.

²³⁸ Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 10. Hereafter Hyde: *Trickster*.

²³⁹ It is an exaggeration to claim Christianity contains absolutely no 'sacred amorality'; the doctrine of *felix culpa*, at least, might be included in this category (and the Snake in the Genesis account is, incidentally, an archetypal Trickster). And Christian marginalisation of Trickster figures was not absolute: as well as the *picaros* of the Spanish picaresque narratives, Shakespeare's Iago (for example) retains most of the characteristics.

however, in folk literature, and so they were available when Eastern European poets under totalitarianism began to examine folk literature for poetic and political resources. Marina Warner has noted how

During the Soviet era, as Ugrešić has said, the use of traditional material gave writers freedom because it appeared to conform to the populist and nationalist policies of the state. (Lenin had claimed that folktales could be used as the basis for ‘beautiful studies about the hopes and longings of our people’.) An authentic proletarian background, supposed naivety and a child audience could also provide a cloak for subversive thoughts and political criticism; fabulist metaphors were hard to censor.²⁴⁰

Fazil Iskander, for instance, appropriates a traditional form of Trickster story in his poem ‘The Devil and the Shepherd’, drawing attention to its folktale origin (and suggesting to the censor its irrelevance to contemporary politics) in its subtitle, ‘An Abkhazian Tale’.²⁴¹ The Devil’s attempts to entrap the Shepherd with apparently innocuous questioning map straightforwardly enough onto the Soviet authorities, and the (Trickster) Shepherd’s subversion of this interrogation through increasingly exaggerated lies suggests a potential strategy of resistance.

Miroslav Holub’s ‘A Helping Hand’ employs the Trickster archetype more subtly.²⁴² The ‘helping hand’ being offered ‘hesitatingly’ to ‘some people’ is far from the benign historical necessity posited by Marx. The process is unpredictable: ‘We gave a helping hand to fire / and it turned into a rocket’ leaves open the question of whether the ‘rocket’ is a spacecraft or a missile. (The poem was published in 1960, and presumably written around the time of the Sputnik launches.) This amoral ‘helping hand’ is the Trickster incarnate, in his Prometheus role. (In several cultures, part of the divine knowledge stolen by the Trickster includes instructions for domesticating plants and animals. Compare with Holub: ‘We gave a helping hand to grass / and it turned into corn’.)²⁴³

The Trickster archetype did not only provide a motif which poets could employ; it also contained a latent *mythos* for poetry itself. Just as in many myth

²⁴⁰ Marina Warner, ‘Witchiness’, *London Review of Books* 31 / 16 (27 August 2009), p. 23

²⁴¹ Fazil Iskander, ‘The Devil and the Shepherd’, trans. Daniel Weissbort, *Post-War Russian Poetry*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Penguin, 1974), pp. 120-22.

²⁴² Miroslav Holub, ‘A Helping Hand’, *Poems Before and After*, trans. George Theiner (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 61.

²⁴³ John R. Hinnells, ‘Trickster’, *A New Dictionary of Religions*, *Blackwell Reference Online* (1995), last accessed 25 July 2012, <www.blackwellreference.com>.

cycles Trickster is expelled from the community of the gods, Plato banished poets from his republic, for lying (and in mitigation, Sidney argued that the poet ‘nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth’, a weird evasion which seems to locate the whole poetic project in Hyde’s category of ‘sacred amorality’).²⁴⁴ Czesław Miłosz would later go on to defend the ‘the right of the poet to invent – that is, to lie’ (Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 79). Other Trickster characteristics had also been attached to poets: Eliot, for instance, had characterised poetry as theft, ‘a raid on the inarticulate’,²⁴⁵ and famously noted that ‘immature poets imitate; mature poets steal’.²⁴⁶ Keats’ description of the ‘camelion poet’ also describes the Trickster motif of shifting identity:

What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women [...] have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures.²⁴⁷

As Hyde notes, ‘the functions [of the Trickster], like the bones of Orisis, [...] have been scattered [...] The problem is to find where his gathered body might come back to life, or where it might already have done so’ (Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 11). It is impossible for a unified Trickster to exist under an all-powerful God. Rather, I suggest, it took the fallible dictator-gods of twentieth century totalitarianism (Richard Crossman’s book of anti-communist essays was titled *The God that Failed*) to recreate a potential domain for the archetype. Jeanne Rosier Smith, writing on the persistence of Trickster folktales in African-American slave communities, argues that ‘awareness of coexisting, contradictory

²⁴⁴ Sebastian Barker notes that ‘it struck me as clear in this debate that Plato banned poets because they could not explain how the divine inspiration of poets actually worked. It also struck me as clear that it was dangerous to permit such an unexplained force as poetry into the city state.’ Sebastian Barker, untitled article, *Agenda* 27 / 3 (1990), p. 6.

²⁴⁵ T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, *Collected Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 182. Although ‘raid’ might initially suggest a bombing mission, this can’t be what Eliot had in mind: obviously something (the poem) needs to be brought back.

²⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays 1917 – 1932* (London: Faber and Faber 1932), p. 206.

²⁴⁷ John Keats, letter to Richard Woodhouse dated October 27 1818, *Selected Letters*, ed. Jon Mee and Robert Gittings, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 148.

versions of reality and an ability to operate and express one's identity at a "metalevel" – primary trickster skills – became a key to survival for Africans in America.²⁴⁸ The same argument could be made for those writing under dictatorships in the USSR and its satellites.

Ken Smith's long poem *Fox Running* can be read as a sustained meditation on the Trickster's relationship with the State. The main character, Fox, is explicitly described as a folktale protagonist:

Years ago long ago late he is
 skin of his name of his legend
 skin of his alias son of his alibi
 son of his tale told for children²⁴⁹

'Skin of his name' reminds us that the trickster changes skins as easily as he changes names. Subsequent passages, indeed, seem to recall particular Trickster heroes: 'shotgun pepper in his backside', for instance, as well as being appropriate for a fox, hints at Daddy Mention, the African-American Trickster and prison escapist famous for outrunning shotgun blasts (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 132).²⁵⁰ The transformation of 'avocado' into its Nahuatl root '*ahhuacatl*' (testicle) recalls a reverse metamorphosis, of the Trickster Coyote's genitalia into edible plants, in the Colville Native American myth-cycle.²⁵¹ 'Today I'm crow' might gesture towards Ted Hughes' Trickster protagonist (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 155). The most obvious parallel, of course, is with Reynard the Fox, hero of the 12th century Alsatian *Roman de Renart*. Early in *Fox Running*, we see Fox 'running into the tube maps', and much of the poem's structure is dictated by his long journeys 'through the tunnels' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 132, p. 156). The *Roman de Renart* finds a direct analogue in the twisting tunnel network of the Reynard's castle: 'For Maleperduys was full of holes, here one hole and there another, and yonder another, narrow, crooked and long, with many ways to go

²⁴⁸ Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 114.

²⁴⁹ Ken Smith, *Fox Running*, in *The Poet Reclining: Selected Poems 1962-1980* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe 1982), p. 132. Hereafter Smith: *Fox Running*.

²⁵⁰ For more on Daddy Mention, see i.e. Zora Neale Hurston, 'Folklore and Music', reprinted in *Frontiers* 12 / 1 (1991), pp. 182-198. Smith would have encountered Daddy Mention, as I did, in Hudson's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

²⁵¹ Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 132. The Colville myth-cycle is described in Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 30-1. Incidentally, the word *coyote* is also derived from the Nahuatl.

out, which he opened and shut after that he had need.²⁵² These parallels, however, only go so far: while Reynart is perpetually in control, shifting identities as a means of getting an easy meal (most famously impersonating a monk to catch the children of the rooster Chanticleer), Fox is driven by necessity, and changes skin to evade his unnamed pursuers. This capacity to lie and swap identities is particularly emphasised:

Just another of my feints
 Just another invention
 Just another of my lies
 Just another skin coming off

(Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 167)

The tube journeys which Fox describes often represent actual feints; in the section of the poem where Fox drunkenly reminisces about his abandoned wife, he visits Maida Vale, Paddington, Kilburn and Paddington again, doubling back on himself twice down the Bakerloo Line (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 134). Fox's thefts, another distinguishing mark of the Trickster, also occur out of necessity, in this case Fox's 'cash flow problem': we find him 'along the market side, selling / half a dozen ties he's nicked' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 135). ('Ties' is also a pun, reminding us of the other 'ties' that Fox has managed to get rid of.) Fox's 'blank hunger', finally, is also a feature of Tricksters: Hyde writes that 'a trickster is often imagined as a "hungry god"' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 136, Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 37). To summarise, Fox's Trickster features consist of a shifting identity (human/fox), a knack for evading pursuit, continual travelling, an aptitude for lying and thievery, and an insatiable appetite.

The protagonist of *Fox Running*, as we have seen, is a Trickster in trouble, a fairly common motif in folk literature (see, for instance, 'Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby'). Jeffrey Wainwright sums him up as 'pursued, improvising, but uncaptured'.²⁵³ The phrase 'skin of his name', through the parallel with 'skin

²⁵² Pierre de Saint-Cloud, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, trans. William Caxton, revised and ed. Henry Morley, *Early Prose Romances* 5 (London: Routledge, 1891).

²⁵³ Jeffrey Wainwright, "'With a dewdrop on his nose": a piece on the poetry of Ken Smith', *Stand* 6 / 1 (2005), p. 23.

of his teeth', gently suggests the precariousness of his condition. Similarly, when Fox is described as 'drawn to the life to the bone', the reader is likely to remember his 'cash flow problems' and notice the faint insinuations of 'overdrawn' and 'close to the bone' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 168). Elsewhere, Fox's troubles are rendered far less subtly: 'one eye hunted / one eye hunter' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 148). Again, there are apt parallels with Trickster mythology. Hyde notes that, in many myth-systems, 'Trickster is at once...predator and prey' (Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 19).

But unlike the mythological Tricksters with whom he shares so many characteristics, Fox's adversaries are not a pantheon of gods but the various apparatuses of the State. Their relationship is bureaucratic: Fox becomes 'words // entered in the black form filed away / besides the red his birth was' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 137). The State has transformed his natal blood into red ink (still used to print birth certificates in 1979, when the poem was written). Later, in 'the wrong office... / in the wrong part of town', the State speaks for the first and last time, telling him that he '*doesn't qualify / ...for any sort of benefit*' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 140). His 'cash-flow problems' and the 'hunger leashing him in to the city' implicitly become the fault of the system, the Thatcherite neoliberal capitalism which has left him 'out classed out priced' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 131). But states elsewhere are no more benign: in one of the poem's most moving passages, he turns the dial through various radio stations as

All night in the radio dark
the opinions arrive, urgent

hooded versions of history. From Kiev
Hangchow long grain statistics,

Sofia in impeccable Oxford
listing tractor production 1946-49.

Meat. Wheat. Sweaty feet.
Who gets what.

(Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 144)

The distribution of resources, Smith implies, is as unfair under Communism as under capitalism, with the ‘impeccable Oxford’ accent of the Bulgarian radio announcer suggesting a persistence of a stratified class system even in Eastern European satellites. ‘Who gets what’ is made a statement rather than a question, a pre-determined fact, and the ‘grain statistics’ and ‘tractor production’ are simply another manifestation of the bureaucracy Fox loathes. ‘Hooded’, and the first syllable of ‘Hangchow’, hint grimly at the fate of those who defy the system. (According to William Oxley’s memoir, Smith was by temperament a ‘socialist utopian’, in which case *Fox Running* represents a moment of doubt in the possibility of these utopias.)²⁵⁴

The radio broadcasts fade, leading into a long passage in which Fox contemplates the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse. In this section the State is seen for a moment as it really is, not a monolithic entity but a group of individuals: the ‘sleepy technician’ who might potentially ‘go crazy’ and launch a nuclear attack, the ‘bullnosed politicians’, and the radio announcers who ‘sweetly reason round’ the possibility of war (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 145). Just as the State is suddenly individualised, so individuals become states; in his description of the total destruction caused by nuclear war, Fox lists as a casualty the ‘republics of raw nerve’. This is something the Trickster cannot lie or dodge his way out of, as his own particular territory has been destroyed, the ‘disputed borders of meaning’ in which his archetype exists (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 145).

Fox continues his flight. The next location where we can chart his relationship with the State is in the letter he writes explaining how he became Fox, having started out as a ‘good dog’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 148-50). ‘I’ve not paid the mortgage, / I’ve not paid the bank, // stamp tax or insurance, / I’m a blur, I’m a blank’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 149). Once again, the description is of a bureaucracy to whom Fox only exists as a record of payments. The ‘blank’ he has become recalls his ‘blank hunger’ earlier in the poem, linking it again to these missed payments, and ‘blur’ suggests his strategy of resistance, his shifting and blurring identity. It also reminds us of one of the poem’s recurring motifs, the Victorian photographs of a ‘man bouncing a ball’, and how it falls through ‘a

²⁵⁴ William Oxley, ‘Remembering Ken Smith’, *Stand* 6 / 1 (2005), p. 15.

white blur of rebound'; Fox, we infer, has slipped between two frames in the filmstrip, between two moments, dodging through time as well as through space (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 134).

Fox runs on and the poem fragments, taking in overheard scraps of conversation (a typical stylistic trope of Smith), political slogans ('Send the Shah back / Shahn't'), estate agents' listings, nursery rhymes and hidden messages ('If you're reading this / Mildred / we're through') (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 151 – 55). The State's electioneering and marketing language is made absurd by the removal of context: 'Urban. Efficient. Articulate. And costly.' For the first time, the State is also personified as a single person: 'ayatollah Thatcher'. (The single line which follows this fragment, 'zipping up his fly', suggests this is graffiti on the walls of a urinal.)

The toilet graffiti also marks the ominous introduction of the 'NF skins', the far-right skinheads of the National Front. This organisation was particularly prominent in 1979, the year the poem was written, having contested over 300 seats in the General Election, and memories of the 'Battle of Lewisham' (a running street battle fought between police, skinheads and anti-fascists in August 1977) were still fresh in the public imagination. These skinheads represent an uncomfortable third possibility distinct from Communism and Thatcherism: a complete breakdown of government, and the emergence of a violent racist dystopia. Fox is assaulted by 'skins' in Neasden, and apparently killed:

where he died
easily among the skins
razor to the throat
drowning in his blood
all he ever saw was boots
and the boots going in

(Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 159)

The invocation of the famous line from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – 'If you want a vision of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face – forever'²⁵⁵ – is

²⁵⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 215.

surely deliberate. But Fox has almost certainly already recovered, a cryptic reference to a ‘spring festival / urban version’ pre-empting his resurrection (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 159). We know Fox has escaped by faking his death at least once before, and a later poem called ‘Fox in October’ seems to pick up where *Fox Running* leaves off.²⁵⁶ Still, the narrative ‘I’ becomes much more prominent from this point; Fox has escaped even the poem, leaving Smith, who ‘want[s] word of the bloke / who leans over with a razor / and slits the protagonist’s throat’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 167). Fox once again becomes ‘a blank’ to the State: ‘his file closed down the dole office / his last account cleared / his black form / filed with his red form’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 160).

After this point in the poem, the Trickster archetype begins to dissipate; instead, Fox is identified with the Everyman narrator, ‘just another face / just another walking wounded’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 162). The political argument of the poem becomes more heavy-handed, and the realistic invocations of London landscapes are replaced by ‘Pakkibashers’ Court’ and ‘Martin Webster Gardens’ (Webster, an organiser in the National Front, had run for MP of Bethnal Green in the 1979 elections), themselves districts of a caricatured ‘Thatcherland’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 163). The narrator recalls ‘men [he] knew years back’, and their

Faces
 mentioning defeat saying
 bankruptcy desertion failure redundancy
 lost bottle.

(Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 167)

‘Such was Fox’, the passage ends, in an attempt at identifying the Trickster hero with the working-class communities of Pearson Park, from the Yorkshire of Smith’s youth. This supposed identification is arguably the poem’s least convincing section. As Hyde notes,

²⁵⁶ This is confirmed in the blurb for *The Poet Reclining: Selected Poems 1962-1980*, in which Fox is described as ‘a broken man faking his own death’. The blurb was presumably written by Neil Astley or Smith himself. Ken Smith, ‘Fox in October’, *The Poet Reclining: Selected Poems 1962-1980* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1982), pp. 195-7.

...one can see that most modern thieves and wanderers lack an important element of trickster's world, his sacred context. If the ritual setting is missing, trickster is missing. If his companions – all the other spiritual forces within whose domain he carries on his mischief – are no longer with us, then he is no longer with us. (...) The god of the roads needs the more settled territories before his travelling means very much. If *everyone* travels, the result is not the apotheosis of the trickster but another form of his demise.

(Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 13)

Fox (in his guise as the fugitive shamming his own death) may well have once belonged to this working-class community, but his flight and his feints have separated him from it. However, Fox's unnamed pursuer and 'double' is also his own death ('running into his death / and his death always with him'), and in this sense his identification with the unemployed old men being 'pursued / room to room through suburbs / in a slow terminal frenzy' is apt (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 132, p. 168). (Roger Garfitt suggests these men represent 'the double, the shadow [Fox] could so easily become', noting that 'all that separates them is the survival instinct', although arguably this interpretation is not borne out by the text.)²⁵⁷ The poem ends with the brief reappearance of Fox, this time in a synthesis of his roles as Everyman and Trickster:

he is anyone
 naked under his clothes
 alone his moment
 anyone at all wandering back
 from the Laundromat late Saturday noon
 clearing his throat
 speaking again
 in the white room
 sweeping his hat off and asking
who all belongs to this blood then?

²⁵⁷ Roger Garfitt, 'Ken Smith: The Poet Reclining (Life and Work 1, 1938-1986)', Ken Smith, *You Again: Last Poems and Other Words* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 47. But the motif of shadows and doubling throughout *Fox Running* is already closely bound up in Smith's self-identification with Fox.

Fox has changed skins once more; he is, indeed, potentially ‘anyone at all’, putting on new identities as easily as fresh clothes from the Laundromat. (The second meaning of *launder*, ‘a transfer of illegally obtained money to conceal its origins’, is possibly hinted at.) But Fox has slowed to a walking pace for the first time in the poem (‘wandering back’), and by the poem’s final line he has stopped altogether.

The relationship between the Trickster and the State depicted in *Fox Running* is made far more explicit than would have been possible in an Eastern European poem on the same theme. Smith can openly name the politicians he is attacking (Thatcher, Martin Webster) and the dire consequences he is afraid of (nuclear war). This explicitness of content translates directly into an openness of form which is also uncharacteristic in poetry written under the threat of censorship: when one’s poetic transactions with the State are only possible through allusion, it is necessary to keep the metaphoric borders of the poem fairly impermeable. Similarly, Smith’s collages of overheard conversation and graffiti would have been impossible in a society where poets were required to take full, sometimes lethal responsibility for every word in their poems. It is difficult, therefore, to trace all of Smith’s Eastern European sources, and much of what follows is speculative. It may be more useful to treat the Eastern European poems under discussion as instructive parallels, rather than clear-cut influences. Nonetheless, I will only discuss poets who were known to Smith at the time of *Fox Running*’s composition.²⁵⁸

Of these, Zbigniew Herbert is the most important Eastern European presence in Smith’s work. Smith’s prose poem ‘Cogito at the British Museum’ extends and continues Herbert’s most famous sequence, his account of the melancholy everyman Mr Cogito.²⁵⁹ The poem’s final passage seems to explicitly link the ventriloquised Cogito with Fox:

²⁵⁸ *All Souls Day in Vienna*, by Sándor Kányádi, would certainly be included in this discussion if it were possible that Smith had encountered it. (In fact, it was written in 1976, but only translated into English much later.) The poem’s English translation is tonally very similar to *Fox Running*, and includes many tropes which are characteristic of Smith. This goes to show how easy it is to over-ascribe influence, and reminds us that poetic similarity (in whatever form) does not necessarily imply relation.

²⁵⁹ Ken Smith, ‘Cogito at the British Museum’, *A Book of Chinese Whispers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1987), p. 148-149. Hereafter Smith: *Whispers*. The material in *A Book of Chinese Whispers* was not included in either of Smith’s collected volumes for Bloodaxe.

He waits there, numbering off his ordinary tragedies, his many dress rehearsals for the undertaker. He lists the days of his life, his disappearing acts, his silences, his fortunate ability to see himself in the third person. *To lose a country, that is careless* he whispers to himself. *But now to lose the book of it.*

(Smith: *Whispers*, p. 149)

Most of these attributes are directly associated with Fox. Fox has faked his own death more than once, and has suffered the ‘ordinary tragedies’ of marital breakdown and financial trouble. He is a master of ‘disappearing acts’ (we hear of him ‘learning how to vanish’. Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 152) and, through his complex identification with the narrator and poet, is also expert at ‘see[ing] himself in the third person’. He is a denizen of a ‘lost country’ (‘stepping out... / into NF occupied country’. Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 163). ‘Cogito at the British Museum’ even references Fox by name: ‘It is a shame about the governments, he thinks, the sleeve tuggers, the time servers, the party hacks. *Fox with fox* he says. *Party dog with party dog*’ (Smith: *Whispers*, p. 148).

When *Fox Running* was being written, the only Cogito poems available to Smith were those in Herbert’s *Selected Poems*, translated by John and Bogdana Carpenter (published three years before *Fox Running* was completed).²⁶⁰ Tonally, Herbert is entirely distinct from Smith; where Smith is forthright, sometimes to the point of artlessness, Herbert is subdued and gently ironic. The metaphoric domains they draw from rarely overlap, and Herbert’s fascination with Classical mythology is not at all shared by Smith. Common cultural interests are similarly absent. Herbert’s 1962 volume of essays, *Barbarian in the Garden*, displays a deep passion for Renaissance art, Classical ruins and Gothic cathedrals; Smith loads his poetry with references to Westerns and 1940s *film noir*.²⁶¹

In terms of form, style and syntax, the two poets are a little closer. Both are enthusiasts for the prose poem. Herbert, except in his prose poems (which are

²⁶⁰ Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Hereafter Herbert: *Selected*. This volume includes seventeen Cogito poems, out of a total of forty in the original Polish *Pan Cogito* sequence. The full sequence would only be published in 1993.

²⁶¹ Zbigniew Herbert, *Barbarian in the Garden*, trans. Michael March and Jaroslaw Anders (New York: Harvest / HBJ, 1985).

punctuated normally), employs no punctuation apart from dashes; Smith, too, tends towards minimal punctuation. *Fox Running*, in fact, uses much less punctuation than Smith's previous works, and this may partly be attributed to Herbert's influence. Michael Hofmann notes how the 'corollary of [Herbert's] absence of punctuation' is an 'unusually powerful, certain, unambiguous vestigial syntax'.²⁶² (This syntax, Hofmann goes on to point out, is partly a result of the Carpenters' prowess as translators.) Smith's own forceful syntax at times feels reminiscent of Herbert in English translation. Lists unbroken by commas or conjunctions are a common device used by both poets. Smith describes the foundations of a future suburb, 'where will be flyover / industrial estates new bungalows' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 132). The missing punctuation renders every item on the list equal; as in the imagined suburb, the various land-uses overlap. (It is even possible to read 'flyover' as an adjective, meaning *an urban area under a flight-path*, modifying the two items in the next line.) This overlapping is also a feature of Herbert's unpunctuated lists: 'a labour a long march at midday', 'Here seasons parts of the world have a home', 'the loss of one's own nature drunken stability' ('Gauguin the end', 'Island', 'Sense of identity', Herbert: *Selected Poems*, p. 11, p. 3, p. 37). In all three examples, the boundaries between the items in the list are deliberately dissolved. The 'labour' and the 'long march' blur into one another to create the connotation of a *forced march*. 'Parts of the world' overlapping with 'seasons' suggests state boundaries shifting over time (part of what is evaded or negated on the 'sudden island [of Sculpture]'). 'Drunken' seems to modify both 'one's own nature' and 'stability'.

Sean O'Brien lists some other features of Smith's style: 'a deliberately restrained vocabulary; refusal of abstraction; an extreme economy of metaphor, as if the imagination were still subject to wartime rationing and extravagance were a waste'.²⁶³ This metaphor of words as rations was first used by Tom Paulin in his introduction to the *Faber Book of Political Verse*: 'the Eastern European imagination designs a form of anti-poetry or survivor's art...it proffers a basic ration of the Word, like a piece of bread and chocolate in wartime'.²⁶⁴ Whether

²⁶² Michael Hofmann, 'A Dead Necktie', *Poetry (Chicago)* (May 2007), p. 121.

²⁶³ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 83.

²⁶⁴ Tom Paulin, 'Introduction', *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, ed. Tom Paulin (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 16.

or not O'Brien actually had Paulin's passage in mind when describing Smith's work, the similarity between the two descriptions is compelling.

Peter Barry suggests that the idiom of *Fox Running* is closer to '[Ted] Hughes' ultimately monotonous animal-inner-monologue register'.²⁶⁵ Barry is correct to note that the figure of Fox is closely related to Hughes' Crow, an important (perhaps the most important) Trickster predecessor in English poetry. But this relation is thematic, not idiomatic, and the specific instances of Hughesian idiom Barry finds *Fox Running* are not characteristic of the whole poem: 'dropping the definite or indefinite article, for instance, and using lots of very short sentences beginning with "And"'.²⁶⁶ (In fact, there are only four of these sentences: 'And put the boot in', 'And wakes to the same black anger', 'And keep running', 'And I'm gone' ((Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 136, p. 137, p. 150)). Nor is the device particularly characteristic of Hughes.) *Fox Running*, indeed, can be read as Smith's attempt to actually *distance* himself from Hughes: after Anthony Thwaite had described him as a member of the 'tribe of Ted', Smith said in an interview that he 'realised at the time that I had been writing a pastoral nostalgic lament for the country, whereas in fact I was a townsman'.²⁶⁷ The idiomatic and thematic connection between *Fox Running* and Hughes is easy to overstate. The connection between *Fox Running* and Herbert has been much less examined.

Thematically, also, Herbert shares many of Smith's concerns. Alienation, escape and urban devastation (imagined by Smith, actually experienced by Herbert) are as much a part of *Pan Cogito* as *Fox Running*. 'On a sunless autumn afternoon Mr Cogito likes to visit the dirty outskirts of the city. There is no purer source of melancholy, he says', runs the italicised introduction to Herbert's 'Houses of the Outskirts' (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 44). Smith's narrator also visits these 'dirty outskirts':

Surbiton Norbiton Sanderstead
blue scatter of sparks
smokey embankment flowers

²⁶⁵ Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 89. Hereafter Barry: *British Poetry and the City*.

²⁶⁶ Barry: *British Poetry and the City* p. 89.

²⁶⁷ Colin Raw, 'The Godfather of the new poetry', interview with Ken Smith, Bloodaxe Books catalogue 1998-99, pp. 8-11. Quoted in Barry: *British Poetry and the City*, p. 89.

ownerless back lots of flats

(Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 162)

Smith's 'ownerless back lots of flats' are very close to Herbert's 'houses always for sale'. Smith writes from 'the valley of abandoned bedrooms'; Herbert, in a similar (though more vivid) metaphor writes of 'stairways [which] are palmtrees of dust'.

'The Monster of Mr Cogito' is another poem with close affinities to *Fox Running* (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 69). The 'monster' of the title 'doesn't really have measurements' and is 'spread out like low pressure / hanging over the country': it is an embodiment of 'nothingness' itself, the 'nihilism of fire, stupidity and hatred' which Herbert was quoted as warning of in the introduction to his *Selected Poems* (Herbert: *Selected*, p. xi). Like Fox's unnamed pursuers, Cogito's monster is kept deliberately vague, shrouded under a 'thick fog'. Smith's narrator receives ominous 'phonecalls / from people who didn't exist'; Cogito faces the monster 'like a bold skirmisher / of an army that doesn't exist' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 166). To face the monster, Cogito 'walks out at dawn / into a sleepy suburb'; to evade the monster, Fox runs 'between lamp dark and daylight / loping through the suburbs' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 130). Cogito's monster can't be harmed 'with a pen / or with a spear'; the idea that language falls short in the face of nihilism is repeated throughout *Fox Running* ('Goodbye / to the language that failed', Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 146). The other inhabitants of Mr Cogito's world would prefer to deal with the monster indirectly:

reasonable people say
we can live together
with the monster

we only have to [...]
...breathe lightly
to pretend we are not there

Mr Cogito however
does not want a life of make-believe

Fox initially goes along with this strategy of the ‘reasonable people’, but *Fox Running*’s final lines can be read as a Cogito-like abdication from make-believe, as Fox begins to ‘speak[...] / from the lengthening floor / of his blood his conviction’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 169). (This ‘lengthening floor’ is the culmination of a motif which has been building throughout the poem: earlier, Fox has been described as ‘running in his long blood anywhere’, and we also hear of his ‘long fox outline’. Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 138, p. 148.)

In these themes, then, *Fox Running* and *Pan Cogito* have a lot in common. But I have already argued that Smith’s poem is best read as a ‘sustained meditation on the relationship between the Trickster and the State’. Here, it would seem there is much less affinity between the two poets. Mr Cogito is not a Trickster figure. Of the earlier qualities we picked out shared by Fox and the mythological tricksters (shifting identity, a knack for evasion, constant travelling, an aptitude for lying and thievery, and an insatiable appetite), Cogito has none.²⁶⁸ In ‘Sense of Identity’, Cogito/Herbert experiences a ‘feeling of profound unity’ with a stone, and although it ‘[isn’t] at all the idea of invariability’ which attracts him, the stone is only ‘changeable’ to the extent that it can represent his shifting moods (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 37). In ‘Mr Cogito’s Alienations’, the woman sleeping alongside him is metonymised as ‘blood... / armed with its own skin’ (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 43); while the line shares elements of diction with *Fox Running* (‘Just another of my feints... / Just another of my skins coming off’. Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 167), the sense is reversed, and the skin is a ‘weapon’ not because of its capacity for change and misdirection but because of its impermeability (‘impenetrable / like a stone’). Similarly, in ‘Sister’ we learn that, unlike Fox, ‘the young Cogito remained in the limits of his own skin’ (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 36).

Mr Cogito is much closer to another folkloric archetype, the Sage Fool, ‘the “all-licensed” critic who speaks the real truth about the people around him’.²⁶⁹ This archetype is often applied to religious figures including Jesus Christ and Saint Francis. (It should not be confused with the Holy Fool, the Russian

²⁶⁸ This is, at least, debatable. Tom Paulin’s description of Cogito certainly recalls the Trickster in several particulars: ‘Cogito is the poet as non-person speaking invisibly and silently in the empty daylight. He is the voice of an underground [...] nation.’ Tom Paulin, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 204-205.

²⁶⁹ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 254.

iuodivyi Khrista radi or ‘fool for the sake of Christ’. This was an existent social role in medieval Russia, probably deriving from pre-Christian shamanic beliefs.)²⁷⁰ The Sage Fool is a stock character in fairytales: the most notable example is the small child who points out that the Emperor is naked, ‘the child...who could only see things as his eyes showed them to him’.²⁷¹ The Shakespearean fools in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *King Lear* are the most important literary manifestations of the archetype, along with Prince Myshkin in Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*.²⁷² Like the Trickster, the Sage Fool is often identified with the artist or poet: ‘the Saint, the artist, the poet, and the Fool, are one’, writes the English painter Cecil Collins.²⁷³

The Trickster might initially appear to be the opposite of the Sage Fool. The Trickster, after all, is the archetypal liar, while the Sage Fool is the archetypal truth-teller. In fact, their relationship is much closer, as we see in Welsford’s description of the Sage Fool as one who ‘speaks the *real truth* [my italics] about the people around him’. *Real truth* seems at first like an odd construction: are there any unreal truths? Welsford, of course, is using the adjective to draw a distinction between ‘real’ truth and socially-constructed truths, truths the Sage Fool is unable to perceive. Like the Trickster, the Sage Fool is a disturber of boundaries, in this case socially erected boundaries designed to protect people from unpleasant realities: like the Trickster, he requires ‘a relationship to other powers, to people and institutions and traditions that can manage the odd double attitude of both insisting that their boundaries be respected and recognising that in the long run their livelihood depends on having those boundaries regularly disturbed’ (Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 13). (Ted Hughes has observed something like this already, when he notes that ‘the Trickster, the Hero and the Saint on the Path meet in the Holy Fool’.)²⁷⁴ Hence the appeal of the

²⁷⁰ Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), p. 10.

²⁷¹ Hans Christian Andersen, *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, trans. Ned Bustard (London: Veritas 2004), p. 30.

²⁷² Thompson sees Myshkin rather as an adulterated Holy Fool, ‘a figure modelled on holy fools’ who does not retain any of their important characteristics Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), p. 250.

²⁷³ Cecil Collins, *The Vision of the Fool and other writings*, ed. Brian Keeble (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1994), p. 81.

²⁷⁴ Ted Hughes, ‘Crow on the Beach’, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 241.

Shakespearean court fool, whose ‘judgements are really impartial because his mental peculiarities and his degraded social position prevent him from having any particular axe to grind’.²⁷⁵ It is not enough to say that the Trickster represents relativism and the Sage Fool divine revelation, because if relativism is *true* then the Trickster, as its representative, must himself be conveying a sacred truth. As Hyde notes, one of the Trickster’s revelations is that ‘apparent chance is in fact a [divine] oracle’ (Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 135).²⁷⁶ Under a State, rather than a polytheism, the archetypal roles of the Sage Fool and the Trickster will tend to elide with one another: both are concerned with exposing the limits of power, both must be social outcasts, and both will be persecuted by those whose position depends on the maintenance of illusions.

Most of the poems in *Pan Cogito* take as their starting point a popular way of viewing a particular concept (suffering, alienation, magic), which Mr Cogito can see through, and which must be revised or discarded. The opening of ‘Mr Cogito and the Movement of Thoughts’ is characteristic:

Thoughts cross the mind
says the popular expression

the popular expression
overestimates the movement of thoughts

(Herbert: *Selected*, p. 41)

Similarly, ‘Mr Cogito Meditates on Suffering’ opens with a catalogue of humanity’s various failed attempts ‘to remove / the so-called cup of bitterness’ (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 38). ‘Mr Cogito Reads the Newspaper’ considers the distortions imposed by a front page juxtaposing ‘news of a sensational crime’ and a ‘report of the killing of 120 soldiers’ (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 39). Similar examples are scattered throughout the entire Cogito sequence.

We have already examined a second motif which connects Cogito and the Sage Fool: Cogito’s refusal of ‘a life of make-believe’. In ‘The Trial’, Cogito’s

²⁷⁵ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 250.

²⁷⁶ Hyde mentions certain similarities between the fool and Trickster in this section, but does not discuss them in detail.

show-trial is conducted by ‘member[s] of the union of magicians’ (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 77). Similarly, in ‘Mr Cogito on Magic’, the ‘breathless alchemists of hallucination’ are presumably to be identified with state propagandists (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 61). This ‘make-believe’, however, is as much an internal temptation as an external imposition:

be courageous when the mind deceives you be courageous
in the final account only this is important

(‘The Envoy of Mr Cogito’. In Herbert: *Selected*, p. 79)

In both ‘The Monster of Mr Cogito’ and ‘Mr Cogito on Upright Attitudes’, this struggle takes the form of a literal battle (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 69, p. 64). The latter poem is set in Utica, presumably at some point during the first millennium (when the Roman colony was repeatedly sacked). We witness the ‘citizens’, who play the same role as the ‘reasonable people’ in ‘The Monster of Mr Cogito’, ‘teach[ing] their children how to lie’ and ‘falling to the knees’. Mr Cogito, on the other hand, ‘would like to stand / up to the situation’, though in the end, his only freedom is ‘the choice of position / in which he wants to die’. In other poems, the struggle is one to ‘give testimony’ or ‘to be the intermediary of freedom’ (‘The Envoy of Mr Cogito’ and ‘Mr Cogito’s Game’. In Herbert: *Selected*, p. 79, p. 60).

This phrase, ‘the intermediary of freedom’, is a good description of the role shared by the Sage Fool and Trickster motifs in both their mythological and contemporary contexts. Pitched somewhere between Stalin’s idea of poets as ‘engineers of human souls’,²⁷⁷ and Auden’s conception of a poetry which ‘makes nothing happen’, the twin dangers of complicity and quietism, it is characterised by resistance and refusal: Cogito ‘accepts an inferior role’ and ‘won’t inhabit history’ (Herbert: *Selected*, p. 60). Fox, similarly turning down his position in society, is identified as ‘like a wheel / that stops turning’, and promises that he ‘will be honest with who will be honest with me’ (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 169, p.

²⁷⁷ In fact, the phrase was coined by Yury Olesha, but it was popularised and used extensively by Stalin.

164). Fox's honesty, by this point, has become as much of a threat as his lies and evasions.

Miroslav Holub is another Eastern European poet who may have influenced Smith's treatment of this theme. Smith would have encountered Holub's work in the 1967 Penguin Modern European Poets selection, edited by Al Alvarez.²⁷⁸ Holub certainly shares fewer of Smith's preoccupations than Herbert, and is in some ways a much more optimistic poet than either. He is closer to Smith in his directness, his sometimes unsubtle use of clichés (a poem entitled 'Love' ends 'Believe me when I say / it was beautiful'),²⁷⁹ and his use of very short sentences and abrupt line-breaks to create effects of emphasis and pace. (The stylistic trope Barry identifies as common to Hughes and Smith, 'lots of very short sentences beginning with "And"', is far more a trope of Holub's.²⁸⁰ More than half of Holub's early poems contain at least one of these constructions, and longer poems like 'Wisdom' are structured entirely around them.) He shares with Smith and Herbert a fascination with ruined buildings and the relation of the individual to his historical context, as well as what one reviewer termed 'a dislike of "poetical" embellishment'.²⁸¹

We have already encountered one example of his use of the Trickster motif, in our earlier discussion of 'A Helping Hand'. In his three poems 'The flypaper', 'The fly' and 'The best room, or interpretation of a poem', we can examine the gestation of this motif through a particular image (Holub: *Before and After*, p. 26, p. 52, p. 68). The three poems do not form a sequence, and seem to have been composed at different times. Their common ground is solely the figure of the fly, and a pervading theme of redemption from (historical) futility.

In 'The flypaper', this redemption is only really visible in the first line, which makes the flies trapped on the flypaper 'the kitchen's buzzing conscience'. Their sound, onomatopoeically enacted in 'Sisyphuses', is what makes the poem's instruction to the reader ('Behold an earthly paradise / without midge,

²⁷⁸ Miroslav Holub, *Selected Poems*, trans. George Theiner and Ian Milner, intro. Al Alvarez (London: Penguin, 1967). *Although and Notes of a Clay Pigeon*, both translated by Ian and Jarmila Milner, were also available to Smith, and (in the year of *Fox Running's* publication) *Sagittal Section*, translated by Stuart Frieber and Dana Hábová.

²⁷⁹ Miroslav Holub, 'Love', *Poems Before and After*, trans. Ian and Jarmila Milner, Ewald Osers, George Theiner, David Young, Dana Hábová, Rebekah Bloyd and Miroslav Holub, intro. Ian Milner (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006), p. 57. Hereafter Holub: *Before and After*.

²⁸⁰ Barry: *British Poetry and the City*, p. 89.

²⁸¹ Anon., 'Poems Before and After' (review), *The Economist* (5th August 1995).

gnat or fly') impossible. The final line elides the flies with the victims of Auschwitz, and provides a grisly pun on the struggle of the flies to work themselves free. Except for the small subversion of those in power (by being a 'buzzing conscience'), there is nothing of the Trickster motif here: the flies are not characterised at all.

The later poem 'The fly' has substantially developed this image. The fly this time is still not a Trickster figure, except insofar as she is immortal through her offspring, and driven entirely by appetite. The poem's central idea, of demonstrating human insignificance by describing it from the perspective of another order of life, is common in Holub: 'In the microscope' and 'The rampage' are early and late variations on the theme (Holub: *Before and After*, p. 28, p. 411). 'The fly' differs from these in the specificity of its historical setting, and the inherent horror of its presentation, a horror emphasised rather than negated by the chilly aloofness of Holub's style. The final sentence, with its syllogistic introduction ('And thus it was...'), drives home the theme of fatalism which will be taken further in the Holub's final fly poem.

'The best room, or interpretation of a poem' at first glance seems to be presenting a similar scene. It is worth examining the poem in its entirety:

And now tell it to me
in other words,
says the stuffed owl
to the fly
which, with a buzz,
is trying with its head
to break through the window-pane.

The fifth line revises the idea of the flypaper as 'buzzing conscience'. The buzzing here is merely a side-effect of the fly's struggle to 'break through the window-pane', something the stuffed owl is unable to understand. The analogy with the role of the poet, made explicit in the title, is obvious, and hints at Kafka's description of the role of literature:

Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt,
wozu lesen wir dann das Buch?... ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in

uns. [If the book we are reading doesn't wake us with a blow to the skull, what are we reading the book for? ...a book must be an axe for the frozen sea inside us.]²⁸²

Here, we are moving closer to the Trickster. The fly/poet attempts to break through the window's invisible barrier, 'play[ing] with boundaries both inner and outer' (Hyde: *Trickster*, p. 11): the fly attempts to break through the boundaries 'with its head', but for the analogous poet the boundary is presumably inside the head. The stuffed owl, for whom the poem is a simple set of words rather than an action, represents the settled (and complacent) community among which the Trickster must move. Ken Smith's treatment of this theme is similar: 'I write or die: that dramatic / that simple', claims his protagonist (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 147). In the long section beginning 'Word', Smith offers a vision of word and action fusing: 'each letter is a life / forming into meaning' (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 161). This vision, however, is never attained: the sections beginning 'I want a word' culminate in Fox's dying babble, '*not me not me Jack*', and the 'wise man' who 'defeats his enemies with words' is an ideal Fox is unable to reach (Smith: *Fox Running*, p. 169). The fly, the poet and Fox are all, in the end, battering their heads against the windowpane. Tom Paulin might have been writing about Smith when he described Holub's poetry as 'the art of a prison-camp society, of a closed world where poetry is written without hope but with an obstinate integrity that negates as it creates'; creation in negation is one of the central paradoxes of the Trickster.²⁸³

²⁸² Franz Kafka, letter to Oskar Pollok dated January 27 1904, Kafka online archive (in German), last accessed 2 June 2013, <<http://www.kafka.org/briefe/Brod/1904/br04-003.html>>. My translation.

²⁸³ Tom Paulin, 'Risks', *London Review of Books*. 7 / 14 (1 August 1985), p. 23.

Licking over wounds: English-language poetry in response to the Bosnian War

In 1992, the editor of *Poetry Review*, Peter Forbes, wrote an editorial on the state of political poetry in the UK, in which he noted that ‘a feature of contemporary life is the need to exhume, to lick over the wounds of the past forensically, to find out definitively *what happened*.’²⁸⁴ Out of his catalogue of examples, one stands out: ‘Eastern Europe, as the mass graves are dug up’ (Forbes: Editorial, p. 3). The reference is to Nazi and Soviet mass graves (two years earlier, the USSR had finally admitted responsibility for the massacre at Katyn in Poland), but there is a grim and unwitting irony in Forbes’ choice of example; shortly before his editorial was published, new mass graves were being dug for the victims of the massacre at Vukovar.

There is also a strange tension in Forbes’ metaphor. To lick a wound is to try and heal it, a procedure apparently at odds with his adverb ‘forensically’. It seems as if he was unable to choose between two opposing clichés – to lick one’s wounds, to pick over the bones – and instead amalgamated them into one rather unsatisfactory whole. But the formulation captures the central dilemma of poetry which responds to atrocity: how can reconciliation (which may entail forgetting, as well as forgiving) exist alongside the forensic examination and clear sight which the atrocity deserves? In other words, how can we balance our responsibilities towards the victims with the needs or requirements of the survivors? Reviewing a collection of photographs from the siege of Sarajevo, Charles Simic reminds us that ‘pictures of atrocities were used and continue to be used by the media on all sides in the former Yugoslavia to fan the flames of hatred...the books under review, for instance, do not show any Serbian dead. Consequently, one cannot look through these photos without ending by feeling a murderous loathing for the Serbs.’²⁸⁵ Poetry which takes atrocity as its subject runs similar risks.

This chapter will examine the response of poets writing in English to the Bosnian war of 1992-1995. The scale of this response was more or less

²⁸⁴ Peter Forbes, ‘A Hundred Harms: poetry and the Gulf War’, *Poetry Review* 82 / 2 (1992), p. 3. Hereafter Forbes: Editorial.

²⁸⁵ Charles Simic, ‘Open Wounds’, *Orphan Factory: essays and memoirs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 87-88

unprecedented; it can be judged from an overview of publications. In 1992, Joseph Brodsky, at the time the US poet laureate, published his ‘Bosnia Tune’ in the *New York Times*.²⁸⁶ 1993 saw the publication of *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia*, a charity anthology of largely original English language material published in association with *The Independent* (which had previously run its own regular *Bosnia Poems* serial).²⁸⁷ In the same year, Nigel Osbourne’s opera *Sarajevo* debuted, featuring in its libretto David Harsent’s translations of Goran Simić’s poems about the conflict. (A pamphlet of these translations was published in 1996.)²⁸⁸ The International Peace Centre / P.E.N. Centre in Sarajevo also put out *Contemporary Poetry of Bosnia and Herzegovina*, the first anthology of its kind.²⁸⁹ (The first anthology of Serbian poetry, Charles Simic’s *The Horse Has Six Legs*, had been published in 1992.)²⁹⁰ In 1998, Chris Agee’s anthology of contemporary Bosnian poetry, *Scar on the Stone*, was published, including many poems written during and about the conflict.²⁹¹ Many of his translators were established UK poets, often the same poets whose own responses to the conflict had been published in *Klaonica*. The book was launched with a heavily promoted reading at the South Bank Centre in London.²⁹²

No comparable humanitarian crisis of the late twentieth century produced a similar outpouring of poetry and publication. English poetry on the Rwandan genocide, taking place at the same time as the Bosnian war and on a larger scale, is practically nonexistent (Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s sequence ‘The Rwanda Poems’ may be the sole example). The US-led invasions of Iraq did inspire a number of poems and sequences (including J.H. Prynne’s ‘To Pollen’ and Keston Sutherland’s ‘Song of the Wanking Iraqi’),²⁹³ as well as two charity anthologies

²⁸⁶ Joseph Brodsky, ‘Bosnia Tune’, *New York Times* (18 November 1992), NYT online, last accessed 2 June 2013, <www.nytimes.com>.

²⁸⁷ Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993). ‘Klaonica’ is the Serbo-Croat word for *slaughterhouse*.

²⁸⁸ Goran Simić, *The Sorrow of Sarajevo*, trans. David Harsent (Tregarne: Cargo, 1996).

²⁸⁹ Mario Suško (ed.), *Contemporary Poetry of Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: International Peace Centre, 1993).

²⁹⁰ Charles Simic (ed. and trans.), *The Horse Has Six Legs: an Anthology of Serbian Poetry* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1992)

²⁹¹ Chris Agee (ed.), *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998).

²⁹² ‘Under Siege: Poetry from Bosnia’. Readers included Agee, David Constantine, Francis Jones, Igor Klikovac and Ken Smith.

²⁹³ J.H. Prynne, ‘To Pollen’ (London: Barque Press, 2006). Keston Sutherland, ‘Song of the Wanking Iraqi’, *Cambridge Literary Review* 2 (2010), p. 170.

(including, however, very little new material).²⁹⁴ However, Arab voices from inside Iraq remained untranslated. Furthermore, the Iraq wars involved the UK and the USA as participants; while UN peacekeepers did eventually intervene in Bosnia, most English poetry written in response was produced before this point.

Klaonica serves as an excellent case-study of the different ways in which contemporary English poets have represented Eastern Europe. It also provides a catalogue of the various strategies with which these poets have confronted political subject-matter. In both respects, the poet must negotiate a similar obstacle: how to write on sensitive topics without firsthand experience. Many of the anthologised poems are inevitably unsuccessful: Ivor Cutler's 'It was ever thus', for instance, attempts to veer from the complexities of war and atrocity into epigrammatic generalisation, but his diagnosis that the war is caused by 'a lot of guys making a lot / of money out of [the] war' is ludicrously inapposite for the competing nationalisms of the Balkan conflict.²⁹⁵ The most common strategy for dealing with the disjunction between poet and subject-matter is the lurid or shocking comparison which draws attention to this disjunction, but without deft handling this technique can come off as inadvertently self-parodic, as in Simon Richey's 'The Encounter':

They are there side-by-side: the familiar and the unthinkable;
An Elton John t-shirt blowing on a clothes line;
A young mother in a kitchen being raped on the table.²⁹⁶

Another very common technique is to retreat from the disjunction back into firsthand experience, drawing on memories of earlier peacetime visits to Yugoslavia. Tom Pow, Ted Burford, Chris Agee, Brian Patten, Peter Reading, Adrian Mitchell and Sylvia Kantaris all offer variations on this sort of poem.²⁹⁷ A glance at their titles shows how interchangeable they are: 'Recalling Former

²⁹⁴ Paul Keegan and Matthew Hollis (ed.), *101 Poets Against War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003). Todd Swift (ed.), *100 Poets Against the War* (London: Salt, 2003).

²⁹⁵ Ivor Cutler, 'It was ever thus', Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 24. The poem reads, in full: 'There's a lot of guys making a lot / of money out of this war, for if / they weren't, there wouldn't be / any war'.

²⁹⁶ Simon Richey, 'The Encounter', Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 43.

²⁹⁷ Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 54, p. 55, p. 56, p. 57, p. 57, p. 58, p. 59, respectively.

Travels: Yugoslavia '72', 'Foreign Travel', 'Old Sarajevo', 'Waiting in Macedonia', 'Peace Memories of Sarajevo'. Peter Reading's 'Bosnian', quoted here in its entirety, is by a long way the best of these:

Sipping grit-coffee and vinjak outside a
bar in the Turkish
Quarter, observe how Hooded Crows crowd and
bicker for carrion
in the fast-darkening air grown rank with
barbecued lambs' smoke.²⁹⁸

Reading writes in full awareness of his status as tourist, and the subjectless imperative 'observe' extends that status to the reader (a device Reading may have borrowed from the early poetry of W.H. Auden).²⁹⁹ This acknowledgment allows him to get away with devices that would be clichéd in other settings: references to food and drink in prewar Sarajevo, for instance, are an easy and overused way to invoke solidarity through shared experience (Pow's 'four pears', Patten's 'coffee and a doughnut', Mitchell's 'slow dinners' in 'smoky little orchards', Kantaris's 'slivovitz, bread, olives, grapes'). Reading, instead, presents his scene with intense detachment, contextualising only through connotation; his 'vinjak' (a Serbian brandy, formerly known as cognac but renamed following the delimitation of cognac production zones) offers a faint analogue with the shifting ethnicities, nationalities and appellations which characterised the Bosnian war.³⁰⁰ (Similarly, his aperitif of alcohol and coffee reminds us of the Balkans' dual European/Near Eastern heritage, as does the poem's localisation in Sarajevo's 'Turkish Quarter'.)

As the poem continues, the connotations rise to fever-pitch, reinforced sonically by the repeated 'r' sounds (grit, Turkish, observe, Crows, crowd, carrion, grown) and velar plosives (vinjak, bicker, darkening, rank, smoke). The implied metaphors become more obvious: carrion birds as herald of war, the

²⁹⁸ Peter Reading. 'Bosnian'. In *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia*. Ed. Ken Smith and Judi Benson. Newcastle: Bloodaxe 1993. p57

²⁹⁹ I owe this suggestion to Dr. Gareth Reeves.

³⁰⁰ Anon., 'L'encyclopédie du Cognac', last accessed 9 March 2012, <<http://www.pediacognac.com/histoire-du-cognachistory-of-cognacgeschichte-des-cognac/20-jahrhundert20th-centuryxxe-siecle>>.

‘fast-darkening air’ as an analogue for the darkening future, the lamb as the archetypal sacrificial victim. But these connotations are held in place by the verb that introduces them: ‘observe’, acting almost as a warning against interpretation. The poem’s subheading, ‘(Sarajevo, 1992)’, backs this up; the poem is taking place before the tenor of its metaphor (e.g. the war itself) has come into existence. It invites the reader back into a time when it *was* possible simply to ‘observe’ the smoke, the crows and the lamb, without reading any deeper significance into them. Like the poems by Pow, Patten, Mitchell and Kantaris, therefore, it is employing nostalgia; unlike these poems, it is also providing a commentary on and a dissection of that nostalgia.

Christopher Middleton’s poem ‘The Warlords’ takes a radically different approach. Once again, it is quoted in its entirety:

The blackbird once believed
He cranked the sun up with his song

Likewise but with love
Quite inconspicuous women

Now the warlords crank and crank
Only graves come up³⁰¹

Middleton’s model here is clearly Bertolt Brecht, whom he translated in the 1970s.³⁰² The blackbird is a typically Brechtian symbol, appearing most notably in Brecht’s very late poem ‘Als ich in weifem Krankenzimmer der Charité’ [‘When I, in my white sickroom at the Charité’], and representing the life that will continue after Brecht’s death: ‘Alles Amselgesanges nach mir auch’ [‘Every blackbird-song after me as well’].³⁰³ The extreme brevity, simplicity and structure of Middleton’s syntax also recall Brecht, as well as the tone: at once humorous (‘quite inconspicuous women’), resigned to atrocity (‘only graves come up’), absurdist and, finally, quietly hopeful (the warlords’ failure to

³⁰¹ Christopher Middleton, ‘The Warlords’, Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 17.

³⁰² In *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913 – 1956*, ed. John Willetts (London: Methuen, 1976). There are 34 translators in total.

³⁰³ Bertolt Brecht, ‘Als ich in weifem Krankenzimmer der Charité’, *Gessamelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 1031. My own translation.

produce whatever it is they are striving for, a common trope of Brecht's).³⁰⁴ Finally, Middleton's diction is especially Brechtian: as Brecht noted in 1944, '[my] poems are written in a kind of Basic German [...] every uncommon word sticks in my craw'.³⁰⁵ In Middleton's poem, the only trick of language is the subdued pun on 'crank' (with its secondary sense of *obsessive eccentric*).

Image and epigram are put to use successfully by Reading and Middleton, but these strategies alone are not suitable for longer poems. Ruth Padel's 'Desire Paths of Sarajevo', the final poem from *Klaonica* I will consider in detail, is essentially narrative.³⁰⁶ The first two sections of the poem tell the story of a couple caught up in the siege of Sarajevo and the fighting around Mostar, while the third shifts the action to the poet herself, caught in the act of inventing the earlier sections and extending their interpretation into her own life and circumstances. A 'desire path' is a term from town planning: 'The paths people make for themselves through a city. Not planned by an architect.'³⁰⁷ Various 'paths', both literal and metaphorical, form the imaginative scaffolding of the poem: they include the Sarajevo tunnel (stanza 11), which supplied the city with food, water, petrol and medical equipment during the siege; the strange career-path of the male protagonist (stanzas 1-6) and his scientific project ('on the trail / of phibellasomes'); the path to war (stanzas 14-15: 'no backturn'); the female protagonist's scar, 'a strawberry sabre up her inner thigh'; the paths between burnt cars in the ruined city, where the two protagonists make love (stanza 9); and the poet's imaginative journey from Mount Iouktas to Mostar to Novi Pazar (stanzas 17-20). Extending this trope is a recurring image of passageways: the 'corridors' where the male protagonist sleeps (stanza 9), Burlington Arcade where the two lovers meet (stanza 5), and the 'pink shadows' of the female protagonist (stanza 10, stanza 16). All of these are 'desire paths' in one sense or another; it is the interplay and connections between these paths, rather than the inconclusive and arguably unsatisfying story, which forms the poem's

³⁰⁴ See, for instance, Bertolt Brecht, 'Words the Leader Cannot Bear to Hear', trans. Sammy McClean, *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913 – 1956*, ed. John Willetts (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 298. There are many other examples.

³⁰⁵ Bertolt Brecht, 'Texts by Brecht', *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913 – 1956*, ed. John Willetts (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 462.

³⁰⁶ Ruth Padel. 'Desire Paths of Sarajevo', Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 124-126. Hereafter Padel: 'Desire Paths'.

³⁰⁷ Padel: 'Desire Paths', footnote, p. 126.

intellectual scaffolding. (The poem itself, then, might be seen as yet another ‘desire path’; note how, in Padel’s definition, the paths are ‘not planned by an architect’, i.e. the design of an author.)

Discussing the poem’s final section in an interview with John Stammers, Padel notes her ‘sense of the terrible hubris of writing from a position of complete safety that we have about the tragedies that are happening there’, and suggests that the final section is an attempt to come to terms with this sense: ‘here am I, a western European, talking about unimaginably awful things happening within a society which, although I have been in some parts of, I really don’t know very well’.³⁰⁸ (The lack of genuine local knowledge, and reliance on newspaper reports and memory, is apparent in the poem’s large number of transcription errors: e.g. ‘Dodjinje’ for Dobrinja, ‘Belasnja’ for Bjelašnica, ‘Kikanjac’ for Kukanjac.) This third section shifts the poem’s localisation from Mostar to Heraklion, where Padel was living when the poem was composed in August 1993:

I thought I saw this, standing with my safe child
on my old lover’s balcony. Swollen suburbs.
A near-full moon beyond this city’s wall
over Mount Iouktas: its radar profile

of a safely buried god.

(Padel: ‘Desire Paths’, p. 126)

There are two sublimated discourses in play here. At first, ‘swollen suburbs’, the ‘near-full’ moon and the ‘safely buried god’ feed into a metaphor of pregnancy: the narrator’s ‘safe child’. The comparison of the moon to a ‘radar profile’ suggests a sonogram. But the language simultaneously hints at the situation in the besieged Sarajevo: suburbs may be ‘swollen’ because nobody is able to leave, and ‘radar’ is first and foremost a military technology. This is furthered by a trope of fortification: the literal tenor for the ‘safely buried god’ is the fortified Minoan sanctuary on Mount Iouktas (or Juktas), and in Padel’s description the

³⁰⁸ John Stammers, ‘The Vulnerabilities of Living’, interview with Ruth Padel, *Magma* 10 (1997), p. 12. Hereafter Padel: Interview.

‘city’s wall’ becomes metonymous with Heraklion itself. In the poem’s subsequent lines, the presence of both these discourses is confirmed, and they are brought together: ‘Marilen and Niko / argue in whispers over nappies unavailable / in Sarajevo’. (This explicit confirmation of an analogy is perhaps less successful than the blended metaphor previously employed.)

As the section continues, the argument develops rapidly. The ‘old lover’ whose balcony the poet is standing on moves from the third to the second person, and rather than proceeding by metaphor the poet compares her situation with that of her Bosnian protagonist with a sustained act of imaginative transfer:

[...] If this was us? Your fingers,
in me out there on rough ground, under shadows
of uprooted oleanders, *lyra*-backed bozouki.

If it was us drinking, you teasing
in Novi Pazar, under the pierced
milk-alabaster of the old bazaar,
where pigs and geese once fought for space,

where woodcarvings and leatherware
glowed in the black-finned lamps,
where now old newspapers, *Oslobodenje*,
Le Monde, *The Herald Tribune*, *Al-Ahram*,

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,
telling like Roman astronomers
so many coffee-cup hopes,
are skittering in hot wind?

(Padel: ‘Desire Paths’, p. 126)

The narrator’s empathy develops in stages. In the first of the quoted stanzas, the setting is not yet Yugoslavian: we are still in Crete (confirmed by the ‘oleanders’ and the ‘lyra-backed bozouki’), and the only path the poet can find to empathise with her protagonist is a shared erotic experience which takes place on ‘rough ground’ (lines 34 and 75). By the second of the quoted stanzas, the poet has moved on via the tactic examined in the earlier discussion of Peter Reading’s

‘Bosnian’: what appears to be a shift to genuine firsthand experience, drawing on earlier memories of peacetime Yugoslavia. Padel’s details carry similarly ominous connotations: the ‘pigs and geese’ which ‘fight for space’ pre-empt the upcoming sectarian conflict, the ‘black fins’ and ‘glow’ of the lamps hints at aerial bombardment. (This last connotation is especially convincing: the ‘woodcarvings and leatherware’ have obviously been brought together to be sold at the bazaar, but there is a sublimated hint towards the detritus and havoc which will be wreaked by the war.) Finally, reminiscent of Reading’s ‘fast-darkening air’, Padel ends with a ‘hot wind’ symbolically blowing through the café’s newspapers.

The poem’s final lines blend past, present and future convincingly. Still, it is hard to delineate a coherent argument, or to paraphrase what Padel is saying about the difficulties of empathy. The repeated question ‘If this was us?’ seems unimportant in its context: far more interesting is her abandoned tangent earlier in the poem, ‘Maybe / I’ve got it wrong’. (‘The Desire Paths of Sarajevo’ does contain a number of factual errors, odd for a poet with Padel’s reputation for precision: ‘phibellasomes’ do not exist, and the August meteor shower is the Perseids, not the Leonids.) These lines appear to hint at an interesting distinction between imagination and empathy, a distinction not sustained in Padel’s own commentary on the poem: talking to John Stammers, she suggests that the lines ‘comment [...] on the fact that I’m using my imagination to take me somewhere else. I think the role for imagination is to go out into the other person, into another world’ (Padel: Interview, p. 12). Although ‘The Desire Paths of Sarajevo’ is a compelling work of imagination and ventriloquism, its account of the ethical problems surrounding these practices is less convincing. Still, it deserves credit for its initial acknowledgement of these problems.

Tony Harrison’s ‘The Bright Lights of Sarajevo’ was produced as part of a post-war visit to Bosnia commissioned by *The Guardian*.³⁰⁹ It presents a vision of romance in postwar Sarajevo similar to the first two sections of Padel’s poem, minus Padel’s erotic and biographical contextualisation:

The dark boy-shape leads dark girl-shape away

³⁰⁹ Anon., ‘Tony Harrison’, Poetry Archive profile, last accessed 10 April 2012, <<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7814>>

To share one coffee in a candlelit café
 Until the curfew, and he holds her hand
 Behind AID flour-sacks refilled with sand.³¹⁰

Martin Sonenberg has complained of Harrison's 'jingling rhymes' in this poem.³¹¹ Indeed, the demands of the rhyme scheme often force the poem into a congested syntax: 'you'd think the nights / of Sarajevo would be totally devoid / of people walking streets Serb shells destroyed'. Furthermore, Harrison's attempts at shocking imagery occasionally result in questionable word-choices. Describing a mortar attack on a queue of civilians outside a bakery, he focuses on the 'blood-dunked crusts of shredded bread': 'dunked', here, attributes bizarre agency to the mortar shells.

The poem's central interest lies in its dialogue with W.H. Auden's 'September 1, 1939'. The 'bright lights' of Harrison's title are not city lights: rather, they are sparks of flame from a 'match or lighter', through which the flirtations Harrison describes are able to take place. These match-flares pick up on the famous final lines of Auden's poem:

Defenceless under the night
 Our world in stupor lies:
 Yet, dotted everywhere
 Ironic points of light
 Flash out wherever the Just
 Exchange their messages...³¹²

Harrison emphasises the extent to which Sarajevo is 'defenceless under the night': 'the Sarajevo star-filled evening sky / ideally bright and clear for bomber's eye'. The match-flares, 'flash[ed] out' by the 'Just' ('Just' because, as Harrison notes, they are unable to distinguish 'Muslim, Serb or Croat in such dark'), are literal realisations of Auden's 'affirming flame': they affirm the commitment of the two potential lovers.

³¹⁰ Tony Harrison, 'The Bright Lights of Sarajevo', *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times*, ed. Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney (London: Faber and Faber, 1996). Reprinted in Tony Harrison, *Laureate's Block* (London: Penguin, 2000).

³¹¹ Martin Sonenberg, 'Skewed Perspectives', *Magma* 8 (1996), p. 52.

³¹² W.H. Auden, '1 September, 1939', *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber 1979), p. 89.

This extended allusion allows Harrison to engage with the same issues of imagination and empathy which confront and confound Padel. ‘The Bright Lights of Sarajevo’ seems to deliberately veer away from the first-person, which only occurs in the first sentence of the second verse paragraph, in the determinedly neutral ‘I see...’ and ‘I think...’. By implicitly identifying the young lovers with Auden’s ‘Just’, Harrison is able to have things both ways, maintaining a detached, journalistic composure common to many of his commissioned political poems³¹³ while at the same time bringing to mind Auden’s famous final lines: ‘May I, composed like them / Of Eros and of dust [...] / Show an affirming flame’.

As an aside, it is worth noting that Harrison’s poem has succeeded in antagonising those who deny the existence of the Bosnian genocides. Responsibility for the Markale massacres, to which the poem refers, was initially a contentious issue, and genocide deniers have persistently suggested the massacres were caused by the Bosnian army shelling Bosnian civilians, rather than Harrison’s ‘Serb mortars’.³¹⁴ (In 2003, the Serb general Stanislav Galić was found guilty of both massacres.)

One of the most sustained responses to the Bosnian war in English poetry is David Harsent’s long sequence *Legion*, published nearly a decade after the conflict’s end.³¹⁵ This consists of thirty poems, presenting (in the words of the volume’s blurb) ‘a series of discrete images, voices, events and intermittent despatches [...] that cohere to give witness to war and the consequences of war’ (Harsent: *Legion* dust jacket). The war is left unidentified, but as Ian Samson notes, ‘we’re led to think this could be Bosnia’.³¹⁶ (Especially, I’d suggest, we are led to think that the warzone *couldn’t* be Iraq. The setting is clearly late twentieth-century European, with its references to Christian heritage and church-towers. But DVDs and PCs are also mentioned, both of which postdate the

³¹³ See e.g. Tony Harrison, ‘A Cold Coming’, *The Guardian* (14 February 2003), Guardian online, last accessed 1 January 2012, <www.guardian.co.uk>.

³¹⁴ See e.g. John Burns, footnote 6 of ‘Serbs and the West: The Role of the Media in Defining Policy Towards Serbia and the Serbs’, *Internet Library of Serb Culture*, last accessed 27 May 2012, <<http://www.rastko.rs/istorija/sanu/Europe/SerbsWest.html>>.

³¹⁵ David Harsent, *Legion* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), pp. 3-39. Unless otherwise specified, all references are to this sequence only, not the book which takes its title. Hereafter Harsent: *Legion*.

³¹⁶ Ian Samson. ‘The devil’s wine’. *The Guardian*. 15 October 2005

Bosnian conflict. The sequence contains a single more concrete reference: in the poem ‘Street Scenes’, someone yells ‘Snajper!’ Serbo-Croat for *sniper*.)³¹⁷

The central device the poems share is an obsession with cataloguing. A few examples are enough to illustrate this, although similar catalogues occur in almost every poem:

...cobwebs on bare bricks,
a tin truck, a rusty Barlock, empty wine-racks,
pictures in busted frames, a doll’s house, Meccano, Airfix...

(‘Barlock’, Harsent: *Legion*, p. 7)

...the-inside-out of bedsheets on a road, the lazy susan in a ditch, the chair drawn up to a fireplace, the stairway to nowhere, CDs, TVs, DVDs, PCs, VCRs...

(‘Despatches’, Harsent: *Legion*, p. 12)

...they showed us St. Stephen, St. Eulalia,
St. Nicomedes, St. Kilian, St. Catherine, St. Euphemia, St. Jude.

(‘All Hallows’, Harsent: *Legion*, p. 17)

...armed with only a shovel, with only a trowel, with only a toothpick, with only his teeth.

(‘Chinese Whispers’, Harsent: *Legion*, p. 21)

Other poems use the catalogue as a formal organising device. The two poems entitled ‘Snapshots’ (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 15, p. 35) offer a series of discrete images united by grammatical structure (in the first poem) and repeated sounds (in the second). ‘The Goodwife’s Tale’ (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 36) uses a repetitive, lamenting structure which catalogues victims of rape. ‘Filofax’ (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 24) places two catalogues in disturbing juxtaposition: the items carried by the

³¹⁷ ‘Despatches’, ‘All Hallows’, ‘Sniper’, ‘Street Scenes’. In Harsent: *Legion* p11, p17, p32, p25. ‘Snajper’ is also Polish for *sniper*.

fleeing population ('TV, toaster, Filofax, Magimix, ladle, spindle, spinet') and the predators moving in the opposite direction to feed on what has been left behind ('lynx and wolverine and bob-cat').

Harsent's use of these catalogues reflects the influence of the Bosnian poet Goran Simić, whose poetry Harsent translated during and after the Bosnian war.³¹⁸ (Harsent has noted that 'I think the images I used in those versions may have informed what I was doing [in *Legion*] to some degree').³¹⁹ The poem which opens Simić's *The Sorrow of Sarajevo*, 'Lament for Vijećnica', features a catalogue of characters who escape from burning library books: 'I saw Werther sitting on the ruined graveyard-fence; I saw / Quasimodo swinging one-handed from a minaret. // Raskolnikov and Mersault whispered together for days...' (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 9). The collection's title poem lists the haunting inscriptions on the back of 'family photographs [which] spill / from the back of a garbage truck' (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 16). In 'Lejla's Secret' (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 17), the neighbours of a doctor at the 'Department for Corpse / Identification' guess at which particular horror drove her to madness and suicide:

A spare-parts corpse, tits and cock,
stubble and maidenhair,
all cobbled together by killers who like a joke?
A child in an open womb?
The sudden face of her late husband?

This poem in particular is a central influence on Harsent's 'Chinese Whispers' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 21), which retains both the catalogue of urban legend and specific details: a 'woman who went mad', a man 'searching among the day's dead' who discovers 'his wife, son, uncles, sister, father, mother'. Lejla 'open[s]...her veins'; one of the urban legends in 'Chinese Whispers' involves a suicidal 'Surgeon General' who also 'open[s] a vein.'

The technique of cataloguing shared by Harsent and Simić, I would argue, is a realisation of the tendency identified by Peter Forbes: 'to lick over the

³¹⁸ Goran Simić, *The Sorrow of Sarajevo*, trans. David Harsent (Tregarne: Cargo, 1996). Hereafter Simić: *Sarajevo*.

³¹⁹ Anon., 'Poetry? It's crucial', Interview with David Harsent. *The Guardian*. 6 October 2005, Guardian Online, last accessed 20th April 2013, <www.guardian.co.uk>.

wounds of the past forensically'. (The other tendency identified by Forbes, exhumation, also enters the sequence; 'Arena' ((Harsent: *Legion*, p. 37)) takes place in a makeshift graveyard in which 'not everything buried is dead'.) The word 'forensic', etymologically derived from Latin *forum*, means 'appropriate for courts of law', which has expanded into the more contemporary sense of 'obsessively detailed'.³²⁰ Poems which are forensic in both these senses do exist: Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* consists solely of witness testimonies, presented without interpretation or interpolation on the part of the poet.³²¹ For Harsent and Simić, however, a forensic examination is an ideal to be aimed towards, rather than achieved. Simić in particular undergoes sustained doubt in the possibility of forensic understanding through aggregated detail. The succession of images which makes up 'The Sorrow of Sarajevo' (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 16) concludes with a meditation on the technique:

There's no way of describing these things,
not really. Every night I wake
and stand by my window to watch my neighbour
who stands by the window to watch the dark.

Only Simić's neighbour, the poem seems to suggest, is qualified to report on 'the dark'; Simić can merely itemise its human effect. Elsewhere, in 'The Calender' (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 19), these catalogues of images receive a more sustained condemnation. The unborn child of the poem's protagonist 'feeds / on terrible images and silence'. (The child's father is her rapist, a 'drunken soldier'.) These images, the poem suggests (offering as example 'Her blood-stained dress [...] / fluttering from a pole like a flag'), contribute to the mother's torment: the child, through 'feed[ing]' on them (or being fed), will grow up to become a permanent reminder of her rape.

Harsent also explores these questions, most notably in 'Sniper' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 32-33), perhaps the most sustained act of empathetic transfer in the entire sequence. Again, the poem relies for its effect on a central catalogue:

³²⁰ Arthur Bradley, for instance, describes Derrida's 'forensically close reading' of Rosseau. Arthur Bradley, *Derrida's Of Grammatology: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 137.

³²¹ Charles Reznikoff, *Holocaust* (Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 1975).

With the scope pulled up to my eye, the world is close
 And particular: this grandad, hugging the shade, each hair
 On his head, the wet of his eye, the pre-war
 Coin on his fob-chain, the weave of his coat...Over there
 By my friend the Marlboro Man is where
 I would sit with my morning coffee: Arno's place,
 Its pinball machine, its jukebox, the girl with Madonna's face
 Until she showed her teeth...

This time, however, the catalogue is subverted by its context: the poet becomes identified with the omniscient sniper who holds the power of life and death over his characters ('And where they go they go by my good grace'). '...the world is close / and particular' recalls Louis MacNeice's poetic credo ('World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural'), corroborating this identification, as does the mention of the hare for the first and only time in the sequence: 'then a child, out into clear / view, going a long diagonal and running like a hare'.³²² (The hare is a recurring symbol throughout Harsent's work; he has referred to it as his 'totem' and 'daemon'.)³²³ As the sniper lists the potential victims and details visible through his 'scope', we are made complicit in his work; we may be reminded of how much of 'Legion' has been presented to us as if through a sniper's-eye view. The rhyme-scheme, 'jink[ing]' between sibilants and rhotics, gives the catalogues a false sense of consistency and inevitability.

The final lines of the poem offer perhaps the most memorable climax in the sequence:

The night-sky floods and clears, flagging a single star,
 and the city settles to silence under my peace.
 The woman, the child, the grandad, are nothing...or nothing more
 than what history can ignore, or love erase.

Much of this, especially the 'silence under my peace', owes a great deal to Ted Hughes' 'Hawk Roosting', a text which has been a background presence for the

³²² Louis MacNeice, 'Snow', *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter MacDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 24.

³²³ James Byrne, 'Interview with David Harsent', *The Wolf* 11 (2005/06), p. 34.

entire poem ('I kill where I please because it is all mine').³²⁴ What Harsent adds is an awareness of scale; the sniper, and by extension the poet, are suspended uncomfortably between the broad historical perspective, in which fine details are necessarily 'ignore[d]', and a human intimacy which 'erase[s]' the distinction between 'the woman, the child, the grandad'. But there is a sinister ambiguity here also; 'love' can also be read as the mock-divine love the near-omniscient sniper feels for his potential victims. (This identification of the predator with the divine is another point of common ground between 'Sniper' and 'Hawk Roosting'.) The ambiguity leaves 'erase', the rhyme which the rest of the poem has apparently been straining towards, suspended uneasily between the potentialities of love and the inexorability of death.

We might expect 'love' to point towards Keith Douglas's 'How to Kill', an obvious thematic predecessor for 'Sniper'.³²⁵ But the word in Douglas has none of Harsent's ambiguity: 'Being damned, I am amused / To see the centre of love diffused / And the waves of love travel into vacancy'. Here, 'love' is the simple antithesis of 'damned', although Douglas's sniper is too self-aware to come across as genuinely evil. Harsent's sniper, on the other hand, has become his work so absolutely that he is unable to reflect on his position, except to see himself as god of his 'own space'; his one description of himself is as 'a sure thing', Death itself, rather than Douglas's 'sorcer[er]' who is able to conjure Death. Douglas's unforgettable image of the 'mosquito death' is startling in its smallness; Harsent's is more familiar, 'the night-sky' which 'floods then clears, flagging a single star', 'flagging' holding a clear referent in military jargon of *marking for death*.

The final line of 'Sniper' reaches back through the sequence, turning to 'nothing' everything it touches. Forensic itemisation will inevitably concern objects at the scale which 'history can ignore, or love erase'. The catalogues which are left turn into what an earlier poem, 'Art' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 14), has identified as 'the art of hint': the residue of 'a face stuck flat that came away whole / [...] just a touch or two left on the whitewash'. In the five poems entitled 'Despatches' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 3, p. 11, p. 19, p. 28, p. 38), the catalogues

³²⁴ Ted Hughes, 'Hawk Roosting', *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 69.

³²⁵ Keith Douglas, 'How to Kill', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 53.

have been created by literal erasure, the redaction of context from military communiqués. The fourth of these poems picks up on the penultimate line of ‘Sniper’ as well: all that has been left unredacted are phrases containing ‘nothing’ (*‘where nothing remained, nothing more to be seen, nothing more to be heard, nothing on two legs, nothing on four, nothing, in fact, but’*). Forensic itemisation, Harsent seems to suggest, may not just be an ineffective technique (as suggested by Simić in ‘The Sorrow of Sarajevo’) but, through the necessary reductions and redactions it entails, an actively wicked one.

Though ‘Legion’ can be self-reflexive and self-critical, as we have seen in ‘Sniper’, it is interesting how much less tentative Harsent’s poems are than those of Simić, whose experiences were first-hand. Part of this, of course, is attributable to the fact that Harsent is writing about a (nominally) fictitious war. Nonetheless, there is no parallel in ‘Legion’ with the refrain of ‘The Calendar’ (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 19), ‘I don’t know. I don’t know’, and certainly nothing close to the austere self-reflexivity of ‘The Apprentice’ (Simić: *Sarajevo*, p. 14):

Half a lifetime I’ve been looking
for a language so perfect
that everything will come good
in the moment when my pen meets the paper.

Shadows taught me a little, a little I got
from monuments; sometimes, in the search
for beauty, this *beautiful* language,
I kept the company of ghosts.

These days, I spend more time at funerals
than I spend at my desk...A book of fairy tales
burns blue-green in the frozen stove
as I warm lime-tea for my sick child.

The landscape depicted by Harsent is a world without relief, a world in which Simić’s final revelation would be impossible: that ‘the sudden colour in [the child’s] cheeks is beautiful’ and (because of this) ‘the lime-flower is more beautiful than the rose’. The idea of ‘the colour of health’ as a ‘*beautiful* language’ is unthinkable; the one moment of genuine human tenderness in

Harsent's sequence is horribly thwarted, in 'Baby Blue' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 82), quoted here in its entirety:

She might be singing 'My buttie, my lolly, my blue-eyed boy'
as she stoops to take him up in joy,

then stops on a broken note, her own eyes full
as she catches a glimpse of the sky through the skull.

The child's body is one of the several memorably grotesque corpses which punctuate 'Legion': the face which has to be 'peeled off the wall' in 'Art', the boy reduced to "residue" between the wheel and wheel-arch' in 'Chinese Whispers' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 14, p. 20). While much of what Simić describes is similarly horrific, it is contextualised and placed in a realistic human setting. Harsent's fictionalised Bosnia is at times almost a caricature of itself. One of the most striking images in the sequence, presented as a stand-alone sentence in 'Snapshots (2)' (Harsent: *Legion*, p. 35), is 'A shrapnel-wound pursing its lips and blowing a bubble': it manages to be vivid and horrific, and yet at the same time cartoon-like.

The Sorrow of Sarajevo is one of the very few translations from Serbo-Croat to be published during the war itself. The reasons for this are obvious. Translations are harder to commission than original poetry, especially from unfamiliar languages (where two translators may be required); they often require sustained communication between poet and translator, likely to be disrupted in wartime; and in any case the lag time between acceptance and publication, especially in the case of poetry, is often a period of two or three years. Although, as mentioned previously, the war years saw the serendipitous publication of several collections of Serbo-Croat poetry commissioned prior to 1992, the translation of poetry written during the war (with the exception of Simić) mostly had to wait until the postwar reconstruction period had begun. The most important anthology, in this respect, was Chris Agee's *Scar on the Stone*, featuring a combination of prose (some originally in English, including Francis Jones and Hubert Butler, some translated), pre-war poetry (including the first sustained translation into English of the central Bosnian poet of the 20th century,

Mak Dizdar), and work written during the war.³²⁶ All translations were commissioned; all were produced in the period 1996 to 1998. In most cases, the translators were English poets (including Ruth Padel, Ken Smith, David Constantine and Kathleen Jamie), working from literal versions provided by Antonela Glavinić and Igor Klikovac.³²⁷

Ted Hughes provided the translations of six poems by Abdulah Sidran, based on Glavinić's literal versions, of which four were chosen for inclusion.³²⁸ They are among the last poems completed by Hughes. Hughes was an especially appropriate choice of translator for the project: the 'Notes for Translators' Agee sent out to the contributors included essays on translation by both Hughes and Csokits, who had provided Hughes with literal versions for his translations of János Pilinszky (see Chapter One of this thesis).³²⁹ As Daniel Weissbort notes, 'Hughes must have felt particularly comfortable with this assignment'.³³⁰ (Some translators were less enthusiastic; Kathleen Jamie, for instance, felt that translating through literal versions did not do justice to the original poetry.)³³¹

As ever, the translations produced by Hughes are very reminiscent of his own poetry, despite being adapted from Glavinić's versions. John Hartley Williams also translated Sidran's poetry for *Scar on the Stone*, and poems provided by each translator alternate through the selection; two clear voices can be easily distinguished. (A sentence as tonally out of place as 'Beasts make a racket!', in Williams' translation of 'A Dispute About God', is unthinkable in Hughes.)³³² Hughes notes that Sidran's procedure 'is so focused and simple [...that] the possibility of feeding some kind of intensity back into the literal cribs is limited almost entirely to syntactic shifts [...] controlling the pace, the

³²⁶ Chris Agee (ed.), *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998).

³²⁷ Charles Simic and John Hartley Williams, who are fluent in Serbo-Croat, produced their translations without the use of literal versions.

³²⁸ In Chris Agee (ed.), *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 55-66. Hereafter Sidran: Hughes. 'Six translations' is from a letter to Agee dated 30 November 1997, quoted in Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 221.

³²⁹ See Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 173.

³³⁰ Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 173.

³³¹ Kathleen Jamie, interview with the author and Heather Yeung, 11 February 2010.

³³² Chris Agee (ed.), *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 58.

timing'.³³³ This is a slight exaggeration on Hughes' part: in terms of vocabulary, the poems depart from the literals at least as much as in his Pilinszky translations. In 'Gavrilo', for instance, Sidran's poem about the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, Glavinić's 'submerged' becomes 'deep', 'indecisive' becomes 'undecided'.³³⁴ The replacements substitute Anglo-Saxon words for Latinate words, shorter words for longer ones, as with the vocabulary changes in the Pilinszky translations. Other changes make what is abstract more concrete: Glavinić's nebulous 'things' become Hughes' 'clutter'.

Hughes' changes to the 'pace [...] and timing' of the literal version of 'Gavrilo' work to slow down the poem substantially. Exclamation marks are retained only for the voice of Princip himself, and his repeated 'cry', 'Let's get the weapons!' (Sidran: Hughes, p. 55), making the distinction between Princip and the narrator clearer than in the literal version. (The original seems to resist this distinction: the 'you' of the first verse paragraph becomes 'we' and 'us' by the second, and finally 'my'.) Despite Hughes' note that 'the poems are pretty well as literal as they can be' (Hughes: Agee letter, p. 221), the changes to the syntax are substantial. This can best be seen in a comparison between the opening of the second verse paragraph in the literal and final versions:

[...] For,

so unreal and too quiet is this / the night. There is no
one to tell us: Tomorrow, horror awaits you!
Tomorrow, love awaits you! The skull fills / is filling
with terrible light.

(Sidran: Glavinić literal, p. 222)

[...] Because

The night is so unreal –
And far too quiet. And there is no one

³³³ Letter of Hughes to Chris Agee dated 30 November 1997, Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 221. Hereafter Hughes: Agee letter.

³³⁴ Literal version by Antonela Glavinić Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 221-222. Hereafter Sidran: Glavinić literal.

To tell us: Tomorrow, for you – horror.
 Tomorrow, for you – love. The skull fills
 With a terrible brightness.

(Sidran: Hughes, p. 55)

Hughes has broken two lines into three, and altered the syntax to link the first line of the second verse paragraph with the poem's opening ('The night is unreal, quiet like hell': Sidran: Glavinić literal, p. 221) much more forcefully. 'And' is foregrounded by its shift to the start of the second line; an additional 'And' is added to the start of the second sentence. This additional 'And' is probably Hughes' most substantial departure from the literal, linking the fact that 'there is no one / to tell us' with the earlier clause (modified by 'Because'): 'This is the moment for you, / The hesitant one, the undecided' (Sidran: Hughes, p. 55). The impossibility of foreknowledge of consequence ('no one / to tell us') becomes, in Hughes' version, a reason or motive for the assassination Princip is contemplating, rather than merely an additional fact about it. It is worth mentioning the link with Hughes' own poetic concerns at this time: while translating Sidran, he was finalising the proofs for *Birthday Letters*, in which the gap in knowledge between the poet and his protagonists (himself and Sylvia Plath in the 1950s and 60s) is a crucial theme. Plath, for instance, is described as 'A new soul, still not understanding, / Thinking it is still your honeymoon / In the happy world, with your whole life waiting, / Happy, and all your poems still to be found'.³³⁵ The difference is Gavrilo's self-recognition of this state, which has turned him into 'The hesitant one, the undecided'.

This lack of foreknowledge becomes the 'terrible brightness' Gavrilo's skull fills with, the 'glare' which prevents the potential assassins from seeing into the future. In Glavinić's literal version, 'brightness' is 'light'; Hughes has taken his 'brightness' from the fifth line of the second verse paragraph of Glavinić's literal, which he himself has translated as 'Before the bone splits in the glare'. A large part of the motivation for these changes seems to be sonic: the run of l-

³³⁵ Ted Hughes, 'You Hated Spain', *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 1068. The dates of composition for the poems in *Birthday Letters* are contentious; this poem, though, had certainly been written before 1994, when it was included in Hughes' *New Selected Poems*.

sounds (skull, fills, terrible, splits, glare) offers Hughes' own take on the 'marinade of syllabic saturation in the poet's own make-up' (Hughes: Agee letter, p. 221).

The changes to punctuation similarly serve to make the poems more noticeably Hughesian. Hughes' final translation has far more dashes marking pauses than Glavinić's literal; the first, second and fourth verse paragraphs are all given an extra pause after their first line, for instance. The change in meaning created solely by pauses can be substantial:

The night is unreal, quiet like hell
which does not exist.

(Sidran: Glavinić literal, p. 221)

The night is unreal, quiet, like hell –
Which does not exist.

(Sidran: Hughes, p. 55)

Here, the literal version retains an ambiguity not present in the final translation. Glavinić's 'quiet like hell / which does not exist' allows the possibility that hell is quiet *because* it does not exist, a possibility closed off by Hughes' dash. Hughes' version creates, however, an ambiguity of its own: the comma after 'quiet' allows 'like hell' to modify both adjectives, and the dash forces 'Which does not exist' to apply to a particular rather than an abstract hell. (It is natural to read Glavinić's literal as though it is missing an indefinite article in the first line: 'quiet like a hell'.) Even the line-initial capitalisation in Hughes (not present in Sidran's original) changes the poem; line-breaks carry more weight, and the movement is slower and statelier. (They also serve to tie the translations closer to Hughes' own work, in which line-initial capitalisation is used throughout.)

The 'hell - / Which does not exist' will come into being in the poem's final verse paragraph:

[...] Afterwards

There will be nobody to talk to
 And nothing to talk with.
 We'll be lying under the oil
 In darkness – under the deaf
 Heavy blunt years that press down
 On this century's shoulders as this night
 [...] Presses on my shoulders...

(Sidran: Hughes, p. 56)

In these lines, the metaphor is made explicit for the first time. The 'hell' is the future created by the assassination, the subsequent 'hell' of the twentieth century, and, by extension, the 'hell' of Sarajevo during the siege: 'Bursting our eardrums with screams from the street / [...] we suck in air mixed with hot shrapnel' (Sidran: Hughes, p. 55). ('Gavrilo' was first collected in Sidran's 1995 collection of war poems *Sarajevo Tabut*: in English, *Sarajevo Tomb*.)³³⁶ This hell 'does not exist' only because Princip, 'the hesitant one', has not yet brought it into being, and is only 'quiet' because it cannot speak to Princip to encourage or deter him. As the repercussions of Princip's act extend through the century, the hell will shift from being 'quiet' to being 'deaf', the future from a blinding 'brightness' to an opaque weight of 'oil'. Hughes is helped in his translation by a felicitous play of sound, not available to Sidran: 'We'll be lying under the oil' is likely to first register in an English ear as 'under the soil', producing an apt vision of life in death.

Hughes' changes have created a poem which is slower and less ambiguous than the original, working out and insisting on the full implications of Sidran's metaphor. What is lost from Glavinić's's literal version is the breathless stream of consciousness, the hysteria and the pressure:

...you (one) need(s) / should / ought to descend / go down the rotten staircase,
 you need to touch that wall with your hand, that oil,
 you need to say: let's go, sweetheart / soul, to get the weapons!

³³⁶ Abdulah Sidran, 'Gavrilo bunca, noć uoči pucnja', *Sarajevo Tabut* (Sarajevo: Civitas, 1995). There is no English translation of the whole work, but the book has been translated into Italian by Silvio Ferrari as *La bara di Sarajevo* (Rome: Edizione E, 1995). The Serbo-croat title translates as 'Gavrilo delirious on the eve of the shooting' (translation by Maxime Dargaud-Fons).

(Sidran: Glavinić literal, p. 222. Slashes indicate alternative phrasing.)

In Hughes' final translation, the repeated 'you need' has been lost:

This is the moment for you
 [...] to go
 Down that rotten stair, your hand
 Feeling for that wall, touching the oil,
 Saying: Come on, my heart, let's get the weapons!

(Sidran: Hughes, p. 55)

The changes serve to place Princip more in charge of his own destiny; more in line, it might be argued, with the vision Hughes presents of himself in *Birthday Letters*. ('And I heard / Without ceasing for a moment to kiss you / As if a sober star had whispered it / Above the revolving, rumbling city: stay clear'.)³³⁷ 'This is the moment for you...' could be read simply as meaning 'This is the moment in which you will...', with no hint of moral approbation or disapprobation. Glavinić's literal version, which uses 'the right time' for 'the moment' and presents Princip's actions as a succession of commands ('you need'), does not allow this possibility. The changes Hughes makes to the literal version, then, involve an act of interpretation and, indeed, creation. The final translations are not, as he suggests, 'pretty well as literal as they can be' (Hughes: Agee letter, p. 221).

Over this chapter, I've examined several of the possible routes through which poets writing in English and translating into English have attempted to make sense of, or bear witness to, the atrocities of the Bosnian conflict. This sustained project, I have argued, has few parallels in contemporary English-language poetry. Even the second Iraq war, in which the UK is involved and implicated, has not produced a comparable amount of material. New poetic strategies had to be devised for handling this material, often suggested by the examples of earlier Eastern European poets and authors. We have examined the

³³⁷ Ted Hughes, '18 Rugby Street', *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 1058.

debt Middleton owes to Brecht in his poem ‘The Warlords’; it is apparent that Padel’s erotic contextualising narrative in ‘The Desire Paths of Sarajevo’ owes much to Milan Kundera. Harsent, in *Legion*, has made use of tropes and suggestions from the work he translated of Goran Simić, and Hughes, in his translations of Sidran, employs the same method he developed for his translations of Pilinszky. These models and influences were appropriate: the wounds being ‘lick[ed] over’, in Forbes’ phrase, were not the poets’ own, and the ‘exhumation’ was of bodies and atrocities with which they had only tangential connections. The moral charge against this sort of work, that it uses or lives vicariously through the suffering of others in order to create an unearned gravitas, will be explored thoroughly in the next chapter.

Witness Protection: Donald Davie, Christopher Reid and the anxiety of responsibility in Eastern European translation

In 1988, Czesław Miłosz took the unusual step of writing a letter to the *New York Review of Books*, complaining about Al Alvarez's very positive review of his *Collected Poems*.³³⁸ Miłosz objected to Alvarez foregrounding the element of 'witness' in his work, and to the emphasis placed on his poetry's social and political background. He writes,

...an insane course of history tore out of me during the war anti-Nazi poems of anger and solidarity with the victims. And yet we should distinguish between our duty to preserve memory and our natural desire to move forward with our affairs of the living. [...] ...after all, a poet repeatedly says farewell to his old selves and makes himself ready for renewals.

(Miłosz: 'Reply')

Miłosz's objections here are unexpected. In the book Alvarez was reviewing, the penultimate poem is titled '1945' and ends in a deliberate acknowledgement of the importance of safeguarding 'the language of the vanquished / No more durable than old customs'.³³⁹ In the book's final poem, 'Six Lectures in Verse', the third lecture is set in a Nazi prison camp, and makes a faint gesture towards problematising the idea of bearing witness before going ahead regardless:

I know it's not for you, that knowledge of Smolensk, Saratov.
And better it is not. If one can, let him avoid
Compassion, the ache of the imagination.
So I won't labour this. Just fragments, an outline.
They appear. The guards. Three men and one woman.
The leather of their long boots is soft, first-class...³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Czesław Miłosz, 'A Poet's Reply', letter, *New York Review of Books* (July 21, 1988). Hereafter Miłosz: 'Reply'.

³³⁹ Czesław Miłosz, '1945', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 481.

³⁴⁰ Czesław Miłosz, 'Six Lectures in Verse', *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 486.

Miłosz's descriptive powers carry him away, and he forgets about his promise to remain at the level of 'fragments' and 'outline', going on to note in great detail the guards' 'expensive coats' and 'beaver cap[s]', and that the female guard is 'well-fucked in bed'. It would be very hard not to read this poem as depending for its power on reporting accurately a scene (after the capture of Smolensk) which would otherwise have been forgotten, and it wears its 'anger' and 'solidarity with the victims' on its sleeve. Both poems ('1945' and 'Six Lectures in Verse') were composed in 1985, only three years before Alvarez's review and Miłosz's response.

There are other reasons why Alvarez may have been surprised by his review's reception. In 1983, Miłosz had published *The Witness of Poetry*, which is almost certainly where Alvarez found his review's title (the single word, 'Witness'). 'All of us who come from these parts', Miłosz writes, referring to Eastern Europe, 'appraise poetry slightly differently [...] for we tend to view it as a witness and participant in one of mankind's major transformations. I have titled this book *The Witness of Poetry* not because we witness it, but because it witnesses us.'³⁴¹ Presumably, individual poets are the conduits for this process. And yet, in his letter to the *New York Review of Books*, Miłosz writes 'you may guess my uneasiness when I saw the long evolution of my poetic craft encapsuled [*sic*] by Mr. Alvarez in the word "witness", which for him is perhaps a praise, but for me is not' (Miłosz: 'Reply'). The inconsistency is startling.

All this became more confusing in 1992, when Donald Davie published a review of Daniel Weissbort's Eastern European retrospective anthology *The Poetry of Survival* in the *London Review of Books*, entitled 'Their Witness', which drew heavily on Miłosz's response to Alvarez.³⁴² Davie's argument was that, in the case of Eastern European influence on much of the contemporary British and American poetry establishment, 'adulation can mask condescension'. The 28 Eastern European poets who featured in *The Poetry of Survival* were, according to Davie, demeaned by the editor's insistence on reading them as 'witnesses': that is, treating their poems as vicarious reportage which only English-speaking Westerners are capable of interpreting correctly or sensitively.

³⁴¹ Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 4.

³⁴² Donald Davie, 'Their Witness', *London Review of Books* 14 / 4 (27 February 1992), p. 3. Hereafter Davie: 'Their Witness'.

‘The crucial betrayal of them’, he wrote, ‘is in the term – the *cant*-term – “witness”’ (Davie: ‘Their Witness’). But in his own critical book on Miłosz, *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric* (published six years previously), Davie uses that ‘*cant*-term’ in unambiguous praise of Miłosz twice on the first page ([Miłosz] has consistently offered his witness to the twentieth century as that of a representative and therefore *déraciné* individual’), and subsequently repeats it throughout the rest of the book.³⁴³ Praising Pasternak, he notes that ‘his witness is courageous and admirable’ (Davie: *Insufficiency*, p. ix). ‘In the first place’, he asks, ‘did the poet [Miłosz] witness and survive the rising of 1945 rather than participate in it? (To which the answer seems to be: yes.)’ (Davie: *Insufficiency*, p. 14). ‘Witness’ and ‘survive’ are two words he takes issue with in his review of *The Poetry of Survival*; here they appear without scare quotes. Davie writes, ‘In their mouths, ‘witness’, often stepped up as ‘agonised’, means, in effect, when they address the foreign poets they have anthologised: “You know what happened to you, but you don’t understand it. We’ll supply the understanding, if you’ll give us the happening”’ (Davie: ‘Their Witness’). ‘Agonised’, too, had been previously used by Davie to describe the experience of certain Eastern European writers: ‘[these poets have] been brought face to face with the agonies of the human condition in our time’.³⁴⁴

These inconsistencies do not seem to indicate any substantial shift in Davie’s critical viewpoint. (Certainly his assessment of individual poets does not seem to have altered; he retains his respect for Miłosz, while citing a 1977 review by Clive Wilmer to deprecate Hughes’ translations of Pilinszky.)³⁴⁵ This suggests the real gulf between Davie and Weissbort may be elsewhere; that it is not the word ‘witness’ Davie objects to, but the implications he suspects arise from the way in which Weissbort deploys it. This suspicion is confirmed by *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric*:

The disparity between one sort of historical experience and the other has at times been exploited to furnish moral blackmail, by which a single word like “Ravensbruck” or

³⁴³ Donald Davie. *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. ix. Hereafter Davie: *Insufficiency*.

³⁴⁴ Al Alvarez, ‘A New Aestheticism? A. Alvarez talks to Donald Davie’, *The Review* 1 (1962). Reprinted in: Ian Hamilton (ed.), *The Modern Poet: Essays from the Review* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1968), p. 175-176

³⁴⁵ Donald Davie, letter, *London Review of Books* 14 / 8 (23 April 1992).

“Auschwitz” is invoked so as to shame into silence all English-language poets, indeed (in its most extravagant form) so as to silence all poets whatever, in whatever language. This is obviously intolerable. And indeed it is something worse than that; for in effect, in such an argument, the sufferings of thousands dead are being used so as to claim a moral superiority for one party or another among the living.

(Davie: *Insufficiency*, p. 60-61)

The unnamed blackmailers are clearly Theodor Adorno and George Steiner, and some of Davie’s anxiety about Weissbord’s use of the word ‘witness’ becomes more understandable. (On Davie’s personal copy of *The Poetry of Survival*, he has heavily underlined Steiner’s name in the bibliography.)³⁴⁶ He apparently sees in *The Poetry of Survival* a continuation of acrimonious 1960s debates about the legacies of the Holocaust.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the theses of Adorno and Steiner concerning artistic silence and the Holocaust. Both writers saw the Holocaust as a failure of high culture. Steiner writes, ‘We now know that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach or Schubert, and go to his day’s work at Auschwitz in the morning’.³⁴⁷ Adorno, more simply: ‘Auschwitz [hat] das Mißlingen der Kultur unwiderleglich bewiesen.’ (Auschwitz has demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed.)³⁴⁸ Furthermore, the failure was fundamental, not ‘an admittedly unpleasant but nonetheless temporary glitch in an otherwise progressive culture’ but rather ‘part and parcel of the civilising process *itself*’.³⁴⁹ Responding to this failure, Adorno suggested that ‘nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch’ (to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric).³⁵⁰ Elsewhere, he described ‘alle Kultur nach Auschwitz, samt der dringlichen Kritik daran’ (all culture after Auschwitz, including its

³⁴⁶ Daniel Weissbord (ed.), *The Poetry of Survival: Post-War of Eastern and Central Europe* (London: Anvil, 1991), annotated personal copy of Donald Davie, author’s collection, p. 367.

³⁴⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 15. Hereafter Steiner: *Language and Silence*.

³⁴⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik: Jargon der Eigenlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973). Translated by and quoted in Elaine Martin, ‘Re-reading Adorno: The “after-Auschwitz” Aporia’, *Forum Postgraduate Journal* 2, last accessed 10 August 2012, <<http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/archive/02/martin.pdf>>.

³⁴⁹ Elaine Martin, ‘Re-reading Adorno: The “after-Auschwitz” Aporia’, *Forum Postgraduate Journal* 2, last accessed 10 August 2012, <<http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/archive/02/martin.pdf>>.

³⁵⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Prismen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1955), p. 30.

urgent critique) as ‘Müll’ (rubbish).³⁵¹ This is often misquoted, even by Steiner, as ‘No poetry after Auschwitz’ (Steiner: *Language and Silence*, p. 75).

Adorno’s prohibition is phrased as a critical judgement (‘barbarisch’); Steiner’s, as a political imperative. ‘It is better for the poet to mutilate his own tongue than to dignify the inhuman either with his gift or his uncaring’, he writes (Steiner: *Language and Silence*, p. 76). Unlike Adorno, he does not defend silence except under ‘totalitarian rule...so effective as to break all chances of denunciation, or satire’ (Steiner: *Language and Silence*, p. 76). (His subsequent argument arguably depends on a confusion between this ‘totalitarian rule’ and our own ‘technological mass-society’.)³⁵² While Steiner’s actual recommendations for contemporary writers seem to fluctuate throughout *Language and Silence*,³⁵³ this extract from ‘Silence and the Poet’ is as good a summary as any:

I am not saying that writers should stop writing. This would be fatuous. I am asking whether they are not writing too much, whether the deluge of print in which we seek our deafened way is not in itself a subversion of meaning. (...) Silence *is* an alternative. When the words in the city are full of savagery and lies, nothing speaks louder than the unwritten poem.

(Steiner: *Language and Silence*, p. 75)

Michael Hamburger has argued that much of the poetry anthologised in *The Poetry of Survival* offers a response to this statement and Adorno’s. ‘Różewicz [and others]’, he writes, ‘have made themselves at home in the silence which it

³⁵¹ *Negative Dialektik: Jargon der Eigenlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973). Translated by and quoted in Elaine Martin, ‘Re-reading Adorno: The “after-Auschwitz” Aporia’, *Forum Postgraduate Journal* 2, last accessed 10 August 2012, <<http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/archive/02/martin.pdf>>.

³⁵² The ‘totalitarian rule’ must be worldwide, or the writer could emigrate (as with Brecht and Nazi Germany) and denounce or satirise from outside. The fact that Steiner can imagine a *potential* society in which it would be better for poets to remain silent implies nothing about how poets should behave today, unless we accept an equation between ultimate totalitarianism and ‘the erosion of European *bourgeois* values’ (p. 76).

³⁵³ Donald Davie called Steiner’s discursive style in *Language and Silence* ‘a restless and lurid chiaroscuro’: Donald Davie, ‘George Steiner on Language’, *With the Grain* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 332.

prescribes. Their anti-poetry does not contradict it.³⁵⁴ (Adorno's statement, incidentally, does not prescribe silence.)

It is this idea of 'anti-poetry', I suggest, which Donald Davie saw embodied in the word 'witness' and reacted so strongly against. (Michael Schmidt, in an editorial in *PN Review* published subsequent to the controversy, also took this line.)³⁵⁵ The word 'witness' belongs in two registers, the legal and the religious, and the connotations of each sense are subtly opposed. A witness in the legal sense does not offer an argument or state a case; rather, his or her statement is part of a body of evidence presented to a judiciary. Davie suggests that Weissbort believes 'the critic is superior to the poet, because the critic can interpret what the poet (poor inspired zany) can only report', and implies that translations of Eastern and Central European poetry are particularly vulnerable to this doctrine *because of the value of their reportage* (Davie: 'Their Witness').

Witness in its religious sense, on the other hand, denotes a profession or demonstration of faith through statement or action. (The Greek for *witness*, μάρτυς, is the root of the English word *martyr*.) It is only in this sense that a poetry of witness can be seen as an 'exemplary exercise' (in Geoffrey Hill's words).³⁵⁶ For Miłosz, poetry '[above] a certain level of awareness' is capable of 'sav[ing] people'; again, note the co-opting of religious vocabulary.³⁵⁷ What Davie responds to in Miłosz, and the other Eastern European writers he approves of, is their (explicit or implicit) declaration of faith in poetry:

As far as I can see, among the acquaintances I have made in these countries, [totalitarian suppression] has the effect which is, I should have thought – inspiring, of confirming them more than ever in their values, in the value of the poetic act, in the act of the imagination. They speak with all the less embarrassment, all the more confidence about

³⁵⁴ Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (Carcanet: Manchester, 1982), p. 251.

³⁵⁵ Michael Schmidt, 'Editorial', *PN Review* 87 19 / 1 (1992), p. 1. Schmidt goes on to argue – convincingly, I think – that the quality Weissbort identifies in *The Poetry of Survival* as Różewicz's 'presentness' often lacks 'resonance beyond the hammer-blow of gesture'.

³⁵⁶ Geoffrey Hill, quoted in *Agenda* 27 / 3 (1990), p. 3.

³⁵⁷ Czesław Miłosz, *Poets and Writers* (1993). Quoted in Dennis O'Driscoll (ed.), *The Bloodaxe Book of Poetry Quotations* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2006).

the creativity of the human imagination, about its indestructibility, its inexhaustibility...³⁵⁸

What Davie and Miłosz object to, therefore, is the co-opting of the word ‘witness’ to refer to poetry written from a standpoint opposed to this position of faith. The pared-down, legalistic idea of the witness embodied in the poetry of Różewicz and Pilinszky serves as an affront (or ‘moral blackmail’) to the ‘confident’, ‘unembarrassed’ and essentially religious witness of Miłosz and Pasternak.³⁵⁹

This ambiguity in the word ‘witness’ was identified by Davie himself in the late poem of that title.³⁶⁰ ‘Bearing and giving are different, it appears’, the poem begins. The paradox at the poem’s centre is that, in the case of witness, to ‘bear’ something is also to cast it off:

...the weight
on the grieving shoulders
thankfully hefted off,
a sack into the shadows of God’s barton.

The poem goes on to describe religious witness as a ‘physical fact’, a ‘weight in the gut’ and a ‘load that / must be evacuated’, making explicit a metaphor of excretion which has run subdued through the entire poem. The naturalness of the load evacuated ‘into the hedge-bottom or elsewhere’ is contrasted with the artificially torturous syntax of legal witness: ‘In the latter case (constrained) / one supposes, or may suppose / a judge and jury’. (The unspoken link is between constraint and constipation.) The unpleasantness of the metaphor is apt, linking religious witness with original sin (which ‘We bear like a weight’), as is the implication that our sins must be digested before they can be ‘hefted off’. ‘God’s

³⁵⁸ Al Alvarez, ‘A New Aestheticism? A. Alvarez talks to Donald Davie’, *The Review* 1 (1962), reprinted in Ian Hamilton (ed.), *The Modern Poet: Essays from The Review* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1968), p. 175-176.

³⁵⁹ Davie uses Pasternak as an example in both *Czeslaw Milosz and the Insufficiency of Lyric* and his interview with Alvarez. His 1965 translation of Pasternak’s poetry examined *Doctor Zhivago* as ‘the story of an artistic vocation’, but did pay sustained attention to any concept of ‘witness’ or ‘witnessing’. Boris Pasternak, *The Poems of Doctor Zhivago*, trans. and commentary by Donald Davie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1965), p. 5.

³⁶⁰ Donald Davie, ‘Witness’, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 460. Hereafter Davie: *Collected*.

barton', through its suggestion of 'burden', implies the role of Christ in Davie's personal construction of the term 'witness'. The implication of 'hedge-bottom lawyer' (an archaic slang term for 'an unqualified or a disqualified attorney or solicitor doing business in the shelter of a proper solicitor's name')³⁶¹ in the poem's final line seems to suggest that even in courts of law, genuine witness can only be achieved before God.

Other poems by Davie address similar issues. 'Method. For Ronald Gaskell', published in 1955 (so pre-Adorno), directly addresses the question of how the poet should respond to 'atrocities' (Davie: *Collected*, p. 37). (The question it avoids is whether the poet should respond at all, especially when their knowledge of the atrocities does not come through direct experience.) The poem embodies the style or tone it argues for, even to the extent of satirising it: in the opening line, the parentheses around 'atrocities' clearly *are* 'too neat and self-possessed' (like the parentheses around 'constrained' in 'Witness'). It is only in the poem's final lines that a 'neat' style reveals its full capacities:

An even tenor's sensitive to shock,
And stains spread furthest where the floor's not cracked.

The word 'shock' enacts literally a sudden drop in pitch, just as the word 'cracked' sharply fractures a succession of drawn-out fricatives.

The argument of 'Method...' initially seems to operate through a facile opposition between 'an even tenor' and 'a disordered mind'; but while Davie enthuses over his preferred technique throughout the poem, the line 'Has discourse still its several heads, in Hell? // It has, of course...' insists that any given 'theme' has several potential styles. (This point is repeated in 'Rejoinder to a Critic': 'and I do not suppose / That others may not have a better plan' (Davie: *Collected*, p. 67).) In fact, the poem only attacks those who call for a single style or method as a response to 'atrocities', who are accused of 'conceal[ing] the fact', and mocked as enthusiasts for a 'Ramist paradigm'. (Ramus 'explicitly denied that there could be more than one method and that there was any

³⁶¹ Eric Partridge (ed.), *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

difference between *methodus* and *ordo*, i.e. acquiring knowledge and transmitting it.)³⁶²

Hugh Kenner identifies this anti-Ramism as a particular virtue of Davie's criticism. What Davie argues against throughout his work, Kenner suggests, is the belief 'that certain poets being admirable, certain others must be no good on the face of it'.³⁶³ The silences and truncations of Różewicz's 'anti-poetry', the linguistic evasions of Paul Celan, and the historical near-nihilism of Pilinszky are all simultaneously strategies and accusations, and it is this sense of accusation that Davie identifies as 'moral blackmail'. Testimony in the legal sense, as Derrida notes, is necessarily partisan: its status as testimony depends on it not being proven fact.³⁶⁴ Davie does not resist argument in his poetry or criticism (quite the reverse), but he does resist the tribalism that comes about when one is forced to take sides. In the case of *The Poetry of Survival*, he identifies this tribalism as creating a false opposition between the Eastern European translations and (quoting Weissbort's introduction) 'the inertness of the English scene at the time' (Davie: 'Their Witness').³⁶⁵ (Davie also points out here that his 'own special interest is too obvious for me to declare it' – e.g. that he saw this as a personal attack on his own poetry.)

So far this has been a summary of Davie's case against the Eastern European translation project of Weissbort and Hughes, and an attempt to ground this argument both in Davie's own work and among the wider debates which were taking place at the time. Up to this point I have resisted examining the actual validity of the case, which obviously has substantial implications for this thesis. Having laid it out sympathetically, I will now examine it point by point.

³⁶² Erland Sellberg, 'Petrus Ramus', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, last accessed 02/05/2013, <<http://www.science.uva.nl/~seop/entries/ramus/>>. Davie's interest in Ramism may well stem from his examination of sixteenth and seventeenth century poetic logic for his *Articulate Energy*, and section 4 of the fifth chapter of this book sheds a lot of light on what is for Davie an unusually compacted stanza. Donald Davie. *Articulate Energy*. Printed in one volume with *Purity of Diction in the English Language*. Manchester: Carcanet 1992. p239

³⁶³ Hugh Kenner, 'Responsibilities', *Donald Davie and the Responsibilities of Literature*, ed. George Dekker (Manchester: Carcanet, 1983), p101.

³⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Poetics and the Politics of Witnessing', *Sovereignties in question: the poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 78.

³⁶⁵ As Weissbort notes in the subsequent correspondence, he is being quoted dramatically out of context.

Firstly, is Adorno's statement a form of 'moral blackmail'? The answer is surely 'not necessarily'. Even if we resist the idea that Auschwitz demonstrates indubitably the failure of culture (Adorno's Auschwitz is metonymic for the wider atrocities of the twentieth century), the maxim serves as a corrective to arguments that the cultural and historical spheres were entirely separate, or that culture could exist in an arena of privileged irresponsibility. Gareth Reeves argues that Davie's own humility (not quite the quality identified by Kenner, but close to and dependent on it) is partially a response to Adorno's 'challenge'.³⁶⁶ Similar correctives from the other side are not hard to find: Kenneth Seeskin, for example, argues that 'silence can be taken for acquiescence or, in some circles, lack of interest'.³⁶⁷ It would be strange to read statements of this sort (or Schwarz's, 'In truth it is barbaric *not* to write poetry')³⁶⁸ as moral blackmail against non-poets. Rather they work as an illumination of a particular difficulty: the Scylla and Charybdis of barbaric triviality vs. complicit silence. Davie approaches this idea himself in 'Rejoinder to a Critic': the poem's memorable closing line, 'How dare we now be anything but numb?', is not necessarily the blunt rhetorical question it might appear on first reading (Davie: *Collected*, p. 67). Instead, as Reeves notes, it 'hint[s] that such an attitude does...require at some level the denial of feeling, that not to express emotion is to run the risk of negating it.'³⁶⁹

This is not to say that Adorno's statement can *never* be used in the way Davie deplores. Davie attributes to Weissbort an argument that 1950s Movement poetry 'did not measure up to the condition of peoples which had suffered the Nazi and after that the Soviet hegemony'; if this was an accurate representation of Weissbort's position, it would clearly be an example of invoking the Holocaust to silence an opponent (Davie: 'Their Witness').³⁷⁰ Davie's example of the Holocaust being used by a poet to pre-emptively silence criticism is more

³⁶⁶ Adorno's statement was described as a 'challenge' by John Banville, 'Beyond Good and Evil', *The Nation* 11 (31 Jan 2005). Quoted in 'Poetry and the Memory of the Second World War', Gareth Reeves, *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 579-591 at p. 581.

³⁶⁷ Quoted in Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 22.

³⁶⁸ Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 22.

³⁶⁹ 'Poetry and the Memory of the Second World War', Gareth Reeves, *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 579-591 at p. 581-2.

³⁷⁰ But see footnote #365.

convincing; he discusses Peter Jay's translation of Pilinszky's 'The Three-Coloured Banner',³⁷¹ which he describes as a 'blank cheque on which we are invited to inscribe whatever sentiments we may readily summon concerning convicted prisoners [and] dead soldiers'.³⁷² It indeed seems to be the case that the poem depends entirely for its operation on 'the disparity between one sort of historical experience and another' (Davie: *Insufficiency*, p. 60-61). (Don Paterson defines this sort of poem as 'inverse sentimentalism', noting that it attempts 'to provoke an emotion of which its target readers are already in high possession'.³⁷³ This can sidetrack criticism into a discussion of the validity or otherwise of the emotion itself, a slightly different instance of 'moral blackmail'.)

Secondly, is there any truth in Davie's accusation that 'we have had to live out with [Weissbort and Hughes], vicariously, the experiences they were spared or cheated of' (Davie: 'Their Witness')? That is to say, do Weissbort and other translators of Eastern European poetry demean their subjects by treating them only as witnesses in the legal sense, valuable for the prose content of their testimony and little else? Here, to talk about living vicariously through certain writers is to concede a great deal to Davie's choice of vocabulary; one man's living vicariously can be another man's empathy. (The varying critical reactions to Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac*, which will be discussed in more detail subsequently, provide an example of this.) The most important point on Davie's side is the project of Weissbort's anthology as a whole: the primary criterion for selection is experience of extreme forms of government, and the centrality of this experience to the poetic work. (Hence, presumably, the rejection of Eastern European writers who operate more recognisably in the lyric tradition, for instance Sándor Kányádi.) A second argument, made explicitly by Davie, is the openness of the translation; if the translations are 'shapeless and prosaic',³⁷⁴ the value which Weissbort imagines the poetry has to the English reader cannot be inherent in its structure. Prose content is retained through lax translation, therefore Weissbort imagines the only value of this poetry is in its prose content.

³⁷¹ János Pilinszky, 'The Three-Coloured Banner', trans. Peter Jay, *The Poetry of Survival*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Anvil, 1991), p. 237.

³⁷² Donald Davie, letter, *London Review of Books* 14 / 8 (23 April 1992).

³⁷³ Don Paterson, 'The Dark Art of Poetry', T.S. Eliot Lecture 2004, Poetry Library website, last accessed 10 May 2013, <<http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/news/poetryscene/?id=20>>.

³⁷⁴ Donald Davie, letter, *London Review of Books* 14 / 8 (23 April 1992).

It is certainly the case that many translated poems in *The Poetry of Survival* do not retain rhyme or original metre. (The majority of the poems, however, are not end-rhymed or strongly metrical in the original language, and several translations *do* retain end-rhyme, especially the translations of Ágnes Nemes Nagy by Frederic Will and Bruce Berlind.) To attribute this, as Davie does, to a naïve insistence on reportage alone is to deny the substantial engagement with translation theory from Weissbort and others. Ted Hughes, especially, through several *Modern Poetry in Translation* editorials, consistently argued for his own style of translation, in full awareness that he had ‘ignored [some] important things, and no doubt missed others completely’.³⁷⁵ Any translation will necessarily do the same, as well as introducing elements not present in the original text, and this side of Davie’s argument only stands up if Hughes and the other *Poetry of Survival* translators are *unaware* of what is being omitted: any translator is obliged to make decisions about the retention of particular aspects, and the fact that Weissbort and Hughes found a quality of ‘great urgency’ particularly important does not condemn them as heartless exploiters of Eastern European suffering.³⁷⁶ Incidentally, Davie’s own translations of Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* poems and Adam Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz* also omit end-rhymes and employ altered metre.

The not-so-subtle implication in Davie’s ‘spared or *cheated of*’ (my italics) is that Weissbort and Hughes are suffering from something we might term ‘dictator envy’, a nostalgia for the abysmal conditions in postwar Eastern Europe. He mocks Weissbort’s description of *The Poetry of Survival* (in an interview with Yehuda Amichai) as a ‘good old days anthology’, noting po-facedly that ‘those good old days were the worst and most wretched days for writers under Stalinist tyranny’ (Davie: ‘Their Witness’). (The context makes it quite clear that Weissbort is being ironic.)

George Szirtes has analysed ‘dictator envy’ through some pronouncements of Al Alvarez, and his conclusions seem particularly applicable to this case.

³⁷⁵ Ted Hughes, ‘Introduction’, János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*, trans. János Csokits and Ted Hughes (Manchester: Carcanet, 1976), p. 13.

³⁷⁶ Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (eds.), *Translation: Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 521.

Alvarez's argument is the articulation of a conscious sense of lack in the best Western poetry of the time. [...] The lack of a public and moral role is tied in with the perceived lack of common public risk. What poet and public have in common here is less a common physical and political danger, than a more subtle stake in the world of language, where language is as much a private as a political matter.³⁷⁷

This correctly diagnoses 'dictator envy' as an attitude towards language and poetry, not politics. Clearly it is morally wrong to desire tyranny and political oppression as spurs for one's own poetry; but equally, it is surely not wrong for poets to desire 'a validating principle, or test of courage' and believe that Eastern European poets have been offered such a test.³⁷⁸ Weissbort and Hughes can legitimately endorse the situation of responsibility the Eastern European poet finds himself or herself in, and these poets' responses to their situations, without endorsing the dictatorships and repression which brought such situations about.

Thirdly, is there any truth in Davie's accusation that many translators of Eastern European poetry stand in a 'condescending' relation to their subjects, and that they have a hidden critical agenda based on the principle that 'the critic is superior to the poet, because the critic can interpret what the poet [...] can only report' (Davie: 'Their Witness')? Davie imagines a conversation between a translator and an Eastern European poet: 'You know what happened to you, but you don't understand it. We'll supply the understanding, if you'll give us the happening' (Davie: 'Their Witness'). If this attitude really existed (and Davie's argument that Weissbort and Hughes are participating in a 'career-ploy' depends on it), one might expect Davie to produce this condescending criticism, the 'understanding' which the 'careerists' are supposed to supply. In fact, all he cites are the brief introductions to the authors given in *The Poetry of Survival*, hardly sustained pieces of critical enterprise. (*The Poetry of Survival* also contains nine appendices, consisting of interviews with and statements by the poets themselves.) It is hard to imagine what criticism Davie is thinking of, unless he is referring very obliquely to the broadcasts by Al Alvarez collected in *Under*

³⁷⁷ George Szirtes, *Fortinbras at the Fishhouses: Responsibility, the Iron Curtain and the Sense of History as Knowledge* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 32-33.

³⁷⁸ George Szirtes, *Fortinbras at the Fishhouses: Responsibility, the Iron Curtain and the Sense of History as Knowledge* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2010), p. 33.

Pressure.³⁷⁹ While Hughes and Weissbort did a great deal of work *promoting* Eastern European poetry, the *critical* attention they paid it was relatively minor, largely confined to introductory essays for particular volumes. Even in these introductions, a good proportion of the space is taken up with describing the political situation in Eastern Europe at the time (as well as particular difficulties with the translation); in other words, the same prose reportage which Davie considers the only justification for the poetry's publication!

Although Davie's arguments here do not stand up to close analysis, they highlight moral issues of particular importance to Eastern European translation. A high percentage of the intended audience for these translations have no acquaintance with the original languages, making questions of trust, condescension and responsibility vitally important. Consideration of these issues would have been essential even if there had been no question of 'appropriate' or 'correct' response to atrocities (out of which, I have argued, the anxiety of Davie and Miłosz over the word 'witness' stems). In this context, it is worth examining the strange case of Christopher Reid's *Katerina Brac*, a text which throws these questions into stark relief. In this case, not only do the audience have no acquaintance with the original language; there *is no* original language.

Katerina Brac is hard to categorise.³⁸⁰ Though it is made up of fictitious translations from an invented poet, it is neither a hoax nor a spoof, both of which depend for their effect on the reader being taken in. Nor does it fit very neatly into any tradition of dramatic monologue: the assumed persona is sustained over an entire book rather than a single poem or sequence, and the poems contain odd turns of phrase which we are probably supposed to take as artefacts of translation. Furthermore, the straight-faced back-cover blurb of the first edition, composed by Reid himself,³⁸¹ both maintains the pretence of translation, and suggests the concept of translation is especially important to our understanding of the work: 'Christopher Reid demonstrates his awareness both of the translator's special responsibilities, and of the paradox whereby a poet must

³⁷⁹ Al Alvarez, *Under Pressure. The Writer in Society: Eastern Europe and the USA* (London: Penguin, 1965). Even here, the criticism is very broad, and in large part consists of descriptions of the political situation in the countries under discussion and quotation from the poetry.

³⁸⁰ Christopher Reid, *Katerina Brac* (London: Faber and Faber 1985). Hereafter Reid: *KB*.

³⁸¹ Elizabeth Frost, 'Found in translation: an interview with Christopher Reid', *Electronic Poetry Review* 6 (2003), last accessed 3 June 2013, <<http://www.epoetry.org/issues/issue6/text/prose/reid.htm>>. Hereafter Frost: Reid interview.

become the creation of his or her translator.’ The text is perhaps best categorised as a pseudo-translation, but this invented categorisation is never going to display hard and fast edges: at different points on the continuum, we also find Tom Paulin’s ‘Where Art is a Midwife’ and Richard Berengarten’s *In a Time of Drought* (discussed in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis, respectively).

There is another complication. Almost every critic who writes on *Katerina Brac* has noticed the similarity in voice, tone and subject matter between ‘Brac’ and Reid’s earlier poetry. William Scammell, for instance, writes ‘In fact the poetry is much the same [as Reid’s first two books]’.³⁸² Michael Hofmann identifies Reid’s ‘continuing love-affair with the ridiculous and the inglorious’,³⁸³ while John Redmond notes that the ‘poetry is as parochial as his earlier work’.³⁸⁴ Early poems published in magazines bore the subtitle ‘From *Katerina Brac*’, but when they have been reprinted in anthologies this subtitle has not been retained, suggesting Reid is happy to let the difference between Brac’s work and his own blur over time.³⁸⁵ Poems include oddly English points of reference: Hoffman has noted how the mention of Laputa (the flying island in *Gulliver’s Travels*) seems ‘an anglicism that also undermines the “reality” of the book’.³⁸⁶ Similarly, the setting for the book’s closing poem is an English archetype, familiar from *Tintern Abbey* and Shakespeare’s sonnet 73: ‘the famous abbey, / its nettle-sprung ruins’.³⁸⁷ In the work of Tom Paulin, parallels can be drawn between his occasional Eastern European landscapes and Ireland, specifically themes of occupation by a foreign power, but there are no such links between Brac’s unnamed satellite state and Reid’s relatively cosy England. Nor does Brac’s creation allow Reid to deal with material which his more familiar poetic voice might otherwise find indigestible. In Colette Bryce’s *The Observations of Aleksandr Svetlov*, a work which owes a great deal to *Katerina Brac*, Svetlov is an octogenarian whose persona allows Bryce to deal with

³⁸² William Scammell, ‘Very Nice’, *The London Magazine* (1985 / 1986), p. 119.

³⁸³ Michael Hofmann, ‘Compassionate Ridicule’, *Poetry Review* 75 / 4 (1986), p. 48.

³⁸⁴ John Redmond, ‘Lyric adaptations’, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 249.

³⁸⁵ See e.g. ‘What the Uneducated Old Woman Told Me’ in *Good Poems for Hard Times*, ed. Garrison Keillor, p155

³⁸⁶ Michael Hofmann. ‘Compassionate Ridicule’. In *Poetry Review* 75 (4) (1986). p47

³⁸⁷ ‘I Disagreed’, Reid: *KB*, p. 47 Other ruined monastery poems in English include *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Browning’s ‘Love Among the Ruins’, Hughes ‘Pike’ and Hill’s ‘The Laurel Axe’ (in *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England*).

themes of old age and fear of death.³⁸⁸ But Reid's handling of Brac's 'political background' is, as Hofmann notes, characterised by intense 'restraint and moderation'.³⁸⁹

To what extent should we take Reid at his word that the poems are commentaries on the 'perpetual negotiation' between poet and translator (Frost: Reid interview)? One might suppose the fact that Reid's 'translations' had no originals would make such a commentary harder, rather than easier. (All we can detect of the original language, perhaps, is that it employs the perfect tense rather more than standard English.) Inevitably, we witness only one side of the negotiation. Reid's translations of Rilke, with facing-page original text, would seem to provide or invite a potentially more useful commentary on the act of translation.³⁹⁰ I suggest the poems of *Katerina Brac* engage more profitably with ideas about the reception of material in translation, and its accommodation in whatever tradition they are being translated into; the difficult moral areas we have already identified in our discussion of Davie. This is a similar reading to John Redmond's, who suggests that *Katerina Brac* is a 'commentary... on the way eastern European poets have been received in the West'.³⁹¹

There is an important distinction to be made between a commentary on something, and a catalyst for thinking about something. It seems obvious that Brac's poems cannot refer directly to their own reception, and that any reference they make to the reception of Eastern European poetry in general must be indirect. The only mechanism for commentary available to Reid is a tentative half-acknowledgement of Brac's weird status, bridging the gap between the influencer and the influenced.

'I Disagreed' illustrates this technique (Reid: *KB*, p. 47). We have already noted the conventional Englishness of the poem's setting. In the willed simile 'bibles fat as suitcases', we can also detect a characteristic of Reid's old 'Martian' style. But the presence of *Katerina* gives 'suitcases', with its connotations of fugitives and forced migrations, its own valence. Similarly, a statue's 'peep of a foot' might seem innocuous enough in a straightforwardly English poem, but here, where helicopters move overhead in 'a snooping glass

³⁸⁸ Colette Bryce, *The Observations of Aleksandr Svetlov* (London: Donut Press, 2007).

³⁸⁹ Michael Hofmann, 'Compassionate Ridicule', *Poetry Review* 75 / 4 (1986), p. 47.

³⁹⁰ Collected in Michael Hofmann (ed.), *Rilke in English* (London: Penguin, 2012).

³⁹¹ John Redmond, 'Is there still life on Mars?', *The Guardian* (3rd November 2011).

bubble', peeping and peepers are loaded with menace.³⁹² Even 'neatly arranged / fragments' carries a faint connotation of governmental efficiency, and 'gappy crumble' surely hints at the archetypal 'smashed dreary city' of postwar Europe.³⁹³ These valencies do not impress Sean O'Brien, who describes the 'sense of gravity' they lend the poems as 'unearned'.³⁹⁴ But Reid has anticipated this line of attack, and the closing sentence of 'I Disagreed' subverts it exquisitely:

I thought we might have been standing backstage
with all the props
and that anything was likely to happen.

(Reid: *KB*, p. 47)

Here, Reid has Katerina almost acknowledge her own precarious fictionality, and suggests her Eastern European ephemera are props in both senses of the word: stage properties and integral supports to the structure of the poems. Michael O'Neill has noted how the word 'happen' conjures and undermines Auden's famous claim about the utility of poetry.³⁹⁵ Katerina's 'props' (in an interview, Reid describes them as 'tricks' common to several Eastern European poets)³⁹⁶ are what allow her poetry to function. 'It is like being on stage, where the third dimension / is in short supply, but at least we are safe from interlopers', Katerina writes in another poem ('History and Parody'. Reid: *KB*, p. 19). Reid recognises that, to an English audience, the Eastern European experience will inevitably play out as a piece of theatre, and that the gulf between the entirely created Katerina and the semi-created author in translation is not vast; both lack, to some degree, that 'third dimension'.

Reid's commentary on Eastern European translation becomes more profound when considered in light of specific authors. Hofmann lists some of *Katerina Brac's* recurring motifs – 'memory, history, parody, music, angels,

³⁹² 'Meditational Exercise', Reid: *KB*, p. 42.

³⁹³ Graham Greene, *The Third Man/The Fallen Idol* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 13.

³⁹⁴ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1997), p. 229. Hereafter O'Brien: *Deregulated Muse*.

³⁹⁵ 'Christopher Reid'. Michael O'Neill. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry in English*. Ed. Ian Hamilton. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994. p448

³⁹⁶ Frost: Reid interview.

cities and villages, travel, a past affair with a clever and dominant male' – and connects these with Milan Kundera.³⁹⁷ To me, the obvious writer they conjure up is Wisława Szymborska, whom Reid encountered in the 1980s as part of the Penguin Modern European Poets series. (Reid, it is only fair to mention, does not list Szymborska among *Katrina Brac*'s influences; but as he includes Vasko Popa on his list, with whom Katerina's voice has only a tangential relationship, we can perhaps take his statements with a pinch of salt.³⁹⁸ As poetry editor for Faber and Faber, Reid would later go on to become Szymborska's UK editor.)

Some of Reid's poems take obvious cues from Szymborska. 'The Oriental Gallery', for instance, reverses the sentiments of Szymborska's 'Museum', but retains a very similar diction:

Here are plates but no appetite.
And wedding rings, but the requited love
has been gone now for some three hundred years.³⁹⁹

They were his faithful servants, showing
by their unblemished complexions and perfect poise
how Nebuchadnezzar can be outsmarted.⁴⁰⁰

While Szymborska celebrates the persistence of objects, Brac is captivated by their tendency towards entropy ('Even more moving are the broken patterns / of pots that wanted to be earth again'), but the tone is identical. William Scammell identifies in *Katerina Brac* a 'desire not to presume', and this is certainly shared with Szymborska, along with the 'love-affair with the ridiculous and the inglorious' mentioned above.⁴⁰¹ The close of Szymborska's poem is a strong affirmation of that common love: her dress 'struggles, foolish thing, so stubbornly! / Determined to keep living when I'm gone!' Both poems depend for their argument on subtly anthropomorphising the objects they describe; Brac

³⁹⁷ Michael Hofmann, 'Compassionate Ridicule', *Poetry Review* 75 / 4 (1986), p. 47.

³⁹⁸ Frost interview. Reid's list consists of Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert and Vasko Popa.

³⁹⁹ Wisława Szymborska, 'Museum', *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 11. Hereafter Szymborska: *Selected*.

⁴⁰⁰ 'The Oriental Gallery', Reid: *KB*, p. 18.

⁴⁰¹ William Scammell, 'Very Nice', *The London Magazine* (1985 / 1986), p. 120.

writes of a 'jar that dribbles / its glaze like a sloppily fed baby', Szymborska notes how 'some Egyptian flapper's silly hairpin giggles'.

More common are poems that borrow single images or motifs. The 'transcontinental journey / from A to B' of Brac's butterflies conjures up Szymborska's 'non-arrival in the city of N' in 'The Railroad Station' (Reid: *KB*, p. 9, Szymborska: *Selected*, p. 40). In 'An Angel', Brac studies 'the poems...of a friend, now dead', recalling a similar scene in Szymborska's poem 'The Letters of the Dead' (Reid: *KB* p20, Szymborska: *Selected*, p. 71). The final line of 'An Angel', in which the poems are left 'not knowing they had been abandoned', summarises the whole conceit of Szymborska's poem. Angels themselves are a common motif in Szymborska and Brac: Brac in 'An Angel', 'The South', 'I Disagreed', Szymborska in 'Poetry Reading', 'Thomas Mann' and 'The Classic' among others.⁴⁰² Brac's presentation of theatrical imagery in 'I Disagreed' may owe something to Szymborska's 'Theatre Impressions', especially its implication that the dead of history are 'waiting patiently offstage'. (Even the technique of a central conceit worked into a poem - i.e., that the Muse of history might be a man - is far more typical of Szymborska than of Holub, Herbert or Popa.) Poems also share formal characteristics. Brac's 'What the Uneducated Old Woman Told Me' is a catalogue of the old woman's complaints, presented with gentle irony that does not turn into mockery:

That her legs hurt in spite of the medicine.
That times were bad.
That her husband had died nearly thirty years before.

(Reid: *KB*, p. 28)

Szymborska's 'Pietà' contains more framing narrative than 'What the Uneducated Old Woman Told Me', but the central construction is almost identical:

Yes, she heard the shots.
(...) Yes, the memory still moves her.

⁴⁰² Reid: *KB*, p. 20, p. 27, p. 47. Szymborska: *Selected*, p. 26, p. 53, p. 85.

Yes, just a little tired now. Yes it will pass.

(Szyborska: *Selected*, p. 51)

The relationship of influence between Szyborska and Brac/Reid is not straightforward, however. Everything which is shared between them passes, necessarily, through Clare Cavanagh's translations. Szyborska can influence Reid only on the level of motif or image (what Pound termed 'phanopœia').⁴⁰³ Her 'logopœia', the 'dance of the intellect among words', disappears, and where Reid imitates Szyborska's tone, as in 'The Oriental Gallery', there is every chance that the tone is actually Cavanagh's. This is one way in which *Katerina Brac* can work as a commentary on the way in which influence operates through translation, and it is arguably the dampening effect of this process which is responsible for the book's 'impersonality'.⁴⁰⁴

'A Box' might serve as *Katerina Brac*'s manifesto (Reid: *KB*, p. 32). At first glance it is a poem about censorship and repression, which straightaway raises issues of authorship (and condescension): poems openly about censorship, of course, don't make it past genuine censors. (Zbigniew Herbert's 'Szuflada' ['Drawer'] is one obvious exception to this rule; however, it was published during the Polish 'thaw' and primarily concerns self-censorship rather than official censorship.)⁴⁰⁵ Like Tom Paulin's 'Where Art is a Midwife', 'A Box' is an Eastern European poem which an Eastern European poet could not have written.

The mechanism of 'A Box' can be seen in the clumsy-sounding near-repetition between the first and the thirteenth lines: 'Imagine a box, not a very big one', and 'Imagine this box, which should not be too large'. In the first line, the reader is being asked to imagine a *specific* (external) box; by the thirteenth line, the reader is being asked to create a box of their own, in their imagination ('somewhere you know its contents will be safe'). But the 'box' is also the poem

⁴⁰³ Ezra Pound, 'How To Read', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and intro. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 25.

⁴⁰⁴ Ian Ousby (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 784.

⁴⁰⁵ Zbigniew Herbert, 'Drawer', *Selected Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 32. Information on the Polish original is from John and Bogdana Carpenter, 'Zbigniew Herbert: The Poet as Conscience', *The Slavic and East European Journal* 24 / 1 (1980), p. 49.

itself, and here an edgily ironic distance between the respective situations of Reid and Brac is most visible. The security which Brac is longing for (O'Brien describes Brac as 'wishing only for a private life')⁴⁰⁶ is a fact of life for Reid. Furthermore, it is that security which makes the poem possible: in order to pass into our heads, Brac must 'be sure its contents will be safe' in the poem as well. This is not the same dilemma as Popa faces in his famous poem 'The Small Box'



(which Reid had probably read in Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making*; it was not included in the Penguin Modern European Poets selection of Popa).⁴⁰⁷ Popa's box contains the 'whole world quite tiny', and ends with a plea to 'take care of the small box', but there are no specifics given. By 'the land' he means the whole land, not Brac's particular 'landscape of mists and birches'. In fact Popa's 'take care' is double-edged; we know from the first line that the small box has 'teeth'.

'The Small Box' deals with the capacity of a poem to contain the world, and our responsibilities towards that poem, not with a specific imagined world. Brac's poem deals in particulars. Her 'small photograph / in which the wince of a girl in sunlight is the main point' even seems to be reproduced on the cover of the first Faber edition (1985, see illustration).

Brac's box, this is to say, seems to be inside-out. Herbert's 'drawer' is 'swept out empty', or appears this way, as Herbert has 'had to sell the mark of [his] rebellion', but still it holds back something from him: 'I knock on you forgive me open'. Popa's box engulfs, rather than conceals, and when 'the house and the town and the land' appear in the poem this engulfing is enacted. Brac's box aims to conceal at the same time as revealing; as O'Brien notes, it 'gives itself away immediately' (O'Brien: *Deregulated Muse*, p. 230). Reid's own description of *Katerina Brac* as a 'parody... [although not a] hostile parody' may be relevant here (Frost: Reid interview). ('The following indispensable items' seems caught uncomfortably between mockery and translationese.) Finally, then, 'A Box', is a poem about translation. We have already examined the gulf

⁴⁰⁶ O'Brien: *Deregulated Muse*, p. 230.

⁴⁰⁷ Vasco Popa (sic.), 'The Small Box', quoted in Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967). The unnamed translator is probably Anne Pennington. Elsewhere translated as 'The Little Box'.

between ‘Imagine a box, not a very big one’ and ‘Imagine this box, which should not be too large’, and it is the distance between the two statements which is the distance between the original poem and the translated one. The poem is instructing its translator in how to reproduce its content, and it is unsurprising to this end that the content is occasionally reduced to ephemera and backdrop. Stage properties may be unreal, but they are also portable. Many of the poem’s quieter images seem to hint at the translation process: a translation could plausibly be ‘a message received from a friend of a friend’, a ‘journey by train’ or even ‘an odd-looking parcel’. (The poem itself, with its overlong and overhanging eighth line, seems almost deliberately odd-looking.) The penultimate line even suggests a particular style of translation: ‘with as little fuss as possible’. In this reading, ‘somewhere you know its contents will be safe’ becomes not the readers’ head or the poem itself, but the English language, and ‘safe’ takes on an ironic double-meaning. In English the poem is ‘safe’ in the sense of *protected*, but also ‘safe’ in the sense of *harmless*.

This accusation is different to Donald Davie’s. Davie argues (or asserts) that many post-1950 Eastern European translations fail because of shortcomings on the part of the translator. Reid suggests (or hints) that differences in political situations may leave the gap between the poem and its foreign-language counterpart almost unbridgeable.

Crucially, this is not a point about different experiences and the experiential background required for a reader to appreciate a poem. There may be certain things which are literally impossible to imagine, but the condition of life under a totalitarian state is not one of them, and the techniques of poetry are exquisitely calibrated to render very hard-to-imagine things as clearly as possible. The difference is rather in the poem’s status as performative utterance: to say something in one society is different to saying it in another, and this difference is untranslatable.⁴⁰⁸ Seamus Heaney, discussing *Katerina Brac*, notes ‘the insular and eccentric nature of English experience in all the literal and extended meanings of those adjectives’, and how

⁴⁰⁸ ‘Performative utterance’ in J.L. Austin’s sense of the term. See J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words: The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J.O. Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 6-24.

England's island status, its off-centre European positioning, its history of non-defeat and non-invasion since 1066, these enviable and (as far as the English are concerned) normative conditions have ensured a protracted life within the English psyche for the assumption that a possible and desirable congruence exists between domestic and imagined reality. But Christopher Reid's book represents a moment of doubt.⁴⁰⁹

But this is incorrect; the 'assumption', insofar as I read it, surely does hold good 'as far as the English are concerned'. (Reid is *correct* in his comfortable security, Brac in her paranoia.) The 'moment of doubt' Heaney identifies is hopefully not a banal observation along the lines of *they write different sorts of poetry in different countries*. (Corcoran offers a similarly weak summary of *Katerina Brac* as a 'challenge to... [our] cultural or national consciousness'.)⁴¹⁰ Reid, instead, suggests that even if a perfect translation existed – and *Katerina Brac* is just this, being literally identical with its original – the fact that the new poem exists in a different political situation alters the poem's status, and creates an unsurpassable, untranslatable barrier.

To take Eastern European poems as examples of performative utterance brings us back to Donald Davie, and the distinction we have noted between the religious and legal senses of the word 'witness'. Legal witness is not an example of performative utterance (although the oath the witness takes before giving evidence is); it is valuable solely for its content. Religious witness is entirely performative, and it is this aspect of Eastern European poetry which (Reid suggests through *Katerina Brac*) is untranslatable. It can be imitated, in the same sense as an actor onstage can imitate the marriage vows, but this is suspension of disbelief and should it be broken we will go back to treating the actor as an actor. Reid emphasises this precarious condition of Brac's poetry through the Eastern European stage properties of 'I Disagreed'; 'A Box', similarly, continually gestures towards the idea that we are in a drama or fiction ('Some jokes, anxiety and a final revelation'). This emphasis is one way in which *Katerina Brac* complicates our response to Eastern European poetry in translation.

⁴⁰⁹ Quoted in Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Eastern Ripples: Afterthoughts on Contemporary Poetry in English', *The Poetry Ireland Review* 26 (1989), p. 46.

⁴¹⁰ Neil Corcoran, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 4.

Conclusion

Does it make sense to talk about ‘the Eastern European context’ of contemporary English poetry?

This thesis has largely treated context in terms of influence, which was defined in the Introduction as any compelling narrative which can be constructed out of the relationship between two texts. In some cases, these texts have been specific, known to or even translated by the English-language poet being influenced (for instance Ted Hughes, Charles Simic and Seamus Heaney); elsewhere, the ‘influencing’ text has been more nebulous, sometimes even imaginary, as with Richard Berengarten’s neglected long sequence *In a Time of Drought*.

These contexts are grounded, to some extent, in a particular time and place. The time is post-1950; the place is the contentious zone demarcated sometimes as ‘Eastern’ and sometimes as ‘Eastern and Central’ Europe, more precisely the territories of old Europe under the control of the USSR. It is debatable whether much more can be said. Was there ever an identifiable ‘Eastern European style’? The phrase, at least, is a critical commonplace, widely employed (but rarely defined) in reviews and blurbs. Dana Gioia calls it ‘sparse, quiet but luminous’.⁴¹¹ Carol Rumens suggests it may be identified in poetry which is particularly ‘terse, skil[ful]...occasionally unpunctuated’.⁴¹² SJ Fowler notes a ‘luminous...tradition’ but is wary of its potential tendency towards ‘restrictive Romanticism’.⁴¹³ Further back, Ted Hughes offered a more sustained analysis, focusing on Vasko Popa, Miroslav Holub, Zbigniew Herbert and (the Israeli) Yehuda Amichai, but widening his scope at the last minute to entail an entire ‘generation of mid-European poets’.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹¹ Dana Gioia, ‘James Tate and American Surrealism’, *Denver Quarterly* 32 / 3 (1998), reprinted on Dana Gioia personal website, last accessed 18 January 2013, <<http://www.danagioia.net/essays/etate.htm>>.

⁴¹² Carol Rumens. ‘Innocence when roses smelt divine, and Brechtian hard common sense’, *Poetry London* 59 (2008).

⁴¹³ SJ Fowler, ‘maintenant #66: an interview with Valzhyna Mort’, *3:AM Magazine* (2011), last accessed 15 January 2013, <<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/maintenant-66-valzhyna-mort/>>.

⁴¹⁴ Ted Hughes, ‘Introduction to Vasko Popa: *Selected Poems*’, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 220. Hereafter Hughes: Popa introduction.

Their reaction to the mainly Surrealist principles that prevailed in Continental poetry in the inter-war years was a matter of personal temperament, but it has been reinforced by everything that has since happened...They have had to live out, in actuality, a vision which for artists elsewhere is a prevailing shape of things but only brokenly glimpsed...They must be reckoned among the purest and most wide awake of living poets. In a way, their world reminds one of Beckett's world. Only theirs seems perhaps braver, more human, and so more real...In another way, their world reminds one of the world of modern physics.

(Hughes: Popa introduction, p. 220-221)

Hughes goes on to describe the poetry as 'ironic', moral, not cynical, 'purged of rhetoric' and containing within or behind itself 'the consciousness of a people' (Hughes: Popa introduction, p. 221-222).⁴¹⁵

These hazy generalisations do not add up to anything very useful. There are many obvious counter-examples. The poetry of Czesław Miłosz, for instance, is hardly 'quiet', 'terse' or 'purged of rhetoric', and despite Hughes' best efforts it is almost impossible to reconcile Holub's freewheeling scientific precision with Popa's carefully controlled folkloric sequences. (Popa, it could be argued, takes a scientific stance towards mythology; Holub, a mythological stance towards science. But such neat formulations are not enough to prove substantial continuities.) If we return to the quotation from Peter Porter with which this thesis opened, 'the Eastern European Translation Market / whose bloody fables tickle liberal tongues', we find an authentic publishing phenomenon given an inauthentic description: 'bloody fables' is closer to a caricature of the American Deep Image school than any particularly prevalent tendencies in Eastern Europe. (In an uncollected poem, 'From the Translation Conference', Porter continues his satire: 'The Guardian poetry critic / tells us that the West has lost its will to live / and recommends the epodes of a Montenegrin shepherd'. The extract given of the fictitious poem is, perhaps, a parody of Miłosz. The critic, incidentally, would have been Martin Dodsworth.)⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ To quote the sentence in full: 'One feels behind each of these poets the consciousness of a people'. Hughes is not suggesting that the Eastern European poets all speak for a single, bloc nationality!

⁴¹⁶ Peter Porter, 'From the Translation Conference', *Times Literary Supplement* 4255 (19 October 1984), p. 1193. The parodied epode runs, in part, 'The lights of life still burn in the high hills / And men arrive with litters after long journeying. / Words also will be found in the stars and old

Is English poetry's 'Eastern European context', then, solely an artefact of the market, a publishing bubble? This suggestion is certainly not unreasonable. A study which treated it as such, perhaps conducted along the lines of Sue Bradley's *The British Book Trade: An Oral History*, would be valuable.⁴¹⁷ A study of this sort would deal with these poets in terms of publication, reception, commissions and newspaper coverage; it would chart the rise and fall of Eastern European poetry in translation through sales figures, and its central methodology would be interviews with translators and publishers. The introductory chapter of this thesis offers an overview of the publication history of these translations, but only in the broadest terms, and there is much potentially fruitful work in this area still to be carried out.

This thesis has taken an alternative approach. Rather than attempting a reductive characterisation of all Eastern European poetry ('luminous', 'terse', 'ironic'), or treating its explosion into English as an episode of publishing history alone, a number of case studies have been offered. Taken as a whole, these case studies offer some points of contact with various larger tendencies in English poetry since 1950. These points of contact make up what I mean by 'the Eastern European context of English poetry'. The word *context*, indeed, has the Latin root *contexere*, 'to weave together': this Conclusion will bring together the threads which have been running through the previous chapters.

The first of these threads concerns the curious redefinition of translation throughout this period. This was not confined to translations of the poets of Eastern Europe. Arguably, it was connected (at least to some extent) with the emergence of 'translation studies' as a separate discipline. James Womack notes a tendency among those writing after Ferdinand de Saussure, and especially those writing after Lawrence Venuti, to 'view[...] translation as a metaphor which can be extended practically indefinitely, without acknowledging that spreading one word so thinly can be damaging to its meaning'.⁴¹⁸ Adherents to this over-extended metaphor, Womack notes, commit the etymological fallacy of confusing *translation* with (its close relative) *transference*. Many texts are falsely

men / Count them, falling into darkness. Beyond dreams / Love's words are harried by the heaviness of life.'

⁴¹⁷ Sue Bradley, *The British Book Trade: An Oral History* (London: British Library Publishing Division, 2010).

⁴¹⁸ James Womack, 'What translation really means', *Areté* 13 (2003), p. 108.

described as translations, when better words exist to describe their relationship with their source material (for instance, adaptations, pastiches, imitations). Willis Barnstone writes, in a representative passage, of how

...every perceived metamorphosis of a word or phrase within or between languages, every decipherment and interpretation of a text, every role by each actor in the cast, every adaptation of a script by a director of opera, film, theater, ballet, pantomime, indeed every perception of movement and change, in the street or on our tongues, on the page or in our ears, leads us directly to the art and activity of translation.⁴¹⁹

Similar passages could be found in George Steiner (especially his introduction to the *Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*), Lawrence Venuti and many others. These over-broad conceptions of translation as an activity partially arise from a loss of faith in the possibility of any standards of accuracy or fidelity whatsoever in translated poetry (a strange idea which is at least partially attributable to Walter Benjamin's seminal essays 'On Language as Such and On the Language of Man' and 'The Task of the Translator', although these are not mentioned by Womack).⁴²⁰

This radical undermining of the theoretical basis for translation paradoxically coincided with an especially fertile period for English translation in practice. It also led to a wave of new and rediscovered translation techniques or strategies, the most important of which for our purposes were 'versioning', and translating through literals (in which a literal crib of the poem created by a second person was used by the 'translator' as the framework of the poem in English). Although Robert Lowell titled his book of poetic 'versions' *Imitations*, the technique and the ideas underpinning it were very different from, say, Pope's *Imitations of Horace*. 'I have been almost as free as the authors themselves in finding ways to make them [e.g. the original poems] ring right for me', Lowell

⁴¹⁹ Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 19.

⁴²⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p. 26-45; Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and On the Language of Man', *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), p. 314-332.

writes in the introduction to that volume.⁴²¹ His imitations are attempted recreations, to be judged as successful or not by their ‘ring[ing] right’; Pope’s are attempted emulations, to be judged by their access to Horace’s moral seriousness and purpose.⁴²² Dryden, who made imitation of Pope’s sort the third category in his taxonomy of translation types, had warned that ‘imitation of an author is the most advantageous way for a translator to show himself, but the greatest wrong which can be done to the memory and reputation of the dead’. In the twentieth century, for the first time, these techniques were being applied to living poets rather than classical authors.⁴²³

Clive Wilmer categorises both ‘versioning’ and translation through literals as ‘indirect translations’, and indeed both had a similar effect: they allowed poets to translate who were not bilingual, and who indeed may have known nothing or next to nothing about the languages they were translating from.⁴²⁴ (‘Versioning’ allows this by giving a poet leeway to work from pre-existing translations rather than the original. Some poets are more scrupulous about this than others; Don Paterson, for instance, writes in the essay accompanying his version of Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* of ‘triangulat[ing] from multiple cribs, for fear of missing anything’.)⁴²⁵ This development was crucial for the emergence of Eastern European poetry in English. Unlike French, German, Italian and the classical languages, the Eastern European languages were never taught in schools, and competent translators, let alone outstanding ones, were almost nonexistent. (Hence the dominance in this field through the nineteenth century of the semi-fraudulent John Bowring: see Introduction, page 3.)

⁴²¹ Included in *Collected Poems*, Robert Lowell (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 196. Incidentally, some of the versions in *Imitations* were also produced using literal intermediaries; Lowell traced the practice back to Boris Pasternak.

⁴²² The distinction is well captured in John Denham’s elegy for Abraham Cowley: ‘And when he would like them [e.g., Horace and Virgil] appear / Their Garb, but not their Cloaths, did wear’. Quoted in Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1952), p. 56.

⁴²³ John Dryden, Preface to Ovid’s *Epistles*, quoted in Douglas Robinson, ‘The Limits of Translation’, *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 17.

⁴²⁴ Clive Wilmer, ‘Two Modes of Translation: The Direct and the Indirect’, *PN Review* 26 / 4 (2000), p. 36.

⁴²⁵ Don Paterson, ‘Appendix: Fourteen Notes on the Version’, afterword to *Orpheus* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 82.

The practice of translating from literals was also a spur for the development of original poetry in English, perhaps best observed in the case of Ted Hughes. The first chapter of this thesis has examined in detail how the translations he made of János Pilinszky's poetry, using literal cribs provided by János Csokits, may well have provoked significant changes in his own poetic practice, particularly in his handling of metaphor and the development of a nihilism which became increasingly embedded. As Hughes noted in a *Modern Poetry in Translation* editorial, the 'struggling dumbness of word-for-word versions is what makes our imaginations jump'.⁴²⁶ It was this 'struggling dumbness' that would go on to become a crucial part of his own poetry, wrought into (as he puts it in *Gaudete*) 'speech // [...] eking and deferring'.⁴²⁷

Hughes' translations of Pilinszky also provide us with something extremely unusual: sustained critical access to the process of composition itself. As Pound notes, 'the meaning of the poem to be translated can not "wobble"', and while this is presented as advice for young poets it is equally valid as a hint for critics.⁴²⁸ If the translation is indeed a poem in and of itself, we can observe the text which must stand as the inspiration or concrete experience behind it. (This is less true of drafts or manuscripts, although they open critical possibilities of the same sort. The poem's imaginative conception may be altered substantially during composition, and the thought processes responsible for these alterations will be hard to reconstruct.⁴²⁹ But the poem being translated cannot 'wobble'.) This is especially important in the case of a writer such as Hughes, whose compositional practice is easily romanticised or distorted. Michael Schmidt has described Hughes' practice as 'working out emotions and impulses through image and complex cadence'.⁴³⁰ Examining the alterations he made to literal

⁴²⁶ Ted Hughes, *Modern Poetry in Translation: 1983, An Annual Survey* (Carcenet: Manchester, 1983), quoted in Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (eds.), *Translation: Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2006), p. 522.

⁴²⁷ Ted Hughes, '[The Epilogue Poems]', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 357.

⁴²⁸ Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. and intro. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 6.

⁴²⁹ Though not impossible, as demonstrated in Hughes' magnificent reconstruction of the composition of a poem by Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of "Sheep in Fog"', *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 191-211.

⁴³⁰ Michael Schmidt, 'Editorial', *PN Review* 25 / 3 (1999), p. 1.

versions of poems provided by Csokits and Antonela Glavinić, it is possible to witness this ‘working out’ as if we were reading the poems over his shoulder.

Although Hughes left a substantial number of translations, not all of which were published in his lifetime, it would be difficult to argue that translation as a practice was central to his work. Charles Simic, on the other hand, has translated and published full collections from thirteen poets writing in three languages, alongside several anthologies of translated poems.⁴³¹ As with Hughes, whose translations Daniel Weissbort described as ‘unmistakeably Hughesian’, Simic’s translations are often immediately identifiable as his own work.⁴³² In part, this is due to his selection of translated poets. (The anthology Simic co-edited with Mark Strand often feels similarly contiguous with his own poetry.)⁴³³ It is also due to a few characteristics of idiom and syntax common to Simic’s original poetry and his translations, including the use of archaic slang (for instance, the adjective ‘old-timey’, in his translation of Aleksandar Ristović’s ‘Tree’, strikes the typical Simic note, as does ‘scram into your nowhere’ from his translation of Vasko Popa’s ‘Give me back my rags’),⁴³⁴ simple declarative sentences, and an overuse of commas to amplify syntactical pauses or line-breaks. (For example, the final verse of Simic’s own ‘Frightening Toys’: ‘It looked like a serious matter, / Even the rain wanted to hear about it, / So it fell on her eyelashes, / And made them glisten’.)⁴³⁵

These shared features may recall the clumsy attempts towards a general definition of Eastern European poetry excerpted above (‘terse’, ‘sparse’), and this is no coincidence. Simic and Hughes are probably more responsible than any other single individual for the diffusion of Eastern European poetries on their respective sides of the Atlantic, and it is no surprise that it is their personal styles with which this poetry in translation has become associated.

⁴³¹ This prolificacy is not confined to work in translation, however. Simic has published twenty eight full collections (not counting the almost innumerable iterations of his *Selected Poems*, many editions of which contain work unavailable elsewhere), and eight volumes of essays. 2008 alone saw the publication of three separate collections and a memoir.

⁴³² Daniel Weissbort, ‘Introduction’, Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. vii.

⁴³³ Charles Simic and Mark Strand (eds.), *Another Republic: 17 European and South American Writers* (New York: Harper Collins, 1976).

⁴³⁴ Aleksandar Ristović, ‘Tree’, *Devil’s Lunch*, trans. and intro. Charles Simic (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 48. Vasko Popa, ‘Give me back my rags’, *Homage to the Lame Wolf*, trans. and intro. Charles Simic (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College Press, 1987), p. 64.

⁴³⁵ Charles Simic, ‘Frightening Toys’, *Selected Poems 1963-2003* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 80.

As has been established in the third chapter of this thesis, this association has been contaminated by overuse or misuse of the term ‘surrealism’. This error hinges on the conflation of two strands I have termed, following Durrell, ‘folk’ surrealism and ‘movement’ Surrealism: that is, an over-broad definition which describes as surrealist any production of art in which everyday rules of causation are suspended. This definition can encompass all literature, apart from the most strictly mimetic, and as such is valueless. In ‘folk’ surrealism, causation is not discarded but altered (so, for instance, a fairytale villain’s ugliness can be caused by their wickedness), and the audience’s appreciation of the work is dependent on their understanding the variant laws of causation which underpin it; in ‘movement’ Surrealism, causation is either abandoned altogether or obscured (for instance, through the use of dream material). Simic, Popa and Ristović are all surrealist in the former sense, and are not surrealist at all in the latter. (This is not, however, true for Eastern European poets more widely, despite the claims of Hughes in the passage quoted above. Holub’s apparent ‘folk’ surrealism resolves simply enough into allegory, while Miłosz and Tadeusz Różewicz are both rigorously realist.) Only once these misidentifications have been cleared will we be able to properly assess the impact of Simic as poet and translator.

The second thread running through many of the works examined in this thesis is that of the pseudo-translation, a literary form which can only achieve prevalence during a period in which a substantial number of genuine works in translation are being published. Two notable examples are Richard Berengarten’s *In a Time of Drought* and Christopher Reid’s *Katerina Brac*, both of which use different strategies to achieve a similar end: an apparent ‘translation’ with no original. The form has been particularly popular with poets writing, one way or another, in the shadow of Eastern Europe.⁴³⁶

What is the appeal of this form? As we have seen in our discussion of Tom Paulin’s ‘Where Art is a Midwife’, another important pseudo-translation, it can enable Anglophone poets to use (what they consider) typically Eastern European modes, techniques or strategies to confront experiences about which

⁴³⁶ Although not exclusively. The Canadian poet David Solway, for instance, has published three full collections of pseudo-translations, as ‘Andreas Karavis’, ‘Nesmine Rifat’ and ‘Rhys Savarin’. Don Paterson and Michael Donaghy have also both experimented with the form, and while Kent Johnson’s ‘Araki Yasusada’ poems depend on the reader being taken in (and so should rather be categorised as a hoax), they do exploit certain conventions of translations to produce their dubious effects.

genuine Eastern European poets would have been obliged to remain silent. Paulin is able to address the inherently ticklish contradictions of censorship and the education of censors with a subtle, probing irony characteristic of Zbigniew Herbert. (The poem seems to have been sparked by a conversation with a Polish poet at a literature festival.) Elsewhere, in ‘From the Frontier of Writing’ and ‘From the Canton of Expectation’, Seamus Heaney is able to draw a parallel between Irish and Eastern European experiences of writing under occupation by a foreign power, a parallel which might have been felt, but could not be made explicit, by a poet writing in a Soviet satellite state.

Katerina Brac and *In a Time of Drought* use the form slightly differently, in a way more concerned with identity and its mediation through translation itself. Patrick McGuinness, whose ‘City of Lost Walks’ will shortly be examined more thoroughly, has described the afterlife of his own alter-ego, the dissident Romanian poet Liviu Campanu: ‘I think about him quite a lot, and we are still quite entwined’.⁴³⁷ This ‘entwining’ was similarly crucial for the composition of *Katerina Brac* (‘it hit me like the discovery of a new continent. Suddenly, Katerina came into existence. It's her voice that I heard uninterruptedly for about a month’).⁴³⁸ The poetic style and subject matter of Brac and Reid were remarkably similar; the assumption of the persona, as we have seen, allowed Reid to examine how his own voice changed as it was mediated through alternative political concerns. The proper theme of *Katerina Brac* is the extent to which contextual information can alter our reading of a poem, and the best poems in the book experiment engagingly with tricks of connotation dependent on the Eastern European associations made by an English reader.

Similarly, the creation of a hybrid Anglo-Serbian folklore and its associated ritual incantation that makes up *In a Time of Drought* allowed Richard Berengarten to probe seriously into the question of a translator’s responsibility to his or her material. We have examined how Berengarten confronts the dichotomy of translation proposed by Schleirmacher, in which the translator either ‘leaves the author in peace [...] and mov[es] the reader towards him; or he leaves the

⁴³⁷ Patrick McGuinness, personal communication, 29 March 2013.

⁴³⁸ Elizabeth Frost, ‘Found in translation: an interview with Christopher Reid’, *Electronic Poetry Review* 6 (2003), last accessed 3 June 2013, <<http://www.epoetry.org/issues/issue6/text/prose/reid.htm>>.

reader in peace [...] and moves the author towards him'.⁴³⁹ Indeed, it has been suggested that the whole of *In a Time of Drought* can be read productively as a sequence of variations on these two themes, and their reproduction on the larger scale of folklore; different devices are used to render particular Slavic folkloric tropes as strangely domesticated, and more familiar English tropes as unerringly foreign and alien. (This idea is, of course, familiar from Hughes' translation practice, as discussed earlier in this chapter. It is perhaps unsurprising that Francis Jones, in a long discussion of Berengarten's Slavic sources, has compared the work of the two poets.)⁴⁴⁰

A pseudo-translation makes this sort of exploration possible by deferring the question of responsibility. (Since there is no original, there is no original author for the 'translator' to be answerable to.) As such, it can be seen as a strategy of evasion, a means of bypassing the responsibilities of translation while simultaneously avoiding the responsibilities of the poet. It is perhaps to avoid such a charge that the pseudo-translations of Reid, Berengarten and (as we shall see) McGuinness adhere so closely to the poets' more familiar styles.

This question of responsibility embroils us in the third contextual thread I will analyse in this conclusion: the appropriate response of poetry to atrocity, or in the words of Andrew Motion, how the poet can 'perform acts of the imagination when faced with barbarism'.⁴⁴¹ This is arguably the most important point of contention among poets writing in English in the second half of the twentieth century, in the same way that loss of faith and confrontation of an apparently collapsing cultural inheritance formed a nexus of poetic contention in the century's first half. To some degree, these questions inform the work of almost every important poet since 1950; and just as Larkin's rejection of the principles of modernism was in itself a stance in that debate, those poets who have evaded or not confronted these questions are themselves taking a position.

⁴³⁹ Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'On the different methods of translating', trans. André Lefevre, *Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinnsson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 207.

⁴⁴⁰ Francis Jones, 'In a Balkan Light: Richard Berengarten and the South Slav Cultural Space', *The Salt Companion to Richard Berengarten*, ed. Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield (Cambridge: Salt, 2011), p. 289.

⁴⁴¹ Andrew Motion, 'Afterword', Michael Hollins and Paul Keegan (eds.), *101 Poems Against War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 137.

In the simplest terms, then, the first half of the twentieth century was marked by a debate concerning poets' responsibility towards their cultural tradition; the second half saw poets debate their responsibility towards the civic society in which they were writing. Phrased in this way, the point in question was not a new one; the quarrel could be traced back at least as far as Plato. But the positions taken by both sides were very different to those maintained in the past, with one side claiming that the Holocaust and other atrocities of the twentieth century had radically altered the terms of the debate, and the other affirming that no such realignment was necessary.

This debate was further complicated by the fact that many English poets had no direct experience of the atrocities they were being forced to come to terms with. The horrors of concentration camps, repression, starvation and totalitarian governments had been largely experienced secondhand. English poets had been left in a peculiar position: while many believed that a poetry which ignored these horrors was valueless or obscene, it could only be assimilated firsthand in languages other than English. Translation was the obvious solution to this problem, and it is no surprise that so much poetry from the second half of the twentieth century which takes cognisance of these difficulties is so heavily influenced by material in translation. As Cinzia Mozzato notes, 'Eastern European poets could claim higher authority on history than their Western counterparts and became thus instrumental to debates which overcame the national and regional boundaries of the British intellectual scene'.⁴⁴² Eastern European authors, *contra* Donald Davie, offered more to English language writers than a chance to 'live out, vicariously, the experiences they were spared or cheated of'.⁴⁴³ Rather, they provided potential models or guides, Virgils through the Inferno of the twentieth century.

Ken Smith's seminal *Fox Running* offers one example of how these guides were followed. While Smith's models in terms of prosody and form may be more immediately apparent (indeed, a reaction against these models and influences, especially the Beats but also Ed Dorn, Barry MacSweeney and others, may partially account for the poem's relative critical neglect), the influence of

⁴⁴² Cinzia Mozzato, *Representations of Central and Eastern Europe in Contemporary British Poetry*, Ph.D. thesis (University of Padua, 2009), p. 88.

⁴⁴³ Donald Davie, 'Their Witness', *London Review of Books* 14 / 4 (27 February 1992), p. 3.

Eastern European authors in translation, especially Zbigniew Herbert, is constantly discernable in Smith's handling of content and idiom. It is hardly surprising that these influences are most pronounced when the historical matter being dealt with is at its heaviest, as in the poem's magnificent finale which sees Fox abandon his 'feints' and begin to 'speak [...] from the lengthening floor / of his blood his conviction'.⁴⁴⁴ The temperament of these two authors is obviously very different (and Smith's intermittent outbursts of fury would have been off-limits to Herbert in any case); but the Herbert's work, through the translations of John and Bogdana Carpenter, is consistently echoed and shadowed by Smith. Smith elsewhere borrows Herbert's poetic persona, Pan Cogito (Mr Cogito), for his own prose poem 'Cogito at the British Museum', a work which gestures ambivalently towards the similarities between Cogito and Smith's Fox.⁴⁴⁵

Fox Running's most important borrowing from the Eastern Europeans, however, was its use of the Trickster archetype, which offered Smith and many poets writing under totalitarianism a ready-made mythology in which poets and poetry could play a crucial, disruptive role. This archetype might appear to be the direct opposite of the Sage Fool, the naïve truth-teller who notices what others cannot, as embodied in Pan Cogito. In fact, the two archetypes and the poetic strategies arising from adopting them as models for poetry are fundamentally similar: both, as I have argued in Chapter Five, are concerned with exposing the limits of power and the sham which allows polite society to pretend ignorance of the abuse of this power. Both, in the words of Enid Welsford, are "all-licensed critics".⁴⁴⁶

Ciaran Carson's relations with Eastern European poetry in translation are less connected with a specific poet, although his adoption of extremely short lines, minimal punctuation and sparse syntax in *Breaking News* and some subsequent collections are surely indebted to Tadeusz Różewicz. To Carson, Eastern Europe, especially the German Democratic Republic, offers a series of parallels and points of contact with the Troubles. His poems play with the connotative charge of Eastern European motifs, a charge acquired as much

⁴⁴⁴ Ken Smith, *Fox Running, The Poet Reclining: Selected Poems 1962-1980* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1982), p. 167, p. 169.

⁴⁴⁵ Ken Smith, 'Cogito at the British Museum', *A Book of Chinese Whispers* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1987), p. 148-9.

⁴⁴⁶ *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*, Enid Welsford (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 254.

through the handling of these themes in spy fiction and cinema as through poetry. This tendency in his poetry reaches its zenith in his 2008 collection *For All We Know*, arguably Carson's masterpiece. Here, through a central idea of 'truth in reformulation' (itself probably borrowed from the 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen*), the poet's fascination with the Eastern European motifs mentioned above is given a superstructure large enough for the parallels to resonate spectacularly throughout. Carson's ideas about poetic responsibility in the face of atrocity are stated most plainly in the passage from 'Peace', which reformulates a poem from Paul Celan, itself a reformulation of an earlier passage by Brecht. 'What kinds of times are these, you'd say / when a conversation is deemed a crime because it includes so much that is said?', Carson writes; the fact that this is itself a quotation of a quotation provides a synechdoche of the entire debate discussed above. At the crucial point in his poem, Carson turns to translation and the 'firsthand account', and in doing so transforms this account.⁴⁴⁷

The substantial body of English language poems provoked by the Bosnian war of 1992-1995 provides further examples of engagement with these questions, some more successful than others. Ruth Padel's 'The Desire Paths of Sarajevo' takes a narrative approach, wisely foregrounding the erotic and tender elements of the story and letting the atrocities play out, as it were, off-screen. In the fourth section, the poem enlarges into a discussion of the difficulties of formulating an appropriate response from a distance, and the problems of a genuine empathy mediated through newspaper accounts and television reports. This discussion, however, is frustratingly inconclusive: Padel's only point of contact with her protagonist is through a shared erotic experience, and where she forces parallels the effect is often unconvincing (two characters, perhaps the narrator's neighbours, argue 'over nappies / unavailable in Sarajevo').⁴⁴⁸ Other poems in *Klaonica*, where 'The Desire Paths of Sarajevo' is anthologised, demonstrate smaller-scale strategies which are occasionally more successful, as in Christopher Middleton's epigrammatic 'The Warlords' or Peter Reading's 'Bosnian'. These stake out far smaller territories than those claimed by Padel;

⁴⁴⁷ Of course, Carson *does* have firsthand experience of at least some of the extreme political situations he describes: police brutality, surveillance, bisected cities etc.. But the parallel between Ireland and Eastern Europe was always an exaggerated one, and this section of *For All We Know* represents, I would suggest, an acknowledgement of that exaggeration.

⁴⁴⁸ Ruth Padel, 'Desire Paths of Sarajevo', Ken Smith and Judi Benson (eds.), *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993), p. 126.

their slightness is, perhaps, a point in their favour, a reluctance to over-claim for an empathetic response which would otherwise risk coming off as forced or inauthentic.

David Harsent's sequence 'Legion' was a response to Bosnia both sustained, like Padel's, and essentially imagistic, like Reading's. There is no overarching narrative; war is presented as a series of fragments or snapshots, occasionally broken with monologues (like the astonishing 'Sniper'). The sequence's central technique is the catalogue, on which, as we have seen, many individual poems offer innovative variations. These poems engage at length with firsthand accounts of atrocity, notably Goran Simić's *The Sorrow of Sarajevo*, which Harsent had translated during the conflict, as part of his work on the libretto for Nigel Osborne's *Sarajevo* (1994). There are many close parallels between this translation and Harsent's own sequence, ranging from idiomatic tropes, to techniques (the catalogue and its manipulations are common to both poets), to particular incidents: several gruesome accounts in 'Legion' seem to have their original in *The Sorrow of Sarajevo*. But Harsent mediates his response to Simić through a number of English poets (particularly Hughes, Keith Douglas and Louis MacNeice), and at times the reader may suspect that the responsibilities of the poetry towards the victims (however contested these responsibilities may be) has been sacrificed for poetic expediency. At its best, the sequence can turn back on itself, engaging with the morality of its own poetic strategies. 'Sniper', as we have seen, complicates the relentless cataloguing by implying a correspondence between the reductions inherent in the technique and the sniper's own amorally curtailed perspective. At its worst, the sequence feels exploitative of both Simić's originals and the victims it sets out to chronicle and ventriloquise: the refusal to name the country in which the conflict is taking place feels, at times, like an abdication of responsibility. It is hard to imagine that cartoonish images like the 'shrapnel-wound pursing its lips and blowing a bubble' (from 'Snapshots') would have found a place in a sequence describing a particular atrocity, rather than a generalised one.

There have always been objections to poetry which responds to or records atrocity in ways like those described above. W.H. Auden, for instance, wrote about the separate, conflicting duties of the poet and historian:

It is necessary that we know about the evil in the world – about past evil so that we may know what man is capable of and be on the watch for it in ourselves, and about present evil so that we may take political action to eradicate it. This knowledge is one of the duties of the Historian to impart. But the Poet cannot get into this business without defiling himself and his audience. To write a play (that is, to construct a secondary world) about Auschwitz, for example, is wicked; author and audience may try to pretend that they are morally horrified, but in fact they are passing an entertaining evening together in the aesthetic enjoyment of horrors.⁴⁴⁹

This offers another angle of approach to the debate set out in the previous chapter between Donald Davie and Daniel Weissbort. (It is illuminating, too, to the analysis of Harsent; my objection to the image of the shrapnel wound in ‘Legion’ is that the aesthetic enjoyment arising from Harsent’s consummate proficiency with image, connotation and metre outweighs any sense of the line as a considered moral statement. This objection obviously entails a number of wider claims about the status of poetry, some of which have been discussed in the previous chapter and some of which I will consider here.) Davie’s claim, as we have seen, concerns the supposed misuse of the word ‘witness’ as a description of Eastern European poetry. His own use of the word in essays on Miłosz and Pasternak is not as self-contradictory as we might imagine; he is keen to reserve for the word a sacred sense (as in ‘Christ’s witness’, a doctrine extrapolated from John 1:1-3),⁴⁵⁰ while at the same time decrying the use of poetry as mere ‘prose reportage’ of atrocity. A sympathetic restatement of his position would be that he is concerned about the exploitation of Eastern European poets as mere firsthand accounts, ‘witnesses’ to atrocities which English language poets can subsequently retell and embellish. Furthermore, he views the claim given above – that the Holocaust and other atrocities of the twentieth century fundamentally altered the character of the relation between the poet and the public – as both dangerous and dishonest, dangerous because it can be used as ‘moral blackmail’ against certain styles of writing, dishonest because it presupposes a stable relationship between poet and public prior to the Holocaust which in fact did not exist. (This emphasis on continuity over radical change is a consistent feature of

⁴⁴⁹ W.H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 74-5.

⁴⁵⁰ ‘That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life [...] That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us.’ (KJV)

Davie's criticism. See, for instance, his *Ezra Pound*, which presents Pound as an 'Edwardian man of letters' rather than a radical break with the English tradition.)⁴⁵¹

How we respond to this argument will determine more than just our attitude towards many of the poets discussed in this thesis. The appropriate response of art to atrocity has been, as we have seen, the vital literary debate in the second half of the twentieth century. I have shown that some of Davie's own poems undercut or (at any rate) complicate the line of argument taken in his review of Weissbort's *The Poetry of Survival*. I have also shown that some of his arguments are confused or miss the mark, especially his ungenerous charge that Weissbort and Hughes undertook their translation of Eastern European poets as a deliberate 'career-ploy'.

But Davie's central contention, such as I identify it (that the relationship between the poet and their public does not need to be revised in the light of the Holocaust), is unassailable by argument, being at root a matter of faith. Davie's early poem 'Rejoinder to a Critic' contemplates the opposing point of view:

"Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?"
 And recent history answers: half Japan!
 Not love, but hate? Well, both are versions of
 The "feeling" that you dare me to...Be dumb!
 Appear concerned only to make it scan!
 How dare we now be anything but numb?⁴⁵²

Our interpretation turns on how we read the final question: bluntly rhetorical, or straining towards a response? Davie himself seems to have overcome the moment of doubt this poem represents; many of the poets discussed in this thesis were unable to do so. (It is perhaps worth noting that 'numb' was to become one of Hughes' favourite adjectives: see, for instance, the late collection *Earth-numb*.)

To these three points of contact – new methods of translation, the pseudo-translation, and the debate over the appropriate response to atrocity causing a

⁴⁵¹ Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound*, Penguin Modern Masters (New York: Penguin, 1976). This is a simplification of Davie's argument. Davie's emphasis throughout, however, is on Pound's work considered as part of a living tradition; not a break from that tradition.

⁴⁵² Donald Davie. 'Rejoinder to a Critic', *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 67.

turn towards translation – others could be added. The simultaneous turn towards mythological frameworks for the treatment of political material in Hughes, Berengarten and Smith, for instance, is no coincidence. They found sanction in the use of these strategies from Eastern European poets writing under dictatorships, for whom they were a method of evading censorship and disguising subversive criticism. (In the words of Marina Warner, ‘Fabulist metaphors were hard to censor’.)⁴⁵³ But these original three points of contact will serve as our anchors for our final close reading: Patrick McGuinness’s ‘City of Lost Walks’, a sequence which embodies all the elements we have been discussing, and so will serve as a suitable means of drawing together the threads and concluding.⁴⁵⁴

‘City of Lost Walks’ is a pseudo-translation, claiming to be from the Romanian of ‘Liviu Campanu’. A substantial biography is given for Campanu, far longer than the brief blurb Reid offers for *Katerina Brac*, or the even shorter biographical material attached to Colette Bryce’s *The Observations of Alexandr Svetlov*. Campanu is also a felt presence in McGuinness’s semi-autobiographical novel set in Bucharest around the time of the Ceauseşcu regime’s collapse, *The Last Hundred Days*.⁴⁵⁵ McGuinness was originally planning to introduce Campanu as a minor character in the novel, ‘with a view to printing [the poems] in full as part of a subplot (my narrator was at one point considering translating him, I recall)’.⁴⁵⁶ In the end, feeling the novel was ‘overpeopled with walk-on and walk-through characters’, McGuinness removed Campanu, and ‘The City of Lost Walks’ became the project of Leo O’Heix: a book begun as a commissioned guidebook for a travel company, which finishes as an ‘urban elegy, a memorial to a place gone or going at every cobble and cornice’ (McGuinness: *LHD*, p. 46). The book becomes literalised in Leo’s flat, which fills up as the novel continues with valuable salvage from the buildings being destroyed, ‘like a backwards portrait of Dorian Gray: as the place itself disappeared around us, so Leo’s apartment grew in compressed splendour’ (McGuinness: *LHD*, p. 49).

⁴⁵³ Marina Warner, ‘Witchiness’, *London Review of Books* 31 / 16 (27 August 2009).

⁴⁵⁴ Patrick McGuinness, ‘City of Lost Walks’, *Jilted City* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010), pp. 60–70. Hereafter McGuinness: CLW.

⁴⁵⁵ Patrick McGuinness, *The Last Hundred Days* (Bridgend: Seren, 2011). Hereafter McGuinness: *LHD*.

⁴⁵⁶ Patrick McGuinness, personal communication, 29 March 2013.

‘City of Lost Walks’ is a pseudo-translation, then, but a complicated one. It seems cheerily aware of these complications, engagingly flagging and mocking them in part III of the sequence’s first poem, ‘The Ovid Complex’:

I’m not adapting. But what’s worse
 is that I’m getting used to it: I’m a bad version
 from the classics, Ovid in translationese
 jazzed up with radio and TV
 (albeit black and white and with just one channel),
 unable to hit the right note without feeling
 I’m borrowing from someone else’s story.

(McGuinness: CLW, p. 64)

Much of what has been discussed in this Conclusion and elsewhere is here in microcosm. There is the same vocabulary of new translation types, reworked to fit Campanu’s situation (exiled to Constanța after falling out of favour with the Ceauseșcu government): ‘adapting’, ‘version’, ‘translationese’. These are the most explicit manifestations of what has been a winking subtext throughout the poem: ‘We all carry our provinces around inside us, / but there’s no such thing as a portable metropolis’, Campanu writes earlier (McGuinness: CLW, p. 63). The earlier examination in this Conclusion of late twentieth century writers turning to material in translation in order to engage with atrocities could be summed up in the quoted excerpt’s final lines: ‘unable to hit the right note without feeling / I’m borrowing from someone else’s story’. But there is an extra level of irony here: the story McGuinness / Campanu is borrowing from is, of course, his own. The lines are a fine demonstration of the shifting ambiguities and effects that pseudo-translation is, at its best, able to achieve.

McGuinness was a firsthand witness of much of what is described in *The Last Hundred Days*, and the ‘precarious tedium’ which characterises the sequence (in the words of Campanu’s mock biography) is plainly a record of something authentically experienced (McGuinness: CLW, p. 61). Like Reid and Brac, McGuinness and Campanu share preoccupations and style: ‘Scenarios for Lovers and Magnets’, one of the shorter Campanu poems, would have fitted in unnoticeably among the poems in McGuinness’s own voice (McGuinness: CLW,

p. 67). What Campanu imparts is an extra set of connotations, used in this poem (as in *Katerina Brac*) to create an air of subtle menace around a poem's margins: iron filings 'falling back at last / when one of them drifts out of range / or someone, something, cuts the current'. That 'someone, something' in the work of an English poet would surely be read as an oblique reference to circumstance or fate; mediated through Campanu, it becomes the dangerously fallible god of totalitarianism which has plunged Campanu into exile, and the identification of the iron filings with the 'lovers' becomes pertinent and moving.

This is one example of a technique we have witnessed throughout the poetry examined in this thesis: the creation of an Eastern European context able to 'charge' words with connotation. Sean O'Brien complains that the 'encoded condition of poetry under dictatorship' lends this process 'an unearned sense of gravity'.⁴⁵⁷ Perhaps so; but it is the same mechanism as that by which the poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were able to charge words with religious connotations. A poem which exploits these connotations does not have to maintain a working allegory between the straightforward context and what is being connoted (as, for instance, Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew' does not). In other words, this 'encoding' is valuable not just to those poets writing under dictatorships; it rather provides an extra layer of meaning and ambiguity, something caught out of the corner of one's eye, and as long as separate registers of language exist poets will be able to exploit these effects. (O'Brien might argue that the vision of Eastern Europe embodied in that part of the English register which can connote in this way is a reductive one, which is surely true. But while this may make the effect less subtle, it is hard to see what it has to do with it being 'unearned'.)

Another preoccupation of this thesis has been the creation, by English authors, of poems in a real or invented 'Eastern European style' that actual Eastern European poets could not have written. 'Where Art is a Midwife' is one such poem; so is Heaney's 'On the Frontier of Writing', and much of *Katerina Brac*. Campanu's biography offers an account of how his own poems of this sort (that is, those poems which would have been unpublishable under Ceaușescu) come to be written: they are discovered in 'a file of poems and notes that was

⁴⁵⁷ Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1997), p. 229.

found after his death'. Most obviously, there is the sequence within a sequence also called 'City of Lost Walks', supposedly written in 1985, especially the section entitled 'In the Natural History Museum' (McGuinness: CLW, p. 68-69). Both tender and hilarious, the sequence is a sustained meditation on surveillance culture and the secret police (once again it is worth noting that McGuinness had firsthand experience of this culture):

The Museum of Natural History was our only refuge from all that –
we spent hours there in the old days, though only minutes at a time –

*after all, I asked her under my breath, our hands joined
at the knuckles, how can a brachiosaur be political?
Check her police file she answered, her face straight...*

(McGuinness: CLW, p. 68)

The supposedly eternal verities of communism are realised here in geological time, and the effect is sublimely ridiculous. Here, the realistic biographical background McGuinness has created for Campanu pays off: the fact that the poem was written long after the collapse of the regime it describes might otherwise undermine the seriousness of what is at stake. The levity with which Campanu treats both life under totalitarianism (a description of Bucharest, for instance, as a city where 'even the snowflakes / photograph you as they fall': McGuinness CLW, p. 63) and the regime's collapse is perhaps what is most unbelievable about the persona. But this levity is also what is most unique and vital in Campanu.

'City of Lost Walks' is a late embodiment of certain tendencies which arose among a particular subset of English poets following the Second World War. These tendencies were in some way a reflection of the practices and motifs of certain Eastern European poets as they appeared in English translation (particularly writers from Poland, Hungary, former Yugoslavia and former Czechoslovakia). The tendencies were intimately connected not only with translated material, but with the practice of translation itself. I have described these tendencies as an openness to innovative forms of translation, especially translation through intermediaries and the foregrounding of literal versions; an

interest in pseudo-translation and the issues surrounding persona this practice raises; and a concern with the representation of atrocity in poetry and how it could be mediated through translation. ‘A great age of literature’, wrote Pound in 1934, ‘is perhaps always a great age of translation’.⁴⁵⁸ The poets I have considered in this thesis cannot be apprehended thoroughly without consideration of the unprecedented centrality of translation and translated material to the effects they strove towards. The Eastern European context in which I have endeavoured to place them is part of what will make them endure.

⁴⁵⁸ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber 1968), p. 232.

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