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“Sealing Their Two Fates with a Fracture”: Ted Hughes’s
“Pyramus and Thisbe” as an Emblem of
the Paradox of Translation

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

“Sealing Their Two Fates with a Fracture”: Ted Hughes’s
“Pyramus and Thisbe” as an Emblem of
the Paradox of Translation

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This work explores how the 20th century English poet Ted Hughes translates one episode from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (the “Pyramus and Thisbe” myth included in Hughes’s *Tales from Ovid*) to make it an emblem for his notions about translation. In translating “Pyramus and Thisbe,” Hughes removed many of the formal Ovidian elements and amplified the themes of violence and mingling latent in the myth. In doing so, he highlights the concept that communication sometimes necessitates breaking, symbolized primarily by the chink in the wall through which Pyramus and Thisbe whisper to one another. This metaphor for translation corroborates Hughes’s discursive assertions that he favors literalness when translating, and yet contradicts the markedly Hughesian poems his translation work produces.

Keywords: Ted Hughes, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translation

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What was Ted Hughes’s theory of translation? He translated throughout his career—most often from Greek and Latin sources—and capped a lifetime’s work with a late outpouring of major classical translations: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Euripides’ *Alcestis* (both published posthumously in 1999), and, most famously, in the year before his death, a selection of episodes from the *Metamorphoses* called *Tales from Ovid* (1997). What did the poet for whom translation was so important have to say about its theory and practice?

Very little, as it turns out. Beyond a few brief editorial comments in a journal he co-edited, and cursory remarks about translation in introductions to various works of translation by himself and others,¹ Hughes reveals little about his notions of translation theory. But the absence of lengthy discursive statements engaging with questions of translation doesn’t mean Hughes did not produce writing that takes up the topic. Critics and scholars have overlooked one of Hughes’s most important critical insights into the theory and practice of translation: overlooked it because it is embodied in one of his translations from the *Metamorphoses*. My purpose is to argue for the last of the sections in *Tales from Ovid*—the episode of Pyramus and Thisbe—that it is not only a translation from Ovid’s poem, but, in Hughes’s hands, a meditation on the very act of translation—one that aligns with what few comments Hughes has made about the work of translation. Hughes’s idiosyncratic treatment of the poem invites readers to see a particular feature of that episode—a crack in the wall that separates Pyramus and Thisbe, and through which they secretly communicate—as an emblem of a paradox at the heart of translation, and as

¹ Hughes founded and co-edited *Modern Poetry in Translation* and wrote introductions to *Selected Poems by Vasko Popa* translated by Anne Pennington; *Amen* by Yehuda Amichai; János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*; and *Seneca’s Oedipus* adapted by Ted Hughes.

an emblem that reveals a greater paradox between Hughes's theories of translation and his demonstrated practice.

Hughes's insights into the nature of translation are embodied in the changes he makes to Ovid's text as he translates. The three types of changes are (1) stripping down the classical rhetoric; (2) adding violence to the text when it is not in the Latin, or exaggerating it when it is; (3) and adding the concept of union and mingling when it is not in the Latin, or exaggerating it when it is.

The first major alteration Hughes makes to Ovid's text is stripping it of its artful rhetoric. Hughes's translation is notable in part for the way it resists—even contradicts—the stipulation laid down by the greatest of English poet-translators, John Dryden:

The sence of an Authour, generally speaking, is to be Sacred and inviolable. If the Fancy of Ovid be luxuriant, 'tis his Character to be so, and if I retrench it, he is no longer Ovid. It will be replied that he receives advantage by this lopping of his superfluous branches, but I rejoin that a Translator has no such Right. (118-119)

Yet lopping off the superfluous branches is just what Hughes does to Ovid. He strips Ovid's poem of one of its most distinctive features: its elaborate and intricate rhetorical patterns. For example, towards the beginning of the myth, Ovid writes about the lovers' city,

ubi dicitur altam

coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis urbem. (4.57-8)

the lofty city which, it is said, Semiramis circled with brick walls (Miller 183)

The strategic line break after *altam* allows *altam* 'lofty' and *urbem* 'city' to occupy the end position in both lines, which joins the two by placing parallel emphasis on both. By separating *altam* 'lofty' and *urbem* 'city' with the interjected phrase "coctilibus muris cinxisse Semiramis,"

then, these two words enact formally what Semiramis's bricks do for the city: they "wall" in the rest of the phrase, an appropriate construction for a sentence about walls.

Additionally, Ovid constructs this sentence in such a way that readers themselves, as they read the phrase, perform the same action Semiramis's walls perform: they circle. To read the phrase as "the lofty city which, it is said, Semiramis circled with brick walls," for example, the reader's eyes move from *altam* 'lofty' to *urbem* 'city' to *ubi dicitur* 'which, it is said' to *cinxisse Semiramis* 'Semiramis circled' to *coctilibus muris* 'brick walls,' following a sort of circle that mimics Semiramis's walls circling the city. The rhetorical craft of these lines is highly artful, elegant, and civilized, such Ovid is not merely giving details to the story, but demonstrating his skill as a poet which gives him a noticeable presence in reader's experience with the myth.

How does Hughes translate these lines? He reduces them to "the mud-brick city" (230).² He scrapes off the allusion to Semiramis and pares down the civilization of Ovid's construction to a spare phrase—only four short words, all monosyllabic but one. (Not one of Ovid's words in the corresponding section is monosyllabic.) In reducing Ovid's artful construction of the description to merely "mud-brick city," Hughes is lopping off the presence of Ovid.

Hughes also consistently lops off Ovid's chiasms, another "Fancy" of Ovid's rhetoric. One chiasmus reads, "ubi constiterant hinc Thisbe, Pyramus illinc" 'on this side Thisbe, and Pyramus on that' (4.71; Miller 183). The chiastic arrangement mirrors the "chiastic arrangement of the two at the wall" (Anderson 420): Thisbe is on one side of the wall and on one side of the comma, and Pyramus is on the other. The full passage reads,

saepe, ubi constiterant hinc Thisbe, Pyramus illinc,

² The full stanza reads:

Throughout the East men spoke in awe of Thisbe—
A girl who had suddenly bloomed
In Babylon, the mud-brick city. (230)

inque vice fuerat captatus anhelitus oris,

‘invide’ dicebant ‘paries, quid amantibus obstas?’ (4.71-73)

Often, when they had taken their positions, on this side Thisbe, and Pyramus on that, and when each in turn had listened eagerly for the other’s breath, ‘O envious wall,’ they would say, ‘why do you stand between lovers?’ (Miller 183)

This luxuriant rhetoric Hughes strips down to “they”:

Sometimes they slapped the wall, in frustration:

“How can a wall be so jealous!” (231)

Another chiasmus reads, “quique a me morte revelli / heu sola poteris, poteris nec morte revelli” ‘whom death alone had power to part from me, not even death shall have power to part from me’ (4.152-3; Miller 189). This chiasmus does not rely on parallel diction alone (*morte revelli ... poteris* ‘death had power to part’ to *poteris ... morte revelli* ‘death shall have power to part’), but on positive/negative phrasing (*sola poteris* ‘alone had power to’ to *poteris nec* ‘will not be able to’) and tense (from past tense *poteras* ‘was able’ to future tense *poteris* ‘will be able’) as well. While poetically beautiful, the chiasmus also suggests this moment in the narrative is contrived and artfully artificial, again reminding the reader that between them and the experience of the lovers is a poet who is mediating the story.

While Hughes does repeat the word “death” (a sort of nod, perhaps, to Ovid’s repeated use of *morte* ‘death’), he otherwise destroys Ovid’s chiasmus. Hughes writes, “Death has divided us, so it is right / That death should bring us together” (237). Instead of repeating the same verb (as Ovid does with *revelli* ‘parted’), Hughes first uses “divided,” then “bring.” In terms of verb tense, instead of the clear opposites of past tense and future tense (as with *poteras* ‘was able’ and *poteris* ‘will be able’), Hughes uses past (“has divided”) and conditional (“should bring

us”). Were Hughes aiming for fidelity to Ovid’s style, the translation of this phrase would be different.

One of the more complex chiasms comes on the night before the lovers’ elopement. Ovid writes, “*pacta placent; et lux, tarde discedere visa, / praecipitatur aquis, et aquis nox exit ab isdem*” (“They liked the plan, and slow the day seemed to go. But at last the sun went plunging down beneath the waves, and from the same waves the night came up”; 4.91-2; Miller 185). Here, on either half of the chiasmus, *lux* ‘daylight’ and *nox* ‘night,’ *tarde* ‘slow’ and *praecipitatur* ‘rushed down,’ *discedere* ‘depart’ and *exit* ‘depart’ balance each other, with *aquis, et aquis* ‘water, and water’ as the pivot point of the chiasmus. The moment these lines describe is itself a pivot point in the story: it is the moment when the night of planning becomes the day of eloping, when the lovers’ single lives become the lovers’ united lives (or deaths, as is the case). Ovid’s use of a chiasmus here—a rhetorical pivot point—reinforces this plot action, a reinforcement further enriched by Ovid’s use of *cardine* ‘hinge’ in the very next line.

All of these layers of poetic craft Hughes reduces to,

They made their plan

.....

Their sole anxiety was the unrelenting

Glare of the sun in the day, that seemed to have stopped.

But suddenly it was dark. (231-32)

Instead of translating Ovid’s neat alliteration in *pacta placent* ‘agreement pleases’ to a similarly alliterative phrase (something like “their plans please them”), Hughes writes merely, “They made their plan” (231). In terms of content, he delivers the Latin’s most basic sense (the sun is slow in the day, then suddenly it is night) but the intricacy, the elaborate symmetrical responses of its

rhetoric is demolished, and in its place is bluntness, starkness, bareness: “But suddenly it was dark.”

Instead of Ovid’s long, mellifluous clauses, packed with chiasmus and alliteration and artistic finesse, Hughes writes a translation stripped bare of poetic pretense. Earlier, I quoted Dryden, who said that if Ovid is luxuriant, then it is Ovid’s right to be so, and that “lopping of his superfluous branches” is beyond the rights of the translator. It seems here that Hughes would argue otherwise, to the point of lopping off those very Ovidian branches which Dryden so adamantly defends.

The second major alteration that Hughes makes to Ovid is adding violence to the text when it is not in the Latin, or exaggerating it when it is. For example, Ovid’s version does not explain what made the chink in the wall through which the lovers whisper to plan their elopement. Ovid writes only, “*fissus erat tenui rima, quam duxerat olim, / cum fieret, paries domui communis utrique*” (“There was a slender chink in the party-wall of the two houses, which it had at some former time received when it was building”; 4.65-66; Miller 183). Hughes, on the other hand, introduces a violent event—one that in no way appears in Ovid—as an explanation for the chink: an earthquake. He writes,

In the shared wall that divided their houses,

Earth-tremors had opened a fissure. (230)

What is a minor plot detail to Ovid, one he passes over almost dismissively, Hughes accounts for by interpolating a violent natural disaster.

This is not the only addition of violence that Hughes makes to the details of the story. Where Ovid makes no mention of why the parents forbade the lovers’ marriage (“*tempore crevit amor; taedae quoque iure coissent, / sed vetuere patres*” ‘In time love grew, and they would have

been joined in marriage, too, but their parents forbade' [4.60-61; Miller 183]), Hughes adds that it is "for angry reasons, no part of the story" (230). Where Ovid's lovers merely take their places on either side of the wall to listen for each other ("ubi constiterant hinc Thisbe, Pyramus illinc" 'they had taken their positions, on this side Thisbe, and Pyramus on that' [4.71; Miller 183]), Hughes adds that they also "slapped the wall, in frustration" (231). At myth's end, when Ovid's Thisbe implores her parents to lay her and Pyramus together in the same tomb ("quos certus amor, quos hora novissima iunxit, / componi tumulo non invidetis eodem" 'begrudge us not that we, whom faithful love, whom the hour of death has joined, should be laid together in the same tomb' [4.156-57; Miller 189]), Hughes's Thisbe adds a funeral pyre: "Do not separate us. Burn us as we lived / In the one flame" (237). And to the mulberry tree, Ovid's Thisbe says only "signa tene caedis pullosque et luctibus aptos / semper habe fetus" 'keep the marks of our death and always bear your fruit of a dark colour, meet for mourning' (4.160-61; Miller 189), while Hughes's Thisbe suddenly introduces the violent action of crushing:

Remember how we died. Remember us
 By the colour of our blood in your fruit.
 So when men gather your fruit, and crush its ripeness,
 Let them think of our deaths. (237)

Beyond their function as mere additions to plot detail, each of these additions is more violent than the equivalents in Ovid's myth. To Ovid's less-than-worthy-of-explanation masonry mishap, Hughes adds an earthquake; to Ovid's non-mention of the reasoning behind the parents' marriage prohibition, Hughes interposes "angry reasons"; to Ovid's lovers merely situating themselves next to the wall, Hughes introduces slapping the wall. From being buried together to being burned together and from remembering the lovers by the color of the mulberries to

remembering the lovers by crushing the berries, Hughes is not merely interpolating arbitrary details to Ovid's myth; he is interpolating violence.

In addition to adding violence to the text when it is not in the Latin, Hughes also exaggerates the violence that is already in the Latin. In some instances, he does this by using more violent diction in already violent moments—moments that involve tearing, splitting, or severing of some sort. One such instance is in how both authors describe Pyramus's death. Ovid writes:

Ut iacuit resupinus humo, cruor emicat alte,
 Non aliter quam cum vitiato fistula plumbo
Scinditur et tenui stridente foramine longas
Eiaculatur aquas atque ictibus aera rumpit.
 Arborei fetus adspergine caedis in atram
 Vertuntur faciem (*Met* 4.121-26)

As he lay stretched upon the earth the spouting blood leaped high; just as when a pipe has broken at a weak spot in the lead and through the small hissing aperture sends spurting forth long streams of water, cleaving the air with its jets. (Miller 187)

Hughes writes:

When a lead conduit splits, the compressed water
Jets like a fountain.
 His blood shot out in bursts, each burst a heartbeat.
Showering the fruit of the tree— (235)

Though Hughes's description is more concise (four lines to Ovid's six), it also employs more violent verbs than does the Latin. First, Ovid uses *scinditur* 'is cut' (the present passive indicative of *scindō* 'to cut') and *vitiato* 'corrupted' (or as the Loeb translator puts it "broken"—again, a verb in passive form). Hughes instead uses "splits"—an active verb. The passive voice that Ovid uses isn't as strong (or as violent) as Hughes's active voice, so by choosing active diction, Hughes makes this passage more violent than Ovid's.

Hughes similarly chooses more violent verbs for three other verbs in the passage: *eiaculatur* 'to shoot out, discharge,' *emicat* 'to spurt out or up,' and *adspergine* 'the action of sprinkling.' True, to describe the water leaving the pipe, Ovid uses *eiaculatur* 'to shoot out, discharge' and Hughes uses jets ("to shoot prominently forward" ["Jet"])—more or less equivalents in intensity. But though the two may lack grammatical distinction, the punchy monosyllable of "jets" feels more active than the Latin equivalent. Then, to describe Pyramus's blood leaving his body, Ovid uses *emicat* ("to spurt up or out" ["Emico"]) and Hughes uses "shot out." Though "spurt" and "shot" are nearly synonyms, there exists a slight difference—no more than a nuance, really—between the two. While "spurt" does mean "to spring or burst out in a small quantity but with some force" ["Spirt"], "shot" connotes not just "some" force, but the force of a bullet. (Whoever heard of a bullet "spurting" out of a gun?) The connotations embedded in "shot" make Hughes's diction here more violent than Ovid's. Then, to describe the blood hitting the mulberry fruit, Ovid uses *adspergine* ("the action of sprinkling, the scattering [of a liquid] in drops," ["Aspergo"]) and Hughes uses "showering." The difference here? Sprinkling deals with a matter of drops. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of showering, on the other hand, uses words like "copiously" and "abundantly." This is all to say that the blood of Hughes's Pyramus shoots out with more intensity than does Ovid's.

A fifth verb in the Latin passage—*rumpit* ‘to burst’—Hughes seems not to translate. Actually, Hughes does use *rumpit*, except he turns it into a noun, then uses it twice (“in bursts, each burst a heartbeat”), again trumping Ovid’s violence by its double-use. What’s more, using the alarmingly corporeal “heartbeat” is also an intensification of Ovid’s image, as it takes the cliché “broken heart” and makes it literal—a sort of melodramatic hyperbole. In his descriptions of both the broken pipe and Pyramus’s blood-gushings, Hughes adds more violence to Ovid’s myth via more violent diction.

In other instances, rather than substituting more violent words for Ovid’s language, Hughes exaggerates the detail in already-violent moments. For example, when the lioness gets hold of Thisbe’s veil, Ovid writes “*ore cruentato tenues laniavit amictus*” (she “tears it with bloody jaws”; 4.104; Miller 187). Rather straightforward. Ovid’s lioness merely performs an action: she tears. Yes, there is the detail of the blood on the mouth (*ore cruentato*) and the slenderness of the garment (*amictus tenues*), but Ovid is concise. Hughes, however, elaborates the scene with oddly specific detail:

The beast began to play with the veil—
Forepaws tore downwards, jaw ripped upwards
And the veil towelled the blood
From the sodden muzzle, and from the fangs. (234)

Here, Hughes prolongs Ovid’s brief moment of violence by first spending four lines (twenty-eight words) where Ovid spends only one (five words),³ and secondly by deliberating with such meticulous detail: Hughes puts double emphasis on the action of tearing (“tore

³ This is a technique Hughes uses elsewhere as well. In *Alcestis* “he expanded a passing reference to Orpheus, a single sentence in Euripides, to a twenty-seven line recapitulation of the whole story (as he had earlier inserted the story of Prometheus’ release from the torment of the vulture).” (Sagar 19)

downwards...ripped upwards”); he notices the fangs; he describes the delicate veil toweling the blood from the lion’s last kill. Hughes thoroughly describes this violent moment, down to which direction the forepaws and the jaw tore.

Just as Hughes highlights the violence in his translation, he also develops the concept of union or mingling as an important theme in the myth, which is the third change he makes to Ovid’s text. He does this in the same way he adds violence: by interpolating the concept of union or mingling when it is not in the Latin, or by exaggerating it when it is. In some places, he does this simply by adding the word “mingle.” For instance, Ovid’s Pyramus and Thisbe address the wall that separates them by saying, “nec sumus ingrati: tibi nos debere fatemur, / quod datus est verbis ad amicas transitus auris” (“But we are not ungrateful. We owe it to you, we admit, that a passage is allowed by which our words may go through to loving ears”; 4.76-77; Miller 185). To Ovid’s couple, the chink is a passageway only. Hughes’s couple, though, sees it as an opportunity for mingling:

O wall, we are grateful. Nowhere in the world
 But in this tiny crack may our great loves,
 Invisibly to us, meet and mingle. (231)

By adding the word “mingle,” Hughes asserts that the crack is not merely a passageway for communication, but an opportunity for the couple’s love to meet and mix—a concept nowhere apparent in the Latin.

Later, when Hughes’s Pyramus finds Thisbe’s torn and bloodied veil, Hughes interjects mingling again by presenting the veil not (as Ovid does) simply as a prop in the story, but as a locus of mingling. Ovid writes, “utque dedit notae lacrimas, dedit oscula vesti, / ‘accipe nunc’ inquit ‘nostri quoque sanguinis haustus!’” (“And while he kisses the familiar garment and bedews

it with his tears he cries: ‘Drink now my blood too.’”; 4.117-18; Miller 187). The Loeb translator is generous, substituting “drink” for Ovid’s less visceral *accipe* “receive.” In both, however, Pyramus understands the veil only as something that receives the blood. Hughes, on the other hand, writes, “Let our blood mingle / As never in love, in this veil torn by a lion” (235). As the wall’s chink affords the lovers’ breaths a place to mingle with each other, so the veil affords their blood an opportunity to mingle. In short, in places when Ovid conceives only of the concepts of passage and reception, Hughes interpolates the idea of mingling, simply by adding that word.

Hughes also adds the concept of mingling by adding knot imagery to the myth. In the following two examples, Hughes uses similar details and framing as Ovid, but in both instances, Hughes interpolates knots where Ovid makes no such mention. These knot interpolations contribute to the concept of union, as the knots in both instances symbolize not the knots that are snags or tangles, but the sort that hold things together. Ovid writes,

o multum miseri meus illiusque parentes,
 ut, quos certus amor, quos hora novissima iunxit,
 conponi tumulo non invidetis eodem. (4.155-57)

O wretched parents, mine and his, be ye entreated of this by the prayers of us
 both, that you begrudge us not that we, whom faithful love, whom the hour of
 death has joined, should be laid together in the same tomb. (Miller 189)

Hughes augments the concept of mingling in this moment by adding a knot reference:

...Parents,
 As you find our bodies,
 Limbs entwined, stiffened in a single knot,
 Do not separate us. (237)

Both authors begin with Thisbe invoking her parents and both end with Thisbe requesting she be buried with Pyramus, but Hughes interjects the “single knot” image in his version. Later, Ovid writes,

nam color in pomo est, ubi permaturuit, ater,
quodque rogis superest, una requiescit in urna. (4.165-66)

for the colour of the mulberry fruit is dark red when it is ripe, and all that
remained from both funeral pyres rests in a common urn. (Miller 191)

which Hughes translates,

Mulberries, as they ripen, darken purple.
And the two lovers in their love-knot,
One pile of inseparable ashes,
Were closed in a single urn. (237)

Again, both authors begin by talking about mulberries ripening darker and both end with the lovers in a single urn, but Hughes adds the love-knot image to reinforce the union occurring in these moments.

Where Ovid *does* mention the concept of mingling, Hughes exaggerates by increasing the line number and developing the details. This is the same strategy he used in intensifying the violence of the lioness tearing Thisbe’s veil. When describing the lovers’ communication through the fissure, Ovid writes, “tutaeque per illud / murmure blanditiae minimo transire solebant” (“Safe through this [chink] your loving words used to pass in tiny whispers”; 4.69-70; Miller 183). This description—that the chink is a safe passageway for the lovers’ whispers—is trim (both in length and in detail), especially when compared with Hughes’s corresponding segment:

This crack, this dusty crawl-space for a spider,
 Became the highway of their love-murmurs.
 Brows to the plaster, lips to the leak of air
 And cooking smells from the other interior,
 The lovers kneeled, confessing their passion,
 Sealing their two fates with a fracture. (231)

Though “mingling” is never specifically mentioned in either version, this moment is thematically important to the theme of mingling, as the wall’s chink is the first place that Pyramus and Thisbe’s love mingles (via their words and breath). Where Ovid merely has two people whispering through a crack in a wall, Hughes interpolates the spiders, the smells of the houses’ meals, the plaster of the walls, the lovers fiercely pressing their brows and their lips to the crack, kneeling, confessing, and sealing fates. Just as Hughes exaggerates the images of violence that were latent in Ovid, so he does the same with the image of mingling.

What do these three kinds of changes—the stripping down of Ovidian rhetoric, the accentuation of violence, and the interpolation of the concept of mingling—achieve? By interpolating and exaggerating violence and mingling simultaneously, Hughes points out a paradox: that breaking something can also bring two things together. The chink in the wall which “seal[s] their two fates with a fracture” is an emblem of this paradox (231). The torn veil which provides a place for the lovers’ “blood [to] mingle / As never in love” is an emblem of this paradox (235). That something torn may offer a place for mingling that would not be available were the object whole.

Hughes’s treatment of Pyramus and Thisbe implies and embodies a critical stance on the paradox of translation: communication, normally thought of as constructive, actually requires

destruction—of the style, idiom, and formal conventions that the original poet built while embodying the myth in words. A poet, through sophistication and artifice, can erect a wall between the myth and the readers, such that when readers encounter the myth, what they come up against is the poet, not the myth itself. A good translator, Hughes implies, will break that wall down. For instance, to get Ovid to communicate with English readers, a good translator will break Ovid's Latin down and add his or her own details and emphases, as Hughes has done by stripping Ovid's rhetoric, and adding and exaggerating violence and mingling to the myth. Just as to Hughes, the chink in the wall isn't a fault in masonry but an opening (Ovid says the wall was "cloven, divided" *fissus erat*, while Hughes says the wall was "opened" by the earthquakes), so those intrusions a translator makes are not destructive, but in fact open a hole through which communication flows. By intensifying and interpolating violence and mingling and by performing violence on Ovid by "lopping off" branches, Hughes shows how a defect of construction can be an opportunity for communication. If his myth is an emblem of translation, then, Hughes is demonstrating that the ruptures and breaks and defects of construction that are inevitable in translation can actually be opportunities for communication.

This notion of translation—that the violence of lopping off the more cultivated branches of an original text encourages and enables communication—connects with Hughes's wider concerns in his other translations, in his discursive prose, and in his original poetry.

It is not surprising that Hughes adds violence in his translation of Ovid—readers of Hughes know violence (specifically the salutary nature of violence) is a preoccupation of his. Defending himself against the charge of celebrating violence in his verse, Hughes argued that violence in and of itself is not brutish or evil, but merely "a vehement action that breaks through something" ("Poetry" 253). To Hughes, this "vehement action" of breaking through produces

communication with truth. Hughes writes that man is “everywhere an exile, everywhere separated from his true being” (“Baboons” 164)—separated by civilization, culture, and refinement from his pure, primitive self. And to Hughes, violence is the thing that can break through the civilization and liberate a person’s or a text’s true being, its real self (“Myth” 149), its “blood roots” (*Seneca’s* 7), the “archaic energies of instinct and feeling” that lie at its core (“Myth” 149).

This sort of violence, Hughes argues, is positive, in that it liberates truth, beauty, and reconciliation. In one essay on the topic, he called it “the strong, positive mode of violence” and said of all modes, it “ought to concern us [most] since behind it presses the revelation of all that enables human beings to experience—with mystical clarity and certainty—what we call truth, reality, beauty, redemption and the kind of fundamental love that is at least equal to fundamental evil” (“Poetry” 255). Hughes uses Saul’s transformation into Paul as an illustration: the violent destruction of Saul’s pride and love of sophistry liberated his “highest spiritual being” (251) and made way for the saint’s metamorphosis. Hughes calls this violence admirable, even “life-bringing”: it has all-important, “contagious and far-reaching” benevolent effects (254). Any violence, he says, that helps us “break out of ‘our customary social and humanitarian values’ and push through to that clearer understanding” (259-60) is positive.

The concept of some pure instinct or feeling being imprisoned by cultural refinement and needing to be violently liberated runs throughout Hughes’s writings and all throughout his conception of the world, specifically in his ideas about nature, education, and even television.

In his poem “Thrushes,” Hughes shows how violence liberates the divine and pure. The poem uses two strong images of violence: a thrush stabs at and devours worms; a shark, at the smell of its own blood, begins attacking itself:

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
 More coiled steel than living—a poised
 Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs
 Triggered to stirrings beyond sense—with a start, a bounce, a stab
 Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.
 No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares.
 No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab
 And a ravening second.
 Is it their single-minded-sized skulls, or a trained
 Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats
 Gives their days this bullet and automatic
 Purpose? Mozart's brain had it, and the shark's mouth
 That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own
 Side and devouring of itself: efficiency which
 Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it
 Or obstruction deflect. (82)

Rather than seeing these moments as base, purposeless violence, Hughes argues that this violence actually reveals the divinity in these creatures: “they are innocent, obedient, and their energy reaffirms the divine law that created them as they are” (“Poetry” 259). In other words it is not the peaceful, romantic vignettes of animal life that most reveal the truth of nature (that it is perfectly obedient to the divine law). It is the violent moments, in all their gory honesty (as with the shark) that affirm that these creatures are obedient to a primitive, commanding energy. Because he feels it demonstrates a primitive and even divine law, to Hughes this sort of violence

is admirable. He writes, “The poem now becomes, logically, an attempt to wrench a universal reality—the characteristics of divine law as it operates in created things—away from the stereotype, sentimental, weak, loose, media reading of it.” (259) The violence here achieves divine ends: it is not just a poem about animals “killing and eating each other” (255) but about animals answering an immanent call from their Creator. Thus, the violent action liberates the truth of animals’ creation.

This same process of violence being the means of liberating truth appears in Hughes’s ideas about education as well. In “Myth and Education,” he writes that anciently, religion “embraced and humanized the archaic energies of instinct and feeling” and helped humankind understand and control their inner, raw selves (149). However, Hughes argues, scientific objectivity has taught us to be numb to the raw and divine cries of our inner selves. He writes:

We solve the problem [of not understanding the inner self] by never looking inward. We identify ourselves and all that is wakeful and intelligent with our objective eye, saying ‘Let’s be objective’. . . . We come to regard our body as no more than a somewhat stupid vehicle. All the urgent information coming towards us from that inner world sounds to us like a blank, or at best the occasional grunt, or a twinge. . . . We are disconnected. . . . It is a modern ideal. The educational tendencies of the last three hundred years, and especially the last fifty, corresponding to the rising prestige of scientific objectivity and the lowering prestige of religious awareness, have combined to make it so. (145-46)

Children play an important role, though, in breaking through the shingles of scientific objectivity and civilized numbness:

Every new child is nature's chance to correct culture's error. Children are most sensitive to it, because they are the least conditioned by scientific objectivity.... They are aware that this inner world we have rejected is not merely an inferno of depraved impulses and crazy explosions of embittered energy. Our real selves lie down there. Down there, mixed up among all the madness, is everything that once made life worth living. All the lost awareness and powers and allegiances of our biological and spiritual being. (149)

Hughes's allusion here to Dante's *Inferno* ("not merely an inferno of depraved impulses and crazy explosions of embittered energy") suggests that the journey through the numbness of civilization will be a journey of violence (as Dante and Virgil experience in the *Inferno*), but that it is also the journey to the divine, as the two poets eventually achieve *Paradiso*. To unearth the primitive "powers and allegiances of our biological and spiritual being[s]," he suggests breaking away from the traditional, more civilized modes of education to journey towards a model more correspondent to the biological and spiritual beings primitive in our nature as human beings. In short, Hughes's poetry and philosophies are keenly interested in how violence liberates raw and divine energies. Violence used in this way, he writes, is positive because, just as with Saul/Paul, it reveals a thing's "highest spiritual being."

Embedded within this view of the salutary nature of violence is a belief that the "raw" or "elemental" or "primitive" is of greater worth than what is merely civilized and cultivated. Lorna Hardwick comments that Hughes's desire is "to engage with the primitive" (58); in his inaugural chapter in *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, Keith Sagar writes that Hughes does this by letting the "power and meaning of the myth flow through the wire of language, burning off in its surge the accretions of the poet's ego and the cultural accretions of his time and place" (Sagar 9). The

“lopping off” he does of Ovid’s rhetorical refinement in “Pyramus and Thisbe” (even though, ironically, many of Ovid’s chiasmic juxtapositions and line breaks embody the kind of mingling and severance Hughes tries to emphasize) bespeaks this view and is consistent with his other work.

In 1968, director Peter Brook commissioned Hughes to make a translation of Seneca’s *Oedipus* to be staged at the National Theatre in London. The idea that governed his approach to translating *Oedipus* was that,

Under this enormously ornate temple of language there’s a very primitive raw shape of a drama. [...] And this is what [we] wanted to dig out from all that language. And from the start, it was my idea in the translation to do that—to find some way of discarding the ornateness and the stateliness (and in a way, there’s a great majesty of the thing, because they’re enormously, impressive, majestic pieces) and to bring out some thin but raw presentation of the real core of the play. (Hughes about *Seneca*, qtd. in Sagar 8-9)

In other words, deep down in the story of Oedipus (as separate from Seneca’s telling of it), Hughes sensed rawness and purity of emotion, and this is what he aimed to bring out in his translation, but the wall of Seneca’s rhetoric obscures that skeletal heart, and is a barrier to it. This also explains why, despite the little Latin he knew, he rejected using the Victorian translation he had at his disposal, calling it a “very elaborate, stately translation of these very stately, elaborate passages of Seneca’s”; “All you got from that,” he said, “was stately Victorianness” (Interview). To create a translation that communicated what he sensed were the real sentiments of the myth, Hughes said he had to strip it of its rhetoric to get at “the raw dream

of [the work], the basic, poetic, mythical substance of the fable, . . . thus releasing whatever inner power this story, in its plainest, bluntest form, still has” (*Seneca’s* 8).

He did this by lopping off Seneca’s rhetoric (again with the violence): “Hughes delivered a raw, visceral script, stripped of the original’s lengthy rhetorical speeches, references to divinities, and elaborate metrical structures (elements that Hughes believed had not stood the test of time), but brilliantly capturing the essence of Seneca’s play” (Jacobson). The final product makes no attempt “to answer to the elaborate rhetorical and formal characteristics of Seneca’s Latin. Hughes is prepared to let the elaborateness of Seneca’s rhetoric and metre drop as dated, and as an obstacle to getting at the mythical core of the fable” (Talbot 64). Smashing Seneca’s rhetoric (as he did with Ovid’s) demonstrates that Hughes values the rawness of the myth over the civilization of the poet.

Hughes’s handling of Seneca is consistent across his translations: Keith Sagar notes, “This stripping and simplifying process was by no means limited to Seneca or collaboration with Brook; it became a fundamental method with regard to all Hughes’s dealings with the classics” (Sagar 9). For his translation of 100 lines from the *Odyssey*, breaking through to the myth meant leaving out the conventional “verbal markers like ‘as’, ‘during’, and ‘when’ [which, in other translations,] are constantly organizing the material” and smoothing over the roughness of such direct translation (Hardwick 33). And for *Tales from Ovid*, breaking through to the myth meant destroying the remarkably complex rhetorical artifice of Ovid—the “suavely flowing hexameters” (as David Hopkins called them, 522), the intricate interweavings of alliteration and assonance, the chiasms, the long, interwoven, poetically lovely (though thoroughly civilized) sentences that mark it as a product of Ovid. All of these actions are the embodiment of the breaking and mingling that Hughes highlights in “Pyramus and Thisbe.” All of them are ways

Hughes is attempting to break through the wall Ovid has constructed between the myth and the reader—the wall of poetic artifice, of self-aware artness—in order to get through to “whatever inner power this story...still has” (*Seneca's* 8).⁴

Similar to his discursive prose and translations, Hughes's original poetry also values violence and primitivism. His preoccupation with violence in “Pyramus and Thisbe” with passages like the lioness tearing Thisbe's veil strongly resembles a similar preoccupation with violence in his original poem, “The Brother's Dream.” The *Tales* episode reads,

The beast began to play with the veil—
Forepaws tore downwards, jaw ripped upwards.
And the veil toweled the blood
From the sodden muzzle, and from the fangs. (234)

With similar fixation on the details of tearing and blood, “The Brother's Dream” describes killing a bear:

I grip it with my left hand by the shag
And cordage of its gullet and with my dagger
In this other hand I rip it up
From the belly—up, up, up
I rip it. (“The Brother's Dream” 196)

Here, not only does he dwell on a moment of violence in the same manner, but he dwells on the ripping specifically.

⁴ Tangentially, I find it noteworthy that Hughes calls his collection *Tales from Ovid* rather than *Tales of Ovid*, as if Ovid carried the myths to Hughes, encased in his orotund elaborateness, and now it is for Hughes, with his punchy rhetorical directness, to show us what these myths really are, as apart from Ovid.

The poetic style that results from Hughes valuing rawness in his translation of Ovid also resembles the style of his original poetry. In *Tales*, Hughes creates a “stabbing, short-breathed free verse” (as Hopkins called it, 522) through jabbing meter, monosyllabic diction, directness, and thrifty denseness. These same characteristics appear in “Thrushes”: “More coiled steel than living—a poised / Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs / Triggered to stirrings beyond sense—with a start, a bounce, a stab” (“Thrushes” 82). “Delicate” here is the only word beyond two syllables, and yet the few syllables Hughes does use are image-rich: “coiled,” “triggered,” “bounce,” “stab.” His directness, even terseness, that appears in *Tales* (“they” instead of “on one side Thisbe, Pyramus on the other”) is the same direct Hughes that appears in “Prometheus on His Crag”:

Prometheus On His Crag

Began to admire the vulture

It knew what it was doing

It went on doing it (“Prometheus” 290)

Here, rather than elaborate or lengthy explanations, Hughes simply and shortly describes the vulture—“It knew what it was doing / It went on doing it.” The pattern of densely-packed, triple adjectives that surfaced in *Tales* in lines like, “Their addiction to each other / Was absolute, helpless, terminal” (“Pyramus” 230) and, “The lion’s footprints, alien, deep, unwelcome” (234) is the same Hughesian pattern that appears in lines from “Prometheus”: “Scratching, probing, peering for a lost world” and “black, bold and plain were those headline letters” (“Prometheus” 286-87). These triptychs of adjectives contribute to the jabbing meter characteristic of Hughes, and by paring out prepositions and conjunctions, he compresses the imagery to as dense a delivery as possible. One way Hughes’s preference for violence and primitiveness in *Tales from*

Ovid appears is via his raw, violent style, and this is the same style that appears in his other translations, in his discursive prose, and in his original poetry. What he has done with the Pyramus and Thisbe episode, then, is more than just one instance: it helps us understand all of Hughes.

But if what surfaces in Hughes's translations are patterns consistent across Hughes's poetry, then how can it be said that his translations are literal and faithful to an original rather than merely faithful to his own style? The statement Hughes makes about translation via the paradox of the Pyramus and Thisbe myth—that to release the inner power of a story, a translator must break through the stylistic elements of the original author—aligns nicely with what Hughes has said in discursive prose about the value of literalness in translation. But that statement is at odds with his practice of translating, if his translations are as heavy with the same style of Hughes's other works as I have shown. It is as Daniel Weissbort, Hughes's co-founder in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, said: "It has been observed that paradoxically Hughes, while remaining close to the *ad verbum* text, has created works of translation which are unmistakably Hughesian" (521). This is perhaps the greater paradox in Hughes's poetry: in his discursive prose about translation he propounds literalness and the stripping of style as the way to release the inner power of a story, but his own translations still bear the mark of a poet mediating between the story and the reader. He might say he values breaking through the veneer of the original poet's style, lopping off the Ovidian devices to get at the true "blood roots" of the myth (*Seneca's* 7), but in practice, he creates translations that are rife with his own poetic style. What he has lopped off of Ovid's style he has replaced with Hughes's.

Does this mean Hughes has failed to meet his own mandate? Or that his assertions about translation are tenuous at best and downright deceptive at worst? Possibly. But more likely what

this contradiction means for studies of translation and studies of Hughes is that the work of translation is not a simple dichotomy of literal fidelity versus poetic creation. In fact, perhaps the discrepancy between Hughes's statements about translation and his actual practice show that a poet-translator cannot escape leaving some sort of trace of himself on his translations, as faithful as he may try to be to the original, and that in aiming at literalness, he might actually achieve more than mere literalness. He might create something that is both faithful to the passions of the myth at its most primitive level and also faithful to his unique idiosyncrasies as a poet.

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