"For Everybody Must Answer the Sphinx": Ted Hughes's Translation of Seneca's *Oedipus*[1]

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> "From the start, it was my idea...to find some way of discarding the ornateness and the stateliness...and to bring out some quite thin but raw presentation of the real core of the play" (Correy and Ravlich).

Scholarly debate about Senecan drama has long revolved around its—almost definitive—deployment of rhetoric as its key linguistic form. Yet Ted Hughes's *Seneca's Oedipus* (first staged and produced in 1968), arguably the most successful and most performed twentieth-century appropriation of the Latin play, was created with a conscious attempt to escape those aspects of the play, the avowedly Senecan rhetorical style, which previous—mainly Renaissance—dramatists found so enticing. For Hughes it was the "very barbaric, very raw" centre of *Oedipus* which he wished to dramatise. With a Jungian attention to hidden detail, Hughes wrote:

> while [Seneca] concentrates on tremendous rhetorical speeches and stoical epigrams, his imagination is quietly producing something else—a series of epic descriptions that contain the raw dream of Oedipus, the basic poetic mythical substance of the fable, and whatever else may have happened to the rhetoric, this part has not dated at all (Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus* 8).

As Stead notes in this volume, Hughes was not the first translator of the text to be involved with Peter Brook's production, and was in fact commissioned to work on an existing translation by David Turner (Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* 14). His confrontation with

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Seneca, then, was serendipitous rather than deliberate. Yet the undoubted success of the Hughes version suggests that the poet found in the Latin author a deeply resonant interlocutor, an affinity which I will examine below. If, moreover, we take seriously Hughes's claim to have stripped back the rhetoric, 'the ornateness and stateliness,' of the Senecan text, what is the 'basic poetic mythical substance' which remains? And given its famous subject matter and its significance in Western thought, what is at stake here in Hughes's re-staging of, re-presentation of, that most exemplary of ancient mythical figures: Oedipus?

Violent Ethics

Brian Arkins, citing in passing Hughes's *Seneca's Oedipus* as evidence of the performability and ongoing modern interest in the Latin playwright, has argued of Senecan drama that it is

> no surprise that a century which has witnessed the Holocaust, the Gulags, Hiroshima and much else should be engaged in the rehabilitation of Seneca's tragedies. Far from being contemptible as drama, these tragedies speak directly to our experience. (1)

Yet Arkins's suggestion that the 'radically evil' world dramatised in Seneca's plays mirrors the modern condition, and that this in turn is reflected in Hughes's version, only gives a partial insight into the complex debate which Hughes sets uneasily in motion in his verse, both in his 'translation' of Seneca's *Oedipus* and in his adoption of the Oedipus motif in his wider poetic *oeuvre*. Interviewed in 1970 by Ekbert Faas and questioned concerning the 'violence' of his poetry (Faas remarks, '[c]ritics have often described your poetry as the "poetry of violence"'), with particular reference to his Jaguar poems ('The Jaguar' and 'Second Glance at a Jaguar'), Hughes responded in the following—remarkable—manner:

> A jaguar after all can be received in several different aspects...his is a beautiful powerful nature spirit, he is a homicidal maniac, he is supercharged piece of cosmic machinery, his is a symbol of man's baser nature shoved down into the id and growing cannibal murderous with deprivation, he is an ancient symbol of Dionysus since he is a leopard raised to the ninth power, he is a precise historical symbol to the bloody-minded Aztecs and so on. Or he is simply a demon...a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy. The symbol opens all these things...it is the reader's own nature that selects. The tradition is, that energy of this sort once invoked will destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one. In a perfectly cultured society one imagines that jaguar-like elementals would be invoked only by self-disciplinarians of a very advanced grade. I am not one and I'm sure few readers are, so maybe in our corrupt condition we have to regard poems about jaguars as ethically dangerous. (199)

Hughes's acknowledgement here of the danger of his poetry is, I would argue, significant. His poetic universe is, by this measure, less a mournful or tortured mirror of contemporaneity—as Arkins's account of Hughes's *Seneca* might have it—than a

knowing ethical provocation ('it is the reader's own nature that selects'). Yet it is one fraught with perils of its own. In an introductory essay on the Hungarian poet János Pilinszky, written in the mid-seventies, Hughes speculated revealingly on the role of poetry after the Holocaust, notably echoing Adorno's famous dictum that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric ("[N]ach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch" [26]):

> The silence of artistic integrity 'after Auschwitz' is a real thing. The mass of the human evidence of the camps, and of similar situations since, has raised the price of 'truth' and 'reality' and 'understanding' beyond what normal words seem able to pay (Hughes, *Winter Pollen* 232).

Hughes's allusion here to Adorno's devastating *Kulturkritik* sets—we must assume deliberately—his own poetry in a problematic light. His remarks on Pilinszky and the European poets demonstrate his awareness of the impossible responsibility of the artist in the post-war landscape and the fraught context in which any poetic meditation on 'truth', 'reality', and 'understanding' must be construed in the shadow of Auschwitz.[2] Yet his earlier response to Faas highlights his willingness to adopt a register—that which may be described as the characteristic violent vitality of, at least, his early to middle verse (*Seneca's Oedipus* included)—which strayed alarmingly close to coalescence with anti-rational intellectual traditions. This is a coalescence which potentially opens up a troubling ethico-political gap: while, as so many anti-humanist critics have argued, the Enlightenment project failed at Auschwitz, the rejection of rationalism might seem, however paradoxically, to be only the other side of the same coin.[3] This discomfort may be seen to be a deliberate gesture, and a tightly poised ethical gamble. Leonard Scigaj, in *The Poetry of Ted Hughes*, like the majority of readers of Hughes's poetry, recuperates its famous poetic violence within a vision of the poet's 'North Country heritage' which 'refuses to ignore the violence within nature' (xiii-xiv). This would appear to offer only a partial understanding of the complex ethical impulse behind Hughes's work. For while it is, of course, possible and sensible to comprehend the depiction of 'nature' in Hughes's verse as a veristic portrait of its ontology (it simply *is*) and refusal to soften its realities, such a reading tends to ignore the more symbolic, programmatic aspects of the poetry (those vividly outlined by Hughes in the remarks quoted above, the 'different aspects' of the jaguar). Hughes's definition of these 'jaguar-like elementals' and his queries about the (shamanistic) fitness of himself and his readers to invoke them make clear that simply to interpret Hughes's 'nature' as a refutation of a romanticised or anthropomorphised vision of the world neglects to consider the sophisticated, if alarming, ethical implications which violence might fulfil in his work.

The "Mythical Substance"

In what follows I shall explore what Hughes meant by 'the mythical substance' which he found in *Seneca's Oedipus* and frame this, in particular, with the appropriation of the Oedipus myth in the poems of his 'Crow' cycle (a series of poems, left finally incomplete, which are roughly coeval with his translation of *Oedipus*). I shall argue that Hughes's *Seneca's Oedipus*, couched and understood alongside his wider *oeuvre* at that point, reflects and perhaps, more critically, reflects *upon* a particular stream of post-war pessimism and the rejection of Enlightenment. That Hughes should engage with the Oedipus myth—a myth which figures so prominently both in Enlightenment (and Freudian) narratives of humanism, self-knowledge and rationality,[4] and which might be considered a foundation myth of the twentieth century—should come as no surprise. Hughes's (Seneca's) Oedipus might then indeed, therefore, be the Oedipus most fitted to the modern condition: fearful, irrational, and tragically tormented by a fate which he both acknowledges, and is unable to escape.

It is worth pausing, at this point, to consider the apparent strangeness of Hughes's claims about the 'mythical substance' of Seneca's *Oedipus*. Commentators on Seneca might more confidently argue that Seneca's interest in mythology was slight, and any use of it opportune:

> Athenian drama is truly a ritual because to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides the Greek myths are still a living element in their religious thought. To Seneca they represent hardly more than a convenient framework within which he can create a lurid but very different world picture, inspired by his experience of the imperial court, with its hazards of power, envy, intrigue, exile, and sudden death. (Scott-Kilvert 502)

Moreover, Hughes himself actively sought to 'shed every mythological reference,' (Correy and Ravlich) most notably in utterly transforming and shortening the choral odes, in particular the long central ode to Bacchus. In Seneca, the ode begins:

> Effusam redimite comam nutante corymbo,
> mollia Nysaeis armatus bracchia thyrsis,
> lucidum caeli decus, huc ades
> votis, quae tibi nobiles
> Thebae, Bacche, tuae
> palmis supplicibus ferunt. (Seneca, *Oedipus* ll.403-7)

> [You whose flowing hair is wreathed with nodding ivy,
> and who bear the thyrsus of Nysa as a weapon in your
> soft hands
> shining glory of heaven, attend
> the prayers that your famous city
> of Thebes offers you, Bacchus,
> with palms lifted in supplication. (trans. J.G. Fitch)

Hughes gives:

OOO-AI-EE ..... KA
CHANT (*3 times*)
REPLY (*3 times*)

DANCE DEATH INTO ITS HOLE
DANCE DEATH INTO ITS HOLE
INTO ITS HOLE
ITS HOLE

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 344)

Dramatically, the transformation is apt: it is notoriously difficult successfully, and with serious rather than comic impact, to 'translate' choral odes onto the modern stage, and Hughes's tribalistic chant gives, perhaps, a more convincing flavour of the ritualistic aspects of the choral role. But the abandonment of the paean to Bacchus is nonetheless critical.

What, then, can Hughes have meant by the 'raw dream of Oedipus' or the 'basic mythical substance' if it was not the apparently straightforwardly mythological content of the play? Hughes's poetic engagement with myth and the wider field of traditional knowledge and storytelling which 'myth' may in this respect connote developed markedly in the 1960s. It began, Sagar argues, in his early verse as a recalibration, a refutation of a 'marginalized' and 'sentimentalized' myth of Nature (*The Laughter of Foxes* 13). This was signalled, not least, by the title of his second collection *Lupercal* (1960). His third collection, *Wodwo*, published in 1967, in its organisation revealed his fascination with the figure of the shaman as the spiritual mediator between man and nature, mind and body, self and world. *Wodwo*, Neil Roberts has argued, in its tri-partite structure, narrates the shamanic metamorphosis: chosen, dismembered and reconstituted, the shaman emerges able to overcome and heal man's alienation from nature by means of psychic harmony with the spirit world (57-8). This mythic turn would culminate in the songs of *Crow* (1970), which form a fully developed, though incomplete, mythological cycle, with Hughes a modern mythographer. Sagar writes:

> Crow, once conceived, completely possessed Hughes, grew out of all proportion to his origins, and became the protagonist of *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, an 'epic folk-tale' in prose, studded with hundreds of poems....The tale drew not only on trickster mythology, but on the whole body of myth, folklore and literature with which Hughes had by the late sixties familiarized himself. Its basic shape was that of the traditional quest narrative, ending, like all quests, with the hero's emergence from the blackness of his crimes and sufferings into a raw wisdom, the healing of the split within him, the release of his own deepest humanity, all expressed in images of ego-death, rebirth and marriage. (*Laughter of Foxes* 171)

Moreover, while the impact of the suicide of Sylvia Plath in 1963 might be inferred in his poetic silence until 1967, Hughes was active as a reviewer and critic during this period, notably of anthropological works, which undoubtedly influenced and invigorated his own longstanding interest in primitivism, shamanism, and mythol-

ogy. Hughes would later write to Keith Sagar that his career as a student of English at Cambridge was abruptly ended by the manifestation of a burning fox in a dream who warned Hughes that the analytical treatment of literature was 'destroying us'. Hughes then changed to Archaeology and Anthropology, subjects he found more congenial to creativity.

As has been frequently observed by Hughes scholars, myth—understood in the sense both of bodies of world mythology and as a wider creative and aesthetic impulse formed in dialogue with those traditions (the 'mythic imagination', as Sagar describes it)—became increasingly central to Hughes's poetic programme and reflected his determination to short-circuit the mechanisms of rationality, that tragic instigator of man's precarious dualistic presence in the world, with its 'dangerous alienation of the subjective self' (Scigaj, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* 20).[5] Importantly, Hughes set this vision of myth, or mythic vision—aligned with nature, primitivism, and shamanism—against (what he construes as the inevitably destructive) Western rationality, science, and technology. Hughes was not alone in his privileging of myth and the concurrent (re)turn to the vital and violent principles of Nature and irrational forces as potential solutions to the ills of the modern technocratic world. Such a stance stemmed—at least—from Nietzsche, and *The Birth of Tragedy*, whose revelation of the terrible and awesome power of the Dionysian may be felt in Hughes's own work (whose mention of the Jaguar as 'an ancient symbol of Dionysus' suggests a compelling genealogy). Like Nietzsche, Hughes decried what he saw as the deadening and destructive impulses of Platonic rationality (see e.g. "Myth and Education"). Of Hughes's accretive reading of 'myth', Scigaj writes:

> [l]ike Jung, Campbell, and Lévi-Strauss, Hughes is particularly interested in conflating the folklore, myth, and ritual patterns of primitive and non-Western cultures in order to comprehend the psychological and spiritual common denominators operative, and to discover what survival potential these kernels may hold for contemporary people.
>
> (*The Poetry of Ted Hughes* 101)

Myth's therapeutic or redemptive properties, however, derive not only or simply from its distance from, or critique of, a destructive rationality and technocracy to which it is the necessary counterpose. Contained in myth is also its articulation in its form and in its narratives of those facets of human subjectivity and experience which themselves are responsible for the rationalised, technocratic subjugation of man and nature. Myths thus frequently depict the actions and consequences of the human protagonist or trickster who, by means of his cunning or reason, effects some kind of reversal of circumstance or domination over the natural world or its mythological metonyms. At stake in the telling and hearing of the myth is the exposure of this potentially dangerous equation and its all-too-often tragic consequences. Oedipus, of course, is the example *par excellence*: in solving the riddle of the Sphinx, he paves the way to his own downfall. The fate of the mythical hero reveals the cost paid when man and nature are too violently severed.

But this mythical and tragic antagonism is also, for Hughes, critically gendered. Extrapolating from his earliest poetry on the 'true' face of the dreadful, violent, amoral, yet beautiful natural world, Hughes tropes Nature as female, and her protagonist and antagonist as male. Critically, this equation goes straight to the heart of poetry as practice itself. As Hughes's forebear and poetic influence, Robert Graves, wrote in *The White Goddess*:

> The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites....This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. (14)

Hughes too would later write his own *White Goddess*, with *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*:

> Confronting the Goddess of Divine Love, the Goddess of Complete Being, the ego's extreme alternatives are either to reject her and attempt to live an independent, rational, secular life or to abnegate the ego and embrace her love with 'total, unconditional love', which means to become a saint, a holy idiot, possessed by the Divine Love. The inevitability of the tragic idea which Shakespeare projects with such 'divine' completeness is that there is no escape from one choice or the other. Man will always choose the former, simply because once he is free of a natural, creaturely awareness of the divine indulgence which permits him to exist at all, he wants to live his own life, and he has never invented a society of saints that was tolerable. In other words, always, one way or another, he rejects the Goddess. This is the first phase of the tragedy. Then follows his correction: his 'madness' against the Goddess, the Puritan crime...which leads directly to his own tragic self-destruction, from which he can escape only after the destruction of his ego—being reborn through the Flower rebirth,...surrendering once again to the Goddess. From the human point of view, obviously the whole business is monstrous: tragic on a cosmic scale, where the only easements are in the possibilities of a temporary blessing from the Goddess (an erotic fracture in the carapace of the tragic hero) or of becoming a saint. (392-3)

These themes, explicit in *Crow* (as I shall discuss below), are, unsurprisingly, at work in his *Seneca's Oedipus*. The 'basic mythical substance' of *Seneca's Oedipus* is, therefore, its reiteration—as Hughes understood it—both of the symbolic, fraught, and timeless symmetry between man and woman (both as individual, but also, more 'cosmically' as Nature, the Goddess), and the destructive relationship of the 'ego' with the natural world and the consequences of this. This makes sense, then, of Hughes's distinctive—and seemingly counter-intuitive—comparison of Seneca's *Oedipus* with Sophocles' in the introduction to the Faber edition:

> Sophocles' Oedipus would not have been so suitable...as Seneca's. The Greek world saturates Sophocles too thoroughly: the evolution of his play seems complete, fully explored and in spite of its blood roots, fully civilized. The figures in Seneca's Oedipus are Greek only by convention: by nature they are more primitive than aboriginals. They are a spider people, scuttling among hot stones....The radiant moral world of Sophocles

> is simply not present here. (*Seneca's Oedipus* 7-8)

'The radiant moral world' to which Hughes here refers must mean the rational heroism of the Sophoclean Oedipus and the play's complex negotiation of human agency, and its final affirmation of fate and the power of the gods, with the suggestion that cosmic order has been restored, however tragically, and regardless of the cost. These are assumptions about the universe only possible in a 'fully civilized' world. By contrast, the 'primitive' characters of the Senecan stage more fully enact Hughes's understanding of the tragic equation of myth, and thus, by a kind of near-paradoxical circularity, are more 'suitable' for his poetic critique of twentieth-century enlightenment.

Seneca's Hughes

This moral landscape is, by a peculiar kind of coincidence, enforced by what are the two most fundamentally *Senecan* aspects of Hughes' translation (despite his aggressive paring back of the Latin text and its Senecan rhetoric): namely its retention and radical appropriation of the play's relationship with Stoic thought,[6] and its violent preoccupation with magic, sacrifice, and necromancy. Slaney notes that "[i]n some ways, Hughes outdoes even Seneca's excesses" ('Liminal's' 60). These latter elements, of course, as Leo noted, form a great part of Seneca's play, in stark and almost definitive contrast to Sophocles': "Oedipum ita contraxit ut in 1060 versibus cantica 330 versa complectantur, sacrificium et necromantia 230, ut ipsi fabulae 500 versus reliquantur" (163).[7] Both of these features would have been attractive to Hughes, even if his discovery of Seneca as a sympathetic interlocutor was serendipitous. Their harmony with aspects of his wider *oeuvre* and personal philosophy perhaps accounts for why Hughes was able to make of his translation such a poetic and critical success, and for why this version, despite its departures from the original text, retains an element of fidelity to it which is largely unmatched by more conventional translations.

As Pratt argues, Seneca's play

> is centred on two Stoic conceptions, the destructive effect of fear and the definition of Fate as what is to be according to the plan of the orderly universe....[I]n the play Seneca is using the Oedipus myth to dramatize only the ideas that Fate is a divine mechanism and that fear and rejection of it are evil. (96-101)

Were we to substitute 'Nature' for 'Fate', in this passage, we would, I believe, come close to the kind of universalising poetic that Hughes strove to articulate in his verse, and which he found reverberating in the Oedipus myth. Like Seneca, Hughes foregrounds this fear with the first lines his Oedipus speaks:

OEDIPUS: and I was happy running away from my father
Polybus freedom not exile wandering unafraid
a prince fleeing yes but unafraid till I stumbled

as God in heaven saw me I stumbled on this kingdom
fear that came after me it followed me the
fear... words of the oracle
some day I would kill my father I would kill him
and worse that other worse what can be worse
the oracle pronounced it
the words stick it is not possible but
the god predicted the god threatened me with my
father's bedchamber my mother's bed fouled
desecrated the god predicted it
... I was terrified

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 327)

In his book, *Literature and the Crime against Nature* (2005), Keith Sagar argues that for Hughes, as for a wide cohort of writers, it is precisely the "fear and rejection" of Nature, with all their perceived destructive side-effects, which have led to a so-called contemporary crisis of culture and sense of societal malaise. Sagar, through the poets he studies, and closely echoing the thoughts of the poet he knew well, prescribes a return to poetry as a "healing force" (380). This thesis, derived in part from his reading of Hughes's poetry, replays a particular twentieth-century—frequently ostensibly Nietzschean—narrative which attributes a critical loss of creative and cultural vitality and societal morbidity to an unbalanced relationship to nature and the natural (that both internal and external to man). In this sense, the Stoic comportment towards fear and Fate are made to coalesce with a specific literary-aesthetic tradition in Hughes's version.

Seneca's Oedipus is *already* guilty: "fear / that came after me / it followed me". Sophocles' Oedipus, depicted initially as a good, noble, and courageous king, fearlessly, if arrogantly, seeks the truth behind the plague at Thebes. His concern, shown in his early dialogue with the priest, indicates that his sense of responsibility for tackling the plague in Thebes arises from his role as King; his personal responsibility, his own guilt, do not haunt him at the opening of the play, although he does, of course, become all too cognisant of them by the close. By contrast, Seneca's Oedipus immediately senses all-too-readily that he is somehow the centre of the troubles around him.

OEDIPUS:
even now what is fate preparing for me surely
I see that how could I be mistaken about it
this plague slaughtering everything that lives
no matter what men trees flies no matter it spares
me why what final disaster is it saving me for

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 328)

This Stoic emphasis on the fearfulness of Oedipus provides a kind of blunt dramatic irony as it collides with the powerful momentum of Fate.[8] Crucial to the drama-

tisation of the proper Stoic response to the machinations of the inevitable is his characterisation of Jocasta. Following Oedipus's 81-line prologue, Jocasta responds tersely, and revealingly. But Seneca's 6 lines become, in Hughes, an extended scene of painful dialogue. In expanding the role of Jocasta for Irene Worth, Hughes has her speak a long and raw passage of some 70-odd lines, which narrate her own resolution in the face of Fate. The significant extension of Jocasta's role in Hughes's version is testament both to the specificity of the production itself, but also to his insistence on the symbolic binary of man and woman, and the framing of the 'mythical substance' of Oedipus through this. Jocasta, in Hughes's version, also emerges as the more resolute and comprehending character, in sharp contrast to the terrified, almost cringing, Oedipus. As Schofield notes, "Hughes' Jocasta shows a prescience completely lacking in [Oedipus]. Her opening dialogue with Oedipus starts in the same way but culminates in a long speech—a black Magnificat—for which there is no precedent in the original' (189):

JOCASTA: when I carried my sons
I carried them for death I carried them for the throne
I carried them for final disaster when I carried my first son
did I know what was coming did I know
what ropes of blood were twisting together what bloody footprints
were hurrying together in my body

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 330)

Her emphatic emphasis in this passage is on the fabric of her maternal body, with its 'ropes of blood' and 'roots' and its creative power:

blood from the roots of my hair blood from before any time began
it flowed into the knot of his bowels into the knot of his muscles
the knot of his brain
my womb tied everything together every corner of the earth
and the heavens
and every trickle of the dead past
twisted it all into shape inside me

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 331)

Crucially, Jocasta's lines and their titanic materiality are echoed only moments later by Oedipus, when he recalls his encounter with the Sphinx:

not even the sphinx twisting me up in her twisted words
she did not frighten me she straddled her rock her nest
of smashed skulls and bones her face was a gulf her
gaze paralysed her victims she jerked her wings up and
that tail whipping and writhing she lashed herself she
bunched herself up convulsed started to tremble like a
fit

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 332)

Later Creon, relating his horrifying trip to the oracle (a necromantic report unique to Seneca, and Hughes, and absent from Sophocles), recalls seeing the mutilated ghost of Laius, who also repeats Jocasta's language. Here it is Jocasta who terrifies, locked in some kind of monstrous dyad with the sphinx:

> my country rots but it isn't the gods
> it is this a son and a mother
> knotted and twisted together a son and a mother
> a coupling of vipers bodies twisting together
> ...
> the Queen yes worse than him the Queen and
> her womb that chamber of hell which began it all
> he pushed his way back there where he began worse
> than an animal he buried his head in there there
> where he first came screaming out and brought new
> brothers for himself out of his own mother's body
> horrible tentacles of evil a bloodier tangle than
> his own sphinx
>
> (Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 349-50)

"Jocasta is the Mother—Nature—the blood root—love; Oedipus is the opposite pole: the Spirit—intellect—reason rigid moral law," writes Schofield (199). The insistence on the semantic connection between the twistings of the maternal body and the Sphinx articulates Hughes's frightening vision of female Nature scorned, with horrifying consequence. His sense that man suffers a split psyche, provoked by his dismemberment from Nature, crucially signified for Hughes in the Oedipus myth by his disordered relationship to the maternal body and his killing of the (female) Sphinx, in the wake of millennia of the tyranny of free intelligence, found, then, a concordance in the drama of Seneca, in the Stoic concept of *sumpatheia*. Simply put, this is the proposition that all the things of the universe, animals, the sea, the sky, man, and so on, are united "in feeling, in aspiration, and in extension" (Rosenmeyer 110), even when it follows that sickness, on both a human and a cosmic level simultaneously, may be an inevitable implication. Tragedy, of course, depicts just such a disordered universe. Of Oedipus's opening lines in Seneca, Rosenmeyer writes:

> Here [*Oed*. 31-6] Oedipus, at the centre of a diseased world, knows that the disease will translate itself to him also. But he also knows that in some mysterious way he is himself responsible for the cosmic sickness. Man and the world have become linked, with infection the inescapable accessory and coextension the dreaded consequence. (117)

Such a philosophy would seem to find a like-minded interlocutor in Hughes, who urged that we return to Nature, even if that Nature is sometimes violent, bloody, and cruel, although arguably, for Hughes, *sumpatheia* might be a primeval aspiration, rather than a philosophical truth of the contemporary world.

But what of the passages of sacrifice, superstition, and necromancy in Hughes's translation, sites of some of the most graphic, brutal—indeed irrational and apparently non-Greek—language and imagery employed by the poet? Alessandro Schiesaro

has argued of the dialogue between Creon and Oedipus in the Latin play at lines 509-658 (where Creon reports the message of the oracle) that it

> powerfully enacts what poetry and poets do. The traditional connection between magic and the prophetic power of power and seers [is here] crystallized....[T]he poet can access a domain open only to a non-rational, horrific form of Dionysiac inspiration, and both testify to the limits of a rigid faith in rational forms of explanation....[P]oetry is the revelation of truths carefully hidden from the upper world of reason and power. (9-12)

Although this passage in Hughes is greatly reduced in length, Schiesaro's remarks seem to hold some relevance, not only for Hughes's *Seneca's Oedipus*, but also for Hughes's poetic project as a whole. Magic and other 'primitive' practices which sought to connect man to the natural world, to unite with its chaos, were celebrated by Hughes, who consistently deployed the image of the shaman-poet is his creative *imaginaire*, lauding his expertise in the art of psychic healing, the role played in the process of death, dismemberment, and resurrection. Reviewing Eliade's *Shamanism*, in 1964, Hughes wrote approvingly:

> The results, when the shaman returns to the living, are some display of healing power, or a clairvoyant piece of information. The cathartic effect on the audience, and the refreshing of their religious feeling, must be profound.
>
> (Hughes, 'Secret Ecstasies' 678)

In Seneca's *Oedipus*, Hughes found just this convergence of poetry and magic, deployed to express the rift between man and the natural world. Hughes's "Stoicism" then, his profound agreement with the Stoic sentiment of *sumpatheia*, coupled with his belief in the "therapeutic function of language" (Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* 22) explains why, despite the absence of the more Aristotelian moral and aesthetic trajectory which one associates with Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Hughes's *Seneca's Oedipus* can still be said to be invested in its cathartic capacity *qua* poetry. A Hughesian catharsis is not one grounded in 'pity and fear', as that which Aristotle—paradigmatically—found in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* was. Seneca's (and hence Hughes's) Oedipus, so cowering in the face of Fate, lacking the Sophoclean Oedipus's heroic resolve to save his city, and only wishing for death, does not arouse our pity, at least according to the terms of Aristotelean analysis.[9] Instead, the primitive—*mythical*—force of the poetry itself is intended to work to effect that cathartic function. At the close of *Seneca's Oedipus*, we are not brought to any kind of resolution or affirmation, no tragic confirmation—however terrifying—of the order of the universe. Instead Oedipus staggers off, foully tormented by Fate:

fate remorseless my enemy you are the friend I
choose come with me
pestilence ulcerous agony blasting consumption plague
terror
plague blackness despair welcome come with me
you are my guides

lead me

(Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 371)

As Hirschberg notes, 'his departing words clearly imply his resignation to his role as scapegoat' (148). It was Fate (a fate which, in dramatic terms at least, had always already befallen him), which hangs over Oedipus throughout the play, and of which, despite his *conscious* ignorance of his infamous crimes, he seems—in Seneca and Hughes—so unconsciously aware ('my hands cannot be accursed/but something is left' [Hughes, "The Oedipus of Seneca" 357]).

Oedipus Crow

Hughes's wider poetic interest in Oedipus is evident, most notably and unsurprisingly, in his "Crow" poems which were composed at around the same time as Hughes was 'versioning' Seneca. These poems would themselves come into direct dialogue with *Seneca's Oedipus*, not least through the stunningly irreverent "Song for a Phallus", which Schofield has called Crow's Senecan "crib" (189):

There was a boy was Oedipus
Stuck in his Mammy's belly
His Daddy'd walled the exit up
He was a horrible fella
Mamma Mamma

(Hughes, *Crow* 63)

This spin on the Oedipus myth was originally intended to form the text for the anti-tragic, bathetic dance which the Hughesian Senecan chorus performed at the conclusion of *Seneca's Oedipus* (Gifford and Roberts 103). In the end, a similar effect was achieved when the chorus danced off, carrying a huge gilded phallus, to the tune of 'Yes, we have no bananas' at the close of Brook's production: 'The tragic mood of balance and restraint, the hushed dismay of pained and reflective awe that besets and audience at the close of tragedy and even of disaster-melodrama is here rudely disbursed' (Clark 83-4).

In *Crow*, first published in 1970, we see the fully original working-through of Hughes's interpretation of the Oedipus theme, and its programmatic significance for his critique of enlightenment. The 'songs' (a deliberately ironic invocation of the epic and folkloric tradition of song: crows are, of course, the least musical of birds) of *Crow* also determinedly occupy that violent register for which Hughes, at this point in his career, was infamous. Now held to be amongst Hughes's greatest creative achievements, the collection initially faced a negative critical reception.[10] Roy Fuller's 'Views' for *The Listener* in March 1971, were characteristic; he dwelt on 'the pathological violence of [*Crow*'s] language, its anti-human ideas, its sadistic imagery' (297). In 1974, Calvin Bedient would still label Hughes 'a total nihilist' (101) and Crow's

songs, 'the croak of nihilism itself' (114). This assessment of the poetry accurately skewers its frequently ugly and violent language, though it misses the irony which also accompanies Crow's adventures and which gives critical insight into the intellectual project at the heart of the collection. In fact, Hughes's deployment of irony throughout the poems creates the conditions of possibility for the use of myth at all. Alert to the ways in which myth—however reconfigured in new forms, as here in *Crow*—might suggest a critical naivety, Hughes implies a self-consciousness which cannot take seriously its own urgent recommendations. In a very real sense, this is a problematising of the poetic-mythic form which finds its ethical counterpose in Hughes's later recognition—in his essay on Pilinszky—of the impossible price that words must pay in the post-war era.

Like Oedipus, Crow is both trickster and scapegoat. He also thrives (as his corvine nature dictates) on the debris and fall-out from the struggle between humanity and nature to which he is, furthermore, witness (as in 'Crow's Account of the Battle', *Crow* 21) and sometime-agent of human cosmic enmity:

> And Crow retched again, before God could stop him.
> And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck and tightened.
> The two struggled together on the grass.
> God struggled to part them, cursed, wept—
> Crow flew guiltily off.
>
> 'Crow's First Lesson' (*Crow* 16)

These latter elements, which make of Crow both a commentator on humanity *and* a folkloric symbol of it, represent an uneasy ambivalence which renders Crow an especially charged poetic characterisation. The collection's repetition of the imagery and vocabulary of sight (its first line: 'Black was the without eye', 'Two Legends' [*Crow* 9]; '[Crow] could not see much / But he peered out through the portholes at Creation', 'Crow and Mama' [*Crow* 13]'; 'And Crow has become a monster—his mere eyeblink / Holding the very globe in terror', 'Crow and Stone' [*Crow* 70], etc.) reproduces the same semantic—and deeply ironised—association of sight and knowledge which pervades the Oedipus myth, in both its Sophoclean and Senecan instantiations. Crow may see, but this facility, with its connotations of enlightenment, is representative both of his—and man's—utilitarian instrumentalisation of nature ('Theorems wrenched men in two', 'Crow's Account of the Battle', *Crow* 21), and also of the Oedipal delusion of self-knowledge which makes a mockery of man in a fatalistic universe. The stanza quoted above from 'Crow's First Lesson' also repeats Hughes's fraught gender binary. Crow will dramatise this in particularly Oedipal fashion, not only in his problematic and violent relationship with the natural world (as Oedipus with the Sphinx), even when he seeks to compel some kind of reconciliation ('But Crow Crow / Crow nailed them together, / Nailing Heaven and earth together— / ...Which became gangrenous and stank— / A horror beyond redemption. 'Crow Blacker than ever' [*Crow* 57]), but also in his incestuous and destructive fascination with the material, maternal body.

Following the opening sequence of poems which narrate his brutal birth (including a Sphinx-like inquisition of Crow as he emerges in 'Examination at the Womb-door' and who, like Oedipus, finds in himself the answer to the riddle: 'But who is stronger than death? / *Me, evidently.*' [*Crow* 11]), the infant Crow initiates that circular struggle which will come to exemplify the (gendered) disorder of man in the natural world:

When Crow cried his mother's ear
Scorched to a stump.

When he laughed she wept
Blood her breasts her palms her brow all wept blood.

...

And kept on and slept and at last

Crashed on the moon and awoke and crawled out

Under his mother's buttocks.

'Crow and Mama' (*Crow* 13).

At the centre of the book, we find the poem, 'Oedipus Crow'. In it, Hughes abbreviates the Oedipus story, taking, one could argue, a particularly Senecan line. At the start of the poem, Crow/Oedipus is already pursued by death, and the injury of his infancy, his pierced feet, is here knowingly configured as self-inflicted:

Mummies stormed his torn insides
...
He flew.
A gravestone fell on his foot
And took root—
He bit through the bone and he fled.

'Oedipus Crow' (*Crow* 35)

He escapes an organic reconciliation with 'the wet humus', and, decorated with the meaningless trappings of man's mechanical ingenuity and his will to govern time, runs 'cheered by the sound of his foot and its echo / And by the watch on his wrist'. Lame, he is easily 'tripped' by Death. The poem ends with a vivid image:

Crow dangled from his one claw—corrected.

A warning.

'Oedipus Crow' (*Crow* 35)

Here Hughes draws on the practice of catching and killing crows, and hanging their corpses along fences to ward off other corvids from newly sown fields or vulnerable

livestock. A common rural sight conflated with the universal warning about human nature: 'We have met the enemy and Crow is us' (Scicaj, *Ted Hughes* 4).

Crow, originally sketched out by Hughes in much longer form (as described above), was supposed to end optimistically, with Crow reconciled with Nature as his bride. Scigaj argues that this would have illustrated "the human potential to integrate self and environment and thus transcend aggressive conduct and the utilitarian rape of the environment" (*Ted Hughes* 71). Hughes's inability, in the end, to close the collection in this manner is pronounced. His lover, Assia Wevill, had, in March 1969, killed herself and their daughter, nicknamed Shura, and *Crow* is dedicated to their memory.[11] That Hughes found himself unable to complete his collection, which remained as mutilated as its language, may suggest both a response to the human tragedy which overtook Assia and Shura, and a recuperation and affirmation of the logic of his own programmatic critique of enlightenment: in the end, as he would continue to believe, even late in his career, 'the only easements are...temporary'.

This tragic, Oedipal, equation, that one may be simultaneously and inevitably innocent and guilty, expressed through Hughes's trademark violent poetic, puts considerable pressure on any twentieth-century privilege of enlightenment. Now, Hughes's decision to pare away the overt mythological references and rhetoric of the Senecan original, coupled with his efforts to produce a modern mythological sequence through *Crow*, takes on a more urgent, and markedly contemporary, appearance. The 'mythical substance' of the Oedipus story, far from being an allegory fixed in antiquity, becomes a quintessential universal critique of modern rationalism. This critique is not simply one of modern man's disastrous technocratic subjugation of nature, though through the recalling of Oedipus's triumphant encounter with the Sphinx we are faced with that (gendered) dynamic. It is a critique which suggests that, precisely like Oedipus, we are both innocent and guilty, locked in an ineluctable (self) destructive battle with the natural world. The ethical gamble that Hughes takes, the reconciliation he aspires to, is that poetry might be the vehicle both for exposing and narrating this tragic equation, and also the shamanistic means for effecting a kind of temporary reconciliation: his 'poetry is poetry written for a world that has lost its balance, poetry that can vividly portray the crisis, yet which also has a healing force through its emphasis on the holiness of the natural world and the mystery of the human psyche' (Sweeting 70).

The fact that, however, it is a Senecan *Oedipus* which emerges for Hughes as the most fitting example of this 'monstrous' mythical, tragic equation of human being, of course compels us to ask what the alternative might be. This is not, as Hughes himself admitted, the 'radiant moral world of Sophocles'. Indeed, Hughes's engagement with tragedy precisely disengages from the longstanding Western debate about the ethical value of (Greek) tragedy, as his anti-tragic Oedipal Crow so devastatingly depicts. For Moulin this makes of Hughes a post-tragic poet: 'l'œuvre de Hughes n'est pas tragique, mais, pour ainsi dire, *post-tragique*, puisque la tragedie est son point de depart' (258). We could reframe this definition further by recovering the *Senecan*

nature of Hughes's tragic poetic: in this sense, it is precisely post-tragic, and loaded with a dramatic irony and self-conscious fatalism. But such a position is won at the expense of rationality, with the absolute conviction that its redemption is impossible, and through a prism of ineluctable violent struggle. Perhaps, paying such a price, we should continue to ask at what cost we give up the Sophoclean predecessor.

Notes

1. The title is from Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus* 7-8.

2. It is possible to argue that Hughes believed the Holocaust, and its poetic-ethical implications, to be more 'European' concerns; Hughes would imply, in his poetry and in his prose, that the First World War—a war in which his father fought and whose memories inform his own—was the more significant event in British cultural consciousness. See, for instance his poems, 'Six Young Men', 'Mayday on Holderness', 'Wilfred Owen's Photographs', and 'The Last of the 1st/5th Lancashire Fusiliers' (amongst others). I would not be entirely convinced by this suggestion, however, since it suggests that Hughes had an entirely parochial poetic *Weltanschauung*, which his interest in primitivism, shamanism, and so on, would seem to contradict.

3. The seminal statement and exploration of this paradox, namely Enlightenment's irrational rationality and the uncanny relationship between enlightenment and violence, is made in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Amsterdam, 1947). There too Oedipus figures as a paradigm of dangerous Western rationality. See Adorno and Horkheimer, Fleming.

4. See, for instance, Lacoue-Labarthe, Leonard.

5. See, e.g., Hirschberg; Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* ch. 1; Drangsholt.

6. It is interesting to speculate, given the dialogue between Hughes and Eliot argued for by Talbot, "Eliot's Seneca", whether we can assume that Hughes was familiar—at least—with Eliot's essay, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca".

7. "He [Seneca] shortened the *Oedipus* so that of 1060 lines the chorus takes 330, the sacrifice and the necromancy scene 230 and only 500 lines are left for the action of the play itself."

8. It is worth noting at this point that this dramatic irony, explicit in Seneca's *Oedipus*, is a feature of the Senecan tragic stage which has proven compelling to his successors in the Renaissance and beyond. For what was first a Stoic presentation of man's preordained place in a provident universe becomes, in later drama, a knowing and self-reflexive engagement with the nature of drama—and with life as drama—itself. As Seneca's characters, in their oft-discussed relationship to the figures of Greek tragedy whose names they bear, walk the stage, they seem to embody an almost modern sense of themselves as *dramatis personae*, characters whose fate is necessarily always already pre-determined, and which they must somehow fulfill.

9. By enlarging the role of Jocasta for Irene Worth, Hughes did, however, create a pitiable heroine in Jocasta. This shifting of the moral compass onto the central female character is consistent with Hughes's thoroughgoing association of the female with the principle of Nature and the male with the violent logic which opposes it.

10. See, for instance, Sagar, Gifford and Roberts.

11. I will not comment here on the sad echoes of the suicide of Sylvia Plath or the significance of this. This debate rages on elsewhere.