An Exhumation:

Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes: Disinterred Ancient Texts

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Master of Arts by Research

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any other form for another degree or diploma at any other university or institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references given.

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Lenore Smith
March 31, 2005

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Thesis Abstract

Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes are major English language poets who, like others, disinter the bones of ancient texts and reclothe them in living flesh. This thesis argues that the poems discussed, which were published in the last decade of the twentieth century, expose and explore themes and ideas that have determined human action from ancient to modern times. Heaney, who is Irish and has an English publisher, is installed at the centre of the Anglo-American literary canon. Conversely, apart from *Birthday Letters* which offer segments of his relationship with Sylvia Plath, Hughes is largely ignored by American critics. In dealing with Hughes' last long poems, this thesis fills a gap in the critical literature. Examination reveals Hughes' work to be as powerful, disturbing, appealing and pertinent for modern readers as Heaney's.

The focus of the study is a detailed analysis of the poetry's power in a 1990s context of war, oppression and intermittent peace. Basic to the analysis is Heaney's repeated assertion: "the way an artist engages with the modern world is through the techniques of his art among other things, it doesn't have to be modern subject matter at all, I think" (qtd. in John Haffenden 66). The thesis establishes Heaney's ideal of modern relevance by exposing through close analysis continuous patterns of themes and ideas from ancient to modern times. Concurrently, the argument demonstrates similarities and differences in Heaney's and Hughes' poetic techniques.

An Exhumation:

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Primary Poetry Texts

Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

——. *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.

——. "Death of Orpheus." *After Ovid.* Eds. Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

——. "Mycenae Lookout." *Opened Ground.* London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

——. "Orpheus and Eurydice." *After Ovid.* Eds. Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

Hughes**,** Ted**.** *Aeschylus, The Oresteia.* London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

——. *Euripides, Alcestis.* London: Faber and Faber, 1999.

——. *Tales from Ovid.* London: Faber and Faber, 1997.

Primary Prose Texts

Heaney, Seamus "The Art of Poetry LXXV: Seamus Heaney." Henri Cole. Paris Review 39 (1997): 88-138.

——. "Crediting Poetry." *Opened Ground.* London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

——. "The drag of the golden chain." Times Literary Supplement 12 Nov. 1999, 14-5.

——. "Eulogy: Memorial Service for Ted Hughes." Guardian 16 May 16 1999. Online Guardian Archive. 28/05/1999.

——. *Finders Keepers. Selected Prose 1971-2001.* London: Faber and Faber, 2002.

——. *The Government of the Tongue.* London: Faber and Faber, 1988.

——. Interview. *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden.* John Haffenden. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.

——. *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978.* London: Faber and Faber, 1980.

——. *The Redress of Poetry.* London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

Hughes, Ted. "The Art of Poetry LXXI. (interview with poet Ted Hughes)." Drue Heinz. Paris Review 35 (1995): 55-95.

——. "Two Interviews conducted by the Author: Ted Hughes and *Crow (*1970), Ted Hughes and *Gaudete* (1977)." Ekbert Faas. *Ted Hughes: The Unaccomodated Universe.* Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow P, 1980.

——. *Winter Pollen.* Ed. William Scammell. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

Abbreviations

B	Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf*
CP	Heaney, Seamus. "Crediting Poetry"
CT	Heaney, Seamus. *The Cure at Troy*
DGC	Heaney, Seamus. "The drag of the golden chain"
DO	Heaney, Seamus. "The Death of Orpheus"
Eu	Heaney, Seamus. "Eulogy: Ted Hughes Memorial Service"
FK	Heaney, Seamus. *Finders Keepers*
GT	Heaney, Seamus. *Government of the Tongue*
HA	Heaney, Seamus. "Interview – John Haffenden"
ML	Heaney, Seamus. "Mycenae Lookout"
P	Heaney, Seamus. *Preoccupations*
PA	Heaney, Seamus. "Interview – Henri Cole"
OE	Heaney, Seamus. "Orpheus and Eurydice"
RP	Heaney, Seamus. *The Redress of Poetry*

A	Hughes, Ted. *Alcestis*
FA	Hughes, Ted. "Interview – Ekbert Faas"
DH	Hughes, Ted. "Interview – Drue Heinz"
TO	Hughes, Ted. *The Oresteia*
Ov	Hughes, Ted. *Tales from Ovid*
WP	Hughes, Ted. *Winter Pollen*

All textual references (B 32, Ov 115) cite page numbers.

Contents

Introduction

Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes are major English language poets who, like others, disinter the bones of older texts and reclothe them in living flesh. This thesis argues that the poems selected for discussion expose and explore themes and ideas that have determined human action from ancient to modern times. Written in contemporary colloquial language and appealing to the feelings of modern readers in a political context of war, oppression and intermittent peace, the themes in the poems are continuous through history and still relevant to modern readers. The thesis argument is supported by a close examination of the poetry which focuses attention on the texts, not in relation to their accuracy or otherwise as translations, but in order to demonstrate their poetic skill and power.

Especially in regard to Hughes' work the thesis fills a gap in the critical literature. Heaney's *Beowulf* has received much attention and some reviews have identified parallels to modern society, though not in any detail. Connections have however been made between Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout", *The Cure at Troy* and twentieth-century conflicts in Northern Ireland. Published posthumously, Hughes' *The Oresteia* and *Alcestis* have received critical attention only in reviews and three essay-length articles, none connected with the present topic. His *Tales from Ovid*, which won a prestigious prize, has been considered more often. Modern relevance has been noted in discussions reliant on Hughes' Introduction, which argues a parallel between Ovid's disintegrating Roman Empire and the modern era. A hypothesis is argued later to explain the lack of

interest in Hughes' last two texts compared with the enormous critical concern with Heaney's *Beowulf*.

Heaney's and Hughes' stated ideas, theories, arguments and objectives in connection with poetry reveal both similarities and differences in their approaches and in degrees of emphasis on the submerged themes, that are explicated below. The poets' collaboration in the editing of two poetry anthologies and Heaney's Foreword to the second volume, *The School Bag*, confirms a correlation between their underlying ideas on poetry. For example each identifies independently a connection between poetry and music. Heaney's music has the lilt and dance of a clarinet while Hughes' is like a kettle drum overriding the contrapuntal flutes. Critics of the violence in Hughes' poetry see his language as gratuitously ugly, but I argue that it engages contemporary readers through what Heaney terms its "cry and bawl" (Heaney HA 73-4). Likewise Heaney's language, some of which he terms "rough", engages modern readers as a continuing reflection of human failings, feelings and aspirations. However while Hughes' language is exposed on the cliff edge that separates atrocity from decency, Heaney's lurks in the undergrowth and feigns a less confronting mien. While fascinating contrasts emerge, the poetic analysis nonetheless also reveals astonishing similarities. Works by both poets bring subliminal self-interest and greed and contrary acts of heroism, sacrifice and hope into full consciousness.

Approach

Chapter one expounds the issues of translation, modern relevance and poetic language as these are relevant to the thesis argument. It enunciates connections and parallels among the selected poems, and closes by arguing a hypothesis to explain the reception of Hughes' poetry. Subsequent chapters explore in turn the submerged themes of revenge, power, greed and self-interest, grief, sacrifice, heroism and hope, identified by poetical analysis and continuous from ancient times into the modern world. Each chapter analyses passages of poetry that illuminate one of the identified themes. The discussion moves from "the life-waste and spirit-waste" (Heaney CP 455) themes and motifs of the first chapters towards healing ideas of redemption and hope. Analysis exposes similarities between Heaney's and Hughes' poetic language, as well as differences which are most apparent in images of the same event. An example is Agamemnon's death, where Heaney's metaphors of water contrast with Hughes' metaphors of blood.

This study acknowledges that a theoretical position in much current literary criticism denies the existence of an essential human nature. This position claims that the material world is a play of forces, paradoxes, contradictions and ambiguities which cannot be understood using rational categories. Theory also often postulates that responses and interpretations are ideologically constructed. In this study I apply an earlier humanist approach, based on the understanding that individual readers will engage with the identified themes through personal experience and empathy. I argue that this engagement is at the heart of the poetry's appeal. Poetry lives within the senses and

demands an emotional response. Heaney affirms that what Václav Havel said about hope can also be said about poetry: “it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons” (Havel qtd. in Heaney RP 4). While recent academic positions such as New Historicism argue that emotions have a history and should be subjected to critical analysis, I argue in Chapter 1 that these and similar theories are not relevant to the contemporary poems analysed. Three decades ago Heaney sounded a warning against some aspects of modern theory: “the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes” (P 219).

A number of disciplines apply the term “archetype” in varied theoretical discussions. The following literary connotations are useful for the purposes of this study as they identify Heaney’s and Hughes’ interest in human constants. In speaking of the relationship of analytical psychology to poetry, Carl Jung discerns primordial images which he calls “archetypes”. He defines these as repeated types of experience that survive in the collective unconscious of the human race – a figure or process “that constantly recurs . . . wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed” (1001). In discussing literature, Northrop Frye applies the term “archetype” to a discernment of identifiable, organising, structural patterns, and suggests that “there may be archetypes of genres as well as of images” (1449). As an active contributor to debates about his verse (Michael Allen 8; Ronald Tamplin 101), Heaney similarly identifies recurring archetypal patterns of human behaviour. He develops Jung’s argument that “by giving [the archetypal image] shape the artist translates it into the language of the present”

(1001-2). Heaney states: “the way an artist engages with the modern world is through the techniques of his art among other things, it doesn’t have to be modern subject matter at all, I think” (HA 66). Robert Brazeau elaborates further when he writes that Heaney: “moves past issues of historical specificity while emphasizing the transcendental themes in the work” (92). Hughes forges links between the archetypal subject matter of his poems and the modern world through colloquial language and specific images. His analogy of a heart transplant and metaphor of a nuclear blast exemplify such links.

All the chosen texts were published in the last decade of the twentieth century. While conflict has always existed, this was a turbulent era in history, encouraging modern readers’ identification and empathy with ancient troubles. Heaney’s and Hughes’ new poetic versions give access to comparable ancient events for those who do not read the original languages.

Chapter 1

Fragments of Bone

Thesis Argument

Three issues pertinent to the thesis argument: translation, modern relevance and poetic language, emerge as fundamental to the present project. This chapter addresses each of these in turn, noting relevance to the poems selected. The first issue, translation, is considered in two subsections – the theoretical position of translation in literary scholarship, and the relevance of different theories of translation to the selected poems. The chapter concludes with a hypothesis to explain the reception of Hughes' poetry.

Authorship and Translation

Theoretical Position

This study departs from the traditional view of translation as an imitation or copy which is of a lesser value than the original (Lawrence Venuti *Scandals* 1). Instead I adopt a theoretical position which argues that meaning is not fixed, that *any* copy *must* differ from the original and that one is not to be privileged above the other. Additionally I argue that the question of copyright is irrelevant in this study. It is demonstrated below that poets often regard any translation of a poem as a remaking of the material, with strong elements of originality. This study treats the selected poems as versions created on and around ancient subject matter that are worthy of attention in their own right: "the spirit is intact yet made new" (Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf qtd. in George Steiner *After Babel* 267).

Discursive strategies both in language and interpretation support the position concerning authorship and translation adopted in this thesis. George Steiner discerns that "language is in perpetual change", and that any reading of a text "out of the past of one's own language and literature is a manifold act of interpretation" (17). Each interpretation reflects many influences, including context, relevance for the target audience, and cultural repressions and differences from the source language and period.

Steiner develops the notion of translation as interpretation by arguing that conditions and events when the translation is carried out will influence or even allow or disallow its creation. He notes, as an example of this, the "untranslatability of Aristophanes in the latter half of the nineteenth century . . . Less than a hundred years later the elements . . . had moved into focus" (249). It is only experience, repressions and relevance in a particular time and culture which enable engagement with a text, and each generation's and each culture's differing experiences will result in a different interpretation. I argue that Heaney's and Hughes' poems are interpretations of ancient texts manifestly relevant in the West in the late twentieth century. Venuti says that Richmond Lattimore's *Iliad* "bridged the linguistic and cultural differences that separated his readers from the Greek text, . . . rewriting it according to dominant domestic values" (*Scandals* 101). Heaney and Hughes are following Lattimore.

Steiner's seminal text explicates ideas and theories of translation, and he and others whom he quotes apply a number of terms: "recreative versions, reinterpretation, transformational, transmutation" (*After Babel* 247, 249, 259, 261). These create a space

in which to situate the analyses of Heaney's and Hughes' interpretations that comprise this study. Steiner identifies three classes of translation, of which "the third class is that of imitation, recreation, variation, interpretative parallel", and this class extends into "the freest, perhaps only allusive or parodistic echoes" (253). I argue that Heaney's and Hughes' poems are both "recreative" and at times particularly "allusive" in their connection with the source material.

Furthermore, Steiner notes arguments which confirm that translations of poetry ought to be considered differently from prose: "poetry is, as always, the critical instance" (261). For Ben Jonson, a requisite in a true poet is "creative ingestion", an ability to "convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use" (qtd. in Steiner 255). Rainer Maria Rilke contends that "each word in a poem is semantically unique" (qtd. in Steiner 241), while Roman Jakobson in a discussion of linguistic aspects of translation affirms that: "poetry" . . . is 'by definition' untranslatable. Only 'creative transposition' is possible" (qtd. in Steiner 261). Poet translators other than Heaney and Hughes also support the contention that the translation of a poem is a unique creation (Don Johnston, Mabel Lee "Interview"). This authoritative position of "untranslatability" supports the following analysis and appreciation of Heaney's and Hughes' poems independently of the original works.

Additionally Steiner cites an analogy between translation and a composer who writes variations on another composer's theme (254), concluding that: "because it is interpretation, translation extends far beyond the verbal medium" (261). Since both

Heaney (P 44-5, 61-2, GT 92) and Hughes (DH 82-3, 92, FA 208, WP 245) perceive a close connection between poetry and music, Steiner's analogy further supports the current project. A piano concerto is an interpretation by the pianist, and a symphonic work is an interpretation by the conductor, and each introduces new and variable elements that differentiate them from the composer's basic conception and from other performances.

Following Steiner, Lawrence Venuti, who is a practitioner of translation rather than a theoretician, questions current concepts of originality and authorship and argues that the latter relies on two premises: "the Romantic concept of original authorship which negates the translator's work" (*Scandals* 49), and a "legally constructed . . . response to changing cultural and social conditions" (55). He cites a genealogy of legal arguments concerning translation and contradictory rulings on copyright – the right of an author to own a text – which have emerged since the eighteenth century. In eighteenth-century rulings "originality was assumed to be a precise selection and arrangement of words, regardless of whether those words were intended to imitate another work" (56). However the "Romantic concept of authorship came to dominate the law" (58). Its influence is first noted late in the eighteenth century and it prevailed in law by the middle of the next century (54). Venuti deduces that the current copyright law therefore protects a "concept of authorship . . . [which is] a god-like essence of individuality" (51), and he disputes the prevailing idea in law, where "meaning is assumed to be an unchanging essence embedded in language" (59). He further argues that the selection, arrangement and elaboration of materials that already exist in a culture, "the structures

and themes that have accumulated in the various cultural discourses of that language . . . are never raw [that is original] or natural [but] always culturally coded by previous uses" (61). This argument is another strong defence for the procedure adopted here, of analysing Heaney's and Hughes' interpretations independently of their sources.

In a reflection of the view argued by Steiner, and following Jacques Derrida, Joseph F. Graham, the editor of a collection of essays on translation and a practising translator, affirms that "the effect of deconstruction has already been to question the very notions that have long defined translation" (19). As well as Venuti, this is argued by John Johnston who affirms that the traditional view of translation as an imitation "rests on a falsely static view of language" (43). Poststructuralist thinkers including Derrida and Paul de Man "question the concepts of originality and authorship that subordinate the translation" (Venuti *Rethinking* 7). Derrida notes the "limits of the prevalent concept of translation . . . [and its] multiple problems" (92), one of which is "the effacement of language [*la langue*]" (93-4). In a characteristic argument, he substitutes various notions, including "textural superimprinting, transference, transformation" (83, 87, 94), for that of translation. Following Gilles Deleuze, who argues for an overturning of Platonism's "model-copy distinction", Johnston argues further that "translations propose themselves as the 'origin' of a new set of meanings" (48-9).

In sum, Steiner's discussion of an interpretative model especially as applied to poetry, and the variations, recreative versions, transformations, transmutations and reinterpretations that ensue; Venuti's attribution of authority to translator and

translations; and the poststructuralist discussion of language by such theorists as Deleuze, Derrida, Graham, and Johnston, underlie my position and are the basis for the treatment in the present study of the selected poems without close reference to their sources. My position is confirmed in practice by the following literary critical commentary, which identifies transformations and reinterpretations of the ancient texts in the poems discussed.

Selected Poems

In addition to my position on authorship and translation stated above, I argue that Heaney and Hughes themselves regard the poems selected for study not as translations but as re-workings or acts of interpretation. Furthermore, some poems select only fragments of the original poetic skeleton. Only Heaney's *Beowulf* of the selected poems is intended as a close translation, and even in *Beowulf* critical reception notes many deviations from the literal meaning of the source. This supports my argument that Heaney produced an interpretation suited to a new time and place, thereby challenging once again the traditional view of translation as a mere copy. While a powerful poetic translation will preserve the sense, feeling and excitement of the original, new elements from the translator's poetic persona, the actual conditions that he experiences, and his imaginative representation of those conditions (Heaney RP xvi) will also influence the version produced. This is manifestly the case with the selected texts, as the following discussion demonstrates.

In practice, Heaney and Hughes retain the generic framework of poem, play or myth and, by using contemporary language, build around this scaffolding so that, like a Gaudi building, their poetry diverges from the original concept. In “Mycenae Lookout” Heaney selects fragments of a myth to create a new poem of conflict and hope. *The Cure at Troy* draws attention through allusions, additions and vernacular language to links created between Troy and Northern Ireland and thus echoes with the pain of dispossession and marginalisation (Heaney qtd. in Hugh Denard 17). Both poets craft versions of well known tales that Ovid, in his turn, had selected from Greek and Roman myths and re-presented in the *Metamorphoses.* Hughes notes Ovid’s textual selectiveness, pointing out that “Ovid is of little use” as a guide to the original forms of the myths (Ov viii). Likewise it is argued that Heaney’s and Hughes’ poems diverge in their turn from Ovid’s template precisely because they are written in contemporary language. Hughes’ *Alcestis* and *The Oresteia* are filtered through earlier English translations (Keith Sagar “Alcestis” 5) which distance them from their origin texts. As happened with Heaney’s *Beowulf,* critics frequently delineate textual divergences from the original, as well as additions and omissions in the poems selected, further supporting my treatment of them without close reference to sources.

Critical discussions of *Beowulf* acknowledge Heaney’s poetical skill in transferring an early medieval poem into modern English (Michael Alexander 3, Bruce Murphy 4, Thomas Napierkowski 1). Heaney’s pre-emptive response to criticism of the accuracy of his translation in his introduction to *Beowulf* explains word choice, his inherited “word-hoard”, his variation of metrical rules, and “deviations, distortions, syncopations

and extensions" (B xxii-xxx). Notwithstanding the intentions of Heaney and his commissioning publisher, differing views are expressed by Old English experts and in some instances these challenge the notion of close translation and even question whether Heaney's *Beowulf* is a translation in the traditional sense. Professor Howell Chickering for instance notes "Heaney's efforts to mark the translation as his own poem" (2). This position is developed by Nicholas Howe who suggests that Heaney is "not really a translator of the poem at all. He is, rather, a reinventor of the poem", who remakes "the literary and cultural history of the British Isles" (9). Howe approves some of the translated speeches but overall uses "reinventor" as a term of disparagement. The traditional culture of translation privileges the original language, and critical discussion of Heaney's *Beowulf* therefore focuses on his language choice in relation to the Old English original.

However other criticism of this poem inadvertently undermines the validity of close translation as a goal. Loren C. Gruber and Napierkowski report that the language of Heaney's *Beowulf* is "alien to American readers" (Gruber 78), and that "some of Heaney's lines suggest an unfamiliarity with American English" (Napierkowski 4). In their assumption of a dominant cultural form of American English, they question the "presumed unity of what is called the corpus of a language" (Derrida 100), in this instance the unity of standard English. Their arguments reveal differences in the culture and interpretation of modern English as the target language of Heaney's poem. By selecting unusual, often Irish, words or phrases: "thole, bawn", and commencing the poem with the exclamation "So", Heaney deviates from traditional translation practices,

and in accordance with the current American hegemony in critical practice, his selection has been criticised as inappropriate (Gruber 78, Howe 4, Conor McCarthy 152, Napierkowski 4, Tom Shippey 9). His "Ulster vernacular" is also condemned (Howe 7, McCarthy 151). Conversely, Daniel Donoghue (20) and Joseph McGowan (39) argue that affinities already exist between Heaney's earlier poetry and *Beowulf* and that Old English is part of his "voice-right", which Heaney names as a "pre-natal link" (DGC 14). Notions expressed by American critics when English-language differences come into play challenge the view of translation as a predetermined copy, supporting the approach and methodology adopted here.

Similarly, I argue that Hughes' *Tales from Ovid, The Oresteia* and *Alcestis,* which he called "versions", can be treated independently of their sources, because they incorporate textual divergences that critics identify and sometimes condemn. Bernard Knox, a classicist, castigates what he terms Hughes' lack of self-control in *Tales from Ovid*: "speeches and actions that have no basis in the original" (12). In contrast, John Carey and Michael Hofmann see the additions as positive: "Hughes invents a passage of such power that it would be impossible to guess, without consulting the original, that it was not his master's voice" (Carey 2). Additionally, Knox identifies in Hughes' *The Oresteia* major divergences, consisting of both interpolations and omissions, from the original Greek play, and complains that they produce a "travesty of the great original" (12). In a more temperate review, Steiner also notes omissions, additions and tonal changes ("Greek" 3). David Gervais expresses a contrary view to Knox's when he focuses on the poetry and praises Hughes' language as "reaching back as well as

forwards" ("Tragedy" 140). He sees Hughes' version as being "quite frank about being a modern poem rather than an imitation" (150). Knox also damns Hughes' *Alcestis:* "more than half of the text of this book is spurious" (13), while Sagar refers more positively to Hughes' expansion in *Alcestis* of the original's "passing reference" to the Orpheus myth (*Foxes* 85). As well, Hughes' robust colloquial language creates a more human and less supernatural Heracles than early recountings of the twelve labours. Gervais argues that the resulting version of *Alcestis* "shows Hughes as a fully-fledged dramatist . . . and not just as a poet-translator" (*Alcestis* 150). Such critical conflicts are further explored below. However a consensus of critical comments on Hughes' poems selected for study provides a precedent for my treatment of them without close reference to the sources.

Modern Relevance

Significant adaptations to a modern readership are present in the selected poems. Heaney's and Hughes' interpretations suture myth, analogy and imagery to establish composite templates for the failings and feelings of ancient and modern humans. Both poets explore themes which emerge from subliminal processes, reflecting the archetypes perceived by Jung. Myths are a leading form of template patterning discernable in the poems. Claude Lévi-Strauss calls myth "timeless" and argues that it "explains the present and the past as well as the future" (103).

Heaney's and Hughes' poems reflect this position, whereby present actions are explained in terms of past events. Heaney draws attention in interviews, seminars and

lectures to the relationships between ancient and modern events that his poetry envisages. He sees poems as “elements of continuity” (Heaney P 41) and asserts they are “an attempt to rhyme the contemporary with the archaic” (PA 115). He confirms this goal by describing how a sequence of poems blended “atrocities, past and present” in his mind (P 57-8). In a later poem, “The Border Campaign” (2001), he implies the modern relevance of his *Beowulf* by forming a connection across a millenium. He “rhymes the contemporary with the archaic” when he expresses outrage at the destruction of two symbols of authority: a Northern Ireland courthouse destroyed in time present and the hall in Heorot destroyed in time past: “I was a part of then” (*Electric Light* 18). In a further emphasis on connection between present and past, the last three lines of “The Border Campaign” repeat images of Grendel’s dismembered hand and arm from *Beowulf* (31-2). Heaney continues to link his poetical interpretations of the past with contemporary events in *The Burial at Thebes* (76), first published in 2004.

Unlike Heaney, who openly identifies parallels between contemporary events and the subject matter of his poems, Hughes provides little public comment on his work, leaving elucidation of his poetry to the critics. While he identifies aspects of the environment, including living creatures, as a resource for his poetry, he sees myth as the poetic code for the human spirit (Heaney Eu 1). He affirms that the powerful notions emerging from myth are “projections of man’s inner and outer world” (Hughes WP 138), and in mining his imaginative inner world he appropriates and transposes ideas from “the whole deposit of earlier and other religion, myth, vision” (Hughes qtd. in

Sagar *Foxes* 4). Although Hughes rarely identifies parallels between poetry and world events, he states in a 1995 interview that: “The poetry translation boom of the sixties was inseparable, I think, from the Vietnam War” (DH 90). He discerns a change in values and ideas “in a war situation” and suggests that “last-ditch human values” take precedence (90). Poetry is one of the voices of value which is then heard (90). In the same interview he voices a “sense of impending global disaster” and links an “appetite” for poetry with this sense (91).

Instead of expounding connections with modern “global disasters” in comments on his poetry, Hughes implies their existence through the poems’ specific words and images. Many of these link the old narrative thread with the feelings and ideas of modern readers, while leaving space for critics to explicate the connections. Such a connection is obvious, for example, in the image of a nuclear blast turning matter to shadow (Hughes Ov 99). Accordingly the critic John Carey notes that “his description recalls Hiroshima” (3), while Kate Clanchy comments on the metaphor of “a nuclear bomb” in Death’s speech in *Alcestis* (50). The image of a heart transplant donor in *Alcestis* carries a “grim resonance for audiences in the age of organ transplants” (Knox 13). For Gervais too, Hughes’ *The Oresteia* “often reads like a premonition of modern history” (“Tragedy” 141). This insight was confirmed by a London dramatisation at the Royal National Theatre, directed by Katie Mitchell in 1999, which evoked images of the Balkan civil war (Performance Reviews: Michael Billington, Susannah Clapp, Erica Kylander-Clark).

Similarly, Heaney's poetry blends past and present analogous events, and critical discussions discern a modern relevance. Unlike Hughes often Heaney confirms this relevance in elucidating his poetry (HA 66). Denard argues that "the project of reworking Greek tragedy [*The Cure at Troy*] . . . enabled Heaney to explore and articulate the interface between history and myth (ancient and modern)" (3). He notes that a passage from *The Cure at Troy* was cited by the Irish president in her inauguration speech, and repeated a year later by the United States President in the context of cease-fire negotiations in Northern Ireland, confirming that contemporary readers perceived parallels between ancient and modern conflicts. At a 1995 seminar Heaney affirmed an analogous "visionary possibility" for Northern Ireland (qtd. in Denard 15). Brazeau likewise confirms modern relevance when he argues that Heaney "picks up on themes that are latent in the original" and explores them within the context of contemporary Ireland (84). Such latent themes including issues of political repression are further considered below. Similarly, in a discussion of "Mycenae Lookout", Helen Vendler draws analogies between the "aftermath of the Trojan War, [and] the aftermath of Northern Ireland's quarter-century of civil conflict" (156). A review by Nicholas Jenkins notes the same connection (163).

Additionally a heightened contemporary fascination with violence incites an interest in brutal narratives of the past, an effect which has been noted by critics and researchers. This is particularly apposite to versions of *Beowulf* and to reworked Ovid myths. Janet Thormann stated in 1997 that "the Old English poem [*Beowulf*] shares with contemporary popular culture a fascination with and immersion in violence" (65), and

that this is one reason for its continued popularity. The myths that Ovid selected and represented as the *Metamorphoses* depict a rapidity of action comparable with modern action movies (Italo Calvino qtd. in Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun xi). When they are reworked by modern poets, including Heaney and Hughes, both of whom contributed poems to *After Ovid,* one of a number of new publications based on the *Metamorphoses,* these myths have a renewed appeal. The editors of *After Ovid* suggest many reasons for this, including the "extreme forms of human behaviour and suffering" depicted, which people "think of as peculiarly modern" (Hofmann and Lasdun xi). They add: "[t]he stories have direct, obvious and powerful affinities with contemporary reality" (xi). In the introduction to his later collection, *Tales from Ovid*, Hughes further explicates these affinities and establishes their potency for contemporary readers.

Poetic Language

Critical reception of Hughes' poetry has focused on his language, often condemning it as ugly and violent. In contrast, Heaney's language, which can be just as confronting, escapes this labelling. I argue that Hughes is not like the poets who "wanted it cosy" (Hughes FA 201), and that the violence in his poetry reflects the violence that he perceived in a modern world in crisis.

The predatory nature of living creatures depicted in early Hughes' poems initiated the accusation of brutal language often raised by critics. Although Edwin Muir's review of Hughes' first collection qualified perceived poetic violence as "admirable" (Hughes WP 251), much later criticism applied it in a negative and condemnatory sense (FA 197).

The derivation of violence from *vis,* force, means both a vital force and a destructive force and it was in the sense of a vital force that it was first applied. Hughes explicates his view of this use of "violence" in interviews (FA 197-215) and in a later extensive essay, "Poetry and Violence" (WP 251-67), where he questions the role of the word in modern criticism. He goes on to ask: "Who are the poets of violence . . . You'd have to begin with Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, the Beowulfs, Dante, Shakespeare, Blake. When is violence violence and when is it great poetry?" (FA 198) Other critics present a more balanced view in keeping with Hughes' own argument (Ekbert Faas, Heaney P, Stuart Hirschberg, Joanny Moulin, Craig Robinson, Sagar *Foxes,* Ann Skea). Leonard Scigaj, who has exhaustively researched the critical reception of Hughes' poetry, suggests that the violence there is always "mediated and controlled" (*Critical* 33).

Hughes refuses to veil atrocities with pretty language. Instead he chooses words that reflect the ugliness of exploitation, oppression and torture, partly through guttural consonant alliteration and partly through explicit vocabulary that creates revolting visual images. Writing of atrocities committed in the Balkan civil war, Robin May Schott asks: "How should these horrors be described? Is any description a form of complicity and voyeurism? Or is the greatest form of complicity silence?" (4) Hughes is neither complicit nor silent, and his "outcry" is identified by Miroslav Holub who argues, "the poem must have blood (and not just juices, words and postcard images)" (220-1). Hughes' poems rarely present postcard images, but neither are they bloody offerings catering for voyeurs and the depraved.

Hughes' poetry is not "cosy". Rather than conveying a sense of euphoria, rest or comfort, the poems explicate the beauty and suffering which co-exist in the world. In much of his poetry he explores these experiences through the persona of a sympathetic but impartial observer. He has been criticised for the "uglification" of *The Oresteia* and *Alcestis* in his use of "ugly" language, and Knox has complied a list of words to support this criticism (12). Removed from their context of war they appear excessive, but Knox has ignored the point surely being made by Hughes' explicit language, that war is ugly and filled with horror. Additionally his word choice subverts the glorification of war (TO 19-20), and challenges the notion that war resolves problems (TO 25).

Heaney likewise emphasises the horrors of war through specific language. In "Mycenae Lookout", both his watchman and the reader are disturbed by the nightmare brutalities of battle. However Heaney's observer, a recurrent figure in his poetry, also participates in the brutalities through the agony of shared experiences. Thus, through an implied inclusiveness: "My soul wept" (ML 419), Heaney's explicit language avoids the condemnation heaped on Hughes'. Like Hughes, Heaney challenges the notion that war resolves problems (CT 1, 3). Even in *Beowulf,* where fighting is glorified and ugly images abound, a subversion of the glorification of war is evident in the image of an "emptied earth" containing a single surviving veteran (B 71-2).

As an active literary critic, Heaney pays tribute to Hughes' skills with language in a poem, "On His Work in the English Tongue", dedicated to Hughes and first published

in the *Sunday Times* on October 11 1998. A reworked version appeared in *Electric Light* published in 2001:

> Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end
> Not past a thing. Not understanding or telling
> Or forgiveness.
> But often past oneself,
> Pounded like a shore by the roller griefs
> In language that can still knock language sideways. (Heaney 61)

I argue that Hughes' poetic language is both powerful and disturbing, a contention supported here by Heaney's verse. In the following chapters I explore the richness of Hughes' metaphors and the vividness and accuracy of his imagery in analyses of selected passages. Heaney's poetic language is likewise explicated as the themes identified above are exposed and analysed.

Hypothesis: US Reception of Heaney and Hughes

Most literary critical discourse arises in the United States, Great Britain, and European Union countries such as France and Germany. Of these, the United States, as in many other fields, assumes a leading role. There Hughes' poetry, except for *Birthday Letters*, receives little attention, in contrast with Heaney's work. This section argues that a number of factors contribute to this result.

Academic interest in ancient Greek and Latin studies is waning and university courses in the classics have been substantially reduced. Three of Hughes' last four works have their foundations in classical ancient texts. Reduced academic interest is reflected in a reduced critical discourse, which however contrasts with a strong popular culture

interest in the classic world, mediated through novels like *Pompeii,* through theatre performances, television documentaries and movies such as the US-produced *Troy.* Thus this study argues that unexamined academic and critical assumptions of non-relevance are erroneous, and that modern interest in ancient narrative is sustained by its inherent contemporary relevance, and in both oral and visual media. Additionally, one researcher notes that Irish writers have produced eleven adaptations of Greek tragedies in the period 1984 to 1997 compared with few or none in the previous fifty years (Colin Teevan 77-8). Teevan explains this revival by suggesting that Irish writers identify connections between themes in these tragedies and conflicts in contemporary Ireland. Heaney has since added *The Burial at Thebes* to this number. Billington argues: "the escalating horrors of the 20th (and now 21st) century explain the passionate renewal of interest in Greek drama" (qtd. in Jo Litson R16).

In contrast to the declining courses in classics, academic interest in Old English is strong, with many courses offered and with dedicated web sites, particularly in the United States. This accounts for the relative academic popularity of Heaney's *Beowulf,* a verse translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem, commissioned for *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* and published both in England and in the United States.

Furthermore, apart from a brief early residence in the United States, Hughes has lived and written in England. By contrast, for part of each year Heaney lives and works in the United States as a visiting poetry professor. Academic appointments to US universities broaden fellow academics' awareness of scholarly work. Helen Vendler, friend and

critic, is one of a group of Heaney's colleagues and critics who have helped to position his poetry in the American literary canon. Andrews argues that Heaney is "installed at the very centre of that canon" (7). In addition, given the many Americans of Irish descent, things Irish are of great interest, including Heaney's poetry.

Writing in 1986, Scigaj noted: "Critical reception of the poetry of Ted Hughes in the United States has been lethargic for years" (*Poetry* xiii). My research indicates that interest declined further during the 1990s, when the poems by Hughes to be studied in the present work were published. Scigaj notes also the failure of Hughes' American publisher to issue his entire output [as of 1986], a fact no longer relevant as an explanation of critical lethargy when online booksellers evade national publishing cartels, allowing global access to texts.

Research reveals that in the United States Hughes' work is inevitably linked with Plath's, who was an American citizen. Blake Morrison argues: "[i]n that continent, [America] poets and critics either demonize Hughes or regard him as a minor adjunct to Sylvia Plath" (29). The Plath / Hughes coupling was evident at the third Ted Hughes' International Conference convened at Lyon in February 2000, when five of the fourteen participants presented papers developing this approach. Scigaj strongly criticised the *Modern Language Association* for supporting this "one-sided focus" (*Critical* 29), but it continues in 2004, five years after the publication of Hughes' last works, as confirmed by my research. One half of online *MLA* searches – "Ted Hughes" – produces results tied to Plath, while a search for scholarly essays pertaining to Hughes' *The Oresteia* and

Alcestis gives a single digit result with no journals sourced in the United States. This contrasts with the many essays pertaining to Heaney's *Beowulf,* also published in 1999. This lack of interest was sustained in the understated critical reception of *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems,* published in 2003.

* * *

This chapter addresses and resolves three debatable issues which underlie the present study – translation, modern relevance and poetic language. Additionally a hypothesis is argued to explain the lack of critical attention afforded Hughes' poetry in contrast with Heaney's.

My position in respect of translation is supported by Steiner who discerns that poetry in translation differs from the position of prose. He and others apply a number of terms, including "recreative" and "transformational", that create a space in which to situate Heaney's and Hughes' poetical interpretations. Venuti questions current concepts of authorship and copyright law – the right of an author to own a text – and affirms that they conflict with current literary theory. The traditional idea of translation as an imitation fails to acknowledge changes in the theoretical position of language in literary discourse. Poststructuralists argue that language is not static and meaning is not fixed. I argue also that these are modern poems, sufficiently distant from their origin to be examined in this thesis without close reference to their sources. Moreover, except for Heaney's *Beowulf,* the texts examined were not intended by their authors as literal translations but as poetical interpretations and adaptations of ancient stories. My approach to the primary works is further supported by critical commentary which draws

attention to many textual divergences from the source literature. Even Heaney's *Beowulf* is considered by some Old English experts to be an interpretation rather than a literal translation. In sum, my decision to approach the poems as late twentieth-century works has considerable support from practitioners of translation, from poststructuralist literary theory and from published criticism of the selected poems.

In this study I note indications of modern relevance in the poetry, even though the subject matter is not modern. Devices like allegory and analogy create connections between past and present. Patterns of thought and ideas discernible in the poems reflect patterns in the contemporary world. Some parallels are confirmed by Heaney, while critical assessments of his poetry note modern relevance and often further expound the connections. While Hughes refrains from critical comment on his own work, specific words and images in his poems create connections and parallels with modern events, and again these are often elucidated by critics.

The "violence" of Hughes' poetic language is a major issue for some critics who condemn Hughes' language but not Heaney's. The view argued above is that both poets use explicit language to expose violent and ugly actions as appropriate to their subject matter. Such language subverts the glorification of war and challenges the notion that war resolves problems. Hughes positions himself as a sympathetic but impartial observer, while Heaney's observer-persona shares the horrific experience. Heaney pays tribute to the power of Hughes' poetic language, which is insufficiently acknowledged.

While he is arguably as brilliant, as creative and as powerful a poet, Hughes has not received the same level of academic attention as Heaney. Hughes shares through his poetry a rich and complex vision which both disturbs and informs the receptive reader. This vision, and the wonderful power of his poetic language continues to be insufficiently acknowledged in literary and critical exchanges. The present study therefore seeks to fill a gap in the critical literature, following a general failure by many critics and academics to acknowledge Hughes' rightful status among modern English language poets.

The following chapters analyse identified themes, commencing with processes of revenge which drench the poems.

Chapter 2

Revenge

> Revenge begets revenge,
> Truth spins and evaporates
> As blood drains from the head. (Hughes TO 78)

One of the most powerful and destructive motives in the modern world is revenge, issuing in acts of retaliation, retribution or vengeance. However while revenge motivates many acts of violence and maintains national, ethnic and religious conflicts, it is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Old Testament theology incorporates "divers laws and ordinances" in which specific crimes and the appropriate punishments are named (Exodus 20). If compliance with the judgement does not follow, or further injury is inflicted, the theology unequivocally supports retaliation or revenge: "if *any* mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye" (Exodus 21:23-4). Such verses indicate the approval given since ancient times of this form of satisfaction. The Bible nevertheless insists that crimes or disputes should be brought before the justice system for a resolution before vengeance is sought, a procedure often ignored over the centuries. Some acts of revenge are private and individual – one person injures or kills another for a reason known only to themselves; others are public and individual – as when a death penalty is imposed; while others are international and result in many deaths – as occurs in modern ongoing conflicts between ethnic groups.

Themes of revenge expounded in powerful and emotive language saturate the poems selected for study. Heaney and Hughes explore this motive for violence through vivid

images, including metaphors which reveal similarities in their poetical language. Hughes argues that the use of the term "violence" to discuss poetic language needs to be considered in context, as negative and positive implications are "all writhing around inside it" (WP 253). His notion of negative implications is often confirmed in the selected poems, as revenge is a violent destructive action and only explicit language conveys its evil effects. Nevertheless some poems support Hughes' arguments for taking context into account and also the possibility of positive implications. For example positive implications for Orestes' actions "writhe" through the poetical language of Hughes' *The Oresteia.* Similarly brutal language in Heaney's *Beowulf* reflects a positive context for revenge, as much of the action is driven by the need of a warrior society to retaliate against acts of aggression and to avenge earlier defeats in order to survive. Defeat can result in a society's death or enslavement, and so revenge is justified on behalf on the group.

In addition to group vengeance, *Beowulf* also endorses instances of individual retaliation. Beowulf kills Grendel in retribution for the "long and unrelenting feud" the demon waged and because he would not "make peace . . .nor stop his death-dealing" (Heaney B 7). The defeat and death of Grendel drive his mother to seek a personal revenge for a son's death against those responsible. The dragon too avenges the robbery of his treasure hoard, retribution for the loss of property. In "Tereus" Hughes constructs Procne's and Philomela's private acts of vengeance against Tereus' brutality in gruesome modern language, and *The Oresteia* also conveys vivid images of multiple acts of vengeance. René Girard argues that in primitive societies vengeance is the only

method of obtaining satisfaction for a perceived wrong, usually a killing (*Violence* 15). However revenge as a means of retribution is not confined to primitive societies. Individual revenge is not condoned in most modern societies; instead a judicial system operates. Nevertheless both individual revenge and group retribution between societies are common. *The Oresteia* highlights the self-perpetuating nature of revenge, a factor relevant when a resolution of conflicts is attempted. Analysis of pertinent passages in the selected poems exposes Heaney's and Hughes' treatment of revenge as a continuing determinant in human action.

* * *

Beowulf is an epic of heroes, monsters and dragons who act in or against warrior societies that wage unceasing feuds against neighbours (Heaney B 40-1). Beowulf states the philosophy of revenge which drives the narrative and underlies the belief system of these groups: "It is always better / to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning" (46). While modern society differs in many ways from those depicted in *Beowulf,* there is at least one alarming similarity: modern conflicts are perpetuated as much by revenge killings as by a struggle for autonomy. In *Beowulf* some feuds are initiated when a ruler covets another's possessions, but other fighting occurs as revenge. The sight of plundered treasure or a father's sword at a feast can precipitate retaliative fighting: "some heirloom that brings alive / memories of the massacre" (65). These revenge acts are integral to the narrative. The rulers are always poised, waiting for a neighbour's death to be followed by the inevitable war.

Beowulf is lauded as a good king because he avenges his prince's fall with a retributive war (76). "At times the war-band broke into a gallop, / letting their chestnut horses race" (28). The rhythm and pace of the poetry mimic the rampaging thundering feet of the victorious army through the broken hall of the vanquished. Guttural consonants: "boltered, blood, battled, bound" reflect the hammer blows of the broad swords and link together the violent actions of battle (15). Even the evening entertainment revolves on tales of adventure, feuds and wars, as in the saga of Finn and his sons.

In this tale retaliation for the leader's death is delayed only by the onset of winter. Images are evoked of a troop of fighting men, "*blood-sullen*", unforgiving and poised, knives hidden, ready to stab their captors (37). Not only is their boat trapped in ice, but the Danes are "*shackled*" by winter, unable to act, and their mood is bitter like the weather (38). In a passage which exemplifies Heaney's idea of poetic music (GT 92), lilting lyrical poetry unfurls a striking contrast to powerful visual images of a harsh winter and the images and acts of vengeance which frame the passage. Metaphors of spring, re-birth and the miracle of increasing light intensify and contrast with the violent images of fulfilled revenge. Spring brings not maternal softness and safety: "*earth's lap*", but the harshness of winter and death as vengeance is taken: "*Thus blood was spilled / the gallant Finn / slain in his home*" (38). Thus revenge is approved in retaliation for a leader's death, or to ensure the continued safety of the group. The idea of authorised retaliation underpins the poem.

While retaliation drives the society of *Beowulf*, this pagan narrative is embedded in a Christian theme of praise for God, balanced by a moral condemnation of the one (Cain) who had "felled his own / brother with a sword". The Christian narrator interjects at intervals to explain the pagan imperatives to a Christian audience (42). The New Testament exhortation is to "turn . . . the other [cheek]" (Matthew 5:39), but revenge is justified by the *Beowulf* narrator as originating with the Almighty's punishment which "destroyed the tribe of giants" (Heaney B 55). Thus the central action of the poem does not revolve on wars and feuds conducted against neighbours but on the fight and defeat of the descendants of Cain, who are outcasts from the Christian world (6). The identification of Beowulf's enemies with primeval evil legitimises his revenge killings (6, 42). The gruesome images and powerful metaphors used to depict both the outcasts' heathen brutality and the hero's authorised killings resonate through the poem.

Heaney's hyperbolical language focuses the reader's horrified attention by replicating Grendel's monstrous actions. Grendel is "a fiend out of hell" (6) who creates havoc by butchering thirty men at Heorot, "blundering back with the butchered corpses" (6). King Hrothgar is "beset" and the people "bewildered" (7). Alliteration is the basis of Old English poetry but Heaney's interpretation does not necessarily conform to this feature: "the alliteration varies from the shadowy to the substantial" (xxviii). In this instance the alliterative consonance resonating on "b" creates a beat which replicates the thud of Grendel's killing blows on the guards. Additionally, Heaney uses what Hughes and before him Gerard Manley Hopkins called "sprung rhythm" (Hughes WP 326), the pattern of sounds in common speech where stresses come together and the line is

scanned by accents, not syllables. Heaney associates this rhythm with the speech patterns of Ulster (B xxiii). In yet another attack the monster,

> grabbed and mauled a man on his bench,
> bit into his bone-lappings, bolted down his blood
> and gorged on him in lumps . . . (Heaney B 24)

The consonance of "grabbed", "gorged", along with "bit", "bone", "bolted", "blood", creates vivid images of the violence used in the killing and devouring of the guard. Heaney's liking for "a touch of rough and readiness in the language" (PA 108) is evident in the description of the gulping, gorging demon. Grendel would "rip life from limb and devour them, / feed on their flesh" (B 24). Alliteration reinforces the visual images of animal-like tearing and devouring of prey. The arrival of the hero Beowulf, who has previously "avenged the Geats", means that the deaths caused by Grendel will be avenged (15). However Heaney's language reverberates with violence not only in the images of Grendel's slaughter, but also in those of Beowulf's response.

While many of the battle injuries in *Beowulf* are described in harrowing detail: "*blood-plastered*" bodies with "*crusted gashes"* and a hall that *"ran red / with blood"* (36-9), the bloodiest language is reserved for Beowulf's fights with the monsters, thus intensifying the violent nature of revenge. The fight between the hero and the monster is imaged in graphic detail: "Sinews split / and the bone-lappings burst" (27). Guttural consonants and alliteration mimic the sword blows aimed at Grendel, who returns to "the demon's mere" (27) as he is dying: "The bloodshot water wallowed and surged, / there were loathsome upthrows and overturnings / of waves and gore and wound-slurry" (27-8). This blood-soaked language wallows with the life and body matter gushing from

the dying Grendel who leaves behind at Heorot his hand, arm and shoulder, torn from his body by Beowulf. Along with his cannibalism, the monstrous appearance of his hand effectively de-humanises Grendel, thus underlining his connection with "misbegotten spirits" (42) and obviating the Old Testament requirement for a prior justice ruling. Furthermore, the revenge killing of Grendel has already been justified by his link to Cain:

> Every nail,
> claw-scale and spur, every spike
> and welt on the hand of that heathen brute
> was like barbed steel. (Heaney B 31-2)

Sibilant alliterative consonance images the snake-form of Satan, while the "barbed steel" hooks into contemporary language and the modern world. The trophy is nailed inside the wine-hall where all might see the "bloodied arm", proof that deaths of Hrothgar's warriors have been avenged (43). A second trophy, Grendel's head, further glorifies the violence of battle and the act of trophy-taking. Justice has been delivered: "the end came, / death after his crimes" (42). However the violence of Grendel's death generates further bloody retaliation.

That a revenge killing may provide a motive for more bloodshed is immediately confirmed when Grendel's mother is seen as "grief-racked and ravenous, desperate for revenge" (42-3). Both mother and son are imaged as supernatural beings though not immortal. They live in the bottomless mere with "writhing sea-dragons / and monsters slouching on slopes by the cliff" (47). The sibilant hiss of the consonants again links the pair with the Garden of Eden snake and the first sin. As an act of vengeance Grendel's

mother seizes a retainer, the king's "dearest companion" (43) and retreats to the mere. Resumption of the cycle of vengeance is confirmed: "She has taken up the feud" (44).

The fight between Beowulf and Grendel's mother is described in language as graphic as that of the earlier fight:

> a resolute blow
> that bit deep into her neck-bone
> and severed it entirely, toppling the doomed
> house of her flesh; she fell to the floor.
> The sword dripped blood, . . . (Heaney B 51)

Sequential stresses: "sword dripped blood" – Hopkin's sprung rhythm – slow the pace and direct attention to the killing sword and the moment of the monstrous mother's death. The metaphor, "house of her flesh", confirms that she is empty of life and spirit. Beowulf takes "revenge / for every gross act Grendel had committed" (51). In accordance with Hughes' suggestion of a positive aspect to violence, however, the revenge killing of the monsters brings under control the anarchy and the negative violence earlier released by their actions (WP 256-7). Thus this context confirms Hughes' argument for the appropriateness of violent language. Furthermore, the fact that Grendel has "no earthly offspring" eliminates the possibility of reciprocal revenge (Heaney B 64), so that the deaths of both monsters end the cycle. Nevertheless when one motive for revenge is exhausted in the *Beowulf* narrative, another act of violence initiates another cycle.

While retaliation is a recurrent motive for the wars and feuds waged by the poem's warrior societies, unprovoked violence precipitates a new sequence of conflict. Girard states that vengeance "itself is almost never an unprecedented offence" (*Violence* 14). In *Beowulf* man's offence against the commandment forbidding theft is the prior crime that motivates the dragon's revenge. The dragon is woken and retaliates when the treasure he guards is plundered (Heaney B 73). The dragon's turmoil wreathes through the lines, as he ripples and writhes, hunts and scours and scorches the ground "in a fiery blaze" (73). He is "slick-skinned" – snake-like – and "a scourge of the people", imagery which identifies him as the devil or as one of the fallen angels (72). The fires of hell are conjured up, as the dragon, the "burning one", hunts underground (72). In a motif commonly used to identify those possessed by evil or the devil, he embarks on a spree of burning only at night, returning to his den to hide before daybreak (73). The dragon's undulations are replicated by the undulations of the language as participle follows participle: "blazing", "wafting", "flaming", "gliding", "flexing" (80-1). In the long fight with Beowulf, the dragon's struggles are suggested by the sounds and images of his "heaving and hunting" (84). He is killed by a blow to his belly, and Beowulf, dying when the dragon "clamped sharp fangs / into his neck" (85), reconciles his acts of violence and vengeance with the Christian prohibition on killing:

> [I] never fomented quarrels, never
> swore to a lie. . . .
> because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind
> need never blame me when the breath leaves my body
> for murder of kinsmen. (Heaney B 86)

This again recalls Cain's act of fratricide as a crime prohibited by Christian law. However Beowulf claims only to have never murdered kinsmen, and since he did not instigate other "quarrels", the commandment prohibiting killing has not been violated. His death by the claws, fangs and flame of the dragon proves nevertheless to be the signal for yet another outbreak of violence. "So this bad blood between us and the Swedes, / this vicious feud. I am convinced . . . / is bound to revive" (94).

* * *

Motifs of revenge similarly permeate Hughes' re-worked myth of Procne and Philomela and he refers to "extremes of passion that border on the grotesque" which saturate "Tereus" (Ov viii). While the template is Ovid's, the language is contemporary, and commentators have noted affinities with the modern world (Hofmann and Lasdun xi). Procne's and Philomela's vengeance is as gruesome and violent as Tereus' brutal crime, illustrating the contention that "There is no clear distinction between the act for which the [person] is being punished and the punishment itself" (Girard *Violence* 14). Hughes' explicit language reflects the "grotesque" nature of Tereus' actions. It also supports his theory about violence being inherent in transformative events, which he illustrates by the transformation of Saul to Paul (Hughes WP 251). In "Tereus" the transformation of the violent protagonists to birds is such an event.

Hughes' powerful metaphors and similes are precise and vivid. Tereus' insatiable lust for Philomela, "Was like an iron furnace – first black, / Then crimson, then white" (Ov 232). The simile of an overheated furnace and libido blowing his life apart explodes into the rape and its aftermath:

> Afterwards, she crouched in a heap, shuddering –
> Like a lamb still clinging to life
> After the wolf has savaged it
> And for some reason dropped it.
> Or like a dove, a bloody rag, still alive
> Under the talons that stand on it. (Hughes Ov 230-1)

Similes compare the raped girl to the innocent lamb and dove – sacrificial surrogates – bloody, torn and barely alive, while metaphors identify the rapist with a sinister and feared hunting animal and with a bird of prey poised to strike again. Like the wolf and the hawk tormenting their prey, Tereus savages Philomela again, inflicting further injury before silencing her:

> He hauled her up by the hair,
> Twisted her arms behind her back and bound them,
> Then drew his sword. (Hughes Ov 236)

Consonance strengthens the image of physical intimidation and cruel restraint: "hauled", "twisted", bound". The multiple rape and mutilation are the horrific actions which provide the motive for the vengeance.

Procne loved both her husband who betrayed her, and her sister:

> . . . tears were pushed aside
> By the devouring single idea
> Of revenge. Revenge
> Had swallowed her whole being. (Hughes Ov 238)

While it is Philomela who has been brutalised and mutilated, it is Procne who "plunged / Into a labyrinth of plotting / Where good and evil, right and wrong, / Forgot their differences" (238). "Devouring" forms a powerful link between the sisters' states – one

physically torn apart and the other metaphorically consumed by revenge. Procne becomes so disoriented, as in a labyrinth, that she is incapable of making a “good” and “right” decision. The poetry suggests that revenge, “the single devouring idea”, is not the correct or only response possible. This covert reference forms a tenuous link with modern “well-policed societies” in which private vengeance is proscribed and public vengeance is the responsibility of the judicial system (Girard *Violence* 15).

However Tereus is powerful and in the absence of an effective judicial system Procne must act alone. She considers and discards as inadequate a number of revenge scenarios as she imagines punishments which will mimic or reciprocate the original crime (Hughes Ov 240). Evelyn Cobley argues: “Vengeance acts as a reciprocal form of violence . . . Sacrifice breaks the cycle of violence” (79). Sacrifice indeed becomes the vengeance Procne seizes upon when her child enters: “Her demented idea / Caught hold of his image. / ‘The double of his father’” (Hughes Ov 241). Not only does her choice mimic the original assault, but the child’s death eliminates a possible later avenger and thus breaks the cycle. Procne’s struggle with her “ferocious will” is vividly imaged around emotional icons: “her heart ice”; “Her heart shrank”; “Her fury seemed to be holding its breath”; “tears burned her eyes”; “Her love for this child” (241). The heart is the seat of love, but Procne’s is frozen and shrinking; breath symbolises life, but she holds hers in fury; her eyes are blinded by the bitterness of her feelings. Her struggle is against the encompassing, “softening”, “[mother] love for this child” (241).

The sisters butcher and cook the child and serve him up to his father. Tereus is imaged as an animal driven by hunters towards a trap, “helpless” to avoid the pitiless, eviscerating spikes (243). This reverses the poem’s opening images in which Tereus is a powerful hunter. The reciprocity of this image also mimics the process of vengeance. The original brutality and the reciprocal vengeful action are equally revolting, but the transformative violence releases the women from their anger and grief and Tereus from his brutal human persona. In “Tereus” Hughes’ vivid metaphors therefore expose both the grotesque nature of revenge and the manner in which revenge motives disorient and overwhelm avengers so that they are incapable of rational decisions.

* * *

This same notion of the irrationality of revenge infiltrates Hughes’ *The Oresteia.* In this version of the tragedy the tone varies as the subject matter changes, and vernacular language adds immediacy. Graphic metaphors and similes resonate throughout, expressing anguish, torment and brutality. The vivid images of multiple acts of vengeance are terminated only by the intervention of the justice system. In contrast with the public injury and retaliative response of behalf of the community which Heaney’s *Beowulf* depicts, in *The Oresteia* the gods sanction revenge because the primary offence is a violation of their laws. However, as often in modern retaliation killings, private vengeance is not contained but escalates to involve whole societies and even nations. Athene’s court finally intervenes only when the avenger violates the prohibition on matricide. The absence of kin to retaliate further and the intervention of the law court finally end the cycle of vengeance.

Every act of vengeance, public or private, has the potential to proliferate, and in seeking revenge Menelaus and Agamemnon instigate a drawn-out war. While the primary motivation is Paris's private offence against Menelaus, the brothers' "thousand ships / Crammed with the youth of Hellas" locate the retaliation in the public domain (Hughes TO 5). Colourful metaphors and similes of eagles, such as the reference to the "broad oars" of their wings, compare the brothers' feelings with the anguish of a mating pair whose nest has been robbed. The poetry intentionally distorts the eagles' grief, and the falseness of the simile is immediately apparent since the "two brothers, ravenous for war" are not a pair but siblings, and the nest contained not their young, but Menelaus' beautiful wife. Helen's abduction broke the "sacred trust / Between the guest and the host" (6), and the avengers are therefore supported by the gods, in particular Zeus who:

> Sends the two sons of Atreus
> To rip the boasting tongue
> From between the lips of Paris
> And Helen from his bed. (Hughes TO 6)

However the personal revenge approved by Zeus – to silence Paris and retrieve Helen – drags on for ten years as a public retaliation entailing scenes of bloody carnage (6). The colourful compressed language of the poem's explanatory opening lines deepens into vivid metaphors and sickening images which subvert the glorification of war. In Hughes' vision both victors and vanquished suffer (30). Every man is "helpless" to evade the escalating battle: "What is happening / cannot not happen" (6). The horror is that all the soldiers understand their powerlessness and the fact that they are forced to kill and be killed. Contemporary language "jams" this ancient dispute into the present

day by mirroring, for example, the Middle East where more and more people are sucked into retaliation killings. The sealed city of Troy, the “cauldron”, is “seething”, filled with avenging troops, and consonance emphasises images of the massacre (19). In a powerful metaphor, the citizens are grains of salt or sand, and their lives are accorded the low value. Troy is “a slaughterhouse” with “a litter of corpses” 20). Metaphors of cultivation image a “plough” turning the sod so that discarded “roots” are forced “upward”, exposed to die. However the metaphor is ironical because it relates to destruction, not growth. Troy is “gutted” and reduced to “rubble”; the people are “flayed” and reduced to “offal”. What might be considered Hughes’ overindulgence in brutality in fact supports his perception of the negative impact of violence connected with “*sacrilege*” and “explosive evil” (WP 254). The powerful poetry, forcing the horrors of war into modern consciousness, recalls parallel passages in his earlier works, “Bayonet Charge” and “The Last of the 1st/5th Lancashire Fusiliers”, which reconstruct savage incidents from World War 1. While he does not condone the victors’ rampage after the fall of Troy, Hughes is aware of the need for release of feeling in those who might have died in someone else’s war of vengeance: “It is tempting / For the winner . . / To take all” (TO 20-1). *The Oresteia* nevertheless reminds the victorious soldiers as well as modern readers that the folly of plundering and savaging guarantees retaliation, and that vengeance killings are self-perpetuating: “The dead will have many an opportunity / To avenge themselves in full / On those who have angered the gods” (21). The gods are angered because the soldiers’ vengeance targeted the innocent as well as the guilty. However the gods themselves are not impartial and they too engage in vengeance.

Zeus sanctioned a private revenge only, so the public escalation and destruction of Troy swiftly invoke divine retaliation (6). As an instigator of the offence, Menelaus is punished immediately when he and his ship vanish in a storm (33), but Agamemnon continues to claim legitimisation by affirming that the gods shared in the brothers' revenge (39). At this point the poetry shifts from emotive and graphic images of warfare to the vernacular language that Hughes applies in explanatory and connecting passages in replication of the "general-purpose style" that he discerned in Shakespeare (WP 215). On Agamemnon's return, Clytemnestra makes a public speech against vengeance (TO 21), but treacherously plans a private vengeance for her daughter Iphigenia, sacrificed by Agamemnon on his departure for Troy. A message of love to her husband conceals a threat; she invokes the Furies, spirits of vengeance, and validates her intention by referring to justice (43, 71). Repeated recitation of Agamemnon's private offence reinforces her abhorrence (71), and she regards Agamemnon's justification for Iphigenia's death as flimsy: "to persuade the wind to shift a few points . . . on the whim of some shivering priest" (71). Hughes suggests that trivial catalysts can instigate carnage. By sanctioning the sacrifice of his daughter Agamemnon predetermined his own death and activated the cycle of revenge.

Hughes' account of Clytemnestra's revenge chillingly evokes the hatred underlying the hardened emotions that sustain the avenger's intention. Agamemnon is uneasy (45) and court officials are filled with premonitions (47), but:

> . . . the king sees nothing of the avenger
> Staring through her smile,
> Opening beneath his feet –

> Dark as blood, bottomless as death.
> He does not see
> The great wound swimming upwards
> Towards him, from the depths of the bath
> As his wife, the man-killer, kisses him,
> . . . All she ever dreams is the broad blade
> Going into her husband's body. (Hughes TO 60)

The language becomes more menacing in each line, like the abyss hidden by Clytemnestra's smile but "opening beneath his feet". Agamemnon's death is imaged in fish metaphors – the fish shape of the broad blade and the avenger's stealthy and "fishy" (devious) "swimming" movement of the blade towards his naked body while Judas-like, she kisses him. Clytemnestra exults in her fulfilled revenge (72). The fish image is repeated later in a simile that compares Agamemnon's dead body to a netted fish (114). Iphigenia's slaying allowed the becalmed fleet to sail and so was a prelude to the carnage in Troy. Clytemnestra's revenge therefore becomes indirectly a retaliation also for the deaths of the innocent in Troy. Menelaus' and Agamemnon's public revenge-taking against Paris and Troy finally shrinks back to the dimensions of private actions between individuals.

Yet another motive for revenge underlying the narrative of *The Oresteia* is the curse on the house of Atreus. Hughes "hardens" (FA 212) the language to reflect Aegisthus' intransigence as the fulfiller of this curse. The lines are clipped with some containing only one or two words, and each is a powerful indictment of revenge: "hideous, blood-rotten, stinking, gorged" (TO 75). In plotting with Clytemnestra to seize the throne and the queen: "Royal brother defiles the bed of his brother" (57). However as well as by

ambition, Aegisthus is motivated by a desire for vengeance against Agamemnon as the son of Atreus, who butchered Aegisthus' two brothers and served them up to their father Thyestes (80). He obtains his revenge when Clytemnestra entraps Agamemnon (82). The Chorus condemns Aegisthus for corrupting a woman because he "did not dare" to kill Agamemnon himself, and calls on Orestes, Agamemnon's son, to revenge his father's killing (83). Clytemnestra shrieks: "Stop. Stop. / The killing is over. / Beloved Aegisthus – / We have planted enough / Of this horrible fruit" (83). However revenge is not finished and the killing is not over.

Clytemnestra's murderous action inevitably precipitates more killings, but the vivid images of Agamemnon's slaying, a pivotal point in the poem, revert to a more direct tone and language without the component of disturbing explicit imagery. Cassandra, the prophetess condemned to die with Agamemnon, warns at the point of death that the gods will send an avenger "Who will punish his mother" (62). Invocations of justice from the gods and the legal system occur with increasing frequency, until Orestes returns from exile to pray Zeus at his father's tomb to "Right my wrong" (89). One such wrong, and thus a motive for revenge, is the disinheriting of Agamemnon's surviving children (95), but revenge for his father's murder is a more pressing need (90, 98), since it is regarded as an obligation (89) imposed by the victim: "the dead are furious / For vengeance / Against the murderers" (90). Moreover, "The Furies, forcing their way out of thick darkness", threaten a "negligent son" with "night horrors" for "the unavenged blood of a murdered father" (104-5). In *Beowulf* the hero's revenge killings are legitimised through two mechanisms: Grendel and his mother are de-humanised and are

linked with Cain's primeval evil. Orestes likewise pleads two grounds for vengeance: his obligation to revenge his father, and a need for justice, an ideal he repeatedly invokes:

> The bow, justice,
> And the arrow, vengeance,
> Surprise him. He wakes just in time
> To die transfixed. (Hughes TO 91)

Vengeance is thus finally delivered as justice in *The Oresteia,* a pivotal idea which reverberates through the text: "Evil for evil is justice / And justice is holy" (94, 96, 102, 106, 107, 110, 115, 121, 128). However revenge also drives the narrative (94, 96, 104, 106, 110, 112, 113), and the two ideas together inspire Orestes decision:

> . . . unavenged blood – . . .
> Becomes a curse, that cannot be ignored
> And cannot fail. . . .
> All the pure streams flowing from heaven
> And pouring through one bath
> Can never wash the hands that have dabbled
> In blood that is unavenged. (Hughes TO 92)

The stark directness of Hughes' language echoes with juridical overtones, in contrast to Heaney's gruesome descriptive terms permeating the revenge killings in *Beowulf.* At Agamemnon's death the palace was awash with his blood, and Orestes' vengeance replicates this, "with a blade / Remorseless as the blade they pushed through you" (Hughes TO 96). Clytemnestra mutilated Agamemnon's body (111), so Orestes will "hack" apart the "two bodies / Knotted in their crime" (97).

Orestes repeats his appeal to Zeus as one wrong is rectified and in the first of his two vengeance killings (89, 132), recalling an earlier simile and metaphor of eagles (5), he asks Zeus to watch and sanction his actions, because "[w]e are the eagle's children / Bereft, in the nest" (102). When Clytemnestra pleads for her life Orestes responds with the chilling denunciation that his mother has murdered herself by her actions and he "merely hold[s] the sword" (135). Nevertheless he knows that he has broken the law against matricide (138).

The legal element new in *The Oresteia* finally ends vengeance killings through the justice system. For Orestes, "It was not a sin to kill my mother. / From head to foot, she was polluted / With my father's blood" (140). But he knows that he will have to answer for this killing and the escalating references to justice are his attempt to pre-empt the court's judgement. Since wife and husband "share no lineal blood" the murder of one by the other "is not a sacrilege" (157), but Orestes' matricide is potentially a greater crime, and in the last play of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, he must justify his actions in Athene's court (178).

The issues of revenge and justice driving the tragedy of *The Oresteia* are summed up in this passage:

> Where is the right and wrong
> In this nightmare?
> Each becomes the ghost of the other.
> Each is driven mad
> By the ghost of the other.
> Who can reason it out?

Reason fails, mind is a casualty . . . (Hughes TO 77)

Emotion rather than reason is the overwhelming component of revenge, a point Hughes also demonstrates in “Tereus”. Because reason characterises justice Hughes implies that justice too must be a casualty of violent revenge. Agamemnon’s death results from the convergence of three revenge motives: Aegisthus avenges the butchering of his brothers by Agamemnon’s father; Clytemnestra avenges her daughter’s murder; and the gods avenge the war deaths in Troy. The death of Clytemnestra brings the revenge killings to an end when her slayer faces the justice system.

* * *

In many societies, past and present, revenge provides satisfaction for an injury or a death. It may be instituted privately to retaliate for a private injury, or may occur publicly to avenge a group wrong. Public revenge in a society is usually legally endorsed. The justice system imposes penalties intended as a deterrent and as a token compensation to society for the offence. Fortunately few modern civilised nations adhere to the Old Testament law of “life for life” (Exodus 20). Public revenge between societies both modern and ancient includes sanctions, reparations, loss of territory and war. Except for war, these penalties again serve as token compensation for the original offence. War is the most brutal form of mass revenge. The poems analysed demonstrate the self-perpetuating nature of revenge as well as its violent and bloody effects on both individuals and nations: “Revenge begets revenge” (Hughes TO 78).

The power and immediacy of the contemporary colloquial language in the poems analysed in this chapter expose the brutality associated with revenge and “jam” the

bloody images of atrocities into the modern consciousness. Atrocities perpetuate cycles of revenge in the poems, making closure difficult if not impossible, and this is an aspect of vengeance which the texts thoroughly explore. Metamorphoses of the protagonists, such as occur in “Tereus”, bring to an end the cycle of revenge, while the sacrifice of Tereus’ only son finally removes the possibility of retaliation. However Heaney’s *Beowulf* and Hughes’ *The Oresteia,* construct different scenarios.

The warrior societies of *Beowulf* function through acts of war, retaliation and revenge killings. Only the killing of kin is prohibited. Revenge killings are carried out on behalf of the group, are precipitated by feuds or the plundering of treasure, and the certainty of further killings is emphasised (Heaney B 94). Heaney’s language is brutal and vivid and the emotive terms, “vicious feud” and “bad blood”, confirm the powerful emotional component in revenge (94).

In contrast with the group vengeance killings in *Beowulf* those in *The Oresteia* are individual acts, and each perpetrator claims the sanction of justice. However it is only after Clytemnestra is killed that justice and reason surface. Matricide is prohibited, and so Orestes must defend his action before Athene’s court. Hughes’ language varies to reflect both the emotion-driven brutality of the killings and the control associated with the rule of law. *The Oresteia* therefore constructs an alternative to repeated retaliation killings and, through justice and reason, brings an end to revenge.

Chapter 3

Greed, Power and Pride

> Rich pride mounts rich pride
> And begets insolence.
> Pampered insolence begets
> Anarchy. (Hughes TO 38)

The selected poems treat issues of greed and pride, failings which determine human action and frequently involve a misuse of power. Pride, covetousness, envy and gluttony occur in a Christian list of deadly sins as early as the sixth century (Macmillan Dictionary of the Bible), and covetousness, the desire for another's possessions, is an even older prohibition (Exodus 20:17). Greed as a concept encompasses self-interested beliefs and actions – grasping and grabbing with no consideration for others – and in the selected poems greedy protagonists eventually suffer. Pride in its derogatory sense – an overweening opinion of one's own qualities, or an arrogant bearing or conduct – is intertwined with motives of self-interest and a rapacious need to exercise power. Power has contrary connotations in the poems discussed, at times linked with greed and self-interest, and an ability to control, punish, destroy and kill, but occasionally identified with selfless beneficial actions. A powerful ruler was essential for the survival of ancient social groups living under the threat of war, enslavement and death. However these same groups were at risk if the king's power was not applied justly. The issues of greed, pride and misuse of power continue to be relevant for modern readers as forces underlying commercial and political action. When rapacity is the primary motivator driving the desire for power, self-interest sucks everyone into a vortex of disaster. A just

social order, the only defence against these consequences, is needed to prevent such disasters.

Early Christian moral theology documented deadly sins, but their problem-causing potential, which extends into the modern world, was recognised in more ancient times, and forms some of the subject matter of the selected poems. Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* reverberates with pernicious actions, and justice is notably absent from these retellings of myths about the gods. Coercion, injustice and the misuse of power, as well as the possibility of a just solution, are notions that analysis exposes in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy.* As shown in Chapter 2 above, justice emerges also as a resolution in Hughes' *The Oresteia,* which examines issues of greed and pride and the abuse of power when the wealth of the throne of Argos helps to motivate Aegisthus' and Clytemnestra's crimes. In contrast, Agamemnon displays humble characteristics on his return from Troy, and in Hughes' *Alcestis* Heracles uses power and strength benevolently to retrieve Alcestis from the God of Death. That power can be used wisely or unwisely is also demonstrated in Heaney's *Beowulf,* where desire for territory and treasure are among the chief motives of rulers. While praising the hero and his kingly abilities, *Beowulf* also cites examples of bad rulers, and exposes the powerlessness of women in the societies depicted. However this paradigm is not apposite for all women in the selected poems, as evidenced by Alcestis and Clytemnestra, while Heaney's "Death of Orpheus" depicts a band of women aligned with the powerful Furies. The poetic language dealing with greed, power and pride varies from conversational and temperate to lyrical, passionate and trenchant. Heaney enlists Ulster vernacular, forges contrary images of beauty and

brutality and still sings the songs of Orpheus even as he is torn apart. Hughes' language is fluid, fluctuating from gentle and lyrical to colloquial, brutal or glacial as he exposes "the depths man will crawl to" (TO 40).

Greed

The selected poems explore the issue of greed and its immediate or future punishment. Because the narrative of *Beowulf* is overlaid with Christian doctrine, a denunciation of sins might be expected to take the form of a thunderous oration. Hrothgar's discourse (56) on the dangers of power does include warnings against covetousness:

> His old possessions seem paltry to him now.
> He covets and resents; dishonours custom
> and bestows no gold; (Heaney B 56)

However, rather than the anticipated fiery oration, Heaney's verbs in this passage, "seem", "resents", "bestows" (B 56), are tepid and controlled, confirming the view that this is a minor digression. The cautionary example concludes with the inevitability of death and the dispersal of the covetous man's goods (57), and the audience, presumably familiar with the relevant moral theology, is reminded to "choose eternal rewards" rather than earthly goods (57). Punishment for covetousness may not be immediate but waits in the afterlife.

* * *

While Heaney's *Beowulf* thus suspends punishment and passion, "Midas" and "Erisychthon" in Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* explore greed in more depth. Hughes' vigorous language makes the stupidity and selfishness of greed and its immediate punishment vivid for modern readers when the poetry depicts the extreme consequences

which can result from this behaviour. In the well-known tale, Bacchus grants the greedy Midas' wish: "Let whatever I touch become gold" (Hughes Ov 202). Similarly, Erisychthon is greedy for monetary gain, and in pursuing it offends the goddess Ceres who curses him with gluttony (85-94). Unlike Heaney's temperate language in *Beowulf*, Hughes' poetry is explicit, with blade-sharp images and musical flights like the lilting cadenza of Pan's piping (Ov 207).

Erisychthon is greedy and arrogant (Hughes Ov 88) and condemnatory tones forestall empathy for this protagonist who mocks the gods and ignores prohibitions by felling trees in "the sacred grove of Ceres" (85). Nor is there empathy when he suffers the catastrophic consequences. The poetry reverberates with protest at the first stroke of his axe: "Shudderings / Swarm through the whole tree . . . / A groan bursts out of the deep grain" (86). Alliterative consonance and personification of the tree underline the two transgressions – greed and desecration. "Bursts" foregrounds the violence of the attack and the tree's response. When one man protests, Erisychthon extends his response to the tree's protest by beheading the man with the same swinging bite of the blade (87). The violence against the tree is imaged in a sacred metaphor – the tree's blood – and simile – a comparison with a sacrificial animal:

> . . . the blade bites and the blood leaps
> As from the neck of a great bull when it drops
> Under the axe at the altar. (Hughes Ov 87)

By contrast, the contemporary language describing the protestor's beheading covertly creates an image of a ball game as the man's head bounces and spins through the air,

indicating his insignificance and powerlessness compared with the goddess. Meanwhile the resident nymph curses the desecrator of the grove through simile:

> As this oak
> Falls on the earth, your punishment
> Will come down on you with all its weight. (Hughes Ov 87)

Irony links the punishment – the weight of the oak – with Erisychthon's literal weight gain through gluttony.

When he is accordingly condemned "To Hunger – / But infinite insatiable Hunger" (88), powerful images of starvation writhe through the poetry in parallel with the "twisting, knotted / Cramps of hunger" (90-1). The insubstantiality of air is replicated: "He grinds his molars on air", and while his jaws snap at air, he is not subsisting on air but ingesting "Food / for a whole nation" (90-1):

> His every possession was converted
> To what he could devour
> Till nothing remained except a daughter . . .
> His last chattel, he cashed her in for food.
> He sold her, at the market. (Hughes Ov 92)

In the selfishness of greed, nothing is sacrosanct. Hughes pares the language as Erisychthon pares his possessions and becomes:

> . . . a monster, no longer a man. And so,
> At last, the inevitable.
> He began to savage his own limbs.
> And there, at a final feast, devoured himself. (Hughes Ov 94)

The grotesque punishment reflects the extreme greed and arrogance of the offender.

Conversely Midas did not offend a god but performed a service, for which Bacchus rewards him. Midas nevertheless allows stupidity and a fantasy of greed to supersede sense (201). Thus while this myth explores the excesses of "a king's inane greed" (202), the punishment is a logical effect of the original wish, not one imposed by a god:

> A cold thought seemed to whisper.
> He had wanted to chew the milky grains –
> But none broke chaffily free from their pockets
> The ear was gold – its grain inedible, . . . (Hughes Ov 203)

Skea notes in Hughes' poetry, "the allusive power of a single significant word" (9). One such word, "chaffily", describes both separated grain husks and the spurious substitute of gold for food. Assonance, "chaffily free", lightens the realisation of the threat which is contained in the framing lines. Lyrical poetry weaves images of Midas' actions and reactions. The water "coiled into the pool below as plumes / Of golden smoke"; a roasted bird "Toppled from his horrified fingers / Into his dish with a clunk" (Hughes Ov 203). Contemporary language contrasts the ethereal plumes of smoke, associated with the fantasy of greed, with the solidity of the gold bird, and the real non-fulfilment of either the fantasy or the hunger. Midas' attempt to drink, "Saw him mouthing gold, spitting gold mush – " (204). He "reels" as the transformation of liquid to metal jars in his mouth (204). Likewise, the idiomatic "clunk" and "mush" in an otherwise lyrical list of Midas' attempts to eat and drink, jar the reader. The seemingly random tossing of "sweat" and "terror" into this menu exposes Midas' gradual realisation of his stupidity. He begs the god to "Forgive the greed / That made me so stupid" (204).

While Erisychthon can neither reverse his actions nor avoid his punishment, Midas, once given the opportunity to undo his greedy wish, obeys Bacchus's directions (205). Nevertheless while he repents his greed: "The sight of gold was like the thought of a bee / To one just badly stung" (205), he fails to relinquish his stupidity. Hughes' poetic language effectively constructs an image of tension, "prickle" and "tingle", which conflicts with the life of contemplation imaged by "retired" and "deliberate poverty" (205), and prepares the reader for the caustic judgment of the following lines:

> King Midas was chastened. He was no wiser.
> His stupidity
> Was merely lying low. Waiting, as usual,
> For another chance to ruin his life. (Hughes Ov 205-6)

Hughes alerts his modern readers to the truth that not only greed but also stupidity in a ruler can lead to catastrophe.

Heaney's *Beowulf* therefore condemns greed and in controlled and temperate language suggests possible consequences for transgressors. Punishment is delayed and not explicated in the poem. By contrast, Hughes' "Erisychthon" and "Midas" construct graphic images of greed and its effects in language which is subtle, violent, elegant and explicit, and transgression is followed by commensurate degrees of punishment. However that greed is rarely an isolated motive in the selected poems, but is linked with excessive self-interest, arrogance and a desire for power is shown in the following section.

Power

In evoking an illicit desire for power in *The Oresteia,* Hughes focuses on tensions generated through self-interest and misrule. Incisive language ties a craving for power to the crimes of murder and adultery and the usurpation of the throne of Argos, and his chosen language supports his theory that poetry sometimes needs to be "hardened or deepened", to "take the weight of the feeling" generated (FA 212). However he counterbalances this simplified and concentrated language with gripping similes, metaphors and graphic images:

> Life at the top has the best view
> Of the depths man will crawl to. (Hughes TO 40)

Images of a pleasing prospect contrast with the foulness of an abyss. Exteriority opposes interiority. The tensions between the exemplary behaviour of expectation and the base behaviour of actuality resonate through the poetry.

These tensions are protracted as the poem explores implications of the abuse of power. When Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, she arbitrarily assumes the identity of a powerful ruler including the ruler's right to punish. Revenge, discussed above, as a process that extends back and forth over generations, is also involved. However the killing of Agamemnon as dynastic ruler dislocates power in Argos. As usurpers, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra can only exercise tyranny in an action of control (TO 67). Repetition and strong condemnatory words portray improperly directed power as a destructive force which punishes, destroys and kills those who oppose it:

> Yes, power. It is power that has driven you mad.
> Power, and the greed for more power,

> Have made you cunning stupid. (Hughes TO 71)

The adjectival discord of “cunning” replicates the discord between ruler and court as Clytemnestra in turn condemns the Chorus of – “you old men” who acquiesced to Agamemnon’s actions (71). Repetition again focuses attention on the misuse of power, through both action and inaction. Violent images align the tyrants with misuse as they either repress dissent: “They [the people] shall bend their necks to one who will whip them like dogs” (84), or ignore it:

> Whatever comes from their mouths –
> It amounts to nothing.
> Their feet are kicking in the air.
> You and I, Aegisthus, we are the law.
> The lives of all the people of Argos
> Dangle on our word.
> Whatever word we speak, that is the law.
> At last, the throne of Argos is ours. (Hughes TO 85)

Justice is aborted: “kicking [uselessly] in the air”. Dangling, swinging, towards “our word”, justice is corrupted. “Dangle” is another example of Hughes’ “allusive significant word” (Skea 9). It reflects both the suspension of justice and the careless indifference these rulers feel for their subjects. Yet another tyrannical act is ironically named in glowing terms: “Prison and starvation can work wonders” (Hughes TO 81). As well as seizing the power stemming from the throne, the tyrants also want the wealth which supports it. “Now his treasury flowing through my hands / Will help the people to love me, and obey me” (82). “Flowing” implies that wealth will be squandered at speed, and Hughes ironically exposes the falseness of a forced love.

The usurpers are indifferent to the lives of the people, and their abuse of kingly power is further elucidated by Orestes' scathing image of something malevolent: "that creature Aegisthus / Squatting on my father's throne" (119). "Squatting" suggests an act of desecration, and also generates an image of a toad and the toad-like poison of "that creature". Orestes' triumphant words on revenging his father's death confirm the slipperiness of power even when he assumes his rightful position. Justice, and the punishment of abusers of power are however identified as the responsibility of legitimate rulers (137). *The Oresteia* is thus the first of the selected poems to interrogate the interdependence of power, wealth, greed and self-interest.

* * *

Self-interest and the misuse of power continue to be dominating motives in many of Hughes' *Tales from Ovid.* The mortals in these poems can only imagine the powers which the gods use carelessly or maliciously to satisfy fleeting whims. Those who anger or challenge the gods or become entangled in their disputes are punished. Contrary to the ideal of ultimate justice dramatised in *The Oresteia,* in these poems it is the victims of the misuse of power and not the perpetrators who are punished.

For the victims, one possible escape from the horrific punishment is to be transformed, but sometimes the torture continues even after metamorphosis. In the introduction to his re-worked myths, Hughes states: "Ovid set out to write . . .how bodies had been magically changed, by the power of the gods, into other bodies" (Ov vii). He delves into the consciousness of the transformed bodies and creates explicit and frightening images of their retained human feelings. When angry Diana turns Actaeon into a stag his "mind

. . . [is] still human" (105-9), as his hounds tear him apart. Before exercising their transformative powers the gods abduct, rape and punish nymphs and mortals in overt abuse of their power. Pluto snatches Proserpina after Aphrodite's arbitrary power has induced "her winged boy" to shoot a love arrow into his heart (54-5). However Jove and Juno are the gods who most consistently abuse their power.

Juno frequently retaliates in anger to a provocation, real or imagined. Tiresias displeased her and "Juno was so angry – angrier / Than is easily understandable", that she blinded him (73). Others struck by Juno's angry power include the nymph Echo (76) and Alcmene, Hercules' mother (161). Jove's extramarital activities most anger Juno. He indulges his lust and his barren wife punishes his victims:

> And there she was – the Arcadian beauty, Callisto.
> He stared. Lust bristled up his thighs
> And poured into the roots of his teeth. (Hughes Ov 46)

The allusive power of a single word in Hughes' poetry is again evident (Skea 9). In "bristled", he evokes images of hair rising on the back of a challenged animal; suggests the rising of an appendage on the god; implies that Jove is challenged by innocence to debauch it; and finally that he behaves like an animal. The metaphor of toothache implies that Jove's lust is instant and painful. It connects with the later pain – "gagged" and "straightjacketing" – felt by his victim (Hughes Ov 47). "If Juno had seen how she fought / Her final cruelty might have been modified" (48), but Juno's punishment, using her transformative powers, extends the abuse. When a son is born "her fury exploded" (49), and she turns Callisto into a bear which retains its human mind and behaviour. Her grown son Arcas is a hunter, whom she recognises as her child (51), but he perceives

only a bear and a threat to his life when he spears her. Jupiter's intervention transforms them both into constellations (52).

Today's equivalent for the gods' transformative powers is science and technology. Psychiatrists' mind-altering drugs can transform a disturbed person into a more useful member of society. Surgeons transform the dissatisfied into society's current concept of beauty, and advertising magicians sell dreams of temporary transformations. Hughes' re-worked poems refer subliminally to such associations in readers' minds. While his versions of Ovidian myths eschew ideas of justice, whether ancient or modern, others of the selected poems present a more balanced position.

* * *

One such poem is *The Cure at Troy* where Heaney's poetry overtly connects Odysseus' unjust abandonment of Philoctetes with coercion and the misuse of power. His vernacular language establishes modern parallels, challenges the hierarchy of power and questions the perpetual defence, "because I had been ordered to" (Heaney CT 3), confronting blind obedience and resultant conflicts with the demands of justice and the individual consciences. The play posits the possibility of resolving conflict when parochial interests are abrogated. Contrary to Hughes' plain language in *The Oresteia*, Heaney deliberately positions the action in a modern Irish context by applying the vernacular – "slabbering, canny, wheesht, blather, turncoat" (4, 14, 56, 74) – and through imagery and incidents specific to the same context – "hunger-striker's father, innocents in goals, police widow" (77). In addition he uses everyday language to stress the parallels between ancient and modern actions:

Philoctetes.
Hercules.
Odysseus.
every one of them
Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
No matter what. (Heaney CT 1)

Even Philoctetes' emotive denunciation of his betrayal remains conversational and echoes with school-yard taunts: "two-faced crab" (CT 51); weak similes: "I am like / a lost soul" (56); and equally weak metaphors: "I'm chaff" (56). These reflect the character's physical and strategic weakness, rather than a shortcoming of Heaney's language.

Repetition foregrounds the theme of abuse of power as Odysseus (3, 4, 8, 61) and Neoptolemus (6, 51) voice the excuse of acting under orders to justify misusing their powerful positions. They attempt to coerce Philoctetes into returning to Troy with his bow (7), but while they are healthy and free to depart, Philoctetes is wounded and abandoned. Indeed Odysseus regards Philoctetes as less than human – he lives in a "den" (4); and Odysseus will use force to take him (32), herding him "like a wild animal" (54). Animal similes and metaphors intensify Philoctetes' alienation from human society (5, 9, 13, 72). The hunter has power while the hunted is powerless. However the reader knows that Philoctetes is not an animal, he is a wounded hero.

The binary of hunter and hunted is replicated when Odysseus refuses to concede that he has abused his power. However Neoptolemus comes to the realisation that in stealing

Philoctetes' bow he "did a wrong thing" (64). He needs now to act honourably (67, 69), and overrules Odysseus' orders: "The jurisdiction I am under here / Is justice herself" (67). Only when each protagonist abandons preconceived positions is a "cure" possible. Prominent in the "cure" is the place of justice and its jurisdiction over reconciliation: "if you seek justice, you should deal justly always" (60). Philoctetes is rendered powerless by his wound and his abandonment, and it is reconciliation rather than retention of anger which empowers him.

As discussed in Chapter 1 above, Heaney confirms a specific connection of *The Cure at Troy* with the Irish troubles of the late twentieth century (qtd. in Denard 15), but Denard suggests that Heaney's version remains open to a wide range of allegorical readings (5-6). A decade later the parallels are still relevant, and the excuse: "I'm under orders" (Heaney CT 51), is particularly timely, as, despite provisions in the Geneva Convention governing the treatment of prisoners, this defence is being used over incidents of prisoner abuse in Iraq.

* * *

A legitimate use of power is essential for the warrior societies of *Beowulf,* which depend on powerful leaders for survival and where reconciliation is not an option, nevertheless the poem depicts both the beneficial and detrimental use of power by rulers, while positioning abuse of power as a Christian sin (56). Heaney's reasoned and controlled "even-tempered" language highlights the characteristics of a good ruler who must be "prudent and resolute" (B 55). The descriptions enunciate Beowulf's qualities clearly (8, 75), while explicating a submerged motive: "Behaviour that's admired / is

the path to power" (3). Courage and behaviour seen as desirable contribute to the king's power to attract fighters and thus to control and defend his domain. A weakly ruled community may intentionally court a more powerful leader (75). Beowulf's qualities are further contrasted with those of the Danish ruler, Heremod, who grew "bloodthirsty" (56). He "vented his rage on men he caroused with, / killed his own comrades, a pariah king" (55). Harsh consonants – "c" and "k" – reinforce the harshness of this king's misuse of his power, in contrast to Beowulf's epithets. However unlike Heremod's actions "vented", "killed", "cut", "bloodthirsty" are not frenzied and the tone remains controlled, replicating the "prudent admired" behaviour which represents legitimate power.

Additionally, *Beowulf* identifies good and bad queens and suggests that they also have power, though the fighting characteristics desirable in a strong ruler are transmuted in women: "A queen should weave peace" (B 62). "Weave" subverts the perceived power since it foregrounds an approved womanly occupation. Approved characteristics include those of a young queen, whose "mind was thoughtful and her manners sure" (62). By contrast Queen Modthryth "perpetrated terrible wrongs" and was responsible for the deaths of many innocent retainers (62). Her bloodthirsty actions are depicted in the language of war: "death by sword / slash of blade, blood-gush", thereby identifying her with a strong ruler rather than with the muted images of women. However marriage changed Modthryth, and she: "would grace the throne and grow famous / for her good deeds" (63). An analogy between fighting and marriage is drawn, in that her husband's conquest of her brought peace. Another powerful woman, Grendel's mother, acts like a

warrior in attacking Heorot with its sleeping Danes, but her panic-stricken flight suggests that her power is temporary (43). In addition Grendel's mother is demonised. Like the saga of Modthryth, her story momentarily brings to light a submerged theme of women's powerlessness which runs through the text.

Other examples of women's powerlessness are explicated in a controlled language that reflects male hegemony. Modern women can empathise with the powerless women of these societies, who are traded into marriage either to consolidate a peace treaty or temporarily placate an aggressive neighbour (65). While the names of sons are given in *Beowulf*, wives, mothers and daughters are frequently not named, including even Beowulf's mother, "Whoever she was" (30). Because a name confers identity, the women referred to are disempowered. In addition a fresh outbreak of hostilities may result in a repudiation of their identity as wives. A Frisian king was married to a Danish princess who lost her son and brother in a battle with the Danes. After her husband's defeat and death the queen was carried back to her birth place by her kinsmen (37). She had the power to order her son's burial rites but not to decide her future. Like treasure exchanged in peace or lost in a feud, she was retrieved by the victors.

* * *

While his *Tales from Ovid* explore grotesque abuses of power by the gods in vivid imagery, Hughes reverts in *Alcestis* to a vernacular, general-purpose language (WP 215), to suggest that a benevolent use of power is possible. His drunken Heracles boasts of his labours, and his behaviour is more human than godlike, to the point where he dismisses his power:

> If I had the strength to bring your wife
> Back from the dead, my friend,
> Be sure I would have done it. (Hughes A 76)

Nevertheless he uses his physical strength and supernatural power to fight the God of Death: "I surprised him, and trapped his neck in a lock" (82). This use of power to achieve an approved result replicates the legitimate use of power by rulers like Beowulf and Orestes. The selected texts therefore construct memorable images to convey conflicting ideas about power.

Pride

In its derogatory sense of "arrogance", pride is intertwined with greed and self-interest and a compulsion to acquire power and control over others. Christianity identifies it as a sin (Mark 7:22) while highly approving its contrary virtue of humility (Matthew 18:4). The warning from the Christian narrator of *Beowulf* not to give way to pride and his support of humility, are therefore predictable. Indeed the Danish ruler exhorts the hero to: "choose, dear Beowulf, the better part, / eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride" (Heaney B 57). But Beowulf's death occurs in part because he chooses to ignore the advice to "let him [the dragon] lie" (96). In his arrogance, "He had scant regard / for the dragon as a threat" (74), and the narrator points out that "Often when one man follows his own will / many are hurt" (96). Accordingly, Beowulf's failure to remain humble inflicts "a grave cost" on his people, though his slaying of the dragon is honoured as his final heroic act (96). In keeping with the poem's other Christian exhortations, the language remains calm and considered. The idea that insolent pride leads to punishment is also evident in Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* and *The Oresteia.*

* * *

When humans challenge gods, their displays of excessive pride – hubris – result in similar disasters to those ensuing from other human failings. As well as being greedy and hungry for power, the humans and the gods in *Tales from Ovid* are excessively proud. Proud of her weaving skills, Arachne disputes the suggestion that her ability is a gift of Minerva, goddess of weavers. The poetry replicates the intricacy of the tapestry she weaves with lyrical images of nymphs, butterflies, gardens and naiads (Hughes Ov 174). However the beauty of Arachne's work contrasts with the ugly arrogance of her behaviour. A simile compares her with a cobra, spitting when offered advice, and having eyes "hard with fury" as she denigrates the old woman, the shape-shifting Minerva (175-6). Minerva's tapestry "portrayed the divine", the gods and the history of her city (177). She finished with "the tree of peace, an olive" (179). In contrast Arachne's tapestry, while glowing, sparkling and perfectly stitched, portrays the gods' seductions and rapes: "that gallery of divine indiscretions" (181). The ugliness of the theme contrasts with the beauty of the tapestry, but it is Arachne's arrogance which is her crime. "Arachne's triumph / Was unbearable", so the goddess turned her into a spider to "ceaselessly weave" (181-2). Transformation not only renders her powerless, but also a thing of revulsion.

Niobe is proud also and her scorn for the gods is similarly punished (212). Repetitions of the word "pride" punctuate the story of her arrogance, culminating in "her greatest pride", her family (212). "Arachne's fate / Taught Niobe nothing", but it is her own boasting which precipitates her punishment (212, 221). As in the tale of Arachne,

Hughes uses metaphor and simile to stress the ugliness of Niobe's behaviour. She is first linked, through a simile, with the negativity of snakes: "her hair [is] coiled and piled like a serpent" (213). Images of arrogance build as her gaze "raked the worshippers / With a glare of contempt" (213). Finally, in her boasting, she insults the goddess, and since the insult derides the goddess's fecundity, this becomes the mode of her punishment. Hughes' language constructs vivid images of the violent deaths of all Niobe's children. She was "Aghast that they [the gods] had the power to do it, / Enraged that they had dared" (220). Her continuing arrogance is further punished when her husband stabs himself in grief. Finally she is transformed into stone and only then does her hubris dissolve: "This stone woman wept" (223).

* * *

Hughes' *The Oresteia* cautions those who are proud while finding humility in an unlikely protagonist. On his return from Troy, Agamemnon is greeted as a hero but rejects overt praise, "flowery orations" and "purple cloths", because they belong to the gods (Hughes TO 43). In accordance with ancient Greek wisdom manifest in myth, ritual and drama, he insists with humility that he is a man, not a god: "Do not spread them for me. / Greet me as a man" (43). His feelings are tempered by misgiving: "Greet me as a god and the gods / Will punish us all" (43). Therefore the offence for which he is later punished is not hubris. By contrast, neither Clytemnestra nor Aegisthus are humble, and this is one of the reasons for their punishment.

As the Chorus – the old men of the court – pontificates on the ills afflicting Clytemnestra's rule, Hughes pares the poetry, intertwining themes of greed, pride and

power in various manifestations and simultaneously weaving truisms into his language. While cynics suggest that the wealthy and powerful are never punished for wrong-doing, most modern people believe that eventually justice is delivered. Hughes strongly argues this view through the Chorus. Ensconced at court, their language, though imitating a liturgical chant, is more confronting than that in Heaney's *Beowulf* as it condemns conceit, wealth, and pride:

> Everywhere
> The conceited man
> With his lofty scheme
> Ruins himself
> And everybody near him. (Hughes TO 22)

Hughes implies a raising of hope – "lofty" – before the plunge into "ruin", in a statement which raises the topicality of such disastrous sequences in modern times. While wealth itself does not cause dissension, its possession can "crack the foundations" and turn the house of wealth into a prison: "A man in the stupor / Of wealth and pride" can break "heaven's law" (22). In yet another use of an allusive word (Skea 9), "stupor" suggests that wealth and pride, like anaesthetising drugs, derail rational thought. The old men of the Chorus recall ancient wisdom and deride false pride. Their reminiscences culminate in a powerful condemnation in terms that reflect the King James' Bible, giving the lines a Biblical authority:

> Rich pride mounts rich pride
> And begets insolence.
> Pampered insolence begets
> Anarchy.
> And anarchy, where every man
> Is the tyrant

Of his own conceit,
Begets all-out war – (Hughes TO 38)

The amassing of sins and vanities and the final denunciation – "all-out war" – positions Hughes' argument in the modern world, where it has become increasingly obvious that war is not a solution.

* * *

The selected poems explore human failings continuous through history, which Heaney's and Hughes' contemporary language make relevant for modern readers. One such failing is greed, which is shown to be always punished. *Beowulf* identifies greed as a sin but suggests in temperate language that punishment may be deferred to the next life. In contrast, *Tales from Ovid* details immediate punishment, frequently prolonged, both for greedy transgressors and their innocent relations such as Erisychthon's daughter. Hughes' lyrical language alternates with threatening and graphic images of both the original crimes and the subsequent grotesque punishments. Unlike Heaney's even-tempered language in *Beowulf*, and his Ulster vernacular in *The Cure at Troy*, Hughes' poetry subtle, explicit, lyrical and trenchant. Analysis of the selected poems reveals that greed is not isolated but twisted with themes of misused power and pride.

The Oresteia focuses particularly on the abuse of power when usurpers seize the throne. Orestes' accepted claim that punishing his father's murderers is justice demonstrates the possibility of a rightful use of power. However without legitimate controls abuses of power inevitably occur. In confronting language Hughes explores the contradictory nature of power and its misuse as a destructive force. The images of tyrannical repression and repetitions of the word "power", contrast with positive images when

Orestes assumes his legitimate position. The usurpers are punished and the ideal of a just society is enshrined in the text.

Justice, not punishment, emerges as a controlling theme in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* which reverberates with Irish nuances (discussed in Chapter 1 above) and explores the possibility of reconciliation. *Beowulf* contrasts the actions of just and unjust rulers, praising the hero's "prudent and resolute" rule in temperate language while relishing the punishment of Heremod, who misused his kingly power and killed his comrades (Heaney B 55). In this poem justice therefore depends on powerful, prudent rule. The powerlessness of women is a submerged theme: Queen Modthryth's early actions mimic those of a powerful warrior, but she is subdued by marriage. In *Tales from Ovid*, by contrast, power is not grounded in gendered roles but identified with position. The gods are powerful while humans are weak, foolish or stupid. The gods frequently abuse their transformative powers by inflicting prolonged punishments on innocent and guilty humans alike. However *Alcestis* reveals that the gods can use their power benignly, when Heracles rescues Alcestis from death.

Pride, another human failing, is also punished in the poems discussed, and the punishment, like that meted out for greed, can embroil innocent victims. Heaney's calm language affirms Beowulf's pride in his prowess, a pride which leads to his death under the fangs, claws and fire of the dragon, and ultimately threatens his people with another war. Hughes weaves lyrical images and a condemnation of pride and arrogance through the cautionary tales of Arachne and Niobe, in language which is confronting compared

with Heaney's. By contrast, in *The Oresteia* Hughes' language is simplified, when he argues through the old men of the Chorus that the intertwined motives of greed, power and pride, and their various manifestations such as arrogance, selfishness, insolence and conceit, all break "heaven's law" and will be punished (TO 22). But this punishment, like those delivered by the angered gods, may overwhelm many who are innocent and result eventually in anarchy and "all-out war" (38).

Chapter 4

Grief and Despair

. . .a pain too huge to utter.
Pain – dark pain.
Instead of the light – pain. (Hughes A 66)

Heaney's and Hughes' poems explore themes of grief and despair, and the protagonists' feelings of negation and powerlessness. Especially when expressed in contemporary language these themes are relevant for modern readers through empathy and personal experience which few people will evade. Grief is a deep or violent sorrow, while its companion experience of despair is a powerful and debilitating emotion engendered by loss – a want of hope. Apportioning blame and expressing anger are components of grief and despair, as are apathy and numbness. The modern English word "despair" is onomatopoeic. The last syllable is exhaled, with the diphthong lengthening the sound. The physiological action, the loss or expulsion of the breath indicates an end, which mirrors the word's meaning.

The selected poems explicate these emotions as experienced by both individuals and communities, through a range of contemporary poetic expressions – sensuous, musical and colloquial, as well as controlled and simplified. Particularly in his re-worked Orpheus poems, Heaney transforms words into music, a connection he repeatedly argues (GT 92, CP 466). In "Orpheus and Eurydice" the poetical language reverberates with a sense of loss and an utter want of hope for the loved one's return. Similarly in "Death of Orpheus", the birds, animals and woods mourn. Hughes' language is equally

lyrical when “The Rape of Proserpina” constructs Ceres’ despair as she ransacks the earth searching for her abducted daughter Proserpina. In *The Cure at Troy,* Philoctetes is marginalised (as discussed in Chapter 3 above). He expresses despair at his exclusion and isolation and Heaney’s language roughens to reflect a parallel with an Irish context through vernacular idiom. The watchman in “Mycenae Lookout” experiences grief and despair for the loss of his country’s honour and for his adulterous queen. He projects the helplessness of the ordinary citizen when faced with atrocities in times of conflict. Similarly, the house of Atreus and the society of Argos in Hughes’ *The Oresteia* experience a crushing grief when the men return from war as ashes. This poem also expresses an individual’s grief and anger in terms which mimic the cause of the grief: “the rips in our skin are fresh” (90). Hughes creates powerful images of the Greek women’s despair as they wait for news from the battle. Death is an inherent part of grief and despair but in *Alcestis* it emerges as an overt entity who comes for Alcestis. While in *Tales from Ovid* Hughes images Ceres’ despair lyrically, in *Alcestis* he employs stark and simple language which reflects the depth of Admetos’ grief. The possibility of the loved one’s return replicates the Eurydice narrative, but *Alcestis* constructs a contrary ending of hope.

* * *

Heaney’s two interpretations of Ovidian Orpheus texts, “Orpheus and Eurydice” and “Death of Orpheus”, resonate with the anguish arising from the powerful feelings of grief and despair. Onomatopoeic consonance, inherent in slurred sounds – loss and despair – and alliterative consonance – shades, shadows, silences – underpin the poetry. The marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice is doomed before the wedding is over. The

sensuous, lyrical and colourful introduction of the god Hymen: “Robed in saffron like a saffron flame”, forms a deceptive and vivid contrast to the later monochromatic portrayal of grief: “shades, shadows and gloom” (Heaney OE 222). The “s” of the alliterative consonance, repeated six lines later, reverses the celebratory mood of the wedding: “the torch he [Hymen] carried smoked and spat / And no matter how he fanned it wouldn’t flare”. The alliterative “f” portends the failure of the god of marriage to complete his blessing, while repetition of the consonant “s” foreshadows the subsequent manner of the bride’s death: “A snake had bit her” (222). The verse, which commences on a rising note of hope, concludes with the finality of the flat monosyllabic: “She was gone” embodying the theme of loss, grief and despair: “Orpheus mourned her in the world above, / Lamenting and astray” (222). He is astray – out of the right way – when he ventures “down among the very shades” in search of his loved one.

Love of Eurydice compels Orpheus to enter Hades, and he is determined to remain with her and the “Hordes of the dead” if she cannot return to the upper world (223). Alliterative consonance and negative metaphors image the frightening underworld as a poetic rendering of the equally frightening living world of loss and despair. This world without the loved one is: “underearth”, with “gloomy borders” and “Stygian roads”, a “dismal land” of “shadow people, ghosts, bodiless hordes” (222-3). The worlds are alike in containing: “Dark hazy voids and scaresome silences”, further metaphors for grief and despair. In anger Orpheus demands that the lord of Hades, “Unweave the woven fate” so as to “Allow Eurydice her unlived years” (223). His music enchants, apparently

enabling fate to be unwoven, but for the one fatal condition of not looking back. Consonance, again built around the hiss of “s”, portends a repeat of the earlier loss. Uneasy images: “steep incline”, “rising higher”, “grim silence”, “thick mist”, culminate in the final tragedy:

> . . . wild to see her face –
> Turned his head to look and she was gone
> Immediately, forever, back and down.
> . . . his arms just filled
> With insubstantial air. She died again. (Heaney OE 224)

The despair of the second death echoes through the reinforced words of loss: “gone / immediately, forever, back and down”, “insubstantial”, and with the finality of: “She died again”. Overwhelmed by the apathy typical of grief, Orpheus is left “disconsolate” and “dumbfounded”. Subsequent similes comparing him with stone and petrified rocks contrast vividly with the metaphor, “insubstantial air”, which is Eurydice. Self-neglect is another component of grief and despair, and Orpheus spends seven days “fasting and filthy” (224). Heaney again contrasts the permanency of stone, Orpheus’ “mountainous home ground”, with the ephemeral nature of life. However in an ironical twist he reveals that grief and despair are finite. While Orpheus turns “away from loving women”, he does not turn away from love. “[N]ow the only bride / For Orpheus was going to be a boy” (225). Nevertheless Orpheus’ own death reunites the original lovers.

Orpheus mourned Eurydice, found another love in the meantime, but when his “shade fled underneath the earth” he recovered Eurydice: “two forms / Of the one love, restored and mutual” (DO 228). Orpheus’ death, which is more violent than Eurydice’s, is

imaged in more violent language, when the “blood-filled nails” of “crazed” (226) women tear him apart. Images of the blood-soaked destruction of this singer of songs, magical musician of the imagination, stream through the poem, while the “breath / Of life streamed out of him” (227). His death is mourned by “cheeping flocks” of birds; the personified trees “tearing at their hair”; and rivers “in floods / Of their own tears” (227). Alliteration delivers vivid images of “dishevelled” nymphs and naiads in “drab mourning gowns” (227), and of the bard’s “lyre” and “dead mouth . . . / Lapping the ripples that lipped the muddy shore” (227-8). After “the poet’s mangled flesh and bones / Lay scattered and exposed” (227), Orpheus’ violent death has positive implications since it grants him permanent unity with Eurydice (228). Nevertheless negative implications are equally present, since the songs that “had tamed the beasts and made stones dance / [are] blown away on the indiscriminate winds” (227), lost to the world above. Only later poets are left to sing of the music “that held the woods entranced” (226).

Thus Heaney uses rich vivid metaphors, similes, alliteration and contemporary language to convey feelings of grief and despair and their subsidiary emotions of apathy and anger, in ways likely to engage modern readers. By using the subject matter of myth as reworked by Ovid to vivify these themes, Heaney enables the reader to imagine alternate possibilities – such as a different love – and to consider the consequences if these possibilities were to happen.

* * *

Hughes' lyrical language in his re-worked *Tales from Ovid* is rejected by Knox as "disfigured" (12) but Carey's argument that it is "powerful" (2) is valid. In "The Rape of Proserpina" the beauty and restful peace of the dew-soaked dawn are made to contrast with Ceres' grief and despair during her frantic search for her daughter (Hughes Ov 59). Nights are "long" and frosty, a metaphor for the darkness and cold of despair (59). A series of participles, "glittering", "melting", "rising", "setting seeking", in close-to alphabetical sequence builds anticipation of success from a positive "glittering", but concludes with frustration, an inconclusive "seeking" (59). Colloquial language and repetition of alliterative consonance construct vivid compilations of encounters during the search: "greedy guzzling", "goddess", "glaring"; "A cocky brat"; "speckles", "stained", "skin", "shrank", "skinnier", "shape smaller" (59-60). Giving reign to her grief and anger the powerful Ceres transforms a jeering "cocky brat" into a newt (59), and punishes a "babbler" by transforming him into a "sleepy owl, hated by men" (65). Contrasting sharply with her inability to locate her daughter, this exercise of divine power merely intensifies Ceres' grief.

Grief intensifies to despair when she discovers her daughter's girdle in a sacred fountain, leading to self-injury: "She ripped her hair out in knots. / She hammered her breasts with her clenched fists" (60). The verbs: "ripped", "hammered", "clenched" heighten the violence of grief and the strength of Ceres' mother-love. Hughes uses "the strong, positive mode of violence . . . to reveal with mystical clarity . . . the kind of fundamental love that is at least equal to the fundamental evil" (WP 255). In a cycle of blame Ceres accuses "every country on earth" of concealing her daughter (Ov 60),

enforcing her curses by killing “man and beast in the furrow”, spreading “an instant epidemic”, and making “all seed sterile”, so that the land is barren (61). A pool nymph rebukes the excess of her suffering: “You have laboured enough, but have raged too much” (61), but in lyrical alliterative assonance and consonance reveals Proserpina’s location:

> As I slid through the Stygian pool
> In the underworld. I felt myself
> Reflecting a face that looked down on me.
> It was your Proserpina. (Hughes Ov 62)

The nymph’s fluidity contrasts with a simile comparing Ceres and her reaction with stone (63). Her emotions swing from despair to fury as she realises she cannot rescue her daughter without help.

Materialising before Proserpina’s father Jupiter, Ceres’ is distraught with grief: “Her hair [is] one wild snarl of disarray, / Her face inflamed and swollen with sobbing”(63). Again consonance and assonance are developed around the hiss of “s” and of despair. This is counterpointed by the father’s cool misogynist response: “Is this theft / Or an act of love? . . . This is a son-in-law to be proud of” (64). The condition imposed for Proserpina’s return cannot be met, since she had eaten “hell’s food” when she “sucked the glassy flesh from seven seeds” (64). The number seven has mystical connotations. The language swirls with sibilance, making a connection with the snake’s destructive place in the mythology best known to Hughes’ readers – the Judaeo-Christian narrative of the Fall. However, as dictated by the Graeco-Roman myth, Jupiter intervenes, and so Proserpina is able to live in both worlds. Hughes’ impassioned language has constructed

heart-wrenching images of a mother's despair to the point of self-mutilation, juxtaposed with the beauty of dawn, when Ceres is seeking (59), and the warmth of the consoling sun when Proserpina emerges from the underworld (67). Modern readers familiar with abductions and murders which can destroy any family in any country can empathise with Ceres.

* * *

Grief and despair evoked by the loss of a loved one resonate also through Hughes' *Alcestis.* L. P. E. Parker notes the diversity of approaches over the centuries to this narrative which has its origins in folk-tale: "The woman who died to save her husband has proved to have a hold on [people's] imagination . . ." (1). The leading dramatic theme of *Alcestis* is the tragedy of a husband and king seemingly fated to lose a loved wife and queen. Clanchy notes that in Hughes' version "the satirical element [found in Euripides] is gone: Admetos' absolute grief, exquisitely expressed, soaks the play" (50). Hughes explores the mourning process from the time it seems that Alcestis' imminent death is inevitable. Through metaphor and allusion Death, personified as the ultimate victor, tosses aside the armaments with which modern medicine tries to fight him: "general anaesthesia, morphine, hypodermic syringes" (Hughes A 7), thus highlighting their uselessness. Admetos and Orpheus both mourn lost wives but Hughes' language is the antithesis of the lyricism of Heaney's Orpheus' poems. It resembles a dirge in that it is less formal than an elegy, though not short in the manner of a dirge, and draws on a musical relationship between language and sound. It sometimes mimics a liturgical chant and at other times could be called prosaic or "frenzied plainsong" (Hughes WP 246), a resemblance noted also by Gervais (*Alcestis* 148). Extending this musical

analogy, the poetry relies for effect on unexpected word choice and on reprise, in which the theme, in this instance despair, returns at intervals. In *Alcestis* therefore, Hughes applies his perception that in verse "a sense of pattern [is present]: patterns of rhythms, patterns of weight and of mood, patterns of cadences, just as in a piece of music" (WP 245). The exposition and recapitulation of the primary theme of despair resurrects the mental desolation and constructs the feelings which the bereaved commonly experience. Gervais argues: "one of the play's strengths is that his [Admetos'] tragedy is one that is shared by his whole palace too" (*Alcestis* 147). The repetitive outpourings of grief are interspersed with contrapuntal diatonic sections which further emphasise despair and break the tension. This is achieved through changing the tonal focus of both narrative and language. Admetos hopes he "won't be hurled back into grief" (Hughes A 74). The force of the verb "hurled" jolts the reader, as does the rumbustious Death, a dominating presence in the tragedy from the moment he orders "Stand aside" (4).

Another common manifestation of grief is denial. Accordingly, after having accepted Alcestis' willingness to die in his place, Admetos tries to change what "was decided between the gods" (8), by refusing to believe in it: "You will live, Alcestis. / You cannot leave me" (18). Because grief cannot be known in advance of the event which causes it, Admetos is also confused. "He hardly knows himself. / He sits in the room, staring at her" (10). The unknown – the loss and grief to come – is endlessly repeated in his mind. An accumulation of negatives: "does not, has not, does not, nothing", and repetitions similar to musical refrains reinforce the negative experience of loss, until they conclude with the emphatic "he will know" (10).

Denial continues while Alcestis lives and Admetos denies what "he will know", chanting instead: "Only live, live, live, live" (19). When Alcestis admonishes him, his response again denies the inevitable: "Why? Maybe it need not happen" (19), and he continues to shout "No!" (19). Finally he is compelled to accept that Alcestis has died:

> Weeping and groaning
> Cannot fill up this chasm,
> This total emptiness.
> No mourning can ever be enough.
> From today
> This house is closed to banquets
> . . . Laughter is forbidden . . .
> . . . everything has gone with you. (Hughes A 22)

Metaphors of loss: "chasm, total emptiness, closed, forbidden, gone", echo in the poetry in counterpoint to Admetos' mourning, his weeping and groaning. The primary theme enunciated in this passage forms the reprise which returns periodically to remind Admetos and the reader of loss and despair, and to "hurl" them back into grief. In the poetry as in music, however, intervening or contrasting sections temporarily divert attention from the primary theme.

The first digression occurring after Admetos' promise to remain faithful to Alcestis (22), recapitulates the Orpheus myth, revealing a parallel with the present narrative: "He [Orpheus] loved her too much" (23). The elements of dirge reappear in the short lines, with a heavy stress on monosyllabic words "He rode the dark road / . . . Down and down and down" (23). The language is controlled, restricted and repressed, prevented from revealing the feelings which were exposed in the reprise: "He went for his dead

wife" (23). This passage contrasts markedly with "Orpheus", the version that Hughes wrote for children in 1970, which is full of lyrical feeling and the music of "stillness" and "stones" and the "seabed"; "the music of love coming and love going / And love lost forever" (qtd. in Sagar *Foxes* 85). The difference probably reflects the fact that in English-speaking societies children are encouraged to express their grief while adults are expected to repress it. Despite the general narrative parallels, Admetos' solution is not Orpheus' – an attempt to retrieve the lost beloved from "the dead land" – but to join her: "We shall lie together forever / And ever and ever and ever" (Hughes A 23). This is an ironical mimicry of the best known Christian prayer, and like Christians who believe they will be reunited with the dead in heaven, Admetos hopes to be reunited with Alcestis. The evocation of grief returns attention once more to the primary despairing theme.

In a further replication of a musical reprise, memories of the loved one in *Alcestis* return to the bereaved again and again. Metaphors of despair likewise return to the poetry. Alcestis is:

> . . . a falling star
> With a long train
> Of burning and burned out love.
> Falling into non-life.
> Into endless time, endlessly falling. (Hughes A 26)

The metaphors of vaporisation, vacuum and void image the powerlessness of the living and the nothingness of afterlife. In a passage reminiscent of Auden's "Stop all the clocks", acts of mourning and metaphors of despair accumulate:

> Let every head be shaved.
> Let every garment be black.
> Let the cavalry
> Crop the manes and tails of the horses.
> Throughout the city
> Let every stringed instrument be unstrung.
> Let every flute lie breathless. (Hughes A 26)

The flute is "breathless" like Alcestis. The silence of the tomb pervades the city. A powerful simile compares Admetos with a lightning-struck tree, "blasted by grief" (38). Alcestis was essential to his life. "His wife, . . . [was] torn from him / As one of the lungs torn from beneath his ribs" (38). Further similes imply that "Grief has made him mad" (47).

> The Admetos that brought Alcestis to the grave
> Is like the body of a rat
> Trapped with bones and sinews in the trap.
> He is trying to chew it off – the whole body.
> Admetos is trying to gnaw himself
> Free from Admetos. Admetos
> Is spitting out the torn flesh and the blood
> Of Admetos. (Hughes A 47)

The metaphorical self-destruction vividly depicts Admetos' attempts to free himself from pain, grief and despair.

Several intervening sections temporarily force attention away from the accumulation of despair. In drama, the Fool's words can be used to lighten by contrast the tension of preceding serious scenes, but a rapid tone and mood change from frivolity to gravity in following scenes restores and reinforces tension. This technique is used by Shakespeare

when, for example, Falstaff's antics leaven scenes of a dying king and heavy matters of state. In *Alcestis* Death's licentious words similarly precede the heroine's death:

> This one's mine – and better now
> While she's still so young.
> Still juicy, still a beauty.
> Ha ha ha! It's a long way
> To the underworld
> And I have my perks. (Hughes A 5)

Afterwards, a farcical re-enactment by a drunken Heracles of his labours demonstrates the continuity of life in the midst of grief and despair. Admetos stumbles on this truth unexpectedly: "Nothing can be done about the dead" (34). He also learns that the living will cling to life: "A rat's life is all that a rat has" (46). Powerful arguments between Admetos and his father about this issue further divert attention from the primary theme and focus attention on Alcestis' sacrifice. The reprise reinforces the tonal differences between the intervening sections and the emotionally stark return of despair and grief.

Grief is a metaphoric wound, and remembrance of the loved one brings renewed pain which "Rips off the dressings, sets the blood flowing afresh" (67). The violence implied by "rips" conflicts with the ease with which the consonance of "flowing afresh" images the outpouring of the life force. Metaphors of darkness, desolation, despair and death mount with multiple repetitions of single words: "huge", "pain", "dark" and "darkness", as Admetos cries out in agony:

> This house! This horrible empty box!
> A huge grave.
> In it, one huge wound – that took the life

> And is now cold.
> A numbed mouth with swollen lips
> Left behind by a pain too huge to utter.
> Pain – dark pain.
> Instead of light – pain.
> No refuge anywhere in me
> From this fire, this huge dark single flame,
> That caresses my whole body.
> I think of cool soil,
> A mask over my face,
> A weight of stillness over my body,
> A darkness . . . (Hughes A 66)

The grave and the wound are "huge", so enormous they cannot be overcome. The mouth and lips are "numbed" and "swollen" and the "pain" so immense that it cannot be spoken through this distorted mouth. There is no light, no sign of relief, from this darkness. Fire causes pain to the body, but "this huge dark single flame" does not sear but "caresses", a seeming contradiction. However the flame is welcomed because it leads into a finality of "darkness", an end to the pain, with metaphors of relief in the "cool soil" and the smothering "stillness" and "darkness" of the grave. An animal simile is less violent than the earlier rat references but no less despairing: "I shall feel like an animal / With a fatal wound – / Wanting only to crawl off into a hole" (69). Admetos is "[a] saviour of his people" (2) and in the throes of his grief he wants to die, an act that would negate Alcestis' sacrifice. Nevertheless his increasingly despairing utterances raise this possibility (76, 77). While the grouped friends – the Chorus – attempt to divert him by urging him to "be cheerful" (71) and pointing out that people waste time

lamenting “what could not be helped” (72), Heracles at last interrupts the outpouring of despair.

Sober, Heracles reappears with a silent veiled woman, to boast of yet another labour – his fight with Death: “She’s the prize of a clean, hard fight. / . . . I won her” (74). Reversing the Orpheus’ myth, Admetos refuses to look at the veiled woman, claiming instead that her resemblance to Alcestis is wishful thinking and a delusion:

> . . . the eyes of bereavement
> Fixed in their focus on what’s missing
> Find it everywhere.
> It’s a delusion . . . (Hughes A 75)

As Heracles acknowledges, “Losing the loved one is the worst grief” (76), and Admetos’ love and despair saturate the poetry:

> I don’t mourn for a reason, or for duty.
> I mourn because everything in me mourns.
> Everything in me loved her. (Hughes A 76)

However the poetry moves the focus to the silent woman and to Admetos’ willingness to abandon his mourning and consider other possibilities: “She is yours, Admetos” (80). Admetos’ love does not triumph over grief, despair and death. Rather Heracles retrieves Alcestis as an act of friendship and respect. Admetos “made me so welcome, even in his worst hour” (65). Heracles forces him to accept the woman he has brought. “She is yours. / All you had thought you had lost – she is here” (81). Admetos’ final words conclude that “Nothing is certain” (83), and even death may be overcome:

> We have taken the full measure of grief
> And now we have found happiness even greater. (Hughes A 83)

Grief and despair must be acknowledged and endured in "the full measure", but at the end of the cycle the possibility of an intervention introduces hope. Following the outpourings of anguish, *Alcestis* therefore concludes on a positive note of "happiness" which implies that grief and despair are finite, paralleling a conclusion of Heaney's "Orpheus and Eurydice". Hughes uses contemporary language and musical devices, such as plainsong, to exhume and re-work ideas from Euripides' play. The themes he explores, especially grief, despair and the mourning process, are enduring and his poetry has again asserted their relevance.

* * *

The same themes are important in Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout", which is grafted onto a fragment of an ancient narrative. Some people react joyously to the prospect of a battle and the expectation of victory, while others question the legitimacy, duration and achievements of war. Heaney's sober language in "Mycenae Lookout" reflects the latter view and reveals that for some, such as the lookout of the poem's title, grief and despair are war's unavoidable outcomes. The following lines had a grim resonance for me and triggered the research for this study. At the time George W. Bush et al. were determined to invade Iraq and subsequent events have only strengthened the analogy:

> Some people wept, and not for sorrow – joy
> That the king had armed and upped and sailed for Troy,
> But inside me like struck sound in a gong
> That killing-fest, the life-warp and world wrong
> It brought to pass, still augured and endured. (Heaney ML 414)

As an honourable man the lookout posted by the queen is "honour-bound" to remain at his post (414). Andrews identifies him as "a familiar Heaneyan observer", indecisive

and caught up by fate (163), living simultaneously in ancient Mycenae and modern Ireland. The Trojan war has lasted for so long – ten years – that he has been "forgotten". Additionally, because he is a servant his presence is ignored, and metaphorically he is the queen's "blind spot". He sees and hears things which degrade and dishonour her such as her "love-shout" (Heaney ML 415). He is reluctantly embroiled in her affair but forced to remain silent: "The king should have been told, / but who was there to tell him / if not myself ?" (419) The queen's loss of honour and betrayal of her husband, and the lookout's sense of participating in the betrayal heighten his despair: "My soul wept in my hand" (419), as "the queen wailed on and came, / it was the king I sold / I moved beyond bad faith" (421).

While the queen's and the watchman's linked betrayals cause anguish, the nightmare brutalities of battle are even more disturbing, generating grief and despair through an accumulation of similes and metaphors. Consonance, "blood in bright webs . . . bodies", emphasises the horror of a simile of "tattered meat" (414). The troops going into battle, animals on the way to slaughter, are "trampled and rattled", and the firing of the victory beacon signals killings of both the battlefield and the abattoir (414). In delivering the Nobel lecture in 1995, a year before publication of this poem, Heaney referred to "a quarter century of life-waste and spirit-waste" that preceded a ceasefire in Northern Ireland in 1994 (CP 455), and critics have identified further parallels in the poem with Heaney's experience of brutal events (Vendler 155, Andrews 163), such as the killing and maiming of bystanders, including children.

Despair floods “Mycenae Lookout” as Heaney’s metaphors image the mindless killings, and the pervasive denunciation of war contrasts with the glorification of fighting in his *Beowulf*. The Mycenae watchman’s waking dreams oppose the horrors of war to his sight from the lookout of the temporary beauty of “mist, fields, inlets and morning light” (Heaney ML 415). This dawn vision reveals “little violets’ heads, pre-dawn gossamers” but also men striking one another down (419):

> I balanced between destiny and dread
> And saw it coming, clouds bloodshot with the red
> Of victory fires, the raw wound of that dawn
> Igniting and erupting, bearing down
> Like lava on a fleeing population . . . (Heaney ML 415)

The language mimics the balance of the “scale-pans” that “a god of justice” might hold (415). Clouds are “bloodshot”, the dawn has a “raw wound”, before “dread” overtakes everyone. Further strong instances of counterpoint and balances are present. The safety of the queen in the palace with her lover contrasts with the king’s danger in battle. The victory beacons balance the sacked and burning Troy, where “the hills broke into flame” (421). The “bloodbath” of war presages the “filled bath, still unentered and unstained”, where Agamemnon will be murdered (421). Water cleanses the “blood-plastered” warrior, but everywhere the fires of war “put all men mad” (421). Above all, the helplessness of the ordinary person – the lookout – and the inevitability of more atrocities induce grief and despair. The citizens can only exist, like the ox: “tons of dumb inertia . . . head-down / and motionless”, trying not to be aware, but helpless to escape knowledge of the violence and at the same time powerless to intervene (420). Like Atlas, “ox-bowed / under his yoke of cloud / out there at the world’s end”, they are

bowed under the weight of despair (420). By metaphorically washing away the conflict, the concluding “Reverie of Water” nevertheless raises the possibility of a temporary balance – a cease-fire for both the “besieger and besieged” – in a double metaphor of hope which is discussed below.

* * *

In an earlier Heaney work, *The Cure at Troy*, Philoctetes, injured and abandoned on a deserted island and bitter at his “Ten years’ misery and starvation”, also experiences despair (Heaney CT 19). When rescue is denied he laments: “He’s condemning me to death by hunger” (52); “They’ll pick me clean. / My life for theirs, eye and tooth and claw” (52). Rather than die a slow painful death, he demands “the relief / Of cutting myself off” (64). Heaney again challenges the notion that war resolves problems: “War has an appetite / For human goodness but it won’t touch the bad” (25). *The Cure at Troy* nevertheless voices the possibility of a temporary balance, a theme also present in “Mycenae Lookout”. Neoptolemus’ proposal of a third alternative – neither conflict nor suicide – allows Philoctetes to “see straight and turn around”, thus ending his despair (79).

* * *

Grief and despair and the difficulty of recovering from such feelings are a recurring theme in the poems by Heaney and Hughes selected for study. Both poets identify close links between music and poetry and powerfully evoke these feelings in a flowing lyrical discourse with extensive use of poetical devices such as assonance, consonance and alliteration.

Heaney's lyricism in the reworked Orpheus poems reverberates with the anguish of loss and subsequent apathy. Orpheus mourns the death of Eurydice and, in their turn, the animals, birds and trees mourn his death and the loss of his music. "Mycenae Lookout" reflects despair in more sober language. The grief and despair realised by Heaney in the vivid poetry of "Mycenae Lookout" and *The Cure at Troy* may at first appear irrelevant to modern conditions. However the poems rapidly expand their focus on individuals, to encompass contemporary global political events. They invite the reader to draw analogies between the sacking, raping and burning of Troy and 1990s conflicts in the Balkans and Iraq. More specifically, they suggest parallels with Heaney's experiences in Northern Ireland. In addition, *The Cure at Troy* allows the reader space in which to imagine alternative possibilities and solutions to conflicts.

In *Alcestis* Hughes likewise suggests an alternative to life-long despair for those grieving for a loved one:

> We have taken the full measure of grief
> And now we have found happiness even greater. (Hughes A 83)

This implies that "we" should have hope, be open to new experiences and recognise happiness when it comes perhaps in other forms. "The Rape of Proserpina" also suggests that relief from the totality of grief and despair is possible, when Jupiter's intervention allows a seasonal return, with the promise that it is a recurrent event to be enjoyed for ever. While we now know that a loved one will not return from death, memories recur and can be enjoyed indefinitely, and it is in such memories that the loved one survives.

Chapter 5

Sacrifice

> Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
> offerings to idols . . . (Heaney B 8)

Like revenge, sacrifice permeates the selected poems as both event and theme, often evoking an appalled emotional response from readers. Sacrifice can be involuntary or voluntary and may or may not result in death. The OED definition gives primacy to the meaning: “slaughter of a person or animal as an offering for a particular purpose”, and conjures up graphic images of bloody killings. The sacrificial victim is selected by the group and is not a volunteer. A further definition: “the giving up of one thing for another higher or more urgent thing, thus entailing a loss”, refers to the voluntary form of sacrifice. The motives for each kind of sacrifice – love, the will to power, expediency and hate – endure to the present. While individuals may no longer be sacrificed to ensure a fruitful harvest, readers of Heaney’s and Hughes’ poems can find thematic parallels between the poems’ ancient worlds and late twentieth-century reality. The poetic language chosen by Heaney and Hughes emphasises the continuity of sacrificial acts from ancient times, while contemporary idiom and explicit language expose the ugliness and horror that can attend sacrifice in times of conflict and tensions, ancient and modern. However the second definition of sacrifice affirms that not all sacrifices are atrocities. Colloquial language in Hughes’ poetic version of *Alcestis* stresses the ideal of a sacrifice motivated by love, an enduring motive, engendering hope. The following examination of passages selected from Hughes’ *Alcestis, The Oresteia,* and *Tales from*

Ovid and from Heaney's *Beowulf* and "Mycenae Lookout", confirms the continuing significance of the theme of sacrifice.

Voluntary Sacrifice

In *Alcestis* Hughes links ancient and modern acts of voluntary sacrifice by stressing marital love as a motive. Modern readers are familiar with such sacrifices, seen when rescuers willingly risk, and often sacrifice their lives to retrieve other people from danger. Live donor transplants of tissues, cells or organs allow the recipients to live. Hughes transposes this sacrifice to ancient times through a heart transplant analogy, when Apollo reveals that his appeal to Admetos' parents to die in his place has failed:

> I was asking for more than a kindness.
> I was asking for their heart – so to speak –
> To be cut out of their chest, and stitched into his. (Hughes A 3)

The simple, clear and concise language supports the notion of enduring love as a powerful motive in voluntary sacrifice.

Alcestis' motive is stated in similar plain language: "No woman ever loved a man / As she has loved Admetos" (Hughes A 11).

> A woman is dying in this house.
> She is giving up her life
> So that her husband can live.
> And this is the day of her death. (Hughes A 1)

The direct and specific syntax, concluding with the monosyllabic chant: "this is the day of her death" (A 1), renounces distractions as it focuses attention on the magnitude of Alcestis' decision. In the same way plainsong allows singers to concentrate on the

miracle of God's love, and Hughes theorises such a connection when he writes that : "Those Greek plays were close to liturgy" (WP 246). In essays, critical reviews and interviews he expounds the relationship between verse and musical patterns. His interest explains the use of incantatory rhythms in the passage quoted, which is also connected to what he calls a utility style – "a colloquial prose readiness" which reflects a "poetic breadth, a ritual intensity and music" (WP 215). Meanwhile consonance, repetitions and contraries, "life, live, dying, death", reinforce the conflict inherent in sacrifice.

Similar poetic techniques are present in the following passage, as sacrificial options are explored, conflicts identified, and the fallibility of love exposed again for a modern readership:

> You hear men and women swear
> They love somebody more than themselves.
> They are easy words.
> The act is hard. Proof of the oath is hard. (Hughes A 11)

Admetos, "a remarkable man" was "doomed to die young" (2). While "faceless Fate, [would] accept a substitute", no person kindred to Admetos was willing to die in his place (3). His parents, "Two walking cadavers – / Both refused. Their voices rose to a screech" (3). The thunder of "doomed" (2) echoes in the verse with the consonance, while "cadavers" and "screech" jolt the senses and crash into the otherwise easy flowing tone. Parental love fails the "hard act": "the scrap of time left to them / Is more precious to them than you are" (20). However by volunteering to die in her husband's place, Alcestis demonstrates a marital love that does not fail the "hard act". The inner conflict inherent in sacrifice nevertheless operates across the centuries as an unchanging human

dilemma. The conflict which Alcestis must first confront is imaged through simile and metaphor as she fights her own will to live.

She prepares carefully for her death and is “so calm” as she bathes, dresses in magnificent garments and jewels, and prays at each altar (12). However she is eventually overwhelmed: “in her room she broke down” (12), finding that her sacrifice, her intended act, is “hard” to endure. Her sacrifice is voluntary but her will to live is strong. “Her scream was gagged with sobs. . . . clawing at the coverlet . . . She was like a fly / Caught in a spider’s single strand” (12-3). Alliteration and contrapuntal language – “calm” followed by the violence of “gagged” and “clawing” – dramatise the inevitable outcome of the fly’s struggle in the unseen but ever-present web, as an analogy for humanity’s eternal struggle against death. Violent imagery has replaced plainsong as the vehicle for the sacrificial decision. Short sharp sentences embody the brief time which is left:

> She is already a dead weight.
> Her eyes are sunk in dark pits.
> Her blood hardly moving.
> Her skin cold.
> She gasps for air.
> And cries for light – more light. (Hughes A 14)

A list of attributes of the dying constructs a twisted mimicry of the medieval poetic convention of the “beautiful lady” used so brilliantly by Chaucer in his sexual play on the female body. The poetry draws attention to Alcestis’ body, “a dead weight”; her eyes, “sunk in dark pits”; her stagnant blood; her cold skin; her failing breath; and, in the manner of the convention, returns and repeats “light – more light”. Sight – the

ability to see light – is the faculty people most fear losing. Transitions from light into dark and from warmth into cold therefore intensify the conflict between life and death: "The sun! / The great good warmth of heaven" (17) is extinguished by "A huge cold / Coming down over me" (18). The language abandons "utility style", as, like the invisible web, metaphors of death stealthily strengthen and darken in references to the River Styx and the ferryman – "What is that black river ? /. . . Somebody out on the river shouting for me" (18). Finally, reflecting the ebb of life, language conveys Alcestis' regaining of the "calm" of her earlier decision: "Accept what is happening" (19). Clanchy suggests that "Alcestis dies a hero's death" (50). In fact Hughes avoids glorifying heroic death, but it is true that as she weakens physically Alcestis gains mental strength:

> Goodbye, my darlings.
> Remember, I loved you.
> Don't waste the sun. Be happy. (Hughes A 19)

In her dying moments, humanly fearful for her children, she demands: "Do not take another wife . . . Promise me, Admetos . . . Admetos, promise" (Hughes A 20-1). Admetos then makes a voluntary reciprocal sacrifice:

> I shall mourn you, Alcestis,
> Not for a year, but for my entire life. (Hughes A 22)

He promises never to take another woman to his bed, and thus never to father more children. His motive too is love: "I love you. As I have loved you alive / I will love you dead. Only you" (21).

Vivid similes and metaphors in *Alcestis* thus powerfully convey the conflict inherent in voluntary sacrificial acts. Additionally, Hughes' choice of colloquial prosaic and poetic language focuses attention on love as a continuing motive for such acts, and suggests through Alcestis that such love can overcome death. The poem's insistence on the redemptive strength of a love that can, with a god's help, bring a loved one back from the grave, is paralleled in modern times when loved ones are saved from certain death through, for example, organ donation. Thus the theme is still relevant to readers today. While only *Alcestis* of the poems studied explores voluntary sacrifice, a number develop the theme of involuntary sacrifice.

Involuntary Sacrifice

While those living in the twenty-first century are prepared to honour voluntary sacrifices motivated by love, modern sacrifice is often motivated, on the contrary, by despair, hatred or the hunger for power. Images of self-immolation appear more often in media reports, as violence is adopted as a solution to personal and national problems: "in an increasing number of cases [violence] is being practiced in the name of self-determination" (Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber 1). Self-destruction causing the maiming or murder of bystander victims is a modern sacrificial atrocity which overwhelms the reader and viewer with its bloody carnage. Voluntary sacrifice has thus expanded in our technologically sophisticated era to include involuntary victims. In re-working the myths depicting involuntary sacrifice, Hughes uses threatening language and images to establish parallels with the present.

* * *

Tales from Ovid depicts sacrifices of powerless mortal men and women who are victims of confrontations, sparked by anger or jealousy, among and with the gods. In “Semele”, “Actaeon” and “Arachne”, Hughes reinterpretets the passages he chose to rework by applying colloquial language, while “Tereus” replicates the effects of Ovid’s “deliberate use of shock” (Hofmann and Lansdun xi), in vivid metaphors.

When Juno is angered by her promiscuous husband, she transfers her anger to his victims and instigates their involuntary sacrifice. “Juno was incensed when she learned it: / Jove had impregnated Semele” (Hughes Ov 95). Juno manifests herself as: “a gummy old woman – / White wisps, / A sack of shrivelled skin propped on a stick” (96). “Gummy” reproduces both the image and the “mmm” speech of a toothless crone, in a powerful metaphor of aging, while the sibilant hiss of alliterative consonance in “sack of shrivelled skin” emulates Juno’s jealousy. Jove tries to “filter / The nuclear blast / Of his blazing impact – ” (99), but Juno’s manipulation prevails, as Semele’s “blazing shape / Became a silhouette of sooty ashes” (99). Explicit language, “nuclear blast”, and “sooty ashes” link her involuntary sacrifice with twentieth-century mass destruction. Repetition of the earlier sibilant alliterative consonance reinforces Juno’s triumph.

Similarly, another mortal, Actaeon, “steered by a pitiless fate”, stumbles on the naked goddess of chastity, Diana, as she bathes (107). Metamorphosed to a stag, he is torn to pieces by his hounds:

> These three pinned their master, as the pack
> Poured onto him like an avalanche.

> Every hound filled its jaws
> Till there was hardly a mouth not gagged and crammed
> With hair and muscle. . . . (Hughes Ov 111)

Like the avalanche of hounds, the words pour over the reader, mirroring the hounds' feeding frenzy and inducing gagging at the images.

Unlike Semele and Actaeon, Arachne as the god's sacrificial victim does not die a horrific death but is metamorphosed into a creature of revulsion. When she was unwise enough to challenge Minerva by weaving a tapestry in which every stitch was perfect (181), the goddess "ripped it to rags" (181) and turned Arachne into a spider which "ceaselessly weaves" (182). Again consonance and alliteration in these lines pattern the web of Minerva's jealousy – the destroyed tapestry and the destroyed life.

"Tereus" is the most disturbing of Hughes' reworkings of Ovid in this collection, as the poetry powerfully presents the grotesque extremes of human behaviour. He writes: "Different aspects of the poem [continue] to fascinate Western culture, saturating literature and art" (Ov viii). In fact "Tereus" constructs a detailed exposé of obsessive passions which result in the involuntary sacrifice of an innocent child. Procne butchers Itys, her son by Tereus, to avenge Tereus' rape and mutilation of her sister Philomela:

> Like a tiger on the banks of the Ganges
> Taking a new-dropped fawn
> She dragged him into a far cellar . . .
> Procne pushed a sword through his chest – (Hughes Ov 242)

Again Hughes uses counterpoint, "tiger" and "fawn", to foreground the sacrifice, but in this poem, in contrast with *Alcestis,* it is hate not love which rushes the action to its

bloody climax. Onomatopoeia, where the awkward sound of the vowels “a” and “u” in the verbs “dragged” and “pushed” echoes the sense by momentarily slowing the pace, magnifies a graphic image of the deliberate infanticide. Itys’ helplessness is stressed by the adjective “new-dropped”, while the following words, “she dragged him”, intensify the simile. The mother who would be expected to defend her child instead behaves like a man-eating tiger. The language builds the images towards a culminating sequence of the butchering, cooking and serving up of the child to his father:

> . . . the two sisters
> Ripped the hot little body
> Into pulsating gobbets.
> . . . they cooked his remains – some of it
> Gasping in bronze pots, some weeping on spits. (Hughes Ov 242)

Hughes exposes the ugliness of willed destructive traumatic actions by guttural consonant alliteration and explicit vocabulary: “pulsating gobbets”. His descriptions of the child’s dead flesh as “gasping” and “weeping” produce vivid visual images. These locate the act of infanticide firmly in the grotesque, while the “rapidity” of events imaged by “ripped” overtakes the reader and is reflected in the language of “passion *in extremis”* (ix):

> Philomela burst into the throne-room,
> Her hair and gown bloody. She rushed forward,
> And her dismembering hands, red to the elbows.
> Jammed into the face of Tereus
> A crimson dripping ball,
> The head of Itys, (Hughes Ov 243)

The grisly images overlap each other. In contrast to the slowed verbs of the preparation for the sacrifice (“dragged”), these verbs are “jammed” in a high speed rush towards the

grotesque finale. The rapid pace is maintained when Procne and Philomela are metamorphosed into swooping birds. Tereus too is in a sense transformed by the fury of the sisters' revenge, as he dissolves into anguish and grief (244).

Hughes states that Ovid composed the *Metamorphoses* at the end of an era of change when old religions had collapsed and new ones had not yet arrived and when the "Empire was flooded with ecstatic cults" (Ov x-xi). He maintains that the conflicts and tensions created a "psychological gulf" which can be felt in these tales (xi). His selection and reinterpretations relate the tales to what he discerns may eventually be designated as the end of another era. His poetry thus participates in the violent discourses of modern times, and rather than drifting on the surface, he digs deeper, exposing the pattern of a world out of control. In "Tereus" one child is torn apart, but the atrocity is being repeated in this century with multiple victims, as, machete massacres in Africa proliferate, and suicide bombings explode across many countries.

* * *

In Hughes' *The Oresteia* Iphigenia is another involuntary sacrificial victim, who, like Itys, lives in a world out of control, and again it is her parent who initiates the sacrifice. When Agamemnon's forces are trapped in Greece by a contrary wind, a seer reveals that only a sacrifice to propitiate the goddess will allow the ships to sail. Thus Iphigenia is sacrificed "For a puff of air" (Hughes TO 102). Agamemnon convinces himself with a specious argument: "I have done no more / Than sacrifice myself" (14). "If my daughter dies – the winds change" (14). To him Iphigenia is a convenient and expedient sacrifice, and the bystanders, her father's men who might have prevented the sacrifice, are

compliant. They “clench their hearts hard / And avoid her eyes” (15). The scathing words challenge the validity of both the seer’s interpretation of the omens and Agamemnon’s acceptance of it:

> Agamemnon,
> Launches his thousand keels
> On the blood of a virgin.
> To reclaim a stolen whore.
> Iphigenia for Helen. (Hughes TO 14)

However Iphigenia is destined not to be the only involuntary sacrificial victim, as those manning the “thousand keels” are potential victims also. Hughes embeds a menacing tone to capture the prevailing mood prior to the sacrifice. The language of chaos, of war, develops powerful images of atrocities ahead: “As if snatched up / Into the chariot”; “a roar like rage, to deafen himself”; “Drags him, / As at the heels of horses, Into that future” (14). The poetry demonstrates also how easily the mood of a troop can be manipulated. These are “Men who had wept / To hear her sing” (15), but now they are “famished for the war” (15):

> A gale of war roars through them
> Like a gale of visions – the battle-fury,
> The massacres to come, and the glory
> . . .
> Iphigenia
> Is hoisted off her feet by attendants –
> They hold her over the improvised altar
> Like a struggling calf. (Hughes TO 15)

Hughes’ use of animal similes reflects his anthropomorphic interests, in that his poetry often attributes human behaviour to animals and animal-like behaviour to humans. The

innocence and helplessness of the young – the boy Itys, the "new-dropped fawn" and Iphigenia, the "struggling calf" – are grotesquely contrasted with the parents' intention. Procne ignores her child's screams: "Mama, Mama!" (Ov 242). Agamemnon turns aside when Iphigenia's "Daddy!. . . Daddy!" (TO 15) is cut short. "She chokes – / Hands are cramming a gag into her mouth" (15). Later, as we have seen, Iphigenia's involuntary sacrifice becomes a motive for Clytemnestra's murder of her husband: "He ripped my daughter's throat and shook the blood out of her" (71). The verbs "choke", "cram", "rip", "shook" drive forward the horror of the human sacrifice as an image superimposed over an animal sacrifice. Iphigenia becomes the "struggling calf" in lieu of "his precious cattle" or "somebody else's goat" (71). The tearing and slashing of Iphigenia's throat, evoked by Clytemnestra's denunciation, replicates the earlier tearing and slashing of her clothes when she is stripped of her silks by rough hands (15). A frivolous metaphor, "the wind waltzes with them [the silks] / Down across the beach" (15), contrasts vividly with human roughness and ripping actions. The "goose-pimpled . . . masterpiece", the sacrifice, is held up for all to "stare at" (16), and then she is butchered:

> Pity is like a butterfly in a fist
> As the knuckles whiten. (Hughes TO 16)

Pity has no place in war. The butterfly simile evokes its fragile nature by contrasting the delicacy of the insect with the strength of the clenched fist as a symbol of fighting. The verbs "rip", "whiten" reinforce the violence of the sacrifice while implying the inevitability of sacrifices and massacres to come. The inaction of the observer who turns away – "I saw nothing else – I could not watch it" (16) – replicates the inaction of

nations when atrocities are perpetrated elsewhere, as happened in the civil war in Rwanda.

Yet another involuntary sacrifice occurs with bystanders' complicity when Cassandra, another victim entrapped in the fate of the returning Agamemnon, dies because of the inaction of the Chorus who ignore her prophecy (TO 52-3). Hughes presents Cassandra as the clairvoyant who sees that: "Evil / Is pouring out evil" (Hughes TO 53), the fragile survivor of a massacre, who having reached what should be safety, is ironically about to die. She screams out against the Furies and the imminent murder of Agamemnon:

> The cow has gored the great bull.
>
> . . .
>
> And I am there with him.
> Look at me – like a dolphin split open
> From end to end.
> I roll in his blood.
> Carved by the same blade.
> . . . I have to go down
> Under the hammer-blow
> That will empty me –
> Like a chicken on a block. (Hughes TO 55)

The sharp truncated lines mimic the knife thrusts, and the images of savage butchery are compelling: "dolphin split open", "roll in his blood", "carved", "hammer-blow". Clytemnestra sacrifices Cassandra as belonging to her husband, "his trophy, this prophetess" (72), and claims that the curse on the house of Atreus is responsible for the deaths: "Yes, blame the curse / The blood-eating Fury / That hates our house" (74). Cobley argues that: "sacrifice breaks the cycle of reciprocal violence" (79), a view

which is upheld in the “Tereus” narrative, but undermined here, as the cycle of reciprocal violence, murder and sacrifice continues.

Cassandra points out (Hughes TO 59) that an earlier sacrifice by Atreus motivated Aegisthus:

> He took my two brothers,
> . . . Cut their throats and bled them,
> Butchered them, and stewed the meat.
> This was the dish set steaming before my father. (Hughes TO 80)

The language generates graphic pictures through verbs of violence, “cut”, “bled”, “butchered”, “stewed”, in a gruesome mimicry of the killing of Procne’s son in “Tereus”, where, however, death precedes dismemberment. Cassandra’s vision is more horrific:

> Children covering their eyes,
> Sobbing blood through their fingers,
> Children chopped up, screaming
> And roasted and eaten
> By their own father. (Hughes TO 53)

The lines evoke contemporary images of involuntary sacrifices, such as slayings of refugees.

* * *

Heaney’s “Mycenae Lookout” constructs an image of Cassandra opposite to Hughes’ by implying that she is a voluntary sacrificial victim. However like Hughes’ Chorus, the lookout at Mycenae is complicit in Cassandra’s fate. Heaney presents her as “half-

calculating" and, like a sacrificial lamb, she has a "bleat of clair- / voyant dread" (ML 416-7):

> No such thing
> as innocent
> bystanding.
> Her soiled vest,
> her little breasts,
> her clipped devast-
> ated, scabbed
> punk head
> the char eyed
> famine gawk-
> she looked
> camp-fucked
> and simple. . . . (Heaney ML 415-6)

Like Hughes, Heaney uses truncated lines but to the extent of knifing words in half: "devast-ated" (415) and "clair-voyant" (417), to isolate the victim Cassandra whose innonence again cannot save her (416). The knifed words figure the mode of Agamemnon's death, while Heaney suggests further that Cassandra is complicit in her own killing: "'A wipe / of the sponge, that's it'" (418). Whereas Hughes invokes empathy for this victim of violence, Heaney invokes disdain, indifference almost, and only the simile of the lamb implies that she too is a sacrifice. His use of contemporary idiom – "punk", "gawk", fucked" – grounds the pattern of the atrocity in the modern world. Helen Vendler identifies a connection between a ceasefire in Northern Ireland and the poem, as being Heaney's response to a "post-catastrophic moment" (156). She argues: "Cassandra has not been distanced by archaism . . . she stands before us, through

the Watchman's eyes, as she might have been, defensive and defenceless" (170). The bystanders' indifference suggests a parallel with the public's attitude to Irish girls who fraternised with British soldiers, and whose heads were forcedly shaved (169). Acts of "retaliatory violence" overwhelmed communities in the twenty years that followed the collapse of the 1974 peace conference (Heaney CP 455).

Involuntary sacrifices may take a less dramatic, less bloody form than those discussed above, but are still deplorable. Many women portrayed in the poems are powerless, and forced to make sacrifices that do not always result in their deaths. Alcestis does not see marriage as a sacrifice but rather as fulfilment, and she is empowered by her position as wife. However, for other women marriage is a sacrifice as it entails departure from a place of safety, the father's house, to the unknown and often insecure home of a husband. Lévi-Strauss suggests that "marriage is the archetype of exchange" (483), and in "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours", Patricia Klindienst describes the place of women in Greek myths:

> Exchange of the king's daughter is nothing less than the articulation of his power and the reassertion of his city's sovereignty. In the marriage rite the king's daughter is led to the altar as victim and offering, but instead of being killed, she is given in marriage to the rival king. War is averted. (Klindienst 618)

Klindienst's point is that in a violent ancient world royal women were regarded primarily as items of exchange. Hughes recreates this in the first lines of "Tereus":

> Pandion, the King of Athens, saw
> King Tereus was as rich
> And powerful as himself. . . .

> Pandion gave his daughter [Procne] to Tereus. (Hughes Ov 229)

Women like Procne and Philomela, who seize a temporary power and act out aggressive roles, are often avenging an earlier brutality, and their actions transform their essential natures. The Ovidian source texts were composed in an era when the safety of the family, community and country were considered paramount, before an individual's rights had much evolved. Individuals were then regarded as expendable, but readers of Hughes' and Heaney's versions of the texts assume these rights. They are however also aware that an individual's rights may be forcibly ceded, for instance in an exercise of power by a father or husband over a daughter or wife.

* * *

A subsidiary theme in Heaney's *Beowulf* of interest to a contemporary as well as to an Anglo-Saxon audience, explores the treatment of women as items of exchange given in marriage, either to consolidate a peace treaty, or to placate an aggressive neighbour. "The ritual violence that accompanies the exchange of women serves a sacrificial purpose for each group" (Girard *Violence* 249), and brides themselves are sacrifices for breaking cycles of violence. The Christian narrator in *Beowulf* nevertheless expresses concern over the betrothal of Freawaru to Ingeld, which is meant to break such a cycle:

> The friend of the Shieldings favours her betrothal:
> the guardian of the kingdom sees good in it
> and hopes this woman will heal old wounds
> and grievous feuds.
> But generally the spear
> is prompt to retaliate when a prince is killed,
> no matter how admirable the bride may be. (Heaney B 65)

Here the poetry creates a powerful image of a woman living in fear in her new home, waiting in anguish for the next outbreak of hostilities, the next death, and a repudiation of her identity as wife. Heaney uses alliterative consonance – “friend”, “favour”; “guardian”, “good”; “hopes”, heal”; “woman”, “wounds”; “prompt”, “prince” – which link to the positive images but suggests the possibility of conflict through the negative connotations of “retaliate” and “spear”. Klindienst’s analysis of women’s social place in Greek myths is therefore applicable to *Beowulf,* where royal women are envisaged as surrogate victims, through whose sacrifice a community expels its own violence (Girard *Violence* 13). However the faults and failures of this practice are exposed by the clear-sighted narrator of *Beowulf:* “a passionate hate / will build up in Ingeld and love for his bride / will falter in him as the feud rankles” (Heaney B 66). The surrogate victim has no rights, nor any power to evade her fate.

* * *

Sacrifice is defined as including both voluntary and involuntary acts, and always involves the voluntary self-sacrificer in inner conflict. Enduring human motives for sacrifice – love, the will to power and hate – create parallels between ancient and modern sacrifices. Voluntary sacrifice may involve one person dying so that another may live, as occurs in Hughes’ version of *Alcestis.* Alcestis’ love is so powerful that she evades death, and Hughes establishes an explicit connection with the contemporary world of medical miracles by his use of a heart transplant analogy.

Involuntary sacrifice of others, motivated by a hunger for power or by hate, occurs more frequently in the selected texts, as in the modern world. In three of Hughes’ *Tales from*

Ovid the gods enforce the sacrifice of mortals who have angered them, but in "Tereus" Itys' sacrifice by his mother and aunt is motivated by revenge-inspired hate for his rapist father. Hughes represents these horrors through graphic, even revolting, contemporary language, thus linking them with modern abuses such as the degradation and mutilation of unarmed civilians. Hatred inspired by religious, cultural and ethnic differences is a motive for many modern atrocities.

Intertwining complex motives for sacrifice are explored in Hughes' version of *The Oresteia.* One of these is expediency which leads Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia for what is purported to be the greater good. His ships can sail for Troy, his troops can be employed, Menelaus' runaway wife reclaimed and revenged, and the war can proceed. Expediency is also a motive in *Beowulf* when royal women become involuntary sacrificial victims, commodities to be married to potential enemies so that the community may live in peace.

In the selected poems Heaney and Hughes use strong vocabulary and explicit imagery to evoke the emotions that attend both voluntary and involuntary acts of sacrifice. Contemporary idioms – Cassandra's "scabbed / punk head" (Heaney ML 416); evocative similes – "pity is like a butterfly in a fist" (Hughes TO 15); and technological allusions: "nuclear blast" (Ov 99) reinforce continuity between the past and present. Ancient culture is transferred into a modern idiom over a substratum of ideas and feelings about sacrifice that have maintained a continuity from ancient to modern times.

Chapter 6

Heroes and Heroism

> I meant to perform to the uttermost
> what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
> in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,
> prove myself with a proud deed
> or meet my death . . . (Heaney B 21)

The concept of a hero and the naming of his or her actions as heroism is ancient and predates written texts. Heroes appear in many forms and may manifest themselves as humans or as supernatural beings or gods, since they are derived from historical occurrences and from mythology. The hero-deed may take the form of defeating an opponent of superior strength, great feats in battle, or the rescue of an individual, community or nation from disaster. Thomas Carlyle, an interpreter of the concept in the Victorian era, draws all his heroes, except the god Odin, from known "Great Men" (239). Other interpreters examine the mythological counterparts of human heroes. Myth is recognised as a powerful pathway into an understanding of psychology and sociology, and the many theorists argue broad perspectives and interpretations. The very definition of myth is still debated.

This thesis makes no claims about the significance of myth to the study of human behaviour. However Joseph Campbell's understanding of the hero myth can assist in explicating the hero figures in Heaney's and Hughes' poetry, in that these often reflect,

but at other times depart from, Campbell's views. Heaney's and Hughes' heroes also sometimes diverge from Carlyle's construction of the heroic.

Campbell explores concepts of heroes and heroism by using a wider and more culturally diverse base than Carlyle's single disparate representatives. Campbell argues that heroic myth arises in all cultures and that "the heroes, and the deeds of myth survive into modern times" (3-4). He also perceives an archetype, in the sense of a recurring pattern or process (Jung 1001), that encompasses a call to adventure, tests of the hero's ability, and a return (245). "Many tales isolate and greatly enlarge upon one or two of the typical elements of the full cycle" (246). For example, the hero may be lured away, carried away or proceed voluntarily on a quest (245), and the journey to the underworld is but one of innumerable adventures (98). In a discussion of mythic sources in Hughes' poetry, Hirschberg conceives its broad diffusion: "The descent of the hero, whether Beowulf, Siegfried, Aeneas or Christ into the underworld to do combat with the demonic forces below the surface of the world is a recurrent feature in all mythology" (178-9). Similarly Campbell does not explicate the actions of individual heroes, but identifies repeated elements, including the underworld descent, and postulates varied representations of the hero as warrior, lover, saint and world redeemer: "The warrior-kings of antiquity regarded their work in the spirit of the monster-slayer" (340). Beowulf, illustrious warrior re-imagined in Heaney's *Beowulf*, is one such "monster-slayer". "This formula, indeed, of the shining hero going against the dragon has been the great device of self-justification for all crusades" (Campbell 340-1). In parallel, the

justification for modern global wars is often presented as a global fight for “freedom” against “tyrants” or “human monsters”.

Carlyle selects his human heroes in accordance with his reading of history: “They were the leaders of men . . . and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain” (239). It is therefore not surprising that he has been described as “one of the founders of the modern worship of power and success” (Michael K. Goldberg lxvi), or that his concepts of “hero-worship” were important in Nazi Germany (lxxiii). Carlyle’s ideology of the heroic contributed to the Romantic idealism of the Victorian era which followed an age of reason and scepticism. His audience “mainly represented the English political and religious establishment” (Goldberg xxix), which was unsettled by the French Revolution leading to Napoleon’s invasions across Europe, and by agitation for proper representation at home. “Victorians . . . associated democratic aspiration with revolutionary turmoil and mob violence” (Goldberg lxviii). Carlyle’s hero-worship of men who were able to rule and exact obedience (Carlyle 424), manage the world (428), and make “Order” (429), was therefore eagerly embraced by his audience at his lectures and later his readers. Restoring order is precisely Beowulf’s mission at Hrothgar’s court.

Campbell limits the hero’s power with the notion of legitimate action another idea found in Heaney’s *Beowulf*. Beowulf’s boat flew and the sea was calm – a positive omen establishes the legitimacy of the task (Heaney B 9). The hero’s address to the besieged Danes further confirms legitimacy: “We come in good faith . . . and proffer /

[our] wholehearted help and counsel" (11). For Campbell, too, the hero is an active participant who ignores the possibility of failure: "The last act . . . of the hero is that of death or departure" (Campbell 356). Beowulf again fits both these criteria (Heaney B 21).

While Beowulf fulfils many of Carlyle's and Campbell's prescriptions for heroes almost flawlessly, other characters in the poems discussed are identified as heroes by their actions, but display human failings which diverge from and even challenge these prescriptions. Paradoxically, Carlyle presented his conservative audience (Goldberg xxix) with heroes he considered worthy of worship, but some, such as Luther and Cromwell, could be termed revolutionary because of the changes they inspired. Similarly, poetic language in the selected texts often challenges the conservative ideology of heroism, since disorder rather than order follows the hero's actions.

Modern heroic ideology both confirms and diverges from Carlyle's and Campbell's heroic concepts. In the modern world heroic deeds associated with rescue operations parallel Beowulf's affirmation that he will succeed or perish (Heaney B 21). This altruistic aspect of heroism supports Campbell's thesis concerning the hero's death or departure and relates to motives of voluntary sacrifice discussed in Chapter 5. Carlyle's ideology of the heroic is challenged however by the fact that contemporary heroes are not exclusively the "Ablest"; and nor does "Order" necessarily ensue. Moreover contemporary usage devalues the heroic when, for instance, successful sporting teams are named and feted as heroes.

Except for *Beowulf*, analysis reveals that the poems discussed subvert Carlyle's affirmation of the hero as the "Ablest" man, since they expose human failings including hubris and pride, which limit the hero-deeds. Hirschberg argues that heroes "have both super-human powers and all-too-human weaknesses that destroy them" (104). Even Beowulf's final engagement is precipitated by pride and leaves his people vulnerable. Philoctetes' weakness is a suppurating wound that renders him almost helpless, but in *The Cure at Troy* only he can end the drawn-out war. In parallel, in Hughes' *Alcestis* Heracles indulges in a drunken rampage before he wrestles Death to retrieve Alcestis. Analysis of Hughes' *The Oresteia* moreover reveals elements which overtly challenge idealistic aspects of heroism, including those which link it with warfare and the concept of heroic death.

Heaney's *Beowulf:* The Hero-Ideal Maintained

Heaney accumulates descriptions and situations (B 25, 27, 48, 63, 67, 74) that emphasise Beowulf's prowess as "the ideal hero" (Karen Saupe 98). Beowulf intends to "calm the turmoil and terror" at Heorot and his previous heroic actions in war qualify him for fighting the marauding monster (Heaney B 11). Consonance reinforces his commitment to heroic action: "Now I mean to be a match for Grendel, / settle the outcome in single combat" (15), against images of shameful retreats. The hero's readiness to "perform to the uttermost" (21) contrasts with the inaction and cowardice of Heorot's natural defenders: the prince who "sat stricken and helpless" (6) and those who "moved away" to a "safer distance" (7). Heaney's language builds layer upon layer of anguish, adversity, torment, ordeal and hopelessness, allied with the passivity of the

"beset king, bewildered, stunned, numb", who suffered "for twelve winters, seasons of woe" (7, 11). Moreover the recurrent theme of shame attaching to inaction and to a non-heroic death is demonstrated when Unferth's inaction is seen to be at odds with his boasting "contrary words" (17, 20). Hrothgar is bothered by inept fighters who pledge themselves when "flushed with beer" (17). Likewise, Wiglaf later castigates "the battle-dodgers, the tail-turners, the cowards" (89-90), who left Beowulf to fight the dragon with only himself, an untested youth, for support: "you turned and fled / and disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner / die than live a life of shame" (91).

Beowulf's fight with Grendel tests his ability, revealing his alertness, courage and superior strength. He is named as hero (25, 27), but is immediately required to reaffirm this status in the fight with Grendel's mother, in accordance with Campbell's theory of the hero's test (245). Not only is he clutched in the "brutal grip" of the "swamp-thing from hell", but he simultaneously suffers an "onslaught" from a swarm of "sea-beasts" (Heaney B 49). The hero prevails: "his courage was proven, his glory was secure" (53). After celebrations and the recounting of his second heroic feat to Hrothgar's court and the audience, Beowulf departs. He has evaded death, triumphed in tests of his ability, and re-established order at Heorot, before returning to his homeland.

In return for Beowulf's heroic killing of Grendel, Hrothgar promises rewards: a recompense of "a rich treasure" and gifts of land (14). The text luxuriates in the rewards (33, 68, 94), with the narrator gloating over sumptuous descriptions of gold and jewels and elaborate armour, horses and harnesses. Nevertheless some plunder is presented as

defiled. Beowulf “saw treasure in abundance” in the monsters’ lair, but he “carried no spoils from those quarters” (52). Later, the dragon’s hoard also should have been inviolable and its plundering provokes a punishment in the form of the dragon’s rampage. Of the poems selected in this study, only *Beowulf* consents to a connection between heroism and carefully defined and limited material rewards.

Beowulf’s heroism expresses itself in fighting – a relationship reiterated through a text that delights in descriptions of dangerous bloody battles: “Thus Beowulf bore himself with valour; / he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour” (69). At his death, “his worth and due as a warrior were the greatest” (97). His “heroic nature” is extolled and he is buried in a “hero’s memorial”, a barrow so large it can be seen from far out to sea (99). Beowulf fulfils the “last act” in Campbell’s cycle – the hero’s death or departure – when he fights and kills the dragon in Geatland at the cost of his life.

At Beowulf’s death Wiglaf, who assists him in the dragon’s slaying, immediately initiates a new heroic cycle. As a youth and an untried fighter Wiglaf evinces heroic ideals: “I would rather my body were robed in the same / burning blaze as my gold-giver’s body / than go back home” (83). Campbell argues: “Only birth can conquer death – the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new” (16). After Beowulf’s death Wiglaf is named “the young hero” (Heaney B 89), thus supporting Campbell’s contention. Donoghue (16) notes that the epic reflects “the depredations of time and human weakness” on heroes, while Alexander sees it as set in “the heroic age” (1) and therefore as an “elegy for heroism” (3). Carlyle acknowledges the paradox that

heroes do not act in a vacuum, but are like lightning rods, responding to events; the hero is bound not only by his culture, but also by time (Goldberg lviii-lix). A young human Beowulf can fight monsters and win, and an older Beowulf responds to the dragon's attack. However since life is temporary – his "life . . . had been lent" – he knows he cannot triumph over death (Heaney B 89).

Although Heaney's *Beowulf* thus largely maintains the heroic mythologies, a sign of subversion is that Beowulf's death leaves his country unprotected. The poem's climax thus challenges Carlyle's view that the hero restores "Order", since Beowulf's final victory condemns his people to further conflict (Heaney B 94). A Geat woman's dread of war, her "wild litany / of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded, / . . .bodies in piles, / slavery and abasement", subverts the eulogies for the hero (98). The same dissociation of war from heroism which surfaces briefly in the final lines of *Beowulf* is imaged powerfully in Hughes' *The Oresteia.*

Agamemnon's Death: The Hero-Ideal Challenged

Campbell and Carlyle affirm the notion of legitimate action, and Beowulf's deeds support their argument, as does *The Oresteia's* Agamemnon who leads a retaliatory force to Troy. Nevertheless, when Agamemnon and Menelaus raze the entire city, retaliation far exceeds the punishment authorised by Zeus. Sagar identifies a further mythic pattern concealed within Campbell's depiction of the archetypal heroic cycle when he suggests that the "commonest" hero "hubristically sets himself above Nature and the gods" and is punished (*Foxes* 17). As discussed above, Menelaus' punishment

follows his victory when he is lost at sea, while Agamemnon returns home and is murdered. Hughes therefore challenges the ideology of heroism by elucidating dishonourable actions in battle and non-heroic deaths.

The herald who announces Agamemnon's return from Troy terms his triumph heroic: "He brings a great flame of light – / Out of the darkness" (Hughes TO 28), but Hughes' word-choice questions the validity of glorifying war and its link with heroes and heroic deeds: "you get ashes. / Your hero's exact worth – in the coinage of war" (25). Moreover, the herald's salute to Agamemnon is framed by brutal images of butchery inflicted and suffered by the hero's victorious army:

> Such a great hero – he made just this much slag.
> Then the widows weep face-eating acid.
> The house of Atreus has ruined their houses.
> The King cashed in their men – and bought a whore.
>
> (Hughes TO 25)

The discordant "slag" and "face-eating acid", the smelting-refuse and dross of war, confront the ideal of heroic action, while "ruined, cashed in" and "bought a whore", further denounce the heroic bargain. Moreover the house of Atreus is said to have "[s]cattered the bones from the bodies of Troy's heroes" – not a heroic deed (40). Orestes voices the mythology of heroic death:

> Father, you would be better
> Dead beneath Troy's wall,
> Slain in open battle . . .
> Your honour would be our wealth, (Hughes TO 107-8)

Agamemnon's actual death at a woman's hands is not imaged as heroic but as a "heap of shame" (108). "He was killed otherwise [than in battle]" (175):

> Not bronze, hammered in fire,
> But slender threads, woven and knotted
> By a woman's fingers. (Hughes TO 114)

The metaphor of a powerful warrior forged into strength by the fire of battle contrasts with a later metaphor of Agamemnon as a powerless fish snagged by the fishing net "knotted" by a woman: "From the conquerer of Troy – to a helpless fish" (137). Thus whereas Beowulf and Wiglaf mostly fulfil the heroic criteria proposed by Carlyle and Campbell, Hughes strips away pretensions in order to excoriate Agamemnon's actions in parallel with their actual effects: "[the] face-eating acid" that the war-widows weep. Others of the selected poems similarly unmask flaws and limitations in the heroic ideal.

Orpheus as Hero

Heaney's redeveloped Ovid poems reveal the constraints which limit Orpheus' heroism, when he descends into and returns from the underworld but fails his heroic test. Moreover, he fails to satisfy heroic criteria in his death. Individually, Heaney's "Orpheus and Eurydice" and "Death of Orpheus" develop only one or two typical elements of Campbell's heroic cycle, but together they complete his idea of an elemental pattern (246). The poems challenge Carlyle's thesis, because Orpheus achieves neither success nor order in his mission.

Orpheus acts like a hero when he accepts the challenge of the heroic test and ventures into Hades, moving among ghosts and shadow people (Heaney OE 222). Heaney's

poetry conveys vivid images of the horrors he endures as he searches for Eurydice through the “bodiless / Hordes” (223). Like Orpheus’ music as he sings to the sweetness of the “lyre-gut”, the lyrical poetic language bewitches and bemuses the modern reader. Moreover, Heaney’s language has the power to deflect attention from the grossness of hell’s perpetual tortures. Even the furies are made human so they can shed a tear. Through the power of his music Orpheus negotiates a rescue and return, but since he disobeys the directive of the “lord of Hades” (224), he fails as hero to rescue the lost bride. The obedient Eurydice slips back to the underworld, while the hero “who reached his arms out” (224) is ironically able to depart and return to the world above. Thus in this poem completion of the hero-task in the myth-cycle is deferred. The image of pleading is replicated poetically in “Death of Orpheus”, when hero and heroine are reunited, thereby consummating one element of Campbell’s mythic pattern.

However in this poem heroic ideals are unfulfilled to the extent that the death of Heaney’s Orpheus is not heroic. While his return from the underworld fulfils one element in the heroic cycle, the myth deviates from Campbell’s archetypal pattern when Orpheus is ripped to pieces by a band of women, followers of Dionysus. The brutal images of the “poet’s mangled flesh and bones” (Heaney DO 227) are counterbalanced by lyrical language: “Where the lyre trembled and the dead mouth swam / Lapping the ripples that lipped the muddy shore” (228). In a contradiction of Sagar’s modification of Campbell’s heroic cycle (*Foxes* 17), this punishment is not inflicted on the hero by the gods, since Bacchus proceeds to punish those who committed “atrocities against his sacred poet” (Heaney DO 228). Unlike Beowulf, Orpheus does not fight, but stretches

out his hands “to plead” (227), as he had formerly pleaded for Eurydice – a subversion of heroic representation.

Hercules as Hero

Three of the selected texts expound the myth of Hercules as hero, thereby contributing to “the multitude of iconographic, literary and mythological associations circling around the figure of Hercules” identified by Hirschberg (163). Hercules is the Latinised name of the Greek Heracles. His supernatural power to enact heroic deeds in poems by Heaney and Hughes endorses some of Campbell’s views on heroic mythology, including the hero’s journey and his representation as a fearless warrior.

* * *

In mythology, gods or supernatural beings have the power to punish. Unlike other heroes they also evade death. In Hughes’ *Tales from Ovid,* Hercules is the son of Jupiter and a human mother and, in accordance with Campbell’s idea, he is a fearless warrior. However even he is at the mercy of more powerful gods. Hughes’ “Hercules and Dejanira” recounts his rescue of his new bride: “Hercules / Had no fear for himself, only for his wife” (Hughes Ov 151). Dejanira was “Paralysed / Between her dread of the river / And her dread of the goat-eyed centaur” (151). The flooded river they must cross is an “earth-shaking menace / That stunned the air with mist” (151). The language reverberates with menace and anticipates the blow of both the centaur’s abduction and Hercules’ response: “His arrow arrived . . . Jutting from his [the centaur’s] breastbone” (153). This heroic act of rescue later results in Hercules’ death.

Campbell argues the birth of something new can conquer death, a view which is supported by the Hercules myth (16). However Campbell's alternatives for ending the hero's progress are revised, in that, while Hercules departs triumphant after killing the centaur, this action also contributes to his death, when he becomes a victim of Juno's hatred. Hercules' dying is nevertheless rendered heroic by his stoic acceptance. He claws in agony at the shirt that the centaur has poisoned with the bile of the Hydra: "It lifted sheets of steaming skin", so that Hercules' body burns as if alight (Hughes Ov 156-7). Hughes constructs vivid images of disintegrating flesh, using simile, metaphor and alliterative consonance: "writhing rags and rope-ends of muscle, / Baring the blue shine of thick bones" (157); and of the funeral pyre, a "squared stack of tree trunks" (161). Hercules' "bow, his quiver / And the arrows / Destined to return to the city of Troy" (161), are given to Philoctetes, an element of the myth that Heaney re-worked in *The Cure at Troy.* With his release from the intolerable torture imminent, Hercules relaxes upon the pyre "like a guest / Lolling among the wine-cups, / Head wreathed with festive garlands" (Hughes Ov 161). Hughes thus connects earlier images of a triumphant hero wearing a wreath of laurel leaves with the smoke wreathing above the blaze. In a vivid simile, the "elemental power" of fire is likened to "a pride of squabbling lions, / worrying" at their prey, until they and the fire engulf the hero "who smiled in contempt" as he finally frees himself from Juno's tortures (163). His earthly body disintegrates "in a blue shimmer" (161), evoking an image of the furnace-like heat of the victim's agony and the relieving fire. However, Hercules' genes inherited from his father Jupiter are "Eternal – / Immune to flame, intangible to death" (162), and "So the Tirynthian hero emerged / More glorious, greater, like a descended god" (163). Thus

Hercules' heroic death and rebirth as a constellation (163) depicts the glories of heroism and supports this element of Campbell's thesis – the hero's metamorphosis conquers death.

* * *

Heroic virtue, in the forms of friendship and love, is a compelling force in *Alcestis,* which fulfils many of Campbell's criteria for heroism. The friendship between Heracles and Admetos inspires Heracles' hero-deed (Hughes A 32, 63, 65, 66, 73). Campbell argues that the hero enters the field of testing from without (17), a theory supported by Beowulf's entry to Heorot from the sea. Heracles similarly enters from without, as a valued guest in a house of mourning. Nevertheless he causes an uproar (Hughes A 47) by "vandalising the funeral of the Queen" (63) while drunk, a weakness which has the potential to limit his heroic action. "For Hughes, . . . Hercules is an archetypal figure who plays an important role at crucial moments" (Hirschberg 163). He "appears and risks his own life in a descent to the underworld to fight Death and redeem Alcestis" (163). In expiation for his carousing and cavorting (Hughes A 64) and to prove himself a friend, Heracles vows to "wrench Alcestis / Out of the grip of Death" (65). If she is already in the underworld he will "penetrate / The palace of the God of Hell" and "pluck" her "like a stalk of asphodel", the immortal flower that grew in the Elysian fields (65). Consonance devolving on "p" confirms his vow. While Alcestis cannot be immortal, the simile suggests the extended life span that will be conferred on her by Heracles' hero-deed – the heroic fight through which he retrieves her (82). He then refuses Admetos' invitation to "[s]tay with us" (82) and departs, a corroboration of

Campbell's thesis. However Heracles is only one of the heroes of *Alcestis*, where the heroic virtue of unselfish love dominates the narrative.

This is Alcestis' motive for a sacrifice which is also an act of heroism: "Your love for Admetos / Converted death to nothing" (Hughes A 27). The notion of heroic death wreathes through the poem: "All that matters now / Is how Alcestis makes the gift of her life" (3), and Clanchy affirms: "Alcestis dies a hero's death" (50). However as argued above in Chapter 5, her will to live is strong and the poetry represses the heroism of her acceptance of death, only to celebrate the primacy of sacrificial death as hero-deed: "Your death / Was your greatest opportunity / And magnificently you took it" (Hughes A 27). While Hughes' language thus confronts the finality of death, he also slips in a question as to the value of such heroism by emphasising its cost: "A dead woman . . . and burned-out love. / Falling into non-life. / Into endless time, endlessly falling" (26). Campbell notes that in modern narratives: "the world, as we know it, as we have seen it, yields but one ending: death, disintegration, dismemberment" (25-6). However Alcestis achieves her intention, a transformation which enables Admetos to live. While Hughes' language allots space for the modern outlook of despair identified by Campbell, he ultimately rejects it in the words of hope that conclude *Alcestis.* These are explored in the following chapter.

Philoctetes as Hero

Heroic and non-heroic actions pervade Heaney's *The Cure at Troy,* producing tension and challenging heroic mythology. The poem names the least able man, Philoctetes, as

hero and represses knowledge of Neoptolemus' action as heroic. Moreover, as well as being the least able man, Philoctetes is marginalised as not human, a depiction that has been explored above in Chapter 3.

In preparing for his release from agony into death, Hughes' Hercules enlists Philoctetes' help to build his funeral pyre, while gifting to him his bow, quiver and arrows (Hughes Ov 161; see 126 above). By contrast, in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*, a wounded Philoctetes wants only to forget war and return home.

> Philoctetes.
> Hercules.
> Odysseus.
> Heroes. Victims. (Heaney CT 1)

Heaney thus compounds heroes with the victims of war, both linguistically and physically, replicating Hughes' challenge in *The Oresteia* to the hegemony glorifying war (TO 25).

Odysseus expresses his intention to seize Hercules' bow and sail with it to Troy, either with or without its owner Philoctetes. This is not a heroic action, and neither is his earlier abandonment of Philoctetes heroic. The conflict between Odysseus, who follows orders and believes "scruples are self-indulgence" (Heaney CT 10), and Neoptolemus, who sees shame and a hollow victory in Odysseus' proposal (46), further subverts heroic ideals.

The contradiction inherent in *The Cure at Troy*, the failure to acknowledge Neoptolemus as a hero, while promoting a weakened Philoctetes, undermines heroic ideals still further. Philoctetes' possession of Hercules' miraculous bow ensures that those who abandoned him will eventually return to claim the bow, so that they can fulfil a prophecy. Philoctetes is acclaimed a hero only when he agrees, through Hercules' intervention, to their demands: "You're to be / The hero that was healed and then went on / To heal the wound of the Trojan war itself" (73). Contradictorily, he himself realises that he is not a hero but "nothing", of as little importance as "a fossil, cave stones, damp walls, dead leaves, a wet cliff, a sound" (80). By contrast, Neoptolemus is heroic because he returns the bow: "Hold your hand out. / Take it" (70), and so prevents the retaliatory killing of Odysseus: "it would have been the end of both of us" (71). Girard notes a "view of the hero as mediator" developed by Lévi-Strauss (*double business* 178), and this proposition is explored here. Neoptolemus' persuasion and his friendship offered in the Aristotelian sense is a hero-deed: "a friendship based on virtue . . . not a political means to an end" (Richard Bodéüs 69).

While *Beowulf* endorses a relationship between heroic action and reward in the forms of treasure and land, others of the poems favour less materialistic rewards. Orpheus seeks only his lost love Eurydice; Hercules acts to protect his wife from the depravity of the centaur; and Heracles and Neoptolemus seek only the reward of friendship. In the modern world heroic deeds associated with rescue operations parallel Beowulf's affirmation that he will "perform to the uttermost . . . or perish (Heaney B 21). Such

heroism supports Campbell's thesis concerning death or departure, and further idealises motives of voluntary sacrifice discussed in Chapter 5.

* * *

Researchers' investigations of heroes and heroism provide a useful framework for explicating the hero and hero-deed in Heaney's and Hughes' poems. Theorists such as Campbell note archetypal patterns of heroism in a culturally diverse range of myths and largely avoid Carlyle's Victorian ideology of "Heroes and Hero Worship". Analysis of the poems has identified quest, test of the hero, and departure or death among the typical mythic patterns noted by these researchers. On the other hand Heaney's and Hughes' heroes frequently depart from Campbell's arguments, thus challenging his thesis. The notion of legitimate action is inherent in Carlyle's and Campbell's arguments, and for them the hero performs with honour and achieves his goal or dies in the attempt. However Hirschberg and Sagar note the presence of human weaknesses which ultimately destroy the heroes or limit their heroic deeds. Analysis of the poems has revealed subtle depictions that encompass not only heroic glorification but also limitations of heroism.

The limits of heroic action are exemplified especially by Heaney's Orpheus' poems. Orpheus accepts the heroic challenge and descends to the underworld but fails in his quest to rescue his lost bride. His death is not heroic, as he dies at the hands of a band of women. Hercules and Beowulf exemplify the hero-ideal, though not perfectly. Even *Beowulf*, which most closely conforms to Carlyle's and Campbell's notions of heroic myth, subverts their arguments in the final passage. Beowulf dies heroically in an

attempt to save his people from the dragon but leaves them unprotected, a subversion of the ideal. Only Hercules as a supernatural hero evades death, though in one of his manifestations – in Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* when he is a victim of the more powerful Juno – he cremates and transforms himself. His body is dismembered by poison and so his stoic acceptance of death is glorified as heroic. Alcestis too experiences a heroic death, after which Heracles heroically intervenes to rescue her from the "Lord of Hades".

Analysis has uncovered yet further challenges to heroism and heroic behaviour. In Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* Hercules returns to motivate a bitter and abandoned Philoctetes who is named heroic only when he agrees to the demands of others. The failure to affirm Neoptolemus' hero-deed while attributing heroic status to the wounded and weakened Philoctetes again undercuts the myth. In *Beowulf* a Geat woman's dread of war covertly challenges the assumption that war is a field for heroic action. A similar challenge arises in Hughes' *The Oresteia,* where the actions of the triumphant army are without honour, which is a heroic concept, and bloody images of battle and its degrading aftermath overwhelm the reader. Moreover descriptions of brutality frame bitter images of women mourning the deaths of their men in battle. Thus Hughes subverts the association of heroism with war well beyond the stance taken in Heaney's *Beowulf.* Orestes mourns the non-heroic death of his father, and the widows mourn the return of their men, not as heroes but as ashes. Heroes die, but it is the manner of their death which supports the heroic ideal and this element is notably lacking in Hughes' *The Oresteia*.

Chapter 7

Hope

And now
See how God has accomplished
What was beyond belief.
Let this give man hope. (Hughes A 83)

Believe in miracles . . . (Heaney CT 77)

Hope, a desire for something combined with a belief or feeling or trust that the thing desired will come, includes a component of optimism and almost always implies a positive context. Contemporary usage of "hope" is imprecise, but the antonyms of hope – hopelessness and despair – reveal a more precise signification which this study applies. According to Heaney and Vaclav Havel, hope is "a state of mind" (qtd. in Heaney RP 4), and Heaney believes that the poet's imagining can conjure up hope for himself and the reader. He concluded his Nobel Lecture (1995), by affirming that poetry has "the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it" (CP 467). A belief in poetry's redemptive force in fact underlies the poetic vision of both Heaney and Hughes.

As well as in their poetry, Heaney and Hughes express their hopes for their actual and imagined worlds in essays and interviews. Heaney affirms that he makes space in his "reckoning and imagining for the marvellous as well as the murderous" (CP 458). Moreover he maintains that the "poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong

or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions" (RP 1), a vision that is particularly evident in *The Cure at Troy* and "Mycenae Lookout". Hughes' idea of the poet as a shaman whose poetic mission is to undertake healing has been noted by Moulin (34), Sagar (*Foxes* 22-25), Scigaj (*Critical* 1), and Skea (1-5, 216, 219). He affirms his belief that art is "the psychological component of the autoimmune system", and that it works by consoling and healing something in us (DH 82). While prose can also do this, "poetry does it more intensely. Music, maybe, most intensely of all" (82). At a poetry reading in 1978, Hughes stated that poetry "seizes upon what is depressing and destructive, and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing" (qtd. in Scigaj *The Poetry* 257). In his last work, *Alcestis*, he seizes upon death as a theme which evokes despair and lifts it into a healing realm. All of Hughes' poems are a sharing of significances about the world: "There is meaning in our lives and our deaths. The poem promises us this. It is a safeguard against despair, and a mirror of profoundest reality" (Penelope Shuttle 257).

In some of Heaney's and Hughes' poems studied here, feelings of hope surface briefly, only to be dragged like flotsam below a maelstrom of destructive events. Nevertheless, various characters express feelings of optimism which ensure that hope resurfaces, again if only briefly. Several poems affirm that hopeful aspirations are destined to survive the vortex of violence and despair. One such aspiration is for redemption, or deliverance from guilt, which is presented in both Christian and secular terms.

Christian ideas of redemption appear as an intermittent ripple in Heaney's *Beowulf* before being immersed in further waves of fighting. In Hughes' *The Oresteia*, a returning herald momentarily realises his hopes, before a whirlpool of destructive events swamp him and the reader. Only at the conclusion is rage transformed into understanding, so that hope for the future can be articulated through deliverance from civil unrest. Hughes' *Alcestis* focuses on an individual's experience of despair (discussed in Chapter 4), but Admetos' feelings, veering from hopeless to hopeful, eventually deliver his deepest desire. In Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout" and *The Cure at Troy* hope manifests as a desire that reconciliation will suspend, or finally deliver the participants from, conditions of conflict. Following Havel, Heaney affirms through these poems that hope is "not the expectation that things will turn out successfully but the conviction that something is worth working for, however it turns out" (FK 47).

* * *

Heaney's *Beowulf* offers glimpses of hope which are subsequently overtaken by suffering and hopelessness as fighting erupts again, in a way that parallels modern experiences of cease-fires brokered and then broken. Expressions of hope emanate from the observer, the Christian narrator, who acclaims a message of redemption, not for this world but for the next. By suggesting that "the optimism in this poem" resides in "the possibility of the endurance of poetic creation beyond the transience of the suffering that spawns it" (157), McCarthy comments obliquely on the Christian beliefs which underlie the poem. *Beowulf* in fact restates the contradictions of ordinary human life whereby the hope – the expectation and desire – expressed by the Geats for peace is realised for a time but ends in despair when Beowulf is killed. "[S]ecurity is only

temporary" (Heaney B xv). However, even though "War is looming" (B 91) at the end, the textual focus on Beowulf's heroic deeds and his people's fitting farewell temporarily suspends the community's hopelessness.

* * *

Hughes develops the contradictions of ordinary human life into a repetitive motif whereby expressions of hope are framed by despair. The protagonists in his version of *The Oresteia* express hope but subsequent bloody events delay its realisation. However, it is usually the minor characters, like the returning herald, and observers, such as the old men of the Chorus, who are optimistic. When Clytemnestra expresses hope her words are ironical and her desire is for a discreditable result – her husband's death. Hughes' similes and metaphors of hope embody images of brightness, but he frames them in bitter, dark images of brutality, thus evoking hope's transient nature for modern readers.

One such evocation concerns the returning herald, whose hope is fulfilled: "The one hope that matters has come true. / The unlikeliest of my hopes – to die at home" (Hughes TO 27). However Helen's "terrible dowry – / Annihilation" (24), and grief for the men who did not return, precedes this fulfilment. Powerful images of the men's slayings and of the brutal death of the herald's king complete the framing of hope in metaphors of darkness, despair and destruction. A balancing accumulation of hopeful metaphors nevertheless signals that for the herald the "storms" of the Trojan war are past: "Today's sun has lifted me out of the East / And brought me home" (27). "Sunlight" is shining on his life and over his country, as he asks the gods and the "old

heroes" to "bless" the survivors (27). However the "sunrise, dazzle, splendor" that he envisages are rapidly overtaken (28). At first the tonal shift exemplifies a move from a positive "welcome" to an ambivalent "half-happy" (27), foreshadowing conflict in the country, before the poetry plunges into the "suffering" of the herald's fellow soldiers (29-30).

Elsewhere the Chorus's hopeful visions are also framed by contrary evocations of despair and violence. Not believing their senses, the old men ask: "Are we right / To smell hope / In all this?" (8), and the metaphorical aroma of hope indeed proves to be fleeting, overpowered by the fetid smell of despair. The sacrifice of "cherished beasts", and "a worse fear come" submerge hope in a litany of looming threats: "evil, dread, fears, sicken, fiery tongues" (8). Likewise, when Agamemnon is "soothed . . . with hope – / A hope of ultimate good", the Chorus chants of the "curse" and "fatal contradiction" which will lead to pain and terror, and his transformation from father to "war-machine" (11-2). The old men also voice hope for Cassandra (58) even in the midst of her predictions of evil that are pouring out "agony" and "hideous things" (59), but their hope disintegrates when she is sacrificed by Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra's own expression of hope is reprehensible:

> Let the cycle of killing end here.
> Let this be the end of it.
> And let our hope succeed. I have great hope. (Hughes TO 21)

Ironically, her true hope is not that the killing will end but that it will continue and advantage her. This malevolent hoping is framed first by the blood-bath of Troy and

later by the blood-bath in Argos. Metaphors, similes and threatening images overpower any suggestion that a hopeful outlook might prevail.

The darkness of despair and violence dominates the poetic language of *The Oresteia*, and only when Athene's court intervenes to end the violence does Hughes' word choice imply that a resolution is possible. He continues to tease out negative implications, but maintains hope's emergence so that positive images at last prevail. Athene insists that passion should give way to reason:

> Let your rage pass into understanding
> As into the coloured clouds of a sunset,
> Promising a fair tomorrow
> Do not let it fall
> As a rain of sterility and anguish . . . (Hughes TO 184)

The similes of hope – sunset colours and fine weather – override the metaphor of sterile rain. Further positive allusions: "the harvest", the "first fruits", "marriage and childbirth", "gentle words", voice the conviction that understanding, and thus hope for the country's survival, will win over the "angry mouth" (185). Repetitions in a contrapuntal list: "banished / live here, anger / be patient, mind is split / a whole mind", strengthen the likelihood of hope's eventual triumph (188, 192).

* * *

In *Alcestis* too, Hughes creates a contrapuntal chant in which expressions of hope contend with despair. However here the threat that looms over hope in *The Oresteia* is transmuted into an acceptance of death as an event that everyone will face. The threat is frightening, but the brutalities of war and consequent bitter images of *The Oresteia* are

absent. Hughes' word choice nevertheless reflects the contradictions inherent in human responses to death, such as the selfish desire for a loved one to remain alive even if in excruciating pain, contending against unselfish love's consent to a final release.

The opening to *Alcestis* evokes despair: "a woman is dying" (Hughes A 1), but glowing images of king Admetos' new life soon intrude: "A figure of dazzling hope, a figure of power, / Bursting from the doors of death / Crammed with all the possibilities" (4). The energy resonating through "dazzling", "bursting" and "crammed", strengthens the contrast between the dying woman and the "new life" which her death has delivered. Feelings of despair and hope continue to alternate. For example, medicine can cure, but can also fail: "The only real hope / Was Aesculapius, the healer". The paradox is that the healer cannot heal himself – he has died – "So now there is no hope" (9). As in *The Oresteia*, Hughes delivers ideas of hope through the Chorus, while contrary feelings of despair are powerfully expressed, as shown in Chapter 3 above, by Admetos.

The Chorus also generates the hope of resurrection, "if we could bring you back" (27), through metaphors of impossibility: if a drop of water might remain on a needle point or a cinder might remain alight (27). A similar recognition of the limits of human power therefore underlies the contrapuntal chants of hope and despair that comprise the text, not just in the final passages as Admetos' grief threatens to overwhelm him, but with increasing frequency after Alcestis' death. Rather than having a belief, feeling or trust that the thing desired will come, Admetos succumbs to despair, and it is left to others to look for a counterbalancing hope. Vocabulary and a matter-of-fact tone increasingly

emphasise the need for acceptance: “Any one of us can be killed tomorrow. / We don’t ruin today with worrying about it” (33). “Each misfortune / Bears an opportunity, / Cradles a benefit, / If it can be accepted” (37). “Something is always being delivered / Out of the unknown. Often / out of the impossible” (37). “What has happened had to happen. / Men have endured far worse, with silence. / Some have even managed a smile” (67).

> Life is what we can snatch
> From the smiles of Necessity.
> Either die, or be happy –
> At least be cheerful. (Hughes A 71)

Admetos’ efforts to accept the irreversibility of death are finally rewarded with a contrary event, which delivers his deepest desire: “She is yours. / All you had thought you had lost – she is here” (81). Hughes’ final words remind us that “nothing is certain” and that God can accomplish the unbelievable: “Let this give man hope” (83).

* * *

The tone of Heaney’s “Mycenae Lookout” moves from despair and dumb ox-like acceptance of fate, while the lookout is enmeshed in images of the violence of war, towards hope and future possibilities. Unlike Hughes, who as seen above embeds successive glimpses of hope in a morass of hopelessness, Heaney groups events contributing to the lookout’s despair (expounded above in Chapter 4), before evoking ideas that promote hope.

The final section, “His Reverie of Water”, awakens hope through a double metaphor: water both gives life and washes away conflict. Since both “defenders . . . and the

invaders" need the life-giving well (ML 422), it is irrelevant which side initiates the cease-fire, and the "one / bare foot extended, searching" could belong to either. Skea (9) refers to the allusive power in Hughes' poetry of a single word, and Heaney here achieves a similar powerful effect with five words. "One" man stripped "bare" of weapons may initiate a "search" for a resolution of conflict, and rather than merely "extend" a hand he is able to walk, to use his "foot" to that end. The word-choice reflects an earlier metaphor of a beam balance (415), in which seeming contraries are seen to lie, not at the extremities of belief and action, but intertwined:

> the future
> and the past, besieger and besieged,
> the treadmill of assault
> turned waterwheel, (Heaney ML 422)

Every man desires life, and Heaney here affirms that the hope of a life still to be lived is "the ladder of the future" (422).

* * *

Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* develops Philoctetes' feelings of despair (discussed in Chapter 4 above) before it affirms the hope of settling the conflict between Odysseus and Philoctetes and, by extension, between victor and victim. Heaney connects this sequence with contemporary Ulster events, and while acknowledging that "No poem or play or song / Can fully right a wrong", nevertheless hopes for a miracle (Heaney CT 77). He explains the ideals implicit in his poetry in essays and public lectures such as those delivered when he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford, and in his Nobel Lecture of 1995. *The Cure at Troy*, published in 1990, reflects his vision that, unlike governments

and revolutionaries, “poets are more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers’ sense of what is possible or desirable or, even imaginable” (RP 1).

In *The Cure at Troy* Neoptolemus advances ideas which induce Philoctetes to imagine what is both possible and desirable: a cure for himself and an end to the war in Troy. Neoptolemus’ long speech seeks to arrest Philoctetes’ plunge into despair: “There’s a courage / And dignity in ordinary people / That can be breathtaking”, and he chides Philoctetes for “bearing down” instead of “bearing up” (72). “You’re a sick man. . . . But the gods send remedies” (72); “Stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things” (74); “My life was an open door that started closing / The minute I landed here. But maybe now / It could open back again” (75). Philoctetes finally responds to this rhetoric when he asserts: “Hercules’s bow is miraculous / And will save us every time” (76).

Denard comments on Heaney’s invention of these lines, and notes the Chorus’ “emphatic series of imperatives” (13) which are used to introduce a new issue relevant to modern readers. Heaney’s poetic imagination consumates his vision of a miraculous cure:

> History says, *Don’t hope*
> *On this side of the grave.*
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme.
>
> So hope for a great sea-change

> On the far side of revenge.
> Believe that a further shore
> Is reachable from here. (Heaney CT 77)

The section concludes with a further exclamation "I have opened the closed door" (78), meaning a door which was slammed against hope, miracles and self-healing. Since conflict is always open to resolution, Heaney's final exhortation to the poem's protagonists, to readers and to cease-fire negotiators in Northern Ireland is: "never close your mind" (81).

* * *

This chapter has traced a hope for fulfilment, and even a muted trust that it will come, in the poems discussed. Heaney and Hughes deliver the restrained optimism of their vision in company with conflicting feelings derived from modern experience.

Hopeful feelings in Heaney's *Beowulf* and Hughes' *The Oresteia* are rapidly overtaken by events which cause despair. Both poems exemplify an intention stated by Heaney to make space for the "marvellous" as well as the "murderous" (CP 458). They thus confirm a correlation between the two poets' ideas on the purpose of poetry.

Other poems affirm more confidently that hope survives and can triumph over despair. *The Cure at Troy* envisages a miraculous end to conflict between Philoctetes and Odysseus and between the Trojans and Greeks. Heaney's view of poetry's power of redress is exemplified here, as it is also in "Mycenae Lookout" which ends with a similar hope for peace. Hughes' *Alcestis* advocates acceptance of immutable events, but in a final marvel Admetos' greatest desire is realised by Alcestis' resurrection. His last

published words, “Let this give man hope”, expound Hughes’ faith in the power of the poetic imagination, both to impart meaning to human living and dying and to heal those wounded by suffering.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that the poems by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes interpreting ancient texts are powerful, disturbing and appealing, and that they share a rich and complex vision with receptive readers. Published in the last decade of the twentieth-century, they reveal the contemporary relevance of ancient subject matter through themes which are still powerful determinants of human actions in the modern world. Jung discerns archetypes as blueprints for experience surviving over generations in the collective unconscious, and the poems relate to these archetypes through the continuity of their themes. Their contemporary colloquial language reinforces the themes' relevance, which is explicated through detailed analyses in the preceding discussion.

In the first chapter I address three debatable issues: the poems' status as translations, their modern relevance and their language. Recent concepts of originality and authorship by Steiner, Venuti and some poststructuralist theorists, based on the insight that language is not static and that meaning is not fixed, are drawn on to support my approach to the poems without close reference to their sources. The traditional view of translation as a mere copy fails to acknowledge these recent developments in theory. Additionally I argue that the selected poems are sufficiently distant from their origins to validate treatment of them as independent texts. Except for Heaney's *Beowulf,* the poems discussed here were not intended by their authors as literal translations, and frequent minor and major departures from their sources are discussed in the published literary critical commentary.

Heaney's and Hughes' commentary on the selected poems support my second argument in Chapter 1 that they have reinterpreted ancient themes in a way relevant to a modern audience. Archetypal patterns discernable in the poems reflect parallels in the modern world. Heaney affirms that an artist adapts his subject matter so as to engage with the modern world (HA 66), while Hughes makes this adaptation in the selected poems. Moreover, in his most recent poems (2001, 2004), Heaney exemplifies the presence in his poetry of recurring archetypal patterns of human behaviour.

The above analysis has identified differences in the two poets' approaches but also unexpected similarities. The so-called violence of Hughes' poetic language is a major issue for some critics and the study examines the grounds for this criticism and responds to it. While Heaney has escaped the condemnation afforded Hughes, I argue that both poets incorporate explicit language in their poems in order to expose to readers the true horror of violence, and that their word choice is appropriate to the subject matter. Through such language they both subvert the glorification of war and challenge the notion that it resolves problems.

Finally in Chapter 1, I argue a hypothesis to explain the imbalance in critical attention between Heaney and Hughes. One reason is a declining academic interest in the Greek and Roman classics that are Hughes' source texts, in contrast with a sustained professional concern with the Anglo-Saxon culture that produced *Beowulf.* Additionally, Hughes is linked in the American literary canon with Plath and demonised because of her death. Supported by the Modern Language Association of America, this

has produced a “one-sided focus” on some of Hughes’ poems (Scigaj *Critical* 29), and a neglect of others. Moreover, in contrast with its coverage of Heaney the *MLA Bibliography* often omits criticism of Hughes’ works which originates in Europe. Hughes is as creative and as powerful a poet as Heaney, and this study fills a gap in the critical literature, especially in respect of Hughes’ last works. Further recognition of his visionary poetry may be expected, reflecting critical assessments of Moulin, Sagar, and Scigaj who consider that Hughes is one of the greatest modern English-language poets.

My arguments as outlined are supported by a close analysis which focuses on the skill and power of Heaney’s and Hughes’ poetry. “Revenge begets revenge” (Hughes TO 78), and in Chapter 2 I argue that revenge is an embedded archetype in the selected poems, which are saturated with long sequences of revenge killings that make resolution difficult if not impossible. The poems explore the violent and bloody effects of revenge on both individuals and nations. Old Testament theology insists on a prior recourse to the justice system but thereafter legitimises retaliation. In a correlation with this position, some poems seek to legitimise revenge. For example, Beowulf’s enemies are identified with primeval evil, and the poem’s warrior societies maintain internal order through war, retaliation and revenge killings. In contrast, revenge killings in *The Oresteia* are individual acts for which each perpetrator claims the sanction of justice. Only elimination of further kin to retaliate ends the cycle of vengeance. Modern analogies for both group and individual revenge are numerous, and evident in ongoing political, religious and ethnic conflicts.

Other human failings explored in analysis of the selected poems are greed and pride. Chapter 3 examines the consequences of these failings, which include a far-reaching misuse of power. Greed and pride are shown as always punished, though not necessarily immediately. However the poems also demonstrate wise uses of power. *Beowulf* contrasts the actions of just and unjust rulers, while justice emerges as a controlling idea in Heaney's *The Cure at Troy,* which reverberates with nuances of modern Irish troubles. Heaney affirms that reconciliation empowers but sustained anger depletes.

The Oresteia focuses on similar themes of revenge and the abuse of power, exposed when usurpers murder Agamemnon and seize the throne of Argos. Hughes explores the ambivalent nature of power and its misuse as a destructive force, as well as concepts of justice. In *Tales from Ovid* his lyrical language alternates with graphic images of crimes and their grotesque punishments. However even the gods are prone to abusing their power over mortals and lesser gods. A parallel is found for the Ovidian transformations of Procne, Philomela and Tereus into birds in modern science and technology, where drugs and surgery can transform lives.

Chapter 4 considers Heaney's and Hughes' poetic representations of grief and despair. Few people evade such feelings, so the poems establish a continuity between ancient narratives and modern readers. The difficulty of recovering from grief is a recurring theme. In Heaney's "Orpheus and Eurydice", Orpheus loses his bride; in Hughes' *Alcestis,* Admetos loses his wife; and in *Tales from Ovid,* Ceres' daughter is abducted. Hughes suggests the possibility of recovery: grief and despair must be acknowledged

and endured but eventually they will be alleviated. While a loved one may not in modern times return from death as Alcestis does, memories return and can be enjoyed indefinitely, and in memories the loved one survives. Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout" and *The Cure at Troy* develop images of the watchman's, and Philoctetes' despair, but widen to a global and political focus by constructing overt parallels between Troy and modern Ireland. Analogies are also invited between the sacking, raping and burning of Troy which Hughes expounds in *The Oresteia* and modern conflicts in the Balkans and Iraq.

Chapter 5 argues that sacrificial acts both voluntary and involuntary are continuous from ancient times and that contemporary idiom and explicit language in the poetry emphasise this continuity. Analysis of *Alcestis* reveals that the motive for such voluntary sacrifice is love, and in the poem this is so powerful a force that Alcestis escapes from death. A contemporary parallel is found in medical miracles achieved through tissue, cell and organ donations. Despair, hatred or the hunger for power can make others into involuntary sacrifices, and these occur more frequently, both in the selected texts and in the modern world. Modern bomb-making technology has expanded voluntary sacrifice to include bystanders as involuntary victims and Heaney's and Hughes' poems represent parallels to such atrocities in chilling language. In *The Oresteia* expediency motivates Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia for the supposedly greater good, so that the Greek ships can sail and to make war on Troy. In *Beowulf* women are involuntary sacrificial victims in a culture which considers them items of

exchange. They are married off to potential enemies so that the community may live in peace.

In Chapters 6 and 7, close analysis of the poems uncovers generally more positive themes. The first is the heroic ideal that predates written texts in most cultures. Seminal studies by Thomas Carlyle and Joseph Campbell are used as a basis for exploring the poems' representations of heroic myths, beliefs and patterns. Comparison suggests that the poems conceal elements which challenge heroism as a conservative ideology. For Carlyle a hero delivers "Order", while Campbell asserts that his last act is death or departure. Beowulf fits both paradigms, since after defeating the monsters destroying Heorot, he departs for his homeland. He is hailed as a hero but exemplifies the temporary nature of life when in defeating his third opponent, the dragon, he receives a fatal wound. At his death Wiglaf is revealed as a new hero, initiating the next heroic cycle. Other figures in the poems are identified as heroes by their actions but with human failings and vulnerabilities. They include Agamemnon and Orpheus as heroes who succumb to non-heroic deaths, and Philoctetes who has a suppurating wound which prevents him fighting, but in *The Cure at Troy* he alone can end the drawn-out war. Analysis of Hughes' *The Oresteia* reveals further subversive elements which challenge, modern assumptions about war and its associations with heroism and heroic death. In the modern era, rescue operations parallel Beowulf's affirmation that he will "perform to the uttermost or perish" (Heaney B 21).

In Chapter 7 I argue that, despite the litany of destructive themes dealt with earlier, the selected poems do not in the final analysis let go of hope, and that this powerful theme is the final link between the ancient narratives and the responses of modern readers. However the expressions of hope are often fleeting and are framed by bitter evocations of violence and despair. In Hughes' version of *The Oresteia* the tone becomes positive only when the court intervenes. With the restoration of order at Heorot, Heaney's *Beowulf* offers a hope for peace between warring societies, but this is overtaken by an ending in which the Geats face an uncertain future. *Alcestis* commences with the protagonists in despair but ends with fulfilment of Admetos' personal hope. Hughes here uses a format similar to that in his *The Oresteia,* with the framing images consisting of despair instead of the brutalities of war. In "Mycenae Lookout" Heaney suggests a generalised hope, since defenders and invaders, besieged and besiegers, come together to consider common action. Heaney's "Mycenae Lookout" exhumes only a few bones of the ancient source skeleton to implant hope in a modern poem of conflict through metaphors of cleansing water. In Heaney's *The Cure at Troy,* curing Philoctetes' wound ends the war, and again broadens hope beyond the personal. Heaney here grafts contemporary language and an Irish political context onto the skeleton of Sophocles' play, to affirm: "I have opened the closed road". Both poets believe in the power of the poetic imagination to perform miracles.

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