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In 1974, two years before Carcanet published Ted Hughes’ translations of János Pilinszky, Hughes wrote to his co-translator János Csokits asking for ‘a scatter of hints’ on certain aspects of Pilinszky and his work for the Introduction he was preparing. He had been working on the main body of translations that would end up in the *Selected Poems* for the first few months of 1974, although many dated back substantially earlier.[\[1\]](#) (Csokits had first provided Hughes with literal versions of Pilinszky in 1961.)[\[2\]](#)

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

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

As Reid writes, ‘In the event, Csokits felt unable to supply answers to TH’s questions, being reluctant to approach Pilinszky himself, who was under the

constant watch of censors and informers at home in Hungary.’^[4] So the final introduction to the book was written without this additional information.

This letter highlights the gaps in Hughes’ knowledge of Pilinszky. These gaps not surprising; Hughes spoke no Hungarian and Pilinszky spoke no English, and besides a few French translations Hughes had no experience of Pilinszky’s work except through Csokits’ literal versions. More surprising is the fact that Hughes worked on his own translations without ever attempting to close these gaps, and only sent this letter when he needed material for his Introduction. It is surely unusual for a translator of poetry to admit no knowledge of his subject’s ‘atmosphere’, ‘temper’ and ‘texture’ of language, grammatical oddities, or bias in vocabulary.

Weissbort notes that Hughes did not believe any translator, even one authentically bilingual, had the capacity to bring across an original’s ‘unique verbal texture’.^[5] He quotes an editorial from *Modern Poetry in Translation*: ‘we found the closest thing to [the original] in translations made by poets whose first language was not English, or by scholars who did not regard themselves as poets’.^[6] To capture what made a poem unique in its own language was impossible by deliberate effort, but this texture could be brought across by other means, of which literal transcription was Hughes’ preferred ideal. (He reserved special praise for William Bleek’s Victorian transcriptions of aboriginal mythology, *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore*, and his selection for *The Rattle Bag* included several semi-literal versions including transcriptions from Jerome Rothenberg, in Sumerian, and Louis Watchman, in Navajo.)^[7] Another excerpt from a *Modern Poetry in Translation* editorial makes clear the strength of Hughes’ opinion on this point:

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

more convincingly and effectively than any interpreter, and in translated poetry it is the first-hand contact – however fumbled and broken – with that man and his seriousness which we want.[\[8\]](#)

Anything less, Hughes argues in an earlier editorial, is nothing more than ‘the record of the effect of one poet’s imagination on another’.[\[9\]](#) This idea of translation being a ‘record of an effect’, however, is often used in descriptions of Hughes’ own translations. Feinstein, for instance, writes in her introduction to *After Pushkin* that ‘it is something of a mystery...that Hughes’ version of “The Prophet”, which adheres fairly closely to [the literal version], nevertheless has the unmistakable vehemence of Hughes...’[\[10\]](#) Weissbort, Hughes’ strongest co-defender of literalism, notes how Hughes’ translations are ‘paradoxically...unmistakeably “Hughesian”.’[\[11\]](#) In part, this may be due to Hughes’ choice of which texts to translate (and he certainly selects Pushkin at his most vehement and declamatory, avoiding the satirical and humorous side altogether). But note the shared ‘unmistakeable’ in both Weissbort and Feinstein’s estimations.

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

Line 6’s ‘Vályogfal’, which Csokits translates as ‘wall of adobe’,[\[12\]](#) is slightly more troublesome for Hughes. ‘Adobe’ is clearly the dictionary definition of *vályog*, but it is unusual in English and has an immediate, unhelpful connotation of South America. Hughes experiments with ‘baked mud’ (a literal translation of adobe). It is presumably the connotations of cookery that led him to discard this and replace it with the final ‘dry mud’, which is less precise than the original. The

detail is important, as it is the only point in the poem (besides the title) which suggests its location in the rural slums of Arles.

The first two lines depart the furthest from the literal versions, and here it is important to examine the notes on the poemCsokits sent to Hughes. Csokits' rendering of the first line is 'Defeat suffered in the fields', but he notes that the primary denotation of the word is 'the end of a battle' (literally 'battle-ending'). 'Defeat' is a secondary meaning; Csokits believesPilinszky uses the word to retain 'the atmosphere of the first meaning' (e.g., connotations of the primary meaning and denotations of the secondary).[13] Csokits' literal here attaches a verb, 'suffered', which the original lacks. Hughes makes the defeat 'humbling', and removes Csokits' 'suffered'. The adjective, perhaps, makes the defeat seem closer, and so vaguely retains the sense in the word 'csatavesztés' of aftermath: but it is also an imposition of Hughes' own poetic sense. 'Humbling' is an appropriate word in the context of prayer. It also personalises the suffering and introduces the poem's protagonist three lines before Pilinszky's original: who else but Van Gogh is humbled by the defeat? This is, finally, a definite decision: the more personalised 'humbling' replaces 'crushing' from the first two drafts. ('Crushing defeat' is a cliché, and the violent adjective suggests the battle itself, not its aftermath.)

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

Translated literally "honfoglalás" would mean "countryoccupation" or "countryoccupying". It is employed only for the conquest by Hungarians of their present country. The event took place in 896, after Christ. I don't think, here, that Pilinszky wants to have any reference to this matter – he simply uses the word instead of conquest, or campaign, etc.[14]

The word is as charged with meaning as 'Anschluss' would be to a German poet: not in connotation alone but also straight denotation. Hughes wisely follows

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

The change in line 7 is the only one to bring in a deliberately British idiom. Csokits' 'end of the garden' becomes 'far end of the garden' in Hughes' first draft, and finally 'bottom of the garden', more homely and natural-sounding than 'end', and hinting at the home Van Gogh will be excluded from in the final stanza. Several points in Hughes' translations are tailored for a British audience, deliberately de-emphasising his subject's foreignness. The change of 'adobe' into the more concrete and familiar 'dry mud' has already been mentioned. A fine example of this sort of change is in Hughes' translation of Pushkin's 'The Prophet', where 'desert/wilderness' (a concept familiar enough to a Russian audience, but quite abstract to an English one) is translated as 'stones'.^[15] The exact denotation changes, but the concreteness of the image for the intended audience remains.

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

The word Pilinszky uses in the last two lines is the one usually employed for someone covering up someone – such as a mother covering (tuck in) her child in the bed, etc. He speaks here like a sulking child dissatisfied with the parental service.^[16]

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

‘On the Wall of a KZ-Lager’ bears an immediate resemblance to ‘The Prayer of Van Gogh’, consisting as it does of three four-line stanzas, and although it is arguably the more complex of the two poems it appears to have gone more easily into English. The rhymes in the second and fourth lines of each stanza have been lost, with the effect described by Csokits: ‘without the softening effect [of metre and rhyme] the impact of some of these poems can be very painful; they sound harsher and Pilinszky’s view of the world appears grimmer than in Hungarian.’ [\[17\]](#)

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

lines, the victims, somehow ‘enriched’ and transformed by their experience (the idea is set up earlier with line 8’s ‘mutated’), achieve the paradoxical conditions of blind sight and speechless testament, a testament which recalls Pilinszky’s most famous comment on his own work. ‘I would like to write as if I had remained silent.’^[18]

Between Csokits’ literal version and Hughes’ final draft, only line 11 has remained unchanged. (Although the tenses in this line were revised several times, the central word ‘enriched’ remains in place from the first draft.) The only change in line 7 is ‘it’ into ‘they’ (necessary after the alteration of Csokits’ ‘all things’ into Hughes’ more solid ‘every thing’). The title, also, has remained unchanged from literal to print, and this is not as trivial as it appears. In the volume’s early publication history, it was conceived as a joint translation with John Bákti, and Bákti rendered the title as ‘For the Walls of a Concentration Camp’.^[19] ‘For’, rather than ‘on’, is a straightforward error, but ‘Concentration Camp’ for ‘KZ Lager’ is a deliberate decision. The German is unfamiliar to many English readers, and it is vital for the poem’s effect that the readers know where it takes place. The advantage of using the German is to make the location more precise (concentration camps have existed throughout the twentieth century) and, perhaps, more personal, perhaps bringing the poet’s own experience of the actual camps into focus. Subsequent translators have tended to follow Hughes’ lead on this.^[20]

Hughes’ most substantial changes to Csokits’ literal occur in the first stanza, in which three lines which were originally a single sentence each become individual sentences. These sentences without predicates, accumulating and clarifying, are a common feature of Hughes’ own poetry during this period (e.g., ‘The Gatekeeper’, first published in 1978 in *Cave Birds*).^[21] Hughes also removes the repetition, mentioned specifically by Csokits in his notes as a formal concern (‘this way there is progression as in the original’).^[22] While the Hungarian moves from ‘egyet.../ egyetlen’, and Csokits progresses from ‘this place’ (line 2) to ‘this single place’ (line 3), Hughes moves from ‘this is your place’ to ‘Just this single spot’. ‘Spot’ for *place*, like ‘bottom of the garden’ in ‘The Prayer of Van

Gogh', has a hint of English colloquialism about it. In this case, it allows a deliberate effect not possible in the original: 'spot' retains both its primary meaning of 'place', and its secondary meaning of 'speck', emphasising the camp's tininess and geographical insignificance. There are also faint, appropriate connotations of *Macbeth*.

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

In the sixth line, the articles in the original list ('Whether a house, a mill or a poplar') have been lost, and the line has become simply 'House, mill, poplar'. This is much more Hughesian: compare, for instance, a similar list in 'Crow's Vanity' ('Mistings of civilisation towers gardens'), or 'Lineage' ('Blood / Grubs, crusts'), both published around the same time as the translation.^[23] The technique is employed elsewhere in Hughes' other Pilinszky translations: 'Stone, tree, house' ('Enough') and 'altar, shrine, handshake' ('Straight Labyrinth'). 'Apocrypha', where the translation is almost entirely Csokits', includes the definite articles: 'The night, the cold, the pit.'^[24]

The seventh line seems to have given Hughes some trouble. Csokits described the 'grappling' (his own literal translation) as a 'slow, painful, hesitant tussling', which Hughes first rendered as 'scuffle' and then as 'toils to be free of you'. His final choice, 'strives to be free of you', chimes with the v-sound in 'evades', although it renders the struggle in much less physical terms than the Hungarian.

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

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

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

In summary, the changes Hughes makes from Csokit's literals fall into several categories. There are the simple cosmetic changes, rendering Csokits' 'odd English' [\[25\]](#) into more standard English. Then there are changes which replace an adequate translation with a more British idiom (such as 'bottom of the garden' in 'The Prayer of Van Gogh' and 'Just this single spot' in 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'), or clarify an unfamiliar word for English readers ('adobe' into 'dry mud'). Other changes play with the connotations of words to create effects unavailable in Hungarian, or vary synonyms to create (or avoid) effects in the poem's sound. Some changes seem typically Hughesian (most notably the sixth line of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'). The rarest changes are deliberate shifts in

the sense of a poem (for instance, the ones described in the final two stanzas of 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'), which could be charitably interpreted as a focusing of attention on original's crucial points. These changes certainly do not invalidate Hughes' opinions on literalness in translation: as he points out in a *Modern Poetry in Translation* editorial, 'literalness can only be a deliberate tendency, not a dogma'.[\[26\]](#)

What Hughes brought to Pilinszky (in English) can be described straightforwardly. It is harder to gauge the influence of Pilinszky on Hughes' own work. The relationship between the two poets developed and deepened over a long period: as Hughes wrote to Csokits in 1974, 'I've lived with some of his poems for 7 or 8 years & they are still as interesting & still seem as good as ever.'[\[27\]](#) Hughes' relationship with this poetry is especially strange, given that he came to Pilinszky at least partially through his own words. (Paul Muldoon has called translation 'the closest form of reading we have'.)[\[28\]](#) A special complication is that one of Hughes' reasons for translating Pilinszky is the fact that Pilinszky's work was already perceived as having shared concerns: as Csokits writes, 'there must have existed sufficient common ground for the two poets to find each other's personal universe so attractive that both wanted to make an attempt at translating the other's works.'[\[29\]](#) (Pilinszky died before he could begin his translation of Hughes' Crow cycle.) Those elements of Hughes which most resemble Pilinszky may well have been what convinced Hughes to make his translations in the first place. We can therefore make only the most tentative examination of the one poet's influence on the other.

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

Something elliptical in the connections, freakishly home-made, abrupt. It would not be going too far to say there is a primitive element in the way it grasps its subject.[\[30\]](#)

On Pilinszky's use of religious motifs:

The poems are nothing if not part of an appeal to God, but it is a God who seems not to exist. Or who exists, if at all, only as he exists for the stones. Not Godlessness, but the immanence of a God altogether different from what dogmatic Christianity has ever imagined. A God of absences and negative attributes, quite comfortless. A God in whose creation the camps and modern physics are equally at home.[\[31\]](#)

On Pilinszky's 'mysticism':

...his mystically intense feeling for the pathos of the sensual world (...) an ecstasy, a fever of negated love, a vast inner exposure.[\[32\]](#)

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

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

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

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

Finally, Pilinszky and Hughes often seem to share their catalogue of images and symbols, especially those drawn from the natural world. Both have early poems about acrobats and trapeze artists.[\[33\]](#) Both are bird-lovers and bird-watchers (Pilinszky has a special fascination with chickens which rivals Hughes' famous crow obsession), and also write regularly about cattle, maggots and fish. Here, certainly, it is a matter of shared concern rather than influence: Hughes' personal

bestiary had been laid out from *The Hawk in the Rain*, long before he had encountered Pilinszky's work.

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

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

The villages stay clear of them,
the gateways withdraw.
The distance, that has come to meet them,
reels away back.[\[34\]](#)

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

...my life starts to slip softly
like a crumbling sand-pit.[\[35\]](#)

In very different form it can even express joy:

...Through all those rooms
 the same wash of music
 as though the barefoot sea were roaming
 among their walls.[\[36\]](#)

What unites these extracts is the idea of flow, especially the flow of unexpected or under-described objects (as in a cryptic line from ‘Epilogue’, ‘Remember? It’s streaming down’).[\[37\]](#) Pilinszky has two visions of hell, absolute stasis or absolute change (e.g. chaos), and these form the twin poles his poetry veers between. (‘The Desert of Love’, Hughes’ and Csokits’ favourite of their translations, is an example of Pilinszky’s vision of hellish stasis, especially its final couplet: ‘Years are passing. And years. And hope / is like a tin-cup toppled into the straw.’) This flow is often embodied in images of birds, fish or wind: in Pilinszky’s ‘Revelation VIII.7.’, God sees ‘the burning heaven / and against it birds flying’.[\[38\]](#) (The birds are not in the original Bible verse, from which the poem as a whole departs substantially.) These birds also make an appearance in the second line of ‘The Prayer of Van Gogh’, whose image of a roof tucking the poet in like a duvet is another minor instance of an unexpected flow. Perhaps the starkest expression of the flow motif is in the quatrain ‘Cold Wind’: that poem’s description of a post-apocalyptic, ‘unpeopled’ landscape ends with the line ‘Cold wind still blowing’.[\[39\]](#)

Hughes’ early poetry makes use of similar images, not as a repeated trope but as an occasional effect. For instance, the title poem of ‘The Hawk in the Rain’, in its closing evocation of a falling hawk, describes how ‘the ponderous shires crash on him, / The horizon trap[s] him’. Earlier, the same poem describes ‘the streaming air’ (which is contrasted with the hawk’s stillness). Neither of these are exact analogues to Pilinszky’s motif, but they are nonetheless in a similar vein. The word ‘streaming’, incidentally, is employed several times in the Pilinszky translations (i.e. ‘Epilogue’ and ‘Frankfurt 1945’, which summarises the flow motif as ‘the streaming world’).[\[40\]](#)

Nonetheless, early use of this device in Hughes is sparing. Furthermore, it often appears to serve simply as a way of introducing motion into the poem, from line to line as much as from image to image. Hughes only sporadically uses narrative or argument as engines to drive his poems forward; more often they take the form of a sustained cascade of images, where the main movement is the movement from image to image. Here, the trope of flowing can be used to inject forward momentum, as for instance in ‘November’, where it is combined with a piece of literal narrative movement: ‘I ran, and in the rushing wood // Shuttered by a black owl leaned.’^[41]

The ultimate expression of Hughes’ flowing motif in its early form is ‘Wind’, from *The Hawk in the Rain*. The final two lines (‘Seeing the window tremble to come in, / Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons’) would certainly not be at all out of place in Pilinszky, and neither would the image of the fields ‘quivering’, another of Pilinszky’s dominant adjectival verbs (i.e., ‘the net / of the quivering stars’, ‘the shivering / mob of my nights’, ‘shivering / makes the love of loves evenfirier’).^[42] Nonetheless, despite initial similarities, Hughes does not use the trope in at all the same way as Pilinszky. The poem turns out to be a nest of competing metaphors. The wind is an anthropomorphised sythesman (‘wind wielded / Blade-light, luminous and emerald’) who is described as ‘stampeding’, the house is a ship lost at sea (line 1), the hills are a tent ‘strain[ing] its guyrope’, ‘the skyline a grimace’, and so on. Flow in Pilinszky does not work like this at all. When ‘the distance.../ reels away back’ in ‘Harbach 1944’ it does not occur in the form of a metaphor, which is after all a way of making something imaginable. Rather it is precisely, intensely and deliberately unimaginable. Other lines in ‘Wind’ (‘The winds stampeding the fields under the window’) use the Pilinszkyian rush as a sound-effect, comparable to the poem’s ‘booming hills’ and ‘crashing’ woods.

This is not in any way to denigrate the achievement of ‘Wind’, an early masterpiece. Instead, it is to demonstrate that there is delineation in the use of this trope between early Hughes and Pilinszky, with Hughes tending to employ it as an

effect. For Pilinszky, on the other hand, the idea of flow (and utter stasis as a counterpart) is an important element of his world-vision, comparable to Yeats' gyres.

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

The valleys went out.

The moorlands broke loose.[\[43\]](#)

As Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts note in *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, 'the elation of Hughes's response...to the moorland's liberation here recedes to an undertone of the menace derived from the powerful images of disintegration and decay' [\[44\]](#) This is Pilinszky's flow motif in its most primal form, which has an almost exact analogue in 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager': compare 'The countryside evades you' (or '...is fleeing you', in Csokits' first literal) with 'The moorlands broke loose'. Gifford and Roberts are correct to note that there is a pervading sense of disintegration and decay, and this is capped perfectly by the two final lines, which would not have been possible without Pilinszky's example. In fact, the whole sequence, with its repeated images of prisons, Messiahs and even a 'golden holocaust', is heavily indebted to Pilinszky.[\[45\]](#)

Orts (1978) is also full of images of prisons and fugitives: the narrator's blood is 'a prisoner in my darkness', an unnamed 'you' has 'bolted' and 'flee[s] / helpless as grass' [\[46\]](#) Here, the flow has stopped completely:

Everything is waiting.

The tree stilled in tree – swells in waiting.

The river stilled in flow – in away-flow push.[\[47\]](#)

The ‘away-flow push’, the straining to be free, paradoxically discovers an image of flow in stasis. A polarity is set up, between the tree which ‘swells in waiting’ and the river which is desperate to push free. The image of the waiting tree is also found in Pilinszky’s ‘Apocrypha’, which Hughes called ‘Pilinszky’s ultimate statement’: ‘at the dead of night I speak as the tree: / Do you know the drifting of the years / the years over the crumpled fields?’^[48] ‘Apocrypha’ also ends with a paradox, similar to the river pushing its own flow, an empty riverbed which manages to ‘trickle’:

And instead of tears, the wrinkles on the faces
trickling, the empty ditch trickles down.^[49]

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

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

Through the dew’s mist, the oak’s mass
Comes plunging, tossing dark antlers.^[50]

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

closer attention to his own tropes of flowing; and that as they developed, they developed largely along Pilinszkyian lines.

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

A useful delineation between pessimism and nihilism is to say that pessimism is a tendency, while nihilism is a philosophical stance.^[51] A philosophical pessimism, such as Schopenhauer's, is usually distinguished from nihilism by admitting artistic or moral 'modes of transcendence' which can provide a life with meaning or purpose.^[52] Pessimism accentuates the worst, while nihilism diagnoses the meaningless. To be pessimistic is not to hold a belief about the world. It is rather a particular sensitivity to certain aspects of the world. Nihilism in any sphere (politics, epistemology, morality), on the other hand, does make claims about the world; it claims that discourse in this sphere is (semi-, largely or entirely) meaningless.

Meaninglessness and poetry, of course, go poorly together. 'Language is the carrier-wave of sense',^[53] and a belief in complete and inevitable meaninglessness would compel one to silence. (Musical qualities of speech are another aspect of meaning.) Pilinszky and Hughes both believe in a transcendent nihilism, but the form of transcendence is different to that of Schopenhauer, who lays down a prescription anyone can follow. The poets' nihilism is closer to that of Kierkegaard, depending as it does on a 'miracle' to achieve transcendence. As Hughes writes in his Introduction,

Though the Christian culture has been stripped off so brutally, and the true condition of the animal exposed in its ugliness, and words have lost their meaning – yet out of that rise the poems, whose words are manifestly crammed with meaning. Something has been said which belies neither the reality nor the silence. More than that, the reality has been redeemed. The very symbols of the horror are the very things he has redeemed.

They are not redeemed in any religious sense. They are redeemed, precariously, in some all-too-human sense, somewhere in the pulsing mammalian nervous system, by a feat of human consecration: a provisional, last-ditch 'miracle' which were recognise, here, as poetic.^[54]

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

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

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

Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, o littleblood.[\[55\]](#)

Keith Sagar, in his reconstruction of *Crow*'s overarching narrative, describes how Hughes intended 'Littleblood' to be a 'magical song' given to Crow by 'the ghost of an Eskimo hunter', which contains 'a helpful spirit, a power'.[\[56\]](#) This is different again from Pilinszky's 'feat of human consecration', but is evolving closer towards it. Littleblood is not an innocent embodiment of nature like the thought-fox; he or she or it is a cosmic fugitive, 'hiding from the mountains in the mountains/ Wounded by stars and leaking shadow'. Sagar identifies her (dubiously) with the White Goddess, and she certainly retains the Goddess's fearful aspect.[\[57\]](#) Hughes gives no reason for turning towards the thought-fox, whose poems come as gifts or 'its own business'. But Crow commands Littleblood to sing out of necessity. 'Littleblood' takes the form of an invocation, while 'The Thought-Fox' is pure description.

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

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

(...)

His talents
The deprivations of escape

How will you correct
The veteran of negatives
And the survivor of cease?[\[58\]](#)

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

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

Pilinszky has taken the route Hughes started out on in *Crow*.^[59]

'The veteran of negatives / And the survivor of cease' might be Pilinszky himself. At this point, the concerns of the two poets are almost entirely shared. All that 'What will you make of half a man' addresses, in the end, is the Truth, the God Hughes identified in his Introduction 'in whose Creation the camps and modern physics are equally at home'. This is the only being with the capacity to 'correct', and yet he is completely silent. Hughes' addresses to the Muse have moved from description to invocation to desperate prayer.

This is a linguistic nihilism containing an implicit possibility of transcendence, and as Hughes engages with Pilinszky's work it is this vision he moves closer towards. (Paul Bentley links *Gaudete* to Pilinszky by citing a 'distrust of language'.)^[60] Although this shift cannot be attributed straightforwardly to the influence of Pilinszky, this influence deserves to be recognised as one factor among others, and any examination of the development of Hughes' worldview must take the shared concerns of the two poets into account.

Endnotes

^[1] *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid. Faber and Faber: London 2007. Hereafter *Hughes: Letters*. Letter to Csokits, 12 February 1974. p346

[2] János Csokits, 'János Pilinszky's "Desert of Love" – A Note.' In: *Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth*, ed. Daniel Weissbort University of Iowa Press: Iowa City 1989. Hereafter *Translating Poetry*. p18

[3] *Hughes: Letters*. Letter to Csokits, 28 May 1974, p350-1. Points 5-11 cover biographical issues.

[4] *Hughes: Letters*. Footnote, p351

[5] Daniel Weissbort, *Translation: Theory and Practice. A Historical Reader*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2006. Hereafter *Translation: Theory and Practice*. p522

[6] Ted Hughes, *Modern Poetry in Translation: 1983, An Annual Survey*. Carcanet: Manchester 1983. Quoted in *Translation: Theory and Practice*. p522

[7] *Translation: Theory and Practice* p522. *The Rattle Bag* p356-7 (Rothenberg), p455-6 (Watchman)

[8] *Modern Poetry in Translation*, #3, Spring 1967. Quoted in Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. and intro. Daniel Weissbort. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux: New York 2007. Hereafter *Selected Translations*. p200

[9] *Selected Translations*. p200

[10] Elaine Feinstein (ed), *After Pushkin: A Bicentenary Celebration*. Carcanet: Manchester 1999. p12

[11] Daniel Weissbort, introduction, *Selected Translations*. pvii

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

[13] *Translating Poetry* p27, my own transcription

[14] *Translating Poetry* p27-8, my own transcription

- [15] Ted Hughes, 'The Prophet'. In: Elaine Feinstein (ed), *After Pushkin: A Bicentenary Celebration*. Carcanet: Manchester 1999. p26
- [16] *Translating Poetry* p30, my own transcription
- [17] *Translating Poetry* p11. But compare the English rhymed version in footnote 20, which to my ear sounds nowhere near grim enough.
- [18] János Pilinszky, *Selected Poems*, introduction by Ted Hughes. Manchester: Carcanet, 1976. Hereafter *Pilinszky Selected*. p10.
- [19] Letter to Ted Hughes from Michael Schmidt, June 22 1973. Carcanet archives CPA/2/1/39
- [20] For instance, this recent version by Clive Wilmer and George Gömöri: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=181173>
- [21] Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003 p428-9
- [22] *Translating Poetry*, p21, my own transcription
- [23] 'Crow's Vanity', *Collected Poems*, p230. 'Lineage', *Collected Poems*, p218
- [24] All in *Pilinszky Selected*. 'Enough', p59, 'Straight Labyrinth', p60, 'Apocrypha', p38
- [25] Hughes' own description. *Translating Poetry* p11
- [26] *Selected Translations*, p200
- [27] *Hughes: Letters*. Letter to Csokits, 12 Febuary 1974. p346
- [28] Paul Muldoon, interview, <http://www.mndaily.com/2007/11/29/muldoon-mulls-over-nature-candy-bars>
- [29] *Translating Poetry* p10
- [30] *Pilinszky Selected* p8

- [31] *Pilinszky Selected* p11
- [32] *Pilinszky Selected* p13
- [33] Ted Hughes, 'Acrobats', *Collected Poems* p72-3. János Pilinszky, 'Trapeze and Parallel Bars' *Pilinszky Selected*, 18
- [34] *Pilinszky Selected* p20
- [35] 'Sin', *Pilinszky Selected* p24
- [36] 'Impromptu', *Pilinszky Selected* p35
- [37] *Pilinszky Selected* p46
- [38] *Pilinszky Selected* p37
- [39] *Pilinszky Selected* p43
- [40] *Pilinszky Selected* p46, p34
- [41] In *Lupercal*. *Collected Poems* p81
- [42] 'Trapeze and Parallel Bars', 'Sin', 'Complaint'. *Pilinszky Selected* p18, p24, p27
- [43] *Collected Poems* p490
- [44] Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, London: Faber & Faber, 1981. Hereafter *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*. p241
- [45] i.e. 'Football at Slack', *Collected Poems* p475
- [46] '31', *Collected Poems* p402-403. '14', *Collected Poems* p397
- [47] '33', *Collected Poems* p403
- [48] *Selected Pilinszky*, p38. Hughes' comment is in the 'Introduction', p14
- [49] *Selected Pilinszky*, p40

[50] *Collected Poems* p662

[51] See, for instance, the Collins English Dictionary, which defines pessimism as ‘the tendency to expect the worst and see the worst in all things’.

[52] Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy,
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schopenhauer/#5.1>

[53] Don Paterson, *The Blind Eye*, London: Faber and Faber 2007. p80. The aphorism continues: ‘A truism to all but the postmodernists, whom it will one day strike with the force of revelation.’

[54] *Selected Poems* p12

[55] *Collected Poems* p258

[56] Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2000. Hereafter *The Laughter of Foxes*. p178-179

[57] Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975. Hereafter *The Art of Ted Hughes*. p222

[58] *Collected Poems* p357

[59] *The Laughter of Foxes*, p129

[60] Paul Bentley, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond*, London: Longman 1998. Hereafter *Language, Illusion and Beyond*. p76

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First Response

This is an intelligent, entertaining and highly readable piece on the two-way artistic relationship between Janos Pilinszky and Ted Hughes. The first half uncovers the thought processes and strategy that lie behind Heaney's efforts at translating Pilinszky's work, with reference to the provocative concept of "literal translation". It is in the second half of this piece, though, that the author's exercises his real creative muscle; identifying subtle new intersections between Pilinszky and Hughes within Hughes' original early work, s/he provides a truly refreshing perspective on Hughes studies.