

Earth Moon

A Ted Hughes Website

Keith Sagar

»**ALCESTIS**«: Introductory Talk on *Alcestis* for the Performance at the Lowry in Salford, by Northern Broadsides.

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[Introductory matter]

When Tony Harrison wrote his version of Sophocles's *The Trackers* in 1988, he created the part of Silenus, the leader of the satyrs, specially for Barrie Rutter, who had already worked with him in *The Oresteia* and *The Mysteries*. He exploited Rutter's Yorkshire accent; and the satyrs became clog dancers. Barrie Rutter's experience of working in these productions led him to conceive of a theatre company of northern actors using their native idiom to present largely classical plays and Shakespeare in northern mills in a style accessible to popular audiences such as those to whom Greek plays and medieval mysteries were presented. This company, Northern Broadsides, has been operating for several years, and recently won a grant of £100,000 for its innovative work.

Rutter had for some time been an admirer of Ted Hughes:

»I wrote to Ted Hughes once to congratulate him on one of his works, and he wrote back saying his tuning fork had always been in the Calder Valley. After that, we kept corresponding until his death«.

Shortly before his death Hughes gave the manuscript of *Alcestis* to Rutter with the express wish that it should receive its premiere in the Calder Valley.

Here Keith Sagar, author and editor of several books on Hughes (most recently *The Laughter of Foxes*, Liverpool University Press, 2000) puts *Alcestis* in the context first of Greek theatre, then of Hughes's life and work.

Alcestis

By far the most important religious festival in ancient Athens, the equivalent of our Easter, celebrated the annual rebirth of Dionysos, the god of nature, wildness and wine. The worship of Dionysos sought to keep a balance between the civic values of patriarchal Athenian society, law and order, intellect, culture, (all under the aegis of Apollo and Athena herself), and everything the city walls excluded – untamed nature, the passions, the female. Dionysos was always attended by his Maenads or Bacchantes – wild women intoxicated, if not with wine, then with the spirit of the god, and satyrs, who represented men at their least civilized, their most bestial. Their realm was the wooded hills beyond the control of the city.

The pattern of the Great Dionysia was that on three of the days of the festival some 15–17000 people (including many visitors from elsewhere) would gather at first light for the performance of three tragedies (often in the form of a trilogy) and a satyr play by the same author, who was also responsible for staging his plays. These would be over before noon. There would then be a long break through the hottest part of the day. The audience would reassemble in the late afternoon for the performance of a comedy by a different author.

Of the several thousand plays that must have been written in the fifth century alone, only a tiny proportion has survived, including only one complete trilogy, *The Oresteia*, and only one and a half satyr plays, the *Cyclops* of Euripides and the *Trackers* of Sophocles. Of the 80 or so plays written by Aeschylus only seven have survived. Of the 120 by Sophocles, only seven, and of the 88 by Euripides, only eighteen.

We must never forget that Greek drama remained, throughout the fifth century, total theatre, using music, song and ballet. Not only the chorus, but the actors also would frequently burst into song, as in a modern musical. An original performance of a Greek tragedy was probably a good deal closer to *West Side Story* than to any of the stiff, emasculated theatre productions we used to get. Nor must we forget the difference it makes that we are speaking of open-air, theatre drenched by the Mediterranean sun. ›Theatre‹ in Greek meant a seeing-place. The actors saw the audience as clearly as the audience saw the actors. They were united in a shared experience. Greek tragedy is, in Tony Harrison's words, »open-eyed about suffering«. Its whole point is to bring dark things into the light (as Oedipus says) where we can look at them together.

›Tragedy‹ meant ›goat song‹ in Greek. We have little idea of what the word came to mean to the Greeks as a description of a play. The essential subject-matter of Greek tragedy (as perhaps of all great literature) was the relationship between man, nature and the gods, or, in Sophocles' words »the encounters of man with more than man«. Tragedy usually expressed what happened to society, the family and the individual psyche when the balance between Dionysos and Apollo, between men and the gods, between male and female, between body and mind, was lost, usually through hubris, that suicidal pride which leads men to behave as though they are gods, or independent of Necessity.

Our own idea of tragedy derives largely from Aristotle and from Shakespeare. But Aristotle in his *Poetics* was not attempting to define or even describe tragedy. He was writing a book of advice to would-be playwrights. His advice was simple: study the best of the ancient tragedies and use it as a model. And the best seemed to him to be far and away *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. However, many of the surviving tragedies are nothing like *Oedipus the King*. The oldest of them, Aeschylus' *The Persians* is half history play. Even the *Oresteia* itself, tragic enough in its first two parts, does not have, in our sense, a tragic ending. Moreover, Sophocles' contemporaries seem not to have been as impressed by *Oedipus the King* as Aristotle was a century later, since in the year Sophocles entered it for the Great Dionysia he came only second.

It seems that there were no hard and fast rules about the form and content of the tragedies. The convention was that they should draw their plots and characters from the body of inherited myth, though the myths could be very freely reinterpreted. Some of the tragedies are characterized by the greatest suffering and vilest crimes ever depicted on a stage, but others are light in touch and have happy endings. For centuries Shakespeare's problem plays and late romances were neglected simply because they did not fit into the

neat pigeon-holes of tragedy or comedy. We should hesitate before trying to make Greek plays fit our later categories.

The satyr plays were farcical and vulgar, burlesques rather than satires. The Satyr play was so called because it employed a chorus of satyrs led by Silenus. The satyrs were as unheroic and grossly physical as it is possible to get. They had abundant hair and beards, broad noses, pointed ears, horse tails, and large, permanently erect phalluses. They represented natural as opposed to civilized man, everything man shares with the beasts. Their characteristics were naive curiosity, acquisitiveness, lust, drunkenness, lying, boasting and cowardice. They were completely amoral.

Satyr plays constituted a quarter of the entire output of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Yet only one and a half have come down to us. The only complete satyr play is the *Cyclops* of Euripides. The fragmentary one is the *Trackers* of Sophocles.

There are stylistic links between tragedies and satyr plays which are largely lost in translation. Apart from the satyrs, the other characters in satyr plays (who might well be the same characters who have just participated in a tragedy) speak in the high tragic style, which naturally comes to seem rather stilted, incongruous, even ridiculous, in the context of low farce. In *The Cyclops* Odysseus says:

How many times have I with mighty shield,
To twice five thousand Trojans scorned to yield!
If death is here, then bravely die I will:
If life, my fame will then show brighter still!

But the whole heroic context of the Trojan War has already been devalued:

Satyr: Oh-ho! And did you all share Helen then?
I know she loves a multitude of men!
Why, first the greasy Paris charmed her sight
With his outlandish clothes; it wasn't right
To leave good Menelaus, and the kid,
And bolt with Paris. Well, I never did!
Zeus ought to ban all women utterly...
Except, of course, some jolly girls for me!

Even when the heroes were not directly ridiculed, the mere presence of Silenus and his satyrs had much the same deflating effect as the presence of Falstaff does in the *Henry IV* plays. After Falstaff's speech on honour it is hard to take wholly seriously the heroics of Hotspur, and when Shakespeare wants us to take wholly seriously the heroics of Henry V, plump Jack must be banished. So, in the *Cyclops*, Odysseus bravely plots to blind the sleeping Cyclops with a sharpened and fire-hardened olive stake. But the stake is too heavy for him to lift alone, so he asks for volunteers from the satyrs to help him. He gets a predictably non-heroic response:

Odysseus: Come then and help; the weapon's burning bright;
Just what we need to quench an ogre's sight!

Satyr: Well, choose which Satyr first should hold the brand
Destined to blind the Cyclops. Here we stand
All waiting anxiously to lend a hand.

Another: I'm much too distant here, of course, to try

And reach into the cave and burn his eye!

Another: How odd! I've got the cramp – can't move for pain ...

Another: That's just my case! Somehow I've chanced to sprain
My ankle ... Bound to happen, standing here!

Odysseus: What, sprained it standing still?

Another: It's very queer,
But I've got ashes in my eyes – or dust.

Odysseus: Afraid to help? ... You fill me with disgust.

Another: Well really, you can't say that we're afraid!
In care of self true courage is displayed –
I'd be a fool to risk jaw, leg, or arm!
And anyhow, I know an Orphic charm
Will piece that great eye with the burning pole –
And blind the Cyclops by remote control!

Odysseus: I've always heard that Satyrs were the end,
And now I know it's true.

If the purpose of the satyr plays was merely to release the tension of the tragedies, why could that function not have been performed by a comedy? And why were the tragic poets required to write satyr plays rather than the comic poets? And why was there no gap between the tragedies and the satyr play? The audience must have been nearing the end of its attention span. Clearly the satyrs were felt to bring into the same world as tragedy some essential missing element. Thus the satyr plays were felt to belong with and in a sense complete the tragic trilogies, as the comedies were not.

Here is Tony Harrison's explanation of the purpose of the satyr plays:

With the loss of these plays we are lacking important clues to the wholeness of the Greek imagination, and its ability to absorb and not be defeated by the tragic. In the satyr play, that spirit of celebration, held in the dark solution of tragedy, is precipitated into release, and a release into the worship of the Dionysos who presided over the whole dramatic festival. In the one complete surviving satyr play, the *Cyclops* of Euripides, the very last line allows the chorus the prospect of being liberated finally from the dark shadow of the Cyclops Polyphemus and spend the rest of the time in the service of Bacchus:

Hip, hip, hurray!
We're on our way
As ship-mates of the Ithacan!
And happy days
We'll pass in praise
Extolling Bacchus with a can!

The journey back into the service of the presiding god seems to be paralleled by the release of the spirit back into the life of the senses at the end of the tragic journey. The sensual relish for life and its affirmation must have been the spirit of the conclusion of the four plays. The satyrs are included in the wholeness of the tragic vision.

It is this wholeness we find in Shakespeare's last plays, which subsume tragedy in a larger affirmation of miraculously recovered life. And there are Greek plays which attempt to reconcile the tragic vision with the capacity of life to continue. Harrison draws attention specifically to what he calls

the category-disturbing *Alcestis*, often termed proto-satyr because Euripides offered it in place of the satyr play as the fourth play of his competition entry. In this play Euripides introduced his ›satyr‹, in the shape of Heracles, into the very body of the tragedy: the celebrant admitted before the tragic section had come to an end. The playwright thus showed both elements intertwined: *at the same time* the reveller is hasting to his wine and Admetus is burying his wife.

That *Alcestis*, one of the earliest plays of Euripides to have survived, was, apparently, performed in the slot conventionally reserved for a satyr play in the Great Dionysia of 438, does not make it a satyr play. It has no satyrs, no obscenity, and no more ridicule of the gods and heroes than is found in many Euripides plays. It bears no resemblance to the two surviving satyr plays, (the *Cyclops*, remember, by Euripides himself) which bear a strong resemblance to each other. What it does strongly resemble is a much later play of Euripides called *Helen*, which, for all its sparkling lightness, was apparently performed as a tragedy. Just as Shakespeare often handled very similar themes in tragedy, comedy and romance, so Euripides in particular liked to work, until his last years, in an ›up-beat‹ mode. *Alcestis* and *Helen* are not only very like each other, they are also very like such Shakespearean romances as *Pericles* and *A Winter's Tale*. In *Helen*, Menelaus, miraculously preserved from death at sea, is equally miraculously restored to his lost, loving and long-suffering wife. In all four plays the lost wife appears to return from the dead. Only in the *Alcestis* does she actually do so.

Alcestis, however, is not one of the best-known or most admired and produced of Greek plays. This seems to me to be for the simple reason that it is not among the best. The plot and characters offer opportunities for broad comedy, for near-tragedy and for psychological probing of exactly the kind which was to be Euripides' forte. Yet he made little of it. The whole thing seems curiously bland.

Unlike Tony Harrison, Hughes was not a classical scholar. As far as I know he was not fluent enough in any language to translate from it unaided. His method was to procure from someone else, often a friend, a crib – that is a straightforward literal prose translation, from which Hughes would then produce his ›version‹. He would also, of course, read all the other translations he could get hold of. After working on Seneca's *Oedipus* for Peter Brook in the sixties, Hughes returned to ›translating‹ in the nineties, producing, in quick succession, Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus, Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, *Tales from Ovid*, Racine's *Phedre*, and *Alcestis*. But *Alcestis* differed from all the others in that it was the only work not commissioned. Why then should Ted Hughes at the very end of his life have chosen this apparently undistinguished play on which to spend a large chunk of his increasingly precious time? Why not rather *The Bacchae*, the play which had meant more to him than any other and come closest to his lifelong concerns?

It has been said that second-rate poems make much better settings than first-rate. What can be added by music to the verbal music and richness of a poem by Donne or Keats or Hopkins? The composer can at best duplicate and at worst distract from that music. But one of Tennyson's minor lyrics, shall we say, leaves plenty of scope for the composer to augment the poem with something creative of his own. Similarly, *Alcestis* faces a modern adapter with an altogether different challenge from, say, *The Oresteia*. At the beginning of his work on *The Oresteia*, Hughes wrote to me:

Main problem in these plays is to give the active details of imagery etc real dramatic life – projected, active leverage on the listener. To give each image the role of a sort of actor. If you can't do that, then the passages seem simply too long.

There is no question of adding anything of one's own to *The Oresteia*, which would be presumptuous. The purpose of the adaptation is wholly to use one's own gifts of language to try to give the plays the same dramatic impact for Hughes' contemporaries that they must have had for Aeschylus«.

Alcestis may not be a play of the same order as *The Oresteia*, but Hughes cannot have failed to recognize in it disturbing echoes of his own story so recently told in *Birthday Letters*. In the Vellacott translation Admetus says of the death of his wife: »I can never again take heart to touch my lyre«. After the death of Sylvia Plath Hughes wrote no poems for three years. Later Admetos cries: »What sharper stroke can shatter a man's heart / Than loss of his true wife?« The fact that *Alcestis* is a minor play allowed Hughes if not to appropriate it for his own purposes, at least to see himself as creative collaborator, filling out from bitter experience what Euripides only gestures towards. Hughes' version is half as long again as the original.

Hughes' chorus says of Admetus in lines which might be from *Birthday Letters*:

He does not know what loss is.
When everything is too late
Then he will know it.
When he has to live in what has happened.

Later the chorus describes Alcestis as »so wound into his heart, / so woven into his days and years«. Before lapsing into his three-year silence after the death of Sylvia Plath, Hughes wrote two poems, »The Howling of Wolves« and »Song of a Rat«. In *Alcestis* Hughes recapitulates the horror of »Song of a Rat«:

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.

Some of the most horrific poems in *Birthday Letters*, »Suttee«, for example, are also recapitulated in *Alcestis*:

No refuge anywhere in me
From this fire, this huge dark single flame,
That caresses my whole body.

In the sixties Hughes' vision had been of a world made of blood, entirely given over to death. At the beginning of *Alcestis* Death claims that life is »paltry and precarious«, »the briefest concession«, »an aberration from the status quo – which is me«. *Alcestis* is the summation of Hughes' life-long wrestling with Death to prove him wrong.

Hughes' works are replete with suffering, often dealt with in ways which remind us of Greek tragedy. Like the Greeks he wanted to look at suffering open-eyed, extenuating nothing. The danger was that he would become a nihilist or absurdist; that he would leave his readers feeling suicidal. He struggled to make his endings what he called »upbeat«; but it was a struggle because he would admit no positives or affirmations or hopes which had not been fully paid for by a full look at the worst. He described *Wodwo*, the first collection he published after the death of Sylvia Plath in 1963 as »a descent into destruction«. It contains some of his bleakest poems – »Logos«, »Theology«, »Karma«, »Pibroch«,

»Ghost Crabs«, »The Howling of Wolves«, »Song of a Rat« – but it ends with two of the most hopeful poems, »Full Moon and Little Frieda«, recording a rare moment of plenitude which seems to offer the hope that the new beginning represented by his baby daughter might not be entirely doomed, and »Wodwo«, which reaffirms the capacity of the human spirit to reconstitute itself after near-annihilation. *Crow* would have ended in the same way had it not been abandoned. *Cave Birds* transcends many horrors with a final hopeful reconstitution using marriage as one of its primary figures.

What *Alcestis* offered Hughes, after *Birthday Letters*, was a hopeful treatment of the theme of the attempt to recover in some sense a dead wife. In a message read for him at the award ceremony of the Forward Poetry Prize, Hughes said that in writing *Birthday Letters* over about 25 years he had »tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife, not thinking to make a poem, thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself and feel her there listening«.

The Orpheus story was the first that occurred to Hughes after Sylvia Plath's death. He rejected it as »too obvious an attempt to exploit my situation« (Letter to KS). He did, however, write a version for Children in 1970. Here Orpheus' music is the music of happiness only, happiness deriving from Euridice. It makes even the trees and stones dance. But a voice in his ear, like the voice of a spider, tells him that »everything must be paid for«. When Euridice dies – »Her voice has been carried away to the land of the dead« – »Orpheus' hand suddenly becomes numb«. (Hughes wrote no adult poems for three years.) At last Orpheus decides to go to the underworld to attempt to recover his wife. He uses his guitar like a shaman to make a road of sound to the bottom of the underworld, one note insanely repeated, gathering volume and impetus, and lands at the feet of Pluto, king of the kingdom of the dead. His wife, Pluto tells him, was the payment for his music.

Orpheus plays a new music, a music not of beauty and happiness and life only, but of pain and all the cycles of death and renewal. This music causes Persephone herself to flower, the first time Pluto has seen her open since he snatched her from the upper world. Orpheus demands his own wife in exchange. Pluto cannot give him his wife: »Your wife's body is crumbling to dust«, but gives him her soul: »Return to the world. Your wife's soul will be with you«. He returns, like so many of his heroes, »a step, a step, and a step«. He cannot see or touch his wife, but he can hear her. She asks him to play for her: The music was not the music of dancing

But of growing and withering,
Of the root in the earth and the leaf in the light,
The music of birth and of death.
And the stones did not dance. But the stones listened.
The music was not the music of happiness
But of everlasting, and the wearing away of the hills,
The music of the stillness of stones,
Of stones under frost, and stones under rain, and stones in the sun,
The music of the seabed drinking at the stones of the hills.
The music of the floating weight of the earth.
And the bears in their forest holes
Heard the music of bears in their forest holes.
The music of bones in the starlight,
The music of many a valley trodden by bears,
The music of bears listening on the earth for bears.
And the deer on the high hills heard the crying of wolves.
And the salmon in the deep pools heard the whisper of the snows,
And the traveller on the road

Heard the music of love coming and love going
And love lost forever,
The music of birth and of death.
The music of the earth, swaddled in heaven, kissed by its cloud and watched by its ray.
And the ears that heard it were also of leaf and of stone.
The faces that listened were flesh of cliff and of river.
The hands that played it were fingers of snakes and a tangle of flowers.

Hughes avoided the story for decades in his work for adults, even conspicuously omitting it from his *Tales from Ovid*. But in *Alcestis*, feeling perhaps that in the long agony recorded in *Birthday Letters* he had finally paid for the right to lay claim to the story, he expanded a passing reference to Orpheus, a single sentence in Euripides, to a twenty-seven line recapitulation of the whole story (as he had earlier inserted the story of Prometheus's release from the torment of the vulture).

Admetus has lost his wife Alcestis, and is consumed with guilt. He had mismanaged the situation. He had somehow let his wife's life slip through his fingers. Like Orpheus he had taken his happiness for granted:

So much confidence. So many blessings.
So much time!
So many decades ahead of us. (68)

He finds himself

Thinking about Orpheus – in the thick of all this.
Thinking of the impossible.

How he went down there,
Into the underworld, the dead land,
With his guitar and his voice –
He rode the dark road

A horse of music.
He wrapped himself in his voice,
Death-proof, a voice of asbestos,

He went
Down and down and down.

You remember –

He went for his dead wife
And he nearly got her. (22–3)

But for Admetus the impossible happens. »What was beyond belief« is accomplished: Alcestis is returned to him. Heracles says »She is yours. / All you thought you had lost – she is here«. Admetus's happiness is greater than ever, because now fully paid for:

We have taken the full measure of grief
And now we have found happiness even greater.
We have found it and recognized it. (83)

Out of the sufferings of Prometheus and Orpheus, out of the decades of pain, Hughes finally distills this positive vision. Heracles had suffered the worst, had in his madness killed his own wife and children. Yet he had lived to convert even this horror into a strength capable of releasing Prometheus from the torments of Zeus and of wresting victory from Death:

Each misfortune
Bears an opportunity,
Cradles a benefit,
If it can be accepted, and favoured,
Generously, as a guest,
As a welcome, noble guest.

The last words of Hughes' last work are: »Let this give man hope«.

Many Greek tragedies end on a very bleak note. *Oedipus the King* is not untypical: »Count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last«. But, as we have seen, that is not the ultimate wisdom of the tragic poets, not the last word. When all the evils have escaped from Pandora's box, there is still hope. Hope is the theme of *Alcestis*, both in Euripides and Hughes.

The hope referred to at the end of *Alcestis* is not, of course, the hope that if you lose a much-loved wife in her prime, some friendly superman might turn up, wrestle with death, and bring her back as good as new. It is rather the hope expressed in »Red«, the last poem in *Birthday Letters*, where the red of pain and loss is balanced by the blue of what can nevertheless be recovered (recovered in his case only by the full payment of half a lifetime and hundreds of poems) – the memories of joys, births and indestructible love, a healing gift.

Keith Sagar