

Lost in Translation: Reading and Misreading Contemporary British and American Poetry

By Jeffery Alan Triggs

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A number of years ago, *Contemporary Literature* devoted a special issue to the problem of “The Two Poetries: The Postwar Lyric in Britain and America.”¹ The essays ranged from a rather charming and ingratiating memoir of American poets by Charles Tomlinson to considerations of “Little Englandism” and the affects of American expatriation on such English poets as Jon Silkin and Thom Gunn. One comes away from this issue with the feeling, not altogether sanguine, that the “two poetries” are very much isolated, when not actually hostile to each other’s aims. With a few exceptions—Tomlinson for one—poets on either side of the Atlantic have little to say to each other or learn from each other. Indeed, this much may be gathered unofficially by glancing at the poetry shelves in English and American bookstores; there is very little wooing both ways.

Perhaps this is natural to some extent, considering the divergent cultural matrices of these poets, but it is also puzzling, for the same British and American poets have little trouble drawing sustenance from what one might call the “international canon” of poets in translation: Rilke, Milosz, Brodsky, Tranströmer, Seferis, or Neruda, to name just a few. And it would be too easy, I think, to argue that these poets are “major” while contemporary poets of the English language are not. A better explanation might be that foreign poets, because they must be translated, are translatable into familiar and therefore acceptable dialects. Rilke, for instance, may be read in Leishman’s English, or MacIntyre’s, Bly’s, and more recently Mitchell’s American. Larkin, on the other hand, must be read in Larkin’s English, Ted Hughes in his own very different English. The more subtle “language barrier” involved here is a serious impediment both to informal and critical reading.

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In his essay, “Leavis on Eliot,” Denis Donoghue argues that “critical discourse gives the poem a life other than its own but cognate to its own. The power we ascribe to the poem is answered by another power, that of a reading adequate to it in principle and by intention, if inadequate in the event” (332-33). But just as critical discourse may confer a different though cognate life on the poem, a reading which is inadequate in principle or intention may build an insulating barrier around the poem, forbidding it such a second life. My purpose here will be to take issue with one of the essays in the *Contemporary Literature* number, Lawrence Kramer’s “The Wodwo Watches the Water Clock: Language in Postmodern British and American Poetry,” and to argue that Kramer’s readings of British poetry in particular are inadequate in principle and intention. Far from elucidating the British poems he considers, Kramer creates unnecessary obstacles to their appreciation by Americans and in effect perpetuates the self-satisfied, nationalist myth (admittedly abetted by certain disgruntled British critics) that everything truly vital in poetry has been happening on this side of the Atlantic. If it were simply inept, such an essay could be safely ignored. But Kramer’s essay is dangerously proficient, urbanely written, and suavely misleading.

Kramer’s argument is that “American poets have by and large kept up the passionate belief in language as mediation—in the ability of language to confront, interpret, and even to reenact experience,” while “recent British poets...seem deeply distrustful of the intersection between language and reality, and appear to see the process of using language as a hard struggle against what seems its futility or vulnerability” (319-20). To support this thesis, he considers individual poems by Larkin, Hill, Hughes, Robert Lowell, Ammons, and Ashbery. In conclusion, he posits the opposition of a “postmodern American poetics of meaning without meaningfulness” and a British “poetics—or antipoetics—of meaningfulness without meaning” (342). Such an argument is very neat at first glance. It seems to sum up distinct national differences without any messy resort to causes or historical context. Kramer sticks nicely to the texts at hand, covering the language of the poems with his own discourse, or metalanguage. When we examine this metalanguage more closely, however, the cracks begin to show.

It is instructive to consider the different emotive vocabularies Kramer employs to deal with American and British poets. Where American poets are said to be “passionate” in their “belief” in the mediatory power of language, the British poets are described as “deeply distrustful” of language, convinced of its “futility” and “vulnerability.” (Kramer makes no more than a passing attempt to explain this difference in faith, citing the Americans’ inheritance from the modernists, among others Yeats and Auden. As we shall see, this view even of the modernists is

problematic.) American poets, so we gather, are a “passionate,” open, unanxious lot, whose language makes “its own way against reality, no matter how many zigs and zags it takes” (319). British poets, on the other hand, are “craftsmen out of love with their material,” who “either chasten their language” or “churn it into a thrumming intensity” (320).

Seemingly confident in his own language’s “mediatory” power over “reality” (one might do well to keep in mind the naturalized American, Nabokov’s admonitions about this word), Kramer continues his emotive power play in discussions of individual poets. Larkin, for instance, has created in “Dockery and Son” not a “traditional” but “a strict *nonfunctional* form....The form is not a discipline but a *constraint*, not a means of heightening language but a means of *repressing* it” (Kramer 322). Similarly, Geoffrey Hill’s work is marked by “meaningfulness without meaning,” though in this case the problem “arises not from the repression of language but from *aggression* against it” (Kramer 323). Hill’s poem, “Picture of a Nativity,” makes use of a language that “is *twisted*, concentrated, and *misshapen* in order to signify with its *deformity* what its integrity could not master” (Kramer 324) (emphasis added). Such language, in Kramer’s phrase, “has the eloquence of a gargoyle” (325).

When Kramer turns to the American poets, however, we learn that “their hallmark” is “a *transcendental* discontinuity: a *free, self-determined* movement of language from idiom to idiom, standpoint to standpoint, time to time, place to place,” resulting in “a poetry whose movement can resemble anything from *easy* meditation to not quite free association to *amiable* chaos” (325) (emphasis added). When he discusses Robert Lowell’s interestingly patchworked poem, “Ezra Pound,” Kramer is lovingly patient with its “discontinuities.” The poem “is a dense farrago of idioms and *perceptions*” whose “*range* is enormous” (327). The poem’s “shifting voices” are “packed together paratactically to create a *vivid sense*, half-visual, half-visceral, of a verbal space crammed to the seams with scraps of consciousness” (327). Its “*tense* containment” of these scraps “intends to *invest* them, even to *irradiate* them, with *commensurate* meaning” (327). Lowell’s words, unlike Hill’s, “are *lucid* at every point, even where they are fragmentary” (327) (emphasis added). Whereas Hill’s language is described as “heaping itself up in word-spoils” (Kramer 324), Lowell’s is a language of “laconic phrases” (327), or perhaps simply an “amiable chaos.” Whatever such an *amiable* chaos may be said to be, it affords Lowell, according to Kramer, enormous privileges: “as the poem’s language contains reality, the poem, containing the language, transfigures the reality, even where reality protests” (328). (Why and how “reality protests” is of course not made explicit here.)

There are a number of points to be made against such readings. As my added emphases will suggest, Kramer's diction is clearly loaded in favor of the American poets. Kramer expends on Lowell's technique, which a less congenial reader might term haphazard, all the intuitive empathy and appreciative understanding of an impressionist critic. And this is a good thing, as far as it goes. It is useful in guiding us to an understanding of the strategies and techniques inherent in Lowell's poem. The empathy and understanding are withheld, however, when the British poets are in question. "Dockery and Son," to take up one of Kramer's examples, is subjected to a willfully unreciprocal response. Indeed, one is reminded of Leavis's willful refusal to read Shelley on acceptable terms. Kramer remarks, for instance, that "traditionally...poetic language heightens itself by working against the discipline of rhyme and meter" (321), claiming that Larkin's language fails to heed this tradition. This certainly exaggerates both points. Some poetry indeed *heightens* itself by working against rhyme and meter, but by no means all poetry does so. Yeats's practice is much different from Tennyson's in this respect, though both were masters of "traditional" form. Spenser's verse is equally different from Donne's, and equally masterful. Kramer does not specify *which* tradition he is accusing Larkin of traducing. One cannot help wondering, when Kramer speaks of Larkin's "strong midline pauses, muted strong stresses, and persistent enjambment at points where the syntax overrides the instinct to pause" (321), if he is not deliberately missing Larkin's play with the established meter. It could be argued, equally glibly, that Donne and Yeats "conspire" similarly "to blur the metrical integrity of the verse" (321). To speak of Larkin "repressing" language rather than "heightening" it is simply to damn with emotive language, the opposite of euphemizing what some might consider awkward effects in Lowell's poem. It is worth noting, by the way, that Lowell himself found much to admire in Larkin's poetry, commenting that a poem by Larkin "says something" (See Pritchard 63-64, 75). Kramer, however, studiously misses Larkin's rather quiet and characteristic effects. Like Larkin, many American poets have made use of "weak or unemphatic" (Kramer 321) rhymes, though one imagines that Kramer would say the Americans simply do not wish to call attention to their rhymes. Larkin's final lines are singled out for special condemnation:

Life is first boredom, then fear.
Whether or not we use it, it goes,
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,
Then age, and then the only end of age.
(*The Whitsun Weddings* 38)

Kramer comments that “we really know nothing about [Dockery and his son] at all, except that they lead us to a nihilistic conclusion: that ‘Life is first boredom, then fear’ ” (322). He asserts that the poem is simply recapitulating “its mystifications about the process of ‘choice’ (which it has not, of course, presented as a process of choice at all)” (323). About the last line, Kramer notes: “All that the poem’s last words do is diminish the assertive power of the potent, lucid word ‘fear,’ by drawing back from naming its object, death....Larkin reduces a recognition to a periphrasis, a mere riddle... whose answer is self-evident” (323).

There are several problems with this reading. For one thing, Kramer is clearly being disingenuous in failing to note the irony in Larkin’s use of the word “choice”. The diminished sort of life Larkin describes obviously is not a matter of choice; it is determined, a matter of “innate assumptions,” which decline into “habit” and suddenly “harden into all we’ve got.” The frustrated aims of Larkin’s characters (“what / We think truest, or most want to do”), like his strict form, reflect his openly class-bound society, and of course “warp tight-shut, like doors.” It is hardly a mystification that to such people life can seem “what something hidden from us chose.” Nor is this strictly a “little English” problem. Kramer is naive, if he means to assume that Americans are so “classless” that Larkin’s situation must seem mystifying to them. The proposition that Larkin’s poem is merely “nihilistic” is surely something more than naive in the latter half of the Twentieth Century. More than a few recent American poets could be tarred with this brush. It is also worth taking issue with Kramer’s assessment of the lovely rhetorical figure in Larkin’s last line. Here the insistent rhythm and the beautiful balance of open vowels, far from diminishing the power of the word “fear”, are chillingly effective. “Then...and then” suggests the merciless and determinant machinery of time, the ultimate cognate of Dockery’s determinant society. It is a line worthy of the mellifluous English tradition; Tennyson is there, and Keats, and Carew, and Jonson; there are centuries in its making. Substituting “death” for “the only end of age” would be merely blunt. To argue that Larkin presents “a riddle whose answer is self-evident” calls the practice of a great deal of English poetry too easily into question. It seems almost willfully Philistine.

It is also worth commenting on Kramer’s confident assertion that the language of American poetry “contains reality,” while the language of British poetry is distrustful of it. All language is essentially metaphorical, a system of tropes and figures whose mediatory relation to meanings or things is arbitrary and at best problematic. As recent linguistic critics have been eager to point out, there is no inevitable symmetry, in the Saussurian sense, between a signifier and a signified. Meaning does not inhere stably or purely in a signifier but disseminates itself in

an intricate and elusive web of tracings, promiscuous connections with other signifiers, against which the signifier struggles to assert its identity. An intended meaning is therefore never fully present in a signifier and in a sense language may be said to undermine constantly its own meaning.

All this might be adduced, of course, as adequate grounds for the British poets' mistrusting language, but whether the American poets are really any more trustful is also questionable. Kramer claims, at one point, that John Ashbery's language, "trusted to go its own way...manages to slip luminosities of meaning right past our consciousness, so that we have the meaning without knowing it" (338-39). I do not find this lovely statement convincing, however, as it relies on a kind of critical mysticism, if not mystification. Ashbery himself has been quoted as saying something rather different about his own practice: "It seems to me that my poetry sometimes proceeds as though an argument were suddenly derailed and something that started out clearly suddenly became opaque....What I am probably trying to do is illustrate opacity and how it can suddenly descend over us" (See Kalstone 174). Donoghue, who prefers "serpentine" to "opaque" as an adjective for Ashbery's poetry, argues that Ashbery "doesn't mind producing [congruent messages], so long as the reader knows that they do not make the truth visible....In Ashbery's poems, what we feel is the hum of thoughts evaded in the mind, great generalities pressing to be heard and, in the event, being eluded" (*Reading America* 304-05). What this suggests to me is that Ashbery is not nearly so confident in the power of his language to mediate reality as Kramer would like to make out. He is aware of the arbitrariness of meaning and is intensely mistrustful of formulation. If anything, such scepticism about language is his theme, as in this passage from *As We Know*:

We must first trick the idea
Into being, then dismantle it,
Scattering the pieces on the wind.

It is perhaps this decreationary scepticism, rather than any confidence in language's ability "to confront, interpret, and even reenact experience," that Ashbery inherits from the modernists. The legacy of modernism is anything but an easy relation with language.

If we are to believe Richard Poirier, the modernists themselves, comprised mainly of American and Irish writers, represent a tradition of mistrust in language. In *The Renewal of Literature*, he argues that "the feelings associated with modernism" are "a mosaic compounded of nostalgia, belatedness, cultural burden,

and a distrust of language” (96). Such feelings are attributable “to an unprecedented break in cultural continuity and to a remission of some of the authorizing principles behind language” (Poirier 97). When we read modernist works, according to Poirier, we are engaged in “an activity by which with great difficulty we can become conscious that any structure, technique, code, or system of signs is likely to prove no more than extemporized and transient” (113). In a similar vein, George Steiner argues that modernist works “embody a revolt of literature against language...For the writer after Mallarmé language does violence to meaning, flattening, destroying it, as a living thing from the deeps is destroyed when drawn to the daylight and low pressures of the sea surface” (*After Babel* 183). According to Steiner, the program of modernist literature has been “to break its public linguistic mould and become idelect” (*After Babel* 183). At the same time, Poirier contends forcefully that even the “other” American tradition, what he calls the “Emersonian,” views language “not as a transparency but as an obstruction, language not as inherently mobile but as static and resistant, unless made momentarily otherwise” (30). We are a long way here from Kramer’s view of American poets’ “faith in the mediatory power of the language,” its “transcendental discontinuity” and “free, self-determined movement.” If anything, one might argue that the English poets, relatively unmarked by modernist or Emersonian anxiety, evince an easier relation to the language, at least on certain occasions. There is certainly nothing in their work of the “colonial protest” (99) Poirier finds in much modernist writing.

At this point I would like to consider particularly Kramer’s misreading of Ted Hughes, whom he cites as standing at the extreme of the British “antipoetics” of “meaningfulness without meaning.” Kramer begins with the observation that for Hughes violence is “the source of poetic identity” (331). This is nothing new, of course. As early as 1959, A.E. Dyson noted that in Hughes’s work “violence...is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*” (220). More recently, Helen Vendler has distinguished “violence and victimization” as perhaps the most “typical” tonality in Hughes’s poetry (207). These critics, however, have always pointed out redeeming features. For Dyson, Hughes’s essential violence “is a guarantee of energy, of life” (220). Vendler argues that in Hughes’s more recent work the tonality of violence is opposed and mitigated by a rival “tonality of ‘epic poise’,” whereby “the obsessive rituals of the poetry” may be “harmonized with aesthetic as well as therapeutic ends” (207-08). Kramer, on the other hand, believes that violence leads Hughes directly to “the necessity of writing against, rather than with, language,” and that whatever “explosive quality” we may find in “Hughes’s poetry derives primarily from his violence against its language” (331-

32). Among the examples Kramer cites are these lines from “November”, an early poem in *Lupercal*:

the rains’ dragging grey columns

Smudged the farms. In a moment
The fields were jumping and smoking; the thorns
Quivered, riddled with the glassy verticals.
I stayed on under the welding cold

Watching the tramp’s face glisten and the drops of his coat
Flash and darken. (*Selected Poems* 51-52).

Kramer’s comment is that the lines

betray a restless, anxious effort to turn the rainy landscape into a revelation of nature as an antagonistic spirit, an indwelling will to annihilation. To do that, Hughes weighs down his lines with verbs and participles variously signifying force, movement, suffering, piercing, so that the signification of objects is altogether obscured....It is a savage play of meaningfulness that fights its way toward full mediation and never quite reaches it. (333)

Leaving aside for a moment the issue of whether any language (including Kramer’s own) is capable of “full mediation”, I think the poem is neither as “anxious” nor as “savage” as Kramer makes out. Nor do the verbs and participals weigh the poem down especially. If anything, Hughes’s evocation of the “rainy landscape” and the hostile nature it suggests is confidently energetic, as telling and no more strained than Baudelaire’s “Quand le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle”. Kramer’s hostility comes close, in the case of Hughes, to opposing figurative language itself, which can always be pressed on some level as obscuring “the signification of objects.” One shouldn’t need Derrida to realize that all language’s “signification of objects” is problematic, and that “full mediation”, whatever that is meant to signify, is a practical fiction of language. Hughes’s poem, if we care to consult the parts Kramer has left out, might be faulted rather as somewhat sentimental than as savage. It sets up a psychological relationship (admirably suggested by the surreal touches of the rain’s smudging the farms and “the welding cold”) between the speaker, the tramp, and various animals, all of whom must endure the same nature in their own ways. A good part of the poem is concerned

with the tramp, who is depicted as animal-like in certain respects, his existence mediating between that of the speaker, who is fully conscious, and those of the animals, who endure nature with a brute stoicism. The poem suggests subtly that the tramp's sleep is a kind of willed hibernation, and thus an oblivion denied the speaker himself:

In a let of the ditch a tramp was bundled asleep;
Face tucked down into beard, drawn in
Under his hair like a hedgehog's. I took him for dead,

But his stillness separated from the death
Of the rotting grass and the ground. A wind chilled,
And a fresh comfort tightened through him,
Each hand stuffed deeper into the other sleeve.

It is hard for me to see how lines like these commit any violence against the language. The intransitive and non-reflexive use of "separated" is somewhat odd, but it is nicely estranging in a way that heightens our awareness. This is exactly what the Formalist critics predicate of "literary" as opposed to "normal" language. The surreal touch of "a fresh comfort" tightening through him, allied metonymically with the image of the gloveless hands stuffing themselves deeper into their opposing sleeves, is similarly effective, freshly and delicately observed. Far from savaging their language or their subject, Hughes's lines *realize* their subject with considerable empathy. Hughes's vision is indeed bleak (the poem ends with the speaker encountering a game-keeper's gibbet hung with "patient" animals, and suggesting perhaps a broader context in which we are all kept hanging in the weather), but this is nothing new in either British or American poetry. An adequate reading of his poem would find it on quite comfortable terms with its language and with the English tradition in poetry.

Another Hughes poem that comes in for Kramer's censure is "Snowdrop", also from *Lupercal*, which he cites as a "risky gamboling with common bombast" (335):

Now is the globe shrunk tight
Round the mouse's dulled wintering heart.
Weasel and crow, as if moulded in brass,
Move through an outer darkness
Not in their right minds,
With the other deaths. She, too, pursues her ends,

Brutal as the stars of this month,
Her pale head heavy as metal. (*Selected Poems* 58)

What Kramer objects to here is Hughes's "hyperbolic demand that the object...be imagined in a way that is perceptually absurd" (335). Surely, this is a kind of realist fallacy. Shall we say that Keats is making a perceptually absurd, hyperbolic demand when he addresses a Grecian urn as a "bride of quietness?" Many effective metaphors, including Hamlet's spoken daggers and Homer's "rosy-fingered" dawns are "perceptually absurd"—if we are numb enough as readers not to notice what they are about. Kramer is really objecting to Hughes's surreal estrangements of everyday language, though modern literature certainly offers precedents for them, modern theory encourages them, and the decorum of a lyric like "Snowdrop" allows them. "Snowdrop" is more "difficult" than a poem like "November", but not in any sense unfamiliar to readers of modern literature. I do not agree with Kramer that "Snowdrop" is "one of Hughes's best poems" (335), but I believe he is being more than disingenuous in condemning these lines because "they punish their language ruthlessly" (335).

Steiner has usefully distinguished four kinds of "difficulty" in western poetry: contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological (See *On Difficulty and Other Essays* 18-47). The first three "classes of difficulty," according to Steiner, suggest a "contract of ultimate or preponderant intelligibility between poet and reader, between text and meaning" (*On Difficulty* 40). The fourth, on the other hand, "occurs where this contract is itself wholly or in part broken" (*On Difficulty* 40). Such "Ontological difficulties confront us with blank questions about the nature of human speech, about the status of significance, about the necessity and purpose of the construct which we have, with more or less rough and ready consensus, come to perceive as a poem" (Steiner, *On Difficulty* 41). For Steiner, the difficulties of those works that have followed in the vein of Mallarmé and Hölderlin, are ontological, involving a radical critique of language and the somewhat paradoxical attempt "to break the chain of exemplary inheritance" while at the same time returning "to an archaic past in which language and thought had, somehow, been open to the truth of being, to the hidden sources of all meaning" (*On Difficulty* 42-43). Such works "express their sense of the inauthentic situation of man in an environment of eroded speech" (Steiner, *On Difficulty* 44).

"Snowdrop" is clearly a difficult poem in this ontological sense. It forbids us ready and logical access to the dynamic structure of its language, whose goal is not ordinary mediation; the poem's hermeticism involves no necessary unity of signifiers and signifieds. The image of the first two lines is deceptively simple. It

suggests the mouse's hibernation in terms at once minutely particular and cosmic. Kramer, of course, feels that they are unacceptably "hyperbolic," and notes that Hughes's image "flirts with sentimentality for the mouse, bathos for the globe" (336). I find these lines no more hyperbolic or bathetic than Wordsworth's image of a dead girl "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course, / With rocks, and stones, and trees." The difference is that Hughes wants to suggest such a cosmic viewpoint in energetically modern, estranging terms. The "shrinking" of the winter globe is at the same time physically commonplace and rather shockingly imaginative. This much is easy. The difficulty begins in the lines about "Weasal and crow." We are left not with definite answers but with teasing questions. One can see how from the point of view of the hibernating mouse the other creatures, as well as the speaker, "Move through an outer darkness," but in what sense can they seem "moulded in brass" or "Not in their right minds?" And what are those "other deaths" among which they move? Is there some sense, perhaps Rilkean in conception, in which all living things may be seen metonymically in terms of the deaths growing within them? Are they out of their right minds in the colloquial sense that they, and with them Hughes, do not have the good sense or fortune to seek the oblivion of hibernation? Do they seem molded in brass because they are on some level insensible, or because the mouse is insensible of them? There are bewildering possibilities here, and I think Hughes wants them all potentially operative. They all accord with his dark notion of our place in the universe, where, like the mouse's, the ends we must pursue may be "Brutal as the stars of this month" which determine them. Still, many of these lines maintain an air of hermetic mystery resistant to definitive interpretation, and intentionally so. The universe, after all, is difficult and mysterious. As Steiner says about certain passages of similar difficulty by Paul Celan, "at certain levels, we are not meant to understand *at all*, and our interpretation, indeed our reading itself, is an intrusion" (*On Difficulty* 45). Hughes demonstrates not so much unwarranted suspicion of language as perceptive awareness of its condition in the modern world. As I suggested above, "Snowdrop" is not a completely successful poem, but I believe its very difficulty is interesting and perhaps typical of modern poetry in ways Kramer either chooses to ignore or cannot see from the perspective of what he claims is American poetic practice.

I would like to end by considering a more recent poem by Hughes which, it is only fair to admit, Kramer could not have known at the time he wrote his essay. I believe, however, that the poem stands in itself as a refutation of Kramer's judgment and as a prime example of the excellence Americans may find in contemporary British poetry—if they allow themselves to overcome the linguistic

and cultural barriers that have separated the “two poetries.” The poem is “October Salmon” (*Selected Poems* 165-67), first published in *The River* in 1982. Compared with “Snowdrop” it is not a difficult poem, maintaining itself on quite comfortable terms with language, one might almost say terms of transcendental ease. In many ways, however, “October Salmon” is typical of Hughes’s poetry. Its subject is animal life, particularly the completion of the life cycle, the ontological tilt towards death in a violent cosmic order. But there is also a relatively new note of affirmation in the poem, a willingness to be in place and gracefully to accept the fate of being alive:

After his two thousand miles, he rests,
Breathing in that lap of easy current
In his graveyard pool.

About six pounds in weight,
Four years old at most, and a bare winter at sea—
But already a veteran,
Already a death-patched hero. So quickly it’s over!

So briefly he roamed the gallery of marvels!

* * * * *

An autumnal pod of his flower,
The mere hull of his prime, shrunk at shoulder and flank,

With the sea-going Aurora Borealis of his April power—
The primrose and violet of that first upfling in the estuary—
Ripened to muddy dregs,
The river reclaiming his sea-metals.

In the October light
He hangs there, patched with leper-cloths

Death has already dressed him
In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations,
Mapping the completion of his service,
His face a ghoulish mask, a dinosaur of senility, and his whole body
A fungoid anemone of canker—

Can the caress of water ease him?

The elements of Hughes's poetics are all here: the inexplicable violence of nature as conceived from the modern perspective, the close observation joined with surreal and, I would say, enhancing metaphors (consider "the sea-going Aurora Borealis of his April power" and the beautiful image of the fish "patched with leper-cloths"), the rich inheritance of the British tradition in poetry ("The primrose and violet of that first upfling in the estuary" is a line of Shakespearean resonance as well as sheer loveliness of sound), even the touch of sentimentality. The subject of the poem, the remarkably intense and intended life cycle of the salmon, seems made for Hughes, carrying, as it does, a kind of modern morality in itself. And Hughes, not inclined here to elude the generalities that are pressing to be heard, deftly draws out what one might cautiously term the meaning of the experience:

Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg.
This chamber of horrors is also home.
He was probably hatched in this very pool.

* * * * *

All this, too, is stitched into the torn richness,
The epic poise
That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so
patient
In the machinery of heaven.

For Hughes, the scientific marvel, "the epic poise" of the salmon "loyal to his doom" maps out a stoic response for his own less poised and patient species more affirmative of the determined condition of mortal life than the hibernation model of earlier poems. And perhaps because of this, it does so in a language more at ease with circumstances, though recognizably English and Hughes's own. I consider "October Salmon" one of the most beautiful and beautifully realized poems written in English in the latter half of the century. I feel it marks Hughes as a major modern poet of our language, one who should command enduring interest on both sides of the Atlantic.

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