CULT-MAN IN PELLAM'S LAUNDE

Jeremy Hooker. *The Cut of the Light.* London: Enitharmon Press. 2006.

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Evil betide me if I do not open the door to know…
—David Jones

"Spirit of place is a great reality," D.H. Lawrence wrote in his landmark work of criticism *Studies in Classical American Literature*. In that work, Lawrence sets out to examine American literature in English as a product of the informing "spirit" of the North American continent. By way of contextualizing his theory, he compares the American spirit—equal parts self-conscious conqueror and self-loathing conquered, and filled with "dark suspense" and hatred of masters—to its European counterpart, imbued, as he saw it, with an almost selfless "flowing ease of humor." And of the spirit peculiar to non-Native America's immediate cultural predecessor, Lawrence waxes sympathetic, if not sentimental: "The Island of Great Britain had a wonderful terrestrial magnetism or polarity of its own, which made the British people. For the moment, this polarity seems to be breaking. Can England die? And what if England dies?"

Lawrence's near-Lethbridgean evaluation of Britain's terrain, his suggestion that its almost mystical qualities have shaped its inhabitants, and his concerns for the future of the land and its people, share an affinity with the poetry and poetics of Jeremy Hooker. Hooker's greening sense of wonder at the concept of "place" is firmly rooted in a mystical experience of autochthony, and his dedication to a spiritual British landscape is manifested in poetry that is by turns possessive of the hale steward's good-natured devotion to the land, and the brooding anxiety of the geomancer who has seen perhaps too far into the future by regarding the past too closely.

The Cut of the Light: *Poems 1965-2005*, is a wide-ranging collection of writing that Hooker has, on occasion, characterized as "poetry of place." It includes poems from an impressive bibliography of Hooker's works: *Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant* (Enitharmon, 1974); *Solent Shore* (Carcanet, 1978); *Englishman's Road* (Carcanet, 1980); *Itchen Water* (Winchester School of Art Press, 1982); *Master of the Leaping Figures* (Enitharmon, 1987); *Their Silence a Language* (Enitharmon, 1993); *Our Lady of Europe* (Enitharmon, 1997); *Adamah* (Enitharmon, 2002); and *Arnolds Wood* (Flarestack Publishing, 2005).

In addition, it includes poetry from two of Hooker's own collections: *The Elements* (Christopher Davies, 1969) and *Landscape of the Daylight Moon* (Enitharmon, 1978); two anthologies: Faber's 1969 *Poetry Introduction 1* and Susan Butler's very fine *Common Ground: Poets in a Welsh Landscape* (Poetry Wales Press, 1985); as well as one previously unpublished work, "Poems to Carol."

Written over a period of forty years, the poems are primarily concerned with two streams of historical consciousness, natural and anthropological, and reading them leaves one with the distinct impression that they are the fruit of a life spent loafing about the confluence of these streams drinking in the local spirit. It is perhaps fitting that one of the collection's earliest poems, "Landscape," begins with the lines "Inches away a beck slices the hill…I breathe over it, earthbound and aching." Perchance to drink? While it is often difficult to tell whether such imbibing was or is for the sake of sustenance or intoxication, one would do well when reading Hooker to keep in mind the real likelihood that sustenance and intoxication are one and the same. This stanza from "The Giant's Boast" is a good place to start:

> I have walked with ribcage naked,
> When the strong man dug his grave.
> I have contemplated the skeleton
> Under the flesh of all things,
> And I gave to the holy waters
> A natural potency.

Hooker's gloss on the poem's subject from his *Welsh Journal* is very helpful:

> My feeling for the Cerne Giant takes on a deeper significance as I learn of J.C. Powys's preoccupation with the figure; my sense of the earth is fortified. I have been stony ground; now my mind grows roots, which tap unconscious forces. I feel more resourceful, more powerful, as if I were drawing strength from a deeper level.

While the gloss seems to imply the workings of a passive involuntariness—a kind of osmotic absorption of a quickening of knowledge, power, and excitement—the language of the poem is much more assertive and active, perhaps because the "giant" is speaking. But it is Hooker who gives him voice; thus, it is Hooker who, through the act of making poetry, speaks the line "I gave to the holy waters / A natural potency." Wallace Stevens does something similar in his "Anecdote of the Jar," giving significance to a chosen landscape by framing it through his actions, but Hooker goes beyond Stevens's secular results to locate the *sacred* in the intersection of natural and human. This is the key to understanding much of his poetry and poetic philosophy.

The "natural potency" of the "holy waters" Hooker writes of in *The Giant's Boast* alludes not only to the cult of fertility folk magic long associated with the "chalk giant" of Cerne Abbas in Dorset (see Powys's *The Brazen Head* or *All or Nothing* for more on the subject—or give Dylan Thomas's "In the White Giant's Thigh" a read), but also to Hooker's enduring devotion to the inspirational "waters" flowing in the streams of Britain's historical consciousness. Though there are many manifestations of the spirit of Hooker's landscape (or for that matter of Powys's "genius loci"), the "chalk giant" is perhaps the most memorable. The naked, club-wielding "rude man" with the 30-foot phallus is an ideal representation of the intersection of the natural and human worlds. Someone, some human—whether Celt, Roman, Dane or Berber (as Powys might have it)—scraped earth away from Dorset's chalk bedrock to reveal the shape of the god to which Hooker pays tribute.

Though it is clear that *Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant* (1974) owe much to Powys, they are equally indebted to David Jones, especially in the notion that the natural potency of the world is made especially "sacred" when it is framed by human labor and imbued with the significance of human intervention. Jones's understanding of transubstantiation in the Roman Catholic sense was that it is a physical manifestation of the sacred intersection of the natural and the human resulting in God revealed. As Jones saw it, the "natural" (wheat and grapes) is given function, significance, and "form" (bread and wine) only when it is processed by human hands. And only bread and wine (not wheat and grapes), for that matter, can become the body and blood of Christ when they pass through the hands of the priest, whom Jones saw as a kind of "maker," "seer," or poet in his own right.

While Hooker is undoubtedly aware of the notion of poet as maker, seer, or even priest (who after all "share[s] the same dugout" with the other two, as Jones proffers winking), there is something in his poetry that is more suspicious than certain—at least as it applies to himself—of the privilege the profession was supposed by Jones and Powys to carry. Much of *Solent Shore* (1978), for instance, seems to descend from the sentiments expressed in "By Southampton Water" which Hooker concludes with palpable uncertainty about his abilities to see or reveal anything of importance in or of the waters before him when he writes "At night, crossing to Hythe, / The water squirms with ideograms. / I could spare a life trying to decipher them." 1980's *Englishman's Road* continues with this theme in lines like these from his poem for a Welsh river, "Beidog":

> I am not of you, tongue
> through whom Taliesin descends the ages
> gifted with praise, who know
> that praise turns dust to light.
> In my tongue,
> of all arts
> this is the most difficult.

Such lines and the feared shortcomings of which they speak only serve to endear Hooker to his reader—he is such a master at processing thought into poetry that his apprehension about failing at his art can only be read in terms of its success as writing.

Such modesty forms a tidy intersection with Hooker's tendency towards privileging place—in so doing, Hooker seems determined to drive his poetry in the opposite direction of what he himself has called "savage egotism," or poetry concerned only with the self. This tendency is made perfectly clear in many of the poems found in *Master of the Leaping Figures*, especially in the "Itchen Water" sequence that begins with the following revelatory epigraph, in which the self is eradicated by the very things from which the culture of the place is made:

> *When I stand dully*
> *slopping at the dam*
> *of self and the river*
> *dashes it away,*
> *may I give back*
> *of all the river gives*
> *one ripple or one wave,*
> *one chalk-grey grain,*
> *or in a word alive*
> *with light, one drop*
> *in which its nature shines.*

A kind of Fisher King, or Christ-Arthur figure, seems to emerge from this self-immolation. The figure serves a two-fold purpose: first, it sacrifices its own self-interest to sustain the land; and second, it serves as an example to the maker who not only seeks Christ-Arthur, but seeks to emulate him. In the Arthurian tradition (and as David Jones reminds us in "The Sleeping Lord") the king and the land are one, and if the land is ailing so then is the king, and only by healing or resurrecting the king can the land be made whole again. Can England die? Apparently so, Hooker seems to imply, but it can also be resuscitated by the persistent efforts of the poet/cult-man who, to use Thomas Dilworth's image, "fights guerilla warfare against utility" even as its technological civilization threatens sacramental culture.

Hooker suggests in much of *Their Silence a Language* that the cult-man who awakens "the sleeping lord" awakens also himself. This notion is quite clear in the prose epilogue to "So the Old Snake Sheds Its Skin":

> A sleeping painter and a sleeping sculptor come awake in my senses there. /
> When I come back the smell of the sea is on my hands.

Powys suggested that the pleasure one takes in nature should be of a sensual kind. That one should enjoy the natural landscape in and with every sense—that one should go so far as "to make love to it." Much of Hooker's *Our Lady of Europe* centers on this notion by transubstantiating the landscape and giving it a face, a figure, and a following. Drawing largely from David Jones's figure of the Queen of the Woods (see Jere Odell's review of "Our Lady of Europe" in *NDR* #6 for more on this connection), Hooker's lady rises phoenix-like from the wasted landscape of "Verdun" where she "stands on rubble / under pines, on blasted, / cratered ground" as though awaiting the author of "The Stones of Brittany" to appreciate her "war-shaped curves" and answer the question "Is she, then, the Goddess of Love?" In "The Mother of Laussel" the question is answered suggestively:

> Examine the deep breasts,
> the bulging thighs,
> the curve of her belly.
> With her free hand
> she points down, between her legs.
>
> She stands at the cave-mouth
> and is herself the cave.
> This is the birthplace
> of the rock rose and the sabre-tooth.
>
> You will recognise her
> by a touch, when, for the last time,
> you kiss the cold brow-bone
> of the woman who bore you.

Hooker suggests that the union of the "lady" and her "maker" results in the conception of "knowing" that transcends a simple, mundane respect for nature and enters a sacred union with it. He reinforces this idea in the final poems of *Our Lady of Europe,* which he dedicates respectively to Waldo Williams, the Welsh-language poet, and to David Jones.

"What is knowing?" Williams wrote in "What is a Man?" and answered in the same poem, "one root to all branches." Hence, when Hooker completes *Our Lady of Europe* with his dedication to Jones in the poem "'That Trees Are Men Walking,'" the reference is clear: the blind man made whole in Mark 8:24 (the biblical passage that inspired the title of this poem) sees "knowing" for what it is—the root unsevered and feeding every branch. Hooker is not so optimistic about the future of knowing in the present, particularly when he writes to Jones that "the trees / are being torn up from the ground, / silt builds up in the rivers of the world… / pray for us Dafydd. / David the Waterman, / pray for us."

The loss of knowing is further lamented in 2003's *Adamah*, but Hooker holds out an ember of hope in "Walking to Sleep" which he has dedicated to his mother. Here, he asks

> Shall I lend you my senses
> to know once more the finds
> that every day delighted you
> and bound you to the world?

Appearing just previous to the final section of *The Cut of the Light*, *Adamah* takes on cemeteric significance. It finishes with no less than eight elegiac poems dedicated, one assumes, to a clutch of individuals who have, against daunting odds, kept the flame of knowing bright for Hooker: mother, father, brother, dreaming women, and poet after poet. These give way to *Arnolds Wood*, the long poem Hooker wrote for and dedicated to Les Arnold ("*poet and teacher*") who died in 1992 at the age of 49. In spite of its funeral subject, the poem begins with the optimistic line

> 'Hopeful young trees,' we said,
> as we planted them,
> colleagues and friends,
> digging down through matted grass.

More a conversation with a dead friend Hooker continues to find in the present than it is a traditional elegy, *Arnolds Wood* is a reprise of the many important themes found elsewhere in this collection. The lack of a possessive apostrophe in "Arnolds" implies a coexistence of the "two" Les Arnolds—the past and the present—taking root in the moment that is the word, and feeding the branch's "wood" that is the poem, that is the knowing. Hooker writes perhaps to us as well as to the Arnolds

> What I want to make for us
> is a place in words
> which we might share.

The Cut of the Light is such a place. Expect the miraculous should you enter it; after all, Jeremy Hooker knows a thing or two about places.