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"The Great Irish Pike:"

Ted Hughes and the Art of Poetry

Many poets regard an interview with the New York-based magazine *The Paris Review* as seal of approval, not just on a successful novel or collection or two but on a whole career of literary achievement. The text agreed, after a notably collaborative series of exchanges of drafts between interviewer and subject, takes its place in an august and evolving series of statements on a larger theme. The title of the series is simply, grandly: "The Art of Poetry." But few take the opportunity to reflect as richly as Ted Hughes did, in the conversation with Drue Heinz that became "The Art of Poetry" No. 71, published in Spring 1995, on the relationship of writing to a sister art. In *Poetry in the Making* (1967), he had looked back from his thirties and reported that: "I can remember very vividly the excitement with which I used to sit staring at my drawings, and it is a similar thing I feel nowadays with poems" (Hughes 1967, 16). Now that word processors had made possible a very different and less directly physical kind of relationship with the production of text, Hughes felt it was time to assert the virtues of penmanship in particular. In doing so, he was asserting much more than its integrity: he was also associating writing with properly arduous creation, distancing himself from the deplorable facile fluency the new technology encouraged, and asserting a Wordsworthian continuity of endeavour between mature composition and its origins in childhood. With word processors:

> There's always a bit too much there, and it's too thin. Whereas when writing by hand you meet the terrible resistance of what happened your first year at it when you couldn't write at all... when you were making attempts, pretending to form letters. These ancient feelings are there, wanting to be expressed. When you sit with your pen, every year of your life is right there, wired into the communication between your brain and your writing hand.

Pressing deeper as he explored this felt resistance, Hughes went on:

> Maybe the crucial element in handwriting is that the hand is simultaneously drawing. I know I'm very conscious of hidden imagery in handwriting – a subtext of a rudimentary picture language. Perhaps that tends to enforce more cooperation from the other side of the brain. (Heinz 1995, 65-66)

This essay sets out to celebrate a particular, indeed a unique, instance of that cooperation: a poem by Hughes published in 1982 in his handwriting in a limited edition suite of lithographs, accompanied by five images of its subject "The Great Irish Pike." “Not seen” by Keith Sagar and Stephen Tabor when they compiled the second edition of their bibliography of Hughes' work to 1995 (Sagar and Tabor 1998, A81), this work is much more than a curiosity: it merits inclusion in an issue of this journal devoted to literary illustration because of the distinctive position it occupies in Hughes' long experience of the other kind of cooperation, not just from the other side of the brain but from other individuals and artists working with graphic media and photography.

Much the best known of these collaborations was Hughes' periodic engagement and lifelong affinity with the American sculptor and artist Leonard Baskin. They had met at Smith College, Massachusetts in 1958, during the year that Sylvia Plath spent...
teaching at her alma mater. Baskin lectured in Art History; Plath's journal records her intention of attending a lecture he gave on Rodin in April, and after meeting him and his first wife Esther in early May she and Hughes saw at the house of another professor his extraordinary woodcut "The Hanging Man," before visiting his studio one Sunday in July (Plath 2000, 347; 371; 379; 406-408). At that meeting Baskin told Hughes how much he admired "Pike," which Hughes had recently written, but not yet published, and that he wanted to do a woodcut of it; in the event, though Baskin's Gehenna Press did print a woodcut, it was after an exchange of letters in which the two men explored, with the help of a sketch Hughes supplied, the difficulty of rendering the pike's head in an appropriately vital and violent state, that corresponded with the poem's meaning rather than reducing the subject to the appearance of "a pike's head under a fishmonger's slab among cod's [sic] heads and herring heads, abstracted of all but a sheepish surface," as one early proposal Baskin sent him suggested. Hughes confessed that "My other efforts" – presumably, drawings rather than lines of verse –"were over-sensationally vicious – I've seen too many fantastically gaping pike on fishing-tackle advertisements." He suggested that "[m]aybe something like a skull, or even just a jawbone, would be most subtly explosive – illumine the undermeaning of the poem a bit and not over define the real pike in it" (TH to Leonard Baskin, January 1959, in Hughes 2007, 135). And when the woodcut was done, it turned out not to be Baskin's work at all; instead, Robert Birmelin undertook the work at Baskin's request, producing three etchings and then a woodcut from a sketch he had from the pike displayed in the Peabody Museum of Natural History at Yale, and it was Birmelin's woodcut that was the earliest item in the 125 included in the catalogue that Mark Haworth-Booth produced for an exhibition of illustrations of Hughes' work at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1979. Nevertheless, the subtlety of Hughes' own early thoughts about the work that an illustration might do in "illumining undermeaning of the poem" rather than "over defining the real pike in it" – in 1992, he would tell Clive Wilmer that he had, in an early draft, intended them to have the aestheticised status of Blakean murals, before they became, finally, "the real South Yorkshire pike" he had caught as a teenager (Wilmer 1994, 147) – helped

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1 Robert Birmelin to Mark Wormald, email from June 2, 2013; Haworth-Booth (1979). I am grateful to Keith Sagar for drawing my attention to the catalogue and for images of the illustrations, and to Robert Birmelin for his permission to reproduce the image of his woodcut here.
confirm Baskin's interest in the poet. For his part, Hughes was sufficiently moved by the seriousness of Baskin's response to suggest to his editor at Faber and Faber, Charles Monteith, in August 1959, that his next collection, *Lupercal*, and the volume in which "Pike" and "Hawk Roosting" would appear, would justify what he acknowledged would be a clear departure from the publishers' distinctive house style and design format to accommodate a motif, either on title page or cover, by Baskin himself. "I'm not sure that he's known at all in England, but over here he's generally considered about the finest engraver: you will see from the proof how beautiful and intense and delicate his work is" (Hughes 2007, 146). The request for Faber to consider – and, for the moment, decline – was prompted not just by Hughes' conviction that "Baskin is an extraordinary artist" but by an early statement of what he could describe in 1983 as an affinity: "he is so perfectly tasteful and experienced in these matters, and [...] I feel something in the inner nature of his work is so kin to the inner nature of my own (quality apart)" (Hughes 2007, 147). Hughes's long essay "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly" (1984), an introduction to Baskin's collected prints which was itself collected in *Winter Pollen* (1994), represents the fullest statement of their affinity.

Though it would not be until Faber decided to commission Baskin to undertake twelve illustrations of *Crow* for a special edition of Hughes' most visceral collection in 1973 that the two men's work would appear in visual dialogue in print, the 1960s and 1970s contained much evidence of the sophistication and mutuality of their relationship. In 1962 Hughes wrote an introduction to an earlier book of Baskin's prints; in 1965, it was a letter of Baskin's that exploded into the mythic and anthropological richness of the character of a crow that, by Hughes' own later account, stimulated the poet to the two or three years of thinking that would eventually produce the poems in *Crow* that Baskin illustrated. By then, Baskin had given a lecture at Yale in 1967 which he had begun by quoting Massey on "the wondrous, mystic art [...] /Of painting speech, and speaking to the eyes," and ended by reverting to the same poet's hope:

That we by tracing magic lines are taught
How to embody, and to colour thought. (Baskin 1967, 9; 27)

But the lecture itself makes the orientation of Baskin's sympathy plain enough. From his observation about the highlights of Yale's newly opened great collection of graphic arts, which he defined as "printed books, with or without pictures," whose visual beauty merits their retention "regardless of their textual matter. I do not include manuscripts because I know very little about them," to the remark that "[t]he glory of [Vesalius's] *Fabrica* (1543) is its illustrations. I doubt if anyone bought it for the text," there are signs of a defence of his own medium in tough defiance, where he felt it necessary, of assumptions as to the primary value of words; the really magic lines are those of the draftsman rather than the poet, whose text remains thin without the vivid embodiment and coloration of the illustrator's designed hues (Baskin 1967, 9; 16).

And when it came to working with Hughes, this attitude helps explain the real tensions that developed between exponents of arts that sometimes resisted each other. Baskin and his second wife Lisa moved to Devon in 1974, to be close to Hughes, and for the next decade spent all but the summer months at Lurley Manor near Tiverton. But their collaborations remained as taut, at times as viscerally racked, as the ten images of birds which Baskin produced for *Cave Birds* and the poems, and the narrative arc of testing, dismemberment, death and resurrection, which Hughes devised in re-
response, and showed him, as he recalled in a 1983 conversation with Baskin recorded by Noel Chanan, when he "came back from the summer" (Chanan 2009). That narrative schema prompted Baskin to produce more images, Hughes to respond with yet more poems, in which he moved away from a framework he now thought unnecessarily tight and overly demanding, and Baskin finally to illustrate these second poems. As Elizabeth Bergmann Loiseaux and Carrie Smith have both recently argued, 'Illustration' becomes an inadequate and often an inaccurate word for the energies generated and the complex dialogues sustained between a poet responding to image through ekphrasis and an originating artist illustrating responses to his first images (Bergmann Loiseaux 2004; Smith 2013).

At times Hughes expressed frustration with aspects of this close and inevitably competitive friendship, and though they sound superficial, these complaints actually expose one area of Hughes' life into which Baskin had already proved himself unable or unwilling to follow. When Hughes recalled that he had "come back from the summer" with those first poems, what he actually meant was that he as well as Baskin had been away, but on very different business. While Baskin was at home in his studio in Maine, Hughes, a serious and indeed at times in his own word "obsessive" fisherman, had engaged in what his son Nicholas would come to refer to as "the summer campaign" – extended fishing trips, throughout the 1970s, to Ireland, in the company of the major Irish expressionist artist and fanatical fisherman Barrie Cooke, whom Hughes had also known since the late 1950s. In 1975, Hughes shared with Keith Sagar the details of a project which he suspected might be beyond Baskin, and indeed other readers and interpreters. His four-part poem about a luminous predatory deep-sea fish, the text first published as "Chiasmodon" in a limited-edition pamphlet, but included in *Moortown* (1979) as "Photostomias," was conceived "to go with some spectacular coloured photographs" but had then been "rejected as incomprehensible" (Sagar 2012, 46) by Realties [sic], the group who had commissioned it. Hughes remarked, with a wry defiance: "It seems to me only slightly cryptic" (ibid.). He had since given the photographs away, and was now asking Sagar, himself a tropical fish-keeper but no fisherman

where I can find pictures as good as those I've parted with, to show Leonard what I want. He has an absolute block about fish (if somebody eats fish in a restaurant within three or four yards of him he has to go out). (Sagar 2012, 46-47)

The drawings Baskin had done were, Hughes told Sagar, intensely fantastical – "not quite what I was writing about" (Sagar 2012, 47). Sagar, he hoped, might have the specialist knowledge or contacts required.

Baskin and Hughes continued to work together, and to reflect on and extend their affinity. In 1981, following a visit to Maine and thence into the autumnal North Woods, Hughes's poems for the Baskins' daughter Lucretia about the fauna of that wilderness appeared with Baskin's rich watercolours as *Under the North Star*. But even here Baskin needed help when it came to fish. This time Hughes could provide it himself. His poem "The Muskelunge," about the largest member of the pike genus, and a native of North American lakes and river systems, turns, as his pike poems had done, on its deep instinctive predatoriness: Muskelunge's job in the lake is "As jaws / For the hunger of sunk bedrock," and after the fall of the Heavens "Rescued all the gods in one bag / And swallowed it" (Hughes 2005, 115). Here, a contact made on a recent spring trip to Ireland came to Hughes and Baskin's aid, though it has never been

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2 Barrie Cooke, in conversation with Mark Wormald, 21 May 2013.
acknowledged. Hughes, Nicholas and Cooke were fishing in County Mayo; their quarry was pike. But it was March, a month during the coarse fishing close season in England but not in Ireland, when Hughes and Nicholas called on the eminent angler and fishing writer Fred Buller at his fishing cottage. Keen to protect the spawning season, Buller declined to share details of his favourite pike haunts, and the meeting was cool; but Hughes and Buller met and laughed the encounter off at a subsequent dinner in London. Hughes bought the paperback edition of Buller's *Pike* in 1979 and gave Buller permission to include "Pike" in the latter's *Freshwater Fishing*, co-authored with Hugh Falkus. It was evidently the photograph of the great Dowdeswell pike which Buller had used in *Pike* that inspired Baskin's illustration of 'The Muskellunge,' which looms at just the same angle, with just the same square jaw; only an extra tooth distinguishes photograph from painting.

Hughes' own continuing conviction that visual and graphic art could enrich and extend as well as constrain meaning, and impose the discipline of constraint on his poetic imagination, led him to embark on at least four other major creative partnerships and collaborations in the 1970s and 1980s. These worked best when they met his demands for similarly local or expert knowledge. Two, like *Cave Birds*, continued to worry him, and he continued to worry about them for years after their publication. The photographer Fay Godwin's fine and fine-grained essay in black and white photojournalism about his native Calder Valley for the *Observer* in 1975 prompted him to mine autobiographical childhood memories, perhaps for the first time, in the poems he wrote about fishing as a young boy on the Rochdale canal, before moving beyond personal experiences for a geographical mood music he came to find less satisfactory in the poems that became *Remains of Elmet* (1979). Godwin would remember Hughes' plea that the poems be set in a larger font than was eventually chosen, lest they be "swamped by the photographs" (Gifford 2001, 117). In the early stages of another, ultimately less successful collaboration, Hughes warned the photographer Peter Keen, also a fishing friend, who had suggested a book of poems and pictures inspired by

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3 Fred Buller, letter to Mark Wormald, 28 May 2013.
4 I am grateful to Dave Hatwell, angling historian and Fred Buller's archivist, for bringing this to my attention during a meeting on 21 June 2013.
rivers, that he was "bedeviled by a moral need to supply evidence, in writing, of what I'm writing about – a concrete presentation of the setting + characters involved." Hughes' frustration with this project, as it became the lavishly produced and expensive volume *River* (1983), grew as the claims made on a purchaser's attention by the photographs, and the photographer's choice of image and captions, phrased in some cases to acknowledge the contribution of the volume's sponsor, British Gas, threatened to relegate his own verse to merely ancillary text. Hughes' poem about sea trout, "Strangers," illustrated with a wonderful picture of a shoal of fish hanging as apparently weightlessly as the poem demands below reflections on the surface of a pool, and "Salmon Eggs," in which Keen's photograph of a haw against a watery background provides a luminous visual rhyme for the subject, are rare exceptions. In July 1983 Hughes told Keith Sagar: "I've made some bad mistakes, grafting myself onto others" (Sagar 2012, 126), and in his decision to publish significantly revised texts of *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River* in 1993, with no accompanying illustrations or source pictures, under the simple but emphatically literary title *Three Books*, we can read another note of protest, an assertion of the poetry's integrity and self-sufficiency.

Hughes' other two major collaborations with artists were, in different ways, less complicated. Ann Skea has written about the most extensive and readily available of these relationships, with the Bideford artist and gallery owner Reg Lloyd (Skea 2012). United by a common memory from their childhoods of living over shops, and listening to the shop bell ringing with the arrival of another customer, Lloyd and Hughes began working together when Lloyd requested that the latter provide him with poems for which he could supply images in an exhibition of silkscreen prints at his gallery in 1970. These images were, in the words of Lloyd's catalogue, "not illustrations of the poetry but, rather, extensions of the mood evoked by the words – a partnership of word and image." Thereafter, the two men worked on books of verse for children, in which Hughes would sometimes set an agenda for likely subjects and Lloyd would work to produce woodcuts, with Hughes then writing a poem to match: *The Cat and the Cuckoo* was published by the two men's own imprint, launched for the purpose, The Sunstone Press. Their best-known collaboration was *What is the Truth?*, a fable for children, in which Lloyd's rich and extensive woodcuts, commissioned by Faber, really did follow and illustrate Hughes' narrative and the embedded poems about animals and their relationship to the rural community who knew them best. Skea regrets the fact that both Hughes' frame narrative and Lloyd's illustrations did not survive the poems' migration to the *Collected Poems for Children* (2005), which is illustrated instead by Raymond Briggs.

But perhaps the most concentrated and easiest of Hughes' collaborations with an artist has been hitherto the least known. In the remainder of this essay I want to celebrate that collaboration, the friendship that made it possible and its extraordinary fruit.

Barrie Cooke, Ireland's leading expressionist artist, was born in Britain in 1931, but moved with his family to Bermuda in his teens, then studied Biology and Art History at Harvard, where one of his professors was Jack Sweeney. Sweeney was also Director of the Woodberry Poetry Room, and it was in that capacity that he got to know Hughes when the young poet came to read at Harvard on the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957. Recognizing that Hughes and Cooke shared an intense

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6 Keen papers, British Library Add Ms 88614, TH letter of 12 July 1976. I am grateful to the Literary Estate of Ted Hughes for permission to quote from this letter. For a fuller account of Hughes' friendship with Keen and the story of *River*, see Wormald (2013).
passion for the animal world, Sweeney put the two men in touch with each other, and during a visit to London Cooke went to London Zoo with Hughes and Plath. But it was in Ireland, to which Cooke had moved in 1954 for the fishing – he had driven west to County Clare on the recommendation of the zoologist and author of *Angler’s Entomology* J.R. Harris, also a director of Dublin’s leading fishing tackle shop, equipped with a map Harris had annotated, a blanket and a fishing rod strapped to the frame of his motorbike – where their friendship deepened. After calling in on the Sweeneys in Dublin en route to the poet Richard Murphy’s cottage in Cleggan with Sylvia in September 1962, Hughes shocked Murphy by leaving overnight and driving south alone to fish with Cooke; Cooke visited Hughes, Assia Wevill and the children when they were living at Cleggan in 1966. It was at Cleggan that Hughes had successfully contrived to “arouse any dormant passion” for fishing in his son Nicholas (Letter to Gerald Hughes, April 1966, in Hughes (2007, 255)). Thereafter, the two men developed what became an annual rhythm of fishing together, often with Nicholas: for trout, on the great limestone loughs of the West and North in mayfly season; and for pike, regularly from 1973 in the limestone Lough Gur in County Limerick, which had the twin advantages of being lightly if ever fished and of being shallow enough to allow for year-round pike fishing. In other notable pike loughs, such as Corrib, Mask, and Derg, trophy pike sought the refuge of some very deep holes during the winter months, and in Derg and other loughs of the Shannon system were hunted and often killed by visiting continental and particularly German anglers, their skulls being displayed as trophies on their cruisers.

Hughes’ remarkable and detailed fishing diaries, which he began keeping in earnest in 1979 and which were acquired by the British Library in 2010, provide rich and sometimes poetic evidence of the extent and intensity of these Irish trips. Hughes regarded his experiences during his time with Cooke and Nicholas as source material for his writing, as well as refreshing and recharging in their own right, and the diaries are vivid, detailed and full of urgent injunctions to himself: “Remember.” As such, they confirm and qualify what an interview Cooke gave to Dorothy Cross in a catalogue of a major retrospective exhibition of his work at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2011 had brought to public light for the first time: that though Cooke’s other great artistic friendship and collaboration of his career, with the Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, contained many more obvious opportunities for discussion of their sister arts, “Ted was a fisherman,” and the pursuit of their quarry became a consuming, concentrated passion. A distorted, sharpened set of ethics was required. As Cooke recalls: “We lied and lied” about the quality of the pike fishing they found, both to the farmer from whose land they launched their boats and to others, lest their secret hot spot be spoiled by the over-fishing that would result (Cross 2011, 94).

But Hughes did find time, in these expeditions, to do important poetic and graphic work, in March 1981 recording that, while staying at Cooke’s house in Thomastown, County Kilkenny, he had finished his own pen and ink illustrations for one of the three “River poems” that Nicholas would print as broadsides (“Catadrome,” about the eel, and “Visitation,” about the otter, were the other two) on the Hughes’ own printing press at Court Green; the proceeds of these fine printings would, Hughes noted, help to fund Nicholas’s own part in these fishing expeditions. He also paid close, indeed
very close, attention to Cooke's art. In 1980, inspired in part by Fred Buller's own *Domesday Book of Mammoth Pike*, Cooke produced a fine and beautiful life-size painting, in intense deep green and with gold leaf, and "with relics" of vintage fishing reels in a wooden frame beneath the painting, of "The Lough Derg Pike," a famous leviathan caught in the late 19th century; he then drew Buller's attention to this work, a monochrome illustration of which appeared, with a transcript of Cooke's letter, in *Buller's Pike and the Pike Angler* in 1981 (Buller 1981, 91-92). Hughes slept in Cooke's studio during at least one visit, and commented, perfectly accurately, that the fish, despite being a brilliant evocation of the fish, was missing a pelvic fin. Cooke told Cross: "Ted was only interested in how much it looked like something." Cooke, true to his own vision, supported as it was by, and refined in, "a whole sketchbook full of drawings of pike [...], hundreds of them" – the fish evidently providing Cooke the artistic stimulus Baskin found in birds – left the picture as it was (Cross 2011, 94).

Meanwhile, from about 1980, both poet and artist began to approach the ecological and fishing disaster of water pollution in their art. Cooke's pictures of Lough Arrow's blue green algae retain a vivid beauty; Hughes' "1984 on the Tarka Trail" employs an angrier polemic. And Cooke's versions of Sheela-na-Gigs, bas-relief tributes to the primitive images of female genitalia and splayed legs found squatting in the walls of medieval Irish churches, informed Hughes' poem "Salmon Eggs," as he told Ben Sonnenberg in 1981, and the way he viewed the fecund 'cleft' of his local north Devon valleys and coombs (Hughes 2007, 445; Wormald 2013, 126). Hughes went on to dedicate his fine poem about Mayflies and trout on Lough Ree, "Saint's Island," to Barrie Cooke, and Seamus Heaney and John Montague also dedicated poems to him, similarly recognizing the total commitment, not just to his own painting but to literary culture, that Cooke demonstrated in helping to organize the Kilkenny Writers' Week over a period of many years. For his part, Cooke has painted and drawn portraits of both Heaney and Hughes, and in 2012 he showed me a tender abstract portrait of Hughes and Nicholas; his portrait of Hughes hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery.

But it was only once that Hughes and Cooke worked together, and intensively. A number of factors conspired to bring them together. They were gripped, perhaps, by the same earthy worship of the Goddess that had inspired Sheela-na-gigs and "Salmon Eggs;" and there was a financial incentive. Aware that *River's* production costs were eating deep into any profit he was likely to make from that, both men were also keen to produce a fine-press edition that would make them both some money, and in a format over which they could themselves exert uncompromised control. Their first idea was to work together on an erotic subject; but when the press they had in mind, in Australia, pre-empted any development of that project by reporting that any subject would do except the erotic, Cooke and Hughes fell back on what they knew best: a project called "The Great Irish Pike," because "[t]he pike was the obvious thing to do" (Cross 2011, 94). In April 1982, during a visit Cooke paid to Devon, and after a preparatory telephone call from Hughes, they arrived on the quayside at the village of Appledore on the Torridge estuary to work with David Tomlin, who owned and ran the Appledore Press from his home and studio on Meeting Street. Tomlin was waiting for them to arrive: the back of their car was, he told me, "full of fly rods."

My conversation with David Tomlin in April 2013, 31 years after the week Hughes and Cooke spent working in Appledore, yielded some revealingly vivid insights into the process of committing the 37 line poem and five accompanying images of *Esox Lucius* to the large sheets of hand-made "crispbrook" Barham Green paper,
each 70 cm wide by 80 cm long, used for the limited edition of twenty-five suites of these six lithographs. One of their most distinctive features is the fact that each includes text of a finished poem in Hughes’ own hand – uniquely among his publications, in fact. Poet and artist both worked directly on grained zinc sheets which Tomlin had prepared. Hughes would later tell Heinz that he needed “[j]ust a pen,” but here another tool was necessary (Heinz 1995, 5). Tomlin, mindful of the size of Hughes’ “farmer’s hands,” which made the standard lithographer’s pencils difficult for him to master, supplied him with large chinagraph crayons of the kind more commonly used by glass fitters. The grained zinc has a surface similar to fine sandpaper, which, when sensitized with a solution of alum and nitric acid, holds the crayon’s grease or drawing ink and gives the image a distinctive texture. It is hard to imagine a closer fit between this process of applying writing to plate and Hughes’ later description, in the Paris Review interview, of the child forming letters. His writing, overcoming that early resistance, becomes again the rudimentary picture language of the boy.

Cooke’s beguilingly simple account, in his interview with Dorothy Cross, of the way the two men worked, nevertheless confirms this dialogue and overlap between a poet’s unit of sense, the artist’s, and the other kind of lines both cast as fishermen: “I would do a drawing and he would do a line. And then he would do four lines and I would do a drawing” (Cross 2011, 94). Both were crossing a line, both intimately receptive to the experience they had shared and what they had not. One image, of one mature pike cross-wise in the jaws of another, seems like a slant T-junction that knowingly resists the reference in Hughes’ already famous poem “Pike” to one six-pounder “jammed past its gills down the other’s gullet” (Hughes 2003, 84). Another fish presents a dappled visual puzzle in a cross-hatching of light weeds, while a third lurks in dense and, for the angler, promising darkness, what Hughes would call in another great fishing poem, “Gloom-rich water.”

The poem itself revisits the legends of pike, their deep prehistoric and even pagan predatoriness that, in a Catholic country where islands on loughs are sites of pilgrimage, has earned its condemnation by “The Virgin;” it fishily rewrites the scenes of trial and transforming punishment that Cave-Birds had staged (“Nursery trout bore witness in falsetto”) but this time without redemption, if with a nod to the effects that Cooke could not, with his own crayon, achieve:

The water-colourist of human progress
Is painting the ponds afresh,
The rivers and the loughs, without him. (Hughes 2003, 627)

And it ends with a vision of the pike’s likeliest fate, snatched from a defiantly monastic ‘cell’ not for the angler’s forgiving landing net – a fourth of Cooke’s images catches that full deep bulge, but promises an unhooking, a release – but for the German’s trophy skull, strung “with twelve others,/ Along the gunnel of a Shannon cruiser or nailed on a plaque,/ Over the resurrection of Valhalla.”

Cooke has supplied a frame and a shadow for the text of Hughes’ poem, whose own 37 lines make up the first of the six lithographs. But “The Great Irish Pike” re-

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9 Though the Scolar Press did include facsimiles of Hughes’ handwriting in its 1975 edition of Cave Birds, and in the limited edition of “The Interrogator: An Early Vultures” which the Scolar Press produced to accompany a performance of Cave Birds at the Ilkley Literature Festival for 1975, these were always announced as images of early drafts selected from the poet’s working papers. See Sagar and Tabor (1998, A45, A46).
mains a work which, like the friendship that produced it, resists merely linear reading. Tomlin remembers how entirely relaxed the two men were during their week in his studio, how immediately and calmly Hughes made his choices of lines, from the body of the poem, to accompany Cooke's poems, and how surely he positioned them. Both men were "incredibly easy" to work with, Tomlin told me, because they trusted in each other's abilities and were happy to leave the choice of ink colour to the printer while they went off to fish: "The hardest artists to work with are those who think they have a little bit more talent than they have."

These images instead present their own encircling series of individual dialogues between artist's lines and poet's; in harmonious tension. The most menacing is also the most curious solution to that problem which had long preoccupied Hughes and Baskin, of how to render a pike's head. Cooke's dominates, threatens, teeth in an upper jaw threatening us as our eyes dip to read: "He fell asleep in Job. / He awoke in the book of Vermin." Tomlin's memory of the moment when, returning from fishing to view the first artist's proofs, Hughes paused and inspected this image, adds added bite to the image. "But the pike has teeth on its lower jaw, hasn't it?" He is right, of course, characteristically precise in his observation, but Cooke's pike's head captures more than any fish-monger's slab can: the sheer visionary essence of a predator that rewrites both scripture, and poetic vision. As such, it really does do what Hughes had been seeking since 1959: a "subtly explosive" combination of skull and jawbone, it serves to "illumine the undermeaning of the poem a bit and not over define the real pike in it."

12 Image reproduced with permission of Barrie Cooke; Ted Hughes' lines reproduced with permission of the Estate of Ted Hughes.
Works Cited


