

**Jeremy Hooker and Lee Grandjean: *Their Silence*  
A Language. Enitharmon. 1993. pb. £8.95.**

Open Field

In an afterword to this collection, Hooker talks of his working over a ‘ground’. His intention - here, and by implication in his work as a whole - is to “*explore my interest ... in the richness and depth of the ground, and in exploring its many ramifications, in making many and varied ‘openings’ - a metaphor based on the multiple, visible and hidden patternings of a real forest*”.

This idea derives from the ‘open field’ theories of writers like Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams. The poet so thoroughly inhabits the peculiarities of a landscape - its history, geology and politics - that he or she can then express it as a function of self.

In Britain, Allen Fisher has carried out this programme in his long poem ‘Place’, taking south London as his subject matter, a project whose determination and hard worn erudition is not perhaps carried through to its surface. Seriousness of purpose leads to a curious dryness, an aridity of tone. Source material feeds on itself, to become its own justification. It is interesting to compare the work of Iain Sinclair who takes as his ground the East End of London - and shares the same obsessive attention to detail - but then transcends his sources to create a rich occult stew which in turn acts as a metaphor for a society prey to malign forces, poisoned wells of history which infect the present age.

The major charge laid against Hooker is that his work is curiously closed off and partial, politically inert. An early poem like ‘Elegy for the Labouring Poor’ locates exploitation and class dissent safely in the past. The anger is thus anaesthetised, and abandons itself to resignation.

*“Others will meet this isolation.  
They will inherit the emptiness”*

This from a poet first influenced by the Beats, whose early intention was to write a ‘Howl’ for this country.

In his critical collection, ‘The Poetry of Place’, Hooker sets up a dichotomy between the Solent shore of his childhood, “the area of England encircled by the chalk and the coastal water”, and rural Wales. Here is a place where he forever discovered himself a stranger, despite long residence there. The radio play ‘Englishman’s Road’ fictionalises this, and places it - safely - in the past; the English invader is driven out, fails to colonise the landscape. It is as if Seamus Heaney had written ‘North’ from the viewpoint of Sir Walter Raleigh, this is a poem of Empire, and one in retreat.

*“And here these English words play on a surface through which  
they cannot shine, to illuminate its heart”*

As with Heaney, conquest - more properly, its failure - is expressed through language.

Hooker returns, in exile, to the ground of his childhood. ‘Solent Shore’ is in my

eyes a masterpiece, and his closest approach yet to properly opening up a ground. The structure is drawn from the place itself, the Solent's double tide and its ebb. History becomes something which proceeds, not just a record of past failures, our continual stream/to the land of gold".

Yet even here, emotion is centred in the past, in a childhood of Wordsworthian epiphanies. The poet's evocations of natural beauty can include - unlike Wordsworth's - modern industry and pollution; indeed in that book's most stunning achievement, they can feed back to infect our ideas of natural beauty, and to enter the eternal;

*"It might be almost any time,  
As one slow hulk of cloud  
Lags to the west, mirrored  
Like an oil slick off the Needles"*

What Hooker misses is the ebb and flow of contemporary existence, and without this the open ground is curiously lacking in humans or humanity. It is interesting to compare two younger poets of South who write about the same landscapes, but with radically different intent.

David Caddy takes a Dorset village not far geographically from the setting of Hooker's first book 'Soliloquies of a Chalk Giant', but takes Hooker's conclusions as his starting point,

*"If you deconstruct Dorset  
you will be left with bones,  
a dirt track, and a copse."*

Caddy goes on to notice men building a high brick wall around a bungalow, the drunken and violent behaviour of young farmers being studiously ignored by the police. His collection 'Honesty' is written not out of self but to represent a community, the small village in which he lives, and as a poet enters like a spy. Caddy sets rural deprivation not in an antique past but today, a violent, edgy world where schoolyard bullies have grown up to run the country.

*"Old faces coming out of the Rotary  
still kicking the shit out of somebody"*

The best of open field poetry meticulously investigates a particular community and landscape now - not located in some nostalgic past - and has thus to be in the widest sense political.

There is an interesting corollary between the work of Caddy and Richard Hoggart's recent prose study 'Townscape with Figures; Farnham - Portrait of an English Town'. Hoggart uses close observation - as does Caddy - and a keen eye for contemporary mores to carefully portray a whole society, watching its interactions and tensions. Both writers have already constructed a political position - a caring socialism, made cautious by some of the excesses of theory and political correctness - and locate their individual perceptions into a carefully thought out philosophical framework.

Thus the justified anger which both writers express at the pain and suffering that a blanket free-market dogma has brought to the communities they investigate - and are determinedly part of - is all the more powerful. It is this anger, and a matching feeling of belonging to and taking part in the landscape he describes, which seems lacking in Hooker.

Again, one compares Hooker's 'Master of the Leaping Figures', set in and around Winchester, with the work of Andy Jordan. Jordan began with the same kind of careful historical reconstructions, as in his pamphlet on the buried chapel on St Catherine's Hill, but unlike Hooker has been actively engaged in the battle to save this landscape, not just mourn its passing. Jordan's work is politically powerful, from direct observation and intervention at the battle of Twyford Down.

This has not so much reinvigorated Jordan's work as put a nuclear depth charge under it. His earlier concern with landscape has taken two contrary but allied - directions. Firstly he has explored sexuality as possession, how incest and rape are kinds of colonisation, not of enclosed fields but of human flesh. Secondly Jordan has fed back these ideas into ecological action; the Twyford Down protests - against the Government virtually demolishing an ancient and environmental ecosystem to site through it a new road - become part of a wider battle, and subject to wider processes; criminal surveillance, loss of freedom, political impotence.

In 'Ambient Landscapes; lines on the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill 1994', Hooker's 'Elegy for the Labouring Poor' is brought bang up to date, although the concept of jobs for life and universal employment have long become themselves historical anachronisms [*sic*].

“...        *Property is*  
              *meat on a slab.*  
*Nothing but pain*  
              *in a distant view.*  
*The born poor*  
              *cannot be dispossessed*  
*just made homeless ...*

*Bend a blade of grass*  
              *and its aggravated trespass”*

Jordan's subject enters his technique, the rocking to and fro of each second indented line, like a nursery rhyme which has turned threatening, a rhythmic chant to push his meaning into the subconscious, a mantra which radiates unease.

Hooker has himself learnt, not just from those who once followed in his own footsteps but now way outpace him, but from his own enduring models. The oratorical, quirky prose of John Cowper Powys and the thickly multi-layered poetry of David Jones both attempt invocation, a sympathetic magic in which to describe fully is to possess and then to bring into new creation.

In his latest work, Hooker more boldly opens up not just landscape and his poetic technique but himself, a ground previously kept well enclosed and protected, the “*Private, Keep Out* notices of semi-feudal estates” which open ‘Solent Shore’.

## Closed Access

In *Their Silence a Language*, Hooker returns to the landscape of his youth. His vision centres on the New Forest, where he lived between the ages of 7 and 24; in maturity, he returns to reclaim his inheritance. The result is a kind of double focus, in which the briefness of a human life is plotted against - and consoled by - ancient woodland.

*The boy with a fishing rod  
follows the river upstream  
in April, among the windflowers.*

*The young man lies hidden  
in a net of light and shadow,  
naked, with his love.*

*The father walks under the trees  
with his son,  
who is laughing on his back.*

*And we call this now,  
when the man stands still  
in the woods in summer,  
on leaves that we say are dead.*

This is a typical Hooker poem, unrhymed and unassuming, written in plain ‘unpoetic’ language which gradually reveals depths and ambiguities.

The fishing rod becomes a net, in a sinister twist, just as the child is literally father to the man here, the next generation poised on his back to supplant him in turn, and yet the poem’s end suggests that mortality is itself illusory, nothing really dies. Even the title of this poem, ‘Present’, refers both to this spot in time, past as soon as savoured, and yet also some kind of gift.

‘*Their Silence a Language*’ sets Hooker’s poems against three other registers; the prose of his own nature notes - clumsy and magical by turn - the timelessness of the hidden forest he evokes, and the sculptures, woodcuts and drawings of Lee Grandjean, which face, inspire and at times literally enfold the printed word.

Grandjean’s leaping figures provided the cover illustrations of Hooker’s previous collection, ‘*Master of me Leaping Figures*’, in which the ‘ground’ of Winchester was imbued with a marriage breaking down, a man looking for religious assurance. Their triffid like tenacity, stretching out in invocations of natural fertility, here infuses Hooker’s sometimes static muse. In turn, they enthuse his own visual precision, forest ponies grazing “each with a green moustache/at the corners of its mouth”.

The New Forest becomes a place of impermanence, of water and hurricane, of dead trunks yielding to new and blindly determined life. At times Hooker even echoes the early Thorn Gunn, where vegetation crushes the life spirit out of humanity, and is to be resisted, even feared. The main influences, though, are David Jones, with his sacerdotal view of woodland, even in the denuded warsapes

of the Somme - trees as exempla of the sufferings and triumph of Christ - and Paul Nash, whose paintings of the Dorset and Wiltshire landscape were also viewed through a modernism which they in turn subverted, and who died at Lymington, on the edge of the Forest.

A shipyard scene by another English cubist, C.H. Nevinson, inspires 'Oak Song', dedicated to Southampton historian Carl Major. This poem unleashes something in Hooker, who then progresses, via van Gogh's spirals, "the signature that all living things bear", to the death of Rufus, as if some kind of sacrifice, and on to strange druid ceremonies. Hooker's forest is not one of leisure tourism, it is one where even the poet easily finds himself lost, a place of silence and mystery.

All that said, '*Their Silence a Language*' is not as unified an artistic whole as, say, 'Solent Shore'. It seems curiously spasmodic, a kind of dry run for some yet more detailed reworking of this 'ground' in the future. Technically, the book is uneven, notably a poem like 'Opening', which reads like a journal entry chopped into odd lines, and the book does not always naturally flow from prose to verse to image.

'*Their Silence a Language*' works best where poet and artist evoke the majestic terror of the New Forest, its sense of ancient wisdom precariously surviving, and under constant threat from encroachment. There is no sense of revelation at the end as there is in an analogous work of ecology meeting art, John Fowles' strangely overlooked prose meditation '*The Tree*'. That too is a work of covert autobiography. For Fowles, "even the most 'unreadable' woods are in fact subtler than any conceivable fiction".

### Making Clear

Perhaps this is where Hooker most markedly fails to match the finest "open field" poets. His poetry lacks their (sometimes tedious) particularity, and their endless re-examination [*sic*] of the same piece of ground. By the same token, he also lacks what the work of Olson and Fisher - or, closer to home, Caddy and Jordan - can at times evoke, a spiritual dimension glimpsed from the depths of the material world.

Jeremy Hooker has written elsewhere that one of the subjects of his latest book is just this kind of incompleteness, the lack of any final epiphany. What he attempts to put in its place is a meaning that "*manifests itself everywhere.*" Nevertheless, Hooker lacks these poets' willed and continuous creativity, a stretching of both subject and writer which can yield just the kind of (literally) supernatural moment denied to Hooker. This kind of insight is often a surprise [*sic*] to the poet himself, and remains unexplained, but pregnant with meaning.

For example, in David Caddy's earlier pamphlet 'The Beating on the Door', the following poem appears, unexplained, mysterious, a kind of counterpart to poems of precisely delineated rural life, here and now.

*"Something's passing through  
I can hear it screeching.  
Something's passing through  
heaving  
shaking the ground.*

*I feel unsteady  
roam from room to room.*

*Something's passing through.*

*I cannot write.*

*I am too full of expectation."*

Like Hooker's own poetic mentor, David Jones, just when such work seems most arcane and distant from the reader's own particular experience, the poetic process of steady and intense concentration on the work at hand can grant sudden illumination.

Such insights are not easily won; to be a real 'open field' poet requires nothing less than a lifetime's dedication to both one's area and one's work, allied to a complex philosophical and political commitment, allied again to rigorous and hard won technical expertise. And a hard life; as Blake wrote

*"What is the price of Experience? do men buy it for a song?  
Or wisdom for a dance in the street. No, it is bought with the  
price  
Of all that a man hath, his house, his wife, his children.  
Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy,  
And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in  
vain."*

But the result can be a communicable truth which justifies all, the "once-in-a-lifetime portent/the comet's pulsing rose" which Seamus Heaney just misses at the end of 'North'.

Such things are a lifetime beyond the self-satisfied careerists of, say, 'The New Poetry'. In the latest issue of 'Stride' magazine, Norman Jope magisterially dismisses such work exactly for this reason, its lack of any real sense of place, its vacuous self-esteem, and the lack of any serious political edge either in the poets chosen or in the editorial procedure. Conversely, it is poets who attempt to make their poetry take on - and take over - their whole world who will attain lasting recognition, when the thin talents of the likes of Carol Ann Duffy are of merely historical interest, footnotes to a dull era. Such poets are doomed to remain outside the mainstream, 'future exiles' writing for and from the here and now, but also for forever.

Jeremy Hooker is himself capable of such achievements, but not here and not quite yet. He needs to dig still deeper into his chosen ground, to loosen up technically and toughen up politically, to give the silenced back their voice.

*Brian Hinton.*

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Further information about this review can be found here:  
[http://www.nonism.org.uk/downloads/FarmyardFascistsA5\\_Sept96.pdf](http://www.nonism.org.uk/downloads/FarmyardFascistsA5_Sept96.pdf)