## The Itchen at Ovington



# 'Making and Unmaking Lines': Jeremy Hooker's 'Itchen Water' Poems

Terry Gifford
Bath Spa University

### St Johns College, 1787

'Ah let me inglorious court the shade
And stream[s] soft-murmuring through the
opening glade.'

### St Johns College, 1787

'Ah let me inglorious court the shade And stream[s] soft-murmuring through the opening glade.'

Virgil's Georgics (29 BC)

## Virgil himself distinguished

running streams

(rigui amenes)



rivers

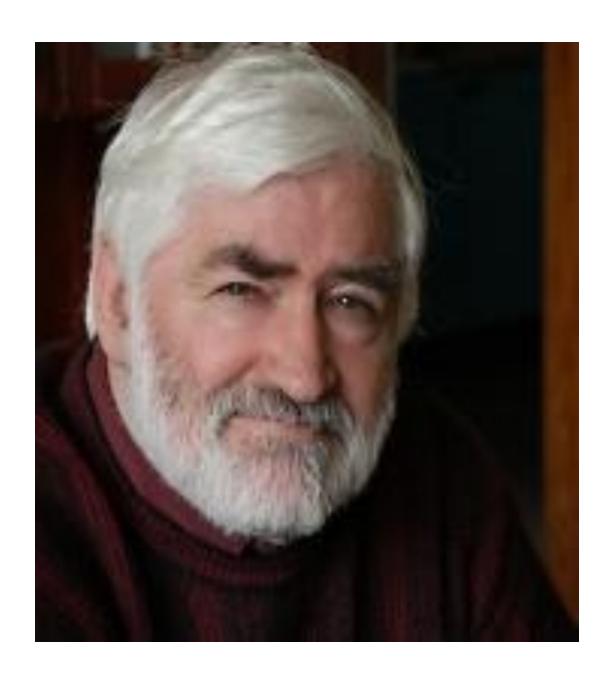
(flumina)



### Juan Christian Pellicer writes:

'Virgil writes feelingly about rivers.'

Virgil's references to rivers 'may be understood as generic tokens representing a literary tradition' of writing about rivers that even for him in 29 BC included Hesiod, Lucretius and Homer.



### Jeremy Hooker:

'It was Coleridge who had the idea of a poem sequence following a river from source to sea, but Wordsworth who completed it in the River Duddon sonnet sequence'.

(Interview 16 December 2022)



### from Ditch Vision, 2017

'The idea I developed at this time was that poetry should be written not *about* but *from* place.'

Jeremy Hooker

### 'from place': the challenge to the poet

catch the nature of the river in words dissolution of the self reciprocal relationship 'unmakes' his sense of self in order to to 'remake' the river in lines of poetry

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 of one wave, one chalky-grey grain, or in a word alive with light, one drop in which its nature shines.



#### **At Ovington**

for Lee Grandjean, sculptor

You would make a form that contains, which your hand moulds as we talk, creating a body between us, in the air. Below the broad full river glides hypnotically, silver, green and dark. Here wind meets light and water, and the current at each instant finds its bed, erupting over shoals of weed. Sliding through a lucid gravel run, continually making and unmaking lines,

as in my mind I catch and loose its images, and about our heads swifts hawking for mayfly unerringly, explosively, glide. I would let all go again, saying – it is perfect without us, but we meet here, we share words and your hand shaping the flow, the brute and graceful wings. And our feet beat solidly on the bridge.



What I love is the fact of it.

A channel kept open, shipping stone for the cathedral; blue Cornish slates; coal from Woodmill to Blackbridge wharf.

A channel used, disused, restored, until the last barge passed under the railway bridge, now abandoned, framing water that is going nowhere, but silts, with passages the colour of stonedust.

I have walked from purist dryfly stream to ramshackle tidal reach, used and reused in commerce with the sea, and at last, secretive at the heart of the city, the Roman port.

Imagine that when at each instant the river enters the sea, nothing is lost, but where the traveller looking back through his past sees the spire of St Michael's sink vaguely behind a skyline of cranes, the Itchen is one from source to mouth, retaining each grain, each wave that forms it even as it breaks.



