

The Itchen at Ovington



‘Making and Unmaking Lines’:
Jeremy Hooker’s ‘Itchen Water’
Poems

Terry Gifford
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St Johns College, 1787

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

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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.



