Proceedings of the 22nd International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 23-25

Uncanny fish in Plath and Hughes

DIANNE HUNTER (*)

Sylvia Plath's 1960 poem "Mirror" builds up to the appearance of a terrible fish, an internalized counterpart of the watching consciousness under the dark pond of Ted Hughes's 1958 poem "Pike." Whereas Hughes's poem evokes the spirit of the place and the genetic residue of England's violent past, a version perhaps of Clarence's dream of the sea of fish-eaten victims of the Wars of the Roses in Shakespeare's history play *Richard III*, Plath's "Mirror" narrates a lifetime of interactions with a nameless, faceless woman and imagines aging as disfigurement. In Hughes's poem, pike are both weapons (cf. a "pike" as an instrument of warfare) and vital presences in the physical world that provide inspiration for his poetic vocation. In Plath's poem, a fish resides in the mirror, a monstrous figuration of coming to recognize oneself as an aging, vanishing façade. The poet speaks through the voice of her mirror.

Exploring timeless, primitive, ruthless fish, "Pike" chronicles a series of vignettes that, says Matthew Fisher, begin in plain diction, giving an objective, scientific description: "Pike, three inches long, perfect / Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold." The word "tigering" in the second line, *pace* Fisher, perhaps evokes William Blake's "Tiger, tiger, burning bright / In the forest of the night," an image of the destructive, devouring element of Creation. The green and gold in Hughes's first line may recall Ovid's description of the Golden Age, when "golden honey was trickling from the green oak"; and closer to home, the green and golden "Fern Hill" of Dylan Thomas. But Hughes's creation has stillness and horror at its core. Line three of "Pike" introduces the interpretive, poetic image "Killers from the egg," suggesting the poet's view of elegant death-by-design at the origin of life, a universe thriving on streamlined predation (Porter, 1974). These green and golden three-inch pike have "grandeur," for they are a "hundred feet long in their world," an example of the poet's putting his perspective inside a nonhuman microscope, submarine and animate. The three-inch pike knead quietly under water; their underjaws form "the malevolent aged grin," "hooked clamp and fangs / Not to be changed at this date," permanent expression of "A life subdued to its instrument" (lines 3-15), a weapon of death/eating. In this first vignette, three-inch pike "dance" on the pond surface among flies or move in "submarine delicacy and horror." They are beautiful and deadly, a species contained within their natural habitat.

Stanza five introduces a second vignette, this one indoors, enclosed behind the transparent walls of a figurative jungle with unusual inhabitants for a domestic aquarium – three pike. These are specified. One pike is three inches long; the other two are bit larger, a pecking order of inches. These

(*) Trinity College, English Department, 300 Summit Street, Hartford, CT 06106, USA.

three are subject to intimate observation: “Three we kept behind glass, / Jungled in weed: three inches, four, / And four and half: fed try to them – / Suddenly there were two. Finally one // With a sag belly and the grin it was born with. / And indeed they spare nobody” (lines 17-22). These fish seem at first to thrive in their enclosure, but then the fittest one survives the others. Though their devouring is brought close for our inspection, the wall of the aquarium provides what Fisher calls “a symbolic partition” effectively protecting the viewer from the savage encounter to be viewed (1989: 58).

A third vignette keeps us from mistakenly assuming the cannibalism demonstrated by the pike “behind glass” was a result of captivity; and it examines self-destructive devouring (Fisher, 1989: 58). Depicting a gory scene that may owe something to Coleridge’s “Christabel” (the green snake strangling the dove) and to Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (the gagged bullfrog), the second half of stanza six and the next stanza confront us with the corpses of mutually destructive pike in the wild. “Two, six pounds each, over two feet long, / High and dry and dead in the willow-herb – One jammed past its gills down the other’s gullet” (lines 23-26). This encounter with violent fish is close up; but it is on land, in a human frame of reference. We see the pike from a dry world, where the fish are “High and dry and dead in the willow-herb” (line 24).

But the eye of the outside fish has an iron stare – a fish-eyed, alien, blank, dead stare. Since the observer is alive and the objects of his inspection are dead, detachment remains between human and fish. The outer fish, its prey jammed down its throat, stares from a dead eye – “Though its film shrank in death” (line 28).

At this point, the poem shifts to subjective meditation, narrating in the first-person a fishing story in which the fishing line of the speaker connects him more deeply to the watery realm where fish swim. This part of the poem culminates in an uncanny effect operating along principles Freud set out in his 1919 essay “The ‘Uncanny’”: having set up one reality, the poem now invades it with another (see Freud, 1919, ed. Strachey, 250). Following the three vignettes described in various degrees of scientific, cautious detachment, the poem reaches into deep time: “A pond I fished, fifty yards across, / Whose lilies and muscular tench [i.e. carp] / Had outlasted every visible stone / Of the monastery that planted them – // Stilled legendary depth: / It was deep as England. It held / Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old / That past nightfall I dared not cast” (lines 29-36). The “fifty yards across” gives an objective sense of the size of the pond; the lilies and the tench that have outlasted monastery stones contrast the time dimension of the survival reach of the denizens of natural habitat against the ephemeral, medieval human institution of the monastery and its stone construction. The still, deep pond is so old, it is legendary, prehistoric yet rich in history, “as deep as England” (line 34). Its pike are imagined to be so big, deep and old, they disquiet the speaker, who dared not cast “past nightfall.” It is transgressive and dreadful to be alone in proximity to such huge fish; but the poet fishes on, his hair frozen as if in fear, waiting for “what might move, for what eye might move” (lines 38-39), as if expecting a visitation from the drowned or dream world of the ancient dead.

Instructing Leonard Baskin in 1959 on the woodcut illustration he wanted for this poem, Hughes stated that the pike are dead: “The skull of a pike would have been best, since the pike in the poem are not really the living. Maybe something like a skull, or even just a jawbone, would be most subtly explosive – illumine the undermeaning of the poem a bit and not overdefine the real pike in it” (unpublished letter to Leonard and Esther Baskin, written from Boston, January 1959 [London: British Library manuscript]). As in the poem’s repetition of the word “three,” suggesting a third realm, Hughes wants to both evoke and undermine reality: “not really the living.”

“Pike”’s final stanza merges the outer scene with the imagination of the speaker as the woods begin to float and the sound of the owls and the splashes on the pond grow frail on the ear in contrast to the dream freed from the darkness deeper than night’s darkness. This deep dark dream, says the poet, “rose slowly towards me, watching.” If one receives an image of the immense pike from prehistoric times rising, one can imagine a meeting of consciousnesses – the poet’s and the pike’s; the fisherman has stirred a deep fish in the pond. This suggests both the stirring of a live fish and a recalling of the dead. The effect might be a successful evocation of the animistic world in which, as in Celtic lore, each pool has a genius of the place, and provides an opening into the underworld, an idea implicit in

the pond of “legendary depth,” “deep as England” (lines 33-34). A pond has a surface that reflects, with a deep world underneath it. This poem brings a submerged consciousness to the surface of awareness and reanimates the dead. This corresponds in two ways to Freud’s claim that disquieting effects are produced by the return of superseded modes of thought. In “Pike,” the scientific perspective of the first seven stanzas gives way to the animistic, pantheistic perspective of the last four stanzas; boundary-conscious, scientific voyeurism opens a line to Celtic animism, the spirit of the place and of the dead, as well as to the prehistoric, genetic residue of the origin of evolutionary life in water. “Pike”’s final two words, “me, watching,” suggest ambiguously: I watched or sensed the presence of another consciousness as the immense, prehistoric pike rose toward me, watching me – I, the speaker was a watcher being watched; and, simultaneously, in so far as the immense old pike from legendary depths corresponds to an aspect of the mind of the speaker and to his genetic past, the “me, watching” is the “I” or “eye” of the poet’s identification with his meditatively freed genetic, feral heritage, his vocation as a Merlin-like shaman casting a spell, and his survival as predator, his own iron-eyed awareness that by fishing he is partaking of what Sylvia Plath called (in “All the Dead Dears,” 1957) “the gross eating game,” feeding on corpses. Hughes’s mesmeric accuracy in making a cast with a fly-line has been described by one of his friends as “Merlin-like” (MEMORIAL ADDRESS, WESTMINSTER ABBEY, London, 13 May 1999). Hughes himself remarked that what goes out with the hook comes back with the line.

The poem’s final image of dream darkness “beneath night’s darkness” raising a primitive watcher has a counterpart in Plath’s fish rising menacingly in “Mirror” and the spooky ancestral figures in “All the Dead Dears”: “From the mercury-backed glass / Mother, grandmother / Reach hag hands to haul me in, // And an image looms under the fishpond surface.” Whereas Hughes’s disquieting pike are external, environmental, cross-species genetic as well as part of the psyche of the poet, Plath’s submerged presences are internal, psychological, familial. Hughes’s pike are living and dead, and Plath’s fish in the mirror show disfigurement and death as personal destiny. Hughes’s pond with pike in its legendary depths seems to be refigured by Plath as a mirror in which ancestral imagoes claim the aging subject. Thus “Mirror” can be read as shrinking Hughes’s mythic grandeur into an introspective psychodrama. If “Pike” is read as revisioning the image that “looms under the fishpond surface” in “All the Dead Dears” (1957); “Mirror” (1961) can be read as Plath’s reply to “Pike” (1959).

Plath’s “Mirror,” confined to a psychic, imaginary realm, leaves out the dimension of reality Freud thought necessary for setting the conditions for an uncanny effect. Though Plath’s poem demonstrates a disquieting theme of the mirror image as encroaching death, it remains less uncanny than “Pike” because by beginning with a speaking mirror, a` la Snow White, Plath’s poem is already in a fantasy world before the terrible fish manifests itself (cf. Freud, 1919, ed. Strachey, 250). We have an intellectual confrontation with the otherness of the self but not a suspension between worlds.

REFERENCES

Fisher, M. D. (1989). Hughes’s Pike. *Explicator, 47* (4), 58-59.

Freud, S. (1919). The ‘Uncanny’. Trans. James Strachey. In James Strachey (Ed.), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. XVII, pp. 218-252). London: Hogarth, 1955.

Hughes, T. (2004). *Collected Poems*. Ed. Paul Keegan. London: Faber.

Hughes, T. (1959). Letter to Leonard and Esther Baskin, January 1959. London: British Library manuscripts.

Hughes, T. (Ed.) (1981). Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*. New York: HarperPerennial.

La Belle, J. (1988). *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Keegan, P. (Ed.) (2004). Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*. London: Faber.

Plath, S. (1981). *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperPerennial.

Porter, D. (1974). Beasts / Shamans / Baskin: The Contemporary Aesthetics of Ted Hughes. *Boston Review, 22*, 13-25.