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## **Linguistic northalgia in Ted Hughes's *Remains of Elmet* (1979) and Tony Harrison's *From 'The School of Eloquence'* (1978-2007)**

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Ted Hughes, in *Remains of Elmet* (1979), and Tony Harrison, in *From 'The School of Eloquence'* (1978-2007), embark on a voyage back to childhood as they reminisce the Yorkshire of their early years, the Yorkshire where they learnt to utter their very first words. Since they both are Northerners, the language they heard while growing up is a local form of Northern English, that is to say, a dialect, even though dialects have different meanings and functions for each poet. They were both confronted with Standard English at school at an early age, and they both came to consider this second language as a normative language that dams the energy of poetry. The convergence, or better said, the dissonance, between these two languages is the source of their idiosyncratic poetic voice. Going back to the place and language they explored when they were children allows them to open up the mythopoetic possibilities inherent in the dialect of childhood and question the very nature of poetry.

The poetic language they create as adults is written in Standard English tinged with what Katie Wales, in *Northern English: A Social and Cultural History*, calls "Northernisms" (Wales 6), that is to say Northern dialectalisms, the reproduction of characteristic features of Northern speech. In poetry, the use of northernisms encompasses what Eliot calls "the auditory imagination", which he describes as:

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the

trite, the current, and the new and the surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality. (Eliot 1964, 118-119)

Eliot uses the vocabulary of shamanism to describe the necessity to stay tuned to the etymology of words – in that sense, the phrase “returning to origin and bringing something back”, so as to create wholeness out of sets of opposite terms, can be read as reminiscent of Romanticism. Indeed, in a Wordsworthian fashion, both Hughes and Harrison would agree that “the child is father of the man” (Wordsworth 79). To reconnect with his “inner child”, the poet has to tune back in what Hughes calls “the gutturals of dialect” (Hughes 2003, 145) in “Thistle” and Harrison “the language that I speak at home” (Harrison 130) in “Classics Society”. Such reverse temporality suggests that the adult’s creative power stems from the child’s experience and imagination, that their ontogenetic poems are growths of a northern poet’s mind. Therefore, northernisms have a strong connection with infancy, with a pre-verbal state filled with perceptions and sensations, and therefore with the acquisition of language, and most importantly with poetry.

Ted Hughes left the moors that surround his native Mytholmroyd when he was seven; Tony Harrison left his local school for a grammar school when he was nine. Both admit that these events introduced a disruption and claim that the roots of their poetic voice have to be found, or at least searched, in those first formative years. Yet, one may find traces of disruption, of division, even in this supposedly idyllic childhood and these traces have all to do with dialect and the way it is perceived. Indeed, for Hughes dialect is both the sign of a division between the intimate self and the public self and the means to bridge the gap between the two, whereas for Harrison, it mirrors the divisions between social classes, which also need to be bridged. This article will therefore analyse linguistic “northalgia”, a particular type of nostalgia for the North, a nostalgia for a time, a place, a self and a language which were all already marked with divisions.

### **1. Ted Hughes’s *Remains of Elmet* (1979)**

One would be hard-pressed to find consistent markers of a northern dialect in Hughes’s poetry. Aside from a few local terms, some in strategic place though, like “reckling” (the smallest one in a litter or

family) and “orts” (remains), the title of two collections respectively from 1966 and 1978, there isn’t much proof of Hughes being influenced by Northern speech. In 1971, Hughes said:

I grew up in West Yorkshire. They have a very distinct dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in some sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. It makes some things more difficult since it’s your childhood self inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it. Some things it makes easier. Without it, I doubt if I would have ever written verse. And in the case of the West Yorkshire dialect, of course, it connects you directly and in your most intimate self to Middle English poetry. (Hughes 1971a, 11-12)

What Hughes seems to suggest here is that there is a continuum between Yorkshire, the adult’s poetic voice, childhood where the intimate self lies, dialect and Middle English poetry. Yet, his definition of dialect is not linguistic or formal but ontological – it refers to some kind of spoken English heard during his early childhood in Mytholmroyd: “[My move to Mexborough] really sealed off my first seven years so that now my first seven years seems almost half my life. I’ve remembered everything because it was sealed off in that particular way and became a sort of subsidiary brain – another subsidiary brain for me” (Sagar 4). Put together, these assertions show that Yorkshire dialect was hard-wired into the poet’s brain at birth and that Hughes’s linguistic theory corresponds to nativism.

One of the reasons for the lack of dialectal evidence is that dialect, just like childhood, is a thing of the past. Hughes said:

You see, dialect disappeared somewhere. But writing verse, it’s what I hear. And maybe because it has disappeared and maybe because it isn’t the language of English culture, maybe it’s enabled me to keep hold of what was associated with it in the beginning. [...] As it was, I suppose they were sealed off and so stayed out of it, were unaffected – as if they were a different language, I suppose. I think it’s useful to have your mother tongue and

your childhood tongue as a slightly different tongue.  
(Hughes 1982)

Hughes reaffirms here the link between “dialect” and “childhood language” and sets a daunting task for the poet: retrieving this long lost language. According to him, dialect is about “first things”, essence, the core of the being, which make the substrate of his poetry, it exists outside any cultural, social or political context.

The poems in *Remains of Elmet* contain almost no first-person pronoun. The poet hardly ever speaks, but leaves the land to speak for itself. He turns himself into an infant, i.e. a being that can’t speak so as to give a voice to the place. But that land is at a stage of infancy too, which is why the poems are fraught with primal screams, mostly under the denomination of “cry”, a word that crops up ten times or so in the collection. Features of the landscape try hard to vocalize articulate sounds, most of the time to no avail, like the tree that “gasped a cry” (Hughes 1979, 47). The overwhelming presence of these pre-symbolic vocalisations tend to show that the poems signify through the sounds they make rather than through the contents they convey.

Some of the sounds that are emitted engage the reader in a synaesthetic experience, which some psychologists say is the way infants experience the world<sup>1</sup>. For instance, the birds are described “Lancing their voices / Through the skin of this light” (Hughes 1979, 29). Apart from the moments when the land speaks for itself in an infant voice, there are also poems in which the description of the land is made through the grammar of childhood, meaning that predication is erased in favour of an ante-predicative, sensory relation to the world. According to linguists Laurent Danon-Boileau and Aliyah Morgenstern: “La prédication apparaît seulement quand l’enfant prend conscience qu’il ne partage pas nécessairement une communauté de pensée avec celui auquel il s’adresse” (Danon-Boileau and Morgenstern 64). In Hughesian terms, predication is the sign of a rupture, of what Eliot termed a “dissociation of sensibility” (Eliot 1932, 247) due to the overrationalisation pruned since the Enlightenment. Only going back to antepredicative discourse –

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<sup>11</sup> For instance, Robert Lickliter and Lorraine E. Bahrick, at the beginning of their article on “The Development of Infant Intersensory Perception”, chart the research on cross-modal capabilities in young children, which they claim is “impressive” (Lickliter and Bahrick 260).

that is to say to the language of the child – can man and world be made whole again.

A close reading of “Wild Rock” (Hughes 1979, 40) will show how Hughes goes back to ante-predicative discourse to construct his dialect of childhood. In the poem, it seems as if the Yorkshire landscape were given without the obtrusive presence of a consciousness organising the perception in an intellectual way:

Wild rock.

Tamed rock.

Millstone grit – a sound grinding sandstone.

Roof of the world ridge-wind  
And rain, and rain.

Heaven – the face of a quarry  
Oak-leaves of hammered copper, as in Cranach.

Grass growing on acid.

Wind. Cold. A permanent weight  
To be braced under. And rain.

Thanks to gerund and infinitive forms, thanks to noun-clauses, thanks to asyndeton and parataxis, the predicative relation – the relation between the subject and the predicate – seems to be deconstructed. It is therefore difficult to say who is speaking, who is the centre of the deictic system. Yet, on line 11, there is a change of mood:

A people fixed  
Staring at fleeces, blown like blown flames.

A people converting their stony ideas  
To woollen weave, thick worsteds, dense fustians.

Between their bones and the four trembling quarters.

One may notice a move from the heuristic function of language (used to explore the world, learn and discover) to its representational

function (used to exchange facts and information). One may also notice a grammatical change: not only do the lines expand, but verb forms are introduced, thus hinting at a predication in the bud. Just as the line grows, so does the voice, from the voice of a child to that of an adult – predication appears and narrative unfolds, as if a more mature voice were giving an interpretation of the world that the child does not have by referring to the industrial (cotton mills with “fleeces”, “woollen weave, thick worsteds, dense fustians”) and religious (Protestantism with “the four trembling quarters”) history of the region.

When Hughes writes “Wind. Cold.”, he uses a zeugma. Indeed, the full stops which separate the two nouns that are preceded by the article Ø turn the physical experience into a concept. He thus expresses strong feelings about the Yorkshire weather and the depressive mood it can throw anybody in while making the reader feel the “weight” of such weather. Compound words, that sound like modern versions of Nordic kennings, and zeugmas also jam together complex ideas into a single word. All these devices conform to a principle of economy that is often deemed typical of Northern speech patterns. For instance, Neil Roberts lists “Anglo-Saxon lexis, short vowels, consonantal diction tending to monosyllables, short syntactical units and unfussy similes” (Roberts 154) – and one should notice the repetition of “short” and the use of “mono” as expressive of economy – as features of Yorkshire dialect that can be found in Hughes’s poetry.

But more importantly, the many noun phrases in the first ten lines bear some features of a specific type of child utterance: the holophrase, which consists in the use of a single word, that is to say a simple vocalisation, to express a complex idea and is based on a shared context, a common body of knowledge between the adult and the child (or the two children) communicating. The use of noun phrases in the poem can be compared to protodeclarative pointing in children: the theme or topic is the feature of the landscape, while the rheme or comment is the tone, the gesture, the facial expression, or, in the case of the collection, Fay Godwin’s black and white photos which mirror the dark brooding mood of the poems. The holophrases therefore make each feature of the landscape “un objet d’attention partagée” (Morgenstern, Leroy and Mathiot 1808) i.e. a commonality between the infant poet and the reader.

At that point, the readers are supposed to feel the atmosphere of the landscape and engage physically in a sensory experience of language. To put it in other words, they are brought back to their own infancy, to their own patterns of language acquisition. It is a question of “becoming-

child", which Deleuze and Guattari, in the context of voice and music, define as follows:

The voice itself must attain a becoming-woman or a becoming-child. That is the prodigious content of music. It is no longer a question [...] of imitating a woman or a child, even if it is a child who is singing. The musical voice itself becomes-child at the same time as the child becomes-sonorous, purely sonorous. No child could have ever done that, or if one did, it would be by becoming in addition something other than a child, a child belonging to a different, strangely sensual and celestial, world. (Deleuze and Guattari 335)

The grammar of childhood has poetical consequences: the lack of presentative constructions might suggest the inability to put the world described at a distance; the noun phrases can read like an attempt to stabilise a world in constant movement due to climatic changes and the passing of time; the noun phrases also function as flashes of sensation. The reader is encouraged to engage in an ante-predicative and sensory relation to the world, in which the subject is the object, so that emotion, sensation, is released without the intervention of analysis or judgement. Through hypotyposis, the North is presented and made present for the reader.

Of course, the adjectives, the stylistic devices at work, the repetitions, the comparison and the hyperbaton are also evidence of a poetic recreation of the scene. Poetry, childhood and dialect – even though elusive – are not incompatible but synonymous, whereas standard English, the formalisation of language, literary language, kill poetry. It is a language stripped of anything human or civilized whereas standard English, the language of culture, is the imposition of a rational system that can only be understood thanks to a context and has consequently lost all connection with the real world. Dialect therefore is the poetic language *par excellence* since it has a universal dimension standard English can't even dream of. Hughes was deeply aware of this:

In other words, if I had grown up speaking - ... if my first language had been ordinary English... then the language would have been wide open and permeable by all the later added cultural influences and those first things that I can

hang onto in verse, and make something of in verse – would have been overlaid and evolved and so on. (Hughes 1982)

In his poetry and in his essays, Hughes elaborated a historical interpretation of the relationship between Standard English and dialect: “It was simply bad luck that the Restoration ... restored a court that imposed the mid-century tastes of the French Court on the literacy and manners of a nation whose radical Englishness it had every reason to fear.” (Hughes 1971b, 20). More importantly, he gave a socio-political interpretation of the linguistic divide:

The causes for this apparent dissociation of sensibility are in the inter-conflict of upper & lower classes in England, the development of the English gentleman with the stereotype English voice (and the mind, set of manners etc that goes with the voice) & the tabu [sic] on dialect as a language proper for the literate man. (Hughes 2007, 146)

This revolutionary act of breaking the taboo on dialect is enacted through the involution of language into the language of childhood. Claiming northern dialect as a valid language is also what Tony Harrison tries to do, but in a very different way. Indeed, while Hughes defines dialect as a childhood language that was lost in the process of growing up and that needs to be recovered somehow because there lies poetry, Harrison defines it as a language he was forced to get rid of first but ultimately tried to adapt to an unusual milieu: poetry.

## 2. Tony Harrison’s *From ‘The School of Eloquence’* (1978-2007)

*From ‘The School of Eloquence’* is a poet’s life-long endeavour to come to terms with the dichotomy between the dialect of his childhood and the language of poetry. Harrison started working on the project in the late 1970s and kept on expanding it at least until the late 2000s. Conceived as the story of how he came to be a poet, the sequence includes over 130 16-line sonnets on the poet’s family and working-class background, on the historical events that shaped his understanding of the many divides Britain is plagued with, on his schooling and introduction to the Classics, and on the reception and posterity of his poetry. Yet, the poems do not tell the story of how Harrison learnt to speak his first

language, northern dialect, but the story of how he had to unlearn it to acquire a second language, standard English, so as to feel entitled to write poetry in his own name. Therefore, *From 'The School of Eloquence'* is not the narrative of a formation, but the poetization of a deformation, a postmodern *Künstlergedichte* of sort.

Hence the many poems in which Harrison dramatizes his school experience. Even though most of dialectal words and sentences quoted in italics in the poems are his parents' or working-class members', "Me Tarzan" (Harrison 126) is a rare example of his childhood self using dialect as a means of being true to his origin. As he is working on translating Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*, he responds to his friends' "Off lakin', then to t'fish 'oil [...] off tartin', off to t'flicks" by using the same language: "Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose". The phonetic transcription of the "I" of identity into the "ah" of despair shows the process of acquisition of the classics is one that will entail the loss of his working-class origins. In "Wordlists II" (Harrison 128), he lists the many dictionaries he learnt by heart and notices one is missing:

but not the tongue that once I used to know  
but can't bone up on now, and that's mi mam's.

The dialect of childhood is not registered, it has no dictionary to be remembered by, and only poetry can make it survive. But to do so, the poet has to fight back against misconceived ideas of what poetry is.

In the oft-anthologized diptych "Them & [uz]" (Harrison 133), the poet narrates how he learnt to control his tongue as a way to get his revenge on the English teacher who humiliated him because he deemed his northern accent was unworthy of Keats:

4 words only of mi 'art aches and ... 'Mine's broken,  
you barbarian, T.W.!' He was nicely spoken.  
'Can't have our glorious heritage done to death!'

Though "Them & [uz]" is often mentioned as a paragon of the qualms of the northern working-class poet, it is worth revisiting it as a poem on the dialect of childhood. Indeed, there are two opposed trajectories in this poem – the first one goes from pre-verbal speech (αία, ay, ay!) to hypercorrection of language ("My first mention in the *Times* automatically made Tony Anthony!") and shows the process of acquisition of a standard language that is supposed to be the language of poetry; the second trajectory entails a progressive devaluation of

Standard English (“All poetry (even Cockney Keats?) you see / ‘s been dubbed by [ʌs] into RP”) and an affirmation of the beauty of dialect (“[uz] can be loving as well as funny”). The use of Yorkshire dialect and children’s access to articulacy are thus combined.

There are numerous voices in this poem: the child’s dialectal voice, the boy’s learning voice, the adult’s poetic voice, the teacher’s normative voice, not to mention the poets’, philosophers’, critics’ and linguists’ voices that are also elicited. The first part of the poem focuses on how Harrison unlearnt the dialect of his childhood:

‘We say [ʌs] not [uz], T.W.!’ That shut my trap.  
I doffed my flat a’s (as in ‘flat cap’)  
my mouth all stuffed with glottals, great  
lumps to hawk up and spit out... E-nun-ci-ate!

The process is filled with articulatory obstacles due to the differences between Yorkshire dialect and Received Pronunciation. The poet needs to work on the trap/bath split and on glottals, the sound produced instead of the aspirated <h> when the air is stopped completely at the glottis by tightly closed vocal chords. While both sounds are presented as representative of working class-culture and therefore getting rid of them as indulging class betrayals (the young Harrison needs to remove the symbols of his belonging to the working class, the cap with its short /a/ and the lumps that also obstruct his father’s throat), they are also considered as a speech sound disorder that needs some form of speech therapy. The dashes that fragment the injunction to “*E-nun-ci-ate!*” give a visual representation of the difficulty of the process and of the drama the boy is experiencing: education allows him to make connections while introducing disruptions.

Yet, the rhyming pattern deconstructs the hierarchy between the two languages: <us> does not rhyme with “Receivers” (those who use the Received Pronunciation but also the receivers of the stolen goods of literature) if pronounced [ʌs], whereas it does if pronounced [uz], in Northern English. In other words, rhyming, which is one of the defining criteria of poetry according to the master, is actually ingrained in the child’s accent. This allows the poet to claim that his voice is worthy of poetry in the second part of the poem. He extols the other main speech feature that builds a typology of the Yorkshire dialect the poet spoke as a child, namely the vocalic system with the absence of the pair foot/strut, the use of “ye” instead of “you” or the rime from/home:

I chewed up Littererchewer and spat the bones  
 into the lap of dozing Daniel Jones,  
 dropped the initials I'd been harried as  
 and used my name and own voice: [uz] [uz] [uz],  
 ended sentences with by, with, from,  
 and spoke the language that I spoke at home.  
 RIP, RP, RIP T.W.  
 I'm Tony Harrison no longer you!

You can tell the Receivers where to go  
 (and not aspirate it) once you know  
 Wordsworth's matter/water are full rhyme.

Whereas [ʌS] was paradoxically a symbol of exclusion in the first part of the poem, [uz] becomes a symbol of inclusion and a "full rhyme" with "as" in the second part, a symbol the poet chants so as to demonstrate its auditory power. As opposed to what happened in the first part, the poet no longer buys into the myth of dialect as a speech impediment children have to work on to join the adult world of poetry; on the contrary, he claims the dialect of childhood as a fuel for poetry. He is now entitled to "occupy [the] lousy leasehold of Poetry".

The vindictiveness of the poet revisiting a scene of humiliation he had to endure as a child is based on the accusation of being a "barbarian" ("You barbarian, T.W."), of speaking a language that does not belong to the nation and that is hardly understandable. Once again, Harrison turns to his childhood language to make this prejudiced accusation an axiom of his aesthetics. In "The Rhubarbarians" (Harrison 123-124), he conflates the "'mob' *rhubarb-rhubarb*", the sound a large cast makes to give the impression of a crowd speaking, with what his father told him about the plant they name "tusky" ("how most of England's rhubarb came from Leeds »)<sup>2</sup>, to show how far he has come:

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison explained why rhubarb was so important to him in an interview with Richard Hoggart, the author of *The Uses of Literacy* (1959): "I used to go walking with my father near East Ardsley where the rhubarb fields were; *tusky* as we called it. He told me that 98% of British rhubarb came from Leeds. And my dad said, 'Oh I was in a play once, I was; I held a spear in Julius Caesar at school.' He said they taught him, as they do in the theatre, to make indescribable crowd noises by saying '*rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb*'. So I always had that sense that saying '*rhubarb*' was what my life was about, whereas the central literary life was somewhere else" (Tony Harrison in Hoggart 39).

mi little stick of Leeds grown *tusky* draws  
galas of rhubarb from the Met-set palms.

In other words, Harrison combines the alleged “barbarian” quality of his language with the local culture of rhubarb to coin the word “rhubarbarian”, which refers to the dialect language of his childhood that is worthy of poetry.

Therefore, just like *Remains of Elmet*, the collection suggests “becoming-child” as a means to access poetry. More generally, becoming-child allows the poet to deconstruct normative identity, which is described by Deleuze and Guattari as “the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male speaking a standard language” (Deleuze and Guattari 116). The poems do not to go back to an idealised childhood – there never was one – but question – and ultimately abandon – the norms established by adults, figures of authority, be they parents, teachers, historical figures or poetic forebears.

To conclude, Ted Hughes and Tony Harrison provide two different ways of revisiting the dialect of childhood to find and found a form of rejuvenated poetry. Hughes’s ontological understanding of dialect sets him on a quest for the song of the earth in its state of infancy through a questioning of predication. Harrison’s social and historical definition of language moves him to deconstruct the discourse on linguistic acquisition in childhood.

In doing so, they both express a form of linguistic northalgia, a nostalgia for a time when the language they spoke in the North of England was already a sign of division. Only by going back to these first words and sounds, only by divesting themselves from the weight of Standard English and Received Pronunciation can the two poets acquire a poetic language of their own. In their different ways, their invention of a minor language – through the grammar of childhood and through dialect – can be interpreted in the light of Deleuze who said, in his *Abécédaire*, under the letter E: “Les tâches de l’écrivain, ce n’est pas de fouiller dans les archives familiales, ce n’est pas s’intéresser à son enfance, [...] C’est une autre tâche de devenir enfant par l’écriture, arriver à une enfance du monde. Restaurer une enfance du monde, ça, c’est une tâche de la littérature” (Deleuze and Parnet 56: 20).

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