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Hugo: Remembering

William W. Bevis

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HUGO: REMEMBERING

We spend our lives remembering what we love, to be sure who we are.

Poets should "take a brief look at something most people ignore," said Dick Hugo, and he must have said that partly because he felt ignored, or worthy of being ignored, not as a poet but as a man. Left with his grandparents at the age of two, sent to live with friends in Seattle at eleven and again at eighteen, he spent much of his poetic career locating and describing the dispossessed within his poetry and heart: "What endures is what we have neglected." He wrote not so much to win his way into our hearts as to take into his own heart the other orphans on the block. Old men, old cars, bums, derelict towns, abandoned ranches — his poetry welcomed people and places born of human love, then left behind.

The reason for his looking at things "most people ignore" was not, therefore, intellectual curiosity, not the play of clever intellect around the obscure (a poetry such as Merwin was devising while Hugo worked at Boeing 1951-63), but a deeply felt need, the need of orphaned people, towns, rivers, fish to find a home:

I thought that if I could look the world square in the eye in the poem . . . that somehow I would be able to survive, and that I would be worthy of love, of affection, of owning a home. . .

(Author's tape)

The basic subject matter of Hugo's poetry—locating the dispossessed—was personal enough, obsessive enough to deserve a passionate style, which is what he began to develop under Theodore Roethke's guidance at the University of Washington in 1947. Roethke was transmitting the "singing" tradition of William Butler Yeats, the rich iambic melodies and internal rhymes of impassioned verse ("We were the last Romantics," said Yeats. Wrong. Elegiac self-centeredness will never die). Roethke's personality as well as his
William W. Bevis

stylistic tradition suited the bearish and boorish young Hugo: Roethke was a large, outrageous, uncontrolled man, a role model for the vulgar and ungainly. Here was no upright Boston Brahmin, no slender Parisian aesthete, but a big mess of a man who could write.

He was kind of an outrageous man, and had all kinds of problems, and I was an outrageous young man, and I realized one day that as silly as this man sometimes appeared, he was able to create beautiful things. And it occurred to me that maybe there was a chance for me, too . . . maybe I can salvage something out of this absurd creature I am.

(Author's tape)

Hugo's early work created the identity he needed, the voice of an urban orphan at camp: intense, street-wise on the river bank, never far from a bar. Although he insisted this identity was deceptive, that he was always "a softy," the intensity must have been right, for he reinforced this tough stance with a style denser than Roethke's. He packed lines with strong stresses and relentless energy, a pressure essentially urban and, like sixties Black verse, reflecting the constant movement and overlapping riffs of jazz:

I'm a poet of density. That is to say at least in my first two books, my syllables are all strongly accented. I achieve this through elisions, a very thick line, a heavy line. I do this through syntactical shifts. . . . the first auditory art I heard that had any value were the big swing bands on the radio: Benny Goodman, Bob Crosby, and later Artie Shaw. This swing music is where I developed the idea of getting something else going before the thing died out. Just as one series of riffs was coming to an end, something else would start.

(Trout in the Milk, p. 257.)

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Such fast and toughened poetry was a distinct advantage for Hugo as a young Western writer. By beginning with extreme density and tight control, he was able to flirt more openly with sentimentality and regional subjects. That is, he had paid his dues, had commanded respect for technique, and that allowed him — as form often does — a more personal voice and a more personal subject. He could take more chances, especially the chances of carving closer and closer to the bone of feeling and place:

Bill Kittredge, my colleague . . . said once if you’re not risking sentimentality you’re not in the ballpark, and that struck me as a very wise statement.

(Author’s tape)

I had been interested in Bill Stafford’s work, in how close he was able to take a poem to the line of sentimentality without falling over it.

(Trout, p. 220)

With one book published (A Run of Jacks, 1961) and another on the way (Death of the Kapowsin Tavern, 1965), Dick went to Italy in 1963 to return to old war haunts, and he believed that the Italian openness helped him break out of his tough-guy stance into more vulnerable poems. The resulting book (Good Luck in Cracked Italian, 1969) “took the stamp of regionalist off my back for good” (Trout, p. 208). In the Italian poems the lines are less dense and the personal voice is more open, but it’s still Hugo: all environment is pressure and those nearly crushed draw his eye. In one of the poems, “Centuries Near Spinazzola,” he refers to a curious incident from the war, curious not because as a young airman, lost in a field, he had refused cigarettes to a mother and children, but because he felt so badly about it afterwards: “I think that it’s one of the real mistakes I ever made” (Trout, p. 217). Only the rich don’t give to the poor; Dick must have been shocked to realize that in that incident he’d been on the other side, the side of power, of the crushers, and that he had instantly been corrupted into behaving like them. He never forgot the scene, and to the end of his life he was embarrassed by power or responsibility. There is no tradition of proletarian poetry in English; if there were, Hugo, curiously, would be at its country core.
Dick came back from his first visit to Italy to a job at the University of Montana. He cruised his new domain, looking for the monuments of neglect that “triggered” many of his best poems, and simultaneously loving and hating the vast landscape that was replacing the ocean as his central image of emptiness, of the pressure of nihilism that surrounds each continent, ranch or home: “the remote ugly west where the space between people, like the enormous, empty land, soars finally into void. . .” (blurb for James Welch’s Winter in the Blood).

His personal life (divorce and feelings of inadequacy in the role of teacher), his drinking, his despair made his early years in Montana some of his worst. However, his bitter self-neglect found in the Montana landscape and ghost towns a hall of mirrors, and with the freer line and voice he had explored in the Italian poems he was ready to write the best single book of his career, The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir. Through some alchemy his poetic resourcefulness and confidence had increased even as he sank, and when he quit drinking in 1971 “then all of a sudden I burst loose” (Northwest Review, p. 128). By 1973 he knew who he was, he knew how to write, his personal life was straightening out with his marriage to Ripley Schemm, and he had begun a nine year “hot streak.”

The Northwest had always had more than its share of abandonments waiting for Dick’s pen, and consequently his poetry, although intensely personal, was never merely personal. His own sense of abandonment dovetailed with the region’s history of disaster: the crushing of the Indians, the fur trade boom and bust (1820-40), the mining boom and bust (1860-1910), the homestead boom and bust (1880-1920; sixty-six per cent failed), the lumber booms and busts (to the present), the water boom and bust (in full swing now). Following his creed (“a brief look at something most people ignore”) Dick cared not for those building each boom, but for those left behind when the boom had passed:

Cracks in eight log buildings, counting sheds and outhouse, widen and a ghost peeks out.
Nothing, tree or mountain, weakens wind coming for the throat. Even wind must work when land gets old. The rotting wagon tongue makes fun of girls who begged to go to town.
Broken brakerods dangle in the dirt.
Alternatives were madness or a calloused moon. Wood they carved the plowblade from turned stone as nameless gray. Indifferent flies left dung intact. One boy had to leave when horses pounded night, and miles away a neighbor's daughter puked. Mother's cry to dinner changed to caw in later years.

("Montana Ranch Abandoned")

Because dispossession, abandonment, and abuse are an integral part of Western history (see Montana historians Howard, Toole, and Malone), Dick Hugo was a social and political poet, a Western poet not just in his landscape and subject but in having the point of view of the abandoned, of the guy on the bottom. Dick's stance was a region's stance:

In my land only the ignored endure, the wolverines, nameless streams the State forgot to dam. . . .

("Sailing from Naples")

Curiously, the regionality of his stance, and his historical context, tend to be overlooked by Eastern critics (including excellent ones: Martz, Vendler, Pritchard, Howard), while Western students see it at once.

The fringe colonies of Europe have always resented the centers of power. England used the New England colonies for lucrative trade and opposed trans-Alleghany settlement, fearing that the colonists would break loose. They did. Jefferson feared that the trans-Mississippi settlers would break loose from Washington's power, and he sent Lewis and Clark to Montana in 1805 partly to keep the West in the nation. He succeeded. Montana has been colonized, exploited and abandoned by the East several times, and this economic and political colonialism has its counterpart in culture: like all dominated and dispossessed peoples, Westerners often feel culturally inferior to the center of power. Twain feared his own ignorance and his disposition to boorish alcoholism exactly as Hugo did, and also feared, as did Hugo, that Western degradation was his only asset. In
“Second Chances” the bottle says to Dick: “Come back, baby. You’ll find/a million poems in your destitute soul.” The West is full of false facades and crumbling “Opera Houses” proclaiming our fears: we are not grand.

So to be “Northwest” and especially to be Montanan is partly to feel intimidated by the rich and powerful back East. Hugo’s voice of personal degradation captures the political and social reality of a region’s degradation:

Overlooking Yale

Top Of The Park, Hillis. Top of the World.
... I am out of wisdom,
eating French toast cooked the year
Yale was founded, too timid to complain,
too far from home to trust my manners.
I’m sure I’m being observed
and my act is not clean. Western paranoia.
John Wayne. Three centuries short
of history. One of stability. Way ahead
in weather and rustic charm you can’t trust.
With Yale below in gold light, I feel
I should have read Milton, ought to be
in the know about something, some key remark
Dryden made about Donne. Not concerned
with the way we talk to old cars,
pat their hoods and murmur “sweet hero.”
Two hundred thousand miles and only
five changes of oil and one valve grind. . . .
Out west, survival is enough. . . .

But we should not too long stress the negative; dispossession and despair are Hugo’s material; the given, not his product, what he gives. Above, for instance, there’s a delightful victory over Yale as Hugo uses the ruse of intellectual and class inferiority to tug on our American heartstrings. Like Huck Finn he lacks book knowledge but his common-sense phrases (“in the know”) happen to be perfect and he has a sound and generous, if road-weary heart—“old hero,” we murmur, and pat his vast Buick of a hood. So far on such bad French toast. Wouldn’t you cook for this man?

If the disenfranchised, the exploited and abandoned find a way to remain, if they endure (Faulkner’s word for the victory of Southern blacks), it is often by means of strength of character, pride. By some
such formula the adolescent toughness of Hugo’s first two books (sometimes a Humphrey Bogart toughness as he said but sometimes more like an orphaned Jimmy Dean) grew in the seventies into a stronger, more mature voice (“now I’m in my Leslie Howard period.” *Trout*, p. 255), a voice for a region’s and a species’ will to endure:

I imagine them resting a moment, then grim with resolve starting down to the sea to get the next stone, and one woman thought strange but obeyed, urging them on and muttering hard at the sky a word we’ve lost. It sounded like ‘shape.’ It meant ‘world.’

(“The Standing Stones of Callanish”)

Learning through suffering is a formula for art at least as old as Aeschylus, and not only was it Dick’s formula but it lies behind the classic Western plot. Easterners—Europe, really—come west expecting paradise, opportunity, a fresh start. Then the work begins and the winter comes and the market prices fall and soon one is, as Nanny Alderson put it, “pioneering in earnest.” The process is one of illusion, disillusionment, endurance. The process as a Western process was vividly observed by Moses Austin in a Kentucky diary of 1796; his paragraph could stand at the head of Western literature:

Ask these Pilgrims what they expect when they git to Kentucky the Answer is Land. . . . can any thing be more Absurd than the Conduct of man, here is hundreds Travelling hundreds of Miles, they Know not for what Nor Whither, except its to Kentucky, passing land almost as good . . . but it will not do its not Kentucky its not the Promised land its not the goodly inheratence the Land of Milk and Honey. and when arrived at this Heaven in Idea what do they find? a goodly land I will allow but to them forbidden Land. exhausted and worn down with distress and disappointment they are at last Obliged to become hewers of wood and Drawers of water.

42 (Moore, p. 26)
The condition of hewing wood and drawing water is not necessarily bad but it isn’t paradise. The note of endurance, the seed of pride, is there. So at the end of many poems of Western disillusionment, Hugo sounds a similar note of vitality:

Fort Benton

This was the last name west on charts.
West of here the world turned that indefinite white of blank paper and settlers faded one at a time alone.
What had been promised in St. Louis proved little more than battering weather and resolve.

... This is the town to leave
for the void and come back to needing a home.
It may be the aged river or the brick hotel
on the bank, heavy as water, or the ritual
that shouldn’t be hard to start: the whole town out shouting ‘come back’ at the breaks one day a year.

In the context of Western history, Dick’s sense of dispossession was in another way elevated from the personal to the political: not only was his dispossession regional, but his resistance to it, his resentment, was the voice of a region: the people in Fort Benton shout at the Missouri breaks; they do not speak with them. Dick was never “regionalist,” if that term refers to someone who pictures a region as delightfully “out of it” or “unusual” or “colorful,” someone who indeed values that region’s distance from power. Pastoral, sentimental and local-color authors do just that; they enjoy a region’s “dispossession.” Hugo resented it. He never wished to escape society, money or control. His impotence he hated; it was a region’s impotence, his rage their rage:

The principal supporting business now is rage. Hatred of the various grays
the mountain sends, hatred of the mill,
The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
who leave each year for Butte.

“Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg”
The primary prayer of his work is not for escape but for real towns, a real economy, real power—a home. Then one can go fishing.

Many pastoralists from Virgil to Dillard had money enough to retire from the court to the country by choice. Hugo sometimes indulged self-pity and self-hate and welcomed degradation, but it was always a degradation that he suffered, never a privileged escape. In all his work you won't find a pleasant bar. Necessary maybe to the dispossessed, but not pleasant. Forget the ferns:


"The Only Bar in Dixon"

This is serious drinking beside the beautiful Flathead River, beside the beautiful buffalo range, near the towering Mission mountains—the land does not redeem. The ranches are serious, the sage flats and wind and winter are serious, the rivers yearn—"the Flathead goes home north northwest"—for the sea. These countryside poems are the cry of a region for something better, not the whine of the privileged to get away. Hugo was never a regionalist: he did not write of things other than power, he wrote of the absence of power. And absence implies presence: the parents, the rich, the militarily superior, the nation that has discarded this waste. If Dick lacked the grace of an aristocrat in handling power and responsibility, he also resented, on behalf of most people on earth, being denied the chance to acquire such grace.

Curiously, the Indians of Montana must have helped Dick assume responsibility; in ways they may have forced his maturation. More visible than on the northwest coast, less assimilated into the dominant culture, the Montana Indians usurped Dick’s position of down and out. His claim to sympathy was challenged by a group, a nation more dispossessed and taking it just as hard:
These Indians explain away their hair between despair and beer. Two pass out unnoticed on the floor. One answers to a cop for children left five hours in a car. Whatever I came here for, engagement with the real, tomorrow's trip to Babb, the first words spoken 'white man' split my tongue. I buy a round of beer no phonier than my money is wrong.

"A Night at the Napi in Browning"

Dick again finds himself uncomfortably cast in the role of the powerful, with money and a "real" life, and as when in Italy he refused the woman cigarettes, he fears he will be phony and wrong. He would rather be the underdog at Yale. His worst fear is that as a person of responsibility he will speak with forked tongue and in this poem I'm afraid he does, for his attempt to shift attention from the Indians' dispossession to his own white guilt, his attempt to sink lower than they, makes a weak end.

And I, a Mercury outside, a credit card, a job, a faded face—what should I do? Go off shaggy to the mountains, a spot remote enough to stay unloved and die in flowers, stinking like a bear?

Although the lines are well written, his petulant, willed exile from love and his imagined death (with us, of course, tearful at his poetic grave) should not be claiming our attention. The Indians have usurped our sympathy, and here is Dick's guilt crowding them out.

I say the Indians must have helped change Dick's stance because in those years, 1964-73, from arrival in Montana to The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, as he was growing in stature and confidence as a poet, as he was becoming more positive in voice, more resilient, less pitiable and ready for marriage and owning a home, at the very same time the Indians were kicking him upstairs, forcing him into the role of a man with something to lose. He responded to new circumstances with new positivism, wrung at some cost from the old negations.
The formula of salvation through suffering and humility, for instance, which in the Napi poem takes a sentimental turn towards self-pity and suicide, in many poems of the period takes a turn towards humility that is as cosmic as personal. The same themes (Indian dispossession, white guilt and how to respond to both) in "Bear Paw," the scene—still an extraordinary site—of Chief Joseph's final military defeat and moral victory, lead to a fine end in which Whites and Indians are brought together, the one nation in noble defeat, the other in bad need of it:

The wind is 95. It still pours from the east like armies and it drains each day of hope.
From any point on the surrounding rim, below, the teepees burn. The wind is infantile and cruel. It cries 'give in' 'give in' and Looking Glass is dying on the hill.
Pale grass shudders. Cattails beg and bow. . . .

... Marked stakes tell you where they fell. Learn what you can. The wind takes all you learn away to reservation graves.

If close enough to struggle, to take blood on your hands, you turn your weeping face into the senile wind. Looking Glass is dead and will not die. The hawk that circles overhead is starved for carrion. One more historian is on the way, his cloud on the horizon. Five years from now the wind will be 100, ful of Joseph's words and dusting plaques.
Pray hard to weather, that lone surviving god, that in some sudden wisdom we surrender.

This poem goes several lines beyond the weeping face at the Napi in Browning. It goes beyond egocentric self-destruction to chastisement—which presumes a superior force. What we and the Indians surrender to is wind pouring like armies, before which Indians literally fade into the grass while we pray for salvation by acknowledging "that lone surviving god": weather.
Hugo's winds, weathers and landscapes are a considerable part of his poetry. Rarely backgrounds or scenes, his landscapes are more usually characters and like characters they can play many roles and have an active relation to the speaker: "Pray hard to weather." The land always excited Dick; in the union of himself and landscape the poet was conceived:

... after I got out of the service, when I was sitting on a Seattle bus—it was at 16th SW and Holden Street—I was thinking about what east meant to me, that is to say, there were four hills east, if you walked from our house. For about a mile you would walk over four hills, and we called them by numbers: First Hill, Second Hill, Third Hill, and Fourth Hill. And then on the top of the Fourth Hill it opened up into the big Duwamish River Valley, and I was thinking about taking an imaginary journey, somehow, over these four hills, going east from the house, and somehow that this would go on forever. [I knew that the entire nation ... lay on the other side of those mountains, there it was, a whole nation, and that here I was in the west.—Author's tape] And I don't know how this led to sudden knowledge. I never said, "You're going to be a poet," but I remember at that moment it suddenly came across my mind that I would spend all my life writing poems.

(TROUT, p. 207.)

The huge space that was the continent became in many early poems, the space that was the sea. Dick needed that space in his poetry or just beyond, a void out of which we carve our homes and bars. When he came to Montana that sea became "Open Country":

It is much like ocean the way it opens and rolls. Cows dot the slow climb of a field like salmon trawls dot swells, and here or there ducks climb on no definite heading.
And you come back here
where land has ways of going on
and the shadow of a cloud
crawls like a freighter, no port in mind,
no captain, and the charts dead wrong.

The "lone surviving god" of land and weather to which we pray is
not always diabolic, pouring like armies from the east. When the void
is genuinely other, out there, like Stafford's sea it saves us from self-
centeredness, it offers an alien grace. As often as not, however, that
void overlaps the human world, penetrates the psyche and is
penetrated, giving birth to images of despair:

Decaying shacks, abandoned ranches, desolation,
endless spaces, plains, mountains, ghost towns:
it's ready-made for my sensibilities.

(TROUT, 258)

In that list the landscape and the psyche are overlapped, as in "Point
No Point":

Even in July, from this point north
the sea is rough. Today the wind is treason
tearing at our flag and kicking that commercial
trawl around. We and salmon are beached
or driven down.

Dick's vast outer spaces are usually in tension with a dense inner
space and a dense poetics, so that far from being a place to relax, that
"big sky" (when merged with the psyche) is humming with the wall-
to-wall pressure that throughout his work seems essentially urban,
driving, banging, strained:

space that drives into expanse,
boredom banging in your face,
the horizon stiff with strain.

"Ocean on Monday"

Within such a horizon we all are driven to makeshift bars, and thus
Dick's own orphaned search for home is lifted above the personal not
only by the regionality of the themes and by the universality of the psyche, but also by the universality of a landscape or cosmos which forces us to shelter. Sometimes his environments seem like a deep sea pressure, at three hundred or four hundred feet or wherever the margin is of unaided human endurance, and the only thing that can save us is something equally strong within pressing back:

Believe in the couple who have finished their picnic and make wet love in the grass, the wise tiny creatures cheering them on. Believe in milestones, the day you left home forever and the cold open way a world wouldn’t let you come in. Believe you and I are that couple. Believe you and I sing tiny and wise and could if we had to eat stone and go on.

(“Glen Uig”)

That last line—“could if we had to eat stone and go on”—is the heart of Hugo, for beyond the issues of content, style or historical context is the voice. Dick Hugo was a presence. His booming laugh, his outrageous Falstaffian vitality engendered in poems a tender toughness “as bear-blunt and shufflingly endearing” as the man. (Trout, p. 289) He was master of a strong, affirmative style, a compassionate voice that had to be heard. He never played around. He was never interested in the perfect image poem, the little jewel of virtuosity that no one needs. Like many older poets—Yeats, Stevens, Penn Warren—he was beginning (in 31 Letters and 13 Dreams, White Center, and The Right Madness on Skye) to use more conversational, accessible lines that don’t pressure us with the poet’s poetics so much as with his need to make us believe. “Please hear me,” these poems say, not “Be amazed.” Alas, Dick died far short of the age, 70, when those other poets were entering their final and most graceful phase.

Because of that booming voice, that resilient energy, humor and heart, Hugo’s poetry is essentially positive, and American. In spite of all the ruin, he is not Roman. He speaks of the past in order to come to the present, of despair in order to come to hope, of dispossession in order to come home. The voice is straightforward—he does “look the world square in the eye”—and his nuances of technique tend to make the voice stronger, not more complex: as the poet Dave Smith (one of Hugo’s best critics) said, in style Dick was “a meat and potatoes man” (Trout, p. 281). That’s what he wanted to be. That’s what he was sure he was.
The power of Dick’s voice was never more clear than at his memorial service in Missoula, when Dick’s presence—for it was that—gave voice to the people. In an hour of great eloquence and riotous tastefulness, the most eloquent, most tasteful and most hilarious were old friends farthest from the university: John Mitchell from Seattle and Jennie Herndon of the old Milltown Union Bar, Laundramat and Cafe. Something in Dick and his poetry gave them supreme confidence in their speech, and if poetry is “the mind in the act of finding what will suffice,” as Stevens said, they became poets that day.

I drove to Spokane last week with the Moulding daughters and my own. On the way we joked about the whorehouses in Wallace, Idaho, and wondered at the lead-poisoned wasteland around Kellogg and Smelterville. Then came the white Cataldo church high and lonely on a green hill, and the girls marvelled—what is it? how did it come to be there? The next day at lunch I read them Dick’s “Cataldo Mission”:

We come here tourist on a bad sky day, warm milk at 15,000 and the swamp across the freeway blinding white. . . .

. . .


. . .

This dry pale day, cars below crawl thirsty, 500 miles to go before the nation quits.

When I had finished, Evey Moulding, ninth grader, who had known Dick half her life and to the end of his, said (so help me God):

That’s what’s so neat about being a writer. I mean, it’s like he was right there with us.

Missoula
April 30, 1983
SOURCES

Author's tape. Bevis–Hugo Interview from University of Montana extension course on Montana writers, 1977, produced by KUFM. Author's possession.


