# Offa's Dyke Journal


A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 7

Edited by Howard Williams

## Aims and Scope

*Offa's Dyke Journal* is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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**Front cover**: Detail of John Speed's map of Flintshire from 1610 showing the earliest cartographic depiction of Offa's Dyke (private collection)

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# Poetry and Archaeology as Earthwork: Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*

Christoph Bode

*This article analyses and interprets Geoffrey Hill's collection of poetry* Mercian Hymns *(1971). In* Mercian Hymns, *Hill deals with the historical King Offa, Offa's kingdom of Mercia, Offa's Dyke, his coinage, rule and foreign relations, but in such a way that all these are connected to Hill's childhood and youth, to his life now and to the region that once was Mercia. It is argued that what Hill achieves here can be read as a poetical transcendence of time and space. This essay also reveals a stunning analogy between Hill's idea of the writing of poetry as work in the layers of language on the one hand and archaeology on the other: both can be seen as earthwork. The article is a slightly revised, but not updated version of Bode 1992.*

*Keywords*: Coinage, historicity, King Offa, Offa's Dyke, poetry and archaeology as earthwork, regionalism.

## I 'There's no there there' (Gertrude Stein): The mediacy of ideas of regionality

It is all too understandable that at a time when regional cultures are fading fast and the ensuing vacuum is filled with the surrogate paraphernalia of uniform mass culture, there should be a reaction against this levelling process, against the imminent total hegemony of the 'centre'. Yet the refusal to be content with the inauthentic and the longing for a sense of belonging do not in themselves vouch for the soundness of a 'new regionalism'. The trap is set for one to be caught in another kind of inauthenticity when the new/old points of reference – viz. region, landscape, history and myth – are not subjected to some critical questioning as well. There is the danger that, fleeing from the dictates of a superimposed hegemonic culture, one finds oneself landed in the new myth of marginality, a myth of blissful *immediacy*. The idea that 'somewhere out there' life is closer to the roots and somehow more 'real', because 'there' the experience of the present still partakes of a rich, unbroken, indigenous tradition – this idea is itself a highly ideological construct of the 'centre', which has always tended to project myths of origin, immediacy and innocence onto its margins.

'Region', 'landscape', 'history' and 'myth' are never 'there' so that one could easily have recourse to them. They are never simply 'at hand', in unmediated presence. But what they *are*, in the sense of what they *mean* to us, is 'always already' the result of a historical and cultural negotiation – and therefore not 'given' but 'made'. If, as Hayden White says in his account of Droysen's hermeneutically based philosophy of history,

> the historically real is never given by naked 'experience'; it is always already worked up and fashioned by a specific organisation of experience,

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> the praxis of the society from within which the picture of reality is conceptualised (White 1987: 98)

and if, as Gadamer says, it is the hallmark of a *historical* consciousness that it always brings its own historicity into consideration (Gadamer 1975: 343), then the idea of a particular region and of what it has come to mean for somebody should always be subjected to a rigorous questioning which must of necessity be a rigorous self-questioning, too. The relation between a historically mediated object and a historically situated consciousness is necessarily a dialectical one, the process is one of hermeneutical interaction.

The difficulties for a new regionalism are therefore at least twofold: For one, it cannot escape its own temporality, it must set itself *relative* to something that is also subject to time, something that, in its *meaningful* aspect, is constituted by a hermeneutical activity, which, by definition, is always as much self-questioning as it is self-assuring. Two, it relates itself to something that is on the verge of becoming extinct. It is a last-minute attempt – not the first in history – to salvage cultural goods threatened by historical change. Jeremy Hooker (1982: 181) was right to point out that 'poetry of place after Wordsworth cannot be understood, I believe, outside a context of loss', and Seamus Heaney (1977), in his brilliant essay on Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill, 'Now and in England', was certainly not mistaken when he drew the connection between a 'sense of an ending' and a kind of poetry that reverts to regional and local 'origins'.

Which is a risky business: The very attempt to preserve and recover, to go back to one's roots, may fatally limit one's horizon. Friedrich Nietzsche, in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie*, differentiated three kinds of relating oneself to the past, the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical, and of the second he wrote:

> Das Kleine, das Beschränkte, das Morsche und Veraltete erhält seine eigne Würde und Unantastbarkeit dadurch, daß die bewahrende und verehrende Seele des antiquarischen Menschen in diese Dinge übersiedelt und sich damit ein heimisches Nest bereitet (... ). Der antiquarische Sinn eines Menschen, einer Stadtgemeinde, eines ganzen Volkes hat immer ein höchst beschränktes Gesichtsfeld; das Allermeiste nimmt er gar nicht wahr, und das Wenige, was er sieht, sieht er viel zu nahe und isoliert; er kann es nicht messen und nimmt deshalb alles als gleich wichtig und deshalb jedes Einzelne als zu wichtig. (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 40, 41)

For Nietzsche, the ideal attitude lay between the extremes of total historical amnesia and a life-denying living in the past, an attitude which manifested itself in the '*plastische Kraft* eines Menschen, eines Volkes, einer Kultur':

> (... ) ich meine jene Kraft, aus sich heraus eigenartig zu wachsen,

> Vergangenes und Fremdes umzubilden und einzuverleiben, Wunden auszuheilen, Verlornes zu ersetzen, zerbrochne Formen aus sich nachzuformen. (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 32)

It seems to me that poetry is especially suited for such an enterprise – to question and to salvage at the same time, to relate itself not to a given entity but to a dialectically opposed pole – because, as Adorno emphasised in his 'Rede über Lyrik und Gesellschaft', poetry is the aesthetic test for a philosophy of hermeneutic and historical dialectics,[1] containing in itself an element of *rupture* and oppositeness, thematising implicitly, and, as it were, allegorically, 'das geschichtliche Verhältnis des Subjekts zur Objektivität, des Einzelnen zur Gesellschaft im Medium des subjektiven, auf sich zurückgeworfenen Geistes.' (Adorno 1957: 16).

If 'region', 'landscape', 'history' and 'myth' are concepts which stand very much in need of questioning before one can rely on them for a new sense of identity and if that questioning can best be achieved through poetry as the most self-questioning of literary genres and the most 'languagy', too,[2] one might do worse than turn to the poetry of Geoffrey Hill for an illustration of what could be meant by a poetry that is at once rooted and deracinated, immersed in history but outside History, regional yet of no particular place, concrete but elusive etc. – a poetry that does not stabilise itself through reified concepts but offers a conspicuously *mediated* vision of its *donné* and that is in turn affected by its mutability. 'No other English poet this century', says Hugh Haughton, 'has generated such a powerful and disturbing sense of history in his work' (Haughton 1985: 148). In the poetry of Geoffrey Hill – for some 'the best poet now writing in England' (Christopher Ricks, quoted in Sherry 1985: 210) or 'the strongest British poet now alive' (Bloom 1976: 234) – there is ample evidence of, as Haughton put it, 'the imaginative pull of the past for a poet obsessed above all by the persistence of what has been lost, and the impossibility of reappropriating it: the idea of continuity – and the stark fact of distance' (Haughton 1985: 131). Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* is a good case in point (Hill 1985).

## II An Offa you can't refuse

*Mercian Hymns* (originally published in 1971), Hill's third book of poetry, was completed in only three years – a comparatively short time for this painstakingly meticulous poet. It is a sequence of thirty prose poems 'about' (but not quite, as

[1] Cf. Adorno (1957: 16): 'Wenn einmal die große Philosophie die (...) Wahrheit konstruierte, Subjekt und Objekt seien überhaupt keine starren und isolierten Pole, sondern könnten nur aus dem Prozeß bestimmt werden, in dem sie sich aneinander abarbeiten und verändern, dann ist die Lyrik die ästhetische Probe auf jenes dialektische Philosophem.'

[2] Adorno 1957: 14–15: 'Die spezifische Paradoxie des lyrischen Gebildes, die in Objektivität umschlagende Subjektivität, ist gebunden an jenen Vorrang der Sprachgestalt in der Lyrik, von dem der Primat der Sprache in der Dichtung überhaupt, bis zur Form von Prosa, herstammt.'

will be seen) the Anglo-Saxon king Offa, who ruled Mercia between 757 and 796 and re-established his kingdom as the supreme power on the British Isles. At the end of his reign, he had practically all of England south of the Humber under his control, with Northumbria and Wessex as allies – a fact that was reflected in his self-styled title *rex totius Anglorum patriae*, or later, for short, *rex Anglorum*.

This unification he achieved by 'ruthlessly suppressing resistance from several small kingdoms in and around Mercia' *(Encyclopaedia Britannica)*, and although he remains 'the obscurest of the leading figures of Anglo-Saxon history', because 'no contemporary wrote the history of his reign, and of much that he did there is only a faint tradition' this most powerful and impressive king before Alfred the Great seems to have been a thoroughly disagreeable man, 'formidable and unsympathetic' (Stenton 1989: 224).

Of his forty years' reign four achievements, apart from the near unification of England, stand out: 1) He was the first English king to be accepted as an equal on the Continent. Charlemagne sought his friendship and wanted their children to marry. Offa had good relations with Pope Adrian I and used them to stabilise his power at home. 2) Offa was a king who saw to the economic interests of his realm: After a trade war with France, Charlemagne and Offa signed the first commercial treaty in English history (796), not only laying down principles of foreign trade but also specifying quality and quantity of the trade goods to be exchanged. 3) In his reign, Offa introduced a new currency – coins 'broader, thinner and heavier' than before, bearing his name and portrait ('showing a delicacy of execution which is unique in the whole history of the Anglo-Saxon coinage') and the name of the moneyer on the reverse: 'The continuous history of the English currency begins in Offa's time' (Stenton 1989: 223). 4) Under Offa, a great earthwork, known as *Offa's Dyke*, was constructed to define Mercia's western frontier against the British. Its remains can still be seen today and both the scale and the course of that fortification bear testimony to a king who seems to have been a *Realpolitiker* through and through: 'No other Anglo-Saxon king ever regarded the world at large with so secular a mind or so acute a political sense' (Stenton 1989: 224).

All this reappears in Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, though significantly transformed; for, as Hill makes clear in his explanatory notes to the sequence, the historical King Offa is only a stepping-stone for him, a point of departure for a poetic disputation of the history of his native region, Worcestershire, or the West Midlands:

> *The Offa who figures in this sequence* [emphasis added] might perhaps most usefully be regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands, his dominion enduring from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth (and possibly beyond). The indication of such a timespan will, I trust, explain and to some extent justify a number of anachronisms. (Hill 1985: 201).

But why Offa? Several answers present themselves: For one, Offa stands for the beginning of England as a national state *(avant la lettre)* and as a military and economic power of international impact. He personifies the merging of political, religious and economic interests and is himself an intriguing compound of cruelty and creativity, of greatness and meanness, both tyrant and creator of order and of law. Besides, as a past ruler of Hill's home country, this highly ambiguous figure presents himself as ideal material for a poetic acting-out of Hill's own ambivalent feelings for the region he hails from – the temporal distance, as indicated above, is, in true hermeneutic fashion, the theatre in which this negotiation with personal and national history takes place. In addition, as will be demonstrated later, Offa's earthwork and coinage supply Hill with magnificent metaphors for his own poetic activity, and lastly, it is the very scarcity of information about Offa that makes him the ideal unifying principle for a sequence of prose poems on the *problematics*, the possibilities and dangers of 'region', 'landscape', 'history' and 'myth'. Winston Churchill remarked that 'in studying Offa we are like geologists who instead of finding a fossil find only the hollow shape in which a creature of unusual strength and size undoubtedly resided' (Churchill 1972: 67). For Hill, this hollow shape, this absence of a presence is ideally suited to trigger off and allow the free play of imagination. Not that he projects a prejudice onto the past or subjects it to 'the violence of retrospective interpretation' (Habermas 1979: 192; author's translation). Rather, what 'Offa' *might mean* is the ruling concern and central question of *Mercian Hymns*, this linguistic field of force containing and celebrating the tensions and contradictions of a subject in commerce with history, of subject and object dialectically entwined.

In an interview with John Haffenden Hill explained his motivation in the choice of Offa:

> (… ) I was genuinely interested in the phenomenon of King Offa and of the rise and fall of the Kingdom of Mercia. My feeling for Offa and Mercia can scarcely be disentangled from my mixed feelings for my own home country of Worcestershire. Since Offa seems to have been on the whole a rather hateful man who nonetheless created forms of government and coinage which compel one's admiration, this image of a tyrannical creator of order and beauty is, if you like, an objective correlative for the inevitable feelings of love and hate which any man or woman must feel for the *patria*. The murderous brutality of Offa as a political animal seems again an objective correlative for the ambiguities of English history in general, as a means of trying to encompass and accommodate the early humiliations and fears of one's own childhood and also one's discovery of the tyrannical streak in oneself as a child. (Haffenden 1981: 94)

Therefore, *Mercian Hymns* is 'about' King Offa, but at the same time 'about' the poet, it is 'about' the past, the present and what's in between, it is both deeply

regional and basically about England. Here as elsewhere, Hill's subject is *difficulty* (cf. Bloom 1976: 235) and the painful and, at times, exhilarating realisation of being inescapably bound to historicity. *Mercian Hymns* is an imaginative meditation on roots, which refuses to consolidate, objectify and reify something that is never immediately accessible.

Yet something *is* given: Offa's deeds, the name he made himself, the titles he paraded, and it is here that Hill begins his 'intense onslaught upon historical realities', his 'indictment, (...) often a funny one, of a particularly English inheritance' (Hart 1986: 153). The first of the Mercian Hymns, which are only headed by Roman numerals, the titles being printed separately, is called 'The Naming of Offa':

> King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sand-
> stone: overlord of the MS: architect of the his-
> toric rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth,
> the summer hermitage in Holy Cross: guardian of
> the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge: contractor
> of the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-
> changer: commissioner for oaths: martyrologist:
> the friend of Charlemagne.
>
> 'I liked that', said Offa, 'sing it again.'

So much for history as a discipline. Into the last line Hill manages to compress a verdict for which, in 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters', Brecht needed a whole poem.

There is another approach, different from the historian's – it is the poet's, through language and sound, and it is displayed in No. II, also called 'The Naming of Offa':

> A pet-name, a common name. Best-selling brand, curt
> graffito. A laugh; a cough. A syndicate. A specious
> gift. Scoffed-at horned phonograph.
>
> The starting-cry of a race. A name to conjure with.

Indeed, 'a name to conjure with'! 'Laugh', 'cough' mimic and echo 'Offa', so does 'scoffed-at horned phonograph' ('His Master's Voice'?). The poem is a play on O, F, F, A ('What's in a name?'), an elliptical riddle ('Curt graffito?' – '– – – off!') (cf. Sherry 1987: 130), a historical crossword puzzle ('specious gift?' – 'an Offa you should refuse'). The race is open ('They're off!') – the Anglo-Saxons enter the competition. Hill's ambiguities are always a means of compressing language, of overlaying meaning with meaning. Yes, Offa will be pursued on *this* ground, on the poet's own, the Mercia of his mind.

**III The Poetical Transcendence of Time: 'I, Offa' on the Moebius Strip**

In Hill's Mercia, the past and the present are merged and blended. The historical past is 'there' only insofar as it is present in the poet's mind, whose own historical present (the twentieth century) in turn consists mainly of childhood memories, his personal past. *Mercian Hymns* is about the presence of the past and about the passing of the present. That is why, strictly speaking, there are no anachronisms in this sequence (cf. Bloom 1976: 244). There is no frame of reference against which an anachronism of one kind or the other could safely be identified.

Here is the beginning and the end of No. XIV, 'Offa's Laws (2)':

> Dismissing reports and men, he put pressure on the
> wax, blistered it to a crest. He threatened male-
> factors with ash from his noon cigar.
> (… )
>
> At dinner, he relished the mockery of drinking his
> family's health. He did this whenever it suited
> him, which was not often.

In between these, we read the following passage:

> When the sky cleared above Malvern, he lingered in
> his orchard; by the quiet hammer-pond. Trout-fry
>
> simmered there, translucent, as though forming the
> water's underskin. He had a care for natural min-
> utiae. What his gaze touched was his tenderness.
> Woodlice sat pellet-like in the cracked bark and
> a snail sugared its new stone.

Who is 'he'? Is this about the love of nature of a ruthless tyrant? Or is it about the Offa hidden in GeOFFrey? Who is to decide? Here is 'he' mercilessly planning to strike back and eliminate his enemies (No. VIII):

> The mad are predators. Too often lately they harbour
> against us. A novel heresy exculpates all maimed
> souls. Abjure it! I am the King of Mercia, and
> I know.
>
> Threatened by phone-calls at midnight, venomous let-
> ters, forewarned I have thwarted their imminent
> devices.

> Today I name them; tomorrow I shall express the new
> law. I dedicate my awakening to this matter.

If this unmitigated ferocity and unrestrained desire for revenge betray an infantile streak in the tyrant, there is also a tyrannous streak in the child:

> (... )
>
> Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after
> the day of the lost fighter: a biplane, already
> obsolete and irreplaceable, two inches of heavy
> snub silver. Ceolred let it spin through a hole
> in the classroom-floorboards, softly,
> into the rat-droppings and coins.
>
> After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering
> with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed
> him. Then, leaving Ceolred, he journeyed for hours,
> calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry
> named *Albion.* (No. VII, 'The Kingdom of Offa (1)')

So, just as past and present merge, the identities of 'Offa' and Hill's childhood self are blended and likened to each other in a process of perpetual cross-fading. As Vincent Sherry remarked, *Mercian Hymns* is 'not a historical fantasia or a museum of local color; it is a poem of autobiography, though an oblique one' (Sherry 1987: 130). But even if it is true, in a way, that 'Hill has at last no subject but his own complex subjectivity' (Bloom 1976: 243), the exploration of his former self and his facing up to 'the tyrannous streak in oneself as a child' (Hill, see above) are means of 'appropriating' King Offa, of coming to terms with him. Calvin Bedient was right in comparing, in this respect, *Mercian Hymns* with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness:* 'The volume has the scary control and exhilaration of Marlowe on his trail for Kurtz' (Bedient 1981: 18); of course, Hill in trailing Offa probes his own 'heart of darkness': at the end of his journey, nothing human will be alien to him. The relation is anything but one-sided: As Offa emerges from the past, he becomes a key to the poet's childhood self. The elucidation is mutual.

The tensions and paradoxes created by this kind of ahistorical collage can be very funny, and indeed Hill himself has twice pointed to the 'occasional comedy' in *Mercian Hymns* (cf. Purkis 1976: 52; Morrison 1980: 213).

This, for example, is part of 'The Death of Offa (1)', No. XXVII:

> 'Now when King Offa was alive and dead', they were
> all there, the funeral gleemen: the papal legate and
> rural dean; Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercen-
> aries; a shuffle of house-earls.
>
> He was defunct. They were perfunctory. The ceremony
> stood acclaimed. The mob received memorial vouch-
> ers and signs.[3]

In No. XVII, 'Offa's Journey to Rome (1)', 'he' drives his sports car through the Vosges and after a flashback to a serious bike-accident when he was a boy –

> 'God's honour – our bikes touched; he skidded and came
> off.' 'Liar.' A timid father's protective bellow.
> Disfigurement of a village-king. Just look at
> the bugger ...' – ,

he speeds up his 'maroon GT car',

> (...) [it] chanted then overtook. He lavished on
> the high valleys its *haleine.*

*Haleine*, Hill explains in his notes, is a reference to *La Chanson de Roland:* "Ço dist li reis: 'Cel corn ad lunge aleine.'" (202). The modern Olifant – a sports car, and contrary to Roland, 'he' is determined to use it.

It could be argued that as a rule such fusing tends to diminish the past but never enhances our esteem of the present. But the answer *Mercian Hymns* gives is not that clear-cut. When we find that in Hymn No. XXI images of ancient warfare and modern holiday tourism are daringly blended and fused, a successful amalgamation of the seemingly disparate, –

> Cohorts of charabancs fanfared Offa's province
> and his concern, negotiating the by-ways from Teme
> to Trent. Their windshields dripped butterflies.
> Stranded on hilltops they signalled with plumes
> of steam. Twilight menaced the land. The young
> women wept and surrendered.
>
> Still, everyone was cheerful, heedless in such days:

[3] The first line refers to the fact that Offa, in 783, had inaugurated his son, Ecgfrith, as his successor, so that the continuity of dominion was ensured. Cf. Stenton, 1989: 218–219.

at summer weekends dipping into valleys beyond
Mercia's dyke. Tea was enjoyed, by lakesides where
all might fancy carillons of real Camelot vi-
brating through the silent water. –

we cannot maintain – or can we? – that thereby history is exposed as a process of degeneration and decline. Again, when Christopher Ricks in reviewing *Mercian Hymns* detected 'pained comedy' in the second stanza of No. XX and commented, 'to see the names of far-off battles resurrected for suburban dwellings is to be perplexed by, not superior about, what history seems to have done to the English and their honourable name of Smith' (Ricks 1972: 274), he ignored two important counterweight aspects: In the preceding lines –

Primeval heathland spattered with the bones of mice
and birds; where adders basked and bees made pro-
vision, mantling the inner walls of their burh: –

the homely cosiness of middle-class England receives an analogue from the natural world – it is not 'unnatural' to protect your private happiness, to make provisions, to make a castle of your home. Second, as the poem is entitled "Offa's 'Defence of the English People' (1)", it can be read as a vindication of a way of life, the life of the Smiths and the Joneses. But, admittedly, given Offa's controversial role in the sequence, this again undercuts any unequivocal reading of this tableau.

There is a second 'Defence of the English People' (No. XXII): It is 'about' World War II as remembered by a boy:

(... )

At home the curtains were drawn. The wireless boomed
its commands. I loved the battle-anthems and the gregarious news.

Then, in the early shelter, warmed by a blue-gassed
storm lantern, I huddled with stories of dragon-
tailed airships and warriors who took wing im-
mortal as phantoms.

No evidence of a downright condemnation of the present as an inferior version of the past – no acquittal either. Only a defence that is tied to the romantic, fairy-tale perspective of a child who doesn't really know what war is – but still, a defence of sorts.

'The memories of childhood', Dylan Thomas said, 'have no order and no end' (Thomas 1953). In Hill's Mercia, the beginnings of England and its virtual coming

to an end are interlaced and interlocked with the beginnings of the poet's mind and his 'now', which must always carry an air of an ending. Time in *Mercian Hymns* is certainly a continuum, but it is twisted like a Moebius strip: there is neither outside nor inside – it has no beginning and no end.

**IV Place is only a point in time: the strata of earth and language and the density of the medium**

In yet another sense the past is present. Landscape can be seen as a physical, material record of history: In its forms, in the strata of earth and soil, we not only find history *inscribed*, but in a way these *are* the material manifestations of time. Or, in other words, history and time are spatialised in the process of sedimentation (see also Lively 1976). In order to go back in time, one must dig and excavate – the further back, the deeper. The historian's job and specifically the archaeologist's job is to bring to light that which lies covered by strata of more recent date. The roots of the present are always in the compost, detritus and sediment of the past – and they profit from it. To follow one's roots is hard labour – but it can be done here and now.

*Mercian Hymns* teems with imagery of earth, soil, strata, digging and excavating. As the cycles of natural life run their course, death and decay form the topmost layer of soil: 'Primeval heathland spattered with the bones of mice and birds' (XX), 'He reigned forty years. Seasons touched and retouched the soil' (XI). Likewise, what is lost in the human sphere becomes part of the underground hoard, as in the case of the lost model airplane:

> (...) Ceolred let it spin through a hole
> in the classroom floorboards, softly, into the
> rat-droppings and coins. (VII)

Ground and soil are the stratum where life is transformed into rotting matter, preparing a rich ground for new life: Becoming and decaying are inseparably entwined (see, for example, No. XII).

Under the most recent sediments of the soil, there are the strata of earth, partaking in the same dialectics, being source and ending, origin and grave:

> I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots
> and endings. Child's play. I abode there, bided my
> time: (... ). (IV)

The mole – or moldywarp (XII) – is the secret king of this realm, a perfect underkingdom, where he makes contact with Roman and Anglo-Saxon remains (IV).

The workers who find 'Offa's Coins (2)' are in the same trade:

> Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant
> soil. They clove to the hoard. They ransacked
> epiphanies, vertebrae of the chimera, armour of
> wild bees' larvae. They struck the fire-dragon's
> faceted skin.
>
> The men were paid to caulk water-pipes. They brewed
> and pissed amid splendour; their latrine seethed
> its estuary through nettles. They are scattered
> to your collations, moldywarp. (XII)

As the present now is only the past of a coming age, even the kitchen garden promises to be a rich archaeological site for future generations:

> We have a kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards,
> with splinters of habitation. The children shriek
> and scavenge, play havoc. They incinerate boxes,
> rags and old tyres. They haul a sodden log, hung
> with soft shields of fungus, and launch it upon
> the flames. (XIX)

As long as one has access to the past, one can become someone else: The boy wrenches the snarled root of a dead crab-apple from the earth and, sporting it like antlers, becomes 'Cernunnos, the branched god' (XV), i. e. the mythological Celtic stag-god of fertility (Sherry 1987: 133).

Given such a dynamic view of landscape, such a temporal idea of place, it is small wonder that sometimes, when 'he' lived in a 'Fern Hill'-like boy's kingdom –

> The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall
> to their freedom, I dug and hoarded. Orchards
> fruited above clefts. I drank from the honeycombs of
> chill sandstone. (VI) – ,

'the landscape flowed away, back to / its source' (VI). Not only can such a landscape be read (Hart 1986: 159) – to the initiated and sensitive it speaks on its own, like the French landscape in Hill's *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy:*

> Landscape is like revelation; it is both
> singular crystal and the remotest things.
> Cloud-shadows of seasons revisit the earth,
> odourless myrrh borne by the wandering kings. (188)

In earth and its strata, in landscape as the material presence of the past, Hill finds a powerful metaphor for language, and in the digger's activity the perfect analogue for

the poet's. For Hill, language has always been a very material thing, a medium which through its density puts up a resistance to the artist who works in it and who, in order to bring out what is hidden in it, to bring out its potential, must overcome 'the coercive force of language' (Hill 1984: 2), a feat that can never be performed to perfection, since the elements of language as his only material 'always already' carry meaning – meaning which even by the most rigorous re-contextualisation of these elements can never be totally obliterated. Compared to the other arts, literature is congenitally impure. Hill: 'The arts which use language are the most impure of arts, (...).' (Hill 1984: 2). But if there is no escape from the prison-house of language, the poet can still negotiate for better terms of convict labour. More on this point later on. Suffice it to say now that Hill's view of language as a material medium comes through in his poetical treatment of it. Critics have often remarked that Hill's 'words verge on a density like that of the physical objects they name' (Sherry 1987: 130) or that, more concretely, his words are like bricks (Bayley 1979: 38) or like 'molten solder' (Heaney 1977: 480).

But earth and its strata is the more appropriate trope for Hill's idea of language because it highlights both its *materiality* and its *historicity*. Hill in an interview with Blake Morrison:

> 'The poet's true commitment must always be first to the vertical richness of language. The poet's gift is to make history and politics and religion speak for themselves through the strata of language.' (Morrison 1980: 214).

And, at another instance:

> Language *contains* everything you want – history, sociology, economics: it is a kind of drama of human destiny. One thinks how it has been used and exploited in the past, politically and theologically. Its forthrightness and treachery are a drama of the honesty of man himself. Language reveals life (quoted in Ricks 1972: 301).

Consequently Hill approvingly quotes the philosopher Rush Rhees as saying: 'For we speak as others have spoken before us. And a sense of language is also a feeling for ways of living that have meant something' (Hill 1984: 11).

Therefore, by immersing himself in his medium, language, which is historical through and through, the poet at the same time makes contact with the past: 'In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice' (Hill in Haffenden: 88). Just as the archaeologist unearths his findings, the poet by engaging in his material is always a treasure-hunter of sorts, a digger for lost but retrievable riches. And riches Hill brings

home in *Mercian Hymns*. The profile he cuts through the English language brings into open view a linguistic layering whose mixed flavour is matchlessly described by Heaney again:

> Hill is (… ) sustained by the Anglo-Saxon base, but his proper guarantor is that language as modified and amplified by the vocabularies and values of the Mediterranean, by the early medieval Latin influence; his is to a certain extent a scholastic imagination founded on an England that we might describe as Anglo Romanesque, touched by the polysyllabic light of Christianity but possessed by darker energies which might be acknowledged as barbaric (Heaney 1977: 472).

But it pays to follow the well-established analogy of poetry and archaelogy (cf. Getz 1982: 13; Hart 1973: 173; Sherry 1987: 31), of writing and digging, onto another aspect which throws light on Hill's peculiar way with words. Archaeological findings do not by themselves tell a story. It is only when they are embedded into a narrative that they attain meaning: reality is found, but meaning is constituted; and it is constituted exactly when the relations between the findings, objects and other data are spelt out, one way or another. Meaning, not only in language, but in history, too, does not reside *in* the elements of discourse or in the objects of study, but it exists *between* what is given, it is not a substance but a relation. And it is here that Hill's practice – or the poet's practice in general – differs fundamentally from that of the historian. The meaning is deliberately and significantly withheld. Words stand there isolated like objects in a landscape – the narrative that might link them is not given:

> Gasholders, russet among fields. Milldams, marlpools
> that lay unstirring. Eel-swarms. Coagulations of
> frogs: once, with branches and half-bricks, he
> battered a ditchful; then sidled away from the
> stillness and silence. (VII)

> Tracks of ancient occupation. Frail ironworks rust
> ing in the thorn-thicket. Hearthstones; charred
> lullabies. A solitary axe-blow that is the echo
> of a lost sound. (XXVIII)

As Hayden White has emphasised, only the chronicle form of historical representation could do without a narrative (White 1987: 1–25), but it could only do so because it presupposed a *transcendental* guarantor of the meaning of the facts it recorded. No such thing in Hill, of course. It is true that the Mercian Hymns are 'looking at history (… ) through minutiae' (Booth 1985: 205), but the solidity and concreteness of the objects evoked by Hill's solid and concrete words (cf. Bedient 1981: 21; Dodsworth 1971: 61–63)

is deceiving: What they are seems clear enough, what they mean is a mystery.

Here, we are at the core of Hill's often-remarked hermeticism, complexity and ambiguity. A poetry that systematically erases the common links between its elements sets them free to multiple interpretation. Despite their seeming solidity in meaning, they begin to flimmer and flicker, and for the moment it seems as if the poet had overcome 'the inertia of language', '[its] coercive force' (Hill 1984: 2). Hill's 'remarkable economy' (Ricks 1972: 364), his Empsonian 'maximal, directed ambiguity' (Thurley 1974: 154), is thus due to elimination, to a systematic withholding of a meaningful context, which is the perfect soil for a *plurality* of *possible* contexts. And what is true of the relations between the words is also true of the relations between parts of a poem and of those between a poem and all others of the sequence.[4] That is why all quoting is misquoting. What I mean is: It is somewhat deceitful to quote from *Mercian Hymns*, let alone paraphrase, because each passage apart from the evidence it is supposed to produce seems to have an undertow of meaning pointing in a different direction – and if it does not, this is only because it has been doctored for the sake of the argument …

This is the secret of the 'unyieldingness' of *Mercian Hymns* (Ricks 1972) and the reason why Hill's poetry has been called 'strong poetry' (Bloom 1976) or could be mentioned as an example of 'Language poetry' (Perloff): As the poet cannot escape the conditions of his material, its inertia and gravity, his only chance is to sever the habitual ties between its elements, condense through elimination and thereby achieve a new quality of *density* of the medium, one that is not at all like the intransigence of established meaning, but, quite the contrary, the result of an extraordinary *charging* of language with meanings. That is why Hill repeatedly cites Henry Rago to the effect that 'when the language is that of the imagination, we can be grateful enough to read that language as it asks to be read: *in the very density of the medium*, without the violence of interpolation or reduction' (Hill 1984: 6, emphasis added). When that state is reached, the referential function of language fades to a degree, and correspondingly new rules govern the axis of combination:

[4] Titles and notes serve the same function: More often than not the titles do not clarify but obfuscate what is the subject matter or at least create a tension between themselves and the poems they head and thereby open the field for a *variety* of readings. The notes are very much like T.S. Eliot's to *The Waste Land* – a witty mix of genuine and mock scholarship, see for example Hill's note to Hymn No. IV: "'I was invested in mother-earth'. To the best of my recollection, the expression 'to invest in mother-earth' was the felicitous (and correct) definition of 'yird' given by Mr (now Sir) Michael Hordern in the programme *Call My Bluff* televised on BBC 2 on Thursday 29 January 1970." (202). Could anything be more tongue-in-cheek? That the poet does not feel himself bound to 'facts' becomes apparent when Hill in Hymn No. XIII gives *Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae* as an inscription on one of Offa's coins – he must have known from Dolley (1960) (reference given in his note to Hymn No. XVII) that none of Offa's coins carried this title; in other words, Hill deliberately 'forges' Offa's coins, cf. Hart 1986: 176; Dodsworth 1985: 50; Sherry 1987: 142)

He was defunct. They were perfunctory. (XXVII)

I abode there, bided my time. (IV)

Or, more daring:

(... ) there, a cross Christ
mumming child Adam out of Hell. (XXIV)

Thus, Hill's digging does not produce evidence of a linguistic Golden Age in which words were not yet debased (as is suggested in the quote taken from Hill 1984: 11), but, *pace* Hill, it is, as Vincent Sherry observed, 'the *virtu* of Hill's own art (... ) to disprove that myth. Etymology for Hill reveals no original or true meaning, but a play of difference; it is a delight in those multiple senses accumulated over the course of a word's history, meanings available in their variety and particularity for the modern poet who studies the dictionary' (cf. Sherry 1976: 20) – plus, it must be added, new, unheard-of meanings his texts *set free* through their *poeticalness*.

In the strata of earth and language we encounter the presence of the past. In the hourglass measuring millenniums, place is only a point in time, soon to be superseded by others. And in both history and language what our findings mean is not in them but between them or rather between them and us – it is not given, but constituted. And if this task is deliberately left by the poet, it is up to the reader to complete it and invest the words on the page with meaning. They are there, no doubt, but they tell no story by themselves and, in this case, no history either. Yet they offer themselves to various readings.

## V Earthworks and coins: Offa the writer

Offa's Dyke is an astounding earthwork in more than one respect. Historians have remarked on its impressive scale, the skill with which its line is drawn and the general efficiency with which it was carried out. To plan and to realise such a dyke is a task very much like the poet's. The original landscape is the starting point of all planning, just as is common language for the poet. And in both cases, the task is to form and mould the given to one's advantage, to overlay what is at hand with constructions of one's own. This is done with maximum efficiency when what the material (be it landscape or language) offers or lends itself to is exploited with a minimum of effort and change. And yet, the whole point of building dykes and writing poetry is to make a difference. A good earthwork is one that is not violently imposed on the landscape but one that, as it were, grows out of it. The analogy with poetry need not be spelt out.

This paradox of both earthwork and writing, viz. that both make a difference by skilfully following and then overlaying the contours that lend themselves to it, is accompanied by another one: Such a rampart as Offa's Dyke could only be constructed in peace time – it

is the expression, military in nature, of truce. By drawing a line, it defines the frontier against the British and makes a pledge at the same time: neither you nor we shall cross this with bad intent. In Offa's case, this gesture of reconciliation is demonstratively obvious: '(… ) 'Offa's Dyke' shows policy as well as man-power. In many sections it follows lines favourable to the British, and historians have concluded that it was a boundary rather than a fortification' (Churchill 1972: 68). In other words: This dyke is a line that defines 'on this side' and 'on the other side', but in defining recognises the other as excluded yet of equal value. The analogy with language should make every deconstructionist's heart jump with joy.

In building his dyke, Offa imposes his will on the landscape, but prudently so, by exploiting the opportunities it offers. He is the writer who, taking away here, adding something there, works on his poem, until it is an impressive monument, a frontier that takes cognisance of what it excludes, a statement which is congenitally non-totalising.

Of the thirty Mercian Hymns, although many contain allusions to it, none is entitled 'Offa's Dyke'. There is no need – Offa's earthwork is the silent unifying metaphor of the whole sequence.

Offa's coins supply Hill with another powerful metaphor for the poet's trade. The archaeological aspect need not be dwelled upon: Just as Offa's coins are found and unearthed by digging through the strata of earth, so the poet finds specimens of older usage when he engages with the diachronical dimension of language, the underground hoard. But words and coins have other things in common – the metaphor is well established and has given rise to innumerous ingenious deliberations (Derrida 1974/75). Words and coins are there to be exchanged. They both have value, but it is a value subject to change and it depends on its being recognised as such – as currency, words and coins always imply a wider frame of reference set by convention. Both bear a stamp of meaning which can be defaced by usage, so that what they meant originally is no longer apparent – save to the expert. Also, the quality of solidity and substantiality implied by the coin-metaphor must have appealed to Hill.

There is in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* a famous passage in which Nietzsche puts forward his idea of truth as an illusion based on an erroneous conception of language:

> Was also ist Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen, kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauch einem Volke fest, kanonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, daß sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind. Münzen, die ihr Bild verloren

> haben und nun als Metall, nicht mehr als Münzen in Betracht kommen (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 4: 546).

This idea of 'the debasement of language' (Hill in Haffenden 1981: 87), the defacement of coins, is a recurrent theme in Hill's thought. As he sees it as the poet's office to work against this debasement – to strike a new relief into coins worn by usage or to exhibit hardly used older specimens – , his practice is at the same time an eminently ethical one. 'To purge the (...) language of both long-established and recent perversions of its meaning and implications' (Hill in Haffenden 1981: 95) is the poet's prime task, a task that also includes the redemption of expressions degenerated into cliches and believed to be irredeemable (cf. Ricks 1964: 96–101). Through his poetical technique, the poet serves a moral function and helps, in Blake's words, 'to cleanse the doors of perception' (quoted in Ricks 1964: 97) – a connection that was also set forth by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovskij (1916) in his seminal essay 'Art as Device', sometimes also rendered as 'Art as Technique' .

The poet as minter can never start from scratch – he finds no unminted bullion in his mint:

> All other artists have for their medium what Aristotle called a material cause: more or less shapeless, always meaningless matter, upon which they can imprint form and meaning. Their media become media proper under their hands; through shaping they communicate. As artists they are uniquely sovereign, minting unminted bullion into currency, stamping their image upon it. The poet is denied this creative sovereignty. His 'material cause' is a medium before he starts to fashion it; he must deal in an already current and largely defaced coinage. (Burckhardt 1956: 279).

That is why the metaphor of coining and minting carries far more violence and force than that of dyke-building: The new image is *struck*. Striking coins is an act of force even more frightening for the exactitude with which the blows are dealt. And the violence does not stop here. The poet's and king's determination and cruelty reveal themselves (and remind one of former tyrants) when it comes to preventing the counterfeiting of their currency:

> Coins handsome as Nero's; of good substance and
> weight. Offa Rex resonant in silver, and the
> names of his moneyers. They struck with accountable
> tact. They could alter the king's face.
>
> Exactness of design was to deter imitation; muti–
> lation if that failed. (... )

> Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring.
> It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger. (… ) (XI)

Uncompromising, though dependent upon helpers whose allegiance must be watched ('They could alter the king's face'), Offa, the poet-minter-king, disseminates his name and portrait as tokens of his sovereign and of his possessive hold of the country:

> Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare
> coins to the light. Ringed by its own lustre, the
> masterful head emerges, kempt and jutting, out of
> England's well. Far from his underkingdom of crin–
> oid and crayfish, the rune-stone's province, *Rex*
> *Totius Anglorum Patriae*, coiffured and ageless,
> portrays the self-possession of his possession,
> cushioned on a legend. (XIII)

Only when an ancient coin has been preserved underground can the poet be content to merely polish it – no need to strike a new face if the original one is still in full relief, unworn. For Hill, to give but one example, 'leechdom' is such a coin. In Old English, 'leechcraft' signifies the physician's art, 'to leech' means to cure, to heal, 'leech' as a noun is another word for the physician, 'leechdom' is medicine, remedy. The connotations of 'leech', 'leechdom' etc. are such that one could even speak of Christ as 'leech' (cf. German 'Heiland') and of his suffering as 'leechdom'. On the other hand, a leech is of course, and that is the original meaning, a worm which sucks out the blood of other animals, it is a kind of parasite. Although the connection between these two fields of meaning is a direct one – leeches were used by physicians to cure their patients –, 'leechdom' might also be taken as an example of what Sigmund Freud called 'der Gegensinn der Urworte'.[5] This becomes apparent when Hill speaks ambiguously of 'Offa's Leechdom' – the healer and saviour of his country or its parasite? Hymn No. VIII – already quoted in full above – underlines that the ambiguity is an intended one: Offa's terror is inseparably connected with the imposition of order and culture, his prescription against imminent anarchy is itself deeply disturbing – it is 'leechdom'.

There is an amusing anecdote about the historical Offa which shows him, for once, doing *exactly* what the poet does, viz. processing bullion already minted. It is about one of Offa's coins, still extant, 'imitating a[n Arabian] dinar struck by the Kaliph Al-Mansur in 774, but carrying the legend *Offa Rex* in Roman capitals across the centre of the reverse' (Stenton 1989: 223). Winston Churchill tells the story:

> The Canterbury mint evidently regarded the Arabic as mere ornamentation, and all men would have been shocked had they known

[5] For a very concise presentation of the concept see Freud 1969: 185–187.

> that it declared 'There is no God but one, and Mahomet is his Prophet'. Offa established a good understanding with the Pope. (...) The papal envoys in 787 were joyfully received in the hall of Offa, and were comforted by his assurances of reverence for St Peter. These professions were implemented by a small annual tribute to the Papacy, part of it unwittingly paid in these same infidel coins which proclaimed an opposite creed. (Churchill 1972: 67)

It seems to me that Hill's use of Offa and ancient Mercia comes close to this re-stamping: Bullion already pre-minted by the historians receives a new relief in Hill's hands. But unlike Offa's moneyers, Hill knows exactly what he is doing.

**VI The language of power and the power of language**

*Mercian Hymns* carries as an epigraph a quote from C.S. Sisson: 'The conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons: that is, as to its object and justification, for as to its methods, or technical part, there is all the difference which separates (...) the man acting on behalf of himself from the man acting on behalf of many'.[6] This seems to imply that the subject matter of *Mercian Hymns* is not 'roots' in all its shades of meaning but the relation between power and morality. I believe this alternative is a specious one. To the same degree that 'Offa' is an alter ego of the poet, the discussion of this 'anarchic lord of order' (Sherry 1987: 136) and his guilt in office is simultaneously a metaphorical deliberation on the poet's responsibility in and towards his craft.

It seems too easy to reiterate that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, to hark back to the fact that Offa 'must be brutal to father an impressive culture' (Hart 1986: 190), or to opine that 'the innermost truth of the *Hymns* is Hill's need for and failure to find, either in the facts or the illusions of his history, its prose or its poetry, anything worthy of one's utmost admiration' (Brown 1981: 67). *Mercian Hymns* is not about the failure of such a quest, but about the illusionary nature of such a craving.

Hill knows only too well that language always 'catches itself with the bitten apple in hand' (Bedient 1981: 22), that the word is both spade and sword (Hart 1986: 157), that it is compromised by power, and accomplice to oppression, but at the same time strangely, even miraculously resistant to the claims of power. And it is one of Hill's greatest achievements to continually expose this undercutting of the language of power by the power of language,[7] which sometimes manifests itself in

[6] Unaccountably, the epigraph is missing from the Penguin edition of Hill's poetry.

[7] '(... ) while Hill is continually drawn to the 'language of power' and entitlement, he consistently subjects it to a paradoxical or critical counter-pressure.' (Haughton 1985: 142).

silence. In No. XVIII ['Offa's Journey to Rome' (2)], 'he' visits Boethius' dungeon at Pavia. The scene is that of a confrontation between spirit and power:

> At Pavia, a visitation of some sorrow. Boethius'
> dungeon. He shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower
> out of the earth. He willed the instruments of
> violence to break upon meditation. Iron buckles
> gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men
> stooped, disentangled the body.

Not very uplifting. Neither is the reaction of the visitor, an odd mixture of relish and complacency:

> He wiped his lips and hands. He strolled back to the
> car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and
> philosophy. He set in motion the furtherance of
> his journey. To watch the Tiber foaming out
> much blood.

But behind all this, there is 'a hinterland of silence' (Hill 1984: 27), the roaring silence of a conspicuous absence, namely that of Boethius' *Consolations* – the reason for the visit and all that has remained of the scene: his words.

Historical guilt is not only a question of personal tyranny. Violence may equally reside in the make-up of a society. The human cost of industry is a case in point. Here is Hymn No. XXV with a reference to Ruskin, a quote from *Henry V*, which, however, 'has no bearing on the poem' (203), and an uncharacteristically direct treatment of the plight of Hill's own grandmother, who fabricated nails in cottage industry:

> Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
> I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
> childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
> nailer's darg.
>
> The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold.
> It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred
> its low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water
> floated a damson-bloom of dust –
>
> not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one
> thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another
> to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing-wire.

> Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*,
> I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
> childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
> nailer's darg.

This underside of culture, all the work and pain that went into it, forms an impressive counterweight to notions of History as the story of rulers, a notion which had been exploded by Hill as early as in the first hymn.

Hill offers no *metaphysical* transcendation of the opposition of good and evil – as, for example, T.S. Eliot does in *Murder in the Cathedral* –, although the recognition of the blending of both in history is obvious. Rather, Hill's drift in this matter seems to be in accord with the line taken by Nietzsche – an unmitigated indictment of the past and, at the same time, an unreserved acknowledgement that we, as descendants, are inevitably part of that past and that the past is a part of us as well:

> Hier wird deutlich, wie notwendig der Mensch, neben der monumentalischen und antiquarischen Art, die Vergangenheit zu betrachten, oft genug eine *dritte* Art nötig hat, die *kritische:* (... ). Er muß die Kraft haben und von Zeit zu Zeit anwenden, eine Vergangenheit zu zerbrechen und aufzulösen, um leben zu können: dies erreicht er dadurch, daß er sie vor Gericht zieht, peinlich inquiriert, und endlich verurteilt; jede Vergangenheit aber ist wert, verurteilt zu werden (...). Menschen oder Zeiten, die auf diese Weise dem Leben dienen, daß sie eine Vergangenheit richten und vernichten, sind immer gefährliche und gefährdete Menschen und Zeiten. Denn da wir nun einmal die Resultate früherer Geschlechter sind, sind wir auch die Resultate ihrer Verirrungen, Leidenschaften und Irrtümer, ja Verbrechen; es ist nicht möglich, sich ganz von dieser Kette zu lösen (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 42–43).

For the poet especially, the chains of the past, materialised in the oppressive power of language, must make themselves felt – subverting it, he defines the conditions of his freedom.

**VII A non-reactionary de-temporalisation**

The objection could be made that in matters of historical, cultural, social or political import *any* kind of de-temporalisation is dubious and questionable, because it inevitably gives rise to fallacious ideas of unchangeable 'human nature', 'constants' of human behaviour, basic 'continuities' untouched by the ripples of history etc., in short, that any de-temporalisation promotes an ideology of human essentialism and mystifies existing power structures.

Indeed, when one reads of *Mercian Hymns* that Offa 'becomes a timeless figure of the struggle to hold psychological as well as political power' and that in presenting him as he does, Hill 'confirms [Offa's] common human nature' (Sherry 1985: 208), or, worse even, that 'cruelty, murder, minting, building, fighting and dying are forever present as man's essential, and terrible inheritances' (Milne 1979: 58), one might, given the premise that these readings are adequate renderings of the sequence, be inclined to agree with Douglas Dunn 'that the book's conception of history is suspect' (Dunn 1972: 70). But *Mercian Hymns* promotes no such myth and its concept of history is completely different, as I hope I have made abundantly clear in the preceding pages. For, quite the contrary, *Mercian Hymns* shows that no such myth will do, that there are, in Coleridge's phrasing, no fixities and definites, that we can never simply go back to our roots, both in terms of time and of place, but that the supposedly fixed entities of 'region', 'landscape', 'myth' and 'history', also of subject and object, continually modify each other and that there is no escape into a haven of timeless, permanent universality.

If there is any central message in *Mercian Hymns*, it is that there is no 'as such'. Region, landscape, myth and history in *Mercian Hymns* are not safe harbours that one might easily have recourse to. Rather, they are the terms (as language is the medium) in which the problem of human existence is discussed and poetically dramatised – themselves problematical, they are not the answer, but the material through which one has to work and with which one has to engage if the quest is meant to be serious at all, serious and unsparingly frank and self-questioning. Therefore, paradoxical as it may sound, Hill's technique of the de-temporalisation in *Mercian Hymns*, his poetical transcendence of time, which would be incomplete were it not accompanied by a corresponding transcendence of place, is not a flight from history, but a radical involvement in it. *Mercian Hymns* shows no signs of escapism from historicity and temporality – it is the document of a mind that takes the only road open to non-mystics: *deeper into time* and its complexities. Eric Hornberger saw this when he remarked that Hill 'shoulder[s] the burden of history' and that 'with *Mercian Hymns* the skills of the formalist and the inclinations of the myth-maker are harnessed to a poetry whose full meaning is historical' (Hornberger 1977: 210).

Always historicise!, is the maxim of Fredric Jameson and friends. Hill historicises naive notions of History writ large as an 'objective' process, probes them, subverts them, de-reifies them. Terry Eagleton must have felt something of the playful earnestness of this eminently dialectical endeavour – to engage in history on its own terms – when he, in an unsigned review for the *TLS*, later reprinted as part of an essay in Schmidt and Lindop's volume on *British Poetry Since 1960*, criticised the trend in some poets towards myth and legend, but cautiously exempted Hill from total condemnation: Having established a difference between the workings of myth and legend – 'myth (...) takes the form of timeless universalisations achieved through symbol and archetype; 'legend' works in an opposite direction, excavating the substance of a specific time and place remote from ours, salvaging it for reinhabitation' (Eagleton 1972: 235) – Eagleton went on to say 'but the important difference is that legend' (and he saw

*Mercian Hymns* as an example of this tendency) 'is still able to accommodate a sense of history, in ways in which myth isn't' (Eagleton 1972: 235). The praise, if praise it was meant to be, could well have been less subdued. If the desideratum is really 'an art (...) which (...) find[s] the possibility of transcendence within history itself' (Eagleton 1972: 234), then *Mercian Hymns* is an example that stands to be surpassed, even if it is not exactly the kind of poetry Eagleton had in mind. Certainly, *Mercian Hymns* not only meets Eagleton's criterion taken from Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* – that 'those symbolic resolutions [should] recognise themselves as heuristic fictions, with complex relations to a real history outside them' (Eagleton 1972: 239)–, it even puts quotation marks around 'real' and is all the more consistent for it.

Geoffrey Hill once wrote of Shakespeare's seemingly non-committal attitude in *Cymbeline* that 'Shakespeare stands back not through timidity or unconcern but in order to obtain focus. His concern is with nearness and distance, with adjustment of perspective; in his handling of character and situation he makes a proper demonstration of that concern' (Hill 1984: 57). When, at the very end of *Mercian Hymns*, the boy-poet drifts into 'the last dream of Offa the King' (XXIX), we are confronted, one last time, with this paradox of historical nearness and distance. This is the last poem in its entirety:

> And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk to-
> wards us he vanished
> he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of
> red mud. (XXX)

Money and blood on the ground, Offa's legacy. It is a ground about which Hill, when a young poet, could feel very strongly. 'So the boy born and brought up in Worcestershire', writes Hill about himself in 1954, 'is still to all intents a local boy. He does not, unless he is very unfortunate, lose touch with his home ground. His roots still ache for their soil' (quoted in Milne 1979: 62). Later, doubts creep in and he speaks of his 'mixed feelings for my own home country of Worcestershire' (Hill 1981: 94).

One of the most moving recognitions of this ambivalent entanglement is when Hill chooses as an epitaph for one of his *Tenebrae* poems ('Te Lucis Ante Terminum') a line from Paul Celan's 'Kermorvan' (of which Hill's poem is an improvisation):

> Wir gehen Dir, Heimat, ins Garn.

*Mercian Hymns* is the result of Hill's productive engagement with this condition, a perfect demonstration, I think, of what, in a quote introduced earlier, Nietzsche called 'die *plastische Kraft* eines Menschen': 'jene Kraft, aus sich heraus eigenartig zu wachsen, Vergangenes und Fremdes umzubilden und einzuverleiben, Wunden auszuheilen, Verlornes zu ersetzen, zerbrochne Formen aus sich nachzuformen' (Nietzsche 1980, vol. 3: 32).

But if this is so, then Hill's Mercia of the mind is not only an affair of the past and of the present – it has a future dimension, too, because it demonstrates, as an 'exemplary exercise', a poetical 'Aufhebung' of the past. And this 'Aufheben' in its threefold Hegelian sense (but without its deterministic overtones) always allows and sometimes even presses for a utopian perspective: If for once we could entertain the idea that 'where we belong' is maybe not in the past but still to come, that we 'can't go home again' because 'home' is something yet to be realised, then we'd have glimpsed the implications, both promising and frightening, of what it means that man is a *historical* being:

> *Die wirkliche Genesis ist nicht am Anfang, sondern am Ende* ( … ). Die Wurzel der Geschichte aber ist der arbeitende, schaffende, die Gegebenheiten umbildende und überholende Mensch. Hat er sich erfaßt und das Seine ohne Entäußerung und Entfremdung in realer Demokratie begründet, so entsteht in der Welt etwas, das allen in die Kindheit scheint und worin noch niemand war: Heimat (Bloch 1959: 1628).

Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*, by radically thematising what was and is, is by inversion a silent elegy for what is not – and maybe never will be, for 'At this distance it is hard to tell' (XIX).

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