

Chapter Two

Englishness and Nostalgia

There is a passionate debate concerning the status of tradition in contemporary poetry. Geoffrey Hill is seen by some critics as a dangerous reactionary, with his poetic interest in England and Tory politics indicating an unambiguous nationalistic imperialism. Seamus Heaney (as we saw in the last chapter) has been more sympathetic to the poets (he specifies Hill, Larkin and Hughes) who seek to write within, and who actually feel the power of, their nationhood. He has also attempted to characterize the crisis English poets are in. For Heaney, the poets' indispensable sense of place is dependant on this constructed, 'country of the mind'. Heaney accepts that the feeling of continuity and community may be imagined, but he does not seek to demean its affective power for poets. Englishness, as a generator of imperialism, is bound to come off damaged from the encounter with post-colonial theories of nationhood. For an English poet, the deconstructions might be threatening rather than empowering. Heaney, as a contemporary Irish poet, might have an axe to grind with Englishness, but his analysis of the encounter of individual English poets with their sense of their place is a generous one. Heaney sympathizes with the alienation that some English poets feel when they consider their land.

Importantly, Heaney sees regionalism as a corrective to nationalism (looking in stops one looking up), but not necessarily as an alternative. John Lucas, in *England and Englishness* puts them in starker contrast.

England increasingly belongs to those whom 'liberty' favours, in the strict sense that they are enabled to take over more of the land and the culture. They appropriate Englishness. It should therefore come as no surprise that a possible alternative for those not appropriated might seem to be not so much 'un-Englishness' - for who, without going into exile,¹ could wish to identify with such a term - as regionalism. (Lucas, 1990, 132)

For Lucas, the attempt to speak for the nation as a poet is so problematic that to attempt it almost inevitably leads to an arrogant claim for vatic status - turning to the region is a way of rejecting this outcome without totally alienating oneself. For Heaney it is not such a violent rupture with the nation as a whole, he sees it as a way of finding out about Englishness and coming to terms with the real sense of belonging that modern theory seems to deny the poet. Although these critics see the relationship with the region and the nation in different ways, both accept the need to look into one's place for a sense of

¹ Hill rejected accusations of being an exile, during his Manchester reading in November 1996. He insisted that he would never give up his British citizenship stressing that he spends a third of each year in England, and owns a house in Lancashire.

identity, and a position from which to write for the people one lives amongst. Heaney makes this explicit in his comparison of Joyce and Hill:

But not only in the form of the individual pieces [of *Mercian Hymns*], but in the overall structuring of the pieces, he follows the Joycean precedent set in *Ulysses* of confounding modern autobiographical material with literary and historic matter drawn from the past. Offa's story makes contemporary landscape and experience live in the rich shadows of a tradition. (Heaney, 1980, 160)

The point here is that, for Hill, the contemporary lives in the shadow of history, and that shadow is rich and enriching. Hill explains that he wrote about Offa for the opportunity it gave him of writing about something he sees in himself and his fellows while also writing about a historical king:

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. Here again one is speaking of those characteristics which one holds in common with one's fellow beings. (Haffenden, 1981, 94)

Comments like these chime with Heaney's opinion that Hill is 'afflicted' by a sense of history. Some critics might wish to distance themselves from Hill's admissions of a childhood tyrannical streak, and claim that they have nothing in common with the brutality of kings or the nation, but Hill is being uncharacteristically open here, and is definitely showing an awareness of the hatefulness that goes along with what he admires. A poem such as 'Cowan Bridge: At the Site of "Lowood School"', on the other hand, does show Hill more openly affirming less ambiguously positive features of Englishness, and condemning some of the violence he seems to approve of in *Mercian Hymns*:

A lost storm in this temperate place;
The silent direction;
Some ash-trees and foam-patched
Alders at the beck.

All the seasons absorbed
As by a child, safe from rain,
Crouched in the dank
Stench of an elder-bush.

So much that was not justice,
So much that is;
the vulnerable pieties

Not willingly let die;
 By chance unmolested
 The modesty of her rage. (*NCP*, 75)

The opening stanza gives us a picture of the landscape and the interaction of a figure with it. The reference to Lowood School suggests that Charlotte Brontë is the lost storm here - she brings the potentially disturbing force of her creativity. She is out of place or lost here, forced to come and teach due to lack of money. The second stanza reflects back on the nature of this 'temperate place' - perhaps some other aspect of Charlotte's character is as accepting and resilient as the child taking refuge in the strong smelling elder-bush against the rain. Together the opening stanzas suggest the combination of threat and welcome offered by the landscape, and the mixture of resistance and acceptance in Brontë. In the final stanza the past tense of the first line seems to refer to specific past injustice, while the continuous present in the second line affirms the overriding continuity of positivity in the relationship with the land. Hill knows that the spiritual love and respect for the land is a vulnerable piety, but he believes that neither he, nor the land, nor even Brontë with her grievances wish it to die. The poem ends on relief that the modesty of Brontë's rage was not molested - whether we put this down to mere accident or her own will power. She did not succumb to despair, nor use her creativity with destructive force. The poem shows Hill's belief that individual suffering can be overcome or even transformed by the traditional, nurturing relationship with England.

In the passage quoted above, Heaney used the word 'confounding' to describe the complex relationship between the autobiographical and historical material. This is an interesting choice of word, the different elements risk being utterly confused and confusing, but the poem might convince us that they are both founded and found together in the experience of the country as landscape. Hill's adoption of Blake's word 'entanglement' when he talks about creativity seems to operate in a similar manner:

There's a phrase of William Blake's from *Jerusalem*, 'the struggles of entanglement with incoherent roots'[...]. One can take 'incoherent roots' either literally or figuratively, and I suppose the particular excitement of *Mercian Hymns* was to find I was meditating on my roots in a double sense. (Haffenden, 1981, 82)

The phrase comes from the preface to chapter IV of *Jerusalem*:

All the tortures of repentance are tortures of self-reproach on account of our leaving the divine harvest to the enemy, the struggles of entanglement with incoherent roots. I know of no other Christianity, and of no other Gospel, than the liberty both of body and mind to exercise the divine arts of imagination: (Blake, 1988, 34)

Blake sees his religion as an intellectual pursuit — 'mental studies and performances' (ibid). The Christian must use his imaginative faculty 'for the building up of Jerusalem' (ibid). One struggles with the physical realm in the attempt to inhabit 'imagination, the

real and eternal world of which this vegetable universe is but a faint shadow' (ibid). The phrase becomes more flexible when released from the chain of Blake's argument. Hill's struggle can be to become disentangled, to get things clear, or it might be to get entangled, to get involved in those roots. The entanglement, like the confoundedness can be positive or negative. But the struggle with these roots (and Hill suggests that there is something special happening when the roots are both personal and historical, not merely technical and linguistic) is essential to his sense of his own writing. The fact that Hill sees 'roots' as so vital for his work means that he will repeatedly be concerned with the past, both his own and that of his nation and the figures he is interested in. In this chapter I shall look at *Mercian Hymns*, parts of 'Funeral Music', 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' and some other single poems and show how Hill's sense of almost-belonging in a place and a tradition helps to shape what he writes. Hill's more recent work, recently published as *Canaan*, complicates the picture. The new volume speaks more directly about contemporary politics, while still brooding passionately on the past of a land that is as full of contradictory possibilities as Canaan. The land promised to God's people is also the place their leader Moses is not allowed to reach. And once in Canaan, the Lord's people fall into idolatry, necessitating the warning voices of the prophets. This chapter will address some of the new material, and how it affects our reading of work from earlier in Hill's career.

The chapter will deal with nostalgia because Hill is aware that his practice leaves him open to charges of that vice; indeed he might even be said to court them since he claims to be writing about nostalgia, although not nostalgically.

If critics accuse me of evasiveness or the vice of nostalgia, or say that *I* seem incapable of grasping true religious experience, I would answer that the grasp of true religious experience is a privilege reserved for the very few, and that one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of a much more common situation - the sense of *not* being able to grasp true religious experience. I'm accused of being nostalgic when I'm in fact trying to draw the graph of nostalgia. (Haffenden, 1981, 89)

There is an interesting 'confounding' of ideas here. Firstly, there is the idea that Hill is 'evasive' - ie deliberately ambiguous and confusing. Hill seems to connect this with the charge of nostalgia. He claims that he is not nostalgic but writing about nostalgia (a sentiment he believes to be a strong presence in post-war Britain). Basically he is suggesting that critics do not notice the fine distinction, between being nostalgic and drawing its graph, for the same reason that they find him evasive: because they are not sufficiently good readers. That the issue of religious experience should come in at this point is also important. Hill seems to be claiming that he writes about not gaining religious experience because that is the more common situation, while some critics see him as a man who plunders religion for subject matter, but will not finally commit himself. In short Hill risks making himself seem perverse in his inability to grasp

religious experience, because he feels that it is more responsible to write about that inability.

This chapter will show, by close analysis of individual poems and research into historical material, that Hill's poems are more subtle than some critics give them credit for. An example of this is found in the rich ironies of "Fantasia on 'Horbury'", where Hill ventriloquises the reactions of the Victorian bourgeoisie to the West Riding of Yorkshire. Hill is quick to spot the 'outworn piety' in a man who will respond with 'Really? Good Lord!' when told of the priest John Bacchus Dykes' 'unspeakable desolation' at his 'exile' in Horbury. The image of Dykes being catspawed by a poem makes him seem more of a mouse than a man, and Hill makes this exile seem bathetic: a commentary on the inadequacy of the stereotypical English Victorian gentleman when faced with the earthy realities of the English landscape.

For Hill, the uneasy mixture of admiration and disgust at the nation's history, and his interest in the failure to have religious experience, are powerfully confounded with his own poetic creativity. There can be no differentiation between the difficulties of a Hill poem and the subtle relationship we have with the beautiful products of oppression:

I think the sad serenity and elegance of the eighteenth century country house landscape was bought at a price: not only the sufferings of the English labourers but also of Indian peasants. Again, critics who think I've succumbed to nostalgia for that landscape cannot have looked with sufficient closeness to the texture of the sequence. The celebration of the inherited beauties of the English landscape is bound, in the texture of the sequence, with an equal sense of the oppression of the tenantry. (Haffenden, 1981, 93)

Tom Paulin is one of the critics against whom Hill is defining himself. Paulin takes the title *King Log*, and from that accuses Hill of advocating complete passivity to authority: "Hill's title is reactionary in its implication and derives from Aesop's fable of the frogs who desired a king" (Paulin, 1992, 276). Hill's title draws our attention to the story, it doesn't necessarily imply that we should never react against authority. Indeed Hill titles his end-notes 'King Stork'. He includes a revised version of an earlier poem, suggesting that he, as poet, has rejected the easy rule of King Log and has submitted to King Stork in producing notes and revisions. Several poems of the volume remember the Jews killed by the Nazis, perhaps the title is ironic - the frogs were stupid to ask for a king, but in some cases authority must be challenged and changed. The factory children who called Richard Oastler their King benefited from his 'rule', even though he at times threatened the nation with armed rebellion. It seems that Paulin has his own preconceptions about what the King Log story means, and will not adapt them to account for Hill's actual political and poetical allegiances. Critics like Paulin are too quick to cry wolf when they see Hill approach a delicate subject, without giving sufficient attention to the poems themselves. Stan Smith, writing in *Poetry Review* is far too hasty in writing off the traditions whose influences Hill is interested in exploring:

Given that so much of what Arnold and Leavis, Newbolt, Quiller-Couch and Tillyard took for granted as 'English' is now as alien to the post-1944 reading public as to any Syrian or Chinese [...] the study of 'English' [...] should involve at the level of cultural practise what Tom Nairn has prescribed at the level of politics as *The Breakup of Britain* - the critical deconstruction of that smugly homogeneous culture. We might begin by asking precisely what Geoffrey Hill means by 'England'. (Smith, 1986, 13)

Smith is clearly wrong when he claims that the kinds of Englishness he speaks of are alien to post-war English people. But he is correct in so far as he suggests it is disappearing. Hill's writing is intimately concerned with his sense of connection to that fast-dying culture and he feels that many people in this country share his mixed feeling with regard to it. Indeed one might regard many of Hill's poems as asking the question "What do we mean by 'England'?", or we could say that Hill's analysis of the mingled feelings of love and hate one has for the *patria* amounts to a kind of deconstruction. *Mercian Hymns* III: 'The Crowning of Offa' will illustrate this:

On the morning of the crowning we chorused our re-mission from school. It was like Easter: hankies and gift-mugs approved by his foreign gaze, the village-lintels curled with paper flags.

We gaped at the car park of 'The Stag's Head' where a bonfire of beer-crates and holly-boughs whistled above the tar. And the chef stood there, a king in his new-risen hat, sealing his brisk largesse with 'any mustard?' (*NCP*, 95)

Here the solemnities of the Easter rite, and its promise of remission of sins becomes merely something that releases one from school and therefore of similar value to a coronation. Offa himself (or is it George VI?) is foreign to the boy. The mention of decorated lintels, together with the mention of Easter, suggests the Passover. Offa is a distant and frightening figure, who may be thanked for providing the occasion for a celebration, but who also may bring down destruction. Of course there is bathos in such a comparison, as the language of the poem recalls our modern coronations with their commemorative trinkets, and a monarchy that has no real power over the population. In the second verset the child pulls apart the religious significance of Offa by his perception of the chef. The chef's generosity is so much more obvious and immediate than Offa's that he now becomes the king. The hat, described as new-risen, makes us reflect on the crown that has recently appeared on Offa's head. While the hat also looks comically like a loaf of bread the chef might cook (trusting his dough to rise correctly). the words also take us back to the Easter imagery. The marvel for the boy is that of rising dough and chef's hats, Christ's resurrection has little meaning for him. Hill's supposed nostalgia is actually an ironic way of looking at the past. Here he uses the chef to satirize people's high regard for Christ and for monarchs. He does not reject these symbolic personages as meaningless,

but he does undermine the solemnity with which people are wont to regard their traditions.

It is, after all, people that are important to Hill, not empty traditions or things. Hymn VIII registers this with words like ‘obsolete’. It is hard to see how the ornament can be obsolete, although the biplane it was modeled on has become so. Rather its uselessness and irreplaceability are part of its value as a symbol of the boy’s martial prowess. Ceolred remains his friend despite the beating and despite the loss of the talisman. The boy’s solitary reflection as he rides his sand-lorry suggests the greater importance of the friend than the thing both to us and to the boy-king. In hymn XXI Hill once more eases us into a more resigned letting-go of things ‘during the years more treasures were mislaid: the harp-shaped broaches, the nuggets of fool’s gold’. Here there is an implication that all gold is really for fools to care about. The poem insists only that we respect human relationships. The photographs in the album are ‘evergreen’ while their velvet presentation is ‘deciduous’, we will be moved by the people in the images, long after the book holding them has decayed.

Hill is prepared to watch, and to draw our attention to this decay, but he also wants to make us see what survives, or might be rescued. This chapter will show that Hill’s poems are not ‘reactionary’ or ‘Conservative’ as Paulin argues, but that his imagination, as Heaney suggests, is ‘confounded’ with the cultural, linguistic and geographical past of England and especially those regions which he has inhabited.

In using the word ‘roots’ in my title I am referring not only to Hill’s quotation from Blake, but also to Simone Weil’s theory concerning culture, put forward in *The Need for Roots*.² Hill’s references to Weil’s work are always complimentary, and one cannot help but be impressed by the frequent similarities in the two writers’ thoughts. Her description of rootedness will help us to steer a path through some cultural theories towards the way Hill interacts with culture in his work:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual, and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part. (Weil, 1971, 43)

Weil sees rootedness as an essentially spiritual need, one which is satisfied only by active participation in a community. Although her book was written as her contribution to the moral rebuilding of France after the Second World War, its arguments have a universal

² To which Hill refers in his essay ‘“The Conscious Mind’s Intelligible Structure”: A Debate.’

significance. Weil is not trying to suggest that French national or regional identity is superior to any other kind, she is merely saying that some kind of belonging to a localised community is a need of the human soul. She sees this as something basically creative and nourishing, not oppositional or xenophobic. She uses this image to characterize a healthy relationship between cultures:

When a really talented painter walks into a picture gallery, his own originality is thereby confirmed. The same thing should apply to the various communities throughout the world and the different social environments. (Weil, 1971, 43)

This attitude is implicit in Hill's writing whether he writes of his native midlands, his adopted Yorkshire or commemorates the *terre charnelle* of Charles Péguy.

This chapter will show that 'rootedness' has three primary agents; landscape, language and history, (things often imaginatively mingled in *Mercian Hymns*) but that the most important factor is active participation. Clearly these elements are all combined in most pieces of cultural information, and it is often the extent to which we can understand one in terms of the others that Hill's poems explore. Hill's poems about the past have often been criticised as 'nostalgic'. I shall attempt to show that he is, in fact, carrying out his stated intention of 'floating' nostalgia, and that in any case what some critics castigate as nostalgia is actually a vital component of belonging in a culture, and not necessarily a nationalistic feeling.

Stan Smith feels that the cultural ideas of Matthew Arnold are entirely defunct. It seems clear that they have not disappeared as entirely as some might wish (Hill has named one of his poems 'Drake's Drum' - also the title of one of Newbolt's best-known poems). I have argued above that Hill does not simply agree with the views of these Victorian theorists, and I have suggested that his own cultural identity is firmly rooted in the actual life of the communities and regions in which he has lived and worked. Arnold's work pioneered the view that literature, and the study of literature, is vital for the development of culture - Hill must agree with this in part, as must all who study literature, but we might argue that Arnold over-emphasises the value of reading. In *Culture and Anarchy*, he set out a theory which gave certain kinds of reading a spiritually enriching role:

One must, I think, be struck more and more, the longer one lives, to find how much, in our present society, a man's life of each day depends for its solidity and value on whether he reads during that day, and, far more still, on what he reads during it. (Arnold, 1932, 6)

As we shall see later, the rise of a common print-language, and therefore a reading-public, is vital in creating a sense of a nation. But there is something too dryly academic about Arnold's argument. There is more to culture than reading books. Arnold's appeal to literacy as a thing with inherent value is made problematic today by George Steiner's observation that some of the men who worked in Nazi concentration camps had been

trained to appreciate literature. Simone Weil highlights the dangers of an education that is out of touch with lived experience:

Nowadays a man can belong to so-called cultural circles without, on the one hand, having any sort of conception about human destiny or, on the other hand, being aware, for example, that all the constellations are not visible at all seasons of the year. A lot of people think that a little peasant boy of the present day who goes to primary school knows more than Pythagoras did, simply because he can repeat parrotwise that the earth moves round the sun. In actual fact, he no longer looks up at the heavens. This sun about which they talk to him in class hasn't, for him, the slightest connection with the one he can see. He is severed from the universe surrounding him, just as little Polynesians are severed from their past by being forced to repeat, "Our ancestors, the Gauls, had fair hair." (Weil, 1971, 45)

Weil puts the kind of education that does not insist upon the practical experience of the truths it teaches on the same level of duplicity as the deliberate falsification of history by imperialists.

Arnold's academic focus leads him insidiously to a form of cultural assertiveness:

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world. (Arnold, 1932, 6)

Once again Arnold sees culture purely in terms of abstract knowledge, not experience. His attitude appears admirably pluralist, but Arnold retreats from this opening inclusiveness to a position where English culture, as preserved and distributed by the Anglican Church and the ancient universities, becomes synonymous with the essence of the sweetness and light he aspires to. This is indeed a far cry from Weil's image of mutually appreciative creative communities. Arnold tries to make Englishness into something which transcends nationalism and represents the expression of the will of God. However, this is dubious: even at the time when he was writing England was not a single-religion state. Arnold is also arrogant to assume that some version of the Christian God is universal. Much of the 'best which has been thought and said in the world' is unchristian.

If Arnold can be dismissed, by critics like Smith and Paulin, as a Victorian theorist whom no-one any longer bothers to read, T. S. Eliot is a more formidable figure. Hill is often described as Eliot's major successor, and he clearly shares Eliot's interest in culture and its decay, as well as the possible redemptive power of poetic language. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* is in some ways a revision of Arnold, an attempt to revive his ideas and build from them. Eliot avoids some of the arrogance we have noted in Arnold, but he stands firm on the necessary interdependence of culture and religion:

The first important assertion is that no culture has appeared or developed except together with a religion: according to the point of view of the observer, the culture will appear to be the product of the religion or the religion the product of the culture.

We may go further and ask whether what we call the culture, and what we call the religion, of a people are not different aspects of the same thing: the culture being, essentially, the incarnation (so to speak) of the religion of a people. (Eliot, 1949, 13, 27)

Eliot's argument might seem weak, we might point to the growth of 'popular culture' around fashion, film, literature and music which does not depend upon religion. Eliot looks back and finds all cultures have developed with religion, but this does not prove that culture can not grow without it. Eliot also moves from giving both terms equal priority, to asserting the primacy of religion. This might merely make us dismiss the second statement as, in the terms of the first, a matter of point of view. However, when we remember Hill's defence of his evasiveness and nostalgia, we recall that for him this was closely linked with the difficulties of attaining religious experience. The connection seems a valid one: any investigation into one's cultural roots will tend to have a spiritual dimension.

Arnold and Eliot's views cannot be simply dismissed. Both men's work has shaped the imagined England of our century. Eliot's poetry and criticism has shaped the way we read literature in universities and schools, both by means of his characteristic style, and in the texts that he helped to establish as canonical. Although we might wish to discuss 'nation' within the freer atmosphere of theoretical discourse, it is dangerous to forget that Englishness has been established through literature, and through literary studies by the work of writers like Arnold and Eliot.

F. R. Leavis's work offers a corrective to Arnold and Eliot, shunting it in the direction of a more organic community of the kind Weil and Hill envisage. Sadly, the important differences in Leavis's views from those of Arnold and Eliot have been somewhat overlooked. As David Gervais's book *Literary Englands* shows, although he shared some of Arnold and Eliot's attitudes, his conception of culture was a broader one.

Leavis never thought of English culture in the predominantly literary terms that Eliot himself did [...]. The fact that his own work was mainly in literary criticism tends to obscure this, until one sees that it has to take that form because, Leavis believed from the start, it was only through literature that those roots were still accessible at all to modern England. (Gervais, 1993, 106)

Gervais goes on to note that, sadly, Leavis's more inclusive conception of the need for culture and the value of English studies has been lost:

English Literature mattered to him not only in and for itself, but because of the England that made it possible in the first place. It seems remote from anything that English departments stand for today. We tend now to study English writers not for the sense they give us of England but in lieu of it. We feel on safer ground with 'theory' than 'tradition'. This is

surely something which Leavis, with his hatred of our 'technologico-Benthamite' civilization, might himself have foretold. (Gervais, 1993, 150)

What Leavis might have seen as a loss of essential Englishness chimes closely with what C. H. Sisson characterizes as the main difference between British and continental administrative training:

'This practice', to quote an authoritative Treasury source, 'is in accordance with the long established tradition of regarding members of the Administrative Class as intelligent amateurs who form their judgements on the basis of experience rather than as a result of a prescribed course of theoretical training.' (Sisson, 1959, 37)

From the point of view of men like Sisson and Leavis (and perhaps Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism is a symptom of similar opinions) Englishness is real and resides in the characteristics that are nurtured by our institutions and traditions. If these are discontinued and remain the interest only of the antiquarian, we shall have lost our identity.

When Arnold and Eliot put forward their cultural theories they seem to have assumed that there really is some kind of national character that is inherent in our institutions. While they feared its degeneration, and thought it could be acquired primarily through book-learning, they do not seem to have considered that it is a construction, and as such inessential, or perhaps even thoroughly false. More recent writers on Englishness attempt to address this issue. Brian Doyle's book *English and Englishness* describes how the Newbolt commission and the rise of English studies created the idea of English culture as something continuous and spiritually nourishing.

By establishing English as the only academic discipline which embodied not only the high culture of 'polite society', but also the 'national character', the discipline came to be promoted as uniquely suited to a mission of national cultivation. (Doyle, 1989, 12)

Here we can see the Arnoldian principle that culture is the means of improvement for our society, and that is available solely through the appreciation of English literature. Doyle argues that the strength of these educative bodies and the cultural assertiveness of Britain encouraged the theorists to elide the problem of nationalism:

The sense of 'Englishness' that English came to signify was apparently so free of any narrow patriotism or overtly nationalist or imperialist politics that any debate about the meaning of the term itself was deemed unnecessary until quite recently. (Doyle, 1989, 40)

Thus, for Matthew Arnold, English culture seems to be a kind of universal good - 'sweetness and light', despite the fact that it is essentially the possession of The Anglican Church and Cambridge and Oxford Universities. A document like the Newbolt report further clouded the issues by discussing the people of England in anachronistic terms:

the evocation of 'wayfaring' folk instead of the contemporary urban proletariat introduces into the discourse of the Report a sense of Englishness linked to a mythology of medieval organic ruralism. (Doyle, 1989, 61)

The dilemma of some contemporary poets is that they are finding out that their sense of Englishness is based upon foundations as unsteady as these. The problem is that although they may come to accept, intellectually, the deconstruction of Englishness, they are left with an emotional certainty that it was real. The 'England of the Mind' that Heaney writes about, cannot be destroyed so easily.

Some of this is a result of what looks a bit like brainwashing. Here is Doyle quoting F. W. Bateson:

What is required of the student is the capacity to identify with English: 'Unless an undergraduate can identify himself in some sense with the subject he is studying, he is either reading in the wrong school, or he has no business to be at university at all'. (Doyle, 1989, 110)

This kind of identification is not required, one would hope, in the present system. Indeed pluralism and a resistance to the kind of canon-building that Bateson is writing within would make the identification impossible even if one set out to achieve it. This begs the question of whether we are even doing the same kind of thing as our predecessors in English departments. It also complicates our relationship to the poetry of people who studied, and taught within this system. Even those poets who did not read English at university cannot have entirely avoided the pervasive cultural assertiveness of Schools of English and the Anglican Church.³

Philip Dodd and Robert Colls's book *Englishness and Popular Culture* gathers together some essays that demonstrate ways in which this Englishness has been constructed with the intention of demystification, of showing that cultural continuity is a mere construction. Alun Howkins in 'The Discovery of Rural England' critiques the manner in which images of rural southern England became emblematic of Englishness:

Since 1861 England has been an urban and industrial nation. The experience of the majority of its population is, and was, that of urban life, the boundaries of their physical world defined by streets and houses rather than fields or lanes. Yet the ideology of England and Englishness is to a remarkable degree rural. Most importantly, a large part of the English *ideal* is rural. (Colls, 1986, 62)

In their essay 'A Literature for England' Peter Brooker and Peter Widowson show how this vision was consolidated by Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*: '[Quiller-Couch's] *Oxford Book*, Fussell argues, 'presides over the Great War' as a provider of common literary knowledge' (Colls, 1986, 120). Similarly Bridges *The Spirit of Man*

³ At his readings Hill has said that he writes about 'England' because he is writing in a poetic tradition, not because he is unaware of the political realities of our multicultural United Kingdom.

encourages the troops to feel that they are fighting for an ideal rural England, that really exists beyond the channel:

We turn from war, states Bridges in his preface, and 'look instinctively to seers and poets', rejoicing that 'our country is called of God to stand for the truth of man's hope.' (Colls, 1986, 121)

If the rural vision of England remained stable through the horror of the trenches, and in the experiences of soldiers who returned to England to seek out country lives, it was actually an untenable position for a society that had been largely urban for half a century. That so many soldiers still clung to this myth as they were dying and writing in the trenches says more for the power of literary conditioning than for the validity of the cultural images they were presented with. However, one may be led to ask what status the arguments that these essays present have.

John Lucas, in his excellent book *England and Englishness*, goes further than these theorists of culture and asks whether poets can speak for their country. He suggests that it is almost impossible as he charts Wordsworth's withdrawal from political radicalism and a commonality with 'the people'. If poets who are country recluses are the nations' spokespeople then we find ourselves in this dilemma: 'by the end of the nineteenth century most English people lived in cities. To be English was not to be English' (Lucas, 1990, 9). No poet who excludes the city experience from his life and work, Lucas argues, can be said to speak for England.

Lucas describes a progression in poetry from the attempt to establish a literary Englishness in the years following 1688, when Englishness and Liberty come to be synonymous, to the gradual abandonment of the Miltonic radical line until we arrive in the situation of the late nineteenth century when poetry has given up its role as the dominant literary art-form to the novel. This decline of poetry's popularity and importance is seen as directly related to the difficulties of writing for the people if one is not of the people, and the relentless suppression of poets such as John Clare who were qualified to write in this (subversive) manner.

Lucas does not paint a uniformly gloomy picture. There is a revival after 1780:

There are various expressions of a rebirth of England [...] such a rebirth may be expressed through and in large part *as* poetry [...] it is impossible to separate this expression from an exuberant conviction that new voices, or voices long suppressed, are now ready to speak for *their* vision of England. (Lucas, 1990, 76)

This rebirth centres around the figure of Blake, who espoused the Miltonic tradition which was inclusive, as opposed to the exclusiveness of the Augustans:

For the Bible and Milton were common property, as Dryden and Pope, and their models, could never be. And it is worth remarking that throughout much of the eighteenth and earlier part of the nineteenth centuries, the metrical psalms were familiar parts of Anglican ceremonies. (Lucas, 1990, 73)

Blake's achievement is to attempt to write about the city, and to stay in touch with the popular incarnations of heightened language, Milton and the Bible:

Blake was the first writer of modern times to grasp the fact that if you cannot define nationhood in terms that include the city, and for that matter give it real primacy, then you cannot define it at all [...] poets who try to write the city out of their accounts of nationhood are unlikely to produce an image of 'England' or 'Englishness' which can carry authority, even though they may claim such authority for themselves. (Lucas, 1990, 88)

While Lucas singles out some figures who managed to maintain some kind of integrity, Clare, Shelley and Browning, he sees most poets' attempts to write about England as inherently self-delusory.

Hill's recent work engages with Lucas's argument. Much of *Canaan* deals with England. Some of the poems, like 'Sorrel' and 'Sobieski's Shield', are working at the regional level that Lucas talks about. They are poems registering Hill's sense of belonging through their awareness of landscape, and local names of flowers. But in the sequences 'Dark-Land', 'To the High Court of Parliament', 'Mysticism and Democracy', 'Churchill's Funeral' and the poems addressed to Cobbett, Constable and Law 'In Absentia' Hill seems to be taking on a vatic role. We have seen how Hill adopts a phrase of Blake's to define his experience of writing. The context for this assertion of the necessity of entering into one's spiritual practice with the imaginative faculty, is a preface to a chapter of *Jerusalem*, a poem in which Blake identifies the English with the Israelites. The English are God's chosen people and it is our spiritual task to build a new Jerusalem in England. *Canaan* registers the back-sliding of the nation. While Blake spoke of re-building Jerusalem (drawing from *Revelation* and Old Testament accounts of the early post-Egyptian period), Hill positions his prophecy in relation to the later books of the Old Testament (*Daniel*, *Amos*, *Zephaniah*). The people are lacking in faith, they hinder the entry into Canaan, and when there they fall into devil-worship and human sacrifice. Thus in 'Canaan' itself Hill parallels the death of innocent children in the wars of our century with the offering of lives to Moloch. Hill has drawn attention to this link with Blake by reading the early poem 'Holy Thursday' in London and Manchester. Also 'Churchill's Funeral' takes epigraphs from *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. At the London reading Hill stressed the fact that the first poem in the sequence is a reply to the Elgar epigraph that heads it. Hill deplores the way Elgar attributes the inspiration for his music (to be played '*nobilmente*') to the history and architecture of London. It is an exploitative appropriation of the lives and deaths of people that Elgar knows little about. When Hill writes against the lines from Blake that head section III of the poem, he does not take exception to Blake, but registers a deterioration:

The copper clouds
are not of this light;
Lambeth is no more

the house of the lamb (Hill, 1996, 49)

The copper clouds of Blake's engraving, depicting Albion preparing for the 'great harvest and vintage of the nations' (Blake, 1988, 380), are not those over Hill's England. Lambeth, where Blake lived and worked, is not 'the house of the lamb' — the idiosyncratic etymology cannot stand. We are further from the Last Judgement than Blake, and Blake's England. The fifth poem is headed by some lines from *Jerusalem* in which Los finds that human potential has been degraded 'all the tenderness of the soul cast forth as filth and mire' (Blake, 1988, 436). This time Hill's poem does not speak against the epigraph, but speaks of a city reordering 'its own destruction'. There is ambiguity here. Is the city re-arranging itself after destruction, or is it setting in action the process by which it will be destroyed once more? In Hill's vision there is not much to choose between these two interpretations. When we admit 'strutting lords' to the temple we invite disaster, like the frogs who brought the rule of King Stork upon themselves in Aesop's Fable. The menace that Hill sees in our attempts to order our society is clearest in the 'salvo' of Remembrance Day poppies with which he ends the poem.

In *Canaan*, Hill comments on contemporary politics, comparing politicians to rats, ironically attacking privatization, and criticising the Maastricht Treaty and the film *Schindler's List*. This is a new departure in his work. However, it has clear continuity with his poems on Wesley, Bunyan, Cobbett, Law and others. Previously we have read the poems about the past as implicit critique of the present. Now Hill is more explicit about what he deplores in contemporary society. The real change is in the thorough-going adoption of a vatic role. Hill is taking up the terms of Lucas's argument, and has produced a volume that aspires to a Blakean vision of England — one in which spiritual practice, national feeling and poetic vocation combine and form an alloy.

Hill's new volume seems directed towards the critical debate around literary Englishness, but this in itself does nothing to answer the questions of critics who mistrust any writer who claims to speak for a nation. For many critics 'England' is a fiction. Modern theories of nation argue that national identity is constructed. Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities*, suggests a close relationship between the rise of nationalism and the decline of religion. This is in stark contrast with the conceptions of Arnold and Eliot:

Needless to say, I am not claiming that the appearance of nationalism towards the end of the eighteenth century was 'produced' by the erosion of religious certainties, or that this erosion does not itself require a complex explanation. Nor am I suggesting that somehow nationalism historically 'supercedes' religion. What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood, by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which - as well as against which - it came into being. (Anderson, 1983, 19)

Anderson describes nationhood as an imagined community, gradually taking over from the religious communities of shared belief as they become eroded in the modern era. The impossibility of envisioning a world-wide Christendom leads to a more limited vision of community - that of the nation.

Anderson argues that the language of a nation is arbitrary; it is not an emblem of the nation. He cites examples of nationhood expressed in the language of a colonizer rather than a native. However he does believe in the strength of a language to establish the sense of community:

Nothing connects us affectively to the dead more than language [...] there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests - above all in the form of poetry and songs [...] singing the Marseillaise, Waltzing Matilda, and Indonesian Raya provide occasions for unisonality, for the echoed physical realization of the imagined community (so does listening to [and maybe silently chiming in with] the recitation of ceremonial poetry, such as sections of *The Book of Common Prayer*). (Anderson, 1983, 132 (text in square brackets is Anderson's)).

The two ideas sit uneasily side by side. Clearly there is some difference in finding a convenient language with which to argue for nationhood, even if it is the language of the oppressor, and the emotional charge found in a shared linguistic past. Interestingly, Anderson does not focus on reading as the primary means of taking part in cultural activity. Rather it is through song and liturgy, through active participation, that culture is acquired and preserved.⁴ Hill would argue that language and landscape are more intimately related than this theory suggests:

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

shouldered the clogged wheel, his gold solidus; where dry-dust
badgers thronged the Roman flues, the long-unlooked-for
mansions of our tribe. (*NCP*, 96)

Earth here is like language. It provides roots and endings - the etymology of a word as well as its morphological characteristics. It is the mother and the crypt, what gives birth and receives one again in death. This multi-valency in the words Hill uses is 'Child's play' the child's delight in the flexibility and resourcefulness of language. But it also describes the child's actual play amongst Roman remains, with the animals that live in the land, and the possibility of finding the identity of the 'tribe' amongst the coinage and architecture that Mercians adopted when the Roman dominance waned. Hill's sense of his rootedness comes about through his active engagement with land, language and the past. Here it is playful, but the mole who 'shoulders' the solidus suggests that real work awaits the child as he grows up.

⁴ Anderson's reluctance to admit that people actually openly take part in liturgical practice is perhaps a necessity within his argument that nationalism in some way takes over from religion as the most powerful form of imagined community.

Admittedly the felt-community in folk-song, or popular poetry from the past, is culturally produced, even imagined, and it depends on the development of a stable print-language, but this does not detract from the real sense of belonging that the imagined community can confer. The community is real and meaningful, even though its cultural treasures may be works of imagination. Ernest Renan wrote 'the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things' (Bhabha, 1990, 11). In Renan's view the people who call themselves a nation have things in common, and they may choose to forget those things they do not share, or the fact that much of their shared experience has been engineered.

Renan makes the idea of nationhood difficult in that he denies that it is a matter of religion, since there may be a multiplicity of religions, or a matter of language, as language does not force people to unite into a nation. He concludes that nation is 'a soul, a spiritual principle' (Bhabha, 1990, 19). Renan's analysis is largely negative, he tells us what nation is not based upon, and it is difficult to explain what the spiritual principle he describes is, or how it arises. However his demystification of language, religion and community (people forget they have fought each other), gives way to this new 'soul', suggesting that something spiritually meaningful can emerge from the dubious basis of constructions of nationhood.

However if it is true that nationhood is imagined community, we may find that Lucas's searing criticism of poets who speak for England looks different. His idea of nationhood as urban and working-class is just as much an imagined one as Wordsworth's of rural retirement. At any point we could locate groups of people who lived in these ways (and in many others) one group might have numerical superiority, but that could hardly ensure that we had found the essence of Englishness. Indeed, Wordsworth's popularity (and that of Tennyson) might suggest that the audience of poetry (the demographics of which are elusive) actually prefers the pastoral idyll, much as the men in the trenches of the Great War embraced Q's *Oxford Book*. Perhaps the principle of active participation we saw in Weil is important; Blake was able to write well about the city not simply because he chose to live there out of some dubious loyalty to the mass culture of his age, but because he was a self-employed working man. he earned his living by being an active part of London's society. Wordsworth's choice to live in the country-side was perhaps not the really dangerous thing Lucas would have it, rather it was his growing distance from the lives of the people living and working around him that weakened his hold on the true national culture. A modern case of this danger avoided might be Hughes's poems based on his experiences in farming. Although distant from the actual lives of most people in England these poems have an immediacy and vitality, owing to their familiarity with the actual work done by country-dwellers, that proclaims them to be part of our national life. To be truly English, a poet need not be urban but s/he must be in some active relation with the real life of the part of the nation s/he inhabits.

The major issue that comes out of the discussion of cultural theories such as Anderson's, alongside the ideas of Arnold, is that of the validity of tradition, especially as it is embodied in language. As a nation of speakers of English (albeit in a variety of dialects) it is to some people a self-evident fact that we are connected together into a unified nation, and back into our past by the generations who have spoken basically the same language before us. The debate over Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* encouraged some writers to side-step Anderson's arguments about the arbitrariness of language in the formation of national identity. The commentators and petitioners to the *PN Review* issue about the abandonment of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the King James Bible asserted that the move undermined the nation's ability to participate in an action that united history, faith and the beauties of early modern English. The storm was heralded by C. H. Sisson's 'Intimations of the Eternal' in issue 2:

Everyone is caught in the decay of our speech, and the Church can only say what it has to say through language it has made its own. It was one of the great conquests of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that the Church commanded a language at once profound and familiar. Now, after immense deliberations, it injects trashy and unmeaningful speech even into its liturgy. There is no such thing as passing on profound truths in superficial speech. So, in the field of social exploration, nothing much will be said in the current language of sociology. (Sisson, 1977, 43)

Sisson's distrust of new-fangled theory is at one with his adherence to liturgical tradition. The *Crisis for Cranmer and King James* issue of *PN Review* seems to bear Sisson out. Despite the waning status of the Church of England and the admitted difficulty of claiming cultural unity, many writers did feel that the absence of these books from young people's education, and worship, would be a heinous wrong. David Martin writes 'The common poetry of English life is now being abandoned, in church and in school' (*PN Review*, 13, 1979, 1). He criticises the rootlessness of the new texts, which he characterizes as 'mid-Atlantic'. G. Shepherd sees an evasive, but palpable, national unity being discarded:

no document better expresses their [the people's] vague but tenacious understanding of what moral, social, public life in England should be, and what should be the temper of English politics. (ibid., 10)

The petitions that close the volume include the names of many distinguished figures, including non-communicants such as Geoffrey Hill. Clearly the linguistic value of these once-familiar religious texts cannot be divorced from their practical application within church services. And yet the issue seems to balance in between suggesting that the Church of England is still at the heart of English culture and admitting that these texts, like the Anglican Church itself, are relics of a lost commonality. Despite our scepticism about the agnostic element in the attempt to save Cranmer and King James, the decay of language is undeniable. Furthermore, if our literature is as dependant on these texts as we are led to believe, perhaps the Church of England is more vital to our sense of English

literature than we want to admit. However, no academic familiarity can really place us in the community which the Book of Common Prayer created, that would only be brought about if we experienced it as participants in it as liturgy. Richard Fenn focuses on the constitutive power of religious language:

Religious language, however, properly concentrated in the dense structure of the liturgy, re-presents the reality itself within the words and phrases of liturgical action. Liturgy thus provides the *substance* of representation, whereas from the point of view of the observer religious language, liturgical or otherwise, at best serves to represent enduring social realities. The difference is between language that constitutes reality by being uttered and language that simply stands for reality. Secularization drives the opening wedge between language and reality. (ibid., 13)

I cannot fully assent to Fenn's assertion that liturgical language is somehow more 'constitutive' than other kinds. Although the continued practice of religion through a certain liturgy will create a sense of community and may lead believers to associate their faith with a specific well-written expression of it, it cannot overcome the problem of ambiguity. Dom Gregory Dix, in his fascinating book *The Shape of the Liturgy* shows how liturgical practices have developed from the Last Supper down to present-day rites. Although there is a great deal of continuity, especially in the overall structure (or 'Shape') there is a remarkable diversity in the actual prayers and their wording. Dix constantly stresses the importance of what is done rather than what is said:

What was fixed and immutable everywhere in the second century was the outline or Shape of the Liturgy, what was *done*. What our Lord instituted was not a 'service', something said, but an action, something done - or rather the continuance of a traditional Jewish action, but with a new meaning, to which he attached a consequence. (Dix, 1945, 214)

Dix would share the sense of loss that the contributors to *P.N. Review* express, although he does not believe that the actual words of established prayers demonstrate some closer rapport between word and truth than is possible in a new rite:

It is always with a certain regret that one comes to 'the end of an auld sang', when a tradition for which and by which many men and women have lived fades irremediably into the dead past. More especially ought this to be so for the Christian in the case of a liturgical tradition sprung from the soil and native to the minds and hearts of a population, which has formed for God whole generations of men and women, nameless and unremembered for the most part, but still praying men and women and bone of our bone 'in Christ'. (Dix, 1945, 581)

Dix does not idolize any individual rite, but points out the fact that it is sad that a living tradition of worship should die out. Men and women who have worshipped in it, and other practising Christians may be sad to see it go, but for an agnostic or atheist to complain that people will no longer understand parts of English literature because it is no longer used is an irrelevance. The liturgy was written as a practical method of

worship, not primarily as literature. What the writers in the *P.N. Review* issue are lamenting is the breach between English culture and the Church of England, not the word and the thing. Indeed, Dix makes it clear that Cranmer's liturgy as it has been used for centuries, is a confusing muddle of his theology and that of the Parliamentary revisers of 1662. Dix explains how the Anglican Church moved away from Cranmer's Zwinglianism towards Calvinism, but retained his liturgy:

The revision of 1662 thus tried to consolidate the general reaction from the ideas expressed by Cranmer in his liturgy, while retaining the whole substance of his liturgy unchanged. It is no wonder that from the point of view of liturgical construction the resulting rite is incoherent, and appears to be a confused succession of parts without a logical design as a whole. (Dix, 1945, 693)

It is with some reluctance that Dix explores the confusion within the liturgical practice of his own church, but he does it with a cool-headedness that the writers in the *P.N. Review* articles notably lack.

The Church of England to-day presents a liturgical disorganisation such as is found in no other christian body, and exhibits a liturgical diversity not commonly found in bodies which do not profess to have any set liturgy at all. (Dix, 1945, 700)

Dix shows how the problems with the 1662 version and the attempts of Bishops to introduce their new liturgy in 1928 had brought about this chaotic state. Cranmer's liturgy was adapted soon after it was written in order to alter, or at least make vague, his theological viewpoint. There is therefore no magical constitutive power in the words the church has been using for four centuries - in fact the words deliberately keep what the rite means vague. For practising Christians a clear liturgy, which expresses the theology of the Church of which they are members, is clearly preferable to this state of affairs.⁵ They (lead by the liturgical and theological experts) are the only people who should have a say in what liturgy and Bible they use.

In effect, the articles and signatories to this issue of *PN Review* want to heal the breach that has developed between English literary history and the practice of Anglicanism. The arguments, and the people who approve them, make it impossible for us to reject the premise that these books have largely shaped our literary and cultural productions for the past four centuries. Since the contributors all basically agree with Ian Robinson when he writes: 'Religious language like any other exists only in use; the use in this case can only be the practice of a religion' (*P.N. Review*, 1979, 13, 24), since we know that Cranmer and King James are no longer the common property of young people in England, or even of literature students, and since they cannot be revived outside the

⁵ In 1945 Dix was suggesting a 'liturgical experiment' which would in fact have allowed all the communicating Anglicans to have a share in celebrating, approving and even creating, a new liturgy.

context of a living liturgical practice, all we can do is note their passing. Some will lament the added cognitive distance that their loss places between us and the works of literature that breathe the air of these texts, others will embrace the new diversity that this break with a past myth of spiritual, moral and cultural unity enforces. However, in dealing with poets who were brought up in this context, and who wished to preserve it, we need to have a sensitivity like Heaney's to their 'sense of an ending'. It seems to me to be unhelpful to dismiss the sense of Englishness that many writers found still valid until 1979, on the basis of theory that subverts the truth-claim of that discourse and the fact that it has now, in fact, largely vanished. While we are justified in condemning any unreflecting nostalgia, we should be generous to the felt-reality of this faded imagined community.

Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots* was a response to a specific crisis in her nation's history. Although England was not ravaged by the war to the same extent that France was it is clear that the liturgical 'crisis' and the end of Empire had already been undermining her traditional identity. Perhaps it is because England has fallen prey to a number of small crises, rather than such a clearly identifiable one as military occupation, that people have been reluctant to identify, or attempt to remedy, the waning of her national character. Writing in 1977, C. H. Sisson, a poet whose concern for national literary identity has led Donald Davie and others to discuss him alongside Hill, even seems to be arguing there isn't really a problem:

The English are, at present, mercifully free from the duty which appears to weigh upon Scotch, Irish and Welsh of talking as if they were themselves. Deliberate literary nationalisms - deliberate nationalisms of any kind are a diversion and restriction of energy. (Sisson, 1977, 2)

But when we turn to Sisson's poems I think his attachment to a literary national identity, and an anxiety about the survival of that identity, are clearly motivating his writing. I would like to compare 'In Flood' from Sisson's volume *Exactions* and Hill's 'Merlin' from *For the Unfallen*. Sisson's poem is as follows:

A word for everybody, myself nobody,
Hardly a ripple over the wide mere:
There is the winter sunshine over the water,
The spirits everywhere, myself here.

Do you know it? It is Arthur's territory
- Agravaine, Mordred, Guinevere and Igraine -
Do you hear them? Or see them in the distant sparkle?
Likely not, but they are there all the same.

And I who am here, actually and statistically,
Have a wide absence as I look at the sea,
- Waters which 'wap and wan', Malory said-
And the battle-pile of those he accounted dead.

Yet his word breathes still upon the ripple
 Which is innumerable but, more like a leaf
 Curled in autumn and blown through the winter,
 I on this hillside take my last of life:

Only glad that when I go to join them
 I shall be speechless, no-one will ask my name,
 Yet among the named dead I shall be gathered,
 Speaking to no man, not spoken to, but in place. (Sisson, 1980, 72)

Sisson doubts his own real presence on this scene more than he doubts that of the dead literary figures. Malory's words still breathe on the water, almost like the spirit of God. Sisson addresses people who would not believe this. 'Do you know it?' suggests a modern deracinated listener who does not know the significance of the place where he is standing. 'Do you hear them?' is addressed to those who cannot feel the presence that Sisson is sure of, or who cannot respond to Malory's prose, and are thus denied their inheritance. Sisson speaks in something close to his own voice here, he is the old poet looking forward to meeting the dead. Amongst them he will finally be truly 'in place', reunited with the figure of his essential Englishness. He will be able to stop speaking and writing.

Hill's poem 'Merlin' is very different. Firstly the title suggests the possibility that the wizard has survived, and we are listening to his voice:

I will consider the outnumbering dead:
 For they are husks of what was rich seed.
 Now, should they come together to be fed,
 They would outstrip the locusts' covering tide.

Arthur, Elaine, Mordred; they are all gone
 Among the rafted galleries of bone.
 By the long barrow of Logres they are made one,
 And over their city stands the pinnacled corn. (*NCP*, 8)

Merlin, separated by the years from the people he had known does not yearn to be with them, or for them to return. The idea of the dead is not comforting as it is for Sisson - a community he wants to join. Here it is a threat - 'the locusts' covering tide'. In both poems there is a litany of names, there is some nostalgic feeling. But Merlin is speaking of people he knew, Sisson of the creations of Malory. For Hill, the dead are made part of the earth. The barrow, no-longer a battle-pile, has incorporated the husks of the dead and new seed produces new corn. The necropolis of Arthur supports the crops that feed the people of Logres - a mythical England. Merlin speaks from on top of the barrows that indicate his distance from the past, but he does not appear to feel out of place.

However, Merlin has certainly not come as far forwards as Sisson has. He still seems to live in Logres, not Britain. Sisson's poem 'Place' is another piece which makes claims for place, this time in more polemical tones:

We have only to live and see what happens

- Nothing perhaps; for it may be that history,
 As Mairet remarked, is coming to an end
 And we shall wander around without meaning.
 That is what most of us would like, and it is death
 However it puts on the masks and opinions of life.
 If we live here, it is indeed here that we live.
 We cannot afford to scoff at the *pays natal*,
 Unless our minds are to be born without content;
 Nor at the acres in which we spend our childhood,
 Unless the things we see are of no account,
 Do not fill our minds, are nothing but generalities.
 What do we see? Faces on a television screen
 Which are more vivid than those we pass in the street.
 So we live no-where, but somewhere there is a place
 Where life is lived, a kingdom of the blest,
 Perhaps, in which the programmes are prepared. (Sisson, 1980, 14.)

Sisson's tautologies and assertions here are so bitter as to undermine his poem. Clearly, we all live in some 'place'. What can a French phrase like *pays natal* signify for English readers over and above birthplace? Is Sisson worried that his mind will be ill-contented or that it will be empty? How can he put our childhoods in a continual present tense and place them in 'acres' when most British people grow up in towns? If the faces on the television are 'more vivid' than those we pass in the street, are not the faces of Arthur and Guinevere more vivid for Sisson than those of his contemporaries? He seems to be deploring one kind of escapism while indulging in another. While Hill has not quite got around to dealing with television in 'Merlin' and still seems to be thinking of an agrarian culture, it seems that Sisson's 'Place' is guilty of trying to speak for too much of the country, and imposing an archaic principle of Englishness upon it. 'In Flood', much more personal and limited, with its generous submission to Malory, seems the finer poem.

Sisson has got a sense of place because he has a share in the literary culture as well as an intimate relationship with part of the country. The speaker of 'In Flood' stands on his own ground and allows the landscape to inform his 'England of the mind'. Thus in his poem 'In Insula Avalonia', Sisson's continued presence in one place, connected with the stories it inherits, enters his dreams in a potent and comforting manner, making him feel rooted:

O there are summer riders
 On the plain
 in file or two by two

It is a dream

For Winter, one by one, is wringing us
 The withers, one, and scrotum-tight the other

Yet I am here
 Looking down on the plain, my elbow on
 The sill
 From which I night by night and day by day

Watch
 for the moon pours unswimmingly

Upon this field, this stream
 That feeds my sleep. (Sisson, 1974, 22f)

Although aware that he dreams, Sisson's dream is fed so intimately from his familiar land that he feels security and reality in it:

This music comes
 from Wendover I think
 Where meaning is at least, there, sure, am I. (Sisson, 1974, 23)

Although meaning is not stable here - we could read the 'at least' as suggesting that Sisson is situated at the lowest level of meaning, or that he finds himself where meaning, if nothing else, can be relied upon - Sisson's position with whatever meaning he has found is secure - 'sure'.

Sisson's poetry makes an attempt to secure a sense of identity through an intimacy with a specific place and its history, even when one's sense of personal identity has been almost completely eroded by modern popular culture, mass communications and television. His poems are rather more angry than Hill's. They insist that the past is real and they yearn for it to come back. Hill is more willing to keep it at arm's length and even to treat what he knows about it with some suspicion. His own identity in the present is kept rather more secure by this detachment from the past - the mingled love and hate rather than an all-consuming love and longing.

As Sisson's name is frequently linked with Hill's in the area of writing about Englishness, I would like to follow the distinction I have made between them a little into Sisson's prose works. Sisson's books *The Case of Walter Bagehot* (1972) and *The Spirit of British Administration* (1972), both reveal that Sisson's attachment to the past and traditions of England is less ironic and cautious than Hill's. This is from the Bagehot book:

The endless yielding to circumstance, until the merits of what is to be done matter nothing as compared with the dexterity required to get out of an awkward situation, has become so much a habit of mind, in the England of our own day, that the consequences of continuing in this line of behaviour are scarcely marked. It ends in the comfort of the operator being the only consideration which should determine action. This may be all right for a private banker, in his acquisitive field. It is something to be watched for rather than encouraged in a politician. (Sisson, 1972, 45)

Sisson cannot refrain from moving out from his study of the nineteenth-century bureaucrat and essayist into a discussion of contemporary national characteristics. The fact that he does so shows that he feels there is something about present-day Englishness that needs to be talked about. Although Sisson may claim early on that he believes 'it does not do to make too much of a man's birthplace', his later analyses shows that, like Weil, he does consider this to be important. This attitude is yet more strongly marked in

his book on the British civil service, which at times reads like an apology for the English character as opposed to the continental.

The habits of the British administration are merely aspects of the national political habit, of the general cast of mind that history and languages have produced. 'For dullness, the creeping Saxon', was a phrase Matthew Arnold had pleasure in quoting when he was making use of the Welsh bards to give colour to his excellent denunciations of his fellow-countrymen. The phrase is exact. A Frenchman put it that he greatly appreciated the talent the English had for remaining silent in company without there being an embarrassed feeling that something should be said. The talents of the nation are not discursive, which is why we, in our turn, greatly appreciate the discourse of France. (Sisson, 1959, 147)

Sisson's relish here for those characteristics which Arnold saw as weakness sets the tone of his book. The habits of the English administrator are right because they are expressions of our natural temper. They should not usurp the continental practices, but they should persist and provide a complementary style to that of our theoretical neighbours. The tolerance and appreciation of French culture here is admirable, but it comes alongside Sisson's worry that our national characteristics will not be respected or nourished, and that they will perish.

So, why does Sisson claim that the English writer does not play on his Englishness in the way a Welshman might his Welshness? I think this reticence (concerning poetry, not politics) reveals Sisson's anxiety that his interest in writing as an Englishman in a specific English place might be nostalgic or reactionary. While it is almost obligatory for poets from the rest of Great Britain to speak of their nation, in much the same way as post-colonial writers often seek identity through writing back against the centre, there is something a little dubious, even for Sisson, in writing poetry that claims to be about, and for 'England'. However, as his prose writing reveals, Sisson clearly feels there is something to write about, and he wants to write about this Englishness that is undermined by post-colonials deconstructing the myths of Englishness. When we come to his poems, and Hill's, we see that this awareness that one is doing something rather distasteful in talking about England is built into the poems themselves. Sisson knows that his opinions will seem xenophobic to some, and that the elements of culture he wishes to preserve are widely considered unimportant or already moribund. In this I feel Sisson has much in common with Hill, despite their different means of tackling the issue.

In his poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Hill's purpose, according to Donald Davie, 'was, so far from illuminating us about either Péguy or pre-1914 France, the celebration of two values: patriotism, and martial valour' (Davie, 1983, 1) Hill's poem seems to me to be more complex than anything that could be describes as a 'celebration

[...] of patriotism'. However, Davie is surely right to connect the poem with Hill's (and C. H. Sisson's) explorations of Englishness which he characterizes as

probing and disturbing to just the extent that Hill and Sisson have attended to the 'subversive art prized by disaffected intellectuals' in a way that Betjeman hasn't. (ibid, 2)

Péguy seems to have little in common with these English poets, and it is in many ways surprising that his life should have much bearing on the kinds of Englishness these 'disaffected intellectuals' incline towards. Péguy's patriotism amounted to a complete lack of knowledge about other cultures, during his life he stayed within the triangle of Paris, Orleans and Chartres, except for a theatre trip to the south. He showed no interest in his neighbouring states except when called to defend France against Germany. In contrast, Hill and Sisson are widely-travelled Europeans. A poem about an English patriot (rather than Joan of Arc) would have been unthinkable for Péguy. What Davie is right to notice in Péguy's patriotism and that of these two English poets, is a kind of regionalism, combined with a highly literary idea of the nation. For Sisson, his home in the West Country is intimately connected with the imagined Arthurian past. In Hill's childhood, he still felt the Midlands were presided over by their genius loci, King Offa. Davie himself has made an attempt to describe his sense of England through his volume *The Shires*, but that project is notably different from Hill's and Sisson's poetry because of its inclusiveness; Davie finds something to tie him to each shire, whether it is a personal connection, or a more general cultural familiarity. When writing about Gunn, it is this difficulty with inclusiveness that Davie sees as the characteristic English note:

It is just this ultimate constriction in Gunn's poetry - not anything in his psyche but we may think inherent in the British English which is his medium - that moves the British reader most deeply. So in his poem called 'Autobiography', it is not the London references that move us, so much as the enormous difficulty that British English has - having, as it were, suffered and been tarnished so much - in registering *inclusiveness*. (Davie, 1989, 88)

The Gunn poem is a description of a sense of loss, and of distance from the life of the capital:

life seemed all
loss, and what was more
I'd lost whatever it was
before I'd even had it (Gunn, 1979, 123)

The poet looks down on London after reading the poetry of Lamartine and feels that there should be more of a sense of belonging with the 'distant babble of children', or St. Paul's and Parliament Hill. The juxtaposition of the foreign poetry with the centre of English nationhood seems to exclude Gunn from that national culture. But even in the poem, he is aware that he is nostalgic for something that he's never had, and maybe never existed. The need for 'a sniff of the real' is partly what Gunn would 'want to get' in

his autobiography, but it is also perhaps what sent him up that hill in his youth. The final section brings these ideas together:

longing so hard to make
inclusions that the longing
has become in memory
an inclusion (Gunn, 1979, 124)

Davie seems to be slightly too keen to make this poem out to be a failed attempt to describe inclusiveness, as if that was a thing Gunn could not have used the language to do⁶. Gunn's poem is about the experience of not finding 'inclusion', this is something he does very skilfully here, in English, but it is a different effect from that which Davie describes. Gunn's suggestion that we make ourselves out of our feelings of loss and exclusion, as well as from the things we imagine we have lost or been excluded from, is highly relevant to the kind of Englishness I am trying to describe. For Hill, as for Sisson and Gunn, the nostalgia is for something that one never had. This clearly undermines one's sense of belonging within the things one feels nostalgia for, but the memory has played the trick Gunn describes; we have created ourselves within these fictive cultural patterns and to recognise their fictiveness is to risk disrupting the self.

Davie's poem on Cornwall moves close to this, in its description of the outsider's experience of this shire:

Different for the Cornish,
it must be. But for us
Lancashire and Yorkshire
interlopers who
run curio-shops on the quay
it has, as an arena
for growing old in, one
desolate advantage:
it cannot be believed in.

Black patches on both eyes (Davie, 1990, 250)

Davie has constructed his Cornwall from *Treasure Island* and cliché 'Cornwall, the fabulous wreckers/ of Cornwall: novelists', but this must seem as unreal to the inhabitants of Cornwall as it does to Davie. Few of them, one imagines, can identify with the Cornwall of *Treasure Island*. Davie seems to excuse his own inability to feel at home and real in Cornwall because he is an outsider. But the kind of deracinated retirement that he describes is surely a phenomenon of a more general uprootedness. One feels at home nowhere, so to assuage this feeling one retires to a place where one has no business to feel at home.

Englishness can often be a way of producing a kind of inclusiveness. The writers of *PN Review 13*, 'Crisis for Cranmer and King James' believed that the liturgy of the

⁶ One might compare the way critics accuse Hill of being incapable of grasping true religious experience when he writes about the experience of not being able to grasp it.

Church of England, in the form of these texts, provided a sense of community in language which may soon be lost for good. Critics might suggest that, even in 1979, the Anglican Church represented the interests of a minority of English people. However, for a poet like Sisson such a marginal and linguistically constructed identity seems stronger than his sense of personal being. Davie writes:

Ultimately Sisson will gladly put up with uncertainty about his own identity (in this world, let alone the next) in the confidence that his own identity, dubious or not, can and will be incorporated in the larger identity called 'England', whether known through recorded centuries or in the seasons wheeling over a particular patch of England that looks down on the battlefield of Sedgemoor and on Arthur's timeless Avalon. (Davie, 1989, 190)

Donald Davie's *The Shires* attempts to speak for all of England in a way that neither Sisson nor Hill do. His program - to write a poem for each shire - would seem inherently impossible on either Lucas's or Hill's account. Lucas would say that by claiming to speak for all the country he is putting himself above everyone else as a bardic authority. Hill or Sisson might simply doubt if any man could know each shire well enough to write about it sensitively. The poems themselves give voice to these questions at times. In 'Westmorland' Davie reveals a strange blend of ignorance and affiliation:

Kendal ... Shap Fell! Is that in Westmorland?
For one who espouses the North,
I am hazy about it, frankly. It's a chosen
North of the mind I take my bearings by,
A stripped style and a wintry; (Davie, 1990, 269)

This 'North of the mind' is not the fully realized thing that Heaney means when he talks of an 'England of the mind'. Davie's attempt at familiarity here is more like the amused mixture of attraction and repulsion of Dykes for Yorkshire, when he calls it 'the too-fashionable North'. He is aware of the reputation of the North for rugged beauty, hospitality and so on, but the provincial life does not suit him, as he reveals in the prissy language of a phrase like 'fritter of excrement'. In these poems Davie holds back from the disturbing encounter with place that Gunn experienced, but also withdraws from the deeper, although identity challenging, sense of place that Sisson and Hill describe. Davie is reticent and democratic, each shire shall have its poem, each shire has its claim on him. But he makes no claim for spiritual intimacy even with the North that he 'espouses'. 'Cumberland' has a similar tone:

I tend to suppose the part I know least
Of England is the north-west.

A honeymoon in the Lake District
Is conventional matter-of-fact;

And ours was the winter of '45!
On ghyll and yew-tree grove

And packhorse-bridge, the blowtorch air
Was singeing the nostril-hair;

Snow that had lain deep for weeks
Fantasticated our walks;

And Rydal Water to our tread
Rang, till Helvellyn heard.

Exalted by love, in wintry rigours
Unlikely Cumberland rages

Thus in my memories. North-west,
I know you least, or best? (Davie, 1990, 251)

Here Davie's unfamiliarity with Cumberland allows him to generalize out from his experience there on honeymoon. He is aware that the lack of a continuous and repeated experience of the place undermines his claim to know it well, but somehow the precise memories of a particular time spent there seem to counter the general sense of ignorance and makes him wonder if actually he doesn't know it rather well. Davie is suspicious of the shires that he creates within a literary context and writes of Cornwall's 'unreality'. Similarly places he identifies with - the North - seem to escape him. When his sense of ignorance is overcome by the powerful memory of a short holiday, I feel that he is creating the same kind of North-west 'of the mind' that we saw in 'Westmorland'. It is like a literary Cornwall, having taken root in the memory and imagination it hovers between the real and the unreal.

Hill's poem 'Elegiac Stanzas On a Visit to Dove Cottage' gives a far more unsettling vision. The shrine to Wordsworth becomes a symbol for a kind of Englishness that lapses into a solipsistic sterility. The 'intercourse between nations' turns out to be a visit to the cottage, where the many 'bite nothings to the bone'. There is no substance to this literary Englishness, it is centred on a man who has no real presence - his things are unused and unworn. The linguistic talent in the fourth stanza seems to offer some hope of real communication, colloquial forms move into the poem as if we are about to experience 'a man speaking to men', but the poem moves to this sublime end:

Greatly-aloof, alert, rare
Spirit, conditioned to appear
At the authentic stone or seat:
O near-human spouse and poet,

Mountains, rivers and grand storms,
Continuous profit, grand customs
(And many of them): O Lakes, Lakes!
O Sentiment upon the rocks! (*NCP*, 31).

While Sisson in 'In Insula Avalonia' manages his exclamatory 'O' with decency, here Hill allows it to undermine the figure of the poet. The comic capitalization of 'Sentiment'

coming after 'Lakes' (which hovers between the familiar capitals of the Lake District and a pompous personification) shows the poet as almost inarticulate, merely exclaiming his elevation. Hill calls the poet 'near-human'. This cuts both ways, one could be near in lacking humanity or in seeming to transcend it. The suggestion here (especially with the intrusion of the word spouse - who wants a 'near-human' lover?) is that the poet is definitely on the wrong side of the human, or at least has been constructed to be like this by the grand and so-profitable customs. The poet who achieves this national emblematic status is not an attractive figure as a man. Compare 'The Dead Bride' from 'Three Baroque Meditations'

This was the poet of a people's
Love. I hated him. He weeps,
Solemnizing his loss. (*NCP*, 79)

Hill's suggestion is that the poet who attempts to speak for a nation, and who is constructed for that role, made into a profit-making concern by it, not only loses the ability to speak 'plain as spitting on a stick' but loses his ability to relate even to his closest companions. This is reminiscent of John Lucas's remarks about Wordsworth's growth in popularity and decline in sympathy with his people:

Blake, never seeking to appease a readership, ends without one.
Wordsworth, seeking appeasement, ends as Poet Laureate. Blake's
visions of England are liberating and tragically truthful. Wordsworth's
are increasingly false. (Lucas, 1990, 117)

Hill's poem makes a subtler point. The Wordsworth industry is culpable in that it turns the poet into an inhuman and vacuous idol. This seems to infect the poetry itself, as in the caustic parody of Wordsworth with which the poem ends. However Hill doesn't assert that Wordsworth's personal view of England was wrong, he is accusing the market-place of debasing Wordsworth by raising him up too crassly.

David Gervais, in his book *Literary Englands*, makes a case for the need for some nostalgia, although he is no apologist for pilgrimages to poets' cottages. He makes the following comment about Brooke's Grantchester:

Its version of England clearly answered to an emotional need and the
emotion itself was real even if its embodiment was precious. Nostalgia
may be insidious but it would be puritanical to repress it altogether.
Without it would there be any versions of England at all? (Gervais, 1993,
4)

The awareness that nostalgia is 'insidious', but necessary - that we must be prepared to face our nostalgic feelings if we are to understand our Englishness, is central to Hill's practice. Gervais writes:

As so often, the theme of his [Larkin's] poetry is what he *can't* remember.
There is a less plangent, more agonised version of such feelings in
Geoffrey Hill too. He speaks of our need to understand and exorcise our
nostalgia: 'there's been an elegiac tinge to the air of this country ever

since the end of the Great War.' In other words, far from being the option of a sentimentalist, nostalgia has become a living part of our culture, something that we may sometimes feel stuck with but not something we can simply wash our hands of. (Gervais, 1993, 196)

This is astute commentary on the nature of Hill's attachment to the past.⁷ When the boy in *Mercian Hymns* imagines Offa at his desk exchanging gifts with the muse of history, there is a delicate transition from the feeling of what it must be like to be a king, and what it is like to be a small boy who never has been one, and never will be:

What should a man make of remorse, that it might profit his
soul? Tell me. Tell everything to Mother, darling, and God
bless. (*NCP*, 102)

Gervais highlights the element of penitence in Hill's writing about the past, suggesting once more the desire to bear witness that his poetry manifests:

He takes history more for a bed of nails than a pillow on which to lay a
nostalgic head.
But why rake over the faded coals of history and fan them back into
heat, only to walk barefoot over them? Should we see *Funeral Music* as
at bottom an elaborate penitential exercise? (Gervais, 1993, 258, 228)

I believe that Gervais's questions are partly answered by what I have already written about poetic witness. Hill himself, in his 'Funeral Music' essay, helps to explain why he writes about such things:

The battle of Towton itself commands one's belated witness. In the
accounts of the contemporary chroniclers it was a holocaust. (*CP*, 200)

Hill uses the language of bearing witness, and even the word 'holocaust', affirming that this domestic battle calls for the same kind of commemoration as the deaths of the Jews in Europe do. These poems are about maintaining awareness of one's cultural identity. Hill refers to the book by Colonel A. H. Burne *The Battlefields of England*. In his forward, the historian G. M. Trevelyan opines 'I think Englishmen ought to be grateful to Colonel Burne.' (Burne, 1950, ix). Burne states his purpose in writing the book as follows:

This brings me back to my first motive - that of helping Englishmen to
find for themselves the actual sites of the battlefields in their own
neighbourhood or on the roads along which they may be travelling.
(Burne, 1950, xii)

⁷ In 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurrus' we can see a similar un-sentimental nostalgia for a lost, or rather never-possessed, emotional past:

'One cannot lose what one has not possessed.'

So much for that abrasive gem.

I can lose what I want. I want you. (*NCP*, 81)

Here Arrurrus quotes the mocking words of his beloved and puns fiercely on 'want' so that it covers sexual desire, childish assertion of independence and the basic sense of lack. This is not 'sentimental', but it faces the feeling of loss one can have for something one knows is merely constructed - the perfect relationship that never existed in the real past.

Hill's citation of this book reveals more of his purpose. During his time at Leeds, Hill was in exactly the position of the Englishman that Burne is aiming at.⁸ The battlefield of Towton is a few miles outside Leeds and it still captures the imagination. The shape of the ground, the effect of which on the battle Burne describes, is still easily discerned. Hill has explained that re-reading the Henry VI plays gave him the impulse to write this sequence, but it is inescapable that Hill was also influenced by being so near the actual place where the slaughter occurred. This, after all, is why the character of the land is what comes so strongly out of the poems about the battle (and what also must be behind Hill's attraction to Péguy's notion of the *terre charnelle*).

Recall the cold
 Of Towton on Palm Sunday before dawn,
 Wakefield, Tewkesbury: fastidious trumpets
 Shrilling into the ruck; some trampled
 Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
 Stuck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind's
 Flurrying, darkness over the human mire. (*NCP*, 59)

Hill's act of 'recall' here is similar to that act of anamnesis which Dom Gregory Dix establishes as being central to the Eucharist in *The Shape of the Liturgy*. Here, as in the liturgy, it is not a simple act of memory but a more total re-calling of what happened. Hill's poem suggests the actual day of Palm Sunday, 1641 when the battle was fought. It snowed that day. But he also presents us with the same 'acres' parched and sodden - in different conditions at different times. It is the same recall we find in 'The Stone Man', one which actually brings the past alive 'So, with an ease/ That is dreadful, I summon all back.' (*CP*, 85) The language of summoning here suggests the calling up of devils, or the dangerous potency of the Eucharist. In 'Funeral Music', 2 Hill's feeling of connection to the historical holocaust of Towton, through his intimacy with the land on which it was fought, and the other towns through which the combatants moved are able to exert an injunction to bear witness equal to that which the murder of the Jews does.

Hill's playfulness is there in 'Funeral Music', even in the bleak second poem the word 'ruck' gives the suggestion that this is some thrilling rugby match accompanied on trumpets. But, as in *Mercian Hymns*, there is always the suggestion of an unchangeable aspect to the land, connected with its ancient animal life (badger, raven, mole) and its endurance and resistance to human activity.

They bespoke domesday and they meant it by
 God, their curved metal rimming the low ridge.
 But few appearances are like this. Once
 Every five hundred years a comet's
 Over-riding stillness might reveal men
 In such array, livid and featureless,
 With England crouched beastwise beneath it all.

⁸ And introduced lectures on the Henry VI plays simply by giving the road directions to Towton battlefield.

‘Oh, that old northern business ...’ A field
 After battle utters its own sound
 Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.
 Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable
 Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly
 Among carnage the most delicate souls
 Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping ‘Jesus’. (*NCP*, 60)

In this poem Hill performs a remarkable fugue on the ideas of history, violence and the earth on which they are enacted. The low ridge is that of the battle-field of Towton, and the ordering of doomsday puns on the record of ownership and lordship which the Domesday book performed alongside the doomsday (in the sense of holocaust) that this battle inflicted on the armies, also in order to decide questions of lordship. Both sides feel that they have God on their side (Burne suggests that the two Kings Henry and Edward may have been present), but their self-righteousness verges on the blasphemous. The poem goes on to comment ironically on the uniqueness of this battle. Although the most bloody ever fought on English soil, the comet’s perspective over-rides it, makes it seem trivial as it flies over the earth. There is a hint that history is cyclical - this conflict is meaningless from the comet’s perspective as the same things will be happening the next time it traverses the land (comets were felt to be bad omens, presaging disaster). The men taking part in it have no character but their anger. Meanwhile England huddles to protect itself, or perhaps to spring in attack, but ‘England’ does not involve itself with the conflict anymore than it can help, it cowers and protects itself, it keens for the dead. It aspires to the stillness and permanence of the comet. The earth’s cries (are we to read the phrase in inverted commas as the comment of the earth, or of some detached historian?) are paradoxically unearthly, lamenting the waste of life - we are moving towards the intense paradox and punning of the last lines - but the creatures of the earth emerge and their life goes on amid the slaughter. The synecdoche of souls for the dying soldiers is particularly apt since it brings out the paradox of the (female) souls which are about to marry Christ acting like particularly carnal bride-grooms (despite Christ’s statement that in heaven there will be no marriages like those on earth). The poem celebrates and laments the endurance of the land, and its witness of this slaughter. Unlike Larkin’s poems suggesting that the ancient England is ‘going’, Hill’s poems affirm that there are places (like Towton) which still bear witness to their past and compel us to bear witness to that past also.

In the seventh poem of the sequence we return once more to the physical presence of the battlefield. This is the reality that Hill uses as his touchstone throughout the sequence. Whatever digressions he makes into the fantasy world of a combatant’s son, or the abstract realms of Avoerrian philosophy, he always returns to the contemplation of the battlefield itself. Here a soldier speaks, and after he has spoken it is as if the ground is bloodied anew by his words:

‘Prowess, vanity, mutual regard,

It seemed I stared at them, they at me.
 That was the gorgan's true and mortal gaze:
 Averted conscience turned against itself.'
 A hawk and a hawk-shadow. 'At noon,
 As the armies met, each mirrored the other;
 Neither was outshone. So they flashed and vanished
 And all that survived them was the stark ground
 Of this pain. I made no sound, but once
 I stiffened as though a remote cry
 Had heralded my name. It was nothing...'
 Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
 Feathers drifted across; carrion birds
 Strutted upon the armour of the dead. (*NCP*, 64)

These appear to be the words of a soldier returning to the battle field, telling the story. The prospect of the battle makes the guiding concepts of soldierly life seem questionable and almost freeze him into inactivity. The dry comment of the poem undermines the profundity of this piece of introspection. The sound he thinks he hears - the remote cry - may be his name or it may be the sound of the earth after battle that we have read about earlier. In his memory there is no great distinction between the two sides, they are mirror images of each other. The dead are all equal, indistinguishable now as they are present merely in the strange colouring of the ice and the discarded armour. Significantly all that 'survives' is 'the stark ground/ Of this pain' - the land as both the site and the actual earth upon which the battle was fought - takes on the pain and so is the most lasting and poignant memorial to the dead fighters. As I have been trying to show throughout my discussion of this sequence, and some parts of *Mercian Hymns*, one has access to the past through one's relationship with landscape. This is, in essence, the argument of Sisson's poems 'Place', 'In Flood' and 'In Insula Avalonis'. The greater subtlety of Hill's work in 'Funeral Music' lies in his choice of something more historically verifiable than Arthurian legend, and his avoidance of speaking in *propria persona*. This gives Hill's poems a greater detachment from his own situation, and makes them seem more faithful to the past. It reinforces the idea that the past is a real thing that we should bear witness to, rather than a set of conventions we require to provide us with meaning and identity. As Gervais would put it, Hill foregrounds the penitential aspect of his relationship with the past.

Hill has asserted that his sequence 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' embodies his awareness of the sufferings of the English tenantry and the Indian peasantry during the prosperous period of eighteenth-century country-house building. We might read the sequence as a penitential act, trying to make sense of our debt both to oppressor and oppressed. The sequence's epigraphs, like the dedications of 'Funeral Music', helps to make the sequence seem historically responsible, and not merely a piece of personal, reactionary nostalgia. Hill carefully prepares his ground before writing of this past. The title is taken from Pugin's treatise on Gothic Architecture, but has a wider significance. Firstly the 'apologia' as a genre has somewhat

died out, and so we are likely to interpret 'apology' as a rather weaker-minded thing than what Pugin (for instance) was engaged in. Hill's title hovers between the sense that he may be saying sorry for this revival, and that he will be strenuously defending it. There was no notable revival of Christian Architecture in the seventies, and this gives Hill's title some irony. We may take the word more widely and wonder if it refers to the architecture of Hill's poems - is he 'apologising' for the 'formality' of his work in *Tenebrae* and for its religious tone? As we shall see when we look at Pugin, it is not the external shape alone with which that treatise was concerned, but the spirit also.

Pugin's treatise is not merely about architecture, it is a plea for consistency, sincerity and true religion. Thus he laments what he sees as the misuse of Gothic jumbled amidst other styles:

Amid this motley group (oh! miserable degradation!) the venerable form and sacred detail of our national and Catholic architecture may be discerned; but *how* adopted? Not on consistent principle, not on authority, not as the expression of our faith, our government, or country, but as one of the disguises of the day, to be put on and off at pleasure, and used occasionally as circumstances or private caprice may suggest.

It is considered suitable for some purposes, - MELANCHOLY, and *therefore* fit for religious buildings!!! a style that an architect of the day should be acquainted with, in order to please those who admire old things, - a style in which there are many beauties: such is the heartless advocacy which our national architecture frequently receives from its professed admirers. (Pugin, 1843, 2)

This long quotation serves to capture the tone of Pugin's book. One might compare Pugin's distaste for people who can take or leave this kind of architecture with Richard Oastler's condemnation of those Englishmen who campaigned against foreign slavery whilst they operated a more insidious form of slavery in their own mills.

Pugin saw Gothic as an expression of nationhood and religion, like Oastler he believed in the English character; while Oastler focused on political and social institutions as a means of keeping up this character, Pugin chose architecture. Driver, in his biography of Oastler, writes:

Oastler's expositions abound in references to 'the character of Englishmen'. The phrase was not a rhetorical flourish: it indicated a problem which was worrying him acutely. Personal character, Oastler considered, has to be regarded as a patterning of loyalties and habits. Since of necessity such patterning can only occur within and around institutions, to grow up in the midst of a given institutional complex is to take into one's personality something distinctively national - a certain way of thinking and feeling and a certain system of preferences. Change or destroy the institutions, therefore and you alter the character of men. (Driver, 1946, 429)

This is not so far away from the opinions of C. H. Sisson, a similar reasoning lies behind his support for the amateur's place in the pragmatical British civil service compared to

the specialist in the theoretical continental version. Pugin hammers his similar message home thus:

If we worshipped Jupiter, or were votaries of Juggernaut, we should raise a temple or erect a pagoda [...] If we denied Christ, we should reject his cross, For all these would be natural consequences; but, in the name of common sense, whilst we profess the creed of Christians, whilst we glory in being Englishmen, let us have architecture, the arrangement and details of which will alike remind us of our faith and our country, - an architecture whose beauties we may claim as our own, whose symbols have originated in our religion and our customs. (Pugin, 1843, 6)

There is clearly a problem about applying this kind of argument to modern Britain 'we' are no longer all Christian, and only a minority 'glory in being Englishmen'. Pugin's treatise adopts its strident tone because he felt the decay of this unanimity. When he calls for a return to Roman Catholicism from reasons of patriotism his argument seems feeble. Similarly, Oastler's conception of the country was fast becoming an anachronism (indeed that was part of his appeal). This is from a pamphlet of 1838 *A Sketch of the Life and Opinions of Richard Oastler*:

In Mr. Oastler's idea *country* is only another word for *home* - home in *extension* - embracing in *one* all the children of the soil, who, naturally, are brethren to be loved and provided for, in preference to the foreigner, just as a brother in blood is loved and defended before a stranger in the same neighbourhood. (Oastler, 1834, 13)

It scarcely needs to be pointed out that today plenty of the children of England's soil look on one another with as little love as they have for 'foreigners', and that our modern state does not conform to Oastler's domestic ideal. Hill's respect for Oastler does not take the form of duplicating his opinions in a period when they are even more out of date. It may involve simply drawing attention to his good works and his kind intentions. However much we may disagree with his politics, no one can deny the rectitude of his work on behalf of factory workers, and children especially. Similarly, Hill is not attempting to repeat Pugin's argument (any more than he is claiming Britain ought to rule India) rather he is recalling the ways in which people he admires dealt with the coming of the Industrial age and the difficulties of imperialism. It is the benign bureaucrat and the radical campaigner he sides with, not the greedy imperialist. How this is relevant to modern England may not be immediately clear, it is at least partly a matter of setting the record straight. It is also opening a debate between figures like Millbank, with his new town, and Coningsby, with his Toryism. It may be that both these attitudes can reside in one mind. Coningsby, in Disraeli's Tory propaganda novel, surveys the clean and somewhat anaemic town Millbank has built around his mills and calls it 'poetic'. It is precisely that - a fabrication, something made. Millbank's defensive fierceness incorporates his resentment for the class that Coningsby represents (the aristocracy: Millbank is a self-made man) and his somewhat grudging gratitude that Coningsby has

saved his son's life (they are school-chums). Some kind of compromise between the old order and the new money might create a real 'English' community, this town's resemblance to 'the New World' amounts to Millbank wishing himself out of his country. In the second poem in the sequence Hill makes a poem of mixed praise and lament (éloge and elegy - his favoured genre?):

November rips gold foil from the oak ridges.
 Dour folk huddle in High Hoyland, Penistone.
 The tributaries of the Sheaf and Don
 bulge their dull spate, cramming the poor bridges.

The North Sea batters our shepherds' cottages
 from sixty miles. No sooner has the sun
 swung clear above earth's rim than it is gone.
 We live like gleaners of its vestiges

knowing we flourish, though each year a child
 with the set face of a tomb-weeper is put down
 for ever and ever. (*NCP*, 141)

The place names here ring more true than that Mr Millbank's eponymous foundation. There is a soured version here of the resignation that takes us to the stately homes of the first poem, walking the mazes, reading the magical Linnaean plant-names off markers and enjoying the stories and myths of the upper-classes. In this second poem, the grim death of children is accepted as part of the nature of the land, the swing of the heavens and the rhythm of the liturgy (for ever and ever). The harshness of life is put up with, like the unfair disparity with the lifestyle of the aristocracy because 'after all' 'we flourish'. There would be something not quite satisfactory about this couple of poems if the ending of 'Damon's Lament' didn't turn against itself here:

Why does the air grow cold
 in the region of mirrors? And who is this clown
 doffing his mask at the masked threshold
 to selfless raptures that are all his own? (*NCP*, 141)

The first question could be a general one - why does one feel a chill when involved in introspection, or more specifically why is there something sinister (perhaps duplicitous) about this poem of reflection on the harshness of life in the voice of a Yorkshire person. The 'clown' could be so named because he is a low-class person in a pastoral poem, or because he is actually a clown, pretending all this quiet resignation to an aristocratic audience, or perhaps to his idea of what that audience is. In the end the 'selfless raptures' (here the language of St. Teresa's description of mystical experience resurfaces) are perhaps only the speaker convincing himself that there is something 'right' and natural about the order of society. And if the child is Clorinda, the clown Damon's love, we must see his strange 'lament' as an attempt to protect himself from grief and rage.

The political questions of this sequence are mainly focused in the three sonnets called 'A Short History of British India' (4, 5 and 6) together with 'Idylls of the King' (11). The sonnets about India have drawn intense criticism, to the effect that Hill is expressing approval of imperialistic sentiments. In the first we are given a series of imperatives:

Make miniatures of the once-monstrous theme:
the red-coated devotees, mêlées of wheels,
Jagannath's lovers. With indifferent aim
unleash the rutting cannon at the walls

of forts and palaces; pollute the wells.
Impound the memoirs for their bankrupt shame,
fantasies of the true destiny that kills
'under the sanction of the English name'.

Be moved by faith, obedience without fault,
the flawless hubris of heroic guilt.
the grace of visitation; and be stirred

by all her god-quests, her idolatries,
in conclave of abiding injuries,
sated upon the stillness of the bride. (*NCP*, 143)

We must ask who is issuing all these imperatives, and to whom. The first line sounds like it might be from an imperialist to an artist whom he patronises. The request is to make a small and domestic piece of art, a personal memento, out of publicly scandalous material. It is also an instruction to make an 'apology' for the atrocities, to make them seem small, to make light of them. But as the voice recalls elements of the picture the tone sounds more like that of the one imperial administrator to another. Just as the soldiers become 'devotees' and the military activities are orientalisised and sexualized into mêlées of lovers, the speaker sounds as if he is instructing a subordinate in the best way to deal with the natives. The cannon are clearly sexualized ('rutting') and the indifferent aim reveals the clumsiness of the British invaders, who (practising radically unsafe sex) pollute the country they enter, and infect themselves with her characteristics. The British administrators seize the artifacts of Indian culture and feel them to be shameful, but perhaps begin to internalize overmuch the view that the English invasion is a form of destiny. It may be that it was part of some Indian people's religion to believe that karma or destiny had something to do with the subjugation of the nation, but that surely should not lead the English to allow those fantasies to overwhelm them, until they believe they are the force of destiny incarnate. As the poem draws to its close we have a strange passive imperative 'Be moved', it is hard to see how someone can order another person to be moved, or even how one might compel oneself; actually the passive construction shows that the force must come from without. However, the imperative suggests strongly that what follows are things which an Englishman cannot help but be moved by: utter obedience, the tragic over-reaching of the hero, and the search for god. Perhaps the voice

has turned once more at this point and addresses itself. The final sexual image of the last line disturbingly suggests a kind of complicity in the invaded land. The stillness it manifests is like the demure sexual technique of a bride, feigning innocence and passivity to further inflame the groom. I think that the way the imperatives work and shift through various possible addressees makes it impossible to read this poem as a straightforward approbation of imperialism. The grammar of the poem reveals the authoritarian desire to control. We can, and must resist the command to unleash violence, or prejudicial sexual attitudes, against other cultures in the way that the voice desires. The imperatives cannot control our desires, or the ways in which we are 'moved' by things.

The second of these poems continues to work out the ideas about destiny. It also begins with an imperative, inviting us to accept a proposition (cf 'Funeral Music' 4 'Let mind be more precious than soul ...'):

Suppose they sweltered here three thousand years
patient for our destruction. There is a greeting
beyond the act. Destiny is the great thing,
true lord of annexation and arrears.

Our law-books overrule the emperors.
The mango is the bride-bed of light. Spring
jostles the flame-tree. But new mandates bring
new images of faith, good subahdars!

The fluttering candles of the wayside shrines
melt into dawn. The sun surmounts the dust.
Krishna from Radha lovingly untwines.

Lugging the earth, the oxen bow their heads.
The alien conscience of our days is lost
among the ruins and on endless roads. (*NCP*, 144)

The suggestion that the Indian sub-continent, and its inhabitants were waiting for invasion, almost like a woman waiting for the (stereotypically active) male sexual partner is present in the word 'sweltered'. But it is unclear whether 'our destruction' means our destruction of them or the destruction that will fall upon us. This allows the opening phrase to work two ways - it could mean suppose they have waited for three thousand years, or alternatively it could mean suppose they now wait for three thousand until destiny crushes us. Either way the imperialist suggests a position of smug acceptance of his actions. He feels a greeting of his action by some force - perhaps destiny, but more likely his own self-assertion. Destiny, after all, becomes merely another name for the administrator who portions up land and collects rents. The delusion follows that, because our new laws are an improvement on Roman Law, we administrators are better than (over-rule) the Emperors. At this point the poem begins to twist out of the grasp of this self-satisfied voice. As brief descriptions of the natural world leak in the voice tries to

assert cheerfully its control over spiritual life. Mandates can rule in 'new images of faith', souls are as malleable as land. But the exclamation mark suggests a slight desperation about this assertion, and the poem's tercets leave the world of the bureaucrat behind and move out into the world of the land, with its rhythms of work, time and worship. In this landscape where Krishna and Radha are called to mind by the dawn, it is the British who are alien, and there is the suggestion that we might lose consciousness, or at least our familiar conscience amidst the riches of this culture that will not have its ancient ways altered by mandate from England.

The next poem strikes a clearer nostalgic note, though briefly, with the twinned 'gone's straddling the gap between first and second stanza:

Malcolm and Frere, Colebrooke and Elphinstone,
the life of empire like the life of the mind
'simple, sensuous and passionate', attuned
to the clear theme of justice and order, gone.

Gone the ascetic pastimes, the Persian
scholarship, the wild boar run to ground,
the watercolours of the sun and wind.
Names rise like outcrops on the rich terrain,

like carapaces of the Mughal tombs
lop-sided in the rice-fields, boarded up
near railway-crossing and small aerodromes.

'India's a peacock-shrine next to a shop
selling mangola, sitars, lucky charms,
heavenly Buddhas smiling in their sleep.' (*NCP*, 145)

The civil servants Hill mentions are men who behaved responsibly in India, with interest and concern for the native culture. Their exemplary careers suggest to Hill that Milton's desire for the 'simple, sensuous and passionate' in poetry could be expanded not only to other intellectual activity, but even to the administration of an empire. The words 'attuned' and 'theme' even suggest a musical parallel, as if government should aspire to the condition of music. The next two sections catalogue the decay of this kind of involvement. The glamorous occupations of the British in India have faded until all that remain are names and ruins of the sacred places (which they have failed to conserve, or entirely destroy), elbowed out of importance by the bathetic 'small aerodromes'. The final tercet offers a miniature of the movement we have already seen in the second poem about India. The vulgar opinion of the present-day visitor is slightly overwhelmed by the transcendence that lingers in the pervasive presence of Buddhist imagery. The final poem on India suggests that there was something positive and fruitful in the cultural exchange between India and England. While allowing that the relationship has been much cheapened, it asserts the humbling power of this culture's spiritual legacy upon even a vulgar twentieth-century English consciousness.

Hill picks out qualities that he identifies as belonging to a previous era, but without necessarily giving his approval to everything that went with it. 'Vocations', for instance, again responds to the tact and efficiency of the administrator which remains after the false loyalties of 'friends'. In 'Idylls of the King' he places the solidly-built transience of the present against the insubstantial endurance of the past:

The pigeon purrs in the wood; the wood has gone;
dark leaves that flick to silver in the gust,
and the marsh-orchids and the heron's nest,
goldgrimy shafts and pillars of the sun.

Weightless magnificence upholds the past.
Cement recesses smell of fur and bone
and berries wrinkle in the badger-run
and wiry heath-fern scatters its fresh rust.

'O clap your hands' so that the dove takes flight,
bursts through the leaves with an untidy sound,
plunges its wings into the green twilight

above this long-sought and forsaken ground,
the half-built ruins of the new estate,
warheads of mushrooms round the filter-pond. (*NCP*, 150)

The continuous present of 'purrs', implying that this is what pigeons always have done and always will do, has to give way to the past tense of 'has gone'. This forces us to do a double take on the line. Are the pigeons purring in the wood wherever it has gone, or are we listening to a voice correcting itself as time renders its description inaccurate? The description of the wood that follows is another lapse into the past. The voice of the poem has to admit that the idyll is unreal, and yet affirms that the 'weightless magnificence' - the beauty of the non-existent wood - keeps the past alive in some way, while in the present it is the cement foundations that struggle to support the new buildings. Wildlife learns how to co-exist with the new technology, and the badgers move in alongside the building site. The final tercets exploit the possibility of survivals from the older world by introducing a piece of an old song,⁹ although it is hard to know if the dove and the fresh foliage are real in a landscape where the plant-life is imitating the wire-fences of the city. The last lines of the poem show us the new estate, not an elegant country estate, but something more along the lines of an inner city council estate. These buildings look like ruins before they are even completed, they spell misery just as clearly as the mushrooms predict nuclear disaster.

This sequence works by examining the social past of England, and finding there a mixture of things to be admired and things to be deplored. The poet sees the situation in modern Britain, however, and feels that too much of the positive side of the nations traditions is being discarded. In *Mercian Hymns* and some other poems, Hill takes a more

⁹ Perhaps Orlando Gibbons' 'O clap your hands together'.

personal view of English history, bringing events from the national past into collision with his own autobiography. 'The Stone Man' is a poem which in many ways seems a fore-runner of the *Mercian Hymns*. The first stanza, with its imperative suggesting a connection with the second India sonnet, hints warily at the relationship between the poet's childhood and his later vocation:

Recall, now, the omens of childhood:
The nettle clump and rank elder-tree;
the stones waiting in the mason's yard:

Half-recognised kingdom of the dead:
A deeper landscape lit by distant
Flashings from their journey. At nightfall

My father scuffed clay into the house.
He set his boots on the bleak iron
Of the hearth; ate, drank, unbuckled, slept.

I leaned to the lamp; the pallid moths
Clipped its glass, made an autumnal sound.
Words clawed my mind as though they had smelt

Revelation's flesh ... So, with an ease
That is dreadful, I summon all back.
The sun bellows over its parched swarms. (*NCP*, 73)

Somehow, in the poet's memory, the things of his childhood appear as omens of his future as a writer. The stones await their inscription, but the plants and landscape of the boy's home also await an act of writing (the elder-bush here giving him a sympathetic link to the Charlotte Brontë he imagines in 'Cowan Bridge'). The boy's father brings the earth into the house as a result of his work, and although the child as yet only studies and struggles with words he is aware of the rhythm of his father's working life. But there is a slippage. Do the words claw his mind now as he writes the poem or then when he was a boy? The answer must be both, and the emphasis on recall and summoning suggests that the present act of writing in some way makes the past present again; it re-presents it. Thus when the final line returns to the natural world, asserting the sun's ability to articulate (if only in a bellow) its overlordship of the swarming creatures, the word 'parched' and the image of the sun suggests summer as opposed to the autumnal setting of the childhood scene, suggesting very strongly the poet's ability to erase the external present world with his linguistic skill, and by the magic of anamnesis.

Canaan offers a counter-poem to 'The Stone Man' in 'Pisgah'. In 'Sorrel' we read the line 'Memory worsening — let it go as rain' (Hill, 1996, 40), but it is in 'Pisgah' that Hill registers his feeling of radical disjunction from the past; the impossibility of communication: 'you cannot hear me or quite make me out' (Hill, 1996, 52). At his London reading, Hill emphasized that *Canaan* is the past to which he is forbidden entry. Like

Moses on Pisgah looking down into Canaan, Hill cannot go back and talk to his father. This is also the reason he gave for the Latin title of 'Parentalia'; the dead language symbolizes his separation from his forebears.

Hill's father was a policeman, but the mason's yard looms large in this poem about childhood. Perhaps Hill shares Bunting's reasons for his interest in this figure. In *Briggflatts* the mason stands for the slow, laborious, but more permanent kind of inscription that cutting words on stone enforces.

they watch
the mason meditate
on name and date

The mason stirs:
words!
Pens are too light.
Take a chisel to write. (Bunting, 1978, 41)

The mason is often occupied in cutting gravestones, an occupation that would indeed provoke meditation on the transience of human life, name and date. But it also provides him with a belief in the weightiness of language when handled correctly. The mason reappears in *Mercian Hymns XXIV*

Itinerant through numerous domains, of his lord's retinue, to
Compostella. Then home for a lifetime amid West Mercia this
master-mason as I envisage him, intent to pester upon
tympanum and chancel-arch his moody testament, confusing
warrior with lion, dragon-coils, tendrils of the stony vine.

Where best to stand? Easter sunrays catch the oblique face of
Adam scrumping through leaves; pale spree of evangelists
and, there, a cross Christ mumming child Adam out of Hell

('Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum' dust in the eyes, on
clawing wings, and lips) (*NCP*, 116)

The master-mason, having travelled and learned his craft, visited the great pilgrimage centre of Compostella, comes back to West Mercia. His work constitutes a 'testament', and it is designed for that home audience. Adam in his garden appears to be 'scrumping', the English colloquialism showing us that the mason depicts the creation myth as if it happened in England. Similarly our Evangelists are pale Northerners. Christ too has been altered by native tradition, here the Mummers' plays. The Latin tag suggests the words which clawed the boy's mind in 'The Stone Man', the biblical message (in latin of course) tears the the mason's mind as he stands looking at his work covered in stone-dust.

Hill's sequence relates the fine work of the mason to his experience of his country, he takes inspiration from the character of the land. The title 'Opus Anglicanum' that Hill uses for these poem refers primarily to lace-work, but it spans a range of activities that

Hill sees as nourished by the land - lace, coins, masonry, manuscript illumination and earth-works. In Hymn XXIII the lace-makers are brought very close to the manual labourers of XII, and the poet's father of 'The Stone Man':

In tapestries, in dreams, they gathered, as it was en-acted, the return, the re-entry of transcendence into this sublunary world. *Opus Anglicanum*, their stringent mystery riddled by needles; the silver veining, the gold leaf, voluted grape-vine, master-works of treacherous thread.

They trudged out of the dark, scraping their boots free from lime-splodges and phlegm. They munched cold bacon. The lamps grew plump with oily re-liable light. (*NCP*, 115)

The workmen who are brought out of the dark seem almost summoned by the artistry of the lace-makers. The movement of the workers in out of the dark, along with the increase of light as they turn up the lamps seems to be parallel with the phrase 'the re-entry of transcendence into this sublunary world'. The work of the men, who have been manipulating soil and lime, shares the power of transcendence that 'art' has. As in 'The Stone Man', the return of the soiled labourer signals or accompanies renewed artistic achievement. Hymn XII shows this power of physical work very clearly:

Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant soil. They clove to the hoard. They ransacked epiphanies, vertebrae of the chimera, armour of wild bee's 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. (*NCP*, 104)

The men constructing latrines here may well be those who turn up later with lime on their boots. There is also a hint that they are building Offa's Dyke. However it is difficult to know where to place them historically. Their discovery of an old hoard of coins seems to bring them into our present, but their find allows them to 'ransack epiphanies', it gives them magical access to the past. This gives an odd transcendence to their rhythm of working, drinking and urinating. But the mole seems to have all this under his regard, he is timeless and eventually they are just scattered for him to feast upon, they become part of the earth he turns over. In the final verset a first person appears, seemingly at yet another stage of remove - perhaps the adult poet reflecting on his childhood opinion of the builders:

It is autumn. Chestnut-boughs clash their inflamed leaves. The garden festers for attention: telluric cultures, enriched with shards, corms, nodules, the sunk solids of gravity. I have raked up a golden and stinking blaze. (*NCP*, 104)

Here the 'I' recognizes the role of the earth in his sense of being in place. Culture is 'telluric', and gardening brings one to rake up, not just leaves, but the past, both one's own and that of the land itself.

The land and the art it produces are inseparable, when the boy explores 'the true governance of England' (in Hymn V) his explorations through the stories of the elves and warriors lead him also to investigate the land which harboured them. The expressions 'barbaric ivory' and 'scrollwork of fern' show the plants taking on the characteristics of the opponents in the struggle for England, the ferns reminding one of manuscript illumination, suggesting the carriers of the 'warrior gospel' attempting to Christianize the barbarous Saxons. Hymn VII shows the boy internalizing some of the principles of the part-heroic, part-barbaric past he is inheriting when his petty violence against Ceolred is solemnized by the fact of their continued friendship, and the reflective journey in the sandlorry 'Albion'. We are in a world where extreme violence is acceptable and does not necessarily lead to personal animosity, especially when meted out by someone sanctified by office - the sandlorry as private possession symbolises (through the significance of its name) overlordship of England. The boy's interest in looking back and using role-models from the past chimes with the nature of the indigenous animals themselves (mole, snail etc) who are forever rooting around in the earth. In Hymn XI the boar appears - another indication that there is something natural in being familiar with and respectful towards, even imitative of, one's national past.

Heathland, new-made watermeadow. Charlock, marsh-marigold.
Crepitant oak forest where the boar furrowed black mould,
his snout intimate with worms and leaves. (*NCP*, 103)

This concludes a poem discussing coinage and what can be learned from it archaeologically. The final verset moves back through the changes made to the landscape by men, to the image of the boar rooting in the legendary, ancient oak-forests of England. *Mercian Hymns* constantly draws these connections between the best of English artistry and craftsmanship, manual labour, violence and the relationship with the land itself and the animals that inhabit it. Through these interconnections Hill builds a picture of an English culture that is dependant not on book learning alone (although his notes point us to the books in any case) but to an active participation in the life of a culture from the rotting leaves of its woodland right up to the decoration of its cathedrals. He depicts, above all, an organic community that grows through the life of each of its component parts, not something that can be preserved merely by 'knowledge', not something that is simply a human construction. *Canaan* constitutes a claim for a Blakean prophetic role. The new volume problematizes the 'ease' with which his earlier work made the dead alive, but foregrounds the role of the imagination in the spiritual life, and in the relationship to one's patria. Hill still talks to the dead, and encourages us to engage with them. If England is to be Canaan, we need exemplary figures like Cobbett, Constable and

Law to save us from idolatry. Hill, like Los, wants to identify the 'jewels of Albion' and prevent them from being thrown into the gutter.