

## Wales and the Spirit:

### Reading Geoffrey Hill's *Oraclau* | *Oracles*

**Abstract:** This essay gives an account of the overall shape and purpose of Geoffrey Hill's richly detailed poem *Oraclau* | *Oracles* (2010), and provides a heuristic by which to read its individual sections. The poem emerges as a rich meditation on the culture and spirit of Welsh-language Wales, with the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (lover of north Wales) at its core. Hill is himself a religious poet in the mode of Blake or Hopkins, the apparent complexity or eccentricity of his style being one of the ways in which he seeks to rearrange our vision of the world. The poem's dense, highly formalistic manner is part of its attack on contemporary materialism. Symbolically Wales becomes a locus of resistance to the predominant secularist values of England.

Gwared ni rhag aur a gemau a gwisgoedd moethus  
Gwared ni rhag celfyddyd er mwyn celfyddyd  
A thrythyllwch er mwyn trythyllwch.  
Gwared ni rhag Arglwyddi'r Angau.

Pennar Davies

(epigraph to *Oraclau* | *Oracles*)<sup>1</sup>

[Rid us of gold and gems and lavish outfits  
Rid us of art for the sake of art  
And lasciviousness for the sake of lasciviousness  
Rid us from the lords of death.]

In poetry that moves us the form-content binary is indissoluble, the one reacting with and against the other in the ways that, if we are honest, make it difficult to discuss in the traditional discursive modes of criticism. This is certainly true of Geoffrey Hill's *Oraclau* | *Oracles* (2010), the third part of

*The Daybooks*. We are faced here with dense, sensuous, concretized verse—it is a moot point whether the work is a series of stanzas or a series of separate poems—that draws us into a complex atmosphere and argument. Here, for Hill’s denigrators, is part of the questionable nature of his enterprise. ‘No poem is profound’, said Bunting of *Briggflatts*; or, in Larkin’s version of the same thought, Thomas Hardy is a good poet because he deals with perennial themes: ‘his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love’.<sup>2</sup> *Oraclau* | *Oracles* does not fit this formula: we are dealing with issues of ageing certainly, but also with matters like nationality, identity, genealogy, tradition, otherness, marginalization, and, relatedly, materialism and secularity and their contestability. The stanzas represent, as we shall see, an extraordinary, sustained formalistic achievement—the denseness of their sensuous and intellectual evocation is in part a result of their fine repetitive patterning—and in a world devoted to the loose, the improvised, the demotic, the off-hand, this is an element of their challenge and their wider resistance to the spirit of the times. In what follows I offer an account of the overall shape and purpose of this richly detailed poem, and attempt to provide a heuristic by which to begin to read its individual sections. For a number of reasons I want to put the issue of nationality at the centre of the discussion, and to try to understand how this relates to the sequence’s profound Christian explorations and commitments.

## I. WELSH BICULTURALISM

Sometime in the future, when criticism of the later work is better established, I suspect *Oraclau | Oracles* will be known simply as ‘the Welsh book’; in one interview Hill speaks of it as embodying his ‘“discovery” of Wales’.<sup>3</sup> A hundred and forty-four stanzas of closely worked artistry draw together a pantheon of Welsh heroes—Welsh-language writers, artists, and politicians, and also individuals who, though not Welsh, had some fascination with or love of Wales—within a wider view of Welsh language, history, culture, and landscape. The impulse or provocation for the sequence is the poet’s Welsh great grandfather, its dedicatee, Pryce Jukes, of Llanllwchaiarn (1826–1895), an iron puddler by trade, who moved from central Wales to the Black Country in the mid nineteenth century.

Is *Oraclau | Oracles*—Welsh biculturalism highlighted in its very title—an Anglo-Welsh work or even a postcolonial work? and what exactly would it mean if we said this? If we consider that the poet is writing as a (very partial) Welshman to a predominantly English (and American) audience, then he is clearly setting himself up on the side of an often marginalized, patronized culture against the still Empire-shadowed, London / metropolitan centre. To say even that much is to say rather a lot about the political adjustment, or decentring, that the work is asking of many readers, within a Christian context. Through the sequence Hill uncovers

aspects of the cultural and spiritual richness of Welsh-language Wales, and standing up as a Welshman, or (more exactly) the Englishman-become-partial-Welshman, asks his English readers what all this means.

The oracles of the title are the mainly Welsh women and men to whom individual stanzas and mini-sequences are devoted within the larger work. English readers will know some of these names (e.g. Nye Bevan, David Lloyd George) but for most there will be real openings-out of knowledge, particularly in relation to the Welsh-language poets (e.g. Ann Griffiths, T. H. Parry-Williams, R. Williams Parry, Saunders Lewis). Readers already familiar with these lives will have less work to do to get near to the sequence—but how many such readers are there, whether English or (monoglot) Welsh? There is also the question of the untranslated Welsh. Although some of these words and phrases are assimilated and create no problem, the majority of English readers will be challenged by at least some of following: foel, cwm, Moel, hebog, hiraeth, Eryri, hwyl, marwnad, Afal du Brogyr, Y Ddraig Goch, Dafydd y Garreg Wen, and yr hen iaith. These occur sporadically, and, of course, just a little effort gives us access to their meaning, but, in postcolonial terms, they signify difference: ‘in an English-language Welsh text the use of untranslated Welsh asserts the cultural difference of “English”-language Welsh writing . . . the refusal to provide a translation draws attention to boundaries and differences between linguistic groups’.<sup>4</sup> In short, as much here as in more obviously Anglo-Welsh texts, what is being challenged is how ‘the Anglocentric hegemony’ constructs the ‘invisibility of Welsh history and culture’.<sup>5</sup> The culturally

marginalized is being placed centre stage; a spanner is being thrown into the works of certain kinds of simplifying debate about multiculturalism.

A serious engagement with the text, the deep reading it requires, will have to recapitulate Hill's own 'discovery' of Wales and what this means to him. The most useful signposts are some of the sub-titles, for example '*i. m. T. H. Parry-Williams*' (st. 10), '*Ann Griffiths*' (st. 15–17), '*Marwnad* [i.e. 'Lament for'] *Saunders Lewis*' (st. 54–57). These are pointers to the knowledge we need to understand particular stanzas, even though minimal research shows that the stanzas themselves contain most of the information we need. Why—the English reader may ask—have I not heard of these writers before, when they are clearly already famous to some Welsh-language speakers? The question of Wales's biculturalism, so near to the English 'mainstream' yet so easily ignored, presses on the imagination, provoking other questions about 'English' history, heritage, and the present state of the cultural scene. Hill handles all this skilfully by treating figures who the majority of readers won't know along with figures they may partially or indeed wholly know. The entanglements of Welshness and Englishness are pressed to the fore, so that readers who have at least some knowledge of the Welsh heritage are being asked in effect why they don't have more.

Some authorities have hailed Ann Griffiths (1776–1805), from an obscure part of rural Wales, as one of the great religious poets of Europe. Why, then, have most English readers not heard of her?<sup>6</sup> And what of the

battles in the twentieth century to establish a Welsh national party and to secure the Welsh language from oblivion? When Saunders Lewis (the great Welsh-language playwright) and his friends, in an act of civil disobedience, set fire to the newly established (English) RAF base on the Llyn peninsula in 1936, they sacrificed their careers to the cause of Welsh identity—but how many English know about what the *DNB* calls this ‘landmark in modern Welsh history’? Or again, what of the origins of the National Health Service? Its prime mover, Labour minister Aneurin Bevan, had his roots in the economic depression in south Wales in the 1910s: a miner at thirteen, he suffered extended unemployment in the 1920s on scant poor-relief before being elected as a Labour MP in 1929. The experience of poverty fired his radicalism. Good things we take for granted now have come to us from the so-called margins. In this way, threads of suggestion about the good, the beautiful, and the true are subtly connected up, while notions of ‘metropolitan centre’ and ‘hinterland’ are subtly undermined.

## II. CHALLENGING A MATERIALIST MINDSET

A second element of challenge in the sequence is implicit in its epigraph, given at the start of this essay: ‘Rid us of gold and gems and lavish outfits / Rid us of art for the sake of art ...’—a profound anti-materialism. The celebration here of Welsh cultural richness and heritage is an implicit attack on what Hill has called elsewhere ‘plutocratic anarchy’, the dominant mode in which he believes we now live.<sup>7</sup> This attack is present in

the subject-matter of the whole sequence, but it is implicit, deeply written into, its formal characteristics. The quiet, meditative, unassuming movement of the verse, achieved by the use of two slightly different nine-line stanzas, is an enactment of meaning. We feel this as we attend to its rhythms; we may realize it more consciously once we see from where these stanza forms are retrieved: Donne's 'Nocturnal upon Saint Lucy's Day' and his later 'The Litany'. The 'Nocturnal' is, of course, a love poem, while 'The Litany' is one of Donne's greatest religious meditations, and it is tempting to see the movement between these forms as a symbolic enactment of meaning, indicating to us within the sequence the interplay between the earthly and the divine, between all these specifics of Welsh culture, language, and life, and that to which they point.

Let us take as an example the start of the mini-sequence in honour of Ann Griffiths:

Intelligence new made of late

By paradox and oxymoron pressed;

The world fast-held the soul's estate

Entailed; old weakness mightily confessed.

Across the Berwyn she moves

In penitential climb

Up to strange Bala with Dolanog's loves:

All things exalted and reduced to Him

For whom her careful ecstasies of rhyme. (st. 15)

This is elaborately concise—an almighty refusal of an overly explicit, ‘in your face’ kind of art—and it makes beautiful use of Donne’s ‘Litany’ stanza. The reading process involves an encounter with confusion, as, at first go, we take in many particulars close together, but then things clear: detail forms into an overall image, and uplift occurs. (This is very much the experience of reading the sequence as a whole.) At her conversion to Methodism in 1796, Ann Griffiths’ intelligence was ‘new made’ into the ‘paradox and oxymoron’ by which, in her hymns, she engaged with the mystery of the Incarnation. Before that moment Ann was no kill-joy: the ‘loves’ of Dolanog, her home village, included ‘dancing, fiddles, the tunes catchy’ (st. 17). Once converted, we see her journeying, sometimes on her own, over the Berwyn Mountains, to attend monthly Methodist communion services at Bala village, on Bala lake. Somehow, in its brevity, the stanza conjures a vivid image of her tiny, solitary figure on this twenty-two mile trek. ‘*Strange Bala*’ is surely extraordinary: it is strange because, for a young eighteenth-century country woman, in that sparsely populated area, it is wholly unfamiliar; it is also strange because of her conversion, which means that everything she does—including what she is doing now—appears wonderful to the eyes of faith. How was the love of the world to fit



into her new religious vision? Hill is saying no more nor less on this than Donald Allchin in his book on Griffiths, which may be his source:

Again the play of paradox [in her poetry] is an essential element in the writer's strategy, taking us beyond our customary use of concepts and images, forcing us to re-interpret them, to let them be transfigured and transformed. But as we should expect with Ann the movement beyond, the movement of ecstasy is lucid and sober. The precision remains.<sup>8</sup>

Hill's version of this is the description of her poems as 'careful ecstasies of rhyme'.

Each of the short portraits of individuals in *Oraclau* is somehow an 'oracle', in Welsh 'oraclau':

**Oracle**, *sb.* . . . A response, decision, or message, given usually by a priest or priestess of a god, and, as was supposed, by his inspiration, at the shrine or seat where the deity was supposed to be thus accessible to inquirers. These responses were for the most part obscure or ambiguous; to which allusion is made in later senses of the word and its derivatives. (*OED2*, 2.)

Here what is apparently, and only at first, 'obscure or ambiguous' is a way of attacking what Hill has called elsewhere 'the ruling imbecilities',<sup>9</sup> but since the sequence as a whole is very decentred, not following some obvious or logical discursive pattern—this too, I take it, is part of its

meaning—it may be some time before we are able to see why this very diverse group of individuals, from different eras, has been brought together.

Many of the individuals evoked in *Oraclau* are countercultural, resisters of aspects of their times, brave or bloody-minded, defiantly hidden or obscure in their doings and commitments. To begin to recognize this is to begin to see how the larger metaphor of Wales starts to come into view. The Welsh-language poet T. H. Parry-Williams (1887–1975), for example, is noted for his pacifism, for which he went to gaol during the First World War (st. 10). Thomas Vaughan (1621–1666), twin of the poet Henry Vaughan, is celebrated for his mystical writings and for how his dedication to alchemy was part of a life-long spiritual quest (st. 31–35).<sup>10</sup> We have already mentioned Saunders Lewis. He is here for his courage in the face of English injustice (st. 55), and for the quality of the tragic vision in his plays, a vision that registers (in the wake of World War II) the profound nature of evil and humanity’s struggle to transcend it (st. 56–57). Ceri Richards (1903–1971) is an unfashionable Jung-inspired painter, prepared to develop Modernism and Surrealism in ways entirely his own (st. 71–74). B. S. Johnson (who Hill implicitly identifies with as another writer of working-class origins) is here because of his love of the Llŷn peninsula and Gregynog, his life-long socialism, and his determination to continue modernist experiment with the novel in the 1960s and 1970s against safer, more saleable views of what the novel should be (st. 83–88). Again, the epigraph from Pennar Davies (1911–1996), another great Welsh-language

writer, suggests the real, deep-down common thread. It has been well said of Pennar Davies that he rejected 'that mass, secular, techno-industrial and consumerist society to which he gave the name Anglosacsonia because he associated it primarily with the destructive, hegemonic culture of Anglo-American capitalism'.<sup>11</sup> Through the sequence as a whole, Wales, and in particular the beauty of some of its landscapes, becomes a complex symbol for the life of the Spirit and hence of the marginalization of the Spirit in modern life, the thinning of the life of the mind and heart in relation to the deeper realities of the human condition.

For Hill, much of what seems obvious today—and much of what is obvious in the preferred 'accessibility' of contemporary poetic modes—only colludes with the standard, distorted mindset of the contemporary world—hence his preference for a sometimes cryptic, intense mode of writing. So-called 'difficulty' in late Hill is a strategy of approach to the reader, a refusal of instant access, and—most of all—a slowing down of the process of assimilation. The rush of the contemporary mind is part of its failure: real art must slow us to get nearer to the truth. Within this slowed-down mode the poet can open up new spaces for intrigue, curiosity, and surprise, awakening a sense of nuance by which the world starts to look different and brighter to the reader's eye. The contemporary sensibility blankets reality with a carapace of secularization, non-mystery, non-depth, speed. How can that carapace be penetrated? Obvious means won't do. What I call Hill's 'refusal of instant access' constructs the patient reader, one prepared to

engage with the difficulty of his ‘oracles’ and so push through into different and more joyous spaces than those provided by modernity.

It is a fair prediction that, though the sequence as a whole may prove a big challenge for many readers, some of the mini-sequences within it will quickly be anthologized and become more widely known. The most likely case in point is stanzas 62 to 67, all headed ‘*Ty-tryst*’, which form a celebration of the life of Aneurin Bevan (1897–1960). The arch of meaning is not so difficult to follow. Nye Bevan went to work as a teenager in the colliery at Ty-tryst near Tredegar, south Wales, in 1910. He is characterized at first as a Danton-like revolutionary, a force like ‘Blake’s Tyger’ (st. 62), burning out from the material and cultural deprivations of his background. Stanza 63 is in part free-indirect speech, noting how, for years, the sheep-like working class ‘were fleeced, dunked in poisons’. Stanza 65—already quoted a number of times in the first reviews because of its extraordinary eloquence—asks simply how someone who had had to work, day in day out, in the harshness of the mine, hard up against the deadly ‘*inert matter*’ that is coal at depth, could maintain spiritual wholeness and then come out of that experience with enough personal energy to take on the establishment, via politics, for the rest of his life:

That was Nye’s phrase for it, *inert matter*.

Having crawled once to a picked seam I call

*Malevolence* the voice of coal,

Squealing, grunting, groaning like water.

How did any man twist away

Soul-free from that shining,

Rise undamaged into the raw day

With his black minstrel's face absurdly grinning,

Travestied as was Jude that drôle of learning. (st. 65)

Stanza 66 asks deeper questions about his eloquence as a speaker, in Parliament and elsewhere. And stanza 67 is inspired, I think, by the Aneurin Bevan Memorial Stones, the impressive monument to the politician's memory set high up on the hills above Tredegar, three giant megaliths, which have the effect of a miniature Stonehenge. Bevan may have been a secularist all his life, but Hill clearly doesn't see him that way. He becomes one of the poet's spiritual heroes, a man working against the materialism and greed of capitalism to establish, via the Health Service, a better, more integrated society. Some of the other mini-sequences or vignettes may be harder to decode, but, once we do so, we find that they are all pointing us in this same direction.

### III. HILL AND HOPKINS

Here we come to something very important in late Hill, something that may be one of his lasting influences on our view of the canon. We do not have to accept the whole, arcane, quasi-cabbalistic working out of Harold Bloom's theory of influence, nor indeed the theory from which it derives, Eliot's in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', to feel that sometimes a particular poet may be hinging his work more on one predecessor than any other. In Hill's case this seems a striking thing to say, given the range of poetry with which his mind is absorbed. Yet, as Bloom observes, when one 'strong' poet picks out a particular earlier 'strong' poet for intertextual relations, then that predecessor comes into a new kind of prominence, is revalued by the attention received.<sup>12</sup> The poet who acts as the guardian angel of *Oraclau* | *Oracles* is Gerard Manley Hopkins, or, as Hill refers to him (sensibly I think) Gerard Hopkins.<sup>13</sup> Hopkins is a pervasive presence, almost a kind of alter ego for Hill himself; they are both, as it were, Englishmen in love with Wales providing 'dogged resistance' to cultural decadence.<sup>14</sup>

Hopkins lived in central north Wales between 1874 and 1877, in Denbighshire, at the Jesuit centre of St Beuno's College, working intensively on theology and enjoying the landscape of the Clwyd and Elwy valleys. Here he wrote some of his best poetry. (St Beuno's, incidentally, is still run by the Jesuits as an Ignatian Spirituality Centre.) It could be argued that this phase of his life is the pivot on which *Oraclau* | *Oracles*

turns. Hopkins is the focus of stanza 13 ‘*near St Beuno’s*’, stanza 113 (an interesting speculation on the origins of sprung rhythm), and stanza 139, but in fact the extensive treatment of nature throughout the sequence is really a constant tribute to his spirit. There are also, as we shall see, some fine stanzas engaging him intertextually in remarkable ways.

One important contrast in Hopkins’s work is between God-made Nature (embodying pure and sensuous particularity that connects us to the transcendental) and Man-made ‘civilization’, the grime of the nineteenth-century urban environment (the world contaminated by human sinfulness, manifest in nineteenth-century slums and in the generalized insensitive unheeding of the green world). This binary is explicit, for example, in ‘God’s Grandeur’ and ‘The Sea and the Skylark’. In the overall structure of this collection Hill is following Hopkins, for the various *oraclau* we have looked at so far, and also the personal ruminations that make up the rest of the sequence, are framed by stanzas devoted to nature in Wales. The sense of the otherness of Welshness is in part overcome by the way Hill himself inhabits the landscape through the kind of quality of religious vision lent to him by Hopkins.

The theme of Nature, and of the Divine in Nature, is set up in the opening of the sequence, stanzas 1–9. Though concerned with other things as well, these stanzas are focused on views of nature as seen from the cottage of Hill’s friend, Chris Woodhead, somewhere in Snowdonia. (This is the central physical locus of the poem.) After this, nature is centre stage in

at least the following stanzas: 10, 13–14, 28–29, 42–43, 76–77, 80, 91, 108, 139. The majority of these views—not all in Snowdonia—are of autumn and winter landscapes, in particular of ‘Mid-October, best of seasons’ (st. 77). With a few exceptions, these landscapes evoke that Hopkins-like purity and truthfulness which lift the poet towards transcendence, which let him escape from or simply cope with some of the depredations of age: painful memories, doubts and uncertainties, regrets, and straightforward physical limitation.

The significance of old age should not be underestimated in the sequence, for it feeds through into aspects of the style. Some of the stanzas, as we have seen, make stately, dignified use of the Donne verse forms. A case in point is the stanza about Ann Griffiths: its quiet rhetorical perfection makes it spiritually resonant. Often, however, this same verse form is made to seem Byronic, chatty, off-hand, unbuttoned, for the brokenness of age makes faith a resistance to certain kinds of despair. The depredations of age mean that the poetry needs sometimes to function at a more homely level. In stanza 75 Hill characterizes himself as a broken, disgruntled ‘Humpty Dumpty’: ‘I am angry / At being made angry’, and he dilates upon Shakespeare’s sonnet 66 as a way of appeasing his near despair. Stanzas 119–124, the ‘*Hiraeth*’ (‘nostalgia’) sequence, are about a first teenage love, a relationship that the poet feels was a tragic loss in the way it went wrong or wasn’t followed through; his writing here vividly evokes how the mind in old age sticks upon certain early wounds and misadventures. And in stanza 126, we have this: ‘Repeat after me the



adage: / Christ descended into our suffering / But not into crippling sad  
age':

Clap to my working forehead the bagged ice

While I struggle with interest and lien

Set on the loans of time still to obtain. (st. 126)

There are other instances like this, as, for example, the painful broken friendship recalled at stanzas 19–20. Nature, and God in Nature, help to salve these things, and the way they do so, I suspect, is something for which this work will become famous.

#### IV. HEARTSIGNINGS

Here there is not space to elaborate on all the special beauties of the stanzas concerned with nature. Some single stanzas, as for example 28, and even some single lines, have extraordinary lift and resonance: 'Grand sog of red woods gold-leaf-fretted' (st. 108). Hopkins is there in that triple-adjective, as he is also, for example, in 'The rowan strung with its bunchbeaded wire' (st. 2), a recollection of the 'beadbonny ash' in 'Inversnaid'. Hill flirts with Hopkins in this way only, in the end, to reach his own very peculiar accommodation with him.

Here are the crucial Hopkins-esque stanzas:

I scarcely trust what I could wish emerge

From such a wishful thinking towards grace—

Reception being beyond place.

In small sun the laurels wax large.

Fatal heredity

These afternoons when rain-mist brings the sea

Closer to the grey house set in its vee

Between hills of coarse-clad conglomerate

Where twice-blossoming gorse abides its state.

As the hebog in these windy sessions

Bends the seasons' pace about its track-rod;

As in westward place the black cloud

Jettisons candescent lesions:

So I make sign for all

Heartsignings; so eternity without fail

Will fail us subject also to our spoil;

As even the last paradox dissolves

Into a scheme of mist about our selves. (sts. 7–8)

Before poetry of this quality one feels strangely vulnerable. It is both straightforward and multi-layered. Paraphrase is not going to work, yet, in part at least, paraphrase is the only tool we have to begin to make sense of such close-packed meaning.

The passage above follows on from stanza 6, which is concerned with how poetry relates to place, and in particular with the Welsh-language bards of the Eisteddfod. Hill is both sceptical and affirming concerning the bards and their work: he worries about their ‘prized effoliate / Atavisms’—clearly something potentially negative—at the same time as he admires their ‘graft’, the continuing struggle to ‘sullenly’ revivify ‘expired encomia to exequies’. These poets, every poet, desires ‘some better grace to entertain’—but how is it going to be done in the circumstances of the present? So we come to stanzas 7 and 8 above.

The ‘reception [of grace]’—both poetic inspiration and spiritual grace—is ‘beyond place’, i.e. is not something conditioned by place. ‘In small sun the laurels wax large’ is ambivalent and complex: in one sense it is a wholly literal comment: the modest levels of sunshine in Wales mean that, where they can, the plants put on larger leaves for photosynthesis, but it also suggests an element of poetic over-reaching: ‘Where there isn’t much (spiritual) light, such an efflorescence of poetry seems anomalous’; or again, ‘The Eisteddfod shows “small light” but rather big poetic prizes’; or

again (more positively) ‘Under thwarting cultural conditions, the flowering of poetry is a form of resistance’. There is a special weight to having ‘Fatal heredity’ as a line on its own: ‘fatal’ means both ‘destined’ and ‘deadly’—the unavoidable Welshness of the bards, the poet’s own Welsh descent, and our general situation as Eve’s children. The rest of the sentence brings revival and relief: the rain-mist coming in off the Irish Sea may limit the light, but we have the beautiful yellow ‘twice-blossoming gorse’ tenaciously flowering, being lovely where it is, despite the harsh conditions.

Stanza 8 is the poem’s first high point. The ‘hebog’ (i.e. ‘hawk’ in Welsh, pronounced with a short *h*, as in ‘hedge’), like Hopkins’s windhover (to which it obviously alludes), resists and controls the wind via its flight: it ‘bends the seasons’ pace’—the high winds—‘about its track-rod’, its chosen sky-path. And, then, after the misty afternoon, the black cloud across the west creates, or throws off, ‘candescent lesions’: the glowing red wounds of a sunset. This sounds like another reworking of ‘The Windhover’: ‘and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion’ (13–14).

The hebog riding the wind and the black clouds creating the sunset are both (as in Hopkins) intense moments where the sense-perceptible and the transcendental meet—moments of divine grace—but also, and just as surely, instances of what blocks grace: there is tension, dialogue, dialectic. The hebog has to struggle desperately with the wind to achieve what it achieves in riding it; it is ‘black cloud’, obscuring and opaque, that creates

the fine sunset. Hill has dug in hard to what might appear a casual allusion to 'The Windhover' to rework some of its theological implications. When he says that 'so' – i.e. in this way – he makes 'sign for all / Heartsignings' (st. 8) he is taking up both elements of the preceding examples: the 'grace' of the bird and the sunset are forged in opposition, just as the poet's struggle to create his 'heartsignings' comes against and within the fallenness of the world. There is a clash: 'eternity', which we must presume to be perfect, becomes imperfect in relation to our fallen natures, 'our spoil'. Here eternity (the perfect) and human 'spoil' (the imperfect) play wonderfully or terribly against each other, in what is again a Hopkins-like effect. And that last word of the stanza is from Hopkins too: 'selves'. In this world we are always subject to the 'paradox' of the Fall and the paradox that is the Christian way out of it. Beyond this, when the 'scheme of mist' about ourselves dissolves, we will be 'our [true] selves'—just in the way that the windhover 'selves itself' (in Hopkins' terms) and so becomes a symbol of the divine.

Looking back from this intense, moving stanza, we may still wonder about the pattern of the argument through stanzas 6 to 8. How did we get from thoughts of the Eisteddfod poets to this high theological moment? Really, this is not so hard to see. Hill (basically an Englishman, with a bit of Welsh blood in him) takes the pressures and dilemmas of Welsh-language poets as symptomatic of the difficulties of any cultural-spiritual endeavour. The real 'grace' of poetry is not solved by 'place' or cultural allegiance, for example by the simple fact of being part of the Welsh-language tradition.

That may be a proud thing, but sometimes it can just be atavistic. The reception of 'grace' is 'beyond place' (st. 7), but it is also, in Eliot's phrase, 'Quick now, here, now, always': in this instance Snowdonia on a misty afternoon, with the hawk seen in the sky and then a glaring, beautiful sunset. The same blocks to 'grace' are built into our condition as humans, but heaven is always there resisting our 'spoil' when we choose to try and get in touch with the divine 'signs'. It is in this context that all the various 'oracles' make sense: they show individual lives that have struggled to find illumination and truth against the grain of sin and alienation. Essentially Hill is writing a boldly Christian and humanistic poetic sequence in a time that he knows is intent on resisting that world-view.

## V: CONCLUSIONS

One feels instinctively that the spirituality on display in this work is going to split readers, and some are going to feel that this angle of approach to modernity is essentially a reheated and out-dated romantic ideology that does not really address the conditions of postmodernity or 'plutocratic anarchy'. What might give opponents pause is not perhaps the argument, as such, but its manner and mode, what I have called these 'dense, sensuous, concretized' stanzas. It is via this style, if any way, that Hill will unsettle secularist and materialist assumptions, partly by its enactment of the way in which language is not transparent or logical in its workings, partly through its sheer affective intensity (as described above), partly by

its implicit insistence on its relation to tradition and on the meaning of tradition. Implicitly Hill suggests, via his poetic manner and mode—and contra certain kinds of contemporary assumption—that we cannot resist tradition, or, in other words, cannot resist radical connection to the past. As Hill makes clear in the passages above, he is the kind of religious poet—like Vaughan, or Blake, or Hopkins—whose poetic manner is inseparable from the lived religious life and its assumptions, a manner designed to unsettle and reshape a viewing of the world in accord with its own religious vision. The textures of writing—rhythm, allusion, pun, elision, and everything else that makes a particular style, and here particularly the dense use of highly formalistic stanzas and their heritage—are the way in which a world is rearranged. Here the usual accusation of Hill’s ‘difficulty’ is beside the point. What would it have been like to purchase *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in 1794 and try to make sense of it without a gloss? Or, in 1885 say, what if Hopkins had—against the odds—actually published his poems, bristling diacritical marks and all—what would it have been like to read them? The answer is simple: ‘Rather like reading Geoffrey Hill today’. Implicitly, he places himself before us within this kind of genealogy, insisting that such a genealogy makes sense. Style, form, and mode are part of the way in which all three poets seek to rearrange their worlds, part of the way in which they are determined to open up religious vision against the grain of the times. Wales fits within this agenda. That the English reader may know little about Wales and Welsh biculturalism, and may be disconcerted to discover the extent of this ignorance, is

intentionally unsettling. Wales, both literally and symbolically, is a metaphor of otherness, marginalization, and the spirit, which insists that, a lot of the time, we are reading our world wrongly.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from *Oraclau | Oracles* are from the first edition, Geoffrey Hill, *Oraclau | Oracles : The Daybooks III* (Thame, 2010), by kind permission of Clutag Press. References are given by stanza number. The text of *Oraclau | Oracles* published in the more recent *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) is substantially the same, though there are some changes in the titles of individual stanzas.

Hill takes the epigraph here from *Triskel Two: Essays on Welsh and Anglo-Welsh Literature*, ed. Sam Adams and Gwilym Rees Hughes (Llandybie: Davies, 1973), p. 126. I am very grateful to Benytta Doman for her help in translating the Welsh and for her enlightening conversation about Welsh culture.

<sup>2</sup> ‘A Note on *Briggflatts*’, quoted from Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2009), p. 20; Philip Larkin, *Required Writing* (London: Faber, 1983), p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from an interview with C. Woodhead: ‘Yes, Of Course I was Wired Weird’, *Standpoint* (July-August 2010), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> K. Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 2004), p. 122.



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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 134, 133.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, who has done much to make her better known, was born into a Welsh-speaking family near Swansea, so, even as Archbishop of Canterbury, cannot count as an Englishman here.

<sup>7</sup> Hill takes the phrase ‘plutocratic anarchy’, of which he has made much in his recent Oxford lectures, from William’s Morris’s lecture ‘Art under Plutocracy’ (1883): see *Lectures on Socialism*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. M. Morris, 24 vols. (London, 1910–15), vol. xxxiii, pp. 164–91 (191). He discusses it elsewhere in *The Daybooks*: see, for example, Odes XIII and XXXIX in *Odi Barbare: The Daybooks II* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2012), pp. 21, 47.

<sup>8</sup> A. M. Allchin, *Ann Griffiths: The Furnace and the Fountain* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1987), p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy’s Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> The Vaughan twins are central figures in *Clavics*, the next book of *The Daybooks*, where much is made of their work and their presence at the Battle of Chester (1645). This is one of several cross-overs between the different *Daybooks*.

<sup>11</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales* (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 1999), p. 99.

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<sup>12</sup> Bloom would call Hill's dealings with Hopkins in *Oraclau* | *Oracles* an instance of *Apophrades* or 'the return of the dead': see H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 139–55.

<sup>13</sup> Hill's main critical essays concerning Hopkins, in whole or part, are chs. 6, 23, and 31 in *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings*, ed. K. Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> This phrase about Hopkins from Hill's 'Redeeming the Time': see *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writing*, p. 108.

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