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**THE AESTHETICS OF HISTORY IN THE MODERN ENGLISH LONG POEM:
DAVID JONES'S THE ANATHEMATA, BASIL BUNTING'S BRIGGFLATTS,
GEOFFREY HILL'S MERCIAN HYMNS AND ROY FISHER'S A FURNACE**

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Submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

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The Aesthetics of History in the Modern English Long Poem: David Jones's *The Anthemata*, Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* and Roy Fisher's *A Furnace*

ABSTRACT

David Jones, Basil Bunting, Geoffrey Hill and Roy Fisher are major poets in the modernist tradition who have written long poems which incorporate and interrogate history. *The Anthemata*, *Briggflatts*, *Mercian Hymns* and *A Furnace* all explore the poet's sense of identity and his relationship to the present by attempting to give order to the past. This thesis examines how this attempt, and the various ideologies, philosophies and aesthetics that have accompanied it, are given form in these poems. It relates detailed readings of the poems to their intellectual and historical contexts. The Introduction outlines the typical features of the modernist long poem and suggests that they are peculiarly suited to expressions of both history and nationalism. Chapter I is a critical assessment of the aesthetics of Wilhelm Worringer and Herbert Read. Chapter II shows how David Jones endeavours to give form to the various histories of *The Anthemata* by using these aesthetics in conjunction with the historical philosophy of Oswald Spengler, the analysis of myth and ritual of J.G. Frazer and Jessie Weston, and his own nationalism and Roman Catholicism. This chapter accounts for the poem's obscurity by investigating its conflicting ideas of form, and locating it in the context of the Second World War. Chapter III, on *Briggflatts*, argues that Basil Bunting combines the ideas of Worringer and Read with an autobiographical narrative and a structure derived from music, in order to give the poem a form mirroring both his melancholia and the harmony he perceived in nature. It contends that the histories in the poem are best read as relating to autobiography and not Northumbrian nationalism. Chapter IV shows how Geoffrey Hill refashions the English long poem in a manner close to that of the lyric sequence. It explores notions of empathy and historical continuity in *Mercian Hymns*, and analyses Hill's ambiguous evocation of his Anglo-Saxon roots in the context of contemporary political discourse. Chapter V discusses the ways in which Roy Fisher enacts different apprehensions of time and history in the dialectical structure of *A Furnace*, and relates them to the thought of John Cowper Powys. The Conclusion draws together the recurrent themes of the thesis: change and continuity, history and identity, time and timelessness.

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INTRODUCTION

David Jones's The Anthemata, Basil Bunting's Briggflatts, Geoffrey Hill's Mercian Hymns and Roy Fisher's A Furnace are four of the most ambitious poetic works by English writers since the Second World War.¹ They belong in the modernist tradition of the long poem and endeavour to give form to various histories. Though the similarities between them have often been noted in passing by critics, they have never been studied in a single work which would make clear just what the similarities and differences between them are. Whilst the modernist long poem in America has received a certain amount of attention, there has never been a study of either the British or English tradition of the modernist long poem. This thesis will attempt to repair this oversight by making detailed studies of four works that may be seen, despite their large debt to a cosmopolitan, and especially American, modernism, to form a particular tradition. This tradition is not an exclusive one and the individual long poems that form it also belong to other traditions. A Furnace, for example, could usefully be studied as a partial heir to William Carlos Williams's Paterson. But it is this tradition of a certain type of modern long poem which has developed in England, rather than the correspondences between these works and other modernist long poems, that will be the main focus of this thesis.

The poems in this study are accounts or stocktakings of a poet's inheritance, a shoring up of what is valuable and a mourning for, or retrieval of, what has been lost. They all reflect upon the poet's roots, his local and family history and wider histories of race, nation or humanity. This stocktaking may also include the poet's own life: Briggflatts, Mercian Hymns and A Furnace all contain substantial elements of autobiography. All four poems in this study, partly as a result of such concerns, also reflect on, and incorporate into their form, particular ideas of time and temporal and historical processes. They also examine what may be thought of as either durable or timeless and so resistant to such processes. They reflect on the nature of the creative act, not just in poetry but in the arts in general, and in turn reflect upon their own status. These poems, then, have important antecedents

¹ By no means all the writers in this study would consider themselves chiefly English. David Jones thought of himself as British, and is generally regarded as being Anglo-Welsh. Basil Bunting thought of himself principally as a Northumbrian. Nevertheless, the writers in this study were born and raised in England. This study does not claim to be representative of the long poem throughout the British Isles, though it will, at times, make points about British Modernism when they are tenable.

with similar ambitions. In the modernist tradition, perhaps the most notable is T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets. But earlier works, especially William Wordsworth's The Prelude, have many of these aims in common, and this thesis will attempt to show how the modernist long poem in England has, at times, had much in common with Romanticism.

Poetry published in England since the last war is not generally labelled modernist. This is perhaps to do with the common view which sees modernism as not so much an ongoing tradition as an era or generation. In English literature this is typically seen as what Hugh Kenner has termed The Pound Era, or more narrowly still, a movement that started around the beginning of the century and which, in poetry at least, was effectively over in England by the second half of the nineteen-thirties. Such a view is obviously mistaken, not only because of the continued activity of the first generation of modernist writers, but also because, at least as far as the modernist long poem is concerned, the major achievements of modernism by native English poets were not written until later in this century. In Scotland, Hugh MacDiarmid had written A Drunk Man Looks at a Thistle as early as 1926. Native English writers, with the partial exceptions of the young W.H.Auden of The Orators and the young Basil Bunting, did not publish a major modernist long poem until a decade later, when David Jones's In Parenthesis appeared.

It is largely since the Second World War that the most important examples of the modernist long poem by English writers have been published. This thesis is a study of four long poems by two generations of English modernists. The works studied may be taken as exemplary, both of the work of their writers (all these works have been regarded by many of their critics as their author's major achievement) and of the evolution of the modernist long poem in England. One of these poems was published in each decade from the 1950's until the 1980's, and they provide an implicit commentary on changing social, political and aesthetic contexts through the period. They also interrogate and are influenced by various earlier histories and artistic movements. Thus they provide a commentary, not just on forty years, but on many hundreds of years of human art and activity.

The Modernist Long Poem and The British Modernist Long Poem

According to Ezra Pound, an 'epic is a poem containing history'.² However, not every poem containing history is an epic, nor is an epic just a poem that contains history. The original epics were long, heroic verse narratives. The Anthemata, Briggflatts, Mercian Hymns and A Furnace are long works containing history. However, they are very different, as indeed are Pound's own Cantos, from what we usually understand as epic. They have a certain amount in common with epics but properly belong to a new genre which we may define as the modernist long poem. This term, though it may be inelegant and seem somewhat imprecise, at least has the virtue of not being misleading. Though Michael Bernstein writes of the 'modern verse epic', the title of his book on the American long poem, The Tale of the Tribe, gives a better description of the long poems in this thesis.³ The term comes from Ezra Pound, who in his turn took it from a lecture of Rudyard Kipling.⁴ It is a rather odd description of The Cantos. The Cantos is a work whose trans-continental range of reference and values is not the tale of anything which would even approximate what could realistically be termed a tribe. The nature of its tale fluctuates between the concerns of the man who wrote it and those of all the many cultures that intrigued him.

Traditional epic tends to have a fairly good idea of what tribe it tells the tale of, though that tribe might be a nation or, as in the case of The Aeneid, a city state which has become an empire. The British poet, though he may not wish to tell its tale, cannot but be aware of his own relationship to his 'tribe'. This relationship may be a complex or ambiguous one. The 'tribe' with which a poet is aligned, and the poet's representations of it, will be partly predetermined - one cannot help where one is born or which ethnic groups or nation one belongs to - but it is also partly a matter of personal volition. Though a successful nationalism will depend upon certain narratives, myths and symbols being shared, there are as many possible narratives of a modern nation as there are members of it, and each nation will be subdivided into smaller regions, and often into smaller ethnic groupings. Such questions of identity may be peripheral to the lyric poem but they will naturally be raised when, as is

² Ezra Pound, Literary Essays, ed. T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) 86.

³ Michael André Bernstein, The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁴ 'There is no mystery about the Cantos, they are the tale of the tribe - give Rudyard credit for the use of the phrase.' Ezra Pound, Guide to Kulchur (New York: New Directions, 1970) 194.

likely to happen in a longer work, the individual concerns of the poet come into contact or conflict with those of the community at large. In a poem that contains history, they will be almost inevitable.

Any long poetic work written by an author who employs the methods of modernism may logically be said to be an example of a modernist long poem. If we look at such works as T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and Four Quartets, Ezra Pound's Cantos, William Carlos Williams's Paterson, Louis Zukofsky's A and Charles Olson's Maximus and, with the partial exception of Mercian Hymns, the works examined in this thesis, we can begin to make some useful generalisations. The modernist long poem is an extended poetic work. It is principally in free verse, though it may contain sections of more regular verse or prose. It is arranged by the juxtaposition of various constituent elements. These elements may be as small as the phrase, or even the word, or be several paragraphs in length, and each juxtaposition may or may not be signalled by a mark or number in the text. Thus the structure of the modernist long poem will at first sight appear as a collection of disparate pieces relating to different times and subjects without the connecting commentary or narrative which typifies earlier models of the long poem. Nevertheless, on closer inspection, the reader will typically discover that throughout the work themes, phrases, characters, ideas and images will tend to recur and be elaborated upon and that there are overall principles of organisation, analagous to but different from conventional narration.

Hugh Kenner, discussing the Cantos of Ezra Pound, writes of 'the subject rhyme'.⁵ This term is a good general description of a phenomenon repeatedly found in modernist long poems. One subject is supposed to be related by the reader to another which is situated at some other place in the poem and which should chime in recognition with the first. Kenner's term highlights the prosodic function of this device. There are, however, different versions of it. There is the subject rhyme proper, where another version of a particular subject raised earlier in the poem appears. There is the repetition of a particular line, phrase, epithet or even word. And, most often in relation to personages named, there is the repetition of essences. This is not when a characteristic or accident recurs, but the technique that is first elaborated in T.S. Eliot's notes to The Waste Land where the concept is put forward that

⁵ Hugh Kenner, The Pound Era (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 423.

various characters in his poem are aspects of the same thing: 'Just as the one-eyed merchant seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias.'⁶ Thus the individual characters of the poem are seen as not being very individual at all. The technique expounded in The Waste Land's notes would be taken up wholeheartedly by David Jones. What is its attraction? Above all it is unity, both in the poem and perhaps in the world beyond it. What appears diverse is always the same. The attraction of the notion that Tiresias is 'the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest' is similar.⁷ Disparate elements are held together by a unifying consciousness in the poem. But it is a moot point, not only whether this is true in Eliot's poem, but whether it may be true at all. Are things any more unified by being objects of a single consciousness?

Eliot's notes also draw attention to the idea that there is a submerged narrative in apparently disparate material, a meta-narrative. Readers are directed to Jessie L. Weston's book From Ritual to Romance and to J.G. Frazer's The Golden Bough. It is hinted that vegetation rituals, the quest for the Grail and the Fisher King may provide some sort of key to the poem. The relevance of such notes to the poem itself, particularly the importance attributed to Weston's Grail myths, has been disputed.⁸ Nevertheless, the notion proved attractive to David Jones at least, as did another implicit meta-narrative, that accorded to history. The Waste Land is written against the background of a perceived cultural ruination and sets it against fragments of a greater past. It was possible again to read this as part of some wider historical scheme.

⁶ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) 82.

⁷ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 82.

⁸ C.K. Stead, for example, writes:

I am convinced that there was never any plan - nothing more than a wavering generalised intention to write a long modern poem, modern both in subject matter and in treatment. Not only was there no plan; Eliot was not convinced, when he had finished, that The Waste Land was one work, single and unified. And precisely because of this uncertainty he was anxious to discover something - anything - that would make it seem so.

C.K. Stead, Pound, Yeats, Eliot and the Modernist Movement (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986) 125. T.S. Eliot himself regretted 'having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail.' T.S. Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1957) 110.

We may usefully divide literary meta-narrative into two types: intrinsic and extrinsic. An intrinsic meta-narrative functions in a way that is analogous to conventional narrative: its primary purpose is to structure the material within the poem to an underlying pattern or story. An extrinsic meta-narrative suggests that the world itself, in, for instance, history or myth, follows a particular pattern. An extrinsic metanarrative can exist independently, and will typically pre-exist a literary work. A literary work structured around the history of Marx or Vico, or history as prefigured in the bible or in ancient rituals would follow this model. Thus extrinsic meta-narrative is exemplary of a wider vision of the world.⁹ The two types of meta-narrative will necessarily overlap, and it may be a matter of contention as to how much an individual meta-narrative may be thought of as intrinsic or extrinsic. The Waste Land would be an example of a work which encourages such confusion in the reader. In the structuring of a long poem there is a good case for intrinsic meta-narrative. It allows meaning to be perceived not just at the level of the fragment but also at the level of the whole. The case for an extrinsic meta-narrative is more debatable, not least upon philosophical grounds. One's reaction to individual examples of extrinsic meta-narrative may vary depending on the metanarrative in question or one's scepticism regarding meta-narratives in general. However, it is reasonable to argue that a meta-narrative in a long poem, even if ultimately extrinsic, should at least function intrinsically. The meta-narrative should make sense within the work. It cannot be said that a long poem is properly structured if the structure is not actually in the poem.

Nationalism and the Historical Imagination

The modernist long poem in Britain is, though often obliquely and sometimes rather loosely, a form that has a natural tendency to exhibit features typical of the nationalist imagination, and has been since Hugh MacDiarmid's A Drunk Man Looks at a Thistle. This may at first seem odd, particularly to readers of Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities.¹⁰ According to Anderson, who draws on Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', the medieval outlook

⁹ This description of meta-narrative is that which is used by Lyotard. Jean Francois Lyotard, The Post Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massoni, intr. F. Jameson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London and New York: Verso, 1991).

views time as something close to what Benjamin calls Messianic time, a simultaneity of past present and future in an instantaneous present. In such a view of things, the word 'meanwhile' cannot be of real significance.¹¹

The modern 'imagined community' of nationhood, however, has a very different chronological compass:

What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time is, to borrow again from Benjamin, an idea of 'homogeneous, empty time,' in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfilment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar.¹²

Time in the modernist long poem is more akin to Anderson's depiction of an essentially synchronic medieval time. It is typified by juxtapositions of various times or by anachronisms which allow different periods to co-exist, rather than the more diachronic time associated with the nineteenth century novel. Without encroaching too much upon ongoing disputes on theories and histories of nationalism, we may reasonably dispute one natural consequence of Anderson's theory: that the modernist long poem appears to be a throwback to an earlier age which is naturally resistant to nationalism. In fact the opposite is the case. That it wasn't apparent in Homage to Sextus Propertius, The Cantos or The Waste Land says more about the cultural concerns of the two American émigrés who wrote them than the latent implications of the form they used.

Nationalist consciousness sees the present as suffused with the past; the ethnic grouping, the modern state, or wished for state, imbued with or prefigured by its ancestral history. Landscape, language, literature, art, architecture and archaeological remains all stand as testimony to the continuance of a people. Even when nationalism invents tradition, that it does so stresses the psychological importance of that very sense of continuity. The modernist long poem, by breaking strict chronological time,

¹¹ Imagined Communities 24. See also, Walter Benjamin 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) 255-266.

¹² Imagined Communities 24.

enables the writer to enter into dialogue with his, and his people's, history. Pound and early Eliot were both very much concerned with tradition and the reworking of the past for the present, but their tradition was one of a cosmopolitan high culture whose heirs were the international clerisy. Yet, as is evident from Eliot's own Four Quartets, the form was equally well suited to other forms of identity, recovery and inheritance and other notions of a shared tradition. In the modernist long poem the poet typically places his own concerns in the context of the concerns of wider cultures, civilizations or frameworks of thought. This may take place in the context of a culture which is not the poet's own - Basil Bunting's The Spoils would be an example of this. Nevertheless, when the poet turns his attention to his own culture, history and ancestry, there is, in Britain at least, a natural tendency at least to be close to nationalism or, if the poet is not overtly nationalistic or even anti-nationalistic (as is the case with Roy Fisher), some of the preoccupations associated with it.

To invert Benedict Anderson's sense, the 'Imagined Community' that most of these poets envisage is not the collective imagination as depicted in novels and newspapers but the means through which the individual imagination can see itself as part of a wider community. This imagined community is one which allows the poet not to be an isolated voice but the member of a collection of voices. It also may supply the poet with a network of symbols, myths, traditions or uses of language sanctioned by history. There is an innate problem in this venture. Poets are not nations, and modern poets to a greater or lesser extent manufacture their own tradition and have preoccupations which may be different from or even opposed to any existing state, tradition or community - even those to which they may nominally be allied. The poet is naturally confronted with discrepancies between his own 'imagined community' and that in which he finds himself.

In common with a work such as The Prelude, the modernist long poem in England constitutes an intellectual and emotional autobiography, an account of the growth of the poet's mind. If a poet endeavours to remove the autobiographical nature of what is essentially a personal inheritance, he may be accused of disingenuousness. Can the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of David Jones's chosen 'anathemata' really be accorded a much wider relevance? If a poet does recognise this inheritance in terms of autobiography, his work may be accused of inclining towards egotism or solipsism. The area

where a strictly personal poem, the poet's own imagined community, and more generally prevalent ideas of tradition and community overlap will naturally be a disputed space, for it involves contemporary political concerns. Because of the pressure that such concerns exert, it will often be here that that the poet may have most trouble making his work cohere.

The long poem as inheritance involves meaningful communication with the dead. But how much can we really understand the dead, their history, and their consciousness from their remains? How much is the world altered so that the past may no longer signify? Problems of sympathy and empathy are pressing for these poets. How much may a modern poet have shared feelings with those in the past? How far may the poet, or anyone else for that matter, imagine and identify with what that past was like? These problems go beyond a simple knowledge of the historical record and are again tied up with the sort of imaginative act typical of, though not exclusive to, the nationalist approach to an historical inheritance. A straightforward rendering of conventional history in verse may not be enough, and it may not be the poet's primary objective. The concerns of the poet in general and the nationalist imagination are here, to some degree, commensurate. As a rule, the poet endeavours, as historians, as a rule, do not, to render the past phenomenologically - to say not just this is how it was but this is how it seemed - and, if there is a contemporary point of view within his poem, this is what the past seems like now.

A number of outlooks present themselves as means to get over such problems of historical empathy, most of which are implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, associated with nationalism. Most contentious among these is race-romanticism. The notion that the past is somehow 'in one's blood' may have certain obvious attractions for the poet. The race-romantic views ethnic and national figures of the past as if they were kith and kin. Being of shared blood, the figures of the past may be thought of as having shared feelings with the poet. But race-romanticism's peculiar mixture of nationalist yearning and pseudo-science obscures the difference between biological and cultural inheritance. Moreover, race romanticism has, for obvious reasons, become a concept many writers have become wary of associating themselves with, particularly since the Second World War. This thesis, in part, charts the decline of its influence.

Ethnicity and nationality allow the past to be viewed through the cultural and historical inheritance of a particular people of whom the poet sees himself as a member. But this notion too is not without its difficulties. We may feel a particular connection to the history of our ethnic group or nation, and feel this to be a part of what we are. But, and this is accentuated the further back in time we go, the experiences and often the cultural values of a people do change. Modern day Englishmen have a certain amount in common with compatriots of the 14th century, but they are also very different, just as modern day England is different from that ruled by Edward III. Our ancestors may be those who made us what we are, but this does not make us our ancestors. Continuity may be perceived through the persistence of particular activity, whether it be ploughing or going to war, or of cultural pursuits, but discontinuity may similarly be found.

Language and literature are the most obvious devices available to poets who wish to bridge such a divide. Past works of literature may provide insights to be taken up by later poets, and will, of course, show evidence of how the past appeared at the time. The poet who consciously employs etymology or words from particular languages in his poem will seek to realign his language with that of his forebears and thus bear witness to, or perhaps share, the experience of history and the mentality that language represented in the past. Outside language and literature, landscape and topography will often have a similar importance for the poet as evidences of continuity and change. Not only is the concept of a native territory vital to almost any nationalism, it is also a useful means of summoning the past, whether one be a nationalist or not. One may perceive continuity in the landscape or a building which makes one's present experience of surveying it comparable to that of one's forebears. One may also see landscape and building as a testament to change wherein one sees evidence of past activities. The largely modern discipline of archaeology may also be employed to enhance such a response to such traces of the past. Archaeology is similarly important in retrieving and interpreting the artefact. The historical artefact may facilitate an intuition of a shared feeling with the past but may also, if the nature of such objects has changed considerably, highlight one's divorce from the past. But artefact, architecture, past art works and literature may also be interpreted by far more specific means than such generalisations would indicate. The aesthetic of Wilhelm Worringer, a vital

influence on modernism in general, and upon David Jones and Basil Bunting in particular, is a case in point. The relationship between his ideas and the aesthetic, nationalist and historical concerns of these poets is a complex one. The nature and history of these aesthetics will therefore be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

WORRINGER, READ AND THE AESTHETICS OF NORTHERN LINE

Hulme, Worringer

Wilhelm Worringer's Abstraction and Empathy, is perhaps the least likely of modernism's founding texts.¹³ A doctoral thesis published in 1908 by the same publisher who in 1912 brought out the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, it is not ostensibly concerned with modern art at all but rather with a psychology of style.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the book, its successor Form in Gothic, and the lectures of its author were to have a huge influence on modern art and writing. In Germany, Kandinsky, Marc and Klee all used his work as intellectual ballast for their move toward abstraction, and Worringer is sometimes credited as the coiner of the term 'Expressionism'.¹⁵ More widely, his early work became an integral part of the intellectual currency of modernist art and literature and aesthetics especially in relationship to the ways in which primitive, Oriental and the Gothic art were viewed.

Worringer's aesthetics applied the ideas of Alois Riegel to the notions of Theodor Lipps. Lipps had identified aesthetic enjoyment with empathy - the capacity to feel oneself into a work of art. But, according to Worringer:

this theory of empathy leaves us helpless in the face of the artistic creations of many ages and peoples. It is of no assistance to us, for instance, in the understanding of that vast complex of works of art that pass beyond the narrow framework of Graeco-Roman and modern Occidental art.¹⁶

¹³ Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style, trans. Michael Bullock (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967).

¹⁴ For details of the publication history of Abstraction and Empathy see Werner Hofmann, Turning Points in Twentieth Century Art: 1890-1917, trans. Charles Kessler (London: Allen Lane and The Penguin Press, 1969).

¹⁵ Lionel Richard, Phaidon Encyclopaedia of Expressionism (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978) 7. It is possible to overstate Worringer's initial influence. Marc and Kandinsky may not have been aware of Worringer until as late as 1912. See Norbert Lynton, 'Expressionism' in Concepts of Modern Art, ed. Tony Richardson and Nikos Stangos (New York: Harper Row, 1974) 33-52, 46.

¹⁶ Abstraction and Empathy 7-8.

It is only naturalistic art that functions empathically. In the many cultures where such art is not the norm something else occurs. To explain just what this might be Worringer draws on Riegel's notion of *Kunstwollen*. *Kunstwollen* is the will to art or, more specifically, the will to form. This idea eschews notions of creative competence, and sees individual works as expressive of an intention that may be allied with the general will of the age or people that created them.¹⁷ It thus arose out of the wider idea of *Kunstgeschichte* which saw the artistic work, its time and country as inextricably linked to the dominant spirit of the time.¹⁸ According to Worringer, mimesis and naturalism arise only when there is a happy relationship between man and the outside world; and that will typically be in a society which is essentially humanist. The art of fifth century Athens or of the high Renaissance would exemplify this. In other societies, fearful of God and frightened or contemptuous of the outside world, some form of abstraction will predominate. If one is aware of the psychology of a people, the form becomes sensible. Thus art of the Byzantines, for instance, 'sought as far as possible to evade the organic as a clouding of eternity-value and once more avoided three-dimensionality with fully conscious intention, seeking all salvation in the plane surface.'¹⁹ Distrusting the outside world, they sought rigidity in their art. On the other hand, the 'world revering pantheism' of the ancient Greeks moved away from abstraction, for there man 'was at home in the world and felt himself at the centre'.²⁰

Worringer's thesis tacitly admires the anti-humanist tendencies in abstract art. It seems to have been this which, above all, excited T.E. Hulme about Wilhelm Worringer. Worringer's aesthetic could, somewhat opportunistically, be grafted onto Hulme's own ideas about the nature of classical and romantic points of view in politics and literature, thus enabling Hulme to break away from the views of Henri Bergson.²¹ Hulme focused upon the geometric art discussed by Worringer and opposed it to

¹⁷ See, for example, Michael Podro's entry on Riegl in Jane Taylor, ed., The Dictionary of Art (London and New York: Grove and Macmillan, 1996) Vol. 26, 369-370.

¹⁸ The implications of such ideas will be further elaborated in the second chapter of this thesis. For a philosophical discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of both *Kunstwollen* and *Kunstgeschichte* see Roger Scruton, The Aesthetics of Architecture (London: Methuen, 1979) esp. 52-58.

¹⁹ Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy 101

²⁰ Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy 101-102.

²¹ T.E. Hulme, The Collected Writings of T.E. Hulme, ed. Karen Csengeri (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) xxiii.

the naturalistic, or 'vital'.²² He applauded the 'desire to create a certain abstract geometrical shape, which, being durable and permanent shall be a refuge from the flux and impermanence of outside nature.'²³ The rigid crystalline forms extolled by Worringer are for Hulme a point of mental resistance to Bergsonian flux. They also provide an escape from *durée*, indeed they provide an escape from time itself. In archaic Greek sculpture:

The first gods were always pure abstractions without any resemblance to life. Any weakening of these abstract forms and approximation to reality would have let in change and life and so would have done what it was desired to avoid - it would have taken the thing out of eternity and put it into time. In monumental art the abstract and inorganic is always used to make the organic seem durable and eternal.²⁴

The empathy inspired by the illusion of 'depth' in a painting or a sculpture will lead to a sense of time as an ongoing narrative, its absence in a hard, abstract form will lead to its opposite.²⁵

A long poem inspired by such thinking would be made of 'hard' pieces that resisted historical process and empathy, thus making history timeless. Joseph Frank, who mixes his reading of Hulme and Worringer with the New Criticism of Allen Tate, has suggested that this is precisely what we find in the use of history in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and, somewhat less plausibly, Ezra Pound's Cantos and James Joyce's Ulysses:

By this juxtaposition of past and present, as Allen Tate realized, history becomes ahistorical. Time is no longer felt as an objective, causal progression with clearly marked-out differences between periods; now it has become a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are wiped out. And here we have a striking parallel with the plastic arts. Just as the dimension of depth as vanished from the sphere of visual creation, so the dimension of

²² T.E. Hulme, 'Modern Art and its Philosophy' in Speculations, ed. Herbert Read (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co; New York, Harcourt Brace, 1936) 75-109.

²³ T.E. Hulme, 'Modern Art and its Philosophy' 86.

²⁴ T.E. Hulme, 'Modern Art and its Philosophy' 89-90.

²⁵ See, for instance, Abstraction and Empathy 38.

historical depth has vanished from the content of the major works of modern literature. Past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition.²⁶

For Frank, this is combined with the modernists' use of myth which again would draw away from history and look towards timeless archetypes.

If this is a fair enough description of what happens in The Waste Land, it is a much less appropriate description of the use of history in most of the long poems of the British modernists, for all their use of myth. But that is only to be expected. It was the Worringer of Hulme's editor Herbert Read rather than that of Hulme himself that was to be a vital early influence on their aesthetics of history; and it was Read who, inspired by Hulme's interest, secured the English translation of Worringer's second work, Form in Gothic, in 1927.²⁷

After a reformulation of ideas in Abstraction and Empathy and a discussion of the will to form of Classical, Oriental and primitive man, Form in Gothic takes up the problem, not properly addressed in Worringer's earlier thesis, of Northern and Gothic art which has a notable tendency to abstraction but which is without the rigid geometric tendencies of the other arts he studied in Abstraction and Empathy. In Form and Gothic Worringer's race-romanticism, despite his occasional attempts to distance himself from it, comes very much to the fore. Form in Gothic attempts to plot the development of the 'general Aryan geometrical style' into what it believes to be at root a Germanic style.²⁸

In this Northern and Central European conglomerate of nations, the real breeding ground of the Gothic style, we will not single out any nation in particular as being the chief exponent of this development: if however, we subsequently speak chiefly of Germanic development, it

²⁶ Joseph Frank, The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963) 59.

²⁷ Wilhelm Worringer, Form in Gothic, Authorized Translation, ed. Herbert Read (London: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1927).

²⁸ Form in Gothic 39.

will not be in any spirit of race-romanticism such as that of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, but more for convenience' sake and from the consciousness that, in this chaos of Northern peoples above all, differences in race are so far outbalanced by community in conditions of life and state of spiritual development, that it is entirely justifiable to cite one single nation as *pars pro toto*. On the other hand, thus to cite the Germanic peoples in particular is in accordance with our view that a disposition to Gothic is only found where Germanic blood has mingled with that of other races. The Germanic peoples are therefore not the sole exponents of Gothic nor its sole creators: Celts and Latins have an equally important share in Gothic development. But probably a Germanic strain is the *conditio sine qua non* for Gothic.²⁹

Worringer's attempts to distance himself from race-romanticism are only a prelude for its re-emergence. For Worringer, Gothic in part emerges from Germanic blood. This stress upon blood fills in the missing quotient in the Gothic Will to Form: if environment or culture cannot quite account for a particular form then blood will supply the answer. Nevertheless, despite his stress on the Germanic, Worringer does not expound a simple notion of racial purity: Germanic hybridization plays a key part in his notion of the development in Gothic. And this may partly explain Form in Gothic's attractiveness to British readers, for the European races which he cites may also be thought of as being constitutive of the British people.

According to Worringer, in the North, and in the Germanic strain, the geometricism of the Aryans was gradually changed:

In the earliest periods it is not essentially different from the primitive geometric style which we have established as common to all Aryan races. But on the basis of this elementary Aryan grammar of line, a particular linear language gradually developed, which clearly revealed itself as being a specifically Germanic idiom. It is the linear fantasy which . . . is described as interlaced ribbon or plaited ornament. To whatever spot the Germanic races were

²⁹ Form in Gothic 39-40.

dispersed by the upheavals of folk migrations, there we find in their graves this peculiar and quite unmistakable ornament - in England, in Spain, in North Africa, in Southern Italy, in Greece, and in Armenia.³⁰

Germanic blood is spread rather thinly in this version of art transmission by *Völkerwanderung*, and one begins to question quite what Worringer means by Germanic. These are the classic features of Celtic art from La Tène and Hallstadt onwards.³¹

However, the term Worringer uses to describe such abstraction glosses over such racial difficulties: this linear language is 'Northern line' and can be found in the early Northern ornament which will become Gothic. Worringer quotes Lamprecht to describe the forms typical of this style:

"There are certain simple motives whose interweaving and com-mingling [sic] determines the character of this ornament. At first there is only the dot, the line, the ribbon; later the curve, the circle, the spiral, the zigzag, and an S-shaped decoration are employed. Truly, no great wealth of motives! But what variety is attained by the manner of their employment! Here they run parallel, then entwined, now latticed, now knotted now plaited, then again brought through one another in a symmetrical checker of knotting and plaiting. Fantastically confused patterns are thus evoked, whose puzzle asks to be unravelled, whose convolutions seem alternately to seek and avoid each other, whose component parts, endowed as it were with sensibility, captivate sight and sense in passionately vital movement."

In 'Northern Line' the symmetry of Classical ornament 'is replaced by repetition'.³² Intricacies of form then emerge which allows 'an ecstasy of movement' to enact man's spiritual expression.³³ Rather than the stasis which characterized the art of the east, here is a movement which never stops

³⁰ Form in Gothic 41.

³¹ The illustrations to Form in Gothic bear this out quite well. It is only fair to note that in Worringer's 'Foreword' to the fourth edition of Form and Gothic he wrote: 'If critics say anything against the plan of the book, against its manner of developing generalisations, and against many of its details, they will, in most cases, knock at open doors.' Form in Gothic xv.

³² Form in Gothic 53.

³³ Form in Gothic 41.

and, unlike Classical 'organic' forms, it 'seems to have neither beginning nor end and above all no centre: there is a total absence of any guidance for the organically arrested feeling.'³⁴ Even as it expresses, as in animal ornament, things of the natural world, those things only arise out of the movement of line. Northern man's artistic adjustment to the world could

only aim at assimilating the objects of the outer world to his specific language of line, that is to say, at interpolating them into this activity intensified and increased to its highest point of expression. The outer world offered him only confused impressions of actuality. He grasped these impressions with all their details quite accurately: but their mere material imitation had not, so far, had any artistic significance for him, for it had not freed any one single impression of actuality from the universal fluctuating sequence of appearances; objective imitation first became art when these impressions of actuality were combined with intensified intellectual complexes of expression.³⁵

So, whilst we cannot speak of true abstraction, such objects are expressions of the non-empathic actual rather than the empathic organic. They are merely assimilated into Northern Man's confused expression of his spiritual life. This is even the case in the racial and artistic hybrid of Gothic with its counterplay between actuality and non-actuality when the line attains the 'accentuation of the vertical'.³⁶ This may be perceived in the drapery of Gothic statues: 'The connection between the Gothic cathedral statuary and the earlier ornament is relatively close. As in the latter the animal forms are completely merged into an independent linear movement, so the statues are merged into an independent architectural movement, of the utmost power and expression.'³⁷

If such is the particular Will to Form of a people, it would be odd to discover that it did not manifest itself in other ways, and Worringer supplies us with the necessary connections. Linear ornament may be connected with the verse forms of early Northern poetry:

³⁴ Form in Gothic 54.

³⁵ Form in Gothic 63.

³⁶ Form in Gothic 54.

³⁷ Form in Gothic 64.

The very peculiar interlacing of words and sentences in early Northern poetry, its artful chaos of interrelated ideas, the expressive rhythm imposed upon it by alliteration and the intricate repetition of the initial sounds (corresponding to the repetition of motives in ornament and producing in the same way the character of a confused, unending melody) all these are unmistakable analogies to Northern ornament.³⁸

In the same manner in which Northern verse forms may be aligned with Northern Linear ornament so too may Gothic be aligned with scholasticism:

Just as Northern man was seized by a mania for artistic construction and building, going far beyond all practical requirements, so he was seized also by a mania for intellectual construction and building which betrays the same need of becoming engrossed in a self-created activity of an abstract kind, whether logical or mechanical. The primary impulse in Northern intellect was not for knowledge but for movement.³⁹

The psychologies that lie behind this art are in essence two: the first is of melancholic angst, the second is of mystical harmony. The first arises in linear ornament out of early Northern man's nature religion:

the searching eye at once discovers the strong substratum of imaginative fear, which, rising from dualistic unrest, peoples the Northern world of gods with ghosts, spectres, and spooks. An urge to body forth fantastic shapes is here at work, creating from the play of impressions a play of wild, confused spirits, who now and then assume a shape only to dissolve into formlessness upon nearer investigation. A certain instability, a certain restless activity is common to this entire world of spirits and ghosts. Northern man knows nothing of repose;

³⁸ Form in Gothic 73.

³⁹ Form in Gothic 170.

his entire power of configuration concentrates itself on the representation of uncontrolled boundless agitation.⁴⁰

The restless characteristics typified by such phenomena as *Völkerwanderung* and such 'archetypal' characters of Germanic literature as Goethe's Faust arise from the uncertainty of the pagan spiritual world and are manifested in the wandering lines of ornament. Later, when the Germanic spirit has been tamed into Gothic, a more individualised, more lyrical, mysticism arises:

With mysticism, therefore, the sensuous element makes its appearances in Gothic, although at first it was so slight and subtle that it manifests itself merely as super-sensuousness. This sensuous-super-sensuousness of advanced Gothic is best described as the lyrical element of Gothic. The springtime of the soul becomes the springtime of the senses, the delight in the ego, a delight in nature, and a world of lyric exuberance is awakened. It is the most intimate, most delicate drama which the evolution of Gothic offers to pure observation, to watch how this new lyric element in Gothic makes a compromise with the old, rigid, non-naturalistic will to form proper to its construction, gradually clothing with bud and blossom the rigid world of abstract forms.⁴¹

In the European union of advanced Gothic: 'A smile dawns on the stern features of the statues, a smile which is born from within and seems the reflection of inner blessedness.'⁴² And Nature, 'known to scholasticism only as a hard actuality and therefore denied by it, now becomes the garden of God'. So harmony is born and nationalism is transcended into European hybridity.

Form in Gothic, depending on which period Worringer is discussing and which notions one is interested in, may supply its readers with a number of different avenues for subsequent interpretations. At some time or another Herbert Read went down virtually all of them. Read was something of an intellectual magpie: over the years he managed to be a leading advocate of Bergson, Surrealism, Jung,

⁴⁰ Form in Gothic 83-84.

⁴¹ Form in Gothic 176.

⁴² Form in Gothic 177.

abstraction, neo-romanticism, abstract expressionism, Whitehead, Heidegger and Sartre. Nevertheless, from the publication of Form in Gothic until his death, he scarcely published a book that did not allude to or draw upon one aspect of Worringer's book or another.

In the nineteen thirties, Herbert Read attempted to define art, and particularly modern art, by applying Worringer's views and methodology. In The Meaning of Art, Read summarises Worringer's views on Byzantine, Gothic and Northern art for a wider readership.⁴³ Already Read perceives Northern line as as much Celtic as Germanic, though he squares this with Worringer's hypothesis by seeing the Celts as Germanic in origin. He also claims the style for Britain: 'This style, which originated in the Middle Rhine area, was brought to the British Isles by the retreating Celtic tribes, and here preserved its characteristics whilst successive waves of tribal invasion swept across the rest of Europe.'⁴⁴ Such works as the Book of Kells and early English illuminated manuscripts now become typical. Inspired by Worringer, Read also propounded a race-romantic view of art, as in this not untypical passage:

It may be old-fashioned to believe in the racial factor in art, or in anything else but politics, but though art in a very real sense is universal, and has had a complex history of interrelations and influences which has passed over epochs and races unnumbered, nevertheless certain types of art have characterized certain types of people; and if we take a broad distinction, such as that between Aryan and Semitic races, we find a very marked difference in their modes of aesthetic expression. The Semites, in fact, are not expressive at all in plastic modes - that is to say, they are not original or 'creative' in them. Relatively speaking, there is no Jewish art. By origin the Jews are a desert race, nomadic, quickly responding to physical experience. But the major arts belong to sedentary peoples, to those who settle in cities and form a stable civilization, an atmosphere of refinement. Nomadic races are only capable of a popular art, expressed in mobile objects, and popular art of this kind has an affinity with the art of Chagall.⁴⁵

⁴³ Herbert Read, The Meaning of Art (London: Faber and Faber, 1951, first edition 1931). This book was originally published as a series of articles in The Listener.

⁴⁴ The Meaning of Art 118.

⁴⁵ The Meaning of Art 219.

This passage shows two clear problems with the race-romantic view of art. First, it easily blends into what may easily be construed as racialism - here anti-Semitism. Second, it tends to ignore cultural and historical facts. Two obvious truths refute Read's thesis: Jews have lived in cities for thousands of years longer than the English, the Germans or the Celts and their religion explicitly prohibits the making of images. Read must have known this, but he has allowed the style of sweeping racial and cultural judgement he found in Worringer to allow him to rush to define a Semitic will to form and to allow this to take the place of sustained historical and cultural investigation.

By 1933, when Read published an essay on 'English Art', Read's attempt to Anglicise Worringer and to recreate his aesthetics in the image of his current preoccupations was in full swing.⁴⁶ Worringer himself did not have much time for English Gothic: 'English Gothic is more reserved, one might almost say more phlegmatic, and therefore easily incurs the danger of appearing frozen and sterile. And above all, it is more superficial, more trivial than German Gothic.'⁴⁷ It is hard to make out whether this is Worringer's stereotype of the English or of their architecture but, as there is very little to choose between the two in Worringer's scheme, one can surmise that they are one and the same. Nevertheless, Read was of the opinion that Worringer's idea of Northern line was central to a true English art. This would entail it deriving from Celtic and Germanic elements, with an emphasis upon the former:

That style which is the first to be distinct as a style, and to be associated with a racial blend that was henceforth to be distinctively English, was formed during the so-called Anglo-Saxon period - that is to say, during the two centuries which preceded the Conquest
When it is agreed that this style has for its main characteristic a certain calligraphic or linear freedom, what seems more likely than the supposition that it was derives directly from the

⁴⁶ Herbert Read, 'English Art' (originally published in The Burlington Magazine, vol. xiii, December 1933) in Herbert Read The Philosophy of Modern Art (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) 249-268.

⁴⁷ Form in Gothic 146.

linear style *par excellence*, the Celtic style, which in these islands maintained its vitality long after it had disappeared from the continent.⁴⁸

As Read continues, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic quickly becomes synonymous with English. Their style is best found in the art of illumination which is 'the distinctively English art'.⁴⁹ This art is rather less gloomy than its equivalent in Worringer. There is little talk of troubled souls and much of 'freedom' and individuality and even of Northern Line operating like 'a careless banner' inside the framework of the manuscript.⁵⁰

From this, in addition to dealing with more traditional masters of English art such as Hogarth, Reynolds and Turner, Read derives a school of English art with abstraction as its central feature. The original style gradually dies out in the later middle ages, despite persisting in 'the folds of a garment', only to be revived by William Blake.⁵¹ Blake, rather than being a peculiar, marginal figure in the history of British art, is for Read an artist who

embodied consciously and consistently the original characteristics of our art, and though the very universality of his genius involved technical limitations (for all the faculties and instincts have to be concentrated in one channel to insure perfection of expression), he so clearly represents the national temper and with such power of imagination, that any judgement relative to the highest standards must give him the highest rank. The artists of the Middle Ages are anonymous; but of those who belong to subsequent ages, only Turner is of equal significance; and Turner, beside Blake is intellectually naïve.⁵²

Blake and his followers are now the most English of artists because the closest to Northern Line. Since that is the art from that best expresses the English genius, Blake is perforce the greatest English artist.

⁴⁸ 'English Art' 250-251.

⁴⁹ 'English Art' 252.

⁵⁰ 'English Art' 251.

⁵¹ Herbert Read, 'English Art' 254.

⁵² Herbert Read, 'English Art' 260-261.

At this time Read was the theorist, critic and propagandist for a group of modern artists of whom David Jones, who was a friend of Read's, was a peripheral member. Such a reworking and reevaluation of art history provided both intellectual justification for Read's artists and a sense of tradition for more conservative observers to take solace in when confronting their work. Unit I was one of the most aesthetically radical of British artistic groupings of the 1930's, and certainly showed Read at his most stridently modernist. Yet even here, in a group that was far more committed to abstraction than more conservative figures such as David Jones, we see a similar sense of artistic heritage portrayed under Read's influence. Paul Nash habitually expressed his Englishness in a depiction of pastoral and of places of especial, semi-mystical significance (one can detect in his painting of prehistoric sites an influence on Roy Fisher's A Furnace). Nevertheless, even he was drawn to Read's interpretation of Worringer. Thus, in his contribution to Unit 1's manifestos, he used the international nature of modern art as a cue for the discovery of racial and national characteristics:

The international character of modern art, by destroying the false values of nationalism, opens the way for a purely academic approach to the question of national idiosyncrasy, and in proportion as art becomes more abstract, so the nuance of national or racial distinction become more subtle and consequently, more subtle and consequently, more interesting to trace.⁵³

These nuances are those of Worringer via Read:

English art has always shown particular tendencies which recur throughout its history. A pronounced linear method in design, no doubt traceable to sources in Celtic ornament, or to a predilection for the Gothic idiom.⁵⁴

⁵³Paul Nash in Unit I: The Modern Movement in English Architecture, Painting and Sculpture, ed. Herbert Read (London: Castell and Company, 1934) 79-81, 79.

⁵⁴ Unit 1 80.

At the beginning of the nineteen thirties Read's reworking of the tradition of English art had already been taken as the new creed by modern painters. Over the next two decades it was to become almost an orthodoxy. Its visual manifestations would be seen in such artists as John Piper and David Jones.

Herbert Read's engagement with Worringer did not cease with Read's formulation of English art. By 1959, time and fashion had moved on, yet Read was still fascinated by Worringer. No doubt inspired by the vogue for existentialism, Herbert Read returned to Worringer's Northern psychology: 'the general condition of Northern man . . . is one of *metaphysical* anxiety which, devoid of the serenity and clarity of Classical art, leads him to 'increase his restlessness and confusion to the pitch where they bring him stupefaction and release'.⁵⁵ Read finds parallels for this in literature. Joyce's late prose style, Brecht, the verse forms of Pound, Williams and Pasternak (as well as the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier) 'exhibit the same restless linear activity and refined construction' in a world where everyone has become an anxious northerner.⁵⁶

Read followed Worringer in cultivating an aesthetic that related certain literatures to Northern ornament throughout his career. As with the above examples from A Concise History of Modern Art, such connections were nearly always shown in a positive light. It is therefore intriguing to read the posthumously published essay 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art'.⁵⁷ In the essay, Read wrote a scathing attack on late modernism/ early post-modernism. Read complained of Beckett and late Joyce: 'The trouble with works like Finnegans Wake and the Molloy Trilogy . . . is that they are superficially exciting but fundamentally boring.'⁵⁸ And the reason for this is that they lack significant form, or rather that they follow the form of Northern Line. This, argues Read, may be beautiful in art but demands an excess of tolerance in literature for it is form that ultimately gets us nowhere.⁵⁹ The writings of Beckett and late Joyce are compared unfavourably with The Book of Kells in which 'Celtic ornament was used to decorate the Gospels - a very simple narrative. In Finnegans Wake, Molloy,

⁵⁵ Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959) 220.

⁵⁶ A Concise History of Modern Painting 220.

⁵⁷ Herbert Read, 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art' in Herbert Read: A Memorial Symposium, ed. Robin Skelton (London: Methuen, 1970) 37-50.

⁵⁸ 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art' 45.

⁵⁹ 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art' 47.

How it Is and other works of this kind, the ornament has invaded the narrative, and the line of this fused expression “breaks off unappeased into the void and flows ceaselessly back on itself.”⁶⁰ Read’s quotation comes from Form in Gothic and is used to dismiss that very form of literature which he had promoted in Britain. The alleged influence of Northern Line has converted meaningful narrative into futility as ‘the creative imagination of the poet sinks into a sea of words’.⁶¹

⁶⁰ ‘The Limits of Permissiveness in Art’ 47.

⁶¹ ‘The Limits of Permissiveness in Art’ 47.

CHAPTER TWO

THE INTERLACE OF HISTORY: DAVID JONES'S *THE ANATHEMATA*

The Form of the Poem

C.S. Lewis once observed of the modern reader:

Of the continuity of a long narrative poem, the subordination of the line to the paragraph and the paragraph to the Book and even the Book to the whole, of the grand sweeping effects that take a quarter of an hour to develop themselves, he has no conception.¹

The problem which Lewis notes is, if anything, exacerbated with regard to the modernist long poem. There is a view, partly corroborated by works such as The Waste Land, that a modernist long poem is merely a series of lyrics cobbled together to serve some wider theme and that we should judge such poetry by the standards of lyric poetry. This, in its extreme form, is the view of M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall who state that:

The modern sequence, then, is a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole. It usually includes narrative and dramatic elements, and ratiocinative ones as well, but its structure is finally lyrical. Intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open, emotionally volatile, the sequence meets the needs of modern sensibility even when the poet aspires to tragic or epic scope.²

Rosenthal and Gall have lumped long poem and sequence under the same heading, a sleight of hand which supports their predisposition toward the lyrical. Still, one wonders why poets bother to write (or critics bother to read) a long poem if it is merely a useful bag in which to place intimate lyrics.

¹ C.S. Lewis, Preface to Paradise Lost (London: Oxford University Press, 1960) 2.

² M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 9.

Naturally Rosenthal and Gall, with their taste for confessional and 'emotionally volatile' lyrics, have little time for The Anthemata.³ As Vincent Sherry has pointed out in his critique of Rosenthal:

It is open to doubt whether Rosenthal's censure of The Anthemata for its lack of lyric intensity is a valid criticism or merely an indictment of the provinciality of his American constructs.⁴

If we do not follow Rosenthal and Gall, what should we be looking for in a long poem? A long poem is more than the sum of its parts. This may lead to lyric virtues becoming vices in a long poem. An ambiguity or an irony may detract from the overall thematic or formal coherence of a work. A particularly dense and intricate passage, however finely written, may upset the artistic balance of a whole book as may outbursts of emotional volatility, intimacy or self analysis. Likewise, allusions to mythologies or to history, if the poet is attempting to introduce some wider scheme in his text (as David Jones does throughout The Anthemata), must harmonise with other such allusions elsewhere. Such points are obvious enough. After all, we should regard a critic who looked upon Hamlet as a lumping together of some emotionally volatile pieces of blank verse with some prose dialogue and plot to add ballast as rather missing the point.

David Jones was one of the few poets this century who came to the long poem without a grounding as a lyric poet. His first, and in many ways best, book, In Parenthesis, showed a style poised between verse and prose which was capable of heightening its poetic features when narrative momentum required, but was equally capable of handling the more mundane.⁵ Indeed, In Parenthesis may be the nearest an English poet has got to traditional verse epic this century. However, though Jones was to attempt to repeat his earlier success in The Book of Balaam's Ass, he did not repeat its earlier form in

³ David Jones, The Anthemata: Fragments of an Attempted Writing (London: Faber and Faber, 1955). References to this work hereafter are signified by the abbreviation *Ana.* followed by the page number in brackets in the text.

⁴ Vincent Sherry, 'Current Critical Models of the Long Poem and David Jones's The Anthemata', E.L.H. 53, 1 (1985), 239-255, 242.

⁵ David Jones, In Parenthesis (London: Faber and Faber, 1937).

his next published long poem.⁶ One can give many reasons why he should have done this; and the most compelling ones are perhaps biographical. At the time of writing The Anthemata Jones's war experiences were some two decades and more behind him, and his own life was more filled with books than action. His isolated existence and nervous disorder may have contributed to his wishing to write a book which was more concerned with the portrayal of the dissolution of community than its evocation. Such speculation is not vain, but it is more important for the literary critic to understand the nature of the shape that David Jones chose to give his new work than to speculate on the biographical causes.

Any discussion of the place of The Anthemata in the history of the modernist long poem faces the dilemma of the poem's form, or rather its apparent lack of it. Doubts about the poem's coherence are not allayed by its subtitle, Fragments of an Attempted Writing, which seems to call into question not just whether the poem is a unity but whether it is a poem at all. The 'Preface', where about much else Jones is very candid indeed, does not appear to help matters. Indeed, much subsequent critical energy has been expended in making up for its paucity of illumination on this question. Jones makes three explicit pronouncements on the poem's form. He writes that:

What I have written has no plan, or at least is not planned. If it has shape it is chiefly that it returns to its beginning. It has themes and a theme even if it wanders far. If it has a unity it is that what goes before conditions what comes after and *vice versa*.

(*Ana.* 33)

Jones later appears to contradict himself, that is if one assumes that a form must have a plan:

I regard my book more as a series of fragments, fragmented bits, chance scraps really, of records of things, vestiges of sorts and kinds of *disciplinae*, that have come my way by this channel or that influence. Pieces of stuff that happen to mean something to me and which I

⁶ The Book of Balaam's Ass was never completed. Part of it is printed in David Jones, The Sleeping Lord (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). See also David Jones, The Roman Quarry and Other Sequences, ed. Harman Grisewood and René Hague (London: Agenda Editions, 1981).

see as perhaps making a kind of coat of many colours, such as belonged to 'that dreamer' in the Hebrew myth. Things to which I would give a related form, just as one does in painting a picture.

(*Ana.* 34)

So the work is like a continental quilt or a collage. It may be composed of fragments but these are so positioned as to make a new whole. Earlier on in the 'Preface' Jones gives a hint of a thematic coherence, albeit one of a very tentative sort:

In a sense the fragments that compose this book are about, or around and about, matters of all sorts which, by a kind of quasi-free association, are apt to stir in my mind at any time and as often as not 'in the time of the Mass'.

(*Ana.* 31)

This would seem to make the poem a version of *stream of consciousness* writing, only not of a character but of the poet himself.

David Jones's pronouncements in the 'Preface' are hardly satisfactory. An awareness of this, whether acknowledged or not, has been the cause of ongoing speculation and debate amongst those critics of The Anthemata who take their cue from one or more of the Preface's formulations. Jeremy Hooker, (who subscribes to the debatable view of Tiresias given in Eliot's notes to The Waste Land) gives a tentative plausibility to the conception of the poem as free association.

If it helps at all, in reading The Anthemata, to think of a consciousness encompassing the world of the poem, as we think of Tiresias's in relation to 'The Waste Land', then it is that of a man present at Mass sometime during the Second World War.⁷

⁷ Jeremy Hooker, Poetry of Place: Essays and Reviews 1970-1981 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982) 38.

Hooker then goes on to point out that it is the mass and its extra-temporal dimension that is central rather than any all embracing philosophy or all-embracing consciousness. This reads more like an enabling thematic device than a form as such: it tells us more about what Jones thought about the unifying power of the mass than it does about a convincing scheme for the poem. Elsewhere Hooker is more ingenious in his search for form and draws our attention to Jackson Knight's Cumean Gates and its discussion of labyrinths and initiation rites.⁸ Yet, even when this is allied to what Hooker sees as the poem's three main symbols, wood, water and stone, Hooker fails to give us a satisfying and systematic account of how the poem follows such a labyrinth and how this would differ from the conception of the poem as meandering and formless with only symbolic and thematic repetition to hold it together, a conception one presumes that Hooker was endeavouring to get away from. Elsewhere, Neil Corcoran and Elizabeth Ward have looked exclusively to the poem's themes and their repetition: Corcoran evidently satisfied by this as substitute for form, Ward evidently not.⁹ Similarly, Vincent Sherry believes there is one unifying theme within the poem: 'the history of man as a maker of art (of anathemata), the making of art as a sign of man's spiritual nature'.¹⁰ That is clearly a substantial part of what the poem is about, but if that is the great unity which Sherry finds in Jones's work, perhaps the poem's critics were not so wrong. There is a wealth of other material which Jones has seen fit for inclusion. Whole books of the poem, 'The Lady of the Pool' in particular but also 'Angle-Land' and 'Mabinog's Liturgy', have this as only a very secondary theme. Sherry, like other American critics (such as Dilworth and Blisset), has played down the nationalist and local parts of Jones's writing to give a thematic unity which the text does not really support.

Thomas Dilworth, unhappy with this state of affairs, has provided the most spirited defence of a systematic structure within the poem:

⁸ Jeremy Hooker, David Jones: An Exploratory Study (London: Entitharmon Press, 1975) 48-51.

⁹ Neil Corcoran, The Song of Deeds: A Study of The Anathemata of David Jones (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982). Elizabeth Ward, David Jones Mythmaker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983).

¹⁰ 'Current Critical Models of the Long Poems and David Jones's The Anathemata' 239.

This pattern consist of a number of closing circles, each involving a return to a beginning.

The outer circles contain the inner ones in ordered succession and create a structure resembling the circles of a target, which diminishes in radius with proximity to the centre.¹¹

Dilworth accompanies this pronouncement with a large diagram which does look like a very sophisticated structure indeed, and is reminiscent of Roy Fisher's careful use of the double spiral in A Furnace. However, even by Dilworth's own admission, whole segments of the poem do not properly fit. Doubts in the mind of the sceptical reader are not allayed by the theological and metaphysical elaborations of Dilworth's further descriptions of this target:

Because of its eschatological boundary, which is beyond the inscape of time, the spiralling diachronic content of The Anathemata symbolically collapses into circular synchronism. This is suggested by the symbolic presence of the world's end in the world's beginning, and it is insisted upon by the poem's narrative content being the Consecration of the Mass, which establishes the meditative time of the poem as nearly instantaneous. Because the birth of Christ marks the midpoint of history's spiralling duration and because the sacrament is correlative to and theologically includes the Incarnation, the poem's diachronic spiral has the Incarnation as its meditative circumference as well as its centre of meditative duration. Without losing its extension in time, history is consequently, and paradoxically coextensive with the synchronic circle of the Christian eschaton, which is also the circle of the Eucharist. Without this coincidence of time's spiral and eternity's circle, the helix of history would have only the aesthetic sense of its own repeated pattern. But since the spiral and the circle do coincide, aesthetics passes beyond itself to metaphysics, and relative form symbolises ultimate meaning.¹²

Dilworth's description is a complex one. Yet, if we put the theological metaphysics aside, how convincing is his explanation? If we follow what Dilworth says here it would be as well to abandon

¹¹ Thomas Dilworth, The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) 158.

¹² The Shape of Meaning in the Poetry of David Jones 200.

the literal image of a target structure as it would now have been folded upon itself several times. So we are left with little more than the centrality of the Mass and the fact that if The Anathemata has 'a shape it is chiefly that it returns to its beginning.' Also, as regards the poem's form rather than its content, this reference to a centre is misleading: if the poem was to have a centre it would surely be its longest, roughly central section, 'The Lady of the Pool'. This, though, is the section which least conforms to what Dilworth would see as the centre of the poem. St. Augustine may have defined God as 'an infinite sphere, the centre of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere', but this is better as theology than as a guide to literary form. Whether or not one thinks Dilworth's explanation to account for the poem's treatment of the incarnation, it does not answer the question of form.

In my discussion of accounts of the poem's form, I have omitted one that has the virtue of being closest in time to the poem's writing and closest to its aesthetics. In his introduction to the anthology of Welsh verse, The Burning Tree, Gwyn Williams wrote apropos of David Jones:

The absence of a centred design, of an architectural quality, is not a weakness in old Welsh poetry, but results quite reasonably from a specific view of composition. English and most Western European creative activity has been conditioned by the inheritance from Greece and Rome of notions of a central point of interest in a poem or a play, or a nodal region to which everything leads and upon which everything depends. The dispersed nature of the thematic splintering of Welsh poetry is not due to a failure to follow the classical convention.¹³

Instead the Welsh poets to whom Williams refers (Aneirin, Gwalchma, Cynnddelw and Hywelab Owain) were following another, equally valid, aesthetic. Their writing was 'like the inter-woven inventions preserved in early Celtic manuscripts and on stone crosses, where what happens in a corner is as important as what happens at the centre, because there often is no centre.'¹⁴ If we add to this description Christopher Fletcher's contention that Worringer was an abiding and direct influence on Jones (though Fletcher only suggests an influence on Jones's art and certain passages in the poem)

¹³ Gwyn Williams, The Burning Tree (London: Faber and Faber, 1956) 15.

¹⁴ The Burning Tree 15.

and the certainty that both Herbert Read (both as a friend and writer) and Oswald Spengler (whose aesthetics were heavily influenced by Worringer and the school of Riegl and Lamprecht) brought the notion of northern form to Jones's attention, we begin to see a far more plausible form for The Anathemata.¹⁵ David Jones evidently concurred with Gwyn Williams' verdict, for in his review of Williams's anthology he wrote:

This Welsh aural art belonged to the same order of being as that which made possible a visual abstract art in other Celtic lands. In that visual art questions of the formal and the contential hardly arise before what we see is the visible image of their union. It was just this oneness of form and content that the unflinching integrity of Joyce was determined to achieve in literary form; it was not for nothing that he looked steadfastly at a page from Kells.¹⁶

Jones's Joyce, no doubt a rather different creature from James Joyce, is envisaged as not so much the ceaseless experimenter with form or the proto-post-modern subverter of form that recent critics have seen but as a Celt. According to Jones, Joyce had merely found a new way (and presumably Jones is referring to Finnegans Wake) of following the natural bent of the Celtic writer. It is legitimate to postulate that Jones wished his own work to be regarded in a similar light. David Jones was reviewing a book that said virtually the same thing about his own work, and, whilst it might have seemed immodest to trumpet his work in the same breath as Joyce's, if he felt his own work was different one would have expected him to mention the fact.

Apart from a reference to 'the Battersea shield, and that other abstract art of the La Tène Celts' (*Ana.* 32), there is little in the 'Preface' itself to support this contention. However, if one looks to Jones's other prose writing, the evidence for his interest in this conception of form is overwhelming. In the year of The Anathemata's publication Jones wrote in the Dublin Review:

¹⁵ Christopher Fletcher, 'Merely Gothic in Disguise: Discontinuity, Continuity and the Aesthetics of British Modernism' (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1992).

¹⁶ David Jones, 'Welsh Poetry' in David Jones, Epoch and Artist, ed. Harman Grisewood, (London: Faber and Faber, 1959) 56-65, 63-64. First published in The Tablet, 5th January 1957, as a review of The Burning Tree.

I understand that what is known of the character of the Celtic liturgies shows a tendency towards the elaboration of forms, rather than towards simplicity; which is certainly what one would expect from the culture-complex that produced the intricate arabesques of Kells, the involved and exacting patterns of Welsh bardic versification and of Celtic art-forms of every sort. I believe that any summary of the Celtic West . . . will strike a false note unless these characteristics are given due consideration. There is in the whole Celtic thing an elusive hardness, a bent towards the intricate and the abstract, there is also a certain punctiliousness, especially with regard to received formulae. At least some of the same characteristics are, I think, quite clearly observable from La Tène to *Finnegans Wake*.¹⁷

Once again Jones mentions Joyce (the La Tène to Finnegans Wake contention is one repeated many times throughout Jones's prose), and each time he seems to be describing his own practice as much as Joyce's. Indeed, he seems to be defending himself from one of the criticisms which Elizabeth Ward would make of the poem, that it is too abstract, with the defence that The Anthemata is merely being Celtic. As early as 1944 Jones was making similar points and postulating the exact relationship between Welsh visual form and some wider ancestry (which seems to be Aryan in character), and ruminating on the form of the book of Kells and the Lindisfarne gospel.¹⁸ As far as the form of poetry is concerned, we may add a further elaboration on what Jones regarded as typical Welsh aspects of a Celtic Will to Form: it would involve meticulous attention to detail and use the of appropriate words from various appropriate tongues.¹⁹ Moreover, in one of his fanciful flights of race-romanticism, Jones saw the Metaphysicals exhibiting something of this tendency due to some rather tenuous Welsh connections.²⁰ Jones was attempting to set up the canons of taste for a Welsh/Celtic literary and visual art. At the same time he wished to write a poem which would contain the wide and divers matters (chiefly relating to religion and national identity) with which he was preoccupied. These materials would have been very difficult to contain in a poem of a more conventional form and

¹⁷ David Jones, 'The Heritage of Early Britain', Epoch and Artist 196-201, 198-199. First published in the Dublin Review, October 1952 as a review of The Heritage of Early Britain (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1952).

¹⁸ David Jones, 'Wales and Visual Form' in David Jones, The Dying Gaul and Other Writings, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) 63-93.

¹⁹ See, for example, 'Wales and Visual Form' and 'Welsh Poetry'.

²⁰ The Dying Gaul 69.

structure. Certainly a great deal of art would have been required to conceal them. So just as his later painting and drawing would contain a profusion of detail and Northern Line, so would his poetry.²¹

Before we examine problems within the work, it is worth pointing out a few of the objections to this conception of form. First, and this is why the form of the poem has caused so much trouble for so many critics, this is not a conventional 'organic' form and it is very different from any standard model. As we shall discuss in greater detail, Jones believed in Riegl's relativism of cultural form (the mainstay of Worringer's and Spengler's aesthetics). To object that his poem showed none of the features traditionally associated with satisfactory form would, for Jones, have been missing the point. For him The Anthemata would not be a failure at form but rather an expression of a different, intricate, detailed, curvi-linear sensibility. If one accepts this thesis, some obvious problems need to be faced by any critic wishing to judge the success of The Anthemata, for it undermines many of our standard criteria for assessing writerly competence. More troubling, for one of Jones's beliefs, is the notion of a form without a centre. Ever since Titian first moved the Madonna and child away from the centre of the canvas, the humanism which Jones so disliked has displaced religion from the centre of an artwork. The Mass, along with the other great Christian mysteries, was central to Jones's conception of the poem. Yet, in the form of Northern Line the notion of centrality disappears. It is this trouble which leads an orthodox critic like Dilworth to posit the formal impossibility of the centre and circumference of the poem being ultimately identical.

David Jones's own mind may have been put somewhat at ease by the fact that so much Celtic and Anglo-Celtic line is illustrative of the cross. Basil Bunting once said of the Lindisfarne Gospels:

as you gaze at one of these so-called carpet pages, little by little, the confusion of ornament
sorts itself out, you notice how carefully balanced the whole thing is, and a great cross

²¹ 'Northern Line' is a concept developed by Wilhelm Worringer in Form in Gothic, ed. Herbert Read (London: G.P. Putnam's Son's Ltd, 1927). It is discussed at length in the 'Introduction' to this thesis.

emerges from the welter of ornament. There are occasions when the cross is made conspicuous, but usually it requires a good look at the page before you identify the cross.²²

No doubt Jones hoped that the underlying incarnational pattern would out and that the poem's principal themes and symbols would rise to the surface. However, as Read was to write at the end of his career, once such visual form is expressed in words it can happen that: 'the ornament has invade the narrative, and the line of this fused expression "breaks off unappeased into the void or flows senselessly back upon itself."²³

If the form of Northern Line is a viable alternative to 'organic' form, how far is this solely related to narrative? In academic literary criticism the later work of Worringer has been most successfully applied to studying the writers of the middle ages through the writings of Eugène Vinaver. In his influential study of Romance forms, The Rise of Romance, Vinaver maintains, by analogy with Worringer's visual aesthetics, that the Arthurian cycle has a form that is different from, but equally as valid as, the so called 'organic' form that is the touchstone of modern literary appreciation:

If the Arthurian cycle has so often been mistaken for a collection of tales haphazardly put together, it is because its mechanism is hidden behind the extraordinary complexities of the text; and if the spirals and the interlace of the decorated initials have for so long refused to yield the secret of the strictly controlled movement which they contain, it is because we have lost the art of perceiving the infinity of the great in the infinity of the small. The fascination of tracing a theme through all its phases, of waiting for its return while following other themes, of experiencing the consistent sense of their simultaneous presence, depends upon our grasp of the entire structure - the most elusive that has ever been devised.²⁴

²² Basil Bunting, 'Codex', Newcastle University Lectures on Poetry, transcribed by Peter Makin, Bunting Archive, Durham, 6.

²³ Herbert Read, 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art' in Herbert Read: A Memorial Symposium, ed. Robin Skelton (London: Methuen, 1970) 37-50, 47. Read is quoting Form in Gothic 42.

²⁴ Eugène Vinaver, The Rise of Romance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 81.

'Which means, I fear, that you won't make much sense of one bit unless you read the lot' (*Ana.* 33). This is 'the poetry of interlace', a modern description of what medieval scholars call 'entrelacement'. Whether or not Vinaver is right about romance form will certainly not be resolved in this thesis. However, it is worth pointing out that Vinaver's theory relates to narrative. Vinaver is chiefly concerned with the way that a number of stories are tangled together, or the lack of Aristotelian order in a single tale (as in The Song of Roland).²⁵ This literary interpretation of Worringer, or something very like it, may have been a basis for the late prose Romances of John Cowper Powys. Jerome McGann has recently cited Vinaver with approval in a defence of the great wanderings of Porius.²⁶ Still Powys, in however odd a fashion, was telling a modern romance. Jones was not. In The Anathemata, even apparently re-emerging sea voyages turn out to be of different times and places. The Anathemata, however medieval it wished to be, was certainly no romance.

How would this poetry of interlace find form in a modern poem? Following the analogy to ornament, it would need to be convoluted but nevertheless show underlying themes. It would have motifs that reoccur, as they do in ornament and romance and early epic, but were each time modified. Given that Jones had resolved to write a poem whose matter was largely historical and was to be drawn from diverse times and sources, a framework of correspondences, which would make one event like another, was required. It is true that Jones's extensive use of the historical philosophy of Oswald Spengler has its political aspect. But, by giving a framework for such correspondences, it also fulfilled a more formal function.

The Anathemata has many such correspondences. The waste-land motif appears first at the very opening of the poem where a priest in a tasteless modern Roman Catholic church is described thus:

The cult-man stands alone in Pellam's land: more precariously than he knows he guards the
signa: the pontifex among his house-treasures, (the twin-*urbes* his house is)

(*Ana.* 50)

²⁵ Chanson de Roland, trans. G. Burgess (Harmondsworth, Penguin 1990).

²⁶ Jerome McGann, 'Marvels and Wonders: Powys, Porius and the Attempt to Revive Romance in the Age of Modernism', Times Literary Supplement, Dec 1, 1995, 4-6.

Along with the material from Malory, T.S. Eliot and Jessie Weston, David Jones incorporates two Latin words. The first is specifically to do with Roman Catholic theology, chiefly as interpreted by Maritain, the Latin serving as a sort of double italicisation of a vital word. The second also has its Christian connotations, to which Jones directs us in a footnote. However, when allied with the description of the priest as 'pontifex', it also has a rather different Romish feel. This suspicion is confirmed the next time Jones writes of a pontifex alone in the wasteland, in 'Middle-Sea and Lear-Sea':

Tiberius Gracchus

wept for the waste-land

and the end of the beginnings . . .

(*Ana.* 89)

According to the historical framework of The Decline of The West, the modern period of decline roughly corresponds to the time of Tiberius Gracchus in Rome.²⁷ So the two pontifexes are the same only very different. One is a priest in a modern church whilst the other is a Roman emperor. This is a problem with such a poetic method and indeed such a philosophy of history, for, in its quest for correspondences, it tends to ignore great differences between epochs and historical figures. The same method extends, to specific features, especially artistic features, of the poem's characters. Here Jones's poetry is rather more general in its correlations. David Jones, in a digression on the subject of an Athenian Korê of the sixth century B.C., depicts her as also being the type of other legendary beauties:

by the radial flutes for her chiton, the lineal, chiselled hair

the contained rhythm of her

is she Elêne Argive

²⁷ Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1939), single volume edition.

or is she transalpine Eleanore

or our own Gwenhwyfar

the Selenê of Thulê

West-Helen?

(*Ana.* 92)

The answer Jones wants, as is the case most of his rhetorical questioning, is 'yes'. He is hardly elusive here, for this is a straightforward list of further manifestations of Korê as motif throughout the poem. These correspond to figures that rise in a cultural spring time. Showing the rather grave artistic tastes that Spengler seems to have acquired from Worringer, which have less love for the great humanist arts of fifth-century Athens or fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Italy than for their rather more austere and religious forerunners, Jones writes that we shall not see such a figure again until 'the Faustian lent is come' (*Ana.* 92).

Though Spengler is important for the interlace of The Anathemata, Jones by no means uses The Decline of the West exclusive of other devices of interlace. The work also contains other near repetitions which refer backwards and forwards in the poem, each time slightly modified in vocabulary and context, which do not rely on Spenglerian scaffolding. This may consist of just a word as in the case of 'baldichins' which appears on page 49 as a travesty of itself and which is resolved in the incarnational 'straw'd crucks that baldachined in star-lit town where he [Christ] was born' ('Mabinog's Liturgy', p.194). At other times whole phrases are self-consciously repeated:

on this hill

at a time's turn

not on any hill

but on this hill.

(*Ana.* 53)

This passage is a Golgotha motif. In its first positioning in the poem it acts as a bridge between earlier explicitly Christian material and the geology and oreogenesis which is to follow. We move, by means of an unannounced associative link, from the Crucifixion and a specific hill to a more general hill. Such association would seek to keep the poem from complete fragmentation and allow an unbroken line to emerge.

Jones reinforces the stitching later in 'Rite and Fore-time' when the motif is re-threaded in a similar passage, this time referring to the rock of Jerusalem where Abraham is supposed to have replaced the sacrifice of Isaac with that of a ram, foreshadowing the future human sacrifice of Jesus:

At this unabiding Omphalos
 this other laughless rock
at the stone of division
 above the middle water-deeps
at the turn of time
 not at any time, but
at this acceptable time.

(Ana. 58)

Once again the passage is used as a bridge, this time between hills and mountains and man the maker, perhaps partly through the notion of incarnation as making, though mainly through the more arbitrary link which follows:

Twenty millennia (and what millennia more?)
Since he became
 man master-of-plastic.

(Ana. 59)

This piece of interlace, long enough perhaps to bring to mind the oral formulas of early Welsh epics, reappears in the final section of the poem.

On to one of the mountains there
 on an indicated hill
not on any hill
 but on Ariel Hill
that is as three green hills of Tegeingl
in one:
 the hill of the out-cry
 the hill of dereliction
 the *moel* of the *mamau*
that is all help-heights
the mound of the in-cries.

(Ana. 233)

As the poem comes towards its end it doubles back and reworks the motifs that were at its beginning. And here it is fused with other recurring words and themes. The link between man the maker, the image of woman as mother (in this case the Willendorf Venus) and Mary the archetypal mother, also the mother land with hills for her breasts (hence the rather coy Latin), had been first mentioned in interrogative mode in 'Rite and Fore-time':

 Chthonic? why yes
but mother of us.
 Then it is these abundant *ubera*, here, under the species
of worked lime-rock, that gave suck to the lord?

(Ana. 60)

As the poem reaches its close the question marks are removed and an attempt is made at fusing the various themes and repetitions of the poem. Here Jones tries to make the one incorporate the many. His own cry at being ripped from his mother and his Welsh motherland and tongue is allowed to coincide somewhat blasphemously with the cries of Jesus:

Of which cry?

His by whom all oreogenesis is
his hill-cry who cries from his own *oreos*.

Ante colles he is and
before the fleeting hills
in changing order stood.

(*Ana.* 233)

Thus the line of the poem loops back and explains the apparently arbitrary shifts and associations earlier in the poem.

The motif has its final exposition towards the very end of the poem when the specifics of hill and place are finally fixed:

On Ariel Hill, on Sion tumulus
on Uru Mound, in Salem cenacle
in the white Beth-El
according to the *disciplina*
of this peculiar people
in accord with the intentions
of all peoples
and kindreds
et gentium, cenhedloedd, und Völker
that dance

by garnished *Baum*

or anointed stone.

(*Ana.* 241-2)

By finally reaching the particular, Jones endeavours to reach the universal, an attempt somewhat undone by the specificity of the Latin, German and Welsh strands he chooses. It is important for the internal logic of the poem that the three peoples 'of these islands' should be fused via a *deus ex machina*.

There are certain resemblances in this method to that employed by T.S. Eliot in Four Quartets. But there is little evidence for much direct influence. David Jones (surprisingly for a Christian) much preferred The Waste Land, perhaps partly because of the huge reading list it gave him. There are also notable differences between the two works. In Four Quartets, fire, rose, England, history etc. reach eventual union and synthesis through an ongoing poetic dialectic which is, in spite of the poet's meditations upon time, ultimately linear. The Anathemata is linear only as Northern line is. It is a poem based on a cyclical view of history (at odds with the Christian themes of the poem that would lead us to a different conception of time) and it seeks to enact this antipathy to conventional linearity in a form that ultimately gets us nowhere, taking us back where we started from, only with a greater sureness that there is a serpentine connectedness to the divers matters of the poem.

The poem's interlace is not as comprehensive as might be hoped. Books III, IV and VI tend to chiefly interlace with each other, as do Books I, II, VII and VIII, rather than with the poem as a whole. Book V, was no doubt intended to solve this problem. Certainly it contains words and passages that pick up, however obliquely, on words and passages in the other seven books, though it often parodies them. Neil Corcoran has described this book as having a narrator, Elen Monica, who 'acts as opposition and subversion.'²⁸ This is not true in quite the way that Corcoran implies when he writes approvingly of the expression of the 'female principle'. David Jones's ideas on woman and a 'female principle', as expressed in 'The Lady of the Pool', appear to be chiefly derived from the second volume of The

²⁸ The Song of Deeds 61.

Decline of The West. Thus woman is portrayed as an essentially plantlike being (it is not for nothing that Elen Monica is a flowerseller) who is in touch with the more primitive cycles. Spengler writes that:

woman despises that other History - man's politics - which she never comprehends, and of which all that she sees is that it takes her sons away from her. . . . Man's history sacrifices woman's history to itself . . . but nevertheless there was and is and ever will be the secret politic of the woman . . . that seeks to draw away her male from his kind of history and to weave him body and soul into her own plantlike history of generic succession - that is, to herself. And yet all that is accomplished in the man-history is accomplished under the battle-cries of hearth and home, wives and children, race and the like, and its very object is the covering and upholding of this history of birth and death. The conflict of man and man is ever on account of the blood, of woman. *Woman as Time, is that for which there is history at all.*

The woman with race in her feels this even when she does not know it.²⁹

According to Spengler: 'woman is the seeress, and not because she knows the future, but because she is the future. The priest merely interprets the oracle; the Priestess is the oracle itself and it is Time that speaks through her.' In short 'man *makes* history, the woman *is* History.'³⁰ This is the 'female principle' of the poem. This vision of woman, though it may have influenced some French feminists (Cixous comes to mind, whilst some of Julia Kristeva's thoughts on 'Woman's Time' may be seen as a careful de-essentialising of such views) scarcely counts as subversive.³¹ In the one book of The Anathemata dominated by this principle certain poetic possibilities are, however, given scope by this view. This allows Elen Monica, who has 'race in her' to give expression to race memories, to leap into anachronisms and have the potential to comprehend the different times of the poem

²⁹ The Decline of the West Vol. II, 328-9.

³⁰ The Decline of the West Vol II, 327.

³¹ Hélène Cixous, The Cixous Reader, ed. Susan Sellers (New York: Routledge, 1994). Julia Kristeva, 'Woman's Time' in The Kristeva Reader, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 187-213.

simultaneously. Such a view of Woman has obvious advantages regarding the ability of 'The Lady of the Pool' to impose some sort of unity at the core of The Anathemata through an all encompassing temporal perspective in its interlace.

As a comment on 'The Lady of the Pool's' themes and form, and within the parameters of such a conception of woman, there is a certain validity in applying the somewhat hackneyed term 'subversive'. For example, Roma, often presented as totalitarian empire builder elsewhere, is inverted by means of a rather heavy handed joke (and one which does not gain in Jones's subsequent retellings of it): 'him swaired as it were work o' Roma, -what he spelled-out *backward*, captain' (*Ana.* 130), the point being that the Roma motif is inverted to become love. Unlike Joyce, on whose Anna Livia Plurabelle he modelled 'The Lady of the Pool', Jones is justly not renowned as a humourist or a parodist. And often one wishes what are no doubt supposed to be jokes were not. Simple, and very unfunny, malapropisms are particularly unconvincing. Would a character who uses the word 'Thalascrat' use the word 'admorality' which is bad as a malapropism and worse as a pun? Nevertheless, from the point of view of understanding the technique of interlace, we must view 'The Lady of the Pool' in this comic and parodic light; and what Jones was chiefly sending up, and this perhaps explains the lack of good jokes, was the rest of the poem. Thus the attempt to mix history, myth and legend, which is taken very seriously indeed in most of the rest of the poem, has a parodic equivalent in John Dee and in the tall tales of the mariner.³²

It cannot, however, be said that 'The Lady of the Pool' provides a parodic mirror for the whole poem. Much interlace appears in a straightforward fashion (though, rather oddly, Jesus does appear as Yankie Doodle). The 'Flora' theme is set up, the Brute and Trojan themes recur as do Redriff and voyaging, hanged men and Arthur and Venus, rams, the mass and Helen of Troy (and her Celtic equivalents). Other pieces of interlace do not appear at all. There is also much which from the point of view of the whole work is mere digression, and to a lesser extent this is true of the whole poem. But this would not have greatly troubled Jones, for not only was *digressio* good medieval practice, it

³² The rather donnish joke, 'what's the cephalic index of the *morforynion*' (*Ana.* 113), which refers to the practice of craniology on mermaids would be a notable exception to this rule.

was also part of the rambling nature of Celtic style and northern line. For in such a conception of form there is little that may be considered truly redundant. In his poetry, as in his paintings and drawings, Jones wished to put in as much detail as possible.

Whilst we may acknowledge 'The Lady of the Pool' to be substantially different from much of the rest of the poem it is certainly not a unifying centre, even a subversive one. One may only regard it as such if one takes very seriously indeed the Spenglerian view of Woman. This would allow Elen Monica to take in all the race history in the poem, and to have an intuition of the eternal (Woman being also closer to the eternal and cosmic as she is to the seasons). Without the Spengler, to which one no doubt should also add an admixture of Christianity, such a unifying centre disappears and the problem of the poem's unity remains.

If The Anthemata is centreless is it also endless? How much is there a move towards some sort of closure in the last two books? There is certainly some. The poem gestures towards a thematic and symbolic unity. The chief intellectual preoccupation of the last two books of The Anthemata is the resolution of syncretic interests into a Christian vision. We may note this in relation to Jones's use of myth and ritual. In 'Sherthurdaye and Venus Day', Jesus is described thus:

Marquis of demarking waters
 Warden of the Four Lands
from her salined deeps
from the cavern'd waters
 (where she ark'd him) come.
 His members in-folded
like the hidden lords in the West-tumuli
for the nine dark calends gone.
Grown in stature
 he frees the waters.
(Nine nights on the windy tree?)

Himself to himself?

Who made the runes would read them -

wounded with *our* spears.)

(*Ana.* 224 -5)

Material culled from Frazer and Jessie Weston is harnessed to a vision of Christ. The theological position is one which sees Jesus as archetype of vegetation rites and related redemptive mythologies, a not uncommon view in the earlier part of the century. Thus Christ is also Odin. The logos is also reader of the runes. He is also the fisher king wounded and then made whole, the bringer of water to the Wasteland. Both theologically and as attempts to give thematic coherence to the poem such passages sail rather close to the wind. For a Christian the resurrection has a unique significance. This was a reason for The Golden Bough rightly being perceived as an atheistic work. It is one thing to say that Jesus is 'like' prehistoric lords buried in round barrows, which at least has the virtue of a certain specificity in its terms of comparison, and another to depict him as Odin (and numerous other deities elsewhere in the poem). The use of Jesus as a sort of transcendental mythical signified certainly solves some of the problems the poet has posed himself by giving a unity to myth, but it is highly questionable as a poetic method for it fails to take into account the diverse associations and contexts of various mythical figures and the vocabularies associated with them. Odin was often used in the ideology of the Third Reich. No doubt Jones had no intention of making any such association. Still, he was certainly aware that Odin signifies in quite a different way to Christ, yet chose to ignore the fact.

To question Jones's ideas of mythic unity is not mere carping. It is a serious question whether such attempts at providing 'a key to all mythologies' are either aesthetically or intellectually satisfying. Making Mary archetype of Guinevere, Helen, Selene and the rest may tie up a good deal of mythical interlace, but it hardly respects the specificities of time, place and cultural association that Jones was otherwise to think so important and makes shadowy abstracts of the other figures. Helen is only like Mary in that she is a figure of adoration. To meld them is to offend not just theological but also poetic propriety. Such a poetic technique relies upon a confusion of accident with essence. And it is from

such confusions that Basil Bunting and Roy Fisher have both endeavoured to escape.³³ The last two books of The Anthemata are more explicit in their delineation of amalgamation through archetype than its earlier books. These two books are expected to return the reader to the earlier sections of the poem in a way analogous to both interlace and Christian readings of the Old Testament that look for prefigurings of the messiah. Jones may have felt that this gave the poem a symbolic cohesion, through a sort of confirmation through revelation. Such a technique does give trans-historic unity to certain mythic figures but in so doing it displaces them from their functions within their respective periods in the poem. However, it is questionable whether such a limited addition to the poem's cohesiveness compensates for the difficulties associated with such an archetypal technique.

Spengler

We have already examined some of the uses to which David Jones put Spengler's Decline of the West within the context of a Northern Form. But there is another, wider claim which Spengler may make on our attention. One might reasonably suggest that the historical philosophy of Oswald Spengler provided an external framework for the whole of The Anathemata. To put it in the terms of Lyotard, The Decline of the West would be a meta-narrative which made sense of the various interlaced parts of The Anathemata.³⁴ Lyotard's depiction of meta-narratives is an inferior reworking of the arguments put forward by the later Wittgenstein. These arguments are a response to a mode of thinking prevalent in the last century and in the first years of this which would look for all encompassing 'narratives' to explain complex phenomena. Freud, Marx and Hegel would be classic examples of such thinkers. One could argue that the fact that such huge external narratives were available was an enabling feature in the modernist move away from conventional linearity of story in poetry and prose. Jones's use of The Decline of the West would thus be a conventional modernist move in a search for form which had placed decisive narrative outside the text.

³³ Bunting's early poem 'Attis: or Something Missing' pokes much fun at the cult of Frazer and the ludicrous nature of some of the identifications that can be made with modern figures. Basil Bunting Collected Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 8-13. Bunting's version of Objectivism stands directly opposed to such confusions between accident and essence as does Roy Fisher's poetic. Such points will be developed in later chapters of this thesis.

³⁴ Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massoni (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

Early writers on The Anathemata were keen to downplay the influence of The Decline of the West upon Jones. René Hague would note with some dismay each explicit reference to Spengler and endeavour to distance Jones from his influence.³⁵ Peter Levi suggested that Jones's interest was only skin deep and did not involve the incorporation of his wider theories.³⁶ More recently, Neil Corcoran has cautiously accepted a more pervasive influence of Spengler but has underemphasised its importance and has tended to ignore The Decline of the West in his readings of the poem. Jonathan Miles in his impressive study of Jones's sources has rightly questioned the validity of any view of The Anathemata which does not take into account The Decline of The West.³⁷ He writes that 'to suggest that David Jones was not utterly absorbed by Spengler's speculations is mistaken and derives, I suppose, from a mistaken fear about the relation of Spengler's thought to National Socialism'.³⁸ The first half of what Miles writes is undoubtedly true, the second is disputable.³⁹ Spengler, who described himself as a 'Prussian' socialist, was certainly not a Nazi himself and criticized both the regime and its anti-Semitism.⁴⁰ His work was, however, a formative influence on Nazi ideology and upon Goebbels in particular.⁴¹ And his philosophy of history certainly had things in common with the vision of the Third Reich. An amoral historical pessimism that verged on nihilism, race romanticism, a dream of a militarily strong Germany and an antipathy towards democracy were all shared with the Nazis.⁴² If that is the reason for Hague's hostility to Spengler we can hardly blame him for it. Besides, it is always possible that Hague and others simply had a low opinion of the

³⁵ René Hague, A Commentary on The Anathemata of David Jones (Wellinborough: Christopher Skelton, 1977).

³⁶ Peter Levi, 'The Poetry of David Jones', Agenda, 5, 1-3 (1967), 87.

³⁷ Jonathan Miles, Backgrounds to David Jones: A Study in Sources and Drafts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990).

³⁸ Backgrounds to David Jones 52.

³⁹ For evidence for Jones's great interest in Spengler see, for example, Jones's letter to Harman Grisewood, 26th February 1942 in David Jones, Dai Greatcoat: A Self-portrait of David Jones in his Letters, ed. René Hague (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 115-117. References to Spengler in Jones's writings are too numerous to cite.

⁴⁰ See Erich Matthias, 'The Influence of the Versailles Treaty on the Internal Development of the Weimar Republic' in German Democracy and the Triumph of Hitler: Essays in Recent German History, ed. A. Nicholls and E. Matthias (London: George Allen and Unwin 1971) 13-29

⁴¹ 'The Influence of the Versailles Treaty on the Internal Deceopment of the Weimar Republic'. See also Ralf Georg Reuth, Goebbels, trans. Krishna Winston (New York: Harcourt Barce, 1993).

⁴² Klaus P. Fisher, History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler's The Decline of the West (New York: Lang, 1989), expresses surprise that Spengler became so antipathetic to the Nazis.

historical philosophy of The Decline of the West. Thinkers as diverse as R.G. Collingwood, Karl Popper and Theodor Adorno have reached a similar conclusion.

The conclusion that The Decline of the West is as important to The Anthemata as Vico is to Finnegans Wake and plays a similar, if not rather more important, role raises more than just political difficulties.⁴³ There is much more damning evidence than an admiration for Spengler to demonstrate Jones's sympathies with Hitler and with fascism. Much of this has been outlined by Elizabeth Ward and some it will be examined later in this chapter. If The Decline of the West is a vital constituent of the poem's make-up, it calls into question both The Anthemata's status as a Christian poem and its unity. This is perhaps the chief reason that earlier Christian critics such as Levi and Hague wished to underemphasise Spengler's importance. Hague writes of the 'impossibility of reconciling Spengler's basic thesis of the isolation of cultures with D's monism'.⁴⁴ This is true, but there is nothing in The Anthemata or in Jones's writings of the time (though he did have reservations about Spengler) to suggest that he did not believe in the isolation of cultures nor the distinction between 'culture' and 'civilization'. For example, in 1941 he described the distinction between 'culture' and 'civilization' 'a most useful distinction and a valid one'.⁴⁵ In 1950 Jones was defending Spengler's idea of 'pseudomorphosis', a new cultural spirit wearing the vestments of an old one, and the concomitant ideas of the isolation of cultures.⁴⁶ Jones evidently had enough faith in Spengler's thesis to use it as an historical framework for a large proportion of The Anthemata. He also felt a need to amend it so that it would cohere with Christian eschatology.

In The Anthemata David Jones uses the terms 'Apollinian', 'Magian' and 'Faustian' and endorses the idea of the Spenglerian year. This is the most obvious influence of Spengler in the poem (though certainly not the only one). The poetic endorsement of these cultural-historical categories implies, amongst other things, a conception of time different from the Christian, and a lack of real continuity in the Christian church. This is at odds with Jones's position as a Roman Catholic, and also with

⁴³ See Backgrounds to David Jones 51.

⁴⁴ Rene Hague Commentary on the Anthemata of David Jones 106. 'D' is Hague's shorthand for David Jones.

⁴⁵ Epoch and Artist 288.

⁴⁶ David Jones, 'A Note on Mr. Berenson's Views', Epoch and Artist 267-277.

certain parts of the poem. This mixture of Spenglerian history and Christianity brings about poetic tensions as here in 'Mabinog's Liturgy':

In that day, *amara valde*

when she, our Wést-light falls from her tráck-way.

Né me pérdas illa dié

in that tremendous day

when Clio has no more to muse about.

When, of the other eight

Polymnia with Eutérpe alone remain:

how else the Spondaulium of the Lamb, slain

ab origine mundi?

(*Ana.* 208)

In this passage Spenglerian ideas and language collide with a Christian vision of history and its end, and the language of the bible and the liturgy. The Decline of the West has metamorphosed into the falling of a celestial light. The falling of 'our Wést-light' may be interpreted either as the fall of the moon from its orbit or perhaps an eschatological refiguring of the star seen by the magi (which would have been to the west of them). Jones appears to be deliberately undermining the vision that has provided the framework for so much of his poem and attempting to make it correspond to a more redemptive Christian vision that would escape the iron grip of history in a move from historical cycle to eschatology and from eschatology to redemption. Nevertheless, his vision maintains a debt to Spengler that runs counter to the passage's Christian subject matter. The second coming is conventionally valid for all mankind, yet here it is only the end of the Western world that is described. The passage holds out Christian hope instead of the pessimism of Spengler but in a roughly Spenglerian framework.

The chief trouble with Jones's use of Spengler is not that he relied on him too much, but that he neither rejected nor fully embraced Spengler's vision. If the whole poem was predicated on The

Decline of the West, a dislike of that fact would have been due to a dislike or distrust of Spengler (or any extrinsic meta-narrative) rather a reflection on the poem's coherence. By only half adopting Spengler Jones may have furthered his desire for a Christian poem, but he also lost the benefit of a complete external structure for The Anthemata. It is possible to imagine a poem structured entirely by the Spenglerian year in which the seasons and the sequence of passages directly follow the model of The Decline of the West. The Anthemata partly, but by no means systematically, follows this model. 'The Lady of the Pool', for example, is set in late summer, which loosely corresponds to the timing of the period described in the Spenglerian year. However, this correspondence is not exact. 'The Lady of the Pool' may be placed at the close of the middle ages and Merrie England but it is on the cusp between the 'Gothic' and 'Baroque' periods, thus rather earlier in the Spenglerian summer. David Jones had an animus against both Protestantism and, peculiarly for a Welshman, the Tudors. If we assume the timing of the section to be significant, Jones has tinkered with Spengler's time scheme in order to fit it to his own historical prejudices. Thus the Tudors would usher in the end of the middle ages and autumn. Jones's manipulation of the Spenglerian year in the last two books of the poem is more interesting. Guinevere's mass 'at mid night/three nights after the solstice-night' (*Ana.* 195) is at the beginning of a new solar year and just before a time consecrated to the beginning of a new age brought about by a new birth. Here 'the Magian handling and the Apollinian word' (*Ana.* 204) through revelation and Revelations (the last two books of The Anthemata abound with references to the Christian Apocalypse) move into the dawn of Jones's beloved Faustian middle ages. Such a movement seeks to bring about a structural and thematic reconciliation between Spengler's history, whilst appending a hope to the cultural despair envisaged at the beginning of the poem, and bringing in an end with the hope of a new beginning. Thus the new Dark Ages (in a foreshortened Spenglerian cycle) would give hope for a new Middle Ages and the cultural rebirth for which Jones pined.

Cultural History and the Will to Form

When David Jones declared that 'there is in the whole Celtic thing an elusive hardness, a bent towards the intricate and the abstract, there is also a certain punctiliousness' he was making a definition of the Celtic *Kunstwollen* and *Volkgeist*. If we relate this definition to Jones's own poetry, the word

'punctilious' is particularly telling. This may refer to formal niceties. Old Welsh poetry was certainly punctilious in that respect. Jones, however, was not following Welsh metrics or poetic conventions. A punctilious poetry, though, would also be one attentive to tiny points of detail. This is both a virtue and a vice of Jones's poetic. It allows a profusion of detail and of fact that other forms may not allow, but it also may lead to a tedious pedantry, a showing off of the 'mugging up' which Jones declared there should be none of.⁴⁷ Take, for example, part of the description of Guinevere in 'Mabinog's Liturgy':

Downward from this terminal,
down from the wide shoulders (for she was a daughter of the *tyrannoi* of Britain and these Arya were *cawraidd*) down over the high-laced buskins (these the *Notitia* permitted) to where the supple Andalusian buck-skin, freighted from Córdoba, cased her insteps (for all the transmarine negotiators, prospectors, promoters, company-floaters and *mercatores* laded and carried for her) covering all but the lower eyelet-rings and the thong-tags and other furnishings of polar ivory.

(Ana. 198-199)

This passage shows a lack of restraint which mars its beauties, but one that David Jones would no doubt regard as a virtue. As poetry (or poetic prose) it gains very little from any dark age history lessons contained in parenthesis. Whilst it is interesting to know (and perhaps worthy of a footnote) that the *Notitia* allowed high-laced buskins, is it not poetry but pedantry that requires it to be mentioned in the text? It is legitimate for a reader to expect that Guinevere wears the correct clothing and, if the author has made a mistake, to hold him to account. Placing such punctilios in the body of the poem, diverting the reader's attention from one of the few fully described scenes in the work, seems excessively pedagogical. Worse is the first parenthesis, which is either tautological or simply

⁴⁷ "There must be no mugging up, "no ought to know or "try to feel"; for only what is actually loved and known can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*", from Jones's 'Preface' (Ana. 24). This sentence contains two of Jones's most quoted phrases, the fame of the second being due in part to Katherine Raine, *David Jones and the Actually Loved and Known* (Ipswich: Golgonooza press, 1978). Whether or not Jones's statement has general validity, it can hardly be said to be true in his case. If ever a poem was mugged up, it was *The Anathemata*. One suspects that 'the actually loved and known' is also a phrase that should not be taken at face value.

wrong, depending on how one reads it. If Arya has its conventional meaning of the Aryans, the word is an historical nonsense. Even if one accepts the Aryan hypothesis, Jones is wrong by some two thousand years. The only way he wouldn't be is according to Nazi race history. However, David Jones seems to be using the definition of 'Arya' that he invented and proceeded to attribute to Christopher Dawson.⁴⁸ In which case we have three words, different philologically perhaps, but all meaning almost exactly the same thing. This is what the parenthesis means: 'for she was a daughter of the tyrants/kings of Britain and these nobles/highmen were tyrants/ kings'. One might add that *cawraidd* also has the meaning 'giants', though what relevance that has to anything else in the poem baffles. The only excuse for such a parenthesis is Jones's philological imperative which would seek linguistic 'richness' as its own reward and the search for detail as valid for its own sake. In this regard David Jones is at the opposite extreme to Basil Bunting who would exhort his pupils to 'cut out every word you dare' and even take the blue pencil to Shakespeare's sonnets.

Yet Jones's attention to details could be pertinent. An earlier description of Guinevere reads very well indeed and, save for one annoying parenthesis, refrains from allowing detail to become congestion:

If her gilt, unbound

(for she was the consort of a *regulus*) and falling to below her sacral bone, was pale as standing North-Humber barley-corn, here, held back in the lunula of Doleucothi gold, it was paler than under-stalks of barley, held in the sickle's lunula. So that the pale gilt where it was by nature palest, together with the pale river-gold where it most received the pallid candle-sheen, rimmed the crescent whiteness where it was whitest.

(*Ana.* 196-7)

If this is punctilious, it is certainly not pedantic, but shows rather a gradual moving towards the correct simile through incantatory repetition. The specificity of 'Doleucothi gold' is apposite, a detail

⁴⁸ See [The Sleeping Lord](#) 66-7 where David Jones contends that 'the word Arya means nobles or high-men, and has nothing whatever to do with race.' This is based on a misremembering or misinterpretation, whether deliberate or not, of Christopher Dawson who certainly believed in the Aryan hypothesis, albeit the less extreme version put forth by V. Gordon Childe rather than that of Gustav Kossinna.

historically correct and to the point. The descriptive exactitude of 'North-Humber barley' shows the sort of attention to local detail and phenomena which is so important in In Parenthesis, working in conjunction with rather than detracting from the matter of the poem. Thus the gradual refining of an image and a quality through repetition and near repetition in a process of poetic accretion mirrors that effect which the repetitions of passages seek to achieve in the poem as a whole.

Jones's 'punctiliousness' and his 'bent towards the intricate and the abstract' has its parallel in the views of Spengler and Worringer upon the connection between Gothic and Scholasticism. Spengler writes that 'West Europe has an *ornamental music of the grand style* . . . which is closely akin to Scholasticism and Mysticism, and which finds its laws in the motherland of high Gothic between Seine and Scheldt.'⁴⁹ Worringer examines such parallels at greater length, devoting a chapter of Form in Gothic to 'The Psychology of Scholasticism'. He is explicit in his connections between Gothic and Scholasticism. He contends that 'Scholasticism is in the sphere of religion what Gothic architecture is in the sphere of art'.⁵⁰ Worringer explains this assertion by making reference to the ornamental status of scholastic knowledge:

Just as Northern man was seized by a mania for artistic construction and building, going far beyond all practical requirements, so he was seized also by a mania for intellectual construction which betrays the same need of the becoming engrossed in a self-created activity of an abstract kind, whether lyrical or mechanical.⁵¹

The Gothic cathedral exceeds its direct aim just as 'scholastic thought also out runs the direct occasion of its activity, developing into an autonomous revelation of an abstract movement of thought, free from any purpose.'⁵²

⁴⁹ The Decline of the West Vol 1, 229.

⁵⁰ Form in Gothic 169.

⁵¹ Form in Gothic 170.

⁵² Form in Gothic 170-171.

By combining such definitions of the Gothic nature of Scholasticism with Jones's own ideas of a specifically Celtic Will to Form we may begin to understand how The Anthemata has a poetic which on the small scale mirrors the ideas of form so evident in the form of the poem as a whole. The profusion of footnotes and parentheses, the longeurs and the digressions, are quite as 'Northern' and 'Medieval' in their intent as the preponderance of alliteration and short and broken lines in Jones's prosody. All these elements are intended to mirror the larger form of the poem. This presents difficulties. It is hard to fault Jones's poetry within the stylistic confines of the particular Will to Form he chose, though easy enough by other lights. When David Jones, in his essay 'Use and Sign', declared that 'Michaelangelo is no "better" than, but only different from, the Paleolithic Masters' he was subscribing to the relativism of the *Kunstwollen* school of art, as he did implicitly in much of his writing.⁵³ The same point of view is rehearsed, though more obliquely, in his descriptions of Palaeolithic painting in The Anthemata. By these lights it is only in David Jones's failure to express fully the Northern Will or to be properly scholastic that he may be criticized. But, however much one may sympathize with Jones's project and endeavour to understand his aims and methods, it must remain the prerogative of critic and reader to place poetry under wider scrutiny and processes of evaluation, just as it is the prerogative of an art critic to understand how a Renaissance artist may have greater competence, knowledge and understanding than a prehistorical, magical artist, however much one may admire him. Thus it is reasonable to write that such twisting form in poetry, though at times very effective, may lose human interest or become pedantic, convoluted or simply too abstract and lacking in the phenomenological interest that we associate with, and often prize in, literature.

Earlier in this chapter Vincent Sherry's assertion that The Anthemata is about 'man as maker of art' was alluded to. There is a sense in which we can take such a claim seriously as a guiding scheme for The Anthemata, but only via a return to the *Kulturgeschichte* school of German idealist aesthetics to which Worringer and, more importantly Spengler belonged. It was the insight of this school that history could be understood by its art. This thesis evolved to becoming *the* key to historical understanding for a number of thinkers, of whom Spengler is the most famous.⁵⁴ David Jones's close

⁵³ The Dying Gaul 178.

⁵⁴ See Roger Scruton 'Spengler's Decline of the West' in The Philosopher on Dover Beach: Essays (Manchester: Carcanet, 1990) 12-31. 'For Wolfflin and his follower, not only did history become a

friend and intellectual mentor Christopher Dawson, who was both critical of and influenced by Spengler, expressed this point of view succinctly:

To understand the art of a society is to understand the vital activity of that society in its most intimate and creative moments. We can learn more about a medieval culture from a cathedral than from the most exhaustive study of constitutional law, and the churches of Ravenna are a better introduction to the Byzantine world than all the volumes of Gibbon.⁵⁵

This takes a partial truth, that one can learn something of history and gain the 'feel' of it from a building or a work of art, and stretches it to the bounds of credibility. It is no doubt reassuring to those of us who are never going to devote much of our lives to reading constitutional law to know that we are better employed wandering around cathedrals, but it is a questionable approach to history. But Dawson's choice of law for an example is a telling one. Roger Scruton, who has more time than most for Spengler, notes that 'Spengler's aesthetic will always misdescribe those institutions, such as law, that are designed to be understood in some other way than aesthetic judgement.'⁵⁶ This is indeed one of the chief troubles with Spengler's approach. It would seek to describe mathematics and science as well as art, literature and music under the same heading. Thus Newton, Descartes and Bach are all described by a term derived from architecture - 'Baroque'. For David Jones, though, it was one of its chief virtues. Jones, though highly knowledgeable in certain areas, was not an historian but a poet with eclectic reading habits. One of the things he did know about, however, was art and the aesthetics of the schools of neo-thomism (exemplified by Maritain and De La Taille), *Kulturgeschichte* and *Kunstwollen* (though it is debatable how much he ever understood its philosophic import and implications). Jones was given a scheme in which what he didn't know became of little consequence and what he did know became vital. In this scheme art becomes the very pulse of the health of an age

way of understanding art - art became a way, perhaps even *the* way of understanding history. It is only a step from there to Spengler: to the vision of history as itself a kind of work of art, with organic unity and consistency of spirit that are marks of the aesthetic imagination. History, like art, becomes expression, to be understood in the terms of the spirit that is embodied in it. In a nutshell, all history is cultural history, and all cultural history criticism.' 'Spengler's Decline of the West' 20-21.

⁵⁵ Christopher Dawson, The Dynamics of World History, ed. John J. Molloy (London: Sheed and Ward, 1957) 68-9.

⁵⁶ 'Spengler's The Decline of the West' 24.

and a race. This notion is predicated on the circular premises that a healthy culture produce good art and that one can define a healthy culture by its production of good art. For Jones, as for Dawson, material artefacts and specifically the visual arts, were the litmus tests of a civilization. Jones wrote in 1944 that, 'Material objects are the greatest give-away of any epoch or place. They, more readily than any other thing, lay bare the state of affairs, and indicate the "soul" of a period or a culture.'⁵⁷ Whereas in In Parenthesis history had been evoked through oral tradition and literary 'deposits', in The Anathemata David Jones would make the visual art the 'archetype and norm of all the ways and modes by which [man] signs his name.'⁵⁸

Thus much of The Anathemata is predicated upon the notion that exempla from the world of art 'sum up' an epoch or a civilization. The opening of the poem functions after such a fashion. In The Anathemata bad pastiche architecture in a modern church is not just a peculiarity of place and time. It is, of course. Old and beautiful churches in England have been largely an Anglican preserve for some four hundred years, and the sort of church Jones describes is merely the sort of church he was obliged to worship at. But, as far as the scheme of the poem is concerned, such an architecture encapsulates the soul of this 'civilization' (in the Spenglerian sense). It leads Jones to write of the Romans:

For the world-connoisseurs to cant their necks and to allow:

Yes, great epigraphers, let's grant 'em one perfected
aesthetic - and, of course, there's the portrait-busts.

(*Ana.* 89)

Jones is uncharacteristically ambiguous here, seeming not to have the courage of his convictions, in the faint praise the 'world-connoisseurs' (whoever *they* are) give the declining Romans. From all we know about Jones's own opinions, his general animus towards the Roman empire coupled with his love of Roman lettering, there is nothing to suggest that David Jones and these 'world connoisseurs'

⁵⁷ The Dying Gaul 90.

⁵⁸ The Dying Gaul 90.

are not one and the same, the latter being merely an anonymous authority for a cultural pulse-taking by art, an ambiguous device used to incorporate unsubstantiated generalisations about a culture. It saves a great deal of writing and some rather knotty problems to be able to symbolise a culture or a period in this way. For, according to this method of cultural evaluation, degrees of health, mortality, liberty, ignorance or superstition are as nothing compared to the folds in Gothic drapery or the quality of vaulting in a church.

This version of *Kulturgeschichte* is pervasive in The Anathemata's subject matter and modes of description and evocation of the past. This point may be elucidated by the contemplation of David Jones's use of statuary in the poem. The poetic likening of human form (and particularly woman's form) to a statue has a long and distinguished pedigree. Catullus describes Ariadne, in an idealisation of female grief that was to be satirized by Ovid in the Heroidas, as like the statue of a Bacchanal:

Quem procul ex alga maestis Minois ocellis

Saxea ut effigies bacchantis prospicit⁵⁹

Nor was such a device unknown to the moderns. T.S. Eliot's 'La Figlia Che Piange', in a manner that owes much to the Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century, depicts a statue of a woman as though she were alive. Catullus's and Eliot's descriptions, one comparing a live woman to a statue and the other doing the reverse, may serve as examples of the two standard devices in such descriptions. It is a mode of description that has entered into common parlance, as when models are described as 'statuesque'. But it is hard to think of a writer as attracted to the depiction of statues and of humans as statues as the David Jones of The Anathemata (and, for that matter, The Sleeping Lord and The Roman Quarry). If we read again David Jones's description of the Korê, we discover something strange indeed: a veneration of woman as stone, over and above woman as flesh:

and the Delectable Korê:

⁵⁹ Catullus, LXIV, 60-61, Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris, (Cambridge Mass. and London: Loeb, Harvard University Press, 1988) 102.

by the radial flutes for her chiton, the lineal, chiselled hair

the contained rhythm of her

is she Elenê Argive

or is she transalpine Eleanore

or our own Gwenhwyfar

the Selenê of Thule

West-Helen?

She's all that and more

all korai, all parthenai made stone.

(*Ana.* 92)

This is an example of when, in Jones's words, 'the Word is made stone' (*Ana.* 93). This curious notion would replace flesh for a lifeless medium as vehicle of the incarnation. The idea must be partly derived from the neo-Thomist notion that man-as-creator is taking part in an activity that mirrors the divine agency of God. But, even by these lights, it is strange that David Jones would place a specific example of man's *imitatio* above woman, the creation of God.

Specifically, Jones is describing virginity ('parthenai') 'made stone'. A statue, unlike Helen, Guinevere or Eleanor (surely only Jones would think of these three as archetypes of virginity), perforce remains virginal. Indeed it will be virgin even to breath. In Basil Bunting's 'Attis: Or Something Missing' there is the cry: 'Send for Medusa: we'll enamel him!'.⁶⁰ In Bunting's poem the cry is closely related to the threat of castration, and it is not difficult to see how the eunuch and the statue are allied. For a statue is denatured in its perfection, deprived not only of true flesh but also of any desire or subjectivity. It is a figure that can only be an object of devotion because it is unable to requite the feelings in the admirer's gaze. It is not capable of expressing the otherness required for love or sexual desire, for it is without eyes (one of the most astute castration metaphors), and the admiration of it will be only the expression of the viewer's subjectivity.⁶¹ The Korê can only be 'more' than the

⁶⁰ Collected Poems 10.

⁶¹ See Thomas Nagel 'Sexual Perversion' in Mortal Questions (Cambridge: New York, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1991) 39-52. Also Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, trans.

mythical beauties whom Jones adumbrates by being less, for she is not allowed even the fictional subjectivity and imagined free agency accorded to a heroine or the actual life which these legendary females (those which existed) led.

The delights accorded by the unchanging idealisations of statue, portrait or, most famously, a Grecian urn must ultimately and always by their very lifeless nature be bitter sweet when compared to the ceaseless flow of mortal life and loves. Thus Keats is richly ambiguous in his depiction of a 'Cold Pastoral' in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.⁶² It is, after all, the urn and not Keats which says the famous 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Jones, however, is unequivocal in his praise of the Korê. This may be partly due to the exigencies of the long poem in which ambiguities (particularly those on a small scale) can be more of a vice than a virtue and cause an unhelpful muddying of larger themes. It is also reasonable to point out that Jones, unlike Keats, had chosen the life of a celibate and to have relationships with women that would not allow for the usual reciprocation of love or desire. This along with his veneration of the Virgin Mary would have formed a natural counterpoint for his idealisation of woman's form in statuary.

But there is more going on here. In order to clarify this greater point, it is worth turning to a passage concerning Attic statuary that is not concerned with female beauty:

Then's when the numbed and scurvied
 top-tree boy
grins, like the kouroi
from the straining top-stays:
Up she looms!
 three points on the starboard bow.
There's where her spear-flukes
 pharos for you

Hazel. E. Barnes, intr. Mary Warnock (London and New York: Routledge, 1969). This discussion does not refer to Lacan's theory of the gaze.

⁶² John Keats, The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958) 262.

day-star for the sea.

The caulked old triton of us

the master of us

he grins too:

pickled, old, pelagios.

(*Ana.* 96)

These are not (save, perhaps, for the great statue of Athena) figures held up for our admiration, or embodiments of a principle. Rather, they operate as keys to their culture. For David Jones is not really describing ancient sailors. He is certainly not describing what it is *like* to be an ancient sailor. Even the sailors' emotions are the stylized emotions of statues. We can imagine an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century academy painting of these statues aboard ship but not a life-like scene. But this is the point: these figures are there to show the health and state of their culture. They are not to be venerated like the older Korê: we are too late in the Spenglerian year for that. But they are still to be admired:

the god still is balanced

in the man-stones

but it's a nice thing

as near a thing as ever you saw.

(*Ana.* 94)

The figures are not characters in the usual sense. It is pointless to credit them with motivation or even motion.

There is a problem here as well as an apparent paradox. *Kunstwollen* would seek to locate the psychology of past makers of art. However, what is evinced here is not an interest in the direct portrayal of Ancient Greek psychology (the sailors, save for the odd word and the historical incidents of their voyage, sound much like all Jones's other sailors). Instead, the portrayal of statuary is used to

denote *Zeitgeist*. The whole passage has been introduced with a long description of two of Phidias's statues of Athena. The bronze Athena is a statue which is once again described as virginal: 'Virgo Potens' (*Ana.* 94.) Thus it is a new form of an old archetype and a key piece of interlace. The maternal virgin is here transformed into a war goddess, the pressures of interlace once again necessitating the confusion of accident with essence. But over and above that she stands for Greece. Worringer writes:

When . . . we know that in the Classical period sculpture, and more especially the plastic representation of ideal human beauty, was predominant, we have already discovered the *Leitmotif*, the fundamental principle of Greek art; we have found immediately the key which will reveal to us the inmost being of all other types of Greek art.⁶³

If this is the supreme expression of organic beauty for the Greeks, it is no surprise that after David Jones's earlier description of the Korê he should invoke the delights of the Gothic cathedral, the supreme expression of the Northern Will to Form.

We have already noted the parodic element in the make-up of 'The Lady of the Pool'. It is natural then that Elen Monica, the figure in the poem who most resembles a character and who is given something of her own history and subjectivity, should be a little less reverent in her vision of herself as statue. She takes on the royal 'we' in the manner of Eliza Doolittle's fantasies of grandeur (there is more than a little of *Pygmalion* in 'The Lady of the Pool') when she anachronistically envisages herself as Britannia:

We *are* a water-maid
fetch us a looking-glass!
a comb of narwhal ivory, a trident
and a bower anchor -
and the Tower Lion

⁶³ Wilhelm Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, ed. Herbert Read, (London: G.P. Puttnam, 1927) 88.

nor twisk his lasher.

(*Ana.* 145)

She goes on to describe herself in a way similar to the poem's later, highly serious, description of Guinevere:

No AEgis?

Why then, for where our marbly shoulders socket the swan-whites of our neck, and for our liliated front, knot and splice the best soft-laid three-quarter inch halliard-hemp . . .

(*Ana.* 145)

This comparison with Guinevere should deter us from attributing irony to this passage at the expense of other parts of the poem. This is merely the lighter side of something about which Jones was certainly very much in earnest. For even Elen Monica may be seen as a marmorealized (even if of her own playful volition) personification of a culture and a female principle.

The description of Guinevere in terms derived from statuary at first appears one of the strangest passages in The Anathemata. This is a passage whose import and background we can now begin properly to understand as the most sustained expression of Jones's conception of the statue, and specifically woman as statue:

Over other than all this, and excepting only these terminal forms, mantling the whole leaning column (which was the live base for these) covering for the most part the handsome, well-shaped Dalmatian tunic of gold stuff inter-threaded green (the stitched-on laticlaves kermes-dipt) that had beneath it the convenient, well-fitting, glossy under-gown of shining fire-stone, that hid all but entirely the long, bleached, well-adjusted, comfortable vest that sheathed immediately the breathing marble.

Habiting all and over all

from top to toe (almost)

ample and enfolding

in many various folds

with the many lights

plying variously on the folds

her wide *lacerna*.

(*Ana.* 202)

Here is flesh made stone. Jones has taken the Catullan device of describing a woman as a statue to greater extremes than any preceding writer. Here is a woman of 'breathing marble' who is miraculous, not because she will be restored to life and voice like Hermione in The Winter's Tale, but because she approaches the perfection of a statue.

The whole passage, of which I have only quoted part, may be conveniently, to borrow terms from Karl Popper, described as historicist rather than historical.⁶⁴ It depicts idealised movements in history as it idealises woman in the form of Guinevere. David Jones does append long footnotes on the subject of dress and refers the reader to the work of T.C. Lethbridge who is actually surprisingly brief in his speculations on the subject.⁶⁵ But this is the veneer of scholarship or scholasticism and punctilious attention to detail which diverts sceptical attention away from the fact that there are no Dark Age archaeological finds, nor probably ever will be, to support Jones's sumptuous vision. In Roman and immediately post-Roman times there were amalgams of Classical and Celtic art forms - the bearded Medusa of Aqua Sulis (Bath) being the most famous example. But David Jones's architecture belongs to the realm of an informed fantasy that would place even a living woman within its realm. Jones has created a grand transition between the Classical and Northern Will to Form.

The Arthurian period was the most legendary and last time of the (Celtic) British. Thus it held a particular importance for Jones which was disproportionate to its very limited artistic achievement.

⁶⁴ Karl Popper, The Open Society and its Enemies, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 1966) 2 Vols. Karl Popper, The Poverty of Historicism (London: Routledge, 1961).

⁶⁵ T.C. Lethbridge, Merlin's Island: An Essay on Britain in the Dark Ages (London: Methuen, 1948) 144-5.

But David Jones, fulfilling the dictums of Dawson and Spengler, has lovingly imagined a grand art of the Dark Ages which is full of promise for the Faustian springtime. David Jones further describes the church wherein worships Guinevere:

It's cold in West-chancels.

So, wholly super-pellissed of British wild-woods, the chryselephantine column (native the warm blood in the blue veins that vein the hidden marbles, the lifted abacus of native gold) leaned, and toward the Stone.

(*Ana.* 203)

'West Chancels' (the use of 'West' here is surely no accident) bring to mind the defining architecture of the Faustian West and of the Northern Will to Form, the cathedral; whilst the chryselaphantine column recalls the earlier splendours of Phidias's sculptures. The column is described like living flesh, the marbled flesh of Guinevere, a flesh so pale that 'the blue veins' appear, and these veins signify the pumping of an artistic and cultural life blood. This is a grand meeting of live cultures. The three cultures of The Decline of the West are present: the first two are gathered by the agency of the mass to witness the birth of the third, the Faustian West.

No wonder

the proud column

leaned

to such a board

even before the Magian handling and the Apollinian word . . .

(*Ana.* 204)

The column is again described as no longer upright, as in the Classical mode, but as inclining towards a more Faustian angle in this cultural synthesis, this pseudomorphosis of live forms. Given the nature of Spengler's idea of pseudomorphosis, which assumed the spirit of these forms had now passed from them, this should strike the reader as somewhat peculiar. But as a counterbalance to the cultural

sterility depicted in the architecture of contemporary 'civilization' at the opening of the poem it works well enough. A scheme which is fairly logical, though not strictly Spenglerian, may here be discerned in the context of the mass as the meeting place of Apollinian, Classical and Faustian.

Thus we return to Guinevere who embodies a meeting between the Classical and Apollinian and the Northern and Faustian in the presence of Magian ritual. Whilst Guinevere's marbled flesh may look back to the Classical, her clothes, though late Roman, are transformed into Gothic drapery as she becomes as much a Gothic as a Classical statue. The 'folds' of the 'enfolding' garment are repeatedly referred to. In order to understand the meaning of such drapery we must turn once more to Worringer:

The Gothic treatment of drapery shows us the stage where the factors of actuality counterbalance the elements of non-actuality: both are now equally developed but remain disconnected, unreconciled, in undisguised hybridism. . . . we can only speak really of the counterplay of face and drapery, for in these representations it is not the body which comes into contrast with the drapery: the conception of actuality is concentrated in all its intensity in the naturalistic treatment of the face. And with this superb naturalism, so faithful to actuality, is contrasted and counterbalanced the drapery which the Gothic artist made the focus of non-actuality, an artful chaos of violently agitated lines possessing an independent vitality and expressive power which in this connection are uncanny.⁶⁶

And thus the figure of Guinevere is poised between the abstract lines of emergent form and a naturalism of representation and gestures forward towards the Gothic whilst in Roman garb.

Aryans

The Anathemata repeatedly works on the basis of simple, and often simplistic, oppositions between culture and civilization, between male and female. Rome, like fascism, is presented in terms of the male and civilization whereas the defeated are presented (and this produces a sex-change in the

⁶⁶ Form in Gothic 65

presiding deities of the Celts) in terms of the female. Jones was abnormally close to his mother and had difficult relations with his father, especially over his conversion to Roman Catholicism. These factors, combined with his war experience and religious fervour, seem to have been at the root of his curious veneration of Woman.⁶⁷ However, though this may be a root cause of Jones's attitude, it is more enlightening to look to its intellectual, rather than psychological, background. Spengler's depiction of Woman as transcending history and man as destiny certainly has its part to play. But Aryan mythologies are also important.

Conventional learning at the time had it that:

There was a shift of interest from the womb upwards to the sun and the heavens It is typical of Indo-European religion that Zeus, a sky god, should rule the Greek pantheon. So it was the strong Indo-European element infused into our Beaker culture by the Battle-Axe warrior which gave its religion this skyward trend. We are witnessing the triumph of some more barbaric Zeus over the Ancient Earth Mother so dear to the Neolithic peasantry. . . .⁶⁸

Jacquetta Hawkes, writing in the Second World War, is careful with her vocabulary. These are 'Battle-Axe warriors' or 'Indo-Europeans', not 'Aryans': a word that had rapidly changed from being one of the most popular in archaeology and armchair anthropology to one rapidly expunged from the lexicon. Jones makes use of the word 'Aryan' or 'Arya' on three occasions in The Anathemata. The first occasion of its use is certainly racial, and is also very odd indeed. The word appears in a piece of narration told from the point of view of a peaceful matriarch in Italy confronted by a conventional horse-riding Aryan invader, who seems to be an early Roman, bringing masculine sky-gods and war. Yet it is her not him who is the Aryan: 'and his mantling horse-tail shadowed dark murex my fair Aryan shoulders' (*Ana.* 87). The invader's ruthless efficiency is detailed and a rape is hinted at, before Jones borrows Augustine's opinions upon empire:

⁶⁷ See Jonathan Miles and David Shiel, David Jones: The Maker Unmade (Bridgend: Seren, 1995) esp. 242-272.

⁶⁸ Christopher and Jacquetta Hawkes, Prehistoric Britain, Revised Edition, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948) 58-9.

West-star, hers and all!

brighting the hooped turn of his scapular-plates enough
to show his pelvic sway and the hunch on his robber's
shoulders. Though he was of the Clarissimi his aquila over
me was robbery.

'T's a great robbery

-is empire.

(*Ana.* 87-88)

One would expect Jones to portray the Aryans as bringers of sky-gods. Moreover, given the foreshadowing technique employed by Jones, one would equally expect this proto-fascist to be an Aryan. Yet Jones does not make him so.

One can only postulate why. Nevertheless, a number of solutions present themselves. It is important to note that the Celts along with the Anglo-Saxons speak an Indo-European tongue and thus, according to those prehistories inspired by Kossina, they are an 'Aryan' people. Through his immersion in Jessie Weston, Jones invested a good deal in Aryan race memories and continuing cults. From Ritual to Romance speculates that by 'linking the practices of Classical and Medieval times with the Folk-Customs of today, we recognise, through Von Schroeder's work, that the root of such belief and custom is embedded in a deeper stratum of Folk-tradition than we had hitherto realized, that it is, in fact, a heritage from the far-off past of the Aryan peoples.'⁶⁹ Jones makes much play of the fact that fisher kings and the rest are, whether figuratively or literally, 'in the blood'. But he is also interested in the non-Aryan proto-mythology of the earth mother, and in relating it to Christianity. Christopher Dawson writes of a developed agrarian cult:

At the root of it there lay the same cult of the Earth Mother which had obtained in more primitive times, but now there is added a second figure, that of her divine son and lover, who

⁶⁹ Jessie L. Weston, From Ritual to Romance (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1957) 28.

is the personification of the vegetative life of Nature, as seen in the trees and the harvest, in the growth of the field and the garden.⁷⁰

Jones uses this formulation as the culmination to his poem, both in his depictions of Christ as John Barleycorn and, very confusingly, 'Aryan' fertility rites and resurrected deities. Most specifically he writes at the opening of 'Sherthursday and Venus Day': He that was her son/ is now her lover' (*Ana.* 224). This mix is, even by the dubious lights of the scholarship of which Jones was so fond, a muddle. Jones bolsters the Celtic identification with female deities and opposes them to the stern male principle of other cultures, but, in so systematising one part of his the poem's constitutive mythology, he makes nonsense of another. Jones was obviously attracted to Aryan histories but was naturally wary of making them explicit, and he was sufficiently unenamoured of some of their features that he chose to rework them. Jones's system, which would give a coherence to the work, does not make sense. Hence positing the poem's unity upon it would be misguided.

The Matter of Britain:

Countermyths, Fascism and World War II

What is this writing about? I answer that it is about one's own 'thing', which *res* is unavoidably part and parcel of the Western Christian *res*, as inherited by a person whose perceptions are totally conditioned and limited by and dependent upon his being indigenous to this island. In this it is necessarily insular; within which insularity there are the further conditionings contingent upon his being a Londoner, of Welsh and English parentage, of Protestant upbringing, of Catholic subscription.

(*Ana.* 11)

As David Jones's remarks suggest, the content of The Anathemata is consciously predicated upon his birthright coupled with the grace of the Catholic church. In this sense, The Anathemata has far more

⁷⁰ Christopher Dawson, The Age of the Gods: A Study in the Origins of Culture in Prehistoric Europe and the Ancient East (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1933) 93.

claim to be the 'Tale of the Tribe' than The Cantos. The imaginative perimeters of Jones's work are circumscribed by geography, race, ethnicity and religion. It thus appears to fulfil the criteria for a national epic; albeit a national epic set against the background of Europe and owing much to Roman Catholicism. Jones's project, with its predilection for archaeology, philology, the collection of national myth, folklore and history, embodies all the central disciplines to emerge from the rise of nationalism in nineteenth century Europe. A.D. Smith, in a study of nationalism and ethnicity, observes:

Through our archaeological rediscoveries and interpretations we locate 'ourselves' and dignify 'our communities' by reference to an ancient pedigree and time-honoured environment. The material remains uncovered bring home to us as only tactile objects can, the physical immediacy of former eras and archaic peoples, lending vivid substance to the records of chronicles and epics. For a 'returning intelligentsia' bent on rediscovering its 'roots', this physical presence confirms on the ground its re-entry into a living past; for a secular intelligentsia . . . archaeology and philology provide the surest basis for their reconstructions.⁷¹

Certainly The Anthemata fits such a description. Not only does it celebrate a selective past but it is also engaged in finding the 'truth' of myth and legend. This further explains the wealth of footnotes and the parentheses, whether illuminating or exasperating, that punctuate the text and also the form of the legends disclosed. Whatever Jones's debt to Malory, the Arthurian material, especially that contained in 'Mabinog's Liturgy', is very different from that of the chivalric tradition from the middle ages through to Tennyson. Though it is a romanticised reconstruction, it is still a reconstruction arising from sources other than a strictly literary tradition. It seeks the stamp of authenticity and this may come closer to the essence of the 'anamnesis' that Jones seeks to evoke in the poem than any theological notion. Here is Jones's footnote defining 'anamnesis':

⁷¹ A.D. Smith, The Ethnic Origins of Nations (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 180-181.

Anamnesis. I take leave to remind the reader that this is a key-word in our deposits. The dictionary defines its general meaning as the recalling of things past'. But what is the nature of this particular recalling? I append the following quotation as being clear and to the point: 'It (anamnesis) is not quite easy to represent accurately in English, words like "remembrance" or "memorial" having for us a connotation of something *absent* which is only mentally recollected. But in the scriptures of both Old and New Testament *anamnesis* and the cognate verb have a sense of "recalling" or "representing" before God an event in the past so that it becomes *here and now operative by its effects*'.

(Ana. 205)

Jones has found religious terms to define what was, for the most part, a secular act: that of representing past events so that they once again became valid. For, if one extends the notion beyond the strictly biblical, it becomes a fairly precise description of the practice outlined by A.D. Smith.

Though Jones's work is anti-democratic and within the provenance of High Art, the project of The Anathemata entails the reworking of a heritage that originally fell outside its limits. Folk rhymes, folklore, folktales and songs are mixed with demotic tongues and unsung national histories into a highly literate and densely wrought work. In its highly idiosyncratic and indubitably modern way, The Anathemata belongs to a tradition of national revival and the synthetic antiquarian epic, from Ossian on. Yet its modernist difficulties, much more pronounced than those of the earlier In Parenthesis, place it far from the more populist voice we conventionally associate with a modern nationalist work. If The Anathemata is a national epic it is a very odd one indeed. Its Britain, though 'loved and known' by David Jones, is far from any current national myth or sense of identity. If one were to isolate key common factors producing a British identity as opposed to an English, Welsh, Scottish or Ulster identity, one would most naturally cite Protestantism, the British Empire, a democratic tradition, a shared experience of war and the threat of continental invasion and, perhaps, the monarchy and an early industrial revolution. The Anathemata is either opposed to, or at least unpreoccupied with, all of these. All such naturally cited factors have arisen from the time of the Tudors onward, the period which Jones erases from the history of The Anathemata, and are the glass

through which earlier British history was conventionally seen both by popular historians and the British people at the time of The Anathemata's composition. The Anathemata's national history is thus an oppositional one. Whereas In Parenthesis saw history through the particulars of a modern Anglo-Welsh community, the more generalised history of The Anathemata sets forth its own more general history. This counter-myth was rooted in a particular time, the Second World War and the years immediately following it, when a national identity was both at a premium and in the process of refashioning through a new sense of common purpose. This purpose, the defeat of fascism, was shared as little by Jones as was a sympathy for the socialist Britain that was to follow it. Thus, to understand Jones's oppositional history, we must first examine his attitude to fascism and the Second World War.

By seeing The Anathemata in its original context we begin to understand both its status as an oppositional work and the true nature of that opposition. The project of The Anathemata and those paintings of Jones's contemporaneous with it entailed the creating a counter-myth, a counter-iconography and a counter-language to those dominant at the time. Angus Calder has entitled a wide ranging and perceptive study The Myth of the Blitz.⁷² Calder writes:

My case for applying the word to the Blitz is that the account of that event, or series of events, which was current by the end of the war has assumed a 'traditional' character, involves heroes, suggests the victory of a good God over satanic evil, and has been used to explain a fact: the defeat of Nazism.⁷³

This new myth held no appeal for Jones who wrote in May of 1939 that:

Should this conflict come, it will not be an affair of morals, or the defence of civilization or the punishment of an aggressor, but rather an affair of supposed necessity and struggle for survival. That is why a sceptical attitude is necessary when any uplift is dragged into the

⁷² Angus Calder, The Myth of the Blitz (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991)

⁷³ The Myth of the Blitz 2.

argument. For any evil that war apologists can fling at the Axis Powers the Axis Powers can easily retaliate.⁷⁴

Though David Jones was 'as appalled as the most fervent anti-Nazi' at the atrocities of Auschwitz and Belsen, there is no evidence to suggest that he was ever substantially to change his mind.⁷⁵ The war was conceived by Jones in terms of a grand nihilism, a mutual fratricidal destruction. In 'Angle-Land' Jones, alluding to Malory, writes:

(O Balin O Balan!
how blood you both
the *Brudersee*
toward the last phase
of our dear West.)
(*Ana*. 115)

The depiction of these 'fratricides/of the latter-day', embroiled in an unyielding Spenglerian time scheme, appeals to the connection of blood between English and German (thus neatly coinciding with the Nazi's own racial analysis) to show the evil of this war.⁷⁶ But it also depicts it as inevitable, by placing it at the end of the Faustian West just as the previous conflict had been at the close of the Apollinian epoch.

⁷⁴ Unpublished essay (originally intended for publication in *The Tablet*) dated May 11th 1939, quoted in Thomas Dilworth, 'David Jones and Fascism', *Journal of Modern Literature* 13, 1 (1986), 149-162, essay quoted 153-158, 156. A typed note by Harman Grisewood on two copies of the essay in the Burns Library of Rare Books and Special Collections at Boston records that David Jones 'soon came to feel - we discussed the subject and the article a good deal at the time - that it was rash to write like this, even dangerous, because one would simply be thought of as a pro-Nazi and the merit of the remarks would not be considered objectively. So we had the piece duplicated and circulated among a few friends.' It is difficult to know quite how much weight to give an unpublished manuscript such as this. Yet Grisewood's remarks suggest that Jones's decision not to publish had more to do with the hostile reaction that the article would receive than 'the merit of the remarks'. Grisewood also writes that 'I considered including it in *Epoch and Artist* (1959) but on balance was against it. And so was David - for the same reasons as had caused one to feel at the time - six months before war broke out - that the observations in it would not get a fair hearing', 153.

⁷⁵ Harman Grisewood to Thomas Dilworth, letter, 10th August 1984, in 'David Jones and Fascism', 153.

⁷⁶ David Jones was not a pacifist. His objections to the war were on wholly different grounds.

In somewhat dubious taste, David Jones had explored the same notion in his painting 'Epiphany 1941: Britannia and Germania Embracing' (subtitled 'Sisters Two, what may we do') which depicts a Celtic Britannia (complete with antlers) embracing her Germanic counterpart against a ruinous background.⁷⁷ Like 'Angle-Land', it alludes to a previous conflict between a Germanic people and the Celts, who, one presumes, are consanguineous due to a shared status as Aryans, but it also contains the explicitly contemporary. Two ships (one of which is sinking), though drawn in the naive style of Alfred Wallis, are indisputably vessels of 1941. Thus they are analogous to the contemporary nautical references in 'Angle-Land':

the greyed green wastes that
they strictly grid
quadrate and number on the sea-green *Quadratkarte*
one eight six one G
for the fratricides
of the latter-day, from east-shore of Iceland
bis Norwegen . . .

(Ana. 115)

Julian Bell has described the painting as 'sexual fantasy serving an ornate apology for fascism'.⁷⁸ The sisters are engaged in lesbian embrace with broken spearheads, one of which is fashioned in the shape of a swastika, functioning as dildos. It is not hard to see either the symbolism or how such imagery could be deemed offensive. There is considerably more decorum in Jones's description of how 'all our easting waters. . .all mingle Rhenus-flow/ and are oned with him' (Ana. 114-5). Nevertheless, as with the subsequent description of Balin and Balan, the matter remains the same. Such a discourse could scarcely be anything but encoded.

⁷⁷ Reproduced in Paul Hills, *David Jones* (London: Tate Gallery, 1981) 110.

⁷⁸ Julian Bell, 'Moon Behind Clouds: The Wounded Vision of David Jones', *The Times Literary Supplement* April 5th 1996, 9-10, 10.

David Jones used the analogy of Wales to defend the actions of Hitler:

If the Welsh, for instance, can be said to be geographically, historically, economically, and politically part of the English sphere of control, the Czechs can equally be said to be, by the same accidents, part of the German sphere of control. If this seems far-fetched, it is only because we choose to apply different standards over this "sacredness of small nationalities" principle according to how it suits us and according to all kinds of necessities and accidents. . . . To continue the analogy, had the Welsh preserved their Catholic religion, and some vestige of political integrity, and had they established a contact with Ireland, and some sort of connection with a continental power, France for instance, then, even today it might be necessary for England to argue that the situation must be liquidated Geographical, historical, cultural, economic, political arguments would soon be found by the London Administration to explain the necessity of incorporating the Welsh people within the English lebensraum and sphere of control. . . .⁷⁹

By this analogy David Jones concluded 'that it is unwise and irrelevant to raise the moral issue'.⁸⁰ The spectacle of a romantic playing *realpolitik* is not edifying. However, Jones's analogy tells us much about the attitude that was to shape The Anathemata. David Jones had little love for a modern, Protestant, industrialised Wales. But a Catholic Wales, a Wales a good deal more like Yeats's backward Ireland, that he would have loved much more. His impression of the conflict is similar to that of his friend the Welsh Nationalist and fellow anti-industrial, arch-reactionary Catholic, Saunders Lewis, who cut short a debate on the 'second front' at Plaid Cymru's annual conference at Lampeter in December 1942 on the grounds that strategic questions such as this were of no concern to a party that simply opposed the war.⁸¹ Lewis's immediate successor as chairman of the party declared in August 1940, in terms of reference similar to Jones's, that:

⁷⁹ 'David Jones and Fascism' 156-7.

⁸⁰ 'David Jones and Fascism' 157.

⁸¹ Kenneth O. Morgan, The History of Wales - The Rebirth of a Nation. Wales: 1880-1980 (Oxford: Clarendon Press and Univeristy of Wales Press, 1981) 257.

this is a clash of rival imperialisms from which Wales, like the other small nations of Europe, has nothing to gain but everything to loose. . . It does not accept the popular English view that this war is a crusade of light against darkness. It does not admit the right of England to conscript Welshman into her army or regard it as the duty of Wales to help London beat Berlin.⁸²

This is analogous to the arguments in Jones's unpublished article and the sentiments in The Anathemata. Jones's romanticisation of the vanquished Welsh, his anti-war sentiments and such sympathy as he had for Nazism all share a similar perspective. The same is true of the 'anti-imperialism' of Jones, which is cited as mitigation for Jones's politics in Thomas Dilworth's article.⁸³ It is a nationalist anti-imperialism, but, though it shares much in common with that of the early leaders of Plaid Cwmru and with the neutral position of Ireland, it does not merely seek to distance itself from the conflict in order to further the interests of small nations.

Jones's anti-imperialism implies a moral equivalence between the British Empire and the fascists. This is true of his unpublished essay but also of The Anathemata. Throughout the work the depiction of Rome is often couched in the language of fascism but also in terms of the administration of a British protectorate:

It is the empty time
 after tiffin
and before his first stiff peg.
The fact-man, Europa's vicar
the Samnite of the Pontian gens
within the conditioned room
 sleeps on
secure under the tiffany.

⁸² The History of Wales - The Rebirth of a Nation 257.

⁸³ 'David Jones and Fascism' 150.

Of itself there is nothing exceptionable about this passage, which is similar to the writings contained within The Sleeping Lord in its anachronistic method and in its drawing on Jones's time in Palestine. However, its effect in a poem that regularly equates Rome and fascism is ambiguous in a way that may be merely confused (if one wants such extended parallels to work they should at least be consistent) or else may covertly continue Jones's argument of moral equivalence into his poetry.

Similar is the case of Jones's depiction of the Anglo-Saxons. The depiction of earlier invasions in terms derived from the Second World War was not an original one. It was only natural, in expectation of a German invasion, to think back to the last invasion of these isles by a Germanic people and to invasions that preceded it. The Neolithic revolution, for example, is described by Jaquetta Hawkes as having caused a 'perpetual demand for *lebensraum*'.⁸⁴ Her introduction notes how, as she wrote the book, she was often mindful of parallels between the previous invasions of Britain and that which was now threatened.⁸⁵ But for Hawkes and writers like her the use of the language of the Nazi threat to describe the past is little more than a rhetorical flourish. The Anathemata, with its Spenglerian historical framework, suggests deeper parallels. To Write of 'our Engle-raum in this Brut's Albion' (Ana. 164) suggests a shared original sin, in blood and history, and a moral as well as a cyclical historical equivalence between the past sins of the Germanic Anglo-Saxons against the Welsh and the present activities of the Nazis.

Thomas Dilworth asserts that the poetry 'he [David Jones] wrote during and after the Second World War is thoroughly and explicitly anti-totalitarian'.⁸⁶ This is far too sweeping a statement and the evidence which Dilworth gives to support his contention in relation to The Anathemata is thin. He cites two passages in The Anathemata which could be read as having modern parallels, both, predictably enough, from the Roman material in the book. He first contends that 'Tiberius Gracchus/ wept for the waste-land / and the end of the beginnings' (Ana. 89) refers to the murder of the socialist

⁸⁴ Prehistoric Britain 28.

⁸⁵ Prehistoric Britain 1-2.

⁸⁶ 'David Jones and Fascism' 150.

Giacomo Matteotti.⁸⁷ Dilworth's contention is not entirely implausible, and certainly worth bearing in mind when one reads the poem, but it is hardly a certain reference. The presence of Tiberius Gracchus is much more felicitously explained, as I have already noted, by reference to Spengler. Moreover, if Jones is making a reference, it is a surprising one since Jones, despite his love of the defeated, did not make a habit of grieving for socialists. Similarly Jones's depiction of Sejanus *may* refer to Ernest Rohm but it probably owes a good deal more to Paradise Regained. One could counter Dilworth with what may be coded endorsements of fascism, such as the lines:

Unless his two-edged gladius gain it
what tillage is there
for the *Volk*?

(*Ana.* 266)

This refers to apocalypse and perhaps to Piers Ploughman and perhaps to prehistory.⁸⁸ But it also stands disquietingly close to Jones's approval of Mein Kampf and the possibility of a steely bringing about of land reform and agrarianism. But be this as it may, to read The Anthemata as an explicitly pro- or anti- fascist work is often to miss the point. The history of The Anthemata is both so deterministic and so aestheticised that fascism is merely shown as a symptom of an inevitable cultural decline and deep seated Aryan or Germanic traits as we move into the age of the Caesars. Nevertheless, David Jones is quite explicit against the pursuit of the war against fascism. If it was 'dangerous' in May of 1939 to write that 'there is much in both the Fascist and Nazi revolutions that demand our understanding and sympathy', such a position, coupled with the belief that the Second World War was a futile exercise, was certainly not becoming any more popular during the period of The Anthemata's composition.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ 'David Jones and Fascism' 151.

⁸⁸ See Prehistoric Britain 88: 'A much more significant new weapon which the itinerants could put into the hands of the Urn men was a fine-double edged sword'.

⁸⁹ 'David Jones and Fascism' 155.

It is not certain to what extent David Jones persisted in his belief that Nazism and fascism represented 'for all their alarming characteristics an heroic attempt to cope with certain admitted corruptions in our civilization'.⁹⁰ But Jones used his fascination with fascism and the exercise of brutal military power in his poetry. The 'Ram' section (*Ana.* 176-8) of 'Keel, Ram, Stauros' was written on fascist stationary which Jones, Tom Burns and Harman Grisewood had purloined when drunk from the Italian embassy.⁹¹ It seems that Jones used the stationary not merely to 'entertain some of his friends and shock some others'.⁹² The section, which describes Roman siege warfare, by no means endorses fascism, yet it does equate it with the Roman empire, the phallus and a particular stage in the world order giving it a certain grand, nihilistic inevitability. But if we are looking for similarities between the mindset of The Anathemata and Nazism we should do better to look at the apologias for Jones's flirtation with fascism rather than those parts of the text in which Jones most explicitly evokes it. Harman Grisewood has written:

His natural sympathy was with the vanquished; that is obvious even to the most superficial reader of his work. . . . He was most eloquent, as is well-known, in his affection for the down trodden Welsh. But it was the Welsh as a vanquished people which attracted his sympathy. The Welsh of our own day were his brethren through their historic deviations rather than their contemporary characteristics. The Germans in Mein Kampf were also a vanquished people; and oppressed by exultant and tyrannous conquerors.⁹³

Commenting on The Dying Gaul, C.H. Sisson both noted Jones's 'dubious race romanticism' and observed that 'a Welshman as well as an Englishman, might doubt whether the continual brooding over the defeat-tradition of the Celts (curiously akin to the suicide-streak in romantic German nationalism) is altogether wholesome'.⁹⁴ Well they might. Jones had envisaged the triumph of the Nazis and the coming of another Roman age, not without some relish, in 1938.⁹⁵ The nature of

⁹⁰ 'David Jones and Fascism' 155.

⁹¹ Harman Grisewood, letter to Thomas Dilworth, 'David Jones and Fascism' 160-1.

⁹² 'David Jones and Fascism' 161.

⁹³ 'David Jones and Fascism' 161.

⁹⁴ C.H. Sisson, 'David Jones's Dying Gaul' in The Avoidance of Literature: Collected Essays ed. Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1978) 498-500, 500.

⁹⁵ The Dying Gaul 100.

Jones's grand despair, instead becoming of an historic actuality, became a part of Jones's counter-myth.

Hugh Kenner has observed that the ending of the Bible's spell on literature has led to 'curial homemade language such as David Jones was compelled to devise for his Anthemata, the public idiom by '52 having drifted so far from Victorian moorings that a theme once so comfortably Tennysonian as Christian mediation on "the matter of Britain" was no longer thinkable save in austere encoding.'⁹⁶ Neither the decline in the influence of the Bible on English literature nor the austere and encoded nature of The Anthemata can be denied. But we should be wary of making too direct a causal connection between the two. It is hardly tenable to suppose that a Christian meditation on 'the matter of Britain' had to be as austere as Jones's. Christian writers with a penchant for romance, the middle ages and the legendary such as C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and J.R.R. Tolkien produced works neither particularly obscure nor encoded. Writers on 'the matter of Britain' both during the war and in its immediate aftermath had a great popularity. Jones's preoccupation with both prehistory and architecture was shared with the wider British public. The Shell Guides had started publication in 1934 and were written by artists such as Paul Nash and John Piper whose modernist and romantic sensibilities had much in common with Jones. They reached a wide public eager to learn about the wide architectural heritage made accessible by motorised transport. Throughout the 1930's Methuen had published the County Archaeology series. The vogue for popular archaeology was met by the new King Penguin imprint which published Jacquetta and Christopher Hawkes' Prehistoric Britain, one of the chief sources for The Anthemata.⁹⁷ Still more popular were the displays of history and prehistory in The Festival of Britain at the end of the period of The Anthemata's composition. If we can detect a trend here, it is towards a more public and accessible voice for matters that may have previously appeared arcane. Thus The Anthemata may more rightly

⁹⁶ Hugh Kenner, A Sinking Island: The Modern English Writers (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988) 245.

⁹⁷ Jacquetta and Christopher Hawkes, Prehistoric Britain (Harmondsworth: King Penguin, 1944).

be perceived as a notable exception to a more general trend rather than as an example of the process in English letters identified by Kenner.⁹⁸

The greatest oratory and the greatest poetry of World War II, T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets and the speeches of Winston Churchill, have more in common than one might suppose. Consider Churchill on the subject of the growing co-operation between the British Empire and the United States of America:

For my own part, looking out upon the future, I do not view the process with any misgivings. I could not stop it if I wished; no one can stop it. Like the Mississippi, it just keeps rolling along. Let it roll. Let it roll on - full flood, inexorable, irresistible, benignant to broader lands and better days.⁹⁹

One may compare this with the depiction of that same river in a poem started in December of that year: 'The Dry Salvages'. Here the river also accrues a sonorous list of adjectives. It is a 'strong brown god - sullen, untamed and intractable':

implacable

Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder

Of what men choose to forget.¹⁰⁰

Whilst Churchill fashioned his oratory into what, at appropriate moments, could be considered poetry, T.S. Eliot was fashioning a poetry that came closer to public speech. And in that public speech, even in the Quartet whose ostensible subject is most removed from England, one can detect a rhetorical and imaginative consonance with Churchill's speeches and with the preoccupations of an embattled British people. The prayer that forms the fourth section of the poem, for example, calls to mind the

⁹⁸ See Margarate Garlake, "Between Paris and New York: Critical Constructions of Englishness c.1945-1960" in Art Criticism since 1900, ed. Malcolm Gee (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 180-195.

⁹⁹ Winston S. Churchill, The War Speeches, ed. C.Ende, 3 Vols., (London: Cassell, 1952) Vol I, 244.

¹⁰⁰ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 205.

perils faced by the Atlantic convoys. No poem which petitions prayer on behalf of 'Women who have seen their sons or husbands/ Setting forth, and not returning' could be considered unconcerned with the wider concerns of a war time audience.¹⁰¹

On June 4th 1940, Vita Sackville-West wrote to her husband Harold Nicolson M.P.:

I think that one of the reasons why one is stirred by his [Churchill's] phrases, is that one feels the whole massive backing of power and resolve behind them, like a great fortress: they are never words for words' sake.¹⁰²

Such a verdict is very different from the one which Neil Corcoran accords to 'Angle-Land': the section of The Anathemata which touches most explicitly upon the Second World War where 'the poem's true subject becomes its own mode of discourse'.¹⁰³ 'Words for words' sake' would hardly do after Dunkirk, when Churchill delivered the speech to which Sackville-West refers, when one man's words became communalised Speech Acts that exhorted and affirmed action to be taken:

Even though large tracts large of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender . . .¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Collected Poems 1900-1962 211.

¹⁰² Harold Nicholson, Diaries and Letters: 1939-1945, Vol. II ed. Nigel Nicholson (London: Collins, 1966-1968) Letter IV, 93-4.

¹⁰³ Song of Deeds 55

¹⁰⁴ Winston S.Churchill, Speech (Hansard), 4 June 1940, 3.40 p.m. in Martin Gilbert, The Churchill War Papers: Volume II Never Surrender, May 1940-December 1940 (London: Heinemann, 1994) 240-247, 247.

Churchill's language owes much to the style and cadences of the King James Bible as well as to some four centuries of English letters and speeches. His speeches were listened to by the majority of the adult population.¹⁰⁵ They evince none of the fragmentation of the language charted by Hugh Kenner.

If any modernist poem prior to The Anthemata can lay claim to the title of a Christian meditation on 'the matter of Britain', or at least the matter of England, it is the last and finest of Eliot's Four Quartets: 'Little Gidding'. Eliot's poetry charts the opposite course to that implied by Hugh Kenner's thesis. His own meditation has far less of the obscurity, the fragmentation of discourse, the forbidding encoded references and surface difficulties of The Waste Land and, of course, The Anthemata. Though Eliot did not command the huge audience of Churchill, he certainly became a more public poet keenly aware of the larger audience his poetry now commanded. Throughout the three wartime Quartets Eliot made increasing use of a third person plural to augment the meditative singular. Such a strategy certainly had its religious aspect and affinities with the Book of Common Prayer; but the emphatic 'We shall not cease from exploration' shares its rhetoric, whether through direct influence or common sources, with Churchill.¹⁰⁶ Such a rhetoric enabled an imagined unification, arising from a sense of shared feeling and objectives, which was not present in the fragmented polyphony of The Waste Land, the response of a non-participant to a world war and its aftermath, nor The Anthemata which was written under the same conditions.

Jones's 'curial homemade language' stands in direct opposition to any such embracing rhetoric. T.S. Eliot made much use of the dictionary in his composition of The Four Quartets. Such a practice sees a history naturally embodied in the language. For David Jones properly to express his counter-history he needed a language that would mirror it; for standard English assuredly does not incorporate Jones's conception of the history of Britain. Jones saw Britain and indeed 'the west' in terms of 'Germans, Latins, Celts' (footnote to *Ana.* 241). Yet the English language belies such racial and historical simplifications. Jones's language, with its profusion of loan words and uncontaminated philologies,

¹⁰⁵ On July 14th 1940, for example, the B.B.C. Listener Research Section reckoned that 64% of the adult population listened to Churchill's broadcast. See Henry Peeling, Winston Churchill (London: Macmillan, 1974) 478.

¹⁰⁶ Collected Poems: 1909-1962 222.

endeavours to create a tongue that does not exist. It is less a language imbued with history than a creation of history. It certainly has parallels with synthetic Scots, being a language artificially created in order to express a nationalist ethos, yet it is far more eccentric, for it lacks the natural constituency of Scots. The Anathemata makes a use of language of 'unshared backgrounds' in its profusion of technical vocabularies. Often these are employed in a far more dense and arcane manner than in the books from which they were culled, books which were nearly all intended for a general readership. This has a didactic and hieratic function, for the ability to read The Anathemata properly involves initiation into a particular version of history under the tutelage of David Jones. It is assuredly not the language of the common reader, nor the shared English of Eliot or Churchill, but of another nation. Similarly there is not the language of reasonableness or controlled argument we find in The Four Quartets. There are paratactic jumps in the text in the move from one exemplum to the next. There is also Jones's cavalier attitude to grammar which allows him a rhetoric that often relies on the absence of a main verb, a technique often allows Jones to give the flavour of austere pronouncement to passages of historical data that if written grammatically would seem prosaic.¹⁰⁷

In 'Little Gidding' 'History is now and England'.¹⁰⁸ The emphasis of The Anathemata is all upon 'then'. Though it reverses the mythic method, making past events foreshadow the future, like The Waste Land and, unlike In Parenthesis, The Anathemata repeatedly contrasts past and present either to the disadvantage of the past or as an expression of a tragic inevitability contained in grand

¹⁰⁷ For example, the description of Tiberius and Sejanus, with the addition of main verbs and suppressed connectives, reads as rather tedious prose and is better described as rhetoric than poetry (*Ana.* 186-187). A comparison with Milton soon disabuses one of the notion that such subject matter is inherently unpoetic:

This emperor hath no son, and now is old,
Old, and lascivious, and from Rome retired
To Caprae an island small but strong
On the Campanian shore, with purpose there
His horrid lusts in private to enjoy,
Committing to a wicked favourite
All public cares . . .

John Milton Paradise Regained, Book IV, l. 90-96, The Oxford Authors: John Milton, ed. S. Orgel and J. Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 656.

¹⁰⁸ Collected Poems: 1909-1962 222.

historical cycles. The vision of The Anthemata scarcely accords with Churchill when he declared with rhetorical flourish:

May it also be that the cause of civilization will be defended by the skill and devotion of a few thousand airmen? There has never been, I suppose, in all the history of war, such an opportunity for youth. The Knights of the Round Table, the Crusaders, all fall back into a prosaic past; not only distant but prosaic . . .¹⁰⁹

Such an attitude could scarcely be more different from that of Jones. His poetry is reserved for the heroes of the past. 'The helmeted airman' has no place in The Anthemata's scheme. Whilst In Parenthesis had managed, however much it looked to the past, to create a modern poetry of war, The Anthemata is engaged in the creation of a mythology that would counter both the elevation of the modern hero and the seamless continuity between present and past.

In December 1939 Sir Kenneth Clark, the most influential patron and promoter of David Jones's painting, formed the project 'Recording Britain', in which contemporary artists would document various buildings threatened by the war and by developers.¹¹⁰ It was supported by Herbert Read, who thought the project important enough to override his commitment to abstraction.¹¹¹ The project would provide a 'home front' to complement the works of official war artists. The paintings produced by the project were then to tour Britain where they could bolster the morale of a mass audience. Whilst the war artists, most notably Henry Moore and Paul Nash, were forging new registers for their neo-romantic art, the officially sanctioned register of 'Recording Britain' tended to look back towards the Georgian as it evoked the Britain that was being fought for. On June 25th 1942 The Times editorial mused upon the project's second exhibition:

¹⁰⁹ Speech, 4th June 1940.

¹¹⁰ David Mellor, Gill Saunders and Patrick Wright Recording Britain: A Pictorial Domesday of Pre-War Britain (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1990) 9.

¹¹¹ Recording Britain 7.

Topography, which means the delineation of the appearance of places, is an art that suits the English temperament admirably. . . . There is something matter of fact, yet sensitive, about the Englishman which results not only in his doing this sort of thing very well - as three centuries of the tradition have shown - but, when he is himself only a spectator of art, in his responding to it freely and spontaneously. Indeed to walk through the present exhibition is to have one's heart strings tugged, to wish oneself far enough from Trafalgar Square and to cry, with Rupert Brooke,

Εἴθε γένοιμην. . . would I were

In Granchester, in Granchester!¹¹²

This contribution to the debate on the essence of English art seems worlds away from the ruminations of Herbert Read and Unit 1, yet the most successful art to emerge from the exhibition was that of John Piper who was, with David Jones, the principal adherent of Worringerian aesthetics in British painting:

In his landmark essay of 1936, 'England's Early Sculptors', Piper reversed the Renaissance paradigm and placed the apogee of British art during a period of 'Celtic' supremacy, linear and rhythmical, from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, before the Fall into 'Humanisation and the age of sentiment'. For Piper, as for Read, the overwhelming influence in this re-structuring of British art was Wilhelm Worringer . . .¹¹³

Reconciling Worringer's and Read's aesthetics with the war effort, just as Eliot had reconciled his modernism with a poetry of place, was obviously not impossible. John Piper not only shared Jones's aesthetic preoccupations, he also shared his fascination with archaeology. However, in other ways they were very different. Piper, particularly in his role as co-editor of the Shell Guide series, was

¹¹² The Times June 25th 1942.

¹¹³ David Mellor, 'John Piper' in A Paradise Lost: The Neo-Romantic Imagination in Britain 1935-1955, ed. and with text by David Mellor (London: Lund Humphries and Barbican Art Gallery, 1987), 34-39, 38.

more democratic; he was interested in recording, preserving and making accessible a national heritage brought in reach by the motor car.

John Piper's love of Gothic churches led to his entering the Church of England at the beginning of the war. Such a move was of a piece with his embracing of the topographic. The continuing presence of church architecture could be seen to embody a reassuring continuity between the present and the past. The Anathemata's opening, with its depiction of 'sterile ornaments', 'pasteboard baldachins' and the rest (*Ana.* 49), predicates the opposite and inaugurates an anti-topographic poem, one which seeks to sever any such continuity. The buildings which the poem will celebrate belong to the past alone. The 'fiery stress/ *und* icy counter-drag' of the landscape of 'Rite and Fore-Time' inaugurates a Burkean sublime (*Ana.* 57). Such sublimity coupled with ceaseless transformation and 'West-*oppida*' and 'West-saga' was opposed both to topography and the intimate expression of England that was current in such writers and broadcasters as J.B. Priestley and George Orwell and the reaction against the sublime which was most elegantly summed up in Bertrand Russell's chapter on 'The Romantic Movement' in his History of Western Philosophy.¹¹⁴ The Anathemata's evocation in its first three books of oreogenesis, race histories, epic violences and the sublime are a counterblast to such formulations. Priestley, Orwell and others would propound the notion of the English (and, when they remembered, the British) being, as opposed to the Germans, a peace-loving, largely tolerant and down to earth people, in sympathy with the gentle contours of their rolling hills. There are no rolling hills in The Anathemata, whilst 'Angle-Land' seeks to give the lie to this, admittedly somewhat historically implausible, notion and to reconfigure England in a Germanic mode. It is only after the abrasive sublimity that fills so much of the first three books, that Jones can concentrate on his alternative versions of the intimate: Eb. Bradshaw, the maker, in 'Redriff' and Elen Monica, the lover, in 'The Lady of the Pool'. In describing Hitler, Jones wrote that 'compared to his opponents he is grand, but compared with the saints he is bloody. And I think I mean also by saints - lovers and all kinds of unifying makers'.¹¹⁵ It is as if Jones had to evoke the grand and bloody in his poetry, as he

¹¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946).

¹¹⁵ David Jones to Harman Grisewood, letter, 24 April 1939, in Dai Greatcoat, 93.

had hoped Hitler would in politics, to cleanse the impurities he found in modern civilization and usher in the saintly world he longed for.

The Skylon that towered over London's South Bank in the year preceding the publication of The Anthemata, though hardly 'utile', embodied a faith in modernity and the aspirations of post-war Britain that had recently embraced the socialism so inimicable to Jones. When he went to visit the exhibition of 'British Painting 1925-50', which contained nine of his works, he commented rather ungraciously: 'The Skylon I thought pathetic - neither amusing, nor elegant, nor impressive'.¹¹⁶ The exhibitions that stretched beneath it set out a popular vision of Britain's history which, though affected, like Jones's, by the growing interest in archaeology, was very different from that set out in the pages of The Anthemata. Even their ideas of fun clashed. Whilst young Britons escaped from post-war austerity by enjoying the Battersea funfair where they could defy gravity or win a cuddly toy, in 'The Lady of the Pool' David Jones was celebrating the past times of Merrie England, as detailed in John Stow's A Survey of London, where one could tilt at a quinten and win a peacock.¹¹⁷ Though David Jones may have been in no doubt, it is hard to see how one is any more real or worthy of celebration than the other.

If Jones was out of sympathy with wartime Britain, he certainly was no more in sympathy with its post-war manifestation. Nevertheless, it would be wrong in many respects to view David Jones as culturally isolated. He was a beneficiary of the new attention given to the arts whether by the newly formed Arts Council or by Penguin Books who included him in their Modern Painters series.¹¹⁸ Though Britain had changed, the world of arts and letters remained. Jones's friends Herbert Read, T.S. Eliot and Kenneth Clark all had considerable influence. Though Jones's outlook may not have been in tune with the times, his preoccupations remained fashionable. But Jones's embattled stance had a certain prescience, for the days of Modernism and Merrie England were soon to seem numbered. It was not long before a character in a most un-modernist novel would opine that:

¹¹⁶ David Jones to Charles Burns, letter, September 1951, in possession of Paul Burns. Quoted in David Jones: The Maker Unmade 242.

¹¹⁷ John Stow, A Survey of London, introduction and notes by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, reprinted from the text of 1603, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1908) 94.

¹¹⁸ Ironside, R., David Jones (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949).

Those who professed themselves unable to believe in the reality of human progress ought to cheer themselves up . . . by a short study of the Middle Ages. The hydrogen bomb, the South African Government, Chiang Kaishek, Senator McCarthy himself, would all seem a light price to pay for not being in the Middle Ages.¹¹⁹

The time elapsed between the publication of The Anathemata and that of Lucky Jim was less than two years, yet the gulf seems as wide as that between Merrie England, which according to Jim Dixon was 'about the most un-Merrie period in our history', and the celebrations on the South Bank. This gulf gives us some idea of how anachronistic Jones's brand of conservative, Catholic, Pre-Raphaelite, Modernism was becoming.¹²⁰

If the Modernist long poem was to continue in Britain, it would have to be considerably different to The Anathemata. Much in the poem was to date very quickly. Jones allowed his ruminations on the Piltdown Man to remain in reprintings of The Anathemata ('or did they emend a Piltdown use', *Ana.*, 61), so he presumably didn't think that a few factual errors did great damage to his overall enterprise. Still, he did go to great lengths to fashion a poetry that was as archaeologically and historically correct as it could be. One cannot imagine Jones allowing Cortez to be the first to glimpse the Pacific. Much of the prehistory of The Anathemata, especially since the advent of radio-carbon dating, is itself of merely historical interest, and hence must have a very dubious claim to revealing the truths about humankind that David Jones hoped it would. But such unavoidable errors merely make much of the matter seem arcane: Aryan race histories, overt race romanticism, a close adherence to Spengler and undertones of fascist sympathy combined to make the poem unpalatable. Moreover, its partial past with its great lacunae sits uneasily even with a nationalist agenda. David Jones refers to five hundred years of Welsh history only by the lines:

¹¹⁹ Kingsley Amis, Lucky Jim (London: Victor Gollancz, 1954) 88.

¹²⁰ Lucky Jim 231.

Before the slow estuarine alchemies had coal-blackened the green dryad-ways over the
fire-clayed seat-earth along the utile seams from Taff to Tâf.

(*Ana.* 72)

This is so peremptory as to be offensive to anyone who wishes to celebrate the Welsh nation. It also demonstrates Jones's failure in The Anathemata to incorporate the industrial revolution and its consequences into his poetry.

Concluding Remarks

'A, a, a, Domine Deus', the first poem of The Sleeping Lord, opens with the lines:

I said, Ah! what shall write?

I enquired up and down.

(He's tricked me before

with his manifold lurking-places.)¹²¹

David Jones was not to repeat the experiment of The Anathemata, and, though he remained adamant that it was his finest work, one can trace in Jones's later work a changing method that in its own way is tacitly critical of the poem. The Sleeping Lord makes use of an anachronistic historical technique to help overcome the yawning gap that had emerged between present and past in the earlier poem. It also employs a language which both avoids some of the austere rhetoric and paucity of main verbs in The Anathemata and which is considerably closer to standard English, with a few loan phrases, than to a created dialect. Its fragmented state also casts doubt on the unification Jones had tried to achieve in The Anathemata.

In many ways it is hard to disagree with Elizabeth Ward's conclusion that The Anathemata is 'a less successful work than either In Parenthesis or The Sleeping Lord collection'.¹²² There is much that

¹²¹ The Sleeping Lord 9.

¹²² David Jones: Mythmaker. 154

remains unsatisfactory in The Anthemata. There is a profusion of devices used to give the poem form and a unity of content; yet none is without its weaknesses or its contradictions. As a national epic the poem is partial to the point of perversity, an effect compounded by Jones's subscription to the idea of poetic impersonality, which gives even the most personal of histories the air of being objective. The embattled, oppositional nature of the poem and its writer's politics and sense of identity had placed a great gap between the poem and the nation and history it would nominally depict. As a more general history the poem, buoyed up by Spengler's cyclic history, seems hubristic. Herbert Read wrote of Finnegans Wake: 'Joyce was inspired by Vico's structural ideas in relation to history, not in relation to the structure of the book he was writing.'¹²³ Read's contention has considerable force when applied to Jones's use of Spengler. That history may have a narrative outside the poem does not necessarily give it one inside it. As often as not Spengler becomes merely a crutch on which to rest scraps of history that allude to a shape they do not themselves possess. Jones's use of Worringer and the idea of a Northern form also has its faults. At times it can allow the poem to drift into near formlessness. Herbert Read's strictures against the later work of Joyce and Beckett and their assumed similarity to Celtic ornament seem to apply best to his own pupil:

Always a vital word-play, a glimmering imagery, a sense of despair or loneliness or futility, but no forward movement, no organic growth, no dramatic tension, no resolution of a tragic destiny such as we find in the great literature of the past. The creative imagination of the poet sinks in a sea of words.¹²⁴

Yet, for all this, Jones had introduced aesthetics and subject matter into the British long poem that were rich in possibilities. Northern line remained a potent notion which would, in very different ways, inspire Bunting, and, through the influence of Jones and Bunting and to a much lesser extent, Hill. The relation of history to the artist, and the structuring of that history, particularly one that relates to visual form, is a concern that runs through Jones's successors into A Furnace. Similarly, the

¹²³ 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art' 43.

¹²⁴ 'The Limits of Permissiveness in Art' 47.

idea of an alternate national identity and history and an extensive use of archaeology would remain strong.

Thus The Anthemata defined many of the possibilities for a Modernist British long poem in England. Whilst American models would repeatedly look to 'space', Jones marked out a territory of historical depth. Like The Cantos, The Anthemata is a work that by both its achievement and its failings mapped out possibilities for those modernist long poems that would come after. The Anthemata undoubtedly contains much writing that is both innovative and accomplished, but perhaps its greatest legacy is contained in the writings of other poets who would take up the challenge of finding the unities which had eluded Jones.

CHAPTER THREE

BRIGGFLATTS

Narrative

The similarities between Briggflatts and The Anthemata are as pronounced as their differences. Basil Bunting claimed he had not read Jones at the time of writing Briggflatts.¹ This may strike the reader as surprising, for many poetic, aesthetic and historical preoccupations are common to both poems. The use of Taliesin and Aneurin, important to In Parenthesis and The Anthemata, provides only the most obvious examples. Both poems use subject matter drawn from the Dark Ages, describing saints, warriors and bards in a poetic that, though fragmented and modernist, owes much to Anglo-Saxon and occasionally Welsh poetic techniques. Herbert Read (who knew more about such things than most), writing of Briggflatts, referred to 'its nostalgia, its celebration of origins, of remote blood, of a natal landscape'.² He could have equally well been writing of The Anthemata. Read, in this early review of Briggflatts, concentrated his attention on sound and Heideggerian notions of presence. It is a pity that he did not comment on the preoccupation which the poem shared with and partly owed to Read himself. For, like The Anthemata, Briggflatts makes repeated reference to Northern ornament, particularly that of The Lindisfarne Gospels. When one adds to this the anti-industrial bias of the poem and its emphasis on an almost sacramental idea of craft, one might start to think that Briggflatts is merely a shorter, Northumbrian version of the earlier work. Such a view would be largely erroneous, but it would be understandable.

What does immediately set Briggflatts apart from The Anthemata is its subtitle. Briggflatts is 'An Autobiography For Peggy'.³ We may take it then that, however much Briggflatts may touch on other matters, the central concern of the poem is of Bunting's own life and his relationship with the dedicatee of the poem. If, reading the poem, we place too much emphasis elsewhere then either this subtitle is deceiving us or, more likely, we are deceiving ourselves. On the other hand, Briggflatts is

¹ Bunting wrote that he had 'never even heard of Jones until about 1967.' Basil Bunting, letter to C.D. Corcoran, 14th February 1977, Basil Bunting Archive, Durham.

² Herbert Read, 'Basil Bunting: Music or Meaning', Agenda, 4, nos. 5 and 6 (1966), 4-10.

³ Basil Bunting, Collected Poems (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1978) 38. References to this work hereafter are signified by the abbreviation *C.P.* followed by the page number in brackets.

far from being a straightforward autobiography. Bunting's notes to the poem point out that this is: 'not a record of fact. The first movement is no more a chronicle than the third. The truth of the poem is of another kind.' (C.P. 148) The reader who is looking for precise details of the poet's doings will have to look elsewhere.

Nevertheless, Briggflatts does tell a story, albeit a fragmented one, of young love laid aside, of wandering, poetic ambition, the discovery of humility, of homecoming and eventual consolation. This central tale sets Briggflatts apart from the majority of modernist long poems which, when not radically disjointed, tend to replace narrative with meta-narrative. The narrative structure that we do have may be used to elucidate those passages whose meaning might otherwise seem obscure. The poem's skeletal story may be seen as belonging to an autobiographical tradition with roots in St. Augustine's Confessions. More specifically, it is similar to that of Wordsworth's The Prelude. The poem appears to chronicle 'the growth of a poet's mind' and a journey from youthful innocence to adult dislocation from nature and, at last, the contentment an elder may find in the contemplation of the natural world.

If this narrative is itself a structuring device, one may reasonably view the images, digressions and interweaving narratives as offering both extrapolation from and comment upon the central autobiographical narrative. We would then be able to make certain autobiographical inferences about other parts of the text. For example, the gap between the character of the poet in the first and last two sections would then be bridged by the narrative of Alexander which would stand for not just the passing of years in Persia but also for the attainment of a certain wisdom and regard for nature. By reading Briggflatts in light of this autobiographical narrative we may also deduce how the significances that such apparently symbolic figures as rat, bull and mason have change throughout the poem.

All this points to a rather more intimate connection between the poet and poem than is the case with a good deal of modernist poetics, and causes difficulties for any reading which would place too great a

division between poem and poet. This is partly the problem addressed by Peter Quartermain in his essay 'Parataxis in Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky'.⁴ Quartermain observes:

The artist of paratactic imagination completely relinquishes control over the work once it is done, and over its reception. The paratactic writer is prepared to abandon whatever pretext and even pre-text there may have been for the work - the aims of the artist irrelevant once the work is finished. And in these terms, probably Bunting doesn't have a paratactic imagination, and Zukofsky probably does. For Bunting is in two minds about how he wants his work to be received.⁵

Quartermain goes on to quote the closing sentence of Bunting's A Note on Briggflatts: 'Let the images and events take care of themselves.'⁶ He then contrasts that declaration with the reasons Bunting gives for his writing of A Note on Briggflatts which include the exasperated:

I have been teased so much by people who cannot be content to listen without reasoning, and by people who think they can detect in the poem notions alien to it and sometimes repulsive to me that I will set down, if I can, some hint of its maker's mind.⁷

Quartermain proceeds to illuminate some of the problems attendant upon these sometimes apparent and sometimes real contradictions in Bunting's stated views. What Quartermain says is highly pertinent, but what he omits to mention is the fact that Briggflatts has in some respects a rather different status from Bunting's other work. By calling the poem 'an autobiography', Bunting placed Briggflatts in much closer relation to himself than any of his other poems, however autobiographical or didactic they might be. He, as it were, allows his signature to underwrite the events and, more particularly, the ideas expressed in the poem. We do not have the ambiguous mask of a Villon

⁴ Peter Quartermain, 'Parataxis in Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky' in Sharp Study and Long Toil, Durham University Journal (Special Issue), ed. R. Caddel and Peter Lewis, Durham 1995, 54-70.

⁵ 'Parataxis in Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky' 55.

⁶ Basil Bunting, A Note On Briggflatts (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, 1989) 6 (my pagination).

⁷ A Note on Briggflatts 3.

through which to view the poem. Bunting may be content to let the images look after themselves. But he is a good deal more cautious in looking after the ideas. The critic is left in a quandary. For a poem, and certainly not Briggflatts, seldom offers an unimpeded view of an idea. And whilst we often have access to Bunting's views on what he was trying to express, they do not always tally with the text of the finished poem.

Other Characters, Secondary Narratives

The technique of conflating of various characters from differing historical periods with shared attributes was one Bunting certainly learnt from Ezra Pound. In the Cantos, for example, Helen of Troy and Eleanor of Aquitaine meld into one another, as in the opening of Canto VII:

Eleanor (she spoiled in a British climate)
Ἐλανδροσ and Ἐλεπτολις, and
poor old Homer blind,
blind as a bat⁸

The technique is very similar to David Jones's description of the Kore in The Anathemata:

Is she Elêne Argive
or is she transalpine Eleanore
or our Gwenhwyfar
the Selenê of Thulê
West-Helen . . .⁹

There is, however, a difference between the two passages. In the passage from Jones, Helen and Eleanor are regarded as manifestations of the same essence: a certain part of 'the female principle.' Pound, in this early Canto, only links the two by attribute, they are both destroyers of cities and men.

⁸ Ezra Pound, The Cantos of Ezra Pound (London: Faber and Faber, 1985) 24.

⁹ David Jones, The Anathemata (London: Faber and Faber, 1952) 92.

Thus it could be seen as merely a form of analogy, linking disparate figures and periods within the poem.

Bunting's use of the technique in Briggflatts is generally closer to the example from Pound, though this is at times ambiguous. Alexander, Eric Bloodaxe, Aneurin and the poet share the attributes of ambition, restlessness and a warlike spirit. Their presentation shows both candid self-analysis and a certain pride on Bunting's part. In the Northumbrian section of the second movement the Bunting/Bloodaxe figure has a quality denied to the crew of the boat: 'Nothing he sees/ they see but hate and serve.' (C.P. 44) Similar but more pronounced is the depiction of Alexander's soldiers in the third section. Here Bunting's debt to the Pound of the Hell Cantos is evident. Both Bunting's personal enemies (Hugh Astor appears as Hastor) and more general capitalist shit-merchants are vilified. Capitalism and defecation are combined in bitter puns: 'Nor will unprofitable motion/ stir the stink that settles round him.'" The homesick desires that might elsewhere seem central to the poem are mercilessly pilloried:

But we desired Macedonia,
the rocky meadows, horses, barley pancakes,
incest and familiar games,
to end in our place by our own wars,
and deemed the peak unscaleable

(C.P. 50)

Alexander, in such company, cannot be other than heroic; and his heroism is in the grand Faustian manner. However, by using an Eastern source, Bunting removes Faustian striving from being a specifically Western attribute.

The episode is very loosely adapted from Ferdowsi's Persian epic Shahnameh, a fact not acknowledged by Bunting's notes to the poem. In Ferdowsi's original Eskander (Alexander) sees

Sarafil (his name is distorted from Esrafil, Bunting's Israfel, to fit the metre) who is the angel of death and herald of the day of judgement:

He saw Sarafil the trumpet in his hands/ His head raised from where he sat
His cheeks full of breath [lit. Wind], his eyes full of tears [lit. moisture]/ For when would the
command come of God come "Blow!"?
When on the mountain he saw Eskander's face/ He roared like growling thunder¹⁰

Esrafil then accuses Eskander of being a slave of greed and ambition, and rebukes him for his career. This rebuke remains only implicitly in Bunting's version of the tale. Elements which are in Briggflatts such as the journey up the mountainside and the details of the soldiers' behaviour, are absent from Ferdowsi.¹¹ These are the Faustian as well as Dantesque parts of the narrative.

The most intriguing feature that Bunting's and Ferdowsi's tales of Alexander share is the assumption that it is better to seek than to stay at home, even though that very seeking may lead to hubris and its inevitable result; an assumption emphasised by Briggflatts's comparison between Alexander and his soldiers. This notion causes certain problems from any who would wish to find a simple moral in Briggflatts. What makes Alexander heroic is his arrogance, his isolation, his contempt for home and the easy life, his failure to be 'content with beer and pickles' (C.P. 54). This is, of course, also the cause of Alexander's downfall. Alexander would not be Alexander if he, like the slowworm, had prospered 'lying low, little concerned.' (C.P. 51) Similarly, it is only 'the rebate' from death's taxation that can make Alexander aware of the natural order which he has forsaken.

Just as Bunting's Alexander has to struggle to rise, so too his fall is unattributable to any agent but himself. The first half of the third section appears then as a genuine counterweight to the Epicurean

¹⁰ Ferdowsi, Shahnameh, lines 1397-1399, translated by Dick Davis in a letter to the author. Dick Davis's letters also supplied some commentary on Ferdowsi's poem and some thoughts about its relationship to Bunting's work.

¹¹ It is worth noting the possibility that 'the morning star' (C.P. 51) may be an oblique reference to Lucifer and his rise and fall. If so, it would be an exception to the generally non-allusive method of Briggflatts, but entirely consonant with its themes.

vision of the natural order in its second half. This vision of natural order seems only to be achieved by striving against it and failing. Alexander offers a model which breaks with the Spenglerian stereotype of Faustian man; and this is important in a writer who claimed to dislike Spengler as much as Bunting did.¹² Much more in sympathy with it is Bunting's presentation of Eric Bloodaxe.

Whereas the tale of Alexander obviously belongs to the realm of myth and legend rather than to any recognisable history, the case of Eric Bloodaxe is somewhat more complex:

what weapon can the king lift to fight
when chance-met enemies employ sly
sword and shoulder-piercing pike,
pressed into the mire,
trampled and hewn till a knife
-in whose hand?-severs tight
neck cords?

(C.P. 46)

The hyphens that mark off the question, 'in whose hand?', are not without their significance and mark a rupture in the text. The question of who killed Bloodaxe is important as it appears to reach outside the poem. Whilst we cannot be certain as to who killed the historical Bloodaxe, there are sources which do give an answer to the question.

In his notes to Briggflatts Bunting writes of Bloodaxe: 'Piece his story together from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the Orkneyinga Saga, and Heimskringla, as you fancy.' (C.P. 149) These three sources do tell us a certain amount about the life of Bloodaxe but little about the manner of his death.¹³ To discover the manner and circumstance of his passing, it is necessary to turn to the chronicles of

¹² Bunting's dislike of Spengler will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹³ See Snorri Sturlason, Heimskringla: or The Lives of the Norse Kings, trans. Monsen and Smith, ed. Mosen (Cambridge: W.H. Heffer and Sons, 1932) 81. See also The Orkneyinga Saga, trans. Alexander Burt Taylor (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1938) 144-5.



Simeon of Durham and, in particular, Roger of Wendover. Roger of Wendover's entry for the annal of 950 does tell us 'in whose hand' the knife is. It also refers, unlike the other sources Bunting cites, to Stainmore:

King Eric was treacherously killed by Earl Maccus in a certain lonely place which is called Stainmore, with his son Haeric and his brother Ragnall, betrayed by Earl Oswulf; and then afterwards King Eadred ruled these districts.¹⁴

The rhetorical 'in whose hand' could then be answered - Earl Maccus. This puts the speculation on rather a different level to the:

long flight
from who knows what smile,
scowl, disgust or delight

(C.P. 47)

where no answers are available. Bunting writes: 'I am not troubled at all about the lack of historicity in my Bloodaxe - his role in the poem is enough in itself.' However, this is given the qualification: 'But I like to think it has some excuse in actual events. Certainly it seems compatible with what Stenton had worked out, so far as Stenton goes'.¹⁵ Bunting could indeed have come across all the relevant material from Wendover and Durham in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁶ Stenton's interpretation indeed seems to be the one in Briggflatts.

It is possible that Eric may have been attempting an invasion of his lost kingdom when Oswulf brought about his death, but a battle on the heights of Stainmore, where the Roman

¹⁴ English Historical Documents 1: c.500-1042, ed. Dorothy Whitelock, 2nd Edition (London and New York: Eyre Methuen) 284.

¹⁵ Basil Bunting, letter, 3rd Feb 1965, quoted by Peter Makin in Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 170.

¹⁶ F.M Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 3rd edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

road from Catterick to Carlisle drops into Edendale rather suggests the last stand of a deserted king on the border of his country.¹⁷

This tallies well with Bunting's account which incorporates both a certain historical scepticism and the notion of a doomed and isolated persistence on the part of Bloodaxe. Bloodaxe's chief status within the poem is parabolic: 'Eric has failed to admit his disaster in Norway' just as the poet 'has failed to admit his continuing love for the girl.'¹⁸ When Bunting's Bloodaxe and the historical Bloodaxe become confused, so too does the nature of the poem. For too much reference outside the narrative of the poem, too much historical detail, threatens to disrupt Bloodaxe's mythic status, calling to mind the similar problems encountered by Jones when he endeavoured to turn history into *mythus*.

Bloodaxe first appears in the opening movement of Briggflatts. The 'Copper-wire moustache,/ sea-reflecting eyes/ and Baltic plainsong speech' of, presumably, the mason declare that: 'By such rocks/ men killed Bloodaxe.'¹⁹ (C.P. 40)¹⁹ The violent death of the Viking is then recalled. The connection with Bloodaxe arises from the landscape, but also perhaps from shared northern blood. By the penultimate stanza of the movement, the poet and the Viking warlord have become very closely identified indeed.

Bloodaxe, king of York,
king of Dublin, king of Orkney.
Take no notice of tears;
let the stone to stand
over love laid aside lest
insufferable happiness impede

¹⁷ Anglo-Saxon England 362

¹⁸ Basil Bunting, letter, 18 May 1965, quoted by Peter Makin in Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse 170.

¹⁹ Some critics, for instance Peter Makin (Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse 132), identify this with the boy. This suggestion has a certain logic given the identification between Bloodaxe and the poet later in the poem. However, one may counter with the common sense observation that it seems a good deal more likely that a stone mason, rather than a boy of that age, had a 'copper-wire moustache'.

flight to Stainmore,
to trace
lark, mallet,
becks, flocks
and axe knocks.

(C.P 42.)

Eric Bloodaxe was not famed as a lover but as a merciless warrior, and to be described as cruel in such times was to be merciless indeed. The reader is left to ponder how 'insufferable happiness' can 'impede flight to Stainmore'. Keith Tuma, writing on the subject of Bunting's melancholy, notes:

Too often the conqueror renounces love, abandons happiness. Read in an autobiographical context, Bunting's bitter self reproach in this passage is obvious. We are indeed to notice the tears, the sacrifice of a possible happiness, ironically called "insufferable". What was he escaping in Northumbria except love? What was he running to except death?²⁰

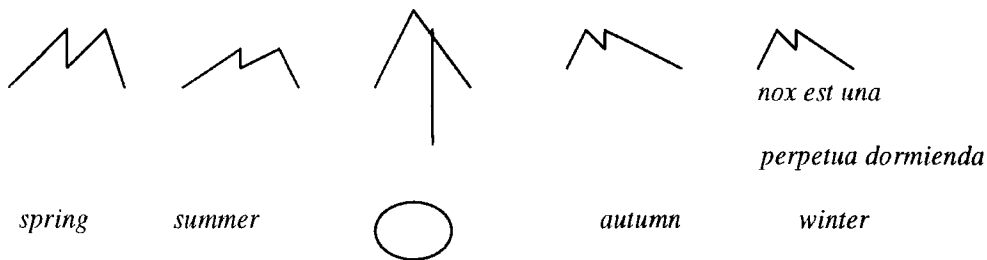
Bloodaxe becomes associated with an urging towards death and a melancholy that finds happiness insufferable, even though it is uncertain what, other than the satisfaction of his bloodlust or the ruling of his kingdoms, constituted his happiness. The Viking warrior becomes the poet's violent and melancholic alter ego. In this manner, we may interpret the character of Bloodaxe through reference to the main, autobiographical narrative, and find ways to interpret it that are more revealing than either reading the Bloodaxe episodes in isolation or as history

Structure

In contrast to The Anathemata, there is good, unambiguous evidence for conscious and very careful planning of Briggflatts. Much of this can and has been derived from Bunting's own writings and sayings. According to Bunting, he had an idea of the formal properties of the poem before he was

²⁰ Keith Tuma, 'Basil Bunting's Briggflatts and Melancholy' Contemporary Literature 34, 2 (1993), 266-292, 278.

aware of what it was to be about. He famously illustrated this to Peter Quatermain and Warren Tallman in 1970:²¹



Bunting explained:

You're going to have five parts because it's got to be an uneven number. So that the central one should be the one apex there. But what is new . . . was that instead of having one climax in the other parts you have two. In the first two the first climax is the less and another comes out of it when you're not expecting it. So you have it for those two. In the others the first climax is the greater and it trails off . . . If you add to that the Coda which came accidentally more or less . . . you've got the diagram of the whole poem.²²

Thus in Briggflatts form existed prior to content. To this form, which was a graph of the emotional climaxes of a poem of five movements, were added brief quotations, the most important being Catullus's 'nox est una perpetua dormienda', to encapsulate the mood of the piece. Basil Bunting also stated that 'the central part of the poem as I knew from the beginning was Alexander's interview with the Angel on top of the mountain.'²³ This was probably not true since Bunting wrote in January of 1965 that:

²¹ The following diagram is a (somewhat inexact) copy of that in 'Basil Bunting Talks about Briggflatts' in Agenda, 2, 1 (1978), 8-19, 15.

²² 'Basil Bunting Talks about Briggflatts' 9.

²³ 'Basil Bunting Talks about Briggflatts' 9.

I have at last got what I believe will prove a fair start of Part Three . . . in fact based on Firdausi's version of the Alexander legend, though at some remove. It was to have been a short episode in Part four [sic] but suddenly showed how it could expand to do just what I wanted for part three.²⁴

Nevertheless, the fact that Bunting remembered it as being at the centre of the poem from its inception says a good deal about the virtue he attributed to the planning of a long poem. Having a literal mountain top encounter at the centre of a graph of emotional climaxes that appears so mountainous on the page certainly has a logic to it that its placing elsewhere would not.

That said, the peaks of Briggflatts are far from being unambiguous. If Alexander's meeting with the angel is the highest point of the poem, it is also its lowest. In Bunting's poem Israfel remains silent, whilst the huge green bird, which in Ferdowsi's poem gives Alexander advice about the transitoriness of life and encourages him to seek wisdom and to live purely, is altogether absent. Since Biblical times the journey to the mountain top has been associated with the divine, as a place where mortals receive words from God or gods. Yet what is surprising is that Bunting's telling of the legend, save for the voices of the soldiers, is silent. Silence is, of course, a Quaker virtue, and one that Bunting esteemed, but there is more to this silence than that. In Briggflatts, it is not on the mountain that Alexander receives wisdom. It is after his fall that he hears the song of the slowworm. If the Mountain top is a climax, it is an hubristic one just as is the one climax that Bunting specifically refers to, the death of Eric Bloodaxe, in the second movement of the poem.²⁵ The climaxes of the poem, then, are also moments of failure, peaks as well as troughs; for Briggflatts is a work which questions conventional notions of exaltation and which mistrusts the sublime even as it presents it.

Bunting appended a season to the first two and last two movements of Briggflatts. The four seasons refer directly to stages of the poet's life. The scenes in each of the movements appear to take place in their appropriate seasons. This is obvious enough in the first, fourth and fifth movements of the

²⁴ Basil Bunting, Letter, 20 January 1965. Quoted in Peter Makin, Basil Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse 156.

²⁵ 'Basil Bunting Talks about Briggflatts' 14.

completed poem, less so in the second owing to its wide geographical spread. There is nothing in the poem to suggest that they refer to a more grandiose scheme of history comparable to the use of the Spenglerian year in The Anthemata. There is, however, an implicit circularity to the seasons not easily accorded to a man's life. Winter here may not lead to spring.

Bunting's Aesthetic Sensibility

Bunting's various dicta about poetics proceed from an aesthetic standpoint which holds that all the arts are interrelated:

I think all the arts can be used to illustrate each other. Rhythm can be as visible in space as it is audible in time; and symmetry, and proportion, are as discernible in time as they are in space.²⁶

This supposition is well described by Suzanne Langer:

It has lately become acceptable again to assert that all the arts are really just one "Art" with a capital A; that the apparent differences between painting and poetry, for instance, are superficial, due only to the difference of their materials. One artist paints with pigments, the other with words - or one speaks in rhyme, and one in images - and so forth. Dance is the language of gesture, drama is "really" a dithyramb, i.e. a chorus dance, architecture is (of course) frozen music.²⁷

As Langer intimates, such a view is not undisputed. Nevertheless it is a characteristic belief of the modernists. Bunting, like Yeats and Pound, believed that poetry, like all the arts, originated in the dance:

²⁶ Basil Bunting, 'The Codex', Newcastle University Lectures, transcribed by Peter Makin, Basil Bunting Archive, Durham, 6.

²⁷ Suzanne Langer, Problems of Art (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957) 75.

I don't need to elaborate, or to try to show how all the elements of music arise. The fundamental one is there, dictated by the human body doing what it is natural for it to do. Poetry must arise very similarly, from the grunts and cries of the dancers.²⁸

If the anthropology behind this is a little questionable, even more so are the aesthetic judgements it brings about. Bunting was of the opinion that the best poetry and music stay close to the dance. This might make a certain amount of sense as a general rule of thumb but it makes it hard to find reasons for preferring a Scarlatti Sonata to 'The Girl from Ipanema' or Ezra Pound to Edward Lear.

But it does provide a useful springboard for the relating of various arts to one another in Briggflatts. From the dancing bull and the river's madrigal onwards, Bunting repeatedly uses dance as a means of allowing the natural world to be linked to the ideal form of the arts. Briggflatts not only portrays the arts as being mimetic of nature but also sometimes shows the natural world being imitative of art:

It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti
condensed so much music into so few bars
with never a crabbed turn or congested cadence,
never a boast or a see-here; and stars and lakes
echo him and the copse drums out his measure

(C.P. 54)

Without necessarily postulating any neo-platonism on Bunting's part, one could say that this hints that great art is in tune with some sort of great dance or ultimate form of beauty which nature also copies. If this is the case, the links between the arts seem almost to be God given.

²⁸ Basil Bunting, 'The Codex' 6.

Myth and System

Bunting believed the arts to be united not only in origin but also in practice; that various properties remain common to all. Such common properties would best be found in works of a particular culture or period:

Giotto and Dante have much in common. There are passages in the Persian epic which call to mind, very vividly, the lovely miniature paintings made six centuries later in Persia.²⁹

This is the language of *Kunstgeschichte* and it sits a little uneasily with Bunting's avowed dislike of idealism and his animus toward Hegel and Spengler, though not with the thrust of most of the great art historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And one suspects that Bunting's idea of the dance partly functions as a pseudo-empirical basis for such speculation. From Burckhardt and Wolflin to Giedion and Pevsner, *Kunstgeschichte* has had a long and distinguished history in the study of aesthetics of art history. Bunting's words were delivered in a lecture of 1969, the same year as Ernest Gombrich's essay 'In Search of Cultural History'.³⁰ Gombrich's empiricism and anti-historicism are a good deal more rigorous than Bunting's own and should make us wary of taking Bunting always at his own estimation. What Gombrich writes of Burckhardt could equally well be written of Bunting:

It may appear outrageous to rank Burckhardt among the Hegelians, since he often expressed his dislike of Hegel's brand of philosophy. He always stressed that he distrusted systems and believed in facts. But I hope to show that Burckhardt here illustrates the important methodological truth that it is precisely those people who want to discard all 'preconceived' theories who are most likely to succumb unconsciously to their power.³¹

Bunting was more cautious with, and sometimes openly hostile to, many of the structural devices favoured by the modernists. The grand meta-narratives, the quasi-religious use of myths, the

²⁹ Basil Bunting, 'Thumps', *Sharp Study and Long Toil* 188-26, 19.

³⁰ E. H. Gombrich, 'In Search of Cultural History' (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) in E. H. Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols: Essays in History and Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979).

³¹ 'In Search of Cultural History' 35.

philosophical and historical schemes of High Modernism are all questioned by Bunting's prose. Whether Bunting's verse was ever fully able to distance itself from such examples is another question. Bunting's own position is clear enough from A Note on Briggflatts:

Yeats too [like Eliot] professed Plotinus, though his spirit seems nearer to that of Iamblichus. Pound took his gods from Ovid, close cousins to the gods of The Golden Bough, never truly pagan but spangles on a neo-Platonic chiffon. Both Pound and Yeats fancied the dreary notion of a history that repeats itself, not as the Buddhists see it, nor as Toynbee, but the cruder Spengler, and that too is part of the neo-Platonic outlook. Pound . . . was not averse to reason; much more a moralist than a metaphysician; yet the scheme of The Cantos rests in the mood of Spengler, even, but not consciously, in the mood of Hegel.³²

Neo-Platonism, Neo Hegelianism and grand mythologising, the staple diet of high modernism: all are dismissed. Spengler is singled out twice in almost as many sentences for Bunting's disapproval. However, it is one thing to state one's aversion to an influence and another to have freed your verse from it. That Bunting took the trouble to point out that his writing had no truck with such notions implies that a reader might be tempted into thinking that there is something in the text which could be misconstrued as Neo-Platonism, Spenglerianism or a grand order of myths. If Bunting's text had nothing reminiscent of such material, it would have been pointless for him to tell us that it owed nothing to them. Conversely, by writing this, Bunting reveals that such systems were an influence, if only one to be assiduously avoided.

The Waste Land and The Golden Bough provided David Jones with much of the impetus to write. Bunting's early verse, however, struggled against such influences. This is most apparent in his second Sonata 'Attis: or, Something Missing'. The title calls to mind The Golden Bough and its use by Eliot. The poem, which is loosely based on Catullus's 'Carmen' and Attis's self castration, has, at its best, the parodic zest of the Pound of 'The Lake Isle' and Homage to Sextus Propertius. But behind the lampooning and the aspersions cast on Eliot's masculinity there is a rather more serious

³² Basil Bunting, A Note on Briggflatts 5 (my pagination).

critique at work. This is not only that the use of such mythologies, and Frazer in particular, had by 1931 become somewhat hackneyed, but also that, in the words of Andrew Lawson, 'mythologising in the Eliot mould is. . . a removal and alienation from origins, a form of castration that celebrates a loss of potency in symbol-hunting frenzy'.³³ The poem first appeared in Louis Zukofsky's An "Objectivist's" Anthology of 1932. But it is less of an objectivist poem than an attack on the sort of poem Bunting and the objectivists were endeavouring to get away from. Bunting had his own interpretation of objectivism which he outlined in "Open Letter to Louis Zukofsky" in 1932.³⁴ It would be, above all, non-metaphysical: 'I never want a philosophy of hats, a metaphysical idea of hats' and would also take its cue from Pound's earlier Imagist pronouncements. That is, Bunting wanted a strongly empirical objectivism that would get away from the grand schemes of the elder modernists.

Andrew Lawson makes some interesting though questionable observations on Bunting's use of the myth of Pasiphae in *Briggflatts* which, if true, would call into question Bunting's own pronouncements:

Adolescent trauma and the fretful masculine labors of the poet are redeemed by nothing less than Zeus. The intricate cosmos is held together by mythical phallic potency, the source of all creation and metamorphosis: its one desire is to be impregnated by God. Bunting, like Pound in the Cantos and Williams in Paterson, redeems the life force from its dialectical implication in its soul-destroying opposite at the cost of identifying it with rape. Like his modernist masters, Bunting attempts to redeem history from its meaningless and arbitrary dispersal as fact by imputing an order of pattern and coherence which transcends history. But at the first climactic point of coherence and original force, of literally seminal identity, he becomes derivative of another master, a discredited and nearly forgotten father figure, Yeats.³⁵

³³ Andrew Lawson, 'Basil Bunting and English Modernism', Sagetrieb 9, 1 and 2 (1990), 95-121, 100.

³⁴ Basil Bunting, 'Open Letter to Louis Zukofsky' in 'Basil Bunting: obiter dicta' ed. Dale Regan, Basil Bunting: Man and Poet 230-289, 240-243.

³⁵ 'Basil Bunting and English Modernism' 113

Certainly the Pasiphae passage reads rather strangely:

men
driven by storm fret,
reminded of sweltering Crete
and Pasiphae's pungent sweat,
who heard the god-bull's feet
scattering sand,
breathed byre stink, yet stood
with expectant hand
to guide his seed to its soil;
nor did flesh flinch
distended by the brute
nor loaded spirit sink
till it had gloried in unlike creation.

(*C.P.* 48)

The bestial coitus is extremely unpleasant, but it is dubious that it is intended to function in quite the way Lawson suggests. First, this does not, strictly speaking, describe a rape. This is Robert Graves's synopsis of the standard tale:

But Poseidon, to avenge the affront offered him by Minos, made Pasiphaë fall in love with the white bull which had been withheld from sacrifice. She confided her unnatural passion to Daedalus Daedalus promised to help her, and built a hollow wooden cow, which he upholstered with a cow's hide, set on wheels concealed in its hooves, and pushed into the meadow near Gortys, where Poseidon's bull was grazing under the oaks among Minos's cows. Then, having shown Pasiphaë how to open the folding doors in the cow's back, and slip inside with her legs thrust down into its hindquarters, he discreetly retired.

Soon the white bull ambled up and mounted the cow, so that Pasiphaë had all her desire, and later gave birth to the Minotaur, a monster with a bull's head and human body.³⁶

Bunting may have changed the myth, which does not conventionally contain a 'god-bull', but there is no reason to suppose that he changed it as much as Lawson suggests. What matters for Bunting is that Pasiphae was a willing partner:

Those fail who try to force their destiny, like Eric; but those who are resolute to submit, like my version of Pasiphae, may bring something new to birth, be it only a monster.³⁷

This is all tied up with Bunting's idea of fate which, unlike divine redemption, is a central feature of Briggflatts. What Pasiphae's bestiality ultimately brings about is the creation of the Labyrinth. This is only the last of many mazes in the second section of the poem, whether belonging to Schoenberg or the Lindisfarne gospels. Though one could certainly make observations about Bunting's strange exultation in this perversion, there is little to support the pivotal importance which Lawson gives it in the poem.

When Agenda wrote to Bunting asking for his views on myths in poetry he replied with a short letter:

Your summer number will surely turn into an argument about what the devil does 'myth' mean. Since it does not seem to mean anything very particular, I fancy that will prove unpopular.

The function Homer performed for Greek poets was performed for 3 centuries for English poets by the Bible. But since the Church of E. has now translated it from English into journalese, and since nobody reads it any more (audiences don't even seem to be familiar

³⁶ Robert Graves, The Greek Myths (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960) Vol. I, 293.

³⁷ Basil Bunting, A Note on Briggflatts 3.

with the adventures of King David) there doesn't seem to be anything tangible we could attach the word 'myth' to.³⁸

Obviously Bunting did not have quite such an attachment to the 'myth kitty' as David Jones did. We can reasonably conclude that the tale of Pasiphae is meant to function at no 'deeper' a mythic level than the other legends-cum-parables within the poem which may be regarded as signifying meaning rather than, as is often the case in Jones, embodying a meaning in themselves. They point toward, continue and elucidate themes that are within the poem. They are not however, the poem's meaning or a way of discerning lasting religious significance in the modern world.

The parabolic element that most typifies the characters and symbols of Briggflatts is not necessarily straightforward. Because of the concision of Bunting's style, and because of his inconsistency in his employment of symbols (sometimes an object or animal is symbolic, sometimes not), some of the meanings Bunting wished to incorporate in Briggflatts are by no means clear from the text alone:

Lice in its seams despise the jacket shrunk to the world's core,
crawl with toil to glimpse
from its shoulder walls of flame which could they reach
they'd crackle like popcorn in a skillet.

(C.P. 54)

Peter Makin chooses to interpret these lines through the medium of one of Bunting's letters. According to Bunting: 'The lice on the brocaded jacket, of course, are those who can enjoy and understand nothing because they are determined not to look at the world itself.'³⁹ In the final version of the poem there is no 'of course' about the lines at all. What Bunting seems to have intended is an anti-platonic parable. Lice, like certain human beings, should be content to enjoy beauty around them rather than striving to escape it for some higher form of experience, which, if they attained it, would

³⁸ Basil Bunting, Letter to William Cookson, 12th May 1977, Agenda 15, 2-3 (1977), 11.

³⁹ Basil Bunting, Letter 18 May 1965. Quoted by Peter Makin in Bunting: the Shaping of his Verse 269.

only kill them. Yet in the finished poem the brocade is gone, there is nothing special about this jacket other than that it is 'shrunk to the world's core', a phrase that defies easy exegesis. Moreover, at various points throughout the poem, as with the maggots or 'gentles' in the fifth movement the reader is confronted by images from the natural world which suggest nothing else but their own beauty. Why except by the hint of the unusual description of the shrunken jacket, should the reader not so interpret the lice? Bunting may give the 'correct' interpretation to those who read his letters, or books which cite them. It is a moot point if his poems always do. Even as Bunting's poetry seeks to attack neo-platonism, it keeps its own hidden truths. It leaves the poetry of facts as a distant ideal, the thing in itself as illusory as ever. If Briggflatts is an anti-neo-platonic text, and there are grounds for believing it was intended to be so, it certainly isn't clearly so.

Music

According to Louis Zukofsky's 'Preface' to An "Objectivists" Anthology, a poem is 'a context associated with "musical" shape, musical with quotation marks since it is not of notes as music, but of words more variable than variable, and used outside as well as within the context with communicative reference.'⁴⁰ This notion of musical shape also present in Bunting, principally refers to the music of prosody. But for Bunting, as indeed for Zukofsky, the principles of musical construction held wider possibilities for the structuring of a long poem.

Scarlatti's B minor Fugato was particularly in Bunting's mind when he wrote Briggflatts (it was to accompany Bunting's readings of the fourth section of the poem) but the notion of Sonata form had been a feature of all Bunting's longer works save 'Chomei At Toyama'.⁴¹ Bunting's models were principally John Christian Bach and Domenico Scarlatti. From them he derived the notion of binary

⁴⁰ Louis Zukofsky, 'Preface' to An "Objectivists" Anthology, ed. Louis Zukofsky, (New York: Le Beausset, 1932) 16.

⁴¹ The examination of music, and particularly sonata form in Bunting's poetry has been extensively treated in David M. Gordon's 'The Structure of Bunting's Sonatas' in Basil Bunting: Man and Poet (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1980) 107-124; Victoria Forde, Music and Meaning in The Poetry of Basil Bunting, Ph.D. thesis, University of Notre Dame, 1973; Anthony Suter, 'Musical Structure in the Poetry of Basil Bunting'; Agenda 16, 1(1978), 46-54 and Peter Makin, Bunting: the Shaping of his Verse esp, 238-265 and 341-343. Owing to these wide-ranging discussions, there will be less discussion of the place of music in Bunting's verse than might otherwise be accorded to such an important topic.

form which would move through various keys with a return in the last moment to the key of the first.

Bunting admitted that:

I think that right from the start I did have things which had some of the simplicity of the Italian stuff without having its skill; and at the end I probably got something which has got the skill of the early Italian stuff, but perhaps not the simplicity.⁴²

Bunting's poetry outgrew the straightjacket of the sonata form employed in his earlier work. Bunting had expanded not only the number of movements in his long poems but also the number of themes. There simply are not just two major themes to be resolved in Briggflatts. To find only two one would have to be deliberately vague in one's choice of the categorisation of principle themes and thus untrue to the poem's complexity. This is clear from the attempts critics have made to find two such principle contradictory themes that may be harmonised. Peter Makin, plausibly enough, suggests growth and decay.⁴³ Charles Tomlinson suggests then and now.⁴⁴ David M. Gordon enumerates the themes in the various movements of the poems: the first theme being 'A Vision that Fades', the second, 'Life v. Art', the third, 'Violence v. Sympathy', the fourth, 'Return to the first theme: Vision Reconciled in the Modern World' and the fifth movement being 'Nature and Art Reconciled'.⁴⁵ A synthesis of such readings would give us a structure in which emphatically plural themes are determined by the tenor of each of the poem's movements. These themes would ultimately be returned to, and presumably resolved, at the close of the poem.

The connection between growth and decay which was apparent in the third stanza of the first movement ('Decay thrusts the blade' (*C.P.* 39)), will be accepted and resolved in the poet's consciousness in a vision of beauty:

Let bass sleep, gentles

⁴² Dale Reagan, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting' Montemora 3 (1977), 66-80, 74.

⁴³ Bunting: the Shaping of his Verse 259.

⁴⁴ Charles Tomlinson, 'Experience into Music: The Poetry of Basil Bunting', Agenda, IV, 5 and 6, 11-17 (Autumn 1966), 15.

⁴⁵ David M. Gordon, 'The Structure of Bunting's Sonatas'.

brisk, skim-grey,
group a nosegay
jostling on cast flesh,
frisk and compose decay
to side shot with flame,
unresting bluebottle wing.

(C.P. 56.)

According to such a scheme 'then' and 'now', will, by the agency of starlight, reach a final resolution in the words 'Then is now' (C.P. 58). The gap between art and nature will vanish:

Silver blades of surf
fall crisp on rustling grit,
shaping the shore as a mason
fondles and shapes his stone.

(C.P. 57)

And love loss, death and life would similarly be accorded some sort of cadential resolve as the poet, following Catullus, declares:

I had day enough.
For love uninterrupted night.

(C.P. 58)

If we read the poem back from such cadences the development of the thematic side of the musical analogy is clear enough. Their modulations through the poem with each mood or key derived from a season and phase of the poet's life and their personifications in such figures as the mason thus appear to show a control of their development which has a consistency paralleled only by Four Quartets.

But, unlike Four Quartets, Briggflatts does not end on such a note of resolution. This is clear on a closer examination of the last two sentences of the fifth movement. Instead of a firm declaration such as 'Then is now' there is the peculiar intrusion of a full stop that interrupts what might seem the natural flow of clauses. Without the full stop we can perhaps have resolution. With it we certainly do not have what could be called a perfect cadence. What might have seemed a simple acceptance of death through the acknowledgement of life's past fullness is, on reflection, an extremely ambiguous and paratactic statement that resists any certain exegesis. 'I had day enough' for what? Not necessarily for love uninterrupted night. And what of the pluperfect? Did Bunting once have day enough but now have it no longer? Is the expression one less of satisfaction at the fullness of life as of disenchantment? By emphasizing the syntactic rupture brought about by the full stop, 'uninterrupted' could be thought of as a verb. Did love once not interrupt night? Is this no longer the case? The previous few lines would seem to suggest that a reading which detects a certain restless melancholia has at least as much claim on our attention as one which finds a satisfied harmony:

Fifty years a letter unanswered;
a visit postponed for fifty years.

She has been with me fifty years.

Starlight quivers.

(C.P. 58)

The visit seems now to have taken place.⁴⁶ Perhaps it is this which brings about the ambiguities in the verb(s) of the last two sentences. If these are cadences, they are far from being perfect.

⁴⁶ This would accord with what we know of Bunting's biography. According to Denis Goacher 'He had, I believe, met up with the first love of his life, and that had caused a great deal of - upset - I gather, because the husband was extremely jealous.' Denis Goacher, 'Denis Goacher Talks about Basil Bunting', ed. Diana Collecott, in Sharp Study and Long Toil 195-207, 199.

Moreover, even though a Coda is an accepted occasional extra in the sonata, Bunting's use of it causes further difficulties for critics who see the formal success of the poem in terms of musical resolution and closure.⁴⁷ David M. Gordon does not even mention the Coda. One can understand why, for its existence radically disturbs the careful cadences that he finds in the preceding movement. Instead, it ends the poem upon a note of restless, unappeased activity where knowledge is replaced by uncertainty.

A strong song tows
us, long earsick.
Blind, we follow
rain slant, spray flick
to fields we do not know.

Night, float us.
Offshore wind, shout,
ask the sea
what's lost, what's left,
what horn sunk,
what crown adrift.

Where we are who knows
of kings who sup
while day fails? Who,
swinging his axe

⁴⁷ According to Bunting, the Coda was not originally intended as a part of *Briggflatts*: 'As for the Coda, you will never believe it, but this is the truth. I'd written three-quarters of *Briggflatts*, was busy in fact on the last part, when I had to turn over papers on my desk to get something for the bloody income tax commissioners, and on the back of an old bill I found a poem that I'd written long before and forgotten when I wrote it, which required three or four lines cut out, and with those three or four lines cut out it was the Coda, and was obviously a part of *Briggflatts*.' 'Basil Bunting Talks about *Briggflatts*' 14. Whatever serendipity occasioned the Coda's inclusion, the important fact is that Bunting chose to include it and that it is obviously meant to function as an integral part of the poem.

to fell kings, guesses

where we go?

(C.P. 59)

The restless wanderings of the poem had seemed settled. But, like Odysseus's stay in Ithaca, this is only a brief respite from an endless voyaging that may never cease save in the, possibly Elysian, 'fields we do not know.' The northern seafaring of earlier parts of the poem with their obvious connections to Anglo Saxon poetry has returned. Read back into the poem it unsettles the formal harmony of the Sonata and hints that all resolution and rest may be, at least in part, illusory. Why did Bunting feel that the Coda 'was obviously a part of Briggflatts'?⁴⁸ The answer to this, as to the double nature of the fifth movement, seems to lie in a conception of form different to that which is embodied in the main construction of the sonata. And that notion of form does not derive from music at all but, as we shall discover, from line.

Lucretius

Of Bunting's philosophical masters, it is Lucretius who has most to say on the subject of melancholy:

If only human beings, just as they seem to feel a weight in their minds that wears them out with its heaviness, could also grasp the causes of this and know from what origin such a great mountain of ill stands on their chest, they would hardly lead their lives as we now often see them do, ignorant of what they really want, and always seeking a change of place as if they could put down their burden. Here's a man who often goes outside, leaving his house because he is tired of being home. Just as suddenly he turns back, since he feels no better outdoors. He rushes off in haste to his country house, bringing his slaves, as if the house were burning down and he had to bring help; he turns back again, as soon as he touches the threshold; or heavy, he seeks forgetfulness in sleep; or, in full haste, he charges back to the city. Thus each person flees himself. But in spite of all his efforts he clings to that self,

⁴⁸ 'Basil Bunting Talks about Briggflatts' 14.

which we know he can never succeed in escaping, and hates it - all because he is sick and does not know the cause of his sickness.⁴⁹

This melancholic behaviour, according Lucretius, arises from a failure of self diagnosis which comes about on account of a failure follow the prescriptions of Epicurus and, in particular, from a failure to accept death.

Keith Tuma, writing on the subject of Lucretius and Bunting's melancholy, makes a quick leap to another subject: 'In Lucretius's description of a typical Roman gentleman we have one of the first diagnoses of the restlessness and the perpetual wandering that constitute the plot of so much "melancholy" literature, especially among Celtic and northern European peoples.'⁵⁰ If there is truth in this generalisation, one suspects that the northern tendency to melancholy might be due more to a mixture of Protestantism, long nights and the cold than any northern *geist*. The chief authority for Tuma's pronouncements on melancholy is Julia Kristeva. What little she writes in Black Sun of the connection between individual peoples and melancholy is a little more circumspect, though not without its sweeping generalisations:

Nevertheless, melancholia is not French. The rigour of Protestantism or the matriarchal weight of Christian orthodoxy admits more readily to a complicity with the grieving person when it does not beckon him or her into *delectatio morosa*. While it is true that the French Middle Ages rendered sadness by means of delicate tropes, the Gallic, renascent, enlightened tone tended toward levity, eroticism and rhetoric rather than nihilism. Pascal, Rousseau, and Nerval cut a sorry figure - and they stand as exceptions.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, l. 1053-1070, trans. Martha C. Nussbaum in Martha C. Nussbaum, The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 197-8. Where possible I have chosen to use Nussbaum's translation. This naturally accords with the particular interpretation which she places on Lucretius's text.

⁵⁰ Keith Tuma, 'Basil Bunting's Briggflatts and Melancholy' 271.

⁵¹ Julia Kristeva, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 6.

Julia Kristeva's poststructuralist French nationalism is somewhat impressionistic but she, like Tuma, believes melancholia to be less an integral part of the human condition than a condition of certain peoples. It is possible to see in Briggflatts a tacit acceptance of such generalisations, and a depiction of melancholia as a particularly northern trait. After all, Briggflatts is full of melancholy northerners (Alexander being a partial exception) and not Romans. This is so despite the fact that Bunting's earlier poetry drew on a much wider tradition of melancholy from Homer's Bellerophon on.⁵² Nevertheless, if Lucretius is an important influence on Briggflatts, which is undoubtedly the case, he seems to have a rather different status in regard to melancholy than the northerners merely afflicted by it.

For Lucretius, melancholy is not a tragic and unavoidable part of the human condition but rather a malady that must be cured, and it is this that marks Lucretius's influence out upon Briggflatts. Basil Bunting wrote in letter to Peter Makin:

by referring to it [the Lucretius "flaming walls" passage] merely as a "Latin tag" you lose quite a bit - the appeal to Epicurus, who was very like the slow-worm [sic], unassuming, pacific, free of folly (and exceedingly kind) for all his intellectual sophistication'; '[accidie] is a sin I feel myself much inclined to, to be cured or nullified by the epicurean slowworm rather than by Alexander's heroics, though both have a place.'⁵³

Bunting's motto or tag for the third movement was 'processit longe flammantia moenia mundi'. As Bunting's gloss indicates, this does not strictly refer, as one might suspect, to Alexander who advances beyond where:

Banners purple and green flash from its walls,
pennants of red, orange blotched pale on blue,

⁵² Basil Bunting, 'The Well of Lycopolis' (C.P. 21). For a discussion of Bunting and *accidie* see Peter Makin, Bunting: the Shaping of his Verse 91-5 and Keith Tuma, 'Basil Bunting's Briggflatts and Melancholy' 271-276.

⁵³ Basil Bunting, Letter to Peter Makin, 3rd December, 1984. Quoted in Bunting: the Shaping of his Verse 155.

glimmer of ancient arms
to pen and protect mankind.

(C.P. 50)

Instead the line retains its initial sense from Lucretius's paean to Epicurus:

Therefore the keen force of his mind conquered, and he advanced beyond the blazing walls of the universe and traversed and brought back to us the account of what can arise and what cannot, and by what rational principle each thing has its power bounded, and its deep-set boundary stone. Therefore religion is abased and trampled underfoot, and he makes us, with his victory, equal to the heavens.⁵⁴

Epicurus hardly seems so 'unassuming' here. He is described as god-like because he allowed men to overcome their fear of death and so become as the immortals. Martha Nussbaum glosses this with the observation that: 'The true Epicurean learns nature's boundaries; at the same time, she is enabled, by Epicurus' victory, to move beyond them.'⁵⁵

The original ambiguity in the Latin tag is reinforced when we return it to its original context. Alexander on a god-like quest despite his impending death and the Epicurean are perhaps a good deal closer than we might have thought.⁵⁶ If we make the reasonable, and now standard, assumption that 'he' refers to Alexander throughout the third movement of the poem, what is it that Alexander learns? The poem doesn't explicitly tell us much, but the slowworm declares: 'I prosper/ lying low, little concerned'. A delight in simple pleasures is expressed, for the slowworm has slugs to relish whilst the natural order of things is hymned:

⁵⁴ Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* Bk. I, l. 70-79, Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* 215.

⁵⁵ *The Therapy of Desire* 215.

⁵⁶ Harry Gilonis has commented: 'Bunting was *partly* the keen soldier of World War Two, the boy who left Peggy's letter unanswered; *partly* Alexander-Epicurus daring his enquiry, darting out of the frame.' Harry Gilonis, "The Forms Cut Out of the Mystery: Bunting, Some Contemporaries, and Lucretius's 'Poetry of Facts'", *Sharp Study and Long Toil* 146-162, 157

Sycamore seed twirling,
O, writhe to its measure!
Dust swirling trims pleasure.
Thorns prance in a gale.
In air snow flickers,
twigs tap,
elms drip.

(C.P. 52)

Here is our cure for melancholy: man re-emerges as part of the natural order and is at his most godlike when nearest to his animal state. As Lucretius says of the restless Roman with his country villa:

If only he perceived [his malady] distinctly, he would at once give up everything else, and devote himself first to studying the nature of things . . .⁵⁷

This could lead us to some interesting conclusions.

Briggflatts could now be read as a text that exhorts the reader by example towards the good life for man. Thus the first half of the poem would read as an attempted escape from nature and the fact of death. This would manifest itself both in the poet's restless wanderings and (according to Lucretius) their underlying cause, the fear of death. The poet is restlessly seeking immortality through his art, unable to enjoy simple pleasures. In the second half of the poem the poet then learns to perceive and accept the natural order and ultimately his death which is a part of it. There is some truth in this, but it remains only a partial reading of the poem. We can begin to understand discern a more complex relationship between Bunting and Lucretius by looking at Lucretius again, but this time in a rather different light.

⁵⁷ Lucretius, On the Nature of Things, Bk. III, l. 1070-5, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith, (London: Sphere 1969) 127.

A brief biography of Lucretius appears in St. Jerome's chronicon for the year 94 B.C.:

Titus Lucretius, poet, is born. After a love-philtre had turned him mad, and he had written, in the intervals of his insanity, several books which Cicero revised, he killed himself by his own hand in the forty-fifth year of his age.⁵⁸

Owing to the probable division in loyalties between Christian moralising and biographical fact in St. Jerome's writing, the veracity of this life of Lucretius is generally held to be dubious. However there is a certain poetic justice in the tale. George Santayana observes:

If anything lends colour to the story it is a certain consonance which we may feel between its tragic incidents and the genius of the poet as revealed in his work, where we find a strange scorn of love, a strange vehemence, and a high melancholy. It is by no means incredible that the author of such a poem should have been at some time the slave of a pathological passion, that his vehemence and inspiration should have passed into mania, and that he should have taken his own life.⁵⁹

St. Jerome's chronicon is perhaps an early example of the use of biography as moral literary criticism. It implies that even Lucretius failed to live up to his ideals, that his passions were not controlled, and that his happy Epicureanism was really an offshoot of those very passions. The modern secular reader might also take solace from Jerome's chronicon for it seems to refute Lucretius's ability to overcome love.

Lucretius's diatribe against love still shocks, for the cult of love is with us now even more strongly. Recently Martha Nussbaum has offered a convincing partial apology for Lucretius's views. In the

⁵⁸ George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets: Lucretius, Dante, Goethe* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1938, first edition 1910) 25. For further discussion of Jerome's life of Lucretius see Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire* 140-144.

⁵⁹ *Three Philosophical Poets* 25-26.

wake of modern feminist debate they now seem rather closer to those of, say, the author of The Female Eunuch than to the outpourings of a bitter misogynist. According to Nussbaum Lucretius 'tries to create, or rediscover, a human view by rejecting the superstitions and mythologies of the popular religion of love.'⁶⁰ The natural rather than the idealised woman will be a partner worthy of an Epicurean marriage.

But Briggflatts is a poem about lost love. Might it not also continue a debate with Lucretius? From one point of view the love in the poem has its Lucretian aspect. The romantic encounter between the boy and the girl at the beginning of the poem is presented as at one with the natural world, with spring, the bull and the slow worm. On the other hand, we know so little of the girl that it would be hard to know of her desires and pleasures. But be that as it may, the poem is far more concerned with the loss of love than its consummation, and here it is apparent that Epicurean therapy has failed. Lucretius writes:

But, even supposing the beauty of her face is all that could be desired, and the power of Venus radiates from all her limbs, what of it? There are others like her; we have lived without her until now; and her behaviour is, as we know, just the same as that of an ugly woman.⁶¹

The young poet of the poem consoles himself in just this way:

Days jerk, dawdle, fidget
towards the cesspit.
Love is a vapour, we're soon through it.

(C.P. 44.)

⁶⁰ Nussbaum, The Therapy of Desire 158.

⁶¹ Lucretius, On the Nature of Things (IV, 1171-40), trans Martin Ferguson Smith, 162.

Bunting's choice of imagery, with its emphasis on the unpleasant side of human processes, has a decidedly Lucretian ring. The disjointed sensations, the moving from immediate pleasure to immediate pleasure, the lack of narrative to human life also have a little of the Epicurean about them. The sexual pleasures of the second movement of *Briggflatts* follow Lucretius's prescriptions for curing love:

For, even if your loved one is absent, images of her are with you, and the darling name keeps ringing in your ears. It is advisable to shun such images, to abstain from all that feeds your love, and to turn your attention to other objects; you should cast your accumulated seed into any woman's body rather than reserve it for a single lover who monopolizes you, and thus involve yourself in inevitable anxiety and anguish. The fact is that feeding the ulcer increases its strength and renders it inveterate: day by day the frenzy grows and the misery is intensified, unless you obliterate the old wounds with new blows, and heal them while still fresh, by taking at random some random-roaming Venus, or unless you divert the motions of your mind into some other channel.⁶²

This is, however, by no means the emphasis of *Briggflatts* as a whole which implicitly criticises the Lucretian view of death and love through the perspective of narrative and poetry. The young poet is mistaken. He is to discover that love is not a vapour that we're soon through but rather a fate that cannot be escaped.

Briggflatts' ending may also contain an acknowledgement of the failure of Lucretius's prescriptions for the old on facing death. Lucretius writes:

And if someone older and more advanced in years should sorrowfully bewail and bemoan the approach of death to an immoderate degree, would she [Nature] not be justified in rating him still more roughly and delivering an even sharper rebuke: 'Stop snivelling, you scoundrel! Away with your whinings! You had full use of all the precious things of life before you

⁶² *On The Nature of Things* (IV, 161-164), trans. Martin Ferguson Smith, 159.

reached this senile state. But, because you continually crave what is not present, and scorn what is, your life has slipped away from you incomplete and unenjoyed, until suddenly you have found death standing at your head, before you are able to depart from the feast of life filled to repletion.’⁶³

The song of the slowworm has partly allowed Bunting to take such a view, but only partly. For Bunting’s unepicurean yearnings remain. The poet is continually craving what is not present, and if he is consoled it is by the belief that ‘Then is now’, it is not an Epicurean consolation. According to Lucretius, one must simply accept that then is not now. This craving for what is not present is, furthermore a craving for love, a love which has been seen as structuring man’s life. Lucretius’s care for nature and Epicureanism may remain as a consolation in Briggflatts, but his therapy has failed to fully cure love, yearning or melancholy.

Epitaphs

As early as Villon Bunting wrote of:

precision clarifying vagueness;
boundary to a wilderness
of detail; chisel voice
smoothing the flanks of noise . . .

(C.P. 7)

Thus is evoked a poetry which would have the quality of inscription. Oddly enough, this would come from a ‘chisel voice’. Thus the poetic voice would be most like the most permanent sort of writing. One may be tempted to read this in the light of Derrida’s observations on speech and writing.⁶⁴

⁶³ On the Nature of Things (III, 952-962), trans. Martin Ferguson Smith, 123-4.

⁶⁴ See Jacques Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in Disseminations, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981) 61-171. Derrida’s complaint about Plato’s treatment of writing is nothing new. See, for instance, B. Jowett The Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English with Analyses and Introductions, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953) (First Edition 1871) Vol III, 128:

However, and especially when we come to the far more complex case of Briggflatts (a text which is far less amenable to such a straightforward deconstruction), it is worth detailing the immediate background to the explicit connections which Bunting makes between the poem and the chisel.

Bunting invokes the notion of Lapidary writing. This notion was no doubt derived in part by the young Bunting from listening to or reading the opinions of Ezra Pound, and perhaps Yeats. Donald Davie attempts to trace the notion in his book on Pound. Davie is ostensibly writing about Pound's essay on Walter Savage Landor, his meditations, no doubt, stirred by Pound's brief observation that:

Gautier himself has never given to the world a more chiselled marmorean quatrain than

Landor's:

Past ruin'd Ilion Helen lives:

Alcestis rises from the shades;

Verse calls them forth; tis verse that gives

*Immortal youth to mortal maids*⁶⁵

Pound suggests much but says little nor, for that matter, does Donald Davie offer us much in the way of explanation:

Probably not in this essay as such, but in that area of Pound's conversation of which this essay is a distillation, we find the reason -so I believe- why Yeats said admiringly of Landor in 1917 'He had in his Imaginary Conversations reminded us, as it were, that the Venus de Milo is a stone.'⁶⁶

Speech and Writing have really different functions; the one is more transitory, more diffuse, more elastic and capable of adaptation to moods and times; the other is more permanent, more concentrated, and is uttered not to this or that person or audience, but to all the world.

For a good discussion of such issues, see Sean Burke, The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992).

⁶⁵ Ezra Pound, 'Landor (1775-1864)', first published in The Future (November, 1917), in Selected Prose 1909-1965, ed. William Cookson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) 354-358, 355.

⁶⁶ Donald Davie, 'Pound as Critic' in Studies in Ezra Pound (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991) 308-319, 316.

Davie goes on to suggest that this is:

that effect in writing which an earlier criticism knew as 'lapidary': that is to say, the effect or the illusion of words as not written or printed on a printed page, but as incised on a stone block. The aspiration after this effect is very ancient, as we know from the Greek derivation common to both 'epigram' and 'epitaph' . . .⁶⁷

This is surely the matter of it, which is rather obscured in the circumspect suggestions with which Davie surrounds it and no doubt confused by the cult of hardness which Pound had derived from Hulme and, ultimately, the early Worringer.

But Pound's example has quite the opposite effect from that usually brought about by an epitaph. It is more akin to the art of statuary. An epitaph, by its very nature, marks an absence. Landor, in a standard poetic conceit, talks of giving 'Immortal youth to mortal maids', of making the dead live through verse, of using writing to conjure the presence of the dead. One can see how this could appeal to the writer of The Cantos. Pound uses the word 'marmorean' rather than 'lapidary'. Marble conjures up the idea of ancient statuary quite as much as it does the epitaph or inscription; and statuary, in contra-distinction to the epitaph, gives the observer the illusion that the dead have not rotted but that they remain fully formed as if they were alive. For Bunting, however, lapidary writing is almost inextricable from the epitaph. This again is evident in Villon:

Remember, imbeciles and wits,
sots and ascetics, fair and foul,
young girls with little tender tits,
that DEATH is written over all.

Worn hides that scarcely clothe the soul

⁶⁷ Studies in Ezra Pound 316.

they are so rotten, old and thin,
or firm and soft and warm and full -
fellmonger Death gets every skin.

All that is piteous, all that's fair,
all that is fat and scant of breath,
Elisha's baldness, Helen's hair,
is Death's collateral.

(C.P. 4)

The lines implicitly rebuke views expressed in Pound's essay on Landor. Skin, of Helen or whoever, is not marble but must pass away. The only sort of permanent writing is that which is written over all, death's writing upon the headstone.

In Briggflatts Bunting has moved still further from Pound's example and much closer to the example of Wordsworth, and in particular, to the Wordsworth of 'Essays upon Epitaphs'. If Pound is still partly behind behind the lapidary writing of poet of Villon, the mature moral scrupulousness of the earlier poet is behind the mature Bunting. Whereas Pound looks to defy death, Wordsworth seeks to acknowledge it and the very nature of the medium in which the words will take their form:

it is to be remembered, that to raise a monument is a sober and reflective act; that the inscription which it bears is intended to be permanent, and for universal perusal; and that, for this reason, the thoughts and feelings expressed should be permanent also - liberated from that weakness and anguish of sorrow which is in nature transitory, and which with instinctive decency retires from notice. The passions should be subdued, the emotions controlled; strong, indeed, but nothing ungovernable or wholly involuntary. Seemliness requires this, and truth requires it also: for how can the narrator otherwise be trusted? Moreover, a grave is a tranquilising object: resignation in course of time springs up from it as naturally as the wild flowers, besprinkling the turf with which it may be covered, or

gathering round the monument by which it is defended. The very form and substance of the monument which has received the inscription, and the appearance of the letters, testifying with what a slow and laborious hand they must have been engraven, might seem to reproach the author who had given way upon this occasion to transports of the mind, or to quick turns of conflicting passion; though the same might constitute the life and beauty of a funeral oration or elegiac poem.⁶⁸

The epitaph is a particular sort of writing. The monument is intended to be permanent, but it stands witness to man's own impermanence. Therefore its writing, which requires a particular effort of manual labour, should be without excessive ornament and stand witness to a universal truth. But it is also subject to impermanence itself for it, like the remains it marks, is subject to the effects of nature.

With these thoughts in mind, Briggflatts and its mason and his grave stones take on a particular resonance:

A mason times his mallet
to a lark's twitter,
listening while the marble rests,
lays his rule
at a letter's edge,
fingertips checking,
till the stone spells a name
naming none,
a man abolished.
Painful lark, labouring to rise!
The solemn mallet says:
In the grave's slot

⁶⁸William Wordsworth, 'Essays upon Epitaphs', Selected Prose, ed. J.O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) 332-371, 334-335.

he lies. We rot.

(C.P. 39)

The words of an epitaph, be they only name and date, are all the words most of us will have to tell future generations that we have lived at all. Careful craft is put into manifesting the materiality of a signifier whose existence testifies to the absence of its signified. Such writing then is inevitably a writing of loss. It is writing at its most material yet that which it writes about is without life.

Though Bunting still maintained his belief in the prime importance of sound in poetry, the 'chisel voice' with its idea of a stony life, similar to the one in Pound, is absent from Briggflatts. The contradictory notion that sees the truest kind of writing as 'carved' in sound, seeks to have it both ways: to have the durable qualities of writing and the life associated with the voice. In Briggflatts, however, it is clear that Bunting has little trust even in the endurance of the engraved word:

Name and date

split in soft slate

a few months obliterate.

(C.P. 42)

If this is the fate of the stone epitaph what of the poet's paper? The insubstantiality of writing and its capacity to memorialise remain a dominant motif of the poem:

Who cares to remember a name cut in ice

or be remembered?

Wind writes in foam on the sea.

(C.P. 44)

Yet the poem is itself an effort to remember, to set down in writing brief words to commemorate a life and a lost love.

Bunting is clearly intrigued by the idea of the lapidary writing of elegies as described by Wordsworth:

Brief words are hard to find,
shapes to carve and discard:
Bloodaxe, king of York,
king of Dublin, king of Orkney.
Take no notice of tears;
letter the stone to stand
over love laid aside . . .

(C.P. 42)

The formulations of Bloodaxe's name have the quality of the epitaph; these are the 'brief words' which the poet has found. The unmarked grave of Bloodaxe has been given a tombstone. The terse 'inscription' allows a few titles to summon up the vain glory of the Viking's life; and this also stands as epitaph for 'love laid aside'. There is a delicate ambiguity in the line 'take no notice of tears' which allows it to stand both as the young poet's injunction to himself and also as a description of the epitaph's stony implacability in the face of human emotion.

As the poem progresses so the parallel between mason and poet becomes more explicit:

No worn tool
whittles stone;
but a reproached
uneasy mason

shaping evasive
ornament
litters his yard

with flawed fragments.

(C.P. 46)

The 'evasive ornament' has its connection to Celtic ornament but also to the unsuccessful epitaph criticised by Wordsworth: that ornate type of epitaph whose ornament ultimately seeks to evade the simple truth of death. To read the lines 'It looks well on the page, but never/ well enough' (C.P. 45) simply as evidence for Bunting's preference for poetry as spoken rather than written, which admittedly is well attested in Bunting's prose, is misleading. It does not take into account the following sentence, which is part of the same quatrain and presumably closely connected in sense:

Something is lost
when wind, sun, sea upbraid
justly an unconvinced deserter.

(C.P. 45)

The poetry does not look well on the page for a reason, that it is a product of denial, that it fails to have the truth demanded of a lapidary writing. It may sound right

spoken on the ridge
between marine olives and hillside
blue figs, under the breeze fresh
with pollen of Apennine sage.

(C.P. 45)

But it does not look right. Live sound may be deceptive in a way that the dead letter may not be.

Poems then are evidences of a poet's mortality rather than a means of escaping it. In Briggflatts Bunting reviews his life and meditates upon his own death. The condensation of the verse, which had

long been a characteristic of Bunting's style, now has a refined signification.⁶⁹ The poem would be Bunting's own testament, an extended epitaph, naturally taking on some of the stylistic features of the form: its reticence, its listing of 'facts' and its particular circumstance. Towards the close of Briggflatts Bunting writes:

The sheets are gathered and bound,
the volume indexed and shelved,
dust on its marbled leaves.

(C.P. 58)

Past life is like a book whose marbled pages, now dusty and presumably unread, are like the marble of the epitaph. The binding and shelving of the book, like the erection and disintegration of the tombstone marks a closure. Its completion, like the completion of life marked by the gravestone, shows past action now fixed and unalterable. By writing his own epitaph, Bunting in one sense inscribed the death of the author into his text, though the consequence of this is rather different from an open text allowing for the free play of signification. To inscribe absence requires particular properties of the text, for the dead as much as the living require certain proprieties. This epitaph inscribes the limits of its own duration just as it marks the limits of man's.

Lies, Lines and Worringer

Charles Tomlinson's early essay 'Experience into Music: The Poetry of Basil Bunting', though the earliest of investigations into the relationship between music and Bunting's poetry, remains in some

⁶⁹See Ezra Pound, ABC of Reading (London: Faber and Faber, 1961) 36:

Dichten=Condensare.

I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of expression. Basil Bunting, fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary, found that this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language. 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'Dichtung' meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense'.

ways the most insightful of such inquiries.⁷⁰ Though Tomlinson does not undertake the extensive inquiries of later writers, he does elucidate an important principle that eludes many more detailed discussions.

The pattern is music, twining like the lines of illumination from the Lindisfarne Gospel whose decoration, margining this edition, was elaborated on the holy island that lies in the poem's northern geography.⁷¹

This suggests aesthetic connections between Bunting's conception of music and the curvilinear forms of this work of Anglo-Celtic art and that this functions not merely on the scale of the poem's prosody but in its very patterning. Eric Mottram once remarked to Bunting that: 'Another report is that the Lindisfarne lacings and plaitings were in your sensibility, quite consciously, when you were working on the interrelationship between parts of the poem' to which Bunting replied 'That is quite true.'⁷² This would suggest the 'poetry of interlace' just as much as sonata form was intended for Briggflatts. What is intriguing for the critic is to study how much it works with and how much against that sonata form.

Bunting's poetry generally avoids word play. When Bunting puns, as in the Alexander passage, it underlines the insubstantiality of the referent through the slipperiness of the signifier, and so it is with all his word play. The words 'lies' and 'lines' appear repeatedly in the second movement of Briggflatts, and one seems to suggest the other. The connection is first brought out at the close of the movement's first stanza in a description of the young poet's bohemian life in London:

He *lies* with one to long for another,
sick, self-maimed, self-hating,
obstinate, mating

⁷⁰ Charles Tomlinson, 'Experience into Music: the Poetry of Basil Bunting', Agenda, IV, 5 & 6 (1966) 11-17.

⁷¹ 'Experience into Music: the Poetry of Basil Bunting' 15.

⁷² E. Mottram, 'Conversation with Basil Bunting on the occasion of his 75th Birthday, 1975', Poetry Information 19, 3-10, (1978) 5.

beauty with squalor to beget *lines* still-born.

(C.P. 43) (My italics)

The pun on 'lies', though scarcely original, serves to draw attention to the poet's dishonesty to both himself and the girl. Bunting's syntax subtly connects it to the 'lines' at the end of the sentence: 'He lies with one to long for another . . . to beget lines still born.' There is a direct link between personal dishonesty and the poetic barrenness which produces still-born 'lines'. This significance of the word 'lines' appears to be reinforced by the earlier: 'lines of a Flemish horse/ hauling beer, the angle, obtuse,/ a slut's blouse draws on her chest' (C.P. 43), for it forms part of a list of the young poet's observations that end in a failure to connect. The poet feels

Buddha's basalt cheek

but cannot name the ratio of its curves

to the half-pint

left breast of a girl who bared it in Kleinfeldt's.

(C.P. 43)

The word 'line' recurs a little later in the movement:

Flying fish follow the boat,

delicate wings blue, grace

on flick of a tissue tail,

the water's surface between

appetite and attainment.

Flexible, unrepetitive *line*

to sing, not paint; sing, sing,

laying the tune on the air

(C.P. 44) (My Italics).

Bunting's use of parataxis combined with concision and omissions demand that the reader fills in certain gaps. What is the connection between the two sentences? The first three words of the second provide a clue. The movement of flying fish can quite reasonably be described as a 'flexible, unrepentive line'. Flying fish weave in and out of the water on wing-like fins. Figuratively they 'plait' the water in the manner of the interlace we shall examine in the Lindisfarne gospels. Initially this line does not lie but rather belongs to the 'truth' of the natural world. This line then, rather curiously, becomes an oral one which reflects Bunting's own poetic prejudice, specifically regarding prosody. Since the passage's 'painting' is its description of the natural world, it is hard to know exactly what Bunting means unless Bunting is lauding abstract linear expression over a representational art. However, this line, through the paratactic succession of clauses, becomes an 'evasive ornament':

nimble and easy as a lizard,
still and sudden as a gecko,
to humiliate love, remember
nothing.

(C.P. 45)

This 'Flexible unrepentive line' is a symptom of Bunting's failure to be cured from love and from melancholy, it is a device through which to lose oneself and to forget. It is, in the end, a lie.

By the next occurrence of the word 'lines' we begin to be in a position to understand the workings not only of this particular motif but also of the poem itself:

There is a lot of Italy in churchyards,
sea on the left, the Garfagnana
over the wall, la Cisa flaking
to hillside fiddlers above Parma,

melancholy, swift,
with light bow blanching the dance.
Grease mingles with sweat
on the threshing floor. Frogs, grasshoppers
drape the rice in sound.
Tortoise deep in dust or
muzzled bear capering
punctuate a text whose initial,
lost in Lindisfarne plaited lines,
stands for discarded love.

(C.P. 45-6).

The stanza performs a delicate geographical transformation, from Italy and the Mediterranean back to Northumbria and Bloodaxe who will reappear after four brief, and topographically ambiguous, quatrains. The dance, which is accorded its usual aesthetic import by Bunting, is evoked. Music melds into the dance which in its turn becomes the dance of the natural world. The tortoise and the 'muzzled bear' (whose dance is actually very unnatural indeed) in their turn become zoomorphic, moving from the dance into the frozen music of the northern ornament of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The swiftness of Bunting's transitions from one art form to the next, from the world of art into the world of nature and back again, is a hallmark of the style of Briggflatts which has its correlative in the aesthetic outlook of Bunting's prose. But Bunting's poetic and his depiction of the Lindisfarne Gospels are a good deal more complicated than any simple formula derived from his lectures, writings and sayings. In this passage Bunting has a specific image in mind. There are no bears and tortoises in the Lindisfarne gospels. Nonetheless this passage alludes to the use of zoomorphic form in the gospels' ornamented initials. In this form the outlines of animals dissipate into a maze of linear activity.

G. Baldwin Brown, whose The Arts in Early England was still the standard authority on The Lindisfarne Gospels at the time of the composition of Briggflatts and almost certainly Bunting's principal source, writes that:

the six pages of sumptuous initial letters and words may be judged to exhibit a balance of qualities that gives them the first place among all the works of the school. They are more restrained than the corresponding pages in Kells but freer and more varied in their motives than the pages of pure ornament by which five of them are faced. In one important respect they have an undoubted advantage over the Irish manuscript in that the words in them are plainly legible, whereas in Kells the letters are sometimes so disguised that experts differ as to whether they are present or not.⁷³

Bunting had studied the Lindisfarne Gospels closely, and though it is possible that he misremembered them, thinking of such works as The Book of Kells, and so exaggerated the obfuscation caused to the letters by Celtic ornament, it is most unlikely. A second alternative makes a good deal more sense. If you view one of the ornamented letters of the Lindisfarne Gospels not from a distance but from close up, the initial does indeed become 'lost in Lindisfarne plaited lines.' The letter then loses its qualities of linguistic signification. The lines within it serve to defy meaning. Taking away an initial letter serves to make a text unreadable. This would have happened in the story of Briggflatts whose sense is constructed by reference to the 'discarded love' of the first movement. Thus the 'Lindisfarne plaited lines' act contrary to meaning, or at least a stable meaning. As regards the poet's life, such a meaning may only be perceived from a hard won temporal perspective.

One of the features of the Lindisfarne Gospels is their harmony and proportion, though it is one that requires a certain distance to discern. The work appears to have Byzantine influence, and is perhaps not so clearly Northern as might have been supposed. G. Baldwin Brown writes that:

⁷³ G. Baldwin Brown, The Arts in Early England: The Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses, The Gospels of Lindisfarne, and Other Christian monuments of Northumbria (with a philological chapter by A. Blyth Webster) (London: John Murray, 1921) 361.

Seldom have human hand and brain collaborated in a decorative scheme more logical, more satisfying to our sense of just proportion and distribution, a scheme carried out with a taste in detail and a refinement in execution and finish more consistent in their perfection, than is the case with some of the wonderful folios. The motives and the whole style they exhibit are of course extremely unclassical, but it is a complete mistake to regard the lavish enrichment with which they are covered as a mere veil of aimless forms and colours spread lace-like over the surface and meandering wherever fancy leads.⁷⁴

G. Baldwin Brown gives an interesting and different interpretation to that given by Celtic and Germanic commentators on Northern ornament, and this is partly the model for the Lindisfarne Gospels that Bunting seems to have favoured in his discussions of them. According to Bunting, on examining the Lindisfarne Gospels 'what you see at first is usually only the perpetual criss cross of line, or perhaps some elements of the design.' But disorder resolves itself: 'as you gaze at one of these so-called carpet pages, little by little, the confusion of ornament sorts itself out, you notice how carefully balanced the whole thing is, and a great cross emerges from the welter of ornament.'⁷⁵ These forms, like the initials, conform to a wider pattern if we look in an appropriate way. Similarly, the maze of disjunction within the poet's life and within the mimesis of that life that is the poem can perhaps be accorded an ultimate order. It will prove important for the design of the poem as a whole that the unruly notion of the form of Northern Line may be made to accord with the orderliness of a sonata.

After four skaldic stanzas detailing the making of a sword and the 'reproached /uneasy mason/ shaping evasive/ ornament' (C.P. 46), Bloodaxe returns wearing the most 'evasive ornament' of all, for the 'plaited lines' of the Lindisfarne gospels have been transformed into the 'linked lies' of Bloodaxe's chain mail; the lost consonant of literal description is there by inference.

Peter Makin has written:

⁷⁴ *The Arts in Early England* 331

⁷⁵ Bunting, 'The Codex' 10.

Of stanza-form itself we demand no meaning. It is as futile, as self-serving, as any permutation of motifs in Bunting, of words in Swinburne, of rhymes in a villanelle. It is a rhyme-scheme, and a metre. Just like the arbitrary and pointless scheme of /ai/-sounds that ends the entire twenty-four lines of Eric Bloodaxe's death:

Loaded with mail of linked *lies*
what weapon can the king lift to *fight* . . .⁷⁶

But form can have its meaning, and Bunting's has more meaning than most. Bunting is not simply arbitrary in his choice of verse form. One should note that Bunting has chosen to rhyme on the assonance between lie and line whilst using the adjective 'linked' to supply the missing consonant. Extensive repetition of end-rhymes is a feature of any number of early verse forms. Bunting would have been familiar with a more sophisticated use of it in Ferdowsi. Its use is particularly marked in early Northern forms. We need look no further than the early Welsh poets Aneurin and Taliesin, mentioned in the poem, to see the examples that must have been foremost in Bunting's mind. If we combine this feature with the heavy alliteration and the text's parallels to Northern ornament, the implied meaning of the form becomes readily apparent. It is a meaning with which we are very familiar. It is the meaning Spengler, Read and Worringer were so entranced by.

Behind Bunting's lines is the conclusion of Worringer:

The very peculiar interlacing of words and sentence in early Northern poetry, its artful chaos of interrelated ideas, the expressive rhythm imposed on it by alliteration and intricate repetition of the initial sounds (corresponding to the repetition of motive in ornament and producing in the same way the character of a confused, unending melody): all these are

⁷⁶ Bunting: the Shaping of his Verse 236-237

unmistakable allegories to Northern ornament. Germanic poetry does not know how to express rest or equipoise; it is all movement.⁷⁷

If it has not been apparent to us before, it should be so now that Bunting was determined that his Northern vision should be given a particularly Northern form. This form is one which he largely derived from Worringer and those writers associated with him.

It is a particular version of Worringer, the more profound Worringer of a fearful Northern angst that Bunting chooses to use.⁷⁸ This is the version Herbert Read used in 1959 in A Concise History of Modern Painting:

This Northern history is in itself complex, but one fact is decisive - the classical acceptance of the organic world as a serene setting for human efforts, and art as a harmonious reflection of this world . . . is not sufficiently expressive for it; it needs rather that uncanny pathos which has reappeared with redoubled intensity in our own harsh times; and hence those emotive distortions of natural forms which seek to express the unease and terror which man may feel in the presence of a nature fundamentally hostile and inhuman. As rest and clear vision are denied him, his only recourse is to increase his restlessness and confusion to the pitch where they bring him stupefaction and release.⁷⁹

Read goes on to quote Worringer at length and proceeds to make some interesting generalisations:

Implicit in this Northern attitude, as Worringer has also pointed out, is a tendency to individualisation and fragmentation. The 'personality' is not cultivated for its social values; instead the 'individual' becomes conscious of his isolation, his separateness, and he may intensify this consciousness to a state of self-denial or self-contempt . . . But the more

⁷⁷ Wilhelm Worringer, Form in Gothic, Authorised translation, ed. Herbert Read (London: G.P. Putnam and Sons 1927) 73-74.

⁷⁸ Basil Bunting was certainly familiar with Herbert Read's art criticism. See Basil Bunting, 'What About Herbert Read', Agenda, 7, 2 (1969) 41-45.

⁷⁹ Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting (London: Thames and Huson, 1959) 53-54.

normal outcome of such individuation is the willing isolation of the artist, and his reliance for motive and inspiration on his subjectivity or introspection.⁸⁰

What is this but that melancholy which we have been trying to pin down? Here is an analysis of the poet's behaviour and of Bloodaxe's and all that restless, melancholic Northern activity within the poem, and what is more it links it inextricably with the poem's form. The 'lies' and 'lines' are one.

By 1959 Herbert Read had become understandably circumspect about using race to explain the will to form.⁸¹ Bunting preferred to use the term 'culture' to race.⁸² Nevertheless, his use of Bloodaxe, whose presence is summoned from the rocks of Stainmore and the natal landscape, is not far from race-romanticism. Bloodaxe's life can be read as a parable or a tragic archetype but also as a foreshadowing of the Northern melancholy which Bunting cannot escape. The poem, at times, appears to suggest that lost love is the cause of the poet's melancholy, the initial 'lost in Lindisfarne plaited lines'. On closer examination we discover that these very lines, which are themselves melancholic, make up that lost love, just as the Lindisfarne lines make up letters. Why else would the poet leave the girl in the first place if melancholy was not seen as something like an unavoidable tragic flaw inscribed in the swirling text of Bunting's life? If this tragic flaw was prior to the loss of love, reconciliation with the loss of that love would only be an amelioration of a symptom. It is a view of life fundamentally opposed to that of Epicurus, whose doctrine of the atomic swerve was added to Democritus in order to avoid notions of fate and predestination.

An interpretation of Briggflatts through Worringer makes more sense of the poem and its form than any other single explanation except music. For if music and Lucretius drive one half of the poem, Worringer and Northern line *lie* as a counterpoint to that form. If this is the case, then those parts of the poem which do not seem in keeping with the orderliness of the resolution of a sonata suddenly make much more sense. A resolution of a poem of lost love is the last manifestation of a particular melancholy, not a cure for melancholy itself. Worringer's psychology of Northern art certainly

⁸⁰ A Concise History of Modern Painting 56.

⁸¹ A Concise History of Modern Painting 222.

⁸² See the end of this chapter for a full discussion of Bunting's views on race.

coheres with that flight from nature which characterises the first two movements of the poem. But it also characterizes features which remain at the end of the poem. It would offer an alternative to the acceptance of nature, limitation and the shackling of the restless poetic ego that appear in the fifth movement of the poem.

Even that fifth movement tacitly concedes much to the Worringer reading. The later use of Worringer by Herbert Read has the undoubted air of the doomed, isolated romantic poet about it. In Briggflatts, though the poet may be a witness of an organic community in the rural north, he can never be truly a part of it. There is a sense in which the presentations of harmony and resolution in the fifth movement are dishonest. And this dishonesty is written in the skies. Bunting lauds the stars and the growing interstellar spaces of an expanding universe:

Furthest, fairest things, stars, free of our humbug,
each his own, the longer known the more alone.

(C.P. 58)

Yet he uses the paradox of interstellar time to allow himself to cancel out human entropy. It is a beautiful conceit but it is also, perhaps, human 'humbug', a result of an inability to accept growing isolation and death. Though this is far from comforting, the harmony achieved thereby and the return to the theme of the first movement may be a good deal less honest than the restless melody of the Coda.

So we are poised between the harmony of sonata form and 'the ceaseless melody of Northern Line'.⁸³ This ceaseless melody is enacted in the poem's prosody but also in the idea of interlace, of repetition without resolution. This is a good deal less loose in Briggflatts than The Anthemata; even as he described the Lindisfarne Gospels Bunting was always keen to emphasise their qualities of symmetry and balance. Briggflatts is evidently a much more orderly poem than The Anthemata. Nevertheless, the notion of Northern line, associated with the obfuscation of meaning and with melancholy, remains

⁸³ Form in Gothic 53.

an important and disturbing part of Briggflatts. It would signify a form close to formlessness and to meaningless melancholic activity which resists closure.

The concept of distance, the idea of a greater order that Bunting derived from the particular example of the Lindisfarne Gospels was strong:

You look at it, close up with a magnifying glass, and it seems rather florid, rather chaotic.

You stand back and look again, and it's classical, as perfectly placed on the page, as simple in essence, as those Japanese prints with a single spray of cherry blossom.⁸⁴

Bunting had to hold on to some notion of classical order if his poem was to contain such a disruptive element. Inscribing order around florid chaos is a very tricky operation. Yet this daring, despite any reservations we may have about Worringer and the ideology of race-romanticism, accounts for much of the poem's power and success. Bunting largely succeeded in achieving a form that manages to take account of both centrifugal and centripetal forces and which manages to leave the poem poised between the two in a genuine ambiguity. Whether the poet and his poem are ready for 'love uninterrupted night' or merely travel 'unappeased into the void' is not resolved, for perhaps both are true.

There has been an alternative theory of the use of Lindisfarne Gospels, propounded by Peter Makin, ostensibly on the basis of Bunting's stated views. Although it makes some valid points, this thesis has two weaknesses when compared with the one outlined above. First, it gains very shaky authority from Bunting's pronouncements. Second, it fails to relate to Briggflatts with nearly as much consistency as the Worringerian thesis. Nevertheless, it is worth studying, for it presents the largest critical obstacle to the acceptance of this thesis's reading of Briggflatts.

Makin's central contention is this:

⁸⁴ Basil Bunting, 'The Codex' 8.

In Bunting's view, Northumbrian art (an interviewer recalled) 'stressed abstraction and pattern'. Elsewhere Bunting explained that he wanted once more, for Northumbria, an art whose procedures would be these:

first to simplify detail till only the barest essentials are left; second to weave an enormous number of such details into an intricate pattern which yet keeps perfect balance and proportion; and thirdly to set your central theme with infinite care in just the right place . . .

'Abstraction' then is simplification; or 'terseness'; or 'condensation'. Simply to convey your thing while reducing the number of its details - or ignoring them. The strokes need not necessarily reproduce the individual lines or features of the subject, for what one is after is essence.⁸⁵

Makin then goes on to elaborate Bunting's use of the Lindisfarne gospels as a piece of 'realism'. A number of considerable gaps in Makin's argument should be readily apparent.

Bunting never defines abstraction as terseness here or anywhere else in his writing. He always uses the word in a way that implies its standard usage. Terseness is certainly a feature of his poetics but not of his description of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Bunting is not even writing explicitly about the Lindisfarne Gospels here but about the sort of Northumbrian art which he would like to see, an art no doubt partly based on that of the Lindisfarne Gospels but not identical with it. Even if he were writing explicitly of them, nothing would suggest Makin's gloss. Details are not necessarily those of realism. The concept of balance and proportion can be traced to G. Baldwin Brown's assessment of the Lindisfarne Gospels which provide Bunting with a more classical and empirical counterpart to Worringer's Northern idealism.

⁸⁵ Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse 222.

Makin's interpretation has almost nothing to say about line in Briggflatts, and yet this is the only feature of the Lindisfarne Gospels the poem ever refers to. Bunting no doubt admired the illustrations to the gospels, but even in his lectures and conversations he has almost nothing to say about them. The reason is obvious enough. He had a ready made aesthetic of Northern Line to which he could add his own particular stamp. The Worringer/Read tradition had had half a century in which to mature. Nevertheless, Makin's interpretation does alert us to a serious point. Latent in Briggflatts and explicit in Bunting's later prose is an individual nationalist aesthetic which would seek to synthesise the diverse and often contradictory aspects of Bunting's vision into a Northumbrian nationalism which would cause confusion in anyone who tries, as Peter Makin does, to give them a coherent explanation.

Northumbria and Northern Line

In a special edition of New Statesman and Society devoted to the question of English nationalism, Tom Pickard, Bunting's former protégé, wrote of Basil Bunting:

Bunting considered himself a *northern* nationalist, and thought in terms of the Northumbrian borders of the Humber and the Firth of Forth. Over a pint, he mused about setting up passport controls in the South. But he was passionately convinced that we have been screwed by southrons for centuries. The Lindisfarne Gospels were the cornerstone of European art, while being distinctly Northumbrian. He clearly thought there was a particular culture to acknowledge; and much of the poetry was in the sound of the language.⁸⁶

Bunting's nationalism was perhaps prophetic of recent calls from regionalism. It is still very much his own and the product of the same man who, according to Zukofsky's fictionalised autobiography Ferdinand, believed 'A decent British empire . . . could be the best government in the world.'⁸⁷ Both views are largely anti-utilitarian and form differing reactions to pragmatism in British politics. It was perhaps this aspect of Bunting that endeared him to the young of the sixties, so dissatisfied with the materialism of their elders.

⁸⁶ Tom Pickard, 'Local Preacher', New Statesman and Society 24 February 1995, 33-34, 33.

⁸⁷ Louis Zukofsky, Collected Fiction (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990) 223.

Though Bunting never wrote of Worringer explicitly, he certainly had an ideology of line. He declared that:

I don't mean to suggest that his [Eadfrith, the illuminator of the Lindisfarne Gospels] art had anything to do with his race. Indeed, the Angles who settled in Northumberland seem to have lived on such cosy terms with the Britons among them, that it would be hazardous to suggest that Eadfrith or any other Northumbrian who was not a nobleman was of purely Anglic race. Many must have had British mothers. Even some of the kings married British women. Race is a very misty notion anyway, and racial characteristics change with lightning rapidity.

But languages last pretty well, and cultures seem to last almost forever. Conquests and catastrophes bury them for ages, and yet sooner or later they stir into life again. I don't think I am misrepresenting recent historians if I say I believe that, race or no race, a fusion of cultures took place in early Northumberland. What the Angles had to begin with you can see in the finds from Sutton Hoo now in the British museum; there must have been similar things here; and they added the very abstract art of curving lines and great complexity which the Celtic people developed in France and Belgium and Britain, before the Romans came and overlaid it for centuries with their imperial stuff.⁸⁸

Bunting's remarks on race are a good deal more cautious than those of his predecessors. However, this does not amount to much more than a changing of terms. Apart from that, and Bunting's own particular Northumbrian gloss, there is little to distinguish such remarks from the writing of Read and his artistic followers.

We find the dislike of Roman representational art, and the identification with the plucky but imperially oppressed British and their shaking loose to show their own genius, in Jones. Both poets

⁸⁸ 'The Codex' 12.

may have got their history from R.G. Collingwood, but their interpretation is very much in the mould of Read.⁸⁹ Bunting's history is far from being outré. What is remarkable is how little of it differs from that particular version of English history, and especially its art history, which sought both to distinguish the British from the Germans (and one must remember that Bunting had a particular loathing for Germans and German culture) and to allow English art to claim Northern Line for its own. Bunting, with as little or as much justification as Read had when appropriating it for England, appropriated it for Northumbria.

As we have seen in our examination of artists, the ideology of the English exposition of Northern Line is never quite the same twice, and by the time of Bunting's lectures it had a very peculiar stamp indeed. Bunting's prose remarks on Northumbrian culture invent a tradition that is in many respects a model of his own mind. This helps us understand his suggestion for a Northumbrian art as an effort to syncretise various of Bunting's beliefs, including his strongly held empiricism and more classically minded notions of form. Bunting's lectures, in which he proposed the unlikely figures of Spenser (whose Fairie Queen is a good candidate for a poetry of interlace) and Wyatt for the north, exhibit the same tenuous appropriation of almost anyone whom the poet admires that we find in David Jones.⁹⁰

Bunting's nationalism exhibits some of the same problems as that of David Jones. When Bunting made his proposal for a Northumbrian art he made such observations as:

If either Beowulf or The Dream of the Rood is a northern poem, and both seem to be, we have some of its literature; and in Bede and Alcuin we have some of its thought - and very striking thought it is when you get down to it.⁹¹

What is astonishing is quite how historically narrow all this is. Bunting never refers to the industrial heritage of the north nor to any bona fide Northumbrian poet in these lectures save the questionable

⁸⁹ R.G. Collinwood and J. N. L. Myers, Roman Britain and the English Settlements (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937) 247-260.

⁹⁰ Basil Bunting, Newcastle University Lectures, 'Spenser', 'Wyatt', transcribed by Peter Makin, Basil Bunting Archive, Durham.

⁹¹ 'The Codex' 12

examples of Wordsworth and Swinburne who hardly fit into Bunting's ideas of Northern form.⁹² Nor does he refer to Northumbrian art after the Dark Ages. His call for the revival of Northumbrian art essentially asks for a thousand years of Northumbrian history to be ignored. It is true that the poetry he was conceiving at the end of his life did have a slightly wider historical base as has been well documented by Peter Quatermain.⁹³ And it is possible that Bunting, had he written more in his last two decades, would have supplied us with a wider corpus of Northumbrian poetry. But his tale of southern oppression of the North, though heartfelt, hardly inaugurates a Northumbrian renaissance nor does it give the full and mature history we would expect of the writer of such a complex and ambiguous poem as Briggflatts.

If we do read Briggflatts strictly as a work of Northumbrian nationalism along the lines which Bunting indicated, we find much to admire but also certain weaknesses which are of less relevance to our previous readings. Bunting did, to an extent, manage to relocate his world view in Northumbria. We may recall that Worringer characterised the religious experience of Classical man in these terms:

For Classical man, the divine no longer exists as an exterior world, it is no longer a transcendental idea but exists for him in the world.

Man's belief in this direct divine immanence in all created things, this assumption of a world-wide and joyful pantheism, is the culmination of the world's anthropomorphizing process. For it is this which lies concealed in such a deification of the world. The ideal unity of God and the world which has now been attained is but another name for the unity of man and world, that is to say, for the completely accomplished subjugation of the world by mind and sense which annihilates the original dualism.⁹⁴

⁹² Bunting's ideas on oral Northerness are a good deal more convincing as is his championing of Joseph Skipsey. See Joseph Skipsey, Selected Poems, ed. Basil Bunting (Sunderland: Ceolfrith Press, 1976).

⁹³ Peter Quatermain, Basil Bunting: Poet of the North, (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, 1990).

⁹⁴ Form in Gothic 28.

This characterisation of Classical man is close to one part of Bunting's own pantheistic sensibility, that part which is close to Lucretius.

Bunting outlined his own religious sympathies in a letter to Donald Davie:

Snyder wanted to consider me a Buddhist, presumably because I don't want to separate men from animals or trees or stones, any more than Wordsworth did in his youth. St. Cuthbert preached to the birds and the seals, and I dare say he'd have preached to the pebbles if it had occurred to him. Buddhists might sympathise: but their contempt for their own life revolts me.⁹⁵

Bunting's admiration for the Celtic saints of Northumbria as pantheists does allow him to bring virtues associated with Classical man into Northumbria. *Briggflatts* makes only a fleeting reference to the saints: 'Columba, Columbanus, as the soil shifts its vest,/ Aidan and Cuthbert put on daylight' (*C.P.* 53).

Yet their presence suggests that they supply the inverse principle to the melancholic northern warriors. Placed so close to Bunting's invocation of Aneurin and Taliesin we may find in them a Northumbrian alternative to the restless aesthetic of Northern line. Lucretius's therapy, though not his cures for love or his sensuality, and attendant notions of harmony with the natural world have been located in Northumbria, but under the guise of Northumbrian Mysticism. This ideal of Northumbrian Mysticism is analogous to Worringer's own ideal of Northern Mysticism. This allows the South to be presented in the poem, not as the place of man's oneness of the natural world but, in the second movement, as a place where sensuousness and sensuality are virtually indistinguishable. In the North, however, sensuousness and spirituality may be at one.

Thom Gunn has written:

⁹⁵ Basil Bunting, Letter to Donald Davie, 9 October 1975, Basil Bunting Archive, Durham.

In his last section of Briggflatts Bunting is in a position from which he can see the right rhythms as continuing - in the seasons, in the tides, in the scene of the dogs with the pregnant ewes, later in the stars themselves. "Then is diffused in Now". He has recovered those rhythms in the present, and more than Pound has recovered them in terms not only of the imagination but of *literal fact*. This is the sense in which Briggflatts is autobiography: he has arrived at the essential beginnings by returning to his own beginnings. It is not a permanent arrival. The Coda, if nothing else, would take care of such a cheerful notion.⁹⁶

Gunn puts it very well and his emphasis on the idea of autobiography is well chosen, for it is only in such a context that any sense of harmony is reached and certainly not in an organic community. Bunting can never be a full part of the community he observes. There is consolation and not rest.

Briggflatts has an anti-urban bias and presents a history and representation of Northumbria that, not viewed as autobiography, is simplistic and far from representational, as are any politics we might derive from the poem. The relationship between city and countryside it depicts is no more complex than the age-old presentations of court and countryside. It is also deeply conservative. Yet if the poem is read as 'autobiography', it makes sense enough. Epicureans distrusted the city. Bunting obviously did find great consolation in the natural world and had no great liking for an urban environment. Unlike David Jones, he lived out of it when he could.

The Northumbrian history in Briggflatts does work well outside the political context. But it works as legend or parable rather better than history. What historical veracity Bunting may gain by alluding to the precise circumstances of Bloodaxe's death he loses in narrative clarity. To enter into such historical debate Bunting would have had, like Jones, to allow his text to become porous to various conflicting historical debates and to contain a good deal more data. Had he done so, Bunting simply could not have used Bloodaxe in the way that he does, treating him in roughly the same way as he

⁹⁶ Thom Gunn, 'What the Slowworm Said' in Shelf Life: Essays, Memoirs and an Interview (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1993) 53-65.

does a legendary tale of Alexander. The wise reader will not read Briggflatts for the insight it gives into history or politics.

Bunting was not so much a part of an 'Imagined Community' as a creator of one. The Northumbrian aspects of Briggflatts, save the diction and the odd dialect word, are the work of a man who has imagined a community that corresponds to his particular preoccupations. That he achieved very well. There is no doubt a consolation for the lonely and melancholic intellectual in the imagination of such a community. However, part of the greatness of Briggflatts is the candour with which Bunting inscribes the limitations of such a refuge. Such is the honesty required of a successful epitaph.

CHAPTER FOUR

DOUBLE LYRIC AS LONG POEM: GEOFFREY HILL'S *MERCIAN HYMNS*

Introduction

Mercian Hymns, like The True Confessions of George Barker or Dylan Thomas's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog, portrays the young poet as a gifted but thoroughly savage little Briton. As Barker observed of himself:

While other urchins were blowing up toads
With pipes of straw stuck in the arse,
So was I, but I also wrote odes.¹

But Mercian Hymns explores just how such behaviour can provide a link to the more grown-up savagery of an earlier figure in British history, King Offa, who ruled Mercia from 757-796 A.D. Thus Mercian Hymns is full of conscious, and sometimes grimly humorous, anachronism. The eighth century monarch is not only 'King of the perennial holly-groves' but also 'overlord of the M5' and the proud possessor of a maroon sports car (*G.H.* 105).² This is the method of Homage to Sextus Propertius and the later poetry of David Jones.

The sequence of thirty prose poems that constitutes Mercian Hymns shows a marked change in Hill's poetic. The rigid, usually iambic, metres and formal polish, evident in so much of his previous work, are now broken. In their place is a rhythmical prose influenced by Anglo-Saxon and early Welsh verse and a modernism which appears to owe more to the examples of David Jones and Ezra Pound than to T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate. The book's highly paratactic language encompasses a greater range and ambiguity of tone than Hill's earlier verse, whilst its diction relentlessly veers between the

¹ The True Confessions of George Barker (London, Hereford and Harlow: The Parton Press, 1957) 9.

² All references to Mercian Hymns, unless otherwise indicated, are to: Geoffrey Hill, Collected Poems, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *G.H.* followed by the page number in brackets in the text. The titles of the poems may be found in the 'List of Hymns' in Geoffrey Hill, Mercian Hymns (London: Andre Deutsch, 1971), which, unlike Collected Poems, is unpaginated.

demotic and the learned, the Anglo-Saxon and the Latinate. And, as David Trotter points out in his The Making of the Reader, the pathos which so marked Hill's earlier work has in part been replaced by its opposite, an anti-pathos.³

Mercian Hymns was conceived as a sequence of poems rather than as a single work. Thus, in certain respects, the work could be perceived as a liminal example in the genre of the modernist British long poem, for it would seem possible to can examine it as either lyric or long poem. Merle E. Brown, who includes Mercian Hymns in a study named Double Lyric, is happy to place it in the former category.⁴ Defining what he means by double lyric Brown writes that:

this poetry rings in echo of William Empson's notion that poetry is most fully realized in the seventh type of ambiguity, where "the total effect is to show a fundamental division in the writer's mind." What at first seems to be irresoluteness may turn out to be a divisiveness that results from the refusal to falsify by simplification.⁵

This neatly summarises many of the features of Hill's writing which owe a great deal to those ambiguities which were the mainstay of Empson's early criticism. Indeed, when Empson describes the influence of Hebrew on the Jacobean he could be describing the language of Mercian Hymns: 'Hebrew, having very unreliable tenses, extraordinary idioms, and a strong taste for puns, possesses all the poetical advantages of a thorough primitive disorder.'⁶

Other critics discern a more sustained project emerging out of this primitive disorder, the pattern of The Anthemata. According to M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall:

³ David Trotter, The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1984) esp. 70-81 and 209-218.

Whilst Trotter's observations remain interesting and largely valid, this study of Mercian Hymns will tend to concentrate instead upon the way in which much of the apparent anti-pathos in Hill's work can be seen to work towards an underlying pathos.

⁴ Merle E. Brown, Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

⁵ Double Lyric 1-2.

⁶ William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930) 246.

In a sense, Mercian Hymns is a recasting of The Anathemata in more vividly poetic form - a highly concentrated reorientation of Jones's work - just as much as it is an expansion of "The Return." More so, because the specific subject matters of the two British poets are so close to one another, and the kinds of consciousness of local memory and the overlays of successive cultures and languages provide the same problem of synthesis and identity.⁷

John Matthias comes to a similar conclusion when he suggests that Hill, almost despite himself, is giving new life to the 'valid' forms of historical and cultural continuities in an unsympathetic age in the manner of The Anathemata:

Hill, since the death of David Jones, carries almost alone the burden of maintaining in the teeth of unsympathetic times - and very profoundly against his own inclination to remain silent - a visionary poetics in England. After The Anathemata, Mercian Hymns.⁸

There is some truth in both these views of Mercian Hymns and, considered alongside Merle Brown's description, they draw attention to its status as a work which may both be read a sustained meditation and mythopoesis of the matter of Britain, a modernist long poem, and an ambiguous and often ironic series of fragments of lyric prose.

Geoffrey Hill's Mercia is less of a created country than Basil Bunting's Northumbria or David Jones's Britain. It is not so much a work of nascent nationalism as a reflection upon the English nation and its nationalism from a regional perspective. The country described in Mercian Hymns cannot adequately be described as being Hill's own creation or, despite the numerous autobiographical references in the work, his singular preserve. It is the state as experienced rather than the state as wished for that is Hill's subject. Thus the uses and abuses of state power resonate through Mercian Hymns as do the myths, symbols and rhetoric of England and of the British state. There may be

⁷ M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983) 305.

⁸ John Matthias, 'Such a Kingdom: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill 1952-1971' in Reading Old Friends: Essays, Reviews and Poems on Poetics (Albany: State of New York Press, 1992) 151-160, 154.

traces of nationalist nostalgia, but there is scarcely an untarnished affection for England or indeed for Mercia. Furthermore, at the root of the poem lies the problem of whether eighth century Mercia and England can be properly related to one another. Offa's kingdom predates England. Offa, despite the title which Hill invents for his coin, was never really '*Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae*' (G.H. 117). Mercian Hymns continually establishes connections between Mercia and England's subsequent development, but they are always built upon insecure foundations. David Gervais observes that: 'Hill has prevented us from reading out familiar notions of 'Englishness' into our own history. Mercia confronts us with a culture-shock, a reminder of our exile from the past and not of our belonging to it.'⁹ But, at the same moment, Mercian Hymns continually presents the possibility of making such connections between past and present ideas of kingship, leadership and personal and national identity. This is 'Not strangeness, but strange likeness.' (G.H. 133) Again and again Mercian Hymns presents the relationship between past and present, between continuity and discontinuity in terms of an ambiguity.

Empathy and Irony

Mercian Hymns is characterized throughout by the suggestion of a possible failure of sympathy and empathy. This is, in part, a psychological condition of its protagonists: the tyrant and the child. Neither properly feel with or for others save as adjuncts to their own impulses. In Mercian Hymns death and suffering, like history, is something that happens to others and at a distance. Its may be contemplated with grisly relish, as is intimated in Mercian Hymns XVIII, or even ignored save as an inconvenience, as in Mercian Hymns X when Offa/the young Hill is sitting at his desk: 'It was there that he drew upon grievances from the people; attended to signatures and retributions; forgave the death-howls of his rival.' (G.H. 114) Others' grievances may be properly attended to, or perhaps they are merely doodled upon. Death howls may bring forgiveness for a rival's deeds or just the racket his dying makes. But there is a question of sympathy even here. Can a twentieth century child really have shared feeling with an eighth century monarch? A gulf of history and experience separates them. There is also a qualitative difference in their behaviour: boys may have fantasies of absolute

⁹ David Gervais, Literary Englands: Versions of 'Englishness' in Modern Writing (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1993) 245.

power, eighth century monarchs and tyrants possess it. Hill is as aware of the distinctions between the two to as he is of the connections, as is made clear in his choice of an epigraph from C.H. Sisson's 'Seven Oaks Essays':

The conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons: that is, as to its object and justification, for as to its methods, or technical part, there is all the difference which separates the person from the group, the man acting on behalf of himself from the man acting on behalf of many. The technical part, in government as in private conduct, is now the only one which is publicly or at any rate generally recognised, as if by this evasion the more difficult part of the subject, which relates to ends, could be avoided. Upon 'the law of nature and the law of revelation', Blackstone said, 'depend all human laws.' This quaint language, which would at once be derided if it were introduced now into public discussion, conceals a difficulty which is no less ours than it was our ancestors'.¹⁰

By prefacing Mercian Hymns with Sisson's Anglican Conservatism, Hill draws attention to its status as a reflection upon 'the true governance of England' (*G.H.* 109). Offa, insofar as he governs, is different from the young Hill of the poem, who does not. But aside from the technical part of government, Offa may presumably be taken as showing attributes which may be judged by more universal laws. Offa the man appears in Mercian Hymns as a rather unpleasant gangster-like figure. However, it is evident that we are called upon to admire some of his achievements, especially his coinage. Thus there is an ambivalence at the heart of Hill's presentation of Offa.

Empathic and sympathetic failure extends to the engagement of its protagonists with the natural world as in Mercian Hymns XIV:

¹⁰ C.H. Sisson, quoted in Geoffrey Hill, Mercian Hymns.

Dismissing reports and men, he put pressure on the wax, blistered it to a crest. He threatened malefactors with ash from his noon cigar.

When the sky cleared above Malvern, he lingered in his orchard; by the quiet hammer-pond.

Trout-fry simmered there, translucent, as though forming the water's underskin. He had a care for natural minutiae. What his gaze touched was his tenderness.

Woodlice sat pellet-like in the cracked bark and a snail sugared its new stone.

At dinner, he relished the mockery of drinking his family's health. He did this whenever it suited him, which was not often.

(*G.H.* 118)

The first paragraph envisages Offa as legislator as Gangland boss. The last depicts the 'mockery of drinking his family's health', presumably a mockery because Offa had done something brutal or fatal to some of its members. Between these descriptions of Offa as an eighth century cross between Nero and Reggie Kray is a passage which details Offa's care for natural minutiae. Merle Brown gives this presentation a moral weight and believes it to be a criticism of Ezra Pound, and, more specifically, Donald Davie's praise of Pound:

In the fourteenth hymn, Hill is lining up Offa's hatred of and violence against all makers of men (who by making men are malefactors because every new man is another personal threat to Offa) with his tender care for woodlice and snail (Davie, in praising Pound's care for "inhuman forms of life," lumps together wasp and ant, as though they were, for his purposes, indistinguishable). Offa's hatred of men and his tenderness for woodlice and snail are not at all incompatible: together they suggest that Offa himself did not belong to the human family and so they indicate why his drinking his family's health was a mockery he relished. His "care for natural minutiae" flatters his sense of his own capacity for tenderness

and so releases him to be as brutal as possible, ordering mass murders by a flick of “ash from his noon cigar.”¹¹

The argument by Davie to which Brown refers draws these conclusions from a passage of The Pisan Cantos:

The wasp retains its otherness as an independent form of life; it is only by doing so that it can be a source of comfort to the human observer:

When the mind swings by a grass-blade
an ant's forefoot shall save you

For, only if the ant is outside the human mind, can it, as we say, “take us out of ourselves” when we observe it and try to enter into its life. This quality of tenderness and the capacity for sympathetic identification with inhuman forms of life, make up an attitude of reverent vigilance before the natural world, an attitude which, if it is no longer the attitude of the physicist, is still surely the habit of the biologist, in the field and the laboratory alike.¹²

If Davie's description is true of Pound, it is truer of Bunting. In Briggflatts the ability to escape from the self through the contemplation of, and capacity to empathize with, the natural order has a Lucretian and pantheistic importance which goes beyond simple empiricism. Brown's argument that a care for the non-human somehow implies inhuman behaviour seems unwarranted. There is no reason to suppose that Bunting, or indeed any naturalist, is any more inhuman than the rest of us, nor should we necessarily suppose that the more empiricist outlook of Bunting is any less worthy than a post-symbolist aesthetic. But, and here Merle Brown's point is important, it is certainly the case that Hill's treatment of the natural world is very different from Bunting's. It is one mediated through human processes of signification and, as here, psychology and subjectivity. What Offa's gaze touches

¹¹ Merle E. Brown Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 66-7.

¹² Donald Davie, Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) 177.

is his 'tenderness' rather than the otherness of animals. The observations of one sense are immediately converted into another: Offa's gaze does not see but rather strokes himself. Hill simply isn't interested in writing in the way Bunting did; the filters of his own and others' self-regarding subjectivities provide instead his matter.

In Mercian Hymns VI where Hill writes of how he, an only child:

fostered a strangeness; gave myself to unattainable toys.

Candles of gnarled resin, apple-branches, the tacky mistletoe. 'Look' they said and again
'look.' But I ran slowly; the landscape flowed away, back to its source.

(G.H. 110)

Hill's syntax, as so often in Mercian Hymns, allows nouns and adjectives to cluster without verbs, yet presumably the 'Candles of gnarled resin, apple-branches, the tacky mistletoe' may be identified with the 'unattainable toys'. To give oneself to such things implies a primitive, fetishistic, dispersal of subjectivity amongst iconic objects whose resonant power is enhanced by their free-standing in a sentence which allows an Adamic naming. But the spell of 'strangeness' is partly broken by the word 'tacky'. Mistletoe may, like the mud in Briggflatts, be literally tacky.¹³ Yet it also may be tacky in the sense of being vulgar and hackneyed. Writing of tacky mistletoe evokes the imagery of a thousand Christmas cards, sentimental films and advertisements. The whole project of The Anathemata is, in a sense, a journey away from the tacky: the poem starts with pasteboard baldachins, and proceeds to attempt to reclaim symbols, architectures and historical icons from their debased modern forms. The poetry of Mercian Hymns incorporates the fact that a source of natural wonder and an ancient symbol may have lost much of its resonance by association. Mercian Hymns often evokes the peculiar pathos of the loss of innocence and intimacy with nature and iconic objects, of running as a magical landscape flows away 'back to its source.' These toys are 'unattainable' because already some of their particular magic has been dispersed. Hill is neither able to innocently 'look', nor is he able to confine

¹³ Basil Bunting, Collected Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978) 57.

his signs to their magical sources or keep them as private fetishes away from the irreverence of mass-signification.

Similarly, unmediated knowledge of the past may be impeded by subsequent history and mythology. In The Anathemata David Jones took great effort to take his depiction of Arthuriana back before all subsequent versions of it in order to make it more historically real and to free it of later inauthenticities, whilst at the same time relying on the aura created by them, realigning the myth with its source. Geoffrey Hill's brief mention of the Arthurian myth dwells instead upon that very inauthenticity which Jones endeavoured to escape from: 'Tea was enjoyed, by lakesides where everyone might fancy carillons of real Camelot vibrating through the silent water.' (*G.H.* 125). The passive of 'Tea was enjoyed' brings to mind the stilted tones of a report of an outing that one might find in a parish magazine or the journal of a ramblers club. Here are English day-trippers enjoying a national but scarcely native drink. Hill's rather arch sentence suggests the same for Camelot. This isn't the 'real Camelot' that was being excavated by Leslie Alcock at the time. This real Camelot is about as 'real' as that in the Hollywood musical. Not only had the carillon not been invented in the time of Arthur, it is also hardly very English or even British. English church bells are traditionally rung and not chimed. The carillon may have grown popular on the continent but remains a rare sound in England. Yet Camelot is as much a product of the continent and of French romances as anything else. It is the myth rather than the Jonesian *mythus* which engages Hill's attention.

It is a mistake to view Hill's vision of a mythic English past solely as an example of a playful, mocking, irony. It is ambiguity that is the most characteristic note of Hill's engagement with the matter which inspired David Jones. Even at his most playful, Hill holds out the possibility that there might be continuity between the myths of the past and the activities of the present as in Mercian Hymns III:

On the morning of the crowning we chorused our remission 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?'

(G.H. 107)

Offa's crowning parallels that of George VI in Hill's own childhood. All the modern patriotic paraphernalia of coronation is on display whilst the king has metamorphosed into the chef at a barbecue. Yet lying behind the playfulness of phrases such as 'new-risen hat' is the syncretist mythologising of David Jones. Christ, Cernunnos and perhaps Odin coalesce into a presentation that implies the sacral nature of kingship. The processes of consecration and burlesque elide. Hill celebrates and ironises; he holds out the possibility of grand mythic syncretism whilst at the same time keeping a sophisticated aloofness from the proceedings.

This stance of Hill seems like a progression from Jones's writing. It is, though, partly a re-establishing of the irony that was detectable in The Waste Land and seldom reproduced in The Anthemata:

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: 'Stetson!
'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!
'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,
'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?
'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?
'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,
'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!
'You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère!'¹⁴

¹⁴ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poem 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) 65.

Myths of death and rebirth from the The Golden Bough are present but, amidst the world of modern meetings, streets and gardens, it is hard to know quite how seriously we are meant to take it all. In Mercian Hymns as in The Waste Land the reader is left in a similar position in regard to such myths. In The Waste Land, or at least in The Waste Land as presented in Eliot's notes, there is the possibility of a uniting mythic structure that transcends its modern ironic presentations. In Mercian Hymns the position is, if anything, less certain. We are never quite sure whether this is merely a sequence of poems dealing with related matter or whether the Hymns are meant to function as a unified whole. If the work is truly a long poem then the recurrence of such myths relating to Cernunnos or Odin might be seen to form a structure that is similar to that which Jones thought he found in The Waste Land. But it is just as reasonable to conceive of each of the Hymns' engagement with such myths as equally non-committal.

Moreover, it is possible to see such mythical figures as embodying rather different significances in different Hymns. When, for example, Cernunnos resurfaces in Mercian Hymns XV he appears to relate more to questions of Offa's relationship to the Celtic elements within and without his kingdom:

Tutting, he wrenched at a snarled root of dead crab-apple. It rose against him. In brief
cavort he was Cernunnos, the branched god, lightly concussed.

He divided his realm. It lay there like a dream. An ancient land, full of strategy. Ramparts
of compost pioneered by red-helmeted worms. Hemlock in ambush, night-soil, tetanus.
A wasps' nest ensconced in the hedge-bank, a reliquary or wrapped head, the corpse of
Cernunnos pitching dayward its feral horns.

(G.H. 119)

Before the resurgence of mythology in the final sentence, the second paragraph could equally well represent a child making a kingdom of compost or the creation of Offa's Dyke. The ancient land appears to be Wales or perhaps ancient Britain. The worms appear to be sentries. Cernunnos, as whom Offa/Child Hill briefly cavorts, is now, presumably, a presiding Celtic deity rising against Offa.

Nevertheless, the line between a crushing and keeping out of the Welsh and the Celtic and their ability to concuss and take over the Anglo-Saxon, leaves a historical point partly poised. It appears to allow for some historical interpenetration between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon elements. Offa is both attacked and possessed. Here myth is an allegory of a specific historical event. It refers to Offa's relationship with the Welsh and links the psychology of Offa's relationship with Wales to the suburban childhood of a boy in the 1930's or 1940's.

Coins

The humour which is often evident in Hill's expressions of mythical continuity is similar to that of his anachronisms. They simultaneously show how like and unlike the past the present is. In Hill's depictions of coins this same underlying feature is allied to the sense of the failure to gain appropriate empathy or communion with iconic objects. And here it is less Jones than another poet of the first world war, Ivor Gurney, who informs Hill's imagination:

It is hard to guess tales from the sight of a thing
Brought up suddenly to the light, though one may have blood
Of Rome, and as I, all instinct, quick to one's high mood.
So Constantine's coin suddenly upwards turned here, ploughed,
Still left me dumb of word as to what the loser seemed
(. . .)
And the Roman that lost the small penny-thing was most
A wonder to me, though Plutarch I had read, Virgil and others
(English). I could not get to comradeship of him, nor make ring
The coin on stone as once he might have - but stared and stood
Far-off watching the valley, the Welsh hills, with a sting
Of regret . . .¹⁵

¹⁵ Ivor Gurney, Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney, ed. P.J. Kavanagh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 187.

What sets Gurney's 'The Coin' apart from poems such as Housman's 'Wenlock Edge' and also from In Parenthesis is the way in which it depicts the lack of sympathy or empathy with the past and past consciousness. We may reasonably allow this to have been, at least in part, an effect of The Great War which brought into sharp relief discontinuities with the past which Gurney now strives to renew. The continuity that was assumed in the literature preceding the war or even depicting the war, as in In Parenthesis, has become something looked for but by no means easily attainable. It thus invites a pathos evoked by the possibility of a lack of historical sympathy, an exile from the world of one's ancestors. The coin as historical trace invites identifications with that ancestral world, but at the same time insists on the otherness both of itself and of that world. This is the conclusion that is gestured towards in the last of Hill's Mercian Hymns:

And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk to-

wards us he vanished

he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of

red mud.

(G.H. 134)

Offa departs (in a manner which is peculiarly like that of the Good Samaritan) leaving only the material traces that he has left behind. The gaps in the text are like gaps in evidence and empathy. Lacunae now appear in the prose poem which have hitherto been filled by Hill's own projection of a shared feeling with Offa, chiefly through childhood reminiscence. Offa's coins, like the red mud of his dyke, are after all nearly all we have left of the man and may not be enough to provide any real communion with the past.

Nevertheless, the depiction of Offa's coins in the earlier hymns does draw conclusions both about the nature of past and present society. The meaning of the coins in Mercian Hymns is partly related to their status as signifiers. Old coins, more obviously than most things, do not signify what they once did. Part of the attraction of Offa's coins is their mystique, one which a contemporary common

currency does not have. They have been recovered 'Far from his underkingdom of crinoid and crayfish, the rune-stone's province' (*G.H.* 117). The coin is like a word when divorced from the koiné, it is, for the moment, useless because divorced from mass circulation and exchange.¹⁶ It is analogous to those magical words, such as those used in the rituals of the Anglo-Saxons, which tend to be words from foreign languages that no longer signify. Similar to this is the gold solidus in Mercian Hymns IV:

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.

(*G.H.* 108)

For the moment, the only function that this coin will have is as a mole's burden. But this is 'the crypt of roots and endings', evidence for the material remains of one empire but also the roots of another. It shows money, now out of circulation, worthless in nature and yet invested, for a Roman coin discovered will, as artefact, become of far greater worth than it was as currency. It is also an investment for the future: such coins were the models which Offa based his currency upon. They showed evidence of successful minting and, more importantly, the remains of a successful money economy.

¹⁶ Henry Hart mistakenly wants to identify the solidus with the gold dinar which he believes Offa sent to Pope Hadrian. But a dinar is not a solidus. C.E. Blunt, who unlike Hart's source Charles Oman is cited by Hill, has pointed out that it is likely that the dinar was struck for the purposes of trade and not for the purposes of payment to the Holy See. The coin in Mercian Hymns IV may therefore be taken to be Roman. See Henry Hart, The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill (Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986) 168; Charles Oman England Before the Norman Conquest (London: Methuen, 1910) 10; C.E. Blunt, 'The Coinage of Offa', Anglo-Saxon Coins: Studies Presented to F.M. Stenton on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday, 17th May 1960, ed. R.H.M. Dolley, (London: Methuen, 1961) 39-62, 51.

Mercian Hymns depicts the emergence of a kingdom that will eventually bring forth an empire out of the ruins of another empire that both influences and prefigures it. This is consonant with what we know of the Anglo-Saxon sensibility. J.P.C. Kent observes:

the Anglo-Saxons had an intense interest in and admiration for things Roman. 'The Ruin', that famous poem on the remains of Bath, and the *tufa* carried before King Edwin . . . continue with the coin evidence to testify to a feeling far more profound than the qualified respect earned by the more sophisticated barbarians for the relics of Roman greatness. . . . That we are dealing in some way with a policy or state of mind is evident when we consider its effect on the choice of the first coin types. Roman types abound, those of Merovingian Gaul seem to be of decreasing importance. Sutton Hoo shows that this was not due entirely to the small numbers in which Merovingian coins entered the country and the greater availability of Roman coins for copying. . . . The copies have the appearance of having derived from quite a small number of hoards of a limited range . . .¹⁷

The relationship between Roman and Anglo-Saxon empire and culture is central to Mercian Hymns and it is not for nothing that Hill elsewhere describes Offa's coins as 'handsome as Nero's' (*G.H.* 115).¹⁸ And that too has its weight, suggesting that the success of a civilization, at least as far as the provision of a reliable currency, may rely on the arbitrary exercise of power.

In Mercian Hymns XI Hill illustrates how a strong and indeed vicious governance may have been, through its stable currency, of benefit to the population at large:

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutilation if that failed. Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. Value for a sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres.

(*G.H.* 115)

¹⁷ J.P.C. Kent, 'From Roman Britain to Saxon England' in Anglo-Saxon Coins 1-22, 14.

¹⁸ See later in this chapter for a more detailed examination of Roman and Anglo-Saxon elements in Mercian Hymns.

The first sentence presents the double-sided nature of Offa's coinage. Both the image and the coiner himself may be mutilated. Both are evils, the first the evil of the brutality of Offa's regime, the second of the alternative: an ineffective currency. This value of this second meaning is backed up by the statement that this is 'Value for a sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres'. Hill's native town of Bromsgrove was engaged in the emergent salt trade of the Anglo-Saxon period, H.R. Loyn writes:

Consumption of wood in somewhat primitive processes employed for the extraction of salt was high, and at the time of Domesday Bromsgrove alone was sending three hundred cartloads of wood to Droitwich and receiving back three hundred loads (*mits*) of salt in return.¹⁹

Salt was an Anglo-Saxon means of exchange, both commodity and currency. Presumably, the scrapings of byres could be sold as fuel or fertilizer. Hill's sentence is in a long tradition that equates money and defecation.²⁰ Nevertheless, it holds that defecation as potentially fruitful.

Beyond the obvious virtues that an efficient money economy has for trade, two further features of Offa's coins single them out for Hill's attention: the high standard of craftsmanship that went into their making, and the fact that, being made of silver, they were, unlike modern currency, worth the amount they signified. C.E. Blunt writes that:

The delightful variety of the designs on these coins of Offa is the more noticeable when comparison is made with the contemporary issues on the Continent. These latter were purely utilitarian in design and aspired to do no more than declare the name of king and mint.²¹

¹⁹ H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London: Longman, 1962) 106.

²⁰ Francis Bacon, 'Of Seditious and Troubles' in *Essays*, ed. Michael J. Hawkins (London: Everyman, J.M. Dent, 1994) 36-41, 39: 'And money is like muck, not good except it be spread. This is done chiefly by suppressing, or at least keeping a strait hand upon the devouring trades of usury, engrossing, great pasturing, and the like.'

²¹ C.E. Blunt, 'The Coinage of Offa' 43.

That such a utilitarian object should exhibit artistic excellence appears to ally two things often assumed to be incommensurable: utility and craftsmanship. The example would seem partly to overcome the way in which money in The Anathemata is allied with the *utile*, thus making the Jonesian ethos a somewhat more practicable one. The un-devalued silver standard of Offa squares well with the implicit parallel between Offa's currency and the currency of words in Mercian Hymns. Both coins and words stand for something. And words, especially to one with the philological turn of mind that Hill has, may, like money, be debased. A high standard of currency vouches safe its good relationship with the objects it represents. This is the frame of mind that is expressed when Hill declares:

In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice.²²

The reader may wish to question such pronouncements. Is etymology history? History certainly is not just etymology and this kingdom of innocence and original justice seems a little like the dream of an old fashioned philologist of a particularly religious turn of mind. But Hill's choice of 'debasement' brings out neatly the parallels between such a view of language and Offa's coining, which like some Adamic naming allows the word to exactly equal in weight and worth what it signifies.

In Offa's reign the standard unit of currency moved 'from the small, thick coins known as *sceattas* to the larger, thicker penny which was to remain effectively the sole denomination in England (outside Northumbria) for the next five hundred years.'²³ We may reasonably posit an ironic parallel between Offa's coins and the decimalisation of the currency, the changing of the value of the penny to a new smaller coin which was being instituted by the Wilson government. Even more important than decimalisation, however, is the impact of Wilson's devaluation. In his memoirs, James Callaghan, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer was immediately responsible for the devaluation of November

²² 'Geoffrey Hill' in John Haffenden, Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden (London and Boston: Faber and Faber 1981), 76-99, 88.

²³ C.E. Blunt, 'The Coinage of Offa' 39.

1967, makes some illuminating observations regarding the psychological effect of devaluation on the British people:

During the 1960's the pound sterling sign had been turned into a symbol of national pride, only somewhat lower than pride in the national flag, and no matter how compelling the arguments of the economists, press and public regarded devaluation as a major blow to Britain's prestige and a serious defeat for the government.²⁴

Coinage is a symbol of national power and prestige. Mercian Hymns was written at a time when sterling could no longer be believed to be a national currency comparable to the dollar. The dollar, prior to Nixon's own devaluation, could still be redeemed as an international currency by gold. Just as Mercian Hymns' depiction of Offa's parity with Charlemagne acts as an implicit rebuke to Wilson's sycophantic relationship with Lyndon Johnson, so too Hill appears to value Offa's own currency as an implicit rebuke to his prime minister: Offa does not seek to give his people a lecture on 'the pound in your pocket' and provides Hill with a more distant embodiment of an implicit yearning for the monetary and national certainties of a pre-war gold standard.

Violence and Rhetoric

Despite the problem of historical empathy with the past, or perhaps because of it, it is possible, as in the case of Offa's coins, to see Hill's Offa as being a very contemporary political figure. The two modern settings of Mercian Hymns, Hill's boyhood and the Britain of the late nineteen-sixties, mark the beginnings of the post-war Britain we found under attack in The Anathemata and the beginnings of the breakdown of that national consensus. Mercian Hymns implicitly questions those war time myths that made that consensus possible. Hill grew up listening to that same rhetoric which David Jones opposed:

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

²⁴ James Callaghan, Time and Chance (London: Collins, 1987) 200.

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

(G.H. 126)

Public broadcast becomes private rite and Boys-Own tales of war, heroism and helmeted airman become a personal mythology.²⁵ This description of boyhood fantasises in the Second World War makes clear the fact that Mercian Hymns is as much about post-war conceptions of national identity as it is about Anglo-Saxon origins. Mercian Hymns does not present the England of Orwell and Priestley's broadcasts. Nor is it quite the vision of Churchill's. This is a darker, more bellicose, more atavistic England. This is the war through the savage eyes of boyhood where rhetoric breeds imagined violence. But the link between the words of the radio, boyhood dreams and the actual fighting, even though air battles may have been taking place overhead, is by no means a certain one. Contemporary violence is like that of the distant past, always mediated, always recreated through a particular subjectivity.

That uncertain link between rhetoric and violence, and the point at which rhetoric ceases to be responsible speech, is central to the poetry of Mercian Hymns. It has also been a subject of Hill's essays, as in 'Redeeming the Time' where Hill reflects upon these extravagant words:

Here I stand the Factory King, declared King by the most contemptible enemies of the Cause.

Yorkshire is mine! (*Cheers.*) Lancashire is mine! (*Cheers.*) All Christendom is mine!

(*Cheers.*) WE WILL HAVE THE BILL . . .²⁶

²⁵ Hugh Haughton has noted of this passage that: 'it is only here in Mercian Hymns that he [Hill] directly engages with the modern technology of government, and the new media for representing "matters of power and commandment" like the radio - though words like "battle anthems" and "gregarious" send us back into the remote past.' Hugh Haughton, "'How fit a title . . .': title and authority in the work of Geoffrey Hill' in Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work, ed. Peter Robinson, (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985) 129-148, 145-6.

²⁶ Quoted in Cecil Driver, Tory Radical: The Life of Richard Oastler, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946) 197. Cited by Geoffrey Hill in 'Redeeming the Time', The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas (London: Andre Deutsch, 1984) 84-103, 85.

The 'feverish' oratory is that of the nineteenth century Tory, Anglican and Agrarian, Richard Oastler. Geoffrey Hill, who elsewhere has professed himself to be an admirer of Oastler, writes that: 'Oastler's words are decidedly unfortunate' and notes how:

Phrases redolent of heroic Protestantism ('here I stand', 'enemies of the Cause') and presumably chosen for that reason, are degraded into a mummer's rant. The 'classic' oration of a tribune of the people suffers a grotesque 'transformation', 'soiled' by the outflow of a fractured tradition. A rooted man, faced by the uprooted, by a floating population of the new proletariat, is unable to prevent his own words floating.²⁷

Hill's essay goes on to explore how the changes in society evinced by the language of Oastler's speech may be traced in the literature of the nineteenth century. 'Redeeming the Time' was published in 1972. Given that Mercian Hymns was written between 1968 and 1971, it is not unreasonable to posit some connection between the political upheavals in the first of these years and the upheavals in Geoffrey Hill's verse. On January 16th 1968 Denis Healey had announced the government's decision to withdraw from all its East of Suez commitments. This announcement that, in Larkin's words, 'we are to bring the soldiers home/ For lack of money', like the devaluation which precipitated it, signalled a new and reduced status for what was now undeniably a post-imperial Britain.²⁸ It was natural that both English poetry and English political rhetoric should respond to and reflect such changes and seek both to redefine a national identity and find a language with which to do so. Less predictable was the outburst of a Tory Tribune rather different from Oastler and the nature of Hill's poetic engagement with both him and his speech.

On Saturday April 20th 1968 at the annual meeting of the West Midlands Conservative Political Centre at the Midland Hotel in Birmingham, before an audience of press, television crews and eighty-five Conservative worthies, Enoch Powell delivered a speech on immigration. It was to prove not only the most controversial speech of his career but also of post-war British political history. The speech

²⁷ 'Redeeming the Time' 85.

²⁸ Philip Larkin, 'Homage to a Government', Collected Poems, ed. Anthony Thwaite, (London: The Marvell Press and Faber and Faber, 1988) 171.

was a curious mixture of anecdotes from his constituents, of questionable statistics, of populist assertion and of Classical allusion which, although it did not greatly differ from Conservative policy on immigration and race relations, was, in its poetic predictions of civil strife and its implied sympathy for the racialist views of constituents, to prove explosive. On the Sunday night Edward Heath, the leader of the opposition, dismissed Powell from his post as defence spokesman in the shadow cabinet. Heath informed reporters that he had told Powell that he considered the speech to have been 'racialist in tone, and liable to exacerbate racial tensions'.²⁹

With the exception of a few outspoken right-wingers, politicians of all parties condemned Powell's speech as did all but two of the national newspapers. Jeremy Thorpe, then leader of the Liberal party, and others talked of prosecuting Powell for incitement to racial hatred. The Times was particularly vehement in its criticism. Its editorial dubbed it 'an evil speech', whilst elsewhere in its pages connections were made between Powell and both Oswald Mosely and Colin Jordan, the leader of the National Socialist Party.³⁰ Meanwhile it was evident that Powell's speech had gained considerable popular support. On the Tuesday, the London Dockers, traditionally staunch Labour supporters, went out on strike in support of Powell. Opinion polls were to suggest that they were by no means alone in their sympathy. Powell's speech had chimed with the fears, and no doubt the racial prejudice, of a sizeable proportion of the British public. On the Monday night, in an interview with Robin Day, Edward Heath enlarged upon the reasons for his decision to sack Powell:

I dismissed Mr. Powell from the Shadow Cabinet because I believed that his speech was inflammatory and liable to damage race relations in this country. I am determined to do everything I can to prevent racial problems from developing into civil strife, and I am not prepared to accept this sort of language used by Mr. Powell in dealing with this problem.³¹

²⁹ The Times, April 22nd 1968.

³⁰ The Times, April 22nd 1968.

³¹ 'Edward Heath Gives His Reasons for dismissing Enoch Powell' (an edited transcript of Edward Heath's interview with Robin Day on the 22nd of April 1968) in The Listener 25 April 1968, 536.

Powell had not only broached an 'inflammatory' topic, he had also shifted the language and tone of mainstream political discourse in such a way as to guarantee both the loss of his job and widespread popular support.

In speaking not to the House of Commons but as a self appointed tribune of the people Powell made a political impact which had to do less with the ballot box than the letter-box.³² In his speech Powell quoted a letter from a correspondent whose name he withheld. The letter, which came from Northumberland, told of an old age pensioner in Wolverhampton, living in fear of her black neighbours, who refused to let her house to immigrant families, in highly emotive terms:

She is becoming afraid to go out. Windows are broken. She finds excreta pushed through her letterbox. When she goes to the shops, she is followed by children, charming wide-grinning picaninnines. They cannot speak English, but one word they know. "Racialist", they chant. When the new Race Relations Bill is passed, this woman is convinced she will go to prison? And is she so wrong? I begin to wonder.³³

The press were able to find neither Powell's old lady nor Powell's correspondent, and the tale appears to have been apocryphal. However, this letter detailing the misuse of a letterbox, when quoted by Powell, led to his receiving an unprecedented number of letters himself. Twenty three thousand, mainly supportive, letters arrived for Powell by the first post on Tuesday. The next day a further 50,000 arrived and in the ten days following, a further 100,000.³⁴

If we turn our attention back to Mercian Hymns we can begin to see how such contemporary history and politics can inform a poem whose subject is nominally an eighth century Saxon kingdom and its ruler:

³² See Andrew Roth, Enoch Powell: Tory Tribune (London: Macdonald 1970) 339.

³³ J. Enoch Powell, Speech 20 April 1968 in Freedom and Reality, ed. J. Wood (London: B.T.Batsford, 1969) 213-219, 218.

³⁴ R.W.Johnson, 'Stick to the Latin', London Review of Books 23 Jan 1997, 8-9, 9. Statistics vary, depending on the day and the address to which the letters were sent, still all sources agree that the number of letters sent was very great indeed.

The mad are predators. Too often lately they harbour against us. A novel heresy exculpates
all maimed souls. Abjure it! I am the King of Mercia, and I know.

Threatened by phone-calls at midnight, venomous letters, forewarned I have thwarted their
imminent devices.

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

(G.H. 112)

In a manner reminiscent of W.H. Auden's 'Journal of an Airman', an enemy is named and yet it is not specified. Offa names 'them' but who exactly 'they' are remains a mystery. Hill's paratactic style allows his pronouns to float free of any certain referent. The reader is left to deduce quite who 'they' may be. Is the 'them' of the last paragraph to be identified with 'the mad' of the first? Perhaps, but 'they' could equally well refer to another group entirely. But, if we read Mercian Hymns VIII against the background of Powell's speech, its 'venomous letters' and its fear of immigrants, the poem's vague menace begins to clarify. Geoffrey Hill's appendix to the original edition of Mercian Hymns gives this poem the title 'Offa's Leechdom'.³⁵ A leechdom is, according to the O.E.D., a medicine or remedy. But the word suggests a particular type of cure, one which draws out poison, through the use of leeches to suck out blood. If any had claim to be a modern day king of Mercia, the latest incarnation of King Offa, and the alter-ego to Hill it was the M.P. for Wolverhampton South West. Indeed it would be quite possible, though by no means necessary, to supply some precise referents for Offa's pronouns. If we allow 'they' with its alienating undertones to refer to immigrants in the first two paragraphs, other parts of the poem begin to make sense. The word 'harbour' would become one of Hill's puns. The strange novel heresy and its maimed souls would become less reminiscent of a connection between a Fisher King and eighth century theology than the Race Relations bill, a bill which Powell was nominally attacking in his speech and which, so he and his correspondent argued,

³⁵ See 'List of Hymns' in the first edition of Mercian Hymns.

would exculpate immigrants. The words 'tomorrow I name them' could refer equally to immigrants or to the fact that Powell, who was criticised for failing to name his sources, did at last do some naming. When cross-examined by David Frost, he produced the name of one Dr. Bamford, whom he again cited in his speech at the Eastbourne conference and whose signature was used to back up yet more unseemly anecdotes.

And as for the predatory mad, Powell's rhetoric invoked madness to such a pitch that it helped madden the discourse of the time:

Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. So insane are we that we actually permit unmarried persons to immigrate for the purpose of founding a family with spouses whom they have never seen.³⁶

Powell's background as both Classicist and Poet are here in evidence as Powell alludes to ancient belief and ritual - to the gods and to the funeral pyre - in a style that could itself be described as inflammatory. Mercian Hymns too has a good deal to say about madness, of Gods and funeral pyres, of children 'playing havoc', and launching logs onto flames in the manner of the ritual burning of warships (*G.H.* 123), but it is the curious merging with a Classical inheritance that I wish now to concentrate on.

Douglas E. Schoen, who has written the most thorough study of Enoch Powell, his supporters and the reasons for their support, gives a good account of the 'Rivers of Blood' speech:

One of the country's leading political figures, a man of cabinet rank and experience with a powerful aura of cerebral severity, had made all his own the cause of the pubs and clubs, the

³⁶ J. Enoch Powell, Freedom and Reality 215.

bingo-halls and the football terraces. The bitter anecdotes of a thousand Coronation Streets had poured forth from an apparent stalwart of the Establishment and were set amidst the classical allusions so long the hall-mark of the authoritative in British political rhetoric.³⁷

In Mercian Hymns X, Hill describes a child crying over his Latin home work: 'He wept, attempting to master *ancilla* and *servus*.' (G.H. 114) In so doing he also anatomises Offa's use of Latin words to master slave and slave girl. And indeed Hill punctuates his text with Latin titles drawn from charters and the inscriptions upon Offa's coins. But as Schoen makes clear it is not Latin alone but rather the close juxtaposition of the classical and the demotic that gave Powell's oratory both its authority and popularity.

That same ability has also gained Hill the power to command the respect of Seamus Heaney who has commented approvingly on how 'the Latinate and the local' go hand in glove in these poems.³⁸ Heaney roots out Latin etymologies in Hymns XXIII, XXIV and XXV, but it is their coexistence with the demotic which he singles out for praise:

Much as the stiff and corbelled rhetoric of earlier work like Funeral Music and 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' stands up and will stand up, it is only when this rhetoric becomes a press tightening on and squeezing out of the language the vigour of common speech, the essential Anglo-Saxon juices, it is only then that the poetry attains this final refreshed and refreshing quality: then he has, in the words of another piece, accrued a 'golden and stinking blaze'.³⁹

It was the 'vigour of common speech' that got Powell into trouble, that reflected and inflamed racial hatred. Powell related a conversation with one of his constituents who declared:

³⁷ Douglas E. Schoen, Enoch Powell and the Powellites (Macmillan: London and Basingstoke, 1977) 33.

³⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind' in Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978 (London: Faber and Faber, 1980) 150-169, 160.

³⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind' 163-164.

'I have three children, all of them been through grammar school and two of them married now, with family. I shan't be satisfied till I have seen them all settled overseas. In this country in 15 years time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.'⁴⁰

Powell commented: 'I can already hear the chorus of execration. How dare I say such a horrible thing? How dare I stir up trouble and inflame feelings by repeating such a conversation?' The educated Latinate diction of 'chorus of execration' follows hard on the heels of Anglo-Saxon of Powell's constituent but, instead of being used to distance enlightened discourse from the language of popular prejudice, it tacitly endorses the bigotry of what Powell described as 'a decent ordinary fellow-Englishman'.

It is rare, the poems Heaney cites are notable exceptions, that Latin and Anglo-Saxon English can meet in Mercian Hymns without a trace of blood. Mercian Hymns XXVII allows a hail-storm in a strawberry field to become the trace of a maddened god:

After that shadowy, thrashing midsummer hailstorm, Earth lay for a while, the ghost-bride of
livid Thor, butcher of strawberries, and the shire-tree dripped red in the arena of its
uprooting.

(G.H. 131)

The Latin root of arena, properly *harena*, refers to the sand used to soak up the blood at the centre of an amphitheatre.⁴¹ Red earth and the juice of strawberries have become modern evidences of ancient bloodshed brought forth in a clash of Latin and Anglo-Saxon dictions. It was, of course, the use of a vision of blood in Latin poetry which supplied the title subsequently appended to Powell's speech, and it is to that vision that we now turn.

⁴⁰ Freedom and Reality 213

⁴¹ See Vincent Sherry, The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987) 136.

In the eighteenth of his Mercian Hymns, Geoffrey Hill allows his King Offa some sightseeing on his apocryphal Journey to Rome:

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

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

(G.H. 122)

Offa's journey to a decaying imperial capital is conveyed in a decaying imperial diction. Here, unlike in the poems analysed by Heaney, the Latinate is noticeably, in fact deliberately, clumsy. Peter Robinson notes how the style is partly derived from Ezra Pound's Homage to Sextus Propertius.⁴² Pound's poem drew inspiration from Allen Upward's theory of Babu language, that is the misuse of language by the subjects of an imperial power, which may be discerned in the inelegant latinisms of modern English. It is a theory which has an explicit bias towards a Northern outlook, one which Pound largely chose to ignore as he used it to satirise Imperial London and Rome.⁴³ Here Boethius and his language are tortured as Offa watches the death throws of man and empire.

Hill has commented approvingly upon Pound's use of quotation marks in Homage to Sextus Propertius and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, writing that: 'the effect is not that of avoiding the rap but rather of recording the rapping noise made by those things which the world throws at us in the form of prejudice and opinion'.⁴⁴ Pound does not always use quotation marks to convey such an effect. Hill in this poem uses none at all, but the intended effect is presumably the same. Or is it?

⁴² Peter Robinson, 'Reading Geoffrey Hill', in Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work, 196-218, 213-214.

⁴³ Allen Upward, The New Word (London: A.C. Fifiel, 1908).

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Our Word is Our Bond' in The Lords of Limit 138-159, 142.

Christopher Ricks, commenting very favourably upon the poem's first paragraph, has urged us to 'See how "gave rise to" is redeemed from its heartless officialese'.⁴⁵ Ricks's rather religious language implies that words are somehow wiped clean of previous associations by their incorporation in a poem and by Hill's literalization of a dead metaphor. Such a 'redemption' would, one assumes, muffle the rapping sound such phrases make. The diseased language would be made responsible once more.

Enoch Powell's speech did use quotation marks, but his speech pointedly refused to record a rap, to disown such quotations from responsible speech. This was true not just of the words of constituent and correspondent but also of the Classical allusion in the chilling prophecy of the speech's peroration:

As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'. That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed it has all but come.⁴⁶

Powell's use of Virgil was dangerously ambiguous. Powell might claim to have only been warning of future strife, but the heightened pitch of his feverish rhetoric could scarcely be described as an unemotional diagnosis. In the eyes of many, this most famous part of Powell's speech came perilously close to an apologia for the sort of racial disturbances it claimed it was trying to avert. Geoffrey Hill's notes to Mercian Hymns XVIII gloss his own 'To watch the Tiber foaming out much blood' as 'adapted from Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 87, "et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno"' (G.H. 202). And strictly speaking the citation is correct, though any British reader would naturally recall Powell's words. Nor has this entirely escaped the attention of Powell's critics. Peter Robinson has noted the allusion in his essay 'Reading Geoffrey Hill'.⁴⁷ However, Robinson's reading of the poem, where analysis of Hill's use of Powell never proceeds beyond commending the scrupulosity of Hill's

⁴⁵ Christopher Ricks, The Force of Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 286.

⁴⁶ J. Enoch Powell, Freedom and Reality 219

⁴⁷ 'Reading Geoffrey Hill', Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work 212-6

footnotes, has not satisfied as least one critic. Tom Paulin, in his polemical review of Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work, comments that:

Though Robinson deserves credit for tracing Offa's spoor back to the Midland Hotel, he balks at drawing any conclusions from this conjunction of Black Country powers.⁴⁸

Paulin, though he takes the issue no further than an insinuation, has raised an important point. Not only does Robinson fail to comment on any influence of Powell's beyond this one line, and its possible political implications, he also fails to interrogate properly the line itself.

The last two sentences of Mercian Hymns XVIII are ambiguous in both syntax and sense. Should we read hypotactically through the full stop? 'He set in motion the furtherance of his journey to watch the Tiber foaming out much blood'. By allowing the cumbrous circumlocution of the first sentence to run into the second, watching the Tiber flowing out much blood becomes another grisly sight for Offa the matyrologist to drool over and wipe his hands of. The choice of 'watch' would then be felicitous. A Sibyl 'sees' visions; we passively watch race riots on our televisions 'with horror'. But the syntax is pointedly paratactic. Do we then take 'To watch' to be syntactically separate? In which case the line is curiously divorced from the rest of the poem. Is the syntax being used less to redeem the phrase than to make it record a rap?

Is Hill endeavouring to give a line, tarnished by modern political associations, back to Virgil? Hill's notes give Virgil credit without caveat, so perhaps we should look at The Aeneid to help explain the ambiguity. Sir Frank Fletcher gives this commentary on Virgil's lines:

Xanthus and Simois, rivers of the Troad, will have their counterpart in Italian rivers, Tiber and Numicius, destined like them to be scenes of fighting: there will be a Latin instead of a Greek camp against the Trojans . . .⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Tom Paulin, 'A Visionary Nationalist: Geoffrey Hill' in Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State, (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992) 276-284, 283.

⁴⁹ Virgil, Aeneid VI, ed. Frank Fletcher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941) 38.

Powell chose his quotation for a reason. The Cumaean Sibyl tells Aeneas of a civil war caused by immigration. Offa's journey is presumably undertaken in order to witness bloodshed caused by later violent immigration to Rome. In the previous paragraph of the poem Offa, who himself was responsible for the martyrdom of a certain Aethelbert in 794, visits Boethius's dungeon.⁵⁰ Offa's horrid imagining of Boethius's death draws an implicit parallel between Offa and Theodoric who had sentenced Boethius to be tortured and executed and whose greatest achievement was a peacemaking racial partition between Goths and Latins.⁵¹ Offa's greatest achievement was, of course, his eponymous dyke which separated the Welsh and English and which consolidated the borders of the Anglo-Saxon people. For Offa then, a visit to the fallen imperial capital 'To watch the Tiber foaming out much blood' is to have his policies endorsed by history.

Geoffrey Hill's poetic technique allows him to write words which manage to both criticise and tacitly endorse Powell's speech, to let them neither rap loudly enough and thereby be condemned or disowned nor to be fully redeemed by a poetic reworking. Such writing shows the limitations of the ambiguities that are so much a feature of Geoffrey Hill's style. That Hill's response to Powell's ambiguities is in its turn ambiguous gives a certain weight to a charge of irresponsibility on Hill's part. The justification of the line would rely upon an aestheticisation of political discourse and rhetoric which would view such ambiguities as merely the findings of a diagnostician and the poet as involved in a particular Language Game or Speech Act which is hermetically sealed from the effectiveness and responsibility of such discourse. In this context it is useful to compare Hill's treatment of the Virgil line with Bunting's treatment of Catullus's at the end of the Fifth Movement of Briggflatts. There the ambiguity is also partly the result of the parataxis brought about by a strategically placed full stop. But Bunting's lines connect with more than one structure, narrative and

⁵⁰ See F.R. Stenton, Anglo-Saxon England, 3rd edition, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 210.

⁵¹ See Hugh Fraser Stewart, Boethius: An Essay (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974). See also Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. II, ed. David Womersley, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994). Gibbon's account of Boethius is also interesting in the context of this discussion: 'his spirit soared above the consideration of danger, and perhaps of prudence, to be heated by enthusiasm and to confound private enmities with public justice. The disciple of Plato might exaggerate the infirmities of nature, and the imperfections of society; and the mildest form of a Gothic kingdom, even the weight of allegiance and gratitude, must be insupportable to the free spirit of a Roman patriot.' 522

interpretation of the poem viewed as a whole. It affirms that several things are true and may indeed may be true at once. In that sense it is a rich ambiguity. Hill's line does not risk affirming anything. This is the strategy which Hill, citing the authority of Spencer and J.L. Austin, justifies in his essay 'Our Word is Our Bond':

There would seem to be . . . much cherishing prescience as well as shrewdness in Sidney's contention that the poet 'nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth'. It appears at least to offer a compromise whereby the fiction can be given its proper status precisely because it does not claim that it could be 'seriously performed': 'it is that faining notable images of vertues, vices, or what els . . . which must be the right describing note to know a Poet by'. The thought occurs to us that the poet is here being generously propositioned. If he will accept that his art is a miniature emblem or analogy of *res publica* rather than a bit of real matter lodged in the body politic there is much scope for the exercise of serious and refined example.⁵²

This is less a diagnosis of the poetic art than a manifesto. The idea that poetry in general is an analogy of *res publica* is tenuous in the extreme. Poetry is seldom the work of more than one man or woman, its rigours are the rigours of the artist. The *res publica*, on the other hand, is the product of each member of it, their affiliations, desires, doings and institutions. Poetry seldom reflects more than certain aspects of the body politic. Though some poetry may sometimes be analogous to the doings of the body politic at large, more often it is not, nor should we always expect it to be so. The attendant notion which Hill presents, that poetry is not a part of the larger body politic, takes a truth, that poetry tends to have a rather different status than decrees of public figures, and stretches it beyond the bounds of reasonableness. Just as political rhetoric may be poetical, so too poetry may be political and have its engagement with the body politic at large. However, if we accept that Hill is not writing of poetry in general but of his own work, his remarks do have some pertinence to the questions before us. The ambiguities of Hill's allusions to Powell and Virgil are, one supposes, intended to function in the

⁵² The Lords of Limit 143.

manner of an objective correlative as an emblem of the mixed emotions, and of course political responses, regarding race, immigration and national identity in England.

Nevertheless, these problems are as much Hill's as they are England's. The England and Mercia in Mercian Hymns are linked to the individual imagination and subjectivity. This particular vision of England and Mercia is, through its modern political ramifications, one which Hill can only express ambivalently. We can see such ambivalence played out in Mercian Hymns XX, 'Offa's 'Defence of the English People' in which Hill depicts the racial continuities of the English:

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

Coiled entrenched England: brickwork and paintwork stalwart above hacked marl. The
clashing primary colours - 'Ethandune', 'Catraeth', 'Maldon', 'Pengwern'. Steel
against yew and privet. Fresh dynasties of smiths.

(G.H. 124)

Coiled like an adder making a castle of its home, England is Angle-Land, the realm of the descendants of the followers of Weland's trade, of Mr. and Mrs. Smith. Suburban houses are named after ancient battles against Celt and Dane by which the English took and defended their territory. 'Stalwart' describes the strongly built houses. It also refers to their inhabitants, to those who are, according to the O.E.D., 'disposed to take an uncompromising position with regard to political, religious and social questions in general'. Offa's defence of the English people is also Powell's, and in some ways it is Hill's. For Hill's depiction of this version of the English may not be entirely flattering, but it concedes a tragic historic and racial inevitability to Powell's vision.

Andrew Roth, in his book Enoch Powell: Tory Tribune, observed that 'Powell speaks of the 'English nation' with a mystical zeal that is almost Germanic, and therefore un-English.'⁵³ In a speech of

⁵³ Enoch Powell: Tory Tribune 4.

1967 Enoch Powell reacted to General de Gaulle's second rebuff to a Britain seeking entry to the Common market by detailing his own idea of the place of a post-imperial England:

our generation is like one which comes home again from years of distant wandering. We discover affinities with earlier generations of English, generations before the 'expansion of England', who felt no country but this to be their own. We look upon the traces which they left with a new curiosity, the curiosity of finding ourselves once more akin with the old English.⁵⁴

Hill's project in Mercian Hymns, peculiarly among modern poetic constructions of Englishness, is almost identical to Powell's. However Hill's evocation of a pure Anglo-Saxon identity is one which is repeatedly frustrated, not through the presence of other versions of Englishness but because the violent and the modern keep encroaching on Hill's Germanic myth of origins.

In the context of Powell's speeches, and the political discourse which they legitimised, the word Anglo-Saxon itself becomes not so much an historical period as a racial marker in a fractious political climate. In his Eastbourne speech of the 16th November 1968 Enoch Powell declared:

With the lapse of a generation we shall have succeeded - to the benefit of nobody - in reproducing in England's green and pleasant land the haunting tragedy of the United States.⁵⁵

Paul Foot has commented that 'the theme of national disaster was deliberately played upon by reference to poetic clichés - clichés which in this context had interesting antecedents.'⁵⁶ Foot proceeds to give examples from the pages, not of Blake, but of the publications of the British National

⁵⁴ J. Enoch Powell 'Myth and Reality', Speech to Royal Society of St. George 22nd April 1964, in Freedom and Reality 238-257, 255.

⁵⁵ The Times 17th November 1968.

⁵⁶ Paul Foot, The Rise of Enoch Powell: An Examination of Enoch Powell's Attitude to Immigration and Race (London: Cornmarket Press, 1969) 120.

Party and Sir Oswald Mosely's Union Movement.⁵⁷ In Mercian Hymns VII the boy Offa/Hill exacts retribution on his friend Ceolred:

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed him. Then, leaving Ceolred, he journeyed for hours, calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*.

(G.H. 111)

Blake's *Albion* is now a refuge for the violent, not a country but a brand name. Modern political rhetoric has contaminated 'England's Well' and drawn attention to the politically divisive nature of Hill's vision of England, a vision which tacitly equates being English and being Anglo-Saxon.

So whilst there are phrases in some of the Mercian Hymns which continue to celebrate a quasi mystical pathos of origins with distinct undertones of race-romanticism, modern political rhetoric constantly intrudes, which in its turn may question the validity of such a venture.

Processes of generation; deeds of settlement. The urge to marry well; wit to invest in the properties of healing-springs. Our children and our children's children, o my masters.

Tracks of ancient occupation. Frail ironworks rusting in the thorn-thicket. Hearthstones; charred lullabies. A solitary axe-blow that is the echo of a lost sound.

Tumult recedes as though into the long rain. Groves of legendary holly; silverdark the ridged gleam.

(G.H 132)

The inclusion of oratorical cliché 'Our children and our children's children' has allowed an unambiguously loud and modern rapping sound to blend with the echo of a lost sound of violence, and

⁵⁷ Paul Foot, The Rise of Enoch Powell 120-121.

this is a rapping sound which, by drawing attention to Hill's own rhetoric, ultimately redeems much of Mercian Hymns from the charge of an unexamined nostalgia. This may not after all be a true vision of England. It may be a very modern political rhetoric. Perhaps also these are traces of a history that is irretrievably 'lost' and not of racial continuities at all. We are left poised between the pathos of vestiges of the past and a thoroughly modern anti-pathos. Is England trapped within an atavistic Anglo-Saxon inheritance? Is it utterly dislocated from the past and are its reactions merely a collection of myths of contemporary political demagoguery? The balance is an achieved one but it could also be argued that it is both a false and unduly pessimistic one, for it takes no account of different and broader ideas of nationhood or history. Thus it also fails Hill's own standards, for it is hardly a fitting emblem for Britain. Hill's juxtapositioning of an era before the development of concepts such as citizenship in England with modern day England will naturally distort the political questions raised by his poetry. Such a verdict may seem harsh but it is entirely in accordance with the values by which Hill appears to wish his poetry to be judged.

Opus Anglicanum and Conclusion

The question of the intrusion political rhetoric is very much akin to that of the questionable nature of historical empathy and sympathy. Indeed, it could be argued that many of the Mercian Hymns are, in essence, different versions of the same short poem, giving them a sort of unity through repetition and variation rather than those qualities of development which we associate with the long poem. But even such a unity is not quite homogeneous, and, where it is broken, the characteristic stance of Mercian Hymns may be called into question. This is most clear in the three 'Opus Anglicanum' poems and, above all, Mercian Hymns XXV which is written in memory of Hill's grandmother who manufactured nails:

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

The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold. It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks
had furred its low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water floated a damson-bloom
of dust -

not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one thing to celebrate the 'quick forge',
another to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire.

(G.H. 129)

This is not quite an epitaph, though it observes some of the same proprieties. The first paragraph of the poem, which is repeated at its end, draws attention to the spoken quality of this remembrance and, by using an present tense, connects the present and past through the agency of the speaking voice. The life of Hill's grandmother is not a thing of distant, unfathomable, written traces. The way in which the nailshop is evoked by a man who was never there, by way of sights and smells, would suggest that the historical empathy which has been in doubt in many of the other Mercian Hymns is not here in question. Similarly, ironies, which would surely be out of place in such a poem, are now absent. For close relatives, for Hill's immediate familial inheritance, empathy and, through a spoken act of remembrance and close blood-ties, sympathy returns.

This Hymn is placed as the last in the line of three Hymns collectively given the title 'Opus Anglicanum'. The Hymns present scenes in a history of work in Mercia which, their title suggests, may be taken as being representative of England as a whole. Both Offa's Mercia and the modern are vanished. We know very little of Offa's kingdom, and perhaps too much of the present. Mercian Hymns has presented data from both as ambiguous and unreliable. In this rough history however, something appears to be affirmed: not Worringer's but Ruskin's theory of Gothic, and alongside it a view of history not so dissimilar to that of The Anathemata. David Jones too was intrigued by the 'Opus Anglicanum' school of embroidery and its relation to qualities of Englishness in art:⁵⁸

⁵⁸ The 'Opus Anglicanum' school of needlework flourished from 1250-1350 A.D. See A.G.I. Christie, English Medieval Embroidery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

When one tries to conjure up an image signifying this distinguishing quality, a fretted, meandering, countered image emerges. And when further it is remembered that *the* one art which has taken its name from us, is that kind of needlework called 'Opus Anglicanum', we get a further hint, and another in the unique character of the early English miniatures as those of Nicholas Hillyarde (1547-1619). We see very plainly how that deeply native poet, G.M. Hopkins, when he wrote his 'Pied Beauty', was expressing an intensely native feeling. As for the fragments most remembered from the English poetry of the middle ages, again and again the thing evoked, the image lifted up, is a flowery, starry, intertwined image.⁵⁹

David Jones' quest for the elusive English sensibility residing in the Middle Ages is not so far removed from what we find in Mercian Hymns:

In tapestries, in dreams, they gathered, as it was enacted, 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.

(G.H. 127)

Hill may pun on 'riddled' and 'treacherous', but his lines do not carry the weight and contradictory force of Bunting's depictions of Northern Line. They do invoke a hesitancy, a slight questioning of the transcendent vision of 'flowery, intertwined images', but this depiction of the Middle Ages does nevertheless appear as a celebration of craft analogous to the condemnation of nineteenth century drudgery. It is left to the more earthy vision of the second paragraph of Mercian Hymns XXIII to correct the impression of an unrealistically idealistic presentation of work in the middle ages.

The idea of the prevalence of a rewarding, and artistic craft, in the Middle Ages is, however, reinforced in Mercian Hymns XXIV which converts George Zarnecki's account of the 'Herefordshire

⁵⁹ David Jones, 'An Aspect of the Art of England' in The Dying Gaul and Other Writings, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) 59-62, 59.

School' of architecture into an exemplary tale of the Middle Ages, of enlightened pan-Europeanism and loyalty to one's roots.⁶⁰ Of the remains of Shobdon Church, which was pulled down in the eighteenth century, Zarnecki comments:

Its sculpture astonishes us with its mixture of styles and motives. Some of them go back to pre-conquest times and can be paralleled by the decoration of Anglo-Saxon crosses. There are also links with Scandinavian art, while some motives appear to have been borrowed from Reading and others from Western France.⁶¹

Such work appears to signify the coalescing of styles of the high Middle Ages and the ideal of pre-industrial and pre-reformation Christendom and the anti-utilitarian ideal of the mason:

XXIV

Itinerant through numerous domains, of his lord's retinue, to Compostela. 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)

(*G.H.* 128)

Here the Latinate takes on the aspect that Latin sometimes has in Jones, of that of the church in the Middle Ages. Geoffrey Hill is summoning up a diction that itself is roman-esque, with a decoration of

⁶⁰ George Zarnecki, Later English Romanesque Sculpture 1140-1210 (London: Alec Tirant, 1953) 9-15.

⁶¹ Later English Romanesque Sculpture 9.

other more Germanic elements. Zarnecki's description of the doorway at Kilpeck, as Hill's notes to the poem tacitly acknowledge, lies behind the poem:

The jambs of the doorway are covered with thick bodies of twisting snakes, and one of the shafts with warriors intertwining with foliage, while the other is carved with foliage and a pair of doves at the base. The capitals are decorated with animals and a grotesque head. On the tympanum a vine scroll forms a symmetrical design . . . Projecting from the angles of the nave and from the front are large heads of dragons, carved as open work and reminiscent of Scandinavian art.⁶²

The influence of such an account of medieval art on Hill's poem is apparent enough. The confusion of figure with foliage may be seen not just in this section but throughout the poem as in the 'Crepitant oak forest where the boar furrowed black mould, his snout intimate with worms and leaves' (*G.H.* 115) or the 'fire-dragon' of Mercian Hymns XII (*G.H.* 116).

These other examples of work, when set beside the plight of Hill's grandmother, suggest a Ruskinian history of work which may be affecting, but which is also misleading. The suggestion that each of Hill's examples was equally typical of work in its age is simply untrue. Drudgery was not invented in the nineteenth century nor did craft as art or fulfilling labour then vanish. The 'Opus Anglicanum' poems, despite their occasional self-conscious punnings, illustrate a view of English history quite as partial as that which we find in The Anathemata. They also indicate, by delineating boundaries to the apparent failure of historical empathy that is suggested elsewhere in the work, the limitations of such a presentation of the present's interaction with the past in a sustained enterprise. In Mercian Hymns the maintenance of an ambivalence concerning the connection between present and past relies heavily on fragmentation both in syntax and in the overall structures of the work. In the 'Opus Anglicanum' section the individual Hymns combine enough to make what may be termed a narrative. But that is a process which the rest of the Hymns, barring the sketchy history of Offa's life they tell, obstinately refuse to do.

⁶² Later English Romanesque Sculpture 11

Nevertheless, Mercian Hymns XXIV hints at another narrative or, more accurately, a paradigm that lies submerged behind all of the Hymns: the fall. It is 'child Adam', scrumping like a schoolboy and implicitly parallel to the boy in the poem, depicted in this carving of the middle ages. What Offa and the boy appear to share is their original sin, but also the capacity to be saved. Is this poem then an exposition of 'the law of nature and the law of revelation' of the epigraph to Mercian Hymns? The Easter sunrays also catch the image of 'a cross Christ mumming child Adam out of Hell'. Christ is acting in a silent play, in the work of the medieval artist, and because his actions are forewritten. Elsewhere in Mercian Hymns, Christian ritual and festival are seen in terms of a pagan parody. Here, in the manner of The Anathemata, the true form of such ritual is revealed, and once again it is in the theocracies of the middle ages that we find Christ honoured in art. Given Hill's epigraph from Sisson, we may reasonably presume that such processes are also analogous to the governance of the period, and the health of the art taken as an index of the health of a culture. The largely pre-Christian England of Offa, and the fallen modern world fail to apprehend such significance. Here the aesthetic is presented as in accordance with the ethical and political realms.

Mumming is play and, according to the O.E.D., it may also be murmuring. The child Hill is mumming in both these senses in the penultimate hymn:

So, murmurous, he withdrew from them. Gran lit the gas, his dice whirred in the ludo-cup,
he entered into the last dream of Offa the King.

(G.H. 133)

The child may be like Odin, for his action is that of a caster of runes, but his behaviour is also like the murmuring and redemptive play of Christ. Thus Mercian Hymns portrays itself as an act of redemption, for the past and for Offa, but also for the fallen child who is its subject and ultimately its author. This accords with two statements of Hill's, one of which we have already cited (that the 'history of the creation and debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice') and, a judgement of Pound's which he cites approvingly, that the

'Poet's job is to define and yet again define, till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice.'⁶³ In Mercian Hymns our language and perception, as we found in our discussion of the 'unobtainable toys' of Mercian Hymns VI, is no longer Adamic but contains traces of the sins of our fathers and alienates us from nature. There will be no return to innocence in Hill's world but the possibility of redemption through justice. The depiction of fallen words and the possibility of their redemption is portrayed an exemplary poetic act analogous to the art of the Middle Ages, and in tune with the activity of Christ.

When Hill hints at the role of the artist in Mercian Hymns XXIV and XXIX, he does something which is very rare in Mercian Hymns. He allows the different parts of his work to interact and to make his meaning cumulative, to make what is in effect a subject rhyme. This is one of the distinguishing features of the modernist long poem; it was prominent in The Anathemata and was employed with a great deal of success in Briggflatts. That Hill employs it at all, even as obliquely as this, would suggest a peculiar importance in the correlation made. These are glimpses of how the activity of the poet may be justified and how we should view the material elsewhere in the work. We have had cause to question, especially in our discussion of Enoch Powell, the plausibility and ethics of such a method in practice. This was partly because words, as in Hill's use of the line from Virgil, are never quite innocent at root. Hill's faith in etymology is a strange one because, though the history of words may bear the traces of man's sin, their coiners are not Adam. Similarly, the notion of poetic play as Christ-like is implausible to believer and non-believer alike. Play is an activity of adroitness without effect. Christ, in both his words and actions, cannot readily be described in such terms. Hill has aestheticised religious experience just as he has aestheticised the ethical and political domains.

Moreover, whether or not we are convinced by such an account, it does not really provide a structure for the work. Not only is it very tentative in its expression, it also provides little more than a glass through which to see the rest of the poems, and the themes that are continually repeated, aright. And tentative is a very apt description, for, oddly for a poet who uses ambiguity so much, it is tentativeness rather than satisfying ambiguity that is at the heart of Mercian Hymns. Hill's ambiguities, unlike

⁶³ Viewpoints 88 and 99.

those we found in Briggflatts are all upon the surface of his poem. He ironises but does not fundamentally question his own project or his vision of England. There is not enough development in his work for that. The problems, and the implied solution of the exemplary attitude of the poet, are nearly always the same and never allowed to interact, or debate with other parts of the poem. The divisions of his either/or ambiguities are less fundamental divisions in the mind of the poet, or in the intellectual and emotional structures of the poem and their relationship with the world, than a confirmation of the justness of Hill's guarded method. The question of historical sympathy and empathy, for example, is never explored fully. Hill never really puts forward a notion of what might, for him, constitute a valid empathic act and what not. The question, save where Hill does not appear to regard it as an issue at all, always reappears in the same ambivalent manner. This may be justified in terms of the poems when read in isolation but not in the work when viewed as a whole.

There is plenty of northern ornament in Mercian Hymns, but there is little to imply that its use is other than ornamental, save in its relationship to craftsmanship and anti-utilitarianism. Similarly, elements of northern poetic forms are used, but there is little to imply that their use carries the freight of meaning that it does in The Anthemata and Briggflatts. They supply the 'feel' of the period in a way that is close to pastiche. We have raised questions about the validity and desirability about Northern Line as a form, and there is no reason to expect Hill to follow it, or even to have known about it. But he does not supply an alternative notion of form within his poem. Instead, his poem relies on fragmented extrinsic narratives and meta-narrative of race, nation, state and history. Mercian Hymns, though it makes gestures towards a vision very similar to that of The Anthemata in its politics, ethics and aesthetics, never really develops this vision. Whereas the disjointed fragments of The Anthemata strive towards unity, Hill's paratactic sentences and noun clauses for the most part refuse to connect or relate to one another in any but a provisional way. Mercian Hymns could not be said to resist closure in any meaningful sense, for closure is never really an option in a work whose form is so undeveloped. This saves Mercian Hymns from having many of the failings of The Anthemata, the knowledge of which may partially explain Hill's own guarded style. However, it also means that Mercian Hymns suffers from a diminution and circumscription of poetic ambition.

Whilst Mercian Hymns has much in common with the other works in this study, it has taken the English Modernist long poem not so much forward to a post-modern model, as some of the observations made in this chapter might suggest, as back to the works of early modernism. Though Hill's subject matter is that of the tradition of British modernist long poem, its expression harks back to Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley and Homage to Sextus Propertius and, though it is significantly less developed, The Waste Land. Its knowing ambiguity, its irony and playfulness are of a piece with its lack of formal development.

Mercian Hymns does have features that are strongly reminiscent of the aesthetics of Wilhelm Worringer, but not so much the Worringer of Form in Gothic, though this is much more akin to Hill's subject matter, as Abstraction and Empathy as mediated by T.E. Hulme. Not only is the paradigm of original sin particularly Hulmean, but so are the formal construction and underlying conceptions of the work. There is, by and large, no movement through time in Mercian Hymns. Neither Offa nor the child ever develops or grows up. They are frozen like stylized geometric figures in an anti-humanist art work which challenges our capacity for empathy by removing its subjects from temporal process. The constant use of anachronism may be taken to be of a piece with this, for it also postulates the examination of the durable and eternal rather than that which develops or evolves. Similarly, the insistent parataxis, the noun clauses and the iconic use of images and indeed the whole conception of a work that exists principally in hard fragments which resist narrative would concur with such a view. Mercian Hymns constantly struggles with the limitations of this, principally through its ambivalences and ambiguities which suggest that historical discontinuities may undermine such a vision, but also by the brief snatches of an historical narrative in the 'Opus Anglicanum' section.

Nevertheless, the problem remains that Mercian Hymns, by presenting everything as if durable and then interrogating it, cannot properly present the problems of duration or properly delineate the durable. Works such as Four Quartets and Briggflatts present those things which their authors regard as timeless alongside, and often in opposition to, a view of time, whether as clock-time or relentless becoming, which is in opposition to it. The attempt to successfully incorporate both in a meaningful

temporal dialectic has been one of the outstanding features of the post-war long poem, and it is a project which a structured long poem is ideally suited to tackle. It is an attempt which Mercian Hymns does not so much undertake as evade.

The problem is analogous to Mercian Hymns' relationship with the nation state, for once again Hill's poem can only react to but not engage fully with the problems it delineates: it can examine Hill's inheritance but not make any real testament. This is a problem which Hill has partly reacted to in his other long work, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy. It is a rather more structured piece than Mercian Hymns, although its structure, and its verse form, is considerably less modernist. In it Hill's conservative nationalism is set both in another country and the vision of another poet. This distances the political pressures which hemmed in the expression of Hill's inheritance and testament in Mercian Hymns. Comparison between the two poems suggests that Hill's use of the devices of the modernist long poem without the organising forms other poets tried to give it is, like his ambiguity, a result not so much of choice but of the uneasy relationship between Hill's own vision and modern Britain, which will always be a pressing one in a writer who continually elides the personal and the political, and whose principal subject matter is history and the nation.

As an examination of Hill's inheritance and a collection of short poems dealing with related issues, Mercian Hymns has much to recommend it. The evocation of Hill's childhood, the flashes of lyric beauty and the occasional insights into the workings of the nation and state power and individual psychology in the Hymns show the evidence of Hill's talent as a lyric poet. Nevertheless, as a testament and as a long poem, Mercian Hymns is a minor work which never really transcends its constituent parts. Though its limited form and scope may be partly a consequence of the failures and dangers of some of the grander visions of earlier long poems, that very limitation of scope is also an argument for a more ambitious and coherent model of the long poem that is not just the analysis of inheritance but also testament.

CHAPTER FIVE

A FURNACE

PART ONE: STRUCTURE

Introduction

Geoffrey Hill's writings present an ironic and often ambiguous reaction to the pageantry of the nation state and the legitimized violence that maintains it. When Roy Fisher explicitly addresses such topics, his reaction is more amused but less indulgent:

Where enough were gathered together,
national feeling ran high, and concerted cries of
'Death to the national foe!' were raised.
The national weapon was brandished. Though
festivities were constrained by the size of
the national debt, the national sport was
vigorously played all day
and the national drink drunk.
And from midday till late in the evening
there arose continually from the rear
of the national prison the sounds of the national
method of execution, dealing out rapid
justice to those who had given way
-on this day of all days-
to the national vice.¹

Roy Fisher's sardonic swipe at the archetypal national day has its serious point. Nationalism and the claims the modern nation state has over various objects and activities are silly, but they are also sinister. It may then strike us as somewhat odd that the author of the comic, satirical poem 'The

¹ Roy Fisher, Poems 1955- 1987 (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 190.

Nation' is also the author of one of the long poems in this study. Nationalism has been a central preoccupation of all the long poems that we have looked at so far in this thesis. How does a poet who would distance himself from nationalism deal with a form which in Britain has tended towards being an expression of it?

A Furnace is certainly in the tradition of Bunting and Jones. It is a long poem patterned on a visual form, that of a double spiral, which uses a careful patterning of recurring themes, words and images to express a vision of the poet's inheritance, testament and calling. Its themes of identity, history, ancestry, landscape and the nature of the poetic vocation and act and its relationship to a wider society are entirely consonant with such a tradition. A Furnace is a work which, partly through its form and partly through the modes of understanding which it presents, connects Roy Fisher both to earlier modernism and to the Romanticism which preceded it. It is not, as this chapter will demonstrate, useful to view A Furnace as a post-modernist text or as indebted to avant-garde theory and practice to the same degree as some of Fisher's earlier works. A Furnace is in the tradition of the modernist long poem in England, but of a considerably different outlook to any of the other poems in this study. Fisher reworks a pre-existing form for his own ends.

Ian Gregson, one of Fisher's best critics, has noted that in A Furnace 'there is a movement away from fragmentariness towards unity' and that it 'seems more concerned with belief than doubt; rather than dismantling familiar structures of perception, it reinvigorates them and uses them for its own ends.'² A Furnace seeks to uncover from historicised landscapes its own realm of the sacred, its own 'anathemata', and it does this within a belief system which, at first glance, might seem analogous to Jones's use of Spengler. The poem's 'Preface' acknowledges it to be 'an homage, from a temperament very different from his, to the profound, heterodox and consistent vision of John Cowper Powys' (*F.* vii). To state that a poem is an homage to a consistent vision indicates an attempt at a consistent vision in the poem itself. This use of Powys, though acknowledged by Fisher's critics, has been almost unexamined, yet it permeates the whole of A Furnace. While it is possible to make sense of the poem without knowledge of Powys's works and ideas, the work becomes a good deal less

² Ian Gregson, 'Roy Fisher: A Furnace and Before', *Verse* 6, 1 (1989) 60-69, 63.

obscure with that knowledge. For it is Powys's beliefs that, in the main, are presented as alternatives to scepticism. They facilitate Fisher's use of themes and materials, principally those we have found to be characteristic of the long poems of the British modernists.

A Furnace is an engine devised, like a cauldron, or a still, or a blast-furnace, to invoke and assist natural processes of change; to persuade obstinate substances to alter their condition and show relativities which would otherwise remain hidden by their concreteness; its fire is Heraclitean, and will not give off much Gothic smoke.³

The title of Roy Fisher's long poem is a metaphor for processes that occur within it. Andrew Crozier points out its biblical resonance in terms of Revelations IX: 'and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as a smoke of a great furnace'. This is partly a poem of Apocalypse.⁴ We may add to Crozier's suggestion of a Biblical resonance in the title Daniel 3 where Nebuchadnezzar sets up a golden image and commands that 'whoso falleth not down and worshipeth, that he should be cast down into the midst of a burning fiery furnace'; for the poem is also an inquiry into the nature of monotheism and the worship of idols. Nevertheless, despite resonances of the Bible and of Blake's prophetic books, the metaphor of the furnace as detailed in Roy Fisher's 'Preface' refers principally to industrial process. It creates as it destroys, for it is an engine of change, though in so doing it may show substances in a light hitherto unseen. Its element will be fire, and this will be seen in the terms of Heraclitus. For Heraclitus, the world is 'the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is and always will be, an everlasting fire, being kindled in measures or put out in measures.'⁵ The only constant is that there will be change; for just as a man cannot step in the same river twice, so too the world is constantly evolving.⁶ This is as true of the world as it is of the process of exchange in commercial transactions for: 'the totality of things is an exchange for fire, and fire an exchange for all things, in

³ Roy Fisher, A Furnace (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) vii. References to this work hereafter are signified by abbreviation *F.* followed by the page number in brackets in the text of the chapter.

⁴ Andrew Crozier, 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's A Furnace', P.N. Review 18, 3 (1992), 25-32, 26.

⁵ Heraclitus, Fragments, ed. and trans. T.M. Robinson (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1987) (Fragment 30) 25.

⁶ Heraclitus (Fragment 91a) 55.

the way goods [are an exchange] for gold, and gold for goods.' Moreover, Heraclitus declared that the world is one of opposites and 'what opposes unites, and that the finest attunement stems from things bearing in opposite directions, and that all things come about by strife.'⁷

Nevertheless, the central metaphor is an examined one. A Furnace also explores what may resist Heraclitean process: it posits the breaking down of apparent opposites, whether between subject and object, 'mind and language' (*F.16*) or life and death, and holds out the possibility of an end to strife, whether in the stillness that characterizes the 'Core' of the poem or in certain moments of revelation. Likewise, 'timeless identities' (*F. 15*) or 'ghosts/ innocent of time' (*F. 18*) are the poem's concern in equal measure to those people, buildings and landscapes that have are conditioned by the unceasing processes of change. Thus the metaphor of the poem's title is itself engaged in a dialectical process with its opposite in a way that is perhaps more Heraclitean than Heraclitus himself.

Introit

The 'Introit', with its title's religious overtones, stands apart from the main body of A Furnace and acts by way of an introduction: it is a preparation for the central rite. As Fisher writes in the 'Preface', it 'identifies the poem's preoccupations in the sort of setting in which they were forcing themselves on me at the time I wrote the pieces which were to be published as City in 1961', and as such provides a bridge to, and reappraisal of, Fisher's earlier writings. The poem opens thus:

November light low and strong
crossing from the left
finds this archaic
trolley bus, touches the side of it up
into solid yellow and green.

This light is without
rarity, it is an oil,

⁷ Heraclitus (Fragment 8) 15.

amber and clear that binds in
this alone and suggests
no other. *It is a pressing*
medium, steady to a purpose.

(F. 1) (My italics)

These are free verse lines, but the nature of their prosody is rather different from that of the other poems in this study. Though there is some alliteration, it is not nearly as insistent as we find in 'northern' forms. Indeed, assonance is considerably more marked in A Furnace than alliteration. There is a patterning of short and long O and I sounds throughout the two paragraphs, as indicated by the italics. There are also assonances from one line to another that do not repeat, such as that between trolley and *green*. There is an extensive patterning of sound, but it is generally of a different order to that in the other works we have studied, as is Fisher's diction: Fisher uses standard English rather than a Northern or philological recasting of English.

Fisher's sentences are characterized by hypotaxis, and there is none of the extreme parataxis of much of Mercian Hymns and The Anathemata. Though it is not much in evidence in the passage just quoted, elsewhere in this section (as in the next two sentences which stretch over three verse paragraphs) and the poem as a whole, Fisher's syntax is often at the opposite extreme to Geoffrey Hill's. Whereas Hill makes much use of the barely grammatical noun clause, the sentence most characteristic of Fisher is long and complex, often involving the near dissolution of the subject in the mass of related subclauses which follow. The characteristic sound of Fisher's poetry is not so much the 'sound of sense' as the sound of making sense. Similarly, the use of repetition in A Furnace principally conveys an attempt at elaboration and qualification. 'November light' becomes 'This light' in the second paragraph. This is partly attempt to convey immanence; but it is also an attempt at refinement and at describing just what 'this' entails, even to the point where such analysis is in danger of breaking down. It is this light alone that the repetition describes, it is of itself, it 'suggests/ no other.' But what is 'this alone'? Presumably it is 'this archaic/ trolley bus', but it also seems to be that very quality of thisness which is self sufficient unto itself and the experience it encompasses.

Elsewhere, Fisher repeats words commonly used to start subordinate clauses. In describing the effect of the passing of the stages of 'the street,/ each bred off the last as if by/ causality', he writes:

Because
of the brick theatre stuck next to the roadside
the shops in the next
street run in a curve, and
because of that there is raised up
with red lead on its girders
a gasworks
close beyond the roofs,

and because of the fold of the
folding in of these three to me
there comes a frame tower with gaps
in its corrugated cladding
and punched out of the sheets high
under its gable
a message in dark empty holes, **USE GAS.**

(*F.* 3)

The street turns into a syntax with its own insistent rhythm, a syntax which is almost analagous to conventional prosody, and which leads us towards a cadence that somehow is meant to explain what has come before it. Due to the logic of syntax, this device sets up expectations that can, like an inverted foot, be set aside as in the virtuso opening of 'Authorities', where the weight of 'if' clauses finally collapses on the line 'if not, then not' (*F.* 20). This logic allows a particular 'weight of attribution' (*F.* 20) to be put on the end of the final clause which the matter in it would not naturally be accorded.

What is the significance of the message 'USE GAS', which is, after all, just the wording of a particularly unimaginative piece of advertising? It is unlike 'the figure 5' in William Carlos Williams's poem 'The Great Figure' which signifies no more than:

the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck⁸

It points instead to a potential explanatory status in the sentence and the possibility of its being read metaphorically. The gas in question could be the fuel for the furnace of Hill's title which, given that this was 1958 and the gas in question would have been coal gas, in turn was produced from such a process. Does the whole street rely on the industrial and commercial processes that the injunction to use gas conveys? Similarly, are the 'dark empty holes' merely descriptive or are they indicative of a dark and empty state indicated by the words 'USE GAS'?

Initially, the reader, like the narrator, can only understand a 'passive taking-in' which 'will have itself understood only/ phase upon phase' (*F.* 2). Yet the section moves towards a stressing of the agency of human understanding. This understanding detects a poetry of metaphorical significance in the landscape, even though the narrator can, for the moment, only detect its trace:

Something's decided
to narrate
in more dimensions than I can know
the gathering in
and giving out of the world on a slow

⁸ William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Vol. 1, 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986) 174.

pulse, on a metered contraction
that the senses enquire towards
but may not themselves
intercept. All I can tell it by
is the passing trace of it
in a patterned agitation of
a surface that shows only
metaphors. Riddles. Resemblances
that have me in the chute
as it meshes in closer, many modes
funnelling fast through one event,
the flow-through so
dense with association
that its colour comes up, dark
brownish green, soaked and
decomposing leaves
in a liquor.

(F. 3-4).

The capacity for understanding can as yet not be fully realised. Association is so dense as only to be visualised in terms of an image of autumnal opacity. Yet it is clear that this is only a temporary impasse. The capacity remains for the narrator and reader to perceive landscape in such a way that they will be able to discern and delineate its metaphorical and associational significances. This capacity is one which the poem as a whole will try to render, as it will the intuition of 'more dimensions than I can know'.

The journey on the trolleybus plays with dimensions, for it can be read as a phenomenological reworking of Einstein's theory of relativity. To perceive buildings from a moving trolleybus is to perceive them not spatially but temporally: one building appears and recedes after another and their

relationship with one another may thus be understood in terms of their succession. Time and matter become interchangeable as the combination of light and mass becomes equivalent to energy:

A deserted, sun-battered theatre
under a tearing sky
is energy

(F. 2)

The state of the thing observed is dependent on one's viewpoint, and is here contingent upon the agency of speed and light. The intimations provided by post-Newtonian physics that move beyond a simple materialism have become a part of Fisher's understanding of the world in a way that is uncommon for contemporary poets. Reflecting on Donald Davie, Fisher has commented: 'how anybody after Einstein can separate history from geography puzzles me somewhat.'⁹ And this is also a key to the passage. The associations and metaphors that are as yet undisclosed bear witness to a temporal perspective, to histories that are yet to be made sense of. Similarly, the time of the mind and the time of the world's appearances are noted as being different:

Whatever
approaches my passive taking-in,
then surrounds me and goes by
will have itself understood only
phase upon phase
by separate involuntary
strokes of my mind, dark
swings of a fan-blade
that keeps a time of its own,
made up from the long

⁹ Roy Fisher and Robert Sheppard, Turning the Prism: An Interview with Robert Sheppard (Birmingham: Toads Damp Press, 1987) 18.

discrete moments
of the stages of the street,
each bred off by the last as if by
causality.

(*F.* 2-3)

Fisher's syntax is somewhat ambiguous, but presumably the strokes of the mind are made up of stages of the street, though the interpolation of the description of the 'swings of a fan blade' indicate that this is a conclusion arrived at not directly but through a process of association. This interconnection, though initially tenuous, highlights Fisher's interest in the temporal relations between mind and matter that will be central to the poem. For the initiation of 'Introit' shows the coming into being of a mature solution to problems that remained largely unresolved in his first long work, City.

Indeed, this section begins roughly at the point where City left off. In the last prose section of City Fisher wrote:

I want to believe in a single world. That is why I am keeping my eyes at home while I can.
The light keeps on separating the world like a table knife: it sweeps across what I see and suggests what I do not. The imaginary comes to me with as much force as the real, the remembered with as much force as the immediate.¹⁰

At the opening of A Furnace both image and perception have been altered:

old industrial road,
buildings to my left along the flat
wastes between townships
wrapped in the luminous
haze underneath the sun,

¹⁰ Roy Fisher, Poems 1955-1987 29.

their forms cut clear and combined
into the mysteries, their surfaces
soft beyond recognition;

and as if I was made
to be the knifeblade, the light-divider,
to my right the brilliance strikes out perpetually
into the brick house-fields towards Wolverhampton,
their calculable distances
shallow with detail.

(F. 1-2).

In the first passage, it is the light that divides the world; in the second, it is the perceiving subject that appears to be the agent of division between the world of what is clearly seen and the domain of the imagined, between the soft depths of the mysteries in the haze and the shallow, calculable distances to the right of the trolley bus. This process of perception does not find a single world - and as the passage goes on the world's divisions appear more than just the dual opposition of real and imaginary - but there is no sense of unease about such a perception as there is in City. Indeed, the multiple nature of the world is to be a principal subject of the poem.

Landscape Superimposed upon Landscape

In his late romance Atlantis, John Cowper Powys describes the figurehead of a boat as representing the ruler of Atlantis:

This mysterious Being, whose extraordinary features were not those of a man or a god or a beast or a monster, was the author of a long poem about the beginning and the end of everything, a poem which still remains the greatest oracle of man's destiny existing upon the earth.

The unfortunate thing about this tremendous hieroglyph is that by reason of the drowning of the continent that produced it, and by reason of its being chained with golden chains to the altar of the Hundred and Twenty-Five Gods of that sunken continent, only those who were permitted to read it before the waves covered the altar to which it was bound know anything of its secret; and among these only the Seven Wise Men of Italy have so much as begun to penetrate its contents; and these have only revealed the fact that it is landscape superimposed upon landscape rather than rhythm upon rhythm that is the method of its message.¹¹

Roy Fisher makes mention of this notion of 'landscape superimposed upon landscape' both in the 'Preface' to the poem (*F.* vii) and in the poem itself and acknowledges the inspirational quality of Powys's description, which is a fairly accurate description of A Furnace. It is a 'long poem about the beginning and end of everything' which superimposes 'landscape upon landscape rather than rhythm upon rhythm.'

Through a poetic that sets one landscape against and upon another in an investigation of beginnings and endings, genesis and apocalypse, a series of discrete and interpenetrative revelations is set in train. A Furnace attempts to chart the movement towards and back from the grave both in personal terms and in terms of cultures and their material manifestations. The perception of this through the medium of 'landscape superimposed upon landscape' is detailed in the sixth section of A Furnace:

*Landscape superimposed
upon landscape. The method
of the message lost
in the poetry of Atlantis
at its subsiding to where all
landscapes must needs be
superimpositions on it. All landscapes
solid, and having transparency*

¹¹ John Cowper Powys, Atlantis (Macdonald: London, 1954) 336.

in time, in state.

(F. 41)

The passage is first a description of Powys's lost poem. But it is also a statement of the way in which landscapes may be perceived as having 'transparencies in time, in state.' This vision regards each landscape as historically charged and as palimpsestic. Atlantis may be taken to be exemplary. The mythical Atlantis evoked by Powys and by popular representation owes little to Plato: it is the primal landscape and city, lost and seemingly unrecoverable. Landscapes subsequent to it are superimpositions both because of their geographical position - no city is deeper than sunken Atlantis - and because of their temporal position. All civilizations are posterior to that first civilization and therefore partly prefigured by it and partly palimpsestic upon it. They have their own historical solidities and also their transparencies. Thus the notion of 'Landscape superimposed upon landscape' indicates not only the method of juxtaposition and assemblage in A Furnace whereby different verse paragraphs detailing different landscapes are placed one alongside another in order to achieve new insights, but also the mode of perceiving each landscape as having various identities contingent upon the various histories which have shaped it. Roy Fisher's means of bringing this about are in their turn various.

There is not much in the way of an historical landscape in Mercian Hymns. The traces of history that impinge upon the present in Mercian Hymns are, by and large, names or discovered artefacts. The coin, which manages to be both artefact and name is ideal for Hill's purposes. In A Furnace the case is different. Indeed the endurance of names is of considerably less importance to Fisher than the endurances *and* changes occurring in the landscapes he describes, as in 'The Many' when he delineates the 'Transit of Augusta Treverorum/ to Trier' (F. 37). A good deal of the ambiguities in Hill's text relate to the fact that through historical change a signifier has changed its signified. How then are Albion the Sandlorry and Ethandune the suburban house to relate to past history? The connection is one bred of nomenclature. There is an obvious continuity of signifier and an obvious discontinuity of the signified. This is quite as much a problem of naming as it is of the historical understanding. Fisher, however, is less interested in the name than in the evolution of the place

described: Augusta Treverorum/ Trier is 'a location/ busy with evolutionary forms' (F. 37). The method of A Furnace is not characterised by the either/or ambiguity or the absolute choice between change and continuity which dissolves into a mist of uncertainty, but by a view of the processes of history that would not make such a choice between absolute discontinuity and absolute continuity with previous historical manifestations. Rather than either/or it is a case of both/and.

This point of view is enhanced by Fisher's descriptions of the evolution of an urban landscape. In the description of Trier's evolution we find a history of urban growth, and then the reversion of a site to nature and at last a medieval city:

It sat

smaller than the Roman city, quite
differently shaped
and orientated; entirely grown
out of the landmarks of that city,
and ignorant of it.

(F. 38)

The medieval city is both distinct from and conditioned by the older city: it is a city with both its solidities and transparencies where one city has superimposed itself on another, its spatial rhythms, as it were, add harmony and counterpoint to the remains of those already established. It may be ignorant of the previous city but it cannot avoid that city's continued traces.

What is true of Fisher's narratives of landscape is true also of passages viewed from a single temporal perspective. Thus in Fisher's description of Gradbach Hill we encounter:

the waters joining
by Castor's Bridge, where the bloomery

used to smoke up into the woods
under the green chapel;
the hill,
stretching down west from Goldstitch
a mile from my side yard, shale measures
on its back and the low black spoilheaps
still in the fields . . .

(F. 10)

There is, rarely for A Furnace, a literary reference here, for Gawain and the Green Knight is explicitly evoked. Yet, as Fisher's note informs us, the cleft is now called Lud's church. Relics of early industrialism and the early medieval transformation from paganism to Christianity are superimposed upon each other. The disused furnace, the bloomery and the pagan-cum-Christian chapel belong to different times and carry different resonances. Yet, in a world that follows the working methods of collage, they are juxtaposed, each commenting on the other and the processes and beliefs that gave rise to each building.

Double Spiral

Certain of Fisher's early works, most notably The Cut Pages and The Ship's Orchestra, largely conform to what Marjorie Perloff has described as 'The Poetics of Indeterminacy'.¹² Indeed, though here he uses the term with a slightly different weight to Perloff, Fisher, in an early interview, spoke of how he was 'interested in getting an effect of indeterminacy'.¹³ Like William Carlos Williams in Patterson, Roy Fisher has in A Furnace written a poem which is considerably less 'open' than any of his preceding long works. There are a variety of forms and unifying themes, and a symbolic structure may be discerned. This is what David Jones attempted and failed to do in The Anathemata.

¹² Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1981).

¹³ Roy Fisher, Interview with Jed Rasula and Mike Erwin (19th November, 1973), in 19 Poems and an Interview (Matlock: Grosseteste, 1975) 12.

The Anthemata held open the prospect of a poem modelled upon a visual form containing assembled pieces relating to history and to the redemption of the present through interaction with the past. Although A Furnace is in many ways a very different work from The Anthemata, its project is similar. The visual form, however, is much more straightforward than Northern Line and Fisher is much more explicit in his description of its nature:

A Furnace is a poem containing a certain amount of history, and the sequence of its movements is based on a form which enacts, for me, the equivocal nature of the ways in which time can be thought about. This is the ancient figure of the double spiral, whose line turns back on itself at the centre and leads out against its own incoming curve. After the 'Introit', which identifies the poem's preoccupations in the sort of setting in which they were forcing themselves on me at the time I wrote the pieces which were to be published as City in 1961, the seven movements proceed as if by a section taken through the core of such a spiral, with the odd-numbered ones thematically touched by one direction of the spiral's progress, and the even-numbered so touched by its other, returning, aspect; the exception is the fourth section, which is at the centre and thus has the theme of stillness.

(*F.* vii-viii)

Like Northern Line, the form is in part expressive of the poem's matter. It enacts 'the ways in which time can be thought about'; the even sections of the poem express the forwardly directed aspects of that process whilst the odd numbered sections express the returning aspects.

The figure, as Ian Gregson has pointed out, is emblematic of its 'explicitly Romantic provenance' and can be linked to what spiral form meant to the romantics.¹⁴ M.H. Abrams has written:

The self-moving circle . . . rotates along a third, a vertical dimension, to close where it had begun, but on a higher plane of value. It thus fuses the idea of a circular return with the idea of linear progress, to describe a distinctive figure of Romantic thought and imagination - the

¹⁴ 'Roy Fisher: A Furnace and Before' 64.

ascending circle, or spiral. Hugo von Hofmannstahl's later description of this design is terse and complete: "Every development moves in a spiral line, leaves nothing behind, reverts to the same point on a higher turning."

According to this view, the reunition or synthesis which follows after any division into contraries constitutes a "third thing" which is higher than the original unity which it has overcome.¹⁵

Thus the process of the double spiral will not only be interested in the delineation of Heraclitean opposites, but will also be illustrative of ways of moving beyond them.

Double Spiral as Symbol

The double spiral is explicitly evoked as an image at several times in the poem, most notably in the 'Core' section. But what is this elusive double spiral? Though Fisher is never explicit in the text, the particular ancient double spirals which Fisher had in mind are those at Newgrange in Ireland.¹⁶ This accords exactly with the description of the carving of the spiral and the chamber in 'Core'. Newgrange is a prehistoric burial chamber of some size in which there is a roof box which is aligned with the first rays of the sun at the winter solstice. The rising sun casts its rays upon a stone at the end of the recess on which three double spirals are carved.¹⁷ In addition, the double spiral, when coupled with the references to genes in the poem, inevitably calls to mind a two dimensional rendering of the double-helix, the self replicating structure of DNA and RNA whose two strands run in contrary directions. One suspects that Fisher also intends us to think of the double spiral as having the same qualities as the double helix. This initially seems implausible, for the double helix is three dimensional. However, the correspondence between the two appears more reasonable if one looks at the first X-ray pictures of DNA. In, for example, the X-ray fiber diagram of Structure A of deoxyribonucleic acid in Watson and Crick's 'The Structure of DNA', DNA is a double spiral with

¹⁵ M.H. Abrams, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W.W. Norton, 1971) 184.

¹⁶ This was confirmed by Roy Fisher in a phone conversation with the author.

¹⁷ See, Michael J. O'Kelly (with Claire O'Kelly and others), Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

an absence at its core.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is a correspondence that makes sense only if we regard the correlation between the double spiral and double helix as strictly metaphorical. It is reasonable to state that DNA embodies the continuity of all life with its first manifestation and our own life with our own origin, that at the same time genetic activity looks both forward and backwards. It is fanciful to suggest that the structure of DNA literally embodies the forward and backwards drives of life or that neolithics in Ireland literally inscribed DNA; and it is simply mistaken to regard it as strictly synonymous with the genes.

But Fisher is being reasonable and not fanciful: his correspondences work analogously rather than synonymously. This is born out in the specificity of the terms in which the carving of the double spiral is described:

We're carving the double spiral
into this stone; don't
complicate or deflect us.
We know what we're at.

We're letting the sun perceive
we've got the hang of it.

Write sky-laws into the rocks; draw
the laws of light into it and through it.

On the door under the ground
have them face inwards
into what might otherwise seem dark.

(F. 29)

¹⁸ J.D. Watson and F.H.C. Crick, 'The Structure of DNA' in James D. Watson, The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of DNA (New Critical Edition), ed. Guther S. Stent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981) 257-274, 260 (Figure 2).

The carving of the spiral is represented in terms of the path of the sun and the celebration of its mastery by the creators of Newgrange. It is reasonable to conjecture that the process of advance and retreat in the double spiral has something to do with the dying and rebirth of the sun at the winter solstice. The inscribing the of laws of light into the darkness is an accurate description of what happens at Newgrange:

A curious fact encountered during the excavations was that decoration was discovered on a number of surfaces that in the normal course would be completely hidden. Some of these slabs were in or above the passage roof; other decorated areas were found near to the bottom of orthostats, close to or even below ground level. One profusely decorated stone was built into the roof of the chamber as a corbel and only a small part of the ornament can now be seen. In addition, at least five kerbstones are decorated on their back surfaces; in the case of two of them . . . the ornament covers the entire area.¹⁹

The double spiral is evidently connected with rites of the dead: Newgrange was a burial chamber. The pattern of the retreat and return of the sun is hidden in the darkness of the roof of the chamber in order to show the power of the dead to return. And this is, in its way, analogous to DNA which holds the matrix for replication and continuation of the dead in life.

The imaginative journey in the returning aspect of A Furnace is back through immediate ancestors towards remote ancestors and towards an identification with the non-human world. The action of 'the ghosts' grown children' in the second section of the poem is

Genetic behaviour,

scrabbling, feeling back across the spade-cut

for something; the back-flow of the genes'

¹⁹ Claire O'Kelly, 'The Corpus of Newgrange art' in Newgrange: Archaeology, Art and Legend 146-153, 148.

forward compulsion suddenly
showing broken, leaking out, distressed.

(F. 18).

The classic evolutionary model, revealing something of its nineteenth-century origins, is one in which the Descent of Man is also viewed as an ascent. Nevertheless, the possibility of a regression has been an equally potent notion. John Cowper Powys, unlike older contemporaries such as Conrad, did not fear such a regression to the primitive but, as a great admirer of Rousseau, positively welcomed it. He wrote that 'It is sheer stupidity not to be constantly thinking back, down the enormous tracks of time that separate us from our ancestor the cave-man.'²⁰ We may add to this a still deeper regression, for:

In loneliness a human being *feels himself backward*, down the long series of his avatars, into the earlier planetary life of animals, birds, and reptiles, and even into the cosmogonic life of rocks and stones Every personal life has vast unexplored regions of sub-human existence within the circumference of its being, into which, in certain moods and under certain conditions it has the power of retreating.²¹

It is reasonable to believe that Fisher wished the double spiral as double helix to convey this power of retreating, showing 'the back flow of the genes'/ forward compulsion'. This view is reinforced by such lines as 'that you are dead/ turns in the dark of your spiral' (F. 18), which stress the double spiral as something each of us possesses.

Double Spiral as Form

The patterning of the poem on the model of the double spiral is like a patterning of movements in a musical work. Themes and motifs develop throughout the piece but their mood is conditioned by their position in the poem, with both directions of the double spiral representing a way of looking at time and the world. We may enlarge Fisher's comments in the 'Preface' by stating that the forward

²⁰ Obstinate Cymric: Essays 1935-1947 (Camarthan: Druid Press, 1947) 181.

²¹ In Defense of Sensuality (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1930) 93-4.

movement of the poem exhibits the forward direction of time, history, Heraclitean process, displacement, death in life and 'the One', whilst the returning movement exhibits timelessness, the continuation of, or the means of returning to the past, nature and the possibility of entering its order, life in death and the Powysian 'Many'.²² The middle section 'Core' is an acknowledged exception. Being at the centre of the double spiral, it has the theme of stillness and, more than any other section, of death and the grave. The final section, 'On Fennel-Stalks', is also a partial exception. It attempts to show the possibility of a forward movement in time that takes into account the lessons learnt from the even numbered sections of the poem. It provides what may be regarded as a conclusion to the dialectical movement of the work, albeit an oblique one. In addition to this, there is an underlying movement in the poem towards the grave in the first three sections, whether in the body or in the decaying of buildings; and out from it in the last three, whether it be in reconstituted scrap metal, or the contact with ghosts and gods.

This whole process may be seen in terms of the philosophy of Powys and his own reworking of Heraclitus:²³

This philosophy . . . is at once a setting forth and a return; a setting-forth to something that has never been reached, because to reach it we have to create it, and a return to something that has been with us from the beginning and is the very form and shape and image of the thing we have set forth to create.²⁴

Such a motion can be seen most clearly in those parts of the poem where the wording of particular phrases is reworked in order to show the direction of the mood of the piece. Thus, at the close of the fifth section we have the lines:

Mercurial nature with a heaviness to it
flies with an eye to sitting

²² The term 'The Many' will be explained later in the chapter.

²³ The philosophy of John Cowper Powys will be explained more fully later on in this chapter.

²⁴ John Cowper Powys, The Complex Vision (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920) 7.

down somewhere and being serious.

With a heaviness to it, an opacity

saddening its flight.

Haunted look of stalled energy, of rights

impatiently or contemptuously surrendered.

(*F.* 36)

The syntax is broken. Its full-stops mirror nature, which is like the tired god Mercury (who is both charlatan and guide of the dead) looking for somewhere to cool his heels after all the industrial fire of the section.²⁵ The language too is of the forward movement of the double spiral. The phrase 'haunted look' picks up on 'Haunted/ voyeur' (*F.* 22) in 'Authorities', which is the corresponding section on the journey towards the 'Core': both express a troubled view in the face of the continued presence of ghosts.

In the next section, these lines indicate just how the movement of the spiral has changed:

Mercurial nature, travelling fast,
laterally in broken directions, shallow,
spinning, streaked out in separate lights, an
oil film dashed on a ripple,
its plural bands
drawn out and tonguing back on themselves,

in an instant is gone
vertically on a plunge, on a sudden
switch of attitude,

²⁵ Fisher's notion of the charlatan will be explained in the second half of this chapter.

without ever
pausing to drop its flight,
compose itself, gain weight;
dives
narrowly deep, as far down
as anything;
plunges unaltered,
slips away down
in twisted filaments, separable
argumentative lights.

(*F.* 38-39)

The full-stops have disappeared, and nature, now more like the element than the tired god (though no doubt still carrying some of his significance), is the subject of a sentence of numerous participles, each competing to show aspects of its newly invigorated, multiple flow. The vigour of the flight mirrors the vigour of the subject which keeps its presence throughout, governing three main verbs in the sentence.

The sections of the double spiral should also be seen as analogous to parts of an ongoing dialectical argument. Each section shows an aspect of the way things behave. Take, for example, this passage in 'Calling' (characterised by the forward movement of the double spiral):

Late at night
as the house across the street
stands rigid to the wind
and the lamp on its concrete column plays
static light on to it
everything writhes
through the unstable overgrown philadelphus

covering the whole end wall, its small heart-leaves
flickering into currents that
rock across the wall diagonally upward
and vanish, pursued, white
blossom-packs plucked at hard
and the tall stems
swirled to and fro, awkward
in the floods of expression.

A year or two past the gale
I walk out of the same door
on a night when I have
no depth. Neither
does the opposed house,

the great bush,
glory of the wall, sawn back
for harbouring insurrection and ghosts.

(*F.* 5-6)

The epiphanic vision of the wild, chaotic philadelphus, seemingly electrically charged by the flicker of the street light and indicative of natural processes of expression in the heart of urban life, would appear to be in keeping with the temper of those sections of the poem that are characterized by the spiral's returning aspect. Yet here the movement is away from such expression and away from 'depth' in both the observer and the natural world. The philadelphus is 'sawn back/ for harbouring insurrection and ghosts'. But how can a plant be guilty of 'harbouring insurrection and ghosts'? These lines only give up their mystery by degrees and by familiarization with the poem, but they refer to those characteristics of the returning movement of the poem where both 'ghosts' and the

untrammelled expression of the natural world are seen as subversive of what Fisher terms 'Authorities'.

Nature, and the entry into it, is:

Something always
coming out, back against the flow,
against the drive to be in,
 close to the radio,
the school, the government's wars;

the sunlight, old and still,
heavy on dry garden soil,

and nameless mouths,
events without histories, voices,
animist, polytheist, metaphoric,
coming through;

the sense of another world
not past, but primordial,
everything in it
simultaneous, and moving
every way but forward.

(F. 14)

Thus a particular sort of perception, of an epiphanic primal sympathy with nature, runs counter to the forward flow of the other movement of the double spiral. It is identified not only by timelessness, but also by animism, polytheism and the recalling of 'another world'. This brings us to the 'ghosts' who

in this section are described as 'innocent of time'(F. 18) and who may be invoked by such a perception.

'Ghosts' are manifestations of Fisher's 'timeless identities'. The human characters of A Furnace are, in the sections of the poem characterized by the forward movement of the double spiral, contingent upon the identities conveyed on them by their own time. Hence this passage in 'Authorities', conveying the limitations of 'the time' and its insights:

nothing to be shot for,
forcibly drugged or even
set about in the free market
and kicked insensible;
invitations to conform, assumptions
of healing, animal sanity, left
to women's initiatives
in the style of the time; teachers
with slipped-off clothes, drawing back
the candlewick covers of the time,
jerking artistically,
letting faith pace observation.

(F. 24)

The conditions of perception imposed by the age lead to perceptions always being second hand for 'faith' precludes any real observation. Such 'faith' leads the teachers of the time to engage in activity not creative but infertile. There is 'nothing to be shot for' or be treated as mad for because the perceptions are of the time and provide no resistance to free market capitalism. The teachers of the preceding passage are 'compelled/ by parody to insist/ that what image the unnatural/ law had been stamping/ was moving into Nature' (F. 24). Nineteenth-century materialism, which we shall examine later, and its parodies lead to parodies of the creative act. The position is made more explicit in the

poem's last section when the callings of nature and the poetic art are shown as twisted by modern 'barbarism':

In barbarous times
all such callings
come through as rank parodies,

refracted by whatever murk
hangs in the air

(*F.* 46)

Poetic identity, like individual identity, becomes contingent on prevailing, legitimizing discourses and structures of power.

Likewise, the identity of the old woman, neighbour to the young Roy Fisher, whose death 'in the Cold War' is 'modern and nothing' (*F.* 26) has, unlike the timeless old peasant woman of the previous section (*F.* 15), been conditioned and miniaturised by the contingent factors of the age. 'Timeless identities' in A Furnace are mythic, even though their mythic status might be personal to the author:

Timeless identities,
seeming long
like the one they called Achilles,
or short, like William Fisher,
age ten years, occupation, jeweller,
living in 1861 down Great King Street
in a household
headed by his grandmother, my ancestress
Ann Mason, fifty-seven, widow,
occupation, mangler; come in

from Hornton, back of Edge Hill,

where the masons were quarrying for Christminster.

(F. 15)

In a revealing interview with John Tranter, Fisher notes his debt to Basil Bunting in connection with the constitution of such 'timeless identities' and the concept of a mythic time:

I think what Basil did classically in Briggflatts is to establish a timeless time. You're conscious of the faculty of memory, and the faculty of search in memory, and the bringing of life from the past. I suppose that, yes, I would want to do that. I want to be free to go from Achilles, as I understand Achilles, who is a person in the book, to my great-great-uncle William Fisher, who is a figure in a census return which I happen to have read on a microfiche. It's Homeric for me. As are certain moments from my own life.²⁶

William Fisher and Achilles would then be like the stonemason and Bloodaxe, figures whose mythic status to author and poem lie beyond time. These human identities are like 'certain moments' of the author's own life, be they upon a cart in the rain or the instances when one sees the way the sunlight falls upon the soil in a garden in Handsworth. They both belong to a personal mythology. The place of ancestors in both writers is, however, slightly different. Bunting's identification with Bloodaxe rests upon a wider definition (that of nationalism), than does Fisher's which, in the case of William Fisher, derives from a much narrower notion of kinship. But both poets present permutations on the idea of a time of the ancestors, a time which is different from the contingent chronology of most lives. There is a basic truth in this, the wrath of Achilles or of Bloodaxe is, in a sense, never over but exists in a time of myth that makes such existences both exemplary and other, capable of foreshadowing all future action and capable of being perceived as different from it. That said, it must also be noted that the escape from the tedium of clock-time for both writers is not predicated upon such a perception of myth; the poem instead explores ways of understanding time which would then validate such

²⁶ Roy Fisher and John Tranter, 'John Tranter interviews Roy Fisher' (29 March 1989). Jacket Magazine 1 (Internet Journal), October 1997, Part 2.

identities. The perception that 'then is now' is one worked towards in Briggflatts and, likewise, the validation of 'timeless identities' in A Furnace is secured through Fisher's reworking of the philosophy of John Cowper Powys, which will be the subject of much of this chapter.

Surplus and Symbolism

Andrew Crozier has diagnosed 'modes of surplus' as a particular feature of Fisher's writing:

Modes of surplus imply that signs ('pit', for example) are always in excess of their significance (cinema, grave, etc.) and precede it; that they involve metaphorization of the referent; and that the mode of reference - the propositional - represents first of all its own semiotic system, which threatens to absorb ostensive reference.²⁷

This coincides with Crozier's belief in the primacy of the sign in A Furnace, a belief we shall have cause to question. This belief is symptomatic of Crozier's general approach which stresses aspects of indeterminacy over the more 'closed' features of Fisher's poem. There is a good deal of truth in Crozier's idea of textual surplus, especially in Fisher's earlier work, but it is a truth which needs a good deal of qualification in the case of A Furnace. The example Crozier gives is from the opening lines of 'Calling':

Waiting in blood. Get out of the pit.
That is the sign for parting. Already
the world could be leaving us.

(*F.* 5)

'The pit', it is true, is disquietingly free of any referent. But, like the repeated phrases of interlace in The Anthemata or the analogy between poetic and musical phrase in Briggflatts, the words gain context and reference throughout the section. Their placing here sets them up like the theme of a

²⁷ 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's A Furnace' 29.

musical movement which will be repeated and elaborated upon as the movement progresses. Thus the status of 'the pit' is rather different when it returns two pages later:

Wastes of distant darkness
and a different wind
out of the pit
blasts over a desolate
village on the outskirts
after midnight. Driving fast
on peripheral roads
so as to be repeatedly elsewhere
I pick up out of the blackness
waving torches, ahead and
over to one side.

(*F.* 7)

Here 'the pit' has gained a new context and a certain specificity; it has become less of a metaphorical and more of a geographical feature. We are still uncertain quite what it is. 'Pit' may bring to mind a coal pit, where air circulation does give rise to a wind, but could also refer to some other man made feature. It also has undertones of the grave which seem to be conferred by the repetition of the words 'out of' in Fisher's description of the blackness of the night. The 'blackness', which, like darkness, characterizes the odd numbered sections of the poem, will itself reappear in section V of the poem, 'Colossus': 'This age has a cold blackness of hell/ in cities at night.' (*F.* 35) The infernal resonances of 'the pit' have now been made explicit in the recurrent use of the words that have been used to describe it.

Apparent textual surplus is both thematic marker and structural device. The 'metaphorization of the referent' has the function of linking the specificities of the poem with its more general arguments and

its underlying metaphors. Fisher has stated that this was his intention when writing the poem, that he wished to make

an accretive work, where the thing is written in a sequence which to me is musical, but it is at the same time a heap, it's an arrangement, which is not narrative, it's an arrangement in the familiar style of the modern long poem, from any time in the last sixty or seventy years, one of the styles of the modern long poem, the collage. Where you revisit various themes at various times in the course of a thousand or two thousand lines. If you read it once, and you read it again, they'll start to chime together. And the systems in the poem . . . for instance there's a system to do with identities which is a word that pops up in that sequence a few times, but at one point it's been laid down, and it's chimed on, as if it were an orchestral work . . .²⁸

It is music (Bunting and Eliot's explicitly acknowledged source of inspiration) rather than interlace which is Fisher's conscious model, though the poetic results of both models seem to have been an influence.²⁹ Themes and words or phrases are used in a patterning that works by recurrence and elaboration and requires the reader to read backwards as well as forwards in a form that pointedly resists linearity. The method of A Furnace allows words to act as references to wider themes for:

A tune
is already a metaphor
and a chord
a metaphor wherein
metaphors meet.

(F. 7)

²⁸ 'John Tranter interviews Roy Fisher', Part 2.

²⁹ It is worth noting that Fisher's use of the term 'heap' appears to be a tacit allusion to The Anathemata and its epigraph from Nenius: 'I have made a heap of all that I could find'. The Anathemata (London: Faber and Faber, 1955).

Thus Fisher's use of 'the pit' is like his use of 'waiting in blood', both in the opening passage of 'Calling'; and both are conditioned by the overall structure of the poem.

'Waiting in blood' ultimately evokes latent properties of the genes and DNA; but it is also repeated in its original wording in another passage of the same section:

Waiting in blood.
The sign for parting. The straight way forward
checks, turns back
and sees it has passed through,
some distance back and without knowing it,
the wonderful carcass,
figurehead or spread
portal it was walking,
walking to be within;

showing from a little distance now its
unspeakable girdering, waste cavities,
defenceless structures in collapse; grey
blight of demolition without removal,
pitiable and horrific;

the look that came forward and through
and lit the way in.

(*F.* 9).

Is this a building or a body? A term such as 'carcass' could be indicative of either. Similarly, the 'portal' may be an architectural feature or it could relate to the porta, the transverse fissure of the liver which conveys blood to the liver or other organs (though not the heart). They are expressed in terms

that draw out both meanings: 'The straight way forward' sees it has passed through the 'portal it was walking/ walking to be within'. The words before the line break appear to refer to the movement of the body, and those after the line break to the building. Nevertheless, terms such as 'girdering' and 'demolition' in the second paragraph suggest that this is a building being talked of in terms of the body rather than the other way round. Exegesis of the passage becomes easier if we refer to the next, opposing, section of the double spiral where words that seem indeterminate in this section accrue their own significances.

This passage in 'The Return' begins with a discourse on the nature of the brain. It then reverts to the subject of the body, which it describes in terms that echo the previous section:

Accept

that the dead have gone away to God through
portals sculpted in brass to deter,
horrific. The signs of it, passably
offensive in a cat or a herring,
in a man are made out
unthinkably appalling . . .

(*F.* 16-17)

The portals are now those to God and the afterlife which bring to mind the brass portals of the undertaker or the crematorium and even of the fittings on a coffin. The 'signs' here are the signs for death; and 'parting' is a common euphemism for the death, as in such phrases as 'the recently departed'. The word 'horrific' seems to refer to the reaction to the whole sentence and to the reaction to the processes of death in general.

If we return to the earlier passage, we find an abandoned corpse, or rather a building described in terms of a corpse. The sign for parting, the sign for dislocation which is ultimately the sign for death, waits in our blood, just as our potential death waits in our blood, in our genetic make up or, more

generally, our own mortality. Human beings are 'waiting in blood' for whatever may happen after that blood has ceased to function. The dereliction of a building and its horrific aspect lies parallel to that condition. Thus 'the straight way forward', which initially seems like 'textual surplus', is the forward direction of someone walking through a building with a gaze fixed steadfastly in front, but is also indicative of the forward direction of this section of the double spiral which is characterized by that very way of looking only forward and thus moving towards death. What at first seems resolutely indeterminate, outstripping all reference, with closer examination becomes rich in accrued significance.

This 'accretion' of the significances attached to words becomes, at times, what can only be described as a form of symbolism. The last four sections of the poem, particularly, make consistent use of the four Greek elements. Indeed, one can roughly characterize each of these sections by one of the four elements, and the triumph of each one over its opposite. 'Core' is characterized by earth, burial, death and the possibility of rebirth. 'Colossus' is characterized by fire, the Heraclitean element of the furnace in which forms are endlessly reconstituted with no regard for their histories. 'The Many' is dominated by water, symbolizing history and natural process, whilst 'On Fennel Stalks' is dominated by air, the formation of clouds and the path toward the light. That each section has a dominant characteristic does not preclude the interaction of the elements within each section, particularly the element of fire. Nevertheless the scheme holds generally true.

In 'Core' we read:

That sky-trails may merge with earth-trails,
the material spirits
moving in rock as in air,

it's down by just a step or two
into the earth, mounded above at the sky,

and the floor obliquely
tilting a little
to the upper world again.

(*F.* 28)

The roof box at New Grange allows for the penetration of the light and air into the earth-bound realm of the dead where the inward looking spirals show the presence of light in darkness, the laws that govern movements in the sky (the winter solstice) being placed in the tomb to which the poem has been leading. The Powysian doubleness between being and non-being and the creative and destructive urges (which will be explained later) is also there in these two opposed elements. Light in the place of death occurs again in the description of the ossuary at St. Fiacre but the description of the cairn at Barnenez leads to the furnace and fire's oblique return in the line 'a bank of ovens in the tiliary', and this paves the way for the return of fire in the next section.

It is fire that allows iron to be formed or reconstituted and water which allows it to submerge or rust. In 'Colossus', the grand scheme of Adolphe Sax is left 'rusted and sagging', its signification changed from an awe-inspiring musical instrument to a 'cannonaded,/ rusted and sagging, enormous/ broken image of the Siege.'*(F.* 33). The iron hulks of the battle ships, 'worn tanks of fire/that trundled through the sea'*(F.* 34), are changed utterly by water, but are reclaimed for scrap and the furnace where they may be reconstituted. As Fisher muses on the 'glassy metaphysical void' (*F.* 35) of the post-industrial urban environment, he concludes that:

Something will be supposed
to inhabit it, though it is not
earth, sky or sea.

(*F.* 35)

It will be fire, which is the element of post-industrial progression and acquisition just as it was that of the industrial age; for both exist in restless reconstitution, in a forward trajectory that denies history and 'timeless identities'.

Water and the sea dominate 'The Many' and Poseidon is their god (*F.* 44). In this section, the flints which hold the potential for fire are wet and their multiplicity flares out ancient presences: 'Presences/ flaring out from the wet flints/ at Knowlton ruin' (*F.* 39). Fire-giving substances in nature, in water, no longer use those qualities that drive the furnace, and reveal other potentialities:

Draining through peat-hags,
Dane River, by its weight sucked out
from a mile of upland bog

to pour down, stained
through a crumbling, matt-black, moist
ravine of soft, firm

stuff that could be fire;
peat scattered with coal glitter,
mineshafts in a trail before

the drop into pastures.

(*F.* 40)

In the domain of the river - ancient, fluid and enduring - the peat and coal dust 'could be fire' but is not. Dead industry has not been recycled into a continuing Heraclitean process forward but has reverted to nature's own shaping power. The water puts out fire and reclaims. Rather than being the medium of a simple dialectical process of Heraclitus's opposites, it is the medium of the Many, hence the image of 'Mercurial nature' as:

an
oil film dashed on a ripple,
its plural bands
drawn out and tonguing back on themselves,

(F. 38)

which reveals a continuity in its multiplicity for it:

plunges unaltered,
slips away down
its twisted filaments, separable
argumentative lights.

(F. 39)

Water is used as a symbol in another, slightly different, way. It is the element of transparency and endurance. In the *Odysseus* passage, the last line, 'It is called water that he passes through' (F. 41), seems initially perplexing. It is certainly an allusion to the undersea journey in Powys's novel. But Fisher's mode of expression suggests a new naming of the phenomenon he has previously describing: the idea of '*Landscape superimposed/ upon landscape*' (F. 41). It is the description of 'All landscapes/ solid, and having transparency/ in time, in state' that provides the clue.³⁰ The quality of temporal and physical transparency is that which is associated with water. Thus water provides a counterpoint to the Heraclitean movement forward in the description of landscapes symbolised by the fire of the furnace. A landscape's historical continuities remain, whether acknowledged or not by whatever city or industry may inhabit it, as in the processes 'of reversion' to nature and continuity depicted at Trier (F. 37). *Odysseus's* underwater journey to Atlantis through this element provides a role model for the poet. The seeking of lost civilization through this element that has quenched its

³⁰ One should also note that in describing *Odysseus's* underwater journey to Atlantis John Cowper Powys writes of 'this weird element that could scarcely be called water'. *Atlantis* 432.

fire and its restless development and the telling of what he sees is the poet's role as much as is the chronicling of its Heraclitean force.

The air that dominates the last, forward, movement of A Furnace is the medium of the creative force in the universe, the domain of sky gods and sky laws, and the transfiguring (without its Christian connotations) powers of light. Thus Fisher observes the strange, godlike spontaneous creation of clouds out of chaos that may seem 'Creatures/ of the Last Days' (*F.* 45). It is in 'some other dimension' that these isolate and 'Self-generated' Powysian creatures, these sky-gods, exist in (*F.* 46). The poem closes in the movement away from the earth and the dark toward the air and light by the double spiral in the form of snail shells:

The snails of Ampurias

ascend

as the canopy of air

upon the ruins

cools after sunset.

They infest

the wild fennel

that infests the verges of the road

through what have become wide

spaces above the bay.

The snails ascend

the thin clear light,

taking their spirals higher;

in the dusk

luminous white, clustered

like seed-pods of some other plant;

quietly
rasping their way round
together, and upward;
tight and seraphic.

(*F.* 47-48)

The final movement of the double spiral, with all its accreted significance, is into the canopy of air over cooling ruins, over a city losing its fire. The snails upon the fennel-stalks stand for nature's continuity but also for a movement that is both forwards, as the passage is in the poem's structure, and upwards. Death is moved away from, and the spiral itself, through the agency of light, is now upon a creature that looks like a seed-pod. Thus the tacit connection between double spiral and the double helix of DNA is reinforced, showing the possibility of rebirth and continuity.

When we read the accreted significances of the last four books back into the first three, lines that seem mysterious become clear. For instance, after our reading of the significance of water in 'The Many' we can reassess the meaning of 'the sea' in this passage of 'Calling':

A pick-handle or a boot
long ago freed them
to do these things;
or what was
flung as a stone,
having come slowly on
out of a cloudiness in the sea.

(*F.* 5)

The mysterious 'sea' relies upon significances developed later in the poem. The cloudiness of this sea is a counterpoint to the transparency of Odysseus's sea wherein the past may be perceived.

Similarly the 'timeless identities of' 'The Return' are:

trapped into water-drops,
windows they glanced through
or had their images
detained by and reflected
or into whose molten glass the coloured oxides
burned their qualities;

*like dark-finned fish embedded in ice
they have life in them that can be revived.*

(F. 12)

The image calls to mind the church window of the previous section; but here identities remain 'trapped in water drops'. They are trapped in a stilled burning that retains previous qualities. The italicised lines come from a passage in John Cowper Powys's novel Maiden Castle where the quasi-image Uryen, noting the objects that have been found in the excavations at the iron age camp, says this of such objects as a 'three-horned bull'.³¹ In Powys's novel, Uryen's analysis approximates that of Jungian archetypes or indeed the archetypal mythology we encountered in The Anthemata. Yet this is not the burden of the quotation's sense in A Furnace where it seems to refer to any identity encountered in its traces whose life can be revived through the thawing heat of the living mind.

Air and sunlight, and their fiery counterparts, polluted air and artificial light, abound in the early sections only to be clarified later. Here, in a section characterized by the forward movement of the double spiral, Fisher's schemes are disclosed in a manner that is discretely opposed to their later resolution:

³¹ John Cowper Powys, Maiden Castle (London: Picador, 1977) 167.

Harsh reek in the air
among the monstrous squat
cylinders puts it
beyond doubt. Not a place
for stopping and spying.

The single human refuge
a roadside urinal, rectangular
roofless sarcophagus of tile and brick,
topped round with spikes and
open to the sky.

(*F.* 8-9)

Fisher's use of the word 'sarcophagus' to describe the urinal is telling. For the roofless urinal calls to mind the roof box at New Grange and the interaction possible between the elements and between life. But the air here is polluted and the sarcophagus is one of tile. But the interaction is still there, though in a form that is close to parody.

Not all of this is absolutely systematised, and such systematisation as occurs in the first three sections can only be determined by referring forward in the poem. The connection between air and light, for instance, is never absolute. Fisher's painterly concern with the behaviour of light would preclude it always having an especial significance. Moreover, it is the interaction of the elements that principally concerns Fisher. This use of the four elements combined with an interest in Heraclitus seems reminiscent of Four Quartets; but comparisons with Eliot can be misleading. Once again John Cowper Powys appears to be behind this scheme. Not only are Heraclitus and the Pre-Socratics Powys's favourite philosophers but Atlantis is also continually concerned with these four elements, as here when Odysseus encounters the submerged city:

It was the extraordinary way in which this city beneath the waters satisfied the whole deep-breathing desire in the ultimate chemical elements of existence that they should have nothing within them to the end of their days save what in silence uttereth speech and whose speech is the speech of air, water, fire, and earth, an elemental language which in its essence is the music of enjoyment, that gave the thing its real secret.³²

Signs and Places

In an interview with Robert Sheppard Roy Fisher observed how:

In the old days I would look with wonderment at a poet who could name names. You know Briggflatts! Bunting actually names a river and will say “this little counter - I’ve called it Rawthey - that will answer to what another person might see who went to that place.” I had no such confidence at one time. There are one or two things, like the “Glenthorpe Poems” which was from some circumstances and some experience that I wasn’t in two minds about. And I could handle it. And I wanted to use names. To me that was a great freedom. I think it will probably occupy me in the future, to wonder what it is about the naming of a name that has had difficulties for me.³³

These reflections date from 1982 and provide an intriguing preface to A Furnace. City, as its title suggests, has an unspecified topology through which the landscape is made general, which provides a useful distancing effect from the demands of a limiting realism.³⁴ It is easy enough to see how such a technique could be liberating, but much harder to see how its opposite, the accretion of specificity through ‘the naming of name’, could be so. But if we return to Fisher’s example of Briggflatts Fisher’s point may be clarified, for in Bunting’s poem we not only find a place that is answerable to its description but also a confidence in the importance of the particular, both topographical and

³² John Cowper Powys, Atlantis 428. The theme of an elemental language recurs throughout the book as on page 156 when the club of Herakles is described: ‘it really was a masterpiece of technical triumph this invention of the “Son of Hephaistos”, whoever he was, who divulged the open secret of the long-hidden language, whereby the four elements, earth and air and fire and water, could hold converse together.’

³³ Turning the Prism 6.

³⁴ See Roy Fisher’s comments on City in Nineteen Poems and an Interview 12-38.

autobiographical, and its capacity to have a more universal significance. The river Rawthey, however small upon the map or marginal in official histories, is central in its relationship to the poet. Bunting's naming signifies outside the text, and indeed outside language, in three distinct ways: to the place itself, to the poet's own experience of that place and to the reader's experience, whether actual or imagined, of that or such a place. The place names, which occur far more frequently in the text of A Furnace than in any of Fisher's earlier extended poems, share this quality of Bunting's.³⁵ We can take it that the specificity of place is now of central importance - that places are incommensurable and that this fact is due to various observable specificities and, more importantly, in relation to each place's own history and in relation to the spirit of place to which it gives rise.

Fisher's use of deixis may be taken to be in sympathy with such a phenomenon, though deixis also draws attention to what Fisher has described as the work's 'unconscious or unabashed solipsism':³⁶

This light is without
rarity, it is an oil,
amber and clear that binds in
this alone and suggests
no other.

(*F.* 1)

The repeated use of the word 'this' and the stated resistance to anything comparable with 'this light', if taken literally, stretches the imaginative contract between reader and poet. If this light suggests no other, then how can it and the scene it illumines be compared to the reader's own experience? The poem's own expression of subjectivity partly saves it from such paradox: this is a record of the poet's own responses rather than a more general description. Nevertheless, problems remain. As the poem

³⁵ It is interesting to note that since A Furnace Roy Fisher has explored philological aspects of the place name which have much more in common with Geoffrey Hill. The poem 'Birmingham River' is the most obvious example of this tendency. Roy Fisher, Birmingham River, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 17-19.

³⁶ Roy Fisher, 'Roy Fisher reviews Roy Fisher', The Rialto 35 (1996), 31. For a different interpretation of Fisher's use of deixis see Andrew Crozier, 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's A Furnace' 30.

gestures towards extra-linguistic experience *and* insists upon its particularity it will resist the usual comparisons - each thing being like itself alone. Thus we have Fisher's self consciously breaking off from an expected simile in 'Calling':

a stain in the plaster that so
resembles - and that body of air
caught between the ceiling
and the cupboard-top, that's like
nothing that ever was.

(F. 6-7)

The dash breaking into the sentence leaves us uncertain whether this particular plaster stain suggests other things or whether it only suggests itself. But we are left in no doubt as to the unique nature of 'that body of air'.³⁷ This would imply that its specific nature can be envisaged by Fisher alone - or at least someone intimately acquainted with the objects of Fisher's perception.

And yet, if we read back to the beginning of this sentence, Fisher explicitly holds out the possibility of a shared imaginative experience:

-You'll know this ten-yard stretch
of suburban tarmac, where something
shakes at you; this
junction-place of back lanes, rutted gullies

³⁷ The implicit distrust of the simile and a preference for direct treatment of the object here manifested could be an example of the continuing influence of William Carlos Williams on Fisher's work. In the early *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* Williams comments that: 'Although it is a quality of the imagination that it seeks to place together those things which have a common relationship, yet the coining of similes is a pastime of very low order, depending as it does upon a nearly vegetable coincidence. Much more keen is that power which discovers in things those inimitable particles of dissimilarity to all other things which are the peculiar perfections of the thing in question.' William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations: Kora in Hell, Spring and All, The Great American Novel, The Descent of Winter, A Novelette and other Prose*, ed. Webster Schott (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1970) 18.

with half a car
bedded in half a garage,
this sudden fence-post that breaks step;

the street, the chemist's shop, the lamp . . .

(F. 6)

The movement is a gradual one from the general, from a street like so many others, to that which is like nothing but itself and to the gesture towards a privacy of perception. This privacy of perception, the close communing of the poet and the perceived object, leads to a central notion of A Furnace, the 'entry into nature.'

According to Andrew Crozier: 'To enter nature is to enter an economy of signs in which value is not equivalence'.³⁸ Quite what Crozier means by this is unclear. Economies, as generally understood, do not work like this. Economics, unlike, say, Thomist ethics, works upon the basis of equivalence. If something is incommensurable it has no exchange value. If a sign is like nothing else it cannot function in an economy. The trouble is a question of emphasis. Crozier's model is ultimately derived from structuralism and semiotics and would see the world composed as a system of signs which can be perceived and ordered in a manner analogous to language. Though Fisher is explicitly interested in the efficacy of the sign, there is no good reason to suppose either a structuralist or post-structuralist epistemology to be Fisher's model. Instead, it is the very self-sufficiency of the sign which is often questioned in A Furnace in a manner that is unequivocally in the Romantic and not the post-modern manner.

This is made clear when we recontextualise Crozier's judgement and refer it back to the text of A Furnace. What Crozier is explicitly referring to is the process of the entry into nature which is described in 'II The Return':

³⁸ 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's A Furnace' 32.

but still, with hardly a change to it,
the other dream or intention: of encoding
something perennial
and entering Nature thereby.

(F. 12)

It is certainly a notion of great importance in A Furnace, but it signifies the exact opposite of what Crozier would like it to. Crozier writes that: 'Entry into nature is the metaphoric territory equally of Renaissance magic and the streets of Fisher's childhood; it is also "encoding/ something perennial", so that there can be no knowledge of transcendence outside that of signs. To enter nature is to enter an economy of signs in which value is not equivalence.'³⁹ But it isn't. To encode 'something perennial' implies that something was perennial *prior* to the process of encoding. The process of encoding would be a recording of transcendence previously outside the order of signs; but writing in A Furnace is not transcendence, only a witness to it. Crozier's post-modern predilections, despite the many very real insights he brings to his reading of the poem, have led him to distort the meaning of the text.

Those sympathetic to Crozier's position might be tempted to think that this formulation of the 'entry into nature' at least allows enough ambiguity to accept the possibility of Crozier's interpretation. However, refutation of Crozier's position is made undeniable later in the same passage of A Furnace when Fisher returns to the theme:

But still through that place
to enter Nature; it was possible,
it was imperative.

Something always
coming out, back against the flow,

³⁹ 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's A Furnace' 32.

crowded city as much as in any rural solitude - whenever she finds an intelligence artless and humble enough to listen . . .⁴⁰

The experiences of nature that Fisher describes are his own counterparts to Powys's own epiphanic sense of the presences to be discovered in nature, as here in his Autobiography:

As I write these lines now, there comes back to me . . . one scene after another from those lonely roads. Even as I try to seize upon them they dissolve and melt away; but in their vanishing they leave a lovely residue, a mysterious satisfaction, that seems to well up from the inner being of old posts, old heaps of stones, old haystacks thatched with straw. From glimpses of white roads, appearing and disappearing in the twilight, these feelings spring; from wayside ditches, desolate ponds, solitary trees, windmills caught against the sky! What I would like to emphasise just here is that the pleasure I got from these things of my solitary walks did not present itself to me as an *aesthetic* pleasure, nor did it call up in my mind the idea of beauty. What gave me these sensations seemed to be some mysterious "rapport" between myself and these things. It was like a sudden recognition of some obscure link, some remote identity, between myself and these objects.⁴¹

These are Powys's moments of entry into nature. Fisher supplies his own but the two may be taken as of a kind.

The entry into nature, then, supposes a rapport with the natural world that overcomes the gulf between the perceiver and the perceived object and between the sign and that which is signified. In his masque for the 'entry into nature' Fisher recalls 'Hofmannstahl's/ Lord Chandos' (*F.* 13). Hofmannstahl's fictionalised Lord Chandos recalls former times and how

⁴⁰ John Cowper Powys, 'My Philosophy Up-To-Date As Influenced by Living in Wales' in Obstinate Cymric 137-181, 178.

⁴¹ John Cowper Powys, Autobiography (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1934)169.

in those happy, stimulating days, there flowed into me as though through never-congested conduits the realization of form - that deep, true, inner form which can be sensed only beyond the domain of rhetorical tricks: that form of which one can no longer say that it organizes subject matter, for it penetrates it, dissolves it, creating at once both dream and reality, an interplay of eternal forces, something as marvellous as music or algebra. This was my most treasured plan.⁴²

This vision of the dissolving of the boundaries between the work of literature and the world, between form and subject matter, is similar to Fisher's own 'dream or intention'. But Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos writes from the perspective of someone who has now lost all hope of such a rapprochement. The sense of dislocation suffered by Lord Chandos is also in Fisher's poem.

In refuting Crozier's interpretation, it is important not to be drawn into another error. Crozier treats the status of sign, and much else in A Furnace, as homogeneous throughout. But, if we take Fisher's structuring device seriously, we should expect noticeable differences between the odd and even numbered sections of the poem to extend to the status of the sign. Entry into nature, in all its forms, and the intimation of the world beyond the sign, and the possibility of encoding it, is a characteristic feature of the even numbered sections of the poem. However, signs in the odd numbered sections often behave and are perceived in a rather different manner which is far closer to that which Crozier wrongly diagnoses as a symptom of the poem as a whole. The 'other dream or intention' is set against 'persuading the world's/ layers apart with means/ that perpetually alter and annex,/ and show by day what they can' (F. 12). This echoes a phrase in the preceding, odd numbered, section of A Furnace. There, driving fast 'so as to be repeatedly elsewhere', Fisher sees 'festive little bulbs' (F. 7) flailing in the wind. These are presumably fairy-lights, hung out as signs of festivity to cheer the passing traveller, yet this is not their effect:

The sign they make as I pass

⁴² Hugo Von Hofmannsthal, 'The Letter of Lord Chandos' in Selected Prose, trans. Mary Hottigern and Tania and James Stern (New York, Pantheon Books 1952) 129-141, 131.

is ineluctable
disquiet. Askew. The sign, once there,
bobbing in the world,
rides over intention, something
let through in error.

(F. 8)

This, as opposed to the 'other dream or intention', is a case of the sign and its effects outstripping their author, of having their own disquieting life. This is very much Fisher's theme in these sections of the poem. The prospect of 'entering nature' holds out the possibility, even if it is only a dream, of a union between sign, intention and the natural world. Here is evidence of its opposite. Objects have been relieved of such bonds giving rise to 'ineluctable/ disquiet.' Objects are removed from their histories, or from those events beyond the written record which Fisher wishes to recall.

We may then see the perceptual reaction to the description of the church window in 'Calling' as an expression of a certain sensibility and its limits:

Ancient
face-fragments of holy saints
in fused glass, blood-red and blue,
scream and stare and whistle
from where they're cobbled
into a small
new window beside the Dee;
trapped and raving
they pierce the church wall
with acids, glances of fire and lenses out of the light
that wanders under the trees and around
the domed grave-cover

lichened the colour of a duck's egg

(F. 5)

The evocation of fire and the description of the recombination of disjointed materials links the passage to the metaphor of the title. The aesthetic process which is here in play is, despite its setting, reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp. According to William Carlos Williams, it was Duchamp who claimed that: 'a stained glass window that had fallen out and lay more or less together on the ground was of far greater interest than the thing *in situ*.'⁴³ Duchamp's point, whether meant mischievously or not, raises important ideas. It stresses the importance of chance and non-human agency in an object offered for aesthetic contemplation. Moreover, it stresses the break between intention and the art object. The correspondence between the original form, intention and history that formed this collage of stained glass and the art work as is and the process of its perception have effectively been severed. This is the standard status of sign and art work both in Dada and in one strand of post-modern poetics.⁴⁴

It would be wrong to view Fisher as simply discarding such an aesthetic. It is arguable that the properties of A Furnace as assemblage and indeed the metaphor of its title owe a good deal to Duchamp's example. However, this passage also shows the weaknesses and ambiguities of such an approach when opposed to a Powysian 'entry into nature':

A pick-handle or a boot
long ago freed them
to do these things;
or what was
flung as a stone,
having come slowly on

⁴³ Imaginations 8.

⁴⁴ Much of the work of such poets as John Ashbery, Tom Raworth and Charles Bernstein can be seen to conform to such a view.

out of a cloudiness in the sea.

(F. 5)

This is a freedom which is bought at the price of a clouding of the past, a distancing that ultimately paralyses the imagination - these are things which are free but at the same time 'trapped and raving'. It is a scene of imaginative and sympathetic failure which is similar to the paralysis exhibited and explored in Fisher's City, as when he wrote: 'I am not able to imagine the activity that must once have been here. I can see no ghosts of men and women, only the gigantic ghost of stone.'⁴⁵ It is that visionary quality, taken from Powys, which Fisher employs to break that perceptual impasse. Yet even in the passage from 'Calling' there are traces of that very process of imagination which lie dormant: lichen, the grave and light all have especial significances in A Furnace which will be brought out in the even numbered sections of the poem. What may initially seem to be symptomatic of a poetics of 'layered space' is also an intimation of the 'deep space' poetics of the poem as a whole.⁴⁶

The great iron objects, alienated by history, of 'Colossus' show similar features of dislocation. The section opens by imagining the building and subsequent decay of Adolphe Sax's scheme of 'a vast steam organ' which shows the triumphant 'style of the technology of the time' transmuted into a 'rusted and sagging, enormous/ broken image of the Siege'(F. 33). The raising of the grotesque hulks of the scuttled German fleet, shows both object and the sign it makes as not perennial but lifted, huge, strange and obsolete, ready for scrap. It is both objects and, as with the torches, 'the sign they make' that preoccupy Fisher. This does not derive then from an epistemological confusion between sign and

⁴⁵ Poems 1955-1987 21.

⁴⁶ The term 'layered space', and its companion 'deep space', come from the art critic Harold Rosenberg. Its implications for poetry are elaborated by Geoff Ward who uses it to describe much of the writing of such poets as William Carlos Williams and Frank O'Hara: 'A layered space art would be typified by the innovations of Mondrian, Léger, or Picasso in his Cubist phase. Here the paint is variously organized into sequences of shapes and flats which, be they representational or non-representational, are freed from all metaphysical ambition and urge their claim on our attention by virtue of their *intensity*, rather than their place in some order.' Geoff Ward, Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) 11. Though collage and juxtaposition are key features of A Furnace, its commitment both to subjectivism and Powys's metaphysics makes it less typical of 'layered space' poetics than its opposite, the poetics of 'deep space'.

object, but rather from an observation of the way they interconnect. The iron fed into Fisher's furnace is both the stuff of chemical, industrial and historical process and the way such objects signify, particularly the way they signify disquiet and distress. Once we realise this, we also become aware that such actions and manifestations are only a part of a larger framework in the poem.

People as well as signs may be subject to an equivalent displacement. The activity of 'the ghosts' own children', the 'back-flow of the genes'/ forward compulsion suddenly/ showing broken, leaking out, distressed' is a case in point (*F.* 18). The passage is part of an even numbered section and belongs there. It is part of the returning movement that tries to re-establish a traffic with the dead and reground lost identities. But these people, displaced from their own histories, are trying to rectify an analogous symptom of dislocation to that which may be found in the inanimate torch lights and church windows of the first section of the poem. It is a very literal case indeed of trying to come to terms with the death of the author. But these people are not signs in any meaningful sense of the term and if such behaviour signifies, it signifies a state (that of being distressed) rather than another sign. This leads us to a conclusion once again at odds with Crozier's reading of the poem and in sympathy with the very process of naming with which we started this discussion.

To read A Furnace as a poem whose chief concern is with signs, or more grandiosely 'an economy of signs', as such is, in the end, a misplacing of emphasis. It is not that Fisher is unconcerned with them, nor that he is a naive realist, but to so read A Furnace is to mistake the poem's modus operandi for its subject matter. Whilst we may acknowledge that any play of signification may ultimately outstrip any formal device in a poem, we must also acknowledge the manner in which that play of signification is itself conditioned by that form. Crozier writes of the double spiral:

This graphic suggestion should not be expected to have great explanatory power, any more than the title of the poem itself; both are metaphors for the pattern of vortical movement through which signs are produced and transformed.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ 'Signs of Identity: Roy Fisher's A Furnace' 31.

Not only does this vague generalization disregard Fisher's express statements about the double spiral in his 'Preface' which, even if ultimately dismissed, at least merit serious consideration; but it also fails to take into account how that very structure may change the status of the sign. Crozier's failure to take seriously the poem's structure reveals the ultimate difference that divides A Furnace and its critic: Andrew Crozier is a critic who tends to fetishise the sign. Fisher, on the other hand, is, as we shall discover, interested in a very different sort of fetish which will give the sign a very different function.

PART TWO: 'THE MANY'

An Outline of Powys's Philosophy

A Furnace is dedicated to the memory of John Cowper Powys, and, as Fisher's preface makes clear, Powys's philosophy informs the poem. Though John Cowper Powys is now best remembered for his novels and romances, in his own lifetime he published a good deal of his own idiosyncratic brand of philosophy. The 'philosophy' is a curious mixture of genuine popular philosophy, idiosyncratic insight, and the stuff of self-help books. The philosophical books are many, their subjects various and their style is often rambling and diffuse. If we combine this with the fact that a good deal of Powys's philosophy makes its way into his novels, it is difficult to summarise the essence of what Powys's beliefs were. Nevertheless, if we refer back to A Furnace and disregard those aspects of Powys's philosophy which seem irrelevant to the poem's concerns, it is possible to arrive at a fairly clear and cogent set of beliefs on which Fisher sought to model his work.⁴⁸

Powys's briefest, comprehensive summary of his philosophical system appears in his essay 'My Philosophy Up-To-Date as Influenced by Living in Wales', which has the additional advantage

⁴⁸ Apart from Powys's Rabelaisianism and his eccentric views on sex, it is chiefly the interests which Powys has in common with David Jones which Fisher chooses to exclude. Powys, like Jones, was a great admirer of Spengler, syncretist anthropologies and studies of myth. He was also something of a race-romantic, though of a largely benevolent sort. He was passionately opposed to all forms of totalitarianism, injustice and state oppression. His polemic against Hitler and Fascism was as vehement as his condemnation of Stalin. For Powys's attacks on Hitler and Stalin, see Mortal Strife (London: Jonathan Cape, 1942) and In Spite Of (London: Macdonald, 1953). See also Jeremy Hooker, John Cowper Powys and David Jones: A Comparative Study (London: Enitharmon Press, 1979).

of being written late in his career.⁴⁹ In it, Powys writes in Heraclitean mode of his capacity both to face down his particular demons and to: '*feel myself into the cosmic flux itself that is to say into the general dissolution and rushing away of all things, organic or inorganic, chemical or structural, planetary or elemental, in the ceaseless flow of the vast centrifugal and centripetal currents of our corner of the multiverse.*'⁵⁰ Like 'all natural animists and ritualists, like all instinctive magic mongers and fetish-worshippers', Powys gains strength from Heraclitus' saying: '*panta rhei kai oden menai* "all flows away and nothing remains."⁵¹ Powys's devotion to both primitivism and the pre-Socratics is repeated many times throughout his voluminous writings and may put us in mind of the thought of Charles Olson, as may his aversion to materialism.⁵²

Powys, though, is considerably odder than Olson. He really did worship nature and would indeed pray to it. He also had a metaphysic to justify it which is not shared by Olson. Nevertheless, Powys's philosophy allows for scepticism, especially regarding the possibility of the afterlife:

to a person who is as ignorant as I am of any ultimate secret in even one dimension of this chaotic multiverse . . . it is hard to bring home to the imagination this "other-world" or this "next world," consecrated though it may be by private longing and public expectation. Another world may be awaiting us - it is not an impossible conception - but on the other hand annihilation and complete extinction jump with many of our moods and have a continuous historic instinct to support them.⁵³

⁴⁹ The much longer The Complex Vision (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1920) might be thought a more obvious choice as a central text of Powys's metaphysics. This work, though not dissimilar to Powys's later philosophy, contains a number of ideas and a philosophical vocabulary which he later ceased to employ. In view of the fact that it is the later work of Powys that appears to interest Fisher most and the older Powys who gave Fisher 'words of exhortation', it seems appropriate to concentrate upon Powys's latest and clearest expositions.

⁵⁰ Obstinate Cymric 145

⁵¹ Obstinate Cymric 146.

⁵² Such views may be found, for example, in Charles Olson, The Special View Of History, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez 1970).

⁵³ Obstinate Cymric 147

Powys is not offering a religion or salvation from death. Such a notion would be inimical to him: he detested religion as it is commonly perceived. Instead, he is chiefly interested in the interaction of his private animism and fetishism with a metaphysic of 'multiverse' that confirmed his private intuitions.

This term is not quite as peculiar or esoteric as it might appear. As Powys frequently admitted, it is the writings of William James, and especially James's reflections on Fichner, that formed the philosophical basis both for these reflections and for Powys's views upon the question of 'the One and the Many'. James's analysis of Fichner explains with much more clarity than Powys the manner in which vegetative matter and even inanimate things may be perceived as having consciousness. And beyond them he postulates the possibility of greater forces than human kind. However, he discards Fichner's final emphasis on the absolute from his own philosophy: 'Logically it is possible to believe in superhuman beings without identifying them with the absolute.'⁵⁴ This pluralistic vision has two chief virtues from James's point of view. First, it runs directly counter to the monistic, absolutist tendencies of the idealist philosophies, particular those of Hegel, that would see a spurious virtue in unity. Second, it neatly side-steps difficulties inherent in Cartesian dualism: if all matter has consciousness, then there is no division between that which does and does not possess it. These insights of James arise out of his advocacy of the Many as opposed to the One. This advocacy runs directly counter to the conventional mystical insight which perceives profundity in seeing an underlying oneness. James diagnoses this as symptomatic of most philosophy subsequent to Plato.⁵⁵ The doctrine of the Many is a metaphysical result of James's empiricism which is not predicated on any such desire for unity, but which prefers to see things piecemeal. These features provide the philosophical basis of both Powys and A Furnace.

James's philosophy allows both for animism and for polytheism, and this is taken up wholeheartedly by Powys who declares:

⁵⁴ William James, A Pluralistic Universe (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1977) 63.

⁵⁵ For a clear description of the philosophical import of 'the One' and 'the Many' see William James 'The One and the Many' in The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 258-270.

Now, it is my opinion that your mind is compelled, by the inner law of the way it inevitably functions, to ascribe the whole congeries, or "multiverse," of "souls" and "bodies" with which, on the analogy of your own, you have peopled Space and Time, to the causative power of some ultimate Final or First Cause, whose inward sensation of conscious and will resembles your own. . . . Among these floating impressions coming to you from the "not-self," such as you have just now, by inevitable analogy, allowed to be "selves," with bodies parallel in some degree to your own, there will be many - such as rocks and trees and fish and birds and reptiles and beats - that are obviously sub-human; and there will be a few, though infinitely rarer - such as a vague consciousness of mysterious spiritual forces - that seem to be super-human.⁵⁶

This, published in 1930, retains a residual monotheism in its presentation of a 'First Cause' as the creator of the universe. This First Cause is dualistic, both good and evil. Even here though, Powys has doubts about its existence: 'But this whole concept of a great First Cause, of a one supreme Power, including everything and beyond everything, may be totally erroneous and wholly untrue. The ultimate secret of things may be a Many, and not a One'.⁵⁷ This appears to be the view of Powys as an old man, in the thorough-going polytheism of Atlantis or the sceptical polytheism of the late philosophy:

My philosophy then . . . is quite definite, allowing for its inevitable acceptance of that ultimate agnosticism which is the beginning and probably the end of all human thought about the probability of there being many creative forces, or "gods," or 'goddesses,' in our present dimension, and the unlikelihood of there being any sort of solitary Absolute, whether Trinitarian or Quincuncial in its emanations.⁵⁸

This seems to be the version of Powys which Fisher endorses in A Furnace.

⁵⁶ In Defense of Sensuality 7.

⁵⁷ In Defense of Sensuality 25-26.

⁵⁸ Obstinate Cymric 146.

Powys stands for the resistant power of the individual and the individual's intuitions and private experiences of nature and against all authorities, be they religious or political. In Powys's attack upon materialism, the one God and the universe he writes:

All this - only put more logically and mathematically than I can put it - is the familiar retort of most metaphysical thinkers to what after all is only *another* metaphysical theory, for so, to a modest empirical pragmatist like myself, any sort of deterministic materialism is bound to look. For I am proud to be the sort of *emperic* who is called a quack, a charlatan, and even a mountebank because he insists on accepting the immediate shocking, startling, soothing, tantalizing, transporting, terrifying physical - psychical *contacts with life*, as his starting-points - 'the many' as against the 'one' entering, you see, at the very start - in forming his patch-work hand-to-mouth "philosophy". Any tingling slap in the face given me by real life, any exquisite illumination given me by something in nature or by something in a book can serve as well, in my drifting and strung-along multiverse as a good starting-point, for a philosophy of existence as any mathematical set of axioms. My system of thought-tricks or of thought-gestures, then, represents a return with a difference which all such Renaissances must reveal, to the chaoticism, animism, fetishism, polytheism and pluralism and even something uncommonly like the *magic*, of those happy ages before the authoritarian Parties and Dictators in both religion and science became the totalitarian *absorbers of* and the infallible *announcers* of all the truth as they have taken upon themselves to be to-day.⁵⁹

Here are the essentials of the philosophy of the old Powys which form the backbone of the belief system of A Furnace.

It is the 'patch-work' philosophy of the 'charlatan' which sets chaoticism, animism and the rest against any totalising truth system, religious or not, and any form of materialism. It creates from those things of private significance a personal 'religion' that will be made up from the Many, that has no claim for overall truth or an underlying unity in things. It is a religion for those who don't care

⁵⁹ Obstinate Cymric 147-148.

much for religion, a metaphysic for those who don't care much for metaphysics and a belief system for those who don't care much for systems of any kind. In so far as it is political it resists politics. It is too anarchistic and too anti-materialist for capitalist individualism, as it is for state socialism. It is, in a sense, utopian, but its utopianism is realisable within whatever political system an individual may find himself in. It is a system of resistances to unifying systems of thought or governance. It may be opposed to the industrial and post-industrial world and posit some greater time in the past, but it never really specifies what that time may be (though it seems to be of the domain of the primitive and the pre-Socratic philosopher). Nevertheless, though Powys can at times be deeply nostalgic, his 'philosophy' is concerned with ways of living now and of keeping the past alive, rather than with simple nostalgia. As philosophy it may not be very impressive, and as politics it is not very constructive, but as a way of perceiving lived experience it is coherent enough, though a little solipsistic.

Romanticism and the Sublime

Roy Fisher's debt to a cosmopolitan modernism has been evident from the start of his career. Cocteau, Kafka, Russian Formalism, Surrealism, Cubism, and, most importantly, the poetry of William Carlos Williams, the Objectivists and the Black Mountain School have all been cited as influences both by Fisher and his critics. This list contains no English poet. Nevertheless, Fisher's place in an English poetic tradition has been the subject of debate. In Thomas Hardy and British Poetry Donald Davie wrote that Fisher's temperament is 'like Larkin's profoundly Hardy-esque'.⁶⁰ Others, not least Fisher himself, have disagreed with an analysis which has as much to do with the temper of Davie's book as Fisher's writing.⁶¹ More recently, both Neil Corcoran and Jeremy Hooker, no doubt prompted by the explicit Romanticism of A Furnace, have seen Fisher as belonging to a rather different tradition. Corcoran, whilst acknowledging parallels with Williams, Olson and Dorn,

⁶⁰ Donald Davie, Thomas Hardy and British Poetry (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) 154.

⁶¹ Roy Fisher has commented: 'I wasn't aware that he'd exactly written about *my* work in that book'. Roy Fisher and Robert Sheppard, Turning the Prism: An Interview with Robert Sheppard (Birmingham: Toads Damp Press, 1987) 8.

detects lines in City that seem 'English Romantic in origin'.⁶² He goes on to observe that this tendency makes

Fisher - like [Christopher] Middleton - a more peculiar combination of the local and the 'other' of literary Modernism than some of his own declarations of scope, which emphasise the 'effect of indeterminacy' in his work, would tend to suggest. It is not entirely surprising to find him, in the preface to A Furnace (1986), acknowledging both a formal and thematic indebtedness to John Cowper Powys, that extraordinary late-Romantic exotic and nature-mystic. Although Fisher's later work differs from his earlier in being more overtly and persistently concerned with local histories as well as topographies, I think it is possible to sense, throughout, a bizarre and individuating combination of an English provincial realism, a formal and philosophical neo-Modernism and a will towards a kind of contemporary sublime.⁶³

This is well said, although Fisher, in a candid review of one of his own collections of verse, is less circumspect about his Romantic allegiances, declaring 'I think he's a Romantic, gutted and kippered by two centuries' hard knocks.'⁶⁴

As Fisher's remarks indicate, his Romanticism is not, and could hardly be, the same as that of two centuries ago. It is conditioned by historical and poetic changes. These historical changes are part of the subject matter of A Furnace, which realigns Fisher with Romanticism and its inheritors only after a careful examination of its reaction to and interconnection with the Industrial Revolution. Fisher's analysis can be sharp in its critical observation:

In barbarous times
all such callings
come through as rank parodies,

⁶² Neil Corcoran, English Poetry Since 1940 (London and New York: Longman, 1993) 171.

⁶³ English Poetry Since 1940 171.

⁶⁴ Roy Fisher, 'Roy Fisher reviews Roy Fisher', The Rialto 35 (1986), 30-32, 31.

refracted by whatever murk
hangs in the air;
even the long pure
sweep of the English pastoral
that stretched its heart-curve
stronger, and more remarkably wide

merely to by-pass
the obstruction caused by a burst
god, the spillage
staining the economic imperative
from end to end with divinity.

(F. 46)

The attractiveness of a pastoral is concomitant with the growth of its opposite. The city air refracts the sight of what might be portrayed as an unencumbered relationship with nature. The vision of city and countryside, industrialism and the pastoral is interconnected. Moreover, the animosity towards, or avoidance of, the city, found in much of the writings of the Romantics and other poems in this thesis, is scarcely a feature of Fisher's poetry which, from City onwards, though often critical of its manifestations, has taken both urban landscape and the heritage of nineteenth century industrialism as a principal subject matter. Nevertheless, A Furnace may be justly regarded as a modern and modernist version of the Romantic nature poem. In the words of John H. Johnston: 'The Subject of the Romantic nature poem ("Tintern Abbey", for instance) is not so much nature itself as the emotional or spiritual relationship between man and nature, or between man and society.'⁶⁵ This too is Fisher's subject.

⁶⁵ John H. Johnston, The Poet and the City: A Study in Urban Perspectives (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984) 87.

This raises a question of some importance, for Fisher's notion of Nature is a complex one which derives, in part, from John Cowper Powys. Whilst the young Wordsworth is an acknowledged influence on Fisher, and the sensibility of poems such as 'Tintern Abbey', 'On Westminster Bridge', The Prelude, 'Intimations of Immortality' and 'The Ruined Cottage' all have a distant but distinct influence on A Furnace, it is important to note a distinct difference with regard to the manner of the manifestation of their influence in Fisher's poem. One of John Cowper Powys's most intriguing pieces of literary criticism is his analysis of 'Tintern Abbey'. Powys acknowledges it to be 'one of the finest poems in our language'.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, he objects to 'the idea that I should be a nobler, grander, higher, sort of creature and one possessed of a loftier intelligence, if my sense-enjoyments introduced - even as "something deeply interfused" - the purely metaphysical notion of the universe being One and having One God as the soul of its soul'.⁶⁷ This quarrel with monotheism sets Powys and Fisher apart from Wordsworth and, in so far as he is a pantheist, Bunting. For in A Furnace the god in nature found in Wordsworth is a variety of the monotheism that gave rise to, and whose ideology enforced, the rise of industrialism. The reasoning behind this seems to be two-fold. First, Fisher appears to draw on the sociological analysis of the Protestant origins of the industrial revolution current since Weber. Second, and more peculiar to Fisher, is his analysis of the sublime and the way in which the sublime, the awe inspiring, is a feature of an industrialised landscape.

The urban sublime and the monstrous will it embodies are never endorsed but rather analysed by Fisher:

In the places,
on their own account, not
for anybody's comfort:
gigantic peace.

Iron walls

⁶⁶ Obstinate Cymric 164.

⁶⁷ Obstinate Cymric 165.

tarred black, and discoloured,
towering in the sunlight
of a Sunday morning on
Saltley Viaduct.

Arcanum. Forbidden
open space, marked out with
tramlines in great curves among blue
Rowley Rag paving bricks.

(*F.* 8)

The size and structure of these iron walls, like a mountain or a cathedral, dwarfs the human. The 'only human refuge' is the urinal. The word 'sarcophagus' is carefully chosen. Like a place for the dead, the urinal is fenced off as something inescapable yet embarrassingly human. Fisher's language, like his subject matter, is poised between the public and the private. The definite article of the opening line of the passage implies a private and sacral, in the Powysian sense, significance, a recognition of the link between observer and the presences in place. The phrase 'the places' is repeated from the, apparently autobiographical, preceding passage:

Grown man
without right learning; by nobody
guided to the places; not knowing
what might speak; having eased awkwardly
into the way of being called.

(*F.* 8)

The 'way of being called' echoes the title of the section. It refers to the poetic vocation but also something rather more specific, to the callings of those places with particular presences. But such

private reference works alongside a description of a space that is both public but also forbidden private property.

The passage comes from an odd numbered section where it is the industrial sublime which dominates, though never without its own 'orifices of question' (*F.* 24). Such depictions always have their frailties in Fisher, not least through the working of his syntax in which long subclauses stretch out the building and its attributes:

If only the night can be supposed
unnaturally tall, spectrally
empty, and ready to disgorge
hidden authorities,
summonses, clarifications;

if it can be accorded pomp
to stretch this Grecian office-block
further up into the darkness, lamplit
all the way from the closed shopfronts
and growing heavier; then

that weight of attribution
jolts the entire thing down, partway
through its foundations, one corner heaving
into this panelled basement
where by the bar
the light spreads roseate and dusty.

If all that, then this,
ceiling sagged, drunk eyes

doing the things they do,
stands to be one of the several
cysts of the knowledge, distributed
unevenly through the middle of the mass;
if not, then not.

(*F.* 20)

An office block is built on syntax, on the drawn out, perilous hypothetical that predominates in this section of the poem. The sublimity of the 'dead weight of the old imperious/racket' (*F.* 21) rests on suppositions of pomp and towering darkness which its own foundations, whether literal or syntactical, can no longer hold. Its authorities, like some sublime presence, remain hidden at night in the ghostly, empty building, yet this night is ready to disgorge its bureaucratic might. The classical style, that borrowed imperial style so often synonymous with the authoritative public architecture, was originally designed to house the gods. Now, like the failing empire and industry it once stood for, the weight of sublime attribution appears too much for the great impersonal building which seems to sag into a bar where drunken eyes appear to mimic its diminished status.

This passage has been used by Michael Hulse as evidence of what he sees as Fisher's obsession with the Nietzschean power of the will: 'The anti-democratic power-worshipper who considered Lincoln "abject" and Napoleon "magnificent" broods over much of Fisher.'⁶⁸ Hulse later seeks to qualify this by the more balanced observation that Fisher has sympathy for 'the people dwarfed and terrified by the Piranesi universe they inhabit, but nonetheless is fascinated by the Will, manifestly and (apparently in spite of himself).'⁶⁹ The first contention, of itself, should merely strike us as bizarre and unsubstantiated.⁷⁰ However, Hulse's later qualification and, in particular, his comments on this passage of A Furnace deserve more consideration:

⁶⁸ Michael Hulse, 'Roy Fisher and the Weight of Attribution', *Poetry Durham* 22 (1989), 24-27, 25.

⁶⁹ 'Roy Fisher and the Weight of Attribution' 27.

⁷⁰ Unlike Hulse I do not view these lines from 'The Thing about Joe Sullivan' as an expression of a Nietzschean Will but rather a clear delineation of the perception of a particular artistic endeavour:

the rapid and perverse
tracks that ordinary feelings

The “weight of attribution” rearing up into the darkness like a Goya colossus of the metaphysical imagination is a very curious yet succinct expression of Fisher’s concern with the relation of Will to given actuality.⁷¹

But the syntactical sense of ‘the weight of attribution’ ties it to the first and second subclause, its grandness being conditional, and as we have just suggested, having the effect of ‘jolting the entire thing down’ to the human level. Similarly, Fisher chooses to write ‘If only the night can’ rather than if only the night could in order to avoid using what could be read as a subjunctive which would implicitly indicate desire and the exercise of the will that Hulse detects. What Fisher is delineating is the effort of himself as one of the people dwarfed to deal with an expression of an impersonal will linked to a monotheistic sublime which is rather different from the Nietzschean one Hulse diagnoses. Moreover, there is a distinction to be made between a ‘fascination with the will’, and the delineation of its manifestations.

At the level of the poem as a whole Hulse’s analysis is much less convincing. He prefers City to A Furnace and tends to write about phenomena in them as if the two were part of an identical enterprise. But A Furnace is a much more complex, structured poem than City. And unlike that poem, the formulation of the intimate in A Furnace is at least as strong as the sublime. The monstrous decay of the edifices and instruments of the industrial age, the impersonal grand authorities, characterize the odd numbered sections of the poem but meet their reply in the even numbered sections.

Massive in the sunlight, the old woman
dressed almost all in black, sitting out
on a low backyard wall,

make when they get driven
hard enough against time

(Quoted in ‘Roy Fisher and the Weight of Attribution’ 25).

⁷¹ ‘Roy Fisher and the Weight of Attribution’ 26.

Slow-dying woman,
her life was primordial and total,
the gaze-back of the ikon; her death
modern and nothing, a weekend in the Cold War.

(F. 26)

Whereas the previous description of an old woman, in a section of the poem characterized by the returning aspect of the double spiral, had been an icon of natural, timeless continuity, here is an icon of death in life, the modern and the nothing taking over the 'primordial and the total'.

Icon and Fetish

Fisher's poetry has had a continuing and uneasy relationship with realism. The realism in his work is always relative to subjective experience, the opacities of language or the varieties of modes of perception and interpretation. When Fisher engaged with Powys he also endorsed what may be termed fetishistic realism. In an interview with the magazine Staple he stated:

If landscapes preoccupy me enough for me to want to flog away and do a Zola on them, they must be functioning for me, as they were for him, as fetishes: they are juju, they do hold magical powers of evocation. Because they are really things which were a sensory vocabulary of being alive for me before I was articulate.⁷²

The primitivist impulse to fetishize the world and the impulse behind the realism of an author of the nineteenth century are recognized as one and the same: the desire to record places of especial significance. In A Furnace this holds true, though in different ways, of city buildings and landscapes as it does of nature:

⁷² Roy Fisher, 'Talking to Staple: Roy Fisher' (Interview with Donald Measham and Bob Windsor, 5th April 1990), Staple 18 (1990) 41-43, 43. Fisher's use of the term 'fetish' is rather loose, but is nevertheless useful in this discussion and will be used throughout this chapter to designate places or objects with 'magical powers of evocation'.

I suppose the thing that very much makes the material of the poem is the fact that those cities are huge sudden objects, they are icons, they are ju-jus, they are idols and gods, they are huge physical structures which the surface of the earth has thrown up.⁷³

It is the city which tends to be the domain of the icon rather than nature. For the icons, whether buildings or people, are the visual manifestations of the town gods:

The town gods are parodic,
innocent. They've not
created anything. Denizens.
Personages who keep strange hours,
who manifest
but are for the most part mute,

being appearances,
ringed eyes,
ikons designed to stare out
at the ikon-watcher, the studious
artisan walking in wait
at strange hours for the guard
to drop. Haunted
voyeur.

(*F. 22*)

The words 'haunted voyeur' are carefully ambiguous: is it the observer or the observing icon who is so described? The icon's eyes gaze at the 'ikon-watcher' in a way that makes the two almost interchangeable. To describe human beings as icons is to make them totems of the perceiver's

⁷³ 'Interview with John Tranter', Part II.

subjectivity and to relieve them of their own, or to make them merely vehicles of forces beyond them. Yet the descriptions of human icons in A Furnace are presented in such a way as to problematise any easy equation between his writing and voyeurism. It is voyeurism less exhibited than analysed.

The recognition that living 'by the eye' may be voyeuristic, even sadistic, was present in City:

I have often felt myself to be vicious, in living so much by the eye, yet among so many people. I can be afraid that the egg of light through which I see these bodies might present itself as a keyhole. Yet I can find no sadism in the way I see them now. They are warm-fleshed, yet their shapes have the miniscule, remote morality of some medieval woodcut of the Expulsion: an eternally startled Adam, a permanently bemused Eve. I see them as homunculi, moving privately each in a softly lit fruit in a nocturnal tree.⁷⁴

The narrator escapes his own feeling of viciousness by a sublimation of the objects of possible voyeurism into figures from art which gives them Edenic qualities of the Expulsion (though what their modern Eden was we can never be quite sure). We have come across a less examined version of this phenomenon in David Jones. There is a further similarity: though Fisher exhibits none of Jones's sexual voyeurism, his icons do contain spirits, if not exactly spirits of the age, that may be perceived over and above their own individual identity. Yet A Furnace is a good deal harsher on the possibility of sadism as well as voyeurism in the gaze of the disengaged observer:

Sadist-voyeur,
stalled and stricken, fallen
into that way from the conviction of
not doing but
only looking . . .

(*F.* 24)

⁷⁴ Poems 1955-1987 28.

Voyeurism involves the pleasure of observing others without doing anything oneself; and to enjoy watching them in their suffering is an act of sadism. This is not an act of creativity but of the dislocation that characterizes the third section of the poem. Moreover, when in A Furnace Fisher does present people in terms derived from art, he is scrupulous in avoiding the easy aestheticization of other persons that we found in The Anathemata and which was to a lesser degree present in his own City:

If this were sanity and
sanity were art, this morning street
outside the old music shop would be
robustly done. Portrayal of the common
people and their commonplace bosses
with classless nostalgia. Courbet
transfigured into every substance of it . . .

(F. 24-5)

The comparison with art only exists via a dual hypothesis: 'If this were sanity and/ sanity were art'. This hypothesis breaks down the terms of the assumptions of that very engagement. Is this sanity? The implication is that it is probably not. Is sanity art? Again, it probably isn't. But, were this the case, these figures would have

no need
to be lifted by art out of
the nondescript general case because never
for a second inhabiting it; detectable
identities, of gear-shifts, stumblings, jackets,
coming through unimpeded.

(F. 25)

This critique of nineteenth century realism, its modes of presentation and underlying assumptions, allows the poem both to invoke such means of presentation and to allow specificities of resistance to emerge - the 'detectable/ identities' - which reveal its shortcomings.

The icon is primarily an entity of the forward movement of the double spiral. It is the image of 'the town gods'. It is less the iconic that tends to characterize the returning movement of the poem than the image divorced from authority, the voice of nature, the nature fetish and landscape as fetish and the 'true gods' as opposed to the 'town gods' and those 'by tyrannies given images' (F.42). Fetishes, like gods, are explicitly Powysian and they may enable one to have intimations of those gods. The Powysian fetish has a dual function. It facilitates interaction with the dead; it also allows the perception of the pluralistic multiverse and the notion of timeless extra-human entities to emerge.

Powys's Autobiography contains numerous examples of this first function of the fetish and the fetishised landscape, as here at the close of the book:

When, on that great flight of steps at Rome leading up from the Piazza del Spagna to the Pincian Hill, I suddenly got an ecstasy of mysterious exultation, in which I said to myself, "Let *me* pass and perish, as long as this magical stream of life, so noble in its heroic continuity, still goes on!" What I really did was to sink my own solitary personality in the innumerable personalities of all the men and women who for generations had come up and own those historic steps. But this feeling has come over me, though in a less degree, in much humbler places. It has come over me in narrow lanes opening out suddenly upon the ancient peace of secluded hamlets; . . . it has come to me as I followed the cliff-path from Brighton to Rottingdean, or the road from Cambridge to Shelford, or paused with Llewelyn by the time-worn "Stocks" under the century-polished elm-boles of Tintinhull, or followed some clover-scented cattle-track between Bognor and William Blake's Felpham.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ John Cowper Powys, Autobiography 651.

These fetishes, associated with prior human identities, allow the solitary ego to be submerged amongst the numberless dead. The imaginative action is almost identical to that romantic nationalist urge which uses not the fetish but the ethnic or racial group to facilitate such a submergence of the ego into a wider identity. Yet it is too personal, too specific to be so regarded.

Such is the process which allows Fisher intuitive knowledge of the continuance of the dead living in the mind of the perceiving subject. This offers a resistance to the acceptance 'that the dead have gone away to God through/ portals sculpted in brass to deter' (*F. 17*) and to those authorities which would 'as if it were a military installation/ specialize and classify and hide/ the life of the dead.' (*F. 17*) It provides an alternative to the name on microfiche in the Public Search Office where such identities are:

recorded by authority
to be miniaturized; to be traceable
however small; to be material;
to have status in the record;
to have the rest,
the unwritten,
even more easily scrapped.

(*F. 16*)

It allows that which is unwritten to be guessed at and recovered.

One can see the working of this process in Fisher's description of Kentish Road:

They come anyway
to the trench,
the dead in their surprise,
taking whatever form they can

to push across. They've no news.
They infest the brickwork. Kentish Road
almost as soon as it's run up
out in the field, gets propelled
to the trench, the soot still fresh on it,
and the first few dozen faces
take the impress, promiscuously
with door and window arches;
Birmingham voices in the entryways
lay the law down. My surprise
stares into the walls.

(*F.* 18-19)

'The trench' seems a good candidate for Crozier's notion of textual surplus. The term could refer to a builder's trench or, more grandly, to the division between living and dead. However, when the word is repeated, a particular historical sense preponderates - that of the trenches of the Great War - where the trench is also a line between the dead and the living, and where the 'field' is the field of battle rather than that on which the houses were built. If this is textual surplus we should at least qualify the term, for, in a manner akin to ambiguity, it less outstrips reference than endeavours to answer to more than one range of reference at once. The perception it enables is the crossing of 'the trench' by the dead who, like 'the true gods' in 'The Many' (*F.* 42), have 'no news'. It is both building and a material trace of those who made it. The miniaturised dead may be perceived as inseparable from the medium via which they are communed with and from the act of perception that so enlivens them. In this the dead are Homeric for: 'The dead seem all alive in the human *Hades* of *Homer*, yet cannot well speak, prophesie, or know the living, except they drink blood, wherein is the life of man.'⁷⁶ This Powysian communing with the traces of the past allows for an intuitive understanding. It allows for the dead to 'push across' the trench (*F.* 18) and to be perceived through the architecture of Kentish

⁷⁶ Sir Thomas Browne, *Urne Buriall and The Garden of Cyrus*, ed. John Carver, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1958) 34.

Road just as other endurances may be depicted in masque by the vanishing of 'a gentleman/ in black'
(*F.* 12-13) who has

become inseparable
from all other things, no longer
capable of being imagined
apart from them, nor yet of being
forgotten in his identity.

(*F.* 13)

The imagined figure is inseparable from that which gives rise to him.

In all this positive fetishism, in the 'entry into nature', there is a certain longing to allow the pre-linguistic wonder in objects and their presences somehow to enter the world of language and of the sign without being 'miniaturised', to write the unwritten and somehow encode the perennial 'nameless mouths,/ events without histories, voices,/ animist, metaphoric coming through' (*F.* 14) that may be detected in an epiphanic communion with a natural fetish such as: 'the sunlight, old and still,/ heavy on garden soil' (*F.* 14). Such is the view that is endorsed in Fisher's interview with Staple magazine, when he spoke of 'a sensory vocabulary of being alive . . . before I was articulate'.⁷⁷ When Powys writes of 'The Laurel Axe', the inspiration for the title of a Geoffrey Hill poem, he recalls this primal fetish of his early childhood:⁷⁸

To get back that laurel axe from that garden spinney at Shirley would now be to get back the full magic power of that timeless fetish-worship by the strength of which the quaintest, most ordinary object - a tree-stump, a pile of stones, a pool by the roadside, an ancient chimney-stack - can become an Ark of the Covenant, evocative of the music of the spheres!⁷⁹

⁷⁷ 'Talking to Staple' 43.

⁷⁸ Geoffrey Hill, Collected Poems 160.

⁷⁹ Autobiography 3.

This mixture of anthropology and Wordsworthian romanticism meet in an expression of a longing for the primitive nature of childhood. Whereas childhood, history and nature were, for Hill, an expression of Hobbesian savagery, Fisher and Powys are essentially in the tradition of Rousseau. The vision of primitive man and child is in accord with some pre-lapsarian state. Both Fisher and Powys are fascinated by the intimations of this in the young Wordsworth.⁸⁰ The 'primal sympathy' which Wordsworth detected was one principally felt in childhood.⁸¹ Fisher in his interviews and Powys in his Autobiography also admit the connection, but elsewhere they are considerably more interested in its continuing existence and significance in adult life: there is no real break between child and savage and man and civilization.

The 'entry into nature' via fetishism supposes a means of escaping the symbolic order, of escaping time and the confines of the twentieth century, its codes and identities, to confront the dead through a private experience of the self transcending the ego. Actually to encode such a process in language must, by its very nature, be almost impossible and, at least initially, it is depicted cautiously by Fisher as a 'dream or intention' (*F.* 12). It is Powys again who suggests how this process of encoding might be achieved specifically through poetry. In the 'Preface' to A Furnace, Fisher writes:

I am indebted to his [John Cowper Powys's] writings for such understanding as I have of the idea that the making of all kinds of identities is a primary impulse which the universe itself has; and that those identities and that impulse can be acknowledged only by some form or other of poetic imagination.

(*F.* 7)

The key into Powysian vision is via the poetic imagination. In Atlantis an Ithacan fly, who speaks (of course) in Dorset dialect, has this to say on the matter:

⁸⁰ Fisher notes this interest in capturing the insights of the 'young Wordsworth' in 'City Poems', tape, Clock House Studios, Keele University, 1988.

⁸¹ 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', William Wordsworth, The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. Hutchinson (Humphrey Milford: London, 1916) 587-590, 590.

“Don’t ‘ee forget, dear Pyraust,” he added, “how when we began our study of the alphabet of matter we learnt how much more important the sensations that certain words convey to us are than the precise nature of the words used or the number of syllables they contain.”

“Above all, my dear girl, don’t forget what the Olive-Shoot always tells us, how in the science of language it is a combination of assonance and alliteration that conveys the idea; and thus it is only in poetry that the real secret of what is happening is revealed.”⁸²

Fisher’s verse does use, though in a less obvious way than the alliterative poetics of Northern line, both the techniques mentioned by the moth. It is reasonable to presume that Fisher also is working on the principle that it is the sensation that words convey that also conveys the private intuitions of the fetish worshipper, thus fulfilling the ‘dream or intention’ of the author. This theory allows for the sensations of words as combined in poetry to communicate the sensations of the private relationship of ego with matter that dissolves their latter separation, which in turn may bring about a renewed and meaningful connection between signifier and signified.

This theory of poetry lies close to what, in the terms of Julia Kristeva, would be described as the recovery of ‘the semiotic’ and, more particularly, the *chora*. According to Kristeva: ‘The *chora* is a modality of significance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic’.⁸³ Kristeva is interested in features of avant-garde poetics and a free play of the sign that are markedly different from those features of poetry extolled by Powys and, by implication, Fisher. Yet both do see poetry as a way of transcending a materialistic society by escaping the conventional ‘symbolic’ order. However, though the intuitions that Fisher and Powys write of date back to childhood, neither is particularly preoccupied with any psychoanalytical explanation of their fetishism, nor are they merely interested in generating ‘jouissance’. The poetic expression of ‘what is really happening’ may, as we have seen, facilitate meaningful conversation with the dead. The point is put by one of the characters in Powys’s A Glastonbury Romance:

⁸² John Cowper Powys, Atlantis 155.

⁸³ Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language, trans. Margaret Waller, intr. Leon S.Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) 26.

“Can’t you feel, Ned, as we stand here that this place is magical? What’s Poetry if it isn’t something that has to fight for the unseen against the seen, for the dead against the living, for the mysterious against the obvious? Poetry always takes sides. It’s the only Lost Cause we’ve got left! It fights for the . . . for the . . . for the Impossible.”⁸⁴

Fighting for the impossible ‘dream or intention’ also means gaining access to a true vision of the world, or rather worlds.

How the True Gods Play Dice

Once A Furnace has accepted this faith in the power of poetry, the Powysian fetish becomes the key into the whole Powysian system, for it unlocks the perception of the multiverse, animism and those elusive true gods. Such a process is detailed in a key passage to A Furnace where Fisher expounds his version of Powys’s ‘Complex Vision’:

The true gods, known only
as *those of whom there is never news*;

rebellious, repressed; indestructible
right access to the powers of the world;

by tyrannies given images; given
finish, given work; and in due time

discarded among the debris of that into
private existences, into common use,

deliquescent, advancing by a contrary

⁸⁴ John Cowper Powys, A Glastonbury Romance (London: Picador, Macdonald, 1975) 529.

evolution to the giving up of all

portrayable identity, seeping unevenly

down to a living

level, pragmatic

skein of connections from

lichens to collapsing faces

in drenched walls, exhalations

of polish and detergent

in palace-voids of authority,

patches of serene light in the skulls of

charlatans making tea in swamp cottages,

evidences that dart into the particle accelerator

unaccountably; and others

caught unawares in the promiscuous

rectangles of the Impressionists,

and ready to come back out to us

through the annexation-frames

of a world that thought itself a single colony.

(*F.* 42-43).

The 'true gods' are presences '*of whom there is never news*'. The italicization seems to indicate a direct quotation from The Odyssey, but Fisher supplies us with no footnote which would locate its precise source as he does elsewhere with italicizations. The spirit of the sentence, though not its precise wording, derives once again from Powys's Atlantis. There is a good deal of 'news' about the doings of the gods in Atlantis, and some comment about the nature of that news, as when Enorches, the priest of the mysteries, says: 'These murderous gods always like their news to reach us drop by drop'.⁸⁵ So Fisher's phrase comments upon Powys. Either there is now never news of the gods through their vanishing, or the Olympian Gods were never the true Gods, or else what the gods reveal is never 'news', for their revelations are never of this time, of contingent day-to-day events. In Powys's novel, the Gods are disappearing through man's lack of belief; the fly observes:

"the Pillar has now revealed that as a result of a spontaneous and natural revolt all over the world against god-worship, all the gods that exist . . . are fated to perish. They are not fated to perish rapidly. Some indeed, Athene and Hermes for example, will perish slowly.

"But perish they all will. And the fatal sickness that must ere long bring them to their end is caused by this growing refusal to worship them. If mortal beings depend on the sun and the rain, immortal beings depend on our worship of them. If we stop worshipping them, the juice, the sap, the pith, the oil, the ichor, the very blood of their life vanishes; and like plants without sun and air, and plants without earth and water, they simply wither away."⁸⁶

The gods are contingent upon belief and, in the modern world, the privacy of belief. When, in Maiden Castle, Uryen reveals his private beliefs he destroys their contact with his inner self and loses his power.⁸⁷

The true gods are the 'indestructible/ right access to the powers of the world'; they are resistant to Heraclitean process and a way in which to find hidden forces. They are also without images, or

⁸⁵ Atlantis 259.

⁸⁶ Atlantis 448-449.

⁸⁷ This is Glen Cavaliero's interpretation of the novel. Glen Cavaliero, John Cowper Powys: Novelist, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973) 93-102 and 135.

rather, they are perverted into images by 'tyrannies', be they political or religious. Their 'contrary evolution' is towards 'the giving up of all/ portrayable identity' into a 'pragmatic skein of connections', a phrase which evinces Powys's debt to William James. Though there might be a slightly Protestant undertone to this polytheism, it is recognizably Powys's philosophy, which is ultimately resistant to organised religion, and which places its emphasis upon the human mind's relationship with the intimate 'living/ level' and a 'pragmatic skein of connections' between various objects and presences, that informs this passage. Collected here are Fisher's personal gods, representatives of his intimations of the sacred, for the domain of the sacred has now become that of 'private existences' rather than public worship, and their significance is left for the reader to fathom.

Lichen was also a favourite nature fetish of Powys. It illustrates the creative force of nature. In his Autobiography Powys recounts his time looking at the walls of Cambridge:

But these glances were shy, exclusive, wilful, and were almost always directed to those particular spaces in old walls where the forces of Nature - rain or moss or lichen, or sun, or river water - had added something, added the artistry I suppose, of the only artist I could thoroughly appreciate, to those Early English, Decorated, Tudor, Jacobean, Queen Anne designs!⁸⁸

Powys, like Fisher and unlike T.E. Hulme and the early modernists (and this may relate to their respective ideologies and temperaments), tends to find beauty in things that are soft and wet rather than hard and dry. The 'collapsing faces/ in drenched walls' may show the power of nature over the image and its capacity to create upon a man-made environment. A more likely explanation of the lines is that these faces refer to the sort of impressions of past faces encountered in 'The Return', such as those seen in Kentish Road. The exhalations of 'polish and detergent', though not representatives of nature in the usual sense of the term, also conform to Powys's private cult of sensations. Private sensations and memories of polish and detergent provide the unintentional 'orifices of question' (*F.* 24) in 'palace voids of authority'. Fisher's pantheon then appears to move into the domain of the

⁸⁸ Autobiography 193.

imagined scene, as the figure of the charlatan returns, no longer solitary but in the company of other charlatans and with a skull containing a serene light which appears to have the quasi-mystical significance that light so often has in A Furnace.

This last true god, with its mixture of the marvellous and the everyday, characteristic of the world of Powys's novels, moves the list away from that which could strictly be described as a fetish into the domain of post-Newtonian physics with the naming of 'evidences that dart into the particle accelerator/ unaccountably'. Fisher is explicitly invoking subatomic physics and, presumably, a version of quantum theory, without providing much in the way of argument or explanation. The reader is presumably meant to fill in the gaps for himself. Thus a number of explanations present themselves as being in keeping with the passage and with the system of Powysian beliefs in the poem as a whole.

A Furnace implicitly indicts the failures of the Newtonian materialism connected with the mechanistic world view of industrialism to which it gives rise. It is hard to underestimate the widespread effect that the Newtonian model had upon both the shaping of the world, whether in biology or city planning, or indeed the combination of the two, as in Fisher's portrayal of 'Joe/ Chamberlain's sense of the corporate/ signalling to itself with millions of disposable/ identity-cells, summary and tagged' (F. 26). Scientific materialism is linked both to 'machine mindedness' and to economic materialism that came about in the Industrial revolution and 'a passion for possessing, in one form or another, large quantities of matter.'⁸⁹ It is not science as such but this materialist world view which is objected to in the writings of both Fisher and Powys, and it is the liberating effect of post-Newtonian science, whether in Chaos or Quantum theory which is celebrated in Fisher's poem. The ruler of Atlantis in Powys's novel, who is finally killed by Odysseus, propounds an 'absolutely and entirely scientific' law which will 'become the law of the whole earth' and will care 'nothing about the happiness of people . . . , still less, if that be possible, about the virtue or the righteousness or the compassion or the pity or the sympathy of people.'⁹⁰ The great, grey metropolis on Atlantis is

⁸⁹ Paul Davies and John Gribbin, The Matter Myth: Beyond Chaos and Complexity (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) 7 and 5.

⁹⁰ Atlantis 451.

the archetype of all such mechanistic materialism. Yet it would be wrong to characterize Powys as a hater of science, the boy Nisos concludes, after witnessing Odysseus's encounter:

"I now know what I shall be a prophet of when I am a man. I'll be a prophet for the putting of Science in its place! And what is its place? Its place is the servant, not the master, of life, the friendly 'doulos', or obedient slave of living things, not their pitiless 'basileus', or 'royal despot'."⁹¹

Quantum and Chaos theories seem to be a way out of such mechanism and its concurrent ideologies.

Fisher does not indicate that a belief that the age of Materialism and the ideology that accompanied it is already dead:

For now

Puritan materialism dissolves its matter,
its curdled massy acquisition; dissolves
the old gravity of ponderous fires
that bewildered the senses,
and for this
glassy metaphysical void.

(*F.* 35)

This scarcely veiled attack upon the ideology of Thatcherism and the vision that created such cathedrals to the god of intangible acquisition as the London Docklands project portrays Puritanism and materialism as aspects of the same thing (as they certainly were in the mind of Margaret Thatcher herself), still present, but dissolved in this latest metamorphosis. The lines obliquely echo Newton

⁹¹ Atlantis 454-455

who maintained that matter consists of 'solid, massy, impenetrable, particles.'⁹² They show a view of matter that is now regarded as wrong (quantum theory maintains the polar opposite of Newton's diagnosis) adapting with monotheistic capitalism into a new environment.

In 'The Many', curious phenomena observed at the sub-atomic level are shown as keys into a chance-ridden world, not of one puritan god of materialism, but of many gods which appear and disappear showing their presence to 'a world that thought itself a single colony' (F. 43). This is a possible reference to the 'many worlds' theory of quantum mechanics, first proposed by Hugh Everett in 1957, which resolves the paradox of Schrödinger's cat by positing as many universes as there are unresolvable quantum phenomena.⁹³ The reference appears to be backed up by Fisher's 'ghosts/ innocent of time' who travel 'by way of/ the pass-and-return valve between the worlds'(F. 18). This earlier passage certainly refers to Powys's theory of multiverse, and it is reasonable enough to suppose that the particle-behaviour is invoked to explain it

Powys's multiverse, though hardly the same as the 'many worlds' theory, has a certain amount in common with it, as does his view of matter:

From my point of view there is no such thing as "dead matter," no such thing as chemical, magnetic force outside the circle of living organisms. . . .The world is a pluralistic universe, wherein an assemblage of bodies and souls, some visible, some invisible, struggle for their own individual vision.⁹⁴

This world depends upon the perceiving subject. One can spot the connections that can be made. Just as the nature of quantum phenomena depends on the observer so too does Powys's multiverse. Though quantum theory doesn't stray into the realms of Powys's all embracing polytheism and animism, it, in its different way, has rejected the notion of 'dead matter'. As Heisenberg said: 'the

⁹² Quoted in The Matter Myth 7.

⁹³ See The Matter Myth 191-228, esp. 219-225. See also Paul Davies, God and the New Physics, (Harmondsworth, Pelican 1984) 100-119.

⁹⁴ In Defense of Sensuality 281.

common division of the world into subject, inner and outer world, body and soul is no longer adequate.⁹⁵ Even more peculiar than such a breakdown of divisions is the related phenomenon noted by the physicist John Wheeler: 'The quantum principle shows that there is a sense in which what the observer will do in the future defines what happens in the past - even in the past so remote that life did not then exist.'⁹⁶ And indeed an experiment at Austin has proved that certain uncertainties can take place, as it were, 'innocent of time' (*F.* 18) in a way analogous to the human ghosts in the poem.⁹⁷ All of this is entirely consonant with the preoccupations of A Furnace which sees matter as not dead but as interacting with processes of perception.

If we return to the specific instance of evidences appearing in a particle accelerator, then we can see correlations with other passages in the poem such as the opening of 'The Return' and its invocation of:

the timeless flux
that cannot help but practise
materialization,
the coming into sense,
to the guesswork of the senses,
the way in cold air
ice-crystals, guessed at, come densely
falling from where they were not

(*F.* 11).

This materialisation of timeless flux is indicative of 'the primary impulse which the cosmos itself has' in making 'all kinds of identities' (*F.* vii). So the particle accelerator and the impressionist painting are part of the same process, as is the weather. The weather is also a prime example of another, non-deterministic, branch of modern physics: Chaos theory.

⁹⁵ Quoted by Paul Davies, God and the New Physics 112.

⁹⁶ Quoted by Paul Davies, God and the New Physics 39.

⁹⁷ See The Matter Myth 206-208

Chaos theory states that a complex system such as the weather will be inherently chaotic and unpredictable due to the countless number of variables within it and the possibility of each tiny variable having a huge influence upon that system. The classic example is that if a butterfly flaps its wings in the Amazon it could lead to a whirlwind in, say, the Indian Ocean. Chaos is a subject which Fisher explicitly deals with in a poem composed at about the same time as A Furnace. In 'The Whale Knot' he writes:

Read
the whale in all the ways clouds
are read. The clouds out of sight
are patterned and inscrutable; chaos
from simple constituents,
form out of simple chaos.⁹⁸

The chaos 'from simple constituents' is created out of an underlying chaos. Following the laws of probability, you can guess at the place of formation of ice crystals in a cloud but cannot determine them: 'the way in cold air/ ice crystals, guessed at, come densely/ falling from where they were not' (F. 11).

This interest in Chaos is concomitant with the overall political temper of A Furnace which stresses the importance and ultimate autonomy of the constituents of a supposed whole. Its natural law is one of chaos, as in its description of Birmingham's resistance to the centralising ambitions of Joseph Chamberlain which marks the transition from 'Authorities' to 'Core':

Right under all that, the whole
construction continued to seethe
and divide itself by natural law;

⁹⁸ Poems 1955-1987 170.

...
in the cause of a headless
relativity of zones, perceptible
by the perceiver, linked by back roads,

unstable, dividing, grouping again,
differently; giving the slip to being
counted more than one head at a time.

(*F.* 27)

It is this vision of all entities being made up of their subjective constituents that links politics, physics and metaphysics in Fisher's poem, for all are expressions both of anti-materialism and of 'the Many' as opposed to 'the One'.

The section of A Furnace that most explicitly expounds Powys's metaphysic is entitled 'The Many'. The Many are opposed to all tyrannies, totalising systems and monotheism. 'Mercurial nature' is now characterised by the 'separable argumentative lights' of an 'oil film dashed on a ripple' (*F.* 38-9). The One and the Many are explained with the help of a parable:

Parable of the One and the Many. Presences
flaring out from the wet flints
at Knowlton ruin,

multiple as beans, too small and irregular
to distinguish or call names. Divide;
survive.

Some god, isolated
by a miscalculation, cut off

from his fellows, hauled in
across the bank to clear the green
ring of its demons; churched over;
and in his time forsaken.

They ate him,
and drank him,
and put his little light out and left.

(*F.* 39)

Here Fisher uses the Russian Formalist device of 'making strange' in harness with an evident dislike of monotheism. The Christian God of the church at Knowlton ruin becomes 'Some God' mistakenly isolated from his from his fellow deities, whilst the Eucharist becomes not an enduring sacrament but a brief meal of a God whose fellows remained as multiple presences without names. These presences correspond to 'the nameless mouths,/ events without histories, voices,/ animist, polytheist, metaphoric/ coming through' (*F.* 14) of 'The Return', the corresponding section of a double spiral. Fisher has described himself as 'an anarchist who simply has no time whatever for hierarchical systems, monotheisms or state authority; or for capitalism, along with the absorbent, malleable selves it breeds and with which it populates its democracies and its literatures'.⁹⁹ All these themes run throughout *A Furnace*, and the notion of the One and the Many captures the essence of an argument that stretches from religion outwards to all such totalising systems.

He who perceives 'the Many', which resist any religious or political-religious absolute, will inevitably be branded a 'charlatan', a word that Powys habitually uses to describe himself.¹⁰⁰ The term of reproach is accepted and embraced wholeheartedly. To be a charlatan is to have no authority for what one does, but rather to make a 'patch-work hand-to-mouth "philosophy"', to create a private system of

⁹⁹ 'Roy Fisher Reviews Roy Fisher' 35.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, *Autobiography* 185. 'I hear at this point an indignant murmur in a familiar voice: "Hypocritical Charlatan! Sentimental Humbug! Bastard of Jean-Jaques Rousseau!"'

belief, a 'pragmatic/ skein of connections' (*F.* 43) from what one finds.¹⁰¹ Such is the nature of Fisher's 'Calling':

Grown man
without right learning; by nobody
guided to the places; not knowing
what may speak; having eased awkwardly
into the way of being called.

(*F.* 8)

Such a calling seems displaced in the forward movements of the poem. The charlatan, taking on the role of the oracle, acts in the face of authoritarianism and the acquiescent, 'sensible' literary form that accompanied the rise of industrialism:

in the civilization of novels,
the fields racked hard
to shake people off into suburbs
quiescent with masterless men
in their generations, it would be
pacifist mystics, self-chosen,
who would be driven by private
obsessions to go looking
among slurries and night-holes
for what might be accidentally
there, though not instituted; having to be
each his own charlatan.

(*F.* 23)

¹⁰¹ Obstinate Cymric 147.

Searching for the accidental in a world that thinks it works by a providence as certain as the providence of nineteenth century novels, wherein the apparent accident of, say, the dropping of a letter, will in fact be part of deterministic scheme, will be an action for 'the pacifist mystic', for the charlatan.

This celebration of the charlatan stands at the opposite pole to the role of the poet as instituted by, say, T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'.¹⁰² In Eliot's essay there is both authority and an ideal order in the writers of the past which confers similar authority on the present writer. In both Jones and Bunting we detected an actual nationalism in the imagined communities of past artists. Roy Fisher notably stands apart from this. His 'tradition' is that of the charlatan, and his choice of the ideas of a charlatan as his informing vision partly bears this out. John Cowper Powys is the great marginal figure of twentieth century English letters. He is a writer far too eccentric, far too much of a charlatan, to be central to any canon. Fisher, instead of deriving authority from any 'imagined community' into which the reader may or may not be initiated, concentrates on an isolated figure whose subject in turn is the isolated charlatan.

But inside the 'Core' the charlatan may reveal himself as part of the dialectic between life and death, creation and destruction:

suspended in there, moving
only on its own account,
the image, *deus mortuus*,
death chuckling along in its life,
uncanny demonstration, one edge
of clowning, charlatan,
the other huskily
brushing against nothing

(F. 29)

¹⁰² T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in Selected Essays 13-22.

The clowning of the charlatan (in this passage, that of the jazz musician Coleman Hawkins), even as it seems to be the activity of the god of death, gives expression to spontaneous creativity (here improvised jazz). Hawkins, and this brings us to the core of the poem and the true nature of its Heracliteanism, is represented in terms of a dualistic First Cause: he is moving on his own account, he is the unmoved mover. The dualistic first cause was, as we have noted, a feature of Powys's earlier philosophy. It also appears in his earlier novels, as on the opening page of A Glastonbury Romance.¹⁰³

There is something almost playful in Fisher's use of Hawkins in this way, but it keeps very much to the spirit of Powys and 'the causative power of some ultimate Final or First Cause, whose inward sensation of conscious power and will resembles your own.'¹⁰⁴ The First Cause in Powys is in tune with 'the projection, by advance and retreat, of the creative and resistant power of individual souls'.¹⁰⁵ In Fisher's depiction of Hawkins, as is implicit in the later Powys, it is decentred. It is indicative of the dialectic between being and non-being, in which things are continually created as they are destroyed, which is ultimately the Heraclitean nature of the poem. This brings the devices of double spiral, the philosophy of Powys and the Heraclitean Furnace together:

in the outermost arm of the spiral,
where it disintegrates,
gives itself up, racing
to flake away,

he is once again passing
close to his birth; Hawkins
on his last go-round . . .

(F. 30)

¹⁰³ A Glastonbury Romance 21.

¹⁰⁴ In Defense of Sensuality 7.

¹⁰⁵ The Complex Vision 12.

The double spiral, in its capacity as a two dimensional double helix, stands equally for the creative and resistant power of the individual, the movement backwards to birth and before and the contrary movement through life and towards death. Here in the 'Core' of the poem's double spiral, Hawkins is represented as being on its outmost edge, on his last go-round. In 'The Return' Fisher writes:

that you are dead
turns in the dark of your spiral,
comes close in the first hours after birth,
recedes and recurs often.

(*F.* 18)

The end of the double spiral must be death, yet that is close to birth as birth is close to death. The centre of the double spiral is the moment when neither concept seems to apply. The spiral has stopped moving. The subject of 'Core' is principally the tomb, but that tomb is a place where the life that is in death may emerge. Away from the movement that characterises each section, 'The Core' can analyse how both happen at once, how creation may happen from nothing.

The 'Core' is the place where all the resonances, the 'Riddles' and 'Resemblances' that were found in the 'Introit' (*F.* 4), stop. We have arrived at a 'Chamber with no echo' where sounds like animals caught in a trap make 'a dead fall' which 'knots an entire symmetry' (presumably of neolithic buildings) but uses none.¹⁰⁶ For death seems to signify only to itself. Furthermore, Fisher places an object near the centre of the 'Core' that is 'here flown as fugitive/ from all exegesis' (*F.* 31). This object, which is declared to be free from any interpretation, seems to stand - and this is exegesis - for the ultimate inscrutability of death. Yet this is by no means completely the case, for 'grave goods send word back out' (*F.* 28). Objects in the tomb may signify from the dead to the living as the light of day may penetrate the chamber or a Breton ossuary. The objects of death may have their life when

¹⁰⁶ This chamber could well be West Kennet Long Barrow, which is at the centre of various other nearby sites such as Avebury and Silbury Hill, rather than the tomb at Newgrange.

perceived and made sense of, when they are, like nature, subject to processes of human consciousness and the chance of encoding them appears.

Thus, in the end, the significance of all processes of creation and destruction come from the human mind just as Apocalypse also does, for it 'lies within time' (*F.* 45). The huge clouds, 'five towering beings' seem to embody the 'irrevocable dislocation' of the forward movement of the double spiral and the end of all things but:

their demeanour could equally match
the beginning of all things. It's the same
change. There's a choice of how to see it.

(*F.* 45)

Such spontaneous creations of nature live without that meaning which can only be given by those that perceive it. The gods, like the gods of Atlantis, require human belief. In a Melanesian cargo-cult, the gods are thought of as bringing goods and prosperity. A Furnace, though, proposes a

Cargo-cult
reversed. There have always been
saucers put out for us
by the gods. We're called
for what we carry.

(*F.* 46)

The gods may be like interplanetary beings leaving out flying saucers or like cat lovers putting out a saucer of milk, and yet it is we who bring the god's prosperity. The human eye may get 'the awe it's been craving' (*F.* 46), but the gods at the same time get life.

This accords with Powys's philosophy. For, despite all the speculations, his philosophy is ultimately that of a sceptic. Powys is a sceptic of apocalypse, just as he is of religion, who rests sovereignty with the human mind:

I am not an easy person to teach; but what nature has taught me . . . is that all the cults, all the philosophies, all the staggering inspirations of Jesus, all the disturbing psychological insights of St. Paul, come simply and solely from the ordinary common human mind. She has taught me too that all the humorous checks and balances necessary to keep these dangerous desperations in their place, as we force ourselves while we live not only to enjoy life, but to enjoy looking forward to the indescribably satisfying experience of Death, are drawn from the ordinary common human mind, . . . drawn from where they were perverted, two hundred and fifty thousand years ago by fear of gods and demons and phantoms and monsters, drawn from where they are perverted today by fear of the omnipresent, super-present, sub-present, totalitarian absolute, whose centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere. Yes, it all comes out of the human mind, the whole grand supernatural illusion!¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

A Furnace is a poem which incorporates both belief and scepticism in a scheme that from the 'Introit' onwards is concerned with the distinctions and sympathetic connections to be made between mind and matter. Fisher does not so much deny empiricism or even the realist mode as elaborate upon it. The modes of perception and the Powysian theories engaged with in A Furnace question the separation of perception and the perceived object, the illusion of dead matter. The world portrayed is not all of the mind, nor is it all of signs or language: both these views are solipsistic in a way A Furnace is not. Yet the poem is testimony to the creative power of the mind in its engagement with empirical phenomena, its ability to find ways to awake the dead, or to discover its own gods and to engage with dualities, its interaction with autonomous 'identities'. This involves the perception of a world not homogenised but various. The doctrine of the Many allows the 'identities' within the poem not to be easily conflated into expressions of any *a priori* principle. Though they may have shared accidents, such as

¹⁰⁷ Obstinate Cymric 178-179.

being old and a woman, and more general conclusions may be arrived at by their comparison or from their situations, there is no attempt to show shared essence save their individuality, their separate identities. The poem might seem to offer the opportunity of losing oneself in the communion with the dead, the immersion into the greater stream of past humanity. But, on closer inspection, this involves the discovery of past identities, the particularities that have been lost in a system of authorities that would miniaturise them. And the particularities of a certain object, a certain fetish, may in turn solicit the awareness of these other particularities associated with them.

The doctrine of the Many, like the idea of ultimate, though ambiguous and inextricably linked duality, leads us back to the poem's form. How can a poem whose subject is the Many be a unity? T.S. Eliot finished the Four Quartets with the conclusion that 'the fire and the rose are one'.¹⁰⁸ The words provide a cadence for a poem whose model is musical form, bringing resolution of themes and of opposites through unity. Yet Fisher is not interested in such closure. The spiral is not a perfect circle. Powys observed that his philosophy 'has at least the virtue not common to every metaphysical system, of *refusing to end* It prefers the ragged, wavering, fluctuating and even somewhat vaporous forward-moving line of advance to any sort of circle.'¹⁰⁹ The double spiral that Fisher uses is not as ragged as all that, and indeed comes close to being a circle, but it resists such an ending. So, in practice, Fisher's method is rather closer to interlace than to music. But it is, as we have seen, carefully patterned around the form of the double spiral, and this pattern is in sympathy with the poem's themes and the less comprehensive devices that they give rise to. There is unity in that there is a single coherent vision put forward which is coherently worked out throughout the poem; and its structure through that vision, barring the centrality accorded to individual perception, is multiple.

A Furnace is a difficult and sometimes obscure poem, but it does not rely on extensive scholarship. Its science, for instance, is no more complex than that which is conveyed in popular science books, magazines or television documentaries. Where Fisher does not supply a footnote, as in the case of Newgrange, it is as much to create an air of primal mystery as anything else. Moreover, A Furnace is

¹⁰⁸ T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber and Faber, 1974) 223.

¹⁰⁹ Obstinate Cymric 181.

by no means an inaccessible work. Its language is not characterised by dense allusion or philology and most of its individual passages may be understood and enjoyed without reference to the wider themes of the poem. Yet A Furnace does allow for a pattern of meaning to emerge from lines that, divorced from its greater structures might seem part of a private language of significances, of textual surplus or merely part of a careful recording of place or sensation. When discerned, this system of significances is no longer private, though it remains very personal. There is no leap, from the personal to the national or the racial. The places of especial significance, the histories uncovered, either relate to the poet's own genealogy and background or to places he happens to have visited or read about, rather than any larger entity. This is not to say that A Furnace does not share common features with both nationalism and race-romanticism. It does: it shares their quest to show the dead continuing in the living, to shore up an inheritance, and to delineate places and actions and heroes of especial significance. More particularly, the idea of the backflow of the genes has obvious connections with race-romanticism. But all this is de-essentialised. The genes are not those of any particular race, just as the places in the poem do not conform to any particular or potential polity. There is what we might term 'localism' but no real regionalism, an interest in genetic but not racial inheritance.

This leads to the evaluation of Fisher's use of Powys. Within the poem, Fisher's use of Powys is very consistent indeed. It is not the whole of Powys, but Fisher's adaptation of Powys, that is used, and this could be discerned by a careful reader of the poem without much more knowledge of Powys than Fisher supplies in the 'Preface'. What one makes of that philosophy will depend upon one's own beliefs. However, it is reasonable to point out that its effect on the poem is largely beneficial and that its use is partly heuristic. It allows Fisher to systematise his intimations and observations into a coherent world view, to build from a 'dream or intention' a viable way of ordering his material in a long poem. In poems subsequent to A Furnace, Fisher has not continued to be explicitly Powysian: A Furnace is a single work with a single world-view, not an ongoing project like David Jones's.

In his writing of A Furnace, Roy Fisher has, by and large, managed to deal with the central problems of the English Modernist long poem successfully and to connect his heterodox modernism with a

viable version of Romanticism. The vision of A Furnace may be a personal one, but it is also very wide ranging: its scope is hardly less than that of The Anthemata, but its focus is much more acute, and its ambitions much more achievable. That these ambitions are, on the whole, achieved is a testament both to the artistry of Roy Fisher and to the continuing viability of the modernist long poem as a form.

CONCLUSION

Change and continuity have been principal subjects of the poems studied in this thesis. They have also been conditions of the particular tradition of the long poem to which these works belong. The project which the modernist long poem in England represents has been flexible enough to be adapted to the needs of various different poets and their various concepts of history and identity. Whilst certain ideologies, meta-narratives and formal devices have been discarded, certain core features and aims have remained. Northern line has, for example, disappeared save as an indirect influence in A Furnace. Nevertheless, A Furnace is, like Briggflatts and The Anthemata, patterned on a visual model which is directly related to the ideas of history within the poem. A Furnace is very different from The Anthemata in its ideology and its outlook upon the world, yet it is recognisably the same sort of poem.

In Mercian Hymns this tradition of the modernist long poem in England comes close to breaking down into a series of lyrics. Mercian Hymns partially constitutes a move away from the attempt at a coherent long poem in which meaning is gradually accreted throughout the work and which incorporates a view of history into its form. Yet even Mercian Hymn gestures towards such an attempt. Nonetheless, Mercian Hymns' ambiguous treatment of issues of history and identity implicitly suggests that such grand schemes are ultimately unachievable. The examples of Briggflatts and of A Furnace largely refute such a view. For these poems show poetic ambition and an acknowledgement of the limits of that ambition. Formal closure would, for both poets, have been a realisable, though dishonest, objective. This sets them apart not just from The Anthemata and Mercian Hymns but also from the great, open-ended works of American modernism. However, the form of Briggflatts and of A Furnace acknowledges and allows for those elements which would resist their schemes and incorporates them into the very form of the poem. Whilst the gap between the poet's desires and the world he has to live in help explain the comparative failure of Mercian Hymns and The Anthemata to be formally satisfying, it also helps explain the comparative success of Briggflatts and A Furnace.

In Briggflatts and A Furnace, histories and values of particular importance to the poet are expressed but those forces which would resist them are also acknowledged. This may be seen in the light of the Wordsworthian Romanticism in both poems. Bunting and Fisher both strive to make their visions accord with the natural world. In their contemplation of nature both poets find a consoling submergence of the ego which is a partial, and in Fisher's case almost total, substitute for the consolations of the imagined community and a crucial part of an inheritance which exists partly independent of that imagined community. Indeed, the imagined community of the dead and the contemplation of nature are made almost synonymous in A Furnace. This relationship with nature, in so far as it holds, is the chief predicate of the way in which both Briggflatts and A Furnace can make their forms cohere with the world beyond the poem and thus approach closure. It allows them to acknowledge those discrepancies between their own desires and the human reality they are faced with, to allow for Fisher's scepticism and for Bunting's restless melancholia. Bunting's use of music is largely in harmony with Wordsworthian contemplation of nature and Lucretian therapy, his use of Northern Line enacts that disposition and those processes which resist such a vision. Fisher's nature fetishism and his celebration of Chaos and the Many in the natural world in the even sections of A Furnace is counterbalanced by Heraclitean processes and his acceptance of being a marginal figure, a charlatan, in a world governed by 'authorities' in the odd-numbered sections of the poem. Just as Bunting allowed his ending to have an ambiguity which acknowledged the dialectical nature of its themes and form, so Roy Fisher chooses not to close the double spiral and make its two directions completely conjoin in order to give his vision a spurious resolution.

Such a concern for nature is almost entirely absent from Mercian Hymns and The Anathemata. These works allow the desires of the poet and the imagined community, and indeed human history, to become often near mirror images of one another. However, the myths and desires of their makers and the those of the nations which they represent are sufficiently at odds to discourage any attempt at formal coherence in Mercian Hymns and to disrupt it and the language used to express it in The Anathemata. For neither work has a dialectical structure capable of absorbing such contradictions. This is of a piece with the conceptions of time and history in the two poems, whether static or cyclical, which, unlike Briggflatts and A Furnace, resist, rather than both resist and acknowledge, the force of

time's arrow. Hill's solution to such problems, the ironic and ambivalent sequence rather than the fully developed long poem, may, given the parameters of his vision and disposition, be the best way of dealing with them. Mercian Hymns does at least allow, as The Anathemata on the whole does not, the contemporary pressures which resist its vision of history to be addressed. Nevertheless, placed beside Briggflatts and A Furnace, Mercian Hymns seems a minor work.

'It is easier to die than to remember'.¹ Yet, in both Briggflatts and A Furnace, the act of remembrance is connected with the perception of transitoriness, death and decay. On the one hand, both poems struggle to make the past live. Bunting's perception that 'Then is diffused in now' is paralleled by Fisher's portrayal of an historicised landscape, whilst the assertion that 'Then is now' is mirrored by Fisher's discovery of timeless identities.² Yet, whilst both poems look backward through time and contemplate the ways in which it may be escaped, they also look towards the future in a way that The Anathemata and Mercian Hymns do not. In their depictions of the force of time and the fact of death, Briggflatts and A Furnace allow their treatment of history to be more than simply the expression or analysis of the birthright of the poet. They affirm life by confronting death. They celebrate the enduring whilst acknowledging the transitory and convert the poet's inheritance into a significant testament.

¹ Basil Bunting, Collected Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 42.

² Basil Bunting, Collected Poem 57 and 58.

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