

## OTHER LAND

Geoffrey Hill, *Oraclau/Oraclles*. Thame, UK: Clutag Press. 2010

*Jeremy Hooker*

Geoffrey Hill's description of Charles Péguy as 'one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences, of our century' defines his central concerns. In Hill's poetry 'soul' and 'prophetic intelligence' are of first importance. To this one must add his belief in the reality of original sin.

Given his stance as a Christian poet, however qualified by a no less religious sense of irony, one might have inferred that Hill would turn one day to Wales, the country adjacent to his original home terrain in the English Midlands, on the other side of Offa's Dyke. For Wales is both close to that part of England, its landscapes offering an enticing otherness to the youngster looking across the border, and in Wales the questions—religious, moral, cultural, national—that exercise the mature Hill have not been marginalized, as they have been in England. A religious sensibility continues to shadow, where it does not actually define, Welsh-language poetry, while, as M. Wynn Thomas has shown in his recent groundbreaking study, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit*, major twentieth-century English-language Welsh writers have been strongly influenced by the chapel culture, even when they have detached themselves from it. The great Christian poets of recent times, David Jones and R. S. Thomas, to whom, in certain respects, Geoffrey Hill is closest, were both Welsh.

The occasion of Hill turning to Wales was his discovery, in his early 70s, of Welsh ancestry. *Oraclau/Oraclles* is dedicated to his great-grandfather, Pryce Jukes, who was born in Llanllwchaiarn, near Newtown in 1826, and 'uprooted and moved east into the Mercian Black Country, where he worked as a puddler in an iron foundry'. In the same interview with Geoffrey Hill in *Poetry Wales* (Summer 2010 Vol. 46 No.1) from which this information comes, the poet speaks of his 'historical, theological, sociological and economic interest in what has happened to Wales', and of his reading, in English, of Welsh literature and history.

The fact that Welsh differences are mediated to Hill through English inevitably has a distancing effect, and sometimes compounds the difficulties of his complex poetry. It is clear, though, that the late-awakened interest in Wales has also stirred up strong feelings from the poet's early life, and *Oraclau/Oraclles* contains more than a little passionate simplicity. The poet as lover, and the poet as a man deeply and widely read, are both here. But this

is a loose way of speaking. If Hill is never a ‘confessional’ poet, as the term is usually understood nowadays, it is because he writes as the whole man, acknowledging the sinful condition that confounds complete self-knowledge. As he says, memorably:

True, I do not speak truthfully; how could I?  
We are a fiction even to ourselves.

One thing Hill has in common with traditional Welsh-language poets is that he is a maker. *Oraclau/Oracles* consists of 144 nine-line rhyming or part-rhyming poems, or stanzas, numbered and printed three to the page. The stanzas are both tightly organized and enlivened by wordplay, which sometimes falls between the music of alliteration and assonance distinguishing Welsh poetry’s formal mastery and a more playful punning, as in ‘Eryri;/ The eagle glinting to its lost eyrie’. The prevailing spirit of the book reflects Hill’s wonder at his discovery of Welsh ancestry. In the interview he says: ‘It was almost as though I had spent my life wanting to be forgiven and accepted, and it seemed that in some miraculous way, at the age of 71 or 72, I had been forgiven and accepted’. There is joy in the discovery. But nothing is easy for the poet who believes ‘Adam’s sin within us a chasm’.

Geoffrey Hill’s landscapes have been a strength of his poetry from the outset. In this book, a whole other land of mountainous country and sea, in different seasons and weathers, provides more than a new setting. The first poem begins:

The rain passes, briefly the flags are lit  
Blue-grey wimpling in the stolid puddles;  
And one’s mind meddles and muddles  
Briefly also for joy of it.

The word ‘wimpling’ invokes Gerard Manley Hopkins, the other great English poet renewed by his experience of Wales and an exemplary figure for Hill. One may also suspect a pun on the great-grandfather’s occupation in ‘stolid puddles’. Certainly, what we have here is more than a neutral landscape. The puddles conjoined to the ‘lit’ flagstones ‘wimpling’ reveal at once brute existence and a fluid, visionary world. The mind meddling and muddling is part of the life it perceives. This way of seeing the whole created order in the part is borne out by the concluding lines of the first poem:

The world much fabled to be what it is—  
Radiant mica’d creatures drawn through stress.

Landscape in Hill speaks of the human condition—‘a form of life’ (to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) tense with possibilities of radiance and loss, actual, ‘what it is’, but ‘fabled’, known as the human mind imagines it. Elsewhere in the book Hill describes the winter earth as ‘alchemic-carnal’. Poems addressed to Henry Vaughan’s twin brother, Thomas, the alchemist, together with other references to alchemy, reinforce the theme of imaginative and religious transformation running throughout.

Hill’s eye for landscape has always shown him to be one who sees in the tradition of John Ruskin and Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is a seeing that is also a sounding: aware of the shaping history present, if buried, in words, quick with personal appreciation, and serving a moral vision. One stanza must suffice here to illustrate the beauty of Hill’s Welsh landscapes:

Novembering Wales, the flooded meadows  
 Pewter, lead-sheeting, briefly highlighted;  
     Grand sog of red woods gold-fretted;  
     The road squeezed skywards from wrung Betws;  
     Now the deep-held tremor  
 Of pelting gullies that are wisps in summer  
 Behind the stone house with the slate shimmer;  
 Again this homing, strangely-abrupt word,  
 Possessed domestication of your goad.

‘Homing’ is not to be at home; it may however provide the combination of distance and desire that enables the stranger to see a place more acutely than the native to whom it is familiar.

In Hill, moral intelligence guards against imaginative excess. There are things poetry cannot and should not try to transform. The suffering of others, whether martyrs or history’s victims, including his grandmother ‘in the nailer’s darg’, to whom he pays tribute in *Mercian Hymns*, has always made Hill exchange alchemic power for humbled silence—or not quite silence. There is the clarity with which he treats the human cost of the coal industry, as in these lines:

That was Nye’s phrase for it, *inert matter*.  
 Having crawled once to a picked seam I call  
     *Malevolence* the voice of coal,  
     Squealing, grunting, groaning like water.  
 How did any man twist away  
     Soul-free from that shining...

For the socialist politician Nye Bevan, as for the poet Geoffrey Hill, aware

of the malevolence of ‘inert matter’, human freedom is not a sociological question only, but involves the soul.

The emotional range of the 144 poems is considerable. Hill can admit: ‘How the *Bells of Rhyymney*,/Elementary cadences, unman me!’ But moral intelligence is part of the whole man, guarding against wishful thinking and confessional self-indulgence. The statement I quoted earlier—‘We are a fiction even to ourselves’ - follows a sequence of six poems called ‘*Hiraeth*’, that most evocative of Welsh words, translated, at best, *longing*. The first reads in its entirety:

I would do gratefully what others claim  
They could not: relive my adolescence  
    If I were granted a special licence  
    To learn Welsh and love you. Great shame  
        I cannot speak or sing  
The language of my late awakening  
Nor ask your pardon, Beloved, nor bring  
You, my bride, into the fasting house  
Of first desire, dazed by your wedding dress.

This and the five poems that follow reveal how Geoffrey Hill’s Welsh ‘awakening’ also takes him back to his beginnings, and to first love. It takes him indeed back to silence: ‘before we gave much thought/To language—touching was vivid sight./Our fingers talked, we were illiterate’. True religious poet and love poet, both, if they are not the same, remain aware—in touch with—what comes before words.

One important contribution of *Oraclaw/Oracles* should be to make Hill’s readers more aware of the great Welsh cultural traditions which the dominance of England in the British Isles has obscured. In the main, it is outstanding figures—souls, in a few instances ‘lost’ souls—that Hill remembers, invokes, or addresses. These include poets—for example, the great modern poets T. H. Parry-Williams and R. Williams Parry, and the eighteenth-century hymn-writer Ann Griffiths—and painters, Alfred Janes and Ceri Richards, and politicians, for example, Bevan and Lloyd George, as well as other ‘strangers’ to whom Wales meant a great deal—‘our buried giant’ John Cowper Powys and the experimental novelist B. S. Johnson.

Of all those he invokes he is closest, perhaps, to Saunders Lewis, the nationalist leader, who, as a man born in Cheshire to a Nonconformist family, who converted to Catholicism, was an outsider to the country he loved. In a poem remembering Lewis Hill quotes a Lewis poem: ‘*Merthyr to Dowlais* looks different now;/Though *milk of Lethe* remains our poison’. As

an English poet, Hill has always been acutely aware of the ‘milk of Lethe’, and sought, with poems of historical remembrance and with tributes to ‘great souls’, to drain it from his national culture. Lewis, as dramatist, poet and politician, sought tirelessly to promote national self-awareness in Wales. It is fitting, therefore, that Hill should address Lewis as his mentor:

Let us climb together across the spur  
 And you shall teach me how to be received  
 By people amongst whom I have not lived.

*Oraclau/Oracles* has in some poems—not all—the ‘difficulties’ we expect of Geoffrey Hill, arising from elliptical, compressed expression; difficulties that respect the reader’s intelligence. In this case, where Hill is in many instances responding to literature in translation, and drawing upon a history not well known outside Welsh-speaking Wales, obscurities arise from his interpretation of interpretations. His lyric voice too tends at times to self-colloquy, as the lyric voice will incline to. This is, though, a book that honours its subject, the Wales to which Hill has awakened. Its title, which gives precedence to the Welsh word, is instructive. Oracles, speaking from beyond the voice that utters them, can have puzzling aspects, which reflect their profundity. They also speak with authority.