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Maimed Ones: Wordsworth and Late Modernism

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Abstract of Thesis

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This thesis is an account of how the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) offered a horizon for very different post-war English poets working in, through and after explicitly modernist poetic traditions. It aims to reorient our understanding of twentieth century British poetry by exploring Wordsworth's importance for a triumvirate of highly original readings of history, place, politics, and social life. The three poets whose work this thesis attends to in detail are Basil Bunting (1900-1985), Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016), and J.H. Prynne (1936—), because these late modernists have all become, in turn, influential figures, each attracting a gathering critical literature though my specific subject remains under-examined. These poets are of particular interest because Bunting, Hill, and Prynne have also all been involved in reading and responding to the American high modernists T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972), significant poets who themselves largely criticised and repudiated Wordsworth's work as part of a broader Anglophone modernist avant-garde front which railed against romanticism and its legacy as understood through the work of conservative Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poets. The three figures whom I spend the bulk of this dissertation reading recognise in distinct and sometimes contradictory ways that the examples of Pound and Eliot were unavoidable if one wanted to write an ambitious poetry advanced enough to think through the century of world wars, American imperialism, global capitalism, and communist revolution. At the same time, for these poets the principled objection to the reactionary and fascist politics and tastes of their modernist antecedents licensed a concerted return to certain poets Pound and Eliot had rejected, with Wordsworth foremost among them. The first chapter presents an appraisal of Bunting's masterpiece, *Briggflatts* (1965), arguing that this long poem of personal history constitutes a serious, Poundian attempt to reengage and rethink Wordsworth's poetry and especially *The Prelude* of 1805. I argue that *Briggflatts* recalibrates *The Prelude*'s traumatological concept of the 'spots of time', in which a memory of formative love is painful, abortive, and malfunctioning. Developing this argument, the second chapter turns to Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971) and its considerably divergent engagement with *The Prelude*, reading in that sequence a dazzling tussle between the poetic examples of T.S. Eliot and Wordsworth. I argue that Hill's characteristically elegiac, oblique poetic autobiography uses Wordsworth to think through the dialectic of personality and impersonality in a melancholically conservative reading of English history. The third and final chapter locates its most forceful and complex interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry in the work of J.H. Prynne, reading in 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' and the dialectical lyrics of *The White Stones* (1969) a passionate critique of late capitalist modernity, founded on Prynne's deep engagement with poems by Wordsworth including 'The Solitary Reaper', *The Prelude*, and 'Tintern Abbey'.

Lay Summary of Thesis

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This thesis is an account of how the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770-1850) influenced a number of very different post-war English poets who all wrote in the aftermath of literary modernism. It aims to shift our understanding of twentieth century British poetry by exploring Wordsworth's importance for three highly original readings of history, place, politics, and social life. The poets whose work this thesis attends to in detail are Basil Bunting (1900-1985), Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016), and J.H. Prynne (1936—), because these three figures have all become, in turn, considerably influential writers, each attracting a gathering critical literature though my specific subject remains under-examined. These poets are of particular interest because Bunting, Hill, and Prynne have also all been involved in reading and responding to the American modernists T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) and Ezra Pound (1885-1972), significant poets who themselves largely criticised and repudiated Wordsworth's work. The three figures whom I spend the bulk of this dissertation reading recognise in distinct and sometimes contradictory ways that the examples of Pound and Eliot were unavoidable if one wanted to write an ambitious poetry advanced enough to think through the century of world wars, American imperialism, global capitalism, and communist revolution. At the same time, for these poets the principled objection to the reactionary and fascist politics and tastes of their modernist predecessors licensed a concerted return to certain poets Pound and Eliot had rejected, with Wordsworth chief among them. The first chapter presents an appraisal of Bunting's masterpiece, *Briggflatts* (1965), arguing that this long poem of personal history constitutes a serious attempt to reengage and rethink Wordsworth's poetry and especially *The Prelude* of 1805. I argue that *Briggflatts* recalibrates *The Prelude's* concept of the 'spots of time', in which what should have been a benign memory of formative love is instead damaged, damaging, and troubled with regret. Developing this argument, the second chapter turns to Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971) and its own unique engagement with *The Prelude*, reading in that sequence a dazzling tussle between the poetic examples of T.S. Eliot and Wordsworth. I argue that Hill's characteristically oblique poetic autobiography uses Wordsworth to think through themes of personality and impersonality in a melancholically conservative reading of English history. The third and final chapter locates this thesis's most forceful and complex interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry in the work of J.H. Prynne, reading in 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' and the lyrics of *The White Stones* (1969) a passionate critique of late capitalist modernity, founded on Prynne's deep engagement with poems by Wordsworth including 'The Solitary Reaper', *The Prelude*, and 'Tintern Abbey'.

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Abbreviations

BH: Hill, Geoffrey. *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*. Kenneth Haynes (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

CCW: Hill, Geoffrey. *Collected Critical Writings*. Kenneth Haynes (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

TMW: Wordsworth, William. *The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

TWS: Prynne, J.H. *The White Stones*. 1969. New York: New York Review of Books, 2016.

Introduction
'Snowdon is falling apart'

In Robert Rehder's study *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* (1981), the American critic argues that William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was 'the first great modern poet' (17). For Rehder, 'subsequent poets

share so many of his poetic assumptions, beliefs and concerns that the history of the poetry of the last two hundred years seemed most easily comprehensible when considered as a whole and interpreted as beginning with Wordsworth. (15)

Rehder's thesis is founded on the assumption that modern poetry in English is primarily 'a poetry of self-analysis', 'a poetry interested in the exploration or representation of the unconscious', and therefore because Wordsworth 'is radically more self-conscious than any poet before him' it makes sense for us to read his work as the chief progenitor of so much of what follows (17-18). While there is certainly some truth in Rehder's generalisation, it does not of course tell the whole story. Although Wordsworth's early reception was so contested and beset by hostile criticism, and despite the fact that his revolutionary republicanism made him an enemy of the British government as a young man, the poet enjoyed state sponsorship and canonisation during his later life, having been granted a yearly Civil List pension in 1842 and named Poet Laureate in 1843 at Queen Victoria's insistence following the death of his friend Robert Southey (Gill 409). Indeed, Wordsworth's fame and popularity have not meaningfully diminished since his death even if he has been variably received by poets writing in English after him. The poet's reputation was ably assisted by the fervent advocacy of Matthew Arnold, who claimed he could read almost 'everything of Wordsworth' with 'edification and pleasure', for Wordsworth's authorship constitutes 'one of the chief glories of English Poetry' (*Selected Prose* 168). Following the end of Victoria's reign, however, the nostalgic post-romanticism, sentimentality, and imperialist sympathies of huge swathes of Georgian poetry were under attack from several sides in what would become known as the advent

of literary modernism. As T.S. Eliot wrote in a review of 1918, 'Because we have never learned to criticize Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth (poets of assured though modest merit), Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth punish us from their graves with the annual scourge of the Georgian Anthology' ('Observations' 69). In Paul Cuff's view, 'An age which sought to be self-conscious and formally disciplined now characterized its predecessor as one of intellectual unreason and aesthetic irregularity' ('Exceeding Modernism' 248). This of course was not a politically progressive revolution. Many of the radical vanguard of new poets writing in the early twentieth century would develop far more reactionary politics than even the mawkish Edwardians and belated romantics they castigated, with the infamous case of Ezra Pound's evolution into a ferociously antisemitic fascist propagandist for Benito Mussolini being the most notorious example. As David Simpson has written,

Pound's comments on the major Romantics in general, and on Wordsworth in particular, are both infrequent and offhand. The poets themselves are not accorded any extensive discussion, and Romanticism as a phenomenon in literary history is not usually differentiated from that version of it which was taken up into later nineteenth century poetics as a vague standard of excellence, one which Pound clearly felt a strong need to displace. ('Pound's Wordsworth; or Growth of a Poet's Mind' 660)

In his 1912 lecture 'Romanticism and Classicism', Pound's friend the Imagist poet and philosopher T.E. Hulme denounced the 'awful disease' of romanticism, a 'spilt religion' which he argued propagated the mistaken doctrine that the individual is 'an infinite reservoir of possibilities' (1999-2000). Hulme's proto-fascist case for 'oppressive order' advanced the belief that

Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him. (1999-2000)

Clearly, Hulme's reassertion of classicism was based on a profoundly pessimistic view of humanity incompatible with even liberal teleologies of historical development let alone Marxism, contending that people throughout time have not been capable of meaningful change or mutually

advantageous social organisation and must be controlled, checked, and restrained by tradition and imposed order. Tracing his critique of liberalism back to the philosophy of Rousseau and the failures of the French Revolution, an implicit target of Hulme's polemic is also therefore Wordsworth.¹ Hulme affirms a 'dry hardness' in the classical poetry he lauds, praising Horace while chastising romantic poetry as bombastic, bloated, vague and 'damp', a distasteful sentimentality wet with tears (2000-2001). Romantic excess and revolutionary ardency are dismissed in favour of the reactionary rationalism of the Augustan Tory satirists that came before Wordsworth and Coleridge, with Hulme extolling the work of Alexander Pope in particular. Just as it celebrated tradition, such thinking right at the forefront of the English modernist movement would swiftly petrify into new idols ripe for the breaking.

This thesis is an account of how the poetry of William Wordsworth offered a horizon for post-war English poets working in, through and after explicitly modernist poetic traditions. The poets whose work it will attend to in detail are Basil Bunting (1900-1985), Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016), and J.H. Prynne (1936—) because they are three of the more influential, complex and by now highly regarded English poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Naturally, the neoclassicism of the first wave of modernists and Imagists would become as dominant and passé as the various post-romanticisms of Arnold, Tennyson, Swinburne and their inheritors had been for poetic modernism. A disinterest in or aversion to Wordsworth was certainly not something poets writing after Pound and T.S. Eliot shared with their immediate predecessors, and it is my chief aim in this study to mark how and explore why late modernists actively and intensely involved in responding to the writing of the authors of *The Cantos* (1915-1970) and *The Waste Land* (1922) found themselves turning to Wordsworth as a prevailing counter. Despite the immense influence of these two American modernists, this thesis focuses on three poets who like Wordsworth are English, though they hail from different parts of the country and boast differently sceptical

¹ Even though Wordsworth is not mentioned by name, unlike some of his contemporaries and descendants whom Hulme dismisses: 'parts of Keats, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Swinburne' (2000).

perspectives on national identity, nationalism, and 'Englishness'. Bunting was a proud northerner who detested southern cultural and economic hegemony; the Midlands poet Hill's writing interrogates and explodes myths of English (and British) national identity and history; and Kent-born Prynne is by far the most explicitly Marxist poet of the three, constructing powerful critiques of capitalism and the nation state in his work. These three poets are therefore all outward-looking internationalists just as the young Jacobin Wordsworth was. They recognise in distinct and sometimes contradictory ways that the examples and failures of Pound and Eliot were largely unavoidable if one wanted to write an ambitious poetry advanced enough to think through the century of world wars, American imperialism, global capitalism, and communist revolution. At the same time, for these poets the principled objection to the reactionary and fascist politics and tastes of their modernist antecedents licensed a concerted return to certain poets Pound and Eliot had rejected, with Wordsworth chief among them. As Anahid Nersessian has recently argued in *The Calamity Form* (2020), Wordsworth's 'main concern' is 'crisis, and how we live it', and in this he is no different from a great many modern(ist) poets, or rather they are not so different from him (76). It is this dissertation's wager that Wordsworth's poetry's registration of the dialectic of subjectivity and the social, political and historical contexts which produce it actually provided Bunting, Hill, and Prynne with a more sophisticated model for thinking through twentieth century capitalism than even Pound or Eliot could offer. Therefore, while it is useful in its provision of a generalising critical shorthand, in practice strict periodisation rather withers under the lights of sustained scrutiny. As Leonard Diepeveen has argued, close analysis of early twentieth century artworks too often reveals 'modernism's latent romanticism' (*The Difficulties of Modernism* 224), and to use Hulme's terms the philosophical high Anglicanism of Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1941) is rather a different proposition from the collagic 'dry hardness' of *The Waste Land* (2000). Regardless, the modernists' professed hostility towards Wordsworth and other romantic poets was often vicious, and it is with Pound's reception of his work that this study will lead.

As quoted above, David Simpson's 1978 essay 'Pound's Wordsworth; Or Growth of a Poet's Mind' makes for a fruitful starting point. Simpson assesses the evidence of Pound's repudiation of Wordsworth in order to argue that aspects of his writing and thought yet owed a significant debt to the Cumbrian poet and to Anglophone romanticisms more broadly. Quoting from his essays and letters, Simpson asserts that Pound's

comments on Wordsworth are some of the briefest and least charitable of all his assessments of misguided literary ancestors. Taken in themselves, as I say, they do not seem to amount to much. Wordsworth is often "unutterably dull," prone to "slobber" and generally "so busied about the ordinary word that he never found time to think about *le mot juste*." He is credited with "a genius, an unquestionable genius, for imagisme, for a presentation of natural detail, wildfowl bathing in a hole in the ice, etc., and this talent, or the fruits of this talent, he buried in a desert of bleatings." In essence, Wordsworth is "a dull sheep. He will do you no good though he was better than some, and if there were no French prose and nothing worth reading one might learn a little about descriptions of nature from his endless maunderings". ('Pound's Wordsworth' 661)

For Pound, what proto-Imagist precision there is in Wordsworth's poetry he obscured in glut, a talent for description heavily diluted in overindulgent reams of verse. Furthermore, in the *ABC of Reading* (1934) Pound writes comically of Wordsworth:

But, teacher, mustn't we read ... Wordsworth?
Yes, my children, you can and may read anything you like. But instead of having me or anyone else tell you what is on the page, you should look for yourselves.
Does Mr. Wordsworth sometimes use words that express nothing in particular?
(*ABC of Reading* 77)

According with Hulme's critique of romantic excess and apparent bloatedness, for Pound Wordsworth was a poet of tedious incoherence who did not know how to make the best of his talents, his poetry tending all too easily and interminably towards the meaningless and overblown. Earlier in the same book Pound is able to praise some capacity for compression in Wordsworth's writing, while concluding that this did not go far enough, ruined ultimately by meandering and inconsequence:

Wordsworth got rid of a lot of trimmings, but there are vast stretches of deadness in his writing. Artists are the antennae of the race. Wordsworth vibrates to a very limited range of stimuli, and he was not conscious of the full problem of writing. (*ABC of Reading* 73)

Simpson criticises Pound's insistence on 'poetic language as capable of absolute representational efficiency, without any problematic mediation on the part of the subject, writer or reader' (669). He uses the example of Wordsworth to refute Pound, for Wordsworth 'subscribes (implicitly, of course) to the idea that language never stands in a directly reflecting or embodying relation to "things" but, conversely, is generated precisely out of the impossibility of such a correspondence ever coming about' (663). Citing an essay he published himself in 1919, Ernest Fenellosa's 'The Chinese Written Character as a Method for Poetry', Pound contends in the *ABC of Reading* that poetry must preoccupy itself above all with definition. 'In Europe,' he claimed,

if you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from the simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction. (19)

The ferocity of Pound's rejection of Wordsworth, Simpson argues, is prompted by Wordsworth's poetry's incompatibility with Pound's limited argument that poetic writing is first and foremost a struggle for accuracy. For all the compelling descriptive verities we find in Wordsworth's poems, the intensely subjective singularity of his work cannot satisfy such expectations or demands. Against the abstract philosophising he detested, Pound championed Fenellosa's 'method of science, "which is the method of poetry"' (*ABC of Reading* 20): in Simpson's words, this led Pound to a myopic belief in 'the assumed oneness of mind and world' with no interchange possible between the two ('Pound's Wordsworth' 676). The best that poetry can do in this account is define the world accurately, and this dogmatic claim on objectivity exposes 'fundamentally authoritarian' principles underlying Imagism (672). Here Rehder diverges from Simpson's account, however, pointing out that Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) is also a call for precision in its polemic against eighteenth century poetic diction, and for Rehder Pound's 1913

essay 'The Serious Artist' therefore actually constitutes a 're-statement of the standards' of the Preface (*Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* 207). Rehder attributes this misrecognition and unwitting kinship with Wordsworth on Pound's part to the latter's 'dislike of abstractions, his difficulty in believing that an abstract word could be *le mot juste* and his impatience with involved sentences' (207). All these factors

helped to prevent his appreciation of Wordsworth. He knew that "You can be wholly precise in representing a vagueness;" he did not see that this is what Wordsworth is doing. (*Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* 207)

In any case, Pound is too much a poet for his theoretical declarations about poetry to hold in practice. As Simpson shows, all doctrine unravelled in the composition of *The Cantos*, and Pound's writing starts to look far more akin to Wordsworth's than he would have presumably cared to admit:

Whatever the *Cantos* may strive toward as an objective, "natural" presentation of history, they seem for the most part presented quite consciously as the meditations of a particular mind *within* history, with all its idiosyncracies [*sic*] and commitments to locality, place and time showing forth. Put in another way, the Wordsworthian speaker has reappeared, matching his affirmations against his hesitations. We cannot take on the *Cantos* without entering into the Romantic autobiography of Ezra Pound, and to understand the particularity of his construction of history and culture is also to ask questions about its sufficiency. The appropriate comparison is with Wordsworth's own account of his imaginative education, *The Prelude*. Wordsworth too knows that he is dealing with a language capable of generating its own meanings, taking us back to a prior "reality" but accomplishing mysterious embellishings along the way[...]. ('Pound's Wordsworth' 682-3)

Although he would no doubt protest otherwise, Pound's self-questioning epic curiously shares affinities with Wordsworth's long poem on the growth of his mind: his voice, 'with its agonising vulnerability and its resifting, rewriting of its own materials, has come to understand, implicitly, Wordsworth's "endless maunderings"' (684). There is a tacit kinship with Wordsworth's narration of personal history here, and it can be marked with particular intensity and self-reproach in the

later *Cantos*, Pound surveying the wreckage of the fascism with which he collaborated and reprimanding himself for his cruel, egotistical mistakes:

Pull down thy vanity,
Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,
A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,
Half black half white
Nor knowst'ou wing from tail
Pull down thy vanity
 How mean thy hates
Fostered in falsity,
 Pull down thy vanity,
Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity,
Pull down thy vanity,
 I say pull down.

(*Selected Poems* 180)

Although Eliot's opinion of Wordsworth was not quite as hostile as Pound's, it was still nevertheless often ambivalent and critical. In 'The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism' (1933), and like Pound's rebuke of the 'vast stretches of deadness' in Wordsworth's poetry (*ABC of Reading* 73), Eliot criticised the sheer amount of writing that Wordsworth left behind:

I believe that there must be many people who feel, as I do, that the effect of some of the greater nineteenth-century poets is diminished by their bulk. Who now, for the pure pleasure of it, reads Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats even, certainly Browning and Swinburne and most of the French poets of the century – entire? (93)

In the same essay, however, Eliot can at least favourably compare Wordsworth with Shelley whose politics he found impossible to accept, conceding that there is a modicum of enjoyment to be taken from reading the former:

I admit that Wordsworth does not present a very pleasing personality either; yet I not only enjoy his poetry as I cannot enjoy Shelley's, but I enjoy it more than when I first read it. I can only fumble (abating my prejudices as best I can) for reasons why Shelley's abuse of poetry does me more violence than Wordsworth's. (81-82)

While a backhanded compliment, Wordsworth was not the most loathsome of poets for Eliot as the radical Shelley clearly was, and Eliot's appreciation of the Cumbrian poet had actually matured

over time. But as this thesis will pick up in its second chapter, Eliot did put forward a more concerted rejoinder to Wordsworth's ideas in his early essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919). In that statement he contradicted one of Wordsworth's most famous claims in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that poetry is the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity' (111). Calling Wordsworth's proposition an 'inexact formula', Eliot refuted him:

For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not "recollected", and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is "tranquil" only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" 2324)

For Eliot poetic writing is a way of jettisoning personality and emotion, or rather concentrating them in such an intense and complex way that they are transmuted in the final artwork. But as Rehder argues, and not unlike Simpson's sense of the similarities between *The Cantos* of Pound and *The Prelude*, "There is no major English poet after Wordsworth who uses abstract words more effectively than Eliot, and the poems in which he employs the greatest number most successfully, *Four Quarters*, are an autobiography" (*Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* 207). Personality and emotion can never really be escaped from: the poet striving for impersonality and the sublimation of subjectivity in the finished poem only ends where they began. The inverse of this bind is also true, for obscurity and the many obstacles of the impersonal prove impossible to evade for the poet wishing to make an autobiographical record of their life, the exterior and the interior always in a state of porous interchange. Nersessian's account of Wordsworth rightly emphasises his work's obscurity, its secrecy, the poet's inability to disclose the fullness of his life, which is understood as a nescient defence mechanism against the massive trauma of the development of industrial capitalism. Therefore, when we talk about *The Prelude*, and the majority of Wordsworth's poetry, Nersessian contends that '*personality*' is really 'too collected a term' for us to employ (*The*

Calamity Form 96). In turn, during a discussion of T.S. Eliot's so-called 'counter-romanticism', Michael O'Neill has argued that

Eliot's anti-Romanticism masks a powerful affinity with Romantic poetry; his overt hostility to Romanticism connects with his complex feelings about self-expression in poetry. The high priest of impersonality turns out to be a poet of affecting emotional disclosure. (*The All-Sustaining Air* 60)

So too, we might say, does Wordsworth's striving after 'affecting emotional disclosure' in works such as *The Prelude* encounter obscurity, secrecy, traumatic lacunae in experience or understanding (60). From Eliot's 'The Dry Salvages' (1941) O'Neill deduces an 'updating of Wordsworth's idiom' (80), and he perceives a cleaving to Wordsworth in *Four Quartets* for all of that poem's apparent straining against him:

The value placed by Eliot on the epiphanic moment in *Four Quartets* exemplifies his covert affinity with the Romantics, even as he seeks to redefine Wordsworth's valuation of "spots of time" in *The Prelude*. For Wordsworth, such spots are of value for their "deepest feeling that the mind | Is lord and master, and that outward sense | Is but the obedient servant of her will" (*The Prelude* XI. 271–3), where the repetition of "Is" reinforces the mind's mastery; for Eliot, epiphanies serve as haunting guarantees of a larger national and religious myth. But Eliot fulfils Wordsworth as much as he revises him when in "East Coker" he asserts: "Not the intense moment | Isolated, with no before and after, | But a lifetime burning in every moment". (81)

Modernist epiphany, often associated with Joyce's early style in *Dubliners* (1914), is here recuperated in a version of what Wordsworth in *The Prelude* calls 'spots of time', moments which are both rupturing and restorative, and stand out in the stream of memory and time as it is subjectively perceived:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
In trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired—
A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,

That penetrates, enables us to mount
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
 This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
 Among those passages of life in which
 We have had deepest feeling that the mind
 Is lord and master, and that outward sense
 Is but the obedient servant of her will.
 Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
 Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
 From our first childhood—in our childhood even
 Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,
 As far as memory can look back, is full
 Of this beneficent influence.

(XI. 257-278)

For all their troubling nationalism, the spiritual questing and self-analysis of *Four Quartets* sees Eliot at his most Wordsworthian as he meditates on the nature of time and memory. As he writes in ‘Burnt Norton’:

Time past and time future
 Allow but a little consciousness.
 To be conscious is not to be in time
 But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
 The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
 The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
 Be remembered; involved with past and future.
 Only through time time is conquered.

(*Collected Poems* 179-180)

Eliot’s hubristic, even latently authoritarian desire to redeem time by conquering it is not too far from Wordsworth’s conviction in *The Prelude* that the spots of time and their ‘beneficent influence’ spring from such moments when the thinker feels that ‘the mind | Is lord and master’, when the imagination impresses itself on the external world most forcefully (XI. 270-278). As Rehder unequivocally contends, in *Four Quartets* ‘Eliot has his own “spots of time”’ (207). The notion that Eliot and Pound in seeking to refute Wordsworth end up reproducing and reaffirming ideas vital to his work was not lost on the poets I intend to read in this dissertation.

Of course, the version of *The Prelude* that would have been available to Pound and Eliot in the first couple of decades of their writing lives is not the same poem that became familiar to the

late modernist poets I attend to throughout this study. The 1850 iteration of what Wordsworth often called his ‘poem to Coleridge’ was a work he spent his whole life returning to and amending, but it is not on this arguably inferior fourteen book edition that Wordsworth’s reputation ultimately rests for poets and critics writing in the second half of the twentieth century and after. As Stephen Gill writes:

The first version of this autobiographical poem, in two books, was completed but not published in 1799. A greatly expanded version in thirteen books was completed but not published in 1805. Wordsworth could not fix on a title for it, but he often referred to it, as in a letter to Sir George Beaumont of 25 December 1804, as his poem “on the growth of my own mind”. He revised the poem at intervals throughout his later life, but by 1839 it had assumed its final form in fourteen books. Immediately after Wordsworth’s death the poem was published, in 1850, under the title determined by his widow and executors: *The Prelude: Growth of a Poet’s Mind*. (*William Wordsworth: A Life* 1-2)

The thirteen book *Prelude* of 1805 did not become available to readers until the then-Oxford Professor of Poetry Ernest de Sélincourt edited and published an acclaimed edition of the poem in 1928. As de Sélincourt relates in his introduction to that landmark publication, ‘For thirty-five years’ Wordsworth ‘continually went back to *The Prelude*, retouching and revising’ (xvii), and though the revisions which contributed towards the 1850 version ‘may have brought him peace’ in later years, ‘it never stirred him to that rapture of which great art is born’ (xxxix). Without the 1805 version before them in their earlier writing life, it is perhaps less surprising that Pound and Eliot did not hold Wordsworth’s work in such a high regard as poets coming after them, for in de Sélincourt’s words as they were beginning to define and assert themselves as poets they did not have access to his ‘ frankest and most direct confession’ (xxxix). *The Prelude*’s changeable, confusing, and belated publication history is one obvious reason why Wordsworth newly presented himself to poets following Pound and Eliot as a viable model once the poem had found a talented editor in de Sélincourt.

As a study of responses to Wordsworth, it is important to explain why this dissertation does not simply adhere to Harold Bloom’s well-known Freudian thesis about ‘the story of intra-

poetic relationships', *The Anxiety of Influence* (5). Writing in 1973, Bloom's forceful argument made the case that major poets engage in acts of 'misprision' with their most prominent precursors, by which he meant poets misrecognise and misread the work of their poetic influences in order to attempt to surpass or overcome their work and establish their own originality. Taking the word '*clinamen*' from Lucretius, for whom 'it means a "swerve" of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe', Bloom argued that a poet

swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves. (14)

This hypothesis clarifies into the following organising principle of Bloom's book:

Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets,—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (30 original emphasis)

Bloom's Nietzschean description of the major 'strong' poet is questionable here: his argument about poetic influence is a theory of relation defined by patrilineal struggle and conflict, a fight to the death. The misinterpretations are wilful and ferocious with new poets dialectically antagonising their precursors, the act of misprision understood by Bloom as an attempt to kill the poets' symbolic fathers in a literary interpretation of Freud's Oedipus complex. Finally, Bloom's theory of how the best poetry is produced has no room for generosity:

It does happen that one poet influences another, or more precisely, that one poet's poems influence the poems of the other, through a generosity of the spirit, even a shared generosity. But our easy idealism is out of place here. Where generosity is involved, the poets influenced are minor or weaker; the more generosity, and the more mutual it is, the poorer the poets involved. And here also, the influencing moves by way of misapprehension, though this tends to be indeliberate and almost unconscious. (30)

Of course, Bloom's bizarrely objective sense of which poets are 'major' and 'stronger', and which are 'minor' and 'weaker', is a reactionary argument, the critic happily and unhelpfully universalising in his career-long defence of the Western canon. *The Anxiety of Influence* and its central claims have been much contested since the book's publication, and particularly powerfully so in Christopher Ricks's *Allusion to the Poets* (2002). In this study Ricks claims that 'of Bloom's energies we are all both beneficiaries and victims', victims 'because of his melodramatic sub-Freudian parricidal scenario, his sentimental discrediting of gratitude, and his explicit repudiation of all interest in allusion as a matter of the very words' (*Allusion to the Poets* 5-6). As I see it, and following Ricks, poetic influence as it actually functions can in fact just as easily necessitate a deliberate swerve *towards* the precursor poet as much as a swerve away, out of gratitude or generosity or a kind of transhistorical solidarity.² A swerve towards does not make for a facile and imitative approach to influence: rather it can lead to productive embraces and collisions. Reading the work of the American poet John Ashbery (1927-2017) alongside some of his contemporaries, Oli Hazzard's recent monograph *John Ashbery and Post-War English Poetry* (2018) has articulated a more generous, generative and far less ominously hierarchical model of influence:

The balance and forms of representation of the poetry of the past and present are decisions which every poet has to establish in their own way, but Ashbery's approach was highly original: in short, he reversed the conventional methods of engagement with each model. At certain points in his career, he treated poets and poems of the past as though they were members of a present-tense coterie—as "brothers not ancestors", as he put it in "Young Man with Letter"—from whom he could borrow ideas and establish an idiosyncratic language and economy of exchange. (8)

The understanding of influence which runs through this thesis has far more in common with Hazzard's interpretation of Ashbery's disposition towards his precursors, a queer rereading of poetic relationships. That said, I do not find Ashbery's approach to his influences quite so 'original' as Hazzard suggests because I sense that this way of thinking about influence is not peculiar to

² See also Ricks's more recent study of poetic influence and friendship, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell Under the Sign of Eliot and Pound* (2010).

Ashbery, and to differing degrees could well be applied to the ways in which the poets I read in this dissertation interact with Wordsworth as their precursor (8). Neither Basil Bunting, Geoffrey Hill nor J.H. Prynne whether explicitly or implicitly respond to Wordsworth's work as something to be simply bested in combat or overcome by wilful misreading; while all their work boasts approving affirmations and more sceptical rejoinders to his work none of this is in service to the kind of struggle that Bloom claims for poetic influence. Though they all read Wordsworth as a poet in history and emphatically produced by history, their work in different ways is equally able to read him out of time as part of the individual 'present-tense coterie[s]' each poet constructs (8). Generosity and mutuality are not signs of any kind of alleged weakness, and can be valuable components of constructive critique.

This dissertation uses the term 'late modernist' to describe the trio of twentieth century poets at its centre. In doing so it follows the approach of Alex Latter in his *Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer* (2015), a useful and illuminating critical history of the poet Andrew Crozier's influential worksheet of the 1960s. Drawing on Anthony Mellors's 2005 monograph *Late Modernist Poetics*, Latter argues that

Unlike those versions of late modernism situated predominantly in the 1930s and early 1940s, and in which modernism's moment is supposed to have passed by the end of the Second World War, the chronology of Mellors's late modernism is able to accommodate work such as [Pound's] *The Pisan Cantos*, [Charles Olson's] *The Maximus Poems* and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson* that would otherwise fall beyond the parameters of modernism. The inclusion of such work, alongside British poetry of the 1960s such as Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts* and Prynne's *The White Stones*, makes clear that, rather than being irremediably vitiated in the post-war context, modernism "in fact continued to be the driving force of innovative art and literature". (*Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer* 3)

Latter prefers the descriptor 'late modernist' over 'neo-modernist' because the former suggests a belatedness inherent in such a 'poetics that [is] both innovative and inscribed with the traces of history' (4). This thesis therefore begins with Basil Bunting as a key bridging figure between an older set of innovators and a younger generation of poets interested in extending modernist

practice. Though Bunting was a close friend and mentee of Ezra Pound whom he met in the 1920s, *Briggflatts* (1965) was not composed until the 1960s, the poem on which his reputation rests inspired at least in part by the enthusiasm of the younger poet Tom Pickard and the activity surrounding the Morden Tower in Newcastle at the start of the so-called British Poetry Revival. ‘Late modernist’ is an apt taxonomy because it also helpfully describes the work of Geoffrey Hill, the subject of my second chapter, a poet often lumped misrepresentatively together with the Movement poets, including writers such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and Robert Conquest. Geoffrey Hill was engaged in thinking through and responding to a range of modernist poets, including W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot perhaps most prominently, but also Allen Tate and Marianne Moore among others. He openly despised Larkin’s poetry.³ On the other hand, the poets of the Movement rejected modernism wholesale, viewing it as an aberration in the development of English poetry. In *The Poetics of Saying* (2005), Robert Sheppard outlined how what he terms the ‘Movement Orthodoxy’ came to dominate post-war British poetry, and it is this reactionary, drably academic, nostalgic poetics wilfully lacking in ambition and meaningful commitment which so many late modernist poets opposed or were uninterested in. For Sheppard, ‘The Movement Orthodoxy, or its norm, privileges a poetry of closure, narrative coherence and grammatical and syntactic cohesion’, favouring ‘an empirical lyricism of discrete moments of experience’ (*The Poetics of Saying* 2). The poets I examine over the course of this thesis are all interested in and committed to finding ways of extending the scope of modernist practice while revitalising and reinterpreting some of the poetic forms, strategies and techniques associated with modernism, including parataxis, fragmentation, collage, prose poetry, and non-metrical versification. At the same time, Wordsworth presented himself as an important poet who Bunting, Hill, and Prynne measured themselves up against, seeking in their own ways to retake his work

³ See, for example, Hill’s valedictory lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, ‘I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers’ (2015), in which he criticised Larkin’s poem ‘Church Going’.

from the claims made on it by a Movement inheritance and a heritage industry determined to reduce the poet's achievement to sentimental daffodil kitsch.

Chapter 1, "The quaggy past": Bunting's Prelude', introduces a detailed evaluation of Bunting's masterpiece, *Briggflatts*, arguing that this long poem of personal history constitutes a serious attempt to reengage and rethink Wordsworth's poetry and especially *The Prelude*. Bunting was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1900. As a boy he spent summers around Brigflatts, a Quaker meetinghouse not far from Sedbergh in Cumbria, where he met Peggy Greenbank: as is widely known, the memory of his early relationship with Greenbank would go on to become the subject of *Briggflatts*. The young Bunting was given a Quaker education and in 1918 found himself incarcerated by the state for conscientious objection, having refused conscription to serve in the British army during the First World War. In the 1920s he enrolled for a time at the London School of Economics before living in Paris, and counted Ford Madox Ford, Mina Loy, and Ezra Pound (whom he later visited in Rapallo) among his friends. Bunting's first major poem, 'Villon', was composed in 1925, and his work appeared in Louis Zukofsky's watershed Objectivist issue of *Poetry* magazine in 1931. In 1929 he married his first wife, Marian Culver, and during the Second World War Bunting enlisted in the Royal Air Force. He gathered intelligence for Britain in Persia where he later met and married Sima Alladadian in 1948. The couple left Tehran in 1952 for Newcastle, where Bunting worked for local newspapers to support his family, living meagrely. This thesis reads Bunting as a late modernist poet because although he was part of a second generation of modernists all interested in the work of Ezra Pound (including American Objectivists like Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker, and George Oppen), much of his best work was not written until later in his life. His relationship with the young Newcastle poet Tom Pickard is well-documented: as Richard Caddel writes, the composition of *Briggflatts* 'was stimulated by the crucial encouragement' of Pickard ('Introduction' 13). Therefore, in many ways *Briggflatts* reads like the quintessential late modernist poem, both formally experimental and acutely conscious of global literary history, fiercely and belatedly Poundian yet replying to Wordsworth, a poet Pound himself

had little time for. I begin Chapter 1 by addressing previous accounts of the influence of Wordsworth on Bunting, before attending to the laudatory comments the latter made about the former during his lifetime. I then move to an appraisal of Bunting's lectures, delivered at the University of Newcastle in 1969 and 1970 after he was made a fellow. In these eleven lectures Bunting spoke often about Wordsworth and his poetry, and I tease out the implications of these statements in order to understand how they might shed light on the Wordsworthian foundations of *Briggflatts*, published only a few years earlier. Chief among these arguments are the claims that Wordsworth was not a philosophical poet, despite a didactic commitment to the 'moral edification' of his readers (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 84). Crucially for his own poetics Bunting praised the *sound* of Wordsworth's poetry, which he believed was meant to be read and heard in the Cumbrian accent: to Bunting's ears 'Wordsworth made his music new', a 'music of great sonority and variety' (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 103-104). He also hailed Wordsworth alongside Chaucer as one of the finest narrative poets the English language has ever had, while valuing the realism of his poetry. Furthermore, Bunting articulated a dialectical understanding of Wordsworth as both an evolutionary *and* revolutionary poet, a poet of great innovation who yet had 'far more in common with the poets before him than with the romantic generation amongst which he lived', his originality springing in part from his qualities as a synthesist (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 72). For Bunting, and unusually, Wordsworth's work was the apotheosis of what eighteenth century English poetry had been tending towards, rather than a figure who radically and completely broke away as the iconoclastic Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* might suggest. The chapter then moves to an analysis of allusions to and emblems drawn from Wordsworth's authorship in *Briggflatts*, in order to clarify and expand on just how steeped Bunting's sonata is in his northern predecessor's poetry. Following this, the central argument of the chapter is advanced: that *Briggflatts* engages with and rethinks, reveals a truth about, Wordsworth's concept of the 'spots of time', so central to the operation of *The Prelude*. I argue that it is not that Bunting only recycles a Wordsworthian spot of time, 'updating' Wordsworth for a late modernist, Pound-influenced poetics, but that *Briggflatts*

concerns itself with a spot of time that is damaged, malfunctioning, aborted. It is a quest poem to attempt to fix this malfunction, to locate a ‘renovating virtue’ in a painful, interruptive memory, which yet critiques and deconstructs the nationalist, imperialist logics of quest poetry and epic (*The Prelude* XI. 259). Therefore, Pound’s *Cantos* and the tragedy and failures of that poet’s life colour everything about *Briggflatts* just as it battles to recuperate Wordsworth. Bunting’s friendship with Pound makes the former’s work a vital starting point for this dissertation, and his defensive ode of 1949, ‘On the Fly-Leaf of Pound’s *Cantos*’, seems to protest rather too much:

There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?
 They don’t make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,
 jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,
et l’on entend, maybe, le refrain joyeux et léger.
 Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rock it is smoothing?

There they are, you will have to go a long way round
 if you want to avoid them.
 It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,
 fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble!
(*Complete Poems* 132)

Bunting’s rallying behind the masterpiece and the legacy of his old friend and mentor in this ode is a little too telling in its defiance because using the sublime, historically romantic image of the Alps as a metaphor for *The Cantos* brings in turn a famous moment from *The Prelude* to mind. Book VI of *The Prelude* sees Wordsworth prompted, in recalling the Simplon Pass, to apostrophise the imagination after realising he and his travelling companion had accidentally crossed the Alps:

The only track now visible was one
 Upon the further side, right opposite,
 And up a lofty mountain. This we took,
 After a little scruple and short pause,
 And climbed with eagerness—though not, at length,
 Without surprize and some anxiety
 On finding that we did not overtake
 Our comrades gone before. By fortunate chance,
 While every moment now encreased our doubts,
 A peasant met us, and from him we learned
 That to the place which had perplexed us first
 We must descend, and there should find the road

Which in the stony channel of the stream
Lay a few steps, and then along its banks—
And further, that thenceforward all our course
Was downwards with the current of that stream.
Hard of belief, we questioned him again,
And all the answers which the man returned
To our inquiries, in their sense and substance
Translated by the feelings which we had,
Ended in this—that we had crossed the Alps.
(VI. 504-524)

The anxiety and the disappointment around the ease with which the Alps might be crossed in Wordsworth's poem troubles Bunting's sublime Alpine conception of Pound's *Cantos*. In coming to terms with his own complicated relationship with Pound, Bunting must turn all the more ferociously to Wordsworth, a poet equally no stranger to traumatic rupture, fraught optimism, regret and disillusionment.

In Chapter 2, “my rich and desolate childhood”: Geoffrey Hill, *Mercian Hymns* and *The Prelude*, this dissertation turns to the critical and poetical writings of Geoffrey Hill. 32 years Bunting's junior, Hill was born in 1932 and grew up in the small town of Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, before going on to study at the University of Oxford. Beginning with *For the Unfallen* (1958), a book heavily influenced by the work of T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate, Hill published numerous collections of poetry and essays, and in a much greater quantity in his last two decades, winning substantial if not popular critical acclaim in his own lifetime and even giving interviews on the popular BBC television programme *Newsnight*. Hill held a number of teaching positions throughout his career, including at the University of Leeds and Boston University, culminating in his assumption of the Oxford Professorship of Poetry in 2010 for which he delivered a series of energetic, idiosyncratic, surprising, and at times controversial lectures. In 2012 his poems were collected as *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012* in an edition edited by Kenneth Haynes, and he died in 2016. Chapter 2 trains its eye on Hill's 1971 book *Mercian Hymns*, one of his better known and most favourably regarded collections. *Mercian Hymns* is a sequence of thirty prose poems which blend refracted details from the poet's own autobiography with a fictional account of the life of

Offa, the powerful eighth century king of Mercia, a region which would have included modern-day Worcestershire where Hill grew up. The chapter begins by responding to Harold Bloom's praise of the collection, who in 1975 called it 'a kind of *Prelude*-in-little', Hill's 'masterpiece' to date, impressed with how the historically grounded account of the growth of Hill's mind engages with the implications of Wordsworth's great poem ('The Survival of Strong Poetry (on Geoffrey Hill)' 17-20). I query inconsistencies in Bloom's argument while yet finding his decidedly hyperbolic angle a useful springboard into my own analysis of Hill's sequence and its debts and rejoinders to Wordsworth. Although Bloom ultimately regarded Hill's poetic project as Blakean rather than Wordsworthian, I suggest that Wordsworth remains the key interlocutor with the poetical autobiography of *Mercian Hymns*. The chapter then moves to examine the pronouncements Hill made about Wordsworth's poetry in his critical writing. I begin with a key passage from his treatise on rhythm, 'Redeeming the Time', in which Hill argues a case for the materiality of language and singles out the shift between stanzas eight and nine of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' (1804), an intense moment at which he believes Wordsworth "'saw" rhythmically' into social and political history (*CCW* 90). Moreover, I alight on Hill's approving recognition of Wordsworth's capacity to 'comprehend the nature and power of contingent circumstance', and show how Hill locates value in Wordsworth's poetry in both the arduousness and seriousness of its composition, and in its resistance to and endurance of the travails of contingency (*CCW* 385). Hill's admiring comparisons of Wordsworth to Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and other confessional poets he disliked are registered before the implications of T.S. Eliot's criticisms of Wordsworth must be further interrogated as they relate to Hill. Eliot is a poet who towers over Hill's authorship even more so than Pound, and therefore Chapter 2 contends that in *Mercian Hymns* we see Eliotic and Wordsworthian imperatives enter into a dialectical relation, Hill cognisant too of the affinities between Eliot's work and Wordsworth's of which the former remained, however wilfully, ignorant. *Mercian Hymns* puts the dialectic of impersonality and personality to work, which this chapter then proceeds to argue through close

readings of the prose poems that constitute the sequence, placing especial emphasis on the particular bearing the hymns have on Wordsworth's *The Prelude* while considering how *The Prelude* presses itself on them in turn. I consider the extent to which *Mercian Hymns* constitutes a late modernist anti-*Waste Land* in the tradition of Zukofsky's 'Poem beginning "The"' (1928), Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), and Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers' (1949), countering the potentially stifling influence of Eliot with the more enabling presence of Wordsworth. Ultimately I argue that the conservative, patrilineal, hierarchical conditions of Eliot's imagination are binds from which Hill cannot finally escape, and which refuse to be broken by the influence and example of Wordsworth. The pessimistic politics of Hill's erudite elegism can only lament the tragedy of modern capitalism even though his later work learns to rail more convincingly against it, the poet's gaze fixed on the violence and carnage of history. The most striking example in *Mercian Hymns* of this particular style of elegiacs is hymn XXV, a poem astonishing in its compressed pathos which Hill wrote in memory of his working class grandmother, proving movingly reminiscent of poems by Wordsworth such as 'Michael' (1800) which consider stoical endurance, tragic intergenerational history, and social memory.

It is in the work of J.H. Prynne, then, that this thesis locates the most forceful model of how a late modernist poetry might seriously engage with and recalibrate Wordsworth's authorship. Prynne was born in Kent in 1936. Following national service in the mid-1950s the poet matriculated at the University of Cambridge: he then taught at Harvard for a year before being made a fellow of Gonville and Caius College in 1962 where he remained as a teacher and librarian for the rest of his career. Prynne initiated active correspondences in the 1960s with Charles Olson and Edward Dorn in the United States, becoming a lifelong friend of the latter until Dorn's death in 1999. He has since suppressed his first book of poetry, *Force of Circumstance* (1962), excluding from his canon a collection which showed the early influence of Wordsworth, Thomas Hardy, Charles Tomlinson and his teacher and mentor at Cambridge, Donald Davie. Like a great many British poets entirely dissatisfied with the reactionary and unambitious writing of the Movement,

Donald Allen's 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry 1645-1960* (1960) proved a profound catalyst for Prynne's development as a poet, introducing him to the work of some of the most exhilarating and avant-garde writing coming out of the USA, by poets including Olson, Dorn, Frank O'Hara, and John Wieners. Prynne's student at Cambridge Andrew Crozier then founded the circulated worksheet *The English Intelligencer* in 1966, which as Alex Latter writes 'sought to activate a direct relationship between the production of new work, the means of its distribution and its readership' (*Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer* 6). The worksheet brought Prynne into regular contact with ambitious younger poets across the UK including Barry MacSweeney, Tom Pickard, Elaine Feinstein, and John James (more of whom shortly), and in its pages he would first circulate many of the astonishing lyrics that would go on to make up the books *The White Stones* (1969), discussed in most detail in this chapter, and *Kitchen Poems* (1968). Following the conclusion of the *Intelligencer's* run in 1968, Prynne has continued to publish books of poetry over the last five decades, from 1971's *Brass* to the late masterpiece *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is* of 2011, and beyond, with new pamphlets appearing almost monthly at the time of writing. Chapter 3, "'Again is the sacred word": Prynne's Wordsworth', begins with an analysis of Prynne's 1963 talk for BBC radio, 'The Elegiac World of Poetry', a presentation in which Prynne questioned Victorian poets' conservative, elegiac interpretations of Wordsworth. I then move to discuss some facets of the history of the critical reception of Prynne's poetry, particularly as his poetic project relates to and is influenced by Wordsworth. The poet himself recently stated: 'Implicitly, for all my working life, Wordsworth has been a kind of icon in my way of thinking about the world, for so many different reasons' ('The Art of Poetry, No. 101' 200). My focus in this chapter is *The White Stones* and especially the poem 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform', which I argue presents the greatest distillation of Prynne's thinking about Wordsworth in the collection. In Prynne's work of this period I observe a formal dialectic between lyric and epic poetry inspired by Wordsworth, and I refer to some of the arguments articulated in his 1971 lecture on Olson's *Maximus Poems IV, V, and VI* to support this claim. Following this, I move towards an analysis of 'Thoughts on the

Esterházy Court Uniform’ by restoring it to the context of *The English Intelligencer* in which the poem was first circulated, and taking stock of the material included and some of the most pertinent discussions which occurred therein. I consider the curious inclusion of an extract from Wordsworth’s ode ‘On the Power of Sound’ (1828) which appeared in the first series of the *Intelligencer*, and examine revealing letters by John James, Barry MacSweeney, and Prynne himself which were printed in the worksheet. At this point the chapter then turns to a close reading of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’, a poem which I contend constitutes a deliberate rejoinder to Wordsworth’s 1805 lyric ‘The Solitary Reaper’, composed in Scotland while William and Dorothy were undertaking a walking tour of the Highlands. I consider these two poems alongside Prynne’s later book of prose *Field Notes* (2005), a commodious 135-page close reading of ‘The Solitary Reaper’, while ranging more widely around Wordsworth’s authorship to show how Prynne responds to, affirms, critiques, and re-galvanises passages from ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ (1798), *The Prelude*, and others. I also read ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ in the context of *The White Stones* as a whole, drawing in references to other poems he was writing in the mid-to-late 1960s where appropriate, while contemplating the poem’s musical analogy and complex dialectic of departure and return. Moreover, I analyse Prynne’s poem’s use of rhyme when compared with ‘The Solitary Reaper’, how rhyme both amplifies and troubles his poem’s righteous optimism, poised on the edge of tragedy and lament. The chapter concludes with a reading of some of the other most illuminating later lyrics of *The White Stones* and excerpts from Prynne’s books *Brass*, *News of Warring Clans* (1977), *Down where changed* (1979), and *Kazoo Dreamboats*, assessing how they qualify, contest, and contradict the provisional conclusions Prynne reaches in ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’, all folding into his intensely and committedly dialectical poetics. Drawn out with great virtuosity throughout Prynne’s poetry and prose, I believe that the subtleties, complexities and contradictions in Wordsworth’s poetry are intimately linked to its enduring quality. Prynne’s great ongoing conversation with Wordsworth undergirds so much of the cerebral ferocity of his passionate critique of capitalism: as he has recently a little obliquely

claimed, Prynne considers himself a Marxist, albeit a ‘peculiar and extraneous’ one (‘The Art of Poetry, No. 101’ 186).

Before I turn to Basil Bunting and *Briggflatts*’ impressive rejoinder to *The Prelude*, I want to fast forward a couple of decades from the 1960s and early 1970s during which the late modernist poems I examine in this thesis were composed and first published, to talk about an ode from the middle period of the Welsh poet John James (1939-2018) which offers a luminous twist into my first chapter. Born in Cardiff, James was a lifelong friend of Prynne up until his death in the summer of 2018, and as one of the self-confessed ‘rowdies’ among younger British poets writing in the sixties his exchanges with Prynne, Barry MacSweeney, Andrew Crozier, Peter Riley and others in the pages of *The English Intelligencer* include some of the liveliest and most suggestive prose printed in the worksheet (*Certain Prose of The English Intelligencer* 40). A committed communist all his adult life, James had co-founded the magazine of left experimental poetry *The Resuscitator* in Bristol in 1963, and eventually moved to Cambridge, becoming head of Communication Studies at Anglia Ruskin University. He is a poet whose work married the influence of Wordsworth with that of Frank O’Hara to develop a stylish, urbane, witty neo-romanticism: in Luke Roberts’s words, from James’s books *The Small Henderson Room* (1969) through to *Berlin Return* (1983) [he] worked out a poetry of rigorous sweetness, poised vulgarity, incredible attitude’ (‘One for John James’). As Andrew Duncan’s blurb to his collected poems of 2002 states, James’s poetry is ‘Impossibly romantic and optimistic, miraculously avoiding gloom and didacticism to achieve a continuously surprising and euphoric surface’ (*Collected Poems* back cover). I will conclude this introduction with a brief reading of a poem by James to give the thesis a usefully cyclical structure: in prefacing the body of this study with a poem addressed to J.H. Prynne (the figure with whom the thesis culminates), written by a friend of Prynne’s equally involved with *The English Intelligencer* (the magazine discussed at length in my final chapter), I want to gesture to the myriad other late modernist poets in vital dialogue with Wordsworth whom there is not the space to consider here. While I have limited the discussion in this thesis to three especially influential English poets, a list

of possible Anglophone poets whose work might be deemed late modernist while displaying the influence of Wordsworth however critically that influence is mediated could include poets as different as the Americans Lorine Niedecker and John Ashbery, the Canadians Lisa Robertson and Kevin Davies, the Saint Lucian Derek Walcott, the Irish Seamus Heaney, the Scot Tom Leonard, and indeed the Welsh John James. Finally, James's response to Wordsworth offers a valuable, grounding example of the more generous approach to influence I wish to pursue throughout this thesis.

The poem I will discuss is the second from James's 1991 collection, *Dreaming Flesh*. It is an ode called 'The Conversation', the title alluding to the conversation poems of Coleridge, which include famous pieces such as 'The Eolian Harp' (1795), 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' (1797), and 'Frost at Midnight' (1798) among others. However, the poem also contains loud allusions to both Frank O'Hara, that great poet of conversation and parodist of Coleridge, and to Wordsworth, particularly the Wordsworth of *The Prelude* and the ascent of Snowdon passage which opens the thirteenth and final book of the 1805 version. Most emphatically 'The Conversation' is an ode to Prynne ('Jeremy', in the poem), recounting a hike up Snowdon that the two undertook in August 1982, and the poem sees James unabashedly figuring himself and Prynne as latter-day stand-ins for Wordsworth and Coleridge, a kind of passionate continuation of a radical romantic tradition under duress. I reproduce it here in full:

Snowdon is falling apart. You can't walk upright now
along the ridge beyond Crib Goch toward the Pinnacles
the Zig Zags are held together with wire mesh
& climbers wearing Vibrams should be careful everywhere
as everywhere is very slippery in the rain

(boggy ground, boulders, the derelict sheepfold yes but
the tricky bit is almost vertical all the way
so Mr Poucher can no longer be retained on trips like this
I'm sorry to say!

It's the 19th of August 1982, stepping on quartz
the power quietly rising through my left vibram
the horizon opening like a door, 600 feet to go.

we live so much by the eye & yet
the ear's an organ too

keep looking up!
with what strange utterance does the rushing air
blow through my floating head the sky & motion of the cloud
no light above the level of the mist & biting hail
glimpse of a familiar figure by the brook

I see the millions I catch the language
which is the world of all of us
this only place in which we find our happiness or not at all
the end

(*Collected Poems* 296-98)

'The Conversation' is a tour de force of a poem, a balancing act of comic insouciance and shameless romantic pathos, the insistence on 'revolutionary hope' implying a highly optimistic reading of Wordsworth (296). Throughout James riffs on loosely iambic rhythms, echoing the energetic, supple blank verse of Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey' and *The Prelude* for example, but also happy enough to indulge in terminal rhymes to often humorous effect ('the tricky bit is almost vertical all the way | so Mr Poucher can no longer be retained on trips like this | I'm sorry to say!'). In James's style the connective energy and comradely fraternalism of Wordsworth and Coleridge meet the agile, witty, more parodically-inclined puckishness of Frank O'Hara at his lightest and most buoyant. The first sentence, 'Snowdon is falling apart' (296), throws the reader back to the scene of the grand climax of *The Prelude*, now in danger of disintegrating with a double allusion to the apocalyptic vision of Yeats's 'The Second Coming' (1919). Book XIII of *The Prelude* commences with Wordsworth climbing 'to see the sun | Rise from the top of Snowdon' (XIII. 4-5). From the summit, surrounded by a 'huge sea of mist' (XIII. 43), Wordsworth is struck by the sublime sight of

... a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour,
A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which
Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams
Innumerable, roaring with one voice.
The universal spectacle throughout
Was shaped for admiration and delight,

Grand in itself alone, but in that breach
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,
That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged
The soul, the imagination of the whole.

(XIII. 56-65)

This vision of the universal imagination is to Wordsworth ‘The perfect image of a mighty mind, Of one that feeds upon infinity’ (XIII. 69-70), and the act of having ‘Preserved, enlarged, this freedom in himself’ is ‘genuine liberty’ (XIII. 121-22). It is nothing less than an apprehension of the knowledge of humankind’s existential possibility, joined in love. Yet in James’s late modernist return to Wordsworth’s magnificent, emancipating aspect on imaginative sublimity at the peak of Snowdon, such a promise is ‘falling apart’ and it is impossible to ‘walk upright’ (296). The first stanza of ‘The Conversation’ is replete with images of precariousness: the Zig Zags, a twisting footpath up to the summit of Snowdon, are only ‘held together with wire mesh’, and climbers ‘should be careful everywhere | as everywhere is very slippery with rain’ (296). The risk of death or serious injury is never far away, and there is no pastoral shepherd, ‘the stranger’s usual guide’ in Wordsworth’s account, to lead the way (XIII. 8). Even W.A. Poucher’s guidebook ‘can no longer be retained’ by the poet for the ‘almost vertical’ scramble to the summit (296). In the third stanza James takes pains to situate his walking poem in history, a particular day singled out from the continuum, stating that ‘It’s the 19th of August 1982’ with a flourish learned from O’Hara, before he witnesses ‘the horizon opening like a door’ with only ‘600 feet to go’ in an image which recalls the ‘fracture in the vapour’ of Wordsworth’s poem (XIII. 56).⁴ By the fifth stanza of ‘The Conversation’ James’s opening remark that ‘Snowdon is falling apart’ is qualified by a sudden resistance, a sense of the mountain’s subjection to change being one of its most vital and revolutionary virtues:

this great volcanic frame of things in all
the revolutionary hope & practices
of women & of men does not remain unchanged

⁴ See, for example, the opening of ‘The Day Lady Died’: ‘It is 12:20 in New York a Friday’ (*The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* 325).

it too has its faults through which an exile voice can sing
(296)

Here James puns on the word ‘faults’ to again echo the ‘fracture in the vapour’ Wordsworth observed in his own ascent (XIII. 56). Snowdon’s ‘faults’ are claimed as really the only way the ‘exile voice’ of the poet can sing, through the shifting of the weather and the erosion of one footpath or another (296). It is in flawed brokenness that the poet may begin, might glimpse what is possible, the way things could be. This stanza also contains an allusion to the final passage of Book Thirteen and indeed *The Prelude* entire, James partly contradicting Wordsworth:

Oh, yet a few short years of useful life,
And all will be complete—thy race be run,
Thy monument of glory will be raised.
Then, though too weak to tread the ways of truth,
This age fall back to old idolatry,
Though men return to servitude as fast
As the tide ebbs, to ignominy and shame
By nations sink together, we shall still
Find solace in the knowledge which we have,
Blessed with true happiness if we may be
United helpers forward of a day
Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work—
Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe—
Of their redemption, surely yet to come.
Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how:
Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
On which he dwells, above this frame of things
(Which, ‘mid all revolutions in the hopes
And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
In beauty exalted, as it is itself
Of substance and of fabric more divine.
(XIII. 428-452)

In Wordsworth’s conclusion to his great work, the earth, ‘this frame of things’, through all revolutions ‘doth still remain unchanged’ (XIII. 448-450). James’s poetry, however, runs against such immovable monumentality, cognisant of geological process over sublime stretches of non-

human time. In ‘The Conversation’ the mountain’s changeableness throughout deep history, and even from Wordsworth’s time of writing to his own, is cause yet for James’s ‘revolutionary hope’ (296). There is a moment of sudden rupture, a relinquishment: mired in the Thatcherite eighties, the poet ceases to feel ashamed of his own regrets about what ‘might have been’, ‘which marks a stage of progress’ (296). Disappointment, perhaps in the derailing of the radical potential of the 1960s and the shared project of *The English Intelligencer’s* constellation of poets, is no longer something for the poet to torment or shame himself about, for he retains an undefeated optimism. Instead, Wordsworthian remembering can be shorn of conservative nostalgia and sentimentality in repeated acts of proletarian defiance, a fealty to the histories trampled underfoot, for ‘if there is memory in working-class life | it is because things are always being taken away’ (296). Cruelly dispossessed by neoliberal capital’s privatisation of social life, for James memory might be one of the few things a working class art has left, and in his ode it could yet be ground enough on which to revolt against ‘stupefying duties & degrading cares | labour poverty debt disease & grief’ (297).

After another turn to Frank O’Hara (‘is it raining in New York on 5th Avenue’), ‘The Conversation’ shifts to hail Jeremy Prynne while alluding to the following passage taken from later in Book Thirteen of *The Prelude* in which Wordsworth movingly addresses Coleridge and his work, ‘O most loving soul’ (XIII. 248):

Whether to me shall be allotted life,
 And with life power to accomplish aught of worth
 Sufficient to excuse me in men’s sight
 For having given this record of myself,
 Is all uncertain; but, beloved friend,
 When looking back thou seest, in clearer view
 Than any sweetest sight of yesterday,
 That summer when on Quantock’s grassy hills
 Far ranging, and among the sylvan coombs,
 Thou in delicious words, with happy heart,
 Didst speak the vision of that ancient man,
 The bright-eyed Mariner, and rueful woes
 Didst utter of the Lady Christabel;
 And I, associate in such labour, walked
 Murmuring of him, who—joyous hap—was found,
 After the perils of his moonlight ride,

Near the loud waterfall, or her who sate
In misery near the miserable thorn;
When thou dost to that summer turn thy thoughts,
And hast before thee all which then we were,
To thee, in memory of that happiness,
It will be known—by thee at least, my friend,
Felt—that the history of a poet's mind
Is labour not unworthy of regard:
To thee the work shall justify itself.

(XIII. 386-410)

In his ode James salutes Prynne as Wordsworth saluted Coleridge, projecting himself and his friend into the future and preserving their own ascent of Snowdon in the act of writing the poem:

to say nothing of you Jeremy when you leaf
your pages to that summer & have before you
all we make of what we are when every day
gave some new sense of strengthening regard for common things
& all the land gave up a breath of gentler touch

(297)

The stanza is almost impossibly moving, defiantly reasserting Wordsworth's 'regard for common things' in the poets' friendship (297). Although James's allusions particularly in the final stanzas of 'The Conversation' are heavy, half-ironic in their barefacedness, they yet pass well beyond pastiche and homage, galvanising again the promise of Wordsworth's most insistent optimism, bringing it through history into the ambit of James's own life and work. In the following stanza the poets are precariously 'hanging by unseen fissures in the grey & slippery rock', alluding this time to Book I of *The Prelude* and Wordsworth's childhood recollection of plundering the nest of a raven, an early spot of time (297):

... Oh, when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky

Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!
(I. 341-350)

However, for all the riskiness of their climb, in 'The Conversation' the poets are 'held buoyant by the streaming wind & rain', and soon comes the sudden, exclaimed injunction to

keep looking up!
with what strange utterance does the rushing air
blow through my floating head the sky & motion of the cloud
(297)

In an inversion of the idiomatic phrase 'don't look down', against fear the poets keep their eyes on the sky, on possibility and optimism through despair and defeat. The final stanza of the poem this time plays on Wordsworth's account of the revolutionary optimism of the French Revolution during his residence in France as a young man, balanced on the precipice of doubt:

They who had fed their childhood upon dreams—
The playfellows of fancy, who had made
All powers of swiftness, subtlety, and strength
Their ministers, used to stir in lordly wise
Among the grandest objects of the sense,
And deal with whatsoever they found there
As if they had within some lurking right
To wield it—they too, who, of gentle mood,
Had watched all gentle motions, and to these
Had fitted their own thoughts (schemers more mild,
And in the region of their peaceful selves),
Did now find helpers to their hearts' desire
And stuff at hand plastic as they could wish,
Were called upon to exercise their skill
Not in Utopia—subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, heaven knows where—
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end
We find our happiness, or not at all.
(X. 709-727)

Wordsworth's quest for happiness, his equation of the spirit of the French Revolution with building a heaven on earth, labouring 'Not in Utopia' or any kind of ideal place but in the material world, is powerfully reaffirmed in James's ode's last lines:

I see the millions I catch the language
which is the world of all of us
this only place in which we find our happiness or not at all
the end

(298)

Here ‘the millions’ strikes the reader with a powerful ambiguity at the close of ‘The Conversation’ (298). This is because the phrase could on the one hand refer sublimely to every living person on the planet, the millions of people James’s poem would bind together in revolutionary ardour in a reassertion of what Keston Sutherland calls ‘Wordsworth’s universal brotherhood of all the human race’ (‘Hilarious Absolute Daybreak’ 116). On the other hand, and at the same time, the phrase suggests that what the poet sees is a vision of the seductive ‘millions’ of capital, the perverse will to accumulate threatening to drag James away from his ode’s radically optimistic communist vision as it catches language like a sieve (298). There is always the risk that James’s unashamed utterance is just as fanciful as anyone’s stupefied daydream of winning the lottery and living happily ever after. ‘The Conversation’ knows this as it terminates in a fairy tale’s clichéd sign-off, right on the knife-edge of sentimentality, and yet the poem’s forceful, self-exposing promise acts as a wager, passionately restating the revolutionary fervour of *The Prelude* against the degradations of late capitalist modernity and the brutal Thatcherite economics of the eighties. This version of ecstatic lyricism is not quite the style of response to Wordsworth we will see in Bunting and especially Hill’s poetry, both favouring a more melancholic and even elegiac recuperation of their romantic predecessor, but it is something we may observe in flashes in Prynne’s work at its most desperately utopian and hopeful, as often as that hope is traumatically undercut by the violence of capitalist social relations. With our eyes on and ears in *The Prelude*, then, this thesis will begin with a reading of Bunting’s stunning long poem *Briggflatts*, an oblique poetic autobiography about lost love, abandonment, and regret, and a sonorous eulogy to Wordsworth.

Chapter 1
'The quaggy past': Bunting's Prelude

i. 'Wordsworth most durable of all'

This chapter will argue that the meaning of *Briggflatts* (1965), Basil Bunting's finest and best known poem, is deeply intertwined with Wordsworth's account of memory, experience, loss, and gain; a fitting of some facets of Wordsworth's poetic thinking but also aspects of his style to the frame of a broadly modernist poetics sympathetic to the work and aesthetic project of Ezra Pound. The pinnacle of this inheritance is *The Prelude*, the poem that *Briggflatts* is most consciously modelled on and set against, as much as allusions to the more contemporary precedents of Pound's *Cantos* and *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), and Eliot's *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*, figure prominently in it. Jeffrey Wainwright wrote the first (regrettably very short and unexpanded) essay on Bunting and Wordsworth, 'William Wordsworth at Briggflatts', published in *Agenda's* 1978 Basil Bunting Special Issue (37-45). In this piece, Wainwright focused largely on the ontology of memory and return negotiated in 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', and how recourse to Wordsworth's poetic thinking on these matters illuminated his reading of *Briggflatts*. However, Wainwright's parallels and associations are always tentatively constructed, erring continually on the side of caution '[w]ithout for a moment' wanting to suggest Wordsworth's poetry 'as a conscious analogue' for *Briggflatts*; perhaps in part because Bunting was still alive at the time of writing and notoriously suspicious of and hostile towards literary criticism, including of his own work (37).⁵ *The Prelude* is conspicuous from his argument by its absence, and it is therefore the primary aim of this chapter to assess how far we might take that poem as just such a 'conscious analogue' for Bunting's, in spite of Wainwright's careful protestations about aligning the poem too closely with 'Tintern Abbey' (37).

⁵ Bunting told Eric Mottram in later life that literary criticism 'distracts from the work almost always' ('Conversations with Basil Bunting' 8).

Most readings of *Briggflatts* point out the poem's 'Wordsworthianism', however functional or tokenistic the gesture. As Victoria Forde writes, *Briggflatts* is 'Wordsworthian in the sense that it is recollected in tranquillity, though not in the manner in which it was written' (*The Poetry of Basil Bunting* 208). This is because, when questioned, Bunting asserted his belief that

"Tintern Abbey" is all of a piece. "Tintern Abbey" was not finished, of course, but it was all got down on paper in the thirty-six hours it took to get from Tintern back to home. The finishing of it of course would be a much longer job, but it was on the whole got down in a go. No, *Briggflatts* took a year to write down. (Quartermain and Tallman 18)

Although Peter Makin's *Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* (1992) keeps Wordsworth and allusions to Wordsworth's writing judiciously close by in its account of the development of Bunting's authorship as a whole, the book advances no thorough comparative reading of *Briggflatts* against *The Prelude*. In *The Song of the Earth* (2000), Jonathan Bate characterised *Briggflatts* as 'a deeply Wordsworthian autobiographical meditation on loss and recovery in which identity is forged in place' (234). Following Bate, Sara R. Greaves has noted more recently that *Briggflatts* is 'deeply influenced' by *The Prelude*, but her general and generalising ecocritical analysis of the former poem's debts to Wordsworth and to English romanticism more widely lacks any engagement with *The Prelude* or any really close attention to Wordsworth's authorship, despite the article's vital feminist and ecological credentials ('A Poetics of Dwelling in Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*' 69).⁶ Elsewhere, Ian Gregson calls *Briggflatts* a 'unique hybrid of the modernist (or retro-modernist) and the Wordsworthian' only in passing, in an essay exploring representations of masculinity in Bunting's poetry which does not expand on this rightly perceived hybridity ('Basil Bunting's Rueful Masculinity' 111). Though in *Ceaseless Music: Sounding Wordsworth's The Prelude* (2017), Steven Matthews too stresses that *Briggflatts* is 'heavily influenced by Wordsworth', he does not, a few paragraphs of analogising aside, expand substantially on this comment or seek to read Bunting's

⁶ Greaves mistakenly refers to Wordsworth's lyrical ballad 'We are Seven' (1798) as 'When We were Seven', which makes her engagement with his poetry in this essay difficult to trust ('A Poetics of Dwelling in Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*' 66).

poem closely or adequately (52). Similarly, Stefan Hawlin has noted without development how, 'Like *The Prelude*, [*Briggflatts*] tries to evoke the whole pattern of a life from childhood through to maturity; in the manner of Eliot's *Four Quartets* it is partly concerned with the relationship between time and eternity' ('Bunting's *Briggflatts*: A Quaker Masterpiece' 637). Clearly, Bunting's ongoing dialogue with Wordsworth and the complex resemblance *Briggflatts* bears to *The Prelude* are details oft observed but never well expressed, sufficiently elaborated, or treated with the sensitivity and nuance they deserve. A sustained account of the relation between the two poets and poems is therefore required.

In the self-effacing Preface to the first edition of his *Collected Poems* in 1968, Bunting chose to list a number of poets 'long dead' from whom he 'learned the trick' of poetic composition (*Complete Poems* 21). The first named of these poets is Wordsworth, paired suggestively with a figure of such global literary-historical standing as Dante:

If I ever learned the trick of it, it was mostly from poets long dead whose names are obvious: Wordsworth and Dante, Horace, Wyatt and Malherbe, Manucehri and Ferdosi, Villon, Whitman, Edmund Spenser; but two living men also me taught me much: Ezra Pound and in his sterner, stonier way, Louis Zukofsky. It would not be fitting to collect my poems without mentioning them. (21)

And mention them is all he does, tipping his hat to 'sleights learned from others': there is no further elaboration in Bunting's Preface as to exactly how these poets taught him the 'trick' of writing poetry (21). One has to look elsewhere. That said, the fact that Wordsworth is mentioned first is as good a clue as any to indicate the especially prominent position he occupied in Bunting's personal canon, how significant his acknowledged influence. Bunting was of course more explicit in interviews and letters, and continued in his later years of comparative renown to attest that 'All my life the most important English poet for me was Wordsworth, whom Pound despised' (Lesch 26). Writing in his last letter to Eric Mottram on March 27 1978, the poet complained of his critics that

the word Wordsworth has only come into their writings since I practically put it there for them. I don't want to minimise my debt to Ezra nor my admiration for his work, which should have "influenced" everybody, but my ideas were shaped before I met him and my technique I had to concoct for myself. And, back to condensation: I could never get Ezra to do what I thought enough of it. I've usually more to the page than he has. And the silly bugger despised Wordsworth. Oh well! (Letter to Eric Mottram, March 27 1978)

In an earlier letter to Roger Guedalla dated May 6 1969, Bunting reiterated aspects of the passage of the Preface to his *Collected Poems* detailing his influences and chosen precursors, and communicated unequivocally the pre-eminent significance of Wordsworth to his writing:

But repeat, Wordsworth first: Wordsworth never out of sight: Wordsworth most durable of all, most persuasive of all: Dante: Lucretius. My contemporaries come after those, perhaps often Spenser too. And I don't want to play down my debt to E.P. It's great. Just to keep the proportions. (Letter to Roger Guedalla, May 6 1969)

'Wordsworth first' because he was a poet whose work Bunting encountered early in childhood. Writing to Louis Zukofsky in 1953, Bunting had confessed: 'I've been thinking ... about how and where I got whatever I know and feel about poetry ... Wordsworth, when I was a small kid, showed me what it was' (Letter to Zukofsky quoted in Reagan 268). In 1968, he remembered to Jonathan Williams how

my father used to read poetry to us from the earliest years and included amongst the poems for the children a number of the less recondite bits of Wordsworth. It made a great impression on me early in life. (*Descant on Rantley's Madrigal: Conversations with Basil Bunting* unpaginated)

Bunting repeated this in an interview with Peter Bell in 1981, stating that 'by the end of my childhood I was familiar with most of Wordsworth, except for a good deal of *The Prelude*' ('Interview with Peter Bell, September 3 1981'). His germinal acquaintance with the art and with Wordsworth meant that after the age of five Bunting 'never had any reason to change the conviction then borne in [him] that [his] business was to be a poet' (Burton 75). This sense of a vocation acquired in early youth is shared of course with Wordsworth, and the account of his own

childhood—‘singled out, as it might seem, | For holy services’—presented in *The Prelude* (l. 62-3).⁷ When coupled with the two poets’ common northern upbringings it would buttress Bunting’s sense of kinship with his predecessor. He was keen to trace a lineage of specifically northern poets from himself to Wordsworth, linked chiefly by the radical Northumbrian experimentalist Algernon Charles Swinburne:

My father used to take me up to Capheaton sometimes and he knew some of the Swinburnes. We walked about the park and looked at the lake and so forth and it’s just chance that when I was a small boy Swinburne never had met me. He’d do what he would always have done, what he did to all the children on Putney Heath: he’d pat me on the head and present me with half a crown. And that would have been very interesting to me because when *he* was a little boy of eight or nine, as I, he was taken to Grasmere where he did meet an old gentleman who patted him on the head, but did not offer him half a crown—he was too frugal—and that was William Wordsworth! And I thought that a splendid thing! (*Descant on Rawthey’s Madrigal: Conversations with Basil Bunting* unpaginated)

As Hugh Kenner has consequently noted, Bunting’s were ‘Northern habits of speech ... as, in his version of English literary history, have been those of poets you’d not think of that way. Swinburne was a northerner. So was Wordsworth, who “composed his poems by shouting them aloud,” and shouted deliberate vowels much like Bunting’s’ (“The Sound of Sense” 63). In the notes he appended to *Briggflatts*, Bunting claimed that ‘Southrons would maul the music’ of his poem, because it was written to be spoken in the ‘Northumbrian tongue’ (*Complete Poems* 226). Similarly, he lamented the fact that Wordsworth’s verse was often dismissed as unmusical by southerners, because he firmly believed, in accordance with the ‘systematic defence’ of the poetics elaborated in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, that it was a vernacular rather than a literary poetry, written to be uttered in the Cumbrian accent Wordsworth spoke all his life (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 95):⁸

⁷ Wordsworth writes in Book I of *The Prelude* of 1805: ‘Wisdom and Spirit of the universe! | ... By day or star-light thus from my first dawn | Of Childhood didst Thou intertwine for me | The passions that build up our human Soul,’ (l. 428-434).

⁸ Wordsworth famously states in the Preface that “The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men” (96-97). As Bunting indeed averred in 1970, Wordsworth ‘composed aloud, very loud according to the anecdotes, in the language he spoke’ (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 103).

I suppose that the conception of anything of Standard English is only a little older than Wordsworth, and it had not gained I won't say universal but even common acceptance within Wordsworth's lifetime. By 1850, I daresay middle class people expected to find that other middle class people spoke like London or Oxford or Cambridge, but not until just about the time Wordsworth died, and it's a great addition to the poetry of some of those Romantics if you know where they came from. Some of Keats read in what is now called Standard English is absolutely unbearable, but he was a cockney, and if you read it in old cockney such as he spoke—it would be now the cockney of South East London I think, verging on Kentish—if you read his poems in that, quite a lot of that over-sweetness vanishes. Keats becomes much more tolerable. And the same way with Wordsworth. The ordinary southern Englishman, or the Englishman brought up in the middle classes who speaks Standard English is simply unaware that there is any music in Wordsworth, whereas he's one of the most musical poets if you give his vowels their full northern strength, and you remember that R is a letter which was pronounced in his talk. Somewhere about 1820, Keats was asked to a dinner where Wordsworth was to be one of the guests, and he went along hoping to get a lot of wisdom from the great poet, but for most of the time he couldn't understand what on earth Wordsworth was saying. The cockney couldn't hear the Cumbrian. At the end of the evening, Keats was just beginning to get something from it. And similarly, at an earlier date, Hazlitt went to Somerset to interview Wordsworth and Coleridge in the days when they lived there, but he was defeated because he couldn't understand Wordsworth. ('Interview with Peter Bell, September 3 1981')

'Wordsworth spoke as men spoke where he was born, with broad accents and a marked R. [...] Read him aloud, with R's and broad vowels', demanded Bunting, time and time again (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 103). If one does so and recites a poem of Wordsworth's even as enigmatically compressed as 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal' (1798), with every 'r' duly 'marked', it is difficult to argue with Bunting's conviction:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
 She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.

(*TMW* 147 added emphasis)

Uttered in this way, the residual continuation of the first stanza's alternating terminal rhyme 'fears/tears' into the second stanza with 'hears' is even more pronounced; the poet literally 'hears'

the mortal ‘human fears’ and ‘earthly years’ he had previously dismissed take full resounding effect in the death of Lucy by virtue of their audible afterlife, the rhyming of presence with absence (2, 4, 6). Moreover, the penultimate line of the poem, boasting an alliterative glut of no less than five pronounced ‘r’ sounds, assumes an almost mimetic quality in the mouth, the rolling orbit of the planet emulated by the rolling trill of the human tongue in the act of speech: ‘Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course’ (7). Our reading of Wordsworth’s much-anthologised poem is enriched by Bunting’s simple act of vernacular restoration.

ii. Bunting as pedagogue

Half a decade after the completion of *Briggflatts*, Bunting had much to say about Wordsworth and Wordsworth’s importance for the development of English poetry in a series of eleven lectures he delivered at the University of Newcastle between 1969 and 1970. These lectures have since been collected, edited, and in 1999 published by Peter Makin under the title *Basil Bunting on Poetry*. As Bunting’s biographer Richard Burton notes, the programme of talks was a break with tradition, because fellows of Newcastle University such as Bunting ‘were not expected to give’ lectures (*A Strong Song Toms Us* 431).⁹ Before a reading of *Briggflatts*, Wordsworth, and *The Prelude* can be advanced, it will first be necessary to develop a comprehensive picture of Bunting’s own sense of Wordsworth’s authorship, and these lectures are one of the poet’s clearest records of that. This account should of course be prefixed by the same caveat with which Bunting began the series, a typical topos of modesty emphasising a certain autodidact’s deflecting amateurism, and intended perhaps to exempt him from future critical censure for some of the bolder, more generalising and controversial claims he goes on to make over the course of the lectures: ‘I hope that I’m not here

⁹ As Burton reports, Bunting ‘was consistently hostile towards any academic influence on poetry and particularly towards academics’ drive to uncover “meaning”. But, according to Peter Lewis, “once in post ... Bunting made it clear that his quarrel was not with academe as such but with certain prevalent modes of literary study” (*A Strong Song Toms Us* 431).

under false pretences—I'm no sort of scholar, and I don't want anybody to rely on anything I say' (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 1). And yet for the purposes of this critical inquiry, rely at least a little on what he says we must. It is certainly not in my interest here to chastise Bunting for his opinions.

In these lectures Bunting stridently denies even the possibility that Wordsworth might have been in any way a philosophical poet; as Makin insists, Bunting would 'dismiss with scorn the idea that Wordsworth had any philosophy' (*Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* 18). In Bunting's view, Wordsworth

understood from the admonitions of Coleridge and the example of Pope that a poet ought to propound a complete system of philosophy, and that left him rather in a hole, because while Pope had Bolingbroke to provide the philosophy (such as it was), *he* had only Coleridge, who promised it but never kept his promise. So the great philosophical poem which was to be the business of Wordsworth's life [*The Recluse*] dwindled to a prelude, and some skirmishing with morals by way of an *Excursion* away from the theme that never got started. (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 69)

It is striking that Bunting finds no philosophy in *The Prelude* or *The Excursion* (1814), only 'some skirmishing with morals' in the latter, and an apparent dwindling of scope and ambition in the former (69). The whole movement and subject of *Briggflatts* is emphatically at odds with his own diminution of *The Prelude*, for Bunting's magnum opus, by virtue of the very fact that it is also an autobiographical poem placing an enormous amount of emphasis on the primacy of childhood experience, would seem to concur with the abiding principle of Wordsworth's 'My heart leaps up' (1802) that 'The child is father of the man' (7).¹⁰ *Briggflatts* is no prelude but the masterpiece itself in every sense, intended as 'a QED sonata', the poet aiming at a coherent musical whole with the parting adjunct of a coda even appended to its structure to exemplify this unity (Letter to Zukofsky quoted in Lesch 307), and therefore constituting a formal inversion of the purpose of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which was only intended to introduce the 'great philosophical poem' (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 69). Implicit in this act of transposal is the suggestion that *The Prelude* is in fact the

¹⁰ A poem later collected as 'The Rainbow' after its initial publication in *Poems in Two Volumes* in 1807.

great work, rather than the largely incomplete *The Recluse* it was supposed to announce, the absence of which it endures independently as a fragment.

In his lectures Bunting maintained that Wordsworth was chiefly interested in the ‘moral edification’ of his readers and of society at large, but that this did not amount to expounding a complex and cohesive system of philosophy in and through his verse (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 84). He repeatedly affirms this valuation throughout the lecture series:

I think most critics get lost in chasing his supposed philosophy or his very vague mysticism. I don’t think he had any philosophy. That is why we have a *Prelude* and an *Excursion*, but not a word of the philosophic poem they were to have adorned. As for mysticism, whenever that word turns up those who use it can find support in anything or nothing. It is by definition an unreasonable belief. There is no arguing about it. [...] The people who chase real or imaginary quirks of mysticism through Wordsworth’s output miss the point of his work completely; and I am afraid that is true of nearly all the Wordsworth criticism I happen to have seen. (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 102)

Dismissing mysticism wholesale, Bunting derides those critics willing to fruitlessly chase a ‘will o’ the wisp philosophy’ through Wordsworth’s authorship (103). Again, *The Prelude* and *The Excursion* seem a little denigrated by Bunting’s tone, reduced to mere satellites of the void *Recluse* project. David Bromwich concurs to an extent with Bunting’s derogation of the notion that Wordsworth’s poetry presents a coherent system of philosophy down to which all analyses of that poetry must be reduced, similarly blaming the influential ‘admonitions of Coleridge’ (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 69). In Bromwich’s view, Coleridge’s

ambitions were mismatched to [Wordsworth’s] own talents. When you have disposed of the philosophy of *The Prelude*, you have not disposed of Wordsworth but only of a notion someone once had of him, which he unfortunately came to share. The long poem he withheld for most of his life is a record of accidents, to which the author hoped to give coherence. (*Disowned by Memory* 4)

Such an interpretation has been modified more recently by Jarvis, whose *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (2007) advances the argument that while Wordsworth’s authorship does not present us with a unified philosophical system, it is still of considerable philosophical value because of the unique

pressures poetry can bring to bear on thought; because of Wordsworth's sophisticated and profound poetic thinking. Wordsworth's aspiration to 'philosophic Song' (*The Prelude* I. 231) delivers therefore 'something quite different from a system, a method, a theodicy, or any other kind of philosophical edifice from which "[a]ll the anomalies" would have been removed', because it involves the 'different kind of thinking [that] happens in verse – [...] itself a kind of cognition, with its own resistances and difficulties' (*Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* 3-4). This thesis might come closer to what Bunting was getting at, because whether

philosophizing readings are concerned with leading Wordsworth back to some set of epistemological or metaphysical sources, or whether they wish to see him as anticipating or violating some more recent set of epistemological or metaphysical ideas, any such approach would risk at once disqualifying itself from primary interest, because it would take Wordsworth to be interesting chiefly in so far as he thinks or writes like someone else. In such a case whatever might be singular in Wordsworth's writing might be overlooked. (3)

Jarvis's emphasis on artistic singularity is crucial for Bunting's version of Wordsworth, because the latter 'made his music new' in the eyes of the former, despite the fact that, as we shall see, Wordsworth's poetry for Bunting still constituted in so many ways a synthesising refinement rather than a break with prevailing eighteenth-century sensibilities (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 103). Bunting's dialectical understanding of Wordsworth posits him both as an evolutionary poet and a revolutionary one, a culmination and a watershed in the history of English poetry.

As Victoria Forde has noted, 'Bunting never denies that poetry has meaning; on the contrary, he has stated explicitly: "Of course my poems have a meaning." He insists only that the "meaning" is of another kind. It is not simply the rational meaning of words' (*The Poetry of Basil Bunting* 76). The meaning is always essentially in the sound: 'if you haven't got the sound right, it isn't a poem' (Williams and Meyer 39). This, then, is where Bunting locates a good deal of Wordsworth's value in these lectures:

[What] poetry tells us is scarcely relevant. The poetry is in the sound, the shape of the poem; in its rhythmic variety and power, in the emotional suggestiveness of its vowels

and consonants set out in complex patterns, in the symmetry of the line the sound seems to draw in the air, or in the proportion between one loop of sound and another. [...] Burns, Ramsay, Blake, however good their work, however singable, used well-worn rhythms and sound effects that were part of the common stock. Their songs were new examples of an old mode. Wordsworth made his music new. (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 102-103)

And, echoing Pound's dictum, Bunting complains that Wordsworth's 'great contribution to the range of English sound has usually been overlooked' (103).¹¹ Ruling out in one stroke poets as different as Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens, Bunting claims that Wordsworth 'had no successors'; and, in so doing, and by virtue of the emphasis he places on Wordsworth as a poet of original music, composite and prodigious sonic architecture, and sophisticated formal shape—values foundational and formational, no less, to his own poetics—, tacitly sets himself up as just such a successor. Above all, Bunting can confirm in these lectures that Wordsworth 'was as singular as he was excellent', being 'a prolific and many-sided poet', while reprimanding and attempting to correct the fact apparent to him that 'the customary view of his work is still beset by misconceptions and irrelevancies' (99). It is therefore incumbent upon this chapter to examine the tensions which define Bunting's own work's singularity, and his simultaneous embrace and assimilation of the influence and example of Wordsworth.

Of course, it is critical to acknowledge that this emerging picture of Bunting's construction or reconstruction of Wordsworth is really quite distinctive, eccentric and wilfully contrarian in places. In his lectures, Bunting clearly wanted to try and make a case for his own rejection of what he saw as these certain critical 'misconceptions' of Wordsworth's authorship (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 99). Bunting believed that 'All the eighteenth century moved towards Wordsworth', who had 'far more in common with the poets before him than with the romantic generation amongst which he lived' (71-72). For Bunting, it is as though with Wordsworth all that 'the XVIII c had been tending

¹¹ Ironically, despite naming it, Bunting does not specify what such a contribution might tangibly look like. He extols Wordsworth's poetry's 'music of great sonority and variety', but clearly thinks the specifics, technicalities, and 'rules' of literary criticism a 'pedant's game', as he grumbles in the third part of *Briggflatts* (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 102).

toward had come forward at a bound to meet it' (68). As such, Bunting found it 'difficult to understand how [Wordsworth] has ever come to be classed with the Romantics. It seems to be simply because his first mark was made with the *Lyrical Ballads* bound up with Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner"' (68). For Bunting, 'the "Ancient Mariner", "Kubla Khan", and "Christabel" are the foundations of English Romanticism', whereas the bulk of *Lyrical Ballads* written by Wordsworth were 'far from Romantic: they were realism at its very barest' (68-69). Indeed, with Wordsworth 'realism suddenly became the main weapon of a great poet', following what Bunting perceived to be the missteps of Oliver Goldsmith's pretty sentimentality and George Crabbe's plodding observationalism, though he admits Robert Burns's poems 'The Jolly Beggars' and 'Holy Willie's Prayer' came 'nearer' to Wordsworth's accomplishment (68). For Bunting, Wordsworth's achievement is the synthesis of so much that eighteenth century poets such as these had attempted less successfully before him: 'Wordsworth brought nothing new to this steady movement of taste, but he pushed it faster and more firmly along its path' (71-72).

Aside from what he reckoned the vast and original importance of Wordsworth's poetry's sound and shape, then, in Bunting's assessment Wordsworth's enduring worth is founded on his sophistication as a narrative poet, and in the quality and accuracy of his realism. Both of these values will indeed prove important in our coming assessment of *Briggflatts*. For Bunting, the 'great energy' of Wordsworth's realism

is not merely true of his subject matter—labourers, tramps, and the things about him. It is also the root of his vocabulary. He used English words instead of Johnsonese latinisms, as everybody is told at school; but only in the realistic part of his work. When he speculates or grows didactic, when he tries to be rather clumsily Gothic, he uses an unrealist language like his predecessors, though rarely as extreme as theirs. (99)

Bunting here conflates realism with Wordsworth's mother tongue, only willing to admit that Wordsworth's diction is 'realist' when it is 'English', because presumably closer to the 'language really used' by his subjects (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 97)—and because inflected by the Cumbrian accent—but also only realist when his theme is realist (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 99). This analysis is

unhelpfully gestural, for Bunting seems to intimate that Wordsworth does *not* speculate or grow didactic ‘in the realistic part of his work’, when his vocabulary is rooted in Anglo-Saxon rather than Latinate words (99). Such a claim is, of course, patently untrue. Even if we take a famous example of ‘realist’ Wordsworth from the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, a poem cited by Bunting himself to illustrate Wordsworth’s realism in his lecture on Wordsworth and Whitman, we immediately realise these comments to be gross simplifications on Bunting’s part (85). ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’, for all its realism in representing the complex social relation of that ‘silent monitor’ (115), the beggar, to the parish, society, and humankind at large, is not at the same time without bursts of didacticism and exhortation:¹²

But deem not this Man useless.—Statesmen! ye
 Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye
 Who have a broom still ready in your hands
 To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
 Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate
 Your talents, power, and wisdom, deem him not
 A burthen of the earth.

(67-73)

To claim that Wordsworth only uses allegedly realistic (Anglo-Saxon) diction in realist poems, and unrealistic (Latinate) diction in non-realist (or romantic/gothic/fanciful) poems, is misguided. In the vocabulary even of this short passage we inevitably find an amalgam of the Anglo-Saxon (‘broom’, ‘hands’, ‘rid’, ‘burthen’ etc.) and the Latinate (‘useless’, ‘nuisances’, ‘contemplate’). While Wordsworth tends broadly to favour the relative simplicity of Anglo-Saxon words over Latinate ones, Bunting’s allegation that he purges his language of the latter in the ‘realistic part of his work’ is clearly an unhelpful generalisation (99). It is just as misleading as Bunting’s easy differentiation between a realist and an unrealistic or ‘romantic’ Wordsworth, and his odd claim that Wordsworth’s more overtly realist poems cannot and do not at the same time incorporate elements

¹² For an especially sensitive reading of this relation, and Wordsworth’s faith that ‘gratitude, or any reciprocal feeling or action, can hardly be what matters in [...] social exchange’ (41), see ‘Alienation and Belonging to Humanity’, the first chapter of Bromwich’s *Disowned by Memory* (23-43).

of philosophical speculation, didactic agitation, and idealist or utopian excitement. At the same time, while keeping these qualifications and objections in view, it is difficult to argue with Bunting's thesis, generalising as it is, that Wordsworth is valuable for the complexity and execution of his realist vision. Throughout his authorship the dialectic between idealism and materialism is played out, the speculative revolutionary hopes of the mind constantly reticulating the realities of material circumstance, present conditions, and the primal sympathy of human passions that must be shared by all who feel regardless of class or circumstance. One need only glance down the contents page of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* to witness first-hand Wordsworth's manifest commitment to social realism in the varied majority of his contributions, his dedication to what in the Preface to the later editions he famously calls 'incidents and situations from common life', 'Low and rustic life' (96-97): 'The Foster-Mother's Tale', 'The Female Vagrant', 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', 'Simon Lee, the old Huntsman', 'Anecdote for Fathers', 'We are Seven', 'The Thorn', 'The Last of the Flock', 'The Mad Mother', 'The Idiot Boy', 'Old Man travelling', 'The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman', and 'The Convict'.

Likewise, Bunting's claims for Wordsworth's narrative sophistication are persuasive. The former believed that the latter was 'the most skilful, and the most complex, of narrative poets in English' (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 100). He maintained that

What was new was Wordsworth's narrative skill. Whether he follows an immemorial pattern, as in "The Waggoner" or "The Idiot Boy", or complicates the telling of his story, as he does in the poem I want to read to you ["The Brothers"], he holds his reader like hardly any other poet for many generations before him. As a storyteller, he is one of the family of Chaucer, and perhaps the foremost of the family.

I think it is hardly too much to say that if the multiple ironies through which he relates the story of "The Brothers" had occurred to Henry James or to Conrad, we would have had a thirty page preface to explain them. (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 72)

Furthermore, and actually in concurrence with Pound's belief in that rare instance of praise when he claimed Wordsworth 'got rid of a lot of trimmings' (*ABC of Reading* 73), Bunting argues for Wordsworth's concision, in terms of narrative economy if not always grammatically and lexically:

Wordsworth does quite often let his words hang in a loose, disorderly tangle that could surely be made neat by taking pains. But concision is not entirely a matter of diction and grammar.

You know how people who have something to tell you are apt to obscure it by all sorts of needless detail, explaining carefully things which are either irrelevant or self-evident. Even the television comedians laugh at it. But a good deal of ambitious writing is made tedious by exactly the same fault—the desire to be perfectly explicit in every detail, to leave nothing untold. They do not trust their readers to notice anything that has not been carefully pointed out.

Wordsworth is not entirely free of this fault; but in general he does leave out, very boldly, whatever he thinks the reader can supply for himself. When he does seem to be dwelling on irrelevant details, it is very often part of the technique of realism, the corroborative detail that guarantees less obvious statements, the trick Defoe used so often. The final lines of “The Brothers”, which I read last week, are of this kind.¹³ They say, in effect, “This story seems astonishing, but it is part & parcel of everyday life”. But for this, they would seem irrelevant.

On the whole, Wordsworth is a very concise poet, in spite of fairly frequent untidiness of language. His kind of concision works well in narrative, and in lyrics with a narrative content. (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 100)

This last paragraph indicates that we can even find a model in Wordsworth for the famous rigour of concision of Bunting’s poetry, and of *Briggflatts*, which was allegedly cut down from a preliminary 20,000 lines (Quartermain and Tallman 17). As Bunting claims, all of his autobiography is in that poem, so we should expect it to prove a sophisticated piece of narrative, a piece in which he was able to ‘leave out, very boldly, whatever he thinks the reader can supply for himself’, because he admired such qualities in Wordsworth (*Basil Bunting on Poetry* 100). If, therefore, in Bunting’s account Wordsworth is revolutionary for his innovations in the sound and musical shape and coordination of English poetry, he is evolutionary in his development of existing qualities of poetic realism and narration.

¹³ ‘That night, he wrote a letter to the Priest
Reminding him of what had pass’d between them;
And adding, with a hope to be forgiven,
That it was from the weakness of his heart,
He had not dared to tell him who he was.

This done, he went on shipboard, and is now
A Seaman, a grey headed Mariner.’ (“The Brothers” 425-431)

iii. The Wordsworthian matter of *Briggflatts*

To readers of Anglo-American modernist verse the opening lines of *Briggflatts* will surely be among the most memorable, not too far indeed behind Eliot's 'April is the cruellest month' (I. 1), a pronouncement that their springtime exuberance seems consciously to question and disrupt. The first stanza sounds forth in vernal melopoeia, following Pound's rule that 'Music rots when it gets *too far* from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music' (*ABC of Reading* 61). I reproduce it here in full:

Brag, sweet tenor bull,
descant on Rawthey's madrigal,
each pebble its part
for the fells' late spring.
Dance tiptoe, bull,
black against may.
Ridiculous and lovely
chase hurdling shadows
morning into noon.
May on the bull's hide
and through the dale
furrows fill with may,
paving the slowworm's way.

(*Briggflatts* I.1-13)

The first part of *Briggflatts* comprises twelve stanzas of thirteen lines each, always resolving in terminal rhymes. It serves as a kind of overture to the composition entire, introducing many of the principal themes, figures, and symbols of the poem, such as the bull, the slow-worm, and the mason, while relating the primary experience of first love that underpins the structural movement and temporal shape of the poem. As the poet Charles Tomlinson has written, 'The music of *Briggflatts* lies not only in tones, rhyme, the articulations of syntax, but in the use throughout of recurrent motifs' ('Experience into Music' 14). It will next be vital to trace the possible debts these recurring motifs, images, figures, allusions, and echoes might and do owe to Wordsworth, and how they interact on the threshold of *Briggflatts*. Before tackling *The Prelude* itself, it will be sensible

to attempt to illustrate just how saturated *Briggflatts* is with such matter derived from and in dialogue with the general sweep of Wordsworth's authorship, as well as the tradition of English poetry more broadly, and not just the autobiographical masterpiece on which Bunting modelled his own poem.

In an allusion repeatedly overlooked, even, for example, by editor Don Share in Faber's capacious new edition of Bunting's poems (2016), the opening lines of *Briggflatts* refer slightly obliquely to Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', gesturing towards the poem's emphatically Wordsworthian foundations from the outset. Specifically the passage revisits the third stanza of Wordsworth's ode, a sequence of momentary 'relief' afforded by 'A timely utterance' (23) which rhymes 'grief' away (22), describing spring and those archetypes of childhood 'glory' that the adult poet had claimed 'hath past away' in the previous two verses (18):

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,
And while the young lambs bound
As to the tabor's sound,
To me alone there came a thought of grief:
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,
And I again am strong:
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;
Land and sea
Give themselves up to jollity,
And with the heart of May
Doth every Beast keep holiday;—
Thou Child of Joy,
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy.
(19-35)

For Wordsworth, 'Every Beast keep[s] holiday', celebrating joyfully 'with the heart of May' (32-33), and it is through this image that we must read the bull of *Briggflatts*, among the most prominent of the poem's figures because its 'sweet tenor' invocation and 'tiptoe' dance commence the composition (I. 1, 5). This is a stanza of Wordsworth's ode in which the poet's ego is temporarily

checked, and the solipsism of the pathetic fallacy thwarted. The poet affirms that ‘No more shall grief of mine the season wrong’, the implication being that his sense of loss has the potential to do violence, perceptual or otherwise, to the spring. He demands that the ‘Child of Joy’ of his former self become audible on ‘This sweet May-morning’ (26, 34, 44), continuing to aver how ‘The fullness of your bliss—I feel, I feel it all’ (41). Bunting’s notes to *Briggflatts* make explicit that the ‘May’ of his opening stanza is ‘the flower, as haw is the fruit, of the thorn’ (*Collected Poems* 226), but the flower’s name of course derives from the time of year at which it blossoms and thus indicates that the first part of *Briggflatts* begins in the month of May, the period of bliss in Wordsworth’s ode. The poem, indeed, was originally dated May 15 1965 in its publication with *Poetry* and *Fulcrum*. Keeping its holiday with ‘the gladness of the May’ (179), it is notable that Bunting elects an exhibiting virile bull to open his poem, a clear symbol of fertility, rather than the innocently Christian lambs of Wordsworth, which ‘bound | As to the tabor’s sound’ (20-21). The insinuation is that pubescence and sexual awakening are not archetypes of the Fall and human sin, and that the carnality of the bull might serve as a new emblem of innocence and joy permanently substituting the traditional lamb of God. To exclude the potent bull from any vision of Eden is, feasibly, to continue to preserve Eden as a place of sexual repression, and inhibit the expression of human sexuality on earth. Clearly, Bunting’s apposition of his bull with the mayflower foreshadows the cosmological sweep of the closing moments of the final part of *Briggflatts* by this initial image’s evocation of Taurus, the second astrological sign of the zodiac falling between April 21 and May 21 and symbolised by the Cretan bull. The beast’s carousing may thus be understood better by the fact that Taurus has traditionally been associated with festivity, as famously in *Twelfth Night* (c.1602), that epitome of Shakespearean carnivalesque, and the following exchange between Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek:

SIR ANDREW [...] Shall we set about some revels?

SIR TOBY What shall we do else—were we not born under
Taurus?

SIR ANDREW Taurus? That's sides and heart.

SIR TOBY No, sir, it is legs and thighs: let me see thee caper.

 [SIR ANDREW *capers*]

 Ha, higher! Ha ha, excellent.

 (*Twelfth Night* 1.3 127-133)

Taurus symbolically governs the neck and throat, and is thus connected to drinking and merrymaking. However, Sir Toby's association of the sign with the 'legs and thighs' and therefore with dancing is adhered to here in *Briggflatts*, and thus Bunting's bull seems to leap 'Ridiculous and lovely' right out of the Renaissance court and Elizabethan comedy, and into a local patch of the twentieth century by the banks of the Rawthey (I. 7).

In 'William Wordsworth at Briggflatts', Jeffrey Wainwright alights on 'the voice of the [R]iver' Rawthey, set alongside 'that of the bull' in the poem's opening (37), comparing it with a 1796-97 fragment of Wordsworth's that contains the germs of 'Tintern Abbey', and what will commence the Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799 with the account of the River Derwent's childhood influence:

Yet once again do I behold the forms
Of these huge mountains, and yet once again,
Standing beneath these elms, I hear thy voice,
Beloved Derwent, that peculiar voice
Heard in the stillness of the evening air,
Half-heard and half-created.

(37)

Wainwright notes how 'The waters' 'peculiar voice' is also Wordsworth's first impression when he begins 'Tintern Abbey' ('William Wordsworth at Briggflatts' 38), 'rolling from their mountain-springs | With a soft inland murmur' (3-4), but neglects to mention how this fragment's address to the Derwent will be transplanted into the body of *The Prelude*. In the 1805 *Prelude*'s iteration of the Derwent passage (I. 272-304), the first twelve lines of which remain unchanged from the 1799

version, we find in that river's 'ceaseless music' (279) of germinal poetic inspiration and knowledge a prototype for 'Rawthey's madrigal' (2):¹⁴

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams? For this didst thou,
O Derwent, travelling over the green plains
Near my 'sweet birthplace', didst thou, beauteous stream,
Make ceaseless music through the night and day,
Which with its steady cadence tempering
Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm
Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves?
When, having left his mountains, to the towers
Of Cockermouth that beauteous river came,
Behind my father's house he passed, close by,
Along the margin of our terrace walk.
He was a playmate whom we dearly loved:
Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
A naked boy, in one delightful rill,
A little mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day,
Basked in the sun, and plunged, and basked again[...].
(I. 272-295)

The function of both Derwent and Rawthey is quite similar, and in Bunting's late ode 'Stones trip Coquet burn' (1970) we find another analogue for Wordsworth's 'long bathing of a summer's day' (294). The poet, perhaps an old man comparable to the seventy-year-old Bunting at the time of the ode's composition, mirrors Wordsworth's plunging 'five years' child' by himself swimming in the River Coquet in Northumberland (291), 'to plodge or dip | and silent taste | with all my skin' (16-18), though his tenor is one of experience and eros rather than youthful play and innocent wonder. But here also in *Briggflatts* the commingling of the bull's descant and the river's madrigal

¹⁴ This correspondence has been pointed out recently by Steven Matthews: 'The River Rawthey, which runs next to the Quaker Meeting House at Brigflatts that provides Bunting's sequence with its emotional and religious centre, plays beneath the poem, as the Derwent does beneath Wordsworth's' (*Ceaseless Music* 149).

is erotically suggestive (because of the carnal associations of the bull), where for the young Wordsworth the Derwent blends ‘his murmurs’ only with the poet’s ‘nurse’s song’, making for a comparatively innocent harmony at least at first. Of course, as with the beginning of *Briggflatts* the description of the physical repetitive plunging of the boy into the river also possesses a latent eroticism, which foreshadows the famous ‘stolen boat’ episode introduced only approximately a hundred lines later, the young poet ‘lustily’ dipping his oars ‘into the silent lake’ (l. 401-402).¹⁵ Wordsworth’s line ‘Basked in the sun, and plunged, and basked again’ looks forward to his boyhood self’s penetrative rowing (l. 295)—‘I struck, and struck again’ (l. 408)—in which the purposeful act of rowing might represent a kind of maturation, an ‘evolution’ from the act of swimming, an adult distancing and falling away from contact with the inspirational and knowledge-giving water. This nascent rehearsal of sex carries the poet towards his famously sublime confrontation with the ‘huge cliff’ intimating ‘unknown modes of being’, experiences which await perhaps in adulthood and with the full assumption of poetic vocation, and which trouble the poet’s dreams with ‘huge and mighty forms that do not live | Like living men’ (l. 424-425). This, then, challenges Hawlin’s claim that ‘Bunting’s eroticism’ in the first part of *Briggflatts* ‘makes his “spot of time” unWordsworthian in its final resonance’, because to exclude all eroticism however concealed from *The Prelude* is surely to underread the poem, and take it far too easily at face value (‘Bunting’s *Briggflatts*: A Quaker Masterpiece’ 637).

In the second stanza of the first part of *Briggflatts*, Bunting introduces the mason and the lark, the mason timing his mallet to the twitter of the lark in a duet of the human and non-human: ‘The solemn mallet says: | In the grave’s slot | he lies. We rot.’ (l. 24-26). If an opposition is instituted here it is between on the one hand the mason and his mallet as redolent of work, death, memorialisation, and inscription, and the lark on the other as a loaded symbol of inspired, spontaneous Shelleyan poetic flight. Here too we find precedents in the inscription poems of

¹⁵ Tim Milnes notes that Nigel Wood’s psychoanalytic reading of *The Prelude* finds in this passage an ‘Oedipal fear’ (*William Wordsworth: The Prelude* 98).

Wordsworth. The second stanza yields the poem's first exclamative lyric apostrophe, an address to the lark: 'Painful lark, labouring to rise!' (I. 23). Bunting is also echoing Shakespeare's Sonnet 29, in which the despondent and envious poet uplifted by thinking of his beloved, a state likened 'to the lark at break of day arising | From sullen earth' (12-13). Naturally, many readers will instinctively think of Shelley and his indefatigable skylark when faced with the line, and not without reward; the painful labour of Bunting's lark—doomed eventually 'to nest in sodden trash' (I. 146)—conflicts with the effortless 'ignorance of pain' of its ancestor in Shelley's ode of 1820 (75). Moreover, as Richard Burton has pointed out, Bunting in this image repeats a 'sly dig' at Ralph Vaughn Williams and his famous composition *The Lark Ascending* of 1914 (based on a poem by George Meredith) (*A Strong Song Tows Us* 147). Writing in *The Outlook* in 1928, Bunting had mocked 'the purely descriptive talent of Dr Vaughan Williams, whose Lark ascends apparently interminably' (365). There is a sense in the image of the 'Painful lark' of the older poet's rustiness, of the sheer hard labour of poetic composition, no effortless profusion of strains (I. 23). The 'broken lyres' of Thomas Hardy's fin de siècle anthology piece 'The Darkling Thrush' (1900) loom readily into view (5). In typically elegiac fashion, Hardy's 1887 poem 'Shelley's Skylark' had earlier witnessed the bird in death, and joined his sacralising song to Shelley's. I reproduce this belated poem here in full, a relic perhaps of persistent if considerably diminished romantic hopes which anticipates Bunting:

Somewhere afield here something lies
 In Earth's oblivious eyeless trust
 That moved a poet to prophecies -
 A pinch of unseen, unguarded dust:

The dust of the lark that Shelley heard,
 And made immortal through times to be; -
 Though it only lived like another bird,
 And knew not its immortality:

Lived its meek life; then, one day, fell -
 A little ball of feather and bone;
 And how it perished, when piped farewell,
 And where it wastes, are alike unknown.

Maybe it rests in the loam I view,
Maybe it throbs in a myrtle's green,
Maybe it sleeps in the coming hue
Of a grape on the slopes of yon inland scene.

Go find it, faeries, go and find
That tiny pinch of priceless dust,
And bring a casket silver-lined,
And framed of gold that gems encrust;

And we will lay it safe therein,
And consecrate it to endless time;
For it inspired a bard to win
Ecstatic heights in thought and rhyme.

(The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy 88-89)

The muted sense of loss and absence fostered in this consolatory poem by negative prefixes and suffixes ('eyeless', 'unseen, unguarded', 'unknown') invert in the closing stanza's intimation of immortality, time that is 'endless'. The self-delusions seem a little cruel: the poet requires the assistance of faeries to unearth the lark's dust, a melancholic twist on Puck's mission in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1595), perhaps, or on Keats's 'faery lands forlorn', the thought of which famously serves to interrupt the poet's vision in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' (*The Complete Poems* 148).

It is my view then, though readers will of course recognise that Shelley's skylark hovers tantalisingly over *Briggflatts*' 'Painful lark' (l. 23), that Bunting was also and perhaps more tellingly drawing on examples in Wordsworth, including a passage from Book XIII of *The Prelude*. Wordsworth in fact has his own short poem 'To a Skylark', composed in rather functional rhyming pentameters in 1825 five years after Shelley wrote his ode:

Ethereal minstrel! pilgrim of the sky!
Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?
Or, while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?
Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still!

Leave to the nightingale her shady wood;

A privacy of glorious light is thine;
 Whence thou dost pour upon the world a flood
 Of harmony, with instinct more divine;
 Type of the wise who soar, but never roam;
 True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!

(*The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth*
 246)

Bunting reformulates line five of Wordsworth's poem in the last stanza of the first part of *Briggflatts*: 'Breathless lark | drops to nest in sodden trash' (I. 145-6). The reality of the skylark's actual embodied existence is foregrounded both by Wordsworth and Bunting, singing in the air but nesting on the ground, a reality absent from its 'unbodied' representation in Shelley's poem, for whom the bird seems only to live on the aspiring wing, as for Vaughn Williams via Meredith (15). For Wordsworth the skylark is balanced between paradise and earth, 'True to the kindred points of Heaven and Home!' (12). In the first two stanzas of Shelley's 'To a Skylark', the bird is said similarly to come 'from heaven, or near it', though he 'springest' 'From the earth', but the emphasis thereafter is almost exclusively on the skylark's joyful proximity to the divine (3, 7). In Bunting, mortality and immortality, ascension and descension, are more dialectically the province of the lark than in Shelley's odal excess, following the Wordsworth poem to which he alludes. Furthermore, near the very end of *The Prelude* Wordsworth looks back upon the poem he has painfully laboured to compose, only a preliminary for his projected ambition *The Recluse*, and the image he chooses for himself as poet is the lark:

Having now
 Told what best merits mention, further *pains*
 Our present *labour* seems not to require,
 And I have other tasks.¹⁶ Call back to mind
 The mood in which this poem was begun,
 O friend—the termination of my course
 Is nearer now, much nearer, yet even then
 In that distraction and intense desire
 I said unto the life which I had lived,
 'Where art thou? Hear I not a voice from thee
 Which 'tis reproach to hear?' Anon I rose

¹⁶ Wordsworth refers here to the writing of *The Recluse*.

As if on wings, and saw beneath me stretched
Vast prospect of the world which I had been,
And was; and hence this song, which like a lark
I have protracted, in the unwearied heavens
Singing, and often with more plaintive voice
Attempered to the sorrows of the earth—
Yet centring all in love, and in the end
All gratulant if rightly understood.

(XIII. 367-385 added emphasis)

Again, Wordsworth's emphasis is on the duality of the lark's being, binding both the 'unwearied heavens' and the sorrowful earth while 'centring all in love' (XIII. 381, 384), just as for Bunting it can signify both life and death, vitality and enervation, as it ascends and descends with the crescendo and diminuendo of the opening of *Briggflatts*, the passing of active poetic labour.

Bunting has stated that four of the five parts of *Briggflatts* correspond to the seasons:

There's several ways *Briggflatts* can be explained, but it's quite simple enough on the face of it, if you think that there are four seasons of the year, four times of life, grouped around another part making five principal parts. (Williams and Meyer 39)

As we have observed, the first part takes place in spring 'around Briggflatts', and springtime for Bunting is equally subject to the pain of regeneration described at the beginning of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (Quartermain and Tallman 15). The memory of past 'love is so sore' (I. 39), and 'ears err | for fear of spring' (I. 30-31), the reciprocity between poet and listening reader jeopardised by the anxieties of the season's painful regeneration and the difficulties of remembering and remembering well. 'It is easier to die than to remember', after all (I. 153). Indeed, the 'sodden trash' (I. 146) in which Bunting's lark will come to nest recalls the 'stony rubbish' of Eliot's 'The Burial of the Dead' (I. 20), all aching 'dull roots' stirred by cruel 'spring rain' (I. 4), the poet-lark burying himself in the tradition, perhaps, in preparation for his coming voyages into summer and the deeper recesses of memory. *Briggflatts* is certainly in part an attempt to 'correct' *The Waste Land* and the reactionary politics behind its overbearing pessimism, so these traces of Eliot in the opening of the poem are not a by-product of overreading: Peter Quartermain, noting how Pound's editing

gave *The Waste Land* ‘a more or less clear musical structure’, recalls how Bunting ‘once commented ... that if you remove section four [“Death by Water”] it [*The Waste Land*] sounds like a sonata’ (‘To Make Glad the Heart of Man’ 149).¹⁷ If *The Waste Land* is an unwitting or accidental sonata, *Briggflatts* would be a very deliberate one, owing partly to the importance of Domenico Scarlatti’s sonatas for Bunting as an ‘ideal of music’, as L.S. Dembo discusses in ‘Bunting’s *Briggflatts*’ (197). An implicit critique of Eliot runs through *Briggflatts*, and the mason’s disposal of ‘flawed fragments’ in part two of the poem ought clearly to indicate Bunting’s reservations about Eliot’s incidental pseudo-sonata and by extension the fragmentary poetics of his earlier career for which he is most famous (II. 135). By comparison, the musical whole of *Briggflatts* aimed at coherent compression rather than the potentially flawed collaging of fragments.

Everywhere in the first part of *Briggflatts* is diffused a sense of the poem’s belatedness, the late modernism of this work: we begin in ‘the fells’ late spring’ (I. 4), and many ghosts of the English tradition besides Wordsworth make their presences felt, as we have seen, with echoes of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Shelley, Hardy, and indeed Eliot. But the belatedness is also the poet’s own, late in his life, casting back into the memory of first love and the atmosphere of that pocket of east Cumbria where it breaks onto the West Riding of Yorkshire. Wordsworth opens *The Prelude* self-consciously where *Paradise Lost* (1674) ended, Milton describing the departure of Adam and Eve from paradise:¹⁸

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
 The world was all before them, where to choose
 Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
 They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,
 Through Eden took their solitary way.
(*Paradise Lost* XII. 645-9)

¹⁷ Writing in ‘Basil Bunting and the Problem of Patronage’, Richard Price finds in *Briggflatts* ‘an echo perhaps of the barrenness trope in Eliot’s *The Waste Land*’ (98).

¹⁸ However, as M.H. Abrams has warned, we should not view *The Prelude* simply as a ‘sequel’ to *Paradise Lost*: despite the fact that ‘the preamble comes first in the structural order of the *Prelude* [sic], it inaugurates the stage of the narrator’s life which comes last in its temporal order. It is not, then, *The Prelude* which Wordsworth meant to dovetail into the place in Milton’s poem at which man, having lost paradise, sets out on his pilgrimage to recover it again, but the narrative which follows *The Prelude*; namely, the opening book of *The Recluse* proper, *Home at Grasmere*’ (*Natural Supernaturalism* 115-16).

The Prelude of 1805 picks up the fallen condition of humanity with a vision of the promise of revolutionary liberty on earth. Repurposing much of Milton's language as he does throughout the poem while aping it structurally at key moments, Wordsworth can declare: 'Now I am free, enfranchised and at large, | May fix my habitation where I will' (I. 9-10). Beholding his beloved Vale of Grasmere, Milton's 'wand'ring' Adam and Eve are given purpose in the surety of the poet's steps (XII. 648), though divine providence may now be nothing but the contingency of a 'wandering cloud' (I. 18):

The earth is all before me—with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud
I cannot miss my way.

(I. 15-19)

Fast-forward to the belated spring of *Briggflatts*, and one would be forgiven for reading the 'slowworm's way' (I. 13), paved by the blossoming may, as a reconfiguration of the inexorable 'solitary way' of Adam and Eve 'through Eden' (XII. 649), and therefore the destined 'way' to his best dwelling place in Grasmere that Wordsworth 'cannot miss' (I. 19). This immediately sets up a lot of expectations for *Briggflatts* as a whole. If we can mark an allusive trajectory from Adam and Eve, via Wordsworth the poet of revolutionary republicanism, to the slow-worm of Bunting, some readers might too quickly equate the latter with the snake in Eden. This would make for a rather precarious reading, because the slow-worm himself tells Alexander in part three:

I am neither snake nor lizard,
I am the slowworm.

(III. 104-5)

Anthony Suter has recorded Bunting's equivocation over the meaning and purpose of the slow-worm's recurrence throughout the poem, but only as a representation of 'the quietest attitude',

evoking the Quakerism of Brigflatts Meeting House and Bunting's youth ('*Briggflatts* and the Resurrection of Basil Bunting' 219). In his interview with Peter Bell, Bunting remarked of the slow-worm: 'I can tell you very little about him. He insisted on being there [in the poem], and so he is there' ('Interview with Peter Bell, September 3 1981'). The poet went on to recount:

In my boyhood I used to see slow-worms about around Brigflatts, and played with them a bit. But I've not seen one—except kept in a tank like a goldfish—for years. I have a photograph, a colour photograph of a couple of slow-worms on my mantelpiece which will show you how beautiful they are. But many things are beautiful if you put away your prejudices. People are prejudiced against the slow-worm because they think it's a snake. There are all sorts of other creatures which people speak of with horror, which are actually very beautiful. The common maggot that grows into the bluebottle fly, if you put out a piece of meat and let it get really putrid and all the maggots are dancing about on it, they dance the most wonderful ballet. Beautiful sight, really beautiful. ('Interview with Peter Bell, September 3 1981')

Don Share puzzlingly exaggerates in his editor's notes to *Briggflatts* when he claims that 'Wordsworth's poems are replete with slow-worms', offering the inscription poem 'Lines Written with a Slate-pencil, upon a Stone, the largest of a heap lying near a deserted Quarry, upon one of the Islands at Rydale' (included in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800) as his example: 'There let the vernal Slow-worm sun himself' (34).¹⁹ Indeed, it seems important for *Briggflatts* that Wordsworth's slow-worm appears in an inscription poem, given Bunting's emphasis on masonry and monumentality in the first part of his poem, rhyming off the ninth stanza: 'Words! | Pens are too light. | Take a chisel to write' (l. 115-117). If not a chisel, then at least a slate pencil, perhaps. In Wordsworth's poem, the slow-worm functions as a check against the hubris of landowners and those unwitting builders unsympathetic to nature. Sir William Fleming, a previous owner of Rydal Hall who died in 1736, had plans, as the poet inscribes, to build a pleasure house on this island of Rydal Water, but abandoned his design when he realised the island could be reached easily by any wading passer-by, leaving behind him only a heap of stones. The poet concludes the little blank

¹⁹ There are plenty of glow-worms in Wordsworth, but other than in 'Lines Written with a Slate Pencil', slow-worms do not appear in the authorship. Certainly Wordsworth's poems are not 'replete' with them as Share claims (333).

verse inscription by imploring any prospective builder who might in the future chance upon the stone to ‘think again’ (31):

But if thou art one
On fire with thy impatience to become
An inmate of these mountains, if disturb'd
By beautiful conceptions, thou hast hewn
Out of the quiet rock the elements
Of thy trim mansion destin'd soon to blaze
In snow-white glory, think again, and taught
By old Sir William and his quarry, leave
Thy fragments to the bramble and the rose;
There let the vernal Slow-worm sun himself,
And let the Red-breast hop from stone to stone.
(25-35)

The thoughts here communicated by Wordsworth on building and inscription are not worlds apart from Bunting’s comments on his preference for a chisel over a pen. In the Peter Bell interview, Bunting boasts that his claim ‘Pens are too light. | Take a chisel to write’ (l. 116-117) is ‘very good advice’, because it teaches us best writerly practice:

Namely, don’t be in any hurry about it [writing], and think it bloody thoroughly out before you put down a word. There would be an awful mess if the monumental mason proceeded to write his epitaphs without thinking about them to begin with. They would spill over onto the second side of the gravestone and all sorts of things like that. If you’re writing with a chisel you have to be certain of every word, and they have to be the fewest you can possibly use, and the shortest you can possibly find. (‘Interview with Peter Bell, September 3 1981’)

The emphasis in both Wordsworth and Bunting is on contemplation and pensiveness, stressing the necessity to think before you act; on modesty and humility. Wordsworth’s choice of adjective to describe the slow-worm here is crucial in indicating the creature’s natural significance: ‘vernal’, connecting the creature with spring. This is because the adjective recalls that dialogic brace of poems Wordsworth chose to open the first volume of the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, ‘Expostulation and Reply’ and ‘The Tables Turned’, and specifically this well-known stanza from the latter:

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man;
Of moral evil and of good,
Than all the sages can.

(21-24)

Just as the basking ‘vernal slow-worm’ is introduced as the tutelary poet exhorts future builders to ‘think again’ (34, 31), so too the ‘vernal wood’ figures in ‘The Tables Turned’ as a primary teacher of human nature and morality (21). The slow-worm has a pedagogical role, a function it will also come to assume in part three of *Briggflatts*, as if Bunting is channelling and expanding upon the spirit of its appearance in Wordsworth’s lyrical ballad.

Furthermore, on December 3 1984, Bunting wrote to Peter Makin explaining why Epicurus (via Lucretius) was

the only one of all the world’s philosophers with whom I have much sympathy ... by referring to [*De rerum natura*] merely as a “Latin tag” you lose quite a bit — the appeal to Epicurus, who was very like the slow-worm, unassuming, pacific, free of folly, (and exceedingly kind) for all his intellectual sophistication. (*Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* 154-155)

In the preface to Book Two of *De rerum natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), Lucretius defends what is commonly understood to be the Epicurean philosophy undergirding his poem, holding that ‘nature importunately demands only that the body may be rid of pain, and that the mind, divorced from anxiety and fear, may enjoy a feeling of contentment’, in the ‘tranquil sanctuaries’ of the minds of the wise (35-36). The slow-worm’s intended Epicureanism is evident as it whispers to Alexander: ‘I prosper | lying low, little concerned’ (III. 112-113), wishing ‘Good luck to reaper and miller!’ (III. 116). After this soliloquy, his hubris checked, the heroic Alexander travels ‘home silently through clean woodland | where every bough repeated the slowworm’s song’ (III. 129-130): all of nature reverberates with the slow-worm’s music, his philosophy of modest pleasure, contentment, and harmony, which Bunting has arguably gleaned from the slow-worm in Wordsworth’s ‘Lines Written with a Slate-pencil’. As Makin has argued, ‘the slow-worm “is” Epicurus, or is identified

in Bunting's correspondence as a mythical embodiment of that philosopher's wise passivity. Epicurus is both Alexander the courageous quester, and the gentle, accepting, laughing slow-worm' (*Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse* 155).²⁰

Perhaps the most crucial Wordsworthian analogue to be found in *Briggflatts* is also the easiest to miss. This is, of course, Brigflatts Meeting House itself, the old Quaker place of worship near Sedburgh, Cumbria, where Bunting holidayed as a child during summer vacations and where he met Peggy Greenbank. The persistent stoicism that the meeting house seems to represent is complicated by the fact that there is no overt mention or description of it in *Briggflatts* the poem. This mimics the function of Wordsworth's ruined Tintern Abbey in 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', which too is conspicuous only by its absence from the text of the poem despite its titular prominence, a prominence amplified by the fact that the poem is generally abbreviated to 'Tintern Abbey' by readers and critics. As this chapter will proceed to discuss, for Bunting there was clearly a deep spirit of place attached to Brigflatts and the Northumbrian countryside, and this was often indistinguishable from the poet's childhood memories.

iv. Bunting's spot of time

Having identified some of the precedents in Wordsworth for Bunting's recurring images, motifs, and symbols and their initial appearances in *Briggflatts*, I now want to turn to the question of *The Prelude's* 'spots of time', and what they might be able to tell us about the mechanics of memory and experience in Bunting's poem. *Briggflatts's* interpretation of this central aspect of Wordsworth's ontology of self-trust, and of memory's virtue of self-sustenance, is fundamental to our comprehension of it as an artwork. As Hawlin writes,

²⁰ And in Makin's mention of Epicurus's 'wise passivity', compare the sixth stanza of Wordsworth's 'Expostulation and Reply', the poem elected to open the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*: 'Nor less I deem that there are Powers | Which of themselves our minds impress; | That we can feed this mind of ours | In a wise passiveness' (21-24).

Just as Wordsworth's "spots of time" are an uncovering and the solidifying of his sense of bonding with the goodness of nature and the universe, so too the landscape of the fells above Briggflatts, its sounds and scents, the taciturn majesty and loveliness of the fells in springtime, are for Bunting a similar bonding, a primal experience that all the rest of his life is partially an attempt to recover. ('Bunting's *Briggflatts*: A Quaker Masterpiece' 639)

In Hawlin's account, Bunting 'is not', however, 'simply rewriting a "spot of time"' (639). While by this almost offhand statement Hawlin proceeds to attempt to demonstrate how *Briggflatts* is an exemplary Quaker poem at odds with the Anglicanism of *Four Quarters*, I want to use its perception as a springboard into an analysis of Bunting's poem's adaptation of this vital structural and phenomenological feature of *The Prelude*. How is the first part of *Briggflatts* not rewriting a spot of time? Hawlin wrongly believes the episode is 'unWordsworthian in its eroticism' and 'overt sexuality', as if Wordsworth's poetry is entirely sexless (639).²¹ I want to argue that he is, however, judicious to suggest that the first part of *Briggflatts* does not 'simply' rewrite 'a "spot of time"', but presents instead one that is malfunctioning (639).

This is because Wordsworth's 'spots of time' do possess a function, a 'beneficent influence', albeit one that only becomes apparent to the poet in his maturity (XI. 278). Though it first appeared in the first half of the memory-fragment referred to commonly as the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, the 'spots of time' passage in its later reproductions is not introduced until as late as the eleventh (1805) and twelfth books (1850), providing a kind of philosophical retrospect on those 'renovating' memories it describes, which have been scattered throughout the preceding poem (XI. 259). In the 1805 *Prelude*, the passage is rendered thus:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
In trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired—

²¹ See for example my earlier discussion of the latent eroticism inherent in the imagery of the so-called 'stolen boat' spot in Book I of *The Prelude*.

A virtue, by which pleasure is enhanced,
 That penetrates, enables us to mount
 When high, more high, and lifts us up when fallen.
 This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks
 Among those passages of life in which
 We have had deepest feeling that the mind
 Is lord and master, and that outward sense
 Is but the obedient servant of her will.
 Such moments, worthy of all gratitude,
 Are scattered everywhere, taking their date
 From our first childhood—in our childhood even
 Perhaps are most conspicuous. Life with me,
 As far as memory can look back, is full
 Of this beneficent influence.

(XI. 257-278)

The ‘spots of time’, figuring both a spatialisation of time and temporalisation of space, exert a potentially redemptive and consolatory influence because of their capacity to nourish and ‘invisibly’ repair a ‘depressed’ mind, one perhaps at the point of exhaustion or stupefaction (XI. 257-278). As Anahid Nersessian writes, a spot of time is a particular memory functioning as ‘a repository, a well of virtue’ (*The Calamity Form* 99). Here, in David Bromwich’s analysis, referring to the slightly revised 1850 version of the passage, ‘a memory is valued because it participates in a larger consolation’, in a constellation of reparative benefits (*Disowned by Memory* 177). The ‘renovating virtue’ is a virtue of individuation, an asset of the interior over the exterior; yet one that the poet can specify and point out for others, offering didactic guidance to his readers so that we too might locate those beneficent moments diffused throughout ‘our first childhood’ (XI. 259, 275). Peter Larkin has noted that the ‘spots of time’ ‘occupy a fault line between trauma and aspiration, between the struggles of existence and the pathos of any wishing to be’ (*Promising Losses* 119). David Ellis saw them as ‘episodes where Wordsworth’s self-understanding appears stretched to its limits’ (*Wordsworth, Freud and the Spots of Time* 5), part of an ‘explanatory framework’ prompted by the need ‘to make sense of a life: to deduce order and meaning from the discontinuities of experience’ (95). Earlier, Geoffrey Hartman recognised that the ‘common factor’ uniting the traumatological ‘spots of time’ is a ‘violation of nature’ bound up in the child’s developing self-

consciousness, after which ‘the spirit of place rises up in revenge against the violator’: this will be accepted, in the poet’s retrospect, as ‘an effect of the power of his imagination’ (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 214-215). Destructive acts such as those relayed in the first book of *The Prelude*, with the young poet’s theft of snared woodcocks and plundering of ravens’ nests in ‘high places’, are formative examples of this species of violation (I. 337). Once ‘the bird | Which was the captive of another’s toils’ has become the child’s prey, he hears ‘among the solitary hills | Low breathings, coming after me, and sounds | Of undistinguishable motion’; and hanging from the raven’s nest the ‘loud dry wind’ blows uncannily with ‘strange utterance’ under a sky which ‘seemed not a sky | Of earth’ (I. 326-350). These early desirous incursions upon nature are at the same time actions alleged to have been prompted by nature itself. In the ‘stolen boat’ episode, the culmination of these passages, the poet is ‘surely led by her’, and ‘she’ (nature) rises up again in an admonishing crescendo to temporarily dislocate the poet’s consciousness from the world, darkening his thoughts with ‘unknown modes of being’ as ‘huge and mighty forms that do not live | Like living men’ trouble his subsequent dreams (I. 372-426). But as Hartman specifies, these responses to such ‘wanton and wilful acts’ are revealed to be the product of the imagination, not the vengeful spirit of nature; the child is shielded by a necessary ignorance of this fact because ‘paralyzing recognitions’ of the imaginative power too early in life ‘might prevent growth of mind’ (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 214-215).

As a blank verse fragment originally intended for inclusion in the ‘poem to Coleridge’, the events of ‘Nutting’ (1798-9) inculcate an uncanny rebuke similar to that experienced in the early ‘spots of time’, remembering a day that seems like ‘One of those heavenly days which cannot die’ (3). Eyeing and then encroaching upon the ‘virgin scene’ of that ‘dear nook’ (19, 14), the child drags to earth ‘both branch and bough, with crash | And merciless ravage’ (42-3). He trespasses on and possesses the nook and bower, ‘Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings’ as they ‘patiently [give] up | Their quiet being’ (49, 45-6): the poet has ruined the now ‘Deform’d and sullied’ spots for anyone else in the future (45). The revelation that *spiritus loci*, nature’s ‘spirit in the woods’, has reprimanded the transgressing child (54)—and which Hartman understands truly to be the

apocalyptic imaginative faculty in disguise—, is related in the last two lines of the main body of the fragment, the reliability of the retrospective account called previously into question with a qualification: ‘unless I now, | Confound my present feelings with the past, [...] I felt a sense of pain when I beheld | The silent trees and the intruding sky.—’ (46-7, 50-1). Nature in the silent trees and sky seems to soundlessly intrude upon the child’s consciousness, and it is a painful experience, one transactional violation for another. The character of that tentative qualification, the possibility that the reflective poet’s present feelings might violate the feelings of the past just as he once violated the unsullied bower, has been foreshadowed by the first line and indeed the first stress of the fragment, ‘seems’: ‘— It seems a day, | (I speak of one from many singled out) | One of those heavenly days which cannot die’ (1-3). After all, appearances can be deceptive, and such is the phenomenology of memory. The day remembered can only *seem* a day ‘which cannot die’ because, while it does live on in some form in the poet’s memory and imagination, the poet can never be sure that he has not desecrated or distorted it in the present, confusing present feeling for past feeling and experience now with experience then. How much of that heavenly day has died in the act of its recollection, and what might this say about the truth and ‘efficacious spirit’ of the ‘renovating virtue’ and nourishing, reparative quality such ‘spots of time’ possess in *The Prelude* (XI. 268, 259)? Not unlike the overarching structure of the ‘poem to Coleridge’ as perceived by M.H. Abrams, their importance and vitality is founded on doubt, recovery, and the ensuing recompense of self-trust.²² There is always a substantial chance that any particular memory is faulty, because irrevocably mediated by intervening time. The virtue of the ‘spots of time’ is amplified precisely because of their contingency and fragility, the present obtruding upon the past with the same potentially admonishing force as the sky in ‘Nutting’. So much of the ‘beneficent influence’,

²² As Abrams influentially argued in *Natural Supernaturalism*, *The Prelude* is ‘ordered in three stages. There is a process of mental development which, although at times suspended, remains a continuum; this process is violently broken by a crisis of apathy and despair; but the mind then recovers an integrity which, despite admitted losses, is represented at a level higher than the initial unity, in that the mature mind possesses powers, together with an added range, depth, and sensitivity of awareness, which are the products of the critical experiences it has undergone’ (77). This is true in microcosm of the poet’s faith in the ‘spots of time’, his implicit doubts about them essential to their effect of sustenance.

value, and meaning of these moments in time is actually enhanced by the doubt of retrospect, the instability and uncertainty of their veracity (XI. 278). They each depend upon a leap of faith, without which their imaginative potency and revivifying faculty would be considerably reduced.

Is the memory that Bunting recounts in the first part of *Briggflatts* and proceeds to orbit for the rest of the poem a spot of time in any straightforward sense, and how might it relate to and be informed by the transgressive deeds of the child in the early books of *The Prelude*, those acts of theft and violation which characterise Wordsworth's early explorations of and intrusions upon nature? In stanzas four and five of the first part of *Briggflatts*, 'two children lie' beneath 'sacks on the stone' (I. 45-6):

Stocking to stocking, jersey to jersey,
head to a hard arm,
they kiss under the rain,
bruised by their marble bed.

(I. 53-56)

Clearly, the doublings and pseudo-homophones in this passage give formal expression to the coupling described, with the perfectly repetitious 'Stocking to stocking, jersey to jersey,' leading on to the internal near-rhymes 'head' and 'hard', and 'bruised' and 'bed' (I. 53-56). The same effect is achieved two stanzas later, with the plosive beat of the clauses 'Her pulse their pace, | palm countering palm' and their emphatic alliterating stresses (I. 79-80). Of course, the events related in this opening section revolve around a focal sexual encounter: 'He has untied the tape | of her striped flannel drawers | before the range' (I. 99-101), and 'Rainwater from the butt | she fetches and flannel | to wash him inch by inch, | kissing the pebbles.' (I. 109-112). Comparable anxieties about the monumentalising impulse as we see in Wordsworth's inscription poems and in his doubts over confounding present feelings with the past in 'Nutting' are clear. They are most brazenly articulated in the command to 'Take a chisel to write' (I. 117), demonstrating Bunting's desire to preserve his memory of Peggy Greenbank in the objective durability of stone as 'shame

deflects the pen', and in spite of the acknowledged fact that there can be 'No hope of going back' (I. 122-4).

Briggflatts is, absolutely fundamentally, a poem about 'Love murdered', 'love laid aside' (I. 125, 137), and 'discarded love' (II. 119). Speaking to Tom Pickard in 1994, Ed Dorn called it 'the great love poem of the twentieth century', though he argued that such an observation

is not the most obvious thing in the world because of [the poem's] big structure. It has a musical element and a certain timing that is associated with modern poetry. I think it's also a great modern poem in that it takes geography and personal history and an incredible specificity of place. But in the end it's about love. (*Ed Dorn Live* 85)

As such, *Briggflatts* is a poem that reaches after 'amputated years' (I. 151), wherein what might have functioned as a conventional spot of time affiliated to a loving relationship which could have 'nourished and invisibly repaired' the poet in later years, has instead been mutilated by a crisis or fracture which the intervening time has not healed of its own accord (*The Prelude* XI. 264). Poetry itself and the act of artificing experience into a poetic utterance and object might serve, then, as a kind of antidote to this crisis. This has been summarised rather too neatly by Charles Tomlinson, quoting the allusion to Ephesians 5:16 in Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' (*Collected Poems* 90-91):

the central incident of the poem [is] the love scene between two adolescents (time is threatening them too) which, remembered by the poet over fifty years, supplies the moment of quality to "redeem the time"; at the close of the poem Then is Now[...]. ('Experience into Music' 14)

Tomlinson's assessment here does not adequately convey the strain of remembering, though he is of course right to stress the love scene's centrality to the poem as a whole and the fact that it will, with great effort, eventually supply 'the moment of quality to "redeem the time"' (14). Bunting's memory in the first part of Peggy Greenbank and their relationship forms in effect the antithesis of a 'spot of time' in Wordsworth's description; it has no renovating capacity at all but instead makes the poet feel profound guilt and pain. There is no sense of the imagination's mastery over reality in the first part of *Briggflatts*, no intimation of the 'efficacious spirit' of Wordsworth's 'spots

of time', said chiefly to lurk 'Among those passages of life in which | We have had deepest feeling that the mind | Is lord and master, and that outward sense | Is but the obedient servant of her will' (XI. 268-272). If anything, Bunting reverses this relation, with 'outward sense' and the myriad impressions of the outside world holding sway (XI. 271):

harness mutter to shaft,
fellow to axle squeak,
rut thud the rim,
crushed grit.

(I. 49-52)

The typical rhyming couplet with which Bunting concludes his stanzas in the first part of *Briggflatts* is deviated from here at the end of the fourth in his description of the 'clogged cart' (I. 72), indicating the inability for poetic consciousness and artifice to fully master 'outward sense' (XI. 271). Clearly, 'rim' and 'grit' assonate but do not rhyme, with the absent echo of the rhyme for 'grit' coming from a lacking imaginary fusion of 'rut' and 'rim', a homophone of 'writ' (I. 51-52). What is thought, written, and represented is destabilised as the external racket of the cart takes over, deranging the formal expectation Bunting set up in the preceding three stanzas. This sense of the exterior exercising power over the interior is more generally formalised by virtue of the fact that Bunting's boyhood self is always referred to in the third-person, a subject entirely separate from the older poet doing the remembering: 'He has untied the tape | of her striped flannel drawers' (I. 99-100). The first-person is only assumed by Bunting in the last two parts of the poem, as now moves closer to then, beginning with section four's confident opening declaration of lyric subjectivity: 'I hear Aneurin number the dead' (IV. 4). We have no access to the boy's consciousness in this first part; the past is trespassed upon by the present. Any 'renovating virtue' that the agonising immediacy of the memory might eventually and teleologically give way to is blocked off and inaccessible (*The Prelude* XI. 259):

Guilty of spring
and spring's ending

amputated years ache after
the bull is beef, love a convenience.
It is easier to die than to remember.

(I. 149-153)

Optimistically, the repetition and rhyming of ‘spring | and spring’s ending’ embodies a sense of return and renewal counter to its apparently terminal sense, before giving way to the flicker of a terminal half-rhyme in ‘after’ and ‘remember’, the musical transition between smoothed quite literally by ‘easier’ (I. 149-153).²³ While Wordsworth’s recall of his ‘spots of time’ is also an arduous process, the same ‘efficacious spirit’ does not seem to attend upon Bunting’s memory, for it has been eclipsed by regret and culpability (XI. 268). The experience has been ‘amputated’, a fragment that the unifying structure of *Briggflatts* will endeavour to return to the whole, the monument of the poet’s life (I. 151). Bunting wrote to Zukofsky on September 16 1964 of his intention that *Briggflatts* should explore ‘what happens when one deliberately thrusts love aside, as I then did — it has its revenge’ (Letter to Zukofsky September 16 1964). The decisive doubt of ‘Nutting’ (‘unless I now, | Confound my present feelings with the past,’) finds full, anxious expression in *Briggflatts*: death ‘is easier’ than remembering, because memory always contains within it the potential for nostalgia, fantasy, and self-delusion. Acceptance of and submission to oblivion is less onerous.

Therefore, as Burton writes, ‘If nothing else *Briggflatts* is an enormous feat of memory, something [Bunting] distrusted’ (*A Strong Song Tows Us* 386). In his interview with Peter Bell, Bunting acknowledged this difficulty:

I distrust memory extremely, but the effort to remember the various episodes in *Briggflatts*, for they are all however altered based upon my own past, the effort to remember it was a severe one which went on for many months. So that to make then into now is not something you can just say ...it takes some doing! (‘Interview with Peter Bell, September 3 1981’)

²³ cf. ‘Weeping oaks grieve’ (1924), the opening ode of Bunting’s collected *First Book of Odes* (1965) written when the poet was only 23 years old, which concludes with the clause ‘but spring | is everlasting | resurrection.’ (10-12).

Some critics have denied that *Briggflatts* is a nostalgic text, which seems a surprising defence to make of a poem that is not particularly concerned with exact factual accuracy and documentation but rather with impression and mood—‘Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience’, as Bunting told Zukofsky (Letter to Zukofsky September 16 1964).²⁴ Similarly, *The Prelude* features erasures and distortions which afford the everyday clutter and disorder of a life formal shape, purpose, and the logic of vocational poetic purpose. This is just artistic license. Nostalgia is a criticism usually and rightly levelled pejoratively at literary artworks, but without the at least partly strategic nostalgia of the first part of the poem, and its ‘words to confirm and delight | till bird dawn’, there would be nothing to come to terms with, no movement or potential for development across the rest of *Briggflatts*, for all of its eschewal of simple structural linearity (I. 107-108). It would be untruthful to deny the presence of nostalgia; a delusion, ironically, to pretend that self-delusion is not an everyday inevitability of memory. The experience of nostalgia is its own truth. And thus the nostalgic and impressionistic atmosphere of the first part seems consequently to prove and dramatise the statement that ‘It is easier to die than to remember’, therefore serving to strengthen the reading of *Briggflatts* as a quest narrative (I. 153); a mission of self-discovery and the developmental acquisition of self-knowledge, of remembering well and accurately while recognising the irrevocability of error and illusion; a pursuit of atonement and forgiveness. It is my contention that the poem should be read as an attempt to recover and fix this malfunctioning spot of time, to endeavour to restore what ought to be a renovating rather than remorseful memory to its proper place and ‘efficacious spirit’, and to make amends (XI. 268).

These efforts necessitate an Odyssean voyage outwards, into the world and the sequence and structure of a life, in order to return at last like a musical refrain to ‘The road again’ of the memory of this spot of time (I. 87); to seek to resolve it, and address the poet’s remorse and guilt. As the first part of *Briggflatts* enquires, ‘What can he [Bunting], changed, tell | her [Greenbank],

²⁴ See, for example, Victoria Forde’s *The Poetry of Basil Bunting*, a study which claims, echoing Herbert Read, that *Briggflatts* reasserts ‘first impressions ... all filtered through the poet’s memory which gives the lightest, gayest lines a poignancy, although never a sentimental nostalgia’ (207).

changed, perhaps dead?’ (I. 127-128). The intervening years of Bunting’s life have first to be assimilated and artficed, just as the preparations for *The Recluse* seemed to demand of Wordsworth that he recount for Coleridge and commit to verse the growth of his mind to date and the trajectory of his progress as a poet. Following the first part’s account of Bunting’s aborted relationship with Peggy Greenbank, analogues for *The Prelude* quite deliberately continue to abound throughout the rest of *Briggflatts*, and the poet seems conscious to emphasise productive contrasts between his own life and development as an artist and Wordsworth’s.

At the beginning of part two, the section of the poem representative of summer and the ‘summer’ of his life, Bunting in an act of humbled self-parody brands his vain and arrogant younger self a ‘Poet appointed’ (II. 1); one ‘singled out’ like Wordsworth in the early passages of *The Prelude* (I. 62), and keen to assume the privileged mantle of a ‘man speaking to men’ (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 103).²⁵ An echo of the Baudelairean flâneur, the poet strikes out ‘among the bogus’ in crowded 1920s London (II. 2), that city of ‘motley imagery’ and ‘blank confusion’ through which Wordsworth wandered in Book VII of *The Prelude* (VII. 150, 696). This too presents tacitly the case for Wordsworth’s proto-modernism, that he might arguably be esteemed a ‘modern’ poet, for all Bunting’s sense of his authorship as the culmination of prevailing tendencies in eighteenth century poetry: the first stanza of the second part of *Briggflatts* seems to register and respond to both Eliot’s Dantean vision of ‘Unreal’ London in *The Waste Land* and Wordsworth’s experiences there as rendered in *The Prelude* (*The Waste Land* I. 60), suggesting links between the two poets that

²⁵ In the Preface, Wordsworth famously described his ideal poet: ‘He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than one supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them’ (104). We should not, however, simplify Wordsworth’s thesis by jumping to protest that he simply places his poet on a pedestal over the rest of humankind, their experience superior to that of anyone else, for he proceeds to qualify the above by arguing: ‘However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure’ (104).

Eliot would himself have likely refuted. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth made plain his thoughts on the deleterious impact he sensed the ‘encreasing accumulation of men in cities’ was having on English society, thought, and letters (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 99):

For a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. To this tendency of life and manners the literature and theatrical exhibitions of the country have conformed themselves. The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespear and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse. —When I think upon this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation, I am almost ashamed to have spoken of the feeble effort with which I have endeavoured to counteract it; and, reflecting upon the magnitude of the general evil, I should be oppressed with no dishonourable melancholy, had I not a deep impression of certain inherent and indestructible qualities of the human mind, and likewise of certain powers in the great and permanent objects that act upon it which are equally inherent and indestructible[...]. (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 99-100)

In the opening stanza of part two of *Briggflatts*, both poet and reader are bombarded with impressions, sensations, and ‘outrageous stimulation[s]’ (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 100):

... despised
by toadies, confidence men, kept boys,
shopped and jailed, cleaned out by whores,
touching acquaintance for food and tobacco.
(II. 3-6)

Briggflatts’ brief residence in London is characterised by poverty, crime, peril, fear, and hatred, full of insults to conventional bourgeois morality. As Burton writes, this passage of the poem ‘is not very self-forgiving’ (*A Strong Song Tows Us* 263). Nostalgia, by this point in the poem, is effaced and kept at bay. The slightly excessive mock-heroic sibilance of Bunting’s description of himself then as ‘Secret, solitary, a spy’ has more than a trace of self-parody in it (II. 7). The fact that the passage is somewhat overdone and even melodramatic, especially when compared with the sophistication of the first part of the poem, could, giving Bunting the benefit of the doubt, reflect

that the poet was still raw and developing as an artist during the time in London that he is relating, and wanted to self-reflexively allude to and imitate that fact in the style of this passage of verse. This stanza's barrage of 'extraordinary incident[s]', in the terms of Wordsworth's Preface (99), might serve as a kind of necessary defect or blemish, the pressure of his experience of the city then inflecting Bunting's retrospective verse-description of it in the 1960s with sensational touches and excesses, a kind of journalesque. After all, the stanza resolves with the punning confession that Bunting had been 'mating | beauty with squalor to beget lines still-born' (II. 21-23), unable to write how and how well his youthful ambition demanded. As he will go on to confess of his artistic development later in this part, 'It looks well on the page, but never | well enough.' (II. 93-94). The opening twenty-three line stanza is composed of only three protracted sentences, Bunting restlessly chaining commas, counting

... beat against beat, bus conductor
against engine against wheels against
the pedal, Tottenham Court Road, decodes
thunder, scans
porridge bubbling, pipes clanking, 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.
(II. 11-19)

Here Bunting's panting, elongated syntax artifies the speed of the modern metropolis described, form matching content. The passage overtly replicates the overwhelming structure of Wordsworth's bustling syntax when relating the 'look and aspect' of London (VII. 154), accumulating objects and clauses:

... the quick dance
Of colours, lights and forms, the Babel din,
The endless stream of men and moving things,
From hour to hour the illimitable walk
Still among streets, with clouds and sky above,
The wealth, the bustle and the eagerness,
The glittering chariots with their pampered steeds,

Stalls, barrows, porters, midway in the street
 The scavenger that begs with hat in hand,
 The labouring hackney-coaches, the rash speed
 Of coaches travelling far, whirled on with horn
 Loud blowing, and the sturdy drayman's team
 Ascending from some alley of the Thames
 And striking right across the crowded Strand
 Till the fore-horse veer round with punctual skill:
 Here, there, and everywhere, a weary throng,
 The comers and the goers face to face—
 Face after face—the string of dazzling wares,
 Shop after shop, with symbols, blazoned names,
 And all the tradesman's honours overhead:
 (VII. 156-175)

The sentence of *The Prelude* from which this passage is excerpted is thirty-eight lines long, making the three sentences commencing the second part of *Briggflatts*—the longest of which straddles thirteen lines—seem fleeting by comparison. Wordsworth's image of the London of the late eighteenth century is emphatically modern, a labyrinthine city emblazoned with 'Advertisements of giant size' (VII. 210, 201). Both in terms of their massive scale and the aqueous imagery they invoke, the proximity of a line of pentameter like 'The endless stream of men and moving things' to T.S. Eliot's 'A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many' (I. 62), separated by over a century, is startling. Perhaps surprisingly, Eliot's syntax in the final stanza of 'The Burial of the Dead' is comparatively short and stuttering when juxtaposed with Bunting and certainly Wordsworth's depictions of London: 'Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled, | And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.' (I. 64-65).

After the voyaging, the elliptical account of his time with Pound in Rapallo, and the description of the death of Eric Bloodaxe that make up the rest of *Briggflatts*' second part, Bunting relates in the central third section of the poem the Persian legend of Alexander the Great, adapted from Ferdosi, the tenth-century poet he had been reading and translating since 1930.²⁶ Alexander's

²⁶ See Burton's *A Strong Song Toms Us* (especially 183-6) for an account of this.

campaigns lead him to Gog and Magog, legendary mountains at the edge of the earth, and he climbs alone where he sees an angel, Israfel, ready to blow the trumpet that will end the world:

... he
reached to a crack in the rock
with some scorn, resolute though in doubt,
traversed limestone to gabbro,
file sharp, skinning his fingers,
and granite numb with ice, in air
too thin to bear up a gnat,
scrutinising holds while day lasted,
groping for holds in the dark
till the morning star reflected
in the glazed crag
and other light not of the sun
dawning from above
lit feathers sweeping snow
and the limbs of Israfel,
trumpet in hand, intent on the east,
cheeks swollen to blow,
whose sigh is cirrus: Yet delay!
When will the signal come
to summon man to his clay?

(III. 76-95)

Alexander then falls from the mountain, comes to, realising humanity's scale and cosmic inconsequentiality after being gently reprimanded by the slow-worm, and returns home to Macedonia 'to end in [his] own place by [his] own wars' (III. 75). It is productive to compare Alexander's questing ascent, which ultimately ends in *nostos*, his humbling and desire to return home, and the appeals of the Epicurean slow-worm, with that of Wordsworth on Snowdon at the climax of *The Prelude*.²⁷ Standing in the moonlight at the summit of the mountain and the poem, Wordsworth observes a 'huge sea of mist', and through 'a fracture in the vapour' may perceive 'The soul, the imagination of the whole', a cosmologically inclusive prospect on the human condition granted also to the hubristic Alexander on the precipice of apocalypse (XIII. 43-65). Crucially, imagination is in this moment emphatically situated, located in that 'blue chasm'; it is

²⁷ The peak of a mountain, like Mount Helicon, sacred to the muses in Greek mythology and the exemplary terrain for poetic vision.

spatialised in a manner not unlike the poem's previous *spotting* of time (XIII. 56). Where as a result Wordsworth meditates sublimely on the 'perfect image of a mighty mind, | ... that feeds upon infinity' (XIII. 69-70), Alexander in *Briggflatts* ends modestly at the other pole, silently leading home 'through clean woodland | where every bough repeated the slowworm's song' (III. 129-130). While Wordsworth in this passage finds cosmic unity with the human mind at the centre, anthropocentrism is denied in *Briggflatts*. Jonathan Bate was only partially right to argue that *Briggflatts* 'resists the Wordsworthian attempt explicitly to unify all things, to go beyond the things themselves towards a transcendental signified, whether that signified be the great spirit of the universe or the poet's own unifying imagination' (236). This is because the Wordsworth that Bunting sought to emphasise is not the transcendental one, but the poet who wanted to 'see into the life of things', the stress placed firmly on *things*. Wordsworth will conclude *The Prelude* with the promise that 'the mind of man', and so too the common human brother and sisterhood he wishes for, becomes 'A thousand times more beautiful than the earth' on which it dwells (XIII. 446-448). For Wordsworth, love of nature *leads* to love of mankind. Here in Bunting's adaptation of one of *The Prelude*'s defining episodes, we see that he is keen to dialectically counter any Keatsian sense of Wordsworth's alleged 'egotistical sublime'; the poem has already marked the defeat and death of Bloodaxe, and similarly the presences of Alexander the Great and the slow-worm balance one another (*Letters* 157). A 'pleasure' in the nature of things as they are, unchecked by the intrusions and dominations of the human, is celebrated in the beautiful rhymes of the slow-worm's song:

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.

Swaggering, shimmering fall,
 drench and towel us all!

(III. 120-128)

Any reading back to Wordsworth from *Briggflatts* depends profoundly on the final movement of Bunting's poem, where, on the Northumbrian coast, 'silence by silence sits | and Then is diffused in Now' (V. 60-1). Here we have the indication of a silent Quaker meeting, the denomination in which Bunting was raised and for which Briggflatts meeting house itself served. In 1933, Bunting observed of Pound's poetry that 'His Now is so penetrated by Then it is sometimes hard to separate them; and this is as it is in life for all of us' (Seed 119). Four stanzas on and the declarative 'Then is diffused in Now' contracts to state 'Then is Now'. The past is only its reconstitution in the present, in its flawed cognitive reiteration, the fleeting gesture of remembering. Then of course both *is* Now and *is not* Now: all we have is this everywhere diffusing echo. Bunting has stated that *Briggflatts* is an autobiography, yes, 'but not a record of fact' (*Complete Poems* 226). Nostalgia, fantasy, and the erosive force of years have all taken their toll on the memory of first love grasped after in the poem, a memory that is altogether more akin to an impressionistic palette of moods for all its grounding in populated, worked landscapes. The first part of *Briggflatts* has already warned us of this: in that, Bunting writes 'It is easier to die than to remember' (I. 153). And this implicates how Wordsworth concealed his affair with Annette Vallon in *The Prelude*, disguising an account of their relationship in the tale of Vaudracour and Julia. In Book XI, Wordsworth writes

The days gone by
 Come back upon me from the dawn almost
 Of life; the hiding-places of my power
 Seem open, I approach, and then they close;
 (XI. 333-336)

Any attempt at remembering well proves highly elusive, the imaginative faculty's access to deepest insight only ever temperamental, even mirage-like at times.

Five years had passed for Wordsworth since he last beheld his sylvan Wye in 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', which multiplies allusively to fifty for Bunting, fifty intervening years since he last saw Greenbank. So you have: 'Finger tips touched and were still |

fifty years ago ... Fifty years a letter unanswered; | a visit postponed for fifty years. | She has been with me fifty years' (V. 103-10). These insistent repetitions sound out with stoic acceptance the regretful pain of wrong unrighted, of disappointing return, return with difference in a manner befitting Wordsworth's mature poetry. Personal history and any anthropocentric imperative are sublated by the sweeping arc of sidereal time, imparting the same sense of human scale that teaches Alexander humility as he listens to the slow-worm's song at the foot of the mountain. What is impersonal human time and individuated human time when 'Orion strides over Farne ... Capella [steers] for the zenith ... Procyon starts his climb' and 'Starlight quivers' (V. 82-111)? Poetry takes this measure, the movement of the stars both superseding and in their light preserving the emotional grammar of an individual life on earth.

Bunting thus completes the main body of *Briggflatts* with this acquisition of self-knowledge: 'I had day enough. | For love uninterrupted night', and the elision of the comma there that could fall after 'For love' rhythmically translates this stoical absence of interruption, of eternal silence (V. 111-12). The poet has come to terms with the malfunctioning spot of time which exerted such anguish and regret throughout his life, and it is through poetry that this has been achieved. In drawing down uninterrupted night over the memory of love, Bunting brings into enquiring focus the consolation on which Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode*, and indeed most of his best poetry, stands:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;

(180-85)

There is recompense for Bunting too, in the non-human rhythms of the cosmos. The coda concludes *Briggflatts* on a searching note of latently utopian nescience, the last of Bunting's music dwindling into questions though a 'strong song' continues to pull us along (1). Clearly the regicidal

imperatives of the English, French and Russian revolutions are registered in Bunting's parting fifteen lines, the radical republicanism which helped to produce so much of Wordsworth's poetry reverberating through the images and rhymes which terminate the piece:

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
to fell kings, guesses
where we go?

(1-15)

A deep elegiacs infuses these lines as if they represent Bunting's lament for himself, and we will do well to keep this mood in mind as we proceed to the next chapter's discussion of Geoffrey Hill's assimilation of *The Prelude* in his *Mercian Hymns*. Though an 'uninterrupted night' off the Northumbrian coast has subsumed love, the poet implores it yet to 'float us'. Bunting's coda is finally full of shadowy, uncertain direction and movement, for all the melancholy with which it must rise to countenance the poet's mortality. Even as each singer passes away, the song goes inexorably on, towing everyone else behind it.

Chapter 2

'my rich and desolate childhood': Geoffrey Hill, *Mercian Hymns* and *The Prelude*

i. 'your staggeringly-gifted child'

Mercian Hymns is a sequence of thirty prose poems by Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016), published in 1971. It is one of the poet's better known, better critically elucidated and acclaimed books, in which Hill figures the region of the West Midlands—the historic kingdom of Mercia—as a complex palimpsest, an 'ancient land, full of strategy' accruing wounds, scars, inscriptions, and meanings across history (XV).²⁸ In Hill's own phrase, the eighth century King Offa (757-96 AD) serves as the 'presiding genius' of the book's imaginative landscape (*Collected Poems* 201). Rejecting temporal linearity, the sequence anachronously gathers in simultaneity the spread of time from the reign of Offa to the mid-twentieth century when Hill composed it, subsuming his childhood recollections of the Home Front enduring 'the battle-anthems and the gregarious news' of the Second World War (XXII). In the spirit of Eliot's disingenuous addenda to *The Waste Land* (1922), Hill appended some notes to *Mercian Hymns* in the first edition of his *Collected Poems* (1985), notes which have subsequently been excised from the final collected *Broken Hierarchies* (2013). Therein, he claimed with more than a little irreverence that Offa's dominion persisted

from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth (and possibly beyond). The indication of such a timespan will, I trust, explain and to some extent justify a number of anachronisms. (*Collected Poems* 201)

As Jeffrey Wainwright has surmised, the subject of *Mercian Hymns* is 'the blending and disjunction of autobiography and the history of the land of that autobiography'; the personalities of King Offa of Mercia and Geoffrey Hill the poet are intercut, the distinctions and boundaries between them regularly blurred ('The Impossibility of Death' 91). Jon Silkin concurs, maintaining that 'the reader

²⁸ It is Hill's 'masterpiece', according to Harold Bloom ('The Survival of Strong Poetry (on Geoffrey Hill)' 17).

does not find a historical reconstruction of the King and his domain. Interleaved with a reconstruction of some of the King's acts are passages and whole poems concerned with the contemporary and representative figure Hill makes of himself ('The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill' 121-122). According to Vincent Sherry, *Mercian Hymns* 'is not a historical fantasia or a museum of local color; it is a poem of autobiography, though an oblique one', aligned 'with a postromantic poetry of locale' (*The Uncommon Tongue* 126, 128). As Rajeev Patke observes,

The time of the poem keeps shifting between the present tense of reflection, the past tense of recollected boyhood, the other past tense of Offa in his time and place, and a fluid afterlife in which the fictional Offa moves across the entire span of time from the eighth to the twentieth century. The most striking ambiguity about the poem is the peculiar relation of undecidability of attitude that ties Hill's Offa to the boyhood evoked by the implied first person voice of the poem. ('Ambiguity and Ethics' 260)

The sequence forms, in Harold Bloom's words, 'a kind of *Prelude-in-little*' ('The Survival of Strong Poetry (on Geoffrey Hill)' 20), both inhabiting and ironising the programme of developmental poetic genius and growth of the creative mind Wordsworth charts in *The Prelude* as well as the latent or potential egotisms of romantic-poetical consciousness in several ways, most immediately noticeable in Hill's intermittent recourse to amusing self-aggrandisement, a 'staggeringly-gifted child' (XXX) who finds the difficulties and intensities of poetical labour and achievement mere 'Child's play' (IV). As we have observed in *Briggflatts*, the primacy of childhood and childhood experience for Wordsworth will also undergird Hill's late modernist translation of poetical autobiography. Wordsworth's dictum in his 1802 poem 'My heart leaps up' that 'The Child is father of the Man' (*TMW* 246), the avowal in 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood' that the child is humankind's 'best Philosopher' (299), is tested in Hill's sequence with ultimately ambivalent results, for *Mercian Hymns* does not overlook the ways in which the apparent innocence and knowledge-giving provenance of childhood is called into question by certain faculties of the tyrannical and authoritarian personality registered in germinal form there. Taking Bloom's observation as its starting point, this chapter will therefore attend to the ways in

which Hill's sequence maps on to, recuperates, and constructs a dialogue with *The Prelude*, how it diverges from Wordsworth's poem, and in each case to what ends. Specifically, *Mercian Hymns* puts forward a consideration of the poetic ego in history, probing throughout its series of compressed prose vignettes the dialectic of impersonality and personality, juggling tones which counterpoint irony with sincerity and sincerity with irony.

So first to Harold Bloom. In a 1975 overview of Hill's authorship to date for *The American Poetry Review* published only two years after the appearance of *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and therefore marked deeply by its theory, Bloom garlanded the poet with accolades and rather unhelpful superlatives ('Hill is the strongest British poet now alive'; 'He should be read and studied for many generations'; 'There are no bad poems in Hill's three books'), claiming that such 'canonic prophecy' is legitimated, troublingly, by the alleged 'authority of [Hill's] best work' ('The Survival of Strong Poetry' 17 added emphasis). Considering the exacting obsession in Hill's work early and late with realising a poetics adequate enough to contemplate and confront the atrocities of twentieth century history, insistently involved in considering the horrors of European fascism, imperialism and authoritarianism, 'authority' is a label critics ought to be suspicious of applying to his work.²⁹ Rather than finding simple or easy 'authority' in Hill's earlier poetry, the intricacies of its prevailing tone appear to me to be characterised by uneasy, disgusted self-antagonism, the necessities, indulgences and pitfalls of guilt, and a chronic anxiety that ornateness of expression, technique, and baroque style radically fail to authorise or exculpate. As is consistent across Hill's authorship, *Mercian Hymns* is a poem intensely sceptical of the poet's right to speak to, from or over, 'a man speaking to men', incensed by those poets who would presume to take an *authoritative* stance surely associable with Ezra Pound, to happily speak with the 'authority' Bloom wrongly claims for Hill's poetry (Wordsworth, Preface 103). That said Bloom is of course astute to point to Wordsworth and *The Prelude* as models:

²⁹ And indeed with much emphasis on the full sweep of English history and all its political violence and wars.

Yet here the growth of a poet's mind is not stimulated by nature's teachings, but only by history and by dreams. [...] Difficult as Hill was earlier, *Mercian Hymns*, despite the limpidity of its individual sections, is the subtlest and most oblique of his works. It is not only hard to hold together, but there is some question as to what it is "about," though the necessary answer is akin to *The Prelude* again; Hill has at last no subject but his own complex subjectivity, and so the poem is "about" himself, which turns out to be his exchange of gifts with the Muse of History (Section X). ('The Survival of Strong Poetry' 20)

Clearly *Mercian Hymns* is, as Hill's most famous, frequently anthologised early lyric 'September Song' registers (BH 44), a series of songs for the poet's self and radically, self-consciously against it, as much as they are for any external object, transhistorical collective or polity. But they are still about, for, and imbricated in the world, and *not* exercises in uncritical egocentricity, less still solipsism. Therefore Bloom is desperately mistaken to argue that Hill 'has at last no subject but his own complex subjectivity', just as *The Prelude* is not only *about* Wordsworth's subjectivity but about the social world and contexts that subjectivity inhabited and was produced and formed by, and contradicts his own claim by stating that the theme of *Mercian Hymns* 'turns out to be [Hill's] exchange of gifts with the Muse of History' ('The Survival of Strong Poetry' 20). The apprehension of this exchange implies the porous dialectic of self and world, interior and exterior, and betrays the fact that *Mercian Hymns* is not in actuality solely concerned with the complexity of the poet's own subjectivity, suggesting the counter-example of Hill's serious and far-ranging engagement with English history throughout his poetry and critical writings. Bloom proceeds to argue that 'By reconciling himself with Offa, Hill comes close to recognising the necessary violence of tradition', and this recognition 'produces the dominant tone of *Mercian Hymns*, which is a kind of Wordsworthian "sober colouring" or "still sad music of humanity"' (20). Again, Bloom here appears to contradict himself, because earlier in the piece he claims that 'Hill does not comfort nor console, and offers no dialectic of gain through loss' (17). Such a statement runs counter to his argument for Hill's poetry's recurring 'Wordsworthian' qualities, because as this thesis returns to, Wordsworth's poetry depends fundamentally upon the 'dialectic of gain through loss' through which it finds abundant recompense (17). One of the gifts of this compensation according to

'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour' (1798) is of course the capacity to 'look on nature ... hearing oftentimes | The still sad music of humanity', which Bloom identifies as a dominant tone of *Mercian Hymns* (though a tone achieved through looking on history and dreams rather than nature) (88-91). Is it not therefore true, according to this likely contradictory reasoning, that the achieved tone Bloom marks in *Mercian Hymns* is in and of itself a form of comfort or consolation, hard-won self-knowledge chastening and subduing as it is, evidence of the 'dialectic of gain through loss' associated with Wordsworth's poetry at work in Hill (20)? Perhaps, though one crucial consequence of this apparent contradiction in Bloom's argument could imply that Hill's specifically *tonal* 'still sad music of humanity' is only a veneer, a mask, if tone is the ornamentation or facade of the content, substance and meaning of *Mercian Hymns*, rather than a characteristic indivisibly bound up with and arising from that content. Whether intentionally or not, Bloom might therefore in the collision of these claims have revealed a decisive fault line in the significance of Wordsworth for Hill. Such a reading of Bloom's potentially incongruous interpretation of the book could suggest that though the tone of *Mercian Hymns* might imply a consolatory, recompensing faculty intrinsic to and springing from Hill's poetic exchange with Wordsworth, in actuality this tone only serves vainly to disguise a negative, non-compensating meaning contra Wordsworth's loss and gain dialectic, which does not 'comfort nor console' (17). This chapter therefore seeks to ascertain whether such a gap exists between what Hill's poetry says and the ambiguous way in which he says it, and what this might mean for our understanding of Wordsworth's presence as a key icon informing the poetics behind *Mercian Hymns*.

My line of argument here is supported by the fact that Bloom, following this suggestion that the prevailing tone of *Mercian Hymns* is highly redolent of Wordsworth, stresses that he believes the sequence's 'vision remains Blakean rather than Wordsworthian, for the world it pictures is still one in which Creation and Fall cannot be distinguished, and at the end Offa is fallen Adam or every man' ('The Survival of Strong Poetry' 20). This chapter is not primarily concerned with trying

to study the development of Hill's theological ideas and commitments, so I see no reason to maintain a mutually exclusive opposition between Blake and Wordsworth as points of influential contact in *Mercian Hymns* as Bloom clearly thinks is necessary. For Bloom and according to his model of influence, Blake is the poet with whom Hill feels most acutely the anxiety of influence and must struggle 'even to the death' in the self-actualising swerve (the Lucretian *clinamen*) of poetic misprision (*The Anxiety of Influence* 5):

Yet the true precursor [of Hill] is always Blake, and the War in Heaven that the strong poet [*sic*] must conduct is fought by Hill against Blake, and against Blake's tradition, and so against Hill himself. ('The Survival of Strong Poetry' 17)

On Bloom's terms it is perfectly reasonable to read Hill's 'vision' in *Mercian Hymns* as dialectically Blakean and anti-Blakean, Hill playing the swerving Satan to Blake's Miltonic God. However, as outlined in the introduction to this dissertation I do not consent to Bloom's violently antithetical theory of poetic influence but instead believe that influence is just as likely to be constructive, affirmative, cooperative and dialogic as it is essentially combative and necessarily misinterpretive. Therefore, Bloom's thesis does not for me automatically preclude a simultaneous reading of this poetic autobiography that finds more rewarding and provocative interchange with Wordsworth.

ii. Contingent circumstance

Before turning to his poetry, it will be expedient first to attend to the critical statements Hill made about Wordsworth throughout his life, which were often laudatory. As Seamus Perry remarked in a recent review for the *London Review of Books* of Hill's final, posthumous book of poetry, *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (2019), Hill's are 'the visionary politics of a tenacious high Romanticism, moved by a high disgust at what Wordsworth called "getting and spending"' in the sonnet 'The World Is Too Much with Us' of 1802 ('Cute, My Arse' 23). Certainly, in his

Collected Critical Writings Hill can be found praising the ‘noble simplicity’ of Wordsworth’s poetry at its best (529), and maintaining that, like Whitman, Wordsworth ‘put a great stress on clarity, directness, immediacy of rhetorical and ethical impact’ (516). More strikingly, in the essay ‘Redeeming the Time’, an enquiry into the qualities and potentials of rhythm, a moment in Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’ figures as the exemplary prompt for Hill’s enigmatic contention that rhythm is able to register, ‘mimetically, deep shocks of recognition’ (CCW 91). As Michael O’Neill has written, ‘here Hill’s affinity with the Romantic sense of poetic language is at its deepest’ (*The All-Sustaining Air* 166). Hill prefixes his analysis of the ode with the claim that ‘Language gravitates and exerts a gravitational pull’, that speech has an ‘inertial drag’ not unrelated to the ‘contagion of circumstance’, the pull of material reality and social predicament (CCW 90-91). According to this argument language *is* matter, and correspondingly the line with which stanza eight of Wordsworth’s poem terminates, ‘Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!’ (133), signals ‘a weighed acknowledgement of custom’s pressure’ (CCW 91):

Full soon thy soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

O joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers,
What was so fugitive!

(131-137)

Hill’s attention fixes on the break between stanzas eight and nine because he sees this transition as a vital point at which Wordsworth ‘breaks continuity, thrusts against the [prevalingly iambic rhythmical] arrangement, the settlement, with a fresh time signature’ (91): ‘O joy! that in our embers | Is something that doth live’ (134-135). For Hill, the stanza break, ‘far from being an injury sustained, is a resistance proclaimed’ (CCW 91). As Jarvis has written of this moment in the ode, ‘Something that doth live is precisely not custom in the sense that custom is only “deep *almost* as life”’ (*Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* 211 added emphasis): ‘Custom, then, is not life, however much

it may have come to feel like it' (208). In zeroing in on the significance of this resistant shift, Hill grants that he is drawing on the judgement of one of the other poets most important to him, Gerard Manley Hopkins,³⁰ and presents the following excerpts from a letter Hopkins wrote to Canon Dixon on October 23 1886 outlining his own sense of Wordsworth's ode:

There have been in all history a few, a very few men, whom common repute, even where it did not trust them, has treated as having had something happen to them that does not happen to other men, as having *seen something*, whatever that reality was ... [H]uman nature in these men saw something, got a shock ... [I]n Wordsworth when he wrote that ode human nature got another of those shocks ... [H]is insight was at its very deepest ... The rhymes are so musically interlaced, the rhythms so happily succeed (surely it is a magical change "O joy that in our embers"). (Hopkins quoted in *CCW* 91)

Hill contends that Hopkins's assessment of the ode 'is in no way extravagant', being 'one of the rare contexts in which the debased word "magical" regains some of its pristine power', though "change" is the key word and should take precedence' (91-92). This is because Wordsworth allegedly "saw" rhythmically', surprised by the spondee 'O joy!'. Citing Engels, Hill explains that what he believes Wordsworth 'has seen, or foreseen, [is] the developing life-crisis of the nineteenth century', the transformation of England 'from a largely agrarian to an urban proletarian society' (90-93). Joy for Wordsworth is clearly a prime agent of poetic intuition, allied deeply to life itself, and seems to burst out of this rhythmical change: Hill's claim here is sustained by the fact that the ode's apostrophic appeal to joy surely calls back to 'the deep power of joy' registered in 'Tintern Abbey', which in tandem with 'the power | Of harmony' serves to quiet the poet's eye, allowing him to 'see into the life of things' (48-50 added emphasis).³¹ Such a recognition of Wordsworth's sociopolitical insight is high praise indeed, and its relation to poetic technique mysteriously and even hyperbolically registered: his rhythmical facility in this moment 'transfigures a fractured world', no less (93). Wordsworth's qualities at their best for Hill are therefore nothing short of

³⁰ References to and analyses of Hopkins's poetry recur throughout Hill's *Collected Critical Writings*: one of the *Alienated Majesty* essays is dedicated specifically to Hopkins's poetry, asking how it might illuminate Hill's understanding of 'civil polity' ('poetry's natural habitat') in relation to Emerson and Whitman (*CCW* 518).

³¹ Stephen Gill has called 'Tintern Abbey' Wordsworth's 'impassioned ode to joy' (*William Wordsworth: A Life* 155).

alchemical, visionary, and serve to cement the former as a significant or ‘major’ poet in the latter’s canon. They are also latently redemptive. Praising *The Prelude* and *Middlemarch* in his book-length enquiry into the nature of intrinsic value, *Inventions of Value* (CCW 381-489), Hill claims that ‘It is the ability to recognize, and to realize in the arduous process of writing itself, the nature of the redemptive faculty or agency that characterizes the major writer’ (473). Being a poet, and a complexly Christian poet, Hill has to believe that this recognition through poetical labour of the possibility of glimpsing and realising redemption is feasible, and of real and substantial worth, through all of language’s fallenness. The alternative would implicitly be to yield to disbelief, despair, and apathy in the face of perceived futility, what is most vital in the composition of poetry frozen over, blotted out, or completely overwhelmed.

Writing in ‘Translating Value’, the opening discourse of *Inventions of Value*, Hill again extols Wordsworth’s ability to ‘comprehend the nature and power of contingent circumstance’, this time in reference to his ‘two major critical pieces’, the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and the ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ of 1815 (CCW 385). Hill’s (re)construction of Wordsworth is clearly as a poet profoundly sensitive to those exterior socialising forces which exert such arbitrary power over human life. Having noted that Wordsworth’s manner is less discreet in the ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’, ‘where he shows himself vulnerable to his own disappointment and anger’ with his many critics, Hill claims that his own ‘strong prejudice in [Wordsworth’s] favour [is] particularly marked at such points’ of vulnerability (CCW 386).³² As Hill points out in ‘Language, Suffering, and Silence’, ‘Wordsworth suffered, in a not too drastic way, for his temerity and effrontery: the small first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was effectively ostracized by reviewers and readers, and the poet’s reputation was established with difficulty against heavy opposition’ (CCW 401). By confessing his sympathy with Wordsworth’s position, Hill tacitly draws a parallel between

³² For example, as Stephen Gill writes, the reviews of *Poems, in Two Volumes* were ‘devastating’ (*William Wordsworth: A Life* 266): Byron repudiated Wordsworth’s ‘common-place ideas’ and ‘namby-pamby’ language, and Francis Jeffrey viciously dismissed the volume, going so far as to call the ode ‘the most illegible and unintelligible part of the publication’ (quoted in *William Wordsworth: A Life* 266).

on the one hand Wordsworth's frustration at the critical reception he received and the misapprehensions his work was subject to during his lifetime, and on the other what Hill clearly felt was his *own* poetry's mistreatment, the complaints about difficulty and archaism and the accusations of elitism that dogged his career. John Lyon and Peter McDonald claim in their introduction to Oxford University Press's volume of essays on Hill's later work (2012) that the poet was often portrayed by his critics as 'an elitist and politically suspect bogeyman' (*Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Later Work* 2): one particularly egregious and ungenerous review by Lachlan Mackinnon which appeared as recently as 2011 in *The Independent* dismissed *Clavics* (2011) as 'the sheerest twaddle', accusing Hill of 'wasting his time and trying to waste ours' (Mackinnon 'Clavics by Geoffrey Hill'). Tellingly, as Hill writes of Whitman with an eye equally fixed on himself, 'Desiring above all things to be understood, to be received, the great poet finds that he is not understood, not received' (*CCW* 515).

Returning again to Wordsworth in 'Translating Value', Hill argues that the indispensable question for him is 'how to confer "moral existence" on those "who, according to the classical morality", as Trilling reminds us, "should have no moral life at all": primarily, particularly with *Lyrical Ballads* in mind, the rural poor (*CCW* 390). Taking three lines from 'Michael' (1800) for his example, Hill continues:

The answer is [...] that you work at it. There is language and there is character, of which intelligence is a part and what we call "personality" a part; and each is subjected to a considerable range of contingent forces:

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would break the heart:—Old Michael found it so.

To some extent the strength and endurance that the poem records are composed of elements which can equally bring about weakness and torpor. The gift which ensures the right reading subsists in the strength and endurance of the language, which itself contains elements that could easily be left to drift into a significantly different, Humean, acceptance of "good sense, that directs men in the ordinary occurrences of life". (*CCW* 390)

Clearly, since Hill ‘does not believe that “texts” write themselves’, he avers that it is writerly ‘character’ (intelligence and personality) which by working ‘at it’ can ensure poetry is afforded ‘strength and endurance’ rather than lapsing into ‘weakness and torpor’ (390). Neither poetry nor language are immunised against a drift into corruption, uniformity, or entropy. Hill’s use of ‘torpor’ in this passage is of course intended to recall Wordsworth’s diagnosis in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* of the ‘state of almost savage torpor’ to which the contemporary mind was in danger of being reduced by rapid social changes, and which Wordsworth desired through his poetry to remedy by endeavouring ‘to produce or enlarge’ the human mind’s capability ‘of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants’ (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 99). Indeed, in these passages Hill holds Wordsworth’s ‘intelligence and personality’ and their resistance to ‘contingent forces’ in high regard (*CCW* 390), just as he extols the ‘resistance proclaimed’ by the shift in rhythm between stanzas eight and nine of the ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, miraculously registering the transformation of English society during the Industrial Revolution (91). Quoting from the ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’, Hill proceeds to argue in ‘Translating Value’ that

The particular qualities which [Wordsworth] values in human nature correspond to language, “a thing subject to endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations”. I do not propose that Wordsworth “masters” the arbitrariness: that is something which Hobbes achieves in his own rich, enigmatic, and arbitrary style which shuts out most of what Wordsworth desires to include. Wordsworth, as in the three lines here quoted from “Michael”, feels intelligently through language, with its endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations in such a way that in recording how “love ... will make a thing enduring” he makes out of language an entity able to endure. I would concede from this particular instance, not as a general rule, that language is love’s correlate; and that Wordsworth is here translating ethos into activity[...]. (*CCW* 390-91)

The act of shaping language through poetic artifice however fluctuating is for Hill, in this instance thanks to the record of Wordsworth’s poetical ability, no less than an act directly linked to the strength of enduring love. Wordsworth’s artifice can make durable language objects of value not because it constitutes a form of mastery and rationality, of course, as Hill finds in Hobbes’s writing,

but because it comes through a process of *feeling* ‘intelligently through language’ (390). The affective intelligence here marked also recalls how the more spontaneous eruptions of human love in Wordsworth’s early poetry endure in his language, such as the miraculous promise of universal human fellowship claimed in the sixth stanza of Wordsworth’s lyrical ballad to Dorothy, ‘Lines written at a small distance from my House, and sent by my little Boy to the Person to whom they are addressed’ (1798):

Love, now an universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth:
—It is the hour of feeling.

(21-24)

Such is Hill’s veneration of Wordsworth’s ethical imagination, it is through his example that enduring ‘value is to be realized’, because ‘Endurance is one of the great words which lie directly on the active-passive divide [the divide where Hill believes value can be marked], subject to the fluctuations and arbitrariness that Wordsworth cites’ (*CCW* 391). Endurance lies on this divide because of its relation to the concept of vigilance and the vigil: it is the strength, patience and will to withstand external assault and abrasion, dialectically neither precisely active or passive alone. In Hill’s estimation, then, Wordsworth is clearly a poet who endures, and will be allowed to endure all the more by his work’s recuperation in Hill’s own poetry.

More clues as to the significance and redemptive worth of Wordsworth’s writing for Hill are found in his essay ‘Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value’, and a particular definition Hill offers for intrinsic value by way of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871).

For the author of *Middlemarch*, intrinsic value is not so much in things, or even in qualities, as in a faculty: the faculty of sustained attention; attention conceived of, moreover, as a redemptive power. Coleridge, who comprehended this faculty better than any of his contemporaries, and whose comprehension is exemplified in the title of a major work, *Aids to Reflection*, left nothing that so embodied this comprehension as do George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. Coleridge’s most radically creative ideas and perceptions are sustained, in *The Prelude*, with

Wordsworth's ideas and perceptions engrafted upon them, as they are not sustained even in *Aids to Reflection*. (CCW 472)

Here we find Hill rehearsing a version of the view that Wordsworth in the achievement of his verse realised Coleridge's philosophical hopes for poetry where Coleridge himself could not. If intrinsic value can be located in sustained attention, then the example of the complex, protracted, Miltonic syntax of *The Prelude's* blank verse offers us another iteration of Wordsworth's poetry's valuable assault on the aforementioned 'savage torpor' of the minds of his contemporaries, seeking easy gratification:

Eliot writes with sufficient command of detail (of both plot and style) over some hundreds of pages that the body of her detailed accuracies is able to ride the shock of her special pleading and evasiveness. In this, George Eliot is very like Wordsworth; in both of them quantity, taken overall, enhances quality. (CCW 473)

Readers might be trained to redeem themselves from mental torpor by focusing their attention on the intricate architecture and detail of the vast literary text, where quantity is quality, or rather amplifies it. Writing of *Middlemarch* but also implicating *The Prelude*, Eliot's success for Hill lies in her capacity 'to represent an actuality of reflection and endurance by an achieved style that, in its own reflective power and in its demands upon both author's and reader's sustained powers of attention, shows itself the moral equivalent of those very qualities it describes' (472). The very act of paying concerted attention to difficult poetry and the ensuing readerly labour exerted is an integral part of the reasoning that permits Hill by the conclusion of his essay to advocate for the mediated, reciprocal, 'transitive' nature of intrinsic value, which 'bears the extrinsic at its heart': 'At those points where the intrinsic value of the formal structure, by whatever means, is revealed to us, that value is on the instant mediated' (477).³³ *The Prelude* is a valuable poem for Hill because its difficulty and the complexity of its composition amply reward the reader's sustained attention, attention which is itself of course a value exterior to the poetic construction. This assessment in

³³ In 'Poetry and Value', Hill writes: 'Our grasp of intrinsic value is *transitive* in its implications' (CCW 487 added emphasis).

turn points to Hill's recurring apologia for the difficulty of his own poetry and for aesthetic difficulty more broadly, which he believed to be 'truly democratic' in the face of 'tyrannical simplification' ('The Art of Poetry No.80').³⁴ For Hill, difficulty is resistance, arguing that 'one of the things the tyrant most cunningly engineers is the gross oversimplification of language, because propaganda requires that the minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement. And any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence implies intelligence. Maybe an intelligence under threat, maybe an intelligence that is afraid of consequences, but nonetheless an intelligence working in qualifications and revelations . . . resisting, therefore, tyrannical simplification' (Hill, 'The Art of Poetry No. 80'). As we shall see, the dialectical ambiguities and contradictions running to the very core of *Mercian Hymns* will organise Hill's attempt to think intelligently through the violence of English history, and the imbrication of authoritarian power and tyrannical personality.

Before moving to an analysis of Hill's poems, a final and most crucial apprehension of Wordsworth to return to figures in Hill's diagnosis of the dialectic of poetic personality and impersonality in 'Language, Suffering and Silence', also from *Inventions of Value*. Here, Hill takes aim at the popular so-called 'confessional' poets, foremost among them Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath:

The contemporary pseudo-dogma which maintains that the degree of suffering experienced by persons of an artistic or a literary bent shall constitute an accurate

³⁴ The full quotation reads as follows: 'We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we're difficult to each other. And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most "intellectual" piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are? Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when if such simplification were applied to a description of our own inner selves we would find it demeaning? I think art has a right—not an obligation—to be difficult if it wishes. And, since people generally go on from this to talk about elitism versus democracy, I would add that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that tyranny requires simplification. This thought does not originate with me, it's been far better expressed by others. I think immediately of the German classicist and Kierkegaardian scholar Theodor Haecker, who went into what was called "inner exile" in the Nazi period, and kept a very fine notebook throughout that period, which miraculously survived, though his house was destroyed by Allied bombing. Haecker argues, with specific reference to the Nazis, that one of the things the tyrant most cunningly engineers is the gross oversimplification of language, because propaganda requires that the minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement. And any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence implies intelligence. Maybe an intelligence under threat, maybe an intelligence that is afraid of consequences, but nonetheless an intelligence working in qualifications and revelations . . . resisting, therefore, tyrannical simplification' (Hill, 'The Art of Poetry No. 80').

register of the quality of their work is one which requires close scrutiny. This particular gnosis is especially vulnerable to the test of historical relevance. There is no genuine parity between, say, Wordsworth's sense, in and around 1800, that he had an obligation to engage social injustice in such poems as "The Female Vagrant" or "Resolution and Independence" and Robert Lowell's compulsion to batten on the suffering of his wife and daughter for *Notebooks* and *The Dolphin* or Sylvia Plath's urge to fantasize a cruel psychopathology for her dead father. (CCW 401)

The tacit assumption in Hill's differentiation of Wordsworth from Lowell and Plath is the recognition of a damaging potential narcissism behind the compulsions and fantasies of the latter poets. He proceeds to demolish any claims for 'genuine parity' between them (401), distinguishing Wordsworth's poetry's radicalism by situating it historically and thus indicting what he perceives to be the easy cynicism of contemporary poets' marketable exhibitions of suffering:

Wordsworth's early readership was comparatively small and relatively homogenous. He himself characterized it as having a comparable social status to his own, "People in our rank in life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same thing" [writing in a letter to John Wilson of June 7 1802]. As the early reviews of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) made evident, such readers—or at any rate the tribunes of the reading public—did not wish their prejudices thus confronted by narrative and metaphor detailing the innate worthiness, and inequitable burdens, of exemplary characters drawn from the English rural poor ... There is no true comparison between the English aristocratic and upper middle class culture of 1798 which was, with some notable exceptions, angrily unprepared for Wordsworth's early style, and the pluralistic, pseudo-egalitarian global commodity culture two hundred years later. When a publisher, or a publicity person announces, in the late 1990s that a new volume of poems "expresses solidarity with the poor and the oppressed" what is being offered, essentially, is "more of the same". "Suffering", within this wide contemporary literary perimeter, is the equivalent of minor Elizabethan pastoral or eighteenth-century poetic diction. (401)

This indictment of his contemporaries is all the more damning because it springs from Hill's enduring conviction as articulated in 'Language, Suffering, and Silence' that 'passive suffering' is a theme for poetry of value, contra Yeats via Matthew Arnold, but finds itself debased on the modern literary market eager to commodify said suffering and profit from it (404). For Hill, 'Suffering is real, but "suffering" is sing-song, that is to say, cant' (405). As he proceeds to argue, 'the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the

dead as much as, or even more than, expressions of “solidarity with the poor and the oppressed”, expressions drained of worth by their monetisation and circulation through the ‘global commodity culture’ of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (405, 401).³⁵ It was Hill’s firm position that poetical articulations of suffering too often serve to express marketable forms of commodified piety, such spectacles easily affirming and gratifying the self-righteous poet should they not remain vigilant and inwardly critical.

This defence of Wordsworth, while tacitly serving as an objection to Keats’s influential attack on the so-called ‘egotistical sublime’ of his poetry (*Letters* 157), also draws into its field of reference T.S. Eliot’s equally influential and perhaps even more ardently anti-Wordsworth impersonal theory of poetry as outlined in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919).³⁶ Eliot claimed in that essay that for the purposes of poetic composition, ‘emotions which [a poet] has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him’ (“Tradition” 2324), an analogue of sorts of what Keats in the Woodhouse letter posited as the limitlessly versatile ‘camelion Poet’: a poetical character that is ‘every thing and nothing’, always ‘filling some other Body’ (*Letters* 157). Eliot argued that ‘the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind who creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material’ (“Tradition” 2322). The personality of the individual writing the poem is according to Eliot converted (digested and transmuted) in the aesthetic process that creates the poem itself, an impersonal object, and ‘Consequently, we must believe that “emotion recollected in tranquillity” is an inexact formula’ (“Tradition” 2324):

For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of

³⁵ Far more desirable for Hill would be a ‘democracy of the dead’ as opposed to an *autocracy* of either the dead or the living, and for which he argued in a lecture of December 3 2013 as Oxford Professor of Poetry. In that lecture, Hill quoted the following from G.K. Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy* (1908) to assert his thesis: ‘Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about’ (85).

³⁶ Diverged from in his letter to Richard Woodhouse of October 27 1818. Earlier, writing in the letter to John Hamilton Reynolds of February 3 1818 in which he averred ‘we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us’, Keats refused to be ‘bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist- Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself’ (*Letters* 60).

a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not “recollected”, and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is “tranquil” only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. (“Tradition’ 2324)

Eliot does not even dignify Wordsworth or the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* by name, famous and canonical as they were and of course remain: poetry is for him ‘an escape from emotion’ and ‘from personality’ (2324). In ‘Language, Suffering, and Silence’, Hill is seeking to affirm that the truth of poetic personality and impersonality rests in what, as we shall see, his poetry exposes as the irresolvable tension between Eliot and Wordsworth’s positions, neither able finally to surmount the other. This is because, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the poetry of both Eliot and Wordsworth is too ambitious and complex to adhere simply to a single position: Wordsworth may equally be read as a poet of taciturn, resistant impersonality, as he is for example by Nersessian in *The Calamity Form*, and Eliot a poet of intense personality. They are both personal and impersonal at the same time. As this chapter will explore, *Mercian Hymns* challenges Eliot’s claim that poetry ‘is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’ by openly binding a dense, allusive, historically conscious Eliotic poetics of the impersonality doctrine to Hill’s own autobiography, and showing that the writing ego and its personal history are never fully eradicable from the poetic object, even in poetry alive to the ‘present moment of the past’ (“Tradition’ 2324-25). Eliot may argue that ‘only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things’ (2324). But Hill’s poetry shows us that they can never be fully escaped or transcended in spite of poets’ escapist desires, just as *The Waste Land* bears the unassimilated or repressed traces of Eliot’s nervous breakdown and the collapse of his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood, circumstances which allowed him to retrospectively dismiss the poem as ‘a piece of rhythmical grumbling’ (quoted in Spender 91).³⁷ With *The Prelude* as his model, Hill reveals that personality cannot be as easily or fully metabolised as Eliot implies.

³⁷ As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, in *The All-Sustaining Air* Michael O’Neill has recently argued that Eliot ‘turns out to be a poet of affecting emotional disclosure’ (60).

Through *Mercian Hymns* he shows that personality, the personal, and their disclosure in Wordsworth's poetry are equally ever threatened by impersonal forces, by secrecy, obscurity, misremembrance, and concealments willed and unconscious. Finally, Hill's aforementioned emphasis on the active value of writerly and readerly attention in 'Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value' runs counter to Eliot's claim that the experiences which inform poems 'unite in an atmosphere which is ... a *passive* attending upon the event' ('Tradition' 2324 added emphasis). For Hill unlike Eliot poetic labour *does* 'happen consciously [and] of deliberation' as both believe it did for Wordsworth, recollecting intense experience and emotion in tranquillity ('Tradition' 2324).

Although Hill's poetry protests the lie of the impersonal as universal dogma, the limitations, ethical failures, and vitiations of poetic personality, consciousness, subjectivity, and autobiography are at the same time clearly of central concern, staged with horrifying precision in *King Log's* 'September Song' (BH 44). A free verse sonnet, the poem attempts in vain to eulogise an unnamed ten-year-old victim of the Nazi extermination camps, '*born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42*', only for the poet to register his own authorial egotism in a parenthetical aside, a whispered confession or fleeting soliloquy:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

(8-10)

What is striking about 'September Song' is that it refuses to erase or rather pretend to erase the aspect of the poet in the act of eulogising as Eliot might, a figure easily associated with the egotistical sublime in Keats's aforementioned sense, or with the commodified exhibitionism of a confessional poet. This suggests it is impossible to adequately separate the eulogised from the eulogist, permanently united in the nexus of the poem, a point emphasised by the detail that Geoffrey Hill the human being was born one day before the child he eulogises, always prior to the object of elegiac attention. 'September Song' calls into question both the ease with which art may aestheticise real suffering,

and the poet's own gratification in the act of writing the elegy. This indicates how the elegiac impulse is both uncomfortably generous *and* potentially self-serving or opportunistic: such relish reaches a crescendo in the penultimate stanza's rich image of harvest plenitude: 'September fattens on vines' (11). Tellingly, Hill contends in 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement"' that poetic utterance is always 'an utterance of the self, the self demanding to be loved' (*CCW* 19). Vincent Sherry can therefore confirm that 'September Song' 'reveals the terrible moral complications of aesthetic distance[,] [...] demonstrating the poet's power to transmute fact into an artistic event, producing pleasure that defiles the child's death' (Sherry 103). Just as 'September Song' submits residual lyric personality to unflinching self-antagonism, T.S. Eliot's poetics of impersonality become deranged, monstrous in this poem, the detached, passive artist analogous now with the euphemising agent of the Nazis who has surrendered his own humanity.³⁸ These tensions are sustained and taken forward into the dense, refracted autobiography of *Mercian Hymns*, with Wordsworth's example in *The Prelude* acting for Hill as a corrective to Eliot's, and the poet remaining alert to the risks of poetic personality lapsing into gratuitous egotism or confessional self-absorption.

iii. 'a maimed one'

In the first poem of *Mercian Hymns*, the poet-king is not an integrated personality: instead, the poet-Hill figure and King Offa are separate speaking subjects who address one another.³⁹ The opening two hymns, both titled 'The Naming of Offa' in the contents of *Broken Hierarchies*, form

³⁸ Such implications should also remind us of Eliot's racism and nativism, as in *After Strange Gods*, addressing a Virginian audience in 1933: 'You are further away from New York; you have been less industrialised and less invaded by foreign races; and you have a more opulent soil' (16).

³⁹ By integrated personality I mean the Offa-Hill subject which unstably shifts pronouns and perspectives throughout the sequence.

a double panegyric, with the poet and King speaking separate versets. In hymn I, the former lists the titles of the latter, and the King indulgently demands a reprise which never actually arrives:

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: over-
lord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch,
the citadel at Tamworth, the summer hermitage in Holy
Cross: guardian of the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge:
contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster:
moneychanger: commissioner for oaths: martyrologist: the
friend of Charlemagne.

‘I liked that,’ said Offa, ‘sing it again.’

(I)

Offa is hailed in the third person and his speech is placed in quotation marks, whereas the softly comical anachronism of the panegyric spoken by the court poet Hill makes of himself is not. This suggests that Offa’s personality is at first a presence pressing in from outside the sequence and the poet’s subjectivity, while being very much a part of that poem at the same time: it is the impersonal weight of history, manifested in a historical person of power, the ‘great man’ of the king. But the poet actually defies royal fiat in the process of praising the monarch, because they *do not* ‘sing it again’, or not precisely: Hill does not mechanically reproduce the first verset of I as Offa orders, for though II features a repetition of the panegyric’s form, we do not find a reproduction of its content. Instead, the second panegyric of *Mercian Hymns* takes the form of a series of riddles, all punning on the name ‘Offa’, ‘a name to conjure with’ (II). The poet assumes, in Sherry’s terms, the role of a kind of ‘verbal magician’, a ‘master of the game’ (*The Uncommon Tongue* 130-131). Rather than repeating verbatim the descriptive series of epithets which composed the first panegyric as the King commands, the poet articulates himself through in Sherry’s words ‘the paradox of play’, substituting presentation for representation, the lateral thinking of riddling (*The Uncommon Tongue* 131).⁴⁰ The speaker of these hymns is as much a fool in Offa’s court as he is a favoured patronised poet.

⁴⁰ See Vincent Sherry’s *The Uncommon Tongue* for a useful gloss on the riddles of hymn II (130).

In the following chapter we will see how ‘again’ is a sacred word proffered by Wordsworth for J.H. Prynne’s use in *The White Stones*. Here, however, the consoling and recompensing returns of ‘Tintern Abbey’ are complicated by the word being placed in the mouth of the monarch. It is especially suggestive that the adverb ‘again’ concludes the first poem of Hill’s sequence, a word so evocative of Wordsworth’s poetics, because it is voiced *by a king*, a Leviathan of absolute sovereignty, and not a revolutionary figure befitting the radical republicanism of the younger Wordsworth and his early work, the Wordsworth who could aver, in Book IX of *The Prelude*, that

... in the regal sceptre, and the pomp
 Of orders and degree, I nothing found
 Then, or had ever even in crudest youth,
 That dazzled me, but rather what my soul
 Mourned for, or loathed, beholding that the best
 Ruled not, and feeling that they ought to rule.
 (IX. 212-217)

Here, the vanity of Offa’s command to ‘sing it again’ implicates the poet in structures of political power, authority and domination, while also pointing to the conservatism and unthinking traditionalism potentially latent in the urge to repeat, an opposition to change which preserves hierarchies and social relations as they are. Maintaining in his notes to *Mercian Hymns* that Offa’s rule persisted ‘from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth (and possibly beyond)’, the invocation to hymn Offa’s titles ‘again’ posits Hill and the modern poet as the conduit projecting and upholding the king’s reign into the present, as ‘the presiding genius of the West Midlands’ (*Collected Poems* 201). However, at the same time, because the poet does not simply sing the content of hymn I again, offering rather the imperfect non-repetition of the panegyric form in II, he quietly undermines the authority of the king’s command, all the while drawing poetic energy and a kind of historical inspiration for the sequence to come from the riddling accolades he bestows on Offa: ‘The starting cry of a race. A name to conjure with’ (II). The poet in subjection *follows orders*, but imprecisely, flush with the spirit of their own innovation, and as such the verbal conjuring of this non-repetition or repetition-with-difference is able to carve out space for their

own autobiography and subjectivity to blur with and contest the King's across the span of *Mercian Hymns*. The personalities of Offa and the poet will negotiate and combine with one another in much the same way that flickers of the Wordsworth of *The Prelude* negotiate and combine with Hill's obliquely autobiographical incursions into the sequence.

In hymn III, a collective or community external to the exchange between the poet and Offa of the opening hymns is registered by the sequence's first instance of the first-person plural. What is the first autobiographical moment in *Mercian Hymns* also therefore introduces the chorus, and the nation, uniting individual and collective experience:

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?'

(III added emphasis)

This hymn involves Hill recalling the coronation of George VI on May 12 1937, when the poet was only four years old. The event is figured in explicitly Christian terms, the crowning 'like Easter', a kind of considerably disturbing national resurrection (Easter Sunday in 1937 had already passed by the time of George's accession, falling on March 28). In addition to the poet's competing genius, we therefore find a trinity of further usurpers or pretenders to Offa's kingly presidency over the poem: both Christ and George VI, but also the chef of 'The Stag's Head', 'a king in his new-risen hat', clamouring mock-heroically for attention. The first sentence of III is of particular resonance here not only because it introduces the chorus and thus distinguishes *Mercian Hymns* as a sequence from pure lyric, but because it signals the poem's sceptical engagement with T.S. Eliot. It does so by quietly alluding to William Carlos Williams's criticism of *The Waste Land*, a poem with which Williams argued

Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself—rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. (*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 174)

The intensely fragmented, allusive polyvocality of *The Waste Land* is reflected in the title Eliot originally intended for it, *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, just as Hill and his fellow schoolchildren *chorus* their ‘remission from school’ in the first-person plural, a conglomeration of voices (III). Remission is an etymologically rich noun, with several meanings especially suggestive for this poem: ‘Forgiveness or pardon of sins or other offences’ (OED 1); ‘Release from the obligation of a debt or payment’ (OED 3a); ‘Release from work or exertion’ (OED 3b); ‘Liberation or deliverance from a state of constraint, suffering, etc.; respite’ (OED 3c); ‘Lessening of the severity of a disease or symptom’ (OED 5b); and ‘The action of sending or sending back’ (OED 8). Into III’s echo of Williams we can therefore read the need for Hill or any late modernist poet to go into remission from the ‘disease or symptom’ of Eliot’s pervasive influence, and, in the case of *Mercian Hymns*, his impersonality doctrine. Though relatively tacitly, Hill is stating from the outset of the sequence his desire via Williams to break free of the classroom of high Eliotic modernism, into a poetry ‘rooted in the locality’ of the Mercia in which he grew up, while at the same time refusing to jettison difficulty, knowledge, allusion, and the achievements of the (literary) past in favour of passive simplifications and dangerous anti-intellectualism (*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 174). A return to Wordsworth and the autobiography of *The Prelude* will be one way in which he does so. Of course, in a typical Hillian irony it is the dialectical *re-assertion* of tradition that actually licenses this potentially revolutionary escape from the classroom, because it is the event of ‘the crowning’ which permits the first-person plural speaking the hymn their ‘chorused ... remission from school’, winning them a day off ‘approved by his foreign gaze’ (III).

Therefore, the more Hill’s poetry pushes against aspects of Eliot’s authorship, the more it cleaves simultaneously to his example and endorses his significance by the very fact of this

engagement. As with Louis Zukofsky's 'Poem beginning "The"' (1928), Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), and Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers' (1949), anti-*Waste Lands* before *Mercian Hymns* served to emphasise Eliot's standing by picking him out as an influence worthy of qualification, criticism and correction. In choosing to break an idol one invests it with meaning. The following two hymns (IV and V), also subtitled 'The Crowning of Offa', further enunciate this dialectical metabolisation of Hill's influences, establishing some of the tensions between Wordsworth and Eliot as the key interlocutors of *Mercian Hymns*. These hymns introduce for the first time in the sequence the figure of the emerging poet-child we associate intensely with the opening books of *The Prelude*, though IV bristles also with Eliotic resonances, alluding to *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* ('East Coker' and 'Little Gidding') as I shall soon discuss:

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-du-
 st badgers thronged the Roman flues, the long-unlooked-for
 mansions of our tribe.

(IV)

Hill is literally invested in the poetry of Eliot and Wordsworth just as the poet is 'invested in mother-earth', accruing value as a would-be poet like a bank deposit or financial investment. Crucially, to be 'invested' is 'To clothe, robe, or envelop a person *in* or *with* a garment or article of clothing; to dress or adorn' (*OED* I.1a); 'To clothe with or in the insignia of an office; hence, with the dignity itself; to install in an office or rank with the customary rites and ceremonies' (*OED* I.4); and to 'establish (a person) in the possession of any office, position, property, etc.; to endow or furnish with power, authority, or privilege' (*OED* 5). This choice of verb therefore has connotations of poetic election, while drawing into range Hill's focus throughout *Mercian Hymns* on the development of coinage and its relation to value. Though echoes of Eliot's poetry prove the stronger presence in IV, in light of the meanings of 'invest' cited above it is evident that the

poet's investiture 'in mother-earth' deliberately invokes the following quite famous passage from Book I of *The Prelude*:

To the open fields I told
A prophesy; poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services.

(I. 59-63)

Wordsworth presents his nomination as poet, the calling of his vocation, as a religious investiture, his personality 'singled out' from others, one of the elect (I. 62). Later in Book I, he confirms he believes that he has been 'frame[d by Nature as] a favored being' just as Hill finds himself in mother-earth (I. 363-4), and in Book III of *The Prelude* of 1805 claims 'I was a chosen son' (III. 82). The poet-child is figured as a prophet, as in the Intimations Ode where Wordsworth may hail a 'Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!' (*TMW* 299). However, in Hill's allusion the choice of 'invested', as one invests financially in property or shares, quietly suggests the homophonic pun on 'profit'. In hymn IV, the image of the poet-child invested in 'mother-earth' offers a restatement of Wordsworth's anatomy of 'The gravitation and the filial bond | Of Nature that connect him with the world' (II. 263-264), affirmed by his emergence through the violent conduits of English history, 'the Roman flues': as in *The Prelude*, history (personal, social, political) and nature mutually inform and antagonise one another. With this in mind, one of the more useful keys to understanding *Mercian Hymns* and its relation to Wordsworth may be found in the verse paragraph in Book I of *The Prelude* in which Wordsworth contemplates potential subjects for 'the glorious work' to come he wishes to write (that projected 'philosophic song' *The Recluse* (I. 230)):

Sometimes, mistaking vainly, as I fear,
Proud spring-tide swellings for a regular sea,
I settle on some British theme, some old
Romantic tale by Milton left unsung;
More often resting at some gentle place
Within the groves of chivalry I pipe
Among the shepherds, with reposing knights

Sit by a fountain-side and hear their tales.
(I. 179-184)

Wordsworth dismisses a number of possible subjects drawn from European history, just as Milton before him had rejected chivalric and romantic themes for his epic as recounted in the early lines of Book IX of *Paradise Lost* (25-41). Among those heroic figures Wordsworth alights on to reject are ‘vanquished [King] Mithridates’ of Pontus, Gustavus Vasa of Sweden, and William Wallace, who ‘fought for Scotland’, leaving his deeds ‘like a family of ghosts | To people the steep rocks and river-banks, | Her natural sanctuaries, with a local soul, | Of independence and stern liberty’ (I. 213-219). This is a significant point at which Hill consciously diverges from *The Prelude in Mercian Hymns* by choosing to meld his personality and poetic autobiography with the projected personality and history of King Offa of Mercia. To emphasise the kingliness or more specifically the latent authoritarianism of the poetic (and child) ego in a poem which leans heavily on the autobiographical masterpiece of a republican poet attacked by one of his most brilliant younger contemporaries as an ‘Egotist’ is striking (Keats, *Letters* 60). For Hill, such a move forms a sort of historicising corrective to the lines which follow Wordsworth’s repudiation of historical subjects in Book I, the passage preceding the verse paragraph in which he yearns for *The Recluse* and the facility to compose it:

Sometimes it suits me better to shape out
Some tale from my own heart, more near akin
To my own passions and habitual thoughts,
Some variegated story, in the main
Lofty, with interchange of gentler things.
But deadening admonitions will succeed,
And the whole beauteous fabric seems to lack
Foundation, and withal appears throughout
Shadowy and unsubstantial.
(I. 220-228)

Here Wordsworth questions the usefulness of mere anecdote, rejecting such a poetry as ‘unsubstantial’, although he will eventually resolve in writing the ‘poem to Coleridge’ that ‘the

history of a poet's mind | Is labour not unworthy of regard' (XIII. 408-409). Anecdotes, personal 'passions and habitual thoughts' for their own sake can only engender 'deadening admonitions' (I. 223, 226), but the concerted study of the growth of Wordsworth's own mind might yet provide insight, wisdom, and vitality to fortify him for the great task of *The Recluse's* composition, a life's work. In Hill's reinterpretation of this passage from Book I, the act of binding a fictionalised account of the growth of Offa's mind to his own, though flagging up a sense of late modernist belatedness, is a means by which Hill's youth and early adulthood might enter more fully into generative relation with English history. Where the young radical republican Wordsworth passionately opposed monarchs and tyrants, to advance his inquiry into the dialectic of impersonality and personality Hill fuses his autobiography with a figure the author of the 1805 *Prelude* would most likely have detested. The implication is that Wordsworth's sense of his own election as a poet 'singled out' from others is not so distant from the doctrine of the divine right of kings which his hero Milton so fiercely opposed.⁴¹ Whether the presence of Offa's tyrannical personality might antagonise Hill's poetic ego or confirm and even strengthen it remains yet to be seen, but it is in hymns IV and V that layered allusion to the authorships of Wordsworth and Eliot begins to formulate this question.

Quite clearly, in IV 'the crypt of roots and endings' the poet-child finds themselves 'invested' in serves to recall the 'dead land' with which Eliot finally elected to open *The Waste Land* following Pound's redactions (I. 2). IV alludes to the opening of the second stanza of 'The Burial of the Dead':

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
 You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock,
 (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

⁴¹ See for example Milton's book advocating regicide *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), printed in *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (3:184-258).

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

(I. 19-30)

Hill situates the poet-child both in the womb of ‘mother-earth’ and the grave, ‘the crypt of ... endings’, the ‘stony rubbish’ of a ‘dead land’, therefore also gesturing to Eliot’s ‘East Coker’, where ‘In my beginning is my end’ (1, 14), and ‘Little Gidding’: ‘What we call the beginning is often the end’ (214). Just as with nature and history, birth and death are bound together in this hymn. These allusions continue to develop the sense that *The Waste Land* constitutes an ending for Hill, a dead-end, but nevertheless an imposing one which he must belatedly write through and against in order to ‘become’ a modern poet just as Williams before him had acknowledged. But such a writing through is not actually presented as hard-won, the graft of arduous poetical labour and committed ‘craftsmanship’, what Hill extols in ‘Translating Value’ as the need for the intelligence and personality of the poet to ‘work at it’ against the vagaries and precariousness of contingent circumstance to create something which might endure (CCW 390). Instead, the ‘gifted’ poet-child’s investment, investiture in the literary past and in modernist complexity, intellectuality, and allusion is ‘Child’s-play’, easy: as stipulated above the intimation is of a virtuosity associated with Wordsworth, ‘singled out’ in *The Prelude* for poetic greatness (I. 62). Again this emphasises Hill’s interest in the importance of play as a means of writing back to the Eliot who ‘returned us to the classroom’ in Williams’s view, recalling the riddling language games of II (*The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* 174). The intimation is that all work and no play would be death to the poet, and therefore we ought to remember to return ourselves to the playground just as readily as our desks. In IV Hill’s poet-child is biding his time, though the hymn ends by reaching out again to the first-person plural established in III with that image of ‘the long-unlooked-for mansions of *our tribe*’ (added emphasis). Here the allusion is also to ‘Little Gidding’, Eliot looking back on his life’s work:

Since our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight
Let me disclose the gifts reserved for age
To set a crown upon your lifetime's effort.
(205)

Eliot's reflection on what he interpreted as the Mallarméan poetic mission to 'purify the dialect of the tribe' has deeply discomfiting colonialist undertones, implying as it does that some sort of 'purified' language is even attainable or worth pursuing, with alarming and repulsive connotations of nativist and racial 'purity' impossible to detach from the line. In addition, Eliot's nostalgic conservatism and monarchism is betrayed by his image of the coronation of poetic achievement, an important precedent for Hill's sequence's conflation of poetic ego and kingliness which sits of course at odds with the (disappointed) revolutionary republicanism of *The Prelude*.

In hymn V, the poet-child '[worms their] way heavenward for ages amid barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern': the assumption of self-consciousness and poetic vocation is predicated on emerging through a history coded in and as geological strata and undergrowth. Dingy flora are figured simultaneously in this sentence as both 'barbaric', cruel, uncultivated, *and* aesthetically sophisticated 'scrollwork', suggesting western colonialism's terrible naturalisation of the dialectic of civilisation and barbarism. Throughout this sequence Hill is therefore drawing on that famous adage of Walter Benjamin's, articulated in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', that 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (*Illuminations* 248). Hill's invocation of the Wordsworth of *The Prelude* is stated explicitly in the second verset of V:

Exile or pilgrim set me once more upon that ground: my rich
and desolate childhood. Dreamy, smug-faced, sick on
outings — I who was taken to be a king of some kind, a
prodigy, a maimed one.

(V)

In nominating themselves ‘Exile of pilgrim’, the poet-child draws into allusive range the figure of Wordsworth coming to Grasmere in the opening lines of Book I of *The Prelude*, greeting the ‘gentle breeze’ of poetical inspiration in his exile from the oppressive city and from public life (I. 1):

A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from yon city’s walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will.
[...]
Enough that I am free, for months to come
May dedicate myself to chosen tasks,
May quit the tiresome sea and dwell on shore—
(I. 6-10, 33-35)

Clearly, Wordsworth’s is a liberating exile, an exile which is also a coming home, or a coming to the end of pilgrimage: ‘I journeyed towards the vale which I had chosen. | [...] A pleasant loitering journey, through two days | Continued, brought me to my hermitage’ (I. 100, 114-15). To reiterate Hill’s words, Wordsworth is ‘set once more upon [the] ground’ of the English Lake District and may consequently reach into the recollected horizon of his childhood to compose the ‘poem to Coleridge’. Rajeev Patke’s analysis of the ambiguities and possibilities of hymn V is instructive here:

“Exile or pilgrim” is pretentious if applied by the speaking voice of the poem to his own boyhood self, but could be intended as just that kind of self-characterization (a boy recollected in adulthood as snotty and smug); “exile or pilgrim” is disingenuous if applied by Hill’s Offa to himself, but that too might be part of an intended attribute (the king as self-indulgent hypocrite). While a king might have had a childhood both rich in appurtenances and desolate in its solitariness, the speaking voice of the poem too might remember or imagine his boyhood as desolate in its solitariness but rich in fantasy. The richness differs in being either literal or metaphorical, while the desolation is shared. The logic is not unlike that of a syllogism with a missing middle: “I am short; Julius Caesar was short: am I and Caesar not similar?!” Possible but inadequate as extrapolation, hence slightly ridiculous. The partial analogy between king and boy is not too different. The poet might well be aware that it could seem so, but regardless, he might choose to push the point past the line of plausibility, leaving the proportion of humor and seriousness with which this is done ambiguous. (‘Ambiguity and Ethics’ 262-263)

Clearly the subject speaking this hymn, as with the sequence as a whole, is a fusion of King Offa and the poet, ‘a king of some kind, a maimed one’, and this verset again highlights their shared prodigiousness, their election, as with the young Wordsworth of *The Prelude* ‘singled out, as it might seem, | For holy services’ (I. 62-63). There is too the sense of the poet-child’s privilege, a ‘smug-faced’ brat prone to tantrums and taking ill ‘on outings’, marring the leisure time of others. For all this entitlement and sense of ordination, the hymn concludes with the poet-child naming themselves ‘a maimed one’, ‘maimed’ surely because they are nevertheless wounded by history and experience, permanently mutilated by the violence of the history and the fallen language through which they feel compelled—*elected*—to write. The speaker’s childhood is paradoxically ‘rich and desolate’: it is abundant, brimming with potential material to be mined for poetry in a manner befitting Wordsworth, while also a forsaken space, abandoned or at risk of abandonment. Hill’s phrase ‘rich and desolate’ serves therefore as a fitting and fittingly paradoxical description of the precariousness of memory itself, as we might infer from that anxiety at the heart of Wordsworth’s in ‘Nutting’, ‘unless I now, | Confound my present feelings with the past, [...]’ (46-7). Memory whether personal or historical may be ‘rich’, profuse, and generative, but must also always be ‘desolate’, in danger of misrecognition, distortion or indeed of being forgotten altogether. We have already noted the tension between Eliot the royalist and Wordsworth the republican vying for primacy as influential presences in *Mercian Hymns*, and with a verset such as this in which Hill is suturing kingliness to a retrospect on childhood we should again recall Wordsworth’s conviction while resident in France ‘that the best | Ruled not, and feeling that they ought to rule’ (IX. 216-217). In this acutely Wordsworthian hymn V, Hill’s assertion that the poet-child is ‘taken to be a king of some kind’ therefore draws energy from the tension which inheres between Wordsworth’s coeval and tacitly contradictory rejection of monarchism and the insistence on his own poetic election and calling.

The analogy with and interrogation of Wordsworth's recollections of early childhood and schooltime continues into hymns VI and VII. VI begins by naming and locating 'the princes of Mercia' in the natural world, as 'badger and raven'. They are figures over which the child Hill-Offa does not yet exert royal authority, being 'Thrall to their freedom', digging and hoarding memory. This invokes the young Wordsworth's seeming thralldom to Nature, 'surely' being 'led by her' 'Severer interventions' in the preamble to the famous episode of the stolen boat (I. 370-72). The ensuing versets of VI continues to dig into *The Prelude's* first book for allusive material:

'A boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers.' But I,
 who had none, 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.

In the schoolyard, in the cloakrooms, the children boasted
 their scars of dried snot; wrists and knees garnished with
 impetigo.

(VI)

The poet in Hill's configuration here is an only child, no presences like John Wordsworth and especially Dorothy Wordsworth to afford a life and vocation kinship, mutual purpose and life-giving witness and consolation. The pun on fostering quietly inverts Wordsworth's 'My heart leaps up' and the line 'The Child is father of the Man' (*TMW* 246): the child-poet is rather foster parent of poetry's 'unattainable toys', its 'strangeness'. It also recalls those lines which open that memorable passage in Book I of *The Prelude* during which Wordsworth recounts 'night-wanderings' spent trapping woodcocks in snares, 'beauty' and 'fear' his sublime parental substitutes (I. 325, 304):

Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up
Fostered alike by beauty and by fear,
 Much favored in my birthplace, and no less
 In that beloved vale to which erelong
 I was transplanted.

[...]

In thought and wish
That time, my shoulder all with springes hung,
I was a fell destroyer. On the heights
Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied
My anxious visitation, hurrying on,
Still hurrying, hurrying onward. Moon and stars
Were shining o'er my head; I was alone,
And seemed to be a trouble to the peace
That was among them.

(I. 305-324 added emphasis)

In IV and V, we saw how the poet-child was ‘invested in mother earth, the crypt of roots and endings’, a deeply historical and palimpsestic ‘seed-time’ (*The Prelude* I. 305). But most crucially in VI, the poet-child admits he ‘ran slowly; the landscape flowed away, back to its source’, a pointedly antithetical rejoinder to the violent urgency of the young Wordsworth, a ‘fell destroyer’ anxiously ‘hurrying on, | Still hurrying, hurrying onward’ (I. 318, 320-21). Where repetition emphasises this urgency on Wordsworth’s part, the ironised rhyming of the syllables ‘slow’ and ‘flow’ in ‘slowly’ and ‘flowed’ contrast Hill’s sluggish movement with the landscape’s relative rapidity. The rhyme insinuates itself here as delay, as distance, phonically suturing Hill and the landscape only to stress their separation and the poet’s inability to keep up all the more strongly, joining to divide. However, in Book I of *The Prelude*, a sublime nature and landscape does not flow away from the poet as it will for Hill. Instead, as in the following concluding lines to the verse paragraph excerpted above, we find nature seeming to haunt the young Wordsworth following his incursions and desecrations, in this case the poaching of a woodcock from a stranger’s snare:

Sometimes it befell
In these night-wanderings, that a strong desire
O’erpowered my better reason, and the bird
Which was the captive of another’s toils
Became my prey; and when the deed was done
I heard among the solitary hills
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
Of undistinguishable motion, steps
Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

(I. 324-332)

This passage of terrifying pursuit is comparable with or rather finds itself amplified around one hundred lines later in the book, in the episode with the stolen boat. Again, childish transgression is apparently countered by nature, or so it appears to the young poet, with an intercession of devastating sublimity:

When from behind that craggy steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.

(I. 405-414)

In both instants, the young Wordsworth commits acts of theft, and nature appears to rear up in vengeance as a ‘visitation’, an almost divine admonishment (I. 367). However, as Hartman has made plain this is eventually understood to be ‘an effect of the power of [the poet’s] imagination’: nature of course does not actually stride after the child in a spirit of revenge (*Wordsworth’s Poetry*, 214-215). In VI of *Mercian Hymns*, why then does the landscape rather flow away from the slowly running poet-child, heading off ‘back to its source’? The roles have been reversed in order, I believe, to stress Hill’s poetry’s implicit objection to the estranging construct of ‘Nature’, artificially separating humankind out from the rest of the world. The landscape cannot be apprehended not only because the poet-child ‘ran slowly’, or rather was young and inexperienced for all his nascent gifts, but because it cannot and should not be classified as a sphere somehow separate from the human and so entirely dominated. The point of this verset is not to suggest that by writing in the twentieth century Hill believes he is somehow further removed from ‘Nature’ than Wordsworth was around the turn of the nineteenth, indicating a dangerously conservative nostalgia for a time during which the modern poet feels nature was more easily accessible, ‘purer’ or less sullied by human presence. We all run slowly through history and world. The poet-child is very much a part

of the landscape and indeed ‘Nature’, inseparable from it as he marks the complete imbrication of history both personal and social with landscape. For all this imbrication, the landscape flows away disinterestedly rather than pursuing the young poet in his imagination because Hill’s, like Bunting’s, is not a simply humanist, anthropocentric poetry.

Following the landscape’s flowing away, VI then twists once again into its fourth verset with a latently violent image of the poet-child’s schoolmates, boasting ‘*scars* of dried snot; wrists and knees garnish with impetigo’ (added emphasis). Rather than the sublime terror of ‘low breathings’ in the hills or huge cliffs pursuing the poet, the intimation is that such potential for injury and violence is located in school and in the child’s everyday, ‘a maimed one’, rather than in something necessarily pressing in on him from without. This leap into ‘the schoolyard, [and] the cloakrooms’ again serves to amplify *Mercian Hymns*’ earlier invocation of Williams’s subtle critique of Eliot, recalling too the freedom with which Wordsworth describes vacation from school and from Cambridge in the early books of *The Prelude*, the liberty of quitting his books.⁴² Hill’s emphasis on violence, however, is also I think indicative of his desire for *Mercian Hymns*’ anatomy of childhood to articulate reservations about Wordsworth’s faith that ‘The Child is father of the Man’, the ‘infant sensibility’ which is in Book II declared ‘Great birthright of our being’ (II. 285-6). For *Mercian Hymns*, the violence and recklessness of Wordsworth’s early experiences are the most instructive presences, and the image of the landscape flowing away from the slowly running poet-child rather than pursuing him suggests that nature and by extension imagination may not provide the chastening and ultimately recompensing, consolatory faculties for the late modern poet that they did for Wordsworth. Childhood autobiography must be looked into for what it can tell Hill about germinal evil, tyranny and violence just as much as for those diagrams of bliss, redemption and consolation it might proffer.

⁴² Book III of *The Prelude* concludes: ‘Thus in submissive idleness, my friend, | The labouring time of autumn, winter, spring— | Nine months—rolled pleasingly away, the tenth | Returned me to my native hills again’ (III. 669-72).

With this in view, hymn VII expands upon the intimated violence of the final verset of the preceding VI. The only section subtitled ‘Offa’s Kingdom’ in *Broken Hierarchies*, the hymn begins with Hill’s poet-child mirroring the destructive, poaching ‘fell destroyer’ of the Wordsworth of Book I, making an incursion into the post-industrial inertia of the English midlands (I. 318):

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

(VII)

Just as the Wordsworth of ‘Nutting’ desecrates the bower he stumbles upon with ‘merciless ravage’ (43), here the poet-child of Hill’s sequence ‘[batters] a ditchful’ of frogs, a casual atrocity sidled away from, making an abundance of sentient beings mirror in death the ‘stillness and silence’ of standing water bodies and rusting gasholders. Hill’s use of the pronoun ‘he’ in this hymn might serve to indicate that the figure described more closely resembles the young Offa rather than the first-person pronoun of the preceding VI, for example, but *Mercian Hymns* is characterised throughout by the instability, fluidity and ambiguity of its deployment of pronouns. Therefore, such a distinction cannot confidently be advanced: the child in these hymns may still represent both Hill and Offa, for all of the shifts in perspective. Indeed, the child’s extermination of the ditch of frogs foreshadows and then immediately jump cuts towards even more insidious acts in the same hymn:

Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after the day of
the lost fighter: a biplane, already obsolete and irreplaceable,
two inches of heavy snub silver. Ceolred let it spin through a
hole in the classroom-floorboards, softly, into the rat-
droppings and coins.

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering with fright,
down to the old quarries, and flayed him. Then, leaving
Ceolred, he journeyed for hours, calm and alone, in his
private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*.

(VII)

This hymn directly inverts and so seems to attack one of the central premises of *The Prelude*, that thesis which subtitles the retrospect of Book VIII: *Love of Nature Leading to Love of Mankind*. Here, a violent hatred of or repulsion towards nature, indicated by the child's killing of the frogs, seems rather to lead inexorably towards a hatred of mankind, with vengeance on his schoolmate Ceolred assured by the grotesque act of flaying him. That said, Ceolred apparently 'remained' his friend, 'even after the day of the lost fighter' and its grisly conclusion, therefore intimating with a sinister twist that this friendship was likely maintained through coercion and fear. In turn, this serves to signpost the tyranny with which the book's fictionalised Offa will go on to rule, foreshadowed a little heavy-handedly by the 'private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*' in which the solitary poet departs. In 'Common Weal, Common Woe', Hill criticises the 'inadequate' entry for 'private' in the *OED*, favouring a quotation from Milton which 'holds something of its signification in reserve' over the editors' 'simple' gobbet from Samuel Pepys (*CCW* 274). The occurrence of 'private' in VII indicates the young Offa's ownership of the sandlorry, revealingly named *Albion* to portend his 'private ownership' of the kingdom of Mercia while anchoring the image in the poet's present: Albion Motors manufactured cars and commercial vehicles including lorries from 1899-1972. It also intimates the 'collusion between private malice and public sanction and suggests that legal procedures and terminology may be entirely subsumed by a monstrous unlawfulness of self-will' (*CCW* 274). This reading underpins Hill's depiction of the 'private derelict sandlorry' because it insinuates Offa's own 'private malice', demonstrated by his abusive relationship with Ceolred and the 'monstrous unlawfulness of self-will' he exercises over his subjects and possessions in later poems such as XI (274).

Following this admission of calmness in cruelty, hymn VIII is subtitled 'Offa's Leechdom' and concerns the 'awakening' of Offa, his accession to royal power. It bristles with authoritative declaratives, the poet announcing 'I am the King of Mercia, and I know' before the third verset concludes:

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

(VIII)

The deictic ‘them’ named by Offa are ‘The mad’, delineated in the first sentence of the hymn as ‘predators’ who ‘harbour against us’. Clearly the punishment of Ceolred has escalated into his aggressive othering, the divide-and-conquer, scapegoating governance of the tyrant or dictator, who claims to defend the majority from this counterfeited threat: ‘forewarned I have thwarted their imminent devices’. Any rebels are dismissed as mad, the poet-king presenting his loyal subjects as victims preyed upon by these predators, heretics who ought to be repudiated: ‘A novel heresy exculpates all maimed souls. Abjure it!’. Anti-monarchist dissent is reduced to a ‘novel heresy’, revolutionary sentiment dismissed as mere faddish novelty by Offa.

The violent consequences of these tyrannical positions feed swiftly into hymns X and XI, the first pieces in the sequence subtitled ‘Offa’s Laws’ and ‘Offa’s Coins’ respectively. X commences with an image of the narcissism and avariciousness of the poet-king, the pomp of power:

He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony, assort-
ed prize pens, the seals of gold and base metal into which
he had sunk his name.

(X)

The hymn then moves to detail the maintenance of power through order, how the poet-king ‘attended to signatures and retributions; forgave the death-howls of his rival’ and ‘wept, attempting to master *ancilla* and *servus*.’ This final clause forms a disturbing joke: *ancilla* and *servus* are gendered Latin terms for a servant or slave, but the phrasing here might merely indicate Offa’s attempt to ‘master’ the words themselves as a student learning Latin would hope to ‘master’ the language. The latter is perhaps the more likely possibility for the ambiguity in the context of the verset, but the monstrosity of the former, like the calmness with which Offa departed the flayed Ceolred in

VIII, might be more pronounced by contrast in light of the apparent tenderness and lyrical sweetness of the sentences which precede it:

He swayed in sunlight, in mild dreams. He tested the little
pears. He smeared catmint on his palm for his cat Smut
to lick. He wept, attempting to master *ancilla* and *servus*.

(X)

Mercian Hymns is a sequence carefully committed to the ambiguous ethical comportment of subjectivity, the contradictory capacity for moments of tenderness and compassion even in the most cruel. To lean on the phrasing of ‘Tintern Abbey’, the book seems to enquire how ‘little, nameless, unremembered, acts | Of kindness and of love’ can even be features of the behaviour of the tyrant or fascist (35-36). Clearly, Hill involves his poetry in the task of thinking with Hannah Arendt’s conception of the banality of evil as advanced in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Offa’s will to power and sadism are not usurped by the selective kindness he displays towards ‘his [pet] cat Smut’: the cat belongs to him, ‘deserving’ his protection. It is clear this image actively recalls the casual ease with which the poet-child ‘battered a ditchful’ of frogs two hymns earlier (VIII), and therefore the ironic statement that ‘He wept’ in the act of extending attempted mastery over servants, slaves, and language does not make us pity the king: we may even interpret such weeping, for forgiveness or otherwise, as crocodile tears. Following on is one of the finest hymns in the sequence: XI concerns the extension of royal power through official coinage, ‘*Offa Rex* resonant in silver’. It is a poem of even more pronounced violence and devastation, brutality once again disturbingly recuperated in tranquil natural imagery:

Coins handsome as Nero’s; of good substance and weight.
Offa Rex resonant in silver, and the names of his moneyers.
They struck with accountable tact. They could alter the king’s
face.

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutilation if that
failed. Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. Value from a
sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres.

Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring. It is safe
to presume, here, the king's anger. He reigned forty years.
Season touched and retouched the soil.

Heathland, new-made watermeadow. Charlock, marsh-mari-
gold. Crepitant oak forest where the boar furrowed black
mould, his snout intimate with worms and leaves.

(XI)

Offa's proud, 'handsome' coinage serves to extract 'Value from a sparse people', the pun on 'mutilation' indicating the king's punishment of his moneyers should their minting fail in producing 'Exactness of design'. The jump cut into the third verset brings with it an unnervingly calm image of the aftermath of battle, a grim transition recalling the bloody desolation of Hill's earlier sonnet sequence 'Funeral Music' (1968), a piece which fixed its gaze on the Wars of the Roses and the mass suffering of the Battle of Towton. The grisly 'one eye upstaring' from amidst the corpses of Offa's enemies 'Swathed in the long ditch' could easily belong too to the king's image, reproduced on a coin. The 'Exemplary' in 'Exemplary metal' therefore plays on the king's setting an example of violent and punitive rule, making an example of his disobedient subjects. Indeed, the grief of this Ozymandian wreckage then breaks into those painfully naturalising declaratives which terminate the verset: 'He reigned forty years. Seasons touched and retouched the soil.' Through this paratactic juxtaposition the fact of Offa's reign is figured as inevitably as the changing of the seasons, the poet's hindsight opening precipices at every side and melancholic suggestions of 'What man has made of man' (as Wordsworth's 'Lines Written in Early Spring' (1798) has it). The quietude of the natural world following this scene of human devastation is both calming and disturbing, the only trace of decay the 'black mould' through which the boar furrows intimately.

This disturbing calm is echoed and emphasised again in hymn XIV, a poem beginning with the darkly comic zeugma 'Dismissing reports and men'. This is another pressure point in the sequence where Hill focuses on and obsesses over the ways in which cruelty and tenderness, the barbaric and the civilised, may co-exist and dialectically antagonise one another in the same subject.

Offa is described threatening ‘malefactors’ and generally asserting his dominance before the hymn moves into the following versets:

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.

(XIV)

The image of submerged trout-fry simmering ‘as though forming the water’s underskin’ is emblematic of the poet-king’s contradictory inner life, although the free indirect declaratives proclaiming Offa’s ‘care for natural minutiae’ ultimately serve only to indicate the king’s high opinion of himself rather than any authentic gentleness of character. The irony of Offa’s apparent ‘care for natural minutiae’ is belied by the condescension of this style, the self-aggrandising morality of ‘his tenderness’ near fatally undermined by the ‘one eye upstaring’ among the dead a few hymns earlier in XI. Hill’s continued identification and implication with the tyrannical Offa therefore insists on his sense of the poet’s ethical arbitrariness, being prone to the potential violence and vicissitudes of the dominating personality, and thus abnegating any potential innocence or superiority the poet in whatever fits of self-appointed heroics might wish to declare for themselves. Hill is a poet obsessed with order, his poetry rejecting the free market anarchy of late capitalism and indeed the anti-state principles of anarchism proper.⁴³ This goes some way to explaining why Offa was such a seductive and enabling presence and cipher for him to write through, for all that Hill must name and name again the transgressions and abuses of his fictionalised subject’s reign.

⁴³ In later life Hill repeatedly used the terms ‘plutocratic anarchy’ or ‘anarchical plutocracy’ to refer to the current global capitalist political order (interchangeable phrases borrowed from William Morris), such as in his 2013 interview with Sameer Rahim for *The Daily Telegraph* and several of the lectures he gave during his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry.

Clearly, the deeply conservative hierarchical prerequisites of Eliot's political imagination cannot finally be ceded by Hill, just as Wordsworth lapsed in his later years into the reactionary Toryism that so repulsed Shelley and Byron: as Hill will write, echoing Antonio Gramsci, in the late daybook sequence collected at the end of *Broken Hierarchies, Liber Illustrum Virorum*: 'Bless hierarchy, dismiss hegemony, | 'Thus I grind to conclusion.' (BH 738). For all the ethical seriousness of his project, Hill is unable to fully comprehend that those hierarchies and 'dynasties' (XX) he so continues to affirm and bless contain the germs of the Powellian fascism alluded to in hymn XVIII. Peter Robinson's essay in the 1985 collection he also edited (*Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work* 196-218) provides a useful early account of the references in *Mercian Hymns* to the Conservative MP Enoch Powell. Robinson points out that Hill began the sequence in 1968, the year Powell gave his racist, anti-immigration 'Rivers of Blood' speech to the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre at the Midland Hotel in Birmingham: that is, in modern day Mercia ('Reading Geoffrey Hill' 216). Like Hill, Powell was also actually born in Mercia, in the Warwickshire village of Stechford. He trained as a classical scholar and even wrote poetry, and such qualities allow him to function in the sequence as an ancillary alter-ego for the poet after Offa himself, an insidious sort of shadow self. Reiterating Powell's allusion to Virgil in his 1968 polemic, hymn XVIII can only 'watch the Tiber foaming out much blood', in thrall to the Eliotic melancholy of a nationalism upheld by 'Groves of legendary holly' (XXVIII) and the Adamic 'traces of red mud' Offa leaves behind in the final hymn for the modern poet to contemplate (XXX). In this I find it impossible to disagree with what Tom Paulin in 1985 deemed Hill's 'conservative imagination', though I believe his dismissal of much of Hill's poetry as flawed 'kitsch feudalism', a 'parasite on Eliot's imagination', is too harsh ('The Case for Geoffrey Hill' 13). Ambiguously poised, Hill's allusion to Powell does not of course imply his assent to British fascism and imperialism, but it does betray the poet's knowledge however latent that the conservative strains in his own politics are not properly detachable from such fascism. Hymn XVIII witnesses the poet-king at the scene of the execution of Boethius, the Roman philosopher and author of *The*

Consolation of Philosophy, willing ‘the instruments of violence to break upon meditation’ so as to ruthlessly ‘set in motion the furtherance of his [Offa’s] journey’. The poet-king oversees the murder of that philosopher who served as such a vital bridge between classical Rome and medieval and early modern Europe: if Plato the philosopher expelled the poets from the Republic, Hill the poet in a kind of retaliation oversees the incarceration and execution of the philosophers in the kingdom of Mercia. No consolation is in sight. As XV states, Offa ‘divided his realm’ in order to conquer and control it. Through the latter half of *Mercian Hymns*, bristling as it is with extractive metaphors and images and further markers of the palimpsestic, Hill, like Bunting, does not seem able to shake off the *spiritus loci* of the historical Mercian landscape and its nativist fantasies: ‘The garden festers for attention’ as XII puts it, fallen.⁴⁴ The recurring vision of the sequence, for all its moments of irony, comedy, and genuine pathos, is ultimately one of terrifying domination and brutality.

Starkly, the antepenultimate hymn XXVIII opens with another capitulation to a conservative, hierarchical, patrilineal sense of history and social relations:

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.
 (XXVIII)

The verset breaks off with the poet’s pained apostrophe in the face of hierarchy, submitting to the will of his ‘masters’, the socially coerced expectation to ‘marry well’ misrecognised as a biological ‘urge’. Weighed down as he is by the limiting spectres of Eliot and Pound, and by some of the more conservative inclinations of his own politics, Hill’s engagement with Wordsworth in this sequence does not finally license the revolutionary possibility or fraught historical optimism which

⁴⁴ XII: ‘Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant soil’; XIII: ‘jutting, out of England’s well’; XV: ‘An ancient land, full of strategy. Ramparts of compost pioneered by red-helmeted worms. ... the corpse of Cernunnos pitching dayward its feral thorns’; XIX: ‘a kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards’; XX: ‘Coiled entrenched England: brickwork and paintwork stalwart above hacked marl.’; XXII: ‘Then, in the earthy shelter ... I huddled’; XXVII: ‘and the shire-tree dripped red in the arena of its uprooting’; XXVIII: ‘Tracks of ancient occupation. Frail ironworks rusting in the thorn-thicket’; XXX: ‘he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud.’

marks *The Prelude* out as one of Wordsworth's most intense and powerful achievements. For all its moral ambition, Hill's imagination at this point in the development of his life as a poet cannot offer anything like that 'solace in the knowledge which we have' affirmed by Wordsworth at the end of Book Thirteen, rounding out the 1805 *Prelude* with a passage of common purpose, sociality, and resolve (XIII. 436):

Blessed with true happiness if we may be
United helpers forward of a day
Of firmer trust, joint labourers in the work—
Should Providence such grace to us vouchsafe—
Of their redemption, surely yet to come.
Prophets of Nature, we to them will speak
A lasting inspiration, sanctified
By reason and by truth; what we have loved
Others will love, and we may teach them how:
(XIII. 437-45)

It is ambivalent for Hill whether poetry can afford its readers something approaching this 'lasting inspiration', and its pedagogical function or capacity to deliver any sort of moral education too remains decidedly ambiguous. The poet's ego is repeatedly revealed to be inextricable from the violence of hierarchy and tyranny. This is the chief reason why Patke is astute to argue that *Mercian Hymns* is 'not ambivalent enough', given the dubious nature of Offa's morality, and the dubious pleasure derived by the poet in contemplating violence. If anything, Hill is not severe enough on Offa's unethical conduct, at least explicitly' ('Ambiguity and Ethics' 255).

The possibility of such a 'redemption, surely yet to come' heralded by Wordsworth (XIII. 441), then, remains pessimistically handled in *Mercian Hymns*, perhaps best indicated by the uncertain consolations of the deeply personal, self-questioning elegy that is hymn XXV:

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

The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold. It reeked
stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred its low roof. In dawn-
light the troughed water floated a damson-bloom of dust—

not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire.

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

(XXV)

Outstanding in the sequence for its pathos and clarity of utterance and focus, this poem excoriates the privileged vantage that the 'staggeringly-gifted' poet-child is afforded in the early hymns, and by extension the radical providence of the romantic child as it is presented in *The Prelude* and much of Wordsworth's poetry. Such providence is almost entirely obliterated by the simple cruelty of an entrenched class system, of the degradations of highly dangerous, exploitative child labour, 'a face hare-lipped by the searing wire'. Indeed, beginning its opening and closing versets with the gerund 'Brooding' allusively opens the poem up to Wordsworth and Milton: one of the many echoes of *Paradise Lost* in Book I of *The Prelude* reconfigures a doubly paternal and maternal image of God, who Milton states 'Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss | And madest it pregnant' (I. 21-22). Typically, Wordsworth's humanist passage repurposes a divine image of the creator for an image of the creative human mind in reflection, 'The meditative mind, best pleased perhaps | While she as duteous as the mother dove | Sits brooding, lives not always to that end, | But hath less quiet instincts—goadings on | That drive her as in trouble through the groves.' (I. 150-154). Hill's poem recalls these moments in the long poems of Milton and Wordsworth to invert the familial roles of grandmother and grandson: in assuming the elegist's task, Hill also assumes a maternal relation to the life and memory of his now deceased grandmother. Moreover, in brooding on *Fors Clavigera* (1871-84), Ruskin's letters 'to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain', Hill also seems to adopt such a protective, maternal disposition towards the proletarian dead of his country at large.

In responding to the dynamics of XXV further, Lee Spinks's reading of the hymn will be instructive here. He too finds the poem 'an exceptional moment' in Hill's sequence, a moment that 'offers a way of approaching a curiously vertiginous quality of his own writing which conserves, while seeming also to dissemble, an extraordinary concentration of elegiac force' ('Geoffrey Hill and Intrinsic Value' 373). This is in part because the hymn is 'one of the few points in the sequence where Hill unambiguously detaches his voice from the superimposed' Offa: the costume is momentarily laid to one side (373). The early books of *The Prelude*, involved as they are with the thrilling pleasures and boyish exploits of a middle class Cumberland childhood which led Wordsworth 'To love the woods and fields', are trashed out by the legacy of industrial capitalism registered in Hill's poem (II. 5). If 'celestial light' momentarily apparels or seems to apparel the nailshop between the second and third versets of the hymn (following 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality', *TMW* 297), the poet catches himself mid-sentence in the process of aestheticising a scene of his grandmother's bondage and misery: 'In dawn-light the troughed water floated a damson-bloom of dust—'. The complex consonance and assonating vowels contribute to an image where even the dust, fearful sign of national and societal decay for Eliot, appears to bloom in the light of the dawn, the cadence floating upward before it reaches the limit of what the poet can say, breaking into a new verset 'not to be shaken by posthumous clamour.' Following an apparently rupturing dash, the consonance and assonance of the end of the second verset carry over into the new clause like 'the echo of a lost sound' (XXVIII), with the melodious syllable music of 'damson-bloom of dust' reproduced in 'posthumous clamour'. This runs counter to the latter phrase's indication that the poet wishes to cut the aestheticising short: in stating the poet does not wish to shake the dignified silence of the scene with 'posthumous clamour', it is nevertheless still shaken by posthumous clamour in the sonic architecture and image complex of the poem. Hill the principled witness and elegist is making an elegy for himself again, as in the aforementioned 'September Song'. Spinks shows how

Hill's lines enact their own ethics by insisting that the memory of historical destitution must not be effaced by the "posthumous clamour" of lyric attitudinising, sentimental mystification, fake piety, or the marmoreal glaze of commemorative remembrance. But at this point a problem arises. The poem's ethical propriety necessarily requires the impropriety of exactly the *same* clamour: for what is Hill's poem *but* posthumous clamour, the untimely and belated recovery of an irretrievable suffering? ('Geoffrey Hill and Intrinsic Value' 374)

It is a dialectic Spinks observes Hill reading in *Leviathan* (1651), specifically how Hobbes's elegiac passages for the royalist Sidney Godolphin, whose death in the chaos of battle is registered as the departure of intrinsic value from the world, reconsecrate 'the idea of the intrinsically valuable in the act of renouncing it, so suspending us, as it were, between disavowal and declaration' ('Geoffrey Hill and Intrinsic Value' 375). The image of the sunrise beautifying the dust and decay of the nailshop where the light of the poet's proletarian grandmother's 'childhood and prime womanhood [was] spent' is presented without any of the imaginative, creative consolations of Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'. We are reminded strongly instead of the 'Shades of the prison-house', the workhouse or indeed nailshop, which 'begin to close | Upon the growing boy' in that poem (*TMW* 299). For Wordsworth, the romantic child though bound or even incarcerated still 'beholds the light, and whence it flows, | He sees it in his joy' (299), that celestial light the poet can no longer observe, whereas in Hill's poem the 'dawn-light' is that which lyrically obscures the scene of immiseration and injurious toil. This dawn-light is not revelatory but potentially concealing, 'the light of common day' (299). No 'magical change' such as the one Hopkins marked in Wordsworth's ode ('O joy!') comes upon Hill in the rhythmical shifts between versets: only the despondent termination of lyric indulgence and the stoical insistence of the hymn's cyclicity. Dialectical as it is, this elegy ultimately comes up short against the apparently immovable object of the class system—what Hill calls 'contingent circumstance' in 'Translating Value' (*CCW* 385)—that border in Wordsworth's ode which only joy can shatter, when 'custom lie upon thee with a weight | Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!' (300). The paternalistic,

meliorist politics of Ruskin are not enough: Hill can only brood over them with the melancholia of the elegist, not the active, optimistic power of the truly radical imaginary.⁴⁵

Hill would go on to clarify this ultimately consolatory faculty in his similarly autobiographical long poem *The Triumph of Love* (1998):

what are poems for? They are to console us
with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.
Let us commit that to our dust. What
ought a poem to be? Answer, *a sad
and angry consolation*. What is
the poem? What figures? Say,
a sad and angry consolation. That's
beautiful. Once more? *a sad and angry
consolation*.

(CXLVIII)

History lies around Hill, finally, as a tragedy. XXIX, the penultimate poem of *Mercian Hymns*, opens with the following quotation from the poet-king, balancing contradictions:

'Not strangeness, but strange likeness. Obstinate, outclassed
forefathers, I too concede, I am your staggeringly-gifted
child.'

(XXIX)

At this late stage in the sequence, the amusingly hubristic claim that the poet's 'forefathers' are 'outclassed' rings considerably hollow, the poet only conceding that he is surely the child of the explicitly male poets who wrote before him, Wordsworth and Eliot not least, subject most likely to their same dilemmas and failures. He is 'staggeringly-gifted', but with what gifts? The broken, wasted and decayed, things useless or fallen out of use: 'Frail ironworks rusting in the thorn-thicket' (XXVIII); 'toy-shards [and] splinters of habitation' (XIX); 'nuggets of fools-gold' (XXI). The poet, 'murmurous, [withdraws] from them', these forefathers, their patrilineal burden, and can only *seem*

⁴⁵ Hill has repeatedly styled himself a 'Ruskinian Tory' in politics, in order to articulate his own peculiar interpretation of anti-capitalism: 'I've described myself in public as a Ruskinian Tory, but adding, that it is only Ruskinian Tories who sound like Marxists these days. And I have quoted more than once in my Oxford lectures that phrase from a lecture by William Morris, "anarchical plutocracy." I have said in public we live in a kind of Potemkin village democracy and that the real power is in the hands of oligarchs' ('Interview with Samir Rahim').

to begin to walk towards a new first-person plural, perhaps a new sociality—‘us’—before disappearing, out of reach:

And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk towards
us he vanished

he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud.
(XXX)

A limit point in Hill’s political imagination is reached, and the poet-king absconds, irrevocably fallen, ‘a maimed one’ (V). The Wordsworth of *The Prelude* is useful for Hill insofar as that poem serves as a counter to Eliot’s impersonality doctrine, the ego of another master giving the late modernist permission to mine his own autobiography for poetry. Before us lies the catastrophe of capital and the value-form, the reduction of all human life and labour to economic valuation and equivalence. The trauma of this historical fact flashes into view with Hill’s melancholy termination of the sequence in the parting image of Offa’s coins and the ‘unregenerate clay’ of Adam: with a whimper, the poet breaks before the violent contradictions of contemporary capitalism borne and sustained by the hierarchies, however broken, his poetry will continue to bless (*BH* 3). Hymn XXV, perhaps the finest single poem in *Mercian Hymns*, is the sequence’s starkest admission of this truth, the poet’s Ruskinian, patrician politics able only to cautiously elegise and lament, to attempt to confer dignity on the immiseration of his working class grandmother through the consolation of elegy and with the pathos of repetition. Consequently, for a more sophisticated and radical response to Wordsworth and the ethicopolitical promise of his best work, a poetry up to the task of mounting a critique of the imperialist west’s hegemonic economic system, one needs to look elsewhere. To that end, this study will now turn to the work of the poet J.H. Prynne.

Chapter 3
'Again is the sacred word': Prynne's Wordsworth

i. 'I walk on up the hill'

In a talk presented on BBC Radio's *Third Programme*, J.H. Prynne (1936—) censured what he termed 'The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry', a regretful, nostalgic, implicitly conservative set of poetic coordinates which originated with Wordsworth's limited Victorian inheritors and remained even in 1963 'unexpectedly with us' (291). Eight years before Geoffrey Hill published *Mercian Hymns*, this then-little known 26-year-old fellow of Gonville and Caius College Cambridge was already mounting a critique of a cluster of belated, backwardly transfixed elegiacs not radically dissimilar from those the previous chapter marked in Hill's sequence. Reading Wallace Stevens's 'The World as Meditation' (1955), Tennyson's 'Ulysses' (1833) and 'Tithonus' (1859), Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' (1867), and T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915), Prynne questioned these poems' shared 'solipsistic involvement', expressing a deep scepticism about such acts of 'virtuoso incantation' and contending that they serve only to insulate both poet and poetic utterance from the external world (290). For Prynne, the now-canonical poems he surveyed share a 'predilection for the "rumpled blazonry" of language—a mastery over the musical forms of expression so complete as to be often narcotic in its sway' (290). The self-sustaining pleasure of sophisticated prosodic organisation means poetry may 'become something close to a way of celebrating dependence on a distinctive brand of melancholia', making for the poet 'a kind of elegiac cocoon' (291). Prynne went on to conclude:

Meditative poetry then, I have suggested, at some point after Wordsworth's last contact with the Augustan tradition abandoned the ambition to present the reflecting mind as part of an experiential context and withdrew into a self-generating ambience of regret. With this went an amazing degree of control over incantatory techniques, designed to preserve the cocoon of dream-like involvement and to present a kind of constant threshold music—the apparent movement of a gravely thoughtful mind. (291)

In this account, the post-romantic poet's mind removes itself from play, retreating from the field of experience and the conditions of history and material reality into an oneiric bunker. Prynne saw this as an endemic falling away from 'the first pressure of the Romantic impulse', because in achievements such as Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey' 'there remains a positive force of circumstance—there are facts of experience that have to be accounted for' (290).

Clearly, Prynne's argument does appear to share at least some foundations with Geoffrey Hill's own account of the pull of 'contingent circumstance' in Wordsworth's poetry, how the 'inertial drag' and 'gravitational pull' of human language as matter conditioned by historical usage can nevertheless be dialectically shocked by the rhythms of poetry into breaking continuity, '[thrusting] against' the weights and shackles of 'custom's pressure' ('Redeeming the Time', *CCW* 90-91). At the other end of his career, Prynne will similarly attest in the 2009 lecture 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work' that

for all the pungent games in which poetry can engage, it comprises at its most fully extended an envelope which finds and sets the textual contours in writing of how things are; while also activating a system of discontinuities and breaks which interrupt and contest the intrinsic cohesion and boundary profiles of its domain, so that there is constant leakage inwards and outwards across the connection with the larger world order. (126-7)

Sharing a deep involvement with philological study, both poets aver that poetry can and should counter the oppressive burden of customary language, discourse, order, and circumstance, but may do so only through a simultaneous recognition of and imbrication with such circumstance. This entails a principled and vigilant refusal to turn away into solipsism or anything approaching it, a resolute hostility to petty lyric egotism. As Prynne maintains in the same lecture, 'no poet has or can have clean hands, because clean hands are themselves a fundamental contradiction. Clean hands do no worthwhile work' (141). For all of his habitual pessimism, Hill to his credit never

withdraws or strives to withdraw from the external world as Prynne argued so many post-romantic poets do in ‘The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry’. Indeed, we may observe the same kind of discomfort with the sedative of ‘virtuoso incantation’ Prynne articulates in 1963 at work in the abrupt, self-reprimanding break between the second and third versets of Hill’s Mercian hymn XXV, how that contradictory demand ‘not to be shaken by posthumous clamour’ terminates the falsely gratifying sonority of ‘in dawn-light the troughed water floated a damson-bloom of dust’. But as the previous chapter suggested, this discomfort in Hill’s work is registered as the boundary of an inescapably elegiac poetics, whereas Prynne names such a discomfort so early in his development as a poet and thinker that it swiftly opens out into more radical spaces of imaginative and compositional enterprise. Hill’s limitations are indicative of what Prynne diagnoses as the pervasive inability of ‘the modern poet ... [to] recognize a contingent event if he saw one, and least of all if he had been expecting it’ (‘The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry’ 291). This chapter will therefore consider how Prynne’s engagement with Wordsworth’s poetry goes deeper and further than that of any of his contemporaries, and will do so by focusing primarily on a single early poem.

ii. Lyric and epic

‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ is a meditative poem collected by J.H. Prynne in his 1969 book *The White Stones*. An initial draft of the composition had formerly appeared on pages 382-83 of Andrew Crozier circulated worksheet, *The English Intelligencer* (1966-68), that privately distributed newsletter of poetry, criticism, correspondence, and exchange which numbered among its contributors and recipients the poets Elaine Feinstein, Barry MacSweeney,

John James, Tom Pickard, and Tom Raworth.⁴⁶ Prynne first published a majority of the poems he produced during this period in the *Intelligencer*, alongside a number of commentaries, polemics, letters, and interventions on poetic composition and philology. Indeed, while many of the potential dimensions of the thinking of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ have been enunciated and speculated over with impressive care by N.H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, Anthony Mellors, Robin Purves, and Joshua Stanley, its status as a formative expression of Prynne’s assimilation of the poetry of William Wordsworth remains unexplored at any real length. It is my argument in this chapter that ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ is the single poem from *The White Stones* in which the most extensive freight of Wordsworth’s poetic thinking and its implications is turned over. Understanding the poem in this way will serve to clarify and complement the regularly observed Wordsworthianism of Prynne’s undertaking in *The White Stones*, the book’s utopian open field lyricism and emphatic wish to ‘love them all, severally and in | the largest honour that there is’ (‘Against Hurt’, *TWS* 21).⁴⁷

The greatest claims for Prynne’s work have been made by the poet and critic Keston Sutherland, who contends that his poetry of the late 1960s reasserted ‘Wordsworth’s brotherhood of all the human race ... against the defamiliarizations of post-romantic real life and its laid back ironies and complacent dismemberments’ (‘Hilarious Absolute Daybreak’ 116). For Sutherland, *The White Stones* is mediated by ‘a kind of sceptical, depsychologised Wordsworthian autobiography’; an account of the growth of a poet’s mind into a suspicious testament to modern alienation (‘XL Prynne’ 114). In 2014, he may affirm that Wordsworth ‘has long been Prynne’s acknowledged great poetical teacher’, because—by way of example—the latter claimed ‘in a letter to Ed Dorn on November 6 1964, [that] “if you want to know who we are, just read Wordsworth’s

⁴⁶ The name of the worksheet is a nod to Benjamin Flowers’s radical French Revolution-sympathising newspaper *The Cambridge Intelligencer* (1793-1803).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Joshua Stanley’s ‘Back on Into the Way Home’, a commentary which figures ‘Charm Against Too Many Apples’ as a ‘particular response to “Tintern Abbey”’, and which holds that *The White Stones* ‘engages on numerous occasions ... with Wordsworth’ (12). In an article published in *Prospect Magazine*, Jeremy Noel-Tod cites Wordsworth as ‘the canonical poet with whom Prynne is most often in conversation’ (‘Jeremy Prynne, prankster poet’).

Prelude” (Sutherland, ‘Introduction’ 9). Joshua Stanley concurs, stating that Prynne ‘used and thought through British romantic poetry, especially the poetry of Wordsworth, as a way of imagining alternative social relations to those of capitalism’ (‘J.H. Prynne’s romanticism’ 1). Indeed, Stanley’s essay on ‘J.H. Prynne’s romanticism’ gives a useful overview of this angle of inquiry, and the following chapter will take a number of his central claims as its starting point. Stanley argues that in

the 1960s, the poetry of Wordsworth had represented to Prynne an authentic and free life that has been lost but could be recovered in the composition of poetry. This authentic and free life survives in imaginative impulses and especially in poetic writing. For Wordsworth, every human is born as a poet, linked to the whole of nature, which is the “Poetic spirit of our human life”: “in most” this poetic spirit thrives in childhood but is “abated and suppressed” in later life. Adulthood as a deterrent of poetic spirit also functions as a metaphor for corrupted modern society, which mediates our relationship with nature and with ourselves. (6)

Speaking unequivocally in ‘The Art of Poetry No. 101’, a rare interview Prynne gave in 2016 with the *Paris Review*, the poet himself disclosed: ‘Implicitly, for all my working life, Wordsworth has been a kind of icon in my way of thinking about the world, for so many different reasons’ (‘The Art of Poetry No. 101’ 200). Accordingly, Prynne has in recent years published a number of critical interjections on Wordsworth’s poetry, chiefly *Field Notes: ‘The Solitary Reaper’ and Others* (2007), a virtuosic 135-page commentary-monograph on ‘The Solitary Reaper’ (1805), but also the brief commentary ‘Tintern Abbey, Once Again’, in *Glossator* (Vol. 1 2009), the aforementioned lecture ‘Mental Ears and Poetic Work’ which too discusses ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’ (2009), and the pamphlet *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* (2014), which includes close readings of passages from *The Prelude* (XIII) and *The Pedlar* (1803-04). Understanding Prynne as a poet with an explicitly Wordsworthian commitment however idiosyncratic is not therefore an eccentric approach for the reader of his work to take.

Eric Falci’s *Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry 1945-2010* (2015) perfunctorily lists ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ as a ‘Wordsworthian walking poem’ (106), and Alex

Latter has observed how the poem's typography resembles the blank verse-paragraphing of 'Tintern Abbey', a comparison 'amplified by the similar prominence given in both poems to "again" and "once again"' (*Late Modernism and The English Intelligencer* 106). Both Falci and Latter do not, however, elaborate substantially on these remarks. Stanley has expanded upon the relation between the poem's 'agains', how Prynne must write through 'Tintern Abbey' to move towards a realisation of 'return conditioned by the recognition of change', rather than a superficial reassertion of the stasis of a fraudulent immortality ('Back on Into the Way Home' 18-19). In his commentary on the poem, Robin Purves considers the phrase 'No person can live there', gauging whether it might serve as a 'tribute to severe environmental conditions, related to the qualities of landscape which Prynne investigates as part of his study of Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper"' ('A Commentary on J.H. Prynne's "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform"' 80). These evaluations seem perfectly reasonable, but they will require a considerable degree of substantiation in order for a convincing Wordsworthian critique of the poem to be synthesised and advanced, or for us to appreciate the poem as a critique of Wordsworth's poetic thinking. Therefore, in reading Prynne through Wordsworth and vice-versa, I intend to supplement James Keery's distinctly Eliotic appreciation of the hugely ambitious intertextual range of *The White Stones*: namely that, 'in the achievement of individuation, [Prynne] extends the tradition into the present of his own writing, as the poets of each generation continue to do' ('Schönheit Apocalyptica').⁴⁸

Before a concerted study of 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' and *The White Stones* might be undertaken, it will first be essential to lay some careful foundations, and to outline the significance of Wordsworth's poetry and poetics for Prynne's work, and to *The English Intelligencer* project as it was originally conceived by its core members. Evidently, a preliminary clarification of the most pertinent features of Wordsworth's poetics must be mooted, particularly

⁴⁸ In 'Schönheit Apocalyptica' Keery echoes the governing thesis of Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them' (2322). In the same essay Keery reads a 'rejected white stone' of the sixties, 'East-South-East', finding that Prynne formulates an 'antithetical' retort to Wordsworth's Intimations Ode in the poem's refutation of the premise 'That there hath passed away a glory from the earth' ('Schönheit Apocalyptica').

as they relate to the dizzyingly onerous project for lyric which Prynne proposes and cultivates across *The White Stones* and the coeval materialist addresses of *Kitchen Poems* (1968), and of which it has been argued we see the breakdown proper in the disappointed satire and fragmentary invective of *Brass* (1971).⁴⁹ Onerous because the lyrics Prynne composed in the late 1960s are active in a formal dialectic with the epic, and those ideas about epic poetry Prynne drew primarily from Milton, Wordsworth, Pound, and Charles Olson. The conventional difference between contemporary epic and lyric I take chiefly to be a question of scale, the epic being a radically social but also potentially nationalist form, telling the history of a people while exceeding any limits of time and space in taking in myriad points of view, and the lyric being a far more compressed mode, tending to artifice the perspective of a single voice. As this section will clarify, it seems to me that the poems of *The White Stones* were conceived by Prynne as powerful experiments of epic done into lyric, and lyric done into epic, and it was partly from his interpretation of Wordsworth that he developed this sensibility.

A decisive place to begin then is with certain observations about Wordsworth's poetics put forward by Prynne over the course of a lecture in which he appraised Charles Olson's epic *Maximus Poems IV, V, and VI*, delivered at the Simon Fraser University on July 27 1971. Prynne had overseen the preparation of these poems for publication, arranging the typescript for the Cape Goliard edition of 1968 (Owens 136). As the poet recalls in his *Paris Review* interview, he and Olson had been enthusiastic correspondents before the latter's death in 1970, with Olson exerting a profoundly formative influence on the work of a majority of the contributors to *The English*

⁴⁹ See Keston Sutherland's essay 'Hilarious Absolute Daybreak' for an account of both the breaks and continuations which mediate the relationship between *The White Stones* and *Brass*. If there is a marked shift between the books it may perhaps be comprehended via a cursory consultation of the transcript of Nixon's inaugural address on January 20 1969. The utopian possibilities that the age demanded, so passionately glimpsed and patiently anticipated in *The White Stones*, are grossly appropriated by the new president after the disappointments of May '68: 'Forces now are converging that make possible, for the first time, the hope that many of man's deepest aspirations can at last be realized. The spiraling pace of change allows us to contemplate, within our own lifetime, advances that once would have taken centuries. In throwing wide the horizons of space, we have discovered new horizons on earth' (*The American Presidency Project*).

Intelligencer.⁵⁰ Together, Prynne and Olson ‘exchanged comments about all sorts of things, including the linguistics of poetic composition’ (‘The Art of Poetry No. 101’ 183).⁵¹ In the *Maximus* lecture, the former proposes that Wordsworth must be considered an epic rather than a lyric poet in the living tradition of the Milton and Virgil he so passionately revered, else his poetry be misunderstood.⁵²

You see, I mean, both of those guys [Milton and Wordsworth] were never lyric poets. Milton was never a lyric poet, never wanted to be, trained himself for years not to be, systematically disqualified himself from writing the lyric. And Wordsworth, when he wrote what looks to us like lyrics, was simply teaching what he knew in the most directly didactic[,] effective method he knew how. So, that particular span of operation, the great angelic history of *Paradise Lost*, the great memory of a personal time of the *Prelude*: those things are not lyric. (Prynne ‘Lecture on *Maximus IV, V, and VT*’)

Prynne’s comment on the scope of *The Prelude* might appear obvious, until one realises that he means to imply that the major partner in the *Lyrical Ballads* project composed all of his shorter poetry exclusively *in the epic spirit*, and that the simple effusion of a poem like ‘My heart leaps up’ has apparently little or nothing to do with the lyre. But this is an assessment of Wordsworth’s authorship that can be traced back to the poet’s own proposed schema for his corpus. Writing in the Preface to the first edition of *The Excursion*, Wordsworth specified how that poem constitutes only the ‘second Division’ of his ‘long and laborious’ (and ultimately unrealised) three-part philosophical epic of the imagination, *The Recluse* (*The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* 894). Figuring the ‘long finished’ but as yet unpublished *Prelude* (then the ‘poem to Coleridge’, ‘addressed to a dear friend’) as the ‘ante-chapel’ to the ‘gothic church’ of *The Recluse*, Wordsworth goes on to describe the relation of his shorter ‘lyrical’ work to this anticipated edifice (894-95):

⁵⁰ In the earliest pages of the *Intelligencer* (in a letter published in the third issue), the poet Gael Turnbull damns ‘such near parody’s [*sic*] of Olson’s’, arguing that ‘it should be possible to avoid the more obvious sorts of “I, minimus, of West Hartlepool etc.”’ (*T.E.I.* ser. I 26).

⁵¹ In the same interview, Prynne recalls how his personal copy of Don Allen’s landmark anthology, *The New American Poetry* (1960), which contained selections from innovators such as Frank O’Hara, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, John Ashbery, and Olson himself, ‘fell to pieces out of intensive use’ (180).

⁵² Prynne’s contention has been corroborated elsewhere by Robert Rehder, who argues in *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* that ‘Wordsworth never thought of himself as only a lyric poet. This is evident in his choice of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton as the authors he seeks to equal’ (44).

[my] minor Pieces, which have been long before the Public, when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories, and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in [gothic churches]. (895)

This indication of ‘such connection’ helps to clarify Prynne’s argument (895), where Wordsworth’s shorter poems ‘participate in the whole’ of his projected epic undertaking, minor fragments harmonising with an uncompleted major fragment (Prynne ‘Lecture’).⁵³ As Ernest de Sélincourt writes in his introduction to the edition of the 1805 version of the poem he prepared in 1928, *The Prelude* ‘has not merely a unity of design; it has something of epic structure’ (xi). For de Sélincourt too, ‘Wordsworth was in evident agreement with Milton on the true nature of the epic subject. Both of them repudiated military exploits, “hitherto the only argument heroic deemed”, in the desire to bring within its confines a more spiritual conflict’ (xii). Indeed, when Prynne identifies Wordsworth’s elevation of lyric to the cosmological condition of epic, and synchronous deliverance of epic to the heterogeneous and pedagogically expedient condition of lyric, I believe that he also means to implicate that principal current of his own poetics as they evolved through the 1960s. In the poems constituting *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*, which Keston Sutherland has compared to exhorting ‘sermons’ (‘Hilarious Absolute Daybreak’ 117), and which might look ‘to us like lyrics’, we too see Prynne ‘teaching what he knew in the most directly didactic[,] effective method he knew how’ (Prynne ‘Lecture’). But his remains an epical sensibility, attuned to ‘what in sentiment, we are, we | are’, as ‘The Glacial Question, Unsolved’ will attest in its moving modification of the restless heroic will of Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’ (*TWS*, 37).⁵⁴ Prynne’s poetry is lyric raised to the scope of epic.

⁵³ Observe, for an overt example, the relation between ‘Nutting’s blank verse spot of time, and *The Prelude* for which it was initially intended. Marjorie Levinson’s *The Romantic Fragment Poem* is useful here (60-76).

⁵⁴ *The White Stones* indeed holds with Ulysses that “’Tis not too late to seek a newer world’. Tennyson’s poem concludes (the emphasis is mine, indicating Prynne’s source):

Tho’ much is taken, much abides; and tho’
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, *that which we are, we are*,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,

By way of elaborating this theory of Wordsworth's permanent epicism, Prynne turns later in the *Maximus* lecture to 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal' (1798):

if one read those great "Lucy" poems of Wordsworth's as lyric:

Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

If we took that as lyric, then it would always be partial, it would always be incomplete. There would always be that pathos of something more. These rocks, these stones, those trees, however, participate in the whole, [...] the curvature of the whole spatial condition. (Prynne 'Lecture on *Maximus IV, V, and VI*')⁵⁵

The lyric marshals the unaccompanied music of the part, of the singular, whereas the epic orchestrates the whole, comprehending in Prynne's grand terms the 'horizontal curve' of love for and from the whole cosmos while registering and broadcasting a philosophy for being at home in the fullest and most inclusive sense.⁵⁵ This is evidently because epic stands upon myth, and myth is 'telling the story of where you are' (Prynne 'Lecture'). Such a mode of being is achieved by travelling the furthest distance from home 'in order to come right back round to take it in at one sweep', which is the potential of epic, and thus the calling of Homer, Milton, Pound's *Cantos*, and Olson (Prynne 'Lecture'). In moving like an exile far out into the cosmos, we may return and fully bear witness both to where we are and to the place or condition from which we have come. It is as if the prodigal Luke of Wordsworth's 'Michael', having laid the first stone of his father's sheepfold, had fulfilled the covenant and returned home from the corrupting city to see it completed rather than fleeing tragically in dissolute disgrace to a 'hiding-place beyond the seas' (*TMW* 236). And it is for this sort of totalising remedy to Wordsworth's consoled losses and

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (95-96)

⁵⁵ Prynne's thought was at this time saturated in the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (see, for example, page 7 of Ryan Dobran's 'Introduction' to *Glossator* (Vol. 2 2010), or page 115 of Sutherland's 'Hilarious Absolute Daybreak' from the same volume). *The White Stones* might be construed as one attempt to wrest Heidegger's philosophy of being and dwelling back from his Nazism and the Third Reich's policy of *Lebensraum*. *The White Stones* refigures Olson's journeying 'figure of outward', but does not, I believe, seek any kind of dominion over the cosmos it traverses before returning home. In returning to and fully gaining home (which means the planet itself for Prynne, but was also and perhaps even primarily America for Olson), you lose the cosmos, and might explain Prynne's later break with Olson's domineering *Maximus*.

disintegrations that Prynne seems to wish in making his argument, for a hard-won ‘feeling that rejoins the whole’ (‘Thoughts’, *TWS* 77). Citing ‘...Poetically Man Dwells...’, that metaphysical rumination on Hölderlin’s ‘In lieblicher Bläue’ from which Heidegger attempted to infer ‘the condition of being that makes it possible for man to be at home on the earth’, Prynne concludes that

nothing, nothing in your lyric set-up will allow you to be at home on the earth. You could be at home in, oh, some cozy little piece of North Alberta. That’s entirely permissible. You could be at home in some, oh, the ranch back in Kansas, gee, it was great. But to be at home in that largest sense is not permitted to the lyric. (Prynne ‘Lecture on *Maximus IV, V, and VI*’)

A concerted dialectic between the lyric and epic impulses needed therefore to be projected against contemporary capitalism, and *The White Stones* constitutes Prynne’s great—if fraught—experiment in this vertiginously ambitious endeavour.⁵⁶

iii. *The English Intelligencer*

Among the most active and influential members of *The English Intelligencer* cohort as editors, Andrew Crozier and Peter Riley have been similarly dedicated readers of Wordsworth. Page 340 of the *Intelligencer* actually quotes from Wordsworth’s later ode ‘On the Power of Sound’ (1828) at reasonable length:

O for some soul-affecting scheme
of moral music, to unite
Wanderers whose portion is the faintest dream
Of memory! O that they might stoop to beat

⁵⁶ As Kevin Nolan has recognised, Prynne ‘consistently argues in favour of any “attempted dialectic” over no dialectic at all’ (Nolan ‘Capital Calves’). Substantiating this in his *Paris Review* interview, Prynne claims: ‘It’s difficult not to be overwhelmed by the sense that language joins you up to the powers of lamentation. At the same time, that’s where the dialectical aspect frequently has its task to perform. Contradiction and oppositional thinking, ironical thinking, has to find a way to juggle up these terms, so that the mood quality, and the emotional, and moral tonalities involved, maintain their power without becoming oppressively single-minded. Single-mindedness is no good to a poet’ (‘The Art of Poetry No. 101 195’).

Chains, such precious chains of sight
 As laboured minstrelsies through ages wear!
 O for a balance fit the truth to tell
 Of the Unsubstantial, pondered well!
 (T.E.I. ser. I 340)

This is the version as it was printed at the end of the first edition of *Yarrow Revisited and Other Poems* in 1835. Such a ‘soul-affecting scheme | of moral music’, with its aim of uniting ‘Wanderers’ to ‘beat | Chains’ [sic], finds manifest expression in the comprehensive ‘musical | sense’ of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’, which Prynne would indeed circulate in the *Intelligencer* 42 pages later (I. 382-383), and where said music is a figure for the chimera of a lost mythic whole.⁵⁷ In the final iteration of ‘On the Power of Sound’, published in the last edition of Wordsworth’s poems (of 1849-50) and generally reproduced in this form since, the same passage from stanza XI reads:

Ye wandering Utterances, has earth no scheme,
 No scale of moral music—to unite
 Powers that survive but in the faintest dream
 Of memory?—O that ye might stoop to bear
 Chains, such precious chains of sight
 As laboured minstrelsies through ages wear!
 O for a balance fit the truth to tell
 Of the Unsubstantial, pondered well!
 (169-176)

We can see the attraction of the earlier draft to the community of *The English Intelligencer*, before the human ‘Wanderers’ had been in Wordsworth’s revision abstracted into ‘wandering Utterances’, and supplanted by the vaguer noun ‘Powers’ which now demand the unifying force of ‘moral music’. The instance of ‘moral’ in ‘On the Power of Sound’ was indeed emphasised in the first edition of *Yarrow Revisited* just as it is in the *Intelligencer* (‘*moral* music’, with italics), expressing the wish for the synthesis of ethics and aesthetics. Note also the typo in the *Intelligencer*, modifying ‘bear’ to the more active ‘beat’; in actuality, ‘bear’ did not alter between Wordsworth’s versions,

⁵⁷ I would read, in this new context, Wordsworth’s ‘Wanderers’ as intended analogues for the fellow travellers of the *Intelligencer* community, and, beyond that, the international horizon of the radical left of the late 1960s. See also the figure of the Wanderer in Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, that man ‘of reverend age’ who in Book I relates to the poet the tragic story of Margaret and the ruined cottage (*The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* 897-915).

building always into a rhyme with ‘wear’. Whether mistakenly or not, Wordsworth’s chains are beaten rather than more passively borne. As the editors of *Certain Prose of The English Intelligencer* (2012) hold, the many errors that pepper the worksheet ‘often possess suggestive charm — indicating alternative possibilities of thought or expression’ (xxv). Therefore, this spirited variation might serve to indicate what were the categorically anti-capitalist sympathies and commitments of the majority of the contributors and recipients of *The English Intelligencer*, circumventing the dominant channels of literary production and reception by virtue of the coterie form. They constitute the ‘community of wish’ alluded to in Prynne’s Coleridgean ‘Moon Poem’, quietly bound by the graceful undertones of ‘Frost at Midnight’ which so comport its ebb and flow (37). To many of the working class and left-inclined poets associated with the *Intelligencer*, the French Revolution of 1789 and the uprisings, demonstrations, strikes, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial actions of 1968 would seem to share a spirit, convening a crease in time, and terminate in comparable disenchantments and dejections.⁵⁸ And Wordsworth’s poetry was therefore registered as a gift from history; a testimonial of revolutionary failure; a manual for navigating social hope, defeat, and disappointment, mutuality and consolation; and a poetic inheritance which might be meaningfully allied to Charles Olson’s contemporary example.⁵⁹ For instance, in a letter to Crozier dated February 4 1967 and printed in the *Intelligencer*, the poet John James refers to Wordsworth as ‘the man’, quoting from and underscoring the enduring significance of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to contemporary language and practice:

But presently language is used almost universally for prevarication. This state of affairs has been allowed to come about largely if not wholly because poetry has dropped out of the public sphere. There are now, as the man said “... a multitude of causes ... acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind ... unfitting it for all voluntary exertion ... & reducing it to a state of almost savage torpor ...” – a soft machine. Whatever civilisation the species is capable of will never be

⁵⁸ The praxis of the worksheet would be a matter of contention and frustration. On page 379, the same issue in which ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Uniform’ was first printed, Barry MacSweeney opined in a letter that ‘a public is important. To write and then build little walls round it, is just fucking useless. It might as well not happen. Honest, that’s what the *Intelligencer* is doing, NOW [...] But now the voice must stop talking to itself, and must go outward. I’m very serious about this. An ear, I think, is essential, nay, necessary. Really’ (*T.E.I.* ser. II 379).

⁵⁹ Wordsworth famously remembered the hopeful early days of the French Revolution in Book X of *The Prelude*, declaring: ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, | But to be young was very heaven!’ (692-93).

developed nor maintained without resistance to that “combined force”. Poetry is a means of withstanding that force & also of measuring & informing the degree of private & public satisfaction in our lives. (*T.E.I.* ser. I 208)

Poetry is figured as a corrective to the degraded and instrumental language of late capitalist modernity. Echoing this thought a few months later, Barry MacSweeney contended in a note dated September 3 1967 that the ‘true man [...] really must break the surface of this world to be a great poet. Wordsworth did it’ (*T.E.I.* ser. II 475). Indeed, in the synoptic ‘Argument’ preceding the verse body of ‘On the Power of Sound’, Wordsworth glosses the passage that will eventually be reprinted in the *Intelligencer*:

Wish uttered (Eleventh stanza) that these [sounds acting casually and severally] could be united into a scheme or system for moral interests and intellectual contemplation —[...]. (*The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* 274)

Such conceptions of possibility and ideality were requisite to the horizons of being voiced by the *Intelligencer* project, and profoundly mediated Prynne’s accommodation of Wordsworth’s poetry at this time. In a letter to Andrew Crozier dated December 27 1966, Prynne castigated the erratic quality of much of the writing published thus far in the *Intelligencer*, enquiring in frustration:

What do all these damn neat craftsmen or rowdies do with their lives, how do they get on with it, in heaven’s name? Do they read? or think, or scheme for the possible world? Who are the people as a figure of insistence, as they could go at it, necessary & honourable? [...] I had thought perhaps that something might move, if there were perhaps some initial measure of trust, so that the community of risk could hold up the idea of the possible world; we could approximately and in some sense or other mostly be in it, or moving in part across the same face[...]. (*T.E.I.* ser. I 189-190)

As we shall see, ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ is one attempt to ‘realise this aspect of hope’, this figure for the ‘possible world’ (189)—perhaps indeed Prynne’s last attempt in the full dialectical unfurling of *The White Stones*—and to ‘move’ through such a ‘soul-affecting scheme | of moral music’ as Wordsworth needed so keenly to request in the latter days of his poetic career (*T.E.I.* ser. I 189-190).

‘On the Power of Sound’ is not indeed an especially well-known or reliably well-regarded poem in the wide vista of Wordsworth’s corpus. Interestingly, however, this late ode had received very favourable attention in a contemporary study of Wordsworth’s verse by Bernard Groom, *The Unity of Wordsworth’s Poetry*, the publication of which coincided with the inception of *The English Intelligencer* in 1966. It is reasonable to suppose therefore that a number of contributors to the *Intelligencer* had read this book, considering the academic ties of many involved.⁶⁰ Groom hails ‘On the Power of Sound’ as Wordsworth’s ‘last great ode’ (150), a ‘glorious’ (210), ‘universal[,] and prophetic poem’ (191) on the ‘relation of sense to soul’ (194) which is of ‘crucial importance’ to the argument of *The Unity of Wordsworth’s Poetry* (that is, that such a fundamental unity exists) (193). This is in spite of claims that ‘On the Power of Sound’ is ‘difficult’, ‘compressed’, ‘impersonal’, and very rarely considered ‘seriously’, apparently lacking ‘the qualities which make for popularity’, which is to say the poem is made to sound rather like a neglected or resistant modern(ist) poem (193-194). Moreover, Groom reveals how the ‘most remarkable testimony to its importance [comes] from the poet himself’ (194):

[Wordsworth] points out that he printed it at the end of the volume, *Yarrow Revisited*, “and in the last edition of my Poems, at the close of the Poems of the Imagination, indicating thereby my own opinion of it.” To anyone who has studied Wordsworth’s system of arranging his works, it will be clear that he gave *The Power of Sound* the highest position possible. (194)

In the concluding stanzas of this poem, Wordsworth counters the ‘eternal Silence’ of his own ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, the resplendent Orphic order of ‘one pervading spirit’ orchestrating ‘all things’ into an ‘everlasting harmony’ of worship (*The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* 277). The poet sketches this in the ‘Argument’ as ‘the survival of audible harmony’ following the Creator’s apocalyptic ‘destruction of earth and the planetary system’ (274). ‘On the Power of Sound’ is indeed a fine poem (not that it can really match the Intimations Ode), and its

⁶⁰ Not least Prynne at the University of Cambridge.

sketch of inspiration flourishing ‘When civic renovation | Dawns on a kingdom’ evidently resounded with readers such as Groom and the *Intelligencer* poets who encountered it amid the ferment of the sixties (275).

In a much earlier poem of 1806 ‘On the Power of Music’ (*TMW* 323-24), published alongside the Intimations Ode in *Poems in Two Volumes*, Wordsworth had described a fiddler in lively mock-heroic anapaests and forceful couplets (‘An Orpheus! an Orpheus!’), relating the anaesthetising influence his playing exercises over an Oxford Street crowd. His musical presence is to passers-by a captivating ‘centre of light’:

What an eager assembly! what an empire is this!
The weary have life, and the hungry have bliss;
The mourner is cheered, and the anxious have rest;
And the guilt-burthened soul is no longer oppress.
(9-12)

The fiddler’s music makes ‘twenty souls’ in the crowd as ‘happy as souls in a dream’, momentarily relieved of oppressive ‘guilt’ while deafened to the ‘murmurs’ of the material world, London’s objectionable ‘moving pageant’ through which Wordsworth must navigate an ‘illimitable’ course in Book VII of *The Prelude* (VII. 159, 610). Music here is fancy and escapism; once the street musician ends, ‘That Mother’ who listened rapt will remember that her spirit remains ‘in fetters’, just as, for example, the poet of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ will be mortally wrested home to his ‘sole self’ as the ‘plaintive anthem’ of the ‘deceiving’ bird ‘fades’ away over the darkening meadows, streams, and hills (*The Complete Poems* 148). Wordsworth’s dialectical staging of music as both emancipatory completion *and* mystifying diversion in these two poems will indeed achieve concentrated expression in Prynne’s ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’, where the insufficiencies in conceiving of universal music as a vector of mythic order and cosmological harmony are pressed against a need to mine the discourses of sacred time and the originary models of Olson’s *Human Universe* (1967) for a sustainable ontology of expectancy and wish. This chapter will now turn to an analysis of Prynne’s poem.

iv. Aspects of hope

What follows is the text of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ in full:

I walk on up the hill, in the warm
sun and we do not return, the place is
entirely musical. No person can live there
& what is similar is the deeper resource, the
now hidden purpose. I refer directly to my
own need, since to advance in the now fresh &
sprouting world must take on some musical
sense. Literally, the grace & hesitation of
modal descent, the rhyme unbearable, the
coming down through the prepared delay and
once again we are there, beholding the
complete elation of our end.

Each move
into the home world is that same loss; we
do mimic the return and the pulse very
slightly quickens, as our motives flare in
the warm hearth. What I have is then already
lost, is so much there I can only come down
to it again, my life slips into music &
increasingly I cannot take much more of this.
The end cadence deferred like breathing, the
birthplace of the poet: all put out their lights
and take their instruments away with them.

How can we sustain such constant loss.
I ask myself this, knowing that the world
is my pretext for this return through it, and
that we go more slowly as we come back
more often to the feeling that rejoins the whole.
Soon one would live in a sovereign point and
still we don’t return, not really, we look back
and our motives have more courage in
structure than in what we take them to be.
The sun makes it easier & worse, like the
music late in the evening, but should it start
to rain—the world converges on the idea
of return. To our unspeakable loss; we make
sacred what we cannot see without coming
back to where we were.

Again is the sacred
word, the profane sequence suddenly graced, by

coming back. More & more as we go deeper
I realise this aspect of hope, in the sense of
the future cashed in, the letter returned to sender.
How can I straighten the sure fact that
we do *not* do it, as we regret, trust, look
forward to, etc? Since each time what
we have is increasingly the recall, not
the subject to which we come. Our chief
loss is ourselves; that's where I am, the
sacral link in a profane world, we each do
this by the pantheon of hallowed times.
Our music the past tense:

if it would only

level out into some complete migration of
sound. I could then leave unnoticed, bring nothing
with me, allow the world free of its displace-
ment. Then I myself would be the
complete stranger, not watching jealously
over names. And yet home is easily our
idea of it, the music of decent and proper
order, it's this we must leave in some quite
specific place if we are not to carry it
everywhere with us.

I know I will go back

down & that it will not be the same though
I shall be sure it is so. And I shall be even
deeper by rhyme and cadence, more held
to what isn't mine. Music is truly
the sound of our time, since it is how we most
deeply recognise the home we may not
have: the loss is trust and you could
reverse that without change.

With such

patience maybe we can listen to the rain
without always thinking about rain, we
trifle with rhyme and again is the
sound of immortality. We think we have
it & we must, for the sacred resides in this;
once more falling into the hour of my birth, going
down the hill and then in at the back door.

(TWS 77-79)

This poem prefigures Prynne's prose response to 'The Solitary Reaper' in *Field Notes* by forty years. It is clear to me that 'Thoughts' communicates a quite insistent rejoinder to 'The Solitary Reaper', and to certain other summits of Wordsworth's poetic achievement, including 'Tintern Abbey', *The Prelude* (particularly in its 1805 form), and the aforementioned ode 'On the Power of Sound'.

Prynne's poem launches from the same imaginative dimension in which Wordsworth's terminates; an interlude, as Purves has argued, in the incremental structure of *The White Stones*, yes, but also the resumption of a formative intercession in the history of romantic poetic thinking in English ('A Commentary on J.H. Prynne's "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform" 79). Prynne's poem is a sort of sequel. Compare the final four lines of 'The Solitary Reaper' with the opening three lines of 'Thoughts', and the presence in the latter of an allusion to the former appears quite indisputable:

I listen'd till I had my fill,⁶¹
 And as I mounted up the hill,
 The music in my heart I bore,
 Long after it was heard no more.
'The Solitary Reaper' (TMW 319)

I walk on up the hill, in the warm
 sun and we do not return, the place is
 entirely musical. No person can live there
'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court
 Uniform' (77)

In 'The Solitary Reaper', the interminable heart-memory of the voyeuristic poet-traveller's great 'Long after' preserves the work song of the 'Highland lass', whom he has observed and overheard toiling 'single in the field'. Indeed, recourse to the wider corpus of Wordsworth's poetry informs the tacit influence that the memory of her 'solitary' song will exert upon the poet and his imagination. Like the consecrated prospect of the daffodils, the unending music will presumably proceed to fill the poet's 'heart with pleasure' when 'In vacant or in pensive mood' (TMW 303), and, like a spot of time, 'retain | A renovating virtue' to nourish and invisibly repair his mind, enabling him 'to mount | When high, more high, and [lift him] up when fallen' (*The Prelude* XI. 429-430).⁶² It is imperative to note that in this case it is the auditory recall of the reaper's song that

⁶¹ In the 1820 reprint of *Poems in Two Volumes*, this line becomes 'I listen'd motionless and still', emphasising even more the traveller's fixated halting.

⁶² Note, in both 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' and 'The Solitary Reaper' (which were collected together in 1807's *Poems in Two Volumes*), the telling use of 'fill' as an emphatic masculine end rhyme: 'I listened till I had my fill,' (317), and 'And then my heart with pleasure fills' (322).

the poet retains within his heart; it remains equivocal whether the optical memory of her figure at work in the field will also provide imaginative and restorative ‘food | For future years’ (*TMW* 133), despite the poem’s opening imperative to ‘Behold her’ (317).

With ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’s opening allusion, Prynne simultaneously invokes and revises Geoffrey Hartman’s ‘halted traveler’ thesis, an interpretation of ‘The Solitary Reaper’ delineated in the opening chapter of *Wordsworth’s Poetry: 1787-1814*. Published in 1964 as Prynne began to compose the poems of *The White Stones*, Hartman’s monograph proved a seminal intervention in mid-century romantic criticism. He argued of ‘The Solitary Reaper’:

The supervening consciousness, which Wordsworth names Imagination in *Prelude* VI, and which also halts the mental traveler in the Highlands, is *consciousness of self raised to apocalyptic pitch*. The effects of “Imagination” are always the same: a moment of arrest, the ordinary vital continuum being interrupted[...]. (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 17 original emphasis)

The disruptive inception of apocalyptic self-consciousness stops the poet-traveller in his tracks, inculcating a ‘meditative slowing of time – a real deepening of mind-time’ (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 12). For Prynne, this is ‘the profane sequence suddenly graced, by | coming back’, the passage of time interrupted by ‘the special consciousness that brings a man home to himself’ (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 211). But far more radically and insistently, and diverging from Hartman’s organising interpretation of Wordsworth’s poetics, ‘Thoughts’ is a poem which refuses to be arrested, spoken by a traveller who will not halt. This fact is exemplary of one of the principal dialectics of *The White Stones*, poised precariously between the mutually exclusive human instincts to settle and to wander, the drive both for exile and belonging.⁶³ ‘I walk on’, but I also ‘know I will go back’. Prynne’s revelatory meditation strives to gain an ideal ‘hidden purpose’, declining to pause or to return to the ersatz ‘gain[s]’ of hollow repetitions in which we extract only ‘the recall, not | the subject’ from that

⁶³ In ‘Frost and Snow, Falling’, ‘the wanderer’ is hailed as ‘our only rival’ (*TWS* 44). This paradox is tested at length in the miniature lyric-epic ‘Aristeas, in Seven Years’, a poem which almost immediately precedes ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ in the movement of *The White Stones* (66-74).

deceptively sacred word, ‘*Again*’.⁶⁴ Hartman recognises that the ‘developing structure’ of ‘The Solitary Reaper’ is an ‘expressive reaction’ to the imagination’s interruptive self-consciousness in Wordsworth’s lyric: ‘The poem transforms static into continuous by gradual crescendo which is the obverse of the fixating initial shock’ (18). Prynne, by comparison, is all walking and talking: any moment of apocalyptic self-arrest *precedes* the conception of his poem, rather than gradually dissolving as it unreels. This autotelic progress is the poet’s labour embodied; he declines to ‘repose’ like the Wordsworth of ‘Tintern Abbey’, composing at his leisure under the shelter of a ‘dark sycamore’ (*TMW* 132).

Suggestively, in section 9 of *Field Notes* Prynne connects the final stanza of ‘The Solitary Reaper’ to a second lyric occasioned by Wordsworth’s tour of Scotland from *Poems in Two Volumes*, ‘Stepping Westward’, where ‘onward travel [construes] into a different world, a new brightness of power and sweetness’ (32).⁶⁵ The poet’s commitment to propulsion and momentum is similarly amplified in ‘Thoughts’ both by his sustainment of the present tense, and the accretive chaining of commas (which regularly substitute more appropriate punctuation), impelling our reading into connected breath-segments. For an example, take lines 8-12 of the first verse-paragraph of ‘Thoughts’:

[...] Literally, the grace & hesitation of
 modal descent, the rhyme unbearable, the
 coming down through the prepared delay and
 once again we are there, beholding the
 complete elation of our end.

(*TWS* 77)

Maintained throughout *The White Stones*, Prynne’s energetic syntax takes its cues from Olson’s hugely influential ‘Projective Verse’ (1950), the American poet’s most renowned statement on

⁶⁴ Quite literally, as Anthony Mellors points out, ‘a gain’: ‘to “come back” means to profit ... which also refers to the spiritual “gain” of “rebirth”, cashing in the future (*Late Modernist Poetics* 156).

⁶⁵ The utopian ‘power and sweetness’ of ‘Stepping Westward’ is also invoked in the opening line of the penultimate poem of *The White Stones* (*Field Notes* 32), ‘As It Were An Attendant’, a poem in which the poet is ‘Proceeding still in the westward face’ (110).

poetics, which argued that a poem is constituted of ‘energy transferred from where the poet got it ... by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader’ (*Collected Prose* 240).⁶⁶ For Olson, line would be dictated by breath, and the white of the page became an open canvas for the typewriter, with indentations and spacing shuttling verse away from the left-hand margin as if literalising the epical stepping off into the cosmos of *Maximus*. Contained in this imperative is the wish to continue—a wish reproduced in Prynne’s poetry of the sixties—and to ‘keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen’ (*Collected Prose* 240). But even here Prynne’s complex, elongated syntax calls further back in the tradition to Wordsworth (and indeed Milton, Wordsworth’s great precursory example), whose composite, protracted poetic sentences have been discussed in detail by Robert Rehder. In an analysis of ‘The Boy of Winander’ (1800), the first 25 line passage of which is made up of a single sentence, Rehder argues that because ‘Being is a continuous process[,] To be true to himself, Wordsworth ‘must be true to his perceptions’ and acknowledge that ‘Saying what he wants to say is a cumulative process, a process of accumulating phrases, clauses, qualifications. Wordsworth does not like to stop’ (*Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* 84).⁶⁷ This aversion to halting implicitly reinforces Hartman’s theory because the act of stopping is a traumatic reminder of the death of the self, and of apocalypse (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 17). For Rehder, Wordsworth’s ‘sentences are prolonged to register change’, which is similarly true of the impulse behind Prynne’s syntax in *The White Stones*, encroaching as it does on the wish for the ethical transformation of society and the total reorganisation of existing social relations (93). Moreover, Rehder contends that ‘Wordsworth’s long sentences are the result of his desire for wholeness. They are expressions of longing ... They enable him to connect past and present, and to go back and forth between his phantasies and the world’ (114). This assessment of Wordsworth’s syntax and its endeavour towards totality and harmony affords us a revealing angle onto its stylistic

⁶⁶ cf. Keston Sutherland’s essay ‘XL Prynne’ for an influential account of the influence of Olson’s poetics, and Prynne’s subsequent rejection of a stance too easily tied to the reach of American imperialism.

⁶⁷ ‘The Boy of Winander’ was published as a standalone poem in Wordsworth’s lifetime in Volume II of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, but incorporated also into Book V of *The Prelude*.

assimilation in Prynne's 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform', fluctuating between repetitions of the past and the present need to progress, and bound to that 'feeling that rejoins the whole'.

So the poet 'walks on up the hill', ascending through an 'entirely musical' place; he will not 'Stop ... or gently pass', but forges a course on ahead. It is as though the music borne in the heart has been externalised onto the landscape by Prynne's projective prosody, which Purves reads also as Helicon, 'the hill' 'sacred to the muses' where the poet might be imaginatively replenished ('A Commentary on J.H. Prynne's "Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform" 79). This is figured as 'the birthplace of the poet', but it might just as easily be Calvary, that 'sacred hill ... at the "center" of the Earth' on which healing simples were first said to grow according to 'two formulas of incantation, used in England in the sixteenth century' (*The Myth of the Eternal Return* 30). The Romanian historian Mircea Eliade recorded how such 'holie hearbe[s]' could 'healest manie a wound', the scar left by that absent unity (both of spirit and geography) that Prynne conjectures in 'The Wound, Day and Night' (30). For Eliade, the pilgrim ascending a sacred hill 'approaches the center of the world, and, on the highest terrace, breaks from one plane to another, transcending profane, heterogeneous space and entering a 'pure region' (15). We should compare such a condition with Wordsworth's ascent of Snowdon in Book XIII of *The Prelude*, at which point, through 'a fracture in the vapour' of the mist's 'universal spectacle', the poet perceives 'the imagination of the whole', sublimed into contact with the cosmos (XIII. 56-65).⁶⁸ Prynne was in the 1960s acquainted with Eliade's history of religion, wherein the interrelationship between the sacred time of mythic beginnings and enduring archetypes and the profane time of everyday history is distinguished.⁶⁹ *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954) contends that acts of ritual and repetition project man 'into the mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed', initiating 'an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, or "history"' (35). Thus recourse to mythic

⁶⁸ As M.H. Abrams has said of Wordsworth's ascent of Snowdon, mountains have been 'the traditional place[s] for visions since Moses had climbed Mount Sinai' ('The Design of the Prelude' 593).

⁶⁹ He wrote to Olson about Eliade's *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* in a letter dated April 17 1964.

modalities and the recurring performance of archetypal rites is not simply a nostalgic ploy to give cosmological shape to the chaos of modernity, but an active strategy for making humankind contemporary with the ‘instant of the beginning’, of suspending what ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ deems the ‘profane sequence’ and gaining coterminous purchase on the sacred (35).⁷⁰ For Eliade, ‘every sacrifice repeats the initial sacrifice and coincides with it’ (35), and this coincidence and recurrence is embodied by ‘the music of decent and proper | order’ that frames Prynne’s poem.

The musicality of the space through which the poet navigates is claimed as his ‘own need’—as opposed to an insatiable want or misplaced desire—and hailed as an essential quality: ‘since to advance in the now fresh & | sprouting world *must* take on some musical | sense’ (added emphasis). Of course, this ‘entirely musical’ place refers at least partly to the lyric space itself, endeavouring towards some perfect fusion of sound and meaning (and ethics and aesthetics), a ‘musical | sense’ the impossibility of achieving which is indicated by the vigorous enjambment splitting the phrase. Such a sense alludes to Pound’s principle of melopoeia, described, in his mischievously pedagogical *ABC of Reading*, as the means of charging poetic language ‘with meaning ... by sound’ (37). Bunting’s repeated emphasis on the primacy of the musical analogy for poetical composition was also in the air following the publication of *Briggflatts*, with many of Prynne’s contemporaries looking to the northern poet as an example as I have discussed. Additionally, we may take a further analogue of this musical whole from Prynne’s own critical analysis of ‘The Solitary Reaper’, in which he claims that ‘the all-pervasive totality of [the reaper’s] singing’ floods every part of the physical and lyric ‘space[,] vacated through ... absence and displacement’ (*Field Notes* 19). In Book I of *The Prelude* Wordsworth dedicates himself to ‘chosen tasks’ (34): ‘The holy life of music and of verse’, where the commitment to music is uttered and confirmed even before the commitment to verse (54). The poet goes on to present music as an emblem of the movement

⁷⁰ As it was for Eliot in ‘*Ulysses, Order, and Myth*’ (1923), where myth is ‘simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history’ (178).

of the mind, an image of the sequence of the poet's advancing thought (and one continued in Prynne's 'Thoughts'):

The mind of man is framed even like the breath
And harmony of music. There is a dark
Invisible workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, and makes them move
In one society.

(I. 351-355)

Indeed, exemplifying what M.H. Abrams outlined in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) as the shift in emphasis from mimetic to expressive theories of art in the romantic period, William Hazlitt could argue in 1818 that poetry is 'the music of language, answering to the music of the mind' ('On Poetry in General' 401). The 'Prospectus' to Wordsworth's *Recluse in Home at Grasmere* (1806) figures the 'sweet passions' of philosophic song in similar terms, 'traversing' the soul just as Prynne's poet will traverse the 'entirely musical' place:

On man, on Nature, and on human life,
Thinking in solitude, from time to time
I feel sweet passions traversing my soul
Like music; unto these, where'er I may,
I would give utterance in numerous verse.

(959-963)

In 'Tintern Abbey' musicality is Wordsworth's consolatory hope for Dorothy's mind in the future, remembering her first experience of the Wye Valley once it has matured in coming years into a 'sober pleasure': the poet trusts that his sister's memory will 'be as a dwelling-place | For all sweet sounds and harmonies' (*TMW* 135). But Prynne's poem galvanises the 'still sad music of humanity', which David Bromwich deems 'the cry of human suffering and human need' (*Disowned by Memory* 88), and which had been, in 'Airport Poem: Ethics of Survival', the opening poem of *The White Stones*, locked 'far down in the mind' (*TWS* 3). It is made projective, and may be carried along with the poet, no longer something 'still', to be overheard only in moments of arrested witness and deep poetic contemplation. Prynne's invocation of such a universal music is catalysed by the

evacuation of the fetishised other from his own poem (the solitary reaper herself), a lyric mainstay indispensable to Wordsworth as an object on which the sympathetic consciousness of the tourist may fixate itself.⁷¹ By collapsing the hill-scaling first-person pronoun into the inclusive pronoun that '[does] not return' in the poem's commencing sentence, Prynne idealistically asserts a commitment to common human solidarity that cuts across inequalities.⁷² As he does so, the poem breaks into a half-rhymed allusion to the 'Universal love and hope' of Auden's 'Lullaby' (1940): 'the entirely musical'.⁷³ This individuation is the lyric compromise, but it also asserts the modified epicism of Prynne's vision of the possibility of a genuinely shared humanity, with the 'I' participating in the entire of the 'we', just as 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal' ought in Prynne's estimation to be read as an exemplary figure for Wordsworth's epical sensibility, compressed necessarily into apparent lyricism ('Lecture on *Maximus*').⁷⁴

I believe Prynne derives this dialectical balancing of 'I' and 'we' at least in part from his reading of Merleau-Ponty's conception of intersubjective being-with, formulated at the end of the chapter on 'Temporality' in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) where 'The solution of all problems of transcendence is to be sought in the thickness of the pre-objective present, in which we find our bodily being, our social being, and the pre-existence of the world [...] and at the same time the basis of our freedom' (433). Merleau-Ponty argues:

⁷¹ In *Field Notes*, Prynne states: 'The mood of the poem does not register any self-reproaching sense at all of injustice or hardship in unrelieved labour; not because the material facts have been transumed into an inwardness of spirit, but because there is a tacit equation by which presence strikes a truth to the moment on both sides, each fulfilling and thus justifying the other' (61).

⁷² 'I walk on up the hill', but it is 'we' who 'do not return'; the poet carries the epic totality with him everywhere like home. Therefore, the statement that no 'one' can live there is a pun; the poet must take everyone with him (added emphasis).

⁷³ 'Lay your sleeping head, my love, | Human on my faithless arm; [...] Mortal, guilty, but to me | The entirely beautiful' (1-2, 9-10). Prynne's quiet echo of 'Lullaby' is reinforced by the last three lines of Auden's second stanza, a triplet seeming to issue a challenge to which the abstract hermeticism and geological materialism underpinning the poetics of *The White Stones* and poems such as 'The Glacial Question, Unsolved' respond: 'While an abstract insight wakes | Among the glaciers and the rocks | The hermit's carnal ecstasy'. Coincidentally, other allusions to Auden's verse pepper *The White Stones*, including the bitter anti-consumerism of 'Questions for the Time Being' and its sceptical imperative to 'Buy one | another or die', contra Auden's 'September 1, 1939' (*TWS* 96).

⁷⁴ Even if this vision will collapse by the time of 'Questions for the Time Being', in which 'our desires | are so separate', epic's comprehension of the 'horizontal curve' of love debarred from the poet by damaged life under late capitalism (Prynne 'Lecture on *Maximus*, IV, V, and VI').

It is true that the other person will never exist for us as we exist ourselves; he is always a lesser figure, and we never feel in him as we do in ourselves the thrust of time-creation. But two temporalities are not mutually exclusive as are two consciousness, because each one arrives at self-knowledge only by projecting itself into the present where both can be joined together. As my living present opens upon a past which I nevertheless am no longer living through, and on a future which I do not yet live, and perhaps never shall, it can also open on to temporalities outside my living experience and acquire a social horizon, with the result that my world is expanded to the dimensions of that collective history which my private existence takes up and carries forward. (433)

This is a description of empathy; of common feeling and identification for and with the dead and future generations, and for those living, distinct as we are in consciousness and temporality. Prynne's hill-walking first-person and first-person plural indeed figure Merleau-Ponty's embodied notion of the 'social horizon' of our 'living present', with the 'private existence' of the poet-traveller taking up our 'collective history' and carrying it forward up the path (433).

Each living present and isolated temporality is a single note in the symphony of shared history. Therefore, the spatial music through which Prynne's poet-traveller climbs is, ostensibly, speculative music, the music of the spheres (*musica universalis*), the mathematical orchestration of the whole cosmos into harmonic order as derived from Pythagoras, and what Boethius classified as *musica mundana* (the music of the world) in *De institutione musica*.⁷⁵ In his 1971 lecture on Olson's *Maximus*, Prynne claims:

That's what they meant, that's what the ancients meant when they talked about the *noble*. They meant that it was single. They meant that it participated in the whole. They meant that it communed with the music of the spheres. (Prynne 'Lecture on *Maximus IV, V, and VI*)

Prynne's poet-traveller seeks to manifest that aforementioned 'soul-affecting scheme | of moral music' demanded by the Wordsworth of 'On the Power of Sound' in its partial reproduction in the *Intelligencer* (I. 340); the emphasis is, once again, on grasping an inclusive music of 'decent and

⁷⁵ For a contemporary discussion of the historical relations between speculative music and verse, see the fifth chapter ('The Harmony of the World and the Harmony of Verse: An Idea in Degradation') of Andrew Crozier's *Free Verse as Formal Restraint* (1973), his Ph.D. thesis presented at the University of Essex, favourably examined by Prynne and published in 2015 by Shearsman Books.

proper | order'. In stanza XII of that poem, Wordsworth alludes to Pythagoras's mathematical harmonies, the 'one pervading spirit | Of tones and numbers' by which 'all things are controlled, | As sages taught, where faith was found to merit | Initiation in that mystery old.' The objective of Wordsworth's call for schematised music is 'to unite | Wanderers whose portion is the faintest dream | Of memory!', the focal icons of *The White Stones* locked in the patient stalemate of memory's tepid, nebulous repetitions and so inhibited in their ability to make meaningful progress towards a real moral transformation of society. Consequently, the consolatory harking back of 'Tintern Abbey' will become for Prynne an insubstantial 'insel past' by the time 'Star Damage at Home' appears in the book's structure, gracing the decline with the injunction that 'We live here | and must mean it, the last person we are' (*TWS* 90). Finally, and crucially, the title of 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' offers a presiding source for the poem's musical motif: as Mellors has elaborated, it refers to Joseph Haydn's tenure at the Court of Esterháza, during which time he composed the 'Farewell' symphony 'with its gradual bowing-out of the players in the final movement (each blowing a candle before leaving), as a polite way of freeing his company from the over-extended patronage of Prince Esterházy' (*Late Modernist Poetics* 158-159).⁷⁶ The musicians had worked at the court for too long and missed their homes; the performance of the 'Farewell' symphony offered them a means of return, of taking off their uniforms and going back to their families. Once again, the title's hermetic source gives the sense that music offers both the possibility of bondage and emancipation, uniformity and independence, staying put and moving on, dialectical tensions which also inhere in the work song of the solitary reaper, being both the product of and the spiritual antidote to her incessant labour.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ This is also indicated by the concluding sentence of the second stanza: 'all put out their lights | and take their instruments away with them.'

⁷⁷ Cf. 'On the Power of Sound's account of the work song's ameliorative potential:

Blest be the song that brightens
 The blind man's gloom, exalts the veteran's mirth;
 Unscorned the peasant's whistling breath, that lightens
 His duteous toil of furrowing the green earth.
 For the tired slave, Song lifts the languid oar,
 And bids it aptly fall, with chime

As with so many of the wandering, expectant voices which speak *The White Stones*, the poet is precariously balanced on the threshold of the ‘whole other | image of man’ (‘Lashed to the Mast’ *TWS* 17), humanity’s ideal possibility rendered a ‘hope now lived up | to’ (‘Living in History’ *TWS* 7), a hope carrying with it the need for felt ethical change in the world and the transformation of existing social relations. The poet’s journey uphill is redolent of a sense of humankind’s dialectical movement pilgrim-like towards dormant potential, a tempered account of Hegelian becoming, and a figure for history advancing towards an elusive and likely illusive synthesis, that orgasmic and ‘complete elation of our end’.⁷⁸ In ‘A Pedantic Note in Two Parts’, a commentary on runic etymology not long preceding the preliminary appearance of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ in *The English Intelligencer* (dated June 6 1967, ser. I, pages 346-351), Prynne pre-emptively equates such restive, teleological [walking] on’ with ‘joy’: ‘the complete ground gathered underfoot’ (ser. I 351).⁷⁹ Implicit in this progress is, as Purves writes, ‘a commitment to refuse the act of coming back to a familiar place or condition’ (‘A Commentary on J.H. Prynne’s “Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform”’ 79-80), however much ‘constant loss’ must be sustained by resisting the ‘sacred’, comfortable, and restorative impulse to return. Consequently, Mellors has argued that Prynne’s ‘mythic method reconstitutes history as an eternal present by refusing to mourn the past as a lost object’, rightly concluding that ‘The only hope of returning “home”, is paradoxically, to keep on the move, understanding that the nostalgia for origins is always already a temporal dislocation’ (*Late Modernist Poetics* 9-10). Therefore, Joshua Stanley’s estimation of the opening clause of ‘Charm Against Too Many Apples’ might be extended to refer to ‘Thoughts’ and even indeed *The White Stones* as an argumentative whole, where the myth of ‘abstract utopianism’ is repeatedly tugged back ‘to the dialectic between the utopian imagination and the

That beautifies the fairest shore,
And mitigates the harshest clime (49-56).

⁷⁸ In the *Logic*, Hegel holds that ‘Wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there Dialectic is at work’ (116).

⁷⁹ ‘The runic concentration is in each case the power of longing to include its desired end, to traverse the field without moral debate or transcendent abstraction’ (Prynne *TEI* I. 351).

world': 'truly there is a way things are and truly there is a way that they could be' ('Back on Into the Way Home' 17). This dialectic has a significant precedent also in Wordsworth's authorship, marking, for example, the familiar passage in Book X of *The Prelude* that remembers the urgent 'Bliss' and (potentially) unifying calling of the French Revolution (X. 689-727):

They who had fed their childhood upon dreams—
[...]
Were called upon to exercise their skill
Not in Utopia—subterraneous fields,
Or some secreted island, heaven knows where—
But in the very world which is the world
Of all of us, the place in which, in the end,
We find our happiness, or not at all.
(X. 709, 722-727)

In 'The Solitary Reaper', Wordsworth's Highland lass sings 'as if her song could have no ending', the contingency of the auxiliary verb amplified by the line's literal elongation through the extra unstressed syllable of the feminine rhyme ('ending'/'bending'), the only rhyming pair of its kind present in the poem. The poet's 'song' both mimes and intimates the possibility of infinity in this way, that agonised 'as if', formally realising the heart-music's great 'Long after' through the disyllabic rhyme's unexpected extension of the line. As Prynne observes in *Field Notes*, the poet 'makes his song as she makes hers, both of them at their place of work' (31). Ultimately, of course, the reaper is a popular symbol of death, with the reduplication of 'ending' in 'bending' softly echoing Shakespeare's image of the inexorable ravages of time in Sonnet 116.⁸⁰ The reaper's music is a form of siren song, arresting Wordsworth just as the illusory 'music of decent and proper | order' will threaten to overwhelm the poet of 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform', who 'increasingly ... cannot take much more of this'. Prynne's poet-traveller rejects the earlier resolution in *The White Stones* to be 'Lashed to the Mast' like a homeward-bound Odysseus, instead resolving to keep moving through the Pythagorean world-music and its 'constant loss' towards the

⁸⁰ 'Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks | Within his bending sickle's compass come' (9-10)

ideal, to resist as far as possible Homeric *nostos* despite the poet-exile's knowledge that he must eventually 'go back | down' the hill and 'then in at the back door'. The quietly perennial under-presence of mortality in 'The Solitary Reaper' fulfils Hartman's inference of the apocalyptic pitching of self-consciousness in the poet-traveller's halting, the resumption of his journey 'up the hill' similarly presented in Prynne's poem as the 'end cadence' of death or apocalypse, 'deferred like breathing'.

In 'Thoughts', rhymes are 'Literally ... unbearable': they cannot be tolerated or borne in order for the poet to continue, and their sound is incontrovertibly painful. Ideally, a rhyme is a musical return, a return from which the poet of 'Thoughts' must finally refrain; it is the 'prepared delay' which delivers us home with 'the | sound of immortality', binding language into a 'musical | sense'. In his letter to the poet Ray Crump, dated March 14 1968 and printed on pages 662-663 of *The English Intelligencer* long after the appearance of 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform', Prynne argues for the radically communal potential of rhyme, a kind of melodious commons, 'since sound in its true place is as much true as knowledge (and all that mere claptrap about information & learning)':

Rhyme is the public truth of language, sound paced out in the shared places, the echoes are no-one's private property or achievement; thus any grace (truly achieved) of sound is political, part of the world of motion and place in which language is like weather, the air we breathe. (*TEI*. ser. III 662-663)

This sentiment is anticipated in 'Thoughts', with the poet speculating in the penultimate verse-paragraph: 'I shall be even | deeper by rhyme and cadence, more held | to what isn't mine'. The musically sedimented, even narcissistic lyric enterprise is thus mitigated by the collective sounding of language, the arbitrary chiming of certain words resounding with a 'public truth' as surviving symptoms of etymological development (663). Furthermore, the distance between rhyme and private ownership insinuated by these lines is embodied in the unsatisfactory slant rhyme formed between 'rhyme' and 'mine', 'what isn't mine': literally, rhyme nearly sounds as if it is mine, or

could be mine, belonging utterly to the lyric poet, but this focal incidence of it cannot fulfil its own deceptive echo, the imperfect.

In an interview in 2014 with Shearsman, the poet and philosopher Denise Riley asserted that ‘rhyme, both anticipated and recurring, acts as a guarantor of continuing and perceived time, and of human listening, attuned to that faithfulness of sounding language’ (‘Interview with Shearsman Books’). Rhyme is trust and guarantee. As his poem unfolds, however, Prynne becomes increasingly sceptical of such claims, pre-empting what he will go on to perceive in the pages of the *Intelligencer* as the social virtue of rhyme’s echoing, nobody’s property. In ‘Personal Helicon’, the last lyric of Seamus Heaney’s first collection *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), and a poem sharing Wordsworthian topoi with ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’, the poet confesses: ‘I rhyme | to see myself’ (57). For Heaney, rhyme—and by extension poetic composition—brings us back to where we are, confronting ourselves with ourselves; but this too easily engenders fatal solipsism, pride, vanity, and stasis, as figured by the image of ‘big-eyed Narcissus’, his eyes too big for his stomach (57). In the penultimate verse-paragraph of ‘Thoughts’, ‘rhyme’ internally rhymes with ‘time’, undergirding the nouns’ semantic bond, how the incidence of rhyme interrupts Eliade’s ‘profane sequence’ of history at least superficially. The refusal of terminal rhymes is a formal symptom of the poet’s attempt to resist an artificial return ‘home’, but the residual music of internal rhymes clinging to the poem betrays the poet’s ‘unbearable’ loss of the sacred, his inability to fully abandon a commitment to a renovated earth and humanity. No repetition of sound is perfectly identical, just as going home will ‘not be the same’. In this respect, Prynne anticipates what Kevin Nolan has deemed the ‘optimistic reflexiveness’ of M.H. Abrams’s influential *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), an account which argued that the Neoplatonic fundamentals of romanticism heralded the ‘homeward return of the spirit towards itself, with difference: love’s breathy ‘flight back | to where | we are’ in ‘Airport Poem’ (Nolan ‘Capital Calves’).⁸¹

⁸¹ This noble spiritual estrangement is later mocked in ‘Questions for the Time Being’, where ‘almost everything’ is ‘surface’: ‘the | mirror of a would-be alien who won’t see how | much he is at home’ (*TWS*, 95). Sutherland claims that Prynne reveals in such lines how ‘modern alienation is a trick’ because it wrongly and pessimistically convinces

Conversely, ‘The Solitary Reaper’ contains two abortive line-pairs omitting the end rhymes that organise the rest of the poem: the first and third lines of the first and fourth stanzas. These un-rhymes are leftovers from Wordsworth’s adaptation of the ballad stanza:

Behold her, single in the **field**,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by **herself**;
Stop here, or gently pass!
(1-4 added emphasis)

Whate'er the theme, the Maiden **sang**
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her **work**,
And o'er the sickle bending;—
(25-28 added emphasis)

The two word-pairs that do not fulfil the expectations of rhyme are revealing, their refusal to harmonise emphasising their relation and unrelation as concepts: ‘field’ and ‘herself’ in the first stanza, and ‘sang’ and ‘work’ in the fourth.⁸² By neglecting to rhyme it is as though the reaper’s self (‘herself’) cannot fully be subsumed by the ‘field’ in which she works, just as her song (‘sang’) cannot be absorbed by her ‘work’. Though bound, her song and self are at the same time dialectically untethered from the field of backbreaking labour, of privation and exploitation, even if by a hair’s breadth. Contra deconstructive and new historicist attacks on Wordsworth for the poet’s alleged omission of social and historical contexts from his work, this interpretation supports Prynne’s ethically precise case for ‘The Solitary Reaper’ in *Field Notes*.⁸³ As Stanley summarises:

To give an historical account of why the female Scottish reaper whom Wordsworth observed in “The Solitary Reaper” was likely to be suffering would mute the possibility of her experiences of freedom and joy in her work as well as the potential power and beauty of her song for herself and for others. Wordsworth chose to exclude what he almost certainly knew about the impoverishment of Scottish agricultural workers in the early 1800s in order that her bondage – by hunger, by economic need and by other

us that history is an ‘irreversible disenchantment’, as in, for example, *The Waste Land* (‘Hilarious Absolute Daybreak’ 117).

⁸³ For an influential example of such attacks, see Marjorie Levinson’s reading of the absences of ‘Tintern Abbey’ in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (1986).

humans – does not overwhelm the possibility that she also experienced freedom. (‘J.H. Prynne’s romanticism’ 5)

In ‘Thoughts’, ‘No one can live’ in the ‘entirely musical’ place. Though the poet longs for the cosmological music of the ‘home world’ to ‘level out into some complete migration of | sound’, it is clear we cannot dwell in sound or art alone, just as ‘The Solitary Reaper’s absent terminal rhymes optimistically imply that the lass’s singing self cannot fully be dissolved into her place of work, denying the likely truth of her coerced labour. However, the separation of artistic production from economic production implicit in these un-rhymes, of ‘pure’ life from labour, is pre-emptively undone in the first stanza by the poet’s account of the reaper’s ‘melancholy *strain*’, a word which subsumes both meanings, doubly signifying the physical ‘strain’ of her work *and* the tone of her song (added emphasis). According to the *OED*, ‘strain’ also meant ‘to bind fast’ until at least 1532 (*OED* 5.1a), and ‘to fasten’ until at least 1856 (*OED* 5.1b), lingering connotations which insinuate the reaper’s bondage to a landowner, and pejorate the observation that she ‘*binds* the grain’ in the preceding line (added emphasis). By the final stanza of ‘Thoughts’, the magical capacity for return conferred upon rhyme is revealed as a ruse, with the poet bitterly and even sarcastically declaring that ‘we | trifle with rhyme and again is the | sound of immortality’.⁸⁴ A rhyme is a pale imitation of return: it makes only the ‘sound of immortality’, not immortality itself, an empty signifier sounding out the absence of the signified from which it is traumatically divorced.

For Prynne in this case rhyme is trifling, ornamental and gaudy, like the empty packaging for a non-existent or obsolete commodity. It is what Milton once deemed the ‘trivial’ and decadent ‘Invention of a barbarous Age’ (‘Introduction to *Paradise Lost*’). Therefore we ‘make | sacred what we cannot see’, the past to which we cannot return sacralised precisely because we know that we have lost it. Writing in *Microoliths* (1967-9), Paul Celan discussed the contingency of rhyme as I believe it functions in Prynne’s poem, arguing that the sound of a rhyme contrives ‘a chance

⁸⁴ In Joshua Stanley’s account of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’, the “sound of immortality” is a lie; it is “what isn’t mine,” since the act of return, of “coming back” is premised on change, on having left being beyond my control, beyond correction or recall’ (‘Back on Into the Way Home’ 19).

meeting at a place in language-time nobody can foresee', letting 'this word coincide with that other one' for a 'limited' period of time only (*Microliths*). Obviously, a rhyme is not a time machine, and eventually fades out. The poet longs patiently to 'listen to the rain | without always thinking about rain', or, in other words—because the word 'rain' itself finds a rhyme with 'again'—to listen to rhyme without such painful thoughts of unfeasible return. Prynne's intimations of immortality appear to crumble.

Reckoning the theme of the lass's song in the final couplet of the third stanza of 'The Solitary Reaper', 'pain' forms a decisive end rhyme with 'again', thus literalising the distress of this condition of return in sound:

Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?
(23-24)

While the 'pain' of a realised 'again' is conclusively sounded out in these lines, the pain defined is also partially contingent, pertaining simultaneously to an *anticipated* return, a return that will be made in the future. The modality of 'may be again' signals the uncertain possibility of reoccurrence, of relapse, as if the very act of waiting patiently through the 'prepared delay' of the couplet's duration for the closure of the terminal rhyme is a painful vigil in and of itself. The poem immediately succeeding 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' in *The White Stones* is 'A Sonnet to Famous Hopes' (80), which contains these lines:

A line of scrubby trees, those
fields still not ready but the snow, is still
the physical rain. Also hopeless, as if dead
with strain and every nerve, in the dismal
cathedral a grey waste.
(5-9)

The failure of rhyme hypothesised in 'Thoughts' acquires fuller expression here. Where 'rain' had once chimed with 'again', in 'A Sonnet to Famous Hopes' the noun now falls into a 'hopeless'

rhyme with ‘strain’, an echo of lament hinting at the futile exertion of pursuing restitution from return, and a recurrence of sound which should also recall to our reading the ‘melancholy strain’ of ‘The Solitary Reaper’. By the late stage in *The White Stones* that we arrive at the double-spaced sonnet ‘Love’ (*TWS* 103), we discover that ‘need’, one of the book’s foremost themes, set always in passionate antagonism with ‘want’, is to be found rhyming with ‘greed’:

Cry as you
will, take what you
need, the night is young
and limitless our greed.
(11-14)

In the predatory and negligent capitalist state which committedly blocks the meeting of needs, ‘need’ has become almost indistinguishable from the rapacious growth of ‘greed’, diffused in and debased by the false wants of the unconscious consumer. The regretful cliché ‘try as you might’ is wrenched by grief into the form of ‘cry as you will’, while the rhyming of ‘need’ and ‘greed’ are denied the full finish of terminal rhyme by the aggressive enjambment of line 12. The poet is ‘wan with fever’ because rhyme, once ‘Noble in the sound’, is now exposed as nothing more than the pining, self-regarding ‘en- | circliment of Narcissus’, the pathetic repetition which permits no improvement or synthesis.⁸⁵ Rhyme sounds the apex of lament.

v. ‘and we do not return’

I said before that the poet longs patiently to ‘listen to the rain | without always thinking about rain’, or, in other words—because the word ‘rain’ itself finds a rhyme with ‘again’—to listen

⁸⁵ Prynne perhaps intends us to equate his ‘Love’ with Coleridge’s 1799 ballad of the same name, which recounts the tale of a knight who ‘pined’ for his ‘dear Genevieve’ (*Lyrical Ballads* 169-172), or Herbert’s similarly titled poems on that theme.

to rhyme without such painful thoughts of unfeasible return. Consequently, I decided that Prynne's intimations of immortality appear to crumble, *and necessarily so*. Joshua Stanley diagnoses the poem's perceived shortcomings, asserting that 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' 'presents the experience of return as in itself an intimation of immortality ... In the very experience of repetition and especially in its expression, change appears to be premised on what does not change, the immortal' ('Back on Into the Way Home' 19). Thus Stanley sees the poem very much in the terms of Eliade's distinction between sacred and profane time, that 'change' is only effected by the ahistorical recurring performance of immortalised archetypes and rituals. This also chimes with Jarvis's account of the pathologically cyclical movement of Wordsworth's Intimations Ode, the final stanza of which concludes that 'The innocent brightness of a new-born day | Is lovely yet,' despite the fact 'That there hath passed away a glory from the earth' (*TMW* 297-302):

No progress has been made. No sublation has occurred. The poem is not dialectic but "fluctuations of general feeling". It is pathos of repetition. With all of melancholia's inability to progress, it yet has mourning's open grief. Echo gives the lie to the retrospective gesture of having-sacrificed. Even as it tells the story of how bliss was given up, the poem sounds longing for bliss. (*Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* 213)

Wordsworth lies, pretending to have willingly sacrificed bliss when really it was lost involuntarily as he grew into adulthood. Can the same be said of 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform', the poet 'once more falling into the hour of [their] birth, going | down the hill and then in at the back door'? I believe not, or not quite. Such is the quality of Prynne's poem's sublation: though it seeks to overcome 'melancholia's inability to progress', it also preserves what it overcomes by virtue of its materiality as text, as a document of unfolding experience, argument, and evolving self-consciousness, and by its purposeful relation to the rest of *The White Stones* (*Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* 213). Clearly, the cyclicity of the poem's final verse-paragraph returns us to its opening sentence, the contradictory admission that 'we do not return'. Following Wordsworth, if each return is not a true return but a Heraclitean return *with difference*, because in Prynne's words 'it will not be the same', the poet learns invaluable lessons in traversing the logical difficulties and

paradoxes of this poem which may be sublated and carried forward, out into the final stretches of *The White Stones* and on into the future work. To deny this is to claim that nothing has happened or been grasped or assimilated in between the phrases ‘I walk on up the hill’ and ‘then in at the back door’.

But does the poet return home through ‘the back door’ because he has failed, and is ashamed that he could not resist the impulse to go back? Or is ‘the back door’ an analogue for the disguise in which Odysseus returns to Ithaca, a tactical manoeuvre to ‘[rejoin] the whole’ rather than a discreet admission of failure? This remains equivocal, though the poet is certainly not ‘trailing clouds of glory’ as he goes back indoors (*TMW* 299). I can assent therefore to Robin Purves’s description of this figure as a ‘furtive Odysseus’, but I cannot agree that this ‘inevitable, predicted end cadence ... has us tumble back once more to the point before the point where we began’ (‘A Commentary on J.H. Prynne’s “Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform” 87-88). I instead read the ‘hour of my birth’ into which the poet falls as a modification of the Intimations Ode, which rescues ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ from the flaw Jarvis identifies in that poem, because each return is not ‘a sleep and a forgetting’, an amnesiac’s entrapment, as birth was for Wordsworth in his account of pre-existence. Music will prevent us from truly forgetting, because it is ‘how we most | deeply recognise the home we may not have’, our existential potential. Indeed, ‘the hour of my birth’ does not refer of course to the literal birth of a child, but to *the birth of the poet*, because Helicon, where we are, is the ‘birthplace of the poet’ as was established in the second verse-paragraph. What does it mean for the poet to inhabit and continue to inhabit the hour of their birth, to keep being born, and returning to that point when they first felt the dawning realisation of their poetic potential, while retaining each time the knowledge of all that they have learned so far, even if this retention isn’t immediately apparent? Is it to stay fresh and self-contradictory, to keep reencountering and reinvigorating their own practice so that it never ossifies or stales, refusing complacency? This reads like a radically permanent occupation of *The Prelude*’s ‘spots of time’, the watersheds and motors of Wordsworth’s epical self-consciousness. Seen in this

light, it is a way of remaining vitally on the threshold without any of the ‘ambience of regret’ Prynne earlier criticised in Tennyson, Arnold, Stevens and Eliot (‘The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry’ 291). Of course, ‘The child is father of the man’ as ‘My heart leaps up’ declares, a poem the last three lines of which Wordsworth would go on to prefix the Intimations Ode with in future editions. The poet is ‘falling into the hour of [their] birth’: but this fall is an overcoming of the Fall, and of Christianity’s eschatological version of continuous time, a time which must resolve with the mythic epilogue of apocalypse. As Eliade concludes *The Myth of the Eternal Return*:

Christianity incontestably proves to be the religion of “fallen man”: and this to the extent to which modern man is irremediably identified with history and progress, and to which history and progress are a fall, both implying the final abandonment of the paradise of archetypes and repetition. (162)

Therefore, Prynne’s galvanising re-inhabitation of birth is a recurring fall *back into* history after the ontological comfort foods of eternal return and millenarian termination have threatened to wrench him away.

The Canadian poet Lisa Robertson has in ‘Untitled Essay’ (2010), a recent meditation on the vernacular and on feminist utopias of poetic making, conjectured a figure which might be isomorphic with Prynne’s self-renewing poet, ‘once more falling into the hour of ... birth’. For Robertson, the vernacular is

Characterized not by lexical economy and simplicity or limitation, as in Wordsworth and Coleridge’s formulation, nor by a misappropriation of tradition or heritage as redemptive closure, but by wit, excess, plasticity, admixture, surge, caesura, the wildness of a newly tuned metaphor, polylinguality and inappropriateness[...]. (87)

The vernacular is the name Robertson gives for poetic improvisation, a kind of permanent revolution of the utterance, and a term to describe ‘the native complexity of each beginner as she quickens’ (87). Therefore, Robertson may glimpse a lyric of ‘urgent errancy, a disposition that is at the same time ethical and aesthetic’, arguing that ‘the vernacular needs the poem; where they confer, a citizen, beginning again and again with the pandemonium at hand in the present’ (87).

Beginning again and again, but with the full consciousness of previous beginnings, disclosed to the perennially refreshing poet of ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ by the subconscious mnemonics of music, because it is literally and ‘truly | the sound of our time’, past, present, and future. Music and poetry are a means for Prynne of binding repetitions and new beginnings ‘each to each’, as with those days of natural piety spiritually linking youth and adulthood for which Wordsworth wishes in ‘My heart leaps up’.

‘*Again* is the sacred | word’, emphasising ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’s sustained allusion to the ‘Once again’ of ‘Tintern Abbey’.⁸⁶ But this resonance is mediated by the precedent of Eliot’s ‘Ash Wednesday’ (1930), the poet’s first Anglican composition after his conversion, where Prynne’s phrase echoes ‘Still is the unspoken word’ (*Collected Poems* 92)). In ‘Ash Wednesday’, we find the newly devout Eliot ‘Wavering between the profit and the loss’ just as we find Prynne in ‘Thoughts’ and Wordsworth in ‘Tintern Abbey’, having moved on from the ‘Death by Water’ of *The Waste Land* in which ‘the profit and loss’ is unconvincingly *forgotten* by Phlebas the Phoenician in the archetypal cop-out of his sacrifice (*Collected Poems* 94, 65). Prynne’s attempted returning-to-progress repudiates the single-mindedness of Eliot’s exilic turning to faith because he did ‘not hope to turn again’, because the infernal and even cryptofascist vision of modernity presented in *The Waste Land* was too unbearable for his poetics to sustain. This is Eliot’s unconvincing effort to overcome what Eliade deems the ‘terror of history’, because his work is ‘saturated with nostalgia for the myth of eternal repetition and, in the last analysis, for the abolition of time’, a peace that passes understanding (*The Myth of the Eternal Return* 153). There is a connection between the wishful belief of these lines from part IV of ‘Ash Wednesday’, and the contentions of rhyme that flicker intermittently across *The White Stones*:

The new years walk, restoring
Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
The time. Redeem

⁸⁶ The opening verse-paragraph concludes: ‘*once again* we are there, beholding the | complete elation of our end’ (added emphasis).

The unread vision in the higher dream
While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse.
(*Collected Poems* 90)

In Eliot's handling, the 'new years' of salvation are realised melodically by perfect terminal rhymes, literally coupling 'restoring' and 'restoring' and 'Redeem' and 'Redeem', just as 'rhyme' and 'time' make their customary internal music. Of course, the incredible facility of this line or argument is intimated by Eliot's rhyming of 'tears' internally into the 'years'; of the two 'Redeem[s]' with 'dream'; the fanciful image of 'jewelled unicorns'; and the fact that the music of the stanza literally dies by concluding with 'hearse', which ominously echoes 'verse'. Eliot must tacitly concede that rhymes are just decorations at the funeral, and that only faith in Christ can save him. Consequently, Prynne's claim in 'The Elegiac World of Victorian Poetry' that Eliot's chief innovation for modern poetry was 'to have maintained the subjective cocoon while draining it of its overt melancholy' rings true, the modernist's command of 'narcotic' incantatory techniques trapping him in a potentially solipsistic and conservative politics and poetics (290-91).

Reeve and Kerridge gloss Prynne's recognition of the natural supernaturalism of return in staunchly Wordsworthian terms, a precious spot of consequential time or space: 'Only by returning to a point or place, and thus establishing it as something durable and distinguished from the continuum, can we invest our connection to it with meaning' (*Nearly Too Much* 63). Prynne refers to such a catalogue of spots as the 'pantheon of hallowed times'. For Geoffrey Hartman, 'Tintern Abbey' is a poem in which the individual poet weighs 'the evidences of loss and gain', just as the Prynne of 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' will attempt to sustain 'constant loss' while simultaneously gaining ground (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 156). But Prynne unsettles Hartman's reading of Wordsworth's poem, that 'The past may revive, and with it the consciousness of what we were' through 'an elemental contact with nature' (156), since 'each time what | we have is increasingly the recall, not | the subject to which we come'. According to Prynne, 'we make | sacred what we cannot see without coming | back to where we were', lazily explaining away what we have lost by

sanctifying it, and lapsing into consecrated nostalgia without *truly* returning to that lost spot of time in the sequence of our being.⁸⁷ Pursuing these ‘Thoughts’ to their conclusion might lead us to an interpretation which exposes a chasm at the heart of the consolation of Wordsworthian return, the naïveté of believing one might achieve ‘tranquil restoration’ by revisiting a cherished place or memory (the banks of the Wye), scanning ‘the visible outlook for the prompt of matching forms: nourishing, sustaining, confirming’, as Prynne himself will write of ‘Tintern Abbey’ in 2009 (‘Tintern Abbey, Once Again’ 81). Once more beholding the Wye’s familiar ‘steep and lofty cliffs’, the Wordsworth of this sceptical account possesses only ‘the recall’ of the past five years, not his former self or prior experience, rooted in absence. He has lost himself, just as the valley’s ‘orchard-tufts ... lose themselves | ‘Mid groves and copses’, a Dante in the middle of his journey through this life.⁸⁸ Prynne grasps this, allusively venturing that ‘Our chief | loss is ourselves; that’s where I am, the | sacral link in a profane world’, recalling once again the figure of Narcissus, paradoxically lost in his own reflection on Helicon. The poet of ‘Thoughts’ has learned from Wordsworth that any attempt at a return home is futile, or will be imitation; that ‘*still* we don’t return, not really’; that he ‘will go back | down & that it will not be the same though | [he] shall be sure it is so’. But Wordsworth has Dorothy alongside him, and may resolve the epode of ‘Tintern Abbey’ thus:

Nor wilt thou then forget,
 That after many wanderings, many years
 Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
 And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
 More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!
 (TMW 135)

To close with ‘many years | Of absence’, a lack enunciated by severing enjambment, betrays Wordsworth’s knowledge of the impossibility of reunion with his ‘former self’ and of recuperating the past. The phrase reprises the ‘Five years’ of the poem’s first stanza just as the ‘steep woods’,

⁸⁷ In Sutherland’s gloss, ‘Whatever we can’t get, we name “sacred”’ (‘Hilarious Absolute Daybreak’ 117).

⁸⁸ In ‘Tintern Abbey’, the Tree of Knowledge is fallen, bathetically reduced to mere ‘orchard-tufts’ and lost among the Dantean woods of the ‘unintelligible world’.

'lofty cliffs', and 'green pastoral landscape' will go on to do. These emphatic redoublings, then, compensate the poet's greater loss of self. In Prynne's commentary on 'Tintern Abbey', the poet concludes:

What separates at the outset [of the poem] is the apparently divisive effect of years of absence; but just as five years can be mended through echoes marked by repetition, guiding and guarding the genial spirits, so too the intermissions of a lifetime can enhance the vehemence of feeling into the marks of connection restored and held dear. ('Tintern Abbey, Once Again' 84)

'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform' feels and knows the misery of 'constant loss' just as much as Wordsworth, but remains sceptical even of the consolation upon which Wordsworth stakes his poem, of the 'Abundant recompense' he receives from nature and the lacking repetitions of return, 'hearing oftentimes | The still, sad music of humanity', 'a sense sublime | Of something far more deeply interfused' (*TMW* 134).

By the time we reach 'A Stone Called Nothing' in the developmental structure of *The White Stones*, a lyric on the edge of capitulation and (as the title implies) even nihilism, Prynne may observe how 'The devastation is aimless: folded with- | out recompense' (31-2). Indeed, forty years later while reading William Collins's 'Ode to Evening' (1746) in his 2008 essay 'Huts', Prynne argues that for poets 'it totally must be possible that some version of order does and will prevail over alienation and despair, because otherwise [their] prosody will collapse, [their] vocation as poet sliding into final ruin' (631). At the same time, poets dialectically affirm that 'ruin and part-ruin lie about us on all sides' (631). There is no order to or recompense for the devastation of modern history to which the poet must bear witness, but there is also nowhere worth getting back to for the misguided nostalgic or conservative: poetry persists in hope like life, however damaged, and must always be, as the dedication to the 2015 edition of Prynne's *Poems* attests, 'For the Future'.

'A Stone Called Nothing' elsewhere avers that the romantic 'child is the merest bent stick' (38-9), a meagre false prop on which the disenchanted modern poet may lean. References to this child punctuate the later poems of the book, marking some of *The White Stones*' most complex

interactions with *The Prelude*, and dialectically antagonising that sense marked in ‘Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform’ of the poet’s continual, optimistic rebirth into lyric aptitude. In the aforementioned ‘Love’, the poet declares his ‘fears which set | the vanished child above | reproach’ (9-11): if his own anxieties inoculate themselves in a manner similar to Wordsworth they might entail putting an idealised figure of childhood beyond criticism, an illusory panacea. Three poems earlier, ‘Starvation / Dream’ alludes to that famous spot of time from the first book of *The Prelude* in which Wordsworth steals a ‘shepherd’s boat’, rowing it ‘In cadence’ with skill and purpose ‘Even like a man who moves with stately step | Though bent on speed’ (I. 373-388). As this thesis has previously observed, the sublime ‘troubled pleasure’ of this early moment in Wordsworth’s poem is one of the young poet’s strongest exposures to the intense power of the imagination (I. 389). However, in Prynne’s poem the poet’s stolen transport is in real danger of sinking: ‘the leaky boat drops | slowly downstream’ (3-4), ‘the leaky boat glides down | the morning flood’ (34-35). Though ‘the dream’ of new social relations ‘still curls in its horizon of | total theft’ (8-10), Joshua Stanley’s account deems this poem finally ‘hopeless’ because it sees ‘the commodity [become] a totalising metaphor’ (‘J.H. Prynne’s romanticism’ 9). Wordsworth’s stolen boat and his view of the sublime ‘bound of the horizon’ in *The Prelude* pivots for Prynne into a figure of the ‘total theft’ of surplus value from exploited labourers under capitalism (I. 399).

Similarly, ‘Chemins de Fer’ juxtaposes images of the romantic child as a figure of latent social possibility with disenchanting reflections on the Second World War and the Holocaust: Prynne was born in 1936 and so many of his early memories must have been profoundly imbricated with the conflict. Here are the final four of the poem’s five verse-paragraphs:

Yet in the air, still
 now, I am claimed
 by the memory of
 how the join, the
 incessant *lapping*, is
 already reported in
 talk to a human figure. Again he is
 watchful, the dream slides right up to the

true Adam and he keeps silent among the
 branches. The approach, here, of streamy recall
 seems like the touch of Europe, an invert logic
 brought in with too vivid a pastoral sense,
 too certain for Alsace, the double eagle or the
 Gulf of Lions. He is a dark outline, already
 struck by sacred
 emptiness. He goes
 slowly, her body
 fades into reason,
 the memory ever-
 green and planted,
 like the lost child.

And so slowly, still, draining gradually into
 the Rhine, the huge barges freeze in the heat
 of trade. How much power, the machine gun in
 a Polish scenario, black and white fade into those
 passionless excursions of childhood. The small
 copse, water rusted in, an adventure! With which
 the flimsy self pivots in wilful envy and lusts
 after its strange body, its limbs gorged and inert.

(TWS 108-109)

With echoes again of the ‘stolen boat’ episode of Wordsworth’s early childhood, the idealism of the poet’s ‘streamy recall’ encounters the brutal memory of the Second World War, much as the previous chapter marked its presence in the oblique autobiography of Hill’s *Mervian Hymns*. The violence of the war in France flashes on the poet’s inward eye with references to Alsace, the Rhine and the Gulf of Lions, while the utopian, unfallen image of a ‘true Adam ... keeps silent’. Thus recall’s ‘invert logic’ arrives ‘with too vivid a pastoral sense’, referring to the typical pastoral’s generic repression of war and discord which nevertheless remain latently palpable, the traumatic swell of modern geopolitical history scored into the poet’s memory. This memory is ‘ever- | green and planted, | like the lost child’ because it too is out of reach: all childhood nostalgia is satirised and buried, with the ‘leaky boat’ of ‘Starvation / Dream’ morphing finally into a contradictorily Petrarchan image of capitalism triumphant: ‘the huge barges freeze in the heat | of trade’. Even ‘the machine gun in | a Polish scenario’ is open to the dangerous nostalgic impulse, though photographs and television images of the Eastern Front in ‘black and white fade into those | passionless excursions of childhood.’ There is no room for a Wordsworthian account of childhood

imaginative growth here, of the ‘troubled pleasure’ of the spots of time. Perhaps recalling the imitations of war in boyhood games, the poet exclaims with bitter irony: ‘The small | copse, water rusted in, an adventure!’. The final sentence of the poem castigates the nostalgic adult’s ‘flimsy self’ for ‘wilful envy’ and lust after his own ‘strange [childhood] body’, making a fetish of childhood when the reality of youth during wartime entailed the trauma of bombing, evacuation, rationing, and death. The following poem, ‘As It Were An Attendant’, will continue to make the poet’s belated disappointment in the more ecstatic early phases of the book explicit, testifying to the commitment of Prynne’s dialectical project:

and late again—we can begin with the warmup
about the politics of melody / that one, and
please you say at once, not *again*.

(13-15)

The music of poetry as a frame for politics has grown stale, so stale the poet and his reader cannot bear to hear these songs replayed. Poetic flight is bathetically reduced to a mere ‘warmup’, and the poet is ‘late again’, missing his appointment.

As Stanley has shown, this dialectical scepticism would consolidate itself in Prynne’s later books without the poet entirely relinquishing the possibility for social and political hope. He rightly argues that there are many continuities between Prynne’s poems of the sixties and seventies, not least in the poet’s continued reliance on ‘one of the central forms of romantic poetry: the mid-length irregular (Pindaric) ode’ (J.H. Prynne’s romanticism’ 1). Importantly for Stanley, ‘the disenchantment of *Brass* should not be overstated; it remains a romantic work and the expressed need for hope alongside disenchantment is also a continuous theme through Prynne’s writing’ (3). This calls into question Keston Sutherland’s influential case for the book as a watershed moment in Prynne’s poetical development, inaugurating a period of intense anti-romantic negativity. Although Stanley’s counterargument is highly persuasive, *Brass*’s negativity remains everywhere

palpable. For example, the caustic sonnet ‘Thinking of You’ rejects the liberal capitalist lie of progress as merely ‘the rancid power of the continuum’:

Not going forward let alone re-
turning upon itself, the old fat in the can.
(1-2)

The gerund ‘returning’ is bisected by the line break, affirming the impossibility of going back or indeed forward, the poet frozen in the ahistorical no-time of the capitalist present.

By the late seventies and on the threshold of Thatcherism, Wordsworth’s ‘The World is Too Much With Us’ will find itself bitterly détourned in the tabloid brawling of *News of Warring Clans* (1977), ‘getting and spending | on the same credit card’ (*Poems* 282), and 1979’s severe sequence *Down where changed* will seem to satirise the idealism of Wordsworthian return as a form of ‘denial’ (*Poems* 295). The only futures are those that can be bought and traded on the stock market, the past enclosed, privatised, sold off: ‘Option trading has become | the hottest game in town’ (*Poems* 283). Curiously, Prynne confesses in the *Paris Review* interview that by the time of the composition of his late masterpiece, 2011’s speculative extravaganza *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is*, the poet found Wordsworth ‘becoming a figure of opposition in [his] writing practice’ (‘The Art of Poetry No. 101’ 200):

I’ve always held this view that poets had better be clear about where their allegiances lie, because otherwise they’re going to go sailing off into an empyrean, which is a luxury they should never afford themselves. I was rather on my guard about this, and that meant that, well, in particular one of my targets was Wordsworth. There are remarks in this poem which are directly anti-Wordsworthian digs about the elevation of spirit that Wordsworth so cogently and eloquently propounds. I have believed that kind of worldview, despite the burden of explicit complication that it contains. (200)

Kazoo Dreamboats’ Engelsian argument for the existence of the dialectic in nature and Maoist commitment to the inherence of contradiction in all things means that the poem’s physics must frequently turn over the ramifications of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. This will lead Prynne in the book’s final pages to loudly contradict ‘Tintern Abbey’:

Rule Three: you do not see into the life of things, dimension-
less or not, except by harvest of data plotted against uncertainty.
(*Poems* 655)

The uncertainty principle states that the more closely and precisely a particle's position is observed and ascertained, the less precisely its momentum can be predicted: therefore, the limitations of Wordsworth's claim in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to 'have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject' (Preface 100) are revealed by Prynne's recourse to quantum physics. Following the 2007-08 financial crisis and the subsequent election of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 on a platform of punitive austerity, Prynne's excoriation of the injustices of capitalism in *Kazoo Dreamboats* ("people with top pay are rubbish") pushes him to contradict 'the elevation of spirit' he so values in Wordsworth: 'None of this it | must be said is the power of harmony even in charge fluctuation' (655). Famously, the second verse-paragraph of 'Tintern Abbey' culminates with Wordsworth's attestation that the presence of the 'beauteous forms' of the Wye valley in his memory have in absence gifted him 'that blessed mood' in which deep, visionary poetic insight is possible:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(*TMW* 132-3)

While *Kazoo Dreamboats* does not want ‘to refuse joy | in favour of rapture of contentment’ (*Poems* 656), it retains a materialist’s scepticism about Wordsworth’s arguably pantheistic vision of spirit, that ‘living soul’:

Spirit sat ever upon her hands but then
that’s also not true, the truth of strong being and being strong-
ly true is not weakened by extractive countermeasure, only by
complacent denial.

(*Poems* 656)

Spirit is nearly touted as a sort of fence-sitting, a toothless refusal to take action, before Prynne’s dialectical syntax gainsays the unassailability of his own contradiction of Wordsworth a few sentences earlier, because such contradictory ontological truths are ‘not weakened by extractive countermeasure’ (656). The real enemy for Prynne is ‘complacent denial’, a shirking of one’s responsibility to think in two minds and a refusal to stand by poetry’s task of ‘extractive countermeasure’, the poet allowing themselves to grow too comfortable, self-righteous and unquestioning in their principles (656).

As both my analyses of the later *White Stones* and Joshua Stanley’s recent readings of poems from 1974’s *Wound Response* (‘An Evening Walk’, sharing its title with Wordsworth’s poem of 1793) and 1987’s *Bands Around the Throat* have shown, for Prynne to claim surprise at his own ‘anti-Wordsworthian digs’ in *Kazoo Dreamboats* is somewhat disingenuous (‘The Art of Poetry No. 101’ 200). Allusions, criticisms, détournements, parodies, and refutations of lines and passages of Wordsworth’s poems are distributed throughout Prynne’s lifework, with all the appreciation a fully dialectical understanding of the romantic poet’s authorship entails. As perhaps the most committedly dialectical poet now writing in the English language, surely Prynne’s belief in ‘that kind of [Wordsworthian] worldview’ is not held to ‘*despite* the burden of explicit complication that it contains’, but because of it (200 added emphasis). The difficulties and contradictions that inhere in Wordsworth’s poetry, and which Prynne enunciates so movingly right down to the level of etymology in *Field Notes* and ‘Mental Ears and Poetic Work’, are inextricably linked to its lasting

vitality, influence and value. Once again alluding to ‘Tintern Abbey’ in *Kazoo Dreamboats* by devastatingly substituting Wordsworth’s ‘joy’ for ‘contradiction’, Prynne ecstatically writes:

It was
the deep power of contradiction in dipole scattering brilliance,
tumid with negation, deep only by customary expletive, that made
a blaze before the eyes, because you see only by knowing and
doing what you know.

(*Poems* 656)

Knowledge is seeing, yes, but further to that and crucially knowledge sees only when it moves, when we take action on what we know rather than sitting on our hands. The point, after all, is to change things. Prynne’s poetry’s recurring rejoinders to and contradictions of Wordsworth are a powerful and moving example of how one poet can dialectically read another and in turn be read themselves: two poets mutually invigorating each other across centuries.

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