

# Geoffrey Hill's Mercian Hymns

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**I**N *Mercian Hymns* (1971) Geoffrey Hill discovers in the history and topography of his native West Midlands a particular rhythm of life which he succeeds in conveying in the poem by an informing mythology and an analogous prose rhythm. He builds his poem around the figure of Offa who is not only the eighth century king of historical fact but also the imaginatively-conceived "presiding genius of the West Midlands."<sup>1</sup> Hill praised George Eliot, the great novelist of the West Midlands, for being "a writer with a fine sense of traditional life" and in discussing a passage from Chapter 18 of *Adam Bede*, in which Adam listens to the "recurrent responses, and the familiar rhythm" of Anglican hymns or "collects", he generalized upon the subject of rhythm, adumbrating ideas which are directly relevant to his poetic method in *Mercian Hymns*:

The responses are to be understood both as recurring within the limited time-span of a particular Anglican evensong, following the established pattern of the rubric, and as recurring over an implied and indefinite number of years, recurring Sunday by Sunday, season by season, year after year. It is by such means that "channels" are created; by the joint working of abrasion and continuity. "Responses" is the correct term for the established form of congregational participation in the liturgy. At the same time, over and below this literal meaning, the word connotes the continuity of human response in general to an ancient process of parochial and national life. The collects of the Anglican Church are composed of liturgical prose; they could properly be said to possess rhythm, though not metre . . . "Familiar rhythm" is both liturgical and extra-liturgical, telling of a rhythm of social duties, rites, ties and obligations from which an individual severs himself or herself at great cost and peril, but implying also the natural sequences of stresses and slacks in the thoughts and acts of a representative human being.<sup>2</sup>

Hill's sequence of thirty prose-poems is a "response" to his felt sense of "traditional life" (his own poem "abrades" against

the "continuity" of one thousand years of Mercian tradition) and this life is embodied in the poem by means of a vast historical time-scale extending from the eighth century to the present. It also is embodied by the concentration on the varied life-styles of the Mercians over that long period, "telling of a rhythm of social duties, rites, ties and obligations". The first hymn establishes this, if rather ironically, in its close-pressed catalogue of historically-dirempted professions — "overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch" — and some of the hymns concentrate on such communal projects as law-making and minting. Traditional life also is caught by Hill's felicitous use of rooted Mercian idioms of speech. The "rhythm of parochial and national life" in Hill's poem takes in his own past (his own acts of cruelty in his childhood relate to the wider panorama of the bombing of England by the Germans in the Second World War: see Hymns III, VII and XXI for example). The recollection and re-enactment of these acts by the mature poet imply "the natural sequences of stresses and slacks in the thoughts and acts of a representative human being" in the present and the past. The past of his forebears also is in the rhythm: see the hymn to his grandmother "whose prime childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the nailer's darg," her personal suffering relating to that of the many who were oppressed by nineteenth-century industrialism. Caught up in this rhythm too is the whole legacy, in both its constructive and destructive aspects, of the Mercian past. This past Hill views as representative of England as a whole, and he quotes George Eliot's words on the West Midlands as "fat central England" as well as Engels' observation that the Midlands, in its transition from agrarianism to industrialism, was "the classic soil of . . . transformation" in modern history.<sup>3</sup> Hill uses two principal methods to unify these disparate historical experiences in his poem. The first method is his handling of local geography and the myth of the Mercian king, Offa, who is not only "an embodiment of the folk"<sup>4</sup> of Mercia but is at points identifiable with Hill himself. The second method is by means of a prose style which possesses "rhythm, though not

metre," that is bedded in the impersonal "speech of the landscape" of Mercia and Hill's personal "affectionate joy" in his native landscape and language.<sup>5</sup> Hill can praise George Eliot's essays for their "quintessential . . . masterly conflation" — that is, for their restrained prose rhythm and economy of words — and it is this very quality of rhythmical conflation that one detects in Hill's own Mercian "hymns" or "collects", which "collect" the macrocosmic rhythms of Mercian speech, both present and past, and relate them to the long historical vista of changing social systems within the microcosmic network of his long poem. The technical collection of inter-related images, rhythms and words in *Mercian Hymns* thereby succeeds in weaving together the threads of expansive themes, which are the burdens of kingship, the problems of morality and government in public and private life, the meaning of history and myth and the problem of their imaginative reconstruction in the mind of the poet, and the tension between time and eternity. The sardonic humour running through all the hymns carefully undermines the possibility of the larger themes appearing too pompous. In the Poetry Book Society *Bulletin* for Summer 1971 Hill wrote: "I would . . . be inclined to stress the likenesses, the continuities, between *For The Unfallen*, *King Log* [Hill's first two volumes of poetry], and *Mercian Hymns* rather than the manifest differences. In the new volume the occasional comedy is perhaps more extravagant, but (contrary to some opinion) the earlier books were not wholly devoid of humour." Indeed the appended notes to *Mercian Hymns* (like those to Eliot's *The Wasteland*) amplify the humour in the volume.

Although *Mercian Hymns* was the most extensively reviewed of Hill's books most critics of the poem-sequence were conservative in their assessments of it, although Martin Dodsworth wrote, rather glibly, that "It is the best English book of poems since . . . Eliot" (*Stand*. Vol. 13, p. 63). A reviewer's first impression of the sequence could easily be one of a poet who is continually clowning around, rather than getting to grips with his subject. In fact, Hill's sardonic humour and plangent irony are only two of the ways by which

he controls his amorphous material. In his 1971 article he wrote:

it is now not possible to recall why or how one was drawn into the presence of "Offa". It was an enchantment difficult to justify on rational grounds; but, once one had been drawn, the details of the fantasy took on their own rationale.

Christopher Ricks, in the most intelligent review of the sequence (*The Listener* 26 August 1971) suggested that it was Hill's essay on *Cymbeline*<sup>6</sup> which "prompted" the writing of the prose-poems, quoting Hill's words on *Cymbeline* that "A British king is seen for what he is: uxorious, irrational, violent when prodded, indulgent, of absolute status and ultimately invulnerable," and saying of the poems that they "earn the strong words from Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* with which Hill rounded his claims: 'drenched in flesh and blood, civil history, morality, policy, about the which men's affections, praises, fortunes do turn and are conversant.'" <sup>7</sup> Although Ricks' comparison between the essay and the sequence is interesting, I think that Hill's persistent preoccupation with history in all his volumes of poetry suggests that it was more likely to have been a desire on his part to write of his native Mercia and of the relationship between his own childhood there and the rooted history of the area which generated his initial "irrational enchantment" with Offa. Nevertheless, his essay on *Cymbeline* obviously provided him with interesting parallels between the two ancient kings of Britain, *Cymbeline* and Offa. To my question, "Do you, before embarking on a poem-sequence . . . research thoroughly into historical epochs and their corresponding myths before writing, or is the genesis the other way around?" Hill has replied:

The impulse to write that particular poem comes first; but the impulse itself may of course come from some piece of chance reading in that area. In the case of a sequence, like "Funeral Music" or "Lachrimae" or "Mercian Hymns," I tend to read myself into a particular epoch while the composition of the sequence is progressing.<sup>8</sup>

This answer suggests that the writing of the *Cymbeline*

essay was not the primary impulse behind the composition of *Mercian Hymns*, although a study of Shakespeare's play may have enriched Hill's approach to his subject. There is a greater likelihood that both the sequence and the essay stemmed from Hill's developing interest in the history of the Anglo-Saxon period and in how Shakespeare had managed to correlate the story of an early British king, Cymbeline, with the contemporary political situation of the Tudor-Stuart transitional era (just as Hill attempts to meld the story of Offa with mid-twentieth century Britain). Hill argues in the essay that:

Myths were things of utility to Tudor and Stuart politicians. They were also, though more sensitively, things of utility to the dramatist. . . . It would be unwise to ignore the relevance of Stuart myth to our understanding of this play. Henry VII was the saviour of his people; his great-great-grandson James VI and I, the unifier and pacifier, was "the fulfilment of the oldest prophecies of the British people." To the medieval chroniclers Cymbeline was a man of peace whose reign coincided with the birth of Christ. Shakespeare could have read this in Holinshed and sensed the connotations. Milford Haven, where the secular redeemer had landed in 1485, was a hallowed place celebrated in Tudor and Stuart patriotic verse. Such numinous power is not unknown even in the twentieth century . . . Holy and awesome places do exist. (pp. 19-20)

Hill's analysis of Shakespeare's technical means of fusing the myth of Cymbeline with the contemporaneous political dilemmas of the Tudor-Stuart era indicates technical methods which he could endorse on a smaller scale in his sequence to embody the poetic impulse he felt in "the enchanted presence of Offa." He employs the myth of Offa as Shakespeare had that of Cymbeline. The juxtaposing of contemporary reality (the M5) with Anglo-Saxon history (Offa's dyke) and of eternity ("the perennial holly-groves") with time ("the riven sand-/ stone") in the space of a few lines in the opening hymn mirrors a greater, more expansive, correlation of public and personal myth and history over the whole sequence. The figure of Offa, in his historical and mythical capacities, often fuses inter-changeably with the contemporary protagonist — for example, in Hymn XXI. In the first hymn Offa is invoked as Christ was in all medieval canticles (Hill's hymns are

non-metrical and are therefore types of canticles) as a figure eternally and infinitely present in the landscape of Mercia. Thus, like Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Offa is seen in one light as "A man of peace whose reign coincided with the birth of Christ" and Mercia is conceived as "a hallowed place" with "numinous power":

After that shadowy, thrashing midsummer hail-storm,  
 Earth lay for a while, the ghost-bride of livid  
 Thor, butcher of strawberries, and the shire-tree  
 dripped red in the arena of its uprooting. (Hymn XXVII)

For Hill, Mercia is obviously one of those "holy and awesome places" in which constructive and destructive processes, both natural and anthropomorphic, are enacted continually: when Offa dies nature responds sympathetically in the same awesome manner as at Christ's crucifixion. The "enchanted ground" (Hill quotes this phrase about *Cymbeline* on p. 32 of his essay) of Mercia has lost its "unifier and pacifier," although the "enchanted ground" of *Mercian Hymns* is, as Hill says of that of *Cymbeline*, "drenched in flesh and blood" and "civil history," and mythical Offa is at nearly every juncture of the poem compromised by a historical counterpart who like *Cymbeline* is "irrational, violent when prodded, indulgent, of absolute status and ultimately invulnerable."<sup>9</sup> Hill's delineation of the ambivalence of Offa as a mythical figure and Offa as a historical king reflects the facts which surround the name. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entry says, for instance, that:

No contemporary account of Offa has survived, and the history of his reign is a collection of fragmentary references. . . . There are no adequate materials for a picture of his character. He was a patron of learning and a notable benefactor to many churches, but his rule was arbitrary and he was ruthless to all who opposed him. What can be said is that he left a deeper impression on English history than any other king before Alfred . . . He is said by the Anglo-Saxon poem *Widsith* to have ruled Angel. Said to have been dumb in his early years, recovered his speech when his father Wermund was threatened by the Saxons. . . . Offa of Mercia, however, was a descendent in the twelfth generation of Offa, king of Angel.

The paradoxes of character, the tensions between myth,

legend and history, and the almost total eradication of Offa's civilization are three primary aspects of Offa which Hill explores in the sequence. In Hymn XXVII mythical Offa transcends the wilful childishness, murderous hypocrisy and ferocious cruelty (see Hymns I, XIV and XI respectively) of the historical king. In the paradoxical bonding of summer and winter ("midsummer hailstorm") there is a suggested reconciliation of the psychological problem of Hymn X, where a child weeps "attempting to master 'ancilla' and 'servus'", the Laws of God and the Laws of the Earth. Although Offa is seen to be arbitrarily cruel to the forgers of the coin of the realm in Hymn XI, in Hymn X Hill is posing the problem of how a prince can find a judicial balance between civic order and Christian magnanimity. The problems of the historical Offa and the contemporary protagonist rest upon "the unique and bungling conscience of homo sapiens" by which "Man cannot cope with fragilities or with his perilous reason"<sup>10</sup> without the intercession of "the law of revelation" (the phrase from Blackstone which appears in the poem's epigraph). Offa's "human laws" are independent of natural laws such as the bonds of kinship, and of "revelation" and are therefore unnaturally biased. In a note to the poem Hill says that "Offa, as a king, should embody the folk" but his megalomania prevents him from serving his true communal purpose. Ironically, it is only in a mythical capacity that Offa can embody the people, topography and history of Mercia. A true king should embody the harmonious consort of familial, civic and religious pieties, but such an ideal is rarely attained. However, within the fictional boundaries of myth such a concept is realisable, and in *Mercian Hymns* Hill succeeds in ironically counterpointing the reality of history with the idealistic fiction of myth. In this sense Hill's poem is more "fictional" than the novels of George Eliot, which are concerned with "the speech of the landscape" of the West Midlands, in that its aesthetic and linguistic pattern is not based upon the real laws, rites, duties, ties, obligations and speech of a shared community but upon the ideally, and idiosyncratically, conceived pattern of Hill's own imagination.

Hill has to imaginatively, and sometimes fantastically, collate a particular historical era, whether it be eighth- or nineteenth-century Mercia, with universal twentieth-century experience:

Dismissing reports and men, he put pressure on the wax, blistered it to a crest. He threatened malefactors with ash from his noon cigar.

When the sky cleared above Malvern, he lingered in his orchard; by the quiet hammer-pond. Trout-fry simmered here, translucent, as though forming the water's underskin . . . (Hymn XIV)

In the first clause Offa is seen as the constructive law-maker, but there is also a paradoxical suggestion of his tyrannical cruelty in the loaded words "blistered" and "ash": this is not just the myth-hero "Offa" (whether king or "genius") but a modern businessman aggressively pointing his cigar at a potential buyer, or a contemporary political leader who has the enabling power of modern technology, in the form of nuclear power, "at his fingertips," colloquially speaking — "ash", "noon" and "blistered" potentially summon a picture of Hiroshima. By the end of the hymn Offa's dictatorial mind is overtly emphasised: "Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring." The chronicled paradoxes of Offa's nature ("a patron of learning and a notable benefactor to many churches, but his rule was arbitrary and he was ruthless to all who opposed him") are obliquely created in Hill's poem. Offa is both a constructive law-maker and a destructive tyrant; he is at once, like *Cymbeline*, associated with Christ (see Hymns I, XVI and XXVII) and therefore eternal, but at the same time he is associated with the Earth (Hymn XXX: "he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud") and is therefore mortal. The historical figure of Offa in his various manifestations in the "folk" of the poem — whether he is the tourist of Hymn XVII, the young boys of Hymn XXII or the workmen of Hymn XII — "compromises" at every turn Hill's fictional, mythical creation. Hill in his essay on *Cymbeline* writes that "Shakespeare is perhaps ready to accept a vision of actual power at cross-purposes with the vision of power-in-grace; 'the real world,' in fact, in which the life of



the spirit is at all points compromised." Just so, the recalcitrant nature of the poem's language compromises, in its emphasis on the "actual power" of the law of nature, the transcendent law of revelation:

Shafts from the winter sun homing upon earth's rim.  
Christ's mass: in the thick of a snowy forest the  
flickering evergreen fissured with light. (Hymn XVI)

Here the word "mass" ambivalently unites the possibilities of a Christian service and the world of unredeemed brute creation. The "creative milieu" of *Mercian Hymns* is one in which the personal facts of Offa's life debunk the over-riding mythological significance he possesses in the poem's structure.<sup>11</sup> The poem ironically endorses the method of aligning abiding myth with contemporary reality — we remember T.S. Eliot's clarion call to all young writers to follow the working example of James Joyce's *Ulysses*:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. . . . It 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.<sup>12</sup>

Hill, however, does embody history seriously in the poem, in the sense of Nicolas Berdyaev's definition of history:

History is not an objective empirical datum; it is a myth. Myth is no fiction, but a reality; it is, however, one of a different order from that of the so-called objective empirical fact. . . . Each man represents by virtue of his inner nature a sort of microcosm in which the whole world of reality and all the great historical epochs combine and coexist.<sup>13</sup>

The "reality" of the myth of Offa is creatively explored by Hill in *Mercian Hymns* by means of his thematic concentration on Offa's human frailties, perversities and limitations, while the focused narrative of Offa's historical reign is contained within the "fantasy" or mythical-fictional framework of the poem. Hill thereby creates "a reality . . . of a different order from that of the so-called objective empirical

fact." The material of history is incorporated into an aesthetic pattern which is governed by the dual technique at the centre of the poem: the concentrated account of "Offa", who "represents by virtue of his inner nature a sort of microcosm in which the whole world of reality and all the great historical epochs [of Mercia] combine and coexist," and the rhythmical prose of the thirty hymns which enact, and "collect", the truncated historical experiences of one thousand years of Midlands history. The poem capitalises on the tension that always exists between "ancilla" and "servus",<sup>14</sup> the laws of Earth and the laws of God. The diversity of historical experience is represented in *Mercian Hymns* by the friction between the counterparts, contrarities and correlations of theme, metaphor, image, meaning and style within and between the tight structures of each of the thirty prose-poems.

There are few models of the prose-poem in English upon which one can build a reading experience of the form. However, T. S. Eliot's illuminating comments in his preface to his translation of St. John Perse's French prose-poem sequence, *Anabasis*,<sup>15</sup> can help toward a reading of Hill's *Mercian Hymns*:

Any obscurity of the poem, on first reading, is due to the suppression of "links in the chain", of explanatory and connecting matter, and not to incoherence, or to the love of cryptogram. . . . The reader has to allow the images to fall into his memory successively without questioning the reasonableness of each at the moment; so that, at the end, a total effect is produced. Such selection of a sequence of images and ideas has nothing chaotic about it. There is a logic of the imagination as well as a logic of concepts. . . . A writer, by using, as does Mr. Perse, certain exclusively poetic methods, is sometimes able to write poetry in what is called prose.<sup>16</sup>

The logic of Eliot's translation of Perse's poem is inviolable and there are certain specific echoes of the French poem to be found in *Mercian Hymns*. For instance, on p. 37 of Eliot's translation we have:

At the third lutation, those who kept watch on the hilltops folded their canvas. The body of a woman was burnt in the sands. And a man strode forth at the threshold of the desert - profession of his father: dealer in scent-bottles.

Apart from a similar tone of sardonic humour the imagery

here strikingly resembles that of *Mercian Hymns XXX*:

And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk to  
wards us                      he vanished.<sup>17</sup>

On page 61 of *Anabasis* we find:

And erect on the shining edge of the day, on the  
threshold of a great land more chaste than death,  
the girls made water straddling and holding aside their  
print gowns.

The wrenching across the line of "thresh-/old" in order to set up a series of ironic reverberations resembles Hill's device in Hymn XXII for example: "and warriors who took wing im-/mortal as phantoms," whilst the imagery of "the shining edge of the day" is like Hill's "the winter sun homing upon earth's rim" (Hymn XVI), and the image of the girls making water is like that of the workmen in Hymn XII: "They brewed / and pissed amid splendour; their latrine seethed / its estuary through nettles." St. John Perse's poetic method is transcended, however, by Hill's idiosyncratic deployment of native English history, myth and idiom. The rationale of Hill's poem is as evident as Eliot's translation of the French poem, and by means of its integral logical coherence it succeeds in avoiding that looseness of structure and overbearing pedantry which informs the prose-poems of, for example, David Jones.

None of the Hymns were published separately. Christopher Ricks rightly points out that the reason for this was Hill's "just sense of their graceful, moody inter-dependence: similar considerations, sensing the rhythm within a poem, make them particularly hard to quote from."<sup>18</sup> Hill himself has written that "*Mercian Hymns* was begun in the summer of 1967; it was finished precisely three years later. From the first I sensed that it would be a sequence, a volume complete in itself." This close inter-relationship within and between the Hymns is based upon the use of parallelism, as Jon Silkin points out in his essay on Hill.<sup>19</sup> Silkin, however, does not explain this technical term, although he acknowledges that

he is using it in the sense defined by Frederick Britten in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse* (Hill acknowledges this source himself in his notes to the poem) where he is writing of its use in early Church hymns which "had neither metre nor rhyme; but each verse was divided into two parts linked to each other by parallelism of thought. The second half of each verse emphasised or amplified the thought expressed in the first half or repeated it in different words, or answered a question contained in it" (p. liv). Although Hill's technique is not strictly like this (if it were, then the poems would be much more liturgical than they in fact are) he certainly adopts a "parallelism of thought" which informs the whole structure of *Mercian Hymns* and which gives it its characteristic verbal compression or tension. Because there is no traditional narrative basis to the poem<sup>20</sup> Hill resolves the problem of structure by bonding his juxtaposition or paralleling of disparate events and images (often ironically) in time with a symbolic figure, Offa, who lies outside time. Rather than traditional narrative, then, Hill adopts myth as his method of cohesion: Offa is an archetypal symbol of all history, having a mythological transcendence which serves as an analogue for the whole of the Mercian past including that small part which is a Second World War childhood: Mercia's landscape, legendary first king, battles, children, industries, laws, deaths and arts. It is this firm foundation of myth, enhanced by an array of secondary symbols (coins, bestiary, needlework, nail-forge, crown and sword) and images that "leap-frog the centuries"<sup>21</sup> which provides *Mercian Hymns* with a cohesive structure. Everything is collected, transformed, related and translated into a perfect rapport between vision and technique ("Not strangeness, but strange likeness" of Hymn XXIX) by means of Hill's discovered vehicle of a tense, rhythmical prose whose impulse powerfully infuses the serried idioms of English speech stylistically, thereby reinforcing the thematic, symbolic and imagistic strands of the poem with a strong prose style. It is by a rhythmic method of connection and transformation, relation and translation between the

individual parts, that Hill's poem-sequence proceeds, and by this method "the strands of personal and national destiny are interwoven."<sup>22</sup>

The conflict within and across the prose-poems between complementaries, converses and opposites of theme, image, meaning and rhythm results in a poem of high tension, if by tension one means Hill's acute awareness of contemporary psychological anxieties and social and linguistic frictions. In his essay on *Cymbeline* Hill describes poetic tension as "a dualistic acceptance of things as they are. Such dualisms seem to avoid the chain of cause and effect" (p. 27). His compressed poems work ironically, partly in terms of their different manifestations of tension between linguistic ambiguities:

Behind the thorn-trees thin smoke, scutch-grass or  
wattle smouldering. At this distance it is hard  
to tell. Far cries impinge like the faint tinkling of iron. (Hymn XIX)

Here the wasteful and destructive process of history is projected through the ironies of the phrases "At this distance," "It is hard to tell" and "Far cries," which simultaneously convey a physically tangible setting and an intangible period of history. By concomitantly assessing linguistic ambiguities and an indefinitely long vista of Mercian history, Hill achieves an effect of compression which, whilst conveying the tensions of a contemporary protagonist, reviews also the bloody "parasitic knowledge"<sup>23</sup> of his heritage. This method thereby avoids the looseness of form which a serial view of history would give. It is this quality which provides *Mercian Hymns* with a greater unity than, say Robert Lowell's *History*, where one is never aware of tensions and paradoxes between the present and the past because Lowell is content to view history on a "progressive" basis. The tensions of irony in *Mercian Hymns* (between the mythical Offa and the historical king; distant and more recent history; time and eternity) are conceived over a more extensive range than those of his previous sequences and individual poems, and therefore require a more rigorously planned structure.

Whereas previously Hill had focused independently on various kinds of ironic tension (that inhering in metaphor: for instance, "This hollow bow, /New-sprung in Heaven" of the early poem "An Ark On The Flood"; or in the contrasts between the universal and the particular) in *Mercian Hymns* he draws these varying levels of stress into an overall pattern, from which his poem of tension emerges in accordance with Cleanth Brooks' postulation in *The Well-Wrought Urn* of the poem as a drama in which multiple planes of meaning consort. Hill himself has written of "the poem as drama": "Lyric poetry is necessarily dramatic: indeed the 'different planes' actually available to a director on his theatre-stage could even be regarded as an indication of what takes place 'simultaneously' in the arena of the poem." Such a method ensures that the possibilities of tensionless sentiment or loose narrative description entering the poem are considerably reduced. This tension also exists in the genesis of Hill's *Mercian Hymns* themselves.

As Hill acknowledges in his appended notes to the poem, the title is borrowed from Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*, in which there appear six "hymns" (the name Sweet bestows upon them) or prose "canticles" (their proper medieval designation) that had been translated by monks into Anglo-Saxon from the Latin prose of the Old and New Testaments. Although Silkin rightly suggests that the Anglo-Saxon "Mercian Hymns" act as "a historical filter for Hill" he also argues that they are only oblique to Hill's themes and techniques. I would disagree with this, and argue that the original hymns are directly relevant to the genesis, and reading, of Hill's own *Mercian Hymns*. In his poem Hill takes the aetiology of the confusing tradition of biblical translations (Hebrew to Latin to Anglo-Saxon) as a basis upon which to build his own hymns, which, in both content and form, seriously and wittily counterpoint disparate historical perspectives from the viewpoint of Hill's own "new" translation of the multifarious levels of cultural tradition which underlie the English (specifically Mercian) heritage. The three-fold structure of Hebrew-Latin-Anglo-Saxon finds a

parallel in Hill's method of creating a third "version", albeit the small-scale one of his poem, out of two primary contrasting ones: Mercia of the eighth century and contemporary West Midlands. The "Hymns" in Sweet are those high moments of lyrical praise which occur within the prose passages of the Latin text: one of David's psalms; Isaiah's hymn of thanksgiving; Habakkuk's prayer; the song of Moses; Luke's benediction and Magnificat. These poems, in the context of the Latin biblical narratives, emerge from a mass of surrounding prose, but in the Anglo-Saxon translations they are based upon prose rhythms and give rise to non-metrical hymns, or canticles, which were regularly chanted in medieval churches. Like George Eliot's words on the collects of the Anglican Church, they "tell of a rhythm of social duties." In the Anglo-Saxon translations there is no distinction between the prose of the narrative and the poetry of Moses, David or Luke. The original tension between the two in the Latin version has been fused into a unifying pattern of rhythm in which prose and poetry are subsumed within the native Anglo-Saxon form of the prose-poem; the diurnal rhythm of Anglo-Saxon life finds a creative parallel in the canticles. It is this uniting of private life (specifically Hill's own, in the ontology of his childhood and developing poetic imagination) with public duty<sup>24</sup> (law-making, religious observance, minting, etc.) which Hill attempts in his own Hymns, using a technical medium of his rhythmical prose to embody his theme. The autobiographical details of the poem are thereby handled impersonally on the public level of Midlands tradition, and both present and past are seen within a continuum of changelessness:

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

Civilization is viewed here metaphorically, in terms of a tree; its roots in the past, it climbs to an indeterminable future whose form inheres in the myriad decisions, both

public and private, of the present. The organic, natural form of the tree compares with the unnatural and cruel deeds of man. In his essay on Silkin, Hill writes of "the 'unnatural' apathies of the human soul, the unacknowledged complicities in ancient and recent guilt; unacknowledged and therefore incapable of expiation" (p. 6). The acknowledgment of "I have accrued a golden / and stinking blaze" suggests simultaneously, and therefore ironically, both defiant expiation and harboured guilt. The praise here emerges from Hill's "hostile reverence for life generating the minute particulars"<sup>25</sup> of a poetry which possesses a "sense of the monumental grandeur of . . . heritage, and a violent nausea at its roots in bloodiness and greed."<sup>26</sup> The historical Offa is viewed in "unnatural" terms whilst the mythical Offa is conceived as the "shire-tree" round which the whole of Mercia revolves, and if that controlling centre is removed anarchy ensues: "The shire-tree / dripped red in the arena of its uprooting." Hill is careful to highlight the essential anarchy which exists in every historical epoch, whether it be Offa's murderous deeds or the bombing of the Midlands by the Germans. The objective landscape of Mercia may have changed considerably since the reign of Offa, particularly in the changeover from a rural landscape to a predominantly industrial one, but cruelty, murder, minting, building, fighting and dying are forever present as man's essential, and terrible, inheritances. Ironically, it is only material objects (which include laws and poems transcribed onto paper) that transcend man's brief life:

Coelred 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. Coelred let it spin through a hole  
 in the classroom-floorboards, softly, into the  
 rat-droppings and coins. (Hymn VII)

The biplane joins all the other excrementa of history that will later form a base for archeologists' attempts to decipher a civilization. The biplane and coins are types of the "human law" which eventually are compromised by the law of nature



(the rat-droppings). These man-made physical objects (and this is a poem very much concerned with the world of tangible reality) are not only the residue of history, but themselves shape the patterns of historical decisions, both private and public: the biplane belongs essentially to the private realm although, ironically, it is a replica of a machine which is designed for public massacre; the coins belong to the public sphere of government. In the poem Hill is concerned with the wasteful and tragic implications of the tense paradox between men's ephemeral lives and the abiding nature of physical matter. All the man-made objects in the poem are seen as embodiments of spiritual consciousness (and hence are analogues of poetry) which attempt to surmount the law of time ("ancilla"), but although capable of telling us something about their creators they are incapable of freeing them or us from mortality. Against this Hill postulates the "law of revelation" (or "servus"). Thus, in the last lines of the poem — "he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud" — there is a sense of the enduring power of Offa as myth, but not as an historical figure. Rather, he is a mythical presence who has to shape the landscape of Mercia by continuous destruction and recreation. Offa assumes the significance of the fate of man's history and his continuing search for an abiding ideal of eternity outside the cycles of generation: "Primeval heathland, spattered with the bones of mice and birds" (Hymn XX). This destructive process is qualified throughout the sequence by the natural process of creation (specifically in Hymn XX by: "where adders basked and bees made provision, mantling the inner walls of their burh") and the ambivalent composition of the natural world of destructiveness and creativity is transcended by the "law of revelation" or eternity. The symbols of the holly-grove (Hymn I) and the evergreen (Hymn XVI) are placed alongside the "processes of generation":

Shafts from the winter-sun homing upon earth's rim.  
Christ's mass: in the thick of a snowy forest the  
flickering evergreen fissured with light.

Hill achieves a poetic tension between time and eternity by

using local Midland legend and the enduring language of its people, and thereby succeeds in creating a convincing mythological poem which, however, does not ignore the problems of the present but incorporates them into the framework of the poem, primarily through the pervasive tones of irony and scepticism which, of course, are prevalent mid-twentieth century modes of feeling.

The whole poem-sequence is a spirited call for community, and possibly can be interpreted as an attempt to surmount the modernists' preoccupation with disorder and the private hell of the wasteland. This is how Michael Launchbury views the poem. Writing specifically of the lines from Hymn VIII —

Gasholders, russet among fields. Milldams, marlpools  
that lay unstirring. Eel-swarms. Coagulations of  
frogs —

he says they are an answer to Eliot's wasteland: "A very special image of fields and gasholders is created by the word 'russet'; russet is the colour also of wheat and it gives its name to a distinctively coloured fruit. . . . The pools may be stagnant but they are teeming, glutted with life. The industrial scene is in this way not a wasteland at all." ("Geoffrey Hill's 'Mercian Hymns'" *Delta*, Sheffield, Spring 1972 p.47). Hill certainly succeeds in finding a delicate balance between the rhythm of industrial life and that of rural experience here and at other points in the poem and they surmount T. S. Eliot's refusal to integrate the particulars of the modern industrial world into his poetry. Launchbury's point is interesting as a passing thought, but one or two images that succeed in transcending the modern tradition of disjunction cannot by themselves constitute a poetic revolution, and even if one accepts, as I do, that the images succeed in this way one cannot ignore the pervasive irony in the poem which connects Hill's poem to many of Eliot's own. Although concerned with the possibilities of communal life and its daily rhythms, Hill's poem cannot rely upon such an existing life-style in the twentieth century. As he writes in his essay on rhythm, George Eliot could rely upon a basis of "a pattern of inherited living" (p. 108) and "A rhythm of

'interchange' was available to [her]" which "enabled her to stay imaginatively, if not actually, in stride with Anglican parochial and national life" (p. 107). Hill also quotes Walter Ong to the effect that "the rhythms of a language are already rooted when the poet arrives" (p. 108), a point with which he is in full agreement. Hill's agnosticism means that like George Eliot he cannot accept the "letter" of the Church, but like her he is not insensitive to the inherited rhythms that the Church has generated within the community. His poem is not founded, as her fiction is, upon a settled rural culture whose "language is already rooted", but upon the interchange between past and present idioms, and that of industrialism and ruralism. In this sense the poem is more fictional than Eliot's novels: Hill has to create an enclosed, idiosyncratic community which reflects an ideal rather than a factual account of shared tradition. However, the poem does contain a tone of acceptance of the modern landscape which is not to be found in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and the possibility of a poetic tradition whereby industrial and rural life can inter-relate. It is this respect for life on its own terms and in all its myriad manifestations which is admirable in *Mercian Hymns*. This respect stems from Hill's "hostile reverence for life" and his realisation that "exultation leaps from a defiance of the odds . . . Therefore the challenging of possibilities is both affirmation and defiance; and the poetry that utters the praise and the challenge is a ceremonial, even a sacramental act" ("The Poetry of Jon Silkin" p.7). Hill also writes of Silkin's poems as "hymns of love and hate" (p.8) and within the context of this phrase the words "a ceremonial, even a sacramental, act" can be regarded as a possible definition of a "hymn" if by this word one means a song of praise (the noun) or to celebrate in song or to worship by hymns (the verb). In Hill's poetry praise of the world is not won easily. Its power issues from a bleak background of corruption, death, suffering and cruelty:

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

The broken-backed word "marsh-/marigold" simultaneously conveys a cruel, dark inhospitable world and a world full of beauty and light; the hard-won affirmation of "marigold" emerging from a total realization of the meaning of "marsh". In accepting the modern world on its own demanding terms Hill does not lapse, as the proto-moderns did, into the simple notion of a golden past. His hymns are not only prose-poems but songs of praise which worship and celebrate the rhythms and beauty of Mercia, both past and present, at the same time as they assimilate the paradoxes and sufferings of man over a period of one thousand years up to Hill's own childhood and adolescence. In *Mercian Hymns* the poet praises his West Midlands native soil in terms of poetry, as he earlier had done in prose:

It is worthy of notice, one feels, that the so-called "Oxford Poet" is living away from the university for at least six months of the year. So the boy born and brought up in Worcestershire . . . is still to all intents a local boy. He does not, unless he is very unfortunate, lose touch with his home ground. His roots still ache for their soil. And the poem he writes or publishes in Oxford may well have been conceived during a ramble over the Lickey Hills or round by Bewdley and the Severn.<sup>27</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>From Hill's own Notes to *Mercian Hymns* (London: Deutsch, 1971).

<sup>2</sup>*Agenda*, "Special Issue on Rhythm," 10, No. 4 (1972) and 11, No. 1 (1973), 92-3. The "channels" reference is to Ch. 18 of *Adam Bede*: "The service was a channel to him this afternoon as a certain consciousness of our entire past and our imagined future."

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>4</sup>Hill's own phrase, 1971 BBC broadcast on *Mercian Hymns*.

<sup>5</sup>George Eliot's phrases, quoted in Hill's *Agenda* article, p. 93.

<sup>6</sup>"The True Conduct of Human Judgment': Some Observations on *Cymbeline*," in *The Morality of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969) pp. 18-32.

<sup>7</sup>Hill had dealt with such a landscape before, in "Funeral Music."

<sup>8</sup>Letter dated 4 July 1977.

<sup>9</sup>Offa's megalomania and wilful childishness is obliquely stressed in the tone of the last line of Hymn I: "'I liked that', said Offa, 'sing it again'" where the poet's sensitive utilization of communal myth is insensitively (and selfishly) viewed by Offa as a hymn to himself.

<sup>10</sup>See Hill's essay "The Poetry of Jon Silkin" (*Poetry and Audience* 9 (1961), 5).

<sup>11</sup>Hill writes (*Ibid.*, 6) that Silkin's "creative milieu is one in which public myth is at odds with private fact."

<sup>12</sup>"Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Dial* 75 (1923), 480-83.

<sup>13</sup>*The Meaning of History* (London: G. Blas, 1936), pp. 21-25.

<sup>14</sup>See Hymn X.

<sup>15</sup>C. Ricks (*The Listener*, 26 August, 1971), C. Bedient (*Poetry Nation Review* 4, No. 1, 1976) and S. Utz (*Southern Review* 12, 1976, 431) all mention this poem as a possible influence on Hill's sequence, without drawing specific parallels between the two.

<sup>16</sup>New York: Harcourt Brace, 1938, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup>The style here is similar to Eliot's in *Four Quartets*.

<sup>18</sup>"Overlord of the M5," *The Listener*, 26 August, 1971.

<sup>19</sup>*British Poetry Since 1960*, ed. M. Schmidt and G. Lindop (S. Hinksey: Carcanet Press, 1972), p. 159.

<sup>20</sup>This is primarily due to the vast time-scale which the poem bridges. It would have proved impossible for Hill to trace a thousand years of history serially in thirty prose-poems (as he would have had to if he had adopted traditional narrative). In his essay on Rhythm Hill writes of the difference between "mechanical . . . and organic time" (p. 104). *Mercian Hymns* is conceived on the basis of the latter.

<sup>21</sup>Hill's own note to Hymn XIX in his radio broadcast of the sequence in 1971.

<sup>22</sup>"The True Conduct of Human Judgment", p. 21.

<sup>23</sup>See Hill's essay on Jon Silkin: "He deals in ironic paradox: Europe's richly-tainted body, and our poor parasitic knowledge of her flesh" (p. 6).

<sup>24</sup>See also the epigraph to the poem "The conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons."

<sup>25</sup>Hill's own words on Silkin's poetry ("The Poetry of Jon Silkin" p. 7).

<sup>26</sup>See G. S. Fraser's review of *For The Unfallen* (31 October 1959).

<sup>27</sup>"A Letter From Oxford" *London Magazine*, 1954, p. 75.