

Geoffrey Hill

The poetry of Geoffrey Hill¹ is difficult. And for the awestruck and embarrassed reviewer, most certain of its merit and most uncertain of its meanings, the dictum of T.S. Eliot that poetry may communicate before it is understood has come conveniently to hand. The works present us with one of the more interesting departures since, in the last decade or two, British poetry took leave of its traditions and commenced to ride off in all directions at once. Hill's direction is backwards: in an age in which poetry moves toward openness—moves, indeed, with some abandon, Hill's is closed. Much contemporary poetry calls for the creative contribution of the reader; Hill's is demanding enough, but the reader is controlled in his complementary exercise; more than many contemporaries, this poet knows how he means to be read. Again while much contemporary poetry deliberately avoids depth, back of a single word in Hill, there may be a whole landscape. The word is not the correlative of an act, as in some post-modern poetry, nor replete with primal energy; it is packed with meaning. It is no coincidence that of all its predecessors, Hill's poetry recalls most acutely the somber music of Allen Tate, who was aware early of the new trends but whose late work, even, is strictly of the older tradition and innocent of the least trespass into post-modernism.²

There is one respect in which Hill's tactic approaches that of some modern experimentalists. The intention of the latter to spread the poem over a surface, to defeat the proper terms of temporal development not through the natural power of transcendence over time that a poem may possess but explicitly to compose as if on a canvas, finds a counterpart in Hill's practice of establishing something akin to a field in which the poem may exist in relationships between elements that are not logically related or necessarily to be received chronologically.

He favors the sequence, for example, in which, while the sequential nature of the arrangement is not remarkable, the meaning of the individual poem is colored by its reaction against others. He uses titles, subtitles, and sometimes even dedications and epigraphs to qualify various parts of the poem. The poem may be said to "comment" upon these elements, to use Hill's own expression applied elsewhere. The last poem of a sequence titled "Of Commerce and Society" (a title which comes from Allen Tate's "More Sonnets at Christmas, 1942" which is quoted in the epigraph to the series)

is preceded by apparatus which creates a kind of field, within the various forces of which, along with that of the title to the sequence, we must read the poem if we are to gather its ironies:

VI *The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*
Homage to Henry James
'But then face to face'

The poem begins:

Naked, as if for swimming, the martyr
Catches his death in a little flutter
Of plain arrows. A grotesque situation,
But priceless, and harmless to the nation.

Consider such pains 'crystalline': then fine art
Persists where most crystals accumulate.
History can be scraped clean of its old price.

The martyrdom of the saint, popularly thought to have been effected by archery and made the subject of Renaissance paintings, is travestied here in "Naked, as if for swimming," and in "Catches his death," the common idiom for getting a cold. By cleaning the picture, "History can be scraped clean of its old price," where "price" must in the first place mean sin but refers secondly to the commerce in the general title; "priceless" is also related to commerce, though again in common idiom it suggests "funny"; "a little flutter," referring immediately to arrows, can also have the commercial meaning of an adventure on the stock market or race course.³ One may associate "crystalline" and "fine art" with Henry James. The cleaning process relates ironically to the substitution of a vision seen through a glass darkly by one seen face to face, the expectation of St. Paul, who is quoted in the epigraph.

The poem is an extreme example of Hill's practice of spreading out points of reference between the parts of the poem and its context, a practice sufficiently characteristic to warrant notice of another instance. The body of the poem "Ovid in the Third Reich" reacts against the two elements in the title and an epigraph from the *Amores* in which Ovid declares that any woman is innocent unless she confess her guilt. The poem opens,

I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.

The reference to the Third Reich in the title and the spurious innocence

recommended by Ovid in the epigraph serve to draw out of these apparently innocent, inert lines the terrible solipsism which, in a sentence of George Steiner's, might enable a Nazi torturer to "read Goethe or Rilke in the evening . . . play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning."

The elements within a poem itself, themselves often obscure, may be related by links similar to those that connect epigraphs and titles rather than by a clear and explicit logical progression. But if in such relationships the poems are reminiscent of post-modern work in field composition, one distinction at least must be emphasized: that whereas the component elements in the latter are characteristically lean, Hill's technique depends much on richness.

Hill's practice of issuing points of reference among which the poem may interact is not incompatible with the idea of the poem as music, a medium which naturally transcends its necessary temporality. We designate literature as musical when there are remarkable melodic effects of vowels or consonants as in Tennyson, "mouthing out his hollow oes and aes," or in "Brag, sweet tenor bull," in Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*; or, more significantly, when the literary structure is based strictly on specific musical models as in Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*, for example, and Eliot's *Four Quartets*. We also refer to literature as music when we don't quite know what else to say about it—an alternative to the vade mecum of Eliot's mentioned above.

In his sequence "Funeral Music," Hill says he was "attempting a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks." There are, for sure, melodic places in the sequence and resounding clashes of vowel and consonant: "Fire/Flares in the pit, ghosting upon stone . . ."; or

we are dying
To satisfy fat Caritas, those
Wiped jaws of stone.

But it is perhaps rather a choreography of motifs and images, related to a theme and free of logical advance, that Hill's comment invites us to notice. The sonnets dwell on the human condition, its solipsism, the fallen flesh to which the aspiring soul is ineluctably wed, the pain of earthly existence and its inconsequence in the soul's history—a Manichean vision, an "awful vision" as it has been called. The main theme, the conception of this world as "restless/Habitation, no man's dwelling-place" and life as a lingering pain, is set in the first poem:

Processionals in the exemplary cave,
Benediction of shadows. Pomfret. London.

The voice fragrant with mannered humility,
With an equable contempt for this World,
'In honorem Trinitatis'. Crash. The head
Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood.

Much that follows in the sequence here is anticipated: "the exemplary cave" is Plato's cave of shadows, and the conception the allegory describes fits the pervading theme of *contemptu mundi*. The processions, the moving figures that make the shadows on the stone wall in the fable, are by extension the historical figures that process through the sequence, "Creatures of such rampant state," as they are later portrayed. Pomfret was the scene of the murder of Richard II, which precipitated the civil strife of the Wars of the Roses (the second sonnet begins, "For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain—/For none but the ritual king?" reminding us of 2 *Henry IV* where the Archbishop turns insurrection to religion "with the blood/Of fair King Richard, scraped from Pomfret stones"), the castle being adjacent to the site of the Battle of Towton, one of the major battles of those wars, which appears here in the sequence. London was the stage for the beheading of John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, to whom the sequence is dedicated, along with the Duke of Suffolk and the Earl Rivers, all of whom suffered beheading during the second half of the fifteenth century—three lords, powerful men, lovers of the arts, whose fortunes once high had revolved on the wheel. The voice and what it says belong, as a note informs, to Tiptoft, who commanded "that he should be decapitated in three strokes 'in honor of the Trinity.'" The fate of his head, unmitigated by his piety, contributes to the theme running throughout—the grievous lot of humankind on this earth, the "stark ground of this pain."

References to the Wars of the Roses swirl about the central Manichean theme and provide a smoky glamor. Other motifs reflect each other throughout in idea or image clusters: fire and stone are associated, torches and atonement, armies and flashing light, blindness and reconciliation, trumpets and purification, silence and innocence.

A second theme in "Funeral Music" is the duty of the poet in relation to the demands of the dead to be reported in the world aright. The poem's function is to cleanse the past, to liberate history from the stain occasioned by its association with putrescent flesh and sin. The motif has already been glimpsed in "The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian"; there are other places throughout the poems in which poetry acts to purify: "The lily rears its gouged face/From the provided loam." The poem's act is one of love; as death frees the soul from its earthly bondage so the word may free history from the taint of the mire of human veins. Hence the relationship between the axe that brings death and the seraph that brings the word, as the three

lords “dispose themselves to receive each/Pentecostal blow from axe or seraph.” The theme of poetry as an act of cleansing is announced in the second sonnet:

For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain—
For none but the ritual king? We meditate
A rueful mystery; we are dying
To satisfy fat Caritas. . . .

where “tribute of pain” and “dying” must surely be taken to refer to the act of poetization. The theme of the cleansing is reflected throughout the sequence: “trampled/Acres” are “blanched by sleet”; darkness falls over the human mire; a vision of life controlled by intellect shows “an unpeopled region/Of ever new-fallen snow.” Beyond the sonnet sequence also, the body of Hill’s work is pervaded by the craving for purity, for the antiseptics of the mind as opposed to the corruption of the body, and for the cleansing of the past so that it may reappear as in childhood’s innocent kingdom, purified by time and returning into the present as a part of a harmony. The sixth sonnet of “Funeral Music” looks back through a child’s vision to idealized images of men. It begins,

My little son, when you could command marvels
Without mercy, outstare the wearisome
Dragon of sleep, I rejoiced above all—
A stranger well-received in your kingdom.
On those pristine fields I saw humankind
As it was named by the Father; fabulous
Beasts rearing in stillness to be blessed.

If the poet then has this duty of love to perform, poetry is nevertheless an act performed in pain and even disgust. It is occasionally associated with claws, as in “Words clawed my mind as though they had smelt/Revelation’s flesh.” Ease is reprehensible: the first part of “Annunciations” closes in contempt of the trencher fury of respectable rhyming poetasters:

all who attend to fiddle or to harp
For betterment, flavour their decent mouths
With gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice.

The second part, on the other hand, closes with lines, reminiscent of Lowell’s, on the theme of painful creation, the burden of love:

Choicest beasts
Suffuse the gutters with their colourful blood.
Our God scatters corruption. Priests, martyrs,
Parade to this imperious theme: 'O Love
You know what pains succeed; be vigilant; strive
To recognize the damned among your friends.'

II

The act of going into the past and bringing history into an innocent childhood kingdom in the present, noticed above, produced in 1971 the sequence of prose poems, *Mercian Hymns*. The duty to history now hardly seems a painful one. The sequence opens:

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth . . .
contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster:
money-changer. . .
"I liked that," said Offa, "sing it again."

The poems are to be regarded, Hill says, as commentaries on the subjects supplied by the headings. The so-called headings are not set each above its own hymn but, in both editions, gathered separately. Almost all of them relate the individual poems to episodes or activities in the life of Offa, eighth-century king of Mercia, to his attributes, or to legacies of his reign. In one or two poems the content does not concern Offa directly: No. XIV, headed "Offa's Laws," presents the persona of a West Midland rural magistrate; No. XXV, "Opus Anglicanum," is a lament for one of the old nailers of Bromsgrove, a town in the English Midlands. The headings are not rubrics but elements in juxtaposition to the parts of the poems proper, after the fashion noted in the earlier volumes. The parts of the poems, generally two, three, or four in number, set off as separate paragraphs, are themselves thus loosely related to each other in many of the poems. Individually they may be clear and in this respect quite different from the elements in earlier poems; but the connections between them are often obscure, subtle, and tenuous at best.

Connections may be effected for instance by a motif derived from connotations or etymologies or from the fifth dictionary meaning of a word. Poem No. XX is headed "Offa's 'Defence of the English people'"; it has only two parts: the first presents the "primeval heathland" with the bones of mice and birds, where "bees made provision, mantling the inner walls of their burh. . . ." The second is as follows:

Coiled entrenched England: brickwork and paintwork
stalwart above hacked marl. The clashing primary
colours—'Ethandune', 'Catraeth', 'Maldon',
'Pengwern'. Steel against yew and privet. Fresh
dynasties of smiths.

The small brick houses and bungalows with clashing colors are only too familiar on the English scene, but they are, each of them, the Englishman's home, his castle; without undue exercise of the fancy, they may be thought of as speaking to an England defended, "entrenched," and now presumably at peace. They are "stalwart," which comes from the Anglo-Saxon *stahol-wyrthe*, meaning having firm foundations. A note draws attention to the popular use in England of the name of ancient battles for suburban houses. The battles are presumably the foundations upon which England now rests, so that now the peaceful domestic art of clipping the hedge may supersede the art of war. But with the association of the battles, "hacked" and "clashing" take on a fighting sense; "smith," primarily here a common English surname, becomes associated with steel; and steel, no longer merely the garden shears, suggests ordnance. Then the battle connotations reach back and relate to the first part of the poem, where against a background of battle—the heathland strewn with bones—the bees, like the Englishmen, embellish the walls of the "burh," etymologically a fortress. The two parts of the poem are linked together by these associations.

Poem No. XI "Offa's Coins," shows a similar reticulation formed by underlying meanings and associations of words. The poem has four parts; the first part and selections from the others are as follows:

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

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutila-
tion if that failed. . . .

Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring.
It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger. . . .
Seasons touched and retouch-
ed the soil. . . .

Crepitant oak forest where the boar
furrowed black mould, his snout intimate with
worms and leaves.

A selection of the connecting links includes those between “struck” and “anger,” “struck” and “mould,” “tact” and “touched,” “design” and “seasons,” “soil” and “mould,” and “ditch” and “furrowed.” The association of coins, corpses, and the soil, to be noted here, is discussed below.

“The Offa who figures in this sequence,” says a note,

might perhaps most usefully be regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands, his dominion enduring 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.

Parts of individual poems, apparently disparate, may in fact be related through the identity of the poet who plays throughout three roles: himself, himself in childhood, and Offa the king. In No. XXIX, “The Death of Offa,” the penultimate poem of the sequence, the poet as child plays ludo (a game of dice and counters) with his grandmother and enters “into the last dream of Offa the King.” In the preceding poems the poet as child slips into an identity with Offa in daydream, sometimes to return anticlimactically to the schoolyard where “the children boasted their scars of dried snot,” at others to retain the royal elevation and impose it on his own world. In one poem, when struck on the head by an apple root, he momentarily becomes the horned Celtic god, Cernunnos; but otherwise it is Offa who supplies the ego-ideal. Offa has the attributes a boy might covet, fame, wealth, power, and a GT car, an accessory that bestows status on English youth. In No. X the boy as King at the royal desk despatching royal business becomes the boy at his own desk doing homework. The poem is headed “Offa’s Laws”; it opens with a description of the desk. The second part mentions some of the official business transacted at the desk, using a few portentous latinisms:

It was there that he drew upon grievances from the
people; attended to signatures and retributions. . . .

—activities that a child might imagine as the kingly function. The third part of the poem leads specifically back to the point of view of the child:

What should a man make of remorse, that it might pro-
fit his soul? Tell me. Tell everything to
Mother, darling, and God bless.

The fourth and last part is as follows:

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 mas-
ter *ancilla* and *servus*.

The poem has moved from official acts of Offa to the private acts of a boy doing homework, from the use of latinisms to the frustration over the mastery of Latin, from the "service" of the king—the grievances of his people—to the idea of *ancilla* and *servus*, a motif brought up in the epigraph to the poem (in its first edition), which considers the subject of government and the difference between a man's acting for himself and acting for others.

The poet descends regularly to childhood, to its warmth and security and to the easy availability of forgiveness and innocence:

At home the curtains were drawn. The wireless boomed
its commands. I loved the battle-anthems and the
gregarious news.

(During the war, the BBC's nine o'clock news on Sunday evenings was preceded by the national anthems of all the allies.)

Then, in the earthy shelter, warmed by a blue-glassed
storm-lantern, I huddled with stories of dragon-
tailed airships and warriors who took wing im-
mortal as phantoms. (No. XXII)

Then having gathered the innocence of childhood, the poet comes grandly back into the present as Offa, whose dominion endures, as we have seen, to the middle of the twentieth century.

It will be observed that the hymns return repeatedly to images of earth: soil, compost, ditch; and to the creatures of earth: worm, badger, and mole; there is always digging or burrowing among roots. The child's kingdom is most often underground; regularly it is earthy, as in the quotation above (which portrays an air-raid shelter, presumably). Elsewhere we read, "I wormed my way heavenward for ages amid barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern." The child emerges from earth to become the king:

Far from his underkingdom of crin-
oid and crayfish, the rune-stone's province, *Rex*
Totius Anglorum Patriae, coiffured and ageless,

portrays the self-possession of his possession,
cushioned on a legend. (No. XIII)

The image of Offa in these lines is that on a coin. Coins form an important linkage in the work: they are, first, one of the famous legacies of King Offa's reign and they bear an imprint of his head; second, they are a treasure hoarded underground. In a poem of which the heading is "The Crowning of Offa" and in which a lot of meaning is crammed into "invested" there is, for example, this:

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 [a Roman coin]. . . .

Or, in "The Childhood of Offa," in the rhythms of "Fern Hill," this:

The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall
to their freedom, I dug and hoarded.

III

Coins are related to another feature of the poetry. In earlier poems the pain of poetic creation is often associated with the attempt to break out of confinement. In "God's Little Mountain," ". . . I was shut/With wads of sound into a sudden quiet." In "The Bidden Guest," speaking of Pentecost, the poet says,

. . . I believe in the spurred flame
Those racing tongues, but cannot come
Out of my heart's unbroken room. . . .

Often the poet's sense of being pent up is associated with riches: he is shut up guarding a hoard. Then alternating with this sense is that of release, and these two create a rhythm that becomes familiar throughout the volumes, where repeatedly images of confinement and pressure precede those of relief. "Solomon's Mines" contains the characteristic imagery in its characteristic pattern: there is an underground hoard of riches and there is the sense of restraint and confinement. But the poem opens with the lines, "Anything to have done!" and closes as follows:

Anything to get up and go
(Let the hewn gates clash to)
Without looking round
Out of that strong land.

The image cluster of restraint and money value may conceivably be related to the parts of the repeated word Pentecost, pent and cost, in spite of its proper etymology—a suggestion that will not be thought overreaching by those who have noted Hill's constant and profound use of puns and the depths of meaning that can be plumbed in individual words.

The pattern of hoarding, of shutupness and restraint, followed by release is even clearer in "In Memory of Jane Fraser." In the first three of the four stanzas, the images of immobility and shutupness prevail: cold weather, "She kept the siege," the room, "Her body froze. . . ." In the last stanza there is movement and release:

In March the ice unloosed the brook
And water ruffled the sun's hair.
Dead cones upon the alder shook.

In a volume where meaning is hoarded away like the miser's coin the poem is relatively clear; and the clarity may account for its disfavor in the eyes of the poet.

The coincidence of the pattern of restraint and release with images of treasure, coins, and corpses, and in turn the Freudian association of these last with faeces has a significance that will not have been lost on the reader. The coincidence appears occasionally throughout poems or is hinted at in the overtones of brief passages, such as "the sea/Across daubed rock evacuates its dead." The act of poetry itself is occasionally a part of this cluster of images. In "History as Poetry" Pentecost appears, then the corpse, and then dung:

Poetry as salutation; taste
Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
Unearths from among the speechless dead

Lazarus mystified, common man
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
From the provided loam. Fortunate
Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung

The last phrase recalls Freud's note that in Babylonian doctrine gold was regarded as the dung of hell.

Mercian Hymns, with the predominance of the image of coins, also reveals these associations, which may serve to link together the parts of individual hymns. Coins have already been seen in association with corpses in No. XI. No. XII presents a digging which is both an excavation for treasure—in the first part—"Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant soil. They clove to the hoard"—and a utilitarian plumbing job in the second—"The men were paid to caulk water-pipes." These men have a latrine; and in the third part of the poem, describing the condition of the garden and bringing together the two earlier parts, the poet declares, "I have accrued a golden and stinking blaze."

In some hymns a rhythm of restraint or tension followed by release is observed sometimes coincident with the images of earth and coins, corpses or dung. Release may take the form of a journey. In No. VII, "The Kingdom of Offa," after Ceolred has let the poet's valued silver model aeroplane fall through the floorboards "into the rat-droppings and coins," the speaker lured him

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.

In No. XVII, "Offa's Journey to Rome," after a quarrel with his father, "His maroon GT chanted then overtook. He lavished on the high valleys its *haleine*." Or visiting Boethius's dungeon (No. XVIII) he purges himself of violence by violent imaginings:

He shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower out of the earth.
He willed the instruments of violence to break upon meditation.
Iron buckles gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men
stooped, disentangled the body.

He wiped his lips and hands. He strolled back to the car,
with discreet souvenirs for consolation and philosophy.

This is just one of the more curious of the image clusters that link together the parts of some of the Mercian hymns and of other poems in the canon. The hymns are also dependent on the relation of the king's activities to those of the child and of modern England to historic Mercia, a species of historic regeneration seen here and there throughout. All through the work,

density and fine reticulations of meanings lend structure to poems, unfashionable techniques, bearing Hill's unfashionably grievous message.

NOTES

¹ *For the Unfallen*, London, André Deutsch, 1959; *King Log*, Deutsch, 1968; *Mercian Hymns*, Deutsch, 1971; *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom: Poems 1952-1971*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1975, which brings together the poems of the three previous volumes and is the text from which quotations have been taken in this essay.

² Radcliffe Squires, *Allen Tate: A Literary Biography* (New York: Pegasus, 1971), p. 213.

³ On the double meanings in the opening stanza of this poem, see Christopher Ricks, "Cliché as 'Responsible Speech'; Geoffrey Hill," *London Magazine*, IV No. 8 (November, 1964), 96-101.