

The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill

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1

The word 'formal' in criticism often associates with ideas concerning metrical iambic, strict stanzaic form and rhyme, and the containment by these devices of whatever the poet has to say. It may be used approvingly, or, since the current has recently run more the other way, as a means of implying that a poet using these forms has little to say, and that his sensibility and imagination are insensitive, that the courage a poet needs in order to articulate what ought essentially to be his way of exploring life is absent. As corollary to this, it is implied that only what is new in structure can sensitively and honestly engage this, since, it is argued, we are in the midst of such changes that only those forms originated by the poet in co-operation with his constantly changing environment can adequately express the new (as well as the past and hidden) in the tormenting life so many are forced to live.

The second position is persuasive, providing one keeps in mind the counterbalancing caveat that every more-or-less defined position provides the grounds for much bad work; but even if the second position seems to account for a greater share of low-tension poetry, it is arguable that the position has helped into existence poetry that might not otherwise have got written (*vide* Alvarez writing of Plath and citing Lowell¹). On the other hand one might ask what there is in such a position for Hill, whose work contrasts so strongly with, say, Ginsberg, and the Hughes of *Crow*.

There is however another way of defining 'formal', which involves the origination of constraints and tensions with those forms themselves evolved by the concerns of the writer and his sensibility, as he or she worked these. One might say that a co-existing condition of the material evolving its forms involved, for this kind of formal writer, a productive impediment, a compacting of certain forms of speech, refracting the material into a mode of compression and close conjunction not normally found in speech, and which, probably, could not be found there. Such a definition, however, would imply that the mode of response, which could be brought to conscious active thought, was habitual to such a writer. The question of conjunction is especially important to such a poet as Hill, and in making these definitions, I have been trying to illustrate both a general type and identify a particular writer.

Such formality bears with its own problems. The payments on such a premium are continuous, and one way of apprehending this condition in Hill's work is to consider the variety of forms; to consider the restlessness within the variety. Formality of the first sort occurs with Hill's early poem 'Genesis',² although here

it seems that the formal iambic line, stanza, and section, are used to *express* that already stylized conception of earth's creation; and that the formality while representing such stylization is already at odds with the central theme of the poem

There is no bloodless myth will hold

and to a lesser extent with the sub-theme's concession

And by Christ's blood are men made free.

Hill's 'argument with himself' over formal means and expressiveness is already embryonically visible in the poem, but, for the moment, one might consider the difference in form between say this poem (and 'In memory of Jane Fraser'—a poem he has had trouble with) and 'September Song';³ between that, and the unrhymed sonnets of 'Funeral Music'⁴ and between all these and the prose hymns (canticles) of *Mercian Hymns*.

Restlessness of forms is not something one would normally associate with Hill's work, but this is probably because the voice is unusually present and distinct. Sometimes it becomes over-distinctive, and this is usually the result of the formal means degenerating into mannerisms. Even so, a voice cannot itself provide more than a spurious unity, and to put on it work that is beyond its proper capacity produces the strain that exists in a fraction of Hill's work. This 'mannered' and 'mild humility' however is more often disrupted by the variety of forms. Is it imaginative experimentation, or an inability to find one embracing and therefore controlling mode? It could be argued that such unity is undesirable, but I am suggesting that for a poet such as Hill, unity of form, as of thought and response, are important. This is why we have such apparently absolute control within each poem (or form) but such variety of form over the spread of his work so far. Each fragment of absoluteness represents a pragmatic concession to the intractable nature of the matter and response to it in each poem. One is glad that it is so, and it reflects the on-going struggle between form, expressiveness, and the scrupulous attention Hill usually gives to his material, even when it is struggling against that oppressive attention so as to retain an existence (in life) independent of his own.

2

Hill's use of language, and choice of words, has been noticed, often, one feels, to the detriment of his themes. One sympathizes with the reviewers. The compressed language is intimately bound up with what it is conveying. This is true of many poets, but true to an unusual degree with Hill. It is true in another sense. The language itself is unlike most other writing current, and coupled with this is an unusually self-conscious pointing on the part of the poet to the language. This is not because he wishes to draw attention to it for its own sake, but because the language both posits his concerns, and is itself, in the way it is used, an instance of them. Moreover, his use of language is both itself an instance of his (moral) concerns, and the sensuous gesture that defines them. It is therefore difficult to speak of his themes without coming first into necessary contact with the language.

Hill's use of irony is ubiquitous, but is not, usually, of the non-participatory and mandarin sort. It articulates the collision of events, or brings them together out of concern, and for this a more or less regular and simple use of syntax is needed, and used.

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not.

A concentration camp victim.⁵ Even the 'play' in the subtitle 'born 19.6.32 - deported 24.9.42' where the natural event of birth is placed, simply, beside the human and murderous 'deported' as if the latter were of the same order and inevitability for the victim; which, in some senses, it was—even here the zeugmatic wit is fully employed. The irony of conjuncted meanings between 'undesirable' (touching on both sexual desire and racism) and 'untouchable', which exploits a similar ambiguity but reverses the emphases, is unusually dense *and* simple. The confrontation is direct and unavoidable, and this directness is brought to bear on the reader not only by the vocabulary, but by the balancing directness of the syntax. This stanza contains one of Hill's dangerous words—dangerous because of its too frequent use, and because these words sometimes unleash (though not here) a too evident irony:

Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

'Proper' brings together the idea of bureaucratically correct 'as calculated' by the logistics of the 'final solution' and the particular camp's timetable; it also contrasts the idea of the mathematically 'correct' with the morally intolerable. It touches, too, on the distinction between what is morally right, and what is conventionally acceptable, and incidentally brings to bear on the whole the way in which the conventionally acceptable is often used to cloak the morally unacceptable. One of Hill's grim jokes, deployed in such a way that the laughter is precisely proportionate to the needs of ironic exposure. It is when the irony is in excess of the situation that the wit becomes mannered. But here it does not. So the poem continues, remorselessly.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
One feels the little quibbling movement in
As estimated, you died.

as, without wishing to verbalise it, Hill points to the disturbing contrast between the well-functioning timetable and what it achieved. "Things marched" has the tread of pompous authority, immediately, in the next line, qualified by the painfully accurate recognition that just so much energy was needed, and released, for the extermination. 'Sufficient' implies economy, but it also implies a conscious qualification of the heavy, pompous tread of authority. The quiet function of unpretentious machinery fulfilled its programme, perhaps more lethally. One also notices here now the lineation gauges, exactly, the flow and retraction of meaning and impulse, and how this exact rhythmical flow is so much a part of the sensuous delivery of response and evaluation. It is speech articulated, but the lineation provides, via the convention of verse line-ending, a formal control of rhythm, and of sense emphasis, by locking with, or breaking, the syntactical flow. Thus in the

third stanza the syntax is broken by the lineation exactly at those parts at which the confession, as it were, of the poem's (partial) source is most painful:

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

The slightly awkward break after 'it' not only forces the reading speed down to a word-by-word pace, in itself an approximation to the pain of the confession, but emphasises the whole idea. By placing emphasis on the unspecifying pronoun Hill is able to say two things: that the elegy was made for himself (at least, in part) since in mourning another one is also commiserating with one's own condition.* But 'it' may also refer to the whole event; I have made an elegy for myself, as we all do, but I have also made an elegy on a 'true' event. True imaginatively, true in detailed fact; both for someone other than myself. Thus he is able to point to the difficulty of the poet, who wishes, for a variety of reasons, to approach the monstrousness of such events, but has compunction about doing so. He tactfully touches for instance on the overweening ambition of the poet who hitches his talent to this powerful subject, thereby giving his work an impetus it *may* not be fully entitled to, since, only the victim, herself, would be entitled to derive this kind of 'benefit'. But he also modestly pleads, I think, with 'it/is true' that whatever the reasons for his writing such an elegy, a proper regard for the victim, a true and unambitious feeling, was present and used. I hope enough has been said here to point to Hill's use of irony at its best, and to indicate that the tact with which he uses language is not a convention of manners which he is inertly content to remain immersed in, but an active employment of the convention as it co-operates with his scrupulousness. The scrupulousness, like the pity, is in the language. The theme permeates it.

3

In pointing to the importance of the Imagist movement as it has affected English and American poetry, one is of course considering how central the image has become both in the writing, and for the considering of, twentieth century poetry. What is strange about this is that apparently unrelated movements and poets apparently ignorant of each other were writing in modes which had certain formal elements in common. The hermetic poems of Ungaretti's earlier period as well as certain of Pound's and Eliot's earlier poems use the hard, clear image, seemingly as an instrument considered valuable for its own sake. In the expressionist poetry of Stramm, the images are used, as Michael Hamburger has indicated,⁶ as the only needful flesh of the poem; the poem disdains the use of syntactical connections, thereby placing upon the image the whole burden of expressive meaning and impulse. To a lesser extent one finds this pre-occupation with the image in Lorca; although even here one feels that sometimes the syntactical connections

* See also no 5 of 'Funeral Music', a variation of this idea:

When we chant
'Ora, ora pro nobis' it is not
Seraphs who descend to pity but ourselves.

are used to lay stress on the image thereby placing on it a similar labour. The image becomes that point at which an ignition of all the elements of meaning and response takes place; that is, not only do the meaning and their impulses get expressed, but at that point are given their principal impetus. This occurs even with the hard clear image calmly delivered. Hill has been both the innocent partaker and victim in this. He has used and been used. This is partly because of course the age as it were reeks of such practice. But with Hill one also feels that the choice has been made because he has come to recognize that the use of the image can properly communicate the intensity he wishes to express. Through it he can express the intensity, but fix it in such a way that it will evaluate the concerns of the poem it is embedded in without its intensity over-ruling the other parts. The intensity finds in its own kind of formality its own controlling expression. At the same time, the image as artifact has a perhaps satisfactory and not unmodest existence. It can be regarded, but it is also useful. Curiously enough, although the impression of imagery in Hill is, in my mind at least, strong, checking through the poetry, one is surprised at how controlled is the frequency of the kind of imagery I am thinking of. There are many instances of images used to represent objects, creatures, events. But it is as though the image whereby one object is enriched by the verbal presence of another, combined with it, and a third thing made—as though such a creation were recognised as so potentially powerful, and so open to abuse, that he was especially careful to use it sparingly. And he is, rightly, suspicious of offering confection to readers who enjoy the local richness without taking to them the full meaning of the poem, which is only susceptible to patience and a care for what it is as a whole thing. He says as much:

Anguish bloated by the replete scream . . .

I could cry 'Death! Death!' as though
To exacerbate that suave power;

But refrain. For I am circumspect,
Lifting the spicy lid of my tact
To sniff at the myrrh.⁷

The images have a richness, but here he is not so much reproaching himself for that, although he implies such a possibility, but rather for the perhaps evasive caution which is characterized by 'tact'. The self-questioning exposes further recessions of self-doubts and questions, themselves seen to be faintly absurd. There are other examples, however, of the kind of image I am describing:

Bland vistas milky with Jehovah's calm—⁸

and

cleanly
maggots churning spleen
to milk⁹

from a poem for another concentration camp victim, Robert Desnos; and

we are dying
to satisfy fat Caritas, those
Wiped jaws of stone¹⁰

and from the earlier Dr. Faustus:

A way of many ways: a god
Spirals in the pure steam of blood.¹¹

What is noticeable about these images, chosen for the way in which they combine disparate elements, is their ferocity. Their expressiveness occurs at its fullest in the moment of sudden expansion, when the elements combine in often intolerable antipathy and produce judgements issuing from a disgust that has behind it a sense of outrage at this or that situation.

More often the images are 'abstract', combinations of adjectives and nouns, whose conjunction is ironically disruptive, but with a similar moral evaluation intended. Thus in one of Hill's best shorter poems, 'Ovid in the Third Reich', we again confront his justly obsessive concern with innocence, and its mutilation, or impossibility, within the context of human barbarism:

Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon.¹²

The notion of innocence as a defence against earthly corruption has an ancient lineage; but here it is linked with the more combative 'weapon', and in such a way as to suggest weapon in a very literal sense. Of what use is innocence in such a context? And: if it is of no use on earth, what is its use? Are we right to think of a condition as useless because inoperative on earth? And if thus inoperative, can it be so valued in a 'heavenly' context? Hovering near the phrase 'earthly weapon' is the phrase (no) 'earthly good' with its worn-through substance, a little restored by Hill's regenerative irony. In these two lines Hill returns of course to the consideration of 'Genesis'

There is no bloodless myth will hold.

(The 'Ovid' poem suggests *to me* an Eichmann-like figure—not Eichmann—with whom the reader in his ordinariness and banality is invited to identify, thus being asked to make the connection with that other aspect of Eichmann, his evil. Ovid's exile may be seen to parallel our inability, or reluctance, to associate with guilt—in case we sully an innocence—already sullied.)

There are many examples of these 'abstract' combinations, often zeugmatic in form (the device which has built into it a moral judgement). Thus

fastidious trumpets
Shrilling into the ruck¹³

and

my justice, wounds, love
Derisive light, bread, filth¹⁴

and, at the funeral of King Offa, the punning zeugma where the successive adjective suffers qualification by the former:

He was defunct. They were perfunctory.¹⁵

And again from *Mercian Hymns*, the man who has imagined, with ambiguous relish, a scene of torture

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

'Discreet' is not an image precisely, but it produces an image of a man hiddenly guilty, voyeur upon his own imagination, which is however discreet in that it is secret. It has not tortured another's flesh.

In those instances, where Hill's intensity is released, I have tried to show that it is through images, of several kinds, that the sudden evaluative expansion occurs. Hill has more recently been concerned to accumulate meaning and response in a more gradual way. But, in the earlier work especially, the intense evaluation, response, judgement—all are released at that sudden moment of expansion which is the moment of visualization. Hill's poetry has more often consisted of, not continuous narrative, but a conjunction of imagistic impulses. A conjunction of intensities, sometimes sensuously rich, and nearly always scrupulously evaluative.

4

The imagistic impulse in Hill's work, as both imagistic and image-making, is of course related to the question of narrative and discursiveness. Imagism, considered as a re-action, developed out of an antipathy for the discursive nature of Victorian poetry. That was not the sum of its antipathies, but it is clear, from the principles and the practice, that Imagism constituted, among other things, an attempt to enact, rather than assert, a response. It wanted to cut from it those dilutions of response which had rendered a verse that was vaguely descriptive of states of feelings, and it found a method. It found in the image a pure answer. That is, it found in the image something that could not be adulterated. An image did not attempt to explain; it rendered the verbal equivalent of what was seen, and the more it rendered exactly what it saw, the better. Clearly his kind of antidote was needed in English poetry and we are still receiving its benefits. Yet the difficulty lay in that by nature, the hard, clear image, untroubled by a discursive reflectiveness, had little or no valency. It could only accommodate other images, perhaps of different intensities and implications, and it could not accommodate the syntax of argument or narrative. And despite what its claim implied, it could hardly accommodate connections of any kind: Imagism had to select very carefully indeed, and its methods could not easily be used without its being diluted.

And at that stage in its development, to dilute its purity would have been to have annulled its impetus. What it gained in intensity it lost in its capacity to cope with a range of experience.

This is immediately apparent when we consider Imagism in relation to the war. This is not the place to speak in detail of, for instance, Aldington and Herbert Read, but, briefly, I should like to instance two very different poems by Read—‘The Happy Warrior’ and ‘The End of a War’¹⁶. In the first Read manages to make of his war experience an Imagist poem. That is, he manages to make the ‘syntax’ of Imagism render a particular set of very careful responses to combat, and to render, by implication, a set of arguments. But this is one instance, which, once done, could not be repeated. Moreover, the poem relies, for its deepest reading, on its being correlated with Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Character of the Happy Warrior’ of which it is also a criticism. But the fact that it needs, finally, this correlation with a poem that is anything but imagistic places Read’s poem in a special relation to Imagism. Nothing like this that I know of in Imagist poetry had been done before, and one suspects that Read found his necessities out of what he called war’s ‘terrible and inhuman events’.

In his autobiography, *The Contrary Experience*, Read wrote:

I criticised [the Imagists] because in their manifestoes they had renounced the decorative word, but their sea-violets and wild hyacinths tend to become as decorative as the beryls and jades of Oscar Wilde. I also accused them of lacking that aesthetic selection which is the artist’s most peculiar duty. . . . We were trying to maintain an abstract aesthetic ideal in the midst of terrible and inhuman events.¹⁷

There is of course a skeletal narrative structure in ‘The Happy Warrior’ but poems could hardly be written like that of any length and complexity. In his subsequent ‘war poems’, those composing *Naked Warriors* (1919), we see Read introducing narrative, but the imagistic elements are much diluted by it, and in such a way as to enervate the poetry. In other words, Read had relied, as he had to, upon the imagistic elements to render intensity and expressiveness, but the collision of the two modes produced compromise. By the time Read came to write *The End of a War* (published 1933) he had worked out a solution; he pushed the narrative outside the poem, setting the scene and describing the events of the episode in a prefacing prose argument which, though essential to the reading of the poem, is in ambiguous relationship to it, and without any relationship to it structurally.

Hill is clearly a poet having little in common with Read, but he has, I think, similar problems engaging him. ‘Genesis’ for instance is held together by using days of the week as a means of tabulating impulsions in sequence. The sequence of days is important to the poem structurally, and through it Hill tries to initiate an image of growing consciousness. Yet it is only a proper sequence as it refers back to God’s six days of work. The poem itself does not have narrative coherence so much as a sequence of formularizations; in his subsequent work Hill

abandoned this kind of stylization, and to a lesser extent, the incipient narrative structure.

With 'Funeral Music', the prose note, that at one time preceded the poem, stands in similar elucidatory relation to it as Read's 'Argument' does to 'The End of a War'. Less perhaps, or perhaps less in Hill's mind, for the note has, in *King Log* itself, been placed at the end of the book, and separate from the poems, as though Hill were determined, with such a gesture, to make 'Funeral Music' unneeded of any elucidatory material. The poems do not form a narrative sequence, although they lead through the battle (of Towton) into some deliberately incomplete attempt at evaluating the cost in both physical and spiritual excoriation. Evaluation is made partly by reference to a supposed, or possibly supposed, after-life, in which the ideals of an exemplary spiritual life would if anywhere be found; partly by reference to this, or to eternity, yet into which no sense of human evaluation can be extended with the certainty of finding corroborative 'echoes'*:

If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us—¹⁸

Even supposed *notions* of an after-life, with its spiritual absolutes, are insufficient here since the first of the unrhymed sonnets opens in platonic supposition; that is, the platonic structure throws into ambiguity the question as to whether we are to suppose an after-life is to be believed in; does this by supplanting the idea of an after-life with its own metaphysical scheme. I am indicating here that in Hill's longer poems, sequences and extended works that demand some correspondingly developed structure, he meets the problem without conceding to narrative a function it might usefully fulfill in his work. Fearful of sacrificing the imagistic purity of his work, of sullyng that compression, of impairing a dramatic enactment, or mimesis of psychological impulses, he prefers to accumulate intensities rather than involve them in accumulating and continuous action. This may partly be due to the preference Hill shows for writing that by dramatic mimesis introduces to the reader internal impulses rather than dramatic action. Thus in 'Funeral Music', the battle of Towton, and its murderousness, is not encapsulated as dramatic action, but brooded on after the event, thereby allowing the external state of the field and the state of the mind experiencing and responding to it to meet. It is the self-questioning, the doubts, the beliefs half-held with a conviction of personal honesty, the motives and the state of the spirit, that interest Hill, rather than the shaping action of narrative. Nevertheless, these things too have their form of collision with other minds, and through action, alter and are altered. And they could also, I feel, build a narrative unity that Hill has only tentatively, if at all, used.

One of the most interesting and moving aspects of 'Funeral Music' is its plain-

* Compare with the first stanza of 'Ovid in the Third Reich'.

ness. The images in the following passage do not fabricate, either a local richness to colour-up the passage, nor is there an over-arching image employed to supposedly enlarge or make more significant the events and the responses to those of the observer-participant:

‘At noon,
As the armies met, each mirrored the other;
Neither was outshone. So they flashed and vanished
And all that survived them was the stark ground
Of this pain. I made no sound, but once
I stiffened as though a remote cry
Had heralded my name. It was nothing . . .’
Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
Feathers drifted across; carrion birds
Strutted upon the armour of the dead.¹⁹

An Ecclesiastes-like consideration of vanity moves in these first lines, located in the ironic flashing of the armies mirrored in each other's armour. But they do not see themselves; they see only the flash of their *own* pride by which they are, each of them, dazzled. Yet with an honesty that compels a grudging kind of admission, we are also told that theirs was a kind of sad ‘glory’: ‘Neither was outshone’. But this is also qualified by the other idea inherent in the phrase—that neither had more pride, nor was more capable of victory; what is impending is not the surfeiting of pride but its extinction in the futility of combat. If they mirror each other's pride they also mirror each other's destruction. The strutting carrion birds confirm this judgement.

Yet impressive as this is as narration implicated with judgement, and pity, there is also a turning inwards and sealing off from the outward visible of all this in the ambiguous ‘the stark ground/Of this pain.’ The ground is at once the actual ground where soldiers inflicted pain on each other; it is also, because of the disposition of the syntax, a kind of personification where the ground itself becomes absorbed in the huge lingering tremor of pain. This serves to incarcerate the reader, and perhaps the writer also, in an inescapable response, but it also fails, I think, to release him from a pre-occupation where the event has been so internalised that there results more response than event itself. The passage seems to recognize this by resuming its re-creation of the desolate battlefield. The sense of the pentameter, in these lines, and throughout the sequence, serves not merely a unifying function but as a framework within and around which Hill can make his supple impulses and retractions of rhythm:

‘ . . . as though a remote cry
Had heralded my name. It was nothing . . .’
Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
Feathers drifted across.

The second line begins with a slow, regular pentameter; after the word ‘name’, the expectations of the pentameter are reduced in the foreshortened remainder of

the line, reducing exactly the expectations of the person in the *poem* as his feelings are disappointed. In the next line the pentameter is extended. The other speaking voice is describing minute events on the surface of the battle-field. 'Dislodged' in its participial form, is syntactically isolated, and mirrors the disconnectedness of the feathers, from a bird, or some martial plume, but reflects also the disconnectedness of the dead from the living. In the little halting movement at the end of the line, which the line-break emphasises, the temporary emphasis falls on 'few' and thus serves to re-create sensuously the stillness of the battle-field which is

its own sound
Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.²⁰

These lines, from no 3 of the sequence, serve to pre-resonate the irony of the situation, where the dead are unearthly (because of the possibility of the dead having an after-life) but are for us no more than the earth they have been reduced to by human action. Seen in this way, 'Funeral Music' is, among other things, a consideration of war where 'war', to use Clausewitz's strategy 'is a continuation of state policy by other means'. The sequence is at once an elegy of pity, an examination of pride, a self-examination of the responses appropriate to this apparent constant in human living. It is all these in relation to the question as to whether suffering has any meaning, in earthly life; and whether there exists some ideal platonic and/or spiritual system in which suffering, which is perhaps the only state during which we are innocent, can have a meaningful and positive place.

5

Sebastian Arrurruz ('The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz') was, as we now know, not an actual poet (1868-1922) who has bewilderedly survived into the twentieth century, but an invention that may have perplexed critics searching for the original work.

The poem makes use of the necessary 'silence' surrounding the 'original'. The lack of information on the poet may obliquely refer to Arrurruz's own apprehension regarding the oblivion both of himself and his work, and is thus a wry part of the poems themselves. The poems composed by Arrurruz are also records of certain attitudes towards both the (discontinued) relationship with his mistress and to poetry. In a sense the poem, or group, is Hill's *Mauberley*. But where Pound is using himself, both for what he feels himself to be kin to as a poet, and for what the figure stands in contradistinction to in the effete and vulgar English culture, Hill's Sebastian (the saint pierced with arrows) is more separate from the poet who has shaped him.

Arrurruz (arrowroot) is a man pierced by the arrow (another's predation upon his relinquished wife); the arrow remains rooted in him. He is also a man, the root of an arrow, himself equipped, organically, and with the incising gift of the poet. Though both these, in the poem, are laconically expressed, and survive increasingly on the wryly self-regretful memory of what once obtained. But

this double image, of potency, and the quite powerful if intermittent observation of it, serves to illustrate, among other things, the fate of The Poet surviving through two eras. The original potency may have had a bardic vigour unimpeded by a self-conscious and mocking observation of its impulses; but the later work of Arrurruz that we are offered presents a considerable shift in temper and emphasis. In these poems we have, initially, not so much a man expressing passion as recollecting it:

Ten years without you. For so it happens. . . .

The long-lost words of choice and valediction.²¹

The energy is not in the passion itself, but re-located in the stare the recollects it, and which is itself observed. Arrurruz's writing is at once more complex than it was, and, significantly, more difficult to achieve. Whatever the auto-biographical references may amount to, Hill is clearly defining the poet's difficulties as he encounters an environment that is at once more self-conscious and less bardic. The attention is scrupulous and modern.

Arrurruz is of course a middle-aging man, and knows it. Yet his struggles are not those of a defeated one.

'One cannot lose what one has not possessed.'
So much for that abrasive gem.
I can lose what I want. I want you.²²

The first line is between inverted commas because it is a line from a poem he is writing or has perhaps recently completed. Either way the line is embedded in commentary by an older, more self-conscious, part of the man. 'Coplas'—this is the first of four that constitute the poem—are 'songs', perhaps somewhat lyrically unself-regarding and unironic poems. They are also popular poems, often used to serenade the beloved. Some measure of Hill's irony here may be obtained by contrasting these simple definitions with the stance of the present Arrurruz's coplas which form neither a serenade, nor are popular, but unlyrical, allusive, and complex. The form is of course traditional and it has therefore accumulated to itself the energy of those poems which have earlier filled the form. But like so much else in the twentieth century, the traditional form has broken down. Or rather, not so much broken as become inappropriate; and not this, entirely, but that we have lost the ability to use the form. We have lost spontaneity.

Much of this centres in the phrase 'abrasive gem'. It is abrasive because it is a reminder of what he has lost. It is a gem because it is a lyrical utterance faceted and cut like a jewel. Hill however uses 'gem' to bring in other, colloquial meanings. Thus gem can mean, a real beauty, but the poet can also, and certainly here does, mean it ironically and self-contemptuously. The self-contempt arises from not only his awareness of his having lost his wife to another, but of how his line of poetry untruthfully renders in lyrical terms a considerably unlyrical event. Arrurruz brings to his and our awareness the discontinuity between the two ways of

looking at such an event, and the two ways of writing about it. There is no elegiac or consolatory sweetness to be got; the paradox of Arrurruz's poem is still-born; and is replaced by the unparadoxical and unironical lack of consolation:

I can lose what I want. I want you.

But in the second of the coplas there is already a modification of the harsh tone:

Oh my dear one, I shall grieve for you
For the rest of my life with slightly
Varying cadence, oh my dear one.

The tone of this first line softens that of the previous coplas' ending. He is it seems back in the convention of elegizing the lost one. But the phrase 'with slightly/Varying cadence' tinges the whole with mockery. Is the irony conscious on Arrurruz's part, or is it reserved for the reader's inspection only? It hardly matters. The absurd monotony of such poetics is rendered, and we understand how the irony qualifies into clarity the whole situation. He is perhaps even beginning to write a poetry that feeds on such ironic awareness. Yet the irony cannot dissolve the passion, a crucial point for the poems that follow: 'Half-mocking the half-truth.' Michael Hamburger wrote of Holderlin in *Reason and Energy*:

Even before his enforced separation from Susette Contard he had felt that his fate would be a tragic one. . . . Now he had to lose his last support against the sense of personal tragedy. As he had foretold in 1798, all that remained was his art and the quite impersonal faith that sustained his art. . . . What Holderlin did not know when he wrote this poem is that long after his heart had indeed died, as he says, his "mellow song" would continue; that the music of his strings *would* escort him down.

So with Arrurruz, in a way. Not now with his wife, musing, with increasing dilapidating irony on his loss, seeing that the earlier way of writing will fit neither the age, nor the event in his life, nor now his temperament, nothing it seems can prevent his gentle decline into oblivion. One might therefore expect the poems to degenerate, by mimesis, placing at the reader's disposal an irreversable picture of disintegration, among a flickering irony. This does not occur. What Arrurruz could not have foreseen, since he was engaged in it, was that his ironically truthful examination of the events in his life, including his poetry, would revitalise his art. For I take it that the succeeding poems of the 'Songbook' are not only made of Arrurruz speaking but of his writing. If so, there is no failure, but rather, regeneration. In poem 5 Arrurruz can respond to, or write, a poem of genuine deprivation:

I find myself
Devouring verses of stranger passion
And exile. The exact words

Are fed into my blank hunger for you.²³

A hunger that may not be fed; therefore blank. The crucial word however for the poet is 'exact'. The gaze has caught its truth. The reward is exactness, and its pain. Similarly in 'A Song from Armenia':

Why do I have to relive, even now,
Your mouth, and your hand running over me
Deft as a lizard, like a sinew of water.²⁴

The emphatic, simplified movement of the song has returned, but this time filled with rich, *painful* memories, constantly re-awakened. And admitted into his consciousness by the wry ironic truthfulness with which the mind regards such experience. It is not the distancing irony of the man who can afford irony because he is detached, but an irony created in pain. The relationship may have ceased, but the pain does not get subsumed in distance. There are two final twists to the 'life', both occurring in the second of the prose poems which concludes the sequence:

Scarcely speaking: it becomes as a
Coolness between neighbours. Often
There is this orgy of sleep. I wake
To caress propriety with odd words
And enjoy abstinence in a vocation
Of new-almost-meaningless despair.

'Orgy of Sleep' oddly reverses the ironic vitality I have noticed, suggesting a dying inwards of life. The sexuality gets transcribed in a caressed 'propriety'. Yet the last word is despair. The registration is in the end one of feeling.

Is there a further irony in that Arrurruz, caught up with an exact sense of it, can no longer make poems out of his pain because his equipment belonged to an earlier more rhetorical mode? I think not; although one can imagine that for Arrurruz this might often seem to have been the threat. As a latter-day saint, he experiences two temptations. One is to succumb to his earlier inexact rhetoric, as both an expression of and a response to his experience. The other is to create a distant and neutered irony from his pain. This latter gets suggested in 'Postures'. As it happens, Arrurruz succumbs to neither temptation.

6

As with the Arrurruz sequence, the thirty prose poems that make up *Mercian Hymns* have a central figure from whom the poems depend, in this instance King Offa. Historically, as Hill tells us, Offa reigned over Mercia . . . in the years AD 757-796. During earlier medieval times he was already becoming a creature of legend. However the gloss is not entirely helpful in that the reader does not find a historical reconstruction of the King and his domain. Interleaved with a recon-

struction of some of the King's acts are passages and whole poems concerned with the contemporary and representative figure Hill makes of himself. Why not? Additionally, the poem deliberately thwarts any attempt by the reader to keep his or her imagination safe in the past. The King himself, although rooted in the past, is to be 'most usefully . . . regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands', and thus threads "his" way in and out of his past and our present. Hill makes quite sure we get this by offering, in the first Hymn, a description of the figure as

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sand-
stone: overlord of the M5: architect of the his-
toric rampart and ditch. . . .²⁵

Nevertheless the historic facts of Offa the King are relevant, if tangled, and we should look at them. Entangled with them however are Hill's references themselves: (i) *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1950, pp. 170-80) and (ii) The Latin prose hymns or canticles of the early Christian Church; *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse*, (1962, pp. xvii, 1v).

The interested reader will not be glad to discover that although there is a group of Hymns in Anglo-Saxon, quoted by Sweet, these texts are interlineally placed with the Latin taken from the *Vulgate*, of which these are literal and apparently not always accurate translations. Moreover it has been suggested that these translations embody no sense of the haecceity of the Mercian domain, or of the Anglo-Saxon world at large. That is, they were probably intended as instructional texts for the teaching of Latin. Moreover the two Vulgates are themselves of course translations from the Hebrew, the relevant Biblical references being made by Sweet at the head of each Anglo-Saxon translation (from the Latin). The first reference then suggests that, apart from some elaborate, heavy-witted joke, Hill's pointing to the Mercian Hymns indicates no more, as far as the Anglo-Saxon is concerned, than a homogeneity sanctioned by the Mercian dialect, a homogeneity that stems of course from a geographical area over which King Offa did rule, whose reign may or may not have witnessed these translations.

The second reference is as apparently oblique: "Te Deum", a canticle in rhythmical prose, has been used in Christian worship from the fourth century to the present day. . . . As the Jewish psalter was the sole hymn-book of the early church, it is not surprising that the "Te Deum" is characterized throughout by the parallelism which is the basis of ancient Hebrew poetry.²⁶ As it happens, there appears to be no use of Hebrew parallelism in Hill's poems other than those traces which, through contact with the Bible, have crept into our speech and left there residually a few emphatic forms. Yet checking, in fact, through the relevant Biblical passages in Isaiah, Deuteronomy, Habakkuk, and Luke (which are the original texts for Sweet's Mercian Hymns) I found, almost by accident, and by linking my apprehension of rhythm in these English passages with the phrase quoted earlier—the "Te Deum", a canticle in rhythmical prose—I began to follow the point of the references, and even to give grudging assent to their obliquity.

It is helpful to remember that much of the *Old Testament* is, in the Hebrew, poetry, and that in rendering the translations in English of the Authorized Version, what these offer us is, precisely, 'rhythmical prose'. Moreover it is not merely rhythmical prose, but prose versions of poetry, although rendered, one feels, partly through the repetitions of parallelism, with emphatic *and* subtle rhythms. It is as if the exterior device of line ending, and all those devices contingent on this convention, have been discarded (not *entirely* true of *Mercian Hymns*); what is left, in the main, however, is the inherent structure itself, depending more than ever upon the rhythmical arrangement of the words. Greater stress may get laid on word-choice, and a closer attention is charged, perhaps, upon the meaning. These hopeful attempts at describing a prose poem, but in particular Hill's canticles, now offer the point of the references, since, without falling back on a description of his own method of writing, they allow the reader to pick up, in the best possible way, through example, the kind of poetry he is writing in *Mercian Hymns*. Moreover, although the Mercian dialect and the Anglo-Saxon language have little to do with the structure of the Hymns, and no comparison with the Anglo-Saxon will profitably help us in a reading of Hill's poems, I suggest that the Anglo-Saxon *Mercian Hymns* act as a historical filter for Hill. That is, they remind us that the Biblical transmissions which reach us additionally passed, for whatever reason, through the Mercian dialect, and that however indistinct the locality is now, and however restricted King Offa's jurisdiction may have been, Biblical contact was made via Mercia, which is also Offa's and Hill's locality.

As for the relevance of the Bible to King Offa, and both these to the character of Offa in Hill's poems, verse 21 from *Deuteronomy* 32 may help:

They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those which are not a people: I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

In Hill's eighth poem:

The mad are predators. Too often lately they harbour
against us. A novel heresy exculpates all maimed
souls. Abjure it! I am the King of Mercia, and
I know. . . .

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

It is useful to remember that while all of chapter 32 of *Deuteronomy* consists of God's words, Moses speaks them. They have the backing of God, but are vested in the Moses' temporal authority. Of course, Moses, the prime leader of Israel in a tight situation had much to cope with, not least of all the comically frequent backsliding of the Israelites. But we recall that Moses was an autocratic ruler and, in this, had adequate sanction from the God of the *Old Testament*, who was

jealous and wrathful. Curiously, those passages of the Bible translated into Anglo-Saxon stress, perhaps by accident, this aspect of God: provided we obey Him we shall find Him loving and protective: but should we not, we shall discover his wrath and punishments. The autocratic nature of such a God was perhaps a useful reminder, in that probably more anarchic period, that the nature and power of the Anglo-Saxon King was not unlike that of the Hebrew God.

R. W. Chambers in *Beowulf: an Introduction*²⁷ interestingly examines the character of King Offa II as well as the legends surrounding his supposed ancestor Offa I. He points to the shuffling of the deeds of the King onto his Queen by the monks of St Alban's as a way of exonerating their benefactor of crime. Chambers speaks explicitly of 'the deeds of murder which, as a matter of history, did characterise [King Offa II's] reign.' History helps us to link the autocratic nature of God with King Offa, and to see what Hill has done with this in his *Mercian Hymns*.

Finally, I should quote from C. M. Sisson's Epigraph for Mercian Hymns:

The conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons.

The quotation goes on to suggest that the technical aspects of government are frequently used to evade those moral laws which apply alike to individuals and governments.

The question of the private man and his public actions is one that Hill has already worked in 'Ovid in the Third Reich'. With such a figure as a king the question multiplies in direct ratio to the power of the king and his abuse of it. History suggests that Offa was a tyrant. In no 7 ('The Kingdom of Offa'), a part of Offa's childhood, we have

Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after
the day of the lost fighter. . . .
Ceolred let it spin through a hole
in the classroom-floorboards. . . .

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering
with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed
him.

Then he continues with his play, alone. One cannot mistake the ferocity, or the egocentric peace of mind following it. Hill does not set out to establish the figure of a tyrant, since the sequence does not have that kind of narrative structure or intention. Yet in Offa's adult life the poems reproduce a similar ruthlessness to that of the child. Thus in dealing (in no 10) with forgers of the realm's coinage:

[the King's 'moneys'] struck with account-
able tact. They could alter the king's face.

Exactness of design to deter imitation; mutilation if that failed. . . .

Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring.

It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger.

'Safe' underlies the irony and helps us to refer back to his 'moneymen' who, alone, were free to alter, that is, flatter, the face. One is reminded of the monks rewriting the *Life* of King Offa their benefactor, by putting on his Queen the murder of his vassal King Aethelbert. But the flattery tactfully (via Hill) points to the King's severity, if not cruelty. Of course we see here the attempt to establish in the kingdom the idea of money available only through productive work, and an attempt to establish a concept of lawfulness. Yet one is also aware of the naked word 'moneymen', as opposed to the more neutral words available, with the suggestion that the King is, out of 'good substance', making money. There are many qualifications here, and if the judgement is finally in the poem against Offa, there are mitigations. In poem 14, Offa assumes the role of powerful business man:

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

The effect is one of humour, and opulence. The ritual 'noon' cigar suggests the power of a minor potentate. The power has its reserves; yet in the obvious sense the vulgarity is miniature; he threatens with 'ash.' But ash, we recall, is what the concentration camp victims were reduced to. One notices the zeugma, with the built-in moral device. Men are dismissed as easily and thoughtlessly as reports (the line-split [male/factor] emphasises this by means of the pun). The touch is light and has humour; but it engages the reader only to repel him.

There are other touches of opulence, of a more private kind, connected even more with the contemporary man rather than a king. He has been driving (in no 17) through the beautiful 'hushed Vosges'. Some accident occurs with or between cyclists. It is unclear to me if it involves himself, as an adult, with these cyclists, or himself as a child with another cyclist, or whether Hill is merging both possibilities. In a sense it hardly matters. What is more important is the implied lack of compunction, whoever was to blame for the accident. The car 'heartlessly' overtakes all this and

He lavished on
the high valleys its *haleine*. . .

By using, it would seem, the more delicate if exotic French for 'breath', Hill is able to draw attention to the discrepancy between the beauty of the country he travels through, and the linked 'heartlessness' of the pollution and lack of concern for the accident. The French word is beautiful, but cold, and lacks compunction in its erasure of concern.

Again in no 18, we return to the problem of cruelty, with the contingent problem of the enjoyment of it:

At Pavia, a visitation of some sorrow. Boethius'
dungeon. He shut his eyes. . . .

He willed the instruments of
violence to break upon his meditation. Iron buckles
gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men
stooped, disentangled the body.

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

The irony emerges. Boethius wrote his *De Consolatione Philosophiae* while imprisoned at Pavia. Still the tourist of the previous poem, the man visits Pavia with the conscious, formal intention of commiserating with Boethius' obscene death, and of wondering at the man who could console himself with philosophy at such a stage in his life. He wills himself to imagine the philosopher tortured, perhaps out of a dutiful compunction, but finds that, secretly, a part of him relishes the scene. 'He wiped his lips and his hands'. Both relish and guilt are here. The souvenirs are discreet because secret. He practises his enjoyment on no man's flesh. Yet there is a sense in which he is guilty, certainly, of unclean thoughts. The contrast between the cerebral and touristic appreciation of philosophy, and the voyeur's appreciation of cruelty is notable. Rather, he is not only voyeur, but, in his relish, participator. 'Flesh leaked rennet over them' is horrifying; the blood curdles under the extremity of the suffering; the blood is said to leak, uncontrollably, as if itself incontinent. The wracked body becomes truly pitiful. The buckles restrain the victim, and perhaps muffle his cries; they also choke. What is remarkable here, however, is that the scene and its relishing are admitted to. Admitted to, but hardly confessed. It is not so much a release from guilt as a judgment on the thought and its stimulation. And this judgment is as valid for the tourist as for the king:

I have learned one thing: not to look down
So much upon the damned.²⁸

One should be careful to avoid the impression that there is relish in Hill's recreation of cruelty. The pity is not sprinkled carelessly over the Hymns, as some kind of reward to the reader, but it is present, and, in particular, in the finely intimate and tender no 25:

I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose
childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
nailer's darg.

And

It is one
thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another
to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire.

The insight is crucial to the tender pity. It is one thing to celebrate the dignity of labour, another to endure it in one's first maturity, especially when the work itself has caused the mutilation. Even the sound of the phrase 'nailer's darg', the phrase isolated on a line of its own and following a rather rapid syllabic flow—the long-drawn vowel of 'darg' expresses the reductive nature of the experience. The poem does not indulge in melancholy. It consistently touches on the harshness of the experience. The man is said to 'brood' on Ruskin's text concerning labour. Ruskin's letter, which begins with reflections on a Worcestershire nail factory, is concerned with the immorality and hypocrisy of usury. Hill is suggesting, I imagine, that his grandmother's labour, with that of others, borrows money from her employer, and his profit on that represents his interest.

One has to finish. Offa dies and one is left with not so much the figure of a man, but an area, changing, and filled, on balance, with more distress than comfort, and 'presided over' by a ruler and an ethos more cruel, more harsh, than severely just. Capricious, light, but capable of some consistent authority. One may feel that the work as a whole is perhaps too inconclusive. On the other hand, as Lawrence abjured the novelist, Hill finally refuses to tip the balance by putting his own thumb in the scales. He is concerned with how things are (and an evaluation of that), not firstly upon how they ought to be; although that perhaps also emerges.

Number 27 is not the last of the Hymns but I should like to indicate its diverse elements, and to suggest how the entire set of poems, as they draw to their end, contrive to echo their diversity within this one poem. At the funeral of King Offa an absurd composition of mourners, from all ages, attends:

He was defunct. They were perfunctory.

The contrast is not only between the finality of death and the continuity of the living. There is an absurdity contingent on death, but this is not entirely it either. The comic element here mediates between the two and both eases and recognises the sharpness of the dividing line. Additionally, as Hill suggests, the more public and dignified the man who has died, the more absurd the situation, and the more susceptible to hypocrisy, since those intimate, mourning connections do not, properly, exist. The pun joins the living recognitions with the dead man, only to distinguish finally, and for good. Then follows a last stanza of extraordinary beauty, in which nature mirrors the uprooting of the man. But even in the largeness of the event death is seen to touch every creature. It is the leveler:

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.

'Butcher of strawberries' carries the right amount of pathos. The innocent fruits are remarked on.

Notes

In order to compress these as much as possible, I have not, except with books other than Hill's, given page references, but simply the title of the volumes the poems may be found in.

¹ A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath: A Memoir' in *New American Review*, 12, New York, 1971, pp. 26-27

² *For the Unfallen*, London, 1959; also nos. 3, 11

³ *King Log*, London, 1968

⁴ *King Log*

⁵ 'September Song' (*King Log*)

⁶ Michael Hamburger, *Reason and Energy*, London, 1957, pp. 219-222; 6a pp. 17-18.

⁷ 'Three Baroque Meditations' (2) (*King Log*)

⁸ 'Locust Songs' (3) (*King Log*)

⁹ 'Domaine Public' (*King Log*)

¹⁰ 'Funeral Music' (2) (*King Log*)

¹¹ *For the Unfallen*

¹² from *King Log*

¹³ 'Funeral Music' (2) (*King Log*)

¹⁴ 'Men are a Mockery of Angels' (*King Log*)

¹⁵ No 27 (*Mercian Hymns*)

¹⁶ "The Happy Warrior," *Naked Warriors*, Herbert Read (1919); "The End of a War," *The End of a War*, Read (1933)

¹⁷ Herbert Read, *The Contrary Experience*, London, 1963, p. 176

¹⁸ 'Funeral Music' (8) (*King Log*)

¹⁹ 'Funeral Music' (7) (*King Log*)

²⁰ 'Funeral Music' (3) (*King Log*)

²¹ 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arruruz' (1) (*King Log*)

²² 'The Songbook' (2) (*King Log*)

²³ 'The Songbook' (5) (*King Log*)

²⁴ 'The Songbook' (9) (*King Log*)

²⁵ *Mercian Hymns*, London, 1971 (1)

²⁶ Edited by Frederick Brittain, *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse*, Harmondsworth, 1962, pp. xvi-xvii

²⁷ R. W. Chambers, *Beowulf/an Introduction*, Cambridge, 1932, see pp. 31-40

²⁸ "Ovid in The Third Reich," (*King Log*)