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The Sense of History in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill

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Born in England in1932, Geoffrey Hill was the only child of Williams George Hill and Hilda Beatrice Hill. As a child, he suffered so much because of his mother's illness, his father's indifference and his own loneliness. His grandmother was the only person who was very close to him and consequently, he loved her very much. After finishing his study in Keble College, Oxford, he became a lecturer at Leeds University in 1976. He went to United States of America in 1988. After retiring from Boston University, he returned to United Kingdom. He currently resides in Cambridge.

Hill began to write in the late 1940s and the early 1950s. In addition to many books of criticism, essays and reviews, Hill produced many collections of poetry such as *For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958* (1960), *King Log* (1968), *Mercian Hymns* (1971), *Tenebrae* (1979), *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), *Canaan* (1998), *The Triumph of Love* (2000), *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) and Scenes from Comus (2005). Over the last fifty years, Hill has received many awards such as the Gregory Award, Whitbread Award, Alice Hunt Barlett Award, Hawthornden Prize, the Heinemann Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize, and the Loines Award.

Geoffrey Hill has been acclaimed as one of the best contemporary poets by a large number of critics. While Hall

says that "Hill will remain the monumental English poet of the latter 20th century" (600), Burt considers him "the best English poet alive" (198). Knottenbelt calls him the "poet's poet" and looks at him as "the most outstanding poet writing in English today" (1). What distinguishes Hill among his contemporaries is his ability to use history in different aspects and in varied contexts.

In an interview with Blake Morrison, Hill stated the importance of history. He said that "in order to control the present, one needs to be steeped in the past"(1980, 213). Hill is concerned enough to recognize the importance of history, but realistic enough to know that the same mistakes are repeated again and again. This is one of the puzzles of human nature he tackles in his poetry.

Hill has a special relationship with history. Martin stresses this point stating that "Hill's engagement with history is as vigorous and questioning as ever: he is one of the few contemporary writers with the talent and breadth to meet the past square-on…." (6). Potts supports the same idea that "Hill's work is marked by…contemplations of history" (16). No evidence is stronger than the words of Hill himself. On the publication of his fourth book *Tenebrae*, he wrote a comment for the *Poetry Society Bulletin* saying that "*Tenebrae* shares with *Mercian Hymns* and, indeed, with my first and second books, *For the Unfallen* and *King Log*, a sense of history" (1978, 1).

This paper aims at examining the sense of history in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill. His ability to establish new lines with the past through finding a relationship between the present historical experience and that of the chosen past creates a

continuous dialogue between past and present. This dialogue can be seen in different forms through literary, religious and social contexts. The method followed throughout the study depends on a close textual reading of some poems of his eleven books of poetry.

The use of historical references in poetry is a very important phenomenon for several reasons. First, it refers to the extent of how a poet is culturally well-equipped. Second, it enables a poet to express many of his ideas and feelings in few words; it helps in conveying multiple meanings and impressions in the light of prior knowledge of the intended sources. Using different references in his poetry, a poet can succeed in "preserving the human record [including] the Genesis of all that is good and of worth" (Milne, 53). The frequent use of historical allusions is strongly connected with the ability of the readers to grasp their connotations and comprehend their significance. Garner explains this point saying that "allusions would only be effective if the audience recognized them" (179). If the readers do not understand the intended meanings behind using them, their role becomes a mere "decorative device" (Irwin, 293).

Hill's poetry is full of many references and allusions that revive the concept of history, especially the history of Britain. Baker states that Hill writes his poetry in response to what he has seen as Britain's refusal or inability to confront the often violent reality of its own history, and its readiness to dote on its imagined glorious past (172). Hill tries to fight what appears to him to be an innate tendency towards social apathy. For Hill, using history in his poetry is an attempt to investigate "the dangerous situation seething just below the surface of an England that had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist" (Baker, 174).

Hill's use of historical references and allusions makes his poetry difficult for many readers. Burt states that "Hill's books are complex and full of intricate aural patterns, alert to big questions about belief and history" (198). What is important is that he did not deny the difficulty of his poetry. Moreover, he justifies this difficulty and, as he simply puts it:

> We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we're difficult to each other. And we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most "intellectual" piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are? Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when, if such simplification were applied to a description of our inner selves, we would find it demeaning? I think art has a right – not an obligation – to be difficult if it wishes. And, since people generally go on from this to talk about elitism versus democracy, I would add that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that

> tyranny requires simplification (Phillips, 274).

Hill's historical sense is different from that of T. S. Eliot. While Eliot's historical sense refers to a near collapse, Hill's sense is positive and supportive. This point is emphasized by Wilkinson:

> Hill's poetry still invites comparison and pays homage to the material it draws on, suggesting a positive relation to the past rather than the sense of near complete collapse of a fruitful historical development which Eliot evokes in The Waste Land (35).

Hill's sense of history is strongly connected with the sum of human experience. His poems are full of history's victims, ancient and modern. Besides, there are thousands who died at the battles of Shiloh and Towton. In his poetry, Hill tries to find a dialogue between past and present. In this respect, his poetry deals with different aspects of history in literary, religious and social fields.

Hill deeply dives in the world of literary history. In many of his poems, he uses references to many literary works, characters and incidents. He thinks that a good poet should absorb the literary works of his ancestors and this helps in producing unique poetry (Milne, 56). This is why some critics advise the readers of Hill's poetry to use books of reference to enable them to understand his poems. Knotenbelt stresses this point stating that "the capacity of a Hill poem to move the reader is ultimately the test of its authoritative expression" (2). He adds that many of Hill's poems are "dense with allusions to other texts" (3).

Recalling Laurence Binyon's (1869-1943) poem entitled 'For the Fallen' (1914) which refers to the victims who fell in the First World War, Hill entitled one of his volumes *For the Unfallen.* The poems of the volume refer to the Second World War and those whose devilish nature drove them to destroy everything and to hurt and kill the innocent civilians. In addition, history imposes itself again when Hill recalls Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragic History of Dr. Faustus* when writing one of its poems under the title of 'Dr. Faustus'. Borrowing the epigraph of Marlowe's play, the final stanza of the poem says:

> A beast is slain, a beast thrives,
> Fat blood squeaks on the sand,
> A blinded god believes
> That he is not blind.
>
> (*For the Unfallen*, 16)

Using these lines, the poet brings the atmosphere as well as the implications of Marlowe's play into his own poem. Depending on an important historical event like World War II, the poet tries to discuss the theme of the fall of man in the light of the destruction caused by wars. Like Faustus who causes his downfall and draws his own tragedy, modern man ruins humanity as a whole by sparking wars. The image of man in

Marlowe's play resembles that of 'beast' in Hill's poem. There is a two-fold loss: just like the loss in 'A beast is slain' or 'a beast thrives', it is found in achieving victory or losing it.

Hill's use of literary history is represented in his recalling of some famous literary figures such as Percy Shelley (1792-1822), John Milton (1698-1674) and Charles Péguy (1873-1914). In his elegiac poem entitled 'The Death of Shelley', Hill creates a dialogue between present and past via a historical spotlight on Shelley. He seizes this opportunity to bring to light some of Shelley's controversial technical aspects. In this poem, Hill is led to undermine the whole principle of material progress. It is an epitaph for the millennialism that led Shelley, in youth, to envision a gradual refinement of man's natural condition (Vincent B. Sherry, 66).

Hill does not support the idea that a poet should rely on one vision or approach. In his poetry, Shelley began his literary career by writing poetry that describes the natural world of reality which is far removed from the imaginary world of mythology. Later on, he changed his approach entirely by using his imagination and the imaginary realm of mythology. In both cases, Shelley stuck to one approach without creating a mixture of the two worlds. At the first part of his poem, Hill says:

> 'His guarded eyes under his shielded brow'
> Through poisonous baked sea-things Perseus
> Goes – clogged sword, clear, aimless

mirror-
With nothing to strike at or blind
in the frothed shallows.
(*For the Unfallen*, 31)

The lines refer to a Greek myth that Shelley discarded and did not use in his poetry. It is that of the brave 'Perseus' who, in order to rescue his wife Andromeda, attacked a sea monster and slew it. Hill shows how Shelley, in his early career, insisted on neglecting completely the description of the intangible elements such as myths. Hill disapproves of Shelley's resorting to this approach as the sole source of his poetic inspiration. The same disapproval continued when Shelley changed his approach and began to depict an intangible and imaginary world. Hill says:

Slime; the residues of refined tears;
And, salt-bristled, blown on a drying sea,
The sunned and risen faces
There's Andromeda
Depicted in relief, after the fashion.
(*For the Unfallen*, 31)

Hill compares Shelley's early poetry in being devoid of mythology to 'a drying sea' which is exposed to the blowing to the remains of Andromeda's 'refined tears'. In contrast with his early poems, Shelley 'depicted in relief' myths such as that of Andromeda. What is important here is that Hill's critical point of view is based on the idea that a man of letters should not confine himself to one approach. This can dwarf him and put many restrictions on his artistic creativity. This is obvious when Milne states that "In this context, Hill has written of the poet's need to bear in mind that there is no one method or approach, be it mythological, theological or political, whereby the various levels of reality can be endorsed by art (52). Hill prefers that a poet should use two methods or more for handling his ideas and humanistic themes. He says:

> Over the statues, unchanging feature
> Of commerce and quaint love, soot lies.
> Earth steams. The bull and the great mute swan
> Strain into life with their notorious cries.
>
> (*For the Unfallen*, 32)

In the third line, 'The bull' symbolizes the Greek god Zeus and 'the great mute swan' refers to the queen of Sparta Leda. Hill wants to say that a poet should mingle moral creatures with immortal ones in his poetry.

The content of Hill's 'The Death of Shelley' is better understood when comparing it to Hill's 'Genesis'. In this poem, Hill shows that poets should not immerse themselves in an intangible world of imagination. A poet should mix what is imaginary to what is real, what is touchable to what is untouchable. From Hill's point of view, human blood is considered the symbol of reality and this is what is considered the essence of the lives of all human beings. As Hill puts it:

> By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
> To ravage and redeem the world:
> There is no bloodless myth will hold.
>
> (*For the Unfallen*, 42)

A poet should not fly in the sky of imagination without having a solid presence in the world of reality. This is affirmed by Milne who says that poetry should not neglect "the brute fact [about] the actuality" (52) or the reality of human life particularly and the world of nature generally (53). This is why Hill thinks that Shelley should have mingled the two worlds so as to be able to approach "the various level of reality [that] can be endorsed by art" (Milne, 52). Most of the time, Hill tries to make it clear that a poet will not be able to create what he [Hill] advocates without having a historical background that he can invest in, in his poetry.

After mourning Shelley by criticizing his literary approach, Hill mourns John Milton in his volume of poetry entitled *Scenes from Comus*. As usual, Hill intends to bring to light old literary figures and their works and present them to the modern readers. In doing so, he creates a historical dialogue between the past and the present. He writes:

> *Not in these noises* – Milton. *A troubled sea*
> *of noises and hoarse disputes*, is also him.
> Even short arctic days have a long twilight
>
> as I have time to observe, Gloam lies pulsing
> at the sea-skyline, where the *Hood* blew up
> surging at full speed, a kind of wake

> over the sudden mass grave foul with cordite,
> gradually setting. Milton meant civil war
> and civil detractions, and meant the sway of power,
>
> the pull of power, its *pondus*, its gravity.
>
> (*Scenes from Comus*, 23)

Hill borrows the story of Milton's masque Comus and makes it the story of his volume of poetry and gives it the following title: *Scenes from Comus.* Milton's work tells the story of an imaginary dangerous journey of three members belonging to a high-standard British family in the seventeenth century. They are a sister and her two brothers. Milton calls her 'the Lady' and her two brothers 'the Elder Brother' and 'the Second Brother'. They decide to set out on a journey in their terrific forest where they met the devilish magician called 'Comus', who was the son of god Gacchus and Circe. Hill says:

> I've not pieced out the story--Milton's script
> Was briefly censored [...]
>
> (*Scenes from Comus*, 20)

Besides, the words in italics in Hill's text were borrowed from Milton's following prose works: *An Apology for Smectymnnus* and *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty.* Pestell says that Hill quotes Milton's words to show how "the Platonic ideal is harshly contrasted with the 'noises' of conflicting political discourses" (7). In doing so, Hill wants to expose the continuous conflict between good morals and political discourses and the possibility that man may become hypocritical and may support immoral decisions.

In *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Hill presents a historical description of different aspects of life in Europe of the early 20th century. To fulfill this, Hill laments the death of Charles Péguy by discussing, projecting and exposing the important incidents in Péguy's life. Péguy was a prominent French poet and an important politician. In a historical context, Péguy is taken as a representative of the complicated situation of modern man. He suffered from contradictions in his cultural, intellectual and social life. These contradictions augmented inner conflicts within himself. Like his generation, Péguy took a side of the society around him and separated himself from the church. Though he cut himself off his Catholic creed, he did not neglect the world of spirituality. Depicting the situation at that time, Hill says:

> Happy are they who, under the gaze of God
> die for the 'terre charnelle', marry her blood
> to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down
> into the darkness of resurrection,
>
> into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle,
> almondy meadowsweet, the freshet-brook
> rising and running through small wilds of oak,
> past the elder-tump that is the child's castle.
>
> (*Collected Poems*, 83)

Hill refers to Péguy's tendency towards the importance of spirituality. He wants to say that human life is ephemeral because it is centered around the body which must fade away one day or another. What will remain of man after his death is his spirit. Taking the role of Péguy, Hill wants to attract the attention of people to take care of their spirits and not to spoil and corrupt them for materialistic issues.

During his life, Péguy suffered from several instabilities in his ideas and trends. Like most of the youth of his generation, he fluctuated among certain religious, social and political aspects and their opposites. To inform his readers of the social, religious and political history of Péguy and his time, Hill writes:

> **Who guard the votive candles and the faint**
> **Invalid's night-light of the sacrament,**
> **A host of lilies and the table laid**
> **For early mass from which you stood aside**
>
> **To find salvation, your novena cleaving**
> **Brusquely against the grain of its own myth,**
> **Its truth and justice, to a kind of truth,**
> **A justice hard to justify. 'Having**
>
> **Spoken his mind he'd a mind to be silent.'**
> **But who would credit that, that one talent**
> **Dug from the claggy Beauce and returned to it**
> **With love, honour, suchlike bitter fruit?**
>
> (*Collected Poems*, 86-87)

The lines refer to Péguys' refusal of all superficial appearances of religion and Socialism. He thought that all such appearances made Socialism and religion similar to 'bitter fruit'.

Hill uses elegiac poetry in a historical context to glorify some famous persons such as Shelley, Milton and Péguy. He uses different techniques when dealing with them. Throughout these elegies, he expresses his points of view concerning human life by shedding a historical light on them from different angles. In 'The Death of Shelley', he assures that the poet should mix different methods and should not confine himself to a specific approach. In *Scenes from Comus*, Hill invented a new way for mourning John Milton. He does not criticize Milton's poetic method, as he has done with Shelley nor dose he mention the major incidents in Milton's life, as he has done with Péguy; but Hill does lament Milton by borrowing the plot of his masque entitled *Comus* and commenting on it. In *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Hill narrates the important incidents in Péguy's life and shows how he can be a model of the modern thinker who suffers from many cultural dilemmas that have resulted from the prevalence of many vigorous intellectual currents and literary movements.

The literary history that distinguishes Hill's poetry can take other forms than literary figures. It can be seen in different kinds of references to scientific inventions and titles of literary works. This kind of poetry cannot be understood without prior knowledge of the nature and meaning of the used references and allusions.

Hill resorts to references even to modern scientific history and its discoveries. The best example is his reference to the D.N.A. Describing the structure of this biological element, Hill says:

> A way of many ways: a god
> Spirals in the pure steam of blood.
> [...] men – rise from shut tombs
> To a disturbance of small drums.
>
> (*For the Unfallen*, 46)

To serve his ideas, Hill alludes to many innovations of his age which has witnessed an amazing and unprecedented scientific progress. Beside carrying human genes from one generation to another, D.N.A. seems to bear the seeds of evil from parents to their offspring. In this respect, this reference can be understood in the light of a religious context. If Hill wants to say that evil passes from one generation to another, he refers to the Christian belief in the primal sin and the idea that sin is transmitted from the forefathers of humanity to their children. Thus, evil manages to combine all generations together by moving from fathers to their children. Hill attracts his readers' attention by using certain references. Instead of expecting more details about D.N.A., the reader finds himself dealing with historical and religious issues.

Hill uses the titles of many famous poems to create a historical atmosphere that can help him in conveying his intended messages. In 'Tristia', Hill recalls history when borrowing the title of Mandelstam's poem which he

[Mandelstam] previously borrowed from Ovid. 'Tristia' is the fourth poem from 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets' which was first published in *King Log*. The poem says:

Difficult friend, I would have preferred You to them.
The dead keep their sealed lives
And again I am too late.
Too late The salutes, dust-clouds and brazen cries.

Images rear from desolation
Look...ruins upon a plain...
A few men glare at their hands;
others Grovel for food in the roadside field.

Tragedy has all under regard.
It will not touch us but it is there –
Flawless, insatiate - hard summer sky
Feasting on this, reaching its own end.
(*King Log*, 48)

The historical context of the poem is dealt with in many of Hill's poems, namely wars and their scars and tragedies. The period that the poem covers (1891-1938) witnessed many tragic events in Europe, Russia and the whole world such as World War I and the Russian Civil War. In this poem, Hill concentrates on the dimension of time. All the time, he bears in mind that the power of poetry acts too late since it cannot happen at the same time as the historical events. What the poet tries to do is to raise his readers' consciousness. He urges them to look at their previous mistakes and directs them to avoid making new ones in time to come.

Hill's poetry is full of references and allusions to religious history. In his early poem entitled 'An Ark of the Flood', Hill reminds his readers of an important incident in the religious history of the whole universe. The poem refers to the age of Noah (PBUH) in which a tsunami violently struck the globe's crust or 'our clay' and nothing was saved except the riders of Noah's ship or ark. Hill describes the situation:

> With us the sun keeps stride
> And all the skies unreal
> Around our heads their noon of thunderous shine
> Weep waters hold the world beneath their sway,
> The pummeling seas made livid with our clay.
> Have we then, cast off mortal for divine?

(*Fantasy Poets*, No. 11, p. 1)

Though human beings feel that they are strong, they cannot deny that they are unable to face other forces of nature such as water and fire. In the same poem, Hill says:

> (And they are free who from the burning grove
> May walk untouched by any hand of flame.
> See, beyond driven boundaries they move
> To meet the first of Mornings by its name).

(*Fantasy Poets*, 3)

Hill refers to the benefits which man can gain from being 'divine' or having a strong spiritual side in his life. The riders of Noah's ship were rescued from the actual torment and distress by their by spiritualism. The poet compares the world of the materialistic sinners to 'the burning grove' where they are burning in its flames. On the other side of the picture, Noah's pious followers go 'beyond driven boundaries' of this burning orchard and enjoy 'the first of Mornings'. Thus, the poet advises the arrogant men to be modest and to perceive their true humble position in life in this world.

In his previously mentioned 'Genesis', Hill sheds light on some of 'the miracles of God'. At the last stanza, he refers to Christ's blood:

> By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
> To ravage and redeem the world:
> There is no bloodless myth will hold.
>
> And by Christ's blood are men made free
> Though in close shrouds their bodies lie
> Under the rough pelt of the sea;
>
> Though earth has rolled beneath her weight
> The bones that cannot bear the light.
>
> (*For the Unfallen*, 42)

Hill connects the present blood to the past blood of Christ. He reminds his reader of Christ's sacrifice in an age in which no one is able to sacrifice anything. Hall says that

'Genesis' is "the one poem of Hill's which people remember, if they remember one poem by Hill" (601).

Hill's frequent use of puns is not a form of linguistic decoration. It is an important technique through which he can convey different historical aspects and meaning. In 'Merlin', to shed light on historical themes that may be forgotten, Hill resorts to polysemous words which have "multiple meaning which are both grammatically and semantically possible in the context" (Jeffries 83). Hill says:

> I will consider the outnumbering dead.
> For they are the husks of what was rich seed.
> Now, should they come together to be fed,
> They would outstrip the locusts' covering tide.
> Arthur, Elian, Mordred; they are all gone.
> Among the raftered galleries of bone.
> By the long barrows of logres they are made one,
> And over their city stands the pinnacled corn.

(*For the Unfallen*, 52)

The title 'Merlin' denotes that the poem is focused on combining the past with the present. It deals with the absurdity of human life as a result of the battles of the ancient empires which caused the destruction of large numbers of human beings. Some of them managed to achieve their goals, whereas others failed to leave any sort of impact in it. There are great personalities such as King Arthur and his prime minister and skilful magician; Merlin. These men passed away in spite of all their remarkable accomplishments. There are others who made wrong choices in their lives and disappeared without being noticed or known by others.

The word 'locusts' in the fourth line creates a significant polysemous pun as it refers to three distinctive meanings. It is used to signify the big numbers of the dead who can come to life and destroy it, just as locusts do when they attack green fields and ruin crops. Second, the word may recall the well-known religious story belonging to prophet Moses (PBUH) and his struggle against the pharaoh of Egypt in order to persuade him to liberate the people of Israel and let them go with him. A third interpretation can be related to the futility of the human beings' desires, or as Milne states, "the vanity of human wishes" (21). People have limitless numbers of wishes due to their unceasing desires in this life. These desires and wishes could be imagined as vast fields which are full of plants and crops. Just as these green areas can be ruined by locusts in a very short time, death comes to put an end to all human wishes and lives very quickly. The same technique of polysemy can be found in words like 'outnumbering' in the first line and 'husks' in the second one.

In 'Canticle for Good Friday', Hill continues to use polysemous puns to refer to certain historical incidents. The poem is connected with the Catholic Christian religious beliefs whose main symbol is the crucifixion of Christ on a cross. 'Good Friday', as is well known, refers to the crucifixion of Christ on Good Friday. This is why Catholics have several ancient good Friday traditions including singing a canticle. Hill uses the word 'canticle' in the title of his poem to reflect his Catholic belief about the pains of Christ during the crucifixion. The poem includes several polysemous puns that can be found in 'staggered' in the first line and 'staunchest' in the sixteenth line.

Canaan, the title of one of Hill's volumes of poetry, is regarded as a pun because it has two historical interpretations. The first one is that the word 'Canaan' refers to the ancient civilization of the Canaanites. The second is connected with Hill's intention to show the savage features of European civilization, particularly Nazism, via comparing them with the barbarian features of the Canaanites' civilization. Milne makes this point clear by stating that European Nazis and Canaanites were "materially more advanced than the people of [other countries] [...], but morally they lagged behind [...] [their religion appealed to the bestial] [or brutish] and material in human nature " (167). Moreover, some historians believe that in Canaanite society, child slaughter was widespread as it was in the European Nazi Society.

In the epigraph to his volume *Canaan*, Hill writes that the Canaanites were "the cold hypocrites" who "shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sonnes [or sons], and of their daughters" (iii). Similarly, the European soldiers did not hesitate to kill children during the two world wars. To show the barbarian side of the European civilization, Hill writes:

> ...the trucks
> From the abattoir
> Skidding their loads,
> The shameless body parts.
> [...........................]

Is it that you are cast,
When ghosts of the ditch,
As in all things equal
Unequally gifted
To the wild dog?

(*Canaan*, p. 1, 3)

The lines depict a terrible scene of those of the Two World Wars where 'the trucks' were loaded with the dead body parts of the civilians, especially children.

Hill uses historical allusions to refer to social and philosophical issues. In *Scenes from Comus*, Hill alludes to a musical composition. Saluting Hugh Wood, Hill says in the second stanza of the first part:

Marvel at our contrary orbits. Mine
Salutes yours, whenever we pass or cross,
Which may be now, might very well be now.

(*Scenes from Comus*, 31)

Wainwright says that "On the epigraph page of the book, Hill quotes the twelve notes of the horn solo that opens Wood's *Scenes from Comus*" (129).
Wainwright adds:

> Scenes from Comus is fist an occasional poem [volume of poetry], written "for Hugh Wood on his 70th Birthday", who composed his own

> Scenes from Comus for soprano, tenor and orchestra between 1962 and 1965, is Hill's contemporary to the year and month, so the occasion can be seen to be doubled to take in Hill's own seventieth birthday. (124).

Though the volume is a dedication to Wood's earlier work, Hill does not forget to use history. He seizes the opportunity to talk about the history of poetry and that of music and about the similarities and differences between poetry and music. Besides, history can be seen in Hill's seventieth birthday.

In *Mercian Hymns*, one can easily find historical hints everywhere. Hill tries to create an imaginative world in which he can use history at different levels and in different contexts. There are many historical characters such as King Offa and artifacts such as old coins that go back to previous ages. Hill tries to look at the past via present windows using different glosses on the idea of history itself.

Hill's use of coins minted at the time of Offa's rule indicates the importance he gives to even minor historical signs. In Hymn XIII, Hill describes the act of examining a coin. He says:

> Time the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare
> coins to the light. Ringed by its own luster, the
> masterful head emerges, kempt and jutting, out
> of

England's well. Far from his underkingdom of
crin-
oid and crayfish, the rune-stone's province, Rex
Totius Anglorum Patriae, coiffure and ageless,
portrays the self-possession of his possession,
cushioned on a legend.
(*Mercian Hymns*, XIII)

Examining the hymn again shows that it depicts the relationship between the past and the present. The 'coins' refers to the past and the person who examines the coins refers to the present. The existence of the coins as an artifact in the present, a period 'far from [Offa's] underkingdom of crinoids and crayfish' carries some remnant from that old era to the present situation. The importance of the coins as a historical sign is represented in its ability to continue as a hidden archaeological treasure for a long time. It seems that it gives permanence to the king as it is able to last through the different cycles of nature.

Besides, the poem shows Hill's interest in the duality of language and its ability to suggest more than a meaning in different periods of time. In the third line, 'masterful' can refer to two different meanings. It can refer to Offa's ability to rule England and, at the same time, to the quality of work done by the maker of the coins. Moreover, as Offa and his coins are reborn, the world of Offa and its historical signs are born again in Hill's imagination. Using his imagination and a high level of language, Hill tries to repeat historical events in the present time.

A historical sense can be felt in Hill's 'The Pentcost Castle'. It is connected with "the notion of chivalry and valour associated with the Spanish Knight of Olmedo" (Wilkinson, 36). In the opening sequence of *Tenebrae*, Hill says:

> They slew by night
> upon the road
> Medina's pride
> Olmedo's flower
>
> Shadows warned him
> not to go
> not to go
> along that road.
>
> (*Tenebrae*, 3)

Hill's previous lines are similar to those of the opening of an old Spanish ballad which denotes a warning to the knight of Olmedo:

> It was by night they killed the night, the pride of Madina, the flower of Olmedo.
> Shadows warned the knight not to go out, and advised him not to depart, the pride of Medina, the flower of Olmedo.
>
> (Cohen, 236-37)

The similarity in many aspects of the two poems sustains the common historical background.

Hill gives a historical sense even to the work of his grandmother. She worked in her 'nailshop' which was located behind her cottage. She used to make hand-made nails. Spotting the light on his grandmother and her work, Hill gives a historical survey to the whole situation. He thinks that his grandmother suffered much because of the rich masters of this industry. They unfairly treated the poor nail-workers. In the first stanza of his 'Hymn XXV', Hill inserts the title of John Ruskin's pamphlets *Fors Clavigera*:

> Brooding on the eightieth letter of Fors Clavigera
> I speak in the memory of my grandmother, whose
> childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the
> nail's drag
> (*Mercian Hymns*, XXV)

Sanders says that in these pamphlets, Ruskin discusses the harsh circumstances of the life of nail makers (363). Knottenbelt gives more details that Ruskin himself noticed concerning this injustice during his visit to a house in Worcestershire where two women were at work, laboring with 'ancient Vulcanian skill' (186). Thus, the hymn cannot be considered just as an elegy to his grandmother, but an elegy to all British nailmakers. As Knottenbelt puts it:

> It is more like a 'hymn' than any other poem in the sequence, a

> celebration and an elegy for a form of 'English work' from which the poet is most directly a descendent , for it was the labour of his grandmother (187).

A historical sense can be found in his reactions to many personal situations in his life. While he was learning Latin, he wept because he was unable to solve some problems. To express this situation, he writes:

> He wept, attempting to mas—
> Ter ancilla and servus
>
> (*Mercian Hymns*, XII).

The question is: why does the poet use the pronoun 'he' to refer to himself? 'He' may either be a reference to Hill himself or, as MacBeth states, to King Offa. He says the poet mixes some aspects of the King Offa's life with his own childhood experiences, especially during the war (314). If so, another question may arise: why does Hill make this biographical mixture? The answer lies in Hill's use of history. Connecting himself with a famous historical figure glorifies both Hill and his family. MacBeth elaborates this point:

> The originality of the sequence lies firstly in Hill's merger of elements from the career of King Offa of Mercia, the last great king of the

> Midlands, with details from his childhood in the 1930s and during the war. We confront a small boy proud and recalcitrant, identifying his lonely genius with the royalty of a past local monarch, honoring his family and his country through the enriching metaphors of history (314).

While Milne supports the idea that 'he' refers to King Offa (95), Annwn looks at the two lines from a different angle:

> The child is not at home with ecclesiastics schooling him in Latin. Indeed 'ancilla' and 'servus' remind us that such a child would find the virtue of a Christian kin-service of a community – difficult to master [....] The kings [...] are concerned with dominance not service. (56)

In any case, Hill tries to give a historical context to his connection with King Offa. When he was a child, he imagined that he was like King Offa. Because kings serve their societies, he should do the same. His service to his country was represented in doing his home assignments and studying his lessons well. Even when he was a child, Hill preferred to look at things using a historical scale.

Hill connects even the titles of some of his volumes with a historical context. King Log is a good example. Robert Morgan notes:

> The title . . . comes from Aesop, the fable where the frogs are given a log for a king. When they complain to Zeus that their monarch is unresponsive to their needs, he gives them a stork for king instead, which eats them. It is a brilliant choice of title for Hill at this point because it expresses his skepticism of social and religious progress, and idealistic reformation in general. History is the correlative of guilt and reformers at best fail to comprehend its burden, at worst aggravate and fuel its cruelty (37).

Recalling history and its different incidents require a quiet milieu. In his early life, Hill preferred to live in his native village. This helped him to write poetry while walking in the fields and grumbling vowels at the stones. Living in capital cities does not fit many poets. Hill himself preferred to teach in Leeds and separated himself from cozy London. Hall comments on this point:

> The best contemporary English poets after Hill live in a village outside

> Bristol, in Hull, in a Yorkshire town, in Cornwall and Devon, in Texas, in California. The virtues of a capital have been wrecked by the vices of chumminess. Capital cities are no longer useful to poets; capital cities belong to capitalism (601).

Living in capitals leads to a stressful life. Living in quiet places encourages a poet, like Hill, to go back to history to find what supports his points of view and what enriches his poetry.

The historical elements in Hill's poetry are strongly connected with language and place. The language is the means of conveying the historical message and place is the stage on which the historical incidents are recreated. Hill states that there is a strong relationship between history and language. In an interview in *The Illustrated London News*, Hill said:

> Language contains everything you want—history, sociology, economics: it is a kind of drama of human destiny. One thinks how it has been used and exploited in the past, politically and theologically. Its forthrightness and treachery are a drama of the honesty of man himself. Language reveals life (1966, 25).

It is not surprising that Hill should see language in this way and approach it with such care. He thinks that it is not merely an instrument of expression, but an embodiment of the 'drama of human destiny' and consequently a powerful and dangerous force.

In Hill's point of view, there is a strong relationship between history and place. To present the chosen historical incidents in his poetry, Hill resorts to places that can be used as stages on which he can show his historical recreation. He often sees the place as a focus for historical forces. Therefore, there are several important locations in Hill's poetry such as Shiloh Church and the field of Towton. They provide ground for Hill's investigations into human suffering.

Hill's frequent use of historical references and allusions gives his poetry an obvious strength, seriousness and ethical thought. His use of history makes it difficult for his poetry to be ignored. According to his point of view, the present is best understood in the light of a frequently obfuscated past and the past is given a shape by the present. In this respect, there is a continuous dialogue of mutual validation between the past and the present. It is the role of the poets to decode or disclose it.

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