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“Make Me an Offa”: Geoffrey Hill and *Mercian Hymns*

The commanding note is unmistakable; a poet at once urgent and timeless; sternly formal, wry, grand, sensually direct; unbearable, bullying, intransigent, intolerant, brilliant; exquisite, immaculate music; sick grandeur; glowering, unlovely egotism; mandarin and rarefied; masterly and compelling; morose linguistic delectation.¹

“Some of that I didn’t like,” said Geoffrey. “Belt up!”

A difficult and contradictory body of work, the poetry of Geoffrey Hill; at least to judge from that assembled sampling of critical views, presented here as an invocation to the poet, in roughly the manner of his own invocation-evocation of the long dead King Offa (757-796) at the beginning of *Mercian Hymns* (1971). It is this part of the bundle, this richly-layered Midlands mini-epic, which I wish to examine, perhaps even to interrogate. What has it to declare? But by what handle should I pick it up?

One may as well begin with a quotation from Anthony Thwaite, whose considerable politico-literary experience makes him a broadly reliable guide to post-war British poetry and poets. Writing in his useful survey *Poetry Today* (1985), about Charles Tomlinson, he offers a passing remark which, unintentionally and obliquely, illuminates an important aspect of Tomlinson’s younger contemporary, Geoffrey Hill. Tomlinson, says Thwaite, “seems to have little sympathy with anything (other than Hill’s *Mercian Hymns*) that passes for poetry in England today.”² One notices that only a single poem by Hill finds approval, not Hill’s work as a whole. Despite the verbal precision of both poets, it is not difficult to imagine a lack of commerce between, say, the timeless aesthetic contemplation of a seascape in Tomlinson’s early poem “Fiascherino” (*The Necklace*, 1955):

Over an ash-fawn beach fronting a sea which keeps
 Rolling and unrolling, lifting
 The green fingers from submerged rocks
 On its way in, and, on its way out
 Dropping them again, the light

Squanders itself, a saffron morning
 Advances among foam and stones, sticks
 Clotted with black naptha
 And frayed to the newly carved
 Fresh white of chicken flesh.

and the obscurely threatening moralism of Hill's compressed "Ode on the Loss of the 'Titanic,'" from his first volume *For the Unfallen* (1959):

Thriving against facades the ignorant sea
 Souses our public baths, statues, waste ground:
 Archaic earth shaker, fresh enemy
 ('The tables of exchange being overturned');

Drowns Babel in upheaval and display;
 Unswerving, as were the admired multitudes
 Silenced from time to time under its sway.
 By all means let us appease the terse gods.

Written when their respective authors were both in their mid- to late-twenties, the two poems proclaim their origin in evidently- different temperaments. Why, then, should Tomlinson make his exception of *Mercian Hymns*?

The reason, I would suggest, lies not so much in Tomlinson's admiration for their manner as in his visceral response to their matter. *Mercian Hymns* is in part an act of ambiguous, distant homage to the Anglo-Saxon king who brought Mercia its brief supremacy in the eighth century; but it is also, and in my view more importantly, the re-discovery by a twentieth-century poet in his late thirties of the area in which he grew up, that part of the West Midlands between Birmingham and Worcester. Charles Tomlinson, born five years earlier than Hill, in 1927, was also a "Mercian," from the Potteries conurbation of Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire. In his mid-forties (and thus almost coincidentally with Hill) he too returned, in body and spirit, to his place of origin; and he expressed his reactions in a number of poems whose localized human concern contrasts strikingly with the remoter aestheticism of much of his work of the previous two decades. A number of these poems, such as "Etruria Vale," "Gladstone Street" and "Dates: Penkull New Road," express regret for the loss of an

industrial landscape which Tomlinson in his youth felt a need to escape from. The last contains the poignant phrase, "It took time to convince me that I cared / For more than beauty"; in another, "The Marl Pits," this sense of perhaps having taken a wrong turning breaks through into an image at once of re-creation and of self-forgiveness:

It was a language of water, light and air
 I sought — to speak myself free of a world
 Whose stoic lethargy seemed the one reply
 To horizons and to streets that blocked them back
 In a monotone fume, a bloom of grey.
 I found my speech. The years return me
 To tell of all that seasoned and imprisoned:
 I breathe familiar, sedimented air
 From a landscape of disembowellings, underworlds
 Unearthed among the clay. Digging
 The marl, they dug a second nature
 And water, seeping up to fill their pits,
 Sheeted them to lakes that wink and shine
 Between tips and steeples, streets and waste
 In slow reclaimings, shimmers, balancings,
 As if kindling Eden rescinded its own loss
 And words and water came of the same source.³

This poem, and the others mentioned, appeared in 1974 in Tomlinson's appropriately-titled volume *The Way In*. This was three years after *Mercian Hymns*, and it is just possible that Tomlinson's revival of his own urban childhood near marl pits and "the biggest gasometer in England" ("Etruria Vale") may owe some of its impetus to Hill's earlier re-creation of a rural Worcestershire which nevertheless accommodated "Gasholders, russet among fields. Milldams, marlpools that lay un stirring" (*Mercian Hymns* VII). Certainly the elements common to their early landscapes, and their shared Midlands origin (and perhaps, too, the slow progress of both poets to more than coterie admiration), make Tomlinson's partisanship for Hill's poem easy to understand. There is little, however, in common between Tomlinson's directness of personal feeling even in "The Marl Pits" and the more oblique "disembowellings" of *Mercian Hymns* XII, pursued through a stratified linguistic sandwich of the ceremonial and the guardedly colloquial to a conclusion of unidiomatic, ritualized formality:

Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant
 soil. They clove to the hoard. They ransacked epi-
 phanies, vertebrae of the chimera, armour of wild
 bees' larvae. They struck the fire-dragon's fac-
 eted skin.

The men were paid to caulk water-pipes. They brewed
and pissed amid splendour; their latrine seethed
its estuary through nettles. They are scattered
to your collations, moldywarp.

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

This is fine writing, I think; but it is also “fine writing,” its conscious artistry (or craftedness) the more striking because of Hill’s avoidance in *Mercian Hymns* of the matrices of traditional verse rhythms. One savours its phrasing as one savours such a sentence as this one, from Patrick Leigh Fermor, imagining the devil’s nightly assaults on monasteries: “The sky fills with the beat of sable wings as phalanx after phalanx streams to the attack, and the darkness crepitates with the splintering of a myriad lances against the masonry of asceticism.”⁴ But whereas Leigh Fermor’s sentence is a sort of verbal cadenza on the simple notion “Sin versus Saintliness,” and offers imaginative excitement rather than intellectual challenge, Hill’s “versets,”⁵ here and elsewhere in *Mercian Hymns*, are decidedly more opaque, reach the reader from a variety of distances and angles rather than from one fixed authorial consciousness, and present now a suggestive blending of past and present, and now a blank juxtaposition of the two. In Section XII, both the “fire-dragon” and the “stinking blaze” recall *Beowulf* (the dragon “stinks” round his barrow and Beowulf is burned on a funeral pyre), and in doing so they may also (since they figure in a poem entitled *Mercian Hymns*) trigger in some readers the knowledge that, in the words of D.J.V. Fisher, “many historians are disposed to accept the suggestion that the *Beowulf* poem originated at Offa’s court.”⁶ At the same time, the “men paid to caulk water-pipes,” who “pissed amid splendour” and, perhaps, accidentally excavated it, seem to be modern workmen, possibly recollected from Hill’s childhood, who are now under the earth they once dug; and the “I” of the last sentence who accrues “a golden and stinking blaze” is less likely to be King Offa than his Mercian poet-successor, who may have inherited the rich “hoard” of the past but who is also faced with the mundane task of burning garden refuse. The underlying notion, here, seems to be that remote past and contemporary present are a single physical and linguistic continuum, in which manifold human beings and their activities — heroes and workmen, kings and poets — are united. The

compressed vision has much grandeur — the phrase in Section XX, “fresh dynasties of smiths,” may be said to sum it up — but it may also seem a touch theoretical. The poet as Everyman is both more and less than the individual one encounters in Tomlinson’s “The Marl Pits.”

Such generalised piety towards the past, however, is very much a characteristic of Hill, as is a tendency to express himself through *personae*; or, as in his recent fine long poem “The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy” (1983), through “homage” to an earlier writer with whom he feels an affinity. Hill’s short and gravely splendid poem “Merlin,” written when he was twenty-one, memorably announced this facet of his temperament:

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, Elaine, 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.⁷

More powerfully infused with personal feeling, the eight unrhymed sonnets of “Funeral Music” (*King Log*, 1968) were headed with the names of three noblemen — William de la Pole, John Tiptoft, and Anthony Woodville — who lost their heads during the Wars of the Roses; and in his note to the poem Hill made special mention of the forgotten “holocaust” of the Battle of Towton, fought in 1461, which in his view “commands one’s belated witness.”⁸

Hill’s early involvement with areas of the English past which few before him had handled (another poem of the 1950s bears the resounding title “Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings”) makes his reaching even further back into the past specifically of Mercia a logical development; and that this act of retrieval would be more than impersonally antiquarian is hinted at by the last four lines of “Funeral Music (6)”:

Some parch for what they were; others are made
Blind to all but one vision, their necessity
To be reconciled. I believe in my
Abandonment, since it is what I have.

One sort of “abandonment” is, simply, leaving home, or losing it. Born in 1932 in Bromsgrove (incidentally the birthplace seventy-three years earlier of A.E. Housman), Hill had moved in 1936 four miles north to the small village of Fairfield, where his father was the local

police constable. Here he spent the childhood and youth cryptically recalled in *Mercian Hymns*; but that recollection came two decades later, after a succession of various sorts of removal. In 1950 Hill went up to Keble College, Oxford; in 1952 his parents moved away from Fairfield; and in 1954 he himself, having obtained a First in English Literature, became a Lecturer at the University of Leeds, eventually obtaining a Professorial Chair there in 1977. The story is a familiar post-war one: the clever working-class boy deracinated by a combination of education, accident, and exile (Leeds, in eighth century terms, was just beyond the northern border of Mercia, in Northumbria⁹) from family and home.

The rediscovery of one's roots generally takes time; earlier, one is preoccupied with the spring-like efflorescence of one's leaves. While at Oxford, Hill wrote a poem which ends with the phrase "Here, on Bewdley Bridge, / I think of you, as of my heritage."¹⁰ Bewdley, on the River Severn, is ten miles west of Hill's birthplace; but the "you" is not the nail-making Victorian grandmother whom, in *Mercian Hymns* XXV, he broodingly associates with "the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera*," written by Ruskin in 1877 after a visit to a nail-maker's cottage outside Bewdley. Instead, the "you" was William Dunbar, whose poetry Hill had encountered as an undergraduate, and his poem was written in Chaucerian rime royal, mellifluous and archaic. It was not long before Hill struggled into the beginnings of his own, densely conscientious, poetic style; but much longer before the biography and pre-history of his Mercian origins "festered for attention." Henry Hart, author of the first book on Hill's poetry, has rightly called *Mercian Hymns* a "return to the *patria*"¹¹; one might also describe it by the sub-heading Hill attached to the "amended" version of his early poem, "In Memory of Jane Fraser" (1953), when he republished it in 1968 in *King Log*: "an attempted reparation."¹²

The first and last of the thirty short prose-poems which make up *Mercian Hymns* constitute both a formal frame for the poem's canvas (perhaps a better image would be a pair of book-ends, or the two ivory rollers of a Japanese scroll painting), and an indication of the intense but comparatively brief period of imaginative concentration, at the end of the 1960s, when Geoffrey Hill's local, familial and personal recollections and his intellectual interest in Offa touched, overlapped, partly coalesced ("Offa" partly held within "Geoffrey"¹³), and were bodied forth in verbal formulae that ranged from the contemporary demotic ("Just look at the bugger," in Section XVII) to the stiltedly pedantic ("A novel heresy exculpates all maimed souls," in Section

VIII). Between the florid invocation of Section I, which as it were raises Offa from sleep like a Frankenstein's monster disposed for the moment to be benevolent ("I liked that," said Offa, "sing it again"), to his sudden vanishing, like an expired inspiration, in Section XXX, *Mercian Hymns* stretches widely across time and space in a way both fascinating and bewildering, the latter not only in terms of local meaning but in terms of total structural intention (if, now, one dares mention such a concept) and effect.

The multiplicity of the poem, adumbrated in the varying terms used to describe Offa at the beginning, is confirmed by Hill in his Acknowledgements. Offa is presented not (or not simply) as the eighth-century ruler, but as "the presiding genius of the West Midlands," and Hill admits that his many uses of "the accurate scholarship of others" are made in a context which is "unscholarly and fantastic." Nevertheless, the deadpan "List of Hymns," originally placed after the poems when they appeared in 1971 and were reprinted in 1976,¹⁴ focuses attention (except for the three hymns entitled "Opus Anglicanum") entirely on Offa, even where the text itself relates to Hill: as, for instance, with Section XVII (entitled "Offa's Journey to Rome"), with its "maroon GT," and Section XXII, with its "camouflaged nissen hut," which is called "Offa's "Second Defence of the English People'." It is not difficult, here and elsewhere, to perceive an intended, or effected, link between past and present and between ancient king and modern poet (the two "Mercian Hims" celebrated by *Mercian Hymns*); but the link is frequently tenuous, and one makes it without any assistance from Hill's "Acknowledgements," which combine scrupulous mention of learned sources such as J.J. North's *English Hammered Coinage* (1963) with total reserve about personal matters, such as (in Section IX) the date and location of the funeral described, and the identity of the relative buried. Like Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*, Hill's Acknowledgements and Contents List appended to *Mercian Hymns* convey an impersonality teasingly at odds with a great deal of the poem itself. It is as if (as I once said about William Empson's poem "Aubade") "habitual reticence struggled with an intense wish to preserve something of special value."¹⁵

To "disentangle" the body of *Mercian Hymns* (to use the macabre phrasing of Section XVIII, powerfully but oddly concerned with Boethius, executed by the emperor Theodoric two centuries before Offa) would require a longer course of critical treatment than is possible here, a close section-by-section exegesis which paid attention not only to the layering of Hill's language and the frequent cross-

echoing of his images but to the placing of each section in what is, after all, presented as a numbered sequence; though neither Offa nor Hill emerges from the past chronologically. Nevertheless, it may be useful to give some brief indication, not of the way the text moves forward (while also moving backwards), but of the contributions to its complex nature made by elements both related to its period of composition and "carried over" (like the "two-edged" Avar sword sent to Offa by Charlemagne in 795, and Section XVI) from an earlier time.

In Section II of the poem, with adult (or, perhaps, recalled adolescent) wit, Hill describes Offa by a group of kennings, riddles and puns. One of these is "the starting-cry of a race": both the human race, with Offa as its first distinguished Mercian exemplar, and an athletic event, with Offa ("They're off!") in at the start of it. This brilliantly simple pun stakes Hill's claim for himself, and his contemporary fellow-Mercians (whom in a poem of 1956 he described as "the pushing midlanders . . . men brawny with life, / Women who expect life"¹⁶), as Offa's distant lineal successors; and one begins gradually to suspect that *Mercian Hymns* is a psycho-historical version of the adage "Ontology repeats Phylogeny": that is, that Hill's growth from child to man re-enacts and encapsulates the development of the race (Mercian, British, human) from tangled and now buried beginnings to its present position of assumed "maturity." But it is only in the penultimate Section XXIX, having in the interval spoken of Offa and himself sometimes separately and sometimes together, that Hill gives any evidence that a conscious awareness of Offa might have entered his childhood mind:

So, murmurous, he withdrew from them. Gran lit the
gas, his dice whirred in the ludo-cup, he entered
into the last dream of Offa the King.

Yet it is hard to be sure whether a child, playing a compensatory game of ludo (surely an archetypal image of a working-class family Christmas?), and hoping for the last lucky throw of the dice to bring him triumphantly to the "Finish" square, could really "enter into" Offa's last dream ("the" rather than "his"; and what, anyway, is it?) except via unconscious empathy; just as, in Section VII, even leaving aside the obvious authorial contrivance of a friend named "Ceolred" (a royal predecessor of Offa, not a contemporary subordinate), one does not automatically assume any knowledge in the young Hill, playing in his "derelict private sandlorry named *Albion*," that the model-name on its bonnet also stands resonantly for "his" country. There seems to

be a degree of contrivance, at best hindsight, in both passages. Perhaps a truer indication of the dawning of "Offa" in Hill's life comes in Section III, a memory of a village party for the coronation on 12 May 1937 (just before Hill's fifth birthday) of George VI. Here kingship is instinctively, and amusingly, perceived through a modern version of Anglo-Saxon gift-giving by the chieftain, here confused by the child with "the chef," who stands "a king in his newly-risen hat, sealing his brisk largesse with "any mustard?" Certainly some atavistic perceptions seem to have stirred in Hill early in his life, but how precise were they? Vagueness, however, is the stuff of myth, and indeed of poignant personal memory.

Hill's Mercian childhood, to whatever degree he was at that time conscious of Offa as distinct from his immediate parents, or his paternal grandfather, who had risen to be Deputy Chief Constable of Worcester and of whom Hill felt "considerably in awe,"¹⁷ was the earliest personal source of material for *Mercian Hymns*. A further element, the title itself, was supplied by Hill's study at Oxford. It occurred in one of the standard texts for undergraduates reading English Literature, Henry Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, originally published in 1876. Sweet had attached it to a group of ninth-century Mercian versions of Latin texts from the Roman Psalter and Hymns. By choosing to take it over as the title for his own poems (poems in prose, like the *Benedictus* and *Magnificat* which were among the texts translated by the Mercian cleric), Hill was making a number of interlinked assertions. The most obvious (akin to his claim, and admission, of likeness to Offa, in the words of R. H. Hodgkin both a "great ruler" and "a man of blood"¹⁸) was his place as a modern writer from Mercia, the inheritor of a once-proud provincial tradition. In mentioning the provenance of his title in the Acknowledgements to *Mercian Hymns*, Hill specifically mentions the 1950 edition of Sweet's *Reader*, and it is noteworthy that, between 1948 and 1956, when the claim was refuted in favour of Canterbury, it was believed that the original "Mercian Hymns" had been written down at Lichfield, for which Offa in 787 managed (briefly) to obtain the status of an archbishopric. This Offa did in order to counterbalance the influence of the primatial see in Kent, a kingdom under Offa's jurisdiction but resentful of him. Lichfield (as distinct from nearby Tamworth, Offa's capital, mentioned in Section I of *Mercian Hymns*) does not figure in Hill's poem except by means of a passing reference, in Section IX, to an unidentified "St. Chad's Garth," named after the original Bishop of Mercia who established his cathedral at Lichfield in 669. Nevertheless,

in view of Lichfield's former ecclesiastical status and the short-lived ascription to it of some early literary distinction, I do not find it far-fetched to imagine that Hill, in choosing *Mercian Hymns* as his title, was attempting to restore some degree of importance to his native province in a twentieth-century England dominated by the south, and especially by its metropolis, London, a city long since beyond the control of Offa's Mercia. Hill has admitted that, while at Oxford (also once Mercian), he was "ill-at-ease socially"¹⁹; again, in view of the fact that Sweet's "Mercian Hymns" were printed among other specimens of "Non-West-Saxon Dialects," Hill's choice of title may partly have originated in a sense of difference he still wished defiantly to proclaim.

Mercian Hymns was published in 1971, three years after Hill's volume *King Log* (1968). What caused its fruition at this particular time, I think, was a combination of factors, internal and external, which brought with them a sense of change, realization, and perhaps also, decay. Section VI of *Mercian Hymns* reproduces in altered form the autobiographical words of King David (who also became a poet) in the first of the Anglo-Saxon "Mercian Hymns": "Little I was between my brothers, and younger in the house of my father." In Hill's poem this sharpens into:

"A boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers."
But I, who had none, fostered a strangeness; gave
myself to unattainable toys.

This early feeling of difference, even alienation (already noted in Section V in terms of Offa, and sardonically echoed *in propria persona* in Section XIV), is balanced at the end of the poem by Hill's proclamation (significantly in the present tense) of:

"Not strangeness, but strange likeness. Obstinate,
outclassed forefathers, I too concede, I am your
staggeringly-gifted child." (XXIX)

Such recognitions of family, such acknowledgements of others' parts in one's nature, generally come with increasing age, and often with family deaths. Hill's policeman father was still alive when *Mercian Hymns* was published; but his mother had died, aged 62, ten years earlier; and his maternal grandmother, Sarah Ann Hands, died in 1967, at the age of 98.²⁰ One of these two must surely be the relative buried, with a moving blend of tenderness and irony, among "spoilheaps of crysanthus dead in their plastic macs, eldorado of washstand-marble" in Section IX.

The 1960s were also a time of change beyond the family. Hill says of his buried relative "you had lived long enough to see things "nicely settled" the domestic phrase a genteel earlier generation used for such "things" as marriages (Hill married in 1956), money, and thus, a pious notion of continuity and permanence. The outside world, however, was far from being "nicely settled" in the later 1960s, and among such other matters as the revolt of youth and racial unrest, one in particular was proceeding towards a "settlement" that brought hope to some and foreboding to others. I refer, of course, to England's long attempt to join the "Common Market," the European Economic Community. Offa, the first English king to become a figure of European importance, did much to promote trade between England and Europe: he was, and is described at the opening of *Mercian Hymns* as, "the friend of Charlemagne," a point emphasized by the "Frankish gift" of Section XVI. (It is interesting to find a recent writer on Charlemagne, P.D. King, stating that "there is distant Carolingian blood in the EEC's vapid veins."²¹) A later link between "Mercia" and the Continent is shown in Section XXIV, which describes the "master-mason" who, in the twelfth century, accompanied the chief steward Oliver de Merlimond on a pilgrimage to Compostela, and noted down various designs in Spain and France which found their way into the Romanesque sculpture of some Herefordshire churches.²² He returned, in Hill's words (and like Hill the poet, journeying through the Carolingian "hushed Vosges" to Pavia and Rome in Sections XVII and XVIII), "intent to pester upon tympanum and chancel-arch his moody testament."

One infers from all this a positive consciousness of Europe on Hill's part, as on Offa's. Yet various things modify it. The Frankish sword sent by Charlemagne to Offa is "two-edged"; and one recalls the opposition to Britain as a member of the EEC manifested by Charlemagne's modern successor, Charles de Gaulle. Opposition also came from within England. One notices that the journey "furthered" by Hill in Section XVIII will lead him "To watch the Tiber foaming out much blood." The phrase, a translation of the Sibyl's prophecy to Aeneas in Virgil (*Aeneid* VI, 87), that Rome would be re-born, but only after destruction, figured in one of Hill's set undergraduate texts at Oxford.²³ But with, I suspect, more immediate pertinence for *Mercian Hymns*, it was used by a fellow-Mercian, Enoch Powell, Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton, in a speech he gave at Birmingham in April, 1968.²⁴ Powell's immediate purpose was to bolster his gloomy

views on British immigration policies; but one remembers, also, that he was a fervent anti-Marketeer.

The "coiled entrenched England" described by Hill in Section XX, many of its suburban houses named after insular British battles, was now in process of re-connection with a larger area; it would not be surprising if Hill's feelings on the matter were mixed. Local changes, too, were in prospect. If the historical Offa was "the friend of Charlemagne," he has also become, in *Mercian Hymns*, "overlord of the M5," the new motorway, under construction in the late 1960s, reaching south from Birmingham to Gloucester and beyond, and passing within a mile of Hill's lost village of Fairfield. The title is a grand one; but the M5 was a long way east of Offa's Dyke. Section XXI, guardedly lyrical, and in the phrase "from Teme to Trent" allowing A.E. Housman virtually his only guest appearance in *Mercian Hymns*, recalls trips by charabanc (post-war "Mystery Tours," perhaps), which dipped

into valleys beyond

Mercia's Dyke. Tea was enjoyed, by lakesides where
all might fancy carillons of real Camelot vibrating through the silent water.

Offa had long ceased to be a menace to the Celts of Wales, but his Mercian successors (including perhaps Hill, "sick on outings" (V)) could still forge well beyond Offa's border and enjoy the lakescapes of the Elan Valley, whose flooding (completed in 1952) to make reservoirs for Birmingham's water supply had drowned many Welsh houses. But in two decades this relatively innocent complicity in Mercian predatoriness was punished by the transmogrification of Mercia itself. Section XXVII presents the death of Offa ("He was defunct. They were perfunctory.") as less a matter for lament by Anglo-Saxon "funereal gleemen," than as an essentially modern, commercial carve-up involving "papal legate and rural dean; Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercenaries; a shuffle of house-carls." The latter, in local government terms, recall the "sheepish next-of-kin" at the Hill family funeral in Section IX; the "Merovingian car-dealers" (perhaps crooning "Make me an offer?") suggest a twentieth-century return to the long-haired decadence which preceded Charlemagne, the mere pursuit of personal gain taking precedence over a true rebirth of society. What I take the section to point to, in factual terms, is the re-organization of English county boundaries which finally went into effect in April 1974, a year after Britain succeeded in joining the

Common Market. The last shocked verset of Section XXVII is, I would suggest, a mythologized anticipation of Mercia's internal realignment, and its contingent upheaval of Hill's childhood geographical certainties:

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

The "shire-tree" may appropriately recall the "signal elm" whose continued existence, for Matthew Arnold and Arthur Hugh Clough, somehow guaranteed the validity of youth's ideals; but it is also, I believe, a real Midland tree, the "Three Shires Oak" that used to stand just above Smethwick, a mile from the meeting-point of Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Now that three-fold boundary has shifted, Birmingham sits in the county called "West Midlands," and there is no sign of the tree on contemporary maps.

Both friendship and rivalry, affinity and apartness, are elements in the stories of Offa and Hill alike. A final factor in the crystallization of *Mercian Hymns*, with its volatile blend of history, geography, biography and myth, may have been the publication, in 1968, of two poems which, in styles very different from each other and from Hill's poem of three years later, attempted a synthesis of various of these elements. One, Roy Fisher's long poem, *City*, (originally published in 1961 but much expanded on its reappearance in 1968) was an austere moving elegy, in verse and prose, for pre-World War II industrial Birmingham, Fisher's birthplace.²⁵ Two years older, and a fellow-"Mercian," Fisher may have prompted Hill to emulation. The other poem was Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, subtitled "An Autobiography." Personally poignant, emotionally rich, verbally hard-edged, haunted by memories of England's Viking past, it was the mature, considered testament of a Northumbrian, who had spent much of his life outside England. Perhaps, just as the hegemony of Northumbria preceded that of Offa's Mercia, Bunting's record of origins and growth spurred Hill to poetic rivalry.

Whether or not these two impulses, of which no skald or scop would have been ashamed, actually operated on Hill it is impossible to know; though the pregnancies of date and provenance are worth remarking. The irreducible point is the force of *Mercian Hymns* itself. In the words of Donald Hall: "One must not belittle Hill's difficulty, but one does not praise him because his poetry is hard to read. One praises him

because his poetry is beautiful.”²⁶ Dipping, in early middle age, into the stratified past of his native area, and into his own past, Geoffrey Hill has produced, in *Mercian Hymns*, an artefact as “resonant in silver” as one of Offa’s coins, a poem memorably compounded of aggrandizement and of loss.

NOTES

1. A tissue of critical quotations, some unascrbed, mostly extracted from the fore- and end-papers of Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (Penguin Books, 1985). The first is George Steiner (*Sunday Times*); the second Christopher Ricks (*Sunday Times*); the third Hermione Lee (*Observer*); the fifth Michael Longley (*The Guardian*); the last Seamus Heaney (“An English Mason,” *Critical Enquiry* 3, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), reprinted in *Geoffrey Hill: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, 50).
2. Anthony Thwaite, *Poetry Today: A Critical Guide to British Poetry 1960-1984* (Longman, 1985), 89.
3. Charles Tomlinson, *The Way In* (Oxford UP, 1974), 10-11.
4. Patrick Leigh Fermor, *A Time to Keep Silence* (John Murray, 1957), New Edition (1982), 70.
5. The term is used by Hill to describe the short verse paragraphs of *Mercian Hymns*, and is also used in discussion of the long prose-poem *Anabase* by St.-John Perse (Alexis Léger). (See Martin Dodsworth, “*Mercian Hymns*: Offa, Charlemagne and Geoffrey Hill,” reprinted in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work*, ed. Peter Robinson (Open UP, 1985), 56.) The prose poetry of *Mercian Hymns* is anticipated in “A Letter from Armenia,” from “The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurrutz” (*King Log*, 1968).
6. D.J.V. Fisher, *The Anglo-Saxon Age c. 400-1042* (Longman, 1973), 170.
7. “Merlin,” *For the Unfallen* (André Deutsch, 1959), 20.
8. See *King Log* (André Deutsch, 1968), 24/68.
9. See Christopher Brooke, *The Saxon and Norman Kings* (Batsford, 1963), 96.
10. Quoted in Henry Hart, “Early poems: journeys, meditations and elegies,” in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work* (1985), 7.
11. Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Southern Illinois UP, 1986), 160.
12. See *King Log* (1968), 69-70.
13. Henry Hart pointed out this link a few years ago, as others between Offa and many of the “riddle” phrases used in Section II of *Mercian Hymns*. (See Hart, *op. cit.*, (1986), 163.)
14. The “List of Hymns” is, however, omitted from *Mercian Hymns* as they appear in Hill’s *Collected Poems* (Penguin Books, 1985).
15. Philip and Averil Gardner, *The God Approached: A Commentary on the Poems of William Empson* (Chatto & Windus, 1978), 163.
16. “Two Formal Elegies (II),” *For the Unfallen* (André Deutsch, 1959), 32.
17. Geoffrey Hill, interview (1981), printed in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (Faber, 1981), 76. The various references to the Gaulish/Celtic god Cernunnos in the poem (explicit in Section XV) may conceivably originate from childhood experience. Hill calls Cernunnos “the branched god”; but he is also described as “horned” (in some representations he wears antlers) and “peaked” (see Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (Hamlyn, 1970), 44.) Perhaps a child’s upward look at his father/grandfather in policeman’s helmet or peaked cap could in due course have found mythological expression?
18. R.H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons* (Oxford UP, 1935), II, 386/393.
19. Peter Robinson, “Reading Geoffrey Hill,” in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work* (1985), 218.
20. One notes family piety in the dedication by Hill of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (Agenda Editions/André Deutsch, 1983) “in loving memory of Sarah Ann Hands,” and of his 1985 *Collected Poems* to his parents. (Hill’s father died in 1979, aged 80).

21. P.D. King, *Charlemagne* (Methuen, 1986), 48.
22. See George Zarnecki, *Later English Romanesque Sculpture, 1140-1210* (Alec Tiranti Ltd., 1953), 9-15.
23. Henry Hart, in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work* (1985), 15.
24. Peter Robinson, *ibid.*, 214.
25. A later poem by Roy Fisher, "Staffordshire Red," is dedicated to Hill. (See Roy Fisher, *Poems 1955-1980*, Oxford UP, 1980, 141.)
26. Donald Hall, Introduction to Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (1986), xi.