

Epigraphs and Absences: A Comment on Rajeev S. Patke's "Ambiguity and Ethics: Fictions of Governance in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*"*

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The supplying of contexts is a basic task of literary criticism and textual interpretation. A context may be selected to demonstrate a possible influence, or to indicate a synchronic affinity, or to rely on the atemporal force of analogy or typology. This is valid not only for the citation of one poet to elucidate another, but for contexts of whatever order. Thus, apart from specifically literary influences, critics may cite philosophers, scientists, psychologists or experts from any other discursive discipline: for example, Galileo in relation to Milton (influence), Einstein in relation to Yeats (synchronic affinity), or Nietzsche in relation to Shakespeare (analogy). These three "uses of context" may not represent all possible motives for citation, but they surely cover the greatest number of actual instances in textual interpretation and criticism, whether classical, Biblical or modern.

The literary text has, at least since Homer, incorporated citations on which it relies for support; less obviously, it can suggest preferred contexts through the device of allusion, illuminated by Christopher Ricks in *Allusion to the Poets* (2002). Yet the poet can cite or allude only to those works which must be reckoned as falling within the sphere of influence. A poet cannot cite a contemporary of whom she is unaware, nor a later writer of whom no awareness is mortally possible. In turn, the critic's explication of a literary text will rely heavily on whatever contexts are supplied by or may be detected within that text: whether

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citation or allusion, these are to be acknowledged as “influences.” The search for synchronic affinities, or for analogies that ignore temporal sequence, will usually be undertaken only where there is a shortage of incorporated citation, of what we might call “intrinsic contexture,” or when those contexts have been thoroughly explored and exploited.

Is an epigraph to be regarded as a citation incorporated within a text? Though it stands apart it must be seen to be attached to the text. Yet in remaining apart it can be absolved of responsibility for either its theme or its argument. The epigraph falls on a spectrum anywhere between the axiomatic and the cryptic. If it presents itself as an axiomatic truth, the reader will thereby admit it as an initiation to the argument; and reckon it an argument likely to demonstrate or confirm the truth stated in the epigraph. However, the reader may take the epigraph not as axiomatic but as cryptic, or gnomic; in this case the reader would be enticed to move into the text in order to solve the riddle posed by the epigraph. (There are numerous riddling epigraphs, too often passed over in awkward uncertainty; that to Nabokov’s *Pale Fire*—concerning Hodge the cat—remains unsolved, despite the admirable epilogue to Jeffrey Meyers’s *Samuel Johnson: The Struggle* 457-63.) In the initial taking of the epigraph each of these extremes has its risk: the axiomatic offers the conclusion without the trouble of reading the text, while the cryptic may be merely off-putting.

As with literary texts, so with criticism, where the epigraph is often set to do the critic’s work. Preceding Rajeev S. Patke’s argument about Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns*, and standing apart from it, are these words attributed to Simone de Beauvoir: “Is the ethical concern, even in its realistic and concrete form, detrimental to the interests of action?” One’s initial response, a form of resistance, might be to ask whether this differs much from Hamlet’s “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all” (3.1.83). And, responding further, we could ask what might be meant by the “realistic and concrete form” of ethical concern? What would distinguish the realistic or the concrete from action itself? And why go to a figure as apparently antithetical to

Geoffrey Hill as is Beauvoir to find an idea that is hardly unique to her?

As the epigraph to an essay on Geoffrey Hill, the mildest words ascribed to Simone de Beauvoir will, simply by proximity, be charged with provocation. Are we to see the relationship as one of influence, or as one of synchronic affinity? By both influence and affinity one must of course allow for the antithetical, not only the accordant; for the riddling as well as the explicit. The essay's opening sentence does not resolve our doubts, as it might have done by asserting that Beauvoir has been an important though neglected figure for Hill's thinking. Patke's essay does begin with a general claim, that writers more than philosophers are alert to the fact that imaginative literature is responsive to the ethical sensitivities of what Martha Nussbaum calls "the lived deliberative situation." The phrase "writers more than philosophers" itself begs the question as to which of these categories might hold the figure of Simone de Beauvoir. Or any number of others: are writers so easily distinguished from philosophers? The name of Martha Nussbaum has been introduced into the text of the essay even before the epigraph has been addressed. Are Nussbaum's words to stand as a sort of counter-epigraph, a negotiated stance of reconciliation: not the ethical *or* the decisive, but that which is at once lived *and* deliberative? Yet the two citations, with their specific concern with action and ethics, need not be antithetical; they are not markedly differentiated.

At this point Patke promises to connect the two epigraphs with the poem under consideration: "A singular instance of such alertness is provided by Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971)" (254). We may note that the words of Beauvoir were published some twenty years before Hill's volume, while those of Nussbaum appeared some twenty years after. *Mercian Hymns*, Patke writes, "dramatizes an imaginary interplay of voices" (254), yet a reader will have observed that the voices of Simone de Beauvoir and Martha Nussbaum have anticipated the drama, have been solicited already by epigraph and citation.

To this in itself there need be no objection: it is the task and the prerogative of the critic of any text to supply a context. And, as noted, critics tend to be inventive and far-fetching in this matter to the degree that the literary text is lacking attached or internal citation, "intrinsic contexture"; or to the extent that such allusions and citations have been thoroughly worked on, and out. Is this the case with Hill's poem? *Mercian Hymns* comes to us replete with its own contexts, not least the extensive epigraph taken from an essay by C. H. Sisson. This may not be entirely consonant with either Beauvoir or Nussbaum, yet to any reader of *Mercian Hymns* the words of the latter will inevitably be seen as commenting on those of Sisson; and insofar as Sisson's words go quite unmentioned in Patke's essay, the reader may even reckon them to have been judged inadequate or redundant. C. H. Sisson (1914-2003) was an admired poet who was also an eminent civil servant, a thinker to whom the relation between ethics and action was of deep and daily concern: "His study of *The Spirit of British Administration* (1959) remains a classic exposition of the underlying principles of public service in Britain." Thus the obituary in the *Daily Telegraph* of 8 September 2003. The title of the essay from which the epigraph is drawn is not given by Hill, nor indeed, as Hill acknowledges, can the source be easily located: "The epigraph is taken from the privately-printed *Essays* by C. H. Sisson, ©1967 by C. H. Sisson, and is reprinted by kind permission of the author."

The epigraph to *Mercian Hymns* is reprinted here not by anybody's kind permission, but in the interests of scholarship and according to the rules governing fair use:

The conduct of government rests upon the same foundation and encounters the same difficulties as the conduct of private persons: that is, as to its object and justification, for as to its methods, or technical part, there is all the difference which separates the person from the group, the man acting on behalf of himself from the man acting on behalf of many. The technical part, in government as in private conduct, is now the only one which is publicly or at any rate generally recognised, as if by this evasion the more difficult part of the subject, which relates to ends, could be avoided. Upon "the law of nature and the law of revelation," Blackstone said, "depend all human laws." This quaint language, which would at once be derided if it were in-

roduced now into public discussion, conceals a difficulty which is no less ours than it was our ancestors'.

Mercian Hymns concerns Offa, a ruler of the West Midlands in the late eighth century; its epigraph is drawn from a living civil servant who is also a poet, a thinker explicitly and intricately concerned with the relations between government and private persons, between public action and private conduct, between means and ends. Implicitly, Sisson's concern is also with the ruler and the ruled, and with the ways of executing (or acting on) the decisions of a sovereign authority. Sisson's words are as pertinent to Hill's theme as those of any moral or political philosopher, or indeed of any writer; given their status as epigraph they should be accorded the privilege of the primary context, a context that though detached by a certain expanse of blank paper is properly inseparable from the text. Not least, one would suggest, should this epigraph be acknowledged in an essay that goes under a title containing the phrase "Fictions of Governance."

Given Hill's lengthy epigraph from C. H. Sisson, and passages from other authors cited in the notes, there is little obvious need to set forth such contexts as may be supplied by Beauvoir or Nussbaum. *Mercian Hymns* itself holds rich intrinsic contexture: rich but by no means yet worked out, whether as a seam or a crux is worked. Moreover, there is in Patke's essay no mention of the poet's note on *Mercian Hymns* in Hill's lengthy "Acknowledgments," on its historical foundations and the liberties taken therewith: "I have a duty to acknowledge that the authorities cited in these notes might properly object to their names being used in so unscholarly and fantastic a context." That itself raises a question not only of scholarship but of courtesy: like a guest, a text may be offended or dishonoured by proximity to another. This is the question that might be raised when one sees an epigraph from Simone de Beauvoir leading us into an essay on Geoffrey Hill. (Let it be clear that we have nothing against Simone de Beauvoir. Were Geoffrey Hill to be cited as epigraph to an essay on *The Second Sex*, one's response might be similarly querulous: the invoking of contexts is a matter of courtesy as well as of argument.)

Hill's own notes to *Mercian Hymns* are predominantly of an archaeological and even antiquarian cast. Those notes survive in some of the re-printings of "Mercian Hymns" within diverse *Collected* and *Selected Poems*, though seldom when single "hymns" have been included in anthologies. Patke lists only a single source of textual authority for *Mercian Hymns*: Hill's *New and Collected Poems 1952-1992*, of 1992. This work is unavailable to me, so I do not know whether it contains the four pages of "Acknowledgments" at the end of *Mercian Hymns*; in a volume I happen to own, these are fitted without loss into three pages of "Notes and Acknowledgments" (201-03) at the back of the Penguin *Collected Poems* of 1985. (*New and Collected Poems 1952-1992* is available online, but some pages are omitted; such online texts certainly have their uses, but they cannot be relied upon for precise bibliographical data.) The Notes or Acknowledgments seem to turn up here and there, yet the epigraph is—to the best of my knowledge—nowhere to be found outside of the volume *Mercian Hymns* published by André Deutsch in 1971 and subsequently reprinted two or three times; as a separate volume *Mercian Hymns* has not been re-issued at all since c. 1980.

Late in 1922 W. B. Yeats wrote to T. S. Eliot: "I find *The Waste Land* very beautiful, but here and there are passage I do not understand—four or five lines" (22). Eliot responded in January 1923 that the poem, read by Yeats in the first issue of the *Criterion*, would shortly be appearing "as a book, with notes" (*Letters of T. S. Eliot* 22). The most famously annotated of all English poems began its printed life without notes; it is hard for us to remember that detail, or to imagine the predicament of Yeats and the other readers of the *Criterion*. For the notes are now not just the immediate context for *The Waste Land*: they are a part of the poem, all but intrinsically so, and no critic would venture an account of "the poem itself" that entirely ignored the notes. (The poem has never to my knowledge been reprinted, even in an anthology, without its notes.)

By contrast to the publishing history of *The Waste Land*, *Mercian Hymns* began as a volume laden with a panoply of epigraph and notes yet subsequently it has, mostly, gone without them. This sets up an

interesting predicament for the critic. Is it not a question of academic manners, or scholarly decorum, that C. H. Sisson be accorded “contextual precedence” over Simone de Beauvoir, Martha Nussbaum or any other writer not cited by the poet by way of intrinsic contexture? Rajeev Patke might respond that the presence of Sisson’s epigraph in early editions of *Mercian Hymns* is now of merely bibliographical or antiquarian significance; its non-attachment to “*Mercian Hymns*” since c.1980 might suggest that Geoffrey Hill has ceased to consider it of importance for his poem. One might counter with alternative hypotheses: that Sisson had withdrawn his kind permission, or was not willing to extend it to the various *Collected* and *Selected Poems*; or, most probably, that such a lengthy epigraph was deemed by another publisher to take up too much space. Even this, the most innocent of available explanations, bears the drastic implication that an epigraph is disposable. Imagine any of Eliot’s poems appearing in an anthology shorn of its epigraphs. The textual history of Hill’s sequence—from *Mercian Hymns* to “*Mercian Hymns*” (as unitalicised the poem should properly be styled when it no longer fills its own volume)—challenges a common assumption about the epigraph, that though separate from a text it ought to remain attached. What, then, is the status of an abandoned epigraph?

There are other matters to be discussed in Patke’s essay—plenty of points and words to comment on—but my attention has been entirely taken up with what must be reckoned a serious textual anomaly and its consequences for textual scholarship and literary criticism: not “fictions” but “protocols of scholarly governance.” On the one hand, there’s a familiar and deeply conservative dictum: all literary scholarship should have recourse to the earliest printings of any literary text. Against this, reception history would insist that the more extended readership of Hill’s poetry has been brought about by easily accessible volumes of *Collected* and *Selected Poems*. Reception history is certainly not hostile to the idea of a variorum edition, one that would trace all changes in the text from the first edition through (so convention usually enjoins) to the last edition seen to press by the author. However, reception history would want to go much further, to

investigate how a poem reaches readers through selections and anthologies, without any limitation being conferred by the termination of authorial intention. Reception history can make for a fascinating scholarly narrative, but it is likely to remain always outside the frame of a variorum edition, at least as a printed volume: digital possibilities are not to be circumscribed. Even in the most restricted terms—limited to what the poet saw, oversaw or overlooked—a variorum edition is ambitious in its elaborations, and needs to make a burden of precision.

The burden of textual precision is not easily reconciled with a recording of popular access, of all the jacket illustrations and other paratextual elements by which a text is mediated and marketed. Paperback editions may be easily and cheaply available, but even scholars are restricted in the number of variorum editions each one owns, as in the number of Collected and Selecteds that might be available. That a variorum edition is likely to be available only in academic libraries does not pose a problem for academic critics. What does pose a problem is the expectation that academic critics should have easy access to first editions. Given the rise of Hill's reputation, there can be very few academic libraries that hold a printing of *For the Unfallen* earlier than that of 1971, by which date the emendation to "In Memory of Jane Fraser" had been introduced. *For the Unfallen* was published by André Deutsch in 1959; second impression, 1960; third impression, with emended final stanza of "In Memory of Jane Fraser," 1971. On page 23 of the 1971 printing the poem bears the subscribed date "[1953-67]"; on p. [7] we read

AUTHOR'S NOTE (1971). "In Memory of Jane Fraser," page 23, is here reprinted with the revised final stanza, as in the postscript to *King Log* (1968).

Curious readers may like to know that the unrevised stanza can be found in the easily available anthology *The New Poetry*, ed. A. Alvarez (Penguin, 1962).

Academic libraries seldom catch the first edition of the earliest publications of a writer later to be judged of the greatest importance, nor should they feel an obligation to do so. Given the establishing of

Hill's reputation after the publication of *King Log* (1968), academic libraries are unlikely to have a printing of *For the Unfallen* earlier than that of 1971. On the other hand, no academic library can be expected to acquire each re-printing and every popular edition of any poet's books or collected or selected works. (As mentioned, the availability of digital editions can do little for the bibliographical study of a poet in copyright, as the text is seldom made available in its entirety; protection currently extends to seventy-five years after the last manifestation of an author's intentions.) The textual needs of literary critics are usually but not always in accord with the acquisition policies of academic libraries. Most importantly, it is only the most important poets who are accorded the distinguishings of a variorum edition. A variorum displays a level of dedication befitting only the canonical, and any academic library in the humanities would reckon it obligatory to acquire such.

Through my own lived deliberative situation of figuring out how to respond to Rajeev Patke's essay, I must conclude with a confession of an uneasy sense that Patke has had access to "Mercian Hymns" only in *New and Collected Poems 1952-1992*. Given that there is not yet a variorum edition, nor a scholarly bibliography of Hill's work, this is hardly culpable. Yet one must now look afresh at Patke's epigraph from Simone de Beauvoir: her presence, though still provocative, can no longer be thought to have deliberately brushed aside C. H. Sisson, shouldered him out of view. The discourtesy, we might suppose, was not intended. Nor should any of us be discouraged by the anomalies, accidents and casualties of publishing history, nor need we feel inhibited by the constraints of the holdings of our academic libraries. Yet—and it is not to find fault that I have been moved to respond to Patke's essay, but to point out only this—there are unforeseen and often unwitting consequences for literary scholarship in those limitations, in the bibliographical blindnesses that can accompany critical insights. These ought not to be concealed, nor where evident should they be politely overlooked. Neither ethical scruple nor awkwardness between colleagues should be accounted detrimental to the interests of action: the action, here, of calling for an editorial enterprise worthy

of the most admired of living poets. Among much else, Patke's essay demonstrates the need for a variorum edition of the poems of Geoffrey Hill, epigraphs included and, where excluded, with each absence meticulously registered.

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