

## Ambiguity and Ethics: Fictions of Governance in Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*\*

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*Is the ethical concern, even in its realistic and  
concrete form, detrimental to the interests of action?*  
Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (152)

Writers have been far more alert than philosophers to the kind of recognition articulated by Martha Nussbaum that imaginative writing is responsive to the ethical sensitivities of “the lived deliberative situation.”<sup>1</sup> A singular instance of such alertness is provided by Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* (1971), a sequence of prose poems which dramatizes an imaginative interplay of voices centered on the emotional and moral ambiguities attendant upon a contemporary fascination with a semi-mythical King of Mercia named Offa. The volume as a whole implies a relation of antithesis-within-affinity between the King, as imagined ruling over his people, and the poet as he governs language while answering to its order as a system of expression bound by its own historicity. The analogy, in all its problematic aspects, extends to the ethical realm. The need to acknowledge responsibility for the use of power, and the antithetical need to admit to moral ambiguity when the use of power leads to the kind of violence that gives pleasure to its perpetrator, are both dramatized as the bonds that tie the imagined king to the dramatized persona of the prose poem.

The preoccupations of *Mercian Hymns* conform to the general principle articulated in Hill's critical prose that power and responsibility are “a double vocation, an ethical twinning” (CW 339).<sup>2</sup> For Hill, a

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\*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debpatke02023.htm>>.

sense of ambiguity surrounds the pleasures derived from the power of the imagination as embodied in language. Two recognitions are registered explicitly in the prose and implicitly in the poem: if one has a natural propensity for power, in the realm suited to that propensity it is natural to derive pleasure from the power (over words in the case of the poet, over people in the case of kingship); yet it is also inevitable to face up to ethical considerations when the exercise of power leads to violence and the brutalization of sensibilities in those inured to violence, whether as perpetrators or victims. For Hill, within his deeply English contexture, history, etymology, politics, and ethics thus become mutually interdependent. Kingship is allied to the poetic vocation on the basis of "the correspondence between two given but indeterminate values: political values and English word values" (CW 466-67).

English word values remain an obsessive concern throughout Hill's career as poet and critic. How word values might relate to ethical values is a matter to which he returns in many of his poems and essays. *Mercian Hymns* contributes an unusual dimension to this dual concern. It shows the poet obsessed with recuperating a figure from history which has as much to do with an aura of menace as with the burden of atonement.<sup>3</sup> The moral earnestness that attends Hill's sense of vocation can be reconciled to the exuberant fascination with power displayed by *Mercian Hymns* only through a paradox: we must treat the representation of ambiguous states of mind and morally questionable dispositions as the poet's way of fulfilling a sense of responsibility towards his sense of vocation.

For Hill, the *Oxford English Dictionary* is a cherished authority for all matters to do with the governance of meaning in English. It is therefore appropriate to consider, selectively, how it addresses the relations between ambiguity, equivocation, and ambivalence, given that each linguistic practice has a role to play in the utterances and implied states of mind in *Mercian Hymns*. The *OED* recognizes that notions like ambiguity, ambivalence, and being equivocal can pertain to utter-

ances (in the objective realm) and also to states of mind (in the subjective realm):

Ambivalent: "having either or both of two contrary or parallel values, qualities, or meanings; entertaining contradictory emotions (as love and hatred) towards the same person or thing; acting on or arguing for sometimes one and sometimes the other of two opposites; equivocal." (OED)

Ambiguous: "Of words or other significant indications: Admitting more than one interpretation, or explanation; of double meaning, or of several possible meanings; equivocal." (OED I.2.)

Equivocal: "Of words, phrases, etc.: Having different significations equally appropriate or plausible; capable of double interpretation; ambiguous." (OED A.2.a.)

To be equivocal is a choice, and hence an act of deliberate obfuscation, whereas being and sounding ambiguous corresponds as inner weather to outer report. In contrast, ambivalence has a direct relation to affective states and attitudes: one is told that the speaker is in two minds about someone or something. A self-conflict is acknowledged, more or less directly. Ambivalence operates as a notion in the realm of the subjective, and its corresponding status as objective utterance is relatively straightforward, a matter of being scrupulous in registering a divided state of mind. The uncertainty attending *Mercian Hymns* might look as if it has to do with the poet's ambivalence about his subject matter, but, as I argue below, the problem with the poem is that it is perhaps *not ambivalent enough*, given the dubious nature of Offa's morality, and the dubious pleasure derived by the poet in contemplating violence. If anything, Hill is not severe enough on Offa's unethical conduct, at least explicitly. It appears that this is less a matter of choosing to withhold moral judgment than of choosing to represent a state of mind ambiguously and equivocally. In this context, one can speak of the poet being ethical only through his commitment to the deliberate representation of ambiguity. In painterly terms, one might distinguish between an object near or far represented as a blur not because the painter lacks the eyesight or the

wherewithal to show it precisely, but because it is the blur that he wishes to represent accurately.

I think we should dismiss as unlikely the possibility that Hill ended up sounding more equivocal or ambiguous than he meant to at the level of objective utterance. Of course, we have no reliable recourse to intention except through the printed word, though we do have the author recollecting his intentions in an interview (to which we attend with all the caveats apt to relating recollected intentions to actual performance). Instead, I recommend the interpretive option that we treat the equivocal and ambiguous aspects of the poem as a matter of congruence between intention and execution, as what the poet did deliberately (under the plausible assumption that he was neither inept nor careless in his utterance). That option leads to a view of *Mercian Hymns* as a poem that is intent on registering the difficulties, pitfalls, and subversions encountered in trying to arrive at ethical judgments.

More than one possibility of signification remains latent to, or residual in, specific human situations of the kind Hill evokes through the word "contexture" ("Hobbes's word both for the continuity or contiguity of things and for the structure and composition of artefacts," CW 195).<sup>4</sup> In Hill's view, one can be ambiguous in using a word or phrase to give "quite unambivalent expression to moral preference or decision" (CW 50-52), as for instance, in the seventeenth century use of the Janus-faced "anointed" to suggest both smeared and consecrated (as in Ben Jonson).<sup>5</sup> Jonson manages the dramatic context in such a way that the derogatory and the respectful meanings of "anointed" are both possible, and Hill treats that as an example of how, in the right hands, ambiguity can be constructive in its balancing of equivocal meanings.

Hill's prose turns often to developments in seventeenth century England as having had a decisive role to play in shaping attitudes to ambiguity, both as a general feature of language and as something specific to the English language. Thus, in the Locke tradition, ambiguity is a nuisance to be avoided and eliminated, along with all other obscurities of language.<sup>6</sup> Hill argues that contemporary critics of

Hobbes, especially John Bramhall, anticipated Locke when he expressed concern at “the moral and emotional attrition which is the toll exacted by ambiguity, obscurity, and all forms of disputation” (CW 341). Hill notes of such critics that they “negotiate for the best terms each can get, among a compact body of ambiguities: ambiguities which are in part ethical, part civil, part etymological” (CW 340). Regardless of how laudable the aim of cleansing language of its obscurities might sound, Hill argues that this intent could never succeed because of the inseparability of “fallacies and false appearances from our progressive endeavours,” as Bacon had argued (CW 194), because it resorts to prescriptions which “turn legitimacy into tyranny” (CW 341), and because it presumes “to disconnect language from the consequences of our common imbecility,” from what Calvin, Hooker and Bramhall regard as “the nature of contingency” (CW 341).

Rejecting Lockean sanguineness, Hill aligns himself with a view which he associates with Hobbes and several other English writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for whom “the equivocal and the ambiguous are intrinsic to human nature and civic history” (CW 195), and “our language retains, and is directed so as to retain [...] the stuff of contrary feelings and perplexed experience” (CW 335). That is what we see happening in *Mercian Hymns*. The poem gives voice to contrary feelings and perplexed experience, faithfully reproduced, as evidence of the difficulty in arriving at unambiguous moral positions when engaged imaginatively and affectively with what Offa signifies to the poet. For Hill, ambiguity is a kind of “double-meaning” (CW 338), “impacted” (CW 228) with the customs and habits of common usage, and capable of creating both “bafflement” and “resonance.” Hill thinks that such effects of “contexture,” “semantic doubleness” and “double valency” (CW 330) can be used expressively by poets to achieve mastery over “tonal indeterminacy” through “semantic opportunism” (CW 302), as he thinks was accomplished by Dryden and Pound at their best. We could say of Hill’s poems what he said of Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590) and Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), that either text “commits, but does not abandon, its discourse to that

debatable ground where, in the corrupt state of man, private and public interests are determined—but not irretrievably—by the indeterminate” (CW 332), thus identifying a literary genealogy for his own commitment to the indeterminate element in the interface between language and morality.

Hill’s prose underlines two points: first, the significance he finds in the integral attachment of poetic language to the warp and weft of common speech, regardless of the extremes of pressure the poet applies to that fabric. Thus if ordinary language is sometimes or often ambiguous, poetic language cannot hope to accomplish its aims and responsibilities by aspiring to a clarity that turns its back on a shared origin in possible confusion and likely obscurity. Second, the purely linguistic is never the merely linguistic; ambiguity and indeterminacy at the level of word and phrase remain inextricable from ambiguity at the level of ethical concerns concerning ‘right’ action and thought. According to Hill, this type of contexture is tested and proven when the making of poetry pushes “the maker beyond the barrier of his or her own limited intelligence” (CW 404). That is when writing poetry retains the capacity to startle even the poet. It entails stepping outside the bounds of the poet’s ordinary lexical and ethical norms, to produce “the abrupt, unlooked for semantic recognition understood as corresponding to an act of mercy or grace” (CW 404), the linguistic imagination seamlessly one with the moral imagination. Thus, when Hill proposes “a theology of language,” he describes it in terms of fulfilling an expectation that conforms to his belief that the language of poetry and the language of ethics are closely connected, so “that the shock of semantic recognition must also be a shock of ethical recognition” (CW 405; see also 91).

Several recurrent motifs from Hill’s critical prose have a direct bearing on *Mercian Hymns*: (1) the absolute necessity for a poet to acquire “an auditory imagination,” and the need to recognize the enormous difficulty encountered in doing so; (2) the absolute need to remember that an ear for “particular sought pitch and accent” (CW 421) is inseparable from what is variously described as “moral exactitude” in

Empson,<sup>7</sup> “the ethical burden” in the context of his adaptation of Ibsen’s *Brand* (Hill, Preface xi n2), and “hearing, or sounding, history and morality in depth” in the context of Yeats (CW 391); and (3) an attitude of scrupulous responsibility towards sustaining the balance (or tension) between authorial and fictional voice, an idea derived from Henry James, “that ‘no character in a play (any play not a mere monologue) has, for the right expression of the thing, a usurping consciousness; the consciousness of others is exhibited exactly in the same way as that of the ‘hero’” (CW 421).

*Mercian Hymns* starts off with a complex interplay between two voices: a scop in full flow praising his lord and master, while the subject of his peroration listens appreciatively.

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sand-stone: overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth, the summer hermitage in Holy Cross: guardian of the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge: contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-changer: commissioner for oaths: martyrologist: the friend of Charlemagne.

“I liked that,” said Offa, “sing it again.”<sup>8</sup>

This is witty: appositional extravagance set off against laconic brevity, the entire performance nicely balanced between a king valorized and praise subverted. The epithets are lavish but strangely assorted; and the deliberate anachronisms alluding to a symbolic realm that extends in time as well as space cannot prevent—perhaps, are not meant to prevent—the hint of a “discrepancy between ‘fealty’ and ‘servitude.’”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the King’s enjoyment could be said to betray more than a hint of discrepancy between satisfaction at the praise, and indifference to its slight absurdity. Given such a complex dramatization, scrupulousness of lexical care can be said to have been applied to the specific task of sustaining a degree of tonal indeterminacy in both speakers: we cannot determine if the scop is being ironic or sincere in his hyperbolic language; likewise, we cannot be sure if the king finds the praise hyperbolic or sincere. The authorial strategy is one of judgment and attitude held in abeyance, so that tonal indeterminacy can

be placed firmly in the foreground. As a later Hill poem puts it, “*glow-ery* is a mighty word with two meanings / if you crave ambiguity in plain speaking / as I do” (“In Memoriam: Ernst Barlach”).

In *Mercian Hymns* an inventive historical imagination broods intently on a remembered boyhood and what an eighth century west midlands King “almost lost to history” could signify for the implied “I” of the poem. As several commentators on the poem have noted (e.g. Kerrigan; Brannigan), the sense of place embodied in the poem is intensely regional, with a strong sense of how the past resurfaces in the present. The time of the poem keeps shifting between the present tense of reflection, the past tense of recollected boyhood, the other past tense of Offa in his time and place, and a fluid afterlife in which the fictional Offa moves across the entire span of time from the eighth to the twentieth century. The most striking ambiguity about the poem is the peculiar relation of undecidability of attitude that ties Hill’s Offa to the boyhood evoked by the implied first person voice of the poem.

Ambiguity, as William Empson reminds us at the beginning of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), entails several kinds of undecidability: “an indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings” (5-6). My description of *Mercian Hymns* takes a similar view: that the volume is ambiguous both in terms of states of mind and in terms of what is said by the various fictional voices in the poem, especially since—as noted by Maximilian de Gaynesford—“ambiguity may threaten commitment to one’s utterances or it may strengthen it, depending on whether it is used to slide off a point (to make one’s excuses, perhaps) or to make the point felt (perhaps by owning each of the meanings that could be meant)” (16). The challenge for the reader, in such cases, is dual: first, one has to distinguish between cases where the author might be uncertain or in two minds, and cases where a statement might have two referents, all of which are containable within the idea of a providential author; second, one has to work out for oneself



whether the text provides grounds for believing that it could tell something it does not know about itself. Consider Hymn IV:

I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots and endings. Child's-play.  
I abode there, bided my time: where the mole

shouldered the clogged wheel, his gold solidus; where dry-dust badgers  
thronged the Roman flues, the long-unlooked-for mansions of our tribe.  
(NCP 96)

We could suppose that the "I" is Offa giving voice to his sentiments in posthumously timeless fashion; or that the "I" is the implied first-person of the poem, who remembers boyhood as a state of incipience, an abiding in "mother-earth," which retrospection transforms into a biding. The poem provides no way to decide between the two alternatives. In fact, we could say that it actively solicits an ambiguity of reference, an effect of the equivocal which implies two speaking voices (or their intermittent merger), while leaving the reader unclear about the extent and limits of the implied congruence.

Like ripples spreading from a central disturbance, the conjunction of Offa and his conjuror expands in scope to include by extrapolation any (presumably English or midlands-born) person who transforms identity through similar elective affinity: an investiture whose happening is purely textual, and always attended by a sense of its own discrepant nature. We could generalize from the instance and say that this form of ambiguous contexture is metaphor in metamorphosis, which dissembles its own making as a finding, just as the coins minted in Offa's reign (chief among the few physical artifacts to have survived as metonymies of his rule) become Hill's inheritance, and Hill's writing circulates the cultural capital he finds in Offa across the realm of the English language. The implications of elective affinity do not end in the poem. As John Brannigan remarks, the use of Offa in the symbolic role of a king presiding over the genius of the English nation acquires an ironic resonance for a contemporary England more multicultural than it was in 1971, especially when we note the attention given recently to the fact that Offa appears to have issued at least

one coin in the eighth century with inscriptions from the Koran (cf. Brannigan 100).

Another retrospective irony has gathered momentum as England has become more multicultural in the forty years since *Mercian Hymns* was completed: the tone of the sentiments expressed in parts of the poem sound even more reactionary now than they might have in 1971, especially if the reader sympathizes with Tom Paulin and William Wootten, who argue that the authoritarian declarations of Hymn VIII—"Today I name them; tomorrow I shall express the new law. I dedicate my awakening to this matter" (NCP 100)—imply neither irony nor humour nor resolute decisiveness, but the grim xenophobia of Enoch Powell and his right-wing rhetoric of 1968.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, poetic voice, in addition to the linguistic precision and moral exactitude prized by Hill, also entails a political element capable of activating in readers a need to define their own position in relation to the issues signaled and pointed by the voices in the poem.

The implications of the central ambiguity of the poem can be teased out a little further by turning to the final part of Hymn V:

Exile or pilgrim set me once more upon that ground: my rich and desolate childhood. Dreamy, smug-faced, sick on outings—I who was taken to be a king of some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one. (NCP 97)

"Exile or pilgrim" is pretentious if applied by the speaking voice of the poem to his own boyhood self, but could be intended as just that kind of self-characterization (a boy recollected in adulthood as snotty and smug); "exile or pilgrim" is disingenuous if applied by Hill's Offa to himself, but that too might be part of an intended attribute (the king as self-indulgent hypocrite). While a king might have had a childhood both rich in appurtenances and desolate in its solitariness, the speaking voice of the poem too might remember or imagine his boyhood as desolate in its solitariness but rich in fantasy. The richness differs in being either literal or metaphorical, while the desolation is shared. The logic is not unlike that of a syllogism with a missing middle: "I am short; Julius Caesar was short: am I and Caesar not

similar?!" Possible but inadequate as extrapolation, hence slightly ridiculous. The partial analogy between king and boy is not too different. The poet might well be aware that it could seem so, but regardless, he might choose to push the point past the line of plausibility, leaving the proportion of humor and seriousness with which this is done ambiguous.

Hill's 1981 account of the poem in his interview with John Haffenden throws some light on the matter of authorial self-awareness. It also provides some indication of the ground on whose basis a reader might decide on the degree to which the intention and its realization coincide, or fail to coincide. Hill speaks of the impulse to articulate "mixed feelings for my own home country" and "the ambiguities of English history in general" (Haffenden 94). This helps our interpretation in three ways: it provides confirmation, if any was needed, for the ambivalence we discover in the poem; it reassures us that, if the value discovered in Offa remains unresolved and double, that too is intentional rather than inadvertent; and it shows how the equivocal, the ambivalent and the ambiguous, when used precisely, "can work to clarify meaning," as de Gaynesford puts it (17). It does so, somewhat paradoxically, by foregrounding the difficulty of separating prejudice from ethical judgments, the difficulty of distinguishing between pleasures that are involuntary but questionable and responsibilities that are compelling but unacknowledged. Hill's remarks do little to allay the worry that the poem provides much more evidence when it comes to the poet's attraction to Offa than for any disapproval of Offa. If we are to talk of objective correlatives, as Hill does, then the poem can be said to supply a surplus when it comes to the relish with which Offa enjoys violence, but the supply is turned off almost completely when it comes to an objective correlative for a moral judgment on Offa. The reader can choose to interpret the gap as a form of vicarious enjoyment without any overt restraint (a form of scrupulosity that becomes ethical in its desire to preserve fidelity to the truth of a troublesome frame of mind), or as a form of oblique irony that reveals

ambivalence while sustaining ambiguity about the exact ethical orientation adopted by the author towards his quasi-historical subject.

In writing the poem, we are told in the Haffenden interview, Hill meant “to encompass and accommodate” the voice of a hateful and “tyrannical creator of order and beauty” and the voice of a boyhood remembered for its “early humiliations and fears” as well as the “discovery of a tyrannical streak in oneself as a child” (Haffenden 94). This is plausible. But while anyone might share a streak of tyranny with others, the admission does not provide sufficient ground by itself for the kind of sustained resemblance the poem seems to imply. Offa and the poet come from the same part of England, and are, in some basic sense, patriotic about England as a nation or kingdom (whatever the anachronism of imputing anything resembling a modern idea of nationhood to an eighth century regional ruler, or whatever the interpretive freedom needed to invoke a genealogical connection between two ideas of commonweal): but the skeptical reader might wonder if the gap between intention and execution is very wide when it comes to the central ambiguity of the poem. It could be said that the affinity between Offa and the boy in the poem is given less by way of an objective correlative than Hill’s account of his poem might suggest. We are thus dealing with two kinds of undecidability: how (far) the boy and the king resemble each other remains unclear; and how far this lack of clarity might be part of the poet’s design remains unclear. We could give the poet the benefit of the doubt in both cases. But we can never be sure if that will find a consensus among English and non-English readers. What we can be reasonably sure about is that the desire to create a blurred double-focus between Offa and the boy reads as a figure of fantasy through which Hill projects the empowering aura of kingship onto a young person’s frustrations and intimations. The incongruity of the analogy makes it a figure of excess, and the text could be said to accept the incommensurate as part of a design that has as much room for humor and the grotesque as for the self-revelatory and the annunciatory.

A reader might thus concede that in *Mercian Hymns* poetic complexity is accomplished by creating “semantic energy” from ambiguities inherent to the dramatized and problematic affinity between king and boy. Hill’s respect for ambiguity finds a natural predecessor in Empson, who argued for a necessary connection between poetic merit and complexity throughout *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Hill, in his *Paris Review* interview, asseverates bluntly that “any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence” in poetry equates with “intelligence” (“The Art of Poetry LXXX” 275). In *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, the reckless prodigality of Empson’s ingenuity reduces the efficacy of his seven-fold typology to little more than a bare frame on which to stretch—not a method but—a gift. Seven is no magic number when it comes to types of ambiguity, nor is ambiguity the most accurate term for everything that Empson includes for analysis in his first book. Recognizing this, he qualified his use of the term in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), and admitted that the notion of ambiguity as he had played it out in 1930 was like “the idea of a double meaning which [...] belongs rather to peculiar states of dramatic self-conflict” (103n).

As noted above, for Empson the undecidability of a text is interesting irrespective of whether the poet means two things, or one of two, or both, or remains uncertain (consciously or involuntarily) about whether he meant one or both things. This kind of blur occurs in *Mercian Hymns*. Consider a line from Hymn V: “I wormed my way heavenward for ages amid barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern” (NCP 97). The ambiguity of reference is evident in the hovering between two senses of “heaven” (as sky and as a transcendent realm). If we read “for ages” more or less literally, the reference works best in relation to the fiction of a timeless Offa; if we read “for ages” as mundane exaggeration, the boy poring over ruins comes to focus more readily. The poet’s implied voice can be said to cherish or permit both significations. One could not quite call it an extended pun, because a pun points two ways: semantic difference combined with auditory congruence, meanings indifferent to an agreement between sounds. In

this case, the reader is left uncertain about which of the two references is intended. If they coincided fully, we would approach a situation in which “two or more meanings are resolved into one” (Empson’s second type; cf. *Seven Types* 48).

Such a resolution would satisfy a reader who could assent to a full congruence between Offa and the boy. But for the reader who has reservations about the analogy, it becomes appropriate to think of the line as fitting a different situation, in which, as Empson notes, “two ideas, which are connected only by being both relevant, in the context, can be given in one word simultaneously” (his third type; *Seven Types* 102). What works for Empson at the level of the word can be said to work in *Mercian Hymns* at the level of entire sentences.

So far, I have dwelt on the resemblance between Empson’s ideas on ambiguity and the double-focus created by Hill between the voice of Offa and the voice of remembered boyhood. It is possible to extend the resemblance by noting that “focus on a complicated state of mind in the author” can also be brought out “when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves” (Empson’s fourth type; *Seven Types* 133). Consider the final sentence of Hymn X, “He wept, attempting to master *ancilla* and *servus*” (NCP 102). As Michael North (among others) has noted (cf. North 468), while it is possible to imagine the king as well as the boy weeping at his Latin grammar, the likelihood is more apt for the boy than for the king, and when applied to the king, the symbolic connotations extend to the power to enforce servitude in ways that become incongruous in the case of the boy. The example suggests that Hill’s poem traverses a semantic territory that could be said to occupy a zone between Empson’s third and fourth types of ambiguity.

The difference within similarity between Offa and remembered boyhood gets more problematic, and the poem’s silences become more telling than the ambivalence and ambiguities, when we confront the poem’s fascination with power. Consider the latter part of Hymn VII:

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed him. Then, leaving Ceolred, he journeyed for hours, calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*. (NCP 99)

We can pass over in silence the delicious pun of the last phrase. We can also pass over in silence the question of whether the experience recollected might not emanate from the memory of a victim even though it is devoted to the exaltation of a bully. We focus instead on the experiential sequence from luring to flaying to feeling calm; the need for violence to exact pain, suffering, and humiliation; the calm accomplished and enjoyed because of wreaking violence on others. The moral pitch is of brutishness acknowledged frankly, as if it were a need, a ritual, and a habit that needed affirmation. The moral judgment we might extract from such an anecdote is troubling. How to characterize the poetic voice that declares its pleasure at fear and pain, and the calm quietude derived from the brutal exercise of power? If the poetic text acknowledges an ethical burden, it does so paradoxically, by withholding overt judgments while foregrounding the lack of moral considerations in what is voiced. If there is moral exactitude at work here, it does its job invisibly. That, in itself, constitutes another ambiguity. In a *Guardian* interview dating from 2002, Hill remarks: "In my childhood, the word 'cancer' could not be said aloud; it was mouthed silently. In my own approach to language, that aspect of fraught mime is as significant to me as are the history and contexts of etymology" ("A matter of timing"). Likewise, we could say that ethical responsibility in *Mercian Hymns* is as much a matter of "fraught mime" as of the rich encrustation of words; as much a matter of signification "mouthed silently" as of values made explicit through language.

That Offa is shown as brutish, we see. To produce fear, pain, suffering, and death gives him pleasure; and causing fear, pain, suffering, and death is necessary: either because kingship requires it or the enjoyment of power requires it. The relish and precision with which his voice reports his satisfactions, unqualified by any "usurping consciousness," creates a challenge for the reader. What Hill refers to, in

another context, as the ethical burden in writing, here becomes a burden for the reader because while Offa's pleasures are rendered vividly, the ethical burden of the text is voiced in silence, as an abeyance. We may make of it what we will. The poem's fascination with power raises the question of a counter-balance: does admiration for Offa make room for justice, law and the rule of reason in the application of force? The text is enigmatic on this question. Offa's kingship raises the question of right governance: when one has power, what is the relation of force to law? Does law legitimate violence or force? We have one kind of answer from Walter Benjamin: "If justice is the criterion of ends, legality is that of means" (237). Law has to relate to justice, as means to ends. Legality or legitimation, as we are reminded by Derrida, depends on a balance between force and justness; without that balance, nothing legitimates force (cf. Derrida 11-12). In Hymn XVIII, for example, Offa appears as an epicure of the instruments of torture:

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

He wiped his lips and hands. He strolled back to the car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and philosophy. (NCP 110)

On such evidence, *Mercian Hymns* chooses to remain—not only equivocal or ambiguous, but also—opaque about how justice or legality could be associated with Offa's propensity for violence. And it is in this enigmatic fashion that the poem acknowledges Offa as perhaps the earliest ruler to have envisaged an England of which the present nation is a distant descendant. The Offa gifted by the poet to his nation in *Mercian Hymns* is thus a complex and troubling legacy. At a more general level, *Mercian Hymns* subsidizes a complex figuration in which linguistic, ethical and political orientations are held in suspension, needing the reader's active involvement for sounding the depth



of a poem with an ear for its pitch and stress, and to its capacity to startle, enlighten, and bemuse.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"[W]ithout a presentation of the mystery, conflict, and riskiness of the lived deliberative situation, it will be hard for philosophy to convey the peculiar value and beauty of choosing humanly well [...]. [...] [And] [i]t is in this idea that human deliberation is constantly an adventure of the personality, undertaken against terrific odds and among frightening mysteries, and that this is, in fact, the source of much of its beauty and richness, that texts written in a traditional philosophical style have the most insuperable difficulty conveying to us." Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 142.

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*; hereafter abbreviated as CW.

<sup>3</sup>An allusion to Hill's inaugural lecture, "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement,'" at the University of Leeds, December 1977: "I am suggesting that it is at the heart of this 'heaviness' that poetry must do its atoning work, this heaviness which is simultaneously the 'density' of language and the 'specific gravity of human nature'" (CW 17).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. *OED* "contexture," *n*.1.a.: "The action or process of weaving together or intertwining; the fact of being woven together; the manner in which this is done."

<sup>5</sup>See Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall*: "Why, we are worse, if to be slaves, and bond / To Caesar's slave, be such, the proud Sejanus! / He that is all, does all, gives Caesar leave / To hide his ulcerous and anointed face" (IV.171-74).

<sup>6</sup>John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "The imperfection of Words is the Doubtfulness or ambiguity of their Signification, which is caused by the sort of ideas they stand for" (Book III, ch. IX, 105).

<sup>7</sup>See Geoffrey Hill, "The Dream of Reason" 96.

<sup>8</sup>Geoffrey Hill, *New and Collected Poems* 93; hereafter abbreviated as NCP.

<sup>9</sup>Terms cited by Hill from Coleridge, who applied them to the tone of a Donne sermon (CW 110).

<sup>10</sup>William Wootten points out that on 20 April 1968 the conservative British MP Enoch Powell delivered a speech in Birmingham which was "in its poetic predictions of civil strife and its implied sympathy for the racialist views of constituents, to prove explosive" (3-4). The connection with Hill is then made explicit: "if we read *Mercian Hymns* VIII against the background of Powell's speech, its 'venomous letters' and its fear of immigrants, the poem's vague menace begins to clarify. [...] If any had claim to be a modern-day king of Mercia, the latest incarnation of

King Offa, and the alter ego to Hill it was the MP for Wolverhampton South-West" (6).

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