CHAPTER THREE

Geoffrey Hill

Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross
And never move. Sometimes in dreams of hell
the body moves but moves to no avail
and is at one with that eternal loss.

(Hill, Tenebrae 15)
The aim of this chapter is to examine the Absentist elements in Geoffrey Hill’s poetry. Geoffrey Hill was born in 1932 in Bromsgrove, Worcester. He started his career as a lecturer in 1954. Between 1979 and 1980 he was the Chairperson of English Literature at the University of Leeds.

From the beginning of his writing poetry he was preoccupied with the idea of history as the “ground of understanding of the present” (Gronow 69). History as a treasure box and English languages and culture, all together are the main motives in his first Collection For the Unfallen (1959) and later on these subjects formed a strange aesthetics in his versification in King Log (1968), Mercian Hymns (1971) and Tenebrae (1978).

When he was twenty, the Fantasy Press published five of his early poems. Two of these five poems were “For Isaac Rosenberg” and “To William Dunbar”. In these two poems he presents the theme of war, power and faith. In regard to his preoccupation with the theme of power, he can be compared with Ted Hughes; with this difference that Hill demonstrates power through history but Hughes depicts it from the point of view of mythology.

In his collections For the Unfallen (1959) and King Log (1968), there are varieties of forms such as: quatrains, quasi-sonnets, Copulas and elegiac stances. In his elegies he addresses individuals like Isaac Rosenberg and William Dunbar. He also writes about historical figures, relationships and the victims of war. He prefers to write about reality rather than imaginary issues. Michael Schmidt in his An Introduction to Fifty Modern British Poets, points out that Hill’s poems “are soliloquies rather than expository set speeches, ruminations from within an experience, not about experience” (405). Hill wanted to put himself in the center of events in history to
experience it in a way that makes it as real as it was. He writes in a way that shocks the reader what has happened to human beings.

The Influences on Geoffrey Hill

The influences upon Hill go back to the time of his study at Oxford when he listened to the lectures from C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and C. Day Lewis and his friendship with G. Wilson Knights and Norman A. Jeffares. Geoffrey Hill many times acknowledges the influence from Metaphysical poets. Poetry for Metaphysical, Hill says, is “simple, sensuous and passionate” rather than “logic or rhetoric” (Haffenden 80). The combination of the “intellectual strength with simple, sensuous and passionate immediacy” drew Hill to Metaphysical poets. Hill continues that this definition of poetry from the Metaphysical immediacy is different from Wordsworthian “narrative or anecdotal immediacy” (80). The Wordsworth’s definition of poetry “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” misguided the post-Romantic poets while Milton’s notion of poetry sticks to the essence of poetry. With regard to the influence from the Moderns, Hill in his interview points out that his exploration on modern poetry was quite independent from the contemporary; “I was unlike my contemporaries in what I was doing, and they in turn realized that what I was doing was very different from what they were doing” (Haffenden 78).

While Hill rejects The Movement, according to Michael Schmidt, he turns to “the neglected tradition represented by Douglas” and the Scottish Chaucerian poet Isaac Rosenberg, and even Blake and Chaucer. “In putting down his roots in the past, he found his most congenial soil in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and in the late-eighteenth century … the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well” (185).

David Jones (1895-1974) of The Anathemata, (1951) had been a great influence on Hill. Hill’s masterpiece Mercian Hymns (1971) came under the direct influence of
The Anathemata. These two writers rewrite their own version of the past with vivid and literal details of history. In the *Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall classify both David Jones and Hill under the title the Neo-Regionalism. Regionalism is the repossessing of the past that our present is rooted in. *Mercian Hymns* "is in one sense a miniature *Anathemata*, with comparable allusive trappings and with a certain number of lexical and historical end-notes..." (299). The style and the language of *Hymns* along with the humorous tone, deals with the private and the public spheres of the poet.

Between Hill and T.S. Eliot there are many similarities, Hill is under the influence of Eliot. *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets* are the main sources for Hill. According to Jeremy Hooker, Eliot and Hill have similar apprehensions of the sea. Since both believe:

> The sea is a destroyer; it is littered with wreckage, and ‘tosses up our losses’. Eliot identifies it with ‘time not our time’, not the timeless moment, but endless recurrence, suffering and waste without end. Facing the sea’s power to destroy and to waste, its indifference, its temporal endlessness, in effect its representation of Creation as a succession of meaningless lives and deaths, he wins from near despair his most difficult affirmation of faith and hope". (26)

Hill in his “Funeral Music”: eight sonnets from *King Log* (1968) makes clear this influence. “Funeral Music” comes closer to Eliot’s *Four Quartets* in its phraseology and religious themes. Gabriel Pearson writes that “*Four Quartets* is a kind of practical education in the poetics of the post-Symbolist tradition, a summation as well as a demonstration” (34). Hill inherits the rhetoric power from Eliot to choose and to create images of scepticism in religious and historical and social issues. Hill is able to
create an equivalent rhetorical power of the poets such as Yeats, Blake and Coleridge, rather than imitation from the “rhetorical power of this order, without scepticism, would stifle all moral intelligence” (Hooker 24).

For the Unfallen (1959): Christianity as a Poetic Study rather than as a Faith
This collection consists of thirty seven poems written between 1952-1958, it was published in 1959. The revitalization of myth and religion was the dominant theme in the poetry of the fifties. Thus Hill starts with religion, mythology and the salvation of human identity in modern life. Moreover, he deals with poetic tradition and the standard of academic excellence. The themes related to the Absentist in this collection are the absence of faith in Christianity. The epigraph of the book says:

The beast is slain, a beast thrives.

Fat blood squeaks on the sand.

A blinded god believes

That he is not blind.

He is a religious poet who challenges religion and God. In this regard Hill considers Christianity “as his poetic study rather than his belief” (Wall 42). The Absence of faith in God, in Christianity and lack of faith in different religions in the world had been the preoccupation of modern poets and writers. Art, artist and their relation to the world, along with sea as a symbol of death and destruction are the other significant themes in this Collection. Some of Hill’s poems in this Collection will be analysed to exemplify the above themes. The absentist poets of 1960s especially Geoffrey Hill deal with lack of faith as a reason for the crises of society and the world. When a human being separated from his beliefs it is as if some part of his nature is destroyed. Religion is a need to keep the man’s mind balanced. Religion can
control the untamed power of technology and science. Human beings without religion will be a beast with power. 1950s is the decade of religion, economic and social crises in American and European societies. The poems of *For the Unfallen* were written during this decade when modern European societies were in catastrophe. Geoffrey Hill was not the only poet who writes about man in the absence of faith. T.S. Eliot the Anglo-American modernist in his poems *The Waste Land*, “Gerontion” and *Four Quartets* wrote about the catastrophe of western society in the absence of faith and religion. Eliot can be considered a quasi-Absentist, since in a few poems he deals with lack of faith. W.B. Yeats in his apocalyptic poem “The Second Coming” deals with the absence of faith where he portrays a world not with the power of god but a beast-god. *For the Unfallen* can be considered as apocalyptic poetry. It reveals the birth of a beast-god. The early poem of the collection “Genesis” is a remarkable poem with five sections. “Genesis’ is the story of creation, while the form of the poem follows the “elements” of balladic meter and rhyme” it reveals the order of the universe. The first line begins abruptly with the climatic episode of creation; then one by one the poem introduces the elements of the world- “the air”, “the ocean”, “the sea”, “the land” and “sand”. The first word of the poem is a word of disapproval, “against” builds up a resistance to the reality of the “Genesis” in the Bible.

Against the burly air I strode,

Where the tight ocean heaves its load,

Crying the miracles of God.

And first I brought the sea to bear

Upon the dead weight of the land;

And the waves flourished at my prayer,

The rivers spawned their sand. (*Unfallen* 15)
While the first day deals with life and fertility of “the tough pig-headed salmon”, the second and the third days are the stories of killing. In Hill’s “Genesis”, on the second day God creates birds “I stood and saw / the osprey plunge with triggered claw”, the bird which can hunt and tears other creatures.

The third day of creation is full of scary and cruel images. The passive protagonist in this part becomes an effective voice by crying “Beware”, beware of “The soft-voiced owl, the ferret’s smile”, and beware of “The hawk’s deliberate stoop in air / Cold eyes”.

On the fourth day “The watery Leviathan” as “a huge myth for man” was created. The sky “where Capricorn and Zero cross” and other birds such as albatross and phoenix get created.

The phoenix burns as cold as frost;
And, like a legendary ghost,
The phantom-bird goes wild and lost,
Upon a pointless ocean tossed. (Unfallen 16)

The protagonist who renounces on the fourth day turns “again / To flesh and blood and the blood’s pain”. “The blood’s pain” is the pain to be a human being and in the centre of creation. The protagonist picks up his courage on the sixth day and the myth of creation reaches its end.

On the sixth day, as I rode
In haste about the works of God,
With spurs I plucked the horse’s blood.

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

And by Christ’s blood are men made free
Though in close shrouds their bodies lie
Under the rough pelt of the sea;

Though Earth has rolled beneath her weight
The bones that cannot bear the light. (Unfallen 17)

In the Absentist study of “Genesis”, the reader is the witness of the cruelty and tyranny of all the creatures of the universe. In the “Genesis” one reads about killing, death, cruelty, blood and horror more than birth, creation, life and happiness. In the “Genesis” of the Bible, the creation of human beings is significant but in Hill’s “Genesis”, man is in the second stage compared to the elements of horror, hate, and death. Thus this poem is a comparison between God’s work and the work of man. “Man cannot know the Creation without his language, myths, fables, systems, artefacts; nor can he create purely, without mixed motives or the imposition of a pattern on experience” (Hooker 25). Hill’s “Genesis” is a myth of the destruction and corruption.

“God’s Little Mountain”, thematically is the continuation of the “Genesis”, it has an abrupt beginning “Below”. It means below the sky and on the earth, because he says: “And, I fell, until I found the world again”. The protagonist narrates the thunder like the Deluge, a fire or something extraordinary which makes him speechless his “head frames words” but still his “tongue has none”. He is unable “to tell what [he] have seen” because according to him “the word… was not given”.

I thought the thunder had unsettled heaven,
All was so still. And yet the sky was cloven
By flame that left the air cold and engraven.
I waited for the word that was not given,

Pent up into a region of pure force,
Made subject to the pressure of the stars;
I saw the angels lifted like pale straws;
I could not stand before those winnowing eyes (Unfallen 18)

One can understand the pure force which is naturally present in Nature, it is not devilish or malignant power but only God’s will. The first three poems in For the Unfallen are what Hill quotes from Father Christopher Devlin:

There’s a real sense in which every fine and moving poem bears witness to this lost kingdom of innocence and original justice. In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice. (Haffenden 88)

The third poem from the Collection is “Holy Thursday”. The “Holy Thursday” is the night before crucifixion but in this poem it is exactly the time before the Original Sin. Thus according to Hill in this poem the importance is given to the Original Sin as a cause of crucifixion.

The first stanza describes Adam in Eden:

Naked, he climbed to the wolf’s lair;
He beheld Eden without fear,
Finding no ambush offered there
The first word “Naked” refers to the nakedness of Adam and Eve who did not have “desire” and “shame” before eating the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge. From the second stanza onwards the speaker of the poem is Lucifer or the Serpent. He narrates the story of Adam and Eve after they eat the forbidden fruit.

He said: ‘They are decoyed by love

Who, tarrying through the hollow grove,

Neglect the seasons’ sad remove.

Child and nurse walk hand in glove (Unfallen 19)

“Child and nurse walk hand in glove” could be a connotation to Holy Mother and Jesus Christ. They are unaware of the “Time’s betrayal”, which is the time of crucifixion. Time “weaving their innocence with guile”, but they must experience the fire of pain “they must cleave the fire’s peril / And suffer innocence to fall”. The last stanza is by Lucifer “I have been touched with that fire”, Lucifer was made of fire and also experiences pain when he falls with Adam to earth.

In “Of Commerce and Society”, with the subtitle “Variation on a Theme” in five different poems, Hill talks about “a theme” which is “pain”, “sorrow”, and “grief”. The first poem is “The Apostles: Versailles, 1919” is an immediate reaction of apostles to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

They sat. They stood about.

They were estranged. The air,

As water curdles from clear,

Fleshed the silence. They sat. (Unfallen 48)

The force of horror and pain “curdles” their blood and makes them quite. Hill uses the word “estranged” because some of the apostles are so scared that they deny that they
are Christ’s followers or friends. But the second stanza describes our modern society under the economic power:

They were appalled. The bells
In hollowed Europe spilt
To the gods of coin and salt.

The sea creaked with worked vessels. (*Unfallen* 48)

This part is the shock of modern man in front of a world ruled by “the gods of coin” while the invisible workers are the real owner of the wealth. “salt” stands for the sweat of those unknown people who died in the mines and factories. The “hollowed Europe” is the abyss in which European society drowns. One doubts whether the crucifixion as a religious attainment is able to save people? Hill introduces human beings as “estranged” from their religion and from each other. In “Hollowed Europe” nations are “not half innocent and not half undone” but completely sinful and tyrannical. Man forgets his beliefs and spirituality and drowns in the world of “commerce and warfare, ambition, egotism and duplicity” (Hooker 20).

In the second poem, “The Lowlands of Holland”, from “Of Commerce and Society”, Hill continues to criticise the European society, history, political upheavals, nations, violence, and the dead.

Shrunken, magnified- (nest, holocaust)-
Not half innocent and not half undone;
Profiting from custom: its replete strewn
Cities such ample monuments to lost

Nations and generations: its cultural
Or trade skeletons such hand-picked bone:
Flaws in the best, revised science marks down:

Witness many devices; the few natural

Corruptions, graftings; witness classic falls;

(The dead subtracted; the greatest resigned;)

Witness earth fertilised, decently drained,

The sea decent again behind walls.  (Unfallen 49)

Money and power are gods in such societies. Hill’s poetic career from 1950 to 1980 belongs to the period of according to Robert Macfarlane “the epoch of gravity”. The poems of this period “are written in a form so pressurising that grammar and syntax are often crushed within it, and meaning is densely compacted” (241). The poem IV “Of Commerce and Society” brings out the idea of “vision”: “Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone, / Artistic men prod dead men from their stone.” The saviour of human society is not any more religion and God but the gods of commerce and coins along with “artistic men”, they know the “visions” about their future. Such as visions in the past which have perished man;

Many have died. Auschwitz,

Its furnace chambers and lime pits

Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable

Unbelievable in fatted marble. (Unfallen 51)

With regard to the word “Auschwitz”, Hooker writes: “Hill more than any other recent English poet, has made us sensitive to the subtler forms of poetic self-regard, to the ways in which, for example, the desire to shock may be complacently parasitic upon the human suffering with which we are to be shocked” (21). Hill also criticizes art and artist who make use of the catastrophe of history. When art can compromise
with power it turns to egotist and untrustworthiness. He believes that the imagination in art is capable of corruption and duplicity. It is the imagination of the artist that recreates the massacre of the past without being able to go close to the souls of the dead and the victims. Such an art stops at the surface level.

The last stanza is a harsh satire of the modern society:

There is, at times, some need to demonstrate
Jehovah’s touchy methods, that create
The connoisseur of blood, the smitten man.

At times it seems not common to explain. (Unfallen 51)

One of the strong images in the book is the sea and water imagery. The sea imagery in the collection keeps changing its meaning. It is in direct proportion with the title of the book. Unlike the belief in different cultures and mythology where water and sea are symbols of fertility and life here in the For the Unfallen, sea symbolizes death and destruction. The word ‘fall’ acquires an added significance in relation to drowning and the sea. Fall and sea have metaphorical meanings in relating to each other. Fall is from ignorance to ignorance, from power to tyranny, into the darkness of the sea of disappointment and absence. In “Ode on the Loss of the ‘Titanic’”, sea is “fresh enemy”, the “waste ground”, and “Archaic earth-shaker”.

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.  \textit{(Unfallen 52)}

Sea in this poem represents silence, darkness, blood, carnage and the absurdity. It is a place where the fault of statesmen can be hidden, unlike its calm surface, the dark and the doomed world of Absence is hidden there. In this collection Hill recalls T.S. Eliot’s idea about sea as a powerful negative symbol. The negative symbol of the sea is in contrast with the limitation of man with regard to mortality and death which is reality. Thus death and sea are in contrast with man. They are the “otherness” and the “Nonhuman” truth that surround human beings.

Art also suffers from inauthenticity in the absentist world of the values. In “Of Commerce and Society”, the “Statesmen” and the “Artistic Men”, “prod dead man from stone”. Art and artist in modern society cannot be safe from the benefits and undignified ambitions. Hill analyzes the absence of the values in religion, society, economics and even art. The Absentist artist’s situation is as Jeremy Hooker says, “self-deceiving fabricators of conventional images or muddled dreams, and an absolute but unknowable truth” (21). In “Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings”, Hill repeats the same theme of the absence of a measure of “man’s worth” and man’s values. He attacks the artist’s art because they “in their eloquent fashion”, change the reality and conceal it. “Well- dressed alabaster” is the perfect work of art with proper skill and technique. But they flatter the king by providing “flattering self-images” of King; they conceal reality so “they lie”. The alabaster kings are not real, they are made out of man’s “insecurities”, and they are “decay of blood”. The art which suffers from its absences conceals and reduces reality;

\textit{At home, under caved chantries, set in trust,}

\textit{With well-dressed alabaster and proved spurs}
They lie; they lie; secure in the decay
Of blood, blood-marks, crowns hacked and coveted,
Before the scouring fires of trial-day
Alight on men... \(\textit{Unfallen}~30\)

With regard to history, the theme in the poem “To the (Supposed) Patron”, “Tremulous” poet with his “nervous artistic sensibility” criticized the society of Europe. Geoffrey Hill’s poetry “is full of ‘soundings’. Nor is it only history and morality that he ‘sounds’, for he has, like T.S. Eliot, a special gift for choosing the word or image that reveals a suspect ... psychological motivation for an ostensibly pious or disinterested attitude or action” (Hooker 24). In “To the (Supposed) Patron”, the absentist artist has “Tremulous” feeling all the time which is the situation of the modern artist. “Tremulous” connotes to “a para-art, art aside from what art used to be” (Bedient, “Absentist,”18). Absentist artist’s need is to create a self-protective world for himself through concealment and reducing reality.

Prodigal of loves and barbecues,
Expert in the strangest faunas, at home
He considers the lilies, the rewards.

There is no substitute for a rich man. \(\textit{Unfallen}~59\)

“To the (Supposed) Patron”, indirectly reveals the relation between the poet as an artist and the reader as a patron. Hill introduces the patron as “prodigal of loves and barbecues”. The patron is “the connoisseur of blood”. The patron is the reader whom the poem is written for. The reader by reading the poem: “entering a new province / With new coin, music, the barest glancing / Of steel or gold suffices.”

The reader enters a new world of the poem:

For his delight and his capacity
To absorb, freshly, the inside-succulence
Of untoughened sacrifice, his bronze agents
Speculate among convertible stones
And drink desert sand. (59)

He is secure from direct contact with reality “no mirage / irritate his mild gaze”. The poet is in direct contact with reality even at some personal cost to reduce the harshness of realities for the reader, the poet even makes death “idyllic” for the reader, “his flesh is made clean”. Hooker writes that Geoffrey Hill questions “the distance between all forms and degrees of artistic order and the realities of suffering and evil” (24).

All human beings according to their ability to use their imagination, are artists, they are makers of their life and their dreams. They are makers of their myth and their gods; also they can be beasts and gods. As Jeremy Hooker observes; “Geoffrey Hill develop[s] a demonology and an angelology in ‘For the Unfallen’” (28). The Absentist study of For the Unfallen shows the conflict between art and reality on one hand and the aesthetic and morality on the other hand. As “there is no bloodless myth will hold”, so there is no innocent poetry, poetry reveals the “unconscious corruption”. “For the Unfallen embodies a keen awareness of the ‘fallen’ nature of its words and devices, indeed of poetry. A first step towards understanding the book… is a recognition of the way in which Geoffrey Hill perceives words to be fallen and art corrupting” (Hooker 28).

The title of the collection For the Unfallen is an ironic title. Jeremy Hooker in his article “For the Unfallen: a Sounding” writes that “unfallen” relates to those before the Fall, who do not belong to this world. But Absentist reading of this collection shows that Hill ironically names his book unfallen when in reality all the people and
the souls of society are fallen in the Absentist sea. If “fall” is imaged as death the unfallen are the living, Hooker says that the primary meaning of the book is “For the Living”.


Geoffrey Hill’s second collection *King Log* consists of forty one poems concerns with war, death and history, the themes that Hill repeated in many collections. Quoting from Ezra Pound in regard to this repetition, Hill writes: “The poet’s job is to define and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice” (*Collected Critical Writing* 4). He repeats the history because his writing is the “poetry of witness”. Thus his poems make us understand the past as in the “Funeral Music” or the events of holocausts of the Great Wars, they pave the way for us to achieve self-knowledge and values which are absent in us.

Hill’s war poems are the place where the dead and the living meet. Here the dead comes to life and also the living meets death. The poem “History as Poetry” defines poetry as it “unearths from among the speechless dead.” The poem “September Song” is a celebrated lyric for a child, the victim of the Nazi concentration camps:

> September fattens on vines. Roses
> flake from the wall. The smoke
> of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

> This is plenty. This is more than enough. (*King Log* 19)

In this poem Hill takes us back to 1940s and shares with us the pogroms of innocent people.

The horror of these events and the loss of these lives, we must believe have a reality outside our representations of them and outside the
mythologies or ‘histories’ by which we make them meaningful. …

Poetry has the self-regard to show this process at work. To make poetry out of historical ‘subject-matter’ is to reveal how ‘poetic’ the making of history out of the tetter (sic) of the past really is. (Wainwright 51)

Likewise Hill had drowned himself as well as the reader in the catastrophe: “I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true”, this is the way he presents the events. He touches the core of the catastrophe, “undesirable you may have been, untouchable / you were not.” The phrase “harmless fire” is the flame of the furnace of Auschwitz which has been extinguished for long time but they rekindle in Hill’s poetry constantly.

“September Song”, “A Valediction to Osip Mandelstam” and “Funeral Music” all create a sense which is capable of awakening the reader to show him the pain and the woe; it matters for the poet as well as for the reader. “September Song” belongs to the present era and “Funeral Music” refers to our past. Both poems create the same feeling of restless mind. In the present time by reading such poems, one has the same feeling of hatred for violence, disappointment and loss of faith in God. In Hill’s poetry the tribulations in history is always fresh and present. In his poetry the past is so present that it engulfs the present and the past has drowned the present in itself. There is no present anymore, past is present and present is absent.

Kendall argues that when a poet deals with history and its cruelty he “makes art out of atrocity”, Kendall names it “sham”, and it is “an ethical sensitivity”. The “sham” of the authentic artist stands against the “shamelessness” of those “using the deaths of innocents for … [their] personal gain and satisfaction” (229). According to Hill the nation which does not care about its own roots “it is losing some vital
dimension of [its] intelligence” (230). “A poet who bears that sense of history must also bear the shame which is a product of it; when Hill speaks of a world growing more ‘shameless’, he is judging a world grown increasingly forgetful and morally unintelligent” (231).

The collection of *King Log* comes to an end with a prose essay as a context for his “Funeral Music”, the eight unrhymed sonnets. About the form of this poem, Hill claims that he was influenced by Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*. The poem “Funeral Music” refers to the historical events of the ‘War of Roses’ and the ‘Battle of Towton 1461’. Hill defines “Funeral Music” as “a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks” (*King Log* 67).

> Processionals in the exemplary cave,
> 
> 
> The voice fragrant with mannered humility,
> 
> With an equable contempt for this World,
> 
> ‘In honorem Trinitatis’. (*King Log* 25)

Pearson believes that in this poem “Hill’s sentences are … remarkably hospitable to appositional figurations which turn upon unsettling discordances, oppositions that they complicate rather than clarify or amplify” (32).

The War of Roses is the historical ground which makes the poem complicated enough to the reader not to be able to respond to the poem in the first reading. In the second poem of “Funeral Music”, the “fat Caritas, those / Wiped jaws of stone”, conveys horror and an atrocious feeling. The poem is full of horrifying images from a cannibal feast. The line break in this line is significant since it resembles the gap of the jaws. “Caritas” with its stony jaws petrify us because;

> For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain-
For none but the ritual king? We meditate
A rueful mystery; we are dying
To satisfy fat Caritas, those
Wiped jaws of stone. (suppose all reconciled
By silent music; imagine the future
Flashed back at us, like steel against sun,
Ultimate recompense. (King Log 26)

There is an internal music in the vowel sound across the chasm: the “i” sounds in “dying”, “satisfied” and “wipe”, the “a” sounds in “fat” and “Caritas” and the “o” sound in “those” and “stone” “suppose” and “cold”, which is more dominant sound. The play of vowels music sound is the “silent music” of the poem. The “silent music” related to the title “Funeral Music”, is full of songs for the dead and full of silence. It is from the dead and their songs that Hill recalls the coldness, lifelessness of our life.

Recall the cold

Of Towton on Palm Sunday before dawn,
Wakefield, Tewkesbury: fastidious trumpets
Shrilling into the ruck; some trampled
Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
Struck with strange-postured dead. (King Log 26)

So there is no relief from “the wind’s / Flurrying, darkness over the human mire”, and such a sentence connects Hill to earlier Eliot in his “The Dry Salvages V” when he writes about Christian redemption. Hill in the last section of “Funeral Music”, repeats the “sphere”, in “each distant sphere of harmony forever / poised, unanswerable” what Hill portrays is the reality of suffering of mankind; they suffered from silence and death. “His people, or personae, struggle from utterance to utterance, phrase to phrase,
the chain of appositions charting. In its twisting, the trajectory of their un-reconciled human nature” (Pearson 36)

*King Log* such as *Mercian Hymns* suffers from absence of the “Overall”. Its fragmented pieces and parts cannot hold as a single piece but they are collages of “sections, headings, appendix (‘King stork’) epigraphs, ceremonies of naming its own formal procedures (‘Song’, ‘Poems Regarding...’, ‘Fragments’, ‘soliloquies’, ‘Fantasia’, ‘Meditations’, ‘Songbook’)” (Pearson 31).

Jon Silkin begins his article “War and the Pity” with the last line of the poem “The Tyger” by Blake: “Did he who made the Lamb make thee”, in the same way my arguments in this part will be on: “Our God Scatters Corruption” (*King Log* 15), as the concentration of the poet on the Wars and the cruelty and the absence of true faith in God. Geoffrey Hill, as an Absentist poet in *King Log* opens up a new vision of God which is a complicated image. To consider the cruelty and injustice as the nature of God is in contrast with his kindness and his generosity. Hill challenges God’s mercifulness. As Silkin observes, that the same God who created tiger knows for its brute ferocity, created lamb which is meek. Both the creatures stand opposite to each other in terms of innate nature, were created by the same God. This is a complex issue that *For the Unfallen* and *King Log* deal with.

Geoffrey Hill is a post-religious Absentist poet, who in most of his poems, writes about Christian mythology. But, his relation to Christianity is ambiguous. Ambiguity; the essential device of Absentist language has a unique place in Hill’s poetry. Thus, Christopher Ricks quotes from Hill that, “I want the poem to have this dubious end; because I feel dubious; and the whole business is dubious” (99). In his collection *King Log* the sarcastic sentences such as “Our God scatters corruption”, “Men are a mockery of Angeles”, “Christ, what a pantomime!” and “Hell is silent”
are common. Therefore, Hill in most of his poems is concerned about the subject of the absence of faith in Christianity and the un-satisfactory events of history. His poems share with the reader the despair which the persona feels. In the “Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets”, the protagonists suffer from deleterious effects of history in the absence of faith.

Hill’s scepticism towards everything penetrated in his notion of history. He is engulfed in the events of past in a way that present for him is paralyzed. History for him is “an accumulation [fact] rather than a single coherent whole” like “Four Poems” which is scattered into four catastrophes from history, dedicated to four other poets namely Tommaso Campanella, Miguel Hernandez, Robert Desnos and Osip Mandelstam.

The first poem “Men are a Mockery of Angels” is dedicated to Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), an Italian philosopher, theologian, astrologer and poet. He spent 27 years in prison because of his conflict with church authorities. The poem is a clue to the ambiguous theme of the four poems. The dominant theme - absence of faith is combined with horrific events of history. All four poems together added unconditional skepticism and disappointment to the mood of the poem. Hill’s fellow absentist poet Thomas Kinsella asserts: “The realization of this disappointment seems to me the most significant thing in contemporary poetry: it is the source of that feeling of precariousness which is to be found in the best poet now living” (qtd. Bedient, “On Geoffrey Hill” 17).

The poem starts with the lament of Campanella,

Some days a shadow through
The high window shares my
Prison. I watch a slug
Scale the glinting pit-side
Of its own slime. The cries
As they come are mine; then
God’s: my justice, wounds, love,
Derisive light, bread, filth.  (King log 35)

“A shadow” and “a slug” are the only visitors of the speaker-poet in his prison. As a prisoner he hears, the cry of the tortured and wounded men in prison, the cry of the absence of love of human beings for each other and in the end the cry of justice in the world devoid of justice. He claims that these cries “are mine; than God’s”, while outside the world is glinted with the ‘derisive light’ of lustrous life. Then man is relegated to a mere shadow and a helpless slug.

To lie here in my strange
Flesh while glutted Torment
Sleeps, stained with its prompt food,
Is a joy past all care
Of the world, for a time. (King log 35)

After being possessed by the realm of absence and reduced to a shadow, human beings become, as Hill says: a “strange flesh” because life is “glutted” with torment and pain. To what extent man can be careless about such conditions? “To lie … / is a joy past all care / of the world, for a time.” But, to be a human being requires standing up, as Campanella stands up against the tyranny of his society.

“But we are commanded / To rise, when, in silence, / I would compose my voice” (King log 35). Hill gives the idea of how an artist can act in such situations. He says poets “are commanded / to rise” as “a slug / scale the glinting pit-side / of its own
slime”. He needs to compose poem and what he composes is the “poetry of witness”. He has to do it in silence, because it is the resurrection of the dead and the story of the tragedy of the ‘Blind sun’, which never rises thus reveling in the eternal darkness.

The second poem “A Prayer to the Sun” is dedicated to Miguel Hernandez (1910-1942) the Spanish poet. He was an anti-fascist activist. He spends long time in different jails under extraordinarily harsh conditions he eventually succumbed to tuberculosis in 1942. He was famous for his poems in the form of simple songs. One of his famous books is *Songs and Ballads of Absence*. “A Prayer for the Sun” resembles a very simple song like Hernandez’s song.

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Darkness
above all things
the Sun
makes
rise
Vulture
salute their meat
at noon
(Hell is silent)
Blind Sun
our ravager
bless us
so that
we sleep.

(King Log 36)
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The fragmentary nature of the form in this poem is related to the broken form of verse and logos. Three parts of the poem resembles the sunrise. However, thematically they represent the absence of the sun, light and life because the sun is “Blind” and the darkness replaces the sun. The verb “rise” is the last word in the first part as if it is not going to rise. The whole part appears to be upside down to show that darkness rises instead of the rising sun.

The fragmented parts of the poem are in the form of a shapeless cross, as a sign of religion. In the first fragment the cross is in the proper form. In the second it is changed a little and deformed while the last one is almost broken and destroyed. If the sun stands as a symbol for Jesus Christ thus the first fragment is the time when the world was drowned into darkness and ignorance, then Jesus Christ rises “above all things”. The second fragment shows the struggle of Jesus Christ during his life, when “Vultures”, the symbol of tyrant powers of the time were against him. The last fragment shows the world drowned into darkness after the death of Christ, when “our ravager/bless us”. If according to Pearson the “log” is the elliptical form of “logos”, then in the same way these three fragments are the broken cross of Christ. They symbolize corrupt religion and the disintegration of Christianity. “Hill concerns himself with a figure upon whom a whole battery of myths is trained: myths not only diverse in their ‘matter’- patriotic, theological, literary- but of varied status, from the world-myth of Christ crucified to the distilled” (Lindop 147). Here in “A Prayer”, the first fragment starts with “darkness”, the second stops in “silence” and the third in “sleep”. Darkness is the absence of light, silence is the absence of sound, and sleep is the absence of awareness and activity. These three adjectives are in contrast with the sun which represents light and life. Therefore, the poem is a prayer for darkness and the absence of sun rather than a prayer for the sun. The poem resembles the wounded
body of Christ on the cross too. As Hill says “there is no bloodless myth will hold”. The myth of Christianity is coloured by the innocent blood of Christ. It also conveys the paralyzed and the absence of faith in modern life.

Among these four poems the second poem is capable of various interpretations. Compared to the other three poems, it is very short and concise. The structure of the poem materialized the incapacitated faith. The broken structure is in direct relation with the theme of the poem. The elements of the structure of the poem are composed in a way to visualize the lack and the absence in the essence of the poem.

The third poem “Domaine Public” is dedicated to Robert Desnos the French Jewish surrealist poet and writer who died in Terezin camp in Germany in 1945.

For reading I can recommend

the Fathers. How they

cultivate the corrupting flesh:

toothsome contemplation: cleanly

maggots churning spleen

to milk. For exercise, prolonged

suppression of much improper

speech from proper tombs. (King log 37)

The religious theme of the poem is very colourless. The word “Fathers”, on one hand starts with the capital letter “F”, on the other hand it is in the plural form. If it was “Father” along with other words such as “resurrection” and “judges come”, it could guide us to Christianity. But, here it is “Fathers”, thus, it is related to the men of power such as Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin. The men of power are able to “cultivate the corrupted flesh” of men. The “Fathers” have “toothsome contemplation” for innocent
men. Reading the “Fathers” and their deeds are what the speaker-poet recommends for us, through reading the poem; the reader cannot find any sign of the victims except their “proper tombs”, because they are absent in the poem. Actually what the reader comprehends from the poem is the cry of the innocent victims.

“Christ, what a pantomime!” has an anti-Christianity tone. It is the cry of all the Jewish people who were killed for the fault of being born as Jews. The religious theme of the poem is in the margins, and it is in favour of the routine life. It connotes to the life of people in the Nazi’s concentration camps.

The days

of the week are seven pits. Look,

Seigneur, again we

resurrect and the judges come. (King log 37)

We, human beings every day like “maggots” go inside the pits and come out of them in the evening, the next day and the next whole. The poets are men of contemplation and thought. Hill says “I am nothing / if not saved now!” writing is a way of survival. He writes and resurrects the dead.

The massacre of Jews in Europe in the concentration camps of Nazi is still a nightmare for the committed artists. Hill engulfs us in frightening events of bloody history. As Bedient says “he wanted history to confess the worst” and he achieves this aim. But the horror of the past paralyzes the present. Consequently, his poems are full of and horror and tyranny. All these affected his versification in a way that brings out unrhymed sonnets, innovative forms of his own, “abrupted or disruptive rhythms” along with asymmetrical lines in his poem.

The fourth poem Tristia: 1891-1938, is “A Valediction to Osip Mandelstam” who was a Russian poet and journalist. He was arrested by Stalin’s government during
the repression of the 1930s and sent to internal exile. In 1938 again he was sentenced to a camp in Siberia and died in the same year at a transit camp.

Images rear from desolation
Look … ruins upon a plain …
A few men glare at their hands; others
Grovel for food in the roadside field. *(King Log 38)*

The diction of the poem takes the reader to Siberian camps, a place known for its isolation, starvation and coldness. Hill visualizes the heavy snow of Siberia by pausing before and after an incomplete phrase, as if some part of it is hidden in the snow […] ruins upon a plain …]. The mood of scepticism drowns the poet in discontent. The poet creates a strong connection between all human beings who suffer by evoking sad scenes, which are common in history and even in everyday life of many people around the world. The dark history of human beings overflows with pain and torment;

Tragedy has all under regard.

It will not touch us but it is there-

Flawless, insatiate- hard summer sky

Feasting on this, reaching is own end. (38)

“Tragedy” has all the sorrows and grief in itself. It is there in our past, in history, in our memory, although, it will not touch us but it is with us.

Though most of these poems have a fourteen line structure, they are not sonnets, except for one poem. Each one follows its own structure . Hill uses varieties of unrhymed poems. They resemble the “‘a broken utterance from the horizon of storms’” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 22).
If one gives attention to the idea of language and words in these four poems, he will find a collection of negative words and phrases in an ambiguous syntax, spreading pessimistic thought through the entire poems. The negative diction of words such as “silent”, “darkness”, “blind”, “shadow”, “cries”, “wound”, and “torment” are the words used by Hill to express his aesthetics of Absentism. David Gervais with regard to the significance of words and language says:

Poetry has to be adequate to its circumstances, whatever the cost.
Finding the right word means facing the experience as it is, not as one would like it to be. Like a boat put out to sea and facing the elements, the poet is at the mercy of the words- he has to steer a course as the sailor does”, he quotes from Hill that “in a poet’s involvement with language … there is … an element of helplessness, of being at the mercy of accidents…” (93)

The first part of the fourth poem “A Valediction to Osip Mandelstam” is concerned with the commemoration of all four poets: Campanella, Hernandez, Desnos and Mandelstam.

Difficult friend, I would have preferred
You to them. The dead keep their sealed lives
And again I am too late. Too late
The salutes, dust-clouds and brazen cries. (King Log 38)

The fourth poem is a valediction to all these four poets and it reminds us of their ‘endurances’. He salutes them with grief and cries.

“The cry of individual pain … becomes, in the context of ‘Four Poems’, a metaphor of the cry of a world which in the end is losing its sense of any radiance of passionate engagement or deeper self-surrender” (Walker 84). The poem, “Four poems” although
looks like pieces of logs of wood, actually has the magical power of logos in its essence. The words and logos of the poem have the combination of the absence of faith and the poisonous historical facts. In the poem past receives new life constantly in order to shed light on the present and initiate a new aspect for the human being’s existence. Peter Walton points out that Geoffrey Hill “is different: partly through the quality of his diction; partly because of the way he fuses past and present. For him the past is not dead. It lives and suffers on” (68).

Dealing with the events of history is not merely rewriting history rather it is the transmutation of the harsh facts of history into the aesthetics of the creation of poetry through vocabulary and language. In “Four Poems”, “he wanted history to confess the worst, the courtroom of conscience to cry ‘Atrocity!’ But really it was himself he had on trial; he was secretly self-absorbed. He could not get the tone right because he wanted to excoriate himself for being human … the crux of every poem, is the humane aspect of language” (Bedient, “On Geoffrey Hill” 18).

**Mercian Hymns and Prose-Poem**

The form of *Mercian Hymns* is famous as prose-poem. Prose-poem originally is a French form of poetry which could be found in the poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Fargue and St. John Perse. Martin Dodsworth believes that although T.S. Eliot practices this form yet “the form remains alien”. The prose-poem in *Mercian Hymns* helps the poet to achieve the ambiguity of language he persuades. For example, he begins a translation of the Biblical hymns in *Mercian Hymns* in a completely selective way. Dodsworth writes that:

> The prose-poem signifies something other and more than the references to the original ‘Mercian Hymns’ and *The Penguin Book of Latin Verse* imply. Just
because the prose-poem is a paradox, it insists on our taking poetry seriously in Hill’s own manner. Poetry becomes something spiritual, not a matter of external phenomena like rhyme or rhythm, or even of a particular kind of diction; it is not a form but a quality, a quality of rightness. (Dodsworth 53)

He continues that this type of prose needs to carry the aspect of poetry. It needs to have the essence of poetry; aesthetics and morality rather than mere technique of rhyme and rhythm. Dodsworth gives two reasons why the form of prose-poem is the most appropriate form for Mercian Hymns: “the first is that prose was especially appropriate because Mercian Hymns is a celebration of the poetic nature itself. The climactic moment of the book is one of recognition- recognition of relatedness and of gift” (54). He gives hymn XXIX for example

‘Not strangeness, but strange likeness. obstinate,

Outclassed forefathers, I too concede, I am your

staggeringly- gifted

child.

The prose-poem engages ear and imagination lyrically.

Mercian Hymns is not only Geoffrey Hill’s most significant poem, but also one of the best contemporary British poems. It has been defined by Harold Bloom as “a Prelude-in-little” (qtd. in Gervais, “Exemplary” 95). In this work Hill’s subject and style is completely different from his previous works such as For the Unfallen (1959) and King Log (1969). In two earlier works before Mercian Hymns, the individual relationship with power is the principle, while in Mercian Hymns Hill writes sequences of the empowerment of King Offa and implicitly the empowerment of the modern man. The brutalities of man against man during the long history, and the obsession of man with self, as this poem is about, are among the basic issues of
Mercian Hymns. But “the passionate intensity of meaning that marks the rest of his work is absent here”, yet it is “Hill’s most ‘accessible book’” (Dodsworth 49). Although it is the history of Mercia and King Offa in 757-796 AD, yet one finds more evidence of Hill’s childhood, his family background and personal experience than King Offa. Michael Alexander believes that Hill’s grandfather and King Offa are not very different. In the fantastic context of this poem one cannot distinguish Mr. Hill from Offa. The hymns are more about the reign of Mercia than Offa. They are “palimpsest of old and new” (106) of ancient and the modern, of Offa and Hill’s childhood.

While the most critics consider Mercian Hymns as “prose-poem”, Michael Schmidt considers it as ‘verse paragraphs’. This book consists of thirty succinct hymns of two to four brief versets each, which are divided using Roman numbers.

Mercian Hymns is an archaeological romance, a poem of deposits in the earth, like the earlier In Parenthesis and The Anathemata of David Jones. The form of the Hymns is a series of dreamy fragments of poetic prose, which is also Jones’s form. Hill’s form may also owe something to French prose poems, but more to prose translations of Anglo-Saxon poetry- in this case translations of non-existent eulogies of King Offa.

(Alexander 105-106)

Mercian Hymns is a Cubist collage of the ancient and the modern. Alan Wall believes that Hill’s “search for a structure capable of holding history and modernity on the same page results in an elusive and unpredictable manoeuvre” (38). While it is a successful poem yet it suffers from the lack of the “Overall”. It is in this regard that it has been analyzed as a work of Absence. The Absence of Overall is one of the main discussions in this chapter.
“Overall” is from the poem “Corsons Inlet” it has been published 1965 by American Romantic poet A. R. Ammons. Calvin Bedient introduces “Overall” as a literary term in his article “Absentist Poetry: Kinsella, Hill, Graham, Hughes” (22) He explains that “Ammons observes that he cannot draw ‘the sum’ of earthly events, with their small orders interpenetrated by large and still larger ones” (21). In “Corsons Inlet”, Ammons writes:

There are dunes of motion,
organizations of grass, white sandy paths of remembrance
in the overall wandering of mirroring mind:
but Overall is beyond me: is the sum of these events
I cannot draw, the ledger I cannot keep, the accounting
beyond the account. (Ammons)

The word “Overall” is wider than ‘whole’, it is beyond everything and even beyond the words of the poet. So when overall lacks, it means everything suffers from lacuna and absence. When it comes to Absentist poetry of Geoffrey Hill and especially in Mercian Hymns, Bedient explores the absence of Overall. “In Mercian Hymns the absence of the Overall is even more painfully implicit than human and natural violence are painfully explicit” (22). Another meaning of the absence of the “Overall” is the absence of final vision. Mercian Hymns is a collage of oppositions: past and present, childhood and old age, ancient and the modern, reality and imagination, humor and seriousness. It is as real as it is the play of imagination and words. It is about Offa and the history of Mercia, as well as the nostalgia of the poet for the absence of his childhood. This poem is divided with roman numbers but they are under another category by their themes, the whole thirty poems are under fourteen
titles in *Geoffrey Hill’s Collected Poems* (1986). All these classifications and divisions still cannot save the Mercian Hymns from its Absences.

The first hymn is one narrated by the court-poet of the King. It is a single sentence made up of many phrases which are bound together by the help of colons. The “gnomic or riddle style” with the humour and incantatory language of the hymn leads us not to take King Offa seriously.

King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone: overlord of the M5: architect of the historic rampart and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth, the summer hermitage in Holy Cross:...

In this part Hill criticizes history, the king is referred to as “the riven sandstone” and is the “architect of the historic rampart” and “saltmaster”. These phrases hint at the historical facts to which Offa belongs to. This hymn connected King Offa to the present and modern time, he is “overlord of the M5” and the “contractor / to the desirable new estates”. The witness of our time in this first hymn is “rampart and ditch” which connect us easily to the Great Wars. Apart from the lack of chronological time in the poem, thematically it is a collection of different motives, while there are religious connotations in the first hymn, there are elements of the empowerment of King Offa;

    guardian of

    the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge: contractor to the desirable new estates: saltmaster: money-changer: commissioner for oaths: martyrrologist:
the friend of Charlemagne.

History is an important absent agency for Hill. Thus “Welsh Bridge” and “Iron Bridge” are the scattered pieces of the past which are not able to hold the wholeness of the poem. Offa belongs to the ancient history of the bridges, which ironically have gaps between the past and the present, between Offa and the reader. The most unstable and deadliest epithet Hill gives to King Offa is the “saltmaster”. Soon he will melt in the river of his story. The poet reduces him to a “money changer”, “commissioner for oaths”. Instead of eulogizing King Offa, the poet gives such names to make him insignificant and reduces him to “the friend of Charlemagne” in the end. Yet King Offa says: “I like that…” ‘Sing it again’. Offa is an empowered king in this hymn and from his kingdom remains only the unpleasant memory such as “architect of the historic rampart and ditch”. Thus this hymn is a portrait of the scattered past and the Absence of dignity and life. It is a humour of the ruined Kingdom of Offa.

According to Michael Gronow, Mercian Hymns could be considered a “cryptogamic” verse (Gronow 72). In hymn 4, Hill says “the crypt of roots / and endings”, the hymns are full of mystery and cryptogamic verses, for example in the second hymn, we read;


The riddle tries to explore the name of King Offa, and depicts the different layers of Offa’s character through the phrases and lines of the poem, especially in the pun on sound and letters; “laugh”, “cough”. Offa is “an enigmatic figure”. Offa is “a fit subject for Hill’s poetic sensibility, which has consistently found expression in a language of paradox, irony, and modernist complexity” (Lloyd 29). To understand the
poem one needs to be vigilant and connect the elements together. One needs “to conjure with [words]” to find the name of Offa which becomes the comic subject of the riddle. This hymn mocks history through its scattered pieces of “curt / graffito”. In continuing it introduces history as “The starting-cry of a race”.

Hymn III, or “The Crowning of Offa”, according to Lloyd behind this hymn there is the real story of the coronation of King George VI in 1937 because the events are related to Twentieth-Century.

This hymn is a combination of modern England and traditional England in the “bonfire” and the “holly boughs”. In comparison to hymn II, at the first reading, one feels that Hill admires the act of coronation, but “deflate the ancient, once-vital ritual by humorously “crowning” the chef at the pub and by placing the events in a modern environment where crowds sentimentally wave hankies, merchants peddle tacky, stencilled gift-mugs, and the celebratory bonfire is fueled by beer crates burning on tar” (Lloyd 31). Thus the reader finds the humiliation of King Offa and his kingdom by the poet.

In the fourth hymn, the poet reveals that the aim of this poem is investment in “mother-earth”. “Mother-earth” as the source of life and fertility is evident in and *Mercian Hymns*:

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.
The investment of the poet in “Mercian Hymns” is a kind of investment in “the crypt roots / and endings”. “Mercian Hymns”, juxtaposes the story of the ancient Kingdom of Mercia, and the story of our contemporary time which is a combination of the ruins of the past and present and the corrupted civilization of human beings. Hill invests in childhood as another past where he “abode[s] there”. He says: I was “bided my time”, it is where and when “the mole / shouldered the clogged wheel, his gold solidus”. It is the place “where the dry-dust badgers thronged the Roman flues”. The dry-dust badgers attack the “long-unlooked-for mansions of our tribe”. There is nothing left for the poet to invest there, neither past nor present. Thus Mercian Hymns is full of absences, the absence of a glorious past, modern civilization and childhood. These Absences penetrate into the identity of the poet when he identifies his personal and private issues with the whole of English history.

Hymn V deals with pilgrimage in the ancient land of Mercia and the memories of the childhood of the poet. In the first part Hill reveals that “the true governance of England” was “elves and wergild”.

The second part is a painful lament for childhood, either King Offa’s or Hill’s childhood.

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.

Childhood is the richest kingdom which everybody experiences. Childhood is the absence arena in adulthood. This hymn is the cry of the protagonist for the lost kingdom of childhood. Thus the protagonist wants to visit the holy land of his childhood. He needs to be a pilgrim there and if it is not possible he agrees to be sent
into exile in that land. Actually the reality is vice versa, we are all in exile, away from our “rich and desolate childhood”. When one is a minor, he/she is the king of his/her world. Then by growing up gradually, one gets distanced step by step from the world of imagination, fascination and the wonderland of childhood. A child may have the dream of being a King, “dreamy, snug-faced, / sick on outings”. Either we are a “prodigy”, “a maimed one” or anything else; we have the same wish to go back to those precious days. “King Offa, the hero of his exquisite sequence of thirty prose poems, begs ‘Exile or pilgrim’ to set him ‘once more upon that ground:[his] rich and desolate childhood’” (Bedient, “Absentist,” 21).

Hymn VI is the investigation of the poet in Mercia. He finds that “the princes of Mercia” are “badger and raven”, in the cage, because they are “thrall to their freedom”. Hill digs in the past and the history of Mercia, and then he saves all his findings in his writing. He finds the “orchards / fruit above clefts” and he drinks “from honeycombs of / chill sandstone.

The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall
to their freedom, I dug and hoarded. Orchards
fruited above clefts. I drank from honeycombs of
chill sandstone.

The nostalgia for childhood hides in itself the nostalgia for the natural landscape of Mercia and the greatness of the past of Britain. In all these points of view, one can feel the loss of the past and the absence of the glorious past. Childhood is the time to dig and hoard. It is possible only in childhood to drink from “honeycombs of chill sandstone”. He alludes to the hymn from Bible to introduce himself by the help of the hymn in the Bible as “‘a boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers.’” As a child he may not enjoy playing which other children do, he prefers to create his own play
“I… fostered a strangeness; gave / myself to unattainable toys”. “Unattainable toys” is also the ability to write poetry. Writing poetry is to let him to travel back to his childhood or to the past of Mercia as a pilgrim. He says, “The landscape flowed away, back to its source”.

Hymn VII is the continuation of the previous hymn about school children, their “wrists and knees” are covered by “impetigo”, but they are happy and with excitement talk about “their scars of dried snot”. The hymn assimilates the past and present, reality and imagination together it portrays the fascination of children for power. The poet changes the narrative technique from first person to third person. Two school boys find frogs and keep them in the “marlpoools / that lay unstirring” which is full of “eel-swarms”. In the pool they observe:

Coagulations of
frogs: once, with branches and half-bricks, he
battered a ditchful; then sidled away from the
stillness and silence.

The massacre of the frogs reminds us of the coagulation and stagnation of men in the pages of history. Hill opens up a new issue, he criticizes art and imagination. He believes that imagination is capable of every barbarity and brutality; “he conflates the imagination of the poet in childhood with the bloody, luxurious, and tyrannical Offa of Mercia” (Hooker 22). According to Bedient, history is the “secondary existence, that false mobility” (“Absentist,” 21). In this hymn the facts of history such as emptiness; decay; intolerable stillness; and ennui dominate the poem. Ceolred and Albion are two school friends of the protagonist that play with frogs.

Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after
the day of the lost fighter: a biplane, already
obsolete and irreplaceable, two inches of heavy
snub silver. Ceolred let it spin through a hole
in the classroom-floorboards, softly, into the
rat-droppings and coins.

These two names “Ceolred” and “Albion”, relate to the old English history. The fight
between them implicitly relates to the different wars which happen during English
history. The presence of wars and the tyranny of men in history stop the protagonist-
poet to continue his pilgrimage in this hymn. The stagnation of the protagonist drowns
the present in the emptiness and stillness. The pilgrim who starts in hymn V reaches
sublime changes to a “maimed” approach, and finally an awful stop.

Finally in hymn number VIII, the poet comes back to King Offa and to the
concept of the power.

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

King Offa warns us about the madness of predators because “they harbour / against
us”. Only “maimed souls” are saved in front of the madness of the predators. It is “a
novel heresy exculpates all maimed / souls”. He says that “Abjure it! I am the king of
Mercia, and / I know”. He protects us in front of “their imminent devices”. King Offa
continues to promise to protect us by his “new law”. Even he dedicates his awakening
to this matter. His “new law” is the law of blood as Hill says in Genesis “By blood we
live”. King Offa in Mercia is famous for his “laws” which is full of vindictiveness.
The hymns are full of cruelty, pain, and horror of human life and Hill is the poet of
despair and Absence.
Threatened by phone-calls at midnight, venomous letters,
forewarned I have thwarted their imminent
devices.

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

Verse number IX from the danger of predators and the laws and the protection
of King Offa, the poet comes to a completely new scene of a church with a “strange”
and “a ‘bit high’” of “censers / and polish”. Marriage ceremony goes on and the
curate takes off “into the marriage-service”. The poet names the marriage a “gambit”
which nobody “care[s]” to question about.

The strange church smelled a bit ‘high’, of censers
and polish. The strange curate was just as
appropriate: he took off into the marriage-service.

No-one cared to challenge that gambit.

In the absence of love, marriage becomes a war between husband and wife, they must
know what will be their situation and their gambit. The Absence of love and affection
cause the matrimony changes to a ‘gambit’ that nobody cares about.

Then he dismissed you, and the rest of us followed,

sheepish next-of-kin, to the place without the

wall: spoil-heaps of chrysanthus dead in their

plastic macs, eldorado of washstand-marble.

In his article “Geoffrey Hill's Canaan” Alan Wall writes that:

The place without the walls cannot but make one think of Golgotha,
but also of Gehenna, that dumping ground for burning which starts off
our Judaeo-Christian notion of hell, the spoilheap. One can ponder then
the etymology of chrysanthemum, and how the Croesus-gold inside that word gestures to the navigator’s gold inside eldorado. Both are a long way from the gold of Yeats’s Byzantium. What is daring though is the employment of the demotic ‘chrysanths’ shrouded in the comedy routing of ‘plastic macs’. If no one cares to challenge that gambit, it is because of the remarkable skill with which the whole is effected. (40)

Hymn IX is very difficult to understand and to analyze. It consists of different layers of meaning and ideas. Alan Wall in the second stanza of this hymn talks about hell. Gehenna a place which “Israelites sacrificed their children to Moloch”, and Hill deals with it through his own technique of prose-poem. “Then he dismissed you” here “he” could relate to Offa but the strange idea is that it related to God. Hill does not write it in upper case letter because it is the realm of the absence of faith. Thus God dismisses human beings especially Jewish nation because of their sins. Here they sacrifice the “next-of-kin” in a “place without the walls”.

It was an old “sheepish” tradition that all Jewish people “followed”. “The place without the walls” separated from its first meaning that is “Hell”, it connotes to the entire world. Hill as a child experienced the Second World War and all the crises related to it. For Hill the world in 1970s was another hell on earth. He talks about “spoil- heaps of Chrysanth dead in their / plastic macs”. “Washstand- marble”, could be the place of Israelites who scarificed their “next-of-kin”, or the furnace of Jewish massacre. In the next verse he continues that “Embarrassed, we dismissed ourselves”.

The speaker of the last stanza is Offa; he says “I unburden the saga of your burial, my dear. You had / lived long enough to see things ‘nicely settled’” and the audience of this part is all those innocent human beings who died through the cruelty of their
fellow beings during history. Offa laments for peace as a basic element of absence for human beings.

Hymn number X is famous as “Offa’s Law”. It is a successful portrait of Offa or any cruel power. The way the poet explains Offa’s place, his desk and his seals all are the signs of power.

He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony, assorted prize pens, the seals of gold and base metal into which he had sunk his name.

It was there that he drew upon grievances from the People; attended to signatures and retributions; forgave the death-howls of his rival. And there he exchanged gifts with the Muse of History.

The desk was “inlaid with ebony” and Offa “adored” it. His seals are gold and he has many “assorted prize pens”. The desk, the pens and the seals are important elements from Offa’s power. It is in this place and by the help of these elements that Offa “exchanged gifts” with Clio, the Muse of history”.

What should a man make of remorse that it might profit his soul? Tell me. Tell everything to Mother, darling, and God bless.

From Offa’s law and power, Hill comes to religion, Christianity and the question of confession. It is as if he wants to write the confessions of Offa through this poem. He even mentions the Holy Mother that we can confess to her.

Hymn XI, is about Offa’s coins. The moneyers mint his image on silver coins.

Coins handsome as Nero’s; of good substance and weight. Offa Rex resonant in silver, and the
names of his moneyers. They struck with account-
able tact. They could alter the King’s face.

The second verse explains the procedure of minting. They were aware that the image
on the coins must be ‘exact’ because it deters others in counterfeiting them.

He introduced ‘a new type of coin, broader, thinner and heavier than its
predecessors, and bearing almost universally the names of the king and
the responsible moneyer’. This becomes the model for all subsequent
coinage in the Old English period, and even beyond it. According to
Sir Frank Stenton, ‘the continuous history of the English currency
begins in Offa’s time’. (Dodsworth50)

Hymn XIII gives more details about the coins “Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw,
one by one, rare / coins to the light”, shows usage of modern technology to mint the
coins. They were ready to even “mutilate” the failed coins. The third stanza in Hymn
XI brings up a completely new issue that is in contrast with the other two verses in
this hymn. It deals with the death of King Offa.

Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring.

It is safe to presume, here, the King’s anger. He

reigned forty years. Seasons touched and retouched
the soil.

There is no connection between verses three in Hymn XI with the first, second and the
fourth one. While verse three is about the death of Offa, the first and the second
verses are about Offa’s coins and the fourth verse relates to “the boar” and wild life.
One can observe these irregularities among hymns as well as among stanzas in one
single hymn. Although Hymn XI with its four stanzas is a whole yet it is not an
overall. It suffers from the heterogeneous collages of themes. Calvin Bedient writes:
In hymn XI Hill temporarily treats Offa as dead, after having just brought him back to life, in introducing a triad of hymns (themselves in chronological order) on Offa’s surviving coins. System clashes with system. At the same time, randomness wrangles with both, finding in system the relief that makes it tell, tell out of turn. Hymn IX, for instance, on a twentieth-century burial, all anachronism suppressed outside the title (‘Offa’s Book of the Dead’), provokingly eludes the medievalism and concern with Offa in the surrounding poems. And to screen intention, to soften emphases, to perplex, Hill will disband poems on the same topic (the three poems entitled ‘Offa’s Laws’, for instance, appearing as hymns X, XIV, XIX). (‘Absentist,” 22)

Mercian Hymns the masterpiece of Absence of overall suffers from the fragmentation of ideas that aesthetically lack the coherence of theme. In this regard hymn XII which is under “Offa’s Coins”, is a good example. The story of digging and searching in the roots and soil of Mercia reveals the barbaric foray and savagery that dig our bases in our modern society.

Their spades grafted through the variably-resistant soil. They clove to the hoard. They ransacked epiphanies, vertebrae of the chimera, armour of wild bees’ larvae. They struch the fire-dragon’s faceted skin.

The men were paid to caulk water-pipes. They brewed And pissed amid splendor; their latrine seethed Its estuary through nettles. They are scattered To your collations, moldywarp.
Hymn XII “men digging thoughtlessly into a soil that contains tokens of every kind from the forgotten life of the past, including ancient coins they retrieve. Wealth, dissociated from a living culture, is seen as a kind of excrement that all of us ‘accrue’” (Rosenthal and Gall 301).

Hymn XIII gives more details about the coins; he uses modern technology to give these details. After the minting of the coins, they “Trim the lamp” and “polish the lens” because in the light of lamps they wanted to look at the “rare coins”. The coins are so special and shiny, which look different in the light;

Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare coins to the light. Ringed by its own lustre, the masterful head emerges, kempt and jutting, out of England’s well. Far from his underkingdom of crinoid and crayfish, the rune-stone’s province, Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae, coiffured and ageless, portrays the self-possession of his possession, cushioned on a legend.

The minting of the coins is an important event of time for Offa.

In Hymn VIII the new title of Offa is “Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae” meaning “‘King of the whole country of English’” (Dodsworth 50). This title reminds us of the head of Offa on the coins which is “coiffured and ageless”. Thus Offa cushions his head upon this legend. King Offa the great king of Mercia possesses the coin which carries his image. By this portrait Hill reveals that Offa possesses himself as a part of “his possession”. “His underkingdom of crinoid” relates Offa to prehistory and the power which controls the legend as well as King Offa. So he is part of his possession. In this regard Dodsworth writes:
Offa’s rule was bolstered by his claim to ‘the whole country of the English’. Hill’s grammar introduces a fine irony here by making ‘Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae’ refer both to the king and to his title. Both ‘portray’ - odd word - ‘the self possession of his possession’. The legend is a legend of possession, the king is his legend, and his possession is merely and, if you like, magnificently, ‘self-possession’, since the extent of his power is bolstered by the effrontery with which he claims (and he was the first to claim it) that his power extends so far- to the ‘whole country’. (Dodsworth50)

He also finds some similarities between the well and the coin. “The rim of the coin is the edge of the well; the coin’s silver is the water in the well, which shines with a lustre that is the head’s own because the head too is silver, and because it puts the King’s mark on the whole coin” (51).

Dodsworth believes that Hymn XIII is a kind of transferring of power, from Offa to his nation when Offa speaks on behalf of the English nation, and from Hill to his grandmother in Hymn XXV when he speaks on behalf of his grandmother and his generation. Another form of this transferring power is from Offa to Hill, the power to be a legendary King such Offa transfers to the power of a legendary poet in Hill.

Hymn XIV is a continuation of Hymn X which deals with power and authority of Offa. Nobody can disobey him;

When the sky cleared above Malvern, he lingered in

his orchard; by the quiet hammer-pond. Trout-fry

simmered there, translucent, as though forming the

water’s underskin. He had a care for natural min-
utiae. What his gaze touched was his tenderness.
Woodlice sat pellet-like in the cracked bark and

A snail sugared its new stone.

To be brutal and cruel is his law, the law of blood.

Hymn XV with its “wrenched at a snarled root of dead crab- / apple” will come after Hymn XIV which is Offa’s law. His law destroys all nature and culture, as he wrenches the root of crab- apple. Offa destroys everything which stand in front of him.

Tutting, he wrenched at a snarled root of dead crab- apple. It rose against him. In brief cavort he was Cernunnos, the branched god, lightly concussed.

Now from the Kingdom of King Offa only remains a “dream”. “An / ancient land, full of strategy”, it is full of diseases “hemlock in / ambush, night- soil” and “tetanus”.

He divided his realm. It lay there like a dream. An ancient land, full of strategy. Ramparts of compost pioneered by red-helmeted worms. Hemlock in ambush, night-soil, tetanus. A wasps’ nest en- sconced in the hedge-bank, a reliquary or wrapped head, the corpse of Crnunnos pitching dayward its feral horns.

Hymn XVI “Offa’s Journey to Rome” is an imaginary voyage. The ships “keels thrust into shingle” while “Clash of salutation”. It is “in one aspect a child’s fantasy of triumph, possibly of triumph in defeat” (Dodsworth 58).

Clash of salutation. As keels thrust into shingle.

Ambassadors, pilgrims. What is carried over? The Frankish gift, two-edged, regaled with slaughter.
The sword is in the King’s hands; the crux a craftsman’s triumph. Metal effusing its own fragrance, a variety of balm. And other miracles, other exchanges.

The poet believes that “a craftsman” has all the victories because he uses his hands such as a sword in the hand of king, thus he triumphs, the metal in the hands of the craftsman “effusing its own fragrance”. In the visit of King Offa from Franks reign, the ambassadors, the pilgrims, the warriors and the traders exchange many things bartered together in acclaim.

Shafts from the winter sun homing upon earth’s rim.

Christ’s mass: in the thick of a snowy forest the flickering evergreen fissured with light.

In Hymn XVI the poet breaks the unity of idea by referring to Christ. Jesus Christ’s short lived presence in this world was like the “shafts from the winter sun homing upon earth’s rim”. Christ presents in our “thick of a snowy forest” was like “the flickering evergreen fissured with light”. “Christ’s light shines out through the mass, which is a hindrance as well as a help, the mass of forest trees within which both St. Eustace and St. Hubert had their visions of Christ’s crucifixion presented shining with light between the antlers of a stage” (Dodsworth 59).

Hymn XVII is a shift to our contemporary time and the memory of the protagonist’s childhood. In this episode the news of the sudden storms make the reader ready for the climax of the verses.

He drove at evening through the hushed Vosges. The car radio, glimmering, received broken utterance from the horizon of storms…
In the next verse, the protagonist and his friend crush each other with bricks,

‘God’s honour-our bikes touched, he skidded and come

Off.’ ‘Liar.’ A timid father’s protective bellow.

disfigurement of a village-king. ‘Just look at
the bugger…’

The “village-king” is a beautiful image of two other people Hill and Offa; both of them are the “timid father” of the story of Mercian Hymns. Hill as well as Offa are protective. They both create the story.

Hymn XVIII takes us back to 526 AD, the last years of the life of “Boethius”.

“Boethius (whose Consolation of Philosophy was translated by King Alfred) was imprisoned at Pavia by Theodoric, a barbarian hero-king, like Offa” (Alexander 105). Boethius was a fifth century philosopher and one of the intermediaries between ancient philosophy and Latin Middle Ages. He was accused of engaging in magic and was executed circa 526. Hill writes that Boethius “shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower / out of the earth.” The wish of the prisoner brings up a very important word “meditation”, “He willed the instruments of / violence to break upon meditation.” This word guides us to Boethius work “The Consolation of Philosophy”. He writes this book in the final years of his life in prison. Meditation and thinking are the duties of philosophers while that of a poet is to reduce the pains of life. The continuation of the poem introduces the instruments of violence.

Iron buckles

gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men
stooped, disentangled the body.
Hymn XVIII is the poetry of sorrow and violence. In the second verse again Hill brings the reader back to the contemporary time in France, when the protagonist drives his car in “the hushed Vosges”.

He strolled back to the
car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and
philosophy. He set in motion the furtherance of
his journey.

Hymn XIX is a memory of the childhood of the protagonist.

We have a kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards,
With splinters of habitation. The children shriek
And scavenge, play havoc. They incinerate boxes,
Rage and old tyres. They haul a sodden log hung
With soft shields of fungus, and launch it upon
the flame.

It is a representation of the world in which children become “shriek / and scavenger[s]”. It is the story of homeless children. Behind the play of children in this hymn, there is some horror and cruelty. The children “regaled with slaughter” here

The children shriek
and scavenge, play havoc. They incinerate boxes,
rags and odd tyres. They haul a sodden log, hung
with soft shields of fungus, and launch it upon
the flames.

Hymn XX is an Absentist portrait of history; it is where “primeval” land and history are “spattered with the bones”. Hill relates the cruelty of the nature of human beings to the same sense of brutality in animals; the “adders basked” after their hunt. The
second verse talks about “coiled entrenched” of old England and the hacked walls of castle “brickwork and paintwoark / stalwart above hacked marl”. The hymn implicitly talks about the war between different dynasties in England:

The clashing prim-
‘Pengwern’. Steel against yew and privet. Fresh
dynasties of smiths.

Mercian Hymns is a historical book, where in each single page of it and in each single
word, we read about the massacre of human race and brutality of one towards another.

“Ethandune”, “Catraeth”, “Maldon” and “Pengwern” in Hymn XX are the names of battles in old England. The “Ethandune” is the battle of Edington in 878 AD. The “Catraeth” is related to the battle of the Catterick in the sixth century. The battles of “Maldom” happened in 991 AD. “Pengwern” was the capital of the Powys, which was taken by Offa in 779 AD.

Hymn XXI is the story of the battle of Offa in Teme and Trent. It starts with the cohorts of Offa’s military and how they attack Wales and suffer on hilltops. It ends with the cry and weeping of women.

Cohorts of charabancs ‘fanfared’ Offa’s province and
his concern, negotiating the by-ways from Teme
to Trent. Their windshields dripped butterflies.
Stranded on hilltops they signaled with plumes
of stream. Twilight menaced the land. The young
women wept and surrendered.
The words “cohorts” for military forces, “fanfared” for the sound of trumpets and also the “wept and surrendered” of young women who are captured are all evidence of the invasions of Offa in Wales in the Eight Century.

From the war images in this verse it comes to the image of an ordinary day, a “summer weekends” in the “valleys beyond / Mercia’s dyke”. It is an excursion of some tourist in the twentieth century. The sound of leaves, when they fall, sound like carillons. David Lloyd believes that Hymn XXI is a day out of some tourists in Wales. The tourists sight see in Wales, drink tea, and take some photography from the “misty Celtic past of Camelot and King Arthur” (32)

Still, everyone was cheerful, heedless in such days:

at summer weekends dipping into valleys beyond
Mercia’s dyke. Tea was enjoyed, by lakesides where
all might fancy carillons of real Camelot vibrating through the silent water.

The last verse in this part is a satire of Offa’s region and the devastation of his glorious days, in the forays of the treasure of Wales. The triumph of Offa’s cohorts over Wales does not portray the bravery of Offa’s soldiers but their aggressive forays. It also satirizes the tourists and their purchase of old items of Wales.

Gradually, during the years, deciduous velvet peeled
from evergreen albums and during the years more
treasures were mislaid: the harp-shaped brooches,
the nuggets of fool’s gold.

The language of Hill is sarcastic in Mercian Hill; he criticizes both English tourists and military forays in Wales. “Mercia’s dyke” is the most famous earth work in Mercia built by King Offa. This hymn implicitly mentions the building of a dyke in
Mercia which is famous as “Mercia’s dyke” or “Offa’s dyke”. “The best known relic associated with Offa’s time is Offa’s dyke, a great earth barrier that runs approximately along the border between England and Wales” (Offa of Mercia).

The story of the destruction of nature by human experimentation is the theme of Hymn XXII. “The meadow scabbed with cow-dung” and “camouflaged nissen hut”. The protagonist announced his love for war “I loved the battle-anthems and the / gregarious news”. The last verse is related to the world war and coiled entrenches.

Then, in the earth shelter, warmed by a blue-glassed
storm-lantern, I huddled with stories of dragon-tailed airships and warriors who took wing immortal as phantoms.

In Hymn XXIII the carpet or embroidery is a master work of the whole history and society of England. It is a handicraft of “treacherous thread”.

In tapestries, in dream, they gathered, as it was enacted, the return, the re-entry of transcendence into this sublunary world. Opus Anglicanum, their stringent mystery riddled by needles: the silver veining, the gold leaf, voluted grape-vine, master-works of treacherous thread.

They trudged out of the dark, scraping their boots free from lime-splodges and phlegm. They munched cold bacon. The lamps grew plump with oily reliable light.
Mercian Hymns becomes a tapestry as Hill says it is an “Opus Anglicanum” which means the works are related to the English church. “Mercian Hymns” like embroidery is full of the “stringent mystery riddle” by pen where in many intricate details are interwoven. This masterpiece of Absentist poetry becomes a masterwork of “treacherous thread”. This hymn at the same time reveals the scattered pieces which build the poem, the pieces of dream and fantasy along with real and “sublunary world”. Bedient writes that:

The poem is a collage—almost maddeningly unforthcoming and, at the same time all eloquent juxtaposition- of the would- be sacred and the ploddingly profane. Fearful is the gap between the release longed for and the scraping of boots; yet even with all its extremes this world feels small, and the ignorance of what lies outside it more fearful still. (“Absentist,” 22)

Hymns XXIII, XXVI, and XXV are under the title “Opus Anglicanum”, they:

Suggest a devolution of communal aesthetic standards over the centuries. They take us from the high humanism of English embroidery and English Romanesque sculpture in the Middle Ages to the anti-humanism of nineteenth-century capitalist production: that is from the labor that was also art and embodied transcendence over life’s hardships and death itself to labor that was sheer exploitation. (Rosenthal and Gall 300)

Hymn XXIV is the situation of the artist-poet when drawn into lack and absence. He says: “Where best to stand?” because everywhere the “dust” of absence is “…in the eyes, on clawing wings and lips”.

Itinerant through numerous domains, of his lord’s
retinue, to Compostela. Then home for a lifetime

amid West Mercia this master-mason as I envisage

him, intent to pester upon tympanum and chancel-
arch his moody testament, confusing warrior with

lion, dragon-coils, tendrils of stony vine.

Hill finds the stagnation of history instead of its progression. It is a lack that penetrates into human nature.

Hymn XXV is an elegy in memory of his grandmother as well as Hill’s childhood. His grandmother worked in an industry of nail-making. He criticizes the industrial exploitation and the colonized human force. The entire poem of “Mercian Hymns” Hill has never been so very clear about what he says as in this hymn. He says;

Brooding on the eightieth letter of Fors Clavigera,

I speak this in memory of my grandmother, whose

childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the

nailer’s darg.

This hymn is the only hymn that has a refrain. This repetition of refrain very effectively translates the “anger” and the “compassion” of the poem to the reader. The reader grasps the intensity of the outrage of the poet. Hymn XXV is not only in the chain of a personal experience but undertakes a more general experience related to the industrialization of the nineteenth-century. The industrial exploitation in the hymn creates historical circumstances which releases the hymn from a personal and private grief into a public and general outcry. The first line of this hymn refers to John Ruskin’s “Letter 80” of For Clavigera, where a description of women is laboured.

The nail shop stood back of the cottage, by the fold.

It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred
its low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water
floated a damson-bloom of dust.

not to be shaken by posthumous clamour. It is one

Thing to celebrate the ‘quick forge’, another

To cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire.

Brooding on the eightieth letter of Fors Clavigera,

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

Gervais writes:

The repeated rhythm enables the poem to contain the fund of anger and
compassion that he is drawing on. Whether consciously or not, this
procedure is Wordsworthian in more than one way, first because of the
weight of emotion it rests on rhythm itself, second because of the way
the repetition intensifies the original feeling. (99)

In a comparison done by David Gervais on Geoffrey Hill and Wordsworth, he points
out that the grandmother in “Mercian Hymns” and Wordsworth protagonists such as
“pedlars” and “leech-gatherers”, are very similar. They are invisible humble people in
society. Moreover Hill puts beside each other, King Offa, as a King and the
grandmother as a worker. The lower classes always are hidden and absent in history.
Hymn XXV is the poet’s sense of duty to deal with invisible and lower class people to
free them, at least in his poem by breaking the class system and poverty. “It has a
close kinship with the pervasive tones of a whole body of poetry: tones of disillusionment, of strenuous effort to undo the brutal past by reconceiving it and giving the anonymous victims a virtual new life and identity thereby” (Rosenthal and Gall 301). In “Mercian Hymns” the Absentist poet cannot deal with the subject directly as in “Mercian Hymns” the center of attention is King Offa. The grandmother and industry of nail-making is aside and an implicit issue in this poem. The invisible people always are in hidden layers of history. But Wordsworth in “Resolution and Independence” directly writes about the invisible layers of society. Thus the main difference between Wordsworth and Geoffrey Hill is in this point that “Wordsworth’s poem reads as an inevitable whole, not as two powerful fragments splitting apart, and this wholeness in disjunction was surely its prime lesson. Even so startling a change of rhythm as the one between its two stanzas can bind a poem together” (Gervais 103).

Hymn XXVI is Offa’s Bestiary- it deals with power, the power of “Yuletide men” and “Troll- Wives”. The power of the ancient past along with the modern time which role man had during hundred and thousands years.

Fortified in their front parlours, at Yuletide men

are the more murderous. Drunk, they defy battle-axes, bellow of whale-bone and dung.

Troll-wives, groaners in sweetness, tooth- bewitchers,

you too must purge for the surfeit of England

who have scattered peppermint and confetti, your hundreds-and-thousands.
From verse XXVII onwards the hymns relate to the death of Offa

‘Now when King Offa was alive and dead’, they were

all there, the funereal gleemen: papal legate and rural dean; Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercenaries; a shuffle of house-carls.

He was defunct. They were perfunctory. The ceremony stood acclaimed. The mob received memorial vouchers and signs.

Hill uses the pronoun “He” for Offa after his death, he is no more a king.

Hymns XXVII, XXVIII, and XXX are among difficult and complicated hymns of Mercian Hymns. They are under the title “The Death of Offa”. Although this collection suffers from “self-conscious, recherché knowingness and allusiveness” (Rosenthal and Gall 300), yet it is among the successful poems in contemporary times. It keeps the balance between the past and present, yet suffers from the absence of the comprehensive unit while gaining aesthetic integrity.

In Hymn XXX Hill writes about Offa that;

And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk towards us he vanished he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud.

In this hymn Pearson observes that

Offa became a kind of dance of self and other, historic time and personal time, power and poesis, polity and personal passion. … This simultaneous layering and composing of discrete elements, of self and
other, conscientiously woos yet resists any final glamour of resolution.

So, the very last of Mercian Hymns preserves a vision of merging which does not allow itself to form. (31-32)

The journey of Mercian Hymns is through Hymn I to Hymn XXX from the kingdom of King Offa in Mercia to our modern time. The hymns as journey cover the history of Anglo-Saxon to the present time. The brutality of men and violence, according to Hill, lead us to “discreet souvenirs for consolation and / philosophy”. Thus it is a collection of fragments, collages and separated elements. Offa vanishes when he begins to walk towards us. But his traces of red mud and his coins left behind for us. “red mud” represent Offa as a mortal being and “the coins” as an immortal item from his kingdom stand as oppositions in this poem. The whole collection is a combination of these oppositions which make the collection a collage of fragments.
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