

## THE ERA OF ANIMOSITY IN EUROPE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED POEMS OF SIR GEOFFREY HIL

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### **Abstract**

The continent of Europe has witnessed some of the harrowing tales of human history in the twentieth century. The two Great World Wars for which Europe has become the battle ground narrated the endless woes of humanity in various dimensions. The literary world has given diverse expressions to the events and lives of this period through various literary genres. Sir Geoffrey Hill, one of the foremost figures in British poetry, in his poems spoke about the brutality of the rulers and the diabolic consequence of ideologies such as Nazism and Fascism. Organized ethnocide coupled with the massacre of human rights has soaked the soil of Europe with blood. Hill's selected poems vividly portray an atmosphere of animosity and savagery with an exceptional skill of picking up the very precise diction.

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Totalitarian, Victim, Struggle

The Twentieth Century European history is situated between a violent and authoritarian past and the dawn of a more democratic and peaceful period - an era that may represent the future. The two world wars gave a huge blow to the property of Europe. She has to bear the responsibility of countless men in these unwanted battles due to mere imperial reasons. The 1st world war brought about revolutions in various European countries. In Russia the Czar abdicated and a group of communists known as Bolsheviks gained control of the government a revolution broke out in Germany. The Kaiser fled to Holland, and a republic was set up in Germany. In a number of countries in Europe the normal workings of parliamentary institutions had been suspended in favour of dictatorships. In Italy, an anti-communist party known as Fascists seized power by force. Their leader, Signor Mussolini became premier and set up a strong government, in which he had real power. Equally remarkable has been the development in Turkey. The allies by the Treaty of Sevres (1920) had deprived Turkey of its outlined provinces and a part of Asia-minor. The Turks keenly felt this loss of territory, and when a Greek army landed at Smyrna, which had been given to Greek by the treaty, the Turks, under the leadership of Mustafa

Kamal, vanquished the Greeks, established a new Republican government, and forced the allies to reopen the question of peace terms.

Thus the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a period of great artistic change, and is dominated by the impact of World War I (1914–18) and World War II (1939–45), as well as by the artistic concerns of modernism, which affected both themes and methods of writing. The range of literature and of its readership, which increased in the 19th-century English literature period, rose even more rapidly in the 20th century. In contrast to writing which is in favour of the expansion of the British Empire, such as the work of English writer Rudyard Kipling (*Jungle Book*, 1894–95, *Kim*, 1901), works which approach World War I are much more uncertain of the concept of 'Britishness' or 'Englishness'. The works of British novelist Joseph Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*, 1902; *Nostramo*, 1904) are good examples. This indicates the questioning nature of the 20th century, which began by doubting the principles on which the Victorians had based their social code, leading to uncertainty and complexity. Influential early 20th-century writers who mark the changing attitudes include Scottish writer John Buchan (*The Thirty-Nine Steps*, 1915), whose work was concerned with the politics of World War I and the Boer War, as well as English novelist John Galsworthy (*Forsyte Saga*, 1906–22), who was more concerned with social than political change. The *Clayhanger* trilogy (1910–15), by English writer Arnold Bennett focuses on escape from the Victorian past. English writer H G Wells, who practiced science fiction at the end of the 19th century, moved towards anti-capitalism for his later novel *Kipps* (1905). *A Room with a View* (1908) by English writer E M Forster deals with freeing oneself from 19th-century attitudes to relationships, while Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) questions the attitude of the British Empire.

Poetry too was at a watershed. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century had produced contrasting works that shared the common theme of lost illusions, including Irish writer Oscar Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' (1898). 'The Farmer's Bride' (1915) by English poet Charlotte Mew also deals with unfulfilled hopes and English writer Thomas Hardy wrote of a sense of gathering gloom in his poem 'The Darkling Thrush' (1901). Irish poet and playwright W B Yeats is concerned with the realities of Irish politics ('Easter 1916'), as well as with Irish mythology and mystic symbolism. Yeats survived the 1916 Irish Easter Rising and World War I but many poets did not, and there is a great deal of poetry that came out of the war. These include the war sonnets of English poet Rupert Brooke and the work of English poet Wilfred Owen.

Hill has been considered to be among the most distinguished poets of his generation. Hill's poetry encompasses a variety of styles, from the dense and allusive writing of "*King Log*" (1968) and "*Canaan*" (1997) to the simplified syntax of the sequence '*The Pentecost Castle*' in *Tenebrae* (1978) to the more accessible poems of "*Mercian Hymns*" (1971), a

series of thirty poems (sometimes called 'prose-poems' a label which Hill rejects in favor of 'versets') which juxtapose the history of Offa, eighth century ruler of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, with Hill's own childhood in the modern Mercia of the West Midlands.

Regarding both his style and subject, Hill is often described as a "difficult" poet. He makes circumspect use of traditional rhetoric (as well as that of modernism), but he also transcribes the idioms of public life, such as those of television, political sloganeering, and punditry. Hill has been consistently drawn to morally problematic and violent episodes in British and European history, though it should be noted that his accounts of landscape (especially that of his native Worcestershire) are as intense as his encounters with history. (He has written perhaps the most important poetic responses to the Holocaust in English, 'Two Formal Elegies', 'September Song' and 'Ovid in the Third Reich'.) In an interview in *The Paris Review* (2000), which published Hill's early poem 'Genesis' when he was still at Oxford, Hill defended the right of poets to difficulty as a form of resistance to the demeaning simplifications imposed by 'maestros of the world'. Hill also argued that to be difficult is to be democratic, equating the demand for simplicity with the demands of tyrants.

Hill may be called the best of those English poets who entered in to adult consciousness in the post war not the pre-war or the war time, world. Poets just older than Hill – Philip Larkin, say – were in a possession of conscious experienced when the news and then the news reels of Belsen and Auschwitz disclosed the atrocities. A poet of exactly Hill's age did not yet possess any such experienced conscience; Hill was 13 in 1945 and he belongs to the generation who's awakening to this unparalleled atrocity. It is true that no English man had ever before known anything like those news reels, those photographs, those histories; but Englishmen older than Hill did not have this atrocity. Hill wrote his first poems in the late 1940's mercifully, there is every reason to believe that the poems were not bent upon the Nazi holocaust but since then he has written the deepest and truest poems on that holocaust: "September song" and "Ovid in the Third Reich" as well as few other poems on this atrocity which are honourable, fierce and grave; "Two Formal Elegies", "Domains Public" and section 4 in 'Of Commerce and society':

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,  
 Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:  
 Some of us have heard the dead speak:  
 The dead are my obsession this week  
 But may be lifted away. In summer  
 Thunder may strike, or, as a tremor  
 Of remote adjustment, pass on the far side  
 From us: however, deified and defied  
 By those it does strike. Many have died. Auschwitz,

Its furnace chambers and lime pits  
 Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable  
 Unbelievable in fatted marble.

The dignified force of Hill's poetry on such atrocity is a matter of his grasping that the atrocity both is and is not unique and that it presents to the imagination a challenge which likewise both is and is not unique. Hill doesn't permit the Jew's sufferings to be separated from or aloof from the other hideous sufferings which fill the air of past and the present.

This poem, '*Statesmen have known visions....*' is a poem which knows what it is up against. "The dead are my obsession this week": the rhythm is at once strong and strained and it protects the grounded sardonic against the ingratiatingly self-deprecating. It is doubly stytic. As is the turn which first grimly shrivels "deified down in to defy" and then shrivels them both down to 'died'. 'Many have died deified in to defied' is a genuine but precarious movement of the imagination. So the subsequent paired down 'died' rightly does not disown it, but does play and weigh it. Against that laconic shriveling root –simplicity is set the grossly burgeoning un imaginability of Auschwitz, with the very sounds moving from delicacy 'a fable' in to the fattened slabs of monumental evil. Hill's "*Two Formal Elegies*" deals the theme of violence and holocaust in the then Europe in a different style. This poem, the first of many poems on Nazi atrocities and the persecution of the Jews in Europe, deterred the easy response. It contained instead dark ironies directed, by a motivation that was as yet obscure, at 'the pushing mainlanders' who survive in willful, complicit ignorance of the horrors Hill memorialized.

"Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed:  
 Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves,  
 In clenched cinders not yielding their abused  
 Bodies and bonds to those whom war's chance saves  
 (Two Formal Elegies 1-8)

One of the central questions throughout his life's work has been how one might use art in an act of atonement that gives voice to the victims of the Holocaust and witnesses to other atrocities of history in a world that has become "witness-proof."

In the first sonnet, which is the most tightly constructed and formal, Hill uses language to set up a series of double meanings, giving the poem a tension built from the struggle between opposed forces: the dead as restive and threatening; aesthetic fires that merely "play," unlike the crematorium fires; "[fierce heart]" commanded by "iced brain."

Those who died in the Holocaust demand to be remembered. Of course, we cannot "know" these dead; all we can do is "grasp, roughly, the song"—the song being any form of aesthetic atonement that enables the dead to serve as witnesses.

"*September Song*," by Geoffrey Hill, seems to be a poem written in honor of a victim of the Nazi extermination of Jews during World War II. The clearest hint to this is the mention of Zyklon, which is the poison gas that the Nazis used to kill millions of people in concentration camps.

"Undesirable you may have been, untouchable  
You were not, Not forgotten  
Or passed or that over at the proper time.  
As estimated, you died. Things marched,  
Sufficient, to that end.

(September Song 1-7)

The victim is a child who was born in 1932 and killed in 1942, just a few months past his or her 10th birthday. The first lines of the poem convey irony in the balance between "undesirable" and "untouchable" and the "not. Not ..."

The poet describes the victim as "undesirable," but not "untouchable"; i.e. the Nazis did not desire this person, but they knew where to find him and how to "touch" him or kill him. In other words, you died just as the Nazi "scientists" estimated that you would upon being exposed to a particular dose of zyklon. "Thing marched...to that end," meaning that the process of capturing and then killing innocent people "marched" to its desired conclusion. In the third line "passed over" alludes to the Passover, but in this case there is a bitterly ironic reversal. Implicit in the reversal is a recurring theme in Hill's work about the mystery of God's ways. God's plague on the Egyptians resulted in the slaughter of the innocent as well as the guilty. Three instances of mass slaughter converge in these lines: the Egyptian plagues, Herod's killing of the innocents, and the Holocaust.

His greatest poem, "*Ovid in the Third Reich*", written in the 1960s, is one of many meditations on justice and history. At best, as in this new book's first poem, he finds in history, literature and scripture content still compulsively disturbing. What Hill writes about an Old Testament figure resonates with an uneasy thrill in our era of 11 September 2001, "shock and awe", and apocalyptic blockbusters: "They should film Joel:/ A fire devoured before them; and behind/ them a flame burneth."

It is a dramatic monologue in which the poet speaks in the persona of the ancient Roman poet Ovid. The title, however, places him in the Third Reich of Adolph Hitler's

Germany, instead of the first years of the Roman Empire under the Emperor Augustus. It is clear from the title that Geoffrey Hill intends a parallel to be drawn between the two periods. They compare very clearly in several ways: First, both states were totalitarian; in both states there was such a thing as correct thinking; and deviation from general opinion was frowned upon and thought subversive in both. Second, both rulers tended to be puritanical in their habits and tastes. Women were expected to be mothers, cooks, and keepers of the state faith.

The major philosophical basis of the poem is the belief that the world of nature is an eternal battleground on which good and evil, love and hate, and tyranny and freedom are in ceaseless conflict. Since there is nothing new under the sun, as the author of Ecclesiastes asserts, the drama of history will be repeated over and over.

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