

**Abbreviations**

- CP* Hill, G. 1985. *Collected Poems*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- EC* ——— 1991. *The Enemy's Country*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LL* ——— 1984. *The Lords of Limit*, London: Deutsch.
- NCP* ——— 1994. *New and Collected Poems*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

## Introduction

Geoffrey Hill is widely recognised as one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. The reception of his work is complicated by the reservations that very often accompany descriptions of his achievement. The new collection *Canaan*, and the revised version of Ibsen's *Brand* (his first book-length publications in Britain for a decade), have drawn renewed attention to Hill's work. Lachlan Mackinnon's recent *TLS* review of *Canaan* provides a representative example of the critical response:

Geoffrey Hill has perhaps the most forbidding reputation of any living poet. His work is notably armoured in learning, and often intensely difficult because of its dependence on etymology and allusion. (Mackinnon, 1997, 23)

Hill's work makes demands on the serious reader beyond those of most contemporary writing. In his critical prose, Hill aligns himself with Coleridge's position that the reader should be the poet's fellow-labourer (*LL*, 119). We must engage with Hill's subject matter and give the same passionate attention to technical detail that he and (for instance) Christopher Ricks have done. If we do so we shall become his co-workers: we shall be rewarded with a richer understanding of Hill's poems. Those readers who are attracted to Hill's work by his reputation for technical excellence and sincere commitment to challenging subject matter will not find the poems 'forbidding'; rather they will encounter a body of work that is rewarding in proportion to the effort made to understand it.

Anyone approaching Hill's work owes a debt to those critics who have responded vigorously to this challenge. Henry Hart's book *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* is invaluable, largely due to the sustained and inclusive close readings it undertakes. As indicated above, Christopher Ricks's articles on Hill set a standard for the intensity of attention to technical detail with which these poems ought to be read. Peter Robinson's collection of essays on Hill's work is also indispensable for the range of approaches it represents. Several pieces in that volume (especially those by Griffiths, Haughton, Poole and

Wainwright) indicate extremely fruitful areas of inquiry. We are also indebted to John Haffenden for the excellent interview he conducted with Hill for his book *Viewpoints*.

But Hill's critics have not always attempted to be his fellow-laborers. Many have deliberately distanced themselves from the figures that Hill writes about. Others have failed to provide a framework within which the unity of purpose behind Hill's diverse interests can be discerned. Vincent Sherry's distaste for Christianity prevents him from giving a meaningful account of Hill's engagement with martyrdom. Tom Paulin's prejudice against Hill's Holocaust poetry impedes any understanding of witness in Hill's work. Christopher Ricks's reaction against Hill's radical etymology of atonement is symptomatic of a fixed view of language (further evidenced by his inability to see how a poet could accept both Eliot and Yeats' characterisation of the feeling of finishing a poem) that falls short of the complexity of Hill's linguistic practice. Stan Smith's politics mean that he cannot see the positive aspects of Tory Radicals and how they have helped to form Englishness. Donald Davie's refusal to engage with Clio and Veronica renders him incapable of seeing how *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* gives us access to the past. This thesis originates in the attempt to be Hill's co-worker. It delves deeply into the raw material of Hill's poetry. This sympathetic exploration puts one in a position from which one can perceive the underlying concerns of Hill's work, the moral and philosophical framework within which the aims and achievements of the poetry and prose can be identified and assessed.

My main philosophical debt is to the work of Simone Weil. Her vision of human existence, and especially the place she gives to poetry and spiritual experience, is remarkable. Her writing continually demonstrates the depth and clarity of her thought. Her troubled relationship with Christianity is exemplary: she had acquired insight through mystical experience, reflection and study; her scrupulous and frank delineation of what she could not accept of orthodox Christianity inspires because it demonstrates her refusal to simplify difficult matters in order to make life easy for herself. This intellectual and spiritual integrity is also reflected in the charitable, compassionate, and ultimately self-sacrificing way in which she lived her life.

My title suggests a coherence in Hill's interests. His investigations of history and literary and spiritual tradition are motivated by a search for roots and identity. Hill's implicit assertion — that our characters are formed by the language we speak, the place where we were brought up, the literary, spiritual and political traditions of our homeland — is distasteful to those who, in the present post-modern situation, imagine they can reinvent themselves, as if they were autochthonous. They might describe him as a modernist in a post-modern age. Hill agrees with Simone Weil that the human being needs 'roots' in all these areas of its experience. One can see Hill's career as a personal response to the disintegration of various traditions in the modern era, accelerated by the Second World War and its aftermath. Hill seeks to root himself back into his own culture, but also explores other cultures through the lives of individuals in whom he perceives some admirable qualities, or with whom he feels a rapport.

The first chapter 'Hunter of Forms: Hill and Language' uses two ways of looking at language ('contexture' and 'words as living powers') to explore the nature of language and how it affects thought and poetry. The chapter argues in favour of David Jones's belief that a poet makes art out of the material from which s/he is constituted. This leads to the questioning of the limitations of language. Hill's poem 'God's Little Mountain' and the philosophy of R. H. Nettleship are used to argue that language is not the limiting factor in the expressibility of spiritual truth or mystical experience.

'Englishness and Nostalgia', the second chapter, addresses itself to a particular problem that some critics see in Hill's work: while Hill claims to be looking at the phenomenon of nostalgia, they accuse him of being reactionary. The chapter places Hill's work alongside that of C. H. Sisson, Donald Davie, and Thom Gunn and looks at the different ways in which these poets write about England. Heaney's concept of 'Englands of the Mind' and the debate over the Church of England's replacement of the *King James Bible* and Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* are some of the landmarks in a chapter that attempts to delineate Hill's attitude towards his nation. Hill is not prepared to deny people's real feeling of belonging merely on the strength of arguments detailing the process by which nationhood is constructed. Like Weil and Sisson, he

believes this belonging is a need of the soul, although his experience of the fragmentation of national identity is not as apocalyptic as Sisson's. The chapter also engages with John Lucas's book on Englishness, showing how Hill's new volume *Canaan* speaks about, and for, England in a neo-Blakean mode.

In 'Poetry and Witness', the third chapter, we examine Hill's writing about atrocities. This involves a discussion of the theological arguments about the duty to bear witness, and the status of poetry as a medium for such activity. It also necessitates an exploration of 'Holocaust' poetry, and the important differences between the kind of 'witnessing' Hill's poems perform compared to those of people who actually experienced atrocities.

The concept of 'witness' involves issues of truth-claims. The problems of writing about the past, and of speaking for other people are looked at more fully in the fourth chapter where the focus shifts to how one might bear witness to a spiritual truth. Here we begin to explore the difficult relationship between poetry and spirituality. If poetry is a spiritual exercise in itself, is it essentially a diversion from the true aim of such exercise: union with absolute good? Or can poetry be used to express the insights gained from spiritual practice — attainment in the former giving accelerated rewards in the latter. The life and poetry of Alexandr Blok, and Hill's poem 'Scenes with Harlequins', are used to explore the poet's responsibilities, seen here through Blok's choice of poetry rather than Christ, and his dedication to social issues.

The fourth chapter, 'Martyrdom and the Poet's Sacrifice', explores further the relationship between spiritual practice and literary work. By looking at those poems in which Hill engages with Christ and St. Robert Southwell, I attempt to show his respect for martyrdom, and the concern with his own literary skill that prevents him from fully embracing Christianity. The dilemma of the rewards and penalties of the sacrificial life is worked out through analyses of Hill's work on Mandelstam, Péguy, Bonhoeffer and Ibsen's *Brand*. As a result of this we begin to see Hill's distrust of worldly success and approval for 'exemplary failure' — the approval that leads him to eulogize men like Hans-Bernd von Haefthen.

Péguy's image of Clio and Veronica is used in the fifth chapter, 'Poetry and History', to explore the problems of experiencing the past. Hill has a passionate involvement with many figures from the past; he uses the past to provide examples and possible models for responsible living. We should attempt to have a living relationship with the literary and spiritual traditions of our culture (not only those of our nation, although they should come first). The chapter engages with the problematic status of poems that appear to ventriloquize the dead and the charge that Hill's work is manipulative. I explore Hill's engagement with Richard Oastler, Sir Henry Wotton, and the men of the German Resistance to Hitler in order to sharpen our picture of his concept of the 'exemplary figure'. A reading of 'Churchill's Funeral' focuses Hill's feelings about successful leaders and the 'common weal' of the people they represent and manipulate.

The final chapter is entitled 'Imitation, Poetic Vocation and Spiritual Integrity'. It focuses on Hill's version of *Brand*, and his imitations of Hölderlin and Celan. In the context of an argument about the status of the 'poet-translator' based on the ideas of George Steiner, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan and others I make a case for the translation of poetry as a response to the spiritual destiny of the human race, and as a fulfilment of the potential of language. For Hölderlin and Celan, poetry is both the discipline used to explore the limits of human experience and knowledge and the means by which their discoveries can be communicated. Brand's rhetoric, through Ibsen's verse, works in the same dual manner. Hill's versions (especially his *Brand* — the three editions of which I have examined alongside Inga-Stina Ewbank's literal translation) address the difficulty of transmitting truths acquired through the exploration of the spiritual realm of experience using the narrowly epistemological resources of language. This species of 'translation' is far more complex than the simple englishing of sentences written in a foreign language. It is in the coincidence of these kinds of 'translation' that one approaches the fulfilment of the potential of human language.

The thesis as a whole aims to show how Hill's poetry (including *Brand*) together with his critical prose, is driven by the desire to become a fully rooted, and therefore

spiritually healthier, human being. The method that Hill chooses for the achievement of this is the continued meditation upon his cultural origins. He explores his own childhood, and the events that formed the horrifying background to that period of our history. But he also reaches back into the medieval history of his birthplace, and into the poetic and spiritual traditions of other European countries. The awareness of past events he has developed, and the relationship he maintains with their protagonists, crystallize in his poems and essays. These verbal objects bear witness persuasively to Hill's loyalties, aspirations and those things he admires, while the complexity and difficulty of the poetry does justice to the doubts, difficulties and actual suffering that is involved. My thesis presents Hill's career not as a plating of the self with the armour of learning, but as a quest for individuation and self-knowledge through the refinement of poetic technique and the practice of empathy.

Simone Weil wrote that a great work of art, one that qualifies as being an act of witness, is one that could continually sustain a prisoner subjected to solitary confinement. Hill's poetry aspires to this condition. I feel that some of his poems, like those of Mandelstam carved into prison-walls, could continue to inspire a person under the circumstances Weil specifies. For those of us lucky enough to be free, the poems are a challenge to engage with our fellow-humans. This thesis necessarily works with the figures that Hill writes about, and one must engage intensely with these in order to benefit from and enjoy all of Hill's work. But his writing also contains a moral imperative: one must bear witness to the sufferings of one's fellow-beings, and be aware of their spiritual potential and achievements. It is our duty to bear witness to the past and present, to be aware of the atrocities and the glories of our fellow-humans. This will encourage us to live in a more compassionate way, whatever specific beliefs we hold.

The tensions in Hill's work, crystallized, for instance, around Blok's dilemma, emphasize the fact that poetry, or any artistic endeavour, may not be the easiest or most effective way to do this. However, the kind of poetry that Hill is writing now — dense with allusion and experimenting boldly with the techniques he has been refining for over forty years — encourages us to re-think the history that has shaped our present

experience, and to question the consequences of the accepted interpretation of the recent past.

Hill's career can be seen as a continual process of 'translation'. He repeatedly delves into the past, into the experiences of other people. His poems and essays bear witness to these people and demonstrate the principle by which he has gone about constructing and defining his identity. That principle is, essentially, Simone Weil's thesis in *The Need for Roots*. Hill's work can be seen as a systematic attempt to provide the needs of his soul, and to communicate the results of his search to others, partly so that they may engage with the material he has offered, but also to apply the principle to the shaping of their own moral and spiritual landscape.