

History, Identity, and the Search for Roots in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill

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Abstract

Geoffrey Hill is one of the most important and challenging poets of the twentieth century. This thesis rises to the challenge of Hill's work through the attempt to become his fellow-labourer. While Hill's technical excellence and commitment to bearing witness to historical horror have been widely appreciated, the critics have not fully accounted for these characteristics. My chapters on language, witness and history define Hill's conception of the poet's duty to bear witness, and the potential of poetry in this endeavour.

Hill's critics have been reluctant to engage with his fascination with Christianity. This thesis investigates that uneasy relationship through an analysis of the significance of sacrifice in his work, and an examination of the conflict between spiritual and poetic vocation that forms the focus of his poems about Blok and Southwell.

Hill has been accused of nostalgia or reactionary political beliefs by critics who are alarmed by his admiration for Richard Oastler and Charles Péguy. This thesis explores Hill's thinking about history, partly through Péguy's concept of Clio, and draws out the problematic relationship between successful enterprise and morality. Several key pieces in Hill's new volume *Canaan* come into focus when we sharpen our conception of Hill's apparent mystique of failure.

Hill's version of Ibsen's *Brand* has not been given the critical attention it deserves, although the 1996 Penguin Classics edition may help to rectify that situation. I look at Hill's work in this field, and especially at his versions of Hölderlin, Celan and Ibsen, setting Hill's imitations within the context of Walter Benjamin's claim for the redemptive power of poetry in translation.

The thesis as a whole presents Hill's career as an attempt to root the self into various traditions — literary, spiritual, and national — through the practice of writing poetry.

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