

### chapter 3

## The Fallen World of Geoffrey Hill

The poet's dilemma in a fallen world is not how far he has fallen, but how little ground he has regained. Crabbed, clenched, intransigent, the words plain but the language tangled: the inconvenience of a poetry as difficult as Geoffrey Hill's is that it demands more than readers are usually willing to lose, at least to the trivial "art" of reading. If Hill's work makes most contemporary poetry appear trivial, contemporary poetry makes Hill's appear stilted, clotted (even gelatinous), deep in confusion and the calculus of decay.

Our poetry has long been at the mercy of its prose. Hill argues for a poetry secure in its doubts, wretched in its responsibilities, devilish or bedeviled in its labors. His works, previously published in five books and now gathered in his *New and Collected Poems*, form an achievement remarkably fertile but narrow in its numbers: two longish poems and some seventy short poems and sequences. He might be compared to Eliot, a poet of more complex despairs and more common joys, in the asperity of his production (when poets' lives were shorter their works were longer). As with other poets of rapture and self-loathing, the case against Hill has little to do with the dislike his poetry arouses, though that dislike has often schooled his critics in intemperance ("kitsch feudalism. . . a grisly historical voyeurism . . . both insular and complacent"). It is a case intimate with the difficulty of the poetry itself.

Consider the telling grandeurs and tolling gradations of a poem as early as "Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings":

*For whom the possessed sea littered, on both shores,  
 Ruinous arms; being fired, and for good,  
 To sound the constitution of just wars,  
 Men, in their eloquent fashion, understood.*

Hardly a phrase fails to quarrel with its colloquial fiction, hardly a noun or adjective or verb steels itself against the infection of double meaning. The war is the Hundred Years' War, whose staggering cost in men and materiel gave no profit to England or France. The sea may be a king's mere property, his possession by force of arms; but the tides are never subject to noblesse oblige, and the sea may rise and destroy as if demonically possessed. "Ruinous" is a famously mirrored word, silvering now toward the destructive and disastrous, now toward what has fallen to ruin. Those arms, both ruined and ruining (we should perhaps remember the etymological root in fall and collapse), may be steel helmets and swords littering the beaches, or the hacked limbs of fallen soldiers. What is done "for good" is not always "done for good."

The compression of such language answers no intensity of circumstance—this is, after all, a requiem. It responds to anger at the futility of such loss, for which language, however compacted, can offer no gain. But the angers must still scruple at the difficulties of language, of *interpretation*, on which wars are founded: words may mean quite different things "on both shores," and the poem disturbs by its troubled compression our easy compassion for one side or another, or for soldier against king. Whether these are *just wars* or just *wars*, the dead are just as dead.

*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  
 Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song.*  
 ("Two Formal Elegies")

The dead are the common property of Hill's early verse; his first book, *For the Unfallen* (1959), is a dark sounding of the teary inversions and lying solemnities of Laurence Binyon's anthology piece,

“For the Fallen” (“They went with songs to the battle, they were young, / Straight of limb, true of eye”). Under Hill’s hard scrutiny, poems for the dead are always for the living. Such recognition may recommend no ease or pleasure in the condition of speech, and the harshness and marmoreal coldness of Hill’s early work may be plundered by the critic in a way that seems chilling to the reader: Hill seems gripped by a mortuary lust. The first book, within its sweetly bitter ironies, has a number of thwarted love poems worked out in terms scarcely different from the battles and alarms:

*By such rites they saved love’s face, and such laws  
As prescribe mutual tolerance, charity  
To neighbours, strangers, those by nature  
Subdued among famines and difficult wars.*

This was called “The Troublesome Reign.” Thereafter love, unless sanctioned as “divine,” unless sainted in religious trapping, almost never returns to his work (except in deadly guise: “An owl plunges to its tryst / With a field-mouse”).

The complex guilts of Hill’s poetry are keenly judicial; the judgments in language are also the judgments of history and religion, of the gas chamber and the cross. His poetry, the most narrowly formed and most thinly and invariantly proposed of the major work of our late century, might be construed as a search for adequate authority, a search deviled by a skeptical mistrust of the common palliations of government, of religious practice, of language. The poetry attempts, in lonely and resistant fashion, to oppose their emollient nature, without being immune to their lure or unaware of the self-deceptions that afflict such a venture. The fable that informs his second book, *King Log* (1968), warns not just against the wish for such authority, but against the divine spirit who treats lowly creation with such cruel mockery. Dissatisfied with the log Zeus sent them when they asked for a king, Aesop’s frogs were even more unhappy with the ravenous stork that replaced it. A poet who both desires and distrusts authority, a poet of uncertain belief, should be wary of such morals.

*I love my work and my children. God  
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.  
Too near the ancient troughs of blood  
Innocence is no earthly weapon.*

*I have learned one thing: not to look down  
So much upon the damned. They, in their sphere,  
Harmonize strangely with the divine  
Love. I, in mine, celebrate the love-choir.*

Apart from an epigraph from the *Amores*, that is the whole of “Ovid in the Third Reich.” We do not know what Ovid saw or did at the court of Augustus that required his banishment to the Black Sea, nor do we know what he might have observed at the court of Hitler. His terrible punishment (to be removed from the sources of pleasure in his life, to be removed from his own language) and his abject and fruitless apologies make him a compelling symbol of the bitter fate that awaits poetic witness, however “innocent.” Those “ancient troughs of blood” recall the blood that gutters after battle, the blood guttering from ritual sacrifice, but also the blood-filled trench at which the hungry ghosts came to feed in the *Odyssey*. The sacrificial in Hill’s poetry summons the dead in like fashion. (The gods also want “gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice,” and surprisingly often in Hill’s work flesh is rendered disturbingly in terms of food.)

*King Log* is haunted by civil and uncivil wars, and most terribly by the War of the Roses. “Funeral Music,” the sonnet sequence dedicated to three of the noble and ignoble dead of those wars, is central to an achievement where blood sacrifices are never far from failures of government (both civil and personal) and are often potent in the misplaced faiths religion sets one against another. Hill has registered his ambition in this sequence for “a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks,” which might serve as a satanic description of the liturgy.

*They bespoke doomsday and they meant it by  
God, their curved metal rimming the low ridge.  
But few appearances are like this. Once  
Every five hundred years a comet’s*

*Over-riding stillness might reveal men  
 In such array, livid and featureless,  
 With England crouched beastwise beneath it all.  
 "Ob, that old northern business . . ." A field  
 After battle utters its own sound  
 Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.  
 Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable  
 Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly  
 Among carnage the most delicate souls  
 Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping "Jesus."*

This is the Battle of Towton, Palm Sunday, 1461, and Hill is minding fatalities more than facts. The sonnets have been hacked clean of rhyme, metrical favor, anything but the beastlike music of noun and adjective, two-faced ambiguity (*bespoke* also means *custom-made*) and cunning enjambment. The blood of battle and the blood of the marriage bed are set at one; the gasp of the death throes is one with the gasp of orgasm, both taking in vain (and taking vainly) the name of the Lord, from whom descends all possibility of resurrection.

Critics who would pigeonhole Hill all too conveniently as a conservative fail to understand the radical nature of his mistrusts, from which no complacent sentence is safe. All speech is unfaithful in its faiths. These early books are perhaps too greedily satisfied with the demands of rhetoric (a rhetoric calculated to make the reader feel unworthy of it), the forced phrases and hot solemnities all too reminiscent of the religiose high-mindedness of Allen Tate. Hill's childhood Christianity finds an austere outlet in his monkish faith in the phrase, the squalor of the said, the poet having fled the trappings, but never the traumas, of the religious urge. The thickened lines of Tate and the young Robert Lowell have the same soaked intensity that Hill labored to achieve (by influence, not indenture); having secured such brooding morality, he might have continued to offer, like his older contemporary Anthony Hecht (for whom the moral sources were Jewish, not Church of England), darker and darker variations in the secular shudder of religious guilt.

The discordant prose musics of *King Log* were shortly followed, however, by a sequence of prose poems at times a gleam with wit. (Hill would have made a ghoulish song-and-dance man—who would have thought he could be funny?) Without sacrificing the fastidiousness or ore-bearing density of his language, the thirty poems of *Mercian Hymns* (1971) put that language in service to an idea beyond moody requiem. The hymns are sung for, by, on behalf of Offa, the eighth-century ruler of the kingdom of Mercia, a figure whose achievements in coinage and brutal political union continue to preside over notions of Britain as a nation-state. Hill's Offa, however, lives into the present, a king of such gravity that time distorts around him: as Hill noted, this Offa “might . . . be regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands, his dominion enduring from the middle of the eighth century until the middle of the twentieth.”

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

*“I liked that,” said Offa, “sing it again.”*

The sudden, baffled displacements of this history betray the narrow respect for force and influence found in mere chronology. History is no neat laying down of sediments: we fail to understand the deep or abiding authority of an Offa if we do not see where the past still afflicts the present, not least in the perennial holly-groves (symbol of winter rebirth for pagan and Christian both). Offa has his thumb in every pie (the editors of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* further swelled his powers by annotating the M5, not as the main highway through the Midlands, but as a branch of British Intelligence—they were thinking of MI5). The complicities of the past with the present are not always immune to a downward spiral into sentiment and vulgarity, and the remains of the past often produce a mere fiction of the flesh.

*On the morning of the crowning we chorused our remission from school. It was like Easter: hankies and gift-mugs approved by his foreign gaze, the village-lintels curled with paper flags.*

*We gaped at the car-park of "The Stag's Head" where a bonfire of beer-crates and holly-boughs whistled above the tar. And the chef stood there, a king in his new-risen hat, sealing his brisk largesse with "any mustard?"*

The chef in his silly "new-risen hat" (white like risen dough, but also new-risen like Christ at Easter) reminds us that any man might be king, if the domain is small enough, though his kingly largesse may be reduced to sausages. Hill is keenly aware that in their fallen graces these "hymns" are to a lord secular, not spiritual. The wryness of this impiety, and the attendant commercial kitsch of "hankies and gift-mugs," honor the throne they impoverish. Majesty is also outward show, and without inner substance only a tarnished show. The bloated pomp and circumstance of royal investiture in Britain is a late Victorian invention: as the throne contracts, the need for empty display expands.

Into this welter, whose vulgarities are still heir to the richness of the past, is inserted the hobbled autobiography of the child Hill: "Dreamy, smug-faced, sick on outings—I who was taken to be a king of some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one." The child acts out dreams of kingship (dreams alluring to a child later tormented by rituals and sacrifices, and ritual sacrifice), and often retreats, "calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*." The childhood loneliness is at once ripe and wretched ("my rich and desolate childhood"), a shadow over the loneliness of the throne, which reveals some of the complex sources of Hill's poetic language. The wreckage of the truck bears, with a certain mercilessness, the ancient name of Britain, now derelict itself.

In *Mercian Hymns* Hill sacrificed the proud aloofness of his verse, its pure and chilly witness, for a private recital of those betrayals with which history cooperates and toward which history tends. It is difficult to understand modern England without knowing where it has been irrigated in ancient blood. The damaged ghosts of his past violated the antique boundaries of his verse; and

if his poetry has never again risked such half-embarrassed, half-guilty intimacies, it has never again been as moving or appealing.

The sonnets and devotional songs of *Tenebrae* (1978) are a mysterious coda to the themes of national decay and private despair in *Mercian Hymns*. Hill has always been hesitant (even hedging) in declaring his religious conviction: the three religious sequences in *Tenebrae* are cast in idioms of the counterfeit antique, of chemical patina applied like paste. They are repellent alike in their self-lacerating unworthiness and their eyes-lifted piety. Our laggard century has not discovered its religious idiom; neither is it likely to embrace one formed like this:

*As he is wounded  
I am hurt  
he bleeds from pride  
I from my heart*

*as he is dying  
I shall live  
in grief desiring  
still to grieve*

(“The Pentecost Castle”)

Hill’s sources, in Spanish lyrics of the Counter-Reformation, mix the sexual and the spiritual; but not even a church that has given its choirs up for guitars would find these the lyrics of its dogma or its doubt.

Even in the seven sonnets of “Lachrimae,” where Hill’s language returns to its cold depths and contortions, the religious despair is curiously hollow and unconvincing (the multiplication of the loaves and the abstractions), as if spurred to intensities beyond the idiom’s belief in itself:

*Crucified Lord, however much I burn  
to be enamoured of your paradise,  
knowing what ceases and what will not cease,  
frightened of hell, not knowing where to turn,*

*I fall between harsh grace and hurtful scorn.  
You are the crucified who crucifies,*



*self-withdrawn even from your own device,  
your trim-plugged body, wreath of rakish thorn.*

The “rakish thorn” and “trim-plugged body” restore, however briefly, a language of sardonic observation; but the rest sounds like a corpse trying to stuff its mouth with the religious canticles of Eliot.

What salvages a book of despairing secrecy and incontinent satisfactions is a series of sonnets on the underkingdom of English landscape, “An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England.” The title is grotesque and disfiguring, a further sign of the decline into pomposity; but not since the overripeness of Tennyson has anyone rendered so feverishly the doomed grandeurs of English nature.

*The pigeon purrs in the wood; the wood has gone;  
dark leaves that flick to silver in the gust,  
and the marsh-orchids and the heron's nest,  
goldgrimy shafts and pillars of the sun.*

*Weightless magnificence upholds the past.  
Cement recesses smell of fur and bone  
and berries wrinkle in the badger-run  
and wiry heath-fern scatters its fresh rust.*

*“O clap your hands” so that the dove takes flight,  
bursts through the leaves with an untidy sound,  
plunges its wings into the green twilight  
above this long-sought and forsaken ground,  
the half-built ruins of the new estate,  
warheads of mushrooms round the filter-pond.*

Hill has been roundly reproved for nostalgic complacency in these poems. The English landscape inspires something like the religious passion missing elsewhere, and the longing is so rich in its returns that it is easy to miss the quarrels and doubts that hedge such lushness. If he has partially succumbed to the hypnotizing glory of the past, he has provided warning against such temptations and the meat of a criticism (he posts his warnings by subject-

ing the reader to his temptations). The mushrooms are not necessarily dangerous, but our nuclear world has given Hill a dangerous image; to the extent that we must think of the former in terms of the latter we have forever lost our innocence.

One may be of two minds about Hill, but then one may be of two minds about paradise. He has the valor of his limitations, though some might call it the cowardice of his securities. Hill's themes have been constant (the infection of ancient bloods, abiding afflictions in the affections of landscape, the moral responsibilities of language, unworthiness before grace), but his attentions unpredictable. He has forced the marginal into our modes of attention, at the risk of seeming bizarre or merely idiosyncratic, and therefore a figure of margins himself. The subject of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) is a French Catholic socialist, deeply (and perhaps bloodily) embroiled in Parisian politics before the First World War. He was a beetroot nationalist, poet and magazine editor, the intellectual son of peasants, and died leading troops through a beetroot field in the Battle of the Marne. Here and elsewhere this new edition has destructively discarded many of Hill's original notes, without which his poems are even more inscrutable; there he disclosed the attractions in this lonely and unattractive figure, "self-excommunicate but adoring," who despite his estrangement from the Church made two pilgrimages to Chartres. Hill has made such pilgrimages himself.

*Péguy* begins with the assassination of Jean Jaurès, the socialist deputy who had been subject to Péguy's admiration, then his attack. Péguy had called for his blood in metaphorical terms, and a young madman had obliged by shooting Jaurès through the head.

*Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès  
dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares  
through the café-window crêped in powder-smoke?  
The bill for the new farce reads Sleepers Awake.*

*History commands the stage wielding a toy gun,  
rehearsing another scene. It has raged so before,  
countless times; and will do, countless times more,  
in the guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian.*

*In Brutus' name martyr and mountebank  
ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink  
painlessly spouting. Jaurès' blood lies stiff  
on menu-card, shirt-front and handkerchief.*

*Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite  
the assassin? Must men stand by what they write  
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry  
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?*

Such questions afflict a poet anxious that his words be more than gestures, worrying the responsibilities a poet takes on when he descends to the word. The language here responds to the cunning and stealth by which words keep their promises: the war has its aspect of farce—an ironically named *Sleepers Awake*, a matter of stage blood and stage villainy. The deaths are real, nevertheless, and the poetry keeps faith by breaking faith with the simply plain-spoken: matters spoken are never so plain.

The hundred quatrains of *Péguy*, in the brilliant, battered guile of half-rhyme and harsh pentameter, wind through questions of honor and repentance, and the root nationalisms of “militant-pastoral” France, in a profound meditation on faith and the artist’s responsibility. The most striking and demanding long poem in English after *Four Quartets*, it suffers its unsympathetic subject (in its droning repetitions even Péguy’s poetry was absurd) with a duty bordering on complacent nobility. A style so guilty of chilling ironies and cast-iron wit (what would Hill’s light verse be like?) is not likely to be accorded praise equal to its brilliance. That is itself an irony that would not escape a poet who often courts dislike with his despair. In such a book his varying powers have been drawn into new kinship, instead of being cousins squabbling over an old patch of ground.

Hill has an intelligence mortified by religious passion and goaded by lack of faith toward greater ecstasies in the only medium that can serve as the conduit of his trust: his language. I’m surprised not to find him drawn to the mysticism and misanthropy of some of the Counter-Enlightenment figures studied by Isaiah Berlin: Hamann, Herder, Vico, de Maistre. The British critics—most of

them—have always admired Hill, though the admiration has sometimes been molded in terms of disapproval (the disapproval of other critics has been molded in outright rage). Good poetry is rarely so unremittingly serious, and the style has usually broken (the lapses into self-parody are like smashed china) when it could not be bent. The great English love affair with Larkin (a silver cup only a little dented by the slanders and self-hatreds of the letters, the pornography of the life) is almost entirely a love of style, and of the character that style creates. The secret sharings of these otherwise antagonistic talents and opposing spirits include the love of English landscape, the hauntings of religion and religious places, the abiding in tradition, the self-loathing, the loneliness, the fear of death. They are used by their materials to different ends (and with different impurities), but not with different integrities. Had Hill been more affectionately regarded in Britain, he might not have spent the last half-dozen years teaching in the Department of Religion at Boston University. For a poet of such wary religious instincts, this is one further irony the age has demanded. The age is not yet ready to understand Hill in religious terms, and perhaps will not be until religion has been understood in Hill's terms.

The thirteen new poems included in this *New and Collected* are ghostly, even ghostly reminders of former themes, elegiac in tone, many of them memorials for figures public and private. Hill's muscled lines have been wasted with diet, and a few of the poems are inconsequential or indistinct (though the otherwise unmemorable "To the Nieuport Scout" may illuminate the incident of the lost biplane in *Mercian Hymns*). In "Cycle," for William Arrow-smith, the words have been splashed on the page like paint, or spilled like fallen leaves:

*So there    there it is    past*  
*reason and measure*  
*sustaining*  
*the constancy of mischance*  
*its occlusion*  
*a spasm*  
*a psalm*

Something imaginative has been foreclosed in such poems: they reek of a locked church.

A poet must be allowed something for his wintry beauty, and Hill's sequences for Aleksandr Blok and Churchill have a frozen reverence, moving in its damnations as well as in the pinched salvations of its language:

*The brazed city  
reorders its own  
destruction, admits  
the strutting lords  
to the temple,  
vandals of sprayed blood  
and oblivion  
to make their mark.*

*The spouting head  
spiked as prophetic  
is ancient news.  
Once more the keeper  
of the dung-gate  
tells his own story;  
so too the harlot  
of many tears.*

("Churchill's Funeral")

Here the poet has glimpsed savage possibility in the short line, tense with its clattering ambiguities ("The spouting head / spiked" might be a headline or a newspaper columnist, as well as the head of the prophet). No poet since Pound in *Mauberley* has packed short lines with such guarded weight or intonation. Nevertheless, the implication of these brief or broken lines is that the weight of speech has become an almost intolerable burden, that the words have begun to collapse in upon themselves. The poet of such broodings must feel the kinship with Beckett that these expressive inexpressions morosely claim.

Hill has been an uncomfortable figure for contemporary poetry,

resistant to the blandishments of “emotion” or appeal, proud in his lonely dignities as well as his reserves. His two books of criticism, *The Lords of Limit* (1984) and *The Enemy’s Country* (1991), are among the most painstaking, brilliant, and claustrophobic analyses of literature in our century, elaborate in their concern for the guilts and guiles of language and the moral recognitions of the word. Hill’s proud solitude and self-contempt have been subject to the poetry rather than subject of the poetry, in the current fashion (poets with standards make poets without them profoundly nervous). His style has been an outrage upon the glib decencies of recent verse. For this he has risked condemnation for a cold-blooded, reptilian manner—a style like “fatted marble,” to use one of his phrases—and the suspicion that he has aggrandized his guilts, that (like the reactionary poseur Mishima) he has poked the arrows of St. Sebastian into his own flesh. He is the last man in poetry to wear wig and breeches.

Poets have so lost the respect of the audience they once labored to please—the ordinary half-educated reader (most poets are themselves half-educated, and not unappealingly so)—that it is worth asking, not whether poets are any longer worthy of their audience, but whether that audience is any longer worthy of poets like Hill. Should poets continue to stumble down the levels of prose until they are speaking the language of the worm (or, to be fair, a language not even worthy of worms), or should they bear a language in the burden of its saying, a language where the force of words is the trust that language demands? Asking this, in his skepticism, eloquence, and power, Hill is as good as his word.