

CONTRA TYRANNOS

Geoffrey Hill. *A Treatise of Civil Power and Selected Poems*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

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One of Geoffrey Hill's centers of gravity is the literature of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the age of Hooker and Clarendon, of Milton and Dryden, to be sure, but also, let us not forget, of Campion and Southwell. No alert reader of Hill's new collection, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, will fail to catch the allusion to Milton's *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (1659), a powerful attack against the very idea of a state church. And only the reader properly attuned to Hill's writing will *not* think, all too quickly, that the title warns us that the poems hide behind the dusty veil of scholarly learning. Hill has often pointed us to another treatise of Milton's, his *Of Education* (1644), where we are told about the proper placing of poetry in the curriculum. It comes after logic and rhetoric—or so it would seem. For poetry “would be made subsequent, or indeed rather precedent, as being less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous and passionate.” The poet who writes lyrics with titles such as “Whether Moral Virtue Comes by Habituation” and “On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*” also claims that his poetry is not so much “subtle and fine” as “simple, sensuous and passionate.” It is one of the paradoxes that readers of Hill's poetry have pointed to, time and again, though whether they have always been right in doing so is another matter. After all, Hill has also noted his firm agreement with Hugh MacDiarmid who wanted, “a learned poetry wholly free / Of the brutal love of ignorance.” Can poetry be both “simple” and “learned?”

Hill's poetry has never sought to extract or excuse itself from the mire of historical circumstance. Many of his poems, both early and late, deal not only with particular events in English history but also (and more importantly) with the accommodations that art makes in its attempts to live in a world of politics and, at times, to intervene in it. His “Psalms of Assize” and his addresses “To the High Court of Parliament” from his spiky, coruscating collection *Canaan* (1996) are unique in contemporary poetry's varied attempts to find a convincing political voice, and Hill's voice does not allow its hard-won, fractured lyricism to be compromised. That Hill alludes to Milton in the title of his most recent collection can hardly come as a surprise. The great republican poet was also acknowledged in Hill's recent

Scenes from Comus (2005), where we are quietly told, right at the start, that the strong poet always writes “contra tyrannos.” The tyrant is the one who seeks to simplify what is inherently complex. It is the politician who simplifies to make life easier for his or her party; it is the priest who reduces the Gospel to what is acceptable to middle-class expectations; and it is the professor who does not teach students to respect nuance, shadow, intractable ambiguity, or that the stubborn particular case that cannot be absorbed by a bland general statement.

The enemy for Hill is simplification, not simplicity. And scholarly learning and elemental simplicity can be on the same side of the fight. It is a battle that Hill joins with passion, for he is deeply concerned with our common well being, in public and private life, to evoke a distinction that he would rightly deem to be divided and equivocal. One index of this concern is his evident love for the English language: its capacity for nuance, plasticity, and precision. Consider “*The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*,” a long poem published as a book in 1984. We find there a language of sensuous evocation: “the hawthorn-tree, / set with coagulate magnified flowers of may, / blooms in a haze of light.” And we also find a language of original declaration: “Landscape is like revelation; it is both / singular crystal and the remotest things.” And we find too a language of analysis: “To dispense, with justice; or, to dispense / with justice.” Yet poetry cannot be resolved into either magic or punctuation; it is, as Hill insists in *A Treatise of Civil Power*, “a mode of moral life.” What is meant by “moral life” here is, precisely, treating irreducibly complicated situations with justice, while never excusing evil on account of social complexity.

Take, for example, a short poem from *King Log* (1968), “Ovid in the Third Reich.” This eight-line lyric with an epigraph of two lines in Latin tells us even before we read its first word that we are dealing with “a learned poetry.” We begin by having to construe two lines from Ovid’s *Amores*: “non peccat, quaecumque potest peccasse negare, / solaque famosam culpa professa facit,” which might be rendered as “She does not sin who can deny having sinned / and only the fault revealed makes her a person of ill repute.” The poem reads as follows:

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.

The title and the epigraph immediately place Ovid, the urbane poet of the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*, in the context of Nazi Germany: we are forced to view the quest for artistic perfection in a world of moral horror. Everything Ovid says subtly convicts him: he takes shelter in bourgeois comforts, yet places his love for his work before his love for his children; the divine is rejected by dint of being “distant” (that is, transcendent) and “difficult” (perplexing, but also hard to please); and evil acts are passed off with the politician’s casual brush-off (“Things happen”). Innocence has no weight in the “real world” of politics and war, we are told, and at the same time we witness a misunderstanding of innocence when it is called a “weapon.” Ovid defends the practice of his art by insisting on a separation of spheres: the damned (those who sin against God and man) and the angelic (those who write immaculate lyrics or abstract themselves by other means from history), and appeases his conscience by affirming an unnoticed harmony between them. There are damned souls because God is just; and there are love poets because God, out of love, created men and women and told them to multiply. The mixture of passivity in the face of evil and active self-delusion as a mode of self-protection is at once horrid and all too common.

Far more could be said about this little poem, including that its attack on Ovid’s moral simplifications is presented simply enough. The English phrasing is straightforward, even when the lines look in more than one direction at the same time (“Too near the ancient troughs of blood / Innocence is no earthly weapon”). I underline one further thing implied in the poem, namely that poetry is capable of corrupting both poet and reader. It was Coleridge who noted in 1796, “Poetry—excites us to artificial feelings—makes us callous to real ones,” and the seductions of poetry are always before Hill. So too are the seductions of religious vision. An early poem from his first collection, *For the Unfallen* (1959), “God’s Little Mountain,” takes the young poet’s interest in art and religious vision together. The speaker has started to climb the mountain when it is shaken by thunder:

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.

(I pause to note that the new *Selected Poems* has “cloven,” as does *For the Unfallen*, while the earlier *Collected Poems* (1985) has “riven”: Hill retouches his poems, and in this case recurs to the more powerful, early phrasing.) No divine word is given to the speaker, and although he has something of a vision (“I saw the angels lifted like pale straws”) he falls and now “lacks grace” to tell us what he has seen. His tongue has become a stone. This is a lyric about the poet’s failure as both prophet (if the mountain is Mt Sinai) and poet (if the mountain is Mt Parnassus). “God’s Little Mountain” adumbrates Hill not as a poet of religious experience but as a poet who diagnoses failed or partial religious experience, especially when religion and art become entangled. And there is a faint joke, characteristic of Hill’s humor: a little mountain is a hill, and Geoffrey Hill is God’s “little mountain.”

Always when reading Hill’s poetry I hear the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas saying, in an astringent remark: “Art then lets go of the prey for the shadow.” Art, for Lévinas, is always a distraction from moral action. The artist, like a bird of prey, settles on an object of moral concern only to miss it in the very performance of art and to grasp its shadow instead: a poem, a painting, a sculpture, something frozen, perfect perhaps, but a temptation to depart from the moral life. “There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment,” Lévinas says. Few poets would agree with him; one who might, up to a certain point, is Hill, who speaks in *A Treatise* of “the pitiless wrench between / truth and meter.” In an earlier poem, “History as Poetry,” he evokes the “tongue’s atrocities,” perhaps half-inviting us to re-read “God’s Little Mountain,” and so to ponder whether having a tongue of stone is not wholly a bad thing, given the corrosion that writing poetry can bring to the soul. The poet who looks over the past and desires to recast it (in whole or part) as poetry invariably will try to turn human suffering into art and, in doing so, become like Hill’s Ovid. Each elegy, as Hill implies in “September Song” (another memorable lyric from *King Log*), trades someone’s misery for one’s own aesthetic pleasures, and reveals the poet also playing with his own death for the applause of anyone who cares to read.

Only a sharp awareness of the moral dubiousness of poetry can make the writing of poetry “a mode of moral life.” In his finest books—*King Log* (1968), *Tenebrae* (1978), *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1984) and *Canaan* (1996)—Hill is acutely aware of how art enters into dialectical relationships with religion and ethics, often to their detriment. Not that religion needs art in order to be seduced; it can do that entirely by itself and on its own terms. Hill writes of “Ash-Wednesday feasts, ascetic opulence,”

knowing very well how the denial of the sensuous can become a perverse way of achieving sensuous gratification. “Lachrimae” explores this in piercing ways, and it is regrettable that the entire sequence is not reprinted in this new *Selected Poems*. Yet Hill is not paralyzed by constitutive aporias in the writing of poetry about matters of moral and religious importance. He points to exemplary moral decisions and moral lives. If he has an element of the martyriologist in him, he also has more than a little of the hagiographer as well. Needless to say, Hill has subjected both things to an intense scrutiny: the martyr (like Southwell) is always in danger of offering ultimate testimony for the wrong reason or in the wrong way, and the saint (like Fajuyi) is sometimes a person with no halo, whether round or square.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Germans for his part in the plot to kill Hitler, is one of Hill’s uncanonized saints. Consider the final stanza of “Christmas Trees,” the last poem from *Tenebrae* that Hill includes in the new *Selected Poems*:

Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late.

In *Speech! Speech!* (2000) Hill points to Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, tortured and killed in Nigeria for not giving up his guest to a group of murderers, as another exemplary individual:

Not to forget Colonel Fajuri, dead
before I arrived (having lost out to Customs).
That means I was robbed; a sweat-pulped cache
of small ten-shilling notes (Nigerian). He
had worse things to contend with. I don’t doubt
his courage, his slow dying—smell my fear! —
protracted hide and seek to the bushed kill.

And in *A Treatise* Willy Brandt is also offered to us to be admired for a single gesture of moral purity. What moves Hill is that when the Chancellor of West Germany arrived at the monument to victims of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising he fell to his knees:

There is the captioned Wall;
there the Reichstag, the Brandenburger Tor
variously refurbished, with and without wire;
there’s Willy Brandt kneeling at the Ghetto Memorial
on his visit to Warsaw, December of Nineteen Seventy:

I did what people do when words fail them.

One thing that can be noted in these three quotations is that Hill gives up his quest for formal perfection in verse for something that is at first loose and prosy and then, as he says elsewhere in *A Treatise*, for something “direct and angular.”

Hill’s experiment with verse in *Speech! Speech!* (2000) is a failure; the book is leaden. *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) is a partial recovery, while each of *Scenes from Comus* (2005) and *Without Title* (2006) marks a further regaining of poetic strength. In *A Treatise* Hill reflects from time to time on his earlier work, pointing to a zest for “ambiguity in plain speaking,” and a fondness for “the line...that quickens to delay.” True, at times Hill’s commitment to verbal density makes some poems rather muscle-bound, and his flair for paradoxes can generate some mechanical lines (“You are beyond me, innermost true light”). Perhaps it is an awareness of such tendencies that has given him, in age, an “Urge to unmake / all wrought finalities.” If so, it is a pity. The wrought finalities are often wonderful.

The rapidity of Hill’s production in the last ten years or so has been astonishing, especially for a poet whose finest work has been so finely caressed before being presented to the public. New influences have been either inappropriate (Frank O’Hara), not properly digested (Eugenio Montale), or have become absorbed as mannerisms (Gerard Manley Hopkins); and while Hill is entirely right to say that “invention reinvents itself” it does not follow that all reinventions of the self are memorable or even worthwhile. *A Treatise of Civil Power* shows Hill returning to something like his previous form, and adjusting his old centers of gravity in doing so. The title poem is impressive, as is (in the mile, if not always in the inch) “In Memoriam: Gilliam Rose,” along with several other shorter pieces. The bulk of his success, though, remains the sequence of books from *King Log* to *Canaan*.

Inevitably, then, *Selected Poems* is the stronger volume of the two. It contains inescapably major poems, too many to list, although I cannot help but name “September Song,” “Funeral Music” and “*The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*.” I regret that some of Hill’s most demanding and enduring sequences are merely excerpted here, especially “Lachrimae” and “An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England.” The inclusion of many pages from *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon* dilute the book as a whole. In truth, Hill’s finest single volume is the *Collected Poems* of 1985. Add *Canaan* to that, and perhaps a handful of the later poems, and we have a major poet.