

A LORD OF LIMIT

Geoffrey Hill. *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes. Oxford University Press. 2008.

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One can imagine a book by Geoffrey Hill entitled *Collected Critical Writings* that contains both his essays and many of his poems. It would include, like the volume under review, *The Lords of Limit* (1984), *The Enemy's Country* (1991), *Style and Faith* (2003), and two previously uncollected series of lectures that were conceived as books, *Inventions of Value* and *Alienated Majesty*. Yet it would also gather together individual collections of verse from *For the Unfallen* (1959) to *Canaan* (1996). For they too are "critical writings," their imaginative reach being one with their criticism of life in general and their criticism of poetry's longings to speak beyond its proper limits in particular. Despite individual lyrics in the more recent collections, Hill's later poetry does not exemplify, as his best earlier poetry so splendidly does, Pound's dictum: "The poet's job is to *define* and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root of justice" (quoted, p. 4). Were we to suppose that the later criticism falls off at the same rate as the later poetry, though, we would be very much mistaken. As a writer of critical prose, Hill at his best remains as tough-minded and incisive as he has ever been. It is as though Hill the older poet is only half-listening to Hill the mature critic when the latter tells us that, "the great poem moves us to assent as much by the integrity of its final imperfection as by the amazing grace of its detailed perfection" (p. 477). A poem such as "September Song" or "Funeral Music" or "Lachrimæ" is eloquent in its "final imperfection" as well as in its "detailed perfection." One cannot say the same for the poems of *Speech! Speech!* (2000) or for a great many that have come after it. Here the notion of "final imperfection" has become a gesture, not a hard-won consequence of moral inquiry.

The young Hill was as gripped by perfection in his prose as in his verse, and was accordingly sparing in his production of both. *The Lords of Limit* contains nine essays, only five of which had appeared in print before he gave his inaugural lecture "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" on assuming the Chair of English Literature at the University of Leeds in the December of 1977. True, Hill had also published short pieces in little magazines, several reviews and review essays in scholarly journals, and his first three collections of poetry. Nonetheless, it is hard to imagine today how a scholar forty-five

years of age could be appointed to a Chair on the basis of only five solid essays. Yet those five essays—on Jonson, Shakespeare, Swift, the diverse world of nineteenth-century British writing, and the idealist philosopher T. H. Green—remain astringent, probing and illuminating, which can scarcely be said of the first essays of most professors of English thirty years after they were written. Not only is Hill's critical acuity evident in every paragraph of these five essays but also they reach, with impressive ease, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, and deal with drama and poetry, prose fiction and prose non-fiction. When one adds the other four essays that make up *The Lords of Limit*—analyses of Southwell, John Ransom, and J. L. Austin, not to mention the inaugural lecture—it is clear that we are in the presence of a mind of unusual power and scope.

It is also a mind that is unusually self-conscious. The inaugural lecture shows Hill at both his best and most characteristic as a critic, which in his case seldom converges with best and worst. There are no moments of bad criticism in Hill, although there are times when one could have wished him to be less crotchety, less tangled, and less inclined to take his own poetic practice as a norm for all poetry. Consider the first piece in *The Lords of Limit*, "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement.'" It is a wide-ranging essay in which several chords we will come to recognize as Hill's leitmotifs are played by way of quotation. First, we hear Milton's statement that poetry is "more simple, sensuous and passionate" than rhetoric. And second, we are reminded of Coleridge's observation, "Poetry—excites us to artificial feelings—makes us callous to real ones." In the *Collected Critical Writings*, though, one will not hear the first chord: Hill has lightly revised "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" and removed the quotation from *Of Education* (1644), doubtless thinking that he has cited it sufficiently often over his writing career. The emphasis on "atonement" and "menace" remains, and serves to guide us through the thirty-three essays that follow it. The two words in the title are important: each in its own way speaks of sin. Hill is a rare critic, even among those who work in "religion and literature," in that he affirms the doctrine of original sin in all its terrible weight. The word "sin" sounds time and again in this volume, even though it is now written with a lower-case "s." In *The Lords of Limit* Hill wrote "Sin" in the opening essay, the unnecessary capital letter turning an old concept into an allegorical figure, and suggesting a dark intensity that is now lost. The prophet has truly become a professor.

In "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" Hill quotes the second edition of Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* (1921). The young theologian tells us there that sin is the "specific gravity of human nature as such" (quoted,

p. 17). It is a memorable expression, but Hill leaves it unclear what he has in mind in quoting it. For his source he cites an essay by another scholar who quotes the expression, and one must assume that Hill has not read *The Epistle to the Romans*. So it is unlikely that Hill has in mind the exact cut of Barth's distinction between Grace and sin, or anything in Barth's early theology; and we simply do not know if Hill takes "specific gravity" to be the burden of original sin, the weight of actual sin, or the concupiscence that remains after baptism. In this passage, at least, we are dealing with a magpie, not a scholar. He uses Barth's line when making a large mannered formulation. "I am suggesting," he says, "that it is at the heart of this 'heaviness' that poetry must do its atoning work, this heaviness which is simultaneously the 'density' of language and the 'specific gravity of human nature' (p. 17). If Hill is really talking about sin, then "atonement" must refer to how the debt of sin is discharged. Yet he does no such thing. He never truly removes the quotation marks from "atonement," and redefines the word as "the technical perfecting of a poem...in the radical etymological sense—an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony" (p. 4).

Now in the hands of a good poet, technique is very seldom just mere technique; it is the sharp point of a shaping moral intelligence. Scrupulous writing cannot atone for sin. It may, however, minimize the gap between aesthetic and moral judgments, a gap that is a consequence of sin, and produce a sense of at-one-ment for writer and reader alike. One may well wonder why a venerable theological word such as "atonement" is being evoked if it is to be used only in another sense. The best that Hill can tell us is that poetry not only provides "atonement" but also continually risks being a moral menace: enabling, even encouraging, the displacement of moral categories by aesthetic ones, and thereby calling for acts of penitence from the author, sometimes in the poem itself. It is a variation on the project of Jena Romanticism. Where the brothers Schlegel brightly insisted that the poem must include its own theory, Hill instructs us that the poem must include its own act of penitence. The one gives us the "literary absolute"; the other gives us the penitential conditional: we are never fully absolved in the world of Geoffrey Hill.

Poetry, for Hill, can offer at best limited "atonement": not salvation only for the elect but a partial closing of the gulf between aesthetic and moral judgments. This is put as clearly in the sonnet sequence "Lachrimæ" as it is in the inaugural lecture or in any of the essays that follow it in this volume. One could wish that "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" guarded its thesis less anxiously and devoted more time to define and test its central

terms. Does Hill need to evoke theological categories in order to make his point, or could he make do perfectly well with the distinctions of ethics? Probably the latter, although his conviction that human beings are fallen creatures explains why one cannot ever completely close the gap between aesthetic and moral judgments. And so he brings a theological perspective to literature, and is not shy of criticizing others who have done the same. “The major caveat which I would enter against a theological view of literature is that, too often, it is not theology at all, but merely a restatement of the neo-Symbolist mystique celebrating verbal mastery” (pp. 18-19). Quite so; but when Hill talks with conviction of sin and then introduces the concept of atonement solely in the register of poetic technique one may well surmise that he is biting off less than he should try to chew. In pages that could situate a consequence of sin—the very gap between aesthetic and moral judgments—in a theological context, we have instead several fidgety paragraphs that attempt to display a mastery of literature. Olson, Baudelaire, Eliot, Péguy, H. A. Williams, Jeremy Taylor, Jarrett-Kerr, Stevens, Arnold, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Yeats, Rilke, P. T. Forsyth, Steiner, and Empson: all are named in a few pages and little more than named. Perhaps it is best to say that Hill is an essayist, given to empirical criticism and suggestion, and not a writer of books that elaborate a sustained argument.

It is often in local moments of reading a text that Hill shows his highest value as a critic. When reading Swift’s “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed,” for example, he quotes the following lines:

The Nymph, tho’ in this mangled Plight,
 Must ev’ry Morn her Limbs unite.
 But how shall I describe her Arts
 To recollect the scatter’d Parts?
 Or shew the Anguish, Toil, and Pain,
 Of gath’ring up herself again?
 The bashful Muse will never bear
 In such a Scene to interfere.
 Corinna in the Morning dizen’d,
 Who sees, will spew; who smells, be poison’d.

Hill comments: “The perfect dryness of ‘recollect’, the peremptory burlesque of the eighteenth-century colloquial rhyme ‘dizen’d’ / ‘poison’d’, have complete control over the plangencies of ‘Anguish, Toil, and Pain’” (p. 84). So they have, yet only Hill has seen it so clearly. Hill is similarly good in another mode: thinking how best to approach the style of an author. Consider his comments on Robert Southwell, not the easiest of poets to reckon with in this regard. “Style is not simply the manner in which a writer ‘says

what he has to say'; it is also the manner of his choosing not to say. There is a distinction to be drawn here between the manner of not-saying and the demeanour of silence" (p. 9). That is perfectly put, and of more general application than reading Southwell.

When we move forward to "Language, Suffering, and Silence" (1998), we find Hill still talking about "religion and literature," although his general thoughts about it seem not to have developed over the years. "If I were to consider undertaking a theology of language, this would be one of a number of possible points of departure for such an exploration: the abrupt, unlooked-for semantic recognition understood as corresponding to an act of mercy or grace" (p. 404). We have not moved far from thinking of poetic technique, when deployed properly, as "atonement," although other theological terms are now invoked. At the level of ideas, Hill prefers to stay at the beginning. He is too skeptical of systems and too attentive to literary texture to pass from literature to thinking theologically about literature. So *Style and Faith* offers only some gnomic general remarks on the subject. "With Donne, style *is* faith: a measure of delivery that confesses his own inordinacy while remaining in all things ordinate. To state this is to affirm one's recognition of his particular authority in having achieved the equation; one recognizes also such authority in Milton and Herbert. They are not, generally, otherwise to be equated" (pp. 263-64). A writer's style is one with his or her character, to be sure (which makes the desire to "change style" a moral issue), and a writer of tested religious convictions will not change styles except as a consequence of deepening his or her faith or adjusting the object of that faith. Perhaps this is what Hill means here. Yet it is odd that someone who broods over the word "or" (p. 100) and has smart things to say about the semi-colon (p. 393) relies rather lazily on italics to give the impression of a conclusive case being made in the book that follows the preface. Not even a word about *fides qua* and *fides quæ* is given, and without due attention to that distinction one will not have much that is precise to say about faith.

Hill is perhaps more deeply committed to "literature and politics" (taken broadly) than to "literature and religion". *The Enemy's Country* is dense, eloquent testimony of his sense of how literature is embedded, often in an angular way, in the common weal. "Civil polity...is poetry's natural habitat" (p. 518), he says in the later *Alienated Majesty*, lectures he once delivered at the University of Notre Dame, and chooses his words with care. Ecclesiastical polity is presumably not poetry's natural habitat. It may have been for Herbert and possibly for the Eliot of "Ash-Wednesday" and "Four Quartets" but not for most strong poets. "A system of ethics, if thorough, is

explicitly or implicitly a system of theology,” Eliot wrote in his dissertation on F. H. Bradley. To which Hill responds, with reason, “This is debatable to say the least” (p. 551), although he characteristically does not continue the paragraph by following the initial idea, as one could do in different ways with the help of Aquinas, Kant or Kierkegaard, to give only three inevitable names. Rather, Hill modulates to a suggestion that there is a connection between Bradley’s “sceptical idealism” and Anglo-Catholicism, followed by a doubt that Eliot was truly interested in philosophical or theological *systems*, followed in turn by a condescending remark about Bradley’s prose style (“the odd glissades and cornerings of Bradley’s prose: ‘what in morality only is to be, in religion somehow and somewhere really is, and what we are to do is done’” (p. 551)), a prose style that was the basis for Eliot’s own. It is characteristic of Hill as critic that he prefers not to engage at length with ideas and looks instead for a nice quibble or a severe remark.

There are long passages in Hill’s essays, early and late, when he seems continually cross. He sounds then rather like a Master in a British public school a century ago, a character somewhere in the range of the first volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time*: a fastidious philologist who once earned a decent first at Oxford and who is prone to throw a tantrum when boys in the lower fifth make a loose remark about Hooker. Christopher Ricks turns out to be one of those inattentive boys when Hill turns to him towards the end of “Dividing Legacies” (1996) to rebuke him for having the temerity to admire Philip Larkin’s poems. “I would ask him to place his ‘generous common humanity’ within the field of Hooker’s common equivocation and to determine how much weight and pressure that generous humanity can sustain” (p. 379). Ecclesiastical polity might not be poetry’s natural habitat but there are times, it seems, when it can be of use to literary criticism. Yet why should one choose Hooker here? One could put “generous common humanity” in the frame of St Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*, especially the *prima secundæ partis* and the *secunda secundæ partis*, and see how well it fares. And then one could put Hooker’s treatment of “common equivocation” in the same frame and see how well *it* does. The example of Aquinas here merely helps to make a point: Hill’s choice of Hooker in this context, and of one particular aspect of Hooker, is a figure for Hill himself.

What Hill dislikes about Larkin, and the Eliot of “Four Quartets” before him, is their lack of “pitch.” The word comes to him from Hopkins, a poet who has always been close to Hill. In his remarkable review of the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Hill chides the editors in their entry on this word. “In recent years there have been scholarly glosses on the peculiar meaning Hopkins gave to this word (for example, in Peter

Milward's *A Commentary on... 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'* [1968]), which the compilers of the *O-SCZ Supplement* (1982) appear not to have considered" (p. 267). Perhaps those poor benighted souls were indeed unaware of this fine commentary published by the Hokuseido Press of Tokyo in 1968. Milward notes the implication of "the peculiar meaning Hopkins gives to the word, when he speaks of 'this unspeakable stress of *pitch*, distinctiveness and selving, this selfbeing of my own'" (*A Commentary on G. M. Hopkins' 'The Wreck of the Deutschland,'* p. 86). Hill is entirely right to point to the value of this word for criticism, although he makes very heavy weather of it and leaves the word remaining more suggestive than well defined. In the process he bypasses Derrida's sense of the word "idiom" which does some of the same work as "pitch." All he can muster in the direction of contemporary French criticism is the silly remark, "Since I do not believe that 'texts' write themselves, I am here considering a quality of Wordsworth's intelligence and personality" (p. 390). Of course, if Hill had bothered to read a page by Derrida or even Foucault he would have discovered that no one has ever said that texts write themselves, and that the claim at issue is a complex one in the philosophy of the human subject, one that deserves close inspection and not a flip journalistic response.

And yet Hill is no enemy of the complex. Indeed, he is one of our most articulate and insistent defenders of the difficult. Like Hugh MacDiarmid, he desires "A learned poetry wholly free / From the brutal love of ignorance" (quoted, p. 173). And he brings Hopkins quickly to his defense in the poet's letter to Bridges of November 6, 1887: "Plainly if it is possible to express a sub[t]le and recondite thought on a subtle and recondite subject in a subtle and recondite way and with great felicity and perfection, in the end, something must be sacrificed, and with so trying a task, in the process, and this may be the being at once, nay perhaps even the being without explanation at all, intelligible" (quoted, p. 98). My one caveat here is not to do with difficulty, or even with Hill's testy reproaches to those who plead for the "accessible" (for example, Isobel Rivers' concession not to take the reader's knowledge of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British culture for granted, and the decision to use modern spelling in the new edition of Tyndale's translation of the New Testament). Rather, my concern is with the underlying assumption that runs through Hill's criticism that "difficulty" characterizes the best literature and the best ideas. There are times when the most telling word to use of a poem may be "rich" or (with caution) "mysterious" but not "difficult." Strong literature always requires the most its readers can give, and sometimes quite considerable effort and labor are called for on the part of the reader. But one reduces literature to just one of its many



modes of being when one approaches it solely with the word “difficult” or chastises its authors for not being sufficiently “difficult” in their compositions. One reads Larkin poorly when one reads him with the expectation that his poems will give themselves in the same ways that Hill’s early poems give themselves to us. One reads “Four Quartets” weakly when one expects Eliot to write his last poems in the same way he wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” There are distinctions other than the one between “menace” and “atonement” that can guide us when reading poetry, although, to be sure, it is Hill’s genius that he has compelled us to see so much literature in terms of that distinction and all it has spawned for him.

