

The Early Work of Geoffrey
Hill Part 1:
For the Unfallen

by J.D. Hughes



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WHAT TO READ

Poetry

Broken Hierarchies: Collected Poems 1952-2012; Kenneth Haynes ed.

- This is the definitive edition of Hill's poetry. *Selected Poems* (Penguin, 2006) is readily available and sensibly priced, but lacks an introduction and index and over-emphasises the later work.

Further Reading

Andrew Michael Roberts; *Writers and Their Work: Geoffrey Hill*; Tavistock, 2004.

Harold Bloom ed.; *Geoffrey Hill: Modern Critical Views*; New York, 1986.

Jeffrey Wainwright; *Acceptable Words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill*; Manchester, 2005.

Vincent Sherry; *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill*; Michigan, 1987.

Hill's prose writings are largely beyond the scope of A Level students and not for the faint-hearted. The brave, however, are well-served by Kenneth Haynes' edition of his works (*Geoffrey Hill, Collected Critical Writings*; Oxford, 2008).

Beyond this brief list, the bibliography found at the foot of <http://geoffreyhillzinger.blogspot.co.uk/> is helpfully categorized and fairly comprehensive.

SCOPE OF TOPIC

There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

Walter Benjamin, '*Theses on The Philosophy of History*'

Genesis: in the beginning were the words. And *these* words, part of Hill's first published poem, prophetically underscore many of the concerns that would occupy the poet for the next two decades:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.

This is Hill's **Genesis**, and his genesis. The poet sets our "hot" blood (the various passions of battle, violence and sex) next to the "cold" (more calculating yet equally 'bloody' actions) and invests the words with a further meaning through the following, two-edged phrase: "by blood we live". The preposition suggests that we live "by" – that is, both alongside and by means of - these two aspects of our nature. Moreover, they are central to our governance, destruction and (re)population of the environment in which we live: they are how we both "ravage and redeem the world". Additionally, violence seems bound up with our cultural identities and memories: "There is no bloodless myth will hold."

Part One of this **Bookmark** takes as its scope the first published collection of Hill's work, *For The Unfallen* (**Part Two** looks at *King Log*) and, as shown in the brief analysis of the lines above, seeks to demonstrate the poet's working out of central concerns and attitudes. Specifically, these are violence, myth, elegy, and the "varied dead" of history - it is not for nothing that Harold Bloom has called Hill "a martyrologist" (1). These ideas are found in reflections on the violence already inherent in the newly created world, the brutality of medieval warfare, and the problematic nature of 'poeticising' the Holocaust. Indeed, Hill's work seems to bear out Benjamin's assertion that "there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism".

NOTES

To begin (again) at the beginning: **Genesis** opens *For The Unfallen*, Hill's first collection, and strikes a number of important opening notes. Section V has been briefly discussed already, but it is necessary to look at the poem as a whole to recognise the start of a recurring pattern. The speaker begins with an arresting image:

Against the burly air I strode
Crying the miracles of God.

"Against" immediately signposts the idea of opposition or struggle, subsequently developed in the oxymoron of "burly air". The atmosphere itself is almost pugilistic in quality, befitting the conflict and violence seen later in the poem. This problematizes the start of line 2: what is meant by the speaker's "Crying"? It can variously be interpreted as an act of praise, sorrow, opposition, or an expression of physical pain. All somehow seem present together. Certainly, the fecundity of the water, where "the waves flourish" and the "rivers spawn", is celebrated, only immediately to be juxtaposed against the struggle of its inhabitants:

The tough pig-headed salmon strove
Ramming the ebb

The ferocity of the description is emphasised by the initial trochee of "Ramming": a reversal of syllabic direction which neatly mimics the salmon swimming against the tide. Already, this is a creation a little red in tooth and claw. And it is explicitly that Tennysonian image which Hill echoes in the first quatrain of Section II:

The second day I stood and saw
The osprey plunge with triggered claw
Feathering blood along the shore
To lay the living sinew bare.

The savagery is graphic – the "sinew" is "living", and the blood is spattered "along the shore" – but there are also some telling nods in other directions. First, the "triggered claw" of the bird seems a metaphorical forerunner of the mechanised murders of the Nazis examined in both *For The Unfallen* and *King Log*. Secondly, "bodies hooped in steel" anticipates the poems in both collections which deal with the conflicts of the Plantagenets and the Wars of The Roses.

The various bloody images of the poem find their conclusion in "Christ's blood" – a blood which "ma[kes] free". Furthermore, it is only the violent nature of this sacrifice which has enabled it to "hold". Here we have another example of one of Hill's favoured techniques: the pun or double meaning. In this case, "hold" suggests both the act of sticking in our memories, and 'holding fast' or remaining effective. Our status as Christians (in cultural heritage, if not necessarily belief) is 'held' by the image of Jesus' brutal death. Likewise, our status as living creatures is maintained by the violent means through which we "ravage and

redeem the world". This is what Hill's early work seeks to "cry"; to explore what Bloom has termed "the daemonic relationship between cultural tradition and human pain (1)."

This relationship is the subject of two further poems in ***For The Unfallen: The Distant Fury of Battle*** and ***Requiem For The Plantagenet Kings***. ***The Distant Fury of Battle*** seems superficially a consideration of death in war, and a gesture towards the Wars of the Roses poems that follow, but the real 'battle' in this poem is not *of*, but rather *with*, the dead. There can be no winner here, either: as the speaker puts it in line 10, "There are pacts made, if not peace." The language suggests a temporary agreement ("pacts") rather than a permanent end to hostilities ("peace"), and these are also compromises made only "under licence and duress". The words "under licence" allude to the poet's role: there is an echo of 'poetic licence', and hence freedom, but Hill also exploits the other sense of the word - specifically, a permit to do something requiring responsibility (e.g. a driving licence). The poem negotiates between his "licence" to tell it as he pleases and his responsibility or obligation ("duress") to adopt the role of "leader" and make "Union".

The next poem in the collection, ***Requiem For The Plantagenet Kings***, places these relatively abstract concerns into a specific historical context. From the accession of Henry II in 1154 until the (fittingly murderous) death of Richard II in 1399, the Plantagenet dynasty presided over a series of conflicts at home and abroad. Hill's poem articulates the problematic nature of their legacy, implicitly acknowledging their transformation of the state, while also counting the cost. Indeed, while historian Dan Jones has stated that the Plantagenets were responsible for no less than the idea of England (2), Vincent Sherry has argued that Hill's poem shows that "their falsely written histories cannot be trusted." (3) Certainly, the range of potential puns and ambiguities from the outset of the sonnet suggests both perspectives:

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.

The sea is "possessed" in terms of harbouring death bodies and in terms of political territory - the wars with France and Scotland. It "litter[s].../Ruinous arms" in the sense of distributing damaging weapons and (subsequently) "ruin[ed]" limbs. The phrase "for good" likewise interpolates the senses of 'for benefit' and 'permanently', while "just wars" can be read as 'righteous conflicts' or 'simply violence'. In short, the problematic link between statecraft and savagery is established through plays on words. Moreover, the neatly crafted and rhymed nature of the quatrain seems to ironise its ambiguity, and hints at the status of something artificially crafted after the event - which is the subject of lines 7-9:

At home, under caved chantries, set in trust,
With well-dressed alabaster and proved spurs
They lie; they lie; secure...

Now "set" (quite literally) in a position of "trust", the Plantagenets have constructed for themselves not merely tombs but reputations, which allow them to "lie...lie...secure"; the double meaning of "lie" is highlighted by the repetition. Furthermore, the architectural completeness of "caved chantries" and "well-dressed alabaster" stands in contrast to the maiming violence the tombs' inhabitants oversaw:

...blood, blood-marks, crowns hacked and coveted,
...sleeked groin, gored head

The register here is deliberately gory. More important, though, is the play on "crowns". The "covet[ing]" of royal power, for which the first sense of "crowns" is a metonymy, leads to the "hack[ing]" of heads - the second sense of "crowns". In addition, "coveted" finds its first rhyme in "gored head" and its second in "dead". This, along with the movement from a

polysyllabic to a thumpingly monosyllabic rhyme in the very last word of the poem, surely cements the idea: the “end” of this kind of politics is death. Elegising a civilising dynasty means finding a way to reconcile civil achievement and severed limbs.

Hill sets himself an even tougher task in the next two poems in ***For The Unfallen, Two Formal Elegies (For the Jews in Europe)***. If we follow Adorno - writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric - then writing poetry *about* the Holocaust should be even more so. But responding to such a catastrophic event is also a civil responsibility (a favourite topic of Hill's prose works). The challenge, as Sherry puts it, is to avoid the “falsification” by which “a sordid historical reality may be forced into a pleasant aesthetic fiction.” (3) From the beginning, though, Hill's elegies seem aware of this danger: “Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed...//...we grasp, roughly, the song. (**Elegy I**). In “disposed”, we encounter one of Hill's grimmest puns: it denotes both how the bodies of the Jews were disposed *of*, and how we today are ‘disposed’ to the matter. This highlights the poet's awareness of how delicate a balance he has to strike: the subject matter makes all language unusually charged. Consequently, the answer is to dive in; to “grasp roughly” and avoid the “arrogant acceptance” which would be a complicity in “blood”. There is also a suggestion that any “song” should be “rough” and avoid the danger, stated by Sherry, of over-aestheticizing horror. Comparably, even official memorials are grossly inadequate:

To put up stones ensures some sacrifice.
Sufficient men confer, carry their weight. (**Elegy II**)

There is “some sacrifice”, but it is limited, measured, and in “sufficient” – just enough and no more – we are called forward to **September Song (King Log)**, where “Things marched, sufficient” to the death of a child at the hands of the Nazis. There is something similarly calculating, it is implied, about both the Holocaust and any potential response to it. Just as the requisite amount of poison gas was worked out by the SS, so must the dimensions and “weight” of the memorial stones, or any poem.

The artist and his responsibility is arguably the major theme of ‘Of Commerce and Society: Variations on a Theme’, the series of poems which moves us towards the end of ***For The Unfallen***. Sherry has argued that these poems show how Hill rejects “The middle class faith in human progress” and likewise the art that such a belief produces, which he (for Sherry) condemns as “bourgeois, cozy, banal ... the facile perfections of civil eloquence” (3). In **I: The Apostles: Versailles 1919**, the characters are “apostles” for the ‘faith’ of materialism, and their detachment from civil events is clear:

They sat. They stood about.
They were estranged. The air,
As water curdles from clear,
Fleshed the silence. They sat.

In the repeated “They sat”, and the derisory “They stood about”, the speaker shows the “estrang[ement]” of these disciples. They make no effort to become involved, being “silen[t]”, and their uninterested approach is reflected by the perfunctory syntax of the opening line. As a consequence of the beliefs of such ‘apostles’ and others like them, the result of Versailles is “facile ... civil eloquence”; a “hollowed Europe spilt / To the gods of coin and salt.” The Europe of 1919 is “hollowed” by being eviscerated by war and by a lack of culture. The “gods of coin and salt” are essentially the ‘gods’ of money: salt has historically been a form of currency. In addition, Hill possibly alludes to Leviticus (2:13), where the faithful are instructed to season their burnt offerings with salt. If so, this carries a dreadful implication in the context of the slaughter of 1914-8, almost imaging the war dead as society's willing sacrifice to the deities of material gain.

The second poem in the sequence, **2: The Lowlands of Holland**, develops the theme of how Europe sacrifices its young. The title comes from an 18th century British folk-song, which

describes the conscription of a newly-married man. The result of conscription and conflict is a continent maimed and empty: it is "much-scarred" and "much scoured", although the terms could also apply to the survivors of war. Additionally, "scoured" carries connotations not only of being abraded, but also of being carefully examined, presumably for items of value – almost an image of looters on the battlefield. In the first two stanzas, Hill creates two contrasting lexical fields; those of being well-fed ("stuffed", "replete", "ample"), and capitalist trade ("produce", "Labelled", "profiting" and "use"). It can be inferred that this is a Europe which has over-indulged in both greed and war, growing fat on commerce and the slaughter of its youth. We should consider the poem's conclusion:

Witness many devices; the few natural
Corruptions, graftings; witness classic falls
(The dead subtracted; the greatest resigned);
Witness earth fertilized, decently drained,
The sea decent again behind walls.

Here, "devices" suggests artificiality and perhaps trickery, while the idea that "few" of the present "Corruptions" are "natural" implies the majority are *unnatural*. And while the poem as a whole generally echoes Pound's **Hugh Selwyn Mauberley**, Hill's phrase "the greatest resigned" reminds us of the speaker's conviction in Yeats' **The Second Coming** that "the best lack all conviction". The suspicion of a deliberate reference is strengthened by the date of composition of Yeats' poem: 1919. The same sense of a post-apocalyptic world permeates both poems, only Hill suggests that Europe's response is to sink back into a lazy, complacent notion of "decen[cy]", the word being repeated for emphasis. This explains the horrible implication that the earth has been "fertilized" by the bodies of the slain. Finally, so unworried has Europe become that both "The dead" and "the greatest" are neatly packed away in parentheses.

Part One of this **Bookmark** will conclude by looking at **Part 4** of 'Of Commerce and Society': **Statesmen have known visions**. The opening of this poem is partly self-referential:

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,
Artistic men prod great men from their stone:
Some of us have heard the dead speak:
The dead are my obsession this week

The tone of these lines is hard to pin down. "Statesmen have known visions" is wryly punning, alluding to so-called 'visionary' leadership, 'visions' in the sense of ghosts (picked up in "heard the dead speak") but also to the idea of 'delusions'. Likewise, the image of the poet evoking or re-imagining historical figures ("Artistic men prod great men from their stone") can be construed as either serious or mocking. After all, "prod" seems a slightly derisive choice of word, and the stanza's conclusion seems gently self-deprecating. Nonetheless, there is an important equation established between the roles of poet and leader, and their corresponding attitudes to the dead. This was anticipated in the idea of "union" in **The Distant Fury of Battle**, previously discussed. Interestingly, Hill, in his essay 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement', explores the idea of union through "atonement" in its etymological sense of "at-one-ment", a literal act of "bringing into concord, a reconciling" (4), necessary for both poet and "leader". This develops Sherry's notion of Hill's view of the poet's civic responsibility, and looks forward to the declaration in **The Triumph of Love** (1998) that "shaping/Voicing, are types of civic action".

Both poet and politician have a civil and civic responsibility towards the barbarity of the past, for reasons made clear in the poem's third stanza:

...Many have died. Auschwitz,
The furnace chambers and lime pits
Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable
Scarcely believable in fatted marble.

The thrust is clear: it is important to remember, because the lessons of history fast recede. Hill writes these lines barely 15 years after the liberation of the death camps, but even by 1959 they are "Half-erased" and "half-dead", both in terms of their physical dereliction and in our minds. Already they have become a "fable": legend rather than historical fact. Their slaughter and horrors ("furnace chambers and lime pits") are 'disremembered'. To use 'disremembered' is important: it is a word that for Hill signifies the deliberate "dismembering [of] memory" (5), which is precisely the point - we *choose* to forget. All that stands firm is "fatted marble", a reference to the stone memorials erected at concentration camp sites. "fatted" also looks back to the imagery of over-indulgence present in the first two poems of 'Of Commerce and Society', while the awkward nature of memorials was explored in **Two Formal Elegies (For the Jews in Europe)**.

The conclusion of the poem brings into sharp focus the drive of these ideas:

There is, at times, some need to demonstrate
Jehovah's touchy methods, that create
The connoisseur of blood, the smitten man.
At times it seems not common to explain.

Given our willingness to forget or ignore, there is a "need to demonstrate"; to highlight the nature of man as "The connoisseur of blood". In the juxtaposition of "connoisseur" (implying taste, refinement, civility) with "blood" (violence and murder), we are reminded again of the two very different sides of human nature. This is also picked up in the two possible meanings of "smitten": 'strongly in love', or 'struck by a blow'. The two senses co-exist in the one word, just as the ability to love and to strike coexist in the same humans. Thus we are returned to Benjamin, and the simultaneous documenting of man's civility and barbarism. There is something of "Jehovah's touchy methods" – creative, infinitely loving, quick to anger – in our very essence. We recall the lines from **Genesis**, where this essay began:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold
To ravage and redeem the world

This is what Hill has sought to explore throughout **For The Unfallen**. Hence, the poem's final line, "it seems not common to explain", is a fitting point of conclusion for this **Bookmark**, too. It is "not common" to explain in the sense that it is rarely done; it is also "not common" in the connotation of not being dumbed-down. Applied to **For The Unfallen** as a whole, the thought gains traction. If this is difficult poetry, if it makes a significant demand upon the reader, then it is so because, in seeking to understand man's nature, Hill undertakes the most difficult and demanding of tasks; what is, in Jeffrey Wainwright's phrase, "a complex deliberation of our society's greatest ethical demand." (6) For that alone **For The Unfallen** is no less than required reading.

References

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2. Jones, Dan. *The Plantagenets: The Kings Who Made England*. 2012 : London.
3. Sherry, Vincent. *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill*. Michigan: 1987. pp. 63-7.

4. Hill, Geoffrey. 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement''. [ed.] Kenneth Haynes. *The Lords of Limit; Collected Critical Writings*. Oxford : 2008, p. 4.
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About the author

J.D. Hughes studied at Newcastle-Under-Lyme School and Keble College, Oxford. He is now Head of English at St Albans School.

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The English Association
University of Leicester
Leicester LE1 7RH
UK

Tel: 0116 229 7622
Fax: 0116 229 7623
Email: engassoc@le.ac.uk

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