The Early Work of Geoffrey Hill Part 2: 
*King Log*

by J.D. Hughes

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WHAT TO READ

Poetry

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

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://geoffreylhillzinger.blogspot.co.uk/ is helpfully categorized and fairly comprehensive.

SCOPE OF TOPIC

If we weep, it is to be in the right place; when we speak we are to speak advisedly

Hill, ‘Language, Suffering, and Silence’

Once more the truth advances, and again
The metaphors of blood begin to flow.

Hill, The Mystery of The Charity of Charles Peguy

Part One of this Bookmark explored Hill’s first collection, For The Unfallen, and sought to illustrate within it the poet’s consistent focus on our complex relationships with our own history, violence, and the “varied dead”. It also aimed to establish the poet’s view of his civic responsibility to “Shap[e]” and “Voic[e]” a response to these things, however ‘difficult’. Part Two will examine Hill’s second collection, King Log (1968), in much the same light, considering how Hill’s examination of the most appalling episodes from our history develops his notions of the necessity to “weep”, to “speak advisedly”, and how any revelation of the “truth” demands the thoughtful use, and subsequent evaluation, of “metaphors of blood”.

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NOTES

Central to For the Unfallen was the poet’s conviction of the necessity of speaking out about, and sometimes describing, horror, concisely stated in part 4 of ‘Of Commerce and Society’ as “some need to demonstrate/...to explain”. This was, however, juxtaposed against the realisation that speaking out runs the risk of transforming historical atrocity into contemporary aesthetic; moreover, that it served only a self-fulfilling purpose – a variation of Auden’s “Poetry makes nothing happen”. This dilemma moves us into King Log, almost ten years on from For the Unfallen.

The opening poem, Ovid in The Third Reich, suggests that while Hill’s subject matter has changed little in a decade, he may have found a means of squaring the circle. The Ovidian persona enables the poet not only to craft a bitter irony (placing the poet of the Amores in the heart of loveless tyranny) but also to adopt an ahistorical perspective. The poem is quoted here in its entirety:

non peccat, quaecumque potest peccasse negare,  
solaque famosam culpa professa facit (Amores, III, xiv)

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 epigraph (loosely) reads ‘whoever can deny having sinned, does not sin; only those who admit are guilty’. While originally referring to straying spouses, it advocates a moral position of ‘plausible deniability’. This is ethically dubious advice, particularly so in the context of the Third Reich. The significance is that having explored the problematic nature of speaking out, Hill here presents us with the alternative; the poet who overlooks, in both senses of the word. This speaker’s language is casually dismissive (“Things happen”), and simply casts the “Innocent” as inhabiting a position of weakness (having “no earthly weapon”). Any moral considerations are waved away: “God / Is distant, difficult.” This is an irresponsible standpoint at best, and the use of jarring slant rhyme adds to our profound uneasiness. The half-rhyme of “God” and “blood” is particularly unsettling, hinting at a bond between faith and violence (cf. Genesis), yet also illustrating through the imperfect rhyme the falsity of the speaker’s position. Moreover, not engaging with something just because it is “difficult” is an equally negligent stance, and thus Hill also hints at the value of ‘difficult’ poetry. It is sometimes ‘well-advised’ to do what is difficult.

Jon Silkin has seen in the speaker of these lines an “Eichmann-like figure” (1), and there is a banality and indifference to suffering in the persona’s tone. The speaker is deliberately ahistorical, but there is an interesting echo; not, though, of Eichmann, but of the commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoess. Hoess’ behaviour during a series of interviews prior to his trial at Nuremberg was described by the American psychologist Gustave Gilbert:

[He is] quite matter-of-fact and apathetic, [and] shows some belated interest in the enormity of his crime, but gives the impression that it never would have occurred to him if somebody hadn’t asked him (2)

Hoess also wrote to his children the night before his execution (cf. line 1). But as Silkin also observes, Hill is careful to avoid precise identification with any historical figure (hence the Ovidian persona). Rather, the second stanza seeks to represent the example of the poet who
tries to raise himself above day-to-day concerns. The paradoxically arrogant faux-humility of “learn[ing]...not to look down/So much upon the damned” culminates in the idea of “celebrat[ing]” the love-choir. The lexis of “divine” and “love” is given a dreadful irony in the context of wartime Germany; “harmonize” especially, given the Nazis’ warped ideas of racial purity. So, if Genesis functioned as a manifesto for For The Unfallen, Ovid in The Third Reich has a similar purpose in King Log. It shows the imperative “to demonstrate”; that not “to look down”, to compose amorous lyrics as the crematoria burn, is not to “advance” the “truth”.

Nonetheless, it is not always easy to do these things ‘advisedly’, and poetic “truth” is a slippery concept. This is clearly demonstrated in September Song. The poem begins with the epigraph/epitaph “born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42”. First, the subject is Hill’s almost-exact contemporary – just one day younger. Secondly, we are struck by the ghastly juxtaposition of the words “born” and “deported”. The latter – to be removed via a port or place of transportation, and therefore a wholly ‘artificial’ act – is presented as being as natural as the former – our universal entry into the world. This gives an indication of how the reworking of language will be used in this poem to illustrate the way murder became routine or ‘natural’ under the Nazis. Consider the first two stanzas:

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

At the end of line one, “untouchable” takes on two meanings: first, ‘safe from harm’, with the secondary sense of ‘racially unwanted’ – the presumed reason for the child’s death. The line break after the word creates a momentary pause, lending emphasis to the brutal negation of that follows: “you were not”. The next negation, “Not .../...passed over” in lines 2 and 3 echoes ‘passover’, but there is no sparing of the Jews in this narrative. The grotesque efficiency of the Nazi machine makes sure of this, revealed by the words “estimated”, “sufficient”, “just so much”, and “routine” following in succession. In “Things marched”, military connotations arise, and we are reminded as well of the dismissive statement “Things happen” made by the speaker of Ovid in The Third Reich. “that end”, too, is horribly punning, as the end (demise) of the child is precisely the end (design) of the Holocaust. We are made to recall the Nazi fondness for euphemism (‘the final solution’) and that such charged words and ideas (“Just so much Zyklon”) have been somehow normalised is almost beyond horror.

Hill, however, is aware of the dangerous ground he treads. Wainwright puts this well, noting that “The poet cannot be merely indignant but must [also] recognise the ethical implication” (3) of his work. This is pointedly brought out by the poem’s middle section:

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

For the speaker, this is “an elegy for [him]self” in two ways. First, he recognises through the epigraph the contemporaneousness of the child he elegises, and thus his awareness of how, had circumstances been different, he might have been the victim. This arbitrariness of fate is reflected in the obvious artifice of the line breaks, and he goes on to juxtapose implicitly the “harmless smoke” of his own garden bonfire with the fumes from the crematoria of the concentration camps. Next, leading on from the first idea, this is in a way a selfish exercise: Hill is writing for his own purposes. The poem’s double-edged conclusion reflects this:
This is plenty. This is more than enough.

Hill’s “plenty” is both a statement of his own fortunate situation – the professional poet, remarking on the “roses” in his garden – and a self-judgmental reproval: ‘I have indulged myself sufficiently’. Indeed, in his essay ‘Language, Suffering, and Silence’, Hill addresses the fundamental problem that words cannot always respond adequately to the depths of human suffering. Therefore, is poetry which cannot do justice to its subject ‘advisable speech’, however much it moves us to weep?

In the eight, unrhymed ‘sonnets’ that make up the Funerary Music sequence, the poet’s gaze turns back to the Wars of the Roses. Additionally, the difficult nature of the modern elegy is explored further, as Hill demonstrates, as David Sherman argues, that only through “Language that unsettles” is it “possible [to have] an ethical approach to the dead” (4). The epigraph to the sequence is both a dedication and a list of speakers/characters. It names William de la Pole (Duke of Suffolk), John Tiptoft (Earl of Worcester), and Antony Woodville (Earl Rivers), all beheaded between 1450 and 1483, illustrating the collection’s continuing treatment of the victims of war via “The metaphors of blood.” The subjects embody the coexistence of the refined and the horrific, and highlight the difficulty of objective ‘truth’.

Certainly the first sonnet in the sequence is characterised by this “discrepancy”. It begins thus:

Processionals in the exemplary cave,
The voice fragrant with mannered humility,
With an equable contempt for this world,
‘In honorem Trinitatis’. Crash. The head
Struck down into a meaty conduit of blood.

The opening “Processionals” denote musical compositions for a religious event. The term is also used reflexively by Hill, arguably, to refer to his own work (we recall the musical title) - a sense reinforced by the location of “the exemplary cave”; presumably Plato's cave, where we see merely the “shadows” of reality. “Benediction” too is punning, meaning both ‘religious blessing’ (in this context, prior to death) and also something ‘well-said’, in the etymological sense of ‘bene-diction’. Therefore, Hill combines two ideas: the quiet order and religiosity immediately preceding execution, and the sense of the poet barely doing the subject justice, however ‘well-said’ his verse. Another contrast is seen between Tiptoft’s “mannered humility”, Latinate last words, and the stark description of his death: “Crash.” The one word sentence mimics the suddenness and violence of the act, while “meaty conduit of blood” is suitably gruesome. After the beheading, the poem’s register also changes, as the predominantly Latinate, polysyllabic vocabulary of the first four lines (“Processionals”, “exemplary”, “Benediction”, “humility” “equable”) gives way to much more blunt words of Anglo-Saxon origin (“Crash”, “head”, “struck”, “meaty”, “blood”). High-minded idealism gives way to butchery.

If the first sonnet of Funerary Music uses metaphors of blood, and deals with the difficulty of speaking advisedly, then Sonnet 2 begins by asking explicitly for the truth of the matter:

For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain –
For none but the ritual king?
The speaker asks simply: for whom and why do we suffer? The lines allude to both temporal and spiritual power: “ritual” has religious connotations, but potentially also denotes a hollow or meaningless act. The king of the realm, just like the king of heaven, may be merely a name. All we can know for sure is the awful aftermath of battle:

... some trampled
Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
Stuck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind’s
Flurrying, darkness over human mire.

The effects of war on the natural world are consistently negative (“parched”, “sodden”, “blanched”) and the repeated consonance of d sounds give the lines an embittered, hardened quality. Finally, the indifferent “Flurrying wind” picks up on, but rejects, the truth-giving Pentecostal wind of the first sonnet. A similar vision of carnage is found in Sonnet 3:

A field
After battle utters its own sound
Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth...
... blindly we lie down, blindly
Among carnage the most delicate souls
Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping ‘Jesus’.

However unreal the “sound” of a battlefield post-conflict (“like nothing on earth”), it is nonetheless definitive of the pain and brutality of experience – it “is earth”. That we fail to see this is an illustration of how “blindly” we see the world – as “blindly” as those killed in the fighting. Only in the final “metaphor of blood” is “truth advance[d]”. Wainwright aptly summarises the poem’s conclusion as one “in which the bloodletting of warfare and the nuptial bed are conflated ... into an animalistic orgasmic shudder and cry.” (3) This, it seems, is a return to Genesis in For The Unfallen, as sex and violence – how we “ravage and redeem the world” - are united in the groans of dying men. Platonic idealism and the birth of national identity seem a long way away.

Implicit in the first three sonnets of the sequence, an intellectual, theological approach becomes explicit in Sonnet 4, as Hill’s speaker concludes that the soul is “possibly / Indestructible”. The uncertainty – emphasised by the awkward line-break – serves to undercut the grand nationalist/Christian narrative of the Plantagenet regime. Sonnet 5 continues to problematize the idea, questioning our motives for “atonement”, a process, the speaker suggests, denoted more by “ritual” than a real guilt or moral impulse:

...as though trumpets purified law,
Spikenard were the real essence of remorse.

For all the pomp of “trumpets”, be it in the “wild Christmas” of the religious calendar or the grandeur of the court, this is not a world (or regime) of “pure” law or true “remorse”. Despite the quibbling pun on “essence”, there is more to “atonement” than “Spikenard” (the expensive oil used to anoint Christ). Moreover, we recall the troubling nature of ‘atonement’ for Hill (discussed in Part One of this Bookmark), and the poem’s conclusion sets the poet’s difficulty alongside our own unsatisfactory repentance:

Those righteously-accused those vengeful
Racked on articulate looms indulge us
With lingering shows of pain, a flagrant
Tenderness of the damned for their own flesh.

The second line seems to describe those who suffer in the lines of Hill’s poetry - his intricately constructed, formally ‘woven’ poems being perfectly “articulate looms”. Just as the concern in September Song was that the speaker “ha[d] made / an elegy for [him]self”, he here posits
that this catalogue of “pain” is an “indulge[nce]”, an almost sadistic/voyeuristic “Tenderness” for his “own flesh”. The poetry therefore demonstrates a palpable awareness of Sherman’s realisation of “the risks involved in using poetry as a mode of historical witness” (4); or, as Hill himself has put it, the danger of simply reflecting “one’s own interested passions” (6). This risk is highlighted in Sonnet 7 of the sequence, as seen in the line “Averted conscience turned against itself.” Although the speech marks indicate the de la Pole/Tiptoft/Woodville persona, it is hard to avoid the implication that the phrase mirrors the poet’s own grappling with his purpose. “Averted” seems to hint at attempted disinterest, or perhaps the deliberate evasion of feelings of guilt. Similarly, “turned against itself” suggests both the reflexive nature of the action, and almost a self-hatred or loathing in the recognition of one’s selfish motives. By the end of the sonnet, however, we are returned again to the physical consequences of conflict:

Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
Feathers drifted across; carrion birds
Strutted upon the armour of the dead.

For all the human carnage, the natural world is barely affected: only the ice has a bloody tinge (note “Reddish”, not ‘red’) and “a few / Feathers” are “dislodged”. In fact, the birds seem to mock the futility of the slain fighters; the verb “strutted” denotes a certain arrogance, even a triumphalism, in their behaviour. Finally, yet another poem from Hill’s first two collections ends with the word “dead” (Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings, Picture of a Nativity, and Sonnet 7 of Funeral Music), or a closely associated term: viz.”buried” (The Turtle Dove), “the first dead scrape home” (The Guardians), “decay” (The White Ship), “impervious tombs” (A Pastoral), and “sacrifice” (Annunciations I). In each case, the act of terminating the poem on such a note is a linguistic gesture towards the moment of ultimate finality.

The dead are the initial focus of Sonnet 8, which marks the end of Funeral Music. The opening confronts directly our responsibility to those who have gone before:

Not as we are but as we must appear,
Contractual ghosts of pity

Our obligation is indicated by the imperative “must” and the adjective “Contractual”. That said, a sense of the difficulty of true “pity” is indicated by the terms “appear” and “ghosts”: it is hinted at they we are required to give the impression, if not necessarily the true essence (cf. Sonnet 5). These notions are developed in lines 5 and 6:

So it is required; so we bear witness,
Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us

Once more, perhaps against our natural inclination (“Despite ourselves”), we follow our duty (“it is required”) to pay the dead their due, even though they are “beyond us”, both in their historical remoteness and in our lack of understanding (‘it’s beyond me’). But the phrase “bear witness” not only conveys the idea of observing truthfully, it also has connotations of embracing suffering. The phrase in the New Testament (where it is used frequently) is the Ancient Greek martus, the word from which we ultimately derive ‘martyr’. And notions of martyrdom and bearing witness are connected, in Christian thought; Revelations 2:13 relates the idea of the murdered man who “did not deny [his] faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one”. It is revealing that some versions of the Bible render “witness” in this extract as “martyr”.

Is there, then, a kind of martyrdom in bearing witness to those who have died? Certainly, Hill’s poetry upholds the obligation to bear witness; to speak advisedly, in spite of the inherent “risks”. We might also consider the treatment of bearing witness in Acts 22: 20:
and when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing
by, and consenting, and keeping the garments of them that slew him.
Here, the witness to the martyrdom of God's witness (Stephen) is morally culpable. Yet in his
attestation of his culpability, he himself bears witness (the verb suggests a necessary
burdening or labouring) and so achieves a kind of redemption. Hill's work is aware of this
potential self-interest, and the equally difficult problems of atonement and guilt. The sonnet,
and the sequence, ends with a dismal image:

How should that comfort us – or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end 'I have not finished.'

There is little "comfort" to be found in the poem, which has previously raised the possibility
that it may be "without / Consequence when we vaunt and suffer", and the depiction of being
"Dragged" away to death is a fittingly violent end to the sequence. Yet it is also fitting, for
one wishing to speak advisedly, to give the last words to his unnamed character. For the
Unfallen began by "Crying the miracles of God"; King Log moves towards its end with the
condemned man "Crying" that he has "not finished". It is an appropriate cycle.

References

9. —. Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'. See Part One of this Bookmark for a discussion and explanation of the term.

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