

Classic Poetry Series

Geoffrey Hill
- poems -

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Geoffrey Hill(18 June 1932)

Sir Geoffrey William Hill is an English poet, professor emeritus of English literature and religion, and former co-director of the Editorial Institute, at Boston University. Hill has been considered to be among the most distinguished poets of his generation. In June 2010 he was elected Professor of Poetry in the University of Oxford.

Biography

Geoffrey Hill was born in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, England, in 1932. When he was six, his family moved to nearby Fairfield in Worcestershire, where he attended the local primary school, then the grammar school in Bromsgrove. "As an only child, he developed the habit of going for long walks alone, as an adolescent deliberating and composing poems as he muttered to the stones and trees." On these walks he often carried with him Oscar Williams' *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* (1946), and Hill speculates: "there was probably a time when I knew every poem in that anthology by heart." In 1950 he was admitted to Keble College, Oxford to read English, where he published his first poems in 1952, at the age of twenty, in an eponymous Fantasy Press volume (though he had published work in the *Oxford Guardian* — the magazine of the University Liberal Club — and *The Isis*).

Upon graduation from Oxford with a first, Hill embarked on an academic career, teaching at the University of Leeds from 1954 until 1980. After leaving Leeds, he spent a year at the University of Bristol on a Churchill Scholarship before becoming a teaching Fellow at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he taught from 1981 until 1988. He then moved to the United States, to serve as University Professor and Professor of Literature and Religion at Boston University. In 2006, he moved back to Cambridge, England.

Hill is married to Alice Goodman, and they have one daughter.

Awards and Honours

Hill was awarded an honorary . by the University of Leeds in 1988. He is also an Honorary Fellow of Keble College, Oxford; an Honorary Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge; a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; and since 1996 a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In 2009 his *Collected Critical Writings* won the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, the largest annual cash prize in English-language literary criticism.

Hill was knighted in the 2012 New Year Honours for services to literature.

Oxford Candidacy

In March 2010 Hill was confirmed as a candidate in the election of the Professor of Poetry in the University of Oxford, with a broad base of academic support. He was ultimately successful.

Writing

Hill's poetry encompasses a variety of styles, from the dense and allusive writing of *King Log* (1968) and *Canaan* (1997) to the simplified syntax of the sequence 'The Pentecost Castle' in *Tenebrae* (1978) to the more accessible poems of *Mercian Hymns* (1971), a series of thirty poems (sometimes called 'prose-poems' a label which Hill rejects in favour of 'versets') which juxtapose the history of Offa, eighth century ruler of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia, with Hill's own childhood in the modern Mercia of the West Midlands. Hill has also worked in related fields - in 1978, the Royal National Theatre in London staged his 'version for the English stage' of *Brand* by Henrik Ibsen, written in rhyming verse.

Regarding both his style and subject, Hill is often described as a "difficult" poet. In an interview in *The Paris Review* (2000), which published Hill's early poem 'Genesis' when he was still at Oxford, Hill defended the right of poets to difficulty as a form of resistance to the demeaning simplifications imposed by 'maestros of the world'. Hill also argued that to be difficult is to be democratic, equating the demand for simplicity with the demands of tyrants. He makes circumspect use of traditional rhetoric (as well as that of modernism), but he also transcribes the idioms of public life, such as those of television, political sloganeering, and punditry. Hill has been consistently drawn to morally problematic and violent episodes in British and European history. He has written poetic responses to the Holocaust in English, 'Two Formal Elegies', 'September Song' and 'Ovid in the Third Reich'. His accounts of landscape (especially that of his native Worcestershire) are as intense as his encounters with history.

Hill's distaste for conclusion, however, has led him, in 2000's *Speech! Speech!* (118), to scorn the latter argument as a glib get-out: 'ACCESSIBLE / traded as DEMOCRATIC, he answers / as he answers most things these days | easily.' Throughout his corpus Hill is uncomfortable with the muffling of truth-telling that verse designed to sound well, for its contrivances of harmony, must permit. The constant buffets of Hill's suspicion of lyric eloquence—can it truly be eloquent?—against his talent for it (in *Syon*, a sky is 'livid with unshed snow')

become in the poems a sort of battle in style, where passages of singing force (ToL: 'The ferns / are breast-high, head-high, the days / lustrous, with their hinterlands of thunder') are balanced with prosaic ones of academese and inscrutable syntax. In the long interview collected in Haffenden's Viewpoints there is described the poet warring himself to witness honestly, to make language as tool say truly what he believes is true of the world.

Controversy, Explanation and Parody

The violence of Hill's aesthetic has been criticised by the Irish poet-critic Tom Paulin, who draws attention to the poet's use of the Virgilian trope of 'rivers of blood' – as deployed infamously by Enoch Powell – to suggest that despite Hill's multi-layered irony and techniques of reflection, his lyrics draw their energies from an outmoded nationalism, expressed in what Hugh Haughton has described as a 'language of the past largely invented by the Victorians'. And yet Harold Bloom has called him 'the strongest British poet now active.'

For his part, Hill addressed some of the misperceptions about his political and cultural beliefs in a Guardian interview in 2002. There he suggested that his affection for the "radical Tories" of the 19th Century, while recently misunderstood as reactionary, was actually evidence of a progressive bent tracing back to his working class roots. He also indicated that he could no longer draw a firm distinction between "Blairite Labour" and the Thatcher-era Conservatives, lamenting that both parties had become solely oriented toward "materialism".

Hill's unmistakable style has also been subject to parody: Wendy Cope includes a parody of a 'Mercian Hymn' in Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis, and Ron Paste's parody 'Preach! Preach!' appears in Other Men's Flowers under the anagrammatic pseudonym "Fogy Hell-Fire."

An Apology For The Revival Of Christian Architecture In England

the spiritual, Platonic old England ...

S. T. COLERIDGE, *Anima Poetae*

'Your situation', said Coningsby, looking up the green and silent valley, 'is absolutely poetic.'

'I try sometimes to fancy', said Mr Millbank, with a rather fierce smile, 'that I am in the New World.'

BENJAMIN DISRAELI, *Coningsby*

1 QUAIN T MAZES

And, after all, it is to them we return.
Their triumph is to rise and be our hosts:
lords of unquiet or of quiet sojourn,
those muddy-hued and midge-tormented ghosts.

On blustery lilac-bush and terrace-urn
bedaubed with bloom Linnaean pentecosts
put their pronged light; the chilly fountains burn.
Religion of the heart, with trysts and quests

and pangs of consolation, its hawk's hood
twitched off for sweet carnality, again
rejoices in old hymns of servitude,

haunting the sacred well, the hidden shrine.
It is the ravage of the heron wood;
it is the rood blazing upon the green.

2 DAMON'S LAMENT FOR HIS CLORINDA, YORKSHIRE 1654

November rips gold foil from the oak ridges.
Dour folk huddle in High Hoyland, Penistone.
The tributaries of the Sheaf and Don
bulge their dull spate, cramming the poor bridges.

The North Sea batters our shepherds' cottages
from sixty miles. No sooner has the sun
swung clear above earth's rim than it is gone.
We live like gleaners of its vestiges

knowing we flourish, though each year a child
with the set face of a tomb-weeper is put down
for ever and ever. Why does the air grow cold

in the region of mirrors? And who is this clown
doffing his mask at the masked threshold
to selfless raptures that are all his own?

3 WHO ARE THESE COMING TO THE SACRIFICE?

High voices in domestic chapels; praise;
praise-worthy feuds; new-burgeoned spires that sprung
crisp-leaved as though from dropping-wells. The young
ferns root among our vitrified tears.

What an elopement that was: the hired chaise
tore through the fir-grove, scattered kinsmen flung
buckshot and bridles, and the tocsin swung
from the tarred bellcote dappled with dove-smears.

Wires tarnish in gilt corridors, in each room
stiff with the bric-a-brac of loss and gain.
Love fled, truly outwitted, through a swirl

of long-laid dust. Today you sip and smile
though still not quite yourself. Guarding its pane
the spider looms against another storm.

4 A SHORT HISTORY OF BRITISH INDIA (I)

Make miniatures of the once-monstrous theme:
the red-coat devotees, melees of wheels,
Jagannath's lovers. With indifferent aim
unleash the rutting cannon at the walls

of forts and palaces; pollute the wells.
Impound the memoirs for their bankrupt shame,
fantasies of true destiny that kills
'under the sanction of the English name'.

Be moved by faith, obedience without fault,
the flawless hubris of heroic guilt,
the grace of visitation; and be stirred

by all her god-quests, her idolatries,
in conclave of abiding injuries,
sated upon the stillness of the bride.

5 A SHORT HISTORY OF BRITISH INDIA (II)

Suppose they sweltered here three thousand years
patient for our destruction. There is a greeting
beyond the act. Destiny is the great thing,
true lord of annexation and arrears.

Our law-books overrule the emperors.
The mango is the bride-bed of light. Spring
jostles the flame-tree. But new mandates bring
new images of faith, good subahdars!

The flittering candles of the wayside shrines
melt into dawn. The sun surmounts the dust.
Krishna from Radha lovingly untwines.

Lugging the earth, the oxen bow their heads.
The alien conscience of our days is lost
among the ruins and on endless roads.

6 A SHORT HISTORY OF BRITISH INDIA (III)

Malcolm and Frere, Colebrooke and Elphinstone,
the life of empire like the life of the mind
'simple, sensuous, passionate', attuned
to the clear theme of justice and order, gone.

Gone the ascetic pastimes, the Persian
scholarship, the wild boar run to ground,
the watercolours of the sun and wind.
Names rise like outcrops on the rich terrain,

like carapaces of the Mughal tombs
lop-sided in the rice-fields, boarded-up
near railway-crossings and small aerodromes.

'India's a peacock-shrine next to a shop
selling mangola, sitars, lucky charms,
heavenly Buddhas smiling in their sleep.'

7 LOSS AND GAIN

Pitched high above the shallows of the sea
lone bells in gritty belfries do not ring
but coil a far and inward echoing
out of the air that thrums. Enduringly,

fuchsia-hedges fend between cliff and sky;
brown stumps of headstones tamp into the ling
the ruined and the ruinously strong.
Platonic England grasps its tenantry

where wild-eyed poppies rattle tawny farms
and wild swans root in lily-clouded lakes.
Vulnerable to each other the twin forms

of sleep and waking touch the man who wakes
to sudden light, who thinks that this becalms
even the phantoms of untold mistakes.

8 VOCATIONS

While friends defected, you stayed and were sure,
fervent in reason, watchful of each name:
a signet-seal's unostentatious gem
gleams against walnut on the escritoire,

focus of reckoning and judicious prayer.
This is the durable covenant, a room
quietly furnished with stuff of martyrdom,
lit by the flowers and moths from your own shire,

by silvery vistas frothed with convolvulus;
radiance of dreams hardly to be denied.
The twittering pipistrelle, so strange and close,

plucks its curt flight through the moist eventide;
the children thread among old avenues
of snowberries, clear-calling as they fade.

9 THE LAUREL AXE

Autumn resumes the land, ruffles the woods
with smoky wings, entangles them. Trees shine
out from their leaves, rocks mildew to moss-green;
the avenues are spread with brittle floods.

Platonic England, house of solitudes,
rests in its laurels and its injured stone,
replete with complex fortunes that are gone,
beset by dynasties of moods and clouds.

It stands, as though at ease with its own world,
the mannerly extortions, languid praise,
all that devotion long since bought and sold,

the rooms of cedar and soft-thudding baize,
tremulous boudoirs where the crystals kissed
in cabinets of amethyst and frost.

10 FIDELITIES

Remember how, at seven years, the decrees
were brought home: child-soul must register
for Christ's dole, be allotted its first Easter,
blanch-white and empty, chilled by the lilies,

betrothed among the well-wishers and spies.
Reverend Mother, breakfastless, could feast her
constraint on terracotta and alabaster
and brimstone and the sweets of paradise.

Theology makes good bedside reading. Some
who are lost covet scholastic proof,
subsistence of probation, modest balm.

The wooden wings of justice borne aloof,
we close our eyes to Anselm and lie calm.
All night the cisterns whisper in the roof.

11 IDYLLS OF THE KING

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.

12 THE EVE OF ST MARK

Stroke the small silk with your whispering hands,
godmother; nod and nod from the half-gloom;
broochlight intermittent between the fronds,
the owl immortal in its crystal dome.

Along the mantelpiece veined lustres trill,
the clock discounts us with a telling chime.
Familiar ministrants, clerks-of-appeal,
burnish upon the threshold of the dream:

churchwardens in wing-collars bearing scrolls
of copyhold well-tinctured and well-tied.
Your photo-albums loved by the boy-king

preserve in sepia waterglass the souls
of distant cousins, virgin till they died,
and the lost delicate suitors who could sing.

13 THE HEREFORDSHIRE CAROL

So to celebrate that kingdom: it grows
greener in winter, essence of the year;
the apple-branches musty with green fur.
In the viridian darkness of its yews

it is an enclave of perpetual vows
broken in time. Its truth shows disrepair,
disfigured shrines, their stones of gossamer,
Old Moore's astrology, all hallows,

the squire's effigy bewigged with frost,
and hobnails cracking puddles before dawn.
In grange and cottage girls rise from their beds

by candlelight and mend their ruined braids.
Touched by the cry of the iconoclast,
how the rose-window blossoms with the sun!

Geoffrey Hill

From "odi Barbare"

XXIV

What is far hence led to the den of making:
Moves unlike wildfire | not so simple-happy
Ploughman hammers ploughshare his durum dentem
Digging the Georgics

Vision loads landscape | lauds Idoto Mater
Bearing up sacrally so graced with bodies
Voids the challenge how far from Igboland great-
Stallioned Argos

Vehemencies minus the ripe arraignment
Clapper this art taken to heart the fiction
What are those harsh cryings astrew the marshes
Weep not to hear them

Accolades Muses' dithyrambics far-fraught
Borrowed labour ashen with sullen harrow
Cruel past that | Sidney and vesperal Tom
Campion courted

Put to claim not otherwise vowed the era
What else here goes | I am no Igbo wit well
Versed in Virgil Pindar Euripides child-
Hallowed Idoto

Revelation blessed in its unforthcoming
Closed with tempus aedificandi tempus
Destruendi bringing discharge of measure
Blasting the home-straight

XXV

Lovelace there come difficult times between us
Though in your place I cannot well imagine
Why I should not follow her chequered steps in-
Out of the sunlight

Candlelight here given the invocation
Starlit even | whatever else is silence

Gratiana somewhere still | she is dancing
Dancing⌒and ⌒singing

Singing not her heart out beyond the fable
Grand carotid arteries self-fulfilling
How the blood's tempered in its modulation
Balanced impulsive

So are our storms trackered from solemn orbit
Turbulence granted our sequestered sphere now
Buffeted now spun on an awl now baffled
Wreathed in cloud-garlands

Masques do so challenge and compose to labour
Hers the masque-like venture the scenes mechanic
Stars have held being since creation's fourth day
Turned to their music

Noble her frame troubling the fame we yield her
All rites well done short of a consummation
Treading down nothingness to ever-dealing
Maker unmonstrant

XXVI

Łodz I've been there done that the vanished children
Klezmer makes glad music at Lazarus gate
If as stragglng voices the dead return now
They have our number

Breathing hard we wrestled asbestos brake-pads
Luminously radioactive watches
Fizzled green plaque riding elastic wrist-bands
Glue smelt of peardrops

Someone those taut days was predicting biros
Not my blubbered Jewish pal bright a bully
That we knew klezmer I much doubt the Wedding
Dance for the Old Men

Time released me from him as I could not have
Many then had foresight but I was not one
Vital spinners counting there's no subtraction

Ever can oust them

Odds are for pittance where redemption strands us
Debts of those long-dead sparks of phantom brain cells:
Who's to dance broyges tants the dance of anger's
Conciliation?

There is no known voice but a clarinet sounds
Almost human touting a melt to die for
Hurl of things fastbound the last-known survivors'
Wailed diminution

XXVII

Breathe on my nesh eyes as upon a glass | this
Something so exquisite I scarce can bear it
I do not think I ever could have borne it
If not for real

Make estrangement all our desires that age so
Perfect empowerment the imperfection
How indemnify a degraded legend
Lost to computing

Contumacious that I am and that now like
Poggio I | too much enjoy invective—
This for our good—so what you saw me turned on
Mind if I stress this

Breathe on my nesh eyes I am tired of sleeping
Largo ma non troppo affettuoso
Well becomes fierce Didone trionfante
Lyric oblation

As fantastic here as in those odd films we
Watched albeit singly The Tales of Hoffmann
What we must be not to be worked with mirrors
Hives of perspective

Could I have found you in a film by Ophüls
Silent resonances of glass configured
Had I but struck us off The Masque of Blackness
As it was playing

Geoffrey Hill

Funeral Music

William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk: beheaded 1450

John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester: beheaded 1470

Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers: beheaded 1483

1

Processionals in the exemplary cave,
Benediction of shadows. Pomfret. London.
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.
So these dispose themselves to receive each
Pentecostal blow from axe or seraph,
Spattering block-straw with mortal residue.
Psalteries whine through the empyrean. Fire
Flares in the pit, ghosting upon stone
Creatures of such rampant state, vacuous
Ceremony of possession, restless
Habitation, no man's dwelling-place.

2

For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain—
For none but the ritual king? We meditate
A rueful mystery; we are dying
To satisfy fat Caritas, those
Wiped jaws of stone. (Suppose all reconciled
By silent music; imagine the future
Flashed back at us, like steel against sun,
Ultimate recompense.) Recall the cold
Of Towton on Palm Sunday before dawn,
Wakefield, Tewkesbury: fastidious trumpets
Shrilling into the ruck; some trampled
Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
Stuck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind's
Flurrying, darkness over the human mire.

3

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.
'Oh, 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'.

4

Let mind be more precious than soul; it will not
Endure. Soul grasps its price, begs its own peace,
Settles with tears and sweat, is possibly
Indestructible. That I can believe.
Though I would scorn the mere instinct of faith,
Expediency of assent, if I dared,
What I dare not is a waste history
Or void rule. Averroes, old heathen,
If only you had been right, if Intellect
Itself were absolute law, sufficient grace,
Our lives could be a myth of captivity
Which we might enter: an unpeopled region
Of ever new-fallen snow, a palace blazing
With perpetual silence as with torches.

5

As with torches we go, at wild Christmas,
When we revel in our atonement
Through thirty feasts of unction and slaughter,

What is that but the soul's winter sleep?
So many things rest under consummate
Justice as though trumpets purified law,
Spikenard were the real essence of remorse.
The sky gathers up darkness. When we chant
'Ora, ora pro nobis' it is not
Seraphs who descend to pity but ourselves.
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:

6

My little son, when you could command marvels
Without mercy, outstare the wearisome
Dragon of sleep, I rejoiced above all—
A stranger well-received in your kingdom.
On those pristine fields I saw humankind
As it was named by the Father; fabulous
Beasts rearing in stillness to be blessed.
The world's real cries reached there, turbulence
From remote storms, rumour of solitudes,
A composed mystery. And so it ends.
Some parch for what they were; others are made
Blind to all but one vision, their necessity
To be reconciled. I believe in my
Abandonment, since it is what I have.

7

'Prowess, vanity, mutual regard,
It seemed I stared at them, they at me.
That was the gorgon's true and mortal gaze:
Averted conscience turned against itself.'
A hawk and a hawk-shadow. 'At noon,
As the armies met, each mirrored the other;
Neither was outshone. So they flashed and vanished
And all that survived them was the stark ground
Of this pain. I made no sound, but once

I stiffened as though a remote cry
Had heralded my name. It was nothing ...'
Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
Feathers drifted across; carrion birds
Strutted upon the armour of the dead.

8

Not as we are but as we must appear,
Contractual ghosts of pity; not as we
Desire life but as they would have us live,
Set apart in timeless colloquy.
So it is required; so we bear witness,
Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us,
Each distant sphere of harmony forever
Poised, unanswerable. If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us—or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end 'I have not finished'.

Geoffrey Hill

In Memory Of Jane Fraser

When snow like sheep lay in the fold
And wind went begging at each door,
And the far hills were blue with cold,
And a cloud shroud lay on the moor,

She kept the siege. And every day
We watched her brooding over death
Like a strong bird above its prey.
The room filled with the kettle's breath.

Damp curtains glued against the pane
Sealed time away. Her body froze
As if to freeze us all, and chain
Creation to a stunned repose.

She died before the world could stir.
In March the ice unloosed the brook
And water ruffled the sun's hair.
Dead cones upon the alder shook.

Geoffrey Hill

In Piam Memoriam

1

Created purely from glass the saint stands,
Exposing his gifted quite empty hands
Like a conjurer about to begin,
A righteous man begging of righteous men.

2

In the sun lily-and-gold-coloured,
Filtering the cruder light, he has endured,
A feature for our regard; and will keep;
Of worldly purity the stained archetype.

3

The scummed pond twitches. The great holly-tree,
Emptied and shut, blows clear of wasting snow,
The common, puddled substance: beneath,
Like a revealed mineral, a new earth.

Geoffrey Hill

Mercian Hymns

I

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: moneychanger:
commissioner for oaths: martyrologist: the friend of Charlemagne.

'I liked that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.'

IV

I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots and endings. Child's-play. I
abode there, bided my time: where the mole

shouldered the clogged wheel, his gold solidus; where dry-dust badgers thronged
the Roman flues, the long-unlooked-for mansions of our tribe.

V

So much for the elves' wergild, the true governance of England, the gaunt
warrior-gospel armoured in engraved stone. I wormed my way heavenward for
ages amid barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern.

Exile or pilgrim set me once more upon that ground: my rich and desolate
childhood. Dreamy, smug-faced, sick on outings—I who was taken to be a king of
some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one.

VI

The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall to their freedom, I dug and
hoarded. Orchards fruited above clefts. I drank from honeycombs of chill
sandstone.

'A boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers.' But I, who had none,
fostered a strangeness; gave myself to unattainable toys.

Candles of gnarled resin, apple-branches, the tacky mistletoe. 'Look' they said and again 'look.' But I ran slowly; the landscape flowed away, back to its source.

In the schoolyard, in the cloakrooms, the children boasted their scars of dried snot; wrists and knees garnished with impetigo.

X

He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony, assorted prize pens, the seals of gold and base metal into which he had sunk his name.

It was there that he drew upon grievances from the people; attended to signatures and retributions; forgave the death-howls of his rival. And there he exchanged gifts with the Muse of History.

What should a man make of remorse, that it might profit his soul? Tell me. Tell everything to Mother, darling, and God bless.

He swayed in sunlight, in mild dreams. He tested the little pears. He smeared catmint on his palm for his cat Smut to lick. He wept, attempting to master ancilla and servus.

XI

Coins handsome as Nero's; of good substance and weight. Offa Rex resonant in silver, and the names of his moneyers. They struck with accountable tact. They could alter the king's face.

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutilation if that failed. Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. Value from a sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres.

Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring. It is safe to presume, here, the king's anger. He reigned forty years. Seasons touched and retouched the soil.

Heathland, new-made watermeadow. Charlock, marsh-marigold. Crepitant oak forest where the boar furrowed black mould, his snout intimate with worms and leaves.

XV

Tutting, he wrenched at a snarled root of dead crabapple. It rose against him. In brief cavort he was Cernunnos, the branched god, lightly concussed.

He divided his realm. It lay there like a dream. An ancient land, full of strategy. Ramparts of compost pioneered by red-helmeted worms. Hemlock in ambush, night-soil, tetanus. A wasps' nest ensconced in the hedge-bank, a reliquary or wrapped head, the corpse of Cernunnos pitching dayward its feral horns.

XVI

Clash of salutation. As keels thrust into shingle. Ambassadors, pilgrims. What is carried over? The Frankish gift, two-edged, regaled with slaughter.

The sword is in the king's hands; the crux a craftsman's triumph. Metal effusing its own fragrance, a variety of balm. And other miracles, other exchanges.

Shafts from the winter sun homing upon earth's rim. Christ's mass: in the thick of a snowy forest the flickering evergreen fissured with light.

Attributes assumed, retribution entertained. What is borne amongst them? Too much or too little. Indulgences of bartered acclaim; an expenditure, a hissing. Wine, urine and ashes.

XXVII

'Now when King Offa was alive and dead', they were all there, the funereal gleemen: papal legate and rural dean; Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercenaries; a shuffle of house-carls.

He was defunct. They were perfunctory. The ceremony stood acclaimed. The mob received memorial vouchers and signs.

After that shadowy, thrashing midsummer hail-storm, Earth lay for a while, the ghost-bride of livid Thor, butcher of strawberries, and the shire-tree dripped red in the arena of its uprooting.

XXX

And it seemed, while we waited, he began to walk towards us he
vanished

he left behind coins, for his lodging, and traces of red mud.

Geoffrey Hill

On Reading Crowds And Power

1

Cloven, we are incorporate, our wounds
simple but mysterious. We have
some wherewithal to bide our time on earth.
Endurance is fantastic; ambulances
battling at intersections, the city
intolerably en fête. My reflexes
are words themselves rather than standard
flexures of civil power. In all of this
Cassiopeia's a blessing
as is steady Orion beloved of poets.
Quotidian natures ours for the time being
I do not know
how we should be absolved or what is fate.

2

Fame is not fastidious about the lips
which spread it. So long as there are mouths
to reiterate the one name it does not
matter whose they are.
The fact that to the seeker after fame
they are indistinguishable from each other
and are all counted as equal shows that this
passion has its origin in the experience
of crowd manipulation. Names collect
their own crowds. They are greedy, live their own
separate lives, hardly at all connected
with the real natures of the men who bear them.

3

But hear this: that which is difficult
preserves democracy; you pay respect
to the intelligence of the citizen.
Basics are not condescension. Some
tyrants make great patrons. Let us observe
this and pass on. Certain directives

parody at your own risk. Tread lightly
with personal dignity and public image.
Safeguard the image of the common man.

Geoffrey Hill

On Seeing The Wind At Hope Mansell

Whether or not shadows are of the substance
such is the expectation I can
wait to surprise my vision as a wind
enters the valley: sudden and silent
in its arrival, drawing to full cry
the whorled invisibilities, glassen towers
freighted with sky-chaff; that, as barnstorming
powers, rammack the small
orchard; that well-steaded oaks
ride stolidly, that rake the light-leaved ash,
that glowing yew trees, cumbrous, heave aside.
Amidst and abroad tumultuous lumina,
regents, reagents, cloud-fêted, sun-ordained,
fly tally over hedgerows, across fields.

Geoffrey Hill

Ovid In The Third Reich

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.

Geoffrey Hill

Picture Of A Nativity

Sea-preserved, heaped with sea-spoils,
Ribs, keels, coral sores,
Detached faces, ephemeral oils,
Discharged on the world's outer shores,

A dumb child-king
Arrives at his right place; rests,
Undisturbed, among slack serpents; beasts
With claws flesh-battered. In the gathering

Of bestial and common hardship
Artistic men appear to worship
And fall down; to recognize
Familiar tokens; believe their own eyes.

Above the marvel, each rigid head,
Angels, their unnatural wings displayed,
Freeze into an attitude
Recalling the dead.

Geoffrey Hill

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 wards,
Men, in their eloquent fashion, understood.

Relieved of soul, the dropping-back of dust,
Their usage, pride, admitted within doors;
At home, under caved chantries, set in trust,
With well-dressed alabaster and proved spurs
They lie; they lie; secure in the decay
Of blood, blood-marks, crowns hacked and coveted,
Before the scouring fires of trial-day
Alight on men; before sleeked groin, gored head,
Budge through the clay and gravel, and the sea
Across daubed rock evacuates its dead.

Geoffrey Hill

Respublica

The strident high
civic trumpeting
of misrule. It is
what we stand for.

Wild insolence,
aggregates without
distinction. Courage
of common men:

spent in the ruck
their remnant witness
after centuries
is granted them

like a pardon.
And other fealties
other fortitudes
broken as named—

Respublica
brokenly recalled,
its archaic laws
and hymnody;

and destroyed hope
that so many times
is brought with triumph
back from the dead.

Geoffrey Hill

September Song

born 19.6.32 - deported 24.9.42

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.

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

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

Geoffrey Hill

Tenebrae

He was so tired that he was scarcely able to hear a note of the songs: he felt imprisoned in a cold region where his brain was numb and his spirit was isolated.

1

Requite this angel whose
flushed and thirsting face
stoops to the sacrifice
out of which it arose.
This is the lord Eros
of grief who pities
no one; it is
Lazarus with his sores.

2

And you, who with your soft but searching voice
drew me out of the sleep where I was lost,
who held me near your heart that I might rest
confiding in the darkness of your choice:
possessed by you I chose to have no choice,
fulfilled in you I sought no further quest.
You keep me, now, in dread that quenches trust,
in desolation where my sins rejoice.
As I am passionate so you with pain
turn my desire; as you seem passionless
so I recoil from all that I would gain,
wounding myself upon forgetfulness,
false ecstasies, which you in truth sustain
as you sustain each item of your cross.

3

Veni Redemptor, but not in our time.
Christus Resurgens, quite out of this world.
'Ave' we cry; the echoes are returned.
Amor Carnalis is our dwelling-place.

4

O light of light, supreme delight;
grace on our lips to our disgrace.
Time roosts on all such golden wrists;
our leanness is our luxury.
Our love is what we love to have;
our faith is in our festivals.

5

Stupefying images of grief-in-dream,
succubae to my natural grief of heart,
cling to me, then; you who will not desert
your love nor lose him in some blank of time.
You come with all the licence of her name
to tell me you are mine. But you are not
and she is not. Can my own breath be hurt
by breathless shadows groaning in their game?
It can. The best societies of hell
acknowledge this, aroused by what they know:
consummate rage recaptured there in full
as faithfulness demands it, blow for blow,
and rectitude that mimics its own fall
reeling with sensual abstinence and woe.

6

This is the ash-pit of the lily-fire,
this is the questioning at the long tables,
this is true marriage of the self-in-self,
this is a raging solitude of desire,
this is the chorus of obscene consent,
this is a single voice of purest praise.

7

He wounds with ecstasy. All
the wounds are his own.
He wears the martyr's crown.
He is the Lord of Misrule.
He is the Master of the Leaping Figures,
the motley factions.
Revelling in auguries
he is the Weeper of the Valedictions.

8

Music survives, composing her own sphere,
Angel of Tones, Medusa, Queen of the Air,
and when we would accost her with real cries
silver on silver thrills itself to ice.

Geoffrey Hill

The Triumph Of Love

I

Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp.

XIII

Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose?
Who can now tell what was taken, or where,
or how, or whether it was received:
how ditched, divested, clamped, sifted, over-
laid, raked over, grassed over, spread around,
rotted down with leafmould, accepted
as civic concrete, reinforceable
base cinderblocks:
tipped into Danube, Rhine, Vistula, dredged up
with the Baltic and the Pontic sludge:
committed in absentia to solemn elevation,
Trauermusik, musique funèbre, funeral
music, for male and female
voices ringingly a cappella,
made for double string choirs, congregated brass,
choice performers on baroque trumpets hefting,
like glassblowers, inventions
of supreme order?

XIV

As to bad faith, Malebranche might argue
it rests with inattention. Stupidity
is not admissible. However, the status
of apprehension remains at issue.
Some qualities are best
left unrecognized. Needless to say,
unrecognized is not
unacknowledged. Unnamed is not nameless.

XVII

If the gospel is heard, all else follows:

the scattering, the diaspora,
the shtetlach, ash pits, pits of indigo dye.
Penitence can be spoken of, it is said,
but is itself beyond words;
even broken speech presumes. Those Christian Jews
of the first Church, huddled sabbath-survivors,
keepers of the word; silent, inside twenty years,
doubly outcast: even so I would remember—
the scattering, the diaspora.
We do not know the saints.
His mercy is greater even than his wisdom.
If the gospel is heard, all else follows.
We shall rise again, clutching our wounds.

XXXV

Even now, I tell myself, there is a language
to which I might speak and which
would rightly hear me;
responding with eloquence; in its turn,
negotiating sense without insult
given or injury taken.
Familiar to those who already know it
elsewhere as justice,
it is met also in the form of silence.

XXIX

Rancorous, narcissistic old sod—what
makes him go on? We thought, hoped rather,
he might be dead. Too bad. So how
much more does he have of injury time?

XL

For wordly, read worldly; for in equity, inequity;
for religious read religiose; for distinction
detestation. Take accessible to mean
acceptable, accommodating, openly servile.
Is that right, Missis, or is that right? I don't
care what I say, do I?

XLI

For iconic priesthood, read worldly pique and ambition.
Change insightfully caring to pruriently intrusive.
Delete chastened and humbled. Insert humiliated.
Interpret slain in the spirit as browbeaten to exhaustion.
For hardness of heart read costly dislike of cant.

XLII

Excuse me—excuse me—I did not
say the pain is lifting. I said the pain is in
the lifting. No—please—forget it.

XLIII

This is quite dreadful—he's become obsessed.
There you go, there you go—narrow it down to obsession!

LI

Whatever may be meant by moral landscape,
it is for me increasingly a terrain
seen in cross-section: igneous, sedimentary,
conglomerate, metamorphic rock-
strata, in which particular grace,
individual love, decency, endurance,
are traceable across the faults.

LII

Admittedly at times this moral landscape
to my exasperated ear emits
archaic burrings like a small, high-fenced
electricity sub-station of uncertain age
in a field corner where the flies
gather and old horses shake their sides.

LXVI

Christ has risen yet again to their
ritual supplication. It seems weird

that the comedy never self-destructs.
Actually it is strengthened—if
attenuation is strength. (Donne
said as much of gold. Come back,
Donne, I forgive you; and lovely Herbert.)
But what strange guild is this
that practises daily
synchronized genuflection and takes pride
in hazing my Jewish wife? If Christ
be not risen, Christians are petty
temple-schismatics, justly
cast out of the law. Worse things
have befallen Israel. But since he is
risen, he is risen even for these
high-handed underlings of self-
worship: who, as by obedience,
proclaim him risen indeed.

LXVII

Instruct me further in your travail,
blind interpreter. Suppose I cannot
unearth what it was they buried: research
is not anamnesis. Nor is this a primer
of innocence exactly. Did the centurion
see nothing irregular before the abnormal
light seared his eyeballs? Why do I
take as my gift a wounded and wounding
introspection? The rule is clear enough: last
alleluias forte, followed by indifferent
coffee and fellowship.

LXIX

What choice do you have? These are false questions.
Fear is your absolute, yet in each feature
infinitely variable, Manichean beyond dispute,
for you alone, the skeletal maple, a loose wire
tapping the wind.

LXX

Active virtue: that which shall contain
its own passion in the public weal—
do you follow?—or can you at least
take the drift of the thing? The struggle
for a noble vernacular: this
did not end with Petrarch. But where is it?
Where has it got us? Does it stop, in our case,
with Dryden, or, perhaps,
Milton's political sonnets?—the cherished stock
hacked into ransom and ruin; the voices
of distinction, far back, indistinct.
Still, I'm convinced that shaping,
voicing, are types of civic action. Or, slightly
to refashion this, that Wordsworth's two
Prefaces stand with his great tract
on the Convention of Cintra, witnessing
to the praesidium in the sacred name
of things betrayed. Intrinsic value
I am somewhat less sure of. It seems
implicate with active virtue but I cannot
say how, precisely. Partaking of both
fact and recognition, it must be, therefore,
in effect, at once agent and predicate:
imponderables brought home
to the brute mass and detail of the world;
there, by some, to be pondered.

XCVI

Ignorant, assured, there comes to us a voice—
Unchallengeable—of the foundations,
distinct authority devoted
to indistinction. With what proximity
to justice stands the record of mischance,
heroic hit-or-miss, the air
so full of flak and tracer, legend says,
you pray to live unnoticed. Mr Ives
took Emersonian self-reliance the whole
way on that. Melville, half-immolated,
rebuilt the pyre. Hoist, some time later,
stumbled on dharma. What can I say?—
At worst and best a blind ennoblement,

flood-water, hunched, shouldering at the weir,
the hatred that is in the nature of love.

CXVIII

By default, as it so happens, here we have
good and bad angels caught burning
themselves characteristic antiphons;
and here the true and the false
shepherds discovered
already deep into their hollow debate.
Is that all? No, add spinners of fine
calumny, confectioners of sugared
malice; add those who find sincerity
in heartless weeping. Add the pained,
painful clowns, brinksmen of perdition.
Sidney: best realizer and arguer
of music, that 'divine
striker upon the senses', steady my
music to your Augustinian grace-notes,
with your high craft of fret. I am glad
to have learned how it goes
with you and with Italianate-
Hebraic Milton: your voices pitched exactly—
somewhere—between Laus Deo and defiance.

CXIX

And yes—bugger you, MacSikker et al.,—I do
mourn and resent your desolation of learning:
Scientia that enabled, if it did not secure,
forms of understanding, far from despicable,
and furthest now, as they are most despised.
By understanding I understand diligence
and attention, appropriately understood
as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgement
of what is owed the dead.

CXX

As with the Gospels, which it is allowed to resemble,
in Measure for Measure moral uplift

is not the issue. Scrupulosity, diffidence,
shrill spirituality, conviction, free expression,
come off as poorly as deceit or lust.
The ethical motif is—so we may hazard—
opportunism, redemptive and redeemed;
case-hardened on case-law, casuistry's
own redemption; the general temper
a caustic equity.

CXXI

So what is faith if it is not
inescapable endurance? Unrevisited, the ferns
are breast-high, head-high, the days
lustrous, with their hinterlands of thunder.
Light is this instant, far-seeing
into itself, its own
signature on things that recognize
salvation. I
am an old man, a child, the horizon
is Traherne's country.

CXLVII

To go so far with the elaborately-
vested Angel of Naked Truth:
and where are we, finally? Don't
say that—we are nowhere
finally. And nowhere are you—
nowhere are you—any more—more
cryptic than a schoolyard truce. Cry
Kings, Cross, or Crosses, cry Pax,
cry Pax, but to be healed. But to be
healed, and die!

CXLVIII

Obnoxious means, far back within itself,
easily wounded. But vulnerable, proud
anger is, I find, a related self
of covetousness. I came late
to seeing that. Actually, I had to be

shown it. What I saw was rough, and still
pains me. Perhaps it should pain me more.
Pride is our crux: be angry, but not proud
where that means vainglorious. Take Leopardi's
words or—to be accurate—BV's English
cast of them: when he found Tasso's poor
scratch of a memorial barely showing
among the cold slabs of defunct pomp. It
seemed a sad and angry consolation.
So—Croker, MacSikker, O'Shem—I ask you:
what are poems for? They are to console us
with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.
Let us commit that to our dust. What
ought a poem to be? Answer, a sad
and angry consolation. What is
the poem? What figures? Say,
a sad and angry consolation. That's
beautiful. Once more? A sad and angry
consolation.

CXLIX

Obstinate old man—senex
sapiens, it is not. Is he still
writing? What is he writing now? He
has just written: I find it hard
to forgive myself. We are immortal. Where
was I?—

CL

Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp.

Geoffrey Hill