

GEOFFREY HILL: KEEPING POETRY ALIVE

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Born in 1932 and brought up in the West Midlands, Geoffrey Hill won a scholarship to Keble College, Oxford, in 1949, by which University he was awarded his B. A. and M. A. in 1953 and 1959 respectively. Meanwhile, in 1954, he joined the academic staff of the University of Leeds where he lectured for twenty-six years, holding the Chair of English Literature between 1979 and 1980. Hill's preoccupation with the history and values of English language and culture is partly the result of the influence upon him of the lectures he received at Oxford at the hands of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. Day Lewis, and of his collaboration with the Shakespearean scholar, G. Wilson Knight, and with A Norman Jeffares, the great authority on Yeats, at Leeds. His concern with poetic tradition and the standards of academic excellence come together in his first published collection, *For The Unfallen* (1959), which reflects the same interest in revitalizing myth and religion as is demonstrated in the fifties by poets like Thomas Blackburn, R. S. Thomas, Philips Larking, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings and Charles Tomlinson. Together with Wain, Sisson, Hughes, Heaney, Tomlinson, Silkin and Scupham in the nineteen sixties and, in the seventies, with a new generation of poets, including Jeffrey Wainwright, Jeremy Hooker, Andrew Motion, James Fenton and Roger Garfitt, Hill contributes much in his verse to the exploration of history as the ground of understanding of the present. *King Log* (1968), *Mercian Hymms* (1971) and *Tenebrae* (1978) are the result of his soundings. Hill himself describes his own work as «scentings of love across a wilderness / of retrospection» (p. 150)¹. *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, published in 1983, again reveals Hill's astonishing and authoritative capacity to reap the fruits of the tradition that has bred him and to sustain the very life of that tradition through his own contributions to it. It is the problems involved in keeping that same tradition alive in our contemporary era, as explored by Hill, that is the subject of this article.

¹ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). All references to Hill's work will be noted by page number in the text of this article and will refer to this edition of this poetry.

Although any attempt to isolate a particular aspect of Hill's work may suggest an unjust limitation of his scope, it is possible to draw attention to his insistence upon the theme of the interdependence of Art and Life or of Language and Nature in men's lives. As an inheritor of «The Wasteland», living in a world dominated by scientific and technological obsessions and by ecological irresponsibility, Hill is concerned with the salvation of our very identity as human beings. His wisdom is channelled towards the regeneration of the living as he puts his «poet's gift» to work «to make history and politics and religion speak for themselves through the strata of language»². The reader is continually being invited to dig «through the variably-resistant soil» (p. 116) of Hill's verse since, as Henry Gifford reminds us, «Geoffrey Hill has been a philologist» from the outset. In *Mercian Hymns*, for example, the poet constantly synthesizes his mythic rôle within poetic tradition, his personal history and the telluric qualities of his language.

It is precisely the link between the «earth», Nature or Life, on the one hand, and Language on the other hand, that is in danger of being broken in our contemporary era. In his «Preface» to *The Anathemata* David Jones emphasizes the interdependence of language and cultural history. He states that poetry is an «effect» caused by the «employment» of language «at an especially heightened tension». He continues thus: «The means or agent is a veritable torcular, squeezing every drain of evocation from the word forms»³. As Donald Davie states, it is precisely the difficulty of «squeezing . . . evocation from . . . word forms» that poets of the twentieth-century writing in the English language have had to face given «that Britain as a whole is the most industrialized landscape in the world». He goes on to say «that there the non-human has been exploited and violated by the human more consistently and over a longer period than anywhere else . . . Our poetry suffers from the loss, or the drastic impoverishment, of the traditional images of celebration»⁴.

It is clear that our current cultural deprivation is directly linked with the demise of the natural environment in which we dwell. Langbaum reminds us that our present-day «nature philosophy», which has been influenced by Freud and Frazer, «connects» Man's whole being «to the primeval coze». However, he goes on to say that «you cannot convey that sense of nature in poems about the cultivated countryside of England or New England». Nature and nature poetry have been reanimated, according to the author, only because our contemporary view «of the unconscious... has extended mind to the very borderline between animate and inanimate nature» and «has connected the substratum of our minds with the minds of the very lowest reaches of animal» and, we may add, vegetable «life»⁵.

² Henry Gifford, «Hill and the Dictionary», in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work*, ed. Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), p. 149. Hill himself has said: «In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history». See *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber, 1981), p. 88.

³ David Jones, *The Anathemata* (London: Faber, 1951), p. 20.

⁴ Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 72.

⁵ Robert Langbaum, «The New Nature Poetry», *American Scholar*, Summer 1959, pp. 323 etc.

A number of twentieth-century poets recognize the value of the lowest forms of natural life as one of the few points of reference left to Man before the organic cycle of Life and Death is broken up irreparably. The simplest of organisms offers Hugh MacDiarmid a sense of security, a link with geological times. He considers «lichens and mosses» as «earth's first mercies» and establishes a relation between the human and non-human: «Contrary to common belief, the lichens and mosses / Love the winter sunlight as wise human beings do!»⁶. Other poets also emphasize how Man's understanding of himself passes through his recognition of his own emergence from the «primeval ooze», living proof of which are the «mosses» and «lichen». R. S. Thomas says: «History goes on; / On the rock the lichen / Records it: no mention / ...of us»⁷. Charles Tomlinson, describing a pile of stones lying alongside a ruined mill, says:

... they were cut from the cliff
And the same stone rises in wall and roof
Not of the mill alone, but of shed on shed
Whose mossed tiles like a city of the dead
Grow green in the wood⁸.

English poetry has expressed the process involved in the return of the monuments of men to the natural world since the epoch of the Anglo-Saxons: «Wall stood, / grey lichen, red stone, kings fell often, / . . . / . . . shone the old skilled work / . . . sank to loam crust»⁹. The «moss», in the case of Tomlinson's poem, and the «lichen», in the Anglo-Saxon verse, represent the link between Man and Nature. In «Te Lucis Ante Terminum» Hill says, «BE FAITHFUL grows upon the mind / as lichen glimmers in the wood» (p. 166). In other words our identity as men is a reality only if the natural world exists «as» that from which the expression itself originates.

In an article on Hill's *Tenebrae* John Peck quotes a reflection by Allen Tate upon the task of the translator of the *Pervigilium Veneris*: «Is he not telling us, he asked, that the loss of symbolic language may mean the extinction of our own humanity?»¹⁰. Contemporary poets cannot approach the question, as Langbaum reminds us, by means of a «Philosophical and Protoreligious concept of nature» of the kind that flourished in the eighteenth century and was already on its way

Due to the difficulty of obtaining this article, it has been necessary to quote from the shortened version of it printed by the Library Research Service of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Chicago. The section quoted appears on pages 4 and 5 of this version.

⁶ *The Hugh MacDiarmid Anthology: Poems in Scots and English*, ed. Michael Grieve and Alexandre Scott (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 253. The lines are taken from the poem entitled «On Reading Professor Ifor Williams's 'Canu Aneurin' in Difficult Days».

⁷ Cited in Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 63.

⁸ Cited in Michael Kirkham, «Charles Tomlinson», in *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Survey*, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), p. 60.

⁹ The quotation is from «The Ruin» found in Michael Alexander, *The Earliest English Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 30.

¹⁰ John Peck, «Geoffrey Hill's *Tenebrae*», *Agenda*, 17, No. 1 (1979), p. 13.

out in the nineteenth». Rather, as has already been suggested, they adhere, like «lichen» that «glimmers in the wood», to the «new concept of the unconscious» which «has extended mind to the very border-line between animate and inanimate nature»¹¹.

John Wain identifies himself with another simple form of vegetation —the fern: «And the fern holds on, / rooted in any cranny, green and curling, / its form a patient embroidery, a scroll...». The author of *Feng* owes his sense of security to these cryptogamic plants. He states clearly that «it steadies him to think of the beginnings / and of the time before the beginnings, / WHEN / life had not yet arrived»¹². Hill's recognition of «mother-earth» as being «the crypt of roots / and endings» in the fourth of his *Mercian Hymns* (p. 108) coincides with Wain's reference to the «time before the beginnings». Hill's phrase «the crypt of roots / and endings» is taken directly from the adjective «cryptogamic». In Greek «kruptos» means «hidden» and «gamos» means «married». In other words, life-forms such as the «fungus» and the «fern» are in contact with the mysterious, mythical origins of life. Marriage implies the closest and most sacred of unions which suggests that the poet, personified in the «fern», is both human (in life) and vatic, having been «invested» in mother-earth» (p. 108). The poet is in and out of time. For this reason the dead poet of Hill's *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* is seen to «marry» his «blood» to the «'terre charnelle'» (p. 188).

It is the dourness and steadfastness of the «fern» that Wain admires. While he watches them «sprouting from crevices», they «clench and curl towards the rainy sky». Like Wain's «ferns», Sylvia Plath's «mushrooms» in the poem of the same name, another example of a basic organism, are «nudgers and shovers / In spite of» themselves. Plath's fungi, which «take hold on the loam / Acquire the air», Wain's ferns which «curl towards the rainy sky» and MacDiarmid's lichens searching for the sun, are all examples of simple life-forms which are involved in an upward struggle. That they symbolize «the poet» and that they suggest ambition that poets are human «in spite of» themselves, in spite of their inherently mythical altruism¹³.

Hill keeps this strain of cryptogamic verse in mind when writing the fifth of his *Mercian Hymns*: «I wormed my way heavenward for / ages amid barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern» (p. 109). It is significant that the «ivy» adheres itself by means of aerial roots. This implies that the «ivy» symbolizes those poets who think themselves as being autonomous as regards rooted poetic tradition. On the other hand, the phrase «scrollwork of fern» refers to the work of those poets who have enriched the same tradition. The fact that Hill directly identifies himself with neither the «ivy» nor the «fern» is an indication of his affiliation with both and of the difficulty of finding a symbol which expresses adequately the doses of individualism and traditionalism that go to make up the figure of a true poet.

¹¹ Both quotations are from Langbaum, *Britannica*, pp. 1, 5.

¹² The two verse quotations are from John Wain, *Poems: 1949-1979* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 116, 117.

¹³ Sylvia Plath, *The Colossus* (London: Faber, 1960), p. 35.

This failure of language is seen in even more startling terms in the nineteenth section of *Mercian Hymns*:

We have a kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards with splinters of habitation.
The children shriek and scavenge play havoc. They incinerate boxes, rags and
old tyres. They haul a sodden log, hung with soft shields of fungus, and launch
it upon the flames (p. 123).

The richly suggestive language of the piece yields numerous significances. The «sodden log, hung / with soft shields of fungus» symbolizes poetic tradition regaled with respectful poets who adhere to its values and try to reinvigorate it. There is also a suggestion that this same poetic tradition is dying out as a result of, and together with, those poets who have clung to it in an unoriginal way and have not regenerated it. Similarly the «sodden log» may symbolize the experienced poet surrounded by acolytes whose pressure leads to the destruction of his standing and reputation. The etymology of the participle «sodden» illuminates the theme of the loss of the symbolic value of language. As participle of the verb «seethe» its origins go back beyond the Anglo-Saxon verb «sēothan» to the Germanic verb «sieden», in turn derived from the Old Icelandic verb «sjotha». It is as if its origins were to be found almost in preverbal, mythical times. In recent centuries «sodden» has become associated with the idea of drunkenness and has been linked with the participle «besotted». The corruption of society and the demise of language go hand in hand. Due to this semantic development, the link has been lost between «sodden» and its infinitive «seethe», meaning «to boil» or, in a figurative sense, to be agitated or indignant. In this sense it may be related to the participle «blazing» in Hill's poem «Quaint Mazes» (p. 152) where the traditional Anglo-Saxon «rood», symbolizing poetic tradition itself, is seen to be indignantly «blazing upon the green», exasperated by the treatment modern society gives to its cultural heritage.

The society in question is represented by the «children» of *Mercian Hymns* who «shriek» and «play havoc» and who, in an irresponsibly hedonistic way, «launch» their inheritance «upon» the bonfire of destruction. These «children», the personification of egoism, belong to the era of our contemporary lives referred to in the epigraph to Hill's long poem *Charles Péguy*: «We are the last. Almost after the last. Immediately after us there begins another age, a quite different world, the world of those who no longer believe in anything, who glory and take pride in it»¹⁴. Humankind is at the dawn of an «age» the culminating point of which lies in Eliot's «dissociation of sensibility» from thought, in the ultimate incapacity of Man to analyze his own feelings, in the failure of his intellect to relate to his natural instincts as a human being. In the end it becomes a failure of expression, a rupture between Language and Life or, as Hill presents it, between Nature and Poetry.

¹⁴ The translation of Charles Péguy's own words which serve as the epigraph to Hill's long poem is by C. H. Sisson and appears in his review of Hill's composition in *PN Review*, 10. No. 1 (1983), p. 12.

Relevant to the present argument are the words of G. L. Bruns who states that language «gathers people into communal existence»¹⁵. Paradoxically in section XIX of Mercian Hymns Hill «gathers» the symbols of the «log» and the «fungus» into the «communal existence» of his fellow men by describing their destruction in the bonfire of ignorance and indifference. He rescues these symbols from meaninglessness as his poetic process enacts his theme. By doing so Hill is serving his fellow men and saving them from extinction.

In one of his most compelling articles Hill describes how Wordsworth and Hopkins had the capacity to «redeem the time» at which they lived through their art¹⁶. Langbaun speaks of Wordsworth in similar terms:

To talk about nature in Wordsworth's way was at the turn of the nineteenth century to be at the forefront of thought, to take into account the science, philosophy and psychology of the age, its religious skepticism, the French Revolution, the problem of the modern analytic intellect as the destroyer of feeling... No nineteenth-century reader could share in one of Wordsworth's epiphanies... without a very poignant awareness of victory over the age¹⁷.

To talk, like Hill, about the destruction of nature and, by implication, of language, in the final decades of the twentieth century is also to be at the «forefront of thought». This destruction also implies the loss of simplicity and ethical values, the lack of control over scientific and technological advances, the exploitation of human beings, permanent cold war and the imminent nuclear hecatomb.

It is the great danger to the natural that is explored by Hill in «Idylls of the King» from his *Tenebrae* collection of 1978: «The pigeon purrs in the wood; the wood has gone» (p. 162). Hill's punctuation and distribution of stress reflect the idea of deliberateness of intent contained in this line. The pause at the semi-colon makes the second phrase even more measured, while its simultaneous abruptness suggests Man's incredulity in the face of such an inevitable process of destruction. By using the present perfect tense Hill seems to be charting the next point on the map of destruction unfolded in a poem like Philip Larkin's «Going, Going». Hill casts a critical eye upon the pastoral hinterland of the England of the very future —the period of the reign of Elizabeth II's son suggests itself in the poem's title. As «gone» replaces «going», the tradition of poetry which concerns itself with the quality of men's lives is extended out from Larkin and Eliot and, before them, from John Clare's vision of England as a rural paradise.

The on-going process of destruction of the natural environment that is being constantly lived with in our contemporary era is reflected in «Idylls of the King» in such oxymoronic phrases as «fresh rust», «long-sought and forsaken ground» and «half- built ruins of the new estate». Regarding the second line of Hill's poem, the epithet «dark» attached to «leaves» has a sinister air: «dark leaves that flick

¹⁵ Gerad L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language: A Critical and Historical Survey* (Newhaven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 215-216.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Hill, «Redeeming the Time», in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: André Deutsch, 1984), pp. 84-103.

¹⁷ Langbaum, *Britannica*, p. 4.

to silver in the gust». The secondary stress placed upon the short-vowelled monosyllable contrasts with the sudden rotundity of the heavily stressed monosyllable «gone» which, in turn, contrasts with the less sonorous quality of «gust». This three-way relationship based upon the texture of the poem's language suggests how Man's self-satisfaction (indicated by «purrs» in the previous line and by the unsavory nature of «gust») can be shattered at the «flick» of a nuclear switch.

«Cement recesses», a phrase which appears in the second line of the second quatrain, is another example of Hill's pin-pointed exactness of language that shares the same paradoxical nature as phrases like «fresh rust» already mentioned. Such a phrase symbolizes the poet's task of bringing together the traditional, as represented by the idea of a quiet nook or grove of trees, and the highly modern, as suggested by the idea of quick-setting concrete. It is creation bred from the impossible. Such positive scrutiny of negative processes forms the basis of «Idylls of the King».

In the first quatrain what is set against the incalculable value of rare natural phenomena such as «the marsh orchids and the heron's nest», symbols of a once-fertile eco-system and of England's pre-Saxon past, is the exploitation of the earth's resources in mining projects and the exploitation of human beings forced to live in highrise blocks: «goldgrimy shafts and pillars of the sun». The consequences of the glorious industrial era, and the material wealth created as a result of it, is the impoverishment of Nature's rich store. What should also be taken into account is the place occupied by this third line in the opening quatrain as a whole:

The pigeon purrs in the wood; the wood has gone;
dark leaves that flick to silver in the gust,
and marsh-orchids and the heron's nest,
goldgrimy shafts and pillars of the sun.

Due to the syntactic ambiguity of these lines it is possible to see «shafts» and «pillars» as subjects of the verb «go» in present perfect in the opening line. In this sense the sonnet is seen to be highly contemporary since it refers to neither a pre-industrial nor a post-industrial age. Rather, the poem is set in the post-nuclear age of space technology. Launch-pads, rockets, vast space-programme expenditure, the gold-foil of the panels of lunar orbiters, together with moon dust, suggest themselves. «Weightless magnificence», the phrase at the beginning of the second quatrain, reinforces this idea.

What is unique in Hill's «Idylls of the King» is this attempt to create the future, given that almost everything has already «gone». In order to do so the poet is forced to draw attention to Man's lost inheritance. By employing the formula common to Anglo-Saxon riddle poetry, based upon the use of the ambiguous pronoun «it», Hill suggests in the first sonnet of the «Christian Architecture» sequence how his own art violates the zone of pre-Saxon myth: «It is the ravage of the heron wood» (p. 152). Poetry is becoming literally unnatural, according to Hill, and forces into language that which no longer exists—in the case of «Idylls of the King», «the marsh-orchids and the heron's nest», victims of pollution and land

exploitation. It is as if the «Orphic activity» spoken of by G. L. Bruns in relation to Heidegger's philosophy had become a desperate act of survival¹⁸.

The attempt to keep Man's identity or «historical activity» alive is also seen in the use Hill makes of the symbols of the «heath-ferns» and «mushrooms», on the one hand, and of the «filterpond», on the other hand, in «Idylls of the King». Hill's «heath-ferns» are not associated with the joyful dispersal of freshness and sweet-smelling renewal, as in Gray's «Ode on the Pleasure Arising from Vicissitude», part of which reads thus: «April starts and calls around / The sleeping fragrance from the ground; / And lightly o'er the living scene / Scatters his freshest, tenderest green»¹⁹. In Hill's sonnet the «wiry hearth-fern scatters its fresh rust». There is a sense in which the kind of poets symbolized by the «wiry heath-fern» are playing for time instead of attempting to «redeem the time». Similarly the «warheads of mushrooms» referred to in the final line of the poem are seen to be the symbol of another kind of undesirable poet —the fiery, hot-headed type who wishes to become recognized immediately without having to struggle to become worthy of his vocation and who ignores the tradition of which he forms a part. «Mushroom» is slang for «upstart».

If «wiry heath-fern» and «mushrooms» are related to the idea of fast-moving change, it is the danger of stagnation that suggests itself in the third symbol of the figure of the poet presented in «Idylls of the King» —«the filter pond». The final line of the sonnet reads thus: «washeads of mushrooms round the filter pond» (p. 162). Hill's compound is, however, a synthesis of both negative and positive elements. It implies the personification of the best kind of poet who stands between the «pond» of tradition and the floods of revolution that threaten to swamp it. Accusations of his being staid or inactive are counteracted by his rôle as filter, letting pass through his poetry those innovations which contribute to the increase of Tradition's wisdom. In turn, the figure of the poet suggested by the symbol «filter-pond» veers between arrogance and humility. There is a danger in which, as «filter», he can become a dictatorial «arbiter elegantiarum». Also, the sly, underhanded slipperiness suggested by the scarcely-uttered noun «filter» is contrasted with the depth of sonority of the noun «pond», its vowel sound echoing «gone» in the sonnet's opening line. The poet-figure here is a wiley old fox. In fact, he possesses the voice of experience precisely because of the painstaking labour invested in getting himself to the point he has arrived at, as is echoed in the fifth section of *Mercian Hymns*. For this reason he is to be revered and hot-headed young poets or belligerent scientists gather «round» him to cull his wisdom.

The success of Hill's compound «filter-pond» is due to the balance it establishes between the emotional and rational elements that go to make it up, a balance which is lacking in «sodden log» or in «wiry heath-fern». Semantically the

¹⁸ The reference to historical «activity» is taken from Bruns' comments quoted earlier. In the eighth chapter of his book Bruns uses the theories of Martin Heidegger with regard to the relation between language and being as the main point of reference for his arguments concerning language as a vital matter.

¹⁹ Quoted in G. S. Fraser, *A Short History of English Poetry* (Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1981), pp. 190-191.

noun «filter» is related to the Old Low German word «filt» which, in turn, is associated with the verb «feel», taken from the Anglo-Saxon «felan». The noun «pond» as a variation of «pound» («pund» in Anglo-Saxon, «pfund» in German is also linked with the Latin verbs «pendere» and «ponderare». Hill's wise poet-figure is literally «pound»-erous: an intellectual and, at the same time, as worthy of love and respect as an old schoolmaster or an eccentric rural squire. In his compound «filter-pond» Hill overcomes the pathetic fallacy and becomes a forger of words, having made something natural out of a supposedly unnatural aspect of the landscape of nuclear power-stations. He has literally breathed life into the compound «filter-pond», thus incorporating it into the fertile tradition of word formation set in motion by the Anglo-Saxons and present in the work of such great poets as Milton²⁰. At the same time Hill is keeping alive the figure of the poet in our brutalized «fin de siècle» society. Like others of his generation, but in a highly personal way, he is reinforcing the links between Nature and Language.



²⁰ For a discussion of this phenomenon in Milton, see Archie Burnett, «Compound Words in Milton's English Poetry», in *Modern Language Review*, Vol. 75 (July, 1980), pp. 492-506.