

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

The Enduring Gift of Geoffrey Hill

Copley, H.

This is an author's accepted manuscript of an article published in Stand 15(2) (214), pp. 62-67, 2017. The final definitive version is available online at:

https://www.standmagazine.org/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=2146

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch: (<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>).

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

The enduring 'gift' of Geoffrey Hill

In a letter to *The Times*, written in 1943 but only published in 1971, the poet Keith Douglas lamented the scarcity of effective literary commentary of the Second World War. 'In the fourth year of this war', Douglas complains, 'we have not a single poet who seems likely to be an impressive commentator on it'.ⁱ The letter, full of bitterness, ends with a predication that shows a remarkable degree of foresight. ~~on the part of the under-appreciated Second World War writer.~~ Resigned to the fact that 'the soldiers have not found anything new to say', for Douglas the responsibility and opportunity fell to those who came after the War. It would be the role of the civilian writer, as well as the soldier poet, to reflect back on the character and legacy of the conflict. 'Their [the soldiers'] experiences will not forget easily', he concluded, 'and it seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after the war is over.'ⁱⁱ In his prediction, Douglas, who would be killed only months later, laid out an invitation to a new type of war-poet; one who was self-consciously removed from the battlefield and sites of conflict, in a position to reflect on what exactly it was that differentiated 1918 from 1945, and able to offer a new voice to characterise past and future conflicts.

Geoffrey Hill, I would argue, was one of very few poets writing in Britain after 1945 who successfully took up this invitation (the others, including *Stand* founder Jon Silkin, were most likely to be found in the pages of this magazine). Embodying the figure of the often guilt-ridden civilian war poet, in all of his collections Hill reflected upon war, violence, and history, finding new ways to explore and alter his relationship to all three. Hill's 'gift' to British war poetry was his insistence to 'go on' about these subjects, even in times of apparent peace, coupled with the 'wounded and wounding / introspection' ('LXVII', *The Triumph of Love*) that characterised these attempts. As he so marvellously puns in *The Triumph of Love*:

Excuse me – excuse me – I did not
say the pain is lifting. I said the pain is in
the lifting. No – please – forget it. ('XLII')

Unable – or refusing – to 'forget it', the heavy burden of history pressed down upon Hill's poetic imagination, and in turn he insisted that we not be allowed to forget

Commented [e1]: 'on'?

those 'ditched, divested, clamped, sifted, over- / laid, raked-over, grassed over, [and] spread around' ('XIII') by time, expediency, and false memorialisation.

In Hill's writing, moments of childhood recollection and historical witness are frequently undermined by the gulf of geography, inexperience, and the poet's own self-reproach. He was the private poet who had to answer to his readers, his predecessors, and himself for his choice of subject matter, and so he often ~~he~~ lamented the supposed inevitability of coming up short:

why do I write of war? Simply because

I have not been there ('7', *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*)ⁱⁱⁱ

Writing in the long shadow of two wars, as well as through the threat of Nuclear War and the existence of recurring genocide, he was one of the most important voices of the last 'fire-targeted / century' (*The Triumph of Love*, 'CXXIII'), regardless – or perhaps because of – his 'near distance' to past and on-going violence. Now, as the President of the United States demonises intellectualism and threatens nuclear war over Twitter in under 140 (~~horribly phrased~~) characters, there remains an urgent need for Hill's particular brand of pessimism, self-reproach, and complexity. Keith Douglas once spoke of the need for good poetry to defeat 'bullshit',^{iv} and now it is to Hill's work that we can turn in order to find the same kind of deliberate, 'active virtue' (*The Triumph of Love*, 'LXX').

This complex and persistent 'civic action' is perhaps explored most explicitly in *The Triumph Of Love*, yet Hill's 1968 collection, *King Log* also contains some of the most powerful statements on war, memory, and tyranny, across his the poet's oeuvre. Even the title of the collection, which draws upon the fable of King Log and King Stork, warnsing of the dangers of tyranny, populism and bad leadership. It is hard not to draw parallels between the figure of King Stork, the wished for, murderous ruler of Aesop's fable, and more contemporary populist leaders. Yet, despite containing poems such as 'September Song', the sparse and powerful elegy for those who died during the Holocaust, it is ~~to~~ 'Funeral Music' – hisHill's sonnet sequence on the Wars of the Roses – that I wish to celebrate as an example of Hill's particular 'anti-bullshit' poetic. Highly formal and surprisingly violent – illustrated in the relish with which the poem describes the death of the nobleman John Tiptoft: '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'

(‘Funeral Music: 1’, *King Log*) – the poem also takes a marvellously long view of human history. The sequence demonstrates Hill’s ability to compress language, centuries, and events. It offers, like the comet that streaks across the body-strewn battlefields of Towton, a transcendent vision of ‘men in such array’ (‘Funeral Music: 3’) ~~and, in turn~~ allows ~~ing~~ the reader to come to ~~his or her~~~~their~~ own conclusions as to the relevancy of this vision to contemporary life. For Hill at least, the years were nothing. The bloodshed of Towton, Wakefield, and Tewkesbury remained as relevant to modern warfare as it was to those living and dying through the Wars of the Roses. Warning against the urge to memorialise and subsequently forget the dead, the visceral and urgent sequence instead insists upon their continuing presentness alongside the living.

Another aspect of Geoffrey Hill’s particular war poetic that the poem exhibits so wonderfully is his academic rigour. Hill may have perfectly understood the relevancy of Towton to modern life, but he still felt the need to explain his choice of subject matter. Acknowledging the critical tendency to play down the battles as ‘that old Northern Business’, he defended his choice of subject matter, arguing that despite its chronological distance, ‘imaginatively, the Battle of Towton commands one’s belated witness. In the accounts of the contemporary chroniclers it was a holocaust.’^v For a writer so acutely aware of the power of language – of how ‘the matter of “but one syllable changed” [was] not a “pretty” optional embellishment but the nub of ... predicament’ – the choice of the word ‘holocaust’ could be no mere coincidence.^{vi} By using the term out of its familiar context Hill cemented the linguistic and historical link between fifteenth-century England and twentieth-century Europe. The poem and prose together put forward a palimpsestic model of history, where events lie stacked on top of each other like layers of soil.

This defense of the Wars of the Roses as a suitable subject matter for contemporary poetry was originally located in an essay written by Hill to accompany ‘Funeral Music.’ First published in *Stand* alongside the poems, the notes would eventually end up at the back of the first edition of *King Log* within the postscript, entitled ‘King Stork’, before eventually disappearing altogether. Formal, dry, and meticulous (a key example being the humorous clarification of an inaccuracy within the poem: ‘the word beheaded is a retrospective aggrandizement; [the Duke of

Suffolk] was in fact butchered across the gunwale of a skiff'), the notes add a further dimension to the already multifaceted sequence.

The very existence of the postscript reveals much about the type of civilian war-poet that Hill was; the introspective and ironic tone, the academic rigour, the need to follow Ezra Pound's dictum to 'define and yet again define' – all can be found in 'Funeral Music: an essay'.^{vii} The only thing missing from this equation is the overt moment of self-accusation, but even this can be located in Hill's private response to the piece. In a letter to Jon Silkin in 1972, he asked that it be removed from the version of 'Funeral Music' that was due to appear in the anthology, *Poetry of The Committed Individual*. Having received the proofs back from Silkin, Hill admitted that he had 'serious doubts about (and had not necessarily contemplated) the seeming *de rigueur* juxtaposition of the prose essay with the Funeral Music poems.' He goes on to 'concede':

that such was the original appearance in Stand and I further concede that I retained the essay (though tucked away at the back) in King Log. I concede even further that I may not have thought out the issues clearly, right from the start, and ought to have done. What I am obviously faced with now is the albatross - like nature of the prose hung seemingly forever around the neck of the poems.

[...] I don't shirk the issue that it's my original error, mea culpa, etc., but as time goes on I feel increasingly that I don't want the poems eternally shackled to the prose...the prose makes me vulnerable to a recurrent strain of hostile criticism (however unfair) about 'pedantry' etc. [...] And I think one ought to have the chance at least to be released from one's over-hasty vows^{viii}

The prose and the letter together embody the vision, put forward years later in *The Triumph of Love*, of a poet 'Charged with erudition' and 'put up by the defence to be / his own accuser' ('XXXVI'). Luckily, Jon Silkin did not share the same concerns. Disregarding his contributor's request, he predictably chose to retain Hill's prose 'albatross', even publishing it alongside the sequence rather than at the back of the anthology.

In the drafts of 'Funeral Music' Hill seems to predict the 'albatross' of his own fastidiousness, pre-empting the accusations of difficulty and obscurity that would later

be laid against him. Originally titled 'The Violent and Formal Dancers', here the self-accusatory tone is far more overt and vicious than in the finished sequence:

Bring in Necessity and Poetry, two
Agents of corpse-washers; watch how they act,
Fingering flesh, silver, fo! Let us suffer
Purely these visions of art, our inhuman
Memory, a virgin crone, rocking and
Pointing there 'there / there 'there / there 'there forever.^{ix}

The accusation that Hill lays at his own door of 'corpse-washer... fingering flesh' articulates his sensitivity to the constant, even inevitable threat of prurience entailed in the representation of war, history, and the dead. The bawdy description of the 'virgin crone' draws attention to the unconsummated nature of his civilian witness, mocking – in a sexual manner – his apparent desire for consolation and a precarious experience of pain. Although the degree to which the poem castigates its own author would be toned down in the finished piece, the sense remains of a poet who knew the impossibility of ever ~~fully~~-doing full justice to the memory of the dead. As the speaker of the final poem in the finished sequence asks:

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". ('8: Funeral Music')

This unresolved nature of this ending is emblematic of a writer who resisted any easy 'atonement'.^x The 'wounded and wounding / introspection' that Hill later articulated in *The Triumph of Love* was on full display throughout the sequence ~~---~~aAs was the insistence to 'go on' about war long after the event. At the end of 'Funeral Music' the reader is left with the sense that it is both the speaker and the poet himself who cries 'I have not finished', as the demands of Hill's role as a historical witness exceeds the formal conclusion of the sonnet.

Ironically, ~~it is this refusal to resolve that~~ I want to end on this refusal to resolve. It articulates Hill's sense of the inevitability of future violence, as well as his suspicion of simplification. By refusing to acknowledge that he had done enough for the dead, or indeed to concede that conflicts such as the Wars of the Roses had ever truly come to an end, Hill provided an insistent poetic witness to an age where war – either recently ended, threatened, or taking place elsewhere – remained a constant

presence. In turn, he demanded that his readership be continually challenged. Refusing to allow us to be ‘reconciled ... by silent music’ Hill instead asked that we sit up and pay attention:

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,
Struck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind’s
Flurrying. Darkness over the human mire. (‘2: Funeral Music’)

Like the rich and vivid cacophony of the battlefield, his work insists – in a style simultaneously jarring, sensual, and evocative – that we continue to ‘recall’ both the ‘strange-postured dead’ and those still struggling in the ‘ruck’. In his letter to *The Times* Keith Douglas had looked forward to a poet who might be able to put two wars into perspective. Geoffrey Hill went one step better. A ‘belated witness’ in the fullest sense, he was – and remains – a war poet for the centuries.

ⁱ Douglas, ‘Poets in this War’, *Times Literary Supplement* [1943], 23 April 1971, p. 478. The question of whether Douglas includes himself in this censure is left unanswered.

ⁱⁱ Douglas, ‘Poets in this War’, p. 478.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hill, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 7, Broken Hierarchies*, p. 150.

^{iv} Keith Douglas to J.C. Hall, 10 August 1943, *Keith Douglas, A Prose Miscellany*, Compiled and Introduced by Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985), p.127.

^v Postscript, *Funeral Music: an essay, King Log*, p.67

^{vi} Hill, ‘The Tartar’s Bow and the Bow of Ulysses’, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: OUP, 2009), p. 199.

^{vii} Ezra Pound, in Geoffrey Hill, ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 4.

^{viii} BC MS 20c Stand /3 /Hil-4, Stand Magazine Correspondence, Geoffrey Hill to Jon Silkin, 9 June, 1972.

^{ix} Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill/2 /1 /5, Notebook 5: King Log.

^x Hill, ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’, p. 4.

I am grateful to ~~Thanks go to~~ the Geoffrey Hill estate and the Jon Silkin estate for granting permission to use material from each poet’s archive.