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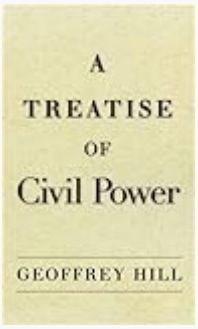
Geoffrey Hill's civil tongue

by David Yezzi

On Geoffrey Hill's A Treatise of Civil Power.

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Geoffrey Hill
A Treatise of Civil Power
Yale University Press, 64 pages, $20.00

In the late plays of Shakespeare, John Updike recently noted, "storms, terrors, and confusions give way to recognitions, reunions, forgiveness, and reconciliation. But a silvery chill blows through these romances." Geoffrey Hill's latest book of poems, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, revisits a number of the storms that have raged in his poems from the beginning: "the tongue's atrocities," "the slither-frisk to lordship of a kind as rats to a bird-table," and the bitter realization that "no bloodless myth will hold"—in other words, unflinching and melancholy interrogations of language, political power, and history.

Hill has softened his more slashing and querulous tones (at their shrillest in *Speech! Speech!* from 2000), affecting as much of a reconciliation as he is likely to muster, though a silvery chill still blows through these poems. Hill's late style has emerged after a long and occasionally arduous formal journey; his work has traveled from indurate pentameters through manic and hectoring free verse to arrive at something in between—a self-reflective, highly allusive lyricism. Impacted, circumspect, fraught, Hill's work has, since *For the Unfallen* in 1959, aroused admiration, indignation, and baffled indifference in almost equal measure.

Hill started out as a mid-century poet very much in the vein of Robert Lowell. His first book appeared the same year as Lowell's *Life Studies*, but his affinity is less with the confessional Lowell than with the rhetorical density of *Lord Weary's Castle*. Like Lowell, Hill was greatly impressed as a young man by the flinty diction and apocalyptic imagery of Allen Tate. "I still have in safe keeping," Hill once told me, "a very short letter that Tate wrote me in 1952 after he'd seen [my poem] 'Genesis' in the second issue of *The Paris Review.* And I kept it as a talisman, because … it was discovering 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' when I was about fifteen that somehow showed me how it might be possible to write modern poetry."

The "Ode," Tate's widely influential and best-known poem, begins:

> Row after row with strict impunity
> The headstones yield their names to the element,
> The wind whirrs without recollection;
> In the riven troughs the splayed leaves
> Pile up, of nature the casual sacrament
> To the seasonal eternity of death;
> Then driven by the fierce scrutiny
> Of heaven to their election in the vast breath,
> They sough the rumour of mortality.

It is easy to guess what Hill (and Lowell for that matter) admired in these lines: the poem's elevated rhetoric and lush syntax bring Tate's stark subject into high relief. The ground where the soldiers are buried is *riven*; falling leaves enact their "casual sacrament to the seasonal eternity of death" and "sough the rumor of mortality." (The pun one hears on "sow" is the kind of move that Lowell and Hill both cherished early on.)

Tate wrote the introduction to Lowell's first collection, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), which contained poems dense with blood and Christian symbolism much like Tate's own. Lowell's "The Soldier" from *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) is similarly steeped in gore:

> The soldier drowned face downward in his blood.
> Until the thaw he waited, then the flood
> Roared like a wounded dragon over shoal
> And reef and snatched away his crucifix… .

Of Lowell's early poems, Tate wrote that "T. S. Eliot's recent prediction that we should soon see a return to formal and even intricate meters and stanzas was coming true, before he made it, in the verse of Robert Lowell." It also came true, a few years later, in the poems of Geoffrey Hill. Though the three poets represent successive generations, all partake of the same mid-century style redolent of late modernism and the New Criticism. (Hill has said, "I try to write in such a way that someone like R. P. Blackmur would not despise what I've done.")

A similar funeral-drum music beats in Hill's "Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings," though without the religiosity of early Lowell or Tate's Symbolist mannerisms:

At home, under the carved 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 the sleeked groin, gored head,
Budge through the clay and gravel, and the sea
Across daubed rock evacuates its dead.

If Hill, like Lowell, began with the intensity of Tate, then, also like Lowell (though to decidedly different effect), he moved away from lapidary forms toward a more personal and flexible catch-all free verse, from discrete lyrics to sprawling sequences. For Lowell, this resulted in the journal-entry sonnets of *Notebook* (1970); for Hill, in the sonnet-like sections of *Speech! Speech!*

"From epigram to epic is the course/ For riders of the American winged horse," Howard Nemerov observes in "Strange Metamorphosis of Poets," all of whom, he jibes, "start out Emily and wind up Walt." Despite Hill's English roots (he was born in 1932 in the West Midlands and educated at Oxford), Hill has followed the trajectory of Nemerov's American poet in this regard. Instead of Emily morphing into Walt, Hill starts out in the Renaissance—with Herrick and Jonson—and winds up Blake. Given Hill's largely British and European subject matter, it is hard to think of him as an American poet at all, yet the two decades that Hill lived in the United States, roughly from the late Eighties to the mid Oughts, coincide with his most prolific output as a poet, everything from *Canaan* (1995) to *A Treatise*.

Some poets dote on their signature styles. Drawn by Siren-calls of praise to produce poems similar in shape and tone to those that made their names, they adopt a formal cautiousness that betrays an indifference to form. The effect on their work can be disastrous, stultifying, each book a slough of enervating repetition and embarrassing self-parody. Other writers (Joyce was one) never settle for comfortable modes; having wrestled one style to ground, they are immediately off, questioning previous strategies and casting about for new methods.

Sudden stylistic shifts, however, can leave one's readership feeling a bit bruised. Many of Hill's fans admire the formal torque of the early poems but find the later sequences indulgent, obscure, and musically ragged. Others find the early work stilted and wan next to the more varied and energetic music of the later books. Too many readers, I think, feel compelled to choose one or the other: there's the Hill they like and the Hill they don't, the Good Hill of *For the Unfallen* and the Bad Hill of *The Triumph of Love*, or vice versa. Readers trace Hill's Jekyll-and-Hyde transformation chronologically, dividing his work roughly in the middle, with *Canaan* (1997) as the pivot. While it's true that a number of the later books are idiosyncratic, demanding, and even crabbed, it seems reckless to disregard anything Hill writes. (Much has been made of Hill's use of antidepressants, and by his own admission there has been a pronounced effect: books which used to come once a decade began appearing almost annually.)

Auden, in his lectures on Shakespeare, sees formal restlessness as characteristic of major artists "engaged in perpetual endeavors": "The moment [such an artist] learns to do something, he stops and tries to do something else, something new, and not caring if it fails… ." By contrast, minor artists, Auden argues, never risk failure, arriving quickly at a fixed style, at which point their "artistic history is over." Discovering his early style is no country for old men, a poet may adopt a method better suited to a broadened range of experience. Hill's career shows a constant evolution, one that has taken him far from the agonizingly clipped, traditional measures of his early books. His challenging middle books, roughly from *Canaan* to *The Orchards of Zion*, spin out epic sequences in dense free-verse, each numbered stanza littered with Hill's familiar complement of historical, philosophical, and moral accounting, and each marked by an increased attention to autobiography and broad satire.

These books can be tough going, to put it mildly. Here is an example of the 120 twelve-line stanzas of *Speech! Speech!*—one for each of the Days of Sodom:

> As many as the days that were | of SODOM.
> If thís is to be exorcism. Is it?
> You turn me on. Hoick out another clue.
> THE LENGTH OF THE THING. Let them imagine
> some signal blessing sent but not received,
> saying: I am in the pink. Wish you were here.
> In Abraham's tent and bosom. did you EVER… ?

Huh? With "Hoick"—a call to incite hunting dogs—Hill sets us on the scent of his themes, which can be maddeningly elusive, darting away into tangled thickets of reference. Such passages test the patience of even his most stalwart adherents. Unreadable, they grumble.

But to complain that Hill, perhaps the most linguistically gifted poet now writing in English, has risked change is churlish. If one of our finest poets ventures a new way of writing, prudence suggests, at least for the moment, that we venture a new way of reading. Or, perhaps, an old way. In his review of Pound's *Draft of XXX Cantos*, Allen Tate, one of Pound's finest critics, provided a key to Pound's poetry, but he could have been talking about Hill:

> About a third of the lines are versified documents. Another third are classical allusions, esoteric quotations from the ancients, fragments of the Greek poets with bits of the Romans thrown in; all magnificently written into Mr. Pound's own text. The rest is contemporary—anecdotes, satirical pictures of vulgar Americans, obscene stories, evenings in low Mediterranean dives, and gossip about intrigants behind the scenes of European power… . They are combined on no principle that seems in the least consistent to a first glance. They appear to be mixed in an incoherent jumble, or to stand up in puzzling contrasts.

Tate then addresses one of the common criticisms leveled at *The Cantos,* the same one frequently wielded against Hill: their *difficulty*. To which Tate counters:

> The form [of *The Cantos*] is in fact so simple that almost no one has guessed it, and I suppose it will continue to puzzle, perhaps to enrage, our more academic critics for years to come. But this form by virtue of its simplicity remains inviolable to critical terms: even now it cannot technically be described… . The secret of his form is this: conversation. *The Cantos* are talk, talk, talk; not by anyone in particular; they are just rambling talk… . it is a many-voiced monologue.

Delineating the many voices in Hill's monologues can require a good deal of gloss. Each book creates its own web of reference, based largely one suspects on what Hill was reading at the time. The sheer number and wide-ranging nature of Hill's allusions can be exhausting, even with the internet only a mouse-click away. A little bit of digging in *Speech! Speech!*, for example, uncovers references to Colonel Fajuyi and the Nigerian-Biafran civil war, the Battle of Jutland, Augustine's *City of God*, Bucer's *De Regno Christi*, Dürer, Charles Ives, Saki. Certain references reappear from Hill's earlier books: from *Tenebrae*, Gustav Holst; from *Canaan*, Winston Churchill and the Kreisau Circle that plotted against Hitler; from *The Triumph of Love*, Bletchley Park and the wartime cryptanalysts, Nobel laureates, and forensic oratory.

In the end, Hill's recondite references are not really the point. Hill has said that he does not expect readers to track down every allusion (though I suspect an annotated edition will be prepared at some point). What he most wishes to convey is the "pitch" of his rhetoric, the music of rant, the verbal shapes of anger, disgust, vituperation, even to the point of ridiculousness. Showing himself as ridiculous becomes at times a penitential act in the poems. Hill can also be funny, though occasionally he demonstrates a tin ear for humor. "Poetry is play for mortal stakes," Frost believed, and Hill can throw himself into the game with gusto.

In a small-press limited edition of *A Treatise of Civil Power* (400 copies were published by the Clutag Press in 2005), Hill includes this tribute to yet another mid-century poet, John Berryman:

> And Berryman—how did he slip through
> this trawl of gratitude? The *Dream Songs*, then,
> with other things; their bone-yard vaudeville,
> sparkish, morose, multi-voiced monologue,
> erratic tenderness to self and lovers.

This is an excellent description of what Hill himself is up to in his middle books, though Hill's polyphony never includes Berryman's jazzy sweetness. The final version of *A Treatise* omits these lines (as well as a stanza in praise of early Lowell), but it retains their retrospective feel of taking inventory and of settling debts.

"Coda," the penultimate poem in the book, casts a backward glance over a number of Hill's pet concerns:

> If it's the brunt of years and luck turned savage
> this is our last call, difficult coda
> to the facility, the bane of speech,
> a taint of richesse in the haggard seasons,

withdrawing a Welsh iron-puddler's portion, his
penny a week insurance cum burial fund,
cashing in pain itself, stark induration,
something saved for, brought home, stuck on the mantel …

The iron-puddler is Hill's great-grandfather, and the image recalls the portrait of his grandmother, from *Mercian Hymns* (1971), "whose childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the nailer's darg."

Elegiac and agonized, the poems read like notes jotted by Prospero as he pores over his books in exile. For Hill, books are an experience as palpable as mountain climbing. As Eliot said of Donne, a thought to Hill is an experience; he feels it as immediately as the odor of a rose. The critic Merle Brown has identified "the centrality to all of Hill's later sequences of the conviction, which he shares with Coleridge, that 'meditation is central to practice,'" and books are (weren't they always?) the catalyst.

A Treatise keeps a great number of books to hand. The title of the collection is taken from Milton's *Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes.* Poems are ruminations on books—"On Reading *Milton and the English Renaissance*," "On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*," and five or so others with titles begining "On Looking Through …" and "After Reading… ," etc. One of the most affecting of these refers to a contemporary book of photography, "On Looking Through *50 Jahre im Bild: Bundesrepublik Deutschland*":

There is the captioned Wall;
there the Reichstag, the Brandenburger Tor
variously refurbished, with and without wire;
there's Willy Brandt kneeling at the Ghetto Memorial
on his visit to Warsaw, December Nineteen Seventy:
I did what people do when words fail them.

Hill's suspicion of "the pitiless wrench between/ truth and metre" (art's inevitable prettification), or, as he puts it elsewhere in *A Treatise*, the recognition of "How certainly words are at one with *all corruptible things*," has not lessened over the years; rather it is intensified here by the brunt of years, the sense that time is running out.

Carting one's library into poems can have a distancing effect, but more and more Hill has dared to warm things up through personal reference and intimate reflection:

This not quite knowing what the earth requires:
earthiness, earthliness, or things ethereal;
whether spiritus mundi notices bad faith
or if it cares; defraudings at the source,
the bare usury of the species. In the end
one is as broken as the vows and tatters,
petitions with blood on them, the charred prayers
spiralling godwards on intense thermals.

The blood is back, but not the violence; this is poetry that has learned to keep a civil tongue. When tombstones return (think of the opening of Tate's "Ode"), they are accompanied by harsh natural imagery so beautifully rendered as to become almost redemptive:

> In plainer style, or sweeter, some figment
> of gratitude and reconciliation
> with the near things, with remnancy and love:

> to measure the ownerless, worn, eighteenth-
> century tombstones realigned like ashlar;
> encompass the stark storm-severed head
> of a sunflower blazing in mire of hail.

Other art forms spark poems for Hill—the music of Brahms, for instance, or the paintings of Holbein. Painting, poetry, and history mingle in a sequence of poems on Holbein, Surrey, and Wyatt (and Wyatt's translation of Petrarch's *The Quiet of Mind*):

> Quiet mind,
> in Wyatt's English, is far from slumber
> or waking lassitude. It is parsed here
> because, since Wyatt wrote, that *continent*
> *temper* which could play equivocation,
> land it and slit it, find there the gold ring
> of truth safe in its gut, is history.

A *Treatise* is essentially a book of ekphrasis, of poems describing and responding to works of art, both visual and literary. Hill's rants on human failings (societal, cultural, moral) have quieted; his late poems seek atonement, acknowledge fault:

> The poor are bunglers: my people, whom I
> nonetheless honor, who bought no landmark
> other than their graves. I wish I could keep
> Baconian counsel, wish I could keep resentment
> out of my voice.

Despite Hill's stylistic adventurousness, a consistency of sensibility abides. From the corpses of the Hundred Years' War to this intimate requiem for his ancestors (as in "September Song," Hill here makes an elegy for himself as well), Hill takes us further than any other contemporary poet without ever leaving home.

Notes

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1. *A Treatise of Civil Power*, by Geoffrey Hill; Yale University Press, 51 pages, $16. Go back to the text.

David Yezzi is former Poetry Editor of *The New Criterion*. His most recent book, *More Things in Heaven: New and Selected Poems*, is forthcoming from Measure Press.

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