

# The New Criterion

## Books

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### Pitch highly strung

by [Paul Dean](#)

On the collected critical writings of Geoffrey Hill.

*Geoffrey Hill, edited by Kenneth Haynes*  
Collected Critical Writings.  
Oxford University Press, 832 pages, \$49.95

Geoffrey Hill's prose shares with his verse an uncompromising strenuousness and denseness of allusion; his train of thought halts at all stations. *Collected Critical Writings* is not a book which will win over those who have decided that Hill is aloof and inaccessible. I suspect this would not worry him unduly, given his impatience, in the course of a diagnosis of the flabbiness of contemporary religious language, with the view that readers should be protected "from the jeopardy of cultural embarrassment or the faintest possibility of mental or emotional strain."

The collection brings together Hill's previously published critical books, *The Lords of Limit* (1984), *The Enemy's Country* (1991), and *Style and Faith* (2003), together with uncollected and unpublished work, mostly lectures, in two groups conceived as distinct though related sequences, *Inventions of Value* and *Alienated Majesty*. The range of interest is chronologically broad (sixteenth to twentieth century) and generically narrow. There is almost nothing on the novel, apart from some valuable remarks on George Eliot, and little on the drama, although the essay on Jonson's tragedies (1960) is one of the few that have appreciated those powerful, neglected plays. Shakespeare receives attention mainly in an essay on *Cymbeline* (1969), which, while stimulating in its examination of the Baconian element of experiment in the play, now looks rather out of date (there is little evidence generally, by the way, of the revisions which the editor, Kenneth Haynes, tells us have been made to the essays—in this instance Roger Warren's 1998 edition of *Cymbeline*, from which Hill might have profited, goes unmentioned). As one would expect, poetry is at the center of Hill's attention. Even here, there are few conventionally exegetical pieces, though Hill can do that kind of thing if he cares to; the long discussion, in *The Enemy's Country*, of Pound's "Envoi (1919)" from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, with its delicate tracing of the clash between the traditional form and the modernist thought of that poem, is one of his best things. More often an essay is an occasion for a stock-taking of a poet's work, as in those on Southwell, Vaughan, Dryden, Housman, Whitman, Gurney, or Rosenberg. These are self-contained appraisals, but there are poets to whom Hill returns broodingly, such as Hopkins and, centrally, Eliot, against whom, it seems to me, he increasingly measures himself. Like Eliot's, his interest in literature spills over into its philosophical dimensions, with T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley among the prominent points of reference, and social implications are never far from his mind; "Civil polity," he tells us, "is poetry's natural habitat."

Above all, Hill is fixated on the life, decay, death, use, and abuse of the individual word. He avows a

“critical bias” (which we can see is also a creative one) in favor of “the alien and alienating formal word-pattern before everything.” “Alien and alienating” invoke a key concept for him, akin to Eliot’s “impersonality.” “In the act of creation,” Hill writes in the last essay in this volume, “A Postscript on Modernist Poetics” (2005), “we alienate ourselves from that which we have created, or, conversely, the genius of language alienates us from itself.” Alienation is the price the artist has to pay, not only personally but socially too if necessary; Hill admires intransigence, is drawn to recusants, and has nothing but contempt for poets who court popularity. Tucked away in the footnotes is a stunningly vituperative attack on Larkin, in which anger sandblasts through the usual mandarin suavity: “During his lifetime Larkin was granted endless credit by the bank of Opinion. . . . The notion of accessibility of his work acknowledged the ease with which readers could overlay it with transparencies of their own preference.” Even Christopher Ricks, an early champion and later colleague of Hill’s, stands rebuked for being “pleased to be numbered among Larkin’s advocates.” Larkin, one may venture, was everything that Hill is not and has no wish to be—and that includes being a poet communicating to a mass audience in terms they find immediately intelligible.

Justly or unjustly, readers of Hill have often been, in their turn, “alienated” by what they feel to be a proud scruple and a patrician disdain. He writes, he tells us, “as a Christian” (in a lecture of 1998—I give the date because the explicit statement is important) and assumes moral high ground, with apparent sincerity and earnestness; I am not the first to feel that there is more than a touch of the Old Testament prophet about him, which, however, is oddly mingled with a *fin-de-siècle* aestheticist view of language. As much as Flaubert or Pater he has a sacerdotal reverence for words, yet simultaneously a profound distrust, even distaste, for them. The concept of “the language of theology” is familiar, but when Hill proposes “a theology of language” I do not know, and he does not spell out, what that might mean. Among his chosen subjects, Hopkins might seem likely to endorse such a thing; yet it was Hopkins who said, in a remark Hill doesn’t quote, “The only just judge, the only just literary critic, is Christ”; and I suspect Hopkins (pupil of Green and Pater) might have regarded a “theology of language” as a kind of idolatry, while admitting that language, like everything else, could be epiphanic of God. Yet Hill also sees language as “inseparable” from Original Sin. According to Genesis, as Hill of course knows, language pre-existed the Fall, whose punishment was death, not speech; so he may refer to the serpent’s use of specious argument to win Eve over. If language is fallen, yet can be God-bearing, has it been redeemed, and if so, how? Was language, too, saved on Calvary? (That is not a flippant question.)

If language is to be saved in a more secular sense, it will be by the vigilance of its speakers and writers, and there are many fine passages in this book recalling us to a fully awakened sense of the “pitch” and “tone” of individual words: two more key terms in Hill’s critical vocabulary. The musical analogy is helpful: “pitch” implies the degree of tautness and complexity of statement, the richness of semantic and syntactical range—what Hill calls “hearing words in depth”—whereas “tone” implies the attitude shared towards the material by writer and reader. Yet elsewhere Hill seems to deny this relationship and to say that language is independent of us. In the phrase I quoted earlier (“the genius of language alienates us from itself”), it is not clear how “the genius of language” can be alienated so far as to exist apart from its users. *Language* can have no intention, can exert no will; it is an abstract noun. Hill even asserts that “in the judging of works of art the reader’s, spectator’s, auditor’s ‘mood’ is at best irrelevant, at worst a gross intrusion”—a pronouncement which, taken literally, would make the act of reading impossible, for while we may try to fix our attention on the work for its own merits we cannot stand outside our cast of mind as we read, though we may change our opinion subsequently. If a work of art is absolutely alienated both from its creator and from those for whom it was created, it becomes meaningless.

Could Hill—could anyone—believe this, and go on writing? Criticism is not, for him, a prostration before the enthroned absolute monarch which is the poem; he explicitly says, “the alien strangeness of the poem does not involve questions of awe, or the reader having to feel inferior.” Criticism is a

judgment, a weighing of significance and value. This goes to the heart of his troubled relationship with Eliot, his great predecessor. Eliot, Hill believes, went awry as a result of misreading Bradley's *Essays on Truth and Reality* and allowing himself to describe poetry as "a superior amusement," thus giving a hostage to his and Bradley's enemy, the pragmatist who dismisses art as worthless. A modern example would be J. L. Austin, that gadfly philosopher whose *How to Do Things with Words* has had a great and damaging influence on literary critics. Austin was dismissive of poetry since its "statements" had no practical consequences, and to indulge him as a comic writer, as Hill does, is to be too kind to him. This is not Auden's "Poetry makes nothing happen," which Hill reads as a dig at Eliotian pretensions to be the Sage—although, as a pupil of mine once brilliantly observed, the phrase can also mean "Poetry brings into being that which had no existence before." Eliot played into the pragmatists' hands by laying such stress, late in his career, on the "enjoyment" of poetry—meaning not the effort to realize the poem for oneself, but an affirmation of agreeable sociability (the kind of thing Hill's Larkin prompted). Eliot, in short, sold the pass to the Establishment philistines, renounced his younger, uncompromising self, and damaged his work irretrievably. In his Clark Lectures on metaphysical poetry, "Eliot aims at pitch but, for the most part, succeeds only in tone," and "Eliot's poetry declines over thirty years from pitch into tone," from *Prufrock* which "disturbed and alienated readers" to *Four Quartets* which "assuaged and consoled them." And elsewhere: "to have abandoned *Coriolan* and to have completed *The Rock* instead is indicative of a savage defeat." It may be helpful to see Hill's own *Speech! Speech!* (2000) and later volumes as acts of homage to the tradition represented by the *Coriolan* poems; they certainly reflect his sense of affinity with the Jonson who showed that public, political rhetoric with its "clichés and equivocations" can also be "part of the living speech of a society." Hill is determined to keep his pitch highly strung.

As with poetry, so with criticism. The critic's duty, says Hill, glossing Eliot, is "to point to the minute particulars, particulars in which the individual judgement of the critic is itself implicated." He is thinking of a passage in which Bradley writes of the necessity to pass beyond subjective feeling to objectification of the feeling in the face of fact. (Hill suggests this is the source of Eliot's "objective correlative," although I believe that if there is a source it is Newman, who refers in a sermon to Christ as "the Object correlative" of the "divinely-enlightened mind.") The individual's unique emotional response to the external stimulus, says Bradley, "has to be contained within the judgement and has to qualify the context of your truth." If you fail to do this "you have failed to get within the judgement the condition of the judgement." If the external stimulus is a critical account of a work of literature, then the critic succeeds if the reader grasps the basis for the critic's judgment, and therefore has a greater understanding of the work being analyzed; failure, however, is a mere expression of opinion, inviting interest rather than compelling assent. This, Hill says, applies just as much to writing a poem as to reading one. It is thus, presumably, that the poet/critic bears moral responsibility for his utterances; the text comes with the full weight—or lightness—of its creator's humanity behind it. (Given the resemblance of this to so much in F. R. Leavis, one wishes Hill had allowed him more than the two mentions he receives.)

In the essay "Our Word Is Our Bond" (1983), Hill notes the dual valency of "bond"—restraint or covenant?—which is no real ambiguity since, as he says in the "Postscript," "there is something in constraint which frees the mind, and something in freedom which constrains it." There is a creative tension between the fixed denotations and shifting connotations of words, between the chosen limitations of a fixed poetic form and the poet's freedom within it. To an empiricist such as Locke or Austin, the function of words is to serve meaning, and form is logical sequence; to Coleridge, in a phrase Hill frequently quotes, words are "LIVING POWERS" not wholly under our control, to be respected, even propitiated, and form "develops itself from within." As mentioned earlier, Hill does not expect to be in awe of the poem, but he does invest it with considerable power—even erotic power. When he describes Bradley as "one of the most directly erotic of modern philosophers," we rock back on our heels; but he means by "erotic" a yearning for fulfilment, so a philosopher's or a

poet's desire for maximum clarity of thought and completeness of statement are erotic. This, too, young Eliot had, and old Eliot lost. Hill finds this kind of erotic charge in what are for him two of the greatest moments in nineteenth-century English poetry, Wordsworth's sudden surge of vitality from a position of numbed dreariness in the "Immortality Ode"—

Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!  
O joy! that in our embers  
Is something that doth live... .

—and Hopkins's "uncouth anacoluthon" blazing in to vanquish the power of death in "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection":

Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots  
black out; nor mark  
Is any of him at all so stark  
But vastness blurs and time | beats level.  
Enough! The Resurrection,  
A heart's-clarion!

In this fusion of faith and poetic technique Hopkins "gets within the judgement the conditions of the judgement." But, says Hill, the beauty of this moment "imposes a great strain upon the nerves." It is the kind of consummation (decidedly *not* as in Hardy's "The Convergence of the Twain") that can only happen once. The triumph of getting a poem "right" is like falling in love; "the act of composing is itself the instant of composure, even when it is discord that is composed." Great religious or political poetry, such as that of Hopkins or Yeats, is not unreadable once its theological or historical context is past. The critic's job is to recover that context, not as an archaeologist but as a restorer. The words of the true poem will live by their own power.

At the very beginning of his career as critic, in his inaugural professorial lecture at Leeds, "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" (1977), Hill spoke of the act of writing a poem as one of "at-one-ment," harmonizing and reconciling, but he grounded this upon the poet's awareness of the "menace" of his own shortcomings, issuing in feelings of self-laceration and guilt. "Out of the quarrel with oneself one makes poetry," Yeats said, and of few writers does this seem more true than of Hill. He dislikes "confessional" poetry, but his account of the poet's work is often, at least implicitly, darkly self-referential, hinting at struggles with intractable and unattractive stuff in the writer's mind as well as in the topic explored. To call this a sense of sin may seem presumptuous, but that at least pays Hill the compliment of supposing he is not being melodramatic.

The reader of *Collected Critical Writings* must be prepared to find much that is opaque, tortuous and unrewarding. Whether one thinks the labor worthwhile will depend on whether one sympathizes with Hill's cast of mind and is prepared to batten onto local insights. Those with an open mind about his poetry will find it illuminated by his concerns in these essays. He says much which I do not understand, and which I find contradictory where I do understand it. This may be my fault; he certainly impresses on you a deep sense of your own intellectual inadequacies. In writing this review I have often felt like the Fool on the Hill.

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