

# The New Criterion

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## Verse in perfect pitch

by David Yezzi



*Geoffrey Hill, photographed in 1986*

When the English poet Geoffrey Hill died last week at age 84, the headlines read: “often hailed as Britain’s greatest poet.” Striking that, since many will never have heard of him. He was not a popular poet, to that the extent that poets can be popular, and in a sense he was not of his time. If this rankled him at all, it did not affect the way that he wrote. One gets the sense in reading Hill that he did not measure his poems by any contemporary lights but by his eminent precursors and sometime models such as Hopkins, Milton, and, more recently, the modernism of Tate and Eliot. His poems are moral without being religious in any conventional sense, skeptical of power and the duplicity of language, and tonally fluent in ways that recall both the Jeremiad and the Psalm.

He was that rarest of things: a musician of genius, able to strike in language a new “pitch” (his prized word adapted from Hopkins). Perhaps that is why he was so little known in the end; his copious and original gift was for something that few readers of poetry and even many poets truly understand, let alone value—a language able to convey precise shades of emotion through sound

as well as sense. It is telling of how dependent poetry has become on subject matter to the exclusion of much else these days. It's not that Hill has no subjects; quite the contrary. His books range over huge spans of history, literature, and intellectual life. He is also one of the greatest pastoral poets of the English landscape.

Hill could include more matter in a single page than many poets manage in an entire volume. In his book *Speech! Speech!*, for example, we get references to Colonel Fjuyi 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 in that book reappear from earlier works: from *Tenebrae*, Gustave Holst; from *Canaan*, Winston Churchill and the Kreisau circle that led the plot against Hitler; from *The Triumph of Love*, Bletchley Park and the wartime cryptanalysts, Nobel laureates, and forensic oratory. Such wide-ranging learning, delivered in Hill's often-fragmented style, earned him a reputation for being "difficult." I remember him scolding an audience once for needing poems to be "What's the word?" he growled. "Accessible?" He drew out the vowels like they were poison on his tongue. So much for any hope of wide popularity.

But in the end I came to believe that this *difficulty*, if that's what it was, was not the point. (It must be noted that few allusions today escape the net of a Google search, which makes pretty much all of Hill's lumber room of reference "accessible.") Daunted by the many obscurities in his poems, I once asked him if he felt that readers needed to ferret out every reference in order to understand his poems. No, he said. What he was after was to make language ring out like the piercing pitch of a banjo—to make it that distinctive and penetrating. (It turns out he was something of a bluegrass fan.) It was then that I understood that he turned to the recesses of history and of literature not as a scholar but as an artist, for their moral and emotional charge. One can dip into his poems anywhere and find lines that pack a wallop. A good place to start is with his *Selected Poems*, which draws both from his lapidary early work as well as from the rangy sequences he turned to later on. Also available on the Keble College website are his wonderful and wonderfully humane and even funny Oxford lectures.

For further guidance and recommendations, *The New Criterion* archive has numerous poems by Hill as well as reviews of most of his books by our poetry critic [William Logan](#), who has done some of the best writing on Hill's work.

**Poems:** "[Jumping boy](#)," "[Ipsley Church](#)," [first](#) and [second](#) excerpts from *Odi Barbare*, "[Before senility](#)," "[Citations I](#)," "[Coda](#)," & "[Epiphany at Hurcroft](#)"

**Essay:** "[Geoffrey Hill's civil tongue](#)," by David Yezzi

**Reviews:** *Poems, 1952–2012*, *Odi Barbare*, & *Clavics*, reviewed by William Logan

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