

UP AND DOWN THE | HILL

Speech! Speech! Geoffrey Hill. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000; *The Orchards of Syon*. Geoffrey Hill. Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002.

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'Geoffrey Hill is a difficult poet.' 'Is Geoffrey Hill a great poet?' The assertion organizes almost all responses to Hill's work, while a veneration of difficulty in one or more senses, and positive evaluations of this poetry's particular demands on the reader, are invariably involved in the anxious question that informs most critical study of the poetry. A good deal could be said about the ways in which this poet has been read over the years, and little of it would be flattering to those who have set the vanishing points of the discussion. Hill is not as baffling as Michel Deguy or Jeremy Prynne, though he is far better than either. He is no more challenging than René Char or Eugenio Montale. Like them, he makes local and historical allusions; but, having come upon the scene much later, he finds a readership that is less well educated in history and literature and, more importantly, a readership that is less likely to be impressed by the assumptions and destinations of literary modernism. Besides, Char and Montale offer lyrical and emotional satisfactions that Hill refuses to give. What makes Hill's poetry demanding is not any special weight of learning but his invitation to think and feel in ways that are unfamiliar and that, even if pursued to the end, do not console. The best poems concede little to those readers who expect verse to yield instant satisfactions or vaguely pleasing bewilderments.

Hill's work falls into two periods, more or less plainly marked by the appearance of his *Collected Poems* (1985). Almost everything in that volume calls for and amply repays serious reading. 'Annunciations,' 'Funeral Music,' 'Lachrimae' and 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy' are among the finest poems written in Britain since the Second World War. After a dry period, four volumes come in quick succession. *Canaan* (1996) has memorable lustres but no single poem to match the best of the earlier collections. *The Triumph of Love* (1998) shows Hill moving away from the impacted lyric while also risking less oblique satire. There have always been flashes of high humor in the poetry; there are more here, however, and there are also flashes of very sharp teeth. *Speech! Speech!* (2000), another book-length collection, lets us hear even more of Hill's humor, even while the stern

moralist remains in view. Yet it is a failure, the weakest book by far in the poet's work. *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) is a partial recovery, and admirers of Hill, who have greeted the book with some relief, can be lulled into thinking that it sometimes reaches the heights of his best poetry. Talk up the value of experimentation, extend the principle of charity to the poetry's meter and Hill's heavy-handed wit, and indulge the poet for introducing himself so often as a figure, and the book can stand beside *King Log* (1968) and *Tenebrae* (1978). So they say. Yet no amount of special pleading can disguise what is all too apparent: the currents of feeling, thought and poetry are far weaker in *The Orchards of Syon* than in the earlier work.

Early in *Speech! Speech!* we overhear this question and answer:

How is it tuned, how can it be un-
tuned, with lithium, this harp of nerves? Fare well
my daimon, inconstant
measures, mood- and mind-stress, heart's rhythm
suspensive; earth-stalled | the wings of suspension. (3)

Lithium carbonate, prescribed to cure a range of psychiatric disorders from simple depression to schizophrenia, can 'tune' the body by making it responsive to a new chemical balance, and at the same time the poet's voice can be adjusted, brought to a particular standard of pitch. Of course, the chemical can also untune the body, unnerving the patient until the right level of medication has been reached. A poet's voice that has been untuned will be incapable of harmony, or perhaps — if one could risk an analogy with virtuoso blues guitarists — it will be characterized by haunting new tones. Readers of Hill are used to ambiguities. (Even the best poems give an uneasy sense of having been written with the new criticism as a template.) And here Hill invites us to contemplate the contrary ways in which medication has changed his poetic voice. For a moment he recalls Milton's Satan ('Farewel happy Fields/Where Joy for ever dwells'), yet his identification with the arch-demon is negative. Hill turns aside from his torment to seek a measure of peace and happiness. Medicine can change Hill's allotment of fate; it can certainly free him from the evil daimon of 'mood- and mind-stress'. The question is whether he can write strong poetry without his daimon.

People who argue that the medicated Hill simply cannot write as well as before are mistaken. The essays contained in *Style and Faith* (2003), which were written over the period that marks the decline of his verse, are just as acute and searching as anything in *The Lords of Limit* (1984) or *The*

Enemy's Country (1994). Settling in the United States, marrying, and participating in the Anglican rite, have doubtless contributed to the new approach to verse. 'I can prolong the act at times/to rival Augustine', he writes (in dubious taste) of his long deferred conversion and married life in the first chant of *The Orchards of Syon*. Old age plays a part as well: the fear of certain extinction before long has made Hill want to tell us all rather than to follow the path of perfection. *Speech! Speech!* is elaborated in 'As many as the days that were | of SODOM' (55). Later we are invited to 'count all hundred and twenty | then shriek/I'M COMING' (96). It was the Marquis de Sade, in *Les 120 Journées de Sodome* who exhibited his tireless and tiresome drive to 'say all.' *Tout dire*, for Sade, indicates the freedom to say everything forbidden but also to talk endlessly. These days we are more likely to indulge the former than the latter: the encyclopedic catalogue of perversions is of more interest to historians of sex than to readers with a taste for eighteenth-century literature.

If we pick up *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*, however, we will be warned that the book will not offer us any delight at all. Anything pleasing has been 'deliberately excluded', Sade says, and is to be found, if at all, only when 'accompanied by some crime or colored by some infamy.' The same holds true of *Speech! Speech!*, although the crimes and infamies here are mostly presented and judged obliquely. The killing of Lt Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi in Ibadan, Nigeria, while protecting a guest from rioting natives, is a significant exception. Hill is well known for denying himself and his readers any easy pleasures. Until recently, *tout dire* for him, as for Paul Celan, has passed by way of stringent compression, requiring the reader to search for meaning upon meaning. That this can be so in *Speech! Speech!* is evident from the lines about lithium that I quoted, which are among the most moving in the volume. Other allusions are poorly made, adding little to the poetry. Knowing that Alan Turing worked in World War II as a code breaker in Hut Eight does not make the following lines shine any more brightly: 'Harps/in Beulah. In Hut Eight the rotors. So few/among many true arbiters' (7). At other times ambiguities are laboriously explained ('no offence/to her intended (or to her intended)' (35)), and passages of very lax versification are presented. Consider:

Trust Ted-next-door to swear that his stuffed
parrot still talks. Trust Irish Jim
to call it a grand wake. Trust rich Uncle Tony
to drink from the saucer because we're watching,
and because he's rich. Trust Mad Bess

to queen it in purple. Trust your Mother
to notice who's missing. Trust Sandy
MacPherson to blow us to Kingdom Come (17),

and,

Soccer versus Islam. Rip through this lot:
END OF THE WORLD CUP, GO EASY WI'T'SENNA.
PECCAVI RESCINDED. THE AMUSEMENT
PARK TWISTER AND OTHER STORIES. MORE FAUNA
OF THE AUGEAN. BELT UP, PHAZZ. TAKE
TIME OUT, SIMONE WEIL. (31)

Even if we pass over the banality and leaden humor of the first passage, and the flatness of the second, the limp enjambments mark the failure of the verse.

'Up the Hill | Difficulty,' we hear in section 30 of *Speech! Speech!* The poet has become the connoisseur of his own critical reception, and for long stretches this long poem fails to clench on anything more solid than the author's sensibility and idiom. The manner is handled more effectively in *The Orchards of Syon*, even though, as he admits, 'vision loses out/to wandering speculation' (XXIX). Perhaps the title alludes to Syon House on the Thames, known for its collection of rare trees and also for the dogs that mutilated Henry VIII's corpse while it was kept overnight there on its way to Windsor. Certainly it refers to *The Orchard of Syon* (1519), a paraphrase of St Catherine of Sienna's *Il Libro*, addressed to the Bridgettine nuns of Syon Abbey in Devon. Divided into seven parts, each of five chapters, this valuable contribution to English mystical literature invites the sisters to wander through the 'xxxv aleyes' of the 'fruytful orcherd.' We hear of the soul's 'inward biholdinge to knowe herself'. Hill's long poem shares this longing for self-knowledge. His orchards consist of seventy-two monologues, each of twenty-four lines, and are developed around and between several imaginatively charged sites: the Abbey of Syon, Gerard Manley Hopkins's Goldengrove, the forest of those who used violence against themselves in *Inferno* XIII, Syon House, and Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, the poet's childhood home.

The orchards of Syon are more varied and more troubled than those evoked in *The Orchard of Syon*. They are what we bring to them, Hill informs us in the final monologue. He talks of 'recovery of sprung rhythm' (LVIII), yet the poem is written in a far looser measure. The caesura and

stress marks are there to help us recite the verse correctly; however, they tend to recall James Henry's fussy notations rather than Hopkins's precise musical scores. At times the ruminations are drained of verbal and intellectual energy. Consider:

As for posterity,
whose lips are sealed, I do prefer
Polish to Czech | though, not speaking
either language, I am unable to say
why (II),

and,

Montale, in *Finisterre*,
focused something, his eros, though I can't
quote him or even recall
clearly what he said of desire and absence
of the desired. (XLVI).

Or entire passages display the embarrassment of the late learner. In *Speech! Speech!* especially, Hill tries to incorporate demotic speech, which sometimes turns to glue in his hands: he does not have the quick ear of a John Berryman, and is better matched to *La vida es sueño* than to *77 Dream Songs*. More worrisome, in *The Orchards of Syon* he seeks to learn from—of all people!—Frank O'Hara: 'Love/you, Frank, come on home! Frank being Frank/ O'Hara' (XXXVII). Some lessons are better left unlearned.

Each page of *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon* reminds us that Hill is a writer of remarkable powers. They show themselves in these books more often in memorable evocations of nature than in moral thinking: 'rough soggy drystone clinging to the fell,/broken by hawthorns' (*Speech! Speech!*, 16), 'December chastens the stream bed; frosted mist/hangs in autumn's leasowe' (*Orchards*, XXXVI). Yet no page convinces me that Hill is writing with full attention. The failure is not a function of 'difficulty.' Rather, our disappointment turns on Hill projecting a shadow play of learning while not freshly responding to the mystery of why we live, love, suffer and die. These books are unworthy of such an impressive poet.