

Editorial

In this summer of 2010 we are becoming accustomed to interpretation of our constitution through the words of an unexpected Coalition. The power of the banks, foreign and domestic policies, and the conduct of Parliament all concern us as they might have concerned Milton just before the restoration of the monarchy. Since 'our condition is not sound but rotten [...] However with all hazard I have ventur'd what I thought my duty to speak in season, and to forwarne my countrey in time...'. He is intensely involved in his moral role during political change. Perhaps we, too, might worry through, or celebrate, our continuing involvement as victims or speakers for whatever constitutes Civil Power. I think of the powers of communication, or lack of them, through the press, through writing and through publication. There are important negotiations with power, sometimes only partly visible or legible. For example, few with an interest in poetry will have missed the recent election of Geoffrey Hill to the Oxford Professorship of Poetry. The broadsheet papers recorded the processes of nomination and voting with glee and various levels of knowledge or sympathy. *The Times* noted that he 'emerged triumphant', yet, 'appropriately for the victor of the prestigious literary contest, his emergence was entirely metaphorical,' since he 'did not attend the announcement, and declined to make a public statement about his presumed joy' (*The Times* 19 June 2010).

I wonder what Hill would think about the word 'victor' and of his 'presumed joy'. So much of his poetry has emerged (that word again) from the misplaced and misunderstood powers that impose and enact the roles of victor and vanquished. And so much comes from the awful need to articulate and speak: Speech! Speech! Some might have thought it odd that he declined the opportunity to make his own, on-line, election statement. In her response to Hill's candidacy, Professor Dame Averil Cameron, Warden of Keble College, wrote:

Geoffrey Hill is a lecturer of unrivalled power, whose standing as a poet gives his discourse an added dimension. His pre-eminence in the world of poetry guarantees a global audience, but his particular attachments to Oxford give a special appropriateness to Hill's candidacy for the Chair held by Arnold and Auden.

Hill's silence after the votes were counted may have been frustrating for the media, but perhaps the real response has come through a form of communication in many ways still unimaginable - an electronic hint at that 'global audience'. Andrew McNeillie's Clutag Press recently issued an email flyer which announced the publication in October 2010 of a new volume of poems, *ORACLAU* | *ORACLES*. Surely this is right. It is as though Hill has wished to draw attention to the poetry or, put another way, to let the poetry emerge as itself and to speak for itself in painful and loving intersections of words and power, as if to say: of course, he is there - read the poems.

Understandably, some might be inquisitive. What sort of person would avoid the inevitable plaudits and celebrations given such existing worldwide recognition? Hill the actor (in as many senses of the word as you might choose) and performer has always been present in the poems. His overt self-questioning has been given a home in many recent poems and has taken the form of a concern with tyranny: how totalitarian regimes depend upon certain relationships with language and the media and how our current political culture with its personality-obsessed media is a barrier to proper communication characterized by linguistic vigilance. In a recent interview with Chris Woodhead which draws on a car journey they made together across England, from Cambridge through Bromsgrove to the church in Wales where his great grandfather was baptised, Hill makes the intense feelings of his school-days link frighteningly with the rawness of old age: homes, churches, schools; art versus tyranny:

Art, he believes, has 'a right to be difficult' if it so wishes. 'Cogent difficulty, that yields up its meaning slowly, that submits its integrity to the perplexed persistence of readers of goodwill, is one of the best safeguards that democracy can have.' Why? Because 'tyranny requires simplification...Propaganda requires that the minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement. And any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence implies intelligence. Maybe an intelligence under threat, maybe an intelligence that is afraid of consequence, but nonetheless an intelligence working in

qualification and revelation...resisting, therefore, tyrannical simplification'. (Woodhead, *Standpoint*, July/August 2010)

We look forward to the new poems and to Hill's continual resistance to simplification. Indeed, his acceptance of a complex life is no surprise. From his earliest poems to his most recent, he has examined the lives of those who have positioned themselves in the most frightening and courageous ways towards the state, religion, and art. Hill's work is never simply referential. It is a dramatised 'thinking through'. His own poetry, and the poetry of those others so movingly incorporated into his self-questioning meditative procedures, so often walks through self-destruction and onwards to punishment inflicted by words themselves:

Cloven, we are incorporate, our wounds
simple but mysterious. We have
some wherewithal to bide our time on earth.
Endurance is fantastic; ambulances
battling at intersections, the city
intolerably on fête. My reflexes
are words themselves rather than standard
flexures of civil power.
(*'On Reading Crowds and Power'*)

Who would have expected jolly sound-bites at a post-election press conference? The words in a poem do their own work; and simple explanations of the creative processes neither respect nor inform anyone:

Poetry's its own agon that allows us
to recognize devastation as the rift
between power and powerlessness. But when I
say poetry I mean something impossible
to be described, except by adding lines
to lines that are sufficient as themselves.
(‘In Memoriam: Gillian Rose’)

Either you are prepared to join the dialogue that informs the agon on its own terms or you aren't. That said, it is fascinating that so many poems in *A Treatise of Civil Power* are founded in dialogue. The dead here renew the best of their own languages, and, through Hill, we have the best projections of their future speech and ours.

In this volume there are three ‘In Memoriam’ poems. He not only acknowledges, but shares the activity of talk as it happens - and questions why it happens: ‘On Reading Milton and the English Revolution’, ‘On Reading Blake: Prophet Against Empire’, ‘After Reading...’, ‘On Looking Through...’. There are several dialogues with composers and individual musical works. And the sense that music is sufficient as itself is ever present, however technically self-

aware we may be as listeners. ‘Coda’ – the musical term for a conclusion – is highly personal, very moving and yet based on shared human behaviour. ‘In Memoriam: Gillian Rose’ works for and earns a ‘cleared space’: his portion of the rifts and devastation informing his poetry of knowledge.

Hill's shareable territories are always unexpected despite their common humanity. It is thus fitting that his next books should appear through a small, though distinguished, press. His work has had a wonderful history in *Stand* and ‘Northern House’. Recently, the poems' visible evolution between Clutag and Penguin editions offers readers a quiet place, almost a participation in, his humbling, exploratory talk. Will the media perceive and respect these qualities in his forthcoming Oxford lectures? Near the end of Milton's ‘The Readie and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth’, he writes: ‘I have not more to say at present: few words will save us, well considered; few and easie things, now seasonably done’. Hill, like Milton, is not playing games for the mass media. The ways that he chooses to speak with us might give us pause for thought on the role of the small press in poetry publication.

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