Editorial

Early this year Geoffrey Hill gave readings to packed audiences in Leeds, Manchester, and Oxford. The publication of his latest collection, *Without Title*, was the ostensible reason for the three events, but the career-long retrospect which each reading involved produced a strong sense of the valedictory. As he has done on previous occasions, Hill began very deliberately with 'Genesis'; he ended with 'The Storm', a new poem 'after Eugenio Montale' from *Without Title*, the last phrase of which is: 'and stepped into the dark'. Such powerful and playful conjurings of self in relation to place and occasion have always been a feature of his readings as well as his actual poems. In keeping with one of the preoccupations of the latest collection – the landscape of his childhood in the West Midlands – Hill described himself as 'a Worcestershire man', read numbers I and III from *Mercian Hymns*, as well as 'Sorrel' and 'Pisgah' from *Canaan*. (The latter contains the headnote: 'Very common and widely distributed … It is called Sorrel … in some parts of Worcestershire'; the latter imagines, following Vergil, an encounter with his father as a 'shade' inhabiting the 'cane loggias, tent-poles, [and] trellises' where 'the steep garden overlooks the house'.) From *Without Title* he read the brilliant 'The Jumping Boy' which ends its creative exploration of the beguilingly simple language of childhood games with: 'Jump away, jumping boy; the boy I was/ shouts go.' In both encounters – with his father and with his boyish self – there was more than a recognition of the past being 'a foreign country', as he once put it: more a sense of imminent parting, of a very pressing sense of mortality.

Not that this developed sense of the valedictory acted as a barrier to Hill's equally characteristic, though often unacknowledged, penchant for a dry, laconic, sometimes mordant, and self-deprecating humour. Far from it. Here was a poet who, with a rare combination of self-mockery and admitted self-conceit, explained his interest in the comparison a radio host in the US had drawn between his own work and that of Jimi Hendrix. Before he read the poem in question, the aptly titled 'Improvisations for Jimi Hendrix', Hill drolely informed us that when he researched the matter some time later he found out that there had been a misprision: the comparison had, in fact, been with U2. In similar vein, he was delighted to inform his largely British audience that a US college edition has glossed the phrase 'overlord of the M5', from the opening poem of *Mercian Hymns*, as 'Head of the British Secret Service'. In Manchester, he prefaced his reading with a profession of admiration for the Lancastrian music-hall comedienne Hilda Baker; and then, some considerable way into the proceedings and immediately after one of the drier, more abstruse poems in *Speech! Speech!* he looked up at the audience and with excellent comic timing said: 'It's not that much like Hilda Baker, is it?' At Leeds, in a typical moment of geniality and arch irritation, he broke off from the poems and thanked his audience for attending, only to follow it with: 'Wild horses wouldn't drag me to a poetry reading.' So much for these abrasive gems!

The day before the reading in Leeds, Hill gave a lecture on the poet Sydney Keyes in which he explored his poetic roots in the

eighteenth century, used insights from Charles Williams to help understand preferred ways of seeing art, suggested influences from Rilke and German poetry, and offered the context of *Eight Oxford Poets* and other writers from the Second World War. It was an approach which affirmed the possibility that both poet and reader can accept the dominance of history whilst also accepting that poetry is not to convey information but to 'shape a thing', that Keyes revealed a vulnerability but was drawn 'to transform language into power', that he had a dramatic voice but, like Keith Douglas and Drummond Alison, he gave no 'hints' to the reader, and, most interestingly, that Keyes was best seen not as a Christian gentleman, but as a 'stoic'.

It seems important that this agenda invites us to share new ways of reading Hill's own work. And one of the least expected, although most obvious on reflection, was the opportunity to see Hill as continuing a tradition that was embodied in some of those poets from the 1940s. Keith Douglas wrote in May 1943 that the 'whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after the war is over' (*A Prose Miscellany* edited by Desmond Graham, 1985). Interestingly, Hill asserted that Keyes was 'a poet of war as history and history as war'. Listening to his selection of his own work from 'Genesis' to 'The Storm', one could only recognise a sense of continuity. Here I am not simply suggesting family resemblances of theme but an attitude to poetry itself perhaps best summarised in Hill's 'Preface' to *Style and Faith* (2003): 'I am prepared to argue ... that it is a characteristic of the best English writing of the early to late seventeenth centuries that authors were prepared and able to imitate the original authorship, the *auctoritas*, of God, at least to the extent that forbade them to be idle spectators in their own writing. / As a generalisation such implications of authority are also true of the best writing of later periods, though I would contend that here such excellence is more isolated and more beleaguered' (p. xiii). These remarks are prompted by quoting Calvin on the *Psalms* and relating this to John Donne. But they are also a continuation of the debate about the moral standing of the words we use which has so illuminated both Hill's poetry and prose. In his essay 'Our Word is Our Bond' his reference points range from Donne and Hobbes to Hopkins and Pound. The issue is concerned with the sorry links in the 'real world' of Pound between the philosophy of language and 'war as history': 'The charge that the "transition from generalization to practice completely eluded" Pound, though excessive, at least takes with a proper seriousness the idea that "rhetoric" is a part of the ontology of moral action' (*The Lords of Limit*, 1984). We must be very careful if we do not mean what we say.

If Keyes can be seen as a 'stoic', might it be helpful to ask the same of Hill? Like so many poets who came to prominence in the 1950s he had lived through the war. Keyes and Douglas were at Oxford only a few years before Hill arrived there. In 2006 it has, perhaps, seemed increasingly difficult to place 'Genesis', and his Fantasy Press pamphlet, into moral intersections of word and action that might have been felt in 1952. But Keyes' genuine 'presence' in Hill's lecture invites another look. Bonamy Dobrée, in *The Broken Cistern:* The Clark Lectures 1952-53, sought to rediscover the big themes available to poetry for the last four or five hundred years. They emerge as 'Stoicism', 'Scientism' and 'Patriotism'. And

these are public themes that he can detect in the world of the '40s and '50s and in important contemporary poets such as C. Day Lewis and Herbert Read. I make no claim that Hill was influenced by Dobrée, rather that an essentially stoical experience in being a poet has been more a part of the last 60 years than we perhaps have imagined. Keyes said in 'The Artist in Society': '[The artist] is neither propagating a doctrine, nor "expressing himself"; rather, he is letting the world express him and giving himself entirely to something outside himself' (*Minos of Crete* p. 144). Dobrée quotes Herbert Read:

> Knowing that there is no reward, no certain use
> In all your sacrifice, then honour is reprieved.
>
> To fight without hope is to fight with grace,
> The self reconstructed, the false heart repaired.

> With the phrasing and diction perfectly in tune, with the occasional rhyme giving precision, this mirrors what is perhaps the ultimate moral Stoicism; not only endurance, the leaving aside of what is beyond the will, but the achievement of an integrity at once proud and humble, together with a free acceptance. (p. 10)

How odd the move from stoical 'content' to the indissoluble mimetic link between rhyme and meaning, from style to world view. But in 'A Pharisee to Pharisees' in *Style and Faith* Hill develops a similar line:

> It would perhaps be generally agreed that a 'poetic' use of language involves a release and control of the magnetic attraction and repulsion which certain words reciprocally exert. One is impelled, or drawn, to enquire whether that metaphysical rapport felt to exist between certain English rhyme-pairings is the effect of commonplace rumination or the cause of it. (p. 79)

Hill's readings were an affirmation of the profound importance of such issues in our understanding of language and an invitation to accept that our sense of this truth may be as simple, sensuous and passionate as his poetry.

In his farewell reading to the US this spring Hill explored the work of others, including Donne's 'A Nocturnall upon St Lucies Day', lines 549–572 from Book VI of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, Hopkins's 'The Leaden Echo' and 'The Golden Echo', Whitman's 'Beginners', Rosenberg's 'Expression', Dylan Thomas's 'Twenty-four years remind the tears of my eyes', and Lawrence's 'Bavarian Gentians'. The reading was framed by excerpts from the *Psalms*. He began with lines 12–17 of *Psalm* 90 and ended with line 13 of *Psalm* 39: 'O spare me that I may recover my strength, before I go hence, and be no more'.

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