

GEOFFREY HILL AND 'THE FLOATING OF NOSTALGIA'.

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Although Hill gives the impression of feeling England in his bones he also thinks of it as lying outside himself, at a remove. His sense of it is conscious and constructed as well as intuitive. Even in a poem about his own part of England he begins with a pondered deliberateness, as if it were only imaginable through a process of self-conscious meditation:

So to celebrate the kingdom: it grows
greener in winter, essence of the year;
the apple-branches musty with green fur.
In the viridian darkness of its yews

it is an enclave of perpetual vows
broken in time.

'The Herefordshire Carol'

The 'kingdom' is only disclosed gradually, step by step, as if one's eyes were slowly becoming accustomed to the dark and beginning to make things out in it. Hill is not from the same part of England as A.E.Housman for nothing but the many-layered, unfathomed quality of his 'Kingdom' makes Housman's look rather simple. His music is richer, with more pith and sinew, like a dark baritone to Housman's tenor:

Oh tarnish late on Wenlock Edge.
Gold that I never see;
Lie long, high snowdrifts in the hedge
That will not shower on me.

A Shropshire Lad, xxxix.

The poignancy of these lines attaches more to the poet's feelings than to their object: Wenlock Edge seems precious because it is also insubstantial, so little really known. It is Housman's distance from his treasured image of England that gives A

1.- 'The Herefordshire Carol', which is the final poem of *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* (a central sequence in the present context), *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Poems* (Penguin, 1985), p. 164. All subsequent references to Hill's poems will be to his edition (CP) and will be incorporated into the text.

Shropshire Lad its lyric simplicity. He never gets near enough to a real Shropshire to complicate this image with a living complexity. Hill, by contrast, though equally remote from the past, is always trying to edge nearer to it, to press beyond the level of poetical assumptions about it. What gives depth to his sense of England is his sense that, though it is neither measurable nor finally knowable, he feels drawn to pursue it even as it eludes him. He is as much stimulated by its mysteriousness as by (numerous) things he does know about it. A static symbol of lost beauty, like Housman's Wenlock Edge, could not satisfy this need, for all its evocativeness, because it is a need to recover a relation to the past and not simply a desire to make plangent celebrations of its pastness.²

The sensation of being drawn to your roots in direct proportion to the feeling of being cut off from them is, of course, a particularly modern one. Hill himself has been especially conscious of it in connection with the written word, which may be why he has so often chosen to express himself through a traditional form like the sonnet and has sometimes sought, as in *Tenebrae*, to write in the accents of earlier poets. But this fascination with the past has been inseparable from his sense of being removed from it, as if English civilisation no longer benefitted from the same strength of continuity that it had in earlier centuries. Thus, in a recent essay on Tyndale and the *Revised English Bible*, Hill maintained that modern 'education and communication' have 'destroyed memory and dissipated attention'. In the same essay he claimed that for us 'The doctrine, the faith, of Luther and Tyndale are an alien tongue'. The consequence of this has been 'the irreparable damage inflicted, during the past eighty years or so, on the common life of the nation'.³ England has become 'alien' to the English because of their obsession with their own modernity (in this case, with producing modern versions of the Bible). Such views are no doubt 'conservative' but they are also anti-establishment (Hill gives short shrift to the Anglican hierarchy) and they do not necessarily belong in a realm of fantasy simply because they reject present tastes. Hill is not interested in the past as a stick to beat the present with. He no more takes the 'common life of the nation' for granted in its history than he can in his own times. To participate at all in such a 'common life' the poet has to try to recreate it for himself by a slow process of conscious effort. He knows very well that, if the English are, as it were, spiritually amputated, their plight can hardly be rectified merely by wishful thinking. This is why his poems about English history so often focus on passages in our history that most of us have forgotten about.⁴ It is in this respect that poems in *Funeral Music* and *Mercian Hymns*, which seek to rescue such history

2.- Hill himself points out that 'it's entirely due to the fact that Housman was hardly ever in Shropshire that the atmosphere of his literary 'Shropshire' is so curiously clear yet remote. See *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 80. (The interview with Hill - a very important one - was first published in *Quarto*, no. 15 in March 1981.)

3.- 'Of Diligence and Jeopardy', *TLS*, November 17-23 (1989), 1274.

4.- See *CP*, p. 199. This two page essay is as concentrated as the poems themselves and repays re-reading. (Like many of Hill's notes to his own work it sometimes seems designed as much to tantalise as to inform the reader.)

from oblivion and remind us of parts of the 'common life' that we have foregone, can be seen as poems about what it is like to live in twentieth century England too.

To begin from Hill's preoccupation with the past may be misleading, however, because most poems about the past are wistful and elegiac whereas Hill's are more often terse and direct. For him, the act of retrospection is seldom an excuse for leisurely musings about 'battles long ago'. The first thing that strikes one about his poems (it also helps to explain their frequently cryptic quality) is their lack of preamble, their ability to begin from the front-line:

I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult.

There is a land called Lost
at peace inside our heads.

Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
dies in a wine puddle.

Openings like these throw us off balance, plunge us without more ado into some new experience. They are quite un-discursive, free of that tone of rumination which lowers the temperature of so much recent verse. The words are crisp and definite, chiselled words that demand attention. Even when they seem obscure there is nothing hazy about them. Thus, when Hill writes about the past he can make us feel as if we were living in it and not simply looking back on it. Even his ellipses and his obliquity are really there to enhance the feeling of immediacy. It is more important to him that history should be capable of shocking us than that it should be picturesque. It is a part of his present, not a 'world elsewhere' to which he can escape.

In the important interview he gave to John Haffenden in 1981 Hill was quick to repudiate the suggestion that, in writing about the past, he had been prompted by nostalgia. What had really motivated him was the desire to exorcise the nostalgia that struck him as endemic to twentieth century England:

If one writes lyrics of which nostalgia is an essential element, naive or malicious critics will say that the nostalgia must be one's own. There are, however, good political and sociological reasons for the floating of nostalgia: there has been an elegiac tinge to the air of this country ever since the end of the Great War. To be accused of exhibiting a symptom when, to the best of my ability, I'm offering a diagnosis appears to be one of the numerous injustices which one must suffer with as much equanimity as possible.

Hill may be a rather too self-conscious St Sebastian here to the arrows of his critics but he is surely entitled to feel stung by their complaints. The past he dwells on is more

often a snare or a bad dream than a consoling refuge from the present. It is anyway pain that solicits him, more than pleasure. Sometimes he invokes the past almost as if he were about to don a hair-shirt:

Poetry as salutation; taste
Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
Unearths from among the speechless dead
Lazarus mystified, common man
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
From the provided loam.

'History as Poetry'

Violence and death are the only soil in which the spirit can truly grow. Thus, Hill's *Funeral Music* unremittingly undermines any nostalgia or glamour we may still project onto the blood-stained history of the Wars of the Roses. The sequence is able to explore religious feelings only because it always keeps in mind what the sixth sonnet calls 'the world's real cries' of pain and despair. Hill interrogates the ghosts of the fifteenth century as if they enabled him to perform an especially testing series of spiritual exercises. Every sonnet is tight-lipped with suffering. The verse remains lapidary and chillingly concise, refusing to pull out all its rhetorical stops as one expects it to do:

Recall the cold
Of Towton on Palm Sunday before dawn,
Wakefield, Tewkesbury; fastidious trumpets
Shrilling into the ruck; some trampled
Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
Stuck with strange-posture dead. Recall the wind's
Flurrying, darkness over the human mire.

There is no attempt to force some contemporary meaning onto the grim scene, no wish to provide the twentieth century excursionist with a guided tour of one of the more colourful landmarks of history. The reader is no more spared the meaningless horror of the scene than is the poet or the poem's speakers themselves. What survives of Towton, in the words of Hill's short essay on *Funeral Music*, is 'a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks' that penetrates 'the stark ground / Of this pain'. To come to terms with history as human experience the poet has to recognise its otherness and distance. The last thing Hill offers us is an opportunity to make believe that we are medieval.

Nostalgia, on the other hand likes to pretend that the past is really there just to feed itself. It makes it into a repository for feelings it is unable to indulge in the present, projecting them onto it until they mask what it really was. (Thus, the traditional Western film - all those open spaces and shoot-outs laid on for suburban

America - is a classic example of nostalgia.) By contrast, in Hill's poems we are directed to the invisible and larger part of the iceberg of the past and not to its obvious emotional high-points above the surface. One consequence of this approach is that it entails a radical revision of the sort of literary 'Englishness' which Hill inherited from predecessors like Housman. He is not interested in our received ideas about England - the passages of history which we all know what we think about - but either in Englands of which we are ignorant or in seeing the Englands we do know from an unexpected angle. But what strikes one most in Hill's treatment of history is his acute sense of the painfulness of life in the past. Life is not a whit less hard in his medieval England than it is in poems like the 'Two Formal Elegies' which he dedicates 'For the Jews in Europe'. For the past he writes about is never *over*. In his moving essay on St Robert Southwell, the Jesuit martyr tortured under Elizabeth I, Hill puts himself on the rack too, both repelled and drawn by the thought of the poet's terrible end. It is as if he himself were implicated in the guilt for such horrors and felt doomed to re-live Southwell's agony. History evidently triggers off the deepest undercurrents of his own psyche. It guarantees neither an attitude of objectivity nor a means of escaping from the self.

Referring to his sonnet sequence *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England*, Hill reminded John Haffenden that it could be as important to deplore what happened in the past as to celebrate it. One good reason for not being nostalgic about the England of history is the thought of the countless ordinary people who suffered in the creation of its greatness:

I think the sad serenity and elegance of the
eighteenth-century country house landscape was
bought at a price: not only the sufferings of
English labourers but also of Indian peasants
..... The celebration of the inherited beauties
of the English landscape is bound, in the texture
of the sequence, with an equal sense of the
oppression of tenantry.

This feeling for the unsung classes which political and artistic history usually ignore is a constant in Hill's work. (Not for nothing did he choose to write at length about a poet like Charles Péguy, who came of a peasant stock.) Thus, even at its loveliest, the past can weigh on Hill like some beautiful incubus. One finds such feelings in one of the first things he ever published, a student piece written at Oxford:

One might think that the great strength and appeal
of Oxford lay in its tradition; that an awareness
of this would grant a sense of peace and security.
But one has found tradition as cold a shadow here
as in Westminster Abbey. There is small comfort in
being crowded out by ghosts. Under the chill salty-
smelling stone of the great Tudor gate-houses, beneath

the high rows of portraits in the halls, thin-lipped
prelates, all evil-looking old men, you are brow-
beaten by the past.⁵

Hill's fascination with history has always been accompanied by such feelings of exclusion. It is this that has drawn him to a poet like Yvor Gurney who felt so bitterly his lack of recognition from the country on whose behalf he had written. The only way Hill has ever been able to express a full-throated, unembarrassed love of country has been indirectly, through the French poet Charles Péguy's commitment to his 'terre charnelle'. In his own voice, he has never been certain of *which* England his poems address. Indeed, speaking of *Mercian Hymns*, he describes Offa as a 'tyrannical creator of order and beauty' who serves him as 'an objective correlative for the inevitable feelings of love and hate which any man or woman must feel for the *patria*.' Offa represents 'the ambiguities of English history in general' - that is, an England that can never be so defined and known that it evokes only one emotional response. It is an illusion to imagine that, because one is English, one ever knows what England is.

Hill's claim to diagnose the 'elegiac tinge' of modern Britain might be taken to mean that he sees himself as a physician bent on lancing some infected growth. If so, he is also less puritanical about nostalgia than such a description suggests. His attitude to it is by no means simply hygienic or priggish. In the essay on Southwell, for instance, he speculates that as early as sixteenth century England, a nostalgia for lost innocence was already present in English culture in 'that vision of the pre-dissolution Church... a beautiful but nostalgic image for which some Englishmen already possibly 'hankered' as early as the mid-sixteenth century, and which perhaps bore, and bears, little resemblance to late medieval and early Tudor reality'.⁶ This does not imply that such emotions are automatically spurious or self-deceiving; indeed, Hill even finds a certain nobility in them, as he does in their literary equivalent:

...there's a real sense in which every fine and
moving poem bears witness to this lost kingdom
of innocence and original justice. In handling
the English language the poet makes an act of
recognition that etymology is history. The history
of the creation and the debasement of words is a
paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence
and original justice.

For the poet who uses a fallen language there are two ways of imagining the past, one nostalgic and the other redemptive, but they are too complementary to be easily told

5.- Quoted in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work*, ed. Peter Robinson (Open University Press, 1984), p. 12. (This book provides a helpful if over-detailed introduction to Hill's verse - though it tends to take its importance for granted.)

6.- 'The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell', *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (André Deutsch, 1984), p. 22.

apart. The interview with Haffenden makes this clear by both disclaiming nostalgia and, in the same breath, acknowledging its central place in the subject-matter of poetry. Hill begins by describing the 'failure to truly grasp experience and substance' as no less than 'one of the characteristic failings of human nature'. What is at issue is more than just the taste or the sentiment of a particular culture:

If critics accuse me of evasiveness or the vice of nostalgia, or say that *I* seem incapable of grasping true religious experience, I would answer that the grasp of true religious experience is a privilege reserved for the very few, and that one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of a much more common situation - the sense of *not* being able to grasp true religious experience. I'm accused of being nostalgic when I'm in fact trying to draw the graph of nostalgia. The painter Francis Bacon said somewhere that he was 'trying to paint the track left by human beings like the slime left by the snail', and it seems to me that in poetry also one is trying to trace the track left by human beings, which is full of false directions and self-pity and nostalgia as well as lust, wrath, greed and pride.

The diagnostician is not simply bent on keeping himself pure from some emotional malady. He recognises nostalgia as part of his humanity, something more perennial and deep-seated than the sort of modern vice which a writer like D.W. Harding tended to treat it as.⁷ To be able to draw its graph a poet must first of all feel it in himself. One lesson we can learn from Hill is to be suspicious of any English writer, coming this late in the country's history, who claims to be free of nostalgia. It is a salutary lesson for there have been few periods when more writers have pretended to be aloof and immune to their own 'Englishness' and free to judge it dispassionately than in the last twenty years. Condescending analyses of Edwardian and Georgian patriotism have, for example, been the stock-in-trade of many writers on the Left who never trouble to expose their own feelings about England to a similar scrutiny.⁸ Their attitude to nostalgia is very different from Hill's: he can claim to chart it because he has felt it himself, whereas they reject it because they cannot quite believe it to be real. For him it is only too real and ingrained in the culture, however much he may distrust it. As his essay on Yvor Gurney makes clear, it has not been just the sentimentalists

7.- Harding's 'A Note on Nostalgia', which appeared in *Scrutiny* and reached a wider audience in his *Experience into Words*, is by now a *locus classicus* on the subject.

8.- See, for instance, *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, edited by Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd (Croom Helm, 1986). This otherwise very valuable book seldom scrutinises its own sense of England anything like as sharply as it does that of its historical subjects. Where the sense of national identity is concerned, criticism has to be self-criticism.

among us who have yearned for the England before the Great War. It needs no ghost come from the dead to remind us how such feelings have been sharpened by such a watershed, severing for good what continuity had been left untouched by a rampant industrialism. It is, in fact, arguable that, without nostalgia, for many of us the past might not exist at all. The malady is not simply deep-seated - it may even be necessary. This too must have a bearing on Hill's inability or refusal in his poems to put history behind him.

ii

Hill's verse at times can give the impression of having discarded the fleeting liveliness of modern speech for a weightier idiom culled from the past. It often has a curiously timeless feeling about it, as if it would be as much at home in the age of Wordsworth or the seventeenth century as with the glib intimacies of much contemporary poetry. This is not to say that its music is archaic but his scrupulosity with words is a more musical scrupulosity than usual.⁹ He listens for the right word like a musician listening for the right note. It is this - rather than its more cerebral qualities - which gives his language its special crispness and precision. The effect would be beyond a simply Parnassian stylist. It aims at power, not fastidiousness. *Funeral Music*, for instance, has a grave underswell to it which feels neither simply ancient nor simply modern in its suggestions. It probably owes more to the English of the King James Bible than any of Hill's contemporaries do though it does not read like imitation or pastiche. Witness the plain dignity of these lines from the seventh sonnet, describing the bloody battle of Towton in 1461:

‘At noon,
As the armies met, each mirrored the other;
Neither was outshone. So they flashed and vanished
And all that survived them was the stark ground
Of this pain. I made no sound, but once
I stiffened as though a remote cry
Had heralded my name. It was nothing...’
Reddish ice tinged the reeds; dislodged, a few
Feathers drifted across; carrion birds
Strutted upon the armour of the dead.

This is so grim because it is shorn of rhetoric. In many ways, its rhythms are prose rhythms - they refuse to catch fire, to sing. The witness of the battle is cut short in mid-sentence and his voice swallowed up in an eerie silence. The last three lines of the sonnet feel almost clinical in their unremitting pursuit of the *mot juste*. Yet the overall effect is far from being simply austere. What makes *Funeral Music* unusual is its

9.- Hill's twin sense of the moral and the aesthetic qualities of rhythms and cadences is to the fore in his essay on Tyndall and in 'Redeeming the Time' in *The Lords of Limit*.

union of intensity and detachment, as of fire and ice. Far from being a means of disengaging himself from the carnage of Towton, Hill's neutral tone is a way of bringing out the enormity of the scene. It is striking how vivid a picture of the battle's violence the sequence conjures up whilst treating that violence with a sort of guarded reticence. Of course, Hill is less interested in a drama of action in *Funeral Music* than in the silence of its aftermath. This is why he avoids giving his sequence any coherent narrative (though his essay on the poem hints at one). The real drama takes place between the reader and the unrehearsed cries of its victims as they seem to carry across the centuries. Hill's past is not some exotic country in which we are invited to take up the role of spectators or visitors. Its anguish is there to disturb our present. Hence the language of the voice heard in sonnet 7, measured like the speech of yesterday but as direct as a contemporary's.

The reader of *Funeral Music* is never offered the compensatory thought that time heals all things (as the reader of *Little Gidding* is): Hill's object seems to be to direct us to an exposed wound in our history and then to make very sure that it stays exposed. He refuses to mediate the anguish of Towton through any sort of hindsight that claims to understand its purpose. The battle, or what glimpses we have of it, is presented as raw experience, not as a stage in any larger historical pattern. Its victims are denied the option of viewing their fates with detachment:

I believe in my
Abandonment, since it is what I have. (6)

And:

Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us - or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end 'I have not finished'. (8)

Such suffering is irreducible, without hope of transcendence. Its only lesson is in its sheer acuteness. With other Hill poems in mind (eg. *Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets in King Log*) it might be argued that the sufferers in *Funeral Music* undergo a kind of martyrdom (Hill has always been drawn to martyrs) but it is less easy to say what their martyrdom might be for. The many religious allusions in the sequence are, as one would expect, studiously agnostic in their cumulative effect. What matters most to Hill seems to be the suffering *as* suffering. But why rake over the faded coals of history and fan them back into heat, only to walk barefoot over them? Should we see *Funeral Music* as at bottom an unusually elaborate penitential exercise? In fact, there are obvious twentieth century parallels for Towton but Hill is careful not to spell that out or imply that its bloodshed is evoked merely to symbolise more recent holocausts. To make Towton's suffering stand for something else would be to make it less actual by providing a way of intellectualising its horror. Hill's poetry is often accused of being overcerebral but characteristically it works very close to lived experience - in *Funeral Music*, uncomfortably close. His vigilant attention to

the suggestions of its every word strikes me as stemming not primarily from either self-consciousness or academic ingenuity but from an anxiety not to falsify or doctor that experience. Thus, one of the most constant effects of *Funeral Music* is its habit of punctuating its own rhetoric with unmusical, vernacular cries of pain. It is as if the poet need to remind himself that what he has made into a poem had another, quite unliterary origin. For example, in the last lines of the fourth sonnet:

Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable
Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly
Among carnage the most delicate souls
Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping 'Jesus'.

The word 'Jesus' is deliberately ambiguous - either sacred or profane - and, coming where it does, with an unexpected spontaneity as well as with finality, its ambiguity undercuts the meditative assurance of the lines that lead up to it. Whether the word is said in prayer or as an expletive its effect is to sabotage the carefully cadenced music of the poem's conclusion. This sort of sniping at the aesthetic satisfactions which the sequence appears to be offering is clearly a reminder that there was something in the horror of Towton which could not be sublimated into art. Similar scruples can be found both in Hill's first book, *For the Unfallen*, which is overshadowed by the modern holocaust, and in much later things like his tragi-comic treatment of the death of Charles Péguy at the Battle of the Marne. All through his career Hill has been both drawn to make poetry out of pain and violence and suspicious of his own motives for being so.

Usually, when writers re-create the past, they seek to bring it back to life so that we feel for a while as if we belonged in it. This is not how Hill proceeds. The nameless speakers of *Funeral Music* may voice an intense experience but that experience always seems truncated, eeked out in an abbreviated and edited way. The sequence even leaves us uncertain as to when Suffolk, Worcester and Rivers - its putative protagonist - are being referred to; we are never allowed to be on speaking terms with them. The voices we hear in the poems seem to belong to everyone and no one, a chorus of anonymously individual cries of pain. History, that is, remains foreign and impenetrable, a puzzle for which we possess only a few of the clues. The poet adjures us to remember events which we have no means of reconstructing, a past which leaves us face to face with a kind of redoubtable blank:

...some trampled
Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
Stuck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind's
Flurrying, darkness over the human mire. (2)

As the coldly neutral word 'stuck' suggests, the picture of the battlefield is alienating as well as appalling. Windswept and amorphous, it offers no purchase to our emotions. It is as if the sequence had only created a sense of tragedy in order to reveal that there is nothing in the scene for tragedy to attach itself to. History affords only a succession of unanswered questions. There are no clearly shaped tragic destinies to be found in the undifferentiated 'human mire' of Towton. Similarly, when the third sonnet refers

to 'England crouched beastwise beneath it all', one takes it that, whatever 'England' may be, it is something too hidden and primitive to be interpreted by the rational patterns of the historian. Hill takes us only a step inside this remote past and then the line goes dead and we are left to conjecture. But this is not simply a way of reflecting our limited knowledge of the history of the fifteenth century. More is known about Towton (or even about Offa's Mercia) than Hill chooses to divulge in verse. The drive of *Funeral Music* is towards a rigorous selection from the available historical material - so much so, that the sequence even leaves us to guess at who was fighting at Towton and who won. Clearly, Hill wanted to keep his reader in the dark, conscious of being unable to make historical judgements of what is being described. Not that he is merely teasing his readers. Keeping us in the dark is simply a way of reminding us that history is never there just for the asking, just because it is ours. It is a peculiarly English trait, to claim to be inward with some aspect of history on which one is ignorant, just because it is English history. *Funeral Music*, on the other hand, is partly one long caveat against our desire to explain the past. Its historical questions are constantly turning into even more unfathomable religious ones:

If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. (8)

Hill unflinchingly refuses to prise a meaning out of such echoes. To put it in another way, he leaves his 'England' where it is, 'crouched beastwise beneath it all'.

Hill's originality becomes clearer if one compares him with a writer like Sir Walter Scott, who was equally absorbed by the past. For instance, in *Old Mortality*, one of Scott's finest novels, the story is mediated through the strange figure of Old Mortality himself as he travels the length and breadth of lowland Scotland renovating the gravestones of the old Covenanters. His chisel, like Hill's pen, serves as a reminder of mortality, of all the deaths that constitute what we call history. But Scott uses *Old Mortality* as a means of underlining our fellow-feeling with the dead. If the faces of the Covenanters begin by seeming as blank as their gravestones the novelist's task is to fill those blanks in. This is precisely what *Funeral Music* avoids doing. If it invites sympathy for the victims of Towton at one moment it fends it off the next. What shapes up as a drama keeps turning into a kind of ritual which, though moving, keeps up at arm's length. For example, the gravity and composure of the voices which open sonnet 2 could hardly be taken for the accents of actual soldiers:

For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain -
For none but the ritual king? We meditate
A rueful mystery; we are dying
To satisfy fat Caritas, those
Wiped jaws of stone.

Whoever is speaking here, Hill is speaking through them. This is why the lines appear to be standing back from the suffering in which the speakers say they are trapped. The

poignancy of the verse has none of that warming sense of fellow-feeling that characterises similar moments in Scott.¹⁰ The special solemnity of Hill's lines depend upon the feeling in them being contained within the tone of meditateness. The object of the meditation, 'fat Caritas', is far more vivid than those who are dying for it. If, in Hill's words, the sequence achieves a 'florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks' it is clearly the 'grim music' that controls the 'grunts and shrieks' and not the other way round. The undoubted intensity of *Funeral Music* remains a rather cold intensity whose finest effects often cultivate a cold, estranging kind of beauty. The last lines of sonnet 4 might almost be taken as an epitome of such poetry and its ability to attract and repel us in one and the same movement:

...Our lives could be a myth of captivity
Which we might enter: an unpeopled region
Of ever new-fallen snow, a palace blazing
With perpetual silence as with torches.

Such lines seem to hold themselves aloof from us, just as the past Hill describes does.

The remoteness of the speakers in *Funeral Music* is of a special sort. They are also very much at the poet's disposal. One feels that they say just so much and no more, when required and according to the overall shape of the poem they appear in. By not naming them Hill makes it easier for himself to control them. There is frequently something placed about his people, as if he had asked them to stand still and hold their pose while he photographed them. The stained-glass saint of 'In Piam Memoriam' is a famous example of a figure pinned down in an attitude that facilitates and never distracts the poet who is communing with him. Other characters in Hill's poems are pinned down by death - he has none of Hughes's delight in creatures that move. Even Péguy, a man whom no one could silence in life, is virtually dispossessed of his voice in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, a poem in which one often forgets that he was a poet. I do not suggest that these things are at all inappropriate in context (Hill has a very strong sense of poetic decorum) but that they imply a strong component of mastery in his writing, a will that needs to keep every element of a poem in its grip. And this is what his vigilant alertness to possible puns, the tightness of structure of his poetry and his weakness for over-finical footnotes also imply. His habit of holding himself morally responsible for every word he writes (see 'Our Word is our Bond') is itself in part an expression of his feeling of power over what he creates.¹¹ The desire to leave nothing to chance can also denote an unusually insistent sense of purpose. The pared-down economy of a sequence like *Funeral Music* portends something very similar. So strict a sense of relevance suggests a writer who

10.- Before we conclude that this means that Scott is therefore Hill's superior we have to ask whether any modern writer is still close enough to the past to be able to humanise it as warmly as Scott did with Scottish history. It may be that one of the things that *Funeral Music* is saying is that an *Old Mortality* is no longer possible.

11.- See particularly 'Our Word is Our Bond' in *The Lords of Limit*, eg. 'the dyer's hand, steeped in etymology if nothing else, is, by that commonplace craftsmanlike immersion, an infected hand' (p. 153).

is unusually conscious about what he is trying to do. In each of Hill's major sequences his calculated abridgements of his story leaves one comparing his control over his material with one's own uncertainties about it. What we know about Sebastian Arrunz or Offa or Péguy always feels more salient than complete. This is not a predicament that one feels tempted to ascribe to the author himself. The brevity and selectiveness of what he tells us is obviously extracted from more extensive sources. Any coldness in his poetry is clearly related to the reduced opportunity for empathy that such selectiveness entails. To describe Hill's writing as cryptic is really to point out the ways in which it keeps emotion at bay rather than its more obvious tendency to tease the intellect.

A critic who takes a similar view of *Funeral Music* to this is C.S.Sisson. Though he praises its 'indubitable directness' he is also troubled by the way it seems to draw attention to itself as an 'artifact':

...something worked towards and built, which suggests a growing distance between the poetic impulse and the words which finally appear on the page - a gain in architectonics, perhaps, but at a price which is so often paid, by all but the greatest writers, in a loss of immediacy.¹²

Sisson goes on to describe the intensely written quality of Hill's verse as being ultimately a form of self-protection: 'There is in Hill a touch of the fastidiousness of Crashaw, which is that of a mind in search of artifices to protect itself against its own passions.' This may be so but another upshot of Hill's fastidiousness is surely to be found in his gift for stamping his own identity on whatever he dealt with. Thus, there is nothing random about the speakers in *Funeral Music*, no sense of their forming a chorus of jarring and disparate voices: every voice we hear in the poem has the solemnity of the poet's own voice. That is presumably part of the attraction to Hill. The dead, like the past itself, cannot answer back. We can impose ourselves upon it as we wish. However, the fact that we are always conscious of Hill's fashioning of his material does not mean that his sequence is an 'artifact' merely in the technical sense, as, say, a clock is the product of the clock-maker's craft. Hill is evidently as much drawn to his subject by the moral as by the technical demands it makes on him; the sort of 'difficulty' he deals in is a matter of both. What Sisson does put his finger on is the sense that Hill has laboured and laboured his lines and, unlike the Yeats of 'Adam's Curse', is prepared to let that labour show. But Hill is a more dogged poet than Crashaw. It is easier to imagine him chipping painstakingly away at his words than as having the leisure to elaborate them with a flourish of fancy. In the end, the Hill Sisson conjures up sounds too deliberate and not sufficiently concentrated in feeling to have written *Funeral Music*.

A fuller description of the kind of control Hill has over his subject-matter in *Funeral Music* is supplied by Merle Brown (one of his most perceptive critics). He draws attention to the tenacious, heuristic movement of the verse:

12.- 'Geoffrey Hill', *Agenda*, vol. XIII, no. 3 (1975), 26.

Even though it seems magnificent when read as both sequential and simultaneous, it is always edged with a problem in painful need of solution, so that it does not move like a broad and deep river, but twists and turns, swerves or shrinks.¹³

This captures well Hill's gift for keeping his reader on the *qui vive*, never letting any one emotion take over more than briefly. The poem shapes the feeling, not the feeling the poem. Hill's later work may be less jagged and sudden in movement than *Funeral Music* but it remains every bit as controlled. Jon Silkin argues persuasively that in the later poems this control declines into a merely literary manner which lacks the force found in *King Log* where:

...the directness comes in the character of expressed experience, for which there is no finer, more delicate intermediary than directness, the simplicity [in *Tenebrae*] is one of style. There is nothing to compose from conflicted response into directness. There is no apprehension.¹⁴

Certainly, anyone turning from the earlier to the later volume will come upon verse which seems liturgical and aesthetic, as if the intensity had been shaped out of it:

And you, who with your soft but searching voice
drew me out of the sleep where I was lost,
who held me near your heart that I might rest
confiding in the darkness of your choice:
possessed by you I chose to have no choice,
fulfilled in you I sought no further quest.

These lines from *Tenebrae* are so finished, so poised in their antitheses, that their beauty, though moving, feels artful. The very smoothness of the verse's movement seals it in upon itself. It is as if an aesthetic emotion were keeping an actual one at bay.

This is not to imply that *Funeral Music* itself is always innocent of the sounding phrase and the ringing cadence. Its rhetoric can be equally self-conscious and *written*, as in sonnet 5:

So many things rest under consummate
Justice as though trumpets purified law,
Spikenard were the real essence of remorse.
The sky gathers up darkness. When we chant
'Ora, ora pro nobis' it is not
Seraphs who descend to pity but ourselves.

13.- *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 45.

14.- 'War and the Pity' in Robinson (op. cit.), p. 115-116.

The difference between these lines, in contrast to those from *Tenebrae*, is that their rhythm is skilfully arrested whenever it seems about to become too swelling (e.g. after 'remorse'). The final cry of the speakers may be moulded by Hill's taut syntax but it still has the force to break free of it:

Racked on articulate looms indulge us
With lingering shows of pain, a flagrant
Tenderness of the damned for their own flesh.

The kind of shock sprung by that last line is missing from *Tenebrae* precisely because the past which the later poem evokes is so much more malleable and recoverable than that of *Funeral Music*. It offers less resistance to Hill's power as translator and orchestrator. This is not because he has more control over his material than in the earlier sequence but that his control has become more striking than that which is being controlled. The final section of *Tenebrae* underlines this:

Music survives, composing her own sphere,
Angel of Tones, Medusa, Queen of the Air,
and when we would accost her with real cries
silver on silver thrills itself to ice.

This is immaculate but hardly unobtrusive. The poetry too inhabits its 'own sphere' where those 'real cries' seem to elegantly freeze. In *Funeral Music* it is the sound of such cries that we remember.

One of the epigraphs to Hill's *Collected Poems*, a line from Pound, seems especially pertinent to his treatment of history: 'In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it.' He is as moved by what history leaves in the dark as by what it illuminates. Moreover, he clearly wants to plunge his reader into this darkness (often by deliberately omitting half of the facts himself) so that he can let him slowly become accustomed to seeing in the half-light. Thus, England itself, which history both discloses and conceals, lies not on the visible surface of our lives but buried like treasure trove, as in poem xiii of *Mercian Hymns*:

Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare
coins to the light. Ringed by its own lustre, the
masterful head emerges, kempt and jutting, out of
England's well. Far from his underkingdom of crinoid
and crayfish, the rune-stone's province, *Rex Totius*
Anglerum Patriae, coiffured and ageless, portrays the
self-possession of his possession, cushioned on a
legend.

It is from this well that the speakers of *Funeral Music* also come. One of the most fascinating aspects of the sequence is the sense it gives of some raw human experience suddenly looming towards us out of a remote past. The silence in which it seems enveloped is itself part of the drama. A well has to be deep. It is as though Hill could see life most clearly when he saw it from a distance.

This is why the dead of *Funeral Music* are faceless and undefined, without the bravado of tragedy. Hill infers their suffering but never presumes to share it. Their cries never quite come from centre-stage. Moreover, Hill distrusts the modern myth which chooses to see the poet as occupying some perilously exposed outpost on the frontier of 'Reality'. He has written more than one poem about the holocaust whose real subject is the inadequacy of poetry to describe such a subject. It is not, to his mind, so easy to live on the front line as some modern poets have made out. The point is made in his essay on Yeats when he quotes from Czeslaw Milosz (a favourite of Ted Hughes's). In Milosz's view, 'only those things are worth while which can preserve their validity in the eyes of a man threatened with instant death.' In Hill's view this is to glorify 'an arbitrary fire':

The passage purports to establish new terms of the utmost purity: things and moments. What it does, in fact, is to elevate the man-of-the-moment. However humbled one may be by this, it is still necessary not to be bullied by its absolutist élitist tone. For those who detect the élitism, yet remain humiliated by their implied failure to live up to such demands, the poem of rigorous comfort is Yeats's 'Easter 1916'.¹⁵

One of the things for which Hill prefers Yeats's poem is what he calls its 'artifice', 'the tune of a mind distrustful yet envious, mistrusting the abstraction, mistrusting its own mistrust'. If it achieves such 'intellect', poetry need not be either 'confessional' (a word Hill only uses with distaste) or bent on outstaring the Gorgon's head. But if Hill's patiently reconstructed history, his peering down "England's well", seems vicarious in comparison with the front-line activity of a Milosz, that does not mean that its end-product is necessarily less intense. In *Funeral Music*, at least, Hill's indirections give rise to an unsettling directness. If this is not the tension that Milosz recommends it is at least equal to it.¹⁶

15.- "The Conscious Ming's Intelligible Structure": A Debate', *Agenda*, vol. IX no. 4 and X no. 1 (1971-2), 22.

16.- The present essay is an extract from a longer essay on Hill. Readers interested in pursuing its line of thought further will find *Mercian Hymns*, of the later books, especially interesting. They will also find *The Lords of Limit* very relevant, particularly "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement' ", 'Redeeming the Time' and 'Our Word is Our Bond'. Hill's most recently published poetry is 'Scenes with Harlequins' which appeared in the *TLS* for February 9-15, 1990, p. 137. These six poems are concerned with the Russia of Aleksandr Blok but their way of imagining the past has distinct affinities with *Funeral Music* (or, for that matter, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*).