

Geoffrey Hill's Patience

Talk of the patience of any individual author, and perhaps of Geoffrey Hill in particular, is apt to arouse a certain degree of apprehension—and perhaps even the suspicion of irony. It would be unfortunate, at the very least, to try anyone's patience in this respect, so I am beginning here, as I should, with some definitions. Still, since patience is, according to Samuel Johnson, "the quality of expecting long without rage or discontent", I will presume on that of my readers to the extent of withholding certain conjectures about patience in Hill's poetry until a later stage. For the *Oxford English Dictionary*, patience is "The suffering or enduring (of pain, trouble, or evil) with calmness and composure; the quality or capacity of so suffering or enduring" (1a); "Forbearance, longsuffering, longanimity under provocation of any kind" (1b); "The calm abiding of the issue of time, processes, etc." (1c); "Constancy in labour, exertion, or effort" (1d). The English phrases associated with this word are often ways of expressing *failures* of patience (look how Johnson only has to mention the word to find himself speaking of "rage or discontent"): "*patience perforce*, patience upon compulsion, i.e. when there is no other course (*obs.*)", "*my patience!* an ejaculation of surprise (*colloq.*)", "*patience! have patience!* be patient; wait a little; give or allow sufficient time", "*to have patience with (in, toward)*, to show forbearance toward; so, *out of patience with (colloq.)*, to be unable to bear patiently, to be irritated by", "*to have no patience with*, advb. phr. (sometimes adj.), provoked so as no longer to have patience (*with*)". Naturally, this is hardly the end of the matter, for the *OED* still has much besides this up its sleeve; but we can at least note that patience and endurance are close, one to the other, and that patience concerns closely the power of enduring, and the state of things not being past endurance. In defining patience, impatience seems to be always at hand, offering us the most immediate and vivid evidence for what has not been achieved.

Put like this, the whole affair might try the patience of a saint (though not all saints, in fact, are especially notable for their patience), or require the patience of Job, whose endurance could be, as we know, sorely tried. In fact, in establishing what patience might mean, the Book of Job provides a central literary figure who, in his repeated scornful rebukes to his comforters, is one of the angriest men in the Bible. It is to Job, as it turns out, that much talk of patience has a tendency to turn and return—as here, in the New Testament’s General Epistle of James:

Be patient therefore, brethren, vnto the comming of the Lord: behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, vntill he receiue the early and latter raine.

Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the comming of the Lorde draweth nigh.

Take, my brethren, the Prophets, who haue spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.

Beholde, wee count them happie which endure. Ye haue heard of the patience of Iob, and haue seene the end of the Lord: that the Lord is very pitifull and of tender mercie.

(Jas. 5.7-8, 10-11)

Endurance, and its happy end, are figured in Job’s disputatious tribulations; the injunction to “stablish your hearts” prepares those hearts, by reference back to the Prophets, for “suffering affliction”. St Paul, too, seeks to harden his readers to endurance:

And not onely so, but we glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation worketh patience:

And patience, experience: and experience, hope:

And hope maketh not ashamed, because the loue of God is shed abroad in our hearts, by the holy Ghost, which is giuen vnto vs. (Rom. 5.3-5)

Again, the link between tribulation, patience, and hope, with the promise of a change in our hearts at the end, is one provided by Job. Of course, Job’s questions are rather less confident than their later Christian interpretations:

O that I might haue my request! and that God would graunt mee the thing that I long for!

Euen that it would please God to destroy mee, that he would let loose his hand, and cut me off.

Then should I yet haue comfort, yea I would harden my selfe in sorrow; let him not spare, for I haue not concealed the words of the holy One.

What is my strength, that I should hope? and what is mine ende, that I should prolong my life?

Is my strength the strength of stones? or is my flesh of brasse? (Job 6.8-11)

By this stage, perhaps, we have become inured to the hardening undertaken by patience. We might notice, at the same time, that to “harden my selfe in sorrow” is not quite the same thing as hardening the heart: Job is adamantly neither metal nor mineral, neither stone nor brass, while St Paul, like James, insists on what patience can “shed abroad” in the heart.

It is time to turn to poetry—though not yet to Hill’s, and hardly as a relief from such wearing considerations. Gerard Hopkins has a sonnet, tuned in a fittingly agonised way to Job’s tribulations, which considers (or confronts, or commends) patience:

Patience, hard thing! the hard thing but to pray
But bid for, Patience is! Patience who asks
Wants war, wants wounds; weary his times, his tasks;
To do without, take tosses, and obey.

Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,
Nowhere. Natural heart’s ivy, Patience masks
Our ruins of wrecked past purpose. There she basks
Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills
To bruise them dearer. Yet the rebellious wills
Of us we do bid God bend to him even so.

And where is he who more and more distills
Delicious kindness? —He is patient. Patience fills
His crisp combs, and that comes those ways we know.

“To do without, take tosses, and obey”: here is identifiably the patience of Job, along with the insistence that patience is at once “hard”—difficult, that is, as well as solidly unyielding—and yet

not hardening in its effect on the human heart. Not that the heart is exactly having an easy time of it: “We hear our hearts grate on themselves: it kills/ To bruise them dearer”. What we “hear”, really, if we listen in to the processes of the self’s working body, is the life-sustaining beating of our hearts. What Hopkins wants us to pick out in that sound is something altogether harsher, a self-damaging attrition in which patience is the hard thing which bruises the tender organ, the heart. Although the sestet liquefies this stark material, and issues in images of honeycombs and delicious distillations, what is most powerful in the poem (despite the final appeal to “those ways we know”—ways known, perhaps, but ways starting and leading somewhere outside the poem itself) is its determination to endure the worst, with patience as the heart’s hard, and bruising, shield.

Yet Hopkins also makes patience organic in the poem, turning this hardness into a kind of vegetable resilience:

Rare patience roots in these, and, these away,
 Nowhere. Natural heart’s ivy, Patience masks
 Our ruins of wrecked purpose. There she basks
 Purple eyes and seas of liquid leaves all day.

The rooting that takes place here is akin to that of another patience, *Rumex Patientia*, or *Rumex obtusifolius*, a species of dock, here transformed by Hopkins into “heart’s ivy”, which covers the “ruins of wrecked purpose” of a life. There is a glamorous abundance here, but it does not forget about enduring hardness; nor, indeed, does it quite turn away from the dangers of ivy, and its berries (“eyes”) and leaves.

“Natural heart’s ivy” is one of the many lines of Hopkins to which Hill’s *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) has recourse:

Range
 how you will, anger, despair, are inbred
 monsters: Nebuchadnezzar’s crawlingly
 bitter egress to gnaw grass; Cain’s brood
 busy at Heorot. Such startings-up,
 slouchings, of self-hatred: a sullen
 belch from the ice-maker in the small hours.
 All honour to patience, but patience which
 as *natural heart’s ivy*—HOPKINS—must
 surely choke it: *it*, here, being the heart.

How much patience can the heart take? The question is, perhaps, Hopkinsian; further back, it is Job's question, and Hill's lines find some haunting and powerful images for the "inbred/ monsters" of anger and despair which are patience's close relations. "Self-hatred", like that dyspeptic ice-maker, is always having its say, working over and over its attritions on the self-grating heart. For Hill in *The Orchards of Syon*, the problem is how to make patience endurable without hardening the heart; and this is a difficulty which has appeared before in his poetry.

It is important for Hill—as, in fact, it was important for Hopkins—that the heart should remain (whatever its metaphorical and spiritual import) a heart of flesh. Elsewhere in *The Orchards of Syon*, the heart is arrestingly out in the open:

The heart is not beautiful. Exposed
it leaps fattily, apes a sexual motion
as if copulating with itself, *la vulve*
insomnieuse, to re-transplant FRÉNAUD.

This, Hill seems to be suggesting, is what patience has to protect, but which it will also—natural heart's ivy—see through all the way to expiration. What Job does, in one sense, is simply put up with one damned thing after another. But he does not pretend that his tribulations are not damaging, nor that the patience with which they are borne makes them any less than what flesh and blood can stand: "What is my strength, that I should hope? and what is mine end, that I should prolong my life? Is my strength the strength of stones? or is my flesh of brass?" In Hill's *Speech! Speech!* (2000), the eyes and leaves of mistletoe, like heart's ivy, collide with Job's words:

See all as miracle, a natural graft,
as mistletoe ravelling the winter boughs
with nests that shine. And some recensions
better than that I should hope.

"A natural graft" seems to touch on horticulture and heart-surgery at once; and almost at once, as section 58 begins, Hill re-accent's Job's words:

Better than that I should hópe, assign me
to bond with some other fatedness

coveted as free will. ...

Better than that I should hope: my
word is my bond, my surety, my entail.

“What is my strength, that I should hope?” The verse here shows how heavily Hill’s own work on, and with, the matter of words bears down on his strength, invoking the essay “Our Word Is Our Bond” with a certain weariness before pressing on to further strengthening—and near-unendurable—exercise: “Twelve press-ups at a time; such heaviness/ increased like due allowance”.

Strength, then, is needed for patience; but strength itself is a “heaviness”, one that both weighs and ties us down. As Hill says elsewhere in *Speech! Speech!*, “Patience/ is hard, reductive. What comes next?”. This very question, though, is what the heart asks of patience. If one answer is, following the Bible, that what comes next is hope, there are also other, less comforted, responses in the course of Hill’s poetry. In what it endures, poetic patience here has to cope with actual duration, the slow working of poems through and into one another, or the gradual push in a long poem towards a point of completion, or at least of cessation. In Hill’s longer poems, there are cries of impatience, and anticipations and accommodations of readerly impatience, as things move, or seem to be moving, towards an end. *The Triumph of Love* (1998) has impatient voices in abundance, including those that seem to anticipate destinations: “So what about the dark wood, eh?/ When do we come to the dark wood?—”. Although Hill has passages in the poem where comment on duration becomes explicitly a progress report, measuring off the distance still to go, there are also points at which the mode of progress itself, for both writer and reader, is figured in terms of heavy going:

If you so wish to construe this, I shall say
only: the Jew is not beholden
to forgiveness, of pity. You will have to
go forward block by block, for pity’s sake,
irresolute as granite. Now
move to the next section.

“For pity’s sake” takes up a cry of exasperation, setting it into an altogether different context, one not so much laboured as labouring, where the heaviness of being burdened is put together with the hardness, and the massy solidity, of patient work. “Irresolute

as granite" (that is, as I take it, not irresolute, in the sense of being without determination, at all) is a grimly inured irony here: to exercise patience, in this sense, is to be both weighed down and goaded by self-awareness.

This brings me to another aspect of patience in Hill, which might more clearly be put as patience *with* Hill: how readers—actual readers, as well as the readers projected within the poems—cope with the poetry, and how much attention they are willing (or able) to pay to it. To say that many harsh critics of Hill's later poetry have simply been too impatient to appreciate the books in question would be both hasty and inaccurate, for time, effort, and hard reading have gone into some combatively negative reactions. But it is worth pointing out that poems like *The Triumph of Love*, *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon* require time on the part of readers to make their full range of effects apparent; like any good poetry, perhaps, in this respect. These books have been subjected to the kinds of instant reaction (puzzlement, misapprehension, taking of offence, incomprehension, disgust, dismissal, ridicule) which they repeatedly internalise and dramatise. It may very well be that even the admiring critics of this poetry have been "hard, reductive" in the sense they have tried to make of it; and perhaps Hill's comforters, like Job's, have succeeded only in making a bad situation worse. The kinds of endurance involved in this poetry are not to be airily congratulated, any more than they should be carelessly dismissed.

There is a more general, and more generalised and generalising kind of critical impatience to be reckoned with, however: this is the irritable impatience with what is perceived as Hill's irritation and impatience, and it issues in condemnations of the "rebarbative" elements of his poetic voice, as though deploring a catastrophic failure in manners: for a great many of Hill's unadmiring critics, the poet has effectively made a public spectacle of himself, behaving in ways which no decent member of a reading public can be expected to put up with for long. This is not the place for any detailed engagement with the "difficulty" of Hill's writing, save to point out that this element in the poetry has been routinely denounced as (in essence) bad social form, an egregious offence to all concerned. Of the many sins which contemporary culture holds to be beyond endurance, "showing off" (a symptom of "self-importance") in the matter of learning is cardinal: depending on circumstances, any supposedly extreme display of

knowledge is either an embarrassing over-explicitness (we've all been there, and done that, but there's more to life in the real world...), or a fatally acute instance of "talking down" to an uncomprehending (and righteously resentful) contemporary readership. Above all, matters held to be "difficult" (though who, exactly, is to judge what these are?) should not be presented in a difficult manner, and the crabbed social difficulty of impatience in their delivery is an intolerable compounding of the offence. To have learning without nonchalance is to dwell on the wrong side of the (English) intellectual tracks. Even those critics of Hill who can bring themselves to imagine sympathy for aspects of what his later poetry might be saying have been heard to deplore, unhesitatingly, the manner in which they think he is saying it. Something very bad, some *faux pas* beyond redemption, is evidently going on here.

However, there is no absolute measure of what, or how much, we are willing to put up with from writers. It all depends, of course, on how we feel ourselves disposed towards the writers concerned: for one reason or another, some people will always have more claim on our patience than others, and will be subject to our sense of understanding, even when comprehension or agreement is lacking. This is something less abstract and impersonal than Auden's "Time", which "Pardoned Kipling and his views/ And will pardon Paul Claudel", and it operates, not according to long views and dispassionate judgements, but in line with immediate cultural and political needs and the market-values of "personality". The widespread unacceptability (in Britain) of the later Hill is not a primarily political phenomenon, though some hostile critics have ventured to clothe it in political terms. Insofar as Hill's actual politics may be gauged, they are of an unexceptionably democratic (and to some extent an old-fashioned English Labour) character, yet this has not prevented hostile readers of his poetry from finding there evidence of suspiciously nostalgic conservatism and even, at worst, of a full-blown "fascism". There can be little doubt that Hill does not speak the political language of the times (though this does not, of course, mean that he is not able to understand that language). But such aloofness cannot be forgiven by a literary culture intent above all on values of perceived accessibility and "relevance". The instant communicability of whatever buzzword or sound-bite is felt most passionately by the speaker has become an implicit point of faith

in British culture. Recalcitrance and circumspection, in this context, simply do not make sense, and difficulty of this kind can figure only as a wilful (and ill-meaning) perversity.

And yet, much *can* be forgiven, and is. We have only to reflect briefly on the example of Tom Paulin, whose reported explosion of murderous hatred against “Brooklyn-born Jews” in the context of contemporary middle-eastern tensions brought him such opprobrium in the world beyond the British cultural media in 2002. Paulin is an avowed adherent to the literary principle of “writing to the moment”. Unlike Hill (whom he has condemned on both political and artistic grounds), Paulin has little time for patience in writing: speaking of journalism, but clearly holding it up as an example to the studiedly literary, he has praised “something provisional, off-hand, spontaneous, risky in this volatile mindset—it seeks but never finds absolutely definitive judgements”. It is possible that, since 2002, Paulin has discovered new (and unwelcome) depths to a word like “risky”, which has so often figured as a term of promotional cant in writing about contemporary arts. Nevertheless, it remains clear that even the breathtaking risks taken in Paulin’s off-the-cuff, impassioned (and unwise) reflections on Israeli and Palestinian affairs are not such as to put him beyond the pale of British media attention, hospitality, and reward. For many, Paulin’s unfortunate brush with huge and bitterly contested matters of international politics was no more than a misfortune, a consequence of losing his patience in an act of spontaneous, passionate speech. As such, it is evidently forgivable, however regrettable the incident itself might have been. Whatever words were spoken, they did not constitute “definitive judgements”—and they are not, therefore, generally held to be themselves subject to the “definitive judgements” of others.

A paradox, of sorts, seems to emerge here: impatient outburst can be understood most fully in a spirit of patience. Yet it is important to remember that patience of this kind is not universally available, or indiscriminately applied in contemporary cultural discussion: it is there if we want to use it, and as we agree to use it; it *need* not be used, however, and is often withheld. Patience of this kind is, very obviously, a measure of putting up with things, allowing them in someone we know, and whom perhaps we think we know better of, rather than directly and determinedly suffering them in the hope of their cessation or reversal: it is low-

Visually isolated, “patience” here does not *quite* make a convincingly binding link with what the heart feels for, since the alternative syntactic possibility, that “patience/ reflects upon itself”—the hard thing, inuring itself to itself, bruising a heart that merely “feels for its own”—is made equally possible in the verse. Apocalyptic imagery puts that “heart” into even more serious isolation; the heart is truly exposed here, and is nothing if not vulnerable. Endurance, in this poem, is an open question. Lest there be any doubt concerning Hill’s habitual linking of patience, hardness, and duration, it is worth remembering section 8 of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983):

Drawn on the past
these presences endure; they have not ceased
to act, suffer, crouching into the hail
like labourers of their own memorial

or those who worship at its marble rote,
their many names one name, the common “dur”
built into duration, the endurance of war;
blind Vigil herself, helpless and obdurate.

“Duration” and “endurance” have the “obdurate” in their verbal being; to be “helpless and obdurate” is also, as *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* brilliantly concedes, to be as much a clown as a visionary.

I will end with two further quotations from Hill. The first locates patience historically, in William Cobbett:

I say it is not faithless
to stand without faith, keeping open
vigil at the site.
Who shall endure? What force throws off
the verdict of each day’s
idle and taunting honours,
the lottery, the trade in grief,
the outrageous quittance, the shiftless
orders of fools?

“Who shall endure?”—Job’s question, essentially—acknowledges how there is, and there always is, simply no putting up with all this. The anger and voiced impatience of the lines here is magni-

fied, and amplified, in some of Hill's later writing. Yet even the impatience (Job is the Bible's angriest man) is to be accommodated, contained not by common sense but by a kind of brute determination. It will not do to call this "faith", for it is a standing (that is, not buckling under, or going down beneath the weight of things) "without faith", albeit one which may be deemed, in the end, "not faithless". At the same time, the very words in which this idea of patience can find articulation are capable of self-dislocation: what we stand for is also what we (wrongly perhaps) put up with (see "Respublica" in *Canaan*, and "The strident high/civic trumpeting /of misrule. It is/ what we stand for").

Patience believes in an end which it does not have in view. My own thoughts on patience here end with lines from *The Orchards of Syon*, in which Hill considers the inurements, endurances, and forms of patience which may be necessary; at the same time, there is the possibility of preservation, of what the heart feels for. Like other passages in the book, this one marks a point where the Job-like curse around and in the world's attritions is modulated—with whatever irony or reserve—into something other. That other thing lies on the far side of "Rare patience", or perhaps under the tight covering of "natural heart's ivy"; if one of its names is death—and *The Orchards of Syon* leaves little doubt that this is the case—others may come closer to hope. "As with other patri-monies", Hill has written elsewhere, "our language is a blessing and a curse; but in the right hands it can mediate within itself, thereby transforming blessing into curse, curse into blessing".

Difficult to end joyful starting from here,
but I'll surprise us. Inurements
I allow, endurances I approve;
nothing of ours is irreducible
though passion of failed loves remains
in its own selving. So let us
presume to assume the hierarchies,
Goldengrove, even as these senses fall
and die in your yellow grass, your landscape
of deep disquiet, calm in its forms: the Orchards
of Syon, sway-backed with pear and apple,
the plum, in spring and autumn resplendent.