

SLITHER-FRISK



John Burnside

GEOFFREY HILL, *Canaan*. Penguin, £7.99

The question of difficulty is one that has haunted poetry in the second half of the twentieth century. While some insist that a poem needs to be difficult (though not obscure) in order to endure, there has been a tendency in other quarters to emphasise “accessibility”; to render poetry user-friendly, easily-consumed. Those who promote “accessible” poetry claim it is democratic; that the argument that poetry is somehow more valuable, or worthwhile, for being philosophically or aesthetically challenging, is elitist. Indeed, “elitist” has more or less superseded “obscure” as a term of condemnation in poetical discussion.

I imagine the School of Accessibility will find Geoffrey Hill’s new collection elitist, if not downright obscure. As always, Hill is uncompromising, peppering his work with Old Testament references, Latin tags, curious items of botanical or historical interest and fragments of philosophy. Even in the opening poem, “To the High Court of Parliament, November 1994”, the passing reference to the privatisation of a graveyard in Westminster, and to the political corruption which allowed some MPs to accept money for questions, yet still remain in office, is not immediately obvious, even to those who witnessed those events:

Where’s probity in this—
 the slither-frisk
to lordship of a kind
as rats to a bird-table?

England—now of genius
 the eidolon—
unsubstantial yet voiding
substance like quicklime:

privatize to the dead
her memory:
 let her wounds weep
into the lens of oblivion.

This first encounter with Parliament—there will be others on pages 51 and 72—is the key to Hill’s principal subject matter in *Canaan*. For, despite the fact that the central, superb sequence, “De Jure Belli ac Pacis”, concerns itself with German resistance to Hitler, Hill’s main concern here is with England. The title of the book refers as much to the New Jerusalem as it does to the Promised Land of biblical times and, as the epigraph informs us, those who defile the promised land, by shedding innocent blood and offering their children to devils, are doomed to destruction.

Unfortunately, however, this destruction does not come. Throughout the book, those unfashionable words—justice, equity, probity, democracy—occur again and again, alongside cries of anger and whispers of lament; against the corrupt England of today, Hill sets what now seems a mythical past: a kind of Albion, that promised land which the “masters of servile counsel” and “grandees risen from scavenge” have betrayed. Blake, Bunyan, Churchill, Constable, Elgar, Law, Marvell, Milton, Pugin, Ruskin, Wesley—all these and more appear in this collection as exemplars of a lost age: the religious and political figures, in particular, important for their defining role in the history of dissent, and in the accomplishment of those liberties that are central to traditional Conservatism in England. Indeed, none of the above would seem out of place in a Conservative Party broadcast, though all would deplore the present state of affairs.

Is this poetry elitist? In *Canaan*, Hill assumes that any English language reader will know something about William Law, or Cobbett, or the history of Methodism in England. But is it really so? Surely he is not so naive as to imagine that the “masters of servile counsel” have not done their work well, dismantling an intellectual tradition which they doubtless find no more than an irritation. Indeed, some of the key passages in this book occur where Hill acknowledges the temporary victory of the grandees, the triumph of the accessible over the difficult. In “To William Law: In Absentia”, he invokes the figure of Law (as well known, perhaps, for his stand against the Oath of Allegiance as for his writings), who seems at once to be vanishing—moving from image to mirage to “skeined light”—and also to be entering another, almost Platonic space, where such concerns as justice and probity are eternal.

Looking back, it is you I see stand
quiet, exact, under the tree of conviction—
image to mirage, mirage withdrawing
to skeined light,
light to the unmoved miraculous
pool of Shiloam.

