

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 Indeed, “elitist” has more or less superseded “obscure” as a term of condemnation in poetical discussion.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.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the shorter poems in this collection, however, are those entitled “Parentalia”. Here, Hill presents us with a (partial) vision:

streets of Jerusalem, seraphs the passers-by,
and other extras, artisans per diem,
imperative in hindsight

a brief blessing.

I cannot tell how we might be otherwise
drawn to the things occluded, manifold,
the measureless that stands

even so depleted

in the faint rasp of dry autumnal flowers.

The second poem takes as its epigraph two references from the book of Daniel: "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever. But thou, O Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased"; and, "And he said, Go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end." This advice—from God to Daniel, the visionary—is repeated, in altered form, in the poem:

But go, as instrumental, of the Lord,
life-bound to his foreknowledge

and in his absence making your return
to the generations, the rosaceae,
the things of the earth snagging the things of grace,
darkened hawthorn, its late flare, that stands
illustrious, and the darkening season—
Harvest Festival to Armistice Day
the other harvest.

This advice is at the centre of the collection. The poet as dissenter posits something to set against the corruption of our times—in other words, he chooses to exemplify. In *Canaan*, it would seem, Hill offers the following:

Go your ways, as if in thanksgiving . . .

It is hard not to share the pain of that “as if”. Elsewhere, he wonders if “Perhaps I too am a shade”. In the present climate, it may be that he is right.