

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE



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GEOFFREY HILL, *The Triumph of Love*. Penguin, £8.99

The Triumph of Love is a work of millennial gloom spoken by a persona who seems part Old Testament prophet (the epigraph is from Nehemiah), part nit-picking academic. Geoffrey Hill tries to pre-empt our natural dislike for this censorious figure. Some of his 150 brief cantos internalize reader-resistance so that protagonist and author may appear less punitive than self-punishing. Such passages also characterize the poem, and Hill's whole career, in negative terms: "Obstinate old man—*senex / sapiens*, it is not. What is he saying: / why is he still so angry?" "Scab-picking old scab", "Rancorous, narcissistic old sod—what / makes him go on? We thought, hoped rather / that he might be dead", "This is quite dreadful—he's become obsessed". If you want to call yourself an obsessive old bore, perhaps you should devise sexier and more elaborate masks (like "You think it horrible that lust and rage..." or "I carry from my mother's womb / A fanatic heart"). The subversive voices that interrupt Hill's soliloquizing voice supply a spurious dialogism, a creaking form of self-referential irony. Hill cannot, *pace* the blurb, be "savagely humorous about himself". Nor (perhaps to his credit) can he do "ludic". In fact, the over-the-top tone of the attack ultimately discredits it and places it as a parody of Hill's literary enemies (see below). The result of these convolutions is to license "obsession" which Hill clearly equates with conscience, frowning on shorter attention-spans ("inattention" is a crime in his book). He values and exploits anger, rancour, "splenetics" as ground-clearers for praise—if there is anything left after the scab-picking:

What remains? You may well ask. Construction
or deconstruction? There is some poor
mimicry of choice, whether you build or destroy.
But the Psalms—they remain; and certain exultant
canzoni of repentance, secular oppugnancy. *Laus
et vituperatio*, the worst
remembered, least understood, of the modes.

On the whole, I prefer Hill when he is “crying the miracles of God” rather than crying woe. And, as in the quotation above, he finds it difficult to dramatize, and hence negotiate, the tonal shifts that *laus et vituperatio* demand. One unsatisfactory method is the listing of oppositional “Angels”: “the Angel of the Morning Gold-fix”, “the ashen-fleshed, wrenched-silent, / untouched, unhearing Angel of Forgiveness”. Hill can be brilliant with polysyllables but now they too often write about the poem instead of writing the poem. The prissy abstraction of “Construction / or deconstruction” or “secular oppugnancy” evokes the academic essay, as do other locutions: “there were some particulars to be recalled”; “By default, as it so happens”; “The secular masque, advanced / by computation, has not otherwise / progressed”; and (of “intrinsic value”) “Partaking of both / fact and recognition, it must be, therefore, / in effect, at once agent and predicate”. Here again Hill may seek to disarm criticism; in this case by constituting his fraught persona through language whose pedantic ineptitude magnifies the pain towards which it gestures. Yet this often seems too vulnerably thin-skinned to be a strategy—besides recalling the pompous metaphysical haverings of *Four Quartets*. Where Hill risks poetry, as in section VI, the language ceases to be so tortuous and self-conscious:

Between bay window and hedge the impenetrable holly
strikes up again taut wintry vibrations.
The hellebore is there still,
half-buried; the crocuses are surviving.
From the front room I might be able to see
the coal-fire’s image planted in a circle
of cut-back rose bushes. Nothing is changed
by the strength of this reflection.

But something *is* changed by the poetic strength on display here, as it is changed by Gracie Fields’s “patter still / bright as the basement gents’ brass taps at the Town Hall” or by “that all-gathering general English light, / in which each separate bead / of drizzle at its own thorn-tips stands / as revelation”.

As with imagery, so with history: the devil, or Angel, is in the detail. *The Triumph of Love* distills Hill’s critique of the twentieth century, which pivots on the condition of England therein (more dark dispersal than all-gathering light). For poetry to take a religious line with history refreshes our cynicism and relativism, as when the speaker deplores “a nation / with so many memorials but no memory”. Yet to castigate

Haig's incompetence or "Chamberlain's compliant vanity" is fairly uncontroversial, as is this broad-brush version of imperial endings: "India did for us finally, hideous / sub-continental death-rites, the widowed Queen— / Empress felled like Lenin, melted down; new / sacred monsters bellowing at the pyre." Some images of the world wars (Gracie Fields, "my cousin's / Lancaster") seem closer to home. Hill rightly objects to a critic's accusation that he presumes to represent what he has not shared: "when the flesh of the frescoes knew corruption— / *he wasn't there*, as Croker pointed out": "Confound you, Croker—you and your righteous / censure! I have admitted, many times, / my absence from the Salient". Yet "being there" is an imaginative if not literal prerequisite. The quality of Hill's poetic attention flickers when he lacks a personally compelling point of entry into the Raj or the Holocaust: "refocus that Jew—yes there, / that one. You see him burning, / dropping feet first, in a composed manner...". A rhetoric of attention to particularities is no substitute for particularity: "This, and this, / the unique face, indistinguishable". Although Louis MacNeice thought that occasional vulgarity did poetry no harm, it might be vulgar to ask Hill to enter history in a more immediate sense. Since 1945, however, English memory, society and politics have been heir to shocks which barely inform the poem's scourging lament with its residues of national romance. The weakness of dialogue between past and present creates an imbalance as to the destructive element in which *The Triumph of Love* immerses. It seems more interior than responsive. Again, this may be the bleak point (the protagonist calls himself "lost—need I say—in this maze of my own / devising") or it may be putting on the agony.

As with history, so with literary history. The condition of poetry, equally on Hill's mind, is anatomized in a solipsistic idiom that tends to contrast a rich past with a shoddy present. At the same time, he avoids deeper engagement with his contemporaries—the hidden intertextualities of form, structure and image that continue the dialogue we call "tradition". Among his touchstones, the presiding geniuses, are "Milton—the political pamphlets. Blake / in old age reaffirming the hierarchies. / Péguy *passim*, virtually". Hill gives poets marks for a mysterious quality, hovering between the ethical and the aesthetic, that illuminates the spiritual self: "Hopkins / had things so nearly right, as did Herbert". The poets—and critics—who get things wrong are those who miss the force of Montale's "private, marginal, uncommitted writing", and succumb to the lure of publicity and celebrity. Two poets attacked in the spirit of the Dunciad "contrive / to run their depilators off the great turbine— / the raw voltage could flay them. Such intimate buzzing and smooth toi-

letty...". Three critics whom Hill attacks, given the names Croker, O'Shem and MacSikker, have also lost touch with "the great turbine". The speaker speaks for poetry when he declares: "And yes—bugger you, MacSikker et al.,—I do / mourn and resent your desolation of learning". In the penultimate section he reminds these critics what poems are "for": "They are to console us / with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch... *a sad and angry consolation*". The fine italicized phrase is Leopardi's; but in this poem, or as this poem, it remains a contradiction. Hill's furious didacticism forbids consolation. Certainly love does not triumph.

Now, I sympathize with some of Hill's prejudices and paranoias about the condition of England, poetry and criticism. His mythic England, when it comes to metaphorical life, lacks the right-wing Romantic monstrosity of Hughes's, and the austerity of this sequence could not be further removed from the hectic splurge of *Birthday Letters*. Yet you can recoil too far. There are different kinds of literary self-indulgence and self-advertisement—Peter Cook's Garbo megaphoning "I want to be alone". And much of my comment has responded to *The Triumph of Love* as to a critical essay—which much of it is. The current vogue for the long poem or sequence has encouraged discursive bad habits and local insensitivity to form. "Perfect pitch" is about rhythm and music. Indeed, the comparative absence of sensory seductions, like assonance or significant line-breaks, may serve Hill's punitive/self-punishing aims. We do "sense" the difference, as in section VI, when the texture thickens, the rhythm quickens. Autobiography or observation always seems implicated in such effects. But the poem's dominant self-image is on the sado-masochistic side of pleasurable. Thus the third canto begins: "Petronius Arbiter, take us in charge; / carry us with you to the house of correction".

Once again, this is not quite a joke. Craig Raine has said, revealingly: "Even when the poetry is difficult, obscure, or painful for us to read, we know it is doing us good." This castor-oil or hair-shirt model of reading and writing poetry is correlated with Hill's continuing uncertainty about what he owes to poetry and what to God. After Eliot's conversion Ezra Pound regretted "the psychosis / Of all those who desert the Muses for Moses". English literary devotees of the theological spectrum that runs from high Anglicanism to Catholicism sometimes bring with them paradoxically puritanical anxieties: an emphasis on sin, rules, punishment, martyrdom. Hence the very Protestant Catholicism of Graham Greene, the doctrinal rigours on which Evelyn Waugh insisted. Waugh, however, did not go so far as to mortify the flesh of his style: reading *The*

Triumph of Love can be like swallowing barbed wire. Nonetheless, Hill resembles Waugh psychologically in that Waugh looked to *laus* to control his *vituperatio*. Struggling between these poles, between binary “angels”, between the satirist Petronius and the Dantesque *Vergine bella* to whom his protagonist alternately and coyly appeals, Hill cannot really talk himself into charity: “But since he is / risen, he is risen even for these / high-handed underlings of self- / worship”. Perhaps Hill should trust more to the gift of poems, to his deeper intuition that the aesthetic consoles the spirit by its own unpredictable means. Religious poetry is not theology. As Donald Hall notes in “The Unsayable Said”:

the conventional intellect wants to translate particulars into abstractions, as if images were allegorical: such translation is the grave error of the philosophers. The unsayable speaks only through the untranslated image and its noises.