

The Many Humours of Geoffrey Hill

First published in Stand Magazine, February 2017, and dedicated to the memory of GWH

Geoffrey Hill's work has often been labelled notoriously "difficult" – and much, probably too much, has been made of this assertion. In his review of *Without Title* for *The Guardian*, Peter McDonald described Hill's difficulty as having been "too much debated of late" – and yet such debate continues ten years after McDonald's helpful intervention. A Google search for "Geoffrey Hill difficulty" yields more than 370,000 results: ten times less than "impeach Donald Trump", admittedly, but still enough to suggest that Hill's supposed "difficulty" now rests as the cornerstone of his reputation as a poet.

The very word "difficulty" implies many of the others some readers and scholars might associate with Hill's work; challenging, obscure, complex, dense. And yet, as with all writers of Hill's achievement, we would err to cast his work as that of a terrible Old Testament prophet (though Hill resembled such, physically at least, in his later years), hurling down perfect, gloomy lines into modernity's ruin. Instead, as Hill now "becomes his admirers", as Yeats did for Auden, any complete appreciation ought to include the role played by humour in his work.

Those looking for humour in Hill's poetry will readily admit the ease with which one can distinguish his voice from that of Edward Lear or Pam Ayres; there are few belly laughs to be found in works such as "Ovid in the Third Reich", or, "September Song." In prose, too, Hill's capacity for acerbic judgement remained until the end of his working life. In his last essay for *The Times Literary Supplement*, published just a few months before his death, Hill meted out the judgement that a sentence by Charles Williams "deserved the lash" for its imprecision.

As those fortunate to have been his pupils would attest, though, Hill could in person be hilariously funny, speculating as to what might have happened if medieval scribes had had access to yellow highlighter pens, describing Hopkins' *Wreck of the Deutschland* as a "metrically watertight" poem, wondering whether confused readers might think the Diet of Worms to be "something off Masterchef", or apologizing for the late start to a lecture by blaming "the ineluctable modality of human existence."

Hill's humour stemmed from his penetrating intelligence and vast learning coupled with a disdain verging on despair for much of modern experience, from the aforementioned highlighter pens and all their works to his perception that modernity has achieved a level of ignorance of humanity's past rarely seen before in history: that the dead, and their experience, remained with us was one of his strongest convictions. In some ways, and especially in the later work, it's possible to see Hill's aim as being to restore that consciousness of the past to the present, whilst at the same time capturing the complexity of living in the here and now in all of its compromise, irony, pleasure and sorrow.

In an interview for *Prospect* magazine conducted in 2012, Hill spoke of "certain juxtapositions of the real and surreal in life. One is simultaneously terrified, appalled and curiously detached. Which is as good a description of a poem as I can think of." In Hill's work, word-play and puns combine to create this juxtaposition of the real and surreal, opening up multiple meanings: in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, this playfulness with darker purpose extends to syntactical puns: "to dispense with justice; or, to dispense/with justice." In the same poem, there's more than a hint of absurdity in the image of Péguy having "fallen flat on your face/among the beetroots" - if the effect of such lines is not comic, then their technique is such: and to employ the techniques of comedy in high seriousness is one

source of the richness of Hill's work, in this case tempering the tragedies of Péguy's life with a comedic vision.

If tragedy narrows and closes down possibilities, then comedy promises the unexpected: as John Morreall notes in *Comedy, Tragedy and Religion*, "in tragic vision there is a need for order ... processes, once begun, have to be completed. Comedy, by contrast, enjoys incongruity and presents disorder as something we can live with and even take delight in." In his later works, Hill reveals the complexities inherent in the commonplace and unsettles his readers – and in particular his critics – with deadpan switches of register, mocking references to himself and his much-mentioned "difficulty" ("I am willfully obscure/*man sagt*"), and puns aplenty. Line-break and line length, multilingual and syntactic puns – Hill throws the technical book at the reader, the intent being not to confuse or overwhelm, but to open the mind to possibility, the Horatian desire to instruct and delight:

"Finis was the last
Word to escape me. Period. Stop
Trying to amuse me with such gleeful sorrow."

In *Without Title's* Sixteenth Pindaric, Hill reflects that Shakespeare was "conscious of a double or treble reality fused together into one line or a single word", an observation which might also serve as a description of his own method. That this method, in Hill's case, implies an understanding of a wide range of cultural and linguistic references ought not to deter that military man of letters, General Reader, since knowledge of specific references matters less than the effect those references have on the texture of the poem overall – and, by extension, the complexity Hill seeks to represent. In this regard, Hill resembles most closely the Joyce of *Ulysses* and especially *Finnegan's Wake*, where linguistic and referential complexity – or "difficulty", if you prefer – are secondary to the aim of capturing the multi-faceted and inconstant nature of reality as it is experienced.

If Hill mocks his own perceived difficulty in his later work, and cocks various limbs towards his critics, then this underlines (in yellow highlighter, perhaps) how unimportant specific cultural references are to understanding his intentions, if not specific meanings: in *Speech! Speech!*, he refers to the "Angels of Sacred Equivocation", as, "redundant: we might have lost the *Bloody Question*" – with a pun on the demotic curse and Elizabethan religious interrogation, which is then immediately referenced: "[vide state trials (Elizabethan) – ED.]" Elsewhere, critics are invited to "write me about it/you whacking bore", and an open and acknowledged theft from Walt Whitman is excused with "I've/cribbed Whitman, you stickler – short of a phrase."

For a writer frequently referred to during his lifetime as the "greatest poet now writing in English", and other such labels, it must be acknowledged that Hill was not above an opportune fart gag, as the following passage (apologies) from *Speech! Speech!* noises forth:

"Augustine's
Fellow, who could fart – with most sweet savour –
Angels' song: tones passing as angel's song
Cross-reference ODOUR OF SANCTITY and run..."

...don't overstretch it, asshole. Don't say

TIME WIPES ALL THINGS CLEAN."

Without stooping to describe these lines as fundamental to our appreciation of Hill's technique, the point is not just the humour, but its manner: the base is deployed to evoke a father of Holy Church; the casual-with-a-cause use of clichéd tropes enhances our sense of the complexities Hill seeks to express.

Indeed, the ironic use of register, of tone and reference, are the kernel of Hill's sense of humour. Throughout his poetry, we find the juxtaposition of ironic opposites. In *Péguy*, lines such as, "having composed his great work, his small body", or, "a simple lesion of the complex brain" establish both a certain irony – that a human being endowed with a great mind is as subject to physical frailties or deficiencies as any other – as well as reminding us of Péguy not just as intellectual hero, but as living being. The same technique is seen in *Of Coming-into-Being-And-Passing-Away*, which offers terms in apposition "the unsustaining/wonderously sustained"; or in *Scenes with Harlequins*, "common things/glitter uncommonly" – such poems are by no means comic: yet they employ the techniques of comedy, and embrace a comedic vision.

"Comedic my control: with each new old/scenario keep moving" – Hill's poetry is comic not just in the fact of being funny – "should have fared better than R. Harris/with laryngitis." – but in its openness to alternatives, to other possibilities. In this sense, it can also be described as democratic, a point Hill himself was keen to stress both in verse and prose, rejecting the claim that merely being "ACCESSIBLE" could be "traded/as DEMOCRATIC" for modern readers and critics. Instead, Hill regarded difficult poetry as profoundly democratic "because you are doing your audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings."

Hill deliberately undermines his own seriousness, leaping around tones and registers with glee, bringing light to his more gloomy reflections and finding humour, however terse, in the most arid of academic references. In *A Treatise of Civil Power*, Hill's interrupts his reflections on the work of Ernst Barlach, the German expressionist sculptor and writer whose works were banned by the Nazis as degenerate, with the note that, "the Low German/snapped at an angle is a right bugger" – again, in *Speech! Speech!*, he flits between high seriousness and the demotic casual, the switches of register emphasising both his serious purpose alongside a capacity to delve into the profundities of the quotidian:

"Where áre we? Lourdes? SOME sodding mystery tour.

Whát do you mean | a break? Pisses me off.

Great singer Elton John though. CHRIST

ALMIGHTY – even the buses are kneeling!"

For all the complaints about obscurity, difficulty and lack of accessibility, Hill's poetry remains, by his own definition, profoundly democratic, in the sense of his readership being self-selecting, self-electing: that there is so much of the positive and affirming nature of comedy in his poetry, to say nothing of downright good humour, ought to encourage more readers to join their number. It may also be that

those who find his work obscure, difficult *et caetera* are merely ill-tuned to the music of his verse or resistant to its invitation to revel in complexity rather than run from it, since an appreciation of the complexity of experience constitutes one expression of what it means to be human.

(1667 words)