

NOTES FOR BROADSHEET POETS

A few notes from the editor

Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare
coins to the light...

Geoffrey Hill, *Mercian Hymns (XIII)*

What better advice to anyone who writes poetry, young or old?

‘I write poetry’ is different from the big claim ‘I am a poet’. It has always seemed to me to be such an arrogance to refer to oneself as ‘a poet’. So many people do just this without a blush, in particular those who have graduated from Creative Writing Schools. Geoffrey Hill surely agreed with Yves Bonnefoy who said, ‘One should not call oneself a poet. It would be pretentious. It would mean that one has resolved the problems poetry presents. *Poet* is a word one can use when speaking of others, if one admires them sufficiently. If someone asks me what I do, I say I’m a critic, or a historian.’

The School boy Geoffrey Hill

In the Geoffrey Hill: Sixtieth Birthday issue of *Agenda* (Spring/Summer 1992), Norman Rea visits the Grammar School, Bromsgrove High School that both he and Geoffrey Hill attended. Here he found poems by Geoffrey in the school magazine. From Hill’s earliest humorous juvenilia on boating, fishing and football, accomplished in rhyme and rhythm, to his more mature verse which possessed a ‘new power’, a leap in maturity, it became evident from the fifth form upwards, as evidenced in his poem ‘Fotheringhay, 1587’ published in the school magazine in 1949, that ‘Geoffrey Hill was a major presence in our literary world and was developing as a very good poet indeed’. With apologies to Geoffrey, we re-print this ‘poem’ here as an inspiration (or perhaps a disincentive!) to all young ‘poets’ who will be able to tease out many hallmarks of Hill’s later work.

Fotheringhay, 1587

i

The rain-flaked sky-wheel rubs the
Dove-tailed shingle off the stall,
The pied mare heaves and moans in foal.

The iron-keeper's scaffold holds the
Whirling circle of the wall.
Out of its orbit shoots the soul.

Circles start and stop in pain,
 But I –
Until the axe-arc fall again –
 Am whole.

ii

Morning moved the image nearer
To the constant queen, and clearer
Came the rays of life to sere her.

Praying gave the image grace,
But dread of death usurped its place:
Fear wiped its hand across her face

And passed; for dying on the bleak
Scaffold, she saw what all men seek.
But then it was too late to speak.

iii

The elder doffed its cap of mist. The wind
Drummed through the snaring branches of the wood
Till the black-laced birches bobbed on their toes
Like eager children at a festival.

And craning forward they saw the sun, mounting
With firm step to her expectant zenith, poise
At the turn of the stair and brazenly
Lean on a bannister of cloud, waiting...

Waiting until her desire died. Lust waned
With the wind, and the drooped birches dozed as
The moon crept like a little dog to lie
Between the head and shoulders of the earth.

Here already the teenage poet shows his skill in the use of ‘negative capability’, placing himself in the mind and body of the queen. Here too, with a concise narrative that changes in tone and mood, he approaches questions of mortality: ‘she saw what all men seek.//But then it was too late to speak’ and intimates his holistic view of the cosmos with the sun and moon which frame the death of the queen. Images are startlingly vivid and original, intensified by devices such as hitched-together words, personification of the trees, sun, similes and metaphors, all contributing to the overall music of the poem. The rhyming triplets in part ii seem ironic as it is here that the queen dies on the scaffold. Likewise in i where there is a subtle intricate patterning of rhyme with the second lines of the first two triplets rhyming, and also the third lines. The broken lines pre-empt her broken life, yet paradoxically resound in triumph since the queen remains ‘whole’.

Omar Sabbagh, a former young *Agenda* Broadsheet poet, and now an established essayist and poet with several collections to his name, and a novel about to be published, looks closely here at Geoffrey Hill's poem, 'Genesis'.

As far as we know, human beings are unique in the animal kingdom, in so far as they write and are capable of writing poetry. And poetry, here, may stand in for all symbolic use of language, language which transcends the function of mere communication. How did we get this capacity? And, more significantly, why did we get this capacity? Even if we are merely the last in a slow gradating line of other animals, wherefore this gift? For surely there is something radically different, at-odds with the behaviours of other animals, in telling stories. And, in poetry, there is something expressed quite beyond the atomic breakdown of words or sounds or signs that indicate mere survival needs. When we read a great poem, it is surely more than its mechanical breakdown – because it means; it is more than the perfectly-parsed definitions of all its separate words. So: wherefore – or why – this prodigal capacity?

Perhaps it was God? Which is to say, a gift lit in us from within – dubbed tellingly in the Western tradition: a Word, a Logos, or a Ratio – from a transcendent Person or Mind? Whether this is the truth of the matter or not (and none will ever know), the idea of humanity being special, marked-out, in this sense, is of a piece with the religious notion of God's creation being *ex nihilo*; and this model is in my view the most apt pattern upon which to model our own, mortal, poetic creation. I'd like to discuss the first poem in Geoffrey Hill's first collection, *For The Unfallen*, titled, 'Genesis,' to elicit this view.

The declarative poetic voice, a man, is both before and after Man. There are five sections to the poem, representing within them six days of creation. The poet is thus one behind creation – *both in both senses*. The poet is also, presumably, writing from the perspective of the day of rest, one day beyond the content; *as well as* day by day, section by section.

The first word of the first line is 'Against' ('the burly air I strode') and the first word of the second line is 'Crying' ('the miracles of God.') Two double entendres then: or irony as well as gravitas. The poetic voice is set into relief by and sets into relief 'God'; and the miracles of creation are both cried/lauded by the voice and are of a nature to cry/weep.

Throughout the poem, the difference between a 'Logos' and what George Steiner in *Real Presences* calls 'the epi-logue' is adverted to; the difference between being an originating Person and being a latecomer or artifact of

that very origin; the difference between a language that references a given world, already objectively 'out there,' and a language that creates reality as it's expressed. The poet is in a sense the 'God' of the poem and (set off) 'Against' Him.

And first I brought the sea to bear
Upon the dead weight of the land;
And waves flourished at my prayer,
The rivers spawned their sand.

These are the third to sixth lines of this first section. The sea is like the spirit breathed into the letter, the 'dead weight.' If the waves flourish at the poet's 'prayer' though, he clearly isn't the Creator but dependent on such. Similarly, just as spirit is breathed into dead letter, so, 'the river spawned its sand;' namely, the solid comes after the fluid. Again, a force-field in which Creator and creature are fudged, or made ambivalent. '[S]pawned' is both realistic, given the grainy nature of sand, and loaded with Satanic intents. In a similar manner, for all their visceral vitality and vibrancy as penned, 'the tough pig-headed salmon' towards the end of this first section, strive, 'To reach the steady hills above.' Which is to say realism and surrealism, gravitas and irony, creature and Creator beyond the bounds of the senses or the possible are one and many.

In the second section the poet stands and sees the violence of the 'osprey' 'with triggered claw' laying 'the living sinew bare' on the 'shore.' The poet is both witness of creation and penning that very act of witnessing. He is both first person and third person. Below, the 'hawk's' 'deliberate stoop' and its being 'Forever bent upon the kill,' is another description of visceral violence which is ratified by the assonance and consonance, the ruddiness and density of the language. But more than this, this animal violence is perhaps a metaphor for the torsion lived and evinced in poetic creativity, that plucking from the infinite dark both within oneself and within language. Creation is both *ex nihilo* – the poet's unique perspective in space and time, say – and work upon something that came before, and that comes after, namely, language. Self and Other imply each other, like life and death.

So when we read in the third section of the 'ashes of the sea' we are reminded of the hermeneutic interpenetration of life and death, or the two trees which might be signified by what the poet calls, 'the unwithering tree,' that of knowledge and that of life. Indeed the beginning of the next, fourth section, enacts this antinomy by talking of the rising 'phoenix' (a pre-Christian redemption in contrast to the later-invoked Christ) as 'burning' 'cold as frost.' This bird is 'lost' and 'pointless' we learn, so that on the 'fifth

day' the poet returns to more mundane reality 'To flesh and blood and the blood's pain.' This: just before the final section which introduces the more humane or inhumane redemption of Christ and the Christian tradition. But even here, there is paradox: 'the blood's pain.' What could this mean but, again, the pain of the flesh, *as well as* the pain of pain, a bit like the thought of thought, which is one definition of God, Logos; thus, here, again, the alternating of the poet as before and after God and himself.

In the fifth section the poetic voice 'rides' 'about the works of God,' and we are faced with another double entendre: the poet is all 'about' the works of God, lauding them, marvelling and also topographically going around them: he both names them and reflects upon them. And though men are made free by Christ's 'blood', and though no 'bloodless myth will hold' – both of which justify the content and the expression of the poet – despite this 'weight' we, that is, those discussed by the poet and the poet himself, by turns, are 'bones that cannot bear the light.' In other words we are epilogues to a thorough Logos. We don't follow in His footsteps, so walk in darkness I suppose. And yet, we *certainly have* followed the stepping feet of the poet.

When in the last section Hill writes, 'By blood we live, the hot, the cold, / To ravage and redeem the world...' he expresses again the paradox of eternity and temporal existence, life and death. Or, if you like, just as in the implicit contrast between the mythic 'phoenix' and 'Christ', the contrast between Manicheism and the more properly Christian view. One suggests that matter pre-existed creation, the other suggests that creation was the work of something out of nothing. Similarly, the poet is as original as the language allows him to be.

In a way, this poem invokes the basic question of metaphysics, 'Why is there not nothing?' When we ask it in language, as a (mortal) sentence, we commit a pragmatic contradiction: just to put 'why' or indeed 'w' is already to assume some thing. We cannot practically get behind the positivity of our own existence; we are inexorably 'thrown' in(to) this world, to use Heidegger's phrase; and yet, if, just if there is the possibility of the meaningful thought *separate from* the material sentence (different in different languages after all), then meta-physics, or the reality of the world out there, is possible and salvaged. There is a spirit behind, through the letter.

If we just had physics, we'd be as clueless or story-less as the rest of the animal kingdom. If you like, the ability to question with a 'Why?', just as the ability to posit (though not access demonstrably) our own nothingness, sunders us from the rest of the material earth with as much of an absolute break as the very idea of creation out of nothing. For 'Why?' means an

incipient story: the possibility of *poesis*: con-figuration; ‘Why?’ means the forthcoming constructions of the imagination; ‘Why?’ makes us symbolic, not merely literal beings. The rest of the animal kingdom doesn’t tell stories, write poetry; as far as we know, they only communicate, functionally. And the paradox elicited so far is parsed here by the question: is this difference between us merely contingent, or is it essential? Are we the poetic creature par excellence, because we were made to be such, authors authored? Or, and at the same time, will we find out in five hundred or five thousand years an Odyssey spoken by the dolphins? This is the humane question posed and considered by Hill’s poem, if implicitly.

And yet: can we ‘bear’ the light? Again, as throughout, the idea of ‘weight’ is paradoxically redolent: gravity in a physical sense throughout speaking to metaphysical gravity. At the last, unlike God, we are not able to wholly embody both: first person and third person perspectives at the same time – the given facts or data of the world, and their meanings for us. Our meaning-fuelled mortality means that we are essentially dissociated (thus, *pace* Eliot, essentially ‘metaphysical’). It is our living in the rupture between the two – what is and what it means – that is the source of our drama and creativity.

God, on the other hand, and to put it in an iconic way, ‘Is that He Is’ – a tautology, with no dramatic or poetic tension; the ‘tide’s pull’ (surreally) mentioned in the poem is how the poet as human animal needs must ‘strive’ towards (and is also emergent from, surely) silence.

Shanta Acharya reviews *Daodejing Laozi – A New Version in English* by Martyn Crucefix (Enitharmon Press, 2016)

A prize-winning translator and poet, Martyn Crucefix is a teacher of English who regularly publishes thought-provoking reviews and articles on his poetry blog. Having translated Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and *Sonnets to Orpheus* with great success, this version of *Daodejing* extends his repertoire, illustrating his range and skill as a translator. Laozi, the author of *Daodejing*, is said to have despaired of the 'world's venality and corruption', but was persuaded to leave a record of his thoughts as a parting gift. The poems 'still vivid, astonishingly fresh, irresistible' were used as an aid to teaching from as far back as the 7th century BCE. However, the poems are not to be read as a handbook, nor as an instructional scripture, but as 'inspiration'. In his Introduction, Crucefix informs us these poems 'freely given at a point of change, a gateway to new experience' are 'an inspired outpouring of poetry as much as a moral and political handbook'.

In his version of *Daodejing*, Crucefix adheres to the traditional division between the 'Way' and the 'Power', enabling him 'to explore the nature of the Way before considering its more specific manifestations' in the Power. He also adopts a style that makes the original feel contemporary. The poems are 'unpunctuated, flowing, untrammelled' (Penelope Shuttle) enhancing their simple, authentic and paradoxical quality, drawing the reader into its message which is universally relevant. As Crucefix points out in his Introduction, 'we seem to hear Laozi writing a kind of poetry which enthusiastically accepts that its profound and heartfelt messages are inevitably compromised by the need to express them in the form of language, hence demanding that it employ a variety of technical manoeuvres, that it stays light on its feet'.

The unexpected opening sets the tone, reminding us not only of the limitations and imperfections of words/ language with which concept the book also ends ('Store' Chapter 81). It reminds us 'the Dao is not an individual entity, still less anything divine, it is more a mode of being that is all encompassing, a phenomenal, an existential primacy':

– that the path I can put a name to
cannot take me the whole way

words I am capable of using
are not the words that will remain

heaven and earth spring from wordlessness
what can be named is no more

than the nursery where ten thousand things
are raised each in their own way

The opening dash suggests both a continuation and an elision, and the relative pronoun, ‘that’, draws our attention to the path that one cannot put a name to, nor can it take us ‘the whole way’. We learn that ‘heaven and earth spring from wordlessness’. These lines from ‘Nursery’, Chapter 1, go on to say the Dao gives rise to ‘ten thousand things’, each raised in their own way, suggesting the Dao is the ‘mother of all things’. (‘Of all things’, Chapter 25). The Dao is a vessel to be drawn from, the bottomless source of all things (‘Something greater’, Chapter 4). It is also the uncarved block of wood that has inherent within it all things that have been, are, will be (‘Uncarved Wood’, Chapter 15). It is ‘the flood-gate from which flows greater truth’ (‘Nursery’, Chapter 1).

The poems can be seen from multiple – ‘epistemological, temporal, perceptual, political or environmental’ – perspectives, though none of these exhaust its real nature. ‘It is not subject to time yet contains it. It is never fixed. It is ever-here, both omnipresent and unchanging. We might be tempted to say the Dao is the substratum of all things,’ says Crucefix. It reminds us of the great Unknown which is the essence of all being. The Dao is beyond conception and so beyond any conventional use of language, the limits of which constitute a recurring motif.

The Dao manifests several female qualities; the teacher reflects this in her quietness, passivity, sensitivity, lack of overt force (‘Raw material, Chapter 27). By representing the teacher as wholly feminine – as ‘personification of the Dao itself and as its incarnation in actual human form, a mother figure, a female teacher, a friend – Crucefix stamps his individuality in interpreting the original text. When the true teacher emerges, no matter how detached, unimpressive, even muddled she may appear, Laozi assures us ‘there are treasures beneath’.

The primary concern of the text is how our growing awareness of the Dao shapes our personal lives. In the ‘Three treasures’ (Chapter 67) we are urged ‘to be compassionate frugal to lack ambition’. As ‘only those who feel compassion are truly brave/ only the frugal know sincere generosity/ only one reluctant to grasp power/ is properly capable of government’. In each of these manifestations of human behaviour, the ego is diminished if not relinquished, and there is a corresponding rise in one’s awareness of others and the world, a kind of wise passivity. We are to act ‘Like water’

(Chapter 8), flowing passively, dispassionately towards lower ground in both personal and political spheres ('Influence', Chapter 66).

Crucefix's versions reveal 'an astonishing empathy with what they have to say about good and evil, war and peace, government, language, poetry and the pedagogic process' (Introduction). Laozi suggests the teacher's role is to 'show, facilitate, enthuse, give space, watch and approve'. We must be honest, be ourselves, give the tools, give opportunities, do our job well, but then let go, don't dwell. Our role is to sympathise and connect, shed light, provide 'indirect direction'. And the best teacher's ambition, as spelt out in 'Store' (Chapter 81), is 'to sharpen not sever/ via the deed undone/ without rules to govern.' In 'Dazed' (Chapter 49), we learn:

the true teacher is like a poet
who has no self to speak of
using the self of others as his own

This idea of selflessness is found in various systems of thought – from Hinduism to Sufism. We are also reminded of Keats' notion of Negative Capability, 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'. In his letter of 27 October 1818 to Richard Woodhouse, Keats wrote: 'As to the poetical character itself...it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing'... This aspect of being a poet/teacher is what it means to be human, to serve others while growing in mindfulness. In 'Doing Nothing' (Chapter 47), we learn: 'ever mindful/ in doing nothing/ she pursues/ her goals'. A book for all times, the ideal society we could live in is described in 'The Commonwealth' (Chapter 80). The poem ends with: 'the people of my country/ would grow wise/ they would age without knowing/ the restless desire to visit', the treasures of compassion, frugality and lack of ambition being rare gifts for us who live in interesting times.