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Stephen James

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Robert Lowell and Geoffrey Hill**

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STEPHEN JAMES

## 'A Conflict of Opposites': Robert Lowell and Geoffrey Hill

The poems understand the world as a sort of conflict of opposites. In this struggle one opposite is that cake of custom in which all of us lie embedded like lungfish—the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self, the obstinate persistence in evil that is damnation. Into this realm of necessity the poems push everything that is closed, turned inward, incestuous, that blinds or binds: the Old Law, imperialism, militarism, capitalism.... But struggling within this like leaven, falling to it like light, is everything that is free or open, that grows or is willing to change: here is the generosity or openness or willingness that is itself salvation;... this is the realm of freedom, of the Grace that has replaced the Law, of the perfect liberator whom the poet calls Christ.

There is much in this description that accords with the ethos and perspectives of Geoffrey Hill's poetry. Hill, however, is not the subject. Rather, these words were used by Randall Jarrell, in 1947, to summarize the concerns of *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), the first full-length collection by Robert Lowell.<sup>1</sup> In characteristically vigorous and inventive terms, Jarrell outlined the struggles dramatized in the early poetry of Lowell, struggles that would in due course come to exercise Hill: the passage anticipates both Hill's sense that poetic language is mired in, yet strives to escape, the deadening forces of 'custom', and his belief that the poet needs to defy 'the stasis or inertia of the stubborn self'—to repudiate, as he put it to John Haffenden, 'a certain kind of luxuriating in personality' and to work towards 'transcendence' of self-regard in the process of composition.<sup>2</sup> Yet, though the pressures of 'custom' and selfhood are to be resisted, they cannot be eluded: they define, in Jarrell's phrase, 'the realm of necessity' in which the poet is constrained to practise his or her art.

For Hill, this sense of constraint extends to an acute awareness of the 'necessity' of working in the verbal medium, with all its debasements, approximations and equivocations. There is a theological charge to this: his 'sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt', as a constant reminder of man's fallen condition, encourages a view of the poet's art as an unavoidable confrontation with spiritual anguish.<sup>3</sup> Yet though Hill works in this medium he also works against it, subjecting words to formal pressures and shaping impulses so as to intimate an ideal of perfectibility beyond the tormenting encounter with imperfection. This tension may be understood in terms of the 'conflict of opposites' of which Jarrell speaks: his description of the struggle in Lowell's verse between the blinding, binding 'realm of necessity' and the redemptive 'realm of freedom' towards which the poetry strives has its counterpart in Hill's profession that poetry occupies an intermediate position between the 'kingdom of incurable anxiety' of which Charles Péguy once spoke and an inaccessible 'transcendent kingdom... wherein truth abides', as described by Simone Weil.<sup>4</sup>

In Hill's poetry, as in the early verse of Lowell, the exertions and strains of expression testify to the severity of the struggle. They are manifested in certain shared characteristics: an effortful, compacted form of utterance, an anguished magniloquence, a baroque linguistic violence, a concentration on states of spiritual despair, and a ready capacity for moral affront. Both rhythmically and conceptually, the early poems of Lowell and Hill are, to borrow a phrase from 'God's Little Mountain', 'pent up into a region of pure force'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, what Neil Corcoran has perceptively said of Hill might well be attributed to the influence of Lowell:

In some of his earlier individual lyrics the attempt to compact into a brief space the desired level of irony and ambiguity can, at its extreme, seem implosion rather than revelation, the poem pushed in on top of itself by the effortful tension and stress of ambiguous articulation.<sup>6</sup>

Each poet exhibits a self-reflexive awareness of language as a physical presence, an awareness mediated at least in part via a contemplation of the passage in John's Gospel (1.14) that speaks of the Word of God being made flesh:

... the jaws  
Grate on the flesh and gristle of the Word.  
(Lowell, 'Charles the Fifth and the Peasant (After Valéry)',  
*LCP* 40)