



Sir Geoffrey Hill was mourning for Europe, Is Europe mourning Geoffrey Hill?

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Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec on Geoffrey Hill

Sir Geoffrey Hill was mourning for Europe.
Is Europe mourning Geoffrey Hill?

Before the European Union came into existence, Europe was a geographic location that could be found on any map of the world. The European Union was born of a shared desire for peace that arose during and just after the Second World War. In 1946, during a speech given in Zurich, Winston Churchill called for 'a kind of United States of Europe', and in December of 1946, the European Federalists Union was founded in Paris. In spring of 1947, under Churchill's care, the United Europe Movement was created. The two movements joined together in December 1947. The first session of the Council of Europe was held in Strasbourg, in August. In 1950, the European Coal and Steel Community was created, and Robert Schuman instituted Europe Day as May 9, providing a plan for European Cooperation. In November of 1950, Fundamental Rights and Human Rights Conventions were signed in Rome. Schuman's treaty was signed in Paris, April 18, 1951 by Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg: called The Treaty of Paris, it effectively established the European Coal and Steel Community. By holding heavy industries in common, the countries hoped to avoid warring against each other again. A blue flag with twelve gold stars in a circle was adopted in December 1955 by the Council of Europe. The Treaty of Rome followed in 1957, creating the European Economic Community. In March 1958, an inaugural session of the European Parliamentary Assembly, presided by Robert Schuman, was held in Strasbourg. In April 1958, the official languages of the Union were established as German, French, Italian, and Dutch, and the first Official Journal of the European communities was published. Discussion for a



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common agricultural policy took place in Stresa in Italy during July 1958. In 1959, Greece and Turkey applied to join the EEC, and member countries of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) decided to establish a European Free Trade Association (Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom).^[1]

The key founding feature of the European Union, for anyone that had survived its wars, was its aspiration to establish peace. The formation and grounding of the identity of the EU have been complex. Perhaps beginning with its third and fourth generations of citizens, the EU lost a bit of clarity in projecting its own identity. New generations needed to be taught about its *raison d'être*. Each EU member state teaches schoolchildren about national history: should there not be a required semester-long course specifically about the formation of the European Union for all schoolchildren educated within Europe? One may suppose that one of the factors leading to the Brexit vote was a lack of clear knowledge about the EU. No doubt, some who voted Brexit also may also have felt that the EU has lost its soul over the past several decades, as it has developed into an economic entity promoting capitalism more than a strong civic and cultural force. The cultural and peace-keeping vocations of the institution are not always highlighted or promoted as they should be. Be that as it may, the European Union, the history of Europe, and its vocation are entities that Sir Geoffrey Hill's poetry have constantly engaged with—after all, he was a first generation EU citizen. One member of the Hill clan has affirmed that he and all of his children voted remain on June 23. There may be reason to think that the Brexit vote—which largely and unfortunately overshadowed centenary commemorations of the great losses in the Battle of the Somme—hastened his unexpected death a week later on June 30th; since then, a memorial piece by his wife, Rev Alice Goodman, has revealed that his last poem 'looks forward into the grim details of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union'. [2] He was not the only European thinker to die so soon after the Brexit results were known. In rapid succession

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other great Europeans such as Yves Bonnefoy, Elie Wiesel, and Jacques Delors were also dead. Jacques Delors was one of the founding sponsors of the European Book prize, which was first awarded in 2006. No poet writing in English would deserve that prize more than Geoffrey Hill, who should be recognized among the greatest European poets of the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He leaves behind a giant 1789 page two-volume legacy: *Collected Critical Writings* (2008) and *Broken Hierarchies, Poems 1952-2012* (2013), both edited by Kenneth Haynes and published at the Oxford University Press, as well as unpublished poems and manuscripts. In addition, there is also his work as a translator of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and *Brand* (1987, 2016).


It is not just that the poetry Hill read and memorized at an early age, in the small volume *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry, English and American*, provided an ideal backdrop for a poet.[3] This volume contained poetry of recent European history – including World War I, the 1930s, and World War II, in poems by Auden, MacNeice, Owen, and Yeats. Later Hill became greatly interested in classical and medieval literature, which also implied a continental European perspective. Hill's American poetic influences such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Robert Lowell were also the most European of Americans in register and in their preoccupations with history and language: the public/private divide in Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) included the poem 'Sailing Home from Rapallo' in which he repatriates his deceased mother from the city Ezra Pound took to be a paradise. Although Lowell's poetry was permeated with American history too, he had discovered how to write such poetry from Europeans or European-influenced Americans.

It is around 'Judeo-Christian-Senecan Europe' (BH 241),^[4] that Hill's work evolves. Glance through Hill's essays, with their mention of poets, writers, theologians, and philosophers: Aquinas, Arendt, Artaud, Auerbach, Barth, Benda, Boileau, Calvin, Catullus, Cavalcanti, Comenius, Dante, Eliot, Erasmus, Freud, Grotowski, Heidegger, Horace, Huysmans, Ibsen, Kant,

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The years Hill spent teaching at Boston University in the Professor's Program and in the company of Christopher Ricks at the Editorial Institute only deepened his European perspective, even as a wider range of American idiom entered into his works—in the language of *The Triumph of Love* (1998) and *Speech Speech* (2000). In fact, simultaneously, *The Triumph of Love* incorporates numerous European languages and allusions, while it addresses the problems of Europe head-on.

One could say that Hobbes (of Malmesbury), whom I would call the last great projector of Europe prior to Hudson (Hudson the Railway King) is radical as we are *déracinés*; granted that Leviathan towers on basics rather than from roots; and that roots itself, unhappily, is now a gnostic sign among the Corinthians. (BH 268).

Of entertainments that leave the people in torpor, Hill writes, 'Europe lies naked to their abuse' (BH 254). Re-reading *The Triumph of Love* after Brexit, it strikes me as eerie and troubling prophecy: 'Europa wakes / abruptly multi-fissured, the demiurge / rewriting things in her dust.' (BH 268).

The prophetic tone rings clear in the late poems, as both private and public warning, particularly in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007):

Did you then say
circumscribed betrayal; did you say, the years,
the years alone have done this, circumambient,
did you so propose? (BH 579)

Or:

Poetry's its own agon that *allows us*
to recognize devastation as the rift
between power and powerlessness. (BH 591)

And yet, the entire poetic work of Hill could be read as a continuous hymn, if sometimes in a minor key, to Europe and the exercise of power through peaceful democracy.[5] His focus is untiringly upon European literary culture from his earliest works to the present—with special preference given to those individuals that resisted tyranny in troubled times. The reader encounters Tommaso Campanella, Miguel Hernandez, Robert Desnos, Osip Mandelstam in ‘Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets’ in *King Log* (1968, BH 55-58); Antonio Machado who inspired ‘The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz’ from the same volume (BH 69-79) resurfaces in *The Triumph of Love* (BH 280). There is also Rilke (BH 266), Cocteau (BH 278, 354), Caldéron (BH 353), and Günter Grass (BH 289). Eugenio Montale is a recurrent presence from *The Orchards of Syon* (2002, BH 396) and ‘The Storm’ in *Without Title* (BH 517), resurfacing again in *Al Tempo de’ Tremuoti* (2012, BH 926). André Frénaud gets attention in *The Orchards of Syon* (BH 355, 373, 407, 410) and in *Pindarics* (2005-2012, BH 552). Charles Péguy draws the long poetic masterpiece *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983, BH 141-153), and his name continues to be sprinkled throughout the poems that follow. Dante’s presence is also persistent (BH 344, 891 and *passim*); at times he is presented in counterpoint to Machiavelli (BH 892). As a supporter of the European democratic project Hill chooses to reveal human frailties in ways as acerbic as Dante: ‘So many of us, fools of our own lives’ (BH 891).

But it is not only the great poets and writers of Europe that Hill calls up in his poetry. European history, theology, and philosophy are thoroughly integrated within the poems, from the numerous allusions to classical Greek and Latin texts, to Biblical allusions. Among the theologians and philosophers are Augustine (BH 284, 333, 346, 351), Boethius (BH 265), Julian of Norwich (BH 277), Goethe (BH 269), Gabriel Marcel (BH 584), Simone Weil (BH 115), Etty Hillesum (BH 300), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (BH 137), and Wittgenstein (BH 276). Numerous

works of European creativity in music, painting, sculpture, and cinema are also present. And of course, political leaders—commendable or not—are not absent. Art is not separate from life, lived privately or publicly, as section VII of ‘A Précis or Memorandum of Civil Power’ makes clear:

Why *Quatuor pour la Fin du Temps*, this has
nothing to do
surely with civil power? But it strikes chords
direct and angular: the terrible
unreadiness of France to hold her own:
nineteen forty
and what Marc Bloch entitled *Strange Defeat*,
prisoners, of whom Messiaen was one,
the unconventional quartet for which
the *Quatuor*
was fashioned as a thing beyond the time,
beyond the sick decorum of betrayal,
Pétain, Laval, the shabby prim hotels,
senility
fortified with spa waters. (When I said
grand minimalist I’d someone else in mind—
just to avoid confusion on that score.)
Strike up, augment,
irregular beauties contra the New Order.
Make do with cogent if austere finale. (BH 584)

One senses that Hill is pointing his readers back to history and memory. He is also encouraging readers to take time out to think, having lived from the radio days of the 1930s and World War II (with all the uses for propaganda that the new tools could offer), through the age of the sound-bite and white noise, and on into the internet roar of velocity.

Unlike many British citizens, Hill early on (at least as early as the poem about Bonhoeffer, published in *Tenebrae*, 1978), acknowledged and gave credit to German Resistants to Hitler. Via his poetry, he seems to have criticized the policy of total surrender required of Germany by the allies during World War II. Hill’s poetry often seems to point out more accurate ways of viewing historical evidence before the majority of historians themselves catch up with the facts. This was particularly evident in the case of the German Resistants as they were presented in

Canaan (1996). 'De Jure Belli Ac Pacis' (BH 198-205) speaks of the Kreisau circle by referring to the (not long) surviving brother of Werner von Haeften, who was shot on July 20, 1944 alongside Claus von Stauffenberg. Hans Bernd Von Haeften would undergo torture and trial following the failed coup, and yet still would not be humiliated enough to lose his human dignity and courage, though wearing clothing without buttons—requiring him to hold the clothes together himself. He was thus filmed on August 15th, 1944, standing before the notoriously cruel Nazi judge Freisler who had humiliated the other prisoners by screaming or shouting at them. But Hans Bernd von Haeften, who had been a childhood friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, managed to speak out clearly—to articulately say that Hitler was the greatest incarnation of evil. Like the other prisoners, he knew that there was nothing he could do to prevent his own hanging (which occurred in Plötzensee the same day). Nonetheless, he maintained his presence of mind enough to speak the words that foiled the Nazi propaganda filming of the trials of the Resistants. Intended for broadcast on German television, the films was not diffused to the general public. With only his voice, Von Haeften, who was a jurist, could still declaim evil and cry out truth. Hill's attraction to this figure might also be linked to his interest in J.L. Austin's treatise, *How to do things with words* (1962).

Of course, given the referentiality of Hill's poetry, where expectations of the reader run high, some find the experience too daunting. Yet the whole point is that no one approaches Hill's complete poetic works totally prepared for all their allusions. No one is totally prepared for life at birth either. No nation is rushing to give a warm welcome to refugees arriving every day on European shores. It has also become apparent that no one has the solution for stopping Daesh next week or for saving the democratic process from mishaps such as the recent presidential elections in United States. On several occasions Hill took the opportunity to explain that his poetry was complex, just as life is complicated.

Meanwhile education institutions around the western world have become instruments of the market system and much less concerned with human learning, at least if one is to judge by the financial cuts to many humanities departments. The general range of humanities taught—and culture transmitted—has visibly plummeted in the past decades. It is not just that many foreign language classes have been cancelled, but sometimes whole subject areas have disappeared. Learning Latin and Greek is now primarily reserved for a high elite—though not all of the elite are interested, even in France. In the United States, and increasingly in Britain, getting an education is such a financial investment that the aftermath is devastating to students of the middle classes. Hill himself was a working-class student, in a home that encouraged intellectual pursuit, from parents ‘with their truncated elementary education’.[6] He was among the first to benefit from the 1944 Education Act, but as he noted about such students today: ‘we seem to have disappeared from the face of the earth.’[7]

What ambitions do the leaders of western democracies still hold for the education of young people? Will you weep if you compare the average college curriculum to the ambitions of Milton’s 1644 treatise *Of Education*?

Hill’s poetry is late, great, modernist poetry, perhaps the only kind that can address the complexities and wounds of our present in that it offers no immediate solutions but leads readers to search, to remember the past, to sound themselves. Look here, dear reader. Look here and here.

In *Al Tempo de’ Tremuoti*, Hill wrote:

I have outlived Yeats now. The old man hād
Seen something, well, rhetorically tenable
Between the huge vortex and the little stable,
High tide, tempest, the raging Herod,

Innocents everywhere. (...) (BH 901)

For Hill, as for Yeats, writing may be an act of redemption. *Broken Hierarchies* is the summum of a life devoted to thought and poetry, the writing of which Hill found to be in harmony with his vocation as a human being. A full third of the volume is comprised of poems written since 2007. This final surge of poetic composition recalls not only late Yeats, but also Péguy's last five years, preceding his death in the Battle of the Marne in 1914, when he wrote his greatest poetic masterpieces (including *Le Mystère des Saints Innocents*), alongside an outpouring of caustic prose. Péguy wrote with urgency, sensing the oncoming war. Hill's late poems were also composed urgently, with anxiety for the state of Europe and the world. For him poetic composition is action, as he wrote in *The Triumph of Love*: 'Still, I'm convinced that shaping, / voicing, are types of civic action.' (BH 259). Words do act, poetry can make things happen.

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Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec has co-edited several books that include significant criticism about Hill: *La poésie de Geoffrey Hill et la Modernité* (2007), *Selected Poems from Modernism to Now* (2012), *Poetry & Religion: Figures of the Sacred* (2013) and *European Voices in the Poetry of Yeats and Hill* (2015).

[1] This paragraph was constructed with snippets from the European Union website about the history of the EU. < https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history/1945-1959_en > consulted 29 August, 2016.

[2] Alice Goodman, 'Poetry gives us a way of reading the world' (October 5, 2016), <http://cofecomms.tumblr.com/post/151398012257/poetry-gives-us-a-way-of-reading-the-world> consulted 31 October, 2016.

[3] Several anthologies by Oscar Williams were published in a short period, and one must distinguish this 1946 volume of 672 pages from others with similar titles. The poets included were: W.H. Auden, Hart Crane, E.E. Cummings, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Gerard Manley Hopkins, A.E. Houseman, Louis MacNeice, Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas, and W.B. Yeats.

^[4] All *BH* page references refer to *Broken Hierarchies* (2013).

[5] Hill strove for the democratic ideal, but denounced governments of our present reality, thrilling students during his Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures with the phrase 'plutocratic anarchy'.

[6] Geoffrey Hill in *Keble College, The Record 2009*, 51.

[7] *Ibid.*, 52.

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