

# BOOK REVIEWS

*Without Title*  
 & *A Treatise on Civil Power*  
 Geoffrey Hill  
 Yale University Press, 2007

It seems as though every review of Geoffrey Hill's work begins with a discussion of his difficulty. One recalls Randall Jarrell's essay "On the Obscurity of Modern Poetry," in which the writer realizes he is discussing two problems at once: modern poetry's nature and its readership. He resolves his problem with an historical appeal: modern poetry is difficult in the same way that 17<sup>th</sup>-century poetry is metaphysical or late 18<sup>th</sup>-century poetry sentimental, a particle of its nature and something its readers would, one way or another, accept. And so with Geoffrey Hill.

Geoffrey Hill is arguably the most powerful English poet currently writing (another common trope). His poetry is wrought-iron, hard-minded and yet lovely. He wears his debts on his sleeve, from Milton to Blake to Ruskin, less in deference than to stand among them. Ruskin is a particularly apt figure to find in Hill's work; he has ghosted the lines of *Mercian Hymns* and *Canaan*, and now Hill calls Ezra Pound "a Ruskinian" in his series of Pindarics at the heart of *Without Title*. Like Ruskin, Hill is concerned with the aesthetic and the ethical, the hopeless intertwining of the two in language, in poetry, in art. When our criticism too often ignores one in favor of the other, Hill is an essential voice. In *Without Title*, he continues to confront this challenge with a tenacity and wry humor that are among his later poetry's chief pleasures.

When readers of Hill refer to his difficulty, they most often mean of subject, content, allusiveness, and so merely participate in that endless debate on accessibility. But Hill's other difficulties are far more rewarding and continue in his recent work. The difficulty of perception, for instance, in "Epiphany at Hurcott":

On hedge-banks and small rubbed bluffs the  
 red earth,  
 dampened to umber, tints the valley sides.  
 Holly cliffs glitter like cut anthracite.  
 The lack, reflective, floats, brimfull, its tawny  
 sky.

The moment is parceled out one hard word at a time, and it remains, nonetheless, a surface, impenetrable. This is the sort of epiphany which would have been familiar to Rousseau in his late reveries when he said, "My ideas are hardly more than sensations now, and my understanding cannot transcend the objects which form my immediate surroundings." The struggle to speak, in its grief and its triumph, is palpable, and the language as beautiful as anything Hill has written.

"I also am a worker in iron," concludes Hill in the final poem of the collection, acknowledging the challenges of his writing. At its most frustrating, Hill's jagged rhetoric seems to refuse to any consolations; chopped syntax and gnarled lines design to throw readers off the trail. I would not pretend that the most incoherent moments of his verse promise those "clarities" which he attributes to Pound's late work, but amidst the tangle one finds Hill again and again confronting that beauty and strain which have intrigued his readers since

his very first book. *Without Title* is a significant, difficult pleasure.

As is *A Treatise on Civil Power*, and this pleasure comes with the added benefit of clarifying for the reader certain aspects of Mr. Hill's style. From his turn away from discrete lyric to book-length sequence and back again, we have now had the opportunity to read Hill across two volumes of his resumed short lyrics, and the differences are telling. The subjects are new enough, but not radically so: the meditation on art and poetry has been turned from its conversation with ethics to one with social and civil power. What comes through is a poetry that grasps at elevation in what has become an increasingly notational style, and often achieves it.

This sometimes feels as though we're reading the score rather than hearing the music. Hill has always been interested in musical forms—song-books, canticles and chorales appear often enough, and this particular book find Handel and Brahms fit subjects for meditation. But where Hill would once have been content to sing his difficult songs, he is now more likely to offer only the notation, mood and measure to guide the reader's ear. "This sounds like Herrick without his grace," he says in "Harmonia Sacra." These little cues abound, along with his italic references and quotations, chatty parentheticals that clatter for attention (and scholarly glosses). For the reader who longs for the intense observational detail of the earlier volumes, and clings to it like jetsam after a shipwreck, the beauty of this volume will appear scattershot and ultimately disappointing.

For the reader willing to sound the depths of this style, a great deal can be gained. There is a difference between lyric poetry which is crammed full of discursive elements and poetry which attempts to raise discourse to lyric

intensity. Mr. Hill has chosen the latter and achieves it, I think, in poems such as "G.F. Handel, Opus 6":

*Monumentality* and *bidding*: words  
neither yours nor mine, but like his music.  
Stalwart and tender by turns, the fugues  
and largettos, staid, bürgerlich,  
up to the wide gaunt leaps of invention.  
Repetition of theme a reaffirming,  
like figures in harmony with their right  
    consorts,  
with the world also, broadly understood;  
each of itself a treatise on civil power,  
every phrase instinct with deliberation  
both upon power and towards civility.  
At the rehearing always I think of you  
and fancy: with what concordance I  
would thus steadily regale and regard her,  
though to speak truth you are ever in my  
    mind;  
such is eros, such philia, their composure  
these arias, predetermined, of our choice.

I can think of little in contemporary poetry that approaches this level of careful regard for its subject. These starkly meditative love poems stand out more and more as the great works of Hill's late poetry. His occasional foray into the English countryside is still always beautiful but could almost be in a different language.

Hill often stumbles in this style, and not all such poems are successes. His pop-culture references, from Princess Diana to Jimi Hendrix, sound forced, not merely the justifications of a "guilty" pleasure but the attempt to incorporate it into his work and make more of it than is really there. Or when, in a poem on Blake, he admits to stealing a phrase from Whitman, his aside ("I've / cribbed Whitman, you stickler") grates, and the reader is hard-pressed to imagine the reason for this admission. More guilt? A depreciated faith in his reader? The strophe is rather spoiled as a result. And yet

Hill pulls off some beautiful work in this poem, as in this grave, tense declarative on *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*: “For a long age you do not see the monster.”

Randal Jarrell accused Wallace Stevens of beginning as a poet and ending as an improviser. It is conceivable that one might level this accusation at Geoffrey Hill, but to do so would be a serious mistake. Jackson Pollack redeemed many of his paint dribbles by doubting if they were really art. When Hill says in the final poem, “Urge to unmake / all wrought finalities, become a babbler / in the crowd’s face,” we feel his deep anxiety at the mode in which he speaks his poems, an anxiety which I believe redeems the thornier passages. Perhaps what critics have noted as Hill’s distrust of language is really his distrust of Hill’s language and its ability to make sense of himself for himself and others. But the reaching’s the thing and these are no mere improvisations. In *A Treatise on Civil Power*, Hill continues forward in the struggle of art, however difficult, for himself or for his reader. We should be grateful for the results.

—Justin Sider

*No One Belongs Here More Than You*

by Miranda July

Scribner, 2007

According to Miranda July everyone in the world is sad and lonely, and you can tell because...just look at their sex life. Her first collection of short stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, focuses on sad and lonely women, women who imagine greater lives for themselves filled with true love and platonic understanding, but are instead stuck in their own small-scale lives, trading their worth

in sex and silently banging on the walls of self-made prisons. And yet July’s stories don’t leave you with a vacant sense of sadness and loneliness. By the end of each short and contained narrative you get the sense that these are women on the verge of breaking out. July spends the bulk of each story setting up the frustration, the sexual abuse, and the latent desires, until it crests in a strange but completely appropriate action, becoming something slightly hopeful.

July, who is also an accomplished performance artist, filmmaker, actress, and musician, imbues her characters with eccentricities that, for the most part, are entirely believable. Nearly every story is told in the first person, so we must take these characters’ zaniness at face value. In “Majesty,” a woman begins by saying “I am not the kind of person who is interested in Britain’s royal family,” but then spends the rest of the story betraying herself, when her obsession with having sex with Prince William threatens to finally break her free of her sister’s strangling hold. In “Swim Team,” a woman teaches four eighty year-olds to swim on the waterless floor of her living room—they’ve all convinced themselves that they can learn to swim that way, and July’s first person narrator charms us into buying it: “I was the kind of coach who stands by the side of the pool instead of getting in, but I was busy every moment. If I can say this without being immodest, I was *instead* of the water.”

But July doesn’t stop there. Once we’ve bought into the bizarre nature of her characters, she takes it a step further. It must be said, July doesn’t shy away from frank sexuality. Indeed, each character’s relationship to her own sexuality is directly connected to their own private misery. In “The Moves,” a two-page story, the narrator describes the time her dying father showed her how to pleasure a

woman with his fingers, and it becomes an uncomfortable but revealing meditation on what goes unsaid in the parent-child relationship. Perhaps the most disturbing and complicated expression of sexuality comes in “Something That Needs Nothing,” which first appeared to critical praise in *The New Yorker* in 2006. In that story a woman’s breakup with her girlfriend prompts her to star in a porn shop peep show. Amid her post-breakup self-hatred, the narrator learns to sell her body, love her body, and then love herself, enough to quit the job and the devotion to her ex. She ends the story with a countdown: “If no more customers came in, I would yell the word ‘quit.’ As in no more, enough, I’m going home. I stared at the door. It threatened to open with each breath I took, with each passing minute. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight.” And so the story ends.

Many of the stories in this collection end on a type of countdown. In that way the sad and potentially vacant becomes hopeful. In “It Was Romance,” two women take a break in the hallway from attending a seminar on how to create more romance in your life. The two frustrated and loveless strangers cry together, push their bodies together, and create a bizarre intimacy out of their own wounds:

The snaps on our jeans pressed into each other and our breasts exchanged their tired histories, tales of being over- and underutilized, floods and famines and never mind, just go. We wetted each other’s blouses and pushed our crying ahead of us like a lantern, searching out new and forgotten sadnesses, ones that had died politely years ago but in fact had not died, and came to life with a little water.

This is the catharsis through shared misery found in almost all of her stories. In other words, yes, you are sad and lonely and strange.

But so is she, and perhaps you two can talk about it.

In July’s world, people are dysfunctional, sex is currency and life is claustrophobic. But somehow, this is all very accessible. July writes with a clean but zany voice, never flowery, never boring. Her stories are generally short, six to eight pages at the most. But most of the accessibility comes from the marketing. July is probably best known on the independent circuit for her film *Me, You, and Everyone We Know*, and the same audience will likely follow her to this book. The hardback also comes in three different neon covers, reminiscent of the equally young and quirky Jonathan Safran Foer’s multicolored *Everything Is Illuminated*. Additionally, July upped her street cred by publishing in *Zoetrope* and the *Paris Review*.

It can be said that *No One Belongs Here More Than You* is a collection of people about to break apart. And while these characters are on the verge, they’re all on the same verge, they’ve all come to a point where it’s shared misery or no misery. And July is inviting you—you belong there, join them, you’re just as strange and sad. I RSVP’d, and you should too.

—Aja Gabel

*The Usable Field*

by Jane Mead

Alice James Books, 2008

*The Usable Field*, Jane Mead’s third full-length collection of poetry, is a stunning meditation upon grief, death, language, the natural world—and the ways in which these exert pressure on one another. “This is some chant I’m working at—” Mead tells us early on, and the chant that builds and echoes across these

seventy-odd pages is one of immense sorrow in the face of living as well as dying, but also of immense joy (be it learned, relearned, or involuntary) in the world, in language (“To Whatever Remains”). “I came a long / way to believe / in the blue jay,” writes Mead, and by the end of the book, the reader comes to understand and appreciate the poet’s reliance on nature, her inability to abandon the dead, and her choice to remain alive and engaged with the world.

*The Usable Field* recommends itself to contemporary poets because of its truly electric (and eclectic) language. Almost every poem features word play, tonal shifts, repetition, pleasingly-gnarled syntax, and dashes—which, in these poems, often signify turns or pauses in thought. The poems make clear that Mead is not interested in redemption (“Pray for anything but forgiveness”) but in a hard-won existence; likewise, the poet is not interested in laying bare all stories or ideas. Rather, she is interested in probing, in pushing up against the possibilities and limitations of language in order to explore the emotional and intellectual effects of the often unnamed event. One has only to look at her titles to gain a sense of the marvelous syntactic turns found in her poems: “The Dead, Leaning (in the Grasses / and Beyond the Trenches, Like Oaks),” “To the Wren, No Difference / No Difference to the Jay,” and “Where in the Story the Horse Mazy Dies,” to name a few. In this final poem, the syntax is particularly complex (“Anymore the rain that matters, anymore the thistle. / And never matter the *word* as a way of being for:”)—but this is fitting for Mead’s project. You cannot look God or grief in the face; they threaten to annihilate you. Similarly, some experiences cannot be adequately or easily held by language (e.g. Emily Dickinson’s poems). Mead’s syntax, therefore, is not com-

plex for its own sake, but for the sake of providing the speaker with scaffolding in which to safely encounter her own grief, her own wondering. Also, it enacts (for the reader) the difficulties we encounter when we attempt to examine something as overwhelming as death.

One of the techniques I loved most was Mead’s use of tonal and diction shifts, the range of voices this produces. The following are lines from “The River Itself”:

Regard the ill-fated bus  
and ask me if I give a damn.  
Say *Luna*, do you give a damn?

I say crow.  
I say wind.  
It’s a river. (31-36)

A new speaker (*Luna*) emerges, and the lines play with the reader. *Do you give a damn* is a moment of playful taunting that is answered with utter seriousness: *crow* and *wind* being the only adequate responses to the ill-fated bus; *crow* and *wind* also reflecting the impassivity of nature. This is, perhaps, the most dramatic voice shift in the collection—but there are numerous others at the level of tone and diction: “the dead lean on the living / like nobody’s business...;” “and the crow / falls—as the crow flies, // so to speak...;” or this, from “Same Audit, Same Sacrifice”:

I spent half my life talking to you  
and I never got an answer. That’s a kind  
of sailing you wouldn’t call sailing

unless you had to. (1-4)

Humor and playfulness act as pleasing counterforces to the poems’ intricate syntax, meditation, and grief. All of these are central to the book.

In a craft talk delivered at The University of Virginia in November 2007, Jane Mead iden-

tified the range of aesthetics in contemporary poetry, and the emergence of a kind of poem that draws on the possibilities and permissions granted by “oppositional” schools of thought (e.g. narrative v. lyric; accessible v. difficult; New Formalism v. LANGUAGE poetry). The wonder of *The Usable Field* is that Mead *does* borrow techniques and possibilities from all of these camps. Such a blend of felt grief, implied narratives, chiseled tercets, beautifully wrought syntax, colloquial expressions, paratactic leaps, and interrupted thoughts makes for a collection of incredible aesthetic range, as well as depth. *The Usable Field* is Jane Mead’s best collection to date, the fiercely personal bursting from behind the poems’ purposeful and pleasurable intricacies. She has felt what Wallace Stevens called “the pressure of reality,” and she has pushed back with all the force of language and imagination; she is not only thankful for “what matters most— / the not knowing of what [she does] not know—,” she chooses to inhabit it: “*Go out, heart, into it.*” This is a poet who is not afraid to admit that she is grieving and that she is, at times, consumed by the unknown; this is simultaneously a poet who chooses life and wants, more than anything, “to exist in a physical world.” *The Usable Field* is as wise as it is wry, and these poems could not be more authentic, stylistically fresh, and necessary. We are lucky to have a poet such as Jane Mead, lucky indeed to read this beautiful book.

—Julia Hansen

*Windcatcher*

by Breyten Breytenbach

Harcourt, 2007

*Windcatcher*, published last year, collects two decades’ worth of Breyten Breytenbach’s poetry—written during eleven years of European exile, seven years in a South African prison, and finally, from what he calls “Outside.” Breytenbach married a non-white woman—an act prohibited by South African law—and led an anti-apartheid organization from exile in France. He was arrested in 1975 for high treason upon illegally returning to the country.

The political violence that surrounded Breytenbach’s life resounds through his poetry as well. He cannot card brutality out of the world like knots out of wool. And so, he writes, “the machine gun enlightens the way/ and washes your feet/ and places before you the bread and the wine.” There is torture here, and blood. His need to speak out against injustice is not limited to his own country; rather, he embraces a community, a history, of the oppressed. He describes “Granada/ where Lorca lies with bullets seeding his body,” as well as “the rotted bitter black rice fields of Vietnam.” He speaks, often accusingly, to America’s past and present. “Under yankee planes of annihilation/ the wiretaps and the microphones/ like cockroaches in cranny and nook/ we heard how Allende gave his life.” And later, he writes “I am the statue of liberation/ with electrodes tied to my balls.”

There is brutality here, but at the same time, the poems are rich in image and the rolling music of common speech—with few pauses and little punctuation. Afrikaans, Spanish, and jail-bird colloquialisms (“Voice of Section Chief: Jump to it! . . . out for exercise round/ and round the sightless pansies./ Boer’s

cap-badge, whiskers, gleam”) impose their sing-song syllables throughout the poems. His descriptions of the world’s violence unfurl, by necessity, in the rhythms, cadences and rhymes of that same world. “In the singing,” he writes, “is twined the endlessness of dying.”

*Windcatcher* explores what it means to speak out and sing in a world like ours, and what value that utterance has. It both witnesses and addresses the imperative act of witnessing. “I’m scared to close my eyes,” Breytenbach writes. “I don’t wish to live in the dark and still see what passes.” In other words, where suffering exists, there is no choice but to watch it. The poems careen between hope, despair, and irony. At times, Breytenbach’s prophetic voice calls the world to attention and shame—“fears and fears and fears with drenched colorless heads/ and I shall neither hold nor soothe this black tongue,” he writes. And, only a few lines down in the same poem, speaking of the poet, he writes, “look, he is harmless. Do have mercy on him.” For a man imprisoned for the things he said, he clearly puts more stock in the consequence of words, though at times he feels their futility. He describes the world as “a crumbled totality/ frayed to the ultimate strophe.” And in another poem, “all vanity, all about him the barren word.” And later he asks, “is the orifice of speech/ indeed the birth-vault of dust?” *Windcatcher*’s ambivalence does come to a kind of conclusion, or at least, it ends with the command to “make song,” regardless.

It is possible to witness great beauty as well, and Breytenbach does this too—especially in the last section of the book, entitled “The Lines Have Fallen unto Me in Beautiful Places; Poems from Outside.” In the midst of his violent landscape, Breytenbach gives us sheer images—almost, it feels, for the pleasure

of it—and because, of course, he’s speaking to the loveliness of man as well as his cruelty.

Listen, there’s a small bird, somewhere  
between peewit and quail,  
with duskfall it shoots  
two thousand meters high  
into the shuttered sky....  
I don’t understand it either.

This section is also the love-poem section of the book. “I will dream you/ like an immaculate beloved knowledge,” he writes. This, too, is part of what “poetry completes/ what history leaves out.”

Cynics may be tempted to presume that Breytenbach’s artistic success owes more to his personal history as an activist than his poetic merit. And, it’s true, his life does overshadow his work, in the same way that the cells in his poems, and “other cells,/ bodies stuffed with dying,” cast real shadows in a way no metaphor can. But there is no fixed identity in these poems; Breyten Bach is a character among many. He establishes this from the very first poem, which he dedicates, ambiguously and comically, to himself. This is no life story reported. Breytenbach’s poems, terrifying, lovely, and surprising in turn, are about communication, not event or regurgitation. All the varying identities on these pages share one thing—their connection to each other and to the reader. “All over man/ is death and dust,” Breytenbach writes. “And only in others he reverberates.”

—Honor Jones