



The discomfort of words

Geoffrey Hill, an English poet, died on June 30th, aged 84

IT WAS, he said, like falling in love. When Geoffrey Hill was ten years old he was given a Victorian anthology of English poetry, an award to mark his punctilious attendance at the Sunday school of his local church. It was filled with the kind of high-flown, sentimental stuff he would later scorn. But for the child of a village policeman who had left school at 13, the poetry of past lives suddenly seemed a revelation—and led to his eventual vocation.

As with all vocations, or indeed love affairs, it was often difficult. Few seemed to understand him in the beginning. At Oxford University, his first year was miserable and he had few friends. He was often wracked with “savage melancholia” and what he later realised was obsessive-compulsive disorder. The history of the place, with its portraits of evil-looking old men, initially oppressed him. While other undergraduates cavorted through their time there he stood aloof, worrying at his poems. They did not come easily: he would work on a line for weeks, like a sculptor chipping away, bit by bit, at marble.

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,
Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:
Some of us have heard the dead speak:
The dead are my obsession this week

While other British writers such as Philip Larkin and Donald Davie tore into the 1950s with short, plain-speaking poems inspired by the staccato of jazz and modern life, he turned instead to the past: to the England of his grandmother, a working-class woman who spent her life making nails; to Robert Southwell and Edmund Campion, 16th-century Roman Catholic martyrs he longed to have known; and to Anglo-Saxon kingdoms buried deep beneath the soil of his beloved native Worcestershire.

Nature appeared too, but was rarely comforting: “An owl plunges to its tryst / With a field-mouse in the sharp night. / My fire squeals and lies still.” Religion played its part as well: for a modern poet, he was unashamed to show his fear of the fate of his soul. Death—whether in the form of the Holocaust or earlier, English, massacres—continued to obsess him.

This made him different as well as difficult. Some loved him for it: the first publisher of his poems, in a short pamphlet when he was 20, would wake up in the night to read his work again, marvelling at its strange beauty. Several critics spent decades championing and defending his poems and his criticism; to many, he was Britain’s greatest living poet. Others dismissed him as obscure, high-flaunting and, latterly,

plain incomprehensible. Spending a life in seemingly dusty academia—teaching at Leeds, Cambridge, Boston and then back at Oxford, to be Professor of Poetry from 2010 to 2015—he could appear like a figure from another age, with his white beard and broad-brimmed hats. His heroes included John Milton and Alexander Pope and, as he aged, he appeared to resemble aspects of them more and more, with his biting invective and fondness for arcane words and complicated phrases.

Rancorous, narcissistic old sod—what makes him go on? We thought, hoped rather, he might be dead. Too bad. So how much more does he have of injury time?

Even friends could feel wary of him, his dark eyes sometimes glowering with a toad-like stare before he broke into laughter. His sonorous voice, shaped by a childhood illness which made him deaf in one ear, could sound as if he was admonishing his listeners. At one reading in London he bellowed “SOD OFF!”; at another, he condemned the “anarchical plutocracy” he lived in, scorning the depravity of modern society and its politics. He saw the louche, camp comic Frankie Howerd as an influence. But when he taught at Leeds he was given the nickname “Chuckles” for his apparently unrelieved gloom.

As he got older, writing came more easily. Once he would have counted himself lucky to write seven poems in a year. In his 70s he could write seven or more a week. His first books had come out only after at least five or six years of agonised revisions; now he published one every two years. When his poems were gathered into one volume in 2013 it ran to just under 1,000 pages.

Refusal to reveal

Part of the reason for the change was his health: after a heart attack in the 1980s, time appeared ever more precious to him. He would work away on an exercise bike while reading murder mysteries and wrote laboriously in longhand journals. A second marriage in 1987 to Alice Goodman, a librettist turned Anglican priest 26 years younger, was a happier reason. She introduced him to livelier modern poets, such as Frank O’Hara; he trusted her judgment more than anyone else’s. Medication for his depression, first lithium and then serotonin, seemed to inspire him further—though, when pressed, he professed it was something of a mystery as to why he could suddenly write so much.

Perhaps it was better to keep it that way. Although his later poems seemed more autobiographical, he resisted any idea of a poet revealing himself in his work. Rather, poems should be like love, expressive of something greater and yet mysterious: “Crying to the end, ‘I have not finished.’” ■