

# British & European: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill

Seminar for ESSE 8: LONDON 29 August - 2 September 2006

With two new books of poetry in 2005, and another coming out in January 2006, Geoffrey Hill's muse seems to have swung back to themes of politics and the British nation. Yet what makes his poetry so European? ESSE 2006 in London provides an opportunity to explore Hill's recent stylistic shifts. Speakers are invited to discuss the British aspects of the work as they are focused and put in context by the poet's wider concern with the matter of Europe. Proposals should focus on publications since *Canaan* or use the earlier poems and essays to interpret the recent works.

Each seminar session is limited to 6 presentations. At the Conference each participant will be given 5 minutes to summarise his/her abstract; the respondent will be given 5 minutes to initiate debate. Neither will be allowed to read a paper. Knowledge of the six abstracts by the six participants will facilitate discussion with the active participation of the floor.

**Convenors:** Jeffrey Wainwright & Jennifer Kilgore

## ABSTRACTS

**Carole BIRKAN (Université de Paris VII)**

**"Our patience proven in the rage of others": Geoffrey Hill's Poetry and the Writing of Toleration in Britain and Europe.**

Geoffrey Hill deconstructs the representation of Britain as a tolerant country contrary to the Continent as a place of persecution. Celebrating Milton as the **father** of toleration, he nevertheless sides with those Milton would not have tolerated. This paper will delineate Hill's counter-history of toleration. Seeking to atone for the wrongs of England and other nations, Hill contemplates a reconciliation of Europe. But at what price? Is tolerance redefined as *caritas* freed from sectarian shackles? Or is toleration a by-product of a secular conscience governed by market forces? The figure of Milton stands firm against apathy in excessive toleration.

**Sheridan BURNSIDE (Royal Holloway, University of London)**

**Undoing remembrance: the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan**

In *The Triumph of Love*, Geoffrey Hill describes Britain as "a nation/ with so many memorials but no memory." I propose to explore the theme of remembrance in Hill's work since *Canaan*, in connection with relevant texts by Paul Celan. I will discuss a number of shared motifs for doing and undoing remembrance in order to examine the British and European aspects of Hill's work. These motifs are: sacrament, naming and nature. While both poets write about remembrance in connection with these subjects and 'undo' them in order to write about forgetting, Hill does so with a uniquely British inflection.

**Sara H. D'ORAZIO (Manchester Metropolitan University)**

**Going after 'La Bufera': Geoffrey Hill translates Eugenio Montale.**

Hill's most recent book, *Without Title*, opens with a dedication "in omaggio a Eugenio Montale", a homage fully carried out by the remarkable translation of Montale's 'La Bufera'. Here, the English poet not only confirms his European stance but seals a relationship that has been developing for almost a decade.

Hill does not call his poem 'translation' but uses the more generic sentence "after Eugenio Montale, 'La Bufera'" to guide the reader. However, his version — literally entitled 'The Storm' — is striking for its likeness to the Italian. Prompted by the unusual literalness, this paper will explore the relationship between the two poets.

**Ann HASSAN (University of Otago, New Zealand)**

**Speech! Speech!: A European Poem**

Why does Hill's poetry remain so identifiably European? In this paper, which focuses on Hill's long poem *Speech! Speech!* (2000), it is shown that the language itself — the most portable and adaptable vessel for our history available to us — is the strongest link to our past. Although Hill has lived in the United States for almost twenty years, his poems remain distinctly un-American. The past of Europe and Britain remains, through language, Hill's primary concern. For Hill, the *past* is most *present* in Europe, and remains powerfully manifest in both his own past and his own language, English.

**Emily TAYLOR MERRIMAN (Boston University)**

**Geoffrey Hill: Remembering Religion**

Sociologists' recent consideration of the inter-relations between memory, community and religion in the context of modern European secularization contribute to a fuller understanding of Geoffrey Hill's persistent dwelling on Britain's difficult past and present, in, for example, *The Orchards of Syon's* penultimate section (LXXI). Grace Davie's analysis of the decline of religion in Britain in particular and Europe in general illuminates the connections between Hill's poetry—through his acute historical sense, the multiple communities of the living and dead who inhabit his poems, and his language's openness to the unexpected—and the possibility of a contemporary religious consciousness.

**Stephen ROMER (Université de Tours)**

**In absentia: Geoffrey Hill's Drama of Belated Witness in the Recent Work**

From the Battle of Towton during the War of the Roses, which "commands" Geoffrey Hill's "belated witness" in *King Log*, up to the industrial-scale carnage of the last century, a constant theme of this poet's work has been the epistemological and ontological questions thrown up by the poet's attempt to "witness" historical events at which he was not and could not have been present.

I want in this paper to explore how Hill's perennial theme, the "daily acknowledgement of what is owed the dead", is developed in the recent work. Also germane is the old question of whether nostalgia starts to corrode the obligatory moral outrage, even though that outrage (as delivered in poetry) was a peculiarly English phenomenon, belonging to the consecrated "War-Poets".