

December 2016

Ministers of the Imagination

Francis Hutton-Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys>

Recommended Citation

Hutton-Williams, Francis (2016) "Ministers of the Imagination," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34068/01.01.12>

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Yeats Studies* by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

MINISTERS OF THE IMAGINATION

European Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill (bilingual edition), ed. Ineke Bockting, Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec, Elizabeth Muller (Peter Lang, 2015), pp. vii+172

Reviewed by Francis Hutton-Williams

“The greatest living poet in the English language” was the official verdict most often repeated in connection with Geoffrey Hill, until his recent death at the end of June 2016. Not since W. B. Yeats, whose name serves as a pillar for both the British and Irish literary establishments, had a living poet received so much canonical attention. A refusal to compromise on difficulty, an immovable disdain for much that passes as modern poetry, and an obsession with national politics and statesmanship have helped to cement both Yeats and Hill’s position as writers of exemplary status across much of the English-speaking world. Hundreds of books and articles have been written on the significance of their literary achievements within the contexts of Anglophone literatures of empire and anti-empire, twentieth-century verse and European modernism. Yet the ways in which these two major poets echo, overlap and interact with one another has attracted far less joint consideration. Peter McDonald’s *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (2002) is one of the few book-length studies centred on the common force of their poetry’s social, intellectual and ethical commitments.

The main purpose of *European Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill*, which is derived from an international conference on Yeats and Hill that took place in 2013 at the Catholic University of Paris, is to “take up” the “slack” of “the Yeats-Hill connection” (6). *Classical Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill* may have been a more accurate title for the collection. Half of the eight essays that feature in the book discuss Yeats and Hill’s engagements with leading poets and dramatists of ancient Greece. The collection approaches the vitality of that inheritance from several angles: from renditions of the Orpheus myth to cryptic modes of address based on the structures of Pindaric odes. Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec’s essay, the longest in the volume, entitled “Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Péguy, Hill” (91–121), provides an account of each poet’s “debts to writers of antiquity” (93).

The “haunting perception” that provides the “background” to Kilgore-Caradec’s essay (and also to the introduction, which comments just as fatalistically on the destruction of the classics curriculum in France), is that, “because even a basic knowledge of classical culture has all but disappeared [...] the majority of English speakers may be only several generations away

from a total loss of the ability to read and interpret modernist texts” (93–94). Kilgore-Caradec contrasts this crisis in classical learning with the pedagogical climate in which Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Hill honed and practiced their craft, arguing that an “essential culture” of classical literature “pervades their works” (93). However, it does not necessarily follow from this observation that a formal training in classical literature is essential for reading and interpreting modernist texts. This claim needs to be treated more cautiously and is not as self-reflexive as it might be when considering the poets under discussion. As Jean-Baptiste Picy’s essay, entitled “Approaching Dionysus: Yeats and Pater’s Instinctive Differences” (31–43), demonstrates, Yeats’s learning in the classics was primarily self-directed despite his Victorian schooling, less extensive than that of many of his modernist contemporaries, and more heavily mediated by his engagement with the English Romantics and the Aesthetic Movement. As Picy contends: “Even his exact mode and degree of acquaintance with scholarly works and contemporary theories of Greek culture—such as that propounded by Nietzsche’s 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*—remains open to question” (32). It is worth exercising a similar degree of caution when predicting the inadequacies of future readers, who will have better access to archival materials than their predecessors even if they are unlikely to match the classical learning of the gentleman classes of the late nineteenth century. One might also offset the priority of the classical curriculum that Kilgore-Caradec insists upon for reading modernist texts with other precedents, such as Dante and the medieval Italian philosophical poets, which are surely just as vital to a critic’s arsenal when approaching the poetry of Yeats, Pound, Eliot and Hill.

The editorial principles behind the collection are unclear.¹ None of the contributions is numbered as chapters, and there is little sign of an effort to group the essays according to chronology, methodology or theme. As the only essay to address Yeats and Hill in equal measure, McDonald’s paper is pivotal for conjoining the essays in the first half of the collection (on Yeats) with the second half (on Hill). However, the placement of Colbert Kearney’s essay after McDonald’s returns the focus back to Yeats, which breaks up the continuity that Kilgore-Caradec’s essay purports to express with McDonald’s (113). More problematic from the perspective of the classical framework that Kilgore-Caradec imposes upon the collection is the fact that neither McDonald nor Kearney’s essays, which form the centrepiece to the volume, read Yeats or Hill’s work in terms of its affinity with classical tradition. Indeed, Kearney’s essay actively contradicts this emphasis.

When discussing the prophetic intensity of Yeats’s verse, Kearney notes that “we should recognise an element of irony in the scholarly urge to ‘fix’ or contextualise Yeats in his time” (73). The italicisation of deictic indicators—“Back then,” “Today” (78)—that recur throughout “Yeats in Time to Be” (71–90) serves

as a playful reminder to the reactionary imagination that poems by Yeats do not belong to a previous age and should be actively reinterpreted outside the framework of linear periodisation. Alternatively, Kearney looks forward to the development of new reading cultures that, growing out of the social and cultural challenges of our own epoch (market instability, climate change, terrorism, migration, artificial intelligence, cyberspace), will transform our understanding of these poems in ways that neither the generation of 1916 nor we can predict. Arguing for a “revisionary reading” of Yeats “through the filter of our own circumstances” (81), Kearney harnesses “the living energy” in Yeats’s verse to present and future needs, releasing the animate and disruptive potential of several poems through close and engaging readings of “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892), “September 1913” (1913), “The Magi” (1913) and “Easter, 1916” (1916). Kearney’s reading of Yeats’s poetry against the grain of traditional historicism enlists contemporary reading cultures to highlight the full force (and insolence) of Yeats’s visionary beliefs, which the unapologetic senator was never afraid to voice over and above his contemporaries. A case in point is the plural in the title of Yeats’s poem “To Ireland in the Coming *Times*” which, Kearney suggests, means that “Yeats is not speaking to any particular generation to follow” (75), but to *all* future generations that will have the chance to consider his work. The boldness of Yeats’s ambitions extends to his playful syncretism which, though the poet’s interest in *prisca theologia* and intellectualised pagan thought goes unremarked in Kearney’s essay, is examined by Elizabeth Muller in relation to the eighth part of the 1932 poem, “Vacillation” (25–7), and by Kilgore-Caradec in relation to the values and meanings of the image of the rose (93–105).

Once the classical framework that Kilgore-Caradec imposes upon the collection is left to one side, the significance of other individual contributions comes into focus. The first essay in the collection, Elizabeth Muller’s “‘Unity of Being’: Dantean Echoes in Yeats’s Aesthetics” (11–29), makes intricate use of Yeats’s *Autobiographies* (1927) and Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* (1295) to establish a direct link between the visionary intensities of both poets and their unrequited loves. Muller argues that self-overcoming in artistic creation was not only “a pre-requisite for great art” in Dante’s time but demanded a “fusion” between the life of the artist and his or her work that Yeats “tried to emulate and reproduce in Ireland in a prodigious effort to turn back the clock” (12). What Yeats sought to recreate in the Ireland in which he lived was, according to Muller, nothing less than the absolute unity between man and the cosmos that Dante had inherited during the Florentine Duecento: the “fully integrated, classical civilization in which no artist could be free from or greater than his times” (24). Muller’s eloquently argued and detailed essay reveals just how important Dante’s assortments—or *saturae*—of philosophy, poetry and autobiography,

such as those arranged in the *Convivio*, were to the construction and pursuit of Yeats's aesthetic ambitions as a fellow poet, mystic and auto-biographer.

Peter McDonald interviewed Geoffrey Hill at length about W. B. Yeats (at his own, not Hill's suggestion) while Hill was Professor of Poetry at Oxford. His essay in this collection, entitled "Gaiety and Dread: Late Yeats and Hill" (55–69), considers the ways in which both poets experiment with paradoxical inflections of genre and feeling. With examples from Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli" (1938) and Hill's *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) and *Scenes from Comus* (2005), McDonald demonstrates how much dramatic information is left out of these *poèmes de la maturité* and allowed to remain behind the scenes. For two poets so experienced in their craft, McDonald shows how even a passing dedication may change the entire theatrical shape of the poem as a visible expression, or mock expression, of gratitude. In such a gesture, McDonald argues, may lie the difference between a powerful transfiguring of lived physical emotion ("gaiety") and ironic self-transfiguration ("dread").

Peter Behrman de Sinéty's essay confines itself to a single Hill poem. The poem, entitled "In Memoriam: Ernst Barlach" (2007), alludes to Barlach's First World War memorial sculpture, the *Mater Dolorosa* (1921), which was destroyed by the Nazis during the Second World War. De Sinéty bases his analysis of this poem on a passage from one of Hill's critical writings, "Language, Suffering and Silence" (1999), to identify a powerful correspondence, or ekphrastic tension, between the poem's *technē* (the difficulty it enacts of "working in" allusive materials) and the sculpture's carved inscription and appearance (158–160). Difficulty, ambiguity and plain speaking are understood to be constitutive both of the verse construction and of the sculpture's ethical meaning—a meaning that in "Language, Suffering and Silence" Hill calls "the abrupt, unlooked-for semantic recognition" that precedes "an act of mercy or grace."²

The conference from which these papers are derived was held to mark the 140th anniversary of the birth of Charles Péguy. But despite his shared interest with Yeats in nationalism, mysticism and peasant culture, Péguy barely finds his way into *European Voices*. He receives only passing mention in Kilgore-Caradec's essay (105–8) and in a four-page condensed conversation between Hill and Kenneth Haynes, the editor of the canonical editions of Hill's works (165–8). Haynes's transcript of that conversation describes the genesis of Hill's book-length poem, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983), as a version of one of the English poet's *saints innocents*, inspired "in a direct way" from the last line of C. H. Sisson's 1946 review, which was reprinted in *Art and Action* (1963): "He was found face-down among the beetroots" (167). That line summarises how Péguy was discovered in the fields after he had been shot in the forehead in the tiny village of Villeroy. Further discussion on the relationship between poetry and action may have helped to tighten the slack of the Yeats-Hill connection:

Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite
 the assassin? Must men stand by what they write
 as by their camp-beds or their weaponry
 or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?³

Did that play of mine send out
 Certain men the English shot? (VP 632)

Both passages remain uncertain about the viability of a poem embodying a projected personality or ideological motive. How answerable should a poet be to extreme interpretations of his or her work? To mistake the poet's conscience (these are, after all, rhetorical questions) for vasectomised self-promotion is to miss the entire ethical tension.⁴ Other vital points of convergence arise from their reactions to middle-class materialism:

What need you, being come to sense,
 But fumble in a greasy till
 And add the halfpence to the pence
 And prayer to shivering prayer, until
 You have dried the marrow from the bone? (VP 289–90)

The Catholic shopkeepers that attract Yeats's vitriol strike a definite chord with the lifeless bourgeois civilisation in Part III of Hill's "Of Commerce and Society" (1959), where "*replete* strewn / Cities" "*stuffed* with artistry and substantial gain" provide "*ample* monuments to lost // Nations and generations," their "cultural or trade skeletons such hand-picked bone [...] // decently *drained*" (emphases mine).⁵ But perhaps the most arresting point of connection lies not in their disdain for the middle class but in their mutual fascination with statesmanship. Whether in response to impulsive blood sacrifice ("Easter, 1916") or to the cold utilitarian logic that takes the reader, in the space of three short variations, from the Treaty of Versailles to the horrors of the Auschwitz concentration camp ("Of Commerce and Society"), poetry, for Yeats and Hill, is a singularly useful way of challenging the thoughts of national leaders. In the fourth variation of "Of Commerce and Society," Hill aligns "Artistic men" with "Statesmen":

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

But may be lifted away.⁶

While brooding on the difficulties of speaking about the dead, the speaker develops an unresolved tension between the forces of weight and ascension, stone and air, official tributes and the irreducible force of lost lives. It is to the “known visions” of “statesmen” that the poem adds its own reflections on death, albeit in a deliberately unscrupulous tone that mimics the shallow nature of this convenience. Poetry, of course, is capable of delivering far more than inert tributes to the past, and the intense scrutiny to which Hill subjects its capacity for visionary transcendence produces a remaining energy, one that invites the reader to question just how available the cultural referent (the Nazi Holocaust) ought to be as a ubiquitous and instinctual touchstone for memorialisation.

Both Yeats and Hill uphold a poetic tradition that rivals civil, commercial and religious power by imagining and foreseeing an indestructible order—one which, to quote Shelley’s oft-cited “A Defence of Poetry” (1840), “gathers a sort of reduplication from deep inside the community.”⁷ Perhaps the extreme importance that Kilgore-Cadarec assigns to classical antiquity might be seen as part of the more complex, differential attitude that both poets sustain towards a Romantic legacy of national politics and visionary thought. The strongest essays in *European Voices* show how and why Yeats and Hill infuse early voices with the present, not as symptoms of a pedagogical climate in which a classical training used to be valued more highly, but as poets more deeply invested in that most Romantic of concepts: the nation’s timeless being.

Notes

1. A case in point is the editors’ decision to include notes for a speech that is not a finished article. Brian Arkins’s “The Theme of Opposites: Yeats and Oedipus” (45–52) is filled with numbered bullet points and lists that have yet to be restructured as full paragraphs. This essay’s focus on Yeats’s drama needed to be further explained when the overall emphasis of *European Voices in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats and Geoffrey Hill* is on poetry.
2. Geoffrey Hill, “Language, Suffering and Silence” (1999) in *Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 404.
3. Geoffrey Hill, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) in *Geoffrey Hill: Broken Hierarchies, Poems 1952–2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 143.
4. See Paul Muldoon’s riposte to these lines from Yeats’s “September 1913” in “7, Middagh Street” (1987): “If Yeats had saved his pencil-lead / would certain men have stayed in bed?,” *Poems 1968–1998* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 178.
5. Geoffrey Hill, “Of Commerce and Society” (1959) (*BH* 28).
6. Hill, *BH*, 29.
7. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry; or, Remarks Suggested by an Essay entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry’” (written 1821; first published 1840) in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, selected and edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistate, second edition (New York: Norton, 2002), 513 (510–35).