

About Suffering They Were Never Wrong

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Geoffrey Hill, *Clavics*, Enitharmon, £12, ISBN 978907587115;

Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems*, Gallery Press, €20,

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Both Geoffrey Hill and Derek Mahon are releasing a spate of work in the later part of their careers. Hill's *Clavics* is the second collection of a promised five to appear since mid-2007; Mahon's *New Collected* brings together work of fifty years, yet over a third of it comes from books published in the last six. What we find in each volume is a poet who is increasingly pushing something of his established style onto new grounds full of potential. Both late works take on new and urgent concerns, which directly confront their authors' established formal practices.

Strangely so, in the case of Hill's new book. *Clavics*, we are told, means "the science or alchemy of keys", and these thirty-two poems are shaped on the page so as to present, however approximately, some resemblance to a key. This is achieved in the manner of pattern poems: most well-known, perhaps, through George Herbert's 'The Altar' and 'Easter Wings'. Indeed, Hill's "keys" seem to be created by jamming a shape variant on the first upon the stanza shape of the second. Out of this visual punning Hill forms a twenty-line poem which balances upon an answering or variant ten lines. Typically, given the numerological interests that late Hill shares with late Yeats, in poem twenty Herbert's formal influence is confronted: "Herbert times and twists text hereby: / Balanced glass wit let-tipple into Grace."

Sitting on Hill's shoulder throughout is the shade of John Milton; as it has since the late style emerged in the mid-1990s. Hill's *Clavics* is an elegiac sequence for the Royalist musician William Lawes, killed in 1645 at the Battle of Chester. Milton had lauded Henry Lawes, William's brother and also a musician with Royalist sympathies, in a sonnet. Milton's praise for Henry centred upon his treatment of lyrics with "just note and accent", without wrenching the stress and intonation of the text in his setting. Hill's elaborate wringing of the language (he too "times and twists the text") to celebrate William Lawes contends that a Miltonic lyric smoothness is now often impossible to achieve. Typically for this late work, Hill deploys a variant of telegraphese, in which the "swarm- / Ing mass, the dense / Fluctuations of the material" are in danger of baffling the writer, to the extent that he proclaims that he will be "lucky" to drag much "Creative fire" from it.

If, here, "The grace of music is its dissonance / Unresolved beneath resolution", then an implication might be, as it was for T.S. Eliot, that the English Civil War was the moment at which the "material" of history and poetry, or poetry as history, became dense and fluctuating. Side-swiping at the recent financial crisis, as he does across the book, Hill suggests that, "at best", poetry might "Shake a crosspatched nation", but that it does so "At cost". Readers prepared to go with the inevitable vexations that the extremity of Hill's ambition here causes will experience the myriad passing bounties which *Clavics* conveys. What the book dramatizes through that ambition, more starkly than his other recent work, however, is the question as to *what* is eventually unlocked by this labour? "Alchemy" is a fool's game, even for international bankers to indulge, and there is much tom-fooling in the book. If, on the other hand, "clavics" is a "science", then its result in relation to Hill's demanding poetic experiment remains occluded, the "Creative fire" denied air.

Followers of Derek Mahon's career will breathe something of a collective sigh of relief upon opening his *New Collected Poems*. Aside from some silly tinkering around with poems' titles, this wilfully perverse custodian of his own output has left things relatively well alone since the last 'collected' edition of only twelve years ago. Rather than messing with the fabric of many of the poems (although the early tribute to MacNeice, here 'Carrowdore', now has a very different second stanza), Mahon has simply eliminated poems wholesale from the canon. Seemingly, one principle behind this has been to suppress the many, and it has to be said compelling, versions of classical and (largely) French texts, which have hitherto impelled and inflected his oeuvre. Some recent variants on Homer, though, oddly remain. On the other hand, several poems which have themselves become staples of critical work on the poet and his context now no longer appear. The early metamorphic wonder, 'The Apotheosis of Tins' has gone; the mid-career, amused meditation upon modernism, 'A Kensington Notebook' also. Interestingly, swathes of the recent books, such as (mercifully) the poems dubiously written for the fictitious Hindi poet Gopal Singh, from *An Autumn Wind* (2010), are not collected in the *New Collected*.

Like Hill, Mahon has increasingly seen poetic economy as in some sense performing a stricture upon the haphazard of finance and of narrow nationalisms. Although acknowledging the allure of 'Decadence' (the new title for the old book-length sequence *The Yellow Notebook*), the complex Byronic or Marvellian architecture of Mahon's stanzas has always offered its own countering stance:

Magic survives only where blind profit,
so quick on the uptake, takes no notice of it
for ours is a crude culture dazed with money,
a flighty future that would ditch its granny.

Although this is flippantly maintained, elsewhere and unexpectedly, such as in the Swiftian context of 'St. Patrick's Day', the mood can become plangent, as

[...] we give ourselves to a vast corporate scheme
where our true wit is devalued once again,
our solitude known only to the rain.

Excoriating as Mahon's satire can be, the Baudelairean context of the solitary wanderer amongst others' fripperies remains.

Increasingly, though, it would seem that Mahon's former sense that poetry, at least, might transform the dross of the world has stalled before concern at the plight of 'Life on Earth' in this late, climate-change-blighted, time. In the late 1990s, "the bright garbage on the incoming wave" could still become, via Pasolini, subject to punning inquisition: "in the refuse of the world a new world is born". While Mahon shares with Hill a "rage" to see "material shaped" into poetry, he does so aware now that "The orchard withers but the birds sing on". Mahon's achievement has always been to adapt the seemingly stern discipline of his tight form to a conversational idiom that operates within a calm community of addressees and recipients (many poems are "for" friends and colleagues in the craft). Against the increasing threats to the planet, a capitalism astray, and continuing historical debilities, such geniality proffers its steady and wonderful appeal.

Steven Matthews's collection *Skying* appears from Waterloo Press in January.