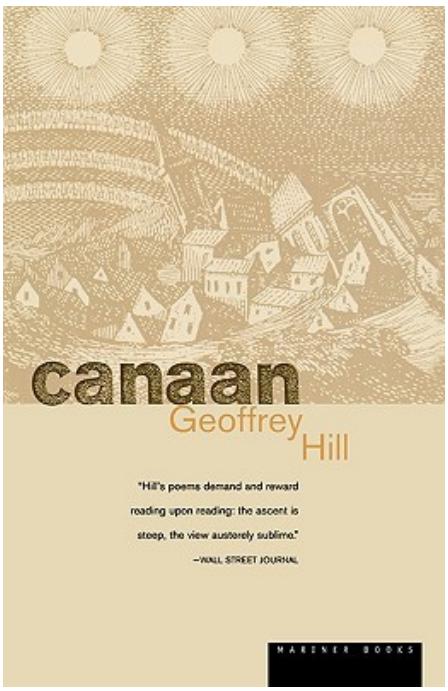

Canaan

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Here is public poetry of uncommon moral urgency: it bears witness to the sufferings of the innocent at the hands of history and to the martyrdom of those who have dared look history in the eye. "Rich, quarrelsome...handsome and brutish...Hill's poetry is the major achievement of late-twentieth-century verse," says The New Criterion. "Canaan is one of the few serious books we will have to mark the millennium."

Canaan Details

Date	:	Published September 11th 1998 by Mariner Books (first published 1997)
ISBN	:	9780395924860
Author	:	Geoffrey Hill
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From Reader Review Canaan for online ebook

Steve says

I'm a big fan of Hill. But Hill is not an easy poet. He supplies no end notes, so often the reader is left with the language itself. Without some knowledge of history and the Bible, much will be missed. Despite that, I feel Hill's language, at its best, does possess what Michael Dirda of the Washington Post called a "sensuality and coiled force," which in a way reminds me of Donne, and the idea of the "strong line." Nevertheless, Hill is a poet of the 20th Century. The images and history he draws on are our own. He is a Christian poet, but one who is practically Manichean in his use of light and dark in history. For Hill "innocence is no earthly weapon."

In *Canaan*, Hill has reinvented himself, choosing image over rhyme. His earlier work, which also possessed strong images, was more formal, and somewhat recalled Allan Tate (a poet Hill greatly admires). The book has a number of stunning sequences. My favorite is "De Jure Belli Ac Pacis," which is dedicated to Hans Bernd von Haefton, one of the bomb plot conspirators against Hitler. Martyrdom is important to Hill, and he shows it's cost, absent the hagiography:

"The iron-beamed engine shed has chapel windows.
Glare-eyed you spun. The hooks are still in the beam;
a sun patch drains to nothing; here the chocked
blood seeped into place, here the abused blood
set its own wreaths."

The whole sequence runs on like this, taut and powerful. I saw Hill read this years ago, and he said this poem caused some problems with a friend, a Dominican priest, in particular the line

"Evil is not good's absence but gravity's
everlasting bedrock and its fatal chains
inert, violent, the suffrage of our days."

Hill acknowledged the grimness of these lines, and the possibility of a theological line being crossed, but he also felt this a legitimate (and human) response for poet and non-poet alike. What we think and muse over is not the same thing as belief. He then appealed for a theologian in the house (Catholic University and Georgetown are nearby). (Hill is funny in person, and mocks his own gravity at times. He is also generous in explaining poems and answering questions.)

Another remarkable sequence is "Scenes with Harlequins," which is written in memory of Aleksandr Blok. Blok is an important figure is Russian literature, and is viewed by many Russians as something of a prophet. Hill touches on Blok's prophetic nature with these vivid lines that show the deep religiousness of the Russian soul, but also the sense of an approaching storm -- the Revolution.

"The risen Christ! Once more
faith is upon us,
a jubilant brief keening
with respite:
Obedience, bitter joy,
the elements, clouds,

winds, louvres where the bell
makes its wild mouths:

Holy Rus – into the rain’s
horizons, peacock-dyed
tail feathers of storm,
so it goes on.”

The collection also has some sequences that are about England in particular, and the poet’s sense that what was once noble and heroic is now gone and that the country is “voiding substance like quicklime”. You will also find pieces dealing with government “Mysticism and Democracy” and the Church of England. All are couched in terms of a country in downward spiral, which I find very reminiscent of the Book of Kings. There is an extended sequence dealing with Churchill’s funeral, where the old veterans are poignantly portrayed as warriors from another time:

“The men hefting
their accouterments
of webbed tin, many
in bandages,

with cigarettes,
with scuffed hands aflare,
as though exhaustion
drew them to life;”

The rest of the collection also has a number of dedicatory poems to such figures as William Arrowsmith, William Cobbitt, Aileen Ireland, and others. I don’t really know who these people are, but it doesn’t seem to matter, much in a way that those elegies of Donne continue to move us, even though the people they were written for seem distant. It’s best, I think, to view such poems as vehicles for the poet’s speculation on larger matters. Not knowing the subject certainly didn’t affect my enjoyment of the dedicatory poems, and Hill’s austere and muscular language.

Rodney says

Hill’s Renaissance Faire to Ashbery’s Oscar night. But where John, endless onion, always makes me grin, grave and grumpy Geoffrey’s what I cut to get a cry.

Justin Evans says

Hill is in a strange position--not experimental enough for the literary left, but far too crabbed, difficult and flat out weird for the Establishment. In other words, he's the kind of poet I like: I'm not going to get more than about 20% of what's going on from my first reading, but since the language is compelling, I'll keep

reading, and one day might get up over 50%. In Canaan he borrows the tone of a biblical prophet to denounce and praise, depending on the object of his attention; usually it goes very well, sometimes it's all a bit too much. Much recommended.

Jon Cone says

The English poet Geoffrey Hill is in possession of a pitiless, stony imagination: his language nearly free of all familiar lyric involvements.

Thus, these lines from his poem 'Ezekiel's Wheel' :

"Let the brittle
devourers, the locusts
of pity, enrobe you:
let the veteran
maimed fig tree stand
stark out of the waste."

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If these few lines interest you, then Geoffrey Hill is a poet
whose thorns and stone, whose ruins of history and revelation,
will provide, if not solace, a quiescent rancor that yet
gives curious relief from the surrounding sea of our modern
day idiocies.

Kent says

I admire the voice in these poems, and the torqued style, especially in a poem like "De Anima." I think, though, that the main topic of the book gets lost on me as I don't have a working knowledge of England's 20th century history. How do poems like "To the High Court of Parliament" work with the idea of *Canaan*, and are they describing Britain as that place or not?
