

An emblem of some consequence: Geoffrey Hill. *Clavics*. London: Enitharmon Press, 2011.

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Biography

Carole Birkan-Berz teaches at Paris Descartes University. She wrote her doctoral thesis on Poetic Forms and National Values in Hill's work and has published on the subject of contemporary poetry and national identity. Her current research centres on Geoffrey Hill's work from the point of view of forms and sources.

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"CLAVICS", says Hill's epigraph, is, according to a futuristic OED entry "the science or alchemy of keys – OED 2012". From the blurb on the dustjacket, we may expect from this volume some distant clavichord sounds from the music of William Lawes, the Royalist musician to whom this sequence is dedicated, and from our acquaintance with Hill's poetry, a great many riddles to unlock. And indeed, Hill's volume does look like a *poème à clef*. More precisely, the book presents almost as a Renaissance emblem book, condensing cryptic meanings in striking visual and verbal forms.

It's through those visual forms that one may first apprehend *Clavics* and begin to appreciate its intricate structure. More overtly than any other volume perhaps, *Clavics* is a book that constantly calls attention to its form. Just as *Speech! Speech!* had been set as a series of 120 twelve-line textual blocks spread four by four over a double page, *Clavics* presents as sequence of 32 units, each printed on a single page and headed by an Arabic numeral. Each unit in fact comprises two stanzaic shape-poems, in the manner of George Herbert's *The Temple*, with a highly sophisticated rhyme scheme. The first shape-poem is reminiscent of Herbert's "The Altar", the second is set in the manner of "Easter Wings". Both poems are separated by a horizontal diamond-like shape breaking the page up into two thirds. In the manner of

the devotional poet, each poem is put forward as a hieroglyph, a sacred shape with a hidden meaning, or in the words of the poet "an emblem of some consequence" (6). Like other works by Hill, *Clavics* relies on the modern keyboard to reproduce some of the typographical features of seventeenth century ecclesiastical eloquence: stress marks, extended spacing, italics, play on uppercase and lowercase, etc. But, like Herbert, Hill not only plays with form, he plays against it, "conjuring disjunction into printers' founts" (4). For instance, Hill's shape-poems do not follow the straightforward cross pattern one might expect. Hill's "Altar" is many-tiered (suggesting perhaps a now multifaith Western culture), and its complex rhyme scheme highlights a discrepancy with its lineation. His "Wings" are a single poem, not a double one, signalling perhaps the difficulty to "imp [one's] wing" on Christ's or just the blank absence of any God, viz. poem 3: "Until / No sun/ No dying climb (...)/ No intercept from zero friskily drawn." Other visual clues include emblems in their heraldic, clannish or nationalistic aspect. Beginning with the cover image - a striking image of a white owl on a black background entitled "Heraldic Attitude Adopted by Barn Owl" and also iconic for being one of the first pictures of an owl with its prey to be taken using flash photography during World War Two - they point to the volume's theme as war, especially the English Civil War, moving on to more recent conflicts such as the war on Terror, on its Afghan terrain (7) . In the prophetic yet self-defeating strain found in Hill's religious lines, the speaker calls on Astrea, the goddess of justice (1), to return to Earth, yet calls her a "bitch", making this call a ill-fated one.

These spatial clues bring us to the temporal dimension of *Clavics*, or more pointedly to Hill's capacity to write verse that is at once in and out of its time. The poet seems to have written proleptically in 2011 about the year 2012. Reading it retrospectively this year makes one realise how many of this year's emblems feature in the volume. First of all, the torch for the 2012 London Olympics, making an oblique appearance in the first line ("Bring torch for Cabbalah brand new treatise"). Second, Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee, alluded to in the diamond shape on every page (and concomittant with Hill's recent renewed public implication in the UK). Third, the Scottish national emblem, particularly topical now that a referendum on independence has been pledged: "Hullo, thistle, / Silver-silk head/ Gashed green-blue woad,/ Buoyant in old fallow,/ Watch by your dead" (15). This last may be linked with the second, obscure epigraph to the book : "Be very var vith his raklese toyis of Padoa", a phrase written by one of the conspirators who attempted to abduct James VI of Scotland as reported in the Scottish Criminal Trials of 1600. Had the abduction been successful, James might not have become James I of England, nor would he have united the Crowns.

The conflict between "sister-countries" such as England and Scotland, or of England with its past, is another theme Hill returns to in this sequence, with its linked topos of twinship. Once again, England is cleft between Roundheads and Cavaliers, a quarrel which is reflected in Hill's representations of twinned musicians and masques. The musicians are the Lawes brothers, Henry and William, the latter being the volume's dedicatee. The first masque is *Coelum Britannicum*, composed by Thomas Carew and Inigo Jones, held at Whitehall on Shrove Tuesday 1634, and featuring Momus, the god of ridicule, to be paired implicitly with Milton and Henry Lawes's *Comus*, held only six months later at Ludlow. Hill dedicates his sequence to William Lawes the Royalist musician killed in battle, but not unlike like Milton, who had dedicated a sonnet to Henry overriding the national divide, Hill seems to side with the Republicans: "Cultic beyond reason that king-martyr./ He was a double-dealer,

betrayed friends/ Without quarter/Parliament/ Waved its black wands;/ The deodands/ Of sick spittle and cant/ Stained the altar. (4)" The lines seem to defend regicide: deodands in medieval English law were chattel that had caused a person's death, and so were forfeited to God. Here the king seems to have been slain by his own behavioural and linguistic flaws (it is helpful here to recall Hill's charges against seventeenth century cant, in his book of essays *The Enemy's Country : Words, Contexture and other Circumstances of Language*. In the same section, Hill argues for "thinking best of our selves": reading his depiction of unappeased historical wars merging into new conflicts, one cannot help but think that Hill will forever inhabit a disunited kingdom: the Olympic torch and Jubilee pomp fuelling national sentiment but appearing powerless to bring about reconciliation.

Leaving national identities to attend to personal ones, the reader may consider the relative stability of poetic voice in this somewhat fragmented sequence: whether belonging to the scholar poet, to the clown, whether meditating or portentous, the "I" remains a strong presence in the midst of quotations and diffracted references, much more so at any rate than any of the poet's addressees. Numbers in *Clavics* are the emblem or hieroglyphic giving the final clue in this respect."Numerology also makes much sense", says Hill in the second line of the poem. Indeed, dividing the 960 lines in the volume by 12, one is left with 80, 2012 being Hill's eightieth year. In the midst of all erudite references, memorializing of national strife and occasional flashes of light, it remains to be seen whether Hill has written a poem for the self.