

Language, art, purity

A vignette in honor of Geoffrey Hill

1990

§1 Hill claims that ‘the arts which use language are the most impure of arts’ where the key word “impurity” is reflexive: is his art and language devoid of impurity?

§2 At first reading, Hill’s statement indicates that language is more important than one could think. By saying “impure” or rather “impure art”, Hill implies that it is the language of the use of words – or the abuse of words – that determines whether this art is impure or not.

§3 We might as well say that whether or not art is impure depends solely on the degree of purity of language and as a language for a poet is about the expression of words, expression of a tension between words, we may conclude that purity of art is purity of thought. Yet are we able to define as closely as possible “purity of thought”, let alone, to quantify this purity?

§4 Nevertheless, Hill does not go thus far, his main concern being the relationship between author and his language, albeit what he thinks. It seems that Hill’s concern is at two levels: firstly, how the words a writer uses influence the reader and secondly, with which precision does a writer express his thoughts.

§5 Concerning the first idea, Hill has written

O stamping ground of the shod Word.
(Hill: *King Log*)

§6 The Word is king and as such it has the power to command, whether wisely or not.

§7 This reminds considerations made by Orwell in that ‘all Art is propaganda’ because of the expression of thought while that ‘all propaganda is not art’ thus questioning the ‘exactness of design’ of language.

§8 With Spender, the same problematic appears:

The word bites like a fish
Shall I throw it back, free
Arrowing to that sea
Where thoughts lash tail and fin?
Or shall I put it in
To rhyme upon a dish?
(Spender: *Word*)

§9 Its meaning is linked to that of Hill's: does a word depend on its context to be correctly expressed or does the author have the choice between 'exactness of design' or not?

§10 For Hill a word must be free and furthermore has to create tension. In this respect Hill's use of words is surprisingly effective for he uses oxymora, in other words, antiphrases of vital challenge such as 'mortal proud'; he uses hyphenated or new words such as 'true-torn' according to the importance and the weight he wants to confer to a word or a compound one. Hill's words are not 'shod' or on a 'stomping ground'.

§11 In *Mercian Hymns* Hill says that 'exactness of design was to deter imitation', implying that the only way to discourage imitation is by preserving accurately and in likelihood an idea, for an idea or a thought is already by definition characterized by a difference to somebody else's thought.

For reference:

ZAMAROS, PANAYOTIS (1990), *Language, Art, Purity - A vignette in honor of Geoffrey Hill*, Lausanne: DrZ Network.