

Poem by Geoffrey Hill

Improvisations for Hart Crane

Thou canst read nothing except through appetite.

1

Super-ego crash-meshed idiot-savant.
And what háve you.
This has to be the show-stopper. Stay put.
Slumming for rum and rumba, dumb Rimbaud,
he the sortilegist, visionary on parole,
floor-walker watching space, the candy man,
artiste of neon, traffic's orator,
gaunt cantilevers engined by the dawn
of prophecy. A sight to see itself:
he, swinger with the saints in mission belfries,
broken and randy zooming on the toll,
love-death by elocution a close thing.
Publish his name, exile's remittancer,
prodigal who reclaimed us brought to book.

2

The Stars-and-Stripes looks best when it's unfurled
stiff as a board on a declaiming wind
under a cobalt sky; the National
Guard at stand-to, half-cock weaponry;
the Chief's advisers, unsexed white and black,
good with binoculars and shown to be so;
their photo-faces lit with simple purpose,
their public selves the sanctum, the arcane;
their privacy the clamor of events;
the keys of war bestowed like a small heirloom
of sentimental value to the clan.
Poets are unstable, least to be trusted
with scripts of grand arraignment. All in all
you screwed us, Hart, you and your zany epic.

3

Unwise these thoughts high-spanned. A shade too much
Library of America, liberty
safe on the list, shiny-electric-gated,
noble its new-old mansions. Heave him in
bounced for some lethal kind of bunkum test,
my self-accusing bard: naked bacardi
and sailors. Straight sex mothered him
all the while he threw up. I'm yours, I said,
reckless, twizzling the ever-fuzzy dial
to get Roosevelt. Admit, though, we had plunged
before that first term, faithful old depression
working us all the way. What derelicts
we must have been, ripped off by infancy.
Thou canst grasp nothing except through appetite.

Geoffrey Hill is University Professor and professor of literature and religion at Boston University. His most recent collections of poetry are "The Triumph of Love" (1998), "Speech! Speech!" (2000), and "The Orchards of Syon" (2002). He has been a Fellow of the American Academy since 1996.

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