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Reinvention in the Line of Death: A Reconsideration of Geoffrey Hill's Commemorative Verse

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REINVENTION IN THE LINE OF DEATH:

A RECONSIDERATION OF GEOFFREY HILL'S COMMEMORATIVE VERSE

By

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Geoffrey Hill's Commemorative Verse

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This paper considers the embodied ethics of Geoffrey Hill's poetic practice. Hill stages his engagement with poetry through the idioms, images, tropes, and diction of the literary tradition. Through this pragmatic rehearsal of the language of the dead, Hill's poetry projects the tradition into the present. Hill resists the ethical entrapments of appropriative poetry through his insistence upon the brute physicality of atrocity and through a rigorous (for both poet and reader) formal difficulty. Hill's practice refuses to console after the models of Peter Sacks, Jahan Ramazani, or John Vickery. Instead, concerned with modernity's disconnectedness, Hill's poetry returns us to the presence of the dead, to *their* ritual and language. Alternatively, because Hill's subjects are historical atrocities, rather than natural occurrences, the sort of communal consolation that the elegy traditionally offered would be inappropriate to Hill's concerns. These atrocities are, most frequently, instances of human violence (the Holocaust, the Battle of Towton, the Wars of the Roses, etc.) and, for this reason, they do not lend themselves to the consolations of natural cycles of death and rebirth. Since they were often committed in the name of religion, Christian transcendence is similarly questionable, as are other consolatory transcendences. These conventional modes of consolation being denied, Hill's poetry reconnects us with the dead through the formal devices and techniques of the historical institution of poetry. Through the rigorous engagement with and sacrificial making of poetry, Hill attempts to redeem tradition and history for the present.

To my father, who undoubtedly remembers his Latin:
Ego sum discipulus mei patris.

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INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Hill's poetry takes literary tradition and history as both its subject and its medium. Hill insists upon the ethical importance of "knowing the dead," articulated in *The Triumph of Love* (1998). His notion of "understanding" as "diligence / and attention, appropriately understood / as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgement / of what is owed the dead" asserts that an understanding of the self is inextricable from an understanding of one's historical indebtedness. In his essay "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" (1978), Hill presents a similar argument in terms of aesthetics. There he argues, quoting Yeats, that "when the poem 'comes right with a click like a closing box', what is there effected is the atonement of aesthetics with rectitude of judgement."[1] Both Hill's poetic and critical formulations share an emphasis on the arduousness and ethical import of the poet's task. The poet's "diligence / and attention," his "rectitude of judgement," operate upon and within the art of poetry. For Hill, these subjects, upon which the poet must exercise his judgement, are most frequently historical atrocities and the literary forms which have inscribed and transmuted them. Thus in the sonnet series "Funeral Music," for the *King Log* collection (1968), Hill considers the 100 Years War, the War of the Roses, and the Battle of Towton, specifically. Similarly, "September Song" considers the more contemporary atrocity of the Holocaust through a form reminiscent of the poetics of Paul Celan. In its more recent manifestation, this insistence upon the interconnectedness between history and literary tradition has taken the form of translation, as with Eugenio Montale's "The Storm" from *Without Title* (2006), and extensive quotation, as with "Citations I," "Citations II," and the "On Reading…" poems from *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007). The prevalence of this emphasis on history and

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[1] Geoffrey Hill, *Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 10.

the manner in which is has been inscribed by literary tradition is the foundation of Hill's

critical and poetic practice. The "diligence / and attention" of the poet will focus as much

upon the history of language as upon the history which that language inscribes.

In the recent collection, *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007), Geoffrey Hill asserts

that he

think[s] of poetry as it was said

Of Alanbrooke's war diary: a work done

to gain, or regain, *possession of himself*,

as *a means of survival*, and, in that sense,

a mode of moral life.[2]

Our discussion will attempt to explicate exactly what Hill means by this gnomic assertion,

what this might look like in practice, and what the implications of this assertion are.

Although critics such as Peter Sacks, Jahan Ramazani, and W. David Shaw consider

Hill's poetry primarily elegiac, it is my contention that Hill's poems are not elegiac as

that term is commonly understood. They do not offer consolation, nor do they attempt to

establish an alternative to the dead's absence. Rather Hill's poetry reconnects a

modernity fatally disconnected from its own indebtedness to its history by engaging that

history in a poetic practice that is traditional and inventive, difficult and determinate,

disturbing and redemptive.

Critical considerations of the elegy have traditionally focused on the

psychological work of consolation these poems seek to perform. Sacks and Ramazani

ground their studies in the psychological model of "successful mourning" developed in

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[2] Geoffrey Hill, "Citations I," in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 2.

Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia."[3] In Sacks's reading, the elegy—at least the

English elegy through Yeats—enacts a psychological narrative of loss and substitution.

The classic example, for Sacks, is Milton's "Lycidas." Milton's elegy begins with an

expression of shock in response to the loss of Lycidas:

> Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
>
> Ye Myrtels brown, with Ivy never-sear,
>
> I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
>
> And with forc'd fingers rude,
>
> Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
>
> Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
>
> Compels me to disturb your season due:
>
> For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime.[4]

Lycidas, the object of desire in Sacks's model, is recognized as absent. The libidinous

attachment having been severed by death, the speaker must seek a substitute object of

desire. Initially this rift manifests itself as a relinquishment of the world. The speaker

cannot accept the loss of Lycidas and abdicates agency in the world:

> Alas! what boots it with uncessant care
>
> To tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade,
>
> And strictly meditate the thankless Muse,
>
> Were it not better don as others use,
>
> To sport with *Amaryllis* in the shade,

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[3] See Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

[4] John Milton, "Lycidas," in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), lines 1-8.

Or tangles of *Neæra's* hair?[5]

Faced with the loss of the object of desire, the libido reattaches itself to the ego and causes regression to a state of secondary narcissism. The speaker becomes the self-reflexive object of desire. Because the self has become the new object of desire, familial and communal obligations are disregarded. The self becomes the subject's sole concern. In this state, the speaker seeks explanations for his loss before finally arriving at a substitute object in Lycidas's spiritual transcendence:

> Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more,
>
> For *Lycidas* your sorrow is not dead,
>
> Sunk though he be beneath the watry floor
>
> So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
>
> And yet anon repairs his dropping head,
>
> And tricks his beams, and with new spangled Ore,
>
> Flames in the forehead of the sky:
>
> So *Lycidas* sunk low, but mounted high,
>
> Through the dear might of him that walked the waves.[6]

This is the poetic expression of "successful mourning" for Sacks: the libido has reattached itself to the transfigured, poeticized Lycidas as the object of desire. This is, in brief, the principal, common structure that Sacks finds in the development of the English elegy from Spenser to Yeats.

In his consideration of the English elegy after Yeats, Ramazani continues to deploy the Freudian model. In this context, he finds that what distinguishes the elegy in

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[5] Milton, "Lycidas," lines 64-69.
[6] Ibid., lines 167-173.

the modern and post-modern periods is a rejection of traditional forms of consolation and a refusal to accept alternative objects of desire. This is the persistent melancholy found in Thomas Hardy's "The Going." Like "Lycidas," Hardy's poem begins with an expression of shock at the loss of the object of desire and of the difficulty of separation:

> Why did you give no hint that night
>
> That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
>
> And calmly, as if indifferent quite,
>
> You would close your term here, up and be gone
>
> > Where I could not follow
> >
> > With wing of swallow
>
> To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!

Already we can hear the tonal difference between Hardy's elegy and Milton's. What begins, here, as a question ("why did you give no hint") ends in accusation. The speaker sounds indignant as well as bereft. He accuses the loved one of dying with calm indifference, and the poem's reiterated "why" feels more like an interrogation than an elegy. Further, the speaker only glances at the potential consolation of spiritual transcendence—"you would close you term *here*, up and be gone"—and quickly returns to the experience of loss. Instead of enacting a process of grief and consolation as "Lycidas" does, Hardy's poem remains mired in grief's more insidious modes of accusation and regret. This disposition is consistent with that regression to a secondary narcissism in which the libido has attached itself to the ego when faced with the absence of the object of desire. This condition leads, in "Lycidas," to a desire on the part of the speaker to an abdication of personal agency. In the "successful mourning" of Milton's

poem, this state is eventually surmounted; in "The Going," however, the speaker never

moves beyond his morbid attachment to the dead:

> Well, well! All's past amend,
>
> Unchangeable. It must go.
>
> I seem but a dead man held on end
>
> To sink down soon… O you could not know
>
> That such swift fleeing
>
> No soul foreseeing—
>
> Not even I—would undo me so![7]

While the speaker does exculpate the dead—"O you could not know"—the libido finds

no substitute object. Instead, the speaker accepts his mortality in the mode of rejection.

He remains in a state of secondary narcissism that Freud termed "melancholia" or

unhealthy mourning. Ramazani sees this refusal to accept consolation as the primary

mode of the modern and post-modern elegy.

Ramazani argues that the weakening of traditional belief systems results in the

insufficiency of past traditions and cultural rituals to provide consolation. Put simply, the

Christian transcendence in which the speaker of "Lycidas" finds consolation is not

available to Hardy's speaker because the Christian framework, whence such consolation

derives its efficacy, is no longer culturally vital. The ritual practices of the elegy (or any

other cultural practice) are grounded in and express culturally shared frameworks. Once

those frameworks are debased or debunked, the rituals that embody them can no longer

perform their culturally determined function. The failure of the elegy to provide

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[7] Thomas Hardy, "The Going," in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 119.

consolation, in Ramazani's thesis, points to a cultural lack. Because this lack resides in the cultural order of institutions, the primary predicament of the contemporary elegy, and Hill's poetry particularly, is cultural and anthropological as much as it is psychological.

Recently Robert Pogue Harrison has argued that the primary predicament of post-modernity is its having become unmoored from its historical roots:

> one could say that in the age of the new barbarism words lose their moral memory. For even our moral memory—indeed our morality above all—depends upon the historical resonance of its foundational words: *liberty*, *duty*, *sacrifice*, *compassion*, *equality*. The 'false eloquence' of the times exploits the traditional charisma of such words while at the same time emptying them of their historical memory.[8]

Harrison's insistence upon words' "moral memory" echoes Hill's insistence on an "intrinsic value"[9] in language which the poet must resurrect through attention and reflection. As we shall see, Hill's criticism and poetry evidence a struggle to consider and recover the "moral memory" of language. Thus by examining the principles of judgement that Hill applies in his criticism, we can discover the principles of enactment that inform his poetic practice. Similarly, Harrison's awareness that "false eloquence" leverages words' "traditional charisma while at the same time emptying them of their historical memory" recalls Hill's description of an irresponsibly elegiac poetry in "History as Poetry": "taste / Of Pentecost's ashen feast." In that poem, Hill considers that vacuity of a poetry that appropriates history for its own gains rather than struggling with its own historical indebtedness. Because of this failure of self-examination, the

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[8] Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 86.
[9] Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 477.

words lack Pentecostal vitality and remain inanimate ash. In opposition to modernity's

disconnectedness from its own history, both Harrison and Hill point to the importance of

the present being grounded in the past in a vital way.

Harrison vividly describes the traditional poetic response to such erasures of

history:

> when history turns against its own memorializing and self-conserving
>
> drive, when it is perceived to have become a force of erasure rather than of
>
> inscription, of assault upon the earth rather than humanization of the earth,
>
> then images of an apocalyptic sea inevitably surge up in the human
>
> imagination. Such images remind us that history exists in a covenant that
>
> has a history of its own, and a finite one at that, and remind us furthermore
>
> that only an ever-vigilant awareness of the covenant's finitude assures its
>
> perpetuity.[10]

Although Harrison does not cite Hill in his extensive examination of poetry, such images

of the dead taken up and returned by an apocalyptic sea abound, particularly in Hill's

early collections. In "Genesis," the dead lie "under the rough pelt of the sea; // Though

Earth has rolled beneath her weight / The bones that cannot bear the light." A "possessed

sea" litters "ruinous arms" in "Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings," and the dead lie

"secure" until, with "the scouring fires of trial-day," "the sea / Across daubed rock

evacuates its dead." "Metamorphoses, 4: Drake's Drum" maintains the dead's

permanence and alterity in the face of the present's "designed wreaths… used words." In

"The Guardians," the old "gather the dead as the first dead scrape home" from a

malevolent sea. Through such images, Hill's poetry evidences its participation in the

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[10] Harrison, 16.

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tradition of concern that Harrison analyzes. Hill's particular contribution to this tradition is sacrificial struggle to recover the history and tradition from the "apocalyptic sea" of cultural amnesia.

In the process of this recovery, Hill's poetry engages the history and tradition in what Harrison refers to as the "humic element"[11] of language. Images of the sea's erasure have figured prominently in English poetry since "Lycidas," as Harrison notes, and have their ultimate ground in the biblical literature which Milton's poem recalls. Hill's "authentic retrieval"[12] of this image, time and again, grounds his poetry in the priority of tradition. Hill's consideration of tradition and his scrupulous[13] practice remind us that, has Harrison phrases it, "as human beings we are born of the dead—of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional, legal, cultural, and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn."[14] Hill's poetry serves as an acknowledgement of "what is owed the dead" because of its enactment of this vital relation between past and present. It is because of this indebtedness—assuming, of course, that one is aware of the obligation—that the present "is the sustaining basis of those who are 'not,' of those whose mode of being is defined by 'not' insofar as they have perished. If to be responsible in the mode of guilt means to 'be-the-basis for,' Dasein is responsible for whatever is of the order of human dying, and not simply its own 'constant' dying."[15]

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[11] Ibid., x.

[12] Ibid., 101.

[13] Hill will use "scrupulosity" in *Speech! Speech!*, as we shall see in Chapter II. I use scrupulousness as an alternative to the more common "self-skeptical" because, while Hill is always appropriately reticent in his judgments, he does not hesitate to make those judgments. Scrupulousness (or "scrupulosity") has connotations closer to the sort of ethical deliberation Hill enacts than "self-skeptical," which implies a post-modern indeterminacy.

[14] Ibid., xi.

[15] Ibid., 156.

Hill's "peculiar unnecessary shame," which the poet bears into a "world growing ever more shameless,"[16] is analogous to Harrison's understanding of Dasein's "primordial guilt."[17] Hill characterizes this indebtedness as shame because that legacy includes those historical atrocities that Hill takes as the subject of his poetry. The world into which the poet bears that shame is "growing ever more shameless" because, in its disconnectedness, it fails to acknowledge the shame of its primordial guilt. In Harrison's terms, modernity can no longer hear "the call of conscience," which

> reaches us from the nullity of our being's ground, in fact comes from—or
> comes in the guise of—the dead? Is it not *they*—the dead—who, in their
> uncanny modes, indwell in the temporal ecstasies and come out to meet us
> in our self-overreaching? Are we not constitutionally guilty in *their* regard,
> indebted to *their* sacrifice and labor, subject to *their* authority insofar as
> they, not we, authored the institutions that ensure our future?[18]

Hill's poetry fulfills this obligation to the dead by drawing attention to the indebtedness of poetry itself. In so doing, Hill's poems recall the attention of the present from its own "'constant' dying" to its own indebtedness, particularly to the historical atrocities in its own legacy. The poem becomes "*a mode of moral life*" by bringing into a concurrence the self that is "'constantly' dying" and the not-self that "whatever is of the order of human dying." The ethicality[19] of this act resides in Hill's recognition of the responsibility to the past and the future that Harrison characterizes as an essential aspect of the human condition. In their scrupulosity with language, the considerations of the

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[16] Geoffrey Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 18.
[17] Harrison, 98.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Although Hill's concerns are intimate with a Christian world view, I use "ethics" throughout this paper as a religiously neutral term because issues of religious disposition are not explicitly considered herein.

history and tradition, which are Hill's poems, enact how the living respond to, are responsible towards, and perpetuate the dead. In Harrison's terms, the residual texts of tradition are "more than enduring tablets where an author's words survive his or her demise. They are the gifts of human worlds, cosmic in nature, that hold their place in time so that the living and the unborn may inhabit them at will, make themselves at home in their *articulate humanity*."[20] Or, in Hill's terms,

> …. Still
>
> I think of poetry as it was said
>
> of Alanbrooke's war diary: a work done
>
> to gain, or regain, *possession of himself*,
>
> as *a means of survival*, and, in that sense,
>
> *a mode of moral life*.[21]

The "*mode of moral life*," here, is both an inscription and an enactment ("diary" and "work"), which is a way of gaining possession of the self by regaining the ways others have gained possession of themselves. Hill's structure here emphasizes the interconnectedness of utterance and act, the "doing-by-saying" that W. David Shaw depicts as central to the historical development of the elegy.[22] Hill's choice to place the totalizing utterance—"a work done"—at the line-ending (importantly *not* at the stanza's end) forecloses the semantic efficacy of Alanbrooke's war diary, asserting its historical pastness, even as the self-perpetuating movement of the stanza continues the reinscription promised by "I think of poetry as …." The impulse towards simile generates that ligature

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[20] Ibid.,14-15; emphasis mine.
[21] Hill, "Citations I," in *A Treatise*, 2.
[22] W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985),13.

between the living and the dead that makes the absent present. In such ways, Hill's poetry enacts a struggle with its historical inheritance. Through such struggles the poems not only express an ethics of embodied practice, they enact that ethical position in the workings of language.

That in "Citations I" such a positivist assertion can develop from a poem that begins be depicting the existential uncertainty of post-modernity establishes the tradition—and, particularly, their inscriptions—as a "ground-base" for a stable self-conception:

> This not quite knowing what the earth requires:
>
> earthiness, earthliness, or things ethereal;
>
> whether spiritus mundi notices bad faith
>
> or if it cares; defraudings at the source,
>
> the bare usury of the species. In the end
>
> one is as broken as the vows and tatters,
>
> petitions with blood on them, the charred prayers
>
> spiralling godwards on intense thermals.

Hill here recapitulates the characteristic questioning of responsibility towards the "humic element." For Hill, the earth—which Harrison characterizes as the "humane element" in juxtaposition to the sea's inhumane erasure—remains at best an ambivalent medium ("whether spiritus mundi notices bad faith / or if it cares") and at worst a malevolently equivocating one: "…. A field / After battle utters its own sound / Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth."[23]

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[23] Geoffrey Hill, "Funeral Music 3," in *New and Collected Poems: 1952-1992* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 60.

In contrast to the Christian context of the fifteenth century, which allowed those at the Battle of Towton to bespeak "doomsday and they meant it by / God," Hill's temporal position limits the semantic certainty available to any utterance; one is left with "this not quite knowing what the earth requires." The historical context of the Wars of the Roses, of which the Battle of Towton was a part, provided an ethical context lacking in Hill's context. Rather than a provided ethical system, Hill's poetry points to the need to work at developing and enacting an ethical practice in the context of modernity. The implicit need, in "Citations I," for a poetry that achieves possession of the self and that is "*a mode of moral life*" derives from the threat of dissolution figured in the conclusion of "Funeral Music 3": "blindly we lay down, blindly / Among the carnage the most delicate souls / Tup in their marriage blood, gasping 'Jesus'." The faith which allowed the fifteenth-century aggressors of the Battle of Towton to speak and mean it by *God*, and allowed the victims to gasp "Jesus," is denied to "one… as broken as the vows and tatters, / petitions with blood on them, the charred prayers / spiralling godwards on intense thermals." While the earth—a figure of human history for both Hill and Harrison—absorbs the tradition, it also disperses and buries its influence. While the earth may be the "humane element" for archiving the resources of tradition, Hill's poetry reminds us that accessing those resources is a sacrificial struggle.

For a historical consciousness such as Hill's, the questions of faith necessarily remain conjoined with the historical working out of that faith. Hill draws on a quote from Rush Rhees to establish the humane within the historicity of language: "For we speak as others have spoken before us. And a sense of language is also a feeling for ways

of living that have meant something."[24] From the historical record, Hill's criticism

attempts to recover and explicate what those "ways of living" were. His poetry enacts

that process of recovery and consideration. It is with such an understanding of the way

language can perpetuate tradition that Hill claims that Charles Sorely's letter home is "an

exemplary instance of the at-one-ment of the 'sense of language' with a feeling for the

ways of life." Hill finds an awareness of language's indebtedness embodied in the

texture of the letter. However, in the fraught nexus created between "Funeral Music 3"

and "Citations I," the quote from Rhees also points to its obverse: that a "sense of

language" may make one aware of the insufficiency, or immorality, of that language to

express felt ways of life. Shaw points to the difficulties that turn "this not quite

knowing" into a linguistic as well as ethical struggle: "For the poet Geoffrey Hill, who

finds it barbarous that elegiac language should exult in itself, even when memorializing a

death camp, the pastoral elegy's power to heal and console may be deeply insulting."[25]

While the recovery and explication that the criticism engages in is fraught with the

complications of judgments passed, the poetry acknowledges an even more fraught

process of judgment when the poet comes to express his own "feeling for ways of life."

Shaw's remarks on Hill's difficulties with language point towards the subtle

distinction embodied in Hill's deployment of Rhees's quote and Alanbrooke's war diaries:

without a sense of one's own indebtedness, the pastoral elegy (to take Shaw's example)

may no longer be a viable mode of expression, may commit its own atrocities. When we

write (or live, for that matter) without a sense of our own primordial guilt, we risk

appropriating history for the present. The elegy that consoles the culpable insults the

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[24] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 11.
[25] W. David Shaw, "Elegy and Theory: Is Historical and Critical Knowledge Possible?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (March 1994): 1-2.

dead to whom they are indebted. However, with a sense of one's "peculiar unnecessary shame," the past may provide positive models for original and responsible expression. Often the reinvention of form and utterance constitutes appropriate memorializing:

> …. I'd
>
> swear myself blind atrophy's not the word
>
> but that invention reinvents itself
>
> every so often in the line of death.[26]

Even as the traditional modes of supplication (vows, petitions, prayers) may no longer be viable for Hill either because of historical atrocity ("petitions with blood on them" recalls the militant Christianity depicted in "Funeral Music," while "charred prayers" evokes the Holocaust) or because of modern disconnectedness, their historical value may be maintained even as they are reinvented. The process of invention, for Hill, is always a process of reinvention from the inheritance of tradition and history. Through an awareness of how others have spoken before us, we can speak more responsibly to our present and future. This is particularly the case when Hill comes to memorialize historical atrocities of the modern era. Through a consideration of and judgment upon traditional ways of speaking, Hill finds ways of responding to his own historical position.

Thus in considering the ways in which poetry constitutes "*a mode of moral life*," we must first examine the nature of Hill's engagement with tradition. Harrison describes this quality as "lexification," a "retentive relating or binding by which the human mind, like our basic words, continuously accesses the priority into and out of which it is born."[27] Hill stages his engagement with poetry through the idioms, images, tropes, and

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[26] Hill, "Citations II," in *A Treatise*, 3.
[27] Harrison, 84.

diction of the literary tradition. Through this pragmatic rehearsal of the language of tradition, Hill's poetry projects the dead into futurity. Yet as Harrison responsibly notes, an engagement with the dead can easily become an appropriation of the dead for the poet's consolation and acclaim. Hill resists such ethical entrapments through his insistence upon the brute physicality of atrocity and through a rigorous (for both poet and reader) formal difficulty.

Finally we must consider a central tension between Harrison's claims and Hill's practice. Harrison claims that mourning is central to our "being-towards-the-dead"; yet Hill's practice refuses to console after the models of Sacks, Ramazani, or Vickery. On the one hand we should note that Harrison does not emphasize consolation, but rather the institution of mourning and burial as a cultural practice. It is the social act of objectifying loss that makes the burial ritual central to Harrison's theory. For this reason, we need not expect a poetry of "authentic retrieval" to console. Instead, poetry, like Hill's, concerned with modernity's disconnectedness returns us to the presence of the dead, to *their* ritual and language. Alternatively, because Hill's subjects are historical atrocities, rather than natural occurrences, the sort of communal consolation that the elegy traditionally offered would be inappropriate to Hill's concerns. These atrocities are, most frequently, instances of human violence (the Holocaust, Towton, the Wars of the Roses, Shiloh Church) and, for this reason, they do not lend themselves to the consolations of natural cycles of death and rebirth. Since they were often committed in the name of religion ("they bespoke doomsday and they meant it by / God"), Christian transcendence is similarly questionable, as are other consolatory transcendences. These conventional modes of consolation being denied, Hill's poetry reconnects us with the dead through the

formal devices and techniques of the historical institution of poetry. Through the

rigorous engagement with tradition and the sacrificial making of poetry, Hill attempts to

redeem tradition and history for the present.

CHAPTER I: "THE DEAD MAINTAIN THEIR GROUND"

Rather than recognizing Hill as primarily an historical and commemorative poet, early considerations of his work frequently noted the mythopoetic elements in Hill's poetry, particularly in the early collections. This led many to promote Hill as the heir of William Blake and the larger Romantic project of imaginative reinvention. In Harold Bloom's comparison, "Blake could insist that pity survived only because we make each other piteous, but Hill comes later, and for him the intoxication of belatedness is to know that our reality and our desires are both negated by our appearance as legatees."[28] Yet the very notion of "legatees," of prior obligation to history or tradition or language, undermines the self-inspired stance of the Romantic poet-prophet. The difficulty, as Jeffrey Hooker explains, is Hill's awareness of his indebtedness to a tradition which both enables and constrains the poet: "Man cannot know the Creation without his language, myths, fables, systems, artifacts; nor can he create purely, without mixed motives or the imposition of a pattern on experience."[29] In "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'," Hill addresses the dilemma of Romanticism, at once acknowledging its appeal and negotiating away from its more egotistical implications:

> the major Romanticism of our time, or that which some propound as the
> major Romanticism, sees the poet's vocation as a 'searching for a way of
> reconciling human vision with the energies, powers, presences, of the non-
> human cosmos'. Charles Olson has described the poem as a 'high energy-
> construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge'. In such cases the

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[28] Harold Bloom, Introduction, in *Modern Critical Views: Geoffrey Hill*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 6.

[29] Jeremy Hooker, "*For the Unfallen*: a sounding," in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, ed. Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), 25.

'menace' of poetry may be taken as referring not only to the 'energy'

which is to be released, at whatever cost, but also to the inevitable

fatalities occurring in any high-risk occupation. In my thesis, however,

the idea of 'menace' is entirely devoid of sublimity: it is meanly

experiential rather than grandly mythical.[30]

The groundedness that Hill claims as poetry's "menace" stands at odds with

sublime claims like Bloom's ("the *intoxication* of belatedness"). Rather than pointing to

something beyond itself, Hill understands poetry as enmeshed in the common experience

of language and history.   Hill's parenthetical aside, "at whatever cost," pushes

"inevitable losses" closer to the inhumane "collateral damage" with its dark

understanding of acceptable losses. Similarly, "high-risk occupation" has a reserved

sneer coming so close upon "the idea of 'menace' is entirely devoid of sublimity… is

meanly experiential." While Hill here does not diminish the importance of the poetic

utterance, he does foreclose the value of its more hyperbolic manifestations. Instead, he

proceeds to assert that the "menace" of poetry "comes close to resembling that 'frightful

discovery of mortality' to which [T.S.] Eliot alludes."[31] The meanly experiential aspect

of poetry's "menace" is, in part, that temptation to escape from the facts of history and

from language's complicity in historical atrocity. The "atonement" is, alternatively, a

reconciliation between such historical facts of language and the poet's responsible

engagement with and through them. Because of this historical recalcitrance in the

medium, the writing of poetry shares more with Eliot's "hard labour" and with Milton's

sense of writing with "Christian diligence or judgement" than it does with a post-

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[30] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 15.
[31] Ibid.

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Romantic "spontaneous outpouring of powerful feelings" divorced from Wordsworth's ethical and social obligations.

Hill's technique exemplifies the fraught condition of the poet whose *métier* is the language in which the persistent vitality of history is inscribed. In this sense, Hill's predicament seems close to Bloom's poetic *agon*; however, this would be a misapprehension. Hill's relationship with history and the poetic tradition involves not only an obligation, which might act as a restraint, but also a generous inheritance that becomes a poetic resource. Hill's technique guards against the solipsism of Bloom's achieved *apophrades*, in which "the new poem's achievement makes it seem to us… as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work."[32] To subsume tradition into the self would ignore "what is owed the dead." While that obligation can often act as a constraint, the priority of tradition must be maintained as separate from the self. Hill rejects a Romantic remaking of tradition in his own image and rather asks that tradition and history become the foundation whence derive his own ethical judgments.

In "Merlin," from Hill's first collection *For the Unfallen* (1959), this emphasis on the priority of tradition takes the form of a consideration of the dead and the poet's predicament:

> I will consider the outnumbering dead:
>
> For they are the husks of what was rich seed.
>
> Now, should they come together to be fed,
>
> They would outstrip the locusts' covering tide.

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[32] Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 16.

> Arthur, Elaine, Mordred; they are all gone
>
> Among the raftered galleries of bone.
>
> By the long barrows of Logres they are made one,
>
> And over their city stands the pinnacled corn.[33]

The distinction—one of subtle tonal variance—between Hill's relationship with tradition and Bloom's "anxiety of influence" obtains in that initial expression of intentionality: "will consider." The future tense gives the poem a sense of inquiry and exploration that also marks Hill's essays at their best. The impulse and the methodology are those of meditation and judgment rather than recreation and argumentation. As Henry Hart describes it,

> Hill's obsession with the dead is really his obsession with tradition and history, whose organic and seasonal cycles he ritualistically observes in nearly every poem. Meditations, often disguised as mythic quests, follow the natural rhythms of withdrawal and return, rising into intense perception and passionate articulation, then falling back into the silent recalcitrant earth. When moral perception fails, and when the vanity of the artist's attempt to act as conscience and unacknowledged legislator of his race predominates, Hill rises to challenge these defeats by writing of them winningly.[34]

Hart rightly adduces a conjunction of meditation and mythic quest: for Hill the poet's search for "rectitude of judgement" participates in aspects of both the religious meditative

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[33] Hill, "Merlin," in *New and Collected Poems*, 8.
[34] Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 24.

tradition and the tradition of the romance epic. However, his characterization of Hill as a more disgruntled Shelley again represents the critical attempt to locate Hill as a post-Romantic writer. If anything, for Hill, the poem, not the poet, is the "unacknowledged legislator of his race" and even this seems an altogether too expansive gesture. What Hart misses is the private connotations of "meditation" that coincide with Hill's "I will consider" as both diligent meditation and attentive deference. Directly proceeding Hill's stated disposition, Hill offers justification, "For they are the husks of what was rich seed"; the preceding colon doubly reinforces this clause's role as explanation and justification. Already we have, within Hill's texture of words, the lineaments of a meditation.

The weight of the threat—or at least potential threat—in "the outnumbering dead" is not entirely contained by the temporal distance of Hill's "was" in the second line. Hill's allusion evokes a literary tradition of considering the dead that runs from Homer and Virgil through to T.S. Eliot's allusion to Dante in "The Waste Land": "So many / I had not thought death had undone so many."[35] Hill's allusion complicates the mere act of considering the dead by acknowledging the literary history of such considerations. Hill's awareness of this indebtedness revitalizes the conventional literary figure, "the outnumbering dead," into something more than mere "husks." The "outnumbering dead" contains the weight of the past and the poet's experience of that weight within language through an acknowledgement of "what is owed the dead." This sort of "understanding" accounts for the odd interaction of agencies in the image that follows. Certainly the threat which the dead pose remains in the moment of the poem; however, the passive infinite, "to be fed," maintains the causal agency of the poet—first announced in "I will consider"—in equipoise with the dead's agency to "outnumber." The threat that the dead

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[35] For a more complete discussion of this tradition specifically see Harrison, 124-141.

"would outstrip the locusts' covering tide" remains guardedly in the conditional, even as the poet allows the suggestion of other mythic catastrophes (the biblical plague of locusts and the Flood) to hang on the lineaments of the utterance's apprehension. The polyphony of echo here acknowledges the threat of the "outnumbering dead" by keeping them constrained; yet, like the revitalization of the traditional figure, these echoes ground the poem's metaphor. The acknowledgement of prior voices enacts the appropriateness of associating the dead with so animated an image as a swarm of locusts. The complex dynamic between utterance and echo acknowledges tradition while resisting the overt imposition of its presence that would make the poem a servile imitation.

Hill takes up the issues of imitation and originality in his essay "The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses" (1991), where he acknowledges the difficulty between communication as a social contract and communication as obsequiousness: "the distinction between advocating technical compliance and maintaining the civil 'Arts of Complacency and good behaviour' is not always easily drawn."[36] To Hill's understanding, working from a prior formulation by Thomas Hobbes, "poetic measure… is a manifestation of 'Custom' which 'hath so great a power that the Minde suggesteth onely the first word; the rest follow *habitually*' while, at the same time, it is the power to override, with its ever-renewing capacity for springing and counterpointing, the habitual and the customary."[37] While Hill's "springing and counterpointing" recalls the dynamic between spoken and poetic cadence in Hopkins's "sprung rhythm," what is sprung and counterpointed in "Merlin" is the indebtedness of poetic imagery to tradition. The appropriateness of Hill's locust metaphor—and his revitalization of the figure of the

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[36] Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 21.
[37] Ibid., 26.

"outnumbering dead," for that matter—is a function of its acknowledgement of and resistance to that "Custom," which is the inheritance of tradition. In that regard, the process of the metaphor's judgement mirrors that of Hill's critical judgement. The quotation from Hobbes, "Custom hath so great a power that the Minde suggesteth onely the first word; the rest follow *habitually*," is itself sprung and counterpointed by Hill's own critical judgement. In so doing, the critical judgement acknowledges at once, through its recourse to quotation, the obligations inherent in the deployment of a particular meter and, simultaneously, the potentialities that gift of history enables. In both cases, the appropriateness of Hill's judgement stems from his work within history and language. His poems and critical essays ground themselves in and grow out of an understanding of his own indebtedness.

Thus "Merlin" moves from the complex dynamic of rehearsal and creation, utterance and echo, into the further consideration of the moment of the poem and the influence of tradition upon that moment. "Arthur, Elaine, Mordred": as Hill's lines toll out these names from among the "outnumbering dead" they gain totemic strength, reiterating the energy of words so deftly handled in the first stanza. The plaintive "they are all gone" acknowledges the ephemeral presence of the dead in language by acknowledging the poem's indebtedness to the *ubi sunt* motif. The historical awareness embodied in the "outnumbering dead" returns here, recalling our attention to the presence of the dead in quotidian language. Hill resuscitates the fatalism of "they are all gone"—and the *ubi sunt* motif generally—by reinvesting it with an awareness of its own literary history and by drawing the motif into the present. Just as the first stanza acknowledges the threat of the dead by transforming their prior utterance into a vital structure of

language, as this stanza begins the dead are recalled, paradoxically, through a conventional evocation of their absence. This is to reassert the dead's presence in our emotions and the structures of language through which those emotions find expression. The line break, "gone / Among," subtly represents this paradox in its own structure of language, allowing both the sense of "gone from among…," implying the true absence of the dead from language as well as from the world, and the sense of "gone out among…," suggesting the presence of the dead not in names but in the "raftered galleries of bone" that are the structures of living language. The semantic ambiguity acknowledges the threat to the dead inherent in their priority: their inheritors may reject or ignore their inheritance.

In the second stanza, the threat is that the poem does not respond to the underlying echoes of the *ubi sunt*'s question. In that case, the dead are truly gone from "Among the raftered galleries of bone." Thus, the concluding image must consider another threat:

> By the long barrows of Logres they are made one,
>
> And over their city stands the pinnacled corn.

Here the threat of absence and anonymity foreshadowed in the juxtaposition between the tolled names and "they are all gone" finds its apocalyptic fulfillment in "they are made one," an absence that the near-rhyme ("gone / bone") reinforces. The image considers the threat of cultural amnesia under the image of physical erasure: the dead are absent from the present because they have been erased from memory. Hill, however, redeems this erasure by forgetting neither the dead nor his own images. In the specifically "*pinnacled* corn," Hill's translation of the city of the dead into the "pinnacled

corn" is the objective correlative of his technique. Further, the alliterative and assonantal echoes of "long" and "barrows" within "Logres" acknowledge the presence of the dead within the echo chamber of language. Yet this alone would be too facile and self-congratulating a conclusion: a triumphalism that considers that which is acknowledged to have been accomplished. Instead, in "they are made one," Hill literalizes the poem's achieved atonement. The image of the "pinnacled corn," as a transformation of city of the dead, both acknowledges the threat of cultural amnesia and encapsulates the poem's generation from the presence of tradition. This recapitulates the technique of engagement enacted in the image of the locusts and the poem's manner of resisting the threat of tradition overwhelming the moment of utterance. The final image atones aesthetics with rectitude of judgement by at once restraining and remembering tradition in the texture of its utterance.

Further, Hill's poetic meter,[38] evocative of the heroic couplet, responsibly restrains itself in the expression of that consideration as mediation and attention. Hill's meter humbly acknowledges the difference between considering and conjuring. The title, "Merlin," casts the poet in the role of magician or conjuror, and the poem, through its poetic figures and images, responsibly acknowledges the complexities involved in a vital engagement with the dead, an understanding reinforced by the atonement effected in the poem's final image. The poem realizes the "ever-renewing capacity for springing and counterpointing" by recalling the prior meter without reiterating it. The deviation to near-rhymed couplets eschews the Romantic image of the poet as the Miltonic Satan, heroically making worlds unto himself. Instead, Hill's suggestion of the meter does the

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[38] The meter and rhyme of "Merlin" are curious. While the meter is iambic pentameter, the rhyme scheme is near-rhyme (A1, a1, A2, a2 / B1, b1, B2, b2) and occasional visual rhyme (as with "gone/bone/one").

work of conjuring the priority of tradition promised by the poem's title. Our awareness

of his indebtedness remains "meanly experiential" and allusive, rather than sublime. The

near-rhyme couplets acknowledge the poet's indebtedness rather than his agency. That is

to say that it is the *engagement*, which Hill's language and images in "Merlin" so deftly

depict, as a process, not the accomplished fact of the poem, which is heroic. The choice

of meter embodies the other half of Hill's "understanding:" "diligence / and attention,

appropriately understood / as actuated self-knowledge." The reticence of Hill's meter

embodies that consideration that is deference rather than a mode of the egotistical

sublime.

In the instance of "Merlin," the poetic meter acknowledge that, as Hill explains in

"The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses,"

> language, even as it takes the measure of things, falls short. Its various
>
> formalities, syntax, prosody, etc., are enacted partly within the domain of a
>
> paradox: that its limitations and inadequacies are defined by its own
>
> cogency and eloquence; but there remain circumstances which baffle all
>
> attempts at definition.[39]

In its rehandling of the relationship between the moment of the poem and the priority of

tradition through the diligence and attention of its conventional figures and images,

"Merlin" acknowledges and operates with an awareness that language's "limitations and

inadequacies" are, at least partly, a function of the "cogency and eloquence" of the dead.

Hill's meter acknowledges that language "falls short" by its suggestion of, and restraint

from, the pure heroic couplet. The poem's entire form enacts the paradox of language's

limitations.

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[39] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 26.

Hill's technique in "Merlin" embodies the same pragmatic rehearsal of the dead that he argues for in his essay on John Donne's verse epistles, "Caveats Enough in their Own Walks" (1991). Hill begins his consideration of Donne's epistles by making a distinction between those authors "who, while concurring with Bacon's 'Caveats ynough in their own walkes', nonetheless treat the caveat itself as one of many pertinent commonplaces and those whose concurrence is embodied in the contexture of the style itself."[40] This marks a distinction between the expression and the act, between a poem whose subject is to consider and a poem that, as we have seen in "Merlin," "will consider" in its style and so becomes a mediation and judgement upon tradition. Thus, Donne's final verse epistle of 1604, "To Sir Henry Wotton," "*acts* as the diligent secretary to its own moral images and examples, referring in order of status, as though at some cabinet of privileged responsibility, to the 'reverend papers' bearing 'Our good and great Kings lov'd hand and fear'd name', the 'learned papers' of the scholar-diplomat himself, the 'loving papers', the farewell letters of friends and well-wishers, and finally the 'honest paper' of Donne's own valedictory, which both serves and subsumes the rest."[41] In this manner, Hill shows Donne's moral allegiances to be inscribed in the texture of his verse: "to claim that his [Donne's] particular poetic virtue leaves not a hair's-breadth between moral principles and poetic practice is a half-truth unless one adds that his practice is to find fit expression for the unfittedness of 'Countries, Courts, Towns' to lives of rectitude."[42] Hill finds in Donne that ethical enactment that Hill, himself, embodies in his poetic practice. Hill gives assent in his own enactment of that "hair's-breadth" between a responsible judgement and a "half-truth" in the dash that

[40] Ibid., 41.
[41] Ibid., 42.
[42] Ibid., 50.

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maintains the separation of these compound nouns. Because of the inherence of moral

virtue within poetic practice, "language is more than a discrete courier between *de facto*

circumstance and *de jure* commitments. As much as a man himself, a man's language is

'enter'd into very intrinsecal Familiarity' with 'dangerous matter'."[43] Hill's transition

from the consideration of Donne's epistles to the more purely theoretical proposition—

beginning "language is"—enacts the active moral implications of Hill's own engagement

with tradition in its technical response to that engagement in Donne:

> In addressing his friend [Henry Wotton] Donne undertakes, at a deeper
>
> level than convention requires, a rehearsal of the traditional understanding
>
> that, by a study of 'the short and sure precepts of good example', a wise
>
> man prepared himself to face, unperplexed, the manifold perplexities of
>
> state affairs. He goes over what must presently be said and done by going
>
> over again what has many times been said and done, and he puts himself
>
> to school in the very phrases with which he commends ethical scholarship
>
> and well-versed moral action.[44]

Tradition constitutes the ground for utterance in the moment of the poem. This ground

takes its shape and is transmitted through language: those "short and sure precepts of

good example" that Hill's criticism also puts itself to school on as a curb to the threat of

cultural amnesia. The characteristic pun on "well-versed" acknowledges that such

awareness resides in the texture of language, as evidenced in the texture of Hill's

criticism and the images and devices of his poetry.

 Like Donne's epistles, Hill's writing, both poetry and criticism, rehearses

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[43] Ibid., 57.
[44] Ibid., 61.

tradition in the moment of its utterance. For Hill, as for Donne, that rehearsal is an

acknowledgement of obligations to tradition that must be negotiated in the present

circumstance. Insofar as the writing enacts such engagement, it maintains not a "hair's-

breadth" between "moral principles and poetic practice." Style and contexture interact to

make the utterance an ethical response to the obligation to tradition and to the

requirements of circumstance; "a poet's words and rhythms [become] not his utterance so

much as his resistance" to the inertia of language embodied in Hill's "outnumbering

dead" and to the coercion of a cultural amnesia that would maintain "they are gone."[45]

Instead, Hill visits the "long barrows," the structures of the language of tradition. By

rehearsing tradition, Hill's writings ground their resistance in a past that authorizes the

present. This acknowledgement of indebtedness is the primary characteristic of Hill's

poetic ethics.

Because of Hill's insistence upon works, the poem contains the poet's moral

principles in the workings of its language and figures: that which is resisted can only be

known through an acknowledgement of resistance, much as the presence of tradition in

"Merlin" was made known through the poem's resistance to the "overwhelming tide" of

the dead and through its recuperation of their lost voices. In the more familiar

formulation: "by their works ye shall know them." Such an apprehension stands at the

center of *The Triumph of Love*:

> On chance occasions—
>
> and others have observed this—you can see the wind,
>
> as it moves, barely a separate thing,
>
> the inner wall, the cell, of an hourglass, humming

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[45] Ibid., 5.

> vortices, bright particles in dissolution,
>
> a roiling plug of sand picked up
>
> as a small dancing funnel. It is how
>
> the purest apprehension might appear
>
> to take corporeal shape.[46]

Again in VI:

> Between bay window and hedge the impenetrable holly
>
> strikes up again the taut wintery vibrations.
>
> The hellebore is there still,
>
> half-buried; the crocuses are surviving.
>
> From the front room I might be able to see
>
> the coal fire's image planted in a circle
>
> of cut-back rose bushes. Nothing is changed
>
> by the strength of this reflection.

Both passages consider the complex relationship between a poet, a past, and a present
that are all embodied in the same language; yet both poems also negotiate that
consideration through a consideration of tradition that Hill responsibly rehearses in an
allusive idiom. As in "Merlin," tradition is not allowed to overwhelm the "strength of
this reflection"; rather, it becomes the means by which "the purest apprehensions might
appear / to take corporeal shape." The distinction that these two passages represent
obtains in the different activities which they "consider": "reflection" and "apprehension."
These actions become the style, just as consideration orders "Merlin." Hill argues in
"Dryden's Prize Song" (1991) that style is "a seamless contexture of energy and order

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[46] Geoffrey Hill, IX, in *The Triumph of Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 4.

which, time after time, the effete and the crass somehow contrive to part between them; either paying tremulous lip-service to the 'incomparable' and the 'incommunicable' or else toadying to some current notion of the 'demotic'."[47] The energy of a poetic response to circumstance requires the constraints of an ordering principle in order to avoid the irresponsible solipsism of a lax Romantic mode. In "Merlin," the energy of "consider" generates the order of its dominant tropes and images in such a way that tradition is acknowledged without overwhelming the verse. Style reconciles the "extreme form of the problem all poets face: in making a choice one is drawing down, as though by natural gravity, that which one has not chosen but which is an inextricable part of the 'circumstance'."[48] This is the particular difficulty that circumstance places upon the poet, which Hill considers in his essay "Unhappy Circumstances" (1991). Responsible poetry requires an ordering principle; yet that ordering principle, insufficiently resisted or unconsciously accepted, can overwhelm the energy of the verse. In "Merlin," Hill accepts the historical weight of implication inherent in "locusts" and "covering tide," the inevitable echoes of the *ubi sunt* motif in "Arthur, Elaine, Mordred; they are all gone," the aural correspondences between "long," "barrows," and "Logres," and the feudal implications of "pinnacle" as "the gifts, the things given or given up, the *données*, of language itself."[49] The *données* of tradition order both the manner and the matter of Hill's consideration: a way of considering tradition that resists an easy acquiescence to the "natural gravity" language.

In sections IX and VI from *The Triumph of Love*, Hill restrains the expression of the *de facto* instance of the poem, drawing attention, instead, to the indebtedness of their

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[47] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 81.
[48] Ibid., 16.
[49] Ibid., 15.

making. As Hill explains in "The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell" (1979), "style is not simply the manner in which a writer 'says what he has to say'; it is also the manner of his choosing not to say. There is a distinction to be drawn here between the manner of not-saying and the demeanour of silence."[50] Hill finds value in Southwell's restraint in the face of circumstance, and there is often much that should remain consciously unsaid in the process of ordering poetic energy. In Hill's reading of Southwell, what is restrained is the (understandable) animosity of an English Jesuit towards the prelacy during the sixteenth century. It is this energy brought under the order of Christian and civil polity that characterizes Southwell's accomplishment. These sections from *The Triumph of Love*, like the images from "Merlin," are concerned with engaging that which passes unsaid as a way of retrieving tradition from the threat of cultural amnesia. What remains unsaid in these passages is, again, that tradition underwrites the matter under Hill's consideration. Rather than the poem as *fait accompli*, these poems remain meditative and attentive in their considerations, assaying the subject of tradition.

In VI, Hill engages with the Romantic paradigm by recalling Romantic figures in a Romantic idiom. In structure, the poem traces the common Romantic epistemological narrative, familiar in "Tintern Abbey," the "Intimations" ode, "Dejection: An Ode," and many others: a movement of the poet's perception from external nature to a consideration of that image in the poet's mind as a product of the imagination. The poet's perception moves from the "bay window" outward to the "impenetrable holly," the "hellebore," and the "crocuses." Further, the poet endows these external objects with the condition of his own circumstance. Previously the poet has introduced the reader to the immediate

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[50] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 27.

circumstance of these reflections: a vague awareness of historical guilt ("Guilts were incurred in that place," II) such as would make the external world an "impenetrable" barrier to redemption; and a concern with mortality and impotency ("Ever more protracted foreplay," IV; "Obstinate old man—*senex* / *sapiens*, it is not. What is he saying: / why is he still so angry?" V), which accounts for the poet's projection of the vegetation's endurance: "the hellebore is *there still*, / *half-buried*; the crocuses are *surviving*" (emphasis mine). From these figures of self-projection and the pathetic fallacy, the paradigmatic Romantic poem would reverse this expansive gesture, delving into the mind of the poet which these projections intimate.

Hill's poem, instead, maintains a distinction between nature and the mind of man through the conventional figures and idioms of Romanticism. In Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," with which Hill's poem shares common cause and mode, such the conventional Romantic narrative depicts the restoration of the poet's powers of apprehension through the poet's anticipation of his child's own sympathetic response to nature. The structure of Hill's poem reiterates the structure of Coleridge's position. In both, the poet sits before the fire looking out a window onto a winter scene. Coleridge overtly acknowledges the self-projection he engages in: "Methinks," "gives it dim sympathies," and the way the "film" fluttering on the grate mimics his own mental fluttering "making it a companionable form" become "by its own moods interprets… echo or mirror seeking itself." This is the threat—one similar to that which Hill acknowledges in "Merlin"—introduced by Hill's own self-projections. This is the primary threat of any engagement with tradition in Hill's verse: in the act of judgement that is verse, the poet might lack the rectitude of judgement to avoid the complacency of

remaking the world in the poet's own image. In "Frost at Midnight," the poet moves

from a state of dejection to romanticizing the past (his grammar school days), to finding

comfort in the assumption that the "cradled infant" will soon experience similarly

unimpeded access to nature and inspiration. Hill's language acknowledges the appeal of

such escapism in the pathetic fallacies which open the poem, but it turns, at the crucial

Romantic juncture of introspection, and distances itself from the act by switching to the

subjunctive imperative (a technique similar to that in "Merlin:" "should they to come

together to be fed"): "I *might* be able" (emphasis mine). This "might" acknowledges the

strength and appeal of the Romantic tradition of the poet-prophet; yet it also repudiates

that disposition. Hill's poem eschews this resolution, instead taking as its object of

consideration the state of dejection in which Coleridge's poem begins:

> The frost performs its secret ministry,
>
> Unhelped by any wind. The owlet's cry
>
> Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
>
> The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
>
> Have left me to that solitude, which suits
>
> Abstruser musings: save that at my side
>
> My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
>
> 'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
>
> And vexes meditation with its strange
>
> And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
>
> This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
>
> With all the numberless goings on of life,

> Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
>
> Lies on my low burnt fire, and quivers not;
>
> Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,
>
> Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
>
> Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
>
> Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
>
> Making it a companionable form,
>
> Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
>
> By its own moods interprets, everywhere
>
> Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
>
> And makes a toy of thought.[51]

In reconsidering the Romantic figure of the Aeolian harp as a figure of inspiration, Hill's "taut wintery vibrations," in VI, announces an engagement with the Romantic tradition through an acknowledgement of its influence. Where the genius of Nature would animate the poet in the Romantic mode, here it is the genius of the Romantic mode itself that animates the poet. It also recasts of the "circumstance" of Coleridge's poem. Where Coleridge's meditation proceeds "unhelped by any wind," Hill's poem takes ordering the energies of tradition as its inspiration. As Hill noted of Wordsworth's "Immortality" ode in his essay "Redeeming the Time" (1972), "if language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a physiological motor. It is capable of registering, mimetically, deep shocks of

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[51] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Romantic Period*, 8th ed., ed. Jack Stillinger and Deidre Shauna Lunch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 464-466.

recognition."[52] By adopting and resisting Romantic modes and figures, Hill mimetically

registers a recognition of his own indebtedness to Romanticism even as he draws a

distinction between the two projects. In picking up the "demotic" cadences of speech,

through the manipulation of line break and punctuation—an uncommon occurrence in

Hill, whose syntax typically tends towards the more circuitous Miltonic line—Hill offers

us the clarity of Wordsworth's "selection of language really used by men":

> A use of words; a rhetoric
>
> As plain as spitting on a stick;
>
> Speech from the ice, the clear obscure;
>
> The tongue broody in the jaw.[53]

By deploying the Romantic idiom, Hill acknowledges the common appeal of both

the Romantic stance and the egalitarian principles inscribed in their poetic practice.

However, Hill also recognizes the insufficiency of such a poetics. Rather than

reconciling "human vision" with "the energies… of a non-human cosmos," the poet's

appropriate horizon of concern remains reconciling "human vision" with a frequently

inhumane human past. Thus within the quintessentially Romantic poem is a counter-

strain that insists upon the world's objective permanence unaffected by the concerns of

the poet.

In Hill's reconsideration of Romantic sympathy, there is embedded the perennial

assertion of Hill's that "the dead maintain their ground— / That there's no getting

round."[54] Frequently, as with "impenetrable holly," these images of intractability are

coupled with images of natural permanence and endurance. Again, from "The Distant

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[52] Ibid., 87.
[53] Hill, "Elegiac Stanzas," in *New and Collected Poems*, 31.
[54] Hill, "The Distant Fury of Battle," in *New and Collected Poems*, 15.

Fury of Battle":

> Who in places vitally rest,
>
> Named, anonymous; who test
>
> Alike the endurance of yews
>
> Laurels, moonshine, stone, all tissues [;]

and from "Elegiac Stanzas": "Mountains, monuments, all forms / Inured to processes and storms." Rather than Romantic introspection, for Hill the world, and tradition and history, which constitute the "tissues" of the world, are the subjects of his consideration. The implicit temptation that the Romantic mode offers still remains in the coal fire's suggestion of the Shelleyan image of inspiration. The image is also intimate with the poet's anxiety about his own continuing vitality: "the coal fire's image planted in a circle / of cut-back rose bushes." However the immediately physical quality of the plosives in "back" and "bushes," the artificiality implicit in the way the image is "planted," and the way "cut-back" is literally cut-back by the typography of the dash reinforces the immediateness and self-sufficiency of nature in the face of a poet's "abstruser musing." The physicality of Hill's practice "registers mimetically" the recognition of Romanticism's insufficiency. "Nothing is changed / by the strength of this reflection," where reflection is multivocally associating the inscribed image, the poet's musings, and the verse itself as a reflection of and upon the Romantic project. This compaction emphasizes the inseparable relationship in Hill's work between utterance and echo, "diligence / and attention," as the enactment of an ethical obligation to "consider" tradition. The image at once acknowledges the influence of tradition within the ethical judgement of the poem (just as "taut wintery vibrations" had acknowledged the Aeolian

harp motif while recasting it), represents that judgement, and is that act of judgement. This is similar to the way that the images of the locusts or the pinnacled corn in "Merlin" simultaneously consider and enact an engagement with the dead. Nothing is changed either by the speaker's might, as both an indicator of the condition and a version of "strength," or by the vividness of the image itself because, as Hill notes in "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'," the "tendency [of his verse] to 'swim up against the stream' of much current thinking about the nature and function of poetry is itself a minor Romantic trait."[55] Though Hill here rejects the "major Romanticism of our time," the texture of his verse also acknowledges that the very act of repudiation is itself "a minor Romantic trait" contained in Romanticism itself. Yet "unrecognized is /not unacknowledged. Unnamed is not nameless."[56] Although the influence of Romanticism remains obliquely unsaid, the ethical judgement of the poem acknowledges its importance through the manner by which the poem's texture reconsiders the Romantic mode.

As Hill's consideration of poetic apprehension proceeds in *The Triumph of Love*, that understanding begins to take the more "corporeal shape" intimated in the reconsideration of Romanticism. In IX, apprehension is considered again through the metaphor of wind, this time generated by the falling sand of an hourglass vibrating the "inner wall." As with the locusts and pinnacled corn in "Merlin" or the coal fire in VI, Hill's image in IX is both a figure of apprehension and the enactment of his consideration of apprehension. If the "circumstance" of VI, which resulted in Hill's engagement with Romanticism, necessitated an emphasis on the immediate and the physical, part of the

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[55] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 15.
[56] Hill, XIV, in *The Triumph of Love*, 7.

reason "nothing is changed / by the strength of [that] reflection" is that such an emphasis

forces a negotiation of Christian dualism like that found in George Herbert's "Church

Monuments," with which Hill's poem keeps company. This dualism reasonably presents

a problem for a poet like Hill who, as we have seen, insists that language incorporates the

immateriality of tradition. Like the coal fire, Hill's image has the hospitality not "to

sever the good fellowship of dust," this time between Hill and the Metaphysical tradition:

> Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem
>
> And true descent, that, when thou shalt grow fat,
>
>
> And wanton in thy cravings, thou mayst know
>
> That flesh is but the glass which holds the dust
>
> That measures all our time, which also shall
>
> Be crumbled into dust. Mark here below
>
> How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,
>
> That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall.[57]

In considering the dualist dilemma, Hill removes Herbert's metaphor of the

hourglass from its immediate moral implications, but retains the fundamental

correspondences of the image. The glass still, loosely, corresponds with body; the dust

still corresponds with spirit or *animus*. However, Hill's image does not accept the

submission and, ultimately, relinquishment of the body that Herbert advocates. Instead,

Hill's image insists that spirit animates body; just as ethical judgement should animate

the physicality of language in poetry. Part of this consideration upon the commingling of

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[57] George Herbert, "Church Monuments," in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature: The Literature of Renaissance England*, ed. John Hollander and Frank Kermode (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 676.

the material and the immaterial inherent in Metaphysical poetry is the grace of common constraint that Hill announces in the poem's opening.

For Hill, who, like Herbert, strives to transform the material fact of the poem into the immaterial expression that is prayer, the difficult dualism to be overcome is how to reconcile the material, connotative fact of language with both the immaterial tradition that the poem embodies and the immaterial apprehension that the poem enacts. Because of this difficulty, it is both fateful—"On chance occasions"—and an "action of grace," through the "shock of semantic recognition" that is also "ethical recognition," that "others have observed this" difficulty. Hill's consideration maintains the autonomous existence of the object of apprehension—an insistence consistent with his judgement of the autonomy of nature in VI—even as the language which describes that object becomes increasingly immaterial and figurative. Hill begins with the bald statement "you can see the wind," which is allowed, through the combination of comma and line break, to stand a moment as the sole object of contemplation before the introduction of the complication: "as it moves, barely a separate thing." Here, the texture of the verse maintains the wind's separateness even as its language begins to complicate that apprehension through the introduction of "circumstance."

The problem with seeing the wind, like acknowledging the dead or enacting ethical judgments in language, is that the wind is "barely a separate thing" from that which it moves. The spiritual and material are almost inseparable insofar as, in human experience, spirituality is always embodied. In VI, this complication, announced in "taut wintery vibrations," leads to Romantic solipsism. Here, Herbert's image and Hill's apprehension of it are barely separate things from the material fact of language which

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both poets animate. As the image proceeds, it becomes increasingly difficult to extricate cause from effect. The language embodies the wind's energies within the particles of sand: "humming / vortices," "bright particles in dissolution"; until the wind is lost as a distinct object and dissolves into the sand and the simile: "a roiling plug of sand picked up / as a small dancing funnel." Herbert's influence has been similarly dissolved and incorporated. Hill's "small dancing funnel" arises from Herbert's tame ashes; yet it bears little overt resemblance to them. The progression of the verse insists upon memory and diligent attention to maintain the wind's energy to which we are returned in the concluding lines: "It is how / the purest apprehension might appear / to take corporeal shape." The descent of the lines reverses the process of dissolution. From the "how" that considers the ultimate immateriality of the white space to the more specific, if no less immaterial, "purest apprehension," to, finally, the emphasis that "corporeal shape" places upon the physical, the structure of Hill's verse returns us to the embodied fact of Herbert's metaphysical considerations and to the embodied consideration of that fact in Hill's poem. Hill responds to Herbert's separation of *animus* and body by embodying his response in the physicality of the poem. The "corporeal shape" of the poem's structures embody the apprehension, gained through "diligence / and attention," of both "actuated self-knowledge" and "what is owed the dead."

Through such "understanding" Hill distances himself from the traditional positions embodied in the images under consideration (the coal fire and the hourglass). However, these poems create that considered position of distance by "a rehearsal of the traditional understanding." "By a study of 'the short and sure precepts of good example'," Hill prepares himself for "what must presently be said and done." In *The*

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Triumph of Love, this comes in the creation of a metaphor for Hill's own apprehension of the necessary relationship within poetry between a writer's "resistance" to "circumstance" and the "natural gravity" that language exerts upon utterance as a function of both its historical indebtedness and its quotidian existence. The poet has been descanting on the "moral landscape" in the sections just prior to LII, bemoaning the state of the age:

> Admittedly at times this moral landscape
>
> to my exasperated ear emits
>
> archaic burrings like a small, high-fenced
>
> electricity sub-station of uncertain age
>
> in a field corner where the flies
>
> gather and old horses shake their sides.[58]

To which the poet's presiding genius, *Angelus Novus*, responds,

> But leave it now, leave it; as you left
>
> a washed-out day at Stourport or the Lickey,
>
> improvised rainhats mulch for papier-mâché,
>
> and the chips floating.
>
> Leave it now, leave it; give it over
>
> to that all-gathering general English light,
>
> in which each separate bead
>
> of drizzle at its own thorn-tip stands
>
> as revelation.[59]

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[58] Hill, LII, in *The Triumph of Love*, 26.
[59] Hill, LIII, in *The Triumph of Love*, 26-27.

Within the seeming abdication which *Angelus Novus* suggests there is the implication of an art derived from "circumstance": that "rainhats" may become "mulch for papier-mâché." While the poet may "leave it," what is left (both in the sense of *relinquish* and *remain*) might become the substance of new art, much as *The Triumph of Love* finds the springs of poetry in quotidian and obscurantist mid-century history. The bead of drizzle becomes a figure for Hill's poetic practice: an utterance at once immaterial and corporeal shaped by the historical weight of its own language and by the "natural gravity" of "circumstance."

Even as Hill insists upon the poem's "resistance" to the inertia and coercion of language, poetry, at least accomplished poetry, is enacted in the context of that quotidian "all-gathering general English light" that is tradition. As we have seen in Hill's criticism and verse, poetry responds to its historical circumstance in part by acknowledging the "natural gravity" of tradition within language. Further, it is in the poetic structures and texture of the verse that such understandings are enacted. In "each separate bead / of drizzle" Hill offers an image of the corporeal embodiment of apprehension that is itself an apprehension. It is the "natural gravity" that creates the shape of the bead even as it is the "natural gravity" of language that creates the poetic structure in which "revelation" stands, itself almost a separate bead," at the line end of the final line. The context of tradition and present circumstance is the frame in which poetry stands as revelation. Hill's engagement with tradition in the texture of his verse is inseparable from the ethical obligation that such an engagement brings upon the self. The dynamic of engagement with tradition and circumstance orders the energy of poetic judgement. Because the institutions of language and present circumstance are historical, ethically responsible

poetry must begin with an embodied apprehension of its own historicity.

Chapter II: "POETRY AS SALUTATION"

It is the awareness of language's indebtedness that grounds Hill's position as a "politicized aesthete." The subject of Hill's poetry is, most frequently, the consideration of tradition and history with a responsible awareness of their alterity. The work of the poet is to engage with that alterity and, thus, draw upon the poetic resources of tradition. However, as Hill notes in his essay on R.S. Thomas, the work of poetry involves the poet in the public sphere in which the poem is enacted:

> speaking as a politicized aesthete, I suggest that what we are pleased to call the truth of poetry resides in forms of coinherence that are drawn from, and relapse into, incoherence…. The truth of poetry is in part corruption and contamination, in part a field of reference by which to interpret an unknown language, in part the unknown language itself. Poetry as utterance—both genuine and fraudulent—is part of 'the common behavior of mankind', even though people are commonly oblivious to its peculiar attractions and demands.[60]

Hill's delineation of the "tripartite nature of creativity" describes the poetic practice which we have been examining. As the sections from *The Triumph of Love* evidence, poetry is necessarily "in part corruption and contamination." To some extent, history and tradition are always given over to corruption in the "tongue's atrocities"[61] of the poem. They are corrupted by the appropriation that poetry requires, and they threaten to contaminate the poetic utterance with their overwhelming influence. The Romantic idiom contaminates Hill's consideration of the metaphysical status of tradition within

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[60] Geoffrey Hill, "R.S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral," in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 56.
[61] Hill, "History as Poetry," in *New and Collected Poems*, 72.

language in VI from *The Triumph of Love*; yet that idiom is also contaminated by what

Hill calls the "hefting" and "tuning" of language.[62]

In his essay, "The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses," Hill address the way

that Renaissance writers like Donne, Marvell, Milton, and Hobbes, "heft" and "tune"

inherited language in order to negotiate particular meanings out from the quotidian

connotations of words. In doing so, their language acknowledges the inertia of tradition

and the coercion of common speech in the process of clearing their own meanings.

Words, in the ethical act of writing, must do the "hefting" and "tuning" work through

which the writer resists either the "outnumbering dead" or the cultural amnesia of present

circumstance. Language accretes meaning as writers tune language's historicity to

present circumstance. As Hill explains, the tuning of language is "something more than

the Lockian ability to put words in their place. It has more affinity… with George

Herbert's 'being true to [the] business'."[63] Hill's poetry and criticism address and

emphasize the *negotium* that is the nature of the poet's craft: "a minor problem left

unmastered… comes to exercise a disproportionate advantage, and in the art of poetry, it

is so often the effortless that impedes."[64] It is in acts of language that Hill labors to

"heft" and "tune" his utterance between the inertia of language's historical indebtedness

and the coercions of language's present circumstances:

> the 'tuning' faculty involves tuning out as well as tuning in. The extent to
>
> which any writer is, or is not, aware of 'overtone', 'harmonics', in the
>
> language, the degree to which it is possible, necessary, or desirable for a
>
> reader to 'hear' the harmonics are matters for nice speculation. Should I,

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[62] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 33.
[63] Ibid., 34.
[64] Ibid., 8.

or should I not, for instance, in my own choice of 'hefting', try to tune out

all recollection of Leontes' 'violent hefts' in Act II, scene I, of *The*

Winter's Tale? I would agree that a judicious weighing of one's words

might find intolerable such a grotesque notion. On the other hand, an

image of violent psychic and physical nausea is not inappropriate to an

account of the always exhausting, at times mortifying and ignominious,

struggle with language.[65]

Even within the formulation of a principle for the poet's way with language, Hill puts his

own language to work "defining and yet again defining"[66] ("'overtone', 'harmonics'" or

"possible, necessary, or desirable") the exact deployment of his terms "tuning" and

"hefting." He at once acknowledges the potential for "heft" to heft up and foist Leontes'

words into the mind of the reader. He then tunes in and tunes out that previous utterance

in a negotiation between present circumstance—"a judicious weighing of one's words" as

though before a tribunal—and the self's concurrence with the not-self of the previous

utterance—"an image of violent psychic and physical nausea is not inappropriate…" (this

last caveat being an utterance of the poet's experience within language that has found its

historical echo in Leontes' speech).

At the same time, the appropriateness of the reader's hearing such echoes is

relegated to "nice speculation," a phrase that could subordinate the reader to the position

of a mere voyeur or, as Hill's succeeding "nice speculation" evidences, a phrase which

emphasizes the tediousness and laboriousness of the poet's craft in trying to heft and tune

words so that we become aware of the ethical quality of the act. For we see Hill, in the

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[65] Ibid., 34-35.
[66] Ezra Pound, qtd. in Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 3.

space between "I would agree" and "on the other hand," considering the reader's response: what one "might find intolerable" and what might "not [be] inappropriate." We have seen the same kind of "hefting" and "tuning" by and of words at work already in the "Now, should they come together to be fed" of "Merlin," and in the work that "might" and the poetic structure are asked to perform in VI and IX from *The Triumph of Love*. These acts embody the poet's scrupulousness with language that is a recognition that the words are not his own: "one is true to one's aim by taking one's true aim in the measures of a craft that is at once intimately one's own and not one's own."[67] Hill's obligation consists in connecting present circumstance with its historical antecedents by enacting the continuity between language's historicity and its deployment in the present circumstance of the poem. This is the critical response to the predicament acknowledged in "Merlin" and sections VI and IX from *The Triumph of Love*, where tradition and common assumption might either overwhelm the present or be entirely erased by it. The threat of contamination, which requires a writer's "hefting" and "tuning" of language, results from language's status as that "not-self" to which the self must rise into concurrence. The not-self of tradition might contaminate the poet's utterance to such a degree that the poem becomes a corruption. Conversely, the self might so contaminate the language through historical ignorance that the poem, again, becomes a corruption.

It is because of this alterity of language that the "truth of poetry" is also "a field of reference by which to interpret an unknown language." It is through the poet's working in language that the poem becomes a "field of reference" for negotiating between the "unknown language" of tradition and assumption and the "unknown language" of the self. As we have seen, Hill's scrupulous poetic practice attempts to place the historical

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[67] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 38.

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indebtedness of language, its fundamental alterity, before the reader. The diligence and attention given to resisting the inertia and coercion of language is, at root, an act of clarifying interpretation. The scrupulousness with which Hill treats language's historical indebtedness is a function of his understanding that language is "intimately one's own and not one's own." Acts of "hefting" and "tuning" interpret language's alterity in such a way that "from the depths of the self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not-self"[68] rather than appropriating what is "not one's own."

This poetic practice of maintaining and considering tradition in its alterity and then of scrupulously engaging that alterity so that, in the poem which results, the self of the poet comes to a concurrence with the not-self of language is problematic. For if language's alterity establishes itself as an "unknown language," then the new utterance that results from such engagement is "in part the unknown language itself." In rising to a concurrence with the not-self, the poem exhibits "the alienness of poetic statement"[69] that Hill, in "Caveats Enough in their Own Walks," understands as intrinsic to the act of utterance:

> If I say that all writers are bound to work with relative proportions of 'hefting' words to 'tuning' words I must immediately add that Hobbes' caveat 'all *metaphors* are by profession *equivocal*' still applies and that the same word may satisfy either attribute at one time or another: it is a matter of the drift and occasion and contexture of the speech.[70]

In a more Empsonian vein, Hill acknowledges the predicament from the position of the critic who is also the poet: "I constantly propose to myself that the intrinsic value

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[68] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 3.
[69] Hill, "R.S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral," 56.
[70] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 33.

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of the poem is securely demonstrable; in my experience, however, the clinching

demonstration is one of the most difficult achievements in the field of poetics."[71] What

both of these passages maintain, I would argue, is an intimate awareness that even one's

own poems are "intimately one's own and not one's own." Hill's "it is a matter of the

drift…" and in the distance between his "securely demonstrable" and "one of the most

difficult achievements" accepts language's alterity—even if it is one's own—and asserts

that the "intrinsic value of a poem" resides in the labor of engaging that alterity

responsibly.

　　　　Through this engagement, the poem becomes that aesthetic enactment before the

body politic that is the role of the "politicized aesthete," so long as we understand *politics*

in the deepest sense of *polis*. This is, of course, consistent with the way Hill returns us to

notions of the body politic by returning us to *commonweal* and *res publica*—literally,

from the Latin, "public things." In his position as poet, Hill understands a responsibility

to diagnose the peculiar predicaments of modernity; yet in his poetic practice Hill also

enacts a solution to those predicaments. Because Hill's poems embody and enact their

response to this civic obligation, Hill stresses a distinction between the appreciation the

poem receives as an object and the appreciation the poet receives as creator:

> One is left with the awkward observation that the acceptance of a principle
>
> of penitential humility in the conduct of life does not necessarily inhibit a
>
> readiness to accept the status of 'maestro' conferred by a supportive yet
>
> coercive public…. I would reply that it is not a matter of *ad hominem*
>
> rebuke but a suggestion that fashionable adulation of the 'maestro' when
>
> there is so little recognition of the 'fabbro', 'homo faber', is one aspect of

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[71] Hill, "R.S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral," 50.

what C.K. Stead mordantly but not unfairly calls the 'struggle between

poets and "poetry-lovers"', except that the very word 'struggle' suggests

purpose and engagement.[72]

For Hill, this inert struggle is an aspect of present culture's adamant complacency and

ignorance towards poetry, and as such, it poses a particular threat to the poet: "As Jon

Silkin has remarked, 'it is not disagreement we have now but deafness'. Deafness, yes;

and arbitrary assumption. To 'assume' is literally 'to take to oneself, adopt, usurp'; and

the fashion in which society can 'take up' and 'drop' the poet (as John Clare was taken

up, and dropped) is a form of usurpation which has little or no connection to intrinsic

value."[73] In the very act of lionizing the poet, of making the "fabbro" into the "maestro,"

society diminishes the arduousness of poetic making. This presents a particular threat to

Hill (though to some extent, I would imagine, all poets share this concern), because his

peculiar emphasis rests on practice, on the scrupulous making of poetry which

contributes to its intrinsic value. The poet's claim to "maestro" resides in his abilities as

"fabbro," for it is a poet's way with language—that working to rise to a concurrence

between the self and the not-self—that is the enactment of his ethics.

For Hill such rigorous engagement with language is the ethical responsibility of

the poet, insofar as he is an agent in the public sphere. The poet's obligation to use

language responsibly is, to a certain extent, the grounds for his responsibility to the *res

publica*:

It seems to me one of the indubitable signs of Simone Weil's greatness as

an ethical writer that she associates the act of writing not with a

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[72] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 10.
[73] Ibid.

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generalized awareness of sin but with a specific crime, and proposes a

system whereby 'anybody, no matter who, discovering an avoidable error

in a printed text or radio broadcast, would be entitled to bring an action

before [special] courts empowered to condemn a convicted offender to

prison or hard labour'. It may well strike others as unassailable evidence

that the woman was merely an obsessional neurotic. Perhaps one could

phrase the matter more moderately and say that one does not regard it as at

all eccentric to endorse the view that grammar is a 'social and public

institution', or to share W.K. Wimsatt's belief in 'the fullness of [the

poet's] responsibility as public performer in a complex and treacherous

medium'.[74]

For Hill the most treacherous aspect of this responsibility of the poet's role as

"public performer," or "politicized aesthete," comes from the inertia and coercion of

language to appropriate historical violence in the texture of the poem: to commit the

tongue's atrocities by speaking atrocities into beauty. As Hill acknowledges, however,

that not to speak is an equally irresponsible act, and "in certain contexts, the expansive,

outward gesture towards the condition of music is a helpless gesture of surrender, oddly

analogous to that stylish aesthetic of despair, that desire for the ultimate integrity of

silence, to which so much eloquence has been so frequently and indefatigably devoted."[75]

To remain silent, Hill suggests, is to abdicate the poet's responsibility to engage both

tradition and history in their capacities as "public and social institution." Hill's "helpless

gesture" derides a poetic practice that lacks sufficient "*negotium* of language itself," and

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[74] Ibid., 8.
[75] Ibid., 9.

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"stylish aesthetic of despair" looks back to that lionizing of the poet as "maestro" while ignoring the *negotium* involved in making the poem. Instead, Hill's poetic practice maintains the alterity of history and tradition by working to a concurrence between the self, which responds through poetry, and the not-self of the public institutions of tradition and history. Beneath these workings there remains the acknowledgement of a public sentimentality, from which the poet himself is not immune, that must be resisted.

The poet's culpability in that public sentiment, the poet's awareness of the culpability of language itself, creates Hill's peculiar understanding of the poet's vocation, articulated in "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'" (Hill's statement deserves quoting at length):

> in the constraint of shame the poet is free to discover both the 'menace' and the atoning power of his own art. However much and however rightly we protest against the vanity of supposing it to be merely the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', poetic utterance is nonetheless an utterance of the self, the self demanding to be loved, demanding love in the form of recognition and 'absolution'. The poet is perhaps the first to be dismayed by such a discovery and to seek the conversion of his 'daemon' to a belief in altruistic responsibility. But this dismay is as nothing compared to the shocking encounter with 'empirical guilt', not as a manageable hypothesis, but as an irredeemable error in the very substance and texture of his craft and pride. It is here that he knows the affliction of 'being fallen into the "they"' and yet it is here that his selfhood may be made at-one with itself. He may learn to live in his

affliction, not with the cynical indifference of the reprobate but with the

renewed sense of a vocation: that of necessarily bearing his peculiar

unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless. He may

'rise to be a person' in a society that aggregates and items; he may even

transfigure and redeem that 'word-helotry' to which Dr. George Steiner

sees the merely literate man ultimately condemned in a culture divided

between electronic data-processing and music.[76]

What strikes one immediately about this statement in the context of Hill's other

writing is its clarity and force. While there is the characteristic acknowledgement of a

predicament, there are none of the puns, quotations, and other complexities of language

so common in Hill's style as an essayist. Instead, in this passage, Hill's returns us to the

concerns we have been examining with a renewed and clarified emphasis on the poet as

an ethical agent in the world. He depicts the poet caught in the familiar "constraint"

between the self "demanding love in the form of recognition and 'absolution'" and an

"empirical guilt… in the very substance and texture of his craft and pride."   The

emphasis of Hill's language rests on the act, on "the conversion of his 'daemon' to a

belief in altruistic responsibility." The "menace" of poetry, as a craft which takes

language as its medium, is that the poet is always tempted to appropriate historical

violence under the guise of "altruistic responsibility," and so to fulfill the self's desire for

"love in the form of recognition and 'absolution'." In contrast, Hill acknowledges the

greater difficulty of the "shocking encounter with 'empirical guilt'." Hill conceives of

this as something like language's and the poet's original sin, an "irredeemable error in the

very substance and texture of his craft and pride." The conjunction in that prepositional

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[76] Ibid., 17-18.

phrase is most telling; poetry, cogency and eloquence with language, is the poet's craft and, when done well, his pride. Because of this, it is a necessary condition of the poetic life that any poem may be an act of speciously conceived "altruistic responsibility." His poems, as aesthetic objects, are necessarily fallen into the "they" of a "society that aggregates and items," into that "'word-helotry'… in a culture divided between electronic data-processing and music." The difference for a poet like Hill is that this condition is not treated as a "manageable hypothesis" nor does the poet proceed with the "cynical indifference of the reprobate"; instead, the poet enacts "his peculiar unnecessary shame" in his poetic practice before a "world growing ever more shameless." The ethical force of Hill's idiom—"vanity," "absolution," "altruistic responsibility," "empirical guilt," "irredeemable error," "affliction," "cynical indifference of the reprobate," "vocation," "shame," "shameless," "condemned"—makes clear that, although poetic practice is under consideration, the true concern is with ethics in human life. For the poet willing to bear the responsibility of the poet's public role, the challenge remains to negotiate between the indebtedness of language's historical guilt and the poet's desire to satisfy the public demand for beautiful poems that will gain him "recognition and 'absolution'." This negotiation, for Hill, is an ethical *act*.

In the previous chapter we considered Hill's engagement with history and tradition under one aspect of his formulation of "understanding": "a daily acknowledgement / of what is owed the dead." The nature of that engagement is consideration as both diligent attention to the echoes within utterance and as due deference to the limitations that the "cogency and eloquence" of those echoes place upon the poet. Thus in VI from *The Triumph of Love*, we noted that Hill's language and

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images reconsidered the Romantic reflection of "nature and the mind of man" in the poem's own consideration of apprehension. Hill then proceeds, in IX, to consider the limitations of the Romantic project through a consideration in and of Metaphysical poetry. In this manner, the poetry negotiates an "oxymoron embedded in the inmost texture of English writing: the viciousness of virtue when virtue is not called forth to action in the *negotium* of language itself,"[77] which Hill discusses in "Unhappy Circumstances" (1991). This formulation comes out of Hill's consideration, in that essay, of the complications arising from the necessity of leisure and the necessity of labor. The creation of poetry requires a certain amount of leisure. Economic, social, and political freedoms provide the poet with time in which to create. However, at least for Hill, there is nothing leisurely about the act of creating poetry. In this respect, Hill reiterates the classical emphasis on *negotium* as the ethical obligation of the citizen. The citizen, or "politicized aesthete" in Hill's phrase, must work to fulfill his obligation to the *res publica*. This ethic poses certain problems for the citizen who finds leisure a requirement for his *negotium*. In poetry, the principal challenge is not to allow the circumstantial *otium*, which enables the creation of poetry, to contaminate the poetry itself. When this occurs, "that which is 'laboured' may at the same time be 'otiose' for the 'laboured' may not, in fact, have been worked on enough."[78] When the public work of the citizen remains "otiose," then the citizen has failed in his obligation to the *res publica*. When this failure occurs in poetry, the poem becomes an "utterance of naked will" that "haunts the 'just city', 'res publica', poets and philosophers."[79] Such poetry does not contribute to the *res publica* because it fails to acknowledge "the way in which the formal creative or critical judgement and the

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[77] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 10.
[78] Ibid., 8.
[79] Ibid., 13.

inchoate force of circumstance become awkwardly implicated or stand in irreducible confrontation."[80] When poetry ceases to respond to its own circumstance, either positively or negatively, the poet has failed in his civic and ethical obligation.

The poetry considered in this chapter engages this predicament and embodies poetry's responsible *negotium.* Rather than being commemorative of specific, historical events, like "In Memory of Jane Fraser," "September Song," "Two Formal Elegies," or the "In Memoriam" poems, the poems examined here consider the broad ethical dilemmas and obligations of a poet who takes the writing of such commemorative poems as his civic *negotium.* If part of Hill's position as "politicized aesthete" involves a responsible consideration of tradition, then Hill's discussion of *negotium* implies that the work of poetry is part of the poet's civic obligation. Just as tradition requires consideration in any responsible act of poetry, the poet must subject his own circumstance to the diligent self-scrutiny that is "self-knowledge."

In *Speech! Speech!*, Hill compacts the dynamic between a consideration of tradition and self-scrutiny into *scrupulosity* as the character of ethical poet's disposition:

> … Scrupulosity
>
> unnerved so | *gelassenheit* is a becoming
>
> right order, heart's ease, a gift in faith,
>
> most difficult of freedoms.[81]

As with Hill's notion of virtue as enacted in the *negotium* of language—within which "scrupulosity" has its part to play—here Hill works within the paradox of free will's difficult obligations: "most difficult of freedoms." Under the condition of free will, the

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[80] Ibid., 15.
[81] Geoffrey Hill, 11, in *Speech! Speech!* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), 6.

poet may abdicate this civic duty in favor of *otium*. Only in a context in which freedom

makes this choice available can duty and the "scrupulosity" that fulfills that duty have

any ethical force. Unless one is free to ignore civic duty, the acceptance of that duty

cannot have the ethical valuation that Hill understands poetic *negotium* to have. In this

section from *Speech! Speech!*, as we might expect, Hill's language and rhythms are

"capable of registering, mimetically, deep shocks of recognition" as to the true nature of

scrupulousness. As it does not in "Merlin," Hill's language here enacts that

"scrupulosity" which may have the salutary effect of unnerving one out of preemptory

judgments. Yet as the equivocation of his "unnerved so" also enacts—is this "unnerved"

a verb or an adjective of scrupulosity?—"scrupulosity" may also have the inhibitory

effect of unnerving one so and leading him to abdicate rigorous engagement in favor of

complacency. Hill follows this acknowledgement of a difficulty with a further difficulty,

"*gelassenheit*," in "right order." Were Hill to simply maintain the equivocation of

"Scrupulosity / unnerved so" he would, indeed, evidence that self-skepticism so

frequently adduced in post-modern literature and in Hill's work particularly.[82] However,

gelassenheit returns us to that diligence and attention that guards against the ready and

easy way. Hill's deployment here, proceeding as it does in "right order," deftly tunes the

connotative sense of "composure" towards its affinities with "composition," reinforcing

the attention to and the structuring of language as an ethical act. In doing so, *gelassenheit*

enacts the engagement with scrupulosity that is that "most difficult of freedoms." For the

scrupulosity in *gelassenheit* is "a becoming / right order" in the ethical act of composition

that is the poem.

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[82] The most articulate example of this position remains Christopher Ricks's article "Geoffrey Hill 1: 'The tongue's atrocities'," in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

However, Hill's language never ignores the temptation of scrupulosity's more insipid recourse to complacency just as, in VI from *The Triumph of Love*, the Romantic mode is never relinquished even as Hill distances himself from that position. *Gelassenheit* (Ger.: "placid"), "heart's ease," "a gift in faith," and "freedom," in their closeness to the complacency that is cliché, demonstrates an awareness of the temptation to abdicate responsible labor in favor of complacency, which might yield a "heart's ease" from the unnerving effects of self-scrutiny. But the paradox of a difficult freedom strains too strongly against such complacency. Through the alliterative and positional associations of "faith" and "freedom," Hill's practice recalls the difficulty of free will when one recognizes free will as carrying a civic obligation. "Scrupulosity," as the quality of Hill's engagement with language, is, then, in the "unnerving so" of the poet. It is the character of the poet's *negotium* while, at the same time, it is that practice which keeps otiosity at bay. The *negotium* resides in the poet's engagement with his subject.

Diligently working at language and tradition comprises Hill's civic obligation as a "politicized aesthete." For this reason, it is almost impossible to separate the poetic subject from the poet's practice. It is through "scrupulosity" that Hill reconciles both concerns:

> … Scrupulosity can kill
>
> like inattention. How will this be judged?
>
> How shall I plead as one greatly
>
> gifted with hindsight: those dead and dying
>
> dropped there to maim the irresistible

beauty of the advance?[83]

Hill both balances "scrupulosity" against that "understanding" from *The Triumph of Love*—an overly ascetic scrupulosity: "More mental | hygiene / urgently call for | to forget oneself"[84]—and aligns these two principles as complementary responses to a meditative consideration of tradition. A scrupulousness that can "kill like inattention" is not dissimilar from an understanding which makes one forget oneself. This interplay between poet and subject reinforced through its embodiment in the questions the poet then proceeds to, and in the temporal markers ("hindsight" and "advance") that frame the difficulty of the circumstance. Hill moves from the impersonally circumstantial "How will this be judged" to the special pleading that announces the enactment of virtue in the textures of language: "How shall I plead as one greatly / gifted with hindsight." The first question begs the reader's indulgence, or at least anxiously anticipates the judgement from circumstances that remain beyond the poet's control. It proleptically anticipates its own uncertain reception. In doing so, the question acknowledges the human desire for acceptance that can compromise the virtuousness of *negotium*. The second question returns to the issue of virtue's manifestation in the "*negotium* of language itself"—virtues, themselves, being *données*, though they may need to be worked at. In the ambiguous vocalization of "shall," Hill compacts the emphases on virtue embodied in language and the concern with poetry as an "utterance of naked will." That "shall," understood as a question of poetic practice, embodies the self-scrutiny of *negotium*. Before the poet can adequately fulfill his civic obligation through poetry, he must question *how* to fulfill that obligation. In this sense, the question genuinely enacts Hill's understanding that poetry's

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[83] Hill, 28, in *Speech! Speech!*, 14.
[84] Ibid.

particular civic *negotium* is to speak to the present from a knowledge of tradition as "one greatly / gifted with hindsight." However, "shall" should also be understood as a more practically rhetorical question: "how can my rhetoric use appeals to authority to validate its claims?" This sense pushes poetry towards the otiose "utterance of naked will." Rather than stemming from the sort of consideration of tradition that Hill practices, poetry can, instead, appropriate tradition for its own aesthetic gains.

In the context of such equivocation, the concluding image unites Hill's consideration of tradition with the importance of scrupulousness. Just as the anxious "How will this be judged" announces the awareness of those contingencies in the present circumstance that might mitigate the poem's *negotium* and reception, "those dead and dying / dropped there to maim the irresistible / beauty of the advance" can either represent the responsible *negotium* of tradition that constitutes Hill's civic obligation, or the image can represent the disingenuous appropriation of tradition's authority in the "utterance of naked will." This figure recalls the "pinnacled corn" and Hill's awareness of the threat of cultural amnesia. Only Hill's "scrupulosity" guards against the otiose appropriation of tradition. His enactment of virtue in the "*negotium* of language itself," drops those "dead and dying" in such a way that they must give us pause and, thus, "maim the irresistible beauty" of cultural advance. Hill's practice forces the reader to consider tradition in considering Hill's poetry, rather than merely appropriating the tradition to authorize an utterance of Hill's or the reader's naked will. If the "dead maintain their ground," then Hill's civic obligation is to force us to consider that tradition in the process of advance.

The "scrupulosity" called up as virtuous engagement with tradition and self, here,

achieves what Hill has called "intrinsic quality of style":

> Intrinsic quality of style is the simultaneous recognition of strength and
> impediment which, as it declares itself triumphantly possessed of such
> knowledge, suffers the ignominious consequences of that possession.
> Even the most unequivocal utterance is affected by the circumstantial and
> contingent matter implicated in our discourse.[85]

In section 11, "*gelassenheit*" evidences the recognition of strength by tuning in one vocalization of "Scrupulosity / unnerved so" while tuning out another; yet that strength is also acknowledged as an impediment in the poet's reiterative and refining attempt to locate the precise meaning of *scrupulosity*. As Ezra Pound urged, in a dictum to which Hill gives qualified assent in "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'," "the poet's job is to *define* and yet again define till the detail of the surface is in accord with the root in justice." The equivocation of "scrupulosity," which *gelassenheit* responsibly qualifies, embodies Hill's own understanding of Pound: "From the depths of the self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not-self. For so I read those words of Pound…."[86] As "Merlin," sections VI and IX from *The Triumph of Love*, and section 28 from *Speech! Speech!* acknowledge, poetic *negotium* always occurs in the close constraint between the not-self of tradition and the not-self of present circumstance. This, for Hill, is the inevitable nature of the poet's condition in taking language as his medium:

> that commonplace image, founded upon the unfinished statues of
> Michelangelo, 'mighty figures straining to free themselves from the
> imprisoning marble', has never struck me as being an ideal image for

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[85] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 25.
[86] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 3.

sculpture itself; it seems more to embody the nature and condition of those

arts which are composed of words. The arts which use language are the

most impure of arts, though I do not deny that those who speak of 'pure

poetry' are attempting, however inadequately, to record the impact of a

real effect. The poet will occasionally, in the act of writing a poem,

experience a sense of pure fulfillment which might too easily and too

subjectively be misconstrued as the attainment of objective perfection. It

seems less fanciful to maintain that, however much a poem is shaped and

finished, it remains to some extent within the 'imprisoning marble' of a

quotidian shapelessness and imperfection.[87]

The texture of Hill's language in the various formulations of poetic *negotium*

("the most impure of arts, "might too easily and too subjectively," "ignominious

consequences," "implicated," "the viciousness of virtue," "the *negotium* of language

itself") should alert us to the fact that, while Hill's subjects are frequently historical, his

concerns are always ethical. The poem, as an ethical act of consideration and as an

obligation to present circumstance, offers the poet up to judgement The ethical quality

that asks to be judged is the "scrupulosity" of the poet's language in reaching a

concurrence between the self and the not-self.

Yet each aspect of language's otherness, its being both historically other and

circumstantially other, presents different difficulties and necessitates different

negotiations. Hill's consideration of the historical indebtedness is both "diligence / and

attention" and a due deference consistent with his understanding of "our obligation as

informed readers… to take into account both the special pleading and the circumstantial

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[87] Ibid., 2.

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facts."[88] The maintenance of the alterity of tradition results in the syncretic, evolutionary

quality of Hill's writing. Where a bald appeal to authority would generate a syllogistic

quality in which premise "A" from authority and premise "B" from authority are

combined by the author into a new thesis, Hill's practice, rather, embodies the poet's

growth out of a consideration of tradition in its own context. The reading of documents

that generates "informed readers" is not the substance of Hill's ethics; this comes, most

fully, when the "special pleading" and the "circumstantial facts" are actively taken into

account within the contexture of the poem. As Vincent Sherry explains,

> Hill focuses on that pernicious power by which the hermetic artist can
>
> transform and falsify the facts of history; concedes the responsibilities of
>
> the "artistic men" to the common tongue; recognizes the rival claims of
>
> history and poetry for what they are; indeed makes poems out of that
>
> tension. This circumspect view of the problem—and not delight in vatic
>
> obscurity for its own sake—produces the peculiar but necessarily difficult
>
> poems.[89]

Hill recognizes, as Sherry articulately points out, the temptation to appropriate history, to

"transform and falsify" the circumstances in an attempt to validate an "utterance of naked

will" through appeal to authority. Thus Hill's poetry finds itself in the difficult

circumstance between ethically unavoidable historical violence and the aesthetic

demands of the poetic occupation. For Sherry, "paradoxically, then, Hill's language

seeks to be both the medium of aesthetic perfection and a force field of historical

violence. If the individual work, as an aesthetic whole, achieves a formal perfection, as

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[88] Ibid., 63.
[89] Vincent Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (Ann Arbor:
University of Michigan Press, 1987), 74.

such lifting us away from history, its parts are still heavy with history, immersing us in the matter of bloody fact."[90] Sherry's paradox, here, captures well that negotiation that Hill has defined and yet again defined as "scrupulosity." For Hill, "aesthetic perfection" can only be attained within "a force field of historical violence," that confluence of "special pleading and the circumstantial facts." If one were to quibble at all with Sherry—and this is, perhaps, a matter of some import—one might justly question whether, for Hill, poetry should ever be allowed to lift us away from history.

For Hill, quoting Yeats in due deference, "when the poem 'comes right with a click like a closing box', what is there effected is the atonement of aesthetics with rectitude of judgement."[91] Sherry's "both… and" and "as such lifting us away from history" more closely resembles the failed self-generation of "Genesis" or the failed apotheosis of "God's Little Mountain":

> I waited for the word that was not given,
>
>
>
> Pent up into a region of pure force,
>
> Made subject to the pressure of the stars;
>
> I saw the angels lifted like pale straws [.][92]

In both cases, among the things sought in these "mythic quests," to borrow Hart's phrase, is a wholly undetermined language, a word that is neither coerced nor incapacitated by its indebtedness. In short, a word, a language, "that was not given" by either history or present circumstance. This desire to transcend the historical contingencies of language fails and the poet falls back into language and history: "So, the

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[90] Sherry, 29.
[91] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 10.
[92] Hill, "God's Little Mountain," in *New and Collected Poems*, 6.

fifth day, I turned again / To flesh and blood and the blood's pain"[93];

> I could not stand before those winnowing eyes
>
> And fell, until I found the world again.
>
> Now I lack the grace to tell what I have seen;
>
> For though the head frames words the tongue has none.
>
> And who will prove a surgeon to this stone?[94]

While a tedious distinction to make with otherwise cogent criticism—and, in fairness to Sherry, it is more evident in the development of Hill's poetry than in the early collections specifically under his purview—,nonetheless, the distinction between transcending history and immersing oneself in the contexture of historical circumstance is central to Hill's understanding of the ethical *negotium* of poetry. Thus one might, reservedly, revise Sherry's paradox, and say that Hill's language seeks aesthetic perfection through the operation of scrupulous judgement within the force field of historical violence. This insistence upon the enactment of judgement in historical circumstance is, more exactly, that tension whence poetry arises, and why Hill's poems "are still heavy with history, immersing us in the matter of bloody fact." There is no fall into language for Hill; rather the bloody and redemptive matter of history is inevitably inherent in the poet's medium. If one maintains, as Hill does, that speech is an ethical act, then the poet's "rectitude of judgement" must exercise itself upon that language in which virtue—or vice, for that matter—obtains. This is the ethical valence of the emphasis on embodiment found in the two sections, from *The Triumph of Love*, examined in the previous chapter. The

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[93] Hill, "Genesis," in *New and Collected Poems*, 3-5.
[94] Hill, "God's Little Mountain," in *New and Collected Poems*, 6.

"atonement" or, in Sherry's term, "aesthetic perfection" of the poem can only be achieved through the enactment of virtue in language.

In practicing a poetics whose parts "are still heavy with history," Hill avoids that cultural amnesia that considers language from the ever-new perspective of present circumstance: "The Word has been abroad, is back, with a suntanned look / From its subsistence in the stiffening-mire."[95] Hill's flippancy of tone in the opening of "Annunciations 1" ironizes the casualness with which language is considered only under the auspices of its present usefulness. If it does, in fact, have an historical indebtedness, that depth is considered here as a limbo of "stiffening-mire." As obscure as the location of "abroad," whence language comes to hand eloquently ("suntanned look") from beyond the sphere of public obligation, "stiffening-mire" recalls both the threat of inertia posed by language's indebtedness and the threat of cultural amnesia in which history becomes a homogenous mass of indistinct occurrences. With "stiffening-mire," Hill evokes history's solidification so that it is no longer a vital resource for the present. Alternatively, "mire" suggests the ethical quagmire that presents itself to the poet who takes the consideration of history as his *negotium*. In such a disposition towards language, "Cleansing has become killing, the reward / Touchable, overt, clean to the touch." "Cleansing has become killing" addresses both the present circumstance of euphemistic atrocity ("ethnic cleansing") and the special pleading that, far from ensuring freedom from obligation, cleansing the language in fact kills our ethical grounding. In this context the distinction from Sherry is important. At such "a distance from the steam of beasts, / the loathy neckings and the fat shook spawn," that is from the viciousness of physical reality, the "searchers with the curers sit at meat / And are satisfied." Removed

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[95] Hill, "Annunciations 1," in *New and Collected Poems*, 50.

from "the matter of blood fact," poetry becomes a gourmand's exercise in self-satisfaction. When "such precious things" as the bloody facts of history are "put down," easing the flesh "through turbulence," the "soul / Purples itself." Amongst the contexture of "steam of beasts," "loathy neckings," "fat shook spawn," "eye squats" and "gobbets," the image of the soul purpling itself takes on the corpulence and grotesqueness of an insufficient "*negotium* of language itself." Once we remove ourselves from the "matter of bloody fact" and accept an otiose freedom from our historically grounded civic obligations, we become unable to ethically engage in the public sphere of the *res publica*. Indeed the entire idiom of the poem depicts an "otiosity and vacuity" resultant from the subservience of language to a present circumstance in which "all who attend to harp or fiddle / For betterment, flavour their decent mouths / With gobbets of sweetest sacrifice."

However, Hill's poetic practice parodies this otiose appropriation of language and, instead, works towards an enactment of the poet's *negotium* in language. We have already noted the way the "energy of judgement" in Hill's idiom contradicts the otiosity and vacuity which it represents by the equivocation within "Cleansing has become killing." Additionally, Hill's capitalization of "Word," which cannot help but recall the biblical *logos* and the power of language to create, juxtaposes the depiction of art in the service of present pleasure with the poet's awareness of the obligations of an art committed to rigorous engagement with tradition. These subtle "heftings" and "tunings" of language are antithetical to that otiosity which they depict. The *negotium* here, of deference towards and attention to language's alterity, is the enactment of the concurrence between the poetic self and the not-self of language. The atonement obtains in the difference between Hill's *negotium* of language and the otiose appropriation of

language that the poem depicts. Instead of a responsible engagement with language, poetry in the sole service of present circumstance may become merely "gobbets of sweetest sacrifice" to appease "the (supposed) patron." In modernizing the genre of the patron poem, Hill, in "To the (Supposed) Patron," inculpates himself in the genre's historical temptation. The parenthesis of the title both ironizes the patron that the poem depicts: one who supposes himself to be a patron of the arts; and projects a desired patron who would secure the *otium* necessary for the poet to create:

> Prodigal of loves and barbecues,
>
> Expert in the strangest faunas, at home
>
> He considers the lilies, the rewards.
>
> There is no substitute for a rich man.
>
> At his first entering a new province
>
> With new coin, music, the barest glancing
>
> Of steel or gold suffices. There are many
>
> Tremulous dreams secured under that head.
>
> For his delight and his capacity
>
> To absorb, freshly, the inside-succulence
>
> Of untoughened sacrifice, his bronze agents
>
> Speculate among the convertible stones
>
> And drink desert sand. That no mirage
>
> Irritate his mild gaze, the lewd noonday
>
> Is housed in cool places, and fountains
>
> Salt the sparse haze. His flesh is made clean.

> For the unfallen—the firstborn, or wise
>
> Councillor—prepared vistas extend
>
> As far as harvest; and idyllic death
>
> Where fish at dawn ignite the powdery lake.[96]

In examining the difficulty that the poem addresses, we might note the distance between Hill's "consider" in "Merlin" ("I will consider the outnumbering dead") and the patron's consideration, "He considers the lilies, the rewards." In "Merlin," "consider" announces a manner of engagement with the subject of the poem. The consideration, here, enacts a much different engagement.[97] Hill's "lilies" alludes, obliquely, to the discourse on *otium* and *negotium* in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew V, Jesus complicates the dictums of the Ten Commandments into a rigorous moral negotium: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgement: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without cause shall be in danger of the judgement: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire."[98] Jesus proceeds, in verses 23-48, to similarly complicate other foundational Old Testament ethical principles. In these verses, Christian ethics is transformed from the adherence to ethical dictates into a rigorous process of interpretation between the self and the world. The idea of Christian practice changes from an adherence to proscriptive dictates into a holistic, dispositional way of being in the world. It is in the context of this renewed ethical rigor that Jesus asks the crowd to consider the lilies:

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[96] Hill, "To the (Supposed) Patron," in *New and Collected Poems*, 46.

[97] I owe my reading of this poem to generous consultation by Professor Ashby Kinch, University of Montana.

[98] Matt. 5:21-22.

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And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how

they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that

even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to

morrow is cast into the oven, *shall he* not much more *clothe* you, O ye of

little faith?[99]

Christ points out that the *otium* granted by God's providence only comes as a

result of the *negotium* of Christian practice. One must first seek "the kingdom of God,

and his righteousness" before "all these things shall be added unto you."[100] Part of that

seeking consists in humbling the self in the manner of the Beatitudes. This tension

between the *negotium* of humbling oneself in the world and worldly *otium* animates the

poetic practice of "To the (Supposed) Patron." Hill, himself, notes the presence of this

tension as an inherent fact in the role of the public poet. In "Poetry as 'Menace' and

'Atonement'," Hill observes that "the acceptance of a principle of penitential humility in

the conduct of life does not necessarily inhibit a readiness to accept the status of

'maestro' conferred by a supportive yet coercive public."[101] The genre of the patron

poem has historically had to negotiate between the poet's ethical "conduct of life" and a

"supportive yet coercive public." The temptation to compromise the ethical self in order

to praise the patron and secure financial solvency (and, at times, political security) is

inherent in the genre.

Yet the *zeugma* in the opening line that conjoins "loves" and "barbecues"

immediately calls into question this (supposed) patron's ethical valuations. The

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[99] Matt. 6:28-30.
[100] Matt. 6:33.
[101] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 10.

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conjunction fails to acknowledge the inherent difference of value between the importance of loves and the importance of barbecues. Nevertheless, Hill does conjoin them, depicting the patron as prodigal of both. Initially this may appear as an instance of Hill compromising his ethics and pandering to the patron. Only when we recognize the poetic tradition of the *zeugma* as an ironizing device in Neo-Classical poetry and hear the echoes of the Parable of the Prodigal Son do we understand the poet's *negotium* of language being enacted. In considering the "lilies, the rewards," the patron misses the ethical emphasis on *negotium* in the Sermon on the Mount. "At home," that is removed from the public sphere of civic obligation, the patron enjoys an otiosity not gained through ethical labor. Yet, insofar as the poem is an accomplished patron poem, Hill acknowledges the temptation to write otiose poems in praise of such a patron. The two laudatory epigraphs ("there is no substitute for a rich man" and "his flesh is made clean") and the sublime concluding images that seem offered as a supplicant's gift ("prepared vistas extend / As far as harvest; and idyllic death / Where fish at dawn ignite the powdery lake") show Hill's capabilities in this genre. These structures implicate Hill in the desire to secure his leisure through patronage, even at the expense of his ethical obligations. However, Hill's poetic practice resists this temptation, insisting instead upon the ethical importance of toughened sacrifice.

At least some of the "rewards" for the supposed patron are the loves and barbecues, as well as the art presumably, which his affluence affords him the leisure and means to enjoy. Further, Hill suggests, such affluence lends influence so that "at his first entering a new province / With new coin… the barest glancing / Of steel or gold suffices" to lend him authority. The "music" of his wealth tunes the art with which he surrounds

himself. This is the temptation to an ethically compromised aesthetic that Hill's images

provocatively acknowledge. It is because of the patron's influence and affluence that

"there are many / Tremulous dreams secured under that head"; yet the patron remains

unconcerned ("barest glancing") with the *negotium* of the poet's task ("tremulous").

Here "head" both synecdochally denotes the person of the patron and metonymically

denotes the head of that "new coin," which he introduces into the artistic economy. The

"bronze agents" panderer to the patron's acquisitiveness, much as Hill seems to pander to

the patron's vanity his sycophantic epigrams: "there is no substitute for a rich man" and

"his flesh is made clean." The bronze agents merely "speculate" amongst art that is both

economically tradable ("convertible stones") and lifeless ("desert sand"). The emphasis

here is upon art's economic and cultural value, its status as a commodity. In order to

cater to the supposed patron's "delight and his capacity / To absorb, freshly, the inside-

succulence / Of untoughened sacrifice," these agents appropriate art for the patron. As is

appropriate to one "prodigal of loves and barbecues," the "lewd noonday / Is housed in

cool places, and fountains / Salt the sparse haze" to maintain the patron's *otium* and

ensure "that no mirage / Irritate his mild gaze." The patron remains beyond the sphere of

public obligation and sacrifices. "For the Unfallen," those like the patron, who

appropriate art for pleasure while remaining ignorant of the contexture of its making,

"prepared vistas extend / As far as harvest; and idyllic death / Where fish at dawn ignite

the powdery lake." The vistas extend as far as harvest because, at harvest, *negotium*

begins. As with the "lilies," the harvest as boundary reinforces the patron's leisure.

Similarly, "prepared" reinforces the artificial and self-serving function of art as the patron

understands it. For this art, and indeed the otiose circumstance of the patron generally,

foreshadows an "idyllic death" in the pastoral landscape of the lake at dawn. In the depiction of the patron, art is understood as part of, and contributing to, an unearned *otium*. Further, this commodification of art has the pernicious effect of creating a demand for "untoughened sacrifice," otiose art.

However, even if we were unaware of Hill's critical caveats about the otiosity of poetry and making artistic judgments into "gobbets of sweetest sacrifice," Hill's working of language within the poem itself would alert us to the threat posed by a system of patronage whose evaluative criteria ignores the ethical in favor of the aesthetic. As Hill insists, the perfection of the poem is the enactment of ethics in its aesthetic techniques. Only then does the poetry enact the ideal embodiment of ethics in action. The idiom alone is enough to constitute a critique. The unobtrusively equivocating conjunction of "loves and barbecues"; the flaccid reiteration of "new" in "new province" and "new coin"; the corporality of the labial [b] in "absorb"; the lisping alliteration in "inside-succulence" and "sacrifice"; the biting [z] that ironically connects "dreams" with "bronze," "gaze," "haze," and "wise"; the weak vowels of "untoughened"; the vacuity of "speculations" (one might recall, for contrast, the precision of Hill's "nice speculation"); the impossible paradox of "convertible stones"; and the violence of the final image in which "fish at dawn *ignite* the *powdery* lake" all undermine the sycophantic idealization of the beneficent patron. Once we are aware of Hill's subtle *negotium* of language, we are simultaneously made aware that this poetic practice enacts an art antithetical to that valued by the patron. The patron values the "inside-succulence" of "untoughened sacrifice": an art that is aesthetically pleasing (even pandering at times) and that neither embodies the poet's *negotium* in its practices nor requires *negotium* on the reader's part.

"Inside-succulence" looks back to "at home," and conforms to the patron's and the poem's removal from the ethical obligations of the public sphere. Similarly, "untoughened sacrifice" ignores the *negotium* that is a poetry that embodies its fulfillment of civic obligations. While both layers of Hill's poem, the overt depiction of the patron and the covert critique, have their "inside-succulence," the covert critique enacts the toughened sacrifice of a poet's struggle with the medium of language. Although Hill acknowledges his own temptation to abdicate the ethical rigors of civically responsible poetry, his language works with an antithetical diligence and rigor to depict the otiosity and vacuity of that art that delights the patron.

The toughened nature of this sacrifice is made all the more apparent as Hill tunes in biblical and classical allusions, rather than evacuating the language of its historical weight and making it into "convertible stones" and "desert sand" in the service of aesthetic enjoyment. In a historical context, the desert imagery and "expert in the strangest faunas" evoke British colonialism and the birth of amateur anthropology and archeology. The British empire (though not only the British empire) appropriated the art of conquered cultures as novelties and symbols of cultural superiority much like the patron appropriates art for his own benefit. Hill tunes "prodigal" so that, even as we understand the patron's affluence, we hear the Parable of the Prodigal Son's squandering of gifts and fortunes. Although greatly gifted, we are given to understand, the patron squanders that "new coin" on "untoughened sacrifice," facile art. Similarly, Hill brings a litany of Christ ("firstborn, or wise / Councillor") to bear, ironically, within his litany of the supposed patron and rewords the classical epigram, "there is not substitute for a just man," into the sycophantic "there is no substitute for a rich man" in such ways that the

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disjunctions maintain the pressure of Hill's critique. These textural critiques, however, move beyond the immediate effect of parody. It is within the play between overt representation and covert critique that Hill enacts a poetic practice antithetical to that art of "untoughened sacrifice" appropriated by the patron. The poem, then, may be understood as having (at least) three levels: the overt depiction of the patron; the covert satire; and the enactment of a virtuous poetic practice. At this last level, Hill enacts a scrupulous poetic practice through the reticent judgement of his idiom, the density of his images, and responsible deployment of both. His rigor with language, which is the rigor of self-examination, stands in distinctive contrast to that art which panders to the patron's *otium*. Instead, Hill's enactment offers an art of ascetic rewards, of ethical action embodied in language.

Yet if the dead, history, and tradition are the subjects of consideration, as they are in "Merlin," or the means of enacting an ethical resistance to a poetry of present pleasure, as they are in "To the (Supposed) Patron" and "Annunciations 1," they, themselves, may also become the object of appropriation. As Hill guardedly announces in "September Song," "(I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true)," the impulse to glorify the dead and appropriate history in the service of present circumstance must also be guarded against with scrupulosity. For, as Hill phrases it in "A Pastoral," we might too readily "cleanse with a kind of artistry the ground / Shared by war" in order to "celebrate, fluently and at ease."[102] This is the more vicious aspect of that cultural amnesia that Hill considers in "Merlin." Rather than being forgotten, the dead are memorialized; "statues" are "darkened by laurel" and tradition and historical violence become, instead,

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[102] Hill, "A Pastoral," in *New and Collected Poems*, 43.

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"evergreen names," "evidently-veiled griefs," and "impervious tombs."[103] The impetus

to memorialize the dead and edify the present through their example ignores the

obligation to responsibly take into account the dynamic between special pleading and the

circumstantial facts. However, to consider the dead in poetry is inevitably an

appropriation of sorts. The dead are, to some degree or another, removed from the knotty

complex of their "special pleading and the circumstantial facts" and appropriated into the

contexture of language that is the poem.

Such is the predicament that Hill address in "History as Poetry." As in "To the

(Supposed) Patron," Hill atones for this predicament through his poetic practice. His

scrupulosity with language mediates a consideration of the dynamic between inevitable

appropriation and rectitude of judgement:

> Poetry as salutation; taste
>
> Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
>
> The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
>
> Unearths from among the speechless dead
>
> Lazarus mystified, common man
>
> Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
>
> From the provided loam. Fortunate
>
> Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung:
>
> 'A resurgence' as they say. The old
>
> Laurels wagging with the new: Selah!

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[103] Ibid.

> Thus laudable the trodden bone thus
>
> unanswerable the knack of tongues.[104]

As we have seen, Hill understands the poet's engagement with language as an attempt to reach concurrence between the self and the not-self. In this sense, poetry offers a "salutation" to the tradition whence it proceeds. Here the poet considers the not-self that is tradition through the figure of the dead. "Salutation" implies a welcome and lauding. Yet the danger, addressed also in "To the (Supposed) Patron," is that otiose poetry might pander to its subject; and poetry, too often, welcomes the dead by hyperbolically lauding them. In this way, the gift of tongues bestowed upon the apostles at Pentecost becomes an "ashen feast." When used irresponsibly, when language is not worked into a concurrence between the self and the not-self that is the basis of communication and community, the poet fails to take up the charismatic strength of language offered at Pentecost. For too unscrupulous a welcoming of the dead, of history, within poetry does not yield the revelatory pronouncements of the gospels, but rather an ashen and servile rehearsal of the dead. Such a rehearsal, which is a merely reiterative poetry, stands in contrast to Donne's rehearsal of the dead in order to ascertain "what must presently be said and done," which we examined in the previous chapter. In the context of "History as Poetry," the emphasis is changed from a concern with the influence of tradition to a concern with the responsible representation of traditional concerns. The emphasis changes from the poem's subject to the manner of the poem's enactment. Lax appropriations of tradition are "blue wounds." The figure here calls up the wounds on corpses, suggesting both reiteration of previous "tongue's atrocities" and fresh atrocities being perpetrated on the dead as they are rehearsed in the service of present circumstance.

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[104] Hill, "History as Poetry," in *New and Collected Poems*, 72.

"Lazarus mystified, common man / Of death" points towards the fetid exhumation that a poetry that "unearths from among the speechless dead" enacts. The sort of historical poetry Hill considers here is a morbid version of those "convertible stones" and "desert sand" from "To the (Supposed) Patron." This reiterative poetry merely exhumes the dead in order to appropriate them. Just as the "soul / Purples itself" in the otiosity afforded by a historically evacuated language, here the dead are synecdochally reduced to "blue wounds," a vapidly self-serving melancholia. Yet such poems are accorded the status of miracles in their reanimations of "Lazarus mystified," as though the poet himself had been blessed with the Pentecostal charisma. Thus the diminution of historical violence into the "lily" is understood as a violated object that "rears its *gouged* face / From the provided loam." Here "gouged," again, recalls those "blue wounds" and reinforces the poem's status as, metaphorically, an exhumed corpse. Similarly, "provided" implies that the loam, the substratum of history whence the poet unearths his reiterative appropriations, stands in the service of present circumstances as the material of which the poet makes use. Thus these poems become prognostications, "Fortunate / Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung," because they treat the past, the dead, solely in relation to the present. In that final image "tarred golden dung," the dead have become the fecal mater in which the poet reads the present's future. From such a perspective, the present will always be "'a resurgence' as they say" because the present poem is merely a reiteration of the dead corpse of history. "The old / Laurels wagging with the new" (not unlike the tail wagging the dog) reinforces the mutually reaffirming relationship Hill here depicts between history and reiterative poetry. The "salutation" between poetry and the dead with which the poem opens is not a concurrence between the self and the not-self;

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rather, it is a greeting between the self in the present and the self that has been read into the exhumed corpse of history. In the very act of praising ("laudable") the dead, the dead become the "trodden bone" of poetry, exhumed in the sole service of present circumstance. The "knack of tongues" stands, like the ashen feast that Pentecost has become, in opposition to a vital negotium of language. The dark pun on "unanswerable" contains the substance of the poet's predicament. Reiterative poetry asserts that it is not answerable for the historical atrocity which it appropriates. This self-exculpation authorizes the colonization of history by the present. A civically obligated poetry, however, asserts the essential irrefutability of historical violence as a condition embedded in the medium of the poet's craft. This, Hill suggests, is the tension and ethical dilemma posed in the writing of commemorative verse.

Yet as with "To the (Supposed) Patron," Hill moves beyond the mere diagnosis of a predicament by enacting his atonement in the contexture of the poem. In contrast with its depiction of a poetry that places the dead in the service of the present, Hill's poetic practice is alive to the fact that language is "intimately one's own and not one's own." Hill frames his poem with "salutation" and "laudable," both indebted to Latin greetings (*salutare* and *laudare* respectively), and where the poem merely speaks of greeting, Hill's precision here finds concurrence between the self and the not-self in the genuinely fortunate indebtedness of language. In practice this is distinct from either the prophetic claim of tasting "Pentecost's ashen feast" or the more mundane claim to a "knack of tongues." Hill's deployment of these words recognizes contemporary usage while depending on both historical depth and on the reader's recognition of that indebtedness, just as "ashen" tunes in its own incongruity to the Pentecostal gift by noting the absence

of a vital fire in this "knack of tongues." Similarly, "mystified" comically and sympathetically imagines Lazarus's unutterable gratitude in contrast with a poetics that considers the dead "speechless." Hill's self within the poem comes to a concurrence with the not-self that is tradition's historical weight through a poetic practice that gratefully acknowledges the gifts of the dead who are not speechless. Recognizing this dynamic, the concluding lines unleash the multivocality of the context of the surface critique where the emphasis falls upon "laudable," "trodden bone," "unanswerable," and "knack of tongues." This weighting of noun and adjective is consistent with a reiterative poetic practice that considers the dead as objects to be acted upon. However, the contexture of the poem places the emphasis differently upon the ironically reiterative "thus…thus" of the second-to-last line, mocking a servile reiteration. In generating a semantic tension between content and form, the structure here calls due attention to the importance of poetic practice, reinforcing Hill's emphasis on enactment. Historical poetry responsibly responds to and the lauds the dead when it tunes in the historical indebtedness of language. This maintains the autonomy of the dead as not-self. Here, again, it is Hill's "scrupulosity" with language that characterizes the nature of his labor. Indeed this emphasis on poetry as an ethical act remains a persistent element in Hill's poetry. While frequently Hill's language seems to equivocate into indeterminacy, his scrupulosity with language enacts determinate judgments by forcing the reader back into history rather than lifting him out of it. It is this poetic practice of "virtue… called forth to action in the *negotium* of language itself" that comprises the self's investiture in the poem.

CHAPTER III: "A MODE OF MORAL LIFE"

In its insistence upon considering tradition in light of present circumstance and upon the poet's ethical investiture in that consideration, Hill's poetry strains against the tenor of what John B. Vickery describes as the "modern elegiac temper": "in the very act of acceptance there still sounds the note of received sorrow. It functions as the ground-base of the elegiac uttered in the primary and essential isolation of the human condition…. Such a *topos* brings the elegiac impulse full circle by recapturing in a manner both self-aware and self-critical its recapitulation of the late medieval 'ubi sunt,' Spenser's haunting phrase 'the ruins of time,' and the Vergilian 'lacrimae rerum'."[105] Hill's commemorative poetry recalls and projects the conventional *topoi* as a response to "the primary and essential isolation of the human condition" in modernity. Hill's engagement with tradition maintains its essential alterity rather than enacting a servile rehearsal. Vickery rightly depicts the elegy as historically retrospective. Even Vickery's description participates in the nostalgic sentimentality of the consolatory elegy in its lovingly tolling out those traditional motifs from the "primary and essential isolation" of the critic's condition. Vickery understands this mournfulness as essential to the modern poet's condition where Hill depicts, rather, the potentiality "that his selfhood may be made at-one with itself" and that the poet may "learn to live in his affliction… with the renewed sense of a vocation."[106] The difference between Hill's engagement with the dead and Vickery's obtains in Hill's refusal to seek or offer consolation. Hill, rather, mourns that modern "human condition" that has detached us from the dead and enraptured us in an eternal present. His engagement with the literary tradition is a direct

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[105] John B. Vickery, *The Modern Elegiac Temper* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 166.
[106] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 18.

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response to this situation.

For this reason, Hill's poems also do not fit Peter Sacks's more conventional understanding of the elegy as enacting a psychological process by which the speaker relinquishes libidinous attachment to the lost object (the dead) and arrives at consolation from grief through a reattachment of the libido to the substitute object (the poem, natural cycles, spiritual transmutation, etc.). Within the framework of "healthy mourning," Sacks notes "the extreme toughness of Hill's elegiac stance… a refusal to console without first stressing decimation and the bleak harshness of judgement—a harshness as intransigent as rock, however daubed."[107] Such judgement, according to Sacks, constituted the consolation of Hill's elegies:

> [Hill's] elegies are sacrificial and expiatory in the extreme. By
> recognizing not only the connection between the horror of contemporary
> violence and the violence of ancient theology but also the necessity of
> extreme chastisement for the gain of any solace, he has written some of
> the few consoling poems of our time.[108]

Sacks narrowly misses Hill's emphasis on refusing consolation ("a refusal to console" comes close, but then "without first stressing…"). The ethical responsibility of the poet, as we have seen, is to bear "his peculiar unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless"[109] and to tune language so that the "shock of semantic recognition" becomes also "the shock of ethical recognition."[110] Hill's considerations of the dead and his scrupulosity with language do not aim to console the reader any more than they

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[107] Sacks, 309.
[108] Ibid., 310.
[109] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 18.
[110] Geoffrey Hill, "Language, Suffering, and Silence," *Literary Imagination* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 256.

attempt to console the poet by transfiguring the dead. Rather, Hill's poetic practice

guards against this "altruistic responsibility" by maintaining the distance between the

circumstance of the poem and the dead's priority. Even one of Hill's most overtly

elegiac poems, "Two Formal Elegies 2," refuses to console and rather seeks in the present

an "acknowledgement / of what is owed the dead":

> Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen,
>
> Of what they have witnessed and not seen?
>
> (Deaths of the city that persistently dies…?)
>
> To put up stones ensures some sacrifice.
>
> Sufficient men confer, carry their weight.
>
> (At whose door does the sacrifice stand or start?)

Hill calls the efficacy of the conventional elegy into question, not as lacking the ability to

console, but rather as lacking the ability to shock the audience into an ethical recognition

of "what they have witnessed and not seen." The "brief screen" of artistic representation

can only reiterate the "Deaths of the city that persistently dies." This sort of repetitive

elegy, like that considered in "History as Poetry," obfuscates the reality of historical

atrocity by merely recasting it. Certainly "to put up stones ensures some sacrifice";

however, "sufficient men confer, carry their weight" suggests that the sacrifice is more in

the service of erecting those memorials and monuments than in acknowledging the dead.

In this context, the guarded final line serves as an indictment of modernity's abdication of

responsibility and an expression of that abrogation. Hill neither seeks nor offers solace in

these lines, but rather diagnoses the very problem with poetry's—or any other art's—

standing in place of the dead.

However, this refusal to console should not be read as a movement to the opposite

extreme of Jahan Ramazani's reading, which, working like Sacks from Freud's

"Mourning and Melancholia," revises Sack's model of the elegy into a "work of

melancholy." Ramazani proposes "the psychology of mourning or melancholic

mourning" as an alternative to Sacks's consolatory or "healthy mourning."[111] In this

formulation, rather than enacting the "conciliatory paradigm" that Sacks charts from

Spenser to Yeats, "the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to

override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen wounds of loss."[112] In contrast to

Sacks's reading, for Ramazani, Hill's poems "mark an extreme in the economic

misgivings of the modern elegy"; Hill "is vigilant in preventing his rhetoric from drifting

towards the redemptive."[113] Thus, "for Hill… every elegy is an elegy for elegy—a poem

that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning. But modern

elegists… collectively redeem their mounting losses as aesthetic gains for the genre of

the elegy."[114] Ramazani's argument presents (at least) two difficulties with regard to

Hill's work. First, as Ramazani admits, the redemption of "mounting losses as aesthetic

gains for the genre of the elegy" is a "recuperative line of argument which shifts the

rhetoric of redemption from particular elegies to a historical narrative about elegies."[115]

While this is a subtle move in theory, it does little more than reiterate Sacks's argument

that "the issues of justice and of judgement become prominent precisely when the

inherited fictions and modes of consolation have grown weakest"—a line of development

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[111] Ramazani, xi.
[112] Ibid., xi.
[113] Ibid., 7.
[114] Ibid., 8.
[115] Ibid., 8.

that Sacks traces from "Lycidas" forward.[116] For both critics, the poem becomes an

object of consolation in substitution for the lost object. As we have already seen in our

consideration of Sacks's claims, Hill's poems do not attempt to replace the dead with the

aesthetic object of the poem, and more frequently, they point out the irresponsibility of

doing so.[117] Instead Hill's poems attempt to reconnect the present with the priority of the

dead through the texture of their engagement with tradition.

The second difficulty is Ramazani's notion of the elegy as "an elegy for elegy,"

and his recapitulation of the post-modern conceit of existing in a post-lapsarian state of

language. The notion that the modern elegy is a "poem that mourns the diminished

efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning" presupposes a pre-lapsarian moment of the

"efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning." Yet Hill does not distinguish the poet's

resistance to the coercions of public demand and historical indebtedness as a particularly

post-modern predicament—although it seems reasonable to assume that Hill would agree

that poetry garners less public attention at present. Instead, Hill finds that writers as

historically diverse as "Dryden and Pound are indeed comparable in their awareness of

the political and economic realities of circumstance, of the ways in which the writer's

judgement of word-values both affects and is affected by his understanding of, or his

failure to comprehend, the current reckonings of his day."[118] Hill does not "mourn the

diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning," but diagnoses its pandering to

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[116] Sacks, 310.

[117] Further, Ramazani's shifting the "rhetoric of redemption from particular elegies to a historical narrative about elegies" ignores the crucial distinction between "particular elegies" and a "historical narrative about elegies": the former being the site of either consolation or mourning; the latter being merely a critical interpolation of those sites over a period of time. If there remains a redemptive or conciliatory rhetoric in the modern elegy—as I'm sure there does, just as there are those poems which enact Ramazani's "work of mourning"—that rhetoric inheres in particular poems and poets, rather than in critical exegesis. The best the responsible critic can hope to accomplish is the recuperation of those poems which offer a type of redemption.

[118] Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, 5.

"the current reckonings of value" in the society of his day. By turning the "mounting losses" of historical violence into the "aesthetic gains" of merely altruistically responsible poetry, poets in the genre risk appropriating historical violence for acclaim. The failure lies in the disconnectedness of the elegist rather than in the form of the elegy as a genre. In response, Hill's poems do not mourn this state of poetry, but rather enact a poetic practice that is grounded in tradition and that resists appropriation through formal difficulty.

More broadly, the problem with Vickery's, Sacks's, and Ramazani's models in regard to Hill's poetic practice is their emphasis on consolation. Hill's poems are neither nostalgically retrospective, nor do they seek to console. Hill's poetry concerns the present and seeks a way of reconnecting the present with tradition by "going over what has many times been said and done" in order to ascertain "what must presently be said and done."[119] For this reason, Robert Pogue Harrison's genetic, historical thesis offers a better model for examining the predicament of the Hill's commemorative poetry.

Working in the mixed mode of Vico's *The New Science*, Harrison deploys anthropological, philosophical, and philological analyses to develop his assertion that "being-towards-death," Heidegger's phrase, is, first and foremost, "being-towards-the-dead."[120] In Harrison's model, we are first made aware of our finitude, our indebtedness, and our potentiality by the physical presence of the corpse:

> For all its grave stillness there is nothing more dynamic than a corpse. It
> is the event of passage taking place before our eyes. This phenomenon of
> passage—from which devolves our abstract idea of the past—makes of the

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[119] Ibid., 61.
[120] Harrison, 97.

unalive body a relational "thing" which, in its subjection to the power of

death, binds past, present, and future. The past (the no-longer-hereness of

the person), the present (the corpse in its presence at-hand), and the future

(the fate awaiting those who follow in the footsteps of the deceased) all

converge in the dead body, as long, that is, as it remains an object of

concern or solicitude for the living.[121]

It is in the presence of the corpse, then, that we recognize our own historicity. The body

of the absent person reminds us that we are engendered by the past, that we exist in a

moment of finitude, and that, in the moment of our finitude, we are obligated to the future

we engender. That obligation derives from, reflexively, the recognition of our own

engendering in the presence of the corpse. In the presence of that which engendered us,

in the awareness of our own indebtedness to the corpse before us, we are made aware of

the obligation, which we share with the dead, to ourselves engender the future. As

Harrison explains, the "authority of the dead and the charisma of the ancestors" derive

from their "passing from the realm of the engendered into that of engendering."[122] By

this transition, "the dead become the authors and proprietors of life, personifying all that

transcends and yet at the same time generates human society."[123] Because of the

authority of the dead, present existence falls under the condition of "guilt," in the

Heideggerian sense of a debt or obligation. The experience of "guilt," which is "the debt

I owe my future," stems from the "call of conscience… that issues forth from… finitude,

calling Dasein back to its primordial guilt."[124] That "primordial guilt" is our

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[121] Ibid., 93.
[122] Ibid., 94.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid., 98.

indebtedness to the dead insofar as we, the living, are the inheritors of their rituals, traditions, and ideologies.

It is because of this "tenacious, subterranean authority" of the dead that our own "freedom is linked so intimately with authenticity."[125] This authenticity is the complex dynamic by which the legacy of the dead is taken up by the present. As such, it "consists neither in blind rebellion against, nor in slavish submission to, the dead's authority."[126] Authenticity, rather, is an "authentic retrieval" of the possibilities engendered by the past through our inheritance of their rituals, institutions, and ideologies. "The problem with inauthentic retrieval," Harrison explains, "is that it almost always means allowing the dead to choose our inherited possibilities for us."[127] Inauthentic retrieval does not recognize the fundamental differences between the historical context of the past and the context of the present. Alternatively, inauthentic retrieval can ignore the historical continuities between the past and present, and thus, can ignore the resources that the past offers to the present. Authentic retrieval, instead, finds the resources for the present and future in the inherited rituals, institutions, and ideologies of the past.

It is in light of the cultural centrality of the dead that Harrison argues for the centrality of funerary and mourning rituals in our understanding of our mortality. Funeral laments, rituals, and elegies encode this "being-toward-the-dead" in culturally specific modes. Yet in Harrison's thesis the psychological work of consolation that these traditions enable is secondarily important to the socializing work that they perform. It is by socializing and objectifying grief that mourning practices enable consolation. Consolation is achieved by bringing the mourner back into the public sphere of the living.

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[125] Ibid., 101.
[126] Ibid., 98.
[127] Ibid., 102-103.

By doing so, the ritual generates the lineament between the past, present, and future. It is the process by which these institutions adopt the dead into culture and return the bereaved to their obligations in the present and future that constitute the value of these practices. The articulation of grief in and through culturally prescribed modes, Harrison argues, connects past, present, and future in the institution of the lament:

> The obligation conveyed by grief is that of self-mortalization. To mortalize oneself means to learn how to live as a dying creature, or better, to learn how to make of one's mortality the foundation of one's relations to those who live on, no less than to those who have passed away. To cope with one's mortality means to recognize its kinship with others and to turn this kinship in death into a shared language…. Through grief I learn to speak my death to the world… and to understand that whoever has the capacity of speak is, like me, a creature for whom dying is first and second nature. Where this pedagogy fails, language inevitably works against us, grief remains locked in aphasia, and the work of objectification miscarries.[128]

The inability to enact "healthy mourning," which Ramazani describes as the unique characteristic of the contemporary elegy, is thus as much a problem of institutions and rituals as it is of psychology. Without vital cultural practices by which to objectify our grief and create continuity in our intimate experience of human historicity, we remain "locked in aphasia," unable to access the potentialities offered by our historical inheritance. In its ability to transmute the natural occurrence of death into cultural value, the ritual of mourning is the initial site at which historical continuity is created, and

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[128] Ibid., 71.

through which the resources of tradition can be accessed. However, as Harrison reminds us, these very institutions are "historical, hence they too succumb to the law of passing. If new ones do not take their place, the transformation into value does not happen, precisely because we are at a loss when it comes to knowing how to mourn."[129] The failure of the elegy in modernity can be read, in light of Harrison's thesis, as a failure of the present to maintain a connection with the dead through an authentic retrieval of their rituals and ideologies. This inability can result either from a perceived irrelevance in the rituals themselves or, as is more often the case, an incongruity between ritual consolation and the loss it must objectify. In either case, however, this inability to mourn the dead and transmit their passing into cultural value undermines the foundation of society. In being unable to find adequate modes of "being-towards-the-dead," the living cannot authentically retrieve the legacy of their own "guilt."

In poetry, the principle cultural mode of "being-towards-the-dead" is the elegy. The continuity in the genre, which Sacks and Ramazani describe, authorizes the elegy's claim as a cultural institution. The historical evolution that these scholars trace is the repeated authentic retrieval of the institution of the elegy. The continuity that exists between historically disparate elegies is evidence that these poets have all engaged with the dead in the mode of primordial guilt. Such continuity is the foundation of tradition. However, these scholars also note the evolution of certain tropes, images, and modes of consolation. These evolutions mark the authenticity of the tradition. Prior modes are not simply recalled and redeployed; they are reconsidered. The new poem inherits the possibilities that tradition offers. Insofar as Hill's primary mode is a consideration of history and tradition, his poems should be considered as enacting an authentic retrieval

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[129] Ibid.

under the condition of primordial guilt. In returning himself and us to historical atrocities, Hill's poetry seeks to authentically retrieve the inherited possibilities of the dead. Hill's consideration of tradition and history maintains their alterity. In "Merlin," as we have seen, this takes the form of the meter acknowledging the ritual of the heroic couplet and deviating from it. In sections VI and IX from *The Triumph of Love*, Hill engages with Romantic and Metaphysical modes in order to distinguish his own understanding of "apprehension." The difficult historical and literary complexes embodied in the "lilies," from "To the (Supposed) Patron," order the energy of judgement in the poem. These are instances of Hill's technique as an authentic retrieval. Tradition and history are not ignored in these instances, but neither are they imitated. Rather, Hill finds these historical resources embedded in the texture of language. The present utterance of the poem thus evolves from an awareness of its own indebtedness.

Hill's elegy, "September Song", returns us to the primordial encounter with the grave. In its epitaphic epigraph we encounter our own indebtedness to historical atrocity.

> *born 19.6.32-deported 24.9.42*

> Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
> you were not. Not forgotten
> or passed over at the proper time.

> As estimated, you died. Things marched,
> sufficient, to that end.
> Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented

terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made

an elegy for myself it

it true)

September fattens on vines. Roses

flake from the wall. The smoke

of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough.[130]

As we have seen, in Hill's poetry to find oneself caught in the straights of a

predicament is to have recourse to critique. Such was the dynamic between the layers of

language in "Annunciations 1," "To the (Supposed) Patron," and "History as Poetry." In

these instances the irony—if one can call Hill's responsible handling of language

"ironic"—obtains in the disjunction between the language's matter and its manner. In

"September Song," the irony rests touchingly, humanely, on an awareness that "quotidian

language, both casual and curial, is itself highly charged, but charged with the enormous

power of the contingent and circumstantial."[131] Hill creates a juxtaposition between the

surface of the poem and the poem's enactment by working quotidian language into an act

of responsible witness of atrocious circumstance. There is a "local vividness" in the

awareness that both "undesirable" and "untouchable" might be undressed into a much

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[130] Hill, "September Song," in *New and Collected Poems*, 55
[131] Hill, *Lords of Limit*, 65.

more intimate relation in their quotidian senses. Yet this suggestion of the desire for and

pleasure of human touch is tuned out by that least desirable of touches that leaves

"undesirable" and "untouchable" untouching at the line's end. Hill's "untouchable" also

bears in mind the caste of untouchables, and recalls the ways in which entire peoples are

oppressed through ideology. It serves as a reminder that, although the Holocaust was

horrible in its extent and viciousness, it is not unique in its ideological foundations. The

human desire for contact asks us to elide the sense-making punctuation; however, this

impetus makes the inhumanity of the event all the more senseless by rendering Hill's

syntax equally senseless: something like "undesirable you may have been, untouchable

you were not *not* forgotten." In this sense, the reader colludes with the anonymity of the

epitaphic epigraph by appropriating the act of memorization into a longing for human

contact. In juxtaposition, Hill's punctuation forces attention to the particulars of syntax

and mediates the progression of clauses, ensuring that words and lines are only "passed

over at the proper time." In this enactment of the movement between the particular and

the general, Hill's technique draws attention to the black irony of this historical reversal

of the salvific Passover. The reader is restrained from passing over those victims who,

unfortunately, were not passed over. Hill's scrupulous grammar atones for the coercion

of quotidian language to appropriate loss by tuning attention back to the aesthetic

particulars. The syntax draws attention to the historical precedents of this unprecedented

atrocity.

Hill's practice here has the tact to acknowledge that "we cannot regard motive as

something which lies outside the contextual frame; it is through 'the process, ordre and

meaninge' of the 'texte' that motive declares itself."[132] Hill's parenthetical and guarded

acknowledgement of motive and self-interest—"(I have made / an elegy for myself it / is

true)"—darkly confirms what we might surmise from the poem's epigraph and a little

biography; for the anonymous epigraph announces the victim's birth on June 19, 1932, a

day after Hill's own. The syntax opens a multivocal texture that inculpates the poet into

the poem's appropriation of historical violence. "I have made / an elegy for myself"

acknowledges the apprehension of the poet's own mortality. However, rather than enable

the irresponsible and melancholic association of the self and the not-self of the epigraph,

"the process, ordre and meaninge" of Hill's text asserts the voluminous space which that

single day represents. Hill's line acknowledges the subjective validity of the elegy.

"September Song" is also an elegy only true "for myself." And there is, finally, the blank

assertion of acting within a tradition: "I have made / an elegy." Hill's attention to the

minute particulars of punctuation and the ways in which they might tune in or tune out

quotidian motives and meaning enacts the uniqueness of the life represented by that

anonymous epigraph. In the encounter with the dead, Hill recognizes the historical

indebtedness of his act. The layers of ambiguity in this parenthetical aside recognize the

common fact of humane encounter with the dead. In the poetic tradition, we write elegies.

Insofar as their purpose is consolation for the living, the elegy is for us. Further, because

it is an attempt to transmute the phenomenon of death into value, it is only true for us.

   However, as Christopher Ricks points out, "the dignified force of Hill's poetry on

such atrocity is a matter of his grasping that the atrocity both is and is not unique, and

that it presents to the imagination a challenge which likewise both is and is not

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[132] Geoffrey Hill, *Style and Faith* (New York: Counterpoint, 2003), 22-23.

unique."[133] Thus even as Hill's poetic practice insists upon particularity, his idiom and

images suggest commonality. The anonymity of the epigraph; the terrific vagueness of

"things marched, / sufficient, to that end"; the abstractness of "as estimated," "patented

terror," and "routine cries" reinforces the commonness of this particular atrocity.

Similarly, the play between the epigraph and the equivocation in "I have made / an elegy

for myself it / it true" points towards both the uniqueness of this elegy (one made for the

self and true for the self only) and the common impulse to elegize as a means of

consolation and humane contact in the face of atrocity (an elegy made to comfort myself,

as we all are wont to do). Hill's poetic practice continuously asserts the difference and

distance between the atrocity and the act of utterance as a means to both acknowledge

"what is owed the dead" and to arrive at "actuated self-knowledge." Rather than

collapsing the elegiac subject into the act of elegy and finding there the substitute of

consolation, Hill's final image asserts the distance between the September of the present

moment and "24.9.42":

> September fattens on vines. Roses
>
> flake from the wall. The smoke
>
> of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

The innocuousness of those "harmless fires" and the fecundity of nature juxtapose

the mechanistic depiction of death in the camps. The natural images glance at the

traditional consolation of natural cycles of death and rebirth; yet Hill recognizes in

"fattens" and "flake" the inappropriateness of this mode of consolation. There is an easy

similarity between the harvest of autumn and the human harvest of the Holocaust that is

entirely inappropriate to a responsible commemoration of the historical atrocity. Part of

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[133] Ricks, "Geoffrey Hill 1: 'the tongue's atrocities'," 288.

the strength of Hill's judgement here is to allow the acknowledgement of that

inappropriateness.   Throughout, this disjunction has been mimetically represented in the

broken lineation of the poem. The sentences stop mid-line or spill onto the next,

eschewing the sense-making potentiality of the aesthetic line for the more rigorous

governance of punctuation. In doing so, Hill's poetic practice refuses the motive,

announced in the parenthetical aside, to appropriate atrocity for the present's consolation.

This is the enactment of Hill's authentic retrieval. He recognizes the possibilities for

responsible commemoration available in the ritual of the elegy, not by reiterating them,

but by acknowledging the elegy's unfittedness to this event. Therefore, it is not until the

final line that we get an atonement of sense and poetic line, and even here it comes in an

acknowledgement of reticence: "This is plenty. This is more that enough." The

compounding sense of the line—if the first sentence is "plenty," then the second must be

"more than enough"— returns our attention to grammar as the "public and social

institution" by which we atone for the "tongue's atrocities." Throughout the poem, Hill's

"language appears sharply conscious of both its own workings and of the general drift of

assumption."[134] Hill uses grammar, in its position as public institution, to recall "the

general drift of assumption" back to an attention on the poet's role as "fabbro." The

scrupulosity of language in "September Song" depicts well Adrian Nichols's assertion of

"the difficulty at times—and times more frequent than facile judgement would allow—of

disentangling the gracious from the disgraceful, of separating out transfiguration from

disfiguration. Such is the complexity of historical and personal agency… that judgement

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[134] Hill, *Style and Faith*, 15.

must frequently be nuanced and complex."[135]

It is through his negotiation of history, personal agency, and the drift of circumstance, that Hill achieves an authentic retrieval of the ritual of the elegy as a public institution. Paradoxically, this comes in the form of his recognizing the inappropriateness of that institution to transmute the Holocaust into value. In the face of such atrocity, the poet is returned to the condition of "Citations I": "as broken as the vows and tatters, / petitions with blood on them, the charred prayers, / spiralling godwards on intense thermals."[136] The institutions that we have inherited from the dead cannot suffice to transmute historical atrocity into value because the ideologies that ground those institutions are often complicit in the atrocity. The modes of supplication that Hill notes in "Citations I" ("vows," "petitions," "prayers") all have their place in the elegiac mode through which we have traditionally enacted our being-towards-the-dead. Yet here they are all sullied by the historical atrocities in which they are implicated. Frequently, an authentic retrieval of inherited legacies will consist in recognizing those legacies' unfittedness. Only in that fashion can we appropriately acknowledge the commonality of the event as well as its uniqueness. We have cultural modes of transmuting loss into value—of which the elegy is the primary poetic mode—, and yet, it is through a recognition that those inherited modes are incapable of transmitting certain events into value that we responsibly commemorate the event. The incapacity of the elegy is not a failure of the genre; it is an acknowledgement that, as Hill acknowledges in "Citations II," "invention reinvents itself / every so often in the line of death."[137] In the case of

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[135] Adrian Nichols, "Grace and Disgrace: A Theological Reading of Geoffrey Hill's Poetry," *Providence* 3, no. 4 (1997): 339.
[136] Hill, "Citations I," in *A Treatise*, 2.
[137] Hill, "Citations II," in *A Treatise*, 3.

"September Song," reinvention comes in the form of recognition of the elegy's limitations. The extent to which the Holocaust exceeds those limitations is an acknowledgement of its uniqueness, even as the impulse to elegize, which Hill responsibly acknowledges, is a measure of human indebtedness. At the primal scene of historical atrocity, Hill "goes over what has many times been said and done" in order to ascertain "what must presently be said and done." In considering the dead, Hill retrieves the possibilities of his humane inheritance by recognizing his indebtedness to tradition.

CONCLUSION

John Milton, in "An Apology to Animadversions" (1642), notes that his political

and poetic vocation stemmed from an appreciation of the judgement of classical authors:

> Having observed them to account it the chief glory of their wit in that they
>
> were ablest to judge, to praise, and by that could esteem themselves
>
> worthiest to love those high perfections which under one or other name
>
> they took to celebrate, I thought myself by every instinct and presage of
>
> nature, which is not wont to be false, that what imboldened them to this
>
> task might with such diligence as they used imbolden me, and that what
>
> judgement, wit, or elegance was my share would herein best appear, and
>
> best value itself, by how much more wisely, and with more love of virtue I
>
> should choose (let rude ears be absent!) the object of not unlike praises.[138]

We have seen a similar response to the example of tradition in Hill's poetic practice.

What Hill's and Milton's valuation of tradition recalls is the novelty of the past. As

modernity searches for the new, the utmost bound, and the furthest extension, Hill

reminds us that, if considered responsibly, the past is another space of exploration and

limitlessness. This is the value of literature and reading. The texts of tradition and

history embody the worlds which they depict. They are the spaces of exploration into

which Hill's poetry and criticism delves. We have seen "September Song" search, in the

historical physicality of the Holocaust, for a responsible commemoration of that atrocity.

In "Caveats Enough in Their Own Walks," Hill illustrates how Donne's verse epistles

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[138] John Milton "An Apology to Animadversions," qtd. in William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1:73.

embody his rehearsal of tradition and how they find there the wisdom with which to engage present circumstance. Similarly, in "The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell," Hill examines how Southwell's rhetoric restrains personal animosity in the service of Christian justice. In "To the (Supposed) Patron" and "History as Poetry," Hill enacts a poetic practice that challenges the reader to appreciate the poet's *negotium* of language. Insofar as these become more than historical and poetic curiosities for the reader, they are the means through which the reader can reconnect with tradition.

As Harrison shows, this is an increasingly important connection in the age of the "new barbarism." If, as Hill and Harrison both assert in different ways, a vital connection with the past is an essential condition of our humanity, then the disconnection with tradition and history that modernity promises (and has largely achieved) is only an otiose freedom. Without a sense of one's historical indebtedness and the obligations which that indebtedness entails, modernity exists in a condition of "freedom from" without any guidance as to its "freedom to." Without the sorts of connections which Hill's poetry creates, we cannot discern what "must presently be said and done" because we do not know what "has many times be said and done."

However, Hill's poems of historical atrocity remind us that in maintaining a connection with the past we incur an obligation to atone for humanity's atrocities. Part of that atonement is effected by our pragmatic rehearsal of history in the present. Perhaps all that we can effect is that atonement in which, by considering the past, we avoid reiterative atrocities. This is the most basic of civic obligations. More positively, history and tradition constitute resources for the present which may be generously drawn upon. They offer possibilities that can be actualized in the future and thus show humanity a way

forward. This is also part of that most basic civic obligation. Yet to understand Hill in this fashion is to locate him in a tradition that understood literature and knowledge as an essential part of a healthy public sphere. Aristotle argues that a plurality of perspectives is more beneficial than a single perspective. Milton repeatedly argues in the pamphlets for the importance of an educated body politic. Although Wordsworth argues against books in "The Tables Turned," the general tenor of his poetry and correspondence evinces a strong valuation of literature and history. Emerson, in his essay "History," goes so far as to understand the rehearsal of history as the primary condition of autonomous self-hood:

> Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know. What the former age has epitomized into a formula or rule for manipular convenience, it will lose all the good of verifying for itself, by means of the wall of that rule. Somewhere, sometime, it will demand and find compensation for that loss by doing the work itself.[139]

Hill's particular contribution to this tradition is his insistence upon embodying that valuation in the enactment of verse. Hill understands his civic obligation to be reconnecting the present with its historical indebtedness. Hill's poetry considers history and tradition, returning the reader to the "bloody facts of history." It reminds us that we are not self-generated and that, because of our historical contingency, we owe a debt to the past, which is to perpetuate its vital presence in the world.

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[139] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "History," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, Norton Critical ed, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 108.

Because of his emphasis on enactment, Hill's practice has political and religious implications as well. In the political sphere, the embodiment of our historical obligations in action creates a historical commonwealth, in the full, literal sense of that phrase. History and tradition are the common wealth, the shared resource, of the public sphere. As such they have the potential to unite a body politic in consideration of historically shared concerns. The enactment of specific historical concerns in utterance (whether poetry, prose, pamphlet, or speech) places an individual's understanding of that historicity into the public sphere were it might encounter alternative understandings. This is Harrison's "authentic repetition" on the socio-political level: the individual brings his personal considerations of tradition into the public sphere where the full inheritance of tradition can be brought into the service of the public good. Our principal concern in this essay has been to show that Hill understands such enactment in the public sphere as the poet's *negotium*. Yet this study does not inquire into the specific socio-political principles that Hill's verse enacts. The result of that study would contribute to a fuller understanding of Hill's relationship with tradition. In religious terms, Hill's emphasis on enacted virtue reiterates the Jesuit motto: *ad majoriam dei gloriam* [to the greater glory of god]. Yet it remained beyond the scope of this study to consider Hill's theological principles in depth. However, further pursuit of the allusion to the Sermon on the Mount in "To the (Supposed) Patron" might begin provide insight into the specific character of Hill's faith.

Yet it is ultimately with speculation that Hill seems intent to leave his readers. Though his poems are not indeterminate, their formal difficulty resists loose paraphrase or easy synopsis. The value of poetry, of history, and of tradition is that they cause us to

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reconsider ourselves in the present moment from the perspective of the historical other. In considering the value of historical indebtedness, Hill's poetry forces the reader to access the inheritance of tradition and assume his historical obligation.

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