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The Burden of Authentic Expression in the Later Poetry of Geoffrey Hill

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The artist lies
For the improvement of truth. Believe him.

Charles Tomlinson, "A Meditation on John Constable"

Geoffrey Hill's later work is increasingly concerned with the authenticity of the poet's civic voice, and with the extent to which persuasive lyricism is at odds with the apprehension of moral truth. This concern provokes in his poetry a fierce, at times anguished obsession with the possibilities and limitations of language. Hill's determination to forge an authentic and autonomous idiom, even as he acknowledges the essential "otherness" and intractability of language, underlies the strenuous difficulty that has characterised his work from the publication of *Speech! Speech!* in 2000 [1]. But, whereas many of Hill's peers, from John Ashbery to J.H. Prynne, revel in linguistic indeterminacy, the poet-figure in Hill's recent work emerges as one who strives to resurrect language, to preserve its capacity for "eloquence and apprehension" against the destructive tendencies of the age (*CCW* 349). These semantic preoccupations inform a broader anxiety about the public role of a poet in the modern world. Can he still aspire to the status of Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators", or has this aspiration since been undermined by Yeats' dictum that "[w]e have no gift to set a statesman right" (Shelley 233, Yeats, *MW* 72)? Hill's own acknowledgement of his diminished influence is coterminous with his refusal to accommodate popular whim, so that the authenticity of his verse as public utterance derives precisely from its difficulty, its anti-materialism and its resilient heterodoxy.

Hill's "late flowering", in David Gervais's phrase, began in 1996 with *Canaan,* followed two years later by *The Triumph of Love*.[2] These volumes anticipate the concern with authenticity that characterises Hill's subsequent work, but they remain intelligible according to a Modernist conception of poetry as aesthetic consolation, albeit the "sad and angry consolation" to which *The Triumph of Love* attests (82).[3] In contrast, *Speech! Speech!* (2000)

finds the poet in crisis, unsure of even a niche position in a debased and alien cultural landscape:

> Age of mass consent: go global with her.
> Challenge satellite failure, the primal
> violent day-star moody as Herod.
> Forget nothing. Reprieve no-one. Exempt
> only her bloodline's *jus natalium*.
> Pledge to immoderacy the outraged
> hardly forgiven mourning of the PEOPLE,
> inexorable, though in compliance,
> media-conjured. Inscrutable Í call
> her spirit nów on this island: memory
> subsiding into darkness | nowhere
> coming to rest. (11)

The imperative mood bespeaks a desire for influence that is pointedly at odds with public indifference in the age of mass consent. This frustrated ambition is reflected in a prevalence of negation, "nothing"..."no-one"..."nowhere", and the derogating qualifications, "only" and "hardly forgiven". Explicit reference to the death of Princess Diana is studiously avoided, possibly as a crassness too far, although the stanza collates obliquely the repercussions of her demise, mediated by the speaker's sardonic and apparently callous tone. He itemises the unprecedented public displays of mass grief, the hysterical condemnation of all royals save for Diana's then cherubic offspring, and the deluded conviction amongst the amorphous, capitalised PEOPLE of a personal connection with someone they had never met. Considered in isolation, these observations paint the poet as little more than a professional snob, seeming to license William Logan's criticism of *Speech! Speech!*, that it witnesses Hill "sneering at [his] readers" (72). But the closing sentence of the stanza complicates this picture, replacing the didactic strains of preceding lines with a more ambiguous and reflective tone. "Inscrutable" could refer to the curiously accented "Í" that follows it, to Diana, to the response to her death, or to all three. It seems to conclude a triune sequence – "immoderacy", "inexorable", "inscrutable" – which traces the poet's withdrawal from a populist sphere, in which he has no authority, to a near-mystic realm, in which artists may still strive for meaning. Successive enjambments, and the etiolated sibilance of "subsiding into darkness", cast these lines as a

retreat into lyricism, alien to the public mood, but adequate to a more compassionate view of the beleaguered "People's Princess". Hill affords Diana an individual identity – as a wandering, romantic spirit – denied by the coarse operations of mass culture, although the attenuated final line leaves the memory of the dead princess, like the poet's achievement of a hieratic mood, symbolically incomplete.

Such brief snatches of studied elegance, dissolving into uncertainty, recur throughout *Speech! Speech!*, reflecting Hill's deep anxiety over the compromises engendered by public utterance: "Would I exchange/ my best gift, say, for new spools of applause . . . ?" (4). The impression is of some self-denying ordinance, as the poet's frustrated desire for authentic expression drives him away from persuasive lyricism to ever more forbidding complexity. Hill writes perceptively of Thomas Nashe's prose works that: "The energy has to go somewhere; since it cannot realise itself as a legislative act, it turns back into the authority and eccentricity of the style itself" (*CCW* 304). This observation serves equally well for Hill's own poetic practice in the early 2000s, and his obsession with the limitations of language persists in his 2002 volume, *The Orchards of Syon*:

> Now there is no due season. Do not
> mourn unduly. You have sometimes said
> that I project a show more
> stressful than delightful. Watch my hands
> confabulate their shadowed rhetoric,
> gestures of benediction; maledictions
> by arrangement. For us there is
> no deadline, neither for stand nor standoff.
> I can prolong the act at times
> to rival Augustine, this shutter
> play among words, befitting
> a pact with light, the contra-Faustian heist
> from judgement to mercy. (1)

The opening line rebuts the biblical promise, from Galatians, that "in due season we shall reap" (6:9). Redemption, it seems, is no longer possible, although the interplay of "due...unduly" implicitly acknowledges that it may never have been. Turning away from this cosmic concern, the speaker remains aware, as in *Speech! Speech!*, that wrought language can

"project a show more stressful than delightful", but he displays far greater willingness to surrender himself to the subjective play of words. It is difficult to imagine the blandly confessional strains of a Carol Ann Duffy or Sian Hughes accommodating the injunction to "[w]atch my hands confabulate their shadowed rhetoric", laden as it is with studied philosophical resonances. As Stephen James observes, Plato's cave first emerged in Hill's poetry as a dominant analogy for the poetic process in "Funeral Music", the unrhymed sonnet sequence from the 1968 volume *King Log* (James 69-71).[4] The opening lines of that volume, "Processionals in the exemplary cave, / Benediction of shadows", clearly prefigure the opening of *The Orchards of Syon*, but Hill's employment of Plato's famous allegory in the two volumes is markedly different (25). In "Funeral Music", although Hill adapts Plato's allegory – which explores multiple levels of perception – to convey the specific tendency for poetic utterance to distort reality, he retains the sense of the poet as one who desires to escape the cave, and obtain untainted knowledge. In other words, the poet's aspiration to a pellucid and unsullied vision remains valid. But in *The Orchards of Syon*, Hill dramatically recasts the poet's role from escaped prisoner to puppet master. No longer the interpreter of shadows, he is now their creator. At a stroke, authority is regained, as the poet symbolically shifts the obligation to remedy the uncertainties inherent in language from himself to his readers. It is stunningly bold conceit, casting the poet as a Mephistophelian figure, whose language, albeit an imperfect medium, represents the closest impression of platonic illumination that his readers are likely to experience. This impression is extended by the speaker's avowal that "I shall promote our going and coming, / as shadows, in expressive light", which effectively turns Plato's allegory on its head (1). Individual human subjects, like the world they inhabit, are irredeemably shadowed and unknowable; but their progress can be illuminated by the "expressive light" of artistic creation. Thus the authenticity of the poet's voice is no longer contingent upon a painstaking apprehension of the "real", and can encompass the linguistically unfettered exposition of an alternative realm.

This stance does not represent, for Hill, a final resolution to the problems of linguistic uncertainty. Rather, his tentative hope for poetic autonomy has been fleetingly amplified by a doughty persona, donned in the fashion of the metaphysical poets he so admires, and licensing temporarily a playful excess that elsewhere is suppressed as a source of insincerity. But semantic play and astringent exactitude are forces that, in Hill's verse, are not simplistically opposed. In the essay "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'", Hill presents the disruptive and redemptive properties of literature as held in delicate tension. In his terms, "the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense – an

act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord" (*CCW* 4).[5] A poem may disrupt conventional idioms whilst remaining internally harmonious, and this realisation is the closest Hill comes to aping the modernist manifestos of Pound and Eliot. "From the depths of the self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not-self"; Hill observes, and he quotes Pound approvingly: "The poet's job is to *define* and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice" (*ibid*.).

Pound's poetic and critical examples are recurrent preoccupations in Hill's verse and prose. The two poets share an obsession with Platonism, and the epigraph page of Hill's *Collected Poems* quotes from Pound's Canto XI: "In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it". On one level, the line is a defiant assertion of the potentialities of art, pursued in spite of the pervasive philistinism that surrounds the artist. But as Hill comments, in his essay on Pound's *Envoi*: "If it were not for the darkness and the enemies' torches, the beauty of factive virtù would not shine out so in defiance of that circumstance which the gathering has in part transformed" (*CCW* 246). This partial transformation is central to Hill's concept of poetic authenticity. Having rejected the neo-modernist ideal of art as entirely untrammelled by the mass demotic, he states the true value of poetry as public utterance: its capacity to escape the circumstances in which it is written, and to modify the circumstances into which it is received.

Unsurprisingly, this fresh estimation of poetic endeavour is also inconclusive. For Hill's anxieties over language and public utterance are intertwined, in his later volumes, with the vexatious problems of age and precarious appeals to posterity:

> I'm spent, signori, think I would rather
> crash out than glide on through. Pound glided
> through his own idiocy; in old age
> fell upon clarities of incoherence,
> muteness's epigrams, things crying off. (*Without Title* 48)

Pound is now invoked as a personal monition. "Clarities of incoherence" aptly conveys the lyrical, often haunting but thematically disjointed material of the later *Cantos*. Hill is evidently fearful of a similar fate: that his verse will decline into elegant lyrics shorn of the intellectual rigour that had previously defined his work. Like Hill's linguistic preoccupations, not only do the problems of age and uncertain legacy remain unresolved, but the poet remains

unsure precisely how to approach them. His poems are preserved from sterility not by the introduction of new themes, but by the freshness of Hill's ever-changing approach to longstanding concerns, his flirtation with different personae, and his mastery of a range of styles, from the strenuous half-rhymes of *King Log*, to the discursive idiom of *Without Title* and *A Treatise of Civil Power*.

Nonetheless, this lattice of internalised, solipsistic preoccupations is open to parody, and Hill recognises this, mocking his own unbending seriousness in verses addressed to the Italian poet Cesare Pavese: "This could be you or me, Cesare; you're / the second most self-centred man I know, / though at the far edge nothing if not staunch" (38). Flashes of humour often redeem passages which sail perilously close to pomposity. But it would be misleading to claim that Hill's high seriousness is always so redeemed. Sometimes the inertia is crippling:

> But think on: that which is difficult
> preserves democracy; you pay respect
> to the intelligence of the citizen.
> Basics are not condescension. Some
> tyrants make great patrons. Let us observe
> this and proceed. Certain directives
> parody at your own risk. Tread lightly
> with personal dignity and public image.
> Safeguard the image of the common man.[6] ("On Reading Crowds and Power" 47)

These lines, from *A Treatise of Civil Power*, are, according to Hill's own formula of menace and atonement, at an opposite extreme to the platonic sections of *The Orchards of Syon*. Whereas that volume often surrenders itself to linguistic felicity at the expense of the exigencies of public engagement, here Hill broaches obviously public themes with a lack of linguistic subtlety. Full stops repeatedly mark dominant caesuras, emphasising a disjunction between syntax and lineation that lends an unwelcome triteness to these clipped *sententiae*. The effect is not unintentional, just as the voice is not Hill's own, revealed in the assumed pomposity of "Let us observe", and the following aside "Certain directives / parody at your own risk". An oblique reference, through "Tread lightly", to Yeats' "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" alerts us to the possibility that declamatory voice may be a device to cloak inner frailties; and it also implicitly invites us to conflate Hill's "common man", perhaps ironically,

with the "smiling public man" of "Among School Children" (Yeats, *MW* 34-35; 113-115). Despite this association, we are left with a composed, not a composer's voice. It offers ample "menace", in the sense of direct engagement with the public political sphere, but without the "etymological atonement" Hill recommends. As Yeats observes, in "Anima Hominis", "[w]e make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (*CCP* 170). For Hill's public voice to succeed, it must, paradoxically, be twinned with his internal preoccupations over language and legacy:

> I'm wresting myself into simplicity –
> exhaustion's bonanza – also I want to leave
> something in trust, something by definition
>
> not by default. Head-on the big crows
> halt the wind, the gulls plane in wide curves,
> vanishing among the flurries; fields are blue-brown
>
> with a top-dressing of snow. In whose name
> such conflagrations of undeeded gifts?
> If not Milton then Hardy; if not
>
> Hardy, Lawrence – *Look! We Have Come Through!* (*Scenes from Comus* 11)

The intention to escape obscurantism – "wresting myself into simplicity" – is explicit, although Hill's discriminating intelligence, which revels in precise distinctions and wordplay, is still present in the desire to leave "something by definition / not by default". As if to display precisely what might be left "in trust", the verse returns to the pastoral idiom characteristic of Hill's early career. Crows are a primal but resolute proxy for the artist, their resilience reflected in the balance of "head-on" and "halt", while the long vowels of "plane" and "wide" augment the description of the gulls' unfettered flight, before this temporary serenity cedes to a mesh of fricatives and sibilants: "vanishing among the flurries". Hill manages to achieve this limpid diction without sacrificing his penchant for understated allusion. The imagery of fields "blue-brown, with a top-dressing with snow" surely recalls Edward Thomas's "land freckled with snow half-thawed", and, more obliquely, the desolate landscape of Eliot's "Little Gidding".[7]

Scenes from Comus witnesses Hill's achievement of an intricate but fluid idiom that allows him to exploit his longstanding civic and linguistic preoccupations for creative gain. Though, as we have seen, this settlement becomes slightly skewed in *A Treatise of Civil Power*, Hill's most recent volume, the doubly-titled *Oraclau/Oracles*, recaptures the profitable balance between complexity and lyricism. Here the poet's enduring uncertainties over language and status are compounded by a focus upon his Welsh ancestry. For the poet is estranged from his distant Celtic heritage, just as his language is inevitably estranged from the extra-linguistic reality it seeks to apprehend:

> Here, take your gift of angry fellowship.
> Salute the bards – the prized effoliate
> Atavisms – who yet recite
> Pieties through contentious sleep:
> Choosing not to despise
> Your craft that sullenly revivifies
> Expired encomia to exequies:
> Standing your call, re-opening your vein;
> Wanting some better grace to entertain. (2)

The example of the bards, esoterically dubbed "effoliate / Atavisms", implicitly refigures Hill's own willed sublimation in his ancestral past as a purging or restorative act, whilst the sibilant play of "pieties" and "contentious sleep" emphasises the disjunction between the bland certitudes that persist at the surface of a culture and an underlying "live tradition" that is not so easily accessible and refuses simple categorization. For the speaker, seemingly a mere bard himself, claims no effortless, Romantic insight, but "sullenly revivifies / Expired encomia to exequies", in which alliterative phrase the fustian futility of his endeavour is effectively thrice underlined.[8] In these lines the speaker stands at a remove from Celtic tradition, even as he seeks to recover it, but elsewhere in *Oraclau* he projects himself into the personae of figures from Welsh history, thereby borrowing another's cultural authenticity:

> Proclaim these bodies our joint avatar;
> The metamorphics from loves long unmade;
> That, as I elegize, parade
> Brusquely: like a spectacular

Comet, the rough crown-a-roast,
Which, when the line of its horizon's crossed,
Blazes away, vanishes, is not lost. (11)

Here the philosopher and alchemist Thomas Vaughan, brother of the poet Henry, becomes a proxy for Hill's own creative ambitions. The designs of both men are conflated in "metamorphics from loves long unmade", which connects the poet's desire for enduring expression with the alchemist's search for the philosophers' stone. Though both ambitions seem chimerical, once again Hill's longstanding concerns are given a fresh perspective by the Celtic subjects invoked. And the poet's thirst for public influence is also refracted through this prism, as Hill's implicit and individual desire for sublimation in Welsh landscape is recast in Nye Bevan's muscular, collective and politically oriented tones:

Come, let us take to the mountain
Our leaned freedom,
Unassailable freedoms to maintain. (21)

These personae do not constitute a strategy to disguise Hill's own disposition; rather their layered voices enact the poet's own tentative but incremental journey of progressive belonging. Through the adoption of authentic vernacular, Hill is able to recast himself as a full participant in the broader Welsh cultural landscape, reaching a temporary accommodation with the burden of inheritance. But Hill's enduring anxieties over the gulf between language and reality remain symbolically unresolved: "It is not nothing having to make sense / Of moods that argue so with case and tense" (2).

Hill never settles on a final resolution for the intractability of language and the anxieties of public utterance, but this is not a weakness. Rather, his austere and implacable poetic voice derives its authenticity from a constant striving to preserve the protean function of words against the disorienting pressures of reality. Though this self-conscious vigilance can sometimes render his poems forbiddingly opaque, it is the tension between private and public utterance, between arcane and demotic language, and between menace and atonement that gives his verse its distinctive and resilient force. In the finest of Hill's later poems, language remains rich with allusion even as it breaks free from convention and cliché, liberating the poet's imagination without falsifying the reality upon which it draws. As Hill remarks in *Scenes from Comus*, 'weight of the world, weight of the word, is' (12)

[1] Hill discusses the ‘’otherness” of figurative language in his essay “The Weight of the Word” (*CCW* 349-365).

[2] David Gervais. “The late flowering of Geoffrey Hill.” *PN Review* 35.1 (2008): 32-8.

[3] Given the continuous format of Hill’s recent volumes, all quotations from his poetry are referenced by page number.

[4] Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. and introd. Desmond Lee. Rev ed. London: Penguin, 1987, pp. 255-64.

[5] Hill’s theory of poetic “at-one-ment” has been challenged by Christopher Ricks, who argues that in fact Hill often writes with “the sense of honourably *not* being able to grasp such a perfect concord” (*Force* 323, Ricks’ italics). I should argue, *pace* Ricks, that Hill is suggesting that “at-one-ment” should be a poet’s ultimate goal; he is not arguing that it has always to be achieved.

[6] All quotations from *A Treatise of Civil Power* are from the 2007 Penguin edition.

[7] The Edward Thomas quotation is from his poem “Thaw”.

[8] The *OED* records an original association of ‘bard’ with occasional (i.e. written for a particular event) verse, often represented as mechanical or uninspired.

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