

Geoffrey Hill: poet of sequences

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Abstract

Geoffrey Hill is a poet who writes mainly in the form of poetic sequences. This thesis examines Hill's sequences to illuminate his poetic career, especially the proliferation of published poetry in the last twenty years of his life. The introduction defines 'sequence' and offers a taxonomy of the forty-five sequences in *Broken Hierarchies*. The first chapter examines 'Metamorphoses' in terms of generic ambiguity. The second discusses 'Of Commerce and Society' as variation and disrelation. Chapter 3 explores the forms of Hill's sequences from the 1960s and 1970s in terms of what he, following Hopkins, calls 'the monumentality / bidding nexus'. It examines 'Funeral Music' as processional; 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz' as implicit moral drama; *Mercian Hymns* as his first book-length sequence; 'The Pentecost Castle' as song cycle; 'Lachrimae' as dance; and 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' as historical imaginary. Chapter 4 studies the book-length sequences from the middle phase of Hill's career – *The Triumph of Love*; *Speech! Speech!*; *The Orchards of Syon*; and *Scenes from Comus* – with respect to extension, epanorthosis, relationality, and multimodality. It argues that the sequence-form allows Hill to incorporate shortcomings of the self; to stage character comedy; and mix modes in ways which prevent any single mode from dominating. This emboldens him to include *laus et vituperatio*, the confessional, and the farcical, along with polemical interventions in 'culture wars'. Chapter 5 explores the aesthetics of dissonance and how sequence represents selfhood and time, over a long-term project: *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres*, 1982-2012. The final chapter discusses Hill's early models of sequence; notes mid-length sequences in *Canaan*, *Without Title*, and *A Treatise of Civil Power*; suggests that sequence releases Hill from the impasse of lyrical perfectionism; and sketches a critical approach to *The Daybooks* and *The Book of Baruch*.

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List of Abbreviations

BH	<i>Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012</i>
KL	<i>King Log</i> (1968)
MH	<i>Mercian Hymns</i> (1971)
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OS	<i>The Orchards of Syon</i> (2002)
SC	<i>Scenes from Comus</i> (2005)
SS	<i>Speech! Speech!</i> (2000)
TL	<i>The Triumph of Love</i> (1998)
TLN	Through Line Numbering (in Norton facsimile Shakespeare Folio)

Introduction: Hill's sequences

Geoffrey Hill is a poet who wrote mainly in sequences. This has been critically neglected. It is the single most important factor in explaining the trajectory of Hill's overall career as a poet, and the contrast between his early and late work. Throughout his poetic life he wrote in the form of poetic sequence and from 1998 onwards he was publishing prolifically in the form of book-length sequences.

The propositions above have ramifications for how we read Hill. His poetry escapes the aesthetic of the short lyric, the well-wrought urn or two inches of ivory, whose ideal is to be finished, flawless, compressed, intense, exquisite, polished, self-contained. Most of Hill's poetry, and nearly all his later poetry is written as poetic sequence: open-ended, imperfect, expansive, extensive, awkward, rough-surfaced, and composed of inter-relating sections.

Defining 'sequence'

Critics may have been deterred from studying Hill's sequences by a fundamental definitional problem. The meaning of the term 'poetic sequence' is debatable, and a 'sequence' seems hard to distinguish from a 'long-form poem', especially a long poem in numbered parts. One shades into the other. The problem is immediate. 'Genesis' is in five numbered sections, so should we think of it as a sequence in five sections?¹ Intuitively, it does not seem to be sequence. Also, in *For the Unfallen*, the poem 'Doctor Faustus' (BH, 31) has three sections which are both numbered and titled. Should this be categorised as a sequence? Each section of 'Doctor Faustus' is only eight lines long, so if it is a sequence, it is a short one, but the way in which the sections are set obliquely to one another is reminiscent of the technique of the modernist sequence. If it is ineligible on the grounds of shortness, then where is the numerical limit and how long must a poem be to qualify as 'sequence'? The problem recurs with 'Asmodeus' (BH, 14) and 'The Assisi Fragments' (BH, 60) which are both in two numbered parts. Are these poems to be thought of as sequence, as proto-sequence, or just as lyric in numbered sections? The problem threatens to scupper any attempt to define the set of Hill's sequences, which is a precondition for meaningful study of the difference between lyric and sequence in his poetry.

¹ Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems, 1952-2012*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 3. Hereinafter, BH.

My first expedient was to posit a list of sequences which was conservative in the sense of deliberately cautious. So, in the case of *For the Unfallen I* restricted the set of sequences to 'Metamorphoses' and 'Of Commerce and Society' on the grounds that these are *indubitably* sequence. The solution was pragmatic in that it enabled study of a limited (but still substantial) set of sequences. But it was unsatisfactory because in tolerating conceptual fuzziness about the distinction between lyric and sequence, it foiled analysis of the move from the former to the latter. Is *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, for example, to be categorised as a sequence or as 'a long poem' which is how Hill described it?² Suppose one tried to compare the extent of sequence in Hill's first two books with three later books. The grey area would be so large as to preclude meaningful conclusions. Under my conservative definition, Hill's first two books have four sequences, but under a more liberal definition there are fifteen poems in numbered sections, which might all be categorised as sequences. Four or fifteen? It makes all the difference. Likewise, in three later anthologies – *Canaan* (1996), *Without Title* (2006) and *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007) – there are thirty-three poems in numbered sections which might all qualify as sequence, although my conservative approach ruled them all out. Again, zero or thirty-three is a difference so great as to render discussion meaningless.

Fortunately, there is a solution. The editorial apparatus of *Broken Hierarchies* affords a method to define the complete set of sequences as understood by Geoffrey Hill and as presented by his editor, Kenneth Haynes. The method is reliable but somewhat indirect since it involves using the 'Index of First Lines', which implicitly distinguishes between a single poem in several sections and a sequence of poems that share a title.

The 'Index of First Lines' amounts to twenty-four pages (BH, pages 951 to 975) largely because it includes the first lines of each section in all sequences. Thus, it includes the opening line of all 150 sections in *The Triumph of Love*, all 120 sections in *Speech! Speech!*, all 68 sections in *The Orchards of Syon* and all 120 sections in *Scenes from Comus*. In the same way it includes the opening line of all eight sections in 'Funeral Music' and of all eleven sections in 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz'. But it does not include the opening line of all sections in 'Genesis', 'Doctor Faustus' and 'The Assisi Fragments'. For these poems only the opening line of the whole is indexed. This difference is unlikely to be accidental given the care with which Geoffrey Hill curated his work and the

² Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc', (Thame: Clutag Press, 2006). Track 13.

attention to detail of his editor, Kenneth Haynes. It seems reasonable to infer that poet and editor have decided that in the case of a sequence the opening line of each section is to be indexed, whilst in the case of a poem-in-sections (such as 'Genesis') only the first line of the whole is to be indexed. If this be so, then a check in the 'Index of First Lines' will suffice to tell us whether the editor considered a poem to be a sequence or a poem-in-sections.

In light of the above, I emailed Hill's editor, Professor Kenneth Haynes, with a definitional question as to the difference between a sequence and a poem-in-sections. I wanted to know whether his 'Index of First Lines' could be used to distinguish the one from the other. I therefore asked him what was the principle by which he decided whether to index the first lines of all sections in poems of more than one section. Why, for example, does his 'Index of First Lines' include two entries for 'Asmodeus' (in two parts) but only one for 'Genesis' (in five parts), and only one for 'Doctor Faustus' (in three parts). Likewise, why does it give three entries for 'Improvisations for Hart Crane' but only one for 'Improvisations for Jimi Hendrix' (although it has four sections). Again, why would there be two entries for 'Tu B'Shevat' but only one entry for 'Discourse: For Stanley Rosen' (although it has three sections)? Rather than enumerating further instances, I asked Professor Haynes more generally if his index offered a way to distinguish a sequence from a poem-in-sections. Had he and Hill followed some rationale which differentiated a sequence (in which case opening lines of each section were to be indexed) from a poem-in-sections (in which case only the opening line of the first section was to be indexed)?

Professor Haynes replied:

You are right about distinction between a single poem in several sections and a sequence of poems that share a title. The distinction was carefully — I'd say pedantically — observed and imposed in BH. As you noted, the index of first lines will clarify which poems form part of a larger sequence, in contrast to poems that are made up of sections...

In answer to your specific questions: in *Broken Hierarchies*, Asmodeus consists of several poems, as do Improvisations for Hart Crane and Tu B'Shevat, whereas Genesis, Doctor Faustus, and Discourse: For Stanley Rosen are single poems, each in several sections. I made sure to write "in *Broken Hierarchies*" just now because this was a retrospective distinction imposed on earlier poems by the specific needs of editing the oeuvre as an oeuvre. I wouldn't take it too solemnly. (I don't myself understand why he decided to mark Discourse as a single poem rather than a sequence.) If Hill thought it was important to make the difference

obvious to readers as they encounter the poems themselves, he would have done so.³

It is not surprising that Haynes as editor was cooperating with Hill, nor that Hill was scrupulous in discriminating between a single poem in several sections (such as 'Improvisations for Jimi Hendrix') and a sequence of poems that share a title (such as 'Improvisations for Hart Crane'). Haynes' terminology differs from mine in that he does not here speak of sequences as having 'sections'. Instead, he describes the unit which I have called a 'section' as being a 'poem', such that a sequence is then understood as 'a sequence of poems that share a title'. In these terms, *The Triumph of Love* would be described as 'a sequence of 150 poems that share a title', rather than 'a poem of 150 sections'. Haynes' terminology emphasises the completeness and autonomy of the individual unit (150 'poems'), which also justifies why the first line of each 'poem' in a sequence would be recorded in the 'Index of First Lines'. But in his readings Hill would also refer to the parts of his longer sequences as 'sections'. Introducing *The Orchards of Syon* he says 'I will read two or three poems from, two or three sections from, that book. This is section 36.'⁴ The repetition might be a correction, or a near-synonymous apposition. It amounts to a difference of emphasis and this thesis will have recourse to both the words 'poem' and 'section' to describe parts of a sequence.

When Haynes writes that the distinction between a single poem in several sections and a sequence of poems that share a title 'was carefully — I'd say pedantically — observed and imposed in BH', we may observe some tension between the two verbs. To 'observe' a distinction suggests that the distinction inheres in the material whereas to 'impose' a distinction suggests that it has been imported from without. There is also some adverbial tension between the distinction being observed and imposed 'carefully — I'd say pedantically' and the later sentence 'I wouldn't take it too solemnly.' If a distinction has been observed by Geoffrey Hill and his editor 'carefully', even 'pedantically', then it deserves to be taken at least seriously, if not 'too solemnly'.

Initial taxonomy

Haynes' explanation, cited above, allied to his 'Index of First Lines', serves to clarify grey areas to the point of eliminating them. It enables us to define what Hill understood to be his sequences, and to state with confidence that *Broken Hierarchies* contains forty-five such sequences. These are listed in the first

³ Kenneth Haynes, 'Email of 16 November 2020', ed. by Edward Reiss (2020).

⁴ Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc'. Track 24.

column of the table below, in which the fifteen book-length sequences are italicised. The table is first presented before the descriptive terms of the second and third column are explained and discussed.

Initial taxonomy of poetic sequences in *Broken Hierarchies*.

'Asmodeus'	Isomorphic?	Rhymed
'Two Formal Elegies'	Isomorphic?	Rhymed
'Metamorphoses'	Hemi-isomorphic?	Rhymed
'Of Commerce and Society'	Hemi-isomorphic?	Rhymed
'Annunciations'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'Locust Songs'	Isomorphic x	Rhymed
'Funeral Music'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance...'	Anisomorphic	Unrhymed
'Soliloquies'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'Three Baroque Meditations'	Isomorphic x	Unrhymed?
'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz'	Anisomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>Mercian Hymns</i>	Isomorphic x	Unrhymed
'The Pentecost Castle'	Isomorphic	Rhymed
'Lachrimae'	Isomorphic	Rhymed
'An Apology for the Revival...'	Isomorphic	Rhymed
'Two Chorale-Preludes'	Isomorphic	Rhymed
<i>The Mystery of the Charity...</i>	Isomorphic x	Rhymed
<i>Hymns to our Lady... (1982-2012)</i>	Isomorphic	Rhymed
'To the High Court of Parliament'	Anisomorphic Sp.	Unrhymed
'Dark-Land'	Isomorphic Sp.	Unrhymed
'Mysticism and Democracy'	Hemi-isomorphic? Sp.	Unrhymed
'Scenes with Harlequins'	Isomorphic x	Unrhymed
'Parentalia'	Isomorphic Sp.	Unrhymed
'De Jure Belli ac Pacis'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed

'Churchill's Funeral'	Isomorphic x	Unrhymed
'Psalms of Assize'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>The Triumph of Love</i>	Anisomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>Speech! Speech!</i>	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>The Orchards of Syon</i>	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>Scenes from Comus</i>	Hemi-isomorphic?	Unrhymed
'On the Reality of the Symbol'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'Tu B'Shevat'	Hemi-isomorphic	Unrhymed
'In the Valley of the Arrow'	Hemi-isomorphic	Unrhymed
'Improvisations for Hart Crane'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>Pindarics (2005-2012)</i>	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'Holbein'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'To the Lord Protector Cromwell'	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
'A Précis or Memorandum of Civil Power'	Isomorphic x	Unrhymed
<i>Ludo</i>	Hemi-isomorphic	Rhymed
<i>Expostulations on the Volcano</i>	Isomorphic	Rhymed
<i>Liber Illustrium Virorum</i>	Isomorphic	Rhymed
<i>Oraclau Oracles</i>	Isomorphic	Rhymed
<i>Clavics</i>	Isomorphic	Rhymed
<i>Odi Barbare</i>	Isomorphic	Unrhymed
<i>Al Tempo de' Tremuoti</i>	Isomorphic x	Rhymed

To the forty-five sequences in the first column of the above table should be added Hill's posthumous *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* (2019), which is isomorphic, though not isometric, and which makes extensive use of internal rhyme. This thesis also refers to the 2006 version of 'Pindarics' and to the 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' of 1985 and 2009. Being absent from *Broken Hierarchies*, these are also missing from the table above. Other omissions may come as a surprise. For example, the table excludes 'Tenebrae', a poem in eight sections, which Sherry, Knottenbelt and Wainwright all describe

as the 'title sequence'.⁵ On the other hand, the table includes the much slighter 'Two Chorale-Preludes' from the same collection. The Hill/Haynes selection also excludes 'Canaan', a poem in three sections, which one might equally have supposed to be the title sequence of the eponymous book.

One could take issue with Hill's selection of sequences and propose a different list, but there is no cause to do so. Hill's selection provides a definitive list and useful parameters for further study. If it be objected that his list is itself arbitrary, then at least it is arbitrated by the poet himself. A further benefit is that his list stands midway between the 'conservative' and 'liberal' extremes. Thus, he identifies eleven sequences in his first two books (rather than four or fifteen) and fifteen sequences in the three later anthologies (rather than zero or thirty-three).

The first column, then, is an objective list of sequences as understood by Hill. The second and third columns begin to classify these sequences into categories. The 'isomorphic' sequence is composed of sections (or poems) of equal shape and form. Note that the term 'isomorphic' refers to a homology between the component parts of a sequence, not to the form of an individual section itself. Thus, a sequence composed of three forms – say, its first section a sestina, its second a sonnet and its third a triolet – would be classified as anisomorphic, because the sections are in different forms. Where the sections are in unequal blocks of free verse, I count this as anisomorphic (although theoretically they might be classed as isomorphic by virtue of all being in free verse).

An example of the isomorphic sequence is 'Funeral Music', which is composed of eight unrhymed sonnets. Subsequent isomorphic sequences include the four sequences in *Tenebrae* and the book-length isomorphic sequences: *Speech! Speech!*, *The Orchards of Syon*, and *The Daybooks*. 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres', in all three versions (1985, 2009 and 2013) is written in sections, each of five rhymed quatrains, and is therefore an isomorphic, isometric sequence. So too is (or are) 'Pindarics' (2006 and 2013), in that the poems are formally alike, each being composed of a strophe (nine lines), antistrophe (nine lines) and epode (five lines).

⁵ Vincent B. Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), p. 180.
 Elisabeth Mary Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, (Amsterdam; Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1990), p. 229.
 Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 42.

Some sequences are composed of poems which share the same form but are of differing length. In other words, they are isomorphic but not isometric. Examples are *Mercian Hymns* and *The Book of Baruch*, where each poem has the same form (versets of rhythmic prose in long verse-lines which are indented after the first line of type, giving them a hanging indent, and right-justified) which is isomorphic, but versets are of differing lengths (anisometric). Likewise, *Al Tempo de' Tremuoti* is isomorphic in that it is all written in quatrains, but anisometric because sections differ in length. This is registered in the table above as 'isomorphic x'. It is evident that most of Hill's sequences, particularly his later sequences, are isomorphic.

The opposite of the isomorphic sequence is the anisomorphic sequence, in poems of heterogeneous form, as in 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz'. There can be scope for debate as to whether a sequence be categorised as isomorphic or anisomorphic. A sequence which mixes elements of isomorphic with anisomorphic is termed 'hemi-isomorphic'. Ticklish cases are registered as 'Hemi-isomorphic?'.

In *Canaan* four sequences are composed of separate poems sharing the same title and spread through the book, separated from each other. There are three poems called 'To the High Court of Parliament, November 1994' (BH, 171, 216, 235); and five poems called 'Mysticism and Democracy' (BH, 183, 193, 210, 220, 234), two of which (BH, 193, 220) are themselves divided into numbered sections. Likewise, *Canaan* features three poems called 'Dark-Land' (BH, 182, 194, 219); and two poems titled 'Parentalia' (BH, 196, 209). We could call these 'broken' or 'disrupted' or 'intermittent' sequences, but this thesis will prefer Roberts' term which is 'spaced sequence'.⁶ The four spaced sequences are registered in the table above with the sign 'Sp.'

Sequences can also be categorised by whether they use rhyme (including half-rhyme). The taxonomy above shows that Hill moved in and out of rhyme in five distinct phases. The sequences in *For the Unfallen* (1) use rhyme, whilst those in *King Log* (2) are mostly unrhymed, as is *Mercian Hymns*. With *Tenebrae*, *The Mystery of the Charity* and *Hymns to our Lady* (3), Hill moves back to rhyme. *Canaan* (4) marks a significant move away from rhyme which leads to a series of unrhymed book-length sequences, before in *The Daybooks* (5) he returns to rhymed forms. Although *Odi Barbare* does not rhyme, its Sapphic metre acts as a constraint not unlike rhyme. Hill's posthumous *Book of Baruch* is outstanding for its use of conspicuous internal rhyme. It is therefore evident that Hill's poetic sequences mostly use rhyme except for two substantial phases without rhyme.

⁶ Andrew Michael Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, (Tavistock: Northcote, 2004), p. 62.

These are (1) *King Log* (1968) and *Mercian Hymns* (1971); and (2) the sequences from *Canaan* (1996) through to *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007) including the five book-length sequences from that period.

The extent of Hill's sequences

The list of sequences as given above indicates that, measuring by number of pages, 85% of *Broken Hierarchies* is in the form of poetic sequence. All the poetry from the last nine prolific years of his life was in the form of poetic sequence. But Hill had been working in the sequence-form from his early years as a poet and throughout his career. In *For the Unfallen* (1959) Hill dates his early sequences: 'Asmodeus' (1955), 'Two Formal Elegies' (1955-56), 'Metamorphoses' (1954-56) and 'Of Commerce and Society' (1956-58). He continued to work in sequence for *King Log* (1968) which contains ten lyric poems and seven sequences. *Mercian Hymns* (1971) is the first of his sixteen book-length sequences. Three sequences in *Tenebrae* (1978) – 'The Pentecost Castle', 'Lachrimae' and 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' – are Hill's major poetic achievement from the mid and late 1970s. In *Broken Hierarchies* he dates *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres* as being 1982-2012. The expansion of this work in three stages – from three sections to seven and then to twenty-one – is the subject of chapter 5. From 1998 a great increase in Hill's poetic output occurs with four unrhymed, book-length sequences from *The Triumph of Love* (1998) through to *Scenes from Comus* (2005). To this was added 'Pindarics' (2006), a sequence in twenty-one poems which constitutes the middle third of *Without Title* (2006), and which is revised and expanded into thirty-four poems given their own separate 'book', dated 2005-2012 in *Broken Hierarchies* (2013). The last third of *Broken Hierarchies* contains *Ludo* (2011) and the six *Daybooks* dated 2007-2012. These are all sequences in set forms and at book length. The posthumous *Book of Baruch* (2019), composed in the last five or six years of Hill's life, is a sequence of some 271 poems. If we think of *Baruch* as a continuation of *Broken Hierarchies*, then the last 476 pages of Hill's published poetry are all in the form of book-length sequences. The book-length sequence had become Hill's principal and default form.

Sequence and productivity

Hill's increased use of sequence is a technical, formal and generic solution to the problem of writer's block and 'drying up'. Brooding on how poets from a previous generation had approached the problem of ageing, Hill found two cautionary warnings and two inspiring examples. Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

published his last slender (33 page) volume of poetry, *High Windows*, in 1974, at the age of fifty-two, and, subsequently, apart from a few one-offs, notably 'Aubade', deserted, or was deserted by, the Muse. T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) also fell in his fifties, according to Hill, 'into a kind of dereliction of the critical imagination' along with 'an unwilling dereliction of the creative faculty'.⁷ Against the decline of Larkin and Eliot, Hill looked for inspiration to the examples of Yeats and Pound. Yeats had addressed himself to the horrors and indignities of ageing in his later poems, whilst Pound, ever a master of the fragmentary, moved with his *Cantos* towards writing a sequence both fragmentary and boundless. It seems that Hill used sequence as a spur to keep writing. Something in the form or process of sequence liberated him to write more copiously. It gave him the space in which to work more freely with persona-in-change, drawing the weaknesses of the self into his poetry and performing a comedy of embattled and conflicted selfhood. The capacious potential of sequence allowed Hill to exploit his keen sense of imperfection and dissonance on a larger scale. All this enabled him to be more productive. The thesis recuses itself from addressing an important question about the quality of the poetry – whether it declines.

Hill's resort to sequence is the single most important technical or formal factor in his increased productivity. It has become customary, almost *de rigueur*, for articles on Hill to contrast the early 'costive' output with the outpouring of his later years, although critics fail to link this to his writing in sequence. In 1970 Edward Lucie-Smith had described Hill as 'a poet so compressed and elliptical that it is difficult to avoid the word "costive"'.⁸ The adjective, suggesting constipation, stuck as a descriptor of Hill's earlier work. 'For four decades, Mr Hill was the most costive of poets', wrote Adam Kirsch in reviewing *Without Title*.⁹ The word 'costive' served as short-hand to contrast the early work with the later, with the dividing-line somewhere around *Canaan* (1996). Whilst Jeremy Noel-Tod described *Canaan* as 'costive',¹⁰ William Wootten claimed that '[f]rom 1996's *Canaan* on, the costive impersonality of Hill's earlier work has been shredded to reveal a poet more nakedly rivalrous and rancorous, more overtly ungenteel, more flagrantly assertive of bad taste and distaste than he

⁷ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 563, 64. (Hereinafter, CCW).

⁸ Edward Lucie-Smith, *British Poetry since 1945*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 240.

⁹ Adam Kirsch, 'The Long-Cherished Anger of Geoffrey Hill', *The New York Sun*, 28 March 2007.

¹⁰ Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Awkward Bow', *London Review of Books*, 25. 5 (2003). 6 March 2003.

ever was before.’¹¹ Another journalistic stand-by was the image of a dam bursting. ‘And then, from *Canaan* (1996) onwards, the dam burst’.¹² ‘Then the dam burst: beginning with *Canaan* in 1996[...].’¹³

Hill’s phenomenal productivity can be quantified in various ways. His poetry publication in the first twenty years of his writing-life (from *For the Unfallen* of 1959 to *Tenebrae* of 1978) amounts to 140 pages in *Broken Hierarchies*. In the last twenty years of his life (1996 to 2016) his poetry publication amounts to some 767 pages. Taking these figures at face value, the increased rate of production is more than fivefold, but the comparison by number of pages understates the expansion in two ways. Firstly, the later work is presented in a more compact way. Later sequences, *Ludo* and *Al Tempo De’ Tremuoti*, are arranged such that one section immediately follows the next with no white space, whereas ‘Funeral Music’, ‘The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz’, and *Mercian Hymns* are laid out with one section per page so that much of the page is blank space. Moreover, early lyrics are also presented one per page such that there is plentiful white space around them. Secondly, the figures given refer only to *Broken Hierarchies* whose cut-off point is 2012 so that the 767 pages represent sixteen years of publishing, not twenty. To compare like with like — the first two decades of Hill’s published life as a poet with his last two decades — we would have to include his posthumous publication, *The Book of Baruch* (2019). Adding its 143 pages to the sum of Hill’s output, we find an increase which is more than sixfold or (allowing for white space) sevenfold. For the sake of accuracy, it would be better to measure the expansion in terms of words written rather than pages covered, but I have not computed it by that metric.

Hill’s greatly increased rate of production in the last two decades of his life has been linked to changes in his medication. This is partly on the poet’s say-so. In his *Paris Review* interview, conducted in 1999, he mentioned getting ‘the right kind of dosage’ for treatment of ‘chronic depression’ and ‘various exhausting obsessive-compulsive phobias’. He said there were ‘several causes’ for his ‘unlooked for creative release’, among them his medication, which made him feel ‘more at home in the world’, having ‘a degree of emotional freedom that

¹¹ William Wootten, *The Alvarez Generation: Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and Peter Porter*, (Liverpool, England: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 193.

¹² Nicholas Lezard, ‘The Greatest Living Poet in English’, *The Guardian*, *Review*, 23 November, (2013), p. 6.

¹³ Daniel Johnson, ‘Geoffrey Hill and the Poetry of Ideas’, *Standpoint*, June 2014, (p. 48).

allows me to push on, hard and fast, with my work in good faith and with a sort of quiet confidence in myself.'¹⁴

Hill's increased productivity also corresponds closely to a change in genre as he moves from lyric to sequence. This move is both cause and consequence of his increased output. The sequence-form, almost by definition, permits iteration, digression, correction and return. No single utterance, no single unit need carry the burden of finality. Something can be assayed, safe in the knowledge that it is not the last word but can be revisited, reassessed, reframed or retracted. For a poet highly sensitive, indeed hypersensitive, to the responsibility and consequence of the art, wary of '[t]he tongue's atrocities' (BH, 61), this provides reassurance. The additive principle stimulates recalibration and further invention, where 'invention' is the literary 'devising of a subject, idea, or method of treatment, by exercise of the intellect or imagination' (OED 3. b.). The sequence-form tolerates and even welcomes local imperfection because it works on a larger scale where each component is contrasting or contradicting or setting up or reflecting on another. Given the candour with which Hill discussed his poetry in interview, it is regrettable that no interviewer ever asked him in any detail about the contribution of the sequence-form to his career as a poet.

Review of the critical literature

Writing in 1988, Holly Laird observed that 'the poetic sequence as a genre has drawn astonishingly little attention'.¹⁵ Her assessment holds true in 2020. Whilst there are studies of individual sequences, especially those of the great modernists, there is little study of poetic sequence *as a genre*. The main exception is from nearly forty years ago: *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* by M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall.¹⁶ Having noted criticism's 'strange blindness to... the towering presence of a genre that has dominated the ambition of every great modern poet', Rosenthal and Gall define the modern sequence as 'a grouping of mainly lyric poems and passages, rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole'.¹⁷ The definition does not quite fit Hill's isomorphic sequences which use uniformity of form to build monumentality. Rosenthal and Gall propose that the modern poetic sequence is made up of 'centers of intensity' and depends for its life 'on a

¹⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', ed. by Carl Phillips (*The Paris Review*, 154, Spring 2000).

¹⁵ Holly A. Laird, *Self and Sequence: The Poetry of D. H. Lawrence*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), p. xi.

¹⁶ M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

¹⁷ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, pp. 5, 9.

progression of specific qualities and intensities of emotionally and sensuously charged awareness'.¹⁸ Despite the adjective 'specific' this is quite general and perhaps must be since it is generalising about such a large and disparate body of work. The word 'awareness' is a vague one on which to establish a critical position. It may be that some of the best poetry springs from lack of awareness. The word 'progression' applies to *Mercian Hymns*, which the authors discuss, but is too ordered for Hill's later sequences.¹⁹ This thesis will not be examining poetic sequence in terms of progression or intensities or awareness, but in terms of relation, disrelation and multimodality. It also considers how sequence represents selfhood and time.

What then does the sequence-form contribute to the development of Hill's poetry? Among the few critics to broach, approach or address the question are Brown (1980), Sherry (1987), and Roberts (2000, 2004 and 2020 ed.).

Merle E. Brown, who died in late 1978, and wrote about Hill's poetry up to and including *Tenebrae*, may have been the first to articulate the significance of Hill's move towards sequence. Having admired the 'mystic miracle' of the second of Hill's 'Three Baroque Meditations', Brown wrote 'it seems unavoidable that from this mystic miracle Hill would move on to the more indirect, ampler forms of "Funeral Music", "The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz", *Mercian Hymns*, and the more recent "Lachrimae".'²⁰ In retrospect, these words might anticipate that the poet would continue to favour the 'indirect, ampler forms' of sequence. If Brown was indeed edging towards such a prediction, his argument was hampered by problems of definition, for he discussed both 'Three Baroque Meditations' and 'Soliloquies' as if they were lyric poems, although by the Hill/Haynes definition both would count as sequences.

Brown takes Hill's sequences to be 'lyrical', not in the sense of 'impulse bodied forth in words, or as narrative', but rather as 'double lyrics or dramatic lyrics [which] are more authentic, closer to the way thoughtful, engaged human beings actually behave, than anything of a self-expressive nature can be, or anything that can be staged objectively or theatrically.'²¹ This claim is all the bolder for using the verb 'behave' rather than 'think'. Brown praises these poems because they do not only present a scene, but also 'implicate the act of

¹⁸ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, p. 6. Their italics.

¹⁹ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, pp. 299-307.

²⁰ Merle E. Brown, *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 34.

²¹ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 37.

their making by Hill himself.²² In so doing, the poem can double up and turn on its maker, as descriptive and evaluative modes flip into self-accusation. The sequences then become 'so dense, so multi-layered, so polyphonic' that 'it is hard to say anything that is more than partly true of them.' (p. 38) When Brown regrets that he as critic may show intricacies in these sequences 'but not power, not explosiveness, not anguish, and not insight', this very expression of failure and frustration itself gestures eloquently towards the insight, anguish, explosiveness and power of Hill's sequences.²³

Sherry (1987) is writing up to and including *The Mystery of the Charity* (1983): a body of work which contains seventeen sequences by the Hill/Haynes definition. Sherry writes about all seventeen, although five of them — 'Asmodeus', 'Two Formal Elegies', 'Annunciations', 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets', and 'Two Chorale-Preludes' — he never describes as 'sequence'. On the other hand, he does take 'Tenebrae' to be a sequence.²⁴ Sherry is sharp to the presence of sequence and notes how individual volumes are shaped by sequences. Thus, he observes that 'all three of Hill's volumes of lyrics contain sequences'; that the structure of *King Log* 'is supplied by two sequences'; and that '*Tenebrae* is entirely dominated by its four sequences'.²⁵ He also notes that *Mercian Hymns* and *The Mystery of the Charity* 'are textured like long modernist sequences'.²⁶ But, working without a clear definition of what constitutes 'sequence', he is not precise about calculating the extent of Hill's work in sequence. Perceptively though Sherry writes about individual sequences as sequences, and about how sequences structure collections, he never draws this together into an argument about the importance to Hill of the sequence as a form.

Andrew Michael Roberts is also alert to the significance of the sequence-form. His essay, Roberts (2000), couples 'An Apology' with 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy' seeing both as 'sequences concerned with the landscape of the past, literal and metaphorical'.²⁷ His subsequent book, Roberts (2004), notes that 'the non-narrative book-length poetic sequence has since [*Canaan*, 1996] become established as Hill's most important form'.²⁸ Roberts

²² Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 37.

²³ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 38.

²⁴ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 158. p. 188.

²⁵ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*. pp. 158, 86, 158.

²⁶ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 3.

²⁷ Andrew Michael Roberts, 'Geoffrey Hill and Pastiche: "An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England" And *the Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13. 1 (2000). p. 154.

²⁸ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, pp. 29-30.

describes the form as 'a single, multi-part poem which, while including fragments of narrative and description, is essentially neither narrative [...] nor descriptive.' Instead, Hill creates 'a dialogue or cacophony of multiple voices' in which the voice of his own persona 'is constantly interrupted, undercut and quarrelled with, from within and without, by other voices and other discourses.' This moves Hill's poetry towards 'those forms of postmodernist or avant-garde poetry which displace subjectivity into discursive multiplicity' though 'Hill's trajectory remains unique.'²⁹ Roberts notes different kinds of sequence. For example, he describes 'The Songbook' and *Mercian Hymns* as 'sequences mediated through a persona, an other, or a double'.³⁰ Regrettably, the structure of Roberts (2004) functions to suppress an incipient line of argument about the importance of Hill's move to the book-length sequence. For the analysis is arranged in three chapters based on themes: 'Identity and Otherness', 'History and Politics', 'Faith and Doubt'. This thematic perspective disrupts a potential argument about form and sequence.

Something similar happens in Roberts (2020). The introduction sketches a potential line of argument which then goes largely undeveloped by the subsequent essays in the book. That introduction identifies and summarises 'a set of antitheses between "early" and "late" Hill'. The work up to Hill's *Collected Poems* of 1985 'takes the form of highly concentrated lyrics, prose poems and short sequences (often sonnets)'. After *Canaan* (1996), there follows 'a later phase' in which '[t]he book-length sequence dominates', with most sequences 'in regular sections of defined length' and featuring 'performed and imagined dialogue'.³¹ True though this is, the essays in the book tend to take it for granted or ignore it, rather than seeing it as the basis for further analysis of Hill's career and the role of the sequence-form, especially the book-length sequence, in building his poetry.

Sequence, genre and mode

In arguing, as the first chapter of this thesis does, that one of Hill's early sequences, 'Metamorphoses', enacts and exemplifies generic metamorphosis, and that subsequent sequences are 'multi-modal', a terminological question arises as to usage of the words 'genre' and 'mode'. In this thesis, the term 'genre' does not refer to broad categories of composition (such as fiction and non-fiction; or, under the latter heading, categories such as diaries, letters,

²⁹ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 30.

³⁰ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 101.

³¹ Andrew Michael Roberts, *Strangeness and Power: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2020), (p. 9).

speeches, autobiography, biography, reportage, travel writing, technical writing etc.). Instead, the word 'genre', as applied to a poem, is used in its root sense to refer to a *genus* of poem, or to its deep character; its form, perspective and purpose; its stance towards its subject, its reader and its world. In this sense and in this thesis, 'genre' refers to the central axis of a text.

A literary genre has been defined as 'a recognizable and established category of written work employing such common conventions as will prevent readers or audiences from mistaking it for another kind.'³² A kindred term is 'mode' which Baldick defines as 'an unspecific critical term usually designating a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood, or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre. Examples are the satiric mode, the ironic, the comic, the pastoral, and the didactic.' (Baldick, s. v. 'mode'.) Arguably, 'mode' can touch on more than 'literary method, mood, or manner' in that it suggests some idea of both subject-matter and the angle of approach to that subject-matter. For example, the elegiac mode has to do with loss and bereavement, and it approaches the subject in a recognisable way.

Writing about unrhymed sonnets ('Funeral Music'), versets (*Mercian Hymns*), clavics (the eponymous *Clavics*), and sapphics (*Odi Barbare*), Docherty describes these as 'genres' rather than 'forms' because 'genre is a wider word, a word that involves the formal characteristics of a poem with its attendant connotations and expectations: these connotations might be lexical, syntactical, thematic, stylistic, even visual – and often they are all of these.' Docherty attaches a footnote: 'Genre is a messier word than form, and consequently more useful'.³³ In this thesis I employ the words 'form', 'genre' and 'mode' on the understanding that their meanings shade into each other. 'Genre' and 'mode' are nearly synonymous. 'Genre' carries a more solid sense of fixity, propriety and stability, as of something prone to guard its boundaries and insist on its distinctness whereas 'mode' is lighter, readier to melt into another mode. Hill's poems often deploy conventions such that we are unsure what kind of poem we are reading. In the melding of modes one into another, the blending and contrasting of modes, lies much of the vitality and puzzle of the poetry. Like genre, mode establishes associations and expectations. Once we identify genre or mode, we know that a text is likely to be like x and we can expect y. These expectations and associations run deep in our store of literary knowledge. In activating them, mode and modal-switch connect with our deepest literary

³² Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). s. v. 'genre'. Hereinafter, Baldick.

³³ Thomas Michael Docherty, 'Consummatum Est: The End of the Word in Geoffrey Hill's Poetry' (Cambridge University PhD, 2017), p. 176.

intuitions and reach far into the latent intelligence of the critical imagination. A writer with the skill to deploy mode and the flair to ring modal changes holds the power to make deep connections and spring deep surprises. This is how so much of Hill's poetry works: by modulating mode, by skilful collage or even bricolage of modes.

Structure of this thesis

This thesis examines Hill's poetic sequences and presents Hill as a master of sequence. Rather than spreading its attention equally across all forty-five sequences in *Broken Hierarchies*, it selects examples. The first two chapters investigate two early sequences, 'Metamorphoses' and 'Of Commerce and Society' which have been critically neglected. Chapter 3 studies sequences from *King Log* (1968) to *Tenebrae* (1978), which are among Hill's best and best-known early work. This third chapter is focused on what Hill, adapting Hopkins, calls 'the monumentality / bidding nexus'. It refers to previous critics who have discussed these sequences as sequences (rather than as lyric poems). Together the first three chapters show Hill as a writer of varied, ambitious and successful sequences in the first phase of his poetry career.

Chapter 4 examines *The Triumph of Love* (1998) with further reference to three other book-length sequences from Hill's 'middle period': *Speech! Speech!* (2000), *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), and *Scenes from Comus* (2005). Reading *The Triumph* in terms of multimodality, it argues that sequence provided a secure frame in which Hill could work with 'dangerous' modes he had previously avoided, notably *laus et vituperatio*, the didactic, the polemical, the comic, the farcical, the confessional and the journalistic. Each of these modes would be likely to dominate any lyric in which it occurred, but in sequence each can be held in tension against the others.

Chapter 5 demonstrates how Hill moved from lyric to sequence. It does this by close reference to time, selfhood and dissonance in the three different versions of 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (1985, 2009 and 2013) Chapter 6 offers concluding thoughts on Hill as a writer of poetic sequences.

Overall, this thesis argues that Hill's poetry is different from what most of his critics suppose. Rather than being quintessentially a set of exquisite lyrics, it is predominantly in the form of sequences, indeed predominantly in the form of book-length sequences. The thesis shows when and where Hill's poetry moved decisively towards the book-length sequence and how this accounts for his vastly increased output. It also discusses why Hill adopted sequence as his preferred form and how he used the sequence-form to create effects impossible

in lyric. Underlying the thesis are questions about why critics have been slow to write about *The Daybooks* and how best to approach Hill's later poetry.

Assumptions, omissions and aims

This thesis presupposes that Hill's poetic sequences have meaning and are not merely, if satisfyingly, opaque. Whilst it sometimes discusses poetry in terms of theatre and art, it pays scant attention to dance and choreography. It also neglects musical influences, important though these be. These and other omissions are discussed in the conclusion. The thesis does not draw on Hill's sequences as a resource to illustrate something else, such as Hill and the philosophy of T. H. Green, or Hill and Symbolism, or Hill and religion.

This thesis opens a new perspective on Hill which is true to the facts of his publications. It examines how Hill's sequences work: their structural dynamic and organising principle. Although this thesis does not analyse *The Daybooks* or *The Book of Baruch*, it is oriented towards finding the right approach to these late books. It establishes a context from which they can be understood in their own terms as sequences, and as a culmination of Hill's longstanding practice of writing poetic sequences.

Chapter 1

‘Metamorphoses’: sequence as metamorphosis

Introduction

Little has been written about the sequences which appear in Hill’s first book, *For the Unfallen*. This is regrettable since these early sequences anticipate later developments. This chapter focuses on ‘Metamorphoses’. The aim is to explore it as a *sequence*; to examine the inter-relationships of its parts, both in their irreducible difference and in their necessary relationship; and thereby to investigate the constructive principle of the sequence: how it works as a whole. An argument about ‘generic ambiguity’ will be developed in chapter 4 into an argument about multimodality in *The Triumph of Love*.

Terminological note

The secret dynamic of ‘Metamorphoses’, which enables it to metamorphose, has to do with genre, generic ambiguity and generic mutability. Some explanation of terminology is necessary. By ‘generic ambiguity’ I mean indeterminacy as to what genre is in play. As different possible genres bring pressure to bear on the text, it may seem to change genre: a capacity which I refer to as ‘generic mutability’.

What though of this word ‘genre’? As outlined in the introduction, the word ‘genre’ is here used to refer to poetic genre, meaning the *type* of poem: its structure, orientation and intertextual association. It may also refer to the kind of speech-act towards which the poem directs its mimesis: eulogy, censure, warning, analysis, reproof, vow, joke etc.

Correct identification of genre (thus conceived) is fundamental in that a reader must decide, or at least make a working assumption about, the kind of text being read; how such a text normally functions; and whether this particular text deviates from a norm. From the reader’s point of view, our judgment as to genre establishes how we approach, situate and understand that text. Whether a text satisfies our expectations or controverts them, they are the frame through which we interpret it. Since no text (literary or otherwise) exists in isolation but is related to other texts (as part of an intertextual system) we must make a provisional best guess as to which system (or genre) it belongs with; and therefore, what conventions and attitudes it presupposes; and what kinds of assumptions we are to bring to it. In the case of ‘Metamorphoses’, that best guess is highly debatable.

The five sections of 'Metamorphoses' comprise, as a first approximation, five different kinds (or genres) of poem: i) riddle; ii) comic instruction; iii) compressed myth; iv) elegy or refused elegy; and v) mini-narrative. In each case, in each section, the genre is more complex, questionable and ambiguous than the first approximation allows. Whatever genre a section seems to be, it might be something else. 'Metamorphoses' is then, a site of generic ambiguity.

This term, 'generic ambiguity' is not among Empson's seven types.¹ But it is of great significance (and therefore a significant omission in Empson's taxonomy) since it is an ambiguity about the whole. By way of example, consider a film, exhibition or text where one is unsure whether it is homage or parody. This is a fundamental, underlying ambiguity which affects the whole. Or consider the song 'Clementine', whether it is elegy or comedy. Does it mock Clementine or mourn her, or both, or neither exactly?

Similar ambiguity of attitude informs each section of 'Metamorphoses'. Each contains latent generic alterity, which facilitates alteration in the (apparent) genre of the whole. Because both part and whole can appear to change genre, they can also change their apparent meaning in a trice. By switching genre, or our sense of the probable genre, Hill can alter the sequence more fundamentally than by changing a single image or choice of word (transformative though those may also be when skilfully effected). By exploiting possibilities of generic heterogeneity and genre-switch Hill can effectively metamorphose the poem as a whole and in a flash. Before examining this, however, we must first consider how the critics have dealt with Hill's 'Metamorphoses' or have brushed it aside.

Existing criticism of 'Metamorphoses'

An overview of critical responses to 'Metamorphoses' is largely a story of critical oversight. It is not considered as a sequence by Ricks,² nor by the contributors to Robinson (1985) – 'the first major collection of critical essays on [Hill's] work'³ – although Haughton invokes the title. "'Metamorphoses'", he writes, 'obscurely

¹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, (London: Penguin, 1995 [1930]).

² Christopher Ricks, 'Geoffrey Hill 2: At-One-Ment', in *The Force of Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Christopher Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and 'the Tongue's Atrocities'*, (Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1978); Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship : Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell under the Sign of Eliot and Pound*, (New Haven, Conn.; London: Yale University Press, 2010).

³ Peter Robinson, *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985). Back cover blurb.

invokes Ovid's title to preside over Hill's twistedly gnomic metamorphoses'.⁴ This is not 'gnomic' in the sense of consisting of 'gnomes or general maxims' (OED s.v. 'gnomic' adj. A a), but 'gnomic' meaning 'so terse, opaque etc. as to be difficult to understand' (Chambers Concise Dictionary, 2009), as in 'Metric makes gnomic' (OB, XX. BH 854). Following the adverbs 'obscurely' and 'twistedly', Haughton's formulation sounds both warning and dismissal. 'Metamorphoses' garners two brief mentions in Milne,⁵ and a further two in Wainwright (2005).⁶ The contributors to Lyon and McDonald (2012) ignore it.⁷ 'Metamorphoses' goes unmentioned in Pennington and Sperling (2011),⁸ Sperling (2014),⁹ Pestell (2016),¹⁰ Wylie (2019),¹¹ and Roberts (2020).¹²

Three critics have written about 'Metamorphoses' but fail to consider it adequately as sequence. Instead, they take it to be failed symbolist poem (Wallace D. Martin); intermittent narrative (Henry Hart); or thematic comment (Elisabeth Mary Knottenbelt). Each of these critical approaches will now be critiqued, before turning to Vincent Sherry's reading, then offering my own.

In an essay originally published in 1971 and reprinted in Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Views*, Martin introduces 'Metamorphoses' as 'one of the longer poems in *For the Unfallen*' and as 'a collage of five sections related to one another through overlapping themes and allusions to animals associated with Venus'.¹³ When Martin does use the word 'sequence' he immediately retreats from the implications of that term and endeavours instead to read 'Metamorphoses' 'as a symbolist poem', before declaring that 'even this' cannot be sustained.

It is possible to read the sequence as a symbolist poem involving the progress of the poet from bewildered naiveté to the realization that true love and song are possible only in the fate of Orpheus; there is not

⁴ Hugh Haughton, "'How Fit a Title. . .': Title and Authority in the Work of Geoffrey Hill", in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), (p. 133).

⁵ W. S. Milne, *An Introduction to Geoffrey Hill*, (London: Bellew, 1998).

⁶ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, pp. 58, 136.

⁷ John Lyon and Peter McDonald, *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁸ Piers Pennington and Matthew Sperling, *Geoffrey Hill and His Contexts*, (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

⁹ Matthew Sperling, *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Alex Pestell, *Geoffrey Hill: The Drama of Reason*, (Oxford; New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

¹¹ Alex Wylie, *Geoffrey Hill's Later Work: Radiance of Apprehension*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019).

¹² Roberts, *Strangeness and Power*.

¹³ Wallace D. Martin, 'Beyond Modernism', in *Geoffrey Hill*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986 [1971]), (p. 12).

however enough symbolic implication to sustain even this interpretation.¹⁴

It sounds as if the critic is trying his generous best before conceding defeat. The critic has made an initial allowance ('It is possible') giving the benefit of the doubt to something dubious, but unfortunately there is not enough symbolic interpretation to sustain 'even this interpretation'. The adverbial use of 'even' implies that there were several interpretations of which the most promising one has been chosen so that if 'even' this one cannot be sustained, to how much greater degree must the others also be doomed? The existence of these other interpretations is nebulous for Martin never provides them. Instead, he proceeds to discuss 'The Re-birth of Venus' as a 'juxtaposition of archetypes' and as if it held a truth to be revealed. 'What is revealed is not that "the center cannot hold" but that there never was a center, except in Yeats's system, and never a still point, except in Eliot's imagination.'¹⁵ This is to read 'The Re-birth' as a polemical, or covertly polemical, rebuke to Yeats and Eliot. It also makes the poem essentially didactic, as if a poem sets up an interpretative obstacle-course but offers its diligent reader the prize of a revelation. Martin never considers the sequence as a significant and necessary form in its own right.

Hart's reading of 'Metamorphoses' starts in a much more promising way.¹⁶ He presents his reading under the title 'Modernist Sequences' and observes that Hill 'arranges his sections like pictures in a gallery, with more emphasis on spatial than temporal relationships.' When he notes that Hill 'breaks up his narratives [...] into short, self-contained vignettes that focus intense energy' (p. 62), he presupposes that the sequence was conceived as narrative, or primarily still is narrative. This might imply or risk assuming that the critic's task is to recover a lost narrative, to piece together the ur-narrative which has been broken up. But since a 'vignette' can mean 'a short descriptive or evocative episode in a play' (OED s. v. 'vignette' n. 2. b) Hart's formulation could be presenting the sequence as a composition of brief dramatic intensities. Whilst these vignettes are 'self-contained' they also inter-relate and analysis must consider both these aspects.

Hart's initial observations offer a framework for understanding not only this sequence, but also Hill's subsequent sequences: most of his subsequent poetry. Based on them, we might expect the critic to analyse Hill's 'vignettes' in

¹⁴ Martin, 'Beyond Modernism', (p. 12).

¹⁵ Martin, 'Beyond Modernism', (p. 13).

¹⁶ Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 62-69.

terms of their spatial relationships, as 'self-contained' units, before examining how they stand in relation to each other both formally and thematically. Such a study might equally consider how the vignettes can be set in deliberate disrelation to each other, thereby generating a sense of dissonance, contention and mutual contradiction, often implicit and deep-rooted. This would serve to expose much in the sequences that seems quasi-dialectical, in the sense of proposing a thesis, then confronting it with antithesis – with any emergent synthesis rapidly challenged by a new antithesis. A study on such lines would elucidate the workings of Hill's 'militantly ruminative and sceptical utterance' (page 62). As it is, Hart ascribes this sceptical utterance to 'compressed syntax, weighted and often tortuously woven with ambiguity and paradox, metaphor and myth' (page 62). True as this is, it overlooks a deeper cause which has to do with the clash of contentious energies generated by counter-acting 'vignettes'.

When Hart proceeds to a reading of 'Metamorphoses', he honours his own precepts more in the breach than the observance. Rather than prioritising spatial relationships between the sections, he focuses on temporal relationships and simplifies the different sections into a single narrative. He postulates an explanatory love story such that the sequence is then supposed to chart the emotional transformation of 'the lover in mad pursuit of his beloved image' (p. 63).

In five episodes, [Hill] traces an erratic path between fear and love, ecstasy and sorrow. The plot resembles an Aristotelian tragedy, which Hill, however, shatters by recording the failure of catharsis rather than its happy fulfilment. It begins in desperation, struggles towards purgatory, comes to a climax with a violent crime, and ends with a failed reconciliation between lovers. (Hart, p. 63).

Hart reads the first section as two lovers 'estranged' by 'the fear which separates them' (page 63). He then misreads the second section as a 'sublime vision of civility' (page 66). To ensure continuity and feed the second section smoothly into the third, Hart posits that the lover is androgynous. 'When he does descend from his summit, he approaches the civilized world [...] as a lawless, ravenous shark' (page 65). The next critical challenge is to funnel the explanatory narrative from the third to the fourth section. This Hart tries to effect with two rhetorical questions. 'But what is the result of abandoning romantic notions of Elysian fields and majestic sea gods? An obsession with war?' (page 67) Hart claims that the 'immediate goal' of 'Metamorphoses' is 'reunion with an estranged beloved, but when Hill's lovers meet, they do so only to plot strategies of evasion.' (page 68). So 'Hill's lover enters the sea, with phallus "hammocked" in salty underclothes, rather ludicrously preparing himself for

amorous transformation.' (page 68). But the ludicrousness here stems more from Hart's interpretation than Hill's poem.

There are several reasons for rejecting Hart's method. First, it is naive in its elision of the poetic persona with Hill the poet. In the second section, addressing the 'unlyrical scapegoat', Hart conflates and confuses the poet and the poetic persona, as if this were a tale of Hill the poet. Thus, we are told that he (Hill) 'criticizes [...] He declares [...] he now tries [...] he battles [...] Hill wants [...] He fights [...] He goes to Parnassus [...] Hill playfully suggests [...] The poet mocks [...] The poet recognizes [...] He may wish [...]' (pages 64-5). Although the language of the poem distances itself from the antics of the scapegoat, the critic misses the poem's irony. Critically, he ignores the final stanza of the second section: a stanza which reverses the direction of the previous three stanzas.

Hart's approach to the sequence runs contrary to the critical precepts he himself proposed. He neglects the 'spatial' relationships of the sequence (as poetry) in favour of its temporal relationships (as narrative). Ingenious though his narrative is, it compels him to dissolve the sections in their particularity and reconstitute them into a narrative mould of his own design. It is mistaken to presuppose that the sequence is governed by a covert narrative, or that the task of the reader is to find a plausible narrative thread with which to draw the sections of the sequence together. Likewise, it is wrong to assume that the individual sections are a disguise for what the sequence is truly 'about'. A poem is not a false appearance covering a true essence. Nor is a sequence a poeticised rendition of an independent, pre-existing narrative. What matters, as Hart correctly appraised, is not the sequence as a temporal narrative, but the sequence in its poetic and spatial relationships.

Knottenbelt identifies 'Metamorphoses' as 'Hill's first sequence lying at the heart' of *For the Unfallen*.¹⁷ This is to assume that 'Asmodeus' and 'Two Formal Elegies', which precede 'Metamorphoses', are not themselves sequences. Since the poem at the heart of Hill's first collection (page 37) is the fifth section of 'Metamorphoses', it is odd that Knottenbelt ignores this section along with the third section. This prevents her from ever considering the sequence in its entirety. In discussing sections I, II and IV, Knottenbelt approaches them as three lyric poems sharing themes in common.

Knottenbelt locates the 'singularity' of Hill's 'contemplative art' in its scrutiny of the elegiac mode, its 'stressing the place of thought and feeling as they belong

¹⁷ Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 35.

to the (poet-)mourner – the survivor' (page 35). Taking elegy as the lyrical form *par excellence*, Knottenbelt argues that Hill's poems demonstrate the limitations of 'poetry as a meditative lyrical art' (page 35). This comes close to seeing that Hill's sequence (as sequence) is potentially a critique of the lyric (as lyric), but Knottenbelt ignores that line of enquiry, probably because she never sees 'Metamorphoses' as sequence but only as a group of (three) lyrics. The difficulties of each section – and their difficult inter-relations – are smoothed away as if the critic's role is to reduce difficulty and map a shortcut to clarity.

Commending the first section, 'The Fear', Knottenbelt writes that 'This poem is a good one because in trying to grasp as methodically as it can the paralyzing effects of fear on speech it shows in those abstractions the ungraspable dimensions, the inexpressibility, the dehumanizing effects, of such fear' (page 36). Her account gives us graspable dimensions (such as imputed intention) by which to understand Hill's poem, but the poem itself does not only show 'the ungraspable dimensions': it lets them in and sets them to work. Knottenbelt does not show how.

The second section ('Through scant pride') is taken to be offering advice of a sincere rather than ironic kind. According to Knottenbelt it 'says' that 'the late twentieth century [sic] lyric – elegy – must reflect an "out-of-town" energy which shows an uncommon sense of proportion' (page 37). But the poem is also 'a pastiche of the more expansive gesturing often associated with the (Shelleyan) Romantic mode' (page 37). More pointed than pastiche, the section is closer to critique or satire, as a close reading would show. The 'unlyrical scapegoat', the subject of address, is presented in the first stanza as a nuisance ('Plague') infected with envy, ambition and rancour. In the second stanza this would-be visionary exercises 'loftily' on his imagined moral high ground. The verb 'Echoes' hints at the complementary narcissism of the Romantic exile. The third stanza shows both aggression and foolish pride powering the Promethean impulse: 'make the sun your pedestal'. Like Hart, Knottenbelt overlooks the *volta* of the fourth stanza in which the Byronic protagonist is 'returned to favour', or returns himself, his indecent haste hastily covered 'With admirable restraint and fervour!' The sardonic wit becomes drier when the final exclamation mark is revised-out in Hill's *Collected Poems* (1985).¹⁸

Knottenbelt skips the third section to arrive at 'Drake's Drum' (p. 42). There is something undiscerning when the 'The undiscerning sea' is printed as 'The discerning sea' (page 42). Typographical inaccuracy aside (and there is another misprint three lines later), it is simplistic to summarise the final couplet as 'a

¹⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 33.

bitterly self-ironic statement about its own desire to reshape the shapelessness and unshapeliness of previously used words next to the disfigurement of the dead' (page 42). Rather than bitterness, the lines may express a sober, even tender acceptance of the finality of death, carrying the sweeter implication that elegy does not 'Sink' to the dead's 'melted ears and melted hearts' because it is for the ears and hearts of the living.

Overall, Knottenbelt does not show how 'Metamorphoses' works as a sequence. Where Hart melted the sequence into an imagined fiction of a lover and beloved, Knottenbelt solidifies it into a praiseworthy cluster of homiletic lyrics which 'mark out the ground concerning all the subtly different tendencies towards moral evasiveness in the human imagination' (page 36). This reduces the sequence to a group of (three) poems sharing a common concern and whose main point is that they all make a similar point.

Whilst most critics, therefore, have either ignored 'Metamorphoses', or failed to approach it as a sequence, a notable exception is Vincent Sherry, who writes five pages of useful analysis on 'the five-part sequence "Metamorphoses" (1954-56)'.¹⁹ The problem with Sherry's approach is that he takes the sequence to be a narrative sequence. He proposes that it is 'Hill's first extended study of a poet' (p. 52) and 'an ironic fiction, reminiscent of Pound's fictional autobiography of a poet, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"' (pp. 52-3). 'Metamorphoses', according to Sherry, 'follows a figure not only fictional but nameless' (p. 52) as '[t]he narrative brings the shadowy protagonist from a youthful poet's beginnings, through the self-doubt created by critical rejection, to suicide. He speaks first to himself (in parts I and II), then as poet in two of his poems (III and IV); finally his death is narrated by another (V).' (p. 53).

By this interpretation, the sections of 'Metamorphoses' are of different kinds. The first two are soliloquies in which a callow poet introduces himself. The next two showcase his poems before the fifth section kills him off. This reading offers a neat way to eliminate some difficulties and explain the whole, but it does so at the expense of converting sequence to narrative: a form which Hill eschews, unless it be nonlinear narrative. Critical ingenuity is especially required to force the third and fourth sections into the narrative frame. Sherry meets the challenge by presenting both sections as sample poems symptomatic of the protagonist's state of mind. In the first, '[t]he young poet must forego as his muse Venus the dove, who might inspire the conventional love lyric, for Venus the shark, who pictures the jaggedness of his unlyrical verse, and prefigures the death he will suffer for practicing it.' (p. 55). Next, 'the poet-protagonist' (p. 52) –

¹⁹ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, pp. 52-57.

the 'fictional poet' (p. 56) who Sherry somewhat elides with 'the poet' Hill, asserting that the sequence 'enacts to a limited degree Hill's own growth' (p. 56). – 'contrasts the reality of drowned sailors with the verbal testimonials for them' (p. 56).

Although Sherry simplifies (and distorts) by metamorphosing sequence into narrative, he is perceptive in noting how 'Metamorphoses' itself moves towards metamorphosis; how 'the transformation of various animals of the sea-goddess Venus and the protean changes of the sea create a backdrop of magically shape-shifting images' (p. 52); how 'Hill's irony is dynamic, part of the dramatic process of the poem, in effect changing its direction and the character of its speaker' (p. 54); and how the 'stop-and-go action of Hill's syntax [...] seems to pause, shed one perspective with a syntactic unit, move forward in the next to assume another point of view' (p. 55). This 'disrupted syntax prepares us, at every turn, to look at the subject from another angle, while these changes accumulate the vatic, visionary metamorphoses Hill has been espousing for art.' (p. 56). Whatever its author might espouse, the sequence itself is not explicitly 'espousing' anything, although Sherry may be right that it does so implicitly.

Of all the critics, Hart and Sherry are the two who consider 'Metamorphoses' as sequence. It is regrettable that both restrict it by taking it to be primarily a narrative sequence. Before presenting 'Metamorphoses' as a non-narrative sequence, or a sequence which is much more than narrative, we now track back to the single poem from which it began.

'The Metamorphosis' (1955)

On 4th March 1955 there appeared on the front page of *Poetry & Audience*:

The Metamorphosis

Doubtless he saw some path clear, having found
His love now fenced him off from the one ground
Where, as he owned, no temperate squalls could move
Either from the profession of their love.

Storm-bound, now she'd outweather him, though he
Between sun-clouded marshworld and strewn sea
Pitched to extremities, in the rock's vein
Gripped for the winds to roughen and tide stain.

But when he tore his flesh-root and was gone

Leaving no track, no blood gritting the stone,
 Drawn freely to the darkness he had fought
 Driven by sulphurous blood and a clenched heart,

Grant the detached pierced spirit could plunge, soar,
 Seeking that love flesh dared not answer for,
 Nor suffers now, hammocked in salt tagged cloth
 That to be bleached or burned the sea casts out.²⁰

In that 'The Metamorphosis' is a poem open to several interpretations, an early challenge is the definite article of its title. Which metamorphosis? Metamorphosis of whom and into what? The range of possibility can be indicated in an unscientific way by soliciting opinion. Having sent the poem to various poetry-reading friends, I have been told that its subject is a heterosexual man in crisis after being abandoned by a girlfriend; a gay man at a time when homosexuality was illegal; a man renouncing sexual love in favour of spiritual; Orpheus; a Christ-figure; Melville's Billy Budd; mankind; a limpet.

Because the poem seems to relate something of a man's life, we might want to guess to whom it refers. Is its subject, for instance, a mythical figure; a character from fiction; an historical personage; a contemporary, such as a friend; someone invented for the poem itself; the poet himself (fictionalized into the third person) or a mix of the above? To pursue that line of enquiry is to assume that we are reading a narrative poem, or a ludic poem which mixes narrative with puzzle. But the narrative elements may be secondary, or the poem might be playing with, or commenting obliquely on, narrative in general, rather than narrating one man's life. If so, the reader should initially focus on the language of the poem, rather than try to guess a story behind it. This would be in line with Hill's advice (as summarized by the journalist Michael Dempsey):

You work out the poem through the language rather than through the ideas. In a play or a novel you can think of a situation and then project a language for it. In poetry the language *is* the situation.²¹

The poem's opening word, 'Doubtless', could doubtless, in other circumstances, be read in the breezily confident tones of someone explaining the obvious. It might also be understood as a tactical concession prior to an attack, on the lines: 'Doubtless he saw X (idiot that he was) but in fact...' In this poem, however, it seems that the opening 'Doubtless' signals someone, in a similar

²⁰ Geoffrey Hill, 'The Metamorphosis', *Poetry & Audience*, 2. 17 (1955).

²¹ Geoffrey Hill, 'Literature Comes to Life', *Illustrated London News*, (1966), (p. 24).

position to the reader, working something out in an act of deliberation as much as exposition, as if to say, 'amidst all the uncertainty, we can assume this much at least'. The poem initially directs its mimesis towards the careful imaginative act of piecing together a story, converting trauma into a coherent narrative to make sense of events. The opening 'Doubtless' is an adverbial disjunct which modifies the first stanza, the sentence in which it occurs, and extends its influence beyond, onto the rest of the poem. It is both a content disjunct (which makes an observation about the truth of what follows) and a style disjunct (which expresses the conditions under which the listener should interpret what follows). It establishes a tentative, thoughtful voice of imaginative empathy, and leads us into thinking that the conflict to be described was deep; the person valued; and the outcome tragic. This poem is well read in slow, grave voice.

Since almost every line of this poem offers significant ambiguity, it is useful to address some key ambiguities line by line, before considering the ambiguous nature of the whole. The poem's second word, the pronoun 'he', could be an Everyman figure or could refer to an individual male, identity to be established. This pronominal indeterminacy threads the poem with eight occurrences of male pronouns ('he', 'him' and 'his') and a single use of the feminine form ('she' in line 5). 'His love' of the second line might refer to this 'she'; or to her as seen through and distorted by 'his' subjective feelings of love; or those feelings themselves, however misconceived and remote from (her) reality. The phrase 'as he owned' might be an old-fashioned way of saying 'as he admitted' or might serve to foreground masculine presumption and possessiveness. Again, the noun 'profession' might signal heart-felt avowal; a public declaration more than an actual event; or a tactical, transactional protestation.

Throughout the second stanza the reader must choose between taking the images literally or symbolically. If the sense is literal, then the lines might pose a riddle whose solution, as one friend suggested, is a gastropod mollusc such as a limpet. If the sense is symbolic, as seems more likely in the context of the first stanza, then we may see a man clinging on to his love or his life as if to a cliff-face. The words 'Pitched' and 'Gripped' double 'an active and a passive function'.²² We might construe 'Pitched' as passive, referring to either the man or the sea, with 'Gripped' as active. The sea could symbolise freedom, danger, escape, Otherness, the indifference of the natural world, life, death.

A crux of interpretation is in the ninth line, which opens with the contrastive conjunction 'But', as if in the *volta* of a sonnet: 'But when he tore his flesh-root'. Is this emasculation', literal or figurative? Although the OED gives 'flesh-hook',

²² Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 517.

'flesh-pot', 'flesh-meat' and 'flesh-worm', it does not record 'flesh-root'. Nor is the word found in dictionaries of slang. It sounds like quasi-Shakespearean bawdy ('Hast fleshed thy flesh-root, Pompey?'), or a Lawrentian epithet, or, as one friend put it, 'middle-range porn'. 'But when he tore his flesh-root' might not be physical emasculation so much as a vivid image for the trauma, whether single decisive act or longer-term process, of leaving a marriage or relationship to which one has been committed and perhaps still is. The danger of such a graphic image is that it renders the images of the preceding verse ('sun-clouded marshworld and strewn sea') weakly decorative images of psychological allegory. The 'root' of 'flesh-root' is bivalent. It suggests being tied to one place, constriction, continuing the idea of love as being that which 'fenced him off'. But in a positive sense a root is also necessary and nourishing, as when Vaughan regrets that man 'hath no root, nor to one place is tied, | But ever restless and irregular | About this earth doth run and ride'.²³ Having torn the root, man runs and rides, *déraciné*, rootless.

'But when he tore his flesh-root and was gone' is dangerous as well as forceful. If not literal, it risks hyperbole and melodrama. One might infer male masturbation, in that 'flesh-root' is penis and the word 'go' can also mean 'to orgasm'.²⁴ The reader will, at any rate, wonder: gone where? That participle 'gone' might mean 'gone from the marital home' in which case the second half of the poem refers to a man who has 'gone' his own way as a free spirit newly 'detached' from the manacles of mismarriage though also 'pierced' by the experience. Or 'gone' might mean 'died' as in various colloquialisms: 'gone to bed', 'gone west', meaning 'dead'. In this case the 'spirit' of the final stanza is the soul freed from the body, rather than masculine willpower freed from marital shackles.

The final stanza 'breaks the fourth wall' by addressing the reader: 'Grant the detached pierced spirit'. The opening 'Grant' could be ignored as an insignificant narrative device to hold audience attention and propose a narrative possibility. It could also be given more weight and taken to be an entreaty or exhortation, inclining the final stanza towards prayer. Or it could be taken as a polemical supposition, a move in a metaphysical argument about the nature of spirit and flesh. When that noun 'flesh' appears in the following line (13) there is ambiguity as to how much it retains from and is coloured by the earlier 'flesh-root' (line 9). If this 'flesh' is one and the same as the 'flesh-root' and the 'flesh root' is the

²³ Henry Vaughan, *The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 239. 'Man', line 16.

²⁴ Jonathon Green, *The Cassell Dictionary of Slang*, (London: Cassell, 1998). s. v. 'go' verb 3.

severed phallus, then the final and grotesque image is of a dismembered penis 'hammocked' in cloth and bobbing on the sea. But 'flesh' could be the physical and mortal body as a whole.

The fourteenth line, resonant and mysterious, is best construed as a present participle whose object contains a relative clause: 'Seeking that love [which] flesh dared not answer for'. The omission of the relative pronoun ('which') conjoins the nouns 'love' and 'flesh' and the resultant fragment 'love flesh' sounds erotic, recalling Whitman's hyphenated erection: 'love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching' in the fifth section of 'I sing the body electric'.²⁵ Then the following verb 'dared' recalls Lord Alfred Douglas's 'full sad and sweet' naming of homosexual love as 'the love that dare not speak its name'.²⁶ It is therefore difficult to decide whether the fourteenth line – 'Seeking that love flesh dared not answer for' – refers to same-sex desire, Christian agape, or some other love.

The final two lines also demand interpretation. If the spirit is free because the flesh has perished, then the poem and the sea both ultimately deliver a corpse, beyond further suffering, presumed drowned. This would fit a common motif in Hill's first collection. 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' offers another seemingly emasculated sea-corpse with its 'sleeked groin'. Witness also 'Two Formal Elegies', 'The Guardians', 'The White Ship' and 'Wreaths'. But setting aside these examples, one might also read the end of 'The Metamorphosis' as a love surviving the sea-storms and returning sea-changed to land.

Apart from the specific ambiguities mentioned above, there is throughout 'The Metamorphosis' an ambiguity of tone which is fundamental to the poem's overall ambiguity. I have suggested that the opening adverbial disjunct, 'Doubtless', establishes a thoughtful attitude to the topic: an attitude as of working out something important. This would point the poem's voice towards truth-telling and sincerity. But the first stanza also offers irony in the phrase 'temperate squalls', which recalls one of Shakespeare's sunnier sonnets, sonnet 18 ('Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'). A fragment of this sonnet – 'temperate | Rough winds' – is lodged in 'The Metamorphosis', with its 'temperate' squalls in line 3 and 'winds to roughen' in line 8. If 'temperate squalls' is a wry euphemism for marital tiffs or bloody great rows, then the first stanza is sardonically communicating that the honeymoon is over, and the marriage has hit the rocks.

²⁵ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, (Clinton, Massachusetts: Colonial Press, 1965), p. 84.

²⁶ Lord Alfred Douglas, 'Two Loves', <<https://poets.org/poem/two-loves>>, (1894) [accessed 27 May 2021]

When in the second stanza the poem is 'Pitched to extremities', we can read that as accurate description of inner storms or as deliberate hyperbole verging on melodrama, ironized and implicitly criticized by the voice of a more sceptical narrator.

The poem, however, is not just an exercise in maximizing ambiguity. It prompts the imagination to participate in finding a satisfactory solution. 'But when he tore his flesh-root', for example, invites interpretation. If we think it refers to physical emasculation, we are likely to wonder to whom it refers. Considering the title, 'The Metamorphosis', we might recall the medieval legend that Ovid was castrated.²⁷ We might also remember Pierre Abelard, castrated on the orders of Heloise's uncle Fulbert. But since both these were acts of violent assault, the phrase 'when he tore his flesh-root' would be inaccurate and cruel. With respect to elective self-castration, we might think of Origen: 'enervate Origen' in 'Mr Eliot's Sunday Morning Service'.²⁸ To make sense of the first two stanzas we would then have to imagine a 'she' whom Origen had loved.

All the above complexities and ambiguities are held within an all-encompassing ambiguity as to genre. The poem can be understood as riddle, challenging us to imagine or identify its main subjects: the 'he' and the 'she' whom we might assume to be the subjects of metamorphosis. The poem could be a mini narrative offering a thumbnail sketch of a psychodrama, blending description with diagnosis. It could be a meta-narrative which deploys the codes and conventions of narrative without committing itself to a single story. It could be a protest against a society which criminalizes same-sex love; or sustained irony at the expense of its male protagonist presented as a Byronic 'drama queen'. It could be recounting a miniature myth as in the myths of Ovid to which its title draws attention. It could be advancing an argument about the separate nature of flesh and spirit, or warning of the psychological consequences of divorcing spirit from flesh. If we take the last two lines of the poem to record death by drowning then the poem finally tips towards elegy, or elegy refused. It could also be a mixture of fantasy and confession, where that confession is distanced by usage of the third person, rendered deniable and decently swaddled in obscurity.

Riddle; mini narrative; meta-narrative; protest; ironic critique; miniature myth; argument; warning; elegy; anti-elegy; fantasy; confession. Although each of

²⁷ Jehan Le Fevre, 'Le Livre De Leesce (the Book of Gladness)', ed. by Linda Burke (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), (p. 97).

²⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 54.

these genres or modes is distinct and offers its own distinctive understanding of the poem, they are not mutually exclusive in an absolute sense. A reader may blend these and other approaches in the mind. 'The Metamorphosis' is a generic hybrid in the sense that it is produced by crossing at least two different kinds of genre. Generic hybridity is also potentially generic mutability because a reading in terms of one genre (say, riddle) can easily turn into a reading in terms of another (say, myth) or another hybridised (say, myth ironised). This endows the poem with an ability to live up to its title and metamorphose from one genre to another and from one interpretation to another. Perhaps the verb 'metamorphose' is misleading here in that a biological metamorphosis takes time (caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly) whilst poetic metamorphosis moves with Ovidian rapidity, at the speed of mind and imagination.

Which of the potential genres is foregrounded or actualized depends on reader and context. When first published in 1955 'The Metamorphosis' appeared recto as the front page of *Poetry & Audience* with 'The Troublesome Reign' verso. This situated it within a context of marital discord (or 'relationship troubles'). Both poems are written in rhymed and half-rhymed quatrains; both are in rough iambic pentameter; and both use the third person. They might well be taken as two poems about one and the same troubled union. This would be to situate both poems in the personal mode if not the confessional. Roberts (2004) categorises these two poems, along with 'The Turtle Dove' and 'Asmodeus' as poems 'which evoke sexual and psychological conflicts through muscular syntax and dense, atmospheric imagery', adding that they 'surely drew on Hill's own experience at some level'.²⁹ In *For the Unfallen* (1959) Hill moved 'The Troublesome Reign' to follow and face 'The Turtle Dove', thereby producing a brace of poems which analyse and dramatize ongoing marital discord.³⁰ By moving 'The Metamorphosis' out of the orbit of the marital, he released other more surprising and more successful associations.

'Metamorphoses' (1959)

When 'The Metamorphosis' (1955) metamorphoses into 'Metamorphoses' (1959) it carries its generic mutability deep within it.³¹ Each of the five parts of the new sequence is complex and potentially fluid as to its own and main genre. In each case a reader would have good reason to pause before deciding the predominant genre, and the five sections are all susceptible to genre-switch, or

²⁹ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 12.

³⁰ Geoffrey Hill, *For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1959), p. 25.

³¹ Hill, *For the Unfallen*, pp. 33-37.

an appearance of genre-switch, in relation to each other. Because they inter-relate in strong and peculiar ways, the generic character of each section, mixed and volatile as it is, can influence and impose itself on every other section.

The following exposition of 'Metamorphoses' will not, for reasons of space and economy, expound the sequence line by line in every detail of its ambiguity. Instead, it initially summarizes each section in a thematic way by outlining its links to the theme announced in the title: metamorphosis. It then examines how each part carries its own potential for metamorphosis or performs its own metamorphosis with respect to the main genre by which it is understood. We will see how the different parts interact to produce a capacity for generic mutability which is central to the polysemantic and protean nature of the whole. This way of reading Hill's sequence contrasts with the approach taken by Hart (1986) and Knottenbelt (1990). It is closer to Sherry's (1987) reading, though Sherry ignores questions of genre and mode.

By way of initial overview, consider each of the five sections in relation to the theme of metamorphosis announced by the title. The first section is 'The Fear'. The use of the definite article paradoxically reminds us that fear can be indefinite, attaching itself to, or projecting itself onto, different entities, objects and phenomena. 'The Fear' evokes this by sounding specific, using the definite article ('The Fear') and the demonstrative determiner ('This fear') without ever defining or determining which fear, making for a fear whose nature is undemonstrated and probably indemonstrable, liable to metamorphose. The second section, untitled, presents a drama of enantiodromia as a (representative) individual grasps, or is granted, a role opposite from one previously held. The 'unlyrical scapegoat', 'possessed of agility' rather than ability, metamorphoses from rebel into respected maestro. In the third section, the goddess Venus metamorphoses into a predator shark. In the fourth section, the drowned bodies undergo the metamorphosis of decomposition. In the fifth, as we have seen, a male lover leaves and suffers some kind of metamorphosis such that his 'detached, pierced spirit could plunge, soar' (line 13), although his flesh is in the sea, presumed drowned. At a simple thematic level, the sequence offers at least five metamorphoses.

'Metamorphoses' as sequence

Having claimed that most critics have failed to see 'Metamorphoses' as a sequence, this chapter must now demonstrate what it means to think of Hill's sequence as a *sequence*. It does so in two stages. The first is static, showing the sequence as a sequence of shapes as if it were a sculpture. The second is more dynamic, showing how the generic indeterminacy of each section

generates generic mutability in the whole. The sections can metamorphose (in their entirety) by showing each other in different (generic) light.

To see 'Metamorphoses' as a sequence, for the sections to be made fully visible as a sequence, it is helpful first to contemplate their shape, volume and presence. An analogy may be drawn with viewing a group of abstract sculptures. We would need to describe their materiality, their shape and their mutual arrangement, rather than (or as well as) speculating about what they symbolize. So, with Hill's sequences rather than rushing to interpret, it is helpful to pause and make time for elementary considerations of shape. When reading, after and before all, our first impression of a poem is likely to be its shape on the page. From this we infer its probable form. It looks like a haiku, or villanelle; or we spot the octet and sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet; or it is clearly free verse. When we know the poem by heart, its shape is part of what we know. As we read the poem, we should be aware where we are within it: how far it has developed, how far it has yet to go. Larkin gave this as a reason for disliking poetry readings. 'Hearing a poem, as opposed to reading it on the page, means you miss so much – the shape, the punctuation, the italics, even knowing how far you are from the end.'³²

Shape is always significant in Hill's sequences, most obviously in the emblematic poem 'A Prayer to the Sun' (BH, 56) and in *Clavics*. The sequence 'Metamorphoses' is comprised of five distinct shapes which mix symmetry with asymmetry. They neither conform in form nor reject form. The effect is its own puzzle and might be called hemi-symmetry, where symmetry is 'the arrangement of parts in pleasing proportion to each other, or the aesthetic satisfaction derived from this' (Chambers Concise Dictionary). Consider the proportions of 'Metamorphoses' with respect to a basic measure: the number of lines in each section. The five parts are arranged in the ratio: 12: 16: 8: 8: 16. This reduces to proportions of 3: 4: 2: 2: 4. The effect is somewhat asymmetrical without looking symmetry-less. Remove the first section, 'The Fear', dismissing it as introduction or exordium, then we are left with proportions of 2: 1: 1: 2. Were symmetry the prime consideration then the first section could be reinstated in the middle to produce more symmetrical proportions: 4: 2: 3: 2: 4. In Hill's sequence, slight asymmetry is a feature of the design. In respect of number of lines, the centre of this sixty-line sequence is the end of its thirtieth line, which comes between the second and third line in the first stanza of the third poem: 'herald: | Tufts'. This seems slightly off-centre or 'out'. Indeed, the

³² Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 61.

sequence seems to be deliberately designed to be somewhat 'out'. Its last word is 'out', where that 'out' is itself 'out' in that the whole poem has hitherto rhymed or half-rhymed such that this non-rhyme on 'cloth [...] out' stands out. Perhaps the poem is placing itself alongside the 'unlyrical scapegoat' (of part II) who is 'so put out'. Hill's sequences often project a strong sense of 'out' where the connotations of that word include care ('watch out'); rejection ('get out'); the unconscious ('pass out'); error ('miles out'); and asymmetry ('it looks out to me').

The shape, weight and outline of each section is not only a matter of how many lines it has. It also depends on line length. Again, here we find a pattern which is neither fully symmetrical nor asymmetrical. The first two sections are mainly four-stress lines, whilst the last three are pentameter. If we understand each section's 'sense of mass' ('in terms of relationship, totality even')³³ as its total number of stresses (the number of stresses in each line multiplied by the number of lines) then the proportions of 'Metamorphoses', at least in an ideal form, are 48: 64: 40: 40: 80, which reduces to a ratio of 6: 8: 5: 5: 10. This differs from the proportion by number of lines which was 6: 8: 4: 4: 8. The centre of the poem shifts two lines to the 'estuary-water' of 'A shark hurricaned to estuary-water'. The sequence is not quite single-pointed, but artfully off-centred. In terms of shape and mass, the pattern of the five sections of 'Metamorphoses' suggests symmetry whilst also frustrating it. The sections never resolve into a clear symmetrical shape, nor are they chaotic. The angles between them open strange vistas for the imagination.

'Epic proportions'

Having discussed shape, we must now turn to the question of 'epic proportions' as an aspect of Hill's poetic technique; as theme; as an essential feature of the sequence; and because it modifies and expands our understanding of genre, and thereby contributes to an explanation of generic mutability within the sequence. In turn, the workings of generic contrast illuminate how the sequences achieve their epic-like effects in so small a space. We are studying the poetic mechanics of *multum in parvo*.

The term 'epic proportions' is taken from Hart who observes that 'Hill gives to his sequences almost epic proportions' but does not enquire how this is done.³⁴ Rosenthal and Gall concluded that the modern poetic sequence is the 'genre most suitable for epic and heroic undertakings'.³⁵ They placed their short study

³³ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 455.

³⁴ Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 63.

³⁵ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, p. 494.

of *Mercian Hymns* under the heading (Part 4 of their book): 'Neo-regionalism and Epic Memory'. We will now look at each of the five sections of 'Metamorphoses' for historical and mythic associations of potentially 'epic proportions'.

'The Fear' provides no specific reference point and its non-specificity beckons to fears in the reader's imagination. Knottenbelt takes 'The Fear' as an address to its readers (us) who are supposedly so traumatised by 'the bestialities of totalitarian states' and twentieth-century history that 'we should even be afraid to think and feel. In our fearful numbness, our speech has become paralyzed. We, addressed by the poet as "you" [...]. are speechless" (Knottenbelt, p. 36). As often with criticism, it is unclear whether the critic is sharing her own reading or presenting it as the correct reading. Clearly 'The Fear' resonates with Knottenbelt who sees Hill's poems as being 'conscious of how the political inhumanity of the past and present has demeaned and brutalized language beyond any precedent' (pages 35-36). But 'The Fear' could apply to, or be applied to, some other fear. It might be the pervasive fear which destroys confidence and paralyses a culture. Warning that civilisation is 'quite fragile', Kenneth Clark named its enemy as 'first of all fear – fear of war, fear of invasion, fear of plague and famine, that make it simply not worthwhile constructing things, or planting trees or even planning next year's crops. And fear of the supernatural, which means that you daren't question anything or change anything.'³⁶ Or it might be a more conservative fear of revolution. Writing of those, such as Goethe and Wordsworth, who retreated from Romantic revolutionary ideas, Clark observes that 'Most of them were silenced by fear – fear of disorder, fear of bloodshed, fear that, after all, human beings were not yet capable of liberty.'³⁷ Or the fear of 'The Fear' could be of a more recent generation: fear of the Cold War, or nuclear Armageddon, or eco-catastrophe. But whatever it is, this fear is focused in 'that look' and 'the stiff face of shock' and it is not generalised Angst for it 'strikes hard and is gone'.

The second section was first published as 'Scapegoat'.³⁸ Perhaps it anticipates René Girard who would argue in *La Violence et le Sacré* (Grasset, Paris, 1972) that scapegoating is a fundamental, inevitable component of all human and social behaviour. But Hill's poem focuses less on the catharsis which society obtains by scapegoating, and more on how the scapegoat reconciles himself to exile and comes to love his half-imagined role. (I say 'his' because the folly

³⁶ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation*, (London: The Folio Society, 1999 [1969]), p. 14.

³⁷ Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 227.

³⁸ Geoffrey Hill, 'Scapegoat', *Listen*, 2. 3 (1957), (p. 6).

seems to be gendered as masculine.). Give a scapegoat a bad name and he will revel in the role of Rebel, until such time as the Establishment whistles him home. The joke is on both the society and the scapegoat.

In its 'epic proportions' the third section of the sequence, 'The Re-birth of Venus' stretches between Botticelli and the Florentine Renaissance; the Classical world; that Western and European culture where humanism meets Neoplatonism; and now. It merges the eternal present of myth with the actual present of current affairs. The opening words ('And now') are a frequent formula on radio and television for moving-on and introducing a new topic. The catchphrase 'And now for something completely different' is associated with a later programme, 'Monty Python's Flying Circus' (1971), but Hill's poem already contains Pythonesque features of the skit, animated cartoon and interlude. When Botticelli's Venus reappears as 'the sea-scoured temptress', the feminine suffix '-ess' sounds salacious, as it might be in a gossip column 'scoop' (line 2). Perhaps this is Venus as 'the amorous strumpet of paganism',³⁹ pictured with a splash of sensationalism as she 'shakes off an entire sea' to become, in the second stanza, a shark. This has the brevity and crudity of a satirical cartoon which punctures a hallowed image by adding an incongruous detail. The technique touches on the Dada-esque, like Duchamp painting a moustache and goatee on the Mona Lisa ('La Joconde'), whether this be admired as subversive transgression or deplored as imbecility. It is a form of iconoclasm; or rather *iconoplasm*, moulding the icon rather than smashing it.

Cheap or deep? To fathom the depths of 'The Re-birth of Venus' we would have to consider it in relation to its progenitor. The abused adjective 'iconic' justly applies to Botticelli's masterpiece of the mid-1480s: the first fully nude depiction of the goddess since Antiquity. The painting illustrates some lines from Poliziano's poem, the *Giostra*, which describe the goddess rising from the seafoam. This Classical image goes back to Apelles (4th century BC) whose Aphrodite Anadyomene is depicted, full of grace and charm, 'wringing from her hair the water of the sea from which she has just risen'.⁴⁰ Botticelli, 'one of the greatest poets of Venus', unites Venus Coelestis with Venus Naturalis and marries both with a Christian humanist tradition.⁴¹ As Clark observes, the head of Botticelli's Venus 'is the same head which Botticelli uses for his Madonnas'.⁴²

³⁹ Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 82.

⁴⁰ {Harvey, 1974 [1937], *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, s. v. 'Apelles'.}

⁴¹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude*, (London: The Folio Society, 2010 [1956]), pp. 71, 53.

⁴² Clark, *The Nude*, p. 77.

So, Botticelli's Venus, 'pale and withdrawn, dissolves into his image of the Virgin Mary.'⁴³

Living in Medici Florence, Botticelli was imbued with the Christianized Platonism of Neoplatonic philosophy. He painted 'The Birth of Venus' for a room in the Villa of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, second cousin of Lorenzo the Magnificent and a pupil of the leading Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-99). Ficino advised Lorenzo that he

should fix his eyes on Venus, that is, on Humanitas. For Humanitas is a nymph of excellent comeliness, born of Heaven and more than others beloved by God on high. Her soul and mind are Love and Charity, her eyes Dignity and Magnanimity, her hands Liberality and Magnificence, her feet Comeliness and Modesty. The whole, then, is Temperance and Honesty, Charm and Splendour. Oh, what exquisite beauty!⁴⁴

Venus, then, is Humanitas, an image of fertility and a fertile image of Renaissance and Western ideals, both Christian and Classical. Rather than being simply a cheeky 'scratching-over' of a Renaissance masterpiece, Hill's 'Re-birth of Venus' can be read as a reflection on what has happened and what is happening to Western ideals. Its comment may entail complicity. It contrasts 'the dove, harried' with a shark 'unflurried'. Hill's 'dove' – Church, soul, Spirit, sacrificial bird – is 'harried'. Meanwhile the predator, the shark 'unflurried, lies, attempts all | Stayers and searchers of the fanged pool.' The shark itself could symbolize greed; or capitalism; or the primal, solitary power of the predator, as opposed to more humane, civilized energies. This shark lies in the 'fanged pool' as if the very environment has adopted the attributes of the shark, perhaps in self-defence. Hill's 'Re-birth' therefore has the very embodiment of Renaissance and European ideals – Venus, goddess of love and beauty; Humanitas, goddess of wisdom, intellectual pursuits and spiritual beauty – reborn as a shark. With respect to genre, this 'Re-birth of Venus', which is the Fall of Venus, could therefore be categorized as satire, lament; warning; or tragedy.

There are more 'epic proportions' in the fourth section of 'Metamorphoses'. 'Drake's Drum' sets its co-ordinates between the age of exploration in Elizabethan England; late nineteenth-century British Empire; the waning of that Empire in the 1950s when the poem was written; and now, the moment in which the poem is re-read. The title comes from Henry Newbolt who published his

⁴³ Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 82.

⁴⁴ Clark, *The Nude*, p. 72.

'Drake's Drum' in *Admirals All and Other Verses* in 1897. In vogue for half a century, it was widely anthologized.

'Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;
If the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port o' Heaven
An' drum them up the Channel as we drummed them long ago.'

Newbolt's poem was set to music by Charles Villiers Stanford. 'It's the sort of song', Professor Jon Glover recalls, 'that Grammar School boys would have sung often. I did, including me as a solo at an annual Prize Giving. Possibly, probably a song that Geoffrey would also have sung at school. One of the very interesting things, to me, is how in those poems Geoffrey has de-contextualised those words from the prize day "jolly old boys" tones in which he probably first knew them. How daring!'⁴⁵. In his penultimate Oxford lecture, Hill referred to Newbolt and recalled that 'Empire Day' was still celebrated in his elementary school in 1942.⁴⁶ Newbolt's poem is a variant on the folklore motif of a king asleep under the mountain. In this case the 'king' is Sir Francis Drake: explorer who circumnavigated the world; Devonian, privateer, slave-trader, State-sponsored pirate who famously singed the King of Spain's beard; and victor over the Spanish Armada. With its drum-like, music-hall rhythms, its end-rhymes and internal rhymes which are full, resounding rhymes, Newbolt's poem can be taken as a whimsical elegy and rousing patriotic anthem.

'Drake's Drum' in Hill's version need not be an absolute rejection of Newbolt's homonymous poem. It is hard to assess how far it is homage rather than irony. Written barely a decade after the end of the Second World War, the memory of sailors drowned in their country's service would be painfully fresh. Hill's verb 'patrols' evokes military rather than merchant or leisure shipping, as if his poem remembers those who in some way, *mutatis mutandis*, had recently responded to the beat of Drake's drum and sacrificed their lives. Hill's poem could express more sorrow than anger. Thinking in terms of proportions, it is one quarter full rhyme ('ride... side') and three quarters half-rhyme, 'which sustains order and expectation while maintaining its scepticism of them'.⁴⁷ The scepticism about Newbolt's fantasy may involve rebuke: what Haughton calls 'a form of imaginative reproof'.⁴⁸ Hill's sailors are dead and decomposed, beyond

⁴⁵ Professor Jon Glover, 'Email of 2 April 2020', ed. by Edward Reiss (2020).

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Hill, 'The Feel of Not to Feel It', *Oxford lecture 14* <<http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2015-03-26-engfac-poetry-hill.mp3>>, (2014) [accessed 8 May 2021] 10:50 to 11:40.

⁴⁷ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 529.

⁴⁸ Haughton, "'How Fit a Title'", (p. 134).

communication, in contrast to Newbolt's spritely Drake resting in his heavenly hammock, dreaming of Plymouth Hoe. Hill's 'Drake's Drum' rejects cosy, compensatory fancy in favour of the plain truth-telling of realism, though realism which permits pathos and elegy of a terse kind. This turn to realism and away from elegy could foreshadow Hill's subsequent turning away from lyric: his turn to sequence.

Hill's allusions deepen the poem and widen the scope of its contention. The dead who do not ride dolphins are contrasted with those drowning who in legend were rescued by dolphins, or those drowned whose bodies were gathered by dolphins and returned for decent burial on land, as in Milton's 'Lycidas': 'And, O ye dolphins, waft the haplesse youth.' These dolphins waft us back to those which rescued Arion, son of Poseidon. Hill's dolphins might also be Yeatsian, psychopompal creatures conducting souls to the place of the dead: 'Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood, | Spirit after spirit!' ('Byzantium'); 'Straddling each a dolphin's back | And steadied by a fin, | Those Innocents re-live their death, | Their wounds open again.' ('News for the Delphic Oracle'). Hill's dolphins – or, rather, non-dolphins – are Miltonic and Yeatsian, and his shrieking gulls fly in from Masfield's 'Sea-Change'.

"Goneys an' gullies an' all o' the birds o' the sea
They ain't no birds, not really," said Billy the Dane.
"Not mollies, nor gullies, nor goneys at all," said he,
"But simply the sperrits of mariners livin' again."⁴⁹

The second stanza of Masfield's well-known 'Sea-Fever' (1902), with its triple 'call' to 'the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying' contribute to the 'gulls' and 'spume' in the second stanza of 'Drake's Drum'.⁵⁰ The allusions are glancing, and their effects are far-reaching. These allusions contribute much to the poems' complex ambiguity, which is felt as a matter of emotion as much as intellect. The poem's attitude towards its own citations from Yeats, Newbolt and Masfield is passionately ambiguous. We may hear scorn for bygone myths of after-life, and the poem could be read in a Bloomian way as an Oedipal rejection of the childish delusions of the older generation. But this would be 'undiscerning' of its under-currents of elegy and deep memory. Hill's 'designed wreaths' are using the words of earlier poems, such as Marvell's 'The Coronet' with its 'wreaths of fame and interest'.⁵¹ Like Marvell, Hill's poem is 'double-

⁴⁹ John Masfield, *The Collected Poems*, (London: William Heinemann, 1930), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Masfield, *The Collected Poems*, p. 27.

⁵¹ Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 54.
Line 16.

edged', offering alternative readings; and 'poised', conveying 'a dual attitude at the same time'.⁵²

The obvious physical metamorphosis in 'Drake's Drum' is that which 'dissolves their flesh' (line 2). But the title's tangling with Newbolt nets a much bigger metamorphosis of an historical, cultural and ideological kind. For Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938) exemplifies the poet as man of letters and pillar of the Establishment. Drake, at the height of the Elizabethan Age, was a pioneer of British imperialism. Newbolt, at the height of that Empire, exemplifies Imperial attitudes: patriotism, service, loyalty, sacrifice, entitlement, assumed superiority. Hill, writing about Newbolt and Drake in 1955, in the early years of the reign of the second Queen Elizabeth, with India independent and the Empire unravelling, registers in 'Drake's Drum' an historical metamorphosis of Empire and attitudes. Hart is right to ascribe to the sequence 'almost epic proportions'.

Inter-relations of sections

One of the sources of deep, abiding and productive vitality in Hill's sequences is fundamental uncertainty as we search for the inter-relations of different sections. Readers may feel that they have joined the 'harrowing search' (II), as 'searchers' (III), 'Seeking' (V). This search can be conducted by way of more specific example. For reasons of space and economy, I will not examine every permutation and combination, but will focus instead on the inter-relations between sections III and IV of 'Metamorphoses'; then, sections I and III; then, more briefly, sections II and IV.

The last three sections of 'Metamorphoses' are sea-related. The 'fanged pool' of section III adjoins the 'choked pools' of IV; the 'entire sea' of III meets the 'undiscerning sea' of IV and 'strewn sea' of V. Because 'Drake's Drum' has to do with naval defence of the British Isles, some of the idiom and imagery in 'The Re-birth of Venus' may begin, unexpectedly, to hint at a subtext involving the language of submarine warfare. If it is not gratuitous hyperbole when Venus 'shakes off an entire sea', it might be a way of describing a submarine breaching the surface; a torpedo being fired; or a submarine-launched ballistic missile beginning the arc of its upward flight. Again, when Hill's shark 'lies, approaches all | Stayers, and searchers of the fanged pool', we might glimpse an image of a submarine lurking underwater. OED gives the first usage of the collocation 'nuclear hunter-killer submarine' as 1962 (OED, s. v. 'hunter', n. C5).

⁵² L. D. Lerner, 'Andrew Marvell: An Horatian Ode Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland', in *Interpretations: Essays on Twelve English Poems*, ed. by John Wain (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), (p. 69).

The technique of eliding shark with submarine – figuring each in the light of the other – would be like ‘Genesis’ which elides hawk with fighter plane: ‘The hawk’s deliberate stoop in air, | Cold eyes, and bodies hooped in steel, | Forever bent up on the kill.’⁵³ Hill’s ‘shark’ may operate like his hawk. He had a keen interest in naval warfare (witness *The Book of Baruch*, section 138) and would have been intrigued by the use of Classical myth in submarine nomenclature. Whilst Venus, identified with the Greek goddess Aphrodite, was said in some accounts to have sprung from seafoam, in others she was the daughter of Zeus (and Dione). In the 1950s, when Hill was writing ‘The Rebirth of Venus’, the Royal Navy deployed the Amphion-class diesel-electric submarine, Amphion being the son of Zeus (and Antiope). One such submarine was HMS Artemis (1946-71), Artemis (Diana) being daughter of Zeus (and Leto). Venus herself was mother of Aeneas, and another Amphion-class submarine was HMS Aeneas (1944-1974). Nominally, therefore, Venus is related (by her half-brother Amphion) to the full complement of “A” class submarines, which includes her half-sister (HMS) Artemis and her son (HMS) Aeneas. Also, in the submarine fleet was HMS Ambush which might explain the parenthesis: ‘(The lesser hunter almost by a greater | Devoured)’. In 1945 Vickers-Armstrong in Barrow-in-Furness had an order (cancelled) to build an “A” class submarine to be called HMS Aphrodite. Had it been one of the preceding “V” class submarines, it could well have been HMS Venus. Hill may be toying with the logic (and madness) of these names. If the Classical goddess of beauty and sexual love is seen as a (nuclear) submarine, then Hill’s ‘Re-birth of Venus’ anticipates the gallows humour of the 1964 movie ‘Dr Strangelove’. But it holds back. It does not dive all the way into satire or protest (as Adrian Mitchell might have done). There is almost outrageous delicacy in the lightness with which it sketches the possibility of outrage and satire.

Sections I and III, as they became, of ‘Metamorphoses’ were first published together, but as separate poems: ‘The Re-birth of Venus’ and ‘The Fear’ in *Poetry & Audience* 1955.⁵⁴ The relationship between them is not obvious. Therein lies its interest, its indeterminacy and ability to generate new cross-lights on each section and on the sequence as a whole. At one remove we may see the poems as entirely separate. At another they comment on each other in such a way as to readjust, even metamorphose, in the light of each other. Clearly ‘The Fear’ is a title and a subject which relates to the image of a shark in a ‘fanged pool’. The poems are acoustically conjoined by percussive

⁵³ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Hill, ‘The Fear’, *Poetry & Audience*, 3. 5 (1955); Geoffrey Hill, ‘The Re-Birth of Venus’, *Poetry & Audience*, 3. 5 (1955).

monosyllables: 'shark', 'shock', 'strikes'. But 'The Fear' speaks of 'fear of a furred kind' which suggests a land-based predator such as a jaguar or large feline. It might also be fur as worn by a rich human, as status symbol, perhaps in a Renaissance portrait (such as Durer's portrait of Oswald Krell). We might remember Lear's insight into social justice: 'Through tattered clothes great vices do appear; | Robes and furred gowns hide all.'

There is, however, a further possible connection between 'Venus' (in the third section) and 'fear of a furred kind' (in the first). When the stand-alone poems are joined into the longer poem 'Metamorphoses' we may remember Kafka's novella *Metamorphosis* in which Gregor Samsa finds himself changed into a verminous bug. Above his table hangs a picture which he has recently cut out of an illustrated magazine of a lady in a fur hat (Pelzhut), fur stole (Pelzboa) and fur muff (Pelzmuff). When his sister and mother are cleaning out his room, Gregor clings to this picture of the lady 'all swathed in furs' ('das Bild der lauter Pelzwerk gekleideten Dame'). Perhaps this is Gregor's 'fear of a furred kind'. Critics have linked this lady in furs to the novella *Venus in Furs* (*Venus im Pelz*) by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch who gives his name to 'masochism' and whose hero at one point assumes the name 'Gregor'. *Metamorphosis* might shed Kafkaesque light on the first part of 'Metamorphoses'. Gregor Samsa's sister has not addressed him since his metamorphosis into an insect: 'No manner of address will do.' Their looks crossed as he clings to the lady in furs and twists his head round to see his sister. ('Da kreuzten sich ihre Blicke mit denen Gregors an der Wand.') That could account for 'that look' and 'the stiff face of shock'. If we allow something Kafkaesque in Hill's 'Metamorphoses', it might explain the sexual anxieties of III and V. But one should not claim too much for this. 'The Fear' keeps both its own unknowability and that of its relationship to the other sections of the sequence.

Finally, let us briefly consider the inter-relationship of II and IV. When *Listen* (2:3 page 6) published 'Scapegoat' and 'Drake's Drum' – two stand-alone poems subsequently the second and fourth parts of 'Metamorphoses' – the reader might take them independently.⁵⁵ But read together, they inter-relate to highlight an aspect of Vanitas. When the eponymous scapegoat is 'so put out' – both offended and ostracized – this is vanitas in the sense of pride and being self-centred. 'Drake's Drum' is vanitas in the sense of futility: the wasted lives of the 'varied dead' and the failure of our 'designed wreaths' and 'used words' to reach them.

⁵⁵ Geoffrey Hill, 'Drake's Drum', *Listen*, 2. 3 (1957), (p. 6); Hill, 'Scapegoat'.

Generic mutability

Let us now consider 'Metamorphoses' as sequence in a more dynamic sense, with respect to generic ambiguity and generic mutability. This will take us to the secret of how 'Metamorphoses' can self-metamorphose. Remember that the term 'genre', as used here, is the metaprogram which governs the totality of theme, structure, style, attitude, tone and emotional effect. It directs the choice of subject; how the text presents or spins its subject; and what it asks of its reader. Each of the five parts of 'Metamorphoses' is unfixed, even unfixable in genre: in its conventions and its orientation to what it describes. Its very nature is debatable, liable to change depending on our angle of approach. This is not a peripheral matter when interpreting the sequence, because each reader must make at least a provisional judgement as to the genre and character of each part. That judgement may then alter according to the context in which each part is situated and develops.

Let us now assay a provisional judgment about the generic character and outlook of each section. The likelihood that another reader would make a different assessment only emphasizes that the generic character of each part is profoundly unstable.

The first part, 'The Fear', is a riddle of the kind which is not susceptible to a single solution. It deploys paradox in that it opens by stating 'No manner of address will do' and then addresses a 'You', identity unknown and unknowable. Although it drops several possible clues, these are cast in negative terms and never reveal what 'This fear' is, such that the section retains its character as riddle.

The second section mocks the rebel who half adopts and is half pushed into the role of outcast and outlaw, only at the end to be embraced as an Establishment figure, the maestro. The rebel, addressed throughout as 'you', is making a nuisance of himself at 'shrines where each fissure blows | Odour of laurel clouding yours.' The reference is to the Pythia, the priestess at Delphi, who both inhaled sulphureous vapours and was crowned with laurel, a symbol of prophecy and poetry. The satire develops through six or seven active verbs instructing the rebel on how to play his role. These are followed by another six verbs in the passive voice which culminate in his being 'returned to favour'. There is a comic disproportion between the two movements since the instructions on the rebel role are spread across three quatrains whilst those on becoming a national treasure are squashed into three lines. The process of rehabilitation is accomplished with dizzying speed and unseemly haste. This contrast satirises how the rebel pounces on acclaim, however despised, once

enough is offered. The last three lines may represent the rebel's ongoing fantasy of acceptance and glory, rather than any reality. The rhetorical figure whereby one commends to another some profitable rules and precepts is called diatyposis. An obvious example is Polonius' advice to Laertes in Act I, scene 3 of *Hamlet*: 'And these few Precepts in thy memory | See thou Character' (TLN 523).⁵⁶ Robert Frost's 'Provide, Provide', a set of instructions on preparing for old age, is diatyposis poised between comic, satirical and earnest. Part II of 'Metamorphoses' is satirical diatyposis.

Section III, 'The Re-birth of Venus', is myth compressed into eight lines. Venus is re-born as a shark. The title recalls Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus' and the whole might be considered as a caricature, scratching-out or scrawling-over of its Quattrocento original. If so, it belongs to that 'avant-garde' school of intellectualised iconoclasm known as 'anti-art', which defaces art. But as we have seen, its generic capability is wider than mini-myth or caricature. More seriously it could be read as lament, warning, or tragedy.

Section IV, 'Drake's Drum', might initially be taken as parody of Newbolt's poem of the same title, or rebuke to patriotic sentimentality. It can also be seen as oscillating along a spectrum of elegy, sceptical elegy and anti-elegy. The ambiguity which governs section IV is mirrored in its melted punctuation which allows the concessive ('Though') clause of the third stanza to apply either to the second or the fourth stanza. The section's ambiguity of genre, tone and meaning is anchored in the final stanza and bound up with a metaphysical question about the afterlife. Our acts of commemoration do not 'Sink to their melted ears and melted hearts.' Elegies, like funerals, are for the living.

Section V, as we have seen, presents itself in the past tense as a thumbnail sketch of a psychodrama, or a mini narrative – though readers will have widely varying ideas as to what story is being told. The voice may be understood as deliberative (as of somebody working something out in their own mind), as ironical or as critical. In its final quatrain the section makes two gambits. First, it addresses the reader (with the imperative 'Grant') in what might be polemic or prayer. In its last two lines it moves towards elegy.

It is therefore evident that none of the five sections of 'Metamorphoses' (1959) belongs wholly, solely and unequivocally to a single genre. Each is produced by crossing different genres. This is done quite without show and in a way which profoundly affects the character of each section and how the reader is to 'take' it. By considering how the sections interact in their various permutations we will

⁵⁶ William Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, 2nd edn, (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 764.

see how the sequence acquires its ability to metamorphose in the comprehension and imagination of its reader. This may first be demonstrated by assaying five separate readings of the final section of 'Metamorphoses' (1959): reading it through five different lenses. The first of these has already been accomplished by reading it as a stand-alone poem, as it appeared in 1955. Our reading has already demonstrated that the section contains the various possibilities of riddle; mini narrative; meta-narrative; protest; ironic critique; miniature myth; argument; warning; elegy; anti-elegy; fantasy; confession. Since one cannot read the poem in all these ways equally and simultaneously, which frame is to take priority? Our choice will condition our assumptions about how the section works: its stance, its voice, how it should be read. And our choice will itself be conditioned – shaped rather than determined – by context.

We will now read section V through four other lenses: the four other sections of the sequence to which since 1959 it belongs. The focus here is initially on generic inter-relationships and genre-switch. Let us relate each section of the sequence to its final section. Read through the lens of 'The Fear', an aspect of riddle and puzzle is highlighted in the final section. 'The Fear' also sets up a warning: 'No manner of address will do' and 'This fear strikes hard and is gone'. With this warning in mind, we may begin to hear similar notes of warning in the fifth section, which could be warning against loveless marriage or stormy, Byronic posturing. The influence runs in both directions. If the fifth section directs its mimesis towards an act of deliberation, an attempt to work something out, then the first section may sound less like riddle and more like a scrupulous attempt at description, trying to define something both in terms of what it is not (which elements it lacks, 'Hate is not in it') and in terms of its characteristic action ('This fear strikes hard'). We might then interpret the first section as ekphrasis, describing a portrait, or as forensic analysis of 'that look', such as Proust applies to the eyes of Legrandin.⁵⁷ Likewise, the sardonic humour, if such it is, of the fifth (in which marital shouting-matches are 'temperate squalls') may bring out something similar in the first. When we are told that 'This fear' is 'recognised' when found, that recognition may not be cerebral illumination so much as deadly discovery, the way the field-mouse 'recognises' the owl whose talons pierce it in the sharp night.

The second section of 'Metamorphoses' ('Through scant pride') can be read as an X-ray of ambition and aggression, a satirical critique of the rebel writer and poseur. In this light the fifth part turns chameleon-like towards critique of its

⁵⁷ Marcel Proust, *Du Côté De Chez Swann*, (France: Gallimard, 1988 [1913]). p. 125. Translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, *Swann's Way*, Penguin, 1957 [1922], p. 150.

protagonist, emphasising his self-ignorance and turmoil, his hunger for ego-food, his absurdity. At the same time, the dozen ironic directives of section II may begin to colour how we receive the directive ('Grant') in the final stanza of section V.

If the third section, 'The Re-birth of Venus', is taken to be ekphrastic satire on Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus', then the fifth section may also swing towards satire in its account of the man 'Drawn freely to the darkness he had fought'. But as we have seen 'The Re-birth' may also be read as cultural lament; warning; or tragedy, which would reinforce a more sombre interpretation of the fifth section. We might also remember Venus's unlovely conception when the Titan Cronus castrated his father, Uranus, whose genitals plopped into the sea and fertilised it. This mythos of castration-as-conception might modify how we understand the tearing of the 'flesh-root' in section V.

'Drake's Drum', the fourth section, 'patrols' somewhere on a spectrum between elegy and anti-elegy. As elegy it might weigh on the final two lines of section V, perhaps shifting the whole of the final section itself to elegy, not this time for those 'varied dead' but for an individual man driven to the edge and drowned. The inter-sectional dialogue offers dispute because the fourth section proposes, on the face of it, that death is final. Our acts and objects of commemoration do not 'Sink to their melted ears and melted hearts'. Theoretically this leaves open the possibility that the soul survives elsewhere, but in practice it seems to assert that the drowned are drowned and the deceased dead. This then provides an antithesis to the fifth section which posits a 'detached, pierced spirit' surviving death. When the fifth section deploys the rhetorical formula 'Grant' it could be speaking to and arguing against the materialist view of the preceding section. Again, when 'Drake's Drum' uses the noun 'flesh' (line 2) of the dead, it speaks to the severed 'flesh-root' and the 'flesh' (as opposed to spirit) of the following section (lines 9 and 14). Contrariwise, the 'flesh-root' and the 'love flesh' of section five may bring out a sexual innuendo in the preceding section, colouring the odd phrase 'England's erect side' with a hint of the saucy seaside postcard, a cartoon of John Bull, pants down, standing up to the invader. There again, in the context of military readiness it may remind us of Marvell's 'Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland' with its view to the future ('Still keep thy Sword erect').⁵⁸

Conclusion

⁵⁸ Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 55-58. Line 116.

Critically neglected, 'Metamorphoses' is a sophisticated sequence in the modernist style, with an intriguing hemi-symmetry, neither upholding symmetry nor renouncing it. Semantically, the sequence exemplifies an aesthetic of *multum in parvo* and attains, as Hart noted, 'almost epic proportions'. The sequence works through generic ambiguity. Each of its five sections seems to be a different kind of poem. So, we have (I) a riddle; (II) comic diatyposis; (III) a mini myth which might be light satire or tragic lament; (IV) an elegy which might be anti-elegy, if not satire or warning; and (V) a thumbnail sketch of what might be psychodrama. The sections are different from each other but not indifferent to each other. They inter-relate in ways easier to sense than to define. If the sequence is committed to an aesthetic of maximal generic heterogeneity, it is not so in a promiscuous or carnivalesque manner. Rather, the play of heterogeneity is skilfully staged. Each of the sections has elements of the other and is primed to undergo some process of generic metamorphosis when considered in the light of another section. To the extent that Hill succeeds in using the sequence-form in 'Metamorphoses' to generate generic metamorphosis, this is not only a successful sequence but a virtuoso sequence, bolder and better than any critic has acknowledged.

Chapter 2

‘Of Commerce and Society’: Sequence as Variation and Disrelation

Introduction

If ‘Metamorphoses’ is Hill’s first major sequence, then his next one is ‘Of Commerce and Society’. Written in parts between 1956 and 1958, it first appeared as a full sequence in *For the Unfallen* (1959). The chapter examines how the sequence develops, showing how ‘Variations on a Theme’ – the subtitle or epigraph to the sequence – are effected by variations of form and style, by a drama of relation and disrelation, where ‘disrelation’ signifies lack of connection, or relation by striking unlikeness. Disrelation functions to create striking effects of oddity and estrangement.

This chapter discusses ‘Of Commerce and Society’ in line with Haynes’ definition of a sequence, as ‘a sequence of poems that share a title’. It will therefore not speak of six ‘sections’ but of six ‘poems’ which together constitute the whole. The word ‘poem’ here signals something of the autonomy of each part as if each refuses to compromise its individuality and accommodate the other parts. It follows that effects of disjunction and disrelation are worked over a wider span than would be possible in lyric. In the process of exploring each ‘poem’ individually, the sense of disrelation will be evident, but common themes will also emerge, to be examined with respect to the sequence as a whole.

The title ‘Of Commerce and Society’ sounds as if it might head an essay or treatise, but the sequence does not so much propose an argument as dramatize history, where history involves imagination and memory, including folk memory, rich in symbol, not without trauma. Something of the thematic parameters of this sequence can be outlined by listing the proper nouns in each of its six poems: 1) Versailles, Europe; 2) Holland, Europe; 3) Shelley, Andromeda, Perseus; 4) Auschwitz, Jehovah; 5) the ‘Titanic’, Babel; 6) Saint Sebastian, Henry James, America, Europe. The subjects have to do with Europe and America, and twentieth-century catastrophes, viewed through a Classical and Judaeo-Christian framework. ‘Of Commerce and Society’ begins and ends with Europe, and with the geostrategic and cultural relationship between North America and Europe. Blake’s prophetic books *America* and *Europe* provide a precedent for exploring the continents as symbolic forces and dramatic characters. As ‘Europe muddles her dreaming’, the continent is personified and described in an idiom which is eloquent to the point of magniloquent, but also, with that verb ‘muddles’, strangely homely.

The subtitle, 'Variations on a Theme', suggests that the theme 'Of Commerce and Society' will be approached and arranged in a musical way. The sequence as a form is ideal for exploring variations on themes because it welcomes inconsistency and disparity and even makes a strength of them. Where the lyric is smooth, concise and polished, the sequence can be rougher and more extensive. Its jagged lop-sidedness is apparent in the disparity of the poems' titles. For five of the six poems which share one title – 'Of Commerce and Society' – also have an individual title. These individual titles are conspicuously inconsistent. The title of the first poem gives co-ordinates of people, place and time: 'The Apostles: Versailles, 1919'. The second poem's title supplies only place: 'The Lowlands of Holland'. The third gives us a poet and an event, 'The Death of Shelley', from which we might infer date (1822) and place (the sea near Leghorn (Livorno)), although that inference is misleading. The fourth poem breaks the pattern by being untitled. The fifth is headed 'Ode on the Loss of the "Titanic"', from which again we might infer place (North Atlantic) and date (April 1912), not that these explain the oddity of this 'Ode'. Poem 6 offers several times, frames and themes in its title, subtitle and epigraph. 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian' points to the original martyrdom (mid-fifth century, Rome); to the legend of the soldier-martyr; and to the image and subject of the nude male body of Sebastian as depicted by Renaissance artists. The subtitle 'Homage to Henry James' recalls James (1843-1916) and his explorations of European and American culture. 'But then face to face' is the apostle Paul's promise of full knowledge after death, outside of time. 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.'¹ (1 Corinthians, 13. 12. AKJV.) Partial perception and obscurity will give way to full and mutual knowledge; or so the epigraph seems to promise the reader.

Most critics have neglected 'Of Commerce and Society'. Below I summarise the views of Hart (1986), Sherry (1987) and Knottenbelt (1990).

In discussing the sequence Hart (1986) shies away from describing it as a sequence, though he does remark that both it and 'Metamorphoses' 'arrange sequences of intense, fragmentary glimpses of civilization's battle to contain immense passion and barbarism's opposing battle to shatter those containments.'² The poet, according to Hart, is 'arranging seemingly disparate fragments' (p. 69) in order to 'X-ray a culture broken by the First World War' (p. 70). The result sounds educational: 'This is Hill's history lesson' (p. 73). Happily,

¹ 1 Corinthians 13. 12.(Authorised King James Version).

² Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, pp. 69-80; 80.

it is also more, because whilst Hill's poems 'may resemble short encyclopedias with many brief chapters, his intense fears and desires give them a lyrical complexion.' (p. 80).

Sherry (1987) describes 'Of Commerce and Society' as a 'six-part sequence', '[a]rguably the best-sustained and most impressive poem in [*For the Unfallen*]' and 'Hill's most probing and disturbing rejection of the civil aesthetic.'³ By 'the civil aesthetic' Sherry understands 'bourgeois, cozy, banal' art (p. 64) and 'the disproven ideals and attitudinal clichés of the old civil order' (p. 69). With its 'argumentative flow' the sequence 'opens itself to paraphrase to a degree unusual in Hill's earlier poetry' (pp. 64-65). Sherry's paraphrase stands in danger of reducing the sequence to a condemnation of 'middle-class faith in material progress' (p. 64). But the gap between his paraphrase and the poem itself widens the more one attends to the poem.

In her chapter on *For the Unfallen*, Knottenbelt describes 'Of Commerce and Society' as 'the volume's longest sequence' with six of its 'strongest poems', praising these as 'mature poetry of witness.'⁴

Let us now examine how the six poems of the sequence unfold, focusing on the different characters of each poem, and noticing how the poems traverse the borders of various genres, such that by 'a tremor | Of remote adjustment' we may pass from one interpretative paradigm to another.

The Apostles: Versailles, 1919

'The Apostles: Versailles, 1919' is a miniature of history, historiography, journalism, diary jotting, folk tale and lyric. It plays variations on these various genres. The poem's title provides persons, place and date as if to introduce history or drama. The verbs are in the simple past, the preterite tense. They set the scene or tell the story. But the style and syntax of the poem also sets up a drama of contrasts as if to reveal history debating with itself. The poem plays on 'the cross-rhythms and counterpointings' (which Hill found deficient in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*).⁵

Of the eight sentences, five have only three words or two. Simple and concise, they uphold a plain, matter-of-fact style. They suggest a view, or an ideal, of history as being a matter of conveying key facts. They could be narrative of a simple kind. 'They sat. They stood about.' History, they seem to say, should tell how it actually was. In and among these five short sentences, however, are two

³ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 64.

⁴ Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, pp. 52, 53.

⁵ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 94.

longer, more elaborate ones using metaphorical language, as if aiming to identify more elusive essences behind the facts. In blending the two, the final sentence offers a sort of resolution. Six words long, it dips into more figurative language: 'The sea creaked with worked vessels.' The poem becomes not just a depiction of Versailles 1919 but an instance of historiography as poetry: or poetry enacting a drama about the nature and principles of history. It exemplifies the debate about Ranke's maxim 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' and whether this requires an empirical history of 'how things actually were' or speculative/analytic history of 'what essentially happened'. The five short sentences tend towards the former while the two longer ones lean away. The final sentence and the poem as a whole direct their mimesis towards history written in the past tense and given a flamboyant, subjective twist, as by an historian with a command of the evidence, a sense of panache, a feel for the strangeness of the past, and delight in the theatrical dimension of the craft. But the poem is not showy. Nor, although it is expressed in statements rather than questions, does it sound dogmatic or didactic. It retains a sense of the deliberative historical imagination at one with the intellect puzzling out the past, and projecting onto it, as if the historian too is 'estranged' and 'appalled'. At the same time, the poem is so pared down as to sound like the bare bones of a folk tale describing an incident of bewitchment. In terms of style, it could be a collage in which five sentences have been written by Hemingway and two by Henry James, with the final sentence as a happy collaboration.

Who are the said 'apostles'? Literally, an apostle is a messenger, or someone sent forth. In the context of the Treaty of Versailles 1919, the term 'apostles' might refer to the delegates who had gathered from thirty-two countries, or to the leaders of the Great Powers: the 'Big Four': President Woodrow Wilson, Prime Minister Lloyd George, Clemenceau (France) and Orlando (Italy). The word-choice is wry in that these are not conventional 'apostles'. The wryness hints that the grim situation is not without its humorous aspect, or that the situation is so grim as to require a slice of humour, however desperate, as antidote. Perhaps the word 'apostle' is being used here to signify the 'chief advocate of a new principle or system; the leader of a great reform' (OED, s. v. 'apostle' n. 3. C.), a sense whose first recorded usage in the OED is appropriately ironic: Thomas Jefferson writing in 1810 of the 'first and chiefest apostle of the desolation of men and morals'. Hill's 'Apostles' could be apostles for a League of Nations, or apostles of the American Century, but far from being gifted with tongues they are struck dumb with something like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Four times in the first quatrain the pronoun 'They' is followed by an intransitive verb, or a passive form, or a form of the verb 'to be' used

descriptively, as if 'They' are unable to act or even speak. It might even be that 'They' are the defeated Germans who had to sign the Treaty, not negotiate it.

The first poem moves in its second stanza from political stasis to signs of resumed economic activity. In its distinctive idiom, unseen powers, seemingly commercial and social, are figured as 'gods'. So 'the gods of coin and salt' could be a short-hand term for invisible forces, with the noun 'gods' conveying their superhuman power; their unknowability; their great age; perhaps their caprice; and their operating, at least in part, from another dimension. The noun 'gods' also suggests 'false gods', and Feuerbachian gods, sublimations made in man's image. In other poems too, 'Of Commerce and Society' contains an implicit question about how to describe forces greater than any individual or any one group.

When 'The bells | In hollowed Europe spilt | To the gods of coin and salt', that verb 'spilt' suggests accident and excess. It also recalls spilling of blood and the proverbial 'spilt milk' over which it is no use crying. The 'gods of coin' sound like economic or financial powers, perhaps Mammon, although 'coin' suggests less the paper or electronic money of the international currency markets and more the bolstering 'pound in your pocket', that coin 'of good substance and weight' which is 'ripe for commerce' (*Mercian Hymns*, XI). The 'gods' of 'salt' are ambiguous. In that salt is a commodity, these 'gods' could be the unseen market forces of commodity exchange. But salt is no ordinary commodity. It preserves. As one of the necessary rations with which the Romans paid their soldiers and civil servants, salt (*sal*) provides the etymological root of salary (*salarium*). Many of the connotations of salt are positive. We speak of the 'salt of youth' for vigour, and the Biblical Elect are the 'salt of the earth'. Salt symbolises incorruption and perpetuity as in a covenant of salt, a covenant which cannot be broken (Numbers 18:19). On the other hand, salt is corrosive of materials. In the world of trade and accountancy, to 'salt' an invoice is to price an article high in order to allow a seemingly generous discount. To 'salt' an account is to price articles high or insert fictitious entries in order to boost its attraction to a prospective buyer.⁶ As well as deception, salt is associated with desolation and infertility, as in 'Carthage | chemically defoliate, salt understood | here as chemical.'⁷ Reward, salary, vigour, virtue, incorruption, perpetuity, corrosion, deception, desolation: with so many possible significations, Hill's 'gods of coin and salt' might be described as 'sal Atticum', as in Byron's 'A turn

⁶ Eric Partridge, *The Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972). s. v. 'salt', senses 3 and 4.

⁷ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 416. *Orchards of Syon*, LXVI

for punning, call it Attic salt' ('English Bards and Scotch Reviewers', line 68) where 'Attic' means Athenian and suggests acerbic or intellectual wit. These 'gods of coin and salt' take their place in an enigmatic lyric which dramatizes a moment of historical inaction, a hiatus between the terror of war and the resumption of trade.

The Lowlands of Holland

If the first poem is primarily history, then the second looks more like geography. Its title, 'The Lowlands of Holland', also the title of a folksong, supplies place without date, though 'the much-scarred, much-scoured terrain' of the first line tells of war, whether it be the Eighty Years War (1568-1648, the Dutch War of Independence), or later wars up to the World Wars of the twentieth century. The noun 'terrain' suggests a 'tract of country considered with regard to its natural features, configuration etc.; in military use especially as affecting its tactical advantages, fitness for manoeuvring etc' (OED, s. v. 'Terrain' n. 2.). Europe is presented as 'terrain' to be fought over and to be used for military advantage.

This poem of four quatrains forms a single sentence of a lengthy, fragmented character. The head noun is 'Europe', and the fundament (the basic unit of subject and predicate) is 'Europe... invites use'. The fundament 'X... invites use' suggests a bill of sale, auction catalogue, or entry in the personal column of a newspaper. It might apply to a piece of real estate, as in 'This charming property invites use as a holiday let.' 'Europe... invites use' could be the reporting of a fact or a perception, or it could be an announcement, the speech-act by which Europe puts itself up for sale. It sounds like critique. Heard as anger it could be satire; heard as lament it might be elegy. The present tense might direct us to the period of composition: 1956-58, when the European Economic Community was coming into being with the Treaty of Rome, signed in 1957 by Italy, West Germany, France and the 'Benelux' countries. 'The Lowlands of Holland' in the title are subsumed into 'Europe' in the first line.

'Europe... invites use'. This could be read positively as a sign of being open for business, the economy restarting after the trauma described in the first poem. But the poem sounds more critical. 'Stuffed with artistry and substantial gain' suggests that the 'artistry' is seen in terms of commercial profit and 'Stuffed' is a careless, unartistic choice of word. The poem can be read as a satire on the emerging 'Common Market' in which everything is commodified and available for exchange; in which intrinsic value is sold for exchange value; in which the European project is reconceived not in terms of shared history or culture, but as the development of a single market for goods, labour, services and capital. The 'attested liberties' are up for sale, with the adjective 'attested' contributing as

testimonial to the sales pitch. (Forty years later Hill would be sceptical, even scathing, about 'the liberties of Maastricht', in 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis' section I, in *Canaan*, p. 30. BH, p. 198). These 'liberties' are in apposition with, or juxtaposed to, 'home-produce' such as eggs or pasties in a market stall, ready to be picked up, bought and consumed. The effect is a bird's-eye or a god's-eye view of Europe which in the second stanza is subject to dizzying change as if the continent were lifted, like some of that 'home-produce', turned over, weighed and judged. It might be scrutinised through microscope or telescope lenses – such as those ground in Amsterdam by Spinoza. 'Shrunken, magnified (nest, holocaust)'. The style is compressed, almost brutalist. Compare 'It was shrunken, then it was magnified.' In Hill's version only the essential words are included, making for telegraphic concision, leaving all possible relations open between words which remain. The aesthetic here is cubist-like: to show a subject simultaneously from angles diametrically opposed. So, the nurturing 'nest' is only a comma away from 'holocaust'. This recalls the death-camps of the Nazi Holocaust, but since Hill's 'holocaust' is lower case, the collocation of 'nest, holocaust' also refers to the phoenix which sets fire to itself and is reborn amidst its own ashes, a common trope for post-war reconstruction in Europe; as images of ruin, such as the firestorms following the 'strategic bombing' of Dresden, were overlaid by the 'Wirtschaftswunder', the economic miracle under Erhard and Adenauer. In the 1950s the image or cliché of the phoenix reborn would apply to the hopes and fears then attendant on the new European Economic Community: hopes that centuries of distrust and warfare between France and Germany might be replaced by cooperation and prosperity; fears that the EEC would provide cover for resurgent Germany and threaten the British national interest. The possible referents – Third Reich death camps, the carpet-bombing of Hitler's Germany, the 'Wirtschaftswunder', and the consequences of the Treaty of Rome – all clash.

'Not half innocent and not half undone'. Europe, Europa may be figured here as a violated woman or as a prostitute, with the adjective 'undone' meaning 'ruined' or raped. As Europa was seduced by Zeus in the form of a bull, so Europe is here being portrayed as a 'much-scarred, much-scoured' woman. The phrase 'Profiting from custom' has an obvious economic sense, applicable to prostitution. In view of the Treaty of Rome, we may also remember the aim of the new EEC to increase profit by eliminating customs duties and establishing a customs union. Both sexual and economic interpretations can be set against a more Burkean reading which would have Europe, bombed and ruined, still 'Profiting from custom' as in 'drawing nourishment from deep-seated and

established ways of life'. If so, the description is implicit prescription in praise of 'custom'.

The poetry is replete with generic possibilities. Even a single portion of the single sentence of this poem is strewn with variations on elegy, critique, and satire: 'its replete strewn | Cities such ample monuments to lost || Nations and generations'. This could be regret about what has been 'lost', with 'lost' even more loaded, pointed and poignant for rhyming with 'holocaust'. The rhyme allows the word 'lost' to be a euphemism for genocide. The poem moves its mimesis towards critique if we hold that flourishing cities should be more than 'ample monuments' to the past. It then verges into satire when it speaks of Europe's 'cultural | Or trade skeletons such hand-picked bone'. It is unclear what a 'trade skeleton' is; the collocation does not appear in the OED. Does it refer literally to a trade in skeletons, as in selling skeletons, at discount price, to customers and interested parties such as medical students? In everyday commerce, a 'trade drill' would be one bought at factory-floor prices, with the possibility that it had 'fallen off the back of a lorry'. So, these 'trade skeletons' could be stolen skeletons. In the context of the word 'holocaust' in the preceding stanza, the 'skeletons' evoke images of emaciated prisoners in the Nazi death camps. The idea of a 'cultural' skeleton implies a moribund culture. It reinforces the fourth line in which Europe was 'Stuffed with artistry' where 'Stuffed' suggests the stuffed carcase of the taxidermist. The bone is 'hand-picked' which gives an idea of careful selection, but also presents culture as a cadaver which has been 'picked' clean. To 'pick' a body is to probe or penetrate it with a pointed instrument so as to remove extraneous matter (OED, s. v. 'pick', v. 1. 2.).

What are these 'trade skeletons' and who prices them? 'Flaws in the best, revised science marks down'. This line, with the telegraphic sparseness of some of Hill's later work, hints at the macabre idea of an auction of skeletons: literal skeletons, or figurative ones if artefacts are being viewed reductively as dead and sellable. Flawed products are marked down, in the sense of 'sold at discount'. The line might contain a reference to the notorious case of the 'Piltdown Man' which had been exposed in 1953 as a forgery. Having been widely accepted for forty years as part of the skeleton of a newly discovered *genus* of man, it was shown to be the jaw of a modern ape and the skull of *Homo sapiens*. 'Flaws in the best, revised science marks down' could also refer to revisionist history, such as Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) which had debunked Cardinal Manning, Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold and General Gordon. The phrase 'revised science' could be sardonic. The 'science' might be the 'science' of experts as deployed by dealers. Hill might also be

ridiculing the pretensions of 'scientific socialism' which claimed that whilst bourgeois history was ideology, its own Marxist practice of history attained the status of 'science'. If so, the adjective 'revised' would call to mind the controversies of 'revisionism', a derogatory word within Marxist circles for reinterpretations and modifications of Marxist theory. From 1956, 'revised science' might be a sardonic description of debates in the Communist Party after Khrushchev had denounced Stalin at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in February of that year.

In its last five lines the second poem is governed by the verb 'Witness': 'Witness many devices... witness classic falls... Witness earth fertilised'. This continues the conceit of Europe being up for sale. If the first eleven lines direct their mimesis to a bill of sale, then the last five lines are the signature and attestation, as at the end of a legal document: 'Witness my hand'. The repeated 'Witness' might also be a formula to introduce evidence for a proposition, although the nature of that specific proposition and the overall case being made remains obscure. The 'many devices' could be technical instruments such as Spinoza's, or stratagems. On the evidence of the last five lines, the evidence offered by the thrice repeated 'witness' is largely a rhetoric of sonorous generalisation: ('The dead subtracted; the greatest resigned;'), which a heckler might challenge with 'Name three!'. If the poem is directing its mimesis towards the presentation of argument and evidence, as in the oratory of a barrister, then it seems to be more of a dream-argument than one which could be sustained in courtroom or seminar.

The Death of Shelley

The third poem, 'The Death of Shelley' turns on a pun in that Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) appears not *in propria persona*, but as a latter-day and incompetent Perseus who can neither locate Medusa nor rescue Andromeda. The whole can be read as imagism; comedy; ekphrasis; legend; and contemporary comment which verges on satire. The poem is in two parts, and both are written in a present tense which conjures both a timeless condition and the contemporary moment. It uses a symbolic language in which the sea, 'Eagles or vultures', the 'bull and the great mute swan' symbolize the powers of Nature and Society. The symbolic use of animals is reminiscent of Blake: 'while the Lion seizes the Bull, the Tiger the Horse, the Vulture and the Eagle contend

for the Lamb.⁸ The Lamb might be the absent centre around which secular 'Commerce and Society' revolves.

The poem begins with two and a half lines of images without main verb, moving from 'Slime' to 'sunned and risen faces', as with cinematography: image after image, frame by frame. 'Slime; the residues of refined tears;': this first line is pitched between the tragic and the comic. 'Slime' could be the rude comedy of decay and Death the leveller. Ashes to ashes: tears to slime. The idea of 'refined tears' is droll if we imagine a distillery with tankers delivering crude tears, to be distilled in retorts, then exported as gleaming 'refined tears'. It is also a comedy of class, poking fun at 'refined tears' as if these were affected, stuck-up tears believing themselves superior to common tears. It recalls a joke at the end of *The Winter's Tale* when the newly ennobled shepherd's son says, 'and so wee wept: and there was the first Gentleman-like teares that ever we shed.'⁹

The whole poem shimmers in the light of pastiche. The voice of a commentator points out Andromeda as one might identify a celebrity on a beach. The contraction in 'There's Andromeda' suggests someone sharing the excitement of discovery and 'Depicted' suggests an art gallery, museum or archaeological dig. The use of a phrase in inverted commas or 'scare quotes' draws attention to the narrative as being constructed and borrowing from previous narratives. Perseus here is in the wrong place and the wrong era, out of his element: a latter-day Don Quixote, 'With nothing to strike at or blind | in the frothed shallows.' This Perseus might be the image of the 'committed poet' who cannot now locate the monster (Moloch) and so thrashes around, stranded 'in the frothed shallows' of secular piety and virtue-signalling. We might remember 'In Memoriam': 'My words are only words, and moved | Upon the topmost froth of thought.' (When Hill read those lines, he dwelled on the phrase 'froth of thought' and stressed the word 'froth'.¹⁰) With his 'shielded brow' and 'aimless mirror' this Perseus has something in common with the 'ragged urchin, aimless and alone' in Auden's 'The Shield of Achilles'. As it re-tells the legend of Andromeda and hapless Perseus, the poem loses its rhyme and slides towards burlesque. As satire it would be taking aim at a fixed target, but the target here is unclear.

⁸ William Blake, *Blake: Complete Writings*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 441. 'Inscription on the back of "The Fall of Man", Watercolour Drawing 1807.'

⁹ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 319. The Winter's Tale, V. 2. 145. TLN 3152. Hill refers to this joke in his penultimate Oxford Lecture, 'The feel of not to feel it', 53:30.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Hill, 'Fields of Force', *Oxford lecture 7*
<<http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2012-11-27-engfac-hill.mp3>>,
(2012) [accessed 8 May 2021] 29:47 to 31:59.

Despite the title, it is not Shelley himself, but some latter-day would-be Shelley, whether an individual or a type, such as the contemporary 'radical'. The poem is poised between private allusion and public comment.

The second part of the third poem (3, ii) turns towards allegory and 'auguries'. Its eight lines include several avatars of Zeus: 'Eagles', the 'bull and the great mute swan'. These emblems of Zeus might also stand for the vital energies of the secular and commercial world. The 'Eagles' churning the skies might be the avionic forces of the American Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) as an emblem of the American World Order. The poem offers its double view of 'Eagles or vultures': the one considered majestic, the other a scavenger. The conjunction 'or' is introducing an alternative which might also sound like an afterthought: eagles, or vultures? It could also have something of the force of a synonym: eagles or vultures: both large carnivorous birds.

The animals here are emblematic of human and social energies. The bull is 'a mass of ambivalences'.¹¹ It can stand for fecundity and, commercially, a bull market signifies economic boom. The bull also stands for violence and tyranny. If the image of the primordial bull, which so fascinated Picasso, signifies male sexuality or brute patriarchy, then the 'notorious' cries with which the poem ends herald not only new life but rapes. The adjective 'notorious' is unfavourable as in a notorious offender, or criminal.

The swan is an emblem of the poet since the soul of Apollo, god of music, was said to have passed into a swan. But this is 'the great mute swan'. It and the bull come from Greek legend but are presented in the present tense, both as symbols and as real powers. Hill takes paganism seriously. He does not explain the symbols, nor are they incomprehensible. The eagle, the bull and the swan are part of common knowledge, what Larkin dubbed the 'common myth-kitty'.¹² Hill makes them live and work through the active, present-tense verbs 'churn' and 'Strain'. The poem is close to symbolism in that it evokes a mood or an idea little by little through powerful symbols which do the work of suggesting more abstract ideas, by the very power of the symbol, not by labouring into interpretation. That power draws a parallel between Classical paganism and the modern world. The eagles, the vultures, the bull and the great mute swan come from a Graeco-Roman pagan world. Here in the present tense, they are reborn in our world, as forces of vitality and as regressive powers of cruelty. Hill is

¹¹ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, (London: Penguin, 1996 [1969]), p. 135. s. v. 'bull'

¹² Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, p. 79. Discussed in Hill's final Oxford lecture, 'I know thee not, old man', 49:00 to 51:45.

describing a post-Christian age; and his description, like Auden's in 'The Shield of Achilles', sounds an alarm.

In this sequence, 'The Death of Shelley' is the only poem divided into two numbered parts. What is the relationship between them? The first has Perseus with his 'clogged sword' and 'nothing to strike at or blind'. Although the sword could be 'clogged' because he has killed the sea-monster, he appears in this poem to be 'aimless' and deprived of any monster against which to prove himself. The second part lacks any Perseus or human figure, but the landscape is Shelleyan with its rivers and sea and the 'auguries' look Shelleyan too.

'Eagles or vultures' may recall 'Adonais' with its eagle 'who like thee could scale | Heaven' (stanza XVII) and 'vultures to the conqueror's banner true' (stanza XXVIII). We may also recall the 'monstrous sight' of 'An Eagle and a Serpent wreathed in fight' in 'The Revolt of Islam' (canto I, stanza VIII). Whilst the first part of this poem lampoons some modern-day Perseus, the second offers a Shelleyan landscape awaiting its Shelley. It suggests that modern society has its powers ('The bull and the great mute swan') if only a poet had wit to discern and describe them.

4

The fourth poem sounds quasi-oracular as it speaks of knowledge, visions, the dead, thunder-strikes, Auschwitz, and Jehovah. An oracle reveals truth but often in a way which invites misunderstanding. This poem is poised between declamation and troubled meditation. The single, outstanding word is 'Auschwitz' which stands out in a literal way on the page as it extends closer to the right-hand margin, further into the white space which surrounds a poem, than any other word. The subject of 'Auschwitz' is set among thunderstrikes, forces of disaster or divine intervention, but also and disturbingly, as we shall see, with echoes from the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

'Statesmen have known visions.' The poem begins with knowledge of a special, seemingly restricted kind. It ends with apparent recognition that further explanation is needed. 'At times it seems not common to explain.' As elsewhere, Hill offers a locution which is close to a common one, but, on investigation, significantly different. 'At times it isn't easy to explain' would require no explanation. 'At times it seems not common to explain' is harder to explain, especially when no explanation is offered.

The fourth poem seems to arise from gnosis of esoteric mysteries, whilst being enigmatic, open to misinterpretation. Being untitled, it offers no initial pointers as to person, place or situation. Instead, the words emerge out of nothing, carrying

all the potential for mystery and drama which inheres in the unknown. Hill's speaker might be 'not alone' but an Everyman figure drawing on a depth of lived experience, as in Eliot's 'Gerontion'. The voice might be voices in the plural, as in a Greek chorus, though for convenience I shall refer to it as a single voice. The poem offers a monologue which is an enigma in that it is unmarked: it does not reveal who is speaking or why. Although we know what is said, we are unsure what is meant, or if we are sure, we are likely to be mistaken. The voice initially sounds sagacious, compelling and mysterious, as if speaking from a wealth of experience. 'Statesmen have known visions.' The tone is authoritative, as of someone with the confidence to generalise about statesmen and visions. Solemn, even portentous, this voice does not sound pompous but alive to possible amusement, as in the choice of the verb 'prod' in the second line 'Artistic men prod dead men from their stone'. This might be a witty description of a sculptor wielding a chisel, or an historian prodding his characters to play their assigned parts. But any light amusement is deepened by sombre repetition of 'dead men... the dead... The dead' on successive lines. 'Some of us have heard the dead speak.' The eight consecutive monosyllables give this line the strength of simplicity. We can show this by trying an alternative. 'The dead have spoken to some of us' is much weaker, perhaps because it also lacks the concluding spondee ('dead speak'). 'The dead are my obsession this week || But may be lifted away.' For the first time the sequence is using the drama and urgency of the first person: 'us... my'. We might want to receive this as the authentic voice of the poet, breaking cover, despairing at mortality. But it could equally be an impersonal voice or a choric voice speaking out of deep history or articulating some collective unconscious.

This voice, this speech goes on to talk about thunder-strikes, those seemingly random disasters from above, not without irony. 'Thunder may strike, or, as a tremor | Of remote adjustment, pass on the far side | From us'. We may take 'thunder' as an abbreviation of 'thunderbolt' and a metonym for 'lightning'. The words 'tremor' and 'remote', as near-anagrams, might with a tremor of adjustment turn into each other but in fact 'pass on the far side'. The reader may sense a 'tremor | Of remote adjustment' in remembering the priest and the Levite who 'passed by on the other side' in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10. 31-32). Theirs was an act of prudence and fear, whereas thunder passing 'on the far side | from us' is presumably a matter of Providence or good luck. The ethical polarity has been flipped: to 'pass on the far side' is now a matter of good fortune and an occasion for gratitude in having been passed over.

Along with the quasi-oracular, the fourth poem has something of *belles-lettres* in its aplomb; its range of opinion; the scope of its civilised perceptions; its unobtrusive good sense, and elegant distinctions. It confides and entertains as it imparts its judgements and *bons mots* about fear, propitiation and the elementary psychology of religious life. The style combines precision and concision with well-wrought antithesis. So, thunder may strike or pass on the far side 'however deified and defied || By those it does strike.' We might expect 'deified or defied', but Hill tends to defy expectation. The figure is paronomasia, in which words repeated are nearly but not exactly alike in sound. The underlying question is how we are to relate to the infinite and particularly the infinite in its hostile aspect: with awe, with defiance or with indifference? The Classical world deified lightning in the form of Zeus or *Jupiter tonans*; King Lear defied the 'oak-cleaving thunderbolts' and 'all-shaking thunder' (*King Lear*, III ii, 5-6); so too, in quieter way, does the modern science (whilst developing its smarter thunderbolts); but thunder strikes or passes, irrespectively.

'Many have died.' Is this deep truth or commonplace? The next word, 'Auschwitz', has us reassess what has come before. Perhaps the first two stanzas were preamble: generalisations of a throat-clearing kind. Perhaps we were misled by the authority appertaining to the opening noun 'Statesmen' and by the rosy connotations of that noun 'visions' crowning the first sentence. They might after all have been Hitler's 'visions'.

To understand this poem, we must consider the effect of placing 'Auschwitz' between thunder-strikes and 'Jehovah's touchy methods'. As a meteorological phenomenon, thunder is strictly incommensurable with the extermination camps of Auschwitz which were staffed by men. A thunderstrike is an instance of random misfortune, although in Law it might be judged an 'act of God': 'the operation of uncontrollable natural forces; an instance or result of such forces; frequently in the context of insurance' (OED, s. v. 'act', P 4, 'act of God'). In the Classical world, thunder is an attribute of Jove. In the Bible, thunder is one of the forces of nature controlled by God; a symbol of God's power; one of God's weapons against his enemies; and a sign of wrath and judgment. Thunder is particularly associated with Jahweh, the special name of the God of Israel. When he appeared on Mount Sinai 'there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled.' (Exodus 19. 16. See also Exodus 20. 18). It seems that Jahweh was a sky-god, a god of thunder and lightning, based in the mountainous regions (I Kings 20. 23).

Thunderstrikes. Auschwitz. Jehovah. The third stanza makes a claim and shares an anxiety: Auschwitz, or the memory of it, is fading into 'fable'. It is 'half-

dead' as the victim in the parable of the Good Samaritan was left 'half dead' (Luke 10. 30). That echo, the shard of that parable, uneasily juxtaposes a single individual, fictional, unnamed and representative, who is 'half-dead' (and therefore half-alive), against the victims of Auschwitz who are fully dead. Auschwitz is become 'a fable | Unbelievable in fatted marble.' The 'marble' here stands for something durable, cold and unyielding. It is also that which can take a polish and can be used for decorative purposes. We might think of the marbled pattern or paper used in ornamenting books; or of the woven pattern of 'marble men and maidens overwrought' on Keats' Grecian Urn. The adjective 'fatted' not only conveys disgust; it also introduces another dissonant allusion if we remember the 'fatted calf' mentioned three times in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15. 23, 27, 30) and referred to in *Oraclau* stanza 60. That 'fatted calf' was a sacrifice of thanksgiving and reconciliation, incongruous in the shadow of the word 'Auschwitz' which leans out only three lines above it.

In its final quatrain the poem knocks more loudly on the gate of theodicy. If the problem of divine justice as encountered post 1945 were to be compressed into two proper nouns, they might be the two which occur in this poem: 'Auschwitz' and 'Jehovah'. The poem is touching on the 'poetry after Auschwitz' debate associated with Adorno. It does so in a way which combines solemnity with levity. 'There is at times some need to demonstrate | Jehovah's touchy methods'. The infinitive 'to demonstrate | Jehovah's touchy methods' verges on a parody of Milton's great argument: to 'justify the ways of God to men.' (*Paradise Lost*, I. 26). The subversion operates through verb, noun and adjective. To 'demonstrate' is what a scientist does in a well-devised experiment. This choice of verb puts the poet in charge as the god-like scientist; with 'Jehovah's touchy methods' as the subject of experiment. The use of the name 'Jehovah', the personal name of God in the Jewish Scriptures, is pointed in the context of Auschwitz. For the name 'Jehovah' is the coinage of Christian theologians (c. 1520) who combined the consonants of the Tetragrammaton (JHVH) with the vowels of Adonai (meaning 'Lord') to create the name Jehovah, 'a purely fictitious name which has become hallowed by four centuries of use'.¹³ Based on a Jewish word, though not itself a Jewish word, 'Jehovah' is taken to refer to the Jewish God. In the context of Auschwitz this raises the question of theodicy – God's justice – in relation to his 'chosen people'. We may remember that the first of Hill's 'Two Formal Elegies, for the Jews in Europe' ended with 'Jehovah's hand'. The use of the name 'Jehovah' sharpens the problem of

¹³ Alan Richardson, *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, (London: SCM, 1957 [1950]), p. 96. s. v. 'God'.

theodicy and Auschwitz, in that it asks questions not of the divine power in general but of the Jewish God in particular.

The adjective 'touchy' means 'irascible, irritable, tetchy'. (OED, s.v. 'touchy, adj., 1); also 'risky; ticklish' (OED, 3). It portrays 'Jehovah' as proud, with a short fuse and poor sense of humour, especially regarding matters of *amour propre*. The accusation is only slightly veiled. It can be read as jokey, deadly serious, or baffled. It is a glancing accusation in that it depends on an adjective rather than explicit argument, and that adjective qualifies Jehovah's methods rather than Jehovah himself. But the sentence toys with blasphemy, under the warning in the second stanza that 'Thunder may strike'. The adjective 'touchy' is unusual and witty. We might have expected the adjectives 'questionable' or 'bizarre' to convey, with however raised an eyebrow, the sense that, in the words of Cowper's hymn, 'God moves in a mysterious way | His wonders to perform'. Nowadays the adjective 'touchy' touches on a more contemporary adjective, 'touchy-feely', as in 'given to the open expression of affection or other emotions, especially through hugging or other physical contact' (OED, s. v. 'touchy-feely' adj.). Clearly this association would be ironic in the context of a god hurling thunderbolts. OED gives its first usage of 'touchy-feely' as 1968 so the meaning would not have been available to the poem's first readers. If the poem is implicitly hazarding an accusation, then it should be remembered that accusations against divine justice are also found in the Book of Job and the Psalms. They have become more frequent and more forceful since theology demoted or retired the Devil, and since people have ceased to credit the existence of Evil. In such a context, the buck stops at God.

In raising questions of theodicy, the final stanza avoids direct accusation, vindication or even commemoration. Consider what Hill did not write:

There is at times some need to demonstrate
Jehovah's touchy methods that permit
The concentration camps, six million slain:
Extermination awkward to explain.

Whilst the above is explicit and crass, Hill's poem speaks of 'Jehovah's touchy methods that create | The connoisseur of blood, the smitten man.' This 'connoisseur of blood' could be an Auschwitz guard or a sadist delighting in murder, in which case the poem asks why Jehovah has created such a monster and whether Jehovah is thereby complicit in cruelty. The poem's accusation turns into self-accusation if 'The connoisseur of blood' is the writer as aesthete, in his armchair of privilege, consuming the suffering of others whilst approving his fine distinctions about others' pain, as if their pain were a delicacy.

Elsewhere Hill has written of pain and lust 'distilled by the connoisseurs', adding that '[t]he connoisseur is as likely to be the poet as the critic'.¹⁴

Is the 'smitten man' the same as the 'connoisseur of blood', or do the two stand in antithesis? The word 'smitten' is often used in a jocular way for someone 'smitten' in love, but that sense does not fit this context. The 'smitten man' could be Isaiah's 'man of sorrows' who 'is despised and rejected of men' (Isaiah 53. 3). 'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.' (Isaiah 53. 4). In Jewish interpretation this 'smitten' man is a figure of the nation Israel: small, afflicted, but significant in the divine plan. Christian interpretation has these verses as a prophecy of the suffering Christ. With the licence of liberality, it could be taken as a type of suffering humanity. If we remember the priest and the Levite passing by 'on the far side', then the 'stricken man' might be the man from the parable who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves (Luke 10. 30). Hill's 'smitten man' combines the victim of the Nazi camps with Isaiah's 'man of sorrows' identified either with Jewish destiny or with the suffering Christ or suffering humans. The 'smitten man' and the 'suffering servant' are important in Hill's theology. When, later, he asks 'What remains?' one answer is 'something through which it is made possible | to give credence – if only to Isaiah's prophetically | suffering servant' (TL, XXIII). The 'suffering servant' reappears in 'Tu B'Shevat' (BH, 492). From one angle, 'The connoisseur of blood' and 'the smitten man' stand in the same line in antithesis to each other, as 'have' and 'have-not'. But we could also take 'the smitten man' to be a figure for the poet as 'a maimed one' (MH, V. BH, p. 87), such that 'connoisseur' and 'smitten man' are two aspects of the same poet.

Ode on the Loss of the 'Titanic'

'Ode on the Loss of the "Titanic"' declares itself an 'Ode' although it is no more than eight lines long. We could take the title as a provocative tease, which directs attention to the limits of the word 'Ode' even as it addresses the 'Loss of the "Titanic"'. If so, a question of classification and self-definition precedes and frames any lament for the sunk liner. Are we reading ode or pastiche? The poem seems poised between exalted diction and sardonic wit; between the literal and the figurative, the particular and the general; between description and allusion. Is the poem offering an account in the present tense of the loss of the 'Titanic'; an account of a separate event, a storm as seen from land; or an

¹⁴ Kenneth Allott, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse, 1918-60*, 2nd edn, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 391-92.

extended metaphor or compressed allegory, in which figurative description conveys a veiled moral meaning?

The poem opens with an unexpected participle and a twist of perspective. 'Thriving', with its connotation of prospering and flourishing, makes a startling start to an 'Ode on the Loss of the "Titanic"' and encapsulates our contradictory attitude to a stormy sea as both terrifying and exhilarating. The initial point of view is not the 'Titanic' itself but somewhere on land, such as a seaside resort in a storm as the sea 'Souses our public baths, statues, waste ground'. The 'public baths' connote community and cleanliness and there is something comically paradoxical in these baths being soured by the sea.

Hill's 'Ode on the Loss of the "Titanic"' offers a 'Titanic' without the iceberg. Havoc is wrought not by an iceberg but by 'the ignorant sea' in a storm. The title might be a deliberate mis-title, setting up a subplot of hubris and comic mis-self-categorisation to displace or run alongside the disaster of the 'Titanic'. To what extent is this 'Ode' really an ode? Its third line could feature in a traditional ode or even an epic: 'Archaic earth-shaker, fresh enemy'. The line surfs the wave between the heroic mode and pastiche, in deniable complicity with mock-heroic.

The fourth line. – ('The tables of exchange being overturned') – compounds description with allusion and evaluation. In its simply descriptive aspect, the line shows the 'tables of exchange' (not the deckchairs) in the 'Titanic' being overturned. The 'exchange' here could be conversation, playing-cards, gambling-chips or unspecified commercial business. Placed in both brackets and in inverted commas, the line presents itself as a quote. The obvious reference is to the Gospel story, illustrated on the cover of Hill's *Collected Critical Writings*, of Jesus in the Temple when he 'cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple' and 'overthrew the tables of the moneychangers' (Matthew 21. 12). The same phrase is used in Mark 11. 15. The translation of the New International Version (1973) uses the word 'overturned' in its active form: 'He overturned the tables of the money changers'. Hill's slight adaptation – ('The tables of exchange being overturned') – combines the 'Titanic' and the Temple in a double exposure which adds strongly ambiguous evaluation. The story of the cleansing of the Temple is superimposed on the story of the sinking of the 'Titanic' in a way which could be described as 'Metaphysical':

heterogeneous ideas yoked together, not 'by violence' but with skill, to violent effect. The reader is left to find points of equivalence between the 'Titanic' and either the Temple or the cleansing of the Temple. It could be that the 'Titanic' is being shown as the secular, modern equivalent of the Temple: a place of prestige which symbolises the core values of a community or social group. As such, it might be considered an idol, the focus of a cult of misplaced worship.

Like the Temple it is tainted by commerce and doomed to destruction, with the sinking of the liner figured as a cleansing. The line inclines towards critique of Mammon and the monied elite. But condemnation may be 'overturned' if we understand the point of equivalence between Temple and 'Titanic' as being based not on comparison but on contrast.

When 'the ignorant sea... Drowns Babel' we assume that Babel here is like the Titanic in being a prestige-project which ends in ruin. If the word 'Babel' stands for the plans of the metropolitan and global elite, then 'Drowns Babel' is not the present tense of immediate occurrence but more the present tense of prophetic vision, of justice and punishment foretold. The poem is moving towards the rhetoric of populist chiasm.

The poem's final line delights in ambiguity. 'By all means let us appease the terse gods.' These 'gods' could be the gods of fate, emanations perhaps of 'The Immanent Will' and 'the Spinner of the Years' in Hardy's 'The Convergence of the Twain'. Since the late 1930s the verb 'appease' sounds discreditable, appertaining to a course of action which is weak, dishonourable and ultimately self-defeating. But the equivalent French verb ('apaiser') has positive connotations, meaning 'to pacify', and when facing hostile gods, to 'appease' them could be prudent. 'To appease', perhaps, is one of those irregular verbs, declined something like 'I make a sensible compromise; you concede rather too much; he or she exhibits rank cowardice'. The phrase 'by all means' may function as an expression of permission or agreement, or it might mean 'in every way possible' which is how Paul uses the phrase: 'I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.' (1 Corinthians, 9. 22). The sense of Hill's line might be: 'By all means let us appease the terse gods – it won't help (but it's worth a try)'. Or it might signify that the situation is so dire that the gods must be placated in every way possible.

The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian

The first stanza of the final poem is comic ekphrasis looking at the 'arty' element inside 'martyrdom'. 'Naked', its first word, describes the soldier-saint; 'as if for swimming' is a droll aside, because 'swimming' introduces the possibility of a bizarre alternative scenario in which all the figures in the painting give up on the martyrdom and go for a dip instead. As it is, in the next line Sebastian 'Catches his death', as one might catch a ball, a cold, a thief, a bus or someone's eye. There is an incongruous emphasis on the aesthetics of the martyrdom as if it matters whether these be 'plain arrows' or fancy, luxury ones. Although to the painter (and viewer) such details do matter, it seems irreverent to have this brought to our attention. There is something 'camp' in the wit and one can

imagine Kenneth Williams playing Sebastian and complaining about the shoddiness of the arrows. The witty insight into the aesthetics and vanity of martyrdom is akin to Chris Morris's jihad satire, 'Four Lions' (2010), in which the suicide-bombers, staging their martyr-video, are improperly, though realistically, preoccupied with presentational considerations such as the size and verisimilitude of their replica Kalashnikov. Hill's fourth line puns on the adjective 'priceless' meaning either 'of inestimable value' such as a painting by an Old Master, especially one at risk of being sold abroad, or else 'highly amusing'. The comedy is facilitated by comic disyllabic (feminine) rhyme ('martyr'/'flutter', 'situation'/'nation'). The gravity of 'martyr' is undercut by the levity of 'a little flutter' with its associations of tremulous excitement ('to be in a flutter'); display ('to make a flutter'); or casual gambling ('having a flutter').

The second stanza invites us to consider a hypothesis, then sketches a theory about the psychology of suffering and fine art:

Consider such pains 'crystalline': then fine art
Persists where most crystals accumulate.

Given its magisterial brevity, this approaches aphorism. We might recall Auden's 'slogan': 'Let each child have that's in our care | As much neurosis as the child can bear.'¹⁵ But for Hill it is not how art is created but where fine art 'Persists'. The verb contributes to a sonic crystal: 'Consider [...] "crystalline" [...] Persists [...] crystals [...] History'. This breaks on the humble phrase 'scraped clean' in lines poised between grandeur and satire:

History can be scraped clean of its old price.
Engrossed in the cold blood of sacrifice,

The provident and self-healing gods
Destroy only to save.

Grammatically, these 'provident and self-healing gods' are the subject of a major sentence within a poem whose grammatical subjects are 'the martyr', 'fine art', 'History', 'The provident and self-healing gods' and 'America'. So, these 'gods' appear between 'History' and 'America'. They could be metaphysical or imagined entities such as 'the terse gods' of poem 5; or gods (not dogs) of war who have been 'Engrossed' in the 'sacrifice' of World War and who 'Destroy only to save'. Here at its half-way point the poem veers towards satire. As Hill writes elsewhere: 'I may have been thinking of Mr Dulles's idea of

¹⁵ 'Letter to Lord Byron', part IV, W. H. Auden, *The English Auden*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 193.

God as Head of Strategic Air Command.’¹⁶ These ‘provident and self-healing gods’ seem to be economic powers like the ‘gods of coin and salt’ in ‘The Apostles’. The ‘provident’ gods might refer, with whatever mix of irony and gratitude, to agents of the Marshall Plan: the European Recovery Programme, providing United States aid for European economic reconstruction. It could be a quizzical term for institutions like the American Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) or the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC). In the 1950s, when the poem was written, the Marshall Plan would be very much ‘news’. Since it did not much benefit Britain, which continued on rations later than Germany, a British poet might well have a jaundiced view of American largesse. The provident gods would be ‘self-healing’ in a Keynesian sense in that food provided was subsidising American agribusiness. The phrase ‘Destroy only to save’, which could be an Orwellian mission statement for a Ministry of Defence, points to the economy of war, and the ‘revolving door’ through which lucrative post-war reconstruction contracts are won by firms or constituencies allied to those who wreaked the destruction, as more recently with Halliburton in Iraq.

Hill’s sequence concludes with a grand and mysterious sentence whose head noun, ‘America’, is preceded by clauses which sound factual, envious, and satirical. ‘Well-stocked with foods | Enlarged and deep-oiled, America | Detects music...’ The first clause figures America as an expedition or a boat, perhaps, in light of poem 5, the ‘Titanic’ on a spectral return voyage. The descriptive phrase ‘Enlarged and deep-oiled’ exemplifies what Hart calls ‘epic proportions’ compressed into few words.¹⁷ ‘Enlarged’ encapsulates in one word an historical process which in the lifetime of Henry James included the Texas Annexation (1845); Oregon County Annexation (1846); land ceded by Mexico (1848); the Gadsden Purchase from Mexico (1853); the Alaska Purchase from Russia (1867); plus the acquisition of other territories and dependencies, capped by ‘Enlarged’ share of global markets. The epithet ‘deep-oiled’ recalls the Texas oil boom, the gusher age, in the first decades of the twentieth century, along with oil production in Oklahoma and California, with associated growth of petrochemical industries and industrialisation, compressed into a compound epithet which might be categorised as fact, praise, or satire.

When America ‘apprehends the day-star’ ambiguity continues. To ‘apprehend’ might mean to become conscious of, to understand, to seize, to arrest, to anticipate. The ‘day star’ is taken to be Christ in II Peter 1. 19; and in Charles

¹⁶ Allott, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse, 1918-60*, p. 392.

¹⁷ Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 63.

Wesley's hymn 'Christ, whose glory fills the skies' the 'Daystar' is Christ: 'Daystar, in my heart appear'. There is, however, room for ambiguity, doubt and reversal of polarity. In the OED, the first meaning given for the 'day star' has it equivalent to the 'morning star'. The 'morning star' and the 'evening star' are both Venus: a planet, not a star. The 'morning star' can be Christ as in the 'morning star' of Revelations 22.16. But it might also be Lucifer. 'How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!' That is Isaiah 14.12 in the 1599 Geneva Bible, which explains in a footnote that 'the morning star that goeth before the sun is called Lucifer'. 'The Bibliographers', the poem which precedes 'Of Commerce and Society' in *For the Unfallen*, begins with 'Lucifer blazing'. Hill returns to Lucifer 'the strong planet' in *The Orchards of Syon*, XXXI. The final sentence of 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian' raises the possibility that America is apprehending 'the day-star' as in Christ, or as in Lucifer, or as in secular Enlightenment rationalism. The subject of the final lines is also ambiguous. It could be either America or Europe which is 'loud and critical'. The ambiguity is critical in a sentence which is differentiating America from Europe and dramatizing their relationship.

The whole sequence

So far, we have been discussing 'Of Commerce and Society' in terms of its individual poems. This is a valid approach to the extent that poems can legitimately be read as autonomous units and independently of the whole sequence. Indeed, in some of his editorial choices Hill did present poems of the sequence detached from the whole. Seven years after the sequence was published, two of its poems, 'The Death of Shelley' and 'Ode on the Loss of the "Titanic"', were published separately, as stand-alone poems or as a pair.¹⁸ Hill excerpted three of the poems (numbers I, IV and VI) for his Caedmon recording of 1979.¹⁹ His *Selected Poems* (2006) published only two poems under the titles 'The Apostles: Versailles, 1919' and 'Ode on the Loss of the Titanic'.²⁰ Our focus now, however, turns to how the poems work together as a sequence, with respect to theme, form and idiom.

In examining how the poems relate to each other, it is helpful first to acknowledge and accept the extent to which they do not greatly relate to each other. Once this disrelation is appreciated as a fundamental, necessary and

¹⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *Penguin Modern Poets 8*, (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 63-64.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hill and Grace Schulman, 'The Poetry and Voice of Geoffrey Hill', (New York: Caedmon, 1979).

²⁰ Geoffrey Hill, *Selected Poems*, (London: Penguin, 2006).

intentional element in the design of the whole, one is less eager to seek a spurious wholeness which, if non-existent, cannot be found, and, if manufactured or invented, induces errors of eisegesis. This observation about disrelation of unit-parts goes to the heart of how to read a sequence. Reading a sequence, particularly a modernist and a Hillian sequence, requires different expectations from reading a lyric. The evident disrelation between the parts can be a deliberate strategy to obtain a significant effect of estrangement. The six poems of this sequence resemble the 'Apostles' of its opening lines. 'They sat. They stood about. | They were estranged.' This opening can be heard as iambic pentameter, in which case the final word of the line, the word which takes a slight emphasis, is 'estranged'. The poems of this sequence are significantly 'estranged'. They are not welcoming each other, nor are they ingratiating towards the reader; they are stand-offish, semantically distanced. If these poems were people, one feels there would be more cold-shouldering than back-slapping. The effect of this sense of estrangement may register with the reader as discomfort. It rejects a trend over the last sixty or seventy years to ensure that 'mainstream poetry' be accessible and hospitable. It is seldom among Hill's priorities to smooth the reader's path.

Let us pause on the word 'disrelation': a word Hill deploys in his own criticism. In 1984 he was commending Ivor Gurney's 'grasp of the way words and tones sit within our lives and the way they situate the life of one man in relation, or disrelation, to his comrades and his superiors.'²¹ Another early usage has to do with sequence. The 1986 essay "'Envoi (1919)'" remarks how Pound's 'Envoi (1919)' is 'embarrassingly placed in relation, or disrelation, to the sequence as a whole'.²² A 1998 essay speaks of 'the self in its relation and disrelation to society', whilst an essay published in the year 2000 speaks of Hopkins' 'description of Scotus's disrelation to his age'.²³ Among Hill's critics the concept is deployed by Brown (1980) who uses the adverb 'disrelatedly' when characterising Hill's sequences as 'genuine dramas, each line being vied for by opponents each of whom is a charged source of the line itself, so that it tends to double up disrelatedly, the linkage, the oneness so vividly and livingly unique as to exceed not just one's language but almost one's capacities for experiencing.'²⁴

The deliberate disrelation of parts can be demonstrated by considering the themes as announced in the titles. The Treaty of Versailles (1919) does not

²¹ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 425.

²² Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 258.

²³ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 454, 530.

²⁴ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 38.

much relate to the loss of the 'Titanic' (1912). Both the First World War and the loss of the 'Titanic' were disasters which occurred in the same decade, but there the resemblance ends. The death of Shelley was another 'untimely tragedy', another death by water, some ninety years before the 'Titanic' sank, but the Shelley poem (3) relates to poems 1 and 5 as much by difference as by similarity. Whether the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian evokes the original saint or Renaissance depictions of him, both seem anachronistic within this sequence. One could claim that the soldier-saint is a type for the soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice in the First World War and that the sequence is therefore returning to its opening theme, but this is not borne out at the level of detail. The martyr catching his death 'in a little flutter | Of plain arrows' is quite different from the soldiers gassed in the Trenches. Both are a 'grotesque situation', but no-one would claim that the First World War was 'harmless to the nation'. Finally, the Lowlands of Holland (in poem 2) stand at some remove from Versailles (1), the Gulf of La Spezia in which Shelley drowned (3), Auschwitz (4), the North Atlantic (5) and the transatlantic world of Henry James (6). It is better to acknowledge the distance and consider its artistic effect than to apply critical ingenuity into manoeuvring these settings into proximity.

This aesthetic of dislocation and disrelation incorporates and conveys a sense of profound disorder. From Oscar Williams' *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, Hill would have known from an early age Yeats's 'The Second Coming' with its oft-quoted line: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'. If we think of the themes announced in the title ('Of Commerce and Society') as being the centre of the sequence, then that centre does not 'hold' all the contents of the sequence. The sequence is decentred. The separate poems do not quite 'fall apart' but neither do they firmly cohere. Not only does the sequence describe aspects of disorder; it draws a degree of disorder into the very principle of its own arrangement.

I say 'a degree of disorder' because a paradox obtains. If the sequence were disordered to the point of chaotic, then that disorder would come to signify less and less. As it is, the disorder has its effect because it is set in a field which is highly ordered, such that disorder clashes against an equally strong sense of order, in a poem which speaks with as much authority as anxiety. A will to uphold order is evinced in the numbering, whether the Roman numerals in *For the Unfallen* (1959) or the Arabic numerals in *Collected Poems* (1985) and *Broken Hierarchies* (2013). We might think of an instructor or orator, enumerating their key points as they make each in turn. The sequence succeeds in conveying both authority and crisis, disorder and order.

However idiosyncratically and obliquely, 'Of Commerce and Society' does address historical, even world-historical matters. This is not the lyrical poet celebrating his garden '& the newest frog to croak there'.²⁵ Chief among the themes which hold the sequence together are those announced in the title: commerce and society. The first poem with its 'gods of coin and salt' has maritime trade creaking into work after the First World War. The second poem presents Holland, or Europe, in terms of commerce ('home-produce', 'use', 'gain', 'Profiting', 'custom', 'trade', 'science') and society ('liberties', 'artistry', 'holocaust', 'Cities', 'monuments', 'generations'). The third poem introduces the quaint collocation 'commerce and quaint love', where the connotations of 'commerce' (as being go-ahead and ruthless) clash with those of 'quaint love' since 'quaint' suggests 'pleasantly old-fashioned'. The poem presents Shelley / Perseus / the poet beached in 'frothed shallows'. The grimed statues are contrasted with the nascent vigour of bull and swan. The fourth poem has the 'furnace chambers and lime pits' of Auschwitz in danger either of being erased or of being commodified into a tourist attraction. The fifth has commerce disrupted: '("The tables of exchange being overturned)'. The sixth moves from a 'priceless' painting or situation to History being 'scraped clean of its old price'. It gives a materialistic account of America ('Enlarged and deep-oiled') in relation to Europe and ends on the word 'commerce'.

Commercial forces are figured as 'the gods of coin and salt', and gods of one kind or another are a recurrent presence, part of the idiom of the sequence, which might accurately be retitled 'Of History and Gods'. The third poem is graced with Classical gods, demi-gods and avatars: Perseus (son of Zeus and Danae); Andromeda (Princess in Ethiopia and later a heavenly constellation); and avatars of Zeus, notably eagles, the bull, and the swan. Poem 4 has the thunder 'deified and defied' by those it does strike. It also touches on 'Jehovah's touchy methods', details of which are kept vague, but are likely to include Nature and natural forces. The fifth poem implicitly compares 'the ignorant sea' with the righteous anger of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneylenders. The sea, seen as some quasi-divine force of retribution, 'Drowns Babel' and the poem closes with a plea to 'appease the terse gods'. The sixth poem is more secular and aesthetic. Its 'provident and self-healing gods' may, as proposed above, refer to the new superpower, the USA. If this involves irony, that irony pays its respects to its target in remaining covert and deniable.

²⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka / Leroi Jones*, (New York: William Morrow, 1979), p. 238. Introduction to Hard Facts.

A force of nature and sometime god is the sea, which enters at the end of the first poem: 'The sea creaked with worked vessels.' The corresponding final line of the second poem is 'The sea decent again behind walls.' In both cases we see the sea at the start of the final line with two long 'ē' sounds ('The sea creaked' and 'The sea decent'). At the end of the second poem the emphasis on decency ('decently' and 'decent') hints at a comedy of manners and impropriety, as if the sea had made indecent advances on the dykes and walls of 'The Lowlands of Holland', like a ruffian who had lowered his breeches and breached the defences.

'Of Commerce and Society' comes from a private world of the imagination and a public world of men. 'Artistic *men* prod dead *men* from their stone' (my italics). We may note the absence of women in this sequence whose only named woman is Andromeda, 'Depicted in relief, after the fashion'. Traditionally Andromeda is seen chained to the rock as a sacrifice to the sea-monster: the very type of woman disempowered, awaiting a man to free her. But in this poem Andromeda is neither meat for the monster nor 'meat for Perseus' (*Oraclau*, 79, BH 767). Detached from the rest of the stanza by two half lines, she seems an independent woman who needs Perseus as a fish needs a bicycle. She is depicted 'after the fashion' – either in line with the fashion, or subsequent to the fashion, differently from the fashion – but 'Depicted' all the same: 'Depicted' as a depiction, not an active agent.

As with 'Metamorphoses', the shape of the second sequence could be described as 'hemi-symmetrical': a mix of symmetry and asymmetry, regularity with irregularity, formality and non-conformity. In its formal features, 'Of Commerce and Society' seems deliberately not quite regular and less consistent than it might be, establishing pattern only to make exception. Each of the poems has some feature which makes it the odd-one-out. The first poem is the only one to be written all in the past tense and the only one written in trimeter. The second poem is the only poem to be written as a single sentence. The third is the only one to be subdivided into two parts. The fourth is the only one to be untitled. The fifth is the only one to announce itself as an 'Ode' and then test the limits of what that genre entails. The sixth is the only one to announce itself as 'Homage' and to be prefaced with an epigraph.

Throughout, the principal unit is the quatrain, but the first part of the third poem uses half-lines such that the quatrain appears as a five-line verse, or the unit hovers between a quatrain and a five-line verse. The predominant line is five-stress, though some lines have four stresses, and the first poem is trimeter. Poems 1 and 2 rhyme *abba*; poems 4 and 6 rhyme *aabb*; poem 5 rhymes *abab*; and poem 3 is mainly unrhymed but moves into rhyme at its close. It seems

significant that the final poem, having rhymed in couplets, breaks the pattern in its last two lines with a non-rhyme, or perhaps a quarter rhyme: 'domes... commerce.' The sequence refuses to close on a clinching rhyme, nor does it close with outright disorder.

The sequence works by contrast. Consider its first two poems. The first conveys some sense of trauma by its short sentences. The lines are short, being mostly three-stress lines. The eight lines contain eight sentences. Statistically, the mode for the number of words in each sentence is three, and the mean is less than six. This might direct its mimesis towards patholect: writing impaired by injury to the brain. By contrast, the second poem is a single sentence of ninety-one words over sixteen lines. Whereas the most complex sentence in the first poem has only three punctuation marks (two commas and a full stop), the second poem is punctuated by four hyphens, twelve commas, two dashes, two sets of parentheses, six semi-colons, five colons and one full-stop. (These figures apply to the poem as published in *For the Unfallen* (1959); the punctuation is modified in *Collected Poems* 1985, although both versions have the poem as a single, elaborately punctuated sentence.) The syntax of this much more complex sentence suggests both order and chaos: a list that is getting out of control. It has clear differences from the first poem in that lines are now five-stress rather than three-stress; along with affinities, in that the rhyme scheme is still *abba*. Overall, the syntax of the second poem creates an effect of disorder, or of something struggling to hold on to order.

The different poems in 'Of Commerce and Society' are held together by a shared idiom, which combines something Shakespearean with something Symbolist. In particular, the fear of disorder expressed through images of the stormy sea is a Shakespearean trope. Ulysses pictures 'disorder' as 'raging of the sea, shaking of earth' (*Troilus and Cressida*, I. 3. 97) where the 'shaking of earth' is like the 'Archaic earth-shaker' of Hill's fifth poem. A Symbolist idiom runs deep through the sequence with its emphasis on the sheer musicality of words and 'a strange atmosphere of mystery and hallucination'.²⁶ Sea, statues, animals and other images represent themselves and yet something more than themselves. Hill trusts the symbol in all its ambiguity, leaves it virtually unexplained, and combines it with something 'down to earth', in everyday words: 'creaked' (1); 'Stuffed' (2); 'Slime' (3 i); 'sucks', 'soot' (3 ii); 'prod', 'touchy' (4); 'Souses', 'waste ground' (5); 'flutter', 'scraped', 'muddles' (6). This helps to create a sense that the sequence is in some measure 'home-produce' even as it is ambitiously 'looking up'.

²⁶ Charles Chadwick, *Symbolism*, (London; New York: Methuen, 1971), p. 53.

Throughout the sequence runs a theme, or idiom, of elemental disturbance. 'The air, | As water curdles from clear, | Fleshed the silence.' One element, air, is being described in terms of another, water, whilst the action of the air is in the verb 'Fleshed'. In the second stanza, water is figured as wood or metal. 'The sea creaked with worked vessels'. Although this is a transferred verb in that we may assume the vessels 'creaked' on the sea, the sentence has it that the 'sea creaked' as if the sea itself were wooden floorboards or rusty machinery. In the third poem, 'a drying sea' pictures the sea as a desert wind. Perseus goes through 'poisonous baked sea-things' as if the sea were an oven or furnace baking the life within it. When 'eagles or vultures churn the fresh-made skies', the verb 'churn' suggests a change of state, as one agitates milk to solidify it into butter. Then 'Earth steams', as if it were water coming to the boil, or as if it were steaming with sexual desire. Closely following the noun 'soot', the verb 'steams' evokes the steam power of industrialisation, as in Turner's 'Rain, Steam and Speed: The Great Western Railway' (1844) where, on a high viaduct over a river, a steam train approaches, and a hare flees before it.

Conclusion

'Of Commerce and Society' closes with 'varied domes | Resonant with tribute and with commerce.' One of the resonances here is Yeats's 'Byzantium' where 'Night resonance recedes' and

A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

Yeats' starlit or moonlit dome could typify the poem as lyric epiphany disdaining the imperfection of 'All that man is'. The dome here also symbolises the domed sky and, in more Jungian terms, the vast sphere of Soul, hence the right relation between the human soul and the universe, between universe and society. 'Of Commerce and Society' changes that model of the single, lyric dome into a sequence of 'varied domes' accommodating the 'complexities | The fury and the mire' of commerce and society. Later sequences, especially *Speech! Speech!* (2000), *Pindarics* (2006 and 2013) and *The Book of Baruch* (2019), will not disdain to incorporate the humiliations of the physical body: 'The fury and the mire of human veins.'

The sequence as a form is well-suited to exploring worldly problems in that it does not press for transcendence or closure but stays open to that which 'is loud | and critical beneath the varied domes'. We have seen that the final poem uses rhyme and half-rhyme, then closes on non-rhyme or perhaps quarter-

rhyme ('domes... commerce'). But that final word, 'commerce', makes for a rough epanalepsis in that it picks up the 'Commerce' announced in the title, repeating the same word at beginning and end, returning us to the beginning. Likewise, the first word of the subtitle is 'Variations' and the penultimate word of the penultimate line is 'varied'. The beginning and the end make a pattern of the four words: 'Commerce... Variations... varied... commerce'. This pattern *abba* (or in this case *cvvc*) is the figure of antimetabole or 'turning about'. A third figure here is polyptoton: variations of words derived from the same root, as in 'Variations' and 'varied'. This combination of polyptoton, antimetabole and epanalepsis sketches an arc of roundedness, making a gesture towards lyric completion, without closing the circle. The circle is open, and the sequence moves between generic dimensions, never fully settling in one alone. Elements of epic, history, myth, oracular pronouncement, theodicy, along with pastiche and satire, are worked into each other in a play of relation and disrelation.

Hill's 'varied domes' are both secular and religious. In its commercial sense 'tribute' is a tax or rent paid as submission or for protection. In its social sense it is a gift or an act to show esteem. In Hill's literary-critical philosophy 'tribute' is a necessary act of attention and respect. 'The greatest tribute one can pay to a fine work of art—a tribute that one ought to be able to take for granted—is that its qualities reveal one's own "mood" to be redundant.'²⁷ The final poem, 'Homage to Henry James', pays tribute to that novelist. In a church setting, tribute can also be a thanksgiving of praise, as in the hymn 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven; | To his feet thy tribute bring'. In the New Testament the word 'tribute' appears at the core of the problem about the separate spheres of Church and State. When Jesus is asked 'Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?' (Mark 12. 14, Matthew 22. 17, Luke 20. 22), his answer becomes the basis of Paul's injunction to render 'tribute to whom tribute is due' (Romans 13. 7). The word 'tribute', offering its provisional answer to the competing demands of Church and State, encapsulates the tension and the *entente* in the separation of Church and State.

The sequence encourages massed forms and recurrence, and Hill throws some good shapes. The 'varied domes' in 'Of Commerce and Society' include poems strangely, obliquely, unevenly addressing themes announced in the title. The second poem is the one most obviously related to matters of political economy with the third, fourth and fifth poems more tenuously so. The arrangement into poems is like the invisible hand of Adam Smith producing order, or semblance of order, from chaos. Taking account of the titles alone, it is already strange to

²⁷ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 463.

find a sequence titled 'Of Commerce and Society' which has poems headed 'The Death of Shelley' and 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian'. The epigraph, from Allen Tate's sequence 'More Sonnets at Christmas, 1942,' should warn us against taking titles at face value, since it provides the un-Christmassy lines: 'Well-milked Chinese, Negroes who cannot sing, | The Huns gelded and feeding in a ring.' This epigraph is dropped in *Broken Hierarchies*, perhaps for being outdated in its racial or ethno-nationalist slurs.

Sustained attention to Hill's first two major sequences illuminates his subsequent development. In the light of these early sequences, it is no longer surprising that he should become so much more prolific later in his career. Indeed, it seems highly likely, even inevitable, that he would write further sequences of increasing length. 'Of Commerce and Society' is a sequence ripe for expansion. The six poems are quite different from each other and are set down to make a virtue of that difference. It is easy to imagine any number of other poems, relating, however obliquely, to commerce and society, which could with creative adjustment be slotted into the sequence. Whereas a lyric (such as 'Merlin') takes pride in being concise and finished to perfection, 'Of Commerce and Society' contains spare capacity and is eminently expandable. The final effect is 'loud | and critical' as if this is a sequence with more to say for itself, more domes, unlike the lyric in the plenitude of its singularity. With lyric, the closure, the sense of completion is a major part of the achievement. Not so with sequence, or less so.

In the last twenty years of his life, Hill would work on principles established in his earlier sequences: worldliness rather than transcendence; disrelation, dissonance, generic complexity, juxtaposition and contrast. He takes a format with which he had experimented in his first book and expands it into the book-length sequences which constitute most of his later work. The critically neglected sequences in *For the Unfallen* are the forerunners of that later work.

Chapter 3

Early Sequences and Monumentality

Introduction

Previous chapters have examined two sequences which Hill wrote and published in the 1950s, when he was in his twenties. We now turn to six sequences written and published in the 1960s and 1970s. These are two sequences from *King Log* (1968), namely 'Funeral Music' and 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruruz'; the book-length sequence, *Mercian Hymns* (1971); and three sequences from *Tenebrae* (1978), namely 'The Pentecost Castle', 'Lachrimae' and 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'.

Although these poems are well-known and much admired, the fact that they are sequences has often been taken for granted and ignored, as if self-evident or insignificant, rather than taken as the key to understanding how they work, and how they fit into the overall pattern of Hill's oeuvre. Several critics, however, have studied these poems as *sequences* and this chapter will therefore refer freely, though not systematically, to selected criticism by Merle Brown (1980), Henry Hart (1986), Vincent Sherry (1987), Elisabeth Knottenbelt (1990), Andrew Michael Roberts (2000 and 2004), Jeffrey Wainwright (2005), Sophie Ratcliffe (2012) and Steven Matthews (2020).

In thinking about sequence as the dynamic structure which organises and drives the poem, this chapter also employs Hopkins' distinction between 'monumentality' and 'bidding', which Hill considers 'one of the most essential instincts concerning poetry to have emerged in the past 150 years'.¹ Hill judges 'the relation of "monumentality" to "bidding"' as one of Hopkins' 'sharpest creative realizations'.² He explains the term 'bidding' by citing one of Hopkins' letters to Robert Bridges:

'Bidding' is Hopkins's term for 'the art or virtue of saying everything right *to* or *at* the hearer... and of discarding everything that does not bid, does not tell'. Hopkins goes on to make one of his most penetrating

¹ Geoffrey Hill, 'Milton as Muse', *University of Cambridge, Christ's College, Lady Margaret lecture, 29 October 2008*
<https://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.christs.cam.ac.uk/files/inline-files/hill.mp3>, (2008) [accessed 7 May 2021] 49:30 to 51:45.

² Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 529.

observations: 'It is most difficult to combine this bidding, such a fugitive thing, with a monumental style'.³

Hill quotes the same letter in his eleventh Oxford lecture, titled 'Monumentality and Bidding'.⁴ In this lecture he uses the term 'bidding' and adapts the term 'monumentality' to contrast the rhetoric of Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg address with that of Martin Luther King's 1963 Lincoln Memorial 'I have a dream' speech. Hill rates Lincoln's address as four parts monumentality to one part bidding, whilst King's speech is four parts bidding to one of monumentality. Rather than privileging one element over the other, Hill proposes that each is to be used 'with power and discretion'. He repeats as his 'credo' that 'there is no major work of address, major poetry included, that is entirely without some degree of reciprocity between the two elements.'⁵ Arguing that 'the monumentality / bidding nexus – nexus, please note, not dichotomy – is vital to the making of enduring art, let alone great art', he gives three possibilities:

Sometimes the monumentality, for instance the structure of the Italianate or Miltonic sonnet, is there to keep in check the bidding. Sometimes the bidding is there to humanise the monumentality. Sometimes... they extravagantly move together in their mutual excitement. It is this third possibility that I find the most promising, but which I do not find, broadly speaking, in contemporary poetry in the English language.⁶

All these possibilities are at work in Hill's early sequences, as this chapter will show. But first we should pause in front of that word 'monumentality', not a word which Hopkins himself used. His phrase 'a monumental style' carries many connotations. A monument connotes size, stability, endurance, a material symbol of public respect and commemoration. It might be something grandly imposing, though in the context of poetry that potential grandeur may be transformed by 'bidding power'. This 'bidding power' suggests a directness of address whether that be colloquial or oratorical. The word 'monumentality' might be used by an art critic to praise qualities of grandeur and dignity in Roman funerary art or sculpture. Hill's admiration for monumentality sets him apart from many of his contemporaries and younger poets who would be more inclined to spurn monumentality as imposture, pomposity or pretension. They would prefer

³ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 529. Hill is quoting Hopkins's letter to Bridges, 4 November 1882.

⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', *Oxford lecture 11* <http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/general/2014-04-17_hill_lecture.mp3>, (2014) [accessed 8 May 2021] 23:11 to 25:08.

⁵ Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', 19:58 to 23:04.

⁶ Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', 41:28 to 42:38.

something less imposing, a smaller domestic subject, an observation from quotidian life or a minor epiphany casually related. For many of Hill's contemporaries, a 'monumental style' sounds 'heavy': formal, backward-looking, turgid and funereal.

A terminological note is here required for the words used to designate the parts of a sequence. Where the individual parts are headed by their own title (as in five of the parts in 'Of Commerce and Society') we might think of each one as a 'poem'. Where those parts are headed only by a number (as in 'Funeral Music') we might think of them more as a 'section'. The difference is registered in the critical apparatus of *Broken Hierarchies* whose 'Index of Titles' (pages 943-949) excludes poems which are merely numbered, as its editor explains:

Note that the title index does not list those poems in a given sequence which lack their own titles. Take a look (e.g.) at *Oraclau*: poems with individual titles are listed under their individual titles in the title index, although merely numbered sections are not; whereas the first line of every poem in *Oraclau* is listed in the first-line index.⁷

In this chapter I will tend to use the word 'section' for parts which are only numbered, with the word 'poem' being used for parts which have their own title. But the distinction will not be observed rigidly. *Mercian Hymns* is a unique case in that its individual parts are numbered on the page (like sections) but also named (like poems) from a distance, in the 'List of Hymns' at the back of *Mercian Hymns* (1971) and on the 'Contents' page at the front of *Collected Poems* (1985), the *New & Collected* (1994) and *Broken Hierarchies* (2013). In the case of *Mercian Hymns* I will usually describe each part as a 'hymn' without surrendering the right also to use the word 'poem' and 'section' for variety, or where appropriate.

In the six sequences now to be considered, Hill employs the sequence-form as a structure enabling both monumentality and 'the monumentality / bidding nexus'. It also enables Hill to use different kinds of structuring, so our analysis will consider the variety of structuring-devices.

Funeral Music: sequence as processional

'Funeral Music', the first sequence in Hill's second book, *King Log* (1968), consists of eight unrhymed fourteen-line poems, which makes it an isomorphic sequence. Subsequent isomorphic sequences include the three sequences in *Tenebrae* and the book-length isomorphic sequences: *Speech! Speech!*, *The*

⁷ Haynes, 'Email of 16 November 2020'.

Orchards of Syon, *Scenes from Comus*, *Ludo* and the six *Daybooks*. 'Funeral Music' is therefore an early example of a form which would eventually account for more than half of Hill's poetic output.

'Funeral Music' is also the first of Hill's sequences to be accompanied by an explanatory essay, published alongside the sequence in *Stand* (8:3), then re-published, somewhat revised, at the back of *King Log* (1968) and *Collected Poems* (1985). In discussions of 'Funeral Music' critics often pick from Hill's essay such evocative phrases as 'a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks'; 'a commination and an alleluia'; and 'ornate and heartless music punctuated by mutterings, blasphemies and cries for help.' But these shrieks, comminations and mutterings need a ground against which to resonate: 'the stark ground | Of this pain' (section 7). That ground, I shall argue, is provided by the form of sequence and the arrangement as sequence.

In the first paragraph of his essay on 'Funeral Music' Hill describes some of its events and characters, then starts the second paragraph, somewhat disarmingly: 'Admittedly, the sequence avoids shaping these characters and events into any overt narrative or dramatic structure.'⁸ This sentence is a guide to Hill's sequences more generally. It makes explicit what they do *not* attempt and therefore what the reader cannot reasonably expect of them. Of course, the emphasis may be on the adjective 'overt'. If a sequence avoids any 'overt' narrative or dramatic structure, it may still employ such structures, or elements, covertly. Without being overtly dramatic or narrative, the sequence-form of 'Funeral Music' gives formal shape to dreams and nightmares associated with what Hill calls 'the period popularly but inexactly known as the Wars of the Roses'.

In general, Hill's sequences do not resolve into narrative or dramatic structures. In this respect they conform to the model of the modern poetic sequence as set out by Rosenthal and Gall. Such sequence involves 'a way of making and viewing poetic constructs that concentrates on something other than logical and narrative and thematic links.'⁹ But what then does it concentrate on? Rosenthal and Gall speak of 'centers of intensity'; 'centers of intensity and tones [...] to go with them'; 'centers of passionate preoccupation'; and 'a number of radiant centers, progressively liberated from a narrative or thematic framework'.¹⁰ In reading Hill's sequences, it might be better to seek centres of form and theme, allowing also that his sequences may be deliberately decentred. What is most

⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *King Log*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968), p. 67.

⁹ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, pp. 6, 7, 9, 11.

striking about them, says Brown, is 'that they are 'polycentric, including as part of them more than one originative center.'¹¹

Hill's essay does not prescribe a term for the eight parts of his sequence. Indeed, his essay never mentions them. Jeffrey Wainwright opts for the descriptor 'fourteen-line poem' on the grounds that these poems are unrhymed and not patterned like any conventional sonnet.¹² Neither Petrarchan nor Shakespearean in their structure of argument and meaning, they are more 'strange-postured' ('Funeral Music', 2) blocks of fourteen lines, as *Speech!* *Speech!* will be blocks of twelve lines. They can, however, be read as brutalised sonnets, hacked, compressed, then lined up in sequence, such that images and ideas, choppy and fragmented in themselves, cohere. Orderly succession orders something deeply disordered. I will be describing each of the eight parts of the sequence as a 'section', an 'unrhymed sonnet', or simply a 'poem' depending on context.

The (ghostly) sonnet form, if such it is perceived to be, is deprived of rhyme and knocked around by rough-hewn rhythms which mix irregular pentameter with free verse. Towards its end the sequence turns towards regular iambic pentameter which sounds clearly in the line: 'Averted conscience turned against itself.' The final poem opens with iambic pentameter and trochaic substitution in the first foot: 'Not as we are but as we must appear'. After moving away from iambic pentameter, it then returns with a softening address:

... In such eternity. Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us – or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end 'I have not finished'.

Here again the iambic pentameter of the first two lines is 'Dragged half-unnerved' out of that rhythm into irregularity. The mighty and ornate line of blank verse is dragged 'into the ruck' (2).

The form of the unrhymed sonnet (if such we call it) functions to compress and concentrate the whole. This might best be illustrated counterfactually by imagining the words and phrases of each section laid out in short, stepped lines, of the kind Hill would later use in *Canaan*, making fuller use of the space on the page. Rearranged thus, the opening might look:

Processionals

¹¹ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 37.

¹² Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 24.

in the exemplary cave,

Benediction

of shadows.

Losing the power of compression, this looser lay-out dissipates its effect. In Hill's sequence, the form of the unrhymed sonnet functions as 'the exemplary cave' of Plato's allegory, in which cries are heard and in which fire flares, ghosting upon the rough stone walls of the cave/sonnet 'Creatures of such rampant state'. Glover notes that 'Hill's use of Platonic ideas is quite overt even if their implications are not'.¹³ In 'Funeral Music' Hill takes Plato's allegory as a figure for the phenomena of historical memory and human consciousness.

When 'Funeral Music' was first published, it occupied three pages in *Stand*: one page for the introductory essay, plus two pages for the sequence (four poems per page).¹⁴ In *King Log* and subsequent publications, the sequence has been afforded more room, with poems being laid out one per page, such that the sequence occupies at least eight pages. In *King Log* it accounts for thirteen pages because it is set off and set apart by a presentational flourish, being preceded and announced by three pages: one blank page, one title page and one page of epigraph or dedication, giving the names of three aristocrats and the dates they were beheaded, between 1450 and 1483. The sequence is then 'bookended' by two pages: one bearing a small plant-scroll, backed by another blank page. These five pages serve to separate the sequence from the poems adjoining it. This was not the case for the two sequences in *For the Unfallen* which took their place alongside adjacent poems on equal terms. In Hill's *Collected Poems* (1985), *New & Collected* (1994) and *Broken Hierarchies* (2013), 'Funeral Music' occupies eight pages: one poem per page.

'Processionals in the exemplary cave'. 'Funeral Music' begins with 'Processionals'. This image of a liturgical 'processional' provides, according to Sherry, 'a visual gloss for the sequence'.¹⁵ Whether a 'processional' be a procession itself, a hymn or piece of music suitable for such a procession, or the book containing those hymns, a 'processional' bespeaks orderly succession, formality and ceremony. These qualities are provided by the sequence-form which imposes its order on the material in such a low-key way, with such unobtrusive authority and so effectively that it may scarcely be noticed. Organising its material into eight non-rhyming sonnets, arranged one

¹³ Jon Glover, 'The Poet in Plato's Cave', *Poetry Review*, 69. 3 (1980), 60-64 (p. 60).

¹⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Funeral Music', *Stand*, 8. 3 (1966/67), 4-6.

¹⁵ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 88.

per page, the whole sequence acquires something of the dignity and stateliness of a 'processional', each of its poems separated from the others by a large and equal amount of white space, which can be figured as 'processional || Silence' (BH, 63). That space bounding each poem safeguards its autonomy and character and ensures it 'utters its own sound' (3). At the same time, the space between numbered poems is more permeable than the space between autonomous lyrics each with its own title. The white space allows the poems to communicate with each other, '[s]et apart in timeless colloquy' (8), where that Latinate noun 'colloquy' bespeaks eirenic dignity but is also of course related to the adjective 'colloquial'. The communication between the fifth and sixth poem is especially close in that the fifth poem ends with a colon and leads directly into the sixth. So, the sequence gives us 'a flagrant | Tenderness of the damned for their own flesh: ||| My little son'.

The white space between sections in a one-section-per-page sequence is not inert. Within it we might imagine, or project, images and themes raised by the poem or excluded by it. At the risk of being fanciful, we might sense in the space beneath and around the poems elements of 'silent music' (2); 'Over-riding stillness' (3); 'perpetual silence' (4); 'the soul's winter sleep' (5), if sonnet and blank space are in relation, as if 'each mirrored the other' (7). The space bears witness perhaps 'to what is beyond us, | Each distant sphere of harmony forever | Poised unanswerable.' (8). If the blank space opens on 'eternity' (8) it is also open to 'the human mire' (2) and 'remote cry' (7). When the sequence speaks of 'A rueful mystery' (2) and 'A composed mystery' (6), the space around each poem may be taken as a figure of that mystery, whether it be knowledge withheld or, in a more scriptural sense, truth revealed. 'A composed mystery' may be 'composed' in the sense of 'calm and controlled' or 'composed' in the sense that music and poetry are composed. Hill has noted that "compose" is beautifully ambivalent and can refer to the act of writing as much as to the settling of the emotions'.¹⁶ Plentiful intersectional space helps to 'compose' 'Funeral Music' in both senses of that verb.

Merle Brown (1980) sees it differently. In his chapter on 'Funeral Music', which he presents as 'Hill's first major sequence', he construes the whole as 'linear, developmental, sequential', and relates this development to 'the inaudible, invisible gap between the poems'¹⁷ Within or across this gap there occurs significant action, such as 'a momentous thrust forward between the first and

¹⁶ Geoffrey Hill, 'Sir Geoffrey Hill, Professor of Poetry, in Conversation with Dr Peter McDonald on W. B. Yeats', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXc0tdg_HvY>, (2012) [accessed 8 May 2021] Part 5, 0:44 to 0:57.

¹⁷ Brown, *Double Lyric*, pp. 35-51, 38, 43, 40.

second poems; the second bears the first with it and yet grows beyond it'.¹⁸ Brown seeks to differentiate the voice of 'soldier-poets' (fifteenth-century) from the voice of 'the modern poet-historian and his like' (now), and to show how they double up within and simultaneously occupy a pronoun such as 'we', which can also encompass 'we' readers and 'we' mortal beings.¹⁹ Likewise, In his account of 'Funeral Music', Roberts (2004) states that 'impulses of faith and scepticism intertwine in various consciousnesses, which themselves meet and separate'.²⁰ For Sherry (1987) the central theme of the sequence is 'sensuous asceticism' and the poet 'exploits a sensuality immanent within language, conceived and handled as a physical medium'.²¹ Rather than Brown's linear movement, Sherry detects 'backspinning, a series of contrary and alternative views'.²²

Alternative views are given by alternative voices: vivid, ghostly and transient. We could imagine the medium of poetry channelling voices from the fifteenth century, or Shakespeare's representation of that century as transmitted through his plays. As the sequence bodies forth the forms of things unknown, it does not so much give them a local habitation and a name as 'restless | Habitation' (1) and an indeterminate pronoun. It is the imagination which must ultimately decide who is the 'we' of poems 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8; the 'they' in poems 3 and 8; and the 'I' of poems 4, 6, 7 and 8. The reader is addressed and the past is summoned by the directives, as in the second poem: 'Suppose... imagine... Recall... Recall'.

Ultimately, the sequence of unrhymed sonnets does not exist on quite the same plane as its 'trampled | Acres' (2) and 'pristine fields' (6). It holds them in the composure of a poem per page, enhanced by ample space, to amplify 'the florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks' which Hill described and which critics have discussed.

'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz': sequence as implicit drama

'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz' with its poems written in different forms and of different lengths is a medley and anisomorphic sequence. Its first three 'songs' are triplets (three lines per stanza), as is 'A Song from Armenia' (the ninth poem). Poems 4 and 11 are six-line chunks and other poems have other shapes. Poems 1, 3, 4, 5, and 11 are numbered, whilst the others have titles.

¹⁸ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 43.

¹⁹ Brown, *Double Lyric*, pp. 48-49.

²⁰ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, pp. 46-50, 49.

²¹ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, pp. 92, 94.

²² Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 96.

'Coplas' has both a title and Roman numerals for its four parts, so the sequence is half-numbered, half-titled. It is set apart in *King Log* by a page bearing a vine or floral imprint; a blank page; a title page; and a page with Arrurriz's name and dates. It is also followed by a blank page, so the entire sequence takes up sixteen pages. Two of the poems are dated in square brackets [1922 and 1921], but this quasi-editorial apparatus is removed in *Collected Poems* (1985) and subsequent publications.

The main inspiration, according to Hill, was the work of Antonio Machado 'who had created an "apocryphal professor" called Juan de Mareina [*sic*] and an imaginary poet-philosopher called Abel Martín.'²³ Hill gave Arrurriz the chronology 1868-1922 which 'enabled him to die on the very threshold of modernity, without having had the advantage of reading 'The Waste Land' or *Ulysses*.' This, Hill said, 'tells in the rather old-fashioned nostalgia of his writing.'²⁴ But the poem which Hill goes on to read – 'Coplas' – opens with an instance of 'sententiae curtly abandoned' which Hill has identified as one of the 'discoveries of "modernist" poetry':²⁵

'One cannot lose what one has not possessed.'
So much for that abrasive gem.
I can lose what I want. I want you.

This last and monosyllabic line exemplifies Hill's Miltonic *desideratum*: poetry as 'simple, sensuous and passionate'. It also contains three instances of the first-person singular pronoun ('I'), an unprecedented triple repetition of the first-person pronoun in Hill's poetry till then.

Should one think of this 'I' as Geoffrey Hill? Perhaps the cover of a persona, the artifice of an invented voice, has released Hill to be more 'personal' and to write in a simpler, more direct way, thereby 'Establishing true sequences of pain'. This might be an instance of the most feigning poetry being the truest, just as Touchstone claims that 'the truest poetrie is the most faining'.²⁶ The final line of the 'Notes' to *King Log* state that 'The Arrurriz poems contain no allusion to any actual person, living or dead' – a formula which may be tongue-in-cheek but is often a clue that a text is closely based on some actual person, with the disclaimer intended to forestall litigation.²⁷ Some readers, especially sleuths

²³ John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 95. 'Mareina' is a misprint for "Mairena".

²⁴ Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc'. Track 6.

²⁵ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 253.

²⁶ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 216. *As You Like It*, III. 3. 16. TLN 1630.

²⁷ Hill, *King Log*, p. 70.

who hunt the poet within the poetry, will suspect that this 'Songbook' is closely based on an actual person, living or dead, namely Geoffrey Hill. But 'The Songbook' can also be read as a *jeu d'esprit* and as an homage to Machado (born 1875, seven years after Arrurruz) who is later praised, along with Montale, in *The Triumph of Love*.²⁸

Roberts (2004, pp. 15-19) reads 'The Songbook' as 'ironical reflections on self and otherness' in which 'Hill ironizes his own relationship to literary tradition through a persona who is pre-modernist in biography, modernist in technique and postmodernist in his pseudo-textual (non)existence'.²⁹ That persona, Sebastian Arrurruz, is for Hart 'both lyricist and martyr of love'.³⁰ To Sherry, he personifies 'erotic asceticism'.³¹ As Sebastian he is a martyr pierced with arrows, but as Arrurruz he has Eros's potent arrow as his root, so, as Ratcliffe says, his name is 'playing muscularity against aestheticism', and asceticism.³²

There are further and formative ambiguities about the implicit narrative of the sequence and about its narrator-protagonist: Arrurruz himself. Initially, he seems a likeable melancholic, afflicted by loss, a type of us all. But that cosy interpretation is undermined by the penultimate poem, 'To His Wife', which prompts a reassessment of antecedent poems. For it may well surprise a reader that Arrurruz had a wife. The new information makes us reconsider the referents of the pronouns which have been so central to the drama. The sequence has been passionately addressed to a 'you', present in the 'you' and 'your' of poems 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and implicitly present in the 'we' and 'us' of poems 4 and 6. The reader will probably have imagined this 'you' as an absent lover or Muse. The tenth poem offers the theoretical possibility that this 'you' was all along his wife, in which case we would account for her absence and Arrurruz's grief by assuming that she is back in Spain or dead. But this strains belief, especially regarding the start of 'Coplas' cited above: "One cannot lose what one has not possessed" is not a line which a man is likely to write about his wife.

If the 'you' of the first nine poems is not Arrurruz's wife but another woman, then poem 10, 'To His Wife', gives us something of a love triangle, or love polygon, depending for example on the (imagined) identity of the 'him' and 'her' in the second poem. The address 'To His Wife' says that 'You ventured occasionally –

²⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love*, (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 73. Section CXXXIV.

²⁹ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 17.

³⁰ Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 141.

³¹ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 118.

³² Sophie Ratcliffe, 'On Being "A Man of the World": Geoffrey Hill and Physicality', in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. by John Lyon and Peter McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), (p. 71).

| As though this were another's house – ... like one idly commiserated by new-mated | Lovers rampant in proper delight'. This suggests that the poor wife had to treat her own house as though it 'were another's house' trying to dodge her unfaithful husband and his lover who were treating her house as their own. If so, sympathy for lovelorn Arrurruz may run out. It may even turn to anger at this adulterer indulging his sorrows, stringing the reader along with lyrical self-pity, depicting himself as victim of circumstance or his own passion, and then writing 'To His Wife', a lyric which unwittingly exposes his lack of empathy and manners. Under this interpretation, the final poem would be ironic at Arrurruz's expense. His lover has left him, and marital relations are 'as a | Coolness between neighbours.' He is left in the doghouse to 'enjoy abstinence in a vocation | Of now-almost-meaningless despair.'

Sceptical about Arrurruz's self-presentation, and critical of his selfishness, we may reassess the earlier lyrics. The sixth one, 'Postures' becomes more revealing as Arrurruz imagines himself as '[i]ndulgent' and 'relishing | Let us say the well-schooled | Postures of St Anthony or St Jerome'. If we are critical of Arrurruz then his 'Postures' are no longer endearing whimsy but reveal more than he intends of his self-approving ego. Arrurruz would admire St Antony of Egypt (251-356) for his ascetic achievements in the wilderness, his mastery of 'abstinence' ('Postures' and 11). Nursing his loss, Arrurruz might also feel an affinity with St Antony of Padua (1195-1231), popularly known as the finder of lost articles. As someone who sees himself as 'a disciplined scholar' (1) he admires Jerome (c. 341-420) for his scholarship, notably the writing of the Vulgate. If 'To His Wife', the tenth poem, reveals his thoughtless ill-treatment of his wife, then we will be more critical of these prior fantasies and 'well-schooled | Postures'. The 'Songbook' moves from being a tale of loss, grief and melancholy of a Hardy-esque or sub-Hardy-esque kind to being an ironic and gendered account of masculine narcissism and self-deception. Or it might be better thought of as half and half, 'half-mocking', like the line half-way through 'Coplas' which uses 'half' to pre-modify a verb then a noun: 'Half-mocking the half-truth'.

These being fragments, however, the pronoun 'you' which threads the sequence might have more than one referent. Other narratives can be imagined; and it is the resource of the sequence that they be so. This potential, which a critic may see or overlook as a problem, is central to the sequence's imagined drama. Skilful use of pronominal indeterminacy fosters great imaginative possibility, as it does in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence which turns 154 love sonnets, full of pronouns whose referent may be fruitfully guessed but never finally ascertained, into a mystery which has tantalised for

over four centuries. Another precedent is Eliot's 'La Figlia Che Piange' which addresses a woman in the second-person, then moves to the third-person to sketch a love-triangle brimming with desire, regret and imagining. 'So I would have had him leave, | So I would have had her stand and grieve, | So he would have left'.³³ In her reading of the sequence Knottenbelt loses its potential for imaginative drama and short-circuits Arrurruz's dilemma by conflating and hyphenating to produce 'his woman-wife-mistress'.³⁴

It is not only our evaluation of Arrurruz which may be altered by later poems. Romantic, sexual and elegiac preoccupations are cast into a more critical light by possible reference in the eighth poem, 'A Letter from Armenia', to the Armenian genocide of 1914-1923. 'I hesitate amid | circumstantial disasters. I gaze at the | authentic dead.' The last two words stand out visually in that they are centred on their own line as if they provide the base for the squared-off eight-line slab of text above. Those 'circumstantial disasters' and 'authentic dead' could be the normal vicissitudes of life and bereavement, but could also be a diplomatic circumlocution for massacre, especially since Arrurruz, as Hill remarks, 'held a minor diplomatic post in Armenia'.³⁵ As such, it would be part of his job to know of genocide in that land. The 'Songbook' itself does not 'gaze at' the massacred. Nor does it much describe or witness to them. The genocide seems to have only a marginal place in 'The Songbook', although it may be deliberately marginalised in order to raise issues of selective vision, evasion and culpability, already adumbrated in 'Ovid in the Third Reich', the opening poem in *King Log*. Just as the Armenian massacre is both present and absent in official history, it is absent and present in 'The Songbook'. If we take the genocide to be a significant background factor, in view of which an aporia opens within the sequence, then the storm which '[b]roods over the dry earth all day' (5) might be not only a meteorological event but a figure for an historical storm, for war and displacement, as it is in Montale's 'La Bufera' which Hill would later translate.³⁶ 'The metaphor holds; is a snug house.' With the Armenian genocide in mind, the storm of poem 5 becomes a snug metaphor for the genocide; in which case the significance is that Arrurruz turns away from it into personal and romantic matters, 'into my blank hunger for you.'

Under the heading 'Copla by Sebastian Arrurruz/Geoffrey Hill' there appeared in *Stand* in the early/mid 1970s a poem of three or four lines.³⁷ Never republished,

³³ Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 34.

³⁴ Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 115.

³⁵ Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc'. Track 7.

³⁶ Geoffrey Hill, *Without Title*, (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 80.

³⁷ Geoffrey Hill, 'Copla', *Stand*, 14. 1 ([n. d.] 1974?), (p. 4).

it survives as a lone fragment, a reject outside the 'Songbook'. In its exclusion from the sequence, however, it shows what sequence is. The other Arrurruz poems are also 'fragments' but the sequence places them in fruitful relation to each other. Recall how Hill wrote of 'Funeral Music' that 'the sequence avoids shaping these characters and events into any overt narrative or dramatic structure'. 'The Songbook' does not shape its own characters and events 'into any overt narrative or dramatic structure', but it does shape and arrange its fragments such that they hint at any number of narrative or dramatic possibilities. When it speaks of 'past conjecture | Establishing true sequences of pain', that phrase 'past conjecture' could mean 'beyond doubt' or 'speculation about the past'. In drawing fragments together without resolving them into a fixed narrative, the sequence stokes conjecture and generates a covert narrative and implicit drama which give it imaginative life even as the sequence provides formal shape.

***Mercian Hymns*: book-length sequence**

'From the first', Hill wrote of *Mercian Hymns* (1971), 'I sensed that it would be a sequence, a volume complete in itself.'³⁸ As his first book-length sequence, it prefigures four book-length sequences from his middle period (the subject of our next chapter), the book-length sequences known as *The Daybooks*, and *The Book of Baruch*.

Hill describes the volume as 'a sequence of "hymns" written in rhythmic prose'.³⁹ He told John Haffenden:

I designed the appearance on the page in the form of versets. The reason they take the form they do is because at a very early stage the words and phrases began to group themselves in this way. I did immediately see it as an extended sequence.⁴⁰

These 'versets' are usually long lines, indented after the first line of type and right-justified. Each one could be described as a single 'verse-line' which is itself composed of several lines of type.

Each time *Mercian Hymns* has been published it has been set out as thirty hymns (or poems, or sections) spread out over thirty pages: one hymn/ poem/ section per page. Although hymns II and XXX are only four lines long, each

³⁸ Clare Brown and Don Paterson, *'Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words'*, (London: Picador, 2003), (p. 115).

³⁹ Eric W. White, *Poetry Book Society: The First Twenty-Five Years*, (London: Poetry Book Society, 1979), p. 64.

⁴⁰ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, pp. 93-94.

nonetheless is given its own separate page, enjoying equal and ample space. The effect is measured, unhurried, even ceremonious. As Offa might, in Hill's words, 'be most usefully regarded as the presiding genius of the West Midlands', so the 'presiding genius' of *Mercian Hymns* is the sequence-form, its form as sequence.

From an early age and from Oscar Williams' *Little Treasury*, Hill would have known Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall', with its quasi-proverbial saying 'Good fences make good neighbours', repeated at the conclusion of the poem.⁴¹ Whether Offa's Dyke is a good fence is a moot question, but in *Mercian Hymns* the arrangement in numbered hymns and the space between those hymns make for 'good fences' which allow appropriate and variable degrees of boundary and hospitality. The space between hymns gives each hymn the necessary room for its separate identity. Thus, the sequence maintains the autonomy of its 'numerous domains' (XXIV). But the space between hymns also allows for a degree of neighbourliness, the 'Clash of salutation... And other miracles, other exchanges' (MH, XVI). In *Mercian Hymns* the effect of the sequence as form is to order and shape the material in a beneficent and unobtrusive manner. The argument can be made counterfactually by envisaging the book as continuous prose with no sections and no section breaks. As such it would melt into something more like stream of consciousness. The section-breaks provide a necessary punctuation and 'breather'.

Consider, by way of example, the relationship between the first three hymns. The first verset of the first hymn offers a topography, a beating of the bounds, a preliminary sketch of the reach of Offa's kingdom. It takes the form of polyonymy, a list of different names and titles for one and the same person: Offa. It directs its mimesis to description, eulogy and flattery. But it is also setting up a joke, the much shorter second verset.

'I liked that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.'

In the disproportion between the eight-line verset and the half-line verset, the opening poem has the formal characteristics of a joke. The punchline changes the perspective so that we see the preceding verset not only as description, but as address and brazen sycophancy. Offa absorbs the ego-food and commands more. This is a joke about 'Power and sycophancy, sycophancy in power'.⁴² Whether one is appalled by Offa's narcissism or amused by his susceptibility to

⁴¹ Oscar Williams, *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947).

⁴² Hill, *The Triumph of Love*, p. 79. Section CXLIII.

flattery, the poem offers both a *tour d'horizon* and a glancing critique of power and compleasance.

There follows a white space of more than half a page, followed by a new section-heading in Roman numerals: II. This second poem contains ten or so riddles, whose solution is 'Offa' or some homophone of 'Offa' such as 'offer' or near-homophone such as 'off'. The sequence has moved from comic polyonymy to comic homonymy. As well as juggling with Offa's name, the riddling offers its own opinion. So 'a specious gift' (offer) anticipates Hill's later observation that 'in the half dark of commodity most || offers are impositions.'⁴³ Poem II lacks a main verb, which sets the poem outside of tense and time. This absence of a main verb is the defining feature of the rhetorical figure called 'scesis onomaton'. The first verset of the first poem is also scesis onomaton. Hill, in telegraphic mode, has a predilection for the figure. It frequently occurs in his *Daybooks*.

The space between poems allows for a 're-set' in terms of scene, time and narrative mode. So, the third poem is free to move into conventional recollection with time-markers. 'On the morning of the crowning we chorused our remission from school.' This introduces the notion of a first-person plural 'we': in this case, Hill's cohort of schoolchildren. The choice of the word 'remission' puns on remission as literally a 'sending back' and 'remission' as in the credal 'remission of sins', which would liken school to sin. The memory is generational and national, referring to the coronation of King George VI in May 1937. It is also village history which implies a measure of local knowledge, as if we know where 'The Stag's Head' is, it might even be our local. The poem has wider elements of cultural anthropology (coronation as fertility ritual) and folk religion. So 'Easter' in the first verset begets the chef's 'new-risen hat' in the second.

As mentioned, *Mercian Hymns* is unique for its double ordering: numbered sequentially in Roman numerals on the page and titled on 'Contents' page. So, the first two hymns are 'The Naming of Offa' and the next three are 'The Crowning of Offa'. I propose the word 'grouping' to refer to poems gathered under a subheading such as 'The Naming of Offa'. In the 'List of Hymns' (1971) the thirty separate hymns are grouped into fifteen such groupings. The largest grouping is 'The Death of Offa' which is the title given to the last four hymns. The next largest are four groups each comprised of three hymns, namely 'The Crowning of Offa' (hymns III to V); 'Offa's Coins' (XI to XIII); 'Opus Anglicanum' (XXIII to XXV); and the distributed grouping 'Offa's Laws' (X, XIV and XIX). Six

⁴³ Geoffrey Hill, *Scenes from Comus*, (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 12. Section 1.19. BH, 430.

poems have a title unique to them alone, which is to say that they are in a grouping of one. This holds for the 1971 volume, but alters in *Broken Hierarchies*, in which the twenty second hymn, previously known as 'Offa's "Second Defence of the English People"' is given in the 'Contents' as 'Opus Anglicanum', which makes a grouping of four poems with that title.⁴⁴ Hill's editor comments:

The change to "XXII Opus Anglicanum" was deliberate. It was introduced by Hill at a relatively late stage of copy-editing. I do not now recall whether he believed that the original *Mercian Hymns* table of contents was in error, or whether he believed this change to be an improvement.⁴⁵

If the original table of contents was an 'error' then it was one which had been left to stand in Hill's *Collected Poems* (1985) and his *New & Collected* (1994). It seems more likely to have been a late 'improvement', bolstering the 'Opus Anglicanum' grouping and beginning it in the 1940s. This would be a tribute from the older Hill to his parents' generation and their hard work which enabled a boy and his 'war-band' to play, sleep and dream safely. Hill has widened the scope of the word 'Opus' to include parental, emotional work. It is an achievement to risk sentimentality and get away with it.

'Most people,' wrote Adrian Mitchell, 'ignore most poetry because most poetry ignores most people.'⁴⁶ Among the reasons for the popularity of *Mercian Hymns* is that it is peopled by a sparkling cast including Charlemagne (I), the children with their 'scars of dried snot' (VI), Ceolred (VII), the three mute great-aunts (IX), the young women (XXI), 'our war-band' of children at play (XXII), needle-workers (XXIII), 'papal legate and rural dean; Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercenaries; a shuffle of house-carls' (XXVII) and others. It is also populated by some thirty different kinds of animal and colonised by some thirty different kinds of plant. Against this plenitude we can set Brown's sense that 'the innermost truth of the *Hymns*' has to do with omission: 'the omission of religious magnificence' and 'anything worthy of whole-hearted admiration'.⁴⁷

Michael Alexander sees *Mercian Hymns* as 'a celebration of the home ground of Hill's childhood, of things hoarded and of dreams of future omnipotence.' Yet it 'refuses the pastoral mode' and 'is an archaeological romance, a poem of deposits in the earth, like the earlier *In Parenthesis* and *The Anathemata* of

⁴⁴ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. x.

⁴⁵ Haynes, 'Email of 16 November 2020'.

⁴⁶ Adrian Mitchell and Ralph Steadman, *For Beauty Douglas: Adrian Mitchell's Collected Poems 1953-79*, (London: Allison & Busby, 1982), p. 93.

⁴⁷ Brown, *Double Lyric*, pp. 67, 62.

David Jones.⁴⁸ Roberts (2004) sees ‘the ordering principle of *Mercian Hymns*’ as ‘mutual exchange between modern child and ancient king’. The principal protagonists, young Geoffrey and Offa, ‘share in a linguistic continuum’ with ‘neither being subordinated as metaphor for the other.’⁴⁹

Perhaps the heart of the sequence is section XXV, the final poem of the sub-sequence ‘Opus Anglicanum’, which stands out for the plain strength of its commemoration, with strong and strongly restrained love, sorrow and rage, as Hill speaks ‘in memory of my grandmother’. Rosenthal and Gall describe this as ‘a rare surfacing in the sequence of its strongest current: a mingled anger, humiliation, and guilt at the insult to humanity felt especially in working-class family memory but in general history and personal recollections as well.’⁵⁰ The repetition of the first verset as the fourth and final verset confers on this poem both dignity and intensity. So too does the understatement of the third verset. ‘It is one thing to celebrate the “quick forge”, another to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire’, where that infinitive verb ‘to cradle’, contrasted with ‘to celebrate’, speaks of tender affection: affection of a reversed kind in that normally we would expect the grandmother to ‘cradle’ her grandchild, not the other way round. The antithesis also directs scepticism at “the quick forge and working-house of thought” in line with what Hill calls ‘one abrupt entry in Coleridge’s 1796 Notebook: ‘Poetry—excites us to artificial feelings—makes us callous to real ones’.⁵¹

Poetry lives or dies in the action of its verbs. Ceolred is not ‘quaking’ but ‘sniggering’ with fright (VII). That ‘sniggering’ hints at a relish of masochistic complicity, supported by the information that ‘Ceolred was his friend and remained so’ even after being ‘flayed’. The competitive scholar-tyrant did not tolerate or even enjoy, but ‘forgave the death-howls of his rival’ (X), where ‘forgave’ comically corrupts forgiveness into a fantasy of callous and self-congratulating piety. Likewise, it is not ‘I too boast’ but ‘I too *concede*, I am your staggeringly-gifted child’ (XXIX, my italics): the verb ‘concede’ helps to spring much of the surprise of the sentence. A verb can launch a metaphor. The children ‘launch’ a sodden log upon the flames as if it were a Viking longboat (XIX). Vitality of a kind can be squeezed even from a worn cliché. ‘Tea was enjoyed’ (XXI) is a stock-phrase which might have limped out of any report of a coach-trip in a parish magazine.

⁴⁸ M. Alexander, ‘Mercian Hymns’, *Agenda*, 34. 2 (1996). p. 106, p. 105

⁴⁹ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*. p. 30. p. 22.

⁵⁰ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, p. 301.

⁵¹ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 5.

Section-divisions also exercise an active function. So, when poem IX, 'Offa's Book of the Dead', ends on the phrase "'nicely settled'", the ensuing section-break with its space does leave the poem 'nicely settled'. The spacious section-breaks serve to differentiate sections, preserving their 'strange likeness' (XXIX), emphasising their individuality, making the reader analogous to the numismatist who can 'draw, one by one, rare coins to the light' (XIII). The coin becomes a figure for the hymn, such that when in the final hymn 'he left behind coins' he also left behind the hymns which are the sequence.

However much a purist might deplore it, many readers like to feel that in reading a poem they have gleaned something of the poet's inner life. Such readers will feel rewarded by *Mercian Hymns* with insights into the early life-experience of 'Geoffrey Hill'. The hunch that *Mercian Hymns* is at least partly autobiographical is confirmed by the poet, who has said of hymn XXII, 'Offa's "Second Defence of the English People"', that the 'battle-anthems' were a programme called 'National Anthems of the Allies' broadcast by the BBC on Sunday nights before the nine o'clock news. We have the poet's word for it that 'the "earthy shelter" was in fact dug in a bank behind a cottage opposite the police station and we were invited to share this, I think, this rather dangerous shelter when the bombers were passing over the village.' It is as if the reader too is invited to share that earthy shelter with the policeman's son reading his comics in the light of the 'blue-glassed storm-lantern'. This lantern, said Hill, 'was probably my father's police-lamp, which was supposed to be placed in front of fallen trees and the like. He used rather desperately always, every winter, he used to put it under the pipes in our bathroom, but the feeble warmth that it radiated never stopped the pipes from freezing, freezing up.'⁵² This is the poet's boyhood, but it is also childhood more generally and the opening verset of Hill's hymn XXII (with its run of words 'ran... crab-apple trees...curfew-time') re-runs Dylan Thomas's longer and more ecstatic 'Fern Hill' (with its 'apple... Time... apple... time... trees... Time... running... ran... time... time... Time').⁵³ Hill's short verset is also pocked with realistic details of 'cow-dung' and a 'nissen hut'.

Part of the charm of *Mercian Hymns* is that it is grounded in mundane objects: 'Gasholders... Milldams... half-bricks... classroom-floorboards' (VII); 'lime-splodges and phlegm... 'cold bacon' (XXIII). It is earthy with 'rat-droppings' (VII), 'night-soil' (XV), and 'dung' (XXVI). The 'scutch-grass' (XIX) is *Agropyron repens*, creeping wheatgrass or couch-grass, known in Worcestershire as

⁵² Geoffrey Hill, "'Goldengrove": A Poet's Vision of His Local Roots', (Author's transcription from an authorized recording, 2004).

⁵³ Williams, *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, p. 75.

'Scutch'.⁵⁴ One might guess that there is dialect or local knowledge in the 'shire-tree' (XXVII), but 'shire-tree' is not recorded in Amphlett and Rea, nor does it appear in the OED or any book of botany. It seems to be a local or family name and the assumption that we as readers are familiar with this 'shire-tree' makes of us honorary locals. So too we are expected to know 'St Chad's Garth'. These 'Hymns' rejoice in the 'parochial' in Patrick Kavanagh's positive sense of that term.

Parochialism and provincialism are [direct] opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned –has to say on any subject. This runs through all activities.

The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism - Greek, Israelite, English.⁵⁵

Set in both the region and the parish, *Mercian Hymns* was published in 1971 when the British Government was negotiating entry into the European Economic Community (accomplished in January 1973). Throughout, the sequence moves between the European and the British as may be seen from some of its proper nouns and adjectives derived from proper nouns: 'the Welsh Bridge [...] Charlemagne [...] Offa [...] the Roman flues [...] Albion [...] Nero's [...] *Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae* [...] the hushed Vosges [...] Pavia [...] the Tiber [...] Teme to Trent [...] Camelot [...] Compostela [...] West Mercia [...] Merovingian car-dealers, Welsh mercenaries'.

Mercian Hymns mixes colloquialism with the fantastic. 'So much for the elves' wergild, the true governance of England, the gaunt warrior-gospel armoured in engraved stone.'(V). The 'Acknowledgments' offer a gloss on the word 'wergild', defined as 'the price set upon a man according to his rank', but do not explain the elves or the warrior-gospel. The phrase 'So much for' sounds idiomatic and is often used to express disappointment in a brisk, rueful way. 'So much for my great plan' means that my plan has failed. The idiomatic formula gathers the fantastical into the strangely familiar.

The form of sequence itself, along with arrangement in page-long hymns, establishes order with a light but firm touch, structuring the material and ushering the reader from scene to scene – from 'Tamworth' and 'the desirable

⁵⁴ John Amphlett and Carleton Rea, *The Botany of Worcestershire*, (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1909), p. 423.

⁵⁵ Patrick Kavanagh, 'The Parish and the Universe', in *Collected Prose*, (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), pp. 204-05).

new estates' (I) to 'the Roman flues' (IV), schoolyard and cloakrooms (VI), fields, ditches and classroom (VII), the strange church (IX), the desk (X) – and from one time-frame to another, as 'Seasons touched and retouched the soil' (XI). The logic of numbered poems contrasts with, complements and facilitates something more dream-like. This sequence, with its 'mild dreams' (X), its realm which 'lay there like a dream' (XV), where anonymous people gathered 'In tapestries, in dreams' (XXIII), and where finally a boy much like the narrator 'entered into the last dream of Offa the King' (XXIX), offers its dream-world of imagination, repression, regret and memory. So, hymn X gives a series of past tense verbs ('He adored [...] drew [...] attended [...] forgave [...] exchanged') then swoops inward:

What should a man make of remorse, that it might profit his soul? Tell me. Tell everything to Mother, darling, and God bless. (X)

This sounds like free indirect speech, shifting from a heightened register, as from a book of contemplative enquiry or spiritual direction, to Mother bidding goodnight to her child. Focalisation and voice are hypermobile, like someone doing an impression, or as in a dream. The hymn returns in its next line to external focalisation and the past tense with 'He swayed [...] tested [...] smeared [...] wept'. The reverse happens in the penultimate hymn, XXIX, which follows one verset in first-person and present tense with one in third-person and past tense. Throughout, the sequence is switching between first-person singular (VI, VIII, IX, XXII, XXV) and third-person singular (VII, XIV, XV, XVII, XVIII), exercising and undoing the distinction between the two.

In the white space between hymns, the sequence slides effortlessly between various kinds of field, mode and speech-act: memoir and Jungian regression (VI); confession (VII); pledge (VIII); family anecdote (IX); daydream (X); numismatics (XI); gardening notes (XII); purple prose (XIII); a pen portrait (XIV); humorous self-deprecation (XV); historical reportage (XVI); radio play (XVII); travelogue, sadistic fantasy and moral exemplum (XVIII); journal or letter-writing (XIX); topography (XX). Each of those categories is only a rough approximation and fails to do justice to the generic diversity within hymns. That diversity is also exuberance, present in the sequence's various forms of apostrophe, which lift it far outside limits of conventional address, to apostrophise Offa (I); one recently deceased ('my dear', IX); a burrowing mammal ('moldywarp', XII); 'Obstinate, outclassed forefathers' (XXIX). The apostrophe 'o my masters' (XXVIII) might be remembered from a Latin Primer as a translation of the second declension vocative plural ('mei magistri'). The most extravagant apostrophe occurs in hymn XXVI: 'Troll-wives, groaners in sweetness, tooth-bewitchers, you too must purge for the surfeit of England – who have scattered peppermint and confetti,

your hundreds-and-thousands.' (XXVI) Here the comic apostrophe is followed by mock-verdictive or mock warning in a mock-heroic register as of someone fortified by alcohol.

Writing in sequence enables the engineering of effects over a wider span than would be possible in shorter lyric. This is large-scale and chronological, allowing a sweep from 'The Childhood of Offa' (V) through 'Offa's Coins' (XI to XIII) and 'Offa's Laws' (X, XIV, and XIX) and on to 'The Death of Offa' (XXVII to XXX). It is also more minutely lexical with respect to the development of particular words. So, we have not only the riddle of hymn II but 'a kitchen-garden riddled with toy-shards' (XIX) and embroidery 'riddled by needles' (XXIII). Roots extend from 'the crypt of roots' (IV) to 'a snarled root' (XV) and the 'uprooting' of XXVII. The 'fire-dragon' of XII is taken up in the 'dragon-tailed airships' of XXII and 'dragon-coils' of XXIV. 'Chestnut-boughs clash' in XII; we hear the 'Clash of salutation' in XVI; and see the 'clashing primary colours' in XX.

The sequence as form introduces formative ambiguity into the structure of *Mercian Hymns*. On the one hand, the sequence-form confers on the *Hymns* benign and low-key order, letting them be capacious, flexible and well-organised, moving back and forth, to and fro, between 'natural minutiae' and the world of power. On the other hand, the ordering provided by sequence could itself be construed as a form of power, even megalomania: 'I am the King of Mercia, and I know.' (VIII). I am inclined to favour the former interpretation. The arrangement of one hymn per page, with ample space between hymns, slows the sequence down, yet also permits flow as one scene fades into another. 'But I ran slowly; the landscape flowed away, back to its source.' (VI).

'The Pentecost Castle': sequence as song cycle

Like 'Funeral Music', 'The Pentecost Castle' is a sequence in set form: an isomorphic sequence. Each of its fifteen lyrics is in the form of three quatrains, their short lines mostly trimeter with some dimeter. These lyrics gather into a sequence which is polyphonic and dialogic, offering what Hill calls 'a hinted drama'.⁵⁶ The whole sequence could be described as fragmentary narrative or a dramatized meditation on the *mysterium Christi* if the word 'meditation' may be stretched to include elements of quarrel, parody and rejection.

Introducing *Tenebrae*, Hill wrote that many of its poems 'are concerned with the strange likeness and ultimate unlikeness of sacred and profane love; and it is this concern which, perhaps, creates the dominant tone of the book.'⁵⁷ In 'The

⁵⁶ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 92.

⁵⁷ White, *Poetry Book Society: The First Twenty-Five Years*, p. 64.

Pentecost Castle' this 'dominant tone' is struck and maintained by vocabulary which is more homogenous than that of Hill's previous sequence. Whereas *Mercian Hymns* had sparkled with anachronisms – Offa as 'overlord of the M5' and 'Cohorts of charabancs' figuring day-trippers as legionaries – 'The Pentecost Castle' eschews such wit. Like 'Funeral Music', it seems to establish a harmonious language-world consistent with a distinct time, though it veils in artful indeterminacy when exactly that time is. If 'The Pentecost Castle' were the imagination of an historical culture lucidly dreaming itself (back) into being, then that culture would be one based on honour/shame, feudal bonds, feuds, faith, chivalry, romance and courtly love. It might be the world of Saint John of the Cross, or of Heloise and Abelard, or, as Matthews suggests, 'the Pre-Raphaelite world'.⁵⁸

'The Pentecost Castle' is more of a 'songbook' than 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz'. As it acknowledges in its notes, it is indebted to old Spanish songs.⁵⁹ About half the poems take their departure from J. M. Cohen's *Penguin Book of Spanish Verse*. The sequence originated from hearing a piece by the sixteenth-century Spanish composer, Antonio de Cabezón, whose theme was the same little folk tune which gave Lope de Vega the motif for his play *El Caballero de Olmedo*. 'The words of the little folk song became the first lyric of the "Pentecost Castle" sequence.'⁶⁰ 'The Pentecost Castle', with its lyrics composed of short lines, is more singable than any of Hill's other sequences.

The sequence's concern with 'the strange likeness and ultimate unlikeness of sacred and profane love' is mirrored at the end of each line by the 'strange likeness' of repetition and rhyme and the 'ultimate unlikeness' of non-rhyme, along with the ambivalence of half-rhyme. With short lines (dimeter and trimeter) the effect of rhyme (and non-rhyme) is insistent and intense. Of all Hill's sequences up to this time, 'Pentecost Castle' is the one which most relies on rhyme for its effects. The patterning is complex. In its microcosm of only thirty-five words, the first poem of 'Pentecost Castle' flies the half-rhyme of 'road... pride... lord'; the immediate and full repetition of 'not to go | not to go'; the full but delayed repetition of 'Medina's pride | Olmedo's flower... Medina's pride | Olmedo's flower'; patterns of antimetabole ('road... pride... go... go... pride... road'); and antimetabole compounded with interleaving in 'road... pride... flower... road... pride... flower... road'. These patterns of repetition

⁵⁸ Steven Matthews, 'Felt Unities': Geoffrey Hill, T.S. Eliot and David Jones', in *Strangeness and Power: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, ed. by Andrew Michael Roberts (Swindon: Shearsman Books, 2020), (p. 21).

⁵⁹ Geoffrey Hill, *Tenebrae*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978).

⁶⁰ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 92.

serve to foreground those dissonant lines which conspicuously fail to rhyme: 'They slew by night... shadows warned him' (notwithstanding assonance between 'night' and 'pride'). Such patterns thread each poem together. I will not describe them in detail. Suffice it to say that the sequence stretches across a spectrum from the unrhymed (poems 4 and 5) through multiple patterns of rhyme and half-rhyme, including *abab* (poems 7, 8, 14 and 15) to stanzas of monorhyme in poem 13. In this way it directs its mimesis back and forth across the spectrum of likeness and unlikeness of sacred and profane love.

Of all Hill's sequences, 'The Pentecost Castle' has the lightest punctuation, although it is not, strictly speaking, unpunctuated, since it uses the initial capital letter, apostrophe and hyphen. This minimal punctuation respects the reader's intelligence by making demands upon it, forcing the reader to intuit probable punctuation (therefore also syntax and meaning) in an interpretive act which keeps further interpretations in reserve. Minimal punctuation distances 'The Pentecost Castle' from the traditional English canon and recalls both modernist writing which dispenses with punctuation, and also the older lineage of Hebrew. From the outset the sequence deploys the parallelism of the Psalms to hint at its drama:

Down in the orchard
I met my death
under the briar rose
I lie slain

Here the first two lines are echoed, almost antiphonally, by the second pair, which say something similar, but add an extra facet: 'I met my death' is open as to the cause of death, whilst 'I lie slain' implies murder. When this opening stanza is repeated as the final stanza, its sense is altered if we interpret the intervening and seemingly innocent lines 'my love waited | among the trees' as a clue either that a tryst was ambushed in an 'honour killing' or that the lover (himself) is the killer who 'waited' to commit the murder.

The language-world of 'The Pentecost Castle' draws in other language-worlds. The opening 'Down in the orchard' may recall Yeats's 'Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet' or the ghosts of other folksongs and wronged lovers' complaints. The sequence includes 'nursery rhyme' rhythms and elements of fairy-tale. The 'briar rose' might recall 'Sleeping Beauty' and the 'child-beads of fingered bread' (in poem 10) call to mind 'Hansel and Gretel'. Visually some lines conjure up tapestry, as in 'Goldfinch and hawk | and the grey aspen tree' (poem 5) where the greyness could describe an effect of faded dye. An element of tableau merges with drama which seems 'contemporary' in

both senses of that word: 'then' and 'now'. In 'scrolled effigy of a cry | our passion its display' (10), the 'scrolled effigy' of the past is united through a cry which might be timeless to 'our passion' now. Indeed, on one page of the draft dated December 1971, Hill dedicates the opening two poems of what would become 'The Pentecost Castle' to the memory of Christopher Okigbo, the Igbo caballero killed in the Biafran War.⁶¹

Given these heterogeneous constituents, Hill's challenge is 'to make incoherencies cohere'.⁶² This he achieves musically by powerful rhythm and rhyme, and semantically by exploiting the resources of paradox. The very title 'The Pentecost Castle' exemplifies oxymoron and paradox in so far as 'Pentecost' suggests free movement of the Spirit across boundaries, whilst 'Castle' evokes stasis, enclosure, protection, possession, conflict and hierarchy. In the context of the Spanish markers 'Medina' and 'Olmedo' in the opening poem, the title 'The Pentecost Castle' also evokes Theresa of Avila's spiritual masterpiece *The Interior Castle* (*El Castillo Interior*) written in 1577. The language of Hill's 'Pentecost Castle' moves so freely between interior and exterior worlds as almost to dissolve the distinction.

The punctuation of 'The Pentecost Castle' is light to the point of non-existent. In the spaces in which the verse (invisibly) punctuates itself, one voice flows into another and masks are changed almost imperceptibly. This facilitates a choric effect of voices breaking out of one another and merging back into one another: 'implication merging into implication'.⁶³ The absence of punctuation releases words to operate simultaneously on different planes and allows proliferation of paradox. Hill's notebooks record Praver's observation that 'The complete absence of punctuation marks' in Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge' 'only underlines Celan's control over his material.'⁶⁴

The array of paradox or quasi- or pseudo-paradox can be explored logically, but the rhythm holds the contraries and contradictions in the harmony of the poem, in that fertile poetic realm between nonsense and profundity. The compressed paradoxes amount not so much to a labyrinth as a castle of paradox, in which meaning is fortified, walled and enclosed. The castle is Pentecostal in that its walls are not brick but breath. Whatever their logical meaning the lines may, in

⁶¹ Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry Notebook 18.', (BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/18: Geoffrey Hill archive, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, [n.d.]), (p. 18).

⁶² Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 579.

⁶³ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 252-53.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry Notebook 19', (BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/19: Special Collections, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, [n.d.]), (p. 74). Hill is citing Siegbert Praver, "Paul Celan" in Brian Keith-Smith, *Essays on Contemporary German Literature*, (London: Wolff, 1966), p. 166.

more human, emotional and musical terms, be heard as a cry: a cry of pain, rage and remorse. That cry is like a cry from the Psalms wherein a cry may be a complaint ('O my God, I cry by day, but thou hearest not', Psalm 22:2); a plea ('Hear my prayer, O Lord, and hearken unto my cry', Psalm 39:12); a jubilation ('All the earth, sing ye loud unto the Lord: cry out and rejoice, and sing praises', Psalm 98:4); and an exhaustion ('I am weary of crying', Psalm 69:3).

Hill is composing on different planes of language and existence – sacred and profane, Christian and secular, spiritual and sexual, particular and general, personal and archetypal – simultaneously. The simultaneity is aided by absence of punctuation such that it is not always clear where one sense-unit begins and another ends. Nor can we be sure which phrase is to be assigned to which voice. But the form clues us into the sense. As Matthews notes, Hill's method in this sequence is "to split the pentameter in two, and to slightly vary the resultant line length, whilst sustaining the unpunctuated line as the unit of sense", a unit which is 'poised within and against the flow of the sentence'.⁶⁵ The poem manages to "speak" the "unspeakable" at a pitch that simultaneously represents intense formality and idiomatic immediacy.⁶⁶

In an interview published three years after *Tenebrae*, Hill said that 'the grasp of true religious experience is a privilege reserved for very few' and 'one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of a much more common situation – the sense of not being able to grasp true religious experience.'⁶⁷ He declared an interest both in 'mysticism as an exemplary discipline' and in 'the psychopathology of the false mystical experience'. Alluding to the painter Francis Bacon, Hill said that in poetry 'one is trying to trace the track left by human beings, which is full of false directions and self-pity and nostalgia as well as lust, wrath, greed and pride.'

Hill has defended 'the making of lyric poetry out of one's mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion'.⁶⁸ 'The Pentecost Castle' explores and dramatizes the psychology of belief and doubt in a sequence which is experimental in its lack of punctuation. This gives the sequence a sense of greater openness in structure and poetic method, helping to create an effect of vivid dream and cultural psychodrama or psychomachia. To the extent that the characters are archetypes — Lover and Beloved, Knight and Lady, the Human and the Divine — we might call this sequence an archetypodrama or archetypomachia.

⁶⁵ Matthews, "'Felt Unities'", (pp. 23, 22).

⁶⁶ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 391. Hill is writing of Hopkins.

⁶⁷ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 89.

⁶⁸ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 91.

‘Lachrimae’: sequence as dance

‘Lachrimae’ is a sequence in isomorphic and regularly rhymed poems: seven Petrarchan sonnets. It has an alternative or sub-title ‘SEVEN TEARS FIGURED IN SEVEN PASSIONATE PAVANS’, where a ‘pavan’ is ‘a grave and stately court-dance in slow duple time’ (OED s. v. ‘pavane’, n. 1 a.). The form of the Petrarchan sonnet contributes gravity and stateliness whilst the sequence-form adds a sense of ceremonious repetition as enacted in court-dance. The number seven is the Biblical number of completeness and perfection, as God created the world in seven days and in Revelations the Lamb has ‘seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.’ (Revelations, 5. 6). We take it that the ‘SEVEN TEARS’ are tears as in weeping, because the opening line suggests somebody contemplating the crucifixion through the blurred eyes of weeping. But these could also be tears as in being ripped apart.

The critical accounts of ‘Lachrimae’ tend to discuss its form, then speculate as to what the sequence indicates about Hill’s spiritual state: his belief, or disbelief. Brown (1980) describes ‘Lachrimae’ as ‘seven rhyme-clanged (half aslant) sonnets or imitation sonnets’ marked by ‘that incompleteness, that groping, that holding back, which has won admiration for [Eliot’s] “The Hollow Men”.’⁶⁹ For Gifford (1985), the ‘sequence, “Lachrimae”, seven poems in sonnet form, sets up the endless counterpoint of Christian meditation, the more painful for the poet’s sense of exclusion and unworthiness.’⁷⁰ For Hart (1986) Hill both ‘recreates the form’ of meditational poetry ‘with such insight that it has all the vibrations of novelty’ and ‘is the raucous comedian of decreation as much as its gloomy disciple.’⁷¹ Sherry (1987) sees ‘Lachrimae’ as ‘meditational sonnets’ which assert ‘the aesthetic menace to moral atonement, and so extend and reorient the symbolist-modernist tradition in which they fit.’⁷² Roberts (2004) reads ‘Lachrimae’ in terms of dissonance, false relation and oxymoron. He suggests it can be read as ‘an account of an individual’s troubled relationship to Christian faith’, with Dowland and Southwell ‘evoked as mediating presences’.⁷³ For Wainwright (2005) the sonnets in the sequence are both ‘a piteous and

⁶⁹ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 67.

⁷⁰ Henry Gifford, ‘Hill and the Dictionary’, in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), (p. 157).

⁷¹ Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 222. p. 225.

⁷² Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 197. p. 196

⁷³ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 89.

pitiful accompaniment' to a reality of suffering, and also 'a profound discussion and demonstration of artifice in expression'.⁷⁴

Referring to the tradition of Petrarchan poetry as the main model for 'Lachrimae', its author mentioned 'in-built problems to be solved' concerning paradox and oxymoron. Being interviewed, he posed two questions of his own:

How, for instance, do you cope with this volatile and very treacherous instrument, paradox? How do you enter that strange relationship with form and language in which you partly guide them, and they partly guide you?⁷⁵

When Hill speaks of 'this very treacherous instrument, paradox', we may take it to be an intellectual, philosophical and poetic instrument, possibly a musical instrument too. Perhaps the modern, rationalist mind is suspicious and intolerant of paradox in a way that ancient Jewish thought, happy to acknowledge truth in logical opposites, was not.

At the semantic level, 'Lachrimae' does not show spiritual progress, in the way that Bunyan's Pilgrim progresses. The seven sonnets could be described as seven steps forward, seven steps back, their deft movements dancing round rather than marching forward. They imitate a 'pavan', a grave dance, in that they explore and embody the possibilities for movement within a confined space. As the 'Crucified Lord' in the first sentence is said to 'never move', so the final sentence finds the protagonist 'bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse', not so much feeling 'promise and remorse' as sceptically aware of the dubious psychology around them.

These sonnets dramatize the relationship (if such it can be called) between the Crucified Lord and the fallen self in the fallen world. Their origin might be Hopkins' 'Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend': another Petrarchan or Miltonic sonnet, in which Hopkins expresses 'Disappointment' and 'Defeat', complaining he is 'Time's eunuch'.⁷⁶ Although 'Lachrimae' is composed of Petrarchan sonnets, Hill sometimes ends them with what might be called the 'quasi-couplet', which mimics the rhyming couplet closing a Shakespearean sonnet without being a rhyming couplet. An example is the end of the sixth sonnet: 'We find you wounded by the token spear. | Dominion is swallowed with your blood.'

⁷⁴ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Hill, 'Under Judgment', ed. by Blake Morrison (*New Statesman*, 8 February, 1980), (p. 212).

⁷⁶ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 106. Hill would have known this poem from Oscar Williams' *Little Treasury*, p. 244.

This is not a rhyming couplet but each sentence slots exactly into the line of iambic pentameter, and the words also have a summative quality as they often do in the concluding couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet. Yet the summation can generate tension with what it claims to summarise.

'Crucified Lord' is the opening address of '1 Lachrimae Verae', '4 Lachrimae Coactae' and '6 Lachrimae Antiquae Novae'. A fourth 'Lachrimae' sonnet, '7 Lachrimae Amantis', also addresses a Christ-like figure who arrives '[a]t this dark solstice' and stands 'as though a stranger to my door': a figure like 'The Light of the World' in Holman Hunt's 1853 painting which Hill would have known from Keble College chapel. This is a Christ who has come down from the cross and walked 'through the long night and in the icy dew' to stand at the door (as in Revelations 3. 20) and knock.

These four sonnets with the subheading 'Lachrimae' and addressing divine and sacrificial love are intermixed with three others which have more to do with flawed human love. 'Self-love' (in the sestet of '2 The Masque of Blackness') is shown as delusion, whether it be individual, collective or poetic fantasy which 'models new heavens in his masquerade'. 'Clamorous love' (in the sestet of '3 Martyrium') is a needy expression of 'grief' and 'fear'. 'Self-wounding martyrdom' (in the second quatrain of '5 Pavana Dolorosa') sounds suspect in that martyrdom should witness to something greater than the self. 'Self-wounding' might be self-harming in a self-indulgent way. In the context of 'Ash Wednesday feasts' this could be a stab at cheap 'martyrdom' as of somebody proclaiming their resolution to forego chocolate for Lent. As often with Hill, there is somewhere, not quite at the surface, a sardonic edge. The phrase 'Self-seeking hunter of forms' plays on the double meaning of 'Self-seeking': looking in for the (authentic) self; and looking out for one's self-interest. This 'Self-seeking hunter of forms' could be a self-aggrandising title for the artist or poet foundering in desire and transience: 'I founder in desire for things unfound. | I stay amid the things that will not stay.' The steady iambic pentameter, the end-stopped line, the sense of this being another quasi-couplet and the play on 'founder... unfound... stay... stay' contradict the ostensible meaning of foundering and evanescence.

The dichotomy of four sonnets of divine love and three of worldly love is a simplification because the sonnets of divine love also position themselves as spoken by a sinner exiled from the divine:

I cannot turn aside from what I do;
you cannot turn away from what I am.

You do not dwell in me nor I in you [...]

The stated meaning of separation confronts a run of pronouns which express passionate interaction: 'I... I... you... I... You... me... I... you'. There is passion too in the run of monosyllables, as there is in Hopkins' 'Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.'⁷⁷

The fourth and central sonnet not only confesses sin, but it also enacts it. Consider the accusation:

You are the crucified who crucifies,
self-withdrawn even from your own device,
your trim-plugged body, wreath of rakish thorn.

The two adjectives in the last line are pejorative and mocking. The epithet 'trim-plugged', not to be found in the OED, casts an aspersion of narcissism on Christ as if he has been keeping trim to look his best on the cross. It may carry the negative meanings of 'plug' in the sense of an incompetent or undistinguished person' (OED 9 a), an old and worn-out horse (9 b) or a book which sells badly, a remainder (9 c). The epithet 'trim-plugged' may also derive from 'plug' as promotional publicity, as in a sleek selling-campaign. To describe Christ's crown of thorns as 'rakish' – raffish, jaunty, dashing – adds insult to injury. The 'rakish thorn' rhymes with and acts out 'hurtful scorn'. In its second quatrain this sonnet takes the Crucifixion, the central event of Christian salvation, and views it aesthetically, mockingly, as if it were a fashion show. In so doing, it jabs another thorn into the crown of thorns. If that reminds us of Marvell's 'The Coronet' (which begins 'When for the thorns with which I long, too long | With many a piercing wound, | My saviour's head have crowned') then Marvell's 'wreaths of fame and interest' become Hill's 'wreath of rakish thorn'.⁷⁸

The nub of this fourth sonnet lies in its turn from octet to sestet. After the petulant accusation of 'rakish thorn' the sonnet quietens into questioning:

What grips me then, or what does my soul grasp?
If I grasp nothing what is there to break?
You are beyond me, innermost true light,

uttermost exile for no exile's sake,
king of our earth not caring to unclasp
its void embrace, the semblance of your quiet.

The paradox of 'beyond' yet 'innermost' conjoins a possible shrug of giving up ('beyond me') with passionate immediacy of address, or address which implies

⁷⁷ Hopkins, *Poems*, p. 107.

⁷⁸ Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, p. 54.

a kind of faith that one is addressing something or someone. The central sonnet closes on the striking image of Christ as king 'not caring to unclasp' our world's 'void embrace, the semblance of your quiet.' There might be here a sense of disgust, or a sense of Christ accepting the disgustingness of the world with forbearance. The idea of our earth's 'void embrace' being the 'semblance', the outward appearance, of 'your quiet' is profoundly disquieting.

The sequence ends in the ambiguity of 'half-faithful for a time':

So many nights the angel of my house
has fed such urgent comfort through a dream,
whispered 'your lord is coming, he is close'

that I have drowsed half-faithful for a time
bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse:
'tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him.'

Sherry thinks that the protagonist manages to lament his estrangement from Christ 'in the same burnished, superbly chastened rhetoric that, as it achieves its own harmony, precludes his union with Christ.' The poem 'is the convincing symbol of the poet's rival lordship, its fiction the credible myth of the artist as Promethean threat.'⁷⁹ The dubiety derives not only from Promethean ambition and formal pseudo-perfection; it is also evoked by the implications of words. For example, the final line may in itself seem to offer some hope, promise, or resolution, but it is undermined by the fact that this has happened 'So many nights'. In the absence of a foregoing comma, the word 'bathed' seems to be a passive participle rather than an active intransitive verb. To be 'bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse', not once but 'So many nights', suggests indulgence and a capacity for self-deception. The 'tomorrow' is the Spanish *mañana* which is forever deferred. Whether this 'I' be the autobiographical 'I' or an 'I' who represents Everyman and sinner, the sequence ends with one drowsing, as the disciples drowsed in Gethsemane, 'half-faithful'. This fits with traditional protestant doctrine that salvation cannot be earned but is a free gift from the Grace of a loving God. The gift can be spurned not only by the hardened sinner but also by the heart 'that keeps itself religiously secure'. The adverb here implies the pejorative connotation, verging into modern denotation, of 'religious' to signify 'cold, aloof, antiquated, righteous and self-righteous'. The (saving) grace of 'Lachrimae' is the warmth, directness and honesty of its address, both to the 'Crucified Lord' and to the reader.

⁷⁹ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 198.

As a sequence, 'Lachrimae' with its addresses to 'Crucified Lord', may remind us of the Psalms, which express feelings from exaltation to despair. But significant speech-acts of the psalmist are absent. 'Lachrimae' does not feature confession of trust in God; petition for relief; exclamation of certainty that the prayer has been heard, or vow of praise. Its dance is not so much a flow of remorse and repentance ('SEVEN TEARS') as a stasis of perplexity and bafflement.

**'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England':
sequence as historical imaginary**

'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' is the third sequence in *Tenebrae* (1978). It resembles 'Lachrimae' in being a sequence of rhymed sonnets in Petrarchan or Miltonic form, arranged on the page in four stanzas: two quatrains followed by two tercets. This form generates thirteen sonnets whose subject-matter is more secular than 'Lachrimae', which may explain why Hill wrote thirteen of them. In the Bible the number thirteen indicates sin and apostasy from Genesis onwards: 'Twelve years they served Ched-or-la-o-mer, and in the thirteenth year they rebelled.' (Genesis 14. 4). These sonnets transform formal constraint into creativity, and thus prefigure the longer sequences in *The Daybooks* where set forms also provide a sure frame for invention.

Hill liked to quote Yeats's words to Margot Ruddock: 'difficulty is our plough'. He glossed Yeats's dictum as follows:

It is the being forced down under the surface by the resistance of technique that inaugurates a self-alienating process which, as it drives down into strata that are not normally encountered, may produce alien objects.⁸⁰

'The alien', Hill explains, 'is what we did not expect to find.'⁸¹ If the difficulty of the set form is Hill's plough, then the field here being ploughed is nineteenth-century Britain, with forays further afield. The second sonnet is dated 1654; the twelfth (with its 'photo-albums') evokes the 1950s; and the 'warheads of mushrooms' in the eleventh sonnet speak to the threat of nuclear war. The predominant tense throughout the sequence is the present tense as if all is present in the imagination to poetry.

⁸⁰ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 567-68.

⁸¹ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 568.

John Lucas doubted the seriousness of the sonnet form as such. 'The sonnet is, surely, more or less a pastiche form unless it's radically rethought. Does Hill use it seriously or not?'⁸² One might question Lucas's binary distinction between pastiche and seriousness and allow for a poetry mixing both. If 'An Apology' is pastiche it is not so in the sense of OED 2. a: a work 'created in the style of someone or something else; a work that humorously exaggerates or parodies a particular style'. Hill does, however, employ pastiche in the sense of 'incorporating distinctive elements of other works or styles in a literary composition' (OED s. v. 'pastiche, n.' 2. b.). This is typically accomplished with delicacy such that it is open to discussion whether a particular stylistic element is pastiche, or what kind of pastiche it might be. For instance, is Hill's 'godmother; nod and nod' (12) a nod to Sylvia Plath's 'Disquieting Muses' with its 'Mother, mother... to nod | And nod and nod... Mother... Godmothers'?⁸³ All the sonnets are titled and most of these titles are literary allusions which sit at a sharp angle to the sonnet below them. The effect of these loxic titles is less to orient the perplexed than warn that nothing in this language-world is quite as it seems.

The critical debate about 'An Apology' has probed its latent politics, asking whether the poem is at heart a conservative celebration of a bygone age of Empire. This subject was contentious in the mid and late 1970s when Margaret Thatcher, leader of the Conservative party from 1975, was advocating a return to 'Victorian values'. Some individual lines and images in 'An Apology' do indeed whiff of nostalgia. 'The pigeon purrs in the wood' (sonnet 11) could be taken, out of context, as an instance of cosy nature-notes. 'Today you sip and smile' (3) could typify complacency. Some of the diction is conspicuously 'literary' such as the compound epithets ('new-burgeoned [...] crisp-leaved [...] long-laid' in sonnet 3) and some is archaic, such as words using the be- prefix popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth century: 'bedaubed' (1); 'becalms' (7); 'beset' (9); 'betrothed' (10); 'bewigged' (13). But archaism can contribute to atmosphere, invention and parody. It is not conclusive evidence of nostalgia and even a superficial reading shows rose-tinted sentimentality challenged by such phrases as 'bankrupt shame' (4); 'the flawless hubris of heroic guilt' (4); 'The alien conscience of our days' (5); 'the phantoms of untold mistakes' (7); 'the mannerly extortions' (9); 'the half-built ruins of the new estate' (11); 'perpetual vows | broken in time' (13). These phrases would not advertise a nostalgia-trip to the nineteenth century.

⁸² John Lucas, 'Letter of 3 October', *London Review of Books*, 7. 17 (1985).

⁸³ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 74.

'An Apology' has become a battle-site in the war of Hill's reputation. Where his detractors, such as Tom Paulin, decry reactionary nostalgia, his defenders find something more nuanced. Thus Roberts (2000) argues that Hill is 'using the sonnet sequence' partly for a 'pastiche effect' and 'as a way of inhabiting, linguistically and imaginatively, the cultural landscape of Victorian England, while simultaneously measuring something of our distance from it.'⁸⁴ Roberts (2004) concludes that 'An Apology' evokes 'a complex sense of the meanings attached by contemporary culture' to myths of the past including 'a strand of organic, romantic conservatism', to diagnose how our culture remembers, forgets and reimagines the past.⁸⁵ This matters because history is a 'vital dimension of intelligence'.⁸⁶ As Rowan Williams says in relation to Hill, 'a present which has no sense either of gift or of loss in relation to the past is in serious ways a barbarized and impoverished environment.'⁸⁷ Wainwright sees the sequence as 'a profoundly sensed critique of nostalgia' which 'turns over, page by page, [...] the affective ideology of a whole area of English mind and culture'.⁸⁸

By way of apologia for his 'Apology', Hill said that '[t]he celebration of the inherited beauties of the English landscape is bound, in the texture of the sequence, with an equal sense of the oppression of tenantry.'⁸⁹ So when 'Platonic England grasps its tenantry' (7) that verb 'grasps' could have the force and intent of a predator. 'Platonic England' stands 'as though at ease' with its 'mannerly extortions' (9), where 'mannerly' is a homophone of 'manorly'. Hill said that 'the sad serenity and elegance of the eighteenth-century country house landscape was bought at a price: not only the sufferings of English labourers, but also of Indian peasants.'⁹⁰ The sufferings of those Indian peasants are left to the imagination rather than explicitly presented. They may be inferred from metonymy and juxtaposition without resolution. 'Krishna from Radha lovingly untwines || Lugging the earth, the oxen bow their heads.' (5). Remembering Yeats's plough, however, those oxen might also be poets yoked in solidarity with beasts of burden. A 'radical' or even a Leavisite critic might desire the misery of the Indian labourer to be realised and conveyed in

⁸⁴ Roberts, 'Geoffrey Hill and Pastiche', (p. 158).

⁸⁵ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 58. p. 53.

⁸⁶ Hill, 'Under Judgment', (p. 213.). Quoted by Roberts (2004), p. 54.

⁸⁷ Rowan Williams, 'The Standing of Poetry', in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. by Peter Robinson (2012), (p. 64).

⁸⁸ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 42.

⁸⁹ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 93.

⁹⁰ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 93.

sensuous human detail, as felt experience, but to make the attempt, which Hill does not, would risk appropriation and impertinence.

In *Tenebrae* Hill prefaced 'An Apology' with its own apology or defence in the form of two contrasting epigraphs. The first was five words from Coleridge: 'the spiritual, Platonic old England'. This was contrasted with a quote from commercial Britain (UK plc) taken from Disraeli's *Coningsby* (1844) in which the eponymous aristocratic hero is speaking with a Lancashire manufacturer whose name evokes both mills and banks:

'Your situation', said Coningsby, looking up the green and silent valley,
'is absolutely poetic.'

'I try sometimes to fancy', said Mr Millbank, with a rather fierce smile,
'that I am in the New World.'⁹¹

In *Broken Hierarchies* Hill replaces this epigraph with one which highlights an upper-class will to occlusion in which industry and the world of work are deliberately overlooked.

In the valley at our feet, still half hidden in mist, lay farms, cottages, villas, the railway, the colliery and the densely teeming streets of the men who worked there. . . [Sir George] turned and spoke in the wistful, nostalgic tones of a castaway, yet of a castaway who was reconciled to his solitude. 'You see', he said, 'there is *no one* between us and the Locker-Lampsons'.⁹²

The new epigraph, which Hill identifies as 'Evelyn Waugh in Osbert Sitwell, *Laughter in the Next Room*', points directly to the self-protecting, privative force of an imagination bound by privilege, snobbery and nostalgia. Disraeli's 'green and silent valley', echoing Blake's 'green and pleasant land', has been replaced by a valley 'teeming' with agriculture, social division, transport, industry, work. Sir George's 'wistful, nostalgic tones' are those of wilful blindness, indulging a fantasy which denies his neighbour and ignores what is in front of him. The 'Locker-Lampsons' are named almost allegorically for those who would lock their social sympathies in a locker, not hiding their lamp under a bushel but leaving it in a locker. The name also evokes Frederick Locker-Lampson (1821-95), a writer of light verse, known for his description of *vers de société* as a

⁹¹ Hill, *Tenebrae*, p. 22.

⁹² Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 125.

genre in which 'sentiment never surges into passion, and where humour never overflows into boisterous merriment'.⁹³

There is an occlusion: the first-person singular. In dropping the epigraph from *Coningsby*, the sequence loses all usage of the first-person singular which had occurred originally only in the speech of Mr Millbank. It follows that the 'Apology' as it appears in *Broken Hierarchies* has no form of the first-person singular at all. In this it resembles Hill's first sequence, 'Metamorphoses'. As will be shown in the next chapter, from *The Triumph of Love* (1998) onwards that first-person singular will make a triumphant return.

Like 'Lachrimae', 'An Apology' deploys half-rhyme, which, in Hill's words, 'sustains order and expectation while maintaining its scepticism of them'. It 'draws bidding power into the extremities of the lines.'⁹⁴ Although Hill himself does not make such an elementary point, half-rhyme also creates room for manoeuvre and surprise. So, the run of end-words 'frost... dawn... beds' does not produce the predictable 'lost... lawn... heads' as it might with full rhyme, but rather the surprising and mixed 'braids... iconoclast... sun!'.

Whilst being fixed in important respects, the Petrarchan sonnet permits formal variety. If we take its regular or orthodox rhyme scheme to be *abba abba cdc dcd*, then only five of the thirteen sonnets (numbers 2, 6, 7, 8 and 10) satisfy this ideal. Four of the sonnets (1, 4, 11, 12) vary the rhyme scheme in the octet, whilst six of them (3, 4, 5, 9, 12, 13) vary the sestet. The fourth sonnet, the first in the subsequence 'A Short History of British India', does not conform in either octet or sestet.

With respect to its division into octet and sestet, the Petrarchan sonnet in 'An Apology' is less regular than in 'Lachrimae'. Each of the sonnets in 'Lachrimae' ends the octet with a full-stop, defining it precisely. In 'An Apology' only six of the sonnets end the octet with a full-stop, whilst one ends with an exclamation mark. But in six others the punctuation is less, so that octet runs into sestet and the sonnet overflows the regular Petrarchan schema. Hill again uses what I have called the 'quasi-couplet', which mimics the rhyming couplet closing a Shakespearean sonnet without itself being a rhyming couplet. Consider the sestet in the first sonnet of 'An Apology'. It rhymes regularly *cdc dcd*, Hill also creates the illusion of a final couplet by means of syntax and isocolon, such that the last two lines are a unit of an apparently summative kind:

⁹³ Margaret Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 6 edn, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). s. v. 'Locker-Lampson'.

⁹⁴ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 529.

It is the ravage of the heron wood;
it is the rood blazing upon the green.

As well as appearing to summarise, these lines are deeply mysterious. The last line sketches an outbreak of iconoclasm. With 'the ravage of the heron wood' should we see the bulldozers moving in? Again, the last two lines of sonnets 5 and 13 do not rhyme but they do form their own sense-unit, like the couplet in a Shakespearean sonnet.

We could envisage 'An Apology', like much of Hill's other poetry, as existing between 'the twin forms || of sleep and waking' (7). The 'Quaint Mazes' of the title to the first sonnet recall 'the queint Mazes in the wanton greene' from the liminal fairy-world of *Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁹⁵

Vulnerable to each other the twin forms

of sleep and waking touch the man who wakes
to sudden light, who thinks that this becalms
even the phantoms of untold mistakes.' ('An Apology', 7).

The image here, the implicit scenario, is of a man with a bad conscience whose sleep is troubled perhaps to nightmare by 'the phantoms of untold mistakes.' These 'phantoms' could arise from deep memory, from the 'far and inward echoing' of the first stanza. The man 'wakes | to sudden light' and 'thinks that this becalms' the phantoms. The two verbs here are ambivalent in their different ways. The man 'thinks' that the light becalms the phantoms, but he may be wrong. He thinks the light 'becalms' the phantoms; not that it exorcises, annihilates or expels them. The 'untold mistakes' could be personal mistakes, sexual errors, even the crime of rape ('the ruined and the ruinously strong'). Or they could be the 'untold mistakes' of 'British India', the subject of the previous three sonnets, or of wider Empire.

Poetry requires compression and Hill can give his sequences 'almost epic proportions' through a single choice detail.⁹⁶ Take the noun 'copyhold' which occurs in 'the dream' at the start of the sestet in 'The Eve of St Mark' (12): 'churchwardens in wing-collars bearing scrolls | of copyhold well-tinctured and well-tied.' OED defines 'copyhold' as 'a kind of tenure in England of ancient origin: tenure of lands being parcel of a manor, "at the will of the lord according to the custom of the manor", by copy of the manorial court-roll' (OED, s. v.

⁹⁵ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 167. A *Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. 1. 99. TLN 474.

⁹⁶ Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 63.

‘copyhold, n.’ 1 a). It adds that all copyhold land was enfranchised in 1922. Into this one image, the ‘scrolls | of copyhold’ borne by churchwardens in their high, stiff shirt-collars, Hill rolls weighty matters of class, property rights, generational inequality, inequity condoned by Church and State, the ‘wooden wings of justice’ (10), tradition (‘well-tinctured’), conflict, constraint (‘well-tied’), consensus and change. The word ‘copyhold’ is not dropped out of nothing casually but develops from ‘servitude’ (1) and ‘tenantry’ (7).

Sometimes Hill gives ‘almost epic proportions’ to an image, phrase or clause. For example, in the first sonnet he exposes the shadow side of the fluffy-sounding ‘Religion of the heart’ by mentioning ‘its hawk’s hood | twitched off for sweet carnality’ (1). Balanced against the ‘trysts’, which sound consensual, is a glance into a religion with a double ethic, double standards and scope for sexual abuse. The ‘hawk’ is a type of the raptor as in the fifth section of ‘The Pentecost Castle’ (‘the wings flash and are still’). The ‘hood’ suggests a blind-spot or wilful refusal to look (as in the sequence’s 2013 epigraph). The prepositional verb ‘twitched off’ catches the quick jerk or pull, and ‘twitched’ can also be applied to clothing (as in ‘Lycidas’, ‘At last he rose and twitch’d his mantle blue’). The noun ‘carnality’ mixes condemnation with gratification, whilst its qualifier ‘sweet’ adds to the suggestion that what is officially condemned is unofficially coveted and condoned.

In few words ‘A Short History of British India (1)’ offers a sharp insight into sexual politics with its closing exhortation to ‘be stirred || by all her god-quests, her idolatries, | in conclave of abiding injuries, | sated upon the stillness of the bride.’ Here the ‘abiding injuries’ of Empire are being ‘sated’ on ‘the bride’; or to put it the other way ‘the bride’, the female half of the population, is bearing the brunt of those injuries. The violence of Imperial subjugation is being ‘taken out’ on the bride. That is to assume that the bride is India, though it might also be Britain, the motherland, with her own god-quests and idolatries (‘I vow to thee my country, all earthly things above’). The deeper meeting of British and Indian culture, a clash which might justly be described as ‘world-historical’ or ‘tectonic’, is summarised in the cool understatement of ‘There is a greeting | beyond the act.’ This seems to differentiate a surface greeting from a deeper meeting and to hint at potential for pretence (‘the act’) and bad faith. We sense something of that at the start of ‘A Short History of British India (II)’ with its fearful ‘them and us’. ‘Suppose they sweltered here three thousand years | patient for our destruction.’ The verb ‘sweltered’ implies the heat of India (as felt by someone used to British climes) in which case ‘they’ are the Indians. This is the paranoid ‘they’ previously heard in *Mercian Hymns* VIII: ‘Too often lately they harbour against us.’ It differs from the indeterminate ‘they’ with which the whole

sequence begins: 'And, after all, it is to them we return' (1) where the personal pronouns ('them we') back onto each other and the reader is unsure to whom those pronouns refer.

'An Apology' shows Hill working with techniques of juxtaposition which will become a central principle in his later sequences. Juxtaposition of some kind is a *sine qua non* of art, and every writer must choose how words, sounds, images, ideas, lines, paragraphs, sections are to be placed alongside each other. In the Petrarchan sonnet, the major locus for juxtaposition lies in its division between octave and sestet. We see Hill using this in 'Fidelities', the tenth sonnet in 'An Apology', which juxtaposes octave with sestet in a strongly ambiguous way. The octave takes the form of a reminder or a memory ('Remember how') which introduces past time ('were brought home'). The theme is resentment and the tone resentful, though even here there are two sides ('well-wishers and spies' rhymed with 'brimstone and the sweets of paradise'). The resentment is picked out by the internal rhyme of 'child-soul must register | for Christ's dole' where 'dole' could be a gift of food or money made in charity (OED, s. v. 'dole, n. 1. 6 a) as in 'the dole'; grief or sorrow (OED, s. v. 'dole, n. 2); or even guile, deceit, fraud (OED, s. v. 'dole, n. 3'). Whichever it is, 'Christ's dole' is here associated with passivity (were brought... be allotted'), compulsion ('must register') and cold administration ('decrees... register... allotted') whilst the day of Resurrection is 'blanch-white and empty, chilled by the lilies'. Resentment was closer to the surface in the original fifth line which read 'bridling amid the well-wishers and spies'.⁹⁷ The 'Reverend Mother' is associated with a feminine rhyme ('Easter... feast her') and with 'brimstone' with its connotations of 'fire and brimstone' and the nursery medicine 'brimstone and treacle'. OED also gives 'brimstone' as 'a virago, a spit-fire' (OED, s. v. 'brimstone, n.' 4).

The sestet is ambiguous as to whether it confirms and continues the tone of resentment or checks and contradicts it. As the sestet moves into the present tense, we infer that in the gap between octave and sestet the child has grown up. So now the adult can assert or propose 'Theology makes good bedside reading.' On the face of it, this recommends that theology be read in bed as elsewhere to 'calm' the troubled spirit. Following the octave, however, it could well be sardonic, hinting that theology is so tedious it is good only for boring the mind to sleep. If so, the resentment of the octave has been carried across the

⁹⁷ Geoffrey Hill, 'We Close Our Eyes to Anselm and Lie Calm', in *Poetry Nation Number 3*, ed. by C. B. Cox and Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Department of English, University of Manchester, 1974), (p. 6).

years, across the turn, and compacted into irony. The sestet divides into three lines of general propositions, then three lines of domestic description. The final line, 'All night the cisterns whisper in the roof', is not a report on the plumbing but quiet desperation as 'calm' stretches into insomnia. As always, much is left to the imagination. The 'cisterns' in the plural might suggest an institution with a dormitory wherein the 'we' is not man and wife but the brothers in the dormitory. In this scenario the sound of 'cisterns' might whisper of 'sisters' and shared sexual repression and frustration. We might then think not of some free-thinker who has rejected 'Reverend Mother' but of a priest or monk such as Hopkins, as we do in the next sonnet where the 'wiry heath-fern' shrinks the 'Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern' in 'Inversnaid'.⁹⁸

The third sonnet also shows the past living on in the present. The title, 'Who are these coming to the Sacrifice?', alludes to Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), but the second stanza slips into the past tense to recall an elopement, as if Scott's *Lochinvar* had galloped in and carried off the still unravished bride of quietness:

What an elopement that was: the hired chaise
tore through the fir-grove, scattered kinsmen flung
buckshot and bridles, and the tocsin swung
from the tarred bellcote dappled with dove-smears.

Roberts (2000) discerns pastiche of Victorian novel or melodrama.⁹⁹ We might also feel a relish for the anarchic, which will energise the later sequences. 'What an elopement that was' could be the enthusiastic appreciation of a connoisseur of elopements who embellishes this choice specimen with picturesque, mildly scatological evocation of 'the tarred bellcote dappled with dove-smears.' The sestet depicts an ambiguous aftermath. 'Love fled, truly outwitted, through a swirl || of long-laid dust.' That could be the lovers fleeing (as at the end of Keats' 'Eve of Saint Agnes'), or their love fading into dust.

A much larger juxtaposition is achieved by interpolating a suite of three sonnets about British India into the sequence. 'A Short History of British India' is introduced quite without comment, which effectively raises historical, economic and cultural questions about the relationship of Britain and India. The implicit point of view of Hill's tripartite 'Short History' is ambivalent: it neither absolutely condemns nor condones 'the life of empire' (6). In this respect, its perspective is not unlike that of Karl Marx:

⁹⁸ Hopkins, *Poems*, p. 89. Line 11.

⁹⁹ Roberts, 'Geoffrey Hill and Pastiche', (p. 156).

The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.¹⁰⁰

Where Marx (teleologically) assumes that 'history' has its own agenda and that 'mankind' has a destiny to fulfil, Hill is more sceptical. When he writes of 'fantasies of true destiny', the noun 'fantasies' works against the adjective 'true':

Impound the memoirs for their bankrupt shame,
fantasies of true destiny that kills
'under the sanction of the English name'.
(*'A Short History of British India (I)'*)

One wonders what a false destiny would be. In the following sonnet, the noun 'destiny' again attracts the adjective 'true': 'Destiny is the great thing, | true lord of annexation and arrears.' (*'A Short History of British India (II)'*). The 'annexation and arrears' here signify land-grab, but also the inescapable fact, the destiny, of time and impermanence. It might be said that Hill conveys a dual attitude of praise and censure, or that the sequence moves beyond attitudes of praise and censure into the realm of destiny and tragedy. Consider the start of *'A Short History of British India (III)'* with its four names: 'Malcolm and Frere, Colebrooke and Elphinstone'. Malcolm is the sort of man we would expect Hill to admire. One of seventeen children of an impoverished tenant farmer, John Malcolm (1769-1833) rose to be Major-general Sir John Malcolm, Governor of Bombay (1827-1830), promoted Indian education and wrote nine books including a *History of Iran* (1815) from Iranian sources, plus a volume of poetry. Henry Bartle Frere (1815-1844) was a later Governor of Bombay (1862-1867) and designed India's postal system. But the second half of his career, in which he tried to create a federated Southern Africa, was broadly a disaster. The career of George Colebrooke (1729-1809), son of a London banker and Chairman of the East India Company (1769-1772), was also a disaster, featuring corruption and ending in bankruptcy. 'Elphinstone' could refer to Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859), Governor of Bombay (1819-1827) who promoted state education in India and wrote a *History of India* (1841). Or it could refer to his nephew, John 13th Lord Elphinstone (1807-1860), Governor of Bombay in the 1850s who acted to suppress the Indian Rebellion ('Mutiny') of 1857. So, at the risk of simplifying or moralising history, it is safe to say that

¹⁰⁰ *Marx and Engels on Colonialism*, (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: Progress Publishers / Lawrence & Wishart, 1959), p. 41. The article cited is 'The British Rule in India', first published in *the New-York Daily Tribune*, No. 3804, 25 June 1853.

Hill's single line compounds praise, dispraise, impartiality, knowledge and dubiety.

After these juxtapositions in its opening line, 'A Short History of British India (III)' works by a set of further and larger juxtapositions, with the volta at the start of the eighth line dividing the sonnet into two equal parts. This sonnet sets past (first seven lines) against present (next seven lines). The past is marked by anadiplosis, not 'going, going, gone' but 'gone. || Gone' between first and second quatrain. The present is marked by the present tense of 'rise' and 'India's' as a contraction of 'India is'. The tense might better be called 'emergent present' or present/future since 'Names rise' suggests what is coming into being. Within this timeframe are further juxtapositions of past and present, notably the 'Mughal tombs' rhymed and contrasted with 'small aerodromes'. That juxtaposition is achieved by the preposition 'near' and the next tercet juxtaposes religious and commercial life with a simple 'next to':

'India's a peacock-shrine next to a shop
selling mangola, sitars, lucky charms,
heavenly Buddhas smiling in their sleep.'

This summary is given in speech-marks where the speaker is anonymous and the tone undecidable. Does it lean more to admiration or disdain? It could be the voice of the traveller regaling wide-eyed stay-at-homes, or our foreign correspondent reporting on religion commodified into devotional souvenirs and spiritual tat.

'A short History of British India (I)' plunges *in medias res* into India and 'British India'. The first sentence ending in 'mêlées of wheels, | Jagannath's lovers' is likely to refer to a cult practice at the temple at Puri in Orissa. Jagannath, the Hindu 'Lord of the World', is dragged in a huge car with sixteen enormous wheels, under which, so it was believed, frenzied pilgrims threw themselves to be crushed to death. The scene then moves to what is probably the Indian Rebellion of 1857 with the 'rutting cannon' firing at forts and palaces. The effect is cinematic and is achieved by a series of directives: 'Make... unleash... pollute... Impound... Be moved... be stirred'. 'Make miniatures' sounds like a reference to the art of Mughal miniatures, with the sonnet itself understood as a kind of miniature. 'Make miniatures' could also be an invitation to child's play, to take up the toy soldiers, 'red-coat devotees', and re-enact the gory horror as Hindu worshippers are crushed under the wheels of a pretend-lorry. But 'pollute the wells' is more cynical and 'Impound the memoirs for their bankrupt shame' sounds like an edict from the Viceroy unless it be a querulous cry from 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells'. It would look more convincing as an order if it

were followed by an exclamation mark, but, punctuated with a comma as it is, it carries less authority.

The directives in the sestet ('Be moved... and be stirred') could be an abbreviated report on self-musing. If they are heard as direct instruction, the reader would be justified in feeling bossed around. All these apparent imperatives are better understood as directives of conjuring or summoning, as in Wordsworth's 'Behold her single in the field, | Yon solitary Highland lass!' They contribute to what Sidney calls *energeia* or forcefulness; and to what Hopkins calls 'bidding'. They act as a spell which summons British India to the imagination, or, in the language of film, the directions of a director which create the movie we will see. Throughout 'An Apology' the structure of the Miltonic sonnet contains the bidding and bids it on.

Every successful sonnet must develop in some way over its course. The second sonnet in the sequence develops away from pastiche. Its title, 'Damon's Lament for His Clorinda, Yorkshire 1654', recalls Marvell's 'Clorinda and Damon'.¹⁰¹ Since 'Damon' is a stock name for a goatherd or shepherd, and 'Clorinda' is a stock name for a rural maiden, the title inclines towards pastiche. Hill's 'Acknowledgments' inform us that his sonnet imitates a sonnet by Argensola.¹⁰² Hill's sonnet begins with external focalization in its first quatrain, which is third-person description as if told by an outsider describing 'Dour folk', who are associated by proximity with the adjectives 'dull' and 'poor', although these do not grammatically qualify the 'folk'. In its second quatrain the focalization of the sonnet changes as it introduces the first-person plural ('our shepherds' cottages... we live'); and the final tercet asks a rhetorical question: 'And who is this clown | doffing his mask at the masked threshold | to selfless raptures that are all his own?' The clown doffing his mask could be Damon indulging his loss; or, as Edwards sees it, 'the Englishman', gleaning 'vestiges' and 'picking, one supposes at what remains of empire' (not much);¹⁰³ or, in Hart's view, the poet who 'acknowledges the void beneath all elegiac pretensions'.¹⁰⁴ The 'selfless raptures' could also be those of the poet, congratulating himself on having produced a sequence which never employs the first person, as if that ensured Eliotian impersonality, or were a badge of selflessness. If so, this would be an early instance of Hill aligning himself with 'the pained, | painful clowns,

¹⁰¹ Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, p. 23.

¹⁰² Hill, *Tenebrae*, p. 48.

¹⁰³ Michael Edwards, 'Hill's Imitations', in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, ed. by Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).

¹⁰⁴ Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, p. 240.

brinksmen of perdition.' (TL, CXVIII). Overall, the second sonnet moves from external narration to self-doubt.

The eighth sonnet, 'Vocations', enacts dissipation as much as commitment. It starts with contrast and certainty of address ('While friends defected, you stayed and were sure') but the 'you' of that address fades and the integrity and efficacy of this 'vocation' is put in doubt by the transferred and ill-matched epithets. So, we have 'fervent in reason' and 'judicious prayer' rather than 'judicious in reason' and 'fervent prayer'. Any heroic or eulogistic implications in the opening line are diffused in present-tense description of gewgaws such as the 'unostentatious gem'. 'This is the durable covenant' sounds affirmative but the adjective is otiose if we ask what a transient covenant would be. The covenant shrinks to 'a room | quietly furnished with the stuff of martyrdom' as if 'martyrdom' too has been reduced to furniture and 'stuff'. If this is 'martyrdom' it is a cushy one. After the pictorial and quasi-Tennysonian opulence of 'silvery vistas frothed with convolvulus', the following 'radiance of dreams hardly to be denied' sounds so vague as to suggest transitory reverie as much as inspired vision. This narrative which fades is also a narrative of fading. In revising the poem Hill deletes a specificity. The original sonnet had opened: 'Ambrose defected; you stayed and were sure'. The name 'Ambrose' indicated Isaac Ambrose (1604-1664), a Lancashire Anglican priest who 'defected' to the Presbyterians in 1641 and ministered in the Leeds area. In the original poem it was not the indefinite article but 'his' (Ambrose's) signet-seal in the third line.¹⁰⁵ It seems that Hill wanted to smudge the reference and referent. The deletion allows the possibility that the poem addresses some Victorian rector who, amidst the controversies of Darwinism, is collecting 'flowers and moths' from his own shire.

The 'reckoning' in the eighth sonnet is part of a wider trope of balance and the balance sheet. Sonnet 3 speaks of 'the bric-a-brac of loss and gain' and sonnet 7 is titled 'Loss and Gain', which is also the title of Newman's philosophical and satirical novel (1848) about conversion from Anglicanism to the Church of Rome. The ninth sonnet speaks of 'all that devotion long since bought and sold' where 'all that devotion' could be a single noun-phrase ('that devotion in its entirety has long ago been sold off'), which is how Hill reads it in his Oxford reading (2006).¹⁰⁶ But 'all' could also be the subject followed by a relative clause ('everything which devotion acquired and got rid of'). The phrase 'bought

¹⁰⁵ Geoffrey Hill, 'Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England', in *Homage to George Barker on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. by John Heath-Stubbs and Martin Green (London: Martin Brian & O'Keefe, 1973), (p. 46).

¹⁰⁶ Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc'.

and sold' suggests betrayal, as in 'Dickon thy maister is bought and sold',¹⁰⁷ or 'Fly, noble English, you are bought and sold',¹⁰⁸ although Hill's ignoble English are buying and selling themselves. The universalising of 'all that' echoes a famous stanza from Gray's 'Elegy':

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave
Awaits alike the inevitable hour:
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

A 'clear theme [...] of order' (6) obtains in the Petrarchan sonnets of 'An Apology', though disorder is present and may spread from one sonnet to another. Consider the final line of the first sonnet: 'it is the rood blazing upon the green.' Sherry takes this as one of 'those incandescent images of divine presence on earth' and 'numinous emblems'.¹⁰⁹ But, taking the 'rood' to be a wooden cross on the beam over the entrance to the chancel or on the rood screen, this is an image of desecration and iconoclastic bonfire, as during the reign of Edward VI. The title of the next sonnet (2) gives the date as 1654, during the Commonwealth, when such roodscreens as had not been destroyed in the Reformation might well have blazed upon village greens. Its opening words show November as an iconoclast or profiteer: 'November rips gold foil' (2).

The sequence ends with two quasi-couplets, or syntactic couplets, signalling that the sequence is concluding:

In grange and cottage girls rise from their beds

by candlelight and mend their ruined braids.
Touched by the cry of the iconoclast,
how the rose-window blossoms with the sun! (13)

The 'iconoclast' recalls the ending of the first sonnet: 'it is the rood blazing upon the green.' The sequence has returned on itself, albeit not quite full circle. Furthermore, the final word of the first sonnet ('green') is picked up by the final sonnet with 'greener' and 'green', whilst 'the hidden shrine' of (1) becomes the 'disfigured shrines' of (13). In turn, the final sonnet moves through the seasons as 'greener' leads in to 'winter [...] darkness [...] frost [...] puddles [...]

¹⁰⁷ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 557. Richard III, V. 3. 304. TLN 3775.

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 342. .King John V. 4. 10. TLN 2471.

¹⁰⁹ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, p. 162. p. 164

candlelight' which makes the final verb 'blossoms' such a surprise. The sonnet is linked to the start of November (month of the second sonnet) because 'all hallows' is All Saints' Day (November 1st). Since this is only days from Bonfire Night, 'the squire's effigy bewigged with frost' is likely to be the 'guy', the squire ready to go up in flames and the final line of the sequence might be an image of that bonfire.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed six sequences from Hill's early phase, from the 1960s and 1970s, roughly corresponding to when he was in his thirties and his forties. These sequences are taken from his second, third and fourth books, in which his poetry moves away from individual lyric and towards sequence. The chapter has demonstrated the variety of Hill's devices for structuring his sequences. Let us now summarise some key points.

'Funeral Music' consists of eight unrhymed sonnets. It begins with Plato's 'exemplary cave' and the form of the unrhymed sonnet can be seen as the uneven cave-wall onto which shadows are cast, the space in which cries echo and in which memories, fantasies and images rise and fall. The sequence-form provides an easy and ready way to shape material and give order to the disparate stuff of dream and nightmare. The occurrences and incidents recorded in this sequence appear as momentary flashes: 'imagine the future | Flashed back at us' and 'So they flashed and vanished'. The sequence gathers and composes in its 'processional' what would otherwise vanish. It is the screen onto which phenomena are projected and whereon shadows play. This shadow-play cuts and continues by skilful use of indeterminate pronouns. We cannot be sure who are the 'we' and the 'I' in 'Funeral Music', but they speak out of the darkness from their own experience and gather into a choric voice of conviction: 'A field | After battle utters its own sound | Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.'

'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz' is a medley of anisomorphic poems centred on an apocryphal persona. As a sequence it announces its incompleteness with the bereft lover and poet comparing himself to 'a disciplined scholar' who pieces 'fragments together' into 'true sequences of pain'. The ethical and psychological ambiguity in the sequence arises from incompatible ways of understanding its protagonist. Seen as a poet reflecting on loss and disappointment, Arrurruz is a likeable and sympathetic fellow, even a type of the human being in that we all suffer loss. But if the poem 'To His Wife' shows him as an adulterer and a particularly crass, inconsiderate, cruel one, that prompts a more critical view of him as a self-indulgent man adonizing his

egoism, deceit and irresponsibility. This double perspective on the eponymous poet inscribes a formative ambiguity into the sequence.

Mercian Hymns is Hill's first book-length sequence, written in versets of rhythmic prose. It concerns childhood and is more autobiographical than previous sequences: more autobiographical than any sequence until Hill's next book-length sequence, *The Triumph of Love* (1998). Capacious and flexible, the versets of *Mercian Hymns* contain mundane objects ('boxes, rags and old tyres', XIX); local knowledge ('the shire-tree', XXVII); and colloquialism ("Just look at the bugger . . .", XVII). Landscape and language are vividly sensuous, eroticised and dream-like. 'Orchards fruited above clefts. I drank from honeycombs of chill sandstone.' (VI). The sequence-form facilitates a chronological sweep back and forth between Offa and the middle of the twentieth century. The hymns are of many kinds of mode and speech-act; with the section-break and the blank space between hymns allowing for a re-set between each one. In this way the light but firm touch of the sequence-form functions to structure bountiful material.

'The Pentecost Castle' is a hinted drama in quatrains of dimeter and trimeter, with rhyme, non-rhyme and half-rhyme used to reflect the likeness and ultimate unlikeness of sacred and profane love. The minimal punctuation distances this sequence from the English canon, whilst its use of antiphonal repetition draws on the Psalms. There is plentiful use of the first-person pronoun, more the lyrical or dramatic 'I' than the autobiographical 'I'.

'Lachrimae' is an isomorphic sequence of seven regular Petrarchan sonnets where seven is the number of spiritual perfection. The sonnets dramatize the relationship of the fallen or natural self to the 'Crucified Lord', an object of would-be devotion and frustration. These sonnets have a smooth iambic pentameter and a highly polished surface. Four of them directly address this Lord as 'you', while three are centred on flawed human love: 'Self-love' (2); 'Clamorous love' (3); and 'Self-wounding martyrdom' (5). The sonnets which address the 'Crucified Lord' mix devotion with resentment and irony. The fourth one mocks the 'Crucified Lord' at the end of the octet and questions itself at the start of the sestet.

'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' is another sequence of Petrarchan sonnets, but its thirteen sonnets differ from 'Lachrimae' in being more rooted in the secular world. The second sonnet alone has a greater variety of secular proper nouns — Damon, Clorinda, Yorkshire, November, High Hoyland, Penistone, the Sheaf and Don, the North Sea —than is to be found in the whole of 'Lachrimae'. Note how the names of the two

people come from the Classical world or the realm of poesy, whilst the placenames are actual places. This could be taken as an instance of the sequence being open to both imagination and empirical reality, to 'the twin forms | of sleep and waking' (7). Overall, the sonnets in 'An Apology' are less regular than those in 'Lachrimae' and rougher in rhythm and texture. They are also less immediately subjective. The sequence has no use of first-person singular forms.

'An Apology' was criticised as nostalgic defence of Empire, but the ideal of Coleridge's 'Platonic England', mentioned in the first epigraph, confronts a reality of injustice and oppression. The new epigraph added in *Broken Hierarchies* emphasises class division in Britain and how the moneyed class can wilfully ignore the lives of workers. Nor in its tripartite 'Short History of British India' does the sequence overlook the injuries inflicted by the British Empire on India, injuries which are deeply incorporated and gendered. The reader is exhorted to be 'stirred' by her 'abiding injuries, | sated upon the stillness of the bride.' The stance of this sequence towards Empire is nuanced and non-committal. 'Factual' in the sense of accepting fact, it is also marked by twin sense of destiny, close to the Indian notion of *kismet*, and tragedy. Something of its even-handedness, or will to be even-handed, alongside some notion of profit and exploitation, is caught in the trope of the balance sheet, with repetition of the phrase 'loss and gain' (in sonnets 3 and 7). The close of the sequence juxtaposes iconoclasm with beauty and order, as the rose-window, touched by the cry (not the hammer) of the iconoclast, 'blossoms with the sun!' We can take the 'rose-window' as a figure for the achieved sequence, touched and threatened but not smashed by the 'cry of the iconoclast'.

It was in the 1960s and 1970s that Hill consolidated his achievement in sequences (however little that achievement has been recognised for what it is) and proved himself *de facto* a master of the sequence as form. This chapter has considered the different formal structures which characterise each of his sequences. It has discussed the sequence as processional ('Funeral Music'); as implicit drama ('The Songbook'); as legend (*Mercian Hymns*); as song cycle ('The Pentecost Castle'); as dance ('Lachrimae'); and as historical imaginary ('An Apology').

So far, the first three chapters of this thesis have studied eight of Hill's sequences up to 1978. These sequences are all published in his *Collected Poems* (1985). Applying the Hill/Haynes definition of sequence in *Broken Hierarchies* retrospectively to the *Collected* produces a total of eighteen sequences in the *Collected*, amounting to nearly two thirds of it by page (109 pages of sequence in a total of 170 pages). Each of these sequences has its

distinctive structure and character. Each is a success. It is therefore odd that that the critics have so neglected Hill as a writer of sequences. Perhaps they have been too dazzled by the brilliance of his lyrics (not discussed in this thesis) to notice that some two thirds of his early poetry is in the form of sequence. The next chapter examines the next phase of Hill's career in which sequence, chiefly book-length sequence, becomes even more prominent.

Chapter 4

Sequences in Hill's middle period

Introduction

From the late 1990s Hill began to publish his poetry in the form of book-length sequences: the format which became the norm in his later career. This chapter considers Hill's developing art of sequence with particular reference to *The Triumph of Love* (1998); and with some further reference to three subsequent book-length sequences: *Speech! Speech!* (2000); *The Orchards of Syon* (2002); and *Scenes from Comus* (2005). The period in which Hill wrote these four consecutive sequences might be called the middle phase of his poetic career, from his mid-sixties to his mid-seventies.

After briefly summarising each sequence, highlighting what is particular to each one, this chapter examines *The Triumph of Love*, demonstrating what the sequence-form enables which would be impossible in shorter lyrics. It discusses sequence as an extension of invention; in terms of intra-sectional and intersectional relationship; and as a way of combining, often to dissonant effect, a wide variety of literary modes. The argument here is trifold. First, the sequence contains enormous modal variety wherein lies much of its wit and vitality. Second, the sequence-form enables Hill to introduce modes which he seldom tried in lyric. These include *laus et vituperatio*, the prophetic, the didactic, the polemical and accusatory, the comic, the farcical, the confessional and the journalistic. Hill had probably avoided these hitherto because they do not conform to his strong idea of what lyric is and what it does best. Each of these modes could too easily dominate, cheapen, simplify, and vulgarise lyric. In sequence, however, each can be worked against a counter-mode, preventing any single mode from dominating, holding each in productive tension with the others, or compounding each into strangely beautiful forms of generic hybridity. Third, therefore, the argument is that examining the organisation of modal variety is key to understanding how Hill's book-length sequences work.

This chapter also argues that the sequence-form encouraged Hill to explore his deep interest in selfhood, and to develop a theatre of character in which the persona was forever changing, often comically so. Hill's book-length sequences mix elements of the autobiographical, the imaginative and the archetypal, facilitated by the layered and disjointed sense of time which sequence enables. Among Hill's personae is the cultural Warrior and sequence provided the form in which Hill began to intervene in 'culture wars' fought initially on campus in North America, and which have since spread.

The Triumph of Love

The Triumph of Love (1998) is a free-verse book-length sequence, making little use of end-rhyme, and in sections of varying length. The 'irregular order' (section CXXXIV), with unpredictable switching between short and long sections, creates variety and surprise, as if the sequence were blessed by 'the Angel of Improvisation' or 'the Angels of Irrational | Decision and of Reversed Order' (CXIV). Five sections are only one line long, and ten have only two lines. Some of these short sections dip into the flippant and facetious, striking a new and lighter note in Hill's poetry, as, for example, in the single line 'For Cinna the Poet, see under *errata*' (LXXIV), or as when section XLVIII mimics the letters page of "Arts/Life" or *the Beano*. ('[Phew, | what a "prang"! — ED]'). Other sections are more substantial, with the longest (CXXV) having 57 lines and a further five sections (LV, CIX, CXXXIV, CXXXIX and CXLII) have thirty or more lines.

'Triumph' is already sequence of a sort. In Roman history, a 'triumph' signifies '[t]he entrance of a victorious commander with his army and spoils in solemn procession' (OED, s.v. 'triumph', n. 1 a). That procession, with its order, pageant and spectacle, may beget more raucous celebration, as when Theseus promises to wed Hippolyta 'With pompe, with triumph, and with reuelling'.¹ *The Triumph of Love*, as title, sets itself in a lineage which goes back to Petrarch's *Trionfi* (Englished by Henry Parker, Lord Morley) and Petrarch's *Trionfo della Morte*, (Englished by the countess of Pembroke). *The Triumph of Peace*, James Shirley's masque, designed by Inigo Jones and with a score by William Lawes, is deemed 'the best known of all seventeenth-century masques'.² With Shelley, the line of triumph veers towards political dissent. His unfinished *The Triumph of Life* is a triumph of tyranny, whilst his *Mask of Anarchy* depicts 'the triumph of anarchy'.³ Hill's own poem 'Canaan' is a Shelleyan 'triumph', a nightmarish masquerade of folly and massacre. As title, therefore, the noun 'triumph' combines the order of a procession, sequence even, with more anarchic energies of injustice and oppression.

Throughout *The Triumph of Love*, there are references to growing up in Worcestershire during the Second World War, so *The Triumph* shares common ground with *Mercian Hymns*. Whereas the sections in *Mercian Hymns* were arranged one to the page, in *The Triumph* they follow each other continuously,

¹ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile. A Midsommer Nights Dreame*, I. 1. 19. TLN 21.

² Drabble, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. s. v. 'Triumph of Peace, The'

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetical Works*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956 [1905]), p. 339. 'The Mask of Anarchy', stanza XIV.

as if ceremony has given way to sociability. The publisher's commendation on the book's back cover says that Hill 'expresses... the themes that have preoccupied him: the corruption of the Church, the horrors of the Holocaust, the atrocities of war and the interweaving of public and private lives.' It is right to say that Hill 'expresses' these themes, rather than examines them, although his expression does not preclude examination. The blurb continues: 'But here he is also more candid, more personal and more savagely humorous about himself, his art and his role as a public poet.' The candour and the self-mockery function to prevent seriousness toppling into self-importance. They anticipate and forestall a charge of '*unearned grandiloquence*' (LIX).

Part of the triumph of *The Triumph* is to combine tragedy with satire, the serious and the self-mocking. Roberts (2004) is right to note that in *The Triumph* Hill's sense of humour 'finds freer expression'.⁴ But Wainwright (2005) is equally right to see *The Triumph* as an act of oblation, for 'guilts incurred', private and public, and 'in the face of "the act of oblivion"'.⁵

Speech! Speech!

Hill described *Speech! Speech!* as a book 'which even my staunchest admirers were aghast at. And the, I mean, the best that my dearest friends could find to say of it is "nasty but powerful"'.⁶ He recommended that the book 'be taken, at least on first reading, at a cracking pace. The scenario is simple: an individual voice battles for its identity amid a turmoil of public speech and media noise, a crowded wilderness of acoustical din.'⁷ Hill also recommended that the reader 'listen first to Jimi Hendrix's rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner"'.⁸

Roberts (2004) sees *Speech! Speech!* as 'a work on a huge scale' with 'new openness to the contemporary' and 'increased dependence on humour and parody, together with allusions to film, music-hall and clowning'.⁹ Wainwright (2005) reads *Speech! Speech!* as a modernist sequence, its narrative, point of view, authorial voice and temporal coherence divided and multiplied. 'The sequence is a cacophony of different voices: meditative, speech-making, comic

⁴ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 70.

⁵ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, pp. 89, 94.

⁶ Geoffrey Hill, 'The Orchards of Zion [Sic], Poetry Reading at Warwick University, 22 May 2001', *Writers at Warwick Archive* <<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/www/about/archive/writers/hillgeoffrey/>>, (2001) [accessed 7 May 2021] 27:40.

⁷ Brown and Paterson, '*Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words*', (p. 116).

⁸ Nicholas Lezard, 'A Growl in His Voice, a Twinkle in His Eye', *The Independent*, 6 May (2005).

⁹ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, pp. 40-41.

strip, stage-comic, cliché, advertising and other branches of performance and the media. All appear in a cut-and-paste of to-do lists, post-its, diary jottings, imperatives, real and imaginary dialogues, obits, mishearings – often incongruously funny'.¹⁰ Within this bedlam Wainwright detects a search for what Bonhoeffer called 'inwardness and conscience'.¹¹

Each section of this sequence is an unrhymed 'twelve-line block' (SS, 86) comparable to the unrhymed sonnets of 'Funeral Music' or a truncated version of the English sonnet, shorn of 'its idiotically malign final couplet'.¹² There are one hundred and twenty of these blocks: 'As many as the days that were | of SODOM.' (SS, 55). Or, *à propos* monumentality, as many as were the cubits in the high porch of Solomon's Temple (II Chronicles, 3. 4). The monumentality would not be that of the new Temple but of the Temple pillaged and subject to 'violent | disassembly' (113).

The 'acoustical din' is amplified by CAPITALS and italics. 'TALK ABOUT LAUGH, TALK ABOUT | ANGRY.' (SS, 10). Three quarters of the sections employ CAPITALISED words, which can give the impression, as in text-speak, of SHOUTING. Over half of the sections employ some use of italics. Towards its end, the sequence comments on this typographic trait:

CAPITALS | STAGE DIRECTIONS AND OTHER
FORMS OF SUBPOENA. Italics | words
with which Í – sometimes – surprise myself. (117).

If not 'plainly disingenuous',¹³ these lines are plainly inadequate to describing the range of effects produced by italics, the standard capital font and 'small caps'. The lines quoted above also demonstrate Hill's use of the vertical mark (the 'verticule', |) and of accent used as stress marks ('Í'). The verticule can replace a word, as after the first word in the example above, it presumably replaces and means something like 'signify' or 'stand for'. In this way the verticule both contributes to and helps a reader to navigate a compressed syntax which is often ugly 'telegraphese' (SS, 33), with sentence-fragments grammatically incomplete, non-standard, and, conventionally speaking, ill-formed. The stress-mark in the above example emphasises the first-person pronoun 'Í' in a way that would be unthinkable in *For the Unfallen*. Together, the

¹⁰ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 97.

¹¹ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 99.

¹² Geoffrey Hill, "Eccentrique to the Endes of His Master or State", *Oxford lecture 2* <<http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/kebl/general/2011-hill-poetry-2.mp3>>, (2011) [accessed 8 May 2021] 12:20.

¹³ Ann Hassan, *Annotations to Geoffrey Hill's Speech! Speech!*, (New York: Glossator Special Editions, 2012), p. 38.

use of capitals, italics, verticules and stress-marks function to roughen the typographic appearance of the text, rather as 'ANSELM KIEFER' (113) roughens the surface of his artworks by physical blows, by bathing them in acid and by incorporating lead, broken glass, clay, mud, plaster, semen, shellac, straw and ash.

The Orchards of Syon

Hill described *The Orchards of Syon* as 'a very different book in spirit, a much more forgiving book than *Speech! Speech!*'. He called it 'so mellow you wouldn't believe. It's 72 sections of 24 lines each. "Strange Symmetry in the Later Work of Hill".'¹⁴ It is the only book of Hill's in which page numbers consistently match sequence numbers. Macfarlane notes that 'The Orchards of Syon is composed of seventy-two cantos, one for each year of Hill's life to the year of writing, and each canto is a diurnal twenty-four hours long.'¹⁵ The correlation and the symmetry are broken in *Broken Hierarchies* which deletes four of the sections (LXI, LXIV, LXVII and LXVIII) from the last dozen in the original book. Hill described the shape of the sections as 'roughly like a short Miltonic canzone. It's a sort of block of lines of varying lengths. It looks on the page a bit like "The Solemn Music". I won't push the comparison beyond that point.'¹⁶

According to the publisher's blurb, *The Orchards of Syon* 'is Hill's Paradiso, a Dantean eclogue in which the natural world ("our chequered" England) and the dream-state of one's earthly existence offer glimpses into Paradise.' But *The Orchards* is not an eclogue, Dantean or otherwise, in the sense of 'a short poem of any kind, especially a pastoral dialogue, such as Virgil's *Bucolics*' (OED s. v. 'eclogue', n.). Rather it is a sequence in which, as Roberts notes, the key mode is pastoral 'though Hill continues to create his own late-modernist hybrid form out of multiple modes and models.'¹⁷ Moments of epiphany – 'How beautiful the world unrecognized | through most of seventy years, the may-tree filling | with visionary silent laughter' (V, line 18) – contend with grittier images, such as 'A road-drill | swallowed through tarred slab re-emerges fighting.' (OS, XVIII, line 23).

When the Penguin blurb promises 'glimpses into Paradise', that noun 'glimpses', conceding transience, may have been adapted from its verbal use towards the end of section XXXVIII:

¹⁴ Hill, 'Poetry Reading at Warwick', 27:30 to 28:00.

¹⁵ Robert Macfarlane, 'Gravity and Grace in Geoffrey Hill', *Essays in Criticism*, 58. 3 (2008), 237-56 (p. 242).

¹⁶ Hill, 'Poetry Reading at Warwick', 42:06

¹⁷ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 99.

And here—and there too—I
 wish greatly to believe: that Bromsgrove
 was, and is, Goldengrove; that the Orchards
 of Syon stand as I once glimpsed them.
 But there we are: the heartland remains
 heartless—that's the strange beauty of it.

The strange beauty of this conclusion is connected to its move from the volitional (of 'I | wish greatly to believe') to the indicative, as the colloquial acceptance of 'there we are' blends regret with acceptance, both then to be spliced with wit ('heartland' / 'heartless') and consolation. (Hill's 'heartland' may, incidentally, echo Eliot's 'Waste Land' in that the 'beauty of it' echoes Valerie Eliot's addition 'to get the beauty of it hot'.)

One presence in Goldengrove is Jeremy Taylor whose manual of devotion is called *The Golden Grove*.¹⁸ But in Hill's twenty-first century text the voice of that pious and learned prelate is likely to be drowned by other 'murmurings, sudden hectorings, abrupt questions, truculent and apologetic by turns, often interrupted by noises off'.¹⁹

Scenes from Comus

Scenes from Comus (2005) was marketed on its back cover as 'the new sequence of poems from Britain's most acclaimed, original and ferocious poet-prophet'. The status of 'poet-prophet', with its kudos and attendant risk of hubris, had been conferred on Hill by Harold Bloom in an earlier commendation on the back-cover of *The Triumph of Love*. Although a reader's attention may be drawn to the trio of adjectives ('acclaimed, original and ferocious') rising towards the powerful assertion of 'poet-prophet', it is also significant for our purposes that the book is described as a 'sequence'. Apart from *Canaan* (1996) that term had been absent from publisher's summaries and commendations, either because the word 'sequence' is deemed not to sell or because Hill's sequences were not recognised as such. *The Triumph of Love* had been described on its back cover as a 'new book-length poem' whilst *Speech!* *Speech!* was a 'tragi-comic work' and *The Orchards* was marketed as 'the fourth and final instalment' of 'four books'.

¹⁸ Jeremy Taylor, *The Golden Grove: A Choice Manual Containing What Is to Be Believed, Practised, and Desired or Prayed For*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1838 [1655]).

¹⁹ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 112.

Scenes from Comus is a book-length sequence of fixed but varying form, divided into three parts. '(1) The Argument of the Masque' has twenty stanzas, each of ten lines (arranged 3, 3, 3, 1). '(2) Courtly Masquing Dances' has eighty stanzas, half of them being nine lines long, and the other half being seven lines, arranged 9, 7, 7, 9, 9, 7, 7, 9 etc. '(3) A Description of the Antimasque' has twenty stanzas each of twelve lines, arranged in tercets. In terms of our initial taxonomy the sequence is 'hemi-isomorphic'.

Sequence as extension and epanorthosis

Our focus now is on how Hill's book-length sequences work and how he works the sequence-form over the length of a book. The first and obvious advantage of this form is that it allows the poet to develop themes and create effects across a much wider span than is possible in the shorter lyric. It lessens the pressure to settle on one single clinching detail which reconciles the whole and encapsulates ambiguity in the security of final unity. Instead, the sequence-form encourages the poet to keep inventing so that image, form and idea are altered, risked, challenged, developed, and further extended.

Consider Hill's angels, who are perhaps the 'Unfallen' of his first collection. Its opening poem, 'Genesis', could be the words of an angel, or the angel-like demiurge miscreating the Gnostic's flawed world. In its second poem, 'God's Little Mountain', the angels are associated with judgment and condemnation to silence:

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;
I could not stand before those winnowing eyes

And fell, until I found the world again.
Now I lack grace to tell what I have seen;

Although these angels are 'lifted like pale straws', like chaff, they have the 'winnowing eyes' of those who sort the grain from the chaff, or dispatch souls to heaven or hell. The protagonist's fall from 'a region of pure force' looks like a fall from grace, but it is the heavier grain which falls when the lighter chaff is blown off. The result is the finished lyric which is also stony silence, or the echoes of a rhetorical question. 'For though the head frames words the tongue has none. | And who will prove the surgeon to this stone?'

Contrast this lyric silence with the communicative energy of the angels in *The Triumph of Love*, where ‘winnowing eyes’ are replaced by a host of angels sending memos or emails to each other. ‘From the Angel of the Morning Gold-fix | to the angels of Mandragora and Rip-off. To the Demotic Angels...’ (TL, CXLI). Throughout the sequence, angels appear and reappear many times, over a much wider span than would be possible in shorter lyric. There are angels of the strangest kind, including ‘Angels of Tannic | Acid, Salicyl, and Plain Water’. Even the angels of aloneness are several and sociable:

To the Autonomous Angel
 from the several Angels of Solitude:
 cc Angel of Self-Alienation,
 Angel of Solitary Confinement. (CXLI)

That ‘cc’ speaks of the speed and ease with which new angels can be copied in. The book’s title already adumbrates angels in that it is an English rendering of *Triunfos del amor de Dios* (Medina, 1589-90) by the Spanish Franciscan and mystic Juan de los Ángeles (c. 1536-1609). The third section appoints the German mystic-poet Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) as a guardian angel. He reappears (unresponsive) in section LXXXVI in which he is also reduced to his initials at an academic conference: ‘A. S. | stayed for my paper.’ In *Broken Hierarchies* the initials are replaced with ‘Angelus’.²⁰ The angels are often agents of creativity. Hill leads on Paul Klee’s ‘Angelus Novus’ in sections XXV and returns to it in LX. He refers to ‘his own angel’ in section LXXXVIII; to Rilke’s ‘angel | of suffering creation’ in XCV; and to ‘the Angel | of the Agony’ attending Hopkins and Herbert (CXXXIX). The angels multiply in the last third of the sequence with the ‘demoted angels’ of metaphysics in CIX and ‘good and bad angels caught burning | themselves characteristic antiphons’ (CXVIII). The many angels in sections CXIV, CXXVI, CXLI set up a chain from one angel to another angel, as ‘From the Angel of X to the Y Angel’. It seems the poet has the metadata about sender and recipient, but not the content of the exchange itself. The formula adapts and extends an earlier lyric: ‘Gold seraph to gold worm in the pierced slime: | greetings.’²¹ In *The Triumph*, two further angel-poems, sections CXLII and CXLVII, have a slightly different form. Overall, the sequence plays host to its angelic host with less angst than in ‘God’s Little Mountain’. If that lyric were smoothed stone, the sequence would be the river. ‘Below, the river scrambled like a goat | Dislodging stones.’

²⁰ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 264.

²¹ ‘A Pre-Raphaelite Notebook’, Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 133.

From the Angel of Extension to the Angel of Epanorthosis. In the figure of epanorthosis the writer corrects their work and leaves the mark of that correction visible. As well as extension by correction, this creates an effect of composition-in-the-moment as if we are alongside the writer and privy to both their first and second thoughts. Consider two examples from Hill, both having to do with light. 'See in what ways the river | lies padded – no, dashed – with light.'²² The epanorthosis here suggests that the second word is more apt without cancelling the first, so the river is both 'padded' and 'dashed' with light. Again, when Hill writes 'stone holt of darkness, no, of claustral light' both descriptors obtain, and we have both the darkness and the claustral light as well as a sense of the poet choosing the latter over the former.²³

In *The Triumph of Love* epanorthosis takes the form of misprints and mishearings. Several sections (XL, XLI, XLVIII, LXIV) are based on corrections of printer's errors: ('For wordly, read worldly') TL, XL. In section CV the misunderstanding has to do with deafness: 'For definitely the right era, read: deaf in the right ear.' Certainty ('definitely the right era') is found to be misfounded on error ('deaf in the right ear'). This sounds like an actual mishearing by someone hard of hearing: quotidian surrealism. Misunderstanding may stem from deafness or linguistic incompetence, as when a patient struggles to clear their meaning with a physiotherapist.

Excuse me— excuse me—I did not
say the pain is lifting. I said the pain is in
the lifting. No—please—forget it. (XLII)

The sequence's ability to extend itself is helped by its willingness to correct itself. Rather than being deleted or silently corrected, errors can stand and become the starting point for a new section. Section XXXII with its 'blatter of trumpets' is corrected by XXXIII: 'Trumpets? Come off it — that was cavalry!' where 'Come off it' is an impatient expression of incredulity, exasperation and dissent. Verbal errancy is taken as an opportunity to try again. Elsewhere, a phrase from one section acts as a springboard into the next. When section CXXXV claims that we have been in 'the dark wood' and 'are there still, in a manner of speaking', the next section picks up on this: 'But only in a manner of speaking.' Rather than deleting the offending phrase as inaccurate and self-serving, the new section enters a qualification and so adds to the sequence. Corrections also appear across volumes. *The Triumph of Love* casts an aspersion on Julian of Norwich alleging that she would have 'raised | few

²² Hill, *Scenes from Comus*, p. 25. Section 2.22. See also BH, 441.

²³ Hill, *Without Title*, p. 22. 'Offertorium: December 2002'. See also BH, 496.

objections or none' to the doctrine of hellfire (CXXV). This is retracted in *Orchards of Syon* XXXVI: 'I did the Lady | Julian an injustice | which I will leave for evidence against me, | configured by the final stroke.' The injustice is, as it were, weighed in the balance in the short line 'Julian an injustice'.

In his sequences Hill can sound loquacious. 'Since I am compromised | I shall say more. Assume the earphones.' (SS, 20) Someone who has been 'compromised' might be wary of further speech, but here the attitude sounds defiantly voluble, as if there is nothing to lose, 'publish and be damned'. 'Assume the earphones' could be the poet taking up his vigil, listening to the promptings of the Muse, but sounds more like a lordly directive to the auditor: a loftiness tinged with either self-mockery or megalomania, as in the earlier 'I am the King of Mercia, and I know.' (MH, VIII).

Extension, length and stamina can become a source of pride: 'I can prolong the act at times | to rival Augustine, this shutter | play among words' (OS, I). The act can be prolonged by diacope, polyptoton and epanorthosis. 'Strophe after strophe [...] Strophe after strophe | ever more catastrophic. Did I say | strophe? I meant salvo, sorry.' (OS, X). Hill is seeing each section as something provisional, something to 'keep moving' rather than the finished item. 'Comedic my control: with each new old | scenario, keep moving.' (OS, XVIII). A 'scenario' can be an outline or synopsis of the plot or scenes in a film (OED s. v. 'scenario' 2. b.). It can also be 'a postulated or projected situation or sequence of potential future events (OED 3). Each section is a new scenario, an extension, not an autonomous finality.

Sequence as relationship

The sequence-form extends invention as one section follows another. This in turn engenders relationship between constituent sections, where relation may involve any kind of continuity or discontinuity, development, amplification, correction, contiguity, obliquity, irony, contention. The vitality of a sequence comes from the quality and energy of its inter-sectional relationships, or from the skill with which the possibilities for inter-sectional relationship are actualised in the process of writing, ordering and sequencing – plus, to see it the other way, the skill with which they are realised in the process of reading. It is in the nature of relationship to be unstated, non-verbal, pregnant with potential. In its unwritten-ness, therein lies its mystery and its capacity to charm the imagination. In the relation or disrelation of one section to another lies much that is occult about sequence, much that activates and exercises imagination.

Whilst each section may in principle relate to any and every other section, setting up a huge number of potential relations, in practice each section has a particular relationship with adjacent sections and other close neighbours (before and after). It will also relate strongly to sections which share a family resemblance either thematic or formal. In the case of the isomorphic sequence all sections are drawn together by shared form. But some are drawn into closer relationship by a shared linguistic feature, such as sections 92 to 95 in *Speech! Speech!* which are addressed in their first line to RAPMASTER. This could be categorised as a sub-sequence.

A sub-sequence is a group defined by similar theme or a shared peculiarity of form. It might be said that all of the angel poems in *The Triumph of Love* amount to a sub-sequence, but it is particularly so for the three angel poems in sections CXIV, CXXVI, CXLI which share the same shape and similar syntax. Each is twelve lines long and works with the prepositions 'From... to... from... to'. This sub-sequence is not continuous but distributed. Another distributed sub-sequence addresses Petrarch's 'Vergine bella' (TL, LV, LXXV, LXXXVII, CIX, CXXV).

The definitional boundaries of 'sub-sequence' are blurred, for it is debatable when a shared motif or family resemblance is strong enough to bind sequences together into a sub-sequence. It is a moot question whether to describe as 'sub-sequence' those sections which are stitched together with references to 'the long-exiled Salve Regina' (TL, XXXVIII), phrases from which hymn reappear in sections LXXV and CIX. Neither the sections which mention Romsley (I, VII and LXXXII, CL) nor those which mention 'Boerenverdriet' (XXVIII, CXI, CXIII) quite qualify as 'sub-sequences' although they do have something in common. Sometimes the sequencing is roughly chronological. In *The Triumph of Love* there is a run of sections, amounting to a sub-sequence, having to do with the Second World War. These deal with Chamberlain and appeasement (TL, X); Dunkirk (XI); the 'saturation bombing' of Germany (XII); the search for the victims of Nazi atrocities (XIII). A later sub-sequence is united around '[i]ngratitude' (LXXVI), 'grief' (LXXVII) and the 'war-dead' (LXXVIII).

In quantity and quality, the possibilities of relationship in and across a sequence are numerous to the point of innumerable. By way of exploring different kinds of inter-sectional relationship with reference to a single section, consider the antepenultimate section of *The Triumph of Love*. Twenty-four lines long, section CXLVIII follows a shorter, ten-line section which sounds like a failed attempt at summary:

To go so far with the elaborately-
 vested Angel of Naked Truth:
 and where are we, finally? Don't
 say that — we are nowhere
 finally. And nowhere are you —

Section CXLVII ends on an ecstatic wish: 'But to be | healed, and die!'. These last two words recall Auden's revision to 'September 1, 1939' where he altered 'We must love one another or die' to 'We must love one another and die.' Hill's exclamation, or ejaculation, may also be a lewd double-entendre with the Elizabethan pun on 'die' as 'come to sexual orgasm'.

Section CXLVIII then begins with a retrenchment into etymology: 'Obnoxious means, far back within itself, | easily wounded.' The opening adjective may comment on the 'obnoxious' innuendo of 'die' (the preceding word from the previous section). It also picks up on and illuminates an earlier use of the word in section XXXIV: "Boom-boom! Obnoxious chthonic old fart". The final adjectival participle ('wounded') returns to the proposition that 'wounded pride is clownish, deadly' (TL, LIX), and to Hill's 'wounded and wounding | introspection' (TL, LXVII). The subject here might be classified as moral psychology, crossed with apology in the sense of defence, combining self-understanding with self-justification. With its attack on 'Crocker, MacSikker, O'Shem', section CXLVIII recalls preceding 'wounded and wounding' attacks on the critics, especially the sniping at Crocker in sections CXXIV and CXXXVIII. When Hill introduced section CXLVIII as one 'which I hope subsumes and transcends the pettiness' of those two earlier sections, the word 'pettiness' is semi-ironic self-accusation functioning as self-defence, prompted by a justified fear that the sections could be misconstrued as petty when they are actually honest and witty responses to critical malice and misreading.²⁴ With respect to mode (on which more later), Hill is nudging the effect of the whole away from complaint (or even whinge) and towards *parrhesia* or truth-telling.

Semantically, section CXLVIII connects with the sections which mention pride, whether 'shamed | gratitude' (TL, LVIII) or proper self-respect (LXXXIII). With respect to rhetorical figures, the epanalepsis-plus-polyptoton in the line 'Pride is our crux: be angry but not proud' recalls the epanalepsis-plus-antimetabole of section X which both mentions epanalepsis explicitly and exemplifies it in its structure: 'Last things first [...] the same word first and last.' Section X is also

²⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry Reading at Marsh Chapel', *Marsh Chapel audio collection*, Boston University <<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/1104>>, (1999) [accessed 11 May 2021] 09:43.

germane to CXLVIII in that X announces 'the slow haul to forgive them'. That 'slow haul' might be associated with the haul to forgive one's own obnoxious self, and with poetry as 'a sad and angry consolation', a phrase which is repeated four times, broken differently across the line, to assay the relative weight of the words. The second instance breaks on the word 'sad' as if to emphasise that adjective, and the final instance breaks on 'angry'. But it follows that the final line is then the single word 'consolation', which emphasises that culminating noun all the more since this is the sole example in the whole sequence of a line having only one word.

If, however, that single word 'consolation' inaugurates any 'Hollywood moment' of conclusion and catharsis, it is rudely interrupted by the subsequent section (CXLIX), beginning 'Obstinate old man — *senex* | *sapiens*, it is not.' This is Hill's 'antiphonal voice of the heckler',²⁵ which emphasises the negative adverb 'not' by retaining it to the end of the sentence, just as cummings does in 'pity this busy monster, manunkind, || not.'²⁶ The first half of this six-line section has Hill's heckler using the critical focalisation of the third person ('it...he... he... He'); in its second half, the section introduces the personal perspective of 'I' and 'myself' before both are conjoined in 'We'. 'We are immortal.' But then the uplifting unity of that 'We' is also curtailed in baffled senescence. 'Where | was I? —' The penultimate section is a recollection or *Aufhebung* of section V, just as the final section recollects, repeats, and revises the first section, altering the article as 'a livid rain-scarp' (I) becomes 'the livid rain-scarp' (CL).

With any section, but particularly one near the end of a sequence, an underlying interest is how that section relates to the sequence as a whole. Section CXLVIII could be understood as both a centre and a conclusion in that it offers a defence of poetry and of wider civilisation as 'a sad and angry consolation.' But the sequence can be seen through the lens of any other section, opening in each case a different perspective on that whole.

Sequence as multimodality

The vitality of inter-sectional relationship arises from modal plurality and modal contrast. Roberts (2004) noted 'a more typically postmodern multiplicity of discourses and registers' in *The Triumph of Love*, and 'sharp juxtapositions of contrasting modes' in the book-length sequences'.²⁷ More recently, he describes Hill's later phase, following *Canaan* (1996). 'Disputation,

²⁵ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 94.

²⁶ Williams, *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, p. 500.

²⁷ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, pp. 96, 99.

denunciation, self-mockery, colloquialism and scabrous humour diversify the tone, though solemnity and lyric beauty still persist.²⁸ The sentence illustrates how modal variety is bound up with 'tone' although I would claim that multimodality goes deeper and does more than 'diversify the tone'.

The interaction of modality and tone can be explored by revisiting section CXLVIII. The section begins with an observation about etymology which may sound academic. 'Obnoxious means, far back within itself, | easily wounded.' This makes an implicit analogy between word, person, and territory, each of which has a history, an appearance and 'far back within' a more inward reality. The etymological observation moves into a personal confession: 'I came late | to seeing that.' Soon we are in moral philosophy and psychology: 'Pride is our crux'. This turns to literary history with the pathos of Leopardi finding 'Tasso's poor | scratch of a memorial'. Through Leopardi's words ('or — to be accurate — BV's English | cast of them') Hill then proposes his Apology, his Defence of Poetry, as 'a sad and angry consolation'. But the Apology is also a fantasy in which his critics, 'Crocker, MacSikker, O'Shem', chorus, like chastened schoolchildren, the words he feeds them. To share that revenge fantasy, on the final page of a 'new book-length poem' which, according to its blurb, 'chronicles his own "slow haul to forgive"', is a paradox not without arrogance and self-mortification.

Within a single section (CXLVIII), therefore, we find a mix of the academic and the confessional, along with moral philosophy, some literary history, a touch of elegy and a defence of poetry presented as a revenge fantasy, or a revenge fantasy presented as a defence of poetry. All this is challenged by the 'antiphonal voice' of the following section. That voice combines Latin with the demotic: '*senex* | *sapiens*, it is not.' There follows a confession which might also be a boast, or a plea for sympathy: 'I find it hard | to forgive myself.' (CXLIX). The subsequent three-word statement might be a grand summation, or a pathetic wish. 'We are immortal.' Recalling section CXXI, which ended in 'Traherne's country', it carries an echo of Traherne. 'The corn was orient and immortal wheat'.²⁹

The modes in each section interact or 'speak to' each other both within their section and across sections, to compose the ever-altering whole. This multimodality is not a unique property of Hill's sequences. He also wrote lyrics whose mystery has much to do with modal indeterminacy and whose power derives from modal hybridity. The twenty-line lyric 'To the (Supposed) Patron',

²⁸ Roberts, *Strangeness and Power*, (p. 9).

²⁹ Thomas Traherne, *Centuries*, (London; Oxford: Mowbray, 1960), p. 110. 3.3.

for example, could be categorised as satire, polemic, apology, enigma, or allegory, which is to say that it combines elements of them all. But modal diversity works differently in a sequence, which would not squeeze that diversity into the hollow of a 'well-wrought urn'. Whilst an individual section may combine more than one mode, modal switch also occurs between sections. Because each section is a discrete or semi-discrete unit, it allows for a 're-set' of mode, form of address, place and time.

Hill described *The Triumph of Love* as 'a continuous sequence' which makes it 'very difficult to excerpt passages from it'. 'Again,' he said of his next book, *Speech! Speech!*, 'it's a difficult sequence to excerpt from'.³⁰ It is as well to take these words literally and apply them also to Hill's other sequences. For much of the artistry of the sequence lies in the careful patterning of sections, how one section develops and contrasts with another, or rather how each section contrasts with and develops each other section. That development and contrast is often a matter of modal difference. To read a single section out of context is to remove it from its modal network.

'Even now,' section XXXV begins, 'I tell myself, there is a language | to which I might speak and which | would rightly hear me'. The surprising word here is the humble preposition 'to'. One might expect 'a language | in which I might speak' but Hill writes of a language 'to' which he might speak. There is a similar surprise in section CXXV, the longest section in the sequence, also the fifth and last addressed to *Vergine bella*, which opens on a summative and valedictory note:

I have been working towards this for some time,
Vergine bella. I am not too far from the end
 [of the sequence — ED]. It may indeed be my last
 occasion for approaching you in modes
 of rhetoric to which I have addressed myself
 throughout the course of this discourse.

Again, the preposition 'to' (in the fifth line) springs its surprise. Where one might expect 'modes | of rhetoric in which I have expressed myself', Hill's wording has it that he is addressing himself *to* these modes. Even if this is a usage of the verb 'address' in the weaker sense, as one 'addresses oneself' to a task, Hill is still addressing both '*Vergine bella*' and modes of rhetoric. The short 'to' suggests that the modes of rhetoric are very much Hill's subject: that to which he addresses himself section by section.

³⁰ Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc'. Tracks 17 and 21.

Something of the multi-modal character of *The Triumph* is reflected in the Classical writers mentioned therein. Petronius Arbiter (III, LXXIX and LXXXI) was a satirist; Suetonius (XXI), a biographer; Cinna (LXXIV), a poet; Boethius (XCII), a Christian philosopher who saved ancient Classical texts; Marcus Tullius Cicero ('Tully') and Seneca the Older (XCII), orators; Lucian (CXVI), a writer of semi-satirical essays and dialogues; Livy (CXVII), an historian; Plutarch (CXXXIX), a biographer and moral philosopher. *The Triumph* itself wends its contemporary way between satire, history, moral philosophy, cultural conservation, theology, oratory and dialogical drama.

Hill's has recourse to the apocalyptic and the satirical. 'It is to *Daniel*, as to our own | tragic satire, that one returns | for mastery of the business'. (XI) That 'tragic satire' is mixed with 'political satire' (XXIII), 'Impotently | bereft satire' (XXXVII) and 'Time's satire' (L). With reference to 'satire', Petronius and Lucian, it should be remembered that 'it was the Roman achievement to develop satire as a separate literary genre characterized by variety of subject matter and occasionally of form (dialogue, fable, anecdote, precept, verse of various metres, combinations of verse and prose).'³¹ Our word 'satire' comes from the Latin *satura*, meaning a medley or farrago, from *satur*, meaning 'full'.

Classical modes are entwined with the Biblical. 'It is to *Daniel*... that one returns' (XI) partly because that book is half a story of exile and adversity (the Jews' exile in Babylon) and half a record of Daniel's visions. Linguistically divided, written half in Aramaic and half in Hebrew, the Book of Daniel is an early example of the mode of 'apocalyptic history' in that it records visions of future happenings and shows historical events as part of God's plan. As such it offers 'consolation' and hope, since, whatever the immediate setbacks, God's plan is sure to prevail. Daniel in the fiery furnace (Daniel, chapter 3) is then a resource by which to understand the 'fire-storm' (XIII) and the 'fire- and water-ruin' (XIV) of 'saturation bombing'. The return to 'Daniel' opens the long view and enables a measure of distancing such that the effects of 'carpet bombing' can be described in section XII with a mix of understatement (There were some | particulars to be recalled'); objectivity ('he said... he cited... he concluded'); teasing omission (who he?); and sublime horror ('bacterial supernovae, half-life contaminants, | multi-cellular mischance, myriad- | tongued anomie, are as shadows, vapours to it' (XII). But the long view is foreclosed by cultural amnesia. '*Daniel* | a closed book.' (LXXX).

³¹ M. C. Howatson, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). s. v. 'satire'.

With its one hundred and fifty sections, *The Triumph of Love* reflects and refracts the structure of the Book of Psalms which has one hundred and fifty chapters. One of the best-known psalms is the twenty third Psalm, a psalm of faith and fortitude, 'The Lord is my shepherd'. Hill's twenty third section begins 'What remains?', where that question recalls Pound's passage in section LXXXI of *The Cantos*: 'What thou lovest well remains, | the rest is dross'.

What remains? You may well ask. Construction
or deconstruction? There is some poor
mimicry of choice, whether you build or destroy.
But the Psalms — they remain; and certain exultant
canzoni of repentance, secular oppugnancy. *Laus
et vituperatio*, the worst
remembered, least understood, of the modes.
Add political satire. Add the irrefutable
grammar of Abdiel's defiance. (XXIII)

This takes the form of question-and-answer, even if the 'You' who asks the question is the poet in internal colloquy. There is a strong sense of 'circling the wagons', of culture under attack, regrouping around its embattled core. Top of the list of '[w]hat remains' is the Psalms, either as consolation or as a channel of communication with the divine. Reference to Abdiel ('Among the faithless, faithful only he;' *Paradise Lost*, V, 897) sets the stakes high: nothing less than loyalty to God or Satan. The 'exultant' strain is checked as the section proceeds with phrases cautiously, almost legalistically, picked: 'And if not... then something... And if not... then something... if only to...if only by'.

The claims of faith surface occasionally, artfully, tactfully:

If one is so minded, these modalities
stoop to re-enter the subterrane of faith —
faith, that is, in real Being;
the real being God or, more comprehensively, Christ —' (XXXVIII)

The word 'modalities' sounds neutral and abstract, lifted from the lexicon of social or literary theory. The 'subterrane' of faith, suggests not the Erastian Church Triumphant but a subculture in hiding from a post-Christian age, like the early Christians taking refuge in the catacombs. Hill described his own readership as 'all rather subterranean, a bit like wartime resistance'.³² The play on 'real Being; | the real being God' combines the repetition of anadiplosis with

³² Geoffrey Hill, 'Strongholds of the Imagination', *The Oxonian Review*, 9.4
<<http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/geoffrey-hill/>>, (2009) [accessed 11 May 2021]

the wit of antanaclasis, ‘a figure which in repeating a word shifts from one of its meanings to another’.³³ There is also a kind of grammatical polyptoton in that the words shift grammatical function: ‘real’ (adjective), Being (noun), the real (noun) being (present participle). Christ is seen as the more comprehensive aspect of God, not *vice versa*. Christ is more *comprehensible* than the ineffable Absolute, but ‘comprehensive’ suggests some kind of cosmic Christ figure, a statement of Faith more confident than would be anticipated from the tentative courtesy of the opening clause: ‘If one is so minded’.

The modes to which Hill addresses himself in *The Triumph* include modes of narration, description, argumentation and exposition. As we have seen, there is episodic narration of the Second World War (sections X to XIII). There is description of, for example, snow (XXXVIII) and the moon (XLIX); argumentation about Malebranche (XIV); an essayistic thesis about the ‘ethical motiv’ of *Measure for Measure* (CXX); and exposition of ‘the metaphysics | of tautology’ and ‘The intellectual | beauty of Bradwardine’s thesis’ (CXXV). This last example Roberts (2004) describes as ‘a poetry of theological, logical and philosophical debate, mixed with humorous interjections and colloquial asides’, making for a ‘different poetic mode, one of expansive, humorous, almost relaxed debate’.³⁴

Modes in *The Triumph* range from the high (the heroic, the sublime, the prophetic) through praise-poems, the devotional and the complaint, to lower modes of the autobiographical, the confessional, and right down to insult and the scatological. Among modes working and worked through the sequence are *laus et vituperatio*, *saeva indignatio*, elegy, love poetry, self-mockery, the autobiographical, the journalistic, the didactic, the historical, the theological and the philosophical. These will now be discussed in more detail to demonstrate the modal variety of the sequence.

Section XXIII introduces *laus et vituperatio* as ‘the worst | remembered, least understood, of the modes.’ The mode will be referred to again explicitly in sections XXVI, LXXXIX and CXLII. It is linked by its intention to Miltonic integrity:

Laus et vituperatio, public, forensic,
yet with a vehement
private ambition for the people’s
greater good — *Joannis*

³³ Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare’s Use of the Arts of Language*, (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2005 [1947]), p. 165.

³⁴ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 96.

*Miltoni, Angli, pro Populo Angli-
cano Defensio: (XXVI).*

In his 'Defense of the English People' Milton was defending Cromwell's Commonwealth and the English people. Whether Hill is defending Western culture or a chimera, his ambition is high as of 'powers, far-radiant' (XXVI) although the heroic strain is again checked, as we shall see, by self-mockery. The vehicle is '*Laus et vituperatio*, lost, rediscovered, | renewed on few occasions this century' (XXVI), a mode which provides both consolation and defiance.

When Hill addresses Sidney and Milton, he says he is 'glad | to have learned how it goes | with you' and with 'your voices pitched exactly | somewhere – between *Laus Deo* and defiance.' (CXVIII). Hill pitches his own voice, or one of his own voices, in a similar way, with *Laus* to Sidney and Milton followed by defiance in the next section (CXIX) to 'MacSikker et al.' His defiance has some of Pope's combination of the satirical and polemical modes. Rather than '*Laus Deo*' Hill's 'high praise' (LV) is offered to '*Vergine bella*' who is directly addressed in five sections (LV, LXXV, LXXXVII, CIX and CXXV). In the first of these, 'a canzone of some substance', the speaker petitions '*Vergine bella*' to 'acknowledge the work' whilst himself acknowledging how 'endless the dragging | in of your name.'

I ask that you acknowledge the work
as being contributive to your high praise,
even if no-one else shall be reconciled
to a final understanding of it in that light. (LV)

Although the word *laus* is not used, there is much praise in the five sections, amounting to a sub-sequence (CXXIX to CXXXIII), each of seven lines, and which all conclude with 'ta-Rah, ta-Rah, ta-rarara Rah'. Carl Phillips describes these as 'a miniature suite of sorts' and Hill calls them 'a set of little vaudeville dances'.³⁵

One or two illustrations might help us —
Geffe — to take a fix on your position,
anomalous as it is. Two Kokoschkas
and one Rembrandt: Rembrandt's unfinished
The Concord of the State, OK? The Masaryk
portrait and *What We Are Fighting For*, OK. OK?
ta-Rah ta-Rah ta-rarara Rah (CXXIX)

³⁵ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80'.

Here the poet imagines readers, his students perhaps, requesting clarification. As if to satisfy that request, he names in the following sections some artists and writers whom he admires. The underlying format is familiar from magazine columns and chat-shows wherein a celebrity discloses their favourite movie, holiday destination or snack, although Hill's list is of course more high-minded and more culturally embattled. The style gives the impression of its being a semi-improvised list where the head-noun giving the person celebrated is followed by a brief reason, almost in note form, usually without a main verb.

The apparent informality and imprecision of the opening 'One or two' becomes part of a chiasmic patterning 'One... two... Two... one'. The italicised name, *Geffe*, a diminutive or pet form of 'Geoffrey', offers Geoff Hill in informal mode, or, more precisely, a version of Hill as mediated by John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, in which the name *Geffe* appears. Hill said that Gower's '*Geffe*' was 'one of the motives behind the writing of the new book... one of the numerous motivations for, that set the new book off', adding that this accounts for 'a certain tonality' in the book.³⁶ The idiomatic phrase 'take a fix on' sounds current and is not recorded by the OED, though 'get a fix on' appears in a citation *sub verbo* 'radio bearing, n.'. If not student-speak, the phrase 'take a fix on your position' might be used of an explorer needing to be rescued, or a spaceship that has strayed from orbit. Also, a sniper or drone-operator might 'take a fix on' a target. Hill is ironically presenting himself as someone remote, possibly 'off the map', to be located and/or shot down.

The first section of the suite celebrates Kokoschka and Rembrandt, the former famed for his 'psychological portraits' and the latter for his self-portraits. One senses that *The Concord of the State* and *What We Are Fighting For* are not frozen, historicised relics but are offered as vital to present times. The next two sections go on to praise Milton, Blake, Bernanos, Radnóti, Wat, Haydn and Bartók. These proper nouns, these Hillian heroes, could be seen as the equivalent of the high-keyed flickering colours in Kokoschka's Expressionist painting, such as 'Lorelay' on the front cover of *Broken Hierarchies*, whose broad and broken brushwork might also be mirrored in the apparently back-of-an-envelope way that Hill lists his heroes, plus a reason for citation, using informal grammar, or non-grammar. The colloquial 'OK' makes its first appearance in Hill's poetry, being used three times in two lines. The first and third 'OK?', in the interrogative form, are asking for and expecting agreement (OED, s. v. 'OK', B, interjection, 2. a.) establishing a connection with an interlocutor or drawing attention to what the speaker is about to say. This is the

³⁶ Hill, 'Poetry Reading at Marsh Chapel', 02:15 to 03:50.

pedagogic 'OK?' as of teacher checking that the seminar-group follows. The second 'OK' puns on the initials of Oscar Kokoschka who was known as 'OK'. The refrain '*ta-Rah ta-Rah ta-rarara Rah*', repeated at the end of each of the five sections in this suite, could be the trumpets of a marching-song or a ditty of self-comfort.

Although the first-person form does not occur in sections CXXIX and CXXX, they are both profoundly personal, focused on core values where the *laus* shows what is admired, whilst in its shadow lurks what is feared and hated. The *vituperatio* surfaces when Hill rounds on his critics in sections CXI, CXIX, CXXIV, CXXXVIII and CXLVIII. The critics are named, or lightly fictionalised, as Croker, MacSikker and O'Shem. They provoke a vitriol which is both violent and comic as when, constructing a metaphysical argument about the elective will, section CXXXIX sideswipes the critics in brackets and in crude terms: '(eat | shit, MacSikker)' and '(up | yours, O'Shem)', where the disproportion of philosophical scruple and coarse invective makes for comic incongruity, which is also a comedy of truth-telling if we recall how often intellectual argument is driven by personal animosity. Both insults are, regrettably, deleted in *Broken Hierarchies*.³⁷

Riding high in *The Triumph*, and often risking a fall, are lofty modes of the heroic, the sublime and the prophetic. The title, *The Triumph of Love*, promises something grand, even sublime, whether it signal the victory of love or the procession honouring such victory. In view of the content of the sequence, the title might be construed as ironic. The epigraph proclaimed high ambition in Hebrew, Latin, German and the English of the Authorized Version in archaic orthography: 'AND I SENT MESSENGERS VNTO THEM, SAYING, I AM DOING A GREAT WORKE, SO THAT I CAN NOT COME DOWN'. This epigraph to the 1998 edition, taken from the Book of Numbers 6. 3, was replaced in *Broken Hierarchies* with a much shorter epigraph: 'Tempus aedificandi tempus destruendi': a time for building and a time for destroying. Hill's formulation builds destruction into itself in that it reverses the biblical order: 'tempus destruendi, et tempus aedificandi'. (Ecclesiastes, 3. 3). The deletion of the earlier, grander epigraph is a rare concession to 'complicitous bouts of self-deprecation'.³⁸

Both the heroic mode and the didactic manifest in the sequence's defence of poetry, which is made lightly, without fanfare, in an understated, eminently reasonable way. Poetry plays a role in '[t]he struggle | for a noble vernacular' (LXX), which has been hacked into ruin. 'Still, I'm convinced that shaping, |

³⁷ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 282.

³⁸ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 427.

voicing, are types of civic action.' (LXX). 'Still, I'm convinced' sounds more like someone corroborating their own thinking than trying to convince another. As we have seen above, in the antepenultimate section poetry is commended as 'consolation' (CXLVIII).

The sublime mode oversees the opening and the close of the sequence, from the compound epithet 'sun-blazed' to the compound-noun 'rain-scarp', coupling the elements of fire and water, such that 'Romsley', the local habitation at the heart of that imagistic line, is imbued with significance, like a diminutive Rome. The adjective 'livid' paints a blueish leaden colour, and hints at fury to come. The sequence is dotted with moments of the sublime such as 'the aeonic dense snowflurries' (XVIII) which suggest the great sweep of the ages. Hill has the perception of a seer when he describes the wind in terms of 'the inner wall, the cell, of an hourglass, humming | vortices, bright particles in dissolution', which turns to metaphysics when he adds that this 'is how | the purest apprehension might appear | to take corporeal shape.' (IX).

The Triumph offers its 'hierarchies of splendour | and salutation' such as the triumph of 'the Kenyan runners' (LXXXIV). Its mystical sublime is sometimes an English sublime. Section LIII has four lines on an English 'washed-out day' followed by five lines which enjoin us to '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.' (LIII). Matthews observes that 'the mystical-pastoral jerks back into the discursive, in the blank space between the bursts of poetry', in this case the blank space between sections LIII and LIV.³⁹

Hill's revelation can include innocence and joy as well as apprehension about ageing:

Light is this instant, far-seeing
into itself, its own
signature on things that recognize
salvation. I
am an old man, a child, the horizon
is Traherne's country. (CXXI).

Within the celebration of light, we may sense anxiety in the visual pairing on the same line of 'salvation. I', as if the first person stands alone with 'salvation' but grammatically unconnected to it and exposed at the end of the short line.

Hill mixes mystic nationalism with troubled nationalism as in section XXIX which presents 'England's | iron-bound storm-tree turbulently at rest.' The turbulence

³⁹ Matthews, "'Felt Unities'", (p. 37).

comes not only from the question about those ‘hanging amid the branches... like traitors like martyrs?’ It also stems from a recollection of Abel Meeropol’s song, made famous by Billie Holliday, ‘Strange fruit hanging from poplar trees’. The first four lines of Hill’s poem have the words ‘strange tree’, ‘fruit’ and ‘hanging’, commingled, along with a disconcerting echo of Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’: ‘and who are these’. It is not that Hill is directly comparing England’s ‘storm-tree’ with the lynching of two African American men in Indiana, but his words suggest that English history has its own victims, its own shame.

The Triumph looks back to ‘the solitary great ones — Isaiah, Amos, | Ezekiel’ (XXII), notes that ‘[t]he odds | are against High Prophecy’ and worries what will replace ‘the Law, the Prophets’ (CXLIV):

Now, for the Law, the Prophets, must we take
inspired guesswork; for inspired guesswork, inter-
locked ignorance, vanity, fear, hope?
It’s a difficult line—I can just hear
Unwisdom grinding like fury, the farthest
breaking of Nations. Even beyond that,
distorted sound-patterns of grace. Is this
Manichean? No— Manichean! What?
Lauda? Lauda? Lauda Sion? LAUDA!

Here ‘for’ means ‘in preference to’ or ‘above’ (OED 3); or ‘in place of, instead of’ (OED, 5). The certitude of ‘the Law, the Prophets’ is lost in a question which is as much genuine as rhetorical. But the setting is somewhat farcical since the poet is on ‘a difficult line’, a poor connection, for the line is ‘breaking up’ along with the Biblical ‘breaking of Nations’ (Jeremiah, 51. 20). The section ends by punning on LOUDER meaning ‘speak up!’ and ‘LAUDA’ (praise!). The ‘distorted sound-patterns’ are also modal, in the inter-relation over the nine lines of cultural pessimism, the deliberative mode, the Jeremiad, farcical miscommunication and the final, single-word Latin imperative of the praise-poem.

Involved as it is in ‘moral | imagination’ (XXVI) and ‘moral landscape’ (LI, LII), *The Triumph* cannot help but pass implicit moral judgements. Its praise is intermixed in true prophetic mode with denunciation, as of the ‘undeniable powers of this world’ who are ‘vassal- | lord-puppet-strutters, not great scourges of God.’ (LIV) Moral, political and cultural questions are not just viewed from without: they are embedded in the diction and syntax, in choices about language-use. Section LXX links ‘The struggle | for a noble vernacular’ to ‘Active virtue’ and ‘Intrinsic value’, then puzzles at the link:

Intrinsic value

I am somewhat less sure of. It seems
 implicate with active virtue but I cannot
 say how, precisely.

This gives a sense of thinking in process rather than fixed conclusion. The ideal of a noble vernacular is itself contested. 'A noble vernacular? We could screw him, | finish him, for all that.' (CXVII). Opposing cant, the 'noble vernacular' is vilified by cant. 'For hardness of heart read costly dislike of cant.' (XLI). The single word 'cant' implies a far-reaching but unspecified critique of contemporary idiom and 'secular piety' (OS, XXIX).

Elements of praise and denunciation are deeply embedded within the elegiac mode, as they are in section XIII which imagines, in its first ten lines, how the Nazis disposed of their victims. Whereas, 'Two Formal Elegies for the Jews in Europe', a sequence of two sonnets in Hill's first book, had imagined the dead 'In clenched cinders', this section from *The Triumph* sees them in 'base cinderblocks'. In its last eight lines section XIII moves to elegy or the 'solemn elevation' of dubious and would-be elegy in its 'Trauermusik, musique funèbre, funeral | music'. There is a sense of both elegy and accusation, tragedy and war-crime. The earlier poem, 'Two Formal Elegies', took the form of two rhymed or half-rhymed sonnets in rough iambic pentameter. The later section is unrhymed free verse, rhetorically structured as three questions of uneven length. The first two are in the first line: 'Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose?'. This double question enquires after those who have died. The phrase 'hidden in God' might be a respectful way of talking about the dead, or it might be mordantly ironic. There could be an allusion to the apostle Paul speaking of those who are dead to the world and living in Christ: 'For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.' (Colossians, 3. 3). It is one thing to say this to a living Christian: another to a murdered Jew. The third question is 'Who can now tell what was taken...?' to which the answer is 'no-one, though we might imagine it', as the question itself does in its unfolding over the next seventeen lines.

A later section mourns the victims of totalitarian regimes (with their 'graphs of totality') and 'Each sensate corpse, in its fatal | mass-solitariness' (XCVII). The oxymoronic 'mass-solitariness' may evoke the pathos of elegy, but coming after the words 'totality... annihilation... corpse' it also conjures the thought of 'mass-grave', demanding not elegy but the more forensic, analytic response appropriate to a crime. In the context of totalitarianism, Hill's coinage of 'mass-solitariness' (1998) aligns with a mass of 'mass- compound nouns' whose first recorded use is given by the OED as occurring between 1930 and 1945,

including 'mass democracy' (1932), 'mass fear' (1932), 'mass entertainment' (1933), 'mass culture' (1934), 'mass advertising' (1934), 'mass suicide' (1937), 'mass literacy' (1937), 'mass art' (1938), 'mass public' (1938), 'mass circulation' (1939), 'mass-mindedness' (1939), 'mass hypnosis' (1940), 'mass behaviour' (1940), 'mass persuasion' (1942), and 'mass-murderer' (1943).

The Triumph also moves into the ironic and accusatory modes of critique:

If the gospel is heard, all else follows:
the scattering, the diaspora,
the shtetlach, ash pits, pits of indigo dye. (XVII).

This is tantamount to accusing 'the gospel' of causing pogroms, the Jewish diaspora, the tight-knit Jewish communities in Central and Eastern Europe, and ultimately the Holocaust or Shoah. The following section makes, or implies, a more veiled accusation, cast in negative terms, about Jewish and Christian faith succumbing to materialism and secularism: 'the mortgaged conversions — the synagogues, | the cathedrals — to Caesar and the great Pharaoh.' (XVIII). Elsewhere there is evident irritation at 'the State Church' which has 'lost dignity' (LXXXIII) and is over-run by 'high-handed underlings of self- | worship' (LXVI), offering 'indifferent | coffee and fellowship.' (LXVII).

As an ethical mode which laments individuals and upholds the values which they embody, elegy inclines to praise-poem. Thus, Thomas More is praised for his humility and wit, and Southwell for his cordiality and courage (XLV). Ruskin is shown less as the unsatisfactory husband and more as 'some half-fabulous field-ditcher who prised | up, from a stone-wedged hedge-root, the lost | amazing crown.' (CXLVI). Part of the ethos of elegy is gratitude, such as gratitude to the 'cryptanalysts, | unpredictable Polish | virtuosi' (XV). where 'virtuosi' would be people with both remarkable skills and virtue. The civic duty to memorialise the dead and to show gratitude is taken up in sections LXXVI to LXXVIII. 'Ingratitude | still gets to me' (LXXVI)

Where memory has been lost there is a duty to teach or remind. *The Triumph* offers much in pedagogic mode, teaching by commendation. Hill has described the nineteenth-century tradition of Romantic *paideia* as 'a continuity unbroken from 1798 to 1918.'⁴⁰ When he praises 'the obscure | Aleksander Wat' (XV), a reader may be nudged to read the spoken memoir,⁴¹ or the poems,⁴² or a

⁴⁰ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 454.

⁴¹ Aleksander Wat and Richard Lourie, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual*, (New York; London: Norton, 1990).

⁴² Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan, *With the Skin: Poems of Aleksander Wat*, (New York: Ecco Press, 1989).

biography.⁴³ Some readers may be polymaths but most will have something to learn, or be taught, by *The Triumph*, if only about a detail such as the history of the words 'mob' and 'fun' (LXII) or Machiavelli's sartorial habits (CXXXIV). Against the run of contemporary poetry, which would compromise with anti-intellectualism rather than be branded 'élitist', Hill has the courage to be erudite and he is both skilful and tactful as educator. His allusions add depth and complexity in that they summon another context which may then work against what is apparently being said. The deployment of specific allusions is linked to, but should be distinguished from, more general instances of pastiche. Roberts (2000) notes that 'much of the language of Hill's sequences has a quality of being in invisible quotation marks.'⁴⁴ Roberts (2004) remarks that Hill's allusions 'offer a form of intimacy, even if a demanding one.' (p.103).

In keeping with its higher modes – the heroic, the sublime and the prophetic – *The Triumph* apostrophises dead and absent persons. Although the apostrophe may sound like a grand and artificial convention, it can also be an inclusive one in that it includes the dead and the absent, presenting them alive in the imagination. Mishandled or perceived as high-flown, the convention can crash an entire poem from the sublime to the ridiculous. Perhaps that is why *The Triumph* initially apostrophises its subjects in a quiet manner which does not draw attention to itself as a rhetorical device. Its first apostrophe addresses Petronius Arbiter and Angelus Silesius, without making much of it, in a speech act which might be command or entreaty:

Petronius Arbiter, take us in charge;
 carry us with you to the house of correction.
 Angelus Silesius, guard us while we are there. (III)

This establishes the apostrophe as one of the conventions of the sequence. We find ourselves communicating with the dead and why not? There will be further addresses to Petronius Arbiter (in LXXIX and LXXXI), to the playwright Gerhart Hauptmann (XX), to Donne and Herbert (LXVI); to Sidney and Milton (CXVIII) and, at greater length, to Eugenio Montale (CXXXIV). More comically and employing rhyme, the sequence addresses 'Jane Grey' (XCII) and 'sour | old Gower' (XCIII). In vituperative mode, it addresses Croker (CXXXVIII) and the terrible triad of 'Croker, MacSikker, O'Shem' (CXLVIII). In amatory mode it addresses 'My dear and awkward love' (LVII) and '*Amarilli, mia bella*' (CXV).

⁴³ Tomas Venclova, *Aleksander Wat: Life and Art of an Iconoclast*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ Roberts, 'Geoffrey Hill and Pastiche', (p. 155).

There are also direct addresses to an unknown 'you' in sections LXXVIII, XCV and CVI.

The amatory mode in *The Triumph* is represented by the love-poem of experience as in section CI, which could be a daydream, grounded by the specific details of 'the old scythe-works' and 'moist woods | full of wild garlic. The unidentified 'we' creates a gap through which the reader can step into the dream and 'set out' unencumbered by gratuitous autobiography. 'There will be | no quarrel between us — all this time —' suggests that there was once a quarrel but that in this section — 'all this time' — any quarrel is suspended.

In a Romantic or post-Romantic age, love poetry, as a mode, veers towards the autobiographical and confessional. From the outset, *The Triumph* is in the mode of mythologised autobiography. Romsley (I, VII and LXXXII, CL) sets the sequence in the poet's native Worcestershire as a site of pained introspection: 'self-molestation of the child-soul, would that be it?' (II). There could be reference to Hill's heart-attack in 'the blown | aorta pelting out blood' (IV). With 'Kenelm, his mouth full of blood and toffee' (VII), we are back in the Mercian 'imperium' (LXXXII) of Geoffrey/Offa, where the autobiographical is overshadowed by the eschatological mode, 'at the flash of Judgement' (LXXXII). The autobiographical mode meets the historical in section LXXXV which juxtaposes photo-negatives with 'stills of the burning ghetto'; and again when early influences, comics and aircraft recognition cards, shade into 'the sustained, | inattentive, absorbing of King James' English.' (CX). Hill refers to his marriage to Alice Goodman explicitly in sections LXVI and XCVIII. One feels that Alice Goodman is a crucial presence, intellectually, emotionally and artistically, and is the Muse of Hill's later work. That, however, is the subject for another thesis.

In *The Triumph of Love* Hill's attack on his critics — 'Crocker, MacSikker, O'Shem' — reveals more animosity than is considered decent in contemporary British poetry, which cherishes a façade of mutual respect. In Hill's estimation, 'maybe about one in a hundred reviews is hostile, but when the hundredth duly appears its intention is palpable, not to correct but to annihilate'.⁴⁵ Hill has received his share and in *The Triumph* he does not feign equanimity, but responds with rage, which seems both honest and comic. His is not a hygienic confessional, but one sullied by 'spite, jealousy or indignation'.⁴⁶ As Hill observed in relation to

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Hill, 'I Know Thee Not, Old Man, Fall to Thy Prayers', *Oxford lecture 15* <http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2015-05-05_engfac_hill.mp3>, (2015) [accessed 8 May 2021] 51:50 to 52:30.

⁴⁶ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 85.

Pound: “‘Saeva indignatio’ is no guarantee of verdictive accuracy, or even of perception’.⁴⁷ Perhaps Hill would excuse his incivility in the manner of Socrates. ‘The excuse of Socrates for his appalling incivility was that he had seen something incommensurate with the world he inhabited.’⁴⁸

Along with the confessional mode, Hill’s book-length sequences have some of the character of a journal, as becomes explicit in the title of *The Daybooks* (2007-2012). The journalistic mode mixes the confessional and quotidian with personal observation and comment: little joys such as ‘the crocuses are surviving.’ (TL, VI). Introducing his *Autumn Journal*, MacNeice acknowledges that the *Journal* does contain over-statements and inconsistencies. ‘In a journal or a personal letter a man writes what he feels at the moment; to attempt scientific truthfulness would be—paradoxically—dishonest.’⁴⁹ Sometimes Hill’s sequences have something of the feel of a scrapbook, cuttings and jottings, as from a local paper, or the epistolary, real or imagined. ‘Sir, your ‘Arts/Life’ column claims that Gracie | Fields sang at Dunkirk. Is this | a misprint?’ (TL, XLVIII).

The potential self-importance of the autobiographical mode is checked by a vein of explicit self-mockery which functions to ‘Prick him’ (TL, V) and puncture pomposity before it swells. Pretentiousness is a present danger. The sequence, or a voice within it, risks sounding grandiose and opinionated as when, for instance, it pontificates ‘upon Judeo-Christian-Senecan Europe’ (XI). But pomposity is sidestepped with modal light-footedness and self-mockery. One sentence moves from ‘the British walking-wounded’ to ‘child-victims | in mill and mine.’ Then the next sentence sidesteps into irony with ‘Here’s your Lost Empire | Medal for a life spent giving blood.’ (XCI).

Since Hill was born in 1932, the first half of his life coincided with the loss of the British Empire.

India did for us finally, hideous
sub-continental death-rites, the widowed Queen-
Empress felled like Lenin, melted down; new
sacred monsters bellowing at the pyre. (LXV)

The demotic idiom of ‘did for us’ is far from an academic pronouncement such as ‘India precipitated the decline of the British Empire’. It suggests a sceptical

⁴⁷ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 164.

⁴⁸ Hill, “Eccentrique to the Endes of His Master or State”, 1:01:30 to 1:02:13. Hill is quoting A. D Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and Saint John*.

⁴⁹ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979 [1966]), p. 101.

class and intellectual standpoint, as of someone who tells it as it is, to the point, favouring plain words above fancy abstractions and academic niceties. It avoids condescension. 'Democracy | is in the voice – Churchill's or some other – I cannot now hear' (SS, 37). There is an element of regret but more make-do and get-on-with-it. It is a confident, independent, non-conformist voice which links Queen Victoria with Lenin, suggesting that both they and what has replaced them are 'sacred monsters'. More strictly, the immediate analogy is of their respective statues being melted down: an analogy which was of course only available following the collapse of the Soviet bloc from 1989.

Elsewhere, political history veers into fantasy and farce as with 'the vintage hearse | exploding on impact' (XXVII). There is also parody as in 'Fairground-mirror distortion' (LXXI), with a touch of the enigmatic in the six questions at the start of section LVI: 'For what amour | did he wear a woman's wig? Who tried | to set fire to it?'. A recurrent element is self-mockery and self-abuse. Hill insults himself as 'Obstinate old man' (TL, V and CXLIX); 'Scab-picking old scab' (TL, XXXI); 'Obnoxious chthonic old fart' (XXXIV); 'Shameless old man' (TL, XXXVII); 'Rancorous, narcissistic old sod' (TL, XXXIX). Since all these insults involve the adjective 'old', the nub of the matter may be that Hill fears that he will be seen as superannuated, which becomes a source of both pride and pain. If he is to be cast as dinosaur, misfit or clown, he might as well play along and 'recast this | as mere entertainment-interludes' (LIX), counters to the world's 'tyrant-entertainment' (LXII) and 'Entertainment overkill' (LIV).

The ekphrastic mode describes, or reproduces the impact of, a work of art. *The Triumph* uses an ekphrastic mode in its evocation of 'Rouault (XII), Kokoschka (XXVI) and Callot (XXVIII) and in its description of the donor figure in religious art of the Renaissance (XLVI). With its 'cinder | path', section CI could also be an improvised response to Spencer Frederick Gore's oil-painting 'The Cinder Path' which Hill might have seen at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Finally, the reflexive mode allows the sequence to comment on itself, as when it describes its beginning as 'Ever more protracted foreplay' (IV). It comments on its own progression when it notes 'I am half-way | and lost — need I say — in this maze of my own | devising' (LXXV); 'Well over half-way now' (LXXXVI); and in quasi-editorial interpolations such as 'I am not too far from the end | [of the sequence — ED].' (CXXV).

Laus et vituperatio, the heroic, the prophetic, the didactic, the sublime, the mystical sublime, the English sublime, moral philosophy, the elegiac, the love-poem, the autobiographical and confessional, the historical, the fantastic, the farcical, the self-mocking, the ekphrastic, the reflexive — the list of modes could

doubtless be extended. The point is that *The Triumph of Love* is full of different modes which interact with each other to create unique effects. One might see the sequence as a 'glowering carnival' (CX, CXII, CXXIV, CXXXVII) of literary modes, and add that the carnival has something 'overexcited' and 'rampageous' (XXIV). But even the carnivalesque has its own order and orders. Within *The Triumph* are high seriousness, devotion and Irony. At the end of section LV, the work seems to be offered to *Vergine bella*, but the reader is left not only with devotion but with a sense of 'dis- | memberment':

This and other *disjecta*
membra, the abused here drawn
 together with pain for their further dis-
 memberment, I offer to the presiding
 judge of our art, self-pleasured *Ironia*. (CIII)

There is of course irony in that formulation and criticism in the epithet 'self-pleasured'. The implicit self-disgust will be taken up in the following section which combines anadiplosis with epanorthosis, antimetabole and grammatical polyptoton, to suggest the poet is sick of it. 'Self-pleasured, as retching on a voided | stomach pleasures self.' (CIV).

The effects produced by modal contrast operate both within sections ('intra-sectional') and between sections ('inter-sectional'). The two interact. This generalisation was illustrated above with reference to section CXLVIII. It might be shown again with reference to section CXXXVIII, which in the space of its twelve lines, moves from imprecation ('Confound you, Croker') to confession ('I have admitted'). Confession then swells into comic self-incrimination with an increasingly absurd list of Hill's sins of omission. He was absent from the frontline trenches and from a mining disaster near Dewsbury. 'Yes, to my shame, | I high-tailed it at Pozières (Butterworth | died in my place).' (The slang 'high-tailed', a verb whose first recorded use in the OED is dated 1908, matches the time.) He also 'sacrificed | Edward Thomas' so the self-incrimination expands into self-apotheosis as if Hill were a god who could have sacrificed First World War poets. It is a *reductio* or *productio ad absurdum* which operates as self-defence. Hill is in effect saying, 'I could never have been a first-hand witness to this suffering, and it is therefore absurd for a critic to accuse me of failing to be there.' The self-defence involves concession: 'My cowardice | is not contested.' This then moves to question or explanation which involves a recurrent polemical issue about the politics of memory and of memorialisation: 'I am saying (simply) | what is to become of memory?' Throughout the short section we have a sense of argument with Croker, which closes with a testy 'Yes—I know— | I've asked that before.'

There is, therefore, in section CXXXVIII much intra-sectional multimodality. This is complemented and complicated by inter-sectional multimodality. So, the reference to the mining disaster at 'Combs Pit, Thornhill' recalls the previous section (CXXXVII) with its vivid hypotyposis: 'Lawrence's wasted pit-villages rising early, | spinning-wheel gear-iron girding above each | iron garth; old stanchions wet with field-dew.' That is a sort of industrial pastoral which verges on minimalist mysticism if we associate Hill's 'field-dew' with Marvell's poem 'On a Drop of Dew'.⁵⁰ The archaism of the Norse 'garth' meets the archaism of the adjuration 'Confound you'. At the other end of section CXXXVIII there seems to be a clean break as the next section begins in essayistic mode: 'Concerning the elective will, *arbitrium*.' But later that section insults MacSikker and O'Shem (CXXXIX). The inter-sectional play of modes goes beyond the immediately neighbouring sections. For example, the cursing at Croker must recall 'bugger you, MacSikker et al.' (CXIX), the sniping by Croker and the sarcasm towards Croker (CXXIV), and the schooling of 'Croker, MacSikker, O'Shem' in CXLVIII. The comic self-incrimination at the heart of section CXXXVIII recalls the comic catalogue of faults in section LXXV.

What has been argued above about *The Triumph of Love* and about sequence as extension, relationship and multimodality — applies *mutatis mutandis* to all the book-length sequences. But this is not to suggest an aesthetic of anything-goes modal anarchy. Each sequence, while being multi-modal retains a distinctive modal character based on its distinctive mix of modes. With characteristic circumspection, Hill suggested that *Speech! Speech!* is something of a tragic farce:

'In his essay on Christopher Marlowe, T. S. Eliot observes that a play such as *The Jew of Malta* is not so much a tragedy as it is a tragic farce... To say that *Speech! Speech!* is an attempt to create the equivalent of that genre would be a fairly accurate suggestion.'⁵¹

'What was I thinking —', Hill asks, 'Bergmanesque tragic farce?' (SS, 69). A sense of tragic face seeps into the sequence including the closing lines of section 61, which portray the death of Princess Di:

It is not Ceres' living child I see
broken asprawl inside the wind-tunnel,
from limo to limbo in a soundbite,

⁵⁰ Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, p. 102.

⁵¹ Brown and Paterson, *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words*, (p. 116).

fuck-up as obligation. ENGLAND AWAKE.

You fell for Aladdin's uncle – one of those.

These lines layer a Classical allusion (to Proserpina) with contemporary reference to the fatal crash early on the 31st of August 1997. They hurry from an image of Diana's broken body to the groaner-pun of a tabloid-style headline ('from limo to limbo') to coarse, summative slang to Blakean injunction and prophetic exhortation. They speed from elegy to satire to denunciation, from grief to rage, 'in a soundbite', quick as the Mercedes and the pursuing paparazzi. The final line blends and blurs sorrow and denunciation, diagnosis and judgement, with the pantomime or folktale of Aladdin, an ancient tale from *The Arabian Nights* which derive from an Egyptian text of fourteenth or fifteenth century origin. If 'You' is Diana Spencer, then Aladdin's uncle could be Mohamed Al-Fayed, the Egyptian billionaire and father of Diana's boyfriend, Dodi. 'You' is also sleepy England.

One mode of the farcical is down-to-earth, back-to-the-body of scatology, which undercuts literary high-mindedness. In *Speech! Speech!* (74) 'Bucer's England – *De regno Christi* –' is 'not on, not really.' The section ends with a stage direction. 'End of scholastic | disputation. Now the theatricals: | *enter* SCATOLOGY, *dancing, with* DESIRE.' (SS, 74). The sequence aspires to the popular tradition of medieval street-theatre. 'Like Herod | raging in the street-pageants, work the crowd.' (SS, 94). Scatology is both an acceptance of our being bound to earth, matter and sex, but also residually a protest it. 'Almost we cannot pull free; almost we escape || the leadenness of things.' (SC, 1.20). The surprising word here is 'cannot'. The commonplace thought would be 'we can almost pull free', but Hill writes 'Almost we cannot pull free', as if our natural state is being able to pull free. Scatology is both 'the leadenness of things' and the urge to pull free from disembodied high-mindedness.

That urge is also expressed in a new casualness, 'Or something like.' (SC, 3. 6). The ethical drive within the unbuttoned approach is to undermine 'the bristling strut, demonic rectitude' (SC, 2. 79), as if to try 'the ultimate fixity of things let slide' (SC, 3.11). The casual look can be camouflage. When Hill writes 'Take it, leave it, the serious work's been done.' (SC, 2.77), that 'Take it, leave it' is not only laid-back. It can indicate one of the qualities of excellent poetry which, Hill believes, 'has a certain high-handedness about it, a kind of take-it-or-leave-it, a kind of 'Sod Off!' to enjoyment'.⁵²

⁵² Hill, 'Fields of Force', 34:50 to 35:47.

The multimodality of Hill's sequences encompasses high modes and low. It is implicitly self-questioning in that the modes spar with each other. They never settle into a bland blend in which everything is relative. Their outlooks are logically incompatible, an affront to Urizen. As usual, there is precedent in Blake:

He sent his two Servants, Whitefield & Westley: were they Prophets,
Or were they Idiots or Madmen? shew us Miracles!⁵³

Historical declaration; sceptical question, leading to a second question, the pair offering diametric opposites; millenarian entreaty. Multimodality is also a drama of different speech-acts.

Sequence and selfhood

One transformation in Hill's poetry from the mid 1990s concerns his attitude to the self, or the role of the self in poetry. Since this change is co-extensive with his increased use of the sequence-form, questions arise as to whether the two developments are linked. What if anything is the connection between sequence and selfhood in poetry? Did the sequence-form enable Hill to write more directly from the self or of the self? Or did his wish to write more from the self propel him away from lyric and towards sequence?

Hill's changing ideas about questions of poetry and selfhood correspond to his changed evaluation of Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

When I was twenty I thought that Eliot, at the end of the second section of 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' was absolutely right; and at forty-six, having been taught to be broad-minded and wary, I still think that he was more right than wrong.⁵⁴

'More right than wrong' became more wrong than right. In 2001 Hill explained that he had been trained by Eliot's essay 'to believe that 'the poem is achieved by the fullest possible objectification of the individual subjectivity'. He then said that he had taken 'a far too extremist view of what seemed then a total incompatibility of the objective and the subjective'.⁵⁵ But his view had modified with the passage of time. He still thought that the last forty years had seen a continuing 'naïve trust in the unchallengeable authority of the authentic self', by

⁵³ Blake, *Blake: Complete Writings*, p. 506. Plate 22, lines 61-62

⁵⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill Writes...', *The Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 98. Autumn (1978).

⁵⁵ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 282).

which he meant not 'the authentic self as it really is' but 'the allegedly authentic self':

But I no longer think that the answer to this lies in the suppression of self; it requires a degree of self-knowledge and self-criticism, which is finally semantic rather than philosophical. The instrument of expression and the instrument of self-knowledge and self-correction is the same.⁵⁶

In rejecting self-suppression, Hill risks a new kind of self-exposure: 'I have come to see that the closest approximation of truth requires that the shortcomings of the self shall be admitted into the most intimate textures of the work.'⁵⁷ Taken too far, this principle would draw an artist into the great parade of Self, to perform, on the bandwagon of poetry celebrity and would-be celebrity, a personal and courageous exhibition of candour, damage and virtue. Attendant risks include over-sharing, self-promotion, attention-seeking, approval-seeking and special pleading. In his later poems, particularly *The Book of Baruch*, Hill runs these risks, with results which will depend on the judgement and generosity of the reader.

From *The Triumph of Love* onwards, Hill's book-length sequences accommodate 'shortcomings of the self' and address matters of mental health. Asked in interview about his 'spate of writing', he replied, '[t]here are several causes. I allude pretty clearly to one of them in section 109 of *The Triumph of Love*':⁵⁸

Since when has our ultimate reprobation
turned (*oculos tuos ad nos con-*
verte) on the conversion or
reconversion of brain chemicals —
the taking up of serotonin? I
must confess to receiving the latest
elements, *Vergine bella*, as a signal
mystery, mercy, of these latter days. (TL, CIX)

'Reprobation' might mean only 'disapproval, censure, reproof' (OED, s. v. 'reprobation' n. 1. c.), but 'ultimate reprobation' leans towards the theological meaning of 'rejection by God' as the reprobate are damned to be (OED, 1. b.). This lends the word 'reprobation' an ironic pessimism since one might have expected 'our ultimate salvation'. The lines mix the twelfth century Marian

⁵⁶ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 283).

⁵⁷ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 284).

⁵⁸ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80'.

anthem 'Salve regina' with references to chemical anti-depressants, breaking the Latin entreaty ('con- | verte') over the line-break and punning on theological and neurochemical meanings of 'conversion' and 'reconversion'. The tone, difficult to pin down, might be described as articulate perplexity streaked with mania as of one pepped up with 'happy pills'. In *Speech! Speech!* Hill muses how his medication will affect his sensibility and poetry: 'How is it tuned, how can it be un- | tuned, with lithium, this harp of nerves?' (SS, 3.)

Hill's middle-phase sequences open lines of communication with 'the elaborately- | vested Angel of Naked Truth' (TL, CXLVII). After implicitly accusing two Nobel laureates, presumably Walcott and Heaney, of 'intimate buzzing and smooth toiletry', he turns on himself:

Mea culpa,

I am too much moved by hate —
pardon, ma'am? — add greed, self-pity, sick
scrupulosity, frequent fetal regression, *and*
a twisted libido? (TL, LXXV)

As the charge-sheet is extended the comedy is one of hyperbole tinged with parrhesia. The self interpolates itself more quietly when the longest section of *The Triumph* (CXXV) reaches its crescendo:

I have been working up to this. The Scholastics
mean more to me than the New Science. All
things are eternally present in time and nature.

Between the Scholastics and the New Science is 'me'. Before all things eternally present in time and nature stands the 'I'. This is not only a matter of grandiosity, for the presence of the self in time and over time gives these sequences something of the character of a journal in which conscious, even flamboyant, presentation of the self mixes with a Protestant tradition of the diary with its ethic of serious self-examination.

The Triumph and later sequences draw on personal life without quite being 'autobiographical', since the 'self' is not conceived as a latent phenomenon waiting to be discovered or expressed. Neither fully knowable nor an absolute mystery, it is introduced as a site of guilt and anxiety: 'self-molestation of the child-soul, would that be it?' (TL, II). Selfhood is also a site of error and idolatry as with the Anglican 'high-handed underlings of self- | worship' (TL, LXVI). Terrified of 'unselfbeing' (TL, LXXI), the self in life cannot be thrown out of the window as in some 'self-defenestration' (TL, CIV).

Presentation of self is not only a matter of first-person singular statements but manifests in choice of language.

Ethics at the far edge: give the old
bugger a shove / gentleman a shout. (TL, LXXII)

Half-referring to their author, these lines are comically poised between demotic disrespect and quaint courtesy, employing the punctuation mark of the slash to have it both ways. Much of the sequence is both 'at the far edge' and poised / toppling on the caesura of antithesis. This holds for the detail as well as the whole: the phrase 'the old | bugger' could itself be aggressive or affectionate. Hill is and is not both 'the old | bugger' and the old 'gentleman'. There is something forthright, blunt, even aggressive in the diction of *The Triumph*. (When spell-checking this chapter, I have been warned nine times that 'this language may be offensive to your reader'. In each case, the offending words are Hill's rather than mine.) The effect of rude words and much of Hill's self-presentation is to open space for comic irony. 'It is a formal | self-distancing, but like choreography' (TL, CXXXIII): This 'formal | self-distancing' can be achieved through self-criticism and (self) interruption. In the instance below, it involves switching between first and third person, as if the poet or poetic persona has caught himself quoting Milton's *Comus* then mocks the plagiarism and pretension:

But to my task . . . But
to my task, I ask you! He also cribs
from Dryden and *Vox Clamantis*. (TL, CXXIV).

The Triumph of Love and later sequences involve a 'return upon the self' which Hill defines, with the help of some phrases from Nettleship, as 'the transformation of mere reflex into an "act of attention", a "disinterested concentration of purpose" upon one's own preconceived notions, prejudices, self-contradictions and errors.'⁵⁹ That 'concentration of purpose' strives to be 'disinterested' but is never fully so, since it necessarily retains an interest in how the self appears and how the 'I' positions itself relative to others. The 'return upon the self' is not a turn to hedonism so much as a return to the Delphic maxim: γνῶθι σεαυτόν; 'gnōthi | seauton' (OS, XXXVII); know thyself. It is also of course a product of that Romantic tradition, exemplified by Wordsworth's *Prelude*, whose subject is inwardness, the sense of ourselves as beings with inner depths. Hill's 'return upon the self' is not a Rousseauan project advocating self-actualisation and self-fulfilment. It is more marked by penitential self-

⁵⁹ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 164-5.

awareness of Original Sin disguised by self-delusion. Depth of self includes self as nasty surprise, self as ambush. 'We are made | to make ourselves | instruments of violence and cunning.' (TL, LXXV).

Hill's 'return upon the self' aligns his poetry with his intellectual interest in selfhood, something of which can be gleaned from the index to his *Collected Critical Writings*. This index contains entries for some seventeen nouns formed by hyphenating self-, including 'self-consciousness', 'self-experience' and 'self-realization', along with 'self-deceit', 'self-gratification' and 'self-will'. Absent from the index but present in the *Collected Critical Writings* are many other self-nouns indicative of Hill's interest in how self attaches itself to and governs other considerations. Restricting these to self-nouns in essays published after 1998, we find thoughts on 'self-promotion' (330), 'self-knowledge' (332), 'self-applause' (335), 'self-conceit' (346), 'self-flattery' (346), 'self-correction' (400), 'self-misreading' (403), 'self-complacency' (414), 'self-occlusions' (449), 'self-deceptions' (473), 'Self-Deceit' (473), 'self-possession' (483), 'self-scrutiny' (501), 'self-questioning' (512), 'self-projections' (530), 'self-withholding' (537), 'self-laceration' (545), 'self-recognition' (562), 'self-healing' (562) and 'self-promotion' (566).

The above list, which does not claim to be comprehensive, sketches something of the extent of Hill's intellectual interest in selfhood, which lack of space precludes us from pursuing in detail. It seems fair to infer that Hill's view of the self is complex and inclined to be more sceptical than celebratory. That inference might be corroborated by the appearance in the same (post 1998) essays of such adjectives as 'self-serving' (400, 481), 'self-congratulatory' (403), 'self-correcting' (470), 'self-stabilizing' (473), 'self-complacent' (508), 'self-contradictory' (535), and 'self-enamoured' (578). Poetic sequence enables Hill to explore his intellectual and moral preoccupations with self in an open-ended, unsystematic way which exerts no pressure to find lyrical closure in the form of a neat solution or the last word on selfhood.

Hill's interest in the self continues in his later book-length sequences, but shortage of space again prevents adequate exploration. Suffice it to say that in *Odi Barbare* we find him 'hauling | Self from grimpen' (III) assisted by such self-compounds as 'self-willing' (III), 'self-satisfied' (V), 'self-enthraling' (VI), 'unself-stabilizing' (VII), 'self-hounding' (VIII), 'self-gathered' (IX), 'self-found' (XII), 'self-hazard' (XVI), 'self-fulfilling' (XXV), 'self-wronging' (XXXVI), and 'self-harmers' (XLIII). To these might be added 'Solipsist' (IV), 'Solipsism' (XV), 'selfhood' (XXI) and 'sacked self' (LI).

In proposing that the sequence-form affords new opportunities for making poetry out of the disjointed self, it is important not to overstate the case. Lyric is also a vehicle for exploring, animating and performing the divided self. But the lyric-shaped self differs from the self-in-sequence. In the successful lyric the first-person 'I', as subject or protagonist, serves and is subservient to the needs of the lyric. In Wordsworth's 'Daffodils', for instance, the 'I' sees the daffodils, describes them, is uplifted, reflects on their value to the 'inward eye' (or I) and dances with those daffodils. In this case the lyrical 'I' is close to an autobiographical 'I' matching what we know of Wordsworth. This 'I' is the ideal guide to these daffodils, keeping them alive in language and imagination. In general, the lyrical 'I' functions to present to its best advantage the incident, experience, or intimation which constitutes the main subject of the lyric. This 'I' need not be as temperate as Wordsworth, indeed it may be wildly irrational, as in 'Mad Tom's Song' (in the version by Robert Graves). No matter how this 'I' may beg, cringe, confess, intimidate, boast, rave, curse, promise and express any number of 'furious fancies', it remains throughout at one with the unfolding of the lyric. If a lyrical 'I' is contradictory or divided against itself then that division will be well-hewn to fit a self-division which is the subject of the lyric. One thinks of Frost's divided self: 'Two roads diverged in a wood and I – | I took the one less travelled by| And that has made all the difference.' The lyrical 'I' and Frost's 'I | I' sit flush to the needs of its lyric. If that 'I' has social markers they too will serve the lyric. The lyrical 'I' is lyric-shaped.

The sequential 'I', by contrast, can be discontinuous. It can metamorphose from one section to another, as it does in 'Funeral Music'. The first section of that sequence has no first-person forms, then the second and third sections use the first-person plural ('we'). In the fourth section an unidentified 'I' appears:

That I can believe.
Though I would scorn the mere instinct of faith,
Expediency of assent, if I dared,
What I dare not is a waste history
Or void rule. ('Funeral Music', 4)

This 'I' appears in the fourth section from nowhere and melts back into the first-person plural ('we') of the fifth section. When in the sixth section another 'I' appears, we cannot tell whether it is the same 'I' or a new one. This 'I' addresses 'My little son' and says, 'I rejoiced' and 'I saw humankind | As it was named by the Father'. It is in turn in unknown relation to the 'I' of the following section (7). 'I made no sound, but once | I stiffened as though a remote cry | Had heralded my name.' In sequence the 'I' is not 'anyone', but it can be changeable and more-than-one, as in the final section of 'Funeral Music'. 'Then

tell me, love, | How that should comfort us – or anyone | Dragged half-unnerved
out of this worldly place, | Crying to the end “I have not finished”.’

Whereas traditional poetry is guaranteed by the formal contract of rhyme and rhythm which it offers and honours, free verse is often underwritten either by the (supposed) authenticity of the ‘I’ or the strength of a reader’s interest in that ‘I’. In much contemporary poetry, the authentic self, the ideal self, or the performed self, figure as the great Panjandrum which the poem serves. Anecdote is used to stage the self and its dilemmas. Shortcomings of the self may also be feted in lyric (Larkin’s speciality).

Hill’s sequences are less glimpses into the self, more interventions by the self. They do not so much approach and disclose an ‘authentic I’ as open themselves to fragmented, disjointed, refractory selving, which has a disruptive function, but also holds the sequence together as it does in much ‘free verse’.

As Hill turns away from the short lyric in *The Triumph* and the following run of book-length sequences, he calls into question ‘the lyric cry’. ‘Incantation or incontinence—the lyric cry?’ (TL, CXLV). ‘Incantation’ suggests sorcery and enchantment, whilst ‘incontinence’ is want of self-restraint, sexual unchastity or, in its pathological sense, evacuation of urine. Hill returns to the lyric cry in *Orchards*.

Or

something fazed mentors called the *lyric cry*?
You can cross frontiers in suspended
animation, homing onto the inner voice.
Lyric cry lyric cry lyric cry, I’ll
give them lyric cry! (OS, XXX).⁶⁰

The formula here is demotic as when somebody says something you dislike (X) and you pick up on that same word or phrase (X) and repeat it, as if bashing it on the table or pumping your disgust into the very marrow of it, and then cap it off with ‘I’ll give you X!’ or ‘I’ll X you!’ or ‘I’ll give you something to X about!’ The formula, often used by someone in authority such as a sergeant-major, should have a name but seems to be unnamed. The phrase ‘lyric and futile’ occurs in *The Orchards* (2002) LXIV, one of the sections deleted as if futile in *Broken Hierarchies*.

The presence of the self can foster a sense of intimacy as if the poet feels at home with the reader and is comfortable to admit uncertainty:

⁶⁰ In BH (2013), the whole phrase is italicised: ‘*the lyric cry*’.

Dante

describes it somewhere — I may be mistaken.

Don't look it up this time; the sub-

conscious does well by us; leave well alone. (OS, XXI).

'Don't look it up this time' is a note-to-self which tells a reader that Hill is relaxing his standards and trusting the 'sub- | conscious,' with the prefix 'sub-' emphasised at the end of the line. Lax though this appears, it suggests a new confidence and sense of confiding, with the self not an agent of alienation but a token of trust. The presence of a self in the writing and mediating between that writing and the reader is felt as the presence of a living entity:

I think that what one needs to feel is the presence of a living entity, but not that one has something squared out on a graph paper by a person who thinks that he or she is cleverer than you are. I think there's a sense in which good poems can be in part baffled by themselves. I think that poems do not always know the outcome of their own feelings except in that rich and imprecise way that we intuit possible answers to those things in life which baffle us.⁶¹

By 'living entity' Hill probably means the poem itself, though it might also be understood as the presence of a person animating the poem. The semi- or quasi-autobiographical nature of *The Triumph* will appeal to many readers and allows a sense of purchase on the material.

Sequence as theatre and character comedy

After its suppression, in accordance with Eliot's dicta on impersonality, in Hill's earlier lyrics, the self makes a triumphant return in *The Triumph of Love*, which could almost be titled *The Triumph of Self*. From then on, the book-length sequences present and perform multiple and mutable versions of self, 'like a provincial | actor-manager' (TL, CXXIV), participating and directing, often with an appearance of amateur authenticity more than slick professionalism. Over the course of these longer sequences, Hill develops the comic potential of persona into a poetic theatre of character comedy, enriched by formative ambiguity as to whether the persona is serious, or comic, both somewhat, or neither quite.

Speech! Speech! offers its 'THEATRE OF VOICES, noble | if not | ridiculous.' (SS, 104). The 'actor-manager' is self-deprecating. 'Can't do dialogue even when the dramaturge | purposes confrontation.' (SS, 67). 'Act through a few

⁶¹ Hill, 'Poetry Reading at Marsh Chapel', 21:00 to 21:44.

poor mime faces' (SS, 107). Hill presents himself in various lights, often unflattering, in relation to what he is doing: 'damned liar that I am: | trying on broken accents, reading Dante | as if for the first time – this is the first | time, better admit it.' (SS, 112). In the next book he is still reading Dante, but now with misanthropy and regret: 'Reading Dante in a mood of angry dislike | for my fellow sufferers and for myself | that I dislike them.' (OS, LVII). He tries various new roles, such as 'my impatient norseman rôle' (SC 2.77). He allows other voices to be heard: 'Voices from the wings | interpolate a chorus.' (SC, 3.14). The voice of oracular paradox meets the voice of bafflement, as at the end of *Scenes from Comus* when three or four paradoxes are followed by the enquiry: 'What did you say?'.⁶²

In the book-length sequences, a comedy of self mixes autobiographical selves with imagined selves and archetypal selves. The result may be examined in a neo-Jungian way by considering some of the different archetypes alive in the poetry:

Pigeon-mobbed, on the play-patch, my own
public madman hurls at the laden air
his archive of bagged injustice. (OS, LXIX).

This 'public madman' might be King Lear, or, in more Jungian terms, the Madman, the Ruler and the Fool. In Hill's first-person, it becomes the crazed bard, Horace's *genus irritabile vatum* personified, with the noun 'archive' suggesting long-cherished resentments. We may also see the Victim or Orphan. Hill said that 'I' is 'more vulnerable always than "we"'.⁶³ The Hill of these book-length sequences rates high 'on RECENT PAST | AS DISTRESSED SUBTEXT.' (SS, 18). Prophet and Fool morph into each other, which is to say that Hill compounds ironic modernism with visionary modernism.⁶⁴ Other archetypes are active. The Lover and the Seer direct us towards theosis:

This is England; ah, love, you must see that;
her nature sensing its continuum
with the Beatific Vision. (OS, XXXII, line 8)

Hill can work wonders with an unpromising abstraction such as 'continuum'. The endearment, the two plain words 'ah, love,' convey the sense that we are over-hearing a moment of intimacy, a desire to share a heart-felt vision with the

⁶² Hill, *Scenes from Comus*, p. 66. 3.20. In BH the words are capitalised. BH, 480.

⁶³ Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', 15:34 to 15:50.

⁶⁴ James Keery, *Apocalypse: An Anthology*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2020), p. 2.

beloved. In this way, the words 'ah, love,' soften and particularise the communication, as subtle intensifiers.

Archetypes occur, of course, in both sequence and lyric. The Magician is there when 'the saint stands, | Exposing his gifted quite empty hands | Like a conjurer about to begin'.⁶⁵ The poet beginning a sequence is also Magician. 'Watch my hands | confabulate their shadowed rhetoric, | gestures of benediction; malediction | by arrangement.' (OS, I). In the very arrangement of the sequence is something of the Wanderer and the Seeker, not as the persona playing these parts, but as these parts being enacted in the poetry itself.

The sequences create a sense of listening-in to different voces like a radio ham, or an impatient participant in a seance. 'Get off the line.' (TL, LXXVIII). 'Strengthen your signal I AM LOSING YOU.' (SS, 5). They also provide occasion for talking to oneself, as in the repeated 'A se stesso' ('To himself') of *The Triumph* (LXI and CXL); and for telling oneself, 'I tell myself', (TL, XXXV). Sequence favours colloquy, whether it be 'timeless colloquy' ('Funeral Music', 8) or 'a colloquy with occasion' (TL, LXXV). 'Even these late | colloquies are fictions.' (SS, 108.). In Hill's posthumous work the colloquy sounds eirenic. 'There is colloquy, even at noonday, between us and our neighbour Venus.' (BB, 159). The colloquy is shaped by experience. 'I would say that both my visual dramatic sense and my inner ear for colloquy owe a great deal to both wartime cinema and wartime radio'.⁶⁶ That debt is overt in *Speech! Speech!* 17 and audible elsewhere:

This is quite dreadful — he's become obsessed.

There you go, there you go — narrow it down to *obsession!* (TL, XLIII)

Typically, Hill's sequences do not clarify their colloquy by inverted commas or speech-marks. The reader is left to work out, by change of pronouns or by linguistic intuition, where one voice overlaps or interrupts another.

The exuberant sense of theatre in Hill's work from 1998 may have been stimulated by his writing of an English version of Ibsen's *Brand* which was first performed in 1978. Asked in 1980 whether it had been a liberating experience which taught him much, he replied:

I thought at the time, in those last moments of exhausted euphoria, that it had taught me a great deal, that it had widened the scope of my art in a quite unexpected way, and that it had given me self-confidence and the means to write fluently. At the moment all that appears to have been an

⁶⁵ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 34. 'In Piam Memoriam'.

⁶⁶ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 154).

illusion, but it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that in ten years from now I may be working in a way that *Brand* prepared me for.⁶⁷

If that was prophecy, it was about ten years out. Not until 1998 would Hill be publishing poetic sequences of a theatrical kind that *Brand* had prepared him for.

Sequence and Time

The beauty of lyrical time is its rounded intensity, whilst time in sequence is more ragged, closer to everyday experience of time, or what might be called 'psychological time'. The sequence can represent and respond to experiences without having to mould them into lyrical form. As the sequence is divided into sections, so time can be cut into semi-discrete units aligned with those sections. Each section allows for a 're-set' of time as well as genre, such that each section arises anew out of the unknown. At the same time, sections, or slices, of time can then gather and inter-relate through addition, modification, and mutual correction.

With its many sections, a sequence can posit different time-states in different sections, enabling a complex effect of multi-layered or multidimensional time, like 'palimpsests' (OS, XXIII) or 'my | palimpsest' (OS, XXVIII). Whereas lyric time is centred in the single lyric, time in sequence can be centred on different sections, making it polycentric or decentred. Each section constructs its own sense of time which relates in complex ways to other sections and to the whole. We might conceptualise each section as its own zone, bordering in different ways on other zones, each its own time-zone. The analogy is suggested by the line: 'Here there's no crossing-point from zone to zone.' (SC 3.15). An example may clarify this. At the start of *The Triumph*, we find at least three examples of a present tense: 'now I am convinced' (II); 'What is he saying; | why is he still so angry?' (V); 'The hellebore is there still' (VI). The present tense in each section refers to its own time-state and is not identical to the time-state of its neighbours. Grammatically each is in the present tense but semantically they exist in different zones, dimensions. The relationality is complexified by the present participle ('the blown | aorta pelting out blood' (IV) and the present perfect: 'They have conceded me — I think, beyond question —' (VIII) and 'it has seen better days' (X).

As in the long poem, sequence can direct its mimesis to the passing of chronological time by arrangement of episodes and incidents over and through

⁶⁷ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 97.

time. For example, in section LXXV of *The Triumph* N and N 'may yet | draw blood from bloodless Stockholm.' but, twelve sections later, time has passed and now they are both 'Swedish millionaires' (TL, LXXXVII). If taken literally and correlated with historical time, then at least three years must have passed, since Derek Walcott won the Nobel Prize in 1992 and Seamus Heaney in 1995. But the sequence works linear conventional time through the irregular, psychological time of memory and imagination. All operate together, with psychological time at the centre, as can be demonstrated by reference to the Princess Di sub-sequence in *Speech! Speech!* which presents Hill reacting to these ongoing public events. 'I trust that she is now done with the body | search' (SS, 71) suggests that the words are written very soon after news of Diana Spencer's death on 30th August 1997. Whether or not that is the case, the inclusion of the self ('I trust') functions to narrow the gap between composition and the situation being described. Six sections which allude to Diana Spencer are in turn alluded to in a seventh elegy (114): 'Six times this trip I have brought round my wreath | to the vulgar gates.' This sub-sequence is organised more around emotional recollection and the aesthetic demands of the sequence than strict chronological time. Its first section (22) might chronologically be the last if 'this island' is not only Britain but the specific island on the lake at Althorp where Diana is buried: 'Inscrutable Í call | her spirit nów on this island: memory | subsiding into darkness | nowhere | coming to rest.' Section 36 mentions 'the funeral sentences' while section 61 seems closer to the crash ('from limo to limbo'), as does section 71 although it too alludes to words from the funeral service ('I cannot think how | else to commit, commend, her'). Section 93 martials Diana's in-laws to line up for the funeral procession ('get in line, SNÚFF-MAN') whilst section 94 brings in Elton John, whose hit-song 'Candle in the Wind' had caught the public mood. Section 114 moves backwards from the funeral itself (with Tony Blair reading from I Corinthians 13) to the preceding day when the Queen had addressed the nation: 'Comedienne to act | SORRY for hostile nation.' The whole is presented through memories and flashbacks, half play, half movie. 'CURTAINS. CREDITS.'

The Orchards of Syon is a sequence of 'phantom showings' (OS, XXIV), where the noun 'showing' evokes Julian of Norwich's revelations, dreams and visions (OED, s. v. 'showing, n. 4. a.'). The quotidian opens onto Dantean vistas of Purgatorio, Paradiso or Inferno:

This cannot
be Purgatory, neither is it
The Wood of the Suicides, nor dead
Goldengrove alive with mistletoe;

not swirling Venus, even, where a day
goes slower than the year. (OS, XXXIV)

Time entails mortality. 'Nothing untimely, since we are all | in time checked at dispersal, possibly | for keeps.' (OS, XV). Eschatology lends urgency. 'Last days, last things, loom on: I write | to astonish myself. So much for all | plain speaking.' (OS, XXIII). The 'plain speaking' is also punning and syllepsis. 'In no time at all | there's neither duration nor eternity' (OS, XXIV), but there is ambiguity since '[i]n no time at all' means both 'very soon' and 'where time does not exist'. Overshadowed by mortality, *The Orchards* presents the world and the mind as mutability and as delight. 'Kierkegaard springs to mind and is gone | as swiftly into the prodigal rainbow.' (OS, LXII; OS, LXI in BH). The sequence catches impermanence in a present tense which is close to reportage. 'Abruptly the sun's out' (OS, LXV; OS, LXIII in BH). The interest in the rapidity of the quotidian is declared in love for Frank O'Hara, a poet so different from the early Hill: 'Love | you, Frank, come on home! Frank being Frank | O'Hara. (OS, XXXVII, line 15). *The Orchards* have something of O'Hara's free spirit of free verse, pitched with some traditional iambic pentameter: 'The curlew's pitch distracts us from her nest.' (OS, VIII, line 18).

The span and timespan of sequence allows for many moods and mood-changes, as when 'the sea's mood || turns from slate-black, to yellow ochre, to green.' (SC, 1.4). Then, some ninety-six sections later, 'The sea is greenish first, then mustard-yellow, | then chevroned, then broken up, || camouflaged in its abundant colours.' (SC 3.1). Some references bridge different books. 'End with that reference, in the Ludlow masque | to *haemony*' (TL, CXV). Haemony reappears in *The Orchards* (IX) and 'haemony's in the script', not surprisingly, in *Scenes from Comus* (SC, 2.9). In sequence not everything has to be said about a subject in one go. The arrangement in sections allows for an impression of backing off, thinking afresh and returning with altered perspective, as when, in the following section Hill reassesses the subject. 'Suppose I tell it otherwise: haemony | is of the blood (therefore the lovely name)' (SC, 2.10). The sections allow for different 'takes' on a theme, with some sense of learning and emotional response to learning. 'Haemony may mean *technē*, ' now he tells me. | Haemony means whatever Milton ' meánt by it.' (SC, 2.12). The sequence-form enables it to give an impression of Hill's thoughts about haemony as they develop, unevenly, over time. 'Yes, Comus, about time – about time | and justification.' (SC, 2.13). This is anadiplosis with syllepsis. The first 'about time' can mean that Hill is aware that he may be perceived as being slow in arriving at his main subject. A sequence is always 'about time' with an awareness of what has been said before, and of the current section as provisional fulfilment.

'About time and about this time | when all | her days are fulfilled: as at Pentecost | or at the Nativity' (SS, 15).

The increased visibility of the self in these sequences allows for an effect of spontaneity as if we are reading something which Hill is extemporising and on the edge of changing. 'I have a mind to recast this | as mere entertainment-interludes' (TL, LIX), Hill remarks, apparently sharing with us his reflections on the sequence even as he composes it. 'Hold on —' (TL, LXXXVI), he interjects as if to pre-empt interruption. And two lines later, 'Hah —'. These seem to be first thoughts written in the moment of composition. They are deleted in *Broken Hierarchies* (p. 264). Within the sequence he allows himself second thoughts which create an impression of thinking in the moment. 'Nothing true | is easy — is that true? Or, how true is it?' (TL, CIV). In this way Hill exploits the predisposition of sequence to capture 'the improvisatory, tentative nature of artistic experience, which is intimately related to the volatile richness of ordinary human awareness.'⁶⁸ He can give the effect of writing at speed and in the moment, *currente calamo*. The first ice edges across the pond 'even as I describe it' (SS, 79). There is in this the excitement of the moment. 'Look!' Hill interjects as if grabbing the reader's arm. 'Look! — crowning the little rise, that bush' (OS, XXIV). 'Yes, but here | look here!' (OS, XXIX).

'Sun — fetching us this instant!' (SC 2.53). The trick of writing in the instant gives an impression of something swift and perfect. 'There goes a fox | like a swift perfect image of itself.' (SC, 2.59), as if Hill is watching a thought-fox or sketching *en plein air*, catching the movement of the fox in a single line. 'Listen!' (SC, 2. 77). The passing moment is extended, savoured and elegised through epanalepsis and anadiplosis: 'While the height-challenged sun fades...while the sun fades. While the sun fades' (SC 2.80.).

Sequence and Culture Wars

From the late 1990s and following his move to the United States, a new and occasional element of polemic enters Hill's poetry as it joins, in a maverick way, in 'culture wars'. The phrase 'culture wars' is here used in its North American sense to refer to 'an ideological struggle for political and cultural dominance between conservatives and liberals' (OED, s. v. 'culture war, n.' sense b., s. v. 'culture, n.'), although, when so many 'conservatives' conserve nothing and so many 'liberals' are profoundly illiberal, the war is messier than the definition. At Boston University in the 1990s Hill would have been exposed to 'culture wars' on the North American campus. The ferocity of these wars, which have since

⁶⁸ Rosenthal and Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, p. 4.

spread and metastasised, explains much of the polarised way in which Hill has been positioned and perceived, whether as champion of embattled Western culture, or chthonic reactionary.

The lyric-form, as practised by Hill, owes its loyalty to beauty and enigma, not agit-prop. The sequence-form, however, provides cover, out of which Hill's polemic can emerge to intervene in culture wars and back into which it can then recede. It may be camouflaged as grumble or grudge, or fight more openly in the public sphere. It unites the personal with political:

And yes — bugger you, MacSikker et al., — I do
mourn and resent your desolation of learning:
Scientia that enabled, if it did not secure,
forms of understanding, far from despicable,
and furthest now, as they are most despised.
By understanding I understand diligence
and attention, appropriately understood
as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgment
of what is owed the dead. (TL, CXIX)

Here the imprecation and accusation develop antagonism towards MacSikker and O'Shem already exhibited in the 'Savage | Indignation' of CXI and the 'defiance' of CXVIII. Hill presents himself as someone passionately defending 'learning: | *Scientia*', where '*Scientia*', the Latin word for 'knowledge', might also stand for Western culture from antiquity onwards, if not to the present day then at least to the end of the eighteenth century when vernacular languages began to replace Latin as the language of learning. '*Scientia*' is a word from the Vulgate, which translates as 'knowledge'. In the second chapter of Genesis the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is 'lignum scientiae boni et mali'. '*Scientia*' has the connotation of 'science', as in use of and respect for evidence, rather than argument from authority or *ad hominem*. Rational discussion of evidence is arguably a defining feature of 'Western culture'. In the humanities, '*Scientia*' would signify a degree of knowledge and the obligation to present cogent argument, rather than a potpourri of subjectivism, approved attitudes and virtue-signalling. After the initial imprecation, Hill makes his case with succinct elegance, playing with polyptoton, words from the same root but with different endings as, above, in the run of 'understanding [...] far [...] despicable [...] furthest [...] despised [...] understanding [...] understand [...] understood [...] self-knowledge [...] acknowledgement'. Understanding is here understood not as self-expression but as 'diligence | and attention', where the word 'diligence' has Biblical resonance (with nine citations in Cruden and more for 'diligent' and 'diligently'). The 'daily acknowledgment | of what is owed the dead'

sounds like a daily office of devotion, more Confucian than Christian, although in being daily it is like the 'daily bread' of the Lord's Prayer. The last word 'dead' springs something of a surprise. A secular scientist might have emphasised 'what is owed the evidence', but Hill's argument links the two since we owe the dead respect for learning, *Scientia* and actuated self-knowledge, where 'respect' includes a willingness to fight for those values.

Hill tends to write against 'our time' (TL, XV). In his Clark Lectures (1986) he observed that two editors had made presuppositions about 'our time' in the phrase 'some of the most important writers of our time'. "'Our" time', Hill remarked, 'must here mean "your time made placable to our cultural scenario". If they truly meant "our time" they would have to take account of e.g. *my* time.'⁶⁹. When Hill asserts that 'A great | Polish luminary of our time is the obscure | Aleksander Wat' (TL, XV), this is both an assertion about Wat and the values which he embodied, and also a polemical challenge to widespread assumptions about 'our time'.

As cultural warrior or guerrilla, Hill appears both quixotic and embattled. There is something quixotic in his allegiance to unfashionable causes such as commending 'the *De Causa Dei* of Thomas Bradwardine' (TL, VIII, CXXV). Bradwardine wrote against the Pelagians of his time, and Hill is consistent in opposing ideological notions of human perfectibility. He battles intellectually and generationally against 'these strange children | pitiless in their ignorance and contempt' (TL, LXXVII), where the phrase 'strange children' is from Psalms 144 (verses 7 and 11), but in so doing, runs perilously close to grumbling. 'They don't know, | these kids, what weight of the word is' (SC, 1.19). Reading those lines, Hill commented ruefully 'That was the section that led A. N. Wilson to write that I was now writing like a silly old git.'⁷⁰.

Hill attacks Foucault and his followers who would collapse problems of moral science into questions of power, promoting a totalitarian paradigm which reduces complexity into the binary opposition of oppressed and oppressor, good and bad, black and white, and out-virtues dissent with its own master-question: 'who has the power here and who speaks for the oppressed group?' (Answer: us.) Rather than power and knowledge (Foucault's great reduction), Hill writes of power and sycophancy:

Power and sycophancy, sycophancy in power
power's own cringing to extrapolation

⁶⁹ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 636.

⁷⁰ Hill, 'Poetry Reading, Oxford 1 February 2006, Compact Disc'. Track 27.

and false prophecy. Subways of white tile
 smeared with obscene brown banners. Foucault
 running there for his life. Synaesthesia
 of appeasement's brain-stench. (TL, CXLIII)

Although this might refer to the appeasement of the 1930s (as in section X), the context suggests that the 'brain-stench' is the appeasement of a resentful, self-righteous, grandstanding faction weaponizing their discourse of knowledge and oppression, advancing a philistine agenda under the cover of 'diversity' and 'equality'. Foucault 'running for his life' is prophetic vision or revenge-fantasy.

Hill presents himself as a guardian of cultural memory. 'The cultivation of depths of memory I see as a civic duty as well as a private burden and consolation. Depths of memory relates to depth of language in some way'.⁷¹ When he mourns the ingratitude of "a nation | with so many memorials but no memory.' (TL, LXXVI) that 'so many' remembers both Churchill ('by so many to so few') and 'The Waste Land': 'so many, | I had not thought death had undone so many.' He remembers, with mixed gratitude and resentment, 'the protracted, indeterminate, | passion-through-history of the English Church, | the Church of Wesley, Newman, and George Bell.' (TL, CVI). The last name provides an example of how a text mutates through time. In 1998 Bishop Bell would have been known for his outspoken opposition to the 'saturation bombing' of German cities towards the end of the Second World War. Two decades later he is more likely to be known for the allegations of sexual abuse levelled against him posthumously and for the Church of England's inept response to those allegations.

In old age, Hill was fond of identifying the destructive principle of contemporary society as 'Plutocratic anarchy' (OB, XXXIV) or its variant, anarchical plutocracy. 'Anarchical Plutocracy destroys memory and dissipates attention'.⁷² Hill would trace this back to William Morris who spoke of 'anarchical Plutocracy' in a lecture at University College, Oxford in 1883 ("John Ruskin in the Chair"). Plutocracy is rule by the super-rich, but the meaning of 'Anarchy' is more ambiguous. In Hill's worldview and lexicon, 'anarchy' might be the opposite of hierarchy. Its agents might include a neo-Pelagian cult of Progress which thinks tradition bunk. If it relates to *laissez-faire* capitalism, globalisation, or an ideology of multiculturalism which furthers cultural disintegration, Hill does not

⁷¹ Brown and Paterson, 'Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words', (p. 117). First published in PBS Bulletin, Introduction to The Orchards of Syon, 2002.

⁷² Hill, 'Strongholds of the Imagination',

argue the case. Anarchy might be kin to Durkheimian anomie: 'Anomie is as good a word as any' (SS, 4) or 'anomy's coherence' (OS, III).

One battlefield in 'culture wars' is poetry wars. Here Hill challenged the dogma of 'accessibility' and insisted on poetry's right to be 'difficult'.

Take accessible to mean
acceptable, accommodating, openly servile.
Is that right, Missis, or is that right? I don't
care what I say, do I? (TL, XL)

Note the aggression in both the repeated question and in the tag question. Hill had a ready reply to the charge of elitism.

You are
wantonly obscure, *man sagt*. ACCESSIBLE
traded as DEMOCRATIC, he answers
as he answers most things these days 'easily'. (SS, 118)

The final adverb is uneasily haunted by Theodor Hacker's note that 'Tyrants always want a language and literature that is easily understood.'⁷³ The adverb 'easily', lolling at the end of its sentence, acknowledges that the answer risks being facile.

A cultural battle, a furore, and a storm in a teacup might be confused one for another. The 'bouts of sleep | and community arm-wrestling, elbows | in spilt beer' (SS, 10) conjures bored drinkers passing the time, or, more sardonically, members of the 'poetry community' in squabble. The word 'arm-wrestling' features in an exchange of acrimonious letters in the *London Review of Books* in 1985 in response to Tom Paulin's hostile review of essays edited by Peter Robinson: *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work* (Open University Press, 1985). After Eric Griffiths praised Martin Dodsworth's 'refusal to be armwrestled into statements of conviction which are not relevant to the matter in hand' (LRB, 7:19, 7 November 1985), John Lucas accused Griffiths of using 'the tricks of any cheap journalist' in calling his argument 'a "despicable" form of "arm-wrestling"' (LRB, 7:21, 5 December 1985).

As cultural warrior, Hill faces 'desolation of learning' (CXIX) with poetry not so much a weapon as 'a *sad and angry consolation*' (CXLVIII). The poet is despairing, truculent and cheerful. 'I'm drawn to writers who seem to me to be brave, beleaguered and cheerful – like John Dryden.'⁷⁴ The voice crying in the

⁷³ Brown and Paterson, 'Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words', (p. 118). PBS Bulletin, 2002.

⁷⁴ Hill, 'Strongholds of the Imagination',

wilderness may be heard, heeded, misinterpreted. Hill's phrase was taken up by Chris Woodhead, Chief Inspector of Schools (1994-2000), in the title of his book: *A Desolation of Learning: Is This the Education our Children Deserve?* (Pencil Sharp Publishing, 2009). Hill in turn cites Woodhead's book in his 'Confessio Amantis'.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Critics have been slow to appreciate the diversity and range of Hill's achievement with book-length sequences. This chapter examined the workings of these sequences with reference to two fundamental principles of poetic sequence: extension and relationship. It then argued that Hill's sequences are characterised by lively, witty and surprising play of different modes or genres: a play which I refer to as 'multimodality'. The sequence-form emboldens Hill to include modes which he did not assay in lyric, notably *laus et vituperatio*, the didactic, the polemical, the prophetic, the comic, the confessional and the journalistic. He probably avoided these modes because they would overpower or undermine any lyric in which they appeared. For example, the early lyric 'Merlin' has no place for the comic, the confessional or the quotidian. That is not to say that 'Merlin' is itself 'pure' lyric or monomodal for it mixes the prophetic with the elegiac, or the elegiac with the telegraphic. In its short space of eight lines, it could not stage the carnival of different modes, including lower modes, which can be celebrated in longer sequences, where different sections can act as a check against each other and prevent any single mode from dominating. Thus, the prophetic mode is checked by the farcical which is in turn lifted by instruction and polemic, making modal patterns through the sequence. Each mode may transform in the catalysing presence of other modes, creating effects impossible in lyric.

The sequence-form also allows Hill to explore selfhood, especially disjointed, discontinuous selfhood as it changes through time and context. As can be seen from his *Collected Critical Writings*, Hill has a deep interest in ethical and intellectual aspects of selfhood. Far more than the lyric or the shorter sequences of the 1970s, the book-length sequences offer a theatre of character which is often a comedy, although in *Speech! Speech!* it is closer to tragic farce. One of Hill's personae is the cultural Warrior, or guardian of cultural memory seen as a vital aspect of civic intelligence. Within the different time-states or time-zones of its different sections, the sequence-form layers conventional chronology into the psychological time of memory and imagination. The

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Hill, 'Confessio Amantis', *The Record*, Keble College, (2009).

arrangement into multiple sections also allows for a re-set of imagined context and literary mode with each new section.

Cumulatively the discussion demonstrates how accomplished Hill already was in his writing of sequences before the late flowering of *The Daybooks*. The next chapter will examine with reference to *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres* how the sequence-form differs from lyric in its representation of selfhood and time.

Chapter 5

From lyric to sequence: 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres'

Introduction

Sequence differs from lyric in its sense of selfhood and of the self-in-time. Its different aesthetic will now be demonstrated by reference to a thirty-year project which Hill published, revised, and expanded in three distinct texts: the three 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (1984);¹ 'Seven Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (2009);² and the twenty-one *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres, 1982-2012*.³ The three versions furnish us with invaluable evidence about how Hill changed his approach to writing poetry during these thirty years. Given that key variables — the title, the stated genre, and subject of address ('Hymns to Our Lady') as well as the poetic form (sections each consisting of five quatrains in a five-stress line) — are held constant, changes in style and aesthetic approach can be observed. As Hill revises and expands the 'Hymns' we will see the effect of his changing ideas about the creative possibilities of writing sequences; the use of the first-person in poetry; presentation and performance of self, especially the imperfect self; notions of decorum and (im)propriety. In their different versions the 'Hymns' demonstrate Hill's migration from lyric to sequence.

As of January 2021, there exists no substantial criticism of the three different versions of the 'Hymns' nor of the connections between them. This may be partly because the hymns have never appeared in print as a solo publication. When first published in Hill's *Collected Poems* of 1985 the three initial 'Hymns' were followed and overshadowed by 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy'. Subsequently, the 'Seven Hymns' of 2009 are published only online. Presented for the first time as a book, the twenty-one *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres* took their place in *Broken Hierarchies* between *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) and *Canaan* (1996), with five books preceding them and fifteen following them. Surrounded by these twenty other books, the *Hymns* were overlooked by reviewers who had so much else on which to comment.

¹ Hill, *Collected Poems*, pp. 177-79.

² Geoffrey Hill, 'Seven Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres', *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, VII (2009).

³ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, pp. 157-68.

This chapter examines how Hill wrote, revised and expanded his 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' through the versions of 1984, 2009 and on to the *Hymns* of 2013. It discusses developments in his poetic approach, particularly the role of selfhood in the text; and evocation of time, both the sacred or eternal time of *mystique* and the secular chronology of *politique*. It also considers the play of wit, scepticism and heterodoxy across the hymns, asking how this affects the way we understand and categorise them with respect to genre. This analysis of the 'Hymns' illuminates Hill's move from the intense perfection and polished finality of lyric towards an aesthetic of sequence which is open-ended, digressive, and fragmented – deliberately and flamboyantly so.

'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres', 1984

There are three 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (1984), where three is the number of the Trinity, the number which represents the spiritual and eternal. These 'Hymns' cohere by holding to a steady focus and abiding by three 'lyric unities': unity of place, unity of time, and unity of action, like the classical unities in Aristotle's theory of drama. Unity of action is understood as unity of address and this section observes and explains the absence of first-person singular forms. Having established the presence of the unities, it explores a countervailing tendency which is the play of wit across the hymns and the disconcerting sense of dissonance therein. Examining the interplay of unity and dissonance takes us to the core of these peculiar hymns.

Keeping to lyrical unities

Each of the original 1984 'Hymns' is focused on Chartres and its cult of 'Our Lady'. The central action of 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (1984) is that announced in the title: acts of address to Our Lady. The title is not 'Hymns about Our Lady of Chartres'. All three Hymns are addressed unequivocally and intensely to her, throughout. The address is sustained by skilfully combining direct vocative address; second-person imperatives; the second-person pronoun ('you'); and the second-person possessive determiner ('your'). This sustained address, which would be a strong action in any culture, sounds even more distinctive in a Protestant or post-Protestant culture inclined to dismiss 'Our Lady' as little more than a theological relic or superstitious fantasy. One form of address is prayer, and we might initially take the 'Hymns' as public/private prayer, enriched with description, intermixed with expressions of an inner conflict of faith and doubt. The opening sentence of the first hymn moves towards its final word of 'salutation!' The subsequent, near-continuous salutation to Our Lady is the essential organising principle of the 'Hymns'. The

assertion can be tested by a thought-experiment in which we eliminate from the poem all sentences which contain forms of address to Our Lady. This done, the 'Hymns' collapse and all but disappear. Sustained address gives the 'Hymns' much of their character and emotional force, persuading the reader that they express genuine conviction, arising from strong feelings, however tortured, be they feelings of love or fear: longing, intimacy, exaltation, despair.

A hymn usually transcends the secular time of clocks, calendars and timetables, the 'hours, days, months' which are Donne's 'rags of time', to lift the reader (or singer) into an imagined time-space beyond Chronos. In the experience of full-hearted hymn-singing, as heaven and earth are brought together, the temporal is felt to fall away. This is a subjective and intersubjective experience, aided by the absence of temporal markers in the hymn. In terms of verbal tense, Hill's three 'Hymns' aim away from secular temporality towards an experience of 'worship-time'. They are predominantly in a present tense which correlates neither with Chronos nor the momentary quotidian but points beyond the temporal to an eternal where hindsight and foresight become one. The presiding tense of these Hymns is a compound present which combines several different kinds of subjectively felt present. These include a) an historic, vivid or imagined present in which Péguy (died 1914) still 'cries out' in the present tense; b) a continuous, timeless present of metaphysical truth-claims ('you are the stained world's | ransom'); and c) present-moment description which d) might also be habitual action and which e) verges on timeless symbol ('Across France the great west | windows are full of the sun's holocaust'). But this is already to simplify since the last example also recalls mid-twentieth-century atrocity ('holocaust'). The merging of all these modes of the present tense creates the effect of a far-reaching present, often grand and exalted, which is the lyric time of the poem itself, in which the poem unfolds, and also the time of faith and worship, occurring within secular time but felt to transcend it. With respect to kinds of speech-act, this comprehensive present encompasses exhortation, greeting, description, question, effusion, creedal affirmation and exclamation almost as one. Establishing a sense of time *sub specie aeternitatis*, it is an 'ecstatic' present tense in the sense that it stands outside markers of secular time.

The 1984 'Hymns', therefore, combine unity of place (Chartres) with unity of action (sustained address to 'Our Lady') within unity of time (an ecstatic present). Yet these 'Hymns' also unleash a dangerous play of wit which blemishes the sacred with something (apparently) sacrilegious.

'I' and selfhood

The 1984 'Hymns' contain no first-person singular forms, perhaps because the 'I' is so often a carrier of the social self and of conventional sequential time. Hymns are likely to exclude a socially marked self in the first-person. They might tolerate the presence of an undifferentiated worshipping 'I' free from social markers and outside social time, as in a hypothetical line such as 'I sing your praise O dulcis Virgo'. The introduction of a socially marked self would be bathetic and disruptive. The 'Hymns' would be vitiated by a line such as 'Sipping my Lucozade, I reflect...' These 'Hymns' do not house a socially-marked self from a recognisable social world performing mundane actions such as Larkin's 'Hatless, I take off | My cycle-clips in awkward reverence'. This is a formative exclusion. The absence of the first-person pronoun gives power, all power almost, to second-person address.

The 1984 'Hymns' have six instances of the first-person plural ('we', 'us', 'our') of which five occur in the third hymn. Its opening injunction is to Notre-Dame de Sous-Terre, an eleventh-century statue in the crypt of the cathedral, to 'pray for us' where 'us' is quite open and could refer to us human beings, us believers, us who pray to you, or we who are reading the poem. Whoever they include, these first-person plural forms do not convey any strong social marking.

Wit and dissonance

The strong unity of these 'Hymns' – their unity of place, time and address – gives them a sense of harmony, as if they are mutually aligned, undivided and internally consistent. This helps to persuade a reader that these 'Hymns' spring from sincerity or faith. The sense of harmony, however, is also contested by something dissonant, often covertly and wittily dissident. As always with Hill's poetry, we should attend to his wit, genial or caustic, because it is more than decorative; because it can pervade and flavour the whole; because it is too often critically neglected; and because it can be transformative. The word 'wit' here refers to comments and observations which surprise and delight by their dexterity, accuracy and unexpectedness, as in 'the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way' (OED s. v. 'wit', n. 8. a). Elements of wit and dissonance give the 'Hymns' much of their distinctive character.

Since dissonance depends on context, great potential for dissonance stems from the expectations deriving from that bold title-word: 'Hymns'. It implies a 'song of praise to God', particularly one which is adapted to be sung in a religious service (OED. 1.), or else 'an ode or song of praise in honour of a deity, a country, etc.' (OED. 2.), as in Julia Ward Howe's 'Battle Hymn of the

Republic'. Given that these are 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' we expect a song of praise to 'Our Lady', evenness of tone and inoffensiveness: not perplexity, irony or veiled criticism. Had Hill chosen to call his poems 'Cantata Profana', as in his notebooks he considered,⁴ or 'Troubled Meditations on Conflicted Feelings regarding Our Lady of Chartres' then dissonance would be both anticipated and forestalled. The actual title-word, 'Hymns', establishes powerful expectations against which the poem can create equally powerful dissonance. A reader might understandably misdoubt: 'but these are not hymns' or 'such sentiments are incongruous in a hymn'. These 'Hymns' are banking on just such a reaction.

After discussing some examples of dissonance, this subsection considers the purpose and effect of dissonance. It argues that dissonance helps to animate and colour the poem with subjectivity, to create a persona and suggest a voice. Not only can dissonance create human interest, but it can also do much to construct a text's 'sense of pitch' and 'centre of gravity'.⁵ This subsection asks to what extent dissonance tips into heterodoxy. It also contends that some of the wit is self-describing of the poem, giving the 'Hymns' what seems to be a rudimentary self-consciousness of themselves as complex, ambiguous texts.

Dissonance enters these 'Hymns' early. In the first hymn, Our Lady is saluted not with trumpets but 'with handbells, jews' harps, risible | tuckets of salutation!' This 'risible' salutation is immediately followed by a harsh alternative: 'Otherwise | gnashing and gnawing', such that the cries either of hell or hell-on-earth already sound out in the third line. In the next stanza we meet 'the new poor, | scavengers upon grace' where a 'scavenger' was historically one who cleaned the streets of dirt (OED 2. a) and usually now refers to an animal that feeds on decaying matter, such as the scavenger beetle (OED 2. b) or 'one who collects filth' (OED 2. c). The noun is striking and amusing, but also jarring in so far as it brings to mind foxes scavenging dustbins and could blasphemously imply that Christ's grace is the putrid waste being scavenged.

Dissonance is also there at the centre of the 'Hymns', in their central stanza:

Love is at odds. Your beauty has gone out
so many times; too vividly has flared
through the mild dreams of Herod undeterred.

⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry Notebook 27', in *Special Collections, Geoffrey Hill archive*, (Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, 1984), (p. 171).

⁵ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 376.

There is much odd and 'at odds' even in three-quarters of this one quatrain. Its first sentence, disconcertingly simple, four monosyllables, may have us wonder: if 'Love is at odds' what is it 'at odds' with? Itself, and if so, perpetually so? The idea slips towards heresy if we recollect that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8,16). The phrase 'at odds' speaks of disparity (OED, s.v. odds, n. 2. b.) but also of disagreement, conflict, variance, strife (OED, s.v. odds, n. 4). It is a Hillian phrase of existential discomfort as in 'A boy at odds in the house' (*Mercian Hymns*, VI). If it is not a lament that your beauty has been extinguished like a candle, 'Your beauty has gone out | so many times' might be a proclamation that your beauty has marched forth into the mission-field. Since the adjective 'mild' is usually associated with both Mary, as in the fifteenth-century carol 'Mary mother, meek and mild', and with Jesus, as in Charles Wesley's hymn 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild', it is shocking to use the same adjective of Herod's dreams. Again, the word 'undeterred' applies most readily to the adjacent noun 'Herod' in which case it would underline the ineffectuality of 'Your beauty'. It is quite a stretch to construe 'undeterred', the last word in the sentence, as an adverb qualifying the way your beauty has 'gone out' such that the sentence praises the courage of 'Your beauty' undeterred.

Wit, oddity, heterodoxy and dissonance, merging into one another, are tricky to isolate and identify. When Hill calls Chartres 'Sion's twin city | or city-in-law' it sounds like a *jeu de mots* or well-worn joke about in-laws, but it is then followed by the phrase 'the sun's holocaust'. Whilst that might be no more than a vibrant description of the intense blaze of sunset as glimpsed in a cathedral's west windows, it sounds more ominous within its chain of signifiers: 'jews' harps... Sion... Sion's twin city... holocaust... dying'.

Also consider the various kinds of dissonance in the central stanza of the third Hymn. It is strange first to describe Our Lady's countenance not as blessed, loving or mild, but as 'strange'.

Spes nostra, salve! Your strange countenance
is our remaking. Turn, then, its remote
familial smile upon this Christian rote.
Sly innocence of the blood seized in a trance

by violent knowledge – what it is to know
our strength!

It is also strange to describe Our Lady's smile not as warm or caring, but as 'remote'. The "Christian rote" is presumably the Eucharist, but 'rote' carries undertones of routine and rigmarole, as in learning 'by rote' in a mechanical

way, 'without proper understanding or reflection' (OED 1, s.v. 'rote', n. 1). This could disclose a Protestant's wariness of Romanist ritual. Hillian 'innocence' is unlikely to be simply innocent and the oxymoron of 'Sly innocence' recalls other Hill poems 'Weaving their innocence with guile',⁶ such as the phrase 'innocent venoms of the earth',⁷ or that Franciscan fragment in which 'the serpent | Innocently shone its head.'⁸ In the phrase 'Sly innocence of the blood', the crux is: whose blood? Whether it be the blood of Our Lady, of Christ, of sinful humanity or of the poet, each possible interpretation involves such a high level of dissonance that a reader may well shy away and think that some other explanation must be correct. The poem flows on, untroubled by a boulder of indeterminacy. Perhaps that indeterminacy acts like a Zen koān, mocking reason, rationality and Urizen, making space for some other faculty such as wonder, awe or devotion. Or perhaps the hymn has turned in on itself such that the aptness of the three adjectives — 'strange', 'remote' and 'Sly' — lies in their being self-descriptive, applying better to this 'hymn' than to Our Lady, as if the hymn is not so much describing Mary as 'remaking' itself in its own image.

Do wit and dissonance operate for their own sake, as a jewel, or do they serve some greater function? One effect of wit is to animate the poem with an alert, distinctive and even likeable intelligence. In these three 'Hymns' which have no first-person singular forms from which to infer a stance or voice, the mix of observations and comments and some of the peculiar word-choices combine to sketch something of an individual persona and viewpoint. Whilst the sustained address to Our Lady testifies to passionate faith, the wit works as an antiphonal voice of someone gifted with sceptical intelligence. This is a matter of both style and integrity. We gather, for example, that our guide much prefers 'your true || servant Péguy' to the crowd of clattering 'bienpensants'. This French noun (which the OED records but refrains from defining) is Janus-faced, both positive and pejorative. A 'bienpensant' is either someone conservative and conformist, or a 'progressive' who espouses moral fashions in a self-admiring way. It could be somebody right-thinking, righteous or self-righteous. The fact that Hill uses it in the plural indicates herd-mentality whilst the verb 'clatter' communicates noisy show. The poet then distinguishes 'Our Lady' from the material icon which represents her, and jokes dryly at the expense of the latter. So, he moves from the second-person when addressing Our Lady to the third-person for 'la Dame du Pilier and her wooden stare', where 'wooden' figuratively signifies 'dull' or 'inert' but here also means literally 'made out of wood' (walnut in fact). This is

⁶ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 6. 'Holy Thursday'.

⁷ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 41. 'Locust Songs'.

⁸ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 60. 'The Assisi Fragments'.

hardly flattering to the dame in question. That 'wooden stare' is noticed, named and ironically paired, as by a quicker intelligence, to the verb 'adore'.

The reader is likely to infer something about the character and subjectivity of the (putative) poet-speaker. Although he is devout in the sense of 'adoring', he is not so in an overly pious way. He keeps his distance from the priests who 'go nodding by, dainty and shrewd', where the nodding hints at something too automatic, too self-approving or approval-seeking. Hill's chosen adjectives imply critical distance in that a flower or patisserie can be 'dainty', but priests collectively should not be. The adjective 'shrewd' can mean 'sharp-witted' and 'canny', as in 'a shrewd investor', but its original meaning is 'depraved, wicked; evil-disposed, malignant' (OED 1. a), implying that these 'nodding' priests are more *au fait* with the realm of '*politique*' than '*mystique*'. Taken together the pairing 'dainty and shrewd' shrewdly and daintily portrays the priests as effeminate, worldly and scheming. A latently anti-clerical attitude is consistent with other Hill poems such as 'The Bidden Guest' with its 'stiffly-lined priest' where the adjective's focus on sartorial stiffness suggests undue emphasis on sartorial appearance rather than the upright heart and pure.⁹

Wit as lively intelligence may testify to both intellectual flexibility and probity. It can switch mode, link opposites, surprise and delight as in the second hymn with a scatological (but oddly beautiful) sentence unimaginable in the pages of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*: 'Outside the glass, pigeons rancid as gulls | roost in their stucco-dung on the tiered sills.' This glides from observation of nature, through disgust ('rancid... stucco-dung') to masonic detail ('tiered sills'). The 'stucco-dung' uses the technical detail of 'stucco' sensuously to evoke stickiness or stuckness in a way which may seem improper in a hymn. Hill's hymns contain elements which are calculatedly inappropriate, such that it would never be true of them what Marvell wrote 'On Mr. Milton's "Paradise Lost"': 'Thou hast not missed one thought that could be fit, | And all that was improper dost omit'.¹⁰

Does the play of subversive wit pitch these 'Hymns' towards heterodoxy? This is a matter of attitude and tone as well as belief. Consider the final stanza of the first hymn which capitalises Mary's quality 'Mercy' and seems to cast aspersions on it: 'at the high seats | where Mercy is redeemed from its own threats'. The notion that divine Mercy needs to be 'redeemed from its own threats' is unorthodox, as if divine Mercy were a complicit velvet glove over the tyrannical iron fist of divine Justice. The 'high seats', however, could recall the

⁹ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 8. 'The Bidden Guest'.

¹⁰ Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, p. 192. Lines 27-28.

Canaanite 'high places', seats of 'heathen' sacrifice, or the high seats occupied by those who wield power in Church and State, as in a 'High Court of Justice', in which case worldly 'Mercy' might connive with threats and other forms of injustice and therefore stand in need of redemption.

Consider another disconcerting passive verb: the usage of 'spared' in the Hymns' final sentence:

The seraphim with stark pinions aglow

look blankly at us: we who may be spared,
as well as other ecstasies, the hues
of burning and the damned at their old cries,
your varied mercies, variously adored.

The first dissonance here is angelological in that the seraphim are neglecting their proper office, which is to adore the godhead, not 'look blankly at us'. The second dissonance has to do with that passive verb 'spared'. Usually we are 'spared' something unwanted, such as punishment, death or 'gory details', but what we may be 'spared' here are Mary's 'varied mercies' through which, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, we might be granted eternal salvation. It is indeed an odd suite of hymns which end with us being 'spared' the Virgin's 'varied mercies, variously adored'.

At times these 'Hymns' appear wittily to be describing themselves. The first line of the 1984 'Hymns' ends with 'risible', rhymed in the fourth line with 'invisible' and those two adjectives can be taken as twin poles about which the hymns turn and develop, where the 'invisible' corresponds to the *mystique* of Christian faith, with the 'risible' as the *politique* of self-seeking in society. Perhaps there is always something latently comic in any human attempt to worship the Absolute, and the more forcefully it is expelled, the more disruptively it returns. The 'risible' here includes the sceptical, ironic, irreverent, subversive, and grotesque such as the notion that 'gnashing and gnawing sound out your praise.' The play of 'risible | invisible' tips the 'Hymns' out of the liturgical and into a space for poetic derring-do, dialectical drama and brinksmanship of witty ingenuity.

I suggested above that in the third stanza of the third hymn three of the adjectives — 'strange', 'remote' and 'Sly' — apply to the hymn itself as much as to Our Lady. The same could be said of the adjectives 'dainty and shrewd' in the third stanza of the first hymn. In the next stanza we might suspect that it is not only the 'virgins' who 'do the honours of your mysteries'. Somehow the reader too is called to 'do the honours' of interpreting the 'mysteries' of the hymn. As for 'those neophytes who found | in you the source of life, their secret

wound', we might feel that these 'Hymns' too with their 'radiantly-occluded' lyricism are hiding at the source of their life 'their secret wound'.

In conclusion, Hill's wit functions in these 'Hymns' to provide some sense of voice, perspective and attitude. Such provision is even more important given the absence of any first-person singular pronoun. It gives us the glimpse of a persona, a perceptive, critical observer who preserves independence of mind and sense of humour. If the putative speaker, our guide to the scene, exhibits a touch of crabbiness, that makes him more believable and more likeable. Where most hymns express belief, Hill's 'Hymns' set belief and scepticism dancing and sparring with each other. It is part of their distinctive achievement to stage the 'risible' alongside the 'invisible', as if in a contest where wit is both participant and referee. While the strong lyrical unities imply devotion, dissonance takes an impish delight in changing register, and in keeping questions and contradictions unresolved. In constructing mutually contradictory subject-positions, from devout to sceptical to resentful and back again, dissonance works to prevent closure.

'Seven Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (2009)

When Hill expanded his three original hymns into the 'Seven Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' (2009), he disrupted unities of place, action and time. The new sequence leaps from one place to another and it represents time in a more complex, secular way, allowing a greater role for the self (as represented by the first-person pronoun), along with a more complex relationship between that self and 'Our Lady', who appears in greater jeopardy in the fallen world.

In a quasi-mathematical sense, the new sequence is centred in the same place as the earlier 1984 'Hymns'. Two new 'Hymns' have been added on either side such that the three original hymns, slightly revised, are still in the same order, balancing the new whole on the same point of equilibrium. If in the three original 'Hymns' the number three represents things spiritual (the Trinity), then in the four new 'Hymns' the number four represents things temporal, as in the four elements of earth, air, fire and water. The sum, seven, 'represents the completeness of the spiritual and temporal'.¹¹ Put another way, forty lines have been added before the original and another forty lines have been added after it. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, forty is usually the number of purification, as in the Jewish rite of Purification (Leviticus 12. 1-4) or the forty days of Lent. We might feel, however, that Hill's additions contribute not purification but

¹¹ Malcolm Miller, *Chartres Cathedral*, 2001 edn, (Andover, Hampshire: Pitkin Unichrome, 1985), p. 95.

contamination, as they unsettle the 'Hymns' by breaking the unities of place, time and action.

Breaking lyrical unities

Where the three original hymns had focused on Chartres within a sort of 'eternal present' these new ones dart about in place and time, bringing in war and the two World Wars of the twentieth century. The first new 'Hymn' moves from the French Third Republic (1870-1940) and the fallen soldiers of 1914 to Roman centurions in the New Testament – in Capernaum, at the cross, guarding the Sepulchre and with Saint Paul – before flying back to the start of Christ's ministry at the wedding feast in Cana and forward to the eschaton and the arrival of Christ's mourners in heaven. In the second hymn, Our Lady new-arises amidst a world of Original and continuing Sin. The hymn hovers in a post-Edenic world ('Cain's wrath'), in 'a cosmic web' which includes signs of the Zodiac ('the Goat, the Crab'). We might have left Chartres for an archetypal symbolic realm or still be there, pondering the thirteenth-century Zodiac window, one of the lower windows on the south side of the ambulatory, which shows a crab for the sign of Cancer, also Capricorn being 'half goat and half fish, the fish being a symbol for Jesus, whose advent is feasted in the sign of Capricorn.' The head of the goat in the goat-fish roundel looks up to a quatrefoil in which Christ is enthroned as Chronocrator, 'seated between two candles, and the Greek letters alpha and omega. Time, hence, is both linear and cyclic.' Two windows away, underneath the famous Blue Virgin, Notre-Dame de la Belle Verrière, six scenes narrate the Marriage Feast of Cana, referred to in the penultimate line of Hill's first (2009) 'Hymn'. 'Cain's wrath', his fratricide, mentioned in the second quatrain of the second (2009) 'Hymn', can be found in the thirteenth-century glass of one of the lower windows on the south aisle of the nave, in the 'Good Samaritan and Adam and Eve window'. In the same window we see the 'serpent of the tree'.¹² Rather than unity of place, a doubleness includes both Biblical places and the symbolic stained-glass windows of Chartres Cathedral.

After slightly amended versions of the three original hymns, Hill has added another two hymns (numbers VI and VII). In the sixth hymn the Virgin is addressed at its centre, imagined in *sacra conversazione* with 'this Jewish child | Fixed at your breast, in the great glass annealed', where that 'annealed' recalls Herbert's 'The Windows': 'But when thou dost anneal in glasse thy storie'. As with the second Hymn and the new sequence, war rages on either side of the Virgin. The sixth hymn begins 'A match crack-scuffs' which recalls the first

¹² Miller, *Chartres Cathedral*, pp. 72, 64.

image in Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation of *Henry V*, described in the screenplay as 'Darkness. A match is struck.'¹³ Hill elides trench warfare on the Western Front with the siege of Troy, Englishing and upending the French 'autres temps, autres moeurs' as 'Other manners, another century', although the context invites a meaning more like 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose'. As in the second of the three original 1984 'Hymns' (which becomes the fourth of the 'Seven Hymns'), 'Our Lady' is juxtaposed with Herod. The oblique allusion, if such it is, to the mass murder of Jews in Nazi death-camps ('the sun's holocaust') is made explicit in a line which leaps almost two millennia: 'Herod was dire but he was not the Shoah.' The modern Hebrew 'Shoah' (literally 'catastrophe') is then rhymed with the word 'Chaos', which brings the mid twentieth century into relation with the salvific 'shattering of Chaos'. After the Virgin's brief appearance between 'Shoah' and 'Chaos', we find David Jones ('Dai Greatcoat'), whose *In Parenthesis* is part-dedicated to 'the enemy front-fighters who shared our pains against whom we found ourselves by misadventure'.¹⁴ Hill then moves to another foot-soldier from the First World War, Charles Péguy, and ends with the line: '*Mystique* and *politique* there intershriven.' (VI). That verb 'intershrive', known neither to OED or Google, is a neologism based on the verb 'shrive', meaning 'to hear confession and impose penance' or else 'to make confession', as in Hamlet's 'not shriving time allowed'.¹⁵ To be 'intershriven' would, presumably, be the action of jointly confessing or doing penance together, suggesting that both '*Mystique*' and '*politique*', the 'temple scroll' and the 'unsold *Cahier*', have erred. In the seventh 'hymn', Hill, or the Hill who is the poem's protagonist, returns to Chartres, but this time 'in mauvais esprit', outside the Cathedral, in the commercial and service zone, pointing out 'my old pension in the rue St-Jacques'. He presents his modern martyrs, Charles Péguy and Jean Moulin, as pawns in the politics of civic memorialization while the scene shifts to Paris and the secular splendour of the Panthéon.

The effect of the overall revision is to expand the Hymns' geographical, historical and thematic range, and to place 'Our Lady' in a more secular, hostile environment. The seven 'Hymns' of 2009 no longer abide by a unity of place. Nor, as we shall see, do they maintain unity of address.

¹³ Kenneth Branagh and William Shakespeare, *Henry V, a Screen Adaptation*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 15.

¹⁴ David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963 [1937]), p. xvii.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 787. V. 2. TLN 3549.

In the 1984 'Hymns' the unity of address was clear from the opening quatrain: 'Salve reginal' tells us that these 'Hymns' are addressing the Queen of Heaven, 'Our Lady'. By contrast the first quatrain of the 2009 'Hymns' begins 'Portrait of a centurion,' which has little, on the face of it, to do with 'Our Lady' (although if we take the 'centurion' being portrayed as Charles Péguy then he is, we are told, her 'true servant'.) She enters these 'Hymns' slowly, unnamed; present perhaps among 'some who bear | The weight of sorrow to the driven fold' (I: stanza 2); present but anonymous among 'Christ's mourners risen as the unbereaved' (I: st.5). In the second hymn she first appears, in hostile circumstances, identified only by the second-person pronoun: 'You new-arising through a cosmic web | Of truth and fable to a signal reign' (II:3). When that word 'reign' reconfigures as 'Regina' in her title 'Regina Coeli', Queen of Heaven, the act of direct address names her but then falters. Her life is abbreviated into a single line ('Childhood, Annunciation, the Dormition', II:5) whose brevity borders on comedy (as in 'hatches, matches, despatches'), before the hymn moves on: 'Late snow ravelling off along the wind.' This is followed by the three original hymns (now, slightly revised as numbers III, IV and V) with their much steadier address to 'Our Lady' though this also lapses in the first two stanzas of the sixth hymn. The directive 'look at Odysseus' is not, one presumes, directed at Our Lady, unless it is an act of presumption. The address is resumed in the third stanza with its question: 'What do you say, Vierge, to this Jewish child | Fixed at your breast [...]'. The seventh 'hymn' progresses without any address at all to 'Our Lady' until its final line: This passage of great things your conflagration.' The possessive determiner 'your' makes this a kind of address and it may be felt to operate retrospectively on the antecedent lines, though how far back it reaches to govern the 'hymn' and turn it into implicit address would be hard to determine. Address has become more interrupted and intermittent, its boundaries disputable.

We have also seen (above) that the three 1984 'Hymns' are written predominantly in an 'ecstatic present'. Something of this is conserved in the 2009 'Hymns', especially the original and central ones, but the new 'Hymns' complicate and compromise the overall effect of time and tense, ejecting the whole from the ecstatic present. The most significant time-change occurs in the seventh hymn when the poet returns to Chartres, such that the 'ecstatic' present tense of the three original (now central) hymns is converted retrospectively into an experience which is now fixed irreversibly in the past. 'Return,' begins that seventh and final hymn, 'if in mauvais esprit, to Chartres'. The performative 'Return' enacts the grand style as in Milton's 'Return, Alpheus: the dread voice is past'. But grandeur is undercut by the conscious grumpiness of 'if in mauvais

esprit', where 'mauvais esprit' normally means a bad mood but more literally could signify an evil spirit, the opposite of 'le Saint-Esprit', the Holy Spirit. What matters is not so much the negativity of 'mauvais esprit' or the *comédie humaine* of fractious ill-temper as the fact that an extra layer of time has been added. It follows that the original numinous experience, formerly expressed in an ecstatic present, is re-appropriated by Chronos as a slither of sequential historical time. In this way the sense of ecstatic present which was a distinguishing feature of the original hymns becomes limited and relegated to fallen time. It has been reclaimed by Chronos as the shadow or memory of an experience now over.

For all its dipping into recognisable secular history, the overall time-scheme of the new sequence retains something imaginative, sacred and eschatological: 'Jehovah's time not ours' (VI). Thus, the first of the 'Seven Hymns', having reversed from the First World War back to the time of Christ and Saint Paul, darts into Resurrection and heaven with 'Christ's mourners risen as the unbereaved.' The word 'risen' has a past form but would refer to a future state, or a present one if we read it in terms of preterism or realized eschatology.

'I' and selfhood

Hill's changing representation of time is closely related to his changing presentation of selfhood. We have noted the absence of the first-person singular ('I', 'me', 'my', 'mine') in the three 'Hymns' of 1984 and seen how this contributes to their exalted register as if they transcend any individual subject's experience of and in time. In the 'Seven Hymns' of 2009, however, the first-person singular pronoun appears in five places. This means that the sequence now incorporates an individual or persona identifiable as Hill or someone much like him. This first-person helps to integrate the disparate elements of the new sequence; it softens and humanises what might otherwise sound overly didactic; and it embodies a sense of time passing.

The introduction of a first-person into these (2009) 'Hymns' has a significant effect on the sequence, perhaps even changing it from one genre to another. 'Have I miscounted?' Hill wonders in the first hymn, which puts us in the present tense of the hymn's composition, as if the hymn is vouchsafing us a confidence about Hill's thinking-process and (second) thoughts. This creates new intimacy and offers a reassuring contract of comprehensibility between text and reader. The first quatrain has been disorienting (with no main verb) and the imagery of the second is esoteric. The question which opens the third quatrain initially seems unexpected, but then the first-person question ('Have I miscounted?')

acts as a pledge that we are in an intelligible world, alongside, as it were, a poet who cares about textual and historical accuracy.

'One I think was blinded' muses the Hillian first-person two stanzas later in the same hymn. The phrase 'I think' introduces an element of present-tense subjectivity and uncertainty into what is otherwise in danger of sounding didactic. 'Cursing I say' (II) adds a dash of something personal and emphatic, as in an expostulation. Nine lines into a sentence which is hard to construe, the reader may feel encouraged by the company of an authorial 'I' who is also floundering, impatient and splenetic. A sentence which has ranged (bewilderingly) across death, Cain, the serpent, the Goat and the Crab, is rescued by the human presence, the present tense of 'Cursing I say'. 'That 'Cursing' takes us twelve lines back to the 'imprecations' of the opening line.

The most significant single use of the first-person is in the seventh hymn where the deictic gesture of 'There's my old pension' (VII) sketches the possibility of a back-story about where Hill stayed, as if he is offering to take us back-stage, to reveal the inspirational experience behind his original (1984) 'Hymns'. This, as we have seen, leads the three original hymns out of the timeless and back into the regime of Chronos.

In admitting the first-person, the self, into the poem Hill is following an insight which we discussed in the previous chapter: 'I have come to see that the closest approximation of truth requires that the shortcomings of the self shall be admitted into the most intimate textures of the work.'¹⁶ Hill risks that 'the shortcomings of the self' may entail error, profanity and banality, wrecking the exalted achievement of the three original hymns.

The 2009 'Hymns' tip away from adoration of 'Our Lady' and towards the interests, anxieties and compulsions of the self. The changing pronouns indicate this, but the full story is more about the troubled self (and less about 'Our Lady') than any pronoun-count can show. The opening of the 1984 'Hymns' was a summons or invitation to join in a procession of praise ('Eia, with handbells'). The opening of the 2009 'Hymns' offers a 'Portrait of a centurion' which is more of a sketch in that it contains five descriptive phrases, unconnected by conjunction or main verb, followed by 'Well, good for him.' That 'good for him' could be a nod of approval but sounds more like dismissal, a formula by which something is 'curtly abandoned' in the interests of moving

¹⁶ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 154).

on.¹⁷ The tone and function of 'good for him' sounds contrary to traditional hymn or even is dismissive of it.

Wit and dissonance

The 1984 'Hymns' had started with praise which broke over the line with an acknowledgement that praise can be inadequate or comical ('risible | tuckets'). The first line-break of the 'Seven Hymns' has the centurion 'shot | To glory'. This subverts the cliché of a celebrity 'shot to' fame or 'shot to stardom' since in context the phrase looks like a euphemism for 'killed', or 'shot to pieces'. After the unheroic 'haggard' this noun 'glory' sounds ironic although it might be taken as the glory of the Christian after-life. Four stanzas later, the joy of Jesus's first miracle, the Marriage at Cana, and the joy of the Resurrection of the Dead, are soured by the detail of the 'Soured wine'. This detail of miraculous wine becoming 'Soured' effectively marks the passage of Chronos and the physical facts of entropy. Perhaps it also marks a disenchantment of belief, in that an educated and scientific mind is trained to explain miracles in a rational way and thereby 'sours' them or explains them away as a cognitive category error. In so far as the wine is a symbol of the saving blood of Christ this would suggest a souring of the central Christian ritual in which the wine is the blood of Christ. This would be to sour the ritual heart of Christianity, as when the altar lies 'Wreathed in its sour breath, cold and dead'.¹⁸ 'There is no bloodless myth will hold.'¹⁹

As if to concede the proximity of blasphemy, the next section begins: 'Prayers are imprecations for a start'. This has etymological truth in that the word 'imprecation', derived from the Latin 'precārī' ('to pray') did once mean 'a prayer, invocation, petition, entreaty' (OED 2.), though OED gives this meaning as obsolete. The current meaning (first attested in 1589) is 'the action of invoking evil, calamity, or divine vengeance upon another, or upon oneself, in an oath or adjuration; cursing' (OED 1. a.). 'Is prayer | residual in imprecation? Only | as we equivocate.'²⁰

More dissonant and un-hymn-like than any single semantic detail is the syntax of the second 'hymn', particularly that ungainly sentence which sprawls across thirteen-lines, laying itself out with six commas, five semi-colons, a colon and a dash. Its conspicuous ugliness directs its mimesis towards its subject matter: 'death', 'fecundity', 'wrath', 'a cosmic web', 'Grand misconceivings', 'the Goat,

¹⁷ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 252-3.

¹⁸ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 8. 'The Bidden Guest'.

¹⁹ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 4. 'Genesis'.

²⁰ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 257. The Triumph of Love, LXIII.

the Crab', 'onerous desire'. It reads as the 'embrangled' grammar of 'the viscera' or of a 'sensual migraine'. Its phrases accumulate, separated by semi-colons, but the sentence does not resolve itself with a main verb, as if syntactic disarray signals and conveys distress. In this 'Befouled' context the Mary figure is announced unceremoniously as 'You new-arising', ominously preceded by the serpent and followed by the Goat and the Crab. This new hymn gives more symbolic identity and more vitality to the forces of evil and destruction, war, death and cursing, such that 'Our Lady's' position becomes both more precarious and more miraculous.

The vein of 'mauvais esprit' to be found in the original (1984) hymns is now mined more deeply. But along with the 'mauvais esprit' is a *jeu d'esprit* where *esprit* signifies wit. The ingenious conceit of 'Notre-Dame stone-turbining to Pâques' is metaphysical in that the cathedral is conceived in relation to the turning of the Christian year as a turbine (from the Latin *turbo*: eddy, storm, child's top, spindle). The next verse will introduce Jean Moulin (1899–1943), leader of the Conseil National de la Résistance, who was interrogated and tortured by Klaus Barbie, the 'Butcher of Lyon'. Although this is hardly the occasion for a pun, the poem is playing the earlier 'stone-turbining' against the name of Jean Moulin and the French noun 'moulin' which means a mill, as in 'moulin à vent', a windmill. As *mystique* is forever appropriated by *politique*, the horror of Jean Moulin's interrogation by the Nazis leads on to his being 'Received by Malraux at the Panthéon | With words of platitudinous haut ton'. André Malraux (1901–1976) was the author of *La Condition Humaine* (1933) and later Minister of Cultural Affairs under President Charles de Gaulle. In his (1964) speech about Jean Moulin at the Panthéon, Malraux ended his peroration by commending Moulin's silence — 'ses lèvres qui n'avaient pas parlé'.²¹ Perhaps it is *la condition humaine* that a courageous silence such as Jean Moulin's under interrogation should be memorialised 'With words of platitudinous haut ton' by a civic dignitary who, whether demagogue or *moulin à paroles*, utters the run-of-the-mill clichés pressuring on the occasion. However, the seventh 'Hymn' retains some ambiguity as to whether this critical estimation of Malraux and his speech at the Panthéon is just, or just a splenetic projection of 'mauvais esprit'.

In the final stanza of the 'Seven Hymns', the choice of words implies revulsion at the vats of candles 'wallowing in their fats'. Rather than the technical 'votive stands' the word 'vats' is down-to-earth as in vats of beer or dye or tan-vats. The verb 'wallowing' expresses disgust at the worldly pride which finds its

²¹ Laure Moulin, *Jean Moulin*, (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1983).

secular apotheosis in the Panthéon, if it is not Protestant revulsion at an excess of Romanist ritual. The Hymns' final line is: 'This passage of great things your conflagration.' This sounds summative, like the ending of *The Mystery*, which Hill had chosen as the finale of his *Collected Poems*: "in memory of those things these words were born." The word 'conflagration' suggests both destruction and purification.

Wit and dissonance are related but distinct. When, in the first hymn, a centurion is saved 'by a superflux of faith' that slightly unusual 'superflux' means surplus and sounds mildly comical. The notion of an excess of faith is sceptical as to the virtues of faith, as if faith is better diluted and limited in some (quasi-Aristotelian) middle way. This would show an Anglican aversion to extremes. But the word 'superflux' sounds like an intensive form of 'flux' where 'flux' is already an 'abnormally copious flowing of blood, excrement, etc. from the bowels or other organs; a morbid or excessive discharge, specifically an early name for dysentery' (OED 1. a.). The wit is donnish and dissident.

'Seven Hymns': conclusion

In revising and expanding the three hymns of 1984 Hill transforms them in terms of theme, time-frame and selfhood. The 'Seven Hymns' add much new material about war (in I and VI) whilst a spectacularly ugly sentence (in II) outlines a nexus of death, the serpent and 'onerous desire' which may aptly be summarised as Original Sin. The seventh hymn introduces an extra layer of time, a 'writing-present' in which the poet returns to Chartres. This new level of a writing-present plunges the original and earlier hymns into the past and delimits the 'ecstatic present' in which they had initially rejoiced. Thus, the whole drops out of exalted time and back into worldly circumstance and competitive negotium in which 'Malraux negotiates the elevation'. At the end of VI '*Mystique*' and '*politique*' are 'intershriven' and at the end of VII the apparent triumph of *politique* over *mystique* is in the final line summarised ambiguously as 'your conflagration', although that might also equal a last-line triumph of *Mystique* in ascribing the whole to the purifying (or destructive) powers of 'Our Lady'.

Throughout, the seven Hymns have shown a heterodox wit heckling hymnal decorum. In parts, style is deliberately mis-fitted to stated genre (hymn) and subject matter. The effect of all these changes may be enough to transform the whole into a different genre, especially if we consider the full implications of the epigraph to the 'Seven Hymns', from Simone Weil:

Regarder un bien, aimé comme tel, comme condamné par le cours prochain des événements est une douleur intolérable.²²

This translates: 'To see something good, which is loved as such, as being condemned by the imminent course of events is an intolerable sorrow.' The epigraph expresses a mix of grief at the prospect of impending defeat, along with resistance in anticipating a battle where defeat is not quite inevitable. As so often with poetry, not least Hill's, it would be hard to trace these elements out in their proportions. Perhaps the overall effect is to turn the hymns into an elegy for 'Our Lady' or the cult of 'Our Lady', as well as an elegy for those such as Péguy who died in war. The elegy might also be for the earlier 'Hymns' of 1984 ('un bien, aimé comme tel,') or for the poet who penned them.

The 'Seven Hymns' of 2009 were, as we shall see, to be further revised, reframed and 'repaired' when Hill published them in their next and 'definitive form'.

Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres, 2013

The sixth individual book within *Broken Hierarchies* is titled *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres, 1982-2012*. Its focalization is much more complex than either the 1984 or 2009 version. Hill has added fourteen hymns to the 'Seven Hymns' of 2009, attaching three hymns on the front and eleven at the end of the sequence. The centre of the new sequence is now the middle stanza of the eleventh hymn:

She, prejudged to common wantonness
in a land racked for tribute, takes pity
on us by virtue of the Nativity
which was not without shock, although faultless; (11)

Significantly, the pronoun here has changed from the direct address of 'you' to the third-person use of 'She'. In this new sequence continuity of address is broken as the 'you' of 1984 is now both 'you' and 'She' in a way that makes identity harder to construe. The complexity and uncertainty are now much increased, and it is often unclear who is addressing whom; and why; and whether the lines relate to 'Our Lady'; and if they do, how. This makes for a different kind of text: more heterogeneous, playful, distressed, shot through with indeterminacy.

²² Simone Weil, '*La Pesanteur Et La Grace*', *Les classiques des sciences sociales* <http://palimpsestes.fr/textes_philo/weil/pesanteur_et_grace.pdf>, (1988 [1947]) [accessed 8 May 2021]

Whilst the 1984 'Hymns' are fixed on Chartres, and the 2009 ones include the Palestine of the New Testament (2009, I. 2013, 4) and the blasted landscape of the Western Front (2009, VI. 2013, 9), the 2013 *Hymns* dart to Eden (13: stanza 3), Yunnan (14: stanza 1), a school lab (14:5), Sodom (15:4), a living room with six cats (16:4), a 'sparsely furnished guardroom' (20:3) and 'Xanadu' (21.20). Unity of place has given way to freedom of association.

In changing place, the 2013 *Hymns* also change times and so break lyrical unity of time. They take place 'in common time' (15) and are presented as by and 'for old-timers' (2): people with a past. These new hymns cut across different historical times. The second, for example, sets off from Henry Adams' thinking about the difference between the medieval world and the modern, then proceeds to Dante who is figured in twentieth-century aeronautical terms as an aviator braving wings and 'de-icers' (a word whose first written usage is 1932) that foul 'trailing-edges' (first usage in 1909). The next stanza flies to Petrarch. Elsewhere, fictional creations mingle with canonical authors. So, in the sixteenth hymn, the hymnists John Newton and William Cowper are found between Shakespeare's Falstaff, Lear and Osric, and Ibsen's Peer Gynt. Between the historical Cowper (1731-1800) and the theatrical Peer Gynt (1867 onwards) stands the Chartres Virgin, now a dust-laden souvenir. To exaggerate, it is as if a Rothko canvas has been repainted as a Brueghel.

Unity of address is also broken. Where formerly 'Our Lady' had been the sole and pre-eminent subject of address, now she is one subject among several. Some of these several seem shady or disreputable, exposing 'Our Lady' to dubious company, or threatening her poetic identity more fundamentally since it is no longer clear who she is, or which is her among the other characters. Nor is it always clear who is meant by the pronoun 'you'. The address is 'roughed up' which entails depreciation and disparagement insofar as it is a principle of courtesy that one addresses another person clearly and directly. It seems that the 2013 *Hymns* have entered a troubled dream where one character melts oneirologically into the next.

Consider pronouns, identity, address, time and tense in the first hymn of 2013, whose first personal pronoun is one absent from the 1984 'Hymns': the first-person singular.

I am pensionable
and you have no news. When last we laid bare
our manifest othernesses cable
television had not been installed here.

For what other reason are there notebooks,
 intemperate archives? Bring me to dance,
 who cannot dance, your features of botox
 and I shall reconsider temperance.

You are my fancy; nor do I accost
 her royal highness directly: Virgin
 to the eccentric spires where I went lost
 tracking down Péguy and faith resurgent.

The first-person singular pronoun 'I', now takes pride of place and enters before the 'you'. This 'I' is defined in the secular terms of Chronos as 'pensionable': an aged protagonist who keeps track of time (in an all-too-human, even degenerate, way) by reference to the installation of cable TV. 'I am pensionable' — which picks up 'There's my old pension' (2009, Hymn 7) — is in a present tense of ageing which moves in the next sentence to the simple past ('laid') and the past perfect passive ('had not been installed'). No longer is this hymn in the 'ecstatic present'. It has been moved into secular time with a 'before' and 'after', not Before Christ or Anno Domini, but before the installation of 'cable | television' and after.

The 'you' who previously was always 'Our Lady' is now someone of questionable identity and character, defined in negative terms ('and you have no news'). The title has announced *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres*, but this 'you' is not 'Our Lady of Chartres' in a recognisable sense. Where the 1984 'Hymns' associated 'Our Lady' with the timeless, this 'you' is associated with the ephemeral world of 'news' or rather 'no news', someone with no information of recent events. The context sounds like a sexual affair (getting 'laid'), but in a deniable way. Something is 'laid bare' and something is not. Assuming that 'laid bare | our manifest othernesses' refers to sexual encounter, the quasi-legal or academic periphrasis sounds if not disgusted then wry and disappointed. Had the sex been satisfying, the sentence would probably not mention the timing of the installation of cable television. The phrase 'your features of botox' speaks of flesh, ageing and cosmetic surgery with more aggression or clumsiness than tenderness. If 'features of botox' are unchanging, ever-youthful features, they are not so in a flattering way. Likewise, if the mimesis is directed towards conversational speech, then 'You are my fancy' is not a great pledge or compliment whoever it refers to. The word 'fancy' speaks of sexual attraction possibly of a superficial or fleeting kind ('he fancies her'). As a noun, 'fancy' may refer to 'delusive imagination' (OED 3.); a 'supposition resting on no solid grounds' (OED 6.); or capricious inclination (OED 8. a.).

In this context, the phrase 'accost | her royal highness' sounds ironic, even sarcastic. In colloquial speech the phrase 'her royal highness' can be used of someone assuming airs and graces, as if to ask, 'who does she think she is?' Such an interpretation is plausible here partly because of the comical potential of the preceding verb 'accost'. This, it will be remembered, is the comic keyword used six times in a short exchange when Toby Belch goads dim Andrew Aguecheek to 'front' or 'board' the much brighter Maria: 'Accost, Sir Andrew, accost.'²³ If this allusion to *Twelfth Night* casts Hill as Andrew Aguecheek, then who is the equivalent of Maria? It could be the same woman who appears in the nineteenth hymn in which the same rhyme of 'accost' and 'lost' is repeated, with the rhymes now enwrapping 'sixty years of accreted banter'. If we take the sixty years literally rather than impressionistically then it would indicate a woman Hill had known from early adulthood. Of course, time in these hymns is more subjective and the 'sixty years' may well be conversational hyperbole, as in the claim 'I sent you out of my mind for a dare | centuries past and have heard nothing since.' (14).

Whereas the original hymns of 1984 were steadily addressed to Our Lady, the women in *Hymns* (2013) meld and morph into each other. In the fourth stanza of the first hymn, for example, as quoted above, it is unclear what is the relationship between this 'You' (who is fancied) and 'her royal highness' and 'Virgin | to the eccentric spires'. They might all be 'Our Lady, or aspects of her, though 'You are my fancy' sounds a crass remark to the mother of God. There might be two women here: one sacred, one profane, like Spenser's Una and Duessa. If the 'you' who has 'no news' is the same 'you' who has 'your features of botox', then this might correspond to 'You are my fancy' and contrast with the 'Virgin | to the eccentric spires'. If so, the primary address ('you') has now become the profane love. This would be a radical revision which alters the primary subject of address. I cannot think of any revision to any other poem which does that.

How many women are there in *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres*? Have I miscounted? One answer is 'none': there are no women who have well-developed character and significant agency in the *Hymns*, only symbolic female figures onto which Hill projects his masculine fears and fantasies. Another answer is 'one': the apparently different women in the *Hymns* are all aspects of 'Our Lady', rather as someone, such as Ted Hughes, reading in the tradition of Graves' *White Goddess*, might claim that both sacred woman and physical

²³ Shakespeare, *The First Folio of Shakespeare: The Norton Facsimile.*, p. 274. *Twelfth Night*, I 3. TLN 165.

woman are versions of womankind, and it takes all women to form the goddess. Perhaps there is a triangle, a seedy threesome, composed of two women and one man. None of these possibilities quite answer to the complexity of these Hymns which delight in switching address and keeping the reader guessing:

From the vile slough, black as tar-macadam,
lug the Black Virgin: gross her sepulture.
May I cite you indirectly, Madame,

as someone I knew briefly; who could speak,
through intermediaries if called upon,
attesting to my virtues as a freak? (3)

Here the Black Virgin takes the third-person and may or may not be the 'Madame' (rhymed with 'tar-macadam') whom 'I knew briefly'. If the 'Madame' is Our Lady, then she is being shoved into the past 'as someone I knew briefly'. It is uncertain what is going on. Perhaps the Black Virgin is being lugged away to be cleaned, as it or she was in 2009, controversially. 'Whenever and however Chartres's Black Madonna acquired its mysterious patina—through oxidation or smoke from candles and incense—it was familiar as such to centuries of the faithful until its recent multicolored makeover, which has transformed the Mother of God into a simpering kewpie doll.'²⁴ Elsewhere Hill writes of 'That long-revered Black Virgin soon covered by a sack in the back of a white van.'²⁵

Is Hill imagining a court drama or psychodrama in which the Black Virgin is called as witness? If so, it would be self-regarding for the dispute to concern 'my virtues as a freak'. The messiness of the 'vile slough' and the low, down-to-earth register of 'lug', contrast with the formality of 'May I cite you indirectly'. Indirectly, a mock-formality and mischief are at play, evident perhaps in the slightly arch tone of 'Madame'. Some readers might stoutly maintain "I am not interested in your virtues as a freak", and it is certainly a freakish 'hymn' which moves from the Black Virgin to 'my virtues as a freak' in such a way that we are not sure whether the Black Virgin is being requested as a potential referee to vouch for these 'virtues' or whether she has been supplanted by an ill-specified 'Madame'.

When Hill addresses 'Our Lady' in these new Hymns he sometimes sounds over-familiar or curt. There is room for discussion as to whether he is speaking

²⁴ Martin Filler, 'A Scandalous Makeover at Chartres', *New York Review of Books*, 14 December (2014) [accessed 13 September 2019]

²⁵ Geoffrey Hill, *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 113. Section 206.

to her or to himself or to what extent that distinction is even valid. The final hymn pitches its address to 'Lady of International Acclaim'. That title could literally apply to 'Our Lady' but sounds like a phrase from marketing and promotion, as in an author or librettist 'of International Acclaim'. The poet seems familiar enough with 'Our Lady' to tease her. A reader who is taking these 'Hymns' as hymns is likely to sense something inappropriate, to which the response might be that less should be made of the claim that these are 'hymns', for they are so only loosely and nominally. These 'hymns' are self-evidently not ones which simply laud Our Lady, but ones more like Job's protest or those psalms which lament and argue, express frustration, argue and pray.

The 2013 Hymns show much greater preoccupation with self and selfhood. They are held together in part by a persona who is old, clowning and desperate. If this person is not precisely Geoffrey William Hill, the reader suspects it is someone not unlike him. In the 1984 'Hymns' it was said that 'Our Lady' is 'disposed | to acts of grace: tumblers and holy fools.' In the new 2013 *Hymns*, Hill takes the part of holy fool, or mere fool. He is 'pensionable' and 'lost' (1); up for trial (3); an electrocuted 'sparkler-haired scarecrow' (14). He compares himself with roguish Falstaff and choleric Lear. In the final hymn he presents himself as a crazed etymologist, celebrating and suffering 'bi-polar | addiction to the figment of true stem' (21). He is prone to both grandiosity and mortification ('idiot-crucifix', 14), and to that kind of self-confession which is also self-promotion. He tells himself to 'Spurn confession | unless to strut with Osric-like fashion' (16), where Osric, Hamlet's antagonist, is a career courtier and fop. The word 'confess' is again linked to Shakespeare or a Shakespeare-complex:

Can you smell *Sonnets* in this? I confess
myself his adulator unrivalled,
supposing him to have breathed. What distress
sublimes thus to far oceans caravelled? (18)

Any humility in the formula 'I confess' is nullified by the adjective 'unrivalled' which discloses ambition, competition and emulation, as in the 'Rival Poet' of sonnets 78 to 86. The final question is ostensibly asked of Shakespeare, but one feels is also being floated as a compelling question in respect of his 'adulator'. The second hymn of 2013 has spoken of 'distressed wisdom' and in prose Hill has depicted himself as 'a distressed and errant lay person'.²⁶ For a poet to compare his own sequence with Shakespeare's sonnets could be interpreted as a bid for immortality by association, and as such a breach of

²⁶ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 289.

decorum, but it also contributes to a drama in which the poet presents himself as a 'Deeply flawed' (2) persona.

In the 2013 *Hymns*, forms of the first-person singular are used much more and the second-person is less dominant. The change can be quantified. Forms of the first-person singular ('I', 'me', 'my' and 'myself') are absent from the 1984 'Hymns' and occur only 5 times in the 2009 'Hymns'. In the 14 added hymns of 2013, there are 65 such forms (40 usages of 'I', 8 of 'me', 15 of 'my' and 2 of 'myself'). This attests that the first-person singular is much more explicitly present in the 2013 *Hymns*.

We have seen that the original 1984 'Hymns' were intensely focused on 'Our Lady': a focus manifesting as direct address through the key words 'you' and 'your' which occur 18 times in 15 verses. The intensity is diminished in the 'Seven Hymns' of 2009 in which these words 'you' and 'your' occur 20 times over 35 verses as the focalization is diffused. In the 2013 *Hymns* this trend continues. In its 105 verses, the words 'you' and 'your' occur 50 times. In 1984 the terms of direct address 'you' and 'your' are occurring on average more than once per verse, whilst in 2013 they occur slightly less than once per two verses.

If we consider the 1984 'Hymns' in terms of (quasi-Buberian) 'I-Thou' address, then the corresponding pronominal score is zero: eighteen. This changes when Hill revises his 'Hymns'. If we consider the seven 2009 'Hymns' as 'I-Thou' address, then the corresponding pronominal score is five: twenty. In the twenty-one *Hymns* of 2013 the equivalent score is seventy: fifty. The first-person forms are now more prevalent than the second-person. This indicates a transformation in that a text which rejected the first-person now embraces it. Perhaps it marks a turn towards the psychological in that Hill is now investigating the self through performance rather than, or as well as, projecting aspects of the self onto the symbolic figure of 'Our Lady'.

That said, the 'I' of these new hymns need not be the poet or the poet in persona. When section 15 opens 'Will not now say how I contract prayers | through agencies', something is being explicitly withheld. Who, we may ask, is this 'I' who contracts prayers? It could be 'Our Lady' in which case the pronouns have flipped their polarity and 'Our Lady' is now speaking in the first-person.

In moving outside the unities of single place, steady address and ecstatic time, *Hymns* (2013) shifts the structural principle from traditional lyric to modernist sequence. The new and 'definitive' sequence is multimodal and prefaced by '*the Argument*' which foregrounds a new element of polemic. Although this italicised '*Argument*' might be discounted as a spoof, it is worth considering the possibility that it is a good argument, to be taken seriously. Its first proposition – about 'the

Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin in the womb of Anna' – broaches questions of incarnation, original sin, free will, and the Christological conundrum of Christ's being both fully human and fully divine. Recall the final line of Hill's 'Canticle for Good Friday': 'Creation's issue congealing (and one woman's).' What the 1956 'Canticle' holds in parenthesis is much elaborated in the 2009 sequence, especially its second hymn, which confronts fallen, sinful nature. In terms of 'theopoetics' Hill's 2013 sequence shows keen interest in the problem of incarnation and sin, as if Hill, like Milton, 'cannot praise a cloistered virtue'. The central rhyme-words of its central hymn are the Christian or Marian virtue of 'pity' rhymed with 'Nativity', where 'Nativity' means not only the sentimentalised manger and crib of the Nativity play and of Christmas cards, but also human birth with its 'shock, although faultless' (11). In the following section, Hill imagines 'Our Lady' as vulnerable flesh and blood: 'Fancy her mutilée—' (12) and 'the wound birth opens mundanely sutured.' (13). This fancy might strike believers as sacrilegious, and a psychologist might diagnose covert, if not overt, hostility to 'Our Lady'. But the visualisation can also be an attempt to explore vulnerability and the full ramifications of incarnation. The poet insists on 'the absolute freedom of poetry to encompass the maximum range of belief or unbelief'.²⁷ The eccentric and the undevout may be in 'the waste margin':

Queen and Virgin,
claim your eccentrics from the waste margin.
Concentric the grand singing of the hive. (15)

Rather than aspiring to lyric perfection, the sequence makes space for 'the waste margin'. It moves between (plural) 'eccentrics' and the (singular) 'Concentric'.

The Aesthetics of Sequence

Dissonance, which in the earlier 'Hymns' was sly, becomes in the longer sequence more overt, more flagrant. From the outset the 2013 *Hymns* set up an aesthetic which relishes the rough and rude along with the enigmatic and self-referential:

Retainers out: that *florid grim music*
broken by grunts and shrieks. No motion else.
Amorous bonding putty, mosaic
that breaks up features and wears colours false,

²⁷ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 88.

discovered, how?

If a retainer is a follower or servant (as in an ‘old retainer’) then “Retainers out” could be a warning like ‘seconds away!’ in a duel, warning that fight is about to commence. If a retainer is ‘a contrivance or device which holds something in place’ (OED 2. b), then we expect something to fall or crash out of place. If a retainer is that which restrains, then that which has been kept-in will now burst out or ‘hang loose’. The ‘*grunts and shrieks*’ are bodily cries of sex or pain or dying. They are also part of an italicised quote from Hill’s ‘Funeral Music: An essay’ about his sonnet sequence in *King Log*.²⁸ It might be considered a breach of decorum to quote oneself and it may deliberately be so.

The opening stanza of *Hymns* (2013) goes on to present an aesthetic of brokenness, mosaic and camouflage. The ‘mosaic’ here foretells ‘a variegated whole formed from many disparate parts’ (OED, 2. b.). The passive form (‘broken by’) in the second line now becomes active in ‘breaks up’ and the syntax of the line does indeed break up as the interrogative adverb ‘how?’ ends the line rather than beginning it. The syntax of *Hymns* (2013) tends towards idiosyncratic, non-standard forms. In the first new hymn, the first two sentences are non-standard in that they lack a main verb. The third sentence seems to comment on its own syntax, the syntax of the sequence and Hill’s new or late syntax, with respect to function, aesthetics, ethics and origin: ‘Amorous bonding putty, mosaic | that breaks up features and wears colours false, || discovered, how?’ The ‘Amorous bonding putty’ could be a lubricant for sexually intimate moisturising. It is pleasantly down-to-earth and haptic to think of syntax as ‘putty’, putting grammarian next to glazier, and language-user alongside lover and plasterer. The ‘mosaic | that breaks up features and wears colours false’ is presumably a camouflaged periphrasis for ‘camouflage’, a word first deployed in a military sense in the First World War. (Hill refers to this in *Scenes from Comus*, 2.62, where the word ‘camouflage’ stands out on its own line.) The phrase ‘colours false’ moves from camouflage to false pretences, as in ‘sailing under false colours’, which raises ethical questions about imagination and truthfulness, invention, sincerity and authenticity. Perhaps the most striking feature of the sentence is that the interrogative adverb, ‘how’, is not the first word but the last. This non-standard grammar would conventionally be adjudged incorrect, but to the extent that it is comprehensible, expressive, and forceful, it is excellent grammar.

²⁸ Hill, *King Log*, p. 67.

The aesthetic of the 'mosaic' has something in common with the aesthetic of Gauguin and medieval stained glass, an aesthetic visible in 'The Vision after the Sermon', reproduced on the front cover of Hill's *Collected Poems* (1985):

...a style based on pre-Renaissance sources. Modelling and perspective have given way to flat, simplified shapes outlined heavily in black & the brilliant colours are equally "un-natural". This style, inspired by folk art and medieval stained glass, is meant to recreate both the imagined reality of the vision, and the trance-like rapture of the peasant women.²⁹

That is Janson's account of Gauguin's achievement. Hill twice wrote it out longhand in his notebooks when writing 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres'.³⁰ Adapting the passage, we might think of 'flat, simplified' phrases, 'outlined heavily in black' by colon, semi-colon and full-stop, as in the following example:

Childhood, Annunciation, the Dormition:
rich in theology our poor contrition;
late snow ravelling off along the wind. (2009, 2. 2013, 5)

This style becomes more prominent in *Hymns* 2013, as may be illustrated numerically: there are five semi-colons in the 'Hymns' of 1984 and fifty-one in *Hymns* 2013: two colons in 1984, twenty-five in 2013. If the 'flat, simplified' phrases initially sound staccato, they become less so as the rhythm of the phrases establishes itself.

Successful glass designs use the rhythms of the lead lines and the rich colours and painting techniques that the medium affords to create a unique art form. The groupings and representations of people, the simplicity and economy of backgrounds and the pared-down and stylized props for the varying scenes all reflect this unique language.³¹

Once again, we might adapt this and study *Hymns* (2013) with respect to the rhythms of its phrases; its rich colours; groupings and representations of people; the simplicity and economy of backgrounds; and the pared-down and stylized props for the varying scenes.

The aesthetic of the 2013 *Hymns* also prioritises 'animation' (13) and 'primitive animation' (14), where 'animation' is not only about imparting vitality, but a poetic equivalent to 'the process or technique of filming successive drawings or

²⁹ H. W. Janson, *History of Art : A Survey of the Major Visual Arts from the Dawn of History to the Present Day*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 508.

³⁰ Hill, 'Poetry Notebook 27', (p. 138). See also Hill 'Poetry Notebook 28', page 7.

³¹ Painton Cowen, *English Stained Glass*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), p. 88.

positions of puppets or models to create an illusion of movement when the film is shown as a sequence' (OED 8 b).

The moral aesthetic of the 2013 *Hymns* is one of 'warts and all', where 'all' includes wit. A Puritan ethic of truth-telling, introspection, scepticism and realism encounters Our un-Puritan Lady. As we have seen, each of the 1984 'Hymns' had its own poetic equivalent of a wart or blemish, whether it be 'scavengers' (1), 'pigeons rancid as gulls' (2), or 'the hues | of burning and the damned at their old cries' (3). Wart-like nastiness also obtrudes in each of the new 'Hymns' of 2009: 'soured wine' (I); 'A sensual migraine shafting eye through head' (II); 'the machine gun's cunningly-loosed ceinture' (VI); and 'Travestied Judas reddish as a fox' (VII). This wartiness is a matter of individual images and phrases, and syntax. But roughnesses, pimples, warts are most openly and expansively on show in the *Hymns* (2013). Since an exhaustive list would be exhausting, suffice it to mention one unlyrical 'wart' in each new hymn: 'botox' (1); 'Shit' (2); 'the vile slough' (3); 'Anarchy' (11); 'crudsoot-furcate crests' (12); 'death' (13); 'idiot-crucifix' (14); 'the waste margin' (15); 'a slave-trip' (16); 'incessant pain' (17); 'distress' (18); 'brimstone' (19); 'sordor' (20); and 'a leper' (21). When the final hymn notes that 'a leper too might show such skin' it reflects on the sequence as a whole: lesions, warts, and all the disgust and fear which they induce. If the leper is Hill, then these his 'Hymns' could be his 'medieval mimicries of Wrath' (21), including 'Cain's wrath' (5) and 'wrath's weak eyes' (12).

Hill's later aesthetic of 'warts and all' is not simply shock tactic or perverse exhibitionism. It is ethical and theological. In his critical writings Hill twice quotes Harry Williams from 'Theology and Self-Awareness'.³² Williams is also quoted in the OED *sub verbo* 'wart' (n.), 4 b: 1976 H. A. Williams *Tensions* vii. 111, 'God... accepts us, accepts all men, unconditionally, warts and all.' This is a theology of grace and divine acceptance, which Hill found hard to accept. In the last years of his life, he described himself as 'resentful of the implications of Christian theology'.³³ His emphasis was more on original sin than sinners as recipients of grace. 'Music has always seemed to me free of the taint of original sin, whereas words are full of it. That's about the only strong tie I have to Judeo-Christianity: I profoundly believe in the reality of original sin.'³⁴ Poetry, he adds,

³² Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 18, 318.

³³ Geoffrey Hill, 'Interview with Sameer Rahim on 29 November 2013', *Prospect*, 20 July 2016 <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/blogs/sameer-rahim/an-interview-with-geoffrey-hill-1932-2016>>, (2016) [accessed 8 May 2021]

³⁴ Geoffrey Hill, 'If I Write About Destruction, It's Because I'm Terrified of It', *Isis magazine interview*, 27 April 2015 <<https://isismagazine.org.uk/2015/04/if-i-write->

‘can miraculously seem to offer some sort of blessing, and it can, when it is working at its very greatest, remind us of the inescapability of original sin.’ Dangerous though it is to extrapolate a theology from an interview, the emphasis here is less on grace and salvation than an acceptance of original sin. The belief does not commit one to gloom or misanthropy. Its psychological results are counter-intuitive:

Christianity preaches an obviously unattractive idea, such as original sin; but when we wait for its results, they are pathos and brotherhood, and a thunder of laughter and pity; for only with original sin can we at once pity the beggar and distrust the king.³⁵

Much of Hill’s dissonance is ‘contrabanded’ (12) by a play between ‘ardour’ and ‘sordor’, two words which rhyme at the end of the penultimate hymn. Here ‘sordor’ speaks of physical or moral sordidness. Anything which imagines fully the Incarnation will feel a pull towards matters of bodily function and human excrement. The 1984 ‘Hymns’ had the pigeons roosting in their ‘stucco-dung’. In the second of the 2013 *Hymns* nature’s ‘bad sums’ (a comically ‘bad’ rhyme on Adams) are ‘righted by grace not time’s coprophagy’, where ‘coprophagy’ is from the Greek κοπροφάγος, dung-eating. Two stanzas later, the κόπρος is Englished and we are told that ‘Shit, even, can be further degraded.’ This is an unusual observation for a hymn to make. The presence of the scatological can be excused as a result of thinking seriously about the doctrine of Incarnation, and not without precedent in that the word σκύβαλα (skubala, shit) is to be found in Philippians (3. 8). It could be that Hill is using crude words for physical functions as an amulet, to ward off the perils of being acclaimed a maestro, or the temptation of falling into the clutches of acclaim and Respectability so esteemed in Anglican circles. In a late interview he said ‘I am not a Church of England poet. I’m married to a Jewish lady who is now an Anglican priest. The Church of England I find deeply irritating.’³⁶

With respect to faith and disbelief, it would be easy but facile to read the journey from ‘Hymns’ (1984) through ‘Seven Hymns’ to the twenty-one Hymns of 2013 as an anti-pilgrimage from devotion through doubt to disbelief. Certainly, the Hymns of 2013 are more broken, their ‘music | broken’, but such brokenness breaks theologically in two ways. One of the ‘Sentences of the Scriptures’ to be read ‘with a loud voice’ at the beginning of the Order for Morning Prayer (daily

about-destruction-its-because-im-terrified-of-it-an-interview-with-geoffrey-hill/>, (2015) [accessed 8 May 2021]

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, cited in Alan Jacobs, *Original Sin: A Cultural History*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. vi (Epigraph)

³⁶ Hill, ‘If I Write About Destruction, It’s Because I’m Terrified of It’,

throughout the year) is the seventeenth verse of Psalm 51 which reads in the King James version: 'The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.' The *Hymns* of 2013 are somewhat broken and somewhat less contrite. Whilst they value 'truculence' (12) and 'temerity' (16), they can be read as hymns-in-the-loosest-sense of a man who has come to terms with realities of living and can almost jokily present himself with 'crap | perfuming my right hand' (16). The voice is volatile: variously angry and mellowed, reconciled and unreconciled with old age and its indignities, at grudging peace with fallenness.

Sequence creates more space to perform the imperfections of Hill's protean personae: professor, curmudgeon, clown, dirty old man. *Hymns* 2013 allows the self and its imperfections into the heart of the poetry, following the example of 'Petrarch's Secretum' (2). Hill's longer sequence accepts the unacceptable and the shameful, as well as the self-promoting, to develop a more complex and troubled sense of relationship and isolation. Selfhood is performed through syntax, which gives a sense of someone thinking, something *ad hoc*. Syntax can suggest cantankerousness, someone not paying *congés* to conventional grammar.

In order to assess the pitch of Hill's *Hymns* it is helpful to consider the connection between grammar and manners, remembering that Hill 'does not regard it as at all eccentric to endorse the view that grammar is a "social and public institution"'.³⁷ One aspect of manners is how one addresses others. In these new hymns the act of address has become more complex, playful and troubled. The first hymn presents itself as a failed act of greeting: 'How febrile, how distraught, this has become: | it was meant as greeting'. This sounds like an explanation or act of communicative repair for an exchange which has miscarried. After a gnomic opening sentence, the third hymn's 'Let me give you this address' is addressed not to Our Lady but to 'complacent || Ministers of Oaths and for High Culture'. Hill plays with address as in the paradoxical line 'It is not you I address, great Chartreine' (14:2) where the titular 'great Chartreine' must itself be an address to 'Our Lady' so we assume that the meaning is that elsewhere in the sequence the poet is not (necessarily) addressing her. This switching of address can sound uncouth, as in the line 'Slur me your gifts' (13), whose subject seems to be the subject of the previous sentence which is 'Imagination'. The verb 'slur' has two main meanings, both of which obtain. Transitivity to 'slur' is to disparage or calumniate someone; intransitively to 'become indistinct through imperfect articulation' as when drunk (OED 6. b.). To

³⁷ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 10. Hill is quoting Donald Davie.

the extent that a gift should evoke gratitude, the phrase 'Slur me your gifts' disparages those gifts and the act of giving. Compare the more polite 'Grant me your gifts' or 'Bestow on me your gifts' (neither of which Hill uses). There is something slurred or blurred in the uncertainty about subject of address. Later in the hymn it is unclear who or what is the subject of the sentence 'Surrender a marvel.' (13) Perhaps it is the achievement of *Hymns* that it creates a world in which that question need not arise and may seem scarcely to matter.

How much dissonance and cacophony can a poem take? An aesthetic of dissonance eventually bumps into the law of diminishing returns since for dissonance to work, to be meaningful, there must be some harmony for it to work against. How much dissonance is too much? Hill acknowledges the problem in a late interview:

'But some of my poems *are* like a brass band approaching from this end of town and a brass band approaching from that end of town, and, I suppose, for some people, that is a kind of unacceptable raucousness.'³⁸

Hill's analogy does not evoke pure or absolute dissonance since each of the brass bands has its own order, as does their 'approaching' through the town. The resulting dissonance is all the greater for exploiting and clashing against residual elements of order.

'Hymns' and *Hymns*: conclusion

The foregoing examination of Hill's revisions to 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' – two earlier versions of 1984 and 2009 incorporated into the 'definitive' 2013 *Hymns* – is the first of its kind. It reveals much about Hill's move from lyric to sequence. The 1984 'Hymns' exemplify Hill in lyric mode, playing exaltation against enigma, where the enigmatic is often dissonant. The 'Seven Hymns' of 2009 show how he revised and integrated the original text into new work which breaks the earlier lyrical unities and moves the whole away from lyric and towards sequence. The final and 'definitive' text of 2013 with its twenty-one hymns, has turned into a full-scale sequence. It is more capacious, more open to the self and its imperfections, more overtly broken and wounded. Much of the poetic interest now arises from how the twenty-one sections complement, question and elaborate each other.

The *Hymns* of 2013 historicise, psychologise and politicise the 1984 'Hymns'. They also uglify and alienate them, making the work more dissonant. This is a risky policy. Recall Hill's verdict about other poets' revisions: that Ransom

³⁸ Hill, 'If I Write About Destruction, It's Because I'm Terrified of It',

'ruined' his work, that "Auden rewrote disastrously", and that Marianne Moore showed 'monstrous misjudgement'.³⁹ Hill is conscious of the urge, even compulsion, to revise, and the concomitant dangers. The 'urge to disinter' (19) sounds like the 'Urge to unmake | all wrought finalities' in 'Nachwort', (BH, 601) although 'disinter' implies something dead and buried.

There was always something anomalous about Hill's 'Hymns'. On first publication, in Hill's *Collected Poems* of 1985, they disrupted its principle of arrangement. The ordering was chronological, with 'Hymns' the sole exception for Hill noted that, although *The Mystery* was written before 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres', he had reversed the order and placed the 'Hymns' out of chronological sequence because he wanted his *Collected* to conclude with *The Mystery*. In *Broken Hierarchies* one reviewer questioned the placing of *Hymns: 1982 to 2102*, saying that 'they introduce a sour note at too early a stage in the book.'⁴⁰ The question of placing the 'hymns' within Hill's work as a whole offers a prosaic and mechanical explanation for the start of the final stanza of *Hymns*: 'Judge this a lyrical intermission | to acts yet unwritten'. Although first published in 2013, and presumably written after the 'Seven Hymns' of 2009, those words appear in *Broken Hierarchies* out of chronological order, on page 168. They accurately describe the place of the *Hymns* in this context: an 'intermission' or interval before *Canaan* (1996) and the next 750 pages of the book. Not everyone would consider *Hymns* (2013) a 'lyrical' intermission, but the claim made by that adjective is teasing and witty in that contextual irony allows it to mean lyrical, unlyrical and anti-lyrical. The prospect or promise of 'acts yet unwritten' (21) is the third quasi-commissive, following 'I have letters | still to write you' (18), and 'I shall write of the Hesperides yet' (20), as if the increase from three hymns to twenty-one may yet be further extended.

If the 'Hymns' and *Hymns* are anomalous they are also exemplary in that they show Hill's development from lyric perfection towards the writing of long sequences which embrace imperfection, especially imperfections of the self. Collectively, the three versions of 'Hymns' (1984, 2009 and 2013) illustrate Hill's migration from an aesthetic of lyric to one of sequence. This move to sequence is the single most important technical factor in explaining Hill's increased productivity in the last two decades of his life. Studying how Hill develops these 'Hymns' from 1982 to 2012 helps to show how he moves from the 'reined-back exercises in traditional forms' of *Tenebrae* (1978) to *The Book of Baruch by the*

³⁹ Hill, 'Sir Geoffrey Hill, Professor of Poetry, in Conversation with Dr Peter McDonald on W. B. Yeats',

⁴⁰ Paul Batchelor, 'Weight of the Word, Weight of the World', *Poetry*, July/August (2018).

Gnostic Justin (2019) which is more broken-backed, rebarbative, teasingly confessional, yet sceptical of confession.⁴¹

⁴¹ The words quoted are from Hill, 'Strongholds of the Imagination',

Chapter 6

Geoffrey Hill: poet of sequences

This final chapter draws together some threads and looks beyond the thesis. After noting Hill's first and uncollected poetic sequence, it considers his early models of sequence and the long poem. It then discusses the psychology of writing in sequence and argues that sequence offers escape from the *impasse* and anguish of lyrical perfectionism. Hill's migration into sequence enabled him to produce poetry much more quickly. After confessing sins of omission, the chapter projects some lines for future enquiry, then concludes.

Hill's first sequence

Hill had been drawn to sequence from the beginning. Among his juvenilia is a sequence, signed 'Geoffrey W. Hill, Form IV L.', published in Bromsgrove County High School magazine 1946/47.¹ This was a short, untitled sequence in fixed form and consisting of three numbered and titled poems, of which the first, '1. "Fishing"', begins:

If you find that this life with its day-to-day strife and its bustle and buzz is depressing,
Then go with your line on the first day that's fine and yield to the river's caressing.

This and the next two sections, '2. "Boating"' and '3. "Football"', are written in the same form, the 'patter song' using the second-person 'you' pronoun, anapaestic rhythm and conspicuous and comic rhyme. The model is W. S. Gilbert's song, 'Nightmare' from *Iolanthe* (1882) – which Hill would have known from Williams' *Little Treasury*:

When you're lying awake with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo'd by anxiety,
I conceive you may use any language you choose to indulge in, without impropriety;²

The long lines rhyme *aab*, *ccb*, where *a* and *c* are internal and masculine rhymes, whilst *b* is the clinching, witty feminine end-rhyme. The units with *a* and *c* rhymes, are in pairs of anapaest dimeter, such that the first half of each line has four anapaest feet. As such it is anapaest tetrameter. The second unit with

¹ It is reprinted in Norman Rea, '9.9.42 Hill, Geoffrey W', *Agenda*, 30. 1-2 (1991/92), (pp. 114-25).

² Williams, *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, pp. 586-88.

the feminine *b* rhyme is in anapaest trimeter. It follows that the whole line is anapaest heptameter. We see then that Hill's first published poetry was an isomorphic sequence in set form. Its three sections each consist of six lines of anapaest heptameter with internal rhyme and end-rhymes arranged in couplets. Hill did not continue with anapaestic couplets nor with light verse. But, as we have seen, he did continue with sequence in fixed form.

Hill's early models

In Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* Hill would early have met Spenser's 'Prothalamion'; Milton's 'Ode on the Nativity', 'Lycidas', 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'; some of Gray's odes and his 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'; Wordsworth's 'Ruth'; and Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', 'To a Skylark' and 'Lines written among the Euganean Hills, North Italy'. Whilst all of these can be categorised as 'long poems' rather than 'sequences', they would have introduced to Hill something of the potential of poetry which exceeds the normal length restrictions of lyric. Although Palgrave presents Shakespeare's sonnets as individual lyrics, Hill must also have known of them as a single sequence – a sequence whose excitement and enigma owe much to the unknown identity of its several characters. Again, from Oscar Williams *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, Hill would have known by heart Eliot's 'The Waste Land'; and Wallace Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', 'Le Monocle de mon Oncle' and 'Sunday Morning'. Although Hill's poetry exemplifies the assimilation of the American modernist long poem by an English writer, he is also responding to British influences, since the *Treasury* contains Francis Thompson's 'The Hound of Heaven' and Dylan Thomas's 'Sonnets' ('Altarwise by owl-light'). From an early age Hill would have known of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, a collection of sixty-three poems which might well be described as a 'sequence'. All these would have offered models for the Worcestershire lad, showing the rich possibilities of sequence, whether traditional or, in the case of Eliot, Stevens, and Dylan Thomas, modernist.

Sequence as release from perfectionism

The short lyric poem exerts a strong pressure towards transcendence and epiphany. It prizes intense, exquisite unity in which the lyric's closure meets seemingly impossible demands, managing to be both fitting and astonishing, marrying the unexpected with the inevitable. In achieving their lyrical perfection, Hill's early poems set a standard against which his subsequent poetry would be judged. The expectation that he would produce more poems of equal brilliance might well have felt paralysing. The pressure of expectation would be lifted by

turning to write in sequence. Requiring less by way of transcendence and epiphany, the sequence-form permits the poet to write more prolifically, more contingently, in a fallen world of imperfection. It encourages experiment and exploration.

The above account is not one which Hill himself gave in so many words. But in an interview of 1980, he did hint at something on similar lines when he said that writing for him 'is never less than an extremely arduous activity':

One certainly writes *under judgment*. In every poem I write I have a sense of someone of acute sensitivity and judgment seeing what I write and I'm conscious that I want to satisfy the most stringent demands of that other.³

To satisfy 'the most stringent demands' of an unseen 'someone of acute sensitivity and judgment' is likely over the years to induce and foster inhibitions of a neurotic kind. The poet '*under judgment*' stands like defendant in the dock.

In a later interview (2000) Hill spoke of a 'kind of perfectionism' in the past tense, implying that his views and practice had changed. The interview followed the publication of *Canaan* (1996) and the writing in quick succession of *The Triumph of Love* and *Speech! Speech!*. In discussing what he called 'this unlooked-for creative release', Hill explained that since late childhood he had suffered, undiagnosed, from chronic depression 'accompanied by various exhausting obsessive-compulsive phobias':

I now see that the kind of perfectionism at which I was aiming in the earlier books was, so to speak, the acceptable fact [sic] of this obsessive-compulsive disorder.⁴

Much of the meaning here is carried in the word 'perfectionism', implying a psychological disorder: a 'refusal to accept any standard short of perfection' (OED, 2). In applying the word 'perfectionism' to the poetic quest for verbal precision and formal distinction, Coleridge's 'the best words in the best order', Hill shows awareness and wariness of artistic order as a product of internal disorder. He said that 'the kind of obsessive concern I have with order in the early work is one that somebody has who feels all the time how endangered order is, and what a potential threat to order he is.'⁵ This implies that Hill does not have quite the same 'kind of obsessive concern... with order' in the later work and that he has arrived at a new understanding of order and the energies

³ Hill, 'Under Judgment'. pp. 212, 214.

⁴ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 288).

⁵ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80', (p. 290).

of disorder. It may be that the sequence-form freed the poet from the quest for lyrical perfectionism with its attendant obsessive-compulsive behaviours. Sequence may be more fun to write.

The sequence-form as practised by Hill is ready to accept into itself the forces of disorder and elements of imperfection, or apparent imperfection. It can be more accommodating than lyric and more realistic in that it allows 'quotidian shapelessness and imperfection'.⁶ It admits what Mombert calls "the imperfection which marks all human effort, especially where it aims to avoid it".⁷ This involves an accommodation with the central matter of original sin, understood as 'that imperfection which stamps all activity of the graceless flesh'.⁸ Compared with the immaculate and transcendent lyric, the sequence-form is reconciled to the flawed world in all its deep and necessary imperfection, its original sin.

Hill's 'Genesis' shows his early interest in the Gnostic notion that the Creation was a miscreation, a botched job by the demiurge, such that the Creation and the Fall are the same. He revisits this idea. 'Europa wakes | abruptly multi-fissured, the demiurge | rewriting things in her dust.'⁹ He closes *Broken Hierarchies* on the idea that the demiurge is time, to which even stars are subject:

Time is the demiurge
For which our impotence cannot atone.
Nothing so fatal as creation's clone.
The stars asunder, gibbering, on the verge¹⁰

Lyric perfection, with its impulse to immortality, would defeat time, whereas sequence compromises with impermanence and disorder, understanding that order and disorder co-inhere, so that 'disorder' is not necessarily to be abhorred. The acceptance of imperfection aligns with anti-Utopian, conservative *laissez-faire*, suspicious of *dirigisme* and State intervention. The case is put by Thomas Sowell:

As long as human beings are imperfect, there will always be arguments for extending the power of government to deal with these imperfections.

⁶ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 4.

⁷ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 281.

⁸ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 282.

⁹ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 268. Triumph of Love, section C.

¹⁰ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 936.

The only logical stopping-place is totalitarianism — unless we realise that tolerating imperfections is the price of freedom.¹¹

Hill has never been a perfectibilist except perhaps in poetry. His earlier and lyrical attitude towards perfection might be illustrated in the final lines of 'Little Apocalypse', from his first book:

See, for the brilliant coldness of his skin,
The god cast, perfected, among fire.¹²

Here the god is 'cast', as in cast-iron or molten metal, formed, moulded and shaped, then 'perfected', between commas, set between 'brilliant coldness' and 'fire'. If the 'god' is the poem, then the poem is an idol to which self or others are sacrificed. Compare this with a later section from *The Triumph of Love* in which the kiln-door produces not perfection but ruin, though that 'ruin' is an integral part of the poem's achievement:

My dear and awkward love, we may not need
to burn the furniture; though, like you,
I understand by this time all too well
despair at the kiln-door—the first moment's
ultimate ruin of the final prize.¹³

Here the defective becomes the subject of affectionate address: 'My dear and awkward love'. Instead of a hope for perfection we have an understanding 'by this time all too well' of awkwardness and despair. That 'all too well' speaks not of perfection but of experience, probably bitter experience, of continual imperfection. The 'all too well' gestures to something unsolicited beyond that which is merely 'well', as if all shall not necessarily be well, since, as the French have it, 'le meilleur est l'ennemi du bien'. In the final line of this section, which might be a love-poem of experience, we find 'ultimate ruin' of and as 'the final prize'.

In the same year as *The Triumph of Love* was published (1998), Hill lectured on Rosenberg's attitude to perfection and finality. In his Warton Lecture at Keble College, he conjectured that Rosenberg is a rare example of a poet who 'having attained that which, in our fallibility, we recognize as perfection, takes the elements of that intense achievement and rethinks his way through them, even at the cost of diffusing and dissipating the grasped power.'¹⁴ In discussing

¹¹ Thomas Sowell, *Ever Wonder Why? And Other Controversial Essays*, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2006), p. 454.

¹² Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 26.

¹³ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 255. *Triumph of Love*, section LVII.

¹⁴ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 458.

Rosenberg, Hill is reflecting on the tension between achieving ‘finality of phrase’ and ‘advancing the idea’. He posits that the latter may prevail over the former. ‘I believe that, for the sake of advancing the idea, Rosenberg would be prepared, though not gladly, to sacrifice finality of phrase.’¹⁵ Here the opening ‘I believe’ may mean no more than ‘I think’ or ‘I have come to think’, but it may also adumbrate a new credo, on the lines of: I believe that, for the sake of advancing the idea, one must ‘be prepared, though not gladly, to sacrifice finality of phrase.’

Hill proceeds to criticise what is called the ‘common readership’ as ‘a confection of literary middlemen’. This ‘common readership’ is a ‘postulated readership’, meaning ‘critically, or entrepreneurially, postulated’. By contrast, Hill asserts that ‘The true common reader is a natural aristocrat of the spirit, and is far more necessary, far more valuable, to a culture such as ours than are the majority of its writers.’ This belief exemplifies Hill as both democrat, champion of ‘the true common reader’ and ‘aristocrat of the spirit’. He argues that the demand for ‘wrought art’s perfection’ derives from the postulated readership, not from the true common reader. Hill considers the opening line of Gurney’s ‘War Books’, taking the “they” to be the entrepreneurial “they”:

What did they expect of our toil and our extreme
Hunger—the perfect drawing of a heart’s dream?
Did they look for a book of wrought art’s perfection,
Who promised no reading, no praise, no publication?

Hill comments that here ‘Gurney indicates “perfection”, not in the sense of a working ideal for true labourers in the craft, but rather as an imposed limitation, set by an artificial consensus of tastes.’ From about this time Hill may himself be seeing perfection, of the kind to which hitherto his poetry aspired, as ‘an imposed limitation, set by an artificial consensus of tastes.’

Let us now examine four instances in which Hill momentarily dwells on the word ‘perfect’, each time repeating it or one of its allomorphs, the repetition of anadiplosis. The first instance is from a richly paradoxical section in *The Triumph of Love* which begins ‘Overburdened with levity’ and in which *Amarilli* advises ‘to keep faith, even with self-pity, | with faith’s ingenuity, self-rectifying cadence, | perfectly imperfected’.¹⁶ Here ‘perfectly imperfected’ is an instance of polyptoton: repetition of words derived from the same root. OED tells us that the transitive verb ‘to imperfect’, meaning to render imperfect or to impair the

¹⁵ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 459.

¹⁶ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 273. *Triumph of Love*, section CXV.

perfection of something, is used by Donne and Sir Thomas Browne, but falls into disuse between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. It is clear that 'perfectly imperfected' differs from 'imperfectly perfected' at least in intention. The sequences show Hill 'imperfecting' his poetry.

In the next three examples, Hill stops on the word 'perfect' whilst touching in the same line on some allomorph of 'time'. In *Speech! Speech!* Hill writes of 'The bride of tongues | intimately perfect, perfect though untimely; | not our day.'¹⁷ Paradox appears in the notion of being 'perfect though untimely', where 'untimely' means premature, unseasonable, inopportune. The paradox moves towards irreverence if the 'bride of tongues', the Holy Spirit, part of 'the Godhead', is deemed 'untimely'. Whether this means that the Spirit is ill co-ordinated with worldly time, or time as experienced in the world is mis-co-ordinated with the spirit, the thought is well co-ordinated by rhetoric as anadiplosis nestles inside antimetabole heightened by paronomasia: 'intimately perfect, perfect... untimely'. At the same time, we have an idea of perfection which is imperfect with respect to time.

A poem inspired by a recollection of Bromsgrove County High School's production of *Twelfth Night* speaks of 'Shakespeare, who scarcely | brooded on perfection, perfect so many times.'¹⁸ Here the anadiplosis takes the form of polyptoton: 'perfection, perfect'. If the relative clause is causal, then Shakespeare is 'perfect so many times' partly because he 'scarcely | brooded on perfection'. Perhaps perfection, like happiness, or like Fame in Keats's sonnet, flees those who pursue it. The lesson for the poet then would be to write more like Shakespeare's dramatic verse, with an eye not to perfection but to vitality and contingency, disregarding the Classical unities, improvising to the exigencies of the dramatic moment.

The three examples above have all been taken from Hill's sequences. The fourth example comes from a shorter lyric. The word 'perfect' reappears repeated, in 'To Lucien Richard: On Suffering'.¹⁹ This is an unusual poem for Hill in that it conforms to a conventional model of the lyric poem which he would normally eschew. It describes that primary-school favourite, a day at the seaside, in conventional steps. Its first verse is description; its second mixes description with commentary; the third relates its central incident, no more than a few moments; then the fourth undertakes development, assays epiphany and secures a conclusion. The word 'perfect' is repeated in the stanza which

¹⁷ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 296. *Speech! Speech!* section 15.

¹⁸ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 405. *The Orchards of Syon*, section LV.

¹⁹ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 494.

recounts the central happening and is applied to a particular instance of accident and comic timing:

So enjoyed it when
the weighted line you cast tore from its rod,
bait and all, and flippered and was gone,
the timing perfect, perfect your chagrin-
charged resignation, mute expressive glare:
no chance to practise custody of the eyes.

It is rare for Hill explicitly to record himself so enjoying a moment and on other occasions he mistrusts the very word 'enjoyment' for being possessive: 'Whatever strange relationship we have with the poem, it is not one of enjoyment.'²⁰ In the poem 'To Lucien Richard' enjoyment is found in the accidental, in imperfection and in the reaction to wounded pride. The comedy is in the mishap and the mistake; and in the reaction, the facial expression and timing: 'the timing perfect, perfect your chagrin- | charged resignation, mute expressive glare'. The comedy also, of course, finds expression through the exactitude of that intransitive verb 'flippered', where, in sudden reversal, the fishing-line is moving by means of flippers, like a fish. The 'weighted line', the fishing-line, is also 'the weighted line' of poetry with its high seriousness which by misfortune 'flippered and was gone'. The debacle may remind us of reading a Hill poem, that moment described by Merle Brown 'when a reader slides, as is apt to happen, into taking a line in only one way, he feels the line being pulled away from him, or at least blurring, doubling up, so that he must check his glasses or rest his eyes'.²¹

These four examples envisage perfection not as transcendent beauty but as that which can be 'imperfected'; that which can be 'untimely'; associated with the mongrel and make-do of Shakespeare's stage; and with a reflex comic reaction to adversity.

An early lyric, 'The Humanist', seems sceptical about perfection. The 'achieved guest' broods 'Tired and word-perfect | At the Muses' table.'²² Here 'word-perfect' might mean just reciting lines correctly by rote. The eponymous humanist seems more complacent than inspired, discussing an aphorism in the manner of a consumer or connoisseur, with his lips not his brain. 'These | Lips debate and praise | Some rich aphorism, | A delicate white meat.' Here 'word-

²⁰ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 566. Also 'Fields of Force', 35:40 to 35:59.

²¹ Brown, *Double Lyric*, p. 37.

²² Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 46. 'The Humanist'.

perfect' shrinks to 'desirable features of conversation'.²³ In *Speech! Speech!* it is a matter of not being 'word-perfect', though the deeper question is what it would mean in a context of desecration, grief, and possibly repentance, to be 'word-perfect'. 'The sanctuary hung with entrails. Blood | on the sackcloth. And still we are not | word-perfect.' (SS, 29). In *The Triumph of Love* perfection, or flawlessness, is found among 'mayhem' and comedy. Before the 'aircraft recognition cards' and 'King James' English' we find 'Laurel and Hardy | cutting, pacing, repacing, their | flawless shambles' (TL, CX). Whereas the lyric poem has a beautiful finish, in *The Orchards of Syon* the limestone is 'unfinished to perfection.' (OS, IX).

'Wait, I've not finished.' (OS, XLV) is an attention-holding formula which implies excited desire to hold forth. Compare it with the final line of 'Funeral Music': 'Crying to the end "I have not finished"'. 'Wait, I've not finished' announces more to say, which is then said:

Wait, I've not finished. A radical
otherness, as it's called, answers
to its own voices: that there should be
language, rituals, weddings, and wedding-nights,
and tapes which spin fast forward, stop, reverse;
that there is even now hawthorn, this bush
pregnant with the wild scent and taint of sex;
that there are men and women, destinies
interlocked; and dying, and resurrection. (OS, XLV)

This 'radical | otherness, as it's called' which 'answers to its own voices' includes the otherness of 'language', the otherness of 'rituals', and the otherness of self. The congress of self and 'radical | otherness' leads on to 'wedding-nights' and 'the wild scent and taint of sex' in which sense of self is consummated, heightened and lost.

The sequence-form is more open than lyric, open to incorporating other modes. In Bakhtinian terms, sequence is more 'novelistic', not seeking closure, but staying open to the incorrigible plurality of language and thought, the possibility that a new thought, a better image is ever imminent. Something of this is conveyed by the punctuation. In *The Triumph* six sections (LXXV, LXXXIV, XCIII, CVIII, CXXVII, CXLIX) finish on a dash. Fifteen (II, XI, XIII, XXI, XXXI,

²³ The phrase is taken from Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 75. 'From the Latin' in 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz'.

XXXII, XXXIX, XL, XLIX, LVI, LXIII, LXVIII, LXXXIII, LXXXIX, CXVII) end with a question mark.

Writing process, speed

In describing his writing praxis, Hill initially emphasised its slowness. In 1980 he remarked in interview that ‘over the years my pattern of working has changed’. He explained that in his early twenties he used to compose in his head whereas ‘now’ (1980) he works ‘on to paper’. In making this contrast, however, he describes his working in both cases as being slow. “Genesis” was composed very slowly over a period of weeks in a series of long one-day walks in Worcestershire’, whilst ‘I work much more now by a slow process of trial and error, on to paper’.²⁴

Interviewed twenty years later, Hill was emphasising newfound speed in composition. He divided his poetic career ‘about halfway through *Canaan*’: the early or mid 1990s:

Again, the astonishing difference between the period that began with *For the Unfallen* (one that actually ended about halfway through *Canaan* — nearly forty years), the difference between that period and the few years since I finished *Canaan* is that the phrases are coming faster, and my discovery of where they seem to be leading takes place much more speedily. Up until *Canaan*, which is a kind of borderline book, a sort of boundary book, I would sometimes take ten or fifteen years to discover where a phrase was going. And I can’t quite understand now how that is possible. I seemed able to wait that long. That’s the difference between being twenty-seven or thirty-seven and sixty-seven. If I don’t do it now, I never will: there is that sense of urgency.²⁵

This new speed might be illustrated by some images taken from later Hill which have to do with velocity, control and, implicitly, the speed of creativity.

In strife of certitudes to be outstared.
Let me urge for myself virtues
Of the skald as hit-man
Things narrow thus
Chaos
Or chess
To harrow us

²⁴ Hill, ‘Under Judgment’, (p. 213).

²⁵ Hill, ‘Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80’, (p. 290).

Go swanning through skidpan
 As a freelance virtuoso
 Other means of advancement undeclared²⁶

The emblem here is the hourglass which shows time slipping away. The 'skald' is the Viking poet whose role it was to praise martial heroism, and to compose an inspirational poem on the eve of battle. This is Hill enacting a new role of himself as poet. The 'hitman' would be an assassin or 'hired gun', more active, courageous and dangerous than the earlier image of the poet 'under judgment'. The verbal participle 'swanning' evokes the spotless bird, a manifestation of light, at home on water and in air, an image of physical grace, as in Yeats's 'brilliant creatures' ('The Wild Swans at Coole'). But 'swanning' has another, slangier sense, especially with the prepositions 'around', 'about' and 'off', such that 'swanning around' would be wandering idly or aimlessly, affecting airs like the idle rich. In this sense 'swanning' is doing something casually, or too casually. When Pavese 'hectored boys to fight then swanned away | on a prolonged vacation',²⁷ that verb 'swanned' signals conspicuous disregard and *hauteur*. In our example from *Clavics*, Hill tweaks the verb 'swanning' by twinning it with the preposition 'through' which, though common itself, is seldom used with the verb 'swan'. We are used to 'swanning about' but not to 'swanning through'. One might perhaps go 'swanning through' a test, meaning to take it without much effort, or with a polished appearance of effortlessness. To 'Go swanning through skidpan' may involve catachresis or mixed metaphor. A 'skidpan' is both a slippery treacherous surface, such as a road covered in black ice, a site of accidents, and a place where the driver practises how to control a vehicle on such a treacherous surface. The noun 'virtuoso' activates a range of connotations from the positive associations of expert or master (as in a 'virtuoso' pianist) through the knowledgeable but potentially self-indulgent (as in 'connoisseur') to the pejorative undertones of 'dabbler' or 'dilettante'.

Sequence can be composed more quickly than lyric. One of the most time-consuming and nerve-wracking aspects of writing lyric poetry is waiting for inspiration for the next poem. In the sequence this wait can be much reduced or even eliminated since the subject is already given; the germ of a new part is present in previous parts; and a defect, excess or fault in one section generates a corrective impulse for the next. Likewise, the lyric poet will spend much time on closing a poem down, polishing and burnishing it, since the end crowns the

²⁶ Geoffrey Hill, *Clavics*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2011), p. 38. Section 28. See also *Clavics* (2013), section 29, BH p. 819.

²⁷ 'Pindarics' (2006) section 16 in Hill, *Without Title*, p. 50.

work: 'finis coronat opus'. In the sequence this is less necessary since an imperfection or omission may be productive. A blemish becomes an opportunity to return and address the fault in a subsequent section. 'Finis incipit opus'.

Sequence may also be read more quickly than lyric, as Hill himself recommended. '*Speech! Speech!* is not a book to be slowly pondered; it is meant to be taken, at least on first reading, at a cracking pace.'²⁸ But note that qualification 'at least on first reading'.

Within his sequences, Hill sometimes refers to his sequences in a utilitarian way, as an artisan or worker. He talks of the sections not as precious carvings but as blocks, where 'block' implies raw material yet to be worked on (such as a block of marble) or a prefabricated building-block. This figures the writing of poetry more as assembly than inspiration. 'Some discourse is expansive, but some | composed of opposing blocks.'²⁹ The poet might be assembling a prefabricated shed, rather than perfecting the well-wrought urn of finished lyric. When the word 'assemblance' is repeated twice in the same line (TL, XLIV), the poet may be delighting in a utility word, or questioning whether 'this assemblance' is only a semblance of poetry. In *Speech! Speech!* the process is uglified as if these are blocks of brutalist architecture, excreted, vomited or gulped out like Lego. 'He voids each twelve-line blóck | a head | solemnly breaking water.' (SS, 86). Elsewhere, the reader could be a soldier fighting through 'blocks' of a hostile city. 'You will have to | go forward block by block, for pity's sake, | irresolute as granite.' (TL, XIX).

Individual parts are held by powerful rhythms of formal recurrence running through the whole: the aesthetic here is like modern sculpture. Speaking of sculpture by direct metal construction, as opposed to the carving-away technique of classical sculpture, the modernist sculptor David Smith said that 'the new method is to assemble the whole by adding its unit parts.' This he describes as an 'an industrial concept, the basis of automobile and machine assembly in the steel process.' Particularly in his later sequences, Hill can be seen as assembling the whole by adding its unit parts.

The replication and accumulation of same-shaped blocks generates formal unity. In conjunction with rhyme, it creates a sense of pattern. Whilst the twenty-one 'Hymns' of 2013, examined in the previous chapter, break the lyrical unities of place, action and time, which obtained in the prior, 1984 version of the 'Hymns', they increase the sense of formal unity simply through replication and

²⁸ Brown and Paterson, '*Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in Their Own Words*', (p. 116).

²⁹ Hill, *Without Title*, p. 55. 'Pindarics', Section 21. Also *Pindarics* 5, BH 527.

accumulation. As Hill moves from lyric containment to the sequence which is expandable and has no obvious limit, he creates a new overarching rhyme scheme. The 'Seven Hymns' of 2009 were all rhymed (or half-rhymed) *abba*. The first three new hymns (of 2013) rhyme *abab* as do the last four. Meanwhile numbers 11 to 17 inclusive rhyme *abba*. The new 2013 sequence therefore has three hymns rhymed *abab*, followed by fourteen rhymed *abba*, followed by four rhymed *abab*. This establishes a pattern or even rhythm of rhyming which extends beyond the part to the whole. The 'Parnassian pattern-block' (*Hymns*, 12) of sequence is established by dint of repetition and patterning. The adjective 'Parnassian' is self-deprecating in that it is Hopkins' term for 'uninspired'.³⁰ Hill describes his 'pattern-block' as 'cleft by joint strokes of gravitas and schlock' (*Hymns*, 12) where 'gravitas' is over-earnestness, perhaps induced by a surplus of ambition, while 'schlock' is defined as 'cheap, shoddy, or inferior quality goods or material; junk, rubbish' (OED). If this is irony, then critics of Hill's later work would see it as irony which tells the truth.

Omissions and aporia

This thesis has significant gaps. One formative omission has been Hill's lyric poetry. Grievous though the omission is, since these lyrics are my first and abiding love, it has been necessary in order to concentrate on the critically-neglected sequences. The thesis has passed over the important question of quality and whether Hill's migration from lyric to sequence entails a decline of intensity and brilliance.

Although the thesis has described some of Hill's poetry as 'modernist', it has failed to examine and place the poetry in relation to modernism(s). To evaluate whether Hill's poetry is best categorised as modernist, late modernist, later modernist, high modernist, neomodernist, or postmodernist begs the question whether such labels are mutually exclusive. It may be wise to combine them judiciously. Thus Sherry, having introduced Hill's work as 'neomodernist poetry that is complex, formally innovative, and richly allusive', concludes that Hill is shaped by the 'pressure of literary modernism' and by the pressure of history, but 'postmodernist in his openness to the processes of his art, his situating the traces of the language as they crisscross his poems.'³¹ Is the term 'postmodernist' to be understood chronologically (those who come after modernism) or analytically? Sherry places Hill 'among the later British modernists—postmodernists chiefly in time'. Roberts (2020) slides the hyphens,

³⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Prose*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 19-22. Letter to Alexander Baillie, 10/11 September 1864.

³¹ Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue*, pp. 1, 243.

so that Hill (and Denise Riley) are both 'deploying the power of the lyrical within a self-consciously critical late-modernist poetic' and 'maintaining the lyrical within a self-consciously late modernist poetic'.³² Self-consciously critical or self-consciously late? Modernist or late-modernist? How self-conscious and how critical is the distinction? If pursuing the problem of modernism and its cognates, one would have to contend with Hill's own understanding of 'modernism' as "originality" and of "postmodernism" as 'a form of animus'.³³

Within the set of sequences as defined by Hill and Haynes, this thesis has neglected the sequences from *Canaan* (1996), *Without Title* (2006) and *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007), along with the poems-in-sections in the liminal area between lyric and sequence. This latter omission will now be partially redressed. *Canaan* (1996) is never far from the idea of sequence. The blurb on its back cover announces sequences. 'Various sequences, including "To the High Court of Parliament, November 1994", "Churchill's Funeral" and "Mysticism and Democracy", consider England and public life, and weave into an indirect narrative of European history.' Already in this advertisement we find two kinds of sequence. Whereas 'Churchill's Funeral' is a conventional sequence in five consecutive sections, the other two sequences mentioned are 'spaced sequences' as defined by Roberts.³⁴ Overall, *Canaan* has eight sequences by the Hill/Haynes definition given in the introduction to this thesis. It also includes five poems-in-sections which are not sequences by the Hill/Haynes definition but are numbered in Arabic or Roman numerals. These are 'Sobieski's Shield' (with 2 numbered sections); 'Ritornelli' (iii); the title poem, 'Canaan' (III); 'Cycle' (5); and 'Ezekiel's Wheel' (IV). In the form in which it appears in *Broken Hierarchies* there is a visual way to tell a sequence from a poem-in-sections. In the sequences each separate section is granted the dignity of standing on its own page, separated by white space and a page-break from the next. By contrast, when sections follow on immediately, we can tell the poem is not a sequence and the index will therefore have only the first line of the whole poem, not the first line of each section.

Without Title (2006) is also poised between individual lyric and longer sequence. It has only four sequences by the Hill/Haynes definition: 'On the Reality of the Symbol' (6 sections); 'Tu B'Shevat' (2); 'In the Valley of the Arrow' (5); and 'Improvisations for Hart Crane' (3). Five other poems are divided into

³² Roberts, *Strangeness and Power*, pp. 13, 132).

³³ Geoffrey Hill, 'Thoughts of a Conservative Modernist', in *Post-Modernisms: Origins, Consequences, Reconsiderations*, ed. by Claudio Veliz (Boston: Boston University, 2002).

³⁴ Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, p. 62.

numbered sections, which gives them something of the look of sequence, although they are not so by the Hill/Haynes definition. Their numbering is usually with Arabic numerals but once or twice with Roman. Thus, we have 'The Jumping Boy' (4 sections); 'Discourse: For Stanley Rosen' (3); 'Improvisations for Jimi Hendrix' (4); 'To the Teller of Fortunes' (VII); 'Ars' (2). In the original *Without Title* (2006) there is also 'From the Annals' (in III sections), but this is dropped in *Broken Hierarchies*. These poems with their numbered sections are keeping contact with the idea of sequence and its capacity for further expansion. So too are the three poems 'In Ipsley Church Lane' which are numbered in Arabic numerals in their titles and are presented with other poems in-between, as in a spaced sequence. The effect is so like spaced sequence that they should perhaps be categorised as such. Despite my claim in the introduction that the Hill/Haynes definition distinguishes definitively a single poem in several sections from a sequence of poems that share a title, the three poems 'In Ipsley Church Lane' are a grey area. *Without Title* (2006) also contains a sequence of twenty-one poems 'Pindarics' (after Cesare Pavese), which is upgraded in *Broken Hierarchies* into its own book, titled *Pindarics (2005-2012)*, a sequence of thirty-four poems.

By the Hill/Haynes definition *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007) contains only three sequences: 'Holbein' (II numbered poems); 'To the Lord Protector Cromwell' (4 numbered sonnets); and 'A Précis or Memorandum of Civil Power' (VII numbered poems). Ten other poems are in numbered sections as if Hill is experimenting with their potential as proto-sequences, or just keeping contact with the logic and look of sequence. The numbering is sometimes Roman and sometimes Arabic. The visual effect on the page is prominently to divide the poem into numbered sections. This I will not reproduce but instead list those poems which are divided in this manner, along with the total number of their sections: 'On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*' (XII sections); 'Parallel Lives' (II); 'On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*' (IX); 'A Cloud in Aquila' (6); 'After Reading *Children of Albion* (1969)' (3); 'Integer Vitae' (6); 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose' (14); 'Johannes Brahms, Opus 2' (ii); 'On Reading *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (11); 'Coda' (6). The apogee of numbering is the sequence in sonnet-form 'To the Lord Protector Cromwell' (BH, 571-74) where each line is numbered by an Arabic numeral centred above it. The mimesis here is directed towards the compulsion to order in Cromwell, his New Model Army and Puritan thinking. We might imagine ranks of soldiers as in 'Ordered form square' of *Odi Barbare* VI (BH, 840).

Two numbered poems in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007) do not appear as such in *Broken Hierarchies* (2013). Hill deletes 'On Reading *Burke on Empire*,

Liberty, and Reform' (in IV sections). He also deletes the last three sections of 'On Reading *Crowds and Power*', leaving in *Broken Hierarchies* just one section, which of course does not need to be numbered. A *Treatise* also keeps in touch with the idea of sequence *via* the patterning of its titles. Thus, A *Treatise* (in *Broken Hierarchies*) has four poems entitled 'On Reading...', along with one 'After Reading...' and one 'On Looking Through...'. None of these counts as a sequence by the Hill/Haynes definition, but collectively they convey a notion of grouping and theme which is close to sequence. Likewise, the collection has two poems titled 'Citations I' and 'Citations II' which sounds like the start of a sequence, although neither is a sequence. It also has three poems whose title begins 'In Memoriam:' although none counts as a sequence.

This thesis has hitherto failed to consider the Clutag booklet, *A Treatise of Civil power* (2005).³⁵ This booklet, not reproduced as such in *Broken Hierarchies*, includes eight poems, in each of which each stanza is numbered, giving it the look of proto-sequence. The booklet contains one sequence also found in *Broken Hierarchies*: 'To the Lord Protector Cromwell'. The heart of the 2005 booklet is its title-poem in forty-two stanzas, which is omitted from *Broken Hierarchies*, although some stanzas are salvaged and reappear in somewhat revised forms as short lyric poems ('The Minor Prophets', 'Citations I', 'Citations II', 'Harmonia Sacra', 'Before Senility'). Here Hill is operating against the grain of his normal practice by breaking down a long poem, arguably a sequence, into shorter lyrics.

This thesis has neglected musical aspects of Hill's poetry and it may go without saying that Hill also thinks and hears his poetry musically. One example: speaking of the chaconne and passacaglia 'in which an initial theme becomes the ground bass above which are developed a succession of variations', Hill praises them as 'a type of musical form which is simultaneously wild and strict. This is a quality which somehow must be brought back into English poetry this century, or English poetry will die.'³⁶ In his later isomorphic sequences, the repeated form of the sections is the ground bass above which he develops a wild succession of variations.

This thesis has also neglected dance and choreography, although Hill acknowledged that 'the choreography of Mark Morris, in the numerous performances by his dancers that I have attended, has shaped my ideas about how to put words together in new ways.' Hill compares Morris with John Dryden for 'the way he can move rapidly from broad satire to pointed farce to tragic

³⁵ Geoffrey Hill, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, (Thame: Clutag Press, 2005).

³⁶ Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', 30:30 to 31:55.

resonance and back'.³⁷ Without recourse to jargon, Hill is speaking here of what this thesis has clunkily called 'multimodality': the skill of conjuring, and darting between, different modes, which sets up questions about the relationship of those modes, questions which ride unverballed far into the reader's sensibility and imagination.

Hill's aesthetic is influenced by film, as he acknowledges in his *Paris Review* interview. 'It was my wife Alice who first pointed out to me, quite some time ago, that the way I write has been very much influenced by techniques of film-cutting.' Hill also mentions his debt to music-hall and the comedians, as to 'Laurel and Hardy' (TL, CX), quoted above. Poetry, like film, can 'change views entirely' and cut to 'Baskerville cutting, setting, his plain | and ornamental types; artificers' | resounding mastery of things hard laboured.' (OS, XVI). The poet is like the film-editor. 'Press the right word, the scenes change.' (OS, XXXIV). *The Orchards* and other sequences verge into a phenomenology of impermanence, a spectral play of 'ghosted speech' (OS, LVI), like a movie, a projected 'show' (OS, I), perhaps one directed by the Angel of Death: 'Beam | us up, Asrael.' (OS, IV).

If the thesis is correct in claiming that Hill's critics have failed to see the significance of his move to the sequence-form, the question arises, why? It may be partly because they have been committed too absolutely to the practice and ideals of close reading. One of Hill's first advocates, Christopher Ricks, is praised as 'the closest of close readers',³⁸ and Peter Robinson notes that Hill's poetry 'requires and rewards very close reading'.³⁹ But such 'very close' reading has the unintended consequence of occluding the bigger picture: Hill's move to the sequence-form, and the significance of that move. To understand sequences requires that close reading be supplemented with another kind of reading which is more alert to the inter-relation of sections over a wide span. Whilst 'close reading' has both a name and prestige, this other kind of reading is a poor stranger in critical circles. We might call it 'holistic' reading. It is akin to thinking how the chapters of a novel, acts of a play or scenes of a movie combine into a whole. It would be simplistic to posit a binary opposition between close reading and holistic reading, then favour one over the other. Close reading, which illuminates the ambiguities of the lyrics, remains necessary but also becomes insufficient, even unhelpful, when applied to sequence. One must combine close with holistic reading to show part and whole in proper relation to

³⁷ Hill, 'Geoffrey Hill, the Art of Poetry No. 80'.

³⁸ Bernard Bergonzi quoted on the back cover of Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1984]).

³⁹ Robinson, *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work*, p. x.

each other. Hill may have been ill-served by a hierarchy, even snobbery, of 'very close reading', which tends to myopia, just as holistic reading on its own blurs into generality. A judicious combination of 'close' reading with 'holistic' reading is a prerequisite for examining how Hill's poetic sequences work, which is to say, how most of Hill's poetry works.

The problem can be reformulated in the first-person. I first encountered Hill in 1981 via Alvarez's anthology, *The New Poetry*, which includes ten poems from *For the Unfallen*.⁴⁰ It seems I had been reading Hill for thirty-seven years before it crossed my mind that sequence is significant in his development. The blind-spot was exacerbated by my approach which prioritised learning Hill's lyrics, or individual sections of sequences, by heart, in line with the practice of Helen Vendler and as a prerequisite for critical comment.⁴¹ Rewarding though this discipline is, it hid the underlying pattern. By analogy with learning to see the pattern behind a random dot autostereogram (marketed as 'Magic Eye' in the 1990s), I was not diverging the eyes to see the z-axis of depth perception: I was too focused on the surface to see the deeper pattern.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why Hill might have been drawn to poetic sequences. Whilst the lyric can look pleased with itself, sequence has something more restless. It rejects perfectionism and avoids the concomitant danger of sinking into dissatisfied silence, as Larkin sunk in the last decade of his life.

Sequence may be truer to how the mind associates, how it circles round an obsession; and how we experience or recover memory. It opens a way of probing depths of memory. It offers more depth of field and lets the poet work on a larger scale with multiple modes simultaneously in play, waiting to be played off against another, such that all confront and restrain each other. This releases Hill to work with dangerous modes he had hitherto avoided, both high (such as *Laus*, the prophetic, metaphysical speculation, the didactic) and low (*vituperatio*, farce, polemic). Each of these could overpower, overturn or take over any lyric in which it occurred. They would impugn the high mystery and dignity of lyric to which Hill retained fealty. In sequence, any one mode may hold the stage in one section, but the section-break re-sets the mode and imaginary context, such that no single mode monopolises the whole. Secure in the capacity to check and control the unruly powers of farce, polemic and

⁴⁰ A Alvarez, *The New Poetry*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

⁴¹ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, (Cambridge, MA ; London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 11.

prophecy, Hill began to work with these hazardous modes in ways which he (sensibly) avoided in lyric. The long sequence freed him to experiment with ungenteel modes in which he had a peculiar and ugly genius.

Sequence enacts the working of the mind and forgives local imperfection. Its aesthetic of dissonance suits Hill's gift for disjunction. It lets him include high philosophy and low farce, without either taking full control. Sequence allows iterations, excess, digression, ongoing correction and addition, turning out to further invention. But whilst invention is certainly a major component of the creative arts, it is not the only one and it involves a trade-off with other desiderata, such as subtlety, accuracy of observation, and restraint. Hill has quoted Emerson: 'In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty.'⁴² That phrase 'alienated majesty' provides the title for his final 'book' of critical writings and it closes a sentence which recognizes the importance of recognition in a work, where recognition entails insight and understanding, not mere inventiveness.⁴³ Hill and Emerson both knew that poetry cannot simply be a matter of maximising the presence of the alien, for a tyranny of Invention would degenerate into mere bizarrerie and surrealism which is ultimately tedious.

Hill's move to the sequence-form may be furthered by his changed understanding of error. In the lyric, error is a falling short of perfection. But this may lead to failure of nerve, playing safe, and errors of omission, as at the end of Pound's Canto LXXXI. 'Here error is all in the not done, | all in the diffidence that faltered . . .'⁴⁴ Errors of omission might be worse than errors of commission.

Within Hill's sequences there remains an element of the lyrical. He likes to round off a section with a gesture towards lyric completion, which can also gesture towards lyric continuation, as in the final line of *Orchards IV*. 'Coming or going, do the circuits again.' He will do the same again at the end of his subsequence 'Sei Madrigali', drawing the ephemeral hawthorn blossom into the circuits of eternity, 'Edging the meadow | The may-tree is all light and all shadow. | Coming and going are the things eternal.'⁴⁵ *The Triumph* too returns on itself as the closing section almost exactly mirrors the opening one: 'Sun-blazed over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp. [...] Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp.' With the combination of 'Sun' and 'rain' the rain-scarp sketches something of a rainbow arcing over the whole sequence. Hill is playing notions

⁴² Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, p. 565.

⁴³ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, pp. 491-580.

⁴⁴ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 522.

⁴⁵ Hill, *Broken Hierarchies*, p. 932.

of transience and recurrence against notions of finality: 'the coda, | the invoked finality | the setting-out.' (OS, XII). Here the finality is only a provisional finality, set in apposition with 'the setting-out'. In sequence, the emphasis is on setting-out with a new section rather than invoking finality. Hill relinquishes the finality – or the claim to finality – of lyric. 'Nothing to be struck out | of like finalities.' (OS, XXVIII).

This thesis has argued that the forty-five sequences in *Broken Hierarchies*, along with other sequences, notably *The Book of Baruch* (2019), constitute the bulk of Hill's poetic achievement. The 'bulk' is not necessarily the 'best', but the reader should not preclude the possibility that sequence is Hill's preeminent form in quality as well as quantity. The problem is that these sequences have seldom been read as sequence, as a whole. Should that neglect continue, then Hill's oeuvre might suffer a fate similar to Blake or Browning where the poetry public knows familiar anthology pieces ('September Song', 'And did those feet', 'My last Duchess') at the expense of more substantial work (*Al Tempo de' Tremuoti*, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, *The Ring and the Book*).

Although this thesis has not examined *The Daybooks* and *The Book of Baruch*, which constitute nearly half of Hill's output, it has throughout been oriented towards them, hypothesising that these late sequences would be well approached as we have approached the earlier ones. They too can be understood in terms of extension; relationality, which is to say relation and deliberate disrelation between sections; multimodality and modal dissonance; and selfhood in time. For example, a study of selfhood as moral drama illuminates *The Book of Baruch*, a book rich in self-explanation, self-regard, self-reference, self-serving, self-criticism, self-accusation and self-deprecation.

To understand the poetry of Hill's last decade it is helpful to approach it as sequence, and as a logical outworking of Hill's career. As such, the later sequences can be read in the terms discussed above, in relation to their various structuring-devices, and in the light of 'the monumentality / bidding nexus'. Read thus, the later sequences can be seen as Hill's grand project to rejuvenate the Eros of English and recreate the structures wherein monumentality and bidding 'extravagantly move together in their mutual excitement'.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hill, 'Monumentality and Bidding', 41:28 to 42:38.

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