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Geoffrey Hill: Poetry, Criticism and Philosophy

Alex Pestell

DPhil

University of Sussex

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

ALEX PESTELL DPHIL

GEOFFREY HILL: POETRY, CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHYSUMMARY

This thesis examines the role played by philosophy in the poetry and criticism of Geoffrey Hill. Despite countless references to philosophy throughout Hill's critical authorship, there exists no study of any length on this vital aspect of his thought. Through close readings of his poetry, criticism, and archival material, I attempt to demonstrate that philosophy has played a more crucial role in Hill's work than has hitherto been assumed.

Hill's sceptical attitude to philosophy is intimately connected with his understanding of poetry as a sensate form of cognition. My thesis examines the ways Hill's poetry and criticism responds to the challenges imposed upon this scepticism by a tradition of philosophy that emphasises the importance of the aesthetic to its analyses of modernity's contradictions. I argue that a tradition of Anglophone Idealist thinkers, from S.T. Coleridge, via T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley, to Gillian Rose, is of sustained relevance to Hill's work, shaping the way he thinks about politics, ethics and literature.

In particular, German Idealism's attempts to negotiate universality and particularity via an emphasis on the aesthetic bases of critical thought lay the groundwork for an understanding of poetry as a mode of cognition. Reading Hill's poetry from *For the Unfallen* to *Oraclau/Oracles*, I try to show the ways in which problems traditionally conceived of as philosophical can be cognised in prosody and syntax. In part a vindication of Hill's elevation of poetry over philosophy, these readings also show the degree to which Hill's 'craft of vision' is indebted to conceptual and aesthetic models supplied by philosophy.

Contents

List of abbreviations.....	5
Introduction	6
1. ‘Vision’ as the domain of poetry.....	7
2. Anglophone Idealism’s dissatisfaction with modernity.....	15
3. Poetry’s dissatisfaction with modernity.....	22
SECTION I: COLERIDGE’S INFLUENCE	36
Chapter 1: Imagination	37
1. Lyric as diagnosis.....	39
2. The imagination’s role in subjective aesthetic reflection.....	45
3. Imagination and the common sense.....	53
Chapter 2: The Drama of Reason	66
1. The ‘drama of reason’.....	66
2. Coleridge’s aesthetics and literary criticism.....	78
3. Living Powers.....	85
4. <i>Sensus communis</i> : a ‘decaying sense’.....	92
SECTION II: VICTORIAN IDEALISM AND OBJECTIVITY	100
Chapter 3: Art of Judgement	101
1. The role of legislative metaphors in philosophical and poetic judgement.....	105
2. What is Popular Philosophy?.....	113
3. Popular philosophy as impediment to poetic thought.....	120
Chapter 4: ‘The strife of phrase’	130
1. Wavering thought.....	130
2. What is a Bradleian poem?.....	140
3. Optional / obligatory music and its role in judgement.....	144
4. Ephemeral thought.....	157
SECTION III: WORDS AND THINGS	170
Chapter 5: Performative Speech	171
1. The example of Ezra Pound.....	174
2. Speech-acts.....	180
3. The diagnostic word in Hill, Pound, and Austin.....	184
4. Blindness and stultification.....	194
5. Words and things.....	202
Chapter 6: Poetry and Value	214
1. Intrinsic value.....	215
2. Civil Power and Intrinsic Value.....	223
3. ‘In Memoriam: Gillian Rose’.....	231
Conclusion	239
Bibliography	248

List of abbreviations

<i>C</i>	<i>Canaan</i> (London: Penguin, 1996)
<i>CCW</i>	<i>Collected Critical Writings</i> , ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i> (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985)
<i>LL</i>	<i>The Lords of Limit</i> (London: André Deutsch, 1984)
<i>O</i>	<i>Oraclau / Oracles</i> (Thame: Clutag Press, 2010)
<i>OS</i>	<i>The Orchards of Syon</i> (London: Penguin, 2002)
<i>SC</i>	<i>Scenes from Comus</i> (London: Penguin, 2005)
<i>SS</i>	<i>Speech! Speech!</i> (London: Penguin, 2001)
<i>T1</i>	<i>A Treatise of Civil Power</i> (Thame: Clutag Press, 2005)
<i>T2</i>	<i>A Treatise of Civil Power</i> (London: Penguin, 2007)
<i>TL</i>	<i>The Triumph of Love</i> (London: Penguin, 1999)
<i>WT</i>	<i>Without Title</i> (London: Penguin, 2006)

INTRODUCTION

What follows is a study of the role philosophy plays in the work of Geoffrey Hill. Philosophy is often presented by Hill as ancillary or even antithetical to poetry. Poetry is, or ought to be, ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’: a matter of the instinctual apprehension of sensate particulars.¹ By contrast, philosophy is suspected of flattening out the granular surface of lived experience in the name of a systematic model of this experience. Philosophy might offer coordinating perspectives in Hill’s work, as when F.H. Bradley is quoted in the epigraphs to Hill’s *Collected Critical Writings* and *Without Title*, or when Simone Weil stands at the head of ‘The Pentecost Castle’, but in the main its role in what Hill calls ‘the craft of vision’ – the effort to obtain critical purchase on objective truth – is downplayed.² Perhaps for this reason, critics have not yet produced any study, book chapter, article or monograph devoted to understanding Hill’s relationship to philosophy.

Briefly, the argument in this thesis is not only that philosophy warrants this kind of attention, but that Hill’s conception of poetic ambition, of what poetry can and should strive to achieve, rests to a large extent on concepts and practices supplied by philosophy. Moreover, I will argue that Hill’s investment in philosophy is in fact committed to a particular tradition, that of an Anglophone Idealism derived from German Idealism. This is a tradition about which Hill has written at some length: most obviously in his essays on T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley, but also in occasional meditations on the thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Gillian Rose. But my evidence for Hill’s commitment to this tradition

¹ Blake Morrison, ‘Under Judgment’, *New Statesman* 2551 (1980), 212-4, at 212. Hill is quoting Milton, ‘Of Education’.

² See *CCW* vii, *WT* vii, *CP* 137.

will be drawn not just from a study of Hill's critical commentary upon these writers, but from close readings of his prose style and his poetry, in order to demonstrate the impact of Anglophone Idealism upon the texture of his writing. In reading the syntax and prosody of Hill's criticism and poetry in the light of the ideas developed by Coleridge, Green, Bradley, and Rose, I hope to disclose a far greater reliance upon philosophy's modes of cognition than heretofore suspected.

The rest of this introduction considers in what ways poetry and philosophy might be thought to inhabit overlapping domains of inquiry. In particular, it focuses upon the ways in which both poetry and philosophy, through a diagnosis of contradictions and an imagining of alternatives to contemporary experience, express a dissatisfaction with modernity. It offers some theoretical context, setting out the main outlines of the philosophical tradition in which I argue Hill's work is most invested. It then offers a detailed close reading of an early Geoffrey Hill poem in an attempt to demonstrate what a philosophical poem might look like from the point of view of its syntax and prosody, rather than from the point of view of any content which might be taken to be philosophic. First, though, I will briefly consider some of the concepts, attitudes, and practices at stake in Hill's poetic practice as they bear upon philosophy.

1. 'Vision' as the domain of poetry

What is the status of visions in Hill's work? On occasion, as here in 'Of Commerce and Society' (*CP* 46-51), Hill betrays a deep suspicion for the claims of the visionary:

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,
 Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:
 Some of us have heard the dead speak:
 The dead are my obsession this week

But may be lifted away.
 (CP 49)

This suspicion is audible in the poem's metre. The first stanza begins with two lines of pentameter, but almost immediately the trochees of the first sentence come up against the rhythmic ambiguity of 'have known'. The emphasis might rest on either syllable. If it rests on the 'have', the sentence appears defensive or regally insistent: politicians *have* known visions, whatever others might say. Alternatively, it might be read with the emphasis on 'known', in which case the weight is more equally distributed, and suggests some kind of narrative. In what way have statesmen 'known visions'? How is this different from the visionary experiences attributed to prophets and artists? But the issue isn't seriously considered, or is assumed as incontrovertible fact, for a new sentence importunately breaks into the rhythm: 'And, not alone, / Artistic men prod dead men from their stone'. A claim for artistic vision opportunistically butts in, rather as the molossus 'men prod dead' interrupts the presiding rhythm. We then hear the voice of artistic connoisseurship as the following lines relax into irregular tetrameters, padded out by unstressed syllables to reinforce the informality of the occasion. 'Some of us have heard the dead speak' coyly hints at arcane knowledge, but makes light of the affair the better to impress the audience; it comes across as the diction of a creative writing veteran vaunting his vatic status. No wonder Jeffrey Wainwright can write of this passage, 'No sooner has the speaker pretended to visionary knowledge than the claim is undermined, trashed even, by a scepticism that

sees it as an affectation, something like a nervous headache'.³ Vision, here, is barely distinguishable from narcissism.

However, Hill's scepticism is not impervious to the seductions of the visionary tradition. In a much later poem, 'On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*', occurs a line which is suggestive for Hill's understanding of poetry's role in modernity: 'The craft of vision is what I make of this'. Vision, on this account, clearly has a role to play in Hill's 'craft'. Note, here, how vision's status is downgraded to a contingent, spontaneous object of artifice rather than a heaven-sent gift: art is subjective, provisional, and not subordinate to any pre-existing universal concept, category or criterion. This is a familiar position in the theories of continental aesthetics, from Hegel onwards.⁴ No longer subject to the coordinating authorities of the church and monarchy, art acquires a degree of autonomy, and with it the privilege of critical distance. That Hill conceives of this distance as critical, and not just as the expulsion of art into the domain of the pastime or the decorative, is suggested by his use of the theologically-loaded 'vision'. Vision suggests a faculty more transcendent than simple sight, though close natural observation is a staple of Hill's poetic gestural repertoire. Hill has written that "'vision" is too commonly taken to mean effortless, unimpeded rapture' (CCW 318), and it will become clear that a deep suspicion of the unimpeded intellect is a recurrent feature of Hill's authorship. But in a paradox that will be frequently encountered in what follows, vision, as a diagnostic grasp of some objective

³ Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 19.

⁴ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T.M. Knox, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), i, 51. For more recent examples, see J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992) and Gerald L. Bruns, *On the Anarchy of Poetry and Philosophy: A Guide for the Unruly* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

configuration of the world claimed by the author to be in some way true, also sits at the heart of this authorship.

Furthermore, vision, or truthful insight into some objective element of reality, is explicitly conceived of as a privilege of lyric poetry. Vision is ‘what I make of this’, ‘this’ being the poem under construction, the lines written by an agency pronominally brought into the poem, Hill’s version of Pound’s *ego scriptor*. Questions are provoked by this statement which will be examined in the chapters that follow: about the constitutive nature of the subject, and this nature’s antagonisms with syntax in literary production; about the kinds of truth-claims art is able to make in a modernity which relegates art beyond the domain of truth; and about the relationship between the singular, contingent quality of this poetic assertion and the scientific, generalised quality sometimes evident in Hill’s criticism.

For an example of this quality, we might turn to the essay ‘What Devil Has Got Into John Ransom’, in which Hill alludes to ‘[Ransom’s] celebrated definition of the poem as “nothing short of a desperate ontological or metaphysical manoeuvre”’ (CCW 128). Hill quotes this statement, or a truncated version of it, on three separate occasions in the *Collected Critical Writings*. So despite Hill’s criticism that it appears ‘a formula at once all-embracing and exclusive’, it seems to carry some explanatory weight for him (CCW 128). Several contrasts with Hill’s line on the ‘craft of vision’ are immediately apparent. Subjective agency is given a less dominant role, for example. Far from poetic ‘craft’ being subordinate to the constructive abilities of the author, the crafting subjectivity is conceived of as floundering in an element which permits only ‘desperate ... manoeuvre[s]’. Under such conditions, any diagnostic insight will be something snatched from a manifold of sensory and metaphysical data, rather than a calmly considered report. Second, these

conditions are named as bearing upon the ‘ontological or metaphysical’ aspects of the writing subject: to speak of these aspects brings into play the possibility of a mode of cognising them, which in turn raises the spectre of philosophy, of the extension of knowledge beyond what is subjective and contingent, to questions of freedom, community and law. In other words, despite the sense of inadequacy and incompleteness suggested by ‘desperate’, the very inclusion of metaphysics within this definition brings a far larger domain into the scope of Hill’s ‘vision’ than was perhaps apparent before. Lastly, this quotation is taken from a critical essay: unlike the ‘craft of vision’ (in which a modern art banished from scientific, rational domains of truth-speaking is obliged to come at objectivity via other, aesthetic means), the diagnostic options available to critical prose are closer to those of rational discourse. Note, for example, that Hill is quoting Ransom’s ‘definition’: the notion of truth implicitly offered is one of *defining*, of the rational subsumption of particulars under universals, rather than that of the interaction of the material and communicative elements of language. Yet if criticism is not to set itself in opposition to art’s truth-claims, it must make some account of its distance from the object of its analysis, and it will be shown that Hill’s prose style is profoundly affected by the repercussions of this account’s necessity.

These two quotations contain within them the two poles governing the terms of my thesis. On the one hand, the poetic is seen as a mode of critique, of subjective agency and autonomy; on the other hand, this critical capacity is seen to be embedded in a wider, more general scene of activity which threatens to deprive it of its specificity and freedom. Hill is drawn to these poles of poetic activity again and again in his criticism and poetry, as many commentators have acknowledged. What is less often remarked upon is his equally

immersive preoccupation with philosophy as a rival to poetry in the crafting of vision, and as a productive way of thinking about these poles.

Philosophy's role as rival and spur to the 'craft of vision' is the subject of this thesis. If a struggle between the totalising view of human experience and a conception of it as fragmentary and unique exists, as I have argued above, in Hill's conception of the poetic, this struggle is reproduced in his encounters with philosophy. Taking in the systematic or scientific approaches (for example, Kant), and the ad hoc, empirical approaches (J.L. Austin), Hill's chosen avenues into philosophy mirror similar paths in his poetics. I will argue that Hill is fully aware of this rivalry between poetry and philosophy, and in fact is an enthusiastic debater on the side of poetry. And yet I will also argue that philosophy, whether as thought-provoking opponent or indeed as repository of valuable cognitive perspectives, contributes a great deal to Hill's idea of the 'craft of vision'. Furthermore, my thesis will demonstrate that Hill's adversarial embrace with philosophy is remarkably cohesive, being almost entirely concerned with a particular tradition: British philosophy derived from German Idealism; in other words, the work of S.T. Coleridge, T.H. Green, F.H. Bradley, and Gillian Rose.

It should be pointed out at the outset, though, that this cohesiveness is frequently masked by Hill's apparent urge to marginalise philosophy's role in his thinking. A case in point is the final essay in Hill's *Collected Critical Writings*, 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics'. The title promises to its readers a summary of its author's attitudes to poetic practice. It also happens to contain more allusions to philosophy per page than almost any other essay in his *Collected Critical Writings* barring the explicitly philosophical pieces. It views poetry in terms that constantly recur throughout Hill's prose: poetry has an 'arbitrary nature'; it depends on 'the intertwining nature of the arbitrary, the arbitrariness, in the

senses of free choice, arrogation of free choice, and the despotic'. This notion of the arbitrary, 'by a long process of semantic conglomeration, is at once freedom of will and the will obdurate in itself and subject to, and in service to, a greater obduracy' (*CCW* 571-73). These are central themes in Hill's poetics.

And yet Hill advertises the essay's marginal status in its title: it is a 'postscript'. He presents it as an afterthought, an addendum, something nonessential to the main argument. In doing so he is conforming to a career-long attitude towards the organised presentation of ideas or theories. Such assemblages of thought, his attitude suggests, are liable to have their carefully-defined borders blotted by the first experience that does not conform to them; or experience itself risks damage at their edges. If Hill calls upon a wide range of philosophers in the course of the essay (including Bradley, Peirce, Rose, Weil, Kant, Adorno and Arendt), this can only confirm the experimental, ancillary status of the essay, rather than its serious intellectual ambitions. Hill's suspicion of jargon is certainly a part of this: elsewhere he has written of the challenge 'of resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive' (*CCW* 3). It's notable, for instance, that Hill rarely if ever engages with the work of any of the theorists whose projects have involved the very critique of modernity Hill might be thought to assent to. To judge from remarks in his poetry and interviews, his attitude to philosophy is lukewarm at best. His poetry contains some of his most disparaging comments: 'Philosophy, / in general, seems groundless', 'more potent by far than metaphysics', 'What a wonder [man the philosopher] is, and how / abysmal', 'whatever it is that is sought // through metaphysics'.⁵ Hill recently said in interview that he has been 'completely moved by philosophy only two times in my life: by

⁵ *TI* (np); *TL* 56; *WT* 25; *C* 5.

Simone Weil when I was young; more recently, by F.H. Bradley'.⁶ In linking the experience of reading a philosopher with immediate emotional reaction, Hill thereby sweeps aside the aspects of philosophy which do not and very likely could not have such an impact, but which may still make valid contributions to the 'craft of vision'.

It is characteristic that in the act of affirming the emotional power of one or two thinkers, he implicitly downplays the many occasions on which philosophy has moved him to construct or elaborate his own thoughts about poetry, politics and ethics. But in 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics', as I've said, the range of philosophers alluded to is remarkable. They supply the terms to which he often has recourse in his elucidation of freedom and obduracy, even if only negatively. Poetry's relation to the world isn't Pierce's 'logical thought' vs 'purposive action' opposition, for example. It is closer to the 'broken middle' of Gillian Rose or the conditions of judgement of F.H. Bradley (*CCW* 566-7). This is just one instance of dozens in Hill's critical work where he deploys ideas from philosophy as placeholders for strategies, directions and obstructions in the work of vision. Admittedly, Hill's habit of understating the influence of philosophy upon his work should be taken seriously: his thought is equally informed by the controversies following the political and religious settlement of Elizabeth I. But to accept Hill's self-distancing from the language and concepts of contemporary academic thought, and more broadly from modern philosophy as a whole, risks losing sight of this important constituent of his attitude towards modernity. His intellectually self-isolating position should not be taken at face value: his thought is quite consonant with a trend of post-Enlightenment thinking of which Hill has explored one of the tributaries – Anglophone Idealism – at some length.

⁶ Anne Mounic, 'Le poème, "moulin mystique": Entretien avec Geoffrey Hill', *Temporel* 6 (2008) <<http://temporel.fr/Le-poeme-moulin-mystique-Entretien>>, accessed 6 December 2009.

2. Anglophone Idealism's dissatisfaction with modernity

To read Hill, or to read some of his more partisan critics, is to be frequently reminded of his marginal status – in contemporary literary culture, in the spectrum of moral conviction, in political and religious affiliations. Seemingly untouched by contemporary intellectual concerns, reluctant to comment upon his academic and poetic contemporaries, his thought seems to tread a line completely *sui generis*. Even when his thought becomes allusive – as it does repeatedly in his essays and poetry – the act of allusion is represented as a highly personal choice. Certain figures, indeed certain phrases, are cited and re-cited, cumulatively giving the effect of a private display cabinet. We get the impression that Hill's constellated figures are chosen to illustrate his theme, rather than his theme being determined by their thought. Even textuality and allusion, then, do not mitigate the instinctual, sensuous tact that is emblematic of Hill's solitary position in contemporary culture.

However, if Hill's subjects and satisfactions are, for the most part, conceptually and chronologically distant, he is only conforming to an intellectual trend that has reverberated through modernity. For Hill's manifest dissatisfaction with modernity is what makes him quintessentially of his epoch. It is very much part of his participation in the intellectual landscape of modernity that he is so suspicious of modernity and the assumptions it is founded on. It is true that Hill can only with difficulty be captured in the same conceptual frame as the writers and theorists who have dominated the period covered by his writing activity: he is reluctant, in his prose, to admit intellectual trends and terminologies that are yet to possess an interrogable history of usage. But one might argue that what defines

thought in what used to be known as postmodernity is its suspicion of theoretical completion, of unequivocal assertion, and of explanatory confidence. An analytical prose style that creates its own formal laws, its own rhythms, syntax and vocabulary is the unmistakable marker of modern thought which is critical of modernity. Hill's approach to essay writing is of a piece with the valorisation of aesthetic, non-identity thinking which gives so much theory its idiosyncratic flavour.

In Hill's work it is apparent that he shares with much modern thought the notion that, for all the progress of Enlightenment rationalism, the technological advances of modernity, and the trumpeted global spread of Western values, the earth radiates disaster triumphant. Civilisation and barbarism are seen to be entwined in histories Hill's poetry unravels with its ironic equivocations and dilated syntax. Again, like much so-called 'postmodern' thought, Hill punctures the universals to which civilised culture had looked for its explanatory concepts. In place of guiding conceptuality Hill defines a sceptical approach to truth-claims: doubt, failure, blindness are given more value than confidence, clarity and success. And yet (in what might be interpreted as yet another instance of his intellectual recusancy) unlike postmodern thought, Hill's is deeply imbued with a humanism and a sporadic faith in traditional models of experience. In all this, though, he is not a lone figure crawling from the wreckage of Europe; rather, he is following quite consistently a tradition of intellectual speculation which forms the basis of this investigation into Hill's engagement with philosophy.

Conceived of as a radical break with modernity, as a proclaimed end-of-modernity, postmodernism can now seem premature in its diagnoses and naive in its responses. As Robert Pippin has argued, we should view the period now thought of as postmodernism as

the latest in a series of modern expressions of dissatisfaction of and with modernity.⁷ Pippin looks to the early nineteenth century for the origin of these expressions, and specifically to the tradition of German Idealism beginning with Kant and Hegel. Bearing in mind his analysis of the contribution made by these thinkers to a critique of modernity, and the weight placed upon Kant and post-Kantian philosophy in the studies of artistic autonomy by J.M. Bernstein and others, it is perhaps no surprise that when Hill chooses to engage with philosophy it is usually the British heirs of Kantian thought to whom he turns. Before considering Hill's reception of their body of work, I'll give a brief overview of this theoretical background.

Central to the critique of modernity espoused by these more recent thinkers is the division of human activity into discrete realms, a division seen to have been caused by Enlightenment rationality and most spectacularly theorised by Kant. Bernstein writes that 'Modernity is the separation of spheres, the becoming autonomous of truth, beauty and goodness from one another, and their developing into self-sufficient forms of practice: modern science and technology, private morality and modern legal forms, and modern art'.⁸ One result of this splintering of domains of knowledge is the removal of the possibility for humans to cognise a totality by which they can orient their judgements. Kant's legacy is the problem of how to self-regulate our cognitions in the face of this deprivation: the systematic philosophies of German Idealism are attempts at such a self-grounding investigation. (This has also been a critique expressed by the theorists from the 1960s onwards – the philosophers I have described above as postmodern.) But unlike the postmodern theorists, for whom the role played by idealist metaphysics was seen as

⁷ Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture*, 2nd edn. (Massachusetts and Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

⁸ Bernstein, *Fate of Art*, 5-6.

damagingly totalising, more recent academics have reconsidered the role played by Kant (especially in his *Critique of Judgement*) in informing ways of thinking about this division productively rather than simply reiterating or confirming it. In accounts of the thought of Derrida, Adorno, Heidegger and others, these academics have argued that the aporiae postmodern theorists claimed to have found to inhabit the philosophical systems of Enlightenment philosophy are less unconscious byproducts of a naive scientism than conscientiously retained concessions to the fragmentary nature of thought.

Writing in the eighties, Peter Dews noted how the new French philosophy was characterised by a return to Kant, under whose aegis notions of universality were permitted to re-enter intellectual activity after having been banished by the post-structuralist thought of the sixties and seventies: ‘Kant’s virtue, in the eyes of contemporary French philosophers, is to have definitively unmasked the claims of totalizing metaphysics ... without undermining the objectivity of moral principles, and without ruling out entirely the use of totalizing concepts, which are attributed a specific *regulative* status’.⁹ The anti-humanist philosophy with its decentred, disintegrated subject, its critics thought, was unable to elicit an ethical or political set of positions equal to the ranged forces of domination it originally sought to analyse and deconstruct. If the answer is not to be found in a transcendent universalism – if that indeed is seen to be part of the problem – to dispose of all objectivity entirely eliminates the possibility of judgement at all. It is this paradox – that ‘vision’ is called into action by the diremption of fact from value while requiring the healing of this break to operate at all – that led some British thinkers to summon Kant’s third *Critique* to their aid.

⁹ Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1987), pp. xiii-xiv.

For example, two years after Dews, Howard Caygill argued that while Derrida and Lyotard paid attention to the aporetic quality of Kant's critical system, they saw this aporia as an unintended consequence of Kant's investigations. Caygill argues that, on the contrary, Kant explicitly foregrounds the aporetic nature of his system, so that 'the knot, or aporia, is itself framed, and brought to judgement'.¹⁰ Similarly, J.M. Bernstein helpfully elucidates those features of Kant's third *Critique* which bring it within range of a potentially universal but not dogmatically constitutive objectivity. Two of these 'central concepts' include aesthetic reflective judgement, which 'questions the paradigm of knowing as subsuming particulars under universals', and the concept of the *sensus communis*, which 'installs a notion of an epistemic community that breaks with the claims of methodological solipsism and permits a reinscription of sensibility'.¹¹ Both of these concepts will be helpful in thinking through Hill's encounters with philosophical problems and their articulation in his chosen philosophers.

These two concepts bring us within earshot of Milton's 'simple, sensuous and passionate', emphasising as they do the sensate nature of their particular form of cognition. In a work which defends the notion that Kant explicitly foregrounds the aporetic in the third *Critique*, Anthony Cascardi argues that sensuous cognition was thought by Kant to play a role in the understanding of the fissures between our different methods of knowing:

What lies at stake in the third *Critique* is not any quality that inheres in 'works of art' *qua* objects, but how the subject feels the divisions between fact ('is') and value ('ought'), between pure theoretical reason (cognition) and pure practical reason (morality), the phenomenal and the noumenal realms. If any basis for relating these domains is to be found – if the subject is to feel the world as a whole – Kant thinks it must take as its point of departure the particular pleasures or pains that remain

¹⁰ Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), 7.

¹¹ Bernstein, *Fate of Art*, 8.

unaccounted for when all pragmatic and economic interests have been subtracted, and likewise when all desire for or interest in the existence of objects has been removed.¹²

At stake is ‘how the subject *feels*’ the divisions created by Enlightenment rationality. In other words it is in the most peculiarly subjective regions of human experience – sensory experiences like pleasure and pain – that an objective understanding of the way we experience life, including the divisions it creates within the act of understanding itself, might be produced. The name given to this understanding in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* is aesthetic reflection. It is a form of judgement quite unlike the one proposed in his first *Critique*, since rather than subsuming the particular (sensible intuition) under a given universal (conceptuality), it operates *as if* the particular is able to harmonise with a concept, without however that concept being given: ‘if only the particular is given and judgment has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*’.¹³ Another critic who deploys this Kantian insight in the name of art’s critical capacity is Robert Kaufman. He writes

The key idea is that aesthetic thought-experience, while feeling itself to be cast in or aiming for conceptual thought, is not yet substantively-objectively conceptual. In proceeding via the *feeling* that it is objective (that it is keyed to judgments that could be universally shared), aesthetic thought-experience maintains the form – but only the form – of conceptual thought. The inherently experimental exercise of that formal capacity can produce, to paraphrase Kant, a wealth of thought-emotion that cannot be reduced to any determinate, presently existing concept, and that thus can create the materials with which to construct new concepts and the socio-political dispensations that would correspond to them.¹⁴

¹² Anthony J. Cascardi, *Consequences of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 56.

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 18-19.

¹⁴ Robert Kaufman, ‘Aura, Still’, *October* 99 (Winter 2002), 45-80, at 76.

Kaufman argues that precisely this reading of Kant leads to Adorno's aesthetics, but in the first chapter I will show how much earlier, some post-Kantians, especially Schelling, viewed art as the privileged source of such an understanding, and that this view became important for Coleridge and, after him, for Hill.

Uncongenial to Hill's work as the lexicon involved in this digression may be, I argue that it goes some way towards explaining why it is that, when Hill does choose to engage with philosophy, it is typically a philosophy derived from German Idealism. For although his criticism (which, rather than his poetry, is where the majority of his encounters with philosophy take place) engages with a range of philosophers from outside this tradition (including Simone Weil, J.L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein), it is the primary and secondary texts of idealism (albeit a British strand of idealism) to which he returns most frequently. In particular, S.T. Coleridge, T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley sit close to the heart of Hill's understanding of the 'craft of vision', and each, to varying degrees, is profoundly influenced by German Idealist philosophers like Kant, Schelling and Hegel. Coleridge's understanding of a community founded on the sensate apprehension of metaphysical detail; Green's Wordsworthian ethics of rationalised nature; Bradley's metaphysics of approximation and becoming: all derive from German Idealism, and all are to some extent realised aesthetically in Hill's work. More recently, Hill's interest in Gillian Rose only cements his connection with the academics mentioned above. Rose's critique of poststructuralist philosophy mirrors the return to objectivity noted by Dews, although rather than Kant it is Hegel upon whom she depends to restore this metaphysical foundation.

3. Poetry's dissatisfaction with modernity

As I have hinted above, at stake in Hill's readings of philosophy are the competing claims of philosophy and poetry to the 'craft of vision', or to the possibility of attaining knowledge of some objective constellation of facts about the world. Insofar as this is true, his is one further reaction in the history of reactions of artists to Plato's initial expulsion of poetry from the realm of social efficacy. It is common to observe that this first banishment comes within a dialogue – that is, within a fictional, crafted work of artifice – and thus that it opens the possibility that philosophy is anxiously invested in poetry, or that poetry, rather than philosophy, can claim to be the originary 'visionary' expression.¹⁵ Certainly, in his analyses of T.H. Green and J.L. Austin, Hill is acutely interested in the moments when their arguments depend upon poetry, whether as antagonist or as quotable resource. At these moments Hill recognises that various opportunities for exegesis are in play. A potentially common repository of apprehension may be perceptible, in which the syntactic and acoustic resources supplied by poetry both offer support to philosophy's endeavour to understand the world, and are in turn validated by being petitioned by this Saturnine tradition. On the other hand (and perhaps more often) the presence of poetry in a philosophical text signals philosophy's grandiose but unfulfilled ambitions: importing poetry as an earnest of its oceanic comprehensiveness, philosophy ends by misunderstanding poetry's materiality, and remains moored in the solipsism it sought to overcome.

At such moments, poetry is arraigned, belauded, or otherwise exploited in the name of some kind of limit: as David Wood writes, 'philosophers have often run up against the

¹⁵ See, for example, Stanley Rosen, *The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 1-26.

limits of what can be said. ... [I]t would matter enormously for philosophy if poetry could reach the parts that eluded a theoretical discourse'.¹⁶ There are many ways of conceiving these limits: as the break between subject and object, between thought and being, between nature and culture. In the following chapters I will be exploring the possibility advanced by Hill that lyric poetry can achieve a degree of 'vision' that is able to recognise these limits. In other words it does not just fall silent at first sight of them but has the power to say something about them.

Lyric's special relationship to such limits has been theorised by many poets and critics, and almost always revolves around the interactions between the communicative (public, transparent, rule-bound) and the material (private, sensuous, arbitrary) aspects of language. Where poetry might be thought able to transcend philosophy's constitutive limits is in this very combination of the abstract and material. Abstraction's sovereignty is, as we have seen in the case of grand claims for 'vision', viewed with suspicion. Yet it bears a power to which Hill is undoubtedly indebted. When, for example, Hill writes

I have learned one thing: not to look down
 So much upon the damned. They, in their sphere,
 Harmonize strangely with the divine
 Love
 (CP 61)

the poem must be read in a way which confronts the sovereignty – albeit the divided, enjambed sovereignty – implicit in the words 'divine / Love'. A reader's response to the invocation of 'divine / Love' will vary according to the experiences and assumptions prescribed by the social and cultural institutions in which his or her attitude towards ideas

¹⁶ David Wood, 'Introduction: Thinking Poetic Writing', in David Wood (ed.), *Philosophers' Poets* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 1-6, at 2.

of the sacred are continually formed and reformed. The phrase might appear excessively compensatory, a capitulation to the fantasy of a commonality of eternal values; or an engagement with theological scholarship which, as a response to an event that has challenged the assumptions of any eschatological perspective, now appears inadequate.¹⁷ On the other hand, faced with the argument that ‘divine love’ is the only proper response to the Holocaust, that a singular atrocity requires a singular atonement, one might suspect another kind of piety, the ‘Holocaust piety’ Gillian Rose discerns in cultural and political responses to the Holocaust, a piety which prevents political and sociological analysis in favour of permanently deferred mourning.¹⁸ The point is that no abstraction, no matter how hallowed, is meaningful apart from its manifestations in the lived experience of actual human beings, and that the corollary of this is that lived experience is meaningless without the coordinating aid of abstractions.

‘Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings’ is one of the first poems in Hill’s authorship to register this compaction of the private and the public, or the particular and the general, in its prosody:

For whom the possessed sea littered, on both shores,
 Ruinous arms; being fired, and for good,
 To sound the constitution of just wars,
 Men, in their eloquent fashion, understood.
 (CP 29)

Symptomatically, the poem deliberately runs the risk of being misunderstood to be a repository of nostalgic emblems. It all but beseeches us to read it as an elegy for a period of

¹⁷ See Adorno’s comments on poetry after Auschwitz in *Prisms*, tr. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

¹⁸ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41-3.

feudal privilege and violence. The almost onomatopoeic accumulation of Old English and Old French words – ‘blood’, ‘hacked’, ‘Budge’, ‘daubed’ – advertises an aesthetic sensibility for which the past has a very real presence. The poem’s culminating image is a kind of unveiling: ‘and the sea / Across daubed rock evacuates its dead’. The abraded, disfigured nature of this revelation (the dead have ‘sleeked groin[s]’ and ‘gored head[s]’) only adds to its instructional value. This revelation stands as a warning or a rebuke to we who have forgotten our own history. The poet, in this interpretation, stands over against the objects of his regard: history is a spectacle waiting to be revealed, and the poet will do this with the appropriate skill and tact.

However, a more complex conception of history is revealed upon examination of some key words in the text. Central to Hill’s vocabulary in this and other poems is a notion of non-identity, revealed in his compulsive habit of equivocation. In phrases like ‘fired, and for good’, ‘to sound the constitution of just wars’, ‘Relieved of soul’, ‘their usage, pride’ and ‘they lie’, dual meanings betray the complex contradictions inherent to the concepts involved. As a result we are shown how these concepts possess identities which are not fixed and knowable but fluid and speculative. Abstract notions like virtue (‘for good’), *jus ad bellum* (‘to sound the constitution’), court culture (‘usage’), and ancestral piety (‘they lie’) are revealed to be sites of conceptual conflict, in which the subjective and objective are interdependent rather than separate. These equivocations document the experience of private morality, on the one hand, and reasons of church and state, on the other, marking and remarking their boundaries. Rather than following postmodern thought and depositing these phrases into the category of the ‘liminal’ or ‘undecidable’, this interpretative conflict mirrors real historical conflict, in which religious and political identities struggle to define

themselves against each other. Their radically divergent meanings expose the lack of identity, the real historical conflict, at the heart of their supposed referents.

The subjects – individual and national – in Hill’s texts are constituted by the anxieties, failures and triumphs involved in the work of negotiating between, on the one hand, abstract notions of order, and on the other, those of human, corruptible order. Both abstract and human order are viewed, in these texts, as powerful conceptual sites to which political ideologies have been drawn in order to justify their world-views. We can return to the poem with which this chapter began, ‘Of Commerce and Society’, to see how these ideas are played out in poetry’s forms:

The dead are my obsession this week

But may be lifted away.
(*CP* 49)

As this excerpt indicates, the poem is concerned with aftermaths – how to ‘lift away’ the destruction of war, the guilt of colonialism, the horror of genocide. However, it deliberately avoids using these morally-loaded terms. Terms like ‘the horror of genocide’, far from describing any event of real ‘horror’, more closely resemble ‘moral slogans’, earnest of the writer’s own sensitivity.¹⁹ They posit a stance of sympathetic impotence masquerading as ethical comprehension. The first poem in the sequence, ‘The Apostles: Versailles, 1919’, creates a kind of miniature of the aftermath of the First World War, a model of moral complacency which reduces complex historical outrages to a conceptualisable minimum. Its blunt, brief declarative sentences establish a mock simplicity – ‘They sat. They stood

¹⁹ For ‘moral slogan’, see *CCW* 56.

about. ... They sat. // They were appalled'. In the meantime, the scene of devastation is restored as a mechanical vignette of simple objects: 'The bells / In hollowed Europe spilt', 'The sea creaked with worked vessels', the repeated consonants *l* and *k* bluntly delimiting the scope of the vowels (*CP* 46). There is no attempt, in this poem, to imagine the scale of the political situation, but this is not Hill's intention. 'The Apostles: Versailles, 1919' is rather about the deliberate reduction of horror to the level of graspable civic dignity: 'coin' and 'salt', whose traversal of the sea breaks the 'silence' of the war's aftermath, are emblems of a society endowed with the kind of morality that allows stock responses, in easily available language, to death on an unimaginable scale.

Scale continues to be a theme in the next poem in the sequence, 'The Lowlands of Holland'. Europe has become adorned with labels and is 'looking up' – optimistic, but also perhaps like a 'Stuffed' animal raising its eyes to 'invite use' (*CP* 47).²⁰ Its cities' features, as in a balsa-wood architect's model, seem 'Shrunk, magnified': reduced in scale but thereby more available to the gaze. Europe is described as 'Not half innocent and not half undone'. But what can 'Not half innocent' mean here? There is the ghost of a notion that Europe is not *half* one thing and *half* another thing – in this case *half* innocent and *half* undone; but the repeated 'not' undermines this reading (which would require 'Not half innocent and half undone'). Colloquially, 'Not half' indicates understatement – Europe having been 'not half undone' meaning, of course, that it's more 'undone' than not. But in what sense might one apply a similarly quantitative evaluation of Europe's 'innocence'?

One reading of this strange construction is as an invitation for the reader to dwell at length on its constituent elements. The experience of reading this line is akin to that recorded by William Empson, in his analysis of a line from Keats's 'Ode to Melancholy':

²⁰ Compare 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis': 'Europa / hetaera displays her parts, her triumph' (*C* 31).

‘No, no; go not to Lethe; neither twist’ tells you that somebody, or some force in the poet’s mind, must have wanted to go to Lethe very much, if it took four negatives in the first line to stop them.²¹

As Empson suggests, there is, in Keats’s line, a logic inherent to its parsable meaning, and a logic brought about by the simple preponderance of negatives, and both are audible simultaneously. As the poet turns away from Lethe, the force of its attraction is tangible in the emphatic ‘No, no ... not ... neither’. Analogously, Hill sees innocence as a motivating concept in the construction of post-war Europe: ‘Not half innocent and not half undone’. Yet through its negation it is revealed to have been ‘undone’, mitigated by commercial forces. The syntax dramatises the argument: ‘Not’ places ‘innocence’ in a relation to its contamination. ‘Innocence’ is posited only to be negated; but the phrase remains on the page (‘Not half innocent’) as a reminder of the experience of this argument.

One source of innocence’s confutation is the accumulation of real political events that mark and mask the history of Europe’s development, a development culminating in the ‘attested liberties’ of the first stanza. Hill dwells on the multiple senses of ‘liberty’ in his essay on Jonson, “‘The World’s Proportion’: Jonson’s Dramatic Poetry in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*’: there is a liberty ‘involved with property and heredity’, a liberty ‘synonymous with licence’, and a moral concept which can be deployed to virtuous or vicious ends (CCW 43-44).²² Many of Europe’s liberties may be traced back to 1789, the year of the French Revolution, and of the publication of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*: ideas of birth, promise, and love are inextricable from the concept, as is, perhaps most importantly, the idea of Enlightenment rationality. Those liberties which allow citizens to ‘profit from custom’ are

²¹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 239.

²² Compare, again, ‘De Jure Belli ac Pacis’: ‘the liberties of Maastricht’ (C 30).

also part of the picture. ‘The Lowlands of Holland’ refuses to record any of the political events that mark and mask the history of Europe’s liberties. But this accumulation of sociopolitical ordinance, gradually covering an originary idea of freedom or emancipation, is, I argue, documented in the poem’s syntax.

Taking a broader look at the poem’s syntax, we can see that its sixteen lines compose one sentence, split into a series of clauses separated by colons and semicolons. As Vincent Sherry writes, ‘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’.²³ In the poems ‘Elegiac Stanzas’, ‘The Re-Birth of Venus’ and ‘Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings’, sentences containing multiple colons and semicolons create a sense of sequence without a concomitant sense of direction. Semicolons, for example, typically allow meaning to be arrayed in a horizontal sequence of separate semantic units, none of which is required to bear a relationship to its neighbour, but all of which relate to one central clause of the argument. The use of colons traditionally implies a causal or otherwise meaningful relationship between the divided units; when a second colon is added, without the first having brought the argument to a conclusion, the relation between the divided clauses becomes a source of perplexity for the reader:

Profiting from custom: its replete strewn
Cities such ample monuments to lost

Nations and generations: its cultural
Or trade skeletons such hand-picked bone:
Flaws in the best, revised science marks down:
Witness many devices
(CP 47)

²³ Vincent Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 55.

If we are to take the colon as signifying something more than a pause, as, that is, a sign that a premise or prelude has been given and its expansion or conclusion will follow, the above lines are an epitome of logical and grammatical perplexity. While, as Sherry argues, each severed clause offers a new perspective, it is not so much that the old perspective is ‘shed’: rather, perspectives accumulate with each fresh start.

Reading the passage above, the cities’ repletion in the second clause could conceivably be interpreted (thanks to the colon) as the result of the ‘Profiting’ in the first clause, which is thereby amplified and explained. But the next clause (‘its cultural / Or trade skeletons...’) has a more uncertain provenance – does it look back to Europe’s profit, its cities, or both? The very presence of two colons provokes a moment of hasty rereading, a search for the point of reference this putatively conclusive line hangs from. As we read yet another colon at the end of this line, all hope of maintaining the conceptual integrity of the sentence in one’s memory disappears. Does the next line, ‘Flaws in the best’, refer to the ‘trade skeletons’? Must it not also, by virtue of its position in a chain of colon-separated clauses, bear at least a degraded relationship to the first clause in the sequence? Finally, ‘Witness many devices’, perhaps an imperative addressed to ‘Europe’, bears, by virtue of the colon preceding it, some causal connection to the preceding observations. Layers of meaning have accrued to the subject (‘Europe’), and parentheses and new subjects have been superadded, to the point that the force of the verb, when it finally comes (repeatedly: ‘Witness ... witness ... Witness’), is distributed over these dispersed units. Its appearance has been postponed to the point that its object is lost in a fog of syntax: each colon takes the reader further from the source of the verb’s energy. It enfolds the historical contingencies joined by arbitrary linkages in the preceding lines to an injunction to ‘witness’: witnessing

being an institutionally hallowed attestation of knowledge. After the epistemological uncertainties created by a series of colons (making the relations between subject and object in the sentence ambiguous), to enjoin witness is to require, in the teeth of these uncertainties, some grounding perspective.

I hope it is clear from the above examples that Hill's dissatisfaction with modernity includes questions with which philosophy is especially concerned, especially the possibility of ethics in a society governed by an enlightened technocracy. Philosophy's claim to 'vision' – to the perception of contradictions and their possible resolution – competes with poetry's claim. Poetry's 'craft of vision', unlike philosophy's, is not dependent on the establishment of premises, propositions and conclusions, but on the more contingent basis of sensuous resources like assonance, rhythm, and syntax. However, unlike certain poststructuralist bodies of work, in which contingency or play is conceived of as an adequate riposte to the authoritarian strictures of reason, Hill is bound to certain objective truths, to the possibility of 'witness'.

My thesis is divided into three sections, each subdivided into two chapters. My first section will explore the tensions brought into Hill's work by this conflict between a sense of a grounding, legitimating whole and a sense of experience and history as fragmented and contingent. Through a reading of Hill's many references to Coleridge, whose philosophic legacy will be argued to be a German Idealism supplemented by a compensatory Christianity, the chapter will bring to light connections between Hill and an author whose significance for Hill's work is often acknowledged but rarely investigated. As well as

examining the areas of Coleridge's thinking that are of most importance to Hill, the chapter will introduce some of the key ideas of idealist aesthetics which will form the backdrop of the subsequent chapters, especially aesthetic reflection, the possibility of objective judgement, and the ideal of a community of sense. It incorporates a close reading of Hill's long poem *The Triumph of Love*, drawing links between the Anglophone Idealist ideas of community and the sensuous fragment as conceived by Coleridge, and the thematic and prosodic investments of the poem. I focus in particular on 'vision' as a social function: the imagining, planning and construction of new social spaces (especially post-war urban spaces), and the material, aural and affective consequences they give rise to.

Having given an account of Hill's engagement with Coleridge, perhaps the first writer to bring German Idealism to Britain, my second section moves on to consider Hill's interest in two later nineteenth century British Idealists, T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley. Centering on the notion of judgement, I argue that the 'craft of vision' as Hill sees it requires an objectivity that cannot mesh cleanly with an objectivity already existing in the world. I introduce Hill's lately-expressed apprehension of the struggle between thought and syntax (further explored in chapter 6), and suggest that this implies a shift in thinking as regards the degree to which the lyric 'I' is constituted by external pressures. Bradley, with Green as a minor forerunner, contribute to Hill's critical writings ways of thinking about the formulation and communication of critical thought, and of the surges into individualistic clarity and lapses into solipsism such thought is prey to. Such surges and lapses are then discovered to be operative in two of Hill's later volumes, *Canaan* and *Speech! Speech!* The first is read as a transitional text, retaining the reluctance to employ the first-person pronoun of Hill's earlier work, but suggesting in its prosody a greater spontaneity than was hitherto visible. *Speech! Speech!* is then read as a text which opens to

scrutiny the earlier tendency towards self-effacement. Its asymmetric prosody and didactic diacritics are read as markers of the difficulty of judgement, of the stresses undergone by subjective expression attempting to establish binding, objective vision.

Conflict between belief in a unifying, grounding objectivity and a spontaneous, contingent subjectivity accounts for much of the sometimes stifling, sometimes intoxicating self-reflexiveness of Hill's verse. A similar self-reflexiveness characterises Hill's criticism. If anything, the conflict is more acute in his critical prose, which has received such epithets as 'tortuous and tortured', than in his poetry.²⁴ This is especially the case when he writes about philosophy, since he is forced back on the logic of traditional discourse, while simultaneously writing about logical, communicative language and its failings. He wants to define very closely the varieties of syntactic expression while revealing the errors into which such empirical definition is liable to lapse. This is why Hill's interest in the philosopher J.L. Austin, about whom he wrote in the essay 'Our Word Is Our Bond', is particularly relevant to an understanding of his attitude to objectivity. In the third section, I explore Hill's investigation of Austin's claims, which are part of a wider philosophical project called ordinary language philosophy. This project pays particular attention to minute distinctions in language and their origins in historical experience. Clearly this is an attractive approach for Hill, but its radical empiricism disallows metaphysical speculation, and Hill is forced back on an idealist perspective in order better to grasp the contradictions inherent to Austin's philosophy. The metaphor of blindness becomes important as descriptive of a non-determinative function that conceives of the 'craft of vision' as a critical faculty that is not reliant on pre-existing conceptuality, but at the same time is not

²⁴ Andrew Michael Roberts, review of Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, in *Review of English Studies* 56/232 (2006), 854-56, at 855.

entirely arbitrary. At the same time it describes a situation in which poetry's critical apprehension of the social is fated to be unheard by the wielders of communicative, legislative language. I explore the use of this metaphor in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* and the poems collected in *A Treatise of Civil Power*, ending with Hill's elegy to Gillian Rose and an analysis of his relationship to her late philosophy.

Throughout what follows I will make extensive use of Hill's *Collected Critical Writings*. I hope to show that it is an essential resource for thinking about Hill and philosophy not only because it contains his most extended writing on philosophy and philosophers, but because his prose style is to a great extent a corollary of his attitudes towards definition, critical distance, aesthetic reflection and objective judgement. In other words, while I will rely on his essays to a very great extent for their explicit philosophical content, I will also have occasion to subject them to close reading, as I would a poem, in order to bring to light the philosophical issues that contribute towards their form. In addition I will be making use of the materials made available in the Geoffrey Hill Archive at Leeds. This comprises a large collection of notebooks and papers including previously unpublished lectures, lecture notes, poetry notebooks, journal cuttings, and early drafts of published essays and articles. Some are of particular value because they represent early stages of Hill's thought on philosophy, before it is integrated into the less easily paraphraseable surfaces of his published prose. Others offer useful contextual information illuminating the broader argument.

In order to better sketch some of the connective tissue that binds Hill to the intellectual climate of his day, I will have recourse to the thinking of those writers mentioned above (Bernstein, Caygill, Dews and Rose) whose work represents a turn from the postmodern scepticism in the face of metaphysics towards a belief in the necessity of

reason despite its occasionally damaging normativity. The primary reason for my seeking aid in the works of these thinkers is their perception (which runs contrary to the predominant intellectual currents of their day) of the relevance which the thought of the German Idealists could still possess in the twentieth century. This will also necessitate some engagement with a thinker – Theodor Adorno – whose relevance to Hill is not immediately obvious, but who has been taken by these thinkers as exemplary for their understanding of the aesthetic as a privileged mode of cognising the social. If Adorno's intellectual background bears little resemblance, and his politics even less, to Hill's, the fact that they still share a wide cultural and moral common ground merely testifies to the multiple political directions German Idealism can take, and did take in the nineteenth-century. Gillian Rose's presence as an informing theorist is less surprising. Her late conversion to Catholicism puts her among the throng of converts of which Hill is especially fond. More importantly, as a writer who begins as a specialist on Adorno, before articulating a philosophy which derives from Hegel and explicitly, in the later work, propounds an understanding of rationality that recognises the necessity of both objectivity and contingency, she can shed valuable light on the issues that follow.

SECTION I: COLERIDGE'S INFLUENCE

CHAPTER 1: IMAGINATION

‘They have conceded me ... power of determination’: Hill’s remark in *The Triumph of Love* is expressive of a degree of confidence in the diagnostic power of lyric poetry. Later in the same sequence, though, he casts doubt over this efficacy, asking ‘Incantation or incontinence – the lyric cry?’¹ This chapter will begin to explore the avenues through which Hill pursues the possibility of a diagnostic, determinative poetics, and the doubts and anxieties inherent to his search for the grounds of objective judgement. In particular, the intention is to show that Hill’s most enduring aesthetic principles have arisen in response to Coleridge’s critical, philosophical and moral work, and that, to a great extent, Hill’s attention to the objectification of thought in philosophical discourse is prompted by Coleridge’s ambivalent position vis-à-vis German Idealist philosophy.

It has become common practice to claim literary kinship between the two writers, but these observations rarely go beyond noting Hill’s reliance on certain aphorisms drawn from Coleridge’s notebooks, letters, and criticism. Hence the first half of this chapter will trace the philosophical background of Coleridge’s statements, and try to restore some life to phrases which have by now (at least in the context of criticism on Hill) lost much of their meaning. It will do this through a reading of Hill’s important, and most Coleridgean essay ‘Redeeming the Time’. Coleridge offers a way into understanding the ambiguities in Hill’s attitude towards the persuasive aesthetic power of certain forms of nineteenth-century thinking. At stake in this understanding will be Coleridge’s wish to ground immediate, sensuous modes of understanding in universal principles, and to give objective reality to

¹ TL 3, 79.

what begin as subjective, abstract ideas. Coleridge is doubly important in this respect, since not only does his thought stand historically behind the attempts of nineteenth-century ideologues to form a community sense (a *sensus communis* which will be defined later in this chapter), but this seemingly self-contradictory task (to reconcile subjective, aesthetic apprehension with objective, social fact) also lies behind the rich contradictions in Hill's poetry.

Coleridge's importance is not limited to Hill's investment in the nineteenth century. It extends to Hill's entire critical and poetic authorship. This chapter will argue that Coleridge's theories of aesthetic reflection, grounding the claim that aesthetic subjectivity can be the medium by which commonalities of interest, purpose, or experience can be given objective reality in the world, are given new expression in Hill's poetry and criticism. Coleridge's ideas on aesthetic reflection have left a lasting impression upon Hill's concept of ethically responsible writing. Nineteenth-century intellectual culture is second only to that of the seventeenth-century in its significance for Hill's understanding of the relationship between politics, ethics, religion and language, and the figures from that epoch to whom Hill returns are all demonstrably inheritors of Coleridge's thought: Newman, Hopkins, Green and Bradley. In taking an overview of Hill's relationship to this tradition, philosophy will become an essential object of study.

Alongside my analysis of 'Redeeming the Time', I will read Hill's long poem *The Triumph of Love* in the light of the Coleridgean ideas that emerge from this analysis. In the process I hope to demonstrate that this poem, with which Coleridge has not previously been associated, is at all levels – thematically, structurally, syntactically, and prosodically – deeply saturated in Coleridgean habits of thought, diction, and imagination. Taken as a whole, I hope that by examining Coleridge's ambivalent attitude to philosophical thought,

this chapter and the next will help readers to recognise Hill's own paradoxical dependence upon and suspicion of philosophy.

1. Lyric as diagnosis

In describing what he was trying to achieve in the sonnet-sequence 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England', Hill said that 'to the best of my ability, I'm offering a diagnosis' of English nostalgia.² Taken together with his comments, in the same interview, about the 'political and sociological reasons' for his approach, this suggests a serious ambition for poetry: a 'diagnosis' backed by systematic sociopolitical knowledge. What though are the conditions under which language – particularly something as distant and muted, to the ears of politicians and sociologists, as lyric language – can effect any kind of diagnosis?

'An Apology' carries two epigraphs. The first is an extract from an 1895 compendium of entries from Coleridge's then-unpublished notebooks, *Anima Poetae*: 'the spiritual, Platonic old England...' (CP 152). Coleridge's phrase strikes the note of capricious abstraction for which he was notorious, and which led to Peacock's caricature of him as a 'lover ... of shadows'.³ Hill's understanding of the spiritualised nation fills it out with visible and audible detail, but this doesn't quite dispel the impression of the abstract swallowing the particular that Coleridge's epigraph creates:

² John Haffenden, 'Geoffrey Hill', in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 76-99, at 93.

³ The character of Mr Flosky in Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey* is widely recognised to have been based on Coleridge. Peacock writes in a note that 'Flosky' is 'A corruption of Filosky, quasi Φίλοσκοιος a lover, or sectator, of shadows'. See *Nightmare Abbey and Maid Marian* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 9.

Pitched high above the shallows of the sea
 lone bells in gritty belfries do not ring
 but coil a far and inward echoing
 out of the air that thrums. Enduringly,

fuschia-hedges fend between cliff and sky;
 brown stumps of headstones tamp into the ling
 the ruined and the ruinously strong.
 Platonic England grasps its tenantry
 (CP 158)

Who are the ‘tenantry’ in Hill’s poem? Coleridge’s ‘spiritual, Platonic England’ is constituted by ‘Sir P. Sidney, Shakespere, Spenser, Milton, Bacon, Harrington, Swift, Wordsworth’, but Hill’s sequence conspicuously declines to name names.⁴ We are given the information in the preceding lines that, whoever this ‘tenantry’ are, their bodies are intimately connected with a picturesque landscape, that their ‘Platonic’ endurance is indebted to nature, specifically to the English countryside. They maintain an attenuated existence – to the point of airy nothingness – given aesthetic figuration in the echoes that sound within stanzas and over the stanza breaks, ‘sea’ calling to the ‘sky’ and ‘tenantry’, ‘ring’ to ‘ling’ and ‘strong’, and so on. Indeed the sequence as a whole thrums with acoustic invention but is short on empirical fact: scenarios, landscapes, architecture are rendered with a deliberate combination of blur and close-up, giving the impression of intermittently strong recall in a maze of amnesia:

The twittering pipistrelle, so strange and close,

 plucks its curt flight through the moist eventide;
 the children thread among old avenues
 of snowberries, clear-calling as they fade.
 (CP 159)

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 4 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), ii, 2598.

The precision with which ‘plucks its curt flight’ mimics the rapid movement of the pipistrelle is indeed ‘strange and close’, but it is then absorbed in the ‘moist eventide’, before the attention is distracted by Eliotic echoes of unnamed ‘children’. Distraction in this sequence is precisely defined in acoustic remnants that bespeak a recently departed presence: the geographical spaces – the country house grounds and drawing rooms, domestic chapels, colonial forts and aerodromes – retain legible traces of the lives that inhabited them.

Clues to the tenantry of these spaces are provided in the poems’ titles. ‘Loss and Gain’, the title of the first poem quoted above, echoes the title of John Henry Newman’s novel *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* (1848). Newman’s fictionalised account of his conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1845 evokes the anxieties of identity inherent to the struggle to define and preserve a particular community (in this case the Anglo-Catholic community).⁵ These anxieties are also invoked by the title of Hill’s sequence, which duplicates the title of Augustus Pugin’s study *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England*, an argument for a return to an architectural style which embodied Pugin’s religion and customs. The frontispiece of this tract displays an elevated view of the twenty-four Roman Catholic cathedrals, churches and chapels Pugin had been commissioned to design, huddled shoulder to shoulder against a faintly-sketched pastoral landscape. A New Jerusalem whose project was never fulfilled, it is nonetheless a memorable symbol of the projected renaissance of Gothic architecture, springing from the

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Loss and Gain: The Story of a Convert* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962).

soil of England as a natural emanation of her spirit.⁶ Hill's second epigraph is from Disraeli's *Coningsby*: "Your situation", said Coningsby, looking up the green and silent valley, "is absolute poetic". Here country-house culture is depicted as spiritualised nature, continuing the connection between architecture and nation, and, significantly, viewing such a binding of culture and nature as the especial preserve of poetry.

That such ideas became a vital part of the texture of people's lives is testified to by Hill's poem (the 'elopement' in the third sonnet, for example, takes place in the surroundings of 'new-burgeoned spires that sprung / crisp-leaved as though from dropping-wells').⁷ The creation of public forms of community – whether through legal, aesthetic, or political means – leaves behind it a cultural landscape tingling with visible and audible traces: hence the strong flavour of nostalgia that has made the sequence one of Hill's most provocative texts.⁸ While critics have been correct to defend Hill's sequence against some of the more extreme accusations of nostalgia, there has been a reluctance among his defenders to recognise the sympathy Hill feels towards the ideals and cultural products of the culture he depicts, a reluctance perhaps encouraged by Hill himself. His comment that there are 'good political and sociological reasons for the floating of nostalgia' suggests an experimental or provisional attitude which obscures the investment the poems have in a

⁶ Augustus Pugin, *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* (London: St Barnabas Press, 1969), frontispiece.

⁷ For a discussion of the connection between Gothic architecture and Catholicism, see Avril Horner, "'Linnaean Pentecosts': Geoffrey Hill's 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'", *Literature & Theology*, 4/1 (March 1990), 84-103, at 94-98.

⁸ For a defence of Hill's poem against accusations of nostalgia, see Avril Horner, "'Linnaean Pentecosts'"; 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*', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13/1 (2000), 153-166; Jonathan Bolton, 'Empire and Atonement: Geoffrey Hill's "An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England"', *Contemporary Literature*, 38/2 (Summer 1997), 287-306.

past whose cultural artefacts they make shine.⁹ This sympathy is evident in the sensual solidity with which Hill memorialises the material and intellectual possessions which also, to be sure, he deplores in his recognition of the interdependence of civilisation and violence.

Published just a year before several of the poems which make up ‘An Apology’ made their first appearance in journals, Hill’s essay ‘Redeeming the Time’ focuses on comparable topics: the possibility of cultural ‘diagnosis’, the possibility of the creation of community feeling, and the impact of social change upon the nineteenth-century imagination.¹⁰ It also represents Hill’s first substantial engagement with Coleridge’s authorship. Both ‘Redeeming the Time’ and ‘An Apology’ show that Coleridge enters Hill’s thought precisely where the possibility of aesthetic diagnosis becomes an issue. But the philosophical aesthetics of German Idealism, which informed Coleridge’s thinking about sensate cognition, are not a reference point in Hill’s essay. As irrefutable as the German Idealist sources of Coleridge’s aesthetics are, Hill displays a romantic demand that philosophy’s axioms be proved upon our pulses, or, in the case of ‘Redeeming the Time’, upon the pulses of industrial workers in the nineteenth century.

A useful entrance point to the arguments of ‘Redeeming the Time’ is its assertion that language is shaped by its users’ social circumstances. Hill’s essay begins with the assertion that the nineteenth-century, far from being a period in which the voice of the dispossessed went unheard, in reality heard this voice ring out with unobstructed vigour. But the vigour didn’t wholly belong to these dispossessed, since embedded in the meetings and pamphlets under discussion in Hill’s essay was often, as E.P. Thompson writes, a

⁹ *Viewpoints*, 93.

¹⁰ ‘Redeeming the Time’, *Agenda* 10/4 – 11/1 (Autumn 1972 / Winter 1973), 87-111. Subsequently reprinted in *LL* and *CCW*.

‘demagogic element ... which encouraged the wholly unconstructive rhetoric of denunciation’.¹¹ It is more the voice of the public orator than of a collectivity of workers that one hears in many of the recorded speeches and pamphlets of the time. Yet if Hill inculcates the excesses of radical demagogic oratory, other specimens of radical prose are greeted more warmly. Against demagogic soapbox zeal, judged to be ultimately self-defeating, for example, Hill places ‘the declaration of the Nottingham branch of the United Committee of Framework-Knitters, c.1812’: its language, Hill asserts, presupposes a scepticism with regards to certain areas of social efficacy, but retains the prerogative to critique its authors’ employers.

Such conclusions might comfortably be drawn from an analysis of the content of archival documents. Perhaps more tendentiously, though, Hill wishes to transfer to *rhythm* some of the symptomatic virtues empirical data has for the historian. Social change reverberates – so goes Hill’s argument – in language use, and the early to mid nineteenth-century therefore saw ‘a drastic breaking of tempo and ... an equally severe disturbance of the supposedly normative patterns of speech’ (CCW 88). In one of Hill’s most frequently-quoted apothegms, he writes: ‘If language is more than a vehicle for the transmission of axioms and concepts, rhythm is correspondingly more than a physiological motor. It is capable of registering, mimetically, deep shocks of recognition’ (CCW 91). Literary precedent for this assertion is given in Wordsworth’s ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, in particular the break between stanzas eight and nine, and the metrical gear-shift which ensues (Hill’s assertion, as he acknowledges, derives from Gerard Manley Hopkins’s recorded delight at the ‘magical change’ the ninth stanza embodies). More tendentious still

¹¹ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 682. Quoted CCW 88.

is Hill's next assertion, that this 'silence between stanzas eight and nine and ... the immediate, abrupt surge with which the "joy" of nine's opening lines resists, pulls away from, the gravitational field of the closing lines of stanza eight' – this manipulation of literary convention – in fact 'redeem[s]' the 'shock to be suffered' by English radicals later in the century. 'Wordsworth transfigures a fractured world': in Hill's essay, art lays claim to the power to recognise and reconfigure objective suffering (CCW 92). Coleridge hasn't yet been mentioned in the essay, but in these words the aura of the Coleridgean imagination is clearly perceptible.¹²

2. The imagination's role in subjective aesthetic reflection

Imagination has been a key concept in Coleridge's twentieth-century critical heritage, from I.A. Richards's classic study *Coleridge on Imagination* onwards.¹³ In the context of British literary history, imagination is presented as a reaction to prevailing neoclassical aesthetic norms – order imposed from external, already existing sources – supplying instead a notion of autonomous creativity, of laws derived from the reflective, creative capacities of the artist. This is the distinction figured by the title of M.H. Abrams's classic study of romantic aesthetics, *The Mirror and the Lamp*: if the neoclassical mirror merely reflects pre-existing forms, the romantic lamp gives rise to its own forms. 'The primary source and subject matter of a poem, therefore,' Abrams writes, 'are the attributes and actions of the poet's

¹² No mention is made anywhere in Hill's work of Coleridge's politics which, needless to say, were not in sympathy with those of the radicals mentioned in 'Redeeming the Time'. We can attribute this to the general tenor of the work on Coleridge that Hill would have been reading. As E.P. Thompson observed, in an article published in 1979, Coleridge's reception had been mostly at the hands of literary critics, apt to displace a consideration of his politics 'from a political to an aesthetic court of judgment'. See E.P. Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997), 149.

¹³ I.A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

own mind; or if aspects of the external world, then these only as they are converted from fact to poetry by the feelings and operations of the poet's mind'.¹⁴

Imagination was endowed by the romantics with the faculty of apprehending, or construing, the real. Imagination acts as the envoy of a grounding principle (whose name varies according to the modes in which it appears): this principle's divinity is reproduced in human consciousness by means of the imagination. In the final book of the 1850 *Prelude*, for example, Wordsworth writes 'This spiritual Love acts not nor can exist / Without Imagination, which, in truth, / Is but another name for absolute power / And clearest insight, amplitude of mind, / And Reason in her most exalted mood'.¹⁵ The emphasis on the creative, spontaneous contribution of the artist's mind to the work of art was paralleled in contemporary philosophy. To quote Abrams again, the 'change from imitation to expression ... was an integral part of a corresponding change in popular epistemology – that is, in the concept of the role played by the mind in perception which was current among romantic poets and critics'.¹⁶ The transition, in the conception of the human mind, from one of passive *tabula rasa* or mechanically-associative machine to the spontaneous, constitutive subjectivity of Kant's philosophy was pivotal in Coleridge's thought. But at the same time a desire to preserve a foundational source from which imagination took its bearings was at work, and led to the writings – such as *The Friend* and *Aids to Reflection* – which seek to ground cognition in a set of principles derived from Christianity: these are the texts by Coleridge from which Hill draws most frequently.

¹⁴ M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 22.

¹⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (New York and London: Norton, 1979), 469.

¹⁶ Abrams, *op. cit.*, 57-8.

Coleridge's famous statement about the imagination occurs at the end of the first volume of *Biographia Literaria*. He writes:

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.¹⁷

This is followed by Coleridge's definition of fancy:

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE.¹⁸

The fancy, faced with the obduracy of 'definites', is restricted to an ordering, organising role which is unable to envision a world that is not determined by these definites. The imagination, on the other hand, is where the diagnostic and constitutive possibilities of art reside. Coleridge's distinction between the primary and secondary imagination bears a family resemblance to certain elements in the philosophy of Kant and Schelling. The primary imagination – 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception' – on the face of it repeats the role played by the imagination in Kant's critical philosophy. (In his transcendental deduction, Kant gives the name 'imagination' to the faculty that matches up

¹⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), i, 175.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 305.

our subjective concepts with the sense data from the objective world.)¹⁹ But, as several critics have pointed out, the creative aspect of this faculty ('a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation') brings it closer to Schelling (whose *System of Transcendental Idealism* is the source for the controversial plagiarised passages which preceded this definition of imagination in the *Biographia*). On this account, the primary and secondary imaginations correspond to Schelling's 'productive intuition' and the 'poetic faculty'.²⁰ This creative aspect contributes to an epistemology which sees the two-tier model of Kantian metaphysics as a threat to philosophical relevance. As Mary Warnock puts it, 'what was an *active* function, constituting the world-as-it-appears-to-us, in Kant becomes, in Schelling, a properly *creative* function constituting the world as it really is'.²¹

The secondary imagination (corresponding to Schelling's 'poetic faculty') has the power to combine materials supplied by the perception, and – importantly for Coleridge's aesthetics – to unify them into a single object. It 'dissolves, diffuses' hard, objective reality – what is seemingly fixed and unalterable – in order to reorganise its elements, and finally produce something new and *whole*. This unifying process is what makes the products of the secondary imagination *objective*, i.e. it is what underwrites the aesthetic product's claim to say something about the world. Fancy, by contrast, plays a vital but subsidiary role in aesthetic creation, organising the facts imagination deals with but unable so to organise them as to produce new, vital interrelations and hence new configurations of the real.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 78/B 103, 211.

²⁰ See G.N.G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism: A Study in the History of Philosophy with Unpublished Materials from Coleridge's Manuscripts* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 224-5.

²¹ Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber, 1976), 91.

Let us see how these ideas might have relevance to a poem of Hill's. The long poem *The Triumph of Love* (1998) has been read as 'a study of the theology of grace',²² 'an exemplary study in ruination', 'the text of a projected old poet with distant detractors',²³ an 'act of oblation offered for guilts incurred',²⁴ and a 'quotidian epic' and satire.²⁵ What I hope to show in the following pages is that it is also a deeply Coleridgean poem, as two passages near the beginning of the poem show. These passages reverberate with Coleridgean ideas about aesthetic reflection, and establish the poem's kinship with Coleridge's annotative, fragmentary approach to philosophy.

The first passage is section VI:

Between bay window and hedge the impenetrable holly
strikes up again taut wintry vibrations [...]
From the front room I might be able to see
the coal fire's image planted in a circle
of cut-back rose bushes. Nothing is changed
by the strength of this reflection.
(*TL* 2)

Several critics have noted this section's affinity to Eliot.²⁶ It is true that there are hints here of East Coker's 'purgatorial fires / Of which the flame is roses', or Little Gidding's 'knot of fire' in which 'the fire and the rose are one'. But what hasn't been noted is a possible connection with Coleridge. Hill's passage irresistibly recalls an article in the second edition

²² P. K. Walker, "'The Triumph of Love': Geoffrey Hill's Contexture of Grace', *Sewanee Theological Review* 44/3 (Pentecost, 2001), 275-298, at 284.

²³ Peter Robinson, review of Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love*, *Notre Dame Review* 8 (Summer 1999), 138-142, at 140.

²⁴ Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 89.

²⁵ Michael Edwards, 'Quotidian Epic: Geoffrey Hill's *The Triumph of Love*', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13/1 (Spring 2000), 167-76.

²⁶ See e.g., *ibid.*, 172-3.

of Coleridge's *The Friend* which is concerned with the role aesthetic reflection plays in religious experience:

The window of my library at Keswick is opposite to the fire-place, and looks out on the very large garden that occupies the whole slope of the hill on which the house stands. Consequently, the rays of light transmitted *through* the glass, (i.e. the rays from the garden, the opposite mountains, and the bridge, river, lake, and vale interjacent) and the rays reflected *from* it, (of the fire-place, &c.) enter the eye at the same moment. At the coming on of evening, it was my frequent amusement to watch the image of reflection of the fire, that seemed burning in the bushes or between the trees in different parts of the garden or the fields beyond it, according as there was more or less light; and which still arranged itself among the real objects of vision, with a distance and magnitude proportioned to its greater or lesser faintness²⁷

Coleridge's passage is ostensibly an attempt to justify how the mind is sometimes able to project visions and dreams in its waking state. If, Coleridge goes on to write, he were to begin his projected work on dreams, visions, and ghosts,

I might then explain in a more satisfactory way the mode in which our thoughts, in states of morbid slumber, become at times perfectly *dramatic* ... and by what law the *Form* of the vision appears to talk to us its own thoughts in a voice as audible as the shape is visible²⁸

Dramatic form in this example means visions, ghosts, specifically Luther's vision of Satan at Wartburg, but it might be extended to mean any interaction of conceptuality and sensory intuition, or, further, a confrontation of patterns of thought, apprehension and affect: the very issues which *The Triumph of Love* will go on to elaborate.

²⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), i, 144-5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

The second of the two Coleridgean passages occurring early in Hill's poem similarly attends to the possibility of purely formal structures acquiring concrete existence.

It reads as a sort of journal entry in *The Triumph*'s patchwork:

On chance occasions –
 and others have observed this – you can see the wind,
 as it moves, barely a separate thing,
 the inner wall, the cell, of an hourglass, humming
 vortices, bright particles in dissolution,
 a roiling plug of sand picked up
 as a small dancing funnel. It is how
 the purest apprehension might appear
 to take corporeal shape.
 (TL 4)

I have not been able to discover who these 'others' are, but this is a quintessentially Coleridgean passage, which, in its microscopic attention to detail, its digressive, explanatory syntax, and its final leap from nature to spirit, might have been lifted from the earlier poet's notebooks. (A possible source is a letter from Coleridge to Thomas Poole, dated 19 January 1801, in which he describes a series of symptoms affecting his testicles, which have left him 'in ruin, like a column of sand, that had been informed & animated only by a whirl blast of the desert'.²⁹) Its descriptive clauses are both carefully empirical and self-reflexive, in that their acoustic organisation – the miscellaneous vowel sounds in 'wall', 'cell', 'bright', 'roiling', 'plug' delimited by reiterated *l* and *ll* sounds – imitates the controlled turbulence of their referent, while this very act of liquid coming-into-being confirms the stanza's thematic intent. In its evocation of the unsettling and reorganisation of material elements (the 'bright particles') choreographed by a metaphorised breath, the

²⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), ii, 664.

stanza is almost a manifesto for the renovating potential of aesthetic – specifically lyric – construction. Indeed Hill’s use of the word ‘dissolution’ recalls Coleridge’s secondary imagination – the creative, aesthetic faculty which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’.

Perhaps we can see, in these Coleridgean sketches, and by extension in Coleridge’s conception of the secondary imagination, the notion of aesthetic reflection as rehearsed by recent thinkers like Bernstein and Cascardi. This would be thinking which exceeds the restrictions of Enlightenment reason through an emphasis on sensory subjectivity, which, in Cascardi’s words, ‘seeks ... to validate the “subjective” moment – the moment of affect, of pleasure or pain – that goes unaccounted by the conceptual frameworks associated with cognition and morality’.³⁰ Already, in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, the aesthetic (the faculty of judgement) had been privileged with the capacity to bridge the gap between freedom (cognisable by reason) and experience (cognisable by the understanding).³¹ Although, as Cascardi’s statement suggests, for Kant the *aesthetic* meant not only art but the senses as such (from αισθέσθαι, ‘to sense’), to Kant’s successors, especially Schelling, art was especially valued in this respect. Schelling wrote that ‘art is the only true and eternal organ and document of philosophy ... it is art alone that can succeed in making objective, with universal validity, that which the philosopher can represent only subjectively’.³² His *System of Transcendental Idealism*, as one critic puts it, seeks to prove that the artwork ‘discloses the “absolute” to us in a non-discursive way that is nonetheless

³⁰ Anthony Cascardi, *The Consequences of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

³¹ See Patrick Gardiner, ‘Kant: *Critique of Judgement*’, in Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (eds.), *The Age of German Idealism* (vol. vi of *The Routledge History of Philosophy*) (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 103-37, at 104.

³² Quoted in Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 116.

more authentically true to the ultimate nature of reality than scientific or even philosophical knowledge can ever hope to be'.³³ The rift between fact and value, inaugurated by a Humean scepticism which restricted the domain of philosophical statements to those which could be empirically verified, ruling out of court any judgements on value (hence effectively separating philosophy from most forms of human experience), is healed, so Schelling thought, by art's reconciliatory power. Though Coleridge was abruptly to abandon, in the second volume of *Biographia*, the Schellingian theses (in fact direct translations) which close the first volume, their importance for that volume's culminating definition of primary and secondary imagination is undeniable.

3. Imagination and the common sense

When Hill turns to Coleridge's celebrated definition of the imagination in 'Redeeming the Time', it is with a view to criticising the fantasies of possession on offer to the population of nineteenth-century Britain. He writes that

the significance of Coleridge's distinction between primary and secondary imagination, particularly when read in the light of later pronouncements in *Table Talk*, is that the first represents an ideal democratic birthright, a light that ought to light every person coming into the world. In the event, the majority is deprived of this birthright in exchange for a mess of euphoric trivia and, if half-aware of its loss, is instructed to look for freedom in an isolated and competitive search for possessions and opportunity. Therefore the secondary imagination, the formal creative faculty, must awaken the minds of men to their lost heritage, not of possession but of perception.
(CCW 101)

³³ Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

In this reinterpretation of Coleridge's famous passage, Hill transforms the original distinction into an ethical norm, dislodging in the process the German Idealist philosophy that forms its cornerstone. The 'later pronouncements in *Table Talk*' in the light of which Hill reinterprets the passage in all likelihood is an allusion to a passage from *Table Talk* already quoted in Hill's essay. In it, Coleridge deprecates the metaphysical ambitions of *Biographia*'s Schellingian passages:

All that metaphysical disquisition at the end of the first volume of the *Biographia Literaria* is unformed and immature; it contains the fragments of the truth, but it is not full, nor thought out. It is wonderful to myself to think, how infinitely more profound my views now are, and yet how much clearer they are. The circle is completing; the idea is coming round to, and to be, the common sense.
(Quoted in *CCW* 97)

To read Coleridge's passage on the imagination 'in the light of' this passage, then, is to dissolve to a great extent the influence of Schelling upon Coleridge's (and, by extension, Hill's) thought. It is to tidy away the formative contribution of German Idealist philosophy to Coleridge's concept of aesthetic judgement, and to supplement the fragmentary quality of his earlier thought with an idea – common sense – which has its own philosophical pedigree, but which, in Coleridge's later thought, acts as a cover under which philosophy can be rounded off by a subjective 'wisdom' partly funded by the poet's reputation.

When Coleridge writes, of the idea first articulated fragmentarily in *Biographia*, that it 'is coming round to, and to be, the common sense', he is getting to the heart of what philosophy means for him, and, I would argue, for Hill. In *Biographia*, Coleridge had written that 'it is the two-fold function of philosophy to reconcile reason with common

sense, and to elevate common sense into reason'.³⁴ What this would mean, if successfully carried out, would be the end of philosophy, or rather the absorption of philosophy in common sense. With 'common sense', Coleridge invokes a long history of reflection upon the notion of a community sense, the *sensus communis* first theorised by Aristotle as that which grounds our separate faculties, but which came to mean an affective consciousness of community which might ground our judgements (in Hans-Georg Gadamer's words) in 'not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race'.³⁵ More pertinently, common sense features centrally in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, where it is conceived of not as an intellectual capacity (the means by which the majority of people understand the world) but as a sensuous understanding: 'a subjective principle, which determines only by feeling rather than by concepts'.³⁶ It is therefore akin to aesthetic reflection, the subjective apprehension of sense data which is received as if by reference to a pre-existing concept but is in fact not so received. It is another way of naming the objective necessity of judgements of taste, their property of subjectivity which, however, is not arbitrary.

On this account, what Coleridge appears to think was misguided in his metaphysical derivation of the imagination in *Biographia* would be its fragmentary articulation (working against an organicism increasingly viewed by Coleridge as essential to society) and its technical language. As Noel Jackson notes, there are premonitions, in the significance Coleridge places on common sense, of Gramsci's ambition to reduce the gap between

³⁴ *Biographia Literaria*, I, 270.

³⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, tr. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 19. Coleridge was particularly intimate with the work of two philosophers, Kant and Thomas Reid, who made important contributions to the notions of common sense and *sensus communis*.

³⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 87.

academic thought and common sense.³⁷ The important difference, as Jackson emphasises, is that for Coleridge the process begins with the individual – the genius whose insight into his modes of cognition, properly articulated, is able to reform common sense – rather than with common sense itself. Common sense is first overturned in order to push the subject inward, away from any ‘preexisting community of taste, sympathy, or doctrine as the ground for aesthetic, ethical, or political relations’ only to be restored when selfhood is eventually found to be predicated upon community.³⁸

Thought, then, is figured for Coleridge as a process of unveiling and veiling philosophy under the cloak of common sense – a retreat from and return to the social, under the motive force of subjective affect. Insofar as this is true, nothing could better encapsulate Hill’s own circling around philosophy, at times dependent upon its claims for objective purchase on the world, at times dislodging them in favour of an empirical fidelity to lived experience. Hence Hill’s rewriting of the primary/secondary imagination distinction in political terms, where the primary imagination – in Coleridge’s terms ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’ – becomes ‘an ideal democratic birthright’ of which nineteenth-century capitalism robs the people. In place of this lost, primary imagination, we have what Hill calls ‘the formal creative faculty’ (secondary imagination). As I shall argue in the next chapter, however, Hill’s retreat from the social into solitary thought is not quite as calmly self-possessed as the picture Coleridge paints in the above passage from *Table Talk*.

What is it that Hill’s poem *The Triumph of Love* would like to create, or re-create?

One thing it tries to make newly legible, or audible, in its pages are the elements with

³⁷ Noel B. Jackson, ‘Critical Conditions: Coleridge, “Common Sense”, and the Literature of Self-Experiment’, *ELH* 70/1 (Spring 2003), 117-149, at 117-8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

which an idea of shared being – objectivity or universality – might begin to be constructed. Political and technocratic solutions to the construction of a shared objectivity are integral participants in Hill's reimagining of Petrarch's allegorical *trionfi*. Its stanzas catalogue several bad examples, notional collectivities in the name of which individuals are given historical agency, though rarely with propitious outcomes, prompting Hill to doubt the virtue of such subsumption:

Bring out Behemoth – so; a sullen beast –
 unentreated of the people. It has come
 close to your name, with nominal disclaimer,
 for your single glory, should that be spoken of,
 your ignominy by nameless attribution.
 (TL 17)

Hobbes is 'the last great / projector of Europe' (TL 52), but *Behemoth*, Hobbes's study of the Civil War, is the shadow of *Leviathan*, his ideal political order. The fear engendered by the sense of powerlessness when a body politic acts in the name of, but with scant regard for, the individuality of its populace is dramatised in the enjambement aping the unalterable combination of proximity and hiatus between political force and private selfhood: 'It has come / close to your name'. Legal issues are disposed of with a 'nominal disclaimer'. As if musicality were a dangerous critical quality, a certain ominous flattening of the voice is apparent in the repeated stifling of vowel-sounds by *m* and *n*: 'Behemoth ... sullen ... unentreated ... come ... name ... nominal ... ignominy'.

There are still other examples of projection – the construction of models of commonality – whose failures are built in to foundations (Hill writes that even '*Leviathan* / towers on basics rather than from roots' [TL 52-3]) the fractures of which are sounded out

through aesthetic reflection. For example, Hill's satire on post-war city planning relies on a series of puns for its critical effect:

Unveil the dust-wrapped, post-war architects'
 immediate prize-designs in balsa wood,
 excelling fantasies, sparsely inhabited
 by spaced-out, pinhead model citizens
 (TL 14)

In this projective process of imaginative reflection the majority of individuals get deleted (this model is 'sparsely inhabited'), and those that remain are 'spaced-out' – their spatial coordinates predetermined, their thoughts flattened to a drugged amnesia – 'model citizens'. If the *sensus communis* is dulled – relations between members of this community dictated from on high, rather than developed through lived experience – in stark contrast the project is 'immediate': both opportunistic (with its swift response to destruction) and indifferent to those empirical facts (such as already existing institutions and lives) which mediate lived experience.

Social engineering's antagonism to the human spirit is a historical commonplace, but art's aesthetic constructivism – the attempt to give objective form to an imagined reconfiguration of the elements of material reality – is no more immune to the temptation to subordinate individual suffering to the organising principle of the whole. Artworks composed to memorialise the dead are subjected to *The Triumph*'s satire for their dependence on institutionalised technique:

Trauermusik, musique funèbre, funeral
 music, for male and female
 voices ringingly *a cappella*,
 made for double string choirs, congregated brass,

choice performers on baroque trumpets hefting,
 like glassblowers, inventions
 of supreme order
 (TL 6-7)

Proliferating instrumentation and musicological taxonomy blot out any originating calamity. The musicality here is too insistent, and deliberately so: the doubled *ing* in ‘ringingly’ is echoed by ‘double string’ in the next line, and mutates into the tripled *a* in ‘*a cappella*’, before the stuttered vowel-sequence of ‘congregated’ is resolved in ‘brass’. For all that song might be thought to give a kind of sensuous intelligence to art’s grasp of political injustice, this stanza targets an industry that has thrived upon art’s assumption of a privileged position vis-à-vis suffering. (Among the compositions Hill may have had in mind is Luigi Dallapiccola’s *Tempus Destruendi – Tempus Aedificandi* (1971), a twelve-tone choral composition ‘for a cappella choir’, concerned with the destruction and rebuilding of Jerusalem, with symbolic resonances for post-war Israel. Hill’s poetry notebooks in the Leeds University Library Archive reveal that the working title for *The Triumph of Love* was *Tempus Aedificandi Tempus Destruendi*.)³⁹

Deprived of the primary imagination, we have the secondary imagination as an aesthetic faculty through which knowledge of the world, and insight into its unfreedom or injustice, might be given. The uses to which this faculty are put vary, as Hill shows in ‘Redeeming the Time’, examining a series of specimen texts that in one way or another engage with the industrialisation of Britain. Following his redefinition of the imagination, Hill writes that ‘even such virtues as “rigorous self-improvement” might be fanciful rather than imaginative’ (CCW 101): in other words, an accommodation to the status quo rather than an attempt to diagnose social wrongs. We have already seen Hill’s assessment of the

³⁹ Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/2/1/42.

‘vital’, penetrative aesthetic of Wordsworth’s Ode, and the ‘inert’, defeated prose of the radical demagogues. To these Hill adds a third category of response: the calculative, opportunistic diction of the technocrat. Hill quotes a passage from Andrew Ure’s *The Philosophy of Manufactures*:

It is, in fact, the constant aim and tendency of every improvement in machinery to supersede human labour altogether, or to diminish its cost, by substituting the industry of women and children for that of men; or that of ordinary labourers, for trained artisans.

(Quoted in CCW 99)

As Hill suggests, the ‘brutal power’ of the connective ‘or’ here pitilessly facilitates the calculation of the relative rewards and costs of employment strategies, in the process eliding the space in which workers’ voices might be heard. This habit of elision is infectious, spreading too to those figures whose sympathies are avowedly radical. Hill cites a description, by the reformist politician George Howell, of the 1851 Great Exhibition:

I cannot express my feelings as I entered that vast palace of iron and as I glanced around the multifarious and magnificent collection of the products of the world there represented. All dreams of fairy land were eclipsed in a moment.

(Quoted in CCW 100)

Hill goes on to observe that ‘[i]f Fancy deals, as Coleridge says, with “fixities and definites”, then Howell’s delight at the Crystal Palace is fanciful, not imaginative’. It is content to stop at the facts in front of it, the ‘multifarious and magnificent collection of the products of the world’, rather than imaginatively to recreate the social relations which brought them into existence. Yet, as Hill notes movingly, it’s the stupefaction engendered by industry, and its correlative, calculation, which is striking: ‘One’s protest is directed not

so much against as on behalf of Howell's dream. It is the blatant coexistence in nineteenth-century England of his "I cannot express" and Dr Ure's "or" that distresses' (CCW 100).

Against Howell's 'ballooning platitudes', Hill places a passage from a pamphlet from the 1830s written by the Huddersfield Committee, and which deals with many of the concerns animating the factory movement of the period. Hill writes that '[t]he Huddersfield men are *perceptive* ... but they are also overborne, and *know it*' (CCW 100; my emphasis). Their imagination is made manifest in the perception that they are not free. By contrast, Howell's unfreedom is hidden from him. His enthusiasm is, in Hill's words, symptomatic of 'a diremption between perception and utterance, energy and effect' (CCW 100). Behind both examples seems to lie the calculative, risk-assessing prose of Ure, which partly composes the force that Hill asserts deprives humanity of the 'birthright' of the primary imagination, enslaving men and women to the fantasy that freedom can be found 'in an isolated and competitive search for possessions and opportunity'. Aesthetic evaluation and critique (or the secondary imagination), which 'awaken[s] ... perception', then must be a countervailing force to calculative ingenuity.

This conflict between aesthetic reflection and Enlightenment rationality is one of the central themes of Hill's poem *The Triumph of Love*. Documentary evidence – another supposed source of unimpeachable objectivity – does not escape the inherent subjectivity framing its judgement. One passage in *The Triumph* imagines the point at which the aesthetic grasp of suffering becomes, through repetition, a token gesture in the repertoire of sentimental reaction to the Holocaust:

Permit me:
refocus that Jew – yes there,
that one. You see him burning,

dropping feet first, in a composed manner,
 still in suspension,
 from the housetop.
 It will take him for ever
 caught at this instant
 of world-exposure.
 In close-up he maintains appearance –
 Semitic ur-Engel –
 terminal agony none the less
 interminable, the young
 martyrs ageing in the fire –
 thank you, Hauptmann – Schauspieler? –
 Run it through again and for ever
 he stretches his wings of flame
 upon instruction.
 (TL 10-11)

This is the objectivity of the technocrat. Prosodically, the stanza appears drained of syllabic musicality, each line delivering a minimum of communicative data before breaking. A mood of stasis is suggested by the words immediately before and after line-breaks: ‘refocus’, ‘still’, ‘suspension’, ‘caught’ reinforced by the deictics ‘there’, ‘that’, ‘that’, ‘this’. Rational objectivity is economically encapsulated in the instruction to ‘refocus’ the image of the Jew, for ‘focus’ is a spectacularly overdetermined word: the *OED* cites several usages from the late eighteenth-century, testifying to the burden of Enlightenment rationality concentrated in its two syllables. Derived from the Latin for ‘hearth’ or ‘fireplace’, ‘focus’ has acquired a range of senses germane to Hill’s critique, including ‘the adjustment ... necessary to produce a clear image’, ‘a centre of radiant heat’, the ‘burning point’ at which rays of light converge, and, in a now obsolete usage, ‘the best-illuminated part of the stage’. The Jew is a focal-point in all these senses: on the stage of history, the object of definition, the object of the clarifying and sharpening of attention, a burning point

of light on film, and a combustible object in flames.⁴⁰ Terms from aesthetics – ‘composed’, ‘close-up’ – reinforce the complicity with the rationalising gaze (it’s hard not to think of the sham objectivity of the Nazi’s scientific experiments upon concentration camp inmates) against which art cannot fully indemnify itself.

Hill had been reading Gillian Rose’s posthumous volume *Mourning Becomes the Law* around the time of the publication of *The Triumph of Love*, and may have already known her chapter ‘Beginnings of the Day – Fascism and Representation’.⁴¹ Rose’s understanding of ‘the sentimentality of the ultimate predator’ resonates with this stanza.⁴² Sentimentality in which pathos is objectified – made separate from the observer, with the result that the observer is absolved of responsibility (one might say of the need to cultivate community sense) – can be gratified and fostered by certain aesthetic forms, as Rose argues it is by Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. In such artworks, Rose asserts, ‘[t]he audience is ... spared the encounter with the indecency of their position’.⁴³ Such art ‘leaves us ... in a Fascist security of our own unreflected predation’.⁴⁴ (Including Rose in our thinking about this stanza also sheds light on a reference in Hill’s stanza which has met with puzzled critical reaction. Gerhart Hauptmann – grand old man of German letters – stands in relationship to the Jews in a position similar to Schindler’s. His ambiguous status within the Third Reich – unwilling to go into exile, but maintaining a privately critical attitude

⁴⁰ Hegel describes the historical field as a “spectacle of passions” (*Schauspiel der Leidenschaften*) – echoing the quizzical epithet ‘Schauspieler?’ in Hill’s stanza. Quoted in Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 106.

⁴¹ Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41-62.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 47-8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

towards the Nazis – demonstrate the implicatedness of ethics and power which is glossed over in Spielberg’s film.)⁴⁵

Contra Benjamin, for whom the mechanical reproduction of images eliminates the cult of the image, this stanza confirms the hypnotic power technology can wield when applied to aesthetic forms.⁴⁶ The object of perception in section XX is literally animated by the mechanical action of a film projector: as the film is wound back to the start and replayed, the man is transfigured by ‘stretch[ing]’ flames engulfing his body. If ‘aura’ – the retention of subjective agency within the work of art – is effaced by photography and film, Hill here shows how a different kind of aura replaces it, the ‘wings of flame’ which now decorate the burning victim giving him primordial significance as a ‘Semitic ur-Engel’. What is lacking (Hill’s stanza implies) is the imaginative creation of a community sense – of a sense of one’s own relations with others: not only of how one’s actions impact upon other lives, but of how our most private intellectual and affective grasp of others affects communities as a whole. So much of Hill’s poetry repeatedly asserts that some measure of the facility with which suffering is transformed into graspable images must be incorporated into the representation of suffering. Here, the Jew is robbed of all identity beyond that of being what Rose calls ‘the sublime other of modernity’: hence the notion of a communality of thought or of being is travestied.⁴⁷ This is the consequence of, in Rose’s words, ‘holocaust piety’, which, enshrining a particular with the status of an absolute (absolute suffering, or absolute silence) in the name of the restoration of community, abolishes the objective, rational grounds of community. Aesthetic reflection – the non-determinative

⁴⁵ See Warren R. Maurer, *Gerhart Hauptmann* (Boston: Twayne, 1982).

⁴⁶ See Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211-244.

⁴⁷ Rose, *op. cit.*, 38.

apprehension of particulars in such a way as to imagine their harmony with a possible conceptuality – aims to avoid this quick conversion of the non-identical into a familiar response. As I shall argue in the next chapter, however, Coleridge's aesthetic strategies frequently conceal an egotistical sublime under the cover of non-determinative conceptuality.

CHAPTER 2: THE DRAMA OF REASON

1. The ‘drama of reason’

To those readers of Hill’s criticism (and of criticism about Hill, which so often seems to subsist on his terminology) habituated to the recurrence across the years of Coleridgean phrases whose repetition has leant them an almost talismanic quality, it can be surprising to rediscover that the majority if not all of them occur in the space of two pages in ‘Redeeming the Time’. The first of these, and that which introduces Coleridge into the essay’s discussion, is that of the ‘drama of reason’. Judging from the abundance of its appearances in the prose of critics writing on Hill, ‘the drama of reason’ contains *in nuce* all of Hill’s aesthetics, ethics and politics.¹ As Hill describes it, ‘the drama of reason’ is the opposite of what Coleridge thought of as ‘unconnected writing’ (a phrase from a letter to Thomas Poole, dated 28 January 1810). ‘Unconnected writing’, Hill writes, is writing that has ‘been run down into the “fixities and definites” of a mere “law of association”, into the inert “general taste” and cliché-ridden fancy that served to gloss over the barbarous prejudice of “the polished part of society”’ (CCW 94). Note the implicit association of ‘unconnected writing’ with ‘fancy’ in the reference to ‘fixities and definites’. By contrast, Coleridge’s style insists upon the notion that divagation and parentheses serve the ends of a

¹ Examples of critics writing on Hill’s parenthetical style – the typographical evidence of the ‘drama of reason’ – include Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 309-18; E.M. Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1990), 27-8, 357-8; Vincent Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), 34-6.

conception of reason which bears some relation, as we shall see, to the imagination. Hill quotes a passage from the letter:

Of parentheses I may be too fond – and will be on my guard in this respect –. But I am certain that no work of impassioned & eloquent reasoning ever did or could subsist without them – They are the *drama* of Reason – & present the thought growing, instead of a mere Hortus siccus (CCW 94).

Two pages later comes perhaps Hill's most cited critical catholicon. It applies to two quotations – the first from *Biographia Literaria*, and the second an entry (quoted in the previous chapter) from Coleridge's *Table Talk*, which reads as follows:

The metaphysical disquisition at the end of the first volume of the *Biographia Literaria* is unformed and immature; it contains the fragments of the truth, but it is not fully thought out. It is wonderful to myself to think how infinitely more profound my views now are, and yet how much clearer they are withal. The circle is completing; the idea is coming round to, and to be, the common sense.

In response to this Hill writes: '[Coleridge] surely foresaw the obligation to enact the drama of reason within the texture of one's own work, since nothing else would serve. His parentheses are antiphons of vital challenge' (CCW 97).

But digression can be pretence or diversion as well as self-criticism, and the passage of Coleridge's which inspires Hill's praise is in fact serenely sure of its position ('It is wonderful to myself to think how infinitely more profound my views now are'). The danger is that self-correction can become an indulgence, so that, like Keats's reported meeting with Coleridge on Hampstead Heath, which one critic cites as evidence of Coleridge's 'drama of

double touch', it can more often come across as narcissistic monologue.² Peter Robinson describes the problem with precision:

When [Hill] describes how a writer may enact the 'drama of reason' by including 'the antiphonal voice of the heckler', his word 'antiphonal' indicates a problem: the church-music term converts into a composed counterpointing of voices a nettled intrusion of dissent in another's seamless mid-flow. It has been reported of leading politicians that as young men they sometimes asked 'supporters to heckle them to enliven dull meetings'. The composition of heckling voices into lyric poems is vulnerable to such party management.³

Hill's poetry certainly displays little of what Robinson calls the 'stylistic rawness' that results from relinquishing a confidently-held sense of aesthetic judgement, especially at those moments when aesthetic judgement is ostentatiously thrown away. Later in this chapter I shall look more closely at the problems produced by this masking of a self-sufficient consciousness under the cover of intersubjectivity. But I believe Hill's critical prose faces the challenge enjoined by Coleridge's critique of 'unconnected writing' with more success. Without obscuring the insight that Hill's prosody is predisposed to refuse the turbulence of contingent noise (though it can perhaps simulate it as antiphonal counterpoint), his sense of 'the drama of reason' does open his work to an intellectual

² 'Last Sunday I took a walk towards Highgate and in the lane that winds by the side of Lord Mansfield's park I met Mr Green our Demonstrator at Guy's in conversation with Coleridge – I joined them, after enquiring by a look whether it would be agreeable – I walked with him a[t] his alderman-after dinner pace for nearly two miles I suppose. In those two Miles he broached a thousand things – let me see if I can give you a list – Nightingales, Poetry – on Poetical sensation – Metaphysics – Different genera and species of Dreams – Nightmare – a dream accompanied <with> a sense of touch – single and double touch – A dream related – First and second consciousness – Monsters – the kraken – Mermaids – Southey believes in them – Southey's belief much too diluted – A Ghost story – Good morning – I heard his voice as he came towards me – I heard it as he moved away – I had heard it all the interval – if it may be called so'. John Keats, letter 'To the George Keatses' (15-16 April, 1819). Quoted in Paul Hamilton, *Coleridge and German Philosophy: The Poet in the Land of Logic* (London: Continuum, 2007), 38-9.

³ Peter Robinson, 'Reading Geoffrey Hill', in Peter Robinson (ed.), *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), 196-218, at 216-7.

freedom in which politics and aesthetics are allowed to shape one another, by virtue of an assumed ground which it is reason's especial virtue to seek.

The parenthetical is, on the face of it, more likely to encourage unconnected writing than not. The *OED*'s entry for 'parenthesis' speaks of it in terms of explanation, but also of disconnection and irrelevance, as an afterthought, an aside or a hiatus. However, Hill implicitly links his citation on the 'drama of reason' to the philosophical background of Coleridge's thought, which gestures towards a way of thinking about the generation of a intellectual commonality based on the fragmentary and disconnected. When Coleridge uses the term 'reason', he means something more definite than everyday cognition. As he reminds us in *Biographia*, 'one main object' of his periodical *The Friend* was '[t]o establish the distinction' between reason and the understanding.⁴ In Essay IV, 'On the Principles of Political Philosophy', he writes:

By the Understanding, I mean the faculty of thinking and forming *judgements* on the notices furnished by the Sense, according to certain rules existing in itself, which rules constitute its distinct nature. By the pure Reason, I mean the power by which we become possessed of Principle, (the eternal Verities of Plato and Descartes) and of Ideas, (N.B. not images) as the ideas of a point, a line, a circle, in Mathematics; and of Justice, Holiness, Free-Will, &c. in Morals.⁵

The understanding, then, is the faculty which enables us to organise our sense perceptions into a coherent set of experiences. Reason, on the other hand, is the faculty which enables us to have knowledge of grounding principles. Reason in this sense gives us access to

⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), i, 175.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke, 2 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), ii, 104.

spiritual objects.⁶ In contrast to Kant, Coleridge sees reason as a faculty to which questions about freedom, necessity, and divinity are accessible.

I mention this because it will help to show how ‘the drama of reason’ is not just the spectacle of a subject conversing with him- or herself. It is also the event in which the specific objects of reason (as opposed to the understanding) – justice, freedom, and morality – are made to speak, are made accessible to human cognition by means of aesthetic figuration. What is at stake in ‘the drama of reason’ – the very notion of ethical utterance to which Hill clings so fiercely – requires this philosophical context to be comprehensible; otherwise it is difficult to see how simple parentheses can carry such a weight of responsibility. Yet it is also clear that this faith in reason, while it doesn’t efface the possibility of intersubjectivity and hence dissent, difference, or the non-identical, nevertheless assumes a common ground from the start. In this respect it works confusedly against the principle of non-determination at the heart of aesthetic reflection.

As if aware of the problems that arise with Coleridge’s notion of reason, Hill both silently alludes to this philosophical context and suppresses it. As part of what Hill sees as ‘a striking continuity and consistency in [Coleridge’s] meditation of many years upon the drama of reason’, Hill cites a passage from Coleridge’s *Table Talk*. Hill writes:

Of crucial significance is his [Coleridge’s] desiderated ‘moral *copula*’ which would, he believed, ‘take from history its accidentality and from science its fatalism’.
(CCW 94)

Hill doesn’t quote the context, even though without it we might struggle to understand how this connective device – the moral copula – works. The phrase comes from the entry in

⁶ See also *The Friend*, i, 157.

Table Talk of September 11, 1831. Coleridge is speaking about his never completed philosophical system, which he hoped would harmonise all knowledge through a process that bears a marked resemblance to the procedure described in Hegel's preface to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*:

[I]t opposes no other system, but shows what was true in each; and how that which was true in the particular in each of them became error because it was only half the truth. I have endeavored to unite the insulated fragments of truth and frame a perfect mirror. I show to each system that I fully understand and rightfully appreciate what that system means; but then I lift up that system to a higher point of view, from which I enable it to see its former position where it was indeed, but under another light and with different relations; so that the fragment of truth is not only acknowledged, but explained.⁷

Coleridge goes on to say that 'I wish in short, to connect by a moral copula Natural History with Political History – or in other words, to make History scientific, and Science historical – to take from History its accidentality – and from Science its fatalism'.⁸ Upon this view, epistemology becomes subsumed under a connective principle that respects the breaks in epistemology's development. By means of this connective 'copula', the subjective perspective is deprived of too determinative a role in the construction of philosophical explanations of the world ('to take ... from Science its fatalism'): instead, narratives about our relationship with the world are constituted – as in a drama – by the interaction of successive perspectives, not always in agreement with one another. With this system of thought in place, Coleridge believed we would be in a better position to 'take from history

⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk: Recorded by Henry Nelson Coleridge (and John Taylor Coleridge)*, ed. Carl Woodring (London: Routledge, 1990), 248-9. Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2. See also T.H. Green, *The Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R. L. Nettleship, 3 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1885-8), i, 1-2; and Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7-8. It should be observed, however, that Coleridge probably did not read Hegel's *Phenomenology*.

⁸ Coleridge, *op. cit.*, 249.

its accidentality', in other words to contrive a vision of social justice which views members of a state not as atoms buzzing in individualistic activity but as inter-related agents. Coleridge's position here is a philosophical one, but – in keeping with the Schellingian turn to aesthetic modes of apprehension of our relations with objects in the world – it is Hill who reconfigures it in terms of language. Yet the very process described in this suppressed passage *is* the drama of reason writ large: the interaction of metaphysical explanations and their productive contradictions, from which Coleridge seeks to establish a firm ground for knowledge.

A clear indication of this Coleridgean 'mosaic' aesthetic – and of Hill's ambivalence vis-à-vis art's critical prerogative – is embedded in one of the earliest stanzas in *The Triumph of Love*:

But how could there not be a difficult
 confronting of systematics – the scale
 of articulation notched up one grade at a time?
 They have conceded me – I think, beyond question –
 power of determination but without
 force of edict.
 If I were to grasp once, in emulation,
 work of the absolute, origin-creating mind,
 its *opus est*, conclusive
 otherness, the veil
 of certitude discovered as itself
 that which is to be revealed,
 I should hold for my own, my self-giving,
 my retort upon Emerson's 'alienated majesty',
 the *De Causa Dei* of Thomas Bradwardine.
 (TL 3)

'Power of determination': the ability to diagnose a problem, to clinch an argument, to identify an object, or just sheer obstinacy – these are the aesthetic qualities 'They' (who I take to be his critics) have conceded Hill. At the same time, any social efficacy or objective

impact ('force of edict') is denied by these readers. And in fact these lines do seem curiously determined to dispense with any of the acoustic and organisational resources with which poetry might normally be supposed to leave an impression on the minds of its readers. Certainly, as some critics have complained, this passage is marked by an anticlimactic accumulation of subordinate clauses only to sputter out in a couple of dry scholarly references. This is one of several stanzas in *The Triumph of Love* whose language – digressive, prosaic, cerebral – appears to parody the ruminative syntax of academic discourse. (Thomas Day has argued this position with respect to a later stanza.)⁹ I would agree that there is an element of performance in these stanzas. Hill as much as admits that the poem requires 'a difficult / confronting of systematics' – a Coleridgean 'mosaic' of descriptive, intellective, confessional and prescriptive compositional styles: the drama of reason. But if, as Day argues, the bathetic syntax of the more recondite, digressive stanzas indicates satire, I read in them traces of Hill's attempts to objectify judgement by means of a tradition of philosophical explanation against which he also actively struggles. For this stanza contains a perfectly coherent and forceful summary of certain aesthetic organisational principles which, having their origin in Coleridge's thought, Hill takes very seriously.

For example, there is the quintessentially Coleridgean wish 'to grasp, in emulation' the 'work of the absolute, origin-creating mind'. This, surely, is an abridgement of Coleridge's primary imagination ('a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'), where Hill's desired 'emulation' of the divine creative act echoes Coleridge's 'repetition' of this act in the human mind. We have seen Hill

⁹ See Thomas Day, 'Sensuous Intelligence: T.S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill', *Cambridge Quarterly* 35/3 (2006), 255-280, at 261-62.

reformulate this as ‘an ideal democratic birthright, a light that ought to light every person coming into the world’ of which ‘the majority is deprived ... in exchange for a mess of euphoric trivia’, and that Hill conceives of the secondary imagination, the creative faculty, as playing a compensatory role insofar as it enables the cognition of social relations, though only through the historicised medium of aesthetic form. If he were to ‘grasp’ the perceptive faculty of the primary imagination, this would mean having objective knowledge of the world – ‘conclusive otherness’ – rather than the imprisoned perception which alienates thinking. Hill’s shorthand for the perception of the possibility of this objective knowledge is ‘Emerson’s “alienated majesty”’.

Hill is alluding to Emerson’s essay ‘Self-Reliance’, but the words ‘alienated majesty’ also form the framing title for three essays in Hill’s *Collected Critical Writings*. One of these, ‘Alienated Majesty: Ralph W. Emerson’ clarifies what is, in the stanza quoted above, a rather gnomic allusion. The essay begins with a quote from ‘Self-Reliance’: ‘In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty’. ‘Genius’ here means not the unique talent of a particular writer, but something close to Coleridge’s imagination: elsewhere, Emerson asserts that ‘Genius is in the first instance, sensibility, the capacity of receiving just impressions from the external world, and the power of coordinating these after the laws of thought’.¹⁰ Emerson’s aphorism is preceded by a passage exhorting his readers to attend to moments of imaginative illumination in their own minds. His words indicate the possibility of a commonality of perception – a common sense – shared between all men and women, if not as a realisable objective, then at least as a normative horizon.

¹⁰ Quoted in Patrick J. Keane, *Emerson, Romanticism, and Intuitive Reason: The Transatlantic ‘Light of All Our Day’* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 13.

As we have seen, this horizon elicits acts of community-founding at various conflicting levels: in this stanza the conflict between objective and private thought is enacted with a flicker of humour in the contrast between the putatively clarifying syntax (each comma-separated clause miming the act of refining the sense yet further) and the obscurely private allusions. Its anticlimactic concluding lines are, with their suggestion of bibliographic mustiness, the source of the stanza's unanswerable irony, since Hill's 'retort' upon the mediated discursive structures indirectly suggested by 'alienated majesty' is just another bit of alienated majesty, the rejected thoughts coming back to him in Bradwardine's *De Causa Dei*. The irony and the sincerity – since Hill would 'hold' these thoughts as his 'own' – cannot be disentangled: as the syntax unwinds, with each clause absurdly raising the stakes, we are led into a position where matters of mounting importance and seeming objectivity (thanks to the increasing refinement of explanation supposedly supplied by each clause) are sequestered in ever more capriciously esoteric allusions. One critic writes that the ideas in this stanza 'are precisely the ones which are most important to the poem, and thus precisely the ones that ought to have been described in the original language of Hill's poetry rather than being reduced to mere tics of allusion'.¹¹ But it's in these 'tics' that Hill is being most faithful to the Coleridgean ideas about objectivity which are so important to the poem. In the 'confronting of systematics' – the collocation of systems of knowledge of different thinkers from Bradwardine to Emerson – Hill is imitating Coleridge's 'moral copula', which, as we have seen, is part of Coleridge's desire to compose a system from fragments of knowledge in colloquy with each other.

¹¹ Brian Phillips, 'A Colder Spell to Come', review of *Without Title* and *Scenes from Comus*, *Poetry* 188/2 (May 2006) <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/journal/article.html?id=178087>>, accessed 15 June 2010.

From this, perhaps, can be derived some of the awkwardness with which Hill deliberately infuses the discursive passages in *The Triumph of Love*. As he writes in *The Orchards of Syon*: ‘Let’s think / about the nature of impasse: metaphysics’ / biochemical mystery’. Truth includes an element of awkwardness (‘Wisdom / conspires with unwisdom’) including, Hill writes, ‘STC’s compunctions’ (*OS* 64). Hill’s compunctions are embodied in the breathless zeal and punctilious syntax of his metaphysical passages in *The Triumph of Love*. One of the defining stanzas in this respect is section CXXV, addressed to ‘*Vergine bella*’, the Virgin Mary, a stanza which

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. Custom
is strange – as I believe, ma’am, you well know –
not least in its familiar
power of estrangement. Estrangement itself
is strange, though less so than the metaphysics
of tautology, which is at once *vain*
repetition and *the logic of the world*
[Wittgenstein]. Some of its moves – I mean
tautology’s – call to mind chess-moves: moves
that are in being before you – even as
you – make them.
(*TL* 66)

This passage and the others like it allow us to overhear the anxieties of the intellect bound to the enterprise of objectivity. Hill’s methodology is here openly stated – the pitching towards one another of different modes of discourse, one form of ‘rhetoric’ addressing another. Day convincingly presents the tone of this passage as (quoting ‘*Dividing Legacies*’) one of ‘tentative authority’, a mix of assertion and self-doubt in a manner

recalling F.H. Bradley's 'curious blend of humility and irony'.¹² The stanza as a whole proceeds with a moving helplessness in response to the necessity to recalibrate theories in the face of historical contingency. Definition succeeds definition with self-correcting and self-forgetting rapidity, encountered in the eager-to-clarify digressions ('– I mean') and the stuttered 'estrangement. Estrangement'. The stanza recalls a tradition of ratiocination which Hill clearly feels is indispensable for the understanding of history, ethics, and aesthetics, but which, as the comically surface-skimming allusiveness suggests, he also views sceptically. Reason – which in Kant's philosophy pursues the syllogistic chain from condition to condition, in pursuit of the final, grounding absolute – here assumes various guises. From Wittgenstein's concept of tautology the stanza moves to theological articulations of the unconditioned:¹³

Tautology,
for Wittgenstein, manifests the condition
of unconditional truth. Mysticism is not
affects but grammar. There is nothing
mysterious in grammar; it constitutes
its own mystery, its *practicum*. Though certain
neologisms – Coleridge's 'tautegorical'
for example – clown out along the edge,
τὸ αὐτό enjoys its essential being
in theology as in logic. The intellectual
beauty of Bradwardine's thesis rests
in what it springs from: the Creator's grace
praecedentem tempore et natura ['Strewth!!!
'already present in time as in nature?' – ED]
and in what it returns to – our arrival
at a necessary salvation.
(TL 67)

¹² Day, op. cit., 262.

¹³ See Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 90-91, for an analysis of Hill's use of Wittgenstein in this stanza.

Concepts and their authors spring unheralded, mid-line, into the discussion – tautology, grammar, Coleridge, Bradwardine – with a hasty nervousness that forestalls any possibility of matching these concepts up to the experiences of suffering, courage, and artistic response inscribed elsewhere in the poem. Candour and mockery alternate, so that the seeming sincerity with which Hill welcomes Bradwardine’s ‘intellectual beauty’ is mitigated by a jokey editorial intervention, and a Coleridgean concept which (as we shall see) has some importance for Hill is dismissed as marginal. Early poems in Hill’s authorship had a formalism that sprung from a belief that art’s critical capacity inheres in impersonality, syntax, and the weighting of syllables. By contrast, there is an abstraction in this passage that embodies as substance the confusions of a private nature attempting public discourse: its critical act inheres in the abstract arrangement of allusion, hesitation, confidence and doubt evident in these lines. Hill’s criticism is a body of work where the enterprise of definition and evaluation must confront its own procedures and assumptions, in the process inevitably encountering this paradigm of hesitation and speculation. I will now turn to consider the effect of Coleridge’s thought upon this confrontation.

2. Coleridge’s aesthetics and literary criticism

In Hill’s poetry, literary criticism is exposed to critique no less than are the pedantic explanations sometimes imputed to academic discourse. A stanza in *The Orchards of Syon* takes this topic up:

Blackened as Rouault’s *Miserere*, a body
splays for the camera, the camera

staying put, except it probes further
 the human midden. [...] Then immediately
 peace brings *The Armed Vision*, a work of courage
 and quick advantage. Who dares show himself
embusqué in this verdurous new terrain
 to be fought through? Did HYMAN go to the wars?
 Empson didn't, nor did I. *Armed Vision*
 is of course COLERIDGE.
 (OS 44)

‘[T]his verdurous new terrain’ is, in the context of the volume as a whole, the eponymous *Orchards of Syon*: Hill’s investigation in verse of the possibility of establishing an ethical, devout communality of feeling through often very private material (‘All along, I’m labouring to try out / a numen that endures, exactly placed’ [OS 59]). But Hill (this passage realises) must be answerable to the same allegation he directs at advocates of opportunistic documentary realism: that his position is one of paid inquiry using a medium encrusted with a gestural repertoire prone to obscure the object of inquiry. (Hence the vilification of literary theorists as literary technocrats which has repeatedly accompanied jeremiads against academic theories of literature.)¹⁴ In the above stanza Hill traces the professionalisation of literary criticism – epitomised in the title of Stanley Edgar Hyman’s book *The Armed Vision*, where ‘armed’ refers to the putatively autonomous methodology touted by the New Critics – back to Coleridge. The source is in *Biographia Literaria*: ‘The razor’s edge becomes a saw to the armed vision’ – the ‘armed vision’ being vision augmented by a magnifying glass, an instrument for bringing its object into *focus*.¹⁵ As Hill implies in the polysemous word ‘*embusqué*’, meaning ‘one who avoids military service’,

¹⁴ For the tradition of this charge, and for Hyman’s role in the development of academic criticism, see Evan Carton and Gerald Graff, ‘The Emergence of Academic Criticism’, in Sacvan Bercovitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of American Literature, Volume 8: Poetry and Criticism 1940-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 281-304.

¹⁵ *Biographia Literaria*, i, 118.

but also literally ‘ambushed’, with roots going back to Syon’s ‘*bocage*’ mentioned at the start of the stanza – the professional observer is vulnerable to isolation from the rest of the community.

Yet it is a fact that Coleridge the godfather of professional literary criticism is more important to Hill than Coleridge the metaphysician. We have seen some of the ways Hill has minimised the significance of metaphysics in favour of a historical interpretation of Coleridge’s ideas. However, Paul Hamilton, in his study of Coleridge and German Idealism, astutely notes the ways in which the two disciplines inform one another in Coleridge’s work:

if practical criticism is the substance of Coleridge’s philosophy, as I.A. Richards thought, it certainly informs his interventions within the German philosophical framework. In other words, it is in his interest in and grasp of the problems of expressing and communicating various philosophical positions that Coleridge could make his own contribution. This originality, now metacritical, did not appear in grand modifications of metaphysical schemes but in criticism of the language of those schemes.¹⁶

Coleridge pursued a project to refine the terms with which thinking could be carried out for the benefit of a community of thinkers. The criticism and clarification of terminology, or more broadly, of the diction and syntax in which philosophical thought is couched, would be a contribution to the development of a common sense, a shared perceptive faculty. The tool with which this clarification might be carried out is a kind of ‘drama of reason’. Much post-Kantian philosophy conceived itself to be following the ‘spirit’ rather than the ‘letter’ of Kant’s thought: attempting to arrive at the same conclusions it thought Kant had rightly

¹⁶ Hamilton, op. cit., 17.

aimed for, but via different argumentative routes.¹⁷ If Coleridge's thought is revived by the translation (and plagiarism) of his German contemporaries, so, for example, Schelling's responses to Kantian philosophy are characterised as a dramatic dialogue, during which certain shared formulations and terminologies are scrutinised and refined. As Hamilton writes,

The possibilities of experience emerge inter-subjectively in the course of employing different languages that contrast dialogically with each other, and quash any single vocabulary's claim to exclusive authority. This ongoing and irresolvable process is signalled by the fragmentary quality of much Romantic philosophy and by its tendency to involve poetic, religious, political and other discourses as part of its articulation.¹⁸

A case in point would be the mixture of autobiography, metaphysics, literary criticism and theology that constitute Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Hamilton's argument is not just a convincing account of the aesthetic foundation of much romantic philosophy. It also offers an explanatory model for situating Coleridge within a tradition to which his relationship is not one of simple belonging. Coleridge's ambivalence towards the systematism of German Idealism has often been noted. One critic describes how romantic writing as a whole is interested in 'the problem of knowledge ... even as it attempts to conceal that involvement', with the result that it oscillates between knowledge and indifference, argument and negative capability.¹⁹ Philosophy and art alternate in Coleridge's repertoire of responses to the challenges posed to modern spirituality.

¹⁷ See Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 98.

¹⁸ Hamilton, op. cit., 46.

¹⁹ Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

One way of understanding Coleridge's importance to Hill is to emphasise the former's intention to preserve the Kantian insight that a language is required which articulates the concept of freedom using a wider diction and vocabulary than 'the technical, obscure, academic jargon' which Kant saw as a regrettable necessity at his stage of enquiry. Hamilton writes that:

the languages of this integrated, characteristically human response employ the expressive resources of an entire culture, not the terminology of the schools. But they do so with philosophical knowingness, as a sign of the limitations of cerebration or formal reasoning. Ultimately this will involve both Schelling and Coleridge in the freighting of Reason with sense, imagination and affect.²⁰

It is in this wider understanding of philosophical work – labour shared between contemporaries and bequeathed to successors – that Hill's approach to nineteenth-century thought is to be seen. Like Coleridge, whose prose work has been described as 'composition by mosaic organization', Hill's understanding of philosophical thought is to a large degree articulated in the collocation and comparison of philosophical language.²¹ In fact, the claim might be made that Hill's understanding of the relationship between language and society is to a large degree informed, via Coleridge, by this 'freighting of Reason' (of the procedures, assumptions and methods of critical reflections on texts and societies) with 'sense, imagination and affect'. In other words, Hill's critical method is supervised by an aesthetic sensibility in which 'sense' – the perceptual faculty enriched with sensuous (aural and visual) detail – and 'imagination' – the means by which sensuous details are arrayed or organised according to a unifying or dissolving principle – governs the construction and critical grammar of his prose style.

²⁰ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, 81.

²¹ Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 27.

This goes some way towards explaining the weight of quotation, and the obliquity of comment upon that quotation, for which Hill's essays are notorious. For much of the critical thinking performed in the essays, including 'Redeeming the Time', occurs thanks to the imaginative, aesthetic, organisation of Hill's materials. Relations between quoted passages are established according to a formal principle which operates at a different level from usual critical discourse. Though Hill has often been compared with T.S. Eliot, his prose style bears little resemblance to that of Eliot. Hill's prose doesn't abide by the traditional discursive canon whereby assumptions are stated, an argument is developed and a conclusion reached – a canon in which the writer's mastery is the determining factor in the perceptions that are made available by the discourse (one need only compare Hill's approach to cultural analysis in 'Redeeming the Time', to Eliot's in *Notes Towards a Definition of Culture*). A more formal, constructive approach works to minimise the degree to which the object of critique is obscured. Hence, in Hill's criticism, commentary upon quotation is less likely to focus upon elucidating a putative intention, clarifying with paraphrase, or establishing a contextual narrative, than to bring to the reader's attention a particular word or phrase and its sensuous aspects (syntactic articulation, tonic overtones, or rhythmic associations). This will be juxtaposed with another word, sentence or longer passage, the aural and affective tones of which now resonate with that of the preceding material, resulting in a perception of the language use of the period under discussion which would not be legible (or audible) under the conditions of more conventional critical writing.

Quoting page-length passages from Hill's essays would be the best way to do justice to the cumulative effect produced by the construction of the web of syntactic and acoustic correspondences that underlies his prose. But to confine ourselves to paraphrase, we have seen how, in 'Redeeming the Time', lines from Richard Oastler's oratory echo, or

discordantly clash with, those of the United Committee of Framework-Knitters; other examples of instructive discordance occur within different passages from the same authors (George Eliot, Matthew Arnold), or across decades (where, for example, the word ‘polished’ undergoes a change from the mid-eighteenth century of Samuel Johnson to the early-nineteenth century of the Framework-Knitters). Echoes can sound even across several pages, so that an active acoustic memory is helpful to keep track of the essay’s implicit argument. If there were any doubt that Hill’s critical methodology – which for many might appear as a mere extension of New Critical, or Eliotic, *ex cathedra* prose – is in fact attempting a more radical, aesthetically motivated *construction* of materials, there is plenty of evidence in Hill’s statements scattered throughout his critical works. Most significant are the occasional references to mimesis, a foundational aesthetic category, and one not conventionally associated with critical objectivity.²² Moreover, as if to corroborate the impact a constructivist approach to aesthetic thought can make, in ‘Redeeming the Time’ Hill speaks of ‘vital ... structures’ as those which deploy formal principles to organise sensuous materials which implicitly expose social materials to criticism (his example is the stanza break in Wordsworth’s ‘Ode’) (CCW 91). Aesthetic reflection, then, is a forceful presence even in Hill’s critical prose, which subordinates the usual acts of critical thinking – stating presuppositions, making definitions and inferences, and elaborating conclusions – in favour of a constructive patterning of historical materials.

²² ‘I am attempting to convey ... my belief that a debate of this nature is committed to a form of mimesis’, CCW 4; ‘it may sometimes be necessary to mimic a dilemma’, “‘The Conscious Mind’s Intelligible Structure’: A Debate’, *Agenda*, 9/4 – 10/1 (Autumn – Winter 1971-72), 14-23, at 21.

3. Living Powers

Jerome McGann writes that ‘Coleridge’s views were to enjoy a truly remarkable triumph in England and America for one hundred and fifty years, particularly in those *petit bourgeois* enclaves which Coleridge called “the clerisy”, that body of culture-guardians whose center today is in the academies’.²³ Hill’s response to Coleridge recalls McGann’s description of Hartman’s ‘pure’ response to romanticism: a response consisting fundamentally of ‘exact translations’ of those issues which concerned the romantics.²⁴ The corollary to this is that Hill’s reception of Coleridge’s idealist thought is as diffuse as the Victorian period’s reception of the same thought. It is as futile to attempt to abstract a unified philosophical creed from the knot of religious, literary and philosophical ideas of Hill’s own writings as it is from that of the nineteenth-century inheritors of Coleridge’s thought. The controversies and confusions surrounding this thought are alive in Hill’s writing, rather than inert objects for Hill’s examination. These include the important social and religious motivations behind Coleridge’s writing.

If the dramatic, intersubjective way of understanding Coleridge’s interactions with German Idealism informs his prose and acts as an important precedent for Hill’s own critical methodology, it also has some relevance for Hill’s understanding of the massive influence Coleridge is thought to have wielded over nineteenth-century thought. As Tim Fulford notes, ‘Talk was the basis of Coleridge’s elevation to the Johnsonian position of moralist and sage’: marooned in Highgate, conversation with visitors was the first source of Coleridge’s influence. If, as Fulford goes on to point out, Coleridge’s conversations were

²³ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 40-1.

more often monologues than dialogues, ‘prone to ignore objections to his arguments’, the objections and other responses occur later, in a much wider sphere of nineteenth-century thought.²⁵ It is some measure of the success of Coleridge’s ambitions for his thought to have a final resting place in ‘common sense’ – or at least in the minds of certain community-forming figures – that its influence was to affect such eminent Victorians as Newman, Arnold, Emerson and Disraeli.²⁶ Hill has traced the fortunes of what he sees as Coleridge’s antiphonal style in the work of (among others) Newman (see *CCW* 96 and “‘The Conscious Mind’s Intelligible Structure”, *passim*), Emerson (see *CCW* 493-505), and T.H. Green (see my next chapter). Coleridge’s thought ultimately reached so wide an audience at least partially because it supplied a complex, insecure religious culture with a philosophical ground. As one critic writes, ‘the regulative principle of all Coleridge’s philosophical activity was to make his Idealist thought a secure base for Christianity, for contemporary Christianity’.²⁷ It’s an important factor in our understanding of Hill’s approach to articulating universality that Christianity was, for Coleridge, the motivating force behind his later philosophical writings.

Community in *The Triumph of Love* is often a national, Christian community. Hill writes, for example (in a manner that might disturb those readers who don’t share his sense of loss with regards to religious and national paradigms) of ‘that all-gathering general English light, / in which each separate bead / of drizzle at its own thorn-tip stands / as revelation’ (*TL* 27): the general and the particular reconciled in the divine nature of

²⁵ Tim Fulford, *Coleridge’s Figurative Language* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 130.

²⁶ See John Beer, ‘Coleridge’s Afterlife’, in Lucy Newlyn (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 231-244.

²⁷ Graham Hough, ‘Coleridge and the Victorians’, in Hugh Sykes Davies and George Watson (eds.), *The English Mind: Studies in the English Moralists Presented To Basil Willey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 175-92, at 179.

England. Nature as divine revelation informs a great deal of Hill's poetry, particularly such later volumes as *The Orchards of Syon* where, for example, Hill writes of 'A methylated cold / glow in the northern heavens that spells God the Creator' (*OS* 50). Often a pervasive nebulosity – the 'general ... light' and 'methylated ... glow' – mollifies the anxieties of objective thought.

In this, too, Hill follows Coleridge's example. Returning to 'Redeeming the Time', we find a phrase which reverberates through Hill's work:²⁸

For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized.
(Quoted in *CCW* 95)

This falls some way short of clarity. Any sense in which words could be described in the post-romantic era as 'living powers' is obscure, yet Hill clearly attaches great importance to the notion. The image of words trailing a numinal glow locates Coleridge's dictum beyond the circumference of modern and postmodern theories of the constitutive properties of language. But the glow is sustained all the way through to Hill's Tanner lecture 'Poetry and Value', where again he quotes Coleridge's 'sudden blaze of a sentence', and asserts that in this dictum Coleridge is describing 'a kind of neutral, or indifferent, or disinterested force in the nature of language itself' (*CCW* 488). This takes place in a meditation on the role of language in 'reflection', by which Hill means objective judgement – 'the faculty or activity that draws the naturally interested sensibility in the direction of disinterestedness' (*CCW* 484).²⁹ Its importance for Hill's conception of the 'craft of vision' is obvious.

²⁸ See *CCW* 95, 148, 270, 488-9, 624; also see *OS* 24.

²⁹ See chapter 6 for more on this lecture.

The influence of this idea over Hill is palpable elsewhere: his essays and poetry repeatedly have recourse to explanations of language use that reveal intellectual and affective experience buried in the etymologies of words. We can see this, for instance, in the scattered, admiring references to the philologist and archbishop Richard Chevenix Trench. In ‘Perplexed Persistence’, Hill writes that ‘It was Trench who learned from Coleridge, via Emerson, “how deep an insight into the failings of the human heart lies at the root of many words”’ (CCW 118).³⁰ A later essay alludes to ‘Trench’s spiritual mentors Coleridge (“For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS...”’) and Emerson’ (CCW 270).

Coleridge’s dictum rests on a mystery: the semblance character of language with respect to the created world. Its mysteriousness defeated Coleridge, who petitioned others to elucidate the import of this sentence (in 1800 Coleridge wrote a series of suggestions to Godwin encouraging him to ‘*philosophize* Horn Tooke’s System’). But we can at least note that this semblance character, as embodied in Coleridge’s notion of ‘living powers’, is invested by Hill with the power of objective judgement. I would suggest that there are two possible explanations, which derive from origins in Coleridge’s thought so intertwined that it is impossible to choose between them. As the connotations of being blinded or dazzled in Hill’s description of the notion as a ‘blaze’ would suggest, one way of conceiving this would be as a principle which cannot be analysed into further principles. It’s the boundary at which philosophy stops, the unknown upon which Coleridge’s version of German Idealism finally rests. On the other hand, the sense of being dazzled or blinded suggests the metaphors of blindness and blankness I will explore in section three, the ‘blank in one’s

³⁰ An endnote points to (among others) Hugh Kenner’s study *The Pound Era* as a source of Hill’s thinking on etymology – a link between Coleridge and Pound which will be explored in chapter 5 (CCW 615).

thinking', as Hill puts it in 'Our Word Is Our Bond', where human thought reflects upon the inhuman world without the guidance of pre-existing conceptuality. Language is removed from the realm of objectified thought – etymology or semiology – and given an active, performative place in the world.³¹ In the activity of semblance posited by Coleridge (and repeated by Hill in *Scenes from Comus*: 'Weight of the world, weight of the word, is' [SC 15]) a relationship is suggested between reality and language which is susceptible neither to empirical verification nor to rational categorisation. It is notable that light – the humanizing aura of words as 'living powers' – also figures in Hill's redefinition of the imagination ('a light that ought to light every person coming into the world').

It is constitutive of the dissatisfactions with modernity articulated by the thinkers so far in this thesis that Enlightenment rationality is viewed as incomplete, as riven by contradictions between the cognitive and the ethical. I have argued that these fissures emerged, and were subsequently tackled, in succeeding moments of the German Idealist tradition. Kant's differentiation of the fields of cognition through his *Critiques* both recognised and, in the eyes of his successors, perpetuated the problem. Schelling (Coleridge's model for much of the first part of the *Biographia*) and others criticised Kant's positing of a world of noumenal things-in-themselves about which we could have no knowledge, and posited the aesthetic as a possible solution. But as we know, Coleridge did not pursue the Schellingian thesis into the second part of *Biographia*. As some critics have argued, this decision represents an ambivalent attitude towards the nature of truth. Contrary to some of the dominant notions of truth in the romantic era (notions which abandon the idea of an epistemology grounded in data given externally in favour of truth as something created by the subject), Coleridge's Christianity would not let him relinquish the concept of

³¹ See chapters 5 and 6 for more on language as performance.

a pre-existing reality ordaining experience. The imagination, then, retained something of the mediating power it had in Kant (whose realm of things-in-themselves left a reassuringly unknowable variable in his system), rather than the absolute diagnostic power it appears to have in Schelling.

Unlike Schelling, Coleridge didn't endow art with the reconciliatory power demanded by the fact/value separation, preferring to remain with a Kantian foundationalism (the idea that knowledge of the world has to bottom at some final justificatory level – whether it's sense data, the cogito, or the transcendental categories). In some sense, a grounding objectivity was presupposed. As one critic puts it, 'While Coleridge's voluntarism drew him closer to Schelling's later view of philosophy as a *symptom* of fact/value alienation, his foundationalism continued to see grounded knowledge as *salvation* from this alienation'.³² In later years Coleridge came to locate this grounding objectivity in religion, and his later works (the second edition of *The Friend* and *Aids to Reflection*) are attempts to find common ground between philosophy and religion. That so many of Hill's citations from Coleridge are from these later works helps us to understand the Coleridgean background to Hill's many poetic devices deploying light imagery in religious contexts. It is as if, for Hill as for Coleridge, light blazes into vision at the moments when thought fails to cognise history and therefore seeks the more encompassing consolations of faith.

For an example of a moment in which being and expression seek reconciliation in nature as revealed religion, let's turn to a passage from *The Triumph of Love*:

³² Tim Milnes, *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose*, 156.

the snow
 half-thawed now hardens over again,
 glassen-ridged, or pashed
 like fish-ice: refracted light
 red against copper. The hedged sun
 draws into itself for its self-quenching.
 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 –
 as a sanctuary lamp treadles its low flame
 (TL 19-20)

Prosody in this stanza is sometimes reduced to a supervisory role, separating certain words the better to accentuate them ('pashed / like fish-ice'); but its achievement is to allow images of logopoeic ingenuity, such as the 'hedged sun', to resonate through successive lines. The echoes of this phrase permeate the stanza, refracted in the image of the low candle-flame, in the figure of Christ (a 'son' hedged with suffering and with thorns), and in the 'stooping' (the humbling or *kenosis* with which the poem as a whole is occupied) required by Christian faith; while this knitting-together of ideal and real is enacted in the enjambed repetitions ('faith – / faith'; 'real Being; / the real being'). Echoes of Coleridge construct this stanza, and not only in the generalised trope of illuminated nature as revealed religion compensating for the deficiencies of Enlightenment rationality. More explicit connections can be traced in the onomatopoeia and hyphenated digressions, which forcefully recall one of Coleridge's notebook entries:

Now this is my case – & a grievous fault it is / my illustrations swallow up my thesis – I feel too intensely the omnipresence of all in each, platonically speaking – or psychologically my brain fibres, or the spiritual Light which abides in that brain

marrow as visible Light appears to do in sundry rotten mackerel & other *smashy* matters, is of too general an affinity with all things³³

The debt to Coleridge owed by the stanza quoted above appears in the way Coleridge's comparison of 'spiritual Light' glowing in a mind to '*smashy* matters' (like fish-flesh) is mirrored in Hill's comparison of revelatory light to the saturation of ice ('pashed / like fish-ice') with light from the setting sun. Moreover, the rhetoric of natural revelation repeats Coleridge's own conviction that nature is a text to be interpreted for signs of divine immanence.³⁴ Light fringes Hill's writing whenever thought is deemed unable to proceed beyond certain limits: as emissary of a consoling power, it speaks also of an elegiacal and despairing attitude towards aesthetic reflection and community sense evident throughout the thought of Coleridge and Hill.

4. *Sensus communis*: a 'decaying sense'

Recall this passage from *The Triumph of Love*:

Though certain
neologisms – Coleridge's 'tautegorical'
for example – clown out along the edge
(*TL* 67)

What is 'Coleridge's "tautegorical"', and why does it 'clown out along the edge'? A multitude of references in his poetry show that Hill stands in a peculiar relationship to

³³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, 4 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), ii, 2372.

³⁴ See James C. McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 18-26.

clowns, particularly in his later work. In this later work, the clown suggests comedic timing and pratfall more than the rustic simplicity that was still an important connotation in 'An Apology' ('And who is this clown / doffing his mask at the masked threshold' [CP 153]). Earlier in the poem Hill complains 'Well as I hear I hear you but as I / hear you you are in a dumb-show' (TL 55), and section CXXV as a whole is a kind of dumb-show where much of the real meaning is got across in the impetuous line-breaks and stammered rhythms, rather than the intellectual content of its allusions.³⁵ Clowning activity has been associated with philosophy elsewhere by Hill. In 'Discourse: For Stanley Rosen', Hill writes 'You're magisterial in your own conviction. / And a clown with it, and a judge of clowns'.³⁶ Hill's judgement that tautegory 'clown[s] out along the edge', then, doesn't ask to be received as criticism from on high, but as a sympathetic comment upon the jittery, self-correcting propulsion of thought anxious to obtain objective validation in the world.

'Tautegory' is a term coined by Coleridge after having read Schelling's *Die Gottheiten von Samothrake*, which received approbation by Schelling himself after he read Coleridge's lecture 'On the Prometheus of Aeschylus' (1825). The *OED* defines 'tautegorical' by reference to Coleridge's use of it in *Aids to Reflection* (1825):

The base of Symbols and symbolical expressions; the nature of which as always tautegorical (i.e. expressing the same subject but with a difference) in contradistinction from metaphors and similitudes, that are always allegorical (i.e. expressing a different subject but with a resemblance)
(*OED*)

³⁵ For an analysis of Hill's clown metaphors, see Peter McDonald, *Pulling Through* (review of *The Orchards of Syon*), *Literary Imagination* 5/2 (2003), 267-85, at 277-283.

³⁶ 'Discourse: For Stanley Rosen', *WT* 26.

However, there is an earlier usage: Coleridge had already defined the tautegorical, in *The Statesman's Manual* (1816), as that which is 'characterized by the translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial'.³⁷ It is beyond the scope of this chapter to give the analysis of the nature of the romantic symbol that would be required to explicate Coleridge's word. For the purpose of my argument it's enough to note that tautegory – which Coleridge often uses synonymously with symbol – is the objective actualisation of conceptuality in aesthetic form. As opposed to allegory, where the aesthetic realisation has a distinct being from its root concept, in tautegory the meaning and its representation define each other: there is no meaning without its representation, and vice versa. Coleridge's example in his 1825 lecture is Aeschylus's figure of Prometheus: he writes that 'Prometheus is a philosopheme and tautegorikon', which, as one critic explains, means he is 'an embodiment of a protophilosophical thought that could not have been expressed otherwise, least of all discursively'.³⁸ Not only does the tautegorical stand for the romantic, post-Kantian conception of the aesthetic's power of critical reflection and recognition, so that, like Coleridge's 'living powers', it actuates or gives objective definition to ideas. It also is the figure for an expressive rival to philosophical discourse, 'an embodiment of a protophilosophical thought': its peripheral location ('along the edge') in Hill's stanza of philosophical discourse makes it central to his attitude to such discourse.

Politically, tautegory looks in two directions. In its Coleridgean, conservative guise it stands for the persistence of certain immutable truths through historical change. The class that was to bring these truths to fruition was the clerisy, the group that formed the

³⁷ Quoted in Nicholas Halmi, 'Coleridge on Allegory and Symbol', in Frederick Burwick (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 345-358, at 354.

³⁸ Nicholas Halmi, 'Greek Myths, Christian Mysteries, and the Tautegorical Symbol', *The Wordsworth Circle* 36/1 (2005), 6-8, at 6.

foundation for Coleridge's conception of society in *The Constitution of the Church and State*. If the idealism (in a non-philosophical sense) inherent to this notion is subjected to critique in 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England', the idealism of *The Triumph of Love* reveals the limits of this critique. Politics suffuse *The Triumph*, but they are politics of the past: it can often appear that for Hill, political injustice stops at the end of WWII, though vague, oblique references to contemporary events do occur once or twice. However, since, as Hamilton points out, tautegory encourages the reflection that ideas are nothing without their expression in aesthetic construction, whether this is language or some other art form, the basis for critique is put in place.³⁹ In refocusing attention upon the materials of expression, on the objectivity of language, poetry is granted a reflective, critical agency. But it would be difficult to demonstrate many moments in *The Triumph of Love* where poetry's especial medium of aesthetic construction – prosody – achieves this combination of sensuous, material objectivity and abstract conceptuality. True, Hill is very adept at the intellectually evocative compaction of meanings in a single word, where the carnal and conceptual are superimposed in a productive cognitive dissonance. But too often, brilliantly inventive verbal music remains chained to an empirical mandate:

some years before that armoured
city suddenly went down, guns
firing, beneath the horizon; huge silent whumphs
of flame-shadow bronzing the nocturnal
cloud-base of her now legendary dust.
(TL 3)

³⁹ Hamilton, op. cit., 109.

yes, look! the Kenyan runners, look, there they go!
 stippled with silver, shaking off the light
 garlands of sweat –
 (TL 44)

In the first example, a kind of aural chiaroscuro is in play: a broad, vague background noise is put in place with ‘huge silent whumphs’, where the final syllable ‘umphs’ is a kind of static obliterating the preceding vowel sounds. Following this comes a more complex syntactical after-shock as hyphenated nouns and the genitive construction of the last line create a sense of rumbling detail expressive of flickering highlights against the broad gloom of debris cast into the sky. Enjambement, in the second example, maps with inspired fidelity the progress of Kenyan athletes: the pause exactly timed to slow the vision to a crawl in order to observe the sweat flung from their bodies. But in both cases, though the prosody reacts sensitively to the object under regard, more of the compunction felt by Coleridge and Hill with regard to philosophical speculation would help to dislodge an absorbed gaze too secure in its mastery of description.

Similarly, as we have seen, the barrenness of objectified thought is ironised in the passages of scholastic disputation – the ‘hortus siccus’ that Coleridge sought to avoid in parenthetical writing – but with few signs of a compensating prosody that might ‘present the thought growing’. Hill’s model for art’s critical function is *laus et vituperatio*, a genre Hill complains is ‘the worst / remembered, least understood, of the modes’ (TL 12). There is enough *vituperatio* in *The Triumph of Love* to cover a broad swathe of calculative, substitutive thought, but finally those moments of *laus* – the expertly delineated observations of the natural world in which the historical is supposed to shimmer – strike me, thanks to their obedience to a pre-existing objective world, as almost as deathly as the parodied objectified thought. In this respect, despite the many claims for Hill’s modernism,

his poetry has not learnt the lessons of abstraction modernist art developed so variously. Charles Altieri, for example, notes how the modernists were similarly animated by a dissatisfaction with Enlightenment principles, and sought a form of constructivism that would escape the mimetic mandates of earlier, representational art which were only able to perpetuate these principles. This modernist poetry was characterised by

a sense of how easily benedictions become epitaphs, unless they manage to construct an imaginative life not reducible to the specific ideological structures and the play of local interests out of which they are generated.⁴⁰

To my mind, Hill's epiphanies, which often mirror the empirical world with a thrilling virtuosity, nonetheless have something of the epitaph about them.

Ultimately I believe this is because Hill and Coleridge share an understanding of the imagination as private retreat rather than public intervention. *The Triumph of Love* knows that the separation of mind and soul is a worldly given, but too often assumes it as final. '[W]hat are poems for?' Hill asks at the end of the volume. 'They are to console us / with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch. ... What ought a poem to be? Answer, *a sad / and angry consolation*' (TL 82). If the task of art, as the younger Coleridge saw it, is to represent 'the purpose and progress of the Absolute, the creative power to dissipate the hard form of "separated" consciousness, revealing the factitious nature of reality seemingly "fixed and dead"', this is only half-performed by Hill.⁴¹ Noting the evolution of Coleridge's concept of the imagination throughout his life, Nigel Leask writes of the 'tension evident in Coleridge's writing between a theory of Imagination as an integrative agency dissolving

⁴⁰ Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6. My emphasis.

⁴¹ Nigel Leask, *The Politics of Imagination in Coleridge's Critical Thought* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 137-8.

and dissipating social divisions and hierarchies, and as an otherworldly *consolation* which removed the practice of virtue from a public to a private sphere'.⁴² Rather than take up the implications of Coleridge's youthful conception of imagination, it becomes in the later Coleridge, as in Hill, a mere alternative to social practice, as politics becomes spiritualised and the *sensus communis* – in Coleridge the property of an elite clerisy – becomes, as Hill writes of it elegiacally in *Scenes from Comus*, a 'decaying sense' (SC 5). When what is most positive in Coleridge's contribution to Hill's aesthetics – its importation of an German Idealist model of aesthetic cognition – is understood in the light of this shift in how the imagination is perceived, the ambiguity of certain key ideas in Hill's Coleridgean canon is better grasped. Estranged from the public sphere, the idea of the 'drama of reason' can become that stage-managed pantomime of moral evaluation that Peter Robinson describes. And the 'moral copula' probably grips with less legislative force if the agency through which Hill sees it operate – language – is a 'living power' blazing with so much light it occludes not just science's fatalism and history's accidentality but science and history themselves.

But unlike the later Coleridge, who, while recognising (in the second edition of *The Friend*, for example) the difficulties of establishing principles for judgement, nevertheless proved time and again that he was never in doubt of his possession of those principles, Hill's most valuable resource in his poetry is his doubt. The moments in his poetry where judgement is inflamed to moral imprecation are tempered by the admissions of deafness, incompetence, and exhaustion. A lyric retreat into the subject is not accompanied by an enthronement of the subject as judge. Hence the closest Hill comes to objectivity is the sharpening of memory, as the first line of the poem – 'Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid

⁴² Ibid., 3. Emphasis in original.

rain-scarp', is given an extra grain of definition in the final line: 'Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp' (*TL* 1, 82).

SECTION II: VICTORIAN IDEALISM AND OBJECTIVITY

CHAPTER 3: ART OF JUDGEMENT

As we have seen, Coleridge's writing often guides Hill's thinking about the aesthetic apprehension of the social in contradictory directions. I concluded the previous chapter outlining the shift in Coleridge's conception of the imagination from a cognitive power able to dissolve and reconfigure seemingly fixed determinants in history, to a source of consolation detached from the public sphere. Reverberations from this shift account for some of the contradictions in Hill's attitude to art's diagnostic and transformative power, an attitude which is coloured by the contrast between imagination-as-solvent and imagination-as-retreat. A transverse layer of confusion is added when Hill's own stance appreciably changes – as I will argue in this chapter it does – from an impersonal to a subjectively-motivated poetics. But despite this shift in Hill's thinking, Coleridge's main contribution – the reconfiguring of conceptuality in aesthetic terms – is sustained in Hill's subsequent encounters with two later figures in the Anglophone Idealist tradition: T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley.

Hill's late essays on F.H. Bradley implicitly make the argument for a philosophical poetics. Hill's work on Bradley confirms his belief that poetry can cognise certain problems about our relation to reality, not through the incorporation of polemical or thematic argumentation such as one might find in a work of philosophy, but through the resources offered by syntax and prosody. In order to clarify exactly what I mean by this, I will begin by reading a poem of Hill's which embodies both these avenues of investigation – the thematic and the prosodic. 'De Anima' was published in the same year as the essay which first dealt with Bradley, 'Dividing Legacies' (1996):

Salutation: it is as though
effortlessly – to reprise –
 the unsung spirit
gestures of no account
become accountable
 such matters arising
whatever it is that is sought

 through metaphysics
research into angelic song
ending as praise itself
the absolute yet again
atoned with the contingent –
 typology
incarnate – Bethlehem the open field –

still to conceive no otherwise: an
aphasia of staring wisdom
the souls images glassily exposed
 fading to silverpoint
still to be at the last
ourselves and masters of all
 humility –

(C 5)

I choose this poem for two reasons: first, its proximity to ‘Dividing Legacies’ (which contains a significant passage on Eliot’s ‘Bradleian’ poem ‘Marina’) suggests useful parallels with Hill’s idea of a philosophical poem; second, it thematises the topic I will be discussing in this chapter: the relative roles of subjectivity and totality in the task of judgement.

Certain textual details warrant a philosophical reading of the poem. ‘De Anima’ is one of a series of poems in *Canaan* that bear ostensibly theological or philosophical titles, many derived from Aristotelian treatises. Several words in ‘De Anima’ – ‘metaphysics’, ‘absolute’, ‘contingent’ – loudly invite (no doubt to reject) explanations in an idealist vein. But I am more concerned in this thesis with the possibility of a syntax or a prosody being

philosophical. Hill thought Eliot's poem 'Marina' achieved this: specifically that its prosody exhibited a method of apprehension (derived from Bradley's syntax) able to cognise the wavering grasp of human thought upon objective truth: its lapses into solipsism and surges into clarity. Many of the poems in *Canaan* are like 'Marina' in the mimesis of this wavering quality of judgement enabled by their sparse punctuation and ambiguously determinative enjambement.

In 'De Anima' Hill's verse enacts the way 'unsung spirit / gestures of no account' might 'become accountable' – the way purely private gestures can become universalized, accountable to a community – in its syntactic ambiguity: indentation, deferred verb parts, and ambiguous connectives make of the task of objectified thought a diffident, exploratory adventure. Near the start of the first stanza, 'unsung spirit' stands stoutly on its own at the margin of the poem, a flag hoisted for the expressive subject. But the ensuing enjambement robs it of its autonomy, linking it adjectivally to 'gestures of no account': 'the unsung spirit gestures of no account'. However these 'gestures', the forgotten, private contingencies of human existence, are abruptly said to 'become accountable': a promise of justice that contains the threat of possible punishment for crimes. It would seem that, according to this view, the possibility of wholeness is purchased at the cost of threatened domination. This is a philosophical problem, dealt with through prosody. Subjective agency is by turns granted its full amplitude, effaced in the name of totality, and left finally with a dubious claim to truth.

That metaphysics is conceived of as a complacent leveller of particularity is also suggested by the phrases redolent of disputational fluency – 'Salutation', '– to reprise –', 'such matters arising' – that occupy so much of the metrical plot. As we have seen, a view of metaphysical speculation as a theorised wholeness that threatens domination is certainly

one side of the story for Hill. But an appreciation of metaphysics's aesthetics of incremental appearance and disappearance is manifest too, for example in the imagined 'souls images glassily exposed / fading to silverpoint' (incidentally recalling *Marina's* 'What images return'). In the line 'whatever it is that is sought // through metaphysics', the almost dismissive insouciance of 'whatever' suggests a vagueness which however has its place in certain idealist systems (including Bradley's, as we shall see). It's an indeterminate glance at the stanza leap which, stretched by the indentation of 'through metaphysics', yawns in mimesis of the gap between subject and object, the bond between thought and being which is conjectured at in the following lines: 'the absolute yet again / atoned with the contingent'. But questions remain. What has happened to the earlier suspicion regarding metaphysical universals? Where does this 'atone[ment]' take place? Coleridge's legacy is indirectly visible in this poem's contradictions.

This section will pursue two ways of thinking about the nature of judgement in Hill's work. First, I will attempt to elucidate Hill's treatment of two philosophers in the British Idealist tradition. One of these philosophers (Bradley) is of the highest importance for Hill's understanding of judgement; the other (Green) is a useful forerunner, both in terms of his relationship to Bradley, and in that Hill's essay on Green demonstrates a much earlier interest in the question of philosophy and judgement than the Bradley essays suggest. The other opportunity for thinking about Hill and judgement will be found in his poetry, and my claim is that there is legible in the willingness of Hill's post-*Canaan* verse to deploy the first-person singular a shift in his thinking about the constitutive nature of the self. This will provide the connecting matter between his critical work on Green and Bradley and his poetry: in both cases the degree to which the judging self is constituted by its context and that to which it is free to make claims about this context is at stake. In the

prose Hill first (with Green) traces the ways in which philosophy exploits poetry to facilitate its judgements, and second (with Bradley) examines the debt of Eliot's poetry to philosophical articulation. In the poetry Hill moves from a conception of verse (in *Canaan*) which downplays the constitutive role of the subject (preferring a poetics of impersonality) to one which (in *Speech! Speech!*) portrays judgement as a more variegated enterprise in which self-expression is subjected to various cognitive frustrations and achievements.

1. The role of legislative metaphors in philosophical and poetic judgement

Hill's critical prose frequently reiterates the maxim that grammar and syntax are more than convenient moulds for the communication of pre-existing thoughts: they are the schemata by which our understanding of the world, and hence the modes of behaviour by which we can transform the world, are formed. This is especially the case in the earlier prose. In "Perplexed Persistence": The Exemplary Failure of T.H. Green', for example, Hill cites the philosopher R.L. Nettleship on the qualitative effect wrought by the articulation of an idea upon the mind that articulates it:

the consciousness which we express when we have found the 'right word' is not the same as our consciousness before we found it, so that it is not strictly correct to call the word the expression of what we meant before we found it.
(CCW 123)

As a rejoinder to Pope's 'What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*', Hill's approval of this analysis brings him well within the embrace of post 'linguistic turn' theory: it transfers the weight of expressive responsibility away from the speaker onto the words

themselves, and conceives of them as exerting a constitutive effect upon the subject.¹ In the transition from the empty concept to concrete experience, word order, the distribution of clauses, the usage of pronouns, subjunctives, copulas and prepositions, have the force of arbitration. This is apparent in the suspicion with which the first-person singular is deployed in Hill's earlier poetry. But what marks his more recent works (post-*Canaan*) is a turn to poems in which the expressive function of the 'I' is viewed with less suspicion than is often cautioned by such theories. Syntax (the channel through which, for Hill, the freight of social and historical determination of the self weighs in) is seen both to constitute and obstruct the subject's expressive potential, which is now allowed a glimmer of autonomy in the first person pronoun. Syntax's status as a priori condition is questioned in the later poems, in which an originary expression is seen to battle with its mode of articulation.

According to Hill's earlier conception of objectified thought, objective judgement stands or falls on grammar, which is why, in the seventies, he saw as evidence of Simone Weil's 'greatness as an ethical writer' her proposal that "anybody, no matter who, discovering an avoidable error in a printed text or radio broadcast, would be entitled to bring an action before [special] courts" empowered to condemn a convicted offender to prison or hard labour' (CCW 9-10). As a criterion for ratifying the legitimacy of subject positions – concrete political, ethical, and artistic sets of judgements – the notion of justice propounded here is almost unbearably austere. Syntax overshadows and subsumes spontaneous expression, since before thought can achieve objective utterance it must undergo the painstaking self-adjustments of its own legalistic invention.

¹ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope, Volume 1: Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London: Methuen and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 273.

Another kind of court is evoked at the beginning of Gillian Rose's study of philosophy and law, *Dialectic of Nihilism*:

Today things will be slightly different. You are on trial. Or, rather, you are to be invited to inspect a court-room in which you have been judge, witness, and clerk for so long that you have ceased to notice its strange *ambiance*.²

Rose is describing a particular discipline of thought – Kant's critical philosophy, which she portrays as 'a maze of litigation and inquisition during the course of which [the subject's] status and the nature of the proceedings shift continuously and almost imperceptibly'. Rose's artful depiction of the founding trope of modern philosophy resonates suggestively with Hill's recent poetry: metaphors of legal form, witness and judgement are major constituents of Hill's poetic inquiries into the possibility of objective judgement and visionary utterance, including the two volumes under consideration in this chapter, *Canaan* and *Speech! Speech!* Howard Caygill brings us even closer to the reflexivity of Hill's juridical tropes. Taking up Rose's account of Kant's legalistic inquiry into reason, Caygill writes of Kant's critical project that in it 'Judgement can come to self-knowledge through instituting a tribunal to judge – according to its own law – its heritage of disputes and quarrels'. But, he goes on to ask, 'how can judgement so legislate without contributing another knot to an already tangled history?'³

The problem Caygill cites is central to modern concepts of self-determination: how can a ground be disclosed upon which to base judgement which does not rob the judge of

² Gillian Rose, *Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 11.

³ Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgement* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), 1. This is another way of putting the problem of subject and object that occupies post-Kantian philosophy: how, in Adorno's words, can we speak of subject and object when the 'determination of their meanings requires reflection on the very thing the act of defining truncates for the sake of conceptual manageability'. Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, tr. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 246.

his or her claim to self-grounding? This paradox comes into play in the poems contained in *Canaan* and *Speech! Speech!* Special attention will be paid in this chapter to the elements in these poems, especially *Speech! Speech!*, that evoke the tribunal. True, these elements are determined to a great extent by Hill's study of Elizabethan and Jacobean recusancy and martyrdom, and the evolution of the concept of 'confession' from ecclesiastical doctrine, via the torture chamber, to recent lyric poetry. Yet, as vital and rich as these informing sources are for Hill's volume, the tendentious shifts of position in the poetic voice require an explanation which can best be supplied by the Kantian paradoxes of philosophical self-arraignment. Various litigant, witness and judge, the voice of the poem enacts a trial in which the heritage of judgement itself, and of those concepts with which it is brought into contact – freedom, duty, beauty, and violence – is investigated. So while it would be fanciful to suggest Hill had Kant's juridical metaphors in mind during the composition of *Speech! Speech!*, or, even more egregiously, that the poem somehow presents a poetic dramatisation of Kant's philosophical system, it will be seen that the paradoxes of judgement delineated by Rose and Caygill above, and which would have been familiar issues to Coleridge in his attempt to synthesise German Idealism and Christianity in nineteenth-century Britain, are part of the fabric of the poem's construction.

We have seen that judgement – which for transcendental idealism means the bringing together of particulars under universals, or the subsumption of intuitions under concepts – is paradoxically both the power under scrutiny in Kant's critical philosophy, and the power under whose auspices this scrutiny is to be performed. Coleridge called Kant's first *Critique* 'that critique of the human intellect, which, previously to the weighing or

measuring this or that, begins by assaying the weights, measures, and scales themselves'.⁴ Coleridge was not alone in connecting judgement with measure – Caygill shows how this is one of the forms taken by the paradoxes of judgement in a tradition stretching back to the renaissance. In this broader sense, judgement means discrimination or evaluation, and implies a standard in relation to which distinctions are to be made. The source of this standard may vary – it may be immanent or transcendent, derived from reason, experience, or revelation, and will affect the aptitude of our judging faculties in making discriminations.⁵ How can the limits of man's power to act upon the world be measured when man has been given the freedom to define the terms of measurement itself?

Hill's poem-sequence 'Psalms of Assize', in *Canaan*, bears a title that echoes this preoccupation with questions of measurement and judgement. The sequence explores judgement's achievements and errors, with particular reference to Neoplatonist philosophy. 'Assize' is another of Hill's abundantly overdetermined words. The *OED* records that it is 'a session of a ... legislative body' and the resultant ordinances; 'a statute regulating weights and measures'; both '[t]he standard of quantity, measure, or price' for material goods like bread and ale, and the '[m]easure, extent (of things immaterial)'; 'a judicial inquest', and, by extension, 'The Last Judgement'. Finally, Hill has said that the poem is about 'cadence',⁶ permitting us to read it as both about 'measure' and a 'mode of falling' (*OED*), and to connect judgement with prosody. These concepts are played out in the subsequent sections of the poem.

⁴ Quoted in G.N.G. Orsini, *Coleridge and German Idealism: A Study in the History of Philosophy with Unpublished Materials from Coleridge's Manuscripts* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 73.

⁵ See David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 21-25.

⁶ Geoffrey Hill speaking at 'Poets Reading Philosophy, Philosophers Reading Poetry', University of Warwick, 28 October 2007.

let us pray
Gabriel descend
as a mood almost
a monody
of chloroform
or florists roses
consensual angel spinning his words
thread
he descends

⁷ T.H. Green, *The Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R.L. Nettleship, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1906), iii, 46-7.

and light
sensitive darkness
follows him down
(C 60)

Coming after the imperious tones of the first half of the poem, ‘let us pray’ sounds glib and almost coercive, and ushers in ‘a mood’ and ‘a monody / of chloroform’. Gabriel’s ‘mood’ has a vagueness suggestive of something less productive than metaphysical indeterminacy: inertia, or abulia, seems more to the point. It suggests the ‘tone’ (rather than ‘pitch’) that Hill deplors in Eliot’s later work, while ‘monody’ suggests the monological, easy path of Rose’s ‘*euphoria*’.⁸ As a song for ‘a single voice’ (*OED*), the monody cannot possess Hill’s cardinal virtue: to ‘get within the judgement the condition of the judgement’ (CCW 561, quoting F.H. Bradley). Gabriel, in this poem, is the ‘consensual angel’ descending: but consensus is a word redolent of tyranny for Hill. In ‘Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot’, Hill writes:

Work of eternal intensity is outside the consensus. If the question is put, ‘actual or alleged consensus?’, the response must be that the alleged consensus is the actual consensus, through the imposition of *force majeure*. The merely beautiful and the merely charming are creatures of the consensus, of *force majeure*.
(CCW 558)

Endowed with the irresistible force of consensus, the angel ‘descends’. He sheds, one might assume, the ‘light’ of Colet’s epigraph, but the end of this section casts doubt on the

⁸ For ‘tone’ and ‘pitch’ in Eliot’s poetry, see CCW 377-9, and Peter Robinson, ‘Toiling in a Pitch’, *Cambridge Quarterly* 26/3 (1997), 263-9. For ‘*euphoria*’ see Gillian Rose, *Love’s Work* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), 116.

efficacy of such an undiluted concept.⁹ The cadence of the lines permits a moment of grace, of brief intensification, in the syllables ‘and light’, but the enjambement dulls this flare with a metaphor of mechanical reaction: ‘and light / sensitive darkness / follows him down’.

Sometimes Hill’s comments suggest that his faith in measure is unshakeable: ‘We are hereby committed to the critical view that shades of distinction – in sensibility, imagination, and ethical position – can be semantically “placed” and assessed’ (CCW 400). Yet, as his phrase ‘semantically “placed”’ suggests, this assessment proceeds not by means of a monological discourse – the projection of subjective categories onto the ‘position[s]’ under evaluation – but by the juxtaposition of these positions. As ‘Psalms of Assize’ proceeds, the gaps that disarticulate its craft or *techne* are simultaneously constituent elements of the poem’s prosody, creating spaces in which to stage the work of ‘*diaporia*’, the exploration of routes between clauses whose unsignposted conjunctions are suggested only by an arrangement of hesitations.¹⁰ Unwilling imperiously to project a transcendent subjectivity onto the world (‘too soon the fanfare / of visions’), and yet equally unwilling to accept the dominance of objectivity, Hill circles around the possibility of atonement – which in our discussion so far has meant the bonding of thought and being, but which in the context of this poem must carry with it its theological sense of the reconciliation of God with nature. A further meaning, though, is the meshing of subjective judgements about the world (judgements which yet have to retain some degree of objectivity or universality for them to have meaning for others) with already existing objectivity – the institutions and

⁹ The epigraph reads ‘*Hinc vagantur in tenebris misere, quia non credunt veritati ipsi ... Querunt lumen confisi ipsis et non inveniunt*’, translated by Sears Jayne as ‘Hence they wander wretchedly in darkness because they do not believe in the truth itself ... They seek the light, trusting in themselves, but do not find it’. Sears Jayne, *John Colet and Marsilio Ficino* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 118-19.

¹⁰ For ‘*diaporia*’ see Rose, *Love’s Work*, 115-6: ‘being at a loss yet exploring various routes, different ways towards the good enough justice, which recognises the intrinsic and the contingent limitations in its exercise’.

concepts that form the dominant receptive arena for these judgements in the popular imagination.

2. What is Popular Philosophy?

Speech! Speech! opens with a lugubrious sennet – ‘Erudition. Pain. Light’ – which as a digest of the cognitive preconditions of poetic thought comes across as a deliberately grandiose rescension of Frank O’Hara’s ‘Light clarity avocado salad in the morning’:¹¹

Erudition. Pain. Light. Imagine it great
unavoidable work; although: heroic
verse a non-starter, says PEOPLE.
(SS 1)

If the ‘great / unavoidable work’ the poem is shaping up to be takes this shape only in the imagination (‘Imagine it’), this imagination nonetheless forms one limit of poetic judgement. The other limit is the cynical judgement of Hill’s hypostasised ‘PEOPLE’, for whom such a project is doomed to failure (‘heroic / verse a non-starter’). Between these two poles presumably is to occur what Hill calls the ‘*negotium*’ or the ‘somehow’, Rose the ‘*diaporia*’, of subjective bonding with the world.¹² Avoidance of Poundian over-reaching (of the kind Hill diagnosed in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’) and of kitchen-sink empiricism (the committed poetry Hill disparages in the form of Czeław Miłosz) – in other words of an

¹¹ Frank O’Hara, ‘Poem’. *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995), 350.

¹² For *negotium*, see ‘Unhappy Circumstances’, *CCW* 176-191.

inflationary or deflationary poetics – summons what in the same inaugural stanza of *Speech! Speech!* is the first mandate to judge: ‘Judge the distance’.¹³

But what is the ‘PEOPLE’, and what is to be made of the inflation (the capitalised typography) that has set it aside from and above the other objects named in this poem? By what legislative judgement has this limit-case been designated? In attempting to set the terms that frame his study of disorder and order, of the propriety and accuracy of judgement, has Hill not also tied another knot in the tangled history of judgement? Some suggestive answers to this question are to be found in Hill’s treatment, in his essays on Bradley, of Eliot’s response to the demands placed upon him by his role as national poet during the Second World War. But before turning to that, it’s worth considering a more philosophical understanding of this false totality as it’s unfolded in the much earlier essay, “‘Perplexed Persistence’: the Exemplary Failure of T.H. Green’.

Hill’s starting point in ‘Perplexed Persistence’ is Green’s essay ‘Popular Philosophy in its Relation to Life’.¹⁴ Popular philosophy, for Green, means those forms of thought which are current in a given society and which have acquired a sheen of natural inevitability that prevents any analysis of their presuppositions. Thought becomes objectified in what Green calls ‘rhetoric’, preserving forms of understanding which may have since been superseded in scholarly circles, but which continue to exert a hold over the popular imagination. Green gives as an example the ethical theories of the Sophists, which remained popular despite the efforts of Plato and Aristotle. He argues that his contemporary situation parallels the ancient one. The ‘doctrines of the *Aufklärung*’ – the mechanistic and psychologistic theories of Locke, Butler, Hume and Rousseau – ‘are not to be supposed

¹³ See the final section for a discussion of Hill’s analysis of Pound and Miłosz.

¹⁴ T.H. Green, *Works*, iii, 92-125.

dead and done with, because Kant outgrew them nearly a hundred years ago'.¹⁵ Just as the mechanistic theories of Democritus gave rise to the pragmatism of the Sophists, Green argues, so the psychologism of Locke and Hume lies behind the hedonistic theories of Bentham and his successors.

Green defines popular philosophy in terms which recall Coleridge's description of instrumental thought as a 'mere Hortus siccus'. For Green, popular philosophy

fixes in coarse lineaments the antithetical ideas, which genuine speculation leaves fluid and elastic, and on the strength of them gives a positive answer, Yes or No, to questions as to the world of thought, which, because asked in terms of sense, true philosophy must either leave unanswered or answer by both Yes and No. It abhors the analysis of knowledge. It takes certain formal conceptions ready-made, without criticism of their origin or validity.¹⁶

Popular philosophy confidently takes in hand the thought of significant preceding philosophers, without pausing to consider the problems which gave rise to this thought and which persist in its contradictions and aporiae. The question that occupies Green in 'Popular Philosophy' – and Hill in 'Perplexed Persistence' – is how to objectify thought (how to give thought objective reality in language) without lapsing into the rhetoric of ossified contemporary wisdom, while simultaneously granting it a degree of universality (without which it yields to subjective arbitrariness).

The central concern of Hill's essay on Green is the difficulty of articulating thought in a way that does justice both to thinking and to its reception by the thinker's contemporaries. Just one extended quotation will have to show how Hill situates this

¹⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁶ Ibid., 92.

problem in the context of the discussion of knowledge and ethics contained in Green's essay:

[Green] criticized Butler for being 'content to leave the moral nature a cross of unreconciled principles' while, as a corollary, he argued that 'Man reads back into himself, so to speak, the distinctions which have issued from him, and which he finds in language' and that, in this 'retranslation', he 'changes the fluidity which belongs to them in language, where they represent ever-shifting attitudes of thought and perpetually cross each other, for the fixedness of separate things'. Green shares here a prevalent ethical emphasis of his time, the recognition that while we are 'unconditionally bound', 'necessarily belonging to such a world', being so bound is not necessarily the same as being in a fix and is most certainly not the same as being a fixer. In his dual application of the word 'cross', once as noun and once as verb, in two consecutive paragraphs, Green finds words for an essentially Kantian crux. The nature of the world is such as we are constrained to recognize, the ineluctable fact, but to be content with the rich discrepancies which this offers is nonetheless dangerous and is sometimes treacherous.
(CCW 110)

The 'Kantian crux' has to do with the transition between Kant's first two critiques. If the *Critique of Pure Reason* was concerned with establishing the subjective grounds for an objective law of necessity – for the notion that certain metaphysical doctrines such as cause and effect have universal applicability – the *Critique of Practical Reason* sought to demonstrate the grounds for human freedom, to prove 'the claim that normal adults', despite this sublunary determinism, 'are capable of being fully self-governing in moral matters'.¹⁷ It is the moral law which 'elevates the human being above himself (as a part of the world of sense)' and which gives him 'freedom and independence from the mechanism of all nature'.¹⁸ The space opened up between the two critiques is a troubling one which has

¹⁷ J.B. Schneewind, 'Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue: An Overview of Kant's Moral Philosophy', in Paul Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 309-341, at 309.

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2002), 111.

led, as we saw in the last chapter, to controversies concerning the objective character of subjective judgement, and which gives rise not only to Kant's aesthetic theory but to the claims made for the aesthetic power of judgement by Coleridge and the German post-Kantians.

In the above passage, Hill argues that the 'corollary' of Butler's mechanistic moral philosophy, in which essence and existence are forcibly separate, is the modern mind's propensity to misrecognise the spiritual nature of the world as a separate, alienated object. One outcome of this philosophy is the apprehension of the world as a kind of alienated intelligence, exerting its own coercive pressure on the subject. But it also entails that this intelligence, as rediscovered in the medium of language, offers the subject opportunities for expression in the teeth of this cognitive pressure, as Green's equivocal uses of the word 'cross' indicate. Being 'unconditionally bound' (an endnote points us to Henry Sidgwick's *Outlines of the History of Ethics*) to what Sidgwick calls the "'categorical imperative" of reason' does not proscribe the possibility of negotiating the grounds of objective judgement: rather, it prescribes this possibility. When an objectivity exists which unites thought and feeling, in which – in a move that Green borrows from Hegel and which is unacknowledged in Hill's essay – the true and the good are posited as one and the same, we are left with a lower order, ephemeral objectivity, the historically conditioned manifestations of this unity in our language and political institutions.

Hill's discussion of 'the strained relations between intention and reception' (CCW 109) is predicated on a recognition of these two forms of objectivity. It is worth noting that Hill resorts to Coleridge to explain the ways in which Green's writing falls foul of these 'strained relations'. Coleridge notes how, in one of Donne's sermons, the poet's mind struggles 'to preserve its inborn fealty to the Reason under the servitude to an accepted

article of *Belief*. Hill observes that Green's writing, too, oscillates between 'fealty' to thought and 'servitude' to the prevalent doctrines of his day. Green is not seen to be a special case here: this oscillation is inherent to thought itself, and Green merely embodies it (this is why his failure is 'exemplary') (CCW 110).

Hill demonstrates how popular thinking negatively affects Green's language: certain of Green's phrases, as Hill wrote in his original lecture, refer to hypostasised concepts which, apparently possessed of social existence, absolve us of any responsibility to rethink them.¹⁹ Hill cites phrases uttered by Green and Sidgwick which point to what Hill sees as an 'illicit bridging of "the chasm which the Kantian analysis of judgment left between subject and object"' (CCW 111). They include Green's opinion that Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* 'form the real bridge between the old world of philosophy and the new', and Sidgwick's remark in a letter: 'Oh, how I sympathise with Kant! with his passionate yearning for synthesis and condemned by his reason to criticism' (CCW 111, 113). Hill's objection to language like this is its misplaced faith in the synoptic power of urgently-expressed opinion. In singling out 'real bridge' as a phrase which 'pre-empts its own verification', Hill is making an essentially philosophical objection – that the connection between two phenomena is presupposed as primary data, as an empirical given, rather than as a relation that must be elaborated by reference to the phenomena it is connecting. In making this presupposition, Green (Hill implies) is acting against his most characteristic intuitions ('Abstract the many relations from the one thing, and there is nothing').²⁰ Similarly, Sidgwick's remark is an impassioned but incautious articulation of identity. Such phrases, Hill writes, 'soften Kant's rigour' but still

¹⁹ 'THOMAS HILL GREEN' (15th October 1973). Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/5/1/75 – T.H. Green, 20.

²⁰ Quoted in CCW 109.

‘accommodate his rigorous tone’. The difference (Hill writes) is that for Kant, the transcendent ‘is a logical, formal presupposition; for the [Victorian Idealists] it is “a pious wish”’ (CCW 113).

Victorian diction on occasion does strike such gluey chords, and traces of a certain *Schwärmerei* are recognisable in these citations.²¹ But Hill’s selection of these phrases as evidence of their authors’ lack of ‘Kant[ian] rigour’ points more to his severe scepticism regarding the possibilities offered by language for objective judgement and for the intersubjective communication of thought than to any defect in their prose style. When syntax is held to such a rigorous standard, thought itself dare barely move for fear of censure. That such comparatively inoffensive sentences incur Hill’s disapproval raises the ante considerably for poetry’s own form of objectified thought. If it is venal to succumb to hyperbole (‘the *real* bridge’) when impassioned by thought, how may poetry as partisan as Hill’s, not to speak of more explicitly political poetry, express its mind without dustily enumerating every counter-argument? The moments of atonement which Hill cherishes in literary production stand in an uneasy relation to this forbidding stance too. If atonement in language-use is attainable, if the moments of abject subjectivity such as Sidgwick’s are to be banned, why would any other use of language be considered: a text would need to be an unbroken string of such atonements, rendering the very concept meaningless. And if, instead, they are distributed serendipitously through the poem, is the rest of the text so

²¹ *Schwärmerei* is usually translated as ‘fanaticism’ in English editions of Kant’s works: ‘[F]anaticism in the most general meaning is an overstepping of the bounds of human reason undertaken according to principles’, Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 110. Coleridge elucidates the word etymologically: ‘Cold and phlegmatic in their own nature, like damp hay, they heat and inflame by co-acervation; or like bees they become restless and irritable through the increased temperature of collected multitudes. Hence the German word for fanaticism (such at least was its original import) is derived from the swarming of bees, namely, Schwärmen, Schwärmerei’. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), i, 30.

much lead to set off the glimmering epiphanies? Indeed, though this essay antedates *Speech! Speech!* by decades, it is only in the later poem that the full implications of the frustration entailed by Hill's stance riddle its pages.

3. Popular philosophy as impediment to poetic thought

Frustration engendered by repeated encounters with 'popular philosophy' (in the teeth of which Hill attempts to preside over his own confession) is partly responsible for the profusion of typographical devices in *Speech! Speech!* Late in *Speech! Speech!* the capitalised phrases are glossed as 'FORMS OF SUBPOENA': judgement, then, is central to presence of these figures in the text. In its capitalised phrases are often to be found concepts inflated and hardened to an objectivity which obstructs the 'craft of vision' even as it remains this craft's object. As we have seen, the 'PEOPLE' is one such inflated assessor:

Imagine it great
unavoidable work; although: heroic
verse a non-starter, says PEOPLE.
(SS 1)

On the one hand, the 'PEOPLE' are they whose attitudes, feelings and behaviour are determined by what Green called 'popular philosophy', the reigning conceptuality of the day. Insofar as this is true it might be possible to come to an agreement over the lower-limit of the receptive arena Hill postulates for his verse: perhaps not in the detail of what this 'popular philosophy' might contain, but at least in rough terms supplied by what we know of Hill's aversions and admirations. Daumier's sketch 'On dit que les Parisiens...' (which

is reproduced on the cover of *Speech! Speech!*) is mentioned in the poem, where Hill describes the artist ‘fixing on these faces / torpor, avidity’ (SS 50). Hill has had occasion to use Wordsworth’s phrase ‘savage torpor’ more than once, imbuing it with more malice than perhaps Wordsworth intended.²² Indeed, *Speech! Speech!* makes much of a conceit whereby first-person poetic production, often described as ‘confessional’, is reconceived as a submission – a confession – to a tribunal with the power to inflict pain. (Hill employs the term ‘savage torpor’ in his essay on the martyrdom of the Elizabethan Jesuit and poet Robert Southwell.) So on this account the ‘PEOPLE’ is a cultivated middle-class which feels itself entitled to certain artistic pleasures.

Other candidates for Hill’s inflated assessor present themselves. As several passages in *Speech! Speech!* reveal, capitalised words and sentences frequently mimic the inflated shock-tactics of newspaper headlines. The ‘PEOPLE’, in this instance, is an abstract entity determined by editorial prejudices in turn determined by the analysis of market demographics. Or the ‘PEOPLE’ is a character in the drama staged in Hill’s poem, which owes much of its allegorical method and some of its dramatis personae to Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678). But can any more detail be provided as to the constitution of this abstract group: are they the ‘ordinary men and women’ who are able to invest huge quantities of emotional energy into ‘clichés’ in times of national stress, as Hill describes the British populace during the Second World War (CCW 537)? Where do they stand on Hill’s Whitmanian spectrum between ‘the mean flat average’ and the ‘grand, common stock’ (CCW 524)?

Hill’s essays and lectures on Bradley and Eliot – ‘Dividing Legacies’ (1996), ‘Word Value in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot’ (2001) and ‘Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot’

²² See, e.g., CCW 24 and TL 27.

(2005) – offer a way into thinking about the role of the ‘PEOPLE’ – and of the other capitalised phrases – in *Speech! Speech!* The reference to ‘great / unavoidable work’ in the stanza quoted above calls to mind the ‘Work of National Importance’, a category into which Hill, in his first lecture on Bradley, says Eliot’s wartime writings were intended to fall. If Green’s ‘exemplary’ failure was to allow his language to express the sway of ‘popular philosophy’, in the Bradley lectures the exemplary failure is T.S. Eliot’s, and the role of popular philosophy is usurped by the literary and national climate of the pre-war and wartime years.

Hill’s criticism of Eliot’s literary style begins to be elaborated in an essay of 1996, ‘Dividing Legacies’.²³ This is a review of Eliot’s Clark Lectures and Turnbull Lectures, which were published in 1993 as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*. As with “‘Envoi (1919)’”, Hill’s essay on Pound, Eliot’s literary production is compared with the prevailing fashions in the professional literary world, though Pound comes out of the comparison much better than does Eliot. Hill arraigns Eliot for adopting, in his Clark and Turnbull lectures, a ‘mechanical ... mode of discourse exemplified by, if not imitated from, Saintsbury, to whom *Homage to John Dryden* (1924) is dedicated, or Charles Whibley, to whose memory *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) is inscribed’ (CCW 369). Eliot’s position determines his literary style, in spite of his stated prejudices:

I mean by this that Eliot, who, in the correspondence pages of *The Athenaeum* (27 February 1920), attacked the ‘apathy’ of ‘the so-called cultivated and civilized class’, was to some extent a practitioner of its modes and to a further extent their beneficiary.
(CCW 369)

²³ ‘Dividing Legacies’ was first published in *Agenda* 34.2 (Summer 1996), 9-28, and subsequently reprinted in *Style and Faith* and *CCW*.

The notion of the public as a class typified by apathy, torpor, and a greed for ‘cultivated’ arts is definitional of the poetics of *Speech! Speech!* The corrosive effect is not the privileged property of the reading public, however. Eliot’s contact with professional men of letters like Saintsbury and Whibley is subjected to similar treatment in the Bradley lectures. Hill writes that a 1928 review of Benda’s *La Trahison des clercs* betrays ‘the style of a clever and ambitious Harvard senior. In June 1928 Eliot was three months short of his fortieth birthday’ (CCW 545). Writing of Eliot’s literary journalism, Hill notes (referring to Eliot’s description of Bradley’s ‘great gift of style’): ‘For the *TLS*, around 1927, having a great gift of style meant writing like Charles Whibley’ (CCW 551), and writes of Eliot’s piece, in the *TLS*, on Bradley: ‘Saintsbury or Whibley would not have disowned the piece’ (CCW 553). As long as he was within range of these writers’ influence, Hill contends, Eliot’s judgement suffered. Hence in Hill’s opinion even Eliot’s assessment of Bradley in his essay ‘F.H. Bradley’ fails to supply an accurate definition of its subject. For example, Eliot writes of Bradley’s ‘scrupulous respect for words, that their meaning should be neither vague nor exaggerated’, yet fails to recognise the occasional strategic vagueness of Bradley’s prose. As Hill writes, ‘There is a stratum of Bradley’s style, which makes it particularly what it is, and in which Eliot shows no sign of interest, which indeed he misrepresents in his carefully chosen words of praise’ (CCW 549, 550). Eliot’s judgement is in error even when it comes to his most cherished arbiter of judgement, Hill concludes, because the expectations of the readers of the *TLS* extort from him a syntax too ready to accommodate the apparent virtues of fluency and expertise.

According to this account, the ‘material’ to which the poet must be faithful is, for Eliot,

no longer primarily language; it is Christian Thought; or the People as he understands them. And how he understands people is still very much how he understood them in the pub scene of *The Waste Land*, only now, instead of saying “Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said”, they say “that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry”. This is not enhancement but impoverishment, and the language of *Four Quartets* also is language that has suffered impoverishment. (CCW 547)

‘Christian Thought’ is the ‘popular philosophy’ to which Eliot was writing: his audience was the ‘People’ rather than ‘people’, a fake universal opportunistically swallowing the particulars of real lives, and speaking in correspondingly empty phrases. In this essay, the target of Hill’s frustration is eloquently delineated; in *Speech! Speech!*, however, the frustration is more exorbitant, more wide-ranging. Obeisance to an idea of the people uniformly flattened out by their interpellation as the trial-hardened populace of the Second World War is clearly damaging; but how much less so is obeisance to an idea of the people as possessed by ‘savage torpor’?

Despite Hill’s diagnostic accuracy in his criticism, then, it is difficult to get a grip on the exact intention behind the capitalised phrases in *Speech! Speech!* Concepts sublimed to the status of immovable objects are sometimes viewed with evident distrust. There is some doubt, for example, whether Hill thinks that Christopher Okigbo’s renunciation of poetry for ‘POLITICS, ESPIONAGE, AND TRAVEL’ was a commendable action (SS 44). Allegory, an art-form in which such hypostasised figures often stand for moral qualities in immediately graspable form, would on this account be a severely compromised activity. By a similar process to that in which, as Simon Jarvis recounts, allegory turns the pagan gods ‘into indifferent and arbitrary material which can be made to bear any significance elected by the allegorist’, leading to ‘the emergence of a forlorn anti-cosmos whose very substance is supposed to be made up of indifference and arbitrariness’, the inflated figures of *Speech!*

Speech! stand, in a universe viewed as complacently arbitrary through Hill's lens, for whatever notion the strongest voice can project: 'Anomie is as good a word as any; / so pick any; who on earth will protest?' (SS 2).²⁴ Hill, in his lecture on Green, explicitly links such hypostasised notions to Green's critique of popular philosophy. The fluid concepts which 'Man reads back into himself', and which he encounters in the world as objects with 'the fixedness of separate things' are linked, in the early lecture, with 'hypostatical entities' which 'exert a compulsive force'. Misrecognition of the difference between these fixed entities and fluid thought leads to ethical disaster:

It is the difference between empirically recognizing, in innumerable concrete experiences, that we are to a greater or less extent free; and able, or not able to make progress in this or that direction AND fancifully supposing that Freedom + Progress are palpable hypostatical entities. This improper crystallization leads to aggressiveness and irrationality.²⁵

So Hill's description of his capitalised figures as 'FORMS OF SUBPOENA' enlists popular thought in a juridical drama in which this misrecognition is voiced with unmistakable bitterness. Each 'crystallization' in *Speech! Speech!* is met, not by an unequivocal nostalgia for moral concepts as unchanging entities temporarily forgotten by modernity, nor by a nominalist debunking of such universalised forms of comportment, but by the whims of a frustrated consciousness for whom such concepts retain their fluidity only with difficulty and are all too easily convertible to generalized platitudes:

²⁴ Simon Jarvis, 'Mock as Screen and Optic', *Critical Quarterly* 46/3 (2004), 1-19, at 9.

²⁵ 'THOMAS HILL GREEN', 20.

Só hate to be caught in mid-
gesture, you know that, noble CARITAS,
proud AMOR – pledge your uncommon thoughts.
(SS 29)

‘Where charity and love are, there is God’ (‘Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est’) – the wholeness invoked by these words of Christian community (‘Christ’s love has gathered us into one’) is caught off-guard, ‘mid- / gesture’ by a principle of form that is intent on requiring hallowed figures to ‘pledge [their] uncommon thoughts’ and interrupting this work of trust mid-flow.²⁶ Charity and love, inflated to CARITAS and AMOR, have been subjected to Hill’s debunking before. In ‘The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy’, Hill writes of

every heroic commonplace, ‘Amor’,
‘Fidelitas’, polished like old armour,
stamped forever into the featureless mud.
(CP 193)

While in ‘Funeral Music’, he asks

For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain –
For none but the ritual King? We meditate
A rueful mystery; we are dying
To satisfy fat Caritas, those
Wiped jaws of stone.
(CP 71)

Amor and *caritas* preside over landscapes of warfare, sponsoring the deaths of a populace whose philosophy prizes these concepts as spotless trophies in a cabinet. Given Hill’s joking reference to *Speech! Speech!* as a version of Augustine’s *City of God*, though, we

²⁶ See Joseph Connelly, *Hymns of the Roman Liturgy* (London: Longmans, 1957), 88.

might expect the references to the varieties of love to be implicated in a more searching examination of the possibilities of human and religious love in modernity. It is true that ‘noble CARITAS, / proud AMOR’ are addressed with less cynicism than in the earlier poems, where the historical setting established a context within which these ideas carried a more popular weight, and were hence a currency more easily counterfeited, than is the case in modernity. And yet their involvement in this history of bloodshed is part of their genealogy, and Hill would not be able to rehearse them sincerely without opening himself to accusations of the very ‘polishing’ he lambasts in ‘Péguy’. Hence the element of farce in the stanza as a whole:

Shów you something. Shakespeare’s elliptical
late syntax renders clear the occlusions,
cálls us to account. For what is abundance
understand redemption. Whó – where – are our
clowns | WET ’N’ DRY: will the photographs
reveal all? Só hate to be caught in mid-
gesture, you knów thát, noble CARITAS,
proud AMOR – pledge your uncommon thoughts.
(SS 29)

In the context of the rest of the stanza, caritas and amor – figures of carnal and divine love – are twins of the clowns wet’n’dry, snapped by paparazzi mid-performance. The kind of Shakespearean atonement noted in ‘Psalms of Assize’ applies here: ‘the entire complex dance / of simple atonement / as in a far fetched / comedy / making of sleep and time / timeless healers’ (C 63). In *Pericles*, the ‘far fetched’ plot concludes with Pericles waking from sleep to be rejoined with his daughter Marina. This ‘complex dance’ is of a piece with the blend of comedic misrecognition and dalliance suggested by Hill’s clowns. This is eros, the creative act – the self-interrupting, incomplete circling around judgement, what Hill

calls ‘the power that can be felt in language when a word or half-finished phrase awaits its consummation’ (CCW 548) – as opposed to eros, the unapproachable completion of AMOR.

Speech! Speech! thus abandons the clarity of definition we saw in Hill’s essays. If thinking must involve the employment of hypostatised concepts, these capitalised phrases seem to say, then these concepts must be hedged with enough difficulties to prevent their instrumentalisation. Not just characters or phenomena belauded by Hill or otherwise esteemed as worthy opponents; not just empty abstractions diverting our attention from the real sites of suffering and injustice; the hypostatised words and phrases are markers which signify to us the difficulty of judgement as such: they are the necessary but traducing forms of representation, forcing us to recognise that in attempting to obtain a purchase upon the world, thought necessarily leaves traces of its presuppositions and conceptuality.

For Green, Platonism after Plato solidified to a religion whose conception of the deity was transcendent, ec-static; this conception, he wrote, has passed down to ‘those of our own day, who, from a metaphysical misapprehension, would efface all definite predicates from the language of religion, and reduce it to a prolonged monotonous sigh’.²⁷ Efface the predicates and you are left with the monotony of the prayer in the first poem of ‘Psalms of Assize’, petitioning ‘a monody / of chloroform’, or with the apotheosis of judgement itself, the Advent of the final poem in the sequence:

²⁷ Green, *Works*, iii, 79.

The great O of advent
 cum sibylla
 O that nothing may touch
 this unapproachable
 levity of the creator
 (C 66)

The 'O' is the eternal, the prophetic, sibylline mouthpiece, and the ground zero of the apocalypse. But it is also, as the third line illustrates, the vocative 'O' of lament or desire: the 'pious wish' that reaches too quickly for transcendent purchase upon the whole, but also (if we hear the more subjective 'oh' in 'O') the sigh of the poet who falls into solipsistic rumination, the unavoidable condition of thought as such, but also a Coleridgean cul-de-sac if one makes the mistake of identifying it with the imagination. The interruption of thought, its co-option by previously existing repertoires of mood, preoccupation, or fantasy, and the effort to overcome these through ever-newly-begun trials of cognition, is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: 'THE STRIFE OF PHRASE'

1. Wavering thought

Besides its theological meaning, 'atonement' most often has an aesthetic and ethical meaning for Hill, and is usually associated with moments at which writing's range of historical, acoustic and communicative aspects resonate with one another. Hill has never offered a definition though, and it might help to redefine atonement as the possibility that thought might maintain its freedom – its ability to make judgements about the world which appear binding and subjective, without losing purchase on its objective situation, without, that is, forgetting that there are others to whom this thought must be communicated if the thinker isn't to subside into solipsism. Poetic thought might want to grip its object with the tools of autonomous art (the plasticity of form that obeys only its own laws and obtains its purchase on the world through the minutest changes, as Hill allows himself at the end of *The Triumph of Love*) but if, as Hill would have it be, it is to be a public art, there are forms it must observe, and these forms in turn set a limit to the distance Hill's writing can put between its products and 'popular philosophy'. In 'Perplexed Persistence' these two refusals – the refusal of the yearning 'pious wish' for transcendence, and the refusal of hermetic aestheticism – are given voice in Wordsworth's poem 'Resolution and Independence'.

Wordsworth is a significant figure in this debate because of his importance to Green's conception of popular philosophy and how it might be transcended. Towards the end of Green's account of the development of moral thought in England, he surprisingly

writes that it is in the work not of a philosopher, but of a poet, that he sees the fulfilment of his moral philosophy. 'In England,' Green writes, 'it was specially Wordsworth who delivered literature from bondage to the philosophy that had naturalised man': poetry, specifically Wordsworth's poetry, is seen to be able to provide solutions beyond the reach of philosophy.¹ Green writes that the 'practical reconstruction of moral ideas in England' emerged, not from 'a sounder philosophy' than those already described in his essay, but from three sources: evangelicism, Rousseau's writings, and 'the deeper views of life which the contemplative poets originated'. Wordsworth in particular, Green thought, was able to refute the model according to which humanity stood in a passive, mechanical relationship to the world. In Wordsworth's poetry the subjective bond with the world is reciprocal: nature is invested with human thought, is indeed created by this thought, and in its turn shapes the growth of human reason. Wordsworth therefore fulfils Green's conception of being in the world, which is predicated upon a transcendent consciousness unifying individual consciousness.

Hill takes the title of his essay on Green from an essay on Wordsworth by A.C. Bradley (F.H. Bradley's brother), in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909). Discussing the section of 'Resolution and Independence' which contains the speaker's reiterated question as to the leech-gatherer's mode of existence, A.C. Bradley writes of the poem's 'perplexed persistence, and that helpless reiteration of a question' (quoted CCW 114). For Bradley, this repetitious perplexity risks becoming 'ludicrous', a descent from those moments in Wordsworth which contain 'intimation[s] of boundlessness'; but Hill sees in it the very movement of thought attempting to establish one kind of objectivity while being bound by

¹ T.H. Green, *The Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R.L. Nettleship, 3 vols. (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1906), iii, 118.

the horizon of another. Every repetition of the question fights against the drag of the mood of solipsistic umbrage that accompanies the poem's evocations of already existing poetic thought: 'We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; / But thereof come in the end despondency and madness'.² The language of yearning, of 'inspiration', as Hill terms it, is refused, while what might be seen as its remedy (the grounding conversation of the leech-gatherer) struggles with poetic autonomy (conceived of as a gloomy solipsism) for the poet's attention.

Hill notes that A.C. Bradley misrecognises Wordsworth's 'perplexed persistence' as a weakness and that Bradley compares it unfavourably with the vague oceanic feeling he sees elsewhere in Wordsworth's work. Green too, Hill argues, is prone accurately to pinpoint the domain of poetry's critical force only to be distracted by the language of inspiration which it was Wordsworth's intention to debunk in the early stanzas of 'Resolution and Independence'. But Green's value for Hill inheres in his own repetitious perplexity. Melvin Richter defines Wordsworth's influence upon Green as a transmission of the ideology of sentiment, but Hill thinks it rather inheres in a 'perception of the dual nature of self-realisation, the dual nature of communication, that gets into the fibre of Green's work as I think it got into the fibre of Wordsworth's'.³ What Benjamin Jowett called Green's 'fuliginous jargon' stood in contrast to the polished but rote-learned productions of Balliol's students.⁴ But as Hill wrote in his unpublished lecture on Green, '[w]hen Green is

² William Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence', in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 236.

³ 'THOMAS HILL GREEN' (15th October 1973). Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/5/1/75 – T.H. Green, 18.

⁴ Quoted in Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T.H. Green and his Age* (London: Weidenfeld, 1964), 153.

dull there is, I think, a “self-denying” intent’.⁵ The refusal to accommodate the strictures of fluent articulation required by examination boards is brought across as metaphor for poetic thought in *Speech! Speech!*, in which the poet is unable to focus on any single thesis:

If I could focus once – Rimbaud’s career,
Nigerian careerists – on a single factor,
self-centre of anomie, I might present
to the examiners in whose shadow I am,
a plainly disordered thesis which they
must receive to reject.
(SS 44)

The ‘examiners’ are now the art-consuming classes, and Hill is fond of quoting the passage in Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* which complains of people who ‘converse with us as gravely about a *taste* for Poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinac or Sherry’.⁶ Poetic speech that courts the accusation of dullness, then, refuses to pander to this taste.

A lecture by Hill from 1971, headed ‘Romantic Poetry – COLERIDGE’, fills in some of the background to his constellation of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Green. Though Green isn’t mentioned in this lecture, certain prosodic and syntactic analyses are established here which eventually feed into Hill’s work on the philosopher.⁷ Hill begins with a discussion of ‘She Dwelt Among th’Untrodden Ways’ and ‘Old Man Travelling’. The latter in particular has a kind of determinate hesitancy:

⁵ ‘THOMAS HILL GREEN’, 14.

⁶ See, e.g., *ibid.*, 6; CCW 99; and see William Wordsworth, ‘Preface’ (1802 version), in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 301.

⁷ ‘Romantic Poetry – COLERIDGE’. Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/5/1/49 – Coleridge.

The little hedge-row birds,
That peck along the road, regard him not.
He travels on, and in his face, his step,
His gait, is one expression; every limb,
His look and bending figure, all bespeak
A man who does not move with pain, but moves
With thought⁸

On the face of it this poem has little in common with the frustrated syntax of *Speech!* *Speech!* Nothing could less bespeak ‘A man who does not move with pain’ than the rhythms of Hill’s poem. In ‘Old Man Travelling’, a steadiness of gaze isolates between commas the traveller’s physical features, in lines which synthesise these brief syntactic monads in a unifying rhythm – the passage is an epitome of balance. Its vocabulary is almost parched where Hill’s is eclectic. Yet the movement of thought that accompanies the description of the traveller has certain characteristics in common with the baffled thought Hill attributes to Green and by extension to the enterprise of objective judgement in general. Writing of this poem, Hill notes that its blank verse has ‘an apparent nullity’, but that this is to be attributed to the contrast presented by the eighteenth-century heroic couplet:

even a brief acquaintance reveals that detail + movement have been selected and directed with an acute ear for the deliberate hiatus. The power of this poem rests in what is not said; in conclusions that are not drawn; but the slow build up to the ~~conclusion~~ final statement, though muted to an ear attuned to the electric bristle of the C18th couplet is, in fact, managed with a fine rhetorical skill. The bleakness of the language is an epitome of the bleakness of the world’s indifference. Old Man Travelling inhabits the borderline where pity meets the pitiless and is almost denied by it⁹

⁸ William Wordsworth, ‘Old Man Travelling’, in *Lyrical Ballads*, 150.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Couched in a prosody that is, Hill argues, deliberately constructed to appear muted to an ear accustomed to the heroic couplet, the poem invites the pitiless response which is the presupposition of its composition. The ‘deliberate hiatus’ is both fidelity to the observed absence of grandiloquence in the old man’s bearing and a refusal on the poet’s part to ascend to the pre-prepared fluency of prevailing poetic idiom. Again, two kinds of objectivity are in play here: that of the world, a world of war and its effects upon families, and that of language, where choices in vocabulary, rhythm and diction are given moral weight and come into conflict with already existing moral categories likewise conceived in aesthetic terms. The comparison with Green’s ‘Popular Philosophy’ is instructive: pre-existing modes of thought are seen as counter-productive to actual thought (to the man who ‘moves / with thought’); preferable are the moods of Wordsworthian ‘obstinate questioning’ which refuse confident fluency and court inarticulacy in the service of critical, innovative reflection.

If poetry is the ‘impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science’, Hill’s later essays on F.H. Bradley invert the relationship: in these it is philosophy offering its expressive power to poetry, Bradley’s prose syntax shaping Eliot’s versification.¹⁰ Both of Hill’s lectures on Bradley and Eliot take as their starting point the occurrence of the word ‘somehow’ in the philosopher’s texts. Hill cites Eliot on the ‘purity and concentration of purpose’ in Bradley’s prose style. Why, Hill asks, would a word like ‘somehow’, usually associated with evasion, vagueness, prevarication and yearning, be a ‘key-term’ in a style as pure and concentrated as Eliot took it to be (*CCW* 533)? As with Hill’s essay on Green, the argument here tends towards a conception of literary objectivity that requires any purchase on the world to be obtained at the cost of a perceived naivety or vagueness. And

¹⁰ Wordsworth, ‘Preface’, 302.

as we shall see, this precondition for literary knowledge is dependent on a philosophical tradition, since Bradley's persistent use of 'somehow' is only explicable with reference to his idea of the Absolute. In other words, the valorisation of the repetitive or unsophisticated, to which Hill attributes so much value for his understanding of poetry, is incontestably wedded to an idealist philosophy.

Bradley's metaphysics incorporates Hegel's critique of the Kantian separation between truth and nature, or thought and being, a separation which establishes the mysterious nature of judgement: how do we bridge the divide between the universal (the concept, the subject, thought, logic) and the particular (the sensual, the object, nature)?¹¹ This is not to say, however, that Bradley conceived of the transition between existence and essence as a *fait accompli*, that nature was a product of reason, or that sensuous particulars were identical with the thinking subject. Rather Bradley postulated, as the sole condition for the intelligibility of existence (that without which we could have no meaningful experience whatsoever), a totality or an Absolute the scope of which renders it unknowable by us, but of which we are constituent elements. As far as we are aware of this totality, we are able to make judgements, or to form binding experiences with objects. However these judgements are never completely successful – there always remains something unknown, a gap between subject and object, and Hegel's absolute knowledge remains elusive.

Again and again in Bradley's philosophy the reader encounters partial truths, objects only incompletely identified. Yet there is also an ideality in which this identification *is* complete. For example, the 'how' or 'why' of things 'holds only so far as a thing is not

¹¹ In fact Bradley's view of Hegel echoed that of many nineteenth-century commentators, who viewed Hegel as a Neoplatonic panlogist for whom nature was derivable from thought; Bradley thus distanced himself from Hegel on a number of occasions. But according to some current accounts, Bradley was closer to Hegel's thought than he realised. See Robert Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 133-4.

complete in itself, and is therefore, on our view, ideally beyond itself. The demand for the making good of such imperfection, not as real but as ideal, the completion of the thing in idea so as to satisfy us theoretically, is what we mean by the search for a “why” and “how”.”¹² All judgements are conditional for Bradley: a subject and a predicate cannot be connected by fiat, but only through the mediation of some unknown condition: ‘we really have asserted subject to, and at the mercy of, the unknown. And hence our judgment, always but to a varying extent, must in the end be called conditional’.¹³ This is the condition, the *x* which was sought by Kant as the unifying condition of all judgement. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant (dogmatically, in the opinion of his critics) located the unifying *x* in the subject: in the schemata which, Kant admitted, must remain a mystery to human understanding. Against this ‘subjective’ idealism, Bradley’s is ‘objective’: judgements are resolved not through individual spontaneity but due to an immanent shared being of all objects in the world. Though Hill doesn’t make it explicit, it is this *x* which is the ‘somehow’ that Hill enshrines in his essays on Bradley. Bradley writes: ‘When I think of contraries I first take them as being somehow separated and yet conjoined. The special nature of this “somehow”, this known or unknown condition, will vary in different cases, but it here is irrelevant’.¹⁴

When Hill writes of the Bradleian ‘somehow’, then, he is implicitly invoking a metaphysical elucidation of the problem of judgement. Hill calls it the ‘*somehow* of realization’ (CCW 534). This, arguably, inflates Bradley’s conception of judgement beyond the boundaries sanctioned by his arguments. ‘Realization’ suggests the successful

¹² F.H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), 312.

¹³ F.H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality: A Metaphysical Essay* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 320.

¹⁴ *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 271.

completion of the act of predication: the moment of identification between subject and object. For Hill, this is exemplified in the writer's discovery of the *mot juste*:

an author – a poet, say – seeks the precise word: for minutes, hours, days, it fails to deliver itself; its absence is a felt presence. Suddenly it is here. How? Somehow it has come to be. *Somehow* is whatever protracted or split second activity of the mind makes real the presence of the right word.
(CCW 533-4)

At first glance it might appear that Hill has changed his mind in the matter of syntactic arbitration: whereas before, in the essay on Green, he could endorse Nettleship's description of a consciousness altering in its articulation of an idea, this description of the creative process presupposes the existence of an articulation that is waiting to be found. The difference, though, depends upon the philosophical position one takes with regard to Bradley's Absolute. If one takes it to be (as mid-twentieth century critics of the British Idealists did) 'some Absolute Experience within which the objects of our ordinary human experience would be unbelievably fused and transformed' – i.e. an *a priori* resolution of all differences, then the *somehow* is rendered somewhat nugatory, and the 'right word' is as inevitable and pre-existing as my reading above takes it to be.¹⁵ If, on the other hand, the *somehow* is given its proper status as the moment of non-identity in the process of identification, of judgement, then Hill's description of the creative act carries with it an implicit recognition that the subject is altered in the discovery and identification of the object.

By a slender margin, then, Bradley's metaphysics saves Hill's conception of the *mot juste* from the dogmatism that converted Pound's turn of the century aestheticism into a

¹⁵ J.N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-examination*, quoted in Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics*, 120.

conviction that correct denotation was not only possible but an imperative for good government. It does this because, as we have seen, it emphasises the unknown condition of all possible judgements, the *somehow* which precludes the possibility of complete identification. Against the promised land of absolute knowledge, Bradley opposes a humanistic scepticism. At the end of *Principles of Logic* occurs a famous passage that concludes with a figurative flourish:

I must venture to doubt ... whether truth, if that stands for the work of the intellect, is ever precisely identical with fact, or claims in the end to possess such identity. ... It may come from a failure in my metaphysics, or from a weakness of flesh which continues to bind me, but the notion that existence could be the same as understanding strikes as cold and ghost-like as the dreariest materialism. ... Our principles may be true, but they are not reality. They no more *make* that Whole which commands our devotion, than some shredded dissection of human tatters *is* that warm and breathing beauty of flesh which our hearts found delightful.¹⁶

It's easy to imagine Hill assenting to this passage, as to others in Bradley's texts which affirm that Bradley has no interest in constructing a systematic metaphysics, and to those where he happily admits the limits of human reason with respect to knowledge of the Absolute.¹⁷ Here philosophy's countenance wears an impassioned expression, but it's something more than the reaching after poetic figures or the 'pious wish' of Green or Sidgwick.

¹⁶ Bradley, *Principles of Logic*, quoted in Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics*, 133.

¹⁷ For systematic metaphysics, see *Appearance and Reality*, p. vii. For the limits of our knowledge, see *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 246, and *passim*.

2. What is a Bradleian poem?

We have seen the failures of which Eliot is accused when he succumbs to the influence of the 'PEOPLE'. But Hill argues that when Eliot writes under the influence of Bradley's philosophy, the philosopher's syntax donates a metaphysics to the poet's words which mitigates the populism. In Hill's opinion, Eliot's poems can be herded into two categories definable in terms of Bradley's philosophy. Hill cites a distinction drawn by Bradley between 'the discursive intelligence and a way, or ways, of apprehension' and maps it onto a 'distinction in Eliot himself between two major modes of his poetic comprehension'. Discursive intelligence is, for Hill, a negative quality, which he associates with *The Waste Land* (before Pound got his hands on it), *Four Quartets* and Eliot's plays. On the other hand, the 'way of apprehension', or what Hill also calls 'the syntax of becoming' (CCW 534), is associated with *Ash-Wednesday* and 'Marina', and is taken to be a positive quality. So what exactly does Hill mean when he divides 'poetic comprehension' – a phrase which puts at stake the very possibility of poetry to obtain purchase on the world – between poetry of 'discursive intelligence' and poetry of the 'way of apprehension'? Since 'Marina' in particular is, I believe, a touchstone for much of Hill's thinking about poetry and poetic knowledge around this time, I will focus on this poem to elucidate Hill's terms.

By 'discursive intelligence' I understand the reason as it relates to the common sense object world: the intelligence which understands the world as a congeries of discrete particulars to be opportunistically generalized according to the intelligence's

presuppositions.¹⁸ It might fruitfully be thought of as analogous to Coleridge's fancy – able to operate only upon the 'fixities and definites' of what already exists. Years earlier, in 'Dividing Legacies', Hill had described the 'voice' of 'Marina' as possessing a consciousness that its description of Christian conversion runs counter to the orthodox vocabulary and discourse of Anglo-Catholic tradition, and he argued that the poem's dallying with the 'non-active' (quoting from Bradley's essay 'Faith') is its 'achievement' (CCW 371). So the 'discursive intelligence' whose mode of articulation is refused in 'Marina' is doctrinal or conventionally confessional narrative. This is the very narrative that Hill accuses Eliot of opportunistically accommodating in his wartime work. In contrast to this work, 'Marina', which Hill calls 'the most Bradleian of all Eliot's poems' (CCW 552) retains a prosody of disorientation which Hill associates with Bradley's 'somehow'. Eliot's poem (in a way, I would argue, that bears comparison to the oscillation, in 'Resolution and Independence', between a poetic solipsism and an impassioned interest in the world) is described by Hill as oscillating between 'apprehension as fear and apprehension as perception' (CCW 535).

Hill begs the question as to the precise textual pivots of this oscillation, and we are left to decide for ourselves what constitutes the Bradleian syntax of 'Marina'. Some clues are to be found, though, in Christopher Ricks's analysis of the poem in *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice*. This is a study Hill cites in 'Dividing Legacies', and it has clearly influenced his understanding of 'Marina'. The poem begins:

¹⁸ See also Jewel Spears Brooker, *Mastery and Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 102-3, where Brooker argues that 'Gerontion' is motivated by a critique of the discursive intelligence as 'the main cause of the devastation of the early twentieth century'.

What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
 What water lapping the bow
 And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
 What images return
 O my daughter.¹⁹

Quoting the opening line, Ricks demonstrates how syntactic ambiguity performs a qualitatively different task than explicitly posed questions. The line, Ricks writes, ‘neither asks ... “What seas are these?”, nor exclaims “What seas these are!”, nor states, “What seas the sirens sang in, is a puzzling question”’.²⁰ Ricks’s point, I think, is that Eliot is not chained to an empirical conception of particular seas, as might be suggested by a deictic ‘these’: what is rather suggested is a very strong sense of being in the world but without any confidence as to how one came to be here, or how one came to have the language by which we can identify these things in the first place. We might add that the deferral, to the fourth line, of the sentence’s verb ‘return’, after the plethora of descriptive detail (‘seas’, ‘shores’, ‘grey rocks’, ‘islands’, ‘water lapping the bow’, ‘scent of pine’, ‘woodthrush’) effectively duplicates the Bradleian ‘somehow’ – the deferral of judgement resting between ‘What’ and ‘return’; and that the deletion of all punctuation from these lines, the lack of commas between the itemised phenomena and their interrogative adjectives, creates a continuum of objects set free, floating, one might say (alluding to Bradley’s essay on ‘Floating Ideas and the Imaginary’) somewhere above actual lived experience, though not above reality.²¹

¹⁹ T.S. Eliot, ‘Marina’, in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), 115.

²⁰ Christopher Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 230.

²¹ See Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 31: ‘Then there is my present actual world, and the ambiguous existence of what has been and is about to be’. In this essay Bradley argues that no such thing as floating ideas exist: that ideas are always tethered to some ‘ground ... of which they are adjectives’ (42) but that this ground is not necessarily the ‘felt whole’ of a single individual’s experience.

Bradley's refusal to admit the existence of mere floating ideas – ideas which do not have some connection with reality – constitutes a major element in Hill's apology for poetry. In Bradley's contention that no 'idea' is a mere idea, that it is 'real somehow', Hill reads a claim for the objectivity of poetry, its qualification of reality:

Like an idea, or an action, or a person, the poem, coming into being, qualifies Reality, which is not to say that it necessarily gives value to Reality or gives real value. ... In this factor stands our main justification for devoting time to the discussion of poetry.
(CCW 552)

If all ideas are 'somehow' adjectives of some reality (i.e. qualify reality though not necessarily a portion of reality accessible to we 'finite centres', to use Bradley's phrase), then all such ideas, including all artefacts popularly assumed to be mere products of the imagination, like poems, can be said to have some arbitral force.

Of course the degree to which we accept such an assertion depends upon our acceptance of Bradley's presupposition of an Absolute in which all such adjectival bondings are finally realised. This, in itself, cannot be demonstrated: as Bradley has written, it must be an act of faith.²² Bradley's Absolute raises two poles between which we might think of Hill's work as shuttling, each with its associated risk. One risk is that faith in Bradley's transcendent unity is translated in aesthetic terms into a monochrome uniformity, every particular centred on and measured by an *a priori* standard; another is that reverence for this standard might invoke a nominalism unwilling to rise above appearance to look for

²² Absolute Reality, Bradley writes, is not visible to us in detail, and 'So far as the detail goes, we everywhere ... may be said to rest upon faith'. *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 344. More generally, the given presupposition of philosophy per se is thought to be accepted upon faith: 'Philosophy demands, and in the end it rests on, what may fairly be termed faith. It has, we may say, in a sense to presuppose its conclusion in order to prove it'. *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 15.

a possible universality. Again, as with Hill's appropriation of Bradley's concept of judgement, he risks inflating Bradley's precepts beyond their warranted scope. So while Bradley explicitly forbids the conflation of the Absolute and God (see 'On God and the Absolute', *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 428-47), Hill comes close to making this conflation himself: 'if one had not found him already, one might well come to God through reading Bradley's *Appearance and Reality*' (CCW 535). As with Coleridge's blaze of light or Green's 'pious wish' effacing a 'Kant[ian] rigour', Hill's adherence to philosophy has its limits.

3. Optional / obligatory music and its role in judgement

Like many of the poems in *Canaan*, the prosody of 'Psalms of Assize' is characterised by a hesitancy and fluidity that bears comparison to what Hill calls, with reference to 'Marina', the 'syntax of becoming'. We can see this in particular in the set of poems at the beginning of *Canaan* bearing titles, like 'Of Coming into Being and Passing Away', 'De Anima', 'Whether the Virtues are Emotions', and 'Whether Moral Virtue Comes by Habituation', derived from metaphysical speculation. These poems make instrumental use of spacing and conjunctions wrought by a spareness of punctuation to produce a prosody that owes something to Charles Olson's 'open field' ('De Anima' refers to 'Bethlehem the open field') but more to Eliot's ambiguous versification in 'Marina'. In 'Of Coming into Being and Passing Away', Hill writes of

visions of truth or dreams
as they arise –

to terms of grace
 where grace has surprised us
 (C 4)

recalling the ‘images’ that ‘return’ to the apprehension of the speaker in ‘Marina’, shade-like through the fog, ‘By this grace dissolved in place’. Obedient to Coleridge’s ‘drama of reason’, these metaphysical poems attempt to preserve multiple perspectives: the white space exposed in lines which are pushed to the edge of the poem, and the absent punctuation that makes available multiple interpretations, are part of this. In a discussion of the poem ‘Of Coming into Being and Passing Away’ (the title translates Aristotle’s *De Generatione et Corruptione*), Peter McDonald writes that the gaps ‘present us with a series of turning-points, or pivots, where one way of reading, or hearing, the lyric measure changes into another way of so hearing or reading the lines.’²³ In this final section I want to explore the relationship between Hill’s shifting attitude towards the constituted first-person pronoun and the kinds of reading enjoined by the relatively open forms of *Canaan* and the stricter prosodic obbligate of *Speech! Speech!*

The second poem in ‘Psalms of Assize’ carries an epigraph from Colet’s annotations to Ficino which translates as ‘No man can serve both masters [the intellect (pointing to the divine) / the senses (operating in corporeal nature)] and go up and down at the same time; you have either to go up or go down’.²⁴ Hill’s reluctance to accept this stark choice is shown in the first line: ‘Ascend through declension’:

*Non potest quisquam utriusque servire, simulque ascendere et descendere;
 aut ascendas aut descendas oportet...*

²³ Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 192.

²⁴ Sears Jayne, *John Colet and Marsilio Ficino* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 120.

Ascend through declension
 the mass the matter
 the gross refinement
 gravitas
 everlasting obsession
 vanity by grace
 the starred
 misattributed
 works of survival
 attributes even now
 hallowing consequence
 chants of the trace elements
 the Elohim
 unearthly music
 given to the world
 message what message
 doubtless
 the Lord knows
 when he will find us
 if ever
 we shall see him
 with the elect
 justified
 to his right hand
 (C 61)

Rather than 'efface all definite predicates' (as Green thought Neoplatonism was wont to do), this poem recognises the necessity to restore predicates, to 'ascend' to a universality through 'declension': through a submersion in particulars, but also through grammatical analysis. (Note the contrast to the consensus imposed by the descending Gabriel in the first poem of the sequence.) The first few lines mimic this movement between synoptic grasp and gravitational lapse: each line begins with a rise from an unstressed to a stressed syllable and ends with a fall from a stressed to an unstressed syllable, before sinking on the dactyl 'gravitas'. Perhaps suspecting that such radical commensurability of word with spirit is too

easy, Hill connects typography with theology in a weak joke at the poem's conclusion. Meanwhile this neat commensurability is complicated in the intervening lines. They sidestep the conventional subordinating tools used in the construction of meaning, and produce a catalogue reminiscent of the disorientated breathlessness of the opening of 'Marina', though with a cynical impatience added to it ('seas what shores' ['Marina']; 'message what message' ['Psalms of Assize']).

Within the carefully delimited cadential space of the poem's short lines, however, impatience is subordinated to a measured syllabic music: in *Speech! Speech!*, by contrast, impatience forces the measure into exorbitant patterns. Within these exorbitant patterns, though, Hill reduces the scope for the reader's interpretation by means of a series of typographical markers. Where, in *Canaan*, punctuation is conspicuously sparse and meaning is only discernible through the fog of white space subsuming the words on the page, *Speech! Speech!* insists on its meaning through the use of diacritical marks that hammer home every cadence with dogmatic urgency. Uncomfortable questions are raised by this change in comportment. Does it initiate a stentorian poetics that shouts down contingency and ambiguity in the name of clarity of expression? Does it push to the limits of credibility the reader's trust in the poem's voice on purpose, so that a realisation of the problems inherent to judgement can come to consciousness? Or does it simply represent the delivery of a sermon *de haut en bas*, to an audience that it is deemed cannot be trusted with more nuanced argument?

Two kinds of diacritical marks affect the reading of the text: truncated vertical lines create caesurae or unexpected fissures within a line, and stress-marks prescribe the author's preferred rhythm:

You want I should write. Write whát I ask.
(SS 9)

Capitalised words, as we have seen, signify the abbreviated telegraphese of newspaper headlines, annunciations of important figures from history and mythology, or esteemed works:

Rate zero on RECENT PAST
AS DISTRESSED SUBTEXT.
(SS 9)

or perhaps three-headed
PUBLIUS, who cannot now be released
from the FEDERALIST PAPERS
(SS 22)

The diacritical marks are disturbing because it is difficult not to find in them, as David-Antoine Williams does, a ‘tyrannical’ aspect, a dispiriting lack of trust in the reader and a consequent simplification of cadence.²⁵ This approach is puzzling because everything in Hill’s contemporary critical work suggests that a creative fiat imposed highhandedly upon a poem’s content is an act of hubris resulting from ethical error. One would expect these accents, then, to be present in lines which are ambiguous and require explicit stress-marks to indicate the sense intended, or to indicate idiosyncratic stress-patterns where Hill intends to diverge from the expected sense, or to place particular emphasis. However, the frequency of cases conforming to the former principle is low, and where stress marks are present they usually conform to the pattern of intonation one would expect given the syntax. Where, for

²⁵ David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 209.

example, Hill writes: ‘Thís / is what we have cóme to: ash and shivered / glass’, the accents only bring awkwardly to the fore a stress pattern which is natural to the sense (SS 57).

As we have seen, the confrontation of poetic thought with public reception is marked for Hill by a painful recognition that poetry must bear the traces of (what he sees as) objectified cognition’s torpor and greed in order even to be recognised as thought as such, while simultaneously attempting to preserve those elements of imaginative expression which are non-identical with that world. This is confirmed in Hill’s claims to see ‘possibilities of strain’ in the fact that Green was bound to a ‘two-fold commitment’: first to exemplify his reiterative ethics of language to students too accustomed to fluency; second, ‘As an educational reformer Green’s commitment was to the revelation of the freedom of the word for those who were, in Wordsworth’s sense, “shy and unpractised in the strife of phrase”’.²⁶ Certainly Hill’s diacritics mimic a prosodic didacticism (or what I have called prosodic obbligato), but where Hopkins wrote that his diacritical accent was intended to signify metrically ‘doubtful cases’, Hill’s accents often merely reiterate expected phrasing; where they don’t, little is gained but a worked-for awkwardness.

A better way of reading the diacritical marks in *Speech! Speech!* and Hill’s other recent work is as a limiting device in the face of the strain produced by the different kinds of objectivity public speech is involved with. As an initial point of contrast, consider what Giorgio Agamben, describing what he views as poetry’s unique identifying characteristics, the caesura and enjambment, writes about the restorative, expressive capacities of these hiatuses:

²⁶ ‘THOMAS HILL GREEN’, 19.

The only things that can be done in poetry and not in prose are the caesura and the enjambment ... The poet can counter a syntactic limit with an acoustic and metrical limit. This limit is not only a pause; it is a noncoincidence, a disjunction between sound and meaning. This is what Paul Valéry meant in his very beautiful definition of the poem: ‘the poem, a prolonged hesitation between sound and meaning’.²⁷

Hill’s diacritical marks, which are the thickened, rigidified caricatures of Valéry’s ‘prolonged hesitation’, leave too deep an indentation in the poem’s surface, giving a stupefied appearance to poetic stress as the caesura is co-opted into Hill’s horrific object-world, which then denies it of all but the most hoarse expressive power. Caesurae, in *Speech! Speech!*, are dislodged, thrown askew, and are often superannuated stand-ins for punctuation or line-breaks:

I have come
so far | anarchy must be in it:
flames ransacking the last scene
(SS 35)

INORDINATE | wording of Common Prayer |
find here dilated.
(SS 26)

There is a sense that, if the caesurae place limits upon rigid forms of thought objectified in language, those forms are recognised by the author to be his own. In the first of the passages quoted above, the caesurae is a kind of fire-curtain blocking the dissemination of Hill’s sexual pun to the rest of the stanza: without the vertical line separating ‘so far’ from ‘anarchy’, the reader’s uncertainty about whether ‘so far’ is to be applied to ‘anarchy must be in it’ allows ‘I have come’ to stand, at least for a moment, on its own. Rather than hesitating between sound and meaning, the caesura here reinforces their coincidence.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, ‘Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films’, tr. Brian Holmes, in Tanya Leighton (ed.), *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London: Tate, 2008), 328-33, at 331-2.

In the second quoted passage, the caesurae perform more complex activities, though their presence bespeaks a scepticism as to their efficacy. ‘Inordinate’, a word which, in the Book of Common Prayer, is predicated of immoral behaviour, corruption, and love of wealth, is rendered in resonant capitals. If we take ‘inordinate’, following Hill’s advice, as a ‘STAGE DIRECTION’, that is, as a verb, the *OED* offers one example of its use, from 1646: ‘To deprave the will, to inordinate the affections, to perturb the passions.’ This state of affective inordinacy – of the corruption or removal of limits or measures – we now ‘find here dilated’, where ‘dilated’ carries multiple meanings: on the point of parturition (consonant with Hill’s repeated complaints about modernity’s prolific abuse of measure); diffused throughout culture; or expanded upon as the theme of Hill’s poem. As if to compensate for, or to show the desperate lengths necessary to combat, the lack of measure, Hill’s vertical strokes box in ‘wording of Common Prayer’, which however still stands in a relation of ambiguity to the first word – is it the wording of the Book of Common Prayer which is inordinate, in that its strictures are incommensurable with modernity?

While I believe that there is reason to despair when faced with the hoarse prosody of *Speech! Speech!*, in that the diacritics probably represent at least in part a momentary loss of faith in the possibility of a receptive reader, I will argue that by paying attention to some texts on prosody with which Hill was familiar, we can reconstruct a less pessimistic account of the poem. Poetic judgement comes into being as a category to be reflected on thanks to these diacritical marks: they call into question the sufficiency of verse’s formal resources (which until now has for the most part been free of this typographic exoskeleton) at the same time as they threaten to undermine and flatly deny the reader’s own role in interpretation (by stridently imposing their own rhythmic emphases).

Those searching for precedents for Hill's diacritics naturally look to Gerard Manley Hopkins. (Hopkins, as Hill notes in 'Perplexed Persistence', was a pupil of T.H. Green's.)²⁸ However, I want to argue that there exist, as well as Hopkins, two significant theories by two American poets, both of which Hill would have known, which bear directly upon the diacritical marks.

Robert Frost is the author of the first theory. Hill's first essay on Eliot and Bradley, 'Dividing Legacies', was published in 1996, just a year before he started the composition of *Speech! Speech!*²⁹ In it, as we have seen, Hill quotes Christopher Ricks's study *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice*, specifically the subsection 'The sound of sense' in chapter five, 'An English Accent'. The chapter begins with Robert Frost's principle that there should be built into any literary utterance the exact acoustic 'posture' proper to its sense: 'Never if you can help it write down a sentence in which the voice will not know how to posture *pecially*'. This is what he calls 'the sound of sense', and it occupies a space between 'sense without the sound of sense' (mere communicative prose) and 'the sound of sense without sense' (nonsense verse and private languages): in other words, the very poles of objective and subjective utterance Hill seeks to steer between. Ricks cites an anecdote in which an actress asks Frost whether 'he really believed there was only one way to read a good poem. Yes he did'. She counters that if that were the case it would be impossible for actors to interpret Shakespearean dialogue in different ways. Frost's response was that 'if such ambiguities occurred in any of Shakespeare's plays, the fault must lie with Shakespeare as poet'.³⁰ Even as unqualified an expression of writerly authority as this is not complete anathema to Hill.

²⁸ See Daniel Brown, *Hopkins' Idealism: Philosophy, Physics, Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 238-326.

²⁹ The first notebook for *Speech! Speech!* is labelled '17: Work in Progress 28-10-97 – 4-4-98. Drafts & Jottings'. Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/2/1/48.

³⁰ Quoted in Ricks, *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice*, 154-5.

And yet, as Ricks goes on to recount, Eliot would have seen in Frost's principle an insufficient attention to the twofold aspect of the dramatic in poetry: lyric, Eliot wrote, can either rely on the supplemental musicality of 'the lute or other instrument', or contain, as in Donne, 'all its possible music' in itself.³¹ Continuing the analogy with drama, Ricks reformulates it thus: 'the dramatic is animated either by building stage directions in or by positively building them out. The posture proper to the sentence is one kind, a tonal kind, of stage direction.'³²

Ricks then gives an example from *Antony and Cleopatra* (cited by Hill in 'Dividing Legacies'), and quotes approvingly Eliot's praise for Shakespeare's addition of 'Ah soldier' to a line derived from Thomas North's translation of Plutarch. As Ricks says of this line, 'it is definitely and unmistakably indicated that here Shakespeare is not definitely and unmistakably indicating the posture proper to the cry, the expression on the face of the word'.³³ The range of senses 'Ah soldier' can potentially constitute is left to the reader to decide among: responsibility is delegated away from the text.

By contrast, the diacritics in *Speech! Speech!* retract that responsibility. As we have seen, Hill explicitly writes, in what must be an echo of Ricks's discussion, 'CAPITALS | STAGE DIRECTIONS' (SS 59). If this is true of the capitalised words, then it is doubly so of the diacritics. No supplemental musicality is permitted by them. But if this is so, do these lines, as Eliot wrote, contain within themselves 'all [their] possible music', as he says Donne's do? Surely not: musical variety is abjured in these lines, and the autonomy Eliot finds in Donne's verse is cruelly caricatured in the countenance of inflexible insistence they present. In fact, just as for Ricks '[t]he fact that the tone is *not* definitely indicated, indeed

³¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 158.

³² *Ibid.*, 159.

³³ *Ibid.*, 161.

is definitely not, might be something dramatized within the character', the hectoring voice these accents give rise to might equally be read as a dramatic effect.³⁴ It appears to be a formal principle in Hill's text that form interrupts its own apprehension of coherence in the despoliation of its most cherished repertoire of balanced cadences and rhetorical nuances.

A second American precedent for this poem's principle of form is arrived at by way of some lines on the final page of *Speech! Speech!*, where Hill identifies the model behind his stress-patterning: 'English Limper | after the English Sapphic' (SS 60). Peter McDonald observes the connection between the *OED*'s citation for 'Limper' – 'Obadiah Walker in 1673, on "Archilochus and Hipponax two very bad poets"' and the multiple ways in which the broken rhythms 'announce and enact Hill's struggle, an encounter the consequence of which is to lame the lyric self'.³⁵ However there is a precise connection to another modernist long poem, William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, book one of which ends with a quote from John Addington Symonds:

In order apparently to bring the meter still more within the sphere of prose and common speech, Hipponax ended his iambics with a spondee or a trochee instead of an iambus, doing thus the utmost violence to the rhythmical structure. These deformed and mutilated verses were called *χολίαμβοι* or *ιάμβοι σκάζοντες* (lame or limping iambics). They communicated a curious crustiness to the style. The choliambi are in poetry what the dwarf or cripple is in human nature. Here again, by their acceptance of this halting meter, the Greeks displayed their acute aesthetic sense of propriety, recognizing the harmony which subsists between crabbed verses and the distorted subjects with which they dealt – the vices and perversions of humanity – as well as their agreement with the snarling spirit of the satirist. Deformed verse was suited to deformed morality.³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 162.

³⁵ Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, 200.

³⁶ Quoted in William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 40.

Hill would have been aware of this poem, as one blogger has pointed out, having supervised Margaret Glynne Lloyd's PhD thesis on it in the seventies.³⁷ Lloyd's study cites a letter from Williams to John Holmes in 1952, in which he describes how the rational structures of classical prosody can be plundered and deployed only in fragmentary form, and how the resulting poem must show the marks of this process:

What shall we say more of the verse that is to be left behind by the age we live in if it does not have some of the marks the age has made upon us, its poets? ... They should be horrible things, those poems. To the classic muse their bodies should appear to be covered with sores. They must be hunchbacked, limping. And yet our poems must show how we have struggled with them to measure and control them. And we must SUCCEED even while we succumb.³⁸

'To the classic muse their bodies should appear to be covered with sores': the presence, in Hill's late texts, of scattered stress-marks and truncated caesurae shows how literally he takes Williams's injunction that modern poems 'must show how we have struggled with them to measure and control them'. Rather than (or as well as being) patronising directives to a readership assumed in advance to be cloth-eared, Hill's diacritics are more crucially indices of the extent to which he despairingly conceives of traditional prosody as incommensurable with modernity:

EQUITY, ELIGIBILITY, CULPABILITY,
heard through a cloud – acoustic din – the rage;
that THEATRE OF VOICES, nóble | if nót

³⁷ See Margaret Glynne Lloyd, *William Carlos Williams's Paterson: A Critical Reappraisal* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, Inc, 1980), 13: 'I am deeply grateful to Mr. Geoffrey Hill for being such a conscientious and inspiring supervisor of my Ph.D. thesis on *Paterson* at the University of Leeds, England. This book has benefited immeasurably from his countless invaluable suggestions and rigorous standards', and *Name to Conjure*, <<http://nametoconjure.blogspot.com/2009/02/solved.html>>, accessed 16/12/2010.

³⁸ Margaret Glynne Lloyd, *William Carlos Williams's Paterson*, 155.

ridiculous.
(SS 52)

Ennobled by capitalisation, the ‘THEATRE OF VOICES’ is the vehicle for Hill’s moral categories, though a sense of resignation is made explicit in Hill’s ascription of the ‘ridiculous’ to this choice of vehicle. (In keeping with Hill’s habit of referring to the production of late twentieth-century music, though, ‘THEATRE OF VOICES’ might also refer to the vocal ensemble founded in 1990 by Paul Hillier.) If ‘our word is our bond’, such sureties are made more difficult to legislate for in the presence of the ‘acoustic din’ which renders traditional prosody quaint, and which intrudes upon the balanced proportion of classical syntax, as we see in these lines. For the swiftly sketched nouns – ‘acoustic din’, ‘the rage’ – are set down between hyphens as afterthoughts that amplify or qualify ‘a cloud’ (assuming, that is, that ‘EQUITY, ELIGIBILITY, CULPABILITY’ are what are heard, and are not the things doing the hearing). Following the semicolon, signalling further amplification, ‘that THEATRE OF VOICES’ floats uncertainly above its referent – is it the trio of moral categories it refers to, or the ‘cloud – acoustic din – the rage’? Ending on the hunchbacked ‘nóble | if nó’, with its doubly redundant caesura (both pushed to the edge of the line, and doing the work a comma could just as easily do), and doubly redundant ‘ó’, the line limps to a lank conclusion, only just tautened by the line-break connecting it to ‘ridiculous’. In effect, Hill seems to be saying that the drawing out from ‘acoustic din’ – from the articulated object world that extorts its own syntax from the poet who wants to obtain a purchase upon it – of moral categories with what Hill would term ‘intrinsic value’ is a noble and perhaps a ridiculous occupation. Noble, because Hill believes the duty of poetry is to delineate the terms of objective judgement and, on occasion, to produce the epiphanies

in which that judgement is made manifest: to render clear Frost's 'posture' proper to the sense. Ridiculous, because this posture is not quite the poet's own: in this case, equity, eligibility and culpability, though once concepts enshrined in religious, moral and legal maxims, now each carry less exalted connotations drawn, in the main, from the world of commerce. In burdening the obvious stresses with superfluous accents, there is a hint of the enforced simplification Hill saw in Green's public lectures. Hill is risking the awkwardness and stupidity of these accents in order to point up the yawning gap between his text and its audience, which despite his poetic ambitions, and because of them, must be included in his act of judgement.

4. Ephemeral thought

In the previous chapter, I read the beginning of section 57 of *Speech! Speech!* as a poem which deflates its own earnest petitions to universalised notions like *amor*.

Shów you something. Shakespeare's elliptical
late syntax renders clear the occlusions,
cálls us to account. For what is abundance
understand redemption. Whó – where – are our
clowns | WET 'N' DRY: will the photographs
reveal all? Só hate to be caught in mid-
gesture, you knów thát, noble CARITAS,
proud AMOR – pledge your uncommon thoughts.
(SS 29)

However, if the poet's request that *amor* 'pledge [its] uncommon thoughts' parodically carries with it the tone of a zealot endowed with undue confidence in the genius of his idol, we catch only half of this poem's understanding of universals if we see its deployment of

them simply as ideology critique. Above and beyond this, Hill displays a real faith in the possibility of trust in the speech-act. Continuing his petition to love ('proud AMOR – pledge your uncommon thoughts'), Hill writes:

See all as miracle, a natural graft,
as mistletoe ravelling the winter boughs
with nests that shine. And some recensions
better than that I should hope.
(SS 29)

Requiring of *amor* a synoptic objectivity ('See all'), Hill continues with a reminder that, as he curtly suggested in 'Psalms of Assize', such objectivity must 'Ascend through declension'. Symbols of admixture and confusion ('ravelling', 'graft') combine to produce objects that 'shine' (reminiscent of the testimony of Green's students cited in 'Perplexed Persistence'). It's in these passages of natural observation that the strident typography is mute, evidence of a certain trust in the performative efficacy of language. As this stanza moves to the next, Hill explores the possibility of this trust, having at the outset of the poem mooted the possibility that he might have to 'persist without sureties' (SS 2). The stanza begins with a line that appears to mock the hope of the kind of 'recension' he mentioned in the previous line:

Better^l than that I should hópe, assign me
to bond with some other fatedness
coveted as free will. I can read
dry-eyed – C. Brontë cleared it with a word –
Olney's own castaway *en famille*. Manic
depressive, wrote about hares. PERFORCE
his word. Better than that I should hope: my
word is my bond, my surety, my entail.
(SS 29)

The poem Hill reads ‘dry-eyed’ is William Cowper’s ‘The Castaway’, a poem written in Cowper’s final years, and which deploys an incident in George Anson’s narrative of global circumnavigation as an analogy of Cowper’s sense of abandonment by God. In Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* Caroline Helstone reads the poem out loud to her friend Shirley Keeldar, ‘with a steady voice’ marvelled at by the auditor. Caroline replies that ‘no tear blistered the manuscript of “The Castaway”. I hear in it no sob of sorrow, only the cry of despair’.³⁹ Caroline’s demand of poetry is that it fulfil the kind of therapeutic role for the writer she believes ‘The Castaway’ performed for Cowper: ‘It seems to me, Shirley, that nobody should write poetry to exhibit intellect or attainment. Who cares for that sort of poetry? Who cares for learning – who cares for fine words in poetry?’⁴⁰ Cowper’s poem, notable for its absence of poetic ornament, eschews a lachrymose attitude towards his fate in a way which might have been approved by the Coleridge whom Hill cites as writing, in *Anima Poetae*, ‘Poetry which excites us to artificial feelings makes us callous to real ones’.⁴¹ As one critic notes, ‘Wordsworth felt that Cowper and Burns were the two “great” authors who helped him to counteract the “mischievous” and extravagant manner of contemporary English and German writers’.⁴² ‘The Castaway’ is hence linked, for Hill, with the attack on the popular taste for certain kinds of poetry that occupied Wordsworth’s ‘Preface’, and with T.H. Green’s Wordsworthian critique of popular philosophy.

³⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 227.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴¹ ‘Romantic Poetry – COLERIDGE’, 6.

⁴² Charles Ryskamp, ‘Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* in Their Time’, in Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (eds.), *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 357-372, at 357.

‘PERFORCE’, in Hill’s stanza, is capitalised, alerting us to its significance in the poem’s arrangement of hypostatized judgement-concepts. It is taken from the fourth stanza of Cowper’s poem:

He shouted: nor his friends had fail’d
 To check the vessel’s course,
 But so the furious blast prevail’d,
 That, pitiless perforce,
 They left their outcast mate behind⁴³

‘Pitiless’ is the word Hill used in his description of Wordsworth’s poem ‘Old Man Travelling’: ‘The bleakness of the language is an epitome of the bleakness of the world’s indifference. Old Man Travelling inhabits the borderline where pity meets the pitiless and is almost denied by it’. It would appear that for Cowper at the time he composed ‘The Castaway’ (his last poem in English) amor and caritas could not be thought of as sureties in the implacable face of the doctrine of reprobation. Perhaps Hill could give assent to the sense of ineluctability with which others in the community are ‘pitiless perforce’ – are driven to act in a way contrary to community spirit by forces (whether they be religious, social, or economic) beyond their control. But for Cowper, ‘No voice divine the storm allay’d, / No light propitious shone’, whereas Hill’s repeated perceptions of gleaming, shining objects offer a rebuke to Cowper’s solipsistic darkness.

Hence, perhaps, the note of repudiation sounded in Hill’s emphasis: ‘PERFORCE / his word’: Cowper’s word, not Hill’s. In place of the despair of disappointed evangelism, Hill retains faith in language as a sphere of reconciliation: ‘Better than that I should hope: my / word is my bond, my surety, my entail’. In this, the third iteration of the clause ‘Better than

⁴³ William Cowper, ‘The Cast-away’, in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), iii, 214-216.

that I should hope', the diacritics have dropped away (the first two read: 'better than *thát* I should hope' and 'Better *l* than that I should *hópe*'). This final recension abjures the 'PERFORCE' of Cowper's despair in the face of objective obduracy, as well as Hill's despairingly strident typography: the clause now vibrates with an alternating frequency between its two predecessors. Hill's 'surety', that which allows for accuracy, trust, and, the word hints, a legal right to his position in the community, is language which, like this final recension, hums with the possibilities of alternative senses, intonations and emotions, and by retaining some freedom among the various ways the meaning could be sounded obtaining an objective standpoint vis-à-vis the world.

As Hill's allusion to the elliptical syntax of Shakespeare's late works in the previous stanza suggests, his own contorted syntax in *Speech! Speech!* is a method of 'render[ing] clear the occlusions': of both bringing to light those elements in the world which block the free flow of thought, and of recognising them, of rendering them transparent (perhaps with a view to future new forms of conceptuality). What does Hill have in mind when he writes of 'Shakespeare's elliptical / late syntax'? An indication is provided by the strange repetition, in *Speech! Speech!*, of a fragment of German, variously broken across the line (I quote from section 79): '*Mein Ariel, hast du, l der Luft, nur ist...?*' (SS 40). The words are those of Schlegel's translation of *The Tempest*, perhaps (given the prevalence of musical motifs in Hill's late works), taken from Frank Martin's setting of the translation in the opera *Der Sturm* (1956).⁴⁴ Schlegel's words translate these lines, with Prospero addressing Ariel, who has returned from the captives and whose narration of their state is the incentive for Prospero to release them:

⁴⁴ Frank Martin, *Maria-Triptychon; Sechs Monologe aus Jedermann; Suite from 'Der Sturm'* (Chandos, CHAN 9411, 1995).

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
 Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
 (One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,
 Passion as they) be kindlier moved than thou art?⁴⁵

There is a point of dispute among editors over the punctuation at ‘sharply’, specifically whether the comma present in the folio edition ought to be preserved: if it is, ‘Passion’ is a verb (‘To show, express, or be affected by passion or deep feeling’ [*OED*]), if not, ‘Passion’ is what Prospero ‘relish[es]’ (feels) as much as the next man. Even without this controversy the syntax in these four lines is recognisably elliptical and estranging: the parcelled clauses in the first line sit between the hesitations created by commas, leaving units like ‘a touch’ and ‘a feeling’ hesitating between noun and verb, things on the verge of becoming actions. If they’re attached to the substantive verb ‘art’, then the insubstantial Ariel is but ‘a touch, a feeling’; if to ‘Hast’, Ariel is in possession of material experience – the nouns becoming verbal nouns – of human suffering. Similarly, the question Prospero then asks (‘shall not myself ... ?’) needs to wait for several subordinate clauses to complete itself, the sentence expanding as he argues his own shared nature with those he had lost touch with.

But the words repeated as a leitmotif in *Speech! Speech!* leave most of this passage unspoken: ‘*Mein Ariel, hast du, der Luft, nur ist...?*’ – ‘My Ariel, hast thou, (which) art but air...?’ Hill’s highly selective quotation, which leaves in place the question mark, but deletes most of the question, significantly alters its emphasis. In place of the happy conclusion in which Prospero’s humanity is restored to him, we have the consternation of

⁴⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1999), 5. 1. 21-4.

self-proclaimed humanity shocked to discover the power of human judgement invested in the insubstantial, in a spirit or a shade. Resolve and thematic closure is replaced with an aporetic riddle: the philosophical signature by which matter is permitted to appear, filtered through the romantic notion of the fragment as practised in Coleridgean philosophy. Indeed in three of the four passages in which Hill repeats ‘*Mein Ariel, hast du, der Luft, nur ist...?*’, contemplation, vision, and fragmentary representation are all at issue. Take section 65:

Fragments of short score: inspirational I
find them. Visionary insights also
as they are called. Clouds of dark discernment
part wrath, part thankfulness, the full spectrum
rekindling [...]
It is not nature but nurture | brings
redemption to mind. *Mein Ariel,*
hast du, der Luft, nur ist...?
(SS 33)

In this stanza Hill introduces a fragment of short score (a musical score inscribed with only a subset of the composition’s full instrumentation) – Frank Martin’s opera *Der Sturm* reduced to a fragment of its libretto. That something might be articulated in so unsubstantial a medium as music, as an air, constitutes Hill’s ‘inspiration’. But this inspiration itself comes from a text – *The Tempest* – that is intimately connected with Bradley and his idealist ‘somehow’. For the poem of Eliot’s that, as we have seen, Hill considered to be the most Bradleian, though it is also one of his most Shakespearean, ‘Marina’, contains lines which enact the dissolution of the material into something more conducive to visionary judgement. ‘Marina’’s instances of sublunary carnality, the poem notices,

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
 A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
 By this grace dissolved in place⁴⁶

By 'wind', 'breath', and 'song', the substantial is dissolved: in its place the 'simple atonement' of 'far fetched / comedy' (C 63), and the discovery of humanity beyond oneself ('This form, this face, this life, / Living to live in a world of time beyond me').⁴⁷ There are clear echoes here of the German Idealist notion of aesthetic reflection, in which something as unsubstantial as an aesthetic apprehension (a feeling, rather than a concept or a verifiable item of sense-data) can play a constitutive role in one's conceptuality.

Musical variations are played on this Shakespearean leitmotif in *Speech! Speech!*, these variations being triggered by the roaming incisions Hill's line-breaks make in the German text. Section 79:

*Mein Ariel, hast du,
 der Luft, nur ist...? Captive I regain
 immortality's incarnate lease. Endure
 vigil's identity with entrapment.
 There are worse obsessions. YOU HAVE MY LEAVE,
 GO NOW I free spirit shaped by captivity,
 forsaken in the telling, so to speak,
 the end of contemplation: overnight
 the first frail ice I edging across the pond,
 self-making otherness by recognition –
 even as I describe it.
 (SS 40)*

Instantiation of the self by contingency is at stake here: the solution to the problems of interpellation and the definitional circulations of power ('entrapment') as theorised by so

⁴⁶ T.S. Eliot, 'Marina', in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, 115.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 116.

many texts in Hill's professional field (the New Historicism of Greenblatt and others) is found by Hill in a dialectic inspired by Green and Bradley. Like the pond-water solidifying into ice, where the marked caesura is the edge of this 'self-making otherness', the constrictions placed upon spirit's expression by the objective world (syntax, the sedimentation of history in language) make that spirit something other. Hill describes this process using terms reminiscent of Green's discussion of 'Popular Philosophy': in section 79, Hill sees it as a process of 'self-making otherness by recognition – / even as I describe it'. In the process of description, the 'self-making otherness' (a founding of the self by the recognition of alterity, *and* a constitution of objecthood through a recognition of one's own reason in the world) enacts precisely Green's idealist philosophy ('That which he calls nature ... is traversed by the currents of his intellect, and where intellect has gone sentiment has followed').

Evidence that the diacritical marks are not considered a necessary supplement to accurate judgement is provided in the fact that, at those moments where Hill seeks identity between subject and nature, in the descriptive epiphanies or objective correlatives in which the bond of judgement comes closest to completion, the diacritical marks, particularly the accents, are fewer. Section 81, for example, begins:

Again: the saltmarsh in winter. By dawn
 drain-mouths grow yellow beards. Old man's duty,
 vigilance so engrained, shabby observance,
 dirty habit, wavelets chinning the shore-line.
 Rich in decrepit analogues I he sees:
 archipelagos, collops of sewage,
 wormed ribs jutting through rime. Sun-glanced,
 it is striking, vacant, a far consequence,
 immaterial reflection beautifully
 primed
 (SS 81)

Bonds between the subject and the world, acts of judgement, are thematised in these passages: the contemplation which ends in the attempt to transfer observed particulars into language which reflects, in its syntax, rhythm and sound, the experience of contemplation and the object contemplated. We are reminded, in the drain-mouths' 'yellow beards', of Ariel's description of Gonzalo, whose 'tears run down his beard, like winter's drops / From eaves of reeds', which in turn reminds us of the unsubstantiality of this Shakespearean spirit who was able to return Prospero to his humanity by a reminder of the humanity beyond him.⁴⁸ And we are thereby reminded of the possibility that mere form – of fragments of sound, cadences and structures of syntax – might constitute the apprehension of an object world beyond the self. A similar moment is expressed by the last words of another stanza engorged with descriptive syntax, section 16: 'hard-come-by loss of self | self's restitution' (SS 8). These moments of description, then, are moments of atonement, of the bond between subject and world. As such, they partake of a mystery equal to the mystery of human judgement Kant discerned in the human soul. As Hill writes, 'My / faux-legalisms | are to be vouched for, / even if unwitnessed, ás are many things / I could indicate but not show' (SS 55).

Again, this horizon is provided with a philosophical exegesis by Bradley, one to which Hill ascribes much significance in 'Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot'. Hill is quoting a passage from Bradley's 'On Appearance, Error and Contradiction':

'The "this" of feeling ... everywhere, I agree, is positive and unique. But when, passing beyond mere feeling, you have before you what you call "matter of fact" the case forthwith is altered. The uniqueness has now to be made "objective". It has to

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5. 1. 16-7.

be contained within the judgement and has to qualify the context of your truth'. Correlatively – and this is characteristic of Bradley and, moreover, adds the essential complicating factor – there is failure and its consequences: 'you have failed to get within the judgement the condition of the judgement. And the accomplishment of this (if it were possible) would involve the essential transformation of your judgement' (CCW 561)

For judgement to make the material of experience 'objective' means to universalise it: to see it as part of reality, as part of a whole, rather than (just) in its 'uniqueness' as a floating particular. Therefore the truer you want your judgement to be – the closer you want it to get to reality, the more of its material it must convert into reality: 'The more conditions of your assertion are included in your assertion, so much the truer and less erroneous does your judgement become'.⁴⁹ Hill seems to stray beyond the Bradleian boundary when he claims, in 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics', that 'the crucial step' in writing a poem 'requires getting within the judgement the condition of the judgement' (CCW 566). This would be the answer to Caygill's question about tying another knot in the tangled history of judgement. For Bradley asks: 'But can the conditions of the judgement ever be made complete and comprised within the judgement? In my opinion this is impossible. And hence with every truth there still remains some truth, however little, in its opposite'.⁵⁰ The overwhelming release of multiple connotations over the course of a series of pictorial sketches can be tremendously satisfying, as vectors within the development of a word's history converge on the contours of a scene, typically one of natural beauty, that is thereby enlivened by a sense of the interaction of nature and culture. However, I would argue that in these passages, too few of the conditions of judgement are brought to bear upon the judgement. *Speech! Speech!* is best viewed telescopically, as an undulant landscape of

⁴⁹ Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality*, 252-3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

frustration. Too often, if viewed as a series of poems, or when Hill's individual poems from other collections are read, the conditions brought within the scope of the judgement are selective. Consider, for example, the differences between these two passages from Hill's collection *Without Title* (a collection that bears an epigraph from Bradley):

Profoundly silent January shows up
clamant with colour, greening in fine rain,
luminous malachite of twig-thicket and bole
brightest at sundown.
(‘Epiphany at Hurcott’)

No, put it this way: cancel, expunge, annul,
self-reference. Philosophy keeps up
embarrassment and expense. I’d quit us
of further scars had these now been incurred.
You’re magisterial in judgement’s gorge
(‘Discourse: For Stanley Rosen’)⁵¹

Even allowing for the fitting of rhetoric to occasion, these passages bespeak two considerably diverging attitudes towards poetic judgement that are better considered as corollaries: the first lyrical, elegiacal (the glimmer before ‘sundown’) and empirical; the second discursive, despairing (‘cancel, expunge, annul’) and combative. Hill, in ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’, goes on to say that, rather than moving towards that moment when judgement includes its conditions, ‘I find myself repeatedly urging, “how recalcitrant, how obstructive, this material is”’ (CCW 566). At what point, then, does he consider it appropriate to give himself leave to stop the process of self-interruption and to blaze out despairingly in epiphanic detail or adversarial banter? At these moments the endless bringing to light of new conditions, of new facets of the acoustic din, is silenced by

⁵¹ WT 23, 26.

one morose yawn of the Absolute. By contrast *Speech! Speech!*, with its prosodic obligato, voices an exorbitant sensibility that frustrates itself in the attempt to bring judgement to bear upon these two contradictory facets of Hill's lived experience. In so doing the intensities of philosophical thought and the conceptuality of perceptual awareness are thrown effectively into relief.

SECTION III: WORDS AND THINGS

CHAPTER 5: PERFORMATIVE SPEECH

In my first chapter I discussed the possibility that lyric poetry might be thought of as offering a kind of diagnosis. This would represent at least a partial vindication of the ‘craft of vision’: the pursuit of the conditions for recognising modernity’s contradictions and thereby giving expression to a dissatisfaction with Enlightenment reason. Throughout the thesis I have tried to show that such vision could not rely merely on the careful observation of particulars, but that a degree of abstraction or universality is required in order to cognise their relationships with one another, and hence to obtain an understanding which exceeds the boundaries imposed by already existing facts and concepts. I want briefly to look at the final section of Hill’s early poem ‘Doctor Faustus’, which incorporates several of the philosophical strategies that were brought to light in the discussion of abstraction and vision in my introduction:

The Innocents have not flown;
Too legendary, they laugh;
The lewd uproarious wolf
Brings their house down.

A beast is slain, a beast thrives.
Fat blood squeaks on the sand.
A blinded god believes
That he is not blind.
(CP 52-3)

What is the meaning of the final cryptic lines ‘A blinded god believes / That he is not blind’? The repetition of ‘blinded ... blind’ associates these lines with the ‘beast ... beast’ of the first line of the stanza: this structural repetition would suggest that repetition as such has

some thematic significance for the poem. Something presumed missing or overturned is discovered to have been with us all along: 'A beast is slain, a beast thrives'. Sacrifice of the bestial – the act of expulsion or expiation or propitiation of some numinous and frightening quality in nature – results merely in the reintroduction of fear – the beast thrives. This reintroduction of the terrifying quality of our relationship with nature is, however, achieved without our being conscious of it. This is suggested by the confidence of the 'god' who 'believes / That he is not blind'. He is blind to the terror surreptitiously reconfirmed in the act of subduing terror.¹

Parallels might be drawn between this perpetuation of myth in the act of self-differentiation and the varying attitudes to a universalising reason in the name of objectivity as outlined so far in this thesis. Contra those philosophers who proclaimed the death of Enlightenment reason ('A beast is slain') in order to justify their claims to diagnostic accuracy (or 'vision'), the writers I discussed in my introduction (including Bernstein, Caygill and Rose) found that reason was not so easily disposed of. In chapter 3 I discussed how hypostatized concepts (like *amor* and *caritas*) could not, for Hill, simply be extinguished in the name of ideology-critique. On the contrary, they formed part of the already-existing objectivity of thought without which new conceptuality, no matter how much it wanted to leave them behind, could not begin to be thought. Hence the first line above: 'The Innocents have not flown'. Any thought that innocence might be a thing of the past, that we are living in an age which has disposed of such myths in the name of reason,

¹ As an aside, I associate the use of 'god' here with a comment made by Hill in "'Perplexed Persistence": the Exemplary Failure of T.H. Green': 'As Blake said, the accuser is god of this world'. The 'Accuser' is Blake's figure for dogmatic legal and religious judgement, and therefore stands for the person in possession of confidence in their judgements. 'To the Accuser Who Is the God of This World' is the title of the epilogue to Blake's short emblem book *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise*. William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 863.

is premature: they are 'Too legendary'. They are not simply 'Too legendary' in the sense that by virtue of their antiquity they oppose thought with an obtuseness too fixed to uproot: they are part of thought's own preconditions.

In this section I will explore Hill's relationships to a poet and to a philosopher, each of whom is thought of by Hill as a 'blinded god' who 'believes / That he is not blind'. Ezra Pound, for whom lyric diagnosis constitutes the ultimate abstract justification of poetry, and J.L. Austin, whose empiricism mocks abstraction in his pursuit of diagnostic veracity, are the subject of Hill's essay 'Our Word Is Our Bond'. Each is convinced of the diagnostic efficacy of language, and Hill recognises that he is indebted to their vision even as he attempts to find a perspective from which to critique their presuppositions. This attempt, I will argue, involves coming to an understanding of a different kind of blindness, one which will prove important in the next chapter.

I begin with an outline of the ways Pound conceived of poetry's relationship to the social (and the implications of these conceptions for a political poetry), before moving to consider in depth the philosophical aspects of 'Our Word Is Our Bond'. In particular I wish to show that Hill looks to the support of idealist philosophy in his engagement with the problems arising from Austin's empiricism. Images of blindness and blankness will be found to be shared between 'Our Word Is Our Bond' and the poem sequence *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*.

1. The example of Ezra Pound

In his study *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, Donald Davie comments that ‘Pound has made it impossible for anyone any longer to exalt the poet into a seer’.² Davie’s contention is that Pound provided official culture with the excuse it needed to relegate art, whose aspiration towards predictive or diagnostic social analysis is in Pound’s life and work exposed as pathologically eccentric, to a realm in which its evaluations have no intelligible relation to the real world. ‘[O]ut of the Bohemia he is condemned to,’ writes Davie, ‘the poet cannot truthfully see or investigate public life at all’.³ Pound’s increasingly irrational assessment, in the thirties and forties, of the economic causes of political injustice motivates not just the poetry written during that time, but the journalism and letters to friends and eminent politicians, in America and Italy, which form the far greater bulk of his written output in that period.⁴ In them we see chastening evidence of Pound’s quixotic belief that he could instigate policy reform by dint of energetic, if vague, reaffirmations of what he saw as fundamental economic facts, guaranteed not by anything so empirical as sociopolitical analysis, but by his status as poet. Pound’s valuation of this status derived from his long-held belief that the poet’s task requires close attention to linguistic precision, and that this honing of verbal accuracy advances (here Pound’s turn to Confucius in the early thirties comes into play) the accurate categorisation of familial, social, and political values. In

² Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 243.

³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴ See Leon Surette, *Pound in Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

short, Pound was led by a misplaced faith in the diagnostic abilities of the poet to espouse his political beliefs with a strength of conviction that brooked no hesitation, doubt or disagreement, and which meant that, when his beliefs came into conflict with the more complex contingencies of real political situations, he could only respond with incoherent bombast. Extradited to Washington at the end of the war to be tried for treason, Pound (for reasons that have not been definitively established) was declared mentally unfit to stand trial, and was imprisoned in a ward for the criminally insane at St Elizabeth's hospital, where he remained for twelve years.

Davie is no doubt correct in his judgement that Pound's example has made it easier for the wardens of literary culture to dismiss as eccentric or unrealistic any subsequent incursions of the literary into politics. But it has also relieved poets of the responsibility to make such incursions. His conclusion that henceforth the poet can only speak truths 'when they operate in the eschatological time-span of religion, or even in the millennia of the archaeologist and the geographer' seems premature (as does his unquestioning acceptance of Pound's 'insanity').⁵ Why should the example of the errors committed by one writer in his dealings with history provoke a hasty withdrawal to a pre- or post-historical sanctuary? Davie's reasons are likely to be found in the post-war penumbra of disenchantment and frustration that characterised his and Olson's reaction to Pound's dogmatism. But he does strike a nerve in post-war poetic practice more generally. What is so unsettling about Pound's life and work is that, despite its manifest blunders and controversies, it presents the writers and critics who follow him with an instance of unparalleled commitment. For all his astonishing bigotry, few writers of the twentieth century have matched his devotion of a life to a (wildly misguided) vision of justice. Davie rightly sees the need to denounce and

⁵ Davie, *op. cit.*, 244.

retreat from this monomania, but in the process he turns poetry into something akin to an intellectual pastime.

Theodor Adorno's essay 'Commitment' is helpful in thinking about the options available to the poet who has diagnostic ambitions for his or her work. Adorno's strategy here is to address the issue without reducing it to a choice between committed and autonomous art. This acute polarisation of alternatives is self-negating, Adorno writes, since committed art, in attempting to approximate reality, negates the identity of art as something detached from reality, while the 'absolutization' that is autonomous art's telos precludes any contact with reality, despite the fact that this contact is 'its polemical a priori' – the foundation from which it launches its refusal.⁶ If it is true that the socioeconomic conditions of modernity enjoin the artist to forsake the approaches previously sanctioned by an individualistic, transcendental romanticism, the 'opposite' approach – an instrumental, materialist aesthetic that accentuates the communication of experience over the cultivation of musical, rhythmic or other formal qualities – is no more competent to cognise the social. (Adorno points out how the 'desire to take Brecht out of the repertory [in West Germany]' was 'superficial', because Brecht's plays, with their committed aesthetic, do not present a strong challenge to established ways of thinking.)⁷ Rather, Adorno advocates a lyricism pushed to its negative limit, where form is divested of its essentialist, organising capacities almost to the point of disintegration, without however losing a fragmentary sensuousness. He writes that the most significant artistic responses to atrocity gain their 'frightening power' from those moments denounced as formalist, moments which more empathetic,

⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, tr. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 77.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

traditional elegies lack.⁸ No guidelines are proposed in Adorno's essay for the 'correct' ratio of formal to conceptual constituents in art: any artwork runs the risk of aestheticising suffering in the production of sensuous artefacts which can all too easily become part of the repertoire of culture's reflex-responses to suffering. Some works of art move too far from the intelligible and devolve to formulaic play, 'decorative patterns', 'positivist formal arrangements, idle play with elements'. 'There is no firm criterion,' Adorno writes, 'for distinguishing between the determinate negation of meaning and the mere positivity of a meaninglessness that diligently grinds along on its own accord'.⁹

The two poles between which Adorno's essay oscillates – committed poetry explicitly thematising empirical data from the contemporary world, and autonomous poetry that turns its back on this world to elaborate its formal structures – are evident in discussions about two of Ezra Pound's early poems. Pound's poem-sequence 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley' is often read as a palinode to its predecessor 'Homage to Sextus Propertius':¹⁰ where the latter poem prefers 'a few pages brought down from the forked hill unsullied' to a poetry dictated by political events, 'Mauberley' begins to register the complicity of the aesthetic and the socio-political: 'We see τό καλόν / Decreed in the market place'.¹¹ In the later poem, Pound is less quick to take refuge on Helicon; instead, he prolongs the encounter between an aestheticism now viewed with suspicion and the realities of war and mass culture. However, such readings ignore the possibility that the refusal offered by 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' is not directed at political poetry, but at the official culture to which the explicitly political propaganda of, say, Virgil, pays tribute.

⁸ Ibid., 88.

⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

¹⁰ See Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28-30.

¹¹ Ezra Pound, *Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Faber, 1984), 207, 189.

Its political content is in its distancing from the work of those British poets engaged in ‘expound[ing] the distentions of Empire’.¹² Similarly, the section of ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’ which has perhaps aroused the most critical attention is its least explicitly political. At the centre of the poem is ‘Envoi (1919)’, a brazen work of lyric sonority couched in archaic syntax and vocabulary. The decades of critical debate centering on ‘Envoi (1919)’, and on the relationship of the personae that stand behind the two halves of the poem it separates, testify to the complexity with which Pound articulates the position of the poet in society, and the critical perspectives available to him. ‘Envoi (1919)’ is a test case for any defence of poetry and its strategies of public and private evaluation and renewal.

Hill’s essay “‘Envoi (1919)’” is predominantly an analysis of the social and literary factors that contributed to the contemporary reception of ‘Mauberley’. Hill’s analysis of the poem in its relation to the dominant literary trends of the time makes for fascinating reading, finely appraising the strategies by which Pound angles for a place in the literary world, balancing between the modernist mandate to renew already existing lyric forms and the danger of being welcomed by an audience of readers and editors all too ready to confuse rigorous assessment of tradition with picturesque archaism. Limits of space preclude a longer study of Hill’s literary historical investigation of the modernist publishing world in this chapter, but I’d like to draw attention to the way Hill defines the terms in which lyric vision might be conceived.

The world’s obtuseness, imperviousness, its active or passive hostility to valour and vision, is not only the object of [Pound’s] denunciation; it is also the necessary

¹² Ibid., 207.

circumstance, the context in which and against which valour and vision define themselves: 'In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it'.
(*CCW* 246)

Exactly the moment the lyric appears most canorous, at which it proclaims its autonomy, is that at which the objective world it has seemingly retreated from exerts its pressure. A condition of poetic vision, on this account, is precisely the edifice of social relations from which this vision requires some distance.

Hill recognises the twofold danger in seeking an individuation that is forbidden by modernity: that the writer sinks into either a belletristic antiquarianism, or a dogmatic insistence on the poet's vatic authority. Both of these pitfalls, as Hill acknowledges, claimed Pound at one point or another in his writing career. But it's worth noting that for Hill, Pound's later political misdemeanours have not invalidated (as they have for Davie) what Hill sees as a vocational reality for poetry: the possibility of what he rather quaintly calls 'valour and vision', but which can be reformulated as the capacity for lyric poetry to grasp the social conditions of its inception in ways that permit the critique of the status quo and the imagining of the new. Hill makes the same point using very different language at the end of the essay: 'The absolute is brought back to become a part of the relative and the conditional, the not quite it and the not quite not it; but, so circumstanced, is all the more fully and directly affirmed' (*CCW* 258). A 'full and direct' affirmation of lyric individuation is only arrived at via a rejection of plenitude and immediacy.

Indeed the change in tone, after the pages of close reading and documentary evidence, is striking. 'The absolute is brought back to become a part of the relative and the conditional' irresistibly recalls the diction of the British Idealists Hill had been reading in the preceding years. Admittedly, this vague resemblance is meagre evidence for the case

for Hill's philosophical investigation of poetic subjectivity: idealism doesn't have a monopoly on the vocabulary of the absolute, which has for decades been part of traditional literary critical terminology whenever the autonomy of lyric song has been at issue.¹³ But the self-correcting propulsion of Hill's thought, in which 'absolute' song and 'conditional' background noise inflect one another, owes something, I would argue, to the collection of citations and meditations on language and philosophy assembled three years earlier in his essay 'Our Word Is Our Bond'.¹⁴

2. Speech-acts

'Our Word Is Our Bond', first published in *Agenda* and subsequently reprinted in a collection of literary essays, is one of Hill's most frequently cited essays, but its philosophical content has yet to receive attention. The density of allusion to philosophy in this essay allows us to pose the question as to the degree to which philosophy is an enabling discourse for Hill's critical work, and the degree to which its performances complicate this work. It is not just Austin's *ideas* that are subjected Hill's analysis: it's also their performative qualities, those tonal and expressive characteristics that betray themselves in the articulation of an intellectual project. At the same time, Hill is attempting to clarify his own position on the relationship between poetry and society, a position which shifts over

¹³ See, for example, William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 188, writing about Shelley's 'To a Skylark': 'Its song ... becomes something absolute, fundamental, outside time, and underlying all terrestrial harmony', and Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, 1947), 75, where he speaks of one theory of poetry as 'a romantic raid on the absolute'.

¹⁴ "'Envoi (1919)'" was presented as one of the Clark lectures at Cambridge in 1986, and subsequently reprinted in *The Enemy's Country* (1991). 'Our Word Is Our Bond' was first published in *Agenda* 21/1 (1983) and reprinted in *LL*.

the course of his career. (In the next chapter this shift will be read through the late lectures ‘Rhetorics of Value’ and ‘Poetry and Value’.) Before going into Hill’s essay in detail, I will give a brief description of Austin’s philosophy.

Austin’s philosophy is most famously elaborated in the William James Lectures, which he delivered at Harvard in 1955, and which were posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words*. Its influence reached areas of inquiry far broader than ‘ordinary language philosophy’, to the fields of linguistics, jurisprudence, and literary theory. *How to Do Things with Words* begins by noting that certain problems in the tradition of philosophy in which Austin is working arise from an insufficient attention to the extra-grammatical characteristics of certain utterances. Previous philosophers, he argues, were too ready to divide language into verifiable statements and nonsense or special cases, with a grey area in between for sentences deploying technically-loaded language, ‘curious words like “good” or “all”, suspect auxiliaries like “ought” or “can”’.¹⁵ However, he argues, there is a category of utterance into which certain sentences fall which are neither nonsense nor falsifiable statements of fact. These are sentences which form part of an action which is incomplete without their accompaniment. At the outset he supplies some examples of sentences which are also actions: saying ‘I do’ in a marriage ceremony, or ‘I give and bequeath my watch to my brother’ as written in a will. In the case of these ‘performatives’, Austin writes,

¹⁵ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 5.

it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.¹⁶

For a performative to be effectual, it must be uttered in the ‘appropriate circumstances’: the person saying, ‘I do’, for example, must not already be married. This emphasis on a definable context is Austin’s contribution to a systematic theory of language. Rather than locate the meaning of an utterance in the speaker’s intention, which assumes a disembodied consciousness existing prior to expression, Austin ties meaning to convention and context. Any presumption of an inviolable inwardness leads, Austin implies, to moral chaos: ‘Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*’.¹⁷

Because performative utterances are a kind of doing rather than describing, it is impossible to say of them that they are true or false. In other words, you can’t read them as a report on the state of the world and define their success in terms of parity or dissimilarity, because they are part of the world they describe. However, there are ways of estimating the validity of a performative. A performative utterance that fails might, for example, not be called false but unhappy; as Austin puts it in a sentence Hill thought important enough to use as an epigraph to *The Lords of Limit*: ‘we call the doctrine of *the things that can be and go wrong* on the occasion of such utterances, the doctrine of the *Infelicities*’.¹⁸ Austin goes on to formulate a schema of varying degrees of infelicity. As Jonathan Culler observes, Austin’s theory is, as a result, predicated on failure: ‘The possibility of failure is internal to

¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14. See CCW 1.

the performative and a point of departure for investigating it. Something cannot be a performative unless it can go wrong'.¹⁹

But having established the initial distinction between a constative statement subject to empirical judgment as to its truth or falsehood, and a performative utterance for which such claims are irrelevant, Austin goes on to undo this distinction. Through a series of ultimately abortive investigations into the possibility of a grammatically sound criterion for a 'pure' performative, Austin concludes that the two forms previously distinguished – constative and performative – are co-dependent. A performative utterance depends for its felicity on a series of contextual facts all of which can be judged to be true or false; similarly a constative utterance implies the very act of describing, an act which can be classified as felicitous or infelicitous.²⁰ As a result Austin has recourse to a new set of terms to facilitate a more nuanced account of the performative nature of language. A 'locutionary' sentence is characterised by its reference to actual things or facts in the world. 'Illocutionary' utterances are those with which the speaker or writer performs an act, for instance pronouncing a verdict of 'guilty' in a court of law. By contrast, 'perlocutionary' describes the subsequent effects produced by an utterance: the emotional effect of a guilty verdict on the defendant, for example. These terms do not necessarily describe different kinds of sentence, but are dimensions to which any particular utterance may be said to conform in varying degrees.

In *How to Do Things with Words* and essays like 'A Plea for Excuses' and 'Pretending', Austin evolves a system which, by contrast with positivist conceptions of language such as that espoused in A.J. Ayer's philosophy, makes room for a wider

¹⁹ Jonathan Culler, 'Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin', *New Literary History* 13/1 (Autumn 1981), 15-30, at 18.

²⁰ *How to Do Things with Words*, 54-5.

spectrum of verbal expression, and moreover postulates an empirical reciprocity between word and world. All the omens are good for a philosophical justification of critical poetic agency. Except that, in a discussion of the completeness of his model, Austin states that certain kinds of utterance are to be excluded from it for the sake of logical consistency:

For example, if I say “Go and catch a falling star”, it may be quite clear what both the meaning and the force of my utterance is, but still wholly unresolved which of these other kinds of things I may be doing. There are aetiologies, parasitic uses, etc., various “not serious” and “not full normal” uses. The normal conditions of reference may be suspended, or no attempt made to make you do anything, as Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar.²¹

It is this exclusion of poetry from Austin’s vindication of the expressive power of language that forms the focus of Hill’s essay.

3. The diagnostic word in Hill, Pound, and Austin

In order to understand why Hill chose to write about Austin, it might be helpful to consider the ways in which Hill’s encounter with the philosopher’s body of work might fit into his critical concerns. I showed in chapter 2 how Hill’s criticism itself employs a kind of empiricism in so far as it conceives of language partly as an index of certain social and political pressures exerted upon the practice of writing in any given period. Hill’s approval of Austin’s technique is evident in his description, in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’, of Austin as a proponent of a ‘more formidable’ empiricism than that of ‘the early empiricists’ (by which he means philosophers like Hobbes and Locke) (*CCW* 147). Indeed the main tenets

²¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

of ordinary language philosophy, the movement of which Austin is the most celebrated proponent, bear comparison with Hill's approach. 'For every distinction of word and idiom that we find in common speech', writes Stuart Hampshire, 'there is a reason to be found, if we look far enough, to explain why this distinction exists'.²² Austin writes that 'ordinary language' 'embodies ... the inherited experience and acumen of many generations of men'.²³ Ordinary language philosophy conceives of language as a repository of the accumulated perceptions and judgements of its users. Hence certain moral and ethical problems ought first to be defined by appeal to their articulation in everyday language. While subsequent developments of speech act theory have concentrated on the linguistic side of Austin's philosophy, its attention was originally trained on what it saw as the real world beyond language: in ordinary language philosophy, Cavell writes, 'one can as appropriately or truly be said to be looking at the world as looking at language'.²⁴

Austin's theory of performative language goes some way to contributing to such a view of the relation between language and the social. As we have seen, what Austin takes issue with at the start of *How to Do Things with Words* is the notion that the most philosophically useful part of language is the declarative sentence, which can be resolved into the logical category of truth or falsehood. As the lecture series progresses, Austin not only introduces a category of language to which this does not apply, but he removes the distinction between constative and performative altogether. All language use is a kind of act, characterisable by felicity or infelicity, as well as (in some circumstances) truth or falsehood. With this conclusion in place, the real goal of ordinary language philosophy – to

²² Quoted in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100.

²³ J.L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 185.

²⁴ Cavell, op. cit., 99.

use language as a benchmark from which distinctions in the ‘real world’ can be deduced – is put on a stronger footing. One critic notes that ‘the subject of speech-act theory is the contribution that contextual factors make to the significance of a piece of discourse’;²⁵ while Richard Ohmann writes that, in contrast to the grammatical rules which determine the validity of a locutionary sentence, ‘the rules for illocutionary acts concern relationships among people’.²⁶ Speech act theory is not only about language: its *raison d’être* is to illuminate and analyse the ways language makes certain social behaviours, habits and institutions available to us, and, by implication, how we can thereby criticise and modify them.

This is precisely the connection at stake in the sentence of Pound’s which provides the provocation for ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’, though its priorities are reversed: ‘All values ultimately come from our judicial sentences’ (CCW 146). In context, Pound’s sentence is seen to be part of his conception of the poet as someone uniquely capable of making distinctions, and of making these distinctions *appear*:

If the poets don’t make certain horrors appear horrible who will? All values ultimately come from our judicial sentences. (This arrogance is not mine but Shelley’s, and it is absolutely true. Humanity is malleable mud, and the arts set the moulds it is later cast into. Until the cells of humanity recognize certain things as excrement, they will stay in [the] human colon and poison it. ...)²⁷

²⁵ David Gorman, ‘The Use and Abuse of Speech-Act Theory in Criticism’, *Poetics Today* 20/1 (Spring 1999), 93-119, at 94.

²⁶ Quoted in Peter J. Rabinowitz, ‘Speech Act Theory and Literary Studies’, in Raman Selden (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 8: From Formalism to Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 347-74, at 349.

²⁷ Letter to Felix E. Schelling, 9 July 1922. *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D.D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc, 1950), 181.

The principle that verbal distinction has an important role to play in political justice is close to the heart of Hill's critical aesthetic. Elsewhere Hill approvingly quotes Coleridge on the 'close connection between veracity and habits of mental accuracy [and] the beneficial after-effects of verbal precision in the preclusion of fanaticism'.²⁸ And as one critic has noted,

Pound's insistence that "The *mot juste* is of public utility. ... We are governed by words, the laws are graven in words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate" is a precept that has marked indelibly Hill's essays and poems.²⁹

However, as Pound's involvement in a political project founded on the authoritarian personality deepened, this insistence on the *mot juste* took on disturbing connotations. Note, for example, how the warning that 'certain things ... will stay in [the] human colon and poison it', in the letter quoted above, contains a disconcerting adumbration of an anti-Semitism which sees the Jews as bacilli in society.³⁰ Later, Pound's *Guide to Kulchur*, written at a time when his opinion of Mussolini as a political figurehead was at its highest, makes extensive use of Confucian philosophy in its attempts to bind verbal precision to authoritarian government. Quoting from his translation of the Confucian Analects, Ezra Pound established a rule of thumb by which to measure all public conduct:

²⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), ii, 143. Quoted in CCW 95.

²⁹ Avril Horner, 'The "Intelligence at Bay": Ezra Pound and Geoffrey Hill', *Paideuma* 22/1 – 22/2 (1993), 243-54, at 249.

³⁰ For Pound's use of the bacilli metaphor in relation to Judaism, see Robert Casillo, *Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 279-82.

Tseu-Lou asked: If the Prince of Mei appointed you head of the government, to what wd. you first set your mind?

KUNG: To call people and things by their names, that is by the correct denominations, to see that the terminology was exact.³¹

In 'Our Word Is Our Bond', Hill displays extraordinary critical intuition in pairing Austin and Pound together, a pairing no fully-accredited member of the Pound industry has yet thought to make. For Austin's philosophy offers a way of thinking through the relations between institutional authority and language that maintains the axiomatic call for verbal precision without sacrificing, as Pound arguably did, political self-consciousness.

'Our Word Is Our Bond' begins with an epigraph from Austin's article 'Performative Utterances' concerning the place of poetic utterance in speech act theory: if the speech-act occurs in a poem 'it would not be seriously meant and we shall not be able to say that we seriously performed the act concerned'.³² Austin makes this point elsewhere, several times: see the passage quoted above, and this, from near the beginning of *How to Do Things with Words*:

a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. ... Language in such circumstances is in special ways – intelligibly – used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use – ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolation* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration.³³

The exclusion of certain forms of expressive speech from Austin's system is at the centre of most literary-critical appropriations of speech-act theory, and formed the focal point of the

³¹ Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 16.

³² Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, 241. Quoted in CCW 147.

³³ *How to Do Things with Words*, 22.

famous dispute over Austin between Jacques Derrida and John Searle in the late seventies.³⁴ At issue, in the part of Derrida's essay 'Signature Event Context' which deals with Austin's theory, is the move by which philosophical systems present themselves as self-legitimizing unified theories. While Austin's philosophy is given credit for reinstating formerly excluded elements of speech (those which cannot be resolved into either of the categories *true* or *false*), Derrida claims that Austin simply repeats this exclusion with respect to what the latter calls the 'non-serious' – the fictional, poetic or citational. Further, in making use of this term 'serious', Austin is reinstating the notion of a prior intending consciousness which his theory had supposedly discarded.

Hill has explored the exclusion of poetry from the domain of philosophical inquiry before: in his examination of T.H. Green's writing, Hill devoted a significant portion of his argument to demonstrate the opportunistic ways poetry was deployed as an ancillary to Green's philosophy. Viewing poetic texts as immaterial place-holders for abstract emotions was a symptom, Hill thought, of Green's privileging his philosophic system over the language in which it was articulated – of his system's grammar over the materiality of its articulation. As we shall see, Hill is of the opinion that, by contrast, Austin's mode of philosophical writing is more aware of its expressive qualities; but this makes it all the more puzzling to encounter Austin's rejection *in toto* of the expressive resources enabled by literary forms. One way of reading Hill's essay is as a consideration of what happens when two writers, Austin and Pound, push to one side the poetic tact they most rely on in order to arrogate to themselves a consistent, coherent power of vision.

³⁴ See Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', *Glyph* 1 (1977), 172-197, John Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph* 2 (1977), 198-208, and Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.*, tr. Samuel Weber (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

No reference is made, in 'Our Word Is Our Bond', to the debate about Austin's exclusion of the literary that had exercised Derrida, Searle, and their followers. It might be useful to note, however, some of the points of agreement and difference between Hill's position and Derrida's. Like Derrida, it is part of Hill's object in 'Our Word Is Our Bond' to take issue with the exclusion of what is variously described as the fictional, the literary, poetry or citation. Michael North writes that 'instead of arguing [as Derrida does] that all language is parasitical or etiolated in the sense Austin applies only to literary language, Hill argues that literary language can be held to a stricter version of Austin's theory'.³⁵ In fact, Hill's argument is more in agreement with Derrida's than this analysis suggests. It is not quite accurate to say that Derrida concludes that all language is parasitical 'in the sense Austin applies only to literary language'. Derrida does not erase the distinction between fictional and real-world uses of language, rather he reverses their priorities, claiming that language which is in some way fictional, cited or performed is the basis for all other utterances.³⁶ Hill argues that language used for 'serious' purposes is often found to be dependent on the fictional (note that he doesn't go as far as Derrida, who claims that this is a universal phenomenon). At the outset Hill notes that 'legal distinctions may themselves be classifiable as "fictions" or "peculiar paradoxes"' (CCW 146). Furthermore, while North's comment that Hill wants to widen the scope of Austin's philosophy to extend to literature is true, this is also repeating a movement in 'Signature Event Context': for 'a stricter version of Austin's theory', to use North's words, would be one which refuses the easy option represented by the exclusion of a particular category of utterance, a refusal

³⁵ Michael North, 'The Word as Bond: Money and Performative Language in Hill's Mercian Hymns', *ELH* 54/2 (Summer 1987), 463-81, at 463.

³⁶ Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 17.

made by Austin with respect to non-falsifiable utterances, but balked at in the face of the literary utterance – precisely the criticism Derrida levels at Austin’s philosophy.

However, there are reasons to suggest that Hill’s reading of the exclusion of poetry in Austin’s philosophy is more sympathetic than Derrida’s. The most common defence of this exclusion is that Austin is only provisionally putting to one side a particularly problematic domain of language use in order to establish the foundations of his philosophy (which are, after all, only sketched out in a series of lectures and articles). John Searle writes:

Austin’s idea is simply this: if we want to know what it is to make a promise or make a statement we had better not start our investigation with promises made by actors on stage in the course of a play or statements made in a novel by novelists about characters in the novel, because in a fairly obvious way such utterances are not standard cases of promises and statement.³⁷

Poetry is not seen as disposable; it is rather that certain kinds of language-use are beyond the scope of what is only a preparatory set of notes towards a new theory of language. As Peter Dews remarks,

Austin is far from insensitive to the kinds of inexplicit, semi-conscious, and even unconscious “play-acting” which are essential to everyday speech ... Thus, Austin’s exclusion of overtly fictional, jocular or ironic speech-acts amounts to no more than the claim that, for the purpose of analysing pragmatic features of language, cases in which some of those features are *self-consciously suspended* are of little use.³⁸

³⁷ Searle, ‘Reiterating the Differences’, 204. Quoted in Culler, *op. cit.*, 20.

³⁸ Peter Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment: Essays on Contemporary European Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1995), 94.

It's difficult to give unequivocal assent to this line of defence, if only because, as one critic has noted, Austin repeats his charge that poetry isn't 'serious' (not that it isn't standard or paradigmatic, but not *serious*) at least ten times in his writing on the subject.³⁹ But it is clear that – when it comes to claiming social efficacy for literary texts – Hill is wary of taking poetry too seriously: Keats, Wallace Stevens and Pound are admonished by Hill for wanting to 'thrust [poetry] back into the theatre of litigation' (CCW 146). If Hill takes issue with Austin over the designation of poetry as 'parasitic' and 'etiolated', he stops short of claiming for it the kind of seriousness that these poets sought to affirm. Instead he seeks to preserve intact the separation from material life guaranteed by literature's formalism, but not without claiming for the latter a degree of critical power.

Hill's defence of formalism does not follow the New Critical route that readers of *Agenda*, the journal in which his essay first appeared, might have been used to. Instead, it pursues a course in large part dictated by idealist philosophy, filtered (not without some loss of clarity) through Coleridge. Hill refuses the Derridean coup by which poetic (or fictional) discourse is given priority over the empiricist 'substratum' of quotidian reality. Instead, Philip Sidney's opinion that the poet 'nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth' prompts Hill to reflect that 'the fiction can be given its proper status precisely because it does not claim that it could be "seriously performed"' (CCW 152).

What does Hill mean by poetry's 'proper status'? The answer to this brings in a convoluted tangle of texts from the tradition of Anglophone Idealism. 'Poetry', Hill says, 'has no "phenomena" in Austin's sense' – Austin's sense of 'phenomena' being the substratum to which language approximates its semantics. Rather, Hill says, poetry deals

³⁹ Maximilian de Gaynesford, 'The Seriousness of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* 59/1 (January 2009), 1-21, at 5.

with ‘noumena’. An endnote directs us to Coleridge’s marginal annotation to Richard Hooker’s *Ecclesiastical Polity*: ‘The law is *Res noumenon*; the Thing is *Res phoenomenon*’ (CCW 626). Given that the *OED* credits Kant for giving ‘noumenon’ to modern intellectual discourse, Hill takes a notably circuitous route around Kant to establish its credentials for his argument. As well as citing Coleridge on Hooker, the endnote points to the entry for ‘Νοέω’ (from which derives ‘noumena’) in Liddell and Scott’s *Greek English Lexicon*.⁴⁰ Hill’s statement establishes a complex relationship between poetry and philosophy. Kant’s first *Critique* is predicated on the premise that no knowledge of things in themselves – noumena – is possible. This banishment of traditional metaphysical questions – questions about freedom, God, immortality – is, in Hill’s conception of the proper material for poetry, reversed. Poetry is banned from any active participation in Austinian phenomena, but is granted in recompense a formalist playground where law or conceptuality as such is open to cognition. In alluding to Kantian metaphysics for his defence of poetry, or rather in specifically alluding, via Hooker and Plato, to a pre-Kantian philosophy in which noumena are the proper object of thought, Hill opens the possibility that poetry might be able to cognize certain relationships beyond the realm of the social status quo.⁴¹

How is this formalist knowledge articulated? In a reading of sonnet LXVIII of Spenser’s *Amoretti*, Hill defines it as ‘a form of troth-plight between denotation and connotation’: an utterance whose felicity derives from the management of the referential

⁴⁰ LL 191. Note that the reference to Liddell-Scott is not reproduced in CCW.

⁴¹ Note how Kant’s proscriptions are seen by Adorno to correspond to a bourgeois satisfaction with the status quo: Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* ‘was in effect the first work to give expression to the element of bourgeois resignation, to that refusal to make any significant statement on the crucial questions, and instead to set up house in the finite world and explore it in every direction’. Theodor Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, tr. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 6.

and contingent aspects of language.⁴² If the noumenal is equated, in Coleridge's definition, with law, poetic creation involves the establishing of laws which productively take up the historical noise sedimented in words (connotation) in order to produce new meanings (denotation). Spenser's poem is 'felicitous' in its production, from a range of verbal tokens including the key words 'deare' and 'loue', of new conceptualisations of divine and worldly love, and spiritual and material value. But this felicity can last only up to a certain point. Hill writes that by the final couplet, beginning 'So let vs loue, deare loue, lyke as we ought', the poem is gesturing towards a physical relationship whose terms lie outside its boundaries: 'The intelligence may be consummate but the consummation is elsewhere' (CCW 152). The poem 'knows its place', and 'respect[s] priority and status'. Hill thereby places strict limits on the possibility of poetry to embody knowledge of the legal and political operations that condition human society. Hill clearly isn't saying that these forms of knowledge are unavailable to human psychology. Rather, the kind of knowledge made available by poetry's autonomy isn't, in his opinion, able to grasp the constitutive forms of real political and legal power that operate upon the writer.

4. Blindness and stultification

Hill's discussion of poetry and knowledge leads to what Hill calls his essay's "'ineluctable" problem': the aporia between two ways of conceiving writing. One way views language use as a pragmatic social or epistemological tool: according to this view writing is like 'bearing a part in the conversation' (CCW 154, quoting Locke). The other, relativist view,

⁴² Cf. Adorno, *Notes to Literature: Volume Two*, 98, in which Joyce's work is argued to offer a 'truce' (etymologically identical to 'troth') between language as material and language as communicative channel.

emphasises that the multiplicity of a word's semantic content will always contribute to create misunderstandings in this conversation. Sidney, in his *Defence of Poetry*, is Hill's model as he tries to resist

two possible defensive postures: one, that the coercive power of the 'particular truth of things' makes all 'truth' merely contingent and relative; the other, that the status of the 'idea' provides the poets with an Archimedean ec-stasis, ... a place of serenely measured hypotheses.
(CCW 153)

In its articulation of this resistance, Hill's argument splinters into a dense collocation of philosophical positions. Each position is not presented as a specimen of a conceptual perspective which is then analysed and tabulated in relation to its competitors. Rather, in the disorientating concentration of citations Hill builds up a rich picture of conflicting perspectives on language use to show that no one position can account for what he seems to present as the metaphysical nature of language use, the fact that it is bound up with our subjective engagement with the world: "‘rhetoric’ is a part of the ontology of moral action' (CCW 168).

Poetry's place in this is equivocal: Hill has argued the scope of poetry's practical knowledge is limited by worldly contingency, yet he goes on to argue for its centrality to the articulation of moral value. It can, he suggests, offer a bridge between the passivity of the relativist, at the mercy of the word's materiality, and the instrumental approach of the utilitarian, wielding his sovereignty over language. This suggestion comes in the most philosophically-dense pages of the essay, and poetry's solution to the aporia thrown up by relativist and pragmatic views of language is presented, again, in idealist terms. Hill begins again (his prose often gives the impression of a series of fresh starts, or of new attempts to

imagine the problem at hand) by quoting the British Idealist (and T.H. Green's biographer) R.L. Nettleship, to the effect that, while there is a temptation to view words 'as mysterious agencies, under whose power we are', this should not lead us to abandon all hope of communication: 'If we all tend to become the "victims of words", the corollary is that we should mean something by our words, and know what we mean'. Nettleship floats the possibility of a communicative theory of language, but, Hill argues, he constructs his argument in such a way that the temptation Nettleship conjures only to refuse (the temptation to abdicate all responsibility for our language use) remains in play. 'By working with the "we" and "if" clauses,' Hill writes, 'the critic chooses to remain "within the process"' (CCW 158).

Remaining 'within the process' is the key figure for Hill's critical practice, and its significance as such has been recognised by those critics who cite the following passage without, however, dwelling on its provenance in British Idealist philosophy. Quoting T.H. Green, Hill writes that 'to place ourselves "outside the process by which our knowledge is developed" is to conceive of an untenable "ecstasy", whereas to recognize our being within the process is to accept our true condition'.⁴³ So much in 'Our Word Is Our Bond' hangs on what Hill might mean by this 'true condition', and so frequent are the occasions upon which Hill's critics have had recourse to the entire passage about 'the process', that, at the risk of ignoring his critical practice (wherein an examination of the historical specificity of the language deployed by philosophers takes precedence over any attempt to arrive at a *definition* which subsumes their objects of inquiry), an attempt at a definition of what 'our true condition' means to Hill might be useful.

⁴³ CCW 158, quoting T.H. Green, *The Works of Thomas Hill Green*, ed. R. L. Nettleship, 3 vols. (London: Longmans Green, 1885-8), iii, 72.

The ontological overtones present in ‘our true condition’ resonate with Hill’s quotation, in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ and elsewhere, of John Crowe Ransom’s description of poetry as an ‘ontological manoeuvre’ (CCW 159), or a ‘desperate ontological ... manoeuvre’ (CCW 128). If we want to seek the precise sense in which desperation might coincide with language, we could adduce the desperation Hill detects in a footnote of Austin’s which raises the haunting possibility that one’s awareness of the sedimentation of ideas in words, of their irredeemable complexity and self-contradiction, precludes their consistent application to ethical ideals. (Austin’s example is the ideal of the good life: ‘why *must* there be a conceivable amalgam, the Good Life for Man’, when the etymologies of ‘good’, ‘life’, and ‘man’, derived from disparate historical experiences, impede the construction of an ethical synthesis?)⁴⁴ Austin’s tactic for derailing the potentially nominalist consequence of his approach is what Hill describes as Austin’s ‘poetic tact’: a use of language in which the connotative resonances of words are so organised as to produce felicitous meanings of their own.

Hill describes the sense of reciprocity between passivity in the face of objective necessity on the one hand, and an active subjectivity on the other, in idealist language. Modern poetics, he writes, display a palpable sense of desperation due to the difficulty of reconciling a subjective perspective with the objectively determined restrictions imposed by language. The most desirable approach, he says, would be Kenneth Burke’s conception of ‘workmanship’ as ‘a trait in which the ethical and the esthetic are one’. Hill rearticulates this horizon by quoting a handbook on Kant’s moral philosophy, A.E. Teale’s *Kantian Ethics*, to elaborate the possibility that ‘a consummation of technique’ exists ‘which simultaneously “satisfies the desire of a moral agent” and, in so doing, resolves the “old

⁴⁴ J.L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 61.

difficulty”, as it has been called, “of conceiving ... *an activity with end attained*” (CCW 159). ‘[O]ur true condition’ must involve a sense of desperation occasioned by an overwhelming intuition of contingency in language, and a sense of activity, of creating or doing things with words. Poetry’s contribution to this sense of being is to offer a horizon of perfect reciprocity between these two definitional poles towards which our activity can be orientated, a horizon which Hill, as we have just seen, depends on idealist language to articulate.

Austin, Hill observes, might object that the accent on the expressive needs of the individual is susceptible of leading to pretence, in the etymological sense of holding something in front of something else in order to conceal it. Hill believes Austin’s empiricism tends to downplay expressivity in favour of a more graspable objectivity. For example, Austin, Hill ventures, would dismiss Ransom’s assertion that ‘the density or connotativeness of poetic language reflects the world’s density’ as ‘metaphysical fantasy’. This ‘angle of vision’ would view Hopkins’s lines (‘O Deutschland, double a desperate name!’, ‘Double-naturèd name’)⁴⁵ as ‘self-stultifying’, most likely because they invoke both particular objects and general concepts (‘Deutschland’: the ship and the nation; ‘name’: Christ the historical figure and Christ the saviour of mankind). But Hill asserts that it is at these points of ‘stultification’ ‘that poetry encounters its own possibilities’. The material of poetry is the no-man’s-land created by the clash of these two perspectives. Precisely where definition becomes difficult is where poetry is able to realise its diagnostic ambitions.

⁴⁵ Note that Hill’s choice of this particular Hopkins poem may deepen the irony by including an homage to Austin’s self-referential wit (viz. Austin’s book *Sense and Sensibilia*): see the line ‘Or as Austin, a lingering-out swéet skill’. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (London: Penguin, 1985), 15.

For Hill, this is a moment of ‘blindness’. Referring to Wordsworth’s ‘blind thoughts’ and ‘blind love’, he notes the ‘compounding of blankness and intuition’ in those phrases. The philosophical import of this assertion might only be teased out a page later, when Hill again uses idealist language to claim that being ‘within the process’ (Green) and ‘in the plot’ (Donne) are part of our ‘thinking experience’ (CCW 160-2). Following Hill’s endnote, we find that ‘thinking experience’ is intellectual historian A.J.M. Milne’s description of Green’s conception of human experience in general:

According to Green, the characteristic thing about human experience is that it is thinking experience. It is an error in his view to suppose that there is anything in human experience which is given ready-made without having been categorized and interpreted by thought. What we experience is always something already within a framework of thought.⁴⁶

Experience, on this model, is an active, discursive process, as Kant claimed in the first *Critique*. If we follow the Kantian implications of Green’s statement, then there is also a passive moment to experience in the reception of the intuitions themselves.⁴⁷ The interest for Hill is in the philosophically-vexed question of the middle-ground between these two moments. The moment of thought Hill describes as ‘blind’ or ‘blank’ (‘[t]o encounter it ... is like encountering a blank in one’s own thinking [CCW 161]) is the ‘aporia’ he mentions

⁴⁶ A.J.M. Milne, *The Social Philosophy of English Idealism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962), 89.

⁴⁷ See, for example, ‘[T]he cognition of every, at least human, understanding is a cognition through concepts, not intuitive but discursive. ... Concepts are ... grounded on the spontaneity of thinking, as sensible intuitions are grounded on the receptivity of impressions’. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 68/B 93, 205. However, note that Green distinguishes his theory of knowledge from Kant’s, in that his seemingly subjective Idealism does not entail an unknowable realm of things but is in fact predicated on an ‘eternal consciousness’ which underwrites a Hegelian assertion that what we know, and reality, are one and the same. See Peter Nicholson, ‘Green’s “Eternal Consciousness”’, in Maria Dimova-Cookson and W. J. Mander (eds.), *T.H. Green: Ethics, Metaphysics, and Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 139-159, at 146.

earlier in the essay, the impasse where two epistemological perspectives overlap and create contradictions which need to be worked through. 'It is within the process of such experience that we are not only active but passive too,' Hill writes.

How does this aporetic moment relate to Hill's poetics, and what role does speech act theory have to play in it? Hill observes that 'Modern poetry ... yearns for this sense of identity between saying and doing – "all values ultimately come from our judicial sentences"' but that 'it discovers itself to possess no equivalent for "hereby"' – no institutional sanction for its ethical and political assertions (*CCW* 163). Its domain of operation resides, we have seen Hill argue, in the moments of 'stultification' which characterise the position of the experiencing agent. In Hill's words, in the creative act we are 'exhibiting the symptom at the very moment that we diagnose the condition' (*CCW* 162). In other words, the creative act registers a foundation, an a priori condition of modern experience. If poetry can be said to 'do' anything, then its doing must be self-reflexive: it is an act of foundational thinking performed by the thinker who springs from that foundation. This is a position which is 'blind' because it inhabits a region of epistemological anxiety: faced with conflicting accounts of the world, with data delimited by its rational and sensible faculties, and unable to establish a presuppositionless perspective on this data, it is forced to feel its way among the material which surrounds it. This is the passive component of poetry; the active component results from the fact that in feeling his way among the material, the writer constructs his relationship to this material, organising it, and giving it shape. Any existing conceptuality is inadequate to the task: it must, in the spirit of Kant's aesthetic reflection, act as if it is governed by a concept which, however, is yet to come into existence.

Hill's example for this reciprocal act is Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius*. As Hill notes, the line which Pound translates as 'And now Propertius of Cynthia, taking his stand among these' takes a passive construction from the Latin and produces the active 'taking his stand'. This active mood, Hill argues, registers not just Pound's claim to poetic distinction, but in a negative sense the various circumstances ('these') against which this status defines itself. The careful regulation of semantic noise inherent to Hill's conception of poetry at this stage of his career is behind his choice of Poundian material. His view of poetry does not accommodate the cut-and-paste aesthetic of the later cantos, for instance. This is not surprising, since in Pound's poetry from the 40s onwards we see an attempt to wrestle with what Hill tells us is not the domain of poetry – the 'phenomena' of legal and political institutions. Pound's place in Hill's essay is, for the most part, as foil – the hubristic, defeated wartime Pound – to the more cautious Austin. In the case against Pound, 'Austin's principles are vindicated' (CCW 168). As Hill concludes, 'Pound's error was ... to fancy that poets' "judicial sentences" are, in mysterious actuality, legislative or executive acts. But poets are not legislators, unless they happen to be so employed, in government or law' (CCW 169). Hill has elaborated a formalist theory of poetry in which its constructive potential opens up the possibility of a new conceptualisation of human experience. But the restrictions placed upon the content of this lyric practice close off certain areas of social experience and prevent any imaginative recreation of key sociopolitical institutions and facts.

5. Words and things

The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (1983) ends with the words: ““in memory of those things these words were born”” (CP 196). This adaptation, as Hill calls it, of a sentence from Marcel Raymond’s study *From Baudelaire to Surrealism*, takes liberties with the original that enable a surreptitious allusion to ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’. Raymond’s sentence reads ‘Ecoutons encore Péguy et le poème né du souvenir de ces journées’. Transforming ‘le poème’ to ‘words’ and ‘ces journées’ to ‘things’, Hill turns a comment about private, individual inspiration, via a reference to Austin’s lecture series, into a description of memory as the intermediary between language and the world.⁴⁸ But Hill’s poem engages with ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ only obliquely: more germane to its concerns are the themes of poetry and commitment that had sprung as by-products of the meditation on language and instrumentality provoked by his reading of Austin.

Questions about the degree to which poetry makes available a critical perspective on the sociopolitical, about the relative merits of lyric abstraction and thematic immediacy, are complicated in the case of Péguy by the complexity of his historical context. The values to which he adhered meet each other, in his life’s work, at various points in the development of their expression in political movements, parties, and individuals, which in turn have their own independent life-spans and undergo their own alterations. In his essay ‘Commitment in Poetry’, E.P. Thompson looks to the 1790s to observe how previously reigning sociopolitical concepts had begun to splinter into modified political positions which were by turns extreme, diluted, or straightforwardly contradictory versions of their ancestors.

⁴⁸ See CP 205; Marcel Raymond, *De Baudelaire au Surréalisme* (Paris: José Corti, 1947), 191.

Within this pot pourri of ideologies, Thompson argues, conventional place holders like ‘Right’ and ‘Left’ lose their meaning; it is the duty of poets to create and organise values to fill up these positions once more.⁴⁹

Thompson’s view of poetry is not so far from Pound’s: it is the poet’s task to ‘disclose the values lurking beneath abstract constructions, indicate the consonancy of clusters of value, and the incompatibility of one cluster with another’.⁵⁰ The poet must be engaged in making distinctions, ‘enhancing our perception’, in the manner encouraged by Pound’s Confucius.⁵¹ Thompson stops short of saying that poets ought to be legislators (they ‘would not create the politics’) but his position is broadly consonant with the sentence of Pound’s with which Hill took issue in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’: ‘All values ultimately come from our judicial sentences’. (Note, however, that these ‘judicial sentences’ would have a markedly different genesis for Pound, for whom they originate in individual poetic talent, than for Thompson, for whom they are contingent on certain necessary social relations of production.)

Péguy’s own political context is as full of contradictions as the eighteenth-century situation as described by Thompson, and Péguy’s life and work thus confront the various philosophical positions dramatised in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ with a troublingly complex case. The French writer’s politics are coordinated by a wide range of historical events and institutions. Committed to socialism but refusing to engage with the Socialist Party; a Catholic critical of the orthodox church; a Dreyfusard committed to a vision of ‘l’ancienne France’ which the anti-Dreyfusards equally revered. On top of these contradictions, the

⁴⁹ E.P. Thompson, *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 335-7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 337.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

shifts in allegiance and changes in ideological emphasis he witnessed in former comrades put him in a more entrenched position. The tenets of Dreyfusism, Socialism and Catholicism were all, in Péguy's eyes, betrayed by their adherents.

Given this complex array of historical conditions, what chance does lyric poetry have of wielding the necessary cognitive grasp that would enable it to analyse and criticise the events of Péguy's life, along with his own response to them? This seems to be the problem hidden in the questions which open *The Mystery*: 'Who or what stares / through the café-window crêped in powder-smoke?' The immediate answer is Jaurès's assassin, but as Hill's afterthought – 'or what' – indicates, this answer doesn't go far enough. Political actions cannot be understood by isolating individuals from the bonds that tie them to their sociopolitical circumstances. How then could lyric, the formal expression of individuality *par excellence*, hope to comprehend events like the assassination of Jaurès? This difficulty is admitted at the start, the poem beginning with an Austinian confession of its inherent limitations: 'Crack of a starting pistol' (CP 183). As Knottenbelt notes, this 'crack' 'reduc[es] both the truth of an historical fact and the truth-telling capacity of art to the level of a joke', and effectively acknowledges that the poem is constitutively unable to produce the answers to the questions it asks.⁵² A broader question – the relationship of lyric's individualism to the social – takes their place: at once a sacrifice of ambition (for it reduces poetry's grasp of social *detail*) it is also an expansion, potentially assigning to poetry some of the noumenal, universal qualities necessary to any project that wishes to envision the new.

⁵² E.M. Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1990), 289.

Given the preponderance of metaphors of blindness and blankness in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’, and considering the definitional role they play in Hill’s explanation of poetry’s unique capacity to negotiate the conceptual and the empirical, it is worth examining the recurrence of these metaphors in *The Mystery*. Furthermore, this examination will lead us to an encounter with a seminal moment in the history of lyric poetry’s engagement with momentous political events: Rimbaud’s ‘*Lettres du voyant*’.

Where in the essay the blind and the blank are figures in a philosophical collage, figures productive of a form of thinking that escapes the opposing strictures of empiricism and rationalism, in Hill’s poem their associations are more dependent on their descriptive and moral contexts. The ‘mediocre’ statue of Péguy is in ‘blank-eyed bronze’, ‘Jaurès was killed blindly’, ‘blind Vigil’ is ‘helpless and obdurate’, and (from the poem’s companion piece *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres*) ‘The seraphim ... look blankly at us’ (CP 185, 187, 192, 195, 179).⁵³ Blindness carries connotations, here, with the objective, ‘obdurate’, world – the world ‘where things (and people) regularly “get done”’ (CCW 147), and, paradoxically, with the sightlessness of the statues in whose presence these ‘things’ take place. In both cases, it’s a figure in a recognisable narrative of moral action. These phrases’ descriptive force – their arresting concision and apparent fidelity to a narratable, empirical world – seem to place them at some distance from the abstract definitions associated with the blind and the blank in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’.

But by referring back to Hill’s essay, it’s possible to reconstitute a layer of philosophical explanation that brings these notions to bear upon the aesthetic problems centering on poetic form and political engagement. Section nine of *The Mystery* is one

⁵³ *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres* was published for the first time in 1985 in *Collected Poems*, but Hill’s poetry notebooks show he was working on the poem (originally called ‘The Virgin of Chartres’) from 1982, concurrently with *The Mystery*. Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/2/1/26.

place where we might look for this interplay of aesthetic subjectivity and conceptual blindness. In this section the dream-like atmosphere of ‘l’ancienne France’ – shorthand for the cluster of sociopolitical narratives which lie at the heart of Péguy’s political imagination – achieves its most intense expression: as Hill writes, ‘this is the heart / of the mystère’ (*CP* 194). Among the furnishings of the natural and domestic landscape – ‘the peppery lilac’ and ‘Sombre heartwoods’ – Hill inserts one of the most famous *données* of modernist literature:

‘Je est un autre’, that fatal telegram,
floats past you in the darkness, unreceived.
Connoisseurs of obligation, history
stands, a blank instant, awaiting your reply
(*CP* 194)

Rimbaud’s phrase occurs in one of a pair of his *lettres du voyant* or visionary letters to Georges Izambard, in May 1871. He was writing from Ardennes, at a time when the Paris Commune was reaching its violent climax. The phrase’s context is a discussion of poetry and commitment:

‘One day, I hope ... I shall make your principle stand for objective poetry ... I shall be a committed worker: it is the idea that holds me back when wild anger pushes me toward the battle of Paris – where so many committed workers are dying even as I write! ... At the present time, I steep myself in debauchery as thoroughly as I can. Why? I want to be a poet, and I am working toward becoming a seer; you will not understand me at all, and I am not sure I could quite explain. The point is to reach the unknown through the unsettling of *all the senses*. The suffering is terrible, but one must be strong; one must be born a poet, and I have recognized myself as being

a poet. It is not at all my fault. It is wrong to say, I think: one should say, someone else conceives me in his thoughts.⁵⁴

These letters have become prey to the claims of various interpretative perspectives, which have read what has become the celebrated slogan ‘JE est un autre’ as, variously, existential estrangement, rebellion against normative rules enshrined in grammar, and epistemological doubt. Something of this overdetermination is captured in Hill’s epithet ‘fatal’, but I would suggest in using this word Hill had in mind more the combination of mythical permanence and quotidian mortality inherent to prophetic thought, than any post-hoc construction of the phrase’s cultural significance. Knottenbelt confesses her confusion at Hill’s apparent inclusion of a ‘solecism’ in the context of Péguy’s notoriously punctilious editing practice, leading her to the vague conclusion that we are dealing with ‘a crisis of reference’.⁵⁵ Henry Hart suggests that ‘For Hill the grammatical solecism is a sign of more serious social and political negligence’.⁵⁶ But Rimbaud’s phrase, if we read the ‘JE’ as a noun rather than a pronoun, is perfectly grammatically correct, and to read it merely as a solecism erases the material significance other critics find in the phrase. Kristin Ross, for example, reads into it a recognition of the power of the collective: the ‘universal harmony’ that produces an

agitation that sweeps through a crowd under the effect of a shared emotion ... When this power rises up and expands, its effect is to make the self vacillate or to create a kind of “centrifugal” subjectivity ... It is in this way, rather than according to any kind of intersubjective or identificatory structure, that we should understand the

⁵⁴ Henri Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1994), 137-8.

⁵⁵ Knottenbelt, op. cit., 343, quoting George Steiner, *Real Presences*.

⁵⁶ Henry Hart, ‘Geoffrey Hill’s *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*: A Commentary’, *Essays in Criticism* 33/4 (1983), 312-338, at 334.

famous slogan “Je est un autre”: something is happening that cannot be seized without letting go of the power to say “I”.⁵⁷

So we find one of the central practitioners of symbolist poetry – traditionally the standard-bearer of autonomous art – espouses a collectivity which implicitly links his practice with his political surroundings: in the words of his visionary letters, ‘on me pense’. Rimbaud’s sympathy for the cause of the workers in the Commune does not lead him to a committed poetry that takes the violent realities of the revolution as a guarantee of aesthetic authenticity. In seeking the autonomy of the visionary, Rimbaud emphasises the role of the disordering of the senses (which implies the extinguishing of traditional modes of sight) in the pursuit of the unknown, of the yet to be established conceptuality. He thereby establishes some of the central tenets of symbolist art. But this is an art in which the principle of lyric individuation – the ‘power to say “I”’ – is forced to an extent to renounce itself, as it registers the demands of a rebellious population. The kind of subjectivity thus produced is therefore not a synoptic, dominative ‘egotistical sublime’, but a porous, investigative intelligence capable of experiencing the social without immediately identifying with it.

The ‘blank instant’ at which Péguy is writing is a blank moment in history because the political alternatives among which the writer could choose no longer reflect the values at play in the society he writes in and about:

This is no old Beauce manoir that you keep
but the rue de la Sorbonne, the cramped shop,
its unsold *Cahiers* built like barricades,

⁵⁷ Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 113.

its fierce disciples, disciplines and feuds,
 the camelot-cry of 'sticks!' As Tharaud says,
 'all through your life the sound of broken glass.'
 (CP 187)

Equally, the blankness of the moment at which Rimbaud was writing is constituted by the conflicting alternatives available to him as a poet. To throw himself into the cause of the commune and write poetry explicitly articulating the workers' point of view is one option; another would be to aim towards a lyric practice in which the foregrounding of abstracted affect and of rhythmic and spatial patterning creates autonomous texts whose hermeticism holds an implicit refusal to ratify the conceptual bases – and thereby the political facts – of the status quo. In this space, Hill suggests, the visionary and collective moments compressed in Rimbaud's letters articulate the mystery of Péguy's thinking life. Just as, as Thompson tells us, the alternatives of 'Left' and 'Right' in the 1790s ceased to stand for any judgements applicable to the state of the society in which they operated, so those values to which Péguy obstinately clung devolved into the variously reactionary and progressive, but always disappointing, anxieties constitutive of the national, racial and religious controversies of his day.

We can project the various anxieties, political and aesthetic, of these proto-modernists forwards to *The Mystery*. If, in Hill's poem, these anxieties lack the urgency of those of a Rimbaud or a Péguy, concerned as they are not with the political structures shaping the present, but with the possibility of recognising the difficulties constitutive of historiography, they at least share a concern with the relationship between poetic form and its other, the social. Metre, in *The Mystery*, is the proxy for an investigative tact: its regular stanzaic form – rhymed quatrains of around ten syllables per line – is a response to the risk

(ethical and aesthetic) of too immediate an identification, a risk always at play in the imaginative reconstruction of other lives, even more so when we are concerned with a life with which the author is predisposed to identify. It's almost as if the pull of the various disappointments, pains and failures in Péguy's life (for there is no mention of what might be taken to be the tokens of a successful life, his poems and articles) is so attractive to Hill that, not trusting his own diagnostic accuracy, he devolves a large part of the task of judgement – of organising the facts and concepts that form the materials of his investigation – upon the determining resources of metre. The object of the poem's focus is thereby distanced, in an apparent regression to pre-Poundian prosody: instead of composing 'in the sequence of musical phrase', that is, according to the contours and rhythms of subjective contemplation expressive of fidelity to the object, Hill returns to composition 'in sequence of a metronome'.⁵⁸

However, at the same time this very object is staring us in the face, because Hill's chosen stanzaic form mirrors the quatrains of Péguy's poems 'Les Sept Contres Thèbes', 'La Tapisserie de Sainte Geneviève et de Jeanne D'Arc', 'La Tapisserie de Notre Dame', and 'Ève'. Perhaps a point is being made, in Hill's choice of form, about the freedom of the artist to represent or make available for knowledge historical events. Aping a reassuring proximity to the object of inquiry, this mimetic prosody also shows the cost incurred by fidelity to fact, and thereby paradoxically produces an inarticulate criticism of the attempts to memorialise Péguy, to assimilate him to official culture, attempts which receive caustic treatment in section two of the poem. Without abandoning the metre in which Péguy expressed his own convictions about, and reactions against, his contemporary culture, Hill's prosody extends the available resources, making enjambement, half-rhyme and quotation

⁵⁸ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 3.

work towards developing the questions with which the poem might begin to discover the previously masked currents of human motivation and ideas which suffused Péguy's intellectual life. If these questions ('Who or what stares / through the café-window...?', 'Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite / the assassin?', 'Would Péguy answer ...?') expect no response, what prevents the poem from lapsing into solipsism is its enactment of historical construction, the questions, descriptions, recreations of modes of apprehension, which, proceeding not from paraphrased accounts of Péguy's ideological context, but from a multiplicity of disparate figures with no clearly determined relationship to one another, finally settle into a new relationship determined by the metre, creating a wholly new account of Péguy's social context.⁵⁹

For example, while it is imitative of the stanzaic form of Péguy's long poem *Ève*, Hill's prosody unlaces the hypnotic regularity of *Ève*'s endstopped lines, and is quite different from the mixture of prose and free verse that constitutes *The Mystery of the Charity of Jeanne D'Arc*.⁶⁰ It is as if the metre is fighting an urge to reproduce the incantatory repetitiveness of Péguy's liturgical lines, in which rhapsodic adoration of their subject dictates their rhetoric and metre rather than a preordained prosody:

Yours is their dream of France, militant-pastoral:
 musky red gillyvors, the wicker bark
 of clematis braided across old brick
 and the slow chain that cranks into the well

morning and evening. It is Domrémy

⁵⁹ For a consideration of Hill's intertextual techniques, see 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*', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 13/1 (2000), 153-166.

⁶⁰ See Charles Péguy, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, ed. Marcel Péguy (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), 933-1174, 363-525.

restored; the mystic strategy of Foch
and Bergson with its time-scent, dour panache
deserving of martyrdom. It is an army

of poets, converts, vine-dressers, men skilled
in wood or metal, peasants from the Beauce,
terse teachers of Latin and those unschooled
in all but the hard rudiments of grace.
(CP 186)

By contrast with the conceptual aptness of *Ève*'s rhymes ('nature / stature', 'solennels / fraternels'), the dissonance in Hill's rhymes leaves room for a conceptual critique of the ideals contained in Péguy's 'l'ancienne France'.⁶¹ 'Domrémy / restored' is tied to an 'army', not only the army led by Joan of Arc (whose birthplace Domrémy was), but to the 'jolly cartoon / armies of France' slaughtered at Verdun. '[S]killed' degrades to 'unschooled', suggesting a gap between the socialist ideals refined by Péguy's education, and his comparative ignorance of the real work carried out by trade unions.⁶² In both cases, the musicality rendered by enjambement and rhyme constitutes an act of criticism, and while similar criticisms might be articulated in a prose analysis, their embeddedness in a form borrowed from Péguy creates a kind of cross-pollination which reduces the distance between subject and object, and indeed suggests these criticisms in the first place.

Rimbaud's telegram finally receives no response from the legislators of the world: 'Connoisseurs of obligation, history / stands, a blank instant, awaiting your reply'. The 'Good governors and captains' (CP 194) – the old Bourbons on which Péguy's notion of 'l'ancienne France' centred – are not affected by the literary act rendered on Péguy's

⁶¹ Péguy, *Oeuvres Poétiques*, 1041.

⁶² See Daniel Halévy, *Péguy and Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, tr. Ruth Bethell (London: Dennis Dobson, 1946), 61: 'When Péguy ceased to give his mind to socialist congresses, it was because the battle of the *mystiques* was engaged'.

behalf. Corroborating the conclusion offered by 'Our Word Is Our Bond' – that autonomous poetry is sealed off from the legislative institutions of the world – Hill's juxtaposition of Rimbaud with an insensible old guard shows the extent to which modern poetry is, in Hill's opinion, restricted to a noumenal formalism whose explanatory power does not extend to forcing its explanations (as Pound tried to do) upon the individuals and institutions of worldly power. The devolution of critical responsibility upon the syntactic, rhythmic and sensuous elements of verse render inaudible to the legislative ear poetry's diagnostic conclusions. Hill's subsequent poetry, the subject of the next section, amounts to an extension of this modernist formalism, by weaving the voice of an empirical self into the familiar combination of sensuous and intellectual parataxis. While retaining the belief that poetry's reflective comprehension of the social will always be unheard on the level of conceptual communication, a new emphasis on the critical perspective offered by a confessional 'I' comes into play.

CHAPTER 6: POETRY AND VALUE

In his Lady Margaret Lecture on ‘Milton as Muse’, Hill recanted on certain aspects of ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’, confessing that ‘I was trying to make sense of J.L. Austin at the time, and obviously conspicuously failing’. The essay’s crucial defect, Hill says in his 2008 lecture, is its relegation of private utterance to the domain of the ineffectual:

I said that poets are not legislators unless they happen to be so employed in government or law. ... Well, that was thirty six years ago, and now I recognise how mean and impoverished my rebuke was. Where I failed to do justice to the matter was in overlooking a deeply-embedded sense of the right ... of the private citizen to dispute in public matters – not merely that but the proper status of the private citizen within the utterances of the public domain.¹

That final clause places an emphasis on the contribution the ‘private citizen[’s]’ – or the poet’s – utterance with regards to the legal and political institutions of the state can make to aesthetic subjectivity. Hill’s ‘failing’ in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ was to annul this contribution, placing literary production in a noumenal sphere of its own. Judging by comments in his lecture ‘Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value’ (2000) Hill’s sense of this relationship had become more firm in the intervening years: ‘My language is in me and is me; even as I, inescapably, am a miniscule part of the general semantics of the nation; and as the nature of the State has involved itself in the nature that is most intimately mine’ (CCW 477). Both this lecture and its companion-piece ‘Poetry and Value’ (2000) (collectively published as the Tanner lectures) extend the investigation of the subject’s capacity to reflect critically on society, to art’s own critical resources, and the polarisation

¹ Geoffrey Hill, ‘Milton as Muse’, lecture delivered at Christ’s College, Cambridge (29 October 2008) <<http://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/milton400/hill.htm>>, accessed 17 December 2008.

of their deployment into two opposing conceptions of artistic practice: committed and autonomous. Like ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’, these lectures depend to a great extent on idealist philosophy (again, often filtered through Coleridge, though now also projected forward to Gillian Rose) to propel their arguments.

At the heart of these pieces is a prolonged examination of the meaning of ‘intrinsic value’. I will argue that this angle of approach allows for a less hermetically-sealed evaluation of formalism than was evident in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’. Central to this change in Hill’s understanding of poetic autonomy is, I will show, a concomitant shift in his understanding of intrinsic value, from a Ruskinian adherence to intrinsic value as an assumed whole underlying social relations, to a conception of intrinsic value as a product of these relations. These lectures suggest that the philosophy of Gillian Rose was a factor in this shift, though other philosophers make an important contribution. After exploring this shift in Hill’s understanding of intrinsic value, I will consider its significance for Hill’s poetry, reading poems from *A Treatise of Civil Power* and concluding with his elegy ‘In Memoriam: Gillian Rose’.

1. Intrinsic value

Hill begins ‘Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value’ by noting the existence, in philosophical discourse, of two forms of intrinsic value, the material, exemplified by the measurable criterion of coinage, and the symbolic, characteristic of moral philosophy, and less susceptible to qualitative judgement (CCW 465). There is, he writes, ‘a “gap”, somewhat in Gillian Rose’s sense of *aporia*’, between these two categories of value, and

failure to recognize this gap, he goes on to say, can have pernicious consequences. 'Aporia', in Rose's definition, 'covers the difficulty of resolving, even of clarifying philosophical investigations, or even of deciding on the meaning of terms'.² Discussions of value which, in Hill's words, 'claim continuity where none exists', which ignore the anxieties that provoke these discussions and which produce unforeseen situations, condemn themselves to discursively reproduce the injustices they attempt to analyse. Following Rose's argument, many political and aesthetic conceptualisations of power and society are polarised between two extremes: a pragmatic accommodation to the exigencies of institutionalised power, and the fantasised retreat to an ethics predicated on an enthroned conception of the 'other', an ethics which eschews any involvement with authority, now conceived as being irredeemably implicated with domination.³ These two points of view are unable to recognise the possibility that some form of mediation is required between the two, that the work of moral philosophy operates within the aporia where power and what Rose calls the 'soul' (but which might, for our purposes, be better conceived of as the expressive, intellectual power of the subject) intersect. 'This ethical witness,' she writes, 'universal and aporetic, can only act with some dynamic and corrigible metaphysics of universal and singular, or archetype and type, or concept and intuition'.⁴

In claiming, in his introduction to the philosophical portion of his Tanner lectures, that Butler, Coleridge and Leibniz 'exist as a triumvirate of moral assessors' in his investigation of intrinsic value and poetry, Hill is locating this investigation within the 'corrigible metaphysics of universal and singular' that Rose describes (CCW 479). His

² Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 8.

³ This argument was first propounded at length in Gillian Rose, *Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 1-10.

⁴ Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 10.

particular interest occurs in the ways language is used to negotiate the aporia between forms of power and of subjective expression. We have already seen how poetry was conceived, in ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’, as an attempt to combine the singular with the universal – to give the expressive and experimental a kind of objectivity. This attempt opens up an area in the conception of language *between* the instrumental (which involves conceptions of language as a communicative, normalised instrument) and the material (viewing language as incorrigibly contingent, and producing a relativism which points towards nominalism). Poetry is thus able to reflect on the dominant concepts of society, to imagine the new and criticise the status quo, without (thanks to its objective content – to the fact that it must work in the medium of existing conceptuality as transmitted in human language) succumbing to the arbitrary, and hence potentially aimless, excesses of private expression.

Hill’s exploration of the aporia he discerns in the heart of intrinsic value follows a similar procedure, and brings to light a subtle change of emphasis in his thinking about the integrity of form which shadows similar changes that were occurring in his poetry. For the purposes of this argument, the key moment occurs in a discussion of Butler, Coleridge and Leibniz, especially concerning the idea of disinterested reflection. As we saw in chapter 1, this is a Kantian concept. Characteristically, Hill does not mention Kant at all in this discussion, drawing instead on Butler and Coleridge: ‘Reflection – certainly as Butler and Coleridge would understand the term – is the faculty or activity that draws the naturally interested sensibility in the direction of disinterestedness’ (CCW 484). But any notion of an absolute universality – a complete disinterestedness – is evaded:

It is not necessary to suppose or suggest that some hypostatized condition of perfect disinterest is attainable within the usages ... of the English language. The particular quality of our humanity describable in terms of poetry and value is best revealed in and through the innumerable registrations of syntax and rhythm
(CCW 484)

Prosody, then, is again seen as a register of individual interactions with an object world; this is not so different from Hill's elucidation of aesthetic reflection in 'Redeeming the Time' which we considered in chapter 1. The echoes of Kant's disinterested aesthetic judgement are unmistakable.

Coleridge is once more the catalyst for Hill's metaphysical reflections in the Tanner lectures; this time his text is Coleridge's philosophical notes on Leibniz. In his dispute with John Locke, Leibniz argued against Locke's conception of the mind as a tabula rasa which accrued knowledge through the reception of sense impressions. In Leibniz's view, Locke's philosophy makes the soul the passive recipient of sensory data. 'Does the soul have windows? Is it similar to writing-tablets, or like wax?' Hill continues (in his translation): '... that there is nothing in the soul which does not come from the senses ... But the soul itself must be excepted and its affections ... *Nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu, excipe: nisi ipse intellectus*'. In the mind, Coleridge writes, there are 'certain inherent forms, that is, Modes of reflecting, not referable to the Objects reflected on, but pre-determined by the Constitution and (as it were) mechanism of the Understanding itself' (CCW 484). Familiar Kantian stuff, but its emphasis upon the constitutive power of the understanding (which is indeed Kant's primary contribution to modern philosophy) brings into relief the element of what Hill calls the 'attuning' (again a term from Kant's *Critique of Judgement*) of 'conceptual hypotheses' with 'semantic perceptiveness'.

But where these two lectures go beyond Hill's previous understanding of art's capacities for reflection is in the palpable loss of confidence in the noumenal, the realm of pure form which 'Our Word Is Our Bond' saw as the proper domain of poetry's operation. Ruskin's notion of 'intrinsic value' is the focal point of Hill's changing attitude towards poetry's reflective capacities. As the critic C.D. Blanton describes it, 'intrinsic value', for Ruskin, 'antedates exchange or even use, originating in the archaic power of substance itself, [and] binds the abstract mechanisms of political economy immediately to history and ... art'.⁵ Its corollary is a conception of art that holds out the promise of a reconciliation of a deformed society, or rather an anamnesis of a society antedating its modern deformation. Blanton continues: 'Art incorporates a hermeneutic function anterior to mere documentation, a quiet reminder of the originary power of an intrinsic value buried underneath even the purest forms of capital'.⁶ Hill confesses a predilection for Ruskin's theory of value, but he now has doubts. 'Until recently,' Hill writes, 'I was essentially an adherent of "intrinsic value" as delineated by Ruskin. I am now much less sure of my position' (CCW 485-6).

Hill's new position is that it is precisely the extrinsic, the contingent and the material which is required for any meaningful theory of value. The element of Ruskin's thought Hill would agree with holds that there are circumstances in which 'intrinsic value' bears upon financial and political relations, for example in the use of money for foreign trade. But the nature of 'intrinsic value' for Ruskin – founded as it is on a presocial conception of substance – comes to be elevated above the relations without which, Hill

⁵ C. D. Blanton, 'Nominal Devolutions: Poetic Substance and the Critique of Political Economy', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 13/1 (Spring 2000), 129-51, at 131.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

implies, it is difficult to assign any meaning to the phrase. Hill's example is a passage from Ruskin's *Munera Pulveris*:

It does not in the least affect the intrinsic value of the wheat, the air, or the flowers, that men refuse or despise them. Used or not, their own power is in them, and that particular power is in nothing else.

(Quoted in *CCW* 486)

Hill writes that 'The elegiac celebration of "intrinsic value" understands the value as being in some sense isolated from current degradation, and therefore as being inviolate, held securely within the sphere of the intransitive'. Locke, contra Ruskin, 'would have said ... that the intrinsic value of a bushel of wheat cannot be isolated from the value of the human labour that contributed to its growth and harvesting' (*CCW* 487).

So in these lectures, Hill's notion of 'intrinsic value' is as a mediated category: as he puts it in 'Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value', 'intrinsic value ... bears the extrinsic at its heart' (*CCW* 477). However the channels through which extrinsic categories of value – those which include labour, international relations, in short anything that inhabits the practical world of Austin's philosophy – become accessible to language, and by extension to poetry, cannot be clearly delineated. Returning once more to Coleridge, Hill echoes the poet-philosopher's 'sense of language as mediator in the struggle toward a grasp of intrinsic natures' (*CCW* 484-5) in viewing language as key to negotiating intrinsic and extrinsic value. The key, Hill writes, is to demonstrate that Coleridge, without succumbing to 'arbitrary analogy', is able to provide a defence of an ethics of language, a sense of how

'the moral rule of action interwoven in [our] nature', as Butler calls it, can without arbitrariness of analogy, be extended into the nature of human language itself, in

such a way that language becomes, not a simple adjunct or extension of ‘the moral rule of action’ but rather a faculty of reflective integration.
(CCW 489)

In other words, Coleridge is tasked with providing an explanation of language as something which is not mere communicative repetition of existing conceptuality (‘a simple adjunct’) but which is able to critically reflect upon it (‘[our] nature’).

This quality of mediation which language is supposed to supply is not, to my mind, convincingly demonstrated. In *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge espouses the necessity for precise verbal definition in the act of reflecting, where reflection involves a form of ‘energy conceived as a “co-instantaneous yet reciprocal action” of the individual will and an empowering law’ (CCW 488). A reflective use of language requires the study of the generations of material history recorded in language: the word binds the speaking individual to the society whose traces are deposited in his utterance. But finally Hill is not convincing on Coleridge’s success at demonstrating the bindingness of the analogy between the operations of the understanding in its attempts to know the world and the material and conceptual components of language itself. Hill refers, again, to what he describes as ‘the sudden blaze of a sentence at the beginning of *Aids to Reflection*: “For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS”’ (CCW 488). Only if it is agreed that this metaphysical conception of language holds can Hill’s argument that language is ‘an integral part of the body of reflection’ succeed. But Coleridge’s bare assertion is left unsupported by argument in Hill’s essay, and a penumbra of mysticism (the familiar residue of Coleridge’s influence upon Hill’s thinking) is left hovering about the question of poetry’s capacity to cognise the relationship between individual and society.

So if there is a shift of emphasis in Hill's thinking about intrinsic value (and hence about the role of poetry in the body politic), it is a slight one. A noumenal realm is still retained in the evocation of words as 'living powers', and Hill has anyway always thought of language as a combination of the conceptual and the sensible. But the foregrounding of the extrinsic in his departure from Ruskin's theory of value does, I believe, license Hill to disregard the impersonal strictures of prosody just to the extent that the empirical self is permitted to enter into the text. If it is difficult to discern, in these later critical pieces, a successful philosophical justification for the departure from his earlier stance, my reading of Hill's poetic trajectory in the next section of this chapter will hopefully demonstrate that he is able to think through the relevant issues with greater cogency in his poetry than in his prose. Hill sets the scene in 'Poetry and Value'. Two instances of poetics which fail in ways analogous to the failures of the political alternatives Rose outlines are given in the theoretical statements of Czeław Miłosz and Ezra Pound. Miłosz's conception of poetry looks to the realities of political violence as the final criterion of poetry's critical power: 'what "*judge[s]*" all poets and philosophers" is the "very amusing sight" of machine-gun bullets upending cobblestones "on a street in an embattled city"'. Pound, on the other hand, reverses this hierarchy in his observation that 'all values ultimately come from our [i.e. the poets'] judicial sentences' (CCW 480). In Rose's 'metaphysics of ... concept and intuition', Miłosz places the emphasis on intuition, on the ineluctable reality of empirical evidence, Pound on concept, the abstract autonomy of the poet's privileged perspective. Lyric autonomy, however, need not be the defensive arrogation of moral superiority expressed in Pound's axiom. Hill's thoughts on lyric autonomy are more fully worked through in the poems under discussion in the next section, and lead to a more complex reflection on the

relationship between autonomous expressivity and the notion of a socially-responsive poetics.

2. Civil Power and Intrinsic Value

We have seen that there is a limit to poetry's capacity for reflection in 'Our Word Is Our Bond': any critique of the social appears to be permissible only in exemplary terms. By this I mean that the poem may, in its careful regulation of acoustic and semantic divisions of language, produce a conceptual and material arrangement that stands as an example (or a rebuke) to a world not so arranged. The emphasis is on the formal law of the artwork, not on any putatively pre-existing self-expression. We have also seen, in chapter 3, Nettleship's observation that the act of finding the 'right word' necessarily changes our 'consciousness', and how Hill's approval of this observation harmonises with postmodern notions of the constituted 'I' which look sceptically upon claims for self-expression. What I am suggesting is that the alteration in Hill's attitude towards the aporia at the heart of the concept of intrinsic value also permits a less sceptical attitude towards the idea of an originary self-expression motivating language, by allowing into the mix an empirical self. He claims that 'this essay ['Poetry and Value'] is inescapably confessional', but also observes that there is 'something artificial or engineered in the premise and mannerism of modern confession' (CCW 480). His recognition that the notion of the immediate self as it is presented in so much modern literary works is in fact highly contrived echoes similar arguments made within the German and British Idealist tradition. Yet a confessional

literature, or a work of art which does not prioritise the act of exposing the self as construction of the other, is given more credence in the recent poetry.

Geoffrey Hill's collection *Canaan*, which appeared thirteen years after *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (though, as we have seen, he began composing some of the poems that would appear in *Canaan* in 1986, three years after the publication of *The Mystery*, and the same year that he gave his lecture “‘Envoi (1919)’”), is usually read as a new departure for Hill. It begins with a poem whose political reference points could not be more explicit: titled ‘To the High Court of Parliament: November 1994’, it contains allusions that point quite clearly to the selling of peerages and the privatisation of public services (C 1). This and the other poems in *Canaan* which bear the same title might be read as palinodial, amending the hermeticism of *The Mystery* in order to address themselves explicitly to existing political institutions. The change in subject matter parallels the right to debate public affairs Hill, in his Milton lecture, ascribes to private individuals. Hill once said in interview that ‘The great poet does not have a social function. The mediocre, yes, finds himself one delivering fashionable platitudes to the public. The true poet is completely isolated’.⁷ I find the value-laden way in which a contingent fact is ennobled by the words ‘great’ and ‘true’ disturbing, but it is hard to disagree that *Canaan*'s public poetry is no less likely to fall on deaf ears than the more private meditation of *The Mystery*. Nonetheless, a domain of political reference is made newly available in Hill's poetry from *Canaan* on, which, if it does not always take its political coordinates from contemporary events, still allows for the possibility of a politically-active voice to be heard above the intensities of modernist formalism.

⁷ Anne Mounic, ‘Le poème, “moulin mystique”: Entretien avec Geoffrey Hill’, *Temporel* 6 (2008) <<http://temporel.fr/Le-poeme-moulin-mystique-Entretien>>, accessed 6 December 2009.

Hill's collection *A Treatise of Civil Power* was first published as a limited edition by Clutag Press in 2005, and reprinted, with substantial amendments and additional poems, by Penguin in 2007.⁸ While not explicitly concerned with contemporary political issues, the poems in these two volumes bear the traces of a prolonged preoccupation with the variables of formalist and committed poetry, particularly as they emerge in the newly-felt pressure to give voice to a self construed in confessional and social terms. The books' shared title alludes to Milton's tract *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*. Milton's treatise is a comparatively austere piece: unlike his other prose tracts, citations from historians of the church, patristic commentaries, and 'heathen' philosophers and poets are markedly absent from *A Treatise of Civil Power*: predominance is given to Milton's voice and his Biblical allusions. His object (as the treatise's subtitle has it) is to 'shew that it is not lawfull for any power on earth to compell in matters of Religion'.⁹ Hill's volumes, by contrast, are constituted to a large degree by citation, from literary, historical, theological and philosophical sources. Power and religion are presented as inextricably, and violently, interwoven, and while the presence of an authorial subjectivity threatens to push the political dimension to the background, this 'I' is constituted by a recognition of these political and religious anxieties.

In the poem 'A Treatise of Civil Power' (*T1*), Hill writes 'I want to know what I'm worth, we all do'. The line occurs in a context in which money, friendship, philosophy, music and sex generate a centrifugal diction calibrating various forms of value with what Hill calls 'intrinsic value and its attendant fictions', echoing the terms of his Tanner

⁸ *A Treatise of Civil Power* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2005). *A Treatise of Civil Power* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007). References in text as *T1* and *T2* respectively. *T1* is unpaginated.

⁹ John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1953-82), vol. 7, ed. Robert W. Ayers, rev. ed. (1980), 239.

lectures from three years earlier.¹⁰ Not that intrinsic value, and its corollary ‘civil power’, are to be comfortably defined amidst the convulsion of propositional and descriptive sentences that threaten to upset the exploratory tact of Hill’s prosody. In a contemporary poem, Hill writes ‘I still can’t tell you what that power is’, though he goes on to add ‘Money’s not civil power in itself; / more the enforcer’ (‘A Précis or Memorandum of Civil Power’, T2 30). Civil power, as Hill sees it, has no fixed identity that can be discovered in or by poetry. By contrast, in his sonnet to Henry Vane, Milton asserts that Vane knew ‘Both spiritual power and civil, what each means, / What severs each’ so that ‘The bounds of either sword to thee we owe’.¹¹ However, while the sonnet suggests that the boundaries of state and church power were cleanly demarcated in Milton’s time, this is of course a fantasy. Milton’s poem is polemical in that it argues for a Parliamentarian’s strong belief in the desirability of the separation of church and state. Its metaphorised, sharply defined categories of power express a certainty construed against the background of the complex arbitration of these categories’ boundaries. Vane is presented as an isolated case in a political context where the jurisdictions of state and religious power are anything but clear.

Acutely aware of the absence of any firm definition of state power, the anxieties articulated in ‘A Treatise of Civil Power’ are in part produced by the compensatory need to negotiate this power’s encroachments upon private, religious and artistic wills. If civil power is not something that can be conclusively identified, at least by poets writing in the twenty-first century, the private identities of all those it affects are open to the same blind but corrigible strategies of approach, contact, and recoil as characterise the tentative

¹⁰ *TI* was published in 2005, but Hill’s poetry notebooks show him working on it from 2003. Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/2/1/62. The Tanner lectures were delivered in 2000.

¹¹ John Milton, ‘To Sir Henry Vane the Younger’, in *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 331.

negotiations of any public, political settlement. To approach the issue in this way accords with Hill's notion of the aporetic quality of definition (recall one of Rose's definitions of aporia: 'the difficulty ... even of deciding on the meaning of terms'). Hill gestures towards the difficulty of definition in 'To the Lord Protector Cromwell': 'Look up aphasia and aporia their origins' (*T1*, *T2* 17). Aligning aphasia and aporia in this way also aligns the πόρος or passage and φύσις or speech (with perhaps a nod to the φήτης, or speaker, in prophet): being in a pathless situation or aporia entails speech impairment, or speech loss. Hence Hill's complaint in the preceding lines: 'Say I would beg / out of this hire-house of ceaseless allusion. / I want out from this mire, say, of bluish flame' (*T1*, *T2* 16).

A consequence of this pathlessness is the natural desire to identify some form of singular value that could help calibrate the extent of civil power's incursions into the self. Just before the lines quoted above, Hill writes: 'If the WORD be not with us, what is our / present legal position?' With no immediate sense of intrinsic value – here given imaginative embodiment in the unmediated word of God – the relationship of the individual to the constitution of the state threatens to become arbitrary. Like Hill's Tanner lectures, these poems consider money as one possible overarching grammar of value. But a strange reversal of priorities occurs in the poems. In 'A Treatise on Civil Power', Hill writes: 'Coins rather than philosophy. Philosophy, / in general, seems groundless' (*T1*). Hill's lectures, as we have seen, make extended use of philosophy in order to demonstrate that value as embodied in coinage does not provide an adequate analogy for moral value. But it seems, at least in the organisation of national and subjective metaphors threading Hill's poetry, the coin carries more weight: 'my Commonwealth shilling from an oddments box' ('On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*'), 'I had a calling for England: that silver piece / I would pierce and hang at my neck, anyday' ('To the Lord Protector Cromwell'),

old coins' inscriptions 'compound[ing] / fact with myth ... corner-and key-stones of the just nation' ('A Treatise of Civil Power', *TI*).

Again, this is a case of Hill devaluing the contribution of philosophy while still relying upon philosophical ideas of the kind we've encountered repeatedly in this thesis. Critically, in the examples quoted above, the coin's value is dependent less on its material substance than on the relations between subject and nation it embodies. Hill writes that 'Coinage becomes / degraded or debased; but, altogether, / workaday splendour marks its sphere of use' ('A Treatise of Civil Power', *TI*). This is consonant with his criticism, in 'Poetry and Value', of Ruskin's concept of monetary value and intrinsic value (a criticism which, as we've seen, derives to a large extent from his readings of the British Idealists). Money 'as a sign of relations' can be viewed as a source of intrinsic value: value associated with one's belonging to a tradition of thought concerned with the construction of a 'just nation', as opposed to an 'intransitive' value where – by analogy with the inherent value of a coin's substance – a sentimental prejudice is dogmatically held to rise above political and historical realities. This is why Hill writes that 'Money's not civil power in itself': civil power is constituted by the set of forces operative in the state at any one time. Like civil power, intrinsic value is something which is constantly changing, transitively dependent on the interactions of law and subjective will, rather than an intransitive hypostatisation of political or private will.

Poetry and music are characterised by a similar push and pull between law and sentiment. In one of Hill's most recent volumes, *Oraclau / Oracles*, the poet observes that 'It is not nothing having to make sense / Of moods that argue so with case and tense' (*O* 2). This feeling of private meaning exceeding the bounds of traditional syntax is first explicitly sounded in *A Treatise of Civil Power*, which complains repetitiously of the conflict

between the critical capacities of the imagination and the form that governs its expression.¹²

‘Poetry’s unjust also, an endless wrangle / between truth and metre ... / where metre chiefly wins’ (‘A Treatise of Civil Power’, *TI*): in a remarkably pessimistic figuration of poetry’s metrical resources, metre is deemed to be damaging to critical perception. Under these conditions, form, traditionally the bearer of melodious truth sung with fullthroated ease, is subjected to turbulent upheaval: ‘Something lyric would be to our advantage / but damned if I can oblige. A civil power’s / unlyrical’. Working through the transitions between self and state produces a text that contains abrupt switches of tone, diction and rhythm. When Hill writes ‘No working transition – I’d assay to claim / the poem as at once cruder and finer’, the material of the poem is acknowledged to be both an impediment to the poet’s capacity to address public issues in a private voice, and something that can be formed to leap equivocally between registers. As the poem changes between ‘European war’ (V) to the speaker’s sex life (VII) to Biblical exegesis (XV) and so on, its diction varies from stage-direction (‘Cast me desire / implanted in the camera angle’), paronomasia (‘Harmonia sacra is not money scares’), pseudo-philosophical discourse (‘There is genius in money, / and hazard, but not immanence exactly’) and wince-inducing confession (‘I cannot sufficiently / regret not being adequate to the occasions / that sexual power displays’).

Remaining within the constraints imposed by conventional syntax, Hill’s poem ‘A Treatise of Civil Power’ leaps between formal modes of address (‘Lords and Commons...’), responses to inferred questions, citations from Milton’s political tracts, panegyrics to individual writers and politicians, puns, lyrical descriptive passages, and passages of

¹² This conception of poetry has affinities with Idealist philosophy: ‘This conflict between the general form of a proposition and the unity of the Notion which destroys it is similar to the conflict that occurs in rhythm between meter and accent’. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 38.

theoretical assertion. Some sense of unity is imposed in the poem's form: forty two stanzas of eight lines, each line approximating four or five stresses (a small number of stanzas end with a line of one, two or three stresses). A tension exists between Hill's assertion of his own expressive will (the poem begins 'I scorn to tell this just like anyhow'), and his recognition that a writer's intent tends to be obliterated by the objective fact of his circumstances. 'I yield to stage direction,' he writes, and concedes that the contribution of empirical reality to the circumstances of his composition includes the empirical reality of language as material object: 'Better start counting obstacles and best / language the obstacles their own way'.

Hill appears to concede that adequately to begin to address the question of living in the modern state, of having a legal position determined by an unfathomably far-reaching concatenation of forces, requires an interrogation of the connective prescriptions and proscriptions of conventional syntax and metrics. After all, form, he says, damages truth. But despite complaining of 'the unending tug between / syntax and sentiment', Hill refuses the symptomatic and investigative unlacing of syntax that characterises contemporary experiments with form. Indeed his antipathy towards certain (regrettably unnamed) practitioners of poetic experimentation is palpable: 'Superabundant maiming of appearance / is not modernism but melodrama'. Syntactic and typographical improvisation is viewed reductively by Hill as histrionic rebellion, the sufficient and necessary dose of anarchy to provide a frisson of radicalism without any serious engagement. Deeper reading in the history of post-Poundian poetics would have given Hill a much-needed corrective to this view, but his harangue does at least indicate what modernist formalism means to him. It would involve precisely adhering to the obligations enjoined by the struggle to articulate imaginative reflection within the bounds of poetic metre and syntax; if the creative

manipulation of syntax is melodrama, then this struggle must, despite its damaging imperatives, be productive of a more sustained engagement.

3. 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose'

The second edition of *A Treatise of Civil Power* contains an elegy to Gillian Rose, the philosopher to whom Hill had previously credited his understanding of the aporetic in 'Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value'. 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose', structured around fourteen free verse stanzas of variable length, is addressed in the first person to the philosopher. In this it is akin to *The Mystery*, and like the earlier poem, it begins with a question to which Hill expects no answer:

I have a question to ask for the form's sake:
how that small happy boy in the seaside
photographs became the unstable man,
hobbyist of his own rage, engrafting it
on a stock of compliance, of hurt women.

Hill goes on to write: 'You do not need to answer the question / or challenge imposture. / Whatever the protocol I should still construe' (T2 35). The conflict between syntax and sentiment here centres on the status of these last four words. 'I should still construe' can be read as accepting the responsibility for the poet to construct his own private history (addressed in the first five lines) or, alternatively, as an imperative to investigate and interpret the terms (the 'protocol') according to which he can do so. It perhaps ruefully notes, too, that even if Rose could answer back, Hill would ignore her and construct his own version of events. But the phrase admits of another reading, providing we take the

pronoun (as with Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre') as a noun: "'I" should still construe'. The first person singular should still possess grammatical integrity in its relation to other elements in the sentence. This provides a sense that insists on the ethical imperative to seek a way of maintaining the borders of individual subjectivity in the midst of the prevailing powers of public authority. The confessional form attempts to find a voice for the self who is at the mercy of external forms of power.

Power is this time construed in terms offered by Rose's final three books, or 'primers' (T2 37), *Mourning Becomes the Law*, *Love's Work*, and *Paradiso*.¹³ The 'primer' to which Hill's elegy alludes most frequently is Rose's memoir *Love's Work*. In this book Rose describes the experience of love as analogous to the work of philosophy, both of which are envisaged as processes involving risk and difficulty. Appropriately enough, the question with which Hill begins the poem has to do with the genesis of difficult love, of the speaker's 'rage' and its symbiosis with 'a stock of compliance, of hurt women'. Love's work, for Rose, involves the recognition of power and violence on the part of both participants of a relationship; any attempt to imagine or create a domain of self-reliance which extols an ideal of unconditional love removes the possibility of justice, since it evades the work necessary to negotiate the power wielded by the other. Analogously, any philosophy which erases the recognition of power in reason is doomed to permanently divorce the application of reason from political reality. Thought must recognise its own violent investments in order to retain the ability to negotiate the 'middle' – the already begun world of contradictions which define human relations. This negotiation is what Rose

¹³ Incidentally, Rose was taught philosophy by J. L. Austin's widow Jean Austin, though Austin apparently didn't meet Rose's expectations. Rose imagines Jean Austin horrified at the possibility that the girls in her charge 'might imagine that philosophy had some substance which exceeded the celebrated idea that certain kinds of proposition have illocutionary or perlocutionary force'. See Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1995), 121.

calls ‘*love’s work*’, a process she has ‘been charting, accomplishing, but, above all and necessarily, failing in, all along the way’.¹⁴ This failure is acknowledged in Hill’s second stanza:

There are achievements
that carry failure on their back, blindness
not as in Brueghel, but unfathomably
far-seeing.
(T2, 35)

Not the blindness depicted in Brueghel’s painting *The Blind Leading the Blind*, which shows six blind men stumbling towards a ditch, but a ‘far-seeing’ blindness, one which works not according to a pre-established system, but equally, not arbitrarily. These lines amount to a formal, aesthetic reworking of Rose’s tentative but incremental definition of aporetic ethics:

If metaphysics is the *aporia*, the perception of the difficulty of the law, the difficult way, then ethics is the development of it, the *diaporia*, being at a loss yet exploring various routes, different ways towards the good enough justice, which recognises the intrinsic and the contingent limitations in its exercise.¹⁵

Imagined as a conversation, or ‘agon’, between Hill and Rose, ‘In Memoriam’ extends this notion of an aesthetic reformulation of, or dialogue with, Rose’s own aesthetically-derived philosophy. This is why Hill’s initial question is ‘for the form’s sake’: it establishes a provisional arena within which questions of aesthetic and philosophical judgement can be addressed. If form, syntax, and metre are inconvenient checks on a writer’s intention, they

¹⁴ *Love’s Work*, 71.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 116.

nevertheless provide the necessary constructive edifice within which thought can begin. Hill's dialogic form imagines Rose's anger (ambiguously presented as an actually existing fact – 'Your anger against me' for 'poetry's / assumption of rule' – for which however there is no evidence in Rose's published texts) at poetry's arrogation of legislative power. Described as an 'abdication / of self-censure', poetry's aspirations to political efficacy, Hill agrees, are worthy of Rose's 'contempt'. By contrast, he writes, metaphysics is erotically 're-wedded to the city', and given aesthetic form in the figure of Phocion's wife, depicted in Poussin's painting *The Ashes of Phocion Collected by his Widow*, which in turn forms the subject of Rose's essay 'Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Three Cities'. In this essay, Rose takes issue with the view of Poussin's painting as a representation of an act of private, individual justice in the face of monolithic civil injustice, of 'pure, individual love [in opposition] to the impure injustice of the world'.¹⁶ Rose argues that the actions of Phocion's wife, burying and mourning her husband outside the city's boundary walls, do *not* represent an act in defiance of the politics of the community, a privileged moment of immediate ethics. Rather, this moment represents the necessary act wherein she 'reinvent[s] the political life of the community', carrying out rites that reorganise the contours of political judgement in the subject, so that, having mourned, it can continue a politically-active life: 'To acknowledge and to re-experience the justice and the injustice of the partner's life and death is to accept the law, it is not to transgress it – mourning becomes the law'.¹⁷

Law is to be accepted not as an impassible cipher enjoining retreat into oneself, but as a historically-constructed arrangement of constitutional prescriptions and prohibitions

¹⁶ *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

which, when they come into contact with an individual's set of determinative activities, generate a plethora of impasses. Recognition of both civil and subjective power is the first step in the ethical act of reconfiguring the organisation of these various political, intellectual and emotional determinants, and I would argue that Hill's sense of the determinative capacity of modernist art has been modified by his reading of Rose. Hill's poetry, in its late phase, shifts between political and personal power relationships: in section 7 of 'In Memoriam', for instance, the poet is driven to a consideration of 'broken love'. Echoing Rose's observation that '[t]here are always auguries, not only of future difficulties but also of impossibility',¹⁸ Hill speaks of the signs of love's failure as ubiquitous, 'met with everywhere / like postcards of Manet and Monet, Van Gogh's shoes' (T2 36). Hill is evoking the initial aftermath of a failed affair, the 'bitter innocence', in Rose's words, of the lover left behind, moored in 'hateful self-regard', incapable of the necessary work that would enable her to love again, to '[k]eep your mind in hell' without despairing.¹⁹

Hill's emblems of private despair – the mechanically reproduced postcards of famous artworks – brings into view again the question of the critical possibilities of lyric formalism. Van Gogh's painting *A Pair of Boots* is a crux in Fredric Jameson's discussion of postmodernity and the requirement to imaginatively reconstruct the social situation of the artwork's production. Without this act of the imagination, 'the painting will remain an inert object, a reified end product impossible to grasp as a symbolic act in its own right'.²⁰

¹⁸ *Love's Work*, 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66-8.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

Rose's discussion of postmodern philosophy's 'despairing rationalism without reason'²¹ weaves together philosophical and erotic despair, and 'In Memoriam' – via the paradigmatic image of reproduced, deauraticised art – supplements this with an account of the fate of autonomous art in modernity and postmodernity. Benjamin's conception of aura as the central figure in his diagnosis of modern poetry – aura as the critical distance essential to pre-modern artworks – is reworked in Adorno's aesthetics as a negative quality retained (pace Benjamin) by any modern art that aspires to critical objectivity. To abandon lyric autonomy would be to abandon any hope that art could enable the construction of new forms of conceptuality regarding the social.

The final two stanzas of 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose' are concerned with just this cognitive potential of poetry. Section 13 encapsulates the argument:

Poetry's its own agon that *allows us*
to recognize devastation as the rift
 between power and powerlessness. But when I
 say poetry I mean something impossible
 to be described, except by adding lines
 to lines that are sufficient as themselves.
 (T2 38)

The 'agon' that constitutes poetry – what Hill had elsewhere complained of as the conflicting energies of afflatus and syntax – turns out to be the activating precondition of poetry's critical power. Formalist autonomy ('lines that are sufficient as themselves') is the only definitional characteristic of poetry Hill will allow himself; its resistance to description is symptomatic of the crisis of identity facing modern art: the removal of its legitimating ground (whether that is understood retrospectively as science, religion, propaganda or

²¹ *Mourning Becomes the Law*, 7.

social critique) enjoins an augmented, self-legitimizing, autonomy. Renewal as much as mourning is proper to the situation so cognised by self-sufficient art: after the evocations of broken public and private truces, the poem's conclusion, Hill writes, 'is not the end, / more like the cleared spaces around St Paul's / and the gutted City after the fire-raid'. This clearing is not some sudden access to epiphanic vision, bracketing off the troubled world and enabling pristine renovation, but is, rather, the occasion for incremental, tentative assessment and construction, founded on the recognition of violence.

Despite Hill's insistence in 'In Memoriam' on the self-sufficiency of poetic form, there is, as I hope to have shown in this section, a turn, in his post-*Canaan* verse, towards the critical capacities of a subjectivity which exceeds the constitutive elements of prosody, of the confessional 'I' whose newly-found confidence generates its own truths which sometimes conflict with those expressed by form. This additional determinative factor ushers in new vectors in the attempt to organise the field of the poem's perception, not least of which are, as we have seen in the consideration of this poem, the resources offered by philosophy (albeit the confessional, aestheticised philosophy of Gillian Rose). There's a certain reluctance, though, in Hill's final admission that the transformative possibilities of art, while not exhausted, need to be supplemented by philosophy's resources: 'I find *love's work* a bleak ontology / to have to contemplate; it may be all we have' (T2 38). This elegy for a philosopher ends with an estranging syntax, where 'to have to contemplate' sounds as both a complaint at the necessity of philosophy, and as a self-correcting jump from one infinitive ('to have') to another ('to contemplate'); and where the repetition of 'have' at the end of the line sets up a standing vibration between its various associations of possession and obligation. On the one hand, the poet, Hill believes, is obliged to continue art's traditionally-held task of reflecting upon the world, of deploying its formal resources in the

service of critical mimesis: the apprehension of reality in ways that permit its critique. But on the other hand, modern art can no longer claim to be in full possession of the grounds of its own technique: the commodification of its repertoire of formal gestures mocks its claims to autonomy. Dispossessed of its privileged status, Hill's art turns, as we have seen throughout this chapter, to philosophy, which is entrusted with ever increasing responsibility until, in this late poem in Hill's career, he reluctantly admits to its necessity.

CONCLUSION

In the notes accompanying Hill's lecture on T.H. Green in the Leeds archive, is a passage Hill has transcribed from Dorothea Krook's study *Three Traditions of Moral Thought*:

The best [philosophers] ... are, like the best poets, a perpetual threat to the conventional distinction between the abstractness of philosophy and the concreteness of poetry. For they give us, so intensely, the sense of being in touch with the concrete, indeed of never having lost touch with it, but only of having, as Coleridge says, generalized the particulars of experience, and generalized in such a way as to involve ultimately no loss of particularity.¹

Though this passage doesn't make it into 'Perplexed Persistence', a similar statement by Krook is quoted there, on 'the significant common ground that may be seen to exist between poetry and philosophy when both are viewed as products of the creative imagination'.² It is the closest Hill comes to admitting, albeit via the words of another, a sense of shared activity between poetry and philosophy; characteristically, he then truncates its likelihood: 'It is in this domain that Green, who had so much to say, has so little to give' (CCW 124). It has been one of the aims of this thesis to trace this combination of proximity and distancing, which perhaps is the only available way for Hill to articulate his attitude to these overlapping domains.

One of the presuppositions of this thesis has been that modernist thought is defined by this uneasy relationship with organised rationality. My argument in the introduction that this discomfort is not confined just to so-called postmodern intellectuals, but that their

¹ Leeds University Library, Brotherton Collection MS 20c Hill/5/1/75. See Dorothea Krook, *Three Traditions of Moral Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 17.

² Krook, *Three Traditions of Moral Thought*, 10. Cited CCW 124.

interrogation of the damaging effects of Enlightenment reason is merely the latest manifestation of a phenomenon traceable back to the German Idealists, opened a way to think about why Hill might have been attracted to idealism as a tradition in Anglophone philosophy. I began by suggesting what precisely is at stake in Hill's wavering stance towards philosophy. Focusing on Hill's similarly uncertain attitude towards 'vision' in poetry, I argued that Hill's difficulty in accepting this concept unreservedly revolved around the possibility of objective knowledge. Hill's attitude towards this notion pauses between a scepticism which views its claims as extravagant and anachronistic, and a confidence that ascribes credibility to it within certain limits. Since Hill's conflicted attitude towards philosophy's truth-claims is similarly fluctuating, I argued that an understanding of his attitude towards philosophy will help to discover the limits within which Hill might assent to the notion of poetic 'vision'.

I proceeded to outline a minor tradition of Anglophone writing from the 1980s and 1990s in which writers like Peter Dews, J.M. Bernstein, Howard Caygill and Gillian Rose effected a return to Kantianism and Hegelianism, in a reaction against a tendency to view these philosophers' claims to objectivity as damagingly normative. This was not to advocate an uncritical acceptance of systematic metaphysics or a reactionary dismissal of the ideas of, say, Derrida and Foucault and their followers. Rather than segregating conceptuality from pleasure and pain, they sought to re-cognise the relations between pleasure and pain and the normative conceptuality of metaphysics. One solution to Krook's desiderated overlapping between philosophy and poetry would be to turn philosophy into mere play with language, where this play is granted cognitive legitimacy by the example of poetry. However this would also necessitate a conception of poetry as mere play with language, quixotically effacing the conceptual element of language. To follow Rose et al

would be to recognise the impossibility of ignoring the conceptual in philosophy and in art, training the gaze instead upon the coincidences and fractures between thought and being that constitute objectivity.

My argument has been that Hill tacitly joins this movement, not just by a recent interest in Rose's writings, but by a life-long critical engagement with British Idealism, both in its embryonic form in Coleridge's borrowings from Kant and Schelling, and in its fully-fledged manifestation in the works of T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley. The rest of the thesis was concerned with reading Hill's criticism and poetry for its strategies of recognition of the difficulties of objectivity or universality. Following Bernstein's account of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, I returned in particular to certain concepts from that work: aesthetic reflection and the *sensus communis*. Both concepts allowed for the intermixing of conceptuality (a claim to objective knowledge) and subjective affect (the sense in common sense, the pleasure or pain in aesthetic judgements of taste). As Bernstein argues, Kant's notion of his theory of judgement as 'a bridge to span the "great gulf" ... separating the realms of freedom and nature' is erroneous. Instead, Bernstein says, Kant's theory is more like 'a sepulchre to stand over their lost unity', offering 'a recognition of their present intractable but contingent separation'.³ My reading, in the introduction, of some early poems of Hill's attempted to show in detail how microscopic aesthetic decisions such as are involved in the construction of a poem's syntax and prosody can offer unique ways of recognising such 'separations' within former unities.

Coleridge has long been recognised as an important constituent of Hill's work, and he also happens to stand at the source of British Idealism. Yet no studies have yet been

³ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 18.

published on Coleridge's place in Hill's thought. The first section of this thesis began the process of teasing out the implications of this important relationship. It traced the channels through which Kantian ideas were brought to Britain via Coleridge's writings, and in the process showed how those ideas of Coleridge most cherished by Hill in fact could often be traced back to German Idealism. A connection was thus created between Hill's ideas of the aesthetic apprehension of the social (as propounded in his essay 'Redeeming the Time') and wider, idealist, ideas about art's capacity to recognise previously unknown aspects of the social. In tandem with this, a reading of Hill's long poem *The Triumph of Love* made a claim for its status as a Coleridgean poem, and brought into play the possibility of a specifically poetic (rather than philosophical) debate about the anxieties of the mind bound to the enterprise of objective thought.

If Coleridge might be said to fulfil Krook's desire to blur the distinction between philosophy and poetry, T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley are *prima facie* more likely to reinforce the distinction. My second section examined Hill's approach to these minor philosophers. In particular Hill's enthusiasm for Bradley's philosophy permitted a closer analysis of what might constitute a philosophical poem. I could ask this question thanks in large part to Hill's connection of certain of Eliot's poems (in particular 'Marina'), which he termed 'Bradleian', to the syntax of Bradley's philosophical writings. This Bradleian syntax comes to be associated with a notion of judgement always threatening to subside into solipsism, and I read some of the poems collected in *Canaan* in this light. Judgement also predominates as a legislative metaphor in Hill's later poem *Speech! Speech!* Here, I argued, more weight is granted to the speaking subject, producing a crisis in objectivity that is reflected in the diacritical accents and deliberately halting prosody that mark the text.

My final section considered some of the already existing alternatives to Hill's wrestle with objectivity. On one side we have the example of Ezra Pound, for whom 'vision' (objective truth) was an unquestioned prerogative of the poet, whose status as final arbiter of truth extended to the reformation of monetary and foreign policy for sovereign states. On the other side are those poets (like Czesław Miłosz) for whom the final arbiter is empirical reality: a poem's truth is predicated on its proximity and fidelity to social facts (often distressing or violent facts). Having already noted how Hill's prose often approximates a form of empiricism (it relies on the historical analysis of fragments of speech – words, phrases – to deduce wider social facts about the speaker's environment), I considered the case of J.L. Austin, a philosopher whose theories about language on the face of it bear some similarities to Hill's, and who forms the subject of Hill's well-known essay 'Our Word Is Our Bond'. In the process I concluded that Hill's attitude is a complicated one of embrace (the poetic, historicised nature of Austin's enquiry is sympathetic to Hill) and rejection (Austin's suspicion of metaphysics finally denies him self-consciousness vis-à-vis his own philosophy). I pursued the theme of autonomous versus committed poetry in a reading of Hill's poem 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy'. The section finished with Hill's recantation of his earlier sequestering of poetry into the realm of the noumenal. It focused on the late lectures 'Rhetorics of Value and Intrinsic Value' and 'Poetry and Value' to read his shift from a formalism that read synoptic diagnosis into the material elements of language to a realism that granted some degree of critical power to the writer vis-à-vis the material he operates with. Some of the consequences of this shift in attitude were explored in the recent volume *A Treatise of Civil Power*.

It is easier to read philosophy as a kind of cognitive poetry (think of Hegel's looping reiterations and Nietzsche's aphoristic polemics) than it is to read poetry as a

thematized philosophy. Both approaches are misguided, of course: philosophy's prose styles are never developed without an instrumental, disputational aim, and poetry's own mode of cognition should be sought not in its ostensible content, but in its prosody (which is equally enmeshed in historical lines of assertion and response). Aside from the philosophical echoes, allusions and coincidences in Hill's poetry, I have tried to demonstrate a twofold philosophical content. On the one hand, the lyric's microscopic prosodic and syntactic music permits ways of cognising certain problems often thought to be the possession of philosophy (for example, my reading in the introduction of the ways 'Of Commerce and Society' fosters an awareness of the difficulties involved in using abstract ideas like 'liberty' to work through the aftermath of conflicts). On the other, I have discussed how Hill has on occasion conceived poetry as explicitly assuming the rhythmic qualities of certain modes of philosophical apprehension, as in Eliot's 'Bradleian syntax'.

If my treatment of Hill's poetry and criticism seemed to smuggle in a philosophical lexicon that is antithetical to Hill's preoccupations as they are traditionally conceived, the relevance of the speculation enabled by this lexicon is, I hope, confirmed by two considerations. First, Hill's poetry indisputably emerges from ethical, aesthetic, theological and political questions which have traditionally been treated as philosophy's domain of expertise. While I have argued that part of Hill's attitude to poetry and philosophy is defined by a rivalry over this domain, such an attitude could only arise from a familiarity with philosophy's inroads and settlements. This leads to the second reason philosophy can be argued to have had a constitutive effect on Hill's work, which is the frequent philosophical nature of Hill's allusions in his critical prose. I hope to have shown that his poetry cannot be separated from his criticism, leaving the sensuous, living matter on the side of poetry and the abstract, technical analysis on the side of prose. Rather, the

remarkable density of references to philosophy and philosophers in his criticism (a density there for anyone to see, but rarely remarked upon) points to an impassioned engagement with the varieties of metaphysical experience articulated in their work, an engagement which can only have had an impact on his poetry.

In my focus on philosophy in the Anglophone Idealist tradition I necessarily left unexamined some other aspects of Hill's intellectual interests. Other figures, more marginal to Hill's project and usually meriting only a mention or two in his poetry or criticism, might still bear closer study: Emerson, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Adorno and Arendt. Most glaring, given his claim that he has been 'completely moved by philosophy only two times in my life: by Simone Weil when I was young; more recently, by F.H. Bradley', is the absence of Weil from my account.⁴ Weil's philosophy overlaps with theology more obviously than does the tradition of Anglophone Idealism I have been concerned with, and might usefully be studied alongside the work of other thinkers, including Joseph Butler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Cambridge Platonists, who bring a philosophical rigour to bear on the theological issues in Hill's criticism. Such a study would usefully fill out the Christian dimension of Hill's metaphysics, which has only been glanced at here.

Finally, I hope to have demonstrated the philosophical foundation of Hill's thought. I have tried to show, moreover, that this foundation is coherent and durable: that a reliance upon idealist thought, even if only sometimes as sparring partner, has been a constant characteristic of Hill's writing career. It has provided him with examples and counter-examples for the case against metaphysics and its putative elimination of the particular in the name of the universal: his encounters with Green and Bradley have shown how the

⁴ Anne Mounic, 'Le poème, "moulin mystique": Entretien avec Geoffrey Hill', *Temporel* 6 (2008) <<http://temporel.fr/Le-poeme-moulin-mystique-Entretien>>, accessed 6 December 2009.

focus on relationships in a webbed context of details can set abstract thought moving, and how it can freeze when faced with the deceiving hidden abstraction of ‘concrete’, ‘lived’ experience in the form of an audience’s demands. Coleridge features as the sage of Highgate: the philosopher who made the transition (with greater or less success, depending on who you read) from hoarder of abstruse reason to communicator of wisdom, via a sensuous, aesthetic mode of articulation. His reluctance to abandon Christian faith as an explanatory foundation preceding idealist explanations, and his theories of language as revelation (‘if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS’), expose similar limits in Hill’s appropriation of traditional metaphysics, and informs the light-drenched epiphanies that occlude thought on occasion in his poetry. On the other hand, J.L. Austin’s suspicion of metaphysics tempers Hill’s admiration for Austin’s linguistic sensitivity, for as substantial as Austin’s empirical observations are, they threaten to break apart into mere substance without the coordinating strategies of abstract thought.

In attempting to tread a line between absolute fidelity to the non-identical – to whatever is not assimilable to current modes of conceptuality without damage – and conceptuality (the long tradition of rationality that makes recognition of particulars possible in the first place), Hill’s response to the dissatisfaction with modernity has unfolded itself over a few decades in a remarkably measured way. Pausing to consider other possible responses to a perceived calamity in modern values (Pound’s complex approach of claiming supreme poetic authority while devaluing prosodic authority in the textual density of *The Cantos*; the sacrifice of poetic authority for a concomitant expansion of associative, unconscious reference for the surrealists; the radical confinement of reference to the arena of an austere object world with ultimate authority in Beckett), one has an idea of the options Hill had at his disposal but chose not to employ. Hill’s concern with public art –

with a mandate that meanings must be elaborated in shareable spaces – entails a reluctance to accept any artistic choice that assumes such spaces to be inaccessible from the start. On occasion this has meant that his effort to recuperate moments of atonement from a splintered sociohistorical context has resulted in an aesthetics of mimetic fidelity: being ‘pitch-perfect’ often seems to mean merely reverberating sympathetically with the already existing. A more nuanced idea of the concrete is defined by Charles Altieri (alluding to Hegel) as ‘not a condition of immediacy, but as a specific kind of relation between phenomena and interpretive systems’.⁵ At certain moments, either through equivocation and syntactic ambiguity (as in the early poems), or a staging of private preoccupations in a parodically public discourse (as in *The Triumph of Love*), Hill’s poetry fulfils the demand implied in T.H. Green’s warning: ‘Abstract the many relations from the one thing, and there is nothing’. It realises a notion of the concrete that permits, in the foregrounding of relations and their historical shifts, the recognition of existing ways of relating to the world, and, by extension, the recognition that such relations are corrigible.

⁵ Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 44.

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