‘Unfinished to perfection’: Geoffrey Hill, revision, and the poetics of stone.

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In his early criticism, Geoffrey Hill conceives of the work of poetry as a process of strenuous revision towards a definable point of ‘technical perfection’, identifying the poet’s ethical engagement in the end-directed ‘act of self-critical decision’. The early poetry, contrastingly, expresses a distrust of the poem as finished product which is often manifest in a poetics of stone: a finished poem petrifies that which (and those whom) it attempts to remember. Employing a genetic methodology, this article tests whether these two conflicting attitudes about ending might produce a friction that affects how the poems develop. It finds that the poems are animated by the question of how, ethically, to finish a poem and traces the vicissitudes of that animation in their developing deployment of stone imagery. Finally, it addresses the customary critical division between ‘early’ and ‘late’ Hill, arguing – through extended close attention to the notebook drafts of *The Triumph of Love* (1998) – that a dramatic shift in Hill’s revisionary ethic catalyses a profound poetic change expressed in a reconception of stone as flux. Hill’s new, late poetic seeks to comprise itself of its own revisionary processes, thus to remain perpetually in process and, in its unfinishedness, to manifest an ethical openness to alterity.

Keywords: poetry, revision, manuscripts, genetic criticism, ethical criticism, Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love*

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i.

In his inaugural lecture, given at Leeds University in 1977 and published in 1984 as ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’ – about as close to a manifesto for his early poetic as we have – Geoffrey Hill (1932-2016) emphasises the importance of revisionary labour and closure to his practice. He begins his account with two quotations to which, he says, he gives ‘instinctive assent’.¹ The first is from Yeats, for whom ‘a poem comes right with a click like a closing box’. (4) The second is from T.S. Eliot:
when the words are finally arranged in the right way – or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find – [the poet] may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable. (4)

Although Eliot equivocates, what both quotations assume as central to the making of a poem is a melioristic revisionary labour that has a definite, achievable and identifiable end in view. Approvingly, Hill goes on to quote Pound: ‘The poet’s job is to define and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice.’ (4 – emphasis in original) The poet’s standing, that is, is distinguished for Hill not by any expressive talent or receptivity to inspiration, by any insight or gift of spontaneity, but by a diligence of self-criticism and self-correction that assiduously tightens the weft of language until it manifests a final correctness, instinctively known. ‘[T]he technical perfecting of a poem,’ Hill writes,

is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense – an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony. (4)

This scrupulousness constitutes neither ivory-towered fastidiousness nor abstract play; as Hill has elsewhere said,

[i]n the act of refining technique one is not only refining emotion, one is also constantly defining and redefining one’s ethical and moral sensibility. One is constantly confronting and assessing the various kinds of moral and immoral pressures of the world, but all these things happen simultaneously in the act of self-critical decision.
The attentive, end-directed self-criticism of stylistic revision is, for Hill, the ethical engagement at the heart of a responsible poetry.

Yet, despite Hill’s professed faith in ‘the technical perfecting of a poem’ (4), much of his early verse expresses a distrust of finishing – or, better, of finish; a suspiciousness of the poem as finished product – that often finds expression in a poetics of stone.iii Jeffrey Wainwright has written about how the early poems are anxious that poetry ‘locks life with its Midas touch – the “Stony vine” of Mercian Hymns, the “sculpted vine” of ‘Veni Coronaberis’ – and turns everything to display.’iv Taking his cue from the poetry, Robert Macfarlane has seen a stoniness in the early poems’ worked-at wroughtness, the feeling that the words are twisted as tightly as they will go. They ‘exhibit’, he writes,

the permanence of geological structures. They are written in a form so pressurising that grammar and syntax are often crushed within it, and meaning is densely compacted.v

It is an anxiety that permeates: to finish a poem is to petrify; to revise is to compact, to compress, to stiffen. In ‘The Distant Fury of Battle’, for instance, written in 1955 and collected in For the Unfallen in 1959 (in part, a collection of, and about, memorial poetry), a memorial to the war dead becomes inadequate because made of stone, therefore static, unliving: ‘Grass resurrects to mask, to strangle/Words glossed on stone, lopped stone-angel’.vi Memorial is a form that, for Hill, fixes the victims of violence in stone, holds them separate, so that they need not form any part of a social consciousness, or present-tense experience – famously, in a much later poem, The Triumph of Love, he calls Britain a ‘nation with so many memorials but no memory’ (261) – and the logic of the violence that engendered their deaths remains uninterrupted: ‘Union with the stone-wearing dead/Claims the born leader’. (13) The poems of For the Unfallen adhere to the rudiments of poetic form: they scan, they rhyme (or, at least, they seek to: failed rhyme,
half rhyme are characteristics of Hill’s early verse, as in ‘strangle’ and ‘stone-angel’). But poetic form is, here, an agent of inertia; its perfection is the perfection of arrested motion.

There is, then, an ethical friction in Hill’s early poetic. Concentrated and committed revision towards a point at which a poem cannot be bettered may be the poet’s responsibility. But to reach that point and walk away is to arrest the flow of the real – in the case of a memorial poem, to enact a second death. Something of how this friction affects the ways in which the early poems develop might, I hope, become apparent in a few reflections on the genesis of Hill’s best-known memorial poem, ‘September Song’. Published in 1968’s King Log, ‘September Song’ begins life as an attempt to elegise the death of a child, Edita Polláková, who was murdered at Auschwitz at the age of twelve.

In its published form, the poem records the likely facts of Polláková’s death as well as the poet’s anxiety that the poetic act he has taken it upon himself to perform is a self-interested one, most memorably articulated in the poem’s central parenthetical interruption. Here is the published poem:

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born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42

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

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

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

This is plenty. This is more than enough. (44)

Recorded in several A5 notebooks held at the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, the earliest stages of the poem’s composition look much as one would expect from a poet who places such importance on revisionary labour: lines dense with crossings out and substitutions, half-formed fragments written out over and again, notebook pages heavy with the marks of second thoughts. But, although it registers as an afterthought, the parenthesis emerged all but whole from the beginning of Hill’s very first attempt, uniquely unmarked by revision, the first full gesture he would write towards the poem:

I have made
An elegy for myself. That
Is true.vii

The confession is no doubt sincere.viii Yet it records a false teleology, staging a revisionary glancing back over a finished text not yet written. It is a mark of how crucial the expectation of closure is to Hill at this stage of his career: the poem is being imagined from its point of origin as a closed box, a container which it is the poet’s task to fill and seal. In his first full identifiable attempt at the poem, however, Hill also records the fact of his not yet having arrived at that end, ending the draft with the lines:
Like one borne away
Terrified, indignant
Outraged + shouting
“I have not finished.”

The final line is a moment of unity, an at-one-ment of expression and subject: its emotional power arises from the fact of its finality, drawing the reader’s attention to both a diegetic and an extra-diegetic ending while simultaneously protesting against both: there is more to say, more to be said. From the beginning, then, the poem seeks to imagine itself as a finished product, a perfected utterance, yet simultaneously enacts a resistance to its own finishing.

As his drafting continues, as he works towards the pre-determined end, Hill begins to articulate, through revision, a consonance between the process of finishing the poem and the act of racial definition that led to Polláková’s death – a piece of language that finished her by fixing her in form. Thus, for example, the line, ‘Material was sufficient for your death’, descriptive of the cold bureaucracy of the Nazi apparatus, becomes, ‘Material was sufficient for that end’, where the substitution not only mimes the way in which cliché can mask brutality, evil utilises banality, but ensures that the words encompass different kinds of ending, mean more than death, and – given the literary resonance of the word ‘material’ – call to mind, now, the act of ending the poem: ‘Material was sufficient for that end’; *I had enough material to finish the poem.* The line’s final form – ‘Things marched./sufficient, to that end’ (44) – not only satirises linguistic inexactitude in ‘Things marched’, thus making a moral case for a linguistic precision brought about through attentive revision, but also mimes, with a rhythmic aptness that implicates the poem, the brutality of moving with steady determination
towards a pre-written ending, just as Hill works to justify the retrospective glance of ‘I have made’.

As the poem nears completion, as it begins to click shut, Hill removes the original final line – which he imports to the ending of ‘Funeral Music’ (1968), a sequence of memorial sonnets about the Wars of the Roses – and replaces it with: ‘This is plenty. This is more than enough.’ Material, now, is sufficient for that end. The poem, which began as an imagining of itself as finished product, had ended its first draft with, “‘I have not finished’”; its composition proceeded towards a predestined, definite end, whilst recording its ethical resistance to that ending. Now, finally, it records, with something like self-disgust, the moment of its completion, or its nauseating more-than-completion, its excess, speaking, now authentically, from the point of conclusion. Read genetically, that is, ‘September Song’ becomes a poem about both the ethical necessity and the transgressiveness of its own finishing.

‘September Song’ poses a question, then: how, ethically, to finish a poem? How to do justice in art to the suffering Other without setting in stone, holding separate and walking away, self-fooled and self-satisfied? It is a question that will occupy Hill throughout his working life. Certainly, the rate of his output in the first, long phase of his career attests to the difficulty of the question: in four decades, from 1959’s For the Unfallen to 1996’s Canaan, Hill published only seven slim volumes, fewer than two per decade. But, as I hope to show, it is a question that will find a potent answer in a late rethinking of both the theory and practice revision – and, accordingly, the development of a new poetic ethics.
Few poets can have had more made of their ‘late style’ than Geoffrey Hill – the ‘remarkable unstoppling of [his] muse’ that Colin Burrow celebrates; ‘probably the most striking stylistic transformation of a major poet in recent memory’, as Garth Greenwell has written. Hill’s early verse and his late verse are often taken as distinct corpuses, the former characterised by its wroughtness and rarity, the latter by its provisionality and torrent: in the final two decades of his career, from 1998’s *The Triumph of Love* to 2019’s posthumous *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, Hill published fifteen sometimes very long volumes – more than seven per decade – occasionally in multiple versions. Where the early poems are thematically focussed and narratively situated, the late poems can be collaged, often surreal, their ground constantly shifting. It is a radical development but, as I hope to show, it has organic roots.

At the centre of Hill’s career sits 1996’s *Canaan*, a volume begun in the early 1980s and worked at until publication, making it by far Hill’s most labour-intensive collection. No longer ‘early’ but not quite ‘late’, it is a collection that pulls in both directions. And it is much concerned with stone. But, unlike the early verse – interested, as Jeffrey Wainwright identified, in the vine turned to stone (a figure of life arrested, perpetual growing petrified) – this collection begins to imagine a kind of plant life at the heart of stone. The flower or creeper that pushes through the inanimate and rock solid is a recurring image. ‘Scenes with Harlequins’, for example, an early sequence about the Russian revolutionary poet Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921), refers punningly to its subject, during a period of writer’s Blok, as a ‘granite-faced seer’, but it describes, too, a poetic reawakening, placing a ‘lilac/at [his] petrified heart’. (184) Another poem, ‘Sorrel’, imagines a rainstorm that

seeps among nettlebeds and threadbare sorrel,

perpetual ivy burrowed by weak light,
makes carved shapes crumble[,]  

where ivy’s timeless recurrence clings to and pushes through an ‘ill-weathering stone’ and, indeed, all elements of the image appear to seep and thread amongst one another in a kind of mutual becoming. (208) ‘Churchill’s Funeral’ imagines the ruined London churches of the Blitz as a ‘Stone Pietà’, ending its description with organic life:

with the ragwort
and the willow-herb
as edifiers
of ruined things. (214)

Unlike the strangling grass of ‘The Distant Fury of Battle’, these plants, forms of perpetual growing commonly classed as weeds, become, at the heart of crumbling stone structure, reconstructive moral agencies: ‘edifiers’.

Accordingly, poetic form begins to crumble, as a new kind of immediacy begins to push through the verse. The earliest poems written for the volume are composed in a compacted syllabic form, quatrains that look like pebbles on the page, as in ‘Churchill’s Funeral’:

Stone Pietà
for which the city
offers up incense
and ashes, blitzed

firecrews, martyrs
crying to the Lord,
their mangled voices
within the flame[.] (214)

Those written later, however, begin to lean towards freedom. ‘To the High Court of Parliament’, for instance, uses the same four-line syllabic form as ‘Churchill’s Funeral’ but allows the lines to slip free from their moorings:

Where’s probity in this –
the slither-frisk
to lordship of a kind
as rats to a bird-table? (171)

Others, such as ‘Cycle’, begin to look as though they are in the process of assembling (or, disassembling) on the page:

Larch or alder
first
then willow
leafless tints
of spring touch red through brimstone

praise and lament
praise and lament

what do you mean
praise
Simultaneously, the poems begin to develop a new poetic glance. No longer speaking, retrospectively, from a point of conclusion – whether imagined, forced or authentic (‘I have made’; “I have not finished”; ‘This is plenty’) – poems such as ‘Cycle’, whose lines appear to await their perfect arrangement, begin to position themselves within an anticipation of a future order. ‘I imagine singing I imagine/ /getting it right’ (172), says the poet of ‘That Man as a Rational Animal Desires the Knowledge Which Is His Perfection’, a line which perpetually delays the clicking-shut of the box, positioning the perfected poem now in a never-arriving future.xiii

In the third poem of ‘Scenes with Harlequins’, the poet appears obstructed: ‘I am not myself’. (186) He asks: ‘What can one say?’ (186) One feels Hill’s presence in the answer:

By humour of lament,
spontaneous word of stone,
inspired débâcle
many times rehearsed […] (186)

The stanza posits a poetry simultaneously spontaneous and made of stone. With the accents over ‘débâcle’, Hill foregrounds the word’s literal French meaning: a rush of water that clears a path through solid structure. An ‘inspired débâcle’ might,
metaphorically, be an immediate poetry, a gush of free verse that breaks through the strictures of poetic form. But it is also, here, ‘many times rehearsed’ – worked at, returned to, heavily revised. This, then, is the poetic which Canaan is beginning to imagine: one combining crystallisation with immediacy; revised, compacted solidity with open-ended process. As I hope to show in the remainder of this article – in which I read the genesis of the first true volume of Hill’s late verse, The Triumph of Love, against its published text – it is a poetic he truly establishes when he finds a way to turn his own revisionary processes into the matter of the poems.

iii.

As he nears the end of his work on Canaan, Hill does what he often does when nearing the end of a new collection: he combs through his notebooks for unused fragments of verse, usually just several words, writing them out in an alphabetised list, in order, presumably, not to lose anything of value. On this occasion, however, Hill begins to organise the list differently. Having passed through the alphabet several times, he shifts to a numbering system. It is a substantial, influential change. The alphabet is finite, a symbolic sequence with a definite end. A sequence of numbers is conceptually endless. And so it proves: this time, the sequence does not end. Once he has gathered all the loose material, Hill begins to write out each fragment a second time, continuing to number each individual gesture, revising as he does so, gluing fragments together if they might happen to chime, adding new particles of poetic thought, research, apprehension or reflection to the sequence as and when it occurs to him. And once he has written them all out a second time, he writes out this new, longer sequence again, again continuing to number it, add to it, revise it. For clarity, I include here a transcription of the first two pages of the new numbering system, comprising a combination of revised and new material, the majority
of which will find its way into the loose first trilogy of Hill’s ‘late verse’: *The Triumph of Love, Speech! Speech!* (2000), or *The Orchards of Syon* (2002):

Not unmoved

1. Much moved by what passes/for excitable

2. the glittering vacant lancets, a sharp /empty/
   unpercussive scurry of swifts’ wings
   revisiting the sills

3. there will be worse times

   nor is this

4. This is not a primer of innocence/exactly

5. small conjugations, live as watch-springs
   the second hand twitching into the slot towards/against

6. you shall hear it one last time and know/that you are
   dying

7. planets of alkali
   the crowd at the gate

8. a snarled and snarling

9. yr patience proven by the rage of others exploited patience proves
10. terminal agony not the less interminable

11. the young martyrs ageing/in the fire terrible

12. the bracken-coloured leaves of winter oak

13. suprasensual how that would have shaken you

14. England’s iron-bound storm-tree turbulently at rest

15. and let ignorance/speak yet again with authority

16. the damson trees by the blackened gable-end

17. that which our betters/had long ago set down as damned


19. each separate bead/of drizzle at its own thorn tip/shines [your hosannah]

20. lust of all sense: it [?]pergations/earthsmonth

21. the storm’s advent It is early/LS a first line unobserved

22. [?]miscueil, ill-timed [?]otherwise unremarked unobserved

the prayer of the Trinity makes adequate
This newly systematic, cyclical approach to composition becomes a driver of Hill’s poetic energy, liberating him from slow work on individual lyrics and subsuming atomised poetic gestures into a totalising motion that allows for an unprecedented prolificity. It is both creative process and revisionary looking back, forward movement and corrective labour simultaneously. It is not hard to see how the process influences the form this new collection will take: *The Triumph of Love* is a series of numbered fragments of loosely bound free verse. Beyond this obvious influence, however, as I hope to show, the change informs every aspect of the long poem and, beyond that, of Hill’s late poetic.

The method allows new habits of revision to enter the compositional process, which in turn influence the form and content of the poetry. It is an influence visible, for example, in the development of a fragment Hill first writes before he develops the numbering system (possibly for *Canaan*):
Whose lives, then, are hidden in God? Whose?

Who knows what has been lost? [?]pelagic
sensibly estimated to the last can be

measured

|) the last true ghetto-soup

Early in his numbering, Hill returns to these lines, writing them out again thus:

41 Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose? among?

Who knows what has gone from us, the deep

been taken, what is gone from us among

the diaspora

pelagic ghetto-soup. The whale’s ?sonar

what has been taken away

acoustic[s] acoustic intelligence sonar

arctic

sonar

One can see here how the process allows small revisions to become part of its motion. Hill has fluently reformulated the question of the second line so that, ‘Who knows what has been lost?’ has become, ‘Who knows what has gone from us […]’ But where revision had previously been for Hill a process primarily of this kind of substitution or reformulation, this new system fosters a habit of accretion. Thus, in the margin, Hill revises the question again, again renegotiating agency (‘gone from us’ becomes ‘been taken’). But rather than substitute the latter for the former, the revised line asks both questions in the same breath: ‘Who knows what has been taken, what is gone from us […]’. In other words, revision functions no longer as a packing down, a tightening, a stiffening; this new system allows the lines to open up and unfold organically, adding
new terms rather than simply substituting old ones: they *gather* their revisions. The fragment continues to accrete over the following months, becoming both an enactment of and a reflection on accretion, reading in its published version:

Whose lives are hidden in God? Whose?

Who can now tell what was taken, or where,
or how, or whether it was received:
how ditched, divested, clamped, sifted, overlaid, raked over, grassed over, spread around,
rotted down with leafmould, accepted
as civic concrete, reinforceable
base cinderblocks:
tipped into the Danube, Rhine, Vistula, dredged up
with the Baltic and the Pontic sludge:
committed *in absentia* to solemn elevation,
*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? (242)

The question has not, as it might once have been, been refined through revision to a perfect economy of utterance. It is now sixteen lines long, a catalogue of atrocity that gathers terms as it unfolds and in its first half describes, as it acquires, a brutal accretion that becomes a violent compaction, a literal petrification, as the accumulated victims of
atrocity become ‘base cinderblocks’, the foundations of contemporary life. The question hinges on a series of colons rather than semi-colons, a mark signalling equivalence rather than sequence. This compaction is thus given grammatical parity with the subsequent satirical accretive list of forms of memorial art. The suggestion that memorial poetry (and this is a memorial poem) might petrify is familiar. What is new, however, is that, while the poetry takes its complaint all the way back to Hill’s own 1968 ‘funeral/music’ – the sequence of memorial sonnets, closed forms, that shared a genesis with ‘September Song’, also a sonnet in disguise – the lines themselves attempt a more provisional poetic.

Hill’s new method of progressive return allows, too, for another, more idiosyncratic mode of revisionary expansion: the fragments do not only accrete through revision, they agglomerate. Hill does not work up the sections word by word, line by line; rather, moments of apprehension come into being singly and, as the numerical sequence progresses, they begin to stick to one another or merge, gradually forming bigger and bigger units. The work is dynamic: instead of pages dense with correction, the notebooks record a stream of expression and re-expression, each fragment – whether it be a revised utterance, a new utterance, a new arrangement of utterances – leading to the next, the work of careful shaping left until a particular section has begun to settle. Often the fragments fit together smoothly enough for the joins to be invisible. But, especially when the fragments join one another less seamlessly, Hill’s new process allows the fullness of an individual utterance’s spontaneity to resonate, fostering a poetry that apprehends the present tense of all aspects of his poetic work – whether it be academic research, moments of expression, apprehension of the natural world, second thoughts, and so on. Something of what I mean should emerge from an account of the coming-together of the first completed poem for the volume, section XXIV.
At number 128 in the sequence, Hill tentatively sticks together a series of individual fragments in order to create a full poem:

or do you not even suspect how immortal we are to begin with? scattered/or despoiled empire
or despoiled empire -(Dereliction of all great building)- or upon what else should the imagination has | fasten | to riches? Do you even | suspect how immortal they are to begin with? How [?]wrought by cherubs [?]or with a [?]broken harmony perfects them. I did not say In the [?]act Subversion. Subvention is what I said. It was all for show: What (?) will you say? England’s iron bound storm tree turbulently at rest or do you not even suspect how immortal we are/in our worst side they/these we are, to begin with? The speech of formulation [?]foundation lies [?]on granite and basalt /[/?]grand bias [of], granite poured in basalt speaking of formulation and you can [?]see the what are the properties of myrrh? earth tilt Is myrrh/addictive? Liturgically I mean, Myrrh or whatever. Or is it hyssop (?) its [?]little [?]out in the [?]Baltic | [?]encyclopaedia [steel and
Difficulties of transcription aside, one can see how the qualities of Hill’s late style are beginning to emerge from the process: there is a surrealism in these lines, founded on an intellectual disjointedness that tempts but resists coherent reading, a constant shifting of the ground. The disparate fragments, resonating on their own terms, are stitched together now by an extemporaneous ‘I’; voice emerges as the adhesive, as though the process itself is speaking. The short original fragment, ‘Is myrrh/addictive?’, for instance – which originated from pages of academic research into the properties of myrrh, while Hill was still working on Canaan – is now introduced, here, with an archivally authentic question – ‘what are the properties of myrrh?’ – and followed by a revisionary clarification: ‘Liturgically I mean, Myrrh or whatever.’ The voice articulates the origin, the present-tense imperfection and the future of the fragment, admitting to inexactitude and imagining a more accurate version of the text to come (‘or whatever’). The fragments are embedded thus in a soil of compositional doubt which is not (like the ‘I have made’ of ‘September Song’) a performance of self-criticism but is an actual record of process.

But it is only voice and doubt that unite these fragments: they do not resonate together. Hill tries another arrangement, fashioning a shorter poem from some of the same material, some taken from elsewhere:

< Scattered and despoiled/empire of history
163 the [?]avenue slick
with a

<Angelus Silesius pray for us

<Carry us to the house of correction]

<A lifetime of obsession

<-[illegible] the conjugations fine as hair watch-springs

broken ear

scripture xvii
Almost every gesture here will appear at some point in *The Triumph of Love*, but scattered throughout the book, indicating just how contingent the process is, how provisional the final arrangement of material: on another occasion, the particles could have fallen differently.xix Again unhappy with the arrangement, Hill extracts the final gestures and fits them into another new arrangement:

Bring out the masters of the leaping captions,
spin any name from the drum – Cardanus
assassinations on the significances of eclipses,
in small open another assassination en route to the office,
tourers the pavement slick with a mizzle of lime flower.
After the morning clouds burn off
it will be a good day:
lake water thumping in the paddle-boxes
the still foreboding of the heavens.
Scattered and despoiled benefactions
of late appeal, what realism can there be
in these apprehendings – case is not reason –
the fast / slow-motion of the carrousel
course without reason, the second-hand
jerking into the slot?  
Children in jelly-green celluloid eye-shades –  
dead children [\textsuperscript{3}] mightier than the solemn clowns –  
the only miracles were miracles of escape\textsuperscript{4}  
29 May\textsuperscript{xx}

This is identifiably, now, an early version of section XXIV:

Summon the leaders, the leaping captions,  
numbers rolled from a drum: Cardanus  
on the significance of eclipses,  
Rathenau, ‘industrialist and philosopher’,  
famous unnamed assassins’ open tourers,  
a road slicked in its dressing of lime pollen.  
After some early clouds burn off  
as predicted by the harbour master  
we will have a clear day –  
lake water chopping under paddle-boxes,  
the scroll-wave motion of a carousel,  
jelly-green celluloid eye-shields; children  
overexcited by rampageous clowns,  
fire-breathers, artists of inept escape. (245-246)

What appears to have made it possible for Hill to construct a first full poem from this experimental process is the admission into the verse of a correlative for the process itself – in this instance, a tombola. As from the tombola’s rolling drum, in Hill’s new process, numbered units of apprehension are drawn from a churning circular motion and slotted
into meaningful, chance sequence. The poem records, describes and enacts the process that created it. Of course, once the arrangement of the fragments is fixed, Hill polishes the lines (thus the lovely ‘the pavement slick with a mizzle of lime flower’ becomes the refined, ‘a road slicked in its dressing of lime pollen’). But Hill’s poetic no longer seems to subordinate immediacy to finish: each gesture is allowed to resonate on its own terms, as it first appeared, is allowed its own immediacy, its own creative-expressive moment, even as it joins a sequence of unfolding meaning, a full gesture – ‘each separate bead/of drizzle,’ as Hill has it in section LIII ‘at its own thorn-tip stands/as revelation’. (253) In this sense, it is beginning to look something like the ‘spontaneous word of stone’ that Canaan had imagined, an ‘inspired débâcle/many times rehearsed’.

_The Triumph of Love_ is a poem woven from such self-apprehendings. Thus, wheels, cycles, gyres, systems of rotary motion spin throughout: there are potter’s wheels, water wheels, carousels, turbines, spiralling winds, ‘a spinning bike-wheel’ that frames the whole vision. (262) The sequence is itself a system of rotary motion, its end in its beginning – its final two sections slight revisions of early sections. Many of these circular agencies, like the tombola, emerge in the notebooks as apprehensions of process that come to reflect _upon_ poetic apprehension (another kind of self-recursivity). The development of section IX is a particularly clear example of how this occurs. The section comes together quickly, most of it in the space of a page. Here, as I want to make an argument about the appearance of that page, and as the Hill archive does not allow photography, I offer, with apologies, a clumsy rendering in my own hand:
With its central curve surrounded by free-floating particles of poetry, the page looks like what the lines begin to describe: ‘the inner wall of an hourglass’; ‘faint-drawn/small vortices, bright particles in/dissolution.’ The lines begin to apprehend their own emergence. In its extraordinary published form, the section becomes a reflection on apprehension, figuring it as a vortex, an eddy of particles with nothing at its centre (note how the word ‘speechless’ sits at the centre of the page):

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. (240)

The ‘corporeal shape’ which this particular instance of poetic apprehension takes in the archive is, in part, that which is being apprehended; it is ‘the purest apprehension’ because it emerges as present-tense self-apprehension. The lines apprehend their own coming-into-being, forming part of that which they apprehend; the apprehending and the apprehended are indivisible. The paradoxical fleetingness of the apprehending is caught beautifully, too, in that final line break. We read: ‘It is how/the purest apprehension might appear’, which, even in its conditional tense, conjures the possibility of pure apprehension. Over the line break, the grammatical ground shifts. We read: ‘might appear/to take’. The possibility is still there, just, but the grammar is now more suggestive of illusion, misapprehension. The possibility of pure apprehension slips into our reading past even before it has unfurled. Yet, on the page, it continues perpetually: apprehending their own apprehending, the lines are always in process, always present.

_The Triumph of Love_, I mean to suggest, expresses and moves within a poetic temporality that would have been unthinkable in Hill’s early verse. There is, I think, one particular thinker who lies behind this development. While working on the sequence, Hill reads an interview with Emmanuel Levinas collected in _Face to Face with Levinas_ (1986), from which he makes a short series of notes, telling of the tenor of his interest:

p.25: Gott fällt mir ein (translates: God comes to mind)

p.26: retention + protension – cf Bloch prevision?
Levinas follows a Bergsonian and a Husserlian conception of time (though he modifies both), for both of whom time is primarily a subjective experience divorced from any objective, measurable quantity, an experience Bergson terms *duration*. Husserl employs the terms ‘retention + protension’ to refer to those aspects of present time that make up Bergsonian duration but escape immediate experience, a kind of temporal peripheral vision: the former referring to those moments already experienced which have not yet been translated to pastness; the latter referring to those moments in the future which are no longer unknowable but unavoidable. For Levinas, human life is founded on the primacy of what he calls the ‘face-to-face encounter’, a singular experience of otherness which calls the self into question, demands responsibility, and from which all else—politics, culture, identity, feeling—flows. It is an experience of the infinite that breaks into a falsely closed world of selfhood, forming, in doing so, the conditions of that selfhood. Its ethical force, writes Michael L. Morgan,

> cannot come from the other person, who is just another person like me. It must come from transcendence, not a transcendence that is present but rather a transcendence that always “has passed by” and leaves its residue or “trace” [...]”

The ethical relation is ‘not,’ as Levinas has it, ‘the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision.” But the divine can only be apprehended in its ‘having passed by’. God may ‘come to mind’, as Hill noted, but as an absence, a kind of non-memory. An openness to otherness, therefore, an openness to the transcendent, means an openness to those
moments of duration that escape the present – a past which is not yet past, a future which is no longer future, a present which is always already over. Hill does not name Levinas in his published poetry (though he often names thinkers of importance in his verse, usually cryptically) but he does around this time write a number of poetic fragments that engage directly with Levinas’s thought about time and otherness – as, for example, here:

440  proleptically

[...]

442  Dasein is the being who died/Levinas *Time and the Other*, 8

443  essential but unplaced

444  alterity

When section VIII of the sequence seeks ‘to grasp’ the ‘conclusive/otherness’ of the ‘origin-creating mind’, it feels, to my mind, as though Levinas’s ideas about apprehending God are behind the expression, behind the theology. Apprehending the present tense becomes an attempt to apprehend the transcendent.

The third quotation Hill copies out from *Face to Face with Levinas* presents a stark polarity: ‘Man can give himself in saying to the point of poetry – or he can withdraw into the nonsaying of lies.’ It is worth reproducing the quotation’s context, as it provides a fuller picture of what Levinas might mean, as well as a useful framing for Hill’s new poetic. Here is the passage in full, a response to a question that Hill had been asking throughout his career: ‘Is there any sense in which language can be ethical?’

In *Otherwise then Being* I pose this question when I ask: “What is saying without a said?” Saying is ethical sincerity insofar as it is exposition. As such, this *saying* is irreducible to the ontological definability of the *said*. Saying is what makes the self-exposure of
sincerity possible; it is a way of giving everything, of not keeping anything for oneself.

Insofar as ontology equates truth with the intelligibility of total presence, it reduces the pure exposure of saying to the totalizing closure of the said. The child is pure exposure insofar as it is pure vulnerability: it has not yet learned to dissemble, to deceive, to be insincere. What distinguishes human language from animal or child expression, for example, is that the human being is characterized as human not only because he is a being who can speak but also because he is a being who can lie, who can live in the duplicity of language as the dual possibility of exposure and deception. The animal is incapable of the duplicity; the dog, for instance, cannot suppress its bark, the bird its song. But man can repress his saying and the ability to keep silence, to withhold oneself, is the ability to be political. Man can give himself in saying to the point of poetry – or he can withdraw into the nonsaying of lies. Language as saying is an ethical openness to the other, as that which is said – reduced to a fixed identity or synchronized presence – is an ontological closure to the other.

Hill had once worked to fashion a poetry of the said, the ‘I have made’, a poetry of what Levinas might categorize as ‘the political’, manifesting an ‘ontological closure to the other’: Hill’s early poems, in Levinas’s terms, were closed forms, elegies for himself. Now, he is attempting a poetry of the saying, a poetry that, though worked and sculpted still, though ‘many times rehearsed’, still speaks directly from its point of origin, still says perpetually, open-endedly, without recourse to the satisfaction or comfort of a clicking-shut. ‘[T]o no conclusion from now on but to no conclusion,’ begins number 211 in Hill’s sequence, providing something of a new battle cry. This is a ‘perfectly imperfected’ poetry, as section CXV has it (273); or, in obverse terms, as in ‘The Orchards of Syon’, it is a poetry ‘unfinished to perfection’. (359)
The Triumph of Love, as is characteristic of Hill’s late verse, is thus spoken in a kind of impromptu mid-draft present tense, manifesting an archival self-consciousness, as the poet anticipates a future to come while evaluating a past already accomplished. Sometimes that future arrives immediately, as when the poet says,

Nor is the language, now, what it once was
even in – wait a tick – nineteen hundred and forty-five of the common era. (254)

The hyphenated instruction satirically enacts the kind of historical forgetting against which the poem rails; the anticipation is a matter of performance. On other occasions, the anticipatory present tense functions as an authentic record of archive. In section CXVIII, Hill joins together fragments composed independently of one another and works the joins into the poetry’s language ‘as it so happens’:

By default, as it so happens, here we have
good and bad angels caught burning
themselves characteristic antiphons;
and here the true and the false
shepherds discovered
already deep into their hollow debate.
Is that all? No, add spinners of fine
calumny, confectioners of sugared
malice; add those who find sincerity
in heartless weeping. Add the pained,
painful clowns […] (274)
Those imperatives – ‘Add’ – mark each join and function as a kind of future performative, performing the act they anticipate, making protension (the future in its becoming present) a feature of the verse. Elsewhere, Hill allows the writing to remain in a literally unfinished state, anticipating a future that will never arrive. Having written the phrase ‘laughing all the way to the grave/stone’, for instance, he crosses out the last two words and, rather than find an alternative, writes in the margin: ‘<\textbf{end} with ‘the’>’. (The phrase will not appear in his poetry). In another instance, a deleted line leads to a grammatical hiccup that the poem never quite smooths over. In revision, Hill removes the first line of an anaphoric section that begins with the phrase ‘It is not’ but does not restore that organising construction to the following lines, so that they cease to make grammatical sense, beginning:

\begin{quote}
Whether we have the Psalms in Hebrew or German

nor by what authority these things are committed […]<xix
\end{quote}

By the time of publication, the words have only been semi-restored (by a future-tense higher authority):

\begin{quote}
It is not [possibly a lacuna – ED]

whether we have the Psalms in Latin or Hebrew

nor by what authority such things are committed […]<xxxi
\end{quote}

In instances such as this, the poem allows its errors and its revisions into the text as pentimenti. In other instances, the poem anticipates revision to come. ‘I have a mind to recast this/as mere entertainment-interludes,’ section LIX admits. Section XXI has it both ways:
Should I leave it like this? Or should I add
that, for the life of me, I cannot
see my own future in prediction? (244)

In section LXXV:

I would go back and start
again; or not start at all, which might
be wiser. No. Delete the last four words. (260)

Textual variance becomes part of the poem’s weft. In section XXIX, bodies hang from a
tree ‘like traitors like martyrs’, a politically crucial editorial decision yet to be made. In
section LXXII, similarly, though less gravely:

Ethics at the far edge: give the old
bugger a shove / gentleman a shout. (260)

The errata slip becomes one of the sequence’s recurrent tropes: ‘For wordly, read worldly;
for in equity, inequity;/for religious religiose’. (250) But the corrections, now, start to get
it wrong:

Delete: sell myself; filched from. Inert:
tell myself; fetched from. For inert read insect. (257)
Revision, that is, is no longer a wholly melioristic practice. Section CXI recalls a critic of Hill’s early work, here named ‘Lothian MacSikker’ (one of a number of Hillean critics thinly masked and paraded through this volume), objecting to the overly-wrought nature of his earlier verse. MacSikker, the poet says,

told us he saw

a draft typescript: caulk on caulk
of liquid eraser, illegible, overwrought,
more like psoriasis or scabies than
genuine inspiration.xxxii

It is a good description of the early notebooks, but reconceived: revision is, here, an inflammatory itching. We scratch an itch because we believe our scratching will solve the problem, that perfection will arrive; in the event, scratching leads not to relief but to abrasion, pain and more scratching. No longer hoping to end, no longer speaking from the place of conclusion, Hill’s new poetic accommodates both its distant and immediate past: we see into the text’s revision history and we see moments into a past that has not yet become history; it accommodates, too, its remote and immediate future: we see into a potentially utopian future and we see moments into an immediate future as it becomes the present; we even see into a worse future. In turning its own revisionary processes into its material, in other words, the poem accommodates both retention and pretension; it has a temporal peripheral vision. It is a poetry of the saying, an openness to the having-past-by transcendence of the other: it is an ethical poetry.
Hill’s new temporality affects a new conception of stone. In one of the most quoted sections of *The Triumph of Love*, section LI, Hill describes a development in his moral thought:

> Whatever may be meant by *moral landscape*
> it is for me increasingly a terrain
> seen in cross-section: igneous, sedimentary, conglomerate, metamorphic rock-strata, in which particular grace, individual love, decency, endurance, are traceable across the faults. (253)

Surface has become depth, landscape underland, the text ‘seen in cross-section’ – that is, in terms of its drafts and archive, across its ‘faults’, the text arrested mid-motion, in error, rather than in its final correction. Hill’s new process has led to a wider temporal gaze, a sense of deep time: stone is reconceived as a flow made momentarily solid, with a past and a future of flux. Early in the sequence, Hill provides instructions for reading that employ another stony metaphor:

> You will have to
> go forward block by block, for pity’s sake,
> irresolute as granite. (244)

Each section of verse is conceived as a solid entity. But these are not the ‘base cinderblocks’ of section XIII. (242) The apparent paradox ‘irresolute as granite’ unsettles their solidity. Indeed, the words themselves fluctuate. ‘Irresolute’ is the kind of word that
so appeals to Hill, one that, ‘far back within itself’ (285), contains a fundamental etymological contradiction. The word is suggestive, of course, of infirmity, vacillation. But the first definition the OED gives for the Latin ‘resolutus’ is: ‘having a loosened texture, slack’.xxxiii To be etymologically resolute, then, is to be loose, unsolid. Thus to be irresolute, etymologically, is to be solid, firm, compressed; etymologically, at least, ‘irresolute as granite’ is not the paradox it appears. Granite, too, has an etymological crux: from the Latin ‘granum’, meaning grain or seed, granite, though solid and lifeless, has a core of becoming, a ‘lilac/at [its] petrified heart’. (184) Hill’s new poetry is far from a purely spontaneous, expressive verse. As the poet concedes in section LXX: ‘Still, I’m convinced that shaping,/voicing are types of civic action.’ (259) The work of ethically responsible revision – Pound’s ‘defin[ing] and yet again defin[ing]’ – remains. But the compacted material escapes total control, total ossification. By apprehending the processes of its own revision, its own apprehending, Hill’s new poetic locates its meaning in its strata, records change by allowing its past and future into its present, shows its present becoming past and its future becoming present, and, in doing so, it allows the seed at the heart of granite to germinate and bloom.


iii Hill’s distrust of finishing accords with an idiosyncratic theory of language – really, a theology – according to whose logic words exist in a state of perpetual and irredeemable error, in a state of fallenness. Any utterance, however perfected, can thus only look backwards, in sin, towards a never-existing state of innocence. For more on this knotty and thorough theology, so central to Hill’s work, see two particularly fine works of critical scholarship: Matthew Sperling, Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Robert Macfarlane, ‘Gravity and Grace in Geoffrey Hill’, Essays in Criticism, 58:3 (2008), pp.237-256.


vii Geoffrey Hill Archive, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, ‘Notebook 6: King Log’ (1965-1966), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/4, p.36. I am grateful to Kenneth Haynes for permission to quote from Hill’s notebooks. Hill’s drafts are regularly covered in indecipherable markings. In general, I have kept my reproduction of those markings to a minimum, except in cases when they are easily decipherable, or when they have a clear bearing on my reading. As photography is not permitted in the Hill archive, my transcriptions are inevitably provisional. Where I am unsure about a particular word, I have prefixed it with a question mark in square brackets. Where a word of phrase has proved illegible I have noted it in square brackets. When a word appears directly above another word as a suggested alternative rather than a replacement, and it has not been possible for me to reproduce the effect typographically, I connect the two words with a ‘~’.

viii Plenty of commentators see insincerity and self-interest in Hill’s mea culpas; that this confession emerged as an anticipation of transgression rather than as retrospective confession certainly opens him to the charge. See, for instance, Rachel Buxton, ‘Transaction and Transcendence: Geoffrey Hill’s Vision of Canaan’, The Cambridge Quarterly, Volume 34, Issue 4, 2005, pp.333-363. Or, see James Wood, ‘Too Many Alibis’, London Review of Books, Vol.21 No13 1 July 1999, np. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n13/james-wood/too-many-alibis>. Denunciations of Hill’s ethics often turn about the question of witness, the subject of much recent Hill criticism. The poet claims to want to bear witness to his century’s suffering (and, indeed, that of other centuries) but, as Garth Greenwell has written, ‘it has reasonably been argued that the witness of his poems is compromised by their suspicion of speech.’ (Garth Greenwell, “The Pedagogy of Martyrdom”: “Witness” in Geoffrey Hill’s The Triumph of Love’, Literary Imagination, Vol.8 No.1, 1 December 2006 <https://academic.oup.com/litimag/article/8/1/91/926087>) Or – in James Wood’s formulation – the poems are compromised by their distance from the suffering they depict, and never more so that when they foreground that distance: ‘The greater the penitence […] the stranger the initial choice of subject comes to seem.’ Do the poems, with their self-conscious penitence, that is, stand as adequate acts of witness, or do they get lost in the folds of self-involvement and self-interest, wanting, as Gabriel Pearson has suggested of ‘September Song’, to ‘get kudos from showing an awareness in the poem of the danger of getting kudos from this “ultimate subject.”’ (Gabriel Pearson, ‘King Log Revisited’ in Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work, ed. Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), p.43.) The question is particularly pertinent to Hill’s witness of the corruption of language by the seductions and indulgences of nationalist nostalgia. Part of the force of such poems is the way in which they allow themselves to be seduced and indulged by precisely this nostalgia, a fact that has been the source of controversy – notably an
extraordinarily ill-tempered exchange of letters in the pages of the London Review of Books. In his review of Peter Robinson’s ‘Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work’, Tom Paulin writes of what he regards as ‘the essentially Blut-und-Boden nature of Hill’s imagination’ (accusing him, that is, of a ‘blood and soil’ nationalism, complicit with the Nazi apparatus) and charges him with a ‘kitsch feudalism’ that ‘draw[s] on the idea of a mythic traditional religious England threatened by collectivist ideas’. (Tom Paulin, ‘The Case for Geoffrey Hill’, London Review of Books, Vol.7 No.6 4 April 1985, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v07/n06/tom-paulin/the-case-for-geoffrey-hill>) Whether this is a fair charge is a question that rumbled on, in the letters pages, for the best part of a year, with particular reference to Hill’s sonnet sequence of nostalgia, ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’. The charge was most reasonably articulated by John Lucas: though they might in some respect be about nostalgia, ‘[t]he sonnets are characterised by a betraying nostalgia, so that even where they offer to place this, or raise critical questions about its worth, they do so in ways that are inevitably muffled and/or have been far more forcibly addressed by earlier writers, who are better able to place the nostalgia, which has so strong a hold on Hill.’ To witness atrocity from a safe distance, that is, to repeat that atrocity; to use its language is to perpetuate it, to give in to it. Or, as Lucas has it: ‘Hill may say he is using nostalgia, in fact nostalgia is using him.’ (John Lucas, Letter, LRB, Vol.7 No.21, 5 December 1985) I tend to agree with Eric Griffith’s response (in an otherwise unnecessarily ad hominem attack on Lucas) that Hill’s sequence ‘accepts that one is used by what one uses.’ (Eric Griffiths, Letter, LRB, Vol.8 No.2, 6 February 1986) For his part, Hill has, rather haughtily, said of the controversy: ‘To be accused of exhibiting a symptom when, to the best of my ability, I’m offering a diagnosis appears to be one of the numerous injustices which one must suffer with as much equanimity as possible.’ (John Haffenden, ‘Geoffrey Hill’ in Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p.90.) Caleb Caldwell might have recently provided an interesting way out of the dilemma of Hillean witness. In his poems’ self-consciousness, Caldwell has argued (with reference to Derrida’s quasi-legal conception of witness), the reader ‘is “asked” to witness for the witness. In this way, the responsibility, the ethical proximity of the subjective “I” to the dead other is both negated and extended, since the witness to the witness (the reader to Hill) must “trust” (per Derrida) or disavow the necessity of response.’ By making the poems’ ethical status indeterminate, in other words, Hill keeps an act of witness in process, until the reader decides either to take the verse as ethically legitimate or ethically transgressive – or decides, better, not to decide. (Caleb Caldwell, ‘Silence and Geoffrey Hill’s Poetics of Witness’, Religion and the Arts, 17 (5), pp.545-567 December 1 2013, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=76e096e0-a51b-47b9-9122-f0d97754bd71%40sessionmgr4007>).

ix Hill Archive, ‘Notebook 6: King Log’ (1965-1966), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/4, p.36.


There has been plenty of biographical speculation as to the cause of the change. The ending of a first marriage, to Nancy Whittaker, in 1983; a second marriage to the poet and librettist Alice Goodman in 1987; Goodman’s love of Frank O’Hara; their move to Boston in 1988, where Hill took up a position as Professor of Literature and Religion at Boston University; his treatment there for depression and chronic anxiety; and a cardiac arrest have all been brought into the frame – not least by the poems themselves. I am more interested in the effects, than the causes, of a changing mind.

Sophie Ratcliffe has suggested that the lines were suggested by Hill’s second wife, the poet and librettist Alice Goodman – a suggestion which might shed light on how Hill’s poetic career developed. *The Keble Debates: Professor Sir Geoffrey Hill on YouTube*, uploaded by KebleCollegeOxford 12 July 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hw77calhKOI>

Hill Archive, ‘Notebook 42: Canaan/The Triumph of Love’ (1995-1997), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/42, p.29. In these notebooks, Hill only numbers every verso page. For recto pages, I thus subdivide the number thus: ‘p.29.ii’.


Ibid, p.41.

Ibid, p.34.ii.

Ibid, p.41.

The first line will feed into section XVII; the second line becomes III; the fourth, XLIII; the penultimate lines will feed into both LXIII and CXXVIII; most of the final line will find its way into LX; the final words and the lines in the right hand margin will settle into XXIV.

Ibid, p.43.ii.

Ibid, Notebook 43: The Triumph of Love’ (1997), BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/42, p.12. The wavy lines at the top left represent text too small to read.


Quoted in ibid, p.207.

Quoted in ibid, p.152.


Ibid, p.63.

Ibid p.86.ii.

Ibid, p.60. Hill’s willingness to aim vituperation so publicly at his critics has sometimes been read as a mark of an over-sensitive bad temper. The poet Lachlan Mackinnon, usually assumed to the model for Lachlan MacSikker, described Hill, a decade after *The Triumph of Love*, as ‘unnecessarily obscure, over-sensitive about criticism and excessively self-regarding’. (Lachalan Mackinnon, ‘Clavics by Geoffrey Hill’, *Independent*, 3 June 2011 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/clavics-by-geoffrey-hill-2292235.html>)

Mackinnon, as a subject of such an attack, can perhaps be excused, but it does seem an odd oversight to read the poetry’s venom so decisively as uncontrollable outburst rather than considered poetic effect. Indeed, in an instance such as this, the criticism being ventriloquised seems to concur with Hill’s own self-evaluation, seems to have been woven into the development of his poetic. To my mind, the impressions of a wounded and bitter consciousness are part and parcel of the extraordinary encounter the poem stages with an alien, an *other* intellect in process. In any case, in the revised edition of the poem prepared for *Broken Hierarchies*, Hill tones down much of his (other-directed) vituperation and this critical observation about the heavy revision of the early poems is given to the poetic voice rather than to that of an apparently resented third party.