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INTRODUCTION

Geoffrey Hill's *Speech! Speech!*: "Footnotes / to explain"¹

Geoffrey Hill's poetic career can be divided into two periods. The verse collections of his first period include *For the Unfallen* (1959), *King Log* (1968), *Mercian Hymns* (1971), *Tenebrae* (1978) and *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) – the volumes reprinted in *New and Collected Poems* published by Penguin in 1994. After a hiatus of thirteen years, Hill published *Canaan* (1996), the volume that catalyzed the publications that constitute his second period: *The Triumph of Love* (1998), *Speech! Speech!* (2000), *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), *Scenes from Comus* (2005), *Without Title* (2006), the Clutag Press and Penguin versions of *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2005 and 2007 respectively), *Selected Poems* (2006), and *Oraclau/Oraclous* (2010).² The obvious difference between these two periods is prolific output: Hill produced only five full volumes during the first twenty-five years of his career (when he was "the most costive of poets"),³ but seven in the next ten. He has provided his own explanation for this increased output, attributing it to the successful treatment with prescription medicines of the debilitating depression from which he had long suffered.⁴

¹ The title quotation is taken from stanza 96: "Footnotes / to explain BIRKENAU, BUCHENWALD, BURNHAM / BEECHES, DUMBARTON OAKS, HOLLYWOOD".

² Hill's verse volume, *Oraclau/Oraclous* (published in October 2010) is not included in my discussion.

³ Adam Kirsch, 'The Long-Cherished Anger of Geoffrey Hill', *New York Sun*, 28 Mar. 2007 (accessed 1 Apr. 2009) <<http://www.nysun.com/arts/long-cherished-anger-of-geoffrey-hill/51347/>>.

⁴ In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Hill states that his recent "unlooked for creative release has a great deal to do" with what the interviewer, Carl Phillips, refers to as "the taking up of serotonin", and that the treatment of his depression with pharmaceutical medicines "completely transformed my life" ("The Art of Poetry LXXX: Geoffrey Hill", *The Paris Review* 42.154 [2000]: 288). See stanza 3 of *Speech! Speech!*, in which he refers to the pharmaceutical 'tuning' and 'untuning' of his neurological state (referred to as his "harp of nerves").

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While *Canaan* is the most obvious pivot of the stylistic shift from the first to the second period, *Speech! Speech!* remains (even after the publication of subsequent volumes) the most extreme example of a later style typified by what Robert McFarlane terms “prosodic restlessness”.⁵ In Hill’s later poems, after his “sudden and surprising transformation”,⁶ the austerity and relentless assiduousness of the earlier work is supplanted by new vigour, with humour and a sense of urgency alternately expressed in feats of lyricism, vitriol and linguistic slapstick.⁷ *Speech! Speech!* sees Hill engaged with – in a kind of *fin de siècle* flourish – the dictions and icons of the late twentieth-century world; the monumental quality of the earlier poems (‘Genesis’, for instance, or the poems of *Tenebrae*) is absent. The sentiments of his earlier work, however, are not: Hill’s stock preoccupations (in shorthand, the triumvirate of martyrdom, memory and responsibility) are still present, resulting in a peculiar admixture of canonical gravity (a poetry always steeped in tradition) and whipsmart comedy.

Speech! Speech! is a poem comprised of 120 twelve-line stanzas of unrhymed verse. Published in the year 2000, the poem is a ceremonial marker for the new millennium, an encapsulation of two thousand years’ worth of utterances as a symbolic act of remembrance and – with its 120 stanzas, “As many as the days that were | of SODOM”⁸ – as an expression of despair for the coming age, an age into which he and his readers will enter, as the back cover of *Speech! Speech!* notes, with “minds and ears relentlessly fouled by degraded public

Although Hill is not named, Don Paterson is surely referring to Hill’s career when he writes: “One spare and brilliant book every eleven years; then they change his meds and he cannot stop writing. Worse, he thinks he has discovered a sense of humour” (*The Blind Eye* [London: Faber and Faber, 2007], 91).

⁵ Robert MacFarlane, ‘Gravity and Grace in Geoffrey Hill’, *Essays in Criticism* 58.3 (2008): 241-242.

⁶ ‘The Long-Cherished Anger of Geoffrey Hill’.

⁷ That this vigour comes later in Hill’s life and career is of note, his recklessness and playfulness having emerged only in his old age: perhaps the most well-known quality of his first poems – published when he was 21 and written even earlier – is their gravity and maturity.

⁸ Geoffrey Hill, *Speech! Speech!* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000), stanza 55.

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speech”.⁹ Travelling at a hurtling pace¹⁰ and along a careening course, the poem has an unexpected sense of urgency: born in 1932, Hill in his later years writes with a vitality that is expressed alternately in invective and brio (a tonality somewhat at odds with an oeuvre known for staid austerity), a “tragic farce”¹¹ with a sense of experience that derives from more than seven decades of listening and speaking. The poem has received rave reviews (“a classic of English poetry”)¹² but also damning criticism (“a freak show”);¹³ it is a compelling example of the difficulties inherent in the act of making public utterance in the contemporary age.

The title of the poem is the appeal of an audience for the performer (here, the poet) to come forward, to speak, to make an address. *Speech! Speech!* is Hill’s answer to this appeal, a performance punctuated with the calls “*encore*” and “*speech! speech!*” from those who made the commission; Hill’s address, as Robert Potts notes, is often “hostile”, but “utterly committed ... to the public good”.¹⁴ In responding to this call for speech, Hill chooses to speak about the difficulty of speaking: the struggle to find one’s own voice amongst the multitude of other voices; the difficulty of having that voice heard amidst the all-

⁹ Publisher’s note, *Speech! Speech!* (2003 Counterpoint paperback edition).

¹⁰ Hill instructs that the poem should be read in the same way. See ‘Geoffrey Hill’, *Don’t Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their Own Words*, eds. Clare Brown and Don Paterson (London: Picador, 2003), 116: “*Speech! Speech!* is not a book to be slowly pondered; it is meant to be taken, at least on first reading, at a cracking pace” (Hill may be referring to silent reading; at a 2006 recital, he read stanzas 15, 20 and 88 at a steady pace; see *Poetry Reading, Oxford, 1st February* [2006], tracks 21, 22 and 23). David Bromwich notes that the poem “aims to be read as a single continuous gesture, though the idiom of the poem tends towards fragmentation” (‘Muse of Brimstone’, review of *Speech! Speech!*, *New York Times*, 11 Mar. 2001: 28).

¹¹ Hill describes “tragic farce” as a “fairly accurate suggestion” for the genre of *Speech! Speech!* (*Don’t Ask Me What I Mean*, 116) and asks in stanza 69: “What was I thinking – / Bergmanesque tragic farce?”

¹² Robert Potts, ‘Theatre of Voices’, *The Guardian*, 30 Nov. 2001 (accessed 23 Jan. 2005) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/nov/30/bestbooksoftheyear.artsfeatures2>>.

¹³ William Logan, ‘Author! Author!’, review of *Speech! Speech!*, *The New Criterion* 19.4 (2000): 65.

¹⁴ Robert Potts, ‘A Change of Address’, review of *Speech! Speech!*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Jan. 2002: 25.

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pervasive din; the impossibility of speaking on behalf of others; the problem of speaking in and of the condition of Original Sin; the challenge of writing poetry after Auschwitz; the apocalyptic decline into wilful incoherence which Hill calls “the debauch”;¹⁵ and the necessity of memorialising the past – of discovering (as opposed to *making*) history – without recourse to romanticization or fictionalization. We are, according to Hill, “existentially compromised”.¹⁶ The publisher’s blurb (into which Hill presumably had input)¹⁷ defines the poem as essentially a formal and oratorical answer to two questions: “how do we even begin to think and speak honestly?”, and “how does the artist find ways to communicate truth and beauty?”¹⁸ These questions are answered despite and because of frustrating circumstances which impose manifold difficulties; and they are answered, Hill claims, via a “simple” scenario: “an individual voice battles for its identity amid a turmoil of public speech and media noise, a crowded wilderness of acoustical din”.¹⁹ *Speech! Speech!* is Hill’s attempt

¹⁵ Steven Burt, ‘Meaningful Speech’, *Publishers Weekly*, 8 Apr. 2002: 198. For Hill, what is ‘in the air’ is foul and should be rejected: in his 2008 Ash Wednesday sermon, he urged the congregation to reject simple acceptance of our reality: “the answer, my friends, is *not* blowing in the wind. What is blowing in the wind is hazard, mischance, the instructions and demands of well-meaning buffoons and idiots, the cries of rage and hatred, and tyranny, the terrible interminglings, the characteristic inability of our previous and present government to distinguish true democracy from plutocratic anarchy, an anarchy which poisons and rots the entire body of political, ethical, and aesthetic thought” (‘Trinity Sermon: Ash Wednesday 2008’, Trinity College: Cambridge [accessed 12 Jan. 2010] <www.trin.cam.ac.uk/show.php?dowid=520>).

¹⁶ Geoffrey Hill, ‘Trinity Sermon: Ash Wednesday 2008’.

¹⁷ Hill has professed a particular interest in the appearance of his published work: “I have always taken part (when permitted) in the physical preparation and presentation of my books – an aspect of things which I also considered academically in my teaching for the Editorial Institute. Title pages and dust jacket design particularly attract my attention and I give much thought to the choice of illustration” (‘Confessio Amantis’, *The Record 2009*, Keble College: Oxford: 48-49 [accessed 5 May 2009] <www.keble.ox.ac.uk/alumni/publications-2/Record09.pdf>).

¹⁸ Publisher’s note, *Speech! Speech!* (2003 Counterpoint paperback edition).

¹⁹ *Don’t Ask Me What I Mean*, 116.

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to negotiate these difficulties and sound his “individual voice”; it is also his statement – itself obfuscated by the poem’s various rebarbative features – about the difficulty of doing so.

Each of the poem’s 120 stanzas has a considerable measure of independence, so that while there are repeated motifs, refrains, and various linguistic and conceptual connections the experience of reading the poem is fractured and disjointed, with any impulse towards sustained fluidity thwarted by typographical or conceptual jolts. There are lyrical lines such as those in the first half of stanza 16 (“like oil of verdure where the rock shows through; / dark ochre patched more dark, with stubborn glaze”), but there are also lines, such as the poem’s last, which defy sense, working instead as alliterative exercises, or by means of subconscious connections (“AMOR. MAN IN A COMA, MA’AM. NEMO. AMEN”).²⁰ Such ‘jolts’ have been cited as symptomatic of Hill’s “collage technique”²¹ with allusion and reference said to be the “basic *unit*”²² for the construction of the collage. While using the vocabulary of twentieth-century visual art to describe *Speech! Speech!* (and other later poems of Hill) is a fresh approach, Hill makes greater use of other more obvious connectors to link phrases, lines and stanzas. Motifs, even quasi-characters reappear (as in 92, 93, 94 and 95: the ‘Rapmaster’ stanzas); and phrases are repeated, giving a rarely glimpsed sense of continuity (as with the last line of stanza 57, repeated almost verbatim as the first line of stanza 58). It is revealing that among the forty-eight stanzas from *Speech! Speech!* (40% of the whole poem) which were chosen for inclusion in the 2006 *Selected Poems*,²³ there are nineteen examples of consecutive stanzas, a fact which demonstrates the prevalence of intra-textual connections and the interdependence of the stanzas.

²⁰ David Bromwich identifies these closing lines as “omens of a passage to oblivion where thoughts like [Hill’s] will have become unnameable” (‘Muse of Brimstone’, 28).

²¹ Jennifer Kilgore, ‘Peace it Together: Collage in the Recent Work of Geoffrey Hill’, *Cahiers Charles V*, 34 (2003): 167.

²² Carole Birkan, ‘Geoffrey Hill’s “Collated” Poems and Criticism’, *Cahiers Charles V*, 34 (2003): 149.

²³ Geoffrey Hill, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006). The selected stanzas are: 1, 3, 6, 10, 11, 15, 16, 20, 22, 24, 26, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 44, 49, 52, 57, 59, 64, 65, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 81, 86, 88, 89, 92, 93, 94, 96, 98, 99, 102, 105, 106, 110, 114, 115, 116, 118, 119, 120.

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The most striking manifestation of unity is the regularity of its stanzaic form: each stanza is twelve lines; no line is more than thirteen syllables; the stanzas are numbered consecutively and printed two-per-page, justified to the left margin. The combination of the regularity of form and density of content gives the poem the air of a feat, an impressive achievement, and the poem is described in the publisher's note on the back cover as a "caustic, tragicomic tour de force".²⁴ The disjunction between its rigidity on the page and the lurching quality of its content gives the impression of a poet struggling to speak within the confines and parameters of a difficult discourse. The poet makes certain that the difficulty of his achievement is known, that his audience will appreciate the effort to which he has gone to make his reply to their call for speech.

Significantly, the call is to speak, rather than to write. In *Speech! Speech!*, Hill is preoccupied with the spoken utterance: with its multitude of dictions, aural ambiguities, potential mishearings, misplaced phonemes and other phenomena and impedimenta of speech. In the second stanza, Hill introduces an image of the poet (with a rare identification of "I") sitting by the Aga at day's end and listening to radio broadcasts made by "agents of Marconi". These broadcasts are "sputtering"; it is as if static or interference prohibits sustained, unhindered listening. This sense of changing stations pervades the poem, as does the image of one struggling to hear amidst a multitude of competing voices, all 'broadcast' across the airwaves on their own frequencies. In the poem, listeners, speakers, and even minds are variously "tuned" and "untuned".²⁵ Sometimes the poet assumes the role of the emcee (i.e., MC, or master of ceremonies), or Rapmaster, introducing his audience to this or that performer and taking charge of proceedings; elsewhere, he appears as if a film director, cutting and splicing images to create (or destroy) narrative. At other times, Hill takes the role of the stage performer, engendering and responding to the cries from the audience ("*applause*", "*cheers*")²⁶ which appear sporadically throughout the poem. These are phrased sometimes as stage directions, sometimes scripted as the

²⁴ *Speech! Speech!*, Counterpoint (2003 paperback edition).

²⁵ See stanza 3, in which the poetic lyre becomes the synapses of the brain: "How is it tuned, how can it be un- / tuned, with lithium, this harp of nerves?"

²⁶ For "*applause*", see stanza 6; for "*cheers*", see stanzas 26 and 94.

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response of a 'live studio audience', sometimes proclaimed in the "antiphonal voice of the heckler"²⁷ (the "unseen interrogative interlocutor" whom Hill constantly acknowledges),²⁸ sometimes attributed explicitly to the mob (the "PEOPLE"), and at other times expressed as scored dynamics – the composer's call for "*lento*" or "*presto*".²⁹ The overall sense is that of staged, public performance, utterances broadcast to and for a listening public.³⁰ What unites these metaphors and images of public performance is their focus on audibility – all require "a court of auditors" (see stanza 63), a listening audience like that in Daumier's etching 'On Dit Que Les Parisiens...' which graces the cover of the poem.

Much of Hill's 'speaking' takes the form of commemoration, and Hill mentions many individuals by name: Max Perutz; Diana, Princess of Wales; Honoré Daumier and Honoré de Balzac; Isaac Rosenberg; Henry Moore; David Bomberg; and many others. But Hill pays homage not only to those who achieved fame. He honours also those who are not named in the pages of history: those war dead who, "missing their stars" (see stanza 7) escaped renown; the women of the Resistance movement. Hill has described his motivation to recognize and praise as a response to the broadcasts for newly-made martyrs of the Biafran War:

When I arrived in Nigeria in January '67, a month or two after the assassination of Fajuyi, the radio was broadcasting praise-songs for him. And I took very much to the idea, so certain sections of *Speech! Speech!* ... are praise songs. And I wouldn't say that I meant much more than that; but I do seem to seize on figures who seem exemplary to me, and what I

²⁷ Andrew Michael Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), 40.

²⁸ Christopher Orchard, 'Praxis not Gnosis: Geoffrey Hill and the Anxiety of Polity', *Poetry and Public Language*, eds. Tony Lopez and Anthony Caleshu (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007), 201.

²⁹ For "*lento*", see stanza 52; for "*presto*", see stanza 3.

³⁰ Writing specifically of *The Triumph of Love*, Jeffrey Wainwright notes that "to use poetry as Rhetoric in the classical sense depends upon the existence of a forum in which to be heard, and upon a mode of discourse sharing common ground. This is precisely what the poem cannot lay claim to." *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 82.

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believe I know of Fajuyi is worth a praise-song or two.... Everyone says how negative I am, and I don't think I am, I think I'm very positive, and I love to praise, I love to admire."³¹

The poem can be read as a record of these half-forgotten lives, and as a commitment to remember them through this performative utterance.³²

But just as Hill uses *Speech! Speech!* to praise and laud, he also uses it to lambast. From railing against the mob (identified repeatedly as "the PEOPLE"), to caricaturing those individuals responsible for particular crimes (Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, for instance), Hill proposes plenty of nemeses to his martyrs. With this juxtaposition of good and bad, worthy and unworthy, the poem can be read as an exercise in the obsolete device *laus et vituperatio*, a form most often found in epic verse, which is defined by a "tendency to divide characters into the polar extremes of virtuous and vicious" and "the injunction to make moral discriminations by praise and blame".³³ Jeffrey Wainwright recommends *laus et vituperatio* as a mode for reading *Speech! Speech!* as well as other later verse of Hill:

One dimension of Hill's work that has become more evident in the later work has been his self-conscious use of the rhetorical modes of *laus et vituperatio* – praise and vituperation. Both what he admires and deplores is especially marked throughout *Canaan*, *The Triumph of Love* and *Speech! Speech!*³⁴

Hill refers explicitly to this mode in *The Triumph of Love*, paying tribute to "*Laus / et vituperatio*, the worst / remembered, least understood, of the modes".³⁵ In *Speech! Speech!*, he first refers to "praise-songs" in stanza 19 ("Faithfulness wrong-

³¹ Robert Potts, 'The Praise Singer', *The Guardian*, 10 Aug. 2002 (accessed 20 Jan. 2003) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/aug/10/featuresreviews.guardianreview15>>.

³² See Robert Maximilian de Gaynesford, 'The Seriousness of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* 59.1 (2009): 1-21.

³³ Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, 81. Wainwright is quoting from Brian Vickers's *Defence of Rhetoric*.

³⁴ *Acceptable Words*, 16.

³⁵ *The Triumph of Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), XXIII.

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footed...asks and receives praise-songs in lieu”), then again in stanza 99: “What / do I mean by praise-songs? I could weep. / This is a praise-song. These are songs of praise.”³⁶ Hill’s sense of advocacy – his lyric testimonies for unsung heroes – and his willingness to lampoon and lay blame – recall Ben Jonson’s description of the poet’s “ability to render the one loved, the other hated, by his proper embattling of them.”³⁷ The sense is of “tragic farce”: Hill’s threnodies to heroes stand alongside his satirizing of the foolish and reprehensible.

In using “tragic farce” as his method of expressing the mode of *laus et vituperatio*, Hill identifies three precursors to whom he is indebted, artists who worked in similar way. According to Hill, his own treatment of “the PEOPLE” comes “courtesy / Balzac”,³⁸ whose detailed cataloguing of the foibles and sins of middle class life in the ultimate bourgeois medium – the novel – stands as a prime example of nuanced satire and subversion. Hill refers in stanza 12 to *La Peau de chagrin*, the story of a wish-giving but life-sapping talismanic pelt in which Balzac criticises the grasping greed of his subjects. Honoré Daumier, whose depictions of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie (including that of the insensible, applauding audience in his ‘On Dit Que Les Parisiens...’) are known for their darkly satirical view of the public and its fickle opprobrium, is identified as the poet’s “latest muse” (stanza 31), and is also offered his “courtesy” (stanza 100). A debt to Catullus is acknowledged in the poem’s penultimate stanza, Hill referring to his “sure- / footed” manipulation of the scazon (‘limping’ verse). Catullus’s competent, strident, confident use of a form that intimates disjointedness and the haphazard is suggested as a model for *Speech! Speech!* Hill identifies

³⁶ Compare *Canaan* (London: Penguin, 1996): “what do you mean / praise / lament / praise and lament / what do you mean / do you mean / beatitudes” (39), and “Praise-song for oil drums, / a psalm of slippage” in the same poem (57).

³⁷ *Acceptable Words*, 81.

³⁸ *Speech! Speech!*, stanza 100; Balzac is offered “Additional acknowledgements” in the same stanza. According to Hill, poetry and criticism offer possibilities for the formal acknowledgement of such courtesies and debts; he writes in “Sydney Keyes in Historical Perspective” that “I owe him [Keyes] an immense debt that I cannot repay, except, most inadequately, in this present tribute” (*The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 418).

Daumier, Balzac and Catullus as his antecedents, and *laus et vituperatio* is a mode of reading the poem; but the density of reference and allusion remains, and poses a serious difficulty to anyone attempting a close reading of the poem.

THE PRACTICE OF ANNOTATION

Why annotate?³⁹ If annotation is “always a testimony to alienation from a text”,⁴⁰ then the annotator’s role is to bring reader and text closer together, to form connecting links. The cause of this alienating distance between reader and text is usually temporal: the text requires decoding and expanding because its language is archaic, or its syntax impenetrable, or its form obsolete. *Speech! Speech!* was published in 2000; that it requires annotation is itself interesting. The difficulties it presents do not result from temporal distance, but rather from its thousands of particulars – these being part of the singular, idiosyncratic experience of the poet. For Hill, alienation is central to the poem: “Whatever strange relationship we have with the poem, it is not one of enjoyment. It is more like being brushed past, or aside, by an alien being.”⁴¹ The task of ‘decoding’, translating for the “alien being” in *Speech! Speech!* which voices Hill’s allusive ciphers, is onerous, but, I argue, finally rewarding; the seemingly élitist inaccessibility of the poem is a veneer which can be stripped away with the right tools. For Hill, who argues that simplicity and (pseudo-)

³⁹ It should be noted that textual work is an occupation in which Hill is deeply interested and with which he has sympathy: “During my final period at Boston University, I co-founded, together with Professor Sir Christopher Ricks, the Editorial Institute.... We shared the view (I believe) that in the past quarter of a century too much emphasis has been placed on theoretical methods of approach, coupled – oxymoronically – with the cultivation of a wild subjectivity of interpretative animus.... Christopher and I envisaged a programme... in which graduate degree candidates would edit, with full textual and historical apparatus, a work chosen in consultation with the directors.” (‘Confessio Amantis’, 47).

⁴⁰ Ralph Hanna III, ‘Annotation as Social Practice’, *Annotation and its Texts*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 178.

⁴¹ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 566.

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straight-talking are manifestations of tyranny and subjugation,⁴² such difficulty is no bad thing; readers, while they may accept Hill's intent as democratic and egalitarian, may (not unreasonably) crave assistance in the form of notes and other explication.

This study is an effort to determine, in Hill's own words, "the true nature / of this achievement" (stanza 92). The self-evident difficulty of the poem (the existence of which Hill accepts, "though with some reluctance")⁴³ means that it is tempting when considering it to slip into generalizations. In part to evade such generalization the greater part of this study takes the form of close analysis, a synthesis of the primary resource (the text of the poem) and various secondary resources (which are collected in the accompanying notes and inform the content of the commentaries). This synthesis – manifested in annotations to Hill's original text – has obviously an explanatory function, but also creates its own narrative, negotiating the text line-by-line and as it is read. Difficulty is easy to identify, but identification of its causes and manifestations is a more demanding task. Responding to a need to "say something definite"⁴⁴ about the poem, I have interrogated examples of difficulty as they appear rather than dismissing them as inexplicable or irreconcilable. In explaining particular difficulties, I have tried to find the reason for their inclusion, and to describe their effect on and role within the poem. In doing so, an implicit argument about reading is sustained: by negotiating each example of difficulty as it occurs, the immediate and cumulative effect of the difficulty of the poem as a whole is dissipated. Treatments of *Speech! Speech!* have tended to focus on its inaccessibility. In relentlessly and mechanically 'accessing' the poem, I make two claims: first, that the difficulty of the text is not insurmountable; and second, that the products of textual analysis – in this case, notes and commentaries – are useful diagnostic tools for looking beyond the difficulty of the text in the attempt to make

⁴² Genuine straight-talking, however, is Hill's aim: he quotes Junius ("an author new to me"): "I speak to the plain understanding of the people, and appeal to their honest, liberal construction of me" (*Don't Ask Me What I Mean*, 117).

⁴³ *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their Own Words*, 116.

⁴⁴ Thomas Day, 'Geoffrey Hill's Finishing-Lines', *Cahiers Charles V* 34 (2003): 162.

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definite, specific statements about it, to determine its "achievement".

In making supplements to the text, it has been necessary continually to question whether a particular fact or elaboration contributes significantly to the understanding of the text, and whether a note, or turn of phrase in the commentary brings out the appropriate nuance within the poem. This is a matter of determining validity: for each detail within the poem which requires or begs explication, there is a sphere of knowledge which can contribute to its understanding; outside of this sphere is a plethora of information which may be fascinating, titillating, and even compelling in terms of its relatedness to this text, but which does not bring to bear upon the poem sufficient weight as to warrant its inclusion, or which is so commonplace as not to require explanation. The context of the phrase, the line, the stanza and the position of the stanza in the poem are all considered when making an addition. In stanza 55, for instance, "impeachment" suggests ex-US President Bill Clinton, because of this stanza's proximity to another (stanza 53) which refers to his affair with Monica Lewinsky; and the echo of George Bush Sr's "Read my lips" is heard in Hill's next phrase, "Watch my lips", and only because of this Clinton connection. The same method is used for exclusion: in stanza 60, for instance, it is tempting to read Hill's reference to Bucer's signing "for England" as an autobiographical comment about Hill's return to his home country, until it is remembered that this return took place in 2006, six years after the publication of *Speech! Speech!* For each note and in each commentary, delicate balances such as these are struck, with an economy of interpretive validity being always played out.

Furthermore, in making additions to the text I have been mindful of the impossibility of knowing the 'truth' of the poem. My interpretation of particular details and even whole stanzas is presented as the best hypothesis I could propose; it is my hope that further work on the poem will refine or replace these hypotheses with better versions. This sense of hypothesis is especially true when dealing with a poem as rich in reference and allusion as *Speech! Speech!* There are, however, occasions when I am quite certain of a particular interpretation of the text. In stanza 88, for instance, when Hill speaks of "Odette" and "Violette" in the context of World War II, I am confident he is writing of Resistance heroines Odette Sansom and Violette Szabo. Likewise, in stanza 80, where Hill uses the word

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“*augenblick*”, in the context of the surrounding phrases, “four chordal horns”, “mute powers”, “pitched in disorder” and “nadir of your triumph”, I am confident about my deduction that he is alluding to Beethoven’s *Der Glorreiche Augenblick*, although Beethoven is nowhere named. Elsewhere, the import of the text and the identification of contributing knowledge is more difficult to determine. In stanza 90, for example, I am not entirely convinced of my note allying the “apostles’ jets” with with the super-rich religious far Right: but it is at present my best hypothesis, and my notes, I believe, contribute to the elucidation of the text despite this uncertainty about their final accuracy.

Determining *what* to include in my annotations was one question; deciding *where* to include different kinds of detail was another. My supplements to the text appear in two forms. The first of these is the note, the textual annotation with direct allegiance to the text, and which cites, translates, defines, contextualizes, signals reiterations and marks the repetition of motifs. The notes tell much about sources and meanings, but little about why a detail is included; they are obviously products of research, but, as Hill notes, research “is not anamnesis”.⁴⁵ With notes only, the explicated poem is akin to a completed cryptic crossword, its many cracked enigmas fitting together in a jigsaw-like formation but to no great end and with no particular sense, the finished puzzle an achievement rather than an answer.⁴⁶ The distinction is one of intent: the poem *appears* cryptic to the reader, but the poet’s intent is not to write in code. Textual commentaries – the second adjunct to the text – perform the conceptual work that is beyond the scope of the note; in these, the poet’s arguments and conceits are identified and the development of his themes is recorded. The two apparatuses perform different functions in terms of

⁴⁵ *The Triumph of Love*, LXVII.

⁴⁶ Hill resists descriptions of his work as cryptic: “I am baffled and saddened when readers, friendly as much as unfriendly, approach my poems as cryptograms to be decoded” (*Don’t Ask Me What I Mean*, 116). The crossword features in *Speech! Speech!* in stanza 2, when Hill describes the Scott Expedition as being “frozen in time / before the first crossword”; in stanza 55, with the imperative “Hoick out another clue”; and in stanza 85, with the quasi-cryptic clue, “Ruin smell of cat’s urine with a small gin” and the instruction to “Develop the anagram”.

difficulty: notes signal the existence of a surface difficulty, able to be negotiated by the dedicated library patron or the experienced Internet user (whom Hill in *Speech! Speech!* terms the “world-surfing ... junk-maestro”);⁴⁷ commentaries deal with those problems which remain after the ‘decoding’ of poetic detail, and these aim to find an answer not to each clue but to the puzzle as a whole.

RECEPTION AND THE ROLE OF THE ANNOTATOR

But does Hill want to be ‘cracked’, explained to a greater, wider readership? Geoffrey Hill is a well-known and lauded poet, but, as Adam Kirsch notes, although it is “now common to hear English critics call Mr. Hill the greatest poet alive; in America [...] it is hard even to find his books”.⁴⁸ Hill writes in *Speech! Speech!* of the possibility of addressing “fresh auditors” (stanza 92), and has claimed that his favourite review of the poem was one published on a popular culture website:

The very best review of *Speech! Speech!* that I got, and one of the very best reviews I’ve ever had, was in an online program called popmatters ... by a man called Andy Fogle.... Springing up from somewhere, some entirely unknown quarter, one gets this vivid and vital response. I find it enormously encouraging.⁴⁹

The poet is pleased to have reached an audience to whom he has been unfamiliar hitherto. Asked in an interview with the *Oxonian* about how he envisages his readership, Hill betrayed a desire to reach not only a larger but also a broader audience, a more ‘public’ public:

When I see my half-yearly royalty statements I seem not to have a readership at all. Yet in 2006 when I gave a reading in the Sheldonian the place was packed, chiefly with young people. And at poetry

⁴⁷ *Speech! Speech!*, stanza 47. Gregory Wolfe, however, notes that “Despite Wikipedia and Google Translate, [Hill’s] foreign phrases and allusions are resented”; see ‘Who’s Afraid of Geoffrey Hill?’, *Image* 66 (2010) (accessed 1 Oct. 2010) <<http://imagejournal.org/page/journal/editorial-statements/whos-afraid-of-geoffrey-hill>>.

⁴⁸ ‘The Long-Cherished Anger of Geoffrey Hill’.

⁴⁹ ‘Meaningful Speech’, 198.

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readings I continually meet older people who bring for signing a copy of every book since *For the Unfallen* (1959). There are obviously devoted readers, but it's all rather subterranean, a bit like wartime resistance.⁵⁰

It seems that Hill feels keenly the isolation that resulted from his "elevated and coldly austere" earlier verse.⁵¹ And although he believes contemporary culture to be increasingly 'debauched',⁵² in this second period he prefers to address the populace rather than to reject it. He makes clear this intention in *Without Title* when he writes: "Turning towards / the people is no worse, no better, say, / than chance of exile."⁵³ This turn towards the people as a way out of exile is symptomatic of a major shift in Hill's verse.

Speech! Speech! occupies an uncomfortable position in Hill's oeuvre: it stands apart from the first period, and is the most dense, obtuse and difficult example of the second. Perhaps as a result of this difficulty, the poem is rarely given sustained attention. Some critics dismiss *Speech! Speech!* in a few words; others omit it altogether from their considerations of Hill's recent work. Michael O'Neill nowhere addresses *Speech! Speech!* in his *The All-Sustaining Air*, despite its pertinence to his discussion and his consideration of adjacent

⁵⁰ Alexandra Bell, Rebecca Rosen and Edmund White, 'Strongholds of the Imagination', *The Oxonian Review* 9.4, 18 May 2009 (accessed 19 Sept. 2009) <<http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/geoffrey-hill/>>.

⁵¹ Elisabeth Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 1. As Jeannine Johnson has noted, Hill appears not to notice that against the numbers who ignore or deride his poetry, there are "at least as many critics who never fail to laud his work: this positive fact, as well as the fact that he has more professional readers – critical and admiring – than almost any other living poet writing in English, seems lost on him". *Why Write Poetry: Modern Poets Defending Their Art* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 258.

⁵² In an interview, Hill explained that one aim of *Speech! Speech!* was to ask "how to make speech meaningful when the world has done all it can to debauch and trivialize it.... I am almost bound not to believe that any particular age in human society was a golden age, when everything was right and everything was good." But Hill adds that in recent decades, "the tempo of the degradation, the intensity of the debauch, have certainly increased" ('Meaningful Speech', 198).

⁵³ Geoffrey Hill, *Without Title* (London: Penguin, 2006), 39.

volumes *The Triumph of Love* and *The Orchards of Syon*.⁵⁴ Jennifer Kilgore, in a passage determining 'Pound as Persona in *The Triumph of Love* and *Speech! Speech!*', cites lines from *Speech! Speech!* only once.⁵⁵ After making an argument for understanding the first and second periods of Hill's career as the "epoch of gravity and the epoch of grace" respectively, Robert McFarlane mentions *Speech! Speech!* only to signal its exclusion from further discussion: "With the exception of *Speech! Speech!*, all these volumes meditate on graceful experience".⁵⁶ Obviously, any derisions and omissions must be weighed up against examples of great praise – descriptions of the poem as "magisterial" and claims for its place as "a classic of English poetry",⁵⁷ for instance – but their existence points to a difficulty that is worthy of attention.

For many devoted readers of Hill, the new style of his later work, and in particular its manifestation in *Speech! Speech!*,

⁵⁴ Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). O'Neill argues for a reading of poetry as a form of literary criticism.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Kilgore, 'Seeking "The Root in Justice": Geoffrey Hill on Ezra Pound', *Ezra Pound and Referentiality*, ed. Hélène Aji (Paris: Presses Paris Sorbonne, 2003), 100.

⁵⁶ 'Gravity and Grace in Geoffrey Hill', 241-242.

⁵⁷ As claimed by Robert Potts in 'Theatre of Voices': his sense that the poem "will, I suspect, become a classic of English poetry" and his final enunciation, "Magisterial", are conflated in the publisher's note on the back cover of the Counterpoint paperback edition of *Speech! Speech!* in the following, distinctly unequivocal iteration: "the London *Guardian*, naming it the poetry book of the year, called it "magisterial – a classic of English poetry." John Lyon draws attention to the fact that positive criticism of Hill's later work is often reluctant: writing of *The Triumph of Love*, he notes that positive reviews "present the fact of Hill's major standing as a chilly concession rather than a celebration, and proceed to unearth or reveal or expose the 'real' Geoffrey Hill beneath the implicitly unnecessary clutter of his difficulty" ("Pardon?": Our Problem with Difficulty [and Geoffrey Hill], *Thumbscrew* 19 [1999]: 11). William Logan ventures beyond the "chilly" when he writes that "Geoffrey Hill stands by his words by standing apart from everything else, proud of an authority no one wishes to dispute because no one cares to be lord of such limited wasteground" ('The Absolute Unreasonableness of Geoffrey Hill', *Conversant Essays: Contemporary Poets on Poetry* [Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1990], 47).

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was difficult to digest. Critical responses to the poem have been largely ambivalent. William Logan considered *Speech! Speech!* a “brute monologue” which alienated readers by refusing to identify its references and allusions.⁵⁸ Reacting to what he perceived as Hill’s wilful obfuscation, Logan described Hill’s assertion that the stanzas number “As many as the days that were | of SODOM”⁵⁹ as “perhaps the only time the poem is helpful”.⁶⁰ Kevin Hart considers this ‘unhelpfulness’ to be a symptom of Hill’s laziness and inattention; his image of Hill is of a septuagenarian who waxes on banalities because he is “drained of verbal and intellectual energy”.⁶¹ On no page of the poem, Hart claims, is Hill “writing with full attention”; rather, he projects “a shadow play of learning while not freshly responding to the mystery of why we live, love, suffer and die.”⁶² Hart yearns for the Hill of the first period – in comparison with earlier verse, *Speech! Speech!* is simply “unworthy of such an impressive poet”;⁶³ summarizing Hill’s career, he writes that: “Not all of Hill’s book-length sequences are successful: *Speech! Speech!* (2000), 120 twelve-liners, remains clotted and inert”.⁶⁴ Hart is, finally, entirely unequivocal: when he compares *Speech! Speech!* with earlier Hill, he finds it to be essentially “a failure, the weakest book by far in the poet’s work”.⁶⁵

In acknowledging the need for further and closer attention to be given to *Speech! Speech!*, some critics have made explicit requests for an annotative study. Online reviewer Rachel Barenblat wrote that she “Again and again” found herself “wanting an annotated version of *Speech! Speech!*, a guidebook to lead [her] through these seemingly-unconnected words”.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ ‘Author! Author!’, 65.

⁵⁹ *Speech! Speech!*, stanza 55.

⁶⁰ ‘Author! Author!’, 65.

⁶¹ ‘Up and Dówn the | Hill’, review of *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon*, *Notre Dame Review* 17 (2004): 161.

⁶² ‘Up and Dówn the | Hill’, 161.

⁶³ ‘Up and Dówn the | Hill’, 161.

⁶⁴ Kevin Hart, ‘Varieties of Poetic Sequence’, *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 194.

⁶⁵ ‘Up and Dówn the | Hill’, 158.

⁶⁶ Rachel Barenblat, ‘Review of *Speech! Speech!*’, *Pifmagazine*, 1 Mar. 2001 (accessed 12 Jul. 2005) <<http://www.pifmagazine.com/SID/662/>>.

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Andy Fogle, a regular reviewer at the pop-culture site *PopMatters* (and of whose review Hill's own grateful mention has been noted earlier), claimed that "with the right tool or two" he could come to believe Harold Bloom's declaration that Hill is the "greatest poet living".⁶⁷ These statements come from outside the academic discourse of Hill criticism, but the desire for closer textual analysis is reiterated by established critics in various literary journals. Thomas Day writes that definitive notation of the poem is required and that "it is not enough to speak of difficulty in Hill by playing on his words and citing irreconcilables" because doing so "ignores the urgent need to say something definite".⁶⁸ Andrew Michael Roberts notes that "No brief account can do justice to the poem's range, nor interpret more than a fraction of its lines".⁶⁹ Reviewing *Speech! Speech!* in *The New York Times*, David Bromwich wrote of stanza 19 that "Annotation will be needed before such a passage can sort itself into coherence in a second mind".⁷⁰ John Lyon simply assumes the existence – and so points to the necessity – of "future editors and annotators of Hill's work".⁷¹

Requests for closer textual analysis of *Speech! Speech!* – and the sometimes specific request for an annotated edition – come not as a result of temporal distance from the text (what Ralph Hanna identifies as the "response to a prior culture"),⁷² but from its textual difficulty. There is a perceived imbalance between the cerebral range of the poet – which spans the many

⁶⁷ Andy Fogle, 'This Canon Fires', review of *Speech! Speech!*, *Popmatters* (accessed 10. Oct. 2008) <<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/speech-speech>>).

⁶⁸ 'Geoffrey Hill's Finishing-Lines', 162.

⁶⁹ *Geoffrey Hill*, 41.

⁷⁰ 'Muse of Brimstone', 28.

⁷¹ "'What are you incinerating?': Geoffrey Hill and Popular Culture', *English* 43 (2005): 89.

⁷² For Hanna, the practice of annotation mirrors the simultaneous nearness and distance which societies feel with the past: "annotation is always a testimony to alienation from a text, always represents a response to a prior culture from which one believes oneself (and consequently, nearly everyone else) distanced. Yet simultaneously... annotation also testifies to inclusion: one usually assumes that only canonical texts deserve annotation, and such canonicity depends on the acceptance of the text by some critical community, a community of which the annotator is the designated representative ('Annotation as Social Practice', 178).

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references and allusions within the poem – and his reader. This imbalance engenders a kind of guilt: readers consider themselves simply not up to the job of reading the poem. Nicholas Lezard described the sense of inferiority that he suffers from while reading the poem, and he craves assistance: “As so often with Hill, one guiltily yearns for extensive explanatory notes; only now more than ever”.⁷³ For David Rogers, the imbalance between reader and poet is the prime cause of alienation in *Speech! Speech!*: “The difficulty of this book for the ordinary reader attracted to poetry is a detail of reference beyond the experience of most readers”.⁷⁴ For Michael Schmidt, Hill’s later poems will “eventually require footnotes or explication ... for many readers unequal to the coherent past worlds he draws together in all their otherness.”⁷⁵ The image is that of Hill as a taskmaster making unreasonable demands on his struggling readers; many of those struggling readers would welcome the assistance offered by detailed annotations to the text.

There is acceptance, too, of the principle that cataloguing the “detail of reference” is a long-term project: Peter McDonald writes that *Speech! Speech!* is “Hill’s most difficult volume of poetry to date, and it is likely that critical approaches to it ... will be slow to take its true measure, just as they will have long work in weighing up its different registers and fields of reference.”⁷⁶ John Lyon attests that the reader of later Hill “knows from past and continuing experience” that understanding will be a “slow and painstaking” (but ultimately “worthwhile”) process.⁷⁷ William Logan’s responses to *Speech! Speech!* can be seen as a manifestation of this slowness to take the poem’s “true measure”. Reviewing *Speech! Speech!* for *The New Criterion* in December 2000, Logan was scathing: its stance is described as “lazy”, its development a “descent circle by

⁷³ ‘Hill Starts’, *The Guardian*, 17 Nov. 2001 (accessed 10 Jan. 2008) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/nov/17/poetry.ts Eliotprizeforpoetry2001>>.

⁷⁴ ‘Review of *Speech! Speech!*’, *World Literature Today* 76:1 (2002): 152.

⁷⁵ Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), 875.

⁷⁶ *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 198.

⁷⁷ “‘Pardon?’: Our Problem with Difficulty (and Geoffrey Hill)”, 11.

circle into an Inferno of blitherings".⁷⁸ Of the four poets with whose work Logan reviewed the poem – John Ashbery, Yusef Komunyakaa, Gjertrud Schnackenberg and Michael Longley – Hill and *Speech! Speech!* received the worst assessment. By June 2002, however, Logan had revised his opinion. Reviewing *The Orchards of Syon*, he reported: "I was not kind to *Speech! Speech!* when I reviewed it, and I must now eat my words, or some of them."⁷⁹ According to Logan, close textual analysis encouraged him to make this reevaluation: "If there are critics to labour over these poems as they have over Eliot and Pound, the deep shafts of footnotes will gradually mine their subliminal hurts and sublime graces."⁸⁰ It is my contention that Logan's response is typical and thus a model: readers' first responses to the poem (the amalgam of bewilderment, guilt, and hostility frequently described) can be transformed via "deep shafts of footnotes" and other explicatory work into appreciative understanding.

THE POLITICS OF DIFFICULTY

The difficulty of *Speech! Speech!* means that – unlike Logan – many readers do not persist and return for reappraisal, but instead reject the poem, perhaps for political reasons. The concepts of 'difficulty' and 'élitism' are closely linked and remain very much in the foreground of discussions around twentieth-century literature; the modernist long poem, in particular, is notorious for such difficulty. The density of Pound's *Cantos* correlates to its élitism (even, according to many, to its fascism); similarly, Eliot's *The Waste Land* with its myriad invocations is emblematic of a high modernist ethic of difficulty which sees works embedded in the literary tradition to such an extent that they can be inaccessible to those outside it. Hill writes from within this and other traditions: the traditions, for instance, of the church and theology.⁸¹ Responses

⁷⁸ 'Author! Author!', 65.

⁷⁹ 'Falls the Shadow', review of *The Orchards of Syon*, *The New Criterion* 20 (2002): 75.

⁸⁰ 'Falls the Shadow', 75. "[T]hese poems" are what Hill describes as his "tetralogy", *Canaan*, *The Triumph of Love*, *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon* (see 'Meaningful Speech', 198).

⁸¹ David C. Mahan provides an account of the relationship between Hill's poetry and the Christian tradition in *An Unexpected Light: Theology and Witness in the Poetry and Thought of Charles Williams*,

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to *Speech! Speech!* have included accusations of élitism and wilful obscurantism. In his first assessment, Logan reasoned: “Refusing to lower yourself to the mob is one thing, sneering at your readers is another – it’s not a matter of finding the fit though few when there *are* no fit and no few”.⁸² Even after his reassessment of the poem, Logan claims that “Hill would be delusional not to realize his poetry is beyond the reach of the common reader, or even most uncommon ones.”⁸³ Likewise, Laurie Smith believes the poem to be “accessible only to the educated few”, and hence fundamentally “fascist”.⁸⁴ Rowland, on the other hand, acknowledges the poem’s difficulty but argues that “Hill does not loathe his readers” but rather expects them “to think harder than some of them want to”.⁸⁵ Hill himself echoes this sentiment: “I am happy to make my work as generally accessible as I honestly can. But this is less often than many professional and amateur readers consider right and proper.”⁸⁶ For Christopher Orchard, the source of Hill’s difficulty is “the physical distance between him and those who should be the subject of his praxis”.⁸⁷ Hill himself acknowledges the difficulty of his poetry and the work required to make sense of it; after a cryptic reference to Dante in *The Orchards of Syon*, he issues the instruction “Don’t look it up this time”, urging readers instead to rely on their “sub- / conscious” to assist understanding.⁸⁸

Michael O’Siadhail, and Geoffrey Hill (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

⁸² ‘Author! Author!’, 65.

⁸³ William Logan, ‘Falls the Shadow’, 75.

⁸⁴ ‘Subduing the Reader’, review of *Speech! Speech!*, *Magma* 23 (2002) (accessed 12 May 2007) <<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=14974>>.

⁸⁵ Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 71.

⁸⁶ *Don’t Ask Me What I Mean*, 117.

⁸⁷ Christopher Orchard, ‘Praxis not Gnosis: Geoffrey Hill and the Anxiety of Polity’, 200.

⁸⁸ The passage is from XXI: “Can you stand -- / cleft – but in the spirit, as a tree / by lightning, close to the shored heart? / I believe this has been done. Dante / describes it somewhere – I may be mistaken. Don’t look it up this time; the sub- / conscious does well by us; leave well alone.”

GEOFFREY HILL'S *SPEECH! SPEECH!*

And yet Hill's direction to not "look it up this time", his championing of the sub-conscious over the encyclopaedia, is somewhat disingenuous. He argues for a complex, difficult consciousness and a complex, difficult poetry to match – both mind and poem rejecting simplification and requiring decoding, whether by ourselves or by others:

We are difficult. Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most 'intellectual' piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are? Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when, if such simplification were applied to a description of our own inner selves, we would find it demeaning?⁸⁹

Describing *Speech! Speech!*, Hill reiterates this mirroring of everyday difficulty in poetry: "The difficulties of daily living get in the way and my poems, unavoidably it seems, collide with the densities of common existence".⁹⁰ To produce deliberately 'simple' poetry is, then, to demean one's readers. The converse is for Hill equally true: delivering complex poetry flatters, even democratizes the reader. According to Hill, difficulty and complexity liberate readers from the threat of tyranny:

I would argue that genuinely difficult art is truly democratic. And that tyranny requires simplification.... And any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence implies intelligence. Maybe an intelligence under threat, maybe an intelligence that is afraid of consequences, but nonetheless an intelligence working in qualifications and revelations ... resisting, therefore, tyrannical simplification.⁹¹

⁸⁹ 'The Art of Poetry LXXX', 277

⁹⁰ *Don't Ask Me What I Mean*, 116.

⁹¹ 'The Art of Poetry LXXX', 277.

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More recently, Hill has identified difficulty as “the greatest safeguard that democracy possesses”.⁹² For Hill, then, difficulty is not a poetic construction, but rather an extension of the difficulty human beings face in every aspect of their lives. To write and provide these same people with a simplified art would be to suggest that their lives are also simple, thereby denying the multitude of genuine complexities with which they regularly cope. As Hill writes in ‘Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918’, the “true common reader is a natural aristocrat of the spirit”.⁹³

Modernist poetry, in which tradition Hill writes, is a difficult discourse. Typically, poems do not function as independent, discrete units of verse, but rather as *contributions* to poetry, continually referring to themselves, the work of other poets, and – perhaps most commonly and significantly – to the act of writing poetry. Hill writes in a similarly intertextually-rich style, and the texts to which he refers and which contribute to and are present (in quotations, or images or vocabulary)⁹⁴ in *Speech! Speech!* are (largely) those (canonical) texts which contributed to the (now canonical) modernists: Yeats, Eliot, Pound and others. In *True Friendship*, Christopher Ricks discusses the effect of this iteration and reiteration within the highly-referential discourse of twentieth-century poetry, in particular Hill’s complex relationship with Eliot, whom he admires but resents: “In Hill’s art, though not always in his argumentations, resentment at Eliot becomes something altogether other by being exactly placed and by being nourished by so much more than resentment.”⁹⁵ A mixture of awe, gratitude and resentment typifies *Speech! Speech!*: it is not easy to determine when the poet is mocking, and when he is sincere.

This understanding of poetic difficulty places Hill firmly within the tradition of modernist difficulty, a tradition which has been variously interpreted as an expression of élitism and homage. For Laurie Smith, Hill’s preoccupations are

⁹² ‘Civil Polity and the Confessing State’, *Warwick Review* 2.2 (2008): 16.

⁹³ *Collected Critical Writings*, 459.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, the note on “haruspicate” in stanza 28, which identifies the word as having come to Hill via Eliot.

⁹⁵ Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 69-70.

exclusionist and alienating. Like Pound, Hill makes “the same appeal to the culture of the past as infinitely better than the present”; he demonstrates “the same wide range of learning displayed for a few like-minded readers”; and he exhibits “the same contempt for accessibility”.⁹⁶ According to Smith, the root of this inaccessibility is the lack of the confessional:

Both Pound and Hill show what happens when poetry loses touch with the need to speak to the individual. A poem that addresses a person, rather than a culture, a class or other abstraction, can never be fascist, as the poems of Eliot and Yeats, despite their authors' reactionary tendencies, almost always show. In their work there is the humility of self-exposure: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’ is a confession, as is ‘the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’. For Pound and Hill, the fragments are ammunition and the heart is unmentionable.

Hill's work has never warranted the description ‘confessional’, and yet there is arguably more ‘Hill’ in *Speech! Speech!* than in any other of his poems, and there are certainly moments of autobiography as the older poet looks back on his age (in both senses of that word). As Adam Kirsch notes, in the later poetry Hill is “still intricate and ambiguous”, but “much more personal”;⁹⁷ John Drexel writes that the older Hill adopts a “determinedly personal tone”.⁹⁸ Indeed, Hill has spent much of his later criticism arguing against Eliot's ethic of authorial absence, and has described his own experience of ‘coming through’ Eliot:

Forty or fifty years ago, nothing would have induced me to say that there is anything resembling self-therapy or exorcism in the art of poetry or the art of writing. I had been trained, by the Eliot essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent,’ to deny this.

⁹⁶ Laurie Smith, ‘Subduing the Reader’.

⁹⁷ ‘The Long-Cherished Anger of Geoffrey Hill’.

⁹⁸ John Drexel, ‘Geoffrey Hill: The Poet in Winter’, review of *The Orchards of Syon*, *Contemporary Poetry Review*, 7 Apr. 2003 (accessed 9 Aug. 2007) <<http://www.cprw.com/geoffrey-hill-the-poet-in-winter/>>.

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And because I was not quick enough to understand the qualifications that Eliot himself would have entered, I acquired a far too extremist view of what seemed then a total incompatibility of the objective and the subjective, and I would have said the poem is achieved by the fullest possible objectification of individual subjectivity. Obviously I no longer think so.⁹⁹

Hill is contemplatively confessional in stanza 11 (when the poet describes how he “clown-paints” his pyjamas with red pen while reflecting that he would like to “shuffle off alive”), and stanza 70 (when he describes approaching the town of Groton by train, looking out the window for a loved one but “without desire”). These are moments at least as autobiographical as Eliot’s ‘confession’ of his shored fragments, and they show that in *Speech! Speech!* the heart is by no means “unmentionable”.

As Smith points out, arguments about individual voice are political as well as poetical. Movements in the middle of last century focussing on egalitarian issues associated difficulty not only with literary élitism, but also with the rarefied atmosphere of universities in the days before general admittance. Antony Rowland relates an exchange between poets Philip Larkin and Tony Harrison to illustrate the gulf between Larkin’s assertion that “a good poem should be understood immediately”¹⁰⁰ and Hill’s inaccessibility: “when Harrison asks the reader in one of his early poems to look at one of Goya’s paintings in the Prado, Larkin retorts in a letter, ‘WHY THE FUCKING HELL SHOULD I?’”¹⁰¹ This effort required – the consultation of sources outside the poem – for Rowland defines the two poets’ different interpretations of democracy: “Larkin and Hill’s versions of democratic art clearly diverge: for Hill, it requires the reader’s perseverance; for Larkin, it must be accessible, acceptable, and

⁹⁹ ‘The Art of Poetry LXXX’, 282-283. Hill’s one-time commitment to Eliot’s ethic of impersonality was evident in a 1981 interview with John Haffenden, where he explains that he sees “no reason to quarrel with the celebrated passage from Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’” (Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* [London: Faber and Faber, 1981], 86).

¹⁰⁰ Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*, 71.

¹⁰¹ *Holocaust Poetry*, 71.

widely read.”¹⁰² Hill, on the other hand, in making his case, quotes Theodor Hacker's dictum: “Tyrants always want a language and literature that is easily understood”,¹⁰³ and states that he “will not stoop to the defensive innuendo that learning is anti-pathetic to ‘true’ intellect”.¹⁰⁴ The trouble here is that ‘immediate understanding’ and ‘accessibility’ are taken to be one and the same thing; there is no place for the text which is difficult but in which the difficulties are negotiable.

Hill's distrust of populism finds its way into *Speech! Speech!* In stanza 37, he describes *The Sun* as a newspaper which “condescends ... daily” to its readers, while in stanza 99 the “AUTHENTIC SELF” – the locus of the faux-egalitarian artistic voice – is dismissed as “a stinker”. Hill is at his most explicit in the final stanzas of the poem when he writes that the public endures the “ACCESSIBLE / traded as DEMOCRATIC” (stanza 118). These are forthright expositions; he also makes other, more subtle arguments. Hill's repeated interrogation in *Speech! Speech!* of demotic utterances serves two purposes: first, indicating current *abuse* of the language, reducing it to an excess of the hackneyed and clichéd; second, indicating that responsible *use* of such language can have a redemptive quality, that it can discover truths and rescue language from “the debauch”.¹⁰⁵ Hill champions the responsible use of language, and attention to semantic, syntactic and lexical detail. He aims to produce a language and a “fine-edged discourse”,¹⁰⁶ capable of reproducing the complexity of everyday life in the written word. In a sermon for Ash Wednesday, Hill provided an antecedent as an example of how to negotiate complexity in literature: “What I brought away from my study of Tudor and early Stuart English was the realization that our language at that time could sustain nuance and fine distinction in ways not now sustainable or understood”.¹⁰⁷ Language for Hill has always the potential for nuance and fine distinction; it is the sustenance of these qualities that is required of those who use it.

¹⁰² *Holocaust Poetry*, 71.

¹⁰³ *Don't Ask Me What I Mean*, 118.

¹⁰⁴ *Collected Critical Writings*, 174.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Meaningful Speech’, 198.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Trinity Sermon: Ash Wednesday 2008’.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Trinity Sermon: Ash Wednesday 2008’.

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This idea of the lexicon as a powerful, redemptive force is attractive, and yet even those sympathetic to Hill's theory of democratic difficulty struggle with its practical application. For some critics, the satisfaction of 'decoding' the poem does not warrant the effort required. For William Logan, "The labor of decoding comes at a price higher than the likely benefit";¹⁰⁸ for *The Economist* reviewer, "Mr Hill has always been difficult, but the beauty of his writing helped readers persevere. In *Speech! Speech!* there is less to draw you in".¹⁰⁹ For others, Hill's "learning" does not appear "real". Thomas Day notes that although:

Hill might give the impression of having read his way through the whole of literature ... the procedure is more like that of a *flâneur* in a world of books ... taking a phrase from here, a word from there – which is perhaps not so difficult as it looks, and which, since it may be relatively easy to counterfeit, implies the sensuous intelligence might be espoused as a way of shirking the labour of real learning.¹¹⁰

Here, close textual analysis can be useful not only as an explicatory tool but also as a means of assessment. Notes identify the poet's references, allusions, and translate unknowns; commentaries lay bare his method, the conceits and linguistic tricks employed. Readers are then able to judge for themselves whether or not Hill's references are "particularly obscure",¹¹¹ or pose a surface difficulty only.

THE PROBLEM OF 'SPEAKING'

Despite the inherent difficulties of speaking, the poet is burdened with a responsibility to answer the call for speech. *Speech! Speech!* is a set of utterances in which the poet is "continually questioning his own impulse to public

¹⁰⁸ 'Author! Author!', 65.

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, 'Books and Arts: Trust in Words', review of *Speech! Speech!*, *The Economist* 21 June 2001: 81.

¹¹⁰ 'Sensuous Intelligence: T.S. Eliot and Geoffrey Hill', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 25.3 (2006): 267.

¹¹¹ According to Logan they are not: it is "not the allusions but the arguments that have fallen into mystery" ('Author! Author!', 65).

utterance."¹¹² The opening stanza, with its obscure staccato dictum, "Erudition. Pain. Light.", provides a great deal of information about the reasons for the poet's need to speak. *Speech! Speech!* is described as a "great" and "unavoidable work"; to speak is unavoidable despite the recognition that "heroic verse" – epic narratives (such as *Speech! Speech!*) commemorating legendary figures – in the current age (dominated as it is by the "PEOPLE") is "a non-starter". Despite the general "confusion" of the modern world, with its focus on instant gratification and "rapid exposure", the poet must sound his "music". In doing so, he impedes the march of history and prevents its many narratives – here condensed in one word: "Archaic" – from being forgotten, "pillaged", and "erased" in the space of only "one generation". *Speech! Speech!* is Hill's effort to rescue the heroes (Diana, Princess of Wales, or David Bomberg, or Isaac Rosenberg, or Charles Ives) and the "innocent bystanders" of history (those unnamed, "speechless dead"¹¹³ who, "missing their stars", are forgotten, such as the women of the Resistance movement) from the potential product of the "distance" between us and them, of being reduced to nothingness by the great "auto-da-fé" of time which destroys any trace of their existence.

There are other perils, too. The poet can speak *about* the heroes and bystanders of history, and he can also speak *to* them in a formal address of homage, but he cannot hope to speak *for* them:¹¹⁴ to do so would be an act of reckless irresponsibility

¹¹² Andrew Michael Roberts, *Geoffrey Hill*, 40.

¹¹³ See Hill's poem from *King Log* (1968), 'History as Poetry': "Poetry / Unearths from among the speechless dead // Lazarus mystified, common man / Of death."

¹¹⁴ Michael Schmidt describes Hill's position as based around the question of how far, "with the Bergsonian past in mind, can a voice speak, speak of, speak to (it cannot hope to speak for); how far can it contain and judge the unspeakable and counter-weigh Adorno's notorious dictum that there can be no poems after Auschwitz?" (*Lives of the Poets*, 986). Adorno's assertion was that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today". See *Can One Live after Auschwitz?*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 162. In "'it / is true'", Kevin Hart notes that in 'September Song', Hill "recoils from the very possibility" of beginning to "talk *for*" the subject of the poem, a child victim of the Holocaust (*Words of Life:*

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and inauthenticity. As Gareth Reeves rightly notes: “Hill’s poetry would give voice to the silent dead, but is all the time conscious that in doing so it relives and resurrects the atrocity buried with them.”¹¹⁵ In writing about the Holocaust, for instance, Hill (and any other contemporary poet) enters a realm of perils. Born in 1932, Hill was a child when World War II began and an adolescent when it ended; any mention of the pain and suffering caused by this catastrophic event, or even of the heroism of those allied soldiers who fought against it, risks the pitfalls of voyeurism, hollow righteousness, or – perhaps worst of all – of self-styling as a prophet, one somehow possessed of especial vantage from which to make pronouncements. As Tim Kendall notes, “having ‘not been there’, Hill must ceaselessly invoke an imperfect act of witness”.¹¹⁶ Hill speaks in *Speech! Speech!* of his “childish anger” at the injustices of the twentieth century. He claims that “At twenty, ignorance was my judgement”, indicating his willingness to accept the limitations of his own life, and the subjectivity that these parameters impose.¹¹⁷

In responding to claims of ‘propheteering’ by making art from the misfortunes of the dead, Hill argues that:

They say that Hill claims for himself the status of the prophet, and nobody has a right to make such a claim in the late twentieth century, and that there is something disgusting in seeing a writer describe on the same level the Shoah, the First and Second World Wars, and his petty resentments. No such claim is made by the author. The author is perfectly aware of the grotesque difference between his own resentments and the plight of millions, between the claims that he makes for himself and the several holocausts of his age.¹¹⁸

New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology, ed. Bruce Benson and Norman Wirzba [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010], 78).

¹¹⁵ Gareth Reeves, ‘This is Plenty. This is More than Enough’, *Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 584.

¹¹⁶ Tim Kendall, ‘Geoffrey Hill’s Debts’, *Modern English War Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 224.

¹¹⁷ *Speech! Speech!*, stanza 83.

¹¹⁸ ‘The Art of Poetry LXXX’, 284-285.

GEOFFREY HILL'S *SPEECH! SPEECH!*

In memorializing history, Hill must be careful (especially as he has “nothing about which he can decently complain”)¹¹⁹ lest panegyric spill over into faux-autobiography; he must ensure that he bears witness to his own experience. The act of looking into the dead, as he notes in stanza 113, is both “destructive” and “vital”; destructive in that the act of ‘autopsy’ – seeing for oneself, eye-witnessing – requires the dissection of the dead, but “vital” in that it brings the dead to life, pulls them “back into being” by the authentic act of bearing witness. But to bring the dead “back into being” without falling into the trap of speaking on their behalf, or idealizing or romanticizing them, or unintentionally reinventing them, is a delicate feat of responsibility and sustained attention, and the poet must be constantly alert to its many dangers. Moreover, the voices of the dead compete with one another: the poet must balance all these voices.

As R. K. Meiners rightly points out, Hill’s efforts to continue speaking despite the mitigating circumstances constitute for him a dedication to a kind of linguistic heroism. Writing in response to the title of Hill’s essay collection *The Enemy’s Country*, he notes that, for Hill, it “may be the enemy’s country and the enemy’s language, but that doesn’t mean you don’t walk through it and keep on speaking and writing.”¹²⁰ This call to speech is the prime compulsion of *Speech! Speech!*; the heroism derives from Hill’s commitment to engaging with that with which he battles: with a language, a diction, an environment which evades rather than embraces the burdens of memory and responsibility. This engagement with ‘the enemy’ is not to the liking of all. For Kevin Hart, Hill’s attempt to employ contemporary diction with which he is only newly familiar is a failure, with the poet vainly trying “to incorporate demotic speech, which sometimes turns to glue in his hands”¹²¹ and including “alien influences” which “have not been properly digested”.¹²² The resulting verse is, for Hart, “slack”;¹²³

¹¹⁹ Kevin Hart, “‘it / is true’”, 85.

¹²⁰ R. K. Meiners, “‘Upon the Slippery Place’; or, In the Shit: Geoffrey Hill’s Writing and the Failures of Postmodern Memory’, *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 238.

¹²¹ Kevin Hart, ‘Up and Down the | Hill’, 161

¹²² Kevin Hart, ‘Poetics and Power’, *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (1 April 2008): 46-47.

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the contending voices seem not so much an imagistic babble as a mess of confusion.

For Hill, the compulsion is to speak, and to speak responsibly, accurately, fully cognizant of the language he uses. More than any of his poems, *Speech! Speech!* carries this philosophy through to its logical conclusion: the resulting verse – 120 stanzas of juxtaposed fragments – is difficult. Its difficulty arises not only from the arguments within (memory, responsibility, and speech are all profoundly difficult) but also lexically, syntactically and typographically. The devices which cause this difficulty and engender a sense of reader-alienation, the symptoms which appear on the page as diacritics, capitals and other devices, represent Hill's efforts (not always successful, nor yet always failures) to speak to his audience with their own language and to use it with the utmost responsibility. I am not sure that Wainwright is right in assuming the existence of an 'I' (the poet's "true", distinctive voice) somewhere at the bottom of the poem, but his comments about the locus of the poem's true difficulty are wholly accurate:

To maintain a distinctive voice, sometimes by jabbing the reader with diacritics to be sure we hear it right, is the great struggle of the poem. Moreover, to achieve such a voice is to ... maintain an ethical responsibility, albeit one that is never transcendent but always beset by our creaturely being. Which is why this work is rough, crude, 'ugly'.¹²⁴

Voices from across the spectrum appear and are themselves variously rough, crude and ugly (John Lyon provides an excellent account of the preponderance in the poem of scatological jokes and other 'dirty' humour);¹²⁵ no one voice is given any especial primacy, nor any position suggestive of a hierarchy of credence.

It is easy to read Hill's dirty jokes and undermining of clichés as implicitly self-critical, yet there is no real reason to do so. It is far more likely that readers are unwilling to believe that Hill – whose work is loved by the present Archbishop of

¹²³ 'Poetics and Power', 47.

¹²⁴ *Acceptable Words*, 107.

¹²⁵ John Lyon, 'What are you incinerating?', 89-95.

GEOFFREY HILL'S *SPEECH! SPEECH!*

Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams¹²⁶ – makes scatological jokes, threnodies for Diana and music-hall comedy *in earnest*; it is tempting to see such utterances as incompatible with the refined, highbrow content elsewhere in the poem. And so – conveniently and erroneously – such passages are read as satirical, or are deemed to be evidence of the poet's poor taste: as Michael Schmidt notes: "One [poetry prize] judge declared that Hill had put himself beyond the pale when he dedicated a poem to Princess Diana."¹²⁷ There is of course an element of satire in the poem, but it is not limited to the lowbrow: the scholars, "Masters of arts toiling as they are bent / to Saturn's justice in praetorian bunkers" (stanza 96) and the new breed of academic, the "junk-maestro" (whose work merits no more than a dismissive slur, "quote research / unquote") are as worthy of lampooning as anyone else. For Hill, the apparent disjunction between the serious and the comic passages is wholly intentional:

The whole structure of the sequence, particularly the way phrases are shaped, the way certain allusions are made to Laurel and Hardy, and comic papers is an acknowledgement of this monstrous inequality; and to read it in any other way seems to me to reveal humourlessness and an inability to listen.¹²⁸

When Hill states that he has "learnt as much from Daumier, Hylda Baker and Frankie Howerd" as from "John Donne and Gerard Manley Hopkins",¹²⁹ there is no compelling reason to doubt him. Humour is part of the problem of speaking: Hill's jokes are sometimes foul and often terrible; they offer a necessary escape from the burden of responsibility, while demonstrating the potential for language to embody any

¹²⁶ The Archbishop's support for Geoffrey Hill is quoted on the cover of *Scenes for Comus*: "Hill remains for me the supreme voice of the last few decades. The recent work, telegraphic, angry and unconsolated, at once assertive and self-dispossessing, is extraordinary".

¹²⁷ Michael Schmidt, 'Editorial', *PN Review* 32.4 (2006) (accessed 1 May 2010) <[http:// gateway.proquest.com/](http://gateway.proquest.com/)>.

¹²⁸ "The Art of Poetry LXXX", 285.

¹²⁹ Geoffrey Hill, 'A Matter of Timing', *The Guardian*, 21 Sep. 2002 (accessed 13 July 2003) <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/sep/21/featuresreviews.guardianreview28>>.

sentiment, and the implication of “nuance” and “fine distinction” in the lighter (as well as the darker) side of life.

A MULTITUDE OF VOICES

The problem of speaking is made manifest in *Speech! Speech!* by the preponderance within it of multiple – sometimes competing – voices and the difficulty of separating from these the ‘I’ of the poet. The authorial voice – the ‘I’ in poetry – is a locus fraught with difficulty in twentieth-century work. After Adorno’s “notorious dictum”¹³⁰ that there can be no poems after Auschwitz, those who continue to communicate in verse have had to address how far a voice can “speak”, “speak of”, and “speak to”¹³¹ in a climate which must “contain and judge the unspeakable”.¹³² Readers have learned not to trust, at least not entirely, any ‘I’ they encounter; in Hill’s oeuvre this ‘I’ is often altogether absent. His work has been characterized by a kind of voicelessness, a suspicion of the authorial ‘I’ so deep and so profound that it is almost entirely ignored. The result is verse which some perceive as cold, lifeless and so impersonal as to be impenetrable. Critics perceive in *Speech! Speech!* this same inaccessibility, but as a result of too many voices rather than too few.

Whether these voices are, as William Logan suggests, the “the divided dictions of one voice”¹³³ or, as Jeffrey Wainwright argues, are instead a “cacophony of different voices”,¹³⁴ is a point of contention: critics are at odds as to whether the authorial ‘I’ speaks, or does so only in fragments, or whether the poet at all times utters an adopted voice, making the poem a “modified form of montage”.¹³⁵ For Hart, the poet’s voice has been “untuned” and is as such “incapable of harmony”.¹³⁶ The difficulty which these voices pose lies in their number: without

¹³⁰ William Logan, ‘Falls the Shadow’, 75.

¹³¹ As already noted, according to Hill, “it cannot hope to speak for”.

¹³² Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets*, 986.

¹³³ ‘Author! Author!’, 65.

¹³⁴ Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, 97.

¹³⁵ Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2003), 73: “At this point he breaks with the canons laid down by the academic taste of the 1950s, to use prose form and a modified form of montage. It seems that the share of fear in his make-up has led to a certain conformism and vacillation, alongside so many positive qualities.”

¹³⁶ Kevin Hart, ‘Up and Down the | Hill’, 158.

character, narrative, and the authorial 'I', it is often difficult to determine who, if anyone, is speaking: the sense is more often of snippets of broadcast material than any individual voice. In *Speech! Speech!*, what replaces the 'I' is a cacophony; a multitude of voices competing for space on the page, some 'shouting' via capitals, others cooing in italicized French or German. The resulting text is difficult, confusing; it is for Logan no more cohesive than the babbling of "a man receiving radio broadcasts through his fillings":¹³⁷ the pervading sense is of the poet's own "doubt about whether he can represent the dissenting poet's voice".¹³⁸

The authorial 'I' is notably absent throughout Hill's oeuvre, but particularly so in *Speech! Speech!*. Romana Huk has commented:

Any conventional performance of lyric expressivism becomes all but impossible in Hill's poems, which are much more frequently spoken in a strangely choral voice, even when the personal pronoun is present – as though culture itself were speaking, or an "I/We" whose choices of form and response are so heavily overdetermined by cultural possibilities that volition becomes the nonissue at issue, flickering in the gaps opened by contradictions and conventionalities. The "true commitment" of the poet, as Hill puts it, sounding like Adorno, is to the "vertical richness" of his or her medium – to "mak[ing] history and politics and religion speak for themselves through the strata of language."¹³⁹

This lack of a unified – however fragmented – authorial 'I', no trace of "that transcendent poetic self"¹⁴⁰ to which readers are accustomed, has its own politics. According to Meiners:

¹³⁷ William Logan, 'Author! Author!', 65.

¹³⁸ 'Praxis not Gnosis: Geoffrey Hill and the Anxiety of Polity', 203.

¹³⁹ Romana Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual: Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, Geoffrey Hill, and the Poets of Postwar Leeds', *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 190.

¹⁴⁰ R. K. Meiners, 'Geoffrey Hill's Writing and the Failures of Postmodern Memory', 228.

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Geoffrey Hill's distrust of the notion of a poetic "voice" is nearly as deep as his suspicion of commonplace notions concerning the poet's mastery of language. Although Hill has nowhere taken notice of the flood of postmodernist theoretical argument engaged in the deconstruction of the romantic-modernist poetic self and its deflected "voices" assigned to textual personalities ... there is a powerful way in which he is coeval with such argument and simultaneously, in ways theoreticians have yet to grasp, makes much of the argument obsolete, irrelevant, and even naive.¹⁴¹

As Meiners acknowledges, Hill, while not contributing to contemporary debates about the deconstruction of the self, has in his criticism argued that "[w]hat we call the writer's 'distinctive voice' is a registering of different voices".¹⁴² In *Speech! Speech!*, it is not a question of the authorial voice disappearing, but rather of more voices entering the *mêlée* so that a clamorous noise is created.

As Wainwright notes, even when Hill appears to be writing autobiographically, he instructs us to mistrust his authorial authority:

We might see the Nigerian sections as in part at least authenticated by the poet's autobiographical involvement. But 'AUTHENTIC SELF a stinker' says the headlines, and the gossip is passed on in the manner of schoolboys' snide whispering.¹⁴³

If speaking in one's own voice is agreed to be so problematic as to be "a stinker", and if one is always contending with a hundred, a thousand other voices in a din of noise, then the poem's title, *Speech! Speech!* – the call for one voice to speak out – is surely ironic. And yet, with Hill, such a call is not entirely ironic: just as his politics of language dictate that his difficulty be not *élitist* but democratic, so his politics of heroism dictate that – although he knows that speaking in a

¹⁴¹ R. K. Meiners, 'Geoffrey Hill's Writing and the Failures of Postmodern Memory', 227.

¹⁴² Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 190.

¹⁴³ *Acceptable Words*, 97.

'debauched' environment, speaking after Auschwitz, speaking of and for others is fundamentally impossible – he must nevertheless continue, aiming to use language responsibly, to appeal to a contemporary audience with the authenticity of "pitch" rather than the vacuity and trickery of "tone".¹⁴⁴ For Hill, his efforts to negotiate what Wainwright describes as the "individual poet's relationship to language and to poetic form and structure" and for the poet to endure the many "external, contingent pressures" of the contemporary world, is to undertake a "particular kind of heroism."¹⁴⁵

Clearly, the prevalence of demotic, idiomatic and contemporary speech contained within *Speech! Speech!* is at least in part the result of the poet's efforts to engage meaningfully with his audience in its own language, even if the meaningful engagement is of an essentially satirical or derisive kind. Although Hill's other work has included little demotic speech (it is at odds, for instance, with the austerity of 'September Song' or even the sometimes playful poetics of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*) – it seems that Hill has for a long time felt it necessary to engage with the language and the voice of his peers. Expressing his admiration for the art of seventeenth-century disputation, Hill writes in 'The Eloquence of Sober Truth' that its practitioners were "not monolingualists, nor are they determinists or mechanistic dialecticians; they engage with the (hostile) other as a contending voice among others."¹⁴⁶ If a man "belongs to his age and culture by virtue of language, institutions, objects, landscapes", and if "to understand him well enough to use his voice is the poet's tact, a tact he will use, too, in constructing his own voice",¹⁴⁷ then these contending voices must also be of the poet's own time. According to Hill, to sound his "own voice" and engage with other voices, the poet must accept that self-interrogation is a pre-requisite for self-expression, for finding one's "own voice":

¹⁴⁴ See stanza 90 for an indication of Hill's understanding of 'pitch' ("Animus / is what I home on, even as to pitch"), and his essay 'Dividing Legacies' (*Collected Critical Writings*, 375-391) for a full explication of his differentiation between the terms 'pitch' and 'tone'.

¹⁴⁵ *Acceptable Words*, 106.

¹⁴⁶ *Collected Critical Writings*, 329.

¹⁴⁷ *Lives of the Poets*, 982.

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A great deal of the work of the last forty years seems to me to spring from inadequate knowledge and self-knowledge, a naive trust in the unchallengeable authority of the authentic self. But I no longer think that the answer to this lies in the suppression of self; it requires a degree of self-knowledge and self-criticism, which is finally semantic rather than philosophical. The instrument of expression and the instrument of self-knowledge and self-correction is the same.¹⁴⁸

In addressing a hostile other and expressing (rather than “suppressing”) his “self”, Hill employs a language which is sometimes a hostile instrument of expression: perhaps unsurprisingly, the resulting verse often takes the form of a “hostile address”.¹⁴⁹ For Hill, engaging successfully, and simultaneously, with the lexicon of popular culture and its sometimes disconnected public does not require a “suppression of self”, a subjugation of the ‘I’, but rather an ‘I’ which is so self-aware, self-interrogating, and self-editing as to be almost unrecognisable as itself, its “self”.

TYPOGRAPHICAL ECCENTRICITIES

The poem’s “idiosyncratic punctuation” is its “most obviously rebarbative feature”,¹⁵⁰ the various supra-segmentals and diacritics which litter the text are a constant interruption and distraction, and urge the reader to take the text word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase. The use of such techniques is neither accidental nor incidental. Thomas Day – referring to a passage in Hill’s criticism in which the presence of “howlers” and grammatical errors in literary work is listed with other (more serious) crimes – notes that for Hill:

amongst the list of rather trifling sins for which he says one must atone testifies to his conviction that language, and grammar in particular, is implicated in the Fall. The title *Speech! Speech!* makes the connection by gesturing towards a pair of speech

¹⁴⁸ “The Art of Poetry LXXX”, 282-283.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Potts, ‘A Change of Address’, 25.

¹⁵⁰ Jeremy Noel-Tod, ‘Curious and Furious’, review of *Speech! Speech!*, *The Observer*, 20 Jan. 2002: R.16.

marks. These debar hermeneutic innocence by bringing an ironic pressure to bear on the whole poem and by suggesting the words they contain are in a peculiar way hollow or void.¹⁵¹

Hill's use of "radically rhetorical punctuation"¹⁵² to be emphatic and suggestive threatens to compromise any lyric beauty he achieves, but I am arguing that such use is intended to 'annotate' the text, foreground a particular meaning, or signal an ambiguity. The various typographical elements serve different purposes; in stanza 117 Hill offers some insight into the exact nature of these purposes:

CAPITALS | STAGE DIRECTIONS AND OTHER
FORMS OF SUBPOENA. *Italics* | words
with which I – *sometimes* – surprise myself.

These lines are plainly disingenuous: offering such an explanation at the poem's close only adds to the obfuscation; moreover, capitalization (the other-voiced interjections which Hill terms "STAGE DIRECTIONS") and italicization are by no means the full extent of the oddities. I will demonstrate (here and in the annotations) that, in the final assessment, these oddities provide necessary information about how to read the poem, bringing the reader close to the poet's intent.

Several typographical features contribute to the physical denseness of the poem and give it the 'barbed' surface that many readers struggle to penetrate. While Jeremy Noel-Tod is right to assert that "capitalised words serve, roughly, as the

¹⁵¹ 'Geoffrey Hill's Finishing Lines', 160. Day refers to a passage in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' (*The Lords of Limit*), when Hill writes: "Under scrutiny, this is the essence to which my term 'empirical guilt' is reduced: to an anxiety about *faux pas*, the perpetration of 'howlers', grammatical solecisms, misstatements of fact, misquotations, improper attributions. It is an anxiety only transiently appeased by the thought that misquotation may be a form of re-creation" (*Collected Critical Writings*, 9).

¹⁵² R. K. Meiners, 'Geoffrey Hill's Writing and the Failures of Postmodern Memory', 236. Meiners identifies four "characteristic structures" in Hill's writing: "paratactic nominative phrases, obsessive paronomasia, radically rhetorical punctuation" and "the entire stubborn texture of his writing".

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typographical equivalent of shouting at the deaf”,¹⁵³ Hill also uses capitalization more variously and specifically in *Speech! Speech!*¹⁵⁴ Capitalization can indicate the presence of direct quotation, as from the Bible (stanzas 23 and 116), or from Charles Williams (stanza 107), where it draws attention to the quoted words by marking them as distinct from the surrounding verse, giving the impression of these words having been lifted from another text and dropped into the poem – a poetic shorthand for acknowledging source material. Hill also uses capitalization to signify the titular; in stanza 38, for instance, of Caravaggio’s ‘Flagellation’. This technique gives a stuttering quality, what Wainwright describes in *Acceptable Words* as “a performance that can sound like static, or the product of the frantic, irritated twiddling of a radio-tuner”.¹⁵⁵ It may also mark the interjection of an editorial voice, although this voice is not (as it is in *The Triumph of Love*) explicitly identified, but instead (and for obscure reasons) appears within square brackets in stanzas 104 and 114, but without them elsewhere. This metatextual ‘editor’ offers comment to the poet: “GO ON” in 68, “MAKE ANSWER” in 32; or comments on the poet’s performance (e.g. “HE’S GOT A NERVE” in stanza 44). Elsewhere, capitals mark the iteration of the clichéd, the hackneyed, and the overtly demotic (such as “EITHER WAY THEY GET YOU” in stanza 63, or “HE’S GOT A NERVE” [again] in stanza 44); they may draw attention to etymological connections (emphasized by capitalizing two words within a stanza; see “CHARADE” and “CHIE” in 31, “REDUCE” and “LEAD BACK” [its definition] in 24, “POMEGRANATE” and “GRENADE” in 19); or they may signify the weighty and conceptual by means of literally ‘big words’ scattered throughout the poem – e.g., “BEHOLDEN” in stanza 18 or “TETRAGRAMMATON” in stanza 62. Tetragrammaton –

¹⁵³ ‘Curious and Furious’, R.16.

¹⁵⁴ It should be noted that, as well as the standard capital font which is used for the usual purposes, Hill and his printers employ the ‘small caps’ version of the Monotype Spectrum MT (the font in which the poem is printed) for the kinds of uses here discussed. The effect of these ‘small caps’ is less jarring than standard capitals, with all letters being of a standard size and sitting no higher than those of the lower case. This effect is not represented in the font used for the commentaries and for this Introduction (Helvetica, chosen for its marked difference from the font of the poem).

¹⁵⁵ *Acceptable Words*, 97.

properly the name for the unpronounceable four-letter rendering (YHWH) of the name of God – also alerts us to the typographical resemblance between *Speech! Speech!* and the English Old Testament in which YHWH is translated 'LORD' (as distinct from the Hebrew *Adonai*, translated 'Lord'). In other words, the capitalization gives the poem a rather seventeenth-century *and* Biblical appearance.

Likewise, Hill uses the italic to mark vocabulary borrowed from other languages, to denote coinages, to insert quasi-stage directions and literary instructions, and to draw attention to a repeated refrain. The italic is used for 'dog' French (5, 46); coinages (25, 40, 39); and, though rarely, for its conventional use of emphasis (59, 106, 117, 120); to imitate the scripted response of a 'live studio audience' (stanzas 26 and 94); or to indicate musical tempo ("presto", "lento"), stage directions (74), and literary instructions (see stanzas 8, 13, 44, 84, 104). There is potential confusion with capitalization: the title *De Regno Christi* is italicized throughout, but Holst's *Jupiter*, for instance, is not. The Martin aria 'Mein Ariel...' is repeated in variations (see stanzas 54, 65, 79, 91, 115) and italicized to indicate the title. Such treatments of capitalization and italicization are relatively conventional; while they add to the surface difficulty of the text they are familiar to readers and their functions are not difficult to discern. However, two other typographical devices – the verticule and the accentual mark – require further explication.

Hill's vertical mark is separated by spaces from the text that surrounds it. Following William Logan, I have termed this mark the "verticule". As Logan rightly recognizes in his review 'Author! Author!',¹⁵⁶ the verticule performs two functions. First, the mark is used to indicate multiple readings or point to the possibilities implicit in an ambiguous phrase; rather than leave to chance the discovery of less obvious readings, Hill manipulates punctuation to bring to the fore particular interpretations. A good example can be found in the opening stanza, where the verticule indicates that the phrase "archaic | means" can be read as both 'archaic methods' and '[the word] archaic signifies'. In stanza 18, the verticule points to the ambiguity of the phrase "Write whát | I ask", which can be read

¹⁵⁶ Although he does so disparagingly: "vertical slants (call them verticules) ... sometimes mark an ambiguity but otherwise serve as little more than fancy pauses" (65).

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as ‘write what I instruct you to write’ or ‘I ask you what I should write’; there are many other examples. At other times, the mark is used as an explicit articulation of caesura; examples can be found in stanza 110 (“unfixable fell-gusts | ratching”) and stanza 83 (“Even so | childish anger at the injustice of it”). Hill’s use of the verticule, therefore, reduces the potential for unintended readings: ambiguities are made explicit and have their existence formally sanctioned, as it were, by the poet; likewise, caesurae do not wait to be acknowledged by the attentive reader but are instead printed on the page.

The accents used as stress marks throughout the poem have been widely interpreted as a kind of typographical homage to Gerard Manley Hopkins: Thomas Day calls them the “accentual marks of Sprung Rhythm”,¹⁵⁷ while Peter McDonald describes them as the “printed cues that recall those employed by Hopkins”.¹⁵⁸ There is little of Hopkins about their use in *Speech! Speech!*; rather, the accents are used as stress marks and in contrary purpose to the verticule. Hill employs the verticule to indicate multiple possible readings and to draw attention to ambiguous phrasing; the stress marks, on the other hand, dictate a specific reading, explicitly marking the diction of lines or phrases to eliminate undesired or accidental stresses, or to indicate an unexpected stress pattern. The use of stress marks to eliminate ambiguities is most evident in the instances in which phrases are repeated, but with shifted accents, as in stanzas 57-58, when “better than thát I should hope” is repeated as “Better | than that I should hópe”. In some cases, the exact weighting of a clichéd exclamation can be identified only by the placement of the stresses, as in the disingenuous – rather than placatory – “THÁT’S ALL RÍGHT THEN” in stanza 48. Likewise, an unusual or unexpected diction is sometimes specified, as in the phrase “whoever you are / or máy be” in stanza 70, which denies natural phrasing.

NARRATIVE OR NOT?

Discussions of the impact of its typography address the material difficulty of *Speech! Speech!*. Its stylistic, technical difficulty is more troublesome to diagnose, and more open to interpretation. One reading of *Speech! Speech!* frames it a

¹⁵⁷ ‘Geoffrey Hill’s Finishing Lines’, 157.

¹⁵⁸ *Serious Poetry*, 198.

directionless collection of abbreviated sonnets united only by their apocalyptic tendencies and the (often oblique) recurrence of images and references, located around an ill-defined topos of Sodom. Even its opening, the staccato dictum, "Erudition. Pain. Light.", is more revelatory than its final line: "AMOR. MAN IN A COMA. MA'AM. NEMO. AMEN." I contend that while it is true that the poem suggests more a "Shambles of peripeteia" (stanza 119) than a linear narrative, and more a "self-centre of anomie" (stanza 87) than an example of thematic development, its author has nevertheless taken care to build into it the beginning, middle and end which hint at conventional narrative development. This framework is manifested in the poem through a series of flagged milestones, utterances that are delivered most often in the voice of, or in imagined response to, a reader frustrated with the palpable lack of evolution in the poem. These milestones – the poet's metatextual narrative regarding a lack of narrative – I contend, become the narrative structure of the poem.

Stanza 1 is a self-conscious opening, with the poet beginning his "great unavoidable work" and identifying his mandate. "Although" heroic verse is in this forgetting age, he claims, "a non-starter", the poet must nevertheless speak – as its title requires. Still in introductory mode, Hill in stanza 12 informs the reader that he has "the instructions" for the poem, and in stanza 13, perhaps acknowledging the first stirrings of frustration and discontent, admits that he may be "failing" his reader. He at this point provides an image of Original Sin, presumably as some form of penance. By stanza 32, these stirrings have taken a definite shape and assumed a legitimacy which Hill acknowledges with an instruction to himself and a promise to his reader to "Take issue"; it is, in this second quarter of the poem, "About time" he does so.

Throughout its middle sections, Hill draws attention to the shape and shapelessness of his poem. In stanza 55, the reader is reminded that *Speech! Speech!* comprises 120 stanzas ("As many as the days that were | of Sodom"), perhaps as an assurance that it will, eventually, come to a close. The poet gives voice to the reader's dismay and frustration with the capitalized response: "THE LENGTH OF THE THING"; he is at pains to mimic the reader's sense of travelling through the poem, but progressing nowhere. Five stanzas later and at the halfway point, the poet asserts that he thinks he "shall get through" to the poem's conclusion but that he will spend the

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rest of stanza 60 having “a bit of a breather”, imagining himself as Bunyan’s Christian pilgrim stopping for lunch. By stanza 78, an exasperated reader decries disingenuous, congratulatory surprise at having “come this far”; and the sense of treading water is reiterated in stanza 86 via the image of the poet as an endurance swimmer doing laps in a pool: “He voids each twelve-line blóck | a head / solemnly breaking water”. Like the swimmer, the poet is making progress; however, this is qualified by a prediction that the final lap – excepting the exhaustion, ennui, and sense of futility, and at least to the untrained, naked eye – will closely resemble the first. The problem, it seems, is the poet’s inability to resist the tangential: if only he could, he claims in stanza 87, “once focus” on but a “single factor”, he would avoid the “plainly disordered” argument he is here submitting. But this wish for direction remains unfulfilled. In stanza 99 Hill’s exasperated cry is heard: “Hów many móre times?”; Christopher Orchard notes that although Hill “frequently refers to endurance [...] there is also extreme fatigue here, as if he barely has enough energy to push through”.¹⁵⁹ Significantly, while the poet admits to his directionlessness, he does not lack drive: he claims in stanza 100 (in characteristically poor taste) that he can, irrespective of his frustration at his own lack of progress, “keep this úp all night”.

The closing stages of the poem are also signposted. The first mark of the close of the poem is found in stanza 113, where Hill informs readers that the remaining stanzas are to be an “Eight block coda” dedicated to the “City of God” (the realised achievement, at the end of the poem, of the ‘Jerusalem’ promised or hinted at earlier). However, in keeping with the meandering which characterizes the bulk of the poem, no sooner is this directive pronounced than the poet formally acknowledges his inability to follow through: he has been “stuck” in one of Dante’s “bolge”, unable to approach his destination. It comes as no surprise, then, that in stanza 115 Hill asks – either rhetorically or in the voice of the reader – “Where CODA to the CITY OF GOD?” The final stanzas serve not to further any argument, but rather to confirm the chaos which has typified their predecessors. The final line of the poem is the confused cry of a voice desperate to be heard amidst the din of confusion, but (importantly) what this voice

¹⁵⁹ ‘Praxis not Gnosis: Geoffrey Hill and the Anxiety of Polity’, 202.

utters is a muddle of quasi-anagrammatic mock-profundity, a nonsense: "AMOR. MAN IN A COMA. MA'AM. NEMO. AMEN." In this final moment of the poem, the literal 'last gasp' of its fissured voice, an implicit comparison is made between the experience of the reader (whose journey has ended, but who has not arrived) and that of the poet (who has finished his poem, but who finds chaos in place of epiphany).

As well as this directorial signposting, the poem features several recurring themes and images. These recurrences fit together in a kind of jigsaw, and although when complete the puzzle offers a picture of abstraction, it is an abstract picture featuring recurring motifs. Such recurrences provide a thread of continuity through the poem and serve as a form of narrative, just as the repetition of motifs in the visual arts can take the place of a prominent subject. Such recurrences are of three kinds: direct repetition, as with the refrain from Frank Martin's *Der Sturm*; thematic repetition, as with the appearance and reappearance of Diana, Princess of Wales, or that of ancient and modern martyrs; and lexical repetition, as with the preponderance of legal and judicial language and the incessant deployment (and interrogation) of clichés. Direct repetition is explicit and obvious, while thematic and lexical repetitions are often more subtle and not immediately apparent on first reading. Such recurrences are signalled in the textual notes through cross-referencing and in the commentaries by the tracing and signalling of thematic lines.

CONCLUSION

By continually emphasizing the difficulty and inaccessibility of the poem, and in favouring discussion about its highbrow rather than lowbrow references and allusions, the academic readership is as responsible as Hill is for readers' perception of the poem as élitist. No reader, as Logan recognizes, wishes to be sneered at, and critics encourage the image of a sneering Hill when they interpret the poem's density as the product of Hill's wilful obscurity, or its demotic elements as proof of a scathing and supercilious conception of the contemporary world. Such a reading is reductionist: notes and commentaries, with their line-by-line and stanza-by-stanza focus on the text and its explication, offer one way of evading such an oversimplification. If each utterance is addressed in turn, then no voice is unduly privileged, nor any of the poet's preoccupations unwittingly favoured over any other.

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As with any work which focuses on particulars as opposed to generalizations, mistakes are inevitable. Attempts at certainty – identifying a source, for instance, or the poet's intention in a particular stanza – are bound on occasion to miss their mark. But I agree with Day's assertion that there is "an urgent need to say something definite", for the very density of the poem invites and encourages analysis. My textual commentaries, though necessarily imperfect, shorten the gap between reader and poet by cataloguing Hill's lauding and lambasting, by identifying his humour and his seriousness, and by tracking the development of the poem. They also make an implicit argument about the democracy of difficult poetry: if Hill's poem flatters rather than insults its readers with its detail of reference, if its difficulty is sited in its myriad references and rebarbative surface but not in any fundamental inaccessibility, if the text itself is not made up of disconnected fragments but forms rather a sequence of verses (albeit one which leads "NEMO" to "A COMA"), then Hill has succeeded in his effort to make democratic poetry, or, equally, poetry democratic.