

A CONTEMPORARY MASTER

Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes. Oxford University Press.

Kevin Hart

Geoffrey Hill's *Broken Hierarchies* will be with us for a long time, perhaps forever. The thick volume under review is unlikely to survive intact, no more so than any collected poems by a major poet, but poems from it will be read indefinitely. Certainly it will take a long time to make decent sense of the whole, largely because of a striking change in Hill's productivity. Once one could have imagined Hill's canon to be marked in essence with the publication of *Canaan* (1996). To be sure, his readers would have hoped for more of the crystalline poems, both long and short, that we had come to expect from him, and indeed for new adventures in style (something like the title poem would not have been wholly unexpected, for example); but we anticipated no more than two or three more slim books, maybe one roughly each decade. Now we find that *Canaan* ends on p. 235 of *Broken Hierarchies* while the collection draws to a close with the last of the *Daybooks* on p. 936. So we have hundreds of pages of unlooked-for poems, far more than any reader twenty years ago could have foreseen. Some of these unheralded pages have already garnered intense discussion, though a balance of light and heat has probably not yet been struck. *Speech! Speech!* (2000) and even the less wild *The Triumph of Love* (1998) have energetic admirers and detractors alike, and thereafter readers of the later, milder books, especially those from *Scenes from Comus* (2003) to *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007), fall almost readily into groups of those who admire "late Hill" and those who regret the change—or, more correctly, changes—and miss the more severe, more harassing master of *King Log* (1968), *Tenebrae* (1978) and *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983).¹

One reason why *Broken Hierarchies* will be on our desks more often than on our shelves is because we have to assess the quality of the later writing, and to make sense of Hill's poetry as a whole, if indeed that can be done. (Some readers will find two bodies of work in *Broken Hierarchies* with *Canaan* looking backwards and forwards. The poet himself would have us see *Canaan*, *The Triumph of Love*, *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon*

1. "Late Hill" appears to be most admired in Britain. See John Lyon and Peter McDonald, *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Later Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). All eight essayists are British.

as one long project.²) The task of assessment requires not only sustained attention to the poetry from *The Triumph of Love* to *A Treatise of Civil Power*, poetry with which we have had a little while to tarry, but also, and more particularly, the six *Daybooks* (2007-12) which, along with *Ludo* (2011), end the volume and themselves make up 331 pages of poetry. Nor is this all: we shall need time to read and re-read the additions that comprise the full text of *Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres* (1982-2012) and *Pindarics* (2005-2012). We need also to hold together *Broken Hierarchies* with Hill's *Collected Critical Writings* (2009), along with uncollected material—his rendition of Ibsen's *Brand* (performed in 1978), in particular—and work in hand that is yet to be prepared for the press, principally his Oxford lectures as Professor of Poetry.

Time would need to be taken as well to identify and weigh the effects of textual changes that have been introduced to this collection. Kenneth Haynes's editorial hand is either light or he himself is retiring or the poet has invisibly directed editorial policy, for the textual apparatus is very spare indeed. We have a few pages of very brief acknowledgements and indices of titles and first lines, but no statement of editorial policy or notes of textual changes. Additions to *Clavics* and changes in the original poems in *Hymns to our Lady of Chartres* are covered only by the dates of the *Daybooks*. Readers have to discover revisions by themselves. The ending of "Coda," for example, has been changed from "I know that sounds / a damn-fool thing to say" and restored to the sharper original lines, "I know that sounds / a wicked thing to say" (600).³ Nor are we invited to see where Hill has reduced his use of accent marks and the raised vertical line to denote a caesura. (Most readers will be relieved to hear that this collection has fewer of the mannerisms of Hopkins than recent individual volumes have had.) *Broken Hierarchies* is clearly not intended to be a critical edition of the poet's works. Yet it would have been very useful in so large a book, one that is more for reference than for reading, to have been pointed to the more important textual changes.

One obstacle to determining the quality of the new poetry, at least for many readers, will be the wide agreement about Hill's uninviting difficulty.

2. Counterpoint Press's publicity statement for *The Orchards of Syon*, presumably reflecting Hill's views, is no longer on its website; however, it remains on amazon.com: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Orchards-Syon-Geoffrey-Hill/dp/1582431663> (accessed February 22, 2015). I find the claim unconvincing.

3. The word "wicked," rather than "damn-fool," was originally at the very end of "Coda" in the 2005 Clutag Press edition of *A Treatise of Civil Power*. "Damn-fool" appears only in the 2007 Penguin edition of the book.

Some of the later poems are spikier in their allusiveness than even the dense earlier poems and, without the grandeur of the best earlier poems (*The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, for example), some of the later poems can seem more than a little arid (for instance, *Speech! Speech!* 7 (292) and 17 (297)). The poet has long responded to complaints about the cryptic nature of his work by insisting on two contrary things at once: that strong modern poetry is always allusive and impacted (and that life itself is nothing but demanding); and that his poetry is, in Milton's expression, "simple, sensuous and passionate."⁴ He has even woven the criticism into his verse: "Up the Hill Difficulty" (318), "I'm / ordered to speak plainly" (368) and "I do not / Establish the recondite as Hill-school" (642). I suspect that, especially in the earlier poems, many readers react less to difficulty than to what they take to be a sense of aloofness in the voice. It's as though they overhear the speaker murmuring under his breath, with Giosuè Carducci, who was later to become important to Hill, "Odio l'usata poesia: concede /comoda al vulgo i flosci fianchi e senza /palpiti sotto i consueti amplessi /stendesi e dorme."⁵ Certainly *For the Unfallen* (1959) and *King Log* (1968) share little with the poetry of Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes or Seamus Heaney, which was variously lauded in Britain at times when Hill's verse was all too often greeted somewhat coolly. *King Log* won important prizes, yet it was only with the appearance of *Mercian Hymns* (1971) that Hill's writing was to be admired at all widely.

I do not hear aloofness in the voice of the early poems; it is a learned voice, to be sure, and one that does not patronize the reader by not expecting him or her to know very much at all and to have only untutored emotions. As it happens, Hill castigates aloofness in an early poem, "In Piam Memoriam" (34). What I hear in the early poems is a man beset by what the Church calls "scrupulosity," an obsession with one's own sins, which, in Hill's case, stems from the slightest tendency to aestheticize suffering, even in a work that stands as a witness to it. "September Song" (44) is a prime instance. Poems in which the poet, as purported judge, keeps finding

4. Don M. Wolfe, ed., *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-82), II: 1643-8, 402-3. Milton's point in this passage is to contrast poetry with logic; the former is "more simple, sensuous and passionate" than the latter. Milton does not say that poetry is "simple, sensuous and passionate."

5. Giosuè Carducci, "Preludio," *Odi Barbare*, edizione critica a cura di Gianni A. Papini (Milano: Fondazione Arnaldo e Alberto Mondadori, 1988). G. L. Bickersteth provides a translation: "I HATE the common muse: she lies / With languid limbs and yields her charms / Without one struggle, an easy prize / To any vulgar lover's arms," *Carducci: A Selection of his Poems with Verse Translations, Notes, and Three Introductory Essays* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1913), 195.

himself in the dock rather than on the bench no doubt can make a reader feel uncomfortable, for he or she also falls within the poet's withering gaze each time a poem is read and granted aesthetic or moral credit. As a poet suffering from scrupulosity, Hill can be difficult in the sense of not being easy to endure, but the allusive and lexical "difficulty" of his verse has been exaggerated. It comes from a capacious knowledge of the canon of English literature, along with forays into classical and modern European literature (with an awareness, sometimes a detailed one, of compacted contexts), on the one hand, and a moral rigorism, on the other. What I have called Hill's scrupulosity is a species of this latter genus; it is characterized by an ethical strictness that does not bow as a matter of course to ecclesial teachings but is animated by a tightly disciplined humanism.

So, almost at the start of the book, one finds a lyric entitled "God's Little Mountain" (8) and one pauses before the peculiar title. But it is strange only if one has not read Mary Webb's novel *Gone to Earth* (1917) and does not know of the site described there called God's Little Mountain and what happens on it. Admittedly, not everyone is familiar with minor British rural novels in the line of Thomas Hardy, and yet I wonder if the reference needs to be caught for the lyric to be understood. It is not so very hard to see that a "little mountain" is a hill, and that the title jokes about the one who signs it: a failed prophet, a failed visionary poet, or both. (Hill's poems have had humor from the beginning, although it becomes apparent only in *Mercian Hymns* and increasingly broad in *Speech! Speech!* By the time of *Al Tempo de Tremuoti* we hear "The glory of poetry is that it is solemn, / Racked with anarchic laughter" (935).) At the start of *Canaan* one finds the first of three lyrics entitled "To the High Court of Parliament (November 1994)" (171), a poem which would be perplexing only if one does not know Milton's *Areopagitica* (November, 1644), addressed "to the Parliament of England" (and, once again, there is a buried reference to a hill, the Areopagus in Athens). Yet if a reader of poetry has not read Milton's great tract he or she can hardly blame Hill for being difficult in alluding to one of the most significant pieces of English prose on the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its publication. Besides, readers of Hill should be well aware of his many allusions to the Puritan poet: the titles *Scenes from Comus* and *A Treatise of Civil Power* both allude to works by Milton.

Similarly, the paradoxes in the poems are not in themselves intractable once one begins to see things as Hill does. "Our God scatters corruption," we hear in "Annunciations" (40), meaning both "Our God dissipates corruption" (He is pure, just, and so on) and "Our God disseminates corruption" (religion is a means of justifying exploitation and violence). Sometimes

the paradox works by way of colloquial speech. In “The Humanist” we hear of hands that were once “Thick with Plato’s blood / (Tasteless! tasteless!)” (46), and the parenthetical exclamations, a gesture to be repeated widely decades later in *Speech! Speech!*, mean at once that it is lacking in good taste to speak of the great idealist’s blood and that this blood has no taste to the tongue whatsoever (because he denigrates the phenomenal world). When considering an ascetic’s wish to overcome desire, Hill has the imagined person reflect on successful self-purgation, “my desire dying / as I desire” (120), meaning both that sensual desire has been transcended by intense practice of contemplation and that a new sort of desire is generated by ascetic exercises. At times a paradox is simply stated and its enactment left to be imagined. “You are the crucified who crucifies,” we overhear Christ being told in “Lachrimæ Coactæ” (123), meaning that He places the prospective believer, presumably a secular humanist, in the excruciating position of having to make an act of faith: to do so might well expose one to criticisms of cultural nostalgia, psychological weakness, lack of rationality, and so forth, while not to do so might result in one’s damnation after death.

Hill’s poetry is quite different from verse by his contemporaries that might be regarded as “difficult” in ways that more surely resist becoming “simple” or “simpler” after study and attuning oneself to a habit of perception. For example, it is hard to know how to begin glossing any number of poems by André du Bouchet, as well as longer pieces by Paavo Haavikko, and challenging, too, to venture a commentary on extended works by John Ashbery (“A Wave” (1984) or *Flow Chart* (1998), say). By contrast, a knowledge of British history and literature, especially of the Tudor period and the First World War, along with a little time on the Internet, gives one pretty much all one needs to master many of Hill’s allusions. Not all, by any stretch: when Hill beautifully evokes “fat Caritas, those / Wiped jaws of stone” (48) it is possible to grasp the first part of the image (and impossible to avoid the edge of “fat cats”) but the second part remains elusive. I have read many studies of Hill but have not yet found a satisfactory interpretation of this line and a half. One has to know far less about Spanish, French and Italian literature and history, and have just a little Latin in hand, in order to read *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, *Tenebræ*, *Pindarics* and *Odi Barbare*. One might well have to give up hopes of finding those “fruitful ambiguities” the New Critics prized so much and content oneself instead with more troubling “thornful ambiguities” but close reading remains essential to reading Hill, even though Ashbery’s poems often make its more familiar versions seem somewhat ineffectual.

It would be more just, and perhaps in the end more rewarding, to

regard Hill's best poetry less as "difficult" than as "rich" or even, if one were willing to take a step or two in the direction of phenomenology, "saturated." For one finds a fullness of phenomenality in Hill's best lines. This is not because those lines are transparent, with all ambiguities and figures removed, so that they allow us to grasp phenomena without the heavy veil of natural language hiding them. Rather, it is because in their verbal and conceptual density those lines register various intuitions of phenomena and manifest them more fully than one finds elsewhere. Heidegger observed, "we see *through* language" and that "the word gives Being"; with Hill we might say, "at its best his language lets things appear."⁶ Consider a few short passages drawn from the full course of the collection:

Why do I have to relive, even now,
Your mouth, and your hand running over me
Deft as a lizard, like a sinew of water? (77)

*

The nailshop stood back of the cottage, by the fold.
It reeked stale mineral sweat. Sparks had furred its
low roof. In dawn-light the troughed water
floated a damson-bloom of dust (107)

*

Here the lost are blest, the scarred most sacred:

Odd village workshops grimed and peppercorned
In a dust of dead spiders, paper-crowned
Sunflowers with the bleached heads of rag dolls,
Brushes in aspic, clay pots, twisted nails (147)

*

Wintry swamp-thickets, brush-heaps of burnt light.
The sky cast-iron, livid with unshed snow. (378)

*

6. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Phenomenological Research*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 22, and "The Nature of Language," *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 88.

first here after the storm these butterflies
 fixed on each jinking run,
 probing, priming, then leaping back,

a babble of silent tongues;
 and the flint church also choiring
 into dazzle (516)

*

How the sea-lightning with a flash at hazard
 Cleft the lanternd yard into pelting angles (838)

This catena could be extended to ten, twenty or thirty quotations without too much effort, and in each case one would find that Hill is a poet who increases phenomenality through the writing of poetry. More of the world is given to us, and more completely, than we are used to finding in any but the greatest of twentieth-century European and American poets: Celan, Char, Eliot, Lorca, Montale, Rilke, Stevens, and Yeats.

The sheer figural force of some of Hill's best lines can jolt passive syntheses, whether primary or secondary, that have been long sedimented in consciousness and bring them to our attention. "Funeral Music," for example, can be read as the overflowing of diverse intuitions of the Wars of the Roses (1455-85) with respect to competing horizons—historical, political, philosophical, spiritual—such as the Battle of Towton (and the suffering of those who fought for Lancastrian and Yorkist interests), the question whether intellect supervenes with respect to flesh and even individuality, and the problem of evil. Sometimes a phenomenon is brilliantly constituted, as in a decapitation resulting in a "meaty conduit of blood" (47), or as in atmospheric conditions: "Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp" (239). At other times, as already noted, the poem registers less a phenomenon than modalization about it. This happens above all with the very idea of reading and writing poetry. Both Hill and his readers are faced with a biopsy of a dire situation, that in enjoying literature we have perhaps been acting quite shamefully, flavoring our "decent mouths / With gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice" (40). It comes almost as a relief later, with *The Triumph of Love*, to be told that poetry, at least Hill's poetry, is "*a sad and angry consolation*" (285). If Hill's poetry is a salve for our scars, it is bound to burn as much as cool.

No one horizon or even a small number of them can encompass *Broken Hierarchies*. Yet one horizon that certainly should be recognized is that of political theology. Towards the end of his academic career, Hill took an interest in the theology of language, and there is no doubt that the doctrine

of original sin has informed his sense of human speech for decades.⁷ This theology is often inflected by way of “political theology,” though this surely does not bind Hill to Carl Schmitt’s political views. Political theology is announced even before one reads a single poem, since for anyone who knows Hill’s prose it is declared on the cover of the book. The words of the title “Broken Hierarchies” change their sense and function when detached from a fine lyric in *Without Title* and placed over all of Hill’s poetry. Like many another of Hill’s poems, this one beautifully evokes rain—“the roadway sprouts ten thousand flowerets” (516)—and we are told how the vertical lines of rain are lashed by wind. The falling rain is nothing but broken hierarchies that stretch from the heavens to the earth. Yet the poem also gives a sense of other orders of life, birds and the ocean over which they fly, that both land upon our world, which is to them an “alien shore.” When allowed to embrace all of Hill’s verse, however, the words “Broken Hierarchies” gather up other lines in the book, most notably “everywhere / Dismantled hierarchies” (719) and “Bless hierarchy, dismiss hegemony” (738), as well as reflection on “the seventeenth-century vision of harmony” (568).

We need to keep in mind, especially when reading a poet who is also a philologist (and a close reader of Richard Hooker’s *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* (1594)), that “hierarchy” stems from ἱεράρχης, leader of sacred rites, and we remember the two treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite who most likely coined the word, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. God may be “distant, difficult,” as Hill’s Ovid testifies (39), but religion consists of endlessly failed attempts to overcome that distance and understand that difficulty, and religion is enveloped in politics as well as in resistance to the State. “Innocence is no earthly weapon,” Hill’s Ovid goes on to say, and we hear both that innocence did not protect people from the brute violence of the Third Reich and that innocence is a divine weapon. We are told later, in *Tenebrae*, how Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned in Tegel, nonetheless “restores the broken themes of praise” through the letters and papers he wrote there (137). And we are also warned in the same lyric, “We hear too late or not too late.” It is less a call for conversion than for informed theo-political judgment so that we might not be covered by “wild reasons of the state.”

I should make it clear that the sort of political theology at stake in Hill’s work does not presume an act of faith. In a recent piece he jokes about the tentative nature of his religious faith, calling himself “a thief / of others’ belief” (609). The political theology in play is a structure that we all inherit

7. See Geoffrey Hill, “Inventions of Value,” *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 404.

by way of passive syntheses, though few interrogate it as piercingly and relentlessly as Hill does. Imbrications of Church and State yield one political theology, often promoted and sustained by way of “culture,” yet the various gaps between them, not to mention their mutual distrusts, simulations and caricatures of one another in major and minor ways, lead to other political theologies. It would naïve in the extreme to think that only the Church is in the business of promoting transcendence, for there are many modes of social and political transcendence on offer. “Funeral Music” is as good an instance as any of the sort of political theology one finds in Hill at his best. The poem identifies and variously criticizes the Neo-Platonic spirituality of Suffolk, Worcester and Rivers: the “Pentecostal blow” that cuts off a head may be believed to be from a seraph rather than a public executioner yet we nonetheless see “Spattered block-straw with mortal residue” (47); and we may suppose a political reconciliation “By silent music,” yet we nonetheless are required to confront frozen ground “Stuck with strange-postured dead” (48).⁸ This is not a poem that separates religion and politics, faith and skepticism; it points to how the one is folded in the other, and the other in the one. Especially in his earlier poems, Hill diagnoses more often than he judges.

One could easily extend the analysis. In *Mercian Hymns* we may not find a version of the “Magnificat” (Luke 1: 46-55) as we do in the Mercian hymns cited in *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Reader*, nor though do we find a secular world that is settled in its lack of belief in God.⁹ Instead, we encounter a Mercia in which the absence of any concord between the Church and the Roman Empire broods endlessly and heavily. In *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* we do not find *la mystique* lauded at the expense of *la politique* but the two held in a fierce tension, albeit with an unsettling sense that the former leads to the latter, as in *Notre jeunesse* (1910). The very title, *Canaan*, bespeaks imbricated religious and political concerns, and if they were to be missed before one opens the book one would meet them in the title poem. It begins, “They march at God’s / pleasure through Flanders / with machine pistols, / chorales, cannon / of obese bronze” (180). *Speech! Speech!* gives us in its one hundred and twenty sections the number of the days of Sodom; it is a contemporary prophecy—demotic and elevated at once—of destruction, or, if you prefer, an inversion of what Augustine calls the City of God,

8. I take it that “silent music” is a translation of St John of the Cross’s “La música callada,” “Cantico Espiritual,” *The Collected Works of St John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, intro. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979), 714.
 9. See Henry Sweet, *Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, rev. Dorothy Whitelock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 184-96.

which for Hill is “towering / at watch and ward, prophetic, exposed / to obscurity, hidden in revelation” (296) and which he later calls the “Unapproachable City of God” (347).

It should be readily apparent that when Hill speaks of “broken hierarchies” he is not lamenting a collapse of the English class system or the loss of the Empire or anything of the sort. Nor is he merely following Shakespeare’s Ulysses when the latter speaks quite generally about rank, “Take but degree away, untune that string, / And hark what discord follows” (*Troilus and Cressida*, I, iii, 109-110). Hill’s concern, rather, is with the break down of a shared order of aesthetic, moral and social values that has come about through repeated abuses of an unregulated market and which informs Tories as fully as Whigs. The lowest common denominator has become exchange value, understood as the whole story about “value,” a belief that, in practice, has imposed its hegemony, from beneath as it were, over all forms of social and intellectual life today. To survive, let alone flourish, poetry of the sort that Hill commends needs a shared public order, a sense of civic justice, an awareness of the sacred, and an affirmation of the value of learning.

In Hill’s laconic words, spoken with a backward glance to Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” our social experience is quite otherwise these days: “Democracy is a Potemkin fiction / Anarchical Plutocracy / Proliferates its gyre” (813). The allusion to William Morris’s analysis of the cause of British social ills to be “anarchical plutocracy” is a biting one, yet it has truth enough for the bite to hurt those who seek wealth solely for private gain who might chance upon the lines.¹⁰ (Equally pointed is the epigraph to the collection, taken from Ezra Pound’s *Ta Hio* (1936): “If the rulers of states think only of amassing riches, they will be surrounded, surrounded ineluctably, by mean men, and the depraved. . .”) By contrast, Hill tells us, poetry, properly conceived, is “hierarchical, democratic, erudite.”¹¹ A true democracy presumes that everyone is able to gain access to knowledge and to appreciate shared values; and, for Hill, a false democracy means that everything produced in a society is “accessible” without effort. In the poet’s own words, “Hierarchy yet: Blake’s lordly plates to *Job* / And he was a sworn Leveller” (738).

At the top of one hierarchy that preoccupies Hill early and late is the nobility evidenced by human endurance of suffering, and here several poets are important to him. I refer first of all to “Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets” (55-58), and note in passing just two things: for all the talk of Hill’s devotion to Britain and its canon of poetry, which are surely

10. See William Morris, “Art under Plutocracy,” *The Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. and intro. A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), ch. 2.

11. Hill, “Civil Polity and the Confessing State,” *Warwick Review*, 2: 2 (2008), 19.

deeply felt, not one of the four poets is British; and it is the *poets* whose endurance is regarded, not the poems that they have written. Yet it is not only the endurance of poets that calls forth Hill's empathy and admiration. His Grandmother is remembered; her "childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the nailer's darg" and we are movingly told, "It is one thing to celebrate the 'quick forge', another to cradle a face hare-lipped by the searing wire" (107). Also in his pantheon is Bonhoeffer who, "in his skylit cell" (137), honorably resists the reduction of Christianity to the forms in which the Third Reich deemed to be acceptable. One also finds Alan Turing who cracked the "enigma code" in the Second World War and who was treated abominably by the British Government when his sexual orientation was discovered and "treated" by chemical means. Colonel Adekunle Fajuyi, first military governor of the Western Region of Nigeria, is another moral hero for Hill, and with good reason: he underwent a gruesome death in order to save a guest. "I don't doubt / his courage," Hill writes, "his slow dying—smell my fear!" (313). None of Hill's tributes is long. As he says elsewhere, after having spoken just thirteen short lines about a young victim of the Shoah, "This is plenty. This is more than enough" (44). To make aesthetic gain out of human suffering is indecent for Hill, early and late. In the words of his succinct ode on the sinking of the Titanic, "By all means let us appease the terse gods" (30).

To my mind, Hill's most enduring individual books are *King Log* (1968), *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983) and *Canaan* (1996). There are imposing sequences in *Tenebræ* (1978), especially "Lachrimæ," and several good things in *Without Title* (2006): "The Jumping Boy" (487) and the title poem of *Broken Hierarchies* both stand out. *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007) has the powerful "On Reading *The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall*" (595-96) and "Integer Vitæ" (579), among other memorable pieces. *Without Title* is stronger than *A Treatise of Civil Power* when it has the first version of the sequence "Pindarics" but not otherwise. Looking back, I find that *Mercian Hymns* (1971) has worn less well than I would have expected; yet it is still an original and powerful work. Generally, in the great outpouring of poetry from *Speech! Speech!* on, I find less to celebrate though much to ponder. The fury of the book just mentioned is impressive, yet the verse itself is lackluster: Hill is usually—not always!—at his best when writing formal verse. To be sure, there are beautiful moments in *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) and *Scenes from Comus* (2005)—for example, in the latter volume the lyric beginning "That weight of the world, weight of the word, is" (430)—though mostly I find the poetry less concretely realized than that in Hill's first books. Sometimes this lack of realization comes as

an effect of exposing oneself to powerful influences (Hopkins and Montale, above all), and sometimes I sense that, beginning with *The Orchards of Syon*, lines in different poems might well be interchangeable. All too often in the later poetry Hill enables us to see things but does not allow them to appear, and what he most often lets us see by way of *dicta*, however plangent or amusing, is his own fury or his own scruples.¹² That said, the expanded version of *Pindarics* (without the headings drawn from Cesare Pavese's *Il mestiere di vivere*) is more likely to be read and weighed over the years to come than *Speech! Speech!*, *The Orchards of Syon* or *Scenes from Comus*.

Of the *Daybooks*, it must be said that they are of mixed quality. I am not sure that opening himself to the influence of John Skelton has always been good for Hill. *Liber Illustrium Vigorum* and *Clavics* seem limited by it. The *Daybooks* with the most solid claims on our attention are *Odi Barbare* and *Al Tempo de' Tremuoti*. There are fine lyrics in the latter collection—"Ravenna, this was your doing: when you buried" (905), for instance—but the former book is the richer of the two. The title repeats the title of Giosuè Carducci's three books of "barbarian odes" published in Italy over the period 1877 to 1889. Their barbarity lies solely in their reaching back to a pagan past for inspiration. Hill does not stretch back quite so far, or at least not without help. He takes as a model Sir Philip Sidney's Sapphic lyric "If mine eyes can speak to do hearty errand" in *Arcadia*, although he may also have Ezra Pound's "Apparuit" in mind.¹³ That he thinks some of his readers might also be a little barbaric, or might enjoy a joke about the weaker brethren, he mistranslates the title, "*I / Hate barbarians*" (836). The sequence of fifty-two lyrics, each of six quatrains, begins with a flourish:

If the soul so glares at annihilation,
Name despair one deviant path of wisdom;
Music steel-rimmed spectacles make as objects
 Claiming a victim (835)

Perhaps a gloss is warranted. In old age the soul is likely to look directly and fiercely at death, and the despair that is consequent on one's inevitable demise has wisdom of its own. One can occupy oneself otherwise, however,

12. I take the distinction between seeing and appearing from Jean-Luc Marion. See his essay, "What we See and What Appears," in *Idol Anxiety*, ed. Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhalf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 152-68.

13. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, ed., intro. and notes Maurice Evans (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 190. Also see "Apparuit," which like Hill's poems in *Odi Barbare* has six quatrains, Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: The Library of America, 2003), 321-32.

by art, which might even steel one for what inevitably will come. The poetry about to be written is music (as meter surely is), and Sapphics is a very difficult meter to master in English; it is like the steel-rimmed spectacles worn during the austerities of the Second World War when death was immanent to many. The meter makes poems, aesthetic objects, and the labor in attending to the meter and the form makes the poet a victim of his own art. Hill has broached the theme of poetic self-sacrifice earlier in “Pavana Dolorosa,” though with martyrs in mind (and with a touch of self-deprecating humor): “Self-wounding martyrdom, what joys you have, / true-torn among this fictive consonance, / music’s creation of the moveless dance” (123). Like St Robert Southwell, whose martyrdom could be regarded as a perfect work of art, Hill’s writing of sonnets is itself a species of voluntary martyrdom.¹⁴

A long essay would be required to do any sort of justice to the dense and often beautiful lyrics of *Odi Barbare*. I shall restrict myself to a few comments on XXVIII:

Broken that first kiss by the race to shelter,
Scratchy brisk rain irritable as tinder;
Hearing light thrum faintly the chords of laurel
Taller than we were.

Fear to have already the direst choosing,
Sixty years spent as by procrastination.
Answer one question, this is all I need, so
Speeding denial.

Ancient question haunting the Platonist: can
Spirit ransom body, and if so could I
Rise again in presence of your devoting
Sorrow to sorrow?

Quick, is love’s truth seriously immortal?
Would you might think so and not be this other
Finally known only through affirmation’s
Failing induction.

What though, wedded, we would have had annulment’s
Consummation early, and though in darkness
I can see that glimmerous rim of folly
Lave our condition,

14. On Southwell’s martyrdom as a work of art, see Pierre Janelle, *Robert Southwell: The Writer* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1935), 286, and Hill’s essay “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” *Collected Critical Writings*, 29.

Had we not so stumbled on grace betimely,
 In that chanced day brief as the sun's arising
 Preternaturally without a shadow
 Cast in its presence. (862)

Young love remembered in age: the poem nicely captures both the love and the remembering, and both are presented in full intensity and each with its share of frustration. The kiss is broken, there is irritation in the air, and even now, in old age, after decades of reflection, one cannot know the proper value of the event. Hill sharply registers the occasion of sixty years before with its “Scratchy brisk rain” and the “chords of laurel”: the light is so overwhelming that one can almost hear it and the laurel playing music. Equally, though in an entirely different manner, he gives us the urgency of reflection in age (“Answer one question,” “Speeding denial,” “Quick”).

In fact, the speaker asks not one but three questions, “can / Spirit ransom body[?]” and “if so, could I / Rise again in presence of your devoting / Sorrow to sorrow?” and “is love’s truth seriously immortal?” The first question is philosophical, and within philosophy entirely conventional. It’s a *faux* question to ask a lost beloved, someone with whom he shared a love that was far from Platonic, and the pressing question comes second; for when love goes wrong it hurts like nothing else. The third question has due weight by dint of “seriously.” Love has its truth, and perhaps it is the highest truth we can know, even if the love was fleeting (and the relationship in effect annulled). But must we consider the everlastingness of that truth with all possible gravity? Is one to be judged eternally on a passing moment—a moment of grace, to be sure, but one on which (and in which) one stumbled—and one’s failure to be true to the relationship it opened up? Or perhaps we should acknowledge genuine doubt about these things: Can we really take the Platonic doctrine of immortality seriously, either in itself or in the version cherished by Christian Platonists? In old age, Hill looks back sixty years to a kiss near a laurel, and thinks of how the couple’s lives would have been different had their marriage been annulled earlier rather than later: the speculation is a “glimmerous rim of folly,” an unsteady light that nonetheless bathes him and his beloved all these years later, a faint light in contrast to their sense then of the day of their engagement being “without a shadow.”

Much more could be said about XXVIII and about many other lyrics in the sequence. To read *Odi Barbare* with the attention and regard it calls for will, as I say, take a very long time, and to get a sense of how much enduring poetry Hill truly bequeaths to us will take far longer. That there are

poems that will continue to prick, haunt and console for generations is not in question; and in the end we shall think only of them. *Broken Hierarchies* is the work of a major poet; it will be with us for decade after decade and even when time has reduced it, as it surely will, the volume will remain an unavoidable reference point when considering the canon of Hill's work and the canon of modern English poetry.