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The Nature of Hill's Recent Poetry

Stephen James

According to William Logan, Geoffrey Hill is 'the most glorious poet of the English countryside since the first romantic started gushing about flowers'; 'few readers', he claims, 'would trade the drenched phrasings of Hill's backlit scenery for his brooding on obscure theologians. Hang the cost in moral uplift'.¹ These are curious observations, and not just for their casual assertiveness, unexamined assumptions or mixed metaphors. As Henry King has noted in response, topography and theology are not so glibly to be distinguished:

Logan either misunderstands or does a deliberate injustice to Hill's poetry in thinking of these two aspects as discrete alternatives. For one whose theological broodings have been as thoroughgoing as Hill's, descriptions of nature (such an inadequate label!) are not divagations – the Professor of Divinity escaping to his watercolours class – but an intrinsic part of a complex whole.²

King's anxiety about the inadequacy of his own phrase 'descriptions of nature' is telling, not just for signalling a fear that the phrase risks devaluing the complexity of Hill's work but also for conveying an implicit sensitivity to wider concerns about the relative value of different kinds of poetic accomplishment. The issue at stake here is clarified by Geoffrey Grigson when he refers, in the introduction to *The Faber Book of Poems and Places*, to 'lines which earn the sneer of being only "descriptive"',³ and by Robert Langbaum when, in his essay on 'The New Nature Poetry', he suggests that 'the term *nature poetry* has fallen into such disrepute that no one wants to apply it to poems he likes'.⁴ It is worth dwelling on this point of anxiety, both as a means of considering how sustained responsiveness to the natural world defines Hill's achievement, especially in

recent volumes, and for taking stock of what has now become a dominant tendency in the critical reception of the poet's later work.

William Logan's position, though *sui generis* in its formulation, is not entirely uncharacteristic of the responses of other reviewers, as a brief collocation of comments from journals indicates:

The most accessible and perhaps the finest poems in *Without Title* [(2006)] are vehicles for Hill's profoundly lyrical responses to the natural and physical world. There are a generous number of these. Their luminous particularity of imagery serves as a counter to the book's sometimes unrelentingly cerebral tendencies. (Douglas Houston)⁵

Hill [...] can dash off a soggy English landscape in the blink of an eye. [...] Hill's landscapes always come as passages of much-needed respite amid the more querulous, questioning, quarrelsome poems that otherwise set the tone of his collections. (Alan Marshall)⁶

There are autobiographical glimpses of childhood in Worcestershire and old age in Suffolk, and these paeans to the English landscape which has nourished Hill's work from the start are of such intensity that they allow no rival attraction. All the talk of Hill as a forbidding poet is fatally deaf to the countless breath-catching instances of beauty threaded through his work. He is especially good – that Englishness again – at writing about the weather. (Tim Kendall)⁷

This passage [from *Scenes from Comus* (2005)] has an unreal beauty which no other living English poet could equal. (Colin Burrow)⁸

Always the most visual of poets, and with 50 years' practice behind him, he now writes about England and the English countryside with a poise and vigour that would be enough by itself to set him among the great poets of the modern age. (Tim Martin)⁹

Few poets can match Hill when he is writing out of [...] a tradition focused and dependent upon a certain exactitude of natural description. [...] Despite the *gravitas* of his poems of historical witness, I am not sure that it isn't as a poet of landscape – in the rich Wordsworthian or Coleridgean sense of its being mysteriously cognate with the mind's own processes of self-realization – that Hill chiefly excels.

(Stephen Romer)¹⁰

Such observations are symptomatic of prevalent views that currently help to shape Hill's reputation. They present a series of broadly apt and understandable yet also question-begging, argument-silencing, and up to a point mutually complicating characterizations of the poet's work. Three salient quandaries arising from the collocation may be summarized as follows:

1. The insistence that Hill's pre-eminence is founded on, or most securely achieved by, his poetic landscapes presupposes that qualities and concerns which might risk defining another writer's work (even if accomplished) as 'minor' are, curiously, in Hill's case central to the plea for 'major' status. (In this respect, it is tempting to speculate how Hill's reputation would currently stand if his work from *Canaan* (1996) onwards had been bereft of, or less frequently characterized by, what Wordsworth once termed a 'sense / Of exquisite regard for common things' in the natural world.¹¹)

2. The obvious rejoinder to point 1 is that, as Stephen Romer has put it, 'landscape [...] provides more than stretches of freedom, of untrammelled vision', that 'Hill's huge ambition [...] could never allow him to rest content with being a "mere" poet of landscape'.¹² Not only are Hill's depictions of nature also often modes of cultural, historical, theological or philosophical engagement; they also usually function as parts of larger poems or sequences (hence King seeing them as 'an intrinsic part of a complex whole'), and their significance presumably needs to be read in relation to the wider preoccupations and rhetorical and formal qualities of these works. Nonetheless, the proposal that the 'particularity', 'exactitude' and appealing immediacy with which Hill

records his responses to nature's promptings provides a welcome 'counter' to or 'respite' from the more recondite, referential and at times rebarbative stretches of the surrounding text conveys a sense (not lightly to be dismissed) that his richly realized nature studies serve as appealing interludes, to be relished as much for their own sake as for their articulations of the concerns of the volume in which they appear. Indeed, such is the disjunction that often occurs between Hill's field observations and the material immediately preceding and following them, and such, by contrast, are the continuities of concern and descriptive style, in Hill's recent volumes, between the poet's various evocations of tree and flower, sky and weather, that it sometimes seems at least as illuminating to take Hill's numerous notations from nature as each others' context (despite the insistent particularity and local attachments of each passage in turn) as it is to attempt to read them in relation to their immediately adjacent context on the page.

3. As John Lyon has observed, the tendency of reviewers of Hill's later works to brandish 'a gobbet from the volume under consideration sacrificed in celebration of Hill as an English nature poet' reveals partial-sightedness, for the idea of Hill as a 'supposed laureate of English landscape' is significantly complicated by the international range of his imagined territories.¹³ Moreover, to conceive of Hill as a great English poet because of his concern with English locales is to perform a contentious (and potentially unexamined) conflation; is he any less accomplished (or English) for training his eye, as he often does, on other parts of the world?

The significance of all three of these quandaries has persisted, and in certain respects intensified, in the most recent work of Hill's to be published. For all their formal,

rhetorical and thematic complexities, the volumes of the so-called *Daybooks* that have so far appeared retain, as their collective title suggests, something of the quality of journal notations, with sketches from nature set down on the page alongside the poet’s frequently oblique ruminations (as if in self-addressed short-hand) on various historical, political and religious concerns as well as the works of numerous writers and artists.¹⁴ Many of Hill’s attempts to record environmental details in these diurnal notebooks achieve the crisp immediacy, keen sense of atmosphere and attentive lexis that his readers have come to expect:

Among rough-spreeing gorse, now heather
 Gives new life to the colours of mourning;
 Expansive its dense sojourning
 Illuminates the drab weather
 That sags in off the sea,
 Snags on the headland’s thorny armoury.
 (*Oraclau* | *Oracles*, section 43)

A few passages, though, are somewhat closer to the nature of a conventional ‘saw this, did that’ diary-entry, even when the language is – as above – held taut across lines of pre-determined metre and rhyme (or occasional slant-rhyme):

A gale from out of Ireland ploughs up rough
 Cardigan Bay; a following splendid rain
 Beats us indoors to self-sustain
 With radio and *Telegraph* [.]
 (*Oraclau* | *Oracles*, section 112)

Hill’s alertness to the elemental, to ‘light’s buffeting’ (*Oraclau* | *Oracles*, section 48) over a stretch of land or water, to ‘the conflagration of rain and wind’ (section 63), has found expression in vivid fragment-form across book-length poem-sequences from *The Triumph of Love* onwards. His habit of interspersing his volumes with such passages has for some time

now given the impression of a poet attempting to bring striking journal observations, drawn from nature, into works often marked by seemingly disparate and discontinuous concerns. A sense of the provisionality and arbitrariness arising from the disjunctions of Hill's poetic method is reflected in several reviews of the first volume in the *Daybooks* series to be published; responses to *Oraclau | Oracles* have perpetuated the reader's impulse to seek refuge from interpretive bewilderment (and in some cases from evaluative disappointment), and to gain reassurance regarding Hill's continued accomplishment, by turning in particular to his visions of nature.¹⁵

However, the concerns of the volume have made it impossible to retain the simplistic conflation of Hill's landscapes with a sense of Englishness – a conflation that, in any case, has seemed questionable since the publication of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* in 1983 (if not much earlier). As its bilingual title implies, *Oraclau | Oracles* is a sequence of poems imaginatively engaged with the country on the far side of Offa's Dyke from Hill's Mercian 'home' ground. The volume reflects the poet's self-professed 'historical, theological, sociological and economic interest in what has happened to Wales', an interest quickened by his discovery that his great-grandfather was one Pryce Jukes of Llanllwchaiarn: as Hill has revealed in interview, Jukes (born 1826) 'uprooted and moved east into the Mercian Black Country, where he worked as a puddler in an iron foundry'.¹⁶ Something of a kindred spirit to his 'grandmother, whose / childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the / nailer's darg', Jukes – the dedicatee of *Oraclau | Oracles* – seems to emblemize for Hill the dignity, self-sacrifice and quiet suffering of the industrial worker.¹⁷ He also provides Hill with an ancestral point of access to an 'intimate Welsh landscape of disquiet' (section 85). The

'disquiet' of the sequence arises at once from Hill's uneasy purchase on his subject, given his double sense of affiliation with and alienation from the homeland of a forebear ('This is a strange country, the words foreign', as he puts it in section 51), and from the physical, political and economic upheavals to which the Cambrian terrain has been subjected.¹⁸ When he writes of 'Novembering Wales, the flooded meadows / Pewter, lead-sheeting, briefly highlighted' (section 108), Hill himself appears to be highlighting, in abbreviated form, the extensive metal-mining to which the ground below the meadows has been subjected. This connects to a more general awareness, running through the sequence, of the fact that the Welsh landscape has, along with many Welsh citizens, been well-worked, if not exploited; Hill writes elsewhere in the volume of the coal- and iron-masters' 'blood-intrigued Capital' (section 51), and his work reads intermittently as a sad and angry lament for the 'misprised coalfields' (section 12). At the same time, however, the sun's brief highlighting of 'flooded meadows', so that they take on the momentary appearance of 'pewter' or 'lead sheeting', is one of Hill's numerous epiphanies, a glint of brightened and transformative vision. It is clear, too, that Hill sees benign continuity, not merely conflict, in the relationship between the mineral world and man-made objects; in writing of a 'stone house' with a 'slate shimmer' (section 108), of 'distant rain-draped slate flanks' that 'gleam like late snow' (section 14), and of 'field walls that are quartz-spangled' (section 14), Hill conveys a sense of mutual enrichment in built and natural environments.

The illuminations of the world to which he responds are characteristically fleeting – as is evident from the very outset of the volume:

The rain passes, briefly the flags are lit
 Blue-grey wimpling in the stolid puddles;

And one's mind meddles and muddles
 Briefly also for joy of it.
 (*Oraclau* | *Oracles*, section 1)

Like the 'briefly highlighted' waterlogged grassland glimpsed later in the sequence, the wet flagstones here are kindled both by the quality of the light that colours them and by the quality of attention brought to bear upon them. Jeremy Hooker is alert to several implications in Hill's opening lines:

The word 'wimpling' invokes Gerard Manley Hopkins, the other great English poet renewed by his experience of Wales and an exemplary figure for Hill. One may also suspect a pun on the great-grandfather's occupation in 'stolid puddles'. Certainly, what we have here is more than a neutral landscape. The puddles conjoined to the 'lit' flagstones 'wimpling' reveal at once brute existence and a fluid, visionary world. The mind meddling and muddling is part of the life it perceives.¹⁹

One aspect of the muddling implicit in Hill's lines derives from the momentary sense, before the first line-turn, of a reference to flag-burning ('briefly the flags are lit') – and this in a sequence that returns to issues of national identity via a contemplation of flags (section 92). This interpretive possibility, along with the potential allusion to Hill's ancestral 'puddler', leaves it unclear whether the phrase 'for joy of it' reflects merely Hill's delighted response to the physical world in all its vivid particularity or, in addition to this, the pleasure his meddlesome, muddlesome mind takes in complicating visual perception with the cross-currents of cultural thinking that arise from the choice and placing of words.

Perhaps the most conspicuously deliberated word in the opening lines is 'wimpling', an adjective with inescapably Hopkinsian associations.²⁰ And it is Hopkins's own sense of verbal acuity in response to the play of light in the natural world that Hill commends when he discusses the poet's work in his essay 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics' (2005). Reflecting

on the poem 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection', Hill makes the following observations:

The first fourteen lines delineate aspects of the Heraclitean world, of infinite change, its eternal round of creation and destruction, which is all intricately and beautifully detailed as Hopkins imitates its wondrous thisness:

Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.

Roughcast and whitewash are indigenous ways of walling buildings, perhaps a memory of Wales where Hopkins would have seen the shadows and reflections cast by the sun and absorbed or cast back by the dazzling white of barn-sides or farmhouse walls. A 'shivelight' is a splinter of light; 'tackle' is a word for bits of ships' rigging, so 'shadowtackle' is the patterns of branch and twig-work from the nearby trees and bushes rigging the bright walls in the light of the sun.²¹

Hill's own evocations of Wales are attentive to Heraclitean flux. They apprehend the numinous in the natural with a verbal inventiveness that seems at once to strive for physical exactitude and to strain beyond verisimilitude towards the visionary. His sense that in 'natural Wales / Supernature's light steadily prevails' (section 23) is recurrently (and often riddlingly) expressed via a notion of alchemical transformation of the known world:

Alchemic-carnal, such the earth remains
In winter even while snow asperges
From shaken branches, shews the ridges
Fresh-configured, swept by shadow-vanes;
And transience transpires
Intensely focused crowing atop spires
To what light is, a glaze between great flares;
The sun arraying in the brittle llyn
A limbeck of itself or of the moon.

(*Oraclan* | *Oracles*, section 28)

If, as Hill suggests, the word 'shadowtackle' in the Hopkins poem describes 'the patterns of branch and twig-work from the nearby trees and bushes rigging the bright walls in the light of the sun', then perhaps Hill's 'shadow-vanes' are the patterns cast on the snow-whitened, sun-

brightened ground by the shadows of 'shaken branches'; as 'vaness', the shadows illustrate the direction from which the wind is blowing. Hill captures their 'thisness' with a neologism – 'fresh-configured', like the ridges of snow on the landscape – that seeks to render the intricacy and delicacy of what it describes. Yet the figurative sense of a 'vane' as 'an unstable or constantly changing [...] thing' (*OED*) is also pertinent, highlighting as it does the sense of the poetry's insecure purchase on the ever-shifting physical and elemental qualities it apprehends in this 'Heraclitean world, of infinite change'.

The insecurity is clearly the reader's also as there is much in Hill's description that challenges imaginative visualization, even comprehension. The stanza reads in part as a philosophy of perception, rather than merely an exercise in it, and not a readily graspable philosophy at that. It is hard to be sure in what sense 'the earth remains / In winter' 'alchemic-carnal'. Might 'carnal' in this context be read as 'not spiritual' or 'unsanctified', as in the usage (cited in the *OED*) to which it is put in J. B. Mozley's *Eight Lectures on Miracles* (1865): "To a carnal imagination an invisible world is a contradiction in terms – another world besides the whole world"? If one were to apply this sense to Hill's stanza one might infer that 'even while snow asperges' – even, that is, while it sprinkles the environment as if with a blessing of holy water (perhaps to intimate a spiritual dimension immanent in the natural realm) – the earth insists on retaining its unregenerate materiality. Yet by being harnessed with a hyphen to 'alchemic', the 'carnal' imagining of the earth is forced to sustain a contradiction whereby the visible and material is susceptible to being transmuted into something beyond itself, to being connected to the invisible and immaterial. It is a contradiction that persists in the image, or perhaps the non-image, of 'intensely focused crowing atop spires': is one to

visualize a crow perched on a spire or, since the bird is only evoked by an aural property, is the intense focus of this line somehow trained beyond the discernable world? A sense of the contradictory persists, too, in the account of light as 'a glaze between great flares' – a description that hovers between an empirical sense of the phenomenon of electromagnetic radiation coming in light-waves from the sun and a response to something fleeting and ineffable ('transience transpires'), something that cannot really be seen in itself even though it is the very source of visibility. Further conundrums of perception arise from the stanza's preoccupation with alchemy; when Hill writes of 'the sun arraying in the brittle llyn / A limbeck of itself or of the moon', there seems to be a precarious, perhaps ironic, mysticism at work, with the sun's reflection in the 'llyn' (the Welsh word for lake) seeming to have been drawn into occult conjunction with the moon, as if the light has been distilled and transformed in a 'limbeck', or alembic – an alchemist's still. Given that the stanza form deployed throughout *Oraclau* | *Oracles* is derived from John Donne's 'A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day', there appears to be an implied connection between Hill's vision of nature and the precursor poem's concern with 'love's limbeck' and the 'new alchemy' that love can generate when one is in a state of intense grief.²² But it is by no means clear whether the 'quintessence' or concentration of despairing 'nothingness' that is distilled in Donne's bleak poem finds an emotional correlative in Hill's vision. The 'alchemic-carnal' process to which Hill refers certainly seems to be a new form of 'alchemy', but the tension between a sense of transformation (of things 'fresh-configured') and intractable sameness ('such the earth remains') renders the results of Hill's experiment in poetic alchemy hard to divine. Indeed, it seems that any attempt to scour the poet's stanza for the philosopher's

stone is more likely to yield fool's gold. The hermeneutic impulse is confounded by the hermetic procedures of the verse.

An interest in esoteric philosophy permeates *Oraclau | Oracles*. Five stanza-sections of the volume (31-5) are dedicated to the Welsh natural philosopher, mystic and alchemist Thomas Vaughan (brother of the poet Henry), from whose *Lumen de Lumine, or, a New Magicall Light* (1651) Hill cites in a note to his essay 'A Pharisee to Pharisees' (1989): 'When I seriously consider the system or fabric of this world I find it to be a certain series, a link or chain which is extended...from that which is beneath all apprehension to that which is above all apprehension'.²³ Hill offers this quotation for comparison to Walter J. Ong's suggestion, in the essay 'Wit and Mystery' (1947), that 'theology and poetry [...] both operate on the periphery of human intellection. A poem dips below the range of the human process of understanding-by-reason as the subject of theology sweeps above it'.²⁴ With reference to Henry Vaughan's 'The Night', Hill concludes 'A Pharisee to Pharisees' by commending an ideal of poetry which captures 'an awareness of such extremes', whereby 'that which is above understanding-by-reason (theology) and that which dips below the process of understanding-by-reason (the contingent nature of sensory material) are briefly made to chime'.²⁵ Although such observations do not resolve, or even reduce, any of the perplexities arising from Hill's own manner of apprehending 'the system or fabric of this world', they do at least intimate a cast of thought that might be felt to inform his poetic practice; especially telling is Hill's recourse to the adverb 'briefly', a word that is fundamental to his reflections on 'the contingent nature of sensory material' in *Oraclau | Oracles* ('briefly highlighted'; 'briefly the flags are lit'; 'briefly also for joy of it'). One of the most significant, but also most riddling, aspects

of Hill's responsiveness to transient illuminations of perception is the sense that the 'thisness' of the world is simultaneously instinct with a sense of 'otherness'. In this connection, it might be helpful to consider some observations that Hill makes in the essay 'R. S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral' (2003). In commending the Welsh poet for capturing 'the *haecceitas* of the Llŷn peninsula – "a branch of rock suspended between the sea and the heavens" (*Autobiographies*, 133)', Hill implicitly aligns Thomas with Hopkins as a writer capable of imitating the 'wondrous thisness' of the 'Heraclitean world'.²⁶ But exactitude of observation of the kind Hill considers Thomas to have achieved is not to be confused with an unambiguous or unalterable grasp on the empirical; as Hill immediately goes on to observe, 'if one is determined to invest one's art in elemental things, both language and contingency must be understood to be as elemental as one's favourite rock and unharmonious (unlike the Llŷn seasons), perpetually out of kilter with our potentialities and desires'.²⁷ For Hill, whose own art is so frequently invested in the elemental, the idea that language can secure one's hold on the contingent world with a quasi-lapidary solidity and sureness is in perpetual tension with his recognition that language is ever-shifting in its implications. It is for this reason, presumably, that Hill's view accords with that of Ong: it is not the case that poetry passeth understanding, but that understanding passeth poetry and that poetry, ideally, is responsive to, and humbled by, that which is beyond it.

Another notable tension that Hill's work exhibits, and a challenge that it presents to its readers, arises from the sense that, on the one hand, 'intricately and beautifully detailed' observations (of the kind Hill celebrates in Hopkins) are 'briefly made to chime' in elegantly crafted phrases, held within carefully shaped forms, and, on the other, that the poetry of his

later volumes is often self-consciously ‘unharmonious’, that lines and clauses are ‘perpetually out of kilter’ with each other, hard to reconcile and comprehend even on the level of coherent syntax. Such considerations clearly have a bearing on the quotations considered thus far in this article; but they became even more pressing with the publication of *Clavics* in 2011.²⁸ In the fourth poem of this book-length sequence Hill writes that ‘the grace of music is its dissonance / Unresolved beneath resolution / Of flow and stance’. His words seem at once to refer to the subject of the volume, William Lawes, a musician in the court of Charles I, and to Hill’s poetic method. There is a strong sense of ‘resolution’ in the predetermined forms of his stanzas; as he has stated, ‘the poems in *Clavics* are ostentatiously, even aggressively, shaped, adopting patterns of rhyme and metre from Henry Vaughan’s poem “The Morning-Watch” and George Herbert’s shape-poem “Easter Wings”’.²⁹ But for all the conspicuous contrivance, and despite the promise of musical regularity within repeated forms, a sense of the dissonant and irresolute prevails. As several reviewers have noted, this sense is primarily generated by what Steven Matthews terms ‘Hill’s elaborate wringing of the language’ so that it frequently functions as a curious ‘variant of telegraphese’.³⁰ There has been some agreement that ‘the syntax is, as is increasingly the case with Hill, very hard to follow’, that it ‘strains against meaning’, that it ‘does not so much unfold as infold’.³¹ In an attempt to account for this, one might consider the relationship between syntactical confusion and regularized patterns of metre and rhyme, stanza length and line length, in the light of Hill’s suggestion that the ‘grace of music’ arises from the impression of dissonant and irresolute effects held within a structure intimating a ‘resolution / Of flow and stance’. Yet so persistent is the beguiling sense that

successive clauses are entangled with preceding ones, and so startling and frequent are the shifts in tone, that the 'flow' and 'stance' of *Clavics* seem anything but resolved.

However, when it comes to Hill's visions of nature, the notion of 'grace' (as both blessing and graciousness) apparently remains available. Once more, reviewers have commended Hill's conjurations of an environment as of a higher order of poetic achievement – an intriguing position, given that the syntactical indeterminacy and referential complexity that so alienate these same readers are often as conspicuous in the 'nature passages' as in any other part of the sequence:

Making of mere brightness the air to tremble
 So the sun's aurora in deep winter
 Spiders' bramble
 Blazing white floss
 (*Clavics*, section 5)³²

Hullo, thistle,
 Silver-silk head,
 Gashed green-blue woad,
 Buoyant in old fallow,
 Watch by your dead.
 (section 15)³³

Chaste, all weathers.
 The journal ends
 Here in its fronds;
 Oblivious the calm
 Jolt of a wave.
 (section 19)

The elliptical, clause-by-clause gathering of physical observations and thoughts (or perhaps physical observations *as* thoughts) is as hard to parse in these examples as it is in the 'alchemic-carnal' stanza and in numerous other notations from nature in Hill's later work. Yet

if one looks beyond the local difficulties a more general understanding of the implications of the poet's technique could be developed by recourse to some of the guiding concerns of John Barrell's *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (1972). Writing of James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30), Barrell contends that 'the crux of Thomson's method was [...] the energy of his syntax, arising as it does from the sense he communicates to us, that the landscapes he is trying to organise can challenge and to some extent resist his desire to organise them'. 'Thomson', he argues, 'manages to incorporate the recalcitrant energy of nature into the structure he uses to subdue her'; in Thomson's poetic, 'the form of the syntax was the form of the place as he perceived it'.³⁴ Yet, with his impulse towards generalized description, and towards order and containment in his vision of the natural world, Thomson represents for Barrell a limited model of the kind of poetic achievement under consideration. It is John Clare who provides a more thoroughgoing exemplar of expressive syntactic particularity; Clare's syntax, according to Barrell, records images 'as parts not so much of a continuum of successive impressions as of one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions'; the result is a poetic mode which conveys a felicitous 'aesthetic of disorder'.³⁵ The applicability of such ideas to the recalcitrant and energetic syntax with which Hill strives to express his response to the environment and the elements is broadly sustainable. His notion, too, that the achievement of musical grace is not incompatible with dissonance and irresolution might usefully be considered in relation to Barrell's understanding of Clare's aesthetic. Yet in pursuing such interpretive analogies, one would do well to remember that the peculiarities of Hill's syntax are not confined to his sense of place; since the same complications of clause-arrangement define the language of his recent volumes more generally, it is important to

recognize that the syntax and idiom of a landscape (or seascape or skyscape) as Hill renders it on the page has not necessarily or exclusively been generated out of the poet's responsiveness to the particular qualities of the locale. Nonetheless, to concede this would not be to deny that Hill's syntactical disorder may be especially well-suited to conveying 'the complex manifold of simultaneous impressions' derived from the natural world.

The hazed grammar of perception also seems appropriate to Hill's impression that the physical realm is instinct with the numinous. It is this animistic sense of nature that defines the most significant influence on Hill of Henry Vaughan, the writer whose poem 'The Morning-Watch' provides one of the formal models for *Clavics*:

[...] hark! In what rings,
And *hymning circulations* the quick world
Awakes, and sings;
The rising winds,
And falling springs,
Birds, beasts, all things
Adore him in their kinds.
Thus all is hurled
In sacred *hymns*, and *order*, the great *chime*
And *symphony* of nature. [...] ³⁶

Perhaps it is not fanciful to consider Hill's poetry, attentive to what Vaughan defines as 'the great *chime* / And *symphony* of nature', as a medium in which all that he perceives is 'hurled' together and yet held in formal '*order*' in such a way as to express the sense that, as Hill says of Vaughan's 'The Night', spiritual apprehension and 'the contingent nature of sensory material' are 'briefly made to chime'. At the very least, the possibility that this is a compositional ideal towards which Hill's poetry might be said to aspire seems to be supported by recurrent tendencies of thought in his critical prose. Hill's affinity with the seventeenth-century poet seems to derive from what Chris Fitter describes as Vaughan's 'Neoplatonic concern with a

pervasive, invisible spirituality', a concern which results in 'a deeply unempiric landscaping, a transcendental imprecision', a 'blurring of fact into radiance'.³⁷ Hill's work, for all its sensuous particularity and its faith in language itself as 'sensory material', is also drawn towards an 'unempiric', imprecise mode of expression as a means of conveying perplexity when confronted by both the mystery of divine immanence and the muddle of material existence:³⁸

The day cuts a chill swath,
 Dark hunkers down.
 I think we are past Epiphany now.
 Earth billows on, its everlasting
 Shadow in tow
 And we with it, fake shadows onward casting.
 (*Clavics*, section 5)

That the syntax of this extract is not strikingly irregular should be noted as evidence that Hill's recent poetry has not entirely drifted beyond the gravitational pull of normative grammar. Nonetheless, the layout of the poem on the page, with its impression at once of nebulously floating skeins and of lines held taut in an inherited verse-structure, as in an ancient vessel ordained for the reception of transcendent intuitions, could be read as part of the grammar of the numinous. And the final line is dense with an indeterminacy that is at once semantic and Neoplatonic: in the post-Epiphany state to which Hill refers, are we 'in tow' with the Earth itself or with 'its everlasting / Shadow', night? And do we make false forward projections, as if in defiance of our mortality and the surrounding darkness, or are we ourselves 'fake shadows', as Plato's analogy of the cave suggests?³⁹

It is hard to know how far to take an attempt to paraphrase, or to itemize interpretive possibilities, in response to a poetic method that seems intent on retaining a sense of the ineffable. Hill's admission, apropos of Henry Vaughan, that he is 'far from convinced that the

relationship between vision and language in poetry [...] works according to theorems, particularly hermetic ones', threatens to serve as an admonition against imposing too intellectualized or intricate a framework of reading upon lines that seem resistant to such an approach.⁴⁰ Given that Hill himself writes of 'the swarm- / Ing mass, the dense / Fluctuations of the materia / Out from which' he feels he 'shall be lucky to twitch/ Creative fire' (*Clavics*, section 1), it would seem impertinent to assume an understanding of a poetic process that the author himself considers to be unaccountable and unstable. Professions of uncertainty in the face of his 'materia' – both the physical world he contemplates and the poetic-linguistic medium in which he works – have become a conspicuous hallmark of Hill's *Daybooks*, and are all the more pronounced in the third of these to have been published. *Odi Barbare* (2012) is frequently self-reflexive regarding the fragility (and at times the seemingly unavoidable obliquity) of its own observations and operations.⁴¹ Hill refers within the sequence to a method of writing that seems to yield only 'the merest memo' (section XLV) or 'a token fragment' (section LII), and he reflects, with an attitude that seems to hover between self-criticism and self-justification, upon 'a process / Metric makes gnomic' (section XX) and upon 'proven things made salvageable like collage' (section LII). The phrase 'into scrap language unpredicted landscape' (section XXXV), which arrives unexpectedly at one point in the sequence, might serve as an apt (and typically shard-like) motto for the ways in which the poetry of the volume records its perceptions of nature. Once more, Hill's visions combine a sense of the clarified and the ungraspable as they achieve (or perhaps receive) a 'glancing / Apotheosis':

As of bare hedges as of fields awash, light
Clouds I call grey-coppery early mornings

Fused with sun-shot fog and the grassblades crispy,
Barely-heard tinsel.

(*Odi Barbare*, section XII)

The self-conscious inclusion of the words 'I call' is characteristic of Hill's recent tendency to retain an impression of the notepad (or 'daybook') jotting in the finished – or perhaps the insistently unfinishable – poem. His reference elsewhere in the sequence to 'Goldengrove notebooks ripped for late bequeathing' (section XL) also captures the feeling that Hill either wishes to insist upon, or cannot but admit to, the sketchy and provisional nature of his descriptions. In its sensitivity to a posthumous state ('late bequeathing'), and in its nod to the Hopkinsian locus of grief (Goldengrove has compelled Hill's attention repeatedly from *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) onwards), Hill's wording is in touch, too, with the melancholy sense of evanescence that is another dominant element in his apprehensions of (and beyond) the natural world.⁴²

The forty-fourth section of *Odi Barbare* pictures a winter scene with a combination of simple optical impressions and enigmatic interpretive implications that is indicative of the qualities of the volume more generally:

Undisclosed clairvoyance of apperception
All around: church towers and silos catching
Shafts of the broad day;

Mistletoe's globules and conglomerations
Sealing boughs waxen with rich-cupped meniscus;
Gilding bare orchards by the moon's endowment
Even at sunrise.

If clairvoyance is the facility to see clearly by discerning that which is beyond the visible world, then the paradox that revelation depends upon an apprehension of mysteries which

nonetheless remain 'undisclosed' through empirical observation can be sustained. This may seem esoteric, but so, too, are the workings of the mind. Perhaps the most richly suggestive definition of 'apperception' provided in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the one derived from psychology: 'the action or fact of becoming conscious by subsequent reflection of a perception already experienced; any act or process by which the mind unites and assimilates a particular idea (esp. one newly presented) to a larger set or mass of ideas (already possessed), so as to comprehend it as part of the whole'. Apperception, in this sense, is an extension of, or extrapolation from, perception. The radiance of things beheld in the environment glimmers with a sense of meaning beyond the physical because of the uniting and assimilating impulses of the perceiving mind. Or is it that the power of comprehending, of clairvoyance and apperception, seems to reside in the illuminated things themselves, and to withhold revelation from the poet's surveying eye? Hill's unsettled syntax leaves the matter irresolute. Moreover, psychology has to vie once more with alchemy and mysticism; one discerns this in the 'gilding', or turning to gold, of the trees, and (as in the 'alchemic-carnal' stanza) in the strange conjunction of sun and moon in the 'bare orchards' ('meniscus' defines 'a figure or object shaped like a crescent moon' (*OED*) and thus seems to refer here to glistening crescents of light on the boughs of the trees). The perceived world is comprised of 'conglomerations' – a term that Hill implicitly redeems from its dominant contemporary use in business contexts by inviting consideration of its original sense: from the verb 'to conglomerate' – 'to roll or wind (thread) into a ball' – a conglomeration is 'a collection of things joined in a compact body; a cluster, coherent mass' (*OED*). In this sense, the process of apperception as the relating of an idea to 'a larger set or mass of ideas (already possessed),

so as to comprehend it as part of the whole' finds analogies for itself in the clustering of the mistletoe balls in the trees, and in the clustering of Hill's phrases and their densely compacted implications. Whether coherence or tangle is the sum of perception here remains an open question – but if the reader feels compelled to pose it, a recognition that the poetry also asks it of itself seems fundamental to an understanding of Hill's methods and concerns.

'The poetry is always playing oblique games with me', Hill has said in relation to the composition of *Odi Barbare*.⁴³ His claim complicates – though it by no means invalidates – the impression many have conveyed that his poems play oblique games with their readers. The very titles of the *Daybooks* carry the risk of enhancing such an impression; yet they also point towards dilemmas with which the poetry itself contends. *Oraclau* | *Oracles* offers a word that seems to promise enlightenment, but the bilingual presentation, along with the upright slash that perhaps summons to mind the Anglo-Welsh border, seems to insist upon barriers to comprehension.⁴⁴ Also, oracles are often 'obscure or ambiguous' messages, gesturing at truths not readily grasped (*OED*). Nor is it clear whether the poems of the volume are meant to be taken as oracular in themselves or as responses (and potentially baffled ones at that) to things which Hill considers to be oracular in the culture, literature and landscape of Wales to which he responds (an oracle can be a physical site, not merely a medium, of revelation). *Clavics*, too, is a riddling title. The nonce-word invites associations with clavichord music, but a red herring epigraph provides a fake definition: 'The science or alchemy of keys – *OED*, 2012' (and this in a publication of 2011).⁴⁵ With perverse ingenuity, and more than a hint of irony, Hill meddles with and muddles the implications of his title, forging vaguely key-shaped emblem poems tuned to the inherited music of Vaughan's and Herbert's poetic forms. The verse

alchemy of Hill's sequence (a pseudo-'science', if ever there was one) purports to transmute musical and physical keys into each other. In the process, Hill appears to be searching for the interpretive keys to his intuitions and perceptions while simultaneously admitting to the risks of delusion and deception that are intrinsic to the alchemist's craft. *Odi Barbare* works by means of decoy also: 'I / Hate barbarians' is a phrase proffered in the second section of the sequence, as if in translation of the volume's title, but in fact Hill's work takes its name, and some of its guiding concerns, from the so-called *Barbarous Odes* (1877-89) of Giosuè Carducci, the Italian poet who expressed his patriotic politics in part through a pastoral vision of ancient Italy and who, as David H. Higgins has noted, saw his odes as representing 'an imperfect, "barbarous" adaptation of a Romance tongue to the prosodic features of classical Latin and its poetic forms'.⁴⁶ Hill's odes – which in turn constitute a 'barbarous' adaptation of an adaptation – eschew nostalgia in their glimpses of the natural world, offering instead perceptions (and would-be apperceptions) that seem to articulate a desire for a clarity and unity of vision that they nonetheless recognize is, for the most part, beyond them.

As such, the poems of *Odi Barbare*, as of Hill's other recent volumes, are in accord with observations he made in an interview in 2011: to the proposal that his poetry is difficult because the reader 'cannot grasp a coherent point of view', Hill said that his reply would be 'well, neither can I' and that his poetry 'is partly a dramatization of that'. 'A lot of my poems', he then observed, 'are about failing to get something or failing to be able to clear one's meaning finally'; this, he claimed, is 'a perfectly legitimate area to write in, [...] provided one is technically efficient and ends up with something beautiful. [...] I think poems should be beautiful'.⁴⁷ In the reception of Hill's later work, a strong body of opinion has formed that the

beauty of his work chiefly resides (or, for some, vestigially persists) in his responses to nature. The impulse to make such a direct claim is understandable, but, when considered in the light of the poetry itself, its implications are far from simple. For, as Hill's work abundantly illustrates, visual beauty is indistinguishable not only from the beauty of the cadences into which a sense of the visual is transcribed but also from the intricacy, even the delicacy, of contemplation brought to bear upon one's surroundings. Coleridge's observations on this point might provide a useful measure of Hill's achievement:

images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit,

Which shoots its being through earth, sea and air.⁴⁸

Notes

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- ¹ William Logan, 'Living with Ghosts', review of *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007), *New York Times*, 20 January 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/books/review/Logan-t.html?pagewanted=all [accessed April 2012]. In interview, Logan has said, 'I think that Hill's passages on nature – the flora of England – are the most accessible of all of his work and I certainly know readers who feel that no book of his is complete without a little natural history and perhaps even no book of his is interesting where it strays beyond nature'. Sam Tanenhaus and William Logan, 'Book Review Podcast', *New York Times*, 20 January 2008, <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/podcasts/2008/01/18/19bookupdate.mp3> [accessed April 2012].
- ² Henry King, 'Fraught Celebration', review of *Oraclau | Oracles* (Thame: Clutag, 2010), *PN Review* 199, 37 no. 5 (May-June 2011), 74.
- ³ Geoffrey Grigson, *The Faber Book of Poems and Places* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 32.
- ⁴ Robert Langbaum, 'The New Nature Poetry', *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), 102.
- ⁵ Douglas Houston, 'Passionate Profundities', review of *Without Title*, *Poetry Review* 96 no. 2 (Summer 2006), 109.
- ⁶ Alan Marshall, 'An Uncompromising Genius at his Peak', review of *Without Title*, *Telegraph*, 12 February 2006, www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3650084/An-uncompromising-genius-at-his-peak.html [accessed April 2012].
- ⁷ Tim Kendall, 'Hire Houses', review of *A Treatise of Civil Power*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 October 2007, 25.

⁸ Colin Burrow, 'Displaced Gravity', review of *Scenes from Comus*, *Guardian*, 15 January 2005, www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/jan/15/featuresreviews.guardianreview [accessed April 2012].

⁹ Tim Martin, 'O Hendrix, Player of Neumes', review of *Without Title*, *Independent*, 15 March 2006, <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article343665.ece> [accessed April 2012].

¹⁰ Stephen Romer, 'Writing for the Dead', review of *The Triumph of Love* (1998), *Poetry Review* 89 no. 2 (Summer 1999), 70.

¹¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1805) ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 235 (Book XIII, ll. 234-5).

¹² Romer, 70.

¹³ John Lyon, 'Self and Love', review of *Without Title*, *PN Review* 170, 32 no. 6 (July-August 2006), 66. Lyon also challenges a simplistic notion of Hill as a 'nature poet' by observing that the poet's landscapes are often subject to 'the encroachment – would Hill's self-proclaimed admirers say "contamination"? – of artifice ("More than ever I see through painters' eyes"), of *human* nature and, pre-eminently, of the poet's idiosyncratic, provocative, unpredictable self' (66). (The bracketed quotation is from 'In Ipsley Church Lane 1' (*Without Title*, 6).)

¹⁴ During a poetry reading for the 'Economist Books of the Year Festival' at the South Bank Centre in London on 11 December 2011 (hereafter referenced as 'London Reading'), Hill revealed, 'I used to feel lucky if I wrote seven poems a year. Since June 2007 I've written eight books and feel that I'm flagging if I fail to write seven poems a week.' A podcast of the

reading is available at www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/12/economist-books-year-festival-geoffrey-hill [accessed April 2012].

¹⁵ The particular virtues of Hill's landscape visions are extolled by several reviewers of *Oraclau* | *Oracles*: see Jeremy Hooker, 'Other Land', *Notre Dame Review* 32 (Summer-Fall 2011), http://ndreview.nd.edu/assets/47784/hooker_review.pdf [accessed April 2012]; King (cited in note 2); William Logan, 'Blah Blah Blah', *New Criterion*, June 2011, www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Blah-blah-blah-7068 [accessed April 2012]; George Potts, 'Oraclau | Oracles by Geoffrey Hill', *Literateur* (March 20, 2011), <http://literateur.com/oraclauoracles-by-geoffrey-hill/> [accessed April 2012].

¹⁶ Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley, 'Cambrian Readjustments: An Interview with Geoffrey Hill', *Poetry Wales* 46 no. 1 (Summer 2010), 12, 11. As Davies and Turley observe, 'puddling [...] involves heating and stirring molten pig iron with oxide in a furnace' (12). Jukes is also a subject of contemplation in the poem 'Coda' in both the 2005 Clutag Press version (n.p.) and the 2007 Penguin version of *A Treatise of Civil Power* (49-50).

¹⁷ Hill, *Mercian Hymns* (1971), XXV, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 129.

¹⁸ King suggests that 'the disquiet is the quiet of a pastoral scene, broken by the intrusion of the same historically burdened language through which it is evoked' (74).

¹⁹ Hooker, 249.

²⁰ See Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover' ('How he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing / In his ecstasy'), in *Poems and Prose* ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 30.

²¹ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings* ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 570. See Hopkins, 65-6.

²² John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 72. It is possible that Hill's contemplation of the transmission of light is in some kind of negotiation with the cosmology of Donne's poem, in which 'the sun is spent, and now his flasks [the stars] / Send forth light squibs [weak flashes], no constant rays'. It is possible, too, that Hill's vocabulary of 'shews' and 'arraying' (which reads as self-consciously contrived archaism) implies a debt to the earlier poet: both 'shew' and 'array' are words in Donne's poetic lexicon.

²³ Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 687.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Hill, 'R. S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral', in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas* ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), 52-3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁸ Hill, *Clavics* (London: Enitharmon, 2011).

²⁹ Hill, London Reading. There is contrivance, too, in the fact that Hill has designed thirty-two of these emblematic pattern poems; as one reviewer has noted, this is 'the number of paths of wisdom in the Cabbala' – the esoteric thought-system to which Hill makes reference in the first line of his numerologically 'keyed' volume. See Bill Coyle, 'A Difficult Poet', *Oxonian Review* 18 no. 2, www.oxonianreview.org/wp/a-difficult-poet/ [accessed April 2012].

³⁰ Steven Matthews, 'About Suffering They Were Never Wrong', review of *Clavics* and Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems* (2011), *Poetry Review* 101 no. 3 (Autumn 2011), www.poetrysociety.org.uk/lib/tmp/cmsfiles/File/review/1013%20Matthews.pdf [accessed April 2012].

³¹ See, respectively, Lachlan Mackinnon, 'Discords and Distractions', *Independent* 3 June 2011, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/clavics-by-geoffrey-hill-2292235.html [accessed April 2012]; Benjamin Myers, 'Clavics by Geoffrey Hill', *World Literature Today* 86 no. 1 (January-February 2012), www.ou.edu/wlt/01_2012/review-hill.html [accessed April 2012]; Jeffrey Hippolito, 'Give Me the Key', *Critical Flame* 15 (September 2011), http://criticalflame.org/verse/0911_hippolito.htm [accessed April 2012]. William Logan claims that 'the rhymes force the poet to manic play that makes the syntax skitter four ways at once, without any consequent gain in depth': see 'Civil Wars', *New Criterion* 30 no. 4, www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Civil-wars-7238 [accessed April 2012].

³² Logan defines these as 'lines of breathtaking elegance' that contrast with the 'sheer gobbledegook' he detects elsewhere in *Clavics* ('Civil Wars'). Hill's italicized words may be a translation of line 2 (which has conflicting manuscript variants) of Guido Cavalcanti's sonnet 'Chi è questa che vien, ch'ogni uom la mira' ('Who is she coming, whom all gaze upon'); see David Anderson, ed., *Pound's Cavalcanti: An Edition of the Translations, Notes, and Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 42-3, 255-6. In his 1986 essay 'Envoi (1919)' Hill praised 'the sensuous intellect of Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega"': *Collected Critical Writings*, 248.

³³ Woad is the common name for the plant *Isatis tinctoria*, and for the blue dye derived from its leaves (*OED*).

³⁴ John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 36-7, 44, 159.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 157, 160.

³⁶ Henry Vaughan, 'The Morning-Watch', *The Complete Poems* ed. Alan Rudrum (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 179.

³⁷ Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 307-8.

³⁸ See, for example, 'A Pharisee to Pharisees', in which Hill claims that 'language is a vital factor of experience, and, as "sensory material", may be religiously apprehended' (327) and argues for an 'understanding both of Vaughan's vision and his perplexities and of his way of "bringing into use, formally, or by authority" the envisioning of perplexity itself' (325). (The quoted words capture an *OED* definition of the verb 'to compose'.)

³⁹ See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), 316-25.

⁴⁰ Hill, 'A Pharisee to Pharisees', 326.

⁴¹ Hill, *Odi Barbare* (Thame: Clutag, 2012).

⁴² See Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', *Poems and Prose*, 50.

⁴³ Hill, London reading.

⁴⁴ Henry King associates the 'bar running through the collection's title' with 'the English/Welsh border', and suggests that it 'divides and yet conjoins, an emblem of the poems' language' (74).

⁴⁵ In section 42 of *Oraclau | Oracles*, Hill writes of ‘Clavics, the alchemy of keys’.

⁴⁶ Giosuè Carducci, *Selected Verse* ed. and trans. David H. Higgins (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1994), 10. The Sapphic form that Hill employs in the volume is similar to the version used by Carducci in his *Odi Barbare* and to that used by Philip Sidney in *The Arcadia*, from which one of the epigraphs to Hill's volume is derived.

⁴⁷ Hill, ‘Poems Should be Beautiful’, podcast of interview excerpts, *The Economist Online*, 2 December 2011, www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/12/economist-books-year-festival-geoffrey-hill [accessed April 2012].

⁴⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817) ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1984), 177. (The line of poetry is from Coleridge's ‘France, An Ode’ (1798).)