

All corruptible things: Geoffrey Hill's Etymological Crux

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Quando, insomma, la potenza fantastica diventa arbitrario? . . . Ancor adesso non sono uscito dalla difficoltà. La ritengo perciò il punto critico di ogni poetica. Intravedo tuttavia una possibile soluzione, che però poco mi soddisfa perché poco chiara.

[When, in short, does the power of the imagination become arbitrary? . . . Even now I am not out of this difficulty. I consider it therefore the crux of any poetics. While I do half-perceive a possible solution, it is not very satisfying because it is not very clear.]
(CESARE PAVESE, "Il mestiere di poeta," 1934)

Six years and three poetry collections after the unelaborated statement in *Speech! Speech!* (2000) that "Poetry aspires / to the condition of Hebrew" (SS, 10),¹ Geoffrey Hill returned to that ancient language in *Without Title* (2006), thinking further about what might make Hebrew essentially poetic:

What P. describes – *duration of real pain* –
Spikes with its radicals the roots of thought.

The author is grateful for the financial support of a series of grants, from the British Academy, St. Jerome's University, the University of Waterloo, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

1. Geoffrey Hill's published writings are cited parenthetically in the text, as follows: CP, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); C, *Canaan* (London: Penguin, 1996); TL, *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin, 1998); SS, *Speech! Speech!* (London: Penguin, 2000); OS, *The Orchards of Syon* (London: Penguin, 2002); SC, *Scenes from Comus* (London: Penguin, 2005); WT, *Without Title* (London: Penguin, 2006); TCPa, *A Treatise of Civil Power* (Thame: Clutag, 2005); TCPb, *A Treatise of Civil Power* (London: Penguin, 2007); O, *Oraclau/Oraclous* (Thame: Clutag, 2010); Cl, *Clavics* (London: Enitharmon, 2011); OB, *Odi Barbare* (Thame: Clutag, 2012); CCW, *Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford University Press, 2008). *Broken Hierarchies: Poems, 1952–2012* (Oxford University Press, 2013) appeared too recently to be considered here. OLD refers to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968); and OED2, to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

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In Hebrew word and thing, the acting word –
 The basic punning language though not all
 punsters are poets, nor could they wish to be.

(WT, 53)

“P.” is Cesare Pavese (1908–50); “*duration of real pain*” is from his diaries.² The passage begins to consider this phrase with a pun on “radical”—the root of which is “root”—at once recalling Hill’s earlier poetic meditation on “the common ‘dur’ / built into duration, the endurance of war; / blind Vigil herself, helpless and obdurate” (CP, 192). In that earlier poem, the historical lexical root *dur* seemed also to connect current ideas of “duration,” “endurance,” and “obdurate,” showing how the “roots of thought” could be spiked with the roots of words.

Hill makes more than a mere pun, however, when his thought turns to the Hebrew word for “word,” דָּבָר (*dabar*), also the word for “thing.”³ The ancient polysemy is explained in the earliest draft of the poem, which had “In Hebrew, word and thing are ~~the one~~ both *dabar*.”⁴ In the version published in *Without Title*, the English “word” and “thing”—the two words for the two things that דָּבָר would unite—remain grammatically uncoupled, the peculiar syntax omitting the copula that would join them together in some other word, some third idea: word and thing “are one,” “the same,” “each other,” “both *dabar*,” and so on. On one level this may be a sort of punning, as well as a description of punning, Hill both explaining and exploiting the double nature of words, which exist both as words and as signs of things. But more radically it figures a basic feature of language: that unlike the ancient and paradigmatic דָּבָר, in current language words and things remain obdurately separate, however closely they are brought together. Poetry may aspire to the condition of unity between word and thing, even if ultimately it always falls short of such unity. For Hill this aspiration has entailed a persistent brooding over words, their sematological trees and etymological roots.

Hill’s late collection *Odi Barbare* (2012), a long poem in fifty-two parts, ends with a one-line sentence: “Wisdom is fable” (OB, 60). Commenting on the “stark ambiguity” raised here (is the existence of wisdom itself a fable, or is wisdom to be found only in fable?), Kenneth Haynes writes that the word “fable” has supplied Hill’s writings more generally with “an essential ambiguity,” in that it figures three important ways in which “language can in

2. See Cesare Pavese, *This Business of Living: Diaries, 1935–1950*, trans. A. E. Murch (London: Owen, 1961), 181.

3. In the King James Version of the Bible, the noun דָּבָר is translated 807 times as “word” (including 242 instances in the formula “the word of the LORD”) and 231 times as “thing.”

4. Leeds University Library, the Brotherton Collection, MS 20c Hill/2/1/62. Material from the unpublished writings is printed with the permission of Kenneth Haynes and Geoffrey Hill.

some way be true and untrue at the same time,” how “it has fallen but retains some power”: “‘Fable’ is at once, in variable and unstable proportions, the creative but fantastic word of the poet, the Word of God, and the mass communication of our shared lives.”⁵ Haynes’s three extensions of “fable” touch on the enduring preoccupations of Hill’s poetry and his prose: the relations made or unmade in artistic language among creating God, created and creating poet, and created and creating culture. That these relations are subject to an “essential ambiguity” is a cause of their importance to Hill, for whom the investigation of lexical and grammatical ambiguities has been an indispensable element of poetic and reflective practice. The ambiguity captured in “fable” comprehends truth and untruth, real and unreal, fallen and potent—dichotomies and dualities that have formed lasting and productive difficulties at the core of Hill’s thought.

Any etymology is, at some level, a fable of origin, however much it lays claim to historical accuracy. Indeed, the more it asserts an enduring correspondence between a remote etymon and present realities, the more fabulous an etymology may appear. What Haynes says about one kind of fable —“current and historical events are already mediated for us” but “do not thereby lose their actuality”⁶—may also be claimed on behalf of fables concerning the current, historical, and original meanings of words. Yet it may be safer to concede the loss of “actuality” for something more enduring, if less tangible, as Hill does in a 1996 lecture “Concerning Intrinsic and Extrinsic Value.”⁷ Referring to his life’s work as an exercise of “philosophical etymology,” Hill argues that this entails an “‘intrinsic value’ commitment.” “Intrinsic value,” he admits, is “not an actuality, but a reality, a reality that is not less real because one cannot call it into an enduring presence in the world of actuality.”⁸

The distinction, somewhat telegraphically invoked here, wishes to ally “reality” to essential, metaphysical, or ethical truth and “actuality” to the data of experience. The mere existence of a thing in the “world of actuality” does nothing to guarantee its value. On the contrary, the world of experience appears to Hill as one full of untruths and valueless accumulations. It is, in the words of the American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), a “Brute Actuality of things and facts,” a phrase to which Hill alludes at regular intervals throughout his critical oeuvre.⁹ The reality/actuality dis-

5. Kenneth Haynes, “‘Faith’ and ‘Fable’ in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill,” *Christianity and Literature* 60 (2011): 398–401, 401.

6. *Ibid.*, 400.

7. MS 20c Hill/4/46.

8. *Ibid.*

9. See CCW, 163, 168, 239, 272, 273, 277, 360, 364, 570; cf. Charles Sanders Peirce, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God,” in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. the Peirce Edition Project, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992–98) 2:435.

inction enters Hill's poems in moments that contemplate the plight of the individual ("We suffer commonly, where we are quite alone / not the real but the actual natures of things" [C, 53]), and the distinction figures for him the difference between ethics and mere social compulsion: "Is this real obligation or actual / pressure of expectancy?" (TL, 28). This distinction also frames the difference between true poetry and mere versifying. Hill takes up R. P. Blackmur's (1904–65) definition of poetry as "language so twisted and posed" that it "adds to the stock of available reality."¹⁰ The result of such a newly created reality, Hill says, is that "everything else in one's comprehension has to adjust itself around it." By contrast, most contemporary poems add to "the stock of the plethora of actuality."¹¹

In the pursuit of "philosophical etymology," one should perhaps concede that etymons and obsolete usages have little actual purchase on current language, less still on the culture that employs it. But Hill will not be reduced to nostalgic regret in the face of this. To rephrase Haynes: fables of linguistic origin, like language itself, can in some way be real although not actual. Hill's resistant posture here is reminiscent of one he once adopted in defense of past generations, when he insisted that "the dead are as real as we are, probably more so."¹² However, in connecting "philosophical etymology" to "intrinsic value," Hill is careful about the nature of the comparison, which describes historical-linguistic investigation in terms of what is itself (Hill acknowledges) already a metaphorical construct. With all this talk of "actuality," "reality," and "enduring presence," he writes, "I find that you have to move out of metaphors (intrinsic value and the gold standard) into statements of theology."¹³ Yet Hill in his prose is wont to halt at the frontiers of theology, and when he does broach the divine there he does so as a lay academic rather than a holy man, making statements on theology rather than statements of theology. In poetry, where the normal course of movement is not out of but into metaphors, Hill's statements on theology are likely to be associated in some direct way with statements on etymology—sometimes statements of etymology.

The "intrinsic value" metaphor, in this application, would have a word carry within it the value of its etymological fables—true and untrue, enduring and unenduring—a burden imposed on the poet who would employ that word. In *Without Title*, Hill writes that "Our well dug-in / language pitches us as it finds . . . granted its dark places, the fabled burden" (WT,

10. Geoffrey Hill, at a conference titled "Geoffrey Hill and His Contexts," July 2–3, 2008, Keble College, Oxford; cf. R. P. Blackmur, "Statements and Idylls," in *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (New York: Doubleday, 1952), 337.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Geoffrey Hill, "The Art of Poetry LXXX," *Paris Review* 154 (2000): 272–99, 298.

13. MS 20c Hill/4/46.

27). In *Odi Barbare*, “fabled burden” is inverted, grafting the fable of human origin to the fabulous story of linguistic origin. There Hill says, “When affinities are released to strangeness, / I am not with you in this burthened fable. / It is so well proven we fell together” (OB, 55). In *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) he had described the extent of his linguistic affinities: “So far I’m with you, conglomerate roots / of words. I wish I could say more” (OS, 69). He wishes he could extend or deepen the affiliation, that is, since he does in fact say more:

I claim elective
affinities ás of the root, even.
Even if unenduring. . . .
Dig the—mostly uncouth—language of grace.

(OS, 69)

We are “redeemed by falling and restored to grace” (CP, 191), Hill says in an earlier long poem, invoking the oxymoronic trope of the *felix culpa*, or blessed fault, in which we “fell together,” or “*fell in one root*” (O, 8). Like humanity itself, however fallen, dug-in, and obdurate language may be, it still has remnants of original grace that may be dug out in the course of one’s work. The “mostly uncouth—language of grace” echoes forward to *Odi Barbare* as “uncouth anacolutha” (OB, 10), where it describes, self-referentially, the rough and seemingly arbitrary interruptions of grammatical sequence that mark Hill’s late poetry. But “uncouth anacoluthon” is also how Hill described, in a 2005 lecture, “one of the greatest grammatical moments in nineteenth century English poetry”—Gerard Manley Hopkins’s irruptive “Enough! the Resurrection,”¹⁴ explaining that “the Resurrection is a kind of eschatological anacoluthon; no amount of standard grammar can anticipate or regularize that moment” (CCW, 570–71). As the Resurrection stands in relation to the fallen world, the uncouth language of grace stands in relation to fallen language. This is because fallenness is not only a state of eschatological menace but also the only state in which atonement and redemption can become realities, if not actualities.

“Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’” is the title of the opening critical essay in Hill’s first prose collection, *The Lords of Limit* (1984). With the closing essay, “Our Word Is Our Bond,” it establishes important and enduring motifs in Hill’s criticism. Both essays consider relations among poet, language, and society, asking questions about the poet’s responsibilities, his duties and difficulties, and both develop an association inherent in the poly-

14. Gerard Manley Hopkins, “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and the Comfort of the Resurrection,” in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 197.

semy of a single word, which in each case vibrates with energetic potential in the title. In "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement,'" the polysemy is in "atonement," where the "radical etymological sense—an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony" (CCW, 4)—is, during the course of the essay, made one with the current sense of the word as "expiation of sin." The polysemy in "Our Word Is Our Bond" is primarily in "bond" (it reverberates also in "word"), which is charged with both the sense of "shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility" and that of "reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol" (CCW, 161). As in "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement,'" the argument of the essay turns on, and is reinforced by, the one sense being "correlative" to the other, at least in the context of creative work in and on the language. Within the "etymological stratum," as Hill calls it, there exist historically related meanings that also stand in some significant philosophical relation to each other. Quoting Hopkins, Hill says that these meanings and usages "lie like shards or bones of 'most recondite and difficult' matter within the simple hereditary accruals of the vernacular" (CCW, 160). The archaeological metaphor is reprised in Hill's late assertion that the better part of contemporary poetry has been "part of the pile up of that plethora of actual things with which our culture is virtually submerged"¹⁵ and in his recent musings over whether "semantic energy" is "objectively there, through history, laid up like mineral strata by the growth and decay of aeons of cultural idiom," the "great poet" therefore to be understood as "someone extraordinarily sensitized to the reception of messages from the semantic strata."¹⁶

For Hill, Hopkins is to be counted among the small number of "great poets." Reviewing his engagements with "most recondite and difficult" etymological material, Hill concludes in "Our Word Is Our Bond" that "Hopkins's theological crux is necessarily a linguistic crux" (CCW, 167). "Crux" is a favorite word of Hill's, appearing seventeen times in the *Critical Writings*, three times in the poems, and frequently in the margins of his drafts and notes ("crucial" comes up thirty-nine times in the prose). It is a term with its own theological and linguistic cross-currents: "crux" is from the Latin for "cross," of course, and signifies figuratively "the central or decisive point of interest" (OED2, 3b), like a crossroads or crosshairs. But the original hyperbolic use, traced by the *OED* to the witty correspondence of Swift and Sheridan, refers to the great difficulty of a pun or riddle, "a difficulty which it torments or troubles one greatly to interpret or explain" (OED2, 3a). This is the sense in which Isaac Disraeli (1766–1848) would employ the related verbal

15. Hill, at "Geoffrey Hill and His Contexts."

16. Geoffrey Hill, "Fields of Force," recorded in Oxford, November 27, 2012, <http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2012-11-27-engfac-hill.mp3>.

form a century later, to refer to a textual riddle that might “crucify the critical intuition of the ablest of commentators” (OED2, s.v. “crucify,” 2c). While preserving the sense of intellectual exertion, this “tormenting” sense of “crux” also returns one inevitably to “at-one-ment” and “atonement,” to the nine instances of the verb “to crucify” in Hill’s poems, and especially to the “Crucified Lord” of “Lachrimae Verae” (1978), memorably described both as “at one with that eternal loss” and “the world’s atonement on the hill” (CP, 145). We are returned also, by extension, to the “eschatological anacoluthon” of the Resurrection and the “uncouth anacoluthon” of redeemed or redeeming language. When this poet, in his digging-in and digging-out of the language, hits upon “most recondite and difficult” linguistic matter, it gives shape to enduring philosophical and spiritual difficulties that torment him greatly to explain but that must be endured if the language of grace is to remain a reality. To rephrase Hill on Hopkins, Hill’s linguistic crux, also a theological crux, is necessarily an etymological crux.

In describing this “etymological crux” in Hill’s writings I want to trace the ways in which philology’s intellectual and theological traditions have shaped central persistent difficulties in Hill’s poetry and poetics. Yet a caveat must be entered at the outset: while productive, these are true difficulties, and at times intractable ones. Hill’s working out of these cruxes, in poetry and prose, involves first a process of working them in. Reflecting a view he once offered of John Milton’s language, Hill’s writings take the form not of “an instrument for commentating upon the moral dilemma, but . . . an activation and embodiment of that crux or crisis.”¹⁷ In activating and embodying the crux, in working it in and working it out, Hill’s commitments, claims, and concessions create further difficulties for him and for the reader—at times for the critical intuitions of even the most sympathetic of commentators—involving distinctions between reality and actuality, the essential and the arbitrary, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the reconciled and the unreconciling, the nature of doctrine and the limits of metaphor.

* * *

Like all Christian thinking about origins, Hill’s work with word origins is coupled to thought about atonement, death, and redemption. A recent treatment in *Oraculau/Oracles* (2010) interprets linguistic evolution as parallel to the biblical progress from the Egyptian deliverance to the Passion:

Language mislabouring out of Egypt
Who shall receive, or who decrypt

17. Geoffrey Hill, recorded at the British Academy, December 6, 2008, <http://britac.studyserve.com/home/Lecture.asp?ContentContainerID=139>.

Immanence its dark mutation,
 With ignorance brought forth,
 With the attendant bloodiness of birth,
 The after-nursing and the milk of wrath,
 Stark tenderness; and, to the wits that care,
 A thorn-head spitting in a cage of fire.

(O, 9)

It would take a certain kind of wit to bisect and distend “care” into near-rhyming “cage of fire,” inserting at the core the author’s own first name, abbreviated, and it would take someone possessed of a reciprocal wit—one trained in (and trained on) the conventions of cryptic crossword clues perhaps—to decrypt what lies in “cage of fire.” Such a wit would care to recognize his own cleverness in finding “Geoff” (even “Geoff, I”) enclosed “in a cage of fire” alongside the thorn-headed Christ and might go on to relate this to Hill’s self-insinuation in Christ’s “atonement on the hill” or in the title of his early poem “God’s Little Mountain” (CP, 17) or even his perversion of this onomastic device, in *Speech! Speech!*: “Up the Hill | Difficulty. Hów do I find thee? / That’s a good name – APOLLYON” (SS, 30).

Another kind of wit might care more deeply about a different indwelling, the “immanence” of language and its “dark mutation,” its difficult births and birthings, its mislaborings and miscarriages. “Immanence” may seem, until the final line of the poem, unambiguously to belong to Hill’s career-long meditation on “intrinsic value,” which is simultaneously linguistic, ethical, and theological value.¹⁸ But to pursue this conjunction beyond a local trope in which the theological is a mere figure for something else (the ethical, say, or the linguistic) would require reconciling the comparative action of metaphor to essential statements of theology.

Historically, the fullest realization of this concord has been the once deeply embedded if now largely forgotten “grammatical metaphor.”¹⁹ Growing out of the belief that human language was a fallen version of the divine language referred to in Genesis, this category of thought could conceive of all creation as if it were an expression formulated according to the “grammar” of the creating God, itself already understood metaphorically in terms of human grammar. That serious theological investigation, developed initially in Augustine’s reflections on the differences between biblical lan-

18. See, among many discussions in Hill, the extended discussions that are the focus of CCW, chaps. 22, 27, and 28. I give an account of this preoccupation of Hill’s in David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 163–73, 205–17.

19. John A. Alford’s discussion of this category of thought is still the best general account. See “The Grammatical Metaphor: A Survey of Its Use in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum* 57 (1982): 728–60.

guage and the divine language it describes,²⁰ found an ideal contingency in the Latin word *cāsus*, which could signify “a fall, a falling down,” a “situation” or “state of affairs,” and “grammatical case” (OLD). The phrase *cāsus hominis* could, via this polysemy, figure a root similarity of etiology and etymology (even as it appeals to such a convergence), allowing “current situation of man” and “grammatical case of ‘man’” to echo behind the primary denotation, “Fall of Man.”²¹

In *The Triumph of Love* (1998), Hill considers the grammatical metaphor via the etymology of “case,” which at its root would unite grammar and Fall. Several lines in advance of its introduction, Hill plants another Latin word, *arbitrium* (“choice,” “judgement,” “legal process”) (OLD),²² preparing the ground for another sense of English “case” to emerge:

Concerning the elective will, *arbitrium*.

The Florentine
 academies conjoined
 grammar and the Fall, made a case of *casus*.
 All things by that argument are bound
 to the nature of disordinance (*eat
 shit, MacSikker*). Judgement is forever
 divided, in two minds.²³

(TL, 75)

First invoking the grammatical metaphor via the conjunction of “grammar and the Fall,” the poem then applies it: “made a case of *casus*,” with its case of fallen “case,” brings *cāsus* into the juridical realm that English “case” shares with *arbitrium*, a connotation developed in the course of the evolving discussion of “argument” and “Judgement.”

20. See, esp., Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, ed. John H. Taylor (New York: Newman, 1982).

21. Alford describes how, in an originary application of the grammatical metaphor, “Medieval poets . . . drew elaborate comparisons between grammar and the story of Adam and Eve: Original Sin is called ‘the first declension,’ and Adam and Eve are ‘oblique’ nouns that fell away or ‘declined’ from God” (“Grammatical Metaphor,” 728).

22. As a term in scholasticism, *arbitrium* refers to a kind of free will, glossed by Hopkins as God’s power to shift “the creature from one pitch contrary to God’s will to another which is according to it. . . . This shift is grace” (Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Sermons and Devotional Writings*, ed. Christopher Devlin [Oxford University Press, 1959], 151–54).

23. “Lothian MacSikker” is one of a trio of pseudonymous poetry critics who receive the brunt of Hill’s vituperations in *The Triumph of Love*: “So—Croker, MacSikker, O’Shem—I ask you: / what are poems for?” (TL, 82). Among other suggested “originals” are Edna Longley, Lachlan Mackinnon, and Sean O’Brien. See William Logan, *The Undiscovered Country: Poetry in the Age of Tin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 157–58.

Hill's contemplation of "elective will" sets a standard theological crux within a complex of linguistic ambiguities: "in so far as the elective is elect / it will not now be chosen. It may choose / non-election" (TL, 75). Here human free will, entailing the power to choose, to elect, to do or to not do that which will lead to divine election, is brought up against the divine will that sits in determination of this. The self may choose to be unchosen by the divine other; as with the agent and the patient, the active and passive forms of "election" may not always be at one. The exemplar of extreme self-will, the paradigmatic elector of nonelection, is invoked here via Hopkins's metaphysics: "Hopkins gave his two best / coinings of the self—*inscape*, / *instress*—to Lucifer for his self-love" (TL, 76). The antecedent of the second "his" is crucially ambiguous: what first appears to belong properly only to Lucifer in reality describes both Hopkins and Lucifer, self and other, the internal and the external threat. "His self-love" is both the principle of self-love externally embodied in the fabulous person of Lucifer and the continual danger of embodying one's own self-love. The enemy without, for the poet Hopkins, is always shadowing an enemy within.

But this poem also intersperses another more mundane conflict between self and other, a different pitting of artistic self-will against external judgment: the determinations made by the pseudonymous literary critics to whom Hill has been directing a series of retaliatory parenthetical insults. Here Milton appears, introducing figures of damnation and redemption:

Milton writes of those
 who 'comming to Curse . . . have stumbled into
 a kind of Blessing'; but if you suppose him
 to invoke a stirrup-and-ground-type mercy, think
 again. It's a Plutarchan twist: even our foes
 further us, though against their will and purpose (*up
 yours, O'Shem*).

(TL, 75–76)

Hill is quoting Milton's prose discussion of the "Balaams" of Ireland, those canting prophets who follow "religion for the sake of gain" (OED2). Here the invocation bridges Hill's discussions of fallenness and judgment, of the case of *cāsus* and of its implications for interior and exterior evils, major and minor. Two figures of redemption suggested by the excerpt from Milton are rejected by Hill in the subsequent lines: first, that Milton's use of "stumbled" might have a similar set of lapsarian echoes as Andrew Marvell's in "The Garden," where "stumbling on melons . . . I fall"²⁴ did evoke one kind

24. Andrew Marvell, "The Garden," in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Robert Wilcher (London: Methuen, 1986), 48.

of blessing arrived at by curse—the *felix culpa*—“melons” calling up (via Greek μήλον, “apple”) the originary etymological pun on Latin *mālum* (“apple,” by Marvell’s time firmly grafted to *malum*, “evil”). But in this case Hill’s is not a figure for the grace that can only come after a Fall, and neither is it the type of last-minute redemption figured in a second fable of falling, the epigram that says, “Betwixt the stirrup and the ground / Mercy I asked, mercy I found.”²⁵ Rather, the blessing is stumbled into despite all bad intentions and is not the redemption of the accusing critic at all but of the accused poet. John Donne’s invocation of the grammatical metaphor applies it to grammatical voice in precisely this way: “Gods grammar is to *change* Actives into Passives: where a man delights in cursing, to make that man accursed.”²⁶ Hill’s manly last challenge to the critic—“(do it and be damned)” —has a dire literal meaning, as the reciprocal and parallel double entendre in the final parentheses confirms: “(Over my dead body, says Slow.)” is the section’s final word on the matter (TL, 76).

In *Milton’s Grand Style* (1963), Christopher Ricks demonstrated how England’s great reteller of the story of the Fall actuated the metaphor of fallen language, employing “fallen” words (e.g., “lapse,” “wanton,” and “liberality”) in their “innocent” etymological senses when describing prelapsarian scenes.²⁷ Milton is an acknowledged center of gravity in several of Hill’s late collections. Even if he is primarily drawn to Milton’s civic or political writings rather than to *Paradise Lost*, part of Hill’s affinity for Milton is the nexus he finds in those writings of civic (including political), theological (including metaphysical), and grammatical (including etymological) thought. In *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2005, 2007),²⁸ a collection that takes the title of Milton’s prose tract of 1659, the poem “ON READING *Milton and the English Revolution*” refers to a book by Christopher Hill²⁹ but is chiefly about reading and readings, about the natures and origins of words, and also about man’s inward nature. Section 7 continues a previous section’s reflection on Milton’s “inward and irremediable / disposition of man,” realizing that

25. Recorded in William Camden, “A gentleman falling off his horse, brake his neck,” in *Remains concerning Britain*, ed. R. D. Dunn (University of Toronto Press, 1984), 350. Camden explains the embedded allusion to a saying attributed to Augustine: “Misericordia Domini inter pontem et fontem” (The mercy of the Lord [is found] between the bridge and the river).

26. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn Simpson and George Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 7:367.

27. See Christopher Ricks, *Milton’s Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 109–17.

28. *A Treatise of Civil Power* was first published, without page numbers, by Clutag Press (Thame) in 2005. This edition is designated here by TCPa, whereas TCPb refers to the enlarged and revised Penguin edition of 2007. Where a poem appears in both editions, the latter is referenced.

29. Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977).

despite orthographic appearances, in the Christian understanding “irremediable” is not transposable to “irredeemable”:

The remnant is the redeemed. Forge the true key;

 How certainly words are at one with *all*
corruptible things.

(TCPb, 7)

The proximity of the “at one” locution to religious and metaphysical themes of corruption and redemption is familiar from “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’” and from several poems prior and subsequent. Here the matter of language is understood in the same terms as the matter of the postlapsarian world: always disintegrating, always declining, always falling from grace. But contained in the very locution that would have words be “at one” with mundane corruption is the promise of “atonement” for that fallen state of affairs. Words are irremediable, that is, like the inward nature of man, but perhaps not irredeemable. As with human nature, in the nature of language there may be some remnant of grace to be redeemed.

Hill’s Miltonian sequence *Scenes from Comus* (2005) returns to the correspondence between a fallen, falling world and a fallen, falling language. Here too there is hope for both, however slim—a hope of reconciliation, of at-one-ment, between origin and remnant:

That weight of the world, weight of the word, is.
 Not wholly irreconcilable. Almost.
 Almost we cannot pull free; almost we escape

 the leadenness of things. Almost I have walked
 the first step upon water. Nothing beyond.
 The inconceivable is a basic service.

 Hyphens are not-necessary for things I say.
 Nor do I put to strain their erudition –
 I mean, the learned readers of J. Milton.

 But weight of the world, weight of the word, is.

(SC, 12)

The poem’s several propositions oscillate between asserted possibility and the denial of possibility, most compactly in the second line, where “weight of the world” and “weight of the word” are described not as “reconcilable” or “irreconcilable” or “not irreconcilable” or even “Not wholly irreconcilable” but rather “Not wholly irreconcilable. Almost.” The next two propositions, which similarly negate and renege themselves, also appear to cancel each other—almost—just as “Almost we cannot pull free” seems accurately

to describe the almost-self-canceling claim that “Hyphens are not-necessary for things I say.” Centrally and vitally, the potential that is both offered and withheld in the repetition of “almost” is only almost canceled in the final line’s return to the opening phrase, this time offered as a caveat to all that has preceded it: “But weight of the world, weight of the word, is.” Coming between “weight of the world” (the final word is almost “word,” but is not) and “weight of the word,” the comma appears as the fulcrum to an “Archimedean point” from which vantage a “solitary enquirer . . . could lift the whole world,” as Hill puts it, paraphrasing a trope in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55).³⁰ Thinking about the American poet Richard Eberhart’s (1904–2005) engagement with Kierkegaard, Hill narrates an imaginary exchange between them and one who would complain, “How arbitrary, how ungainly, how uncouth are such demands on the reader’s attention!” Hill supplies the double reply: “Kierkegaard in effect says, ‘the impossible demands are crucial to one’s salvation, and in making them I myself have become an impossible person.’” To this, Hill imagines Eberhart adding, “the equivalent labour of lifting the art of poetry . . . [is also] an impossible labour.”³¹

Tropes of weight, leadenness, and gravity are in Hill’s later work to be understood in relation to a nexus of theodicy and natural philosophy in early modern thought, especially Richard Baxter’s elaboration of the Augustinian “natural ‘pondus,’ or necessitating principle” (CCW, 362), resulting from the Fall, which draws both man and language gravitationally (as it were) into error. During a symposium held at the British Academy to commemorate the quatercentenary of Milton’s birth, Hill addressed himself to a roomful of learned readers to reflect on a “gravitational pull towards Milton,” how he “just happened, so to speak instinctively, to draw towards Milton.”³² Hill described Milton as “a linguist of extraordinary power,” actively aware of a dual nature within language: “Milton surely recognized that language was a part of creation, it was an element of creation itself, and as such, contained within itself not only *energeia*, but also *vis inertiae*. And that if part of language was drawn down into a kind of—what the theologians of the time called—‘pondus,’ or weight, then it was equally a part of the millennial power of enlightenment.”³³

In this talk Hill does not quote Baxter on the idea of a “natural pondus” but rather the philosopher Ralph Cudworth, who tells in 1647 of the “theological equal” (Hill calls it) to Milton’s linguistic crux. Hill begins with Cudworth’s likening of physical gravity (as we now call it—“magic,” “sympathy,”

30. Hill, “Fields of Force.”

31. *Ibid.*

32. Hill, at the British Academy, December 6, 2008.

33. *Ibid.*

“magnetism,” and “attraction” are the contemporary metaphors) to the gravity of evil: “all these heavy bodies press downwards towards the centre of our earth, being drawn in by it: in like manner hell, wheresoever it is, will by strong sympathy pull in all sin, and magnetically draw it to itself.”³⁴ For Hill the correspondence in this order of thinking between linguistic and theological gravity reflects his “intuitive or instinctive” sense, confirmed preeminently in the works of Milton, that “this is how language is instantaneously part of the moral dilemma . . . an activation, an embodiment of that crux.” From Milton’s example, Hill draws a general conclusion, saying: “I think that every true poet must know some aspect of this magnetic, downward drawing power.”³⁵ The leadenness of things applies equally to fallen, falling words; “weight of the world, weight of the word, is.”

Ricks objected to Hill’s early essay that “despite the etymology . . . there can be no atonement of atonement and at-one-ment. . . . The loss of the ancient concord may be grievous; it must be irrecoverable.”³⁶ When writing on Byron, Ricks declared another Hillian word lost: “There is no longer a word for what used to be called cant.”³⁷ In referring, straight-faced, to “not-necessary” hyphens in *Comus*, Hill may have been rebuffing a well-known essay on his use of that uniting-and-dividing punctuation mark by a well-known learned reader of J. Milton (i.e., C. B. Ricks).³⁸ In “A Treatise of Civil Power,” section 38, we note a conspicuous full-line parenthesis (a Hillian punctuation technique also elucidated by Ricks) containing both resistance and concession over “cant”:³⁹

(Cant: how I love the word and overuse it.)
Etymology of the gutter is our métier.

(TCPa, n.p.)

Hill uses “cant” or “canting” fifteen times in the *Critical Writings*, once in *Brand* (1978), twice in *The Triumph of Love*, once in *Speech! Speech!*, twice in the Clutag *Treatise* (including the instance cited above), once in *Oraclau/Oracles*, and twice in *Clavics* (2011). Its etymological relationship to words having to do with lyric poetry may be more immediately discernible than its historical uses describing disingenuous language, especially the language of false piety or affected religious sentiment (OED2, 6), or as an epithet for

34. Quoted *ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 321.

37. Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 121.

38. Ricks’s indispensable early essay on Hill’s hyphenation practices is collected in *The Force of Poetry*. He writes a kind of rejoinder to Hill’s talk of “not-necessary” hyphens in Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell under the Sign of Eliot and Pound* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 4–6.

39. Ricks, *Force of Poetry*, 284–318.

“one who uses religious phrases unreally” (OED2, 7). In this sense the word shows itself to be a counterpart to “fable,” since “cant” cannot comprehend, in ambiguous suspension, both the real and the unreal, as “fable” can. In Hill’s terms, canting language has actuality but lacks reality, even as the obsolete word “cant” lacks actuality but has reality as a diagnostic of contemporary discourse.

* * *

The fable of a fallen language has the peculiar property that, as an artifact of language, it calls into question its own reality in the same moment that it asserts it. The prophet or apostle is rescued from this essential hazard by direct access to the divine word. For a poet like Hill, however, no such access is claimed. Instead, the only evidence of value is the labor invested in determining it, however “impossible” the demand and the labor may be. Hill asks, with Bunyan, “how do you teach yourself to distinguish the treacherous common sense of the reprobate from the faithful knowledge of the elect; the answer is, you work at it” (CCW, 286). Of Ruskin, from whom he gets his idea of “intrinsic value,” Hill writes, “the *value* of the ‘dream’ is authenticated, validated, by the recognition of the difficulty with which purchase is obtained: you work at it, work it through” (392). Because of the inveterate unreliability of language, linguistic difficulties require similar diligence. Of the legendary Oxford lexicographer James Murray, Hill invokes reports of his “editorial stamina, his ‘iron determination and capacity for unremitting work’” (271). You work at it, not only for work’s sake but because of an “imperative to ‘discover and exhibit’ a ‘long and sometimes intricate series of significations,’” which Hill says “appears morally correlative to, if not derivative from, theological disputations at the time of the Reformation, when the fate of souls could be determined by a point of etymology or grammar” (270). In a review of the second edition of the *OED*, Hill describes “brooding” over its pages, finding in its etymologies, recorded uses, and careful taxonomy of signification, sense, and subsense ample material to persuade him that “sematology is a theological dimension: the use of language is inseparable from that ‘terrible aboriginal calamity’ in which, according to Newman, the human race is implicated” (279). Not “contains” or “is like” or “is an aspect of” but “is” a theological dimension, Hill says.

“Unremitting,” in the description of Murray, is just the kind of word to attract Hill’s attention, both for its double sense negating either an active pardoning of sin or offense (OED2, “remit, *v.*,” 1) or a passive slackening of one’s diligence or attention (OED2, 6) and for its morphology, which with two reversing prefixes appears to stage a struggle between the promise of restoration and the actuality of what remains unrestored. Important poetic passages containing “un-re-” words include the opening poem (also the title

poem) of Hill's first collection, where he describes "this fierce and unregenerate clay" (CP, 14), and later references to "the strength / of Gilray's unrelenting, unreconciling mind" (C, 72), "Unrevisited" ferns (TL, 64), "things / recovered, even if unrestored" (OS, 21), "history unreprieved" (WT, 47), and "unremembrant / Time" (OB, 27). In the *Critical Writings* we find that things are "unrewarding" (CCW, 51), "unregenerate" (77), "unreconciled" (120, 441, 495), and "unrelenting" (122). "Unremitting" is itself employed or quoted seven times in five different essays, typically in relation to Hill's preoccupying themes: "unremitting pattern" (192), "unremitting drudgery" (287), "unremittingly busy" (310), "unremitting vigilance" (315), "unremitting privation" (465), "unremitting activity" (657).⁴⁰

When it comes to the intrinsic value of artistic work, unforgiving privation can only be answered with unslackening activity and vigilance. To excuse overuse of obsolete "cant," perhaps, Hill pleads occupational duty: our *métier* is etymology. Accordingly, and as a matter of professional emulation of "unremitting work," *métier* and its etymology have themselves been direct concerns of Hill's. In an early notebook, under the heading MÉTIER, he copies out several instances of the word in Charles Péguy's writings, including those he had taken for an epigraph to *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1983): "Le monde moderne avilit. C'est sa spécialité. Je dirais presque que c'est son métier, s'il ne fallait point respecter au-dessus de tout ce beau nom de métier."⁴¹ In among these notes is a page of handwritten etymologies, definitions, and usages of "métier" culled from three seventeenth-century French dictionaries by Peter Rickard, professor of French at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.⁴² Hill saw the word defined there as "profession" or "art"; particular usages mentioning "le métier des armes" and "le métier de poète" (underlined by Rickard); an illustrative sentence stating that "Virgile et Homère ont été en poèsie les maîtres du

40. Morphologically identical to "un-re-," the "ir-re-" form also marks important words in Hill's vocabulary: "irredeemable" (CCW, 19), "irremediable" (TCPb, 5), "irreducible" (CCW, 106, 141, 187, 188, 223, 228, 490; OS, 70), "irresponsible" (CCW, 53, 710), "irrefutable" (TL, 12), "irrevocable"/"irrecoverably" (CCW, 322, 367, 558; TL, 12; OB, 40), "irreplaceable" (CP, 111; TCPa, n.p.), "irreparable"/"irreparably" (CCW, 66, 293, 347; TL, 52), "irreversible" (CCW, 76), "irreconcilable"/"irreconcilably"/"irreconcilability" (CCW, 159, 71; SC, 12). A further morphological double turn is to be found in *Oraclau/Oraclès* 29: "the sun, moved to a late setting, / Works its profounder disrecreating" (O, 10).

41. Hill also copies out the translation in his edition: "The modern world debases. This is its specialty. I would almost say that this is its [*sic*] if the beautiful word calling were not above all to be respected" (MS 20c Hill/4/12/3; *sic* denotes Hill's transcription omission); cf. Charles Péguy, *Men and Saints: Prose and Poetry*, trans. Anne Green and Julien Green (London: Kegan Paul, 1947), 99.

42. MS 20c Hill/4/12/2.

métier, Archimède en G[é]ometrie";⁴³ a number of usages involving *mêler*, "to mix," for example, "meslez vous de vostre mestier";⁴⁴ and in two places, a metonymical figurative association that would have *métier* denote "loom." After one quotation from Richelet—"ce sur quoi quelques artisans travaillent"⁴⁵—Rickard adds "= loom," and similarly, in the section citing Furetière's dictionary, Rickard summarizes the definition of one entry as "frame, loom," before quoting its figurative application to literary authorship: "on dit figurément en ce sens d'un Auteur, qu'il a un ouvrage sur le métier, pour dire qu'il travaille à quelque composition de longue haleine."⁴⁶

So Hill's sense and use of "métier" takes on connotations corresponding to the denotations it carried in French in the late seventeenth century (i.e., a century before its first English attestation in OED2). These include, prominently, "profession," "business," "trade," "vocation," "craft," "technique," "art," and "loom machinery," the last applying not only literally to the weaving of thread into textiles on a loom but also figuratively to the weaving of language into texts and also to biological creation: "On dit aussi, qu'un enfant est sur le *mestier*, quand une femme est enceinte."⁴⁷ In these literal and figurative associations, we hear both acoustic and semantic echoes of "mix," "mixing." *Métier* may not be historically related to its alphabetical successors *métis*, *métissage*, and *métisser*, but frequent recourse to the idiom *s'en mêler* in the definitions provided by Rickard; the acoustic presence of *tisse*, *tissage*, and *tisser* ("weave"—a pernicious false etymology could have *métissage* signify "a bad weaving together") in these words; the conceptual proximity of "weaving" to "mixing"; and perhaps another, secondary sense of *métis*—a type of mixed-fiber textile—all end up in the mix. The ancient metaphor of writing as weaving, its traces evident in the etymological cousins "text" and "textile" (as with "fabrication" and "fabric" and, more remotely, "line" and "linen"), is one that Hill has figured more than once: "consensual angel spinning his words / thread" (C, 60); "Why and how / in these orations do I twist my text?" (SS, 13); "Herbert times and twists text hereby" (Cl, 30); "words are warps of signification."⁴⁸

43. "Virgil and Homer were, in poetry, masters of the *métier*; Archimedes in geometry" (bracketed *é* above corrects Rickard's transcription error).

44. Literally, "get mixed up with your *métier*," meaning figuratively, "mind your own business."

45. "That on which some artisans work." See Pierre Richelet, *Dictionnaire François* (Geneva, 1680), s.v. "métier."

46. "One says of an Author, figuratively in this sense, that he has a work on the *métier*, to mean that he is working on a long and difficult composition." See Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* (The Hague, 1690), s.v. "mestier."

47. "One also says, that a child is on the *métier*, when a woman is pregnant." Ibid.

48. Geoffrey Hill, recorded at Wolfson College, Oxford, May 24, 2010, <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/war-and-civilization-series-lecture-2-war-and-poetry-audio>.

This intricate conglomeration of etymological, semantic, and metaphorical connections itself becomes, in section 38 of “A Treatise of Civil Power,” a frame on which to work the text of the poem. The passage mentioning “cant,” quoted above, continues by invoking the several associations of “métier,” as its lexical attention shifts to this word:

Etymology of the gutter is our métier
 mixed with a stoic hubris which it suits
 down to the ground—a joke even I eschew.
 But leave it in, to show how things get written.

(TCPa, n.p.)

The joke may not amount to more than a series of vague etymological puns: “etymology of the gutter” is either a base form of philology or else a philology of “gutter language,” of low, debased, or corrupted speech or writing (see several quotations in OED2, “gutter, *n.*¹,” 8). A gutter is both the trough that brings rainwater from the eaves “down to the ground” (OED2, 2) and a ground-level channel at the margin of a street, used to drain surface water below ground (3a), hence its association with those “of low breeding,” who are presumed to congregate in the street (3b). The idiom “down to the ground” means “thoroughly, completely” (OED2, “down, *adv.*,” 32) and is particularly associated with the verb “to suit”—both *OED* quotations for this sense, from Broughton and Trollope, have “suited . . . down to the ground.” And a suit, in the relevant sense of the related noun (OED2, 19b), is cut from cloth made on a loom, so that something that “suits down to the ground” could well be said to “clothe from top to bottom.” But the verb “to suit” is, etymologically, to pursue (ultimately from Latin **sequere*, “to follow”), and the task of the gutter etymologist is to follow the historical semantic tree down to the ground and down again below to the roots. The joke too poor not to be eschewed—yet that despite this remains uneschewed—lies somewhere among these etymological associations and reverberations and in the downward-drawing figure that brings them metaphorically together.

Is this how things get written, for Hill—on an etymological loom? Certainly there is plenty in his draft poetry notebooks to corroborate the claim, including definitions, illustrative quotations, and etymologies copied from the *OED*, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, and other reference works, as well as notes to look up this or that word, and frequently its etymology, in those works.⁴⁹ And we may well suppose that with this author, for whom the *OED* is “the third most essential work in English after the English Bible and

49. See, among others, drafts of poems in MS 20c Hill/2/1/16–19, 38–45, 62–63, and notes for prose essays in MS 20c Hill/4/41.

the collected works of Shakespeare,⁵⁰ and “the most tragic book in the English tradition . . . that great *threnos* over our lost national intelligence,”⁵¹ a great number of consultations may have occurred without leaving such obvious traces. Hill’s practice, therefore, is not to be called “etymology of the gutter” in either sense, except perhaps in an extended sense that would have all human language be “gutter language,” all words drawn “down to the ground,” all debased and corrupted, all “at one *with all / corruptible things*.” “Stoic hubris” would indeed be required for the continued practice of such a *métier*, above all in poetry, if ever the work were to escape the *vis inertiae* of language and display its *energeia*. Among the many ways Hill has expressed his continuously frustrated desire for such an achievement is in terms of an “envy,” confessed in *Oraclau/Oraclès*, of “the grand paradigms / In vivid patterns coming off the looms” (O, 45).

In this recent 144-part lyric, a series of six sections take for their title the Welsh word *hiraeth*, denoting “longing” or “grief at parting”⁵² but connoting strongly a specifically Welsh kind of homesickness, a sort of Celtic nostalgia combining wistful regret for national, linguistic, and bucolic roots. Here, English etymology is once again described as hard work, even as etymologies themselves take on the work of the poem:

120: *Hiraeth* (ii)
 Tell me, what is mý sense of *abiding*.
 Ah, love, are we to labour over these
 Mechanic etymologies
 Who encountered blank forbidding
 Before we gave much thought
 To language—touching was vivid sight,
 Our fingers talked, we were illiterate.
Abide does not hit home as does *inure*:
 I who have swum in love-words shore to shore!

(O, 40)

If this poem expresses nostalgia for a lost “home” of preverbal encounter, it must yet express this nostalgia by literate, even literary, means. Even if initially it shies from the task, the poem sets out to consider the word “abiding,” which involves unavoidable hard work at the etymological machine. The word “inure,” which will “hit home” more than “abide” (a word tortuously related to a synonym for “home,” “abode”), may share part of its semantic range with “abide” in that “inure” can describe the bringing of some person,

50. MS 20c Hill/4/27.

51. Geoffrey Hill, recorded at the École normale supérieure, Paris, April 13, 2012, http://savoirsenmultimedia.ens.fr/uploads/sons/2012_04_13_hill.mp3.

52. See William Owen Pughe, *Dictionary of the Welsh Language Explained in English* (Denbigh, 1803), s.v. “hiraeth.”

by repetition of action, to “the endurance of a certain condition, to the following of a certain kind of life, etc.” (OED2, *v.*¹, 1). But the origin of “inure,” from Old French *euure*, *œuvre* (“work”), sends us back, via etymological laboring, to the regretted laboring (perhaps too often a “mislabouring”) over “mechanic etymologies” in lines two and three, to Hill’s previous work at the *métier*—both literally the artistic, poetic profession and figuratively the artisanal, mechanical loom—of etymology, and, not least, to the deliberation he has given, in his *Critical Writings*, to the senses of this particular word, “inure.” There he writes that it “doubles an active and a passive function . . . as creatures of Nature we both act (inure) and are made to suffer (are inured) indifferently. We become used to that which uses us up” (CCW, 517). Like its rhyme word “endure”—present in the *OED*’s first definition of “inure” and, according to Hill, “one of the great words which lie directly on the active-passive divide” (CCW, 391)—“inure” displays a double nature. And like the self-reflexive action of its own split sematology, the word itself works on the poet even as it is worked on by him.

* * *

Hill has lamented the “deleterious effects” of “the widespread emphasis, among theologians as well as scientists, on words as ‘arbitrary signs,’” saying flatly that “from the seventeenth century to the present day it has led to false conclusions” (CCW, 336). Chief among these effects is a failure to recognize that, especially for the theologians of the seventeenth century, but perhaps more generally, “language . . . is a doctrinal solution, in which ‘solution’ acts or suffers what it describes: *OED* sense 1.1*a* fusing with senses 11.5*a* & *c* (*transf.*) and 6*a*” (CCW, 363). As with “endurance” and “inure,” Hill is drawn to the double nature in the sematology, detailed in the sense sections of the *OED*’s entry for “solution,” which would here describe either an active solving (OED2, 1.1) of some doctrinal crux in language or else a passive dissolving (OED2, 11.5, 6) of doctrine into language, or vice versa. In this new conceit for the menace and at-one-ment of language, the second sense redoubles as a figure for the uniting of the two into a whole (OED2, 11.5*c*, *transf.*: “fusion, combination”): “we both act (inure) and are made to suffer (are inured).” The writings of Baxter (whom Hill cites, among others, in this discussion), Cudworth, and Milton (whom Hill does not mention here) provide examples of language steeped in just such an active “solution.” They form, according to Hill, “the nexus of a different order of theological understanding, inherent in etymology and the contextures of grammar and syntax, clamped to a paradox that the ‘one solid coherent body’ of the work may be its ‘Intrinsic Goodness,’ its reconciling of style and faith, or . . . an intrinsic malignity ‘as it were heavy as lead’” (CCW, 365). This older kind of understanding is “different,” Hill thinks, from the current

“general drift,” which he says has been toward “effusive post-Symbolism” and “confessional” writing (365). Against this drift, Hill has strained “to bring secular scholarship (and poetics and the ‘fine arts’) into the field of theological judgement” (365); he has claimed that he “would seriously propose a theology of language” (405).

This proposition, adumbrated in places but never fully elaborated, raises some serious questions within the larger context of Hill’s thought on language and theology. If Hill’s etymological and grammatical categories are to be understood in relation to the story of Christian progress—beginning at Creation, moving through the Fall and worldly corruption toward atonement, grace, and redemption—then how is this relation configured? What priority is to be given to its constituent terms? What status is accorded them, per se as well as vis-à-vis one another? Is the relation metaphorical, metonymic, symbolic, allegorical, or something else? Or is Hill moving out of metaphor and into statements of theology when he says that “sematology is a theological dimension,” that “language . . . is a doctrinal solution,” or that “words are at one with *all / corruptible things*”?

Clearly these questions have implications for the foundations of Hill’s Christian faith, a subject he addressed obliquely in a sermon given in Oxford: “If I am a Christian . . . *If I am a Christian*, it is because the Church’s teaching on Original Sin strikes me as being the most coherent grammar of tragic humanity that I have ever encountered.”⁵³ Here it seems possible that “grammar” is being employed figuratively, to describe a “grand paradigm” like those imagined in *Oraclau/Oraclous* or like the one Hill once described to John Haffenden: “The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice.”⁵⁴ Taken in this extended sense, such a “grammar” might well be authorized as the basis for a theological or spiritual commitment. Elsewhere it is literally the grammar of human utterance that is seen as a sign of alienation from the divine, language itself displaying the mark of Original Sin. In *The Orchards of Syon* Hill refers to the “grammar that reminds / us of our fall” (OS, 58) (here opposed to “the nongrammatical speech of angels”) and to “grammar implicated in, interpreting the Fall” (OS, 67)—here opposed to “God’s / grammar,” a phrase that returns in *Clavics* 11 (Cl, 21) and in the preface to *Style and Faith* (CCW, 263), where Hill traces it to Donne’s *Sermons*. But for Donne, Hill argues (and he says the same for Mil-

53. Geoffrey Hill, “A Sermon Preached in Balliol College Chapel, 11 November 2007,” *Balliol College Record*, 2008, 24–27, 24–25. I have altered the published text to give an indication of Hill’s performance, in which he repeated the introductory phrase with emphasis, inclining his head to glare over reading glasses at the congregation.

54. Geoffrey Hill, in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 88.

ton and Herbert), “style *is* faith” (263), while for the rest, “in most instances style and faith remain obdurately apart” (264). The question that naturally arises, although Hill does not himself raise it directly, is how Donne’s metaphor comparing divine fiat to human grammar will operate for the large majority of cases in which “style and faith remain obdurately apart.” As with the word that has figured, for Hill, a similar reconciling of literary and divine creation, ought we to agree with Ricks that “the loss of the ancient concord may be grievous; it must be irrecoverable”?

Hill’s insistence on the obduracy of language would imply that we should. But if so, any inversion of the grammatical metaphor, to describe human language in terms of the divine creative principle, ought also and as diligently to be avoided, as should any ambiguity in this matter. To seek to understand the divine in terms of human concepts is one thing, but absent the “ancient concord,” to understand human concepts in terms of the divine would be, in Donne’s words, to “change Gods Grammer” and “induce a dangerous solecism.”⁵⁵ It may be that it is the “grammar” of Christianity—its paradigms and categories, their permutations, applications, extensions, and implications—that attracts Hill to the faith. By his own accounts, however, it may also be that English grammar—its strata of ambiguities, its semantic and syntactic cruxes and difficulties—leads him there. Such an inversion would make sense of Hill’s assertion that “sematology is a theological dimension.” But it might well imperil other Christian doctrines. In this Hill might heed his own finding that in order to make “statements of theology,” often it is required to “move out of metaphors,” as he puts it. Hill loves “cant” and overuses it. The weakness confessed in that statement invites error, for to return repeatedly by force of lexical attraction to “cant” may itself produce a canting language.

In an informal academic setting, Hill addressed just this problem of the incommensurability of doctrine and metaphor in relation to T. S. Eliot, “the crucial poet and critic of the last century” (CCW, 561), whose work Hill thinks was progressively debilitated by Anglican spiritual platitudes after his 1927 conversion:⁵⁶ “I do not think that once having made that step you can ever be totally committed as a poet again. . . . For such a doctrinal Christian as Eliot there can be *no* ‘undoctrinal correlative to the . . . sacrament of Penance’ except, one is forced to say through clenched teeth, in something as eccentric, marginal, as the art of the twentieth century poem.”⁵⁷ The point conceded in private and “through clenched teeth” is the crux of the matter

55. Donne, *Sermons*, 5:84–86.

56. See, in addition to the chapters on Eliot in CCW, Hill’s interview with Anne Mounic, “Le poème, ‘moulin mystique’” (March 19, 2008), <http://temporel.fr/Le-poeme-moulin-mystique-Entretien>.

57. MS 20c Hill/4/18.

and is an important reason why Eliot is a crucial figure, in every sense, for Hill. Hill's assertions and concessions here emerge from a central difficulty which clearly it torments him greatly to explain.

It is a difficulty that sometimes shows itself in Hill's deliberated prose, especially in those moments when he considers directly the limits of his doctrinally derived descriptions of language, such as this one of his several invocations of the doctrine of Original Sin: "I can at least reconfirm my own conviction that the 'terrible aboriginal calamity' in the contexture of human life constantly implicates, and is implicated by, the textures of our uttered thought" (CCW, 400–401). Hill's reassertion of this claim, versions of which he has advanced since his earliest critical work, is, in the paragraph that follows, immediately brought into conflict with the contingency of history: "If the historical contextures are attended to, our search for an absolute standard of value takes on a complexion of relativity. I find this difficult to admit as a Christian" (401). The admission here, however "difficult," is not made "through clenched teeth" but rather as part of a general recognition of the difficulty of reconciling the doctrinal with other conceptual categories, the theological to other modes of thought. The crux remains: if an "undoctrinal correlative" were in fact a possibility in twentieth-century poetry, however hard to achieve, then doctrinal Eliot could well have remained a committed poet, contrary to Hill's initial assertions. The question would be one of considered judgment rather than of principle, and we could judge Hill's poetry of fallen language by the same criteria. One such criterion is suggested in a late essay on Eliot, wherein Hill complains that "in *Four Quartets* . . . Eliot is invested by, and investing in, what is accepted" (CCW, 547). Between 1930 and the early 1940s, he says, "Eliot was falling into a kind of dereliction of the critical imagination" (563), going on to gloss "dereliction" with rare and common definitions culled from the *OED*, referring in turn to leaving, forsaking, abandonment, and neglect (563). Eliot stands accused, in other words, of remitting vigilance, of remitting attention in the face of accepted social and spiritual doctrines, of not being eccentric or marginal enough. His failing is civic, moral, and spiritual lassitude as much as creative impotence.

However far this may go to explain Hill's feelings about Eliot, it offers little in principle to support Hill's recurring insistence on the reality of fallen language, intrinsic value, and Original Sin. If Hill's rejection of "undoctrinal correlatives," along with his tendency to balk at metaphorical applications of doctrinal assertions, is indicative of an unarticulated or underdefended principle and if English grammar and not Christian doctrine primarily moves Hill into Christian thinking about origins, sin, and redemption and, further, if we do not wish to use "religious phrases unreally," another set of questions arises. These would ask what might be intrinsically valuable about the very contingency of historical language change, as far as

it can be determined. If a word's history of meanings and uses is neither pre-ordained nor actively under the control of a divine power, and the relation between current and former meanings is a result of factors neither predictable nor even always detectable in retrospect, and if that relationship itself bears no general and predictable resemblance to the relationship between the respective referents, in what sense can anything, valued or unvalued, be said to inhere or endure or even exist in an etymology? In what sense can such accidents of history have value? What wisdom is to be found in such fables? What remnant is there to be redeemed? And what will prove a "true key"?

* * *

This is an enduring crux for Hill. In a late long poem he asks, "How to redeem live prophecies thence: good question / Short of an answer" (OB, 13). The answer Hill endorses regarding the cruxes of Bunyan, Wordsworth, and Ruskin—"the answer is, you work at it. . . . The answer is, again, that you work at it . . . you work at it, work it through" (CCW, 386, 390, 392)—in practice provides no sure answer at all. Hill's poetry has always held itself answerable in this sense, by rarely giving much credence to its own answers. He has attempted a number of formulas, without satisfaction: "Stoics / have answers, but not one I go for" (SS, 11); "how to make them / answerable . . . it is this / that confounds me" (OS, 47); "I could answer / though possibly incorrectly" (TCPb, 16). And Hill has lamented the empty finality of all that "goes without answer" (TCPb, 4): "I could / not answer, but left him there in silence" (OS, 59); "It ejaculates its pain and is not / answered" (SC, 32); "There are questions / made not to be answered" (WT, 40).

One thread in Hill's provisional answer to the question of redeemed language can be traced to the early essay "Redeeming the Time" (1972–73). There Hill endorses Coleridge's distaste for the "unconnected writing" of his day, a phrase clearly at one with Hill's idea of contemporary public discourse. Against this unconnectedness, Hill weighs the principle of reconciliation by which Coleridge believed he might "reduce all knowledges into harmony":⁵⁸ "Of crucial significance is his desiderated 'moral copula' which would, he believed, 'take from History its accidentality—and from Science its fatalism.' His sense of the moral copula, though not exclusively grammatical, was attuned to the minute particulars of grammar and etymology: 'For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized'" (CCW,

58. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk II*, ed. Carl Woodring, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols. (Princeton University Press, 1969–2001), 14, pt. 1:248.

94–95). Hill considers this quotation in four different essays in the *Critical Writings* and refers to it reverently in *Orchards*: “COLERIDGE’s *living powers*, and other / sacrednesses” (OS, 24). The assertion is originally made in *Aids to Reflection* (1825), in support of Coleridge’s injunction to the Reader, to “accustom yourself to reflect on the words you use, hear, or read, their birth, derivation and history.”⁵⁹ As Coleridge writes further on, “more knowledge of more value may be conveyed by the history of a *word*, than by the history of a campaign,” another statement endorsed by Hill as “persuasive.”⁶⁰

Hill’s remark to Haffenden on “the creation and debasement of words” is made in elaboration of his statement that “in handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history.”⁶¹ Yet Hill might have recognized that this way of putting it stands at an angle to the fabulous “history” of the Fall that he claims for a paradigm. Coleridge, in his *Table Talk* (1831), proposed a reconciliation of “natural history with political history,”⁶² harmonizing two branches of history that do not typically invoke (and in some instances may seek to revoke) the story that begins with Creation and the Fall. This reconciliation was to be achieved via a “moral copula,” where “copula” is already a conceptual abstraction of the predicative grammatical unit defined by the *OED* as “the present tense of the verb *to be*” (*OED*2, 1). Returning to Coleridge’s earlier statement on words—“they are *LIVING POWERS*”—Hill writes, “much weighs here upon that plural present indicative of the verb *to be*—the ‘verb substantive’” (CCW, 489). “That weight of the world, weight of the word, *is*”: as Ricks observes about the poem that starts and ends with versions of this proposition, “For Hill, the verb *to be* is likewise to be the mystery and the reconciliation.”⁶³ More to the point, perhaps, the pressure exerted by the copula activates the very mystery of reconciliation: Are “weight of the world and weight of the word,” Ricks asks, “one and the same, as *is* might insist? Yes and no.”⁶⁴ Yes—and yet, we might point out a further “*is*” and “*isn’t*,” the terminal “*is*” not insisting but rather suffering the weight of an insistence, the word considered as a word, subject to its own specific pressures and gravity. Taken this way, the weight of the word “*is*,” the word we call “copula,” would be itself coupled to the weight of the world. Almost. On this parsing, in the first and last sentences of the poem an implied second copula, this one functional, is elided by the medial comma that both conjoins and separates the two halves

59. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, ed. John Beer, in *Collected Works*, 9:10.

60. *Ibid.*, 9:17; MS 20c Hill/4/17/1.

61. Hill, in Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 88.

62. Coleridge, *Collected Works*, 14, pt. 1:249.

63. Ricks, *True Friendship*, 4.

64. *Ibid.*, 5.

of the proposition, demonstrating one way in which hyphens can be not necessary for cleaving, even if they may sometimes be preferred.

“My concern, essentially, is with the nature of language; my chief practice is an exercise which Coleridge termed ‘philosophical etymology,’” Hill says.⁶⁵ The term Coleridge uses—“philosophical etymologist”—is not in fact of his coinage, nor historically has it been particularly associated with him. It was an approving epithet in general circulation from the early nineteenth century and was applied among others to John Horne Tooke, the philologist and “radical” politician toward whom Coleridge had complex attitudes and opinions.⁶⁶ In connecting Coleridge to the title of “philosophical etymologist,” in order then to adopt it for himself, Hill may have once again been encouraged by *Aids to Reflection*, where, commenting on his own playful turn on “become,” Coleridge makes his only use of the phrase in an observation rife with the Hillian senses of sematological “double nature” and “active-passive divide”: “There sometimes occurs an apparent *Play* on words, which not only to the Moralizer, but even to the philosophical Etymologist, appears more than a mere Play. Thus in the double sense of the word, *become*. I have known persons so anxious to have their Dress *become* them . . . as to convert it at length into their proper self, and thus actually to become the Dress.”⁶⁷ “To become” in one sense is to suit down to the ground: if some dress becomes you, it is a suit that suits you. Yet in the other sense, “becoming” is what leads to “being”—we come to be that which we become, even though the “be-” of “become” bears no etymological relation to the “be” of “to be.” In Coleridge’s figure, the subject of “become” becomes the object, and vice versa. Like Hill’s lexical touchstones “endure,” “inure,” and “solution,” “become” either “acts or suffers what it describes.” Reflecting on his play on words, Coleridge decides that it is not mere play, that the linguistic facts that permit it also reveal—or figure—a fact about our human natures: that “it is indifferent whether we say—It *becomes* He, or, He *becomes* it.”⁶⁸ As Hill says, “we both act (inure) and are made to suffer (are inured) indifferently. We become used to that which uses us up.”

A certain contemplative praxis is suggested by Hill’s joining, in a crux both moral and etymological, Coleridge’s talk of reconciling “fatalism” and “accidentality” to his earlier description of “LIVING POWERS.” This would be a philosophical corollary to the poetical recognition of language’s two tendencies, toward the “natural pondus” or the “millennial power of enlightenment,” that Hill observes in Milton. In this Coleridgean mode of linguistic

65. MS 20c Hill/4/17/1.

66. In English print the term appears to have originated with a remark on Tooke, “a philosophical etymologist, and a philosophical politician” in the *Critical Review* 3 (1806): 71.

67. Coleridge, *Collected Works*, 9:60.

68. *Ibid.*

reflection, Hill says, "'philosophical etymology' must be a constituent part of the *noesis* if the form of reflection or contemplation is not to be rendered absurd, ineffectual, self-stultifying, by the pressure of circumstance."⁶⁹ Like searching out "shards or bones of 'most recondite and difficult' matter within the simple hereditary accruals of the vernacular," practicing "philosophical etymology" under "the pressure of circumstance" involves identifying, through diligent investigation and contemplation, the accidental and valuable within the great mass of the merely arbitrary. If it is true that by invoking words as LIVING POWERS poetry can actuate, combine, and humanize the universal, then wrestling with their very contingency may itself be an active virtue, a labor that might even show how the contingent can bear the universal at its heart. The life story of such a POWER would be not only a record of previous thought but also an account of ways of thinking, an account of the several connections among ideas as they have been realized in language over time. This complex of changing thought structures would display current and previous activations of the word, their places within their contemporary systems of thought, and finally, either continuities between current and previous meanings, connections, and systems or, as may be the case, an obdurate and revealing gap.

Naturally, at different times these conceptual systems have integrated theological categories of thought in varying ways and degrees, as, for instance, medieval thought integrated theological and linguistic understanding within the grammatical metaphor. As a reflective practice, philosophical etymology can accommodate the religious and theological without necessarily taking religious beliefs or assertions as the foundation of its own investigations. With Coleridge and etymology in mind, Hill makes a distinction, in a draft passage excised from his essay "Language, Suffering, and Silence," between "intellectual assent" to a history of religious thought and religious experience: "the desire either to 'redeem' words, or to show them at work in their reprobate condition, is possible without a personal commitment to the practice of a particular orthodoxy; though, looked at historically, a Jewish or Christian matrix for such emphasis must be understood, and, looked at personally, at least an intellectual assent to Jewish and/or Christian thinking on the nature of language and redemption. Faith is more complex and elusive."⁷⁰ Hill is himself being elusive. We recognize here his habitual avoidance of statements of theology, which might commit him to a particular set of beliefs and practices, in the very moment of insistence on the formative importance of such theological statements. This instance of demurral, in describing a religious historical "matrix," emphasizes the evolving patterns of thought rather than the particulars of those ways of thinking,

69. MS 20c Hill/4/17/1.

70. MS 20c Hill/4/19.

casting a somewhat different light on the “complexion of relativity” that historical contexture gives to questions of value. The importance placed on understanding and intellectual “assent”—a word glossed elsewhere by Hill as “agreement with a statement . . . or proposal that does not concern oneself” (CCW, 4)⁷¹—refers us to the integrity of the “matrix,” the forming and formal structure, before the consideration of propositions that may inhabit it. As always, the “minute particulars” Hill wishes to deliberate are those of “grammar and etymology,” as in his approving invocation of Coleridge’s “moral copula,” quoted above. In the *Critical Writings*, the Blakean phrase⁷² arises in three different descriptions of assiduous attention to vocabulary and grammar, as when Hill writes of the “minute particulars of word-choice . . . the minute particulars with which man expresses his ‘cunning and masterful mind’” (CCW, 431–33). In the poems, by contrast, we encounter the paradoxical sequence describing “Ephemera’s durance, vast particulars / and still momentum” (SC, 66) and the imperative to “Rake to find sense, / Truck with immense / Particulars” (CI, 41).

Hill says that the duty of literary criticism “is to point to the minute particulars, particulars in which the individual judgement of the critic is itself implicated. . . . To ‘get within the judgement the condition of the judgement’ is . . . the basic essential of all true criticism” (CCW, 561). This broadening of the criterion of “intellectual assent” arises as a corollary to what is essential in poetic creation: “Each true poem is required to bear within it the condition of the judgement that inspired it” (561). If this sounds like the abdication of an “intrinsic value commitment” in favor of relativistic dependence on extrinsic principles, Hill insists that it is not. But it does bring an important modification to his idea of intrinsic value. In a related lecture Hill puts the matter generally: “My language is in me and is me; even as I, inescapably, am a minuscule part of the general semantics of the nation; and as the nature of the State has involved itself in the nature that is most intimately mine.” From this “it follows that intrinsic value . . . bears the extrinsic at its heart,” which raises for Hill a “crucial issue”: “do I confuse intrinsic with mediated value?” (477).

The answer, that “in some if not all circumstances, intrinsic and mediated value cannot, may not, be separated” (CCW, 477) suggests that the working out of this crux has arrived at an impasse. Hill finally figures the

71. Matthew Sperling pursues Hill’s engagement with John Cardinal Newman’s “grammar of assent” in *Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 84–85, 140–41. The monograph appeared too recently to receive full consideration here.

72. “Minute particulars,” described in Damon as “the outward expression in this world of the eternal individualities of all things,” appear throughout *Jerusalem*. See S. Foster Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, ed. Morris Eaves (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2013), 280–81.

problem as essentially unresolvable yet invests this insolubility with its own integral value: "The rest is paradox. For the poem to engage justly with our imperfection, so much the more must the poem approach the nature of its own perfection. . . . The great poem moves us to assent as much by the integrity of its final imperfection as by the amazing grace of its detailed perfection. At those points where the intrinsic value of the formal structure, by whatever means, is revealed to us, that value is on the instant mediated" (477). But the paradox cannot lie in the mere fact of engaging with an imperfect subject: a model of imperfection need not be an imperfect model. The paradox, if there is one, arises from Hill's understanding of the linguistic material of the poem as already bearing within it an imperfection analogous to the human imperfection it seeks to "engage." The formal structure that can contain both linguistic and human imperfection yet moves us, despite this, toward assent is, like the very fable of fallenness and grace, both intrinsic and mediated, inherent and inherited. Understanding linguistic contingency as a basic "condition of the judgement" of a poem implies assent to its place "at the heart" of the poem. Making "philosophical etymology . . . a constituent part of the *noesis*" is fundamentally a process of "getting the condition of the judgement inside the judgement."

Hill has described his Coleridgean practice of etymological reflection as "the grammar of noetics—the noetics of grammar,"⁷³ a general structure of thought that is at the same time a way of thinking about language. The chiasmic figure reverses the genitive case in a way that recalls Hill's discussion of an "active-passive divide" and also mirrors the implicit resemblance between Coleridge's theories of mind and language, between cognitive and linguistic structures, with "grammar" doubling back to describe literally and specifically the structure of the language, as well as metaphorically and abstractly the idea of structure in general. Perhaps Hill so frequently has recourse to the language of "paradigm" and "grammar" (in the extended as well as in the restricted senses), of "matrix" and "formal structure" because the relations perceived among language, human nature, and divine creation are not mimetic or metaphorical, quite, but analogical: that is, it is among the respective structures of linguistic, historical, metaphysical, and spiritual fables that mimetic and metaphorical relations of importance may arise.

It may be that "the ultimate basis for Coleridge's copula is theological," as Matthew Sperling has argued,⁷⁴ but Hill's discussions of Coleridge rarely lead to theological cruxes, nor do they help to work through them. Coleridgean etymologizing is always an intellectual (or "noetic") practice, rather than a theological or poetic one, even if Hill's use of "philosophical etymol-

73. MS 20c Hill/4/17/1.

74. Sperling, *Visionary Philology*, 80.

ogy” is not intended to exclude the theological. What Coleridge has in common with Milton, according to Hill, is that they both understand “the deliberated and undeliberated ambiguities of language” to be “complex indices of innate, inveterate human nature” and can “grasp that their own nature is implicated in the general nature which necessarily suffers the weight of the innate and inveterate.”⁷⁵ Yet, if this is so, the weight must fall differently on Coleridge than it does on Milton. Concerning the balance between “the desire either to ‘redeem’ words, or to show them at work in their reprobate condition,” Hill is more pessimistic than Coleridge. Coleridge believed that “to expose a sophism and to detect the equivocal or double meaning of a word is, in the great majority of cases, one and the same thing.”⁷⁶ This turns away from Hill’s insistence on the irremediable natures of man and language and precludes his practice of dwelling on double meanings that reflect the duality of our fallen nature: not just fallen, that is, “But also splendid. Fallen and noble. Sinewy and funny.”⁷⁷ We might add: acting and suffering, solving and dissolving, active and passive, as well as the double senses of “remitting,” “enduring,” and “inuring.”

Hill’s concern with language is not fundamentally with the exposing of sophisms (he might prefer to say “solecisms,” or even “howlers”) or with correcting imprecisions or inadvertent ambiguities; rather, it is with the deliberated ambiguities that reveal our ambiguous human nature. So Milton’s sense of language may exert the greater gravitational force despite the difficulties of reconciling metaphor and doctrine, style and faith, weight of the word and weight of the world in the modern context. Invoking the lines from *Paradise Lost* in which Milton describes the place at the edge of Hell, ruled by Chaos and destined to endure “Unless th’ Almighty Maker them ordain / His dark materials to create more Worlds,” Hill comments: “clearly *His Dark Materials* would be a wonderful title for a book on Milton’s language.”⁷⁸ Authors of Milton’s age, Hill elsewhere asserts, “were prepared and able to imitate the original authorship, the *auctoritas*, of God” (CCW, 263), which places the metaphor and the reality, the imitation and the origin, in their correct relation, at least doctrinally speaking. Yet in attempting at-one-ment with the divine creation by imitating the divine creative act within his own field of “dark and disputed matter” (CCW, 161), the poet repeatedly comes up against a duality in the materials of language.

75. MS 20c Hill/4/17/1.

76. Coleridge, *Collected Works*, 9:7.

77. Hill, “Art of Poetry LXXX,” 297.

78. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2:915–16, in *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1958); Hill, at the British Academy, December 6, 2008.

Hill has described this analogically as *vis inertiae* and *energeia*, natural pondus and millennial power of enlightenment, suffering and acting, among other formulations. Reflecting on Charles Williams's (1886–1945) idea of poetry as “arbitrary” in a positive theological sense, Hill sees another double meaning that encapsulates the nature of the linguistic creative act in relation to the divine creation: “‘Arbitrary’ itself can mean either discretionary or despotic. Poetry can be in, or out, of grace; and the mind of the maker can imitate either God’s commandment or Lucifer’s ‘instressing of his own inscape’ as Hopkins splendidly and humbly described it” (CCW, 563). When Hill alludes to this same passage from Hopkins in *The Triumph of Love*, we remember, it is within the section “Concerning the elective will, *arbitrium*. / Concerning wilfulness and determination” (TL, 75)—concerning, preeminently, the differing kinds of will and self-will that the poet may exert and be subject to. Discussing an early poem for Osip Mandelstam (CP, 69), Hill calls his own use of a nine-syllable line “a wilful and uncouth choice which I have tried to reconcile with the natural speech-melodies of English—formal and informal.”⁷⁹ The exercise of the will against the natural order, the election of arbitrary formal schemas, makes the work of reconciliation both more necessary and more difficult, and also more real. In a late Hopkinsian rewording of this idea, Hill says “in a sense *vis inertiae* is the selected meter, *energeia* is the rhythm of the speech, and the form in which *energeia* rides over and above *vis inertiae* is revealed in . . . the bidding of the speech rhythm across the mere monumentality of the structure.”⁸⁰

The conceptual dualities discovered in and among the etymological strata of the language are typically described by Hill as self-resistant—oppositions that are difficult if not impossible to resolve, that demand long and close attention to work through. This reflects a depiction Hill has given of his critical undertakings: “my self-appointed word for what I do is ‘agon’ . . . the original expositions” become, over time, “bouts of self-wrestling.”⁸¹ If this owes something to Eliot’s “intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings,”⁸² that phrase echoes even more strongly in a late poem’s talk of “wrestling grammar / trusting as Jacob” (O, 8). In a definition Hill once gave to poetic art, self-wrestling and word wrestling become one and the same: “Poetry’s its own agon that *allows us / to recognize devastation* as the rift / between power and powerlessness” (TCPb, 28).⁸³ Each of these depic-

79. MS 20C Hill/5/2/59.

80. Hill, at the British Academy, December 6, 2008.

81. Hill, “Fields of Force.”

82. T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” from *Four Quartets*, in *Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 125.

83. Hill is responding to Gillian Rose’s use of “agon” in *Love’s Work* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995).

tions of poetic creation contends with words as LIVING POWERS, with dark materials, recondite and difficult. "For one as excited as I am by the proximity of language," Hill says, "words appear all the time as if they were three dimensional. They not only strike you, they rear up and strike you."⁸⁴

84. Geoffrey Hill, "'Legal Fiction' and Legal Fiction," recorded in Oxford, March 21, 2013, <http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/poetry/2013-03-21-engfac-poetry-hill-2.mp3>.