CIVIL VOICES: ON READING GEOFFREY HILL READING

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> I'm convinced that shaping
> Voicing, are types of civic action.
>
> Geoffrey Hill (*Triumph of Love* 36)

The work of the contemporary English poet Geoffrey Hill has repeatedly registered the shaping pressures of the civil and the civic upon both poetic and everyday language. His attention to the capacity of the voice and page as communal engagement can be traced from early poems such as 'Poetry as History' (*CP* 84), 'Of Commerce and Society' (*CP* 46), through later poems, 'Respublica' (*C* 29), 'Mysticism and Democracy' (*C* 14), up to his recently published volume, *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007). Such poetry is driven by the recognition that it exists in the midst of a public world of speech and gesture: it is richly embedded in contacts, and context. It engages a public audience, a trans-historical community of real and fictitious literary, aesthetic and political figures—'To the Lord Protector Cromwell' (*TCP* 13), 'To John Constable: In Absentia' (*C* 53), 'Wild Clematis in Winter (i.m. William Cookson)' (*WT* 35–58), 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz' (*WT* 21), 'Churchill's Funeral' (*C* 43)—as well as civil bodies and institutions: 'To the High Court of Parliament' (*C* 1, 51, 72), 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' (*CP* 29). T. S. Eliot has written that 'the poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech and in turn gives life to it' (15). It is this sense of the civil as a people's linguistic co-operation and interchange that plays through Hill's lines from the late poem *The Triumph of Love*.

Like Eliot, Hill reads language here as a form of public responsiveness we partake in daily, suggesting that when speaking or writing, we are continually enmeshed in and 'shaping' social obligations, dramatic roles, historico-political allegiances. Language involves public involvement, not just self-involvement. To use words is to be engaged with a body of others: a community, a nation. It is to partake in a 'civic action' that informs our sense of ourselves as 'a people', as citizens. On this view, language is active: '*shaping*/Voicing' so that the poem articulates, alters, and makes sense of what it encounters. This speaks towards what Peter Robinson has described as Hill's rebuttal of 'those who call their utterances "merely words"' (215), and to Stephen James's comment that Hill's work illustrates 'the . . . relation between word and deed' (37). Hill's lines make clear that they regard poetic language as civic action, but they would also have it that it is not only the learned poet or high-ranking politician whose efforts

make up this work. Poetry's 'civil power' involves the innumerable civic acts of 'shaping/Voicing' performed by citizens over time, the histories, artworks of a culture as well as the day-to-day conversations carried out within it. The civil implications of speaking and writing are generated by each and all.

Surprisingly then, given the work's civil focus, the lines make their assertions in the personal voice, the first-person syntax that continues to be associated with inwardness, privacy, lyric subjectivity. Also surprisingly, in formulating its linguistic observations in the faltering first-person voice ('Still, I'm convinced that . . . '), the lines introduce a tonal weakness that detracts from the claim's assurance. 'Still . . . I'm convinced' is the sort of pronouncement made when one anticipates one soon might not be. Yet locating its observations in the syntax of the first person is a clever move that enforces their import. By taking up the voice of the uncertain *I*, the sentence reveals itself as an example of the very trend it asserts: if language confers the responsibility of performing 'civic action', it does so not only upon poets, legislators, philosophers, and not only in elegant, impersonal theories, but upon each of its uncertain speakers: each *I* participates, however innocently, in the weave and mesh of 'civic' choices. Most importantly, that individual *I*—the *I* closely associated with Romantic lyric subjectivity, solitary voicing—is shown up not as isolated and alone, but as positioned by the discourses its language partakes of. Whether it knows it or not, *I* is continually performing, and implicating itself in 'civic actions'.

That poetry is a vital part of our language-world, specifically engaged in civil life, civil understandings, can be seen particularly in Hill's attention to poetry's political and historical engagement. In both the early work (approximately 1959-1984) and the late work (from *Canaan* onward) there are clear indications that poetry marks out its place *within* civil affairs, not apart from, or above them. In the early poem '*Of* Commerce and Society' (*CP* 46) that 'of' declares the work's involvement *in* the 'commerce' and 'society' it describes (as opposed to 'about' or 'on', which might suggest more neutral commentary, from an uninvolved vantage point). The poem's epigraph is from the American poet, essayist and conservative social commentator Allen Tate, whose work emphasised the writer's need for a tradition to adhere to, and from whose own *More Sonnets at Christmas* Hill's title is taken. Hill's epigraph, laying bare its indebtedness to Tate, ensures that the reader notices the 'borrowed' nature of its title-giving, the present author's debt to previous writing-acts, the linking of these 'new' words with a tradition of literary endeavour that has itself emphasised the need for tradition. So too, Hill's poem, even before it has progressed to its opening line, has called into question *which* commerce and society the poem can be said to be 'Of'. Of Tate's? Of its own? Of the 'real' society 'outside' the poem? Or only of a society and commerce inside the work of other literary figures? By taking the poem's title from the body of another work, which it includes within its own body as epigraph, Hill

sets up complex relationships between epigraph, title and dedication. The six subtitles that follow detail episodes from British and European 'real' history, which set up equally complex relationships between real-time event and reportage/text generated 'about' that event (and in terms of textual-event, between 'original' and 'copy'). We encounter 'The Apostles: Versailles, 1919', 'The Lowlands of Holland' (the title of a popular sentimental song about the ills and personal injustices of conscription), 'The Death of Shelley', 'Ode on the Loss of the Titanic' (which sounds as though it alludes to a well-known popular ode, though to my knowledge, no such ode exists), 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian'. The latter is a particularly rich example. Its homage to Henry James and its quotation ('But then face to face', coming from Corinthians: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face') register a number of voices on the matter of what constitutes fit subjects for art, as well as questioning the aesthetic propriety of depicting suffering, and the form/manner in which suffering can/should be depicted. Is this section recommending 'face to face' appreciation of the event, as opposed to art's seeing 'through a glass, darkly'? Or suggesting that direct, straightforward aesthetic contact, acting upon the senses, can be opposed to a more convoluted seeing 'through a glass, darkly'? The section itself seems to present a face-to-face, an immediate, 'naked', 'plain' encounter with Saint Sebastian: 'Naked, as if for swimming, the martyr/Catches his death in a little flutter/Of plain arrows'. But Hill's dense fabric of associations simultaneously complicates any desire we might have for aesthetic immediacy, making clear that any new depiction of the Saint must acknowledge its dependence upon old, well-trodden ground: there can be no unmediated encounter with Saint Sebastian. As well as demonstrating the impossibility of reflecting its *subject* directly (pointing out its reliance upon previous accounts), the poem also emphasises that the very *words* of its speaker reach us second (or third, or fourth) hand. The poem's language is filtered through innumerable previous speakers, and the context of its language is not just the poem we are reading, but the whole canon of literature, and beyond.

It is in this light that I want to read *A Treatise of Civil Power*, a document received not directly, but mediated through the context of Hill's previous works. This document repeatedly declares its debt to its own and to others' previous writings and readings: 'On Reading Milton . . . ' (4), 'On Reading Burke . . . ' (18), 'After Reading . . . ' (23). The works in the latest volume are situated in the context of our awareness of Hill's textual history, and this history involves not only the scrutiny of the forms and habits of Hill's own previous publications, but also of the significant relationships between his own and others' work. Our reading of his textual history involves an encounter with his readings of others: the latest volume flags up the process of textual re-vision by having us read poems prompted by Hill's reading. Repeatedly looking back on the language, Hill's sensitivity to the links between texts has manifested itself in his re-thinking and re-coining of names and titles. If we are familiar with the

way his work has often conjured and dedicated itself to another author, artist or artwork—to G. Wilson Knight (*CP* 83) or to John Constable (*C* 53), for example—and/or assumes its title from a previously published text (*Scenes from Comus, The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language*), we will note that the latest volume discernibly follows in this trend. Its title is taken from Milton's *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes; Showing That it Is Not Lawful For Any Power on Earth to Compel in Matters of Religion* (1659), and the pattern is repeated in the numerous poems within: 'On Reading *Burke on Liberty, Empire and Reform*' (18), 'G. F. Handel, Opus 6' (32), 'Harmonia Sacra' (10). This new volume not only heavily alludes to and quotes from other texts, but directly declares itself written in response to encounters with them, ensuring that to read Hill involves reading the works of a culture. There are multiple, inexhaustible levels of textual mediation to be traced here. The volume is a history of various forms of civil remembrance as they are manifested in and shaped by public, poetic documents. Hill's poem pays tribute to the power of reading the printed words of a culture, and also makes memories *available* to the public. This casts remembering itself as a social, civil act. It also builds on the notion of 'civil' not only as public action, but also appropriate action: remembrance as fit subject for art, even art's duty. The volume's 'civil' function is its exploration of poetry's power to construct various kinds of literary memorial (recalling historical events, publicly and privately known figures, artistic and poetic works, and a culture's capacity for social recollection itself), and is also its implicit suggestion of art's just role in performing this function, its assumption of responsibility: the civility of poetry's civil power.

Hill has not always been read as civil in this sense. His technique of turning back to others' language has been praised by some as piquant, culturally enriching, historically attuned, but also repeatedly criticised for impenetrability to the point of *in*civility. (He has been accused of being difficult, nostalgic, anachronistic, obfuscatory, reactionary.[1]) Yet the opening up of an allusive aesthetic web is hardly specific to Hill, nor generally dismissed as inaccessible anachronism. We might see it opening everywhere: W. H. Auden's poems dedicated 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', 'In Memory of Ernst Toller', and his ekphrastic 'Musee des Beaux Arts' (Auden 197-98, 146), as well as Ted Hughes's 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar', 'Wilfred Owen's Photographs' (Hughes 19, 28), and of course much of the work of the modern Irish poets, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Derek Mahon, all put aspects of textual interchange into play, posing questions about the public nature of a culture's remembrance, its potential for literary re-adjustments of history. We still tend to think of intertextuality as reminiscent of Modernist poetics; Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* come to mind as its forerunners. There are problems, however, with dismissing its manifestation in modern poetry, as James Wood and Sean O' Brien have with regard to Hill,

as 'a misreading of Eliot . . . the crust of something dead' (Wood 25), or 'a Modernist encrustation' (O' Brien 12). These phrases imply that something decorative, overlaid (presumably intertextual language), camouflages and conceals an original beneath (the poet's own words), which gives quite a different sense from the recognition we make readily enough post Modernism, that any writing that includes quotations, allusions, translations, addresses, dedications, epigraphs, unavoidably sets up reference points to other texts, authors, occasions of composition, calling upon those texts, reading itself and asking to be read in a particular way. Yet we would not think the poems of Auden, Hughes, Heaney and Mahon overlaid by affectation or obfuscatory allusiveness: we might even say that their relation with previous texts seems to occur quite naturally.[2] That has become a common enough, even a civil recognition about writing and documentation. Think of our twenty-first century critical tendency to read literature that was written long before the advent of Modernism in these terms. Knowing which words belong to whom is a notoriously tricky matter. This has always been the case, though it has become lodged in the critical consciousness as a key point of attention, passing, as it were, into general civil awareness.

Nevertheless, the impression of a correspondence between works, and the notion of literary language as shared, mutual voicing become insistent when the works have as part of their *title* an allusion, quotation or author's name (see Haughton). A poem like 'On Reading Blake: *Prophet Against Empire*' (*TCP* 11), or 'On Reading *Burke On Empire, Liberty and Reform*' (*TCP* 18) accosts its reader with all three. True enough, the poems gracefully defer to the specific authors and texts that prompted them. Hill helpfully informs us of the particular occasion that stimulated the creative impulse: far from delighting in obfuscatory intertextual play, such poems seem to lay out their reference points for their readers rather hospitably, and modestly pay tribute to canonical artworks. But also, these works take the liberty of reading themselves in relation to specific literary others, demanding that subsequent readers also perceive them as such. The titles read as instructions for how to place the poems in the culture (readers should consider them alongside particular other works), and also how to regard the author: readers are to see him/her not as independent, or solitary creative genius, but as provoked and engaged with other utterances; as a *reader*-writer responsive to art and to forms of public knowledge. Such titles declare themselves embedded in other acts of entitlement: as though names by necessity were generated through calling upon other names, forming a reciprocating linguistic community in which specific identities continually grow and change. A good example of this is the intertextually titled poem of Hill's, 'On Reading *Crowds and Power*' (*TCP* 46). The poem sets up a dialogue between original text and commentary upon it that makes it difficult to tell original from copy, source from translation, primary action from response. The original is 'transposed, with slight changes of wording, into strophic form' Hill explains,

and this transposition builds a correspondence between the author reading/quoting the old lines and the author writing the new lines as a response to another. The link between Sections 2 and 3 particularly emphasises literary relationship, statement and response, claim and counter-claim.

> *. . . Names collect*
> *their own crowds. They are greedy, live their own*
> *separate lives, hardly at all connected*
> *with the real natures of the men who bear them.*
>
>
> 3
> But think on: that which is difficult
> preserves democracy; you pay respect
> to the intelligence of the citizen.

Perhaps the most commonsensical response to the poem is to read it as a conversation between Hill and the author of *Crowds and Power*. On this view, the change in stance between Sections 2 and 3 are the turn toward Hill's personal perspective, coming in response to the viewpoint of Elias Canetti, the Nobel Prize winning author who is the source of the italicised lines. After all, the poem is written in the second-person language of *I* and *you*: we expect two different voices. We hear them too, when over the section-break into 3, the logical shift and change of direction occurs: 'But think on . . . '. Yet also, as Hill has made clear, these italicised lines are not a faithful incorporation of Canetti's original text. They are Hill's *translation*, or 'transposition', of Canetti's prose into verse. The lines of Section 2 have already been interpreted by our current author, and are then, in Section 3, responded to by him. One cannot straightforwardly pin this dialogue to two precise agents: Hill and Canetti, author and another. The tribute by Hill to Canetti—if it is one—is not straightforward. It alters what it pays heed to, speaking to, of, and even *as* Canetti. All of this ensures that unmediated contact either with current or remembered author is out of the question. They speak together, through each other, *and* as members of a civil body which has ideas about how such remembered figures ought to be read and spoken of: 'you pay respect/to the intelligence of the citizen'. Hill's poetic recollection of another is not posed as a one-way, personal construction or pure private recollection. Rather, Hill's memories draw on the dialogue, vocabulary, memory, ideology of a culture, using and being used by public conventions of remembrance. The poem's apparently private lyric remembrance takes place using—indeed, within—the passages from another's published work. The very impression of direct personal speech is constructed from the social world, from public literary contexts.

This interweaving of the personal and the public, original and construction comes to the fore repeatedly in *A Treatise*, but perhaps nowhere so strongly as

in the memorialising poems of the latest volume: 'In Memoriam: Ernst Barlach' (45), 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose' (35), 'In Memoriam: Aleksander Wat' (40). Each of the poems remembers a public figure or artist-writer whom Hill did not know personally, and works towards constructing *for* them a literary memorial (in another sense, constructing these figures *as* literary memorials). Hill's recollections are available not through his face-to-face acquaintance, but through his encounters with published, public documents, either by or about Barlach, Rose, Wat. For Hill, these figures are 'originally' (*not* secondarily) textual experiences, and can only be imperfectly approached in the terms of a remembered personal relationship: 'I did not blunder into your room with flowers', 'words like compassion . . . I/never chanced in your living presence'. Even when using the grammar of direct address Hill is limited to speculating upon a relationship that he did not have; a relationship he can only imagine, and which gains him no closer access to the remembered figures: 'I did not . . . ', 'I never . . . ', 'I might have . . . '. Hill's memorials, it turns out, are a testament to the primacy of his *literary* encounters: a recollection of these figures not as they 'really' were, but of these individuals as they have passed into the shared language, specifically as communal literary memory: '*My heart bleeds with grief but you give me strength*/you carved in Low German for an *Eherenmal*', '*love's work* a bleak ontology/to have to contemplate; it may be all we have'. This inclusive 'we' emphasises the publicly available nature of information that supports Hill's memory: Barlach's and Rose's texts are accessible to all, 'a . . . legacy'. Both for Hill, as a reader, and also for Hill's own readers, addressees are publicly negotiated concepts; concepts that the present poem cannot report passively, but continues to shape, change and historicise.

In 'In Memoriam: Gillian Rose', for instance, the language available for articulating personal griefs and memories is figured as a public language. The formal demands of private elegy and of writing 'in memoriam' shape and construct how its *I* remembers. 'I have a question to ask for *the form's* sake . . . ' Hill begins, as though it were not only the human subject that prompted the memorial, but also, even predominantly, the organising demands of memorialising language. The poem is affected by the structures of communal, aesthetic and historical memory, seeking to explore how a culture might justifiably memorialise Rose, particularly when the question of direct access to historical figures is so complex. Take for instance the poem's incorporation of the visual arts. Hill's poem is a recollection of Rose's recollection of the death of the Athenian general Phocion: a story mediated through a close succession of narrative frames. Phocion is a particularly relevant reference, for that general's condemnation to death on the false charge of treason opens the question of 'correct' interpretation and the poet's role in accurate or 'judicial' historical recollection. Hill's textual encounter with Phocion is staged through the work of the seventeenth century neo-Classical artist Poussin, an artist who was himself

busy with the question of what constituted appropriate subject matter and technique for art, and whose theories that art should revivify the past and depict 'a live tradition' have been regarded by critics as highly influential in reviving the Classical traditions in the seventeenth-century (Cropper and Dempsey 8). Poussin reclaimed the burial of Phocion as fit subject for art, memorialising it in his famous paintings, *The Funeral of Phocion* and *The Gathering of the Ashes of Phocion by his Widow*. In the former, we are directed to view Phocion's 'disgraced' remains being carried out of the city, and almost directly above them, the image of a grand funeral monument is visible, a reminder of the memorial Phocion would have had. Hill's poetic recollection of Phocion recalls Poussin's recollection of Phocion, and also Rose's recollection of Poussin recollecting Phocion, itself available through yet another text by Plutarch. Hill's text mediates accounts of death and the processes through which we construct artistic memorials through various interpretative processes. Such a text questions what role poems and artworks play in individual and collective memory. Are they simply the means of recording events, or do they actively structure them? Is it language that allows us to experience grief as grief, memory as memory? Hill illuminates how his own text not only registers and records the sayings and writings of others, but also participates in its own interpretative and mediating re-constructions.

If such structures look like impositions problematically intruding on unsullied private memories, compromising the 'true' claims of personal recollection, we should bear in mind that the poem also raises the issue of why we would take as reliable our 'own' inner and ultimately unverifiable memories: 'I have a question', 'I . . . construe', 'carry failure on their back', 'blindness'. As memorial, the poem says much about the precarious nature of memory, indicating that it is clouded by doubt, uncertainty. Even the positive-sounding 'far-seeing'—set apart in the final line of section 2, as if to emphasise that sight or insight could continue unabated well into the future—is still strangely clouded: 'unfathomable'. Far sightedness is itself incapable of clearly perceiving. The structures, forms, demands of lyric memorial are not so much compromising personal/solitary remembrance, but offering it a form in which to compose itself. Forms are an aid to memory not a hindrance; they offer a grounding, a productive structure in which to think and recall.

The artwork-as-memorial, then, is not allowed to stand back as a faithful witness recording neutrally the personalities, philosophies or styles of others. For Hill, memorials are a form of history, a textual, and so flexible, re-thinkable, account-making process. If the memorialising drive stimulates us to record other artists, poets, historical figures, texts, loves, personal experiences, it also gets in the way of secure, formal or objective 'historical' access. Memorials—like histories—are not viewed as unquestionably true, or as authoritative sources, but as mediated experiences; narratives subject to manipulation, change, accident. This not to suggest that the memorialising

narratives *cannot* be true—just that the truth we have on our hands is always up for debate, discussion, and re-construction. And if it is possible to rethink our historical account-making, it is also possible to rethink the self that is performing them. The stories we tell shape and change us. The others we name, and those we remember also start to define us. In each case, selves are formed socially; more largely: civically. Remember, for Hill, documents are communal projects, in which we engage, construct, draw on existing accounts and systems of organisation and sense-making—whether literature, theology, economics, geography, or simply the language of personal recollection. We do not make up histories, poems, memorials alone, but as part of a culture. Most obviously, Hill's decision to use the Latinate public form of elegy, 'In Memoriam,' flags up that the poems are an entrenchedly civic form of remembrance, a historically-grounded form of access to the dead that requires access to a culture's history of remembering (part of which needs, and demands memorials). The words 'In Memoriam' put us in mind of a specific poetic form and tradition: that of Tennyson's nineteenth-century public elegy to Arthur Hallam. Hill's crafting of these poems as memorial-as-history is a way not just of questioning whether memory can access personal truths, but of examining the memorial's authority as *civic* artefact. Like history, memorials are co-operative projects. They do not isolate us from others, but lead us back to them.

In *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Michael Wood notes that close reading has often been taken 'chiefly to mean a radical refusal of history, a vision of the literary text as a perfected and unalterable verbal structure, a paradise of poised irony and ambiguity, invulnerable to time or politics' (219–20). Hill's work challenges the idea that scrupulous attention to language involves a 'refusal of history' (and the related notion that poetic or historical account can attain pure verbal security, invulnerability, unalterability). For Hill, rigorous linguistic analysis *necessarily* involves intricate historical exposition, which changes both what we remember and the way we remember it (the words and forms we choose to structure memory). Hill's language continually leads us back to its role as historical exposition and construction: its civil function as tribute and testament to a culture's recollections indicates its power in the present. We are repeatedly exposed to its detailed attentiveness to vocabulary, form, syntax that is indissolubly engaged with its attentiveness to specific histories, and to the discourses of civil structuring. The way a culture continues to speak and think about itself involves decisions about what to remember and to leave out, and of how to remember. Each informs the patterns of our apparently 'ahistorical', personal voicings of contemporary life. Repeatedly avoiding poetic voicing as direct personal expression, Hill's poems embody forms of mediated contact between authors and readers, and between authors, complicating access to any 'original', and embedding us continually in the structures of civil society. Reading Hill is to read the community of public voicings—both canonical and obscure—his works direct us to: to read Hill is to

read *his* readings of others, his reading of a culture. It is to examine how our sense of the civil has been captured in and established through language. Hill both records for posterity and also *negotiates for the present* a mediated version of the artistic spontaneity we associate with 'voicing', and in so doing, executes artistic participation of his own. Like Poussin's *The Funeral of Phocion*, Hill's poetry is both the occasion of art, and a reflection upon that art's textual and stylistic civil history.

NOTES

Abbreviations

CP   Collected Poems
C   Canaan
RW   Required Writing
TCP   A Treatise of Civil Power
WT   Without Title

[1] 'He has sounded more like a major professor than a minor prophet' (Crawford 1); 'Hill's characteristic style—is high modernist, clotted with ambiguous syntax and abstruse allusions' (Kirsch 7); 'Reading Geoffrey Hill can itself feel like receiving a reading list—one is frequently referred to texts and events with which one is unhappily unfamiliar' (Potts 25).

[2] Philip Larkin is among those who have emphasised the allusive drive as *un*natural, claiming that 'I have no belief in "tradition" or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poets or poems' (*RW* 79). Yet his work does make casual allusions to known contemporary figures (Bechet, Sutton) and literary phenomena ('the *Chatterly* ban'), as well as contemporary art-forms and artists (the Beatles), and politicians, such as Morgan Forster Larson. Meanwhile his poems, 'For Sidney Bechet', 'Conscript: for James Ballard Sutton' dedicate themselves to well-known musicians and painters, although they were also personal acquaintances.

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