

Chapter I

‘A theory of energy’

If Geoffrey Hill’s poetry has ever been at odds with prevailing literary tastes, fashions, and commitments, then his later work, both in poetry and criticism, is increasingly open about this being at odds. This later work is often a self-referential examination of just what it is that makes it so at odds with its surrounding literary and political culture, embracing that sense of “cultural recalcitrance”¹ – though certainly not entirely without caveat or regret. This strong sense of eccentricity, a favourite word of the later Hill’s, arises both from his developments of New Critical and modernist beliefs, an investment bound to put him at bay among the postmodernist culture of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, and from his acute sense of poetry being by nature political and historical, a sense which, as he saw it, made him a natural antagonist of the culture in which this late poetry takes, or does not take, its place. However, as widely acclaimed poet and critic, one of the most written-about of the last few decades in the English language, as well as fulfilling the role of Oxford Professor of Poetry in this period – not to mention being knighted in 2012 – Hill’s self-presentation as an isolated and derided figure demands some explanation – which is one element of this book’s general approach. Geoffrey Hill was routinely described as ‘the greatest living poet in English’² and variants thereof, and so he had a formidable reputation as a poet – though it was, rather, his reputation as a formidable poet which made him, as he saw it, a decidedly minority figure in broadly cultural terms.

I categorise Geoffrey Hill’s later work as roughly a twenty-year period, from around 1996 (the year of ‘Dividing Legacies’, an essay on T.S. Eliot which I see as inaugurating this later phase) to 2016, the year of his death at the age of eighty-four, in which Hill published his last piece, ‘Mightier and Darker’, an essay-review on Charles

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Williams in the *Times Literary Supplement*.³ This body of work incorporates poetry, literary-critical essays, and Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures, and I draw here on unpublished material housed in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds which is dated to this period. Hill's later work is a distinct phase, though there are continuations and reminiscences of his earlier work within it; the period is distinguished not least by the stunning prolificity which it exhibits, Hill producing thirteen new books of poetry between roughly 1996 (*Canaan*, which is not figured here, was published in this year) and 2012; two books of critical essays; and fifteen Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures between 2010 and 2015. Hill had previously published six books of poetry and two books of criticism between 1959 and 1996.

The criticism of this later period may appear daunting to new readers of his work. It is deeply invested in philosophical perspectives, to the extent that one might categorise much of Hill's later work in criticism as 'philosophy of literature': personally, however, I feel that such a categorisation would detract from the available dimensions of literary criticism. Hill's criticism is philosophical, and his later poetry and criticism are a working through – not necessarily a working *out* of – various intellectual, moral, and psychological concerns. On that point, I would claim that the interdependence of the intellectual, the moral, and the psychological – that is, the emotional, the deeply personal – is necessary to writing of real importance: in a work of art, the 'problem' which the piece embodies is both a 'problem' in an existential sense and as intellectual and moral puzzlement. This sense of the problematic certainly drives Hill's later output, copious and challenging as it is: and a remark about poetry of the Movement of the 1950s, including such poets as Philip Larkin (a favourite *bête noire*) and Kingsley Amis, against which his early work (particularly his first collection, *For the Unfallen*, of 1959) took its directions, sums up this crucial aspect of his later work: "when you have techne without crisis, the result is poetry similar to that written by the Movement poets of the 1950s".⁴ Reading through the two new books of criticism in the *Collected Critical Writings*, and the thirteen books of poetry (to date) in this later period, one is constantly reminded that 'crisis' harks back to the Greek word *krinein*, to decide or judge: it is a word that holds in a single thought perplexity and resolution.⁵

Throughout the criticism of this later period, certain fundamental problems are being worried away at: one of the most fundamental of these being, precisely, *being*. Hill's obsession with being begins in his criticism as early as 1975, in the essay 'Perplexed Persistence: The Exemplary Failure of T.H. Green', being figured here as "that which points beyond the data":

The difference between Kant and the Victorian students of Kant in England may well turn on a difference of emphasis concerning that which "points beyond the data". In Kant this is a "common element" existing as "a logical presupposition, a purely formal implication"; in Sidgwick and Green that which points beyond the data is more often a pious wish. Pious wishes are of course wholly valid, unless they are presented as logical presuppositions and purely formal implications. It is then that they cease to be "that which points beyond the data" and become the "ultimate vague reasons" which Whitehead has so precisely described. (*Collected Critical Writings* [henceforth *CCW*] 113)

I wish to begin my exploration of Hill's later work by remarking on his perplexed fascination with being; and to begin with that sentence, which might stand over much of the energy and drive of the later poetry: "Pious wishes are of course wholly valid, unless they are presented as logical presuppositions and purely formal implications." Along with Hill's perplexed concern with being, or "that which points beyond the data", goes an ethical self-recognition that one's own desires, or "pious wishes", cannot fail to orientate one's most "purely formal" interests. In other words, you cannot wish being into being, as it were, but to try to do so is more than understandable, provided you *recognise* that you are indeed doing this – and this sort of self-recognition is the crucial task of the writer, in Hill's view. In the words of F.H. Bradley, a philosopher central to Hill's later approach, the task is "to get within the judgement the condition of the judgement" (*CCW* 566). And in another relatively early essay, 'Our Word Is Our Bond' (1983), Hill writes (quoting T.H. Green again) "to place ourselves 'outside the process by which our knowledge is developed' is to conceive of an untenable 'ecstasy', whereas to recognize our being within the process is to accept our true condition" (*CCW* 158).

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This apprehension, taken largely from F.H. Bradley also, is a crucial dynamo of Hill's later work, as it is one of its central themes. To what extent Hill is successful in this ethical task is debatable; indeed, the extent to which this scrutiny of self-recognition is ultimately a counsel of perfection is also up for debate, and, indeed, has been and is being debated.

Peter Robinson has recently expressed scepticism on this point. "Bradley", writes Robinson, "allows that 'the more the conditions of your assertion are included in your assertion, so much the truer and less erroneous does your judgement become'. But, he adds, 'can the conditions of judgement ever be made complete and comprised within the judgement? In my opinion this is impossible.' What Hill takes as a prerequisite for probity is – given the singular complexity and extent of the world when contrasted with (for instance) the limits of an individual's senses – exactly what Bradley believes to be impossible".⁶ This is an important counter-argument, which actually draws attention to another essential element of Hill's later approach. Along with the obsessed concern for being in Hill's later work goes an enthusiastic commitment to what he calls 'eros' (*CCW* 571 *et al.*) – that is, an existentialist sense of *becoming* alongside the desire for being. It is this sense of eros, of becoming, which Hill takes from F.H. Bradley, that drives Hill's sense of "a theory of energy" which his later work explores embodies. (The erotic sense being that the exploration *is* the embodiment.)

As early as the 1970s, then, Hill displays an interest in nineteenth-century British Idealism (philosophers like F.H. Bradley and T.H. Green), its exemplary failures and pious wishes. In part, this interest is part of an ongoing engagement with nineteenth-century British literary and intellectual culture, but it also represents an interest in being and its failure, whether exemplary or not, in an era of philosophical and economic materialism. If "Metaphysics remain | in common language something of a joke" (*CCW* 490) then perhaps it is their embattled, derided nature which is of a kind with Hill's sense of being at bay; or perhaps an engagement with metaphysics in the present era demands an *uncommon* language. In short, the British Idealists such as Sigdwick and Green, here, and most emphatically F.H. Bradley, are important to Hill's later work, as is the tension between the "purely formal" and the "pious wish": or, put in starker

terms, the objective and the subjective. Indeed, one of the major figures in Hill's later criticism, with whom Hill has a fraught and evolving relationship, is John Ruskin, a figure also piously wishing and asserting the purely formal, according to Hill's overall analysis – it is Ruskin's term "intrinsic value" which is a point of crux for Hill's later writings about poetry and being. 'Intrinsic value' is a term which evokes being, the essence, the thing-in-itself, just as it evokes the a-historical New Critical poem by which Hill is tempted.⁷ "Intrinsic value', as Ruskin uses it, is emphatic but not precise; though its power of emphasis is due in great part to its capacity to *suggest* precision" (CCW 388). This theme runs throughout Hill's later criticism, and is, in no small part, a worried vigilance over his own suggestions of precision: in the words of F.H. Bradley – that philosopher so crucial to Hill's later approach – "illusions begotten on the brain by the wish of the heart".⁸

Hill's critique of T.S. Eliot

A major point of departure for Hill's later work is his critique of T.S. Eliot. Bradley is readily associated with Eliot – who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the philosopher, and who published the essay 'Francis Herbert Bradley' in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1927 – but Hill's later period is driven by his reading of Bradley. Indeed, Hill's critique of Eliot is driven in no small part by his interpretation of Bradley *contra* Eliot. However, Eliot's theory of impersonality, and his example as poet-critic, is a pervasive element in Hill's overall development as poet and critic. Hill's divergence from Eliot is begun to be spelled out explicitly in 1996, in what I take to be the beginning of Hill's later period, in the essay 'Dividing Legacies', a direction traced further yet in the later essays 'Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot' and 'Word Value in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot', two essays included in *Alienated Majesty* in the *Collected Critical Writings* (2008), which were originally delivered as lectures at Cambridge University in January 2005.

Hill's critique of Eliot centres on Eliot's increasingly pragmatic view of poetry, which Hill sees as a dereliction ("Yeats died and Eliot abdicated", as he remarks [CCW 579]), but it is also about the

different use to which the two poet-critics put their readings of F.H. Bradley. This critique should not be thought of as an all-out rejection of Eliot and his poetics: rather, it is an exploration and development of Eliot's ideas *beyond* Eliot, as the New Criticism in the mid-twentieth century was, including the work of such American poets and poet-critics as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Richard Eberhart, for instance, figures hugely influential on Hill's early work. It is a correction rather than an outright repudiation, though Hill often comes out quite strongly against Eliot in the essays of *Alienated Majesty*. Hill's later work, too, is broadly New Critical in its allegiances, both proclaimed and tacit; though these allegiances can be quite overtly stated, as in one Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, for instance, in which Hill quotes with heartfelt approval ("My God, if only I could have written that!") R.P. Blackmur's definition of poetry, that it is "language so twisted and posed in a form that it not only expresses the matter in hand but adds to the stock of available reality".⁹

The critique of Eliot's pragmatism implies another of the central concepts of Hill's later thought, namely intrinsic value. In 'Translating Value', the first essay in *Inventions of Value* (one of the two collections of later essays first published in *Collected Critical Writings* in 2008) Hill quotes what A.C. Bradley (F.H.'s brother) calls in 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake' the 'ulterior' values of poetry. These ulterior values are precisely what Eliot comes to espouse in his increasingly 'public' selfhood, according to Hill: that is, a selfhood whose emphasis is increasingly on the personality condemned in Eliot's early, seminal criticism. Eliot's abdication, as Hill presents it (*CCW* 579) speaks to a betrayal of high modernist values and anticipates the postmodernist cult of personality in which Hill finds himself stranded. "Such a distinction between self and personality – one in which priority is given to self – is now infrequently and insufficiently made", Hill claims in 'Alienated Majesty: Ralph W. Emerson', for example (*CCW* 496).

Hill describes the last chapter of Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) as a "threnos" (*CCW* 563); that is, the declaration of Eliot's abdication, as it were, an unwitting elegy for the writer's own integrity. However, earlier in that book (originally delivered as a lecture series) Eliot also remarks:

When a poet deliberately restricts his public by his choice of style of writing or of subject-matter, this is a special situation demanding explanation and extenuation, but I doubt that this ever happens. It is one thing to write in a style which is already popular, and another to hope that one's writing may eventually become popular. From one point of view, the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian.¹⁰

This is roughly the opposite of Hill's approach in his later work. Eliot's passage is a strangely dissonant echo of the "music-hall theory of life"¹¹ dismissed by Bradley in 'Pleasure for Pleasure's Sake', the chapter on hedonism in *Ethical Studies* (1876); and it is indicative of Eliot's confusion around the notion of pleasure, according to Hill's claim. Indeed, the dissonance of this echo goes some way to illustrating Eliot's parting from Bradleian ideals. Eliot goes on: "Being incapable of altering his wares to suit a prevailing taste, if there be any, he naturally desires a state of society in which they may become popular, and in which his own talents will be put to the best use. He is accordingly interested in the *use* of poetry." The worldly interestedness of Eliot's position here is variously rejected in Hill's later essays; for instance, in the approbatory quotation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Genius is power; Talent is applicability" (*CCW* 530), which stands as a corrective to Eliot's sense of "his own talents [being] put to the best use".

It is Eliot's turning from power in this Romantic sense to that of power as social influence – the applicability of the music-hall comedian – which is a crux of Hill's contention. In 'Dividing Legacies' (1996), Hill identifies this turn for the first time, commandeering the terms 'pitch' and 'tone' to do it: "It was the pitch of *Prufrock and Other Observations* that disturbed and alienated readers; it was the tone of *Four Quartets* that assuaged and consoled them" (*CCW* 377). Pitch describes the commitment to immediate context, to the weight, history, and relations of words, what Hill calls (among other things) "word value" (*CCW* 532–547, 'Word Value in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot', *et al.*); tone describes the attitude of a piece, 'attitude' in the senses both of message and of posture – its social applicability. Eliot's deterioration from pitch to tone is one from selfhood, which in Hill's thought is concurrent with language and history, to

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personality – playing the public persona, echoing national sentiment, and so on. Hill's own commitment to "immediate context" and "pitch" is simultaneously a commitment to the self over the personality, which is at the same time a commitment to Emerson's 'genius' over 'talent' (remembering that 'genius' comes from a word meaning 'spirit').

In the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot describes poetry as "a superior amusement" in a passage singled out for particular opprobrium in 'Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot' (*CCW* 555). Hill claims this is modelled on a passage from Bradley's *Essays on Truth and Reality* but is "markedly inferior to Bradley's" (*CCW* 555). Hill's contention to this general position is the following:

Even if you say "superior amusement" only to save yourself from calling it something worse, you have unnecessarily given hostages to "the Pragmatist", who was suspected by Bradley of believing that the world of art belongs to the region of the worthless-in-itself.

That body of opinion which focuses on, solidifies around, the sense of an object "worthless-in-itself" is a power with which you cannot compromise; the price exacted by your recalcitrance is that of alienation. (*CCW* 556)

Hill's later work is self-consciously pitched against this very "body of opinion" – and this commitment to being pitched *against* (a sense which ghosts his conception of "pitch") radically informs his reading of Eliot. In fact, the whole character of contemporary culture and society as Hill sees it is that which has solidified around the notion of the "worthless-in-itself": that is, the culture of commodity, in which value only exists in exchange, a contemporary situation in various places called "plutocratic anarchy", adapting William Morris's label "anarchical Plutocracy".¹² Eliot, in other words, compromises with this "body of opinion" which Hill sees as antagonistic to intrinsic value, the so-called "worthless-in-itself". Personality is to self what exchange value is to intrinsic value. "Eliot, once the enemy of personality", writes Hill, "has swung the weight of his own elderly personality in support of that very concept or entity" (*CCW* 554). In Hill's view, this is the nature of Eliot's decline from the pitch of *Prufrock* to the tone of *Four Quartets*. The younger Eliot, Hill claims, is all about "eros and alienation" (*CCW* 556): eros being, in Hill's terms, the "way

of apprehension, a syntax of becoming" (CCW 534) which he finds in Eliot's early work, and which he associates explicitly with Bradley's thought and style; "alienation" referring to work which has "disturbed and alienated readers" and to the process by which the writer becomes alienated from the work, this latter a seminal concept of Eliot's in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in fact, to which Hill is utterly committed.

The passage previously quoted is notable for Hill's use of the word 'alienation', which can modulate its meaning rather confusingly in his later criticism, sometimes morphing its meaning from passage to passage. Sometimes alienation is a good thing, sometimes it is not. As poet of "eros and alienation", Eliot is being praised; the fact that *Prufrock and Other Observations* "disturbed and alienated" its readers is commendable; here, "the price exacted by your recalcitrance is that of alienation". Thus, the price one pays for not compromising with that "body of opinion" of the "worthless-in-itself" is alienation in an approbatory sense, the position in which Hill seems to find himself; however, it becomes apparent that Eliot is alienated by *not* doing this, and therefore alienated from his own earlier convictions, then; so that Eliot's later alienation is a form of dishonesty, or 'selling out', to use an appropriately plutocratic phrase. "He alienated himself more and more from immediate context while ingratiating himself more and more with generalized assumptions of, and about, pleasure" (CCW 557). In other words, Eliot's business is less and less to do with the being of the poem as a construct of words, and more to do with the business of being a public figure. This attitude permeates Hill's entire outlook on the 'purpose' of true art, its aversions to 'applicability', its value-in-itself; in an interview with *The Paris Review* in 1999, speaking of a book of reproductions of paintings by Anselm Kiefer, he remarked, "I have to say that I'm less gripped by them in this reduced form than I was with their actual presence. This may well be attributed to the judgment of the artist. There's no reason why a work should accommodate itself to the kind of reproduction and reduction that our methods of communication and circulation require".¹³ Eliot's later poetry in Hill's view is certainly an example of "reduced form".

And it is "the judgement of the artist", and indeed the very nature of judgement, with which Hill is intimately concerned in the later work. In its Bradleian sense, judgement is an act which goes *beyond*

itself while *remaining* itself – a typically Bradleian paradox; and indeed, this is an operative element of “Bradley’s eros” (CCW 571). That is, judgement produces truth, which is necessarily a transcendent category, but that very judgement issues from a subject which is inescapably part of a world. As such, Bradley sees judgement as both transcendent and contingent in a way which appeals hugely to Hill. In *Essays on Truth and Logic*, Bradley spells out his theory of judgement:

The “this” of feeling ... everywhere, I agree, is positive and unique. But when, passing beyond mere feeling, you have before you what you call “matter of fact” the case forthwith is altered. The uniqueness has now to be made “objective”. It has to be contained within the judgement and has to qualify the content of your truth. (CCW 561)

This must be seen against Eliot’s ‘turn’ from his earlier to his later phases (which happens much earlier on than Hill’s), which, I would claim, happens even earlier than the preface to the 1928 edition of *The Sacred Wood*, though for slightly different reasons than Hill argues. It seems to me that the ‘turn’ in Eliot’s work away from Bradley begins in earnest in ‘The Function of Criticism’ (1923) and centres on his new term ‘orthodoxy’ which supplants the more Bradleian ‘tradition’ of ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’. This term issues in the same essay in the famous description of criticism as “the common pursuit of true judgement”.¹⁴ Orthodoxy implies conformity to an objective standard; tradition, both etymologically and as Eliot defines it in the essay, implies a mutual conditioning, in this case between the new artwork and cultural tradition (or by implication between subjective and objective). Bradley might well say to this, with Hill’s approval, that “you have failed to get within the judgement the condition of the judgement”; that is, there is too great a gulf between, on the one hand, the subjective applicability of Eliot’s public persona, and the objectivism of orthodoxy and “true judgement”. “Judgement proper”, writes Bradley, “is the act which refers an ideal content (recognised as such) to a reality beyond the act”.¹⁵ And there is thus certainly evidence that Hill’s reading of Bradley goes back at least to the 1970s: in ‘A Short History of British India (II)’, in the sequence ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’, included in 1978’s *Tenebrae*, “There is a greeting | Beyond the act” (*Broken Hierarchies*

[henceforth *BH*] 127), directly echoing Bradley's definition of judgement; and in 1977's 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', "From the depths of the self, we rise to a concurrence with that which is not-self" (*CCW* 4) which is what one might call a more general 'Bradleyism'.¹⁶ It is echoed also in that reference to Sigwick and Green, the "pious wish" for "that which points beyond the data".

The yearning from *within* the data for that which is *beyond* the data is characteristic of what Hill calls 'eros' in 'Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot': "If unspecified, unbounded yearning is one of the energies of eros, then 'somehow' is part of the erotic language" (*CCW* 549). In a rather crucial way, then, Hill's later work is driven by an obsession with this "yearning" as well as with the "unspecified" and "unbounded" which is the object of the yearning. Hill's obsessive fascination with intrinsic value should be seen within this context of eros, which is akin to what the post-Heideggerian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas called "metaphysical desire":

The metaphysical desire does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves ... It is a desire that cannot be satisfied.¹⁷

Levinas's metaphysical desire is a desire *for* the metaphysical: it is the nature of this desire which is eros in Hill's sense. Levinas's phrase here recalls Hill's "metaphysical fantasy" ('Our Word Is Our Bond', *CCW* 157) (quoting J.L. Austin) and "metaphysical fancy" ('The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses', *CCW* 200). The desire for the metaphysical is always in some sense a fantasy or fancy in Hill's work, and this is a major trope of the later poetry. Hill's sense of eros, then, is not simply an impulse of energy defined impressionistically as vital or 'erotic', a new vitality arising from personal circumstances or even the advent of antidepressants – not merely this, anyway. It is the 'somehow-ness' of Bradley, and the "unspecified, unbounded" energy in its interrelations with the specified and bounded which drive the later poetry and provides its intellectual scaffolding. The "freedom and power" (*CCW* 126) of the creative imagination is its simultaneously grasping its boundedness and unboundedness. To put it another way, the imagination's power resides in the recognition of its

constraint and powerlessness. Or as Hill puts it, "There is something in constraint which frees the mind, and something in freedom which constrains it" (*CCW* 573). In other words, 'eros', that which points beyond the data, as Hill defines it, is nothing without its material, the "semantic field" (*CCW* 571).

Intrinsic value is by definition "beyond the data". It is a translation, into a value-term, of the Kantian thing-in-itself, the *ding an sich*.¹⁸ Bradley himself expresses scepticism about the thing-in-itself, in *The Principles of Logic*, a work to which Hill refers in 'Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot':

We must remember that, even if we are able to assert about such a subject as Things-in-themselves, we must always be on our guard against an error. We may be affirming about the meaning of a word, or about a mere idea in our heads, and may confuse these facts with another type of fact.¹⁹

Also, "Things-in-themselves are not anything at all in the real world, though, considered as illusions, they no doubt have qualities".²⁰ Hill is also deeply invested in the qualities of illusions. He approaches this question explicitly for the first time in the essay 'Translating Value', though the concern is discernible in much of his earlier work also: "it took rather longer than I care to admit before I was prepared to concede that Ruskin's 'intrinsic value' does not guarantee, or even have a direct relation to, the presence of intrinsic value. The phrase is at best a promissory note, at worst a semantic relic to ward off the evil eye of commodity" (*CCW* 383). I would claim that a comprehensive view of Hill's approach to this problem must take account of this Bradleian ambiguity – though whether or not one considers this a valid position or not is another matter.

As Hill remarked in an interview of 2011, "There is a largely unknown order of human beings who believe in that impossible thing: intrinsic value. One must work as if intrinsic value were a reality, even though I myself know no way of demonstrating its real existence".²¹ This "largely unknown order of human beings" is a markedly less afflated version of Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators", and of the imaginative elite – perhaps, indeed, an imaginary elite. Hill's intrinsic value here recalls the Absolute, which Bradley characterised

as indescribable, even ineffable. Hill's belief in the impossible is more like an impossible belief: it is a kind of sceptical faith which, again, is very Bradleian, but which he has evinced at least since an interview of 1983 in which he spoke of his work as a "heretic's dream of salvation expressed in the images of the orthodoxy from which he is excommunicate".²² One of the articles of the faith from which Hill is excommunicate is, in his later work, intrinsic value.

As Hill writes in 'Eros in F.H. Bradley and T.S. Eliot' in a discussion of Eliot's review of the 1927 reprint of Bradley's *Ethical Studies*: "There is a stratum of Bradley's style, which makes it peculiarly what it is, and in which Eliot shows no interest" (*CCW* 550). This element is the 'somehow-ness' of Bradley's style, what Hill calls its 'eros'. This eros of style is an eros of ethos, also, and Hill goes on to quote a passage from Bradley's *Ethical Studies* which encapsulates this: "The artist and poet, however obscurely, do feel and believe that beauty, where it is not seen, yet somehow and somewhere is and is real; though not as a mere idea in people's heads, nor yet as anything in the visible world" (*CCW* 550). One must note the condition of Hill's judgement here, if Hill perhaps cannot quite: he reads Eliot's reading of Bradley in a certain way, perhaps to underwrite his own readings of the British Idealist. In *Knowledge and Experience* (the 1964 Faber edition of his doctoral dissertation on Bradley) Eliot writes that "[t]here are two (or more) worlds each continuous with a self, and yet running in the other direction – *somehow* – into an identity".²³ Eliot clearly shows an interest in precisely this element of Bradley's style here. One might perhaps argue that Eliot's parenthesised "*somehow*" shades into parody, as if for a moment he is doing the voice; or one might argue that Eliot is emphasising the very aspect of Bradley's style which Hill accuses him of ignoring. On balance, I think Eliot may here be demonstrating a mannerism in this parenthetical "*somehow*", a necessary evil where there should be a functional necessity – but whatever the precise nuance of the Possum's tone here, it does not look like he is ignoring this aspect of Bradley's style, as such. However, what might possibly have been an undesirable aspect of Bradley's thought for the young Eliot is enabling and vital for Hill, I think precisely for the reasons that Eliot, as academic philosopher and sometime student of Bertrand Russell, but also as increasingly committed to orthodoxy of faith, rejected.

Though Eliot abandons the “eros and alienation” which Hill discerns in Bradley’s style, not to mention his philosophy, I would suggest that this abandonment is foreshadowed, at least, before the “threnos” of the last chapter of *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, which is where Hill points to, in Eliot’s turn from tradition to orthodoxy in ‘The Function of Criticism’. However, Hill’s emphasis is increasingly on selfhood; not simply the “passive[ly] attending upon”²⁴ the self of Confessional poetry (as part of the cult of personality), but the achievement of selfhood which is crucial to Bradley’s ethics and Gerard Manley Hopkins’s existential theology, the “instressing of his own inscape” (CCW 563) (Hopkins being an important exemplar for Hill’s later work as well). When Hill writes in ‘Citations I’ in *A Treatise of Civil Power* “of Alanbrooke’s war diary”, of “possession of himself, | as a means of survival and, in that sense, | a mode of moral life” (CCW 560) he is occupying the Bradley of *Ethical Studies*: “the question in morals is to find the true whole, realizing which will practically realize the true self”.²⁵ And yet, says Bradley, the self’s moral progress is dependent upon this whole never being fully realised: “I must progress, because I have an other which is to be, and yet never quite is, myself; and so, as I am, am in a state of contradiction.”²⁶ This “state of contradiction” is the organising principle and the radioactive generator of Hill’s later poetry, an aporia which is very close to Hill’s definition of ‘eros’, which is the spirit of Hill’s later poetry, being its “theory of energy”:

Bradley’s eros, if we want a theory of energy that will make a topos out of a technic and that will be answerable across a wide range of expectation, is a much safer bargain. Bradley writes, “We have the idea of perfection – there is no doubt as to that – and the question is whether perfection also actually exists”. (CCW 571)

Eros is the state of apprehension between belief and unbelief, the ideal and the actual, the achieved and the unachievable. This is the ‘topos’ and the ‘technic’ of Hill’s later poetry, and why the final poem in *The Daybooks* ends without a full stop – a typographical gesture towards the unrealisable whole at the very moment of its realisation. Bradley’s statement recalls Sidney’s in *An Apology for Poetry*, a sentence which is very important to Hill’s thinking: “Sith, our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, but our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.”²⁷

The way of apprehension

T.H. Green was an idealist like Bradley who, as Hill claims, had a "respect for concreteness" (*CCW* 109); that is, he enquired beyond the data while acknowledging always his being radically within the data. Bradley and Green, then, are exemplars of the "sensuous interest" which Hill espouses throughout the later criticism, which Eliot allegedly abandons (*CCW* 376). Hill's assessment of Green's ethical thrust is given early on in 'Perplexed Persistence', an account which becomes increasingly illuminative of the later mode: "The nature of the world is such as we are constrained to recognise, the ineluctable fact, but to be content with the rich discrepancies which this offers is nonetheless dangerous and is sometimes treacherous" (*CCW* 110). In other words, the embracing of facticity which drives Hill's later work does not, should not, entail an abandoning of metaphysical desire. This is a central ethical and political focus of Hill's later work, characterising his embattled position. The postmodern culture of "rich discrepancies", its relativism, its "plutocratic anarchy", Hill is constrained to recognise, though he recognises at once that it is "dangerous and ... sometimes treacherous".

"[T]he way of apprehension, the syntax of becoming" (*CCW* 534), discerned in F.H. Bradley's writings, Hill identifies as the authentic technical approach for his later work, just as it is authentic existentially. It implies a semantically and structurally 'feeling forward' towards an unknown and ultimately unrealisable completion. In the essay on Green of 1975, Hill writes of "Green's 'real bridge', Mill's 'in reality' and Marshall's 'in the place of'" which "seem attempts at an illicit bridging of 'the chasm between which the Kantian analysis of judgement left between subject and object'". Significantly, in these forms of "illicit persuasiveness" there is "a hint of the despotic" (*CCW* 111). Bradley's theory of judgement, however, leaves no such chasm, and therefore no such "illicit persuasiveness" is required; his 'somehow-ness' is therefore an ethical generosity – on the part of the reader also, one might remark drily. But no; Hill explains it as "the *somehow* of realization", not "the *somehow* of abdication" (*CCW* 534); it is analogous to the seemingly ineffable process of writing poetry – presumably when it is written well, and without recourse to an online thesaurus – when "[s]*omehow* is whatever protracted or split second activity of the mind makes real the presence of the right word" (*CCW* 533–534).

The concept of apprehension – and its radiance – occurs in Hill's later criticism in various telling places, often in relation to the re-readings of Eliot which energise his later poetry and prose:

[Eliot's] finest work – and here I include critical theory and practice together with the poetry – reveals the closest and keenest affinity with the Bradleian moment of intelligible apprehension: I mean by this the sense that his best writing gives of being the appreciative spectator of its own enlightenment.²⁸

One might say further to this that Hill's later work is driven by its affirmative, Bradleian, sense of being 'somewhere between', as with Eliot at his best moments, a state of contradiction, of inherent difficulty, through which the mind emerges occasionally, unexpectedly, into the arena of its own enlightenment: "the reality of a poem such as *Marina* exists somehow and somewhere between the intelligible apprehension, understood as the rudiments of grace, and the briefly unintelligible affrighted apprehension with which Hercules, in the poem's epigraph, comes belatedly to his senses" (*CCW* 540).

Hill's later sense of direction is powered by the conviction that Eliot belatedly took leave of his senses, and that he himself will not make the same concessions and compromises. Apprehension for Hill means a providential grasping of 'things' in their already-oneness, something akin to what Hill calls "the act of mercy or grace" (*CCW* 404): not so much atonement as attunement – a translated term from Martin Heidegger (an important figure for Hill's later work) describing a state in which "[t]he pure 'that it is' shows itself".²⁹ It is like Keats's negative capability. A Heideggerian sense of attunement bears a similar relation to atonement as apprehension bears to comprehension in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.³⁰

The "way of apprehension" (*CCW* 534) which Hill pursues in his later work is this feeling of "shaping fantasies", a commitment to spontaneity and the feeling forward through language and structure that he calls the "syntax of becoming". And this is what Hill meant when

he enjoined his audience, in an Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture in 2012, to imagine him writing from within "a small intense radiance of apprehension, a miniature vortex of intuition".³¹

Notes

- 1 Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry and "The Democracy of the Dead"', Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, 3 December 2012.
- 2 Peter Popham, 'Geoffrey Hill Is Our Greatest Living Poet', *New Statesman*, 6 December 2012, for example.
- 3 Though the publication of Hill's posthumous book of poetry *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* was published in April 2019, after this book was written.
- 4 Geoffrey Hill, 'A Deep Dynastic Wound', Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, 30 April 2013.
- 5 Or as Ezra Pound declares, "*KRINO, to pick out for oneself, to choose.*" Pound, *ABC of Reading* (Faber: London, 1951) p. 30.
- 6 Peter Robinson, 'Contemporary Poetry and Value', *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Peter Robinson ed. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2013) p. 731.
- 7 This is discussed in chapter 2.
- 8 F.H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (Henry S. King & Co: London, 1876) p. 78.
- 9 Geoffrey Hill, 'How Ill White Hairs Become a Fool and Jester', Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, 30 November 2010.
- 10 T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Faber: London, 1964) pp. 31–32.
- 11 Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 88. "There are times indeed, when we feel the increase of progress means increase of pleasure, and that it is hard to consider them apart. I do not mean those moments (if there are such) when the music-hall theory of life seems real to us."
- 12 William Morris, *Political Writings of William Morris*, A.L. Morton ed. and intro. (Lawrence & Wishart: London, 1973) p. 85. Hill uses this phrase in various Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures, and in his acceptance speech for the Truman Capote Award in 2009. These usages will be discussed elsewhere in the book.
- 13 Geoffrey Hill, interview with Carl Phillips, 'The Art of Poetry: 80', *The Paris Review*, Spring 2000.

- 14 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, Frank Kermode ed. and intro. (Faber: London, 1975) p. 69.
- 15 F.H. Bradley, *The Principles of Logic* (Kegan and Paul: London, 1883) p. 10.
- 16 For example: "Whether the object contains, or does not contain, a self and not-self in connexion, on either view there is a real felt subject." F.H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* (Clarendon: Oxford, 1914) p. 195.
- 17 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis trans. (Kluwer: Dordrecht, Boston, and London, 1991) p. 33. Levinas's phrase here recalls Hill's phrases "metaphysical fantasy" ('Our Word Is Our Bond', *CCW* 157) (quoting J.L. Austin) and "metaphysical fancy" ('The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses', *CCW* 200). I feel this is a more precise term in some contexts than 'eros'.
- 18 Kant introduces this concept in his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. "When we regard the objects of sense, as is correct, as mere appearances, we thereby at the same time confess that a thing in itself lies at their foundation." *Kant's Prolegomena and Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, Ernest Belfort Bax, trans., biography, intro. (George Bell and Son: London, 1883) p. 62.
- 19 Bradley, *The Principles of Logic*, p. 146.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 145.
- 21 Christy Rush, interview with Geoffrey Hill, 26 May 2011, *The Oxford Student*. <http://oxfordstudent.com/2011/05/26/interview-geoffrey-hill-oxford-professor-of-poetry>
- 22 John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (Faber: London, 1981) p. 98.
- 23 T.S. Eliot, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley* (Faber: London, 1964) p. 143.
- 24 T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (Methuen: London, 1934) p. 58.
- 25 Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, p. 69.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 27 Quoted by Hill in 'How Ill White Hairs Become a Fool and Jester'.
- 28 Geoffrey Hill, 'T.S. Eliot Memorial Lecture', MS BC Hill/4/35, p. 25, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
- 29 "The pure 'that it is' shows itself, but the 'whence' and the 'whither' remain in darkness." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Mcquarrie and Edward Robinson trans. (Blackwell: Oxford, 1967) p. 173. Atonement here is a reference to Hill's early essay 'Poetry

and "Menace" and "Atonement" (CCW 3–20). Hill says, among other things, on the topic of 'atonement': "When the poem 'comes right with a click like a closing box', what is there effected is the atonement of aesthetics with rectitude of judgement" (CCW 12).

- 30 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Harold F. Brooks ed. (Methuen: London, 1979) p. 103. Act V, Scene 1.
- 31 Geoffrey Hill, "Legal Fiction" and Legal Fiction', Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, 5 March 2013.