

*Strangeness
and Power*

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*Essays on the poetry of
Geoffrey Hill*

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edited by

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Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2020 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(*this address not for correspondence*)

ISBN 978-1-84861-600-4

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Institute, School of Humanities, University of Dundee, for assistance with permissions and indexing costs, and to Paula Clarke Bain for her work on the index.

I would like to thank Aurora Woods for her meticulous work on permissions and editing, Martin Dodsworth for his invaluable advice and Tony Frazer for his enthusiasm, patience and support in bringing this book to press.

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SAMPLER

Introduction

ANDREW MICHAEL ROBERTS

In one of his final publications, a review of Grevel Lindop's biography of Charles Williams, Geoffrey Hill asserts his commitment to 'the strangeness and the power of poetry'.¹ The words accord with many readers' responses to Hill's own poetry. It is generally seen as 'powerful', in rhetorical, formal, intellectual and emotional terms, and is much concerned with issues of political and aesthetic power. Those who are most critical of Hill's work often acknowledge a certain power of language, but suspect the uses to which that power is put, especially in relation to political allegiance and intellectual authority. 'Strangeness' may here stand for the remarkable distinctiveness of his poetry, which over more than sixty years, from the mid-1950s to his death in 2016, followed a trajectory of development and innovation which engaged in unique ways with many of the crucial questions in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century poetics: the lyrical and the anti-lyrical, Romantic, Modernist and earlier inheritances; form and formal innovation; the personal and the impersonal; history and ethics. But more than that, the word suggests the way in which that poetry is somehow 'strange' and much concerned with strangeness, in both negative and positive terms: estrangement, peculiarity, revelation. Hill's writing fulfils to a high degree the Russian Futurist aim of 'making strange' the familiar, as well as bringing to the reader's attention, through its learning and allusion, aspects of history and culture which are likely to be unfamiliar to many. For some readers, Hill's late work in particular is simply *too* 'strange': too resistant to reading and understanding. Both his admirers and his detractors, and those who come somewhere between, might acknowledge qualities of strangeness, even that if judgment would carry different implications and values in each case. A number of essays in this volume pair Hill with another poet, or poets, to consider his 'strange likeness' with contemporaries and predecessors.²

¹ Geoffrey Hill, 'Mightier and Darker': review of Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inking*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 March 2016.

² The phrase is from *Mercian Hymns* XXIV, where the poet comments on the relationship of his youthful persona in to his 'outclassed forefathers': 'Not strangeness, but strange likeness' (BH 111).

The chapters in this book were written, or begun, during Geoffrey Hill's lifetime, but some minor revisions have been made since his death in June 2016. In literary studies in general, so much attention has been paid to Roland Barthes' theoretical 'death of the author' that the literal event has been somewhat neglected as a phenomenon of literary reception and interpretation. The most succinct treatment remains, perhaps, Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'. Auden's line 'The death of the poet was kept from his poems' captures the paradoxical quality of that moment: the way in which the works, the words on the page and the books on the shelf, remain unchanged, with all their wealth of meaning and history, their 'voice' and their presence, even while the reader's relationship to them is subtly but crucially transformed.³ For many of the contributors to this book, most of whom have read and commented on Hill's work over an extended period of time, the loss of his living presence was clearly an event of considerable significance. The experience of writing about the work of a living author is a distinctive one, introducing into critical practice possibilities for both positive dialogue and awkward relation, and placing the distinction between biographical personality and literary *oeuvre* (however necessary as a principle) under the pressure of potential collisions or interventions. The critic may believe in the necessary freedom and potential creativity of interpretation, and remain aware of the restrictive nature (for both author and reader) of 'the intentional fallacy', yet the lurking fear remains of receiving the reproof which Prufrock anticipates: "That is not what I meant at all; / That is not it, at all".⁴ When the living presence disappears, there can be a strong sense of loss. For some critics this will have been a personal loss; for others there will have been the more diffuse but still powerful sense of an intellectual and creative force having been removed from future interventions, even while its textual embodiment remains, and its reception or 'after-life' continues to develop.

A striking feature of Hill's *oeuvre* is the extent and richness of its development: a combination of formal, technical and thematic innovation with persistent imaginative imperatives, for which Yeats' poetic development seems the obvious comparison. While the patterns of this development are multiple and complex, the shape of a set of

³ W.H. Auden, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats', *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 197.

⁴ T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *The Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 16.

antitheses between ‘early’ and ‘late’ Hill emerges from the work and its recent reception. The work up to *Collected Poems* (1985) can be characterised by a poetic in which strong energies and tensions are contained with terse formal limits. This takes the form of highly concentrated lyrics, prose poems and short sequences (often sonnets), marked by ‘impersonality’ (the poetic ‘self’ being absent, highly mediated, or ironized) and a certain grandeur and formality of tone, but shot through with subversive strains of double meaning and colloquialism. *Canaan* (1996) marks a transition, following which a later phase with some well-defined characteristics establishes itself. The book-length sequence dominates, beginning with a mid-period series of four books (of which the first three were seen by some as a trilogy): *The Triumph of Love* (1998); *Speech! Speech!* (2000); *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) and *Scenes from Comus* (2005).⁵ Of the fourteen volumes which follow *Canaan*, the only ones which are not a single sequence are *Without Title* and *A Treatise of Civil Power*. Most of the sequences are in regular sections of defined length, though *The Triumph of Love* has verse units ranging from one to fifty-seven lines in length. The poetic ‘I’ becomes more prominent, although still frequently treated with irony. Disputation, denunciation, self-mockery, colloquialism and scabrous humour diversify the tone, though solemnity and lyric beauty still persist. In places the poetry can have a quality of annotation, or an internal conversation notated. The subject-matter admits more of the contemporary and the autobiographical, though the poetry is still deeply informed by political and intellectual history, with the density of allusion becoming if anything more intense. Hill’s work, especially from *Speech! Speech!* onwards, includes forms of performed and imagined dialogue, often adversarial (though sometimes humorously so) with imagined (and perhaps real) critics. In many ways this extended his long-standing reflexive dialogue with his own critical

⁵ Jeffrey Wainwright suggested that ‘*The Orchards of Syon* completes a tentative trilogy begun with *The Triumph of Love* and *Speech! Speech!*. “Tentative” because all three-part sequences are bound to refer to the model of Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* as ... Hill’s can be seen to do’. Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 109. Alex Wylie identifies *Scenes from Comus* as ‘the last (for now) of a series of book-length sequences which began with 1998’s *The Triumph of Love* ... Hill is now so prolific that what people were casually referring to as his “late period” ... from *The Triumph of Love* on, has begun to be more cautiously labelled the “middle period”.’ ‘Eros in Geoffrey Hill’s *Scenes from Comus*’, *English* (2011), 1-15 (p. 1).

and self-critical impulses. A ‘touchy’ response to others’ criticism is evident, and widely noticed, in some of Hill’s poetry, critical writing and interviews, but a generosity and scrupulosity of relation to critics was equally in evidence in other contexts: at certain conferences and readings, and in his responses to individuals. During his final years, there emerged a strong sense of his wish to shape and define his literary legacy, embodied in the two substantial, hardback Oxford University Press volumes of his prose (*Collected Critical Writings*, 2008) and poetry (*Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, 2013), and in his 2009 sale of his literary papers to the Special Collections at the University of Leeds, where he had held his first academic post.⁶ Indeed, this careful curation of his legacy continued posthumously: *Broken Hierarchies* culminates in five sequences, *The Daybooks* (2007-2012), but has been followed by a final, posthumously-published volume, *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, identified by his publisher as ‘his final statement’.⁷

Hill’s ‘place’ in British and Anglophone poetry of the later 20th and early 21st centuries was a complex one, and remains in many ways to be more fully defined by the assimilation of his rich late period work, and by the perspectives which time will allow. His poetry did not fit into either of the broad (and often debatable) categories of ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ which informed much discussion about British poetry in general during the second half of the twentieth century. However, the term ‘late Modernist’, which could be applied with some caveats to

⁶ See https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/8501/geoffrey_hill_archive. In the present volume, Matthew Sperling notes that ‘Before *Broken Hierarchies* had been published, Hill was comparing it to Whitman’s 1892 “deathbed edition” of *Leaves of Grass*’.

⁷ *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). ‘At his death in 2016, Geoffrey Hill left behind *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, his last work, a sequence of more than 270 poems, to be published posthumously as his final statement. Written in long lines of variable length, with much off-rhyme and internal rhyme, the verse-form of the book stands at the opposite end from the ones developed in the late *Daybooks* of *Broken Hierarchies* (2013), where he explored highly taut constructions such as Sapphic meter, figure-poems, fixed rhyming strophes, and others. The looser metrical plan of the new book admits an enormous range of tones of voices. Thematically, the work is a *summa* of a lifetime’s meditation on the nature of poetry.’ <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-book-of-baruch-by-the-gnostic-justin-9780198829522?q=book%20of%20baruch&lang=en&cc=gb#> [accessed 29 March 2019]. The idea of *The Book of Baruch* as a ‘*summa*’ must be balanced by the sense (and fact) that it is unfinished (though substantial). Hill’s line from ‘Funeral Music’ – ‘Crying to the end “I have not finished”’ (BH 54; KL 32) seems apposite.

Hill's work, indicates some affinities with aspects of the 'alternative' or 'innovative' stream of writing. One of the aims of the present volume, and notably the chapters which compare Hill to J.H. Prynne, to Denise Riley and to 'radical landscape poetry', is to rectify a certain critical neglect of these affinities, arising perhaps from a strong sense of Hill as *sui generis*. Although some of his early work was briefly linked to 'Oxford poetry' (early pamphlets and poems in *Isis*), to the post-Movement reaction (through his inclusion in Alvarez's *The New Poetry*) and to 'Leeds poetry' (through his connections to *Stand* and to Jon Silkin), he quickly emerged as a writer unamenable to grouping. As both poet and critic Hill attracted both strong praise and some hostility. The widely-shared and often aired sense of him as a strong contender for 'greatness' was at times a mixed blessing, prompting irritation from some as well as celebration from others. Hill's interest in Englishness and its history, although sceptical and critical, and far from narrowly nationalistic, sometimes attracted praise from those whose political affiliations led to others viewing this with suspicion. The view of his work as 'difficult' (sometimes seen as praise but more usually figuring as complaint) became such a staple of reviews as to risk being what Hill himself particularly disliked, a cliché, evoked but not really scrutinized. In the present volume Martin Dodsworth addresses this issue directly and analytically, acknowledging but also subjecting to critique Hill's arguments in favour of 'difficulty'; Edward Larrissy compares Hill's difficulty to comparable elements in the work of J.H. Prynne; and Stephen James argues that the immediately appealing descriptive passages in Hill's poetry cannot be separated from the complexity of its other elements.

The book begins with six chapters addressing in various ways the relationship of Hill's poetry to predecessors and contemporaries. In his chapter "'Felt Unities": Geoffrey Hill, T. S. Eliot and David Jones', Steven Matthews examines Hill's relationship to two modernist predecessors, as a means to articulate aspects of the development of his criticism and poetry. Focusing on the local and pastoral within modernism, ideas of *enracinement*, and common experience, Matthews argues for the importance to Hill of Jones's re-emergence via two issues of *Agenda* magazine in the late 1960s and early 1970s. He goes on to use Hill's own distinction between 'discursive intelligence' and a Bradleian 'way of apprehension' as a way of interpreting the poetic of Hill's later work.

That later work is also the focus of Stephen James's chapter, 'The Nature of Hill's Later Poetry'. Starting from the preferences of many reviewers for passages of natural description in that poetry, James shows how such descriptions are 'often modes of cultural, historical, theological or philosophical engagement'. James goes on to explore 'poetic alchemy', esoteric thought, doubleness, 'thisness' (haecceity) and musical analogies of dissonance and resolution, and a series of poetic relations (with Hopkins, Donne, Thomson, Clare and Vaughan), so as to argue for the inextricability of visual beauty and complexity of 'apperception'.

Tom Jones, in "'Poetry's a public act by long engagement": Geoffrey Hill and the Eighteenth Century', uses Hill's references to, and affinities with, eighteenth-century authors, notably Jonathan Swift, to pose some pointed questions around matters of authenticity, the control of language, and relations between the poet and readers. In particular, he asks whether Hill's project requires the existence of 'a mob for whom the "noble vernacular" ... will be forever out of reach', and whether 'sovereign authority over the language in poems is possible or even desirable', raising questions about the distance between Hill and his audience. Drawing parallels with Swift, Lord Shaftesbury and Joseph Butler, Jones argues that a 'regulatory attitude' to 'the conditions of production and reception of speech' is central to Hill's work, and yet is 'at odds with his recognition of the idea of contingency in poetic composition'. Finding a running tension in Hill's poetic between 'authority' and 'fallenness', Jones points towards a question for Hill's more secular-minded readers: whether an 'external standard' for judging poetic style is attainable.

In the first of three chapters which seek to articulate the location of Hill's poetry in relation to the traditions of contemporary 'innovative' poetry, 'Geoffrey Hill and J.H. Prynne: Language, Subjectivity and Longing', Edward Larrissy finds profound similarities between the seemingly 'ill-matched couple' of Hill and J.H. Prynne. These include a tendency to difficulty in both poets' work arising from 'similar aesthetic aims', 'a self-consciousness about the historically-conditioned nature of language and discourse', a 'political and ethical ... critique of free-market capitalism' arising from mid-twentieth-century New Left ideas and the use of 'the language of the sacred and transcendent'. More widely, he argues for a shared complexity of relationship to Romanticism, Modernism and Postmodernism, in which the poets' seriousness in ethical and spiritual matters marks them as late Modernist writers, but this is combined with a 'representation of subjective experience'

derived from Romanticism, and a postmodernist sense of the ‘limits of understanding’.

In my own contribution to the present volume, ‘Lyric, Awkwardness and Music in Geoffrey Hill and Denise Riley’, I explore another affinity across difference, connecting Hill’s poetry and prose to that of Denise Riley, through reflections on awkwardness as both theme and technique in the lyric. Awkwardness, in both capacities, is closely related to effects of temporality in poetic form, conceptualised by Hill in terms of ‘return’ and ‘resistance’, and by Riley in terms of ‘regression’. Focusing on one volume by each poet, along with material from essays, I address the poets’ shared allegiance to forms of musicality, their ethically-motivated critiques of lyric expressiveness, and their sense of guilt in relation to language and utterance. My suggestion is that the two poets use awkwardness to negotiate such issues, and in Hill’s case to define his relationship to Romantic and Modernist predecessors, so that despite marked differences in their understanding of the self, Hill and Riley are alike in deploying the power of the lyrical within a self-consciously critical late-modernist poetic.

Eleanore Widger, in her chapter ‘Affinities with Radical Landscape Poetry in the Work of Geoffrey Hill’, argues that Hill’s use of shape on the page to create poetic meaning, notably in *Clavics*, points to an under-recognised affinity with the contemporary practice which has come to be known as ‘radical landscape poetry’: the work of poets such as Frances Presley, Wendy Mulford, Mark Goodwin and Peter Riley, collected in Harriet Tarlo’s anthology *The Ground Aslant* (published in the same year as *Clavics*, 2011).⁸ Widger begins by tracing some of Hill’s earlier evocations of the idea of landscape, from *Mercian Hymns* to *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. Turning to *Clavics*, she acknowledges the crucial influence of Herbert and Vaughan, as well as Greek pattern poetry, but also finds an ‘exploration of the ethico-politics of representing the landscape’ which Hill shares with much of the work in *The Ground Aslant*. The use of shape on the page in *Clavics*, she concludes ‘implicates the poet in the production of the cultural landscape’, and seeks to ‘bring the history of the landscape to visual perception’.

In “‘Self going spare’: Geoffrey Hill and Philosophy’, Alex Pestell approaches Hill’s thought through a disciplinary framing, considering what he terms Hill’s ‘agon with Philosophy’, especially in relation to

⁸ Harriet Tarlo, ed., *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2011).

ideas of contingency, objectivity and (in)completion. Noting Hill's 'adversarial' attitude to J.L. Austin's empiricism, Pestell analyses Hill's turn to Idealism and to philosophers who 'make a virtue of incompleteness', including Gillian Rose, Simone Weil and Coleridge. While Rose's 'aporetic ethics' prompt Hill to agonistic dialogue, Weil offers the poet a model of discursive drama via intersecting planes of composition and planes of experience. Coleridge, in Pestell's account, is an ambivalent influence, whose celebration of the critical power of the imagination runs the risk of complacency, and a fading from critique to consolation. Turning to Hill's later engagement with F.H. Bradley (in the 'Alienated Majesty' section of *Collected Critical Writings*), Pestell argues that philosophy can offer the poet 'the idea of truth as something struggling to come into being', but adds a note of caution in his observation that Hill is sometimes led by his passionate engagement with philosophers into 'unwarranted assertions'. These include Hill's widely-noticed value criteria for writing of 'getting within the judgement the condition of the judgement', an idea which, according to Pestell, is rejected both by Bradley and by Hill himself in his earlier essay 'Our Word is Our Bond'.

Martin Dodsworth, in 'Geoffrey Hill's Difficulties', analyses this vexed topic by first identifying three kinds of difficulty encountered by Hill's readers: allusiveness, indefiniteness of relation, and ambiguity. He goes on to approach the issue from the other direction, in terms of the difficulties encountered by Hill in the act of writing, and how these might bear on readers' difficulties. Finally, he assesses the justification for difficulty. Dodsworth is sceptical about Hill's claim that 'difficult art is truly democratic' (which he sees as an inappropriate application of a political term), and sharply critical of aspects of the poet's attitude, such as his 'tendency to adopt or endorse extreme points of view'. However, he finds justification for at least some of the challenges of the poetry in those poems which exemplify Hill's greatness as a poet.

The role (or absence) of 'self' and 'voice' within poetry has been a major debating point since Hill's early 'impersonal' work, and in 'Playing (to) the Crowd: Examining Performance in *Speech! Speech!*', Samira Nadkarni returns to the issue in the light of the prominence given to ideas of performance in Hill's 2000 volume *Speech! Speech!*, the second of his mid-period series of four book-length sequences. In an extended reading of the volume, Nadkarni argues for the centrality of ideas of performance, both as symptom of the consumerist culture which the poem critiques, and as satirical technique; the work's 'poetic persona',

she suggests, aspires to authenticity, but is undercut by the poem's many 'voices'. Paradoxically the fragmentary incoherence which results 'lends it a greater strength' because it promotes readerly evaluation. Authenticity is located within a 'final silence'; 'the uneloquent [as] a form of eloquence', in Hill's words from his 2000 interview.⁹

Finally, two chapters are particularly concerned to reconnect Hill's work with questions of the materiality and conditions of production and publication. Natalie Pollard, in "Like a Mason Addressing a Block": Materiality and Design in Geoffrey Hill's Poetry', draws attention to the importance, for Hill's poetry, of the built environment as a means to negotiating 'cultural inheritance and personal artistic legacy'. Giving detailed consideration to book jackets as well as allusions to architecture in Hill's poetry, she argues that, for Hill, architecture is not merely a metaphor for language (as critics have sometimes seemed to assume), but provides 'sites on which aesthetic relations are negotiated', with ethical and political implications. Engagement with architecture and sculpture functions as part of the poet's 'fraught attention to the politics of redeploying existing built form', both in material terms, in buildings alluded to in the poetry, and 'through literary and historical re-descriptions and reinvestments'.

In 'Geoffrey Hill and Publishing: The Recalcitrance of the World', Matthew Sperling takes two striking phrases from a public conversation between Hill and the publisher Andrew McNeillie as key notes for a consideration of the poet's 'thinking in and about poetry and ... in and about publishing'; 'the recalcitrance of the world' and 'inescapable error'. Correspondence in the André Deutsch Collection of archive papers held at Tulsa University in Oklahoma, along with material from the memoir of Diane Athill with whom Hill principally dealt during his relationship with André Deutsch, offers insights into his distinctive approach to his own poetry and to his career as a poet. Many aspects of this approach will not surprise long-term readers of his work, but it is nevertheless revealing to see them playing out in this personal / professional context; they include: a mixture of high confidence in his own abilities with self-deprecating irony; an exceptionally strong sense of vocation; difficulties associated with anxiety and sensitivity; an 'anxious care for minute details'.

⁹ 'The Art of Poetry LXX', Geoffrey Hill interviewed by Carl Phillips, *The Paris Review*, 154 (Spring 2000), 272-99.