Editorial

'His dark materials' (*Paradise Lost* II, 916)

In a reading last December at the British Academy in London – part of an event to celebrate the 400th anniversary of John Milton's birth – Geoffrey Hill ruminated on this resonant and famous phrase.[1] Humorously recording his regret that it had already been used by Philip Pullman, he thought that otherwise it would have served as a 'wonderful title for a book on Milton's language'. More generally in his reading, Hill paid homage to the seventeenth-century poet as a late and retrospective muse for his own work. This is obviously true of *Scenes from Comus*, but also, following the example of *Areopagitica*, of *Speech! Speech!* and, in relation to the political sonnets, more recently of *A Treatise of Civil Power*. But more particularly, Hill focused on the way in which Milton of all poets, as 'a linguist of extraordinary power', is the one who draws us into the idea that 'language is part of the creative element of creation itself', that is to say that 'all true poetry is made up of dark materials'; for, at its best, such poetry contains contrary and disturbing forces of ἐνέργεια and *vis inertiae* - or energy and entropy - and the contest between the two is 'revealed in the mechanics of the verse'. This contest is manifest in the play between the selected metre (inertia) and rhythm of the voice (energy) where the former 'rides over and above the latter' and is 'revealed in the sharpest way by enjambement' where one 'word should shout across the line to the other'. As Hill points out, Milton is the 'supreme master of enjambement' through which he creates an energy of eloquence which is itself 'partly fighting, partly contained' within the structure. And from his reading of a selection of Milton's sonnets, Hill moved on to consider this presence of competing energies by reference to Hopkins's idea of the 'bidding' of speech rhythm which works in tandem with 'the mere monumentality of the structure'.

As we have come to expect, this homage to Milton was accompanied by a side-swipe at what Hill has repeatedly castigated in recent years as our current state of 'plutocratic anarchy'. His fervent advocacy of the play of energies within Milton's poetic creativity can easily be seen as a response to a perceived lack of rigour in the dominant mode of our contemporary culture. But this enquiry into the 'dark materials' of poetry has long been a major concern of Hill's critical writing where he has often used his experience as a practitioner *par excellence* to probe the mysterious nature of poetic creativity and, in particular, how this creativity gives rise to the precarious and powerful play of forces in the structures it produces.

This sense of the contesting forces operating in a poem and the peculiar difficulty of working with language is central, for example, to Hill's argument in his inaugural lecture of 1978, 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement'. Here, as the title suggests, the confrontation is given a metaphysical status as Hill confronts the peculiar difficulty of working with language. '[H]owever much a poem is shaped and finished,' he claims near the beginning of the lecture and after a brief consideration of Michelangelo, 'it remains to some extent within the "imprisoning marble" of a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection'. As he

considers the degree of formal and moral atonement a poem can achieve, he is also led to reflect on the ways in which it can register the contest of faculties and forces at work in its creation. For Hill, this drama in the mind of the poet straddles ethics and form. Typically, he turns once again to Coleridge as the figure who has resonantly notated this capacity of the mind to show itself self-consciously in the act of creativity, most spectacularly in his notebooks and marginalia but also in verse. In this lecture, Hill adverts to Coleridge's concern in *Biographia Literaria* with 'the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking' and with the process of '*win*[*ning*] one's way up against the stream'. Characteristically, Coleridge captures the mental process imagistically in this reference to a water boatman, the analogy derived from his committed observation of the detailed workings of nature. Hill takes up Coleridge again in the lecture when he uses the poem 'To Wordsworth. Composed on the night of his recitation of a Poem on the Growth of an Individual Mind' (1807) to demonstrate the way in which metaphor can transfigure and even anticipate the poet in the act of creativity. In this poem, according to Hill, 'highly organised art can for a while stabilize the self-dissipating brilliance of the listener's mind, that is, Coleridge's mind, the mind that is concentrating upon that very diffusion'.

Something of the same concern to register the creative imagination's doubleness in the act of creation is also a major feature of Hill's essay 'Redeeming the Time' which is mainly engaged with the way nineteenth-century writers, including Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hopkins, use rhythm to embody crisis within the culture and attempt to register a voice of opposition – an 'antiphonal voice' – as an integral part of their imagining. Here, too, Coleridge looms large in Hill's mind because of his critical alertness to the processes of writing. In this instance it is Coleridge's coining of the phrase 'drama of reason', in a letter of 1810 to Thomas Poole, which appeals to Hill as he attempts to capture his own sense of the mind's reaching beyond itself in the creative act. The particular attraction of the phrase is increased because of its engagement, in context, with the idea of continuity of style. For Hill, Coleridge's disapproval of 'unconnected writing' demonstrates an ethical obligation to manifest, again in Coleridge's phrase, 'a moral *copula*' at work in the sequence of words; and, at the same time, it illustrates how the drama of that 'obligation' of reason might result, 'within the texture of one's own work' in a style which includes parentheses as 'antiphons of vital challenge'. There are clear comparisons here with Hill's own distinctive early poetic style and its powerful deployment of parentheses – something which was first drawn to critical attention by Christopher Ricks in his 1978 lecture 'Geoffrey Hill and the Tongue's Atrocities'.

Listening to him on the tensions within Milton's 'dark materials' and reading his probings into Coleridge's peculiar capacity to register his creative self-consciousness one is tempted to speculate on Hill's own creative process: not just the celebrated achievement of the finished poem, but also the struggle which any poem of his might have undergone with the contending forces of energy and entropy within the strange substance of language.

Watching Coleridge at work in his various notebooks and in his marginalia has been the privilege of readers for some years

now thanks to the pioneering labours of many scholars, including Kathleen Coburn. The same privilege will soon be available to scholars of Hill. I am delighted to be able to announce here in the pages of *Stand* – a magazine with a long association with the University of Leeds – that a major archive of Hill's writing, including numerous notebooks with drafts of poems, has recently been acquired by the University. Work will soon begin on the careful process of archiving in order that these invaluable materials can be made available to scholars visiting the Special Collections in the Brotherton Library. Then, for the first time, we will have the opportunity of witnessing something of the process through which Geoffrey Hill's own distinctive creativity struggles with the 'imprisoning marble' of language and how its emergence into powerful form enacts its own drama of reason.

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[1] http://britac.studyserve.com/home/Lecture.asp?ContentContainerID=139