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‘A final clarifying’: Form, Error, and Alchemy in Geoffrey Hill’s *Ludo* and *The Daybooks*

In his poem ‘It Is Writing’, Geoffrey Hill’s contemporary and fellow Mercian Roy Fisher declares ‘I mistrust the poem in its hour of success’.¹ Fisher’s poem ‘Staffordshire Red’ which appeared in *Stand* in 1977 was dedicated to Hill who, according to Fisher, greeted this gesture with a terse query as to what he was doing in Hill’s imagination.² The pair have appeared in several critical studies as a foil to the other’s technical and affective priorities.³ Fisher himself remarked upon the supposed difference:

[Hill is] always more structured and more controlled [than me]. [His work] is thought of as tending to make an aesthetic-political sound far to the right of what I’m about. And there is this priestly and hieratic quality which some of the people who like what I like would think of as rather tight and bombastic. I was caught by it very much. The idea of there being a history of quite savage energy which is almost recoverable from the body of Middle England, that seems to me worth looking at and worth exploring.⁴

Whereas Hill is ‘tight’, ‘structured’ and ‘controlled’, Eric Falci has suggested that a line from Fisher’s book *The Cut Pages* (1970) may be taken as emblematic of his resistance to premeditation and commitment to process: ‘Tumbled. Strewn. Built. Grown. Allowed’.⁵ In the preface to his long poem *A Furnace* (1986), Fisher describes the poem as ‘an engine devised, like a cauldron, or a still, or a blast furnace, to invoke and assist natural processes of change; to persuade obstinate substances to alter their condition’.⁶ Needless to say, he is as interested in those ‘processes of change’ for their own sake as much as in the success of the experiment.

My essay has begun, rather remotely, with this comparison between Fisher and Hill, arriving at the point at which it may be supposed that they definitively part company. In his inaugural lecture as professor of the School of English at the University of Leeds in 1977, “Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement””, Hill railed against those ‘who regard form and structure as instruments of repression and constraint’, and enunciated his idea of ‘the technical perfecting of a poem’, memorably expressed with a quotation from a September 1935 letter of W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley: ‘a poem comes right with a click like a closing box’.⁷ The finality implied by such an image of ‘technical perfecting’ would seem, on the face of it, utterly alien to Fisher’s processual poetics: Hill cast as a latter-day fin-de-siècle hierophant hushing closed some arcane music box, while Fisher keeps his furnace lit with ephemeral ores. Yet Hill’s pattern of thought in that lecture is altogether more complicated and ambivalent. He maintains, for instance, that ‘however much a poem is shaped or finished, it remains to some extent within the “imprisoning marble” of a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection’, adding by way of explanation that this does not imply a cynical attitude to technique or ‘those rare moments in which the inertia of language, which is also the coercive force of language, seems to have been overcome’ (*CCW*, pp. 3-4). Even his approving quotation of Yeats regarding the moment a poem ‘comes right’ is couched in modal grammar: ‘ideally, as I have already implied, my theme would be simple: that the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement’ (*CCW*, pp. 3-4). In his early poetry,

¹ Roy Fisher, *The Long and Short of It: Poems 1955-2005* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), p. 221.

² Fisher, *Interviews Through Time & Selected Prose* (Kentisbeare: Shearsman, 2000), p. 98.

³ See an exemplary instance of this in Michael O’Neill’s chapter ““Deep Shocks of Recognition” and “Gutted Romanticism”: Geoffrey Hill and Roy Fisher” in his study *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies in British, American, and Irish Poetry Since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 165-91.

⁴ Fisher, *Interviews Through Time*, pp. 97-8.

⁵ Eric Falci, ‘Beyond All This Fiddle: Hughes, Hill, Tomlinson, and Fisher’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry, 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 54-67 (63).

⁶ Fisher, *A Furnace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. vii.

⁷ Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4. All subsequent references to this book are given parenthetically with the abbreviation *CCW*.

Hill's sense of form and finality are indelibly marked by this ambivalence regarding perfection and imperfection—instance the bloodcurdling final line from the killing fields of Towton in his sonnet sequence, 'Funeral Music': 'Crying to the end, "I have not finished."⁸ The line flaunts its status as a resonant conclusion, yet its meaning violently disrupts the logic of its own formal resolution: rather than a satisfying click of a box, there is an interminable howl of anguish. Hill, perhaps even more than Fisher, is despite his reputation as a crabbed perfectionist-formalist, profoundly suspicious of the poem in its hour of success.

These deeper affinities between Fisher and Hill may be tentatively grasped by thinking about the metaphors each uses for poetic creation. Whereas Fisher tropes his own imagination with the chaotic operations of the industrial blast furnace, Hill has tended to gravitate towards cottage industries and highly-wrought craft, as in his celebration in *Mercian Hymns* of the painstaking work of his grandmother in the 'nailer's darg' (BH, p. 107), the tapestries of *Opus Anglicanum* (BH, p. 105) and the 'master-mason' who returns from the continent 'intent to pester on tympanum and chancel/-arch' (BH, p. 106). As E.M. Knottenbelt recognises in discussing the influence of John Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera* on these diverse artistic analogies for the poet's efforts, 'the emphasis lies in precision'.⁹ Nevertheless, if there are indubitable differences between the 'quick forge' that Hill (ambivalently) celebrates in his early poetry and Fisher's furnace of interminable process, some of the other possibilities Fisher toys with in his preface—a cauldron, or a still—suggest overlap with a later metaphor employed by Hill: namely, poetry as alchemy. In *Ludo* and *The Daybooks*, hermetic knowledge and alchemical investigation—exploratory and doomed to failure—serve as an enabling vehicle for the experiments conducted by Hill's late poetry, which I will argue has become even more pronounced than his early work in its ambivalence to perfection. Focusing on the interaction of form and various aspects of error in relation to Hill's alchemic subject matter, I will elicit Hill's ethical and metaphysical objections to ideas of poetic closure and perfection, and the ways in which he deliberately sabotages the Yeatsian 'click' of the 'closing box'.

Hill's late work sprawls across the six volumes that compose *The Daybooks* (2007-2012): *Expostulations on the Volcano*, *Liber Illustrium Virorum*, *Oraclau | Oracles*, *Clavics*, *Odi Barbare*, and *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti*. First published in their entirety in *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*—effectively Hill's "collected poems"—*Oraclau | Oracles*, *Clavics*, and *Odi Barbare* first appeared in 2010 (Clutag), 2011 (Enitharmon), and 2012 (Clutag) respectively. Each volume employs a different, exaggerated poetic form which are in the main adapted from (as well as tributes to) various seventeenth century poems. *The Daybooks* are inaugurated as a sequence by *Ludo*, a ragbag of satiric and straightforwardly comic verse written in Skeltonics, a form deploying variable short lines with internal rhyme and obsessive monorhyme at the end of lines. In addition to the Skeltonics of *Ludo*, Hill's debts in his late poetry to poetic forms derived from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries include Sidney's accentual sapphics from *The Old Arcadia* (in *Odi Barbare*), the visual poetry of Henry Vaughan's 'The Morning Watch' and George Herbert's 'Easter Wings' (in *Clavics*), and the eight-line stanzaic form of John Donne's 'Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day' (in *Oraclau | Oracles*). Where these models deploy their highly-demanding formal patterns for the duration of a single poem, of which the longest (Sidney's Sapphic poem) is only six stanzas long, Hill sustains each of his adaptations over the course of an entire volume, a deliberately risky endeavour which knowingly courts travesty.

As Paul Batchelor writes apropos *Clavics*, 'if the stanza shapes recall Herbert and Vaughan, the ungainliness with which Hill often meets the demands of rhyme and metre sets him at odds

⁸ Hill, 'Funeral Music', *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 54. All subsequent references to Hill's poems are from this volume unless otherwise stated, given parenthetically with the abbreviation BH.

⁹ E.M. Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), p. 187.

with his illustrious forebears'.¹⁰ While Batchelor implies that 'ungainliness' is the result of Hill's failure to emulate the success of his exemplars, on the contrary, Hill actively woos the inevitable shortfall. In his lecture 'Witness for the Witnesses: Geoffrey Hill and Lyric Memorialisation' at the University of York, 17 May 2017, Kenneth Haynes remarked that Hill's discovery of new sources of error guided the formal shape of these late poems—new things to be held off, repudiated, driven against. Haynes highlighted the 'fundamental waywardness' of the late work, adding that the outrageous, caricatured forms explore the burden of error and failure.¹¹ In essence, *The Daybooks* devise a way of dramatizing the tension between two major aesthetic traditions of modern poetry: one that views the poem as product, the formal ordering of a necessary and intended structure (the New Critical 'artefact'), and another that extols the 'process poem', which emphasises its own composition and resists finalisation or formal closure. *The Daybooks*, as the project title suggests, are a quotidian 'lining of account' and 'work that accretes art profoundly like coral' as Hill writes in *Expostulations on the Volcano* (BH, pp. 674, 646). The simile encapsulates the tension Hill's late aesthetic explores: art, like the accumulation of coral, is simultaneously highly architectonic and haphazard. Hill's ludicrously formal scaffolds in the late work only serve to highlight the anarchic and random elements of his quotidian compositional process (he is thought to have written a poem a day in his late phase, hence the sequence title); the forms accentuate his paradoxically intentional resistance to the poem as something intended, complete. If in the *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2005, revised 2007) Hill expressed the 'Urge to unmake / all wrought finalities, become a babbler / in the crowd's face' (BH, p. 601), that impulse to 'babble' becomes in *Ludo* and *The Daybooks* (which immediately follow *A Treatise of Civil Power* in *Broken Hierarchies*) more baroque in terms of form, counterintuitively harnessing his elaborate patterns in order to effect an exaggerated, loquacious burlesque: a babbled, wrought resistance to finality, to retort on those earlier lines.

The only modern borrowed form that Hill draws on in *The Daybooks* verse (*Expostulations on the Volcano* and *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti* consist of rhymed decasyllabic quatrains of variable metre with no discernible model) belongs to Robert Lowell. Hill's *Liber Illustrum Virorum* takes the canzone form of Lowell's 'Rebellion', a dense poem in which Lowell strains against his Boston Brahmin heritage in his second collection, *Lord Weary's Castle*, which Hill has expressed admiration for on numerous occasions, including the last prose piece to be published during his lifetime, 'Mightier and Darker', a review essay on Charles Williams: 'Robert Lowell's magnificent second book... is archaic... [his] rhetorical gambit is to speak from within a nexus of technic as well as vatic witnesses...'¹² Lowell's interest in the canzone and other highly-patterned forms of metrical verse was piqued during his bizarre apprenticeship at Benfolly, Allen Tate's house near Clarksville, Tennessee, where in the summer of 1937 Lowell, wishing to stay and learn from the master, misunderstood a polite rebuff from the Tates, and pitched his Sears and Roebuck olive tent on the lawn; Hill alludes to the incident in an uncollected poem in the 2005 Clutag edition of *A Treatise of Civil Power*: 'incapable of nuance when nuanced by tired patrons; pitching his loopy pup tent'.¹³ As Lowell recollected:

[both Tate and I] liked rather formal, difficult poems, and we were reading particularly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries... It seems to me we took old models like

¹⁰ Paul Batchelor, 'Geoffrey Hill's Measured Words', *The Times Literary Supplement* (online edition) (2 November 2012), <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/geoffrey-hills-measured-words/> [accessed 5 January 2018].

¹¹ Kenneth Haynes, 'Witness for the Witnesses: Geoffrey Hill and Lyric Memorialization', a lecture at the University of York (17 May 2017) [quotations derived from my notes].

¹² Geoffrey Hill, 'Mightier and Darker', *The Times Literary Supplement* (online edition) (23 March 2016), <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/mightier-and-darker/> [accessed 5 January 2018].

¹³ Geoffrey Hill, *A Treatise of Civil Power: the original title poem – uncollected, now reprinted* (Thames: Clutag, 2016 [originally published 2005]), p. 10 [unpaginated].

Drayton's Ode... I think both Tate and I felt that we wanted our formal patterns to seem a hardship and something that we couldn't rattle off easily.¹⁴

Tate and Lowell—along with their contemporaries Richard Eberhart, John Berryman, and John Crowe Ransom—were crucial transatlantic influences on Hill's early work in terms of a New Critical emphasis on form and technique.¹⁵ Lowell's recollection that he and Tate desired forms that one couldn't 'rattle off easily' is suggestive of how the insurmountable challenges that Hill sets himself in the late projects are calculated acts of hubris designed to 'return upon' the poet, a central tenet of Hill's poetics, with the phrase taken from Matthew Arnold's vindication of Edmund Burke in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time"; in "Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"", Hill gives as an example of this reflexive 'return' Keats's repetition of 'forlorn' as an exclamation after the Miltonic cadence of 'of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn' in the preceding stanza of 'Ode to a Nightingale', where the echo revokes 'an attitude towards art and within art' (CCW p. 7). In the deliberate bathos of poetic and rhetorical effects within *The Daybooks*, Hill revokes an idea of artistic perfection which nevertheless must remain the tantalising ideal.

It would be tempting to see Hill's resistance to aesthetic perfectibility, and a nigh-parodic attitude to form, as a drastic departure taken in the late work; not only would this overstate the nature of his experimentation, for *The Daybooks* do not hold technique or poetic craft in contempt, but it would also obfuscate the extent to which Hill's highly-formal early work was written in the shadow of serious reservations about the nature of perfection and formal closure, as I intimated earlier in this essay. In 1958, Hill published an essay on Allen Tate in the Leeds magazine *Geste*, which he treats as an opportunity to explore his ambivalences regarding form:

I think that Tate's insistence on the authority of 'form' in poetry is partly an awareness of the pernicious easiness of self-destruction in art. 'Form', for the modern poet, is indeed both triumph and concession. In a chaotic society the poet creates his own moral world, his own pattern and order; yet through this very order he makes a claim to bourgeois respectability; he hands in a testimonial to the Accuser who is the God of this World.¹⁶

Less than a year before his exceptionally-formal first collection *For the Unfallen* appeared, Hill was expressing misgivings about form and order, a career-long anxiety that finds its most urgent response in the ambivalences and experimentation of *The Daybooks*.

Hill's complicated thoughts on form in the late work, as both a traditional adherence to New Critical ideas of technique expressed in order, and a wayward *reductio ad absurdum* of that same dogma, must be contextualised in light of his philosophical and ethical ideas on perfection and imperfection. In his essay 'Envoi (1919)' first published in *The Enemy's Country* (1991), Hill discusses Ezra Pound's essay on the sculptor Brancusi:

Pound [suggests] that 'perhaps every artist at one time or another believes in a sort of elixir or philosopher's stone produced by the sheer perfection of his art; by the alchemical sublimation of the medium; the elimination of accidentals and imperfections.' 'Sheer perfection' is one of those usages... which, while saluting a lyric sublimation, [succeeds] only in perpetuating a sense of poetic redundancy (CCW, 256).

¹⁴ Frederick Siedel, 'An Interview with Robert Lowell', in *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time*, ed. Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York: David Lewis, 1970), p. 266.

¹⁵ Hill paid tribute to these figures throughout the course of his Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures, which at the time of writing have yet to appear in print. See my essay, 'Ovid in America', which unpicks some of these early influences, in *Stand*, 15.2 (214, August-October 2017), pp. 57-61.

¹⁶ Hill, 'The Poetry of Allen Tate', *Geste*, 3.3 (November 1958), p. 11.

Hill's implication in his reading of Pound's dictum—that 'sheer perfection' in poetry figured as a kind-of philosopher's stone is a specious end, one that would be vitiating were it not in any case impossible—is of a piece with his later remark in the same essay that Pound's poem 'Envoi (1919)' delivers 'a not wholly satisfactory process in the guise of a satisfyingly finished piece' (*CCW*, p. 259). Just such a contradiction animates Hill's attitudes in *The Daybooks* to the poem-as-product and the poem-as-process, as well as his complex attitudes to form and error; it is as though these late works are a knowing goose chase for the 'philosopher's stone', a self-sabotaged alchemical experiment in which the pursuit is itself the elixir.

Hill's exploration of error in the late work is inextricable from his theological aesthetics. From the earliest, an adherence to the Christian doctrine of original sin has been foundational in Hill's poetry and criticism, comparable to a similar immanent conservative aesthetics (shorn of Christian redemption) in the thought of T.E. Hulme, who Hill imagines as an auctioned Staffordshire ornament in *Ludo*, coveting him for 'his creed of primal sin, / argument more than faith' (*BH*, 621). Kathryn Murphy provides a succinct summary of the central tenets of this 'argument' vis-à-vis Hill:

Hill is preoccupied by the manifestation of 'empirical guilt' in the errors and imperfections of written language. He has repeatedly praised J.R. Mombert's observation, while apologising for any errors in his edition of Tyndale, despite his scrupulosity, of 'the imperfection which marks all human effort, especially where it aims to avoid it.'¹⁷

Murphy contrasts this scrupulous vigilance with the 'blithe and sophistic' *felix culpa* theology of a seventeenth century bishop, Godfrey Goodman, where the intrinsic existential reality of sin becomes an alibi for printing howlers.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there are grounds for questioning the degree of separation between Hill's critical thought on error and the theology of the *felix culpa*, while not jeopardising the validity of Murphy's distinction; Mombert's clarifying second clause indicates the pervasiveness of imperfection, and vigilance is itself 'in the plot' (to paraphrase an observation from John Donne that Hill savours).¹⁹ In *The Daybooks*, Hill is certainly not a jot or tittle less scrupulous regarding avoidable errors than he was when, in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', he concurs with Simone Weil that any writer who commits 'an avoidable error in a printed text' should be subject to legal redress and a sentence of hard labour' (*CCW*, 10). Nevertheless, the later work, still passionately engaged with forms of error and solecism and refusing blithe exculpation, is just as adamant in rejecting what William Empson touches upon, as quoted in Hill's essay 'Alienated Majesty: Ralph W. Emerson': 'the idea that the theorist is not part of the world he examines is one of the deepest sources of error' (*CCW*, p. 498). In his resistance to accepting error—especially in its most dramatic, heinous forms—as anything other than the endemic and foundational shape of human moral experience, Hill refuses 'to look down / so much upon the damned', as the speaker in 'Ovid in the Third Reich' puts it (*BH*, p. 39), a phrase of exculpation which by virtue of the condition of its utterance and its modulations and resistances ('so much') attributes the burden of guilt to both poet and reader as much as the imagined speaker: error and failure are inescapable textures of poetry as an ethical craft.

In addition to Hulme, the other Staffordshire figure in *Ludo* that Hill provocatively invents in order to covet is one of the English Blackshirt Oswald Mosley. Hill prizes its figuration of the 'bottled spells that England frowsily / simmered with, drowned in its patent heart; / sweetness, venom, not to be told apart' (*BH*, 621). The inflammatory allusion to Mosley, although couched as a totemic, cautionary example, seems designed to stoke the old flames of the argument that raged within the correspondence pages of the *London Review of Books* after the appearance on the

¹⁷ Kathryn Murphy, 'Geoffrey Hill and Confession', in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. by John Lyon and Peter McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 127-142 (132).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-3.

¹⁹ See 'Our Word is Our Bond', *CCW*, pp. 161-2.

4 April 1985 of a review essay by Tom Paulin, 'The Case for Geoffrey Hill'. Paulin castigated an allusion in *Mercian Hymns* to Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, and attacked Hill as a 'chthonic nationalist'.²⁰ Something inveterate, even sinister in Hill's imagination recognises the inveterate and sinister myths of Englishness that may well lurk behind what Seamus Heaney (punning on a phrase from Yeats) referred to as Hill's 'indomitable Englishry'.²¹ The metaphor of Mosley as a Staffordshire ornament/poison bottle containing England's galls and a national pride perverted may be interpreted more expansively, suggesting that the 'sweetness' of Hill's poetic craft is not to be distilled from the baleful poisons of error and failure in its manifold guises. It seems highly probable that this poetic theodicy—which has become altogether pronounced in the late work—owes much to the radical epistemology presented in John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), which Hill has commended on a number of occasions.²²

Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were impos'd on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt. It was out from the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which Adam fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdome can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil?²³

As Paul Hammond remarks, 'to know good 'by evill' is a strong and even difficult idea, suggesting not simply that one understands good by contrasting it with evil, but rather that it is actually by means of an encounter or even an embrace with evil that one really knows good.'²⁴ One might add that, for Hill, an idea of the perfection of a poem is a dereliction of how 'involv'd and interwoven' good is with error, and a grievous example of intellectual pride.

The radical aesthetic and ethical implications of this Miltonic knowledge *per malum* are explored in the anarchic energies of Hill's *Daybooks*. If Hill has always maintained, and his poetry has attempted to demonstrate, what he refers to in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' as the 'irredeemable error in the very substance and texture of one's craft and pride' (*CCW*, p. 19), in *The Daybooks* this creed becomes a wayward resistance towards perfection, a resistance that entwines the subject matter of alchemy with formal experimentation and an investigation of error. In *Ludo*, the satiric rattle of Skeltonic rhyme deliberately eschews and even botches poetic felicity: Hill urges his poems, 'small steadfast throng / go get it wrong' (*BH*, p. 608). Comparing this late medieval poetic form to the rigours of the Creweian oration which Hill was obliged to deliver during his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, he observes, 'impassively the rhyme staggers its ruin', where the verb (as in Hill's early poem 'Canticle for Good Friday') straddles significations, implying that Skeltonic rhyme progresses in ungainly fashion towards the ruination of the poem, and (perhaps through its comic appeal, or the wit of the play on the verb) astounds the poet's intended dereliction of poetic responsibility. As the epigraph to *Expostulations on the*

²⁰ Tom Paulin, 'The Case for Geoffrey Hill', *London Review of Books* (4 April 1985), pp. 13-14 (14).

²¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), p. 110.

²² For an early example of Hill's interest in Miltonic adversarial virtue and error as endemic, see an undated, unpublished lecture that likely formed part of Hill's teaching at Cambridge in the mid-eighties on his 'Dissentient Voices' course: 'Milton', ms numbered 1-32, the Brotherton Library, the University of Leeds, BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/133, p. 28.

²³ John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Vol. 2: 1643-1648*, ed. by Ernest Sirluck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 514.

²⁴ Paul Hammond, *Milton's Complex Words: Essays on the Conceptual Structure of Paradise Lost* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 119.

Volcano suggests, a Poundian urge to ‘clown verse rather than read it’ (BH, p. 627) is decisive in Hill’s late mode. As the play on ‘staggers’ in *Ludo* suggests, a resistance to perfection is nevertheless qualitatively different, in Hill’s eyes, from mediocrity or a wilful abdication of poetic responsibility. The highly-meditated forms are the main vehicle for the way in which Hill’s late poems, showcasing their denial of lyrical sublimation and other kinds of aesthetic “perfection”, are nevertheless committed to art and technique: ‘How may I differ thee from defeat?’ he asks of his poems in *Clavics*, concluding, ‘If / Intricacy is resistance, take heart: / The strings of strife / Work their measures / Part against part’ (BH, 809).

In *Liber Illustrium Virorum*, Hill is fascinated by the orchestrated, polyphonic formal imagining of political failure in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, treating it as a tragedy of ignorance; in particular, an insight into the play in Bertolt Brecht’s 1954 dramaturgical dialogue-essay, ‘Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*’ seems to have shaped Hill’s engagement with the play in *Liber Illustrium Virorum*.²⁵ Brecht has ‘R’ in the dialogue-essay confess ‘what bothers one at the moment is how to show [Menenius’s] speech as ineffective and having an effect’.²⁶ Hill directly alludes to this in the volume:

In theatre
The ineffective is a judged effect.
Even the vicious creature has stature,
Double alienation twinned in Brecht (BH, p. 702).

‘The ineffective is a judged effect’ could well serve as a key to the secrets of *The Daybooks*. To aspire to a kind of poetic sabotage of ‘the closing box’ is for Hill a fundamental repudiation of false endings—a resistance to an immanent secular ideal of perfection, whether aesthetic, political, organic. *Odi Barbare* figures the metrical demands of Sidnean sapphics as a kind of technical accomplishment utterly pervaded by imperfection: ‘Ready metered set to a mark perfection staggers away from’ (BH, 835). In *Oraclau | Oracles*, Hill recognises the Brechtian contradiction of this effective ineffectual poetics in terms that once again broach its relation to alchemy:

I can do ashes but not diamonds.
She has returned to tease me. I allow—
I think I do—that to will flaw
For the beauty of amends
Is aestheticism,
Spiritual pride, a touch of s.m. / For the effete nervous system.
Returning on occasion she astounds.
I can do ashes but not diamonds (BH, p. 769).

‘For the beauty of amends’ almost suggest that Hill, in some great comic prank, has written flaws into these late poems in order to revise them at some point; until the extent of his posthumous oeuvre becomes clear, that remains a mocking possibility, but certainly he revised even these poems between their appearance as individual volumes and their collation in *Broken Hierarchies: Odi Barbare*, first published by Clutag in 2012, contains a self-conscious revision in its later manifestation. The original lines in the Clutag version read:

Blessings Frank Ramsey as for Yeats von Hügel.

²⁵ See my essay “‘Noble in his grandiose confusions’”: Yeats and *Coriolanus* in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, *English* 65 (250), (September 2016), pp. 211-33.

²⁶ Bertolt Brecht, ‘Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*’, in *Brecht: Collected Plays, Vol. 9—Adaptations*, ed. by Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 257.

Dissertations in at the final conclave...
Reconcile de facto Euripidean
Times past amendment.²⁷

In *Broken Hierarchies*, Hill has substituted the following:

Loved that come-back; how well you speak out, padre:
Secular plaudits as the best-befitting...
Bide me my pardon, enigmatic cadence
Cracked and repaired thus (*BH*, p. 842).

Hill's flaunted revisions here (as elsewhere in the sheer scale of rewritten verse on offer in *Broken Hierarchies*) are difficult to interpret, wilfully 'enigmatic'. At times, particularly in *Clavus*, the revision is local, and simply to correct an original laxity in order to conform to the strict form and/or metre. Here, however, there seems to be no metrical divergence between the variants. In the original version Hill alludes to the final section of Yeats's 'Vacillations' in which the religiously heterodox Irish magus dismisses the Catholic modernist Baron von Hügel with 'blessings', for although they accept 'the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity', Yeats announces that he is destiny-bound to continue celebrating the pagan virtues of 'Homer and his unchristened heart'.²⁸ Hill heaps blessings on Frank Ramsey, a staggeringly gifted mathematician born in 1903, and for his times, an outspoken atheist (and the brother of an Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey). Whereas Yeats blesses a form of Catholicism that he finds congenial, Hill imparts his blessing to a sympathetic form of atheism. The revision 'Loved that come-back; how well you speak out, padre: / Secular plaudits as the best-befitting' seems to suggest that a clergyman correspondent—probably a Catholic priest, to judge from the appellation 'padre' (perhaps Hill's colleague at Boston, Fr Lucien Richard?)—has written to Hill to take issue with these 'blessings', pressing 'secular plaudits' as more befitting, but until archival evidence of this emerges, it remains guesswork.

Whatever the specific contexts of this responsive revision, it indicates an attitude to error and 'amends' in the late work strikingly resistant to an idea of the poem as a final, fixed perfection emerging out of an original chaos of process and possibility, and is, in some sense, a poetics of failure: 'this clicks—/ Damn—is for ever', he writes in *Odi Barbare*, in a parodic recollection of Yeats's 'closing box' that seems to equate an idea of the final and perfect form of a poem with eternal damnation (*BH*, p. 857).

Unsurprisingly, this attitude to error in *The Daybooks* (as with much else in Hill's oeuvre) has roots in modernism.²⁹ *Odi Barbare* celebrates the great magi of modernist poetry:

Yeats with his clangour of despotic beauty,
Pound's destructive matrix, creative hatred,
Stevens circumstancing the blockish rider...
Let the inconsistencies pull together...
We will wing it, working through all the forms now,
Shedding excellencies like moulting angels' (*BH*, p. 871).

²⁷ Hill, *Odi Barbare* (Thame: Clutag, 2012). Due to constraint of space, I have elided the final two stanzas of poem VIII together.

²⁸ W.B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1992), pp. 252-3.

²⁹ For an excellent investigation of the relationship of the late work to modernism (particularly Pound), see Steven Matthews, 'Finding Consonance in the Disparities: Geoffrey Hill, John Milton, and Modernist Poetics', *Modern Language Review*, 111.3 (July 2016), pp. 665-83

Like Yeats's enterprising nudist in 'The Coat' which signalled a repudiation of the specious glamour of his Celtic Twilight verse, Hill figures as the aesthetic idol of these late poems a balding modernist angel, deliberately sloughing off 'excellencies' in pursuit of a more 'destructive' aesthetic. Images of deliberate vandalism, and those inflicted by the severity of poetic forms, abound in *The Daybooks*: 'I checkmate my own moves', he avers in *Ludo* (BH, p. 606), and in *Expostulations on the Volcano* demands 'give me my medal for rhymed sabotage, // Claim catastrophe now as jubilee' (BH, p. 667), while in *Clavics* he consoles himself that 'the grace of music is its dissonance, / Unresolved beneath resolution / Of flow and stance' (BH, p. 793), and in *Odi Barbare* commends 'Noble lines, pre-eminently disordered' (BH, p. 876).

I want to turn in the remainder of this essay to consider how the interpenetrating concerns of form and error in Hill's late works are sustained and accentuated by one of the pervasive subject matters of *The Daybooks*: alchemy. As intimated, Hill's resistance to a poetic 'philosopher's stone' (in terms of craft delivering perfection) turns the alchemic pursuit on its head, so that experimental process and error itself (with highly esoteric uses of technical form) comes to be somehow valuable to his aesthetic. In *Oraclau | Oracles*, he confesses 'I've shrunk susceptible / to Cabbala' (BH, p. 777). In *Expostulations on the Volcano*, in addition to Hart Crane—a modernist poet who despite his tremendous achievement in *The Bridge* and elsewhere is frustratingly dogged by a critical reputation as a failure³⁰—Hill lauds the novelist Malcolm Lowry, whose late modernist masterpiece, *Under the Volcano* (1947) features an alcoholic central character, the Consul. The Consul, along with Crane, recur throughout *Expostulations* as catalysts to Hill's musings on personal as well as artistic flaws. Hill draws on the Cabbalistic overtones of *Under the Volcano*, especially Qliphoth, a daemonic, empty realm which Hill recasts as a kind of limbo for misrequited love (an obsessive theme in these poems): '*Qliphoth*... The realm of rinds, landfill of rotten grief, / A dereliction of love's artifice' (BH, p. 653). In *Expostulations*, Hill announces 'Between a golden calf and a limbeck / I place my inventiveness' (BH, 667), an advertisement of the heterodox textures of the late work. In *Oraclau | Oracles*, he salutes the physical world as 'alchemic-carnal, such the earth remains / In winter... the brittle llyn / A limbeck of itself or of the moon' (BH, p. 750). *Clavics*, which he suggests in *Ludo* was written in part 'for Cabbalistic humours, for the dead' (BH, p. 641), celebrates Renaissance hermetic thinkers, especially the Vaughan twins, Henry and Thomas: he refers to the latter in *Odi Barbare* as a 'necromonger/ To Christian ethicks' (BH, p. 751) and admires his 'Hermeneutics dark with alchemic soot' (BH, p. 752).

Far from contradicting his adherence to the Christian doctrine of original sin, these heterodox Renaissance cabbalists merely provide Hill with another way in which to figure its effects, and the interwoven aspects of error with intricate form. *Clavics*—the Renaissance calligrams which are probably the most outlandish of Hill's forms—opens with the syntactically confounding blazon 'Bring torch for Caballah brand new treatise, / Numerology also makes much sense', hoping that his sequence will 'twitch / Creative fire' out of 'the materia' (BH, p. 791). As with the arcane lore of numerology, counting syllables and metrical feet 'makes much sense' as a way to probe the recalcitrant 'materia' of daily life, perhaps especially the endemic error one encounters navigating an average day. 'Not metaphysics, try clavics', Hill suggests in *Oraclau | Oracles*, 'indigent casuistry... metaphysical acrostics'—poetry as an esoteric art that is nevertheless 'indigent', resourceful, and built out of its own composition—further suggesting that this 'alchemy of keys' derives from a sense of being unable to penetrate the root causes of failure and wrong: 'As lacking something so I have made art—/ The management, the formalities' (BH, p. 754).

³⁰ For an influential example of a common critical view, see Allen Tate's discussion of Crane's 'grand failure' in his essay 'Hart Crane and the American Mind' in *Poetry*, 40.4 (July 1930), pp. 210-16. I am indebted to Francesca Bratton (Durham University) for drawing this to my attention.

While there is no doubt that Hill has become suspicious of an early view he held, aired in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', that the poet is a kind of sacrificial victim involved in 'vicarious expiation' for sin through the particular ordeal of his craft (*CCW*, p. 6), he has nevertheless continued to flirt with the idea in his alchemical metaphors; he recommends emulation of Mandelstam and Rimbaud in *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti*, their 'linguistic alchemy, / Vicarious redemption by the word' (*BH*, p. 904). Nor, as I have stated, is his interest in the heterodox, even dark arts of alchemy unaffected by his longstanding adherence to the doctrine of original sin. Glancing allusions to the radical *felix culpa* theology he derives from Milton (possibly via Blake) abound in *The Daybooks*: he writes of 'beauty stemming from the aboriginal fault' in *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti* (*BH*, p. 901), and in the same volume charts 'a genealogy of song':

each flaw
 Mastered in its own making [...]
 Suffice the Fall, *pace* those mystic Orphic meadows.
 Each mystic good teased out from forfeit.
 Plato yet shines, Ficino shadows us (*BH*, p. 891).

Hill's rejection of the perfect 'Orphic meadows' of poetic inspiration, his radical interpretation of the Fall as sufficient ('suffice the Fall'), and his Miltonic image of 'mystic good teased out from forfeit' (like 'Psyche in the field' in *Areopagitica*) is compounded with Neoplatonic mysticism. He further suggests that the sciences of Christian theology and alchemy are complementary as regards their ideas of imperfection, in another charged verse passage in the last of *The Daybooks*:

Earth, best-rhymed original alchemist,
 Proclaims *the very natural true sperm*
Of the great world. Charged thus to procreant Adam
 My fecund winter glitters its verbed crest (*BH*, p. 926).

The italicised phrase is taken from Thomas Vaughan's treatise on alchemy *Lumen de Lumine* (1651), and refers to a viscous, pearl-like waterfall within the lunar mountains which it transpires is the First Matter.³¹ In all its actual repletion, the carnal earth is seen as already-transmogrified, 'best-rhymed' in the sense of a kind of repletion that is in no ways perfection—the world as a compact of carnality and the fragments of metaphysical ideality, where the trope of rhyme may be taken to mean 'metaphysical rapport' and the attendant contradictory attraction/repulsion of energies which it releases, as Hill explores with reference to Henry Vaughan's 'The Night' in his essay 'A Pharisee to Pharisees' (*CCW*, p. 323-4). Hill's coinage 'procreant' for Adam puns on the idea of the original sinner as procreator and miscreant, himself created (and perhaps, in a heretical undertone, miscreated), a botch and aboriginal error from which Hill's late verse wrestles into being.

To conclude, we might wish to consider how *Ludo* and *The Daybooks* are to be critically received. If in this late sequence Hill purposively rejects the high claims of poetic art, courts esoteric processes of open-ended and botched experimentation, and enforces ludicrously complex forms to probe the nature of error, how are we to evaluate these poems aesthetically? Certainly, these poems do not constitute a 'cogent if austere finale', to adapt lines from 'A Précis or Memorandum of Civil Power' (*BH*, p. 584), although a poem from Hill's posthumous oeuvre that has appeared in a memorial issue *Stand* is almost unrecognisably cogent and austere, with the rest due to be published in an OUP edition sometime in the near future.³² But these are the "last poems". The late poems under consideration here, by contrast, aspire to the ideal that Hill

³¹ See *The Works of Thomas Vaughan*, ed. by Alan Redrum (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 307.

³² This poem, titled '36.', is a miserere for the blitzed churches of the United Kingdom during the Second World War, in *Stand*, 15.2 (214, August-October 2017), pp. 6-12.

renders vividly in 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics'. In discussing Yeats's fealty to the example of Swift in his own later verse from the 1930s onwards, Hill identifies Swift operating in Yeats's poetics as 'the flawed image of an envisioned flawless unity' (*CCW*, p. 576-7). Hill's *Ludo* and *The Daybooks* deliberately shattered that 'envisioned flawless unity' to burlesque violently in the shards. There is a strange clarity, then, to these fragments, and it is from these 'orders of anarchy'—as they are called in a Beckettian trope in *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti* (*BH*, p. 891)—that Hill's 'fecund winter glitters'.