

“Violent hefts”: Geoffrey Hill’s
The Triumph of Love

“Opinion is not worth a rush”: Yeats’s line needs to be quoted, and pondered, more often. In contemporary poetry, “opinion” is generally the motive force behind the rush to consensus: literary critics and journalists, in Britain at least, agree with remarkable swiftness and with impressive certainty on a great many things. In this sense, at least, shared and disseminated opinion is always “true”. The media excitement surrounding Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* is as good an example as any of how literary opinion puts itself around; many other instances could be cited, though, of similar hyperbolic consensus, and of a condition of shared enthusiasm for a number of contemporary poets which seems to reflect a certain anxiety to be seen wearing the right opinions in the company of the British literary media. Arguably, the force of consensus makes itself felt in negative, as well as these apparently positive, ways. If there is one thing, for example, which “everybody” can agree about just now, it is that Geoffrey Hill has moved beyond the circle of those poets found acceptable by the most influential British critics and critical publications. Hill’s indigestibility is sometimes registered with regret, but more often it serves to confirm certain assumptions and preconceptions—about seriousness, about literature and its relation to erudition, and about the nature of language—which give much contemporary literary criticism its opinion-making power and stability.

Geoffrey Hill’s book-length poem, *The Triumph of Love*, published in the United States in 1998 and in the United Kingdom early in 1999, is by turns a daunting, baffling, exacerbating, and a provoking work; the present essay will make no attempt to treat Hill’s poem with anything approaching a comprehensive—or perhaps even a partial—explanatory or exegetical agenda; nor will it try to approach the poem as merely an incident in the history of contemporary literary reception. That is, I do not wish either to attend to the unfolding of Hill’s specific design, intent, and expression in *The Triumph of Love*, nor to examine simply the story of the poem’s immediate critical reception, taxing and instructive as each of these endeavours would be. But I would like to raise some of the questions Hill raises in the book: ques-

tions about language and difficulty, language's difficulty for us, and our difficulty with language; questions too (and perhaps not incidentally) about contemporary orthodoxies in the matter of difficulty, its legitimate bounds and extent, its testing of the limits of our taste, and our reflexes when confronted by the tasteless.

It may be that, as far as the phrasing of these questions is concerned—never mind their substance—we are already sick of hearing this: and being sick is certainly of the essence in Hill's recent work. Nauseous reflex has always been part of Hill's poetic repertoire, as for instance in the pair of sonnets entitled "Annunciations" where "all who attend to fiddle or to harp/ For betterment, flavour their decent mouths/ With gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice"—lines which, as Hill's printed exchanges with his unadmiring Penguin anthologist Kenneth Allott made clear, suggest in part the literal consumption, by connoisseurs, of "husk and excrement". *The Triumph of Love* is more direct in instructing one of its adversaries to "Eat shit, MacSikker!" Yet Hill's early feeling for revulsion is more than simply aggressive: the short piece "The Humanist" (like "Annunciations", from the 1968 volume *King Log*) stages its own moment of irruptive reaction as a parenthesis which the poem's body may not be able to digest:

The *Venice* portrait: he
Broods, the achieved guest
Tired and word-perfect
At the Muses' table.

Virtue is virtù. These
Lips debate and praise
Some rich aphorism,
A delicate white meat.

The commonplace hands once
Thick with Plato's blood
(Tasteless! tasteless!) are laid
Dryly against the robes.

It is as though, in regaining its quiet and restrained equilibrium, the poem expels the matter of that reflex exclamation "(Tasteless! tasteless!)", and feels better at ease, both with the "delicate white meat" of its consumption, and with the thick blood of which the hands now, after all, are dry. The complex status of the parenthetical interjection records a complexity of pitch: are these words, for example, in the same voice as the rest of the poem? Are they, in part at least, in the voice of a prospective reader of the poem and, if so, is the poet treating his readers with acute attentiveness or a condescending brutality? In raising a voice against itself, does the poem try out a productive or a finally

debilitating strategy? Is the parenthesis, in fact, a tasteless bit of writing, and in its way too loud, badly timed, and embarrassing? The parallels with the moments of ventriloquized criticism in *The Triumph of Love* are clear enough:

Shameless old man, bent on committing
more public nuisance. Incontinent
fury wetting the air. Impotently
bereft satire. Charged with erudition,
put up by the defence to be
his own accuser.

(XXXVII)

But *is* this the defence, or even a strategy of “the defence” (as almost all reviewers have assumed)? And who exactly is on trial? As with “(Tasteless! tasteless!)”, it is extremely difficult to fix precisely the relation of the indigestible matter to the larger body that may—or may not—digest such matter.

In suggesting a complexity of pitch, however, it may appear that important questions about what is meant by “pitch” are being strategically begged. Since the word has become increasingly important for Hill (and increasingly useful in writing about Hill) in the burst of poetry which began with *Canaan* (1996) and continued through *The Triumph of Love to Speech! Speech!* (2000), and since its usefulness has also been challenged by hostile critics, some account of it here seems necessary. Reviewing T.S. Eliot’s *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* in 1996, Hill summarises his examination of the posthumously-printed lectures in these terms:

I have attempted to show that, throughout his argument, Eliot aims at pitch but, for the most part, succeeds only in tone. I say “succeeds” because tone is what people expect and suppose themselves familiar with. It was the pitch of *Prufrock and Other Observations* that disturbed and alienated readers; it was the tone of *Four Quartets* which assuaged and consoled them. That is to say, Eliot’s poetry declines over thirty years from pitch into tone and these late-published papers contribute significant evidence to the history of that decline.

“What people expect and suppose themselves familiar with” enters our language at the level of its own postures of accommodation—as for a lecturer (like Eliot) it must, the better to enable the communication demanded and attempted in that context. Hill cites Eliot’s “small tonal irritants and irritations: “what many of you will have expected; a neat and comprehensive definition...”, “But I think that I warned you...”, “You will perhaps think it unjust of me...”. “The style of Eliot’s ad-

dress to his audience," Hill adds, "is a matter of tone; the burden of his analytical criticism is, or ought to be, the question of pitch". In a bravura performance, Hill proceeds to contrast Eliot's suave references to Richard Hooker's prose with the actual complex energy concentrated in that prose, fixing on Hooker's use for the word "common", and citing ten distinct senses in *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* to show how "Hooker's 'style' is to a large extent his semantic ingenuity, his ability to make these senses merge and part with equanimity though not always with equity." If Eliot failed to account for this, his failure was in the cause of his lectures' tone; in detecting and pursuing the failure, Hill's enquiry into pitch is itself an example of the pitch of and in verbal exactingness, something which, he contends, the poet of *Prufrock* knew all about, and which the poet of *Four Quartets* had learned (accommodatingly, as it happened) to overcome.

"Pitch", for Hill, describes a quality of deliberated alertness in the use of a word or phrase, in which even the intended meaning has taken stock of the misconstructions to which it is liable. "Tone", as Hill employs the term, concerns the degree of collusion between writer and audience, where words and phrases are employed to mark and confirm the degree of that practical and mutually accepted relationship. How far this pair of terms depend upon their context in a critique of Eliot is a moot point; certainly, the significance of Eliot in Hill's adoption and use of them in his writing more generally needs to be borne in mind. It is obvious, by now, that Hill's poetry not only relates to Eliot's in various ways, but also has come to challenge Eliot on a number of levels: the 1996 attack on *Four Quartets* is a logical step in a lifelong engagement with Eliot's poetry and poetics, where Hill has constantly pushed beyond those points (in terms of artistic procedure as well as aesthetic principle) at which Eliot left off. *The Triumph of Love* might well be read as a reply to *Four Quartets*, but one which treats its subject unsparingly, disowning "tone" and yet, at the same time—and by the same token—abandoning any aspirations towards impersonality, or indeed commonality—of address. How completely Hill throws the later Eliot's assumptions into reverse may be gauged from comparing the "pitch" of *The Triumph of Love* with what Eliot has to say (in "The Music of Poetry", of 1942) about Dryden:

Perhaps we do not realize how natural the speech of Dryden must have sounded to the most sensitive of his contemporaries. No poetry, of course, is ever exactly the same speech that the poet talks and hears: but it has to be in such a relation to the speech of his time that the listener or reader can say "that is how I should talk if I could talk poetry".

The Triumph of Love hears this kind of pronouncement in comically subversive ways: the poem's running-gag of mishearing ("For definitely

the right era, read: deaf in the right ear" [CV]) and misunderstanding makes short work of Eliot's "sounded to the most sensitive", "the same speech that the poet talks and hears", and his (already patronisingly projected) "how I should talk if I could talk poetry". The precise verbal co-ordinates of Eliot's tone may have passed, but the message they convey is still with us, and it is easy to imagine how, in contemporary British poetic culture, Eliot's point might be translated readily into our own tonal range of relevance, immediacy, and accessibility. Indeed, Eliot's next sentence could do service as the language of more recent "poetry is good for you" promotional enthusiasm: "the best contemporary poetry," he writes, "can give us a feeling of excitement and a sense of fulfilment different from any sentiment aroused by even very much greater poetry of a past age." "Very much greater" would nowadays be edited out; but now as then, the reasonableness of tone, and the ease of its consensus, are not guarantees of the soundness of the judgements being made.

It takes little acuteness to remark that Hill's work is, as far as many literary commentators are concerned, hard to stomach; but indigestibility is a theme as well as an effect of that work. If Hill's poetry was always alert to its own difficulties in keeping things down, *The Triumph of Love* has shown what happens when they come back, or come up again. In poem LXXV, where a voice addresses the "*Vergine bella*", prayers to whom punctuate the sequence, Hill braves tastelessness and embarrassment, or he seems to:

Vergine bella, now I am half-way
and lost—need I say—in this maze of my own
devising, I would go back and start
again; or not start at all, which might
be wiser. No. Delete the last four words.
Talking to oneself is in fact
a colloquy with occasion—*eppur*
si muove—or so I tell myself.
Extraordinary how N. and N. contrive
to run their depilators off the great turbine—
the raw voltage could flay them. Such
intimate buzzing and smooth toiletry,
mingled with a few squeals, may yet
draw blood from bloodless Stockholm. *Mea culpa*,
I am too much moved by hate—
pardon, ma'am?—add greed, self-pity, sick
scrupulosity, frequent fetal regression, *and*
a twisted libido? Oh yes—much
better out than in.

The particular modulations of this "colloquy with occasion" are perplexing, and the passage, like much else in Hill's recent work, is far

from smooth in its flow. The constant self-interruption, the interjections and turnings-back on speech, and the mishearings, all contribute to what we might call a radical instability of tone, had not Hill already made it clear that he rejects what he calls “tone” in favour of “pitch”. But poetry like this is less pitched in a key than pitched hurtling in our faces; and its mixture of (not too subtly) coded references to Nobel Prize-winning poets who appear to be shaving their legs, bloody flayings, and a catalogue of personal faults will not necessarily strike those on the receiving end as something “much/ better out than in”. What happens here seems to bring the “tasteless” into a new dimension of vivid clarity.

So at any rate it has struck many of Hill’s critics, and the reception of *The Triumph of Love* has been marked by a number of more or less disgusted reactions to what the poet has chosen to bring up. Few, on the whole, have paused to consider how immediately they were able to come up with these reactions. Fewer still, perhaps, have taken the time to recall Hill’s critical book of 1991, *The Enemy’s Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language*—a book which itself took, and takes, time and hard attention on the part of its readers. It is here, however, that Hill meditates on poets like Dryden and Pound, both writers “at bay”, in ways that certainly exert pressure of some kind on *The Triumph of Love*. In his chapter on Dryden, for example, Hill acknowledges that the seventeenth-century writer “knew that there were liberties which he could not afford to take or would take at his peril”, and juxtaposes two articulations of the poet’s stance when he is thus “at bay”, and up against it:

We weigh “’tis dangerous to offend an Arbitrary Master” against “When a Poet is thoroughly provok’d, he will do himself Justice, however dear it cost him” and conclude that Dryden’s own style is a matter of constant vigilant negotiation among and between “danger”, “justice”, and “cost”. It may be added that it is one of the virtues of his style to transform a driven condition into a cadenced vehemence and that “however dear it cost him” strikes one as having earned its place in the syntax of his conviction [...]

Ezra Pound’s convictions, too, are figured for Hill in the shadow of his fitness for another, and more judicial, kind of conviction; even so, Pound’s literary “attention upon the forces of attrition” plays an important part in *The Enemy’s Country*, and the necessity of this attention, as well as the reality of those forces, does not slip from view. When another writer gives way to “attrition”, Pound’s reaction is quoted:

[...] he could bring himself to suggest, after [Allen] Upward’s suicide, that he had “shot himself in discouragement on read-

ing of [the Nobel] Award to Shaw. Feeling of utter hopelessness in struggle for values." Such a timbre is not unlike Upward's own in his autobiography, which has been defined as one of "forced levity and grim desperation... betraying the lacerated spirit". [...] Such disparities in fact stem from a coherent emphasis: that the self-same writer may become the helpless and hopeless victim of those circumstances which he has acutely diagnosed and assayed.

Is there a measure of self-identification in this kind of critical writing? If so, it would be a mistake to assume that Hill is simply lining up a series of role-models, so to speak, and putting himself, wilfully or wishfully, in their place. Pound's phrase, "the struggle for values", for example, is not one which Hill allows his readers to accept in an unquestioning way, for "values" are not all self-evidently valuable. But Hill's tenor is plain enough: it is when a writer is most "at bay", most confronted by those forces in his contemporary surroundings, that he is backed into a position where he must—he can *only*—do himself justice in the pitch of his language, and its way with "cadenced vehemence".

But how is this pitch to be judged, and how far should the difficulties of its circumstances dictate its own measures of difficulty and intractability? Is it entirely right, for instance, for such writing to give the appearance of being so worked up on the matter of Nobel Prizes? The adversarial figures in *The Triumph of Love*—critics like MacSikker, Sean O'Shem, and Croker, and laureates like "N. and N.", are quick to point out the element of "obsession" is such a recurring concern. Section XLIII is a couplet in which this identification is juxtaposed with a furious—perhaps "impotent"—snapping-back:

This is quite dreadful—he's become obsessed.
There you go, there you go—narrow it down to *obsession!*

There is a doleful comedy in the compression here: the complacency of the first line, and its "quite dreadful" (only *quite* dreadful?) is counterpointed immediately by the kind of vehemence whose cadence gives it away, as the voice takes on the pitch of a family row, narrowing itself down in the process. The tiny poem has room enough for two matched acts of mutual inattention. Yet Hill's registers remain extremely unstable, and almost helplessly vulnerable to misconstruction: there is irony everywhere, but its pitch is often at odds with its surroundings. In CIII, Hill writes of "the presiding/ judge of our art, self-pleasured *Ironia*", and the implications of this self-pleasuring are taken up at once at the beginning of the next section. The whole section seems important in the context of irony, distaste, and tastelessness:

Self-pleasured, as retching on a voided stomach pleasures self. Savage indignations plighted with self-disgust become one flesh. Pasternak, for example: *shesdesyat shestoy*, they shout—give us the sixty-sixth [sonnet, of Shakespeare—ED]. You could say that to yourself in the darkness before sleep and perhaps be reconciled. Nothing true is easy—is that true? Or, how true is it? It must be worth something, some sacrifice. I write for the dead; N., N., for the living dead. No joke, though, self-defenestration.

Like so much in *The Triumph of Love*, this is poetry which is constantly interrupting itself, seeming to change tack, to tear holes in its own fabric. The intrusions of an editorial voice are part of this, but more generally it is necessary to hear the extreme, painstaking heaviness of the progress—if it is progress—as Hill’s language impacts the difficulties of its situation: “Nothing true/ is easy—is that true? Or, how true is it?” These questions, and the patience of their unfolding, weigh heavily; again and again, Hill insists on the necessity of attending to the things being said, though they are being heard with an increasing lack of clarity:

Excuse me—excuse me—I did not
say the pain is lifting. I said the pain is in
the lifting. No—please—forget it.

(XLII)

The poetry challenges its readers—its mishearers—to ignore the difficulties that are, but are never simply, its burden. In section XL, Hill concludes with “*Is that right, Missis, or is that right?* I don’t/ care what I say, do I?” But this is the note of “provok’d” vehemence which inhabits the teasing structures of the poetry, and enables Hill to find a level between the incompatible extremes (“*Is that right, Missis, or is that right?*”) to which circumstance, and the voice “provok’d” by circumstance continually threaten to drive him. Again, an earlier observation by Hill on Ezra Pound is pertinent:

The ethical and the aesthetic come together at those points where “freedom of pitch” and “freedom of field” perfectly coincide. And when the conjunction is bungled we discover the complicity between a solecism and “a sloppy and slobbering world”. [...] The desperation of “I never did believe in Fascism, God damn it”, the angry bewilderment of “everyone’s inexactitude very fatiguing”, are both prejudged by “the tyro cannot play about with such things, the

game is too dangerous". Pound had written this, in 1917, in an essay on Laforgue, "the finest wrought" of modern French satirists. "Finest wrought" and "everyone's inexactitude" are mutually uncomprehending and Pound stands condemned by his own best judgment, the "tyro" to his own mystery.

Hill's own best judgement—in passages like this from the essay "Our Word is our Bond"—is not such as to leave *The Triumph of Love* standing condemned, and on the contrary it makes all the more audible the pressured and sometimes agonized pitch of the poem's self-checkings and self-crossings.

But what about the sheer extravagance of Hill's "vehemence", and what the poem itself calls his "splenetics" (LXXXVII)? To return to the bare-knuckle ride of section CIV, how far can the poet's critical perspicuity help with the final, bone-crunching wrench in pitch, from the apparently "serious" to the nearly gruesome joke that is "no joke"?

It must be worth something, some sacrifice. I
write for the dead; N., N., for the living
dead. No joke, though, self-defenestration.

To complain about the lack of subtlety in the enjambment here (as some reviewers have done) is to fail to catch the self-consciously awful obviousness of the joke: it is not for nothing that Hill elsewhere in the book makes "Boom-boom!" answer both to the ceremonial salvo of "noon guns" and to the accents of Basil Brush—"... boom-boom, boom-boom!" (XXXIV). In a sense, to fall for this is to fall for something where the poem's voice declares itself to be self-propelled in any fall it does take. Not irony, then, but transparency is involved: the critical capacity to handle the former is embarrassed by the presence of the latter. Once again, we seem to be confronted by the "tasteless". To reconfigure the living as the "living/ dead" is to nit-pick, and so returns a defiantly transparent response to "I write for the dead", if that is heard as the voicing of a common complaint. To complain that Hill's codes in *The Triumph of Love* are easy to see through is both to get the point and to fail to get the point: the parallel is with Hill's characterisation of Dryden, whose "insult to Rochester, though in code, could not be more clear... The deliberated insult has the quality of impenetrable transparency".

The process of "self-defenestration", however, is painful for all concerned. The generic positioning which Hill insists upon, that of *laus et vituperatio*, or praise and condemnation, is one which engages on a deliberately dangerous engagement between language and its "contexture" in a world of multifarious misconstruction. In section CXXXIX, Hill writes of how there is "nothing between/ election and reprobation, except vertigo", and the poem continues into a dizzy (or

at least a dizzying) encounter with precedent, as the poet is joined on his window-ledge by Milton, then Plutarch, then Hopkins, then Herbert, then Joyce... The context for this is precisely that of praise and blame, blessing and “The deliberated insult”:

Milton writes of those
 who “comming to Curse... have stumbled into
 a kind of Blessing”; but if you suppose him
 to invoke a stirrup-and-ground-type mercy, think
 again. It’s a Plutarchan twist: even our foes
 further us, though against their will and purpose (*up
 yours, O’Shem*). Hopkins gave his two best
 coinings of the self—*inscape*,
instress, to Lucifer for his self-love,
non serviam: sweetness of absolute
 hatred, which shall embrace self-hatred,
 encompass self-extinction, annihilation’s
 demonic angelism. Hereditary
 depression is something else again. You
 can draw up Plutarch against yourself; yourself
 the enemy (*do it and be damned*).

This sense of the concern for the self marks the point at which Hill’s impulse towards self-destruction, doing it and being damned, meets the reflexes and the impacted energies of his rhetoric. In a recent essay on some notably vituperative writers of seventeenth-century prose, Hill mentions the relation between “curse” and “blessing” which language can inscribe as something apart from both Lockean ideas of communication and the counsel of despair in an assumption of inevitable misconstruction:

...I would respond that the perplexed matter of tradition, or custom, as we have received it, gives evidence that to legislate, as “the end of Speech” “that those Sounds, as Marks, may make known [our] *Ideas* to the Hearer” is to presume to disconnect language from the consequences of our common imbecility. The Lockean prescription names a legitimate function of language; but its tacit proscriptions turn legitimacy into tyranny. As with other patrimonies, our language is a blessing and a curse; but in the right hands it can mediate within itself, thereby transforming blessing into curse, curse into blessing.

The Triumph of Love is, of course, a poem about the patrimony we inherit, and the extent to which we fail to honour that patrimony: its curses fold within themselves “blessing”, but as a matter of faith. Thus, while the poem laments, sometimes with a wounded rage, the extent

of modern forgetting in the kinds of self-congratulatory cultural and historical amnesia which have become dominant in the literary mind, it also refigures those intensities of poetic vision—in personal memory, in love for place, in unrepeatable vividness of perception—in which “blessing” resides. In none of this can disgust—including self-disgust—be separated from the intensity of vision: curse and blessing are implicate, one in the other; no epiphany can escape from the mire of its contexture. This, one might hazard, is still, as it has always been, Hill’s greatest sin against the literary orthodoxies of late twentieth-century England.

There are signs of labour everywhere in Hill’s work: his poetry, like his prose, is nothing if it is not laboured, and the point is granted explicitly in *The Triumph of Love*. But the poem also, like Hill’s prose, should give us pause in our reflex use of such a term. The series of epigraphs to the book, which present verses from the Book of Nehemiah in Hebrew, Latin, Old German, and English, have been taken as a sign of arrogance, where they are more truly a defence of labour: “And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great worke, so that I can not come down: why should the worke cease, whilst I leave it, and come downe to you?” The point here is that the “worke” is more important, not just than “you”, but than “you” and “I”. Reviewers who have seized on this as a sign of self-importance forget (or do not know) that Nehemiah is being sent for by enemies who wait to murder him: in the meanwhile, he builds his wall. Hill’s “worke”, like Nehemiah’s, is for a community, and not for himself. The point is elementary, perhaps, but it is of the first importance in understanding *why* this poem has the ambitions it does.

Critics fond of accusing Hill of a kind of literary paranoia seem deaf to the intensity of their own vehemence. It is tempting to say that, if anything, Hill tends to underestimate the contemporary forces which set up resistance to the kinds of “worke” he favours. In theory, Hill is committed to absorbing this resistance, as poetic language must absorb ultimately that against which it must react. Now “charged with erudition”—and charged outright by some readers—in *The Enemy’s Country*, Hill had put the matter in this way:

Quotidian language, both casual and curial, is itself highly charged, but charged with the enormous power of the contingent and circumstantial, a “confused mass of thoughts”, a multitudinous meaning amid which the creative judgement must labour to choose and reject. There are “meanings” which are self-evidently wrong [...] but the “meaning” of a poem, its constitution, the composition of its elements, is not so readily abstractable from the constituted opinions and solecisms of the age; and though the grading and measuring of words presupposes the ability to recognize ambiguities,

there are some ambiguities so deeply impacted with habit, custom, procedure, that the "recognition" is in effect the acknowledgement of irreducible bafflement. Dryden and Pound are alike in their feeling for a language that is as expressive of the labour and bafflement as it is of the perfected judgement.

"Labour" is always necessary but, one might say, it is seldom admired by critics whose interests do not encourage self-examination in matters of "habit, custom, procedure". Nor is this a phenomenon attached narrowly to the world of modern poetry and its reception: as Hill has repeatedly suggested, the loss of memory and the loss of attention are aspects of a more general change in temper. In 1989, Hill rounded upon the promoters of "relevance" in Biblical translation by writing in praise of William Tyndale's "diligence":

If "the significance of Tyndale as a highly conscious craftsman" remains unestablished, as the new introduction insists, one can only respond that, in the domain of the review-sated intelligentsia, the power of established fact is scarcely distinguishable from the potency of transient reputation. Norman Davis (*William Tyndale's English of Controversy*, 1971) states, by no means rashly, that "the excellence of Tyndale's translations has been recognized almost from the time they appeared, and has often been analysed and justly praised", but in the world of amnesia and commodity this kind of established fact is no longer thought sufficient. "Tyndale's ravishing solo" must now be "heard across the world" as if he were some dissident poet in line for the Nobel Prize.

Whether the judges in Stockholm impressed Hill more in the years after 1989 must remain extremely doubtful. Nevertheless, "the world of amnesia and commodity" is not a place to be simply shunned: that is in itself a kind of wilful attempt at forgetting which cannot amend the situation for either side. Rather, Hill knows (and knows especially in *The Triumph of Love*) that he has his work cut out for him in that very world: poetry is not above the fray, nor is poetry merely in the fray: in truth, poetry *is* the fray.

It is worth allowing Hill's 1989 essay more room on this point, for recent criticism especially has been both explicit and unapologetic in its contempt to the kind of self-importance, or elitism, which such an attitude is commonly held to represent. Hill insists on the reality of *difficulty* in our dealings with language:

Those who read my objection as an unjust elitist contempt for what Lord Coggan terms "intelligibility", or for the needs of worshippers drawn from "a wide range of ages and back-

grounds” might ask themselves how it was that, in 1910, Everyman’s Library could bring out its edition of *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI* with a scholarly introduction by Bishop Gibson and with the original Tudor spelling unchanged. J.M. Dent, the founder of the series, and Ernest Rhys, its first editor, were not insensitive to the needs of “the weak stomachs” among their wide readership but, like some other men of letters at that time, they showed respect for the intelligence of “ordinary” people by occasionally making demands upon it. To set the old Everyman text and introduction against the introduction and text of the Yale New Testament or to read Lord Coggan’s preface to the REB after Bishop Gibson is to begin to understand the irreparable damage inflicted, during the past eighty years or so, on the common life of the nation. “Intelligibility”, “accessibility”, do not make sense, do not cohere, without “diligence”, as Tyndale defines it.

Ironically, it is the very insistence on difficulty, and on the reality of our labouring on and in the matter of words, that has been successfully identified with “unjust elitist contempt” both in and by the cultural forces that constitute contemporary orthodoxy. This is, indeed, “no joke”. Hill’s conclusion in 1989 is suggestive:

I had intended to say that the Word of God in English could now withdraw from the clamour of its “promotion” into the “inaccessibility” of Mombert’s edition of Tyndale’s Pentateuch or Wallis’s edition of the 1534 New Testament or, best of all perhaps, the old Everyman edition of *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI*. But maybe that is too tempting to be right. The alternative conjecture would be that the Word diligently withdraws *into* the modern world’s jeopardy, the “captiuite of ceremonies”, to make there its “affirmation of resurrection”.

What are the literary consequences of this? Hill’s answer lies partly in his subsequent (and important) insistence on T.S. Eliot’s descent from “pitch” to “tone” in the accommodations of *Four Quartets*—a work which *The Triumph of Love* at some levels sets out to undermine; partly, too, Hill’s response is in the “blessing” which, as his new poem insists, cannot separate itself from the “curse” it knows to be on its lips, and which it constantly tastes there.

The Triumph of Love is, then, a poem in which the effort to lift language out of the mire into which it is constantly being pulled is also, and at the same time, in the same words, in the same breath, the effort to expel, to return upon and bring back up the poisonous matter itself. In this respect, Hill plays the part of Shakespeare’s Leontes:

How blest am I
 In my just censure, in my true opinion!
 Alack, for lesser knowledge! How accurs'd
 In being so blest! There may be in the cup
 A spider steep'd, and one may drink, depart,
 And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
 Is not infected; but if one present
 Th' abhorr'd ingredient to his eye, make known
 How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
 With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.

It is not just because "heft" has become a favourite word of Hill's that these lines have a bearing on the situation of *The Triumph of Love*: they represent a dramatic moment analogous to the poem's intensity of self-imagining. In the fury of its combat, with itself and with the world it knows (and as it cannot then *not* know) is all around it, Hill's book does not ever entirely forget the fate of Leontes: how things go, and how things end for him, cruelly mocked by his own words, and cheated forever by his belief in a "true opinion". *The Triumph of Love*, in other words, is self-lacerating as well as lacerating; far from setting out to be a crown upon a lifetime's effort, it wears the dunce's cap as well as a crown of thorns. In its daring and riskiness, in its extraordinary range, and in its sometimes bewildering tonal unpredictability and inaccessibility, it is part of what may come to be seen as the most remarkable late burst of poetic energy since that of Yeats. Such things do, of course, take time to digest; and time is, at the moment, what most influential ways of reading contemporary literature do not care to spend. And yet, as Hill's poem knows, it is time and not tone that is the ruthless test of all "true opinion".