

# 'Not an Idle Spectator': Geoffrey Hill as Model Reviewer

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**Bridget Vincent**

University of Cambridge, UK; University of Melbourne, Australia

## Abstract

Geoffrey Hill's prose has prompted longstanding critical controversy, much of which turns on the perceived difficulty, intransigence and anachronism of his oeuvre as a whole. This paper proposes that new ways to navigate this controversy can be found in Hill's preoccupation with the exemplary dimensions of writing – that is, in his interest in the poet's capacity to offer examples (positive and negative) to a community of readers. The discussion pays particular attention to the connections Hill's reviews establish between style and ethical choice and between literary difficulty and democracy; connections which are intertwined with his ethics of exemplarity in fundamental ways. The paper also engages with those dimensions of literary example-use which emerge in new or unusual ways in his prose: his presentation of 'models' or ideals for the organisation of civil society; his treatment of certain literary works as exemplars or embodiments of philosophical ideas; and his procedural tic of 'sampling' regularly for the purpose of chastisement the 'bad example' set by some of the works he criticises.

Geoffrey Hill's prose has a tendency to incite amongst reviewers a scurrying return to ontological foundations; a reconsideration of fundamental questions about the nature, purpose and processes of criticism. There is, evidently, nothing like the bewilderment of Hill's cadences to bring on methodological anxiety which sends readers grasping for first principles. In his *Times Higher Education* review, David-Antoine Williams puts words to a silent consensus: 'Hill's criticism is unlike any other' (Williams, 2008: 44). Williams' response is at once elemental and taxonomic: he separates recent critics into two categories in order to show that Hill's work fits neither: the first comprises those whose aim is 'to explicate the artistic merit of a poet, usually via exemplary works' and the second includes those who seek 'to argue for a particular critical method, discursively or implicitly by example' (ibid.). As the repetition in Williams' vocabulary suggests, Hill's confounding of categories here turns on a negotiation of 'argument' and 'example'. This article proposes that examining Hill's prose through the lens of his larger interest in exemplarity as an ethical category (a category encompassing exemplary poems and historical figures alike) sheds new light on some of the more confounding critical problems attending his prose.

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## Corresponding author:

Bridget Vincent, University of Melbourne, Australia, 23 Russell St, Newington, VIC 3350, Australia.  
Email: [bvc20@cam.ac.uk](mailto:bvc20@cam.ac.uk); [bridgetvincent@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:bridgetvincent@unimelb.edu.au)

The chief emphasis of this discussion will fall on two cases in which elements of exemplarity figure both prominently and problematically. The first case is the series of reviews collected in *Style and Faith*: ‘Common Weal, Common Woe’, ‘Of Diligence and Jeopardy’, and ‘The Weight of the Word’. These reviews are united by an underlying expectation that a text from which adaptations are made (especially one which, as is the case for these biblical and lexicographical texts, has the charged status of a memorial storehouse) acts as an exemplar to those who engage with it as scholars, editors and reviewers. His indictment (and indictment it almost uniformly is) of these exemplary texts’ modern handlers betrays an unusual degree of mimetic commitment – they all suggest, in different ways, that the compositional, stylistic and even epistemological norms expressed in the original must be scrupulously followed in the enterprise of the belated modern. The failings he identifies usually originate in the refusal (made worse if driven by considerations of accessibility, or more dangerously yet, marketability) to respect the exemplary patterns set by the earlier text. While Peter Robinson (1984: 174) has identified a similar mimetic element in *The Lords of Limit*, I argue here that the reviews in *Style and Faith* display Hill’s preoccupation with exemplarity in a particularly intensified and revealing light.

In the second case – Hill’s 2008 *Warwick Review* essay titled ‘Civil Polity and the Confessing State’ – questions surrounding exemplarity manifest themselves prominently in the procedural textures of his prose: the essay reveals in amplified form Hill’s tendency to supplement, and sometimes even replace, argument with example. What Alex Pestell (2008: 591) calls Hill’s ‘paratactic prose style’ has been the source of considerable critical reaction, and opens out onto questions concerning the role of examples in discursive writing and the relationship between Hill’s prose and his poetry, especially in relation to the vexed category of the ‘poet’s prose’.

‘Civil Polity and the Confessing State’ is an especially fertile source because the essay involves a second kind of exemplar – the piece is in large part devoted to the presentation of a model of state organisation. He spends much of the essay setting out the characteristics of what he calls a ‘confessing state’ and reflecting on the benefits of adopting such a paradigm. This self-conscious performance – a poet’s presentation of a model (but here in prose form), political in nature but provisional by definition and ‘eccentric’ to a fault (Hill, 2008a: 7) – offers a performative adumbration of a quintessentially Hillian problem: the problem, as he puts it directly in the essay, of ‘the relation between poetry and politics’, and the possibility that the presentation of exemplary models, being autonomous but influential, might provide the means for the poet to (agonisingly, incompletely) overcome this tension (Hill, 2008a: 11).

A considerable amount of critical controversy has arisen from Hill’s longstanding insistence on maintaining poetic difficulty and resisting concessions to accessibility. This has been widely noted, and Daniel Mallory has collated a representative sample of reviewer responses to this tendency (2008: 102). One of Hill’s own references to the question of writerly intransigence occurs in ‘Civil Polity’, in which he quotes from Eugenio Montale, whose beliefs are strikingly similar to his own: Montale speaks in similarly acerbic tones about ‘the corrosive contempt, disguised as compassionate concern for the audience’s capacity, expressed by his refusal for the difficulty of actual experience and the complexity of cultural citizenship’ (Hill, 2008a: 16).

Hill’s preoccupation with the writer’s resistance to accessibility come to the fore particularly clearly in his reviews, in which his negative responses turn, more often than not, on these questions of ill-motivated simplification. It is the element of ‘diligence’ (preserved, for instance, in the original-spelling Everyman First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI) which is lost in the Yale Tyndale: “‘Intelligibility”, “accessibility”, do not make sense, do not cohere, without “diligence”, as Tyndale defines it’ (Hill, 2008e: 293). What is striking about Hill’s objections is not so much his reactions to accessibility itself but to the high stakes associated with them. What is at issue here is nothing less than an essential division between what he calls the ‘circumstances of the world and

of the spirit' (Hill, 2008e: 296). Accessibility is so offensive because it is 'not so much transmission as a kind of contamination' (Hill, 2008e: 287). The texts under consideration fail to ward off infiltration; to uphold the barricade he calls 'the ethical line between compliance and resistance' (Hill, 2008p: 359).

This picture invites questioning most obviously on the grounds of its assumption that the current circumstances are inherently fallen, and that to be 'diligent' constitutes rigorous self-separation from this corruption: 'One's understanding of "diligence", "diligent", "diligently", would be that they trace the barely distinguishable spiritual boundary between that which is immersed in and that which is detached from the world's business' (Hill, 2008e: 294). This proposition does not leave room for the elements of 'the world's business' which are not corrupt; for forms of immersion which might themselves be redemptive. Adam Kirsch (2008: 12) is particularly effective in sounding a questioning note: 'Bad writing can be a sign of bad faith ... but does it follow that faith must have style to be genuine?'

## I. Faith in style: style and faith

Hill's Preface to *Style and Faith* begins by discussing contested definitions of the Hebrew word *bachan* in Psalm II. For him, this term denotes a process of moral evaluation which involves a high degree of active engagement on the part of the judge: 'God distinguishes between the righteous and the unrighteous, and in such a way as shows that he is not an idle spectator' (Hill, 2008l: 263). Drawing on this definition, he states that the collection's general argument will be that 'the best English writing of the early sixteenth to late seventeenth centuries' is characterised by an analogous desire to 'imitate' this 'original authorship' (ibid.). This sentence is hinting at a sense of ethical authority that is inherently transitive: here authority demands responsibility for one's own actions; but alongside this, requires the active judgement of other people. While Hill's assertion relates to the authors of the period at hand, as *Style and Faith* unfolds it becomes increasingly evident that the same outward-looking emphasis on diagnosing unrighteousness in others is very much a part of Hill's own critical and ethical practice. With such a framework in mind, his meticulously opinionated attentions to such matters as the promotional peccadilloes of the Revised English Bible's press release, Isabel Rivers' 'lumpish' concessions to accessibility (Hill, 2008: 351), and the gauche-ness of diction involved in designating the New Testament a 'living tool' lose their complexion of triumphalist meddling and start to look like matters of organic urgency: they are, metaphysically, doctrinally, his business (Hill, 2008e: 292).

Hill's very replication of his sixteenth- and seventeenth-century subjects' vigilance in his own work points to his observance of an attendant – and central – concern: matching the interpretative priorities of critical prose to the example set by the emphases of the writer(s) under consideration. His reverence for this principle is in part revealed in his censure of those who fail to observe it: he finds it 'shocking' (Hill, 2008e: 286), for instance, that the work of the editorial committee of the new Yale Tyndale 'so markedly lacks every quality and characteristic sustained by the original work' (Hill, 2008e: 286–287). While this is a reasonably conventional lament about the inability of later analysts to live up to the quality of the works under study, it also points to a more idiosyncratic expectation: that of a correspondence between the specific virtues of the interpretation and those of the original. *Style and Faith*, then, affords the reader a privileged view of Hill's highly personal readerly ethics, one which shows that the mantle of brother's (locutionary) keeper is both foundational to his ethics and productive of some of its more troubling questions.

Hill's criticism of Isabel Rivers in 'The Weight of the Word' turns on what he sees as her inattention to the 'garb and phrase' of language – to the ways in which sense sediments from the accumulation of local grammatical detail rather than springing forth from a word's intrinsic denotation

(Hill, 2008p: 353). ‘Meaning’ in these texts, he corrects, ‘is not ‘established’, ... it is concatenation, ellipsis, lacuna...’ (ibid.) and Rivers ‘fails to “read” the grammar’ (Hill, 2008p: 359). On these grounds, he objects to her extrication of this embedded sense, and his reaction to her isolation of Locke’s ‘religious views’ is illustrative: ‘Lumpish words like “religious views” belong more to the mechanics of subediting than to the entertainments of Locke’s prose.’ While Hill gives cogent reasons for questioning Rivers’ separation of Locke’s thought into categories (Locke’s religious and the civic thought are, for Hill, indivisible), this confident challenge betrays an idiosyncratic degree of resistance to Rivers’ labelling impulse itself and to the reasonably conventional spirit of synthesis and study it embodies. To ignore the ways in which contextual ‘garb and phrase’ are constitutive of meaning would indeed be a failing, but such ignoring is not necessarily implicated in Rivers’ isolation, in and of itself, of umbrella terms like ‘religious views’ (Hill, 2008p: 351). An expectation seems to be in place that modern scholars must not only recognise the highly contextually-contingent nature of meaning in the religious vocabulary studied, but mimic its resistance to abstraction in their own presentations.

This is a critical *modus operandi* which would reject, as he does, a phrase like ‘the tension between the languages of reason and sentiment’, with its drive towards separation and summary, as a ‘bit of etiolated jargon’. The sentence in which Hill makes this accusation is revealing: ‘If her feeling for words and their implications were more consonant with the capacities of her chosen authors, she would have thought twice before reducing them’ (ibid.). The word ‘consonant’ smuggles in a highly specific expectation alongside a common one, suggesting not only a falling-off of standards but also a qualitative change in approach between earlier author and later scholar. He seems to be challenging Rivers’ scholastic summarising not simply because it involves the abstraction of meaning, but because this abstraction was alien to the writers concerned. Ultimately, his protest is made on the grounds of a lack of epistemological mimesis between earlier writer and later critic.

His criticism of the Yale Tyndale editors’ decision to use modern spelling makes similarly clear his expectation that the example set by the original text be followed (in spirit and, pointedly, letter). Modern spelling is offensive to Hill in large part because it is not consistent with the guiding preoccupations of the original: it aims to render unnecessary the very ‘labour, diligence, anxiety’ which Tyndale privileged (Hill, 2008e: 281). ‘The law and the faith proclaimed by Luther and Tyndale are not user-friendly’ (Hill, 2008e: 290). For him, then, the Yale editors’ handling contravenes the logic of the text itself. It can only be surmised that for Hill, following Tyndale’s precedent would mean retaining the original spelling and requiring readers to exercise their own ‘labour, diligence, anxiety’ (Hill 2008e: 281), but whether this effort would even be analogous or equivalent is itself questionable. Further, it is worth noting that a scholar’s replication of the methodological and linguistic parameters of the source material would, of course, close off certain productive avenues for critical engagement. Hill’s insistence, therefore, on this mimesis prompts broader questions about the tension in his critical priorities between evaluative questioning and venerative elucidation or the guardianship of collective memory.

Hill’s interest in the ways in which meaning is conditioned by highly specific contextual nuances in sixteenth and seventeenth-century writing, along with his insistence that modern writers should reflect this in their own prose, goes some way towards accounting for the (often rebarbatively ironic) quotation-studded texture of the prose he uses in his interrogation of Rivers and others like her. He applies the ‘weight of the word’ in all its force to press out all the implications of the reviewed writers’ critical (and especially promotional) terminology. Strikingly often, he cuts out jagged little fragments of Rivers-speak for our inspection and half-delighted shuddering (Hill, 2008: 351–352).

What is noteworthy about Hill’s will to cite is its faint but unmistakable whiff of excess. His replication of ‘team’, the Revised English Bible editors’ unfortunately corporate self-designation, is

a case in point. One of his citations is phrased as follows: ‘the “team” responsible for the Revised English Bible’ (Hill, 2008e: 289). That the word is an indelicacy is evident after the first quotation, but then it is repeated, in increasingly spiked-looking quotation marks, no less than eight times across the review. Some of the language he highlights is undoubtedly egregious: the copywriter’s misapplied prosodic energies that led to the bountiful internal rhyme of ‘a “New Look” for the Good Book’ is, indeed, deserving of ‘scare’ quotes (Hill, 2008e: 290). Similarly, what Hill calls ‘the striking inappropriateness of ... promotional lyricism’ (Hill, 2008e: 282) is unproblematically present in phrases like ‘Tyndale’s ravishing solo should be heard across the world’ (Hill, 2008e: 281).

Hill’s indignation, though, starts to become exorbitant not when he holds out offending phrases like dirty laundry, but when he waves them around for extended periods: not content to cite them once, he integrates them pointedly into the grammatical foundations of his subsequent phrases. For instance, some pages after its original mention, Hill recapitulates the ‘ravishing solo’ comment in another context, giving it an additional biting twist: ‘Tyndale’s “ravishing solo” must now be ‘heard around the world’ as if he were some dissident poet in line for the Nobel Prize’ (Hill, 2008e: 285). Given Hill’s particular relationship with Stockholm (glancingly explored in section LXXV of *The Triumph of Love*, as Thomas Day has discussed) (Hill, 2008d: 277), the connotations of this line are especially fraught.

The irony generated by this ‘unassimilated matter lodged in the body politic’ of the text can rise to such a pitch as to become bitterness (Hill, 2008c: 222): ‘It is clear from ... the Yale New Testament’s reference to “accessibility” and “difficult early-sixteenth-century spelling” that significant numbers of contemporary theologians and textual scholars accept, as one of their major duties, the protection of “today’s reader” ... from ... the faintest possibility of mental or emotional strain’ (Hill, 2008e: 294–295). Thus, what seems to start as mocking citation of the ridiculous thus tips towards the very ‘rancour’ he denounces in his ‘Preface’ to *Style and Faith*: the collection’s reviews disavow somewhat his initial statement that ‘I have no desire to add my voice to the chorus of contemporary cultural lament ...’ (Hill, 2008l: 263). As Chris Miller writes of this opening disavowal, ‘It is a point on which he might easily be misunderstood’ (2008: 97).

Early in the Yale review, however, reasons emerge for this which show his impulse to be more than ‘solipsistic rancour’ (Hill, 2008l: 263). His repeated citations amount to something other than pointing and grimly laughing: they are the ultimate extension of his own argument’s logic, which is based on an assumption that the example set by the earlier texts must be followed in the present. The review’s objections turn on the contemporary editors’ refusal to give due weight to specific verbal textures – to what Tyndale called the text’s ‘processe, ordre and meaning’ (Hill, 2008e: 281). It is only appropriate, then, that in challenging the editors’ use of language, he apply his own principles of *habeas verbus* and lay the offending words before us in his own ‘judicial sentences’ (Hill, 2008j: 163).

The direct quotations studded throughout the prose of these reviews and the slightly unwieldy degree of mockery thus produced not only constitute a form of procedural consistency with the substance of his argument – the exemplary earlier writers’ attention to ‘garb and phrase’ is taken into account by Hill – but also speaks to Hill’s comfortable expectations of his audience (Hill, 2008p: 353). The confidence with which he belittles the conversion to gender-neutral language of James Murray’s ‘General Explanations’ is a case in point. What is striking is not that he makes an argument for preserving gendered language on historical grounds, but that his diction openly scoffs at the possibility of any other position: ‘I am not the first to point out that it takes a lot of nerve (Sense 10b colloq) to interfere in this way with the prefatory matter of a work devoted to “historical principles”’ (Hill, 2008e: 293). The relaxed rhetorical swaggering involved in, for instance, playing games with the definition of ‘nerve’, or in pointing out that he is one among a majority (‘I am not the first’), or in mischievously juxtaposing the book’s “historical principles” against

their perceived violation by inclusive language, all point to a high degree of assuredness in questions of readerly sympathy. As it turns out, his review of Rivers, in particular, sparked in the TLS letters page an uneasy combination of wholehearted agreement, admiration for Hill's readings but regret at their vituperative cast, and outright indignation. Neil Keeble (1992: 15) defends Rivers' accessibility, W.S. Milne (1992: 15) defends Hill and Brian Young (1992: 15) is sympathetic with the aims of Hill's enterprise (he even calls it 'exemplary') but regrets its tone of what he sees as methodological intolerance.

The mood of Hill's ironic quotations amounts not only to sedulous objection but has an element of aesthetically-honed fun: phrases like 'the merchants of relevance' (Hill, 2008e: 290), in which Hill's allusive echo-chamber of a mind could not fail to register the Shakespearian assonances; the anadiplosis in 'this I understand. I do not understand ...' (ibid.); and the relish with which he parades the worst of the publisher's grotesqueries ("presented worthily" must mean something apart from "leatherex boards, with attractive gilt blocking", ibid.), all reveal an element of connoisseurship in his mockery, an 'epicurean' delight in making it beautiful, which speaks of a level of trust in audience assent. It is this element of connoisseurship which opens out onto a further way in which Hill can be seen as treating the earlier texts as exemplary models from which contemporary commentators deviate at our peril. This concerns the contrast between creative vigour and what he calls 'idleness' of imagination (Hill, 2008p: 363); between the strenuously exercised aesthetic sense of a figure like Tyndale and the diligent but blinkered administrative efficiency of his modern handlers. In including higher-hanging aesthetic fruit in his critical discourse, he seems to be speaking to the kind of audience sensitivity he sees as lacking in the scholars and editors under review.

His criticisms of Rivers and of the REB and Yale editors alike turn on a stringently-defended opposition between what he calls 'idleness' and the intellectual and imaginative rigour required for, for instance, the appropriate 'entertainment' of Locke (Hill, 2008p: 351). Even the phrase in which Hill condemns the 'lumpish' Rivers points obliquely towards this concern: in his assertion that her comments 'belong more to the mechanics of subediting than to the entertainments of Locke's prose' (ibid.), the word 'entertainments' here suggests pleasures only the aesthete can access. The word's function as a noun is overlaid with the connotations of its gerund form (the prose is not only an 'entertainment' but something to be 'entertained' in the manner of a suggestion or idea), tipping the weight of the sentence towards the process of entertainment and the aestheticist receptors for which this calls.

The intertwining of the literary with his criteria for 'idleness' and its avoidance becomes particularly clear in the following statement: 'in some cases, despite the presence of well-intentioned labour, style betrays a fundamental idleness which it is impossible to reconcile with the workings of good faith' (Hill, 2008l: 264). As this statement, pivoting on 'style', suggests, the opposite of idleness isn't labour tout court, but the strenuous exercise of the literary and creative faculties: Rivers doesn't lack a work ethic so much as suffer from a 'limitation of insight and imagination' (Hill, 2008p: 349). Similarly, of 'the REB translators and revisers' he writes, 'though they are masters of the apparatus of scholarship, they lack diligence of the imagination' (Hill, 2008e: 296). In fact, Hill points up the workmanlike tirelessness of Rivers and the editors in order to separate it out from genuine creative 'diligence', as displayed, for instance, by Tyndale's original. In his characterisation of Rivers' labour, it is the spinning tyres of exertion which emerge rather than any end success: he writes that 'the "human effort" in Rivers's book cannot be gainsaid; her scholarship is arduous and scrupulous' (Hill 2008p: 362). Here his use of the less common 'transferred' sense of 'arduous', in particular, emphasises the perceived predominance of grunt-work in her enterprise.

The 'formidable business of her [Rivers's] research', then, is 'annul[ed]' by an 'idleness of the critical, historical, and indeed, the scholarly imagination' (Hill, 2008: 363). This counterpointing

of administrative efficiency with literary laziness is echoed in his criticisms of the Revised English Bible editors; ‘those whose “law” is derived less from Tyndale than from Wemmick (“the office is one thing, and private life is another”’). In the mechanics of their office they are meticulous collators and scrutineers. In “private life” their taste in reading appears to conform to the unexacting standards of the professional middle class’ (Hill, 2008e: 293). It is what he calls the ‘middle class’ element of ‘taste’, with its ‘unexacting standards’ which seems to render imaginative idleness particularly offensive. This association emerges particularly indignantly in his description of early OED (Oxford English Dictionary) editors Bradley and Murray, whose methods were shaped by a belief that discrepancies in literary merit were not relevant to the lexicographical value of citations. As is the case for the doggedly efficient but creatively disengaged Rivers, he observes ‘a sharp discrepancy between the remarkable accuracy of Bradley’s philological knowledge and the post-prandial murmurings of literary “taste”’ (Hill, 2008d: 271). Murray speaks, ‘as Wordsworth said, the language of “men who speak what they do not understand”’; it is the “sciolism”, as Coleridge named it, the “pretentious superficiality of knowledge” (OED) of the literary amateur’ and this is ‘indivisible in Murray’s case from philological knowledge and lexicographical ability of the highest order’ (Hill, 2008d: 273). Chris Miller and Adam Kirsch both observe this particular node of objection in Hill’s response to these figures – Miller (2008: 99) writes that ‘bellettrism is again and again unmasked’, and Kirsch (2008: 11) notes the ‘whole tradition of complacent, consumerist bellettrism ... [Hill] attacks whenever the occasion arises’. As Hill’s excoriations of ‘postprandial murmurings’ suggest, then, it is not so much literary unawareness, but its dishonest concealment under the dinner party table-talker’s ‘pretentious superficiality of knowledge’ – and the departure it constitutes from the earlier writers’ example – on which his criticism of these lexicographers, scholars and editors turns.

The totality of the Hill criticism discussed so far reveals that ideas of the exemplary are central both to the emphasis and to the execution of his objections. Many of his anxieties expressed in these reviews derive from the modern writer and editor’s perceived failure to follow the example set by the textual predecessor at hand. Further, given that what he sees as being missing from these modern incarnations is, specifically, the earlier writer’s focus on ‘garb and phrase’ (the ways in which meaning is constructed through the fine detail of compositional texture as well as semantic denotation), his attention to the intricacies of Rivers’ and others’ language can be seen as his own attempt to follow the exemplary precedent in their stead, a suitably Hillian gesture of compensatory ‘atonement’ for their form of editorial ‘menace’.

## II. The model poet’s model: Hill’s ‘Confessing State’

The concept of exemplarity is relevant to Hill’s ‘Civil Polity and the Confessing State’ on two levels. Not only is the composition of the ‘Civil Polity’ piece, like much of his prose, built around the juxtaposition of examples rather than a linear flow of argument; the essay’s conceptual centrepiece is itself a paradigm or model – a detailed hypothetical presentation of what he calls a ‘Confessing State’. He offers a definition of the ‘Confessing State’ thus: ‘one in which penitential discipline is interwoven with the texture of legislation itself’ (Hill, 2008a: 13). Even here he illustrates this model not through explication but by referring to other models, both positive and negative: he cites the negative example of ‘Calvin’s Geneva’, which is ‘an appalling example of civics’ (Hill, 2008a: 12) but finds a positive ‘blueprint’ in the thought of the Kreisau Circle (Hill 2008a: 13). Indeed, throughout the ‘Civil Polity’ paper, his model (characteristically) composes itself via the accumulation of instances rather than systematic explanation, and at one point these are even codified as a numbered list of ‘episodes’ or ‘incidents’ which epitomise rather than explicate the qualities of the ‘Confessing State’ (Hill, 2008a: 14). He also offers a kind of recipe, or series of instructions which

literalises the supplanting of argument by the accumulation of exemplifying instances: readers are told to ‘add’, as one would add flour and then eggs, various textual items from Kitaj, Weil, Montale and others. Here, then, ideas of the exemplary come to the fore in two ways – the ‘confessing state’ is given the status of model or exemplar, and, furthermore, he presents it using techniques which privilege individual examples over argument.

In so doing, Hill is suggesting through his own compositional conduct that the proffering of a hypothetical exemplar might be one way in which the poet might perform some kind of social intervention. The notion that poets might be equipped to present civic examples emerges not only through the fact that Hill is speaking as a poet – it is his poetry that gained the essay its audience – but also because he describes this governmental model using terms he traditionally associates with poetry. In fact, he ends up describing a state which behaves something like a Hill poem. He aligns one of the defining aspects of the confessing state with the very aspect of poetry he has spent his career vigorously defending: just as a poem can be difficult, so too does difficulty figure in his model of state – ‘a recognition of the difficulty of actual experience... would be drawn into the drafting of the constitution of a Confessing State’ as ‘difficulty... is the greatest safeguard that democracy possesses’ (Hill, 2008a: 14). He even describes moments in which the values of the confessing state are manifested as though they were poems: he writes that among the ‘episodes’ where the spirit of the confessing state is in evidence, ‘citations... (i) and (ii) resemble isolated lyrics – beautiful, profound, heartbreaking, forlorn ...’. He even assigns the confessing state a specific poetic form – ‘I would expect it to be represented by, and in, treatise-poems’ (we are invited to wonder whether elements of *A Treatise of Civil Power* might number among these) (Hill, 2008a: 15).

Part of the essay’s gradual reinforcement of the authority vested in poets as ‘licensed eccentrics’ lies in its progressive transvaluation of ‘eccentricity’ itself.<sup>1</sup> A slanting (eccentric?) light comes to fall on Hill’s opening pronouncement as the essay progresses and ‘eccentricity’, in the sense of the whimsical and the odd, emerges as a methodological feature of the essay as Hill adds more and more garden follies to his rhetorical architecture. What are ‘class exercises’ and ‘Mottos of the Confessing State’, after all, but ‘deviations from the usual methods’?

The essay’s engagement with ideas of exemplarity manifests itself on a further level by virtue of Hill’s repeated invocation to exemplary figures, both verbal and human. In his review of the *Collected Prose*, Chris Miller (2008: 95) observes that ‘[i]n these new essays certain quotations return again and again, acquiring a status like that of slogans’. What Miller doesn’t count among these slogans is Hill’s inclusion of his own phrases, and in particular, his recurring descriptions of exemplary individuals. In the *Collected Prose*, Hill returns not only to his familiar concerns (such as recusancy, difficulty, and the dividing line between resistance and complicity with linguistic corruption) but also to his preferred metaphors and to the specific individuals who have become figureheads in his personal canon, most notably Péguy, Dryden, Montale and especially Simone Weil, who holds a particular synecdochic force.

In these late pieces, Hill’s prose can emerge as something less like criticism and more like a manifesto in variations: the specific authors to which he returns again and again come to have the status of instances in larger arguments which cut across individual essays. In ‘Civil Polity’, this tendency might be expected, given the occasion of the writing: the piece is a synthetic exercise in a commissioned context (he was ‘invited’ ‘to offer his views on... the body politic, power, and culture in this island in these years’), and so he is prompted to draw together various strands of his thinking rather than to focus on one author for his or her own sake (Hill, 2008a: 7). Further, the delimitation introduced by ‘this island in these years’, at once illusorily deictic and non-specific, invites an historically and theoretically rangy form of meditation. While shaped by a very specific framing moment, the piece’s emphasis on these figureheads is nonetheless highly typical of his late prose.<sup>2</sup>



Reading ‘Civil Polity’ alongside his recent pieces on Dante and Sidney Keyes reveals an intensified tendency to treat his critical subjects as exemplary – in both the venerative sense of presenting a guiding influence and the more illustrative one of offering examples for his personal theses. This first sense becomes explicit in his remarks on Dante and Keyes, in that he couches his discussion of Keyes as a ‘tribute’ to a poet to whom he ‘owe[s] an immense debt’ (Hill, 2009: 418); similarly, he suggests that in Dante’s ‘arduous, illuminating congruities wrought from incongruity can be found the essential paradigm for writers of our own epoch’ (Hill, 2001: 328–329). At the same time, his reflections on these writers focus less on the attributes specific to the author concerned (as was much more the case in his criticism on, for instance, Swift or Pound), than on their ultimate applicability to his own longstanding anxieties.

It is immediately evident from the opening quotations from Charles Williams that ‘Keyes in Historical Perspective’ will engage Keyes on typically Hillian ground: the Williams citations gesture towards Hill’s characteristic questions surrounding the ultimate ‘authority’ of autonomy. The essay makes frequent swerves from the descriptive to the normative, rising directly from specific historical speculations to prescriptive dicta like ‘What matters – or so my argument maintains – is not so much “accessibility” as power’ (Hill, 2009: 404). This is an argument not about ‘what matters’ to Keyes but about ‘what matters’. When he reflects on Keyes’ particular contribution to ‘the tradition’ ‘of the self-sufficiency of the achieved poem’, for instance, he does so in the service of his own larger struggle to preserve the category of democratic difficulty against charges of elitism. Particularly striking is the immediacy of his shift from remarks on Keyes’ particular views about ‘accessibility’ (Hill, 2009: 414) to his own questions about ‘the present cultural climate’ (Hill, 2009: 407).

In the case of ‘Between Politics and Eternity’, while the sponsoring frame of the article is Dantean, he uses this frame as an opportunity to reiterate a series of characteristic concerns: his longstanding rejection of ‘our contemporary demand for relevance’ (Hill, 2001: 322); his admiration for those who display ‘sustained accurate attention’ divorced from commercial forces like ‘the impertunity of the press release, the opportunism of the lobbyist’ (Hill, 2001: 321); his much-cited notion of ‘intrinsic value’ and his familiar insistence that ‘this does not require celebrity or even notoriety’ (Hill, 2001: 320); and, in a particularly normative flourish, his antipathy for bourgeois ‘enjoyment’ and ‘other taste-derived qualities’ (ibid.). As in the Keyes essay, he moves vertiginously from the specifics of Dante to general principles guiding political aesthetics in the present day: he even refers specifically to ‘the relationship, in our own time, between poetics and politics’ (Hill, 2001: 330). The circularity of priority and impetus here – Hill presents these authors in a way that highlights those attributes which interest him, but this list of attributes was itself shaped by the earlier writers’ example – provides a rich illustration of the push and pull of self-abnegation and self-assertion associated with the interpoetic exemplary relationship.

‘Civil Polity’, perhaps even more than his comments on Keyes and Dante, reads as a condensed reprise of his greatest critical hits, a recapitulation of his favoured questions and his favoured examples for their elucidation. His self-consciously cheeky suggestion that aesthetic tribunals might accompany administrative ones (Hill, 2008a: 8) smacks very much of his discussion in “‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’” of Weil’s proposal to set up courts for grammatical wrongdoers (Hill, 2008k: 9–10). In such a roll-call, it is fitting that Simone Weil not be overlooked: he even states that ‘in this context the French writer Simone Weil (1909–1943) is an exemplary figure’ (Hill, 2008k: 10). This comment performs several kinds of resonatory work at once, harking back to his long preoccupation with Weil, but also rehearsing his habit of identifying exemplary individuals in itself; seeing values crystallised in a particular figure whose biography (even summarised for the uninitiated in the article) and words provide a kind of focusing point for particular strands of reverence. In this context, his choice of Weil (from all the exemplary figures he has invoked in the past), functions

as a kind of ur-exemplar, standing not only for specific values but for his much-exercised process of exemplification itself.

## Conclusion

As the cases emphasised here (and his work as a whole) attest, exemplarity emerges not only in the content of Hill's work, but is also part of his unspoken methodological and heuristic machinery. As I have argued, in Hill's reviews, ideas of exemplarity shape his judgements of the works under assessment, in that many of his criticisms ultimately derive from an expectation that the modern editor or critic should follow the example (methodological, substantive, or otherwise) set by the earlier writer. Similarly, exemplars and exemplarity have manifested themselves methodologically, in that the unfolding of ideas in his late prose piece advances through the presentation of examples: in the case of the 'Confessing State', the whole piece itself is centred around the articulation of a model.

Further, as I have shown, many of the more sceptical critical responses can, likewise, be traced back to these exemplary dimensions. Indeed, it is Hill's own adherence to his sixteenth-century exemplars' postlapsarian beliefs and verbally-punctilious procedures which so often raise his respondents' hackles and lead to charges of unacceptable anachronism. Hill's response may fairly be that the resilient anachronism in his convictions and the indifference to review-friendly summary in his arguments attest to an integrity; a continuity between stated belief and lived performance.

## Notes

1. Stephen James (2007: 66) has reflected in considerable detail on the role of 'eccentricity' as a trope through which Hill negotiates his specifically 'marginal' form of authority.
2. As discussed in detail by Neil Corcoran (1987; 1998) and Stephen James (2007).

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