

‘The Violent and Formal Dancers’: John Berryman and Geoffrey Hill

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IN THE 2005 CLUTAG EDITION OF *A Treatise of Civil power*, Geoffrey Hill included a belated elegy for John Berryman:

And Berryman, how did he slip through
this trawl of gratitude? The Dream Songs, then,
with other things; their bone-yard vaudeville
sparkish, morose, multi-voiced monologue,
erratic tenderness to self and lovers.
A gentle courteous man, no-nonsense scholar,
badly-transmitted, blarneying on location,
face-fungused wizard in a camp film.¹

The paean is a verse essay in miniature on Berryman’s body of work, evocatively characterised as ‘multi-voiced monologue’. The sense of the impromptu clownishness and makeshift *bricolage* of Berryman’s verse in ‘bone-yard vaudeville’ is further inflected by an allusion to ‘Mr. Bones’, the form of address for Henry adopted by his ‘end man’ interlocutor in the blackface minstrel patter of *The Dream Songs*.² The cluster of adjectives, including suggestive modulations that provide redress (‘tenderness to self

¹ Geoffrey Hill, *A Treatise of Civil power* (Thame 2005), stanza XX (unpaginated). Hill has said in conversation with Andrew MacNeillie that he wanted to use the pamphlet as an opportunity to experiment with a ‘loosened’ style of ‘dramatic loquaciousness’ in the vein of John Berryman. See Matthew Sperling, ‘Books and the Market: Trade Publishers, State Subsidies, and Small Presses’, in Peter Robinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford 2013) p. 199.

² Cf. the epigraph to a late Hill volume in the sequence *The Daybooks*, ‘Such a voice seemed to clown verse rather than read it’; Kate Lechmere, writing on Ezra Pound, ‘Expostulations on the Volcano’, in *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012*, ed.

and lovers’; emphasis added), capture the contradictions of the poet. Hill seems less enamoured of the celebrity involved in Berryman’s 1966/7 MacArthur fellowship in Dublin (‘blarneying on location’) and A. Alvarez’s contemporaneous BBC interview (‘face-fungused wizard in a camp film’).³ The televisual figure of speech ‘badly-transmitted’ seems to provide an answer to Hill’s rhetorical question, ‘how did [Berryman] slip through | this trawl of gratitude?’ Alvarez’s taste-making of the 1960s and 1970s was both influential on and symptomatic of an appetite among British critics for, as Harold Bloom acidly puts it, ‘American poets [who were] suicidal, mentally ill, and a touch unruly’.⁴ This ‘badly-transmitted’ version of Berryman as *poète maudit* helps to explain Hill’s belated acknowledgement of Berryman. In his revisionary study *John Berryman’s Public Vision*, Philip Coleman argues that ‘Confessionalism is a profoundly problematic and limiting critical model’; his reappraisal endeavours to ‘[relocate] the scene of disorder’ from the tortured psyche to the fractured and disorienting public sphere of mid-twentieth-century Cold War America.⁵ Hill is much more ambivalent than Coleman; on the one hand, Hill’s tardy praise-poem seems to admit that the ‘confessional’ tag as promenaded in the Alvarez documentary for a time obscured his deeper recognition of Berryman’s value as a poet; nevertheless, Hill remains sceptical. As will become apparent, Hill shares Coleman’s conviction that Berryman is a poet of *res publica*, whose best work is saved by its painstaking technique from the slur of ‘confessionalism’. Hill’s ‘trawl of gratitude’ recovers a Berryman who shares the belief that, in Hill’s own words from a reflection on his own career in lecturing and writing ‘Confessio Amantis’, ‘poetry rightly practised and understood is part of the nervous system of true polity’.⁶ But whereas Coleman argues that the ‘confessional’ paradigm itself represents “‘a communicative deficit” . . . that hinders clear and accurate critical debate’,⁷ and whose revisionary treatment is a sustained argument for its redundancy, Hill, by contrast, is temperamentally and generationally predisposed to cling tenaciously to its validity in describing aspects of Berryman to which he is unsympathetic, particularly in his 1984 *Essays in Criticism* review of John Haffenden’s biography of Berryman and Eileen

Kenneth Haynes (Oxford 2013) p. 627. Unless otherwise stated, references to Hill’s poems are to this collection, abbreviated as *BH*.

³ Cf. ‘wizard Henry’ in Dream Song 227, in *The Dream Songs* (London 1990) p. 246.

⁴ Harold Bloom, introduction to *John Berryman: Modern Critical Views* (New York 1989) p. 1.

⁵ Philip Coleman, *John Berryman’s Public Vision: Relocating ‘the Scene of Disorder’* (Dublin 2014) p. 20.

⁶ Hill, ‘Confessio Amantis’, *The Keble Record* (2009) p. 49.

⁷ Coleman, *John Berryman’s Public Vision*, p. 11.

Simpson's memoir. In accepting the premise of 'confessionalism', he is roughly in accord with Berryman, who accepts the existence and rejects the attribution of such a paradigm in a 1970 *Paris Review* interview when he responds to the label 'confessional poet' 'with rage and contempt'.⁸ Nevertheless, the 'no-nonsense scholar' (as represented in John Haffenden's *Berryman's Shakespeare* and in the 1976 posthumous collection *The Freedom of the Poet*) is saluted in Hill's poem; in the phrase 'badly-transmitted', Hill like Coleman suggests that Berryman's cultural reception in the decades since his death has hampered a true understanding of his erudite, polyphonic verse by unduly emphasising aspects of celebrity (Robert Lowell's glib 'all the best of life') and 'despondency and madness'.⁹

The immediate context that draws Hill and Berryman into colloquy is as 'poet-critics' who, in Hill's own words, 'spent a lifetime in university teaching'.¹⁰ The pedagogical approach of the mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American academy in which Berryman and Hill variously laboured was to one degree or another dominated by the critical influence of T. S. Eliot and, in his (and, indeed, I. A. Richards's quite different) wake, the New Criticism. This milieu has an important bearing on the connections that can be drawn between Berryman and Hill, which will require a brief precis of the lines of influence involved. As Louis Menand has written in a thorough examination of Eliot's contribution to literary criticism, despite his chariness and occasional derision of the academy, 'at a crucial moment in its history [it] made a representative figure of Eliot. And this suggests that the answer to the question of Eliot's success [in becoming part of the establishment] is likely to be found not simply in what Eliot had to say, but in the institutional needs his writing was able to serve.'¹¹ Menand rightly notes that, rather than propounding a coherent doctrine or theoretical framework regarding literature, Eliot (especially in his early years) was both a controversialist and occasional essayist skilfully navigating the literary enclaves in which he found himself. Nevertheless, Menand concludes that Eliot's 'exegetes' were not projecting a coherence onto his work that simply wasn't there; rather, they were ignoring the extent to which its chief

⁸ John Berryman, 'The Art of Poetry No. 16', interview with Peter A. Stitt, *Paris Review*, 73 (Winter 1972), <www.theparisreview.org> (accessed 1 Sept. 2015).

⁹ From Robert Lowell, 'For John Berryman (after Reading His Last Dream Song)', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (New York 2003) p. 737, and William Wordsworth, 'Resolution and Independence' (1807), which provides the title of Eileen Simpson's 1982 memoir *Poets in Their Youth*.

¹⁰ 'Confessio Amantis', p. 45.

¹¹ Louis Menand, 'T. S. Eliot', in A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey (eds.), *Modernism and the New Criticism*, vol. vii of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (Cambridge 2000) pp. 15–56: 19–20.

distinction was the ingenuity with which Eliot propounded 'a generally diffused body of assumptions about literature and criticism that [he] shared with his contemporaries'.¹² Themselves a 'diffused body' of individuals and temperaments, the 'institutional needs' of the New Critics were well served by Eliot's writing. Of all his critical works, Eliot's 1919 essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' exerted the greatest imaginative hold over the New Critics, particularly its insistence that 'poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality'.¹³

In the preface to his 1995 collection of essays *The Enemy's Country*, Hill writes, '[I] hold, with John Berryman, that "all the artists who have ever survived were intellectuals – sometimes intellectuals also, but intellectuals"'.¹⁴ The Eliotic insistence on poetry as 'an escape from personality' as mediated by the New Critics is one strong antagonistic vein in the shared intellectual make-up of Hill and Berryman, whose generation of Anglo-American academics was so circumstanced as to be unable to avoid taking a position on this critical shibboleth. Hill has on more than one occasion mentioned the transformative effect on him of a Christmas gift of 1949 from his parents, Eliot's *Selected Essays*,¹⁵ and also declared Allen Tate (a central figure in the American New Criticism) to be one of his earliest and most profound influences, discovering at 15 years old his 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' in a volume memorised by heart, Oscar Williams's 1947 *A Little Treasury of Poetry: English and American* (the same volume contained several early poems by John Berryman).¹⁶ For his part, Berryman's initial encounters with Eliot and Tate were as intense, albeit less straightforward: Mark Van Doren, Berryman's teacher at Columbia, wrote to Tate on 10 January 1936 that Berryman had declared on his recent discovery of Tate's work: 'Mr. Van Doren, you know Tate is one of the very best poets we have!' His relations with Tate would sour towards the end of his

¹² Ibid., p. 21. For the Eliotic inheritance within New Criticism and its elaboration of 'impersonality' in its pedagogical arsenal, see also Kenneth Asher, 'T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism', *Essays in Literature*, 20/2 (Fall 1993) pp. 292–310, and Mark Jancovich, 'The Southern New Critics', in Litz, Menand, and Rainey (eds.), *Modernism and the New Criticism*, pp. 200–18. For the influence of Eliot on Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, see John J. Langdale, *Superfluous Southerners: Cultural Conservatism and the South 1920–1990* (Columbia, Mo. 2012) pp. 32–4.

¹³ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London 1932) p. 21.

¹⁴ *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford 2008) p. 173; further references are to *CCW*.

¹⁵ See 'Confessio Amantis', p. 50.

¹⁶ See 'If I write about destruction it's because I'm terrified of it': an interview with Geoffrey Hill, by Dominic Hand and Sofia Crespi de Valladaura, *The Isis*, 27 Apr. 2015, <<http://isimagazine.org.uk/2015/04/if-i-write-about-destruction-its-be-cause-im-terrified-of-it-an-interview-with-geoffrey-hill/>> (accessed 1 Sept. 2015).

life when Tate wrote a devastating review of *Love & Fame* that deeply wounded him.¹⁷ Berryman's engagements with Eliot were more ambivalent from the beginning. From Cambridge in 1936 he wrote to his mother of Eliot's 'slow mind' and the 'monotonous delivery' of his lecture 'The Idiom of Modern Verse'. Yet in retrospect Berryman was to write of his much better-known 'trivial, burning disciple[ship]' of Yeats that it 'somehow saved me from the then-crushing influences of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot', an admission that demands to be read in terms of a vexed, and by no means purely oppositional, relation to Eliot.¹⁸ Hill and Berryman were both products, and to some degree exponents, of the mid-twentieth-century New Critical pedagogy with its Eliotic line on poetic anonymity. Far from suggesting that both poet-critics unquestioningly reproduce that magisterial edict, the ambivalences, faultlines, and evolution in their critical standpoints not only draw their work into tense colloquy (with Hill, despite his moderations and qualifications, the true believer and Berryman the heretic), but also give their criticism and poetry a comparable urgency in working out a postmodernist aesthetic on questions of personality, responsibility, and polyvocality.

Berryman's vindication of the intellectual aspect of poetry with which Hill sympathises is from his 1956 essay 'The Case of Ring Lardner', which includes an attack on 'extra-literary personality'. Berryman, quoting Auden, concludes that 'the notion of art [as] "a self-discipline rather than a self-expression" ... Of this crucial sense there is no trace, I believe, in Lardner's work' (*FP*, p. 216).¹⁹ Berryman indicts Lardner for his obliviousness to Eliot's 'crucial' critical authority, a fact all the more remarkable in that it was written in the same year that Berryman published *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, of which he later wrote, 'Narrative! Let us have narrative, and at least one dominant *personality* [emphasis added], and no fragmentation! In short, let us have something spectacularly NOT *The Waste Land*' (*FP*, p. 327). This contradictory attitude to Eliot's insistence on the impersonality of art is a key feature of both Hill's and Berryman's critical thought, and while an evolution from youthful acquiescence to New Critical dogma towards mature critical heterodoxies is apparent (drastically in Berryman, minimally in Hill), nevertheless they often coincide at the same moment in intimate contradiction, as this instance shows.

¹⁷ Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (Amherst, Mass. 1990; 2nd edn. 1996) pp. 52, 481.

¹⁸ Berryman, *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York 1976) pp. 323–4; further references are to *FP*.

¹⁹ In taking issue with the 'vast apparatus of Opinion', Hill's preface later smuggles in a pejorative, 'the popular boys', from Berryman's essay: 'the popular boys cannot understand this'.

This contradiction in part explains Hill's sustained belief that the 'confessional' paradigm remains (as late as 2008) a valid term of pejoration – 'the so-called "confessional" movement in post-modern art is mainly a mating-display clumsily performed'²⁰ – but that Berryman's work at its best is not 'confessional'. The contradictions of Berryman's stance towards Eliotic impersonality partly explain why his work, even to conservative contemporaries, was not easily categorised and represented different things to different parties: as Donald Davie wrote, 'we look in vain, in Berryman's criticism, for the postures and the arguments or pseudo-arguments that are the stock-in-trade of the apologists for a confessional or an "extremist" poetry'.²¹

In a 1984 *Essays in Criticism* review of John Haffenden's *The Life of John Berryman* and Eileen Simpson's memoir *Poets in Their Youth*, Hill observes the increasing frequency with which Berryman attacks "'this perverse and valuable doctrine associated . . . with Eliot's name" (1949), "Eliot's amusing theory of the impersonality of the artist" (1957), "the intolerable and perverse theory of the impersonality of the artist" (1960)'.²² As intimated by the quasi-oxymoronic adjectives of the first of these instances ('perverse and valuable'), Berryman in his youth was an ambivalent follower of the Eliot–New Criticism party line. Hyperbole notwithstanding, Bruce Bawer is fundamentally correct in his assertion that 'to the Middle Generation poets, such expressions as impersonality, the objective correlative and the dissociation of sensibility were not merely useful locution but dogma, even revelation'.²³ Yet even in apostolic times dogma has its heresiarchs, and Berryman was always a reluctant disciple. By 1960, his misgivings had evolved to something more openly hostile, 'valuable' replaced by 'intolerable' in the adjectival dyad.

Hill's poetics has also readjusted its position regarding Eliot's 'doctrine', albeit in a more muted key. In an interview in the *Paris Review* in 2000, Hill stated:

Forty or fifty years ago, nothing would have induced me to say that there is anything resembling self-therapy or exorcism in the art of poetry or the art of writing. I had been *trained*, by the Eliot essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' to deny this [emphasis added]. And because I was not quick enough to understand the qualifications

²⁰ 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics', *CCW*, p. 567.

²¹ Donald Davie, *Trying to Explain* (Manchester 1980) p. 67. Hill quotes this in lecture notes on Berryman dating to c.1982; see n. 35 below.

²² Hill, 'Lives of the Poets', *Essays in Criticism*, 34/3 (July 1984) p. 265.

²³ Bruce Bawer, *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell* (Hamden, Conn. 1986) p. 65.

that Eliot himself would have entered, I acquired a far too extremist view of what seemed then a total incompatibility of the objective and the subjective, and I would have said the poem is achieved by the fullest possible objectification of individual subjectivity. Obviously I no longer think so.²⁴

Hill immediately qualifies his alteration, insisting that he would maintain an opposition to the ‘naïve trust in the unchallengeable authority of the authentic self’ which he believes presided over poetry written in the last four decades of the twentieth century.

In his book on Berryman and the spiritual dimensions of Cold War poetics, Brendan Cooper builds on the observation by James Longenbach that there is ‘a lingering perception of the postmodernist development in poetry as a “breakthrough” narrative that rebelled against the traditionalism and impersonality of Eliotic modernism’.²⁵ Cooper convincingly argues that despite public pronouncements on the matter, rather than an oppositional assertion of ‘personality’ versus Eliot’s ‘impersonality’, Berryman’s interactions should be understood as ‘a radically ambivalent scheme of influence that centralises hostility as the most productive means of ingesting and developing modernist (anti)models’.²⁶ As Cooper notes, Berryman was more disgruntled with the New Critical calcification of Eliotic impersonality into ‘doctrine’ than with Eliot’s criticism and poetics per se. In a 1948 review of Eliot in the *Partisan Review*, Berryman states, ‘One observes a certain desire in the universities to disinfect Mr. Eliot by ignoring his disorderly and animating associations ... this poetry which the commentators are so eager to prove impersonal [may] prove to be personal.’²⁷ Berryman began to write his personality-driven narrative poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* in March that year.

It is this ‘radically ambivalent’ interaction with Eliot that draws Hill into sustained colloquy with Berryman, but moving from Cooper’s pairing of Eliot and Berryman to the triadic interactions of Hill, Eliot, and Berryman adds another level of complexity. Hill has recognised that he once held ‘an extremist view’ of Eliotic impersonality incompatible with ‘the qualifications that Eliot himself would have entered’, and this means that he has come to share with Berryman an ambivalent (but in Hill’s case, unhostile)

²⁴ Hill, ‘The Art of Poetry No. 80’, interview with Carl Philips, *Paris Review*, 54 (Spring 2000), <<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/730/the-art-of-poetry-no-80-geoffrey-hill>> (accessed 18 Dec. 2014).

²⁵ Brendan Cooper, *Dark Ais: John Berryman and the Spiritual Politics of the Cold War* (Bern 2009) p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁷ Cited *ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

stance towards the New Critical calcification into 'doctrine'. Moreover, it is a stance that in both cases is framed as a recuperation of the actual Eliot from the institutional version of the pedagogues. Notwithstanding this tacit rejection of the New Critical straitjacket put on Eliotic impersonality, both Berryman and Hill are products of the New Criticism and maintain many of its basic principles regarding formal rigour, the high-metaphysical reality of the poem, and poetry's appeal to the intellect. To complicate matters, while Berryman's ambivalence towards the New Critical dogmatisation of Eliotic impersonality was, from the mid-1940s onwards, increasingly hostile, Hill's admission of youthful extremism in adherence to the dogma in the *Paris Review* interview is nevertheless far from an outright repudiation of a poetics of impersonality. The case for and against John Berryman in Hill's 1984 *Essays in Criticism* review is made with Eliotic injunctions as arbiter. Hill asserts that 'Lowell, and to a lesser extent, Berryman . . . succumbed, as poets, to [the] devil of commodity, and in appropriating their own celebrity, increasingly ran the risk of expropriating their poetic tact':

What has been called Berryman's 'self-deluding logic' is only in part a matter of individual error. It is a trait that he shares with a number of his post-Romantic peers, and is characterised by the confusion of power with status.²⁸

'Status' enlists the 'unchallengeable authority of the authentic self' that Hill laments in his *Paris Review* interview. The 1984 review is less hostile to Berryman than to his 'peers' for this confusion (it even excoriates Eliot's *The Elder Statesman*), and Hill praises, against Berryman's own views to the contrary, the successful syntax of the late poems 'Dry Eleven Months' and 'He Resigns': 'In Berryman's last works, as Haffenden usefully reminds us, the sense of rhythmic and syntactical touch remains as something urgently felt by the poet, if only, at times, as a desperate sense of something missing'.²⁹

Hill's review balances on a knife edge Berryman's perceived strengths and weaknesses as a poet, and at the heart of this approach lies an antilogy: on the surface level, Hill's denigration of 'self-esteem/status' is a logical extrapolation of the New Critical distaste for extra-textual personality; on the other hand, the positive aspects of Hill's review seem to anticipate his admission two decades later in the *Paris Review* that the 'total incompatibility of the objective and subjective' is a chimera that Eliot's poetry and criticism do not in reality support. These contradictory forces wrestle in Hill's

²⁸ 'Lives of the Poets', pp. 263, 268.

²⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 265, 269.

critical thought towards an ambivalent but nuanced appraisal of Berryman, whose lapses into ‘confessional’ commodity and self-travesty are to be met with full Eliotic censure, but whose work is also seen as transcending the New Critical orthodoxy in a manner worthy of emulation, even as the best aspects of its emphasis on formal integrity are retained in that transgression. In short, Hill commends Berryman’s impersonal technique as well as the dissentience of his personal voice. In the best of his work they are seen as ideally yoked, both ‘wild and strict’.

The review is from 1984, the midpoint of Hill’s career, but arguably his millennial rejection of a ‘total incompatibility of the objective and subjective’ is less to be seen as the climax of an evolution (‘a breakthrough narrative’) than as the outcome of a specific dilemma, one shared by Berryman – that of a young poet seeking an original voice while pedagogically inclined to be wary of ‘personality’. Hill’s reckoning of the relative excellence of Berryman’s poetry in relation to Eliotic impersonality hinges on a distinction the former observes between ‘personality’ and ‘self’. In an essay on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hill quotes Franz Rosenzweig: ‘Genius is by no means innate, as current liberal education would have it; on the contrary, it one day takes a person by surprise because it depends on the self and not merely on the personality’, a distinction that Hill regrets ‘is now infrequently and insufficiently made’. He adds that Emerson’s ‘creative self was both thwarted and abetted by his professional personality’, a paradox entirely germane to Hill’s assessment of Berryman (*CCW*, p. 496). As Hill sees it, Berryman’s poetry depreciates in quality where it flaunts ‘personality’, here understood as a reductive emphasis on Berryman’s public persona and private pathologies. The true ‘creative self’ revealed in Berryman’s poetry is a resistance to that reduction, one that paradoxically discloses the poet’s true subjectivity by seemingly ‘impersonal’ effects – masks, distanciation, and particularly syntax and grammar. In short, both Berryman and Hill seek to heal the rift between the subjective and objective in poetry in the wake of Eliot (ironically, by harnessing New Critical rhetorical techniques).

In Hill’s 2005 encomium to Berryman, ‘multi-voiced monologue’ is an evocative oxymoron that provides a wonderfully compressed poetic desideratum of how Berryman’s poetry embraced Eliotic impersonality at the same time as it transcended the calcified New Critical version of it. On the one hand, the polyvocality of Berryman’s poetry, as in *The Dream Songs*, resisted lyrical self-expression, while its fusion with ‘monologue’ ensured that the polyphony was assumed into a recognisable melodic whole, a revelation of self and individual voice. There is an analogy with Eliot’s working title for *The Waste Land*: ‘he do the police in different voices’, a correspondence which emphasises the degree to which Hill and Berryman are not so

much jettisoning Eliotic impersonality rightly understood as its subsequent stultification in the academy.³⁰

Hill has remarked, ‘I am continually amazed to discover how few professional critics of late twentieth century writing seem able to grasp the presence of polyphony in literary style.’³¹ One specific example of this presence is what he describes as ‘the antiphonal voice of the heckler’ (*CCW*, p. 94). Henry’s unnamed ‘friend’ in *The Dream Songs* is in vital possession of such antiphony: ‘There ought to be a law against Henry./– Mr. Bones: there is’ (Song 4). By harnessing the role of the ‘end man’ from early twentieth-century minstrel shows (a cultural appropriation not without controversy), Berryman provides a multi-vocal energy to *The Dream Songs*. Hill’s work also deploys such effects, for instance the parenthetical heckles in *Speech! Speech!*: ‘(cat-calls, cheers)’ (*BH*, p. 301).

If polyvocal interjections undercutting personal lyric form one area of Eliotic influence on the poetry of Hill and Berryman, disrupted syntax is another. As Hill writes in his 1984 review of Berryman:

Berryman, I believe, never ceased to care about ‘syntax’ and though towards the end of his life the technical botchings proliferated he seems even then to have retained a self-castigating craftsman’s faculty which is not to be confused with the destructive compulsions of the neurotic self.³²

One of the ways in which Berryman’s syntax embodies his complicated reception of Eliot’s theory of poetic impersonality involves experiments with pronouns. In his essay ‘One Answer to a Question: Changes’, Berryman refers to a ‘discovery’ made in the course of writing ‘The Ball Poem’ (1942), ‘that a commitment of identity can be “reserved”, so to speak, with an ambiguous pronoun’. He adds that this discovery may or may not be indebted to Arthur Rimbaud’s phrase, *Je est un autre* (*FP*, pp. 326–7). ‘The Ball Poem’ begins, ‘What is the boy now, who has lost his ball, | What, what is he to do? I saw it go | Merrily bouncing’. By the end of this poem, there is a sense that the first person pronoun ‘I’ who casually observes this scene of childhood loss cannot be definitively separated from the third person pronoun ‘he’, the boy who grieves the loss of his toy.

I am everywhere,
I suffer and move, my heart and mind move

³⁰ On multivocality and Hill, see Natalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford 2012) pp. 48–9.

³¹ ‘How not to be a hero’ (2000), Hill archive, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, BC MS 20C Hill/4/32, 10 ff. (9).

³² ‘Lives of the Poets’, p. 265.

With all that move me, under the water
Or whistling, I am not a little boy.³³

Berryman elaborates on the ‘discovery’ of the poem: ‘The poet himself is both left out and put in; the boy does and does not become him. We are confronted with a process which is at once a process of life and a process of art’ (*FP*, pp. 326–7). Such a process seems strikingly operative in Geoffrey Hill’s ‘The Jumping Boy’, which appears in the 2006 collection, *Without Title*: the poem opens with a similar tableau of a child at play presented by an apparently disinterested speaker: ‘Here is the jumping boy, the boy | who jumps as I speak’. The poem moves, like Berryman’s, through painstakingly minute calibrations to arrive at the grammatically fraught final stanza: ‘Jump away, jumping boy; the boy I was | shouts go’ (*BH*, p. 487). The boy in Hill’s poem, as in ‘The Ball Poem’, is both the speaker, ‘the boy *I* was’ (emphasis added), and another subjectivity: *je est un autre*. The ambivalent post-Eliotic poetics of Berryman is contingent on this ‘discovery’, in which the poet is both ‘left out and put in’, a poetry that is simultaneously an escape from and a turning loose of personality, to twist Eliot’s terms. It is entirely significant that the deep-sea creature imagery at the end of Berryman’s poem conjures the ‘pair of ragged claws’ in ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’; in an essay on Eliot’s poem, Berryman argues that ‘the “you” whom Prufrock invites to go with him for the visit must be another part of his own *personality*’ (*FP*, p. 272; emphasis added).

In the parenthetical heckles of *Speech! Speech!* and the ‘ambiguous pronouns’ of ‘The Jumping Boy’, Hill harnesses techniques owed to Berryman in creating a poetic style that attempts to transcend the New Critical shibboleth of impersonality and recover Eliot’s subtler original intention – to make subjectivity multi-dimensional. It is intriguing to speculate that the debts may have been reciprocal: certainly, Berryman had read Donald Hall et al.’s anthology *The New Poets of England and America* (1957). Berryman was not represented by a single poem in the anthology; Hill, who had yet to publish a first collection, was represented by seven. It is entirely conceivable that Berryman had more than a passing acquaintance with his work. Philip Coleman notes that Berryman’s ‘Formal Elegy’ for JFK seems in its title to allude to Hill’s ‘Two Formal Elegies’ in *For the Unfallen*.³⁴ Hill’s influence on the older poet must remain a tantalising possibility.

³³ Berryman, ‘The Ball Poem’, in *Collected Poems 1937–1971*, ed. Charles Thornbury (New York 1989) p. 11; further references are to *CP*.

³⁴ Coleman, *John Berryman’s Public Vision*, p. 25.

One final aspect of Berryman's influence on Hill in forging an alternative post-Eliotic poetics to that enshrined by its academic reception concerns the latter's 'disorderly and animating associations'. As we have seen, Berryman argued that this side of Eliot had been sanitized by New Criticism, and that its recovery would challenge the decorum of New Critical impersonality. Ironically, Berryman's early poetry would seek to approach that effaced wildness of Eliot's poetry via a staple of New Critical rhetoric: the oxymoron. In 'The Song of the Demented Priest' from a sequence entitled 'The Nervous Songs', Berryman deploys an oxymoron that demands to be read in terms of post-Eliot poetics:

Afterward the violent and formal dancers
 Came out, shaking their pithless heads.
 I would instruct them but I cannot now, –
 Because of the elements. They rise and move,
 I nod a dance and they dance in the rain
 In my red coat. I am the king of the dead.
 (CP, p. 50)

In the conjunction 'violent and formal', Berryman provides in microcosm the essence of his ambivalence towards Eliot's impersonality and particularly its codification under the New Critics. The emotional 'violence' of Berryman's poetry, and particularly his insistence on the vitality of personality, bridles against a 'formal' sense of syntax and constraint. His poetry is both 'violent and formal', seeking to circumvent the New Critical consensus to recover a more primal Eliot, even as the poetic techniques with which he attempts to do so are recognizably New Critical in character.

Geoffrey Hill strikes on the locution 'the violent and formal dancers' in an unpublished lecture on Berryman from a course he taught at Cambridge in 1982 entitled 'Creation and Attrition in the Writing of Some American Authors of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries'.³⁵ Hill writes:

That violent, formal juxtaposition, virtually an oxymoron, 'violent and formal', is itself miniature of vast implication and procedures. To invent the conjunction 'violent and formal' is to be precisely that. The conjunction violates expectation (we expect violence to spell chaos [superscript: FORMLESSNESS]); there is a correlative sense that the formal and the hieratic are of great positive value as an instrument for

³⁵ Hill archive, Brotherton Library: BC MS 20c/Hill/5/1/12, 11 ff. (plus lettered inserts) numbered.

containing and controlling violence ... It is the unholy coupling of Terror and quiet method that appals us.³⁶

This lecture was almost certainly written in 1982. A dredge of Hill's poetry notebooks in the archive at Leeds reveals that, as early as 1964, beginning to draft the *War of the Roses* sonnet sequence 'Funeral Music' (one of the more frequently anthologised of Hill's poems), the working title was 'The Violent and Formal Dancers'.³⁷ This working title not only indicates Hill's early engagement with Berryman, but draws Hill's procedures in that poem into the ambit of his later musings on Berryman's 'Terror and quiet method'. One might add that Hill's sonnets are mired in Shakespeare's Henry VI plays, which Berryman's scholarship noted showed 'enjoyment as well as skill' in rendering death scenes, 'the spoiled and mighty Suffolk's lonely and ignominious end'.³⁸ Compare this to Hill's 'Those righteously-accused those vengeful | Racked on articulate looms indulge us with lingering shows of pain' ('Funeral Music', *BH*, p. 51). The rejected draft title from Berryman sheds light on the influence behind the cluster of oxymorons in 'Funeral Music', 'violent and formal' collocations which include 'voice fragrant', 'mannered humility', 'equable contempt', restless | Habitation', 'silent music'. The oxymorons attempt to capture the mixture of 'admiration and scepticism' Hill feels towards these victim-perpetrators of the bloody dynastic wars, a polyphonic texture.³⁹ In his Trinity Term lecture of the academic year 2013/14 as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, in typically understated terms, Hill insisted that 'poetry must be simultaneously wild and strict. This is a quality that must somehow be brought back into English poetry this century, or English poetry will die.'⁴⁰ 'Wild and strict' are first cousins to 'violent and formal': his prescription for contemporary English poets might as well be 'read the (early) poems of Berryman'.

Hill's unpublished lecture also commends the syntax of another of 'The Nervous Songs', 'The Song of the Tortured Girl'.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4A.

³⁷ The notebooks for *King Log* indicate that the line from Berryman might also have been in contention as a title for the volume as a whole. In an email to me on 1 Oct. 2015, Jeffrey Wainwright states that in 1965/6 Hill was teaching an MA course that included Berryman on the syllabus.

³⁸ Berryman, 'Shakespeare's Early Comedy', in John Haffenden (ed.), *Berryman's Shakespeare* (London 2001) p. 10.

³⁹ See 'King Stork', the accompanying notes to the André Deutsch edition of *King Log* (London 1968) p. 67.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Daniel Johnson, 'Geoffrey Hill and the Poetry of Ideas', *Standpoint* (June 2014), <<http://standpointmag.co.uk/features-june-14-geoffrey-hill-poetry-ideas-daniel-johnson-public-life>> (accessed 18 Dec. 2014).

After a little I could not have told –
 But no one asked me this – why I was there.
 I asked. The ceiling of that place was high
 And there were sudden noises, which I made.
 I must have stayed there a long time today:
 My cup of soup was gone when they brought me back.
 (CP, p. 52)

Hill writes:

Joel Conarroe, in his book on *Berryman* (1977), is wholly right on this: 'There is nothing in early Berryman that surpasses the disoriented inevitability and imaginative logic of 'And there were sudden noises, which I made' . . . The grasp, the tone of such a poem are accomplished and original in a way that one likes to believe such things are possible . . . I think this is a real and tactful addition to the literature of the psychopathology of extreme suffering. There is a striking line in T. S. Eliot's play, *The Cocktail Party* (1950), two years later than Berryman's *The Dispossessed*, a line from Reilly's speech meditating upon the death of Celia Coplestone (crucified on an anthill): 'The reluctance of the body to become a thing' . . . This is, as I say, memorable, but the Berryman is finer, in the way the syntax, itself a mimesis of the detachment beyond agony: – 'And there were sudden noises, which I made.' The presiding spirit of the speaker is syntactically detached from the objective body which is uttering the sounds of pain.⁴¹

It is no accident that the lecture draws Eliot and Berryman into colloquy in a comment on how syntax transcends ideas of mere personality to arrive at a conception of the self, in this case the naked self of 'extreme suffering'.

Hill seems to imitate that syntax which is 'a mimesis of the detachment beyond agony' in another poem from *King Log*, 'That Men are a Mockery of Angels', part of a quartet entitled 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets' (*BH*, p. 55). The poem is written *in memoriam* and *in*

⁴¹ Hill archive, Brotherton Library: BC MS 20c/Hill/5/1/12, p. 6B. In an email to me of 11 Oct. 2015, Jeffrey Wainwright remarks that Hill had taken him up in an essay of c.1966 on Berryman's 'Nervous Songs' about what Wainwright thought their 'extreme subjectivity': 'he does so by pointing out how for the French surrealists what had been a "theory" of their "sense of dislocation and reversal" was overtaken by events in Nazi-occupied France: [Hill: 'I mean that there is such a thing as "extravagant" political dominion, it is not merely a subjective fancy]'. Wainwright sees this as the argument of Hill's poem 'Domaine Public' on Robert Desnos, and I would argue it informs other poems in that sequence.

vocem Thomas Campanella, a Dominican polymath and Joachimite persecuted by the Neopolitan authorities in the seventeenth century.

Some days a shadow through
 The high window shares my
 Prison. I watch a slug
 Scale the glinting pit-side
 Of its own slime. The cries
 As they come are mine; then
 God's: my justice, wounds, love,
 Derisive light, bread, filth.
 To lie here in my strange
 Flesh while glutted Torment
 Sleeps, stained with its prompt food,
 Is a joy past all care
 Of the world, for a time.
 But we are commanded
 To rise, when, in silence,
 I would compose my voice.

(*BH*, p. 55)

'The cries | As they come are mine', Campanella's 'strange | Flesh' are deeply indebted to the effects of Berryman's 'The Song of the Tortured Girl': nor is the debt purely technical. One of the major emphases in recent scholarship on Berryman, as in Coleman's exemplary study, has been to relocate him out of the so-called 'confessional' poetry and at the heart of a post-Holocaust poetics that is memorial and personal at the same time, not least in his abandoned requiem, *The Black Book*, a 'self-scrutinizing and morally scrupulous art'.⁴² This due attention to the moral seriousness of writing after the Holocaust arguably demands the poet to address the legacies of Eliot and the New Critics on the relationship of style to questions of artistic impersonality, critiquing the limiting and narcissistic elements of 'personality' even as the individual's voice is raised in elegy. Berryman, whose influence is detectable on Hill, writes his most penetrating and syntactically alert poetry from within a space of profound ambivalence towards those legacies. Within that ambiguous vein, both write poems that, to quote an *aperçu* from R. P. Blackmur in Berryman's 'Olympus' much admired by Hill, '[add] to the stock of available reality' (*CP*, p. 179). Hill's

⁴² Matthew Boswell, 'The Black Book: John Berryman's Holocaust Requiem', in Philip Coleman and Philip McGowan (eds.), *After Thirty Falls: New Essays on John Berryman* (Amsterdam 2007) p. 27.

2005 elegy lauds 'The Dream Songs, then, with other things', such as 'The Ball Poem' and 'The Nervous Songs' – these resistances to New Critical dogma ironically deploy rhetorical techniques commended by New Critical praxis. The search in Berryman's early poems for a synthesis of polyvocality and individual voice, a turning loose of personality as well as an escape from its limits, cannot be dismissed, as the poems sometimes have been, as 'rather studied, substanceless, arabesque contortions' on the road to the 'vital human drama' of the later work.⁴³

⁴³ Cf. Christopher Reid, 'John and Henry', *London Review of Books*, 2 Dec. 1982, pp. 13–14.