

‘NOBLE IN HIS GRANDIOSE CONFUSIONS’: YEATS AND CORIOLANUS IN THE POETRY OF GEOFFREY HILL

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Abstract

In the later poetry and critical writing of Geoffrey Hill, W. B. Yeats has come to cast an ever more ‘majestic Shade’ and in *Liber Illustrum Virorum* is styled as Hill’s ‘seamark’, a beacon that is as much a warning as it is a touchstone. Yeats’s political (and indeed apolitical) dubieties of the 1930s in contrast to what Hill sees as some of his finest work in *Last Poems* and *Two Plays* of 1939 serve as an enabling dilemma, energizing and tempering Hill’s most recent poetry. ‘Seamark’ is an allusion to Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, and Hill repeatedly associates the antimonies of that play’s ‘mode’ or polyphonic style in contrast to the reductive politics of its individual characters as analogous to the ‘grandiose confusions’ in Yeats between a masterful, politically sophisticated style and lapses into fascist screed or apolitical posturing. This article examines Hill’s reception of *Coriolanus* as a play crucial for understanding twentieth century poetics, particularly in the wake of modernism and its ‘twin betrayals’: political aesthetics and apolitical aesthetics. The article excavates the imaginative grounds of Hill’s link of *Coriolanus* to the work of W. B. Yeats, detailing the latter’s sustained, underexplored fascination with the play.

Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* has a not-negligible hold on the political imagination of twentieth century writers, particularly Geoffrey Hill (and, as shall become apparent, W. B. Yeats).¹ The eponymous general-turned-enemy-of-the-state has a recurring cameo in Hill’s ‘Pindarics’ from the (subsequently revised) 2006 collection *Without Title*, and throughout *The Daybooks*, six volumes written between 2007 and 2012. It would seem that the major post-Shakespearian influence on Hill with regards to *Coriolanus* is T. S. Eliot’s

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¹ For a succinct introduction to the play’s reception history, see Peter Holland, ed., *Coriolanus* (London: Bloomsbury Arden, 2013), pp. 1–22, 120–33. All references to *Coriolanus* from this edition, cited parenthetically.

unfinished 1932 epic *Coriolan*. Steven Matthews has given a paper to this effect at the British Association for Modernist Studies conference 2014, which at the time of writing is unpublished.² In an earlier article in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, Matthews examines the literary and political hinterland of Eliot's abandoned poem, arguing that it 'alternately resist[s], absorb[s], and transform[s]... the political and critical co-ordinates of Eliot's fascination with Roman history', diverting his conservative 'classical-Tory-Anglo-Catholic' programme from any undertow of attraction to fascism in the early thirties; moreover, that the jarring poetic of *Coriolan* is a refraction of Eliot's politically risky ambivalences, caught between 'the abjection of the crowd before an equally incognizant hero-figure', and the "'hardly" self-knowing perspective of the hero himself'. He concludes that Eliot's abandonment of the sequence gives way to 'a temperate, if still anti-communist, version of individualism'.³

Matthews's assertion that Eliot's poem is the immediate precursor of Geoffrey Hill's exploration of political intractabilities in *Coriolanus* is not without warrant.⁴ Nevertheless, in Hill's critical writing, *Coriolan* is constantly hearkened after as a 'lost' sequence, an aborted 'instrument of great range and resonance' that carried through *would have* provided Eliot with a means to register in the very stuff of his poetry the maelstrom of thirties' misgovernance, economic depression, appeasement, and the subsequent cataclysm of World War II.⁵ In the event, the poem's abandonment – 'an unwilling dereliction of the creative faculty' (*CCW*, p. 564) – and Eliot's poetic voice petering into what Hill sees as the 'abdication' of *Four Quartets*, that 'instrument' remained pure potential. My contention is that Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* already exemplifies for Hill a fully realized stylistic anticipation of such 'range and resonance', and his fascination with this play out of all Shakespeare's works is a matter of how its 'mode' in terms of dialogic/dramatic structure, polyphony, and choral counterpoint resists crude political accommodations: essentially, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's appraisal

² See the programme for the 'Modernism Now!' conference, 26–28 July 2014 (Senate House, London) http://bams.ac.uk/bams-conference-2014_modernism-now/ [accessed 10 August 2015].

³ Steven Matthews, "'You can see some eagles. And hear the trumpets": The literary and political hinterland of T. S. Eliot's *Coriolan*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.2 (2013), 44–60 (pp. 45, 57–58).

⁴ One of the epigraphs to perhaps Hill's most Coriolanic volumes, *Liber Illustrium Virorum*, is from Eliot's *Coriolan*: 'RESIGN RESIGN RESIGN', in *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 683. All subsequent references to Hill's poems from this edition cited parenthetically and abbreviated as *BH*.

⁵ Hill, 'Word Value in F.H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot', in *Collected Critical Writings* ed. by Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 543. All subsequent references are given parenthetically as *CCW*.

of the play, 'the . . . philosophic impartiality of Shakspeare's [sic] Politics'.⁶ In contrast, Hill sees Eliot's *Four Quartets* as succumbing to staid partiality, an establishment condescension to 'public opinion' and 'taste'. In 'A Postscript to Modernist Poetics', Hill writes:

Eliot's 'Triumphal March' [*Coriolan*] brutally juxtaposes the 'aethereal' aloofness of the conqueror ('the eyes watchful, waiting, perceiving, indifferent') with the raucously populist ('Don't throw away that sausage'). What clearly still fascinates him, as he had been fascinated in his great early work, is the requirement to make incoherencies cohere, without imposing the ruminative, well-modulated voice of a man of letters, a tone which so weakens *Four Quartets*. These are scenarios about language-issues, but they are not in themselves language-experiments. They stand in contrast to Yeats's last poems . . . (CCW, p. 579)

In this final essay of his collected essays, Hill repeatedly draws an implicit contrast between W. B. Yeats's last poems and that unrealized 'instrument of great range and resonance', Eliot's *Coriolan*:

[Yeats and Eliot] [e]ach in his own way, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, had fought for the intelligence of poetry within the civic domain in ways that should now stand to us as exemplary. Nonetheless, to have abandoned *Coriolan* and to have completed *The Rock* instead is indicative of a savage defeat. One reads Yeats's last poems and the introduction to *The Words upon the Window-pane* in a different spirit, with the sense that here was a battle much more narrowly lost. (CCW, p. 579)

Compare earlier in the essay: ' . . . *Coriolan* [was] that last moment but one⁷ in which the Bradleian elements in [Eliot's] thinking might have pushed him through into a style of writing as significant, as truly major, as Yeats's best work in the volume *Last Poems and Two Plays* of June 1939 . . . ' (CCW, p. 574).

Clearly, the hold of Eliot's *Coriolan* over Hill's political imagination needs nuancing in light of how Hill qualifies the unfinished poem in contrast to the achievement of Yeats's finished late work. In the 'Pindarics' and *The Daybooks* in which Coriolanus is such a central figure, Eliot's presence is barely felt, whereas Yeats is alluded to multiple times. In several striking instances, Hill yokes Yeats to Caius Martius, later laurelled 'Coriolanus', intimating that the

⁶ In David George, ed., *Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition – Coriolanus* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 103.

⁷ Presumably *Marina*.

prematurely sapped energies of *Coriolan* have been alternatively realized in the best of Yeats's late work. Nevertheless, Hill does not let Yeats entirely off the hook: of *Last Poems*, he clarifies that outside 'The Statues' and other crucial poems, 'the book as a whole is characterized more by aloof hauteur on the one side and haughty rabble-rousing on the other, a difference that is complementary rather than antithetical' (*CCW*, p. 578; cp. *Ludo*: 'and hauteur can cohabit with riot', *BH*, p. 619). Such complementarity is an entirely plausible characterization of the aloof Coriolanus's 'strange alteration' in fighting on the side of his sworn enemies the Volsci (4. 5. 150); as shall become clear, Hill's poetry proposes oblique correspondences between the temperamental politics of Yeats's *oeuvre* and Coriolanus (and both, self-accusingly, with Hill himself).

Hill's association of Coriolanus with Yeats seems broadly intuitive; although the poetry notebooks post-dating 2005 have yet to be made available, it is curious nonetheless that Hill's archive at the Brotherton Library nowhere seems to take note of Yeats's sustained interest in *Coriolanus*. Certainly, in his fond recollection of John Butler Yeats's influence, W. B. mentions his father reading the scene 'where Coriolanus comes to the house of Aufidius and tells the impudent servants that his home is under the canopy. I have seen *Coriolanus* played a number of times since then, and read it more than once, and it is my father's voice that I hear and not Irving's or Benson's'.⁸ In his 1901 Shakespearian essay 'At Stratford-on-Avon', Yeats lambasts critics such as his difficult friend, Edward Dowden; John Butler Yeats had previously attacked Dowden for having the 'splenetic morality [. . . of an] old gardener'.⁹ In the essay, the younger Yeats deplors Dowden's Victorian critical vice of 'The Accusation of Sin', which refuses to treat characters such as Coriolanus as anything other than cautionary examples; Yeats concludes that Coriolanus is 'greater in the divine Hierarchies' than the more reasonable Aufidius.¹⁰ Elsewhere, he warily posits that a naturalistic drama using 'no language but that of the newspapers' could conceivably embrace 'the passion of Coriolanus'.¹¹ In a 1903 *Bookman* review of Lady Gregory, he savages the moralizing tendency to see 'Coriolanus as a lesson to the proud'¹² and in his 1904 instalment of *Samhain* demurs to literature's 'higher court': '[h]ad Coriolanus not been a lawbreaker, neither he nor we had ever

⁸ Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 65.

⁹ Cited in Denis Donoghue, *Irish Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 119.

¹⁰ W. B. Yeats, 'At Stratford-on-Avon', *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats Vol. 4: Early Essays*, ed. by George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007), pp. 77–78.

¹¹ W. B. Yeats, 'Discoveries', *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 201.

¹² W. B. Yeats, 'A Canonical Book', *The Collected Work of W. B. Yeats Vol. 10: Later Articles and Reviews*, ed. by Colton Johnson (New York: Scribner, 2000), p. 97.

discovered . . . that noble pride of his'.¹³ In 'The Freedom of the Theatre', defending his prerogative of 'putting one's sticks into the beehives', he argues:

[w]e watch Coriolanus with delight, because he has a noble and beautiful pride, and it seems to us for the moment of little importance that he sets all Rome by the ears and even joins himself to her enemies . . . those citizens of the Corporation, hungry to have the law of him, saw nothing it may be but a bad example. They saw the exterior life plainly enough, for their little petty businesses taught them that, but they could not see clearly any picture of the soul.¹⁴

It is significant that this defiant praise of Coriolanus as a beautiful lofty thing was published in 1902 in Arthur Griffith's Nationalist newspaper *The United Irishman*, Shakespeare marshalled into Yeats's defences of the Irish Literary Theatre's productions from the vulgar morality of Paudeen's lower middle class. Increasingly, the tensions between Yeats and the advanced nationalism of Griffith's paper were to become apparent. In one sense, the 'stick in the beehive' is a characteristically paradoxical Yeatsian tactic, in which he defends the transcendent quality of art from reductive moralizing at the same time as his polemical focus is very much on 'the exterior life', the 'citizens of the Corporation' in *Coriolanus* interchangeable with the philistine Dublin Corporation and the 'petty' operations of greasy tills. One particular moment in Yeats's involvement with the Abbey Theatre in 1936 brings this paradox into stark focus, a subject of one of Hill's poems from *Liber Illustrium Virorum* as I shall examine later in this article. The consistency with which Yeats sides with the patrician pride of Coriolanus is revealing if not unexpected, and the contexts of this advocacy are also of note. Without imposing a crudely Freudian framework, his father's influential declamation of the play provides an insight into Yeats's famous hauteur, mocked by George Moore and others; and yet, Yeats's connections with *Coriolanus* are much more obscure and less scrutinized than Eliot's well-known preference for the Roman plays.¹⁵ Nevertheless, they support Hill's conjunction of Yeats and *Coriolanus* as something other than mere free association.

¹³ W. B. Yeats, 'Samhain: 1904', in *Explorations* ed. George Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 154–55.

¹⁴ W. B. Yeats, 'The Freedom of the Theatre', *Collected Works*, Vol. 10, p. 93.

¹⁵ As a gauge of just how well-known Eliot's assertion that *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare's 'most assured artistic success' has become, see a recent pop-cultural nod, David Haglund, 'Is *Coriolanus* Shakespeare's Greatest Tragedy? A closer look at T. S. Eliot's zany claim', *Slate* (January 2012),

While Yeats's numerous references to the 1608 play do not seem to be anywhere recorded in the available archival material, certainly the link itself is not a novelty of Hill's late writing. In an unpublished lecture on *Coriolanus* from a series of courses that began in the academic year 1981–1982 at Cambridge as 'Some Dissident Voices' and finished as a shorter course in 1983–1984 entitled 'The Dissident Voice in Shakespeare', Hill draws a connection between Shakespeare's protagonist and Yeats's apposite description in *A Vision* of 'The Assertive Man out of phase', whose contemptuous tyranny imposes opinion on others and whose unfaithful intellect results in capriciousness (Yeats's example was the proto-fascist poet, Gabriele D'Annunzio).¹⁶ Yeats's May 1935 notes to the proposed deluxe edition, in a kind of willed amnesia of his earlier assessment in *A Vision*, praised D'Annunzio's 'terrible drill at Fiume' (the city-port disputed by Yugoslavia and Italy and seized by the soldier-poet in his 1919 coup), a fusion of poetry with life as 'symbolic as Shelley'.¹⁷ This eulogy, with Yeats gloating over the various coloured shirts of European fascist militia, warrants Hill's pithy characterization of Yeats (in the context of discussing the latter's infamous dismissal of 'passive suffering' in the 1936 Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*) as behaving like 'a D'Annunzio in Irish tweeds' ('Language, Suffering and Silence', *CCW*, p. 403); similarly, Roy Foster has described Yeats's politics in the mid-thirties as an attempt to become 'the Blueshirts' D'Annunzio'.¹⁸

There is a disconnect between the Yeats who discerns that capricious 'delight in some new emphasis' of 'The Assertive Man out of phase' and the Yeats who gloats over fascist spectacle in the mid-to-late thirties. This discrepancy, I would argue, rather than merely an evolution in Yeats's politics, is emblematic of a temperamental dilemma manifest throughout the body of his work, a fulcrum on which pivots Hill's association of Yeats with *Coriolanus* as a play (i.e., his art as realistic, self-aware, unseduced) and as a character (the wilful, often vicious obtuseness of his most polemical writing). In the Cambridge lecture, Hill writes 'the play as a Shakespearean

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2012/01/coriolanus_why_did_t_s_eliot_love_it_so_much_.html [accessed 11 July 2016]. Needless to say, the touted 'closer look' is not entirely forthcoming.

¹⁶ Hill, *Coriolanus* lecture, 17 typed ff., in Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, BC MS 20C Hill/5/3/19. Hereafter, 'Coriolanus a'. I am indebted to George Potts for the dating of this lecture.

¹⁷ Yeats, 'Appendix A', *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Vol. 2: The Plays*, ed. by David R. Clark and Rosalind E. Clark (New York: Scribner, 2010), p. 704.

¹⁸ R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, Vol. 2: The Arch-Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 495.

imaginative entity feels the politics which it describes quite differently from the way in which the characters feel the politics in which they take part' [superscript in red ink: 'The play is the dissentient voice'] ('Coriolanus a', p. 5). Yeats's categorical error, so far as Hill is concerned, is to mistake the dissentient voice of his most astute writing for the specious dissentience of extreme political or apolitical provocation. Crucially, Hill sees this dilemma as a paradigm of what 'haunts' modernism and the art produced in its wake: the 'twin betrayals' of political aesthetics ('Three Songs to the One Burden') or apolitical aesthetics ('On Being Asked for a War Poem' and 'Politics') (see 'A Postscript to Modernist Poetics', *CCW*, p. 580). In contrast, the best of Yeats exemplifies that Coleridgean 'philosophic impartiality' that Hill discerns in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

I want to argue that in Hill's view it is ultimately Yeats rather than Eliot who inherits that admirable 'mode' of *Coriolanus*: Shakespeare's choric political intelligence hovering above its characters and their statements. *Coriolanus* proffers a definition of the artwork as almost inescapably political, if by that one does not mean partisanship, but a vigilant multi-dimensional register of minute particulars. Hill insists that politics, like making a poem, requires 'composition on a multiple plane', to deploy the maxim of the French philosopher Simone Weil he frequently quotes (see *CCW*, p. 573), asserting that multi-dimensional composition is the hallmark of Yeats's best work. At the same time, Hill seems to acknowledge a contradictory propensity in Yeats's poetry and prose (especially in the mid-to-late 1930s) towards a kind of perverse obliviousness that he associates with the character Coriolanus in distinction to the play titled for him: in the lecture, he remarks that the play is 'a tragedy of ignorance . . . if we tilt the sense to accommodate the idea of ignorance as being wilfully unaware', that is, a kind of criminal negligence or dereliction of the intellect ('Coriolanus a', pp. 3–4). Between these polarities, Hill's 'Pindarics' and many poems in *The Daybooks* weave their own Coriolanic patterns and energies, with Yeats as an exemplar in both the positive and negative senses of the word.

The most striking of these poems bring *Coriolanus* into colloquy with Yeats, with sustained instances of this found in the second volume of *The Daybooks*, *Liber Illustrum Virorum*:

Medusas, basilisks, dragons in fens,
 Eternal in their demands. Dragon's teeth
 I have learned use of; with Coriolan's
 Obliviousness also a plundered myth;
 Determination of necessity;
 Past recklessness in bruised misreckoning;
 That blazed Yeatsian thing

Of savage joy:
 The reed lake; wintering
 Wild geese a-clang (*BH*, p. 685)

'That blazed Yeatsian thing/Of savage joy', the allusion to *The Wind Among The Reeds* and those unruly cousins of the Coole Park swans, the wild geese from 'September 1913', with the ghost of a quintessentially Yeatsian word, 'clangour', in their harsh flight 'a-clang': these are all conjured alongside Coriolanus's 'bruised misreckoning' and 'obliviousness'. The anserine imagery is apt: in *Coriolanus*, the Romans are berated by their general during the siege of Corioli for cowardice, 'you souls of geese,/That bear the shapes of men' (1. 4. 527–28), and – 'bruised misreckoning' – Coriolanus murmurs on the arrival of his family to sue successfully for relenting, 'I'll never/Be such a gosling as to obey instinct, but stand/As if a man were author of himself/And knew no other kin' (5. 3. 34–37).¹⁹ The irony here is that Coriolanus – frequently described in aquiline superiority to both the populace and its enemies ('like an eagle in dove-cote, I/flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli', 5. 6. 136–37) – is a 'gosling' to instinct, namely his inveterate capricious pride. He reneges on his haughty stand against Rome, 'Breaking his oath and resolution like/A twist of rotten silk', in Aufidius's contemptuous phrase (5. 6. 97–98).

Hill's unpublished Cambridge lecture defines Coriolanus's particular *hamartia* as 'the vice of ignorance' [sic]:

that speaks of ignorance, moreover, which can exist together with a high degree of technical competence, even brilliance. Coriolanus is a brilliantly successful specialist. He is also ignorant of course... I must concede that Coriolanus is scarcely a tragedy of ignorance in [a] literal pristine sense, it is a tragedy of ignorance only if we tilt the sense to accommodate the idea of ignorance as being wilfully unaware... possessing a wilful or perverse failure to connect' ('Coriolanus a', pp. 3–4).²⁰

'Coriolanus's/obliviousness also a plundered myth' seems to correspond to Hill's acknowledgment in the Cambridge lecture that this idea of the

¹⁹ The commonplace Elizabethan insult, 'goose', contains ironies in relation to Roman history, where in legend the honking of Juno's geese on the Capitoline alerted Roman soldiers to the Gallic invasion.

²⁰ 'Specialist' as a descriptor of Coriolanus's military narrowness seems to derive from Brecht's essay: 'the people's enemy Marcius emerges, qua specialist, as leader in war', 'Study of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', in *Brecht: Collected Plays, Vol. 9 – Adaptations*, ed. by Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 384.

protagonist's 'perverse failure to connect' is 'plundered' (in the lecture: 'acquires substantiation', p. 4) from A. P. Rossiter's 1961 Shakespearean study, *Angel with Horns* (where 'myth' might be understood as an aetiology for Hill's political poesis), and in particular Rossiter's analysis of partisan readings of the play:

[t]he partisan would destroy all opposed groups. That is, he would see complex human situations and eventualities only in his own terms [Rossiter's footnote instances the Tribunes' desire to whip a messenger of ill tidings 'until he shares their desire to deny the inconvenient facts'] . . . see them only simplified to his one-eyed creed. And that is, not see them at all. His assumption is that, given the power, right action is *easy*. All history refutes that. As W. Macneile Dixon said (on tragedy), 'In this incalculable world, to act and to blunder are not two, but one.'²¹

More than a local analysis of *Coriolanus*, this insight (particularly Macneile Dixon's mordant aperçu) cuts to the heart of Hill's political imagination. Coriolanus cannot perceive his acts as blunders in the way that the play's knowing architectonics do. Similarly, the achieved poem's dramatic orchestration redresses the limited political vision of the individual poet.

It is significant that Hill concatenates Coriolanus's 'obliviousness' with 'that blazed Yeatsian thing/Of savage joy'. 'Savage' seems to be Hill's adjectival substitution for Yeats's Nietzschean 'tragic joy', the 'gaiety transfiguring all that dread' of Hamlet and Lear in 'Lapis Lazuli'. It is also synonymous with 'fierce' in a poem from Hill's *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti*, 'the infant deity/Amor-Atys, he of the *laughing fierce/Destruction* Yeats courted in high verse' (*BH*, p. 914). This italicized phrase perhaps blends the violence of the 'fierce horsemen' in 'Three Songs to the Same Burden' and Yeats's vision (written about in the introduction to his play *The Resurrection*), of 'a brazen winged beast . . . associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction'.²² 'Savage joy' and 'laughing fierce [ecstatic] destruction' are 'a blazed Yeatsian thing', as incendiary as Coriolanus's insolence to the people ('and their blaze/Shall darken him forever', 2. 1. 252–53) and his own desire 'to [forge himself] a name o'th'fire/Of burning Rome' (5. 1. 14–15).²³ By linking the destructive Nietzschean excesses of Yeats's philosophy to Coriolanus's 'tragedy of

²¹ A. P. Rossiter, *Angels with Horns* (New York: Theatre Arts Books), p. 240.

²² W. B. Yeats, *Explorations*, p. 393.

²³ Cp. also Yeats's 'conflagration' in 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz': 'bid me strike a match and blow'. *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1990), pp. 283–84.

ignorance', Hill mounts a critique of the Irish poet's apology for violence, while at the same time, the glittering imagery – '[t]he reed lake; wintering/Wild geese a-clang' – seems beholden to the allure 'tragic gaiety' holds for a 'wild old wicked man', perhaps especially a poet.

'Dragons in fens' is an allusion to *Coriolanus* that Hill also adopts in his earlier 'Pindarics' of 2006.²⁴

Say Coriolanus fought from dark to dark,
a thing of blood; such as he told his mind
 he could turn cities ashen, being empowered
 by slow brain-worm to swift self-travesty;
 bespoke *a lonely dragon in his fen* –
 that sentimental – something more than huff –
 and hitting wild accord, a *douce* of rage,
 blood-tears by contract, servitor of guilt.
 Shakespeare's god-trading; mortgages; a name (*BH*, p. 536)

Darkness, 'self-travesty' is Hill's reckoning of this 'thing of blood' (2. 2. 107), the dragon image an apotheosis of 'sentimental' spite, 'a *douce* of rage'. The image is from *Coriolanus*'s exile: 'though I go alone,/like to a lonely dragon, that his fen/makes fear'd and talked of more than seen' (4. 3. 2552–53). In the unpublished lecture, Hill quotes Mark Van Doren: '[*Coriolanus*'s] impossible pride is the subject of the play, which makes no attempt to ennoble this pride as a tendentious toriyism [sic] might like to do – merely that is, by elevating it above the animal authority of the mob' (cited in 'Coriolanus a', pp. 12–13).²⁵ The *lonely dragon* image is for Hill a crystalline example of how 'the play feels the politics which it describes quite differently from the way in which the characters feel the politics in which they take part':

This is a haunting, magnificent self-created image of what Van Doren would call 'tendentious toriyism' [sic], but of course, as Van Doren rightly perceives, Shakespeare's play, while giving full value to that image, in terms of rhetorical

²⁴ 'Dragon's teeth' might be a reference to Michael Baird Saenger's suggestion that dragon imagery in *Coriolanus* is an allusion to Ovid's account of Cadmus, who when exiled from Thebes metamorphoses into a dragon: 'A Reference to Ovid in *Coriolanus*', *English Language Notes*, 34.3 (1997), 18–20.

²⁵ Hill's *Coriolanus* teaching material in the archive holds an annotated photocopy of the actor John Phillip Kemble's *Promptbook*; Kemble, who more or less defined the lead role of the play in the years 1789–1817, chose in his amendments/staging to 'ennoble' *Coriolanus*'s 'impossible pride' during a time of political unrest. For Kemble's staging and Hazlitt's famous denunciation of the play see Jonathan Sachs, *Romantic Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 179–220.

eloquence and dramatic placing, does not endorse that image. . . . The quality of such an image as [this] is that it balances so perfectly the sense of slouching rough beast, and the sense of 'poor dragon'. ('Coriolanus a', p. 13)

The throwaway phrase 'slouching rough beast', rather than a momentary random apposition, is once again indicative of an inextricable connection in Hill's mind between Coriolanus and Yeats. Hill's Coriolanus lecture follows this analysis of 'lonely dragon' with a suggestion that it 'acutely anticipates' Burke's 'return upon himself' (as Matthew Arnold styles it in *The Function of Criticism*) in his 1791 reflection 'Thoughts on French Affairs', i.e., 'the distinction between a proper resolution and a perverse obstinacy' ('Coriolanus a' p. 11). This self-rectification, including 'the recognition of the force of the contemptible in oneself and others' ('Coriolanus a' p. 12) which for Hill is not so much an attitude as the proper weighting of language, has become a mode to be emulated.

If the dragon metaphor in *Coriolanus* is seen in the Cambridge lecture as anticipating Burke's 'return', an earlier 1971 uncollected essay on Yeats – "'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure": A Debate' – has Yeats's poems, for good or ill, critiqued in light of it.²⁶ In the second stanza of section five of 'Vacillation', for instance, Hill sees the 'mannerism' of Yeats's confessing to be weighed down by 'things I did not do or say/ But thought that I might say or do' as 'close to being a travesty of what Arnold meant when he praised [Burke]'. However, he judges that in the final line – '[m]y conscience or my vanity appalled' – the word 'vanity' snatches the 'return', and 'concedes the element of clownishness in the man who might have preferred to be a hero in remorse' (p. 20). The Burkean teeter of the sense of *Coriolanus's* 'lonely dragon' that Hill asserts in the Cambridge lecture, between 'rough slouching beast' and 'poor dragon', is clarified by his much earlier opinion in the *Agenda* essay that 'the final lines of "The Second Coming" . . . offer what is perhaps the finest of these "returns"', in which the 'volatile emotional essences' which went into the making of the poem are revoked in the word 'slouches': 'the revocation is the outcome of acute historical intelligence drawing its energy from the struggle with that obtuseness which is the dark side of its own selfhood'.²⁷

²⁶ Hill, "'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure": A Debate', *Agenda*, 9.4 and 10.1 (Autumn/Winter 1971/1972), 14–23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20–21. Hill repeats this point in 'Language, Suffering, and Silence': 'there is a quality in Yeats's auditory faculty, auditory imagination, which saves his poetry, at its best, from the worst excesses of Nietzschean doctrinal sentiment' (*CCW*, p. 404).

The essay concludes by asserting that the entire cadence of 'Easter 1916' is a masterful display of multiple 'returns' and furthermore corresponds to Weil's 'simultaneous review of several different considerations'.²⁸ Hill writes:

It comprises middle-aged uncertain envy of those possessed by single-minded conviction, together with a humane scepticism about 'excess' and romantic abstraction. One is moved by the artifice of the poem, the mastery of syntactical melody, that enacts this tension of 'several considerations'; the tune of a mind distrustful yet envious, mistrusting the abstraction, mistrusting its own mistrust, drawn half-against its will into the chanting refrain that is both paean and threnos, yet once drawn, committed utterly to the melody of the refrain. . . . [I]t is a paradigm of the hard-won 'sanctity of the intellect'²⁹

The similar terrain of the 'Dissentient Voices' lecture on *Coriolanus* and the Yeats essay of a decade earlier, especially the link of the dragon to Yeats's 'beast' in terms of a Burkean return on the verb 'slouches', convincingly establishes Hill's perennial conviction that both *Coriolanus* and Yeats's best poems are essentially political in that they enact a tension of 'several considerations'. Yet the 1971 essay is quite clear in denouncing what it sees, following Conor Cruise O'Brien's influential essay 'Passion and Cunning' (1965), as the inability of 'Yeats's aristocratic bias [. . . to] save him from vulgarity; the "aristocrat" is conned by a pseudo-aristocracy of the gutter'.³⁰ As early as this, Hill is acutely aware that Yeats's Coriolanic streak is apt to mar the 'historical intelligence' of his work.³¹

In 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics' Hill remarks, '[i]f in "The Statues" Yeats is recognizing that the rapturous symmetrical cadences of "Easter 1916" no longer suffice, there is no trace of that recognition in the trumpery of the final stanza of "Three Songs to the One Burden"' (*CCW*, p. 578): 'For Patrick Pearse had said/That in every generation/Must Ireland's blood be shed'. Hill has mentioned in a public reading in Paris, September 2013, that he admired the recent (controversial) Yeats scholarship of W. J. McCormack, including *Blood Kindred* (2005), which aggressively indicts

²⁸ Cited in, "'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure'", 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 19.

³¹ Two roughly contemporaneous engagements with *Coriolanus* prior to the Cambridge lecture are worth mentioning: Hill's tough criticism of a draft article 'Coriolanus and the body politic' by his then-colleague at Leeds, Andrew Gurr (published in 1975), and Hill's own translation of Ibsen's *Brand* performed by the National Theatre in 1978. Ibsen's play and its uncompromising protagonist had been profoundly influenced by his 1855 discovery of Hermann Hettner's criticism on *Coriolanus*; see A. E. Zucker, 'Ibsen – Hettner – Coriolanus – Brand', *Modern Language Notes*, 51 (1936), 99–107.

Yeats (who received gratefully the 1934 award of a Goethe-Plakette from Oberburgmeister of Frankfurt, Friedrich Klebs) for being a 'fellow traveller' of Nazism. A late poem of Hill's 'To Hugh Maxton' (McCormack's literary pseudonym) concludes '[h]ad I read you earlier I might have/Cast my words differently towards the grave' (*BH*, p. 925) – the grave in question ('Cast a cold eye...') under Ben Bulben. If anything, Hill's discovery of McCormack's studies seems to have intensified his censure of Yeats's late politics, especially in poems such as the marching songs for Eoin O'Duffy's Blueshirts. In the spring of 1933, Yeats wrote that he was joining several conservative thinkers including Desmond Fitzgerald and Dermott McManus 'to work out a social theory which can be used against Communism in Ireland – what looks like emerging is Fascism modified by religion'.³² He later met O'Duffy in Riverdale on 24 July and by November of the year had sent 'Three Marching Songs' for the paramilitaries to his Abbey Theatre colleague and Blueshirt enthusiast, Ernest Blythe. Going through numerous versions, they were published in the *Spectator* in February 1934 with a disclaimer by Yeats stating his 'rancour against all who . . . disturb public order'.³³

In a poem in his last volume *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti*, Hill has registered his critical discovery of the diremption between works such as the Blueshirt ditty and the 'auditory imagination' of 'slouches':

[Yeats] did
 Marching songs for Bluto's blue-chinned rabbles.
 Whatever wisdom he wón | ródé on the verb:
Slouches – 'The Second Coming' – is one such,
 The mayhem of his visionary lech
 Reduced to tragic grammar, self's recurb (*BH*, p. 901)

Here, almost forty years of critical insight is bayed into barely a stanza, with an odd (and auditory) amalgamation of O'Duffy with Popeye's nemesis, who wore either a black or blue shirt over his brawn. 'Lech' is an exquisite word to describe Yeats's purveyance of his own visions of 'ecstatic destruction', while the diacritical accents on the verbs 'won' and 'rode' stress that winning knowledge as 'riding' on the phonics of language itself, whereas the ghoulish equestrian refrain of 'Three Songs' – 'from mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen' – is nothing more than a militant rattle.³⁴

³² Yeats, to Olivia Shakespear, April 1933, in Foster, *The Arch-Poet*, p. 472.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 477–78.

³⁴ The refrain's imagery might owe something to Yeats's recollection, folkloric with racial overtones, of a vision of Mary Battle, the Pollexfen family servant: '... the men one sees on the slopes of the mountains with their swords swinging. There is no such race living

The reduction to 'tragic grammar, self's recurb' in 'slouches' corresponds in the Cambridge lecture to Shakespeare's Janus-faced metaphor for Coriolanus, 'lonely dragon', as both self-pitying 'tendentious toryism' [sic] and genuinely tragic. Hill summarizes in the lecture:

The interesting thing about *Coriolanus* is that in it, we have the synthesis of art and politics; but only the art (the art of Shakespeare's play) possesses the strategic rectitude, that ability of the practical imagination to, among other things, return upon itself. The play is multi-dimensional. The politics which are its concern are not. They are merely one-dimensional stubbornness versus one dimensional expediency. ('Coriolanus, a', p. 14)

As has been mentioned, Hill's reading of the play is deeply influenced by A. P. Rossiter's *Angel with Horns*. The conclusion of Rossiter's chapter on *Coriolanus* is that '[i]t is Shakespeare's only great political play'; and it is slightly depressing, and hard to come to terms with, because it is a *political tragedy*'.³⁵ Hill has registered this insight in two different poems: in one of the poems in *Liber Illustrium Virorum*, he alludes cryptically to Rossiter, '[s]omeone hard-named it Shakespeare's only great/Political play' (*BH*, p. 703), while the pessimistic political realism that Rossiter diagnoses seems to inform the bleak turbulence of lines in one of the earlier 'Pindarics':

For Coriolanus there is no escape
in the sublime, in God, or melancholy,
no music for his state, no martyrdom,
no reconciling with the truth of things;
but, crazy-passive, a last mêlée of spite (*BH*, p. 536)

One can detect the attraction of this 'last mêlée' for Hill, a real avatar of Yeats's 'wild old wicked man' who has described himself as a '[s]hameless old man, bent on committing/more public nuisance' (*BH*, p. 249). Nevertheless, ultimately it is the resolutely mundane, non-miraculous political realism with Shakespeare's 'multi-dimensional' treatment of it (rather than an emotional sympathy) that forms Hill's deeper affinities with Rossiter's critical insight.

now, so finely proportioned.' In his eugenics tract posthumously published in 1939, 'On the Boiler', Yeats speculates that when the 'drilled and docile masses' refuse to submit to eugenic directives 'a prolonged civil war' shall occur, 'with the victory of the skilful, riding their machines as did the feudal knights their armoured horses'. One of Hill's draft titles for 'Florentines', a nightmarish equestrian poem from *Tenebrae* (1975) was 'On the Boiler'.

³⁵ Rossiter, p. 251.

On theatrical productions that choose to ignore that multi-dimensional 'recititude', Rossiter writes:

[i]n December 1933, *Coriolanus* was played by the *Comédie française*. Every performance turned into a demonstration by right-wing groups... and the Royalists cheered every outburst against the 'common cry of curs', the populace, and the bald tribunes whose power should be thrown in the dust... While one can admire the French enthusiasm for making Shakespeare really about something that matters here and now, this is still something other than Shakespeare criticism. For the view that Caius Martius should be – or ever could be the good and great dictator, the integrator of a shaking state, is one which the play cannot support for a moment.³⁶

Hill makes a caustic allusion to the Parisian staging in *Oraclau/Oracles*: 'Coriolanus in the Thirties/Made nosebleeds with its brazen sound' (*BH*, p. 759). In 1936, inspired by the *Comédie française* production of several years earlier, Yeats was to commit to just such an 'insupportable' view of Caius Martius, an episode that forms the subject matter of one of Hill's poems in *Liber Illustrium Virorum*:

Yeats – and yet again I fail to avoid
Him as my seamark – plotted some Roman
Fascisti-Shakescene but lost that bid:
Paudeen, some would say, hating the showman.
Coriolan best played in Afrikaans;
They were butchers and would understand him
And cheerfully brand him
Chief of their sons;
With diamonds blind him.
I commend rhyme
That pledged graceless MacBride
As one who stabbed the tender side
Of Britannia while she was busy
With many sore issues, perhaps dizzy
From Zulu blood-letting.
This voids vetting,

³⁶ Rossiter, p. 236. For more on the political context, see Felicia Hardison Londré, 'Coriolanus and Stavisky: The Interpenetration of Art and Politics', *Theatre Research International*, 11 (1986), 119–32; and Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine, 'Coriolanus in France from 1933 to 1977: Two Extreme Interpretations', in *Shakespeare and European Politics*, ed. by Dirk Delabastita, Jozef de Vos, and Paul Franssen (Newark, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2008), pp. 124–48.

Stands primed for stout impress.
 Mark rattle of duress,
 Siren and omen-light.
 So for my sins
 I gut *The Washing of the Spears* by night. (BH, p. 724)

For 'seamark' the *OED*, in addition to a citation in *Othello*, instances *Coriolanus*, 5. 3. 72–75, where Coriolanus prays that his son 'mayst prove/To shame invulnerable and stick i'th' wars/Like a great sea-mark, standing every flaw/And saving those that eye thee!' The play's rhetoric is ambivalent, giving a certain emotional weight to Coriolanus's concern that his son may prove as nonchalant to acclaim or approbation as himself, while simultaneously larded with dramatic irony. That Coriolanus himself might '[save] those that eye [him]' is dramatically foregrounded, his flaws exposed to precisely the kind of moral reading for which Yeats vilified Dowden. Yeats is a 'seamark' for Hill in so far as he is both an exemplary beacon and a cautionary warning. The 'Fascisti-Shakescene' (harnessing Robert Greene's contemptuous epithet) alludes to Yeats's attempts to stage Hugh Hunt's 13 January 1936 Abbey Theatre production of *Coriolanus* in blue shirts. As Frank O'Connor describes:

[i]t had just been produced in Paris [sic: three years earlier] in coloured shirts and caused a riot. Yeats demanded that we produce it in coloured shirts among our European classics, in the hope that, as in France, a Dublin audience might riot and he could defend the message of the play as he had defended the message of *The Playboy of the Western World* or *The Plough and the Stars*.³⁷

Frank O'Connor refused to be party to such a stunt; the play was performed in Renaissance costume, and it nearly bankrupted the theatre, then abandoning for several decades the ambition to compete with the European performances of the Gate Theatre and returning under the guidance of O'Connor to fostering Irish dramatists and themes.³⁸

Hill's poem pivots on its sense of Yeats's political art as a 'seamark' to be both emulated and treated with caution: in its best instances, as in the 'ten-sion of several considerations' of 'Easter 1916', Hill 'commend[s] rhyme/That pledged graceless MacBride'. John MacBride was the 'drunken,

³⁷ Frank O'Connor, *My Father's Son* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 152.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152. On the internecine conflict that followed Lady Gregory's death, see Robert Welch, *The Abbey Theatre 1899-1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 118–30.

vainglorious lout' who had 'done most bitter wrong' to Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult. MacBride's short-lived marriage to Gonne, the object of desire in several of Yeats's love poems, ended in acrimonious public divorce. Nevertheless, Yeats 'number[s] him in the song'. More than just a rehash in verse of what occupies him in essays such as 'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure' and 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics', Hill's poem here attempts to enact on its own terms the best of Yeats's rhetorical strategies. Just as 'slouches' is Yeats's 'recurb' of his Nietzschean excesses, in 'seamark' purloined from *Coriolanus* Hill has a *trouvaille* that condenses in a word the range of his responses to Yeats, both admiration and admonition, Yeats as beacon and as cautionary example. The canzone-rhyme scheme of Hill's poem is borrowed from that most Yeatsian of mid twentieth-century poets, Robert Lowell in his poem 'Rebellion'.³⁹ The rhymes exercise a 'rattle of duress' that propel Hill into his own ambivalent musings on the historical contexts behind both Yeats's Fascist provocation in his proposals for the 1936 *Coriolanus* and the hinterland to the Easter Rising. 'MacBride' is described as 'one who stabbed [Britannia's] tender side', the defensive weakness caused by her over-stretched colonial dominion punning on the clichéd phrase, a hitherto-unguessed-at emotional vulnerability.

The complex repetitions and backtrackings of Lowell's canzone rhyme-scheme enable Hill to modulate through his own vexed interactions with Britain's colonial legacy; for instance, Hill's 'sins' in the penultimate line of the poem complete the rhyme pattern of 'Afrikaans' and 'sons' many lines previous, a sense that his nightly reading of Donald Morris's hefty history of the Anglo-Zulu War, *The Washing of the Spears* (1965), is a penitential exercise in coming to terms with his own culpable status as a white inheritor of British imperialism's ill-gotten gains. At the same time, the 'sore issues' of colonialism are far from healed by this admission; Hill's pro-British palpable anger at 'graceless MacBride' for opportunist backstabbing is not cancelled out by his recognition that Britannia was at the time 'dizzy/From Zulu bloodletting'.⁴⁰ Indeed, by drawing Yeats's Blueshirt agitprop into raw juxtapositions with the Anglo-Zulu war – '*Coriolan* best played in Afrikaans;/ They were butchers and would understand him' – Hill obliquely meshes various kinds of historical and political 'obliviousness' (in the sense in which

³⁹ See 'Rebellion', Lowell's early poem from the 1946 volume *Lord Weary's Castle*, in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 32.

⁴⁰ Compare the provocative lines apropos his father's background: 'So, *black-and-tan* man the dark mutter;/The step dance faltering. I'm out of sorts/With Irishry myself, for that matter' (*BH*, p. 660), the collective noun from Yeats's 'Under Ben Bulben': 'Cast your mind on other days/That we in coming days may be/Still the indomitable Irishry' (*The Poems*, p. 375).

he defines Coriolanus's tragic flaw), including his own, and the Boer campaign background of several of the protagonists of *Easter 1916*. MacBride had already 'stabbed the tender side' of the British by forming a commando Irish Transvaal Brigade to fight for the Boers; its manifesto published in the *United Irishman* on 28 October 1899 stated the old nationalist saw that 'England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity'.⁴¹ Sinn Féin, founded in 1905, was in many respects the intellectual heir of its founder Arthur Griffith's Irish Transvaal Committee set up in 1889 in solidarity with the Boers. The latter's members included James Connolly, Maud Gonne, John O'Leary, and W. B. Yeats.⁴² This protest movement was oblivious to the plight of black Africans (including the Zulu, routed by the British in 1879, who were traditional enemies of the Boer), and Griffith's anti-colonial, anti-Dreyfusard rhetoric was virulently anti-semitic.⁴³ Hill's poem blurs these Yeatsian contexts with his own occasional obtuse political sentiments, the variety of the montage held by the centripetal force of Coriolanus and his 'obliviousness' as a cautionary tale.

From his father's seminal reading in the rented York Street studio in 1881 to his intervention in Hunt's production half a century later, *Coriolanus* loomed large in Yeats's political imagination. It is not difficult to trace connections between Yeats's increasingly *de-haut-en-bas* rhetoric and Coriolanus, whom Wyndham Lewis acerbically diagnosed as 'the incarnation of violent snobbery . . . crazed with notions of privilege and social distinction . . . congealed into a kind of machine of unintelligent pride'.⁴⁴ From *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* onward, 'pride' and 'nobleness' enter frequently into the poems, increasingly in invective against 'knave and dolt' ('Against Unworthy Praise'; 'The Fascination of What's Difficult'), 'the obscure spite'/'the daily spite of this unmannerly town' ('Paudeen'; 'The People'). As Roy Foster argues, Yeats's 'belief in autonomy' (cp. Coriolanus: '[I'll] stand/As if man were author of himself, 5. 3. 36-37) became increasingly more self-conscious and assertive in the period following his American tour. Along with Synge and Gregory, he consolidated his executive power over the Abbey Theatre, and following Gonne's divorce from MacBride and the opening of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, a head-on collision with Sinn Féiners (according to Yeats, 'people . . . who had no books in their houses') was in the context inevitable.⁴⁵ He wrote to Gonne early in 1906 after the Irish Literary Theatre split that he took 'delight in enemies' and 'revelled in his unpopularity'.⁴⁶

⁴¹ See Donal P. McCracken, *Forgotten Protest: Ireland and the Anglo-Boer War* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2003), especially pp. 123-31.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-45.

⁴³ See McCracken, pp. xviii, 60.

⁴⁴ cited in George, pp. 380-81.

⁴⁵ See Foster, pp. 344-65.

⁴⁶ Cited in Foster, p. 345.

Yeats consistently praised 'that noble and beautiful pride' of Coriolanus, and the play's confrontational *agon* (Coriolanus described as 'chief enemy to the people', I. I. 6–7) clearly felt to him analogous with the opposition that was increasingly felt from censorious propagandists of Griffithite Dublin nationalism.

Years later, seriously ill in Rapallo, Yeats would sedulously read Jonathan Swift's *Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome*, with its warnings on the industrious 'pursuits of malice' of the 'bare majority' of elected representatives, instancing the 'revengeful and ambitious' Tribunes who 'kindled great dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons on the account of Coriolanus'.⁴⁷ Indeed, as Yeats's reading in the Irish eighteenth century continued apace ('Swift haunts me; he is always just around the next corner'), he began, in the words of Foster, 'to claim a kind of exclusive patriotism for the Ascendancy world'.⁴⁸ In *Introduction to 'The Words Upon the Window-pane'*, Yeats writes of the 'great blackboard' – the stoic logic and architectural precision of the Protestant aristocracy, 'and something that appeared and perished in its dawn, an instinct for Roman rhetoric, Roman elegance'.⁴⁹ Hill rates this Introduction as among the finest examples of Yeats's writing (see *CCW*, p. 579), and in one of the revised 'Pindarics' has Yeats 'disdaining emulation./Philosophical Irishry sat well with him,/Swift, Berkeley, Burke: therewith to moon the Crowd' (*BH*, p. 530). There is this contemptuous 'Roman' streak in Hill, too, which energizes much of *The Triumph of Love* (1998) but has its moments of 'obliviousness', for instance the unnecessary provocation and vulgarity of 'nigger-brown' to describe 'an old coat' in a poem in the recent *Expostulations on the Volcano*, a Larkinesque lapse into gratuitousness. Moreover, for all that he is circumspect that any hero-worship of Coriolanus is to gravely misread the texture of the play, Hill is equally convinced of the duplicity of Menenius, the wheedling and good-humoured patrician with his 'pleb-defaming' fable of the belly (*BH*, p. 644). Menenius is consistently the villain in Hill's Coriolanic verses:

Menenius is one you can handle,
Work with; doubtless the common reaction;
Duplicitiously direct, the swindle

⁴⁷ Jonathan Swift, 'A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions Between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome, With the Consequences they had upon both those states (1701)', *Major Works*, ed. by Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 38–39. See also Foster, p. 397.

⁴⁸ Foster, p. 411.

⁴⁹ Yeats, *Explorations*, p. 347.

Almost a pleasure, poetic diction
 In busy prose. (*BH*, p. 706)

Menenius represents to Hill all the worst of what he sees as the élite pandering of 'Anarchical Plutocracy', self-serving politicians and literary hustlers alike: 'Menenius taps Liverpool City/Of Culture' (*BH*, p. 707).

Hill's antipathy for Menenius sits equably alongside his longstanding opposition to artistic and political condescension: 'tyranny requires simplification'.⁵⁰ Yet this resistance can court the 'anti-levelling principle' that William Hazlitt discerned when, in a discussion of *Coriolanus*, he famously described poetry as 'right royal'.⁵¹ Against the self-serving Tribunes and the expedient Menenius, Hill briefly imagines Yeats, not as a Coriolanus, but as nevertheless an intransigent outsider, the Yeats of the *Playboy of the Western World* controversy (the italicized phrase here from Yeats's 1909 diary, 'The Death of Synge').⁵²

Who said: a perpetual . . . trumpeting
 And coming up to judgement? Who decreed
 Language like that as close to a great thing
 As you could get amid drool, cant, and screed?
 Not Coriolan, not Aufidius,
 Not either tribune, no sham soothsayer
 Bound from Erutria
 By singing bus;
 No bum-forward liar
 Tarred on his rail;
 No senator on skids
 With forced plebeian platitudes (*BH*, p. 698)

In this invective, Hill champions the Yeatsian higher jurisdiction of art against temporizing and semantic inertia but explicitly separates this from any kind of Coriolanic pride ('not Coriolan'). The 'right royal' temptation is felt and resisted. Hill recognizes that the 'perpetual trumpeting' can quickly

⁵⁰ Geoffrey Hill, 'The Art of Poetry No. 80', interviewed by Carl Phillips, *The Paris Review* (Spring 2000), pp. 272–99. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/730/the-art-of-poetry-no-80-geoffrey-hill> [accessed 15 August 2015].

⁵¹ See William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (1817), 'William Hazlitt: pretensions, arrogance, and absurdity', in George, *Coriolanus - The Critical Tradition*, pp. 97–101. See also Sachs, *Roman Antiquity*, pp. 209–20.

⁵² '[Synge] was one of those unmoved souls, in whom there is a perpetual "Last Day", a perpetual trumpeting and coming up for judgement' (*Autobiographies*, p. 511)

degenerate into the braying 'ushers of Martius' (2. 1. 153), the 'crazy-final refrains' of Yeats (*BH*, p. 820). A 'broken Coriolanus' and Roman rage, Swiftian 'sibylline frenzy blind' ('The Blood and the Moon') are preferable to going with the drift of platitude or cant, and yet, as Hill puts it apropos Yeats's collaborator Pound, '*saeva indignatio* is no guarantee of verdictive accuracy' ('Our Word is our Bond', *CCW*, p. 164).⁵³ In his last volume, *Al Tempo De' Tremuoti*, Hill touches searchingly on this dilemma:

Of course rage narrows . . .
 Pound with his rectitude and epic blague
 Mascot of the reactionary league.
 Yeats noble in his grandiose confusions . . .
 Time grants free arbitration for such errors;
 Taking from each but giving some their due;
 Rebuking and correcting. . . . (*BH*, p. 698)

The verdict of history on the political intelligence of Yeats in the best of his work and the 'grandiose confusions' in his worst is an act of 'arbitration', one that Hill undertakes in this very poem, where 'noble' is wryly pitched between both the sense that Yeats as an artist of perception and vision remains 'noble' despite his excess, while it is precisely his deluded fixation on the trappings of nobility sent up by George Moore in *Hail and Farewell* (1914) that underpinned his 'narrowing' rage against the mob.⁵⁴

I have implied that the 'syntactical melody' of 'Easter 1916' praised by Hill relies not only on various grammatical choices including periphrasis, adversative grammar, and rhetorical question to achieve its particular 'multi-dimensional' political intelligence but also on the careful patterns of its rhymes: for instance, in his ambivalences about Con Markiewicz, rhyming 'beautiful' with 'shrill'. Similarly, Hill's *Liber Illustrium Virorum* extends the rhyme scheme of Lowell's poem 'Rebellion' over fifty-four poems, an experiment in form and an attempt to 'bring/The formless to order' (*BH*, p. 734). In trying to account for what Hill sees as the root of Yeats's political knowingness/obliviousness dilemma, technique and form, and the attention required by both are at the heart of the issue. In the scattered references to *Coriolanus* made by Yeats, what seems glaringly absent is any attempt to deal with the dramaturgy of the play; even if he castigates Dowden for Victorian

⁵³ On Swiftian anger and self-implicating satire, see Thomas Day, 'Savage Indignation and Petty Resentment in *Canaan*, *The Triumph of Love*, and *Speech! Speech!* *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 45 (2013) <http://ebc.revues.org/779> [accessed 10 September 2015].

⁵⁴ See also Kenneth Haynes and Andrew Kahn, "'Difficult Friend": Geoffrey Hill and Osip Mandelstam', *Essays in Criticism*, 63.1 (2013), 51-80; especially 68-69.

character study, his own insistence on art's 'higher court' remains trapped in the same limited frame of reference. In contrast, Hill is keen to distinguish between the form or what he frequently terms in his lecture 'the mode' of *Coriolanus* in distinction to the limited perspectives of its characters and their political outlooks. It is perhaps this feature, a feature of Shakespeare's artistic technique, that makes Hill conclude in his essay that Bertolt Brecht's 1954 dramaturgical Socratic dialogue, 'Study of the First Scene of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', is perhaps the finest critical response to the play that he has encountered. The essay is a dramatization of the contradictions involved in Brecht's (at the time mothballed) Berliner Ensemble staging of the play. Hill praises Brecht's 'subtle and penetrating Marxist critique' for eschewing the simplicities of left-wing agitprop while simultaneously correcting the right-wing hero-worship of *Coriolanus* and 'bourgeois notions of "relevance"' ('*Coriolanus a*', p. 8). I quote from the unpublished lecture at length, because Hill's insights into the critical acumen of Brecht's essay are revelatory in assessing the fault-line that he perceives in Yeats's political imagination:

For Brecht, Shakespeare's realism is a critical grasp of irreconcilables temporarily allied by force majeure, a critique analogous to Mao Tse-Tung's thesis in his essay 'On Contradiction' which 'B' calls 'the classic method of mastering . . . complex events.' [*Coriolanus*], says 'R', is written realistically, and includes sufficient material of a contradictory sort' (257). This, I would have thought, is the essence of the approach, the very opposite of Stalinist realism. Close restatements of the theme, and brief illustrations of it, recur throughout Brecht's essay. So that 'R' says of *Coriolanus*: - 'What an outsize character! And one who emerges as admirable while behaving in a way that I find beneath contempt' (255); and 'R' adds later 'What bothers one at the moment is how to show [Menenius's] speech as ineffective and [underlined black ink] having an effect' (257). And then 'P' says, when they're wondering who they'll get to play *Coriolanus*: 'You want Marcius to be Busch [Ernst Busch, one of the Berliner Ensemble], the great people's actor who is a fighter himself. Is that because you need someone who won't make the hero too likeable?' And 'B' replies:- 'Not too likeable, and likeable enough. If we want to generate appreciation of his tragedy we must put Busch's mind and personality at the hero's disposal. He'll lend his own value to the hero, and he'll be able to understand him, both the greatness and the cost of him'. ('*Coriolanus, a*', p. 9)

As one of Hill's late poems pithily puts it, '[g]lauche poet does right by wronged general' (*BH*, p. 722). This is not a matter of temperament, so far as Hill is concerned, but of Brecht's 'approach' itself: dialogic, dramatic, and self-questioning: a matter of technique. Similarly, it is *Coriolanus's* 'mode' and not (*pace* Yeats) 'that noble and beautiful pride' which is the chief interest

of the play for Hill: as he writes in one of 'The Pindarics' (with a nod to Pound), 'the modus snarls; the modus what kills/Coriolan's challenge to Malatesta' (*BH*, p. 537). In his 2000 BBC lecture, 'How not to be a hero' on *Coriolanus* Hill writes, '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'.⁵⁵ Polyphonic form can redress political one-sidedness. Nevertheless, even the finest and most technically accurate poetry and art cannot absolve itself from the taint of 'obliviousness' merely by an appeal to its attentive technique. In a melding of *Coriolanus* with the figure of the poet, Hill writes: 'Evicting sly foreigners/He was good. Compacting,/Analecting' (*BH*, p. 708), and 'I grant/Metrum not tagged exempt from pride of cant' (p. 723). All the poet can do is 'by hazard maintain care', a vigilance that is ultimately a matter of syntax and 'mode' rather than the vagaries of political sympathy. In this unstinting labour, Hill has both emulated and upbraided W. B. Yeats's engagements with *Coriolanus* that 'maligned and monstrous play' (*BH*, p. 738).

Post-script: This essay was completed shortly before Geoffrey Hill died on 30 June 2016. A close friend of the family has said that he was full of bitter sadness about Britain's political crisis. His sense of rhetoric's implication in political miscalculation and wilful ignorance as dramatized in *Coriolanus* has never seemed more pertinent.

⁵⁵ 'How not to be a hero' (2000), BC MS 20C Hill/4/32, 10 ff (9). This talk has been discussed elsewhere and is a distillation of more expansive thoughts expressed in the Cambridge lecture.