

OXFORD

VISIONARY PHILOLOGY

GEOFFREY HILL AND
THE STUDY OF WORDS



Matthew Sperling

OXFORD ENGLISH MONOGRAPHS

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‘In the photograph used on the dust jacket of *The Orchards of Syon*, Hill sits with the whole weight of the dictionary shelved behind him.’

Courtesy of Boston University Photography

Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words

MATTHEW SPERLING

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For my mother and father

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Some earlier writings foreshadowed portions of this book: the chapter 'Geoffrey Hill and Nineteenth-Century Linguistic Thought', in *Geoffrey Hill and His Contexts*, edited by Piers Pennington and myself (Oxford, 2011), 107–31; the essay 'The Trouble of an Index', in *Essays in Criticism*,

61:4, 325–37; and the doctoral thesis, ‘Visionary Philology: Geoffrey Hill and the Study of Words’ (University of Oxford, 2009). Quotations from Geoffrey Hill’s published and unpublished poetry and prose are reproduced courtesy of the author. The cover image is a detail from a study for *Sappers at Work: A Canadian Tunnelling Company, Hill 60, St Eloi (c.1918–19)* by David Bomberg (1890–1957), © Tate, London 2013. The frontispiece image is reproduced courtesy of Boston University Photography.

University of Reading
April 2013

List of Abbreviations

References to the following books by Geoffrey Hill are given parenthetically in the text, using these abbreviations:

BVS	<i>Brand: A Version for the Stage</i> , 3rd edn (1996)
Cn	<i>Canaan</i> (1996)
Clv	<i>Clavics</i> (2011)
CCW	<i>Collected Critical Writings</i> , ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2008)
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i> (1985)
OB	<i>Odi Barbare</i> (Thame, 2012)
OO	<i>Oraclau/Oracles</i> (Thame, 2010)
OS	<i>The Orchards of Syon</i> (2002)
SC	<i>Scenes from Comus</i> (2005)
SS	<i>Speech! Speech!</i> (2001)
TCP	<i>A Treatise of Civil Power</i> (2007)
TCPb	<i>A Treatise of Civil Power</i> (Thame, 2005)
TL	<i>The Triumph of Love</i> (1998)
WT	<i>Without Title</i> (2006)

I have tried to minimize footnotes and abbreviations by working the source of the quotation into my sentences wherever possible. For the book-length sequences *The Triumph of Love*, *Speech! Speech!*, *The Orchards of Syon*, *Oraclau/Oracles*, *Clavics*, and *Odi Barbare*, references are given to the internal divisions of the poems, in Arabic or Roman numerals. For *Scenes from Comus*, references are given by part and poem number (so poem ten in part one is '1.10'). Other books are referred to by page number apart from the 2005 Clutag Press pamphlet *A Treatise of Civil Power* (TCPb), which is unpaginated. Here I give title of poem and stanza number.

References to various editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and to the following other books are incorporated parenthetically into the text, using these abbreviations:

CG	Augustine, <i>Concerning the City of God: Against the Pagans</i> , trans. Henry Bettenson (1984)
FB	<i>Francis Bacon: The Major Works</i> , ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, 2002)
GHC	Piers Pennington and Matthew Sperling (eds), <i>Geoffrey Hill and His Contexts</i> (Oxford, 2011)
GHELW	John Lyon and Peter McDonald (eds), <i>Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work</i> (Oxford, 2012)
GHEW	Peter Robinson (ed.), <i>Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work</i> (Milton Keynes, 1985)
GMH	<i>The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins</i> , ed. Norman H. MacKenzie (Oxford, 1990)

- OED1* James A. H. Murray, Henry Bradley, W. A. Craigie, and C. T. Onions (eds), *The Oxford English Dictionary: Being a Corrected Re-Issue with an Introduction, Supplement, and Bibliography of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society*, 12 vols (Oxford, 1933)
- OED2* J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (eds), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, 20 vols (Oxford, 1989)
- OED3* J. A. Simpson (ed.), *The Oxford English Dictionary: OED Online*, 3rd edn (2000–), <www.oed.com>
- OEDS* Robert W. Burchfield (ed.), *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, 4 vols (Oxford, 1972–86)
- PR* Carl Phillips, 'The Art of Poetry LXXX: An Interview with Geoffrey Hill', *Paris Review*, 154 (Spring 2000), 272–99
- SDW* *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Christopher Devlin, S. J. (1959)
- SG* Richard Chenevix Trench, *A Select Glossary of English Words Used Formerly in Senses Different from their Present* (1859)
- STC* *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer, 16 vols (Princeton, 1969–2002)
- SW* Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words: Five Lectures Addressed to the Pupils at the Diocesan Training School, Winchester* (1851)
- TLS* *The Times Literary Supplement*
- TSE* *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (1969)
- UJ* Blake Morrison, 'Under Judgment', *New Statesman*, 99:2551 (8 February 1981), 212–14
- VP* John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (1981)

Quotations from the Bible are from the King James Version of 1611, unless otherwise indicated. Quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al., 2nd edn (Boston, 1997). References to Plato are given by name of dialogue and Stephanus number.

References to archive materials held in the collection 'Literary Papers and Correspondence of Geoffrey Hill' at the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, are given according to the reference number and title of the folder in the excellent catalogue prepared by Kathryn Jenner (searchable online at <<http://cheshire.leeds.ac.uk/poetry>>). Where appropriate, I also give the title of the document I am citing, and the page number. So a reference to pages four to five of the unpublished lecture of 1996 titled 'Thou Ailest Here, and Here', held in a folder named 'Noetics and Poetics', is given as 'Thou Ailest Here, and Here' (1996), BC MS 20c Hill/4/17/2 ('Noetics and Poetics'), 4–5. For many unpaginated items such as index cards, letters, and looseleaf sheets, I give the catalogue reference and title of the folder only.

All unabbreviated references are given in full at their first appearance, and in short thereafter. Insertions in square brackets are mine unless indicated otherwise. For books, place of publication is London if not otherwise specified. All web addresses were last accessed on 1 April 2013.

Introduction

In one of his earliest prose writings, published in May 1954 when he was twenty-one, Geoffrey Hill pictures 'the poet' as a lonely figure, seeking after his exalted poetic vision in isolation:

he follows in the wake of a vision of life that goes before him and which he cannot grasp, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. [...] There does seem to be quite general agreement that each artist, young or old, must work out his own salvation, must cut his own path; and that only those with the most strength and the most courage are likely to get to the end.¹

Although he would now perhaps revise that obtrusive masculine pronoun, and find little cause to vaunt his own 'strength' and 'courage', I suspect that the poet of 2013, still working with undiminished energy to 'get to the end', would find his statement of 1954 to hold true in general. In an autobiographical writing of 2009 he described 'my poetry' as 'an element that has possessed my being for more than sixty years', adding that 'my true feelings on the matter require a degree of self-censorship, such is their intensity'.² In both formulations, fifty-five years apart, writing is balanced between activity and passivity. The poet may cut a unique path, but only as a follower of something he or she cannot grasp, a vision they are possessed by. Perhaps this is why Hill titled his late autobiographical reflection 'Confessio Amantis': the poet's plight here is like that of the lover, carrying out feats of strength, courage, and endurance because of an infatuation that possesses and leads on.

This book's task is to explicate and evaluate the ungraspable, individual vision of language whose pursuit has been Hill's way, young and old, through more than sixty years of writing. It may seem here that by a sleight of hand I have substituted a 'vision of language' for what Hill called a 'vision of life', but in considering Hill's work I argue that the two amount to the same thing. Both the strengths and the limitations of his writing reside in this fact. At its most ambitious, Hill's vision of language

¹ 'Letter from Oxford', *London Magazine*, 1:4 (1954), 71–5 (72, 73).

² 'Confessio Amantis', *Keble College: The Record* (2009), 45–54 (48).

holds the key to his sense of human meaning and history—as he said in a 1966 interview:

Language *contains* everything you want—history, sociology, economics: it is a kind of drama of human destiny. One thinks how it has been used and exploited in the past, politically and theologically. Its forthrightness and treachery are a drama of the honesty of man himself. Language reveals life.³

History, politics, and theology are all embedded, or encoded, in the stories of language—as well as being stories told using language. The implications for poetic writing of language's compromised position are a central concern in this study.

My argument is that Hill's work in writing has been sustained by a mythological sense of language's historical drama. The elements of this mythology may be stated succinctly. It starts from the idea that language is fallen. Some traces of its prelapsarian origins can be recovered in the poetic imagination, and through the contemplation of surrogates such as music, Hebrew, or the language of angels. The course of postlapsarian change in language can be traced by detailed study of current and historical usage, through etymology, back to the earliest conjectured roots of words. Invention and innovation on the part of language users can be powered by such study. But language's perfect original state cannot be recovered, for humans are creatures of sin, and original sin has linguistic consequences. It is because of sin that expression and intent, word and thing, are not perfectly congruent; because of sin that ambiguity and error infect, but also enrich, all acts of utterance.

This book analyses Hill's mythology of language as it issues in poetry, and as it originates in readings of scholarly and literary sources. Although Hill is the central figure throughout, the supporting cast is wide, with Augustine, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Richard Chenevix Trench, John Henry Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and successive editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* principal among them, and smaller supporting roles for writers including Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, T. S. Eliot, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and William Empson.

The word 'mythology' is sometimes used as a near-synonym for, and sometimes considered as a part of, 'ideology'. Often the task of recent criticism has been to unmask the mythologies that sustain a conception of life, and to expose the power claims and power relations that are obscured (and thereby naturalized) within them. This study attends to the ideological meaning of Hill's ideas about and use of language, but I have

³ Michael Dempsey, 'Literature Comes to Life', *Illustrated London News*, 6629 (20 August 1966), 24–5 (25).

not often been in an accusatory mood here—although for myself I regard many of the ideas discussed in this book, about original sin, order, and ‘the hierarchies’, as decisively false ways to think about the world, even while I find Hill’s fierce opposition to the ‘plutocratic anarchy’ of late capitalism salutary. I have instead been concerned to analyse how this sometimes dark and unhappy mythology feeds into a politics and poetics capable of issuing in work of remarkable force and originality—just as, for instance, T. S. Eliot’s nostalgic fantasies of a single and integrated European culture, or of a Christian order based on hierarchical agrarian communities, were yet capable of shaping the poetic genius expressed in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*.

My cover image is a detail from a study made by David Bomberg for his painting *Sappers at Work: A Canadian Tunnelling Company, Hill 60, St Eloi* (c.1918–19), in the Tate collection. It is one of several versions of a work that Hill has discussed in a little-known essay, ‘Thoughts of a Conservative Modernist’ (2002).⁴ There he takes the story of ‘the commissioning, executing, and rejection’ of Bomberg’s painting as a figure for ‘[t]he connection—or disconnection—between modernism and post-modernism’.⁵ Bomberg’s painting, for Hill, is majestically concerned with ‘the patterned expression of energy, particularly in its interaction and interplay of forms’, and in this it bears out Hill’s understanding of the ‘modernist contention—a valid one in my opinion—that the source and location of power is to be understood in terms of the unique imagination realizing itself within the “density of the medium”’.⁶ The ‘density of the medium’ is a phrase Hill first cited from Henry Rago in ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’ (CCW8), and it will return in altered forms throughout this study as a figure for the imaginative writer’s engagement with the philological matter of language. To be a poetic philologist is a task commensurate with the work of Bomberg’s painting—it is to engage a highly patterned and formalized dense medium in the service of an imagination which is public and historical.

In using the word ‘philology’ in my title, I follow Hill’s example, who in two unpublished lectures has described himself as a philologist. First, in a lecture from the mid-1980s, he explains that because he is ‘an unredeemed romantic philologist’, who works in the tradition of Hopkins and the makers of the *OED*, he is bound to ‘brood upon [...] an ontology

⁴ ‘Thoughts of a Conservative Modernist’, in Claudio Véliz (ed.), *Post-Modernisms: Origins, Consequences, Reconsiderations* (Boston, 2002), 96–104. Hill derives his account of the several versions of Bomberg’s painting from Richard Cork, *David Bomberg* (1987), 112–23.

⁵ Hill, ‘Thoughts of a Conservative Modernist’, 96.

⁶ Hill, ‘Thoughts of a Conservative Modernist’, 96, 102.

invented for us by the *OED* which was itself invented by Trench and Furnivall and Murray, contemporaries of Hopkins.⁷ In 1996 he wishes to call himself 'a philologist' plain and simple:

My concern, essentially, is with the nature of language; my chief practice is an exercise which Coleridge termed 'philosophical etymology'; the grandiosities of our own time require the substitution of such terms as 'linguistic semantics'; but I prefer to call myself a philosophical etymologist. A colleague asked recently why I can't simply call myself a philologist.⁸

Hill aligns himself with a disparate tradition of Romantic and post-Romantic 'philologists' which he has outlined in critical writings, albeit in an eccentric, piecemeal, and disrupted fashion. It begins with Coleridge, and runs through Emerson, Trench, Hopkins, and the first edition of the *OED*, initiated in the 1850s and completed in 1933. As the work of the *OED*'s second and third editions continues down to the present day, William Empson and J. L. Austin make their own contributions to the field. Hill has suggested several names for the work in poetry, scholarship, and philosophy that these linguistic thinkers are engaged in. If it is not Coleridge's 'philosophical etymology', or a modern 'linguistic semantics', it may be 'visionary philology', the phrase Hill uses for the work of Coleridge and R. C. Trench (*CCW* 270). Or it may be 'linguistic anthropology', after James Murray's description of himself as a man 'interested in that branch of Anthropology which deals with the history of human speech' (272); or 'linguistic phenomenology', after a phrase of J. L. Austin's (159)—though Hill cites Austin himself, admitting that this 'is rather a mouthful' (630); or 'rational and scientific study of language', after the *DNB* description of Trench's work, which Hill applies in turn to the work of Empson and Austin.⁹

My first chapter considers the relationship between poetry and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, looking at the treatment of Hill's vocabulary in the third edition of the dictionary, and his critique of the second edition's supposed failure to account properly for the vocabulary of the finest poet-philologist of the era of the first edition, Hopkins. The second chapter moves back in time to consider Hill's debt to the man who set down the principles behind the first edition of the *OED*, R. C. Trench, in whose writings of the 1850s we find a unique combination of theologically inflected moralism towards linguistic change, with high scholarly accuracy and lexicographical rigour. The third chapter moves back further to

⁷ 'Hopkins II', BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/113 ('Hopkins: The Kingfisher'), 7.

⁸ 'Thou Ailest Here, and Here' (1996), BC MS 20c Hill/4/17/2 ('Noetics and Poetics'), 4–5.

⁹ "Thus My Noblest Capacity Becomes My Deepest Perplexity" (1983), BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/168 ('Religion/Literature: Sermon'), 3.

consider the visionary merging of poetics and logic in the work of Trench's chief philosophical influence, Coleridge, and how Hill negotiates the Coleridgean patrimony of philosophical conservatism and an anti-empiricist view of words as 'living powers'. The fourth chapter considers how and why the claims of plain speech and of etymology are differently weighed by Hill's poetic language, before looking at two items from Hill's vocabulary of complex words: the word *diligence/diligent*, and the cluster of words deriving from Latin *ordo* ('order', 'ordain', 'ordinate'). Chapters 5 and 6 then turn towards Hill's theology of language, analysing, through readings of Hill's poetry, the ideas of linguistic fallenness and of prelapsarian language that underpin many of the emphases of the preceding chapters. These latter chapters also consider the use that Hill's poetry makes of sources for the sin and fall of words and grammar, which range from Augustinian theology to twentieth-century philosophical writing.

1

The *Oxford English Dictionary*

HILL'S WORDS AND THE *OED*

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a work of the first importance to Geoffrey Hill's poetry, criticism, and teaching. Hill has offered words of high and measured praise to the dictionary in a number of writings. In his first Creweian Oration as Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2011, he called upon '[t]he *Oxford English Dictionary*, that great beacon of our national soul and our native intelligence', to give historical definition to the word 'punter', while surveying the damage to the 'national soul' which will be inflicted by continuing to regard students as 'punters'.¹ In his 1996 'Lecture to the Trustee Scholars' at Boston University, the figure was not a beacon but a seismograph, and the medium was not just the 'native intelligence', but the whole sphere of 'human thought and action':

The great *Oxford English Dictionary* in 20 volumes (second edition 1989), unlike the small desk-top dictionaries, is *not* a prescribing or proscribing work. It records impartially the vacillations, incertitudes, prejudicates of human thought and action as these are implanted or embedded, bedded down, in the speech-texture, the linguistic medium. That 'religiosity' should be *both* 'religiousness, religious feeling' *and* 'affected or excessive religiousness', since 1799 on parallel tracks, in some contexts clearly meaning the first, in other contexts clearly meaning the second, speaks to me of a kind of wandering adumbration of bad faith, a confusion or contradiction at the heart of the process of expression and reception, of communication, that the semantics of our language have recorded, passively and actively, rather as the inked stylus on the old seismograph was moved to record the measurable earth-tremors.²

The shifting historical sense relations between the *religious* and the *religiose* are the sort of fine distinction that the delicate recording instrument of the dictionary is made for, and the sort that offers rich possibilities to

¹ 'Creweian Oration 2011', *University of Oxford Gazette*, 4958 (29 June 2011), 754.

² 'Lecture to Trustee Scholars' (1996), BC MS 20c Hill/4/21 ('Lecture to Trustee Scholars'), 10–11.

Hill's word-worrying poetic imagination—as when he inserts a mock erratum into *The Triumph of Love*:

For wordly read worldly; for in equity, inequity;
for religious read religiose; for distinction
detestation.

(XL)

When a similar fine verbal distinction arises, between *consubstantiation* and *transubstantiation*, in classroom notes from the 1990s, Hill again reaches for the *OED*, and advises his students always to do likewise:

The two terms are briefly but cogently set out, with key-instances of their usages, in the great and invaluable *Oxford English Dictionary* [...] If in doubt about the meaning and implications of any political, theological, or literary term look there *before* looking anywhere else.³

In the 1994 lecture 'Touching Pitch', the dictionary becomes not just a body of knowledge about the implications of theological terms, but itself a work with the status of scripture, as 'law and witness':

Those working, as I do principally, within the related areas of English language and of literature written in English, possess one asset of inestimable value which students prior to 1884 did not have at all and which, between 1884 and 1928, became available only intermittently as individual sections were completed. I refer to the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, later known as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. [...] the *OED* is a work that exists, has its being, within an historical dimension, like Leviticus or the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, as a body of law and witness, irrespective of shifting opinion and of debates about 'relevance' and 'accessibility'.⁴

Hill states his writerly relation to the 'historical dimension' of this 'body of law and witness' in a 1983 sermon delivered in Cambridge—here drawing on a geological metaphor characteristic of nineteenth-century philological imaginings of the historical strata of language:

The rock out of which my present discourse is hewn, the quarry of my distinctions and definitions, is of course the original twelve-volume *Oxford English Dictionary* together with its later supplements.⁵

Whether it is pictured as beacon, seismograph, body of law and witness, or geological land mass, the *OED* is valued by Hill as a critical resource, a pedagogical aid, and a poetic inspiration.

³ 'Notes Arising from the Class Discussion Sept. 17 (Poems of Penitence)', BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/22 ('Instructor's Papers'), 1.

⁴ 'Touching Pitch' (1994), BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/93 ('Academic Pieces'), 8.

⁵ "Thus My Noblest Capacity", 3.

If this anthology of praise drawn from minor and unpublished writings were not enough, Hill has also given extended thought to the *OED* in a major review essay of the dictionary's second edition. In 'Common Weal, Common Woe' (1989), he argues

[t]hat the great work of Murray, his associates and his successors is a matter of immeasurable national indebtedness should be a proposal not subject to debate
(CCW 278)

—and that

[m]ost of what one wants to know, including much that it hurts to know, about the English language is held within these twenty volumes.
(279)

Despite the hurtful knowledge held within its pages, in the same essay Hill describes the *OED*'s realized state as 'a blessing, both for the genius of the language and for the "peculiar work" of the writer' (276). The phrase 'peculiar work' is a quotation from sense four of the dictionary's entry for the word *genius*, which Hill had cited earlier in the essay, when he wrote that 'the genius of the language is peculiarly determined by, and is correlatively a determinant of, "the special endowments which fit a man for his peculiar work"' (275).

Hill's own 'peculiar work' has been blessed by and indebted to the *OED* to an unusual degree.⁶ The debt is clear on every page of his poetry, and frequently within his criticism. The long entry for '*Oxford English Dictionary*' in the index to the *Collected Critical Writings* (794) indicates how often Hill's arguments have recourse to its resources; within that book's first dozen pages alone Hill calls on the dictionary twice, not so much to clarify as to enrichingly complicate the senses of his words 'instinctive', 'assent' (4), and 'assumption' (12). As the central monument of historical philology in English and the largest achievement of nineteenth-century linguistic historicism, the *OED* is indispensable to a writer so deeply and continuously engaged with the history of the language. In the photograph used on the dust jacket of the US edition of *The Orchards of Syon* and on the back cover of the UK paperback, which I reproduce as a frontispiece here, Hill sits with the whole weight of the dictionary shelved behind him. Since the *OED* is, for Hill, the 'rock out of which my present discourse is hewn, the quarry of my distinctions and definitions', this is a

⁶ See David-Antoine Williams, *Defending Poetry: Art and Ethics in Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill* (Oxford, 2010), on *OED* as the ideal 'reader's companion to the works of Geoffrey Hill' (165); Vincent Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (Ann Arbor, 1987), on Hill as 'student of the etymological dictionary' (33); and Henry Gifford, 'Hill and the Dictionary', in *GHEW* 149–58.