BEYOND MODERNISM: CHRISTOPHER MIDDLETON AND GEOFFREY HILL

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English poetry of the past two decades has been characterized by critics and poets alike as developing from the English tradition as it existed before the advent of modernism. The great moderns (Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Dylan Thomas) were not in fact English. Despite their differences on other literary issues, Donald Davie, Robert Graves, A. Alvarez, and Philip Hobsbaum (of "the Group") agree that Eliot's language is too cosmopolitan or too specifically American to be included in the English tradition. Pound is excluded on the same grounds; the achievement of Thomas is seen as stylistic, a glorious Welsh rhetoric in the Romantic tradition. The best-known contemporary poets—Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn—have written within the range of possibilities defined by a reaction against modernist and symbolist techniques, though their ironic self-awareness shows that they have learned from the moderns.

The general return to premodern conventions has drawn attention away from poets who, like Christopher Middleton and Geoffrey Hill, have not participated in it. Middleton's first volume of poetry was published in 1944, when he was eighteen, and his second appeared the following year. Torse 3 (1962), which contains poems written between 1949 and 1961, received the Sir Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize; his other volumes are Nonsequences (1965), Our Flowers & Nice Bones (1969), and The Fossil Fish (1970). Five of Geoffrey Hill's poems were published in the Fantasy Poets Series, No. 11 (Oxford, 1952), when he was twenty; three of these reappear in his first volume, For the
Unfallen (1959). The ten poems in Preghiere (Leeds, 1964) are all reprinted in King Log (1968), his second major collection.  

Aside from their tendency to write what D. J. Enright has called “unobvious” poems and their use of personae in an age preferring personal statement, Middleton and Hill appear to have little in common. No contemporary poet has employed a greater variety of styles than Middleton; Hill, on the other hand, has forged a style reverberant with echoes of the English tradition yet distinctively his own. Middleton’s sudden shifts in tone and emotion increase the distance between reader and poem, imposing a detachment that some critics find dissatisfying. Hill unremittingly draws the reader into his poems, leaving no means of escape from their scarifying intensity.

The assertion that Middleton and Hill are among the four or five best English poets to emerge in the past twenty years might in itself justify discussing them together, despite their dissimilarities. But the fact that they are considered difficult or atypical, transmitters of “influences from abroad” (according to Edward Lucie-Smith) in a literary milieu dominated by a return to traditional lyricism, points to a deeper similarity in their work. Middleton and Hill accept the burden of modern poetry and attempt to work their way beyond it. As critics reveal in their attempts to discover the unity underlying the modern, there are almost as many unities as there are critics; perhaps, as Harold Rosenberg suggests, there is only the tradition of the new, perpetually changing. In these circumstances, poets who accept the burden of modernism may appear to have little in common. Because critics of Hill and Middleton have questioned their general aims and methods, I shall discuss their work in relation to the aspects of modernism that serve as the context of their achievement.

Before I woke, the customed thews
Alighted on strangeness.

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1 Torse 3 and Nonsequences were published in London by Longmans and in New York by Harcourt, Brace; Our Flowers & Nice Bones (London: Fulcrum Press) has not been issued in this country. These titles are abbreviated in the text as T3, N, and OF&NB respectively. For the Unfallen (abbreviated FU) and King Log (KL) were published in London by André Deutsch and in this country by Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, Pa. Der Taschenelefant, with texts in English and German by Middleton and graphics by Christoph Meckel, was recently issued by Verlag Eremiten-Presse of Stierstadt im Taunus, West Germany.

In "Male Torso," Middleton moves back in time to explore the condition of consciousness as it develops from the moment of incarnation. We can know that moment only from myths which, despite their ambiguity, indicate the ways in which human existence can be conceived. The first stanza of the poem, quoted above, refers to two incidents in the life of Dionysus—his gestation in the thigh of Zeus and his awakening after he had been taken on board the ship of Acoetes to be sold into slavery. Though of divine birth, Dionysus is subject to laws that transcend the gods: before he is accustomed to earthly existence, his thews—both sinews and the vitality that informs them—are "customed." His passage into life is imperilled by strife between gods and humans, and the world he enters is fully formed before his birth. Once he is born, however, his perception gives reality a new kind of existence, and he is able to transform reality through his relation to the divine power of nature, as when he causes vines to enwreathe the ship of Acoetes and changes the crew into dolphins.

The succeeding stanzas of "Male Torso" recreate occasions of Dionysian consciousness while rendering ambiguous the circumstances in which it can occur. The "I" of the poem becomes successively Adam, Odysseus, and finally the "male torso" of the title, a broken memorial of the mythic imagination that may some day reawaken:

I live now in a hutch of mud,
Without a floor, nailed by the sun,
Now for the interminable writhing sea
A fair food housed in roofless marble.

As an artifact the torso is perfect, but incomplete; the poet who sees it as a paradigm of contemporary consciousness must recognize the torso's limitations as his own. Within these limits, he can strive for such perfection as is artistically possible. The movement of a poem is not from idea to idea but from word to word, and each one should have a precise relation to the whole. In the line "The once buxom canvas quilled," "buxom" joins a reference to Semele before the birth of Dionysus to the negatively defined condition of the sails: they are no longer pliant or yielding (an archaic sense of the word) before the wind. To "quill" is to form in the shape of a ruff; the stiff canvas takes this shape when it falls, nature imitating art.
As J. Hillis Miller shows in *Poets of Reality*, the reconciliation of heaven and earth and the unification of subject and object have been persistent themes in modern poetry. He reveals how each of the great modern poets, by sacrificing the independence of his ego, is able to enter into reality as part of its immanent presence. But each one enters it in his own way, and the question of whether the realities constituted by modern poets are in any sense objective and valid outside the poetic contexts in which they appear is one that Miller does not raise. In the opening and closing chapters of *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry*, L. S. Dembo does raise this question, pointing out that modern poets have avoided it by assuming that "apprehension of reality is attainable through a special intuition." 3

The post-modern poet cannot accept as a starting point the elaborate syntheses of self, reality, and language in the works of his predecessors. After half a century (in the Anglo-American tradition) or a century (in the Continental tradition) of such syntheses, they seem curiously detached from reality itself. They are self-contained, neither affecting nor affected by the outer world. The post-modern poet is here conceived as one who, recognizing the self as inescapable and reality as independent of his will, does not attempt to subsume them in a poetically constituted unity. Recreating moments of consciousness, he exemplifies the process of existence in the structure of his art without attempting to state its meaning.

Several poems in *Torse 3* show that what the self takes to be an intuition of reality is often simply a projection of itself. In "An Alien Town," a visitor's curiosity about the town is equalled, in some sense, by the town's curiosity about him, and through a subtle interchange of mundane, evocative, and disturbing perceptions they discover each other. Discovery begins from what is already understood—from feelings of familiarity that can lead to knowledge and from conceptual knowledge that can be absorbed only through experience. The visitor finally realizes that beginning from himself, he can see the town only as a narcissistic reflection:

Familiarity from the start, this too should have
Posed the enigma, stopped the delusions at source.
Strange that psychology should have taken root
In this particular town, though not so strange

When you consider that psychology is the science

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Of disengaging self from not-self; of confronting
Apparently ultimate masks with authentic faces:
That the patient may endure the invisibility he is. (p. 13)

The final turns undercut every possible conclusion: masks removed,
Narcissus is invisible and will see nothing; therefore perception depends
on the not-self, the mask; this conclusion, however, which seems strange
and then not so strange, may be yet one more instance of the visitor's
seeing the town as himself.

Unremitting self-consciousness is one means of escaping narcissistic
self-deception. Every interpretation of reality becomes subject to re-
interpretation. By juxtaposing different levels of consciousness (dream,
waking state, vision), Middleton assembles some poems from varied
perspectives. The resultant quick shifts in tone and thought demand
considerable agility on the part of the reader, but they insure that con-
sciousness has corrected itself and they reveal dimensions of reality not
apparent in any single state of awareness. “The Forenoon” begins with
an arresting series of images describing the Soho district of London.
People enter the morning scene with memories of the previous night's
dreams and are occasionally jostled into perception of their surround-
ings. A surrealistic image (“One sidesteps a banker with a beak/And
a dead baby dangling on a string from it”) leads to a short acerbic
montage (“One wisecracks. One darts giggling under a hat”); the poem
then closes with the following lines:

One: severed from the great root the strong shrivel
One: the voluminous black fire answers their cry of terror
One: the plummed waves have burst long enough on this shore
One: scattering the blind swarms that drink at the carcass.

(T3, p. 35)

Proverb, prophecy, imprecation, Biblical riddle are here seen as related
states of consciousness, not as meaning or moral absorbing the texture
of the poem.

The limitations of momentary awareness are revealed whenever
any state of consciousness is examined from the perspective of another.
In “Matutinal Adventures of a Third Person Illustrating the Untold
Agony of Habit,” the grammatical third person returns to the site of an
epiphany six hundred heartbeats later, only to discover nothing extra-
ordinary. The tone of the poem is not that of the original experience or
the disappointment that followed it, but an ironic commentary on both.
Detached irony is itself a mask or an impoverished state of consciousness
which sympathy or knowledge can expose as inadequate ("The Sniff," "News from Norwood"). Knowledge of history and myth enables man to correct his perception of the contemporary world by reference to paradigms and archetypes. The absent-minded Professor Palamedes in "News from Norwood" is seen as a reincarnation of the Palamedes who discovered the feigned madness of Odysseus and invented the scales, the alphabet, and dice; as a compeer of Augur, writer of proverbs; as one present at the battle of Salamis. The "Southern Electric Teddygirl" is an avatar of Pomona, Roman goddess of fruit trees. The comparison or combination of primitive and modern perspectives illuminates both ("China Shop Vigil," "Seven Hunters").

The most encompassing historical perspective relevant to human life is that of geological ages, of the emergence of continents from the sea and the appearance of life. But to step outside human history, it is necessary to transcend human consciousness. How can Narcissus escape his own reflection, except by comparing one momentary appearance with another? An answer is provided by Stein in Lord Jim: "Into the destructive element immerse." Rather than pining away on the shore, comparing "reflections" of "quicksilvered" consciousness (T3, pp. 54–55), Narcissus can plunge into the water. This alternative has mythic sanction: in the poem "Glaucus," Middleton recreates the story of the Boeotian fisherman who, after eating an herb, plunged into the ocean and was transformed into a god with prophetic powers. In Torse 3, visionary consciousness appears intermittently when life on earth is seen as life in the depths of the sea, earthly beauty "unfurls" from the ocean, or continents emerge or disappear (pp. 39, 40, 47, 54).

Visionary consciousness is not simply a new awareness of reality resulting from effacement of the ego. It is absolute, in the sense that it has transcendent sanction, and it results in madness and/or death. Poems commemorating Hölderlin and the Swiss poet Robert Walser recall the consequences of Orphic vision. The poet cannot experience that vision voluntarily, but he can imaginatively enter the creative spirit of other writers. Personae provide a means of exploring an eccentric consciousness ("Edward Lear in February"), understanding a puzzling personal history ("Amiel"), imitating a style or mood ("Yes, Mr. Brecht"), or objectifying an imaginary poet, as in the ten-poem sequence entitled "Herman Moon's Hourbook." By recognizing consciousness as fugitive, the poet can turn what appears to be a disabling weakness into a source of strength, incorporating the experience of others in his own.

Rich as they are, the kinds of consciousness accessible to the poet do not coalesce in a stable picture of reality:
Order imagined against fear is not order.
Saith man. Fear imagined against order
only negates or does not negate existing order.

Images of chaos variously coordinated
by disparate imaginations accord or do not accord
to their seasons in time enacting the indeterminations.

(T3, p. 82)

Apart from fear and ideas of order and chaos, and despite acknowledgment of the subjective conditions of knowing, few men escape the conviction that reality endures according to its own laws quite apart from our will or perception. Several poems in Torse 3 are precise, detailed descriptions of scenes, people, or events. Delightful in and of themselves, inexhaustibly resourceful in their language, they occasionally include an arresting image or curious turn of phrase that a more conventional poet would exclude because it violates the tonal or thematic unity of the poem. We are often told that literature is an ordering of reality; whether true or false, the statement calls attention to the disorder of reality itself. The descriptive poems in Torse 3 are realistic because they include incongruent details. On the other hand, one poem in the volume, “Climbing a Pebble,” is completely imaginary and perfectly logical. The consequences of this antithesis are revealed in Middleton’s second collection, Nonsequences: Selfpoems (1965).

In discussing one theme in Torse 3, the relationship between the self and the world, I have not attempted to give a representative picture of the volume as a whole. Every poem is different; the stylistic variety is unparalleled in contemporary poetry, ranging from casual narration to elliptical precision, from portentous rhetoric (“Metropolitan Oratory,” which echoes Eliot’s “Animula”) to transparent lyricism. Because style and tone shift so quickly, complete empathy is precluded in all but a few of the shorter poems. The reader becomes conscious of a deliberately chosen attitude intervening between the poet and his materials. Brecht’s argument that the audience must be separated emotionally from dramatic action in order to understand it could provide an explanation of Middleton’s disinterestedness. What the reader must often share if he is to appreciate the poems is an intellectual and aesthetic vigilance detached from the emotions represented. While such vigilance is assumed in comedy (and many of Middleton’s poems are comic), its presence elsewhere inhibits immediate response in the interests of endowing the poem with meanings that become apparent only through contemplation.

The variegated personae of Torse 3 are replaced in Nonsequences
by a single speaker whose attention is fixed on the world, leading to a structural shift from a dialectic of awareness to a dialectic of reality. It is difficult to generalize about the meaning of the poems in *Nonsequences* because their occasions are varied and their implications ambiguous. What does emerge from the volume as a whole is a "syntax" of meaning—a structure of conceptual relationships indicating how elements of experience interact.

The first poem in the volume, "One inscription for the Berlin Wall," serves as an epigraph evoking the historical context within which the volume as a whole secures its meaning. "Cabal of cat and mouse," the second poem, meticulously describes the catch, play, and kill that reveal the nature of each animal in a drama staged by nature: "it is energy involved, if you like, in a tacit exchange of selves." The cat

acts proud, does a dance, for it is
his appetite puts all the mouse into a mouse;
the avid mouse, untameable,
bound by so being to concur,
in his bones, with the procedure.
Even the end cannot cancel that. (N, p. 10)

The cat applies "a reserved gram of tooth power,/to raise this gibbering curt squeal/at last," and has finally "axed his agitator." This "cabal" is an esoteric doctrine that makes predator and victim, oppressor and oppressed, ruler and agitator co-conspirators in an intrigue they do not understand. While the mouse is victim, it controls the cat because it has been given the role of making the cat behave as he does ("his agitator"). Exegesis of a poem that begins playfully and ends in terror ("the spine exploding like a tower in air") cannot capture its effect. But such exegesis is necessary to convey the sense in which these "nonsequences"—for example, a poem on the assassination of Karl Liebknecht, followed by poems on the Cyclops, a Greek sempster, a tarantula—are sequential and consequential.

"January 1919" concerns the murder of Liebknecht, co-founder of the German Communist Party, by the escort that was supposedly taking him to prison. The fact that his assassins are known is not of the slightest consequence; instead of the inevitability of instinct, as in "Cabal of cat and mouse," we see the helplessness of the individual will in the face of a political cabal. "The cyclops" evokes the grandeur of the ingenuous giant and shows how easily he is overcome by disingenuous men: "drawn/by that monolithic/stare its blank/fondly swallowed/our lies"
repeating the same gestures because it is their nature to do so; our own
junior school poetry book,” “In the light”). We see others as endlessly
discussed emerge from the interaction of antithetical elements. These
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The age in which, as Thomas Mann said, “the destiny of a man
presents its meaning in political terms” is not yet ended.4 Middleton
does not attempt to define or judge political realities; he simply shows
how one or another works within the range from human intention to
natural inevitability. The world of nature (that of the cat and mouse) and
the human world (of the Greek sempster) meet in “Disturbing the
tarantula,” when a visitor to a deserted house moves a ladder and the
spider drops to a rung just above his eyes.

In structural terms, the situations represented in the poems thus far
discussed emerge from the interaction of antithetical elements. These
achieve aesthetic “balance” within the poem, but the realities to which
the elements refer cannot be reconciled. Another group of poems in
Nonsequences employs this structural method in exploring purely hu-
man realities. Here the antitheses and shifts in perspective develop from
temperal contrasts. A generation that cannot understand its forebears
defines itself in opposition to them, yet involuntarily submits to their
sway (“Generations,” “The ancestors”). We are displaced by a younger
generation we disavow but at the same time create (“The monsters”).
Whereas children can see, they cannot understand; the reverse is true of
parents, and attempts to escape time’s arrow lead to the creation of
disabling absolutes over which generations have no control (“For a
junior school poetry book,” “In the light”). We see others as endlessly
repeating the same gestures because it is their nature to do so; our own
repetitions often appear to us as resulting from circumstances we cannot
control. Despite these inescapable laws of succession, the most disagree-
able or unintentional combination of events may suddenly fuse in a
redeeming experience that cannot be explained (“Sanity”). The re-
demptive vision, rare in Nonsequences (the last poem includes the lines

4 Cited by Michael Hamburger, The Truth of Poetry (New York: Har-
“let him move once, \textit{free, of himself, into some few things}”; p. 62), reasserts itself in \textit{Our Flowers \& Nice Bones}.

In discussing \textit{Torse 3}, I noted that some of its descriptive poems were incoherent and therefore realistic. In \textit{Nonsequences}, the incoherence of reality achieves logical formulation as a dialectic of thesis and antithesis without synthesis. An incoherent world is one in which causality results from accident, chance from inevitability, intention from instinct, determinism from free will. If such paradoxes are to be anything more than components of a surrealist aesthetic (and there is a surrealistic streak in Middleton’s poetry from beginning to end), they must be amenable to rational formulation. Within the strictest limits of rationalism, they can be explained. The laws of gravity hold true only if no magnetic forces are involved; light travels in a straight line only if no great gravitational forces are present. In scientific terms, natural laws are true only within the limits of “boundary conditions” that define their applicability and (as W. Ross Ashby has pointed out) the number of such conditions is indefinite. In aesthetic terms, “coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design” (Aristotle), and what appears as accident in the natural sphere (the statue of Mitys fell and killed a man) may seem to be causal in the moral sphere (the man killed was the murderer of Mitys).

We can understand reality only by parceling it out to be explained by one or another set of laws, but our method of understanding is artificial and constantly jolted by reality itself. It is understandable that a tarantula should be living in a deserted house. What it jolts when it appears is not any law of nature but a world of human intention in which poisonous spiders are dangerous accidents. That a poem about autumn should refer to nature and harvest is quite natural. But a moment’s reflection reveals that we assume a principle of “closure” in autumn poems and do not expect them to include perennial realities:

\begin{quote}
They watch the big vats bubbling over.
They walk forward, fists dig
into hip bags and sweep in silver arcs
the seed. They put ready
files that will rush from room
to room when the crisis breaks. ("Octobers," \textit{N}, p. 40)
\end{quote}

While the contrasted smiles of porter and sempster in “What would you have made of it, Kavafis” may be discomfiting, they can be explained; the same cannot be said of “the smile inserted at the corners of Ché Guevara’s mouth by the thumbs of his murderers” (\textit{OF\&NB}, p. 96).
Such facts enter literature as words. Through language we can name relations and fix limits, thereby attributing structure to reality. Language itself has a determinate structure. In *Our Flowers & Nice Bones*, Middleton explores the phonic and visual extremes of linguistic order (concrete poetry; pure sound poems). Any word, when it enters a poem, brings with it an energy of meaning and implication that seeks structural fulfillment. Thus the imperatives of purely linguistic order may pull the poem’s subject in surprising directions, or they may give the poet an insight into his subject when he least expects it. Since perfect order is attainable only in the imagination and its products, such as language, poems referring to reality must acknowledge its disorder and their own limitations. Any limited area of experience in a poem must be open to challenge from any other, as in the following passage from *Our Flowers & Nice Bones*:

To what realm do they belong, rays modelling
the chevelure of stone, pierced volumes which walk
my body through transfigurations of the rays, 200 metres more
carting the flesh in barrows
flesh peeling from bone as we dragged them ghostless
out of the earth to the furnace (p. 63)

By violating the referential boundaries within which poems have traditionally achieved a unified meaning, Middleton allows an eruptive reality to penetrate into art. The syntax of the poem then becomes a structure in which the process of experience can be reenacted; but since semantic closure is denied, no general meaning can be attached to the poem. The boundaries between self and world constantly change, and the surprises of one context may be the commonplaces of another. Middleton’s work does not lead toward an all-embracing meaning, amplified and corroborated by each successive poem. The poems typically challenge each other; they must all be taken together because it is through their destruction of unified semantic meaning that process is set free to discover anew.

Reality is without limits and without relations. To conceive it—to use language—is to create conceptual differences. Modern poetry, as represented by Miller in *Poets of Reality*, assumed the immense yet paradoxical burden of reconciling all differences that are created as soon as reality is converted into words. Insofar as the modern poets have been successful, they have rendered language useless as a means of changing reality or understanding the self. Coleridge said that the
growth of thought leads man to "desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning"; likewise, the growth of poetry necessitates the destructuring of all modern syntheses of the self, reality, and language, including their most ambitious synthesis in the philosophy and poetry of phenomenology.

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,  
To ravage and redeem the world:  
There is no bloodless myth will hold.  
And by Christ's blood are men made free  
Though in close shrouds their bodies lie  
Under the rough pelt of the sea;  
Though Earth has rolled beneath her weight  
The bones that cannot bear the light.  
("Genesis," FU, p. 17)

In Geoffrey Hill's "Genesis," a visionary poet gives an acanonical account of the Creation as an event in which he participated (in its first published version the poem was subtitled "a ballad of Christopher Smart"). His first act is to bring the sea "to bear/Upon the dead weight of the land" (p. 15). By naming, the poet creates: the sea is relevant to (bears upon) the land because he speaks. At the same time, the physical creation is taking place. The sea presses down on the land and brings forth life there (two other senses of "to bear"); life necessitates bloodshed, and at the end of the poem, quoted above, the dead return to the sea. Those who "cannot bear the light" are those who cannot endure apparent or transcendent truths and/or those who have been unable to produce or sustain transcendent illumination. A myth based on blood can endure, but if understood it may not be bearable.

Christianity, myth, history, the sea, love, and death: most of Hill's early poems are constituted from permutations of these few themes. The sea-burial of "Genesis" recurs throughout For the Unfallen. The Plantagenet kings lie in their graves before judgment day, before "sleeked groin, gored head,/Budge through the clay and gravel, and the sea/Across daubed rock evacuates its dead" (p. 30). The dead Jews of Europe lie "subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves" and "the sea flickers, roars, in its wide hearth" (pp. 31–32). "Those varied dead! The undiscerning sea/Shelves and dissolves their flesh as it burns spray," and a dead lover is "hammocked in salt tagged cloth/That to be bleached or burned the sea casts out" (pp. 36–37). (Further examples...
could be taken from five other poems in which death at sea is the central subject, but enough have been cited to indicate the pervasiveness of the image and to explore its significance.) In traditional analyses of thematic imagery, the meaning of an image emerges only after a number of instances have been collated, particulars leading to generalization. But the paradoxical implications of death at sea are evident in one of Hill's earliest poems, even to those not acquainted with Phlebas the Phoenician; the image is an archetype from the beginning. Perhaps, then, the archetype takes on different meanings in particular contexts, the movement of significance being from general to particular.

"Metamorphoses," one of the longer poems in For the Unfallen, exemplifies the relationship between death at sea and Hill's other thematic preoccupations. The protean "Metamorphoses" are a collage of five sections related to one another through overlapping themes and allusions to animals associated with Venus. In the second section, a poet who feels he has been made a scapegoat receives sympathetic counsel on how to get ahead in the literary world. The he-goat, like other tireless breeders, was sacred to Venus. In the third section, entitled "The Re-Birth of Venus," the goddess is reincarnated as a shark after the Flood and in an estuary "approaches all/Stayers, and searchers of the fanged pool" (p. 35). The sea-dead are the subject of section four, the title of which, "Drake's Drum," is the only indication that the poem is to be understood as a warning that England is endangered. In the last section a lover is separated from his love, commits suicide, and ends in the sea, "seeking that love flesh dared not answer for" (p. 37). It is possible to read the sequence as a symbolist poem involving the progress of the poet from bewildered naiveté to the realization that true love and song are possible only in the fate of Orpheus; there is not however enough symbolic implication to sustain even this interpretation.

By comparison, the collage technique of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is relatively transparent. Hill's Venus is not transformed into an aesthetic curio, like Pound's ("Medallion"); she remains goddess, archetypal and powerful, but in her association with the sea acquires its destructive as well as its generative potential. The Venus of Baudelaire's "Un Voyage à Cythère" is perhaps a precedent. Life originated in the sea, yet in the story of the Flood is destroyed by it; the love that arises with Venus springs from the castration of Uranus. The meaning of the poem is created through juxtaposition of archetypes that are referentially associated but traditionally segregated because when combined they tend to negate one another. The poet has intervened in an inherited tradition only insofar as he has selected its materials to reveal their incoherence,
while welding them together in a traditional yet distinctive and powerful style. What is revealed is not that “the center cannot hold” but that there never was a center, except in Yeats’s system, and never a still point, except in Eliot’s imagination.

The example of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is apposite to “Of Commerce and Society,” a six-poem sequence in which the death of Shelley and the loss of the Titanic appear amid records of two world wars and the cultural history of the continent that produced them. Various aspects of death at sea are evoked in particular contexts, just as the sea itself can be terrible or benign, give life or take it away, act as instrument of divine justice or instance of pointless destruction. Likewise with the themes of love, history, myth: their energies are centrifugal, and, always meeting in strife, they never coalesce in an enduring pattern. Critics who have complained about the obscurity of Hill’s poems have understood them but misunderstood their purpose. From Northrop Frye we learned that all poetry is archetypal. Hill reveals that the archetypes themselves are compounded of irreconcilable elements; that those who find in them experiential or aesthetic unity have misunderstood them; that history offers continual testimony to the incoherence of reality; that any art work glossing over these facts is a lie. History cannot be “scraped clean of its old price,” though it can be rewritten or forgotten (“Of Commerce and Society,” FU, p. 53).

Nearly all of the unresolved tensions in Hill’s poetry are represented in the following lines describing a saint depicted in stained glass: “In the sun lily-and-gold-coloured,/Filtering the cruder light, he has endured,/A feature for our regard; and will keep;/Of worldly purity the stained archetype” (FU, p. 58). In art, at least, the saint endures; but the artistic medium itself does dubious justice to what he supposedly represents because it filters the light and stains it. The contradictions inherent in archetypes are paralleled by those inherent in language. In order to represent the latter, Hill has written a number of poems that can be exhaustively explicated—yielding two opposed meanings. The result cannot be characterized as “ironic” because no single word or attitude can hold the meanings together. The verbal ambiguities of For the Unfallen are deliberate but they are seldom sustained through an entire poem. Systematic ambiguity, whereby every assertion denies itself, is achieved in his “Annunciations,” which appear in The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse along with an explication that he prepared for the puzzled anthologist.

Hill dismembers his subject matter, his poetry, and poetry as a whole in “History as Poetry”:

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Poetry as salutation; taste
Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
Unearths from among the speechless dead

Lazarus mystified, common man
Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
From the provided loam. Fortunate
Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung:

“A resurgence” as they say. The old
Laurels wagging with the new: Selah!
Thus laudable the trodden bone thus
Unanswerable the knack of tongues.5

Poetry may be salutation to the Muses or the patron; the salutation of
our Lady, the Annunciation; the Pentecostal tongues of fire burning
where they do not inspire. The atrocities of our tongue (language) are
not only those recorded in our history but those of poets, who are crimi-
nal when they misrepresent history and unforgivable when they write
atrocious verse. Inspired tongues have also led to Christian atrocities.
The lily of Mary, the Resurrection, and poetry feeds on the loam pro-
vided by the dead. Thus history nourishes a mendacious artistic beauty;
but the relationship between life and death is no more benign in nature
or religion. “Selah,” presumed to be a stage direction for performers of
the Psalms, is an ancient counterpart of the shoptalk exchanged by old
and young poets, but the resurgence of poetry (heralded by the English
press) is not a rising again of song to the Most High or a resurrection.
The Christian paradigm of poetry is not of course without ambiguities:
Lazarus is understandably mystified to be alive and/or his story is
unacceptably mystifying. And so on—almost endlessly. If we accept the
terms of the argument—that history, religion, and poetry are inescapa-
bly interrelated—poetry can only embody unresolvable tensions and
cast doubt on its means of doing so. These tensions are implicit in the
poet's medium and materials; he either exposes them or attempts to
conceal them.

Hill, like Middleton, returns in his poetry with an unmannerly
insistence to those atrocities of recent history that “might better be for-
gotten” since they cannot be understood. Unlike Eliot, he does not com-
pare the present unfavorably with the past; neither is given an advantage.

5 King Log, p. 41. Quoted by permission of Dufour Editions, Chester
Springs, Pa.
But an emphasis on the negative implications of Hill's poetry is misleading if its context and intention are forgotten. He did not create Western history or its traditions; although thought and feeling are (inevitably) manifest in his choice of thematic materials, he deliberately avoids reference to his own experience and in this sense is impersonal. While constantly returning to history, he recognizes the division between event and verbal representation as absolute. But within the linguistic sphere to which he is confined, the poet can—and should—accept his artistic heritage, insure its preservation, and enlarge it insofar as he is able. To preserve poetry, it is necessary to preserve language from complacency, mendacity, and indifference. By exposing the contradictions that lie just below the conventional surface of linguistic usage, the poet safeguards meaning and the possibility of creation. Both depend on differentiation, whereby relations can be established; the alternative is chaos, a unity without meaning.

By submitting himself completely to the imperatives of tradition, Hill has been able to reveal its incoherence. Having done so, he tentatively explores the possibility of subverting his accomplishment by attributing it to a partial consciousness. In “Funeral Music,” a group of eight poems on the Wars of the Roses (KL, pp. 23–32), existence is tested in relation to imagined alternatives (“Suppose all reconciled/By silent music”); the endeavor to represent the past impersonally is seen as subject to personal compulsions (“What I dare not is a waste history/Or void rule”); the seeming inevitability of historical patterns does not encompass being in the present (“Not as we are but as we must appear. . . not as we/Desire life but as they would have us live”). The love lyrics that Hill attributes to an apocryphal Spanish poet in “The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz” (KL, pp. 51–63) testify to the significance of what history does not preserve. This lovelorn Sebastian is martyred by the arrows of Cupid, but the honesty and purity of his songs enable them to survive the ironies of their framework.

“Genesis,” one of Hill's earliest poems, can be seen in retrospect as foreshadowing his poetic development. Strife is implicit in nature from the moment of creation. The violence of nature and history is not as surprising as the presumptuousness of one who assumes that man can transcend the natural condition. The energies of thought and language, like those of nature, exist only in conflict; a reassuring idea is a dead idea that can only nourish an efflorescence belying its former truth. Yet one fact remains to be explained (if I read Hill’s later work correctly)—the fact that will and desire cannot be appeased. Whether this fact can be embodied in poetry remains problematic in that when expressed (in
language or action), will and desire are caught up in the foreordained conflict of existence. In literature, representation of something beyond language can be achieved only through rhetorical strategies, and on that frontier of art and consciousness much remains to be explored.

The assertion that the poetry of Middleton and Hill grows directly out of the modern tradition is not intended to insure them some privileged status in relation to poets who have simply rejected modernism. Arnold’s dictum that “the creation of a modern poet, to be worth much, implies a great critical effort behind it” does not state a sufficient condition for poetic achievement, and the work behind creation need not be apparent in the resultant artifact. But the continuities of tradition deserve at least as much attention as declarations of discontinuity. In discussing the poetry of Middleton and Hill, I have emphasized conceptual themes and hope thereby to have shed light on the critical effort underlying their poetic development. What their poetry needs most is to be read, after which there will be a need for structural analysis that will disclose how they lead the reader from one revelation to the next. A new kind of poetry, one that does not attain to an all-embracing unity of symbolic meaning, requires a new kind of criticism.

Little has been said of their most recent and (in my opinion) most impressive work. Middleton’s Our Flowers & Nice Bones includes traditional lyrics and objectivist still lifes, prose poems and concrete poems, short poems in the manner of Creeley, and a haunting symbolist sequence entitled “Pavlovic Variations.” The fifteen short poems of The Fossil Fish are haiku with everything, every word an event. Hill’s single vision has gradually turned on itself to question its very being. The process of questioning is mediated by superimposed personae or by history; its result can be endless reflection or startling, almost painful revelation. In each case a challenge to modernist assumptions about unity has led to new forms of creation.

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