

‘GRINDING THE  
TEXTURES OF HARMONY’:  
HEROIC DIFFICULTY  
IN GEOFFREY HILL’S *CLAVICS* \*

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*Abstract*

Real appreciation of Geoffrey Hill’s *The Daybooks* has been slow. In relation to *Clavics* (2011), the fourth ‘Daybook’, the issue of his ‘difficulty’ has again come to the fore in responses. Actually, so-called difficulty may have less to do with stylistic features or allusion than with questions concerning Hill’s arguments and his Christian humanism. This essay sets up a *Gradum ad Parnassum* of ‘difficulty’, moving from a relatively easy poem to one at the highest level of challenge. It looks at this collection’s engagement with seventeenth-century music and religious faith. This is focused on Hill’s view of the royal composer William Lawes (1602–1645), who he sees as a heroic figure struggling to fulfil the true mission of the artist amid the ill-temper and chaos of his times: the ‘world in its rot’. The conclusion here is that *Clavics* is not some *ne plus ultra* of difficulty, but a boldly original lyric sequence, interrogating the true role of the artist, and other figures, in relation to the discords of national history.

Geoffrey Hill rarely makes concessions to indifferent, unenergised, or unformed readers – the lazy, the impatient, and the tiro really have no chance – nonetheless there is an emerging consensus that his late works, particularly *The Daybooks*, show a challenging aesthetic becoming even more formidable. In the face of this, it seems to have become strangely acceptable just to turn away from this late work or simply to insult it. *Clavics*, the fourth of the *The Daybooks*, was published in April 2011,<sup>1</sup> but in the two years since then it has received scant attention, and some of that derogatory in a simplistic way. Noting Hill’s oft-repeated argument that ‘that which is difficult / preserves democracy; you pay respect / to the intelligence of the citizen’, one critic ruefully remarks that ‘By this measure, *The Daybooks* may represent Hill’s most democratic vistas yet’.<sup>2</sup> And then there are bland repeats of the obvious – ‘*Clavics* will certainly not lessen Hill’s reputation as a “difficult” poet’; wit of a certain kind – a review headed ‘Mr Difficult’; and downright abuse: ‘This book, all as easy on ear and mind as its opening, is really the sheerest twaddle’.<sup>3</sup> Actually, in formal terms at least, what Hill is up to is not obscure at all.

*Clavics* takes over two elaborate seventeenth-century verse-forms, an adapted version of Henry Vaughan’s ‘The Morning-Watch’ and the form of Herbert’s ‘Easter wings’, and writes over them, as it were, by filling them with wholly different matter. This is inherently exciting and virtuosic. If we imagine some very approximate equivalent in contemporary painting – a major artist taking over aspects of the form

and style of Poussin or Claude Lorrain, obscuring aspects of the originals, and filling their outlines with violent and odd colours and subject-matter – we can see immediately the appeal. When one critic complains that ‘the rhymes force the poet to manic play that makes the syntax skitter four ways at once’, or another suggests that ‘[Herbert’s] crimped lines don’t always suit Hill’s coarse-hewn style’, they are missing the point.<sup>4</sup> Hill is quite capable of using these forms with grace and poise; he demonstrates this, for example, in poems 5 and 26. At other times, however, we are clearly supposed to experience a disjuncture between seventeenth-century form and twenty-first-century dissonance. There is a Basquiat-like graffiti element here, the palimpsest of seventeenth-century manner almost covered over by wilful contemporary smudges and musings.

In what exactly then does the ‘difficulty’ consist? This is not an easy question. The once-difficult *Waste Land* has been smoothed over with glosses and explanations so that the only real difficulty now is related to form: voices, dislocations, abruptions. No doubt, before long, there will be a full paraphrase of *Clavics*. Actually, local complexity – twists and turns of syntax, elisions, jumps of argument, double meanings, puns – gives way quite easily to the patient reader. This is the lower end of that kind of friction with which Hill wants the reader to experience meaning. The range of allusion is relatively challenging, sometimes recondite, but while we should not minimize this we should not exaggerate it either. I think one more significant type of difficulty does arise. The ‘strategic position’<sup>5</sup> of the volume is a deep kind of Christian humanism: Hill’s

response to the world twisted and contorted by sin – whether our own, or the centre of concern here, the world of the Civil Wars – is a twisted and contorted manner that is necessary, as far as he is concerned, to avoid what he calls elsewhere ‘collusion with the ruling imbecilities’.<sup>6</sup> One real element of challenge, in other words, lies in his viewpoint and the unusual nature of some of his arguments: his determination, for example, to see deeply into a fallen but heroic national history, and to celebrate quasi-martyrs and saints within it. These are people whose integrity of necessity does battle with their times. At its simplest, what we are looking at is a serious attempt to come to terms with the present via a real grappling with a different but similar past.

As already intimated, the centre of Hill’s concerns in *Clavics* is the seventeenth century. The volume echoes, and to some extent grows out of, his earlier literary criticism, especially the series of essays comprising *The Enemy’s Country* (1991) and his later essay ‘A Pharisee to Pharisees’ from *Style and Faith* (2003), and also echoes with aspects of his treatment of the seventeenth century in *Oraclau* (2010), the previously published ‘Daybook’. For example, the last essay of *The Enemy’s Country* is on Pound’s ‘Envoi’, and so touches on the composer Henry Lawes (1596–1662) in relation to his setting of Waller’s ‘Go, Lovely Rose’, hence on the tradition of ‘*motz el son*’ (words and tune), matters which are on the agenda here. ‘A Pharisee to Pharisees’ shows his deep fascination with the work of the Vaughan twins, Henry Vaughan the poet (1622–1695), and his brother Thomas Vaughan (1621–1666), the

hermetic philosopher and alchemist. Thomas Vaughan, both a religious mystic and an extraordinary prose stylist, was previously the subject of a five-poem sequence within *Oraclau*.<sup>7</sup>

*Clavics*, says the flyleaf, 'is intended as a tribute to early seventeenth-century poetry and music, in the form of an elegiac sequence for William Lawes [1602–1645], the Royalist musician, killed at the Battle of Chester'. Certainly the sequence is focused on this particular death – poems 3, 13, 26, and 27 are directly about William Lawes. But actually Hill is dealing – in rather Shakespearean fashion – with two sets of brothers, for William Lawes was the brother of Henry Lawes, already mentioned, and they were both composers and musicians for King Charles. (Henry Lawes was the composer of the music for Carew's masque *Coelum Britannicum*, treated here in poem 17.) Then, too, there are the Vaughan twins, who feature explicitly in poems 26 and 27 but who are an implicit presence elsewhere. All these men were devoted royalists, and all of them may have been present at the Battle of Chester, one of the last royalist defeats of the first Civil War. It seems no accident, given Hill's Christian humanism and his opposition to 'the spirit of the age', that a defeat should lie at the heart of his story.

On 24 September 1645, Charles I, standing high up on the walls of Chester, on the Phoenix Tower, had some kind of view of the brutal defeat of his forces two miles to the south-east, at Rowton Heath. That day William Lawes was killed by a bullet even though, as one of the king's

composers, he was supposed to be protected from the front ranks of battle.<sup>8</sup> Most biographers are convinced that Henry Lawes and both Vaughans were also present (in the case of the Vaughans, the *DNB* thinks this ‘probable’). Two of Britain’s finest composers, one of her finest poets, and a gracious mystic, may all have been on or near the battlefield. For Hill this fact has symbolic force: elegant, thoughtful, hard-working representatives of the best of beauty and truth in seventeenth-century culture suffered in this brutal late Civil War battle. For him – as I will argue – the death of Lawes is a quasi-martyrdom: it is what happens to a certain kind of integrity in the context of a sinful, fallen world.

In the following pages I want to sketch out a kind of *Gradus ad Parnassum* of difficulty in *Clavics*. Some sections of the sequence will open to most readers without much trouble, or perhaps with just a little help. Others are more resistant, and greater patience is needed to see how their arguments are densely expressed within short lines and a close rhyme scheme. I would argue, however – contrary to some views – that we are not dealing here with some absolute of ‘difficulty’. For example, the poem focused on the death of William Lawes at Rowton Heath is one of the most beautiful in the sequence, and represents what I shall call here the lowest level of difficulty in the volume. It is an excellent entrance into the sequence as a whole.

Poem 3 starts with the punning epitaph that came to be associated with Lawes: ‘William Lawes was slain by those whose wills were laws’.<sup>9</sup>

This was a royalist snub at parliamentarians, a witticism that resonates with some of the deepest grounds of the ideological conflict in relation to ideas of authority, free will, obedience, national community, and subjection. It is clear enough that Hill also takes it as a rebuff to the liberal mind today; it is ‘the assertive rebellious will’ which he derogates elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> The epitaph seems to be spoken here, as first thought of, by an ardent royalist consoling the king (hence the ‘sire’ of line 2), for the king was deeply upset at Lawes’ death. The longing here is that Lawes might come back to life and compose ‘Again’ (3). The following lines evoke him in the process of composition and then suggest some of the characteristics of his music. Implicitly here the thought contained within the epitaph is extended: Lawes’ music may be ‘extravagant’ (7) – ‘fantasies’ (10), i.e. fantasias, were one of his favourite forms; his music was the acme of loveliness, like the deliciously handsome Narcissus (11) – but it was created by, contained within, an underlying discipline of sensibility.

The hand that composed the music was ‘swift and neat’ (4); almost oxymoronicly there was ‘extravagant command / Purposeful frills’ (7–8). There was the disciplined movement of ‘the upthrust and downthrust pen’ (9), so different from the slashing thrusts of sword and pike in war’s chaos. Some of Lawes’ best music was consort suites and setts: for example the Viol Consort Setts for five and six viols and organ, and the Royal Consort Suites.<sup>11</sup> ‘Consort’ means ‘a harmonious combination [. . .] [of] instruments’, created by (implicitly) ‘a company or set of musicians’

(a related sense), and also '[musical] accord or harmony' (another related sense) (*OED*, *sb.*<sup>2</sup>). When Hill writes 'Consort' (15) he means 'the piece of music, as produced by a consort, a group of musicians', but of course the wider resonance of 'musical accord or harmony' is also implied. 'Consort like winter sky / Drawn from the wings' (15–16) means 'a consort by Lawes that has the mood of a winter sky as in the scene-painting of a masque'. This music may be extravagant in its treatment of keys, its harmonic shifts and surprises, but often it has an underlying sadness and is highly controlled in its (masque-like) artifice. From that thought, we move abruptly to an evocation of the composer's death (17–20).

The second section of the poem, the coda (which deploys the 'Easter wings' form) may appear more complex, and no doubt bears more explication than I have space to give it here, but its essential thought is that 'You can't keep destroying beauty': the death of Lawes is unique: it is like a solstice ('no sun' 26), without the 'dying climb' (27) that gives us back the springtime. Lawes is an 'impassionate lost thistle-rhomb' (29), the spores of the circle (rhomb) of the thistle blown off on the wind.

The next level of difficulty in the poems of *Clavics* does not reside primarily in lexis or allusion but rather – as implied earlier – in the challenge of what is being said. That is to say, if we are honest, and exercise just a little patience, we cannot claim that recondite vocabulary or some over-twisted syntax is really what is blocking access to the poem. We are being invited down a certain pathway of thought, but it is so



genuinely unexpected that we may find ourselves mistrusting the signs set before us. Poem 19 seems to me a good instance of this. Again, the issue here is the theme of national history. As a Christian, Hill believes in original sin and in the fall (something which is thematically important through the volume as a whole). As we have seen in poem 3, he is concerned with the entanglements between the best and worst in human nature, between high cultural beauty and the baseness embodied in war. In this context, though the turmoil of the Civil Wars is at the heart of the volume, the collection also evokes a range of other periods of English history, seeking, as we shall see, a larger historical perspective on time.

Poem 19's opening is simple enough: 'Into life we fell by brute eviction' (1). This is not only our individual evictions from the womb, but also our individual births into the stream of *fallen* history, history disfigured by sin. 'Brute' suggests the physical jolt of birth, and also, in part, how we become brutes because of it, entered upon the self-alienation that must be part of our personal history:

To feel by trust

Most things ill-won,

Ill-held; even

Your perfection

## Gross in its mistiming. (3–7)

Over-rewarded, spoilt, in this life; artistic perfection achieved at the wrong time: perhaps Hill is alluding to a sense of awkwardness regarding his prolific old age as a poet. More clearly, however, he is remembering T. S. Eliot's encounter with the shade of the 'dead master' in section II. ii of *Little Gidding*, 'ill-won' (4) being a punning recollection of Eliot's 'awareness of things *ill done* and done to others' harm / Which once you took for exercise of virtue' (60–62, my emphasis).<sup>12</sup> At this point there is a hiatus in the argument. If Hill's life is 'mistimed', then the time at which he 'fell' into it 'by brute eviction' must be a part of this. He was born in 1932, into the shadow of the First World War, and he read about and was told about the Battle of Jutland (1916), no doubt entering into the complex disputes about the relative merits of admirals Jellicoe and Beatty. Lines 8–12 are a brief vignette of the battle. Hill is an Empire child stranded into a post-Empire era, in an England which, as he complains elsewhere, has lost a sense of historical memory.<sup>13</sup> 'The journal ends / Here in its fronds . . .' (13–14): perhaps we are meant to imagine the journal of a particular First World War sailor lost in seaweed, its words slowly obscured. But perhaps here the journal is simply the national historical memory, our collective memory, of which Jutland is apparently no longer really a signifying part:

That is an odd world from which to derive.

You may call ecrased a deep-whelmed acclaim. (17–18)

In the future, I suspect, larger judgements about this volume are going to hinge on evaluations of lines like these. Is their rhetoric too resonant, too beautiful? ‘Ecrased’ is not strictly English, but coined out of the French for ‘crushed, erased, overwritten’. ‘Whelmed’ is an echo of the fate of Edward King, another seafarer, in Milton’s ‘Lycidas’, whose corpse was lost ‘under the whelming tide’ (157). ‘Acclaim’ is the huge fame of Jutland, and the general fame of Empire, from the time when every school-child had a sense of a clearly defined heroic past. The ‘acclaim’ of Empire – of this kind of heroic imperial history – is now as much lost under the whelming tide of ongoing events as the drowned sailors of Jutland. How can this be? It would be easy, from a negative point of view, to say that we are dealing here with a nostalgic, conservative viewpoint, but the sense of historical dislocation expressed here, the openness about the part played by age in that dislocation, and the sheer sonority of the lines are surely not something really – humanly – susceptible to quick ideological dismissal. The poem’s coda makes the human image even clearer. ‘Inopportunist Mechanics’ (22) is a witty way of describing the sheer drudgery of the ageing professional poet day after day at this desk. In an image clearly derived from Hill’s love of Walton’s *The Compleat Angler*, he presents himself as still ‘fishing’ for great

poetry, still hoping for the 'bite / From the deep-laden rise / Of the word my thrill' (27–29).

I have given this poem as an example of what I have described as the second level of difficulty in the volume. Now, it seems incumbent to step up to the top level and to confront at least one poem at what could be called the highest level of challenge. Poem 4 is surely such a poem, and its opening eight lines may really give the reader pause. Their sonority, however – almost what Hill calls elsewhere Yeats's 'clangour of despotic beauty'<sup>14</sup> – is enough to get going the dynamic of attraction for the reasonably informed reader. These lines appear violent, but, in the context of the whole poem, there is an underlying tenderness:

Cultic beyond reason that king-martyr.

He was a double-dealer, betrayed friends

Without quarter.

Parliament

Waved its black wands;

The deodands

Of sick spittle and cant

Stained the altar. (1–8)

Charles I was the last canonized saint of the Anglican Church, his feast – one of the 'lesser feasts' – still being kept, by a very few perhaps, on the

day of his execution (30 January). The Society of King Charles the Martyr still exists to promote his memory and to work for the reinstatement of the Feast of St Charles in the calendar of The Prayer Book. No doubt this seems a world away from the Whig and Marxist ‘grand narratives’ of the seventeenth century, the aspirant Protestant gentry bringing down the corrupt court – in its simplified forms, a ‘goodies and badies’ version of the Civil War – but respectable historiography has long wanted to nuance that picture.<sup>15</sup> In this sense, these poised lines, sympathizing neither with king nor parliament, are very much of our moment. King Charles is flawed, ‘a double-dealer’ (2), prepared to sacrifice friends, and prepared to play off one party against another in the labyrinthine negotiations following his military defeat. Should ‘beyond reason’ (1) be read as equivocal, i.e. the *cultus* of Charles as king-martyr ‘transcends reason’ (as a matter of faith) rather than ‘is absurd’? It seems unlikely. The ‘black wands’ (5) refer both to Black Rod, the House of Lords’ enforcement officer, and also to the black wands carried by the ushers at the head of seventeenth-century funeral processions. ‘Deodands’ were goods or things forfeited in an action at common law where those goods or things were responsible for causing a death. The English word is a corruption of the Latin gerund *deo dandum* – ‘a thing forfeited or to be given to God’ (*OED*) – and it is used here in this Latinate sense. The two figures usually blamed by their critics for causing the deaths of the Civil War were, of course, the Earl of Strafford, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the 1630s, and William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury (whose signature

was ‘W. Cant.’). Their blood figuratively ‘stained the altar’ (8): both were beheaded. These men, then, are the ‘deodands’. ‘Sick spittle’ may reflect the fact that Strafford was very ill at the time of his execution in 1641, but, knowing Hill’s learning, it may also allude to a famous passage in one of Laud’s letters to Strafford, of February 1636, in which he urged him to press on with, and stay true to, their joint (and unpopular) policies: ‘for now let men’s spittle bear as foul a froth as it will, you do your duty, and are quiet within’.<sup>16</sup> As a whole, the passage evokes with extraordinary panache, the sheer pity and horror of conflict, parliament almost obliged, like ushers at a funeral, to wave their wands, and, magically almost, mighty figures are sacrificed.

The work that Hill is challenging and reworking here is Eliot’s *Little Gidding*, section III, his description of the seventeenth-century religious community at Little Gidding itself, and then his review of some of the participants opposed in the Civil Wars. Eliot’s ‘three men [. . .] on the scaffold’ (iii. 27) are usually taken to be precisely Strafford, Laud, and Charles. That Eliot was a royalist-inclined Anglican is also relevant here. In the famous passage, Eliot looks to see retrospectively some kind of religious wholeness or meaning in the Civil Wars, a resolution of the conflict on a higher plane:

Why should we celebrate

These dead men more than the dying?

[. . .]

These men, and those who opposed them  
 And those whom they opposed  
 Accept the constitution of silence  
 And are folded in a single party.  
 Whatever we inherit from the fortunate  
 We have taken from the defeated  
 What they have to leave us – a symbol:  
 A symbol perfected in death.  
 And all shall be well and  
 All manner of things shall be well  
 By the purification of the motive  
 In the ground of our beseeching.

(31–32, 39–50)

In the light of Hill's poem we might be tempted to ask of Eliot's lines: What *exactly* is meant in line 43? and also in lines 44–46? 'Whatever we inherit from the fortunate' is perhaps a grudging acknowledgement, or maybe a partial disclaimer, of the kind of historiography explicit in S. R. Gardiner's *History of the Great Civil War* (1893): the sense of some kind of continuity between parliament's struggle to hold the king to account in the 1640s and the development of modern democracy. Wisely, perhaps, Eliot isn't prepared to buy into that Whig vision. But what exactly is the 'symbol' we take from 'the defeated', 'A symbol perfected in death'? Here,

it does seem likely that Hill's opening is closely engaged with Eliot's lines, because one meaning here, given that Eliot was a member of The Society of King Charles the Martyr, must be that the symbol is essentially the Christian cross, and that Charles's death should be understood as that of a martyr preserving, in the longer term, via the sacrifice of his life, the integrity of an episcopal Anglican Church. Hill challenges Eliot's 'symbol perfected in death' with something visceral and dubious: Charles is a 'double-dealer' prepared to sacrifice 'the deodands / Of sick spittle and cant'. Eliot's passage on the Civil Wars is quiet and mesmeric, grounded as it were in the kind of contemplative prayer practiced in the Little Gidding community itself. Hill's brief, intense evocation of the sheer mess of execution means he has a very different starting-point. Nonetheless, the rest of poem 4 could be seen as a rewriting – with variation, adjustment, and challenge – of Eliot's lines.

Hill is working with a different set of tropes, but to not dissimilar ends. Thus, 'The grace of music is its dissonance' (9) is reasonable enough, but Hill wants to apply that image to 'Our epic work – / Cadenced nation' (12–13), to see, as it were, the musical or providential pattern to the English national story, 'harmony' and underlying 'dissonance' working together to create an artistic whole. This is very hard to do. On the one hand the 'figuration' (the figured bass and harmonies) can run 'staidly amok' (15), a tricky oxymoron; on the other hand, sometimes, strangely, 'discord' can be 'made dance' (16). 'I am conspired, thinking best of our selves' (17), i.e. there is an intensity in the



thinking – as though it were part of a conspiracy – required to see some meaningful (musical) pattern to the whole national story. After this, the coda section of this great poem becomes a kind of prayer for a harmonious nation, able to continue a harmonious national story. The first lines (21–25) chart the disintegration into the chaos of the Civil Wars, something for which the narrowing ‘angel wing’ pattern seems wholly appropriate. Then, on the expanding wing, we have this prayer:

Amend

Our Sovran maims

Be to love as well-found

Drive slow instauration of themes

Grant fidelity to heterophones

(26–30)

‘Heal the self-wounds and splits in the nation. May we be orientated to accept Charity and rejoice in it. Take forward the instauration (renovation) of our great national themes (musical subjects, ideas, beliefs), so that even the heterophones (discords, oppositional perspectives) may make some kind of sense in the larger national music’. In plain English, this seems the meaning here.

No doubt Hill will have plenty of opponents for a poem like this. To those for whom the older version of a Whig or Marxist historiography of

the seventeenth century remains unnuanced, it is going to look nostalgic or plainly reactionary. But as a religious poem, by a believing poet, it can be read as making significant sense. Hill looks at this patch of history – which is, in one sense, any patch of history – to try and see the providential pattern, but Providence cannot be read off from it in a simple way. He can see only in a glass darkly. As in the opening lines here, history looks bleak, but Hill wants to insist on, wants to yearn for – even if only as an ideal – the music of the national story, wants to insist that ‘dissonance’ can be part of its harmony. Some can see ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ in the central ideological conflict of the seventeenth century; Hill cannot. In fact his mode of thinking is a challenge to that perspective, hence what we could call the generally royalist orientation of *Clavics* as a whole.

The examination of national history is, then, the crucial and defining thread upon which the sometimes disparate concerns of the whole volume are held together. In this sense, ‘difficulty’ in the volume is bound up with the notion of the heroic which is the underlying motif. Here, I think, if we want to give Hill a fair hearing, we have to be precise. *Clavics* is not some patriotic splurge, some simple Pomp and Circumstance march of upliftedness. There is certainly a critique of contemporary England: the obsession with ‘percentage’, the profit motive (poem 28); our entanglement in the ‘gyre’ of ‘anarchical Plutocracy’ (poem 11) – a matter which is something more than the banking crisis; the egoism of the New Atheists, including Richard Dawkins, ‘Parasites intolerant of

rivals' (poem 31). But Hill is not contrasting a heroic past with an unheroic or miserable present. He is insisting that history has always been fallen, that virtue in the past was always a struggle against the gravitational pull of mediocrity, cruelty, and selfishness. Hence, I think, some of the points of history which he lets come to the fore. Poem 7, for example, is another of his laments for the dead of World War I and our ability to forget or marginalize their sacrifice. It begins with a quotation from Kipling's *Sea Warfare* (1916) – no doubt a book of Hill's childhood – from the section 'Destroyers at Jutland'. In fuller length, it is this resonant sentence: 'We are too close to the gigantic canvas [of the battle] to take in the meaning of the picture; *our children stepping backward through the years* may get the true perspective and proportions' (my emphasis).<sup>17</sup> Actually, now, children don't know about the Battle of Jutland, and few of any age can name the battleships which so exercised the minds of children in the inter-war years. But Hill insists that the present only grows out of the deep filaments of the past, that the failure to acknowledge this is part of the way in which the self-image of the present becomes egoistic and bloated. In this context, it is notable that two poems in the sequence reach back to very distant pasts indeed. Poem 15 evokes the so-called 'Staffordshire Hoard', the enormous collection of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver metalwork uncovered near the village of Hammerwich, near Lichfield, in Staffordshire, while Poem 23 recalls the famous sermon by Wulfstan II, Archbishop of York, *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*, from the early eleventh century: his attack on the vices of the

English and his call for national repentance. In 15 we are clearly being reminded that our present time is a small part of a much larger continuity. In the second instance, 23, we are being asked to remember that sin is ongoing, that it is forever something from which we have to be called back to be our true selves. The volume's disparate subject-matter is a way of insisting that a national history is all of a piece, and that to live well we have to place ourselves within it. Hence, for example, number 9, an opaque poem indeed, but which I take to refer to the work of the code-breaker Alan Turing in the Second World War.

It is in this wider context that I would like to explicate poem 13, which seems to me one of the other definite masterpieces of the collection, but also – emerging out of the argument above – a clearly self-reflexive poem. The concerns of *The Enemy's Country* are again at play here. Essentially, those essays were intent on defining the hard task facing the real poet in the face of the distortions of his times, the distortions of the market-place and reception, and the difficulties of 'competing with the strengths and resistances and enticements of the English language'.<sup>18</sup> The point is that Dryden, for example – the true poet, the true artist – can find himself surrounded by factors that militate against his art: a lack of unworried time in which to write, a shortage of money, the distortions inflicted by the workings of patronage in an aristocratic society, and so forth. Amid these pressures, how does the poet continue to work with integrity? How does the creative will resist the humdrum, the second-rate, the gravitational pull of cliché and slipshoddery, amid 'the inchoate

force of circumstance’?<sup>19</sup> In poem 13 Hill revisits this theme with regard to William Lawes, and also, implicitly, with regard to himself.

Poem 13 hinges on one of the few reliable images we have of Lawes: the portrait, by an unknown artist, hanging in the Oxford University faculty of music. This shows a bold, attractive young man, wearing a black hat at a jaunty angle: hence here ‘The rakish hat’ (6). Hill knows the portrait, but he is also picking up resonances from the description of it in Murray Lefkowitz’s *William Lawes* (1960), one of the pioneering scholarly works on Lawes:

In the Oxford portrait William is shown as a handsome and somewhat debonair cavalier, with broad-brimmed hat, wide embroidered collar, slashed coat and long curly hair. The thin smile on his lips and the quick sparkle in his eyes betray an adventurous and daring spirit.<sup>20</sup>

Poem 13 begins by playing with the anomalies that this might suggest. What kind of musician would William Lawes be if he were alive in our own time? On the evidence of the portrait, his reputation for good fellowship, boisterous songs, unconventional and innovative harmonies, perhaps he would have been a jazz musician, playing at Ronnie Scott’s jazz club in Soho! It is a fair enough imagining, a way of bringing alive one aspect of Lawes’ genius within its seventeenth-century context, a way of reminding us of one of the main motives and aims of all art: to give joy, to affirm, to entertain. This version of Lawes is ‘musicianship that moves / Oddly in state’ (7–8): from one perspective, it is strange to think

of that kind of man as an official court-musician. At this point, however, Hill challenges himself: ‘Why do you so plug *wit and drollery*?’ (9) *Wit and Drollery: Jovial Poems* (1656) was a volume by William Davenant, but I do not think there is any special allusion here. The point is simple: ‘Isn’t it an exaggeration to see Lawes as just the devil-may-care, boisterous quasi-Jazz musician?’

Clop-clip-clop, ups with his troop to Chester

Unmerrily

To register,

To be felled, *slain*,

Etcetera;

In what corpse-rift unknown;

Riffruffed the day. (10–16)

This is the strange, wonderful music of Hill’s late style. The argument is simple enough: if we can imagine a jazz-like temperament at work in Lawes’ music, we have to face the fact that he was also capable of very serious action: the decision to join the King’s cavalry, and the decision to then put himself into the heart of the strife in a dangerous battle.

‘Unmerrily / to register’ (11–12) is an interesting locution, as though Lawes were, through this action, registering or confirming his commitment to the royalist cause. ‘Corpse-rift’ (15) is suddenly epic, something more than simple ‘burial-place’, for it suggests at one and the same time the likelihood of a casual post-battlefield burial – corpses tossed into a quick-dug trench – and the sense that this is some mystical cleft in the earth. ‘Riffraffed’ is exotic but precise: *OED* gives riff-raff as a noun meaning ‘a tumult, a racket; the sound of this’ (*n.*<sup>2</sup>), so the verb seems a reasonable and evocative extension as applied to the day of battle. All this leads up to the poem’s crucial lines:

Lawes makes his way in grinding the textures

Of harmony; so I think, here’s a mind

Would have vexed yours

With late unharped bounty wrought to find.   (17–20)

It is ‘grinding’ that is so finely judged. There is one first-level, obvious meaning: that Lawes is workmanly: just as the painter grinds his colours, making them with careful, exact precision, just so the composer creates his subtle blending of harmony and dissonance. We may be reminded of

the following passage from *The Enemy's Country* describing Dryden's work on his Virgil translations:

On the evidence of his own critical writings and autobiographical allusions it appears that Dryden bears in mind two kinds of 'labor': the tenacity of the craftsman and the drudgery of the hack. It is a matter of angry pride with him to redeem the circumstances of the second by exercising the skill and judgement of the first.<sup>21</sup>

Lawes is a 'redeemer' in this sense. But there is, in fact, another passage that is even closer to the feel of these lines. This describes Andrew Marvell in the 1660s, dragged out from the world of utopian time so beautifully evoked in his poetry:

In October 1666 he writes to the Mayor of Hull 'really busynesse dos so multiply of late that I can scarce snatch time to write to you'. Barely adumbrated in this hasty phrase is that Horatian theme which Marvell, a poet acutely aware of the perils and ecstasies of 'snatching time', had found so appealing. But now there is no time, no *otium* amid the grinding parliamentary *negotium* [business, difficulty, trouble], for anything other than expedient coining, no place for the gratuitous word-play which is at the same time a considered judgement upon the world of business.<sup>22</sup>



Finally, we may trace back both these kinds of ‘grinding’ to another passage in Lefkowitz’s book on Lawes, a passage specifically referring to the matter of Lawes’ harmonies:

Here, in the fantasias and aires, are the most personal of Lawes’ themes. These are not the little scalewise *motifs* often associated with the music of other early instrumental composers. They are romantic melodies of considerable length and breadth, thoroughly and deliciously instrumental in character. Some – for example those of the C minor fantasias – appear eccentric and even extravagant when lifted from their context. The vertical implications of these lines give rise to grinding counter-points and dissonant harmonies. Other melodies are obviously expressions of the most tender romanticism and strikingly like the style of the Italian *bel canto* [. . .] Fresh and interesting to our own ears, Lawes’ melodies must have appeared extremely daring to pre-Commonwealth music-lovers, who had not the romantic heritage we now possess.<sup>23</sup>

‘Grinding / the texture of his harmonies’ suggests then ‘the tenacity of the craftsman’, the opposition of the world that demands this effort, and, in the context of music, the timbre of Lawes’ work, the way it is able to draw ‘dissonant harmonies’ into a lovely whole. His use of harmony and dissonance is beautiful partly because of how it engages meaningfully with the bitter-sweet of the fallen world. The crucial point here, then, is

that Lawes is the true artist who to some extent reaches up above his situation: he creates amid the tensions leading to war, and war itself, ‘unharpied bounty’ (20), a beauty that is not rapacious, filthy, or crude: it is like the feast of *The Tempest* but not snatched away by Ariel dressed as a harpy to remind us of the ugliness of sin. In the second part, or coda, to this fine poem, Hill is more explicit: Lawes’ Consort setts are the product of ‘true deliberation’ (23), they are ‘fantasies come / At cost’ (24–25), but hence they have the power ‘in crossing rhyme / [to] Shake a crosspatched nation’ (27–28). It might just be the case that their perfection and loveliness shake people out of their usual state of mind, the state of sin – or, in other words, ill-temper – that has the capacity to generate the energies of war.

Hill’s assertions here may remind us somewhat of the ending of Auden’s late poem ‘Moon Landing’:

Our apparatniks will continue making  
 the usual squalid mess called History:  
 all we can pray for is that artists,  
 chefs and saints may still appear to blithe it.<sup>24</sup>

Hill's thinking, however, is clearly in a different mood and key. Where Auden celebrates in lively fashion this seemingly hopeful, even light-hearted, defiance of the self-importance and distortions of the supposed history-makers, Hill wants to register a greater sense of cost: how difficult is the making of true art, its integrity a form of resistance connected to faith. In poem 27, almost in the voice of the Vaughan twins and Lawes – all, as he assumes, profoundly religious men – he speaks of the fallen world bluntly as the 'World in its rot', and praises the Vaughans and Lawes for 'Faith / Their good habit' (7–8).<sup>25</sup> Further critical readings of *Clavics* will no doubt reveal other significant themes, but at this stage in our understanding this emphasis seems a useful one. Lawes, with his rakish hat, and his 'fine slashed coat' (3. 20), has a kind of gaiety which may obliquely remind us of Hill's writings on the Jesuit saints, Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell. He, like them, though admittedly at a lesser level, is not easily elevated above the world: he is as pulled down to earth as anyone else by self-alienation and the alienations imposed by society and world, only through and in his art he resists most effectively. The struggle to make the deep harmony which is art is analogous to, though different from, the struggle to live the good life amid the confusions and cruelties comprising history. This is a powerful assertion about the nature of art. Within this perspective, the so-called 'difficulty' of Hill's poetry can be seen as a form of engagement, even collusion, with the reader: the reader is expected to 'grind out the

textures / Of harmony' from Hill's own poems, much as the poet had to struggle to find those textures in the first place.

*University of Buckingham*

## NOTES

\*All reference here is to the first edition text, *The Daybooks IV: Clavics* (London, 2011), by kind permission of Enitharmon Press. In Hill's subsequent revision of this text, for *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), he has deleted two poems, added twelve new ones, made many minor verbal changes and some larger ones, and reordered the poems. Readers should be alert to this in reading my text. So, the poems discussed here as 3, 19, 4, and 13 have become 2, 21, 3, and 15. There will no doubt be much debate in future about the nature and merit of these changes.

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<sup>1</sup> See starred note. All reference is to the first edition (2011) and is cited in the main text by poem number and line number.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Robbins, 'Three Books', *Poetry*, 199 (2011), 171–80 (pp. 171–2). The Hill quotation is from 'On Reading *Crowds and Power*', from *A Treatise of Civil Power* (London: Penguin, 2007): p.47.

<sup>3</sup> From, respectively: Benjamin Myers, *World Literature Today*, 86.1 (January–February 2012), 70; anon, 'Mr Difficult', *The Economist*, 14 April 2011; Lachlan Mackinnon, 'Discords and Distractions', *The Independent*, 3 June 2011. Paul Batchelor's review, 'Gestures of yearning, acts of faith', is much more perceptive and sympathetic on this issue of difficulty: *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 November 2012.

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<sup>4</sup> William Logan, 'Civil Wars', *The New Criterion*, 30.4 (December 2011), 1–10 (p. 9); and Robbins, p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> A phrase Hill himself takes over from Pound: see Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, *The Enemy's Country*, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Oraclau: Oracles* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2010), sc. 31–35, pp. 11–12.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of what may have happened on that day, see Layton Ring, 'Wednesday, 24 September, 1645: The Death of William Lawes during the Battle of Rowton Heath at the Siege of Chester', in *William Lawes (1602–1645): Essays on His Life, Times and Work*, ed. by Andrew Ashbee (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp. 155–73.

<sup>9</sup> The epigraph is given here from Murray Lefkowitz, *William Lawes* (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 37. The epitaph first appeared in print after the Restoration, in *Catch that Catch Can: The Musical Companion* (1667), in a commendatory verse by Thomas Jordan.

<sup>10</sup> *The Enemy's Country*, p. 14

<sup>11</sup> Both are available in modern recordings, the first played by Fretwork (Virgin Veritas, 1992), the second played by The Great Consort, 2 CDs (Gaudeamus, 1995, 1997).

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<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909–1962* (London: Faber, 1963), p. 218.

Later references are also to this edition.

<sup>13</sup> For example: England is ‘a nation / with so many memorials but no memory’: *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin, 1998), sec. LXXVI, p. 40.

<sup>14</sup> *Odi Barbare* (Thame: Clutag Press, 2012), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> See John Adamson, ‘Introduction: The English Civil War and its Historiography’, in *The English Civil War: Conflict and Contexts, 1640–49*, ed. by John Adamson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–35.

<sup>16</sup> *The Works of the most reverend father in God, William Laud*, ed. by J. Bliss and W. Scott, 7 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1847–60; repr. Hildesheim 1977), VII, p. 236.

<sup>17</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Sea Warfare* (London: Macmillan, 1916), p. 150.

<sup>18</sup> Hill, *The Enemy’s Country*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Lefkowitz, p. 24, which reproduces the portrait as a frontispiece.

<sup>21</sup> Hill, *The Enemy’s Country*, p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

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<sup>23</sup> Lefkowitz, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1991), p. 844.

<sup>25</sup> The reader may wonder how Hill's praise of Thomas Vaughan's faith in poem 27 squares with his practice of alchemy, something that has a wider fascination for Hill. Probably deriving from his early reading of M. M. Mahood's *Poetry and Humanism* (London: Cape, 1950), Hill does not see seventeenth-century alchemy as eccentric but rather as a thoughtful attempt to hold together the new science with a religious view of creation. Also, as Mahood says, 'when Thomas Vaughan writes about the Philosopher's Stone he means a transmutation of the soul' (p. 282); in his writings Vaughan explicitly criticizes those engaged in alchemy for the pursuit of wealth, seeing the study of nature as a way to know God.

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### **Annex: Acceptance Information**

**From:** englishjournal@bangor.ac.uk

**To:** stefan.hawlin@buckingham.ac.uk

**CC:**

**Subject:** the journal "English" - Decision on Manuscript ID English-2013-018



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**Body:** 24-Apr-2013

Dear Prof. Hawlin,

Manuscript ID English-2013-018 entitled "'Grinding the textures of harmony': Heroic Difficulty in Geoffrey Hill's Clavics" which you submitted to the journal "English", has been reviewed and we are very pleased to announce that the referees have recommended publication, subject to some very minor revisions to your manuscript. The comments of the referees are included at the bottom of this letter.

We invite you to consider the revisions proposed below and to inform us at [englishjournal@bangor.ac.uk](mailto:englishjournal@bangor.ac.uk) if you have decided to proceed. If you would like to proceed with a re-submission, we would also wish to know when we can expect a re-submission. Any re-submission of a revised article would need to respond directly to the referees' comments.

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Once again, we would like to thank you for submitting your manuscript to the journal "English" and we look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,  
Stephen Colclough  
Helen Wilcox  
Editors, the journal "English"

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Helen Wilcox  
Editors, the journal "English"

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