

formalities preserve us

The words prepare the close of the poem *Pisgah* by Geoffrey Hill: whether conceding or stating their case, merely, one cannot readily decide: and to isolate and project the sentence so, as seeming cypher or sealing utterance, may have miscast *poiesis* and misled already the reading that is to follow. The reader must judge.

Perhaps I too am a shade: so the poem ends. But even so, for all its estranging portent there, the speaking voice seems to remain a recognisable one, a voice retaining a daily pitch even when it is heard as singularly individual: and the

*cane loggias, tent-poles, trellises,
the flutter of sweet peas caught in their strings,
the scarlet runners, blossom that seems to burn
an incandescent aura toward evening*

— these visibilia, so to term them, which the versing has already assembled toward our eyes — the prior assembly of these picturables had admitted us into the imaginal zone of the voice’s bodying, so I shall hazard, if a bodying reflectent only: and if the poem seems to sound from within such a mirrored and mirroring zone still, upon its close, the minute particulars collecting so have convoked before us a speaking presence bodily enough, nonetheless, some discretely bodied locus for the speaking voice — located by sense, and a particularised speaker thus — and convoked body so in ways that will have seemed entirely familiar to readers of lyric verse in English.¹

1 The grain of description is what ‘locates by sense’ and makes a ‘discretely bodied locus’ for ‘the speaking presence’ here: which gains ‘reflectent body’ by somatic suggestion: from the *tent-poles* bearing up their weight, and (less remotely) from *the trellises* which would support climbing and twining plants, and (more proximally) from *the flutter* of the *sweet peas* (butterfly-blown by anyhow moving air, if still) *caught in their strings*, from the *runners* then (active by contrast, whose *scarlet* is a vivid colour, note) and lastly from the *incandescence* that gives slant substance to *blossom* now. But this is body gained exiguously: convoked by somatic implicature only one might say, dicing with the word Grice used to such purpose: and that description provides data to the eye, assembles ‘visibilia’ first and most, that is implicit in “scarlet” and restated by “blossom that seems to burn/an incandescent aura”: by “aura” coming upon “seems” at last: which together vaporise, almost, such subsistence as “incandescent” had allowed *blossom*.

The picturables which so easily bring ready readers into the poem, standing them in the daily place they limn, surround a *you* its speaker had so far been addressing *sotto voce*: someone already known: but foreknown otherwise, it would seem, some once remote and sequestered personage: who — having turned away before

to speak

with someone standing deeper in the shade

or fork a row, or pace to the top end

where the steep garden overlooks the house,

to be invested *around*, then, by our inviting visibilia — is now suddenly near: and appears to have come abruptly upon his seeming visitor. *This half-puzzled, awkward surprise is yours* the speaker asserts then: and no longer entirely to himself it would seem. *You cannot hear me or quite make me out* he continues, with precisely as much assertion, and seeming intent: and even though only *formalities preserve* the speaker and his seemingly sudden and unhearing auditor by the end of the poem, and as *shades* only then, the speaking voice seems to retain body even there as some particular and assignable lyric presence.

My advance on the poem has been sudden, so I should say that I take myself to be addressing readers indulgent enough to dwell some little while on its words; and they have the poem to hand, I trust, in the collection *Canaan* where it appears. In what follows I shall, as just now, employ italics to mark the use-and-mention, at once, of passages taken from the poem: for much the most part: and from elsewhere in Hill's writing on occasion. Words will be italicized now and again for emphasis, or should they be exotic or foreign; but the reader should be able, from the context, to easily tell apart these distinct and sometimes even coinciding uses of the type. To only mention text from the poem, but for that only, I shall use the **Corbel** font in bold type.[†]

If one puts aside the title, and the closing line, one can readily contrive some natural and human situation for the speaking voice here. The speaker might be mourning an elder: a teacher or a leader say, once revered, looked up to *those many times*: whom he had come expressly to

[†] Double-quotes are used everywhere else to only mention words; and employed as usual to directly quote as well; and I resort to single quotes in order to distance assertion.

meet: and seems to find meanly occupied now, and pitiably infirm even it may be. But on Pisgah that elder could only be Moses: and that complicates our construals of situation considerably. Addressed to the first of Yahweh's prophets, and the quondam custodian of His law, the marked assertion of **this half-puzzled, awkward surprise is yours** will acquire, through the "not mine" that implicature sounds, a peculiar edge: a rasping suggestion of parity: an assertiveness which is only sharpened by **you cannot hear me or quite make me out**: after which **formalities preserve us** is strangely pitched, distant, seems not to comport any more, not easily at least, with the attitude of mourning the speaking voice has assumed.

But that voice is now no longer the immediate presence it first was: however near and familiar its speaking seems to remain: and that Moses on Pisgah is no more the instrument of divine purpose will have become newly grave. He has been sent there by Yahweh expressly to die recall: though "his eye was not dim nor his natural force abated" the Book of Numbers avers: to die with Canaan spread ready before him — spreading away from *where the steep garden overlooks the house* surely, now — having been sentenced thus, we must particularly remember, for some obscure trespass against supernal will: and now, with its uncomprehending auditor stood away just so from the now almost brusque speaking voice, the parting sentence **perhaps I too am a shade** seems to ask if the shame and grief with which the voice had announced itself are not the speaker's ordained condition: and upon just such a capricious withholding of favour as Moses endures, even, in as arbitrary an abeyance of the divine — which is all the parity there could be between a speaker who is so near us, one thinks, and a figure so reverend as Moses — within which abeyance only *formalities* will *preserve us* any more: just such poietic 'formality' as the almost *cliché* visual reprise which **blossom that seems to burn | an incandescent aura toward evening** now presents us, some glancingly mirrored flare, of the bush that had burned whole toward Moses on Sinai.

Taking the image in so, as a 'wonder become sign' of forfeit election, will estrange us even more from the voice proffering the picture: which even now seems to draw it for us not designingly at all, more innocently than not: and whose persisting familiarity after we

must therefore endure. But perhaps that is just how the poem opens towards us the purgatory its speaking voice seems to enter as it departs.

I must apologize for bringing the reader so abruptly upon the special doing, as I take it, of the words of the poem: for presenting with no preparation the distinctive perlocution, the particular and definite *doing* with words, which makes this passage of verse a poem. My reading will seem unsatisfactory to readers who cannot or will not hear so near and familiar a voice, a voice whose vocables they might themselves voice, presume just so with a figure as reverend as Moses. Such a reader might cast about for some 'dramatic persona' to invest the speaking voice with — some kin to Browning's fictions, say, or some lateral descendant of such *personae* as the modernists had educed from those — and those who know their Torah or their Bible may not have to strain their ears very much. They may be able, for instance, to hear Joshua here: come to take his leave of Moses, perhaps, before leading the host of the chosen into Canaan: and who may talk at bereft Moses just so because the dangerous *charisma* of their jealous God possesses him now.²

But I should record that I am not able, and would remain unable I think, even were I willing, to hear the speaking voice of *Pisgah* personified anyhow, in any assignable person or persona: and I shall insist that the poem may be understood, at all, only when its reader concedes that he can *make* its speaker *out* only as much and as little, at once, as his unhearing auditor within the poem does: only by enduring, *preserved by formalities*, the nearness of a voice he cannot assign to any daily person, nonetheless, or to any recognisable persona.

Our summary traversal of *Pisgah* has traced the poem out properly I trust: and tracked its distinctive doing-with-words closely enough, I hope, to warrant imposing just such a condition as I have on understanding the poem. The reader accustomed to having his own way with the words of a poem, and who willingly grants that another may take them otherwise than he does, will balk at that. So I should

² Partisans of the "Solomonic Lady" Harold Bloom conjured in *The Book of J* might even hear *her* creature Yahweh in *Pisgah*: intimate as they will be with "the psychology of God."

record here that I take the understanding of a poem for an event which is just as definite, and in its own way as *generic*, actually, as the successful understanding of any daily passage of words *inter homines*.

But one might ask, even so, if much will depend on how the word “purgatory” is taken; and I intend, let me declare, that my reading should not be hostage to such particular and close understandings of the word as I imagine devout readers will have. I do not know if that is really so of course: such matters do not admit ready resolution; and there is little room here to take up the question. But what got said above is not obscure, or is not only so I trust, to those whom my reading of the poem will have acquainted only just now, and exiguously perforce, with such incident from Biblical story as it relies upon. I should say that I take myself to be writing toward readers who no more feel, or never have felt, such dread and awe as had once set apart, from their fellow creatures, and toward their one God, the peoples of The Book: and I do not mean thus to look away from the intellectual scandal, as it must seem to his worldly readers, of Hill’s being a Christian. But that circumstance does not make the doings of his verse finally obscure to such as are not: or so I think: and as Hill would have us *take the measure* of his thought in *the common medium of language*, surely, he could not be writing only to the faithful.³

3 As I am not, I should declare now: though birth and education have left me more circumspect than a rational pagan would have been, I am quite sure, toward those *impossibilia* that were Tertullian’s particular reasons. In the tract known as the *Enchiridion*, in which he introduces the admiring Laurentius to the mysteries of Faith and Hope and Charity, Augustine considers whether any knowledge of the material world we bodily inhabit would pertain specially to Christian living. He summarily concludes that such knowledge as the surveyors of *physis* specially claim is their possession entirely: and properly: and commands believers to confess only that their God has created the world. The success latterly enjoyed by the “sciences of life” might induce his spiritual descendants to so concede our bodied minds, as well, to their purveyors. But Hill’s poetry seems not to brook such eirenic accommodation; and particularly not with an empirical science of the organic that seems to possess no means, at all, of representing that *aboriginal calamity* that has left human beings *in* a world they do not seem to be *of*. The Christian postulate of original sin allegorizes for Hill some actual founding fault; and whether human being is founded in fault or no, Hill would agree with Coleridge, surely, that *even if mind is entirely of nature, mind is utterly unlike the cause of mind in nature* nonetheless [1] — an un-likeness to origin showing most in the preternatural demand morality seems to make on the natural creatures we first and most are. The circumstance sufficiently exhibits the scandalous character of Hill’s thought; and the strain of “taking its measure in the common medium of language” anymore.

To say any more one would have to return *Pisgah* to *Canaan*: and try to survey the purgatory, as I construe it, that the speaking voice enters as it leaves us. But the word “shade” should be warrant enough for reading its close just so, even upon a first reading of the poem, and I trust I have taken willing readers through the poem in a way that shapes toward them an opening upon some purgatorial subsistence: a subsistence of mind inevitably but even so exiguously body: or so I shall hazard, without having prepared my ground at all. Such ‘shaping toward’ would happen at once within and out from the ‘imaginal zone’ in which its speaking voice has gained a ‘volume’ at once near and strange to us: from within which zone that ‘sounding body’ will seem to own for kin, just as it parts from us, the shades who populate the *Purgatorio*: once corporeal forms whose substance is shadow and memory now, but shapes in air heavy even so, who must remember, strenuously, the sinfully souled flesh they once were.

Only readers of Dante are likely find themselves taken leave off just so at the close of *Pisgah* — taken leave of by a souled body shriven to its formal cause one wants to say, risking solecism, but as an indulgent Schoolman might even so have said — but a ‘subsistence of mind inevitably but even so exiguously body’ could be recognised as purgatorial even by such as are not: or would be so recognised, I must hope, by persevering readers of *Canaan*.⁴

4 I listen to *Canaan* without hearing there the self-wounding voice of Hill’s later verse: as that will sound against the earlier: and I have read *Pisgah* in the confidence that the idiom of *Canaan* is an English not yet abandoned to those *casuistries/for which our tongue’s tongue is choric wherewithal/and uninsured third party*: such *casuistries* as have marched its author to *The Triumph of Love*. I should set down that I do not write in my *tongue’s tongue*: but shall contrive to turn that lack to account: for where the natural speaker of a language must exercise a jealous regard for the speech he shares with his fellows — speaking out from *what is past*, from within what is *passing*, and dimly toward what is yet *to come* their common way — a stranger to them may speak without let for what has come and gone.

I record with astonishment however, and chagrin no less, that a fellow Indian schooled to the ways of New World has asked what “the formalities of the poem itself” might be: unable to gather, apparently, that the word must advert to such daily politeness first — conveyed by gesture say, or deportment more generally — as would see through their awkward meeting a speaker and an auditor who ‘cannot hear him or quite make him out’. But *it seems not common to explain* [0] now. The word “preserve” draws that literal and immediate sense of “formality” into my adventuring with the word here; and the civilities and formalities we resort to when we are at odds with each other might be daily signs even, for the straitly Christian Hill, of the preserving-in-abeyance poetic formality that I impute to the poem.

a formal postscript

I shall venture some little more about the 'definite event' that the successful understanding of a poem would be, as I conceive it. To understand a lyric poem is to follow its particular doing with words, neither more nor less: or so I shall insist: and such performative understanding, so to call it, may not survive its occasion. I mean to use the term "lyric" just as diffusely as is generally done: but readers sufficiently acquainted with Hill's critical writing will grant, I think, that seeing things so sorts well enough with his own ways of valuing poetry. My assay of *Pisgah* has brought out, I trust, how this poem might go about doing what I take it to specially do; and I shall not attempt to articulate all the formal premises of the reading essayed here. I mean to use the word "formal" in an entirely innocuous way now. The conspicuous formal features of a poem would be those which, through their concertion, enable it to do what it specially does: and to formally understand a lyric poem is to ascertain *how* it does *whatever* it does specially do. But I do not at all suppose, I should note, that the following of a lyric poem waits at all upon formal understanding. Coleridge's notion of 'organic form' seems the conception ancestral to whatever I am trying to articulate: and 'formal feature' may be recognized independently of 'special doing' only as much or little, and as provisionally, as 'form' without 'content' may be.

Readers aware of Hill's disdain for "mere word-pictures" would not have been surprised, I think, by how the images in *Pisgah* were treated here: and my reading does make very much of its assembling visibilia having produced an 'imaginal zone' gaining 'reflectent body' to its speaking voice. Offering to the eye such ready picturables as they do, these images would not immediately work just so — if they do their work in such a way at all — and what they make us picture could be received thus in retrospect only, perhaps, and only upon the speaker parting from us as a *shade*. But their recollection as 'minute particulars' will display them then, so I must hope now, as Blake's "jewels of Albion" strangely brightened toward evening: whose slant incandescence itself, upon such parting, conjures the speaker to whose eyes they show just so as a speaking presence which is 'inevitably but even

so only exiguously body', let me repeat — body such as we are, ourselves, but thinned as if to what our eyes see only — making common awareness penumbral even so, estranging us from our sensing selves, almost, toward some sentience only 'formalities' could preserve as self at all.⁵

Readerly picturing can be obverted so because, to note it again, the visibilia of the poem surround a 'you' who cannot hear or quite make out its speaker — the picturing of an attentive and willing reader, at least, should be 'turned inside-out' just so in retrospect — and images whose functioning in a poem is delayed thus, whose formal work is completed retrodictively, could not serve as the "instantaneous emotional and intellectual complexes" Pound had demanded. But our poem comes too late to contest the power of the modernist image: seeks to memorialize its lost authority rather, so I shall venture: and literary historiography might have termed *Pisgah* a 'postmodern' but not 'postmodernist' poem once, and usefully enough, before these words were too much repeated.⁶

ghivarghese kuzhikandam

5 That the assembled visibilia of the poem should have 'particularised' the speaking voice is the formal feature crucial to my reading: that they should have done so by some 'reflectent bodying of voice' is a further claim, specifying condition and concomitant. The core of the reading depends on such particularising only: and will survive the defeat of the further claim: though that will close the way I have taken, to the *Purgatorio*, from "the purgatory the speaking voice seems enter as it departs". These circumstances have been noted for a special reason. An otherwise approving American reader finds my 'assembling visibilia' a mere assemblage of verbal pictures, which together do not effect any bodying of voice at all. Perhaps they do no more when the words are received in Standard American: which appears to differ from English as a medium of *poiesis*: a proposition I shall defend by adverting to the cautions that the poet Donald Hall addresses [2] to fellow Americans reading Hill. But the knowledgeable reader will point me to the poet's vocal critic Craig Raine now: who will no doubt dismiss my elaborations of reflectent bodying as another specious attempt, only, to present "Hill's clear, merely competent nature description as if its genius were indisputable" [3]: a "tactic" he detects and deplores in Hill's declared admirer Peter MacDonald.

6 *as words too much repeated fall out of being*: A. R. Ammons, from *So I said I am Ezra*

cited texts

The Enchiridion, Augustine of Hippo

The Book of J, Harold Bloom

The Triumph of Love, Geoffrey Hill

Collected Critical Writings, Geoffrey Hill, edited by Kenneth Haynes; *in re* “taking the measure of thought in the common medium of language” please see the essay *Poetry and Value*; and *in re* “the postulate of original sin allegorizes an aboriginal calamity” please consult the entries for ‘original sin’ in the *Index*.

other references

[0] I recall the words from an early Hill poem: but not the title, alas, and must run the risk of seeming foolish by repeating them just as I do.

[1] The *Introduction* by William Empson to *Coleridge’s Verse, a Selection*, Faber & Faber

[2] *Naming the Devils*, Donald Hall, *Poetry*, Volume 136 (102-110)

[3] *Hill’s Scenes from Comus*, *Logue’s Homer*, *Heaney’s Henryson*, Craig Raine, *Areté* 17 (147-157)