

**Paradox as a struggle with Language in Geoffrey  
Hill's Poetry: with Special Reference to  
*Scenes from Comus* (2005)**

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**Abstract**

Geoffrey Hill (b.1932) is paradoxically hailed by most critics as a controversially fine poet who is challenging, yet rewarding. This has to do with his conception of language, rather than the nature of his thought. An erudition wedded to periphrasis, polyphony, and Pyrotechnics shapes Hill's artistic personality and accounts for the involvement of his style in general. So, he appeals almost exclusively to the academic reader. Modernist as it is certain of him, he always struggles to command a mastery of the written word and to have a stylistic and syntactic perfection. This quest for a fulfilled and fulfilling language is achieved in the verbal complexity of paradox. He has managed through it to solve the problem of the way to grapple with the ever metamorphosing, nature of truth and to fulfill a higher degree of non-commitment; that is, to escape involving in the use of linear language. Hill's achievement in *Scenes from Comus* (2005) is closely associated with his experimentation with the form of paradox as part of his struggle with language. The book, as a turning point in the poet's mood and attitude towards man and existence, reveals his ability to employ the versatile medium of paradox for diverse moods and different orientations from those of his early poetry. The objective of the current study, accordingly, is to examine Hill's perceptions of the elusive nature of language and the writer's moral responsibility to find a linguistic mode that renders an escape from moral non-commitment attainable. It aims, likewise, to study Hill's employment of paradox throughout *Scenes from Comus* with its distinctly optimistic mood and positive attitude.

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المفارقة كصراع مع اللغة في شعر جيفري هيل و لاسيما ديوان مشاهد من  
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ملخص

يعتبر جيفري هيل (1932) من أهم شعراء بريطانيا المعاصرين وأكثرهم صعوبة وتعقيدا علي الإطلاق نظراً لموقفه الخاص من اللغة ونظرتة المتشككة لها غالباً الأمر الذي يربط بينه و بين نقاد ما بعد البنيوية لاسيما جاك دريدا. ومما لاشك فيه أن حرفة هيل الشعرية هي حرفة فنية شائكة تتبع في المقام الأول من مفهومه لطبيعة اللغة المراوغة مما يفرض علي الشاعر باستمرار صراعاً لتجنب السقوط في شرك المسؤولية الأخلاقية التي غالباً ما تترتب علي فشل اللغة من القيام بدور الوسيط الموضوعي بين المؤلف والقارئ نظراً للتفاوت الطبيعي بينهما ثقافياً وأيدولوجياً وهو الأمر الذي قد يخلف ورائه موقفاً كارثياً يرسخ لدي المؤلف فيما بعد شعوراً بالذنب لا ينقضي.

ومما يسهم في الصعوبة الفنية لشعر هيل هو اتصاله بمذاهب فنية متنوعة ضاربة بجذورها في ثقافات عديدة وتنتمي لعصور مختلفة. ومما لاشك فيه أن العناصر الفنية لشعر هيل تجعل منه شاعراً حدثياً ذا صوت مميز فنياً يفرض علي القارئ تحدياً ولكنه في النهاية يصبح مكافئاً. وتعد "المفارقة" كأسلوب فني هي إحدى السمات الأساسية المميزة لشعره قاطبة والمتصلة بمفهومه لماهية اللغة فضلاً عن كونها من العوامل الرئيسية وراء غموضه وتعقيده. فالشاعر في حالة هيل يتوسل بالمفارقة لتضمين النص الشعري غالباً تضمينات دفيئة تضيء علي النص قدراً من تعدد الدلالات تمكن الشاعر من أن يناي بنفسه عن "التورط" والمسؤولية الأخلاقية الناجمة عن ذلك.

من هنا يهتم البحث الحالي أساساً بتناول عنصر المفارقة كما يتجلي بصورة دائمة في عالم هيل الشعري علي رحابته وفي ديوان *مشاهد من كومس* بشكل خاص حيث يتكامل استخدامه للمفارقة بنوعها: الأسلوبية القائم علي العلاقة التركيبية للغة والسياقي المرتبط بالعلاقة التوافقية بين التيمة الشعرية والمقام النفسي والروحي. وتبرز أهمية الدراسة من كونها تحاول تسليط الضوء علي خروج هيل عن المألوف في شعره السابق علي *مشاهد من كومس* من منطلق استعادته ليقينه في خيرية الإنسان وسموه الروحي مما يمثل تحولاً جذرياً في رؤيته للإنسان والوجود بشكل عام. ومن المفارقة بمكان أن تلك الرؤية المتفائلة هي وليدة مرحلة الشيخوخة في حياة هيل؛ وهي رؤية تنكئ بشدة علي المفارقة كأسلوب فني لتجسيدها والتعبير عنها بشكل بانورامي.

"Thus my noblest capacity becomes my deepest perplexity; my noblest opportunity my uttermost distress; my noblest gift, my darkest menace" (Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 3).

"From the depth of the self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not-self" (Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, 4).

Geoffrey Hill's poetry, like that of others of his generation, is mostly informed by the frustrating moral, political, and cultural context of Post-war Britain. This historical condition, Hill views, has called for a fresh orientation towards language itself; that is, an unending concern with the diverse potentialities of language. In *The Enemy's Country*, for instance, Hill considers the problem of style to be "a seamless contexture of energy and order which, time after time, the effete and the crass somehow contrive to part between them; either paying tremulous lip-service to the 'incomparable' and the 'incommunicable' or else toadying to some current notion of the demonic"(81). In his critique of Hill's book, Roger Sell takes the thread of argument to demonstrate that it is Hill's style that brings with it "a bristling erudition and dense conciseness of phrase, which would tax the concentration of the most sympathetic listener"(300). This erudition is often vested in periphrasis which, understandably, brings about what Eric Ormsby conceives of as a "veritable polyphony" throughout Hill's writings ("A Sad & Angry Summa," 64). As an erudite and polyphonic poet-critic, Hill is endowed, in this context, with high sobriety which impresses his art and thought in general. He is thoroughly demanding, both stylistically and thematically. However, as part of his modernist mood, he seems always ready to sacrifice thought for style and artistry on conceptual grounds; this renders his job a "thorny craftsmanship--" just to make use of Katheeln Staudt's title connected with Hill. William Logan, therefore, remarks that Hill "is an old-style modernist...who still believes that poetry might be a machine for making the reader think. And he is capable of passages of stirring beauty"("Jumping the Shark," 82).

Critics generally highlight Hill's "authoritative" and "linguistic imagination" that his admirers usually celebrate as setting out unendingly to "resist corruption" and "envision a redeemed world" (Tom Paulin 284; and Emily Merriman, 84). His depth of thought, stylistic complexity, and ambiguity, in the process, generate in his readers varied, and sometimes, opposite responses. Eric Ormsby, for instance, voices his habitual obsession with mixed feelings of "bafflement" and "delight" when he reads Hill's poetry which is the product of an "enigmatic marquis" whose whole poetic career is a form of "an austere opulence" ("An Austere Opulence,"<sup>10</sup>; David Yezzi poses a similar attitude, 23). Other critics evaluate Hill and his poetry from the perspective that both contribute to the refashioning of the poetic language in the new era. Paul Mariani, therefore, views that he is "'probably the best writer alive, in verse or in prose,' the 'nearest thing we have got to a poet who refashions language and speaks of serious things in new images'"(21). Thus, critics usually celebrate Hill's unending dialogue with language and his aspiration to achieve a perfect control over his poetic style. With Hill, no wonder, British poetry is viewed to have recovered some of its original metaphysical depth and complexity. David Sherman remarks, in this context, that he "achieves a pitch of historical answerability and response that implicates subjectivity in the unfinished business of the past"(172).

Hill's writing is, evidently, highly academic and thick with allusions so that it does not flatter the popular taste. His style is, exclusively, one targeting the academic elite and deliberately ignoring the common reader to the extent of solipsism and complacency in most cases. Langdon Hammer opines, in this respect, that "Hill is the great contemporary English example of the high style, and he displays something like contempt for the protocols of ordinary speech and common interaction: his difficult style expresses a hostility toward potential readers"(655-6). This accounts, in fact, for the limited scope of his readership, according to David Yezzi (24, 25). Hill's job turns out, therefore, to be most often problematically challenging, yet tantalizingly rewarding. His poetry teems, in this respect, with passages that are highly enigmatic due to the ambiguity, condensation, and elusiveness of language itself. The prophetic nature

of his themes, his personal mood, his recognition of language as suffering from, and corrupted by, the vulgarity of civilization, all have contributed immensely to his involvement. Hence, his finest poetry is stylistically and syntactically “condensed and ambiguous, and can pose a challenge to the reader’s power of interpretation and understanding,” according to Andrew Roberts (*Geoffrey Hill*, 2). Hill has strongly defended such features of his poetry, on many occasions. In his essay "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'," he insists, for instance, on the necessity of both difficulty and unfamiliarity of language as means of accomplishing artistic mastery. Hence, he maintains that against the fault and danger contingent upon verbal habit and familiarity (as Wordsworth and William Carlos Williams perceive of), the poet may rise to an uncommon perfection, “claim the utmost significance for matters of technique” and reach “those rare moments in which the inertia of language, which is also coercive force of language, seems to have been overcome”( *Collected Critical Writings*, 4; subsequent references to the same source will be *CW*). Similarly, in the third division of *Scenes from Comus*, he objects to the way the common reader approaches his poetry and the extent to which this reader suffers from its difficulty and ambiguity: “For some cause or other the block stands./ It’s like a monument to a mythic poet./Better, to the commander of a rearguard”(65). Nevertheless, he insists that such stylistic features are “proper to originality and the medium”(65).

His long literary and academic career has always been, in this connection, a consciousness of the presence of a progressive movement towards discursive imperfection (or what William Logan labels “betrayals of the tongue”) that has always brought about serious changes in the course of history and atrocities leaving behind unrecoverable guilt feelings. Language turns out for him into a “proper site of faith...that nothing except language will redeem,” says William Logan (“Betrayals of the Tongue,”59). In this case, proper “attention to language has become, for Hill, a sort of moral imperative,” maintains Steve Burt (198). Consequently, Hill seems, at his best, to be a mysterious writer who maneuvers with language skillfully and playfully by means of straddling the fences of meanings

and connotations with an equal power of argument. His difficulty is deliberate as inspired by his conviction that: "Behind the façade of challenge is the real challenge: that of resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive"(CW, 3). Hence, as a poet of deep vision, he presents in his poetic world a panoramic view of events of life, history, and religion; all through the difficult medium of language. Paul Dean, therefore, maintains that "Hill and Eliot share an interest in the relationship of the artist to work, of religion to literature, of humiliation to exaltation, of tragedy to farce:" all in terms of technical perfection (64). His poetry, in a sense, fuses the personal experiences of the man-in-the-world with the metaphysical vision of the man seeking atonement and transcendence. Language becomes, says Hill, "a vital factor of experience, and, as 'sensory material', may be religiously apprehended" (*Style and Faith*, 86). Thus, Hill conceives of the act of writing to be a process that embraces the writer's writing experience, his vision, and his critical concerns. Thus, Kevin Hart maintains that: "As Derrida implies, the border between 'literature' and 'criticism' becomes blurred and divided in modernist writing; and if that is the case for Eliot and Joyce, it is all the more so for a belated modernist such as Hill" (222).

In Hill's poetry and critical statements, it would be impractical, in effect, to divorce the man that creates from his spiritual and moral concerns. This is evidently reflected in his vehemently unsettled dialogue with language which is pointedly emphasized in his prose pronouncements and poetic practices. In *The Lords of Limits*, Hill is generally conscious of and recurrently alludes to the nature of his poetic language use and treatment. Hence, he often speaks of the "coercive force of language"(2), the "density of language" (15), of the "gravitational pull" of usage (87), of language as "dark and disputed matter" (145): all are common determiners in his critical and poetic practices. Hill denies, in this respect, the presence of pure experience. In Brian Phillips' words, for instance, the sense of language as guilt "rises to the level of penitential ardor in Hill's work, which adds to the modern idea of language as the dark unconscious of civilization, a religious sense of language as a mirror of the fall of man, as something that swerves into sin" (139). He is, therefore, a poet for

whom the sense of the poem as a linguistic finality, in a highly Formalist sense, is crucial. Language, accordingly, represents a source of “guilt” and a lifelong endeavor to fulfill “atonement” (CW,4). He is most often caught, in this context, in the paradoxical situation of identifying writing as both a source of “guilt” and “an act of atonement.” Artistic perfection that succeeds the poet's struggle with language is no more than a clear expression of the poet's search for “atonement” from language itself as a form of guilt ensuing on the “betrayals of the tongue”- just to make use of William Logan's title—and their ability to evoke guilt feelings, even in the case of the seemingly most innocent utterances (refer also to Brian Phillips,141).

The guilt feelings, and the desire to be healed from them, are sophisticatedly made part of Hill's poetic language. His insistence to make language “atone” for the atrocities of history, obliges him in all cases to evade engagement, and to account for this unending sense of struggle running through the texture of his poetry. His poetry, in other words, wells out of a “poetics” that “implies an ethics of historical obligation, an imperative to investigate the linguistic, intellectual, and political responsibilities that are inherited from a poet increasingly vulnerable to amnesia and obsolescence,” voices David Sherman (171). In Hill's own case, the struggle with language turns into a waywardly serious expression of the problematically involved historical conditions that informed the themes and images of his poetry. This challenging tendency represents the general standard of value according to which his conception of language may be evaluated. The threat of poetry as disturbing is enhanced, moreover, by his personal conviction that:

It is...crucial...to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, a formal acknowledgement of the human condition of anxiety or guilt and, on the other, 'the empirical guilty conscience.' It is one thing to talk of literature as a medium through which we convey our awareness, or indeed our conviction, of an inveterate human condition of guilt or anxiety; it is another to be possessed by a sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt. (CW, 8-9)

Owing to the nature and sources of his issues- political, moral, aesthetic, and philosophic- Hill poses himself to be "distrustful of vivid assertions", a poet determined to write poems that are more "truth-telling" than vivid expressions of the superficial aspect of things (CW, 12). Language is employed, in a way, to convey and evoke in the reader specific tones; the reader, consequently, holds the responsibilities of the tones and thoughts provoked in him. Hill, therefore, is always attracted to forms of language whose brilliant verbal surfaces constantly betray their speaker and function as reflections of "desperate ontological...maneuvers" (*Lords of Limits*, 136). This attitude may account for the endless conflict undergoing his art and personality as informed by a general inclination to evade responsibility or moral engagement by means of unnamable the unspeakable in terms of an art of extreme obliquity, according to Vincent Sherry (582).

Paradox has always been celebrated and appreciated by Hill, in this context, as an ideally inclusive mode of expression. It derives its great validity from the hypothesis that it involves a deep obliquity so much that "when this obliquity is investigated and opened can the means of alienation become a covenant, a bond in the positive sense," states Michael North(466). Paradox is connected, in this respect, with Hill's idiosyncratic fondness of, and preference for, ambiguity and involvement as thoroughly experienced in his poetic world. Vincent Sherry groups Hill with the Movement poets considering that Hill also shares with them a "central, ramifying wariness about the morality of poetic engagement with the horrors of history....These needs help to explain the broad appeal...of the New Criticism, which allowed paradox and irony, those hallmarks of movement tone, to stand in place of the violent conflict of history and nature"(582). He adds also that paradox is "Hill's studied effort to handle language as verbal plastic, reshaping it as a material no less thickly resistant than the history to which the contemporary muse has called poets"(589). Paradox appeals to him as a truthful expression of the real dichotomy governing human nature and human affairs as well. Thus, the truth that Hill utters "can be approached only in terms of paradox," just to quote Cleanth Brooks' description of the nature of poetic truth (1).



The words in his poetic world are intended to largely violate their lexical meanings and become bridges between the poet's sense of "menace" and his quest for "atonement," as Hill himself suggests in one of the chapter titles of *The Collected Critical Writings*. This tendency to modify the language of traditional discourse to represent unique moments of meditation and new sensibilities becomes attainable only through the language of paradox.

Paradox, accordingly, represents one of Hill's favorite and effective tools heavily employed to create different and sometimes contradictory tones that render an escape of moral responsibility and engagement accessible. In the third division of *Scenes from Comus*, for example, he hails the medium of paradox in its complexity and challenge. He depicts his manipulation of the device paradoxically as: "the interminable/Journey to closure./ Here's a beginning/ beginning at the end"(64). Then he identifies it as: "A certain way: interpret, sober fear/sprung of a certain knowledge of the odds./Interpret, crazy shouting on the heath" (65). This attitude is clearly informed by his strong reliance on obliquity as a means of evading commitment and responsibility. Emily Merriman commends Hill, accordingly, for escaping the misfortune of "lesser poets" who "fail to accomplish the technical miracle in which language encompasses disparate, even irreconcilable, elements and synthesizes them into a new form that can awaken its readers' consciousness, and perhaps their consciences;" Hill mainly achieves this in terms of "juxtaposing irreconcilable elements in an aesthetic resolution" (85).

Hill is having, therefore, close affinities with the cumulative critical approach to the language of paradox that Cleanth Brooks assesses its true and serious value by saying: "Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational" (1). Hill alludes to this medium as one of his favorite devices in various places of his prose writings and poetry; his statement in *The Enemy's Country* is a case in point. In this book, he insinuates that "it is 'deft' and 'contexture' that tune the sentence,' making the 'continuity of things' a fundamental element in both the making and unmaking of significance" (25). Similarly, in the first division of *Scenes from*

*Comus*, Hill gives insights into his conception of the nature and objective of paradox as manipulated throughout his poetry. It is to match the "weight of the word" to the "weight of the world"(12). So, paradox, as a medium of expression, presents itself as an ideal and desirable solution for the poet: "Not wholly irreconcilable. Almost./Almost we cannot pull free; almost we escape/ the leadenness of things"(*Scenes*, 12). Thus, Hill seems determined to engage with language on its own terms. In his poetic world, consequently, paradoxes usually imply that out of the "shadings lying beneath, and energy running through, the words are created mazes of thought, various channels for meditation. Often, the maze is not open-ended, and turns back on itself," reveals David Annwn (28). The poetic language, accordingly, is a type of verbal reconciliation that aims at achieving a form of artistic perfection composed of a balancing of contraries and leading to such a crucial achievement in Hill's poetry. It is a major poetic weapon employed masterly and effectively throughout his long poetic career consonantly with his conceptions of language as involving "guilt" and "atonement". Jonathan Bolton insightfully states that "since the poet's domain is language, one can atone for the mistakes of the past via that medium –a verbal reconciliation that can be achieved only in the poem proper" (289).

It is, understandably, appreciable that paradox occupies such a position in the context of Hill's art and thought; that is, his artistic treatment of theological, political, and historical issues: themes that do manifest themselves not only in tension but most significantly parallel together in his ontological and epistemological vision. Paradox, as a technical element in his poetic world, balances other modes, voices, and tones that are "welded into one voice, rehearsing the 'drama of reason'," as David Annwn conceives of it (33-4). The taste for intricate, reflexive modes of thought imposes upon his poetic world artistic models and forms that embrace contraries with a formalistic harmony rather than a disruptive tension. Whatever the motif represented, or the mood highlighted, paradox resists, accordingly, as his indispensable tool of presenting varied- and sometimes contradictory- attitudes impersonally. Andrew Roberts attributes the significance of paradox in Hill's poetic world to "the

frequency of passages which seem to debate philosophical, theological or psychological points, but in a highly enigmatic way...Often these passages have the qualities of aphorism: short, paradoxical, suggestive, but highly resistant to logical analysis or paraphrase" (*Geoffrey Hill*,103; consider, likewise, David Sherman,168). Thus, without the element of paradox, Hill's endeavor to give impersonal expressions to his vacillation between the feelings of guilt and atonement, sacrifice and triumph, death and immortality would have been impractical. It is valuable, in his own case, as essentially a means of condensing both his negative feelings and sublimating outlook concerning the various experiences that filtrate into and press upon his creative consciousness. Hence, paradox—with its reconciliatory and condensing peculiarity— seems to be his proper medium of tackling intricate and thorny ideas with a maximum of non-commitment.

Throughout Hill's stages of development, paradox is masterfully employed in relation to other styles to convey diverse tones. Its value is enhanced on the assumption that it is a flexible rhetorical device employed in Hill's poetic world to achieve both comic and tragic effects. The serious and the humorous, accordingly, are masterly intertwined throughout his poetry, and at times within the single poem, through such an instrumental medium. The significance of paradox in Hill's poetic world has to do, in addition, with its panoramic employment in relation with diverse themes. It takes on different forms and is enwrapped in various moods; this renders indispensable an exploration of the main tenets this medium as an effective tool in Hill's hand. In the process, it may be syntactic or thematically contextual; that is, it may be based on "variation" or "false relation," according to Andrew Roberts (*Geoffrey Hill*, 86, 87). According to the tone underlying it, the paradox becomes both a syntactic and, at best, a contextual object in which "aesthetic inter-subjectivity adumbrates a utopian community of subjects, united in the very deep structure of their being'," according to Terry Eagleton's description of Kant's conception of the cultural domain of value judgment (97). Syntactically, it follows the traditional Petrarchan word-play model that gives itself to a kind of "false relation" of

adjacent words tamed "to a new constructive purpose," states Michel Roberts (*Geoffrey Hill*,87); this evidently echoes Hill himself in his view that "dissonance is the servant preparing the return of harmony" (*Lords of Limits*, 66). The types of paradox, as figuring in much of Hill's critical pronouncements and poetic practices, are closely associated with their being most often "linguistic structures which avoid any direct representation of an individual consciousness," states Andrew Roberts (*Geoffrey Hill*,7). Paradox becomes at its best in Hill's poetic world "where syntactic density –not so much obscurity as a sense of weightedness - matches the complexity of motives in a troubled marriage. Hill reveals an exhausted -and exhausting-relationship, where each principal is driven, rather than attracted, toward the other, and where each '[forges] passion upon speech'," reveals Bruce Martin (112-13).

Contextually, paradox is established to evoke moods thematically. Hill's practice as a poet and literary critic is, in this case, one of "resistance to the reductionist tendency of modern scientism, and that such 'resistance' is vulnerable to its own reductionist tendency whereby the precious autonomy of the poem may appear as no more than a structure of grammar and syntax" (*CW*, 8). In this way, the poem achieves its effect through paradox on the assumption that it calls for "attention" and "meditation" because the whole context suggests not only "an active contemplation of minute particulars and a resistance to sentimental substitution but also an 'ultimate concern' for 'the world of existence that transcends the work'" (*CW*,8). In a manner of speaking, it is usually employed to evoke various, and most often, opposite tones: sublimating seriousness and irony in most cases. The best of Hill's paradoxical images and contexts are really bound up with this type. In all ways, paradox turns into a dense expression of condensed feelings and emotions that can hardly be expressed otherwise. It becomes a truthful expression of the real dichotomy governing human nature and human existence as well. Hence, paradox, says John Burt, is instrumental as a means of highlighting the recurrence of "the moments when Hill wrestles with himself in his own voice", or the moments of attempting to find the "meaning of our imperfection"(591).

Paradox of the thematic contextual type, in fact, fits into Hill's unending concern with a long history of suffering and guilt as interrupted by moments of illumination. Understandably, thematic paradox in the poetry prior to *Scenes from Comus* is structured through to maintain modern man's failure to attain moments of illumination. In this case, it is Hill's firm resolve to create ironic effects that ensue from modern man's failure to gain epiphany and transcendence. This paradoxical context emerges from Hill's strong conviction that moments of illumination and sublimity are not attributed to modern inhabitants as captured into false sacrificial acts that "still lacks the comfort of finality," according to Eric Ormsby ("An Austere opulence,"12). Consequently, paradoxes in his early poetry do not intend to resolve the tensions between ethics and experience; rather, they "embody those tensions and achieve a verbal reconciliation of opposing forces, which serves only to emphasize the impossibility of such reconciliation in the empirical world," argues Jonathan Bolton (289). In *Scenes from Comus*, in contrast, paradox turns into a medium of incarnating a full change of mood. A restoration of faith in man's innocence and goodness is revealed in terms of various forms of resolved tension in man's life to the extent of attaining life-in-death states. Hence, Hill has always been obsessed with an unending preference for such a paradoxical type throughout his long poetic career.

Equally significant, paradox as recurrently figuring in Hill's poetic world is to be evaluated tonally. In the case of the serious paradox, the affinity between the two elements of the paradox is one of "variation", transformation, or transcendence; that is, it is an affinity founded upon some sort of a resolution of the conflicting elements. It implies a tragically positive tone in this context. The paradoxes evoking ironies, in contrast, emerge from the "false relation" between the related aspects of the paradox, or between two paradoxes whose conflicts are clearly unresolved. They are generated by the presence of "two...ideals" that "should prove so irreconcilable" (*Lords of Limits*,132). The tone presented in this case is, expectedly, negative. Andrew Roberts explains that owing to historical and cultural conditions the general predilection for the language of paradox as a

poetic mode of expression –in the manner of Hill himself- is attributable to the elements of circularity and uncertainty that sometimes represent resolvable doubt and existential situations, or turn at other times into "an aporia (an unresolvable doubt or hesitation) arising from that structure of value," only to quote Andrew Roberts' evaluation of recent British anthologies on the basis of intrinsic rather than extrinsic values ("The Rhetoric of Value in Recent British Anthologies," 120).

*Scenes from Comus* stands out, in this connection, as one of the most important books of Hill's later period that cries out for attentive critical examination concerning the development of his themes, techniques, and poetic moods. The book is immensely significant on the grounds that it represents a revolutionary change in his life vision as well as his personal mood. Gone, therefore, is the overwhelming pessimistic tone coloring his previous poetry. This book, in contrast, demonstrates Hill's unprecedented trust in man's moral and spiritual potentialities. It is having, therefore, an "almost laughably misleading" title whose content "throws the reader from the first line into a dense poetic gorse bush," according to Derwent May(15). This remark is highly informative of the nature of Hill's art and thought: seeming (ostensibly and ostentatiously) glossy but thought provoking, awkwardly dark, and ambiguously punning. However, Derwent May, like others, considers the book a "boo with his rage pulsing through a plethora of cultural allusions and abstractions" that "have something sounded like an unhappy marriage between Ezra Pound's paranoid cantos and George Steiner's apocalyptic essays"(15; for a similar view of the book as pessimistic refer to Brian Phillips,139). In fact, this view may be aptly applicable to Hill's poetry of the early and middle periods rather than to the current one that, it is felt, evidently demonstrates a great touch of optimism and *Jouissance* (with all its Lacanian connotations). This new poetry is, rather, related to Hill's fresh vision of the human goodness as inspired by Milton's orientation in *Comus*: both regain faith in man's chastity and morality (See Jeanie Moore,1-2; Maggie Kilgour,323; and Rebekah Green, 210-12).

Critics, nevertheless, almost unanimously appreciate the book both for its artistic power as well as its thematic value. Artistically, the

book figures out as a clear manifestation of Hill's lifelong struggle with language with the object to challenge language on its own terms. Peter Peggall states, in this concern, that "the rewards of his work lie in its muscular wit, its sensual music, its trenchant imagery and its dislocating awareness of its own limitations" (92). However, Hill's practice throughout the book renders the poetic vision "recurring" and "dynamic," in Peggall's words (93). Peggall reaches the conclusion that the poetry experienced in this book is "poetry which matters, elevated and dashed to the ground" (96).

The book's main artistic power and effectiveness derives, in effect, from Hill's heavy manipulation of the element of paradox as a central aspect of his artistry and poetic vision in general. Paradox, as a poetic strategy undergoing the structure and texture of the entire book, persists as an effective tool of gaining a panoramic and all-embracing vision of man and experience. Paradoxically, Hill's poetry of his early and middle periods (as written by a young and middle-aged poet) is dominated by skepticism, pessimism, and distrust of the human goodness or the ability to gain sublimity. In *Scenes from Comus*, the reader is, unexpectedly, in the presence of an aged poet celebrating vitality and regaining in a full awareness of man's ability to gain sublimity and perfection. This represents a change of mood and attitude towards man and existence. So, in *Tenebrae* (1978), for instance, the poet denies the human any validity or power to attain martyrdom (as a peculiarity attributed most exclusively to Christ himself (see, for instance, Hill's poem, "Martirium," *Collected Poems*, 147; Judith Wilkinson, 39, 41, 51; and David Annwn, 71, 72;)). In contrast, in *Scenes from Comus*, he regains his full trust in man's ability to attain salvation and transcendence, both aesthetically and morally. Sophie Ratcliffe wonders that it is "frustrating that so many descriptions of Hill's poetry describe him as a difficult poet," and views rather that this "distracts from the fact that he is, and always has been, among our greatest love poets. His is a sort of love poetry that extends to encompass thoughts on love in its theological forms, as well as aesthetic desire. This...results in a sometimes awkward triangulation between 'earthiness, earthliness, or things ethereal'." (55) The whole book, in this respect, gains in vigor and effectiveness from

its resolved paradox as emerging from the conflict between the poet's old age and the optimistic mood informing the book's whole poetic vision.

*Scenes from Comus*, in this context, reveals Hill's lifelong obsession with the issues of the struggle between good and evil, virtue and decline as well as seduction and chastity both morally and aesthetically. In all cases, the moral and the aesthetic are closely connected and intertwined so much that the one is connotative of, motivated by, and itself motivating the other. They are unendingly and alternatively in a reshuffling process in the sense that each of them is a symptom of, and a reaction to, the other. These various themes and moods are deliberately synthesized. They are running through the whole fabric of this, and other books by Hill. It is difficult and impractical, therefore, to examine either of them separately from the other(s) in the poetic world of *Scenes from Comus* in general, or even within any single poem. David Sherman attributes the power of Hill's poetry, in this regard, to its power of reconciling opposites: Self and Other, the aesthetic and the ethical, the mundane and the religious. It effectively culminates in "the complex way that Hill's poetry hovers between philosophy and theology, suggesting the possibility of a discourse about modern subjectivity that participates in both" (168). Expectedly, all the reconciled opposites bear the stamp of their creator's unfinished and unresolved decisions and statements. Here, paradox, in all its various modes, stands out as his fitting medium in the current book, and the culmination of his artistic efforts throughout his long poetic career.

The book, as dedicated to the musician Hugh Wood on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, evokes the aesthetic and spiritual value of music as produced by man. It stands also in intertextuality with Milton's *Masque* in its morale that man can reach moments of full power and grandeur out of weakness (see, for instance, Rebekah Green, 210, 211; and Brian Phillips, 144). This connotes the aged poet's quest for moments of transcendence and immortality. David Yezzi, accordingly, voices that: "Despite Hill's stylistic adventurousness, a consistency of sensibility abides....Hill takes us further than any other contemporary poet without even leaving home"(26). Thus, the book represents an



affirmation of Hill's paradoxical conceptions of strong weakness, optimistic darkness, and young longevity. So, while part of his later period - written by a poet turning his seventies-the book-length poem teems with strength and vitality. Paradoxically, the volume is structured to dramatize the human power to maintain chastity, sublimity, and perfection as part of the awareness of evil and sinfulness. Thus, Peter Peggall observes that: "Even the villain of the piece finds virtue dangerously seductive. In Hill's poem, the enemy is primarily the poet himself, or the human nature that he inherits and shares. A refusal to submit to silence may not be in itself a celebration, but it marks out duty and intention, not without a rueful smile" (93; refer similarly to David Yezzi, 25).

Structurally, contextual resolved paradox, as running through the whole texture of the book, represents the poet's unfamiliar optimism and faith in the human nature as urgently required for reaching epiphany and transcendence. This fresh orientation of *Scenes from Comus*, as resting on the versatility of paradox, is a deviation from the negative mood of his early and middle poetry as exemplified in *Tenebrae*(1978) and *Canaan*(1996) with their unresolved paradoxes. Hence, the technical peculiarity of *Scenes* as woven into thematic and syntactic paradoxes renders the profane the essence of sacred perfection, according to Peter Peggall (94). Hill's endeavor in this recent book is a facet of what David Sherman terms "Hill's aesthetic of historical obligation"(172) that lies in his implicit acknowledgement of his affinity with the British masters - Milton in the case of *Scenes from Comus*. The book bears, in this connection, the stamp of Hill's writing- as a "serious poetry"- which "insists upon certain obligations-intellectual, social, ethical - that bind us to each other and to the dead," voices David Sherman(173). It presents, accordingly, one of Hill's paradoxical images of the profane perfection of the artist whose work is a reconciliation of the "aesthetic and ethical" (David Sherman, 172,173). It operates, likewise, within the framework of "the relation of sensuality and chastity," or "the reconciliation" that takes place "between the two forces that had begun to break apart in his own work, the sensual love of language and the chaste righteousness that it must somehow serve," in Brian Phillips' words (144).

*Scenes from Comus*, in the process, falls into three divisions, and is textured into the paradoxical representations that ultimately unite “the erotic attractions and the moral aims of art. Sensuous but chaste, virtuous but magical, Sabrina,” as standing for the artist’s understanding of the paradoxical relation of delicacy and power, “is a figure of rare alchemy who transforms the enchanter’s merely bestial designs into liberating deeds,” illustrates Brian Phillips (144). Sabrina should be taken, in the process, as a uniting force that imparts her spirit and general orientation to Hill’s , as well as Milton’s, whole work. According to Brian Phillips, “the tempting spirit of Sabrina does move through this work, soothing what had threatened to become a tone of permanent hectoring and enticing the poet into his closest and most rewarding consideration of nature since *Mercian Hymns* was published in 1971” (145).

The book’s opening division, “The Argument of the Masque,” with its twenty sections, is thematically inclusive; and all themes are masterly manipulated in terms of a variety of paradoxical patterns. One should be conscious, therefore, of the difficulty and paradoxical significance of the whole division in terms of the nature of its theme(s). Man’s imprisoning struggle with his sinful nature and his ability to atone for this fallen nature is dominant, since “we are inordinate creatures and so ordained by God” (*Scenes*,3). Derwent May claims, in this regard, that “the whole section might seem just to illustrate its final point that poetry’s task is to match ‘the weight of the world’ with the weight of the word,’ and that this is practically impossible!”(15). This hints at the ever tantalizing nature not only of this book specifically, but also of Hill’s poetry in general. Peter Peggall illuminatingly observes that “‘The Argument’ is an uncertain, but hard-won credo, a series of demonstrative statements which raise dilemmas rather than unraveling them”(93). Such controversial stylistic problems that ensue throughout this part have to do with its language (as part of Hill’s “thorny craftsmanship” as part of Kathleen Staudt’s title) that is mainly shrouded into waywardness and ambiguity consequent on the heavy use of various patterns of paradox. According to Peggall: “The words circle inwards, echo and accumulate, as if they held captive speaker and audience. We are the

contradictions he charts, and the utterance of this is no evasion" (93).

"The Argument of the Masque" opens with stating the objective of the masque as an art form; that is, the manipulation of the paradoxical truth both of existence and of the human personality as well. It gives insights also into the elusive nature of language:

Of the personality as a mask;  
of character as self-founded, self-founding;  
and of the *sacredness of the person*  
Of licence and exorbitance, of scheme  
and fidelity; of custom and want of custom;  
of dissimulation; of envy  
and detraction. Of *bare preservation*,  
of *obligation to mutual love*;  
and of our covenants with language  
*contra tyrannos*. (3)

The mask image of the opening line determines the paradoxical reality of the human nature. Man is the most sinful but sublime creature. His glossy outer façade is, like that of language, stained with the invisible moral weakness; still, both remain capable of perfection through a latent power to gain "sublimity, perfection, and transcendence." Hence, man becomes always "self-founded, self-founding." He is permanently conflicting between his instinctive nature (the desires of the self) and his intuitive purity (the demands of the soul): "of licence and exorbitance, of scheme/ and fidelity, of custom and want of custom;/ of dissimulation; of envy." The lines, in this context, highlight Hill's new mood. The mask/masque, with its intensive reliance on the element of paradox, therefore, provides Hill with a solution to his foregoing negative attitude towards man's precarious existential context. The content and the form, accordingly, are vested in and coded into paradoxical expressions (syntactic and thematic together). The syntactic paradoxes, here, are revealing of the insecure, but salvaged, position of man's being. The thematic paradoxes, on the

other hand, connote the attainability of salvation, transcendence, and sublimity as fixed into reality itself. Thus, one of Hill's recurrent motifs throughout this book emerges and crystallizes: the potentiality and ability to reconcile the profane and the sacred, or the necessity of texturing the sublime into the commonplace reality. This tells that the book has managed to redress the ontological imbalance that his previous books immensely suffer from.

The mask provides, most significantly, a paradigm for Hill's notion of man/language precarious relationship: "of our covenants with language/contra tyrannos." Man's concern with language, in Hill's view, has always been an unsettled struggle. The writer's attitude should remain a mode of accepting the binding dictates of language as well as a rejection of, and a revolt against, such a tyrannical "covenant." Hill, accordingly, converges on Derrida's conception of the metaphysics of presence. So, one has to embrace the traditional metaphysical centers about which language revolves before throwing them away in a highly deconstructionist manner. Thus, there is an unending need for a lifelong epic struggle to evade language's closed circle(s), to use it as a means of conquering its tyrannical nature.

The second section of the same division elaborates paradoxically on the main theme of the whole book. Hill's intention, in this connection, turns out to be an examination of the question of the validity of the human nature to transcend corruption and sinfulness to attain atonement and sublimity: all through the employment of the contextual paradox:

That we are inordinate creatures  
not so ordained by God; that we are  
at once rational, irrational— and there is reason.

That this is no reason for us to despair.  
The tragedy of things is not conclusive;  
rather, one way by which the spirit moves.

That it moves in circles need not detain us.  
salutes yours, whenever we pass or cross,  
which may be now, might very well be now. (3)

man's fallibility and imperfection are made up for by the power to transcend the materialistic aspect of being as motivating, and itself motivated by, self-centeredness and greed. This renders man the most irrational reasoning creature ready to attain tragic cathartic and epiphanic moments. In the process, the contextual paradox produced by the resolved conflict secures the section (and the whole book in fact) an optimistic framework as distinctly from the one evoked, for instance, by paradox in *Tenebrae*.

In the fifth section, syntactic paradox, with its conciseness and swift movement, is evidently informed by the book's dominant theme. It enhances the section's amount of pleasure in terms of providing a metaphysical dimension by synthesizing wonder and humor in the same context: "That there are immoderate measures in plenty;/that plenty is a term of moderation;/that moderation is by some used to excess" (5). In the sixth section, similarly, paradoxes are allowed free space to state the significance of language as an open-ended medium for the book's central theme:

That, in these latter days, language  
Is the energy of decaying sense;  
That sense in this sense means *sensus communis*.

That common sense bids me add: not  
All language. If power's fuelled by decay,  
So be it—decay being a natural force.

Moral corruption is another matter;  
I cannot get beyond pronouncing it

Inertia of malevolence, or *pondus*.

This *pondus* has itself nothing to add. (5)

The lines, in effect, evoke one of Hill's conceptions of language as leaning towards building and destroying. Language, he warns, "is the energy of decaying sense," and decay itself turns into a motivating force to avoid imprisonment in the deceptively glossy appearance of language itself. In a manner of speaking, language cries out for an unending defamiliarization and innovation to escape decay as well as to maintain its energy and promise. This connotes an implicit hailing of the Deconstructionist perception of the signifier/signified slippery relationship. This postmodernist approach, it is declared, becomes unequivocally the fitting medium for his major theme: "Moral Corruption." In Hill's view: "Moral corruption is another matter;/ I cannot get beyond pronouncing it/ inertia of malevolence, or *pondus*." It turns out, finally, that this "pondus has itself nothing to add."

In the seventh section of the same division, the theme of death-in-life is evoked in terms of a contextual thematic paradox. The speaker meditates, in this connection, on materialistic progress of the Enlightenment, as akin to the modern age, to be illusive:

That stale enlightenment exacerbates  
the incoherence—ask me to explain—  
profuse expediency that leaves us speechless,

wordless, even. Their words attack my throat  
wordlessly. If it were silence to silence!

Silence is shown defending a loved child. (6)

The soul/body imbalance renders this form of progress deadening and threatening at the same time. Hence, the unresolved contextual paradox evokes an overwhelmingly stifling mood of instability, disorder, and anguish. The Enlightenment, with its mode of

materialistic philosophy and progress, is paradoxically a curse in disguise. The sense of loss is usually subsequent on sacrificing innocence for experience in Blakean terms (considering that Blake's vision represents a major influence on Hill's, according to Emily Merriman, 86). In his full experience the speaker, paradoxically, recognizes the world as a place in which:

----- . Mute  
Suffering's a factor of countless decibels.  
I see the pristine hammer hammer alarm.  
I see it but I can hear nothing. (6)

The opening lines of the eighth section rest on the preceding one to evoke a different type of mood; that is, an excitement and thrill created by the agency of primitiveness: "that the imagination is a type / of reactor. Mine works well with bursts / of winter-sun chill-out in Reykjavik" (6). The scene is of an Icelandic context that challenges nature and the weather to create a state of life-in-death and connotes the potential spiritual regeneration in a lethal materialistic civilization. The energizing power of the imagination revives and recreates reality in a highly Romantic sense. It is a defamiliarizing agent standing for spiritual creativity and positivity gained in moments of meditation. Hill relies, in this context, on one of his most habitual attitudes; that is, his tendency to engage in an intertextuality with other poets. Equally significant, the paradox of experiencing excitement and thrill in moments of tranquility and meditation (while reminiscent of Wordsworth's definition of the nature and function of poetry) evokes Yeats' mood dominating his later metaphysical period. After Yeats' model, Hill's Iceland, the real and the symbolic, renders him capable of growing "orgiastic" (6).

The same theme of the power to challenge and conquer corruption and death is evidently carried further in the tenth section. The whole section functions as a contextual resolved paradox evoking a positive mood informed by the newly gained trust in the human spiritual resources and drives:

That the receptor and reactor are a unit

Making themselves many units of energy;  
That the voice of prophecy clings to its logged spar;

That the deep waters toss me about— I shout  
From the crests and the troughs, these words that turn  
To a spooled marker-dye the colour of vomit;

Even so cannot cease from invoking the sea's  
Unchallengeable voltage, its transforming waste.  
The need for good reactors I also accept—  
The alchemy |the primal infiltration. (7)

The lines pun on nuclear technology to maintain the presence of latent human energy that renders possible recreating and defamiliarizing the real and the commonplace via the spiritual and the imaginative. The ensuing contextual paradox of resolved conflict rests, in the process, on the interplay of the real and the un/surreal, the commonplace and the extraordinary. Thus, the speaker's recognition of the need for "good reactors," "the alchemy | the primal infiltration" is highly connotative and inviting as well. This orientation remains a major recurrent motif implicitly textured into the book's predominant vision with its principal emphasis on the struggle of good and evil.

The good/evil interplay, it is evident, is deliberately foregrounded throughout the middle sections of the book's first division. The notion that each of them is motivating, and deeply rooted in, the other is given utterance in various paradoxical images throughout these sections. So, in the sixteenth section, Milton's celebration of Comus, as a good model for the gift for evil and as a source of inspiration for the musician Hugh Wood, guides Hill himself into recognizing the intricate relationship between the two forces governing the human soul:

Milton's *Superbia* is a joy to hear:  
triumphal reticence, verse to be delivered



badly and to survive; and this by virtue  
of Comus' gift—not meant to be so taken. (10)

Hill's attitude—like Milton's and Hugh Wood's— is actually paradoxical. Comus is a symbol of condemned gift, destructive creativity, and, paradoxically, evil's yearning for virtue. He is valid for the evil artist who creates destructively and celebrates evil virtuously (through the creative power of art itself). Thus, the unresolved conflict between the evil tendency and the virtuous means of art itself renders his job to be a synthesis of irreconcilable aspects: a sublime decadence, successful failure, to the end of such a long chain of Petrarchan syntactic paradoxical syntheses (Andrew Roberts alludes to the great Petrarchan influence on Hill's poetic artistry in general, *Geoffrey Hill*, 79).

The next section represents an elaboration on the forms of misguidance and misapprehension that emerge from self-fastidiousness and self-misapprehension:

That actors think too highly of themselves.  
O dam this *pondus* of splenetic pride!  
Sleet's always driven sideways in my experience;  
hard at it now, rustles like harsh tissue  
or creaks against the glass. As Milton said,  
*no more chiding*. He had some years to go. (11)

The lines highlight the paradoxical situation of actors as evil-doers. They may sometimes teach people the ways of evil, even bona fide (a Platonic attitude): all is done paradoxically by wedding art to thought. So, they end in failure as they succeed in playing their roles perfectly and convincingly. Here, the resonance of their situation and Comus' is evident: a state of death-in-life.

However, art retains its glamour and charm that are the product of its paradoxical nature. Thus, in section nineteen, paradox is skillfully manipulated to reveal the creativity of art as embedded into the real world and as capable of transforming dissonance into high form.

Therefore, out of heterogeneity comes consonance: "That from this melee, there issues / a grand and crabby music. And that I / want my piece of it. Even when not mine" (12). The musical conception of harmony represents, in effect, a clear incarnation of the effectiveness of paradoxical presence of non-presence as shaping Hill's life, art, and vision as well. The speaker in this section is inspired, accordingly, by music's overall harmonious context to be healed of any negative attitudes brought about by the real world. It is evocative of the life-in-death state raised by the use of a contextual paradox resting on the resolution of conflicting aspects to bring about moments of epiphany:

That vows so made are like lights on snow-ploughs,  
purpose and power at once. Look what gets  
tossed aside. Massive effects are junked.  
And they talk about Heavy-Metal! They don't know,  
these kids, what weight of the word is,  
that in the half dark of commodity most  
offers are impositions. (12)

The book's first division, accordingly, is greatly rewarding though challengingly difficult and demanding. It evokes an optimistic mood regarding the potentiality of reconciling the opposites to gain sublimity and transcendence in life and art. Hence, the problematic of the human beings' existence as "inordinate creatures not so ordained by God" (3) is solved by means of contriving ways to struggle with their fallen state as subsequent to their sinfulness. Closely relevant, Hill identifies in art a fitting means of gaining symmetry and perfection as advocated by Milton's poetry and Hugh Wood's music. Consequently, he determines to straddle the fence in the current volume: to allude to the paradoxical moral theme of Milton's *Masque*, and to shed light on the magnificent nature of music as a symmetrical heterogeneity experienced in Hugh Wood's musical performance of *Comus*.

The book's second division is a variation on the same tune. It highlights Hill's modified and newly optimistic view of man and existence. The poet, here, is overwhelmingly obsessed with the notion

that sensual fulfillment and aesthetic perfection can bring about moments of spiritual transcendence, sublimity, and epiphany in the end, according to Peter Peggall (94). As an aged man seeking spiritual fulfillment, Hill reveals affinities with Yeats' obsession with the paradoxical themes of mortality and longevity in his middle and later periods. Hill, like Yeats, finds in sensual and aesthetic perfection a means of escaping corruption and annihilation for man and nation alike. As Derwent May points out: "Hill's idea of dance wouldn't be most people's, but at least these are shorter, more varied and more lightly moving poems. However, they are almost as difficult, with the thoughts and images leaping about in ways that are clearly connected in Hill's mind but not easy for the reader to make out" (15).

This division opens with a philosophical view of the reality of objects in terms of paradoxical connections. Its initial section, in this context, rests on a thematic paradox that highlights the paradoxical nature of knowledge and art as challengingly ambiguous, yet rewarding and illuminating. This notion is informed by Hill's view of the theatre and the movies as "illuminating shadows," just to quote one of Hill's highly suggestive and paradoxical prose titles dealing with the movies (*Illuminating Shadows: The Mythic Power of Film*). Thus, life and existence are essentially formed, and should be understood, in terms of paradoxical syntheses: complex simplicity, sweet bitterness, or crooked forwardness (a formula undergoing Hill's life vision in general):

Weight of the world, weight of the word, is.

Take it slowly, like walking

Through convalescence, the load

Bearing not yet adjusted, progress

Made with a slight forward and sideways, tilt,

Or through angled, one hip

Acting up, strung on a wire.  
How heartening it is when it goes right—  
The moment of equipollence, a signal. (15)

The lines, evidently, evoke an optimistic mood regarding the potentiality of grappling triumphantly with the problems of old age as well as the complexity and toughness of the human destiny and existence.

The third section relies on paradox to evoke a highly optimistic mood about man and civilization. It contextualizes Milton's *Masque* to recommend and reach a solution and salvation to the complexity, thorniness, and corruption of both as experienced in the modern age. Rebekah Greene goes to the extreme of taking Sabrina "as a possible substitute for Christ...Sabrina perfectly embodies the ideal of amalgamated Britain" (212). It is Sabrina, therefore, with her orientation towards purity, chivalry, and resistance of seduction that is modeled as a means of triumphing over and transcending modern moral degeneration and decline (In Milton's *Masque*, Sabrina is the savior of the human innocence that defeats Comus' intrigues. Comus himself, a symbol of evil and seductiveness, finally yearns for a Sabrina-like type of innocence and purity):

The river the forest, the river is the forest,  
The forest the river, swamps of loosestrife  
Choking fecundity. Sabrina, she also, chaste  
Genius of teeming and dying,  
I fancy her  
Trailing labiles, placentas, uncomely swags.  
My own lines double here as her lianas. (16)

The section, clearly, rests on a cluster of syntactic paradoxes to present in the end an overall contextual thematic paradox evoking a life-in-death pattern. The resolution of conflicting aspects,

undoubtedly, contributes to the evocation of a general state of euphoria by the end of the poem. The river-forest recurrent allusion and the close affinity between both in the two opening lines provoke thought. They are the locations symbolizing good and evil, chastity and corruption (Sabrina and Comus) in Milton's *Masque*. They stand also for the presence of opposite and conflicting powers governing man's consciousness and attitude as well. This explains the value of suffering and struggle as a means of atonement and purgation. However, Hill's intention is far from accepting one for the other. Rather, he insists on the necessity of both for gaining sublimity, transcendence, and illumination. Paradoxically, the absence of one negates the other in a Derridan sense. Hence, whereas Sabrina is essential for obliterating evil in Milton's world, struggle is rendered an existential option in Hill's vision as a whole: Struggle with guilt, evil, and the corruptibility of language itself. The "choking fecundity" in the third line is central to interpreting Hill's poem as such. It may be the fecundity of the human experience that threatens the purity and innocence of his being. Or, it may be innocence and purity that render man's power to resist and struggle unverifiable. In all cases, Sabrina ("chaste / genius of teeming and dying) has to suffer Christ-like to atone for the corruptible experience and save man's innocence. Thus, she must suffer and die first so that purity and chastity be reborn and given warranty. Even the artist himself, the creator of these images, should suffer in his struggle with language to prove his artistic competence. The closing lines connote, therefore, the poet's suffering to render both his medium chaste and his implications non-committing.

The theme of the complexity of the human nature and experience, similarly, governs the terrain of thought in section eight. This is fully crystallized in his representation of the human vacillation between the two poles of Sabrina-Comus paradigm: Innocence precedes Experience, and suffering from experience is a motivating power for the quest for another cycle innocence:

...I say self-being

Goes the last word with both, that it goes proud

In its own passion—mystical couvades  
With sensual dying, sensuous rebirth. (18)

In the next section, Hill's prevailing philosophy of life and art as caught up into paradoxical images is summed up:

Suppose ingenious, we tell our loves  
haemony's in the script, melts like a pearl,  
chemical self-renewal not to be paid for,  
retroactively inheres, working for givenness  
within the act, enriches all performance  
in the great masquing—or presence-chamber  
of reason and desire!  
you with your daemon or genius, I with one  
who for the fiction's sake must feel betrayed.(19)

The central paradoxical image of the section is the necessity of accepting disaster and suffering in art and life as the sole means of achieving creativity, triumph, and renewal. So, "our loves" that melt "like a pearl, / chemical self renewal" cannot be presumed "not to be paid for." This paradoxical cyclical system, as governing the mainstream of life and art, "enriches all performance / in the great masquing—or presence-chamber / of reason and desire." The absence of such a paradoxical model lets the poet "feel betrayed" by the slipperiness of language.

In section eleven, a parallel is held between the artistic experience and the truthfulness of the human vision as represented in the book itself in terms of a modern masque commanding a view of the human moralizing immortality, or the mundane perfection of the human personality:

Its prickliness is infamous-famous,  
so many contesting-dim prodigy  
uncultivated

and of glummost fruition.  
proffer it then to that transparent virgin  
of pregnant chastity;  
let her go |far afflicted with her friends. (20)

The lines implicitly highlight the impracticality of making a divorce between the mundane and the religious, the sensual and the spiritual, or experience and innocence ( in a Blakean sense, considering that Blake persists as a major influence on Hill's art and thought). The overall meaning is determined by the cluster of syntactic paradoxes of false relation that provoke thought concerning the essence of existence itself. They are evocative of the Blakean-Hegelian conceptions of progression in terms of contraries. Thus, the section maintains the possibility of attaining transcendence and sublimity in terms of a matching of opposites. This, in effect, relates it to the succeeding one:

Yes, Comus, about time—about time  
and justification. That's beginning  
to match—laggard forwardness. In touch,  
my other self—so held—once it's too late;  
my other pulse, beating to Plato's rhythm  
heard through circadian circuits of distress.  
loud hissing in the ears may or may not  
mean blood pressure soaring, or sex on heat,  
or siren voices, or yr lispng snakes. (21)

The section stresses the notion that man can achieve his real self by coming closer to his anti-self—just to evoke Yeats' "Mask Theory" (CF: W.B. Yeats, 503). Hence, chastity can be attained through sensuousness, the spiritual is to be conceived of in terms of the physical, and the highly aesthetic may take form in the absolutely chaotic. The succeeding section represents, in the process, a further development, and an incarnation, of this complexity of vision:

I've not pieced out the story—Milton's script  
was briefly censored, bits of sex expunged  
for the girl's sake. Chastity makes its bed  
with sensuality, could not otherwise  
use such authoritative vehemence  
devoid of knowingness.

it's an attractive doctrine to me now. (21)

In section seventeen, syntactic and thematic paradoxes conspire together to create a highly sublime atmosphere in the presence of the musical performance of *Comus*:

Oh, and yes, Comus, back to our vanity;

now I have brought you out, a shared advantage,  
to walk and take the air around the moat—  
though this smells bad tonight. So be my guest  
emissary, or janissary, to the swans  
who ride the higher air, when they've a mind,  
mysterious radii, not given to tread  
with any flesh of spirit, or be trodden  
by any but the airiest incubi. (23)

The syntactic paradox in the second line is highly connotative. Hill takes his interest in Comus to be a privilege, yet a shared one. He joins Milton and Hugh Wood this curiosity to make connections between the earthly and the ethereal as well as the aesthetic and the commonplace. So, the speaker is a guest "to swans / who ride the higher air, when they've a mind." The whole section, in effect, rests on its contextual resolved paradox to create a cheerful and light-hearted mood. This very mood carries on to the next one.

England's paradoxical situation of fabled gloom, mysterious striking beauty, and wounded dignity is evidently highlighted in



section eighteen. The section's effectiveness is enhanced by the consonance between the contextual and syntactic paradoxes:

This is a fabled England, vivid  
in winter bareness; bleakly comforting,  
the faded orchard's hover of grey-green.  
we have come home, say, all is well between us.  
sharp-shining berries bleb a thorn, as blood  
beads on a finger or a dove's breast pierced  
by an invisible arrow to the heart. (23)

The whole section evokes Hill's attitude to the post-imperial England that has stimulated conflicting feelings inside him for long: love and anger, sense of dignity and guilt feelings, in addition to condemnation and tolerance. It seems that the speaker has finally reached a moment of reconciliation with his mother land. The opening lines present a positive image of a winter England whose fable and glamour challenge any sense of doom. The historical England makes amends for the conquest of threatening fits of bad winter weather (or change of political and military positions and alliances). This is real England that attempts to challenge its wounded present as well as provide a secure shelter for her sincere lovers: "We have come home, say, all is well between us." Thus, the speaker's imaginary reunion with his country is, paradoxically, a therapeutic act for the American expatriate. Accordingly, England with its power to reconcile innocence to experience represents a springboard for ambitious challenges after all. This is given unequivocal utterance in terms of the close affinity established between "fabled England" in the first line and "bleakly comforting the faded orchard's hover of grey-green" in the second and third lines.

The next sections are variations on the same tune. They are dedicated to uncovering the close connection between the aesthetic power of "Platonic" England and the burst out of eternal moments of inspiration and artistic creativity. The aged land is phoenix-like, immortal. In section twenty, the physical atmosphere of the English

location as fitting for performing *Comus* becomes linked with the poet's sense of blissful thrill:

To show immediately how it all works:  
Platonic theology's flight simulators;  
no call to leave the ground of our estate.  
there are designs that light the empyrean.  
I have in mind more |something like Great Tew's  
model symposium that's set in motion  
by slow airs fluted on the inlaid grass,  
aubades to angels from the sons of earth.  
the eternal round's a fixture on their screens. (24)

The lines endeavor to show that romantic (or Platonic) England is a good model for the reconciliation of opposites: the theological and the secular, the ethereal and the real as well as the royal/feudal and common alike. All these oppositions embrace "designs that light the empyrean/.../ Aubades to angels from the sons of the earth/ the eternal round's a fixture on their screens." In the process, the eternal never exists independently from the commonplace, and the ethereal is unendingly connected with the earthly. Similarly, virtue, as incarnated in art itself, is to be born of the vices of reality. The same paradoxical attitude is, similarly, evoked in section thirty five of the same division. It is highly instrumental for the section's power of depicting the magnificence and glamour of platonic England whose identity is one of totality made of diversity; this is an attitude informed by its cultural context that is presented as:

Held by this half-literate grieving excitement,  
honey-infused candles, this vigil: patriotism  
is not unChristian; it is not Christian either,  
I beg to plead. Transcendent indistinction

trashes the thought. Spirit bleeds everywhere  
emoting body-pathos, not unlike  
ectoplasm, or grease-paint from Hallowe-en. (32)

The paradox of English patriotism as “not unchristian; it’s not Christian either” and her “transcendent indistinction” are thought provoking. It is the fine wedding of syntactic and contextual paradoxes that contributes to the section’s depth of vision and richness of imagery. This positive and transcendental paradoxical image of Platonic England is held in sharp contrast with the negative attitude of modern England that is caught up into a state of death-in-life. Unlike her different architectural sites:

It ejaculates its pain and is not  
answered; nor acknowledged even.  
Give you these, by way of apology:  
Obvious things, *patience that has for emblem*  
*Certain oblivious fibres.* (Italics added; section 36, p. 32)

Closely connected is the artist’s phoenix-like image that connotes suffering and sacrifice as the means of gaining purgation, sublimity, rebirth, and immortality. This is clearly depicted in section twenty three. The optimism presented in the section testifies to the change undergoing Hill’s later period compared with the pessimism connected with his denial of any form of human genuine sacrifice in life as discussed in *Tinebrae*, for instance. The poem, with its phoenix-image as a central paradox, reveals that:

Tacitus described the phoenix once,  
Mentioning myrrh and semen, which must mean fire.  
Steady now, old heart, longevity  
Is not at all the Heraclitean thing.

See—hear—how sparks  
Fly from the burning-plumed rotisserie—  
Painful the fable ardently-rewound.(26)

Traditionally, the phoenix stands for the paradoxical context of immortal mortality whose eternity is rooted in “myrrh and semen” that are both connected with “fire,” or burning lust. It is connotative of the creative process itself as part of the lust for creativity, suffering, and self-fulfillment: all are fused together in an immortalized moment. The artistic achievements themselves (as a main concern for Hill throughout his long poetic career) are enhanced as standing in sharp contrast with the devastating achievements of black art. Comus, the son of gods and the great enchanter, is condemned as the negative side of creativity, or the revelation of destructive creativity. He is the “corruptor, the abuser,/the abused corrupted in accepted ways of death, the deadliness of life” (section 25, p.27). Comus’ paradoxical situation has to do with the fact that he is “all imagination,/a demon made against his deepest will/a choric figure awed by what he hears” (27). Thus, the failure to achieve unity of being never makes for immortality, nor chaste creativity. Hill joins Comus with modern England that has fallen into moral decline. Both are destined, accordingly, to end similarly: “by it he means you, Britannia, his deep/and passionate love, high-stepping into ruin” (section 29, p. 29).

In section thirty four, the thematic paradox is employed to highlight the necessity of accepting disaster and suffering as a solution to the moral crises of man and nation:

...the hollow mill that turns  
always full of itself. As master—briefly—  
of my own skill, I call this to account  
under a dated lintel, the gristing-chamber,  
where for a lifetime it has ground me  
an unnutritious powder, a black grain

against the grain of the stone. (31)

Again, the section stresses the urgent need for a phoenix-like type to gain power, triumph, dignity, and coherence. However, it remains always that the artist should become part of the world to avoid being “an unnutritious powder, a black grain / against the grain of the stone.” This attitude is rendered in Hill’s thought essential for saving and sublimating man and civilization. Thus, section fifty presents a solution to England’s Postcolonial cultural, moral, and political dilemmas: “If this sleep mask is a time machine/a world attends us under a strange star,/our gifts are what we owe, each to the other,/ and which we give” (39). The speaker views that the essence of a nation’s destiny as a cultural inspiring power lies in the paradoxical situation of sacrifice as a means of gaining and possessing: “our gifts are what we owe...and which we give.” It is a Comus- like yearning for virtue felt by the end of the Masque. Similarly, England may seek “atonement” for her policies through sacrifice and penitence. However, the solution is fancied as mainly artistic; it is not permanently enlightening and cultivating: “the true fiction/set in the one frame; or the book set down / marked at that page, not closed, and not returned to” (39). The lines rely on paradox to maintain that the true message of art is to hold people in suspense positively.

Hill’s views on art, its nature and function, are inexhaustible in actuality. They include a galaxy of intentions and are given utterance in a variety of modes. Art, in this context, is elaborated on as a form of virtuous vice in the same way as crime, punishment, purgation, and transcendence may be sometimes concurrently related and interdependent. Hence, in section fifty four art is presented as:

Absolutely all in all, all in the picture  
exhibited to the jury |aged overnight.  
overnight seduction by a minor art  
carries life, and the voyeur, with it

without any major recompense. The charge  
is *anadiplosis* and the sentence  
the sentence here handed down. (41)

Art, as the lines indicate, is a seductive virtue, or virtuous seduction; the theatre and the movies remain “illuminating shadows” or darkness: “Absolutely all in all, all in the picture.” In contrast, reality is an illusion (in a Platonic sense), virtue encompasses vice; only the paradox of art becomes the only truthful and perfectly structured one: “The charge/is anadiplosis and the sentence/the sentence here handed down.”

A meditation on the paradoxical relationship between the sensual and the spiritual is examined, likewise, in section sixty eight. The life of one becomes the corruption and death of the other: “unbelievable sex-love,/to which I gave such credence, she believes/ our slow corruption by the Song of Songs”(48). The lines are meant, in fact, to emphasize the sublimating power of music and all the art forms in general. It is the same notion of symmetrical chaos that positively impresses man’s instincts, too. So, the next section seems to be a variation on the same theme. Man’s orientation towards music and art in general is given hints as:

The cunning is to swing it, be a hinge  
Of the unhinged time. At very worst  
Gaping on all, missing what pillage finds;  
At best a portal for the hierarchies. (49)

The lines represent art as the real mission of any civilized nation. In the process, England’s renaissance, no wonder, is associated with art and literature: “All in the make, and broken, and exact, / says Milton, England’s challenge to Petrusson./In wintry solstice like the shorten’d light” (49).

Similarly, in sections seventy one and seventy two Hill experiences in the musical performance of *Comus* the same

paradoxical nature of art and existence. In the former, the paradoxical image of the theatre and the movies as the illuminating darkness is obliquely alluded to: “The theatre / of obligation offers us refuge” (50). In the latter, the theme of self and anti-self and their paradoxical affinity is highlighted. The death of one is the life of the other and vice versa (just to contextualize Yeats’ “Mask Theory”). So, Sabrina’s birth in Milton’s *Masque* heralds the death of vice and evil—Comus the magician: “*Sabrina’s* theme, ascending through the strings / as though such music rounded out mischance. / Dawn-labouring candles twitched their sallow flames” (50). It is Hill’s habit to look at objects paradoxically. In section seventy five, this tendency to perceive phenomena in terms of binary oppositions brings Hill closer to Derrida’s deconstructionist outlook:

anytime, now, the final breath-taker,  
of which I shall not judge—  
not as gravity judges the vortex  
or the stone gravity or the targeted  
arrow the bow or the magnet  
the pendulum, the pendulum mere  
misinformalists of time. (52)

This Derridan attitude running through Hill’s later poetic vision is, paradoxically, guiding his mood and approach into an overwhelming optimism. But, while Derrida’s deconstructionism represents a clear manifestation of Western skepticism, Hill’s catapults him into a panoramic view of good and evil, reality and truth as well as faith and doubt. No wonder then that Comus himself, the incarnation of evil, finally yearns for virtue.

The penultimate section of the second division is valid, accordingly, for functioning as the climax of the book’s line of thought. It zooms in Comus’ longing for his anti-self:

No, no. Comus screamed like a peacock  
at this conclusion. Moral vanity  
is his parole, in the off season,  
at any time mere sensuality  
seems to lie dormant. I know well  
the bristling strut, demonic rectitude,  
the rod and glass, the masks of his fixation. (54)

The section is fitting, undoubtedly, for its climactic position at the end of the second part. It gains in ironic quality from the unresolved tension structured into the discrepancy between reality and the dream that accounts for Comus' moral death. His scream evokes, in this context, the Faust-like tragic cry at the end of Marlowe's play.

The third division of the book gains in greater stylistic complexity and depth of vision. As Derwent May evaluates it: "It is very difficult to read, but slowly declares itself a rueful look back at Hill's own life, and at the same time a meditation on the history of the world" (15). Its style, which is still textured into the language of paradox, is moreover different from the first two parts. According to Peter Peggall, the twenty sections that constitute "A Description of the Antimasque" are "as crooked in thought and perspective as any of the earlier meditations, they play the buffoon as well as the philosopher; not for comic relief, but in comic distress" (95). Paradoxically, it is an "Antimasque" but "not anticlimax," as Hill himself states in the opening line of the first section of this division(57). Hence, this part is not intended to be a kind of denouement; there is, rather, a further development of thought that renders it as meditative and philosophical as the previous ones: all become variations on the same themes and tunes.

In the second section, Hill gives insights into one of his favorite images about the paradoxical nature of art; that is, the image of the theatre and the movies as an illuminating darkness: Sought-after pageantries of light / by darkness annulled; as if by chance/something incomparable gets done; the annulment"(57). This syntactic/



contextual composite is revealing of the speaker's positive attitude towards art in general. A few lines later in the same section, he turns to highlight the authentic nature and function of art by stating that:

Our duty is to find  
consonance in the disparities, like as not,  
duty no less than function—how to rise  
to ceremonies of speech; when, why, to address  
intrusive suffering. (57)

Hill, evidently, poses himself in these lines as an Aristotelian advocate of the function of art as to evoke pity and fear, and to cause purgation. (This is recurrently referred to throughout the whole book as a requirement of sublimity and transcendence).

Closely related is Hill's view of the art of music as the silent herald of the unspeakable as presented in the sixth section of the same division: "Sometimes I wish music / meant less to me. Now it's like standing proxy / in a declaration of unanswered live" (59). The lines gain in extra power and meaningfulness in their evocation of Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn" where the work of art is presented as the silent historian of its own time. Hill, with this implicit attraction to Keats, finds in music a fitting love envoy in the sense that it turns into an incarnation of pure love comparable with physical love that gets exhausted with sensual desire: "...Sexual/ love—what other kind of love is there, / even for an amorist / of the abstract eros?" (59). Contrasting the paradoxical attitudes of love here is akin to Yeats' conception of immortality in the Byzantium poems.

The two closing sections of the third division, and the whole book, are concerned with the issue of timelessness within the temporal. The poet hails immortality as caught up into the mainstream of time itself. Hence, eternity flows from the human consciousness and is its creation simultaneously (in a highly Phenomenological sense). In section nineteen, eternity takes its essence and flux from temporal phenomena: "Nothing is unforgettable but guilt./guilt of the moment to be made eternal./Reading immortal literature's a curse" (66). In the

closing lines, Hill experiences eternity in terms of phenomena of unendingly recurrent rhythm. This connotes the poet's desire to conquer the unconscious fear of the nearby annihilation attending old age and physical corruption and his hope that a form of Platonic spiritual timelessness, or a romantic vision of physical rebirth and permanence, may be attained:

*In shifting scapes eternity resumes.*

I cannot fault its nature, act by act,  
gauged by the lost occasions of the sun.  
Ephemera's dance, vast particulars  
and still momentum measures of the void.  
What did you say? (Italics added, 66)

The lines, no doubt, fit for a strongly provocative finality to the whole book in which the recurrent optimistic mood resists. It is an expression of the beginning at the end in which things come full circle. Thus, the reader within this cheerful mood cannot help but share the poet his involvement in "Ephemera's dance" and become a full expression of the "measures of the void."

In Conclusion, it remains always that Hill's art and thought are at most clear manifestations of the Western spiritual crisis, on the one hand, and the British Post-war political and moral dilemma(s), on the other. This dual trap informs his modernist orientations towards language and the quest for purgation from the various forms of moral and spiritual degeneration. Thus, torn between the inescapable conflict of the sense of guilt generated by the atrocities of culture and civilization and the search for atonement, Hill has endeavored throughout his long poetic career to mould a fitting medium of expression for all these conflicts; this could not be expressed more ideally and appropriately than in the language of paradox. This medium of expression stands out as his most prominent and reliable technical element. Such an option is a consequence of his canonized fondness for all that is difficult and epigrammatic, as well as his

strong desire to struggle with language. In effect, the failure to consider the significance and effectiveness of the element of paradox for the integration of his art and thought would render difficult a proper appreciation of his poetry. It has always been his idiosyncratic way of bridging the gap between tradition and modernism. Evidently, Hill has managed to render this rhetorical device highly flexible to embrace a plethora of themes and ideas over his long poetic career. The language of paradox, as extensively employed in *Scenes from Comus*, represents a good model for a poet managing at last to get out of the stress of varied, and most often, irreconcilable feelings and attitudes, generated by specific historical conditions. What is remarkable is that Hill has managed to employ the device panoramically to express varied tones and moods in both modes of paradox: the traditional syntactic type and the modernist thematic contextual one. The most important thing about Hill's undertaking, in this respect, remains his overwhelming success to widen the scope of the latter type so much that the finest of his poetry is deliberately structured in thematic contextual paradoxes. This associates him with the modernist tendency to employ the form that, in varied degrees, has appealed to a long line of twentieth-century poets related to diverse preferences.

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*Paradox as a struggle with language in Geoffrey Hill's Poetry*

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