

Two essays to accompany the ‘Requiem: The Great War’ issue of Agenda:

W S Milne: Arms and the Man – Geoffrey Hill: Broken Hierarchies

Omar Sabbagh: Avant La Lettre:

On Browning’s ‘Sludge’, Ford, And The Mess Of A Great War

W S Milne: poet, dramatist, essayist and critic, is working on his final draft of translating Homer’s *Iliad* into Scots.

Arms and the Man

Geoffrey Hill: *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952—2012* (edited by Kenneth Haynes), Oxford University Press, 2013

The epic threnos of war runs right through the twenty-one volumes of verse collected in Geoffrey Hill’s *Broken Hierarchies*. The book’s title is borrowed from a poem of the same name in *Without Title* (2006), possibly sardonically, where the poet writes of ‘a man’s low voice that looms out of the drone,’ the pun on that last word being very deliberate. It is not only the buzz, the din, of incomprehensible voices, it is the menacing sound also of one of our more up-to-date, hands-off, killing machines that make murder so remote.

It is the poet’s voice that we hear looming out of the drone, and it is a voice that has been remade, re-forged over the years but always unmistakably Hill’s own, since the publication of his first book in 1959, *For The Unfallen*. Each new volume comes to the reader as a surprise, written from a new perspective, always unpredictable. But this impression of change can be deceptive. Although the forms may alter (from sonnets to prose-poems, from elaborate punctilio to free verse) the voice, Hill’s voice, remains ineluctably unique.¹ And often the same theme abides: the permanence of war. Robert Lowell has written of ‘small war on the heels of small/war—until the end of time’ (in his poem ‘Waking Early Sunday Morning’ – Hill refers to ‘new wars’ in his long poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, 1983). In the large volume, *Broken Hierarchies*, Hill makes references to the many wars: the two World Wars (with an especial stress on the Holocaust and ‘carpet-bombing’ in the Second), the Biafra War, the Russian Civil War, the American Civil War, the English Civil War, the Arab-Israeli War, the Thirty Years War, the Indian Mutiny, the Madhist War, the Irish Troubles, the Boer War, the Zulu Wars, and the Wars of the Roses. His focus then throughout has been on ‘the killing fields’ (what he calls the ‘Schlachtfelds’) of history. He tells us in one interview, for instance, that it was after seeing performances of the three *Henry VI* plays at Stratford that the idea for his most famous sonnet-sequence, ‘Funeral Music’ (published in *King Log*, 1968), came about. He could see some kinship, some correspondence, between the brutal landscape of the trilogy (its realpolitik) and the mass

¹ ‘Voice’ is, of course, complicated. Hill says ‘What we call the writer’s “distinctive voice” is a registering of different voices.’ (Quoted by Andrew Michael Roberts in his monograph, *Geoffrey Hill*, British Council, 2004.)

what he wrote, justifying the belief that, as Philip Larkin has said, ‘poets should mean what they say.’² As Jeffrey Wainwright has argued, ‘the very particulars of Péguy’s death, leading his section across a field towards the enemy, upright in a hail of bullets, exhorting the advance, must make him appear the embodiment of such a spirit, at once heroic and quixotic.’ Roberts quotes John Terraine, *The Great War 1914-18* (London, 1965): ‘At all levels French soldiers were taught the virtues of headlong attack’ (p.20).³

I would like to concentrate now on Hill’s imaginative (and moral) interest in what he prefers to call ‘the Great War’ (it was still present as a memory for his generation, after all) as it is embodied in his work. Before moving on to his own poetry, I would first like to consider what it is he admires in the poetry of the major poets of the First World War as he has expressed it in his essays on Ivor Gurney, Isaac Rosenberg and, more obliquely, in his review-essay of Ted Hughes’ edition of the *Selected Poems of Keith Douglas*, the best of the English Second World War poets where he considers the differences between Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen, for instance.⁴ In his essay on Isaac Rosenberg (Rosenberg, who was both a poet and a painter, died at the Somme on 1 April 1918) Hill writes of his admiration for the poet’s courage in ‘not leaving a corner of his consciousness covered up’ (quoting here from one of Rosenberg’s letters from the Front, Autumn 1916), and for bringing his ‘agitated incertitude’ to ‘construction and command of form’ in the most trying and desperate of circumstances – how the poet retains ‘the integrity of the word’ when all order is broken around him. He also praises (in his essay on Douglas) his ‘fearlessness of the imagination and a scepticism that is not so much metaphysical doubt as the willingness to lay the mind completely open to experience’ (possibly echoing Rosenberg’s own words from the letter quoted above). That is the standard Hill looks for in any fine poem (be it a ‘war poem’ or not). In the case of war poetry itself, he finds this quality of achievement in the best poetry of David Jones, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rosenberg himself, and in the poems of Ivor Gurney.⁵ In Ivor Gurney’s work (Gurney survived the war, only to die insane in an asylum in 1937) he admires ‘the reality of the self’ transcending ‘the reality of circumstance,’ and his overturning of cliché and tired expression (what Walt Whitman termed the mundane ‘words of routine’).⁶ ‘What causes [Gurney] to “cry out,”’ he says, ‘is the discovery that the lyric voice does not necessarily square with the facts of experience... What is remarkable is the way in which the squaring up is made the body of the poetry itself.’ Hill’s own ‘squaring up’

² Philip Larkin, in *The London Magazine*, IV, 8 November 1964, pp.71-2.

³ In *Acceptable words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, Manchester University Press, 2005, pp 48 & 140.

⁴ ‘Gurney’s “Hobby”’: F.W. Bateson Memorial Lecture,’ *Essays in Criticism*, April 1984, pp.97-128. ‘Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918. Warton Lecture On English Poetry,’ *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 101, pp.209-228. See also a review, ‘Isaac Rosenberg Exhibition, at Leeds University,’ *New Statesman*, 6 June 1959, p.795; and Hill’s entry on Rosenberg in *The Concise Encyclopaedia of English and American Poets and Poetry*, Hutchinson, 1963. “‘I in Another Place.” Homage to Keith Douglas’ in *Stand*, Vol.6 No.4, 1962, pp. 6-13. Hill has written an extensive essay on another English poet of the Second World War, ‘Sidney Keyes in Historical Perspective,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, Oxford, 2009, pp. 398-418.

⁵ The Second World War poets he admires most are Keith Douglas, Sidney Keyes, and Drummond Allison. I’m not sure why Alun Lewis is not included in the list. Douglas died in Normandy in 1944, Keyes in North Africa in 1943, Allison in Italy in 1942. (Alun Lewis died in Burma in 1944.)

⁶ In his Note to his double-sonnet ‘Annunciations’ published in Kenneth Allott’s *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (1962) Hill writes of ‘the jarring double-takes in words of common usage.’

can be heard in such lines as ‘Do words make up the majesty/Of man, and his justice/Between the stones and the void?’ (from ‘Three Baroque Meditations,’ in *King Log*, 1968) and

If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. Then tell me, love,
How that should comfort us – or anyone
Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,
Crying to the end ‘I have not finished’.

(from ‘Funeral Music: 8’, *King Log*)

As much as anything (the poem’s ostensible theme is the Wars of the Roses) the ‘lyric cry’ here (it is a phrase Hill has come to hate – ‘Lyric cry lyric cry lyric cry, I’ll/give them lyric cry!’) is a paean for all those young men who sacrificed their lives in war. Like many of Hill’s poems, the lines serve as a memorial to their courage. In the case of Péguy, Hill regrets the loss of what he calls ‘one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences of the twentieth century.’⁷ In any case, what Hill thoroughly dislikes is the ‘agreeable fluency’ he finds in the war sonnets of Rupert Brooke, for instance, bearing in mind as he is, I think, some of the comments of the First World War poets themselves, such as Charles Sorley who in 1915 could write to his mother: ‘Brooke is far too obsessed with his own sacrifice, regarding the going to war of himself (and others) as a highly intense, remarkable and sacrificial exploit, whereas it is merely the conduct demanded of him (and others) by the turn of circumstances, where non-compliance with this demand would have made life intolerable’. Likewise, Isaac Rosenberg could write in a letter to Mrs Herbert Cohen of June 1916: ‘I did not like Rupert Brooke’s begloried sonnets... What I mean is second hand phrases “lambent fires” etc.’ Rosenberg found the poetry ‘commonplace,’ lacking ‘reality and strength.’ With these prose glosses in mind, let us now look at Hill’s poems on the First World War.

The title of Hill’s first volume of poetry, *For the Unfallen*, serves as an ironic counterpoint (as Hill sees it) to Laurence Binyon’s celebratory poem (its ‘agreeable fluency’ if you like) for the British dead of the First World War, ‘For the Fallen,’ which has since become nearly as much of a cliché for the ‘glory’ of that war as the poppy itself. Hill’s ironic title (which is a phrase taken from the last poem in *For The Unfallen*, ‘To The (Supposed) Patron’) directly prepares the reader for poems concerned with man’s corrupt and corrupting nature (in the volume’s other meaning: i.e. the ‘fallen’ state of mankind) and his potential for innocence and love (i.e. his ‘unfallen,’ original state of grace), as well as addressing, in a rather macabre

⁷ In his essay on Péguy appended to his poem, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, 1983.

manner,⁸ those readers who have managed somehow to survive the bloody world conflicts. Hill's poems are scrupulous in their verbal technique. That is not to say that his method is one of ingenuity, but rather one of technical surety allied to unflagging moral sincerity. Hill's acute ear for inauthentic language supporting a false morality allows no place for unintentional clichés in his poems. The result is a poetry of abstruse satire and trenchant language in which 'the perspective requires the utterance of deliberate cliché, but cliché rinsed and restored to function as responsible speech.'⁹ With this moral impulse in mind let us look at one or two of the poems in detail.

Section 1 of the poem 'Of Commerce and Society' is entitled 'The Apostles: Versailles, 1919' and reads:

They sat. They stood about.
They were estranged. The air,
As water curdles from clear,
Fleshed the silence. They sat.

They were appalled. The bells
In hollowed Europe spilt
To the gods of coin and salt.
The sea creaked with worked vessels.

The poem appears to ask, 'What did these men die for?' and answers, it seems, with another, exasperated, question, 'Was it material, monetary interests only?' (a point reinforced by the fact that one of the Cambridge 'Apostles', the economist John Maynard Keynes, was in attendance at the Peace Conference).¹⁰ 'Hollowed Europe' is particularly telling – evoking a sense of the magnitude of the deaths. The incomprehensible holocaust (ironically seen as such only in retrospect) paralyses the actions and thoughts of the European politicians who have gathered to discuss the formulation of war reparations (which, from Hill's privileged belated historical position, are themselves viewed ironically, given the historical fact of the outbreak of another holocaust twenty years later in 1939). The hopelessness (and 'macabre comedy') of the situation is conveyed by a remarkable economy of tone, phrasing and punctuation. Phrases are repeated because the process of war itself is seen to be an inevitable cycle in man's history which no amount of rational fore-planning can negate, whilst man's moral imagination is seen to be inadequate to an understanding of the situation (the cliché 'appalled' suggests men who are too tired or too lethargic to think clearly and thereby have to

⁸ Hill writes of 'the macabre comedy' and the 'skilful juxtaposing of elevated and banal diction' in Rosenberg's verse (in *The Concise Encyclopaedia of English and American Poets and Poetry*, Hutchinson, 1963, p.260).

⁹ Hill, in his essay "'The World's Proportion" – Jonson's Dramatic Poetry in *Sejanus and Catiline*,' *Stratford On Avon Studies*: 1, Arnold, 1960, p.121.

¹⁰ Keynes resolutely opposed the conditions of the Treaty, arguing that they dealt too harshly with Germany (a position outlined in more detail in his 1919 book, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*). In a letter to the painter Duncan Grant he wrote: 'The allied leaders had a chance of taking a large, or at least a humane view of the world, but unhesitatingly refused it' (in *Keynes Hayek: The Clash That Defined Modern Economics*, Norton, New York, 2012, p. 10).

resort to the readiest phrases). The tone of the poem obliquely evinces a moral guilt rooted in the commercial and blood-drenched past of Europe, which lies too deep to be rationally overcome by a ‘mere’ Peace Treaty, whilst the jagged punctuation creates an impression of men who are doubtful of any reconciliation (the pauses in the movement of the poem parallel not only the checks in the thoughts and movements of the politicians themselves, but also those in the mind of the poet, whose elegy exists guiltily in relation to all the dead of the First World War, a sense that, as Dylan Thomas said, ‘After the first death, there is no other’).¹¹ In the second part of the poem, entitled ‘The Lowlands of Holland,’ we find the line: ‘Europe, the much-scarred, much-scoured terrain’, reminding us of many of the First World War poets’ ‘landscapes’, with the additional horrifying thought that that land is now being ‘scoured’ to find the dead.¹²

Tara Christie reminds us that Hill had written a very early poem (uncollected, printed in the Oxford magazine *Isis*, 20 Feb. 1952) entitled ‘For Isaac Rosenberg’: ‘He was prompted to write his poem for Rosenberg,’ she says ‘after reading a review of *The Collected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg* (1949) in the short-lived literary magazine *Nine*.’¹³ The poem is significant as it shows an early influence of Rosenberg on Hill’s style, but also, as Henry Hart has argued, it prefigures that mocking ‘sentimental rites of remembrance’ we associate with *For the Unfallen*.¹⁴

Yet men who mourn their hero’s fall,
Laying him in tradition’s bed—
With high-voiced chantings and the tall
Complacent candles at his head—
Still leave much carefully unsaid...
With ceremony thin as this
We tidy death; make life as neat
As an unquiet chrysalis
That is the symbol of defeat:

¹¹ E.M. Knottenbelt reads the poem similarly: ‘It depicts the situation at Versailles of politicians (the Big Four), she says, ‘as one of extreme failure. The inability to sign a treaty which would properly conclude the Great War and the nationalistic, not to say totalitarian, aspirations in retrospect were so endemic to that war, in fact planted the time-bomb which exploded as the Second World War’ (in *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, Amsterdam, n.d. p.53). See also Vincent Sherry in *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill*, The University of Michigan Press, 1987, p.65: ‘the Second World War stands ominously ahead of Versailles, by suggesting a result of failure there by the ambassadors of materialism.’

¹² See Wilfred Owen’s letter to his mother, 19 January 1917: ‘No Man’s Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.’ This is the ur-text I believe for Hill’s lines in ‘Funeral Music: 3’: ‘A field/After battle utters its own sound/Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.’

¹³ In ‘“For Isaac Rosenberg”: Geoffrey Hill, Michael Longley, Cathal Ó Searcaigh,’ *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, OUP, 2009, p.544. Rosenberg also appears in No. 86 of Hill’s *Al Tempo De’ Tremuoti*, 2007-12, where he is both literally ‘in a trench’ and ‘entrenched’ by pervasive anti-Semitic prejudice. Rosenberg, of course, was a Jew. (The Welsh poet and artist, David Jones, famous for his long prose-poem about the First World War, *In Parenthesis*, also appears in *Al Tempo De’ Tremuoti* No. 7.) Rosenberg is also to be found in No. XVIII of *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), and mention of his poem ‘Louse Hunting’ appears in No. 27 of *Speech! Speech!* (2000).

¹⁴ In *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1986, pp.21-2.

A worm in its own winding-sheet...

Hill's 'hero' is obviously Rosenberg, and the last line summons Rosenberg's poem, 'A worm fed on the heart of Corinth.' I think what the early Hill admired in Rosenberg's verse was the quality described by Marius Bewley. In Rosenberg's poetry, Bewley argues, 'suffering achieves something like classical composure... his victims have a heroic moral strength, a stoicism which invites the mind not to the frustrating pity of helplessness, but to something like the re-creative pity of the ancient stage.'¹⁵ It is this kind of objectivity which the early Hill admired, as we saw from his critical comments above. It is far removed from Wilfred Owen's 'pity,' important though that quality is in other circumstances. Hill feels that Owen's belief that 'the poetry is in the pity' hinders his technique, as 'in *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, between the opening question: "What passing bells for these who die as cattle?" and the concluding vista: "And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds." The fact that Owen employs irony in this poem cannot alter the fact that he takes thirteen lines to retreat from the position maintained by one. If these men really do die as *cattle*, then all *human* mourning for them is a mockery, the private and the public, the inarticulate and true as much as the ostentatiously-false.'¹⁶

Hill feels that the achievements of Gurney and Rosenberg (both 'men of the people,' after all, and not officers) deserve as much respect and honour as Binyon's more publically acclaimed memorial. As he phrases it (in 'For Isaac Rosenberg') like Hamlet, Rosenberg 'ever saw/Beneath the skin of all pretence,' never forgetting the 'irony' of circumstance. It is that 'distancing' that Hill admires and respects. Although not so severe as Yeats, I think he has some sympathy with the Irishman's view that there is no place for 'passive suffering' in poetry, and no place for concentrating only on 'blood, dirt and sucked sugar stick' as he called it (though I have to say, in that respect, I think, like nearly everyone else, that Yeats was wrong about Owen's poetry).¹⁷ Yeats' preference for Greek drama is perhaps mirrored in Hill's liking for Rosenberg's 'dramatic' poems, though clearly the contexts are significantly different.

In the long sequence of 1983, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Hill praises the courage and fortitude of the French poet Charles Péguy who died in a beetroot-field at Villeroy, Seine-et-Marne on the day before the beginning of the Battle of the Marne in 1914:

At Villeroy the copybook lines of men
rise up and are erased. Péguy's cropped skull
dribbles its ichor, its poor thimbleful,
a simple lesion of the complex brain.

¹⁵ In *Masks & Mirrors: Essays in Criticism*, New York, 1970, pp.289-90.

¹⁶ In 'Homage to Keith Douglas', *Stand*, 1962, p.7 See also Jon Silkin, *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War*, OUP, 1972, p.211; Silkin, 'War and the pity,' in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work*, ed by Peter Robinson, Open University Press, 1985, pp.114-129; Silkin, 'Owen's Metrics and his compassion' in his Introduction to *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, 1979, pp.58-69.

¹⁷ Yeats' 'excuse' for not including the War Poets in his selection for *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, 1936 (see his Introduction, p.xxxiv; and letter to Dorothy Wellesley, 21 December 1936, in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed Allan Wade, 1954, p.874). One perhaps detects Yeats' Irish leanings here, towards the (then) recent entanglements of the Irish Civil War, and away from Britain's 'engagements' with Germany on the Continent.

Woefully battered but not too bloody,
smeared by fraternal root-crops and at one
with the fritillary and the veined stone,
having composed his great work, his small body,

for the last rites of truth, whatever they are,
or the Last judgment which is much the same,
or Mercy, even, with her tears and fire,
he commends us to nothing, leaves a name

for the burial-detail to gather up
with rank and number, personal effects,
the next-of-kin and a few other facts;
his arm over his face as though in sleep

or to ward off the sun...

Péguy was a man of deep Catholic faith who died for his country, and Hill's poem is an extended elegy (and eulogy) for, in Hill's words that I quoted earlier, 'one of the great souls, one of the great prophetic intelligences' of the twentieth century. It is interesting to note the influence of Rosenberg in this passage, his 'What of us who, flung on the shrieking pyre,/Walk, our usual thoughts untouched,/Our lucky limbs on ichor fed,/Immortal seeming ever?' (from 'Dead Man's Dump'). Owen is also heard in Hill's lines 'Happy are they who, under the gaze of God,/die for the "terre charnelle", marry her blood/to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down, into the darkness of resurrection' (see Owen's war-poem 'Insensibility', Section I: 'Happy are men who yet before they are killed/Can let their veins run cold').¹⁸ Owen can also be heard, perhaps more clearly, in Hill's moving lines, 'mother, dad,/gone in that shell-burst, with the other dead,/"pour la patrie", according to the book.' The sardonic snarl here is reminiscent of the end of 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' – 'My friend, you would not tell with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory,/The old lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori' and gives the 'lie' to all the seemingly-protective abstractions such as we find throughout the poem: *La Patrie, Amor, Fidelitas, 'vos morituri', 'servitute et grandeur,'* and so on. These abstractions (possibly absurd) stretch to the point of earthly intangibility, to the point of death itself, if needs be, but it is not 'abstractions' which die – it is men and women of flesh and blood ('Whatever strikes and maims us it is not/fate, to our knowledge' the poet writes, intimating that it is usually *bullets*):

¹⁸ Hill's line deliberately echoes Péguy's 'Heureux ceux qui sont morts dans pour la terre charnelle' ('Happy are those who have died for the carnal earth,' but I think Owen's lines have an equally 'happy' correspondence). Hill's lines 'the men of sorrows do their stint,/whose golgothas are the moon's trenches,/the sun's bleak flare over the salient' also echo Owen's letter quoted above: 'No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful...'

The blaze of death goes out, the mind leaps
for its salvation, is at once extinct;
its last thoughts tetter the furrows, distinct
in dawn twilight, caught on the barbed loops.

(Note: not a 'blaze of glory', but 'a blaze of death.')

As Colin Burrow has written: one death here stands for all.¹⁹ In this landscape, even seemingly-innocent phrases such as 'canisters of blossom' (in Section 9) conceal inferences of mass death. Against a background of complex moral entanglement and historical compromise, Péguy is seen as pitching his equally complex poetry of passion, an icon for all those who show courage and integrity in battle:

Violent contrariety of men and days; calm
juddery bombardment of a silent film
showing such things: its canvas slashed with rain
and St Elmo's fire. Victory of the machine!

The brisk celluloid clatters through the gate;
the cortège of the century dances in the street;
and over and over the jolly cartoon
armies of France go reeling towards Verdun.

(The puns here are obvious enough, but behind the words lies Péguy's prophecy about the imminent triumph of materialism.)

Péguy's name first occurs in Hill's writings in his essay on Yeats' poetry, 'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure,'²⁰ where he quotes from Alexander Dru's book, *Péguy* (1956): 'When faith is informed by what Newman calls real assent, which involves the imagination, it is "as living as the imagination itself", and this means to say that it not only leads on to action, but is enriched and deepened by action.' It is this idea of a sedentary poet enlisting as an active soldier which holds Hill's considerable imagination throughout the poem:

'Rather the Marne than the *Cahiers*.' True enough,
you took yourself off. Dying, your whole life
fell into place.²¹

The everyday phrase 'True enough' takes on the deeper significance of one of who is wholly committed to his innermost convictions. Likewise, the Gloucestershire poet (and composer) Ivor Gurney is eulogised in the poem 'Of Constancy and Measure,' in *Canaan* (1996), the title

¹⁹ In his review of *Broken Hierarchies*.

²⁰ *In Agenda*, Autumn-Winter, 1971-2.

²¹ Péguy edited a small but influential intellectual journal entitled *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*. Hill's portrait of Péguy, the radical outsider, is clear enough: 'Truth's pedagogue, braving an entrenched class/of fools and scoundrels, children of the world, his eyes caged and hostile behind glass...' The stance is similar Rosenberg's, and Gurney's when they take offence at 'the officer class.'

Masses of memoried flowers –
Hide that red wet
Thing I must somehow forget.²²

Edward Thomas, another First World War poet, is similarly praised by Hill in No. 44 of the sequence *Ludo* (2011) for his sense of a ‘vanishing’ England, an England where the ‘hierarchies’ are now broken, where (as Hill expresses it, in another poem) ‘grace,/individual love, decency, endurance’ are trampled on in a ‘disnatured’ century where terror has attained ‘new standards’ (see *The Triumph of Love*, 1998). It is in a similar vein that we encounter a tender vignette of Hill’s old schoolteacher in Section II of *Liber Illustrium Virorum* (2007-12): ‘Reestimate a segment of terrain/In which it seems no-one has ever lived,/Riddled and worm-cast, photographed by plane./Amidst all that Bill Williams survived/to teach us Latin, civilise the foul./The Somme was in his blood, his blood the Somme’s;/New voicing the old hymns...’

Hill notes the almost casual magnitude of slaughter of the First World War in lines such as ‘the regiments rehiring by the week’ (in *The Triumph of Love*, XXXII) as if the men were merely lining up for temporary work outside the Labour Exchange; the glib horror of propaganda (‘Haig, whom they justified/in his self-image to the tune of thousands?’ nicely compounding the monetary cost with cost in lives, and a sense of what Hill calls ‘the narcissistic tragedies of man’);²³ ‘the gabled houses ruined’ (he is writing here specifically of a poem by another First World War poet, Ford Madox Ford -- see *Ludo* No. 63); the hopeless pessimism (‘frozen mud wrestlers/entertaining the Jocks... unnatural/wear and tear but finished by Christmas’ in No. 56 of *Speech! Speech!*; and ‘The Christmas of the truce/even as it was passing’ in No. 41 of the same volume); the dead lying somewhere in No Man’s Land (same volume, No. 46); and the innocence and vulnerability of ‘Gallant Little Belgium’ (No. 23).

At the end of it all comes necessary mourning and gratefulness: ‘Poppies, root-torn, blaze into grand remembrance’ (in XLVII of *Odi Barbare*, 2012).

In section XXV of *The Triumph of Love* Hill argues (I think correctly) that ‘the hierarchies are here to be questioned,’ but what is left after that can only be praised and lauded, the courage of men in battle:

Low tragedy, high farce, fight for command,
march, counter-march, and come to the salute
at every hole-and-corner burial-rite
bellowed with hoarse dignity into the wind.

²² ‘To His Love’ in *Collected Poems of Ivor Gurney*, ed. P.J. Kavanagh, Oxford, 1982. Gurney’s first book was entitled *Severn & Somme* (1917). Gurney also appears in No. XVII of Hill’s *The Orchards of Syon* (2002).

²³ In his 1991 book of essays, *The Enemy’s Country: Words, Contexture, and Other Circumstances of Language*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Take that for your example! But still mourn,
being so moved: éloge and elegy
so moving on the scene as if to cry
'in memory of those things these words were born.'²⁴

²⁴ The last two stanzas of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, 1983. The last line, Hill tells us, 'adapts a sentence from Marcel Raymond, *From Baudelaire to Surrealism* (1961), p. 190: referring to Péguy's "Présentation de la Beauce à Notre-Dame de Chartres"' (in the Notes to his poem)

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Avant La Lettre:
On Browning's 'Sludge', Ford, And The Mess Of A Great War
For Tariq Ali

'His work has the mystery which belongs to the complex; his life the much greater mystery which belongs to the simple.'

G.K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning*

'In short, a hit proves much, a miss proves more.'
Robert Browning, 'Mr Sludge, "The Medium"', 368

As a Ford scholar, I have found it strange that in all Ford's writings there is no specific and extensive treatment of Robert Browning. He is mentioned here and there with other 'Great Victorians'. Strange because Browning was ahead of his time, his 'Mr Sludge, "The Medium"' having, precipitately, precociously, much in common with Ford's *The Good Soldier*, or similarly, Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*. This brief article aims in the main to pinpoint a few features of Browning's great prolonged monologue, with specific reference to aspects of Ford's *The Good Soldier*, and via the latter, in conclusion, to the Great War – if only with metaphoric reach. After summaries, I begin by picking out some features of Ford's seminal novel, and then move onto addressing Browning's dramatic poem.

Of course, Ford's magnum opus, *Parade's End* most overtly deals with the Great War, as well as its specter and aftermath, in gritty detail, cubistically visceral. However there are

features of Ford's other (earlier) major novel (*The Good Soldier*) that indicate a link with the Great War. Firstly, he wrote it in 1914, before and (supplementary) after the War's onset. There is still a debate about whether the recurring date in the novel (one of many patterns in the only-seeming seamless flux of the narration) 'August 4th', was a coincidence, or whether Ford (after the onset of war) posthumously inserted this pivotal date. There are four features of the novel I'd like to register for heuristic purposes below. But first: two brief working synopses of both Ford's work and Browning's – the comparison between which comprising the (almost syllogistic) purport of this piece.

Ford's 1915 novel is a tale told by a cuckold named 'Dowell' – and the limpity of the prose and the (self-reflexivity of the) telling is highlighted by this narrator when he says, early on, that he will imagine telling his tale to a sympathetic listener by a hearthside. (This oral-tale-telling element, nominally at least, similar to a 'monologue'). The story, not told with anything like chronological order, is about how Dowell came to marry Florence (a minx), and how the two of them (East Coast Americans) met another typically English upper class couple, 'good people,' Ashburnham (the 'good' soldier) and Leonora, at a spa in Nauheim, to which both couples retire for a portion of every year. Nauheim is a spa for convalescents. Having 'a heart', which both Ashburnham and Florence are 'supposed' to have, is the Edwardian idiom for heart-illness, but also, like the notion of 'goodness', is an equivocation (given this story) playing on the idea of passion. From the two couples, both Florence and Ashburnham turn out (but never lucidly relayed) to have had affairs with others, and with each other. To cut a long story short, Florence – on realizing that Ashburnham doesn't love her, loving another (as we'll see), and that her covert history as a minx has been found out – commits suicide. Ashburnham, in turn, on finding a *true* love, not just, as before, products of his egocentricity, kills himself as well, because the one woman he (truly, and finally) loves is a ward under his and Leonora's care. Having killed himself, this ward (previously sent away, due to the amorous danger), 'Nancy', goes mad. In the end Nancy ends up with Dowell (but yet again, in an eminently unconsummated cohabitation) and Leonora remarries a regular bourgeois. Not only is the tale in the telling, Dowell's highly opaque, if smooth, telling veiling how much he knows or doesn't know, and if and when, as well as veiling how much he is or is not lying to himself – but there is a kind of moral in the last part, an implicit critique of Victorian or Edwardian rigorism. Dowell comes to the realization that those with 'hearts', i.e. those most passionate and idiosyncratic, the un-herd-like, are almost inevitably sacrificed to the machine of society – as has happened. The two survivors ending up being the two (supposedly) straitlaced bourgeois, those most 'passive' in the story about (others with real) 'passion'. So Dowell writes early on in his plaintive address to the reader (now in the wake of the tragi-comic, muddy affairs), overtly perplexed, but also revealingly (of his self-deceit):

'At what, then, does it all work out? Is the whole thing a folly and a mockery? Am I no better than a eunuch or is the proper man – the man with the right to existence – a raging stallion forever neighing after his neighbour's womankind?'

Browning's 'Mr Sludge, "The Medium"', is a long dramatic monologue enacted by a highly characteristic conman, a supposed spirit-seer, a type that boomed in the Victorian period. From the first line, we enter in medias res: the background clearly being that Mr Sludge is a fraud and has been caught after many years of successful hoodwinking. His monologue (as we'll see) is like Dowell's, 'shifty', both in a literal sense (zigzagging across the topography of the text as it were) and in a figurative sense, Sludge being so desperate as to offer a profane litany of many different excuses, justifications, rationalizations, now caught. However the pertinent fact is that both his character and what he represents (for Browning's purposes) are revealed to be radically self-contradictory. He is a tragi-comic figure, who is both guilty and innocent in a way. Browning's modernism is revealed by the equivocal nature of his character and what he represents. Though on the face of things a villain, the reader comes to love him: a bit like Milton's 'Satan' in *Paradise Lost*. And the tale is also in the telling.

Having summed up the works, for my purposes, I begin with some fruitful comparisons.

Firstly, and this is a cliché, both works make use of 'unreliable narrators.' Except, they are differently deployed, and this difference is significant for what I suggest below. In many ways, the far more overt, open and self-immolating registering of the con in Browning's poem renders that narrator far more honest or 'good' than the fictional 'author' of 'the good' soldier. Secondly, there is a similarity in rhetoric deployed by both shifty narrators. As *only one instance*, early on, as throughout, Dowell uses (telltale) hyperbolic metaphors in order to imbue (or hoodwink?) the reader with a sense of the impending gravitas of his (saddest) story.

'You may ask why I write. And yet my reasons are quite many. For it is not unusual in human beings who have witnessed the sack of a city or the falling to pieces of a people to desire to set down what they have witnessed for the benefit of unknown heirs or of generations intimately remote; or, if you please, just to get the sight out of their heads.'

This is one of many examples of Dowell's 'protesting too much'; Sludge too offers different kinds of self-justification; however Dowell's seemingly seamless telling (i.e. prima facie, non-shifty) is far more sly than the hyperbole of Sludge. As we shall see, though both stories shift back and forth, Sludge's monologue is shifty in a far more overt way, almost changing personality with changing rationalizations – thus making him far more reliable at a meta-fictional level.

A second feature that the two works have in common (again, something picked up later) is the fact that both narrators elicit an osmotic effect: which is to say they are not sufficiently

individuated. In his shaky telling Dowell seems (still) attached, both to all the characters he ‘makes you see,’ and through them, his blinding and binding attachment to the (un-mastered) past, his ‘horror’ as it were, revealed as something preventing him from penning a more straight reminiscence, which would entail sufficient distance. Indeed, the main way in which Dowell is guilty is by being both character in and narrator of the ‘saddest story’, but never being able to distinguish between these roles. Quite unlike Sludge, who knows very well when he’s being disingenuous, as do we. Sludge is far more loveable.

Finally, the most pivotal scene (tying the main illicit love-affair with the just as illicit affair of modernity more generally) is the ‘Marburg scene’ where the (treacherous) ‘minuet’ of characters, the two eliding couples view the displayed relic of Luther’s protest as part of a tour or day-out from the spa at Nauheim. This recognition of the (Luther’s) ‘letter’ so to speak, plays a symbolic role, signifying modernity’s disenchantment (i.e. via the onset of Protestantism), in which the sense of selfhood is dispersed via the dispersal of any sense of authority. (Ford’s modernist credentials in other words.) ‘Authority’ being polymorphously poignant thus, for obvious reasons. For Luther in effect highlighted mediation (like a medium): both critically and affirmatively. (Which is to say, he was against the middle man, the kind of mediation enacted by authorities like priests and the body of the church more generally; *as well as* valuing above all else the individual’s experience of Gospel truth and/or God, each according to his own lights – each his own (or a) medium in that sense.) But to return to the Marburg scene: by itself and in its connection with the whole novel, it is suggestive of the doomed attempt of the Enlightenment (witness WWI) – just as much as the more imminent doom in the affairs of the ‘heart.’ The war of the sexes was a parallel thus to that other looming internecine warfare. And just as Sludge’s rhapsody is impassioned, the sense of ‘passion’ is duplicitous in Ford’s novel; both evocative of lust, and the conundrum of passivity as against integral (good) action. Indeed, (partly) tying these together, I only recently realized that in *The Good Soldier*, Dowell meets Florence at a ‘Browning Tea.’²⁴

All these aspects can be discerned as part also of the sludge and mire, *avant la lettre*, in Browning’s dramatic work. Indeed, just as we might see Dowell, on a recursive reading at least, as involved in a kind of novel-wide ‘pan-ic’, so there is muddy sliding, a kind of Pan-logism in Sludge’s narrative. He shifts throughout, at times between modes, tones, attitudes, at others in the (already-known) doomed contents of his hydra-headed special pleading.

As I see it there are *at least* five different, mutually eliding, gambits which Sludge essays. And some are part of Browning’s powerful and insightful characterization, and others, in addition to this, show a subtext Sludge enacts on behalf of his creator. Indeed, a ‘medium’, he seems at times to be a ‘reflector’ in more than the narratological, or theosophist, sense. At times, indeed throughout, he reflects a newly emergent sense of modernity in the mid-Victorian period. This being a descriptive thought-piece, I am not so much concerned with the formal features of Browning’s verse here; merely in mapping certain prominent patterns. Onto the mud and melee, then, of Sludge’s polymorphous rationalizations – and, shifty in this, in no special order...

First, there is the argument from fiction, topical in terms of the changes in literary aesthetics emerging in Browning's period. Sludge in effect justifies his long con by comparing himself to a fiction writer or romancer, a poet, or indeed an actor, thereby registering the late-romantic sense that reality and fiction are not as dichotomously opposed as all that. For instance:

'... Well, they paid for it,
And not prodigiously; the price 'o the play,
Not counting certain pleasant interludes,
Was scarce a vulgar play's worth. When you buy
The actor's talent, do you dare propose
For his soul beside!

(645-650)

The second reason he gives is if you like the argument from poverty, with the addendum of an argument from human weakness in the face of the temptations of comfort put into relief by that original poverty. As an instance:

'I lied, sir, -- there! I got up from my gorge
On offal in the gutter, and preferred
Your canvas-backs...'

(263-265)

Third, changing tack, a sign of desperation, he appeals to the desperation of those he faces. He shifts the blame, making, in modern fashion, the reader so to speak the author of the crime. The gullibility of his clients carrying the burden of moral guilt. A dubious argument. So:

'If such as came for wool, sir, went home shorn,
Where is the wrong I did them? 'Twas their choice;
They tried the adventure, ran the risk, tossed up
And lost, as some one's sure to do in games...'

(630-633)

Fourth, adverting to (the 19th century) notions of continuous or if you like Whiggish 'progress' – again, then, confusing or muddying the difference between speaker and listener – his argument is that his duplicitous practice snowballed; that once started there was (he seems

to be saying) a certain justifiable boldness and *hilaritas* in being and continuing to be resolute in that practice:

‘I think myself the more religious man.
Religion’s all or nothing; it’s no mere smile
O’ contentment, sigh of aspiration, sir –
No quality o’ the fineliter-tempered clay
Like its whiteness or its lightness; rather, stuff
O’ the very stuff, life of life, and self of self....’
(1005-1010)

Then, as ever checkering between abjectness and a kind of desperate anger born of fear at having been caught (quite a straightforward psychology) he not only shifts the blame, but completely changes tack by saying that the whole experience *wasn’t* in actual fact so much better than his youthful poverty; that he (the conman) has been treated with ire, and so on and on:

‘Don’t talk of gratitude to me! For what?
For being treated as a showman’s ape,
Encouraged to be wicked and make sport,
Fret or sulk, grin or whimper, any mood
So long as the ape be in it and no man...’
(599-603)

These are just *some* of the different ways Sludge, now a convicted charlatan, attempts to justify the unjustifiable, meanwhile being, as I say, shifty in tone or attitude, ranging from fawning and abject, to boyish and playful, to desperately a-feared and desperately angry.

To return to Ford: witness the following passage:

‘For, if for me we were four people with the same tastes, with same desires, acting – or, no, not acting – sitting here and there unanimously, isn’t that the truth? If for nine years I have possessed a goodly apple that is rotten at the core and discover its rottenness only in nine years and six months less four days, isn’t it true to say that for nine years I possessed a goodly apple?’

Just so, the Great War crept up on a deluded Europe. With Ford here, we’ve the evoking of an epistemological problem. Ford was a skeptic, which is to say someone who found the

problem of solipsism both exemplary and troubling. The idea being that just as one can't know what's at the bottom of the other's 'heart', so even within oneself, perhaps only what's immanently perceived and thus believed is what's true, as opposed to some independent or objective notion of truth. So that one's truth might be what a more commonsensical notion of truth would dub untrue or false (or indeed, fictional). In Browning this sentiment, alluded to by his unreliable narrator, has a slightly more affirmative effect. Because both he and we know it is an excuse. Sludge is in this sense more of a humanist, his obvious guilt being a cipher of unity with the reader and with his (fictional) listeners. Dowell's stance is far more nefarious (and complicit with evil) for its whale-large claiming of innocence.

As mentioned, the date August 4th is a pattern recurring in Ford's novel, much like the three deaths which end three of the parts of the novel. And it is death, symbolically considered or not, that ties up Ford, Browning – both seminal respectively – with the seminal event of the Great War.

The completion of the syllogism, then – this being a poet's poetic critique.

It is well documented that the huge and, more significantly, absurd incidence of death – doubly absurd, because for the first time the violence was as if out of the hands of the men who'd made the machines – whisked away the erstwhile guarantor of meaningful life. Writers like Ford or Sassoon often relayed this radical visceral unease by speaking of the War as an experience of the loss of control over one's life or soul – such a loss of comprehension being a prime trigger for panic. Significant also, this war was the first 'Total War', where previously guarded distinctions between public and private, army and civilians were blurred. Thus, the panic that ensued during and after is cognate, in my view, as a kind a metaphoric avatar, with the shifty logic of pan-ic in the gambits of both ('authors'), narrators. When one is no longer in control of one's destiny (the latter, a pivotal word for Ford) one is equally unable to pen that same reality in a straight or straightforward manner. There is as it were a feud raging in one-self, leading to a (conflictive) lack of being at-one with oneself. Hence (with symbolic congruence) the two duplicitous narratives. Both ('authors'), narrators are out of control. For panic is like a little death. In classical Freudian mold such anxiety, narrativised / dramatised or not, is in its essence a harbinger of death.

What, then, I am suggesting is that the features discussed – Browning unto Ford unto the equally conflicted pan-ic of the experience of war – show that Ford's first major novel, as a telling parallel to Browning, is just as much a registering of the Great War, even if not biographically intended or even chronologically able to do so. Long after his own war-trauma, Ford wrote that a new 'form' was needed for the world after the war, as opposed to that before. In a letter to a correspondent in 1931 (after the completion of *Parade's End*), then:

‘The world before the war is one thing and must be written about in one manner ... the after-war world is quite another and calls for quite different treatment.’

What I’m insinuating (and it will have to remain a poet’s dodgy insinuation) is that in the symbolic and formal as well as substantive ways Browning foreshadows Ford, Ford himself foreshadowed himself. He was a kind of seer, after all.

Part, then, of the goodness of the (made) mediums was to reflect the awful sense of crisis, privately and publicly; and not only on behalf of their creators, not only for their readers, but also by being icons and indices of the swiftly, dangerously changing times. Both creators, authors, *if not both narrator-characters*, were like operative breaths (‘spirits’) blown upon and through the matter, the brittle letter.