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A POETRY BEYOND ONESELF: COMMUNITY IN AUDEN AND GEOFFREY HILL

by

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Abstract

This project examines the ability, or inability, of the poet to speak for those other than his or herself, by looking at two poets: W.H Auden and Geoffrey Hill. Both poets feel an obligation to their communities, recognizing their linguistic medium as a product of community. However, both poets also recognize that language has a power to build or tear down a community. This power of language, to create or harm relationships among people, becomes a focus for these two poets in the poems investigated in this project, as Hill and Auden both attempt to speak for more than just themselves. For Auden, the question manifests itself in the form of modulating first personal pronouns, shifting between the singular and the plural, as Auden attempts to preserve the individual integrity among a multitude. For Hill, the question of speaking for others manifests itself as a series of questioning introspections, exposing the task as an ethical demand, but perhaps one that cannot be met ethically.

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Introduction: A Poetry That Speaks for Others

On April 4, 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. addressed a crowd of three thousand people outside of the Riverside Church in New York City. King framed his speech, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” as a moral imperative: “This I believe to be the privilege and the burden of all of us who deem ourselves bound by allegiances and loyalties which are broader and deeper than nationalism and which go beyond our nation's self-defined goals and positions. We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls ‘enemy’” (1967). King continues, emphasizing his role as the voice for the voiceless:

I speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. I speak for the poor of America who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in Vietnam. I speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. I speak as one who loves America, to the leaders of our own nation” (1967.)

King’s speech, denouncing United States involvement, was controversial. Goldwater, the Republican presidential candidate in 1964, claimed the speech “could border a bit on treason.” Its controversy surrounding his pacifism was historical, but his rhetorical position, which establishes him as the voice for the voiceless, is also worth questioning. The rhetorical problem I identify is “the problem of speaking for others,” a phrase I borrow from the title of an article by Linda Alcoff that explores both the ethical demands and obstacles of speaking for someone other than yourself.

The problem of speaking for others presents itself frequently in current political discourse, recast as the ability of one person of a certain “type” to speak for those of another “type.” There are certain experiences that are available to some groups of individuals, yet

exclude those of other groups, arguably invalidating one group's claims for or about another.

Consider the following example Alcoff uses to introduce her essay:

At a recent symposium at my university, a prestigious theorist was invited to give a lecture on the political problems of postmodernism. Those of us in the audience, including many white women and people of oppressed nationalities and races, waited in eager anticipation for what he had to contribute to this important discussion. To our disappointment, he introduced his lecture by explaining that he could not cover the assigned topic, because as a white male he did not feel that he could speak for the feminist and postcolonial perspectives that have launched the critical interrogation of postmodernism's politics. He went on to give us a lecture on architecture (5.)

Alcoff describes the issue at stake as one of "location": "where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location. A speaker's location (which I take here to refer to their social location, or social identity) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims and can serve either to authorize or deauthorize one's speech" (6-7). One's "location," using Alcoff's terms, grants a kind of experiential authority. Note how Alcoff typified herself and her peers as "white women and people of oppressed nationalities and races," on one hand validating their own position to speak on postmodern politics, while invalidating the guest speaker's experiential authority, although admitting disappointment.

But why stop at questioning one's ability to speak for those of another type -- by what authority can one human speak for another human? At its worst, speaking for others can be described as a kind of linguistic fascism. Fascist rulers such as Hitler have forcefully amplified their own voices above the many citizens of a nation; his face became the single, dominant face

of a nation. Even with the best of intentions, one risks misrepresenting those for whom he or she speaks, amplifying their own solitary voice and experience over those of the other. Indeed, granting that each individual's set of experiences is unique from that of another preserves a respectful element of mystery. However, such a recognition of one another's differences also poses a problem: if transparent empathy is impossible, how can one bear the moral responsibility Martin Luther King describes -- the imperative to be a voice for the voiceless? To respond to the difficulty of unique human experience in silence, as did the speaker in Alcoff's example, is to surrender in the face of such difficulty. Indeed, Alcoff claims that she and her peers were disappointed at the guest speaker's choice to speak about architecture, a field in which he could assume an unthreatened authority. King's claim that "we are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless" demands that we speak for those other than ourselves. We thus find the dangers of authoritarian speech colliding against the ethical demands of responsible speech situated in the preposition "for." Grammatically, it links the speaker to the speechless, but the precise nature of that link is undefined: is one speaking on behalf of the other, or is he amplifying his voice over another? Even speaking on another's behalf, as King had done, can be slippery: it is still King speaking, after all, and not those whom he represents. Perhaps to recognize the treacherous grounds of this problem unearths a friction that protects against a slipping into authoritarianism.

The political sphere is not the only setting in which the problem of speaking for another has arisen -- this problem has become increasingly pertinent in art, especially literature. A quick Google search of the question "Can white authors write black characters?" yields numerous results of varying opinions on the matter. Alcoff includes literature within the scope of her investigation, citing the example of Ann Cameron, a Canadian author who wrote novels from the first personal perspective of Native Canadian women. Since Cameron herself is not aboriginal,

she was asked to step aside at a 1988 International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal, as her works were allegedly disempowering Native accounts. Cameron agreed (Alcoff 5). The question of speaking for others manifests itself differently for the author of a story: rather than aspiring to effect change or action on the behalf of another, an author who writes fiction aspires to create. A novelist runs in the business of “making things up” -- his fictional events and characters are doubtless inspired by life experiences, but not precisely mapped by them. While the responsibilities and motivations of novelist and politician are distinct in regards to why both would speak for another, the roadblock is similar: can one speak as another (a more appropriate phrasing for narrative) or for another, when they are indeed no one other than themselves. The problem becomes a question of limiting an author’s creative imagination.

The problems of speaking for or as another are most frequently heard of in these contexts of literature and politics. Yet, in this thesis, I will explore how the problem of speaking for or as more than just oneself is also worth investigating in poetry. Poetry, I posit, grapples with this problem on its own terms. Unlike a story, a poem does not necessarily, although it may, invoke the question of character or fiction. Furthermore, the storywriter is not mistaken for his characters; while Huck is Twain’s creation, Huck’s character is clearly distinct from Twain himself. The boundary between creator and creation is not always so clearly understood in poetry, however. At times, a poem can be enunciated by a solitary voice, lacking a narrative backdrop to distinguish that voice from the actual person of the poet. This boundary between the voice on the page and that of the poet is further ambiguated by the fact that poets often draw from their own life experiences. The efforts of New Criticism to reject the conflation of the voice of a poem with the personhood of the poet attest to the prevalent confusion between the two voices. In this vein, the poet seems, at the very least, more exposed than the storyteller; should

the poet misspeak for another, he risks misspeaking for another as himself, without the veil of a fictional character. For poetry, the stakes are higher.

Speaking for others also manifests itself differently within the sphere of poetry than within the rhetorical field of politics, which seeks to persuade an audience towards some active end. To hold poetry, on the other hand, as a call to action is commonly, although not universally, considered by poets to be an error. Auden famously says, “Poetry makes nothing happen,” in his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” If poetry, unlike rhetoric, does not motivate action, then what can it do? What powers lie vested within poetry that make the question of speaking for others worth exploring as a poetic problem? In the same poem, Auden continues on to say that poetry “survives, / A way of happening, a mouth” (II, 6-10). In her work *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*, Bonnie Costello suggests of these verses that “poetry performs and voices our deepest human relations” through its medium of language; “poetry,” writes Costello, “more than any other genre, when it wrestles with political and ethical concerns, does so within the arena of language” (4-5). Indeed, words can be performative, meaning they have an ability to call into being that which they say, in instances such as “I now pronounce you man and wife,” or “His name is John.” Auden does not describe poetry as an instance of happening, however, but rather as a *way* of happening. In his Introduction to *The Theory of the Lyric*, Jonathan Culler characterizes poetics, how one ought to approach a poem, as a system that “questions the conventions that enable [a] work to have the sorts of meanings and effects it does for readers” (6). Poetics, he continues, “does not attempt to find a meaning, but to understand the techniques that make meaning possible” (6). The poems that I will draw upon in this project will not be performative instances, analogous to Prospero’s creations. Rather, they will linguistically perform and voice their own meanings, meanings related to how one can or cannot speak with,

among, or for another. In looking at how a poet can or cannot speak for another, the question can be shifted from the inquiry of private intent, of say, a politician, and more towards how language can, or cannot, bring together various individuals to augment community, rather than reinforcing predefined “types” of people. I will be looking at two poets in particular, Auden and Hill, to explore the question of how an individual poet may speak for others.

Like a political leader who dutifully speaks for or on behalf of another, Auden, as a poet, feels a public responsibility to his community. Although Auden would later repudiate his earlier “political” poetry, holding fast to his own words that “poetry makes nothing happen,” he still recognizes an important responsibility that the poet must bear: “As a poet – not as a citizen – there is only one political duty, and that is to defend one’s language from corruption.” Later in the same interview, Auden recasts this “political” duty as his *only* duty, saying, “my only duty as a poet is to defend the use of language” (*The Guardian*, 1970). The poet’s duty is to defend language from misuse. Indeed, the frequent abuses of language in the public sphere debase language into what Auden calls “nonspeech” -- words that have been so over and misused they are stripped of meaning and devolve into senseless noise. Take the adverb “literally,” for example. The word “literally” means taken in literal or exact sense, as opposed to allegorically or metaphorically. Over the past twenty years, however, the word, employed frequently on social media platforms and in pop culture discourse, began to be misused as a filler word for emphasis. Even its misuse as a tool for emphasis has devolved, as the claims people use “literally” to emphasize are hardly worth emphasizing. When words such as “literally” are frequently over and misused, they lose their meaning, and thereby their value; literally is used more often as filler than as a valuable way to describe a mode of understanding. The poet, playing “within the arena

of language,” can counteract overuse through his or her inventions, intentionally using language in alternate ways to mean more than convention may allow for.

The poet’s duty to defend the use of language is a public duty, as language is borne of community. Yet to repair the abuses of language, the poet must write against the tide of language’s public nature -- a poet has the ability to create a language of his own within a poem, an idiosyncratic language private to the singular instance of his lyric. In his prologue “Writing” from *The Dyer’s Hand*, Auden quotes Kraus: “My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin” (23). A poem works to reinvent beaten and devalued words. Auden explains Kraus’s quotation as follows:

It is both the glory and the shame of poetry that its medium is not its private property, that a poet cannot invent his words and that words are products, not of nature but of a human society which uses them for a thousand different purposes. In modern societies where language is continually being debased and reduced to nonspeech, the poet is in constant danger of having his ear corrupted... On the other hand he is more protected from another modern peril, that of solipsist subjectivity; however esoteric a poem may be, the fact that all its words have meanings which can be looked up in a dictionary makes it testify to the existence of other people. Even the language of *Finnegan’s Wake* was not created by Joyce ex nihilo; a purely private word is not possible (23.)

Poetry’s “shame” is that its words are not entirely its own; its materials are used repeatedly and sloppily within the everyday, common sphere. Yet its shame is also cause for its glory, according to Auden. Language, no matter how new, private, or idiosyncratic its usage, can be made intelligible. A dedicated reader will make some meaning, whether that meaning be rich or lacking, out of some of the most challenging poems. I use “challenging” to describe that which

challenges the current patterns of societal language, making it difficult, although not impossible, to piece together. Poetry's public duty is to privatize public speech. The intended effect is not to necessarily "change" society or affect a course of action; Auden does not anticipate his poetry will create a public that speaks in verse or poetic metaphors. Rather, the poet's duty, framed as a defense of the use of language, is to reveal that language *can* be revitalized. The poet's duty is to restore hope in heaps of dead words, to restore hope in language's ability to mean.

Auden's take on the glory and shame of poetry's linguistic medium bleeds into his poetry. Auden is often categorized into two phases: his earlier years, characterized by political and rhythmically volatile poetry, and those of his later career, marked by a more "drab" style, and as stated earlier, a shift away from political critique. Indeed, at the end of his prologue to *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, Auden describes his ideal audience as one who forgets the communal fabric of language when reading his poetry: "Occasionally I come across a book which I feel has been written especially for me and for me only. Like a jealous lover, I don't want anybody else to hear of it. To have a million readers, unaware of each other's existence, to be read with passion and never talked about, is the daydream, surely, of every author" (12). While more will be said about these two "phases" of Auden in subsequent chapters, for now let it suffice to say that despite Auden's shift away from the political anti fascist poetry of his earlier career, he does not drop his sense of public duty; rather, his public duty manifests itself more subtly, not as overt political content expressed in poetic form, but rather as an attempt to engender intimate, private communities. Auden's "million readers," are depicted as a multitude, yet not as a single mass unit. For Auden the problem of speaking for others is explored through modulating plural and singular pronouns, negotiating a "we" and "us" from an "I" and "you."

Through shifting pronouns, Auden teases out a language that allows one to speak with, although not quite for, others in community, while still exhibiting its dangers.

Hill, like Auden, feels a weight of public duty as an artist, saying, “I think men and women who write poetry or write music or paint are finally responsible for what they do” (Paris Review, 1999). Hill’s sense of responsibility is particularly heavy, and Hill goes further than Auden. Hill speaks not merely with others, but for others, because these “others” cannot write for themselves; Hill writes for the dead. Thus, Hill takes on a responsibility for the dead, both historical and fictional. In his lecture “The Democracy of the Dead,” a title he borrows from a chapter of Chesterton’s *Orthodoxy*, Hill builds upon Eliot, claiming that art of the present exists in confluence with that of the past, and that both past and present are “responsible to and for and with each other. They most fully exist in each other's presence” (Powers 2021). Similarly, Hill notes that human beings, within a community, are indebted to the dead, upon whose shoulders they now stand; Hill yearns to augment the memory of the youth, and bewails the lack thereof in the world today, a world ignorant of what Hill calls “the eternal reciprocity of tears” (Powers 2021). Auden’s voices are less concrete, arising from general pronouns; his poetry speaks within unnamed communities. Hill, however, speaks for individuals. His poetic utterances become a question of speaking correctly, not only for his sake, but for the dead who came before us.

Both Auden and Hill can be described as “challenging” poets, in the same sense that I used this adjective earlier: they both write counter to typical grammatical and semantic patterns. Hill is aware of the difficulties his poetry poses for a reader. In fact, such difficulty is intentional; the readily available, elementary discourse has no place in Hill’s poetics. His intent behind such difficulty is distinct from Auden’s. His difficulty emerges from his attempt at mimesis:

Human beings are difficult. We're difficult to ourselves, we're difficult to each other.

And

we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other. One encounters in any ordinary day far more real difficulty than one confronts in the most "intellectual" piece of work. Why is it believed that poetry, prose, painting, music should be less than we are? Why does music, why does poetry have to address us in simplified terms, when, if such simplification were applied to a description of our own inner selves, we would find it demeaning? I think art has a right—not an obligation—to be difficult if it wishes (*Paris Review* 1999.)

Given the complexities of any individual, easy or “accessible” art that caters to the mass public risks reducing the individual, or at the very least, painting a simpler image that does not interest Hill. He continues to describe such reductive art as those which are anti-democratic, while “difficult art,” he claims, “is truly democratic”: “tyranny requires simplification... Nazi engineers the simplification of language...because propaganda requires that the minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement. And any complexity of language, any ambiguity, any ambivalence implies intelligence... an intelligence working in qualifications and revelations... resisting, therefore, tyrannical simplification” (*Paris Review*, 1999). Hill’s claim appears two-fold: firstly, that artistic difficulty is justified insofar as people are difficult, and secondly that historically, simplistic language has been a tool to coerce the masses, which does not engage the intellect. Similar to Auden, Hill’s intentional difficulty pushes poetry beyond the edges of the common public or mass collective audience. Hill designs his poetry to perplex and frustrate the individual mind. Yet Hill is less concerned with creating a “private” language in

response to public misuse, although his poetry likely achieves this aim, and is more concerned with doing justice to mankind's complexities.

Both poets, then, carry a weight of public responsibility in their poetry. Yet both are faced with a modern public square that, in their view, devalues language. Both are highly critical of mass media. Auden cites Kierkegaard to describe the media of the twentieth century, in 1962, as a "kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything and nothing" (82). Auden criticizes the media for what he calls its "impersonality." Its "impersonality," which Auden describes as "the disappearance of the Public Realm as the sphere of revelatory personal deeds," has nudged poetry beyond its spotlight and into the private quarters of individual studies (80). Poetry was not, however, always such a private affair. Auden continues:

To the Greeks, the Private Realm was the sphere of life ruled by the necessity of sustaining life, and the Public Realm the sphere of freedom where a man could disclose himself to others. Today, the significance of the terms private and public has been reversed; public life is the necessary impersonal life, the place where a man fulfills his social function, and it is in his private life that he is free to be his personal self (80.)

The "personal self" that Auden describes, is linked to his or her interior intention, which has been effaced by the advent of the modern machine. He writes: "If St. George meets the dragon face to face and plunges a spear into its heart, he may legitimately say 'I slew the dragon,' but, if he drops a bomb on the dragon from an altitude of twenty thousand feet, though his intention -- to slay it -- remains the same, his act consists in pressing a lever and it is the bomb, not St. George, that does the killing" (80). The confluence between one's interior will and exterior public action is thus severed by the machine. Rather than revealing the intimacies of the human

soul, therefore, the public sphere conceals the human interior, in turn driving poetry outside its limits.

Indeed, this “gigantic something” has only increased in size since Auden’s time of the newspaper and television in the twentieth century, with the more contemporary dawn of texting and internet -- modes of communication all the more broad-sweeping and distanced. Geoffrey Hill criticized one of the poet laureates of his time, Carol Ann Duffy, for claiming that texting and poetry had much in common: “The poem is the literary form of the 21st century,” claimed Duffy, “It’s able to connect young people in a deep way to language ... it’s language as play. Just, one might say, as text messaging is language at play.” (Guardian 2011). Hill responded to Duffy’s claim: “Like Cromwell in the Rump Parliament, I beg her to consider in the bowels of Christ that she might be mistaken” (Prospect 2016). There is more at stake in poetry than playful communication. Hill criticizes the modern modes of communication for their ease and simplemindedness. Texting, for instance, is more similar to tyrannical slogans and propaganda on account of its ease and accessibility, than poetic wordplay, which at its best, demands the attentive contemplation of its audience. Hill and Auden’s poetry is less of a lighthearted play and more of an earnest, and at times, particularly for Hill, an agonizing grappling.

A willing audience is, however, quite lacking. Hill bemoans the critiques of his work that describe his poetry as “inaccessible” due to its frequent references to historical people, places, and events. In interview with Sameer Rahim, Hill says, “To say that anything outside our mindset is invalid, it seems to me intolerable...the world situation has changed drastically since the invention of the world wide web and texting and so on. If you hit on a phrase or a reference now which you don’t know, you tap it up on the computer and in five seconds you have the obscure reference.” (Prospect 2016). With so much information available with a quick Google

search, Hill argues there is no excuse for finding his references to be a deterrent. Nonetheless, Hill's references continue to frustrate less dedicated readers, those unaccustomed to poring over a text. Hill is not critical of mass media for precisely the same reason as Auden, for its impersonality, but because of how it has fostered intellectual sloth. With knowledge just a few "clicks" away and communication made quicker and easier than ever, people no longer need to work as hard to understand, or at least to feel that they understand enough. When faced with a text that demands more attention, even a quick search becomes too much effort. If the modern audience has been conditioned to discard poetry on account of its difficulty, then what is to become of human relationships, if, as Hill observes, people are all the more difficult than poetry?

Thus, both poets' senses of duty unto others is fraught with tension: for while society rejects their poetry, so does their poetry reject mass, public reception. While Auden articulates that poetry no longer finds its place in the public sphere due to its impersonality, Hill charges public discourse as tyrannically simplistic. Hill's affinity for difficulty is similar to Auden's anxiety regarding the machine's severance of public deeds and human personality. For just as dropping a bomb from a plane distances the interior will from the performed action, so can reductive, even mechanized language, distance one's speech from articulating his complex and difficult personality. The mass and speed of communication that so disturbs Hill contributes, if not creates, the "kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything and nothing" that has so swallowed public life, and seemingly pushed poetry to its peripheral. Yet, perhaps it is in this mutual rejection that poetry best completes its civic duty. Adorno, in his essay, "Lyric Poetry and Society," writes that "The lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society," for a poem can only depart so

drastically from social norms when there are social flaws from which to depart (43). While their poems certainly do not remedy a mass public's inattention or impersonality, their language counters these vices of the public. Out of such language springs alternate poetic communities, much smaller than a "gigantic something," yet much more concrete than the "abstract void" Auden bemoans. Such communities, however, can only be borne through a language that extends beyond just an individual speaker. For a poetics that cannot breach beyond an individual experience, or a poet who cannot speak for or with anyone beyond himself, does nothing to create community.

Poetry as Powerful Speech

Auden's *Horae Canonicae*

In the years 1949 through 1959, Auden wrote a sequence of seven poems called *Horae Canonicae*. The poems are structured according to the monastic hours of the church, which are prayers traditionally chanted by religious orders to sanctify the day's passing hours. There is therefore an imagined communal audience to the sequence. This imagined audience is far from passive; the canonical hours are prayers to be done, or rather, they need to be done, if we are to call them prayers at all. Auden's sequence, introduced by the epitaph "Immolatus Vicerit" -- Sacrificed He will be Victorious -- revolves around Christ's death and passion. While the poem is set on Good Friday, the violent particularities of Christ's sacrifice are not detailed. Instead, Christ's passion is dramatized through a collective voice, a first personal plural "we," that assents to His crucifixion. Religiously, such a reenactment of Christ's death and passion is familiar: Lenten ritual prayers often script a congregation's voices to demand Christ's death in unison, in order to provoke sentiments of repentance. Yet, as a poet, not a theologian, Auden uses this religious framework not to evoke repentance, but rather to underscore a great power within poetry: the power to move one to speak, and thereby think, differently than one typically would. *Horae Canonicae*, a poem to be "done," dramatizes the loss of the individual to a collective. Auden's sequence questions whether poetry can truthfully employ a collective voice, that is, can poetry speak as a "we" while preserving the individual integrities of its manifold audience?

This question of a poetic collective voice in *Horae Canonicae* is an offshoot of a broader problem -- the delicate relationship between a poet and his community -- that Auden wrestled with throughout his career. Auden problematizes the collective in *Horae Canonicae* by

presenting different models of “we.” On one hand, when a poet uses the first personal plural, he or she assumes the role of spokesman, speaking for and to a mass audience. In his earlier poetry, such as “Spain,” one of Auden’s most anthologized pieces that bespeaks the evils of fascism, Auden writes politically as a voice for the current time. Yet, scholars identify a shift in Auden’s career around 1938, just after he had written the introduction to *The Poems of Freedom*. In 1970, Auden denounced this earlier phase on account of its publicly political ambitions: “There are certain things in my history that rather embarrass me. I don’t withdraw them or deny them, the things I wrote – about Hitler and so on. But what embarrasses me is the question ‘Who benefitted?’ And the answer is me. It did not make a difference for a single Jew, or change one thing about the war. But I got a kind of kudos out of it” (*The Guardian* 1970). Indeed, holding fast to the belief that “poetry makes nothing happen,” Auden’s qualm with his political poetry lies in the fact that he benefited from war victims’ suffering. “I don’t withdraw it,” he says, “I am just suspicious of it” (*The Guardian* 1970). Rather than attempting to effect change through his verse, Auden opts for what I understand as a more intimate poetics, or a poetry that arises out of a personal need, as opposed to the needs of the public:

“What now seems to happen is that people take political action as a model for artistic creation. You get this appalling thing of asking yourself all the time, ‘is this relevant to 1970?’ This slavery to the moment is infinitely more tyrannous than constrictions I can think of. The artist ceases to ask the personal question of ‘what is right for me to do?’ and instead asks ‘what is right for 1970?’” (*The Guardian* 1970.)

Rather than envisioning himself as a grand speaker for the times and for the people, Auden aims to speak as an individual artist in a particular place at a particular moment. While his individual

voice evinces these particular contexts, they come forward as illuminated backdrops, as opposed to the focal objects of his poetry.

As an individual artist, Auden imagined himself speaking to an individual audience, striving for artistic authenticity. When asked his opinion on public readings of poetry, Auden replies: “Poetry is the spoken word. It should be read aloud, even when you read it off the page. But there is a danger you may start to think of the audience, to go for the dramatic effect. I try to think I’m reading to one person” (*Guardian* 1970). Auden implies that when faced with a mass audience, the poet risks speaking or reading to a “people” rather than a person. By keeping poetry private, the poet may be able to speak more authentically, in that he is speaking for himself to another, rather than for the time period and its masses. Auden strips himself of any political power, but in doing so, he also potentially strips himself of responsibility: if poetry makes nothing happen, then perhaps the poet is free to speak as he pleases.

Yet Auden’s question, “what is right for me to do?” while personal, is not at all politically irresponsible, but rather frames the moral dimension of his later work in terms of what he, as an individual, ought to do within his limited power as a poet. The responsibility he conceives of for himself, although limited, is no small burden: “As a poet – not as a citizen – there is only one political duty, and that is to defend one’s language from corruption. And that is particularly serious now. It’s being so quickly corrupted. ‘Speech is the mother of thought, not the hand-maiden.’” (*The Guardian* 1970). If speech is the mother of thought, then the common use of a language has the power to structure how a general public perceives and understands its surroundings. With the dawn of mass communication in the twentieth century, these structures became arguably more and more homogenized behind singular voices. Indeed, the twentieth century saw a series of tyrannical leaders sweep the Western world through powerful, persuasive

speech to unite the will of an entire nation into brute force. The collective pronoun “we” bears connotations of power and control -- connotations of which Auden was well aware.

This species of “we,” which I name the “we” of the crowd, appears in *Horae Canonicae* as the vocally violent force behind Christ’s death. The crowd likewise appears in Auden’s poem “Law Like Love,” written in 1939, as a crowd that defines the law as themselves: “And always the loud angry crowd, / Very angry and very loud, / Law is We” (262). One response to the “might is right,” tyrannical force of the angry “we” is to retreat as a solitary individual. Directly after the crowd comes the quiet voice, “And always the soft idiot softly Me” (262). Indeed, the word “idiot” is derived from the Greek “idios” meaning “private” or “one’s own.” Auden does not take on the voice of the soft idiot’s “me,” in response to modern suspicions of the forceful “we.” Instead, he reclaims the plural pronoun to speak communally in his poetry. In *Horae Canonicae*, I posit that Auden speaks for the modern man in that he is responding to a modern attack on language by expressing faith in a communal voice. While presenting the dangers of the very loud and very angry we, Auden also paints an alternative: a more personal “we,” composed of many, yet varying, individuals. This chapter will follow Auden’s *Horae Canonicae*, alongside a few others, to investigate how Auden differentiates his communal plural pronoun from the other uses of the first personal plural. *Horae Canonicae* shifts between at least two different kinds of collectives. I name the first of the two the absorbent crowd, which amasses its constituents into a single-minded existence. The other I will describe as a community of complementary antagonism, which, unlike the absorbent crowd, relies on difference among its individual members.

Firstly, I will lay out a brief description of the sequence and its varying parts, allowing me to shift from poem to poem more fluently. I will not be ordering them here according to how

they were written chronologically, but rather according to their order within the sequence. The first poem of the sequence, “Prime,” is voiced by a waking, individual consciousness. As it draws breath, however, the voice recognizes it is not alone, but rather exists within a lineage of other living beings:

...my name
 Stands for my historical share of care
 For a lying self-made city,
 Afraid of our living task, the dying
 Which the coming day will ask (628.)

We can understand it as a poetic “genesis,” in that it references a creation, birth, and fall. The second poem, “Terce,” begins with three different figures: the hangman, the judge, and the poet. The poem then shifts to the first person, enunciated by a group of mediocre citizens plagued by daily, trivial embarrassments. While “Terce” speaks of going into the city, the following poem “Sext,” and its three sections, enters the city and observes its workers. The first section admires the city craftsman at work with his “eye on object look,” opening with the phrase “You need not see what someone is doing / to know if it is his vocation” (629). The second part opens similarly to the first, saying “You need not hear what orders he is giving / to know if he has authority,” before moving on to describe the grand decision makers of the city. The third part, however, moves into the perspective of the crowd that assents to Christ’s murder. “Nones” follows “Sext” and features a dispersed and disoriented crowd after the act had been completed. In the fifth poem “Vespers,” however, the crowd is no longer present. In the most prosaic piece in the sequence, the perspective shifts to two men of opposing political views who cross paths and intellects. After “Vespers,” comes the poem “Compline,” uttered by a poet who questions his and

other poets' salvation: "Can poets (can men in television) / Be saved?" (641). The poet reflects on his limited understanding of his life and of his salvation, suggesting the death of the speaker may be at hand. The sequence ends with "Lauds," a benediction song. "Lauds" is the only poem that does not employ the first personal plural pronoun, although its repeating refrain "In solitude for company," describes, albeit cryptically, community.

While the sequence is set on Good Friday, to call Christ's death the "plot" of the poem would be incorrect. The voices, present at Christ's death, ought to speak as witnesses to the event. Rather, Christ's death takes shape as a glaring forgetfulness on the part of the citizens that nonetheless drives the sequence forward. The speaker in the penultimate poem "Compline," for example, describes his life, or the past day, as a series of recollections of "doors banging, / Two housewives scolding, an old man gobbling, / A child's wild look of envy, / Actions, words, that could fit any tale" (640). The speaker continues to categorize this list as events that resist categorization: "I fail to see either plot / or meaning" (640). Similarly, the sequential poems do not follow a rising and falling action of Christ's death. Indeed, many of the speakers struggle to recall the event. The speaker in "Compline," for example, puzzles over the past day: "I cannot remember / A thing between noon and three" (640). When a speaker or group of speakers does recall Christ's murder, as in "Nones," they do not clearly grasp *how* the act was committed:

Not one
 Of these who in the shade of walls and trees
 Harmless as sheep, can remember why
 He shouted or what about (634.)

Christ's sacrifice becomes "a thing," as named by "Compline," an event escaping the various voices' memories and understandings throughout the poems, but "a thing" that nonetheless haunts each hour.

The voices of "Compline" and "Nones" cannot recall or bear witness to the details of their own deed, since they were not present as themselves, but rather as constituents of a mass chimerical crowd. As the crowd from "Sext" disperses in "Nones" after Christ's death, the members deny their own complicity in the act: "All if challenged would reply/ -- 'It was a monster with one red eye, / A crowd that saw him die, not I'" (634). The speakers in "Nones" plead a metaphysical difference to account for their crime. Indeed, within the sequence, an individual is metaphysically different from a member of the crowd. "Prime," the voice of a waking, individual consciousness, realizes itself by way of perceiving. It begins with a series of adverbs:

Simultaneously, as soundlessly,

Spontaneously, suddenly

As, at the vaunt of dawn, the kind

Gates of the body fly open

To its world beyond, the gates of the mind,

The adverbs precede the verbs to "fly open" and to "swing to, swing shut"; the voice first describes how something is occurring, before articulating what is occurring. The two are out of the typical order, given how the mind ordinarily describes a completed action: people tend to subordinate the descriptions to the actions in a sentence. Furthermore, the stanza, the first sentence of the poem, ends with the birth of the speaker's "I":

Recalled from the shades to be a seeing being,

From absence to be on display,
 Without a name or history I wake
 Between my body and the day (627.)

The stanza is ordered according to an awakening mind, which first apprehends the manner in which something is happening, followed by what is happening, before realizing itself as the perceiving agent. Thus, the gates of mind and body are opened simultaneously, for as the eye is opened to the world beyond, so is the “I” cognizant of its own existence. The self and the world are necessarily tied to one another for the speaker, who continues on to claim that “The world is present, about, / and I know that I am, here, not alone / But with a world” (627). Existing “with” the world, the voice and outer world are partnered. For as it affirms his own existence, giving birth to his conscious “I,” he also affirms the world’s existence, as a seeing being.

If the individual is awakened as a perceiving “I,” then the crowd, characterized by a lack of perception in “Sext,” kills the individual, not by stripping him of his body, but rather by stripping his body of his consciousness. Indeed, if the individual arises as a perceiving being, there can be no such individual among the crowd, in which “its eyes (which seem one) and its mouths / (which seem infinitely many) / expressionless, perfectly blank” (632). The “anyones” of the crowd are juxtaposed against an “everyone,” a multiplicity of individual “ones” as the poem continues:

The crowd does not see (what everyone sees)
 a boxing match, a train wreck,
 a battleship being launched,
 does not wonder (as everyone wonders)
 who will win, what flag she will fly,

how many will be burned alive

is never distracted

(as everyone is always distracted)

By a barking dog, a smell of fish (632 - 633.)

While the individual is awakened by what he sees, the crowd here is characterized by what it fails to see, as particulars, ranging from “how many will be burned alive” to “a smell of fish” lie outside the crowd’s aperture of perception. Such details grab the attention of individuals, but are missed by a group that sees as a single unit:

the crowd sees only one thing

(which only the crowd can see),

an epiphany of that

which does whatever is done (633.)

The crowd’s “epiphany” contrasts starkly with the waking “I” in “Prime,” whose vision was cluttered with alliterative adverbs, nearly burying the verb. The many eyes of an “everyone” are replaced with the singular vision of the crowd, just as the many “I’s” of a group are reformed into a paradoxically singular “we.”

Lacking outward perception, the individuals likewise lose their inward existence. The crowd’s epiphany, a circular chiasmus of demonstrative pronouns, could be anything -- like a sort of blank. Similar to its blank eyes, expression, and epiphany, the crowd also expresses a blank faith:

Whatever god a person believes in,

in whatever way he believes

(no two are exactly alike),

as one of the crowd he believes
 and only believes in that
 in which there is only one way of believing (633.)

In what “thing” is there only one way of believing? The inserted parentheses offer what feel like an intimate commentary; the voice interrupts itself to speak directly to its audience. Here, specifically, it asserts that no two beliefs of a spiritual being will be identical: personal belief is inimitable from one to another. I push the boundaries of the parentheses yet further: is there any thing, even physical thing, which can be apprehended identically between two individuals? Indeed, as the crowd homogenizes individuals’ senses, the crowd also homogenizes interior belief. To think or believe differently is to think apart from the crowd as an individual. The third part of “Sext” falls in the middle of the poem, in the afternoon, the hour of Christ’s death. Yet, it is not Christ’s death that lies at the center of the poem, but rather that of the amassed individual consciousnesses in the crowd.

Just as the individual affirms its existence by the world it sees, the crowd resides as a sort of anti-existence, by its lack of seeing. In Prime, the waking consciousness thirsts for difference: “I draw breath; that is of course to wish / No matter what, to be wise, / To be different” (628). Contrastingly, in “Sext,” the crowd’s nonbeing is paved by its all-inclusive limits, leaving no room for difference. The third part of “Sext” begins with a general address:

Anywhere you like, somewhere
 on broad-chest life-giving Earth,
 anywhere between her thirstlands
 and undrinkable Ocean (632.)

The indiscriminate location sets the stage for its nondiscriminatory terms of acceptance; “Few people accept each other and most / will never do anything properly, / but the crowd rejects no one” (633). The voice continues: “joining the crowd / is the only thing all men can do” (633). While joining the crowd may be the only thing all *men* can do, no *man* can do so, for the all inclusive nature of the crowd, which exists anywhere, embracing anyone, wipes its constituents of identity, turning an individual into the “anyone” it embraces. Without defining limits, there is no definition. The crowd guts its members of their individual sight and unique, subjective belief; bereft of such internal differences, multiple members become indistinguishable from one another, unified into a hollow sameness. Bonnie Costello in her book *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others*, similarly characterizes the crowd by its binding lack: “Its inclusiveness (‘the crowd rejects no one’) is built on a negation, on complicity, not love: ‘only because of that can we say / all men are our brothers.’ Auden,” she claims, “stresses the unity of the crowd as well as its negativity by repeating and pairing ‘one’ and only”” (Costello 179). Indeed, the crowd’s broad tolerance could be mistaken for an open, accepting charity, but with all members coexisting as a single unit, there can be no exchange of love between members; the crowd could only love its nonexistent self.

While the crowd may have no real integrity, it does wield an attracting force; acceptance can be easily mistaken for charity. This force absorbs even the critical, observing voice that shifts from the second person, to the first person by the end of “Sext.” In the first part of “Sext,” the voice observes and admires the vocational craftsmen, who with “that eye-on-object look” is focused in his task: “Where should we be but for them? / Feral still un-housetrained, still / wandering through forests” (630). The employed “we” speaks of the members of civilized society, himself included, that have benefitted from their hard work and sacrifice. In the second

part of the poem, the speaker on one hand criticizes authoritative members of society in parenthetical asides, saying, “without these judicial mouths / (which belong for the most part / to very great scoundrels)” (632). Yet he also recognizes their necessity in advancing civilization:

how squalid existence would be,
tethered for life to some hut village.
afraid of the local snake
or the local ford demon (632.)

The speaker’s ability to admire and critique the different workers of the city evinces his distance from them. Furthermore, the parentheticals -- “(who does?)”, “(which belong for the most part / to very great scoundrels)” , “(think of the family squabbles and the /poison-pens, think of the inbreeding)” -- frequently punctuate and interrupt the tone of the speaker. These parentheticals are conversational and intimate, like inserted pockets of the speaker’s personality. These parentheticals continue with the initial descriptions of the crowd in the third part of “Sext,” as the speaker watches the mass group: “the crowd stands perfectly still, / its eyes (which seem one) and its mouths (which seem infinitely many) / expressionless, perfectly blank” (632). The crowd, he claims “is never distracted / (as everyone is always distracted), “the crowd sees only one thing / (which only the crowd can see),” and perhaps most disturbingly, the speaker notes the crowd “only believes in that / in which there is only one way of believing,” after intimately assuring the reader that “Whatever god a person believes in, / in whatever way he believes / (no two are exactly alike)” (632-633). These critical parentheticals or pockets of personality, however, disappear, and his perspective shifts. He affirms the crowd’s open acceptance; its inclusivity nearly appears virtuous relative to the surrounding, exclusive social world:

Few people accept each other and most

will never do anything properly,
 but the crowd rejects no one, joining the crowd
 is the only thing all men can do (633.)

As the speaker continues, he discloses his own surrender to the crowd, conceding a “we”:

Only because of that can we say
 all men are our brothers,
 superior, because of that,
 to the social exoskeletons (633.)

The crowd’s claim to inclusivity that “joining the crowd / is the only thing all men can do” also rings a note of absorbent persuasion, as if to say, “all men can do nothing *but* join the crowd.”

Thus far, we can understand the crowd’s power as twofold: firstly, that it exerts a magnetic force with its all-inclusive terms, and secondly, that it metaphysically alters, or rather annihilates, the individual. The speaker predisposes himself to the crowd’s pull when he assumes a more passive, rather than critical, stance. The switch between the critical voice and the crowd voice cannot be precisely located, but there appears to be a bridge between the two, when the speaker abstains from using any personal pronouns, before surrendering to the hollow “we,” observing that “the crowd rejects no one, joining the crowd / is the only thing all men can do” (633). “The only thing all men can do,” denotes more than the nondiscriminatory bounds of the crowd. The phrase rings of desperation: if this is the only thing all men can do, then can men, or I, for that matter, help but do anything else? This helpless tone echoes the voices within the preceding poem “Terce,” which similarly begins in the third person, before ending in the first personal plural.

“Terce” begins by depicting three different figures -- judge, hangman, and poet -- just prior to their taking on of their daily duties. These three come together to constitute the plural first person: “we are left, / Each to his secret cult. Now each of us / Prays to an image of his image of himself” (629). Their idol, a narcissistically reflexive “image of his image of himself” also reverberates of the crowd’s hollow epiphanies and beliefs. However, this collective is not yet the crowd, as each member utters his albeit pathetic and self-absorbed prayer for himself:

Let me get through this coming day
 Without a dressing down from a superior,
 Being worsted in a repartee,
 Or behaving like an ass in front of the girls (629.)

They continue, still as individuals: “Let something exciting happen, / Let me find a lucky coin on a sidewalk, / Let me hear a new funny story” (629). Mendelson, in his essay “The Great Quell” describes “Terce,” in its relaxed, more narrative tone and slowed tempo as a “calm interval of transition,” between turbulent creation and destruction. According to Mendelson, these three figures serve that transition, propelling the sequence forward towards the inevitable murder. The first prayer, Mendelson claims, are petitions to cast off public responsibility. It is prepositionally framed in the negative, hoping for a day *without* interaction or to be left alone (Mendelson 347). A litany of petitions follow this negative prayer, which Mendelson argues, desires “a world with no dimension beyond the aesthetic,” in which one may avoid facing private consequences to his actions (Mendelson 347). Such wishes, he argues, “cannot be innocent. You can move through the world untouched only if others stay out of your way. Because they never do, you must, in order to have your wish, move them out of your way” (Mendelson 348). These

prayers are indeed murderous, not only because they forecast Christ's physical murder in the sequence, but because they shut out the world beyond themselves.

In one sense, "Terce" seems to speak of an opposite sort of existence than that of the crowd: the retreat into a private, singular state. Yet, like the "soft idiot" in "Law Like Love," the choice to reject one's community in "Terce" fails to properly combat the force of the crowd. In fact, "Terce" anticipates the crowd. With a world shut out, and thus no world to perceive, the "I" in "Terce" simultaneously kills its own consciousness. At the beginning of the third stanza, the unified figures anticipate the language of the crowd: "At this hour we all might be anyone" (629). Understanding "Terce" as a bridge in the sequence, from the individual to the violent crowd, grants insight into how the individual speaker morphs into a member of the crowd in "Sext." Both poems transition into a crowd, or crowd-like mentality, in helpless tones. In "Sext," the speaker gives way to a desperate observation that "joining the crowd / is the only thing all men can do" (633). Similarly, the prayers in "Terce" begin with a repeating "Let me..." (629). The nagging petitions are formed not as an asking *for*, but rather as a series of allowances. Yet, the prayers are not asking for permission to do something, but rather wishing that something among a countless number of potential outcomes may happen. These wishes are passive. I suspect that such passivity is what makes people vulnerable to this threat of the crowd -- that such passivity is what makes the ease of the crowd so appealing, and its all-including boundaries appear as virtue. The spectator-speaker in "Sext" is no exception; to be a spectator can be a precariously passive stance. A retreat into solitary individualism does not defend against the mass cult of the crowd, but rather predisposes one to its force.

The communal audience implied by the overarching monastic structure of *Horae Canonicae* thus takes on the hauntingly hollow voice of the murderous crowd. Poetry, like the

crowd, may also drive an individual to speak and think counter to how one typically would. Indeed, Auden was suspicious of poetry's ability to move its audience, especially in the years following 1938, including the time frame in which he wrote *Horae Canonicae*. Victoria Arana in her book *W.H. Auden's Poetry: Mythos, Theory, and Practice* compares Auden's differing and often contradictory visions of poetry throughout his career. In the early 1930s, Auden described poetry as "memorable verse"; the test to a good poem was how frequently it was called to mind and recited. Verse, rhyme, and rhythm facilitate the memory. She quotes Auden: "Verse excites the words and makes them fall into a definite group, going through definite dancing movements, just as feeling excites the different members of a crowd and makes them act together. Meter is group excitement among words" (Arana 60). Arana again quotes Auden, further emphasizing his earlier, hypnotic vision of verse: "it must move our emotions or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable and the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender" (Arana 62). Paradoxically, an exciting, emotional kind of speech spellbinds its listener into a state of unconscious surrender, assenting to the rhymes and rhythms of the speech, without deeply considering the implications of the words' semantics. The emphasis on "exciting" poetry lies in the bodily component of the word, its sound, rather than the ambiguities or difficulties of its meaning.

Exciting speech is not weaponized in "Sext." The poem has no rhymes and is rhythmically undynamic. Were the poem written as exciting speech, perhaps the dangers of the crowd would slip one's notice. Auden is not attempting to absorb a crowd of readers subordinate to his *Horae Canonicae*, but is rather calling attention to poetry's potential to do so. "Nones" compares the power of the crowd to that of poetry more poignantly. The previous members of

the crowd find themselves alone with the aftermath of their deed: “We are left alone with our feat” (634). The poem is in rhyme and meter, beginning as:

What we know to be not possible,
 Though time after time foretold
 By wild hermits, by shaman and sybil
 Gibbering in their trances,
 Or revealed to a child in some chance rhyme
 Like *will* and *kill*, comes to pass
 Before we realize it. We are surprised
 At the ease and speed of our deed
 And uneasy (634.)

The speakers in “Nones” are surprised at the speed of their actions, which occurred quicker than their own consciousnesses. Their deed is likened to the pace of the verse itself, quick as the sleek rhymes of “ease,” “speed,” and “deed.” Like the crowd, rhyme and rhythm can subordinate an audience to one pace -- potentially moving quicker than our consciousnesses may be able to grasp.

The problem of the passive crowd was pressing in the twentieth century. Costello links Auden’s concern for the individual and individuals in community to the rise of modern dictators:

For Auden in the forties, as for many of the philosophers and theologians he knew or read, the private, freethinking individual was the prerequisite to the health of the public sphere; fascism, in identifying the vulnerability of individual conscience and will, had

replaced community with collectivity, the self with state power embodied in an idealized leader who takes up the narcissistic drive of the group (153.)

Indeed, the crowd grants a power in their numbers to a singular ruler; because the crowd is mindless, they act as an extension of a single mind. Auden depicts a more militant crowd in his poem "The Shield of Achilles." The ancient images of war and everyday life that had decorated Achilles's shield in the *Iliad* are replaced with scenes of modern warfare in Auden's poem. He describes the crowd as "An unintelligible multitude, / A million eyes, a million boots in line, / Without expression, waiting for a sign" (597). These millions, the passive crowd, are given their duty: "Proved by statistics that some cause was just" (597). They do not question their cause, but rather,

nothing was discussed;

Column by column in a cloud of dust

They marched away enduring a belief

Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief (597.)

Similarly, the structure of *Horae Canonicae* and the speakers specifically in "Nones," suggest the poet's power to subordinate its readers' voices to its own ought to be questioned.

Auden is not, thankfully, casting out poetry as some manipulative tool. He invokes suspicions, rather, to sharpen the eyes of his readers to the powers and dangers of verse. Emotive verse may be threatening, particularly to a passive audience. Yet, not all poetry anticipates a passive, submissive reader. In fact, Auden proposes a kind of verse in "Vespers" that demands an inquisitive, active audience. Groups of such readers create an alternative community to that of the crowd -- a community of complementary antagonism. "Vespers" illustrates an antagonistic relationship between two individuals, a utopian and an arcadian, whose paths happen to cross.

“Both simultaneously recognize his Anti-type: that I am an Arcadian, that he is a Utopian (637). The speaker looks to an innocent Edenic paradise in the past, while the Utopian looks to the future, placing his hopes in the ability of politics to restore a comparable paradise, and the ability of man to maintain that paradise. Contrary to the crowd, as these two walk together, they perceive the same scenes, but interpret and react to them differently: “Passing a slum child with rickets, I look the other way: He looks the other way if he passes a chubby one” (637). Their system of weight and counterweight continues throughout the prosaic poem, until the end, when the two take on the position of the other:

“So with a passing glance we take the other’s posture. Already our steps recede, heading, incorrigible each, towards his kind of meal and evening.

Was it (as it must look to any god of cross-roads) simply a fortuitous intersection of life-paths, loyal to different fibs?

Or also a rendezvous between two accomplices who, in spite of themselves, cannot resist meeting

to remind the other (do both, at bottom, desire truth?) of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget” (639.)

Their alliance seems kin to the Aristophanic image of one half completing the other. The first personal plural at the end of the poem is characterized by both their difference and their coming together, a fuller image founded upon their differences.

However, the two do more than just fit together as a puzzle; they “take the other’s posture,” one moving into the other. They assume the other after both picture what the other imagines in his mind: “One reason for his contempt is that I have only to close my eyes... there I stand in Eden again... One reason for my alarm is that, when he closes his eyes, he arrives not in

New Jerusalem, but on some august day of outrage... when unrepentant thieves (including me) are sequestered and those he hates shall hate themselves instead” (638-639). Imaginative sympathy binds the two, allowing both to assume the other, in a “being-in one another,” as suggested in “Compline,” as the poet looks forward to joining “the dance / As it moves in perichoresis” and “Turns about the abiding tree” (641). The imaginative faculty is at once a danger, suspending well-founded suspicions, but also the means through which one widens or fills in the missing truths within his or her personal scope. Suspicions properly pave the way for the imagination: only after a struggle between a difficult poem, which resists ready interpretation, and an active participant who weighs the verse against his own understanding, can differences be measured and established. These differences allow for an overlay in the imagination, as opposed to a homogenous subordinating and coming together.

From where exactly, then, the subordinating threat arise in poetry: its sound or its meanings? “Nones” and Auden’s suspicion of “exciting” speech articulated in his writings and interviews suggest poetry’s rhythms and rhymes as threatening to a reader’s attention, while the more prosaic structure of “Vespers” proposes a more discursive, although still syllabic, form. Yet, Auden does not throw out formal, poetic structures altogether; indeed, *Horae Canonicae* ends with “Lauds,” a poem-song tightly patterned by its cyclical repetitions. Each tercet closes with the refrain “in solitude for company,” while its two preceding lines repeat every other stanza. In other words, each line, other than the refrain, echoes itself once, excepting two lines. Furthermore, the paired lines that precede each refrain rhyme with one another. Rhyme and repetition are so essential to this poem that at times the rhymes are forced; the verse “Already the mass-bell goes dong-ding,” reverses the typical order of the onomatopoeia “ding-dong” such that it can rhyme with “turning” and “awaking.” Along with the repetitive structure come cyclical

images of a dawning day -- appropriate for “Lauds,” chanted in the morning -- such as “The crow of the cock commands awaking” and “The dripping mill-wheel is again turning ” (642). To end the sequence with the prayer said the following morning reminds its reader that the sequence itself will begin again the following day. The form of this closing poem and of the repetition of the overarching structure seem to undermine the complementary antagonism proposed in “Vespers” and “Compline,” as more emphasis is placed on the sound and repetitive act of saying the words than the interpretive ambiguities that the verses may propose.

“Lauds” does not only set itself starkly apart from the poems “Vespers” and “Compline,” however. Unlike the rest of the poems in the sequence, as mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, “Lauds” makes no use of personal pronouns. Relative to a sequence of poems largely concerned with a speaker and his relation to other persons evinced by shifting pronouns, this closing poem is grammatically impersonal. While the individual consciousness in “Lauds” is not “dead” as it had been with the crowd’s homogenized sense of apprehension and belief (or lack thereof,) the individual consciousness is mysteriously absent, or forgotten, in this song of praise. “Lauds” is not exploring or describing personal interiorities, but is an impersonal song to be sung. Its form does not encourage controversy, but unity. Those singing the hymn may, as members of creation, praise creation. Thus, *Horae Canonicae* suggests that the form of a poem must be weighed relative to its function, lest it threaten its readership. For while the repetitive, rhyming structure of “Lauds” creates an authentic song of praise, poems such as “Vespers” or “Compline,” could not exist in such a form, or at least not without contradicting themselves.

Auden combats the hollow, tyrannical “we,” with an alternate model of community, one founded upon controversy -- a fuller, more accurate depiction of love than the all-inclusive tolerance of the crowd, for these push and pull communities of antagonism grant its members the

interpretative space to remain individual. In speaking for others as a “we,” Auden allows and encourages disagreement among the many “I’s.” Auden’s “we” does not trump the voices of various individuals, but rather acknowledges the community his poetics seek to augment: communities in which manifold voices bring to the same verses manifold assortments of interpretation. Poetry is powerful speech, and the ability of poetry to collect a crowd of assenting, passive readers speaks to its powers and dangers. Yet, the alternative vision of poetry, suggested in *Horae Canonicae*, that invites a chorus of difference through its own interpretive difficulty, is no less powerful, even if it does not claim the hearts and consent of as many individuals. Its power lies in its ability to mean many things. Words have a remarkable ability, when heeded, to mean something. If we grant that this ability to mean is the power of a word, then a poem that resists easy, quick interpretations, a poem that means differently to each reader, as if a chamber of many meanings, waiting to be unlocked, capitalizes on the power of words more so than “exciting” speech. In this sense, I interpret the refrain of “Lauds” -- “In solitude, for company” -- to sing of man’s individuality; man must exist in solitude such that his company may be made more meaningful. This is one interpretation. Yet, another interpretation of this refrain is also available. “Lauds” is not enunciated by voices conscious of themselves as separate “I’s” or even as a “we,” but as natural creations, singing alongside the “small birds.”

Nonetheless, the existence of the song, written and spoken in word, attests to man’s unique logical faculties that separate him from the rest of creation. In this sense, man is solitary because he is in company: the moment man speaks of himself as a natural being, belonging to a created world, he becomes something more than natural, yet also, therefore, more solitary. Both voices, that of the personal “Vespers” and that of the impersonal “Lauds,” bespeak an interdependence

between the individual and community: both extend beyond the solitary, but only by preserving it.

Speaking for the Dead: A Wounded and Wounding Scrape

Geoffrey Hill, in his 1999 essay “Language, Suffering, and Silence,” affirms Auden’s verse from “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” that “poetry makes nothing happen.” Hill argues that to write a poem to effect some activity beyond itself is an error. Instead, Hill claims “that the achieved work of art is its own sufficient act of witness” (405). Art that seeks its ends beyond its own pages firstly renders itself a failure until such ends are met and, secondly, wages battles better fought through alternate means. Hill claims that “the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead as much as, or even more than, expressions of ‘solidarity with the poor and the oppressed’” (405). While the poor and oppressed would be better served through almsgiving, the memory may not only be kindled, but formed through poetry that does more than to memorialize. Indeed, memorializing alone falls short. In his sequence *The Triumph of Love*, Hill bemoans a “nation with so many memorials but no memory” (LXXVI). While to memorialize means to preserve the memory of, to memorize requires committed activity to learn by heart. Hill’s poetry presents an occasion for a dedicated audience “to memorize,” not simply individuals, but whole populations: Hill writes for all the dead.

This chapter will predominantly examine two of Geoffrey Hill’s works -- “Two Formal Elegies” and *The Triumph of Love* -- to investigate how Hill speaks for the dead, and the problems he encounters in speaking for those other than himself, particularly those he does not know, or at least not in the personal sense of the verb “to know.” In terms of historical, factual knowledge, Hill knows the dead very well. His poetry is often categorized as difficult, due to its frequent references to historical facts, not all of which are commonly known. *The Triumph of Love* is no exception, opening with the line: “Sun-blazed, over Romsley, a livid rain-scarp” (I).

Romsley, a city in Worcestershire, is historical and particular; this initial reference establishes a pattern of historical, particular places and people, all woven together within the one hundred and fifty sections of the poem. Hill includes no footnotes, but rather demands an active, dedicated reader to follow his work. A dedicated reader may “memorize” the dead by uncovering Hill’s references. *The Triumph of Love* is also difficult for Hill, the poet, however. Hill’s difficulty lies in the challenge of doing justice to another through language. He writes:

“Nothing true
 is easy -- is that true? Or, how true is it?
 It must be worth something, some sacrifice. I
 write for the dead” (CIV.)

The self-questioning evinces how heavy the speaker feels the gravity of his task: it cannot be easy for it to be true, a phrase which in itself, seems too easily stated for its own truth value. *The Triumph of Love* is a series of short prosaic poems that dramatizes the difficulty of writing for the dead. The poems vary: some appear to be angry rants, others ring like anxious prayers, and some read as demanding questions to which it seems there can be no answer. While certain phrases, words, and verses are repeated throughout the sequence, I have yet to excavate a logical argument that connects and clarifies these varying echoes. I can say, however, that these echoes, along with a series of self-critical voices -- sometimes in the first person and other times in the third -- establish this sequence as one that questions itself on every page. Were I to describe the sequence in terms of motion towards a completed poem, the word “hesitancy” comes to mind, although even this description falls short, as many poems are recanted or adjusted or even “deleted.” Indeed, the poem ends nearly where it begins -- “Sun-blazed, over Romsley, the livid rain-scarp” -- the only difference lying in the distinction between the article adjectives “a” and

“the,” describing “rain -scarp.” This chapter will not attempt to impart a holistic argument of *The Triumph of Love* -- perhaps that difference between “the” and “a” would be the place to begin for that essay. Rather, this chapter will examine select poems within the sequence, and how those selections admit their own difficulties and failures.

Hill introduces his sonnets, “Two Formal Elegies: For the Jews in Europe” with the problem of writing for a population one does not know: “Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed” (I). Taking the verb “disposed” to mean one’s inclinations or attitudes, knowing the dead by how they are “disposed” seems similar to how one would know or characterize the living according to disposition. Yet the subsequent lines suggest an alternate sense of “disposed,” meaning to get rid of by throwing or giving away: “Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves, / In clenched cinders not yielding their abused bodies and bonds to those whom war’s chance saves / Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song” (I). A rough grasp suggests an imprecise hold on understanding, while also likening such understanding to a rude manhandling. Indeed, the adverb “roughly” disrupts the syntax and meter of the line as a fumbling interruption. However, this rough grasp further complicates the meaning of “disposed” in that first line of the poem: while “disposed” in one sense means to get rid of by throwing or giving away, etymologically derived from the Latin *disponere*, the verb also means to put in order or to arrange. If we know the dead by how we dispose of them, then our grasp of “the song” is at once both rough, but also neatly arranged. The two sonnets themselves, “Two Formal Elegies,” can be understood as a disposal of the dead, arranging the dead into formal sonnets, as a means of knowing them, albeit roughly. If such arranging is a manhandling, why does Hill undertake this project of speaking for the dead? In what sense, then, is Hill writing *for* the dead, rather than for himself? Auden, in his elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” expresses anxiety over Yeats’s legacy

among future readers, writing that the “words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.” Hill’s anxiety is more self concerned than Auden’s, as he implicates himself as one who modifies the words of the dead. History, translated and interpreted by the living by way of memory, inevitably distorts, as it is the words of the living rather than those of the dead. Hill, aware of this problem, and his failure to resolve this pitfall, describes his project in *The Triumph of Love* as a “wounded and wounding introspection” (LXVII). Hill’s acute sense of his own failure as a poet, however, consoles him, and gratifies his personal need, or rather calling, to sacrifice for the dead.

In one sense, Hill writes for neither himself nor for the dead, but for his living readers, to remind them of the dead and to remedy their ingratitude; some grasp that he may impart, albeit it rough, is better than none at all. In the first elegy, the survival of the living is framed as a kind of injustice: “Arrogant acceptance from which song derives / Is bedded with their blood, makes flourish young / Roots in ashes” (6-8). Indeed, the survivors of war were saved randomly by “war’s chance.” This injustice, that the living reside over the dead, escalates in the second elegy, as the “living” are described in more detail:

Here, yearly, the pushing midlanders stand
 To warm themselves; men brawny with life.
 Women who expect life. They relieve
 Their thickening bodies, settle on scraped sand (4-7.)

The living overflow with such excess of life that they must relieve their thickening bodies on the “scraped” sand. This excess is intensified by sentiments of ingratitude: the ground upon which the living relieve themselves, sand, harkens back to the sand-graves in the first elegy. Here in the second sonnet, the sand is scraped. To scrape can mean to make erasures with a knife to remove,

suggesting the living erase the graves of the dead by relieving themselves. Indeed, erasing the lives of the past can bring relief, particularly when a nation bears incriminating history.

If the living scrape the sand graves to erase, Hill also scrapes the sands, although in an alternate sense of the word, meaning to gather by great effort. Hill's effort is evinced partly by erudition: his references speak to the time he has spent memorizing the dead. However, his efforts to "gather" the dead are also made all the more difficult as he questions the ethics of his project. In an interview, Hill claimed that artists -- whether they be poets, musicians, or painters -- are responsible for what they do; artists must answer for their influence upon a culture (*Paris Review*, 1999). This responsibility to a culture is raised in the second sonnet of "Two Formal Elegies," for as the sonnet suggests itself as a reminder to living, it simultaneously questions its own ethical justification for disturbing the comfort of the living by reminding them of the dead: "Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen, / Of what they have witnessed and not seen? / (Deaths of the city that persistently dies...?" (9-11). Although this question is never answered outright, the last line responds to the question with another question: "To put up stones ensures some sacrifice. / Sufficient men confer, carry their weight. / (At whose door does the sacrifice stand or start?)" (12-14). This discomfort that comes with memorizing is likened to the weight of a heavy gravestone, borne on the shoulders of the living to memorialize those of the past. This final question challenges the reader, as it places agency upon his or her shoulders. Discomfort is a sacrifice the reader can accept should he or she choose to dedicate time and effort to Hill's poetry. In this sense, Hill appears to be writing for both living and dead. Writing to prolong the memory of the dead, Hill writes for the sake of the dead. Yet, writing so the living may remember their dead, he also writes for those in the present, inviting his living readers to likewise scrape, as in to gather with great effort, the graves of the dead.

However, we must lay out a distinction here between writing *to* and writing *for*. While Hill writes *to* a living audience, small as it may be, he does not write *for* them. As cited earlier, Hill claimed that “the achieved work of art is its own sufficient act of witness” (405). If Hill writes solely to remind a living audience, then the poem relies on its readers’ understanding and dedication to its own verses for it to be accomplished, rendering the poem no longer self-sufficient. Even the qualification that Hill writes *to* a living audience must be further qualified, as Hill is not addressing the reader, even in the last line of “Two Formal Elegies.” Rather, I posit that he staggers within a sphere of self-questioning, wondering unto himself the moral ramifications of his work when read by a living audience. As a published poet with an acute conscience, Hill questions whether it is good to remind the living of the dead. However, Hill is not speaking *to* these living within the poem. Indeed, Hill rejects his audience in some of his poetry. Hill opens his sequence *The Triumph of Love* with an epigraph, an excerpt from *Nehemiah*: ““And I sent messengers unto them, saying, I am doing a great work, so that I can not come down: why should the work cease whilst I leave it, and come down to you?”” (*Nehemiah* 6:3). In the scripture passage, Nehemiah sent his messengers to deliver this message to his enemies Sanballat, Tobiah, and Gesham, who were conspiring to ambush him. Nehemiah’s “great work” is the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s city walls. The excerpt rings a defiant chord, as Hill, like Nehemiah, refuses to descend to a lower plane to meet his audience; the reader, rather, must climb to meet the work of the poem, should they so desire. In refusing to address such an audience, by not writing for or directly to them, Hill is able to preserve the integrity of his work.

Speaking to himself, Hill writes according to his own conscience, eluding the pressures of an audience. Alex Wylie argues in his article, “This: Ad Socium’?’ : Verbal Power in Geoffrey Hill’s *Triumph of Love*,” that Hill’s audience eavesdrops upon what Hill calls a “colloquy with

occasion”(39). With “occasion” derived from the Latin “occasio” meaning reason, Hill’s project can be interpreted as a conversation he holds with his own faculty of reason. Wylie argues that this colloquy takes the form of obsessive self corrections throughout the sequence, as “there is an obsession in the *Triumph of Love* with the ability, or inability to speak, concurrent with which is an obsession with being heard” (Wylie 339). Hill dramatizes the act of writing and the laborious process of editing, questioning his work as he creates it. Some are written as the speaker’s own edits that he makes, such as in sections sixty-one (“Not unworded. Endworded. / But in the extremity / of coherence”) and sixty-four (Delete: sell myself; filched from. Inert: / tell myself; fetched from. For inert read insect”) (32-33). Other comments, however, appear to be inserted from a fictitious editor, as in section forty-eight: “...Is this a misprint? For sang read sank? [Phew, / what a ‘prang’! -- ED] (24). Wylie compares Hill’s project to Galileo’s famous words -- “yet it moves” -- uttered to himself when forced to recant his heliocentric observations. In section seventy-five, the speaker cites these words himself:

...now I am half-way
 and lost -- need I say -- in this maze of my own
 devising. I would go back and start
 again; or not start at all; which might
 be wiser. No. Delete the last four words.
 Talking to oneself is in fact
 A colloquy with occasion -- *eppur*
si muove -- or so I tell myself (LXXV.)

This anecdote, on one hand, underscores the threats a public audience may pose to the integrity of a work: Galileo could only speak truthfully to himself lest he face severe punishment (Wylie

339). Yet, the anecdote also emphasizes Hill's self-corrections as compulsory; Galileo corrected himself privately, because he felt that he needed to speak, not simply think, honestly, regardless of whether his speech was recorded. Thus, Hill's corrections frame *The Triumph of Love* as a private conversation -- a "colloquy with occasion" -- that responds to some personal moral demand.

While Hill may be speaking to himself, to claim that Hill's writings are not meant to be heard would be to ignore the fact that Hill is a published poet, however. Like Galileo, Hill's words will survive only so long as they are overheard by an audience (Wylie 339). Hill's self-questioning is at once rhetorical and anti-rhetorical. Hill describes his edits as rhetorical: "My question is rhetorical, in that I expect no answer. Would it be fairer to say I do not invite one?" (XCV). Typically, rhetorical questions beg no response because they are hyper-aware of their audience: rhetorical questions emphasize in order to persuade. Hill's questions, however, are not attempting to convince an audience or listener. Indeed, these edits only further alienate an eavesdropping listener, as they do not remedy any misunderstanding, but confound the piece further. If the poet would have preferred one revision or edit to another, then it would be much clearer to simply include one line of script, as opposed to littering obsessive questions throughout the work. His corrections and questions are not for a listener to answer nor to understand; they are not for a listener at all. In this light, I interpret the final question of "Two Formal Elegies" -- "(At whose door does the sacrifice stand or start?)" -- as an anti-rhetorical rhetorical question. Hill is asking himself this last question in response to his earlier question: "Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen, / Of what they have witnessed and not seen?" (8-9). Hill's poetry does not hinge on an audience willing to open their doors to sacrifice. However, should an audience choose to eavesdrop, a kind of active listening which requires close attention,

on his arduous task of memorizing dead, they too, with a sacrifice of time and thought, would stretch and expand their memories. Thus, while Hill can with good (enough?) conscience publish his work, he is not speaking to or for a living audience.

The pressure of an audience, however, is not the only threat to the integrity of his work. Hill, speaking to himself, also faces a more pervasive and treacherous threat in attempting to write for the dead: writing for oneself. Words have an ability to distort the truth. This ability can be used by a rhetorician to misguide or persuade an audience, but it may also be used as balm to comfort oneself. In *The Triumph of Love*, this power of language is illustrated as a species of linguistic violence against the dead, particularly the victims of the Holocaust. The speaker in section twenty, for example, weaves a narrative that allows him to escape the atrocities of the Holocaust unscathed by guilt. :

“...Permit me:

refocus that Jew -- yes there,

that one. You see him burning, dropping feet first, in a composed manner,

still in suspension,

from the housetop.

It will take him for ever

caught at this instant

of world-exposure.

In close-up he maintains appearance --

Semitic ur-Engel --

terminal agony none the less

interminable, the young

martyrs ageing in the fire --
 thank you, Hauptmann -- Schauspieler? --
 run it through again and for ever
 he stretches his wings of flame
 upon instruction" (XX.)

The speaker here examines the film of a Holocaust victim, right before he is burned alive. The speaker's descriptions of the image are disturbingly calm and collected, as he comments upon the figure's aesthetics. The speaker describes the figure as "dropping feet-first, in a composed manner, / still in suspension, / from the housetop" (XX). The speaker's "refocus" upon the figure distorts the horrific reality. Garth Greenwell, in his article "The Pedagogy of Martyrdom" reads this section as an expose of language's ability to gloss over human atrocities (94). The victim in the photo is reframed as the "Semitic ur-Engel" "stretching his wings of flame." (94). "This is the kind of rhetoric," claims Greenwall, "that allows representations of atrocity to comfort: having made him an angel, we no longer need to see him in pain" (94). Greenwell argues this description, which regards suffering as a means of glorious transfiguration, is a morally insulating narrative "worthy of Job's comforters" (94). Indeed, language's ability to transfigure suffering is a kind of comfort, albeit one for the guilty party.

Hill criticizes this linguistic distortion, painting language's ability to make something other than it is as a power akin to a black art. In the following section, Hill exclaims: "Soothsayers of Suetonius and the *Annals*, / touting fatal omniscience, what / actors they were!" (XXI). He continues: "Steady professionals, escapologists, / illuminati of smoke and stench, / to their blackened fingers' ends" (XXI). Indeed, like an "illuminati" the speaker in section twenty reveals a glorious end for the victim suffering amid "smoke and stench." The "blackened fingers'

ends,” however, evince a complicity in the violence done unto the individual in the film. Hill is not the speaker in section twenty, and the descriptions granted in twenty-one respond to the question “What did I miss?” (XXI). He closes the interlude by questioning how he ought to close it: “Should I leave it like this? Or should I add / that, for the life of me, I cannot see my own future in prediction?” (XXI). Hill feels a need at the end of the section to differentiate his poetry from the descriptions in section twenty; unlike the soothsayers and the magicians, Hill cannot see into his future life, and does not pretend to possess that kind of knowledge.

Hill’s *Triumph* is clearly different from the self palliating descriptions of section twenty, as it is not an image driven work. In his chapter “The Triumph of Geoffrey Hill,” William Logan characterizes Hill’s sequence as “purged of image... as if he now distrusts words that move the reader without recourse to intellect” (153). Unlike “the poet” who “has often been scolded by critics for whom his saturated landscapes invite mere indulgent nostalgia,” claims Logan, Hill seeks no cheapened means of engaging his reader’s sympathies (Logan 153). In fact, sympathy does not seem to be what Hill is striving for in his reader at all, who addresses his reader, saying “If you so wish to construe this, I shall say / only: the Jew is not beholden / to forgiveness, of pity. You will have to / go forward block by block, for pity’s sake, irresolute as granite” (XIX). Images and spectacle, tools of magician and rhetorician-poet, move the reader too readily into a sentimental catharsis. When written to arouse catharsis, a poem risks descending into a piece written for the reader or for the poet, as opposed to those that the piece intends to commemorate or do justice towards. Thus, sentimental imagery teeters towards the folly of the “Semitic ur-Angel,” comforting or pleasuring one at the expense of the suffering of another. In his poem, “September Song,” Hill admits this threat to poetry explicitly, a threat to which he succumbs, but also resists. The poem is written with the subscript “born 19.6.32 -- deported 24.9.42” and is

written about a ten-year old that was “deported” during WWII -- “deported” being a euphemism for “killed.” The second half of the poem is as follows:

(I have made
 an elegy for myself it
 is true)
 September fattens on vines. Roses
 flake from the wall. The smoke
 of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough (8-14.)

Rather than writing for the child, Hill confesses the elegy is written for himself; the dead child will receive no comfort. Rather than stop at the parentheticals, Hill continues the poem in a series of simple sentences, each its own gentle image. Yet, even these simple sentences are scrutinized as “plenty” and “more than enough.” Surely no one or thing could do or say enough to memorialize a Holocaust victim; indeed a “perfect” memorial is likely impossible. Rather, Hill closes this elegy he has admittedly written for himself in self-restraint; the poet has consoled himself, yet pulls back from further indulgence.

Relative to the aim of writing for another rather than for himself, “September Song” is a kind of failure; the elegy is for himself. Hill is aware of such failure, and the failure becomes a focus and tragedy of the poem. *The Triumph of Love* is similar in that it fixates on failure, felt acutely when confronted with an ardent desire for perfection. Failure seems an inevitable outcome in the field of language for Hill. Although speaking to himself, Hill obsesses over speaking correctly, as evinced by his anxious self-corrections. Speaking correctly is an impossible task, however, as words are shown as defective. On some occasions, words can slip

into other words, different (perhaps even opposite) in meaning, but all too similar in sound: "... they are his faction; only for them he's not / factitious. Or did you perhaps intend / fictitious? It's self evident he can't keep up a fiction" (CXI). In other instances, precise attention is given to the exact tense of a word in question, arraying words and phrases and sentences as fragile constructions:

Ad te suspiramus

gementes, flentes: which being interpreted,

commits and commends us to loving

desperately, yet not with despair, not

even in desperation (CIX.)

At times, words' phonetic and visual similarities to one another is made a matter of jest: "For definitely the right era, read: deaf in the right ear" (CV). These puns and linguistic slip-ups unveil language as an obstacle to the poet's task. Words seem to obstruct themselves, working against the poet as a kind of faulty, haywire even, medium.

For Hill, words are more than defective, they are wounded. Indeed, Hill claims his poetic task, as I have mentioned before, is "a wounded and wounding introspection" (LXVII). Because words are wounded, they inevitably wound those they address, speak for, or represent. Linguistic errors are weighed not as simple blunders for Hill, but as sins to be forgiven. He addresses *Vergine Bella*, the Blessed Mother, numerous times throughout the sequence. The Italian invocation alludes to Petrarch, who also wrote a "Triumph of Love." For Petrarch, the Blessed Mother was a mediating figure, through whom Petrarch prayed for salvation. Hill also prays to the *Vergine Bella*, asking for forgiveness in section one hundred and twenty-five:

Vergine bella, forgive us the cunning

and the reactive, over-righteous
 indignation, the self-approving
 obtuse wisdom after the event,
 our aesthetics and our crude arrangements (CXXV.)

The catalog of sins culminates in failing aesthetics and arrangements, suggesting that poorly made art is a deep offense, one that needs forgiveness, not because of its potential to lead an audience astray, but simply for existing. Doing “justice” unto another through wounded words seems an impossible task -- so much so, that Hill proposes silence as an alternative: “Familiar to those who already know it / elsewhere as justice, / it is met also in the form of silence” (XXXV). Yet Hill does not remain silent. Indeed, to remain silent would be a kind of surrender, leaving the dead as dead, unresponsive to a “nation with so many memorials but no memory” (LXXVI).

Hill is caught at an ethical standstill: to choose to write and fail, committing an injustice unto those he speaks for, or to remain silent and unresponsive to what he feels to be a pressing need of the twentieth century, that is, memorizing the dead. I read his prayer to *La Vergine bella* in section fifty-five as an analogy for a project doomed to fail. Hill acknowledges there already exist beautiful prayers, “sound / precedents for this, of a plain eloquence / which would be perfect,” by which he could address the Virgin (LV). Instead, Hill begins his own invocation with a stutter: “But -- / ought one to say, I am required; or it is / required of me; or it is requisite that I should / make such an offering” (LV). Such an offering, however, compares to a transaction in a “tobacconist’s cum shop” or a “small convenience store”; the Virgin’s favor cannot be purchased, particularly through an offering of defective words (LV). He then

castigates invocations of the Virgin, framing prayers as curses, only to invoke her name himself directly after:

But you have long known and endured all things
 since you first suffered the Incarnation:
 endless the extortions, endless the dragging
 in of your name. *Vergine bella*, as you
 are well aware, I here follow
 Petrarch, who was your follower,
 a sinner devoted to your service.
 I ask that you acknowledge the work
 as being contributive to your high praise,
 even if no-one else shall be reconciled
 to a final understanding of it in that light (LV.)

Hill recognizes there is nothing one can do for the Virgin, and is thus left with a bare petition, dragging in her name, while simultaneously acknowledging such a prayer as an offense. Indeed, Hill's choice to refer to the Blessed Mother as "beautiful Virgin" not only alludes to Petrarch, but also frames linguistic invocations as strikingly impure in its failure. Nonetheless, such a stuttering prayer, an example of a "crude arrangement" for which he asks forgiveness in the excerpt cited in the previous paragraph, is all he has. Like every invocation, Hill has nothing to offer. Distinct from prayers of "plain eloquence," however, Hill is aware that beautiful words merit nothing by their beauty alone. Aware of language's shortcomings, his prayer is marked by humility rather than beauty.

This pained prayer, uttered in broken speech, paints an image of the sacrifice Hill undertakes in his attempt to write for the dead. As Hill attempts to speak for the dead with wounded language, the dead he cannot know apart from how we, the living, dispose of them, he fails, thus wounding those he speaks for by committing an injustice. Yet Hill also wounds himself, as he feels the weight of his failure and shortcoming. This painful self-wounding, dramatized throughout the sequence, consoles Hill: it is his sacrifice. Paradoxically, his failure to write justly for the dead, confirms his dedication to the dead, as he feels his failure so heavily. This realization, although painful, brings relief. Hill ends his sequence defining what poems are for, and what poems are. He writes:

what are poems for? They are to console us
 with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.
 Let us commit that to our dust. What ought a poem to be? Answer, *a sad*
And angry consolation. What is
 the poem? What figures? Say,
a sad and angry consolation. That's
 Beautiful. Once more? *A sad and angry*
Consolation (CXLVIII.)

The Triumph of Love closes with Hill coming to terms with his failure, with the notion that his poem is for himself. The first time the phrase “a sad and angry consolation” is uttered with difficulty. The phrase only comes after the first imperative, “answer,” as if Hill is forcing himself to admit his piece is a consolation. The second round of the phrase, although also prompted by an imperative, seems to come more easily; the command “say,” is more conversational in tone and feels less scripted. The final echo, followed by a comment on its beauty, comes responding

to a desire to hear the phrase once more. To admit his piece as a consolation, written for himself, is a relief, albeit a painful one. In this sense, Hill has inevitably failed to write for the dead. Yet, amidst the pain of his failure, Hill persists in his task of “memorizing” the dead, rather than silently surrendering, even though those memories, purveyed through broken speech, are his own.

Conclusion: Democratic Poetry

There are two main threads at this point that I have loosely tied in this investigation of poetry's part in forming linguistic communities: the ability of the poet to speak for or with another, and the need to register the difference between that speaker and the person for whom he speaks. I will attempt to pull these threads a bit tighter here in this conclusion. On one hand, the second point would seem to prevent the possibility of the first; indeed, difference between two people prevents one from speaking perfectly for another. Political leaders confront the quaking grounds between these two points in attempting to represent and to speak for a multitude. One option, although impossible to achieve, is to extinguish differences among members of a community. Such is the tactic of tyrants. Hitler, a follower of eugenics, recognized differences among men and types of men. His faith in the Aryan race as superior hinges on this recognition, and those deemed inferior -- the Jewish population, gypsies, and the disabled, to name a few groups -- suffered threats of annihilation. While Nazism defies Marxism for its denial of what Hitler calls "the aristocratic principle of Nature," Marxism also attempts to annihilate difference, in a more covert, but perhaps not in an altogether less violent, manner. Marxism, aiming to collectivize private property, sought to augment a classless society. Nazism sought to annihilate biological differences and Marxism seeks to annihilate those differences that are created by unequal distributions of capital. Stalin and Hitler, both totalitarian leaders, became the single face to represent their entire nations. Stalin's image was plastered on propaganda art, rising above the masses of Russian faces, and Hitler's name became the standard and required greeting throughout his regime. Both leaders' efforts to homogenize their nation's populations should not spark surprise: a more uniform population, with its minimalized dissent, is easier to represent and speak for, paving the way for an authority that can speak for everyone. Both

totalitarian systems under Hitler and Stalin failed. I suspect these systems, fascism and communism, will continue to fail.

Democracy, on the other hand, as conceived of in the founding of the United States, was built upon the principle of human equality -- not however, at the expense of difference. Indeed, while Jefferson proclaimed that “all men are created equal” in The Declaration of Independence, such equality was not equated with absolute sameness. Rather, in a letter to John Adams, Jefferson wrote that “there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents” (1813). Among the American founders, man was understood as unequal in almost everything, except for one thing: his nature. Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, quoted in the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1774 by John Dickinson, writes that “Nature has made us all of the same species, all equal, all free and independent of each other; and was willing that those, on whom she has bestowed the same faculties, should have all the same rights. It is therefore beyond doubt that in this primitive state of nature, no man has of himself an original right of commanding others, or any title of sovereignty.” To appropriately unpack this quotation and articulate how its principles have been implemented in the groundwork of The United States political system lies beyond the scope of this conclusion. Let it suffice to say that this recognition of equality across the human species grants every person the right to vote for a political representative, who will speak on their behalf. Yet if such equality implied uniformity, voting would be unnecessary, as no citizen’s desires or beliefs would differ.

This sense of the adjective “democratic” -- a community in which there is room and place for difference among its members -- is the sense I use when I describe the poetry of this project. The notion of a democratic poetry was first used in the introductory chapter, citing Geoffrey Hill, who described difficult poetry as democratic in its opposition to “tyrannical simplicity.” Because

difficult poetry engages a reader's intellect, which labors through a poem's ambiguities and complexities, it forces its audience to consider its language before assenting to any meaning (*Paris Review*, 1999). Thus, difficult poetry, like a democratic community, not only allows for difference among its readers, but *creates* difference among its readership, as each individual may interpret the same verses uniquely. Democratic institutions create controversy, rather than expunging it: having multiple candidates to elect, rather than a single option, for example, brings people's differing beliefs to the forefront as people must discern who to elect. The analogy between a democratic polis and what I have described as a democratic poem is not absolute: readers do not elect a poet the same way they may elect a representative, and a poet does not speak for a reader in the same way that a political leader does for his constituents. Rather, the analogy serves to underscore the necessity for interpretative differences among its readers for meaningful, rather than homogenized, communities. I am reminded of an observation offered by Chesterton in his social criticism, written in the year 1910, *What's Wrong with the World*: "It is not merely true that a creed unites men. Nay a difference of creed unites men -- so long as it is a clear difference. A boundary unites" (19). Clearly marked points of controversy, rather than vaguely drawn notes of consensus, existing in what have become known as modern "echo-chambers," can be unitive touchstones, and have the power to uphold men and women's individual integrities while in one another's company.

Communities formed by dissenting individuals, which I described as relationships of complementary antagonism in the chapter on *Horae Canonicae*, exist in response to difficult poetry. In a sense, these communities lie outside of the self-sufficient poem itself. However, in *Horae Canonicae*, communities are also the subject of the poem -- grammatically, and therefore, as is the case with poetry, semantically as well. The sequence dramatizes a community's ability

and inability to speak as a polyphony of individual voices rather than a mindless, uniform crowd. The question of democratic communities also lies at the crux of Hill's poetry discussed in this project, as Hill attempts to erect a "democracy of the dead" in the face of the "oligarchy of the living." Yet, by necessity, the problem presents itself differently in Hill: unlike the two figures in "Vespers" whose differing beliefs become a point of contact and transposition, the dead cannot speak against what the living write and say. Thus, the existential difference between the dead and the living seems to be a chasm too distant to cross. Hill is left speaking for others, rather than with others. At this point, an appropriate question is whether or not speaking for others, rather than with others, is possible to achieve justly, when those others cannot speak or push against what is spoken.

Indeed, *Triumph of Love* and "September Song," I argued, dramatize the failure to speak for someone other than oneself. Particularly *Triumph of Love* seems self-obsessed at points in its scrupulosity. Self-obsession seems to counter Hill's aim, which is to write for someone other than himself. Paul Robichaud in his article "Forgiveness and Form in Geoffrey Hill's *Triumph of Love*" reads the poem as a process of self-forgiveness for the speaker, who is initially the "Obstinate old man" who says "I cannot forgive myself," yet who becomes the "Obstinate old man" who writes "I find it hard to forgive myself" (III,1; CXLIX, 82). Robichaud describes a self-concerned speaker who forgives himself of errors and lapses of grace. The mood of the poem, according to Robichaud, is reflexive, such as in section sixty-one: "A se stesso / Not unworded. Enworded. But in the extremity / of coherence. You will be taken up. / A se stesso" (LXI). "A se stesso" or "he himself" signals the speaker is at once subject, but also the recipient of the action. Similarly, it seems at times that the speaker is speaking only to himself, and perhaps, only for himself as well. As the verse reaches beyond its "enworded" self, speaking to a

“you,” the section reverts back to its beginning line “*A se stesso*.” The speaker is not wholly self-involved; there is the second-personal “you.” Yet, Robichaud argues these several references, names, and histories grant Hill alternate materials from which to express himself (Robichaud 132). This argument depicts a claustrophobic poem -- a poem that therefore falls short of not only instituting a democracy of the dead, but falls short of creating any community, as it collapses into a self-obsessed harangue.

Yet this vision of art, as something self-obsessed, as opposed to something concerned for the other, contradicts Hill’s understanding of art. In a lecture entitled “Monumentality and Bidding,” Hill speaks against poetry as a medium of self-expression: “It is public knowledge that the newest generation of poets is encouraged to think of poems as Facebook or Twitter texts — or now, I suppose, now, much more recently, as selfies. And, as you know, in my malign way, I want to put myself in opposition to this view. That is to say, the poem should not be a spasmodic issue from the adolescent or even the octogenarian psyche, requiring no further form or validation” (Youtube 2014). Similarly, in interview with Sameer Rahim, Hill quotes the American choreographer Mark Morris to describe his own vision of his poetic aims: “I am not interested in self-expression. I am interested in expressiveness.” Hill continues on: “that put perfectly what I’ve been trying to say gropingly and inadequately for years. The idea that you write to express yourself seems to me revolting. The idea that you write to glorify or to make glorious the art of expressiveness seems to me spot on” (*Prospect* 2016). While I argue Hill writes for the dead in spite of his failure, by which he speaks for himself rather than purely for the dead, his failure is not so precipitous such that his poetry becomes nothing more than a self-portrait of his personal, interior self and anxieties. Rather, his failures to speak beyond himself

point to a collectively human failure to understand and speak for one another and even themselves.

A collective of individuals unable to speak for one another. This fragment sounds particularly anti-communal and depressingly solipsistic, I must admit. This fragment also calls to mind Auden's refrain in the closing poem to *Horae Canonicae*, "Lauds": "In solitude, for company." What kind of company is solitude? And what kind of community does this knowledge, that a failure to communicate is a universal shortcoming, really provide? Yet, what kind of community can we imagine in which persons are perfectly transparent unto themselves and others? Hill claims that "we are mysteries to ourselves, we are mysteries to each other." One may attempt to replicate the unknown depths of a human person. One may also, however, admit what he does not know; admitting what one does not and cannot know portends another as an unknown, a person of mysterious depths. To disregard the differences of another and to mold them into similarities and images of ourselves is to surely annihilate any hope of community. Rather, may a recognition of our failures to extend beyond ourselves or to adequately plunge into ourselves become a method of motioning towards another. While we cannot speak perfectly, may we at least remember that there exist things worth speaking perfectly about.

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