Elegy under the Knife:  
Geoffrey Hill and the Ethics of Sacrifice

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We read in sacred scripture: “And God tempted [fristede] Abra-
ham and said: Abraham, Abraham, where are you? But Abraham 
answered: Here am I.” You to whom these words are addressed, 
was this the case with you?

—Kierkegaard (21)

The great “experiences” of our life have properly speaking never 
been lived. Are not religions said to come to us from a past 
which was never a pure now? Their grandeur is due to this ex-
orbitance exceeding the capacity of phenomena, of the present 
and of memory. To the voice that calls from the burning bush, 
Moses answers, “Here I am,” but does not dare to lift up his eyes.

—Levinas (“Phenomenon and Enigma” 68)

The “Here I am” of the Hebrew Bible sounds different after Descartes’s 
cogito; after Kierkegaard and Levinas, the cogito sounds different with 
their re-sounding of the “Here I am.” The apodictic elegance of Desc-
artes’s certification of the subject contrasts with the Bible’s tentative 
performative: the “Here I am” names a self at risk of failing in its response 
to a call, and a self falling into danger if it succeeds. While the cogito 
names a self transparently present to itself—a “coincidence of thought 
and being in the act of self-consciousness” (Žižek 15)—the “Here I am” 
is a subject without sovereignty over thought or being, a subject in the 
vicinity of an infinite alterity and exteriority. The “Here I am” is an iden-
tity that is not simply itself because it finds itself among unreadable signs and confronted with a demand or challenge still to come. It is a creature uttering its fragility, and for modern thought about subjectivity this utterance is a revelation of an excess in the self, a dramatic noncoincidence between being and the experience of selfhood, an ontological charge that exceeds the circuitry of identity. The “Here I am”—an admission of guilt as much as presence, of obedience more than self-assertion—can never be the divine “I am that I am.” Kierkegaard himself is not simply Kierkegaard; in Fear and Trembling it is Johannes de Silentio who speaks, a pseudonym or alter ego displacing a proper name. It is in this moment of displacement that we find a capacity of the self to answer to alterity, precisely in its incapacity to sustain the cogito’s seamless equation between being and consciousness.

Levinas finds a decertification of the cogito even in Descartes’s thought: “In meditating upon the idea of God, Descartes sketched, with an unequaled rigor, […] a thinking going to the point of the breaking up the I think” (God, Death, and Time 215). The Cartesian self, after Levinas, ruptures under the thought of God that “overflows every capacity; the ‘objective reality’ of the cogitatum breaks up the ‘formal reality’ of the cogitatio” (“God and Philosophy” 173). What remains of selfhood, for Levinas, is an “assignation in which the nucleus of the subject is uprooted, undone, […] an I torn from the concept of the ego […] This is the I that is not designated, but which says ‘here I am’” (181–82). One way to understand this “assignation” that is not “designated,” or this “I” without “ego,” is as subjectivity attuned to an absolute that exceeds itself, an absolute that cannot be correlated with its own being or knowledge, and that brings that being and knowledge to crisis. Kierkegaard and Levinas imagine this absolute relation in different ways—Kierkegaard’s “Here I am” is a response directed first to God, Levinas’s first to the human other—but even in their different maps of transcendence they share an essential concern: that we notice the modern subject trembling at its implication in an alterity it can neither avoid nor understand. The trembling represents Kierkegaard’s theological critique and Levinas’s ethical critique of thought that coerces the subject into abstraction and subsumes irreducibly particular identities into universal totalities. Kierkegaard and Levinas, in their distinct (and at moments antagonistic) critiques of philosophical abstraction and totaliza-
tion, want us to understand that the human is realized as a nearly unthink-
able singularity, its uniqueness derived from its untransferable obligations and unrepresentable commitments to an alterity that cannot be reduced to the terms of the self.1

It is a sense of this ethico-theological trembling of the modern subject that I want to pursue in Geoffrey Hill’s elegies. Focusing on volumes published in 1996 (Canaan) and before, and especially on the remarkable elegy “September Song,” I examine Hill’s poetics of elegiac witness as an attempt to give form to the subject’s radical singularity in an age of its abstraction. This argument—that Hill’s elegies have at stake the self’s singularity as it is reckoned, in different ways, by Kierkegaard and Levinas—implies that the modern subject achieves its nonsubsumable singularity in its capacity to pay witness to suffering and memorialize the dead. Mourning as Hill represents it, then, is not a recuperation of self but the sacrifice of its sovereignty in an absolute responsibility for the other—an absolute responsibility in which, as Levinas describes it, the self is hostage to the other. That elegy has something to do with Levinasian ethics is not so hard to imagine, but Hill is crucial because he complicates this ethical valence of elegy with a less gentle Kierkegaardian impulse. In Fear and Trembling Kierkegaard also conceives of the subject’s singularity in the presence of the other’s mortality, but in a very different scenario: through the story of Isaac’s binding on Mount Moriah, where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son in the service of a faith that exceeds comprehension and representation. In Hill’s elegies, the fragility of the “Here I am” derives from a subtle oscillation between the extremity of Levinasian ethics and absurdity of Kierkegaardian faith, exposing a tension between the sacrifice of the self for the other and the sacrifice of the other for God. By considering Hill’s elegiac power as a function, in part, of the way it stages an encounter between two of our most radical thinkers of modern subjectivity—two thinkers who inflect philosophy with theology and bring the self to its singular reckoning in religious structures of thought—we can better appreciate the complex way that Hill’s poetry hovers between philosophy and theology, suggesting the possibility of a discourse about modern subjectivity that participates in both.
Elegy and the language of imaginative attestation

Alas!
The gold is dulled,
Debased the finest gold!
The sacred gems are spilled
At every street corner.
The precious children of Zion;
Once valued as gold—
Alas, they are accounted as earthen pots,
Work of a potter’s hands!

—Lamentations 4

A pronounced drift in recent studies of elegies written in English has been from psychology to ethical philosophy, from attention to the psychoanalytic drama of elegy as a process of the subject’s self-reconstruction after loss to a description of subjectivity taking on responsibility for the suffering or injustice experienced by the dead other. The psychoanalytic approach to elegy is probably most theoretically refined and historically thorough in Peter Sacks’s *The English Elegy*, which argues that the work of mourning, as it is instantiated in elegy, requires “a detachment of affection from a prior object followed by a reattachment of the affection elsewhere” (8) because “the dead [. . .] must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words” (9). He compares elegy to a *fort-da* game in which the subject compensates for its lost object by poetically staging its disappearance and return in ways it can control (11). Sacks’s approach is useful because it reveals the intimate, intricate involvement of elegiac lament in the subject’s psychic reconstruction after loss.

However, in subsequent studies that take more contemporary elegies as a principal focus, this model has been considered inadequate, too neat an economy of self, as if elegy in the twentieth century had too much to answer for in its relation to the dead for mourning to be a recupera-
tion of selfhood. Jahan Ramazani’s *Poetry of Mourning* explicitly makes this historical and theoretical shift from Sacks’s “view that compensatory mourning is the psychic basis of elegy” (xii) to an argument that the “economic misgivings of modern elegy” (7) “betray in their difficult, melancholic mourning the impossibility of preserving a pristine space apart, of grieving for the dead amid the speed and pressure of modern
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life” (14). Ramazani describes a mournful excess by which the modern elegy slips into a recalcitrant melancholia that “resist[s] consolation, [. . .] sustain[s] anger, [. . .] reopen[s] the wounds of loss” (ix) as a refusal of “the obliteration of the dead by the socioeconomic laws of exchange, equivalence, and progress” (14). He analogizes the psychoanalytic model of mourning, associated with traditional elegy, to market economics—to principles of rationalized value and efficiency by which the dead become a calculable and replaceable loss. But modern elegists, he argues, resist this model, try to make something unquantifiable and irresolvable of the dead, even if this resistance is ineffective. In fact, modern elegists—Ramazani specifically includes Hill—make their painful awareness of the futility of this resistance a part of their complicated aesthetic; in an influential formulation, Ramazani writes that recently, “every elegy is an elegy for elegy—a poem that mourns the diminished efficacy and legitimacy of poetic mourning” (8). Between Sacks and Ramazani, traditional elegy and its modern melancholia and self-doubt, we find a critical and literary-historical shift in the relation between the living and the dead. We might think of this as a shift in value between identity and alterity: the excessive, unsuccessful grieving of modern elegy as a sign of commitment, at the expense of the self’s autonomy, to the other in the other’s greatest distance and vulnerability.

R. Clifton Spargo calls this radical elegiac commitment an ethics. In *The Ethics of Mourning* he describes melancholia as “an ethical concern for the other” that “interrogates the symbolic social structures that contain and reduce the meaning of the other who is being lamented” (11). Opposing “psychological resolution and the status quo of memory,” Spargo writes, modern elegists make “unresolved mourning [. . .] a dissenting act, a sign of an irremissible ethical meaning” (6). This claim resembles Hill’s own critical description of “the language of imaginative attestation” (“Rhetorics” 268) crafted by “the resistant conscience of our imagination” (269) that seeks to redeem the intrinsic value of language from its degradations. While Hill frames his “resistant conscience” in terms of aesthetic value, Spargo relies on ethical terms that are explicitly Levinasian. Levinas’s ethical philosophy (which Spargo, in a rare and productive philosophical crossing of the English channel, brings into close conversation with Bernard Williams’s philosophy) raises the stakes of elegiac lament and melancholia. The ethical relation to the other—to the dead other, in elegy—becomes the very foundation of subjectivity, the encounter
by which the self is possible: for Levinas, through his massive body of philosophical and theological writing, the self achieves its precise singularity only in its untransferable responsibility for the other. Spargo invokes Levinas’s idea that identity is always already implicated with alterity, that the subject emerges as a discrete event only as a response (“Here I am”) to the other’s call:

Thus through Levinas and Williams we arrive at a paradox, which I state here as a principle: Emerging as a disruption of consciousness, responsibility means to be obligated beyond even the thoughts and actions of which we are capable; and yet despite the fact that it is always in excess of our capability, without the event of responsibility we would be less than ourselves, less than fully human. (17)

Modern elegiac literature, Spargo claims, has been especially attentive to this paradox of selfhood as a mode of excessive obligation. He suggests both that modern subjectivity becomes ethical in its capacity to mourn, and that it is this ethical capacity that delineates the contours of a particular subject in the first place—that appoints it as a presence: “What mourning imparts to ethics is a view in which the subject is signified precisely as one who is answerable to the unjustness of the other’s death, as the very being chosen by the other for responsibility” (28). Modern elegies rehearse this experience of being chosen, of coming to self through the (always belated, always insufficient) response to the suffering and death of the other.

Elegy and value

Of the many ways that Geoffrey Hill’s poetry has challenged readers over the past five or so decades, perhaps the most consequential for those concerned with modern literature’s capacity to work through philosophical problems has been this poetry’s binding ethical force, its obedience to a poetics that brings the self into responsibility for others. At its most arduous, Hill’s poetics especially implies an ethics of historical obligation, an imperative to investigate the linguistic, intellectual, and political responsibilities that we have inherited from a past increasingly vulnerable to amnesia and obsolescence. For Hill, this relation to the past is not in
any interesting sense a question of influence anxiety, as if the dead were primarily creditors of an aesthetic debt in an economy of originality, but questions of memorial obligation, tribute, and witness. He achieves a pitch of historical answerability and response that implicates subjectivity in the unfinished business of the past. In part 8 of “Funeral Music” he renders this memorial labor as an obligation we assume passively, as a necessity that may nevertheless be futile:

So it is required; so we bear witness,
Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us,
Each distant sphere of harmony forever
Poised, unanswerable. If it is without
Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or
If it is not, all echoes are the same
In such eternity. (New and Collected Poems 65)

The cautious thought that one’s suffering might have historical significance, or at least intelligibility, is delayed, syntactically refracted, and contorted into double negation: “If it is without / Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or / If it is not.” Hill makes our redemptive contact with the past an essential possibility but also a tenuous one, at the limit of linguistic coherence, amplifying the precarious irony of eternity’s indifference to our attempt to transcend temporal disasters. Hill’s complicated aesthetic transactions with and on behalf of the dead inhere in poetic techniques that make historical responsibility inextricable from the aesthetic qualities of its articulation: in his work, the fraught burdens of this responsibility manifest as poetic form.

Hill’s aesthetics of historical obligation take on various registers. Paul Robichaud, in his study of Hill’s representation of Gothic architecture, has shown how Hill acknowledges “that artistic values are implicated in societal patterns of violence and exploitation” (196) and that Hill’s “concern with the social ethics of English architecture mirrors his concern with the personal ethics of poetic workmanship” (183). This insight into the capacity of poetic craft to make urgent the injustice of past social relations resonates with Stephen James’s potent meditation on the “figure of the politically and ethically responsible writer” (34) grappling with “the social responsibility inherent in linguistic usage” (45). Focusing on Hill’s “The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy,” James asks
to what extent all writers should (or are able to) “stand by what they write.” What is it, after all, that entitles someone to write on behalf of others who have suffered—or even enlist them as “comrades”? What kind of redress might one be hoping to achieve through such a potentially presumptuous act? (42)

These questions about the risks involved in using poetry as a mode of historical witness—questions that James shows to be posed by Hill's own poetry—raise the stakes of poetic craft: bad art becomes another injustice inflicted on the unjustly dead, an exploitation and continuation of their suffering. This is Peter McDonald's crucial implication in *Serious Poetry* when he focuses on “the manner of Hill's writing” which “insists upon certain obligations—intellectual, social, ethical—that bind us to each other and to the dead” (187) in a way that is “at odds with a number of prevailing modes, and moods, of thought” (188). Hill's insistence upon our ethical obligations, inherent in his poetic form, cuts against a pervasive, complacent ahistoricism; just as important, it refuses an equally tempting complacency in an unrigorous ethical intention that postures as historical witness without registering the ambivalence and risks involved in such writing about the dead.

We might consider Hill's poetry an attempt to create a relation to the past and the dead in which the self-interest of the living is not the organizing principle, or, as Hill puts it in his Tanner lectures “Rhetorics of Value,” in which language involves “more than an easy familiarity with the surface conventions that, by and large, do not interfere with one’s self-possession or the possessiveness of one’s own interested passions” (276). Language that unsettles self-possession and self-interest makes possible an ethical approach to the dead, a reckoning with the dead as a value that retains its alterity from us, a value that cannot be exchanged for the other values we traffic in. Hill, through his lectures, traces an intricate intellectual history of concepts of nonmarket value—“intrinsic value”—through, primarily, British literature, criticism, and philosophy. This exploration, which focuses on the “questionable relationship of value-theory to the spoken and written word, especially as this is formalized in the art of poetry” (259), notes an elegiac strain of thought about intrinsic value. In Hobbes, for example:

*Leviathan,* whatever else it is or is not, is a tragic elegy on the extinction of intrinsic value. [...] Hobbes's despair, in *Leviathan,*
arises from the extinction of personal identity, which he in turn identifies with intrinsic value in the person of the young Royalist Sidney Godolphin, killed in the Civil War.

This association between intrinsic value and elegy also emerges in Wordsworth and Ruskin:

What Wordsworth and Ruskin have in common [...] is the eloquence of mourning. They are essentially elegists when they write of the intrinsicality of the despised and rejected among the common people and the common things of the earth, as Hobbes was an elegist when he wrote of “inhaerant” virtues of the dead Royalist soldier-poet Sidney Godolphin. (279)

While Hill recognizes the limitations of an elegiac approach to assessing intrinsic value and contrasts this strain of thought to less mournful alternatives, he opens the possibility for an idea about the unique power of elegiac valuation of the other. In elegy, he suggests, the self enters into an ethical relation with the dead to the extent that the self is unsettled and dispossessed by its elegiac speech act, dispossessed by its adherence to a value that exceeds the terms of its identity.

The knight of faith, his witness

First and foremost, [Abraham] does not say anything, and in that form he says what he has to say. His response to Isaac is in the form of irony, for it is always irony when I say something and still do not say anything.

—Kierkegaard (118)

In his short poem of praise and mourning, elogé and elegy, for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran theologian who was executed by the Nazi regime after participating in a plot to kill Hitler, Hill considers how intrinsic value, in its alterity, can manifest as sacrifice:

‘Christmas Trees’

Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell
bleached by the flares’ candescent fall,
pacing out his own citadel,
David Sherman

restores the broken themes of praise,
encourages our borrowed days,
by logic of his sacrifice.

Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late.
(New and Collected Poems 159)

Hill opens questions of self and other by subtly complicating the space of Bonhoeffer’s enclosure and, by allegory and implication, the dimension of psychic interiority. Most explicitly, Hill transforms the prison cell, by the logic of rhyme, into a citadel, an exclusion from an outside becoming a fortress protecting an inside. It is as if there are two interiorities or conditions of interiority, just as there are two sources of light, from the sky outside and the flares inside. There is the first interiority, enclosed in relation to an outside that it cannot access, the light seeping in second-hand, and a second interiority that is not a function of a limitation but a creation by a freedom—the freedom to commit oneself absolutely, to deliver oneself to an absolute task. Hill dramatizes an existential recalibration of interiority by which its value is knowable from the inside, intrinsically, measured out in Bonhoeffer’s own footsteps. As the poem continues, Hill shifts this spatial doubling into a temporal or historical one, with Bonhoeffer’s past commitment arriving in the present of the elegiac utterance, still felt; in fact, we might consider the elegiac utterance to be the very restoration of the “broken themes of praise” to which it refers, a performance of this restoration in its own language. The poem becomes the redemption of the sacrifice it records. The danger, of course, is that the poem puts Bonhoeffer in the position of having sacrificed for the poem—that the poem is guilty of sacrificing Bonhoeffer all over again for the sake of its own emergence.

This danger is part of what Hill signals in his final lines as the fragility of such a recalibrated intrinsic value—the fragility of this value’s redemption. We are left with two opposing alternatives: Bonhoeffer is simply murdered or he is not; the world finally answers to justice or it does not. There is no guarantee, but value in the possibility, or value in the way the possibility animates our ethical desire. Hill returns in his Tanner lectures to this either/or formulation of redemption in terms of the intrinsic value of poetic language:
The particular quality of our humanity that I am attempting to
describe, on this occasion in terms of poetry and value, is best
revealed in and through the innumerable registrations of syntax
and rhythm, registrations that are common to both prose and
poetry and to which as writers and as readers we attend or fail
to attend. (“Rhetorics of Value” 276)

We hear, or not. The potent conceit of Hill’s thought is that in certain
situations the value of the entire world is at stake, and that these situations
can depend on the integrity of language. The difficulty of the thought
is that it gestures toward a redemption that we cannot simply know in
an epistemological register, but that we can imagine in an act of hope
or faith. And it is difficult because, as in the Bonhoeffer poem, it is a
redemption to which we may have a secondhand relation, from the
outside of someone else’s existentially recalibrated interiority. The alter-
ity of Bonhoeffer’s intrinsic value to the elegiac speaker of the poem and
its audience requires a poetics subtle and scrupulous enough to perform
its mediation. The mediation of intrinsic value, as alterity, demands our
witnessing faith secondhand. And it is this mediation, through our sec-
donhand faith, that realizes an intrinsicity as value.

At the beginning of Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard’s pseudonym—
his philosophical narrator, Johannes de Silentio—briefly describes a man
who becomes obsessed with the story of Abraham’s binding of Isaac on
Mount Moriah in Genesis 22. We know nothing about this man beyond
his devotion:

The older he became, the more often his thoughts turned to
that story; his enthusiasm for it became greater and greater, and
yet he could understand the story less and less. Finally, he forgot
everything else because of it; his soul had but one wish, to see
Abraham, but one longing, to have witnessed the event. (9)

No matter how many times he confronts this story, he cannot understand
Abraham’s willing dagger raised over his son—raised, really, over an entire
prophesied people. He is in the position of Abraham’s intermediary, test-
ifying to his faith as Hill does to Bonhoeffer’s. The difference is that de
Silentio poses this man as a failed witness, overwhelmed by his task, left
dumbstruck and impotent at the event: “Every time he returned from a
pilgrimage to Mount Moriah, he sank down wearily, folded his hands, and
said, ‘No one was as great as Abraham. Who is able to understand him?’”
Kierkegaard has de Silentio introduce his own eloquent testimony to Abraham's faith by invoking this nameless man's failure to do so; it is as if de Silentio's articulation is shadowed by the possibility of its breakdown, or as if his testimony carries within it a kind of immanent silence to which it might at any moment return.

This opening scenario frames de Silentio's speech not simply as the positive act of speaking, then, but as the negation of a temporally and existentially prior silence. De Silentio—whose name, of course, means “the silent” or “of silence”—gives discourse about faith and witness a strange quality of ontological inversion, in which language also articulates the originating, generative silence it disrupts. Kierkegaard's discourse must carry this sense of its own ontological negativity if it is to testify to the unspeakability of Abraham’s terrible faith. Faith, in Fear and Trembling, is the most dangerous as well as the most important human capacity: at any moment, God may command a monstrous ethical transgression—the killing of one’s child—which it is the nature of faith to obey in recognition of an imperative higher than ethical imperatives. It is in the tension between these two incommensurable registers—the ethical and religious—that language fails to be simply constative, that it must turn to the negations, irony, and silence that also occur in Hill’s elegies. Kierkegaard writes:

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is. 

This description of Abraham's contradiction will help us understand Hill's poetics of elegiac anxiety, where an ethical response to the dead risks implication in their sacrifice and ethical guilt seeks intelligibility as faith.

In act 1 of Hill’s version of Henrik Ibsen’s Brand, Einar reproaches Brand’s religious zeal with a sarcastic accusation: “You’re good at breathing fire, / a real hot-gospeller; / that fear-and-trembling school / has taught you very well!” (13). Hill’s Kierkegaardian insult invokes the problem of articulating one’s own faith to others without mediation and hoping for it to be perceived, from the outside, as anything other than emotional excess or ethical transgression. Kierkegaard has de Silentio explain: “The paradox of faith is that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteri-
ority” (69), an interiority that is irreducibly singular in its faith and therefore not translatable into abstract, public terms. The nature of Abraham’s inexpressible interiority, however, is not simply one of private moods or feelings; it is a transformation achieved through an existential reckoning with the absurd, a belief in the necessity of what one also knows to be impossible, which results in “an interiority that is not identical, please note, with the first but with a new interiority” (69). We might understand this new interiority, incommensurable with its representations in exteriority, as the source of nonconstative language, language as negation rather than articulation—the negation of an articulate silence, the negation of negation. “[W]hat / cannot you not think?” Hill asks in “Ezekiel’s Wheel,” a poem sequence in memory of Christopher Okigbo, a poet who died in the Nigerian civil war in 1967 (Canaan 57). This double negative staggers toward thought about Okigbo’s sacrifice; it is thought as the negation of not-thinking, as if this were the mode of thinking that could bear the cost of witnessing Okigbo’s life and death. But this contortion of thought about the other’s death is fragile and has its limits. Elsewhere in the sequence, Hill notes: “Here too the shrieking / of witness, zealots / high on propane / cracked / faces in the smoke” (Canaan 56). It is a description of witnessing as dementia, similar to Brand’s excess; it is faith perceived from the outside, from which Kierkegaard’s radically subjective existential certainty is indistinguishable from insanity or criminality.

Hill elaborates this commentary on the difficulties of mediating or exteriorizing Kierkegaardian interiority, along with the dangers of leaving it unmediated, in “An Order of Service,” given here in its entirety:

He was the surveyor of his own ice-world,
Meticulous at the chosen extreme,
Though what he surveyed may have been nothing.

Let a man sacrifice himself, concede
His mortality and have done with it;
There is no end to that sublime appeal.

In such a light dismiss the unappealing
Blank of his gaze, hopelessly vigilant,
Dazzled by renunciation’s glare.

(New and Collected Poems 56)
David Sherman

It is a portrait of Bonhoeffer’s cell become simply solipsistic, the interior light inducing a white blindness rather than illumination. The man’s self-sacrifice is realized in his self-enclosure, unmediated by any other who might bear witness to his vigilance and thereby establish his value in terms of alterity. Or, put more pointedly, the man’s death can have no ethical meaning—cannot be a call to responsibility or witness—because he is not in relation to others. This relation has been sacrificed. In his Tanner lectures, Hill suggests that this solipsism can be understood as a failure to inhabit the alterity of language:

My language is in me and is me; even as I, inescapably, am a miniscule part of the general semantics of the nation; and as the nature of the State has involved itself in the nature that is most intimately mine. The nature that is most intimately mine may by some be taken to represent my intrinsic value. If it is so understood, it follows that intrinsic value, thus defined, bears the extrinsic at its heart. (“Rhetorics of Value” 269)

Hill’s description in “An Order of Service” of an interiority in no tension with exteriority, blankly and simply itself, implies a mode of language that cannot carry the weight of elegy or elegiac value. It is faith as ethical failure, a worthless faith.²

Mount Moriah

God decides to suspend the sacrificial process, he addresses Abraham who has just said: “Here I am.” “Here I am”: the first and only possible response to the call by the other, the originary moment of responsibility such as it exposes me to the singular other, the one who appeals to me. “Here I am” is the only self-presentation presumed by every form of responsibility.

—Derrida (The Gift of Death 71)

Hill’s poetry solicits a rare and complex encounter between two stark conditions that have remained for the most part separate in modern thought about subjectivity: the radically elegiac situation, in which the subject responds to—takes excessive responsibility for—the past and the dead in an ethical reckoning that gives the subject its precise contours and singularity; and the situation of faith, in its absurd embrace of the
impossible, which transforms an interiority according to an unexplainable commitment into an intrinsically valuable presence, absolute in its relation to the divine absolute. The relation between Levinas’s and Kierkegaard’s ideas hinges on their shared suggestion that subjectivity, as the “Here I am,” is answerable to some transcendent alterity, and that it is the danger and excess of this answering that constitutes the subject. And both place the subject-in-response at the scene of the death of the other, in a situation of implicit or explicit sacrifice—the elegiac subject’s implicit sacrifice of the dead other for the sake of its own utterance, the religious subject’s explicit sacrifice of the other for the sake of faith in God. In both situations, language is not simply a positivity, some constative presence, but the ironic negation of silence that must carry its difficult meanings obliquely, without exposing them to the light of abstract reason. Hill describes this situation in terms of professional literary critical work in “Scenes with Harlequins 6,” part of a sequence in memory of Aleksandr Blok: “Exegetes may come / to speak to the silence / that has arisen. It is / not unheard of” (Canaan 21). The arising of an articulate silence puts the ontology of language in question, forcing it into its double negation: it is not unheard of to speak to silence, yet it is not exactly heard, either. Levinas and Kierkegaard hear in the preontological silence the sound of subjectivity aroused to the risks of the intrinsic valuation of its singularity; Hill’s poetics, as we will see, negotiates the tension between Levinas’s ethical and Kierkegaard’s religious understandings of this valuation.

This tension between the two philosophers arises primarily in their different concepts of the ethical. For Kierkegaard, the singularity of the religious subject overcomes the abstraction and universality of ethical reason—what Kierkegaard also calls “social morality” (55). His concern is that, because the “ethical as such is the universal,” the “single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy,” must “annul his singularity to become the universal” in ethics (54). This self-annulment in the name of impersonal moral codes requires “the single individual to strip himself of the qualification of interiority and to express this in something external” (69). For Kierkegaard, the ethical is the mode by which the subject abstracts itself, renders itself interchangeable with any other subject according to universal norms. While this abstraction of the self’s particularity into ethical imperatives can be admirable and courageous, and is the condition of the self-sacrificing, traditional tragic hero, it is also a condition in which the subject loses its capacity for an unmediated
relation to an absolute value. The ethical, for Kierkegaard, is the subject’s mediation, and therefore its effacement:

The ethical is the universal, and as such it is also the divine. Thus it is proper to say that every duty is essentially duty to God, but if no more can be said than this, then it is also said that I actually have no duty to God. The duty becomes duty by being traced back to God, but in the duty itself I do not enter into relation to God. (68)

For Kierkegaard, to enter into relation with God, as a particular self with the meaning and value of one’s own selfhood at stake, is a higher capacity than to abide by the universal ethical norms that render the self’s singularity merely accidental or flawed. Faith, the “paradox that the single individual is higher than the universal” (55), makes Abraham’s dagger raised over Isaac on Mount Moriah not an ethical transgression but “the expression for the most absolute devotion, […] for God’s sake” (71). The Akedah, Genesis 22, contains “a teleological suspension of the ethical” (56), the supercession of universal codes—thou shalt not kill—in a critical reckoning of the self as something other than an instance of an abstract category: as a being that can enter into “a private relation with the divine” (60) as an irreducibly unique event in the history of beings.

Levinas’s similar critique of philosophical models of the subject as abstractable, interchangeable quiddities primarily intelligible according to the general imperatives to which they must answer nevertheless differs from Kierkegaard’s in a fundamental way. In his short discussions of Fear and Trembling, 3 Levinas argues that Kierkegaard is mistaken in equating the ethical with the universal; “the relation to the Other,” he suggests, is not an “entering into, and disappearing within, generality” (Proper Names 72). At the heart of Levinas’s ethical philosophy is the naked and vulnerable face of the other directly before us, a living demand that shatters the subject’s solipsism and insularity, not as its abstraction but as its reckoning with an alterity that cannot be reduced to the same: “It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other” (Totality and Infinity 40). The unassimilable alterity of the other ruptures the totality of the subject with the experience of a fundamental, originary responsibility:
Subjectivity is in that responsibility and only irreducible subjectivity can assume a responsibility. That is what constitutes the ethical.

To be myself means, then, to be unable to escape responsibility. This excess of being, this existential exaggeration called being me—this outcrop of ipseity in being, is accomplished as a swelling of responsibility. (Proper Names 73)

Levinas interprets the Akedah, then, not as a story about the teleological suspension of the ethical but about the assuming of responsibility for the other, the ethical awakening of the subject. He focuses on the fact that despite his devotion to God, Abraham in the end does not sacrifice Isaac:

Abraham’s attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential. (77)

For Levinas, it is the second voice, heard late but not too late, that in interrupting the sacrifice calls Abraham to his full interiority, to a selfhood responsible for the other. Merold Westphal describes this Levinasian moment, in response to Kierkegaard, as “the teleological suspension of the religious” (“Levinas’s Teleological Suspension” 153) in which the relation between the human other and divine other shifts:

the faithful have ears to hear but do not hear the cries of human anguish. When the Other does not get in the way of my seeing God, God will end up getting in the way of my hearing the Other. That is what the teleological suspension of the religious is all about. (158)

This interpretation of the Akedah as a story about the priority of our obligation to the human other over our relation to God, or even about our human obligation as our approach to God, converts the command “Thou shalt not kill” from a general, impersonal injunction into an existentially specific catalyst for the subject’s becoming as the one uniquely responsible for the other's death.4
“This is plenty”

In their disagreement over whether it is Abraham’s leap of faith into the absurd or his ethical response to Isaac’s vulnerable face that most profoundly catalyzes him as a subject, Kierkegaard and Levinas help us consider the fraught work of modern elegy. Their disagreement is relevant to elegies that address atrocities that make historical witnessing difficult or impossible because such elegies must summon ethical responsibility at the risk of sacrificing the fragile objects of their ethical attention, the objects that cannot testify on behalf of themselves. Hill’s elegies examine the elegiac tension between ethical response and sacrificial violence, demonstrating the complexity of remembrance in the aftermath of atrocity. Just as Hill’s elegiac speech is structured as the negated derivation of silence, he structures memory as the negation of forgetting. He writes in Orchards of Syon:

Memory proves forgetting. Take gipsylike klezmer, soul music not everywhere unheard, not at all times accusingly silent. (15)

The first negation—in which forgetting is the truth for which memory is evidence, or even in which forgetting is the signified for which memory is the signifier—undergoes further turns of the screw in Hill’s subsequent musical conceit. Klezmer music is not simply heard but “not everywhere unheard,” which is to say that it is heard through its silence. The accusation of this silence is directed not merely at our forgetting but at our trying to remember without knowing our forgetfulness; Hill suggests that elegiac memory must also remember that it has failed to remember, failed to hear a soulful music. Hill’s word “prove” in the first sentence is a crucial invocation—or poetic memory—of his closely related meditation in “Two Formal Elegies” published 34 years earlier, written “For the Jews of Europe.” The beginning of the second elegy is, like Orchards of Syon, concerned with the possibility of proving memory, of proving that memory arises even in forgetting:

For all that must be gone through, their long death Documented and safe, we have enough Witnesses (our world being witness-proof). The sea flickers, roars in its wide hearth.
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.

(New and Collected Poems 20)

Hill’s acute play on “proof”—by which the world is both evidence of our witness and invulnerable to it—emphasizes the ethical difficulty of claiming that the dead are now safe in our memorial care. The dead, in some situations, are never safe; witnesses to the worst suffering and injustice are never sufficient. We might read in “hearth” here, which transforms the sea into a massive furnace, an oblique shadow of the death camps across the holiday. Hill depicts a situation in which the living inhabit—“warm themselves” in—the past they forget, witnessing and failing to witness in the same moment. The poem goes on to ask: “Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen, / Of what they have witnessed and not seen?” What is at stake in this question is the idea of historical responsibility beyond knowledge and intention, of our nonindifference to or noncausal guilt for the unjust deaths of others to whom we have no rational or legal relation. Memory, in this situation, cannot will itself to a straightforward claim to witness but is mediated through silence and forgetting in a way that communicates what Susan Gubar describes as the “breakdown of any normative relations between the mourner-poet and the manifold, nameless dead” in the context of this genocide (210).

Levinas is concerned that this non-normative relation between the living and the anonymous dead still be understood as a relation, as not nothing. He considers our involvement with the dead to be a burden of answerability, as if our own being is interrogated by the other’s death:

The death of the other puts me in question, as if in that death that is invisible to the other who exposes himself to it, I, through my eventual indifference, became the accomplice; and as if, even before being doomed to it myself, I had to answer for this death of the other, and not leave the other alone in his death-bound solitude. (Entre Nous 145–46)

Hill’s poetry, in its Kierkegaardian rhetoric of silence and negation, elaborates the problems of witnessing in terms of Levinas’s ethical “as if.” This is an ethical relation, as Levinas writes, “that I discover in the extreme
urgency that calls for my help, to the point where I always come too late”
(God, Death, and Time 187).

Hill's remarkable elegy “September Song” creates this belated, self-questioning, ethically obligated voice implicated in the death of the other and capable of sacrificial violence.

September Song

born 19.6.32—deported 24.9.42

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
you were not. Not forgotten
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made
an elegy for myself it
is true)

September fattens on the vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough.
(New and Collected Poems 55)

These first lines work by negation, the repeated “un” and “not” affirming the death without naming it, without trying to bring death into the realm of positivity, just as the introductory dates identify no named person. The unnamed or unnamable disorients the language into its initial strangeness: line breaks midclause; irregular syntax in which adjectives precede both subjects and verbs; the omitted “you” and verb in the second sentence; the momentarily dumbstruck stuttering, at the heart of these three lines, of “not. Not”; the negation “undesirable” becoming the double negation “not untouchable,” a double negation that becomes most fatally ironic
in the low and mournful tones of “not forgotten.” With this phrase, the poem makes memory not an event on its own terms but a derived and secondary event, the negation of forgetting, an ethically ambiguous event that becomes part of the crime at hand. Skeptical in this way of its own memorial project, in omitting “you” from the second sentence the poem tries to leave the dead alone even as, despite itself, it continues with the address. The child is then not “passed over” by the poem as well as by the Nazis, as if this kind of poetry of witness were a latter-day plague to add to God's biblical locusts and boils and slaying of first-born sons. That this way of remembering may be so dangerous suggests we read the earlier phrase through the full stop, “not Not forgotten,” a convoluted way of saying that the child has been forgotten by being remembered in the wrong way.

The grammatical negations, syntactical self-interruptions, and unlikely biblical allusion inaugurate our ethical disorientation, making our relation to the dead a function of a negative presence. Levinas writes: “The relation with the death of the other is not a knowledge [savoir] about the death of the other, nor the experience of that death in its particular way of annihilating being” but “an emotion, a movement, a disquietude within the unknown” (God, Death, and Time 16); it is “an unknown that is not purely negative but rather in nearness without knowledge” (18). Like Kierkegaard, Levinas uses negation and double negation to describe our mysterious and essential relation to the death of the other, a nonknowledge and nonexperience that nevertheless is not nothing, that is some third term between presence and absence. He asks, “Is not death something other than the dialectic of being and nothingness in the flow of time? Does the end, or negativity, exhaust the death of the other?” (14) Trying to think the inexhaustion, the oblique presence, of the other’s absence, Levinas turns to a concept of temporality that is not simply of the order of presence and absence: “being affected by death is [. . .] an affection of the present by the nonpresent”; it invokes a moment “foreign to every present” that refracts the self’s synchrony into diachrony and refers to a past that was never a present, “a past which no memory could resurrect as a present” (“Phenomenon and Enigma” 68). This idea of a moment that is of time but beyond the subject’s temporality, a past that was never any subject’s present, inhabits the final words of Hill’s first stanza: “at the proper time.” The proper time, for Levinas, is the time proper to the self-enclosed and totalized subject, an endless present that is the self’s property, invulnerable
to the nonpresent that interrupts the self with the ethical claims of the other.

The only explicit “I” that remains in this poem, the grammatical sign of subjectivity claiming itself, is displaced both to parentheses and to something other than the present tense. “I have made / an elegy,” tensed in the past perfect, doesn’t coincide with the present tense of the utterance, suggesting that this elegy is not being spoken so much as remembered or repeated.6 We might imagine here Levinas’s ethical subject, primordially involved in the death of the other, as always already having composed such an elegy. We might even consider, along with Levinas, the very idea of identity as something founded and organized in an immemorial past by its responsibility for the other. The noncoinciding of this elegiac voice with itself—grammatically bracketed from both its principal discourse and its present tense—connotes the alterity at the heart of ethical subjectivity, the construction of selfhood that makes the mourned-for other its constitutive element. Of all the possible referents for the “it” hanging so perilously at the end of the middle line of the parenthesis, perhaps the most intriguing is the possibility that the “it” that is “true” refers to the immediately preceding word “myself”: this elegiac self is the true self, given shape and life by its witnessing to the other’s death. As Levinas writes, “the ‘me’ only surfaces in its uniqueness in responding for the other in a responsibility from which there is no flight, in a responsibility from which I could not be free” (God, Death, and Time 20). For Levinas, subjectivity emerges from a radical accountability to the other, an asymmetrical and nonreciprocal debt carried at the heart of being.

But this elegiac response is not innocent of sacrificial violence. The subplot of the poem, submerged in the opening dates, is that Hill himself was born one day before the elegized child. He is almost the same, but different; he survives but is not historically innocent in this survival, not isolated in the immanence of his being. Levinas describes our “responsibility for another in bearing his misfortune or his end as if one were guilty of causing it. This is the ultimate nearness. To survive as a guilty one” (God, Death, and Time 39). Derrida has argued that the nature of this guilt in proximity to the dead other involves Kierkegaardian sacrifice. In The Gift of Death, a complex meditation on history, responsibility, faith, and the economy of the gift, Derrida speculates on the qualities of faith that are based on “a form of involvement with the other” and, in a comple-
mentary fashion, on ethical responsibility as an “experience of absolute decisions made outside of knowledge or given norms, made through the very ordeal of the undecidable” (5). He brings Kierkegaard and Levinas together at the point where “the border between the ethical and the religious becomes more than problematic” to trace a subjectivity capable of responding to the death of the other by transforming its death into a sacrifice and by replacing the other’s sacrifice with a self-sacrifice (84). In other words, he draws on these two philosophers of singularity to consider the subject as that which is implicated in and capable of sacrifice even while animated by guilt for it. This capacity for sacrifice is the subject’s private enigma, its secret, but a secret unknown even to itself and therefore without a content it might divulge. The secret might be shared, but not revealed:

To share a secret is not to know or to reveal the secret, it is to share we know not what: nothing that can be determined. What is a secret that is a secret about nothing and a sharing that doesn’t share anything? (80)

“September Song” leaves us with a brooding image that does not tell us what it shares:

September fattens on the vines. Roses flake from the wall. The smoke of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

It is the voice of a subject in ethical proximity to the dead other, unable to articulate the meaning of its response or even to whom it is directed. Hill’s language of elegy is also the language of secrecy: it carries the panic of an interiority incommensurable with any exteriority, yet it suggests that this incommensurable elegiac interiority can establish the value of alterity, of the dead, for the selfsame presence of the living. Giving value to the dead demands a sacrifice of the living’s sovereignty over its language, so that in witnessing the dead we speak beyond ourselves and even at our own expense. In this speech beyond speech is the secret of a singularity prepared for sacrifice.
Notes

1. Michael Weston has rigorously examined the compatibility of their two critiques of philosophy in chapter 7 of *Kierkegaard and Modern Continental Philosophy*, where he argues that both are concerned with recuperating the first-person position from which the philosopher must himself speak. The essential character of this “position” is that I am not for myself a particular case of a generality: and it is this which required for both thinkers a reference to a “transcendence” which itself precludes conceptuality and which therefore involves us in a paradoxicality when we try to speak about it. (167)

2. David Lloyd’s description of the “merging of private and public realms” in *Mercian Hymns* is analogous to Hill’s description of the extrinsic at the heart of interiority; Lloyd examines how Hill creates “an idiom that allows a public voice to take on the intensity and immediacy of a private consciousness, and a private voice to gain the breadth, resonance, and authority of a public persona” (407).

3. In addition to his two short essays on Kierkegaard in *Proper Names*, Levinas makes a handful of references to Kierkegaard elsewhere. In “Phenomenon and Enigma,” for example, he takes up Kierkegaard favorably and conceptualizes “enigma” as “The God who spoke” but “said nothing, passed incognito,” as the “Kierkegaardian God […] revealed only to be persecuted and unrecognized” (66). In “God and Philosophy” he subtly rejects Kierkegaardian “fear and trembling” as an experience that precludes ethical “dis-interest” (172). And in *Totality and Infinity* he contrasts his model of ethical subjectivity to “the egoist cry of the subjectivity, still concerned for happiness or salvation, as in Kierkegaard” (305).

4. Claire Elise Katz also provides a detailed examination of the disagreement between Levinas and Kierkegaard about the Akedah. Merold Westphal puts their disagreements in the context of profound commonalities (“Transparent Shadow”), and Jacques Derrida chides Levinas for ignoring a confluence in their thought (“Metaphysics and Violence”). For an important analysis of “Levinas’s commonality with Kierkegaard on issues of fulfillment of infinite demand and the radical alterity of the other” even though this “is in tension with most of Levinas’s explicit valuations of Kierkegaard’s thought” (an analysis that focuses on books other than *Fear and Trembling*) see Jamie Ferreira 127. And for an ambitious, persuasive intellectual-historical argument that “the Kierkegaard enthusiasm” in France in the 1930s “played a major—indeed, essential—role in the origins of Levinas’s doctrine” (Moyn 165) see chapter 5 of Samuel Moyn’s *Origins of the Other*. 

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5. Giorgio Agamben takes up Primo Levi’s fiction and commentary to develop a relevant paradox of witnessing certain atrocities, a paradox in which the complete witness is by definition incapable of reporting them and any survivor capable of speech is by definition not a complete witness. He discusses Levi’s forbidding account of a child, about three years old, who was liberated from Auschwitz but unable to speak in anything but inarticulate sounds. His “non-language or dark and maimed language” cannot bear witness to anything, but Levi claims that “he bears witness through these words of mine” (qtd. in Agamben 38). Considering Levi’s claim, Agamben describes the paradox by which not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own lacuna. This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. (39)

I consider this description of testimonial language that enters into a nonsignificance reverberating with the silence of the complete witness—the dead or destroyed one—to be a more extreme version of the impulse I trace in the fragmentations, negations, and ironies in Hill’s poetry.

6. This elegiac lapse from the present is especially striking in contrast to the insistent present tense of Hill’s Mercian Hymn 25: “I speak this in memory of my grandmother [. . .] I speak this in memory of my grandmother” (New and Collected Poems 117).


Works cited
David Sherman


Elegy under the Knife: Geoffrey Hill and the Ethics of Sacrifice


