



War Began in Nineteen Sixty-Three: Poetic Responses to the 50th Anniversary

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INTRODUCTION

At a time of heightened interest occasioned by the centenary of the First World War, it is interesting to reflect upon aspects of its 50th anniversary and the considerable legacy it bestowed upon English culture. Inheritors of this legacy and revisionist historians alike seem keen to perpetuate or talk down its immense impact upon our current perceptions of the Great War and the mythology that has developed around it. Today, many of our received truths about the conflict appear to have grown out of this first great cycle of commemoration, played out in a world still populated by large numbers of living veterans willing to bear first-hand witness. Some division appears to exist between perceptions of “real history” and remembrance—the one being “factual” and the other an explorable, though invidious, form of reconstruction. It is an interesting binary entirely in keeping with the nature of the conflict itself. In his book *The Long Shadow*, David Reynolds summarizes the historian’s perspective: “In Britain this social reconstruction of the Great War around its fiftieth anniversary served to drive 1914–1918 firmly into the trenches and into poetry”.¹ Meanwhile, in *Forgotten Victory*, Gary Sheffield opens his revisionist account of the war’s conduct by dedicating a subsection of the opening chapter to “The 1960s and the Birth of the British National Perception”, before obliquely demonstrating his own point with regard to the politicization of the Great War:

British popular interest in the 1914–18 war, dormant during the 1939–45 conflict, began to reawaken in the mid- to late-1950s. It was during the 1960s,

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however, that the British national perception of the First World War as futile and incompetent became firmly established: to borrow a Marxist phrase, it had become a dominant ‘ideology’, constantly reinforced by the media.²

In fact, the slew of neo-con writing and revisionist TV programmes accompanying the post-Thatcherite centenary of the Great War have begun to constitute something of their own counter-revolutionary “ideology”, to the extent that one might be forgiven for thinking that “not royal families, but poetry/tips men into war graves”.³ Whatever one’s view on this debate, centennial studies of the conflict have gone some way to remind us that the Great War has, to a remarkable degree, become the war to construe all wars, and that this state of affairs was brought about by the work of the 1960s. Certainly, the cultural legacy left by its 50th anniversary has proved both potent and durable. The fact of this may well bear out Reynold’s contention that “we have lost the big picture: the history has been distilled into poetry”.⁴ Nevertheless, it should also serve to remind us that the period being blamed for this produced a powerful creative response worthy of renewed attention in itself.

Analysis of the period has tended to focus upon the popular imagination and the effect of programmes like the BBC’s groundbreaking TV series *The Great War* (1964), as well as the success enjoyed by musicals like *Oh, What A Lovely War!* (1963) and Alan Clark’s now infamous book, *The Donkeys* (1961). However, as Reynolds points out, “The 1960s was, in fact, the decade when the Great War poets became iconic” also. Within the poetic community, the influence of Wilfred Owen had been apparent since the 1930s, when he became something of a cult figure to the young poets of the Auden-Spender generation.⁵ It follows, then, that as Auden’s own influence grew upon subsequent generations of poets, the work of Owen and his peers would offer, at the very least, some allure. One could, indeed, compile an impressive anthology of material written as a result of renewed interest in the Great War during the decade either side of its 50th anniversary. Poets such as Ted Hughes, Christopher Logue, Michael Longley, and Jon Silkin all produced work in which the conflict appears. This group features poems about the Great War written by the offspring and grandchildren of the combatant generation, who lived through the Second World War as children and who took their creative bearings from an Auden generation which, as Samuel Hynes points out, was itself obsessed by the trenches as a result of it being too young to go.⁶ The poetry makes fascinating reading for a current audience, perhaps more so for practitioners, since the very contemporaneity of its style conditioned predominant modes of response yet current. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this auxiliary canon of Great War poetry exerts almost as much influence upon contemporary writers as the “primary source” material provided by the trench poets themselves, albeit a different and subtler kind. In many ways, then, the 1960s saw the emergence of *two* Great War poetic canons: that of the Sassoon, Graves and Owen school of soldier-poets themselves and the subtler inauguration of a secondary canon written largely as cultural reception. The second of these—

what Fran Brearton calls “post-war Great War poems”⁷—is fascinating, both in the form of expression which evolved and in the questions of witness it posed, given that it has to do with a writer’s use of shared material avowedly not drawn from direct experience. It is this secondary canon that I’d like to consider here—chiefly because it is born of creative processes closer to those undergone by poets currently using the Great War as their subject. To a surprising degree, the war remains, as Ted Hughes put it back in 1965, “The National Ghost”.⁸

Hughes’s 1957 debut *The Hawk in the Rain* resoundingly announced the arrival of a major new voice in English poetry. The elemental social and folkloric struggles that underpin the collection take a decidedly military turn in its closing sequence, in which Hughes vividly explores various dimensions of modern warfare. The thematic unity of the sequence offers us an opportunity to glimpse his remarkably consistent talent for penetrating the scrutinized moment and drawing from it maximum emotional and linguistic effect. The ironic contrast between “the national sorrow” of the cenotaph and the “Secretest, tiniest” loneliness of the widow in “Griefs for Dead Soldiers” is, for instance, extremely moving:

She cannot build her sorrow into a monument
And walk away from it. Closer than thinking
The dead man hangs around her neck, but never
Close enough to be touched, or thanked even
For being all that remains in a world smashed.⁹

Here, the dead man hanging around the widow’s neck gives vibrant expression to the almost preternatural pervasiveness of Hughes’s notion of a national sorrow. Collectively and individually, the Great War dead *are* his “National Ghost”: closer than thought itself yet never close enough to be touched even by their loved ones. The dead man here comes to represent what Paul Fussell was later to characterize as “the essential condition of consciousness in the twentieth century”.¹⁰ Most fascinating is the degree to which Hughes manages to channel a Great War literacy—acquired from his father and the war poets themselves—into creating work, of itself, distinct and contemporary. Consider the lines from “The Casualty”, “But already, in a brambled ditch, suddenly-smashed | Stems twitch” and how proximate their seeing is to those from Owen’s “Spring Offensive”: “When even the little brambles would not yield | But clutched and clung to them like sorrowing arms”. And, in the same poem, Hughes’s trademark intimacy with the natural world betrays something of Blunden in the way that it provides broader perspective to war’s human destruction, in terms of its effects upon wildlife and landscape:

In the stubble a pheasant
Is craning every way in astonishment.
The hare that hops up, quizzical, hesitant,
Flattens ears and tears madly away and the wren warns.¹¹

Similarly, the nightmare of “Bayonet Charge” is rendered in a phrasing that consciously resonates with Owen’s own from a poem such as “Dulce Et Decorum Est”. The flashback of a dreamer, “Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge | that dazzled with rifle fire” palpably feeds off the energies of “But someone still was yelling out and stumbling, | And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime”, for instance. In the same way, the fully realized ironies of the “national sorrow” in “Griefs for Dead Soldiers” clearly channel Sassoon’s anger at the “peace-complacent stone” of the Menin Gate’s “sepulchre of crime”.¹² The influences are evident, but Hughes’s achievement here goes further for, in finding his own voice through these poems, he was collaterally demonstrating how the war’s long shadow might be a legitimate subject for contemporary poetry.

Perhaps the best-regarded post-war Great War lyric from this sequence is the *ekphrastic* “Six Young Men”. Certainly, it is the poem that has provided subsequent poets with a well-wrought method of entry into writing about the Great War. One may characterize this as the *objet trouvé* route back to 1914–1918, usually facilitated by archival or family artefacts which allow the poet some sense of “direct access” to the events of a century or, in Hughes’s case, “Four decades” earlier. The fact that this was Europe’s first widely filmed and photographed conflict proved hugely significant in providing non-combatant writers, working after-the-fact, with the necessary authenticating elements for their work. The poem is inherently dialogical, enlisting, as it does, a three-way relationship between poet, picture, and the implied reader. In some respects, Hughes has chanced upon a form of chronotope in which the photograph itself allows time to become artistically visible. Such pity as is on display here is of a more considered and remote order than Owen’s, in keeping with the added remove of historical hindsight. Hughes’s evocation of tragic loss manages to be no less visceral, however, on its own terms. The opening stanza literally frames the subject and provides it with a temporal context, self-consciously alerting the reader to the age of the photograph as well as the ages of the young men. As implied readers, we are made subtly aware of the temporal disconnection between ourselves and the poem’s subject, with the reference to their hats being “not now fashionable”. In contrast, the descriptions which form the second half of this stanza are details of timeless human traits, recognizable in any group of young men having their picture taken:

One imparts an intimate smile,
One chews grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride—

The issue of recognition is a key one; locally, it draws the reader onto the opening stanza’s closing barb: “Six months after this picture they were all dead”. However, the sheer *plausibility* of recognizable description here also inaugurates a compositional trick deployed in much Great-War-related poetry subsequent to this poem: whether that be the just-out-of-reach distance of

Larkin's descriptions in "MCMXIV" or the patina of ageless human nature used here. The essential bid for empathetic verisimilitude which underpins this feature is reinforced in stanza two, following the shocking revelation that all the young men are dead. The dialogical focus is shifted to that now taking place between the poet and his putative reader, whose imaginative consent he courts, in almost Wordsworthian style, with the claim that:

I know
That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall
Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit
You hear the water of seven streams fall
To the roarer in the bottom, and through all
The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.

Our engagement with the fate of the young men is, then, heightened by Hughes's pitch for credibility as a witness. Unlike Owen, he is not a serving officer speaking from direct experience, so pity needs be evoked in other ways from greater rhetorical distance, whilst retaining the next-best thing to direct experience—which, in this case, is exactly what Hughes *is* qualified to speak of: his own landscape. In a sense, Ted Hughes is refashioning Eliot in his own image here. In poems such as the *Four Quartets*, Eliot attempts to make history present so that the failures and accomplishments of the past can act as beacons for the future, and in "Six Young Men" Hughes is trying to do something similar. Note that subtle acquisition of the lost generation for the poem's eternal present in the line, "Pictured *here*, their expressions listen yet", before Hughes weaves them into his rhetorical fabric of historical continuity with "And *still* that valley has not changed its sound" (author's emphasis). Having been imaginatively enlisted alongside the doomed young men, the reader is again suddenly thrown out of the second stanza with a repetition of the almost choric closure of the first: Hughes's terse reminder of their fate, "four decades under the ground".

The third stanza of "Six Young Men" most obviously channels what I have termed Hughes's "Great War literacy". This concept involves more than just poetic influence; however, it is the sum of his own father's stories, the war poets, novels, memoirs, and every media image of the conflict—photograph and film—to which he had been exposed. At the same time, the poem reminds us that, just as the classically educated war poets themselves had an initial framework for martial reference, culled from the Greeks and Romans (what Elizabeth Vandiver calls their "comparandum"),¹³ the Great War provided its own store of reference and tradition for subsequent writers. So, as the third stanza outlines the fate of the six young men, we encounter many of the classic Great War tropes: the wounded soldier dying out on the wire, his friend shot whilst attempting a rescue, another sniped while "potting at tin-cans in no-man's land" and the Known-Unto-God missing details of the remaining three. A lesser poet would have finished the poem at the end of its third stanza but

the return of the tragic chorus to the stanza's closing line ushers in a change of tempo and focus that takes "Six Young Men" onto a higher level of response, a fact recognized by Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts in their 1981 book *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*:

[...] the response which raises this poem above an elegy in a Georgian or even 'Movement' manner appears first in the paradoxical but grimly accurate formulation of the sudden intimacy with death at the end of the third stanza.¹⁴

It is an intimacy reminiscent of the one "Closer than thinking" that constitutes the core of the widow's suffering in "Griefs for Dead Soldiers": "But come to the worst they must have done, and held it | Closer than their hope; all were killed". The repetition of death which closes the first three stanzas has undergone a subtle mutation from the merely "dead" of stanza one, through the length of time they have been this way ("four decades") to "killed" in the third stanza, when *how* they died initiates a broadening of the poem's purpose. Hughes is here helping to inaugurate the Great War as the type of collective memento mori it has, indeed, become in the national consciousness. Similarly, he introduces a marvellous fusion of Darwinism and mythology with "Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead". At this point, the poem reaches its sympathetic apotheosis and the gradual replacement of elegiac energy with lyric vitality is completed by the self-conscious introduction of "thought" in the stanza's fifth line. This line creates a crucial switch not just for this poem but for many others meditating upon conflict from a vantage point well to the rear of the frontline since it posits a stark juxtaposition of *imagined* warfare, taking place at the level of thought, with the gruesome realities of the actual battlefield, here represented by "their smoking blood". At this point, the value of indirect witness is to be found in the lessons learnt from empathetic exposure to stories and historical artefacts from past wars, as distinct from exposure to the real dangers encountered by direct witnesses such as Owen. If there is any practical worth in contemporary writers taking on the Great War as a subject for poetry, it surely lies here and, in 1957, Hughes provides something of a prototype for this sort of response:

To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and heat.

The "Smile" here is fascinating, since it is appended to "Such contradictory permanent horrors". Surely horrors do not "smile", yet, within the context of "the single exposure", the smiles of the now-dead men are coterminous with the horror of a shared outcome known only by someone who can *later* look upon the photograph with full knowledge of its history. The lines enact, therefore, a moment of empathy, as the tragic incongruity becomes clear to the

current viewer and provokes the sense of “One’s own body” being shouldered out “from its instant and heat”. In the war poems from *The Hawk in the Rain*, then, Hughes demonstrates a process by which some valid statement of witness is yet made possible in Great War terms. In doing so, he creates a blueprint of response for subsequent writers wishing to explore the conflict.

The year 1963 saw considerable preparation for the Great War’s 50th anniversary. Publication of Owen’s collected *Poems* and a reverential biography by his brother¹⁵ followed Alan Clark’s *The Donkeys* (1961) and Benjamin Britten’s Owen-inspired *War Requiem*, written for the consecration of Philip Larkin’s hometown cathedral in Coventry. Unsurprising, therefore, that Larkin’s third collection, *The Whitsun Weddings*, should make its own contribution to the nation’s growing fascination with The War to End All Wars. “MCMXIV”’s single sentence shorn of a main verb appears to allow for both of its most common readings: that Larkin, in what Heaney called his “Elysian’ mode”,¹⁶ indulges in nostalgic lamentation for a Golden Age lost to the cataclysm of the Great War *and* that he is creating a piece of pseudo-history to evoke an imagined community ironically undermined by its own overt artifice. Of course, the poem does articulate something of that forlorn sense of an English Eden now marooned on the wrong side of the Great War, but the second of these readings strikes me as the more likely product of Larkin’s pen; it is also the more prescient, in terms of the creative legacy bequeathed by the 50th-anniversary poets. Again, we are implicitly in the company of a poet gazing at the sepia-toned photograph of men quick with life and blissfully unaware of the fate they are about to suffer by signing up:

Those long uneven lines
 Standing as patiently
 As if they were stretched outside
 The Oval or Villa Park,

The poem is pervaded by the solemnity of collective hindsight and, consequently, provides an early demonstration of that which unites most post-war Great War poetry: we know what is to follow and that the world shall never be the same. As a result, Larkin’s poem shares similar qualities of intimacy with Hughes’s “Six Young Men”, though, here, it is self-consciously enacted upon a more public stage and for more openly ironic purposes. As William H. Pritchard points out:

In speaking about something that is elsewhere—maybe past and gone but not quite—Larkin achieves an extraordinary intimacy of tone, both in relation to that subject and to the implicated reader, who, it is assumed, will care just as much about it as the poet.¹⁷

And it is, indeed, this assumption of a collective care and recognition that represents the active ingredient in most subsequent poetry of this kind. These

conditions of assumed foreknowledge are what militate against a purely “Elysian” reading of the poem and make it a deeply ironic and rhetorical one. Stephen Regan has it that: “‘MCMXIV’ is not a wilful indulgence in nostalgia, but a knowing and ironic poem which sets up a potent ideal of national and civic virtue, only to record its unavailability in the 1960s”.¹⁸ This is a view supported by the implied intimacy of tone offered by that opening pronoun, “Those”, which demonstrates the “long uneven lines” of volunteers while simultaneously *sharing* some presumption of a reader’s imaginative proximity to them. The poem’s listing, through a single sentence spanning four octets, reads like a checking-off of commonly understood Edwardian signifiers: the sporting crowds, high street commerce, the English countryside, and garden, all reduced in particularity and rendered generic by a flattening repetition of the definite article “the” (16 times after that opening pronoun). Crucial to our purposes here is this suggestion of the possibilities of reinvention for poets wishing to discuss contemporary matters by way of the shared mythology offered by the Great War. Perhaps what Larkin bequeaths most to twenty-first-century writers is the way in which his poem blurs the distinction between historical detail and imaginative creation. As Steve Clark has it:

‘MCMXIV’ offers a commemoration of the dead that brings them back to life as a conscious fiction. The absence of any main governing verb allows an accumulation of cultural signifiers ... which present a world that can never be directly experienced, but which has always been mediated beforehand.¹⁹

So, we get Larkin’s Golden Summer variation upon the battlefield tropes identified in Hughes’s poem: “The crowns of hats, the sun | On moustached archaic faces”, “the shut shops, the bleached | Established names on the sun-blinds”, and “The place-names all hazed over | With flowering grasses”. Everywhere, the poem betrays its hindsight: even the England it recalls is coterminous with that of someone like Edward Thomas, with its “fields | Shadowing Domesday lines | Under wheat’s restless silence”. Yet, as Stephen Regan points out, “it draws its power from a knowledge of what happened between 1914 and 1918”.²⁰ It is precisely this bond of shared knowledge which sets our secondary canon apart from the Great War canon itself: writers such as Owen and Sassoon set out to warn a public they perceived as being remote and ignorant of the realities of the Western Front, whereas the challenge to subsequent writers is how to engage an audience that, for the most part, share their Great War literacy.

Where Hughes, then, inaugurates a method of almost inhabiting the ghosts of the Great War in order to hold a personal *séance* that speaks to his age, Larkin models a quite different technique. His imagined community is evoked more knowingly and with overt artifice, relying upon that accumulation of cultural signifiers to create an *implicitly* shared discourse with the reader, whereas Hughes’s dialogue is explicit and his manner less elegiac than extrapolative. Significantly, both writers demonstrate creative ways into the nascent

mythic structures of the Great War which they and their generation helped to consolidate. Each of these poems also articulates something of the nature of the secondary Great War canon as written around the 50th anniversary. Both appear to share a common origin: the stimulus of a photographic artefact, folk memories of the Great War, and the poetic “comparandum” of the trench poets. Of the two, Hughes is more self-consciously particular, whereas Larkin is more overtly ironic, offering oblique comment upon the process of mythologizing the Great War in a poem which performs that very task. The influence of the war poets upon both, though, cannot be underestimated: as we saw with Hughes, the ghost of Owen was never far from his pen and, whilst more subliminally present, Edward Thomas haunts the fourth stanza of “MCMXIV” just as Owen’s “Anthem for Doomed Youth” hovers over the poignancy of its closing images of absence turning into permanent loss.

What I earlier called “the *objet trouvé* route back to 1914–1918” certainly played and continues to play its part in stimulating much new poetry concerned with the Great War: consider Patricia McCarthy’s poem “Clothes that escaped the Great War” which won the 2013 National Poetry Competition, Sinéad Morrissey’s recent poem, “Electric Edwardians”, or some of Andrew Motion’s “Last Tommy” inspired creations. There is, as Brearton observes, a seemingly insatiable appetite for more work on the subject. However, it is the linguistic and intrapoetic stimulus offered by the war poets which, I believe, exerts the greatest influence upon writers, both those of the 50th-anniversary generation and today’s authors of the centenary. For each, the Great War has become part of the furniture of the mind: just as Edwardian culture adduced the Trojan War as a template for the modern one, we have a tendency to adduce the First World War as a template for subsequent conflict.

Besides Hughes and Larkin’s early meditations upon the Great War, Geoffrey Hill’s contemporaneous work represents an interesting third way that offers a relatively untrodden path to writers approaching the subject today. As Henry Hart observes in *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*:

The eclectic modernist poem is Hill’s model, and, to a certain extent, he reflects on the literature and politics of the modernists. Like the authors of *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Ulysses*, Hill attempts to X-ray a culture broken by the First World War.²¹

Dismissive of the Movement and Larkin, in particular, Hill, nonetheless, reads Larkin’s nostalgia as a national symptom of the Great War and one that is, at least, plausible within the broader context which concerns him: “I think my sense of history is in itself anything but nostalgic, but I accept nostalgia as part of the *psychological* experience of a society and of an ancient and troubled nation”.²² At this national and anthropological level, Hill engages with history as “some vital dimension of intelligence”,²³ envisioning it as a repetitive struggle red in tooth and claw. Like Hughes and Larkin, then, his early collections also engage with the “national ghost”, though at a level intentionally more

problematized than his peers. Within the generational scope of this discussion, his first collection, *For The Unfallen* (1959) and its follow-up, 1968s *King Log*, require some comment.

Set beside Hughes and Larkin's relative specificity of context, Hill makes more encoded and oblique cuts into the corpus of Great War mythology, seeing it within a much broader continuum of human history and capacity for violence. We encounter a more self-consciously allusive and rhetorical language enmeshed within its own purpose, namely, an examination of the problematical nature of indirect witness, particularly to such things as warfare and human atrocity. The poems declare themselves to be elegiac, but the nature of the elegy is altogether different to those of the other poets discussed here. What we encounter in *For The Unfallen* and *King Log* is an abiding *sense* of the Great War intricately stitched into the warp and weft of a canvas concerned with depicting a far broader sweep of human history than the years 1914–1918. Moreover, the very nature of Hill's poetic constitution appears rooted in an innate proclivity towards symbol and allegory, the purpose of which appears to be a form of heteroglossic revelation of human truth, arising from aggregated mythologies and knowledge, of which the Great War is only one culturally available descriptive medium. Thus, we encounter "Baroque Meditations", a welter of classical and Christian mythology, the liturgical calendar, a series of metamorphic fables, songbooks, annunciations, nativities, soliloquies, masks, personae, letters, and variations upon the theme of variation in two collections of startling historical drift. Within such all-encompassing discourse, however, is a widely acknowledged fascination with the Great War and, whilst more obliquely rendered than in Hughes and Larkin, its tropes are ever-present. Though the Great War we encounter is heavily mediated and linked to a deep instinct for historical patterning rather than any performed sense of personal reception. This is clear from the opening poem of *For The Unfallen*, where the nature of Hill's "Genesis" is one of perpetual and bloody struggle:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold
To ravage and redeem the world:
There is no bloodless myth will hold.²⁴

Over the course of the two books, this world-view is enacted in a heady ebb-and-flow of mythical and historical signifiers of war—*all* wars, but most commonly the two world wars which racked the twentieth century. What helps to hold Hill's Great War fascination at one remove is the manner in which it is often mediated through the more recent Second World War and the Holocaust in particular. This is in keeping with the joined-up nature of his historical sensibility: the flawed settlement of the one being the direct cause of the other in Europe. We see this in the *Maubertley*-esque wide-view of the opening fable from his sequence "Of Commerce and Society", where the gross of broken statues are reconfigured as "The Apostles: Versailles, 1919" in order to expose

the collapse of civilized virtues at the end of the First World War and the path it opened up to the Second:

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

They were appalled. The bells
In hollowed Europe spilt
To the gods of coin and salt.
The sea creaked with worked vessels.²⁵

Here, as Hart points out, “In deflated, almost simplistic sentences, he imitates the deflation of values and the concomitant deflation of Germany that set the country, and the rest of Europe, on the track towards holocaust”²⁶ The way in which the topic is approached, both historically and *linguistically*, is very different from the main body of what I have called the “auxiliary canon” of post-war Great War lyric. What Jeffrey Wainwright describes as Hill’s “severe reflexiveness towards his own voices”²⁷ is encapsulated by Jon Silkin in his essay “War and the Pity”:

Hill’s use of language, and choice of words, has been noticed—often, one feels, to the detriment of his themes. The compressed language is intimately bound up in what it is conveying. This is true of many poets but true to an unusual degree with Hill in *King Log*. It is true in another sense. The language itself is unlike most other current writing, and there is an unusually self-conscious pointing on the part of the poet to the language. This is not because he wishes to draw attention to it for its own sake, but because the language both posits his concerns, and is itself—in the way it is used—an instance of them.²⁸

“The dead are my obsession this week”, writes Hill in *For The Unfallen*, thereby dramatizing an authorial voice at the point of such performative self-analysis. And by drawing the reader’s attention to this *linguistic* expansion of theme, Hill is partially solving the inherited problem of direct witness. In dramatizing the difficulty of speech and by approaching warfare askance, via its peripheral participants, Hill relocates the canonical battleground to the No Man’s Land of big history, indirect witness and language itself: “so we bear witness, | Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us”, as he puts it in the final sonnet of the “Funeral Music” sequence from *King Log*.²⁹ The “so” here is quintessential Hill in the weary ambiguity of tone that scrupulously dramatizes the dilemma at the heart of remembrance: “Not as we are but as we must appear, | Contractual ghosts of pity”. This “pity” is self-consciously loaded with echoes of Owen, but, as Silkin points out, with Hill “The scrupulousness, like the pity, is in the language”.³⁰ Hill models, here, a curiously *current* dilemma of permission for the non-soldier-poet to “prod dead men from their stone”³¹ and “Cleanse with a kind of artistry the ground | Shared by War”.³²

The fact that this dilemma is so edgily dramatized links it to Ted Hughes's "essential bid for empathetic verisimilitude", though Hill's truth-seeking will not allow him quite the same leap towards imaginative sympathy. Throughout his first two collections, then, we see his ongoing struggle to accommodate "The tongue's atrocities" with the poet's duty of witness: "Poetry | Unearths from among the speechless dead || Lazarus mystified, common man | Of death",³³ as he writes in "History As History". Always Hill's tongue is "broody in the jaw"³⁴ and his critical self-analysis of the poet's role in such a *milieu* is carried out "with an ease | That is dreadful"³⁵ whilst he lifts "the spicy lid of my tact | To sniff at the myrrh".³⁶ As mid-century man, he poses a question which applies even more pointedly to an era of 24-hour rolling news broadcast, when he asks of a public, "brawny with life": "Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen, | Of what they have witnessed and not seen?"³⁷ In so doing, Hill actually positions himself against the *object trouve* school of response as modelled by Larkin and Hughes, leery of the moral impact that can be made by such ephemera.

The Great War *does*, nonetheless, provide *King Log* and *For The Unfallen* with allusive resources which supply both with metaphorical keynotes. Its tropes, as with Hughes and Larkin, are part of Hill's cultural capital, though his use of them is more syncretic and co-mingled with other historical moments: as he states himself, "Tragedy has all under regard".³⁸ His critical reception as a poet with kinship to the war poets is, then, partly based upon echoes of them incorporated into his verse with the self-conscious intention of Great War resonance. The "speechless dead" from above clearly channel Charles Sorley's "mouthless dead",³⁹ the "pity" of "Funeral Music", and "The Pities" from "A Pastoral" are freighted with memories of Owen, whilst the gods' confusion of men's brief lives with "immortal essences" resonates with the "God-ancestral essences"⁴⁰ of Rosenberg. As Vincent Sherry observes in his book, *The Uncommon Tongue*:

Hill does not often use the Poundian tweezers in his poetry, but he works his clichés in similarly rigorous ways. In some cases, the phrasing is altered, while in others the usual context for it is disturbed.⁴¹

Perhaps even more than worked cliché and references, though, Hill's verse is alive with a discrete analysis of the nature and purpose of commemoration. Everywhere in his first two collections *are* Poundian allusions to the empty monumentalism of public grieving for the dead of war: "their long death | Documented and safe", as he puts it in "Two Formal Elegies for the Jews in Europe". That the Great War's specific influence contributes to this trope cannot be in doubt, since its *modus* of commemoration is so familiarly engraved in the masonry of both books. In *For The Unfallen* we, therefore, encounter "such ample monuments to lost || Nations and generations" ("The Lowlands of Holland"), "our designed wreaths" ("Drake's Drum"), "Words glossed on stone" ("The Distant Fury of Battle"), "raftered galleries of bone" ("Merlin")

and statements like “To put up stones ensures some sacrifice” (“Two Formal Elegies For the Jews in Europe”). Likewise, in *King Log*, Hill refines his troubled interrogation of “improper speech from proper tombs” in poems such as “A Letter From Armenia” in which “I hesitate amid circumstantial disasters. I gaze at the authentic dead”. And his hair-shirted autoethnography appears to conclude in despondency with the final utterance of *King Log* when, in the persona of Sebastian Arrurruz from “1921”, he notes:

I wake
To caress propriety with odd words
And enjoy abstinence in a vocation
Of now-almost-meaningless despair.

It is Hill’s conscientious dramatization of this dilemma which speaks loudest to poets now contemplating the Great War centenary, since it constitutes an extra dimension of verisimilitude that goes beyond our “contractual” empathy for the war dead and requires something more scrupulous than just the channelling of Owenesque pity or Sassoon-like rage. It also problematizes the issue within the long-after-the-fact real-time of current writers themselves. After all, Great War writing from the vantage point of its centenary *is* problematical and loaded with issues of permission. In order to remain viable, it surely has to prioritize the ideas and language of its received culture over mere ventriloquism of the canon, no matter how well executed and researched. It is no surprise, then, to discover that Hill is drawn most to Isaac Rosenberg among the soldier-poets, for his sense of linguistic “mass” and the plasticity of his poetic ideas:

To possess a ‘sense of mass’ in language would require a sense of contexture, and appreciation of, and an ability to initiate, the changes that single words and phrase undergo when moved from one context to another. As a form of technical experiment this can be traced back at least to Chaucer, but I cannot think of another modern poet writing in English who conducts the experiment more intensively than Rosenberg.⁴²

The intellectual rigour that is frequently credited to Rosenberg amongst the soldier-poets is, indeed, echoed in Hill’s own work and may even have been behind the decision to omit a tribute “For Isaac Rosenberg” from his final selection for *For the Unfallen*, since it would have represented too-definitive a Great War reference than was required of a poetry that seeks the very plasticity of contexture referred to above. Philosophically too, Hill’s “ancient troughs of blood” (“Ovid in the Third Reich”) most approximates Rosenberg’s Judaic vision of war as an “ancient crimson curse”.⁴³ Certainly, among the non-participant poets to have written about the Great War, Hill comes closest to enacting Rosenberg’s own injunction, written in a letter (undated but probably July 1916) that:

[war writing] should be approached in a colder way, more abstract, with less of the million feelings everybody feels; or all of these should be concentrated in one distinguished emotion.⁴⁴

In the final analysis, what is most impressive about Hill's early poetry is precisely his *beyond*-revisionist anthropology of human suffering and his scrupulous ability to interrogate the propriety of our finding "value | in a bleak skill" at a moment when Europe was still "Traversing the still-moist dead"⁴⁵ of the two world wars. Like the soldier-poets he most admires, his work stands to the side of the auxiliary canon of post-Great War lyric, a state of affairs with which I feel sure he was content.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, this discussion has been highly selective, ostensibly focusing upon two well-known poems and Hill's gross of broken statues, though it is possible to be illuminating without being exhaustive. Poetic responses to the 50th anniversary were obviously more diverse. One could, for example, write an entire chapter on the influence of Jon Silkin and his editorship of the *Stand* journal in respect of the period and subject here discussed. However, what is most fascinating about the poetry which came out around the time of the Great War's 50th anniversary is the fact that it is, in and of itself, an act of readership. This reading was undertaken by an audience who had no direct experience of the fighting but who lived in a world of many veterans and whose fathers, grandfathers, and uncles had brought home their own artefacts and stories of the conflict. What the work discussed here demonstrates, then, is a mode of cultural reception which should be more familiar to a twenty-first-century audience than it was to that of the late 1950s and 1960s, since, in part, the historians are correct in suggesting that dominant contemporary responses to the First World War were inaugurated by those which found utterance around its 50th anniversary. In compositional terms, the three writers examined here do indeed gain subjective purchase upon events and material beyond their own direct knowledge by working with the yet-living archive of Great War experience. In doing so, they drafted modes of witness that still prevail in the work of contemporary UK poets such as Andrew Motion, Carol Ann Duffy, Owen Lowery, Sinéad Morrissey, and John Greening. This is certainly true of the poems we have seen from Hughes and Larkin, work I have characterized as the "*objet trouvé*" route back to Great War resonance, other forms of which might today be termed the "Who Do You Think You Are?" familial-archive route. Hill's "eclectic modernism", on the other hand, remains underused by comparison. What both approaches did, however, was model forms of response to events and mythologies encountered latterly as cultural reception: almost literally, they are emotions re-collated in tranquillity.

NOTES

1. David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London, rpt 2014: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p. 317.
2. Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory* (London; rpt, 2002: Headline Publishing, 2001), p. 17.
3. The quotation is my own from the poem, “Dear Revisionist” ll.18–19, *Stand* 14, no. 2, Jon Glover (ed) (Leeds: Leeds University, 2016), p. 75.
4. David Reynolds, Introduction to *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century*, p. xv.
5. Spender called Owen the greatest English war poet in “Poetry”, *Fact*, no. 4 (July 1937), p. 26 and, as Heaney points out in his essay “Sounding Auden” the younger poet owed more than just inspirational debts to the soldier-poet. Owen represented a technical precursor also, particularly in his use of parahrhyme (Seamus Heaney, “Sounding Auden”, *London Review of Books* 9, No.11, June 4, 1987, pp. 15–18).
6. As Hynes observes: “This sense of opportunity lost, of the test that one has failed without even having taken it, is expressed in many memoirs of the time, and is, I think, an important factor in the collective consciousness of the whole generation of young men who came of age between the wars”. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 1976), p. 21.
7. Fran Brearton, “‘But that is not new’: Poetic Legacies of the First World War”, S. Das (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Poetry of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 229–241.
8. Ted Hughes, *Review of Men Who March Away: Poems of the First World War*, edited by I.M. Parsons (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965) from *The Listener*, August 5, 1965.
9. Ted Hughes, “Griefs for Dead Soldiers”, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1958; rpt. London: Faber & Faber, 1968), pp. 52–53.
10. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 314.
11. *The Hawk in the Rain*, pp. 49–50.
12. Siegfried Sassoon, “On First Passing the New Menin Gate”, *The War Poems* (1983, rpt; London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 143.
13. Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Reception in British Poetry of the Great War. Classical Presences* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
14. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 84.
15. Harold Owen, *Journey from Obscurity: Wilfred Owen 1893–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).
16. Seamus Heaney, “The Main of Light” from *The Government of the Tongue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 31.
17. William H. Pritchard, “Larkin’s Presence”, from *Philip Larkin: The Man and his Work*, Dale Salwak (ed.) (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 78.
18. Stephen Regan, “Larkin’s Reputation” from *Larkin with Poetry*, Michael Baron (ed.) (English Association Conference Papers, 1997), pp. 63–64.

19. Steve Clark, "'The lost displays': Larkin and Empire" from *New Larkins for Old: Critical Essays*, James Booth (ed.) (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 175–176.
20. Stephen Regan, p. 64.
21. Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Illinois, South Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 70.
22. Interview with Blake Morrison, *New Statesman* (February 8, 1980), p. 213.
23. Interview with Blake Morrison, p. 213.
24. Geoffrey Hill, "Genesis", *For the Unfallen* (1971, rpt. London: André Deutsch, 1959), pp. 15–17.
25. Geoffrey Hill, "The Apostles: Versailles 1919", *For the Unfallen*, p. 48.
26. Henry Hart, pp. 70–71.
27. Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 7.
28. Jon Silkin, "War and the pity", *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work*, Peter Robinson (ed.) (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985), p. 120.
29. Geoffrey Hill, "Funeral Music" *King Log* (1971, rpt. London: André Deutsch, 1968), p. 25.
30. Jon Silkin, p. 122.
31. "The Death of Shelley", *For The Unfallen* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1959), p. 51.
32. "A Pastoral", *For The Unfallen*, p. 56.
33. Geoffrey Hill, "History as Poetry", *King Log*, p. 41.
34. "Elegaic Stanzas", *For The Unfallen*, p. 43.
35. "Soliloquies: The Stone Man", *King Log*, p. 47.
36. "Three Baroque Meditations", *King Log*, p. 47.
37. "Two Formal Elegies For the Jews in Europe II", *For The Unfallen*, p. 32.
38. "A Valediction to Osip Mandelshtam", *King Log*, p. 38.
39. Charles Hamilton Sorley, "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead", *Marlborough and Other Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919: facsimile rpt. Forgotten Books, 2012), p. 78.
40. Isaac Rosenberg, "Dead Man's Dump", *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, Ian Parsons (ed.) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), pp. 109–111.
41. Vincent Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987).
42. Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings: Isaac Rosenberg 1890–1918*, Kenneth Haynes (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 456.
43. Isaac Rosenberg, "On Receiving News Of The War", *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, Ian Parsons (ed.) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), p. 75.
44. To Mrs. Herbert Cohen, summer 1916; *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, Ian Parsons (ed.) (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979), p. 237.
45. "Orpheus And Eurydice", *For The Unfallen*, p. 57.

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