

RAGING WITH THE TRUTH

Condemnation and Concealment in the Poetry of Blake and Hill

Emily Taylor Merriman

ABSTRACT

An analysis of Geoffrey Hill's lyric poem about William Blake illuminates the relations between art, prophecy, and imperial politics across more than two centuries. Hill's poem responds to David V. Erdman's argument that Blake was resolutely, if ineffectually and sometimes secretly, opposed to war. It also establishes Hill's own cryptic but definite resistance to contemporary war and warmongers, while it mourns poetry's public powerlessness to halt the violent competition for material resources. Ignored by the majority, poetry fails to bring about the ethical social change that poets often envision. The layering of perspectives (Hill the poet and scholar writing about Erdman the scholar, who is explicating Blake the poet and artist) allows for a multidimensional interpretation of the role of poets and prophetic poetry. Despite their fury at society's deafness and greed, and frustration at their own incapacities, poets—because if they are great poets, they are prophets, too—continue to speak to their audiences about the problems of this world and about the better worlds that can be imagined. Hill's text obliquely teaches how the small success of a great poem can provide a minor note of consolation as it objects to terror and tyranny.

KEY WORDS: *poetry, prophet, war, Geoffrey Hill, William Blake*

INSPIRED BY *BLAKE: PROPHET AGAINST EMPIRE*, David V. Erdman's seminal work on the poet and visual artist William Blake (1757–1827), Geoffrey Hill (1932–) wrote a poem that places the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the context of community or its absence. Hill's "On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*" offers its own commentary on Blake and on the relationships among poetry, politics, and the public. As Erdman understands Blake to do, Hill condemns those who exercise political and military power to exploitative ends. He identifies a connection between the fact of political corruption and people's inability or unwillingness to listen to the voices of their poetic prophets. Although his political commentary is deliberately obscure, offering a parallel to Blake's often secretive

political dissent, Hill's poem addresses in particular the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the economic motivations underlying it. It also argues that "great poetry," through the rich possibilities of the linguistic imagination, tries to resist corruption and to envision a redeemed world.

In the poem, doubly informed by his reading of Erdman on Blake and by Blake himself, Hill subtly describes the multipronged challenge that poets often face: how to speak to and about power while avoiding clichés that can be easily dismissed, and how to remain truthful, as well as comprehensible, while still writing in an art form that readers can experience as beautiful. Although different historical periods will exert different kinds of pressure on poets, in order to be "great," as Hill considers Blake to be, the poet must work with as well as resist these varying social forces. Writing during the French and American revolutions and their aftermath, as well as during the Napoleonic wars and the intensification of British imperial ambitions during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Blake found his own artistic ambitions impeded despite his genius. Hill's poetic narrator implicitly sees late modern poets, including himself, as similarly thwarted by their own sociohistorical circumstances. Comprehending Hill's poem requires extended attention and a range of contextual literary and historical knowledge; yet even then, parts of it remain mysterious. Hill's poem is both a commentary on the Blake of Erdman's book and a Blakean indictment of the wrongful exercise of power. It shows that the great poet may speak with vatic force in direct or disguised condemnation of war and injustice, but that such prophecy rages unheeded.

One source of the poet-prophet's motivation for speaking out is the apparently unstoppable force of the human drive for power or for monetary gain. In taking a stand against this force, the poet, like anyone, encounters the vexing reality that truth can be contradictory, and self-contradiction is not conducive to clarity. Tyranny thrives on reductive interpretations and on the forced absence of contradiction. Poetry's sometimes cryptic complexity can offer an antidote to the totalitarian exercise of power, although this antidote typically lacks popular appeal. Hill himself has spoken at some length of the fact that "tyranny requires simplification." In an interview, he endorses Theodore Haecker's argument about the Nazis, "that one of the things the tyrant most cunningly engineers is the gross oversimplification of language, because propaganda requires that the minds of the collective respond primitively to slogans of incitement" (Phillips 2000, 277).

Despite the necessary complexity of their writing, poets often yearn to speak to, and for, a wide audience. Walt Whitman famously declared in "Song of Myself," "Do I contradict myself? / Very well, then I contradict myself. / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (1982, 246). In stanza four

of "On Reading *Blake*," Hill self-consciously borrows from this self-defense of Whitman's in order to describe the success of Blake's poem *Jerusalem*: "he could / contradict and contain multitudes."¹ Hill then says, by way of his own defense in relying on Whitman's phraseology, that poets are similar to each other, especially in their joy at the technical achievement of juxtaposing irreconcilable elements in an aesthetic resolution: the poet "rejoices / in the final artifice." Hill abruptly finishes the stanza off: "I mean great poets." The colloquial brevity of this final sentence (combined with the slang terms "cribbed" and "stickler" in the preceding lines) creates a tone of argumentative intimacy. By rising unusually close to the surface (with two uses of the first-person pronoun "I" in the one stanza), the poet's voice of selfhood renders itself vulnerable at the same time that it becomes assertive in its implicit dismissal of lesser poets. Such poets fail to accomplish the technical miracle in which language encompasses disparate, even irreconcilable, elements and synthesizes them into a new form that can awaken its readers' consciousness, and perhaps their consciences.

In a typical twist, "I mean great poets" provides an additional allusion to Whitman and his often-quoted saying: "To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too" (1982, 1058). These words of Whitman's claim that society as a whole is responsible for the quality of its poetry. *Poetry*, one of the most influential poetry magazines in the United States, printed this sentence on its back cover for decades, and the Academy of American Poets currently prints an abbreviated version on its membership invitation envelopes. Hill's poem, like these promotional quotations, is in part a plea for greater audiences for poetry. At the same time, he asserts that there have already been great poets, and implicitly acknowledges that there must have been great audiences too, who have learned how to hear and receive them.

Is being a "great poet" just about demonstrating great technical skill? Or is there something in the nature of exercising technical skill with language that gives poetry a social role extending beyond the aesthetic? To the latter query, Hill's work answers very strongly in the affirmative. His entire oeuvre treats all poetry as political, whether or not a poem sets out deliberately to address social or ethical issues—because poetry is written in the medium of language, and language itself is a political medium, continuously involved in and altered by changes in social power. Great poets are aware of this fact, and to the extent that they are aware and capable, they work with this reality and are not worked by it. For them, it is not so much the case that "now language is master," but that it is "a part-broken leagüe." The second

¹ All quotations from "On Reading *Blake*" are from Hill 2007, 11–12. The complete poem is reproduced below.

of these phrases replaces the first in Hill's revision of the poem "On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*" (2005, 1; 2007, 4). Especially in times of social turmoil, the role of poet then shades over into the role of prophet. Nonetheless, as Erdman's book and Hill's poem observe, poet-prophets run the risk of personal confusion, public rejection, and in some cases even punishment.

1. Hill's Debt to Blake

Like Blake, Hill is a British poet with an interest in America, where he lived and worked for eighteen years. His first book, *For the Unfallen*, was published in 1958. Since 1998, he has become a prolific poet, and his reputation in both the United Kingdom and the United States is vigorously contested. His distinctive, demanding style has been both acclaimed and attacked, just as he himself, consciously practicing the ancient rhetorical mode "laus et vituperatio" (as he acknowledges in *The Triumph of Love*), has set out to "praise and blame" others. His poetry attracts passionate devotees and repels those who dislike its intensity, its allusiveness, or its stridency. Like hot curry, it may prove stimulating and nourishing, yet it can be hard to swallow. The poems remain alert not only to national and international politics, but also to religion—both as manifest in worldly structures that are themselves political, and in the interactions between human beings and powers greater than ourselves, including the forces of nature. Hill was brought up as an Anglican, and although his relationship with Christianity is vexed, he remains connected to the traditions and practices of the Church of England.

Blake's poetry and visual art have long cast both light and shadow over Hill's work. One of Hill's earliest poems was originally entitled "Holy Thursday of William Blake" (later shortened to "Holy Thursday"), and his first published critical piece was an undergraduate review of *Jerusalem* (1953), Blake's illustrated apocalyptic poem about England. American literary critic Harold Bloom has repeatedly highlighted Blake's importance for Hill. Hill's "true precursor," Bloom claims, "is always Blake," and "his largest debt [is] to Blake's vision, which is the conviction that the Creation and the Fall were the same event."² Hill is, in his judgment, "always the heir of William Blake" (Bloom 1976, 234; 1975, xvi; 1998, back cover).

² E. M. Knottenbelt, in her monograph on Hill, makes the same declaration in her opening pages (1990, 9). She later qualifies the claim, however: "Hill's antithetical art then, is not a 'marriage of contraries' in the Blakean sense for whom the creation and the fall are one" (1990, 80). Hill, one might conclude, tries to marry another set of contraries: the creation and the fall *are* one, and they are also *not* one.

Although Hill does not overtly claim the Blakean inheritance that Bloom ascribes to him (except insofar as he most likely assented to the publication of the last comment quoted above on the back cover of the Penguin edition of *The Triumph of Love*), he has spoken, written, and taught about the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century poet for whom revolutionary politics and revolutionary religion were indistinguishable. For instance, he said in an interview: “There’s a phrase of William Blake’s from *Jerusalem*, ‘the struggles of entanglement with incoherent roots,’ and in moments of either elation or depression I feel that the phrase could stand as an epigraph to my whole writing life” (Haffenden 1981, 82–83). In a 2002 newspaper article, he noted, “I turned 70 in June and have been cheered by a Blake quotation received from a well-wisher: ‘In [the Imagination] I am stronger & stronger as this Foolish Body decays’” (Hill 2002a). Both the imagination and the body feature in his poem “On Reading *Blake*.” The end of the poem describes a death-bound body—Blake’s, Hill’s, perhaps Whitman’s, perhaps the body of any older “great poet”—as that of a feverishly speaking, apparently mad person whose words the passing public cannot (and does not even wish to) hear. There is more to Hill’s complex relationship with Blake, however, than can be fully explored here. For example, in the critical essay “Poetry and Value,” Hill acknowledges his debt to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* but also questions its claims (2008, 481). In *The Triumph of Love*, he offers praise for “Blake / in old age reaffirming the hierarchies” (1998, 70).

2. Erdman’s Analysis of Blake’s Prophetic Poetry

In order to consider what Hill himself is saying about Blake in particular and poetic prophecy in general in “On Reading *Blake*,” it is useful to examine the scholarly book to which his poem responds. Erdman summarizes the European and transatlantic history of Blake’s time, and he traces and interprets the symbolic representations of Blake’s views and visions in the poems and engravings. He also analyzes the intertwinings of Blake’s politics and art. Although not a poet, Erdman is no stranger to the consequences of being the author of works that result in the negative attention of those with political power; according to Thomas Altizer, no major scholar was more subjected to persecution during the McCarthy era. Erdman was fired for political radicalism and not able to find another university position for many years, until he secured a professorship at Stony Brook.³

In addition to writing criticism, Erdman, probably the foremost Blake scholar of the twentieth century, edited the *Poetry and Prose of*

³ Thomas J. J. Altizer, e-mail message to the author, June 20, 2007.

William Blake in 1965 and published the significantly corrected and revised *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* in 1982. His monograph *Blake: Prophet against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* was first published in 1954. Second (1969) and third (1977) editions have appeared, and 1991 saw the most recent reprinting of the third edition. Erdman's *Blake* has thus had a remarkably long critical shelf life. This extremely influential volume places Blake in his historical context and explicates the obscure poems by identifying their mythological figures with particular countries and people. Unlike the more evidently accessible and generally better known lyric poems from *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Blake's longer epic poems, such as *The Four Zoas*, are often bafflingly obscure, full of unexplained events and entities with odd names whose references are not given. Erdman sets out to provide the historical parallels.

According to David Simpson, Erdman's work is the "founding text" in the vein of scholarship that looks at Blake's importance "to a tradition of radical dissent and political reference" (2003, 180). Erdman demonstrates that Blake's prophetic poetry can be deciphered in terms of the political, commercial, revolutionary, religious, and military circumstances of his day. As Erdman himself says in the Preface to the first edition: "it has been possible to trace through nearly all of his work a more or less clearly discernable thread of historical reference" (1977, xiv–xv). Other ways of interpreting or responding to Blake remain useful, but it is Erdman's groundbreaking approach that convincingly reveals that even Blake's most apocalyptic and mythological works were inspired by historical realities.

Erdman shows Blake to have been an intensely political animal, in whom cynicism and hope wrestled for ascendancy. According to Erdman, Blake's main hatred—although circumstances meant that he could rarely state it directly—was war, but he also opposed slavery and the incipient free market capitalism of the nineteenth century. Erdman argues that Blake never let go of the "necessary conviction that war and oppression *can* be permanently overthrown" to be replaced by both "a revolutionary millennium for England" and the paradise of creative imagination (1977, 400, 293). Blake was hopeful about the American and French revolutions and their dramatic proclamations of liberty in the face of oppression, although he was soon disappointed. Erdman frames Blake's optimism in metaphorically religious language:

Both Paine and Blake, living in a culture that still discussed politics in moralistic and Biblical terms inherited from the English Civil War, viewed the American revolution as a sort of mass resurrection or secular apocalypse that would overthrow poverty and cruelty and establish a new

Eden in which the arts flourished and habitations were illuminated, to use Blake's language, not by destructive fires but by the joys of the noontday sun [1977, 50].

Such hopes, both about America and about events in Europe, were shattered by subsequent events. Erdman describes Blake's disappointment in dry economic and political terms:

When Blake came to believe, in the decade after Waterloo, that the revolutions in America and France had been merely bourgeois revolutions, destroying colonial and monarchic restraints only to establish the irresponsible "right" to buy and sell, he concluded that nearly everything of value in those revolutions had been lost—at least as far as his own countrymen were concerned [1977, 226].

Erdman strongly emphasizes Blake's embattled situation. Jon Mee has pointed out that "any consideration of the politics of Blake's work has to take into consideration his position in a culture of surveillance where engravers, writers, and publishers faced imprisonment or harassment if they showed signs of political disaffection" (2003, 144). Blake personally experienced such danger; in 1803–4, after getting into a fight with a royal dragoon, he was arrested and tried for sedition. Erdman tells the story to explain why Blake resorted to secret condemnation of war in order to avoid further legal recriminations. Although the soldier's accusations about what Blake said against the King were likely invented, they seem to bear some parallels to opinions that he expressed in his prophecies. In the end he was found innocent, but, as Erdman says, "Inevitably the effect of the experience was to intensify Blake's self-censorship and the tension between man and prophet" (1977, 412). Blake even believed that the soldier might have been employed as "a deliberate or hired informer" (1977, 407).

Blake's legal difficulties compounded the problems that he faced in communicating his prophetic insights to the world. Hill's attraction to Blake is long-standing, and it is not surprising that he has spent time studying Erdman's monograph. Given the uncomprehending response that his own poems have often met, Hill resonates with what Erdman says about Blake's developing conviction that "the insights of one's 'own imaginations' are incommunicable" (1977, 105). Erdman speaks of

Blake's withdrawal from any audience beyond a few uncritical or even uncomprehending friends, his withdrawal from the essential experience of communication, without which even the most richly significant and creative art cannot attain full stature and true proportions. Failure to communicate with the fraternity of citizens for whom and of whom he wrote encouraged Blake to pursue [his] involuted symbolism and obscure manner [1977, 153].

Erdman withholds judgment about whether these circumstances were good or bad for Blake's work in artistic terms. Certainly they will have contributed to his distinctive style, but at the expense of sense and audience. There is no doubt that not being able to publish particular works meant failure in terms of Blake's career, and the stultifying effects of this blockage compounded themselves: "Without the salutary corrective of public appearance in print, he assumed that his own republican thoughts would be considered deeply subversive and bring him to the scaffold. Yet in his bardic self he remained bold" (1977, 153). In the poem under consideration here, and in his poetry more generally, Hill often bears similar marks of involution and obscurity, as well as of boldness.

3. "The cryptic opens": Exploring Hill's "On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*"

Inspired by this work of scholarship, Hill's poem lays down a new surface on the literary substrata: it is a poem about a work of criticism that is about a poet who himself borrowed and adapted many ideas from Scripture and earlier literary works. The poem itself is also a work of biographical (and autobiographical) criticism, as the contemporary poet writes about the older poet through the interpretive historical frame of another critical work that has informed and moved him. It provides an opportunity to explore Hill's insights into Blake's methods and meanings, and also to demonstrate what those insights reveal about Hill's own vision of poetic enterprise and its connection to prophecy and ethics.

On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*⁴

I

Everything swings with the times. Cynicism
becomes innocence—such is my gash of thought.
Before you can say *Quid* or *Obtuse Angle*
or *M^s Nanicantipot*, the milk tooth
hangs from the door-knob by its cotton thread.
Terror is opportune as is relief from terror.

II

This is where the cryptic opens. Blake
was afraid, shaken by the Law's dice-rattle;

⁴ Geoffrey Hill, "On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*." In *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007, 11–12). Copyright © Geoffrey Hill 2007. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd and Yale University Press.

but could have been an opportunist also
if luck had offered, or held, or just begun.
Coarser radicates nobler, by a kind
of sublime compromise with accident.

III

As to the sublime, don't take
my gloss on it. *The Spiritual Form*
of Nelson Guiding Leviathan: you behold
only the hero, the corpses, and the coils
of his victories, grandly weighed and spread.
For a *long age* you do not see the monster.

IV

The visual syntax so conducive to awe.
Which is why, in *Jerusalem*, he could
Contradict and contain multitudes (I've
cribbed Whitman, you stickler—short of a phrase).
One poet is very like another and rejoices
in the final artifice. I mean great poets.

V

If *counting gold* is not *abundant living*
nothing else counts. That there are over-
flowing granaries of Imagination
stands neither here nor there. Money is fertile
and genius falls by the way. It doesn't—
but stays in its own room, growing confused

VI

as I suppose Will: Blake did, overwhelmed
by the spoiled harvest of *The Four Zoas*.

VII

At this end there is the mere amazement
for one's own dumbness and that of res publica
which do not correlate or even collide
except for public utilities, tyrants
of unaccountable error,
whose names are *Quid*, *Skofield*, and *Inflammable Gas*.

VIII

One dies dutifully, of fearful exhaustion,
or of *one's wrathful self*, self's baffle-plates
contrived with the dexterity of a lifetime.
Nobody listens or contradicts the screen;
though, homeward-bound, some find combustious
sights to be stepped aside from—an old body

IX

its mouth working.

Having been a reader and teacher of Blake for more than fifty years, Hill first published "On Reading *Blake*" in the pamphlet *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2005) as one in a short sequence of poems, four of which respond to long prose works on English revolutionary, imperial, and literary history. Clutag, a small British poetry press that uses old-fashioned printing methods, published *A Treatise of Civil Power* as a limited edition. Such a venue suggests the poet's ambivalence about the wisdom of attempting to address a large, unreceptive audience. In 2007, a volume by the same name, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, was published by Penguin in the United Kingdom and Yale University Press in the United States. There is overlap between the two "*Treatises*," but in the second version poems are omitted, added, re-ordered, and revised. The poem under discussion here has undergone only minor alteration: "mere" replacing "stark" in line thirty-three and the removal of the definite article before "res publica" in line thirty-four. The pamphlet as a whole borrows its title from Milton's 1659 discourse "A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes; Showing That It Is Not Lawful for Any Power on Earth to Compel in Matters of Religion," and it addresses English politics since the Civil War. The poems are entitled: "On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*," "To the Lord Protector Cromwell," "A Treatise of Civil Power," "Coda," "On Reading: *Burke on Empire, Liberty, and Reform*," "On Reading *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*," "On Reading: *Hazlitt: Lectures on the English Comic Writers*," and "A Cloud in Aquila." The sequence engages with religious history and explores the role of writers (including Milton, Blake, and Hill himself) who have been involved in that religious history.

Hill's poem on Blake and Erdman quotes, references, and alludes to various of Blake's own works, ranging from the well-known (*Songs of Innocence*, *Songs of Experience*, and *Jerusalem*) to the more difficult (*The Four Zoas*), the less well-known (the satirical prose piece *An Island in the Moon*), and the visual (Blake's painting of *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*). The poem is composed of nine sections of six lines each, with the exceptions of stanzas six and nine, where the dramatic breakdown of the established verse structure embodies the breakdown of understanding and community that Erdman diagnoses in Blake's life.

In a lecture on December 9, 2002, Hill emphasized that Blake's philosophical and religious quarrels were not only with eighteenth-century evangelical teaching about guilt, but also with eighteenth-century rationalism.⁵ Hill lives in the context of related, yet different, present-day ideological oppositions that he also works to resist. One of

⁵ He made these remarks in the final session of a Boston University course entitled "Literature and Religion in England 1500–1800."

the oppositions that Hill must deal with is the conflict between what could be described as political–religious fundamentalism and secular materialism. Proponents on either side of the debate between these two ways of living in modernity often make claims about ethics, morality, and truth, but in reality there are more than two possible ways of understanding and relating to the world.

Hill's world looks in some ways different from Blake's: for example, America is now more like an imperial power than a contested colony or a promising new land of liberty. As Erdman points out at the beginning of his book:

The modern historian discovers with some surprise that most of the satiric prints which served as the graphic editorials of the day were pro-American, representing America as the land of liberty and virtue, England as that of corruption and slavery, and King George as a cruel and obstinate tyrant. We should not be surprised to find that Blake shared the common view, nor to find in some of his earliest work the germs of his later republicanism [1977, 6].

When Hill wrote his poem, the obstinate George lived on the other side of the Atlantic, and to the twenty-first-century eye Blake's self-described "cynicism" looks more like "innocence" (as Hill's second line suggests).

However, despite these factual and cultural shifts, many things remain the same; Hill's opening gambit, "Everything swings with the times," pivots on irony, because it both is and is not true. Two centuries later, the poet still encounters forces that value "counting gold" to the exclusion of all else, even at the expense of human life. These forces still are only ineffectually opposed by organized religion and sometimes are supported by it. Erdman insists that Blake must be read as a poet who is adamantly, if not openly, opposed to war: "[Blake] still wrote in utter condemnation of Britain's war" (1977, 293). Hill's poem also can be read, via Blake and Erdman, as resolutely (if subtly) opposed to war. First published in 2005, it was likely written around the time that the United States government, joined by other countries including Great Britain, used the opportunity of appearing to respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as a pretext for invading Iraq. The supposed justification was to prevent Saddam Hussein's use of weapons of mass destruction. The final line of Hill's opening section, commenting on wars and the justifications for wars, consists of a single, complete, and chilling sentence with no internal punctuation: "Terror is opportune as is relief from terror." The epanalepsis (rhetorical figure in which the same word is both first and last) underscores the seeming inevitability of human beings' violent response to violence.

Hill's poem devotes its entire third stanza to Blake's circa 1805–9 painting of *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*. According to Erdman, whose interpretation is based on textual evidence and his consideration of both the final painting and an earlier version, "The handsome golden Nelson, 'guiding Leviathan, in whose wreathings are infolded the Nations of the Earth,' will be recognized for a villain—by those receptive to Blake's hatred of the 'detestable Gods' of war" (1977, 449). Blake was obliged to keep that meaning mostly secret in order to have any artistic or financial success, and in order to avoid further legal trouble. Blake so disguised his condemnation of Britain's national hero in this painting that even twentieth-century critics have disagreed about the picture's message.



William Blake, *The Spiritual Form of Nelson Guiding Leviathan*. © Tate, London 2008.

Erdman himself acknowledges that his anti-war interpretation of the painting is controversial. In later editions, he cites Kathleen Raine and Bo Lindberg as disputing the “satiric or ironic interpretation” of this picture, as well as the paired one entitled *The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth* (1977, 521). According to Raine, “Blake saw the war against Napoleon as righteously waged by the two great powers of land and sea” (1968, 359). Lindberg sees the Leviathan that Nelson is guiding as swallowing a personification of Napoleon, wearing Caesar’s laurel crown (1973, 300–11), while Erdman sees not Napoleon but Christ in his crown of thorns, caught in the mouth of the monster. “Nearly devoured by imperial war, Christ is still fighting War’s false gods. Yet only a bit of his sword’s hilt is showing, as only a bit of Blake’s meaning” (1977, 450). Erdman also points to the subjugation of the African slave at Nelson’s feet. In mid-2007, the Tate gallery displayed the painting in a room called “1807: Blake, Slavery and the Radical Mind” (part of a larger exhibit on the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807). The painting’s adjoining caption did not commit the Tate to one interpretation or the other:

This painting represents the “spiritual form” of the naval hero, Horatio Nelson. His death at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 had made him a national hero. Here, Nelson directs the movements of the gigantic biblical sea monster, Leviathan, who brings war and terror to the world. The collapsed form of an African slave is a significant detail included at the bottom of the picture. The meaning of this figure is unclear. Is Nelson protecting this character, or is the slave a victim of Britain’s empire as it grows more powerful through war and conquest?

In another room, but only a couple dozen paces away from the Blake painting in this particular display, the Tate mounted a large exhibit about protesting the Iraq war. *State Britain*, by British artist Mark Wallinger, re-created the large outdoor series of posters, photographs, teddy bears, and other paraphernalia that peace activist Brian Haw had set up outside the Houses of Parliament. To get rid of Haw and his very public peace protest, the British government passed a law prohibiting protests within one square kilometer of the House. Technically, the Tate’s re-created display crosses over into that no-protest zone. The contrasts and similarities between Haw’s unmistakable but legally squelched protest and Blake’s ambiguous painting with its self-censored message of protest are enlightening about what has and has not changed over the past two hundred years in terms of freedom of speech and governmental justifications for international war. In re-creating Haw’s protest as a work of art within the no-protest exclusion zone, Wallinger has also re-created the ambiguity of Blake’s painting: is the Tate exhibit *State Britain* an anti-war protest or not?

Why does Hill make so much of this particular painting by Blake? What is *his* meaning in discussing it? His verse commentary on the visual work opens with a characteristic aside that reminds his readers to think for themselves or, perhaps, to turn directly to Blake's painting for instruction:

III

As to the sublime, don't take
my gloss on it. *The Spiritual Form*
of Nelson Guiding Leviathan: you behold
only the hero, the corpses, and the coils
of his victories, grandly weighed and spread.
For a *long age* you do not see the monster.

Hill implicitly concurs with Erdman's view that Blake's real meaning is to condemn Nelson and the British war that he led. By even more subtle implication, Hill also condemns the current war, despite the apparent uselessness of doing so, as the rest of his poem suggests.⁶ The phrase "coils / of his victories" evokes the cliché "spoils of victory" that can be applied to the economic returns from all wars prosecuted at least partly out of greed. In case the reader misses the reference on first reading, "spoiled" is the adjective used later, in stanza five, to describe the multiply resonant "harvest," which there means both poem and people ruined by warmongering. The hidden rhyme, in stanza three, of "coils" and "spoils" suggests an even more deeply hidden rhyme: the sound that unites "coil" and "spoil" in rhyme is "oil," the natural resource that many have argued is the underlying motivation for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Other words in the section—"gloss" and "spread"—evoke oiliness, and in the context of Nelson's apparent apotheosis, the phrase "grandly weighed" suggests the poem "God's Grandeur" by G. M. Hopkins and its "ooze of oil crushed" (Hopkins 2002, 128). The italicized words "*a long age*" probably echo Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," in which wine is described as "cooled for a long age in the deep-delvèd earth"—a description that could apply equally to the process of the formation and extraction of oil.

The original line from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that Hill quotes in part at the beginning of stanza five reads in full: "O Jew,

⁶ One might argue that if a poet wishes to condemn a war, he might be more effective if he spoke plainly. Such poetry is no more effective in achieving its ultimate aims, however. The message of Robert Bly's chapbook *The Insanity of Empire: A Book of Poems against the Iraq War* (2004) could not be any more directly stated, yet it is the poetic equivalent of preaching to the choir, rather than reaching and influencing those with power.

leave counting gold! return to thy oil and wine" (1982, 44).⁷ The irony of Blake's imperative in view of contemporary circumstances is stark: it is now not so much gold but oil (although petroleum, not olive) that is counted as treasure; it is now oil that diverts people from their obligation to love their neighbors. As the poem notes in its opening line, "Everything swings with the times." Stanza three makes much of the viewer "beholding" and "seeing," as the painting itself does. Nelson gazes distantly off into the upper right. The Christ-figure has his eyes on the monster, and the one entity staring at the painting's viewer is Leviathan himself. After "a long age" of gazing at Hill's poem, the reader sees war—war past and war present—appearing as a monster looking at us from there, too.

Interpreting Hill's poem requires the same kind of attention as interpreting Blake's *Nelson Guiding Leviathan*. At the beginning of stanza two, he declares—perhaps acknowledging how Erdman provides a key to Blake's historical obscurities, and perhaps also announcing the secrets to be discovered in his own poem—"This is where the cryptic opens." Erdman's description of Blake as "secretly condemning war's enormities" (1977, 331) applies just as well to Hill's poem.

Hill's second opinion confirms Erdman's diagnosis that "Blake's withdrawal from any audience beyond a few uncritical or even uncomprehending friends" resulted in his "involutéd symbolism and obscure manner" (1977, 153). The lack of public recognition and reward also meant personal financial hardship for Blake. The artist needed money and had to make compromises in order to try to earn it at the same time that he condemned the national pursuit of financial gain. At the beginning of stanza five, Hill echoes Erdman's paraphrase of Blake, which reads: "For 'counting gold' is not abundant living; and grasping colonies and shedding blood whether in the name of royal dignity or in the name of commerce is not living at all, but killing" (1977, 226). Stanzas five and six in their entirety read:

V

If *counting gold* is not *abundant living*
nothing else counts. That there are over-

⁷ Even the most free-thinking writers can be ethically compromised by the oppressive prejudices of their day. Karen Shabetai notes that Erdman, who quotes this passage more fully as an epigraph to chapter ten of *Blake*, "does not remark on the Judeophobic association of Jews with money" (Shabetai 1996, 150 n. 6). Hill does not overtly remark on that association either, but given his long-standing concern with the Holocaust and his own marriage to a Jew, that undercurrent and its anti-Semitic implications likely did not escape his notice. Earlier in *The Treatise of Civil Power*, he notes Cromwell's "known affect for Jewry." Although Jews were not officially readmitted to the country during the Interregnum, in practice the Jews already resident in England received more open toleration.

flowing granaries of Imagination
 stands neither here nor there. Money is fertile
 and genius falls by the way. It doesn't—
 but stays in its own room, growing confused

VI

as I suppose Will: Blake did, overwhelmed
 by the spoiled harvest of *The Four Zoas*.

Hill capitalizes “Imagination” in recognition of the whole Romantic tradition, of which Blake, according to Erdman, is a “spiritual forerunner” (1977, 455). Blake’s great literary significance is apparent in hindsight, but in his own time he became—according to Erdman and Hill—“confused” and “overwhelmed” because of the public indifference to his “over- / flowing granaries of Imagination.” Hill’s poetic line mimetically overflows in his agrarian image of creative abundance wasted. Blake’s *The Four Zoas* becomes, in Hill’s words, a “spoiled harvest,” a damaged sacrifice of labor.

Erdman shows that “harvest” is a core metaphor not only in *The Four Zoas*, but in Blake’s thinking more generally. Borrowing from Blake’s description of the new millennium to come, Erdman entitles his chapter on *The Four Zoas* “The Wondrous Harvest.” He discovers that Blake found a source for his political harvest metaphor in older works:

Thus men have fought for bread, and even reversed the pestilential effect of war to the extent that the blood of tyrants and hirelings, added to their own, has enriched the lean earth. In at least two antiquarian sources, Chatterton’s Rowley poems and Percy’s *Northern Antiquities* (a translation of Paul Henri Mallet’s study of the mythology of the Icelandic Eddas), Blake found indications that many of man’s struggles are literally preparations for harvest [1977, 249–50].

In describing *The Four Zoas* as a “spoiled harvest,” Hill identifies not only the work’s literary incoherence and obscurity, but also the complex unfolding of bloody international events for which *The Four Zoas* sought to provide an apocalyptically redemptive interpretation. Because Blake could not, in the end, interpret the political violence to be salvific, both history and the literary work about it “spoiled.” Hill’s own earlier poetry has also incorporated the topos of political and spiritual harvest. In particular, *The Orchards of Syon* (2002b) dwells on what it means for something to have its “due season,” and also on the kinds of harvests people can bring home or offer up to God in the late twentieth century, when most people in the West have become separated from the rhythms of agrarian life.

4. War, Poetry, and Prophecy

On plate two of his work *Milton*, Blake inscribed Moses's exclamation in Numbers 11:29: "Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets." In lamenting Blake's situation, Erdman declares: "Hard it is for the prophet who sees rulers choosing apparently endless war." As I have previously noted, Erdman sees Blake holding on to the "necessary conviction that war and oppression *can* be permanently overthrown" (1977, 400). Two centuries on, Hill writes from the perspective of someone who knows about many more dreadful wars, and who is once again witnessing rulers undertaking international violence. While he has not given up on England or the idea of a paradise of creative imagination, Hill has learned from Blake himself and from Erdman, as well as from history, that such a "necessary conviction" is mistaken, at least while the double quest for worldly power and profit remains humanity's main public motivation. Nonetheless, he agrees with Blake that when society as a whole fails to listen to its poets and prophets, the consequences for society are even worse than for the poets themselves. From Moses and Cassandra onwards, ancient as well as modern texts describe how people who ignore their prophets have faced terrible consequences, including death in war (or by divine hand) and the destruction, corruption, or exile of entire communities.

At the same time, through Erdman, Hill—studying, interpreting, and relating to Blake as a significant influence—identifies how writing forcefully, even angrily, against the dominant ideologies of an age can have damaging consequences for both the poet and his poetry. Without a public that hears, openly acclaims, and even criticizes poetry, the poet is like a madman talking to himself. Hill's interpretation of Blake—enriched by what he has learned from Erdman's unveiling of the historical correspondences of Blake's mythology and Blake's undercover dissent—reveals how a poet with a prophet's vision of the inextricable relations of the artistic, the religious, and the political undertakes the task of writing only at considerable risk. The forces he must "contradict" reside within as well as outside himself; in writing against the desire for power and success that he so abhors as motivating factors in the ruling elites, he must write both for and against his own desire for power and success, potentially severing his relationship with his audience.

Quoting an image of spoiled harvest from *The Four Zoas* for supporting evidence, Erdman suggests that "the closing years of the century found William Blake in his forties a poet who had shattered his harp, a prophet whose wisdom none would buy, and an artist whose humblest breadwinning tool had been laid by. 'Wisdom is sold in the

desolate market where none comes to buy, And in the wither'd field where the farmer plows for bread in vain" (1977, 288, quoting *The Four Zoas* II. 35:14–15). At the end of his poem, Hill portrays this vain, desolate attempt to reap one's crops and sell one's wares in the image of an old, homeless, mad person—who is also a prophet raging with the truth, his lips touched by the seraph's burning coal in Isaiah 6. A contemporary review of a Blake exhibition accused him of literal insanity; Erdman describes his social exile as eventually "complete" (1977, 455).

In Hill's poem (and era), people still do not listen to their artists, or speak back to the media that now hypnotically absorb the attention of those who might otherwise become poetry's audience. In stanza eight, the term "screen," at the end of the first line quoted below, is a synecdoche for television, computer, and cinema. These are the instruments of an age about which Hill has said, "A society which provides such solid rewards for the vacuousness of the television personality is so centrally and orthodoxly cynical that skepticism belongs with poetry as a kind of marginal resistance to it" (Haffenden 1981, 88). As he describes the prophet as a "combustious sight," that media screen may also act as a fire screen, protecting people from the rage of prophetic truth that would force them to change their lives if they could pay attention to it.

Nobody listens or contradicts the screen;
 though, homeward-bound, some find combustious
 sights to be stepped aside from—an old body

IX

its mouth working.

Whether the ignored old speaker is mad or a prophet, he or she cannot be heard by those who pass by. The neuter genitive pronoun "its" of the ultimate line marks the deliberate disassociation of passers-by from the dehumanized, degendered speaker, whose lips are moving in communicative effort, but whose utterance goes unheard. This sad, unpleasant final image, forming an entire stanza that is truncated almost before it has begun, encapsulates the position of the marginalized, uncomprehended poet, which, according to Erdman, was precisely the situation thrust upon Blake, and which has looked like a threat to Hill as well.

Hill is often described by critics as difficult, dense, and allusive; he has been condemned for his "inaccessibility" because of his resistance to predetermined ways of using language and his angry, sometimes rebarbative voices. Poets who are heard tend to be saying what people want to hear, or at least what they are accustomed to hearing. For this reason, especially during times of political oppression, popular poets

are unlikely to be prophets, even if they may at times rise to the status of “great poets” in the minds of their readership. Like Blake, Hill sees the forces of war and economic self-interest lined up together. They render irrelevant, at least in the immediate public sense, the truly great poets’ prophetic visions, which it nonetheless remains their tiring, angry, and perhaps even dangerous duty to utter.

Early in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (stanza nine of “On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*”), Hill declares in Blakean poetic style: “Everything is holy and we will reign / in our young bodies and make good our age.” The clarion of this beautiful proclamation is soon stifled, however, by a series of English place names, questioning the probability of the prophetic claim, and the stanza ends in doubt and self-mistrust: “how else should I prophesy, / misguided, misconceiving, mis-inspired?” (2007, 6).⁸

Making a necessary if difficult turn within his discourse on the subject of poetic prophecy, Hill suggests that prophets themselves can become immersed in the ethical quagmires of the military-industrial-economic-social complexes in which they live. After stating early in “On Reading *Blake*” that “terror is opportune,” Hill points out that Blake himself, if he had had better luck, “could have been an opportunist.” Hill’s speaker also points a finger at his own weaknesses: his inadequate “gloss,” his stealing from Whitman, his “fearful exhaustion,” and his “wrathful self.” In “A Treatise of Civil Power” (the pamphlet collection’s title poem, omitted from the later versions), Hill writes briefly of himself and his fellow poets, coming to this painful conclusion: “Most of us predators, a few, prophets.” The monster of *Nelson Guiding Leviathan*, like the poet, appears to be “combustious” (flames seem to be emanating from its body), and its mouth, like the prophet’s, is also working, trying to swallow Christ. Hill has spoken admiringly of Christopher Devlin’s description of the motif of Hopkins’s sermons: “the lost kingdom of innocence and original justice” (Devlin 1959, 6; see Hopkins 1959). Hill said, “There’s a real sense in which every fine and moving poem bears witness to this lost kingdom” (Haffenden 1981, 88). Many of Hill’s own poems mourn this loss, rage against injustice, and yearn imaginatively for the return of what has gone. Nevertheless, by condemning the “tyrants of unaccountable error,” as Hill calls them, prophecy itself feeds on their failures. In a restored kingdom, prophecy—as we know it—would be no more.

⁸ Geoffrey Hill, “On Reading *Milton and the English Revolution*.” In *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007, 6). Copyright © Geoffrey Hill 2007. Reproduced by permission of Penguin Books Ltd and Yale University Press.

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