The Performative Limits of Poetry

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J. L. Austin showed that performative speech acts can fail in various ways, and that the ways in which they fail can often be revealing, but he was not concerned with understanding performative failures that occur in the context of poetry. Geoffrey Hill suggests, in both his poetry and his prose writings, that these failures are more interesting than Austin realized. This article corrects Maximilian de Gaynesford's misunderstanding of Hill's treatment of this point. It then explains the way in which Hill's understanding of the performative restrictions on poetry relate to his conception of poetry's role, analogous to that of the Saturnalian misruler, in establishing the authority of ordinary language.

De Gaynesford's Misreading

Ever since the 1955 lectures in which J. L. Austin established a place for performative speech acts on the philosopher of language's research agenda, our discussions of performativity have been particularly concerned with the ways in which sentences that are syntactically apt for making promises, apologies, baptisms, bets, etc., can nonetheless fail to perform those acts when uttered. Austin himself considered several possible sources of such failure, distinguishing between flaws and hitches, misinvocations and misexecutions, misfires and abuses.[1]

Before giving this taxonomy of 'infelicities', Austin set aside those cases in which sentences fail to carry their usual performative force on account of being uttered in poetry or on the stage. He characterized such cases as arising when language is 'used not seriously', and told us that 'a performative utterance will … be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy.'[2] Austin was not especially interested in explaining the cases of performative failure that arise in this 'peculiar way'. This was because he took it that utterances of *any* sort can behave strangely in theatrical or poetic contexts, whether those utterances are performative or not. The failures of performativity that occur in such contexts therefore seemed to reveal nothing very much about performativity per se.

There are several ways in which one might object to these parts of Austin's discussion. Some of these objections were raised by the post-structuralist literary critics of the 1970s. One objection—articulated by Barbara Johnson—rejects Austin's characterization of poetic uses as 'non-serious'.[3] Another—which exercised Jacques Derrida and, in response to him, John Searle—denies the idea that the 'non-serious' uses of language can be isolated and set to one side.[4]

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1   J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: OUP, 1964), 18.

2   *Ibid.*, 22.

3   Barbara Johnson, 'Poetry and Performative Language', *Yale French Studies* 54 (1977), 140–58, esp., 150.

4   Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', repr. in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–21, esp., 17. John Searle, 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida', *Glyph* 2 (1977), 198–208.

There is a further objection, distinct from both of these, which says that Austin was wrong to treat the failure of performativity in poetic contexts as simply one instance of a more general peculiarity exhibited by such contexts. Instead of taking the failures of performativity in poetic contexts to be instances of a more general phenomenon—what Austin calls poetic 'etiolation'—we might instead see these failures as revealing something particular about performative authority, and about the way in which it interacts with the authority of poetic speech. It is this last idea that I wish to pursue here.

In pursuing it, I take myself to be following the lead of Geoffrey Hill's 1983 essay, 'Our Word Is Our Bond',[5] in which Hill uses Austin's remarks on performativity as one part of his attempt 'to attribute causes, or even reasons' for what he calls the 'savage contretemps' between Ezra Pound and the US Judiciary. The lead of Hill's essay has also been followed by Christopher Ricks, in his 1992 essay, 'Austin's Swink'.[6]

These essays have been discussed in a series of recent articles by Maximilian de Gaynesford. De Gaynesford attributes to Hill and to Ricks the claim that 'we must deny that utterance of a sentence in poetry could be performative.'[7] He goes on to show that Hill's own poetry contains what are apparent counterexamples to this claim. He concludes that Hill and Ricks underestimate the range of performatives that our language affords.

This reading is incorrect. Hill's response to Austin does not commit him to denying that the utterance of a sentence in poetry could ever be a performative. When Hill writes that 'Austin's principles are vindicated, though his prejudices and self-satisfactions are not', he cannot be taking the vindicated principles to rule out poetic performatives altogether.[8] We can be sure of this because Hill's final assessment of Pound's judicial 'contretemps'—which follows immediately after this concession of Austin's principles—is not that Pound went wrong in attempting to exercise performative authority in the context of poetry, but that he 'may have misconstrued a fine point of semantics'. More specifically, he may have confused verdicative performatives with exercitive ones:

> It was suggested, at the start of this discussion, that Pound may have misconstrued a fine point of semantics. In *How to Do Things with Words* Austin writes that 'a verdicative is a judicial act as distinct from legislative or executive acts, which are both exercitives'. Pound's error was to confuse the two, to fancy that poets' 'judicial sentences' are, in mysterious actuality, legislative or executive acts.[9]

Hill must here be taking it that performativity within the context of poetry *is* possible, for otherwise it would not be possible for Pound to be confused about the verdicative status of that performativity. It is this 'fine point of semantics', and not any supposed blanket ban on poetic performatives, whose importance Hill is trying to register.

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5   Geoffrey Hill, 'Our Word Is Our Bond', repr. in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), 138–59, at 138.

6   Christopher Ricks, 'Austin's Swink', repr. in *Essays in Appreciation* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 260–79.

7   Maximilian de Gaynesford, 'Speech Acts and Poetry', *Analysis* 70 (2010), 644–6, at 645.

8   Hill, 'Our Word Is Our Bond', 158.

9   *Ibid.*, 159.

Hill's Actual Claim

We can get a clearer view of Hill's position by considering what he asserts on his own behalf, rather than what he takes, with qualifications, from Austin. The claim that Hill asserts, in the discussion that de Gaynesford cites, is not a claim about performative restrictions that apply to poetry in general, but only a claim about *modern* poetry. It is not the claim that the modern poet is unable to make performative utterances in the course of his poems, only that he has no simple verbal device for making the performative status of his utterances explicit. After quoting G. H. Warnock's identification of 'hereby' as a device for making performativity explicit in normal English prose, Hill writes that:

> Modern poetry, we may suggest, yearns for this sense of identity between saying and doing … but to Pound's embarrassment and ours it discovers itself to possess no equivalent for 'hereby'.[10]

It is not obvious that Hill is right about this: It is not obvious that modern poetry lacks an equivalent of 'hereby' (since it is not obvious that 'hereby' cannot itself be employed in modern poetry, just as it is employed in normal speech). Nor is it obvious why the lack of an equivalent of 'hereby' should be regarded as an *embarrassment*, either to Pound or to the 'us' that Hill mentions. By the end of this essay, I hope to have made explicit Hill's reasons for maintaining these points. For the preliminary purpose of seeing the way in which Hill's actual claim differs from the claim that de Gaynesford attributes to him, it is enough to notice that Hill does not make the mistake of thinking that the lack of an explicit marker for performativity would entail that the utterance of a sentence in poetry could not be a performative. Hill's claim is only about performative *marking*, and not about performativity itself. He thinks that Austin is right in taking there to be constraints on the use of performatives in the context of poetry (and thinks that these constraints are worth taking care over), but not, as de Gaynesford would have it, that 'we must deny that utterance of a sentence in poetry could be performative.'

Ricks's elaboration of Hill's position comes somewhat closer than Hill himself to making the claim that de Gaynesford attributes, but Ricks too says something that is more subtle than de Gaynesford allows. Ricks, like Hill, does not say that no successful performative could occur within a poem. He says that when such a performative does occur, it does not 'exactly perform itself':

> Austin was right to distinguish art-speech from direct utterance; was right to judge that a 'performative utterance' ('I name this ship …') cannot be thought exactly to perform itself when it figures within the different kind of occasion which is a poem.[11]

When Ricks talks here about a performative 'not exactly performing itself', the notion he is employing is one that Austin himself took be of the first philosophical importance. He described his work on pretending as a 'humble' contribution to:

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10   Hill, 'Our Word Is Our Bond', 153–4.

11   Ricks, 'Austin's Swink', 261.

the long-term project of classifying and clarifying all possible ways of and varieties of *not exactly doing things*, which has to be carried through if we are ever to understand properly what doing things is.[12]

Although Austin is surely right that there is philosophical work to be done in clarifying the notion of 'not exactly doing things', the point that Ricks is making, when he claims that a performative in poetry 'cannot be thought exactly to perform itself' can be seen clearly enough, even without that philosophical work having been completed. It can be seen by considering the example that de Gaynesford quotes when attempting to refute the position that he takes Ricks and Hill to endorse.[13]

The example comes from the final page of Hill's 1998 poem *The Triumph of Love*:

So—Croker, MacSikker, O'Shem—I ask you:
what are poems for?[14]

De Gaynesford treats these lines as a counterexample to the 'no poetic performatives' claim that he attributes to Ricks and Hill. He claims 'It would be absurd *not* to think that the act of asking named here had successfully been performed.'[15]

The point is one that it is worth taking some care over. We have seen that there is no need for Ricks or Hill to deny that *an* act of asking is here performed. Hill's claim is that the performativity of an utterance cannot be established by an explicit verbal marking within the poem. Ricks's claim is that the asking does not 'exactly perform itself'. Both of these claims are right. We can see this by taking them in turn, starting with Ricks's.

Performatives That Do Not Exactly Perform

Despite de Gaynesford's allegations of absurdity, Ricks is right that the context of poetry has the consequence that the performative sentence that was quoted above does not exactly perform itself. The asking that Hill's line achieves cannot exactly be an asking of Croker, MacSikker, and O'Shem what poems are for. It cannot be *that* because there are no such people. These names are foils against which Hill articulates his attitude to his critical reception quite generally, or, perhaps, they encode his attitude to his reception from some critics in particular, whom he refrains from naming. In either case, de Gaynesford is wrong to say that 'It would be absurd *not* to think that the act of asking named here had successfully been performed.' This allegedly absurd thought seems exactly right. The act of asking named here has not successfully been performed. That act could not be performed as named because, as named, it is directed at non-existent persons. Some sort of interrogative speech act has taken place in the passage that de Gaynesford quotes, but it is

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12 J. L. Austin, 'Pretending', repr. as ch. 11 of his *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: OUP, 1961), 253–71, at 271.

13 Maximillian de Gaynesford, 'The Seriousness of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism* 59 (2009), 1–21, 12 and 'Speech Acts and Poetry', *Analysis* 70 (2010), 644–646, 645.

14 Geoffrey Hill, *The Triumph of Love* (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

15 de Gaynesford, 'Speech Acts and Poetry', 645.

essential to our understanding of what Hill is doing with those three proper names that the enquiry he performs is not 'the act of asking here named'.

Nor is the act that is performed by these lines straightforwardly an act of asking. (And it is by seeing this point that we can begin to approach Hill's claim about the unavailability to poetry of explicit performative marking.) The lines that de Gaynesford quotes do contain a phrase——'I ask you'——that in normal discourse could serve to explicitly mark the performance of an asking. But the phrase cannot be serving quite that purpose here. In the first place this is because Hill's meter puts a strong emphasis on 'ask', and thereby brings into the foreground the idiomatic use of 'I ask you', not as an explicitation of questioning, but as an indication of exasperation. Also, and more importantly, the quotation given by de Gaynesford is truncated in a way that disguises how its context depends for its effect on the differing modes of performance that sentences in the interrogative mood can enact. When the context for these lines is restored, it becomes clear that something more rhetorically interesting is going on. The context is this:

> … Take Leopardi's
> words or——to be accurate——BV's English
> cast of them: when he found Tasso's poor
> scratch of a memorial barely showing
> among the cold slabs of defunct pomp. It
> seemed *a sad and angry consolation*.
> So——Croker, MacSikker, O'Shem——I ask you:
> what are poems for? They are to console us
> with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.
> Let us commit that to our dust. What
> ought a poem to be? Answer, *a sad*
> *and angry consolation*. What is
> the poem? What figures? Say,
> *a sad and angry consolation*. That's
> beautiful. Once more? *A sad and angry*
> *consolation*.

De Gaynesford may be right that the first of the question marks in this passage is marking the performance of a questioning, even if Ricks would be right to say that the act performed is not exactly the questioning that is named. Notice, however, that the reading of Hill's verse that would result if we take the passage's other questions in that same way would miss the force that this section of the poem achieves: the second of the question marks in this quotation does not simply mark a question. It also invokes the didactic context of the ritualized call-and-response form of a catechism. The last of the question marks issues a plea. And neither of the question marks that lie between these serves simply to register a request for information.

This being a poem, the consequence of this context is to make it clear that even that first question mark, with its explicit verbal marking——'I ask you / what are poems for?'——does not exactly perform the act of questioning. Insofar as this *is* a question, it is not a question that pauses for an answer. 'They are to console us' follows without a line break. And even

this does not exactly perform the act of answering. It is, as Hill interrupts himself to tell us, a recasting of an already translated version of Giacomo Leopardi's hard-to-translate response to the sight of Tasso's tomb ('una trista e tremebonda consolazione'). There is also, in 'consolation', an echo of Chaucer; of Harry Bailey's 'best sentence and most solas'. Nor is 'They are to console us' exactly the answer that is given. The line runs on:

> … They are to console us
> with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.

It is clear that Ricks is right here. The performative—'I ask you / what are poems for?'—does not exactly perform itself. We can now see that Hill is right as well. The standard verbal markers of performativity—in this case 'I ask you'—cannot be employed with their usual effect in this poetic context. The presence of such markers does not establish that an asking is being performed. The only reading of this passage that supports de Gaynesford's claim that a performance of interrogation is obviously here being flagged as such is a reading that misses these points. It does so by considering Hill's utterance independently of its meter, its context, and its allusive relationship with its intertextual history. To do that is to treat the utterance as something less than a line in a poem. The requirements of a properly poetic reading do impose limits on the use of performatives in a poetic context.

There can be no doubt that Austin badly mischaracterized such limits when he alleged (entirely without argument) that they originate in the fact that utterances in poetry are not meant seriously. The origins of these limits are much more interesting than that, and potentially much more informative about the nature of poetry, and about the performative authority of poetic speech. It is in the hope of tapping this potential source of information—and not merely in an attempt to defend poetry against Austin's unargued slights—that Hill enquires into the peculiar way in which the limits on poetry's performatives arise.

Authority and the Limits on Performativity

Although it focuses on performativity, Hill's enquiry into the authority of poetic speech is not exclusively concerned with the poet's authority to do things by the performative use of words. It is also concerned with the straightforwardly constative matter of a poet's authority to make claims about the things he knows.

Insofar as it is merely the authority of a *thinker*, without any claim to expert knowledge or to the authority of speaking from first-hand experience, the limits of the poet's authority flare up—as a point of unresolved contention—when *The Triumph of Love* moves (first sadly and then angrily) towards the consolation of the passages from which we quoted above. Section CXXXVI of the poem reads:

> But only in a manner of speaking.
> I was not there, nor were you. We are children
> of the Thirties, the sour dissipation;
> England at once too weepy and too cold.

The concessive tone of this passage quickly changes, in section CXXXVIII, as Hill turns on the figure of Croker (first named in CXXIV: '*he wasn't there,* as Croker pointed out'):

> Confound you, Croker—you and your righteous
> censure! I have admitted, many times,
> my absence from the Salient, from the coal-face
> in Combs Pit, Thornhill.

Here Hill is explicitly *not* laying claim to the constative authority of speaking from experience, or even with expertise. The authority that remains, in speaking as a poet, is authority of a more specifically performative sort. It is named in section VIII of the poem, when Hill first announces his concern for the authority with which he speaks:

> They have conceded me—I think, beyond question—
> power of determination but without
> force of edict.

This performative 'force of edict' is the focus for Hill's enquiry into poetry's performative failures.

One strand of this enquiry is concerned with the *logical* sources of such failure. We can see this on the title page of Hill's 2006 collection, *Without Title*.[16]

As Gérard Genette notes, in his definitive study of such 'paratexts', the material on a book's title page must be understood as having a performative function. It cannot properly be understood if it is taken to be merely fact stating:

> *a novel* [as written on the title page of a book] does not signify 'This book is a novel', a defining assertion that hardly lies within anyone's power, but rather 'Please look on this book as a novel' …

> 'Stendhal' and '*Le Rouge et le noir*' do not mean 'My name is Stendhal' (which is false in the eyes of the registry office) and 'This book is named *Le Rouge et le noir*' (which makes no sense) ['Ce livre s'appelle *Le Rouge et le noir*' (ce qui n'a aucun sens)], but 'I choose the pseudonym Stendhal' and 'I, the author, decide to give this book the title *Le Rouge et le noir*.'[17]

Because entitling is a speech act with its own performative force, it is subject to a logical limitation, which the title of *Without Title* manifests. A title can perform speech acts of various sorts, including speech acts with a self-referential character, but the appropriately authorized inscription of a phrase on a book's title page cannot enact the performative that would declare that that book is to be without a title.[18] When Hill causes his book to have 'Without Title' written on its title page, he cannot thereby make it the case that the book is without a title.

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16 Geoffrey Hill, *Without Title* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

17 Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 15–16, trans. by Jane E. Lewin, as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 11.

18 An example of a title with a self-referential character is Raymond Smullyan's 1978 book, *What Is the Name of This Book?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978).

This limitation is indicative of his authority. If Hill himself wanted to produce an untitled book, he could only arrange to do so by some means other than the performative inscription of that fact, but if 'Without Title' is inscribed without performative authority, as by an archivist or bookseller, it *can* record the fact that a book is, indeed, without a title.

The limitation that is on display here is, in a sense, no more than a logical one, but such limitations can be revealing. When there are limits that prevent a performative from being used successfully, those limits do reveal something about the nature of the speech act in question: something essential about apologizing can be seen by noticing that one cannot apologize for acts that are commonly known to have been beneficial to all of the parties in a conversation. Something essential about bequeathing, promising, and commanding can be seen by noting that one cannot bequeath one's whole estate to two separate beneficiaries; cannot promise never to keep any of one's promises; and cannot command that none of one's commandments (including this one) is to be obeyed.

It is in just this way that Hill's title reveals something about what it is for a use of language to have the authorization to perform an act of entitling, and thereby advertises Hill's approach to his larger questions about the limits of poetic authority. As Genette notes, shortly after the passage that we quoted above, the acts of 'affixing a title or selecting a pseudonym' not only display a degree of performativity, they are also 'acts that mimic any creative power'.[19]

Non-logical Limits of Performativity

As with the title of *Without Title,* the title of Hill's book-length sequence *Speech! Speech!* exhibits a logical limit on performative use.[20] In both titles the limits on display are self-contained: '*Without Title*' enacts a self-defeating baptism; '*Speech! Speech!*' (if said out loud) enacts a self-fulfilling demand. Not all limits on performativity are so self-contained. Some are context-dependent, and it is with these that the poems contained in *Speech! Speech!* are more often concerned.

The defeat of a performative by context might take the form of an explicit cancellation, as when, towards the beginning of *Speech! Speech!,* the reader is assured:

> … Very well | you
> shall have on demand, by return, *presto*,
> my contractual retraction.
> Laser it off the barcode or simply
> cut here ——

Defeat by context might also operate in a more insidious fashion, not by explicitly cancelling the performative, but by compromising the authority with which the speaker issues it. Such a predicament is dramatized towards the end of *Speech! Speech!* (in the 112th of that book's 120 poems) when Hill writes:

> … I woúld be myself
> stuck in some other *bolge* yet scarcely

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19 Genette, *Paratexts*, 12.

20 Geoffrey Hill, *Speech! Speech!* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2000).

> recall what it wás I promised, or even
> what promise ís | damned liar that I am:

Much as we can learn something essential about the act of entitling by noting that it is impossible for a performance of entitling to declare something to be without a title, so we can learn something essential about the basis on which a contract is binding by noting the doublethink that is required by any attempt to stipulate within a contract that that contract can or cannot be retracted, and something essential about the authority of promising by noting that the performative use of 'I promise' may be unavailable in contexts where there is an acknowledged failure to 'recall what it wás I promised, or even / what promise ís'.[21]

Stanley Cavell has provided a useful characterization of this last form of performative defeat. In one of his treatments of Derrida's response to Austin he tells us that:

> One may feel … that if my word is my bond and I forfeit my bond … what I forfeit is language itself. Philosophers have said—my parents said—that if you do not keep your promise (or was it, if you tell a lie) people will not take your word again. That frightened me more than the idea that some person would not accept my future promises. I felt it meant that I would become unintelligible, that the words I would give in my utterances would become ungraspable, not receivable, not currency.[22]

Cavell has evidently overcome this childhood fear of unintelligibility to a sufficient extent that he can now court the self-defeating conditions that provoke it (by announcing, towards the beginning of the essay from which this quotation comes 'I shall proceed in a sense with deviousness'), but even if one can outgrow the anxiety that known deviousness will make one's words 'ungraspable', the fear that compromising one's authority will leave one without the currency of speech is, as Cavell realizes, well founded.[23] A speaker whose past promises are commonly known to have been broken is not merely at risk that his future promises will not be accepted. The risk is that he will be unable to make those promises at all. Once he knows that his audience knows not to take his utterances of 'I promise …' as indicative of genuine commitments (and once this knowledge, in turn, is iterated recursively) the utterance of 'I promise …' will no longer be available as a way to undertake any such commitment. The known forfeiter's promises are indeed 'not receivable, not currency', in much the way that the young Cavell feared.

The point that Cavell's fantasy vivifies is a familiar one (familiar from the fable of the boy who cried 'wolf'), but it was this point that lent much of the drama to the debates about performative limitations that played out between philosophers and literary critics in the 1970s and 80s. The spectacle of Derrida's 'Limited Inc a b c …' was largely owing to the fact that, in response to Searle's dismissive treatment of his commentary on Austin, Derrida made a show of vandalizing his own performative authority to such an extent as to render his own utterances 'ungraspable, not receivable, not currency', in just the way that Cavell finds frightening. Having begun 'Limited Inc a b c' by announcing his 'penchant for falsity' (while

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21 Notice, however, that Hill does not say that he fails to recall what *a* promise is.

22 Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 104.

23 *Ibid.,* 62.

not really having begun at all, since the article starts with section d), and having three times invited his audience: 'Let's be serious', Derrida cannot then establish an intent to be serious (indeed, can only do the opposite), even when, sixteen pages later, he writes:

> Finally, I give my word of honor that I shall be of good faith in my argument. I promise this in all sincerity and in all seriousness, literally, raising my hand above the typewriter.
>
> I begin.[24]

In 1983, when Hill claimed that it was 'to Pound's embarrassment and to ours' that modern poetry 'discovers itself to possess no equivalent for "hereby",' he could perhaps be read as indicating that modern poetry finds itself in this boy-who-cried-'wolf' predicament, which Cavell describes and Derrida wilfully embodies. In his more recent treatments of poetic authority, Hill has become quite clear that he does *not* think that the authority of the modern poet is so compromised that the words uttered by him are 'not receivable', or 'not currency'. In his Tanner Lectures, delivered in 2000, Hill claims that 'It is simply not true to say that the intrinsic value of a line or phrase cannot be assayed and proven in close and particular detail.'[25] The context of this claim is one in which this image of assaying has been established as an explicitly monetary one. The lectures begin by saying that:

> The matter of intrinsic value carries a distinct referential weight in two particular areas or spheres of activity and discourse: coinage, where it can be assayed, and moral philosophy, where it cannot.[26]

When Hill concludes this lecture by claiming that the value of a line *can* be 'assayed and proven in close and particular detail', as when he refuses to exclude Ezra Pound from Austin's 'plain saying that *our word is our bond*', he is claiming that poetry *is* receivable currency.[27] The poet's predicament is not the predicament of Cavell's childhood anxieties. Whatever performative limits the context of modern poetry creates, they are not like the limits that arise from a known history of defaulting.

Instead, as we shall see below, Hill understands these performative limits to arise from the essentially exceptional status of poetic speech, a status that gives poetry a unique role in establishing the moral seriousness of language. Hill explores this status with an analogy, which first appears in section 7 of his 1978 poem 'Tenebrae', between the poet and the Lord of Misrule:

> He wounds with ecstasy. All
> the wounds are his own.
> He wears the martyr's crown.
> He is the Lord of Misrule.[28]

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24 Jacques Derrida 'Limited Inc a b c …', repr. in *Limited Inc.*, 29–107, at 45.

25 Geoffrey Hill, 'Rhetorics of Value', in *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 22 (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 2001), 255–83, at 269.

26 *Ibid.*, 255.

27 Hill, 'Our Word is Our Bond', 158–9, in reference to Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 10.

28 Geoffrey Hill, 'Tenebrae', in *Tenebrae* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 44.

In order to understand why these images of misrule and martyrdom belong together, and why they are appropriate for Hill's purposes, it is necessary to consider the political function of misrule, and to recall the peculiar kind of institution within which the Lord of Misrule could exist.

Performatives of Misrule

The historical context for misrule is examined in part IV of *The Golden Bough*, when Sir James Frazer notes that it was common for ancient and medieval cultures to mark:

> an annual period of license, when the customary restraints of law and morality are thrown aside, when the whole population give themselves up to extravagant mirth and jollity, and when the darker passions find a vent which would never be allowed them in the more staid and sober course of ordinary life.[29]

Frazer's metaphor of a vent for 'the pent-up forces of human nature'[30] seems unavoidable when giving an account of a Saturnalia's social and psychological function, but any account of Saturnalia that is based only on that metaphor seems to be inadequate as an explanation for the fact (with which Frazer is primarily concerned) that periods of Saturnalia traditionally concluded with the ritual killing of the Lord of Misrule who had presided over them. The safety valve conception of Saturnalia leaves us without an account of why it is that the Saturnalia should require the appointment of a presiding misruler at all, still less with an explanation for the sacrifice of him. Frazer takes this to indicate that the Lord of Misrule's status as a sacrifice must precede his role in the Saturnalia, writing that

> the custom of putting a mock king to death as a representative of a god cannot have grown out of a practice of appointing him to preside over a holiday revel, whereas the reverse may very well have happened … [31]

This conjecture about the priority of martyrdom over misrule may prove to be accurate as a point of history, but in order to understand the work that Lord of Misrule imagery accomplishes in Hill's poetry, we need to go beyond this account of the circumstances that led to misrulers being sacrificed, and to consider the logic that makes their sacrifice intelligible. The logic that operates here is a performative logic, such we have been considering above.

The Lord of Misrule's special status does not consist in his being granted a temporary licence to indulge his appetites. That licence is enjoyed by all of the Saturnalia's participants. The rights that are particular to the Lord of Misrule, and in which his special status consists, are, instead, rights to execute performative speech acts of a certain sort: He alone can issue the carnival's authoritative judgements, pardons, and commandments.

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29 James Frazer, 'The Scapegoat', in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, third edition (London: Macmillan, 1963), 306.

30 *Ibid*.

31 *Ibid*., 311.

We can learn something essential about this performative authority by considering its limits (just as we learn something essential about the performance of apology in finding that one cannot apologize when no fault is recognized, and just as we learn something essential about titling by noting the limits on the performatives that can be enacted in a title). It is clear, as a matter of performative logic and not merely as an historical point, that the Lord of Misrule cannot authoritatively declare that the period of his rule is to be extended beyond the Saturnalia, nor stipulate that his pronouncements have standing authority outside of that period. He cannot, as the martyred St Dasius discovered, abdicate his position.[32] Nor can he play the spoilsport by establishing the institution of misrule recursively, so that a doubly negated period of rule is embedded within the period of misrule. The performatives that are unavailable to the misruler (per se) are any of those performatives that would institute normality, either by establishing misrule as itself a norm, or by imposing the standing norms within the Saturnalia. The performative authority of the misruler is, in this sense, *essentially exceptional*.

Misrule as a Device for Manifesting the Basis of Authority

These limits on the performatives issued by a Lord of Misrule mark points of contrast between his authority and the authority that is exercised by the normal ruler, when that ruler authorizes the misruler's Saturnalia. The authorizing of a Saturnalia therefore exhibits the normal ruler's authority as being of a higher order than the popular and patently arbitrary authority of the misruler: It shows his authority to be less arbitrary, and less dependent on popular appeal.

For the purposes of understanding Hill's analogy between the poet and the Lord of Misrule, it is crucial to note that it is *only* through an institution such as misrule that the non-arbitrary basis for a normal ruler's authority can be established.

Liars and truth-tellers can both assert of themselves that they are truth-tellers. The act of making such an assertion therefore does nothing to establish one's credentials as a truth-teller. The trustworthy and the untrustworthy can both go through the verbal routine of promising to keep their promises. The logic of performativity therefore prevents one from establishing one's credentials as a keeper of promises by the performance of any such promise. Direct claims for authority on one's own behalf inevitably fail in just the same way. A ruler can utter such words as 'I am an authoritative ruler', or 'My entitlement to rule is God-given', but any fool can do that. No utterances of this sort can establish that the basis for a ruler's authority is not an arbitrary one.

Nor is it a straightforward matter for a ruler simply to show what cannot here be said. Any display of strength can show that the ruler has *some* authority, but no simple display can establish that the authority being exercised in that display is not an arbitrary one, depending only on such contingencies as brute force, or popular appeal. In order to display the non-arbitrariness of his authority, the ruler needs to show himself to be capable of exercising power of a different *order* from the arbitrary power of popular authority. He can do this by using his authority to establish a popular and patently arbitrary authority, in the person of a Lord of Misrule, and by then displaying the fact that his own authority is sufficient

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32   *Ibid.* 308–9.

to give him power—including the absolute power of life and death—over that arbitrary authority. The Saturnalia thereby serves as a device for manifesting the more-than-arbitrary source of a normal ruler's authority. It is this that makes the sacrifice of Lords of Misrule intelligible, and this that animates Hill's use of Lord of Misrule imagery in 'Tenebrae', and again, in his 1994 poem 'Respublica', in the play on 'standing' when he writes that:

> The strident high
> civic trumpeting
> of misrule. It is
> what we stand for.[33]

In both of these uses, the figure of misrule serves—as an image of anarchic carnival and of sacrifice—to introduce claims about the 'civil power' conferred by poetry (and not only to the poet), especially as it occurs in ritualized public contexts.

The Misrule of Language

The logic that makes it impossible to claim political authority on one's own behalf applies equally to the authority of speech acts, whether they occur in the form of poetry or prose. Just as an author's inscribing of 'Without Title' on the title page of a book unavoidably performs the act of dubbing, with the result that that inscription cannot successfully declare that volume to be without a title, so a poem unavoidably performs the act of taking some verbal style as proper to the topic that is spoken of, with the result that no sentence occurring within a poem can place the subject of that poem into a moral domain for which matters of verbal style are irrelevant. Since no *denial* of language's adequacy to a subject matter could be successfully asserted, no assertion of that adequacy can be successfully performed. No move within the language game can establish the adequacy of language for doing justice to its subjects.

This point—familiar as it is from literary interpretations of the final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*—is not taken by Hill to be a point that is specific to poetry. It is in his reviews of prose writings that Hill gives his clearest articulation of the moral consequences of a failure to address the obligations of style.[34] And it is John Donne's theological prose that Hill takes to be the paradigm case of writing in which the moral obligations of style are satisfied:

> With Donne, style *is* faith: a measure of delivery that confesses his own inordinacy while remaining in all things ordinate. To state this is to affirm one's recognition of his particular authority in having achieved the equation … [35]

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33 Geoffrey Hill, 'Respublica', in *Canaan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), 29.

34 One clear example of this is Hill's review of Isabel Rivers' *Reason, Grace and Sentiment,* repr. as 'The Weight of the Word', in *Style and Faith: Essays* (New York: Counterpoint, 2003), 117–39: 'The critical limitations of *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment* are (as such limitations generally are) inseparable from a general limitation of insight and imagination. … Such a tic ("very interesting," "particularly interesting," "extraordinarily interesting") is the kind of stylistic solecism which is reducible to a philosophy that some will find laudable' (117). It perhaps goes without saying that Hill does not himself find that philosophy laudable.

35 Geoffrey Hill, Preface to *Style and Faith*, xiii–xiv, at xiv.

Since *no* writing can establish its subject as having an importance that transcends verbal styling, we find ourselves, when we attempt to establish the moral importance of the way in which things are spoken of, in the predicament of the ruler who is trying to establish his authority by declaring himself authoritative. It is here that something analogous to the essentially exceptional authority of misrule is required, as a way to manifest what a first-order pronouncement cannot possibly make explicit. Hill takes this misrule-like role to be the role of poetry.

The playing of this role requires the exercise of an authority that is essentially exceptional. But, of course, the logic that we have been considering above applies to this authority as well: the poet cannot straightforwardly lay claim to authority on his own behalf; any fool can claim to be Lord of Misrule, just as any fool can claim to rule authoritatively. Hill can register the concession of an authority—

> They have conceded me—I think, beyond question—
> power of determination but without
> force of edict.

– but his poetry cannot stake a claim, on its own behalf, to any authority that has not been conceded to it. What Hill can do is to ensure that a claim to that authority is made, but made in a voice that does not itself speak with the authority of his poetry. We see just such a manoeuvre in the blurb of *Speech! Speech!*.

Being unsigned, and being written in the third person, a blurb is a piece of writing that speaks without the authority of anyone in particular.[36] The blurb to *Speech! Speech!* uses this status to say things that it is not the poet's place to say, although a hint is dropped, in the concluding sentence of the blurb's first paragraph, that it is indeed the poet who is saying them:

> Caustic and excruciatingly comic, *Speech! Speech!* is also that rarest of things: a tour de force that is tragic. As imperious as the King, forever issuing commands, and as perilously ingenious in rejoinder as the Fool, the voices of Geoffrey Hill vie to outjest each other, outrage each other, yet also to soothe implacable injuries—injuries suffered, injuries inflicted. Whose, exactly? To some degree (third degree) the poet's own, but not his alone—yours too, gentle reader.

Having thus established performativity as a theme, this blurb then moves to making claims about the truth-telling authority of the book that it advertises—claims that it could not be within the poet's power to make, if speaking *in propria persona*:

> In its ferocity and love, in its glimpses of timeless beauty, even in the praises it bestows, this is a supreme 'how to' book—how to be (or at least how to begin the process of being) honest. In speech, for a start. With a poem for each of the 120 days of Sodom, it may go too far—but then, as T. S. Eliot said, it is only by going too far that you find out how far you can go.

This process of being honest—'In speech, for a start'—is a difficult one to begin, for exactly the reasons of performative logic that we have been considering above: one cannot

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36   This point again owes something to Genette's *Paratexts*, especially to chapter 5.

make a move in the language game unless one is recognized as being authorized to do so by the other participants in it. The question of whether one's moves are honest therefore arises only once the authority to make such moves has been conceded. But to concede this authority is already to regard the speaker as honest. If *Speech! Speech!* is to show 'how to begin the process of being honest', and if it is to show this 'even in the praises it bestows', then those praises must establish the authority of their own honesty.

This may seem to trap the poet in a vicious circle, but there is, in fact, nothing paradoxical about these difficulties of self-established authority being overcome, when they occur within the context of poetry. The authority of the poet's speech can be manifested by, for example, bestowing praises on items that we, the readers, recognize on our own behalf as being praiseworthy. This requires the reader to go through the business of making a recognition of that praiseworthiness, but it does not require the reader to make that recognition without the poet's help. The poet's praises can then show how to begin the process of being honest—not because the poet reveals his honesty by saying only what we already know to be true, or by praising what we already know to be praiseworthy—but because, when the poet presents something as praiseworthy, we do not take his word for it. By presenting us with praises in the form of poetry, he invites us to interrogate the justice of his words. It is this that enables him to show how the process of being honest can begin.

It was said above, at the end of the section entitled 'Performatives That Do Not Exactly Perform', that in failing to attend to the rhythm, the context and the allusive relations of Hill's 'I ask you: What are poems for?', de Gaynesford failed to treat those lines as poetry. This was not because the reading of poetry requires attention to rhythm, context or allusion in particular, but just because the reading of poetry—if it is to show the honesty of language—requires us to interrogate the justice of the words used, and so requires attention to *whatever* verbal features of the poem might contribute to its significance. We have seen a part of this point already, in the conclusion of Hill's first Tanner lecture:

> For the poem to engage justly with our imperfection, so much the more must the poem approach the nature of its own perfection. It is simply not true to say that the intrinsic value of a line or phrase cannot be assayed and proven in close and particular detail. For the intrinsic value of the entire poem so to be established would require the significant detail to illumine and regulate the whole.[37]

We have now seen that this constant demand for assaying enables modern poetry to play its essentially exceptional role in showing 'how to begin the process of being honest', but we can also see that it is this demand for assaying that causes modern poetry to lack an equivalent for 'hereby'.

When it occurs within a poem, an instance of 'hereby', or of 'I ask you', demands the reader's scrutiny of the ways in which it is figurative, and so cannot establish, simply by its appearance, that the poem authoritatively performs the speech acts that its sentences would be syntactically apt for, if they were to occur in normal speech. The performative value of a poetic utterance is not thereby set to zero, but nor is it simply given by the face value of its performative markings. It, like the value of promises made by a suspected

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37   Hill, 'Rhetorics of Value', 269.

defaulter, *needs* to be assayed in order to be established, for, as we have seen, it is by this assaying that that 'the process of being honest' is begun. The resulting lack of an equivalent for 'hereby' is 'to Pound's embarrassment, and ours' because this exhaustive attention includes the assaying attention with which we look to the context of a performative when we scrutinize it for signs of bad faith.

I hope it is clear that this 'process of becoming honest'—for which *Speech! Speech!* claims to be 'a supreme "how to" book'—is not simply a matter of establishing Hill's own sincerity, or the good faith of the emotions that his poetry conveys. The conveying of one's own emotion through language, whether sincerely or not, features scarcely at all in Hill's conception of the poet's proper business. His second Tanner Lecture tells us that:

> A poem issues from reflection, particularly but not exclusively from the common bonding of reflection and language; it is not in itself the passing of reflective sentiment through the medium of language.[38]

The honesty that is to be established by poetry is not simple truth-telling. It is the fidelity of English, as currently spoken, as a language in which justice can be done; a language in which, for example, one can recognize Donne's 'particular authority in having achieved the equation' of style and faith. We can acknowledge that fidelity in normal discourse, just as we can acknowledge the authority of a ruler in normal conduct, but it requires the essentially exceptional performance of misrule to make the significance of its recognition manifest. Just as the non-arbitrary authority of a ruler attempts to manifest itself in his exercise of authority over the arbitrary misruler, so, in Hill's account, the moral adequacy of language attempts to manifest itself in the business of talking about the stylistic adequacies and inadequacies of poems. This, as we have seen, does not put the poet into the performative-lacking predicament of the boy who cried 'wolf', but it does require his integrity to be constantly on trial. His pronouncements are currency, but they are an essentially exceptional currency that, needing always to be assayed, cannot go into general circulation.[39]

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38 Hill, 'Rhetorics of Value', 283.