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## The Working-Class Avant-Garde

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THE WORKING-CLASS AVANT-GARDE

# Black Country Dionysus —Archie Hill and *A Cage of Shadows*

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This article considers the case of Archie Hill (1928–1986), the near-forgotten novelist, journalist and BBC television presenter. Using scant archive material, interviews and some speculative theorising, this study hopes to recount something of Hill's life and assess his place in the canon of English literature with particular focus on *A Cage of Shadows* (1973), the account of his impoverished upbringing in the Black Country.

**Publisher's Note:** This article was originally published with an incorrect peer review statement, which said that this article was an internally reviewed editorial. This has now been amended to reflect the fact that this is a piece of research that underwent double blind peer review by two external reviewers.

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## List of Abbreviations

*ACOS: A Cage of Shadows*

*ACOM: A Corridor of Mirrors*

*AEG: An Empty Glass*

*CWOL: Closed World of Love*

He who is richest in fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, can allow himself not only the sight of what is terrible and questionable but also the terrible deed and every luxury of destruction, decomposition, negation; in his case, what is evil, non-sensical, and ugly almost seems acceptable because of an overflow in procreating, fertilizing forces capable of turning any desert into bountiful farmland. (Nietzsche 2001: 234–5)

Hereafter is, firstly, an account of the life of the writer and broadcaster Archie Hill and, secondly, a suggestion of how (the study of) English literature might accommodate, and critical theory might address, his work. In both cases, and owing to a paucity of reference material, little more than a sketch can be achieved, but this study can be seen as either the first step in a process of critical rediscovery, or more straightforwardly as an entry into the academic record for a writer who has been unjustly neglected. At very least this work aims to show how Hill transformed the poverty and degradation of his early life into a 'bountiful' source of literature.

It should also be stated in the first instance that Hill's work deserves re-evaluation because of his uniqueness even amongst working-class authors. He received no formal education beyond the age of fourteen and therefore no further nor higher education. This sets him aside from the majority of writers of working-class heritage as education was not, for Hill, the route out of manual labour and poverty; it was not formal education that made possible (or at very least encouraged) his career as a published author and broadcaster.

In addition, and perhaps as a result of this lack of opportunity facilitated by education, Hill provides a vivid first-hand account of inter-war and immediately post-war Britain, of a society and a depth of deprivation that the post-war settlement was intended to efface and redeem. Thus peculiarly, almost paradoxically, his life and work offer us a glimpse of 1960s and 1970s Britain wherein a hitherto unforeseen

social mobility allowed authors such as Hill to give an account of their lives and social milieu, and to have these accounts accepted as works of English literature. It is therefore my contention that Hill's plaintive voice is significant because it speaks for a forgotten stratum of British society whilst illustrating the new possibilities offered by the post-war re-evaluation of British cultural life. In short, Hill's life and work are testament to the privations of inter-war and immediately post-war Britain, and to the opportunities made possible by the transformation of society in the 1960s and 1970s.

## 1. History

In his 1976 book, *Closed World of Love* (referred to as *CWOL* hereafter), Archie Hill reflects on his wife Violet Hill's commitment to caring for her disabled son – his step-son – Barry:

During my military years as a regular serviceman there was a time-limit to actual duty. So much time on active service, then home-base and relaxation. Mothers like my wife have no such respites; life is one long drawn battle, one mass of routine ... we men have peak-moments of sacrifice, over and done within a fraction of time. Sometimes we strut smartly on to parade grounds to receive medals in velvet-lined boxes, and live our small moments of glory forever afterwards, live and re-live. Hand our valour down to our grandchildren, our adrenalin-spurred moments of valour, often with exaggerations of mystery attached. How cheap and petty so many of us can be ... and which of us will remember women like my wife when they are dead and gone? I see no stained-glass windows to them, no memorials, no statues. But then, what form could a monument to love and patience take? Its essence could never be captured. (Hill 1976a: 57)

The point is clear, perhaps progressive for its age, perhaps atavistic today, but made by someone for whom acknowledgement and recognition seem assured. Hill's labour – that of writing – is testament to itself, there on the page. He writes, perhaps unknowingly, in the mode of one who has been acknowledged, whose subjectivity is testified to – the achievement inscribed.

It is ironic, then, that today Hill, a BBC television presenter and author of nine books, has been forgotten. The following is intended as an act of cultural remembrance.

A simple proposition underpins this work and at the same time justifies it: Hill has been forgotten because he was never, despite his temporary success, integrated within the literary establishment. He was a writer who lived for many years at the margins of society and whose work ultimately remained there also. He had few friends in high places and his work was, at times, an affront to the order which eventually briefly accepted him. As a result, few had any interest in preserving his work and establishing his reputation. He was a misfit, a malcontent, a marginal man.

I contend, however — and as stated above — that Hill's work should be remembered and re-evaluated because his voice and its origin are probably unique in English literature. The following biographical and critical sketch hopes to demonstrate this and the recent republication by Tangerine Press of Hill's first book *A Cage of Shadows* (1973/2017) offers the opportunity to both remember and re-evaluate.

There is little written information on Hill's life other than that provided by his autobiographical texts. He does not feature in anthologies and he did not, for example, have a Wikipedia page until 2017. That he does is almost entirely owing to the efforts of John Price — a fellow Black Countryman and Hill enthusiast. I have therefore attempted to collate various sources and conducted interviews with Hill's son Robin to construct a history of Hill's life, with specific focus on the period up to the publication of *A Cage of Shadows* in 1973 (hereafter referred to as *ACOS*). As we shall see — and much like his work — many of the landmarks of Hill's life have been effaced, forgotten. His life was not one that we were supposed to know of; there was nothing in his origins which would suggest his significance. We might consider it miraculous that Hill left any mark at all.

Arthur 'Archie' Hill was born on 3rd May 1928 in Blewitt Street, Brierley Hill, West Midlands (Hill, R. 2018 and Hill 1984: 9). According to *ACOS* he was born in his paternal grandmother's garden shed — where his mother had temporarily fled from his abusive father. Whether this is entirely accurate or not, we can be fairly certain that Hill was born at this location, in one of the street's 'tiny dark dreary houses' (Hill 1984: 9) and that his twin brother or sister died at birth. He was the second eldest of

nine surviving children and his entire family lived in a collier's cottage with one room downstairs and two rooms upstairs. His father was a coal-miner but was frequently unemployed, violent, and — if not an alcoholic — a heavy drinker. Hill was born roughly eighteen months before the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and therefore grew up during the Great Depression. The opening passage of *ACOS* paints a vivid picture:

I was the eldest but one, with nine brothers and sisters and mom and dad to make us into a dozen. It should have been a Baker's dozen, because I was a twin, but the other half died at birth.

Evenings and nights at home are the worst things I remember; I'd sit to the banked-up fire as late evening closed in and the others would troop off to bed, pulling coats over them to supplement lack of blankets. I had to sit up till the dad came home in case the police had to be fetched, if he came home fighting drunk.

I used to make pictures in the fire, painting them with my imagination, until my ears — sharp as a weasel's — tuned in to his footsteps coming down the entry. If they were straight and quick and firm I'd relax a bit, knowing at least his bad temper would be sober. But if they hesitated, if they came in gusts and rushes, I'd tremble inside and ask God only the favour my dad would be so drunk he'd go to sleep straight away and there wouldn't be a row. Heaven was the snoring regularity of a drunken dad too drunk to move, Paradise was the tip-toed hush about the house to keep the Heaven safe.  
(Hill 2017: 9)

Hill attended a local school and developed a tendency to blush uncontrollably, 'maybe... because of guilt, maybe because of a sense of poor-class shame, maybe because I felt more than most a centre core of inferiority' (Hill 1984: 22). He describes how his response to this was initially to 'pretend that [his] face had reddened in anger' (Hill 1984: 29) and to lash out at others and then, from the age of fifteen to seek 'blissful mind amputation' in alcohol, 'the ultimate answer to self-uncertainty' (Hill 1984: 34–35).

In 1942, aged fourteen, he won a place to study at Stourbridge Technical School (Art School), which he described as 'a different world' characterised by 'lack of bickering, the lack of undercurrents of violence' (Hill 1984: 31). He clearly displayed some artistic talent at an early age, and as his notebooks show (Hill, R. 2018), continued to draw throughout his life. Whilst at Stourbridge he also worked at a local iron foundry to supplement the family income. According to *ACOS* his father would loot his meagre savings and spend the money on alcohol. Hill describes his experience of the foundry succinctly:

I knew already that I hated the iron works, the rough hard work and the dry marrow-sucking dust. My mind raced ahead and faced the future by freezing the present out with better images. Here lay only the withering of private freedom and personal ambition. My spirit rebelled against the dryness and dust, the dead iron, the creaking machinery and strange men who methodically accepted the crushing monotony. (Hill 2017: 18)

In 1944 at age sixteen he left Stourbridge Technical College and in the subsequent year enlisted with the RAF Police Force. (Peculiarly, Hill aspired to join the police force – perhaps because a policeman once severely beat his father, enacting a brutal form of justice.) During his time in the RAF he was posted to Iraq, promoted to Sergeant and began drinking heavily. He was also trading black-market defective ammunition to the Palestinians in exchange for alcohol (Jones 2008: 11 and Hill 1984: 50).

Sometime in the late 1940s, Hill shot himself with his service revolver between the radius and ulna of his left arm. In *ACOS* he simply states that he was shot on patrol. Roger Steel claims that the injury was self-inflicted and designed to result in the granting of sick-leave to the UK (2009: 31). Again, according to Steel this was in order to salvage a relationship. Sick-leave was not granted and Hill eventually returned in 1950 or 1951. It was in this period that he married his first wife. In 1952 he was discharged from the RAF Police Force and joined a police force in the West-Midlands. He seemingly enjoyed two years of satisfactory – if not distinguished – service but in 1954 was sacked from the police force and not long after separated from his wife. Alcohol was a significant factor in these developments. Hill explains that:

my marriage had started to collapse almost from the very day that the contract was made. I think marriage itself had given me the first chance in my life to live with normal, decent people, but I couldn't accept it. Maybe, perversely, I felt that in order to accept the new standards offered me, I had to betray my roots... I planted a darkness in the family. I took the weeds of my childhood and planted them there. (Hill 1984: 64–65)

Following his wife's departure Hill was arrested for an 'accidental' suicide attempt – he supposedly left the gas on whilst drunk. Whatever the truth of the matter, suicide was a criminal offence in the UK until 1961 and he was sentenced to twelve months in Stafford Mental Hospital for alcoholism and attempted suicide. Stafford Mental Hospital was a Georgian asylum dating from 1818 and conditions were, according to Roger Steel (who befriended Hill in the hospital), like a scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Miloš Forman, 1975) (Steel 2009: 29). Hill later reflected that 'more than anything else in my life's journey through such strange conditions and institutions, this one devalued humanity the most in my heart' (Hill 1984: 72). Whilst in the hospital Hill was subjected to a range of now widely discredited therapies and treatments: apomorphine aversion therapy (lauded by William S. Burroughs in the introduction to *Naked Lunch* (1959)); insulin induced comas; and electro-convulsive therapy (ECT). Steel recalls that during this time Hill was allowed a type-writer and was working on what would eventually become *ACOS*. Hill recalls:

I can't number the hours I sat with the madmen and tried to work things out for myself... My man's body sat in a chair in a ward of a mental hospital, but the child's fingers in my mind went plucking and calling down the long empty years; the useless years, a child's broken toys. The traffic of life had crushed them to pieces and no one could mend them. I felt betrayed... I felt that God should be fair and take me back to childhood so that the child could come forwards and rescue the man. I felt things with startling clarity, but could not adjust to the new insight. It was like having two jigsaw puzzles mixed up in my mind, but with no way of separating them. I felt my own disharmony, I



felt the strain of self pulling in two directions. I made my face seem uncaring and indifferent, but inside, my mind seethed with unhappiness and unrest. I lay between the shadow and the substance, and I longed for alcohol to reduce myself and my world to a slumbering mess which could be swept under the carpet and forgotten about... (Hill 2017: 199)

In 1956, nine months into his sentence, Hill escaped from Stafford Mental Hospital using a screwdriver provided by Roger Steel. He then lived in a self-made shelter in the osier beds near the river Stour. He stole food from factory canteens to survive and was soon recaptured by the police. Subsequently he was sentenced to Wakefield Prison for theft.

Without exception, prison rots a man; and the only thing a prisoner can do is fight like hell to see that he rots as slowly as possible. (Hill 2017: 225)

Whilst in Wakefield Prison he met and became friends with Klaus 'Doc' Fuchs, a convicted Soviet nuclear spy. Fuchs – who had worked on solving the problem of implosion at the Manhattan Project, Los Alamos – introduced Hill to, amongst other things, the music of Beethoven and the psychological writings of Émile Coué. Fuchs also exposed Hill to a range of eclectic literature – Schiller, Jung, Nostradamus, Tolstoy, Tom Paine, John Steinbeck – and appraised Hill's own early poems and short stories. Whilst incarcerated Hill seems to have focused on writing, although it is unclear if anything survives from this period.

Hill was released from prison in 1958 but was turned away by his mother when he appeared at her house (Steel 2009: 31). He then went to stay for a short period with either his sister or Roger Steel's parents before leaving for a 'new-start' in London. It was not the land of opportunity that he had envisaged, and after a few nights in a Salvation Army hostel he began sleeping rough on the 'skid-rows' of Embankment and Elephant and Castle – in the cellars of bombed-out houses and in bomb craters not yet rebuilt after the blitz. Whilst homeless and unable to afford alcohol he drank rough cider laced with methylated spirits, supposedly the preferred drink of the homeless alcoholics who became his peers.

Here I was, among the vagrant derelicts of England; the skid-row bums, the smellies, the skippers, dossers, drop-outs. Society's offal and rejects, methylated spirits drinkers who haunted the wastelands and disappearing bomb sites, who dwelt in decaying houses... and holes in the ground from long dead cellars, and among tombstones in churchyards, park benches and the benches of the Embankment, a stone's toss from Parliament. It didn't seem to matter, very much... I had found a strata of 'living' which was more deformed and crippled than that of my boyhood home life; it was here that I learned that the world is flat and if you're not careful, you'll fall off the edge. It was here that I learned that Society has more dinner than appetites but won't share its surplus. It was here that I *learned*. This was *home*, for more than a year and a half. (Hill 2017: 254–255)

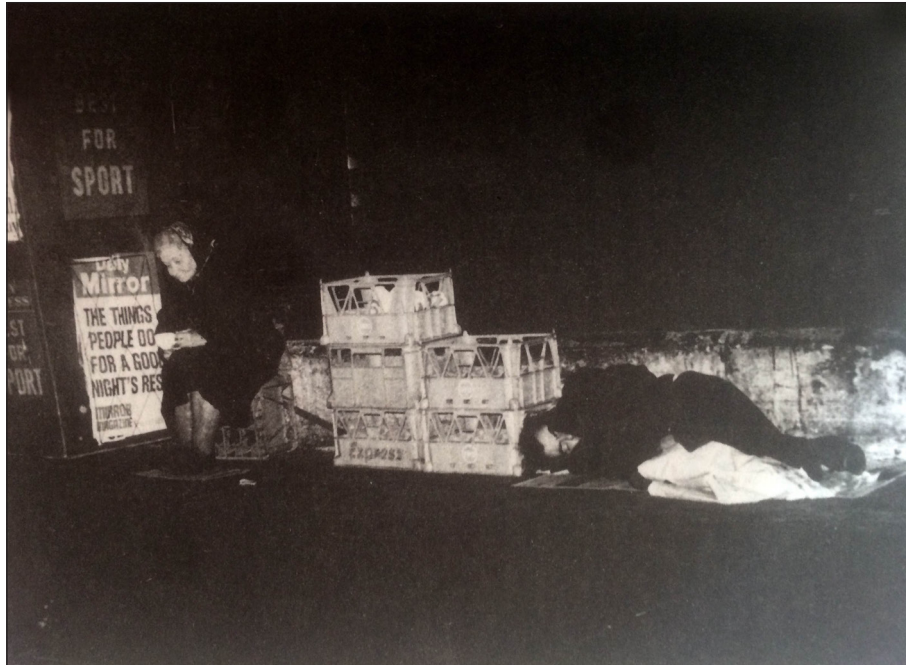
After a period of around eighteen months living on the streets of London, Hill – according to his account in *ACOS* – met an Irishman in a public toilet who gave him soap, a razor and a comb. This event, which probably occurred in late 1959 or early 1960, proved to be the impetus he needed to leave 'skid-row' and with help from the Women's Voluntary Service (now the Royal Voluntary Service) found himself a bedsit and a job in the warehouse of a furniture shop. Rosalind Freeborn, Hill's publicist at Hutchinson recalls how vividly Hill would recount the story of this meeting in Waterloo Station, how 'it was the first step for him in getting back his self-esteem and dragging himself up from the depths of depression and addiction' (Freeborn 2018).

This is where the account given in *ACOS* comes to an end. The story is picked up in *CWOL* where we learn that it was whilst working in the furniture shop that he met his second wife, Violet, who was a customer. In 1963 their son Robin – whose contribution to this current history is invaluable – was born, and during the early-mid 1960s Hill found work (probably owing to Stuart Campbell's liberal and socially-responsible editorship, 1957–66) as an 'agony-uncle' writing for *The Sunday People*. Campbell, who recruited unknown column writers, presumably thought that Hill's troubled background and subsequent recovery and reintegration into mainstream society allowed him a unique perspective on the problems of others. We might also

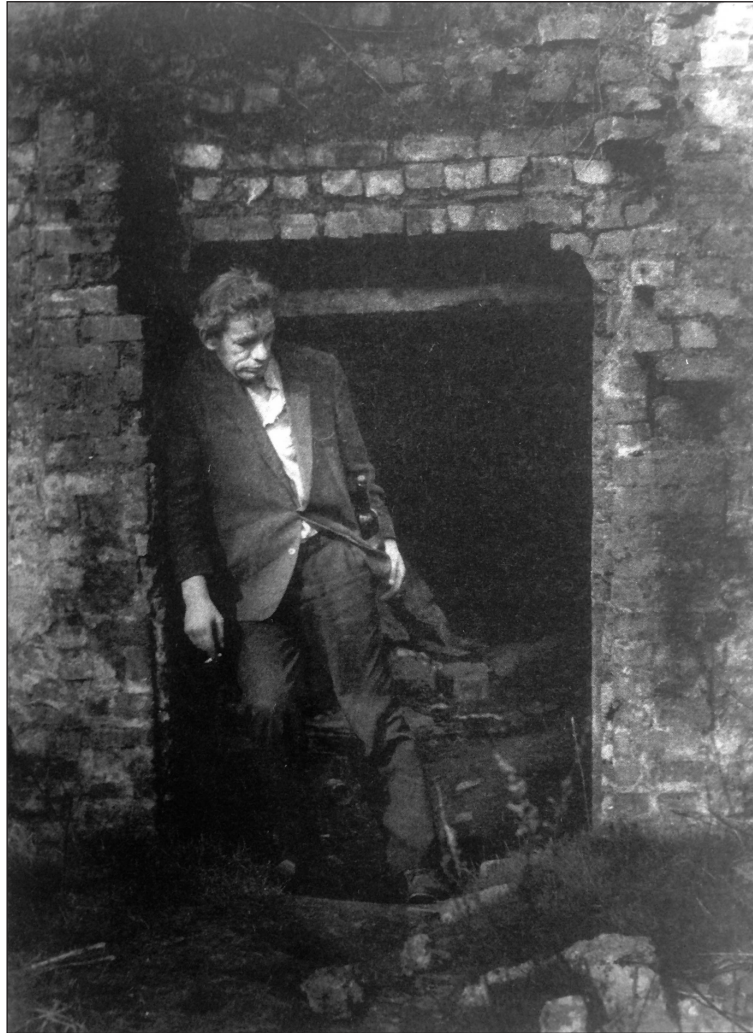
consider this job a recognition of Hill's empathic capabilities; it was also the first time he made money from writing.

At some point in the mid 1960s Hill's wife sent, unbeknownst to him, one of his short stories to the BBC. It was accepted and broadcast on BBC Radio. Subsequently he had another five short stories and three radio-plays broadcast, and wrote two episodes of the BBC television series *Z Cars* in 1968. Although Hill's writing credits are recorded online on IMDb (Internet Movie Database), unfortunately, not a single *Z Cars* episode from 1968 has survived (see Down and Perry, 1997).

It was during this period that Hill's wife encouraged him to become a full-time writer and used her savings to 'buy' him out of work for a year. We can reasonably suppose that he was working on the manuscript of *ACOS* at this time, alongside his work for the BBC. In addition to his writing he began working as a photojournalist, although it seems that few of the images from this period are extant. Three examples are reproduced in the 2017 Tangerine Press edition of *ACOS* and these depict homeless and destitute individuals [see **Figures 1–3** below]. One, showing two



**Figure 1:** *Untitled*, (no date). Published by the Tangerine Press (2017). Copyright Robin Hill. Reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner.



**Figure 2:** *Untitled*, (no date). Published by the Tangerine Press (2017). Copyright Robin Hill. Reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner.

people sleeping on the streets beside a *Daily Mirror* poster declaring ‘The things people do for a good night’s rest’, is bitterly ironic and demonstrates Hill’s acute awareness of social inequity. Others were reproduced in *Fireweed* (1974–78) – a self-declared ‘quarterly magazine of working class and socialist arts’ edited by David Craig<sup>1</sup> and Nigel Gray – along with some of his short stories.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr David Craig, Emeritus Professor of Creative Writing at Lancaster University, was contacted for this study but replied only to express his respect for *A Cage of Shadows*, to state that he considered the



**Figure 3:** *Untitled*, (no date). Published by the Tangerine Press (2017). Copyright Robin Hill. Reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner.

In 1973 the first edition of *A Cage of Shadows* was published by Hutchinson. The front cover featured a photograph taken by Hill of his son Robin. The book was highly praised by *The Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, and *The New Statesman*. The oral historian Tony Parker (1923–1996) declared:

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current study invaluable given Hill's obscurity, and to report that his failing memory meant that he could recall little of his work on *Fireweed*.

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that here is an author who can write not only well but at many times brilliantly and who can and does put over his feelings and thoughts with a salty incisiveness and lack of self-pity or sentimentality, which, far from making his story hard and brutal, which it is – makes it both realistic and moving... Additionally he strikes over and over again a poetic roughness of original phrases which I found staying in my mind long after I had read them... This man has a very rare and a very real talent, and everything should be done to encourage it.

(reproduced in Steel 2009: 32/rear dust cover of *A Corridor of Mirrors* (1975))

As a result of the success of *ACOS* and no doubt owing in part to his prior work for the BBC, Hill was approached by producer Derek Smith<sup>2</sup> to present a series of BBC television programmes. The resulting series, *Archie Hill Comes Home*, was a four-part documentary broadcast on Saturday night at around 10pm (the exact times varied from week to week) on BBC 2 on 27<sup>th</sup> July, and the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> August 1974.<sup>3</sup> Each episode focussed on a different aspect of Black Country life and Hill adopts an unexpectedly nostalgic tone in his description of the area and his experiences. Hill would go on to present two further programmes for the BBC, both part of the *Light of Experience* series. The first of these, broadcast on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> February 1976, was named after and based upon his book *Closed World of Love* and includes 16 mm film footage shot by Hill of his step-son Barry. The second, broadcast on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> February 1977 and called *The Sound of Silence*, recounted Hill's experience of the desert whilst serving in the Middle-East. Some indication of the content of this

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Smith was a BBC documentary producer and perhaps most notably the creator of the BBC's *Top Gear* in 1977. His death in 2015 warranted obituaries in *The Independent* and *The Guardian*. Significantly, as far as this study is concerned, neither article mentioned *Archie Hill Comes Home* and therefore another potential historical link and reference to Hill was missed. The choice – conscious or otherwise – to exclude Hill from the history of English literature and of the BBC is made in circumstances such as this. It should be noted that the obituaries do contain references to other now long-forgotten programmes produced by Smith.

<sup>3</sup> This scheduling information is available on the BBC Genome project at <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk>, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> May 2020.

programme is suggested by a passage from *An Empty Glass* (hereafter referred to as *AEG*):

I had a love and a fear for the deep deserts. There's an aching silence there and if you hear that silence it goes into you bone deep. It will touch the total centre of your mind. At first there is a sense of awe, a feeling that such silence is too much for a human being to try to comprehend; that a continued exposure to it will bring a final madness... You have a desire to shout and scream to make the silence go away, to bring safe noise back to the ears. And then that feeling of fear is replaced by a feeling of unutterable sadness in that the great silent desert sums up mankind for what he is – impermanent, transient, fleeting. (Hill 1984: 52)

In 1975 Hill was successfully sued for libel by his mother, who objected to his representation of her in *ACOS*. Proceedings began in December 1973 and written evidence from the Statement of Claim document suggests that some of Hill's siblings corroborated his account whilst others disputed it. Hill's mother won the case, however, and all unsold copies of the book were pulped. As a result, Hill reworked the book, removing sections referring to his mother. This second edition was published in 1977 (with an apology) and is generally considered to be greatly diminished by the revisions. Michael Curran, founder of Tangerine Press, was certain that he was only interested in republishing the 1973 edition:

I just felt the 1977 edition lacked the fire of the original. Archie was at war with everyone, starting with his own family. Particularly upsetting was the opening paragraphs being removed, and with that so was the conviction and tone. Plus of course the apology to his mother at the start. It just wasn't the book I fell in love with. (Curran 2018)

Between 1975 and 1984 Hill produced eight more books (see the references section below), many of which were translated into other languages, and in 1977 *CWOL* won a Christopher Award. Hill also contributed to *Fireweed* magazine and (by his

own account) appeared on a range of broadcasts, often for BBC radio. An article by Jonathan Raban for the *Radio Times* in September 1982 contains an interview with Hill and was occasioned by the airing of a five-part Radio 4 adaptation of Hill's book *The Second Meadow* (1982). Rosalind Freeborn also recalls how film director Joseph Losey – whose adaptation of *The Go-Between* had won him the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1971 – considered Hill a 'major writer' and contemplated the possibility of making *A Corridor of Mirrors* into a feature film, going so far as to refer the text to a potential producer (Losey 1975).

During this period Hill established 'Community Concern', a programme of lectures, leaflets and audio-recordings aimed primarily at alcoholics and drug-addicts [see **Figures 4–6** below]. He worked in prisons and toured the country speaking to various groups of vulnerable and affected people. Perhaps incongruously – given his fierce atheism – he worked closely with Rt. Rev. Stephen Lowe<sup>4</sup> on a range of community projects.

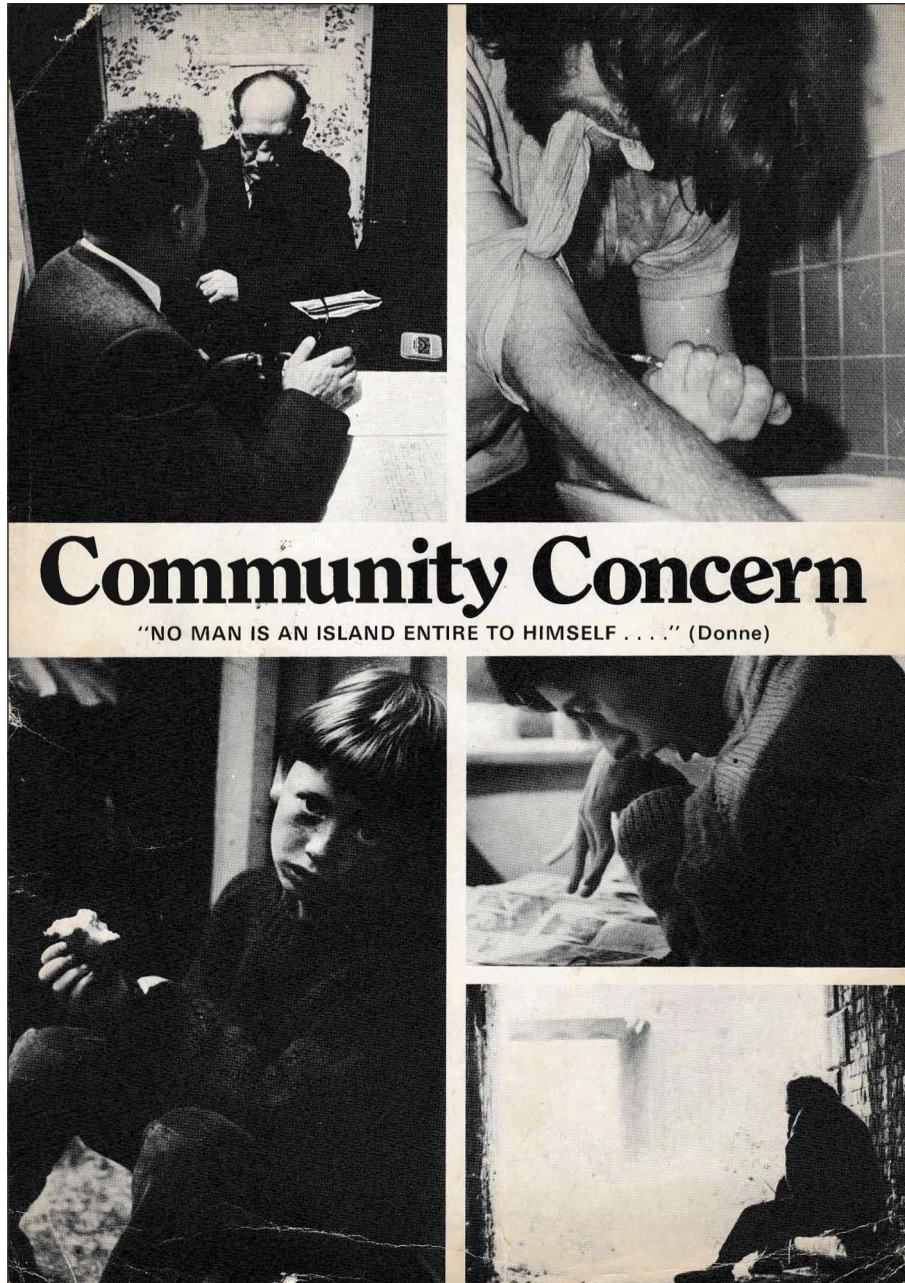
In 1980 or 1981, Hill, considering himself to be a 'hollow man', attempted suicide by ingesting a 'lethal amount of tablets' and a bottle of vodka (Hill 1982: 106). He was discovered by a passer-by and woke from a coma five days later.

Through the early 1980s Hill was drinking heavily again, and his relationship with his family had begun to break down. In 1983, a Mills and Boon romance novel written by Ann Mather was published – its title was *Cage of Shadows*. Probably at some point in 1981 Hill moved to a caravan in Hertfordshire (Steel 2009: 29). In 1984 he published his last book, *An Empty Glass*, an account – written in his caravan in the woods – of his decline into alcoholism and further reflection on his troubled childhood. This book recounts how he suffered a serious heart attack (perhaps in 1983 or 1984) and was told by doctors that he could never drink again. In 1986 he committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning.

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<sup>4</sup> The Rt. Rev. Stephen Lowe – the Bishop of Hulme (1999–2009) – was also contacted for this study, but owing to serious ill-health was not able to contribute beyond the recollection that he had fond memories of Archie Hill and of the photographic exhibitions they would organise together.





**Figure 4:** *Community Concern*, p. 1 (1975–1980). Copyright Robin Hill. Reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner.



"The first thirty-three years of my own life were spent in ruining it. For the majority of them I was a chronic alcoholic, smashing the lives of innocent people around me as well as my own. I served time in prisons, mental institutions, and a long time on skid-row.

Somewhere along the road the right influences were directed at me – influences of good people – and I came out of the mess. These 'influences' existed in certain people as **individuals** and not in State, Institutional or Establishment 'therapies'. If I'd have relied on State Rehabilitation methods, I'd still be living on skid-row . . . ."

No one has the right to come from the dark side of life, to be healed by good friends and circumstances, and leave it at that. An obligation exists to pass areas of knowledge and experience on to others; to help them not only to overcome their own personality troubles, but where possible to prevent such disorders from forming.

This is the purpose behind  
'COMMUNITY CONCERN'

*Archie Hill is 52 years old and lives in Hertfordshire. He makes his living as an author, broadcaster, writer for T.V. and photo-journalist. In between earning his living, he travels point to point around the country giving talks and engineering group-discussions about social problems.*



**Figure 5:** *Community Concern*, p. 2 (1975–1980). Copyright Robin Hill. Reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner.

**Description of films & cassettes immediately available**

**ALCOHOLISM (part A)** Discusses alcoholism in a direct and non-technical way. It does not deal in medical facts or statistics, but rather deals with the human elements of the situation with emphasis upon the need for PRE-care to cancel out the later need for AFTER-care. The film-slides suggest controls over alcohol-advertising, and cites valid reasons why this should be done.

**ALCOHOLISM (part B)**. Shows aspects of homelessness and vagrant alcoholism and warns that the skid-row population is increasing and not decreasing. The slides show the conditions of vagrant alcoholics, male and female, and the concoctions which they consume – i.e. methylated and surgical spirits, gas and milk, boot-polish, anti-freeze, glue-sniffing, etc. 'Skid row is not a place, not a location – it is a condition of suicide in slow-motion . . . .'



**CLOSED WORLD OF LOVE.** Depicts Vera and her 26 years old 100% physically and mentally handicapped son. He cannot walk, talk, feed himself or do any solitary thing. He has to be spoon fed, shaved daily, lifted and carried and toileted.

'It is estimated that Vera has spoon-fed almost forty thousand meals into his mouth . . . . changed thirty seven thousand nappies . . . . and may, well have to do the same again in the years ahead . . . .'



**ASPECTS OF COMPULSIVE GAMBLING (part A).** Shows some of the heartache and misery caused by gambling within the family. True cases of deprivation, suicide, gaol and family separation are quoted and depicted.

**ASPECTS OF GAMBLING (part B).** Is further study on aspects of gambling, but with – as it were – a wider spread, dealing more explicitly with the motives and the symptoms of gambling, and examining examples set by 'high Society' and the 'Leaders' of society, e.g. the Stock Exchange, Property Speculators, the Royal Party at Ascot, etc.



A tape-recorded cassette with linked-narrative is supplied with each set of slides, plus a typewritten copy, and notes for the person giving the illustrated talk.

<p><b>FILM SLIDE SETS IN PREPARATION</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. LONELINESS AND SUICIDE.</li> <li>2. ASPECTS OF DRUG TAKING.</li> <li>3. INNOCENT VICTIMS – PRISONERS' FAMILIES</li> <li>4. CRIME AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE.</li> <li>5. THE YOUNG ALCOHOLICS.</li> </ol>	<p>Details of these will be released as they are completed.</p>
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**Figure 6:** *Community Concern*, p. 3 (1975–1980). Copyright Robin Hill. Reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner.

## 2. Analysis: The Bucolic Extreme and Hill as 'Marginal Man'

I suggest that we might understand Hill's work with recourse to a model proposed by Piers Gray in his book *Marginal Men* (1991). Here Gray – something of a marginal figure himself,<sup>5</sup> despite his Cambridge PhD supervised by J.H. Prynne – offers a reading of the work of Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney and J.R. Ackerley which hypothesises that the writing of each springs from the condition of marginality, of estrangement either from society, the family, or oneself. Gray's project is outlined in the early pages of this work:

Feeling the life of a single other existence or making felt, to another, one's own single existence is a virtue unique to imaginative writing. What follows... is a version of the attempt to understand 'life' through the written lives of three men: three writers whose imaginations struggled to express their own and others' particularities. Understanding their words provokes a belief in the ideal of understanding their lives: understanding their lives justifies the attempt to understand their words – to do criticism. And this is simply the confirmation of the extraordinary illusion of language – somehow arbitrary sounds and signs are naturalised and the isolation of selves is transcended. (Gray 1991: 1)

Here criticism is allied to the socially redemptive, ethical potential of literature; Gray is exploring marginality as a point of origination for literature:

The creative act... becomes the only possible assertion of the value individual lives must achieve. The tragic animus of English writing springs from this

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<sup>5</sup> Gray, after a faltering and ultimately unsatisfactory academic career which took him to Hong Kong University, died of an alcohol-related disease at the age of 49 on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1996. An obituary by Colin McCabe was published in *The Independent*. It was Gray's PhD supervisor J.H. Prynne who, during a discussion about Edward Thomas in 2008, suggested that I read *Marginal Men*. McCabe describes the text in his obituary as 'unjustly neglected' which suggests that even by 1996 the book had drifted into relative obscurity.

belief that individual consciousness, even as it acknowledges its end in a mass whose control lies beyond its single will, must assert its particular transient value. (Gray 1991: 7)

One of the central causes of marginality in Gray's study is the experience of serving in the armed forces – in the First World War specifically – and the subsequent problems faced by servicemen who return home but are incapable of reintegrating into civilian life:

When the natives return they do so *not* simply as the returning sons of the soil, nor as their apparent diametric opposite, the stranger, but as something quite different, a third category of being – the estranged. The once native is now a new creature – the 'marginal man.' (Gray 1991: 13)

This problem can be observed not only in relation to military service but with life in any regimented institution – including prison, or an asylum. Archie Hill, therefore, can be understood as a marginal man in two of the senses in which Gray proposes with regard to Thomas, Gurney and Ackerley: he was in the military and was also committed to an asylum (as was Gurney). He was also marginal in the more fundamental sense common to all of Gray's case-studies: he was estranged from his family, the primary social institution, the *ecos (oikos)*. In addition, Hill was also imprisoned, homeless, an addict. But Hill's marginalities – his subsequent marginalities, his alcoholism, mental illness, criminality, homelessness – derive from the conditions of the principle marginality here unique to Hill: he was born working-class, and not just working-class but impoverished.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Hill's work provides an insight into potential causes of marginality, and the experience of marginality; ultimately the work itself is an example of marginal literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst Hill may have been in the 'majority' as a working-class child born in the late 1920s, his class and wealth determined the extent to which he would be marginalised, certainly as far as opportunity was concerned. With regard to the authors of the institution of English Literature, Hill is a marginal figure. Here a clear distinction is drawn between marginality and minority.

Drawing on the litany of 'strangers' in the history of twentieth century *English* literature (James, Conrad, Pound, Eliot) Gray describes the power of the experience of marginality once inscribed:

the stranger's *objectivity* is at the heart of his curious presence... not a failure to participate; rather it is a lack of prejudice, of *parti pris*, creating a mind which is free; it can speak in ways not possible for a member of the community... He is free to judge his new culture, assert its 'true' values and even introduce dimensions of alien cultures. (Gray 1991: 9–10)

Therefore, we should understand the work of marginal literature (even if such a work ultimately acquires a centrality of sorts, such as *Ulysses* (1922) and *The Waste Land* (1922)) as both an affirmative and critical statement. Insight is achieved at the borders of social norms and conventions and from this vertiginous, intoxicating perspective, values are revealed in their essential arbitrariness, or appear coloured by the tone of their ideological underpinning. And so Hill, through the autobiographical mode, shines a light into both his psyche and the darker recesses of British society, makes the unseen, the frequently unknown, the subject of literature — indeed literature is his tool, his lantern.

He achieves, in a similar vein to Malcolm Lowry in *Under the Volcano* (1947) and Jean Rhys in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), a form of 'Dionysian' insight; insight yielded by experience at the limits of the endurable. He produces knowledge at the borders of the knowable, at the extremities of experience, where logic 'coils up... and bites its own tail' — 'tragic insight,' as Nietzsche (1967: 97) would have it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> This quotation comes from the following passage in *The Birth of Tragedy* and illustrates how Nietzsche sees the 'Dionysian' responding to the inevitable inadequacies of the 'Apollonian': 'Science, spurred by its powerful illusion, speeds irresistibly towards its limits where its optimism, concealed in the essence of logic, suffers shipwreck. For the periphery of the circle of science has an infinite number of points; and while there is no telling how this circle could ever be surveyed completely, noble and gifted men nevertheless reach, e'er half their time and inevitably, such boundary points on the periphery from which one gazes into what defies illumination. When they see to their horror how logic coils up at these boundaries and finally bites its own tail — suddenly the new form of insight breaks through, *tragic insight* which, merely to be endured needs art as a protection and remedy' (1967: 97).

### ***Dream to Become Coal – the Abject/Bucolic Limit-Experience***

Thus, an additional – but not unrelated – concept for understanding Hill's work is that of the limit-experience, developed by Georges Bataille and subsequently adopted by Michel Foucault. The latter describes a limit-experience as 'trying to reach a certain point in life which is as close as possible to the 'unlivable,' that which can't be lived through... A limit-experience... wrenches the subject from itself... seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself or that it is brought to annihilation or dissolution' (Foucault 2002: 241). The limit-experience therefore has both a literal and figurative or paradigmatic aspect. Hill, we might conclude, can be seen with regard to both: he pushed himself to the brink of death on multiple occasions and lived through a variety of experiences which, we can assume, could precipitate the 'dissolution' of the subject. However, Hill survived these attempts (self-inflicted and otherwise) at annihilation and, through his writing – similarly to Maurice Blanchot with *The Instant of My Death* (2000) – testified to his experiences at the limit of the 'livable'. This, I suggest, should be seen as concomitant to his marginality and another means by which Hill's work offers genuine reflective potential: his existence at the borders of human experience, of British society, enacts the 'wrenching' Foucault describes, and this wrenching is a precondition, or at very least one element of Hill's overall marginality. He is always estranged from the world, and at times from himself. But this provides the powerful and unique reflective potential described by Gray and evidenced in the work of Thomas, Gurney and Ackerley. The literary voice is counterpoint to the given social world, to assimilated normative cultural values. In Hill's work conventions of 'Englishness' are put to the test, are challenged in unexpected ways.

Indeed, Hill's writing is characterised by a strange and unsettling intermingling of the pastoral, parochial and the extreme, at times the abject. (Is this a peculiarly English uncanny?) *ACOS*, until its unforeseen upbeat ending, is a nihilistic assault on all cultural norms, whilst Hill's later work discovers some succour in the grim – but frequently aestheticised – certainties of nature. Transcendental idealism is revealed as a product of age-old hierarchies – something the 'common man' can ill-afford – and only the enduring and ineluctable inconsistencies of 'nature' remain. (There is something both naïve and Nietzschean about his work – borne out of experience

rather than speculation.) The idyllic and innocent childhood he momentarily tasted – and which is described in his book for adolescents, *Summer's End* (1976) – is always the counterbalance to an experience or wisdom which Hill sees as the only means by which we escape the stultifying regimes of modern living. He seems to acknowledge that childhood is only ever a dream in the mind of the adult, a projection onto children, an innocence never known truly by those who supposedly temporarily attain, or embody it.

But Hill's own brutal childhood seems to become the 'cage of shadows' from which Hill as an adult cannot escape, and whose antipode is the figure of the poacher.<sup>8</sup> This is something that Hill shares with Edward Thomas, who deeply admired his rural relatives in Swindon and the writing of Richard Jefferies. The happiest moments in Thomas's *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* (1938) are generally those related to the perceived freedoms of rural life: '[Richard Jefferies's] *The Amateur Poacher* [1879] is exactly a celebration of the rural counter-culture, a real adult world which in fact is merely an extension of all the 'values' suggested in the world of *The Childhood*. Here is an idyllic republic of layabouts and mouchers, of lurchers and rustic wide-boys' (Gray 1991: 32).

This rural(ist) iconoclasm – a dream of the free subject braced against a dictatorial and apparently unjust society<sup>9</sup> – is personified by pit-man Jack Furmstone, the robust and clumsily named protagonist of *A Corridor of Mirrors*. But ultimately, Furmstone is unable to realise his dream and 'returns' to the earth – he dies in a pit-collapse – amidst the wood and coal, and in so-doing dreams of becoming coal himself (Hill 1975: 221), his ideal of freedom now metamorphosed into eternal unity and de-subjectified communion with lifeless nature, the immanent comingling with the transcendent. In the end he dreams of being brought down to earth, not elevated to new heights. He cannot be rescued because no one knows he is there, and so he dies, deep in the earth and in a similar manner to the trapped dog whose yelps the

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Pope Tolley from *ACOS*, whom for Hill fulfilled an ideal of semi-rural, noble, iconoclastic fatherhood.

<sup>9</sup> ...of which there are no-doubt currents in contemporary British conservatism.



novel begins with.<sup>10</sup> In death Furmstone achieves a 'base transcendence' as he is swallowed by the earth, finally assimilated – not into society – but metamorphosed into coal, the very thing he strove for, and the means by which he was controlled. A return to lifeless – yet articulate – nature: 'it's a long time, murmured the wood... Ar, a long dark time, sighed the coal; a long time here in the dark...' (Hill 1975: 221).

Hill contends with 'savage amoral masculine society' (Gray 1991: 33); he entangles himself in masculine struggles, in sturdy, atavistic binaries, but frequently decides to dissolve them in a natural oblivion which somehow stands for natural justice, or the absence thereof. There is no dialectic in Hill's work, no synthesis which generates order, only a quasi-Nietzschean will to power tempered at times by a crushing sympathy for creation in all its forms, by the *Weltschmerz* to which Hill ultimately succumbed.

Hill's vision would be terrifying – at times it is – were it not for the vein of archaic English pastoralism which runs through his work, and in this he shares common ground with Edward Thomas. The horrors of the psyche, of the peculiarly parochial, stifled English psyche are weighed against and crystallised by images and experiences of the natural world (a quasi-universal value, of sorts, and as it is leveraged here), by the profound impact of all that humanity is not, or fails to see itself as. It is a curious quirk of the English character that even excess, limit-experience, and the abject often remain in the bounds of the commonplace – the chaotic still somehow couched in the quotidian, the comfortably (reassuringly) familiar. Thus, Hill's limit-experience is modelled on the English countryside, on the manner in which the fauna venture through the meadows; the countryside here provides the 'Apollonian' order through which Hill's 'Dionysian' tendencies find expression.

Indeed, Hill's model relies on the three meadows he could see from his camp as recounted in *The Second Meadow* (1982: 73–76). He observes that the animals he would hunt for food would only occasionally venture out of the first meadow into the second and almost never into the third, where the pickings were richer but

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<sup>10</sup> There is no clear evidence that Hill had read Malcolm Lowry, but the echo of the fate of Geoffrey Firmin should be noted here.

the threat from predators greater. This he construes as a model for human inner experience: 'most of us are First Meadow people, scared to range too far because of the unknown... only a few range into the Second Meadow, and fewer still into the Third... the meadows of mental and spiritual experience' (Hill 1982: 74). The third meadow, he ruminates, when judged by the standards of the first yields the 'strange'... irresponsible, mad,' but also 'those rare geniuses who [are] linked together but separated by the distance of centuries' (Hill 1982: 75).<sup>11</sup> In order to reach the second and third meadows, the subject must wrench itself from the habitudes of the first. Hill seeks out this form of limit-experience — the second and third meadows; he favours, even esteems, marginality. But even so this comes at a price: 'the innocence of childhood is rooted in the First Meadow... the key to the gate of the Second Meadow must therefore lie in wisdom and not in innocence... and there's the shame I think, for what is purer than child innocence?' (Hill 1982: 76). The limit-experience, at least in this formulation, is paid for by the loss of Hill's childhood. In a sense the limit-experience is seen as the greatest prize in Hill's life, given that his childhood is irredeemable. Yet the third meadow, the farthest limit, seems to hold a value which for Hill is also trans-historical, and which would certainly therefore overcome class-barriers. But it is a realm of 'new uncluttered mental and spiritual pastures' (Hill 1982: 76) from which he sees himself excluded. However, the limit-experience of the third meadow potentially wrenches the subject out of all social stratification and thus becomes, in the hands of the working-class writer, a means to — temporarily — efface cultural hierarchy. The third meadow represents the hope for an experience which may — in its age-less, exalted universality — overcome the realities into which Hill was born. Hill's agony and ecstasy are entwined, as in the 'ambivalence' of Dionysus.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Here we might perceive echoes of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: 'No shepherd and one herd! Each wants the same, each is the same, and whoever feels differently goes voluntarily into the insane asylum.' (Nietzsche 2006: 10).

<sup>12</sup> It should also be stressed that Hill achieves the 'Apollonian' feat of writing amidst 'Dionysian' chaos. His work achieves an order and unity of sorts: 'to write suggests a profound degree of control which is its own moral triumph' (Gray 1991: 65).

### ***Unassimilable Element***

We might also profitably consider Hill as an ‘unassimilable element’ (Bataille 1985: 99) in the same way that Benjamin Noys suggests we see Georges Bataille (who is also the originator of the concept). Hill is an essentially ‘unassimilable element’ in British society. Yet he was put to use in the production of a ‘controlled pleasure by being appropriated and then excreted’ (Noys 2000: 4). He is ‘the foreign body that exists on the limit, that cannot be safely contained within or held outside’ whose work cannot be made ‘completely safe for the cultural marketplace’ (Ibid.). Hill’s work documents, on the one hand, a wrenching of the subject out of metaphysical and cultural certainties into unknown and perhaps even unthought realms; on the other, it presents us with a grim account of British society: rife with iniquity, exploitation, repression and squalor. Indeed it is only Hill’s wrenching of himself – both physically and metaphysically – out of the conventional codes, places, and practices of British society that allows him to expose these conventions, codes, and practices. Or rather, this exposure is concomitant to the wrenching. In this way Hill also personifies a comingling of the sacred and the profane, of degradation and exaltation, thus presenting – in accordance with Bataille’s thought – an affront to conventional ‘bourgeois’ (and therefore Christian) values. In *ACOM*, Tuppy descends a mine shaft with the intention of rescuing a trapped puppy only to find that it cannot be saved, so he then smashes its skull in an act of ‘mercy’; Hill nurses a pigeon back to health, feeding it on the undigested contents of the stomachs of other pigeons that he has shot to eat (Hill 1982: 77), eventually releasing it and acknowledging that he may well later inadvertently shoot it.

Despite his marginality, Hill assumed some centrality to British culture in the 1970s. Published by Hutchinson, presenting for the BBC, he could be seen as an establishment figure, someone for whom the opening up of post-war British society had afforded routes, not only out of the restrictions of the class he was born into, but ‘to the top’. But this, as the story of his life attests, was not the case. If anything, Hill got lucky – but this is no surprise given his upbringing and early experiences: luck had to have been a significant factor in Hill presenting television programmes for the BBC. This is not to diminish his talent but rather to stress the cliché (with a

caveat) that talent is nearly never enough, nor is hard-work, unless the right doors are opened for you. Hill's work no doubt spoke to the zeitgeist of his age, to the interest in 'working-class' literature fostered by journals such as *Fireweed*, by authors such as Allan Sillitoe and John Osborne, and in a world of manual work which, by the early 1970s, was clearly disappearing. Hill is significant because his marginality – extreme in some respects – became temporarily mainstream. This suggests, even if he has been forgotten, neglected, that we can – fortunately – with some digging, access his life and his work in a way which marginality ordinarily prevents. He is a confusing, paradoxical figure; he was at home neither in the margins nor in the centre, in the counter-culture nor the establishment.

And not only was he not central to the establishment and its values, but his life and his telling of it revealed a side of British society that we are encouraged to forget, or to rarely acknowledge. He presents an image of Britain, of being working-class in inter-war Britain, which is rarely the subject of literature, not its preserve. The institutions of British society – of English literature – have not preserved Hill's work nor its legacy. When he does appear, it is with regard to the regionalist (and, dare I say, marginal) interests of the Black Country. He is seen, by those who still remember him, as a local (tragic) hero, a faint, obscure star in the firmament of British cultural life. Similarly, many of the 'institutions' – in both the particular and broadest sense – which characterised his life have disappeared from view and from memory. And this has the effect of compounding his obscurity.

For example, many of the landmarks and milestones of Hill's life have been erased or effaced. The house he was born in has been demolished, replaced by post-war 'semis'; St. George's asylum has been converted into luxury flats, skid-row rebuilt into the towers of Elephant and Castle; his *Z-Cars* episodes lost; the original *ACOS* censored, then obscured by a romantic novel. It seems as though only Wakefield prison remains, almost unchanged. (If we were to install a commemorative 'blue plaque' for Hill, where would we put it?)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> It should be noted here that *ACOS* was only republished in 2017 owing to the singlehanded efforts of Michael Curran at Tangerine Press – a labour of love on his part. I only came to know of the book through a chance encounter with Curran, and he was initially recommended the book by a friend.

We might consider it a miracle that Hill produced anything at all – let alone the volume of material produced from the mid-1960s to his death – given his background and the obstacles he faced. It is surely testament to his spirit that he survived and somehow repurposed the experiences of an abusive childhood, the army, a gunshot wound, a suicide attempt, a mental asylum, prison, homelessness, caring for a severely disabled step-son, and alcoholism. Any one of these experiences could be sufficiently traumatising, deleterious to render a subject hopeless, resentful, resigned and uncreative – dissolute – let alone their sum. (Conversely perhaps we could – idealistically – argue that each of those experiences could *provoke* creativity, inspiration, and purpose. In a sense these are ‘second meadow’ experiences.) Yet Hill somehow retained an optimism and a drive to create which improbably took him to the cultural pinnacles of British society. And then he promptly disappeared again, back into the obscurity from which he had emerged. No doubt something indomitable drove him, but that force died with him and his work and memory were not retained for posterity. It seems as though his legacy has not been fought for.

But then he was an outsider, a marginal man. He had few friends in the cultural institutions of British society. His presence in some senses made a mockery of those institutions – his life was testament to the underbelly of British society, the very thing that the veneer of British civility masks. Rather than welcoming Hill to the canon, perhaps it is simpler to let him drift as an aberration.

Even amongst the scarcity of British working-class writers, Hill is a rare breed. He never attended university and received no formal education after the age of 14. Many of Britain’s revered ‘working-class’ writers were – for their time – in actuality well educated. D.H. Lawrence, for example, received a teaching certificate (the equivalent of a degree) from University College, Nottingham; Patrick Hamilton’s parents were both writers and he spent time at Westminster School; Ethel Carnie Holdsworth studied for a year at Owen’s College (University of Manchester).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, some of English literature’s greatest chroniclers of drunkenness, of self-destruction – of the

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<sup>14</sup> One of the reviewers of this article noted that this was also the case for other notable British working-class writers: B.S Johnson, Harold Heslop and Walter Brierley all achieved higher education qualifications, or the equivalent thereof.

'Dionysian' insight I would attribute to Hill — were also frequently drawn from the middle and upper classes: Malcolm Lowry went to Cambridge, Jean Rhys to RADA. Such opportunities were simply inconceivable for Hill. (Indeed, in *Summer's End* he and a school friend discuss passing their school exams in order to be captains of — possibly horse drawn — freight barges.)

As he did not attend University there is no institution of which we might call him an alumnus (unless Wakefield Prison counts), and no institution which might gladly call him its own, collect his works, or recall his name. Petty criminals, madmen, anonymous soldiers: these are the people we are encouraged to forget, the detritus of history only worth recalling en-masse or in abstract terms. Ironically, it was the meeting with Klaus Fuchs — in prison — which exposed Hill to the variety of cultural products (books, music, and ideas) that one would ordinarily hope to encounter at University. Here he benefitted from a chance encounter, perhaps in the same way in which his encounter with an Irishman in a public toilet spurred his recovery from homelessness and alcoholism. Even so, this meeting demonstrates the importance of 'teachers' in the development of any creative mind, the value of the chance encounter in the lives of those for whom conventional and established routes of opportunity are closed.

Writing — as anyone who writes knows — takes time and often does not make money. Therefore it is by its very nature a privilege. Hill, given his background and the expectations of his life should never have become a writer. Again, it is one of the ironies of his life that he was only able to write because he was incarcerated — either in the mental asylum, or in prison. To write seriously one often needs to be 'bought' out of the flow of everyday survival. He was bought out at Her Majesty's pleasure and then later in life by his wife's savings.

At this juncture it is instructive to return to Gray's account of Edward Thomas: he was only fully able to write poetry once the army had 'liberated' him from writing as means to support his family. The poet emerged 'to destroy the other writer — the hack... Thomas began to write his first poems in late 1914; in July of 1915 he enlisted in The Artists' Rifles and from then on wrote prodigiously' (Gray 1991: 19, 34). Similarly, the two other marginal men of Gray's book depend upon some sort of

removal from the concerns and demands of daily life. Ivor Gurney wrote prolifically whilst 'mad' and incarcerated, and J.R. Ackerley's father provided him with a stipend and an office in order that he might *become* a writer. It goes without saying that all of Gray's marginal men emerge from more amenable family circumstances and all go to University – to Oxford (Thomas), Cambridge (Ackerley) and the Royal College of Music (Gurney).

We might suppose that the cultural artefacts which persevere are those of a particularly high order, those which – in meritocratic terms – deserve their legacy, their elevated and 'trans-historical' position – that there is a natural 'law' which determines this. But this denies entirely the question of ideology, and the very material question of who has access to the institutions through which culture is preserved, replicated. Hill's marginality may have been a virtue – of sorts – in his lifetime, but this is not the case with regard to his legacy. If anything, over time his marginality has developed into obscurity. Posterity is a posthumous luxury – and therefore it is something rarely afforded the poor, or the poorly connected. We might think of posterity as an endowment, with the work held 'in trust'.

In the case of Edward Thomas, his reputation was secured by the quality of the work, no doubt, but also by the efforts of his wife, Helen Thomas, to preserve his poems and to establish them amongst the cultural artefacts of the institution of English literature. The entirely materialist approach to this would be that without these efforts the poems would be lost to obscurity – no metaphysics of inherent virtue would keep them aloft, would preserve them for us.<sup>15</sup>

So how might English literature re-assimilate Hill? Perhaps as social history – Rosalind Freeborn (2018) explains that 'his autobiography was already a kind of history book when it was first published in the 1970s and now it's a fabulous window into a lost world'. Or perhaps as a warning, as therapy, or as literature for those who feel themselves excluded from literary circles? There is a richness to Hill's work because he reframes his own life as he writes. *ACOS* presents a broken childhood within a grim social history, but with redemption at its heart; in *CWOL* Hill examines

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<sup>15</sup> Max Brod's influence on the legacy of Franz Kafka can also be considered instructive here.

the bonds which make a family possible, which engender its endurance – the very values his own upbringing lacked; and in *AEG* Hill reflects on a life – despite its successes – ruined by addiction, by a form of self-sabotage brought about primarily by the privations of his childhood. In all cases these are books about the importance of childhood experience in the creation of the adult and in this sense they transcend the peculiarities of the Black Country, of mental asylums, prisons, skid-row, suburbia and caravans in the woods. They are the composite history of a man whose rejection from the first institution – the family – leads to the subsequent rejection of all other institutions. Ultimately Hill is an individual who cannot find his way back ‘in’, who was never given a suitable and stable model of inclusion. Fittingly then, he lived out his final years in a caravan in the woods, on the fringes of both a natural wilderness which long ago – in England at least – ceased to exist and a civilisation which he is unable to call home, or his own. As Gray suggests, whilst considering Edward Thomas’s life, ‘the desire to run away from a whole civilisation into a careless existence is very powerful in Western writing’ (1991: 33) and in this sentiment at least, Hill finds himself in good company.

Hill’s work documents the breakdown of the bonds of family and society; it gives an account of an individual who lives through those breakdowns, who then re-enters society and attempts to recreate those bonds anew. The story of his life has redemption at its centre, and as its goal, but an absolute and nihilistic subjective singularity haunts his work. It is this, we might assume, which ultimately caused him to take his own life – his inability to redeem himself, to renew the bonds and thus redeem the man. But redemption was always bound up in some experience ‘beyond’ the quotidian, beyond the values which Hill could never accept as his own. The transcendentalism of the second and third meadows is what lends life value, but Hill feels acutely his own limitations, his inability to achieve what he intuitively knows to be attainable. Coupled with his iconoclasm, this defeatism – a sense of his own inadequacy – tips ultimately into nihilism and despair, and perhaps derives in-part from his working-class and abusive upbringing.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> We might here consider the account given in *AEG* where the young Hill is told to accept his lot,



Hill can also be considered a unique voice from inter-war Britain, one which speaks of the Britain that the post-war settlement was supposed to leave behind. But this came too late for Hill – the welfare state, social mobility and opportunities of the post-war generations were not afforded to him. He accounts for a Britain of abject poverty, of misery, of a world – a nation, rather – that we were meant to leave behind. If he returns to the traumatic experiences of his youth, his adolescence, it is perhaps for the same reason that Ivor Gurney returns to his experiences in the First World War – these are experiences which cannot be entirely overcome, which one can never leave in the past. We know that war will ruin men long after peace has been declared – Gurney's life is testament to that – but it seems as though other traumas too can have a similar impact. Hill was never able to overcome his past. He couldn't help but recall, again and again, the 'cage of shadows' that was his youth, yet as a society we've done our best to forget it. Somehow Archie Hill 'made a name for himself', against the odds – perhaps the least we can do is remember it.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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