“Some Wayward Art”: David Jones and the Later Work of Geoffrey Hill

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The idea of a specifically “Christian modernism” provides a suggestive way to understand the relationship between David Jones and Geoffrey Hill, two poets in whose work modernist technique and Christian faith engage in an often provocative dialogue. The tightly woven and densely allusive linguistic texture of Hill’s writing has clear affinities with Jones’ own, and the two poets also share a thematic interest in the Middle Ages, the cost of war, and the threat of cultural decline. In the contextual terms set out by Erik Tonning, the modernism of Jones and Hill views modernity “as decadence” rather than as a means of liberation. However, whereas Jones’ poetry affirms the belief that “a revived Christianity was precisely the tonic needed to regenerate a spiritually empty modern civilization”, Hill’s work is more reticent and more sceptical about the possibility of cultural rebirth. Despite their shared strategies and preoccupations, until recently Hill had been curiously reticent concerning his own reception of the older poet’s work. His final Daybook, Al Tempo De’ Tremuoti, first published in Broken Hierarchies: Collected Poems 1952–2012 (2013), makes two explicit allusions to Jones’ artwork, but it is in his 2010 lecture on “War and Poetry” that Hill offers his assessment of David Jones the writer, specifically of In Parenthesis (1937). Hill is most interested in In Parenthesis as an act of memory resisting the forces of cultural chaos in the early twentieth century, an act that can also provide a model of resistance for contemporary poetry. The notion of a “Christian modernism” also offers a framework within which to consider these poets’ contrasting but complementary interpretations of grace. While such a focus draws attention to their confessional differences, it also shows how the relationship between art and grace is central to the work of both poets.

Hill’s own understanding of modernism is as an attempt to symbolically transform the prevailing cultural conditions of the twentieth century and its aftermath into aesthetic forms capable of withstanding them. He approvingly describes the “modernist contention” as being that “the source and location of power is to be understood in terms of the unique imagination realizing itself

2 Tonning, Modernism and Christianity, 5.
within the ‘density of the medium.’”3 Such realization generates the power necessary for the artist to counteract the entropic socio-cultural energies within modernity that threaten meaning and coherence. The phrase that Hill most often uses to describe these energies is “anarchical plutocracy” — a phrase coined by William Morris in his lecture “Art Under Plutocracy,” first delivered at Russell Hall in University College, Oxford, in 1883.4 It is worth noting in this context that Jones himself uses the term “plutocracy” during the 1930’s.5 In his 2010 lecture, “War and Poetry,” Hill argues that such figurations as Yeats’s gyre and Lewis’s vortex both attempt to transmute the negative of “anarchical plutocracy” into a positive through their symbolic power; as Hill goes on to acknowledge, however, “anarchical plutocracy” is too unshapely to be represented even by a gyre or vortex. In contrast to the figures of vortex and gyre, Hill posits his own spatial imagining of a passage by A.C. Bradley “as a kind of incised monument, like a war memorial.”6 The passage from Bradley’s essay on “Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy” reads: “The essentially tragic fact is the self-division and intestinal warfare of the ethical substance, not so much the war of good with evil as the war of good with good.”7 In Hill’s judgement, this sentence has the weight, the gravitas, of “an incised monument,” unlike the churning turbulence implied by gyre or vortex; the aesthetic conflict between monument/memorial and gyre/vortex itself instantiates Bradley’s description of tragedy “as the war of good with good.” It is at this point in Hill’s lecture that David Jones appears, as an unexpected ally of Bradley: “I would describe, in very similar terms, David Jones’ magnificent dedication to In Parenthesis, his book of oratory recounting the events of one day in the Battle of the Somme, a dedication which both reads and appears on the page as printed in same-size capitals as if intended to be incised in stone.”8 Hill’s descriptive phrase “book of oratory” is alert to the declamatory style in which much of In Parenthesis is written, 

8 Hill, “War and Poetry.”