No Más

&

'If I had touched you then/One of us might have survived' – the origins and evolution of Ian Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'

By

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Declan Patrick Jude Ryan, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, it is always clearly stated.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Abstract

This is the most sustained study to date of the late poet Ian Hamilton. The close readings of Hamilton's poems are shaped by a study of Hamilton's biographical and historical context, through interviews with his friends, colleagues and fellow poets and underpinned by the 'philosophy' behind Hamilton's magazines, *The Review* and *The New Review*, as evinced by the critical writings of Colin Falck. The study argues that Hamilton developed an *ars poetica*, 'Perfect Speech', through which it was possible for him to write, given his desire that poems not only serve some purpose but that they might also be able to mitigate their addressee's suffering. The poems were, I will show, intended to fill a void left by orthodox religious belief and place the poet in a 'priestly' role, using ideas influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's writings on the 'imagination'. Hamilton's prosody, I will demonstrate, was built on poems he admired by Robert Lowell, Thomas Hardy and Keith Douglas, but was also a reaction against the emotionally repressed work of The Movement. The study will show that Hamilton's waning 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' had a direct impact on the poems he wrote with the later, less 'faithful' work demonstrating a 'spiritual malaise'. The study, as well as tracing the roots and origins of 'Perfect Speech', will examine the work of poets who were influenced by Hamilton and in whose work some of the elements of 'Perfect Speech' may be witnessed.

Informed by Hamilton's attempts to speak to addressees who are 'incapable of attending' and to write without inhibiting personae, are a collection of poems by the study's author which try to learn from the ideas discussed but without any programmatic attempt at putting 'Perfect Speech' into action. Hamilton's poetry is important, in itself and for the possibilities it offers as an example of 'Songs Among the Ruins', and it is hoped that this study acts as a foundational work for further study of Hamilton's career as both a poet and critic in the years to come.

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List of Publications

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Some of the poems, or earlier versions of them, have appeared in *Poetry (Chicago)*, *Poetry London*, *Poetry Review*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator*, *Ambit*, *Swimmers*, *Test Centre V*, *Days of Roses II*, *Silkworms Ink* and *Poems In Which*.

A round-up piece comprised of interviews conducted with Alan Jenkins, Blake Morrison, Colin Falck, David Harsent and Hugo Williams was published as 'Another Night at the Pillars of Hercules' in *POEM*, Vol. 1 Number 3, Autumn 2013 – 'Displacement'.

An earlier version of the discussion of Michael Hofmann's poems in Chapter Five was published as 'The Hysterical Use of the Present Tense' in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, (London: CB Editions, 2013)

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“Some day they're gonna write a Blues song for fighters. It'll just be for slow guitar, soft trumpet and a bell.”

Sonny Liston

Going Up

When the lift opened in Lambeth
and you were inside,
that was it, really, wasn't it?
I was already in trouble
but the fact I wasn't surprised to see you,
that's when I knew beyond doubt.

Even now, I don't think I've recovered
from the expectations that set up;
the possibility that on entering a room,
approaching any set of doors,
their sliding apart
to reveal you behind them
might have become part of my ordinary life.

Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands

(The Seven Commandments of Joe Louis)

Joe Louis, mid-clinch,
is lifting his opponent -
the six-foot-six 'Ambling Alp', Primo Carnera, -
into the air.
In the Hague,
Italian and Ethiopian officials
have come to the end of their first day
of arbitration talks.
Here, in the Yankee Stadium,
Carnera will sink to his knees
'slowly, like a great chimney that had been dynamited'.

For breakfast this morning, Carnera consumed
a quart of orange juice, two quarts of milk,
nineteen pieces of toast, fourteen eggs,
a loaf of bread and half a pound of Virginia ham.
If he took the *Washington Post*
he will have seen a cartoon showing himself and Louis in the ring.
The illustrated Louis cast a dreadlocked shadow,
his shadow wore a crown.

Louis will start throwing bombs in the sixth round
and knock the Italian down twice
before a right-left combination
ends the fight.
Louis will touch a glove to Carnera's lower back
after the bell, and return to his corner
without celebration.

Joe Louis has been given seven commandments
by his new manager to ensure he progresses

towards a title shot unhampered
by comparisons to Jack Johnson.
He is never to have his picture taken with a white woman.
He is never to go to a nightclub alone.
There will be no soft fights.
There will be no fixed fights.
He will never gloat over a fallen opponent.
He will keep a 'dead pan' in front of the cameras.
He will live and fight clean.

In 1964, Martin Luther King, Jr will write
'More than twenty-five years ago, one of the southern states
adopted a new method of capital punishment.
Poison gas supplanted the gallows.
In its earliest stages, a microphone was placed inside
the sealed death chamber so that scientific observers
might hear the words of the dying prisoner.
The first victim was a young Negro.
As the pellet dropped into the container,
and the gas curled upward,
through the microphone came these words:
"Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis..."'

Catch

'When I was a little girl I nearly ran off a cliff;
my dad caught me
mid-air.'

You're stretching out on white sheets,
yawning at sunlight through the window,
my arm underneath you.
One of our Saturday afternoons.

Daisy Bell, I say I'm glad you lived,
as I tidy hair
from your cheek
to behind your ear.
I'd kiss you on the head
if it hadn't been for all that childhood talk.
The associations.

We know we've gone over together
but we lie still,
still falling.
No one is coming to catch us;
already too far gone
to save ourselves.

Blind Cassius and the Bear

Clay's been saying 'cut the gloves'
but Angelo Dundee continues to kneel,
to wash his eyes with a sponge.
Clay was blinking in round four,
and is complaining of a burning sensation.
He finished the round with his eyes shut.

Clay's been calling Sonny Liston a 'big, ugly bear' for months.
He's said 'I'm ready to go to war.'
He's worked himself into a frenzy.
At the weigh-in Clay's pulse
was 120 beats per minute.
The doctor who took it said 'he's scared to death.'

Clay's been linked to militant Black Muslims
in the press before the fight,
costing the promoter $300,000.
One commentator's written 'Liston used to be a hoodlum;
now he is our cop;
he is the big Negro we pay to keep sassy Negroes in line.'

Clay danced, and was impossible to find
before astringent got in his eyes.
Now he can't see
but it's Liston who'll refuse to start round seven,
conceding his title on the stool.
Liston who can't raise his arms.

Clay's being pushed from his seat
by Dundee, sent out to stand in front of Sonny,
blind, but by the end of the fight he'll say
'Almighty God was with me.

I want everyone to bear witness; I'm the greatest thing that ever lived.
I don't have a mark on my face, and I upset Sonny Liston,

and I just turned twenty-two years old.
I must be the greatest. I showed the world.
I talk to God everyday. I know the real God.
I shook up the world,
I'm the king of the world.
You must listen to me.'

Tomorrow, Clay will be Cassius X
and 'champ'.
The New York Times will concede that
'All those interminable refrains
of "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee,"
had been more than foolish songs.'

The Young God of the Catskills

Mike Tyson is twenty years, four months, and twenty-two days old
and in the dressing room of the Hilton Hotel.
He's breaking his gloves down;
pushing the leather to the back,
so his knuckle can pierce through.
He's afraid of everything.
During training he's been afraid of the world champion,
Trevor Berbick.
He's dreamed of Berbick beating him.
'The closer I get to the ring
the more confident I get', he will later explain.
'Once I'm in the ring I'm a god.'

'I try to catch them right on the tip of the nose,
because I try to punch the bone into the brain.
People don't have the slightest idea
of just how hard it is to break somebody's jaw or eye socket.
They think it's just the power.
But it's the accuracy of the power.
Every punch is thrown with bad intention and the speed of the devil.'

It will take Tyson five minutes and thirty five seconds
to dispose of Berbick.
The final punch Tyson will land,
a left to Berbick's temple,
will knock the champion down three times.
Berbick's brain won't accept he's finished,
but his legs, covered in knee-high black stockings, will.
The first time he'll fall flat on his back
in the centre of the ring;
the second, he'll collapse sideways into the ropes.
The third time he will fall

forwards, failing to extend his hands
in time to stop his face hitting the canvas.

Tyson will celebrate with a shrug,
and a kiss on the lips for his manager.
'My record will last for immortality.
It will never be broken.
It's ludicrous these mortals even attempt to enter my realm.'

Twenty years on, believing God to be a regular visitor
to his apartment and himself the world champion,
Berbick will be attacked by a twenty year old
with a length of pipe and left to die in a churchyard.
Fifty two at the time of his death, according to boxing records,
some reports will have him as fifty six, others as forty nine.
'Legally, I'm a spirit', he will say between this night, and that,
'I have no age.'

Transmission

I'm in my room, listening to your voice.
When this was live
you were in front of me, on stage,
in a red dress with a triangle cut in the back,
exactly the right size for my hand.

It wasn't long ago,
but the musicians must be somewhere else too,
their instruments boxed up,
waiting to go on in some new town.
They're running through it all again
here though; still nothing we can dance to.
Can you hear them where you are?

I suppose that was a sort of dance
on the platform, afterwards:
our feet shuffling towards one another's,
your palm on my chest,
exactly the right size for my heart.

My hand was at your spine then,
wondering if the shape cut in the fabric
was part of a wider unseaming,
or something I might have done to you
with my complicating touches.

If I'm remembering this correctly
you'd be met by applause
if you walked in right now,
asking to be completely undone.

Caligula in Japan

It's just after 9 a.m local time in Tokyo.
Mike Tyson's cornerman has filled a condom with ice water
and is pressing it against his fighter's eye.
There's no end-swell
because no one thought to bring one.

James 'Buster' Douglas, a 42-to-1 outsider,
isn't scared of the champion.
Douglas's mother died twenty three days ago
but he refused to cancel this title shot.
Tyson's barely trained.
He'll later confess to spending weeks 'fucking those Japanese girls
like it was eating grapes.
You thought I was Caesar,
you thought I was Caligula out there in Japan.'

Because of the time,
and the Japanese fans' politeness,
the arena has been in near-silence through the opening rounds.
It will stay quiet when Tyson drops Douglas in the eighth,
and when Douglas gets to his feet.
When Douglas pivots in the tenth to land the blow
which knocks Tyson down for the first time in his career
the stadium will be 'so quiet you could have heard a rat pissing on cotton.'

Years from now, Douglas will say
'My main strategy was to survive.
My corner said he was going to come like hell
and I was ready for that challenge.
I thought Tyson was getting up
until I had seen him looking for that mouthpiece
and then I knew he was really hurt.'

Tyson, when asked why this all happened, will say
'I just stopped caring.
He got up. Nobody else had.'

No Más

In New Orleans, Roberto Duran has thrown his hands up
and turned his back on Sugar Ray Leonard,
who's aiming shots into his side, landing twice.
Duran is making no effort to prevent him.
Octavio Meyran,
the third man,
is saying 'Fight!' in Spanish. 'Fight!'
Duran will not fight, saying instead 'No Más'.

The fight is not over
but Duran has stopped.
The commentator is calling it
'the most inexplicable thing I have ever seen in the ring'.

In Montreal, five months ago,
Duran was a demon.
After taking Leonard's belt
he was flown home in a Presidential aeroplane,
which the President had loaded with champagne.
He's spent the months since
partying in Panama, ballooning in weight,
feeling 'like the King of New York'.

Leonard's spent the lead-up to tonight
trying to erode Duran's self-esteem.
Everything has been working:
footwork, handspeed, combinations.
He's ensured Duran can't get set
by moving, constantly.

Duran has no answers.
Later he'll say Leonard

'must have known I had nothing to give,
that's when he started taunting me,
when he realised I couldn't hurt him.'
As Leonard began to throw fake punches
and dance,
Duran felt 'it might as well end here.
I don't want to fight any more.
I've been fighting for a long time.'

Duran will return to Panama in disgrace, hardly leaving his bedroom,
abandoned 'like a dirty shirt',
He will offer many explanations over the years
for what's just happened:
stomach cramps; hot steaks, cold water,
warm coffee, diuretics.

He will say 'I am a man who was born to fight.
I know how to control myself in the ring.
During the second fight, I couldn't do anything about it.
I have nothing to hide.
People shout at me in the street,
"No Más", to offend me.
Up to this point I've said only the truth.
I'm not fooling anyone.'

In the days following the fight the newspapers will use words like
'bizarre' and 'fix'.
Leonard will say
'I kept him confused, he didn't figure me out.
As I sat there wanting to scream and shout
and tell the world that I got my title back
it was all about why he quit.
I'm saying – because of me.
I made him quit.'

"It is a sad thing to see a man who has been frittered away piecemeal by petty distractions, and who has never done his best. But it is still sadder to see a man who has done his best, who has reached his utmost limits - and finds his work a failure, and himself far less than he had imagined himself."

Ian Hamilton: "Matthew Arnold: A Gift Imprisoned"

When We Were Kings

whales swam in our rivers, stranded
and hours from death, or arriving
at it. They were lost, as we are, branded

with an exile's stamp. Neither thriving
nor heartsick yet, their eyes unable
to adjust to foreign light, striving

for home in a manner their fable-
thirsty rescuers distrusted. Citizens
spoke over breakfast tables

about these lost monsters: impatient;
unsure why these whales
in particular were newsworthy, friends

all of a sudden to the sea-shy, hailed
as martyrs of a sort. The fact remained:
it was in our rivers they had failed.

The Donkey

My mother kept that story near her,
to belittle my father's village;
told us often how the one donkey
they'd brought into the place hanged itself
in the barn, days after market.
He bore it. Only one day she told it,
he came to my room before bed,
explained the root of it,
how when he was my age
but harder, not doughy with leisure
but thin as rushes,
they'd bought that needed beast
and it failed;
somehow tangled its neck in its tether
and ended.
He found it still and big-eyed
like it had seen a creature-god crouched over it
with kindness in the hollow of their palm.
He still pitied it,
acting out the ass of its name in the night,
though he knew it could never have been any good,
but might through wise rutting have sired an animal
who'd take the hardness out of the day,
carry in its bones all the dormant glory
of that cheap, doomed Abraham
remembered only in spiteful jokes
and the absolute emptiness of a hayshed.

From Alun Lewis

There is nothing that can save today, darling,
you not being here. You MUST write.
It's impossible to breathe otherwise.
I'm only talking of the things I really NEED.
I'm so tired of travelling away from you.
I think of you all the bloody time. Do you mind?

This isn't an answer or a letter –
it's only a cup of coffee after lunch.
Many things I've been unable to remember
came to me last night.
You sitting like a babu at a desk
in the bowels of the G.P.O.
You standing in the quartier Latin corridor
of the Hotel Marina on Sunday afternoon
after the cinema saying 'Alright, pay the taxi. Let's stay.'

When I saw you on Saturday July 24th
you were the flash of a sword.
Now I'm hopelessly shut into the camp life again.
A soccer match, a disjointed conversation at dinner,
a visit to the reading room to see how things go:
oh and a longing beyond words.

There's a fat dove strutting across the lawn
by the bougainvillea.
I wish I could be strolling with you
looking at the rose moles all in stipple
in your little stream.
One way or another I make a lot of shadows where I go.

Don't worry over the hairs on my head.

May you not be tried harder than you can bear.

Let there be an again, New Year. Save us.

The Exaltation of Saint John Coltrane

He locked the door.
For five days straight he clucked;
an upper room,
skin pricked by poison thorns.

Cool gone west:
without his horn who knows what notes he heard;
an unsteady doo-wop of Philadelphia juncos,
the scat of leaves ecstatic after winter,
or a movement on the surface of the water
sipped between his shaky cigarettes?

He sought the Lord of Melody in silence,
pledged if he got his music back he'd preach
the Word, blow glossolalia
to make stones cakewalk in their beds,
beatify the redbricks of the Bronx,
bend every knee in prayer who ever laid
beside a stranger's mouth in smoky dark,
used lips to fix their solitary blues.

He heard a voice,
retreated for dictation to begin,
took down a hard-bop Torah in Dix Hills,
sent a coda of elation back to God,
placed his consecrated mouthpiece on his tongue
and blew.

Christie

'Christie? Sure didn't he drown himself?'

'He'd a fine head on him for drowning
and the age of him. Come on.
Didn't he fall into the lake at night, the creature?'

'If he did it was a fierce coincidence.
Maggie said he was lonesome after Nell;
we didn't see him in the village for a month.
Wasn't it Maggie herself raised the alarm;
told the oldest Jordan buck to look for him,
went out herself with her torch and wellies.
It was them that found the body. Called the guards.
She's never told a sinner soul about it.
The Jordan fella either, she made him promise.
No, there was nothing accidental about Christie.'

'I can't believe that now, that's shaken me.
And him a fine looking, a sensible man.
He used to help my father with the turf.
You'd have thought he'd have more sense.'

'Sense? And when did sense come into it
when you're alone and looking in the fire
all the winter? The nights is long.
When Nell was alive he didn't lift a cup.
She had him like a child – he was her child,
as near as she ever came one, anyways.
He took it awful bad. Stopped going to Mass
and everything. Failed shocking in the walk.'

'So he could have fallen in?'

'How's that?
He'd watch falling in, you mark my words.'

'He left a note then?'

'What? A note for who:
the cow? Cop yourself on now, will you.
It'd take the whole day itself to sign his name.
A note. He left nothing, except a mess.
Some nephew of his in London got the lot;
one of your mob, a cockney, out in Epping.
I'm sure he never called when they were living,
that's how it goes. I bet he rubbed his hands.'

'Maggie should have got it.'

'Mighty woman,
Maggie. She must be 85 if she's a day.'

'I always thought she held a flame for Christie.
Well, my father did, I wouldn't know.'

'She did, I'll make no bones about it.
They would have married too, only for Nell.
Christie's father was a snob. Nell's was a doctor:
He spat into his hand and made the deal.
Christie would have married Hunter's dog
for the quiet life, so of course put up no fight.
Maggie took it well, went to the wedding
but no man came into the house again.
Just the one ever went out, and in a box.'

'Does she still have a night cap after dinner?'

'She does. Her hot little nip of whiskey
and her pipe. But always just the one now.
She'd more than one the night that Christie went.
You heard I'm sure? No one can hold their piss
round here, let alone a bit of gossip.
Fair play now, at least, they let her alone;
we kept the place open for her, the fire on.
When I came down there was ten Euro by her glass.
I'm sure that didn't cover it
but I've never brought it up. Nor has she.
A fat lot of good that talking ever did.'

Accident

It's summer and I'm home all day, not knowing how to be quiet
in summer. He wants things, half a glass of Sprite and bacon rolls;

gets them in his bed, the stump hidden under dressing. On the ward
he'd have eaten apples from our hands if he'd been allowed to eat.

I feel the weight of him above us in the day, at night his lack.
Later he'll make it down the stairs, fill the kitchen in his vest,

snatch plates and shout if our service is too slow. I wonder
where his finger ended up, think of times I gripped it as a kid

as he bore me round the house to say goodnight to all my toys.
He's on the mend; if we pretend, he's still the same.

Soon he'll leave us in the day. I'll sprawl in his chair, lap full of albums,
study photos where the hand is on display. His bandage will come off,

and he'll be gone. In gloves you can't tell. You'd only know
if you were someone who used to take him by the hand.

For Our God Is A Consuming Fire

He didn't know it had started, no one knew,
only that it took hold quick;
this was in the thatching days.
There wouldn't have been time to do anything,
the neighbours being distant, himself
in a deep sleep; a dreaming sleep.
He never left the house
so wasn't it a blessing, in its way, women
said at the church gate in the weeks after,
that it happened there, if it was to happen,
that he was in surroundings known
to himself – *familiar* – was the word. Comfort
could be taken, though it was terrible,
worse than terrible, a rabbit
he wouldn't hurt, not so much as a chick.
You could see he was a bit innocent,
that he didn't know,
only saw others doing it, and tried copying them.
It wasn't like in the towns; the only woman
he'd known was his mother, God rest her soul,
how would he know what it was to be close to one,
in a house of brothers? Was it any wonder he looked
for men to talk to, boys really, that it was them
he brought back to the place?
He was a child
himself, hadn't the sense God gave a goose,
wasn't let near the fields. Always looking
out the window at the brothers off digging,
wanting a part of the field life now he was in
all day. That talk of him wearing the mother's
dresses was a tall tale, no one saw that happen,
and if it did, what harm?

The poor creature
was alone alright, they made fine sure of that,
as if he'd have been able to do anything
against a gang of knackers like them,
you'd blow him off your fist he was so thin.
He might have spared them the trouble
if they'd left him to it.
One of them said he knew
it started, that when they looked at him
he laughed, no fear in him,
that he seemed to be enjoying the heat.
They said fierce cruel things,
like how he probably imagined the flames
as boys' hands, hot from their scythes, on his back,
pulling at his shirt, wanting a feel of his skin
like them lads he was besotted with would never do
for him. That as they started moving off he was tearing
the clothes from himself, spreading out his arms.
That he made no attempt at all to head to the door.

Burying the Soldier

It must still have been light out; he never would have done it
in the dark. I wasn't born yet, the garden wasn't any bigger:

still city sharecrop size. He'd have come home to see a khaki-
wearing, razor-domed intruder in his house; fatigues unworn

and military sharp. The bombs were going off in London
at the time; if not each week, regular enough. Paddy on the news

in coded warnings. In cars blown to smithereens. Now this:
after a whole day's digging underneath the sun – hair beaded

to his head, another night's sole-care-giving set to commence –
he finds this lickspit shithouse in his living room. At ease.

Before his dinner – so believe me, that means serious offence –
he dug a hole, ceded a square of precious acreage for the job.

He left one hand Lady-of-the-Laking in the soil: a warning
to my brother's other toys, for sure, not to get ideas. No politics,

no Union Jacks. He'd put one little Brit below a clod of dirt,
had one inside in tears, his birthday spoil turned casualty of war.

The Range

I

'God save all here.' That's what you scored
into the metal of your childhood range.
The house was ruined when I saw it, a bored
boy of six or seven, nagging for a change
of scene as soon as we got there. Twenty
years are gone; I've not been back
to the village, the house, not for lack
of chances. Life is away, plenty
of it. You only asked that He save you. All.
You are dead, as is your mother.
Bad luck has clung to your brother
like an impermeable caul
he couldn't shake by getting out,
or having sons. He has one less. Since you.
For all the decay there was still the view
out back. Mountain family. Wiped out.

II

The blackbird is not a bad-luck bird.
The Blackbird of Avondale was not resigned
to arrears, in Kilmainham. He heard
a fresh start in letters Kitty signed
with kisses. He could not prevent Fiendish Park.
Later he could not prevent scandalising
a 'nonconformist conscience'; his larks
at Eltham almost vandalised
Home Rule. He had to go. 'If I go, I go forever.'
The 'hillside men' stayed loyal but the Master
couldn't have a mistress. Quicklime in his eyes, alive,
he sailed home for Hove and died. He was forty-five.

III

You were betrayed; there is no other way
of saying this. The doctor told you to wash your hair
and go for walks; your appetite may
or may not return. He was only too aware
of your 'nerves' and said so.
He'd delivered all seven of your daughters
after all. They told you to go
back, anti-fatted calf, for more slaughtering
neglect. He rolled your dice for you for a season.
By the time he deigned to look for the real reason
behind your winnowing it was everywhere.
The doctor told you that you'd lose your hair.

IV

There is sadness in this blackbird's song,
and I know well what tuned it wrong.
It was those by whom the deed was done.
Now all its nestlings are gone.
This type of weather I also know,
and such a loss, not long ago.
I know it well, bird, I read your state
at the sight of a home left desolate.
It was sudden they came, the callous boys,
and quick the deed your young destroys.
You and I share a fate we both deplore.
My children, like your children, are no more.

V

When she turned thirteen your youngest child
was plagued by neighbours seeking cures.

The seventh girl of seven girls, a wild
sort of medic, they believed, the surest
route to remedy. You did not last
to see her giving birth. A boy,
out of a house of women. The past
will find him, eventually: its joys
and scandals. He will learn about you
from her; you will be photographs
and stories. She may spare him the true
ending and choose parts to make him laugh,
like your fierce temper, the black curtain
you pinned up to con the girls to bed
with the sun still high. Or, instead
she'll draw your life with a certain
pathos. You at seventeen, lovesick,
walking out 'to see Hughie Langan's duck',
when Hughie wasn't in, or sneaking Mick,
your stepdad, cigarettes 'for the road, and one for luck'.

VI

I found this in a book in a city you never visited:

A Charm Against Sorrow

This is a charm said by Mary for her son,
before the fair man and the turbulent woman
had laid him in the grave.
A charm that God set for himself, when the divinity
within him was darkened.
A charm to be said by the cross, when the night is black
and the soul is heavy with sorrow.
A charm to be said at sunrise, the hands on the breast,
when the eyes are red with weeping

and the madness of grief is strong.
A charm that has no words, only the silent prayer.

My mother called to say you'd gone.
I answered. She couldn't speak;
only made animal noise, a weak
throat sound which meant 'it's done'.

VII

In your dying days your daughters were visited by birds.
They stood in gardens, or entered their homes.
There were robins, for death, and blackbirds.
They are for resignation. You died at home,
light as a bird, bald as a young, blind bird.
Your children had all left but came back
to stay the night. Like your childhood
house on the hill, that home stands idle, its black
range unused also. Since you died there has been good
and bad news. More bad, I think, than good. A lot
of other leaving; the whole country is leaving, I'm told.
I could not live where the young leave before the old.
'God save all here', you wrote. You didn't say from what.

'Girl in Bed'

New York cab, 12 September 1977

He brought the painting to be valued,
knowing something of the price
of this tantalising neck,
of the net that white bedsheets
made before he met this stare,
hard to believe in time before
he met this stare.

Brown paper bound gold hair,
which anyway fell
over a wrist;
wide blue eyes
the size of a husband's closed red fist.

He couldn't scrape together wealth to throw off
age, only a few flashy coins to pay for death,
his fellow passenger,
who opened the taxi door at Kennedy
and stepped inside;
ingredient of the Lowell blood at sixty years,
fisherman-elect at West 67th Street.

He wrapped up and carried the best woman in the world.
She was propped against him,
staring at nothing
as the meter stopped,
bulge eyes covered like the magician's stooge
who pretends not to see,
beyond a tied blindfold,
a man choose to disappear.

Trinity Hospital

There was a gunboat on the river
when you led me to your new favourite spot:
a home for retired sailors;
squat, white, stuccoed,
with a golden bell.

It could have been a lost Greek chapel,
a monument to light,
designed to remind the old boys
of their leave on Ionic shores
among tobacco and fruit trees.

Just after rain,
sunlight stood between us
like a whitewashed wall.
You were lit skin, gilt
and honey, dressed in olive.

No paper trail connects us.
No procedure of law
would tell you where to stand
in your sleek black mourning dress
if I die

but as you turned towards me
the golden bell rang to recognise
that I, being of sound mind,
will be delivered through orange groves
to you, the white church of my days.

'Between the stirrup and the ground, he something sought and something found.'
'Mercy.'
'That's right: Mercy.'

Graham Greene – 'Brighton Rock'

Janie's Song

Thank you. This is our last song of the evening.
You've been a dream. Some of you might know it,
it's from one of our first records so bear with us,
we haven't played it in a while. I'll get the words wrong.
I wrote it for someone; this girl I knew called Janie;
she existed. Janie's a real person. We lived together
for a while once, god, I was a kid then.
She was too. Never a stupid one like me though.
I wasn't ever straight with her, you know,
looking back now – she'd say she couldn't find me,
that was when it mattered I could change;
she'd always want to argue. I used to walk away.

But I remember, it's strange what you remember;
when I think of her it's mornings,
the waking up beside her, how her face was,
so close up I couldn't see her
but I knew. With both her eyes closed
and her makeup on, if we'd been drinking.
Or the mirror, us standing side by side just looking,
my arm around her, not in outside clothes.
I'd lean down, she was so much shorter,
so I could kiss her on the head or pull her vest strap,
try to delay her with a coffee. She'd run a bath
for us to sit in, talking; sometimes she let me wash her hair

and then she took off. She moved out here for some reason.
I don't mean it like that. To a cousin, or an aunt maybe,
I get mixed up. She said she'd write when she was settled
then she didn't. I moved too, so I guess she couldn't
if she wanted to. I miss her,
I suppose is what I'm saying. I mean, I think about her,

even now, and there've been others
but no one like her, no one you could just sit with.
Listen, Janie, I know this is a long-shot, but are you here?
Janie? Seriously, I'm not doing a bit, this is me asking;
I thought you might have seen a poster somewhere.
Janie, if you're here tonight come find me.

The Resurrection of Diego 'Chico' Corrales

Diego Corrales is standing up.
He has risen from the canvas
and his cornerman has placed a clean gumshield in his mouth
to replace the one he spat out.

He's just been knocked down for a second time,
in this tenth round, by Jose Luis Castillo,
but now he's standing, and the fight resuming.
He's starting to open up
and landing heavy shots: a right cross moves Castillo.
Castillo's smiling, which means he's hurt.
Castillo is landing too, but Corrales walks through fire,
coming forward, encouraged to see his opponent in trouble.

On Corrales' back is a tattoo of Christ the Redeemer.
Its arms rise and fall as he tenses his back to measure,
then land, blows on Castillo, who is sinking into the ropes,
hands lowered, no longer able to protect himself.
Castillo's head is being kept up by the force of his opponent's gloves
and not the actions of his neck
when the referee steps between the men
to save Castillo from this assault.
Corrales, having let his hands go, will not stop until he is stopped.

Two years from tonight, Corrales will lie dead
on the Fort Apache Road in Las Vegas,
his Suzuki motorcycle confused by impact
into component parts,
his license expired, his blood three times the legal alcohol limit.
'Bottom line, no one else did anything wrong',
Sergeant Tracy McDonald will say,
following a report into the crash. 'He basically killed himself'.

Corrales' attorney will refer to previous drink driving charges,
adding 'It would be a shame if his memory was tarnished
at this point by past incidents.'
Castillo, who is being cradled in the arms of the referee, will say
'We had two amazing fights and our names will be linked forever.'

Two years from tonight, but not now. Now Corrales is running
towards a neutral corner of the ring
in the Mandalay Bay Casino and leaping into the air.
He's being borne aloft by his trainer and his cutman,
his arms stretched out crosswise,
to celebrate coming back from the dead.

Rope-A-Dope

Nothing for days, then a message:
'I want to see a fight. An old one'
so I bring a fight to you.
You know nothing of these men;
even the most famous
get to slink in their youth again -
for you Foreman is Leviathan, unstoppable;
Ali just past his prime
flown 'home' to muscle back his title.
Not sure how you'll react to violence
we lie down again together –
your feet in woollen stockings
kneadable across my thighs,
your mouth close to my ribs
and their inmate: a pouting lifer.
I fidget and you scold.
As Ali opens up with right-hand leads
you flinch
but soon you're lost to the screen
where he waits it out along the ropes,
takes everything Foreman throws.
You don't believe he can soak up
all this pain and go on standing;
we cheer him on,
winter softened in the tropic of his strength.
When Ali comes alive to put Foreman on the ground
I see a Hallelujah look as you turn to face me,
'He won', you say into my cheek.
'He did', I say.

Jehovah and The River

Patrice Lumumba, 'the greatest black man
who ever walked the African continent'
was bound in ropes,
en route to trial in Leopoldville,
to start Mobutu Sese Seko's rise to power.
The CIA wanted Lumumba's head
but could not complete the job;
it fell to the man Reagan will one day call
'a voice of good sense and goodwill'
to dull the point of a sickle-sponsored hook.
Pictures of Mobutu, a kleptocrat,
'epitome of a closet sadist',
are everywhere you look.

Under the 100,000-seater stadium
detention rooms were built.
Mobutu had a thousand criminals
rounded up to fill his pens,
one hundred singled out at random to be killed.
Career criminals forge connections
to protect them when in trouble:
Mobutu proved these connections' worth.
He was Jehovah.

When it was over, the monsoons came.
Before the fight, Ali said 'we're going to dance'.
Instead, he lay along the ropes,
'loose as a goose' in the heat,
let the undefeated Foreman
exhaust himself with scores of clubbing blows.
Ali taunted him throughout:
'They told me you punch as hard as Louis'

and 'is that all you've got?'
Later, Ali will say
'Foreman couldn't look me in the eyes at first
and when he did, he looked deep.
Then he knew - he knew I was someone different.'

The rain in Kinshasa is so heavy
had it started at the bell
Ali and Foreman would have drowned.
The press corps riding through the night
see crowds line the road;
crowds are leaping up and down.
The news has started to go round.
What happened here is going to shock the world.

Between Stations

The train's stopped, without announcement.
All I have for company is a view
over marsh-land, weeds, a bank which runs
down from the track towards an allotment.
It's a scene, beyond glass, of confusion;
the sheds, huts and patches of dug earth
are in no rank, there seems no design
to where they're pitched, no uniformity
in the shape of roofs, or building material -
blue tarpaulin and wood lean towards each other.
Spades stick out of the foreground.
No people at work, and from this distance
no noise of radios to suggest anyone sheltering
in rickety buildings which can't sustain life
but might hold up their end in a shower.
We can't continue along the line,
or go back to the station we've just left,
nothing can be done
except look at the allotment
resembling a travellers' site, or township
built following a disaster, and notice after some time
the one perfectly straight path running through it,
clear of all tents and fences,
wide enough to accommodate a person,
or perhaps two walking side by side,
careful of each other, who might want to walk out
of this village of disorder and cut across the field
until it dips away, becoming the horizon.

My Son, The Heart of My Life

Joe Louis came to Brockton once
to referee an amateur bout.
Rocco Marchegiano - a local boy
who didn't want to grow up to smell of leather
like his father -
followed Louis to the restroom with a friend.
Rocco was boosted up to get a better look,
earning half a dollar when he was spotted.

Rocky Marciano has almost every strike
against him.
Two left feet.
Stoop shouldered.
A 68-inch reach, which is amazingly short.
Not starting out until he was ancient,
nearly 25, Rocky was so raw his trainer tied string
to his feet to help him keep his balance.

Rocky trains in an aeroplane hangar,
staying there for two months before a fight.
He denies his body all the things he loves.
He hits a custom-made 300lb bag
which makes any man he'll meet seem portable.
He jogs 10 miles a day in hilly terrain,
sprinting up and back, dipping low to generate power.
He swims shoulder deep, punching water.
A week before a fight Rocky takes no calls,
eats no new food, reads no mail
and shakes no hands.

At the height of his championship reign
the US testing company will be contracted

to test the power in his hands.
They'll have him throw a right into a machine –
in their report the energy of his punch
will be equivalent to an armour-piercing shell.

It has just retired Joe Louis,
knocking him through the ropes
in Madison Square Garden.
Louis is a helpless figure, his head tilted back,
his eyes turned towards the lights in the ceiling.
Sugar Ray Robinson is running down the aisle to hug Joe
and see if he's alright.

Rocky will retire undefeated,
saying 'I didn't never really get hurt in the ring,
and I feel perfect physically
and probably still had two or three good fights left.'

The night before his forty sixth birthday
Rocky will be decapitated
when a private plane he is travelling in
hits a tree outside Newton, Iowa.
An investigation into the circumstances
will conclude that 'the pilot attempted an operation
exceeding his experience and ability level.'

When Marciano's mother is told the news she will say
'Figlio Mia, Figlio Mia, Corra de mama!'
Joe Louis will kiss the top of the closed casket,
look at the ceiling of the funeral home,
and say 'Something's gone out of my life. I'm not alone;
something's gone out of everyone's life.'
Someone will run down the aisle to hug Joe
and see if he's alright.

The Rat

That's all I can remember; only the rat,
from the whole of the day we spent together.
Not the gallery, not stopping off for coffee,
just walking along the river, the rocky strip,
and coming upon the rat.

That's all, is it?

Yes, at this distance from it, that's the only
thing left of the day. It was white
and bloated with water, flat out on a stone
in supplication. I would have stepped
on it if not for a shout from my friend.

That's something at least, not stepping on it.

It is. That's one good thing. I looked down
when she screamed for a second or two
and saw its head thrown back, its teeth
over its jaw. I'm nearly sure I saw veins
under the fur but that may be invention.

That can happen, you can misremember a thing.

You can, an unpleasant thing especially,
it can sour further when it's thought about.
I remember my friend's face, how she was frozen,
pointing but unable to say a word. She saw it
first, the rat. I had been talking to her.

At least she saw it, and stopped you doing worse.

She did and it's lucky that she picked it out,
it was daylight and not easy to spot being light-
coloured, against grey. Already I see how it'll go;
I'm worried the whole summer will eventually
be remembered for that rat. The whole year, even.

It'll be a while before the whole year, surely?

It might, but it could happen. The memory
isn't easy to control. Where I'd want to think
of happier things I've no choice in the matter,
which is why I'm so concerned. A sight like it
can wipe out a thousand smaller, better ones.

You didn't stand on it, at least, that's something.

It is, you're right. I must focus now on that.

The Death of a Good Boy

Emile Griffith, former hat designer
and new welterweight champion of the world
is watching a replay at ringside
as Benny Paret lies unconscious, yards away.
He's trying to describe what's happened;
the punches he landed on the Cuban -
between 17 and 25 in five seconds -
how when Paret slipped through the ropes he kept throwing
and stepping back, as he'd been told to.
He doesn't comment on Paret's 'little half-smile of regret,
as if to say I didn't know I was going to die just yet.'
No one will tell him how Paret's feeling.
The interviewer is remarking on the beautiful camerawork.

The first time they met, Griffith said Paret was 'a good boy',
but at the weigh-in this time Paret called him '*maricón*'.
This morning's papers translated the taunt as 'unman'.

Paret didn't want to fight tonight.
He looked in good shape coming in
but like a once-crashed car
carried 'something internally that is never the same'.
Paret's manager will say
'now I have to go and find a new boy'
when Paret dies.
Griffith will hear other Spanish words,
down the phone-line,
threatening his life, telling him he belongs in trees.

Griffith will see Paret in that corner of any ring he enters,
as well as in the mirror, sometimes.

Thirty years from now, after a heavy night's drinking
in a gay bar near the Port Authority,
Griffith will be jumped and beaten so badly he won't get up
for four months.
When he does, in Queen's General,
it'll be with lasting damage to his short-term memory.
He'll have to take the bus like everyone else,
parking his pink Lincoln for good,
but as he'll say himself 'I don't remember a lot of things.
Some of them I guess is for the best.'

Postcard from Australia

Cockatoos and rainbow lorikeets
are loudly showing off to one another,
high in the eucalyptus trees
that tower over this hinterland,
gorgeous in 7 a.m. light. No one's up.
You're lagging behind, still on last night,
asleep, no doubt, in that soft black T-shirt
whose logo gave up years ago; long before me.
Imagine how sunny it would be if you were here.

We've tried time-travel before, in those letters
we used to write, but this is something else.
Given the trouble I'm having
finding anything like a post office
I might see you before you read this,
or even be there when you do,
not daring to meet your eyes.

When you wake up for your big event
I'll already be sitting down to dinner in mosquito spray,
under a ceiling of abuse from the local geckos.
Even if I said 'to hell with this', and rushed off
to be with you, it'd be too late
and they'd have packed up the chairs before I arrived.
When I get home will you read to me
in your new orange dress,
and lie that it's for the first time?

Your last message came through in the small hours.
It looks like we'll have to go on missing each other,
trying to hit on a half hour of the day
when we're both awake.

I'll keep wondering before bed
why we aren't together,
then pretend I understand the new rules.

I can't wait until Tuesday means the same
for both of us again:
that place with the metal teapots,
your jumper pulled down over your hands,
your never staying for quite the full hour.

It'll be such a relief to have the present tense back,
having spent all these days in the past, or future, or both.
Whichever tense I'm in, I'm with you, little bee,
who are somehow outside of them all –
more exotic than any of their helplessly protesting creatures.
Whatever else, I want you to know that.

Thunder

'Irish' Micky Ward has made the four-hour trip
from Lowell, Massachusetts, to Canastota, New York,
to induct Arturo 'Thunder' Gatti into the Hall of Fame.
It's ten years since their last fight;
that night when Gatti broke his hand on Ward's hip
but carried on. Round 10 began with an embrace,
before the last of 30 rounds spent trying
to put each other on a gurney.
For the last minute, the commentator
said little more than 'they rise again in Boardwalk Hall'.

Gatti always said his toughest test would come
when he met someone like himself;
so alike in style when they stepped in the ring
but outside it, when it got later in the night,
Gatti was the wilder one.
He lived in go-go bars; breakfast was three Percocets;
his drinking dented $16 million purses,
loaded up a shotgun wedding overlooking the Grand Canyon
with a dancer half his age who called him *mi Amor*.

When Gatti's body was discovered
at a resort in Pernambuco,
his love was held for murder.
Despite a history of 'domestic unrest'
and his alleged 'suicidal tendencies'
Ward couldn't believe Gatti knew how to quit.
Walking past his coffin Ward touched it with a hook,
to say 'I got you last'.

'I miss him to death every day,
I think about him every day at some point', Ward says,

in Canastota. 'It's like when stars align,
that was me and him. For what reason I don't know.
Arturo will be a part of me forever.
The memories will be in my mind forever.
Our fights will stay in my head forever.
So we'll be together forever.'

The 39th Exception

Joe Louis has outlived his era
and is, according to Muhammad Ali,
'making himself look real ignorant
when he attacks these young, educated, Olympic boys.
He's making himself an Uncle Tom for white people.
Negroes don't follow and idolise that part of Joe Louis.'
Louis is ill-equipped for Black Power;
all that remains is his name
which he's already used to endorse hair pomade,
milk, cigarettes and liquor.

Fans are sending Louis dollars in the mail.
The IRS have finally thrown in the towel.
Louis is hearing gangsters' voices through the air-con,
opening all the windows,
refusing to eat anything which has come out of a can.
He's got a job as a greeter, shaking hands
at Caesar's Palace,
but most nights are at the craps table,
keeping what he wins on other people's chips.
Drink has entered the picture, as has cocaine;
accelerating an inherited condition.
In wedding photos his wives all drank champagne
and he ate apples;
now he over-fills the tumbler.
Some friends will later optimistically claim
he 'ended his days not continually tormented.'

The public's last sighting of Louis
will be ringside in a wheelchair, and cowboy hat,
in colour.
He will be buried with full military honours

in recognition of the four years of his prime
spent being paid $21 a week basic
while amassing a $100,000 tax debt
on donations made to the army relief fund.

Louis will not qualify for burial at Arlington
because he holds no medals for bravery,
distinguished service or war wounds;
did not die on active duty
and was not disabled on active duty.
President Reagan will intervene
to make Louis,
'the son of an Alabama sharecropper
I was privileged to have had as my friend'
an exception -
the 39th since regulations were tightened.

'If I had touched you then/One of us might have survived' – the origins and evolution of Ian Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'.

Introduction

The aims of this part of the thesis are to define and discuss Ian Hamilton's term 'Perfect Speech' and to trace its linguistic and philosophical genealogy, and evolution, through the poets Hamilton was influenced by and a select number of those whom he, in turn, influenced. It will discuss the ways in which Hamilton developed his understanding of 'Perfect Speech' and wrote poems out of it, before losing 'faith' in the concept to an extent. It will also show how 'Perfect Speech' has been developed since Hamilton, by poets such as Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann, through their introduction of other influences or by a widening out stylistically and prosodically from the restrained Hamilton model. This will in turn lead me to discuss, in my conclusion, the ways in which an understanding of the possibilities of 'Perfect Speech' may be seen as an *ars poetica* for the work which forms my own creative submission.

Ian Hamilton will be the fulcrum of this thesis. The term 'Perfect Speech' was one coined by him in his biography of Robert Lowell[1], and referred to directly, or with slight variation[2], in a number of his interviews and writings on his own work. The concept was also, I will argue, a kind of *ars poetica* out of which it was possible for him to write at all. In order to identify how Hamilton conceived of 'Perfect Speech' I will look backwards (Chapter One, Part Two) to the poets who most influenced his arriving at the term, such as William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Matthew Arnold, Thomas Hardy, Ezra Pound, Keith Douglas, Philip Larkin and Robert Lowell. I will trace the stylistic and theoretical influences he drew from each and to what extent he

[1] Hamilton claimed that, following Lowell's break with Catholicism, his only remaining faith was found in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech'. Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1982) p.260.

[2] Hamilton refers to 'ideal speech' rather than 'perfect speech' in *Ian Hamilton in conversation with Dan Jacobson* (London: Between the Lines, 2002) p.65 but its context shows the terms are analogous.

modified, adapted and tried to utilise the gains each had made in their work. I will use a number of original interviews I have conducted with members of Hamilton's circle, such as Colin Falck, Hugo Williams, Alan Jenkins and David Harsent to advance and support my argument and to trace the genealogy of 'Perfect Speech'. The thesis will locate Hamilton in his historical context and, through original research derived from these interviews and his personal archives, discuss the poems in the light of his biography. I will write about the poems as products of Hamilton the man, as any attempt to remove the poet would be to fundamentally undermine the work, based as it is so directly in his speaking voice and his personal and historical circumstances.[3] This approach is also in line with the 'philosophy' of Hamilton's magazine *The Review*, derived in the main from Colin Falck, and written about in Falck's two critical books[4]:

> What we lack … is a notion of the subject which defines it in relationship to apprehensible truth or reality: a partial resurrection (but a resurrection in all its corporeality and historicality) … of the old philosophical and religious notion of the soul.[5]

In keeping with Hamilton's attitude towards poems and the climate in which he discussed, thought about and wrote them, I will opt to 'resurrect' him as an embodied

[3] cf. Neil Roberts, who, in 'The lyric I in late-twentieth-century English Poetry' in *The Lyric Poem* ed. Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), writes of Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*: 'The most lyrically accomplished moments of *Birthday Letters* are not with a few exceptions reconstructions of the past but piercing revelations of the mourning – or more accurately melancholic – "I" at the moment of writing. It would be absurd to try to read these poems without reference to that history.'

[4] Falck writes about the importance of restoring the notion of an embodied self in literary critical writing in Colin Falck, *Myth, Truth and Literature: towards a true post-modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century: the poetry that matters* (Hants: Ashgate, 2003).

[5] *Myth Truth and Literature*, p. 29.

person, and discuss his poems in the light of Falck's approaches to criticism, with its subsumed theological aspect.

In defining 'Perfect Speech' I will show Hamilton believed it was necessary for a poem to attempt to 'reach beyond' ordinary discourse through the creative act itself, adding to experience rather than merely recording it. I will examine the ways in which this 'belief' came about via the influence of writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge to whom he had been exposed by his fellow editors of *The Review,* Falck and Michael Fried. I'll discuss Hamilton's belief in the necessity of avoiding undermining personae, of 'legislating for tenderness', and examine how, through 'Perfect Speech', he found a method of doing so in two distinct and interrelated ways: by creating lyric poems in which the 'speaking voice' was a creative force; and by figuring the lyric poem as an inheritor of religious faith. The active, creative element of 'Perfect Speech', I will demonstrate, developed through Hamilton's understanding – for the main part via Falck and Fried - of Coleridge's writings on the 'imagination'[6] and the line of philosophical thinking developed via Romanticism in which the lyric poem was seen as a revelatory medium. Coleridge, building on St Augustine's writings on the Logos in *De Magistro,* developed the notion, moving illumination away from having a basis in *Reason* 'to see that it should be understood in terms of the *Imagination*.'[7] Coleridge's development of Augustine pointed to the idea that 'We do not … come to a perception of the world … as a result of a series of logical deductions or calculations of the discursive reason … But rather our minds and hearts *go out* to embrace the world imaginatively. There is a kind of "leap of faith"…"actively shaping" its sense and meaning.'[8] The ongoing

[6] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: Dent, 1982) p. 167.

[7] Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) p. 172.

[8] Ibid.

development of a philosophy of the creative imagination[9] was vital to Hamilton, via Falck. For Coleridge, the creative act was a conscious 'repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM'.[10] For Hamilton, however, there was no such Creator or orthodox faith, and any belief would have to be self-generated and in the light of Falck's philosophy in which, quoting William Blake, 'all deities reside in the human breast'.[11]

The idea of the poem as the inheritor of faith came about, I will argue, thanks to Hamilton's immersion in the work of poets such as Arnold and Lowell. Both poets, in their own ways, arrived at a notion of lyric poetry as a virtuous means of filling the void left following a crisis, or abandonment, of orthodox religious belief.[12] This will prompt an investigation into the ways in which Hamilton's talk of being a poet 'of the miraculous persuasion'[13] fits with the language of lapsed faith and (via Lowell) more specifically lapsed Catholicism, with which his poems, and discussions of his poems, are suffused. 'Perfect Speech' is not, I will show, a notion purely to do with the language or diction of the work[14] - although, having been influenced by poets such as Wordsworth and Frost, Hamilton's diction is almost exclusively plain and demotic – but inextricably linked to the more 'philosophical' Coleridgean aspects of the lyric poem as a conscious act of creation.

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[9] William Keach in 'Romanticism and Language', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism* ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) writes of Coleridge's ideas as running 'within the line of thinking that runs from doctrines of universal grammar expounded in the *Port Royal Grammar* and in Harris's *Hermes* to Chomsky's recent work.' p.112.

[10] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* p. 167.

[11] William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

[12] See Matthew Arnold, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[13] Interview with Gerry Cambridge *The Dark Horse* no.3, 1996.

[14] See Donald Davie, on 'diction' in *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954).

This part of the thesis will show how Hamilton's particular circumstances, historically and biographically, led to his need to create the type of poetry he did through 'Perfect Speech', and will examine the extent to which his poetic choices were as much reactive as freely made. I will explore (Chapter Two) how the poems Hamilton wanted, and felt it necessary, to produce were ones which were emotionally candid while not betraying their subject but drastically different in composition from the regular five-beat lines of the prevailing poetic landscape, represented by The Movement[15], and less explicit than some of the excesses of the poets anthologised in *The New Poetry*. The poems would be capable of being, in and of themselves, analogous to the sort of religious ceremony Hamilton was indirectly influenced by through Lowell (Chapter Three), wherein the act of writing a lyric poem is an attempt at a secular transubstantiation, conjuring a 'real' presence not via religious rite but by the creative imaginative possibilities of the lyric poem. I will also show that Hamilton's poems needed to provide him with a means of being of use and were a way of attempting to assuage guilt. In the course of my close-reading (Chapter Four) I will reflect the historical context in which the poems appeared. This was a world shadowed by nuclear threat, where the influence of television, film, photography and, in particular, the power struggles and claustrophobia of the plays of Harold Pinter may all be seen as marginally shaping influences on the poems.

This part of the thesis also addresses Hamilton's impact on poetry. Thus, after a chapter in which I examine 'Perfect Speech' in action in Hamilton's own work, I will aim to show the ways in which 'Perfect Speech' has been adapted and modified by two poets who were directly influenced by Hamilton in his role as poet and editor: Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann (Chapter Five). I will demonstrate that Hugo Williams

[15] As gathered in the anthology *New Lines,* ed. Robert Conquest (London: Macmillan, 1956).

and Michael Hofmann can be seen as the direct heirs to Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' and show the ways in which Hugo Williams's work has increasingly utilised ideas of 'Perfect Speech' since his 1985 collection *Writing Home*. I will also show the ways in which his theatrical background intersects with the handling of time in his poems. In place of Hamilton's Pinter-esque claustrophobia and Pound-derived dramatic intensity, I will argue, Williams utilises a poetic version of comic timing and slapstick more reminiscent of the work of his actor father: a figure who is a rich source of poetic material for Williams. I will also examine how Michael Hofmann has adapted elements of 'Perfect Speech' in his work, especially when reaching for an elegiac tone in *Approximately Nowhere*.

My discussions of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' will lean on a number of supporting critical elements. A biographically-informed, historically-located, close-reading approach to Hamilton's poems will be carried out to demonstrate the enacting of his 'Perfect Speech'. The argument throughout will be supported by the critical writings of Hamilton himself. My initial interaction with the poets and poetic movements against which Hamilton was reacting, such as Matthew Arnold, Robert Lowell and The Movement, will be through the filter of Hamilton and *The Review*'s writings on their work. In most cases the first encounter with each of these influences will be as 'Hamilton's version of them' in order to best isolate the elements of their poetry which drew him to them (or in some cases made him recoil from them), and to demonstrate the ways he leaned on their work, or his understanding of their work, in arriving at 'Perfect Speech'. My argument will also be informed by more recent critical discussions of their writing. Aside from Hamilton's own criticism, the thesis will be underpinned by the writing published in Hamilton's magazines *The Review* and *The New*

Review[16], and in particular the reviews and essays of Colin Falck, who provided the theoretical foundation upon which Hamilton's notion of 'Perfect Speech', and his conception of what poetry might do, was built.

Falck's more theoretical, critical writings will be an important factor in my argument. They will be used to demonstrate two essential aims of 'Perfect Speech' – its offering the poet a means of 'reaching beyond' and mastering experience, and poetry's responsibility to fill the void left by traditional religious belief. The two critical books in which Falck outlines, after the event, the thinking behind *The Review*'s approach to poetry[17], and demonstrates the need for literary criticism to subsume theology[18], can be read in the light of this as the nearest thing to a poetic manifesto that Hamilton was in possession of. To support the religious aspect of my argument, I will touch on the impact that the Catholic theology of Ignatius Loyola had on Hamilton's idea of poetry as an act of service. I will also argue that this idea was derived not through any religious faith of his own but rather by his exposure to Robert Lowell's writing and the lapsed Catholicism inherent in Lowell's work and his understanding of 'perfection'.

When discussing the poets who have followed on from Hamilton, my method will be further nuanced. While still using the filter of Hamilton's critical writing, original interviews and close-reading I will also aim to locate these poets in their contemporary setting. I will discuss the future development of 'Perfect Speech' and argue for its validity and necessity as a means of poetic discourse in the contemporary climate in my conclusion, where I will also aim to demonstrate that an adapted version of 'Perfect

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[16] *The Review* – 30 issues, 1962-1972, *The New Review* – 50 issues, 1974-1979.

[17] Colin Falck – *Myth, Truth and Literature: towards a true post-modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century: the poetry that matters* (Hants: Ashgate, 2003)

[18] A recent survey of the intersections and antagonisms of literary criticism and theology is attempted in 'Theology and Literature in the English Speaking World', Michael Kirwan, in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination, ed.* Francesca Bugliani Knox and David Lonsdale (Surrey: Ashgate, 2015).

Speech' can be seen as an *ars poetica* for my own creative work. At the same time I would like to acknowledge the difficulty in writing 'about' poems' attempts to 'reach beyond', as Falck discusses in *Myth, Truth and Literature*:

> The literary work will always lie to one side of, or beyond, anything that we can systematically say about it, and the essence of the most valuable literary criticism must always lie in a kind of indirection – an indirect gesturing … at the various ways in which we sense the work to 'go beyond' whatever we and the rest of our literature have otherwise comprehended … critical process, like the process of writing itself, is in part necessarily irrational and beyond explanation, and we ought perhaps to remind ourselves that the attempt to explain how a poem 'works' can have a good deal in common with the attempt to explain how a joke works.[19]

While a complete privileging of poetry over 'explanation' would be as unhelpful as too great an attempt to rationalise the poem's attempts to 'go beyond', my close readings and discussions of poems will attempt to be gestural in this sense.

[19] *Myth, Truth and Literature*, pp. 88-89.

Chapter One, Part One – 'Perfect Speech'

> Sleep on
> And listen to these words
> Faintly, and with a tentative alarm,
> Refuse to waken you.[20]

A recurrent feature of Ian Hamilton's discussions about poems, both in his published interviews and critical writing, was the term 'Perfect Speech'. It can be found in his biography of Robert Lowell, who, after abandoning Catholicism, in Hamilton's view had faith only in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech'.[21] The idea of a purposeful perfection of language appears again in Hamilton's preface to *Fifty Poems*, in 1988, 'But did I truly think that poetry, if perfect, could bring back the dead? In some ways yes, I think I did.' An understanding of what he meant by 'Perfect Speech' must include both of these elements, then: the notion of creating lyric poems through a nuanced use of the speaking voice which could alleviate suffering, salvage a situation and even, in his more mystical moods, resurrect the dead – but also something which could legitimately take the place of religious faith in the godless milieu in which he was working. Like the lapsed Lowell, Hamilton's only faith was in the power of 'perfect speech'. In this context 'perfect' doesn't have a hubristic or self-aggrandising sense, at least not a foregrounded one. Rather it is suggestive of writing which is being in its creation *perfected*: poetry which is 'in act', informed by the Romantic and purposeful influences Hamilton believed were essential to writing poems which could be of use to their addressees and more widely act as 'songs among the ruins'. To access and investigate these sorts of poems he needed to allow terms which could be considered

[20] Ian Hamilton, 'Poem', *Collected Poems*, ed. Alan Jenkins (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

[21] *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p.260.

mystical or irrational - which as a result might seem incongruous, even uncharacteristic - into his critical vocabulary.

As a critic, Hamilton adopted an unflinching, no-nonsense approach, with a fierceness which earned him a reputation as a literary 'capo di capi'.[22] When it came to his own poems, however, Hamilton operated in a far less matter-of-fact way, describing himself as a 'poet of the miraculous persuasion' and allowing words like 'magic' and 'inspiration' to slip into his recorded conversation.[23] Elaborating on this claim for miraculousness, Hamilton went on:

> I think of a genuine poetic moment as miraculous, or near-miraculous, and that that's what truly lyric poetry aspires to. I don't think of poetry as being a vehicle for discourse, or a vehicle for narrative. It sounds slightly bullshitting, but I think of its character as being close to what I imagine might be the moment of revelation for a mystic.[24]

'It sounds slightly bullshitting' is typically Hamiltonian, and should be read in the same way as mentions of his 'so-called literary life' and other self-deprecations. It points to the fact that Hamilton knew his belief in revelation or miraculous inspiration to be outmoded, slightly 'poetic'. Nonetheless, he had to surrender to this 'belief' to produce the only poems he could allow past his fierce self-censoring instincts.[25]

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[22] Ian McEwan's phrase from *Another Round At The Pillars*, ed. David Harsent (Manaccan: Cargo Press, 1999) - the Festchrift published to celebrate Hamilton's 60th birthday, p.82.

[23] In *Robert Lowell: A Biography* Hamilton writes 'Many a learned paper has been written on the last line of Lowell's "Quaker Graveyard In Nantucket"', yet it is no "clearer"', no less haunting than it ever was: it was lines like this that reduced even a proudly analytical reviewer like Randall Jarrell to using words like "magic".' p. 104.

[24] *The Dark Horse* no.3, 1996.

[25] As much as 'inspiration' figures in Romanticism in the possibilities of creative imagination, it is present earlier in the English poetic tradition, in Pope's assessment of Shakespeare: 'inspiration indeed: he is not so much an Imitator, as an instrument of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him' (Preface to Shakespeare, *Major Works* ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University

While the idea of 'revelation' might suggest there was no craft involved, the results on the page belie any such claims. One might imagine a poetry of miraculous inspiration would look unformed, and read something like the obsessive spontaneity of a poet like DH Lawrence and his 'plasm' of nature[26], but this wasn't the case in terms of either Hamilton's diction or craft. Spare almost to the point of impenetrability - the five-line 'Memorial' manages to be strikingly vivid, for example[27] – if Hamilton's poems are a 'revelation' it's for their attempt to tap into a platonic realm of address, in line with Coleridge's ideas of the creative power of the imagination, and not that they appear as if dictated by a Muse. Peter Dale touched on a paradox in the composition of Hamilton's apparently 'miraculous' but meticulously crafted poems:

> his method of composition amazed me. Most poems, I
> think, he shaped in his head until something viable emerged
> for typing out. But if he changed or developed something,
> out would come that sheet and in go another. He must
> have used scores of sheets on some poems, many with only
> a line or two on them.[28]

Certainly, for all his talk of inspiration there is no Beat-style shamanism evident in the modest, 'espresso-sized'[29] body of work Hamilton produced. As David Harsent has noted, although Hamilton may have been 'more given over to instinct and serendipity

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Press, 2006)) and has its roots in the ancient Greeks, with Socrates saying that 'poets write because they are inspired and possessed' (Plato, *Ion* trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1871)).

[26] Colin Falck, in *Another Round At The Pillars,* describes Hamilton as 'the finest English *vers libre* stylist since Lawrence'.

[27] A poem such as 'Retreat' perhaps relies too much on inference and biographical detail not supplied within the poem itself to fully avoid slightness.

[28] *Another Round At The Pillars,* p.50.

[29] Christopher Reid's phrase, in his review of Hamilton's *Collected Poems* in the *TLS*, June 2009.

than many'[30] it was his stringent critical attitude which 'produce[d] the climate in which [the poems] were written'.[31] Hamilton elaborated on the idea of revelation in an interview with Dan Jacobson:

> The 'it' you imagine out there to be discovered by you, or that will visit you, with its mixture of passion and control, is a poem of perfection. So you listen out for the poem ... It's as if the poetry you write is what you don't seem to be able to express in your ordinary day-to-day transactions. There's a sort of platonic realm of discourse that you occasionally manage to tune into. That is the impulse behind the poem – to be able to say in the poem what ordinarily doesn't and cannot get said or understood or listened to.[32]

This idea of listening out and waiting for a 'lyrical arrival' seems genuine, given the small number of poems Hamilton published, and is inherently linked to the Romantic influences which suggested to him that a poem must 'reach beyond' ordinary discourse and could be a creative, not merely commemorative, act. Hugo Williams has questioned the veracity of Hamilton's reliance on revelation, saying his willingness to wait for poems to come to him 'goes against human nature'[33] and adding that 'I thought maybe the biographical side of him … came in there.'[34] That said, in a later poem, 'Resolve', Hamilton asserts the role of revelation when he addresses his 'Enchantress, know-all, Queen of Numbers, Muse'.

Hamilton's prosody came out of a series of reactions; an *ars poetica* defined in part by what it was against as much as what it was for. Hamilton, in an interview with

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[30] *Another Round At The Pillars,* p.12.

[31] Ibid.

[32] *Between The Lines*, p.48.

[33] Interview with Hugo Williams, 01/02/12.

[34] Ibid.

Peter Dale, revealed a wish to hit on some poetry sweet-spot between his understanding of the high-minded, theory-soaked Imagism of Pound[35] - which was to become his bulwark against the sterile and often academic tones of The Movement - and the 'confessional', emotionally-invested poetry championed in Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry*, which featured as its exemplars the soul-baring Lowell and Berryman:

> what we were saying was that Pound may have been an 'art', not a 'life' man, but by following some of his art principles and by injecting into the works some Alvarez-type 'life' you might get something rather wonderful.[36]

Hamilton's understanding of Imagism led him to his cramped, compressed poems which were impossible to mistake for the metrically certain but emotionally arid work of The Movement. He expanded on this influence in an interview for *Poetry Review*:

> [Pound] had a problem with poems with a lot of unnecessary furniture. He felt that the poet should get ... to the maximum point of intensity, and then get rid of the furniture. You don't need 'And then he walked across the room and opened the door and slapped her in the face.' You want the slap ... One of the difficulties is that the walking across the room and the opening of the door have to be implied. You must get a sense of setting, past events, likely future events. [37]

The 'life' he would look to inject into Pound's concision and inference was evident in poems produced by the 'confessional' school, many of whom appeared in *The New Poetry*. Their poems were founded on the explication of personal suffering; poems

[35] See Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste': http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/335

[36] *Agenda* 31.2 (Summer 1993): 7-21 - Hamilton's own poems would, incidentally, close Alvarez's revised edition of *The New Poetry*.

[37] *Poetry Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997/98.

of strong emotion which often dealt with mental instability. With key influences such as Lowell, Roethke and Snodgrass, Hamilton was well-versed in the idea of getting 'life' into poems, and the impact it could have artistically. While it seemed that suffering was a key it wasn't to be his own that he would put into the poems. Hamilton outlined his idea of what constituted a 'perfect' poem elsewhere:

> I suppose that the perfect poem became something that had to contain the maximum amount of control – and of suffering. Preferably it wouldn't be about me; rather, it would be about my inability, however intensely I felt, to do anything about the suffering ... One didn't want, on the other hand, to sound wimpishly hopeless about it.[38]

No diaristic 'confession' then. The importance of suffering and the need to be of use, or service, are a hangover, in part, of the religious aspects in 'Perfect Speech' derived from Lowell's lapsed Catholicism. This belief in 'Perfect Speech', however misguided Hamilton may later have felt it to have been, helps to explain the poems he did allow himself to write and publish, especially when read in the light of another central aspect of his character. Again talking to Jacobson, Hamilton discussed the impact his formative years as an observer of his widowed mother's struggle to make ends meet, and later his first wife's mental illness, had on him:

> It's only now I can ... see that there was a pattern in my life, as one does – that possibly I exist or only feel I exist when I am called upon to serve or assist or something. Otherwise I don't really have a personality, an existence.[39]

This seems a rather extreme take on Keats's notion of negative capability. Here the issue is not an ability to exist in uncertainty, rather the inability to exist at all without the

[38] *Between The Lines,* p.47.

[39] *Between the Lines*, p. 48.

demands of service. The idea of suffering was not purely an aesthetic or 'art' concern then. It was bound up with the idea of a lyric poem as a means of adding to, not just charting, experience and charged with some of the enchantments found in discussions of his 'miraculous persuasion'. Hamilton was also, unlike Lowell, carer not sufferer.

Hamilton's idea of the importance of 'suffering' in a poem wasn't solely taken from the remnants of religious faith or these confessionals, however. Another, far earlier, influence for Hamilton was Keats, whose idea of life as a 'vale of soul-making' can be heard beneath the surface of Hamilton's concept of a 'poem of perfection' with its 'maximum amount of suffering.' Keats's ideas around 'negative capability' would also be an important influence on Hamilton's prosody, not least in the way in which his is a poetry of 'you', with the implied narrator revealed only through their actions.

The idea of existing in this middle ground between 'pure' art and emotionally charged life-writing was more than a matter of poetic taste for Hamilton. As much as he was to make poetry out of the plights of people drawn from his own life, namely his late father and his first wife, the impulse to do so was not the same as the one he recoiled from in the expansive, indelicate Lowell. Whereas Lowell was militantly autobiographical in *Life Studies*, and beyond, rarely failing to name names and committing far worse crimes in Hamilton's ascetic book[40], Hamilton would exercise restraint and create a poetry of 'overhearing' rather than tell-all grandiloquence, 'an art of looking away without disguising the price you pay for doing so.'[41]

A Lowellian 'I' was rarely present in Hamilton's take on the 'confessional' lyric. Instead, Hamilton adopted on the whole a direct address which had something in

[40] Lowell was heavily censured by Hamilton both in the biography and the essay 'A Biographer's Misgivings' in Ian Hamilton, *The Trouble With Money* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998). Among his most heinous crimes to Hamilton's mind, or to Elizabeth Bishop's, was the publication of extracts from private letters sent by his ex-wife Elizabeth Hardwick.

[41] Al Alvarez, *Another Round At The Pillars,* p.34.

common with the dramatic monologue. Hamilton's poems are almost always addressed to an unspeaking subject, a conversation which was one-way and to which the reader could only hope to play the role of eavesdropper. This raised its own moral issues. While personal details of the 'you's in Hamilton's poems were suppressed, there was still reluctance on his part even to give away as much as he did, for fear of creating 'a poetic relishing of the situation'[42]:

> there was always this issue: should I be writing about this at all? I had a fear of any exploitation of the situation for the sake of writing a poem, the getting of a reputation as a poet on the back of somebody else's suffering.[43]

Hamilton becomes, then, a reluctant confessional; a poet who believes a poem has to contain 'suffering' and 'life' but who is unwilling to exploit the suffering of others or co-opt it into mere material. This distaste for anything resembling a 'relishing of the situation' couldn't distract from the fact that in Lowell, and the other 'confessional' writers, Hamilton had found the sort of poems he felt were needed and which were the only 'real thing' being produced. The power of Hamilton's poems, then, is not to be found in their personal, confessional, nature but because of Hamilton's ability to deal so successfully in the art of implication.[44]

This *ars poetica* was described by Hugo Williams as an 'emotional symbolism which he more or less invented'.[45] Hamilton didn't in fact entirely 'invent' the sort of poem he would go on to write, leaning on the compressed lyric address of fellow 'board

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[42] *Between the Lines*, p.65.

[43] Ibid., p.65.

[44] David Harsent has singled out Hamilton's ability to create whole worlds within a single free-verse line: 'There's no one better at describing a world by inference; his diction and cadences draw you in immediately. There's no one better able to express the almost-said, or to make careful, incisive and ironical use of gesture and moment.' *Another Round At The Pillars,* p.78

[45] Hugo Williams, *Another Round At The Pillars,* p.56.

member' of *The Review*, Michael Fried, but developing it in line with those ideas of attempting to mitigate other people's suffering. David Harsent has commented that 'The extraordinary thing is [Hamilton] did what he did in a way nobody else could have possibly done it. He had the equipment. He superseded Michael Fried in that, and I don't think anyone's come close.'[46]

Hamilton outlined the notion of his sort of direct address to Jacobson:

> In my poems the people are either dead or unable to make sense ... And so I was speaking to someone who couldn't answer back. Although the poem created the illusion of an address, it's the sort of address you might make over someone's grave ... The poems are ideal speech, what one would like to say to the addressees – if they were alive or were capable of attending.[47]

In the light of this 'Perfect Speech', here figured as 'ideal speech', takes on an additional charge. Not only can it be redemptive, it is also something which has within it a degree of *l'esprit de l'escalier*, an after-the-event attempt to say what should have been said at the time[48]. There is something analogous to the religious rite of confession to this attempt at reparation. Malcolm Guite points towards something similar in a discussion of Coleridge's glosses on 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner':

> The way in which Coleridge's later gloss on the text of his poem allows us to return to a page we thought we knew and read it in a new way is rather like the experience, for Christians, of repentance, confession and

[46] Interview with David Harsent, (23/03/12).

[47] *Between the Lines*, p.65.

[48] David Harsent commented that to an extent 'All Ian's work is reparation, maybe it's [all] an extended apology.' (Interview with David Harsent, 23/03/12).

> grace. One lives through a page of one's life, and looking back it can seem to have the finality of a printed text … How can any of it ever be undone or unsaid, however much one wishes it could? But, in prayer and confession, we offer that page to God for the commentary of His grace; we invite Him to surround the text of our life with a gloss that may reveal to us, many years later, glimpses of redeeming love that were hidden at the time.[49]

For Hamilton, this attempt to reveal 'glimpses of redeeming love', years later, comes through the creative force of the 'esemplastic power' of the imagination, rather than an intercessionary God, but the drive towards undoing and rewriting is akin to that Christian drive outlined by Guite.

The manner of Hamilton's address borrows something from Donne and Shakespeare, and their intimate talk directed at a silent addressee, but this further element of a 'graveside address' adds credence to Hamilton's search for a 'platonic realm of discourse'. The person being addressed is outside of life, or, at least outside to the point where they are 'incapable of attending'. They can't answer back, but by making a poem of 'perfection' it might be possible to restore them to a point where they at least seem able to. By re-animating them through precise lyric writing and creating 'the illusion of an address' which necessitates a listener who is 'capable of attending', the situation can be revisited, replayed and – taking a final leap of 'faith' - salvaged.

But why do it at all, if the concern of making a career out of the exploitation of others was so problematic? The answer to that may be the key to a full understanding of

[49] Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, p. 158.

what is meant by Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'. It is not merely an aesthetic ideal – there's a more urgent part to it, as he outlined to Dale:

> Well, I think I once had the illusion that in writing a poem one might be able to reach into areas that ordinary real-life speech could not reach into. Say that the subject of a poem is the suffering of another person. I think I believed that by writing that poem, there might be some mitigation of the suffering. One knew that in life ordinary speech made little difference, couldn't save the other person from death or from illness. Poetic speech might work differently. Some magic seemed to be required. While writing a poem, one could have the illusion that one was talking in a magic way to the subject of the poem. One might even think that this is doing some good, making things better. And then, of course, you know it isn't. You wake up and find it hasn't.[50]

Urgency and the desire to be of service can be found in the poems Hamilton wrote in the hope that they might alleviate the suffering of others, as much as it can in his desire to 'press forward en masse'[51] in his role as editor and champion of other poets. It seems to follow that for a man intent on being of use to others, the possibility of hitting on a perfect poem which could save them from their plight, or restore them to life, would be the most valuable gift, and the one most worth persevering with in spite of the many reasons not to. As Alan Jenkins has pointed out in his introduction to the *Collected Poems*, it also begins to explain Hamilton's return to the very same bedsides and hospital rooms in his later poems:

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[50] *Agenda* 31.2.

[51] Hugo Williams said of Hamilton's selflessness 'I think his father dying so young like that is what gave him this incredible sense of responsibility for other people. So many of us are just individuals seeking our own careers and fortunes, whereas he wanted to take other people with him. He was determined to press forward en masse.' (Interview with Hugo Williams 01/02/12).

> the poems of his own middle years ... revisit familiar scenes and relive familiar unhappiness in search not of poetic capital but of emotional salvage. They hint at unspoken regret for things done or undone, lives not lived or lived badly ... They attempt to acknowledge whatever – light, love, happiness – has 'managed to get through'.[52]

The repetition of these vigils or 'intense, climactic point[s] of a drama'[53] in the later poems seems, in this light, the opposite of 'relishing the situation' and more a desperate attempt to hit upon a formulation of words to, at last, redeem them, with the additional complication of attempting to right any wrongs carried out during the first poetic attempts at salvage. As Hugo Williams put it:

> In a Hamilton poem, the chaos and complexity of the experience is resolved in the creative process: the resulting simplicity secures the poem to life ... [the poems] assumed that experience began, not in society, but nearer home, in the way individuals treated one another. They led with the heart. They legislated for tenderness.[54]

In essence this is the heart of 'Perfect Speech' for Hamilton; the patient waiting for a lyrical arrival which might somehow alleviate another person's suffering without adding to it, which deals head-on with 'life' and which can order, recapture and even salvage an experience, not along strict formal grounds but by hitting upon a platonic formation of language. It is a sort of ceremony but one which is personal, deeply felt and drawn at 'the maximum point of intensity'.[55] To understand more fully how Hamilton arrived at this concept, and his 'faith' in it, it's vital to look back to a number of the historical

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[52] Ian Hamilton, *Collected Poems*, xiv.

[53] *Between the Lines*, p.61.

[54] Hugo Williams, introduction to *Ian Hamilton: 15 poems* (Warwick: Greville Press, 2004).

[55] *Poetry Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997/98.

influences on Hamilton, and how their poems and writings about poetry helped him to shape his 'Perfect Speech'.

Chapter One, Part Two - The historical roots of 'Perfect Speech'

The appearance of as seemingly mystical a belief as one that poetry might, if executed properly, raise the dead[56] is potentially problematic when weighed against Hamilton's tight-lipped 'critical minimalism'.[57] It seemingly flies in the face of the common-sense led, anti-'poetic' inclinations he demonstrated in his essays and reviews, in which loftiness or phoniness were cardinal sins. But perhaps it needn't, if we are able to divorce ourselves from literal-mindedness and see this 'belief', much like the other unworldly elements of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech', as his attempt at articulating something which demanded a more philosophical bent than the one he displayed in his literary journalism.[58] Hamilton leant on the more philosophically-minded Michael Fried and Colin Falck, both of whom had, through their studies, the training needed to provide – in Falck's words – 'bad reason for justifying what we believed on instinct'.[59] Falck, in his essay 'Dreams and Responsibilities', gave *The Review* 'the closest we came to a manifesto'[60], and his later critical books aimed to set out at greater length the thinking which informed his and Hamilton's approaches to poetry. It is through this aspect of *The Review*'s founding 'board' that the Romantic influence on Hamilton's idea of 'Perfect Speech' as a means of producing poetry which might master experience was most shaping. This influence occurred in part via osmosis, with Hamilton deferring to Falck on matters of the magazine's 'philosophy'. Falck was able to demonstrate a

[56] 'But did I truly think that poetry, if perfect, could bring back the dead? In some ways yes, I think I did.', Ian Hamilton, *Fifty Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

[57] Blake Morrison, *Critical Quarterly* Volume 18, Issue 2, pages 43–52, June 1976.

[58] Falck flags up the need for the practicing literary critic to 'have to believe in the unreality of *inspiration*' in order that they might 'discover or evoke the ghost, if there is ever to be allowed to be one, in the semiological structure which is the literary text.' *Myth, Truth, Literature*, p 32.

[59] Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013).

[60] *Between the Lines,* p.45.

'transcendental line' that ran through the Romantics and beyond, and which attempted, through art, to apprehend reality in the same way that Hamilton's hopes of tapping into a 'platonic realm of discourse' would:

> The 'transcendental' outlook of German Romanticism finds its way into the English tradition through Coleridge and there meets up with the more native … aesthetic philosophy of Blake and … Wordsworth. Both Keats and Shelley see art as visionary … in the post-Romantic period the aesthetic view gains force with the purism of the modernist literary movement (Flaubert's novel 'about nothing', Conrad's 'the whole of the truth lies in the presentation', Hopkins's 'inscape' and the not-unrelated 'emotional and intellectual complex' of Imagism, Joyce's 'epiphany'). [61]

This transcendental line would lead to Falck and Hamilton's vision of a poem which is able to attempt, through its use of the creative imagination, a secular equivalent of the Catholic act of transubstantiation, and conjuring a 'living' presence. The poems of *The Visit* in particular share common ground with Joyce's 'epiphany', both in their attempts to articulate something new through creative language and in the religious undercurrent of these poetic rituals and their efforts to tap into a 'pure' realm of discourse. Falck writes of the link between Joyce's epiphanies and other moments of artistic 'transcendence':

[61] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p.64.

> An 'epiphany' Joyce tells us, is a 'sudden spiritual manifestation', and the artist must record such manifestations 'with extreme care, seeing that they … are the most delicate and evanescent of moments' … the same supernaturalism underlies Pound's claim that 'the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object', or Hopkins's idea of 'inscape' … that we should avoid reaching irritably after whatever these privileged moments may be showing us is a part of what Keats meant by 'negative capability' … Romanticism's version of the *via negativa* of mystical religion but with the difference that the only direction in which such a road can be expected to take us is toward a more authentic experiencing of the world we live in.[62]

Elaborating on the Romantic influence, Falck has spoken about the importance of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* to Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech':

> I'm sure he didn't believe you could bring back the dead or anything like that, but I think he was reaching for something which poetry does need to reach for … in terms of Coleridge's distinction between Imagination and Fancy. This was actually very important to us at that time … the idea of the imagination as creating something that wasn't there before.[63]

[62] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.211-212.

[63] Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013).

Falck described this as

> Ian's colourful way of holding on to the sense of mystery. Coleridge talked about reasoning the unknown into the known of which we are possessed. What poetry does is to appropriate something we don't know and give it shape through metaphor and the way we use language creatively. [64]

Hamilton was thinking in these terms with his ideas of speaking in a 'magical' way to an addressee, but unlike Falck didn't have the philosophical equipment to explain it beyond those semi-mystical utterances quoted above. Even while talking about language on a purely semantic level, Falck has written about the importance of understanding its embodied use that contains this sort of attempt to 'go beyond':

> It is a necessity of language, we might say, that it should always be able to 'go beyond' by means of a process of new articulation out of the incompletely-articulated awareness that we apply it to whenever we use it in new contexts; and it is an aspect of this necessity that our creative using of language should have its basis … in a process of expressive bodily gesture.[65]

It is in *Biographia Literaria* that Coleridge first elaborates on this idea of the imagination as a creative force – or an 'esemplastic power'. Michael Fried introduced Falck to

[64] Ibid.

[65] *Myth, Truth and Literature*, p.17.

Biographia Literaria[66] and it was to lie behind the material he wrote for the second issue of *The Review* ['Dreams and Responsibilites']. Falck concludes:

> I think Ian talked in this rather hit-you-in-the-face, mystical way, but at the same time had to say that of course he didn't really believe that poetry could bring people back from the dead. There was no weight of mystical belief, I'm quite sure.[67]

The ability, gleaned from this idea in Coleridge, to give oneself over to a more intuitive, creative realm of discourse is to be heard in Hamilton's talk of poetry's potential for 'bring[ing] back the dead'. It also offers a way of coping with the 'anguished incredulity, a refusal to believe that fathers die, that wives go mad, that love - however certain of itself - is not enough, not always'[68] which drove him to write the poems which might make some reparation for damage done and by 'going beyond' ordinary boundaries of language even manage something like salvage. In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge's definition divides the imagination into primary and secondary, the primary, which is involved in perception, being 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM', while the secondary, which is conscious, is a visionary act of recreation. Fancy, on the other hand, for Coleridge, is only 'a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space'.[69] The 'esemplastic' imagination stands

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[66] 'Michael hit me with that, I hadn't read *Biographia Literaria* but I did, and that lay behind the stuff I was to write in the second issue of *The Review* ['Dreams and Responsibilites']'. Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013).

[67] Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013).

[68] Preface to Ian Hamilton, *Fifty Poems*.

[69] Coleridge. *Biographia Literaria*, page 167.

behind 'Perfect Speech' and its hope that by tapping into a 'pure' realm of address something might be altered through the act of creation, some good done to the addressee by the poet in the act of writing the poem. However, the idea only goes some of the way towards expressing Falck's fuller understanding of language's (and art's) revelatory possibilities thanks to the fact it speaks of being a repetition of some greater, external power. Coleridge's attempts to hold on to what Falck sees as an orthodox faith in Christianity[70] means he is unwilling to accept the human imagination as the 'only arbiter of what can count as real'.[71] For Coleridge's collaborator Wordsworth, meanwhile, nature is infused with holiness. For Jay Parini, '*The Prelude* is essentially a poem of incarnation … it flows from, and returns to, a divine source and there is that avowedly sacramental quality to the writing, its invitation to take a place in the reader's life once occupied exclusively by scripture.'[72] For Falck, and Hamilton, there is no external I AM, or 'divine source'. Despite having ruled out the possibilities of an orthodox God, as we will see Hamilton's poems nevertheless appear to need a figure to occupy the priestly and Godly role. This seems to give some credence to George Steiner's assertions in *Real Presences* that a 'secular poetics' seems impossible and 'where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition … certain dimensions of creativity are no longer attainable'.[73] In the absence of religion, poetry must become the only 'faith', and it is a 'faith' for Hamilton to be built on 'Perfect Speech', a key aspect of which is this creative, truth-discerning, power derived from the possibilities of language and the imagination. Falck articulates this more fully than Hamilton:

[70] Coleridge wasn't entirely 'orthodox' for his time given his move towards Unitarianism.

[71] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p. 70.

[72] Jay Parini, 'Poetry as Scripture' p. 155 in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination.*

[73] George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989).

> no particular set of objects must inescapably be perceived by us: there is no 'given' reality 'external' to the human mind which our minds must 'mirror' or conform to. When once we have accepted this necessity of creative imagination, or of insight into an as-yet unarticulated reality, as part of all our most ordinary experiencing, it must begin to seem rather implausible to try to exclude art – which is usually thought to involve creative imagination … - from the same kind of participation in reality. [74]

It is this 'belief' of Falck's that leads him to his statement that art needs to 'be seen as, and effectively to become, the reality-inscribing heart and soul of[75] anything which might be called a religion in the future and which also lay behind Hamilton's shared hope of creating poems which might become the modern replacements for a religious faith which was no longer possible.[76]

The idea of imagination as an 'esemplastic power' - if we can refer to the creative imagination using Coleridge's term henceforth without any notion of a 'divine source' - helped to convince him of the need for, and possibility of, poems which were purposeful. It wasn't enough for the idea of a lyric poem as a creative act to be an end in itself. 'Perfect Speech' had at its centre an attempt, however futile, to raise the dead, and it was equally a means of attempting to provide some 'mitigation of suffering'.[77] In

[74] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p. 69.

[75] Ibid., p. 78.

[76] For a discussion of the 'imagination' within an orthodox Christianity, in which it involves seeing Christ as Lord of the imagination who 'imagines things with God', see 'Identifying a Religious Imagination', Michael Paul Gallagher SJ, pp 53-67, in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination*.

[77] *Agenda* 31.2.

this context, another shaping influence on Hamilton's conception of 'Perfect Speech' and poetry itself was Matthew Arnold. Arnold is figured by Hamilton as a left-over Romantic operating in an era which had little need, or want, of the sort of poems he was writing. For Arnold, or at least the Arnold we are presented with in Hamilton's self-reflexive book *A Gift Imprisoned*, there was a need to believe that poems were useful, and more specifically of use *to* other people, beyond the Coleridgean sense of their being proof of the Imagination's capacity to act as a visionary force. Arnold, like Hamilton, was attempting to battle his psychology as much as prevailing literary fashion. Writing of Arnold at the end of his own life, Hamilton betrays a sense that he felt he'd been operating at a time even more indifferent to poetry than Arnold's, but with no diminution of his 'faith' in what poetry could do:

> rejection fed his pride, his sense of splendid separateness. In the twentieth century however, this separateness was not always felt to be so splendid … the poet could complain and criticize … what he could no longer hope for was the kind of central, civilizing social function … that Matthew Arnold had in mind ... on the whole though I think it's true to say that poets at the end of the twentieth century were no less convinced of their own value than they had been at the beginning. [78]

Arnold also had an even more life-defining relationship with his father than Hamilton. If Arnold was a key influence on Hamilton, he in turn had his own shaping 'prophets'. During his time at Oxford, after the death of Arnold Sr, one such figure was Thomas

[78] Ian Hamilton, *Against Oblivion* (London: Penguin, 2003) p. xi.

Carlyle. Carlyle saw poetry as 'the highest form of the Godlike in Man's Being'[79], an idea which came along at the right time for a recently bereaved, decreasingly Christian, Matthew. Ralph Waldo Emerson was another key early voice summoning Arnold to the self-made, creative life, with his Blake-like insistence that 'The seeds of godlike power are in us still/Gods are we, bards, saints, heroes, if we will'[80]. Both figures offered a seductive route out of the duty-bound life espoused by Arnold's late, civic-minded father. For Arnold, though, the idea of service was so ingrained he couldn't gravitate towards anything entirely self-serving. As Hamilton points out, 'He needed to have faith in poetry, he needed to believe that, as a vocation, it might have value in the "general life" – as teaching, for example, surely did.'[81] Not for the last time in the biography, Hamilton might have been talking about himself. Alan Jenkins discussed this strain of Hamilton's character:

> There was an element of Puritanism, a strong element. This business of writing lyric poems, talking about yourself, in some ways it's rather Arnold, this awareness that you're ignoring some other more pressing duty by doing the thing you like the best, or that you're best equipped for - writing lyrical poems - because what use are they? ... he had a strong sense of duty and responsibility. He was of that generation; he was a child of the war. They looked out for each other, there wasn't this massive high-velocity materialism we have now, it was a different cultural world. He came out of that, I

[79] Ian Hamilton, *A Gift Imprisoned: the poetic life of Matthew Arnold* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998) p. 57.

[80] *A Gift Imprisoned*, p. 62.

[81] Ibid., p. 71.

> think he was aware of the importance of making it out of it, but it's not something you forget.[82]

Alongside this need to have a 'faith' of some sort in poetry, another Arnoldian parallel is the fact that, despite the decades which had passed, Arnold was, like Hamilton, living in a 'beliefless' age[83], 'obliged to fabricate a personal identity to get by with as he waited to discover what "beliefless" really meant.'[84] Of the idea of forging a personal identity, Jenkins said of Hamilton:

> He was very Bogart, consciously so. That was what he felt you had to do – you were laconic, you didn't give anything away, you kept your powder dry. You were able to cope with crises – not his own so much, but he was very good at being strong on other people's behalf. You had a duty to people. He was what people call 'a natural leader', his authority was really quite something, his presence.[85]

If Hamilton fabricated a personal identity that was more Bogart than school inspector, the sense that 'The best are silent now'[86] was no less ingrained in him than it was in the former Rugbeian. And, again with clear parallels to Hamilton, Arnold wanted not only to arrive at a manner of faith in, or through poetry, but to reform poetry itself. He

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[82] Interview with Alan Jenkins (08/07/2013).

[83] The earlier influence, Keats, also talks about the idea of life as a vale of soul making providing a 'grander system of salvation' than Christianity, in a letter to George and Georgina Keats, 21 April 1819.

[84] *A Gift Imprisoned* p.102.

[85] Interview with Alan Jenkins (08/07/2013).

[86] *A Gift Imprisoned,* p. 102.

renounced Wordsworth's use of verse as a 'channel for thinking aloud, instead of making anything'[87] in a letter to his sister Jane. His reasons for doing so, according to Hamilton, 'sprang also from ingrained notions about service, selflessness, the public good. Was it possible to serve – or save – "the age" and at the same time nurture one's own inner "line"?' [88] Around the time Arnold was to write his finest work, 'Dover Beach', a poem from which Hamilton would take many cues[89], he was preparing to 'take his place in the real world'.[90] This coincided with Arnold's conclusion that the Romantics' belief in poetry as a possible replacement for religion was at best misguided. However, in spite of his lack of 'faith', and his preparations to become an inhabitant of the 'desert' which constituted the current post-Romantic, beliefless age, Arnold was able to cling to something, heard most keenly in that poem's 'Ah love, let us be true/To one another.'

This pledge of interpersonal fidelity, with its accompanying note of anxious despair, is appropriate enough in a poem where 'The Sea of Faith' gives a 'melancholy, long, withdrawing roar'. Neither 'Dover Beach' nor the apparent abandonment of the possibility of a 'faith' in poetry were the definitive position for Arnold when it came to tackling his own 'beliefless age', however. By the time he was Professor of Poetry at Oxford Arnold appeared to have a renewed sense of optimism, or at least had grown more willing to acknowledge that he had never fully abandoned hope. He was able to move beyond his previously held position of castigating contemporary poets - himself

[87] Ibid., p.114.

[88] Ibid.

[89] 'on the French coast the light/Gleams and is gone' – Hamilton's 'Trucks' contains the line 'Their light/Slops in and spreads across the ceiling,/Gleams, and goes.'

[90] *A Gift Imprisoned,* p. 144.

included - for what he saw as their failure to rise above self-absorbed versifying which served no greater purpose. Now, in Hamilton's words, Arnold looked for

> a revived and reconstructed Christianity which would have poetry, or some real sense of the poetic, at its centre: a faith, in other words, which could be thought of as a thing of beauty. Arnold found it difficult to describe just what he meant by this. It was easier for him to speak of what he wanted to get rid of: that philosophy which set poetry and religion in opposition to each other.[91]

Hamilton, like Arnold, 'found it difficult to describe just what he meant' and often much easier to talk of 'what he wanted to get rid of'.[92] This idea of a 'faith' with poetry at its centre was central to Hamilton and *The Review*'s understanding of what was required in poetry. Falck talks of the need for current critical doctrines such as post-structuralism to 'acknowledge that the demands of human spirituality must either be recognized and faced up to, or else must be expected to find their own uncomprehended way back into our experience from some unanticipated direction.'[93]

This sense is behind Hamilton's notion of Lowell's 'faith' in 'the moral power of perfect speech'. It is also a factor in his Arnold-influenced belief in the possibilities

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[91] *A Gift Imprisoned,* pp 205-206.

[92] John Henry Newman, a near contemporary of Arnold, used 'imagination' as a term for the means of reaching God and dismissed the idea of man as a mere 'reasoning animal'. On the other hand, Terry Eagleton has argued against the notion of literature as a 'religion for atheists' saying 'to colonize religion for cultural purposes … immunizes against the prophetic-humanist demands of biblical faith, [and] merely reinforces the stranglehold of late capitalism on any kind of effective ethical or political protest' cited in 'Theology and Literature in the English Speaking World', Michael Kirwan, in *Poetry and the Religious Imagination.*

[93] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p.98.

afforded by lyric poetry which have their roots in religious ceremony. If some combination of the Coleridgean 'esemplastic power' and an attempt at finding a 'faith' in a beliefless age through poetry with a purpose accounts for some of the more mystical elements of 'Perfect Speech', what of the poems themselves? It is one thing to have a theoretical basis with which to placate a psychological need to be of service, and with which to aim to create poems which are vehicles of seeing beyond the mundane and unimaginative aspects of life in a 'desert', but how does one apply that to the writing? Hamilton had, as we have already seen, firmly held ideas of what poems should be written 'about': the Imagism-derived notion of a moment of dramatic crisis, the 'slap' rather than the backstory. He had two major 'themes' on which to build up a body of work – the death of his father and the mental breakdown of his first wife. One model which he looked to for a way to address those who were 'incapable of attending' - the only sort of 'you' to whom his early poems were to be addressed - was the series of poems Thomas Hardy wrote in 1912 and 1913 addressed to his late wife Emma.

In these poems, Hardy was talking to a woman with whom relations had soured to the point of dissolution. After her death, however, a great wave of sympathy and affection returned, or possibly sprang up for the first time.[94] An abiding force in the poems, then, is guilt, and the accompanying need to attempt some sort of poetic apology where no apology could be offered with any hope that the addressee, Emma, would be 'capable of attending' or aware of the poet's change of heart. Hamilton's clearest stylistic parallel with these Hardy poems, aside from the emotional keening behind them both, is that direct address to a 'you' who cannot answer back. A poem like 'The Walk' bears close comparison with some of the poems set in the grounds of the

[94] Alan Jenkins has spoken of the influence on Hamilton of these Hardy poems, noting the parallel with Hamilton's 'incapable of attending' addressee that in Hardy's case 'They're poems which couldn't have been written when [Emma] was alive.'

asylum which figure in *The Visit*, and in the later *Returning* -era poems. But for the foregrounded rhyme and metrical certainty it wouldn't feel out of place in either collection:

> You did not walk with me
> Of late to the hill-top tree
> By the gated ways,
> As in earlier days;
> You were weak and lame,
> So you never came
> And I went alone, and I did not mind,
> Not thinking of you as left behind.[95]

The consistent use of the present-tense in some of the most effective and affecting poems, such as 'The Going' and 'The Voice', are clear antecedents of the presentism adopted by Hamilton as a means of creating an insistently active means of address. For Hardy, the haunting element is even more overt than in Hamilton's poems. Emma is both someone 'Never to bid good-bye,/Or lip me the softest call' but also someone who 'make[s] me leave the house/And think for a breath it is you I see/At the end of the alley of bending boughs' and who is capable of 'Saying that now you are not as you were', or at least causing the narrator to question 'Can it be you that I hear?'. If 'The Voice' and its rhetorical questions are implicitly ones to which the answer is 'no', that's not to underplay the atmosphere of forlorn hopefulness which was to become an intrinsic part of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'. It can be witnessed in its competing elements whereby one might both 'think that this is doing some good'[96] but also be weighed down by the pragmatic sense that 'you wake up and find it hasn't'.[97]

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[95] *Thomas Hardy, Selected Poems,* ed. Tom Paulin (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), p. 53.

[96] *Agenda* 31.2.

[97] *Agenda* 31.2.

The major point of departure for Hamilton from these 1912/13 poems, aside from that of rhythmic certainty, is the circumstantial aspect. Whereas Emma is evoked with concrete, descriptive detail – 'the original air-blue gown', 'broad-browed and brown-tressed' - for Hamilton even this degree of visual description would amount to a 'poetic relishing of the situation'[98], such was his desire to avoid 'the getting of a reputation as a poet on the back of somebody else's suffering'.[99] Instead of giving this concrete detail, especially in *The Visit*, the poems present a 'you' who is not only unanswering, but whose physical presence is characterised by little more than hair, hands and mouth. The most explicit 'description' in the poems addressed to Hamilton's version of Emma comes in details such as 'your tight mouth', 'your startled eye', 'Your mouth, a thread of dying grass/Sealed to its lower lip'. Certainly no 'relishing' there, with the 'you' at once made emblematic by the sparseness of the individual detail. They become a reflection of the speaker's own ego, an echo or mirror-self who isn't so much an experiencing entity as some version of Eurydice. Hamilton's 'you' is outside of life and has to not only be brought back but entirely conjured up by the ministrations of 'Perfect Speech'. Despite the almost militant refusal to use an 'I' in these poems, it is the implied speaker and not the addressee who appears the more realised person, the one with an inner life who is capable of revealing this life through their actions. 'You' is a mystery, not only physically due to the coyness of the description, but also due to the unknowable nature that their madness has brought with it, the lack of rationality seemingly mirrored by a lack of self-possession. The implied 'I' is mysterious also, revealed only by their deeds. As I will discuss below this has Ignatian undertones, as well as an element of Keatsian 'negative capability'.

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[98] *Between the Lines*, p.65.

[99] *Between the Lines*, p.65.

Hardy isn't the only touchstone from the English canon, however, and as much as Hamilton took his 'esemplastic' ideas from Coleridge, he was also clearly swayed by the arguments for unadorned diction put forth by Wordsworth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. This ordinariness of language and the possibilities offered by the use of the speaking voice had filtered down through the 'English Line' in poets such as Hardy and Edward Thomas. It was also a keynote in the work of the American Robert Frost - a poet whose work Hamilton would later make a selection from - by the time Hamilton was set to attempt to write himself into the English line. 'Perfect Speech' is fundamentally bound to the speaking voice, the cadences and rhythms of spoken English. While Frost's 'Sound of Sense'[100] dictums may have been tied to a stricter iambic rhythm than the one which 'haunts' Hamilton's oeuvre, the principle behind them – that of measuring by the ear and the craft with which the lines in Frost's poems are weighted with unmistakable stresses and inflections - left a mark. Hamilton, writing on Frost in *Against Oblivion* makes the link between his work and another key influence on 'Perfect Speech':

> every so often he achieved an intimate, intense and yet forebearingly intelligent dramatic forcefulness of just the kind which, we imagine, modernists like Ezra Pound were dreaming of when they compiled their lists of Dos and Don'ts. [101]

[100] Robert Frost - letter to John Bartlett, 4 July 1913 'I alone of English writers have consciously set myself to make music out of what I may call the sound of sense. Now it is possible to have sense without the sound of sense (as in much prose that is supposed to pass muster but makes very dull reading) and the sound of sense without sense … The best place to get the abstract sound of sense is from voices behind a door that cuts off the words.'

[101] *Against Oblivion*, page 19.

This lofty praise was prefixed by a rebuff of Frost's too regular reaching for the 'cracker-barrel aphorism', however. Hamilton's rhythms and stylistic minimalism seem a long way from the more expansive and quintessentially rural end of Frost. They look more towards the sort of horror Randall Jarrell identified in the undercurrents hidden in Frost's seemingly straightforward diction. There is a certain degree of inheritance in the primacy of the spoken voice to carry the sense, and rhythm, and the vocabulary which – via Wordsworth's *Preface* – is one of 'men speaking to men'. For a model of how a poet might 'speak' in a voice which offered the sort of restraint and tight-lipped Englishness as well as metrical awareness and conversational sensitivity, however, it was to a different poet Hamilton would look.

As much as Hardy provided something like the blueprint for writing poems laden with guilt and addressed to an impossible-to-reach addressee, it was another poet's 'neutral tone'[102] which helped firm up the nature of Hamilton's diction. Keith Douglas's voice is a crucial ingredient in the poems of *The Visit*, and those earlier pre-book student magazine poems which have survived and are typified by a terse, 'officer class'[103] manner of address. Douglas's attempts to remain in control in the face of unspeakable horrors played an important, and until the end of his life, largely unacknowledged[104] role in Hamilton's conception of what good poetry should do. It

[102] Alan Jenkins's phrase in his Introduction to the *Collected Poems*.

[103] Alan Jenkins said in our interview: 'There are some very early poems, ones which only appeared in Oxford magazines, which have a strong Douglas feel. "Your Place", [which appears in the unpublished section of the *Collected Poems*], with its "great slow fish"', the girl "baring her teeth at me"; there's something in that tone. It's clipped – Ian's tone was always terse, but there's something almost officer-class about that.'

[104] Alan Jenkins in our interview: 'Ian reviewed Douglas's letters much later on, towards the end of his life for the LRB, and that impact he had for him finally comes out there. Douglas had an absent dad, a great sense of duty towards his mother who he was very close to – I think Ian identified very strongly with that. That piece he wrote felt like a grown man remembering an earlier affection, there was this implication that Douglas had been a big influence.'

also impacted on his wider idea of how a man should act. There is a degree of impressed glee in Hamilton's descriptions of Douglas in *Against Oblivion*:

> Douglas kept his distance from literary company … and when successes came his way, he tended to respond to them with a theatrical offhandedness … some of this was tough-guy affectation but a substantial part of it was genuinely felt. Douglas wanted to write poems but he had no wish to be regarded as a cissy poet. He had a soldierly distaste for emotional display and always had one eye on his 'cynical' or common-sensical self-presentation. [105]

The idea of control in Douglas's poems spoke to Hamilton's personality[106], but the avoidance of 'Bullshit'[107], outlined in a letter home from the Front, was also formative when it came to Hamilton's poems of domestic unrest and the rare forays he made into the wider world of 'political' poetry in work such as 'Newscast'. Lines such as 'Peter was unfortunately killed by an '88' in Douglas's 'Aristocrats' marks the cold-blooded tone which Douglas hit under extreme duress. Hamilton's own matter-of-fact descriptions of upsetting and enervating material often reach for a similar tone in lines such as 'Old lunatics who died here' or 'And we,/As if we cared, are smiling too'. Alan Jenkins made a case for Douglas as an early, shaping influence:

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[105] *Against Oblivion*, pages 247-248.

[106] He mentions also, with an evident degree of empathy, Douglas's finding himself as 'dependant and mainstay' after his father left his mother and states baldly that 'much of his cynical attitudinizing can be traced back to … the absence of his father.' p.249.

[107] Douglas writing to his friend John Hall said 'A lyric form and a lyric approach will do even less good than a journalese approach to the subjects we have to discuss now. I don't know if you have come across the word Bullshit ... To be sentimental or emotional now is dangerous to oneself and others.'

> [Douglas] would still have been a figure when Ian was at Oxford, in 1958, he went up there after a couple of years of National Service, and the war was still a vivid memory for most. [Peter] Dale thought he most likely would have come across Douglas while he was still at school, this poet who'd died in the war … Dale said he never heard Ian talk about Douglas, but that tended to be the way, the more he thought of a poet, the more interested he was, the more likely he was to keep quiet about them.[108]

While Douglas, like Hamilton himself, was capable of producing poems which were 'softish at the centre'[109], he pioneered a neutrality whose manly sense of dutiful action and distrust of florid lyricism struck a chord with Hamilton at a formative time.[110]

[108] Ibid.

[109] *Against Oblivion*, page 250.

[110] Alan Jenkins interview (08/07/2013).

Chapter Two - Moving, but not sure in which direction – The Movement and Larkin's influence on 'Perfect Speech'

Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' wasn't just a throwback to the canonical writers of the past as outlined above. It was also shaped by the contemporary poetic mainstream upon which Hamilton and *The Review* were keen to carry out a coup. Colin Falck, talking about the historical context of Hamilton's career-making little magazine, said:

> If *The Review* was going to have a purpose at all it had to slightly exaggerate itself, and it had to have a target which was The Movement, that sub-Empsonian five-beat line, versifying stuff, a series of images strung on one long idea. Of course the good Movement poets were not like that, but there were some that were, now justly forgotten. Thom Gunn was lumped in not entirely appropriately, and of course Larkin. There was this feeling that the immediate target occupying the space that needed to be taken over – you know, it was war – was this Movement thing.[111]

Hamilton, through 'Perfect Speech', and his mouthpiece *The Review,* wanted to topple the dominant mode of The Movement. The chief result of this declaration of war on the regularly iambic Movementeers was, for Hamilton's poems, a prosodic one. Hamilton, as we have seen above, declared Imagism-era Pound an important influence on 'Perfect Speech', his ideas of drawing a poem at the maximum point of intensity, 'removing the furniture' and adopting those 'art' ideas but suffusing them with 'life'. Hamilton's Pund-

[111] Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013).

influenced short, compressed, free-verse poems served as a reaction against The Movement. Thanks to Pound's influence there was no danger of Hamilton's work being confused with the metrically-regular poets of *New Lines* – even a cursory look at the poems on the page would announce their minimalist difference. This was to go for the poems published in *The Review* as a whole, which for the most part tended towards the same compressed, short form as Hamilton's work. This was partly down to shared influences and intentions and partly to the shadow Hamilton cast on those published by him, such as Hugo Williams, who admitted to writing poems ostensibly like Hamilton's without necessarily 'grasping the point of it'.[112] At least in part, then, 'Perfect Speech' was a methodology as much as an ideology, defined by what it wasn't going to be as much as by what it hoped to achieve. As such, as we shall see, it is adaptable, being reactive to the climate in which it is produced rather than simply associated with a single prosodic form.

Being in stark contrast formally had obvious upsides - if the aim was to draw battle-lines it helped to have a radically different appearance to the enemy - but there were constraining elements for Hamilton in adopting this visually arresting, Imagist-inspired, style. Falck has said that while Hamilton's poetic form 'was so obviously different from The Movement', this need to define his poetics in opposition to a prevalent mode cost him the opportunity to use a more conventional metre which was – at least to a degree - appealing:

> Had [The Movement's style] been different Ian would
> have been less corralled into the Imagist, tight-lipped
> end of things, would have been able and willing to be

[112] Interview with Hugo Williams: (01/02/12) 'At the time they were just what you needed. Minimalism. Tip of the iceberg. I used to write ridiculously silly little poems.'

> more expansive earlier in his life. There wasn't all that much of him, because of his psychology … that wanted that, but nevertheless had things been different he might have let himself relax into something a little nearer to conventional metres earlier than he did.[113]

This idea of expansiveness, in the sense of adopting a more regular iambic metre, in Hamilton's poems is a foundationally important part of their makeup. Throughout his work there is a sense of the poems being 'haunted' by iambic pentameter, and the rare moments in which he hits it full-on usually have something poetically to do with a rare moment of calm or consolation in scenes shot through with emotional strain. Being inhibited by his Movement predecessors into seeing the too-regular five-beat line as poetically conservative, and with a need to portray irregular, uncontrollable subject matter, Hamilton settled on a fragmentary form with has none of the metrical regularity of Empson and all of the climactic intensity of Pound's Imagist period. Something is lost, artistically, as a result however, by his inability to reach for the music and rhythms he might otherwise have been able to utilise. Falck has written about the idea of 'memorability' as a test of a poem's quality, and this has as much to do with its metre and rhymes as it does its 'buried sounds and rhythms'[114]:

> Perhaps the structures of sound or rhythm that make poetry memorable can be something less than overt rhyme or meter and still be able to affect us significantly. Some of the poems of (for example) Pound or Lawrence

[113] Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013).

[114] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.180.

> or John Berryman have no rhyme or meter at all, and yet people sometimes remember them quite well. But whatever may be the emotional chemistry or neuro-psychic mechanisms at work here, it seems clear that little of the poetry of the closing decades of the twentieth century has engaged very deeply with them.[115]

There isn't scope here to examine the work currently being done to investigate the links between neuro-science and poetry, but Falck's wider point, that of memorability and the mnemonic function of poetry's formal aspects[116], is what leads him to write 'Talk, grit, and a bitten-off understatedness have sometimes seemed to be all that a poet needs to get by with today, but if he hopes to get by tomorrow as well he may still need to know ways of making his lines sing.'[117] Hamilton, in distancing himself from The Movement, disallowed some of this 'singing' from his version of 'Perfect Speech', although the iambic base ensured that the poems could at least rise above mere 'bitten-off understatedness'.

It wasn't only the shape of The Movement's output which marked them out as the enemy. Pound's Imagist principles to do with the expression of intensity and climax point towards another important schism between The Movement and 'Perfect Speech'. Hamilton, writing about *New Lines*, the anthology which announced the arrival of The Movement, laid out a number of his chief objections to the spirit of 'the enemy'. He also noted the success with which these 'young poets who were ripe to dislodge the old

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[115] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.181.

[116] Michael Donaghy, in his essay 'The Shape of the Dance' in *The Shape of the Dance: Essays, Interviews and Digressions* (London: Picador, 2009) notes these mnemonic, bodily aspects of poetry's formal toolkit, an elaboration of the point Falck makes in a different context arguing against post-structural attempts to remove the poet from the discussion by pointing to speech as an embodied, physical gesture.

[117] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.182.

Forties gang'[118] were steered into the limelight, and perhaps underplays the embattled spirit of Robert Conquest's introduction, describing his 'modest tones'.[119] There's nothing modest about Conquest's concluding statement that 'The stage needed sweeping'[120], or in his comments about 'the sort of corruption which has affected the general attitude to poetry in the last decade'. He refers to the 'bad principles'[121] and overwrought, 'sentimental verbiage'[122] of the Forties. Conquest's aim was no less of an attempted takeover bid than Hamilton's would be with *The Review*; it just happened the cause he was fighting for was, in Hamilton's view, a flawed, stultifyingly dead-ended one. Hamilton's verdict on the poets grouped together in *New Lines* is, largely, withering:

> it seems difficult to conceive of aridity more notable
> than theirs. It is difficult, also, to fathom how such
> largely tame and awkward verses could ever have been
> found dazzlingly fresh and skilful. [123]

At first sight, one might be forgiven for seeing a fair degree of common ground in The Movement's supposed aims and principles and those which would later be put forward by Hamilton. The poets included were 'in concerted reaction against the tangled and pretentious neo-romanticism of the post-war years; where the old lot had been bardic, overblown and religiose, these new men were clever, cagey, scornful.'[124] For Hamilton,

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[118] Ibid.

[119] Ian Hamilton, *A Poetry Chronicle* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973) p. 131.

[120] *New Lines*, xviii.

[121] *New Lines*, xv.

[122] *New Lines*, xii.

[123] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 131.

[124] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 128.

however, it wasn't enough to be merely 'anti-phoney'. As much as being overblown or pompous was a cardinal sin for him, so too was the production of poems which leant too far towards dusty intellectualism. His chief objection to the poets gathered in *New Lines* might be found in the Anthony Hartley publicity blurb which announced that The Movement 'is bored by the despair of the Forties, not much interested in suffering.'[125] For Hamilton, as we saw above, suffering was fundamental to what a poem should be: his recipe for the perfect poem being one which contained 'the maximum amount of control — and of suffering'.[126] The Movement and its deftly managed takeover was occupying territory he and *The Review* sought to conquer and in his eyes that meant something had to be done to overthrow the 'neatly tailored ironies, feeble neo-Augustan posturings and effortful Empsonian pastiche'[127] which filled the little magazines *The Review* had been founded to counteract. Hamilton, unlike those *New Lines* poets, was extremely interested in suffering, and through 'Perfect Speech' hoped to produce poems which replaced their sterility and intellectual mode in favour of genuine feeling. At the same time, his poems would need to be able to handle suffering artfully, without the pretensions of the Forties set. Ironically, one of the guiding lights in Hamilton's search for a way to build on The Movement's anti-phoniness while making room for feeling, creating artistically valid poetry in the sort of ordinary language seen in Hardy, Wordsworth and their ilk, was a poet included in *New Lines*: Philip Larkin.

Hamilton found much to admire in Larkin's work, certainly in contrast to the other poets collected in *New Lines*, noting that

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[125] Ibid.

[126] *Between the Lines*.

[127] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 130.

> At one level it could be said that Philip Larkin's poems provide an exact model for what The Movement was supposed to be seeking. But having noted his lucidity, his debunkery, his technical accomplishment and other such 'typical' attributes, one would still be left with the different and deeper task of describing the quality of his peculiar genius. [128]

As alluded to in this summation, Larkin was in many ways a typical 'Movement' poet, but his work was a source of much admiration for Hamilton. With regards to 'Perfect Speech' itself, one of the most impressive and exemplary elements of Larkin's oeuvre was the way in which he handled natural speech rhythms within traditional form and metre, without diluting the emotional impact of what were often poems of love - or at least poems in which love was discussed and chidingly undermined.[129] Hamilton, writing of 'Mr Bleaney' in *Against Oblivion,* says of its final two stanzas 'nowhere more impressively does Larkin demonstrate his gift for accommodating real speech into metre without even the faintest hint of toil and strain'.[130] This suggests that another, more prosaic reason, for Hamilton's poems being only 'haunted' by iambic pentameter was the difficulty he found in creating the authentic speech rhythms he was after within the boundaries of regularly metred verse. In this sense, part of Larkin's 'peculiar genius' has to do with his mastery of form while still being suitably feelingful, at least on occasion, to pass muster for Hamilton. Poems such as 'Mr Bleaney' were given high praise – by

[128] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 133

[129] Colin Falck said in our interview that towards the end of his life '[Hamilton] says how impressive it is that Larkin could manage to write in fully metred and tightly rhymed form and yet at no cost in terms of authenticity or intensity. It's as though Ian never quite gets beyond that point, as though Larkin could do it so ok, Ian, why can't the rest of us, is it just because we're not as good as Larkin? That might be a perfectly believable reason because none of us are, but it isn't obvious.'

[130] *Against Oblivion*, p. 256

Hamilton's standards – as was 'The Whitsun Weddings', especially its final lyrical lift-off which he describes as 'a superb climax' whose 'arrow shower' manages to 'beautifully concentrate the strands of aspiration and defeat'.[131] It's easy to see how a poet such as Larkin would appeal to Hamilton, not only because of their shared debt to Hardy but because of his unshowy, plain-spoken and blokeishly common-sense-led approach. This level-headedness was the legacy of The Movement Hamilton would have been most keen to see survive; albeit after its aversion to feeling had been counteracted. There are elements of Larkin's tone and address which Hamilton appears to have learned from.

A poem such as 'Deceptions', from *The Less Deceived,* not only employs a direct address but is also infused with suffering. Some of Hamilton's *Visit*-era 'Perfect Speech' is anticipated in its second stanza's 'Slums, years have buried you. I would not dare/Console you if I could' with its helpless speaking voice attempting to offer comfort to the suffering 'you' while knowing it's an effort in vain. There are other examples of the cadences and speech-driven inflections Hamilton would go on to employ elsewhere in *The Less Deceived*. The lines 'Or since you're past and gone,/It means what we feel now about you then' from 'Maiden Name' may have influenced Hamilton's 'Rose' with its phrase 'But you have gone and so I'll call it wise' and Hamilton's later poem 'Almost Nothing' – 'Today, because you've turned away/I'll call it nothing much', while Larkin's 'Myxomatosis' strikes a somewhat Hamiltonian air with its resigned final lines 'You may have thought things would come right again/If you could only keep quite still and wait.'

For Hamilton, however, Larkin didn't entirely shake off the staleness which went hand-in-hand with any association with The Movement. The failings he found in Larkin's work had to do with the divide between the persona - constructed to create emotional distance and wry deflations of the big subjects he was to tackle - and the poet

[131] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 137

himself. For Hamilton, Larkin at his best managed to circumnavigate this limiting, 'undeceived' construction and break through to something like genuine emotional epiphany. These moments were rare, however. Hamilton's reading of 'Church Going' being one such example:

> The final recognition of the church as a 'serious house on serious earth' is not so much a natural intensification of the irreverent early stanzas as a lofty rejection of their slick disengagement. It is almost as if the *persona* is being scolded by the poet. [132]

This 'slick disengagement' can be witnessed throughout Larkin's work in the 'unconvincing sneer' Hamilton identifies in Larkin's considerations of money, sex and love, among the other big subjects. That he is 'unconvincing' is key when it comes to his having won over Hamilton to the extent he did. Try as he might to be sneeringly superior, Larkin is more complicated than that persona he invented would have it, as in moments such as the final lines of 'The Whitsun Weddings' or 'Poetry of Departures' where, as Hamilton puts it, 'the tongue is removed from the cheek and is given a sharp bite.'[133] Hamilton interviewed Larkin for *The London Magazine* in 1964 and asked him about this idea of the poet taking the persona to task. Larkin's reply was:

> The poem starts by saying, you don't really know about all this, you don't believe in it, you don't know what a rood-loft is – Why do you come here, why do you

[132] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 135.

[133] Ibid.

> bother to stop and look round? The poem is seeking an answer … I think one has to dramatize oneself a little. I don't arse about in churches when I'm alone. [134]

In his own self-deflating way, then, Larkin seemed to concede at least to some degree to Hamilton's view that the poem is concerned with how to be a 'man of sensibility' and how to handle 'seriousness in general', as Hamilton framed his question, in a post-religious and debunking climate. This seriousness that Hamilton and *The Review* were aiming for wasn't one with bardic overtones, but they did want to reclaim the possibility of writing about love, or sex, or death without the deflating gestures of The Movement:

> The Movement … destroyed the poet's bardic self-confidence, rob[bed] the poet of a sense of his own possible centrality and authoritativeness. Overwhelmingly, their message was that the poet mustn't take himself too seriously. So then you got me and my peers, who were prepared to take our 'selves' seriously, but were not prepared to promote or send those seriously perceived 'selves' out into the world to comment authoritatively about things in which we had no expertise i.e. society, politics, etc.[135]

This seriousness was at the personal, experiencing level, then, and not in a wider, legislating, Shelleyan sense.

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[134] Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: interviews, broadcasts, statements and book reviews*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 2001) p. 23.

[135] Conversation with Gregory Lestage, *Poetry Review* 87:4 1997, collected in *A Century of Poetry Review*, ed. Fiona Sampson (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009).

This issue of Larkin's 'persona' and Hamilton's reservations about its presence is also allied with something more theoretical. The sense of 'the poem seeking an answer' is something to which Hamilton, and Falck, would have reacted positively, given their belief that the 'purpose' of a lyric poem was to articulate something previously unsaid. A sense of duality is important to Hamilton's version of Larkin. A self-defeating persona having been invented, the more romantic, idealistic, 'love-hungry' poet can't help but fight against and undermine it, letting in a note of idealism to run counter to the dominant cool, superior voice displayed throughout much of the work. Finally the Larkin we get through Hamilton's lens is one for whom regret is perhaps the most abiding emotion of all. As we've seen above, regret and guilt are both vital ingredients for the sort of address that would be made through 'Perfect Speech'. In Larkin, there is regret not only at having remained 'undeceived' and never having found the continual ecstasies he was never willing to publicly concede a belief in but also a regret at not trying to live differently. To have been less immersed in the sort of level-headed, rational, Movement-style reserve and given in a bit more to 'that much-mentioned brilliance, love'.[136] Again, in the interview between the pair, Hamilton raised the issue of Larkin's tendency to include a 'tagged-on comment on themselves' within the poems, which act as a means of 'self-imprisonment'. Larkin's response was:

> I suppose I always try to write the truth and I wouldn't want to write a poem which suggested that I was different from what I am. In a sense that means you have to build in quite a lot of things to correct any impression of over-optimism or over-commitment.[137]

[136] 'Love Songs in Age' in Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

[137] *Further Requirements*, p. 23.

For Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' it would be necessary to do the opposite of this: to allow for 'over-optimism', even a seemingly ungrounded, quasi-mystical belief that poetry might be able to perform miraculous feats. It would also, however, come with the caveat we have seen earlier that the more rational, critical side of Hamilton would recognise all too well in the 'undeceived' Larkin's talk of 'over-optimism'. 'Perfect Speech' would involve an abandonment of the solely rational, the self-imprisoning impulse, and open the door to something more 'faithful' and unrestrained, in order to attempt to achieve the sort of lyric lift-off required to arrive at this platonic ideal of discourse. Tellingly, Hamilton sees something of Hardy's regret-filled poems of 1912/13 to Emma in Larkin's late poem 'The Mower', with its statement that 'We should be kind/While there is still time' which also has in turn echoes of Arnold's 'Ah love, let us be true/To one another.'

If Hamilton alludes to some of the pressing downsides he found in Larkin's poems in his own writing, Colin Falck, writing in *The Review*, gives some other useful insights into what Hamilton and his circle saw as was most lacking in Larkin and his 'persona'. Falck's summary of Larkin's poetic progress up to 'The Whitsun Weddings' as being 'a kind of steady exorcising of romantic illusions, an ever deepening acceptance of the ordinariness of things as they are' lies at the heart of it. The largest, most over-arching criticism of Larkin levelled by Falck is illuminating when it comes to considering 'Perfect Speech', especially those purposeful and creative aspects of it. Falck picks up on a comment by Donald Davie about Larkin's 'humanism', using it as a jumping-off point to lay out what is most urgently needed but found wanting in those poems of Larkin willing to 'surrender in advance to the scientific nightmare'[138] represented by the urban industrial life. Falck's criticisms of Larkin point to something critical in Hamilton's

[138] *The Modern Poet: Essays from The Review*, ed. Ian Hamilton (London: Macdonald & Co, 1968) p. 108.

Coleridge-derived sense of lyric poetry as being a creative force, which has the ability to add to, as well as recreate, experience. For Falck, Larkin's unwillingness to try to do this, his being content only to reflect 'some general sense of what most other people's lives are like'[139] is a failure of his poetic duty, or at least a neglect of an essential aspect of it. Falck explains his take on what this duty is:

> If there is really no beauty or truth or love to be found in the concrete here-and-now … then there is surely none to be found anywhere. The 'other' Platonic truth, if it exists at all, is only the order which is to be found in the real world of existing things, and it is the poet, above all, who can be expected to find this order; and he will find it in his own experience. So that by identifying himself with the drab, fantasy-haunted world of the waste land Larkin has not only downgraded the whole of real existence against an impossible absolute standard, but has also cut the ground from under the poet's feet.[140]

This isn't religious belief, then, in the sense that, for Falck, Larkin has no duty to any higher power. It is however a rallying cry for using the aggregation of experience to construct something, in line with that belief we saw earlier in Arnold, which can replace religious faith using lyric poetry as its 'scripture'. For Larkin to point to some higher order of 'platonic' ideals but always in a negative, deflating sense, is no good for that purpose. Instead, in Falck's view, he should use his experience to arrive at something

[139] Ibid.

[140] Ibid.

like truth and beauty – those Keatsian virtues – which can only be done by allowing the big subjects like love and death to act as generative forces to reveal something new. Instead of illuminating experience, Larkin's work for Falck, at most points, only illustrates the melancholy or boredom of it. The keynote of despair is a failing which Hamilton, through 'Perfect Speech' and its possibilities for reaching beyond, would seek to correct in his own poems. Falck elaborates on this idea elsewhere, documenting what he, and *The Review*, believed the 'duty' of the lyric poet to be:

> there remains the need for a literature of the imagination latent within words themselves, of a certain lyrical intensity, of a cutting through verbal mannerisms to an elemental directness, of a standing by what (from where we stand) we see to be how things are, of a certain firmness of diction and of tone. The other purposes of literature can be achieved in other ways, but if the poet abandons his job in order to do other people's jobs, there will be no one left for us to turn to who can do his.[141]

While his regulated use of the speaking voice and the moments of lift-off which Larkin did manage to achieve are exemplary ones, this additional creative element is central to what Hamilton would consider the 'purpose' of poetry. Falck writes of Larkin's 'hands-on experientiality and subtle reading of mere circumstances … [which] must be an indispensable part of any poetry of the future':

[141] *Myth, Truth and Literature*, p. 168.

> Unless its subtle post-Wordsworthian sensibility can be kept alive in these kinds of ways, modern poetry lives under a permanent threat of reversion to the non-experiential, non-localized, non-revelatory methods that were thought to be sufficient for poetry in its pre-Romantic age. Nor is the 'true philosophy of life' of post-Romantic poetry inherently or ultimately pessimistic: it may be pessimistic about the state of the human world without being pessimistic about life itself.[142]

This pessimism, then, although it must be conquered in ways Larkin's deflating 'persona' was not willing to attempt, needn't and indeed shouldn't be excised entirely as that would be to deny reality. The 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech', while itself slightly mystical-seeming, was intended to address modern life as it was. The ways of coping with experience to be found through the potentially redemptive act of creating poems weren't dislocated from the 'ruins' or 'desert' in which Hamilton and *The Review* found themselves operating. Falck has written of Douglas Dunn's poem 'Modern Love' that 'The scaled-back hopes of this gently ironic epiphany may seem resigned and unpoetic' but that it's important and potentially 'useful' to a modern reader 'by virtue of [its] remorseless honesty alone.' An important part of Falck's criticism of Larkin's brand of 'humanism' can be seen in his allusion to its alternative – the 'violence' seen in D. H. Lawrence. Larkin, then, could only take Hamilton and *The Review* so far in diagnosing a means of writing the sort of 'faithful', purposeful poems that they felt were needed, thanks to his deflating persona and apparent willingness to surrender to 'the ruins'.

[142] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p 108.

Falck's rallying cry that what was needed in poetry was 'lucid barbarism'[143] at the end of his piece gestures towards another shaping influence on 'Perfect Speech' and another grouping of poets who helped Hamilton discover what was possible and necessary for it – *The New Poetry* and Al Alvarez's critique of the 'gentility principle'.

[143] *Modern Poet*, p. 110.

Chapter Three - Songs Among The Ruins: *The New Poetry* and Robert Lowell

The Movement as anthologised by Robert Conquest[144] was, for Hamilton and *The Review,* 'the enemy' which needed to be ousted to clear space for themselves. If 'Perfect Speech' was a reaction against the five-beat line and the avoidance of strong emotion represented by The Movement, the next major grouping of poets by an anthologist played a significant, and somewhat more positive role, in shaping Hamilton's sense of what his poems should look like. Al Alvarez's *The New Poetry* came about as a response to similar feelings of antipathy towards the stiff-upper-lip staleness Hamilton had identified in The Movement. Alvarez's introduction was less neutral even than that of Conquest and set out to diagnose the reasons why ground broken by Eliot and Pound had been lost in the intervening decades, putting it down to English 'gentility'. He looked back to Hardy's claims that *vers libre* would never take off in England, and that instead our poets would forever 'write on the old themes'[145] using the old forms. For Alvarez, as for Hamilton and *The Review,* as we saw above, there was something 'academic-administrative … polite, knowledgeable, efficient, polished and, in its own quiet way, intelligent'[146] about the poems in *New Lines*. That said they were – as he showed in a parodic cento using a phrase from eight of the poets included – a 'unity of flatness'.[147] Describing The Movement as one of a number of 'negative feedbacks' which had worked to reset British poetry after the breakthroughs of Modernism, Alvarez identified something that was central to Hamilton and Falck's critiques of Larkin. As symptomatic of The Movement in general, Larkin made 'an attempt to show that the

[144] *New Lines.*

[145] *The New Poetry*: *An Anthology*, ed. Al Alvarez (London: Penguin, 1966) p. 17.

[146] *The New Poetry*, p. 19.

[147] *The New Poetry*, p. 20.

poet is not a strange creature inspired; on the contrary, he is just like the man next door – in fact, he probably *is* the man next door.'[148] While it would be naïve to conflate Larkin the poet with his undeceived persona, and unfair to pretend that the poems themselves didn't already mark him out as different from 'the man next door', for Hamilton, and by extension *The Review*, there would be a need to return some bardic confidence. The more magical elements of 'Perfect Speech' went hand in hand with a general urge towards taking the whole business of writing poetry more seriously than their immediate predecessors, including Larkin, had been willing to do. There was a need to remove their inbuilt drive towards 'self-imprisonment' and aim for something more purposefully 'faithful'. The problem wasn't so much that Larkin was an ordinary man, then, but that he was an ordinary British man, in the 1950s, and as such inhibited by a cultural embarrassment at presenting himself as 'other'. Instead he opted to inhabit this 'persona' upon whom the toad work squatted, as it did for his contemporaries who didn't happen to also write lyric poems.

Alvarez, like Hamilton, was disturbed by The Movement's attempts to excise extreme emotion from poetry, arguing for a 'new seriousness' and stating that 'Since Freud, the late Romantic dichotomy between emotion and intelligence has become totally meaningless'.[149] While, as we shall see, *The Review* would find much to argue with in Alvarez's introduction, his belief in the need for an increase in the emotional weight borne by poems, an eschewing of 'choking incoherence', and his demands that a poet should 'face the full range of his experience with his full intelligence'[150] were all necessary elements of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'.

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[148] *The New Poetry*, pp 20-21.

[149] *The New Poetry*, p. 24.

[150] Ibid.

Falck took issue with this framing of 'experience' and 'intelligence' by Alvarez, feeling it provided a vague criteria – especially when considering the poems chosen in its light – for what was 'new' in *The New Poetry*. His essay 'Dreams and Responsibilities' in *The Review* was, in Hamilton's words, 'the closest we came to a manifesto'[151] and is a rich source for developing our understanding of the more philosophical elements of 'Perfect Speech'. For Falck, Alvarez's championing of Ted Hughes, and his apparent promotion of the need to deal directly with 'violence', was a move too far away from the spirit of useful Modernism rightly identified by Alvarez in Eliot and Pound. For Falck, it was undeniable that a poet could no longer work in innocence of the advances made by Modernism, nor try to 'decide to go back and write like Yeats'[152], but instead must face the reality Alvarez does at least point towards – albeit with too great an emphasis on violence for Falck's liking – that poems must bring the whole soul of man into activity.[153] For Falck, 'the modern tendency we get from Eliot and Pound towards a poetic diction based in ordinary language and felt speech-rhythms is easy to understand. So is the need to be very intelligent.'[154] If, for Falck, Alvarez's criteria were woolly – Berryman too intelligent, Hughes too little interested in human experience - Robert Lowell, the other American poet championed by *The New Poetry*, did point to a possible way out of the current dilemma for poetry towards what poems written using 'Perfect Speech' might look like.

For Falck, Alvarez's insistence on 'coping nakedly' wasn't the key gain made by Lowell, however, as many of the *Life Studies* family poems were to his mind too much like chopped-up prose and therefore coped too nakedly, at the expense of making good

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[151] *Between the Lines,* p.45.

[152] 'Dreams and Responsibilites', *The Review,* No. 2, June/July 1962

[153] Quote from Blackmur on Eliot, used by Falck, 'Dreams and Responsibilites', page 6.

[154] 'Dreams and Responsibilities', *The Modern Poet*, p. 6.

art, for them to be useful exemplars. 'Chopped-up prose' seems to be a verdict on the original prose source, and the implications of it on the potential for 'esemplastic power' in lyric creation rather than on Lowell's prosody. The 'chopped-up prose' of *Life Studies* more often than not resembles the sort of chopped-up pentameter Hamilton would himself adopt, albeit with a less cramped line-length. Falck found much to criticise in Lowell, even with the caveat that he 'could well be the most important poet now writing in English'[155] and his criticisms provide a useful insight into what Hamilton, through 'Perfect Speech', would attempt to achieve. For Falck, Lowell's shortcomings included the fact that 'an order is being imposed on words and perceptions externally by some kind of discursive or rhetorical control where the experiencing itself failed to reveal order of an internal poetic kind'[156] as well as his being 'unable or unwilling to let words create a basis of meaning by themselves … his poems often feel more hewn out than inspired, as if very little in them ever surprised Lowell himself.'[157] This seems to suggest that Lowell is too much in control of his material, that there isn't the poetry of 'miraculous' inspiration which Hamilton would go on to identify as a necessary ingredient for the more 'mystical' aspect of 'Perfect Speech'. It's only through a willingness to 'let words create a basis of meaning by themselves' and for the 'experiencing itself' to be revelatory that the possibility of the creative, 'esemplastic', force discussed earlier might be tapped into. Many of Lowell's family poems were taken from an uncompleted prose autobiography and worked over into verse, but ideal poetic composition for Hamilton lay in revelation, something Lowell's refining process seemed unable to allow for. However, if Lowell was yet to produce a body of work which entirely chimed with what Falck, Hamilton and *The Review* were looking to achieve, he'd

[155] 'Dreams and Responsibilities', page 8.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Page 8-9.

come the closest any poet currently writing had to showing some of the ways in which vital, contemporary, artistically valid poetry might go on to be written.

Another telling essay from *The Review*, this time written by Hamilton himself, contextualises the work of Lowell and points to the aspects of his work which 'Perfect Speech' would lean on. In the tellingly titled 'Songs Among the Ruins'[158] Hamilton explicitly alludes to the current situation in which poets found themselves: a more fractious and potentially deadening one than ever before. It's no coincidence that Hamilton should have also looked towards poets of religious crisis such as Matthew Arnold for answers as to how one should write and be, as discussed above. The setting in which he places Lowell and Berryman in this essay is indicative of something in the air which can later be found in his own work:

> In the best work of poets like Robert Lowell … one finds not just a cerebral attempt for the distinguishably United States idiom but an impassioned exploration of whatever chances the imagination still has of making sense of a civilization that is bent on self-destruction, that cruelly cannot fail to involve the poet in its manic process but demands also that he survive as guardian of what is being killed; to these poets America is distinct from other societies in the sense that it is more efficiently dehumanizing, having abused its promise as it now prepares to abuse its power, and the best that they feel able to attempt is to oppose its abstracting pressures

[158] Colin Falck said 'I know that Ian felt that "Songs among the ruins" was a very telling phrase, and he did feel that that pretty much caught the condition that we were in.'

> with the full weight of whatever in their own lives seems concretely worth saving.[159]

'Guardian of what is being killed', opposing 'abstracting pressures with the full weight of whatever … seems concretely worth saving' – both of these seem aptly to sum up Hamilton's own position when it came to the poet's job description and an important aspect of the 'purpose' of his purposeful 'Perfect Speech'. For 'America' it's surely no great leap to read 'the Western, capitalist world'. The essay as a whole sees Hamilton in near-manifesto mode, trying to think his way through the calamitous bind he finds himself and poetry in, where 'in spite of love … we are "wild spiders crying together" who are doomed to nuclear extinction'.[160] Nonetheless, despite this imperilled state he has diagnosed, it's not enough for Hamilton to give in to despair. His refusal to concede is evident both in his practical engagement with 'the ruins' via *The Review* and more pertinently in the sort of poems he was attempting to write through the potentially 'miraculous' possibilities of 'Perfect Speech'.

Hamilton, like Falck, felt it wasn't enough to go down the Alvarez-endorsed route of merely admitting to and cataloguing a proliferation of violence and would agree with Falck that Alvarez picked the wrong set of horses in singling out for praise Hughes's too beastly poem over Larkin's more humane 'At Grass'. For Hamilton there was a war going on of which the threat of nuclear extinction and the absence of anything resembling faith were only symptoms: 'the only kind of moral choice that we can now insist on from our poets' is 'the choice of life against death, of the human rather than the brutal, of the reflecting imagination rather than the engulfing

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[159] *A Poetry Chronicle*, 'Songs Among the Ruins', p. 11.

[160] 'Songs Among the Ruins' p. 12.

nightmare.'[161] As discussed earlier, *The Review* saw Larkin as largely unwilling to let his poems attempt to 'reach beyond' and find some reasons for hope through a creative aggregation of experience. As Falck had flagged up in his critique of Lowell's poems' tendency to 'collapse into psychological self-analysis'[162], part of what 'Perfect Speech' would be designed to do was to create poems which could master experience through an internal understanding. There had to be a degree of revelation in the making of the poems themselves to make them a choice of life over death and to fight back against the 'engulfing nightmare'. In that sense to 'choose life' was both a moral and a poetic question, and would mean the writing of the true songs among the ruins to which Hamilton was optimistically referring.

Hamilton wasn't only interested in the wider, societal malaise captured in some of the politically-aware poems of Lowell and the other poems which attempted to face full-on the damaging nature of the world in *The New Poetry*. Aside from the faithless age in which he found himself, there was something closer to home driving Hamilton's work and 'Perfect Speech' in general: the spectre of madness, in this case that of his first wife. One of the imaginative cornerstones of 'Perfect Speech' was the attempt to speak to an addressee who was unable to answer back. In the case of the 'you' in so many of Hamilton's poems the reason for this wasn't only the physical distance between the speaker and listener in real time - in the time of the poems' composition rather than the present tense 'action' of the poems - but because they were beyond reach for more clinical reasons too. Hamilton writes affectingly of the madness with which Lowell's poetry, and life, was plagued, saying 'Great poetry can get written about madness but there is no such thing as great madness'.[163] This is central to understanding the aspects

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[161] p.15.

[162] 'Dreams and Responsibilities', p. 8.

[163] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 99.

of Lowell's work which Hamilton admired, and rejected, in equal measure. There is something in the strength of his demands at all times for control in verse. As we've seen already Hamilton's diction was drawn in part from the chastening restraint and neutrality of tone in the level-headed poems of Keith Douglas and a drive towards maintaining control was in stark contrast to the often overwhelming excesses on display in Lowell.

For Hamilton, Lowell's early poems - at least nominally written out of Catholicism - were accompanied by righteous fervour reflected in the style of the poetry itself. These poems, with their strong use of stanzaic rhyme and apocalyptic energies, 'bordered on the uncontainable'[164] and 'the overall effect was of strait-jacketed hysteria'.[165] It was only when Lowell moved away from this high-energy, ground-out craftsmanship – inspired in part at least by his reading the work of William Carlos Williams and his breaking with traditional metrics – that, in Hamilton's words, he 'achieved true equilibrium'. [166] For Hamilton a measure of equilibrium, like control, would be a quality of 'Perfect Speech', especially when the alternative was a poetic fervour which equated to an uncontrolled outpouring akin to the madness it was attempting to counteract. One of the most telling aspects of *Life Studies* which Hamilton recognises, and reacts favourably towards, is something he picked up on in Hardy's poems to Emma, and Larkin's best work, as previously discussed: guilt.

For Hamilton, *Life Studies* is 'a remorseful book'[167] in which Lowell 'counts the cost of [earlier] intensity'.[168] As we have seen, Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' isn't just an attempt to speak to the unreachable, it's speech with a *purpose*, and that purpose is often

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[164] *Against Oblivion*, p. 239.

[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid.

[167] *Against Oblivion*, p. 240.

[168] Ibid.

driven by guilt and the desire to say what should have been said at the time. The poems that would be written would represent a second chance to undo the damage done through a creative, 'magic', mastering of language. The old religious certainties no longer hold for Hamilton, just as they hadn't for Arnold, and Lowell becomes relevant and useful as a poetic guide only once he no longer thinks he has God on his side and is in the same post-faith dilemma as Hamilton himself. The hell-fire rhetoric of Catholicism won't work for the secular situations which are pivotal in the new style on show in *Life Studies*, and what the book represents for Hamilton is living proof of valid poetry made out of the same ruins he is facing. Writing about the Lowell of *Life Studies*, Hamilton notes that 'His inheritance has dwindled to the involuntary habit of expecting from the world what he knows it cannot afford, or searching for heaven when he knows full well that he is confined to hell.'[169]

Hamilton, in his own poems, would appear to be in a similar bind, and many of the postlapsarian echoes in *The Visit* seem to present an analogous crisis, with the couple cast in the role of a modern Adam and Eve but with no possibility of an external, intercessory salvation. Instead the 'searching for heaven' could only be done through the poems themselves. Hamilton, in his biography of Lowell, reflects that *Life Studies* is a book which

> in its bruised acknowledgement that poetry does indeed make 'nothing happen,' [and which] will seek to be refreshed by a direct, almost wide-eyed attentiveness to objects, places, personal experience. The only 'task' of Lowell's new style will be to prove its own disconsolate and modest propositions; his one remaining faith, if one

[169] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 104.

> can call it that, is in the imaginable moral power of perfect speech.[170]

There is a difference however between Lowell's 'disconsolate and modest propositions' and those which Hamilton criticised in Larkin. While Larkin's default setting, through the adoption of a debunking persona, was a refusal to take anything seriously, at least not without battling his own tongue-in-cheek impulses to get there, Lowell was never one to display a lack of engagement or gravity. Because of this drive towards seriousness Lowell becomes exemplary by showing the way in which being explicitly personal can create the sort of poems Hamilton is hoping to produce. Lowell achieves this through his willingness to attempt the sort of reaching beyond Hamilton demands and identifies in the best of the *Life Studies* poems and those which followed soon afterwards. Lowell, through the relaxation of his metre and the use of a more natural speaking voice - accompanying his more secular, experience-led material - had done what Arnold and Hardy had previously shown was possible, but most impressively he'd done it among the contemporary 'ruins'. For Hamilton 'The personal anguish, the sense of impending horror, that runs through these poems of the 1960s is never merely personal. Lowell somehow manages to seem both apprehensive and imperious – his pain is global pain.'[171] It's not enough to suffer, one has to go beyond that suffering, to master it through writing, in order to come up with truly valid poetry. And that's why the Alvarez line fails: to merely reflect and dwell on suffering, or violence, is to not go far enough and risks being merely a more histrionic reverse of Larkin or The Movement. All excess and no leavening restraint; no attempt to conquer experience but only to hold a mirror up to it. Better instead to write of suffering in a way which not only worked as art but was *of use.*

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[170] *Robert Lowell, A Biography* – p. 260.

[171] *Against Oblivion*, p. 240.

If 'Perfect Speech' was to work it would produce not only good poetry, but also be of service and make good the suffering on which it had been built, thanks to the efforts of a poet who was in control and 'miraculously' inspired.

The idea of 'perfection' in Lowell is one which comes with a degree of religious association, thanks to his time as a Catholic. Lowell wrote, while still a practicing Catholic, about the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and St. Ignatius of Loyola on his thinking about 'perfection':

> Now to be thoroughly *in act* is human perfection; in other words, it is to be *thoroughly made*. According to Catholic theology, perfection demands a *substantial transformation*, which is called first sanctifying grace and then beatitude; it involves the mysterious co-working of grace and free will. To go into this question further would be a digression … for Hopkins life was a continual substantial progress toward perfection.[172]

To go too far into this here, too, would be digression[173], but the notions of a co-working of grace and free will, and the idea of action as a means of moving towards perfection, are both ones which remained in Lowell after his faith lapsed, and are in part behind his movement towards 'Perfect Speech' as identified by Hamilton. Paul Giles

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[172] 'Hopkins's Sanctity' p. 168, *Robert Lowell Collected Prose*, ed. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987)

[173] For the Catholic theologian Enda McDonagh in *Vulnerable to the Holy* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2004) Lowell's dismissal of grace as a 'digression' 'reinforces a rather lopsided view of holiness' since 'the attracting, empowering and perfecting/transforming presence of God … form the basis for the Ignatian concept of 'mutual election' between God and the individual.' McDonagh cites the influence of Duns Scotus on Hopkins, especially his insights into the singularity of each individual – reflected in Hopkins's lines from 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire' 'Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,/Crying what I do is me; for that I came' , which echo Lowell's description of Hopkins' 'dramatic self-enactment'.

flags up the oversimplification represented by any attempt at thinking of Lowell's career as one of stark pre- and post-Catholicism.[174] Lowell himself stated that his later poems 'seem to me more religious than the early ones'[175], a point Giles draws out by highlighting Allen Tate's criticism of Lowell's earlier, more overtly 'Catholic' poems as 'angelic' given their lack of 'concrete experience'.[176] In line with this, Lowell's poems from *Life Studies* onwards, which deal with concrete realities and personal experience, were in fact 'more consonant with some strands of Catholic thinking in the second half of the twentieth century'.[177] For Lowell, Hopkins 'would have been a saint had he written nothing'[178], given his 'heroic sanctity', and 'Writings as well as writers should be judged in terms of substantial action'.[179]

Lowell, in his own 'remorseful book', is attempting to right wrongs, and, as well as counting the cost of what has been done, he is also - if Hamilton's use of 'Perfect Speech' is the same term as he would use to describe his own work - attempting to right them. Ignatian spirituality of the kind Lowell was influenced by, via Hopkins's example, is one based in service and deed[180]and this attempt to be at the service of others is one which – via Lowell – fed into Hamilton's own, albeit secular, attempts to perform something like a 'co-working of grace and free will' in his own poems. In attempting to 'go beyond' ordinary discourse, to be of use, Hamilton would have to be both an active

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[174] Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[175] *Robert Lowell Collected Prose,* p. 250.

[176] Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1968).

[177] Paul Giles, *American Catholic Arts and Fictions,* p.225.

[178] *Robert Lowell Collected Prose,* p. 250.

[179] Ibid.

[180] 'One of the most important functions of the Church for those who follow the Ignatian approach to spirituality is to provide a context for discipleship, mission and apostolic service.' *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear, an Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, David Lonsdale (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), p. 180.

presence and, in the Keatsian sense, a negative one. Ignatius 'saw imagination as a praxis of "realization", where the Gospels, for instance, could be re-enacted in prayer … [and] consolation as essentially an interior movement towards a fire of love or faith or hope.'[181] This idea of re-enactment has its Eucharistic parallels, in the sense of 'do this in memory of me' which involves, through transubstantiation, a real presence of Christ. Lowell, as Rita Horvath notes, still needed some sense of a 'real presence' even after he left the Catholic Church:

> The autobiographical project of revealing the 'truth' about himself was intimately connected to Lowell's basic allegiance to Western logocentric hermeneutics … The pervasive Christian imagery of *Life Studies* underpins Lowell's search for a single, absolute foundation. It is no longer the literal belief in the incarnation … but its hermeneutic implication … the several allusions to the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation indicate Lowell's desire for a full and 'real presence' upon which he can build his personal therapeutic structure.[182]

Falck, as we will see, posits a priestly role for the artist, the attempt to transform experience through the creative imagination into art, in something which is a secular version of transubstantiation. This 'priestly' mission, both in terms of ministering and transforming, is also in the background of Hamilton's attempts to create 'Perfect Speech'

[181] Ignatius of Loyola, *Personal Writings*, ed. J.A. Munitiz and P. Endean (London: Penguin, 1996).

[182] Rita Horvath, 'Never asking why build – only asking which tools': confessional poetry and the construction of the self, *Philosophiae Doctores*, Budapest, 2005.

which might provide consolation and a movement towards hope - in his case the hope of mitigating suffering, and bringing back the dead, through the writing of lyric poems.

In Lowell, or rather in the two or three poems of *Life Studies* which Hamilton felt were truly successful, there appeared to be something like a living example of what 'Perfect Speech' could achieve by facing down traumatic experience and mastering it through enormous poetic skill, which was – as we have seen - the aim of Hamilton and *The Review*. A poem such as 'Home After Three Months Away' manages to enact all of Hamilton's desires for a poem of experiencing:

> What is seen is transformed but not violated by what is understood, there is an intimate collaboration of exploratory and rhetorical energies, and the measurement is by a voice that is memorably personal and contemporary.[183]

Implicitly, too, it is not a poem that is 'hewn out' but one which demonstrates the sort of 'inspiration' Hamilton is hopeful of. When Hamilton praises Lowell's prosody it sounds like a checklist of the aspects which would define the way he wrote his own poems, especially those of *The Visit*. The strides made by Lowell to incorporate an autobiographical tone - lifted in part from Flaubert's prose - were made into poetry which had, for Hamilton, the following characteristics:

[183] *A Poetry Chronicle*, p. 101.

> the 'new country' Lowell was contemplating for his work was to involve some sort of quarrel with the regular iambic line.[184]

> an informality seamed with high instinctive artifice (if such were possible!): small, almost whispered intrusions of alliteration and half-rhyme, a shrewd, suspenseful balancing of short and long lines, an almost ceremonial tightening here and there into strict meter or heroic couplet.[185]

Throughout *The Visit*, and many of the later poems of Hamilton there is plenty of evidence for 'some sort of quarrel with the regular iambic line'. The base form for the majority of Hamilton's poems consists of a movement towards and retreat from regular iambic pentameter, usually only hitting it full-on for the purposes of portraying a rare moment of calm in a poem of crisis, through a mimetic ordering. Falck writes of Lowell's movement towards this sort of disrupted iambic metrics, after the earlier bombast of *Lord Weary's Castle*:

> The same thing is happening here [in *Life Studies* and *For The Union Dead*] as happened in the irregular odes of the early Romantics or in the 'haunted by a meter' poems of Eliot's Prufrock period … a syllable-heavy five-stress rhythm asserts itself, despite the generally irregular form of the poems' line-breaking … the effect of these

[184] *Robert Lowell: A Biography,* p. 197.

[185] Ibid., p.246.

> anchoring-points of regularity is to bring a semblance of order to the difficult emotional energies that are being wrestled with in the more dangerously exposed lines of the verse. [186]

In Hamilton's work, too, the 'haunted by meter' aspect is used to provide 'anchoring-points' and a 'semblance of order'. An 'almost ceremonial tightening here and there into strict meter', in fact. Hamilton also makes use of those Lowellian 'whispered intrusions of alliteration and half-rhyme', and his 'suspenseful balancing of short and long lines'. It wasn't only the new stylistic territory which Lowell had gained with the best poems of *Life Studies* that Hamilton's work would make use of. There was a more attitudinal link with the concerns of both Lowell in this period and the Hamilton of *The Visit*. As he writes of Lowell in the biography, he could almost – as in the Arnold biography – be commenting on his own creative process. For Hamilton, Lowell immediately post *Life Studies* was making poems 'obsessed with time, lost experience, blurred vision; they are nearly all poems written as if from the end of life, aching with nostalgia and remorse, and blankly futureless.'[187] They are also poems written, like a number of those in *The Visit*, in the shade of nuclear threat, 'in rhythm with the global countdown.'[188]

By borrowing from Lowell's prosody, its iambic quarrelling, short and long lines, alliteration and half-rhyme, one might expect Hamilton's poems to bear closer resemblance than they do to Lowell's autobiographical work. A key division between the two poets, however, and one equally inherent to Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' as the positive, prosodic gains suggested by Lowell, lay in the Bostonian's willingness to name

[186] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.62.

[187] *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p.296.

[188] Ibid., p.297.

names and allow explicit circumstantial detail of a far greater degree than anything seen in the Hardy 'Emma' poems. Hamilton's poems attest to his refusal to do anything of the sort. For Hamilton, unabashed 'confession' was anathema to 'Perfect Speech's moral purpose, impossible to reconcile with the 'magical' way of speaking and attempting to repair damage done without creating a 'poetic relishing of the situation'. It was also the opposite of the tight-lipped English reserve on display in other influential poets such as Keith Douglas, as we have seen above. While Hamilton criticised Larkin's prototypically English retreat into a debunking persona, he was unwilling to throw away reserve to the same degree as the chatty, unrestrained Lowell.[189] His criticisms of Lowell's candour are frequent, and harsher than the criticisms levelled at even the least successful aspects of his writing on poetic grounds. Lowell went 'beyond customary bounds of reticence and personal embarrassment'[190] to a damaging degree, which meant that at his nadir, in the 1970s, 'there was nothing that Lowell would not *say* in a poem even though the saying of it might cause serious damage in his life – damage which would in turn provide the subject matter for more poems.'[191] For Hamilton, the purpose of writing his poems, as we have seen, was to attempt to 'mitigate the suffering', not to add to it. Even if that was sometimes a wish in vain, or if there was the possibility of being unsuccessful in these attempts to make good, Lowell's willingness to produce poems which wilfully did the opposite went beyond the pale. These poems 'some would say' (Hamilton implicitly one of them) 'caused suffering to others that no work of art, however marvellous, could compensate for.'[192] The poems which did harm to others were largely sonnets written

[189] After Lowell, Hamilton's next subject was JD Salinger. Almost diametrically opposite in terms of baring all, both had a formative influence on Hamilton and reflect competing instincts as to how one might balance the need to deal with emotion while protecting one's privacy.

[190] 'A Biographer's Misgivings' in *The Trouble With Money*, p. 291.

[191] Ibid.

[192] 'A Biographer's Misgivings' in *The Trouble With Money*, p. 292.

over periods of feverish productivity – some incorporating edited versions of correspondence from Lowell's second wife Elizabeth Hardwick – and were unjustifiable for Hamilton, even leaving aside the fact that on the whole he thought they also failed poetically. Hamilton's take on the much-quoted Lowell dictum 'Yet why not say what happened?' highlights the most radical point of departure for him from Lowell's tell-all style: 'You want to say what happened, but not necessarily who it happened to.'[193]

Lowell then, like those other influences mentioned above, could only take Hamilton so far as a guide when it came to the issue of what poems written using 'Perfect Speech' should look like. Lowell had suggested how one might go about constructing poems which dealt with the same nuclear-threatened, godless ruins in which Hamilton was operating and managed to ally personal experience with valid art but at too great a cost. Hamilton would find ways around the temptations of producing poetry of experience which required a tell-all style, through his use of the second person as seen in Hardy and the stripping away of circumstantial detail further even than in those 1912/13 poems. Lowell would not be of use when it came to answering the question of how to definitively frame a poem which made use of all the tenets of 'Perfect Speech' due to his flouting of reticence: a virtue just as key to whatever it would look like as the strong emotions his unrestrained American example had triumphantly reintroduced to the contemporary British landscape.

One further unignorable problem was that Hamilton and Lowell were operating from opposite sides of madness. Lowell's manic episodes were an engine for his poems – they were often at the root of the damage done, and central to the poems written about the fallout. One of the key reasons why Hamilton was writing was, as we have seen, to attempt to save someone suffering from madness. He was the carer not the

[193] *Between the Lines*, p.103.

cared for, and his reticent empathy was different in intent from Lowell the sufferer, however exemplary, of a debilitating, untethering disease. For all Hamilton's personal acknowledgement that there's no such thing as great madness, and his experience of what it is to be the one witnessing, helplessly, 'the kingdom of the mad', there is an element of Lowell's madness which may have provided a further pointer when it came to utilising 'Perfect Speech' in a poem. As well as the prosodic clues picked up from Lowell, Hamilton notes that, according to Jonathan Miller, in Lowell's manic phases 'all history became a simultaneous event where it was possible for everyone to meet everyone'.[194] In writing poems which attempted to speak in a mystical way to a person who was unreachable, due to madness, Hamilton would blur the chronology of his poems to such an extent that they consist of multiple layers of time overlaid on one another. This not only produces a haunting but also seems to mirror the experience of a certain type of manic episode – at least as it occurred for Lowell. In trying to find a way of talking to an inaccessible 'you', poignantly separated from the speaker by time and madness, 'Perfect Speech' didn't only lean on Lowell's prosody – it would also lean on his experience of being just such an unanswering 'you' as the one it was designed to address.

[194] *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p. 314

Chapter Four - Ian Hamilton: 'Perfect Speech' in the poems

Out of his mass of influences, Hamilton had to find ways of applying the prosodic and philosophical aspects of 'Perfect Speech' to produce poems. He had learnt what he could from Hardy, Douglas, Larkin and Lowell among others (as discussed above) in terms of demotic tone, ghostly addressees, natural speaking voice and post-faith articulations of love. The task remained to create work which could apply a methodology which made allowances for 'magic' and could encompass both its 'faithful' and its 'purposeful' aspects. They were to be poems which had learned the lessons of Imagism's concision, avoided the sterility and easy prosody of the Movement and injected emotion and life like the best of the poets collected in *The New Poetry* but without being dehumanising or betraying their subjects. Poems which were 'songs among the ruins', not undercutting their own seriousness through a persona, or inflating the emotions they contained; nor could they name names, grandstand or slip into easy, received rhythms. They would be written out of life, using experience and personally felt emotion, like Lowell's. They would take a number of other cues from Lowell's free verse with its alliteration and musical rhyme, but in a strikingly different form of address and duration – both on the page and in terms of their necessary hauntedness. They would have learned from Hamilton's understanding of Coleridgean ideas about the 'esemplastic power' of the imagination, and rather than just recording an experience would, through their use of language and their attempts to 'reach beyond' into a platonic realm of discourse, try to add to and even master experience through the creation of the poem itself. They would, in line with Arnold's views on purposefulness, attempt in however unlikely a way to be 'of use' to the unanswering 'you' to whom they were addressed by attempting to 'mitigate their suffering'.

In order to investigate 'Perfect Speech' in action, and the gradual 'loss of faith' which occurred for Hamilton in even this self-willed belief, I will carry out close readings of a number of poems from throughout his career, from the early 'faithful' poems of *The Visit* (1970) in which his 'belief' in the possibilities of 'Perfect Speech' was at its strongest. I will trace the dwindling of his 'faith' and the ultimate desire to be free from the need to be purposeful in the same way, and a desire for release from the obligations which 'Perfect Speech' represented, through his later work as collected in *Returning* (1976), *Fifty Poems* (1988), *Steps* (1997) and *Sixty Poems* (1998). The interpersonal poems in which the 'you' may be taken as a romantic partner are the poems in which this 'faith' and its ultimate dilution may be witnessed most overtly, and it is therefore those which I will concentrate on. One poem which acts as an ideal example of many of the poetic decisions Hamilton made in practice is the one which opened his debut collection.

The first poem in The *Visit*, 'The Storm', exemplifies Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' in action, as well as being one of the most effective uses of the various aspects of it in his oeuvre. If one were to catalogue the ingredients we have come to see as fundamental to 'Perfect Speech', 'The Storm' is the best place to begin. It's a poem which enacts a moment of crisis, in keeping with the Pound-influenced demand that a poem contain no fat and be drawn at a moment of climactic intensity. This crisis is one upon which the reader intrudes; they are an eavesdropper rather than being addressed by the narrator. What is 'overheard' is a scene as it is relived by an implied, never named, narrating 'I'. It is written in the present tense. Its subject is an unanswering other. The poem is one of direct address, as so many of the poems in *The Visit* are, its subject referred to only as 'you'. The nature of the relationship between narrator and 'you' is fleshed out by inference — the 'furniture' having been thrown out, the 'setting,

past events, likely future events'[195] implicit only. There are no circumstantial details about the addressee, even less so than in Hardy's analogous poems to Emma; no 'air-blue gown'. Technically, it is *vers libre*[196], but with a clear iambic underpinning – this acts to replicate speech, conversational and natural rather than metrically rhetorical, creating an intimate, voice-led lyric. It is a love poem, and, as Falck has written, 'there is little modern love poetry … which does not reflect a more immediate or less immediate social threat'; Falck adds 'Personal love both substitutes for, and symbolises, the organic community which modern society does not provide us with.'[197] The poems Hamilton wrote were not, as David Harsent has noted above, baldly, factually 'true' but instead constructed dramas based on psychologically 'true' experience and feeling. This is in line with what Falck, citing Robert Langbaum, has noted about what is important in *The Review*'s take on any poetry of experiencing:

> What matters in poetic achievement is not the closeness or otherwise of the poem's persona to the 'bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast' but whether or not the incoherences of sitting down to breakfast can be wrought into a truly imagined experience … The need in modern verse for a 'poetry of experience' – of experience by a possible person, at whatever distance from the poet's 'own' self – has been persuasively argued for by Robert Langbaum in his

[195] *Poetry Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997/98.

[196] Although, as Colin Falck has pointed out, thanks to its disrupted iambic base it is more like 'metrical poetry that is being haunted by the ghost of free verse' (p.54, *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*).

[197] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p.156.

> study of nineteenth century verse *The Poetry of Experience*.[198]

Elaborating on this elsewhere, Falck writes:

> As British and American poetry moved into the twentieth century the experiential lyric established itself at the center of both traditions, whether in its more autobiographical-seeming or 'confessional' version or in the form of more obviously dramatized monologues … [which] allow us to identify with a particular human consciousness in the act of experiencing: they present us with someone who is there … the twentieth century's closing poetic verdict on itself seems to have been that it is only the poetry of particular – and above all of particular embodied and located – human experiencing that expresses that century's most distinctive cast of mind.[199]

For our purposes and due to this essay's constraints, which prevent an investigation of areas of poetry which would decidedly disagree with 'the twentieth century's closing verdict', we might perhaps most advisedly read this as reflecting *The Review*'s or Falck and Hamilton's, final verdict.

The effect of these separate elements is that 'The Storm' acts as an exemplary instance of Hamilton's restrained take on confessionalism. There is a minimalism at

[198] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p. 156.

[199] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.15.

play: the 'action' of the poem is driven by a single simile, in which the addressee's head is compared to 'A delicate bowl that the storm might break', and by the effect of Hamilton's interruptions of an implicitly ordered iambic rhythm to intensify a hinted-at trauma and create an illusion of consolation. It is demotic and largely 'neutral'. There's no danger of emotional excess, of falling into the overwrought diction of the apocalyptic 1940s, but instead restraint is the watchword, in the spirit of Douglas's insistence on purging 'Bullshit' from poetry and the masculine, Bogartian need to keep – or at least attempt to keep – one's control.

The structural, prosodic aspects of 'Perfect Speech' are all in evidence in 'The Storm', but so too are the more philosophical aspects. These are derived from Hamilton's take on Coleridge and his 'esemplastic power', and from the haunting and layering of time in poems by Hardy to his late wife Emma. The Coleridgean attempt to 'reach beyond' into something less explicable, in line with the Romantic urge to see the act of writing a poem as itself a creative act. This, in turn, brings in the purposefulness derived in part from Arnold, where it's not enough to use this creative imaginative force for its own sake, or for the sake of 'getting a reputation as a poet', but in order to 'be of use', however delusional that aim may be. The poem becomes a ceremony, and one in which time is, if not fluid, at least neither linear nor static. The present tense acts to hide the multiple time-frames of the 'action', with memory becoming concrete reality which can be relived by being constructed in a poem. Just as Hamilton identified in Lowell, Hardy and to an extent Larkin, the driving force behind his own attempt to build and master an experience through writing a poem is guilt: there is a desperation in relation to this guilt which must be managed. This gives the lyric poem a degree of force analogous to, but more controlled than, the violence in many of the poems championed by Al Alvarez's *New Poetry*. In order to bypass gentility, and the Larkinian urge to hide feeling behind an undermining persona, the poems had to learn from Lowell's candour

and faith in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech' while at the same time avoiding his prolixity, verbosity and willingness to betray confidences. Without Lowell's American, candid and excessive influence, Hamilton may have struggled even more than he did to overthrow that neurotic Englishness which – to his mind – hamstrung Larkin and saw him construct a debunking persona to avoid facing up to the big topics without a degree of self-protective armour. As much as he might have balked at Lowell's indelicacy, the Boston poet's influence would at least force Hamilton to attempt the distinctly un-English trick of being vulnerable with regard to the feelings put into his poems, and to the romantic and psychological urges driving his work. Such heavy sentiment could have proved overwhelming poetically in such clipped, Imagist, structures if it wasn't for the leavening influences of a poet like Douglas, without an equivalent 'persona' to the one Hamilton had diagnosed as habitually undermining Larkin's grander gestures.

'The Storm' starts with an impact, giving an immediate sense of interruption and danger: 'Miles off, a storm breaks'. Crucial to Hamilton's poetics is that Pound-derived desire, mentioned above, that a poem take place at 'the maximum point of intensity'[200], and this sonically charged opening, as well as the titular storm, appear to bring the eavesdropping reader in at the height of a crisis. In this instance the distant storm is something of a sleight of hand – there will be a crisis point but it will not be meteorological. The expectation set up, the second half of the line tells us what the storm is 'miles off' from: 'It ripples to our room.' Not only does this shift ground, it also – after the ominous opening - subverts the expectations of external violence set up by such heavy weather. This is to be a behind-doors poem, with an accompanying domesticity. This domesticity is reinforced by the deliberately underpowered 'ripples',

[200] *Poetry Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997/98.

suggestive more of a lido than the apocalypse, and a reminder that 'Perfect Speech' must not be heightened speech, rather that in order to create the effect of 'overhearing' it should be naturalistic. If the far-off storm might have seemed to carry with it undertones of war[201], this move indoors is not the only subversion. The phrase 'It ripples to our room' is in flawless iambics, undercutting the heavy stresses of the first line and apparently redeeming the threat. This is a further sleight of hand on Hamilton's part: just because the narrator and 'you' are not outside doesn't mean they're safe from the oncoming storm's effects.

The next two lines are metrically awkward: 'You look up into the light so it catches one side/Of your face, your tight mouth, your startled eye.' Hamilton, through 'Perfect Speech', was aiming for some manner of consolation, after the real event, by reliving it in a perfected language; reordering a past crisis through controlled syntax. In the first line, 'catches' acts literally, halting the line and drawing attention to itself, and more importantly its heavy 'tch' sound which ensures the idyllic-sounding 'You look up into the light' becomes less a romantic study and more a symbol of yearning. It does so not only through the connotations of light on the face of the loved one, but by the type of address chosen here – the decision to speak to 'you' in the poem is itself an act of remembrance even though the 'action' is in the present tense. The poem is not composed in real time, so we read this intimate, present-tense address not only as description, but as salvage: a reconstruction of an event recounted by one of its participants to the other, whether they are 'capable of attending' or not.[202] So far the situation cannot be saved by a poetic whitewashing; it seems the crisis is fighting back against any attempt to order it. As with 'catches', in the next line the repeated 't' sounds

[201] Michael Hofmann in his review of the *Collected Poems* in *Poetry (Chicago)* January 2010 wrote of 'the perverse way in which, to begin with, I tried to read him, almost as a war poet, for drama and substance' which doesn't seem particularly perverse in the context of many of the poems in *The Visit*.

[202] A definition taken from Hamilton's discussion of address, *Between the Lines*, p.65.

of 'tight' and 'startled' ensure the adjectives set up a sound pattern which is to persist throughout, in which a run of 't's comes to stand for all that is crowding in on the couple in their room, both from the external world and the internal, local 'storm' set to be enacted in miniature by the narrator and 'you'.

The effect of these 't's and of the not-quite perfect metre pays off in line four – 'You turn to me and when I call you come.' This line's exact iambic pentameter rings out for its precision, and in turn seems to suggest there is, after all, to be redemption. Instead of looking into the light, 'you' is now turned towards the narrator; having sought in vain for consolation elsewhere, as portrayed by the 'tight mouth' and 'startled eye'. This act of obedient turning feels quasi-religious. It has in it something of T.S. Eliot's 'Ash Wednesday' with its repeated 'Because I do not hope to turn', but also something more directly biblical, in the idea of 'when I call you come'. Salvation is sought, and the unquestioning acceptance that it is available here, the immediate willingness to trust and follow, nods to the instant acquiescence of the disciples at Christ's urge to 'follow me'.[203] In the context of the poem as a made thing, utilising 'Perfect Speech' to alleviate suffering, it has a further layer of ceremony – the rescue in question is happening as the poem is read, rather than at the time of the actions being recounted. As we have seen earlier, and will see throughout Hamilton's poems, the hope of an intercessory, external God is not possible: the only potential salvation has to be earned poetically. As such there is the beginning of a self-aggrandisement by the narrator with this biblical allusion, in his playing the role of the one towards whom 'you' turns. The three lines that follow create a volta, with their bowl simile:

> Over and kneel beside me, wanting me to take
> Your head between my hands as if it were
> A delicate bowl that the storm might break.

[203] e.g. Mark: 1:16-17.

'Over', like 'catches' earlier, enacts its own meaning, working as an enjambed hangover from the perfectly iambic line which precedes it, and a supernumerary stall in what is otherwise similarly precise pentameter in 'and kneel beside me wanting me to take'. It is also slightly demotic – in light of Hamilton's desire to create 'ideal speech' it is interesting to note that his 'platonic form' of discourse falls into step with conversation and its digressions[204]; he does not forsake naturalism for efficient minimalism.

It is also a deliberate act of rhythmic sabotage – 'over' doesn't add anything to the sense of the line which couldn't have been achieved by 'and when I call you come/and kneel beside me'. As such it is used as an act of distancing in an otherwise intimate movement. If this intrusive 'over' is a hint that all may not be well, it's there also in 'wanting me to take'. The simplicity of the turning and movement is changed into need, which has its own destruction built into it. The prostration of 'you' in front of the narrator, and the absolute need to be sheltered, is moving, but it is also an act of helplessness. It is the beginning of another element of the poem, one involving sexual domination, and an energy which is invoked about which both narrator and poem are somewhat ambivalent. The movement and claustrophobia in this poem, as well as a number of the early poems from *The Visit*, share elements of Harold Pinter's drama; the significance given to a character standing or sitting, the power-plays involved in such posturing and positioning, and the often interior, domestic settings as a battleground for such struggles, recall Pinter's early plays. There isn't room here for a fuller discussion of Pinter's influence, but having worked with him in his time at Oxford[205], and having forged an ongoing friendship, it's no great stretch to assume Hamilton was at least

[204] In this slight nod to a poetic capturing of someone thinking aloud, it echoes Frost's 'sound of sense' in a poem such as 'Birches'.

[205] '[Pinter] sent me the script of a radio play called *A Slight Ache* for publication in the magazine … I decided that the play could work very well as a stage play too. So I mounted the production … And Harold came and saw it and that's how we became friends.' *Between the Lines*, p. 36.

tangentially influenced by Pinter's silence-imbued domestic scenes when it came to 'staging' his own poetic dramatic crises. David Harsent has made the assertion that Hamilton's poems are never explicitly autobiographical but rather like little dramas in which the 'characters' have to be given actions to perform. When it came to 'directing' such scenes it seems apt that Hamilton may have taken some sense of the power struggles of Pinter as a guide for the movement of his 'characters' on his poetic version of a 'stage', a small-scale, domestic setting such as the dramatist would often use.

Here 'You"s prostration not only anticipates the line which follows, 'You want me to get between you and the brute thunder,' but it also leads to one of the poem's most rhythmically emotive lines: 'A delicate bowl that the storm might break'. Although there are ten syllables, this can't be read as a line of iambic pentameter in the same way as the monosyllabic 'You turn to me and when I call you come', thanks in the main to the 'tremor'[206] which runs through 'delicate bowl' but also by the skill with which Hamilton has by now attuned the reader's ear to the subtlety of the speaking voice's cadences and emphases.

'Delicate' has an onomatopoeic quality, heightening the threat latent within the heavy 't's which return here in 'that the storm might break', accompanied by a further sonic snare-drum in the clanging 'break' which end-rhymes with 'take' of two lines earlier. This rhyme is more intrusive than the other, slighter, consonantal end-rhyme of 'side' and 'eye' earlier. The 'k' of break, in conjunction with the run of 't's, mirrors the tension, and danger, of the 'bowl' which is entirely at the mercy of 'the storm' but also, due to the prostrate nature of 'you', the narrator. It is Lowellian, this introduction of an end-rhyme; musical but irregular, and as we have already seen Hamilton admired a number of the *Life Studies* poems for their balance of metrical and rhetorical control and

[206] Christopher Reid, in his TLS review of the *Collected Poems*, notes the 'tremor that runs through "A delicate bowl that the storm …".'

intense emotional suffering. The following line acts as a reiteration of what's at stake and a further ratcheting up of the sonic tension: 'You want me to get between you and the brute thunder.' The repeated 'want' acts not only to show there is a desperation in 'you', but also has something of the word's other resonance – a 'want' of something, and seems to carry with it the implication that 'you' will remain 'in want' of what they crave. The sense of the line recalls another of *The Visit*'s poems, 'Aftermath', which has the same notion of standing between a person and danger, with its ending 'I promise that when your destruction comes/It will be mine/Who could have come between you.' This is projection for the main part by the poet, a seeming knowingness that this 'ceremony' of the poem is a means of doing just that, of interceding or 'getting between you' which is only possible after the event, in the context of the poem where the poet is more godlike and in control, unlike in life. With the 'esemplastic power' of the imagination, the closest thing to omnipotence, they can – if they hit it right – 'go beyond' this time and speak in a magical way which wasn't possible during the real-time interaction.

The next two lines achieve a great deal in a tiny space. 'Settling on your flesh my great hands stir,/Pulse on you and then, wondering how to do it, grip.' The first line persists with the ominous 't's but introduces a sibilant run of 's's to counteract them, creating, musically, a tenderness which has been lacking to this point. This seems to be a victory for 'Perfect Speech', the purpose of which is to ensure that through the creation of the poem there might be some element of repair enacted.

While the sibilance acts to allay the threat, however briefly, 'great' stands out – as well as echoing and, in its way, diametrically opposing 'delicate', it seems suggestive of the sexual but also religious, even blasphemous, element which is growing during this moment of crisis. The notion that the narrator's hands may be incapable of stepping between the 'delicate bowl' and the 'brute thunder', and the association of 'great' with

'brute' rather than the finer bowl, itself an act of betrayal, make us read 'great' as suggestive of elevation rather than oafishness. There is mastery implicit in the resonance of 'when I call you come', but also of a new enlargement of the self, both physical (if we're to read what comes as a sexual act) and figurative. The narrator grows into his role as saviour due to this charge of dynamism which begins with 'you' kneeling in front of him, desirous that his own, 'great' force counteract the external thunder's.[207] This growth is due to the fact that – at least in some fleeting way - those sibiliant 's's and the seeming ordering of the crisis give the impression that 'Perfect Speech' is working. His role as intercessor seems to be having some positive effect. This is especially interesting given the nature of what's 'really' happening at this juncture, with the poet 'observing' himself in a heightened emotional state, growing into his own role even as he writes about a moment in which he is 'remembering' doing the same in a physical, rather than literary, fashion.[208] It is not without difficulty however, as 'great' also makes clear – the 'delicate bowl' of 'you's head is in danger as much from his dominating energy as it is from the thunder he is supposed to shield her from.

This isn't only a physical concern, but as we have seen already there are other aspects of this idea of domination, the fear of going too far towards the Lowellian 'confession', or causing damage in the act of attempted salvage. Just as in the scene itself where her head is a delicate bowl which might shatter, so the relationship is fragile: the implicit obligations of human decency, which could be shattered by too large an inflation of the self at the cost of reserve, are as much at stake as the fate of 'you'. That

[207] A similar 'enlarging' movement can be seen in a poem like Alun Lewis' 'Goodbye', with its progress from the narrator putting 'a final shilling in the gas' to a penultimate stanza where 'Our hearts are massive towers of delight,/We stride across the seven seas of death.'

[208] Hamilton's poems aren't straightforwardly confessional; the poems are more than mere remembered anecdotes. David Harsent noted that '[Hamilton] made a fiction of his life which travels in parallel lines to what the truth was. It's like railway lines, it seems to meet at the vanishing point but it doesn't.' (Interview with David Harsent 23/03/12).

idea of betrayal set-up by 'great' and 'brute' hangs heavy in the air, with its layered meaning in both this room and the wider notion of poetic responsibility.

'Pulse on you' retains the sibilance of the previous line but carries a further sexual charge, and also brings with it suggestions of illumination, picking up on the light which earlier caught the 'tight mouth'. This line brings in something ceremonial, further sanctifying this domestic scene as ritual, but the surety hinted at earlier in the 'when I call you come' is gone, replaced by the uncertainty of 'wondering how to do it, grip'. The narrator is tentative, because of the impossibility of the task: ('get between you and the brute thunder',) and by being ill-equipped for the job of handling something as fragile as 'a delicate bowl' with 'my great hands' as much as he is of forging this 'Perfect Speech' into practice. 'Grip' is an inversion of 'stir', and while it is a confident verb there is a sense of reluctance, less so in the physical movement than in the atmosphere of peril which has been set up. The 'delicate bowl' might shatter, and there is something of this concern in the strong 'o's which dominate the penultimate line. 'Pulse on you and then, wondering how to do it' has in it something awe-struck, confirmed in the poem's final line, with its overwhelming vision which is part oral sex, part Eucharist. 'The storm rolls through me as your mouth opens.'

This end line is ambiguous, but it's impossible to read it without some notion of violence. The 'o's, which continue after being introduced in the previous line, embody the physical motion of an open mouth. 'Rolls through me' is a clinching detail, while the line sees a return of previously menacing but somewhat softened 't's in 'storm' 'through' and 'mouth', bringing us back to that initial shocking impact of the encroaching storm. One interpretation is that 'through me' means that the hands, and by extension the whole sexual self, which first 'grip' and 'Pulse' become the bringers of the dreaded storm, the means of channelling that destructive and feared terror. The evidence in the poem, however, of the sibilance which acts to balance out the 't's, and the return to

something like an ordered iambic pentameter out of the disjunction of the lines in which the jeopardy is at its highest pitch, suggests something more redemptive, in line with the desire that the narrator 'get between you and the brute thunder.' 'Through me' does work as an idea of channelling, but rather than turning the narrator into the conduit of the frightful storm, it suggests the ceremony which begins with 'Settling' transforms him into a lightning rod, diverting the impact into himself even as he, implicitly, enters 'you' whether physically or symbolically.[209] This action internalises the horror – evinced in the 'o' sounds which complement 'you' and 'your mouth opens'.

The repeat of 'storm' brings our minds back to the first mention in line one: 'Miles off, a storm breaks'. The storm has been tamed in this instance, but that caveat of 'Miles off' suggests it is making its way closer to the pair, and that it may not be possible to keep its effects at bay for long by this sought-after act of manual, mystical, intervention. Another effect of Hamilton's present tense is that 'The storm rolls through me as your mouth opens', in this direct address style, makes us read this line as being lived through again; by conjuring up the scene the narrator must endure this action, and so must 'you'. While we know the earlier lines are not real-time reportage it seems that to read this last line as merely present tense rendering of a past event, rather than as a vital re-creation, is to do the poem a disservice. By re-playing the scene, and the open mouth, the narrator seems to have re-created the storm and 'you' into something like an actual presence: the storm, felt every bit as much in the writing as in the experience which is commemorated, 'Rolls through me' all over again. If there is 'some mitigation of the suffering' in the events of the poem, therefore, the further hope of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' would be that it achieves a similar redemption in the real-life present by

[209] This is in line with that 'priestly' role discussed above, with the poet becoming an active figure involved in this 'transubstantiative' act.

'talking in a magic way to the subject of the poem.' 'And then, of course, you know [there] isn't. You wake up and find it hasn't'.[210]

'Perfect Speech' carries a hope of restoration, as we have already seen, and one of its most complex aspects is the multiple time-frames within which it must - by necessity - operate. A critical element of 'Perfect Speech' which can't be gauged from a single poem, but rather in the cumulative, obsessive power of the revisitings which occur throughout Hamilton's early work, is that of the hauntedness of the narrator and the lingering quality of the relationship he has with both 'you's: his late father and his first wife. The poems of *The Visit* operate on a number of different time-lines, with the 'action' recalled in the present tense and therefore in some senses occurring 'now', but both the reader, and the narrator, have an awareness that these are re-visits, the present tense a device used to conjure up something which has been lost in the hope that it might – at least for the duration of the poem – be restored and altered. As such the 'you' in the poem is as much a ghostly visitation as an intimate addressee and in the lineage of a number of exemplary female muse-figures who are similarly unreachable, not least Hardy's Emma. This visitation aspect of *The Visit* is exemplified in 'Trucks'. Unlike 'The Storm' there isn't as clear a disrupted iambic base in the poem's construction, although the poem is haunted by iambic pentameter, the metre which is the keynote of Hamilton's early poems. Because of this, when reading the first line 'At four, a line of trucks. Their light', one is pulled up short by the line-break, which feels like a rhythmical falling off, and this sense of foreshortening is essential to the poem's success. This is a poem of apparitions, as much indebted to the Hardy poems of 1912-1913 as it is to an earlier influence, John Keats. Hamilton deals in a number of recurrent images, especially throughout *The Visit*. Petals and mouths are well represented in the

[210] *Agenda* 31.2.

early poems, but of all the 'symbols' with which Hamilton builds the poems' obsessional vocabulary, it is his depiction of hands which is the most telling and ubiquitous. The opening of 'Trucks' finds us in a now-familiar terrain: an interior domestic setting, and even amongst familiar actions – the light which 'Slops in and spreads across the ceiling' calls to mind the light which 'catches one side/ Of your face' in 'The Storm', just as 'Aching, you turn back' recalls that poem's 'You turn to me and when I call you come'. Whereas in 'The Storm' the light came from a frightening natural source, in this case it comes from the movement of the man-made but equally noisy trucks of the title. If these heavy goods vehicles are an unlikely source for a small-scale epiphany, Hamilton's use of 'Slops' to describe their light is equally unexpected. It's worth noting that despite the inherent power of the trucks, there isn't the same pitch in the feeling of an external threat crowding in which the storm carried, although the precision of 'At four' gives them the sense of an at least initially unwelcome interruption, while their pre-dawn mission carries with it the hint of the unstoppable onrush of commercial progress. Their presence here is symptomatic not only of the demotic ordinariness of vocabulary but also the domestic setting, their associative power with the perils of modern, secular life is relevant to the wider aspects of 'Perfect Speech'. This is subtly alluded to by Hamilton with his reference to Arnold with the phrase 'Gleams, and goes' which is an almost-lift from 'Dover Beach'. Here it works to recall the Victorian's plea that he and his new wife be true to one another, but both there and here it also highlights the search for something akin to the religious experience which can now only be found through poetry, due to the withdrawal of the 'Sea of Faith'. If there is to be any light, then, it will only come from terrestrial sources, just as any hope of rescue must be grounded in earthly experience.

'Slops' brings with it an implicit messiness, but also the idea of dregs thanks to its barroom definition. This is a poem about last things, or rather the unwillingness of

things to be definitively over. 'Trucks' manages to operate within a number of distinct time-frames, and while this is never made explicit we cannot help but feel a layering of time, a distinctly ghostly presence, thanks to the resonance of his allusions and our return to a by-now familiar setting.

The 'action' of the poem's opening may be a present-tense depiction of 'real' events, but no great leap is required to read into it an overlaid chronology, to see the narrator's solitary recollection in the lines even as we read the events taking place as he is in bed with his lover. It is Hardy's Emma who is the clearest poetic forebear of the woman here whose 'hands reach out/Over me', whose hands are 'caught/ In the last beam and, pale,/They fly there now.' While this is a present-tense evocation, we might read a fracture between 'Gleams and goes' and 'Aching', the now-absent lover conjured up by the light on the ceiling which once found her carrying out the actions about to be described, but 'now' in truth absent. This is set up first in 'They fly there now' and expanded on with 'You're taking off, you say,/And won't be back.' While this lift-off into the supernatural could be seen as excessively 'poetic', especially when rendered in such a seemingly mundane setting, Hamilton's subtlety and economy of emotion and language means that just as the voice attempts to convince, or at least ground and placate 'you', we too are lulled into believing this is a more straightforward poem – and scene – we are 'eavesdropping' on than is the case. The poem can be read purely as a matter-of-fact evocation in the present tense of an intimate early-hours act – although this would be to lose a vital aspect of it – and as a result its heightened, supernatural element is in itself a sort of haunting which lies underneath its surface.

For proof of this layering, however, we need look no further than the following line, where 'Your shadows soar' which carries a further evocation of the haunting by the lover, who is literally casting a shadow in this scene and also casting one over the setting and narrator. The plural 'shadows', caused by the trucks' light but also by the

implication that this is one of many such nights, lends this a feeling of being another on-going ritual, rather than a singular recalled anecdote. It is from this point, particularly, that the subtle complexity of the poem's multiple chronologies can be witnessed, with the seemingly practical statement 'My hands, they can merely touch down/ On your shoulders and wait' carrying a tenderness but also an enhanced sense of the futile, repeated act of service hinted at by those plural shadows. With the knowledge that 'you' are trying to 'take off', this act by the narrator to 'touch down/On your shoulders' becomes an attempt at earthing, just as we saw him try to become a lightning rod during 'The Storm'. It is a protective act, but can be read with a violent undertone – to fly, here, would be a release, but by holding her shoulders he is unwilling to let her go, just as by the writing of this poem he shows an unwillingness to let her 'take off'.

This living elegy is given an additional charge by the line which follows – 'Very soon/The trucks will be gone.' If the trucks are the sole source of light their leaving will remove illumination. It's crucial that this is only anticipated, and not shown: unlike the present tense opening of the poem, the end of the trucks is only looked forward to, just as at the end the death of the couple will be. Both 'you', and the narrator, in their own ways are 'caught/In the last beam' which they know will soon fizzle out. It is hard not to read the next line, 'Bitter, you will turn/Back again' without a ghostly colour. The haunting has lasted only as long as the light slopped in; the 'you' as much Hardy's Emma here as she is Eurydice: forced into the darkness again, cheated by the removal of light, but also by the narrator's unwillingness to let her 'take off', however unlikely that may have been. The 'Bitter' seems to refer as much to the narrator's unwillingness to let her soar, like her shadows, as it does the fact that the light can't last; that the trucks' luminosity is one which always 'Gleams, and goes.' A further element must come with that other driving emotion behind 'Perfect Speech' – guilt. There's something of

the guilt of Orpheus in the line. The narrator here, like that other mythic 'rescuer', has failed and his lover must 'turn/Back again' as a result.

In the context of this most mutable of scenes, the final line is reminiscent of Keats at his most haunted, and haunting, in 'This living hand, now warm and capable'. 'We will join our cold hands together' is a remarkably nuanced line, given the competing chronologies of this poem, carrying with it the echo of Keats:

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again,
> And thou be conscience-calm'd–see here it is–
> I hold it towards you.

This makes 'Trucks' final line anything but straightforward. While this act, rendered in the future tense, is at one level simply the promise of a physical action, it is also a pivotal line in understanding the layered time-frames which make this poem work. If, as in line with Keats, the 'cold hand' is a dead, haunting hand which 'haunt[s] thy days and chill[s] thy dreaming nights' – much like Hardy's own visitations – the impact of 'our' before the 'cold' is all-important. It is especially telling when compared with another of Hamilton's hands, in 'In Dreams' – 'To live like this:/One hand in yours, the other/Murderously cold'. The hand which isn't 'in yours' is, then, 'murderously cold', lending weight to the idea that, if both 'our hands' are to be cold here, the act of joining is more symbolic than physical; less a consolatory act by the narrator to the 'bitter' lover, and more of an attempt to join her outside of experiencing life. It is only within death that there can be a release: until then he seems to be locked into this futile act of

service, guilt-laden and unable to let himself, or 'you', go. The post-death hand-holding image can't but remind the reader of Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb', additionally, and its somewhat begrudging acknowledgement of love's endurance.

If 'Bitter, you will turn/Back again' in 'Trucks' brought with it a fleeting allusion to the Orpheus and Eurydice story, a number of poems from *The Visit* build on this, as well as introducing a further, Miltonic, set of associations. As we have seen Hamilton discuss in the Lowell biography, and elsewhere, one of the most pressing questions he was attempting to answer with 'Perfect Speech' was how a poet could write work which had that element of 'reaching beyond' in a godless age. If these were 'Songs Among the Ruins' it wasn't only the contemporary paucity of first-rate poetry which equated to the 'ruins'. Ruinous, too, was the Cold-war age in which he was working, with its seeming antipathy towards anything other than the rational, empirical and surface-level, and which made the idea of achieving something in line with that Coleridgean 'esemplastic power' close to impossible. Hamilton's conception of 'the ruins' was a spiritual, as well as artistic, desert. Larkin's self-defeating persona seemed the only 'rational' response to the age, but it wasn't enough for Hamilton as it hadn't been for Lowell, who from *Life Studies* onwards had pointed to ways of making valid poetry even after having turned his back on the religious faith which made his early bombast possible. The end of *Paradise Lost*, with its depiction of post-lapsarian love becomes a totem of this idea of setting out without certainty and attempting to move forwards into something valid and meaningful. The trope runs through a number of *The Visit*'s poems such as 'Night Walk', 'Admission', 'Your Cry' and 'Awakening'. Milton's affecting summation:

> The world was all before them, where to choose
> Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:

They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,

Through Eden took their solitary way.[211]

can be heard in 'Your Cry' – 'We are alone,/You used to say,/And in each other's care' and almost explicitly in 'Awakening' – 'My love,/The world encircles us. We're losing ground.' But there's more than simply the literary resonance. The idea of being shut out of paradise, of standing alone outside the gates and of being 'in each other's care' is more pervasive when it comes to examining Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' and the possibility of it as a replacement for religious faith.

This fallen state is the one in which the couple must operate, the grounding of their relationship, and also a fundamental barrier to the hope that this 'Perfect Speech' can really 'mitigate the suffering'.[212] It must occur in a fallen place and is a purely human ministration. The search for a platonic realm of speech is the only 'faith' available to the speaker but inherent within it is the understanding that it is already fallen: that it is removed from 'paradise' and that its post-lapsarian nature dooms it to never attain the 'magic [which] seemed to be required'.[213] 'Perfect Speech' is a creed, or faith, which has its own defeat and failure so ingrained within it that only through a sheer effort of seemingly self-denying willpower could it be practiced, and by the mid-period of Hamilton's career, as we shall see, the poems would show that even this 'faith' had been all but lost. As much as Hamilton needed to feel that his poems were of use, by writing and reliving the scenes in an attempt at salvage he would ultimately discover that this attempt at rescue came at too great a cost, and that death, or at least release, was the only consolation possible.

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[211] John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 12, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[212] *Agenda* 31.2.

[213] Ibid.

'Night Walk', in its way, could be a what-happened-next account of Adam and Eve's 'wandering steps', albeit transplanted to an age of the 'dual carriageway' and 'new cars'. The poem's opening line, 'Above us now, the bridge,' may seem at first glance a matter-of-fact bit of scene setting, almost running contrary to Pound's advice that all furniture be removed[214], but, with this added sense of the couple's fallen nature, it is a little more ominous than perhaps it might otherwise sound. The heavens are not full of a watchful, grace-bestowing God, only 'the bridge,/The dual carriageway,/And the new cars'. If Milton is a shadow under this bridge, so is Lowell's 'For The Union Dead', in its depiction of a 'fallen' Boston: the 'old South Boston Aquarium' Lowell's own nostalgic Eden vision, replaced by 'a savage servility/[which] slides by on grease'. Both Milton, in his Fall epic, and Lowell by 1960, were writing about the loss of faith, or at least of the loss of man's personal communicative relationship with God. By conjuring up Lowell's paean to decay, where 'The ditch is nearer', and Milton's great study of man's removal from paradise, the origin of sin, and dislocation from safety, Hamilton places us, like the walking couple, beyond the realm of divine protection. The cars' 'solemn music' reminds us of the 'funeral cars,/Bathed in their own light' from 'Funeral', bringing a death-shudder with their procession, but perhaps also of the vehicles from 'Trucks' whose light promised only temporary relief; hardly a beatific vision or transfiguration.

If 'Night Walk' shows a couple walking away from grace, after a fashion, and into the world 'all before them', 'The Visit' and 'Now And Then' both depict other journeys taken as a couple, other aspects of looking back, with a more overtly Orphic element. It's hard not to hear that myth in 'The Visit's' opening lines: 'They've let me walk with you/As far as this high wall' – with its lack of specificity but the

[214] *Poetry Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997/98.

accompanying threat in 'they', with the imposition of rules; the oppressive barrier of 'this high wall' creating an opening which has in it that cruel, arbitrary demand made of Orpheus in attempting to bring his wife back from the Underworld. The arbitrariness belongs to an older, less Christian God.

What comes next reminds us of Lowell's 'Waking In The Blue', but is almost an inversion of that picture of 'the house for the "mentally ill"' populated by 'the pinched, indigenous faces/of these thoroughbred mental cases,/twice my age and half my weight'. In 'The Visit' we are shown 'The placid smiles/Of our new friends, the old incurables'. This more benign vision may seem less visceral, as is the further description later in the stanza of their 'boyish, suntanned heads' but all is not well. Malaise and horror underlie this scene, even leaving aside the setting which is only made clear by that word 'incurables' – a word which leaves no room for hope. Whereas in 'Night Walk' the couple, in their post-lapsarian but nonetheless free state, 'happily pursued' the 'new cars', here it is they who are being 'lovingly pursued' by the 'placid smiles' of incurables. Not so placid after all, seeing as they are capable of 'pursuit', we note. In a further nod to both the Shades of the Underworld and the sense of despair in this ostensibly calm and pleasant stroll, we learn that 'Their ancient arms/Outstretched, belong to you.' This phrase is, as with so much of Hamilton's layered, implication-heavy early work, charged with layers of meaning. We know that their heads are 'boyish', so why are their arms 'ancient'? Is the true fact, grounded in that 'incurables' adjective, that these people are elderly and their heads only appear 'boyish' because of their arrested growth, at least in terms of their mental capacity? Or is the 'ancient' a more spiritual description, denoting their tiredness and decay, but also bringing back in that idea of the classical nature of the scene: like the Shades of Hades these are types, derived from our knowledge of Orpheus's failed attempt at rescue; these arms might be the same ones that once reached out to him, or Odysseus, so little has changed. The question is further

complicated by 'Now And Then' with its mention of 'young men who have come to nothing'. Of course, they could be different people being described but the consistency of Hamilton's eye, and of the obsessive return to scenes, suggests otherwise.

Leaving aside the age question, 'belong to you' is another key to the poem. The idea of 'you's ownership of the arms, in a metonymic sense, thus denoting her ownership of these 'incurables' and their condition, transforms her into a power of sorts; a goddess of the asylum. Her elevation is a sickly sort of joke, a reversal of the narrator's sublimation in 'The Storm' through the sexual, violent action of the interior ritual where his 'great hands stir'. Now it is the suffering party of the couple who is 'elevated', but her promotion is tragic, her kingdom one of suffering despite the devotion she inspires while being 'lovingly pursued'. This acts to age and degrade her body. Those hands which were once held in the narrator's are now attached to 'ancient arms', and reach out – 'outstretched' in what can only be desperation.

The desperation is expanded on elsewhere in *The Visit* where it becomes clear that, as stated in 'Awakening' 'we're losing ground', and it is implied that the loss is to be final; the battle to be lost. To pick up on the Pinter influence again momentarily, 'Perfect Speech' when it is put into practice in the poems by Hamilton, with his competing urge towards trying to 'reach beyond' coupled with his more undeceived sense that it cannot work, recalls an older, more existential influence on Pinter: Samuel Beckett. The idea of trying and failing and trying again is something Beckett dealt with in his fractured oeuvre[215], and while there isn't space to follow that line of enquiry up here, the existentialist overtones drawn from the work of Beckett via Pinter are an interesting counterweight to the more hopeful, 'faithful' aspects of 'Perfect Speech'

[215] See for example 'All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' *Worstword Ho* in *Company / Ill Seen Ill Said / Worstward Ho / Stirrings Still* (London: Faber & Faber , 2009).

especially when it comes to considering the trajectory of Hamilton's poems and 'Perfect Speech' which was towards a loss of 'faith' in even that invented creed.

An important new note in the collection, with regards to 'Perfect Speech' and its attempts to provide some 'mitigation of the suffering'[216] comes in 'Poem', with its desperately poignant final lines:

> Sleep on
> And listen to these words
> Faintly, and with a tentative alarm
> Refuse to waken you.

The line that precedes this admission that 'these words' cannot alleviate the suffering, is implicated in a final, complex, undercurrent of the poems of *The Visit* – 'more close to death'. *The Visit* isn't explicitly a narrative book, but it is in some ways a chronicle of Hamilton's decreasing 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech', as we will see below, or at least his growing awareness that it cannot do what he wants it to do. That despite his 'faith' he will ultimately be thwarted. By the mid-period poems, and certainly by his final ones, the tragic optimism displayed in many poems of *The Visit* will have all but disappeared, having gone down with a tenacious struggle. It is perhaps not until the poems of *Returning*, in 1976, that we can arrive at a full understanding of what death means, in this context, within the world of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'. It's worth bearing in mind the action of 'Trucks', the narrator's refusal to let 'you' take off, and how the notion of release may in fact be a positive conclusion. In a collection haunted, as Hardy's 1912-13 poems are haunted, the idea that the addressee might finally 'Sleep on' signals a charged and pivotal moment of crisis. That death, in fact, and 'Sleep on', may be read less as despairing or mournful; that 'Refuse to waken you' may be a relief after such a prolonged campaign to do just that.

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[216] *Agenda* 31.2.

'Last Waltz' is a gateway poem when it comes to assessing the ideas of release, death and Hamilton's loss of 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech'. From its title onwards this is clearly, as with the 'Slops' in 'Trucks', a poem to do with final things. Whereas the inhabitants of the institution had earlier been 'our new friends, the old incurables', here they are mere scenery: 'From where we sit, we can just about identify/The faces of these people we don't know'. 'From where we sit' is, at one level, a simple scene-setting note – geographically placing the 'we' in the room in a certain position. However, it also carries with it a more colloquial sense – 'from where we sit', meaning 'the way we see it now'. It is this second meaning which is important in bringing to our attention the sense of degradation in the poem: where once these people were 'our new friends', with 'boyish suntanned heads' and 'outstretched arms' they are now barely identifiable, and made strange. Firstly, this proves that there is a distancing of the 'we' from the 'action' in the ward, where these faceless co-inhabitants are 'Ranged around the huge, donated television set' in a 'shadowed semi-circle'. Additionally, it does something else by its use of memory. In 'Trucks' 'Your shadows soar[ed]', but now it is the strangers who are in shadow, and a stationary, passive shadow at that. There will be no flight here, no escape, we realise. That 'Ranged' suggestive of *ar*-ranged. 'Donated' too, adds to this sense of their being helpless, at the mercy of benevolence, their reversion to a passive state. 'Fond, exhausted smiles' carries with it something of the maternity ward, but the 'birth' here is not a hopeful fresh start, rather a regression, towards a need for mothering.

What 'we' are witnessing, 'From where we sit' is a frieze of the lost, as is made explicit in the poem's second and third stanzas. 'The "Last Waltz" floods over them/Illuminating/Fond, exhausted smiles' – clearly a sign that these shadowed strangers are accepting of their loss with their 'exhausted smiles'. It is essential, therefore, that 'we' are at a remove, that 'we, / As if we cared, are smiling too' – the 'as if we cared' our only clue that 'we' are not quite at the 'Last Waltz' stage yet; that there is

still some distance to go before the 'exhausted smile' which hints at having given up replaces this current feigned one. The summation of these childlike, 'Ranged' ward-mates is made in the final couplet – 'To each lost soul, at this late hour/A medicated pang of happiness'. Whatever feeling those people, i.e. anyone other than 'we', have left is arrived at only by chemical intervention. Even then it is a mere 'pang': a sonically ostentatious word which brings our mind back to the clanging 'Illuminating' in the previous stanza. The only illumination in this scene comes from a cathode tube in a television, a forced pill, and not from anything natural or self-determined. Just as the television 'dominates' the ward, so are these people 'dominated'. By the end of the poem, that opening line's assertion that 'we can just about identify' seems less like a haughty remove and more like the promise of what is to come. The ability to pick out these 'lost souls', however difficult it may be, suggests the proximity to, rather than distance from, which 'we' find themselves in. This isn't just the 'Last Waltz', either, but also 'this late hour'. In contrast to the exterior scenes in 'The Visit' and 'Now And Then', the couple have been drawn into the artificially-lit, chemically-sustained, heart of the institution: the chances of their making it out together, even of walking again 'As far as this high wall', seem to have been destroyed.

As with so many of the apparently straightforward, poems in *The Visit*, 'Nature' is complex and one of the emotional centre-pieces of the collection. It's short enough to quote in full:

> I sit beneath this gleaming wall of rock
> And let the breeze lap over me.
> It's pleasant
> Counting syllables in perfect scenery
> Now that you've gone.

Because of the shocking final line, the poem's equally surprising first line may pass by without its full impact being felt. The poem begins with 'I' – a rarity in Hamilton's early

work and a rare promotion of the narrator to the centre of the 'action' of the poem. While this is an address, 'Now that you've gone' shows a narrator still speaking to his implied listener, the first person is a bold opening word choice in a book where 'we' and 'our' are far more modestly commonplace ways of showing there is an 'I' involved.

As we saw with 'The Storm', perfect iambics usually indicate that there is no crisis occurring; the rhythm of 'I sit beneath this gleaming wall of rock' initially puts the reader at ease, suggests that – as in the implied pastoral idyll of the title 'Nature' – 'I' finds himself in a moment of tranquillity, rather than at 'the maximum point of intensity'.[217] The second and third line are, when read together, a further show of uninterrupted (but for the line-break) iambics, the mood still ordered, and serene. The word choices, 'let the breeze lap over me' and 'It's pleasant' are from a different register than we have come to expect from this poet of destruction and 'the slap'[218], but the 'lap' which is in the middle of this reminds us of another lap: the one implicit in 'The Storm' where the narrator held 'Your head between my hands as if it were/A delicate bowl that the storm might break'. Now there is no storm, only a 'breeze', as sure a sign that trouble has passed as the rhythm is, but of course we return to the first line: 'I sit'. 'You' is not here.

With 'you' gone, however idyllic sounding this breeze-lapped state is, what had been 'Perfect Speech' becomes something degraded, almost whimsical: 'Counting syllables in perfect scenery'. The narrator, who until now has been a lightning rod is now a mere linguistic pedant, a craftsman whose craft is all that remains 'Now that you've gone'. There is no one to speak to, here, and so it isn't the speech which is 'perfect', only the 'scenery'. There can be no 'Perfect Speech' without the usefulness underpinning it, and for Hamilton with his Arnoldian leanings poetry without purpose

[217] *Poetry Review*, Autumn/Winter 1997/98.

[218] Ibid.

is an untenable thing. 'Pleasant', too, in a book of such highly-wrought emotion must carry with it as much disparagement, and pejorative association, as it does a sense of reprieve. The focus of the narrator's actions is 'gone', and all that is left to him is a neutered version of what has been experienced: a breeze for a storm; pleasant scenery for 'a strip of thriving meadowland'; 'Counting syllables' instead of words which 'Faintly, and with a tentative alarm,/Refuse to waken you'. As such 'It's pleasant' may be less of a dismissive abrogation of duties, or measure of relief, and more the narrator's own version of the 'medicated pang of happiness'. For someone who had a need to believe in the usefulness of writing poems, the removal of their ability to help or serve is artistic emasculation.

An earlier draft[219] of 'Nature' makes the fact that this seemingly pastoral scene is in fact far from idyllic even more explicit with the 'you' more central, in lines such as 'The leaves/Glint at me as your vivid eyes would', 'The stone under my hand is cold/As your mouth was when you left me' and 'The river/Laps on white cobbles. Your last smile?' The narrator also states 'I keep thinking of the past', the very existence of the 'I' in the poem seeming to run contrary to that backwards glance to a time where there was only an implicit I, whose actions in ministering to the 'you' who is now removed was once the only means of his asserting an identity. That seeming wish for self-oblivion is taken further in the redrafting process, with 'you' almost entirely removed, along with the too-explicit spelling out of what this 'pleasant scenery' is acting as a surrogate of. By the final version, 'you' appears only in that poignant final phrase's assertion 'It's pleasant counting syllables/ In perfect scenery, now that you're gone.' In that earlier draft the missing 'you' pervades the whole of nature, the landscape taking on aspects of her physical presence in her absence.

[219] Untitled early draft, Hamilton archive, Kensal Rise

Of course, 'you' cannot be 'gone' in anything other than a physical sense. The haunting, the relived scenes, the passionate attempts to 'mitigate the suffering' and all the other aspects of 'Perfect Speech' are grounded on faith not only in the need to salvage what has been lost, but also in what amounts to a lived and at times begrudging attestation of the truth in Larkin's 'what will survive of us is love'.[220] 'The Vow' is exemplary of this and of the multiplicity of meaning which Hamilton can at times wring out of simple, colloquial, language. It opens 'O world leave this alone/At least/This shocked and slightly aromatic fall of leaves'. 'At least' is a hinge, and can quite reasonably, and most accurately, be read as expanding on both the opening line and directly preceding the sense of the third. The poem invokes a MacNeice-esque 'world'[221] to 'leave this alone at least' every bit as much as it demands that 'at least this shocked and slightly aromatic fall of leaves' be 'left alone'. The 'O' is an obvious 'poetic' gesture, but rather than invoking a muse in an archaic sense, it seems to epitomise the desperation of the speaking voice. This is a study in exasperation, and, if Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' is at heart an effort at salvaging, this is its baldest confession of powerlessness. Its invocation of 'O world' is a gesture like one in which the Catholic Lowell would have asked his saviour God for help.

Fundamental to our understanding of the development and intricacy of 'Perfect Speech' is what the nature of this 'favour' being asked in such desperation involves. The leaves are not just symbols of budding life, they are specific in as much as they are 'slightly aromatic'.

> She gathers now and presses to her mouth
> And swears on. Swears that love,

[220] Philip Larkin, 'An Arundel Tomb', *Collected Poems*

[221] cf. Louis MacNeice 'Snow' in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007) - 'World is suddener than we fancy it'.

What's left of it,
Will sleep now; unappeased, impossible.

These leaves then, are a physical sign of the uncoupling: an anti-wedding ring. The 'world' of 'O world' has, it is implied, destroyed everything to this point, and the 'favour' being asked of it is that it doesn't destroy this proof of release. What the narrator is desperate to cling to isn't a promise of the continuance of love – that is unavoidable and has run through all the poems – what he needs is a sign that it will 'sleep now'. An acceptance from 'you', or rather the haunting presence of 'you', that love is now 'impossible'. Thinking back towards the pair's Miltonic overtones, it isn't eternal life the narrator is desperate for, or even salvation, but only 'death', or at least the death of love and the death of duty. If 'Perfect Speech' is a tool for obsessional devotion, this is the first sign that not only does it come weighed down with an inherent, unavoidable, failure but that this failure is in fact sought-after. The release can only come from 'you', and not the narrator – it is she who 'gathers' the leaves, and 'presses to her mouth/And swears on' them. Only she can take charge of the unburdening from the narrator of 'Perfect Speech' and its demands. The 'shocked', like the 'happily pursued' cars of 'Night Walk' is a deferred adjective, applicable to the narrator as much as to the 'slightly aromatic fall of leaves'. It is a surprise to see this child-like gesture, the swearing on – almost pagan. These leaves become emblematic of a state wherein he is an 'I' again, uncoupled and tranquilised, where 'Perfect Speech' is replaced by 'counting syllables' and there is no burden on him to persist because at last love 'Will sleep now; unappeased' Rhythmically ordered, this poem hints at making permanent the tranquillity shown in 'Nature'; 'She gathers now and presses to her mouth', 'Will sleep now; unappeased, impossible' both in stressed iambics, and 'And swears on. Swears that love,/What's left of it' is similarly exact but for the lineation. However, the rhythm of the opening three lines – 'O world leave this alone/At least/This shocked and slightly

aromatic fall of leaves' is not so regular, and carries with it the suggestion that – just as this plea cannot be made to cohere into a controlled shape - 'world' won't grant this mercy.

It would appear that by *Returning* – published in 1976 – as expected 'world' hadn't kept up its end of the bargain. A number of the poems in this slim volume are coloured by an increased sense of futility – more than was on show in even the most desperate moments of *The Visit*. 'Retreat' ends with the line 'And I'm no comfort to you any more'. It is only in the light of the aims of 'Perfect Speech' that this final line attains its full, dramatic effect, given that one of the most important reasons for attempting to 'talk in a magic way to the subject of the poem'[222] is that 'One might even think that this is doing some good, making things better.'[223] This time round, the 'conversation' is, patently, 'no comfort', and as if we were unsure as to the nature of this degradation of 'Perfect Speech' it's helpfully clarified: 'any more'. Implicitly, whatever 'mitigation of suffering'[224] this sort of 'magic' speech might once have been able to carry out is gone. What this final line signals is an apparent loss of faith in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech'[225] – the last vestige of faith remaining in the post-lapsarian state in which he, and 'you', have always existed.

Similarly 'Poet' recalls 'Nature' in its self-awareness of the making of a poem, but seems to hint rather strongly that, as in the ending of 'Vigil', 'the lost will not be found'. If we are looking for evidence of a loss of faith in 'Perfect Speech', 'Poet' is a good place to focus. It's unusual in Hamilton's oeuvre for reasons akin, but not identical

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[222] *Agenda* 31.2.

[223] Ibid.

[224] Ibid.

[225] *Robert Lowell: A Biography*, p.260.

to, 'Nature'. Opening on a quotation which we assume is a self-quotation from the 'Poet' of the title, we are plunged into apocalyptic, over-wrought gloom:

> 'Light fails, the world sucks on the winter dark
> And everywhere
> Huge cities are surrendering their ghosts…'

This is a far cry from the sort of restraint we are used to with Hamilton, turning this into something like a dramatic monologue, albeit a curtailed and relatively experimental one. Immediately, however, there are Hamiltonian concerns which we recognise from *The Visit* – light, which in this case doesn't slop in but 'fails', and ghosts which are – tellingly – surrendered by 'Huge cities'. This surrendering is important, given that *The Visit* moved towards a letting-go of its own hauntedness, and the acceptance that 'I'm no comfort to you any more' of 'Retreat' sounds like a paving of the way for *Returning* to complete this un-haunting role. What follows complicates things. No direct address, this, instead we are shown 'The poet, listening for other lives/Like his', and as if this third person 'character' didn't draw enough attention to himself, he 'begins again'. That what he 'begins again' is an even more despairing line – 'And it is all/Folly…' is important, certainly, with regards to the idea of a loss of faith in the ability to 'be of any comfort'. However, more important surely is the very fact the he does 'begin again' at all – that despite knowing, or at least writing, that 'it is all/Folly' he is still at the desk, pen in hand. It is also important that he is listening for 'other lives/Like his', that he is an isolated but empathetic figure. In these 'lives like his', then, we feel that 'Light fails' and 'Huge cities are surrendering their ghosts' – he is one of the haunted trapped in a more pronounced version of that Beckettian stasis mentioned above. It may all be folly, but he nonetheless 'begins again'. The world is addicted to darkness, despite knowing it's bad for it, just as this 'Poet' is engaged in, and bound to, his own bad habits. With his 'faith' damaged or even lapsed, this new note of self-consciousness is telling in itself.

Falck writes on the idea of literature which is aware of itself, and commentating on experience rather than simply experiencing, noting 'Too much self-consciousness might perhaps fairly be taken to be a symptom of spiritual disorder'.[226] Similarly, he has written of Beckett as representative of a wider crisis of belief, and it's especially interesting that Hamilton's work most overtly recalls Beckett's at this point where his 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' has begun to wane and self-referentiality begins to be allowed into the poems for the first time:

> 'Only the sick man feels his limbs,' said Oswald Spengler, in a phrase which summarized his account of the spiritual decadence of the entire later phase of Western culture ... In a study of some of our more celebrated modernist literature Georg Lukács saw this kind of 'failure of belief', and the rejection of any humanly apprehensible meaning in reality, as central to the work of artists such as Joyce, Kafka and Beckett. Beckett's *Molloy*, he suggests, 'is perhaps the *ne plus ultra* of this development.'[227]

In a similar vein, Falck notes:

> As early as 1864 Dostoevsky saw a spiritual crisis developing, and had the central character of his *Notes from Underground* insist that 'we have all lost touch with life, we are all cripples, every one of us – more or less'.

[226] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p.160

[227] *Myth, Truth and Literature* p.165.

> We have lost touch with life because of the hypertrophying of our self-awareness … that made it impossible for the anti-hero of the *Notes* to accept any of the socially available roles that were being acted out around him, and which therefore left him unable to *be* anything authentic except a socially disembodied and marginalized observing consciousness. [228]

The crisis of 'faith' that this increased self-awareness represents at this stage of Hamilton's career is different to the question of 'faith' at the beginning of his career. Then, he was looking, through 'Perfect Speech', to find something which would make it possible to write, a belief in the potentially restorative and reparative powers of poetry, which meant that his need for purposeful action could be combined with his desire to write artistically valid lyrics. At this point, with that 'faith' diminished, he is like Dostoevsky's character unable to find a way to exist authentically as a poet, knowing his previous 'faith' was in vain. That he chooses to carry on anyway, to attempt to produce poems and revisit familiar scenes, shifts him from an idealistic figure trying to enact his 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' into something more like a character from Beckett, attempting to go on, or to fail better. There are poems, such as 'Returning' and 'Anniversary' which seem like returns to the scenes in *The Visit* driven by just this willingness to begin again against the odds. They are notable for the increase in their circumstantial detail from the earlier poems, with 'a stream,/A thin ripple really', 'a dilapidated boundary', 'a muddily abandoned sprawl' and 'A red coat/Disappearing into snow'. While hardly Lowellian in terms of 'saying what happened', this does mark a movement towards a more Hardyish degree of description. What's most notable about the poems, however, in terms of 'Perfect Speech', and especially the loss of faith in it, is the attempt to go back at all:

[228] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.69

because the initial attempts to salvage the situation failed there is an implicit need to keep trying obsessively until the perfect formulation of words are found, but also to right any wrongs done in previous attempts.

Returning contains a number of poems which do, despite the addiction and folly of 'Poet', hint at the possibility of release, or closure. The idea of a lasting severance is set up in 'Friends', as is a reiteration of the ultimate loss of faith. It is a violent and aggressive address, the speaker, talking to the expected 'you', is addressing 'Old enemy' – 'Old enemy,/You want to live forever/And I don't'. This line, founded on the once-more rhythmically sound iambics of the run-on 'You want to live forever/And I don't', feels like resolution but – ostensibly – also dissolution: death-wish and acceptance of defeat. This statement is loaded with telling detail, in the context of all this haunting and the blurring of past and present – the difference between the two participants being their attitude towards, appropriately enough, eternal life. As we have seen, 'you' is, in their way, already 'living forever', in so far as their presence is unshakeable: even when they're 'gone' they are still remembered, revisited and reanimated. Whereas 'you' wants to linger, the 'I' wants it to stop.[229] The use of 'enemy' is unexpected: throughout, despite the turmoil and suffering, there has been no doubt about the tenderness or intimacy between the couple, and this 'enemy' is complicated. The state of being an 'enemy' derives from the temptation provided by 'you', then, more than antipathy – if we are in a world of obsessions/compulsions 'you' represents the height of addiction, the reason to keep going even when 'it is all folly', the unwillingness to let go, which must be conquered and shaken off in order to not 'live forever', in this negative sense. Paradoxically, the desire not to 'live forever' allows the possibility of change, a breaking

[229] David Harsent has said 'It struck such a chord with me, that notion of the abandonment of the lack of perfection, in other words saying I'm never going to pull this off so I'll quit. Why would anyone want to live forever, for a creative artist it's got to be going on getting better, the notion isn't so much life has worn me down as the unachievability.'

of the stasis of this relationship which might facilitate a new way of living – albeit not an 'eternal' one – and the possibility of renewal if not redemption. The death-wish on show here, then, is also an attempt to 'kill' this relationship, to 'surrender its ghost'. The draw of memory, of the shared intimate past, signified in the opening lines' quotation – we assume spoken by 'you' – 'At one time we wanted nothing more/Than to wake up in each other's arms' is a siren song, calling the speaker back again to this past. The seeming finality of the resolution – underlined by the repetition of 'last' in the poem's closing two lines 'Was the last pact we made/On our last afternoon together' - is one layered in allusion and literary resonance. 'Pact' reminds us of 'suicide pact', the doomed lovers' staple from Romeo and Juliet. The 'last pact' and 'last afternoon' also bring with them the shadow of a 'last supper', not least given the question of eternity and 'Old enemy' which runs through the poem, alongside the notion of temptation and duty. In that context, the narrator must shun 'salvation' insofar as he hopes to turn away from the possibility of 'forever': in leaving his 'Old enemy' he is choosing the side of that other archetypal 'enemy' – Satan – and removing himself not from Eden, from where the pair have always been exiled, but from the memories of their version of it. Here he is attempting to choose 'world', which has so often let him down, over his faith in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech'. But, as important as the repeated 'last', and the idea of not wanting 'forever', is the framing of the declaration – 'You want to live forever/And I don't'. As we have seen throughout Hamilton's oeuvre what one wants is rarely attained, and neither 'you' nor the speaker are likely to get their wish.

Despite the apparent decision to opt for death over living forever, running contrary to Hamilton's demand that poets 'choose life' in his essay 'Songs Among the Ruins', walking away from the quasi-eternity of memory and attempting to minister to 'you' isn't possible, at least yet. 'Rose' is more musical than most of Hamilton's previous shorter lyrics, and its 'rose' motif feels like a gesture towards a higher, more 'poetic'

tradition, with medieval and French symbolist undertones. It's also another vivid example of how much guilt is a shaping factor in the poems. Read on its own the poem, at times, lapses into something rather conventionally 'poetic' – the 'delicately shrouded heart', the 'eye of love', are luxurious gestures for a poet of terseness. However, as a study of obsession, the poem's excesses are telling of the mental state – exhausted, on edge, in a state of piqued, almost paranoid, emotion. This 'eye of love' 'Knows who I am, and where I've been/Tonight, and what I wish I'd done'. This ushers in a new tenor to the difficulty of letting go: the possibility of 'moving on' is figured as a betrayal to the very 'eye of love', symbolised by this most romantic of symbols the – tellingly 'white'– rose. The pacts and desires only to 'wake up in each other's arms' may have dissipated but try telling that to Love itself. The narrator is being judged, and found wanting. As a result, he has turned the rose – itself only a symbol of the chaste, marital love which has been lost – into an effigy, capable itself of 'attending' in a way[230], 'imagining/Each tremor of each petal to be like a breath/That silences and soothes.' In place of 'you', then, there is a rose, and, instead of trying to 'mitigate the suffering', it is the narrator here who is being soothed and given comfort. That the rose has become a stand-in for 'you' but an inverse one, an addressee capable of providing not requiring comfort, also makes it a reminder of what is gone. In the presence of this pure, chaste, courtly love symbol the narrator is reminded of 'you' '"Look at it" I'd say to you/If you were here: "it is a sign/Of what is brief, and lonely/And in love"'. The idea of presence is essential to this poem – those words are what the narrator would say 'if you were here', showing 'you' what it is to be impermanent, the rose a lesson to him but also, because of its being 'brief, and lonely', a sign capable of displaying the merits of being a passing thing. 'In love' is crucial too, especially when we consider the lines between past and present,

[230] *Between the Lines*, p.65.

the ghostly revisitings which have blurred the lines and distances between what it means to love, and be in love, and made it possible to love and perform acts of service for – albeit guiltily and complicatedly – a ghost just as Hardy attempted to love Emma long after it was too late.

By the time of *Steps*, a privately printed pamphlet in the late 1990s, while many of the prosodic aspects of 'Perfect Speech' remained, Hamilton seemed to have entered a new phase of his poetic career. It was one marked most of all by a number of surprising relaxations. Biographically, one of the driving forces of 'Perfect Speech' is now 'removed', at least to a large extent, by the fact that Hamilton and his first wife divorced in 1978: 'The hands I used to write about with 'lyric force'/…Now clutching a slim volume of dead writs'.[231] The urgent purposefulness of 'Perfect Speech', the need to 'be of comfort', is no longer a driving force, and it's no great coincidence that the period following Hamilton's divorce would be categorised by him as a series of 'trashy years' where very little work was produced. By the publication of *Steps* he had found a new way of talking: where *The Visit* era poems were purged, as we have seen, of circumstantial detail, direct allusion and shaped in a defiantly minimalist, anti-Empsonian, Imagist-inspired fashion, the new poems were willing to let more of the world in. They were also open to a relaxation of metre – the adjusted iambs were previously ratcheted up to create tension and a crampedness of diction which spoke of claustrophobia, Pinter-esque internal spaces and climactic intensity. Where regular pentameter had been hit full on it was as a sign of brief calm but always carried the suggestion of being only an interlude before another storm. In 'The Garden', Hamilton is at his most relaxed, not only in allowing something like a sing-song rhythm to break

[231] 'Larkinesque', *Collected Poems*, p.50

out, but also in the subject matter, which speaks of something like contentment, and the literariness of the language.

Despite being utterly immersed in the canon, the most allusive Hamilton had allowed his poems to be was in the odd half-phrase, such as 'Gleams, and is gone', but in 'The Garden' there are a number of explicit allusions competing to create the atmosphere, and more room than is habitual in which they can play these resonances out. Andrew Marvell is a touchstone, with 'green-shadowed/Shadowed green' and the scythe both bringing his work to mind. Perhaps more interestingly, however, in the context of Hamilton's movement away from faith in 'Perfect Speech' and the Miltonic associations of some of the earliest poems, is the 'cobbled little serpent of a path'. It may be too great a stretch to say that 'The Garden' finds the narrator finally within the walls of Eden but the presence of the serpent, the profusion of greenery and – most tellingly – the conclusion of the poem do all strongly hint at something like contentment. For the narrator of *The Visit* to utter the lines 'Let's listen to our shadows and be glad/That this much light has managed to get through' would be unthinkable. Tellingly, this isn't the same as 'Nature', where it was 'pleasant counting syllables' but there was a despairing, emasculated undertone. This seems like acceptance at the very least, and could only have been arrived at having been through the purgative process of release we saw enacted in *Returning*. Nonetheless it is also hard not to consider, at least in line with the demands and purposes of 'Perfect Speech', that these poems are more 'counting syllables' than urgent songs among the ruins. They take stock and are thankful for having endured, but their 'faith' is all but gone. Ever self-aware, Hamilton's poems seem from this point an acknowledgement that his highest purpose has not been, indeed could never have been, achieved and he can take a more relaxed approach to allowing himself to make use of the other aspects of his writing life to make poems which work but are not the urgent crisis-point epiphanies he had previously aimed for.

In *Returning* we may have been brought back to familiar scenes in an obsessional, Beckett-esque attempt to fail better, but now our revisits are – along the lines of 'The Garden' – ones which carry an air of acceptance. In 'At Evening' we see a figure we assume to be the female character from *The Visit*, but now she is displaying only 'dreaminess', acting 'dottily' and even the final line, with its more ominous tone, doesn't seem to carry that same electric charge: 'I'd talk to you about it if I could' might be a phrase taken from the ECT-treatment ward, but here feels less foreboding, the inhibition more on the part of the speaker than the addressee. The urge towards death discussed above has returned too, but is similarly neutralised – 'Dreamed up a day utterly unclouded/By the dread that not quite yet but soon,/Although, please God, not very soon,/We will indeed be whispering/Wretchedly, in unison'. Even 'Responsibilities', the poem most in line with all the aspects of 'Perfect Speech', is clearly the work of an altered narrator – a more accepting and dramatically less burdened voice. The title is itself telling, and while there is not the freedom sought after in poems such as 'Vow', there is something close to it. While the narrator admits 'Imagining you on your own,/I'm vigilant', this admission is in tandem with the striking declaration 'Ghost tremors,/They don't keep you company,/Not now, and they won't bring me back,/Not this time.' As so often with Hamilton's concision of language, this declaration is carrying out a dual role – both confirming to the unanswering addressee that this time the implied 'I' won't be drawn back, and that they can fly off now with his blessing. For this Hardy-infused line of address, the ghost's inability to keep one company or bring the 'I' back is in itself a sort of release. Driven by guilt into these revisitings, this feels almost like a farewell at last, however begrudging and poignant. This is confirmed by the moving 'dialogue' in which 'you' is given something to say – 'Please/Leave me alone' - and the 'I', against his nature, and attempting to shed that burden of responsibility, replies 'Don't make me go'. Out of context, that might seem like an unwillingness to

comply, but with all that's gone before, both in the poem and through the stages of Hamilton's career, it's as close as possible to his declaring that love can, at last, 'sleep unappeased'.

An unpublished draft of a poem from Hamilton's final notebook contains an analogous gesture, combining that sense both of persisting responsibilities and a shedding of the need for intercession. In this poem the 'you' is also given dialogue, via an answerphone message – 'I hope your work is going well, whatever it may be. Perhaps/You'll ring me when you get this./I'll be here. I'm always here. Good night.' The use of the answerphone is a subtle device on the part of the creator of 'Perfect Speech', ensuring that even when there is an apparent possibility of conversation with a 'you' who has always seemed so distant, they remain disembodied but 'always here'. There is no dialogue here, only a speaker who is not answered and an invitation on their part, at a remove, to begin a conversation. Unlike the poet of 'Perfect Speech' who attempted to 'reach beyond' and conjure an idealised graveside address to an unanswering 'you', here the 'I' absolves himself of the responsibility of trying to tap into that sort of magical address – 'The answering machine can deal with this,/I can't. She's in despair. And so am I.' Now it is the machine, and not the 'I', who is burdened by the responsibility of communication, another example of an intermediary like that Rose with its 'eye of love'. We are used to the 'you', here 'she', being 'in despair' but the bald and surprising declaration 'And so am I' feels almost egotistical for a poet of such subsumed ego as that of *The Visit,* where his personality was expressed only through action. Here he is equated with the suffering you, his despair on an even keel with theirs. This occasions a resolution and a changed approach – 'But will I call her back? I don't suppose so./Not tonight,' – that drive to 'be of use' seemingly conquered. It isn't quite as simple as that however, and we are reminded of the poem 'Responsibilities' again, as well as the less-than-linear movement away from 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' by

the poem's final line: 'Although, in general terms, I'm looking out for her, as usual'. By not intervening, by allowing her instead to be untethered, the poet is still being selfless, if anything more so – by having lost his 'faith' in the potential of 'Perfect Speech' he has been able to stop conjuring her back to suffer again through these present-tense ceremonies, leaving her instead at a remove, as a voice on a machine.

If there is a movement towards contentment, or at least a diminution of sorrow and burdensome duty, it does come at a cost. Poetically Hamilton makes a number of advances in these poems, in 'Dream Song' explicitly writing *about* Berryman, for example, or the surprisingly I-strewn 'Family Album' where the narrator is more visible than he would ever have been in *The Visit*. As with 'The Garden', too, his years of reading and literary endeavour are allowed to leave a mark on the poems rather than having to be absorbed and compacted, hence poems with more and more explicit allusions – Housman in 'Resolve' and Henry James in 'Biography' among others. The purpose, or if not purpose then potential, of the work has altered, irrevocably, with the loss of 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech.' This is best displayed in the title poem 'Steps', another referential work borrowing from Emerson, which speaks of some of the concerns which most marked out Hamilton's poetic career – duty and a wish to regain that which was lost: 'The world below/Will never be regained; was never there/Perhaps.' That perhaps is typically optimistic, in the face of what appears to be adult, post-faith acceptance at last that the lost will not be found, that however much pushing was attempted it was always a mission in vain. That he can still write is, in the light of this, something almost as miraculous as what he was trying to achieve in the beginning. While this isn't cause for the same emasculated feeling seen in 'Nature' earlier, it does still leave him on a lesser plane than he had hoped possible. There is 'lethargy at noon', and even in 'The Garden' with its unquestionably hopeful ending there is a darkness unique to the post-faith Hamilton. What precedes the seeming acceptance is a feeling

that 'It shouldn't be so dark/So early' and 'Don't fidget/For old clearances, or new.' This feeling is best, and most movingly, expressed in 'Resolve' where the acceptance is externalised, spoken to the 'Enchantress', a muse figure who knows what they always did but in a state which is 'toothless, blind, forgetful.' 'Resolve' is a quietly self-eviscerating poem, talking of 'how hard I tried' and ending on the desertion of this 'Queen of Numbers'. It seems that there won't be any more poems possible, at least not the sort enlivened and made possible by the belief in 'Perfect Speech', its purpose-making creed and the ability to do good and be of use. What's left is allusion, high-grade syllable counting; and even if the narrator has learned to be more accepting of it there is the unignorable awareness that, as in 'Biography', 'The Middle Years' are the stark opposite of the time when 'Life was wide open.'

Where once Hamilton's self-effacing minimalism was an artistic reaction to The Movement, an attempt at injecting American urgency and feeling into the English line courtesy of Pound's inference and Douglas's diction, with his 'faith' gone the work becomes more explicitly a critic's poetry. An unavoidable, pragmatic element of Hamilton's minimalism, his speaking at the verge of silence, is the fact that his writing was always informed by the critical climate in which he was operating. The idea of expansiveness was not only artistically unwanted but also one which would have left him more open to the sort of aggressive criticisms he so often dished out to others. Hamilton could never fool himself into believing he was as prosodically gifted as Larkin, or as effectively wide-ranging as Lowell, and so rather than risk public failure with poems he knew not to be 'the real thing' he settled for the few intense, occasional, 'miraculous' but purposeful ones he managed to produce. When his drive to be of use was gone, however, what had been the still risky, 'mystical' attempts at 'Perfect Speech' made way for more literary construction: a falsifiable version of his earlier prosody without the driving motor which had given it its full erotic and emotional charge. The

resulting poems are often satisfyingly made, and still possess a foundational core of feeling which can be affecting, but they are less 'purposeful' and, as a result, not true examples of the youthful Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'. Seeing that the author of these later poems, however well achieved, had lost his 'faith', he dwindled ever closer to silence.

An unpublished poem, represented by many versions in Hamilton's archive, seems to admit as much while also pointing to a somewhat less zealous approach to the results of his loss of 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech'. '"Later work" you used to tell me/Early on "is hardly ever any good./It rarely sings"'. The 'you' here seems not simply that 'you' of the interpersonal poems but some combination of it with the more mystical 'Queen of Numbers' muse-figure, some conflation of the two, but somewhat complicatedly, given the caustic address to the you as a 'now-dead prognosticant' and 'corpse' elsewhere in drafts of the poem. The charge of this 'you' that later work 'rarely sings' is to do with that sort of diminution of righteous drive which the younger Hamilton would, seemingly, have agreed with – 'it complains that heartaches nowadays/Are more likely to be chest-pains than poetic pangs'. While there is something akin to the neutered scene of 'Nature' rather than the high-pitched enervations and dramas of *The Visit* to this, a hard-won understanding like that of 'The Garden' emerges. The statement that 'I watched her pottering out in the yard/And dwelling, spell bound as it seemed to me,/on the remains of last year's blooms' is used as a charge against this judgemental 'you' who would claim that only the faithful tenor of 'Perfect Speech', or 'early work', are worthwhile. This older, released version of the poet, freed from the demands of 'Perfect Speech', may be without faith but has discovered that there is at least still something more than simply syllable-counting to be done: 'Surely even you must grant/There's something gallant and unbreakable in this,/Something that gives heart. I miss you/And I even miss the mess we would have shared./But I'm still here

and you're not. So/Let's call it work, let's call it later work.' The highest sort of poetry is no longer possible following the loss of a belief in the secular transubstantiations of 'Perfect Speech', and that is unquestionably a loss, elided with the absence of the 'you' as muse – 'I miss you' – but as we have seen the cost that it always came at, this endurance, this 'gallant and unbreakable' survival, is 'something that gives heart' even if it's worthy of only being called 'later work'. The old urges have been cured, the release achieved, and – like Lowell in 'Home After Three Months Away' - Hamilton cured is, to his own mind, 'frizzled, stale and small'. That is no longer the damning verdict it would once have been, however, when he was in accordance with the 'long-dead prognosticant.' To have endured is now, it seems, worth celebrating in itself thanks to the light that manages to get through and the 'remains of last year's blooms'.

Chapter Five - 'I'd say it to you now if I thought you were listening' – 'Perfect Speech' in Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann

Just as Hamilton's conception and practical use of 'Perfect Speech' derived from a variety of influences, his own poems would prove influential in their turn. Hamilton's position as a central figure, editorially and poetically, throughout the 1960s and 1970s would lead to adapted versions of 'Perfect Speech' appearing in the work of Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann[232] but as we'll see the writing of those who picked up on elements of 'Perfect Speech' would go on to diverge widely. As well as being a result of stylistic decisions both Williams and Hofmann were in part shaped by their contemporary poetic climate, as Hamilton had been. In this chapter I will look at the elements of 'Perfect Speech' which may be discerned first in Williams, then Hofmann, working through their work chronologically through close-reading. I will also contextualise them in their poetic climate, not least because as we saw earlier there is a methodological aspect of 'Perfect Speech' which makes it adaptive and reactionary to the contemporary setting in which it operates.

Hugo Williams was regularly published by Hamilton in *The Review* and *The New Review* but found that the compressed, Imagist-inspired poems of Hamilton had an important, chastening but also inhibiting impact on his own writing:

> At the time they were just what you needed.
> Minimalism. Tip of the iceberg. I used to write
> ridiculously silly little poems, not grasping [it].[233]

[232] Elements of 'Perfect Speech' may also be found in other poets associated with Hamilton's magazines such as David Harsent and Alan Jenkins among others, but it is in Williams and Hofmann that Hamilton's influence is most explicit and sustained.

[233] Interview with Hugo Williams, (01/02/12).

The 'tip of the iceberg' style of Hamilton and *The Review* in general was, as we have seen, an attempt to set themselves in direct opposition to the five-beat certainties of The Movement. However, without the Hamiltonian 'faith' in speaking to some unanswerable you, attempting to repair damage or – driven by guilt – salvage a situation, a number of Williams's poems from the 1970s are more artfully minimalist gesture than 'Perfect Speech'. At the height of his *'Review* period', in books such as *Sugar Daddy* and *Some Sweet Day*, the Hamilton influence is clear at least visually, with a default style of short, elusive, interpersonal poems. The result sometimes hits something like the emotional tenor of Hamilton, at moments where the 'you' being addressed seems in some way unreachable, and there is a hopelessness in the address, such as in 'Daybreak' with its moving final stanza:

> When we look at one another,
> We remember we have faces
> And use them to be ourselves again

or 'Sugar Daddy's intense, and deeply felt, final lines:

> I was the White Hunter,
> Bearing cheap mirrors for the Chief.
> You saw the giving-look coagulate in my eyes
> And panicked for the trees.

These both carry with them something of the alarm of Hamilton's poems of love, and a similarly claustrophobic, anxious charge, as well as showing Williams speaking to an addressee who seems, at least to some extent, 'incapable of attending'. They don't share the need to relive, or recreate, however – Williams's present tense is usually, like Hamilton's, a remembered one but without the same climactic despair. The poems miss the belief in their own potential to restore, which is an underpinning necessity of

'Perfect Speech' – they are not purposeful or faithful in the sense we have come to understand it, but have taken some of its 'art' elements. While they do possess, often, a direct address to a 'you' and are in many other ways in keeping with some of the stylistic elements of 'Perfect Speech' thanks to their compressed nature, their use of inference and flattened tendency towards prosaic diction, their overall impact is more one of symbolism than any Hamiltonian resurrection bid. Some, additionally, display the nostalgic, or present-tense performative remembering element of Hamilton's poems, such as the tellingly titled 'Present Continuous' from 1979's *Love Life,* where 'I am still/The unofficial guardian of your house,/Which is not your house anymore' and 'fifty pairs of shoes/Still hang around the window on the stairs,/The changing fashions of your years with me.' What they lack is a sense of that overlapping of time, and the apparent drive to restore, through words, what has been lost, which is intrinsic to Hamilton's view of what a poem was for.

Falck has written about Williams, and notes that even at the start of his career he was creating poems of experiencing - as we saw earlier a sought-after criteria for *The Review* - rather than self-aware acknowledgements of personal crises without any attempt being made to provide a remedy. In this sense, Williams does more than Larkin insofar as he is not content to simply put up with the falling-short of some unreachable platonic ideal, instead

> With their bold enlistings of our sympathy through a kind of flamboyant self-effacingness, Williams's poems are an accumulation of uncertainty of small victories over a quiet and continuously ongoing identity crisis. Where the uncertainty of selfhood is paraded for us by other poets as a by-now-routine fact of our condition,

> for Williams it is a constantly stumbled-upon discovery,
> and his poems draw their strength from their ability to
> pin down for our comprehension what their speaker-
> narrator knows to be a weakness in his existential grasp
> of the world he lives in. [234]

As we have seen, attempting to write with a degree of discovery and presentism is important in order that the 'esemplastic' elements of the lyric poem be made use of, that the poems should attempt to be an experience, rather than notes made after one. Williams's 'continuously ongoing identity crisis' is, therefore, for *The Review*'s take on things, favourable to the more knowing styles of direct contemporaries such as John Ashbery or the 'Martian School', because by producing poems of experiencing there is the chance that something will be revealed and – by a leap of that 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech', remedied - which will help the reader to cope with their own difficulties of personality. For Falck, poets such as Ashbery or Craig Raine, as an exemplar of a highly metaphorical and 'ludic' style which was to become prevalent in mainstream British poetry in the 1980s and 1990s[235], represent a 'deviation', one which Hamilton in part 'predicted', as he alluded to in an interview in 1997:

> I think there is this continual process of action and
> reaction throughout the development of poetry …
> When I was arguing … for a kind of poetry of intense

[234] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.85.

[235] There isn't scope for a discussion here of Williams's and Hofmann's wider contemporary context but the influence of Paul Muldoon, among others, was a shaping factor in creating the playful and, in Muldoon's case, technically highly-wrought style which occupied a central part of the British poetic 'mainstream' in the 1980s and 1990s. The ludic aspects of Muldoon's work would seemingly fall under Falck and Hamilton's admittedly narrow 'deviation' diagnosis, if not his more lyrical poems.

> personal experience … this excluded the fanciful, the inventive, the narrative ... It got narrower and narrower and narrower in its focus: too narrow in the end. Of poets like Auden and Wallace Stevens, we would have said 'Oh, they're *thinking* poets … they're not poets who write out of the sort of visceral intensities we're concerned with'. So, you could have predicted that the next thing would be a resurgence of Auden and Stevens, and I think that Martianism came out of that.[236]

Hamilton's overall view of the British poetic mainstream of this period was no more positive, in the main:

> I do feel that poetry's become more of a rag bag – more inclusive, more shapeless, more chatty, more discursive, more of a receptacle for amusing observations. I think that poetry should begin with the kind of intensity and focus and craftsmanship that insists on every line being perfect. Most of what is out there today isn't really poetry … every line doesn't count, every word hasn't been chosen carefully … You can play around with the rules, but you don't just throw it all out … I think that the reason I studied a book like Lowell's *Life Studies* was that … you could hear the rules he was breaking …

[236] Conversation with Gregory Lestage, *Poetry Review* 87:4 1997, collected in *A Century of Poetry Review*, ed. Sampson.

> Today, I think that many poems are being written by
> people who have no poetry in their heads.[237]

Certainly if one is looking for the heirs of a Lowellian 'heartbreak note' or lines haunted by iambic pentameter in a terse, inferring, voice which sounds like natural speech much of the more inventive, playful or surreal poetry of the period may seem by Hamilton's definition 'chatty' or 'discursive'. Even Seamus Heaney, who was seemingly closer in intent to the sort of drive for perfection than many others at the time, and informed in part by Robert Lowell, didn't produce the sort of work Hamilton is most keenly in favour of. This is largely because, having the political situation in Northern Ireland as, in Hamilton's words, 'The Subject' to wrestle with, Heaney introduced a form of 'bardic anonymity' to address the political climate, avoiding as a result '[being] introverted, self-obsessed, subjective or narrow … The Subject … gives him the confidence to "put on the airs" … he can speak in an authoritative poetic voice'.[238] While this isn't a moral or entirely negative thing, it does mean that Heaney isn't producing the sort of poetry of experiencing most sought after by Hamilton, opting instead for a more impersonal, historical stance. While Hamilton is keen not to dismiss Heaney, pointing only to the ways he can't entirely embrace his work, he does talk of the bigger problem of a poetic culture of 'bad readers', those without a sense of the tradition behind them, which in turn produces bad poetry. They 'don't know where they are when you present them with a poem by Hardy or Frost'[239] and the work produced where you can't hear the rules which are being broken, only the absence of any 'rules' at all is dismissed by Hamilton:

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[237] Ibid.

[238] Ibid.

[239] Ibid.

'If it doesn't hit them in the face or make them laugh, it has no value to them'.[240] The movement away from a poetry based on craft and personal experience towards one which is intended firstly to entertain or amuse leaves its mark on language, also, with the 'speakers' of many poems by the likes of Raine, Ashbery or later poets such as Simon Armitage or Carol Ann Duffy using either a heightened, 'poetic', language rather than the sort of conversational syntax and speech patterns championed by Hamilton, or producing 'a form of writing that is engaging and sharp and entertaining, but [which] is not poetry'[241] by Hamilton's admittedly narrow definitions.

Using that method of 'flamboyant self-effacingness' Williams, however, is able to provide specificities which 'cannot be reduced to an ironical judgement'[242], and therefore 'offer some surprising reassurances for any reader who may still be trying to decide what it is that makes his or her own life hang together'.[243] The potential for discovery allows for the possibility of writing poems which point to a way of living in the modern 'desert', that could be 'Songs Among The Ruins' and make some move towards that ideal of a new 'faith' with poetry as its liturgy, although such difficulties are no slighter than they had been for Hamilton or his forebears. That idea of attempting to 'Pin down for our comprehension' in Falck's quotation is important too – Williams, like Hamilton, may be dealing with complicated ideas but he does so in a low style, often with 'superficial speech rhythms'.[244] Plainness is crucial to his work and his thinking about poetry, as he has outlined:

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[240] Ibid.

[241] Ibid.

[242] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.86.

[243] Ibid. p.87.

[244] On Eliot's notion that modern poetry must be difficult because the modern world is difficult Falck writes that it is 'an idea which is no more logical than to suppose that if one is knocked down by a truck

> given that poems themselves are metaphors I find overt metaphors more and more embarrassing … There is more not less intensity in plainness, because simple stuff operates without the safety net of the poetical … Fred Astaire said it better: 'If it doesn't look easy, you aren't working hard enough.'[245]

For Falck, this is in contrast with poets such as Raine or Ashbery for whom 'the conceptual ambiguities of human life came to be seen more as a matter of theory than as a matter of experience' and who represent a 'highbrow deviation which seemed to have been especially created for those whose interest in literature was academic or antiquarian, and who were happier to reflect on what it is to find out anything at all about the nature of the world than actually to find any particular things out.'[246]

As discussed above, Hamilton's father's death was a formative influence on the poems he would go on to write, and it was the death of Williams's father which led to a shift in his work further towards the restorative gestures of 'Perfect Speech'. By the time of *Writing Home*, in 1985, Williams had not only begun to absorb and make use of the Lowell influence suggested to him by Hamilton but additionally felt that the death of his father had freed him up to address their relationship more fully.[247] *Writing Home*

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and sent to hospital one's cure will in some way or other need to make use of trucks.' *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.89.

[245] *Strong Words*, ed. Matthew Hollis and W.N Herbert (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000) pp. 229-232.

[246] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century*, p.70.

[247] Interview with Hugo Williams, (01/02/12): 'I think my understanding of Lowell came much later, right at the end of the 70s … my *Writing Home* book came out in about 1985 which is quite late isn't it? Much much further on. I wasn't listening to what Ian was saying about Robert Lowell until much later on. My father died and that released the material. I suppose it has got to be the right time.'

introduces an increasingly complicated relationship with time in Williams's poems. It had always been a fluid device, but in this new book past and present began to elide in ways analogous to Hamilton's work and its attempts to relive, replay and recreate. This shifting of the rules of time can be seen in the book's opening poem, 'At Least A Hundred Words' which ends:

> While his back is turned
> I roll a marble along the groove in the top of my desk
> till it drops through the inkwell
> on to the track I've made for it inside. I can hear it
> travelling around the system of books
> and rulers: a tip-balance, then a spiral,
> then a thirty-year gap as it falls through
> the dust-hole into my waiting hand.

This seems to demonstrate that familiar 'Perfect Speech' attempt to see time as recoverable, for the past to haunt – in an almost visceral sense - the present. In other poems 'different lives' 'race ahead of us like spaniels,/turning and waiting by a river/for their masters to come true' and 'I see the Downs even now/like a backdrop to the scene./ I put on different clothes and I see myself in action.' The influence of *Life Studies*-era Lowell is plain to see in the book's explicitly biographical poems, but as well as this producing childhood reminiscences written in a memoir style which lean on Lowell, there is a new driving force, one of guilt or at least regret. This is most evident in the poems about Williams's father, whose death not only 'freed up' this material, but through his relationship with whom allows some of the previously absent elements of 'Perfect Speech' to come to the fore. While these poems may not look like Hamilton's on the page – the 1970s minimalism having been replaced with a lengthened stride – their newfound emotional force and the shaping impulse centred around attempts at

speaking to an unanswering 'you' (and the element of assuaging guilt) bring them closer to Hamilton's early work in their intent and effect.

In the 'Death of an Actor' sequence, this new drive towards reparation, understanding and the attempt to master time produces poetry infused with the most important 'faithful' elements of 'Perfect Speech' but these poems are also suggestive of ways in which it can be adapted outside the – at times stifled – Hamiltonian model. Williams and his father become sympathetic to one another, and their roles bleed together as they will throughout much of Williams's later work. Here 'Our children left us both/Because we sat so still/And were too wise for them/When they told us their best jokes'. This is a shift in the relationship, and one which reminds us of Hamilton's filial ties: Williams can now understand what it is to be his father, not just to remember him, and as the possibility of playing both parts, father and son, emerges so does the ability to play both in the invoked past. It is an unlocking, brought about by experience-led empathy, and not only one shot through by Lowell's Freudian notes, but one which looks back at those haunted Hardy poems of 1912/13. Whereas Hamilton's ghostly presences are more commonly his first, living, wife, than his late father, here the ghost is the actorly Hugh Williams, leading to the Hardy-esque closing lines of part 9 of 'Death of an Actor':

> Death takes men on from where they were
> And yet how soon
> It brings them back again.

This is a shift in Williams's work: there have always been elusive, surreal or hyper-real moments, but this declaration, in tandem with the Eliot-like 'Now that I …' refrain that runs throughout the sequence, suggests a deeper, more 'faithful', use of the elegiac note and a more developed adoption of 'Perfect Speech' which stretches further than

ornamental minimalism. Hamilton spoke on a number of occasions about the change in his writing life occasioned by the fact of living to be older than his father ever was[248], and this ageing process, chiefly introduced with the poems of *Writing Home*, has proved an important force in the poems of Williams which most fully adhere to the criteria we have come to see as characterising 'Perfect Speech'.

It isn't only paternal concerns which have driven Williams to use and adapt 'Perfect Speech', however. Like Hamilton, Williams's two chief poetic driving forces have proved to be his – now late – father, and his romantic relationships. In keeping with 'Perfect Speech' and its revisiting, the poems to, and about, his late father have continued up to the present, with his 2010 collection *West End Final* containing a further move towards blurring lines between son and father, especially in 'West End Twilight' where 'we watch Hugo Williams strolling through/the long twilight of upper-middle class/light comedy, arm in arm with his son.' The adaptation and evolution of 'Perfect Speech' in Williams's other work is most visible in his 1999 collection *Billy's Rain*, and its 2006 follow-up *Dear Room*, which by their twinned nature and overarching fixation on a doomed relationship bring with them a close parallel to the romantic poems of Hamilton and their singularity of compulsion.[249] Many of the aspects associated with 'Perfect Speech' can be found here – the direct address, the short, demotic prosody, and the blurring of time-frames, but what ensures that the books are authentically, rather than merely superficially, heirs of Hamilton's method of address is their regretful tone, which looks back also to Hardy's elegies. The time-shifting presentism of 'Perfect Speech' can be seen in a poem such as 'Nothing On', where a memory becomes a revisiting, and 'If you carry on/dancing round the room like that/in your sun-tan

[248] Interview with Gerry Cambridge, *The Dark Horse* no.3, 1996.

[249] The same relationship is re-visited once again in a sequence 'Now That I've Forgotten Brighton' in 2014's *I Knew The Bride*.

swimsuit … /it won't be long/till the page fills up/ with four letter words/and I lose my place/in the story of the Creation.' As well as being stylistically analogous, this introduction of the Adam and Eve trope recalls the postlapsarian landscape in *The Visit* in particular, but as with so much of Williams's work there is an added layer of self-deprecating emotional pathos which has something in common with the light-comedy of his father's career. Timing, and a lightness of touch, is everything – as he has commented elsewhere his poems are in their way a 'song and dance act[250] - and the intensity of Hamilton's interiors is largely missing, replaced with a lighter, but nonetheless equally feelingful, atmosphere; poignantly, almost schoolboyishly hopeful rather than self-deceivingly optimistic.

The direct-address, time-defying love poems of *Billy's Rain* and *Dear Room* wouldn't be possible without the Hamiltonian influence, but they allow more of the world in than Hamilton would have, especially in *The Visit*, and as such look back to that common ancestor of both poets, Thomas Hardy. The level of circumstantial detail on display is not at a Lowellian pitch, but Williams goes further than Hamilton's tight-lipped avoidances, colouring the poems with smells, clothing, and 'the combs and face creams/of her childhood sponge-bag', even going so far as to name 'you' in 'The Lisboa'. The title poem of the collection is one of the best examples of how Williams makes use of 'Perfect Speech' while avoiding sounding like a Hamilton pastiche, especially its poignant closing lines:

> When I find myself soaked to the skin, tired,
> or merely bored with God's rain,
> the phrase comes back to me.
> I'd say it to you now if I thought you were listening.

[250] 'A Life in Books', *Guardian*, 11 July 2009, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jul/11/hugo-williams-interview-poet

The speaker is operating in a dual time-frame, as we have seen in a number of Hamilton's poems – the remembered past and the 'present' of the poem's creation, conjuring up not only 'the phrase' but also the scene in which it occurred, invoking as well as evoking. The addressee is – like Hamilton's – 'incapable of attending' not because of madness or death but because their relationship is over – 'I'd say it to you now if I thought you were listening'. The speaker does say it, however, even though the addressee isn't listening, by writing the poem. The poem is then ostensibly the utterance which would have been spoken to 'you' if they had been there, but of course it isn't – it's charged with a wish to revisit, to return the addressee to a point where they are listening, and repair the damage done – all of which are the driving forces of 'Perfect Speech'. If they were listening there would have been no need for this poem to be written, and so it becomes a means of reparation, enacting a sort of time-travel in the hope that all might yet be well, but laden with the knowledge – as Hamilton was – that it's an impossible task.

*

Michael Hofmann's work owes a greater, and more apparent, debt to Lowell than Williams's, but a Hamilton influence can also be discerned from the start, with many of the poems in his debut *Nights in the Iron Hotel* (1983) displaying stylistic analogies to the fruits of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'. The opening poem, 'Looking at You (Caroline)' leans on the Hamiltonian direct address to an absent 'you', but for all its prose rhythms this isn't a moment of climactic intensity, nor is there any of the Hardy-esque guilt, or a need to work magic – the lover named is absent, but will return, and the discursive style is more Lowell- or even O'Hara- derived than the clipped minimalist

Hamilton would allow. The book does point at times to the chastening example of Hamilton's terse diction, even in its more digressive subject matter, not least in the wryly reined-in statement 'you move the fifty-seven muscles it takes to smile' in 'First Night' with its chill air of composed, almost clinical, dissection.

With *Acrimony* (1986), Hofmann's Lowell influence was even more pronounced, and while the poems addressed to Gert Hofmann, Michael's father, had something in common with Hamilton's fatherly poetic concerns, and a number were direct addresses, making use of the present tense to recall past events, the drive was not to recreate or restore so much as to attack or confront. Also, the degree of detail – not only circumstantial but emotional and recollected – made this a collection more aligned in its sympathies and aesthetic with the tell-all Lowell era which Hamilton had previously criticised on moral grounds. From the 'salami breath' to the 'bleak anal pleats' under his eyes, this was Oedipal conflict, rather than dutiful filial ministration. It was also a world away from the reined-in unwillingness to give away the 'you' being addressed – arguably leavened by Gert Hofmann's status as a 'public figure' – which Hamilton had been so shy of lest it mean a 'poetic relishing of the situation.' This was the opposite of the sort of persona-led coyness that Hamilton had criticised in Larkin, which seemed like an unavoidable ingredient of the English sensibility he had struggled against himself, only managing to throw it off to the muted degree he had with difficulty. For Hofmann, the British-schooled German, this stiff-upper-lip was not the inhibiting factor it had been for his forebears, and the introduction of such emotionally candid, unstintingly bare, 'confessional' poetry into the English landscape was a move as disruptive, and violent, as that of Alvarez with his *New Poetry*. It was only, as in the case of Williams, when Hofmann's father died that the poems would move towards something more in keeping with what we've come to understand as the multiple criteria which constitute 'Perfect

Speech', again due to the introduction of the complicating feeling of what had been lost and the *Life Studies*-style addition of remorse to its poetic, and emotional, mix.

In *Approximately Nowhere* (1999) we find a father who is now incapable of attending. The father once so vivid in *Acrimony* and elsewhere, 'who all my life had been a volcano', has died, as we learn in the book's first new poem, after 1979's poignant (and somewhat Hamiltonian) 'Tea For My Father'. 'For Gert Hofmann, died 1 July 1993' doesn't address anyone, there is no 'you' but the 'action' does occur in the present tense which seems, in its own way, rather shocking. The picture we are given is of a room which has been in a state of decay for some time, needing only death – which has now arrived – to authenticate its sense of loss and stasis. This poem owes a debt to Lowell's 'For Sale', a poem which in turn leaned to a degree on the Imagism of Pound, as adopted by William Carlos Williams. It is a room where Hofmann Snr has been living a cut-off existence, where a rare window on the world, 'the everlasting radio', 'pinked his eye once', and 'The same books as for years, the only additions by himself' seem to confirm this splendid isolation, all watched over by 'an African mask ... to keep out evil spirits'. If we needed further confirmation that this has been a death scene awaiting its inevitable consummation, it comes at the end of the poem, with the 'berries/on the mountain ash already orange and reddening, although/the inscrutable blackbirds will scorn them months more.' Gert Hofmann, like those berries, we feel, may have been lent time which perhaps he didn't require or demand. There is a sense of his being a character who, like Lowell's mother in *Life Studies*, has stayed on a train beyond his required destination.

In 'Last Walk' we witness a subtle, humanising shift when the poet embraces some of Hamilton's other 'Perfect Speech' techniques, namely the address of a 'you'. The 'you' in this poem isn't just the late father, it's a plural, parental unit, but because of it the man who had been a mere berry ripe for death's picking becomes part of a mobile duo,

one who is no longer merely battening down the hatches but strolling 'arm in arm' with his wife of thirty-seven years, and 'stable'. The mood is not dissimilar to 'For Gert Hofmann', with a long-understudied old age now having arrived, the telling presence of an *'alteingesessen'* farm among a new suburb filled with gardens, the advent of a new age, in the shape of an airport 'racing day and night to completion like a new book'. The father - one half of the active, experiencing couple who form the 'you' being addressed – is no longer a relic owed 'an odd stone or metal' for his marriage's longevity. Now he is capable of demonstrating 'tenderness for a firefly.' By using the present-tense as recollection method and direct address, 'Last Walk' becomes at once confessional and epistolary, capable of incorporating the minutiae of intimate life without their coming across as mere remembrance. The implication of the present tense is that, with their son still making his electron-buzzes between them, this tenderness is in some sense ongoing; what does survive is love (of fireflies, in this case).

'Endstation, Erding', in part a companion piece to 'Last Walk', is similarly concerned with the relationship between a remembrance of what has gone and the extent to which it can remain a present tense activity. If 'Last Walk' allows the parents to remain walking, for their arm-in-arm perambulations to exist in a continuous present, 'Endstation, Erding' is concerned with 'the walk the other way', immediately plunging us into something seemingly more final, away from the present and into notions of inheritance. The shift from a past-tense evocation of Gert shopping, picking up 'economies now, bargains' in which he 'took the same pleasure', becomes something more radical towards the poem's close. The poet and his subject elide, without warning. We have no indication that it is anyone other than the bargain-hunting Gert making 'The walk through the deserted postmodern forum/of cobbles and fountains' until we are pulled up short by the library, its 'card In Gedenken an Gert Hofmann', and a final line drawing us back again to the opening poem, to Lowell, and to a haunted understanding

of the lingering presence of the father in the world: 'the railway signals still up with the line long gone'. Just as this shows how his father's bruised, banana-buying self endures in his environment, performing a gentle sort of haunting, it also implies that, as in 'For Gert Hofmann', he has to an extent been living in a world which has already memorialised him. Finally, it is also suggestive of the poet's own fate, not only when surrounded by the shades of his father in the general store and postmodern forum, but also destined to some day make this same walk 'the other way'.

Inheritance is at the heart of 'Epithanaton' too. Explicitly, in its opening, with the 'choleric note dashed off to me/cutting me off' but also in a more inverted sense, where the children of the deceased attempt an anti-bequest:

> We wanted to bring you things, give you things,
> leave you things – to go with you in some form, I suppose.
> A plastic ivory elephant from my sister
>
> who mussed up your hair every time they drove a part through it,
> a few crumbs of lavender from me. All of it removed.

Apart from the failure to 'give you things', the most striking element of this passage is once more that 'you'. The direct address is past here, not present, and its impact and implications perhaps best experienced in contrast to the present tense counterparts in Hamilton's oeuvre. Where the narrator here 'Hardly dared touch you/Your empty open hands on the awful mendacious coverlet,/the ochre bodystocking pancake colour of you' there are numerous examples in Hamilton's bedside vigil poems where similar fears and rituals are played out in the present, the father still alive and, for the duration of the poem at least, 'capable of attending':

> Your shadows blossom now about your bed

Discolouring

The last irritated facts.

Your oriental dressing-gown;

Its golden butterflies, laced to their silken leaves,

Ache from the sudden darkness at your door.[251]

The upshot in 'Epithanaton' is that this is not relived, so much as recalled, despite the direct address, and as much as there is a sense of haunting in the poem - the Hardy-ish 'You were well-nigh inaccessible', the adjective 'deadish' pilfered from the beer lexicon and doing a lot of work in explaining this there-but-not-there presence - this is a different sort of epitaph, one not trying to make use of the 'esemplastic power' which could conjure up a 'living' addressee but one which memorialises without the 'faith' that it might perform some magic act of ministration. While Hamilton's bedside vigils are ongoing, conjured up again in the act of being written, the one we find in 'Epithanaton' is over and done with, the 'you' who is being addressed is not to be found here at least, although it is clear that 'Lebwohl' is the wrong word. This picture, with the inert, bodystocking-coloured, inaccessible father is unquestionably one of finality, but the manner of address, coupled with the poem's conclusion that farewell is 'the inappropriate expression', that the narrator is 'prematurely, unconscionably, leaving you behind' and the lingering 'dicke Luft' all bring us back to the poem's opening line: 'Last words? Probably not'. The fact that there is still a 'you', added to the present tense of 'Last Walk' suggest complication, the possibility that more than 'one of us might have survived' in some sense, that although in this scene the father is dead, he is in a wider sense only 'deadish'.

[251] Ian Hamilton, 'Metaphor', *Collected Poems*

The sense of lingering, which has been a constant thread throughout the opening poems, is elaborated on in the poems that follow. 'Zirbelstraße' and the suggestively titled 'Still Life' add a Mr Bleaney-ish air to this atmosphere of past accumulation and clutter gone to seed, building on 'For Gert Hofmann's 'onetime pond' 'packed with nettles' additional proof 'That how we live measures our own nature'. In 'Zirbelstraße', a moving-out inventory becomes a list of a life, where 'démodé gadgets' and other 'doubtful assets of a lifetime' are packed away, almost ceremonially, just as both the father's mischief and lightning, and the 'high pines that gave the street its name' are cut down. If there isn't a direct address or any other nod towards 'Perfect Speech', we are nonetheless left in no doubt that the poet is reliving this home-life, that it is just as much a scene of haunting and return as the other domestic poems of loss, as its final lines demonstrate:

> my off-and-on kingdom in the cellar, among the skis and old boots,
> my father's author copies and foreign additions,
> the blastproof metal doors, preserves, tin-cans and board-games
> of people who couldn't forget the Russians, the furnace room
> where my jeans were baked hard against an early departure.

'Blastproof'' 'preserves' and the 'jeans baked hard against an early departure' all tell their own story of what it is like to be haunted by a family home, while the 'people who couldn't forget the Russians' itself must surely include the narrator who, in 'Epithanaton', looked at his father and saw him as 'Russian, bearded'.

'Still Life' is, as its title suggests, another poem of stasis, the narrator combining that epitome of big-screen inertia, 'La Grande Bouffe', with 'gathered dust' and the religious overtones of 'in *saecula saeculorum*'. In dialogue with 'For Gert Hofmann' and the

cellar of 'Zirbelstraße' this is one of a group of poems that pivot around atrophy, and which engage in a tussle with the poems of the present tense and direct address, indicative of something other than recollection or entrapment and pointing instead to the possibility of continuation, a legacy and inheritance which is alive and which allows the possibility of 'the hysterical use of the present tense' as coined in 'What Happens'. In contrast to 'Still Life's 'in *saecula saeculorum*', in 'Cheltenham' we find 'The days brutally short', and just as we know that 'Lebwohl' is not the right word, we find that a visit to the graveyard is a present tense activity in 'Directions'. The 'onetime pond packed with nettles' of 'For Gert Hofmann' is swapped here for 'huge carp in the ponds' and the only 'slabs' are made of cake.

This wrestling between tenses, between direct address and stasis, presence and inaccessibility, is renewed in the final poem of the sequence, 'Metempsychosis'. The battle between elements of 'Perfect Speech' and their ability to conjure a presence in the 'you' who is 'capable of attending', capable of displaying tenderness or imparting lessons about being a '*homme de peuple'* are seemingly resolved here. The past-tense bedside vigil of 'Epithanaton' differs from Hamilton's filial watches, already aware that whatever 'you' might remain in the poems, or in the air, isn't to be found by the deathbed or at the funeral. Similarly, this transcendent poem begins with an acceptance that 'Your race [is] run' before building to a climax where 'the ants queened themselves … Got to the end.' For a sequence about a father, about death and inheritance, it is fascinating to witness the ways in which the poet takes what he needs from two of his own poetic 'fathers', Lowell and Hamilton, borrowing some of their faith in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech', their talking cures and Freudian concerns, but adapting them to suit his own experience of 'leaving you behind', only finding himself able to buy into some of their 'beliefs'. At the end, with his flowers 'blue for faith', he can assert both that 'overbearing children play,/… itching/to tear down the bookshelves and inherit the

earth' and that 'The clever ones/ would go far, to be in position for/the next pedestrian incarnation.'

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By looking back to Lowell and Hardy, with Hamilton as a pivotal style-defining early guide in the art of restraint and compression, the later poems of Williams are the closest to a living successor to Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' in its purest form, albeit one where terse, cramped, climactic intensity has been in the main replaced with a more comic, theatrical, closely-observed world of domestic aggregation occurring in a less fraught, claustrophobic atmosphere. In attempting to speak to, and conjure up, his late father or a lost lover, Williams has made use of the more 'faithful' aspects of 'Perfect Speech', its belief that it might be possible to talk 'in a magic way' to an addressee no longer 'capable of attending' and repair some of the damage done, however futile that hope is. The poignant sense of this seemingly hopeless mission is given an additional charge by Williams's use of humour, making him less a modern Orpheus and more a sorrowing jester figure, trying to perform tricks to win back affection which cannot be reclaimed. Michael Hofmann's uses of 'Perfect Speech' are less 'faithful' than Williams's, but when he attempts to address his late father, and, driven by regret, tries to repair damage done in life, he falls back on many of the stylistic devices we have come to see as central to it. Lowell is the greater influence artistically, but these attempted addresses and the blurring of past and present lean on those aspects of 'Perfect Speech' which attempt a 'graveside address' to someone no longer capable of listening and, by doing so, try to bring the implicit auditor back to life. While the resulting poems display less of that 'esemplastic power', are colder and more coolly hewn, in line with the prosier examples of Lowell's *Life Studies*, the purposefulness and hauntedness of the poems of *Approximately Nowhere* make them at least in part inheritors of Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech'.

Conclusion

Ian Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' then, as we have seen, is derived from a line which stretches back to the democratising *Lyrical Ballads* via Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost and Keith Douglas among other 'historical' influences, and forward to poets such as Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann. Hamilton's conception of 'Perfect Speech' was methodological to a degree, defined in part by the aspects of contemporary poetry it was opposed to, such as the metrical regularities identified in The Movement or the candid betrayals of confidence that Robert Lowell's brand of 'confessionalism' exhibited. 'Perfect Speech', as conceived of by Hamilton, was a 'faith' of sorts, in which the poet inherited the role once occupied by that of the intercessionary, external God of orthodox Christianity, in line with William Blake's assertion that 'all deities reside in the human breast'. The poems themselves were to be the religious rites, or ceremonies, analogous to the Eucharistic act of transubstantiation. While not faithful himself, in an orthodox sense, thanks to the influence of Colin Falck and Michael Fried, Hamilton recognised that 'only a god can save us now'[252] and that the role of the artist in the process of creation was to act in a priestly capacity, as Falck has outlined:

> In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce's Stephen Daedalus recognizes that the modern vocation of the artist is the proper successor to the ancient vocation of the priest (the artist is 'a priest of the eternal

[252] From Colin Falck Interview (31/07/2013): 'Heidegger picks up an idea from Hölderlin that only a god can save us … we have to find a way back to some form of belief, rationality alone won't do it for us. The whole of history is one form or another of rationality. It comes round to about the same place that Wittgenstein was in at one point – ordinary language is where things are going on, you've got to be in it, with it Heidegger would say, authentically'.

> imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience
> into the radiant body of everliving life') … [253]

This was a development of Coleridge's idea of the creative, 'esemplastic' power of the imagination, that might be used in the writing of a lyric poem which in its ideal state, in Hamilton's terms, came close to the moment of revelation for a mystic. This attempt to 'reach beyond' ordinary discourse through the act of creation opened up the possibility that experience might be added to and mastered, rather than merely recorded – and this was the central tenet of the 'faith' represented by 'Perfect Speech'. For Hamilton, Falck and *The Review*, the role of the poet was not only a priestly one in the transformative sense, but also in a ministering one, derived in part from Keats's ideas about the poet as physician 'because "the disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth"'.[254] The poetic mainstream in which Hamilton and *The Review* were operating, and which followed immediately afterwards, represented for Falck a 'deviation' from the true aims of art:

> this transubstantiation of the idea of art inevitably
> carried the risk of a ritualizing of art itself into a concern
> with techniques and procedures – this way the madness
> of 'post-modernism' lay.[255]

This ritualizing of techniques and procedures came to represent a symptom of a wider spiritual malaise, in which poets were not carrying out their true 'function'. For

[253] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century* p. 188.

[254] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century* p. 188.

[255] Ibid.

Hamilton and Falck this idea of function was tied to one of cultural service – doing what poets such as Philip Larkin seemingly refused to do and engaging with the 'ruins' in order to offer the possibility, through the 'esemplastic' power of the lyric, of helping to point to a way out of the crisis in a beliefless, inhibitingly self-aware age. Through 'Perfect Speech' it might be possible to do this. Hamilton and *The Review* looked to poems such as those by Robert Lowell in *Life Studies* which had got close to showing how artistically valid poetry could be allied to efforts to point towards a solution to the difficulties of living in the nuclear-threatened 'desert':

> the difficulty of being a poet is only (as Wordsworth saw) the difficulty of being a human being carried to a higher power, and the modernist-to-1960s generations saw this difficulty as part of the general subject matter of their poetry – having neither not yet come to recognize the difficulty nor having become so adjusted to it as no longer to notice it.[256]

The heartening possibility offered by Lowell, once he began writing – like Hamilton – without a faith aside from one in 'the imaginable moral power of perfect speech', that there was a way of fulfilling this cultural duty was allied to a deeper sense of dutifulness in Hamilton. From Matthew Arnold, Hamilton had developed an understanding of the vocation of poetry as being justifiable only if it has some purpose greater than mere self-expression or the exercise of ego, and he sought to ally his artistic need to be of use with his deep-rooted personal desire to communicate with addressees unreachable by ordinary means of address. The possibility offered by the 'esemplastic power' of lyric

[256] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century,* p. 99

poetry, that ability to 'go beyond' and become the equivalent of a religious rite, meant that Hamilton had the possibility of 'talking in a magical way' to people, his first wife and late father, whom he could no longer address through ordinary discourse. He also, through his 'belief' in 'Perfect Speech', felt that he might be able to 'mitigate the suffering' they had endured by creating poems which enabled him to relive the events and hit on the perfect formulation of words that might salvage the lost and repair the damage done, or at least for the duration of the poem make it seem possible that this might occur. This hope, however vain, allowed him to write at all, marrying his twin desires to allay guilt and be of service. In a poem such as 'The Storm' the poem itself becomes an attempt at performing a secular transubstantiation, with Hamilton the poet in the role of both priest performing the act and the absent God. He is present only by implication, and action, existing in a version of Keats's negative capability infused with some of the Ignatian aspects which were a hangover of Lowell's Catholicism, where actions, especially acts of service, provide the means of enacting faith. Hamilton, who said he felt he only existed when being of use or service to others, is revealed in the poems only by his deeds, when he is, in an Ignatian sense, being a 'man for others', his being 'in act' the only means of moving towards the sought-after 'perfection' which might allow the poetic ritual to have its desired effect and rescue the addressee from their plight. The 'I' is suppressed, unlike in the 'confessional' work of poets such as Lowell who become 'exemplary sufferers'. Hamilton attempts to go further than that, becoming instead an 'exemplary carer', filling that priestly role he and Falck had identified as being central to what was required of poets in order to move past the current spiritual crisis they had diagnosed.

While searching around for a method of doing so, as I have shown in earlier chapters, Hamilton leaned not only on a poet such as Hardy, who also tried to talk to someone who had gone beyond the realm of discourse, and for whom his feelings were

tied up with remorse and guilt, but also on poets such as Keith Douglas who purged florid lyricism from their diction. In Douglas, the need to rise above the horrors of war provided an example for Hamilton of how one might retain one's masculine, tight-lipped, reticent personality while writing poems which contained feeling and were unflinching in the face of traumatic subject material. It was important to make a break with the contemporary, staid, British poetic environment into which Hamilton was to write and edit, and in identifying the too-academic verse of The Movement, Hamilton went about creating a style which could not be mistaken for their five-beat finger-exercises, looking back towards another iconoclastic poet-editor, Ezra Pound, and his compressed Imagism for the structures of his early lyrics, as well as to the Hart Crane and WB Yeats-indebted lyrics of his associate Michael Fried. In early Pound, he found a tendency towards excision, climactic intensity and a distaste for loquacity which chimed with his own, more English, need for restraint and maximum control in the face of maximum suffering, as well as a model of sorts as to how one might 'press forward en masse' and attempt to overhaul the status quo.

Any attempt at salvage or rescue through this 'esemplastic' address was of course a great leap of knowingly, poignantly, futile faith. As such his poems were to become, like those of the 'confessionals' he would write about, 'Songs Among the Ruins', and attempt not only to minister to those addressed in them but also point to a way of still writing in a lyric tradition without blunting the power of poetry with undermining personae or intrusive prosody. There was a need to build on the ground gained by Eliot and the Modernists, but to avoid the tendency towards an increasing 'difficulty' – the poems would be in a recognisable vocabulary and reflect life as it was lived, but at its maximum point of intensity, and – if properly achieved – do more than merely notate the experience. They would in some way master suffering and faithlessness and make from them something which could sit alongside the poetry

written when faith in its orthodox sense was possible, finding their 'transcendence' in ordinary experiences and transactions of modern life.

The 'madness of post-modernism' that Falck talked of was, as he saw it, based in a spiritual malaise, the self-awareness it exhibited symptomatic of a wider crisis, the Spenglerian 'sick man' who feels his limbs. As Hamilton's 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' waned, his own poems were to become more self-aware and referential, moving from dramatically Pinter-esque present-tense dramas of interpersonal fidelity towards a Beckett-esque repetition and attempt to 'go on' or 'fail better' without that earlier hopefulness and optimism which had made the 'faithful' work possible. The 'bruised rewrites' of his later career lack that faith and as a result become a version of 'syllable counting' (as in 'Nature'), with Hamilton having moved from attempting to fulfil a priestly role to wanting only release from duty, a laying down of arms and acceptance that whatever 'light has managed to get through' will have to be enough. That his 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' lapsed or failed doesn't invalidate the gains made by it or the sense that, in attempting to use lyric poems to 'go beyond' ordinary language, Hamilton pointed towards a valid and important development of the ground broken by Robert Lowell in *Life Studies*. While Lowell showed it was possible to write without orthodox 'faith' and go some way towards producing poems that, as Keats had suggested, acted to salve wounds and to point towards ways of coping with the trauma of being human, Hamilton went further, trying to be of service to others and not merely find a way of coping with his own crises. This 'suffering' at the centre of his formulation of the 'perfect poem' wasn't his own, and as a result he introduced a means of writing a poetry of experiencing not founded on 'confession', but rather a dutiful search for faith through creativity. It is this search which best represents Hamilton's achievement: a figure who points towards the necessity for poems to be expressions of an attempt to 'go beyond' ordinary discourse and find a way of gesturing towards a solution for the

no-less pressing spiritual crisis any poet writing without orthodox faith finds themselves in today.

Falck's summation of the future of poetry is one in which this dutifulness Hamilton aimed for is married to transcendence, an apt summary of Hamilton's own attempted *ars poetica*:

> If poetry can believe in ordinariness and at the same time in the possibility of its being transcended – if we can find the sacredness in what had seemed profane, while repudiating … the banal – the luminous details of life may be set free from the mechanized and alienating utilitarianism by which they are now obscured. [257]

The poets Hamilton has influenced, such as Hugo Williams and Michael Hofmann, point towards a future development of this method of writing. Williams's poetry of experiencing allows more circumstantial, Hardyish detail in than Hamilton, as well as a boyish sense of comedy, and yet as we saw above there are moments when something like that same 'faith' in 'Perfect Speech' is possible, and the reader comes closer to discovering a means of coping with moments of existential difficulty or loss than in most contemporary poets. Michael Hofmann's at times acidic candour is Lowellian in its nature, but the poems in which a version of something like Hamilton's 'Perfect Speech' appears, especially in poems addressed to his late father, is further proof of the possibility of this 'faith' being developed to encompass a more foregrounded 'I' still retaining that element of duty and service, attempting to assuage guilt and address an unanswering 'you', while not going as far as Hamilton to supress all but the poets'

[257] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century,* p. 231.

revelatory actions. In Williams and Hofmann, then, perhaps the biggest sense of development is one in which 'Perfect Speech' can be allowed to contain more of the experiencing self.

As we have seen in Hamilton's work, a version of the Incarnation - through a secular Eucharist - has to be provided by the poet, the work itself becoming a means of filling the void left by the impossibility of belief in Christian transubstantiation, but once again there is that foundational echo of Hölderlin - 'only a god can save us now'. Falck highlights the still urgent need for the subsuming of theology by poetry, the unfulfilled spiritual necessity being neglected by art, and the re-sacralizing drive, as pointed to by Sven Birkerts in *The Gutenberg Elegies*:

> If we are wired for meaning, and if the psyche is a closed system – two big ifs – then it follows, as Freud would agree, that repressed elements return … The sixties were only incidentally about drugs or sexual experimentation or rock and roll – these were epiphenomena. They were about protest … [S]lowly, steadily, we may see the pressure build, and with it the awareness in individuals of a vacancy at the subjective core … And when the crisis does come, no chip or screen will have a solution for it. It will flash forth as an insistent need, a soul-craving, and nothing binary will suffice.[258]

With regards to my own creative work, while not consciously trying to write to or from any prescriptive methods, the wider sense of 'Perfect Speech' with its attempts to speak

[258] *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century,* p. 227

to an addressee in a way that isn't possible in ordinary transactions, and the purposeful, faithful possibilities of the lyric have been concerns in poems such as 'The Range', 'Transmission', 'Postcard From Australia', 'Trinity Hospital' and others. In investigating 'Perfect Speech' I have been drawn towards the ideal of writing poems which are in this sense 'purposeful', which are able to say what couldn't be said at the time, or which enable one to have the illusion of speaking to an addressee who is, either geographically or otherwise, unable to be spoken to in an ordinary sense. I have also been drawn to the possibilities of writing poems which attempt to relive or replay experiences in order to mine some sense or meaning from them, such as a fictionalised event based on reality, as in 'The Rat'. I have allowed myself more circumstantial detail than Hamilton, more in keeping with the Williams or Hardy model whereby some specificity is permissible but not a 'relishing' or naming of names, such as in 'Postcard From Australia' with an 'orange dress', or 'Three Churches' with 'I remember you in mustard yellow/the makeup round your eyes'. Inspired by Hamilton's writing on the use of spoken cadences and demotic language, I have typically aimed at conversational diction, speech rhythms and embodied naturalistic speakers, but I have allowed myself to occasionally reach for more regular end-rhyme than Hamilton usually employed, such as in 'When We Were Kings':

> whales swam in our rivers, stranded
> and hours from death, or arriving
> at it. They were lost, as we are, branded
>
> with an exile's stamp. Neither thriving
> nor heartsick yet, their eyes unable
> to adjust to foreign light, striving
>
> for home in a manner their fable-
> thirsty rescuers distrusted.

or 'The Range':

> The blackbird is not a bad-luck bird.
>
> The Blackbird of Avondale was not resigned
>
> to arrears, in Kilmainham. He heard
>
> a fresh start in letters Kitty signed
>
> with kisses. He could not prevent Fiendish Park.
>
> Later he could not prevent scandalising
>
> a 'nonconformist conscience'; his larks
>
> at Eltham almost vandalised
>
> Home Rule.

or a heightened internal music in poems such as 'Burying The Soldier': '

> He left one hand Lady-of-the-Laking in the soil: a warning
> to my brother's other toys, for sure, not to get ideas. No politics,
>
> no Union Jacks. He'd put one little Brit below a clod of dirt,
> had one inside in tears, his birthday spoil turned casualty of war.

On the whole, though, the method he derived in part from Lowell of occasional interruptions of half- or slant-rhyme, as well as the haunting by an underpinning iambic base, feels closer to my regular method of composition, as in 'Jehovah and the River' or 'Rope-A-Dope'. The series of boxing poems is inspired, in part, by the *Life Studies* poems of Lowell but with more use made of 'found' sources, incorporated quotations and flattened speech, in part to attempt to replicate the sort of journalistic language of

sports reporting but also as a nod to the sort of stripped-back purging of language Hamilton and Douglas used, as in 'Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands':

> Joe Louis, mid-clinch,
> is lifting his opponent -
> the six-foot-six 'Ambling Alp', Primo Carnera, -
> into the air.
> In the Hague,
> Italian and Ethiopian officials
> have come to the end of their first day
> of arbitration talks.
> Here, in the Yankee Stadium,
> Carnera will sink to his knees
> 'slowly, like a great chimney that had been dynamited'.

As we have seen, 'Perfect Speech' is indebted to the spirit of *Lyrical Ballads*, and in keeping with that the idea of ordinary conversation and a language uncluttered by 'poeticisms' is one I wanted to investigate. Boxing seemed an apt method of doing so for a number of reasons – the exposed nature of the fighter, the possibility of 'resurrection' offered by a sport which contains knockdowns and knockouts, but perhaps prime among them was the fact that the 'self-awareness' which Falck diagnosed as symptomatic of spiritual malaise is not found in the act of a fight, where the idea is to be – like Hamilton via Lowell in a different context – fully 'in act'. For a fighter to be too self-aware can be disastrous, and this sort of innocence or immersion felt like it might offer the possibility of trying, through the writing of poems, to 'go beyond' ordinary discourse in the sense that Hamilton talks about by being similarly immersed and using that same sort of presentism.

I have aimed to learn from Hamilton's methodology and ambitions, but permitted myself a less cramped prosody in order to do so, looking back at other influences such as Hardy, Lowell, Douglas and Frost to attempt to achieve a broader canvas on which to try to write poems of experiencing. These are poems which are informed by the idea of 'Perfect Speech' but not systematically attempting to work with any sense of a checklist of its characteristics as outlined in this part of the thesis. In the end, as with the idea of 'explaining' a poem critically, attempting to 'explain' one's own composition is necessarily bound to fail, the hope being that the work finds a final, irreducible and unparaphrasable form as a poem.

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