

The Awakening of Consciousness: Traumatic Repetition in “Funeral Music” by Geoffrey Hill

XING Luan-ming

University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom

The aftermath of the war had devastating consequences on people's lives and society as a whole. In addition to the significant impact of the Great Depression on social production and living standards, it resulted in psychological trauma, unemployment, poverty, and social conflicts. As a prominent English poet that emerged after World War II, Geoffrey Hill depicted the gruesome realities of war through his early works. This article applies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to analyze Hill's poem “Funeral Music.” The fragmented images and repetitive traumatic scenes restore the harsh realities of war. Furthermore, this article explores Joshua Pederson's critical development of Caruth's theoretical framework, providing an alternate perspective for textual analysis.

Keywords: trauma, Geoffrey Hill, “Funeral Music”, Cathy Caruth, Joshua Pederson

Introduction

Geoffrey Hill describes the cruelty of the Wars of the Roses in his poem “Funeral Music”, which uses fragmented imagery and an intense religious atmosphere. Hill “was attempting a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks” in this poem (Hill, 1981). Alex Pestell agrees with Anthony Thwaite when he calls Geoffrey Hill “a visionary nationalist” and argues that Hill's poetry does not deliberately hide suspicion but helps society to restore reality (Pestell, 2015). Many critics still believe that Hill's poetry is not representative, such as Nicholas Lezard, who believes that Hill's poetry is too difficult to understand and is in opposition to contemporary poetry (Nicholas, 2017). However, William Logan (2008) praises Hill for abandoning earthly readers to pursue high-minded poetry. Alex Wylie agrees that The poetic is often marred by a tendency towards self-repetition due to the reflexivity of the work itself that loses touch with the broader audience they are attempting to reach. Through the textual analysis of the poem “Funeral Music” by Geoffrey Hill, this article finds that Hill imitates discontinuous memory traces through fragmented images and restores cruel and natural war scenes through Traumatic repetition.

Fragmented Consciousness and Traumatic Repetition

Consciousness has been a topic of inquiry and debate in the field of neuroscience as the state of awareness of surroundings and activities. Sigmund Freud posits that consciousness emerges as a remembrance pattern and that perception is a crucial system component (2010). This theory proposes that the brain creates a memory of stimuli

received from the environment, leading to consciousness development. Further, creating this consciousness protects an individual from excessive sensory stimulation (Freud, 2010). The human brain is constantly bombarded with a vast array of sensory information from the environment. This information is processed and integrated with pre-existing memories to build our sense of reality. If all the incoming stimuli were to be processed without any filtering or memory creation, the result would be a highly disorienting and overwhelming experience, leading to a breakdown in cognitive function. Hill’s poetry is marked by a recurring theme of war’s ultimate cruelty, depicted through the use of fragmented, disjointed imagery and biting irony. These literary devices unambiguously juxtapose the stark realities of the battlefield with their poetic representation, often serving as deliberate reminders of the devastation that war causes. Hill’s choice of literary techniques is a concerted effort to reconstruct and represent war’s realities in as accurate a form as possible, which seem to be deliberate attempts to imitate memory traces and restore natural scenes.

In the work of “Funeral Music”, a plethora of scene fragments are employed to effectively capture and restore the violent historical context of the Wars of the Roses. While offering his commentary, Anthony Thwaite brought attention to the poignant irony that each of the fragments presented in the work harks back to gruesome and factual scenes (Douglass & Paulin, 1993). Despite their veracity, he expressed his sentiments that these fragments seemed to transcend beyond the confines of earthly existence. Such a portrayal indicates the powerful storytelling methods employed by Hill in his work. Moreover, Hill offered further clarity to his methodology by stating that he aimed to create a work featuring “florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks” (Hill, 1981). It further emphasizes the skilful combination of the macabre and the grandiose. For instance, Hill recreates a cold religious ceremony scene in ‘Funeral Music’:

Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable.
Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly Among carnage the most delicate souls
Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping ‘Jesus’. (Hill, 2000)

“Soul”, “blood”, and “Jesus” have a strong religious connotation. However, this formal and solemn religious scene is confusing and “blindly” is used twice. Perhaps the confusion comes from the terror of carnage, the noise of snail and mole interrupted. It is not a continuous scene but more like a memory torn apart by fear. Through realistic depictions of violence, ‘Funeral Music’ stands as an evocative and striking work that cannot only inform on the factual events of history but also capture the essence of the emotions and struggles present during that time.

Traumatic repetition is the force to awaken the hidden parts from stimulation, although consciousness records facts incomplete. In an interview, Cathy Caruth expounds upon Freud’s frequent usage of the term ‘awakening’ whilst analyzing nightmares in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Caruth et al., 2019). According to Caruth, the term is not merely confined to its literal meaning—the act of rousing from slumber—but instead evokes a more symbolic significance, indicative of the emergence of an otherwise unacknowledged part of the consciousness. It is the insight of force that Freud aimed to convey when he employed the term ‘awakening’ in his analyses of dreams. Therefore, the term appears to represent a profound metamorphosis of the self and the discovery of the subconscious. The transformation can be undeniable when examining cases where individuals emerged from traumatic experiences, powerful enough to awaken the repressed parts of their consciousnesses, such as a nightmare that persists when soldiers return from war in *Beyond the Pleasure*

Principle (Freud, 2010). Repetition compulsion sends soldiers back into sad and fearful memories and images. For Hill, his early poems on atrocity and holocaust are testimony to these hard-to-perceive truths (Hassan, 2012). Hill’s literary pieces, such as “September Song” and “The Triumph of Love”, depict fear, horror, and death themes. The works imaginatively record the multiple facets of atrocity and the holocaust, portraying the complex emotions evoked by these events.

In the poem ‘Funeral Music’, Hill observes the reawakening of consciousness and the restoration of cruelty in the context of the Wars of the Roses, which seems to involve the ethical imperative. Cruth also agrees that the force of “awakening” from consciousness exists in the ethical dimension emphasized by Lacan, whose theories emphasize the centrality of the ethical to our experiences of the world (2019). Therefore, it is intriguing to consider Hill’s perspective on the apparently ‘peaceful and non-traumatic’ accounts of the Wars of the Roses in contemporary retellings. Hill’s interpretation of ‘Funeral Music,’ in which he describes a deceptively tranquil war scene, serves to undermine such sanitized versions of the past, such as

As the armies met, each mirrored the other;
Neither was outshone. So they flashed and vanished. (Hill, 2000)

The military conflicts on the battlefield are often characterized as a display of brute strength, wherein the victor emerges as the hero and the defeated are left to mourn their loss. However, in some instances, the picture of war becomes blurry, with no clear outcome of victory or defeat nor any clear evidence of sacrifice or death. Hill’s depiction of the battle scene embodies this blurry image, compelling readers to analyze it critically and question its authenticity. Hill’s presentation of the scene seems to negate the gruesome reality that characterizes military conflicts. However, another scene is tightly stitched together, with the ice on the “reeds” dyed red and “carrion birds” surrounding the body (Hill, 2000). Through this imagery, Hill endeavours to replicate the horrors of the war described by the historian of the Croyland Abbey. The scene of the military conflict was characterized by a display of carnage mixed with the snow and blood flowing over a vast expanse of land when the snow eventually melted (Hill, 1981). Peter McDonald affirms that Hill’s poems are generally of high value to readers and contribute positively to civilization and personal life (2007). Through the repetition of trauma, Hill achieves total loyalty to the reader.

Sustained Consciousness and Traumatic Healing

Joshua Pederson’s critique of Caruth’s trauma theory is a significant point of contention in the field of trauma studies. A notable example of this is his reference to Richard McNally’s *Remembering Trauma*, which presents the notion that excessively stimulated individuals may conceal their trauma, but this does not signify an absence of memory and expression (2015). Pederson’s criticism underscores the significance of textual analysis, asserting that the story itself is more valuable than any gaps within it. It means that it is necessary to believe in the reliability of the narrative. Pederson’s new trauma framework is particularly illuminating when considering the scene of the meeting of two armies as depicted by Hill. A careful analysis of this scene through the lens of this framework identifies additional elements of this scene that may have gone unnoticed previously. For instance, the absence of an army was “outshone” in the scene, indicating that none of the armies emerged victorious (Hill, 2000). Instead, the war was brutal and devastating for both sides, highlighting the horrors of war and its

devastating aftermath. Interestingly, the use of the words “flashed” and “vanished” reinforces this interpretation (Hill, 2000). “Flashed” suggests an ongoing war, while “vanished” conjures images of death and sacrifice. These metaphors are vital for comprehending the happenings in the scene and the impacts of the war.

While Joshua Pederson may propose a novel framework for analyzing trauma in literature, he acknowledges and values the immense contribution of Caruth’s analytical approach, which he references through the discourse of Hartman regarding literature’s ability to reproduce and recycle the experience of trauma (2015). Pederson subscribes to the notion that through creative expression, one can embark on the road to recovery from emotional wounds caused by trauma. A testament to this possibility lies in Hill’s poetic works, which intermittently exhibit a rare quality of softness. At the end of the poem ‘Funeral Music’, Hill asks how that should comfort us’ (Hill, 2000), although some critics consider his warm questioning undeserved. Nonetheless, some literary critics doubt the worth of his tender introspection.

Conclusion

To enduring the significant impact of the Great Depression on social production as well as living standards, people also became traumatized and suffered extensive emotional and psychological scarring during the war. Further hardships included unemployment, poverty, and social conflicts. Against this backdrop emerged a talented group of English poets who focused on reflecting the gruesome realities of war, using their works to document the horrors of their time. One of the prominent poets in the post-World War II era was Geoffrey Hill, who employed the art of poetry to capture the multifaceted effects of war on human lives to convey the trauma, despair, and chaos that characterized society in the aftermath of the war.

This article concentrates on the application of Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory in analyzing Hill’s poem “Funeral Music”. In dissecting the fragmented imagery and repetitive traumatic scenes in Hill’s poem, the harsh realities of war are brought to the fore. Further, this article considered Joshua Pederson’s critical development of Caruth’s theoretical framework. A new vision of text analysis is discovered by shifting the research centre from the gap of description to the content itself and creating trust in the narrative.

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