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Painted Letters: The Later Writings of Roger Hilton

Abstract

This essay focusses on the later writings of Roger Hilton, concentrating principally upon the illustrated letters he wrote from his sickbed (known as his 'Night Letters'), but with reference also to his contemporaneous late paintings, works renowned for their life-affirming sense of abandon and fusion of media.

Hilton himself wrote that artists should remain silent on their work, and his friend Patrick Heron once noted that writing of his own work 'takes twenty times as long to write down as the elements of the painting actually took to execute'; but in his late writing Hilton radically truncates that process, attempting to unify the act of writing with the act of spontaneous painting in creating an automatic prose that is more in line with the tenets of André Breton.

Holding in mind throughout the relations between life and art, and the manifestation of the self, I argue that Hilton's letters may be taken to be at once honest and deceptive, private and public, specific and general. On first inspection Hilton's limited intended readership (usually just his wife), appears to allow for a remarkably frank account of his opinions and the sources of his creativity; yet this forthrightness also in part owes something to Hilton's notoriously rebarbative personality, and the letters may equally be said to reveal him to be just as inclined towards obfuscation, braggadocio, and prejudice as towards self-knowledge and honesty, whilst revealing too the debilitating effects of his alcoholism.

With recourse to performative theory, the concept of action painting, and the notion of Confessionalism in poetry, I suggest ways in which Hilton's writings and paintings can both re- evoke and transcend the immediate moment of composition, and how they may ultimately be seen to exceed the limitations of the single self. I argue that the letters' combination of writing and drawing, and the paintings' incorporation of drawing and writing, amount to a breaking down of generic boundaries that presents a challenge to distinctions between word and image.

Painted Letters: The Later Writings of Roger Hilton

As with many things in life, Roger Hilton was not keen on art criticism, and thought that the artist least of all should function as critic; he even boasted of turning one of the greatest painter-critics of his generation, his friend Patrick Heron, away from writing to concentrate exclusively on painting.¹ But the written word was always important to Hilton. From his early notebooks to his late letters, Hilton jotted down his thoughts on life and on art as readily as he sketched the world around him. In particular, he was always inclined to combine word with image; to bounce ideas between the two; and increasingly in his later years to explore the ways in which writing, drawing, and painting in the words of W.S. Graham ‘touch or do not touch’ – where they may overlap and even merge, as well as where they remain distinct.²

In 1980, Hilton’s widow, the painter Rose Hilton, edited a volume of what she termed ‘Night Letters’, letters Hilton had written mainly to her during the final few years of his life, when he was largely confined to his bed. This essay focuses on the nature of these letters, in particular the ways in which they fuse the written word with both drawing and painting; and considers them in the context of Hilton’s coterminous gouaches, which had become his sole output as a painter, and which, I suggest, are a related project in which writing can play a vital part. Throughout I hold in mind the question of the manifestation of the self: reflecting on the ways in which art and life herein interact, and boundaries are blurred in terms of public and private selves as well as in terms of genre and medium. Further, I consider how in these letters Hilton reveals as well as obscures himself and his circumstances, and how he ultimately exceeds the limitations of the single self.

Hilton was born in London in 1911 as Roger Hildesheim, his father a well-known paediatrician, who changed the family name to mask his German-Jewish origins

during the First World War; his mother, from a family of Derbyshire coalmining entrepreneurs, had studied fine arts at the Slade. Hilton grew up for the most part in Middlesex, going on to follow in his mother's footsteps at the Slade in 1930, but not without family disputes; he ended up not graduating until 1936, because of an extended time away in Paris; after gaining his diploma he continued to paint in both London and Paris up until the outbreak of the Second World War. His mother noted with anxiety his 'excessive "reading of the lives of modern painters"' in his early art school years: he had begun to rebel against his conventional upbringing, and to dramatise himself as bohemian outsider.³

The Parisian experience was to remain with Hilton: he would quote Roger Bissière, with whom he studied at the Académie Ranson, throughout the rest of his life. But it took him a while to assimilate and make productive use of his influences; he had absorbed various *École de Paris* styles with little thought (above all late cubism, and the *faux-naïf* – both of which would resurface in modulated terms in his final years). The forging of an artistic identity was brutally interrupted by the Second World War, in which he served as one of the first commandos. He was captured by the Germans at Dieppe in 1942, and was a Prisoner of War first in Poland, then enduring a forced march to Bavaria, experiences from which he never wholly recovered.

After the War Hilton settled in London, and truly began to forge an artistic identity in experimenting with abstraction. The most vital encounter of his career was with Constant and the CoBrA group, who unlocked in him the possibilities of intuition in the creative process. His forms became increasingly irregular, and the human figure began to re-enter the canvasses, but merely as suggestion, in intangible, fluid, and personally expressive forms. The second crucial development that led to Hilton's mature style was his encounters with the St Ives artists and his experience of Cornwall.

Through Patrick Heron Hilton began to visit West Penwith in 1956, and took studios there and bought a base in 1957. The encounters with Cornwall brought about a new earthy palette, and the suggestion of landscape, with paintings often named after places. Hilton continued to paint in London too, but in 1965 moved down to Cornwall permanently, now living with his second wife Rose and their two sons in a remote cottage on Botallack Moor near St Just. He became closely associated with the established St Ives modernists, though he would always resist any such labelling; and while he identified with and befriended many of the artists working in the area, he was equally inclined to war with them and to pursue rivalries and vendettas.

As he became increasingly dependent on alcohol so he became increasingly given to outbursts and arguments, often seeking to get a rise out of even his closest friends. Hilton became notorious as a hellraiser after a number of incidents at gallery openings in which he both verbally and physically attacked attenders, most notably getting into a fight with the prominent critic Lawrence Alloway at Tooth's Gallery in 1962.⁴ A fracas at the John Moores Prize exhibition in 1963, at which Hilton won first prize, made newspaper headlines for all the wrong reasons: the husband of a Labour MP collapsed and died, allegedly after a row with Hilton; meanwhile Hilton decried all the other entries as 'terrible pictures. No wonder mine won. I wonder what the world is coming to'; and he is photographed aiming a kick at his winning painting.⁵ Yet the posing for photographers also suggests a certain wilful cultivation of a public image. Hilton's forthrightness spilled over into commentary on his work, and he became increasingly dogmatic on the subject of art in general. At its best, though, his writing on art is trenchant and personally insightful, emphasising often the responsibility of the artist, and the difficulty of the task (he spoke of all 'creative individuals' conducting 'a life and death struggle with existence').⁶ Where his pronouncements sometimes sound

limited, there remains always a delicate openness in his work that refuses to be pinned precisely down.

Until recently the large oils of the early 1960s have been the works upon which his reputation has rested; in the last decade though there has been renewed interest in Hilton after a period of some neglect, brought about perhaps by his difficulty as a painter, above all his resistance to categorisation; and indeed his difficulty as a person – he alienated and offended many. There are now two substantial monographs on Hilton, and the measure has begun to be taken of his life and work as a whole. This has brought about a reassessment of his later work, which was often dismissed as careless, but which as Adrian Lewis rightly says, is as difficult and challenging as the large oils.⁷

In the late 1960s figuration was becoming increasingly important, and Hilton focussed in particular on the female nude. But his health was rapidly deteriorating due to his chronic alcoholism, and his painting was beginning to suffer. By late 1972 peripheral neuritis meant that he was unable to paint in his upstairs studio at all, and had to remain for the most part in his bed on the ground floor. That Christmas, though, he was inspired to renew his painting by some poster paints given as a present to one of his sons: he realised that water-based paint and a smaller scale were the best possibilities now on offer, and he began to delight in the rapidity and informality he could achieve with gouache, which he combined with drawing in pencil, charcoal, pen and ink, crayon, and occasionally pastel, almost always on single sheets of paper. These continued to be his primary materials up to his death in early 1975.

Despite telling *Studio International* in 1974 that he had ‘not written anything’ since 1954, Hilton in fact wrote at length throughout his life, both in extended letters to his friends, and in sketchbooks and notebooks.⁸ Writing, though, was never a pure activity, never purely verbal and never treated as an art form in itself: he would

invariably either be discussing visual art or interlacing his words with drawings. He kept notebooks and sketchbooks for much of his life, and these provide fascinating insight into the visual mind. In the 1946 notebook in the British Museum, for example, he discusses the importance of the general public in sustaining the life of the artist: there needs to be a wider culture of appreciation, and above all ‘people must be told to buy’.⁹ Hilton foregrounds the visual by drawing first a nude and then a large exotic cockerel over the two pages of this screed, suggesting (beyond the playful sexual counterpointing) that though writing may have a role to play in communicating the value of visual art, the visual remains pre-eminent; perhaps suggesting too the way that the artist can grow wings and flourish through greater understanding.

Hilton had a discerning love of poetry, above all of the French symbolists, and we find him frequently quoting Rimbaud and sometimes Baudelaire; he would also claim at one point that his painting was influenced by his reading of T.S. Eliot.¹⁰ Hilton occasionally wrote verse himself, and again the motivation is predominantly visual: a notebook of 1949 contains a poem whose striking images are illustrated in the margins.¹¹ Hilton’s later intense friendship with the poet W.S. Graham would continue to fuel his love of poetry, yet the differences between poetry and painting were also at times one of the many subjects over which they fought, Hilton at one point protesting against what he felt to be excessive obscurity in Graham’s poetry.¹²

Writing for Hilton, we might say, becomes an increasingly visual matter in which at times even the graphic shape of the letters on the page becomes as important as the semantic function of the words: witness the variety of expression to be found in his handwriting in the *Night Letters*.¹³ The meeting of word and image in relation to the self reaches its apotheosis here in these letters, which in as much as they are conceived

as a whole at all might be said to follow in the tradition of the *livre d'artiste* but taking the form of a personal diary.¹⁴

During the final two-and-a-half-year confinement, Hilton would write, paint and draw through the depths of the night, working through his doubts, desires and delights; that night's instalment would be waiting for Rose on the table the next morning.¹⁵ The typical Night Letter combines wit with anguish, hope with despair, impatience with resignation, insult with contrition; and of course writing with drawing. A great many issue demands, often in the form of shopping lists, and he breaks into fury if his orders are not quickly obeyed: 'I said 12 Hankis, where are they? I said 6 eggcups, where are they?...I said 2 pairs of sheets...' He frequently requests exotic items that it would be almost impossible to obtain in Penzance; in any case, he simply could not have stomached them in practice:¹⁶ what we rather have are wistful daydreams, nostalgia for fine tastes from his Parisian days (he also indulges in writing recipes, often listing ingredients in French); so in the above letter we have 'Game of all kinds': 'Phesant, Grouse, Duck, Ptamigan [sic]', which then appears to break out in anger perhaps at the inevitable frustration of these desires: 'Liars, Cheats'.¹⁷ Sometimes there are amusing continuities between instalments: so here, presumably the following night: 'No egg cups. No handkis, No sheets. You have been at my whisky you swine.'

The bad behaviour clearly continues on the page; yet here there is space for remorse; as well as the possibility of withholding or destroying, keeping the written outburst private, perhaps even using it as an outlet to avoid personal confrontation – he had previously gone in for night phone calls, a far more dangerous activity.¹⁸ When published in 1980, many of the letters still had to be withheld because, as Michael Canney euphemistically puts it, they 'refer in highly uncomplimentary terms to persons still living'.¹⁹ But Hilton, one can assume, was granted an enormous degree of freedom

to speak his mind by the permissiveness of his wife and the strength of their relationship; and of course here we can also see the mitigating humour in Hilton's phrasing: 'your nefarious practices'; as well as the remorse a page later: 'It is all my fault. I am a shit' – sincere, or tongue in cheek because not really necessary? And how do we read that 'thank you' (a recurring signoff) – as sincere gratitude or as conclusion of a performance: 'thank you and goodnight'? There is again ambiguity in the illustration: of a decaying man being rowed by a lively female nude: is this an image of touching dependence on his wife, or of an indulgent dependency on the female form more generally (he is being rowed towards yet another nude)?

Insert Figure 1 about here

That the unfulfillable appetite might be an extension of his sexual cravings (also insatiable as a result of his alcoholism) is a connection made explicit by Hilton in one letter, in which a food list is prefaced with female nudes in various contortions, together with an erect phallus; further down, another nude appears to have crawled out of a saucepan. Hilton's depictions of the female nude have been contrasted with Matisse's (whom Hilton cites as a major influence): like Matisse Hilton achieves a remarkable fluidity with an economy of lines, but there is a heightened sexual explicitness in Hilton's nudes that is reinforced by the unadulterated lustfulness of the writing.²⁰

The letters rarely confine themselves to one subject, but digress with the fluidity of a stream of consciousness. Sometimes it is possible to detect a buried theme around which he is extemporising:

You either write or you paint or you eat or you give birth. The slavery of men and women is infinite. Firstly they are slaves to themselves. They cannot escape. Get that tiger.

[Drawing of cat being shot.]

Thank you. And let there be no moaning at the bar, when I set out to sea. Will you be well enough to shop? Do the boys go back to school? Please get Ronsonal for my lighter.

[Drawing of train with caged figures.]

Everyone is expecting me to be there, so I'll have to do it. My last public appearance.

Insert Figure 2 here

Though at first appearance a disordered rambling, we might say that the reflections are underpinned by the subject of limitations: of the sexes, of human life in general, and of the artist in particular. The artist, he seems to say, has time in this life for only one art – but there is the irony of the painter here writing. The eating/ birthing distinction, though bizarre, might be related both to the reference to art and to women: is ‘eat’ metonymic of life, ‘birth’ of art, so that in effect Hilton is saying you either live in the life of the world, or else in the life of art, but the two are incompatible? Hilton’s indulgence in cliché, with ‘slaves to themselves’, makes it difficult to take him seriously, and yet one might argue that he is indirectly approaching the subject of his own limitations with wit and caution. This is confirmed by the again impersonal – and yet deeply personal – allusion to Tennyson.²¹ The remarks at the bottom of this page are themselves boxed, and on the next sheet produced, after another command (more dependency), we see a train crammed full of caged figures, cartoonish, yet unavoidably calling to mind the deportation trains of the War. The final sigh about having to appear in public is perhaps what has generated all these thoughts: the artist having to go along with the whims of the world, the invalid having to make the effort to leave his bed, art having to cohabit with the material world in order for both it and its creator to survive.

These letters have an extraordinary direct power, apparently giving us as close a connection with Hilton’s consciousness as writing might allow; yet in their inherent instability there is also the sense of a metamorphosing self that refuses to settle down, so that we can never speak with full certainty of Hilton the man. Such fluidity may in fact transport the reader beyond the immediate moment of composition; and in this context the linguistic concept of the performative utterance, or speech act, proves

particularly instructive in considering the way Hilton's words, and perhaps even his painting, operate.

The performative utterance in linguistics, as defined by J.L. Austin, is speech which does not merely describe but which enacts in the process of articulation: 'in which to *say* something is to *do* something; or in which *by* saying or *in* saying something we are doing something.'²² So, 'I order you to buy me fresh paints' is not a mimetic representation, it is the command itself. Broadening this concept of a doing speech, J. Hillis Miller suggests that literature itself represents a written form of the performative, in bringing into being characters and selves.²³ For Hillis Miller, by way of Kafka and Derrida, letters are emblems of the performative power of literature to create ghostly dislocations and even to change the self. In framing relationships letters may appear to establish connections between selves, yet for these writers and theorists they may rather be said to destabilize and re-create the self in wholly unexpected ways. For the performative is here conceived as an unpredictable affair in which the 'I' of writer and 'you' of reader are perpetually open to construction.

Hilton's *Night Letters* seem forever cognizant of this creatively disruptive potential: they constantly exceed their demanding imperatives (which are themselves performative in the stricter linguistic sense because commands), playfully anticipating a wider readership that will be shocked into a new sensibility: so often the 'you' they address appears to stand for a non-specific 'you', belted out at the world and its injustices. So too they play upon the disembodied self of their creator, who is invested by the power of the written word with a freedom not granted by direct speech. Hilton's switches, though doubtless attributable to varying degrees to his illness, or state of intoxication, serve as an allegory of the divisibility of the Derridean self, which 'is a commonwealth of many citizens' – in synchronic as well as diachronic terms, so in

each and every moment ‘the self is the locus of many different selves dwelling uneasily with one another’.²⁴ Hilton brings such a sense of the self to the fore, not only in rapidly switching tone and mood, in contradicting and transforming what has gone before, but in the simultaneous ambiguities and ambivalences of his writing of the present moment. To understand this playful texture of the multifarious self may mitigate to a degree the more uncomfortable moments of Hilton’s misogyny and hostility; though it in no way can deny them. We should also not neglect Hilton’s inclination to performance in the theatrical sense: he begins one list by satirizing his tendency to self-fashion, decreeing in the name of ‘his Holiness Pope Roger the 1st’.²⁵

So too Hilton’s writing is haunted by the sense of the loneliness identified by Kafka: the letter-writing process proves a reminder of absence as much as it is its substitute. So many of those imperatives hammer on the person who is not there, the thing he does not have. To borrow the terms in which Hilton spoke of abstract painting, he swings his words out into the void; Hilton often spoke of abstraction in terms of aloneness, with the sense both of the original path he was forging, and of the experience of moving away from the representational world: ‘The abstract painter submits himself entirely to the unknown’, he wrote in 1954.²⁶ The disembodied experience of writing to or for another self, it is worth noting, is also an idea explored in some of Graham’s greatest poetry. Graham also wrote a number of letter poems, most famously and fittingly (given the Derridean sense of letters’ dislocation) the elegy ‘Dear Bryan Wynter’; and he would ventriloquize what he saw as Hilton’s ultimate concern, in the poem ‘Hilton Abstract’: ‘It is the longed-for, loved event,/ To be by another aloneness loved’ (ll. 5-6). Graham and Hilton share a sense of dependency on the word – and it is perhaps not too strong to say that it even became a means of survival. Hilton would speak dismissively of writing as ‘something to do between pictures’;²⁷ but it was also

something to *sustain* both him and his painting. It was, as he elsewhere said, ‘someone to speak to’, and in its regularity and its working through of problems and doubts it amounts to a form of therapy.²⁸

This emphasis on the action of language brings to mind the notion of ‘Action Painting’, the term coined by Harold Rosenberg for the way in which many of the Abstract Expressionists painted, with a heavy emphasis on gesture, spontaneity, physicality, and the finished work remaining in a seemingly raw state;²⁹ Hilton had already been aligned with the European equivalent of the movement, being included in Tachisme painting shows in London. While in performative utterances the word becomes action in the act of being spoken, in action painting the paint becomes action in the (above all spontaneous) act of painting, which in itself is the true art form in Rosenberg’s estimation. However, like the broader literary definition of the performative, the action painting may also have a lasting power to re-create that process in being viewed.

The connection with the painter’s self was emphasised in terms of an existential struggle, by both Clement Greenberg and Rosenberg, a sense at least partially shared by Hilton in his practice and in his own remarks. Practically he was known for his tortuous pauses followed by very rapid bursts of painting; in Canney’s words Hilton in painting adopted an ‘existential position, in which one must act, even if it is wrong, as it inevitably must be’.³⁰ The latent moral sense in Canney’s observation would later prove to be a bone of contention in Hilton’s relationship with Greenberg: the pair corresponded amicably in the 50s, but Hilton grew to detect in Greenberg’s positions an absence of a space for ethical thought, that he could not reconcile with his own motivating processes: it seems Hilton never completely sanctioned the abandonment of conscious thought in the act of creation.

Moreover, Hilton corresponded with Alloway on the question of action after Alloway had brought such concerns to the fore in Britain.³¹ In this case Hilton typically bristled at the prospect of categorisation, pointing to the problems inherent in discerning action *ex post facto*, and in distinguishing one form of action from another: ‘it is ridiculous to see more action in one type of mark rather than another.’³² Whilst revelling in the linguistic quibble, he sees further potential in Alloway’s use of the term ‘existential’, and posits that all creative individuals ‘break out of existence’ in order to give back meaning to the world we inhabit. What emerges is a complex paradox in which ‘the activity is always mental’, and yet ‘the act is its own meaning’ and ‘can only occur when there is no longer any meaning. ...The meaning could not precede the act’.³³ Hilton stops short of analysing ‘meaning’ too, but a distinction appears to be drawn between kinds of meaning possible in conceptualisation, act, and reception. His tense prose from this seminal period reveals an artist who thought deeply about that which lies beyond thought, situating him in a liminal position between consciousness and unconsciousness, between reason and abandon.

In pursuing influences and continuities we can trace similar impulses back further, to Surrealism: the tenets of André Breton have perhaps a greater currency for Hilton than those associated with the New York School. Breton’s notion of automatism in writing and drawing, in which self-censorship is ostensibly abandoned in order to tap into the unconscious mind, is particularly suggestive for the Night Letters, and for his later principles as a painter, especially in the light of the often mediated representation of the unconsciousness that emerges from early automatism – in its retention of strong elements of illusionism in drawing and painting, and of semantic coherence in writing. In practical terms Hilton’s willingness to let go might be seen to increase with the growing rapidity of composition in the later years. Before then he had welcomed

accident even if it was not the *raison d'être*: in the 1960s he spoke of 'accepting' mistakes, with only minor degrees of modification; accidents may be 'tid[ied] up', he suggested, with a 'few simple strokes'.³⁴ He part-jokingly suggests even spilt food might be seen as productive; there is little evidence of this extreme of allowing external circumstances to enter the picture plane, and indeed in his late writing he complains often about disruptions to his painting, particularly in the form of family pets; but he was known to spit at his late gouaches in order to vivify the texture.³⁵ The position certainly holds true as an internal principle in his late painting and drawing, and we see it clearly in his writing where spelling and grammar are subordinate to the speed of the thought, where he digresses never to return, or lapses into French at a whim, and where any changes are left legible or else turned into messy scribble; 'Never rub out or attempt to erase' he wrote in 1974; 'Work round it if you have made a mistake. Make of your mistakes a strength rather than a weakness.'³⁶

Further insight can be gained into the life of Hilton's language in turning to the words that enter his paintings of the time, that are known as his 'late gouaches'. He spoke of them as a renewal, and they indeed articulate with greater urgency the subjects and substance of his previous work, from the early drawings of his childhood belongings to the spatial exploration of the mature oils; above all they sustain and embellish the delicate relationship between representation and abstraction that had increasingly preoccupied his painting. Almost all of these paintings in fact play upon the counterpointing of gouache with other media, especially pencil and charcoal drawing, and this too was not new in itself: charcoal lines began to appear in his oils in 1955.³⁷ But now text also enters the picture plane, as if drawing attention to the paper shared by his writing. In using single sheets for writing instead of notebooks since around 1960 Hilton had already in effect elevated the status of his writing to that of

individual work to be sent out into the world; so it was an extension of that verbal aspiration for his words now to progress into the works formally labelled as art. Like the synthetic cubists, incorporating text in the form of newspaper clippings, Hilton too questions the nature of art and indeed the nature of reality with a written presence that can appear both disruptive and organic to the picture plane. And like Picasso and Braque in cubist mode, playing on that mysterious elliptical inscription 'JOU', Hilton too derives a heightened sense of play from the complex and unpredictable powers of the word.

He sometimes carries the immediacy of the insult over into the gouaches, where it vividly assails the viewer, as in the following example: 'Fuck You WherES MY SUGER'.

Insert Figure 3 about here

The work luxuriates in the insult, prolonging it, transforming it from hasty attack of the moment into sustained work of art, unified in its rhyming of shape with letter and in its balancing of colours. But does this exacerbate or alleviate its potential to cause offence? On the one hand the painting may be said to increase the effect of the insult in outrageously assuming the position of art object and in addressing each and every viewer; yet there is also the possibility of a distance being created by that sense of form and colour, that absorbs the effect of the words into a more elevated sense of forceful life. The specific demand of the moment, for sugar, is lost in the efflorescence of dabbed colour. And while there is a potential unity between the immediacy of the sentiment and that of the paint, there is nevertheless a mismatch here in the sheer joyousness of the decoration that betrays no sense of the anger and impatience of the semantic sense of the words. The work, indeed, negotiates contrarities as much as it deals in likeness: the contrasts of sentiment and presentation, of colour, of text and paint, of line and flat

areas of colour; even in the interplay of lower case and capital letters (that perhaps suggest a difference in tone or volume). And then there is a play with time: the suggestion of the flickering moment of the anger, so sudden it is not even spelt or punctuated correctly; the moment beyond that of the decoration of the words; and the enduring moment of the artwork, a frozen timelessness whose shocking impact nonetheless remains.³⁸

The attitude is put to a wider use in a gouache two years later, of 1975, which reads, emblazoned in orange and blue, 'Fuck Vietnam/ Fuck them/ Shit. Up Viet Cong.' Across which is written: 'Long live Communism'.³⁹ In exceeding conventional grammar the text again foregrounds spontaneity; the painting here is spontaneous too, with its own vocabulary of rapidly painted swirls, dots and dashes; but it nonetheless elaborates and sustains the insult, in three different colours, with over-writing/ painting of the words. It has the effect of a political banner; designed to imprint itself on the eye. In its spontaneous anti-war protest, it calls to mind the Beats, particularly Ginsberg's 'America' ('Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb').

Yet considering Hilton's trajectory, it would make most sense to align him in poetic terms with the so-called Confessional poets of 60s and 70s. Like Robert Lowell or John Berryman he creates art out of the wreckage of a fractured self, and in doing so liberates himself from a conservative training, whilst nonetheless benefiting artistically from that training. The Hilton household may have had in Graham's phrase 'the beat disorder' but Roger was always too urbane in his sensibilities to really be considered a social revolutionary.⁴⁰ The explicitly political stance, moreover, is atypical; as Hilton told *Studio International*, 'Every true artist is a revolutionary, but only in his own domain. He probably does not even vote.'⁴¹ The term 'Confessional' is not ideal either, implying as it originally did a direct connection between the suffering of the artist and

his or her art; but the more recent deconstructions of the putative movement are highly instructive, focussing rather on the complex performances and transformations that are vitally at work in these poets.⁴²

If these examples represent a movement in which painting is brought into the world of the word, then the reverse movement happens too. Maggi Hambling, who has collected Hilton's work, reads the following painting of a circus scene as a perfect marriage of 'the action of the subject' with 'the action of the paint'; she describes how she bought this work and had it on her wall for three months before realizing there is a line of writing embedded across the image: 'women and children last' – a wonderful story of the feminist artist living with a hidden anti-feminist joke and then uncovering it, to her delight.⁴³

Insert Figure 4 about here

So, she suggests, the text also takes part in this perfect union, but here it is through an act of disappearance: 'You have to discover the words' rather than them being 'there as a blatant thing' as it is in the earlier examples – though 'thingness' may here in fact be a useful concept to run with: of the word as graphic imprint above its status as semantic signifier.⁴⁴ 'Text' here seems the apt descriptor, if we draw on the literal meaning of the word 'text': from the Latin 'texere', to weave. This text has intricate patterning, visual and verbal, and moves in many directions, with the potential both to integrate with the painting's images and to step outside its pictorial frame of reference.

On the subjects of sexual stereotyping, the capacity to give offence, and spontaneous expression, the literary critic Helen Vendler has said of feminist poems by Adrienne Rich (another 'Confessional' poet) that invoke male stereotypes: 'it is hard to see how such poems pass muster months later when a volume is being gathered for publication. The truth of feeling ("I felt this way, I wrote it down") has never been

coterminous with the truth of art.’⁴⁵ Yet just as Vendler finds a ‘tense fineness’ elsewhere in Rich’s work that ‘determin[es] the tactics’, so in Hilton’s best writing and painting there is always at some level a formal balancing and an ambiguous sense of play, which may be coterminous with both the truth of feeling and the act of composition.

Considering these projects as a whole, the most striking feature of both the late paintings and the writings is their quantity. Adrian Lewis has taken issue with an auction house chairman’s suggestion that Hilton ‘produced too many works of varying quality on paper for the good of his critical reputation’; he speaks of the conflation of commercial and artistic values (whose relations nonetheless intertwine to a loose degree) and suggests that ‘another sort of value needs in the end to be given to Hilton’s fertile late production of works on paper’.⁴⁶ That value, I would suggest, resides at least in some measure in these late works’ variability itself. There is critical and even aesthetic value in the most incoherent of Hilton’s scribbles: in their artistic context, revealing the riskiness of the procedures and throwing the greatness into relief – what goes wrong pointing more clearly to what elsewhere goes right; and most of all in the context of Hilton’s personal experience, in the way that the project becomes a chronicle of the life, having access to every inadequacy as well as to every strength.

Both are sequences of discrete instalments on single sheets of paper, which weave together in unpredictable ways; so too we find the two projects overlapping, each shedding light on the processes of the other. Together they question what exactly a ‘finished’ artwork is. Most of all, these works blur the boundaries between painting, drawing, and writing, between letter and work on paper, between sketch and fully-worked picture, inviting us precisely not to make distinctions. They come to represent a postmodernist sensibility in which the casual has equal place with the formal, the

accidental with the schematic, the conscious with the unconscious, the ancient with the new. Writing about a 1971 Hilton show Norbert Lynton perceptively and prophetically remarked that Hilton's work was 'held together only by personality': nothing could be truer of Hilton's final outpourings.⁴⁷

Though Hilton could never clearly explain the pain he felt, and did not engage in self-analysis, he could directly access the fractures of his self and through art transform the terrible given into a transcendent made. Painting, he wrote, and I would add writing, 'carr[ies] humanity forward to [its] unknown destination':⁴⁸ a testament to the liberating power of art, Hilton's late work is a life-affirming, living body set free into the world where, on its unpredictable journey, it may find us, touch us, and even change us.

¹See Hilton's *Studio International* letter (March 1974), in *Roger Hilton: Night Letters and Selected Drawings*, ed. by Rosemary Hilton (Newlyn: Newlyn Orion Galleries, 1980), n.p.: 'I was the one who stopped [Patrick] writing and got him on to painting.'

² W.S. Graham, 'Hilton Abstract', Matthew Francis (ed.), *W.S. Graham: New Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 177, l. 12.

³ Adrian Lewis, *Roger Hilton* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 2.

⁴ See Andrew Lambirth, *Roger Hilton: The Figured Language of Thought* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 182.

⁵ Lewis, *Roger Hilton*, pp. 103-4.

⁶ Letter to Lawrence Alloway, quoted in Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 70.

⁷ These two monographs, Lewis' *Roger Hilton* and Lambirth's *The Figured Language of Thought*, have begun to redress this critical imbalance, together with Lewis' earlier short study *The Last Days of Hilton* (Bristol: Sansom and Company, 1996).

⁸ *Night Letters*, op. cit. Hilton is misleading even in the context of his published words, though he could be forgiven for forgetting: his last published statement prior to this was ‘Remarks about Painting’ for the Galerie Charles Lienhard, Zurich in 1961. For a full chronology of Hilton’s writings see Lewis, *Roger Hilton*, p. 179.

⁹ Prints and Drawings Archive, The British Museum, Catalogue no. 1979,0623.19.29.

¹⁰ See *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham*, ed. by Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1999), p. 223.

¹¹ Reproduced in Lewis, *The Last Days of Hilton*, p. 60.

¹² See Lambirth, *Figured Language*, p. 272.

¹³ The recent new edition of *Night Letters* benefits from colour reproduction, and printing technology which differentiates between the finer strokes, showing to a greater degree the variety of handwriting. See *Roger Hilton: Night Letters, Drawings and Gouaches*, ed. by Timothy Bond (London: Archive of Modern Conflict, 2009).

¹⁴ Drawings from the same period supplemented the original edition *Night Letters*, and it is sometimes difficult to discern which are appended to letters; another strength of Timothy Bond’s new edition is a clearer collation and placement of the letters and drawings; the majority of the letters in fact have illustration around and between their words.

¹⁵ Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

¹⁶ Cf. remarks elsewhere in the *Night Letters*: Hilton jokingly orders Rose to ‘get French bread in Soho. Go up once a week and buy it’, only to lament that ‘Most things damage the stomach anyway’ and that it’s ‘All wishfull thinking.’

¹⁷ The seemingly bizarre conclusion to this list, ‘Breaker’s Marmalade’, is helpfully elucidated by Timothy Bond as a reference to a friend who brought Hilton homemade marmalade: see *Night Letters* (2009), p. 279.

¹⁸ Particular late-night calls, to Hilton’s dealer Leslie Waddington, are described by William Brooker, in Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹⁹ Michael Canney, ‘Introduction’, *Night Letters* (1980).

²⁰ See Lewis, *Last Days*, p. 26.

²¹ Hilton misquotes lines from ‘Crossing the Bar’ (1889). The original reads ‘And may there be no moaning of the bar,/ When I put out to sea’ (ll. 3-4).

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- ²² J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 12.
- ²³ J. Hillis Miller, 'Thomas Hardy, Jacques Derrida, and the "Dislocation of Souls"', in *Tropes, Parables, Performatives: Essays on Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), pp. 171-180.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- ²⁵ See *Night Letters* (2009), p. 2.
- ²⁶ Statement in Lawrence Alloway, *Nine Abstract Artists* (London: Tiranti Ltd., 1954), pp. 29-30.
- ²⁷ Quoted in Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 234
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 237.
- ²⁹ Rosenberg coined the term in his essay of 1952, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News* (December 1952): 22.
- ³⁰ Lambirth, p. 263.
- ³¹ Both Michael Canney and Terry Frost recall Hilton's lengthy pauses followed by frenzied action. For the former see Lambirth, *Figured Language*, p. 263, and for the latter Lewis, *Last Days*, p. 33.
- ³² Letter to Alloway, quoted in Lewis, *Roger Hilton*, p. 70.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Quoted in Lewis, *Last Days*, p. 84.
- ³⁵ See Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
- ³⁶ Letter to *Studio International*, *op. cit.*
- ³⁷ Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- ³⁸ A word is needed on Adrian Lewis's brief reference to this painting as an act of revision: in his estimation Hilton has 'altered' the initial curse to read 'For you' (*Last Days*, p. 87); but the curve of the 'k' is in fact consistent with the majority of Hilton's lower case handwritten 'k's.
- ³⁹ Prints and Drawings Archive, The British Museum, Catalogue no. 2003,0601.7.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 210.
- ⁴¹ Letter to *Studio International*, *op. cit.*
- ⁴² Notable reassessments of Confessional Poetry, that have brought attention back to the aesthetic qualities of the texts themselves, include Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic*

Redefinition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Adam Hirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: Norton, 2005).

⁴³ Quoted by Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁴⁴ Hambling suggests that there is ‘nothing literary’ about the use of words here; but it is interesting to note that elsewhere Hilton’s words are often inclined to literary allusion: paintings of boats, for example, contain text alluding to both Rimbaud and Melville; whilst in the letters *King Lear* is a recurrent point of reference.

⁴⁵ Helen Vendler, ‘Adrienne Rich: Diving into the Wreck’, in *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 243.

⁴⁶ Lewis, *Roger Hilton*, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Lambirth, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁴⁸ Lewis, *op. cit.*, xv.