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I, Eric Bliman, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English & Comparative Literature.

It is entitled:
By Underground Light

Student’s name: Eric Bliman

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Donald Bogen, PhD
Committee member: John Drury, MFA
Committee member: Laura Micciche, PhD
By Underground Light

A dissertation submitted to the
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by
Eric Bliman

M.F.A., University of Florida, 2007
B.S., University of Michigan, 1996

Committee Chair: Don Bogen, Ph.D.
Abstract:

This creative dissertation consists of two parts: a book-length collection of poems and an extended critical essay. The creative portion of the dissertation is *By Underground Light*. The composition of these poems is informed by my interest in 20th Century American and British poetry, particularly in poets whose work combines elements of modernist and confessionalist traditions. The poems in the dissertation are linked by their preoccupation with personal relationships, work, cultural differences between places where the speaker visits or lives (or has lived), ancient myths, art, and literature. Formally, the poems range from sonnets and ballads to free verse meditations. This formal variety is echoed by the poems’ variety of content, setting, and tone. Among other artistic and literary figures, Thelonius Monk, Weldon Kees, Nora Barnacle, and James Brown appear here. The speaker’s voice blends “high” and “low” diction, which permits a great deal of flexibility in terms of tone, which often shifts from humor to seriousness, and vice versa. The poems are arranged in three sections, which are loosely based on geography.

The critical portion of the dissertation is “Unusual Children: Mediation, Estrangement, and Growing Up in *An Explanation of America* and *Mercian Hymns*.” The critical essay reflects my interest in the contemporary British and American poets Geoffrey Hill and Robert Pinsky; in it, I discuss how their use of children as mediators, who don’t fit in with the society at large, enables them to grapple with the issues of war, estrangement, and the difficulties of growing up. For Pinsky, a more traditional notion of the identity of his eldest daughter (tempered by the speaker’s awareness of her character as an “idea”) allows the reader to sympathize with the girl who spends most of her childhood as an outsider struggling to come to grips with American democracy, which she finds flawed and often ugly. For Hill, the child-poet-king narrator complex challenges our notions of any settled, stable identity in the speaker. This device invites the reader to engage in the difficult process of etymological sifting, and to learn the complex net of associations of words which, for Hill, is serious “[c]hild’s play.”
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“Prometheus in Pittsburgh” was selected by Oliver de la Paz as a winner of the 2009 AWP Intro Journals Award.

I am deeply grateful to the faculty of the writing programs at the University of Cincinnati and the University of Florida, and to all those who read early versions of these poems. This manuscript is dedicated to my parents Noel and Sam, and to my wife Heather Hamilton.
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LOVE FOR SALE

What thrill can compare to the first thrill of love?
Past the island wreck and its spray of diamond-dust, that fine, green-edged glitter my tires crunched, I found you sitting on the Wendy’s curb, fishing in your purse, in the shade of an unblemished SUV: That jarred me. What were you searching for?

A key, or a picture, or a name—knocked into chaos like so much loose change—to hand the calm policeman standing over you? Glimpsing your passenger-side door curled in on itself, I knew what had filled my usual view: a wall of sound and steel and flying stars.

Had time slowed for you in that imploding fishbowl, as you gripped the wheel tighter, fragments glinting in your hair like fireflies? The world blinked. Moonlight on a lake of oil. I rubbed your neck and shoulders, counted my blessings. We waited for the wrecker, then waited some more.

A week or so later, on our slow way home from dinner, you picked a crystal out of your purse to show me: “Our lucky star,” you laughed. I wanted to keep it, but before I could say so, you’d already tossed it out the window, onto a street studded with infinitely divisible sparks.
PRIDE OF MOBILE

As you and your mother embrace in the driveway,
NIGHT AT THE BAMBİ MOTEL

I drew the blinds across the view of busted
THE DEVIL’S OWN JOB

"As a young man he had the greatest difficulty in telling Nora Barnacle that he loved her, and Molly Bloom, on the subject of Bloom’s declaration of love during their courtship, remembers, ‘I had the devil’s own job to get it out of him.’"

(Richard Ellmann)

“Swimming in primroses, that’s my idea. Aesthetes or atheists, they call themselves. Whichever occurs first to their bad consciences goes howling to the mothering priest. Mea culpa.

‘So we are flowers,’ he says to me. And heaven knows what else: an ashpit, the Alameda esplanade, horny Circes turning ships of men into the squeals of piggies. Clean-shaven, they’re open for business.

A honeymoon in Venice of promises: he sings: moonlight, gondolas, mandolins, lanterns. I ask for jasmine, he offers up the Rock of Gibraltar. Yes of course, but I must first please change the wallpaper!

My primroses, the devil take his eye, offend him. They stick to his swift hull of art like barnacles. And with what does my lord think to decorate our wall? A painting of Cork, in a frame of cork.”
On Championship night at the Winn-Dixie,
EMERGENCY SLEEPOVER

Around midnight, you call. I race back to find
PEANUTS

It’s a wonder no Macon, GA homemaker’s
A FAMILY COMPLEX

From the balcony, I watch her walk past sunnier chairs,
THE SOUND OF SENSE

Their fracas makes our ceiling thump and squeak.
The Guardian’s S. Jeffries fired off
FLORIDA ROOM

A child might dream this sadness of a room into Florida.  
No hoarded orange blossoms make it bloom into Florida.

What weird alchemical makeover spun this storage dun to gold,  
A geriatric’s heaven where nine-irons loom into Florida?

Might some young Einstein not re-fuse this bleak-appointed nucleus,  
Retool its quarks, by magic we assume, into Florida?

A launch-pad’s last earth house to satellites and men.  
Canaveral thrusts its hot flamingo plume into Florida.

“Life would be a dream,” the neon Wurlitzer insists. I’d add:  
If we could safely teleport—“sha-boom!”—into Florida.

Why kid? Aren’t grownups brave enough to dream?  
Ask the crested waves that drive salt spume into Florida.
From a misty pay phone in Pensacola,
MIGRATIONS

I come downstairs to let you in, you pull me out instead.
If you’d seen me in my parents’ basement,
1. Dance of the Flaming Coke

Atop the furnace dotted with blazing lids,  
a lean man crooks an arm to shield his face  
from the burning wind, weighed down by robes of lead.

Flares dance and sing up through the coke-holes:  
dialed-up, dialed-in jets of light and heat  
belch and cavort. No one can control

the beast beneath, whose exhalations shoot  
through the vents in each charnel cover,  
as coal-dust purrs softly down the chute.

In his left hand, a pike—half-shovel, half-lance—  
mounted with a shoulder buckler, fends off  
arrows of heat and incandescence.

In Pompeii’s hot mud, hollow pietas were trapped.  
Poured plaster revealed their human forms.  
Here, a coal car’s wheels polish the track.

2. Workers, Steel Mill

Holy men wear one-piece dresses of asbestos,  
floppy hats, great moon-boots, and goggles  
that recall mustard-gas-filled trenches.

Whistling like miners’ short-lived canaries,  
they totter among sparks and firefalls that cool  
into razorblades, shoveling shards, Antares-ribbons. Their morality plays contain scenes  
of endless suffering and abrupt demise.  
Pots of molten metal pour out their dreams.

My father remembers driving past the slag-hills  
at night, their peaks streaked with orange streams.  
Mills crouched by the river like extinct animals.
Each furnace held a ruby element, that pyre
stolen from the stars to give us life: such a crime
the jealous gods could not forbear.
DISPUTE AT HOMESTEAD

At 3:00 am, the steam whistle wakes us.
My father? I never met the man.
Beyond the Road Closed sign spray-painted “hi,”
KENOBE

Recently barmitzvah, a so-called man,
She used to send him cards she made herself.
PARTING SHOTS

1. *A BAND CALLED ‘URASSIS DRAGON’*

I slept on a couch that stank like a bong hit
LAKE EFFECT

When the world slipped
WHY I’M NOT A GOLFER

for D.W.H.

Grandpa’s ashes are scattered in a sand trap somewhere on a West Texas golf course.

A plume of sand and grandpa geysering:
“A geezer geyser,” he’d chime in, if he could.

All his stories held a grain of the ridiculous,
yet I can’t help wondering what he meant

by his last, gentleman-widower’s request.
Maybe he wished to bequeath his cupful of dust,

his few remaining teeth, to the game he loved:
a game which lent to those crazy years

with Alzheimer’s—“Old-timer’s,” he’d croak—
some kind of peace. Now, in every divot,

for me at least, a chromium baldness gleams.
I can’t help cringing at the thought of cleats,

and wedges sharp as prows, and old men’s legs
like Bermuda-wearing cottage cheeses

traipsing through what’s left: his gritty end.
No redemption here but to drift and settle in,

forever, over these rolling green expanses
devised by retired sportsmen, built on sand.
THEFT

for H.R.B.

Her jump-proof window framed an iron sky
One more Monongahela “Rockin’ Cruise.”
MONONGAHELA

When I want to be invisible I go down to the river,
AGUA MALA

We never reached the Galápagos. Taking a yacht to tour
Darwin’s tortoises: a ticket beyond our means.
We settled for a gala weekend in Salinas,
and an easy day-pass in Fausto’s fishing skiff,
which threatened to pitch us into the surf
each time a new swell took us on its back.

“Agua mala,” Fausto announced, flopping backward
over the side. Flounced in sequins of foam,
our boat’s bridal train simmered.
From his cupped palm to mine, he tipped
one clear jellyfish in brine: the water of evil,
a salad-oil floater, a contact lens with a mind . . .

Freestyling, we circled eelgrass forests, and dove,
rising to laugh our salty laughs
that carried to the island’s lone shack where,
wearing a battered jipijapa, with a bandana
over his face, a man cradled a Kalashnikov
as if it were a child. I wasn’t scared
until I saw its two black banana-clips
taped back to back for an easy, devouring flip.
THE FOLKS ON THE HILL

The west side is where those unable to afford a niche in a cement mausoleum bury their relatives during the night. (From a travel guide to Ecuador)

Marble paths fan out through la ciudad blanca, bristling
HADES DREAMS OF WINTER IN SPRINGTIME

Stalled out on the porch swing, my weird terrier lolls his three long tongues and drools on the guests. He’ll still be waiting for his mistress in December. He’s lost his appetite for chasing ghosts.

Bored to death with overseeing the underworld, I sing Brel’s “Ne me quitte pas” in my underwear as lesser devils beat their heads against the walls, until next winter blows her back home to raise hell.

Then, we’ll have ice cream sandwiches and cable TV. We’ll pay no attention to the dead and their bitchery, hang the “Do not disturb” sign, sip teacupfuls of gin—we’ll check out the suite in our uncheckoatable inn.
MEADOW REPAIR

Canaan-dewy sweat beads silvered His upper lip.
MID-TERM DEPRESSION

Toast evenings without heat, 
or heated talks.

The oak leaves fall unfastens 
from their stalks

do not blame cold for a defeat 
from lack of passion.
GRANITE

When you find your third “taken for granite”
Up here, there’s no wind
to muss a curl.
The flags hang stiff as the day
they were planted.

A spacecraft’s shed legs await
their expiry date.
I aim my pompadour’s wave
back at Carolina.

Tonight, the penitentiary is down
to its last burnt spoon.
Its license plate assembly lines
mass-produce

only rust. Still, somewhere
a rag-top Chevy convertible
unfastens then peels
back the moon like an eyelid.

Music pours out, its hip-
shimmying waves,
shining like the night
night was built.
HART'S LAMENT

To get ahead
POEMS ABOUT PETS

Most he’s read, and there have been a few—
READING IN THE DARK

Somewhere between the trees
Four bored gargoyles hold downspouts in their jaws. 
Sprinklers chatter to the Lincoln College lawn 
behind a heavy gate bolted against the night.

The bollard chirps to admit a garbage truck’s blood alarm, 
as it ratchets flush with the worn-out cobbles. 
At 5:00 a.m. Buck rises, staggers over to the sink, 
and pisses like a marble font in moonlight. 
I can’t help wondering how many pints defeated him 
last night, and what he’ll tell the scout this morning 
when she comes. Last week, I heard him tell her: 
“He’s tight.” I tip her for two. Somehow she washes 
all his disgusting sheets, shirts and socks.

My laundry looks like an Act of God: uninsured. 
“In what way is the Church of England like the Turl?” 
Buck yawns, massaging his pickled kidneys with his thumbs.

“Jesus,” I mumble to my pillow. “No! It runs 
from the High to the Broad and goes straight past Jesus!” 
The mirror’s hairline crack bisects our tongues.
JOURNEY OF THE MACHINE GUN CORPS
—1916

In the carriage marked “8 Chevaux ou 40 Hommes,”
we roll on towards Albert and the Somme, taking in
the sights: the land worn thin by the passing of the slats.

On a church the Boche five-nines turned inside-out,
blown halfway up to heaven, the Virgin still cradles
her golden Infant, clinging to the steeple, upside-down.

A mystery in the provinces! We do not fall to our knees.
We lie in the hay, smoking through the ruins of Gaul.
When the train’s brakes squeal, “Amiii-ens!”—we stretch

and march, never out of earshot of the ruffle of the guns.
Little suns parachute over no-man’s land at night.
In my sights, men topple as grain before the scythe.

Bombs dig graves beside the trenches, and scatter dirt
over our dreaming heads. When it rains, which is always,
the dead grow restless and push an arm or a foot

through our defenses, carved in mud. Their hands sag,
grey and useless, yet their boots are in good shape.
We’ll borrow them when ours wear out, and say an Ave.
CAMELOT IN FLORIDA

“Stray nooses of wisteria
toss purposefully, aimlessly, who can say.”

(Michael Hofmann)

You kept an unabridged dictionary
HALF A CALIFORNIA LIFETIME HAS PASSED
ELEGY FOR A DEAD SEAL WITH SURFERS

Wounded, he must have crawled out of the surf
to lie between two boulders, blond and smooth
and his lost brothers. Below the bite,
a stain has soaked his flank’s embroidered gold.
I can’t help noticing the sea-bird-emptied sockets,
the frayed, black eyelids tasseled like anemones,
and his face sculpted for underwater speed
and for that child-like play among his kind, which serves
two purposes: grace and hunting practice.
After his war with sharks or killer whales had ended
in his suffering, he turned back to face the sea,
that other, older brother he left reluctantly.
Trudging back up the footpath, lost in dazzle,
I pass men and women clad all in neoprene
with boogie-boards tucked beneath their arms
like candy-coated tribal shields. They descend
the last few steps from that airy world above
and emerge into this brilliant afternoon
they’ve set aside for battle.
NOTES

“The Sound of Sense”: The title is adapted from a phrase found in Robert Frost’s *Selected Letters*.

“Journey of the Machine Gun Corps”: The image of the suspended icon and the phrases “8 Chevaux ou 40 Hommes” and “the ruffle of the guns” were borrowed from the late Arthur Russell’s memoir *The Machine Gunner*. 


For Edgar Allan Poe, long poems, which he defined as poems a hundred lines or more in length, presented a problem by their very nature; in them, he noted, the lyrical tension that is needed to sustain the reader’s interest is stretched to the breaking point. In perusing long poems from Poe’s day and earlier, which are most often found to be narrative poems, it is the rare contemporary reader whose interest, like Poe’s, does not tend to oscillate like a mathematical sine-wave, leaving her cold and unaffected at points, engaged and enlivened at others. Contemporary poets and those in the distant past have solved this problem in various ways. One technique which poets, past and present, have used to help guide the reader through a longer text is to supply a character who acts either as an actual guide, in the case of Dante’s *Inferno*, or as a more-or-less tangible mediator between the speaker and the purported subject—an exemplar of a pattern, an idea, or an ideal, with whom the reader is periodically brought back into contact. However, what constitutes a long poem has shifted dramatically since Poe’s time, and contemporary poets use a wide variety of devices to engage the reader’s interest and help her navigate through a longer work; dividing the poem into separate yet linked sections is perhaps the most common. Such divisions can maintain their linkage to previous sections by direct reference to what has already been written, by use of the same character, or by many other means. Each division may stake out its own unique territory by changes in subject,
tone, form, and other aspects, each change potentially adding to the reader’s sensation of freshness.

I would like to examine Robert Pinsky’s *An Explanation of America* and Geoffrey Hill’s *Mercian Hymns* (long poems, which, at least superficially, could not be more different from one another). At times, Pinsky’s long poem can be discursive, like an imaginative history lecture; at other times, his tone becomes playful or humorous. It is not limited to either extreme, and it brings much of the speaker’s own experience, especially his thoughts on the Vietnam war, to the fore. It contains sections that refer to Odysseus, the Roman poet Horace, and Malcolm X, to name a few notable literary or historical figures that appear. Some sections seem to be variations of, or were inspired by, American folk tales or urban legends (real or imagined); and of course, not a few poignant sections (not quite private, yet not wholly public) bring his daughter into sharper focus. Pinsky addresses the long poem to his daughter in an epigraph on the title page, and again in the title of the first section “I. Prologue: You.” This immediate pointing towards a specific reader, an immediate family member, has the effect of making this long poem approachable for the general reader.

*Mercian Hymns*, on the other hand, is one of the more difficult poems by one of the most difficult¹ poets writing in English. Composed entirely in numbered (and, in the notes, named) prose units, the poem spans more than a thousand years, moves in time and

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¹ Robert Potts, who published a sketch of Hill in *The Guardian* in 2002, quotes Hill as saying on the subject of difficulty:

“In my view, difficult poetry is the most democratic, because you are doing your audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings. So much of the populist poetry of today treats people as if they were fools. And that particular aspect, and the aspect of the forgetting of a tradition, go together.”
space from section to section, and uses at least four distinct narrators: Hill the contemporary poet, Hill the child, Offa the King, and Offa the child. It should be pointed out as well that, at times, the narrator is probably better described as a complex of two (or more) of the above narrators. The most frequently used or most logical combinations are that of Hill the poet and Hill the child, and Hill the child and Offa the child. The question of the narrator’s identity seems to be an especially slippery one when the sections are being narrated by a child (or by children). This paper will examine these long poems, *An Explanation of America* and the allusive and elusive *Mercian Hymns*, by paying particular attention to their use of mediation and how the characters whom both poets use as exemplars, both remembered and misremembered, serve as cultural barometers of outsider status, a theme with which both poets are intimately concerned.

Both poems begin by positing their child-mediators as unusual figures who are both estranged from—and oddly representative of—different aspects of the larger culture each inhabits. Pinsky begins “Part One: Its Many Fragments” by noting with detachment, like a speechmaker relating a preamble, that his daughter, the figure to whom the poem is addressed in its subtitle, and to whom the speaker wishes to “tell . . . something about our country,/ Or my idea of it,” is also “my idea of [my daughter].” (*Explanation*, 5) In its philosophical matter-of-factness, the explanatory, quasi-narrative stance ("Discursive," 1) insulates him against the easy criticism that no one can explain all of America, or even explain a specific, well-known human being such as his daughter, which on the following page the speaker admits directly. A certain kind of critic might view this tipping-of-the-hand with annoyance, for it certainly is a device that borrows heavily from
postmodernity, from poems about poems, or poems that refer to their own existence, or the poet’s “idea of it,” yet that is exactly the kind of risk that the poem needs to take in order to set up the kind of quasi-conversational, discursive framework upon which so much of the poem’s baroque ornamentation and layering depends. Perhaps without this admission early on in the poem, the reader might confuse the indefinite article of the poem’s title with the definite one, and consequently, come to a cynical conclusion about the egoism of the poet. But because the poet makes this admission, and shifts the emphasis from the speaker to the speaker’s daughter, the reader does not have to be unduly generous to accept the poem’s raison d’etre or its conceit.

In addition to the poet-speaker’s admission that he is writing about his idea of the country for his daughter’s sake, the speaker makes a further, postmodern admission that the daughter for whom he writes is his idea of her. This fictional version of the daughter, then, is shaped by the poet-speaker’s own values and beliefs, and may come to represent a symbol of his wishes for himself, for his daughter, and for the country. While it would not be prudent to go so far as to assert that one should read the daughter as a “pure” placeholder, it seems significant that the speaker is aware of his limitations in narrating her life, and for presuming to speak to and for her. While presuming to speak for another person can push the limits of credibility as well as raise uneasy questions about hegemony, the limits of the author’s knowledge, and the problem of a male speaker presuming to “take ownership” of a female, the fact that the daughter is still a child may mitigate these concerns somewhat. If the daughter were older, then the speaker would have some serious explaining to do.
Though this paper will be concerned primarily with how the child figures are used for establishing unity and tracing themes, it is worth noting that Pinsky seems to value difference as an ideal America should hold, if not quite an American ideal. The first view the reader is afforded of the daughter in the poem is a picture of a girl struggling to fit into the tightly ordered construct of a dance, or a “Close Drill,” as the speaker ironically calls it, comparing it to a military display. The daughter, and her fellow victim, the drill-sergeant-cum-dance-instructor’s daughter, are the “victims.” The poet-speaker’s daughter is shown as distressed—“Chewing her nails, you couldn’t get it straight”—as the other Brownies practice the square dance. While the blonde girl is described as “tight, humiliated,” the adjectives given to describe the daughter—“brilliant, incompetent”—with no interjecting conjunction such as “yet” to separate the ideas, call attention to this pair of words, and plant the suggestion in the reader’s mind that these two modifiers are, rather than opposites, part of the same larger category.

Interestingly, later in the poem, the lines “Our fantasies about the perfect life/ Are different for ourselves and for our children/ Theirs being safer, less exciting, purer” (emphasis mine, Explanation, 40) seem to suggest the opposite. Has Pinsky the parent stepped in, wanting to correct any mistakes about the early introduction of the theme of difference? The following ten lines give a broader, more explicit, and yet (the poet-speaker admits) still somewhat parental view of the idea of difference he has in mind both for his country and for his daughter (which are, it transpires, different notions).

And so, depending always on the chances
Our country offers, it seems we should aspire,
For ourselves, to struggle actively to save
The Republic—or to be, if not like Brutus,
Like Quinctius: a citizen of affairs,
Free in the state and in the love of death . . .
While for our children we are bound to aspire
Differently: something like a nest or farm;
So that the cycle of different aspirations
Threads through posterity. (Explanation, 40)

Clearly, the speaker makes a distinction, as any parent would, between what’s good for the rest of humanity and what works for his or her offspring. However, the speaker seems well aware, in this passage at least, that, although he may wish to provide a safe home for raising his daughter, her life-choices vis-à-vis that same “cycle of different aspirations” may lead her towards a darker type of love than what the speaker would wish for her, which is surely the point. The speaker’s following aside supports that reading: “And who can say/ What Brutus may come sweeping through your twenties—given the taste you have for noble speeches,/ For causes lost and glamorous and just” (Explanation, 40).

Here, the speaker is actively imagining the grown-up daughter in her twenties, dating the glamorous citizen-assassin; both of them, in common parlance, “may have their hearts in the right place,” but haven’t seen enough of the world to know that their just choices are foolish, or their folly just. Both different readings about the speaker’s thoughts on difference, in the context of the last line’s string of adjectives, are possible. In any case, the speaker comes to a realization about himself as a parent, and has made a distinction which, while not quite democratic, is certainly American—with its slightly bent emphasis on protecting the children at all costs, except possibly at the expense of the child’s individuality (this last addition seems wholly Pinsky’s).

What is especially intriguing about Pinsky’s opening section is that the child is immediately established as one of the two aforementioned outsiders, who do not know or
do not want to participate in the dance, which, figuratively, might be the great dance of societal conformity, its idealized “harmony” (*Explanation*, 5), or the appearance of order. Quite literally, his daughter dances to her own beat; though this is, I admit, an overly simplistic interpretation of outsiderness. Possibly anticipating such an objection, Pinsky quickly qualifies and complicates the trope by the subsequent lines: “[F]rowning./ The children shuffled anxiously at command/ Through the home-stitched formations of the square dance./ Chewing your nails, you couldn’t get it straight” (*Explanation*, 5). Clearly, the daughter is distressed by the awareness, even at this young age, that she has failed to fit in. As a counterpoint, Pinsky introduces the other “Leader” in this opening scene, another girl’s mother who, “exalted/ By something like a passion after order,” takes Pinsky’s daughter and her own by the shoulders to keep them dancing in step with the group, and succeeds in humiliating the latter. Pinsky’s daughter, we are meant to assume, is not immune to the homogenizing effects of society either. By shifting the focus from dancers to the Leader, Pinsky makes a kind of playful, subversive criticism about those who seek to force others to dance to someone else’s beat, which is the polar opposite of the definition of dance that opens the second stanza of the section: “Dancing is the expression by the body/ Of how the soul and brain respond to music—/ And yes, not only to the sensual, God-like,/ Varying repetitions which we love” but also to “harmony” (*Explanation*, 5). Love and music have been replaced by the firm, guiding hand of the troop Leaders, who are “exalted” not by God but “by something like a passion after order.” Disorder, which we may see symbolized by the two “victims” or girls, is held up as something to be nurtured or rescued from the authorities.
The daughter’s depression and her difficulty with democracy (shown in this section, and in various others throughout the poem) is in keeping with what the speaker relates (to his daughter) about other Americans who existed in many ways outside the box, who thought and acted as individuals and who maintained a grim sense of humor and stoic pride in democracy. The speaker refers to Chaplin, Twain, and even Athena, the goddess of wisdom, to help illustrate that the very humorous and democratic traits he prizes in his daughter (garrulousness, intelligence, and a paradoxically youthful maturity) are quite different from those “Which America has always known to prize” (Explanation, 7). When his daughter selects a pair of “owlish glasses” (note the clever allusion to the goddess of wisdom here) over “‘cuter’ frames,” the speaker takes this as a sign that his daughter is her own person, capable of making choices that others would not make for themselves or understand from others. As character development, this conscious choice (nerdy versus cute, difference versus the ability to fit in) begins to define his daughter; such a choice is a natural act of a Brownie who could not dance in step with others; had she been able to, she might well have chosen differently. Furthermore, the speaker concludes that she values “The gaze of liberty and independence” which is “Uneasy in groups” and which, likewise, groups find uncomfortable.

All these themes that Pinsky establishes in part one—individuality, estrangement and independence—will be developed throughout the book as the poet returns to his daughter at certain intervals to illustrate them. In section three of part one, Pinsky again addresses his daughter directly, this time referring to her as:

You, rich in rhetoric and indignation,
The jailbird-lawyer of the Hunnewell School,
Come home from some small, wicked parliament
To elaborate a new theme: forceful topics
Touching the sheeplike, piggish ways of that tyrant
And sycophantic lout, the Majority (Explanation, 12).

Hunnewell, the primary school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, which she attended, is the site of an unnamed event which challenged the daughter’s notions of democracy, or as she says, “‘Voting is not fair’” (emphasis Pinsky’s, Explanation, 12). The poet uses this moment to allow differing modes of governance to communicate with each other, and to illustrate his feelings on the subjects of democracy and tyranny, and democracy and monarchy. His thoughts on "capital-D" Democracy he comes to realize are made up of wise, albeit “lame cheers,” and cites a handful of one-liners including snippets from Winston Churchill and Malcolm X on the subject of America. Notably, neither Churchill’s nor Malcolm X’s remarks are particularly flattering, which highlights the difficulty the parent has in his task of explaining why and how Democracy can be, as Churchill said, “the worst of all the forms of government,/ Except for all the others” (Explanation, 12), a remark with which Twain no doubt would feel at home. However, to his chagrin, the poet notes that his daughter “brushes aside” this comment. By the end of the first section, we see the daughter as a complex figure: one who is heroic and childlike in the sense that she embodies the characteristics of humorous genius (like Twain and Chaplin), yet reticent and mature in that she refuses to dance as others do, or wear what is in fashion because others find it attractive. Moreover, the “jailbird-lawyer” who has “a Jesuit firmness,” which suggests that she has hardened her views about society, remains unconvinced by her father’s appeals to humor and reason. She refuses to toe the line of “official” or mainstream American thought, which Pinsky points out is made up of both
“Clichés and Great Ideas” (*Explanation*, 13). Thus, we see the daughter becoming a bit of an American iconoclast: a character who remains a staunch individualist and values not democracy, but something like an intelligent monarchy run by someone such as herself.

It may be interesting to contrast briefly the mood of this poem’s opening with another famed American long poem, Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, in order to illustrate the mock-heroic status that Pinsky’s opening confers on the daughter. *Song* maintains a sense of unrestrained optimism, while its first-person, presumably autobiographical speaker communicates directly to the reader without an intermediary character; nevertheless, Whitman’s speaker exhibits the same fascination with estrangement from the mass culture as Pinsky’s child does. Where it might be appropriate to call the Whitman figure in *Song* a hero of sorts, Pinsky presents the daughter figure as a kind of noble anti-hero, who prefers to “be the Bad Guy, Clown or Dragon” in pretend games, “Not Mother or The Princess” (*Explanation*, 6). Her optimism is tempered by her unpleasant school and group experiences, and, in a way, seems more complex and adult than Whitman’s braggadocio, his swaggering “I celebrate myself”-ishness, which is simply naïve at many points in the poem. Interestingly, both Pinsky and Whitman imagine personae who are sympathetic to estranged figures, and who are, in several ways, estranged themselves; however, by addressing his daughter directly, and without insisting upon her as the "hero" of the poem, Pinsky allows his daughter-as-audience to stand in for the reader, or at least (and possibly more importantly) to earn his or her sympathy.

At two key places in *Explanation*’s third long section, “Its Everlasting Possibility,” the speaker again comes back to the daughter figure, several years later,
when her younger sister is the same age she was at the poem’s outset. The speaker uses the eldest daughter again to epitomize the poem’s themes, which by now have broadened to include many aspects of our nation (which the poem deftly conflates with Rome), including, but not limited to, the Vietnam war, the assassination of Emperors and Presidents, and how the inevitable passing of time affects people’s perception of events differently depending on their age and level of maturity. In “Serpent Knowledge,” the speaker notes that while he can’t use the word “Vietnam” . . . / Without the one word threatening to gape/ And swallow and enclose the poem,” (Explanation, 45) the daughter is not burdened by the same associations that he has and is able to “touch” the word in a way that he cannot because of the horror, which he elsewhere calls the aging of America, that Vietnam will always hold for him. While the speaker remains in a kind of emotional stasis regarding the war and its afterlife, the daughter, now three years older at this point in the poem, may be able to inhabit that period of history which she was too young to experience firsthand when it occurred, or may, if not come to grips with, at least “touch” it, which the speaker can only imagine.

The themes of local or national horror, which were established in the earlier sections “A Love of Death” and “Bad Dreams,” reassert themselves in part three. Here, the eldest daughter sees a local girl’s photograph in the newspaper, which tells of a horrific experience while camping in Oregon, “a place of wholesome reputation” for the speaker not, as it is now for the eldest daughter, “a highway where strangers go amok” (Explanation, 47-48). While it is inappropriate to read too much into this scene about the daughter’s potential maturation, the speaker does conflate his own experiences in
Vietnam with her fearful conception of Oregon, which allows the themes in this section to include both private and public concerns. The speaker concludes this section by telling that “That family ever after/ Would bear some consequence or demarcation,” an odd word, which reminds one of lines of demarcation such as borders or the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam (*Explanation*, 50). In this way, both Vietnam (for the speaker) and Oregon (for the daughter) are faint but growing signals of the encroachment of death and the awareness of national events that “Change something, inside” (*Explanation*, 49), which, the speaker implies, can not be undone, at least in his case.

In the section “Epilogue: Endings,” which occurs chronologically three years after the Oregon incident, while driving his young daughter to a rehearsal for *The Winter’s Tale* at Wellesley, where she has apparently (oddly) been invited to play “Mammilius,/ The small bold Prince who starts what seems to be/ A story about a ghost, and dies offstage/ . . . in time for bedtime,” the speaker listens to her recite another girl’s lines from memory, before he muses on parenthood, death, and the passage of time, marvelously reworking the passage from Shakespeare just recited:

Children are dangerous hostages to fortune—
Though they may seem, as to that fallible king,
Ornaments to our sentimental past,
They bind us to our future: Hope and Fear;
And though we might recoil, they make us strain
To see the wintry desert out beyond us (*Explanation*, 56).

It seems that Pinsky is saying that our children, those “dangerous hostages,” can be a source of pleasure to their parents and yet also cause parents to run the risk of forgetting that children are individuals, in some way forever “out beyond us.” This kind of
knowledge causes parents, the speaker implies, to worry about that future world or “wintry desert” they can not quite make out, one full of potential, uncertainty, and (for the parents especially) worry, but ultimately beyond their hopes and fears. Yet the speaker revels in this image of his daughter on the stage at Wellesley, where she gains a kind of social currency and acceptance that she lacked in her primary school years. These college actors are the eldest daughter’s first tolerant, non-familial role-models, whose acceptance of her (even as a “dwarf” or “small Prince”) matters a great deal to her. The speaker conflates the play’s ending and the daughter’s current situation as a “model of successful failure” (*Explanation*, 57), which implies that the early alienation felt by the daughter was all leading up to this other vision of America that includes her, and in which she feels included. It must be said that such a happy ending does not seem wholly in keeping with the overall despairing mood or the subject of alienation that comprises so much of the book. Pinsky seems to acknowledge this in “Epilogue: Endings,” by juxtaposing his meditation on the ending of the book with the ending of *A Winter’s Tale*, in which his daughter takes her bows “as if the Tale/ Had not been sad at all, or was all a dream,/ And winter was elsewhere, howling on the mountains . . .” (*Explanation*, 61). Yet this acknowledgement of the happy ending, scarcely to be believed, acts much like the introductory section where Pinsky relates his plan to tell us his “idea.” Even if the closure is incomplete, which it surely is, who can blame a father for wanting a happy ending for his child? Still, soberly, the section’s final lines admit, what remains may be “strangely broken, and unforeseen” (*Explanation*, 61).
Interestingly, Hill and Pinsky seem to take different stances on the relationship between difficulty and democracy, which may have influenced the choices each made between using a narrator complex and a traditional narrator, respectively. Hill’s poet-child-king figure has little in common, seemingly, with American democracy, yet oddly, Pinsky’s daughter, as previously discussed, shows certain monarchist leanings of her own.

In such a wily, difficult poem as *Mercian Hymns*, which is made up solely of linked and numbered units that I’ll refer to as prose units (many of which share titles) it might be useful to begin at the end, in the notes, to establish one of the poem’s main conceits. In the first paragraph of notes, Hill refers to the king as “the presiding genius of the West Midlands,” yet this figure is not merely Offa, nor is the poem a blithe re-envisioning of history; it is more useful to consider the poem’s protagonist as a being with multiple, often simultaneous, identities: a conflation of Hill’s child-self and the legendary ruler, as well as the poet. Hill delights in wordplay and employs the puzzle-maker’s media of “roots and endings” (*Hymns*, IV) as it applies to the origins and contemporary uses of words. Notably, the term “presiding genius” can be taken to mean both the spirit of the place, as well as its more common contemporary use concerning the intellect, both of which allude to Hill himself, who, through the poem’s manifold autobiographical references, presides in the poem. While there is no clear way to chart a division between the King and the child and the poet, in this instance the competing definitions point to the character complex that the poet weaves through the entire poem, using different pronouns to refer to the same character or character complex, thus
subverting any attempt to call the work a simple narrative, lyric, discursive, dramatic, or even epic poem. At various points, it embodies aspects of all of these.

Using the notes to shed light on the first prose unit in which the speaker employs an “I” for himself, (Offa uses his own “I” towards the end of the first prose unit) which are numbered III, IV, and V and are all titled “The Crowning of Offa,” we can read this schoolboy voice as belonging to Offa, to the child (specifically, Hill the child imagining himself as Offa) and to the adult who now looks back on his troubled past. In the majority of prose units, it is impossible to determine which narrator is in fact the “genius” who “presides” over the narration. To draw a clear distinction is, most often, I believe, neither possible nor desirable. The confusion in the speaker’s voice is one of the poem’s great charms and mysteries; the “point” of the poem is not to tell a story chronologically, or to provide narrative stability, which is perhaps the most clear contrast between Hill’s and Pinsky’s long poems: Pinsky is always clear about who is being addressed by whom, which is essential for the discursive-narrative mode he employs. What is clear from these opening prose units is the child’s love of and “invest[ment] in” solitude, his “mole[ishness]” (Hymns, IV) among the crypts of his locality, and finally, his sense of absolute estrangement from his neighbors. After all, the speaker declares, he is “taken to be a king of some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one” (emphasis mine, Hymns, V). The OED’s second entry for “prodigy” defines it as “something abnormal or unnatural; spec. a monster, a freak.” Like Pinsky’s daughter, Hill’s child figure is someone who is outside of the norm, but Hill’s is a much more extreme version, relying upon the complicating factors of physical damage and royalty to build a metaphor of a child who is at once appealing and
apalling, a bit like Shakespeare’s Richard III. The child-poet-Offa complex is made even more extreme by the fact that Hill purposely destabilizes the reader by eschewing unity in his manner of address: for instance, "I" or "he" may be used to indicate, at various points, the king, the child, the poet, or various combinations of these. This has a similar effect on the reader as Pinsky’s insistence that the child in his poem is his daughter, but also more precisely, Pinsky’s idea of her; identity in Hill’s poem is always far more difficult to pin down.

Take, for example, the opening verset of the fourth prose unit, “I was invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots and endings. Child’s play. I abode there, bided my time: where the mole . . .” (Hymns, IV). Even if we imagine, perhaps simplistically, that the poet and not the king is the speaker here (an idea which is called into question in the second verset) our efforts to reconcile the speaker as a man looking back on his youth, in which he played around in the dirt, is subverted by the careful word choice that emphasizes “invested,” which could refer to the speaker’s interest in “mother-earth,” or it could mean he was physically buried in it, and wore it, like a “vestment.” The former and the latter interpretations gain (I almost added “maddeningly”) almost equal momentum, when one considers the words and phrases that follow. “Crypt of roots and endings” is a brilliantly ambiguous phrase. It is a perfect double-entendre for the place in which a king is laid to rest as well as for a poet’s mind. No such riddling is necessary to discern who is addressing whom in Pinsky’s poem, if one clears the relatively low hurdle of acknowledging that Pinsky’s daughter is his idea of her, as previously discussed. Pinsky’s
little meta-admission about writing to an idea or to a fiction of his daughter seems
downright traditional in contrast to Hill’s.

The ending of these three prose units and the beginning of the next one, “The
Childhood of Offa,” form a starting point from which it might be possible to chart the
development of the child figure in relation to the king. The boy’s “rich and desolate
childhood” is likened to things that live underground and in darkness, like moles and
worms, while prose unit VI begins: “The princes of Mercia were badger and raven. Thrall
to their freedom, I dug and hoarded.” What can one say of such a child? There is a sense
of deep loneliness in these lines, of a child forced to resort to his own devices to keep
entertained, or one who fantasizes (digs like a badger, hoards objects like a crow) as a
way to escape some confinement or impoverishment he feels. The following verset
complements this—“A boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers.” However
comforting and clear this brief moment of relatable pathos is, the momentary clarity is
immediately destroyed by the speaker’s admission that he had no brothers and “fostered a
strangeness,” which may mean “encouraged, promoted, or developed,” as the dictionary
has it, or the verb may refer to fostering children, which, given the previous phrase,
would make sense—or it may mean both. Hill’s delight in wordplay is seemingly
boundless. The cumulative effect of layer upon layer of uncertainty (adding or
subtracting meanings from or for words) is one of claustrophobia, the overriding mood,
one feels, of the child-poet-king figure who appears in his various guises.

‘A boy at odds in the house, lonely among brothers.’
But I, who had none, fostered a strangeness; gave
myself to unattainable toys (Hymns, VI).
To read this section a different way, as if the speaker were stable, a child and not a complex of voices, we might observe: without brethren of his own, the child invents a strange familiar, the King, as a double or shadow-self for companionship. The college girls in Pinsky’s poem may serve a similar purpose. However, instead of alleviating the tension, as such camaraderie does in *Explanation*, in *Hymns* the device of an “imaginary friend,” or fostered strangeness, deepens the reader’s worry for this child. Though Hill’s speaker knows on some level that this game is useless, the urge to rebel against the hopeless situation of his own estrangement is irresistible, and it takes two forms in section VI: first, in the child’s refusal to look over the ornaments of “candles,” “apple-branches,” and “tacky mistletoe”; and second, in the tone, which is ironic and oppositional with its constant resorting to a “them/ I” duality. This tone frames him as an outsider, like Pinsky’s daughter who can’t conform to the dance the way a good Brownie should. Lines such as “their scars of dried snot; wrists and knees garnished with impetigo” show the speaker’s abhorrence of his peers, betray his perceived superiority, and express his kingly-childish rage. At least, we know that Pinsky’s daughter tries to fit in; with Hill’s child figure, whose inwardness is his only counsel and refuge, we sense a different kind of outsider, who seems determined to try not to fit in. Yet, admittedly, this is at least partly a “misdiagnosis.” Since the poem may be taking place a thousand years in the past, the child speaker conceals an adult with the objectivity and wit necessary to see himself as a child with such unflinching clarity. To a large extent, as Martin Dodsworth explains, the speaker’s “compulsions simply are what they are. They combine
self-gratification and attention to the world beyond the self, [and] they combine pleasure and menace” (Dodsworth, 52).

The only instance we have of true friendship in the poem comes in unit VII, which details the thrashing of Ceolred, who, paradoxically “sniggering with fright,” remains Hill-Offa’s friend even after the unnamed “he” has “flayed him.” While Hill chooses to relate this prose unit in the third-person singular, it is one of the first of several instances in *Hymns* where anachronisms draw attention to themselves, and none do quite so forcefully as this: “the lost fighter: a biplane, already obsolete and irreplaceable, two inches of heavy snub silver.” The juxtaposition of the biplane with the (equally anachronistic) name “Ceolred” creates friction and uncertainty over who the speaker is, and who is being referred to here, a tension which is further heightened by the final image in the section: “his private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*” (*Hymns*, VII). Such oppositional images that combine elements vastly removed from one another in historical time have the effect of creating in the mind of the reader an alternate time in which all discrepancies are resolvable and finite, a place that is wholly outside of, or estranged from, a time in which the people in the poem who are referred to as “they,” the citizenry, belong. This serves to worsen the sense of isolation for the child-figure, rather than ameliorate it.

The image of the lost fighter returns, slightly changed, in a later section in which it seems the child has finally found something to hold and to love. Prose unit XXII, in fact, contains the only example of the verb “to love” in the entire cycle. The speaker relates:
At home the curtains were drawn. The wireless boomed its commands. I loved the battle-anthems and the gregarious news.

Then, in the earthy shelter, warmed by a blue-glassed storm-lantern, I huddled with stories of dragon-tailed airships and warriors who took wing immortal as phantoms.

In this domestic scene, the speaker finds warmth, comfort, and not insignificantly, companionship with his “stories” in which the lost fighter returns in a strangely antique formulation, those “dragon-tailed airships.” Seen from a certain angle, those ships are the maturing version of the worm/wyrm image of the earlier prose units about his childhood. No doubt the fact that Hill himself came of age during the Second World War is important to our understanding of these images; these romanticized, modern-mythic dragon-fighters reflect the horror and excitement latent in the child character. The child is now part of a collective “we,” possibly a band of friends playing war; not surprisingly, this is one of the least claustrophobic or private sections in the book. To push this argument somewhat, it is possible to see in those “warriors who took wing immortal as phantoms” an image of the warrior-poet, a possible bright future for the child that had heretofore gone undreamt of, or an image of national pride or solidarity in wartime, as in WWII, when the royals assisted with the war effort by “pitching in.” This prose unit seems to signify a pulling away from the Offa myth for the child, in that its placement comes relatively late in the *Hymns*, after the king has established the boundaries of his domain by force. If one were to read hymn XXII on its own, there would be nothing in it to signify overtly a linkage between royalty and the child, as so many of the earlier poems have.
In the penultimate prose unit, XXIX, “The Death of Offa,” the separation between the child and the king seems to come to completion only to begin again in the cyclic manner of hymns. “Obstinate, outclassed forefathers, I too concede, I am your staggeringly-gifted child” implies both closure and a new beginning. As Dodsworth writes: “the poet is staggered by what he is given: his tribute is to the donors” (54), or to his ancestors, particularly those who aided him in his class-based, economic climb upward—no doubt, the poet-child brags, due in great deal to his own talent. The king is absent here. Finally, the opening phrase of this verset—“‘Not strangeness, but strange likeness’”—comes to a conclusion about the themes of estrangement and belonging that haunted the speaker’s youth. He realizes that he does in fact have a peer, albeit a dead one who must be discarded.

Though the poem leaves the problem of the speaker’s maturation unresolved, and the question of whether the king can ever be fully cast aside unanswered, in the last prose unit a vision of the king approaches and suddenly vanishes, as if he had been dreamt by the child-poet speaker all along. However, the poem’s final images are meant to stick with us: the coins “for his lodging” are lodged in the speaker’s consciousness as they were in the blood and mud of the field of battle, or that of play, for the child.

While Hill and Pinsky address the issue of mediation in dramatically different ways, unusual children and their relationship to society and to their peers are at the center of both *Hymns* and *Explanation*. For Pinsky, a more traditional notion of the identity of his eldest daughter (tempered by the speaker’s awareness of her character as an “idea”) allows the reader to sympathize with the girl who spends most of her childhood as an
outsider, searching for acceptance beyond her family, and struggling to come to grips with American democracy which, wise or cynical beyond her years, she finds flawed and often ugly. For Hill, the child-poet-king narrator complex challenges our notions of any settled, stable identity in the speaker. Such a device invites the reader to engage in the difficult (yet democratic, according to Hill) process of sifting through the “roots and endings” of words, which, for Hill, is serious “[c]hild’s play” (*Hymns*, IV).
Works Cited


