

Chapter Three

Poetry and Witness

The supreme reason for which the Son of God was made man was not to save men, it was to bear witness for the truth.

All art of the highest order is religious in essence. (That is what people have forgotten today.) A Gregorian melody is as powerful a witness as the death of a martyr.

(Simone Weil, 1970, 240 and 1952, 137)

Any reader of Hill's work will be struck by his obsessive interest in the concept of witness, and in historical or fictional people who have borne witness in some way. This chapter, and that which follows, will look at the relationship between witnessing and writing poetry. In this chapter I shall focus primarily on the theological background to the concept of witness, while the following chapter will examine more closely the special case of martyrdom, which puts the ultimate emphasis on an act of witness, and what relevance this might have for a modern poet. Hill is notoriously hostile to the idea that poetry should be confessional, or merely anecdotal, but he is concerned with how a poet can make contact with history, or even 'exchange gifts with the muse of history'. Hill's engagement with history will receive fuller treatment at other points in the thesis, but it will become clear that Hill sees the act of extreme witness for truth as a way of gaining some kind of direct, passionate, access to history. The writings, or even just the stories of the lives, of men and women who have borne witness to truth (and almost always suffered for it) are, for Hill, the routes to an interaction with historical and spiritual truths which are not accessible to poems retelling anecdotes from the poet's own life. Although Hill is also interested in 'witnesses' who are not primarily witnesses for God or Christ, it is fair to say that he sees the concept as a basically Judaeo-Christian one which runs through history from the mythical beginnings of *Genesis* to the horrors of the Second World War and beyond.

The epigraphs of this chapter illustrate some of the scope of the idea of witness. Christ's violent death was remarkable above all for its quality of witness, but a kind of witness can be present in a work of art whose maker was not persecuted. Conversely, some witnesses may not produce art, or suffer violence, but their experience may not be any less powerful and harrowing. One feels the need to keep the different senses of the word separate - one witnesses something merely by being there and experiencing it; bearing witness implies some act of communication, or at least of recall. In this chapter I shall examine the concept of witness in Hill's poetry by means of etymological, theological and historical materials.

Hill's interest is in the spoken and written utterances of people who have died for their beliefs. That Hill is concerned with spoken words is clear from his interest in what

Southwell said and did not say during his torture, trial and execution. Christ's story depends largely on his words reported to us in other people's writing. However, Hill's attention is given more fully to those witnesses who are also writers. For Hill, there is a link between his own labour in his writing and the suffering of the witnesses and martyrs. He forces us to connect his need to bear witness to historical violence with the other writers' attempts to bear witness, within their suffering, to the principles for which they were tortured and killed. Witnessing includes the activity of 'Crying the mysteries of God' (*NCP*, 3), but also refers to the necessity of speaking about atrocities. Theological critics like Nathan A. Scott suggest (following Bonhoeffer's ideas of secular Christianity) that in a world where religion has lost its power for most people, and faith has become almost unattainable, literature begins to take on some of the roles of religion. Poets strive to make the world bearable through the redemptive power of poetry, in a similar way to that in which a religious person might turn to the redemption of Christ in the face of unbearable injustice and violence. In his book *Negative Capability*, Scott makes a distinction between the modernist writers who sought to 'compete with reality' and the post-modernist theologians and creative writers who advocate a more passive stance of 'waiting', but waiting in attention and love:

Both seem to be guided by a conscience that tells the theologian and the artist that the burdened and perplexed people of our age are best served by being invited to be patient and to wait (Scott, 1969, 57)

This chimes with the ideas of Weil and Bonhoeffer whose spiritual experiences centred upon 'waiting for God'. Scott's words also suggest the attempt of some writers to present the horrors of the twentieth century as something to be contemplated with acceptance and compassion. There is a belief that this passionate attention may have a redemptive effect upon language, and even perhaps the feelings of the poets' audience. Hill shares the belief that poetry can have a redemptive function with other poets of witness such as Vasko Popa who has written 'they turned the world into a poem to rescue it in that poem. For *them* to write poems meant to love' (Weissbort, 1993, 348).

Hill is attracted to the figures of witness because of his belief in the responsibility of the poet to write of spiritual and historical truth, and the difficulty of establishing it; as well as his recognition of the power which the writings of his witnesses take on as a result of the historical trials to which they are submitted. Although writers in the modern West are not often subjected to physical violence and persecution as a result of holding views contrary to those of the consensus, this does not mean that they should not continue to bear witness to the important differences they feel from the currents of their time. It is perhaps in this sense more than any other that Simone Weil and Charles Péguy count as martyrs, they martyred themselves in a world that would have preferred to ignore them.

This proliferation of poems about witness, as well as the conspicuous interest in martyrs and witnesses that we find in Hill's critical prose, aligns him with these figures. Hill's deeply serious engagement with these issues of spiritual witness-bearing is unfashionable. He is, like many martyrs, contrary to the currents of his time. The embattled nature of Hill's utterances in interviews, as well as the diffident tone of *The Enemy's Country*, suggests that Hill feels he has been mistreated by critics who choose not to follow him into the world of these awkward saints and mystics. Péguy was an impossible man to have as a comrade; Weil (Thibon tells us) never gave in in any debate; Hill's stance is incomprehensible for many critics - they find it pedantic and wilfully contradictory. Christopher Ricks is perhaps the critic closest to Hill's own vision of poetry. His accounts of Hill's punctuation and the quality of his attention to the poems is admirable, but even he becomes exasperated with Hill's mystical-etymological strategies, and he has not yet attempted a discussion of witness in Hill. Most of the critics have chosen to follow lines which focus more on the historical or technical detail than the theological. Vincent Sherry's comments are typical of the anxieties that some critics share when approaching this area in Hill's writing:

That Geoffrey Hill takes Christianity seriously, that he returns to medieval formulations and engages the roots of the faith there, may in itself be offensive to contemporary critics and readers. (Sherry, 1987, 156-7)

Hill was brought up as a Christian and his life and work have necessarily brought him into contact with the rich vein of religious literature and art that our culture has produced. That he finds much to admire in the artistic productions of religious men and women is not offensive. This response in criticism and poetry necessitates a sensitive engagement with the 'roots of the faith' because, for Hill, scholarship must be passionate. The difficulty is that, if one is to follow Hill into the stories of these martyrs and saints, one must share some of his respect for them; otherwise one's work will not measure up to the standards of passionate attention he thinks writing literature, and studying anything, demands. Sherry argues that Hill's familiarity with European culture has allowed him to make the English language into a tool with which he occasionally attains poetic transcendence from within 'the struggle between ascetic form and the physical body of language' (Sherry, 1987, 85). He also charts Hill's attempts to re-enter History, most successfully through the figure of Charles Péguy. I believe these fruitful suggestions can be carried further with a closer response to Hill's theological and mystical influences.

There is a danger that Hill, and the power of the other writers he reacts with, might intoxicate a reader. Jean Rose focuses on the socio-economic vocabulary that she finds in Hill's work. Her historical and etymological analyses are full and enlightening, but when she writes that 'it is almost as though Hill hopes that if he can penetrate the heart of events through poetry he will have found God' (Rose, 1991, 76), she risks collapsing the importance of poetic witness (which gives us a glimpse of the intensity of

Hill's response to historical martyrs) with the difficulty of having a mystical experience. Hill does not expect to find God in his poetry, rather he hopes to discover why people want to find God, how they have tried to, and to ponder whether or not they have succeeded. He is interested in the differences between true and false witness, but he knows that being sure about what that difference is will not solve the other problem of the difficulty of having authentic mystical experience.

To approach Hill's martyrs from a more strictly historical standpoint is more germane to many of the critics. This is of course a vital aspect to Hill's engagement with these figures. In his essay "'How fit a title...' Title and Authority in the Works of Geoffrey Hill", Hugh Haughton shows how 'a language of transcendence is deployed in, and compromised by, particular historical circumstances' (Robinson, P., 1985, 135). His concentration on how Hill uses the historical to attempt transcendence leads him to write as follows:

Hill's is undoubtedly an extreme historical imagination, drawn to situations of maximum moral and civil conflict [...]. Yet he is also a poet committed to an extreme formality, the idea of 'Poetry as salutation' or an act of 'witness' (a word he often uses). The situations he writes of are ones in which the authority of the state, of religion, and the individual moral conscience, are tested - and the situation he writes out of, if I can put it that way, is one in which the authority of poetry, of Hill's own art, is itself tested. (Robinson, P., 1985, 131)

Haughton usefully places the ideas of extremity and authority together. There is an extremity of historical imagination which is a strong commitment to discussing history, but it is also extreme in focusing on conflict and violence. These felt duties (to history, to suffering) are reflected in Hill's formality. Haughton's 'Yet' registers some surprise in this, as if he might have expected the conflict to have disrupted the poet's exactness of design. But the passage moves on to suggest that when Hill examines these moments of violence he is also testing himself, and his power as a poetic witness. Hill is not merely interested in historical violence, he is concerned with the interactions of violence and faith. I would argue that a fuller engagement with the spiritual disciplines, which Hill alludes to, will aid us in our analysis of the writing.

Jeremy Hooker has registered the power and achievements of these figures and he comes much closer to Hill's quality of attention with his phrase 'moral intelligence':

Hence his fascination with those men and women of words (Simone Weil and Bonhoeffer, for example) who transcended words, and with poets like Mandelstam, Celan, and Péguy who made good their poetry in their lives and deaths [...]. Lacking the specific historical challenges of these witnesses, Hill in his poetry has developed a moral intelligence that both uses and exposes aesthetic devices. (Robinson, P., 1985, 28)

Hooker is right to single out the power that these writers' works and lives share, but I would prefer to place the emphasis differently: these writers made good their lives and

deaths in their poetry. Bonhoeffer and Weil transcend words only in the sense that their writings seem infused with a quality (which Weil might call grace) which sets them apart from other authors who have not suffered for their beliefs. What fascinates Hill is not the sufferings of poets, but the poetry of suffering. This is why he is at once suspicious of Southwell's apparent desire for martyrdom and strongly moved by *Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears*. We must be thankful that Hill has not been subjected to the 'specific historical challenges of these witnesses', but that should not blind us to the fact that our period has challenges of its own, which may not be any easier to bear for our tendency to ignore witnesses rather than to torture and silence them. Hill's 'moral intelligence' shows the signs of feeling these challenges deeply, and his attempts to bear witness in the tradition of the poet-martyrs he hesitatingly admires are not undermined by the fact that his is a 'self-wounding martyrdom', that no-one is about to imprison him.

In my reading of Hill's work I shall attempt to take the spiritual issues seriously and to read them, where possible, in their own terms. This means looking at Hill's avowed theological influences, Simone Weil and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as well as some of the main-stays of the Catholic mystical tradition. In discussing the critics, I have suggested that it is impossible to take full account of Hill's work without examining the theological background to his writing, in addition to the historical contexts within which he articulates these concepts, as well as the technical means he uses. It is my contention that the poems and prose only come into focus when we give equal attention to each of these factors.

The necessity of being aware of the theological at the same time as one investigates the etymological (or historical), if one is to account for the poetry, is what leads me to attempt an engagement with the 'roots of the faith'. The roots of Hill's faith are sunk deep into historical and theological material as well as the language itself. In interview with John Haffenden, Hill has said that 'in handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history' (Haffenden, 1981, 88). It seems sensible to look at the etymology of the 'witness'. 'Witness' is a word descended from the Old English word 'witnes, more freq. gewitnes'.¹ From its earliest recorded occurrences (c. 950) it is used to mean simply 'knowledge'. But even as early as this it is also being used for 'attestation of a fact, event or statement'. The word is moving towards its present-day judicial meaning, but remains closely connected with the idea of personal knowledge. As it begins to take on a more theological meaning it moves away from this basic sense and begins to blur the distinction between faith and knowledge. We may take this as some indication of the added authenticity which an act of witness-bearing (suffering violence, usually) gives to a stated belief.² This is the force behind the OED sense 8a 'one who testifies for Christ or the Christian faith, esp. by death; a martyr. Obs.

¹References are to the OED 2nd ed.

²This is surely connected with the medieval concept of judicial ordeal.

exc. as literal rendering of Gr. *martus martyr*'. Perhaps by dying for one's God one moves a profession of faith closer to the status of an eye-witness account.

This etymological account makes two things clear. Firstly, the use of the word 'witness' shows an attempt to make what some might call a statement of opinion more like proven fact or experiential knowledge. Secondly, it is through acts of violence directed against them that witnesses of this kind imbue their statements (written and oral) with this greater authenticity. Within Judaism and Christianity the concept of witness performs exactly this link between experience and knowledge.

Before using the theory of witness that has grown up in Holocaust studies, I want to look briefly at the ways in which the word 'witness' is used in the King James Bible. As one might expect the word is used frequently in its familiar judicial sense, especially in Old Testament insinuations that at least two witnesses are necessary to convict someone of a serious crime. In Genesis 30.48ff two parties to an agreement use a cairn of stones and God as 'witness' to their agreement. The parties clearly believe that God will intervene to punish if either breaks the agreement.

31.50 If thou shalt afflict my daughters, or if thou shalt take *other* wives beside my daughters no man *is* with us; see, God *is* witness betwixt me and thee.

In the New Testament there are many references to the witness of Christ and his disciples. The letters of the Apostles make it clear that miracles, signs, and the power of the Holy Spirit bear witness to the truth of the Christian teachings (Heb. 2.4). Similarly the Apostles claim that they have received their gifts of healing and so on from Christ himself, it is their intimate acquaintance with the Logos that makes them good witnesses and gives them the power to bear witness. John 16.2 gives us Christ telling his disciples that the Spirit of Truth will 'testify' about him, and that they will also bear witness because they have been his companions. In Revelation, John says he saw the 'souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus' in the first resurrection. From these instances it is clear that bearing witness involves a close (preferably first hand) acquaintance with Christ and that this closeness, together with faith, gives the Apostles powers (granted by the Holy Spirit) similar to those of Christ himself. On top of this those who die bearing witness for Christ are guaranteed salvation. Already, therefore, witness seems to include a special sensitivity to truth (the early Christians were lucky enough to have this by knowing Christ as a man, for later generations this must be gained by meditative prayer), and a willingness to suffer persecution; as a reward it confers gifts of healing, tongues and so on as well as increasing one's chances of resurrection. There is another very interesting passage on the concept of witness in John's gospel, where Jesus

replies to the criticism that one has only His 'witness' to the fact that He is the son of God.³

- 5.31 If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.
 32 There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true.
 33 Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth.
 34 But I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved.
 35 He as a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.
 36 But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me.
 37 And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have never heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape.
 38 And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.
 39 Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.

Christ submits to the Old Testament rule that one needs two witnesses to prove something. He cites John the Baptist, and then mentions His own miracles. Next He reminds the doubters that the Father sent a message, in the form of a dove and a voice, at the time of His baptism. Finally He claims that the scriptures bear witness to Him. The interest of this passage is that even Christ (at least in the opinion of St. John) needs to back up his claims to spiritual truth with external signs. These signs bear witness to the truth of His own 'witness', they prove the validity of his teachings. In this chapter we shall have to bear in mind these biblical uses of the word 'witness', the connection with suffering and power, as well as the difficulty of validating any claim to mystical insight.

I have suggested that Hill's use of the concept of witness comes out of a specifically Judaeo-Christian context. Although the etymologies of words are a vital source of resonance for Hill, historical contextualization is also essential for him. Although Hill has focused more on the Christian variety of the idea, there is an unavoidable seam in his work which directly invokes the earlier Judaic senses of the word. Hill's Holocaust⁴ poetry forces us into an engagement with what it means to bear witness to atrocity. In his book *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, James E. Young discusses the Judaic attitude to witnessing by referring specifically to *Leviticus* 5:1 'In both Torah and Talmud the injunction to relate one's witness of an iniquity is taken by the rabbis as explicitly commanded' (Young, 1988, 18). The Bible and Biblical commentaries consider witness to include people who only know about an event as well as those who have directly experienced it. Young points out that the scripture therefore

³The Epistles are sprinkled with instructions to provide more than one witness to the Christian story.

⁴Ricks points out that Hill scrupulously avoids giving this term a specific referent and a capital letter. I have chosen to follow Young but I am not using the term, any more than he does, without an awareness of its duplicities.

entails making more witnesses by telling people about the iniquity. It is necessary to add that knowledge, then, carries the same responsibility and validity as experience, or 'eye-witness'.

Hill addresses this injunction directly in 'Of Commerce and Society 4'.

Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone,
 Artistic men prod dead men from their stone:
 Some of us have heard the dead speak:
 The dead are my obsession this week

But may be lifted away. In summer
 Thunder may strike, or, as a tremor
 Of remote adjustment, pass on the far side
 From us: however deified and defied

By those it does strike. Many have died. Auschwitz,
 Its furnace chambers and lime pits
 Half-erased, is half-dead; a fable
 Unbelievable in fatted marble.

There is, at times, some need to demonstrate
 Jehovah's touchy methods that create
 The connoisseur of blood, the smitten man.
 At times it seems not common to explain. (*NCP*, 38)

Hill opens the poem with assertions that unusual, direct access to truth (visions) do happen, he claims they can come upon politicians as well as artists (although perhaps we are more used to looking to artists to bear witness to truth). Hill quickly brings in the criticism that one might range against someone who writes about historical horror with his image of proding dead men from their graves (stone). There is something obscene about this and one feels that the dead should be left in peace. Of course there is another reading that makes the stone an image for the artist's medium (the sculptor's standing for the others'), now the artist is making his inanimate material bring the dead back to life, so that their experiences will not be lost. Hill asserts that the method works since he (and others) have heard the voices of the dead men they have resurrected in this manner. After these lines the jokey suggestion that Hill is just 'obsessed' with the dead 'this week' in fact makes itself ridiculous - it is because there is a value in these artistic resurrections that Hill engages in them. The second stanza negotiates a tense relationship between human actions and the 'act of god' of the thunder-strike. While Hill asserts that the thunder does not react to the curses or prayers of its victims, he insinuates (with the phrase 'remote adjustment' and the fact that he does not envision the lightning striking 'us') that the method of memorialisation and witness-bearing that he practices is noted by supernatural forces. From this point Hill moves on to the Holocaust. He refers to the argument that Auschwitz is almost fictionalised by some of the memorials and this leads to the uneasy assertion that there is a 'need to demonstrate Jehovah's touchy methods'. This could suggest that it is necessary to carry out

destruction on a God-like scale in order to show how it brutalizes men into victim and torturer. It is more acceptable to read the lines as a defence of the act of describing the events: 'at times it seems not common to explain'.

'Canticle for Good Friday' comes at the issue from a different angle, presenting us with St. Thomas's doubts, his hesitancy to bear witness.

The cross staggered him. At the cliff-top
 Thomas, beneath its burden, stood
 while the dulled wood
 Spat on the stones each drop
 Of deliberate blood.

A clamping, cold-figured day
 Thomas (not transfigured) stamped, crouched,
 Watched
 Smelt vinegar and blood. He,
 As yet unsearched, unscratched,

And suffered to remain
 At such near distance
 (A slight miracle might cleanse
 His brain
 Of all attachments, claw-roots of sense)

In unaccountable darkness moved away,
 The strange flesh untouched, carrion-sustenance
 Of staunchest love, choicest defiance,
 Creation's issue congealing (and one woman's). (*NCP*, 27)

In the first stanza Hill strains to bring the passion to us with a physical realism. The cross 'staggers' Christ and Thomas, in the sense that they can hardly bear to carry it, and that they are amazed and horrified that this torture-device will be used upon the Messiah. Hill records the blood of Christ spitting on the the stones with stunned monosyllables. We are made to feel that Thomas's response to this is not satisfactory. He observes everything, but is not transfigured - he is aware of the cold of the day and tries to get warm like some comical guardsman. From this point the poem registers the poet's shock at Thomas's doubts, despite the fact that he knew Christ.⁵ 'Suffered to remain' covers the sense of being graciously allowed to be this close to Christ as he died, and also the pain that this must have caused the disciples. The parenthesis almost pleads for the small miracle necessary to make Thomas believe. It is as if the modern man, with all his doubts, wishes he could have witnessed this moment: then there would be no doubt at all. But Thomas is not affected as we might think we would be, one almost hears him muttering 'unaccountable' at the eclipse that accompanies Jesus's death as he wanders off. Hill ends the poem on this note of amazement at Thomas's failure here, his

⁵One might compare Péguy's Joan of Arc's envy of those who knew Christ, and her anger at their lack of courage in the Garden of Gethsemane.

obliviousness to the strangeness of his friend's flesh: the paradox of his human body embodying love, a rejection of evil and the creative force of the Godhead.

Hill bears witness partly in two related ways. Firstly he feels the need to obey the command of Leviticus to keep the memory and rejection of injustice alive. This is applicable to the death of Christ also, but there is a suggestion that one should not evade making celebratory witness to the truth. In 'I Had Hope When Violence Was Ceas't' Hill approaches the Holocaust (unusually for him) from the point of view of a camp victim.

Dawnlight freezes against the east-wire.
The guards cough `raus! `raus! We flinch and grin,
Our flesh oozing towards its last outrage.
That which is taken from me is not mine. (*CP*, 66)

Instead of any suggestion of hope rising out of the orient with dawn, here the fact of being in a camp chills the dawn until the light itself seems to solidify like ice around wire. The eastern horizon seems to consist only of this ice-encrusted wire, suggesting the narrowly bounded world of the camp prisoner. The guards shouting the German word *heraus* seem animalistic, their words shortened into a coughing bark. On the other hand the inmates are reduced to something almost sub-human - they flinch and grin resembling beaten dogs, having no-one to turn to except their sadistic master. The third line continues this descent out of the human by describing the flesh as oozing. But the real importance of this line is in the word 'its'. The inmates are separated from their bodies - the flesh may move like a strange river into death, but something is reserved, it is only the flesh, not 'us' that is moving towards its last outrage. The final line consolidates this with its assertion that the Nazis are taking something that is not 'mine', it is not essential. They can kill the Jews, but they cannot destroy their souls. This is a very bold poem in which Hill manages to bring the horror of the camps almost physically back to life through the voices of the guards and the motions of the inmates, while also suggesting the survival of spiritual self-possession through this degradation.

In 'Two Formal Elegies' Hill worries away at the relevance of this concept of witnessing within a society which has not taken on the Judaic injunction with the proper seriousness: 'Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen,/ Of what they have witnessed and not seen?' (*NCP*, 20). Hill calls these people 'pushing midlanders'. On the one hand this suggests the self-centred struggle for promotion through the ranks of society, pushing others aside. It also figures the detached reproduction of these people, pushing out offspring with no care for others. They have not seen for themselves so they cannot be good witnesses, although we are all expected to blandly bear witness to the Holocaust so that it never happens again. Hill bears witness more strenuously even though he too has not 'seen'. Writing of these events brings him closer to being an eye-witness to the events, unlike those who have merely seen the film. Hill is deeply suspicious of the validity of this second-hand witnessing: 'we have enough/ Witnesses (our world being witness-proof)

(*NCP*, 20). With the neologism 'witness-proof' Hill investigates the effect of mass media on the consciousnesses of people submitted to a barrage of representations of atrocity. 'Witness-proof' may be a word like water-proof, suggesting that the witnesses are ineffectual and do not penetrate our world; or it could operate more like fool-proof, suggesting that not even witnesses (awkward though they are) could disrupt the smooth working of our world. In pondering whether it is 'good to remind' people of the Holocaust on a 'brief screen' (referring to the way that the mass media was revealing the full details of the Holocaust from the forties to the early sixties, and events like Eichmann's trial and execution), Hill is questioning the mass media. He obviously has fewer qualms about using poetry to 'bear witness'; this surely is the import of 'To put up stones ensures some sacrifice'. Hill is hinting at the suffering he has taken upon himself in writing poetry. His attempt to write the Holocaust places him in between the midlanders who bred him (who find it easy to forget about the Holocaust) and the people who died because they were Jews. The witness is a person in whom knowledge or belief approaches the intensity of sensory experience. This process may happen within an experience of violence or suffering, whether external or internal. Indeed violence, and the manner in which it is suffered, may demonstrate that this intensification has happened. In a similar way writing may be a place where this transformation happens or where it is registered.

There is a counter-argument to the intensification of experience into fact through writing, whereby the written record may move the experience away from authenticity. Young suggests that the first-hand accounts of the Holocaust can paradoxically work to fictionalize the events: 'The possibility that, once committed to paper, a witness's testimony could be perceived as a fabrication of reality and not the trace of it he had intended' (Young, 1988, 25). Hill's poems of the Holocaust do not attempt to bear witness in the sense of establishing the factuality of the Holocaust, or the other sufferings he writes about. They are places where he can attempt to live in the world with awareness of the sufferings it has contained. This is carrying out the directions of the Bible. Hill is not solely concerned with informing people about the facts which he knows do not enter people's lives, only being something on a 'brief screen'; he is investigating ways in which these things must be deeply registered in our inner lives. Young discusses Plath, who takes the Holocaust as a set of images with which to illustrate her own sufferings. Hill uses it to focus the problems of poetic witness. Where Plath is haunted by the thought that her skin might be made into a lampshade (putting herself into a death-camp), Hill, in 'September Song', agonizes instead over the idea that a bureaucratic language has been forever sullied by allowing itself to be the instrument of the Nazi state. While he is aware of the discomfort that many feel with uses of Holocaust imagery in confessional poetry such as Plath's, Young feels that they are not antagonistic, because both emphasise the poet's personal experience.

There is, in fact, a compelling parallel between 'confessional poetry' and the testimonial mode of Holocaust literature: for what is confessional poetry if not that which emphasizes its personal authenticity and link to material over all else? As testimony to the poet's private pain, confessional poetry depends for its power - its authority - on personal authenticity, as do so many other kinds of literary witness. (Young, 1988, 132)

Hill would disagree. His historical proximity to the Holocaust victims does not lead him to appropriate their images as Plath does. Indeed he refuses to ally himself with the confessional mode in poetry. Hill's problem, then, is how to bear witness (under the injunction he feels, whether its origin is biblical or not), without turning the experiences into 'crystals' of 'fine art'. Although he wants to make poetry out of his encounter with these events he does not want to aestheticize the horror, or to use it to express personal suffering.

In 'Ovid in the Third Reich' Hill creates a dramatic monologue from a person unable to avoid some of these pitfalls of false witness. The epigraph (from the *Amores*) suggests that simply by denying sin one can become innocent. Clearly, Hill means us to take this with some irony.

I love my work and my children. God
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.
Too near the ancient troughs of blood
Innocence is no earthly weapon.

I have learned one thing: not to look down
So much upon the damned. They, in their sphere,
Harmonize strangely with the divine
Love. I, in mine, celebrate the love-choir. (*NCP*, 49)

Ovid is transplanted from one empire to another. The poet seems to position himself nearer to God than the damned, yet God is distant, He is stranded at the end of a line cataloguing the things the poet loves. He is not one of them. The fact that the poet responds to events with the phrase 'Things happen' is a comment on poetic witness. Unlike the survivors or victims of the Holocaust, Ovid is not trying to establish the facts historically. This has the advantage that there is no chance that their historical reality might be questioned by being put into a literary text (especially one using anachronism). Ovid's statement is an acknowledgement, and perhaps an attempt, to excuse his inaction and his turning away from what is happening. Simone Weil, and Hill, might have some sympathy with this position: 'Every attempt to justify evil by anything other than the fact that that which is *is*, is an offence against this truth' (Weil, 1952, 95).

Ovid is no apologist for the Nazis, nor does he have any hope that poetry can save the Jews. The poem is a record of his feeling that the 'damned' are strangely closer to God than he and the 'love-choir'. Although their innocence does them no earthly good, their innocent sufferings bring them closer to God, and are an unearthly weapon of resistance. Ovid does not attempt to condescend to the damned and also avoids looking at them at all. This is a poem of difficult witness from a man who feels out of place in history,

watching sufferings he can neither share nor alleviate. The epigraph's acceptance of utter duplicity is undermined by the poem, where the speaker's uneasy awareness of his untenable position forces him to incriminate himself, even as he carefully excuses himself.

Tom Paulin is a critic who shows some disapproval of Hill's attempts to write about the Holocaust. He compares Hill to Tadeusz Rozewicz:

Hooker recommends 'the quality of Geoffrey Hill's moral intelligence' [in 'Of Commerce and Society'], but that questionable intelligence does not stand up to a comparison with these lines from Rozewicz's 'Massacre of the Boys', a poem dated 'The Museum, Auschwitz, 1948';

A great plain closed
like a figure of geometry
and a tree of black smoke
a vertical
dead tree
with no star in its crown.

Rozewicz has developed an austere, transparent anti-style in order to approach the subject of absolute evil and horror. Hill relies on a plushy series of mannered pentameters, and the result is a grisly historical voyeurism which - despite Hooker's insistence to the contrary - sounds both insular and complacent. (Paulin, 1992, 280)

I think a poem like 'Ovid in the Third Reich' is itself a defence of Hill against Paulin's criticism, because of its subtlety in dealing with questions of guilt and responsibility. There does seem to be something rather unfair in comparing Hill's work with the poems of a man who served in the Polish resistance while Hill was a schoolboy in Worcestershire. Hill's poems of witness carry out the second part of the rabbinical command. He is not usually relating what he has seen happen, but responding to the necessity of continuing to write about things that he knows have happened. This will obviously make a sharp difference between his poems (which he might be dedicating 'to the unfallen') and what we might call (with Daniel Weissbort) 'the poetry of survival'. I will now look at a few poems from Weissbort's excellent anthology in order to show that Hill is working for a different kind of poetry from that of the survivors themselves. The short poem by Brecht called 'I, the Survivor' is very illuminating:

I know of course: it's simply luck
That I've survived so many friends. But last night in a dream
I heard those friends say of me: 'Survival of the fittest'
And I hated myself. (Weissbort, 1993, 32)

Brecht is saying that in fact there was no reason why he should have survived those friends who died so close to him, but the nagging doubt that he is somehow more resilient, that he is part of the barbaric evolutionary machine, repels him. For Hill, the sentiment is quite different. He was so far distant from Nazism (for instance) that the question of 'luck' doesn't come into it (any more than it does for any human being 'lucky')

enough not to have lived through some kind of terror). But Hill is tormented by the fact that people, who were fully as much human beings as himself, have died through mindless prejudice of their fellow-humans. He feels compelled to bear witness because he hates to think that anyone could ignore such events simply because they did not pass very close. Also he wonders whether, and more importantly how, he would have survived in such a period. Would he have been like 'Ovid in the Third Reich' or would he have behaved like Osip Mandelstam? There is a horrified fascination with the terror he has not experienced, which is far different from Brecht's survival-guilt.

Rozewicz's 'The Survivor' is another poem that deals with the fact of a narrow (and possibly shameful) evasion of destruction, it does not need to tread so delicately as 'Ovid' since it is written out of bitter lived-experience:

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived.

The following are empty synonyms:
man and beast
love and hate
friend and foe
darkness and light.

The way of killing men and beasts is the same
I've seen it:
truckfuls of chopped-up men
who will not be saved.

Ideas are mere words:
virtue and crime
truth and lies
beauty and ugliness
courage and cowardice.

Virtue and crime weigh the same
I've seen it:
in a man who was both
criminal and virtuous.

I seek a teacher and a master
may he restore my sight hearing and speech
may he again name objects and ideas
may he separate darkness from light.

I am twenty-four
led to slaughter
I survived. (Weissbort, 1993, 258)

While Hill uses the relative luxury of his distant perspective to weigh up the delicate shading of guilt and self-incrimination in a poet who puts his work and family above the transcendent values of right and wrong, Rozewicz uses his poem to show how all these

questions are meaningless to the survivor. Hill's 'Ovid in the Third Reich' and 'September Song' work by employing ambiguities and disturbing puns to show how Nazism made the relationship between the damned and the saved morally meaningless, or how a certain kind of language is made hateful because it has been used to administrate genocide. Rozewicz presents us with a speaker who has not only lost a sense of fixed meaning, but finds himself unable to accept anything more abstract than his own physical survival. He is reeling from the shock of being in a situation where death comes without reason. All his values are destroyed. His act of witness is primarily to say what has happened to him, and that includes a mistrust of all abstracts. All he knows, all that matters, is his own survival. The words 'led to slaughter' also have a chilling ambiguity, we might be listening here to a man who was not 'led to slaughter' himself, but who led others. Rozewicz's poem 'Lament' explores this theme with incredible steadiness of nerve:

I turn to you high priests
 teachers judges artists
 shoemakers physicians officials
 and to you my father
 Hear me out.

I am not young
 let the slenderness of my body
 not deceive you
 nor the tender whiteness of my neck
 nor the fairness of my open brow
 nor the down on my sweet lip
 nor my cherubic laughter
 nor the spring in my step

I am not young
 let my innocence
 not move you
 nor my purity
 nor my weakness
 fragility and simplicity

I am twenty years old
 I am a murderer
 I am an instrument
 blind as the axe
 in the hands of an executioner
 I struck a man dead
 and with red fingers
 stroked the white breasts of women.

Maimed I saw
 neither heaven nor rose
 nor bird nest tree
 St Francis
 Achilles not Hector
 For six years

blood gushed steaming from my nostrils
 I do not believe in the changing of water into wine
 I do not believe in the remission of sins
 I do not believe in the resurrection of the body. (Weissbort, 1993, 259)

Clearly here the suspension of judgment of the poet comes from a rare sensitivity of passed-over victim for his persecutor. This is somewhat beyond what it would be tactful for an outsider to write about. Coming from Rozewicz it reads as an assertion that some Nazis were almost as much victims of the regime as the Jews were. The poem portrays a violently desecrated innocence, a young man left as valueless as the survivor of the previous poem. Only here the murderer is given a strange anti-credo - with the things that are no longer believed in very carefully chosen. He rejects Christ's first miracle, in which he showed himself as a generous wedding-guest, and perhaps the potential groom of the church, or individual human souls. For this man that vision of Christ is unattainable. He cannot believe in the remission of sins. He must live with his guilt for ever. There will be no resurrection for him, or his victims - they will all live in a hell that he has helped to build. Of course the poem can also be read in another way - as Rozewicz ironically laying blame upon those who have escaped the terror, by collaborating and who now appear young, innocent and happy. The deceit is most clearly suggested by the phrase 'blind as an axe' we cannot help thinking that no human being could be that blind: the defence that one was just following orders will not do in these situations. Here the poem is moving closer to the ground of a Hill poem, but its impact comes from the desperate daring of the man who has come through the conflict, as opposed to the restraint of the younger man watching from England.

A poem that comes closer to Hill's stunned attempt to write about what he cannot ignore, but has not experienced, is Vladimir Holan's poem 'Reminiscence'. Here the poet writes of something he saw as a child, something he did not understand fully, but which had a massive impact on him through the reaction of his father. It is perhaps a useful poem in that we can see Hill's poems as coming from a similar experience - the inability to comprehend fully the actions of the Nazis, but an inability to shake off the feelings to which his vague, early, perceptions of the atrocities gave birth:

After wandering for so many hours up and down
 in vain looking for the pimperl, we came out of the woods
 and at high noon found ourselves on the moors.
 The rarefied air was like tin. We gazed
 at the hillside opposite, thickly grown
 with shrubs and trees. They were still, like us.
 I was just about to ask something
 when, in that unmoving, quiescent, chillingly
 enchanted mass a single tree,
 in one single spot,
 suddenly began to quiver
 like a quarter-tone, but without sound.
 You would have thought it was exulting for joy,
 out of a sheer love of adventure.

But then that tree began to rustle,
 the way silver rustles when it turns black.
 But then that tree began to tremble,
 like the skirt of a woman who touches
 a man's clothes while reading a book in a madhouse.
 But then the tree began to shake and sway,
 as if it were being shaken and swayed by someone
 who was looking into the black-eyed pit of love -
 and I felt as if I were to die this minute ...

'Don't be frightened,' said my father, 'it's only an aspen!'
 But to this day I remember how pale he turned
 when later we reached that spot
 and underneath the aspen found an empty chair ...
 (Weissbort, 1993, 40)

Here the unspoken word is 'suicide', and the slow approach towards the cryptic message of the shaking tree and the empty chair makes this poem an act of witness to the child's awakening sense that there is pain in the world. He is learning suffering here, from the experience, and from his father. The child cannot yet understand why a person might kill him/herself, but the images that enter his head as he watches the tree shake in the still noontide serve, in years to come, as a touchstone. He always remembers this moment - this gives him a way of thinking about 'the black-eyed pit of love'. Similarly for Hill, one feels that the Holocaust broke upon his growing mind with an obscene force. His poems about it are attempts to understand the torture of survival, death, and even the capacity for extreme violence. What distinguishes them from poems by people who have survived such terror themselves is the distance Hill feels from what has happened. He does not pretend to write as one who has come through such pain, but as one who has seen it from far off, and cannot evade the injunction that initial witnessing has placed upon him.

In 'September Song' Hill returns to the Holocaust. The dedication shows his proximity to the events in time: the child was born the day after him. The deportation date reminds us that the Jews went to their deaths unknowingly in many cases, and that the details of their deaths are hard to pinpoint. The deaths are a matter of statistics and estimations, routine. Ricks has explored elements of this poem which are unreadable - the figures of these dates especially. He allows himself to call it a "simple evil headstone" (Ricks, 1984, 303) but just as the poem is an impossible utterance, so the inscription is something of an impossibility. There is no name, no certainty about the child's death, no place where the stone might stand. Although one might imagine such a stone in a death-camp, it is the kind of headstone that is strictly impossible anywhere else. Hill's poem registers his distance from the Jews in the way he can imitate the language that the Nazis used to organize the Holocaust. This results in some excruciating puns; the passover is alluded to; the shiny leather of the Nazis, as well as the Zyklon gas, is 'patented'. Hill is trying to show how language lets us down after the Holocaust. Words

twist out of our grasp, they have been poisoned by the way others have used them.⁶ Hill's parenthetical statement may be read as an attempt to authenticate his poem. It is a true elegy. Or it may be an admission that he has made it for himself. Ricks' analysis focuses on the brackets:

But I believe that it is crucial to them that they are in brackets. For it is this, and not their tone or syntax alone, which gives them that unique feeling of being at once a crux and an aside, at once an inescapable honourable admission and something which the poem may then honourably pass over. (Ricks, 1984, 300)

The unsayability of brackets is vital to Rick's argument through the essay. It is as if Hill is arguing with Adorno over his infamous belief that Auschwitz makes lyrical poetry impossible by allowing his poems to evolve into these unspeakable things. The line breaks (especially that following 'it') also make this hard to read, never mind sing. Hill registers his other deep unease - that he has used the Jews' suffering to help him to write powerful poetry.

September fattens on vines. Roses
flake from the wall. The smoke
of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.

This is plenty. This is more than enough. (*NCP*, 55)

Events have infected everything; the opulence of September seems like preparing lambs for the slaughter, harmless fires seem to irritate the eyes, one has to tell oneself they are harmless or worry that they too are implicated in the Final Solution. The fact that Hill takes on this act of witness, this suffering, voluntarily makes him more like those figures who have found an internal arena for their martyrdom than those who were murdered by persecutors. There is a closeness and yet an abyss between Hill and the deported child of this poem. For Hill 'this is more than enough'. And he is able to stop his poem at the point where it approaches the unbearable. This attempt to be a witness to these events, with which he is so closely connected in time, has resulted in the infection of his language, his perception of the world, and even his sense of self, with the consciousness of these atrocities.

Hill's recognition that he falls short of the experience of the camp victims by pulling his poem up short on 'this is more than enough' makes one think of Christ on the cross. He too had the power to say 'enough is enough', but He did not. This is the force of my first epigraph from Weil. Christ is supremely a witness because He unrelentingly gave Himself up to His role as man abandoned by God. The unrelenting 'witnessing' which gives the self up to destruction will be examined more fully in the next chapter. Of course there are other kinds of witnessing that do not require such a

⁶George Steiner in *Language and Silence* has written eloquently on this, and his belief that we must re-examine our practise in literary studies following the events of the Holocaust (specifically the infection of the German language and the actions of aesthetes as death-camp murderers) is in some ways parallel to Hill's poetic work.

thoroughgoing sacrifice. Some suggest the intense attention and concentration of meditative prayer, while perhaps more common is that of the poet drawn out of an absorption in his/her own emotions into an engagement with what is happening to others.

It is essential to understand the importance of the relationship between poetry and religious experience for Aleksandr Blok if one is to understand why Hill wrote 'Scenes with Harlequins'. Blok's poetic creativity was matured during a summer of intense contemplation (Pyman calls it a 'mystical explosion') spent at his family's country estate. He found he was placed in a dilemma by the mystical nature of his creativity. Pyman puts it like this:

It became clear to him that he could not continue to serve two masters. The work of religious contemplation and lyric poetry did not go together. He chose poetry and the hell of art.

Christ might have persuaded him to give up his 'toys', might even have exorcised the demon which was his Muse. This he had no intention of allowing to happen. (Pyman, 1979, I, 173, 174)

It is clear from the example of Blok that a poet may find himself unsure as to the compatibility of the mystical element in his own poetry and more orthodox meditation. Poetic inspiration might be a secondary form of mystical experience, which, once deepened, would obviate the need for poems, or it might be a kind of demonic possession which Christ would drive out.

My argument is that Hill has experienced a similar incompatibility between his poetic vocation and his spiritual inclinations. In interview with John Haffenden, Hill has said:

I am interested in mysticism as an exemplary discipline, and I'm also interested in the psychopathology of the false mystical experience. Of course no one has been more accurate in defining and warning against the perils of false mysticism than the medieval mystics; the genuine mystic is usually a tough, practical, level-headed man, and I think those iron-disciplined mystics - unless their charity overcame their scorn - would have hard things to say of the more self-indulgent mystical cults of the present day. (Haffenden, 1981, 89)

He shows how closely he identifies with these mystics by his description of meditation as 'exemplary discipline', chiming closely with his description of poetry as 'an exemplary exercise' (Haffenden, 1981, 99). When working on *Brand*, Hill had a kind of mystical experience, always aware that it was a feature of this project and not a characteristic of his 'own' writing.

I was driving myself night after night into the early hours of the morning after a full day's teaching and administration. Labour and excitement combined to induce a state of euphoria, what you would call 'entrancement', a kind of quite false mystical ecstasy, which was most interesting to observe in oneself. (Haffenden, 1981, 84)

Hill allows himself to fall into this 'false mystical ecstasy' because he is producing a version of Ibsen's drama, something he will not have to 'stand by' in the way he would his 'own' poetry. Blok felt in a similar manner about Brand:

A figure which seemed to Blok to unite the qualities of the genius and the Demon in irreconcilable duality was Ibsen's Brand, who turns his back upon the meanness and ugliness of human life to search in the mountains for that God of Love whom he fails to find on earth or in his own heart' (Pyman, 1979, II, 73).

It is only because Brand is the kind of man whom Hill is strongly drawn to that this 'euphoria' can occur. Hill can concentrate on the bringing together of linguistic power and renunciation that Brand embodies, allowing the events of the play and the distance of the character from himself to release him from the strictures of poetic responsibility. He is of course well aware of this, and seems to have felt justified in working in this way because it was a commission with deadlines. And he hoped it might prepare him for a new way of writing in the future. Brand is 'hateful' in some ways, but he also speaks beautifully and suffers for what he believes. He is both genius and demon. His longing for a 'God of Love' juxtaposed with his inability to be loving to the humans he lives with echoes the notebook entry of Coleridge that Hill is fond of quoting: 'Poetry - excites us to artificial feelings - makes us callous to real ones'. Brand's undeniable linguistic impressiveness, and the challenge of reflecting that in his version, clearly obsessed Hill. Poole usefully asks 'how far may Brand be thought to succumb to the power of his own voice' (Robinson, P., 1985, 86). We might ask the same of Hill, not only here but throughout his work. What saves Hill here is his admission that he experienced a false ecstasy along with his assertion that he did not succumb to the power of his own voice, but remained sceptical of what he and Brand were up to.

In his 'own' poetry Hill acknowledges the tension between his poetry and real Christian discipleship. In 'Lachrimae Verae', (the poem where skill rhymes with hill) we read:

I cannot turn aside from what I do;
you cannot turn away from what I am
You do not dwell in me nor I in you (*NCP*, 133)

In this poem Hill sheds true tears over the divorce from Christ that his poetic skill has necessitated. We could say here that Hill is so much under the spell of his own voice that he cannot be religious. He contemplates the 'hell of art' he has chosen with some regret, but also the feeling that he cannot change things now. This poem is not, primarily, about the inability to have a genuine religious experience, but the experience of a poet who cannot renounce the poetic impulse in order to submit himself to Christ. Blok also felt the strain of this 'choice':

The reason for this schizophrenic development in Blok's poetry was clearly the struggle going on within him between the aspiring religious visionary

and dark, demonic spirit who 'seeks perdition'; between ascetic vigilance and the destructive passion. (Pyman, 1979, I, 94)

Like Brand, Blok is a man with the potential for spiritual greatness. But, like Brand, he is unable (and unwilling) to sacrifice his verbal mastery. 'Lachrimae Verae' suggests that Hill's experience is very similar to that of Brand and Blok. In his final moments in the avalanche Brand approaches the humility he has been unable to demonstrate throughout the play. It must be stressed that these men did not turn away from Christ through any simple lack of faith, but rather because they perceived the renunciation involved as unbearable. Poetic excellence and spiritual humility were practically incompatible:

To remain *with God and in literature*, as Bely and the Merezhovskys tried to do, was, he felt from the beginning, to create a false situation. As Bryusov (of all people) later stated in a letter to Bely, they had not sufficient courage or willpower for 'an act of renunciation'. For Blok at that time, the dilemma of whether or not to make such an 'act of renunciation' was immediate and existential. He was exhausted by the long struggle between his bodily needs and his ascetic aspirations, as well as by standing sentry to contain the mystical riot which threatened to engulf his poetry. (Pyman, 1979, I, 107)

Blok's dilemma can be illuminated through Nathan A. Scott's discussion of Henri Bremond which links the composition of poetry directly with spiritual exercise in a way that suggests that poetry is only a side-track off the road to union with God:

The excitement to which poetic art conduces is the excitement of a mystical experience that has not discovered itself to be what in point of fact it is and that does not, therefore, go on to allow the contemplative impulse to complete itself in an act of mergence with the Divine Ground. The poetic transaction, in other words, belongs to a secondary order of mystical experience - secondary, that is, because it does not, characteristically, culminate in the Beatific Vision. (Scott, 1969, 90)

Although Scott does not agree totally with Bremond, he clearly thinks this argument has some validity. However, the area is a little more complicated than Bremond's argument allows. For instance, St. John of the Cross's *The Dark Night of the Soul* takes the form of a gloss on a poem that he claims to be 'the words of the soul already in the state of perfection, which is the union of love with God' (St. John, 1935, 3). Hill is interested in the writings of those mystics who talk about meditative prayer, about achieving union with God, and especially in the difficulties of telling true mystical experience from false, the locutions of God from those of the Devil. The statements he has made in interview suggest that some forms of poetic creativity are 'false mystical experience', but this also implies that one might write out of a true one, in the way St. John of the Cross did. While a poem like 'Lachrimae Verae' agonizes over whether poetic creativity itself separates the self from Christ, the sequence as a whole suggests that poetry is a form of spiritual self-exploration, a spiritual exercise. Although Scott thinks Bremond may be correct in seeing poetry as a side-track from the main road of spiritual progress, Hill feels the potential of

real spiritual experience from within the discipline of writing poetry. This conviction also lies behind Blok's adherence to poetic practice. Pyman quote him as follows:

True art does not coincide in its aims with religion. It is positive and mystic (both spring from the same source). Art has its own Rule, it is a monastery of historical formulation, ie a monastery that has no room for religion. Mystics love to be poets, artists. Religious people do not, they divide themselves from their craft (art). (Pyman, 1979, I, 231)

Blok asserts the spiritual validity of artistic work in terms of this, rather strange, distinction between the mystic and the religious. Part of his 'choice' of art over religion then, stems from his rejection of the hierarchy Bremond has outlined.

Hill is ambivalent about the school of theological criticism that Scott has built up. He is attracted to the Scott's key terms 'attention' and 'meditation', as well as to the 'resistance to the reductionist tendency of modern scientism' (*LL*, 6). However, he attacks a slipshod reading of Saul Bellow and later in the essay 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' he makes this criticism of the theological approach:

The major caveat which I would enter against a theological view of literature is that, too often, it is not theology at all, but merely a restatement of the neo-Symbolist mystique celebrating verbal mastery; an expansive gesture conveying the broad sense that Joyce's *Ulysses* or Rilke's *Duino Elegies* 'must, in the splendour of its art, evoke astonishment at the sheer magnificence of its lordship over language'. If an argument for the theological interpretation of literature is to be sustained, it needs other sustenance than this. (*LL*, 17)

I would like to read this in the context of the tension between religious experience and poetic skill that we have been looking at. If criticism is to be theological, Hill insists that it must not be taken in by writers who have replaced the religious impulse with a glorification of their poetic skill. This relates to the material that we have just been looking at, where we have seen Hill's interest in writers who feel strongly the truth of religion, but are not able to renounce their verbal mastery for it. Clearly this is very different from the position of a writer who does not believe in the spiritual at all, and so uses poetry to fill that absence.

Interestingly, Eric Griffiths, in his essay 'Hill's Criticism: a Life of Form' suggests that Hill has been taken in by Wallace Stevens, precisely in the way he seems to be warning against. The passage Griffiths refers to is as follows:

It is evident that my argument is attracted, almost despite itself, towards an idea by which it would much prefer to be repelled. But surely, one may be asked to concede, it is more than attraction. Is it not a passionate adherence; a positive identification with the magnificent agnostic faith whose summation is in the 'Adagia' of Wallace Stevens?-'After one has abandoned a belief in god [*sic*], poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.' (*LL*, 16)

Hill (who is now a professor of theology) baulks at the lower-case 'g' of Stevens's 'magnificent agnostic faith'. But Griffiths (himself a Catholic) reacts more strongly against the whole passage:

What is one to make of Hill's own phrase 'magnificent agnostic faith'? The paradox, 'agnostic faith', is woefully and wilfully contrived, and there is very little 'agnostic' about Wallace Stevens's plushy sentence, decked out as it is with 'essence' and 'redemption', except his askesis over capital letters. It surprises me that Hill, who so deeply responds to the work of Simone Weil, work which might aptly be called an instance of 'agnostic faith', and a strong harrowing instance of such faith - can think Stevens's sentence 'magnificent'. But then religious doubt and longings of the depth and purity of Hill's demand a language other than that of literary criticism. (Robinson, P., 1985, 183)

Griffiths is right to focus on this passage, and to harp on the inappropriateness of Hill's characterisation of Stevens's 'faith'. It does seem that Hill has fallen into exactly the trap he warns against. Stevens's glorification of 'verbal mastery' gains its power from an absence of faith, not the problematic tension we see in Blok, Brand and Hill. Griffiths does ignore Hill's statement that he would rather be 'repelled' by this idea. Admittedly this repulsion disappears very quickly in the build-up to the Stevens quotation. However, the criticism of lax 'theological criticism' that Hill makes later in the paragraph is aimed at the neo-Symbolism within which Hill positions Stevens. The phrase 'magnificent agnostic faith' must be read as Hill's temporary submission to the attraction of an idea by which he would prefer to be repelled. A submission he indulges in so as to round upon it categorically in the latter part of the paragraph. Griffiths is, of course, absolutely right to contrast the example of Simone Weil with that of Stevens, and he is right to show us how 'magnificent agnostic faith' is a bad joke when applied to Stevens's neo-Symbolist credo. But I am unconvinced by his argument that Hill's criticism is somehow less honest than his poetry:

Whereas in the poems the elaboration of religious quandary through the torque of metaphors achieves writing of the last honesty, the criticism throws clouds of hesitant and impulsive glorification around what Hill supposes the artistic imagination achieves, and does so because of the writing's unsteady reliance on religious metaphors. (Robinson, P., 1985, 183)

I rather think that Hill's criticism is honest - in recognising the appeal of the Symbolist's attempt to replace religion with poetry. I have already shown how Hill experiences the troubled relationship between creativity and spirituality, he cannot but be attracted to such a neat solution of his problem. However, he sees through this misguided attraction in the very paragraph where he acknowledges it. Griffiths has taken a remark that he finds disquieting out of context and ignored Hill's own honest account of his discomfort, and the conclusion he draws from his mixed attraction and repulsion.

Hill's work characteristically operates by focusing on figures for whom he feels a mixture of admiration and distrust. Thus, in his essay "'Perplexed Persistence" The Exemplary Failure of T.H. Green' he uses the key word 'exemplary' to show his muted admiration for the philosopher. In some ways Green is an example for us to admire and follow, but he must also 'be made an example of' for his faults. When, in interview, Hill describes poetry as 'exemplary exercise', there is less of the negative tone about the word. He wants to associate writing poetry very closely with spiritual exercise, 'exemplary discipline' (his phrase describing mysticism). Brand is one of Hill's most important exemplary figures, as I hope I have illustrated through my discussion of his strange experience while writing his version of Ibsen's play. I have already alluded to Blok's comments on Brand - that he was a man who failed to find the image of his 'God of Love' on the earth or in his own heart. Hill is clearly drawn to Blok because the Russian poet wrestled with similar dilemmas to those which exercise him. One might read 'exemplary figures' as a phrase referring to the verbal texture of these poets' works - the outstanding qualities Hill admires are literary as well as biographical.

Aleksandr Blok, whom Hill memorialises in his 'Scenes with Harlequins', lived through the First World War and the revolutions in Russia. Although a man obsessed with his love for his wife, and for his many mistresses and involved loosely with theosophical circles, he came to believe that his poetic vocation was to write about Russia (or Rus' - he preferred the older spelling). 'Scenes with Harlequins' is concerned with an attempt at finding resolution between religious and poetic vocation. It deals with a man who combined Brand's dislike of compromise with a sense of humour and a desire to incarnate his vision in his own heart and in Russia. In their introduction to their translation of Blok's *Selected Poems*, Jon Stallworthy and Peter France write that Blok 'tried to get away from [...] self-centred lyricism in his plays and in his long poem "Retribution"' (Blok, 1974, 14). There was clearly a struggle in Blok between this mystical/lyrical self and the more politically responsible poet:

In 1910 in particular he seems to have discovered a new strength; this found expression on one level in the cult of physical fitness and on another in the long and unfinished poem 'Retribution', which occupied him in 1910 and 1911. His aim here was to write something more epic than lyrical, setting his own individual fate in the context of Russian history since 1880. Those sections of the poem which he did complete are impressive; he wields Pushkin's classical iambic metre with a firm hand and evokes episodes of private and public history with great power. (Blok, 1974, 23)

Pyman's biography gives us Blok's own words on his new vocation:

My theme, and I know that now for certain, without any doubts whatsoever, is a living, real theme, it is not only *bigger than me*, it is bigger than all of us put together; and it is a theme common to us all. All of us who are *alive* come to it one way or another. If we do not come to it, it will come to us, *it is already advancing*.

That is how my theme stands before me, *the theme of Russia* (and in particular the question of the intelligentsia and the people). To this theme I deliberately and irrevocably *dedicate my life*. (Pyman, 1979, II, 1)

Blok's mention of the people and the intelligentsia here looks forward to his place in the revolution. He noted that although the intelligentsia had always been calling for revolution, they were not really prepared for the fact that the people would have to take control of the country, and that their old way of life would disappear. He came to feel very strongly that the revolution was of supreme importance - a thing of divine providence. Thus in his poem 'The Twelve', he depicts the ruthlessness of the Red Guard - their immunity to personal loss and their inevitable advance:

... So they march with sovereign tread ...
 Behind them limps the hungry dog,
 and wrapped in the wild snow at their head
 carrying a blood-red flag -
 soft-footed where the blizzard swirls,
 invulnerable where bullets crossed -
 crowned with a crown of snowflake pearls,
 a flowery diadem of frost,
 ahead of them goes Jesus Christ. (Blok, 1974, 127)

The appearance of Christ here seemed to show Blok's approval of the abuses of the Revolutionary period (which many of the upper-classes could not accept with equanimity) and also to give a supernatural sanction to the Communists that they themselves did not want. Blok's experience of this period led him to write this poem in a fever of excitement. He bore witness to what he felt to be a providential course of events, regardless of the unpopularity that he might bring upon himself. One might compare Hill's 'Ovid in the Third Reich' which is scrupulously fair to the Nazi collaborator. Hill does not hide behind pious disgust with Nazism, but presents the situation in all its human complexity. Blok refuses to adopt the stance of other members of his class who claimed to be in favour of reform, but could not accept the unavoidable consequences of something actually happening. It is largely this uncompromising attachment to his vision that Hill commends in 'Scenes with Harlequins'.

Hill's title refers to Blok's first play 'The Puppet Booth' which satirically explores his creativity and his sexual relationships, as well as the stunned worship of the 'mystics' who think Columbine (the lover of Pierrot and Harlequin) is at once death and the essence of woman. The play is made even stranger by the authorial intrusions which protest against the use of clowns and puppet-figures, as well as the allegorizing of the mystics. His assertions that he wrote a simple love story usually end with him being physically dragged off-stage. Hill seems to have chosen to allude to this play in his title because it is an example of Blok resisting the 'self-centred lyricism' that Stallworthy and France mention (as well as false mysticism), while still suggesting the possibility of true mysticism and love. Pyman discusses the critique of mystical fraud that Blok developed through the idea of puppets:

Zhenya saw himself as a red-haired, blob-nosed circus clown and Blok as the classic, pale pierrot, and it was while talking and clowning with him that Blok first hit upon the idea of the mystics of the puppet booth, for the two saw all mystical frauds (and sometimes even themselves) as puppets without real, inward being: clowns stuffed with sawdust and bleeding cranberry juice, empty dummies, faceless above immaculate stiff collars. (Pyman, 1979, I, 192)

The play shows both Blok's awareness of the intoxicating power of his poetry on those around him, and his commitment to the symbolic world he inhabited. It also reveals the more practical man who knows he ought to consider the relationship between the Russian intelligentsia and the peasantry, and how a more equitable future might be attained.

The first epigraph of Hill's poem is from one of Blok's mistresses, Volokhova - the actress to whom he dedicated the volume 'The Snow Mask'. It reads as follows:

Joyfully I accept this strange book, joyfully and with fear - in it there is so much beauty, poetry, death. I await the accomplishment of your task. (*NCP*, 194)

The second is Blok's own words, describing a period of low creativity: 'All the sounds have gone silent. Can't you hear that there aren't any sounds any more?'. Blok seems to have experienced a lot of events in terms of sounds. Thus he felt the revolutionary period as a time of thunder. This quiet reflects Blok's weakening with age, before his death (probably from syphilis). The poem, however, records a sudden return of the poet's vision:

Distance is on edge;
the level tide
stands rimmed with mercury.
Again the estranged spirit

is possessed of light.
The common things
glitter uncommonly. (*NCP*, 194)

Here Hill reflects Blok's feeling of heightened awareness and excitement when he is able to write. 'Distance' being on edge, refers not only to the way the sea's horizon seems strangely marked with mercury, but also to an edgy, nervous feel that has got into the landscape, even into an abstract concept like 'distance'. This moment in the poem is, I believe, an interesting example of the way Hill has used the individual words and phrases of Pyman's book to create the mood of his poem.

Today a light rain has been falling almost all day long. The night is terribly dark ... Grandfather is very bad. It seems to me that the end is near, today especially. The whispering of the rain was uncanny. There was a queer creaking underneath the floorboards. The dog is on edge. There is something wrong, something wrong. (Pyman, 1979, I, 111)

These words from Blok describe a darker mood than Hill is aiming at, but show the poet's sensitivity to his surroundings - or perhaps the extent to which he imposed his feelings

upon those around him. In *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Hill wove direct quotations and borrowings from his sources into the tight formal structure of his poem; here the relaxation of the form of the verse goes hand in hand with a freer use of source material. The stanzas force us to focus more on the individual power of words and phrases. Instead of using the architectural grandeur of his poem to address and interrogate his subject (as he did with Péguy), Hill employs this looser poetic form with its fragmentary borrowings and quotations to talk about, to, and through, Blok.

When Hill brings the poem to characterize its protagonist he plays around with the strange atonement between this extreme vulnerability to impressions and the rocky imperturbability which has developed alongside his vatic powers:

granite-faced seer
scathed by invisible
planets as men dream of war

like a fresh sea-wind
like the lilac
at your petrified heart
as something anciently known (*NCP*, 194)

Is the poet's heart turned to stone, or is he terrified? Does the scoured face record his suffering, or is he as impassive as a scraped wall of rock? Hill's version of Blok seems to be a man who is able to withstand the vast forces of 'invisible planets' whilst also being sensitive to the breath of the sea-wind and the lilac. He also knows that these gentler images represent, for some men, the 'war' that he envisions as a planet colliding with his face.

Blok was not a stern single-minded man like Brand or Péguy. The ambiguities that this poem lets loose are of a more dangerous kind than we are used to in Hill. They imply something more than distrust of language - they bring in a radical questioning of the self. They are a portrait of a man who did not bind himself in rigid absolutes. The third poem in the sequence shows us the poet torn between his responses to his mystical love and to the destruction and violent change - both of which strove for his total allegiance:

Beautiful Lady,
in reverence
with sorrow and masquerade,
how else should we have lived?

Tempestuous fantasies,
blood-tinted opaline
essential clouds,
I am not myself

I think in this last act
without end. Lordly
and faithful servant of Life -

what can one say?

By humour of lament,
spontaneous word of stone
inspired débâcle
many times rehearsed,

look to abide
tyrannous equality
and freedom led forth
blinded by prophecies.

Now it is gleeting Venus
who so decrees and now
it is parched Mars,
Beautiful Lady. (*NCP*, 196)

The poem dedicates itself to 'The Most Beautiful Lady', a symbol of the eternal feminine whom Blok seemed to feel was embodied in his wife, and for whom he often wrote. Most of the poems to the Lady were written early in Blok's career, but here we see the older poet looking over his work and reconsidering it. He feels he is not himself now, in this 'last act'. He looks back on his involvement with the extravagant and painful erotic adventures of his youth, but not with guilt - for he cannot see how it could have been otherwise. The 'sorrow and masquerade' balance each other like 'humour of lament' later in the poem. Hill's Blok sees his poetry, and his life, as an attempt to bring pleasure into a necessarily painful existence. As the poem continues, the speaker seems to examine the nature of poetry - it is the only means by which we may be able to speak about how we have lived, how we might have lived. It is humour of lament, because we can make a puppet-play from the materials that have caused so much pain. The paradoxical, and especially the theatrical, element is expanded in the following lines. The lapidary poem that appears spontaneous is actually as laborious as the carving of words by a mason. The piece of riotous entertainment that appears 'inspired' may indeed be so, but has to be 'many-times rehearsed' before it can be presented to a public. However, at this point the syntax allows the fourth stanza to move forwards as well as back towards 'what can one say?', and it looks as if we are being told that this laboured creativity that hides its labour will enable us to live through the injustices of life. 'Tyrannous equality' might be a reference to the revolutionary confiscation of property (and the Stalinist terror to come).

These central stanzas show the speaker asserting that poetic creativity is a way of discovering things to say in the face of the pain of life (whether romantic or more material), and that it will help one to survive. Simone Weil believed that only the highest kind of art could continually comfort people who were suffering. Blok is making a claim for poetry which is not necessarily directed to what Weil calls 'the absolute good'. Here Hill is paying tribute to Blok's decision to choose poetry over religion, and yet to write socially responsible poetry. This is something Blok has in common with Osip Mandelstam, who was persecuted by Stalin. He was not a religious poet, but his poems

did sustain prisoners. They used to carve his verses into their cell walls. The final stanza reinforces this by suggesting an alternation of the rule of 'gleeting Venus' (suggesting Blok's unfortunate history of venereal diseases caught, Pyman suggests, from prostitutes) and 'parched Mars'. However, all this is subsumed under the final vocative 'Beautiful Lady'. This figure was an aspect of the divine for Blok, and she overrides the actual situations of the poems he dedicates to her.

I have suggested that in 'Scenes with Harlequins' Hill works more freely with his source material. There is none of the direct quotation that we saw in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. The voice of the poems also seems to be shifting. Rather than a set of poems simply addressing a figure, or attempting to ventriloquize someone, this sequence employs several strategies. In the first poem we have seen how Hill uses a phrase from Blok to evoke a mood. It might seem as if Hill was presenting us with a version of Blok speaking. But the poem then moves to address a 'seer' as 'you' - suggesting that Hill is talking to Blok. In the second section, things are perhaps even less fixed:

The day clacks and birds
gust from the square.
Ferrous sulphate
vapours in the dens

of dead photographers.
With white seraphic
hair against the sun
who are these strangers -

or who are these
charred spirits glaring
their vitreous eyes
towards apocalypse?

They are not of our flesh
to do them justice.
Still they outshine us
among the prophets. (*NCP*, 195)

The poem seems to present a contemplation of photographs (perhaps those of Blok that are included in Pyman's biography). But we also seem to be in the places where these pictures were taken - visiting the abandoned 'dens' of the photographers. The photographs also look strange. The figures in the pictures appear strange. Are we looking at negatives, with darkness appearing as whiteness? Or is Hill dramatising the impact of the photographer's flash - a fake sun making the eyes of the models seem glassy with its small apocalypse of artificial light? Hill's final stanza moves back from the figures. These lines pull in opposite directions. Initially, it seems that we are being told that they are not of our flesh to excuse them from some inadequacy - to be 'just' to them. But the final lines assert their superiority over us. Looking back into the past Hill sees the ways we

have outstripped our predecessors (perhaps in our familiarity with technology, amongst other things) but also acknowledges how we are surpassed by them.

This sequence moves through time and space with a fluidity similar to that of *Mercian Hymns*. In section three we have a first person poem seemingly a version of Blok's Beautiful Lady poetry, while the first and second sections work by encountering and addressing Blok through what remains of him. The fourth section presents us with a version of Blok's experience of the possessing power of Christ combined with his conviction of the spiritual significance of his country's beauty:

Holy Rus - into the rain's
horizons, peacock-dyed
tail-feathers of storm,
so it goes on. (*NCP*, 197)

This is a poetry uniting the contextual freedom of *Mercian Hymns* with the simplicity and lyrical power of 'The Pentecost Castle'. And in the fifth section Hill once more draws us through Blok and back out into an expression of his admiration:

In this light, constrained spirit,
be a lord of your age.
Rejoice; let the strange
legends begin. (*NCP*, 198)

Blok becomes a 'lord of his age' when viewed through the lens of this poem, deftly toying with impermanence, the wierd permanence of the play of shadows, and our fascination with strange legends.

The sixth poem shows Blok's oddly secure hierarchy of loyalties. One should not take the third poem to mean that he did not take his human love-affairs seriously, and we have seen that he felt strongly about the rightness of the revolution from 'The Twelve'. Blok, however, never wanted to be limited by belonging to a group with a clear manifesto, and he hated the sort of spirituality that the theosophical society propounded.

Of Rumor, of Clamor,
I shall be silent;
I will not deal
in the vatic exchanges

between committees,
mysticism by the book.
History is aglow
with bookish fires. (*NCP*, 199)

Here the poet commits himself to silence, rather than conforming to the standards and valuations of mystical societies. Blok's poems seem 'mystical' to these committees, but their inability to make the kind of renunciation he himself made exasperates him to the point that he would stay silent. He sees spiritual or creative development as something essentially personal, not something that one can do in a committee. This suggests the moment in 'The Puppet Booth' when the mystics hail the arrival of Columbine as the

spiritual principle they have been awaiting, but Pierrot tells them not to be so silly, it's his fiancée Columbine. Hill is also alluding to Blok's attempt to turn down the chairmanship of the Bolshoi theatre 'What remains? To sit on committees again, which is something I should so much like to avoid' (Pyman, 1979, II, 343). Blok gave in to persuasion, although he was getting old and tired; after a while he simply sat on the committees in silence, convinced he was no longer of any use - a poet in an era being taken over by 'commercial travellers for ready-made ideas' (as Pyman quotes Chukovsky on this period). The last two lines quoted above are quite sinister - suggesting both book-burnings, and also the burning of martyrs by 'bookish' heretic persecutors. The poem continues:

Begone you grave jewellers
and you spartan hoplites
in masks of foil.
Orthodox arcane

interpreters of repute,
this is understood.
Why should I hear
further what you propose?

Exegetes may come
to speak to the silence
that has arisen. It is
not unheard of. (*NCP*, 199)

The poem amounts to a refusal to bear false witness. Hill's Blok would rather maintain silence when he hears nothing in his head, when 'all the sounds have gone quiet'. He is wary of the artificial, pretentious, self-proclaimed initiates who think they understand everything that is happening. Blok sarcastically ends his poem with a reserved assertion that new voices will arise, people who will understand the new silence. Waiting for them, or even just dying silently, is better than the poison of false witness. Blok seems rather different from some of the 'exemplary figures' that Hill looks at who sometimes seem rather spiritually arrogant. The last section of 'Scenes With Harlequins' draws attention to Blok's poem 'Retribution' - a long poem on which he worked slowly and over many years. Pyman describes the way Blok worked on it:

Working on the poem involved more than just writing. It involved putting into practice what the poet has learnt from his visit to Europe: listening to the 'sounds of history', struggling to 'give form and flesh to that profound, elusive content which fills every Russian soul' and becoming a "social man", an artist, who looks the world courageously in the face and has won for himself the right to study form, to make controlled tests of suitable and unsuitable material, to look into the contours of "Good" and "Evil" at the price of losing a part of the soul.' (Pyman, 1979, II, 106)

It is easy to see that 'Scenes with Harlequins' itself has something in common with Blok's poem. Hill's constant attempts to write about history, both British and European,

reflect a similar set of aspirations to those of Blok - a similar solution to the tensions I have been describing in this chapter. Hill's poem is as follows:

Decembrist blood! We are taxed
for their visions. The earth
turns, returns, through cycles
of declamation;

with feuilletons and iron
fantasies of the state.
Rhadamanthine the grim
torches of naphtha,

the unspeakable dull woe
of which I may have had
foreknowledge - I forget -
in 'Retribution'. (*NCP*, 200)

The opening plays on Blok's connection with the old Russian military caste. It could be calling for the blood of these families in retribution, the common people asserting that their vision has harmed them, or it could be the descendant, Blok, deploring his connection with people whose vision he cannot share. In this poem Hill shows us Blok turning away from his personal pain - and his real spiritual awareness (the Beautiful Lady may have shown him this was coming, the poet will not say). Hill puns on the fact that Blok might seek to forget all this in taking retribution on those of whom he disapproves (the petty article writers and the tyrannical bureaucrats), but he may simply be returning to the demanding task of writing his poem 'Retribution'. Of course this would not be an escape at all since that is a poem where he forced himself to exercise and expand his historical and social awareness. Thus, when he thinks about the grim times he has lived through he cannot find total consolation in happy memories from his individual emotional experience:

To think how once I would career
along with you, oblivious
to all the world! But it's no use
and not much happiness, my dear. (Blok, 1974, 89)

Hill pictures Blok achieving a kind of forgetfulness of his own woe and the abuses of the time in the hard work of writing his autobiographical poem of social witness. That is, he avoids becoming entangled in the present squabbles in order to find, from his study of the past, how he might reconcile his inner experience with the more universal suffering he has witnessed. Blok avoids the temptation to withdraw from the difficulties of the present into a fantasy world. He hopes, via history and his own past, to continue to bear witness to the difficulties of the Russian people - since he has been shaken from the complacency of his class by the Revolutions. Of course we must draw a parallel with Hill here, who does not often comment directly on present-day politics, but who uses the past, and his relationship with figures he admires, to meditate on social and religious

questions. With Blok, Hill is surely drawn to a man who is able to accept that his property and way of life might be taken from him in the name of equality, and moreover that he should not once more retreat into his private mystical-sexual world, but should grow to a new political awareness, even accrediting the Communists' providential favour.

Blok's desire to affirm the revolution means that, for Hill, he is to be admired, because he did not yield to the temptation to ignore the world, or to give up writing poetry. There is perhaps something to be envied in Blok's position as a widely appreciated poet in a time of civil turmoil. In some way, the experience of living through the war and the revolutions must have helped Blok to see his responsibilities more clearly. Tadeusz Rozewicz, a poet who has written much about the Holocaust, has said in interview that he is 'searching for, if I dare put it like that, saintliness in creative people. In practice I may well be far removed from this but I have always been extremely fascinated by this concept' (Weissbort, 1993, 356). Hill is often looking for something that is legitimate to admire, in history, but specifically amongst creative writers. Like Rozewicz, he is looking for the saintly in creative writers. Blok could hardly be called a saint, but for Hill he shares some of the saintly virtues - discipline, attention, humility. Traditionally, the death of the martyr is the ultimate proof of sanctity (although this in itself makes the will to martyrdom problematic). Sainthood is not marked by such an external badge, but Blok's response to his time seems to qualify him as a 'saintly' poet. There is always the problem that surrounds true and false mystical experience when we consider a possibly saintly person. Hill is as suspicious of saintliness as he is obsessive in his search for it. Blok, with his conscious rejection of Christianity in favour of poetry, faced up to the dilemma which exercises Hill in a particularly strong-minded way. However, his renunciation of private sexual and poetic mysticism in favour of socially responsible witnessing in poetry demonstrates that Hill is right to think that the question is not settled so easily by choosing poetry over Christ. In Blok, Hill has found an example of a man who attempted, much as he himself does, to listen to the 'sounds of history' and 'look into the contours of good and evil'. Hill is clearly impressed by the resolution which Blok found in writing poems such as 'Retribution'. His own work, and especially his poetry of witness, often works towards this kind of atonement. 'Scenes with Harlequins' examines Blok's life and work with an intensity born of the fact that Blok is an 'exemplary figure', a man who found a way to live and work with the problems of poetry, responsibility and spirituality that continually prey on Hill's own mind.

The poem 'In Piam Memoriam' raises these doubts about saintliness but then seems to accept the validity of the saint it portrays:

1

Created purely from glass the saint stands,
Exposing his gifted quite empty hands
Like a conjurer about to begin,

A righteous man begging of righteous men.

2

In the sun lily-and-gold-coloured,
Filtering the cruder light, he has endured,
A feature for our regard; and will keep;
Of worldly purity the stained archetype.

3

The scummed pond twitches. The great holly-tree,
Emptied and shut, blows clear of wasting snow,
The common, puddled substance: beneath,
Like a revealed mineral, a new earth. (*NCP*, 45)

In the first section the speaker shows great suspicion of the stained-glass saint. He is already punning on how a symbol of purity can be made from something 'stained'. The open-handed gesture of the saint (symbolizing his generosity, his welcome, his love) is interpreted as the duplicitous action of a conjurer concealing his trickery under a guise of trustworthiness, or then again perhaps the man is asking for money. The second section suggests that the glass depiction may be a way of showing a version of purity. The speaker says that the colours filter out 'cruder light' and is moved by the beauty of the window as the sun catches it. The last line sums up the awkwardness of the image - we have only worldly things with which to depict the supernaturally pure. This does not mean we should mistrust depictions, or turn iconoclast - there is something worthy of our regard in such images. The final stanza moves out into nature and makes a similar point when a gust of wind clears the ground of dirty snow and reveals the earth oddly clean and renewed beneath 'like a revealed mineral, a new earth'.

However when Hill applies this suspicious attitude to the saintly (Orphic) tradition in poetry, the results are not so consoling:

Though there are wild dogs
Infesting the roads
We have recitals, catalogues
Of protected birds;

And the rare pale sun
To water our days.
Men turn to savagery now or turn
To the laws'

Immutable black and red.
To be judged for his song,
Traversing the still-moist dead,
The newly-stung,

Love goes, carrying compassion
To the rawly-difficult;
His countenance, his hands' motion

Serene even to a fault. (*NCP*, 44)

In 'Orpheus and Eurydice' the speaker takes a sweeping view of his times before focusing on the work of the poet. The poem shows us a world where actual violence and destruction is supposedly balanced by poetry and scholarly research. But one cannot avoid thinking that catalogues of birds are not much use if one becomes one of the still-moist dead slain by wild dogs or savage men. Amongst all this comes Orpheus who feels his new love as a sting and creates beautiful poetry. There is something culpably self-obsessed in this figure nimbly avoiding the bodies as he travels to his poetry competition to sing about Eurydice. The final lines of the poem show that this removal from the real suffering around him infects his poetic performance, but only very subtly. The poetry judge sees something in the poet's serenity, the classical calm with which he performs, of which he cannot approve - that is actually a fault.

Perhaps the suffering that was in store for Orpheus corrected this slight callousness in his art. Some poets seem to feel that actual suffering, or at least formal, disciplined meditation might be necessary to guarantee integrity and responsible composition. The Slovenian poet Edvard Kocbek writes about this in his poem 'A Longing for Jail':

I was too late for the most important
spiritual exercises of my life,
I am left without proof
of my true value.
Each jail is a treasury,
a secret drawer, a jealous
torture chamber, the most important stage
of a butcher's martyrdom before he is
corrupted by a naked woman holding a knife.
I missed the delight of that love,
I would die easier if I had counted out
the squares of the floor of my solitary cell
and completed in my thoughts the transparent frescoes
on the dusty pane
and gazed through the walls
at the frontier posts of mankind.
Now you have collapsed, my cell,
disintegrated to openness,
the world no longer consists of redeeming cruelty,
it is but a sabbath courtyard.
You can test me no more,
I am no longer a figure for the Christmas crib,
for a puppet show or a display of robots.
I am preparing myself for a different game -
look, I am turning into a little grey mouse,
my hiding places are all around,
tonight I shall sleep in the sleeve of a child
with no right hand, tomorrow I shall dream
in the echo of a shadow that sleeps after its voyage
through a fairytale that has no end. (Weissbort, 1993, 48)

We might compare the opening lines of this poem with Hill's "Christmas Trees", where Bonhoeffer's prison-cell is also like the monastic cell in which one carries out spiritual exercises. Also in Hill's final line 'we hear too late or not too late', there is the same anxiety that we read in Kocbek. Just as Kocbek fears he has missed his chance to undergo this purifying and empowering suffering, so Hill considers whether or not Bonhoeffer's example is 'too quiet' for us to hear in time, he holds out the hope that we might not be too late. For Kocbek jail would have been a valuable spiritual exercise that would have made him a better artist. The transparent frescoes he would have completed there would have made him a better writer, now he is 'left without proof' of his 'true value'. There is clearly something of this feeling in Hill's poetry, he is drawn to write about poets who have suffered, and born witness within their pain to what they believe, because he himself has never experienced that 'redeeming cruelty'. While Kocbek sees himself turning into a mouse finding comfort in the maimed child's sleeve and dreaming securely, Hill projects himself into the experience of that 'redeeming cruelty'. Just as Blok achieves the status of a kind of witness because of the way he responded to his times in Russia, so Hill hopes that by giving passionate attention to the suffering and integrity of other witnesses, his poetry will acquire that transcendent status.

The key words in Kocbek's poem (for us) are 'spiritual exercise'. Hill is interested in the writings of those mystics who talk about meditative prayer, about achieving union with God, and especially in the difficulties of telling true mystical experience from false, the locutions of God from those of the Devil. Mysticism is directly relevant to the issue of writing about suffering, because often it is a mystical attitude to life that sustains a person, and enables them to continue in their aspiration to good. Simone Weil explains as follows:

That is why mysticism is the only source of virtue for humanity. Because when men do not believe that there is infinite mercy behind the curtain of the world, or when they think that this mercy is in front of the curtain, they become cruel. (Weil, 1952, 100)

For Weil, the experience of forces outside the mundane enables men and women to overcome the horror of their lives: to keep their attention fixed on, and their actions oriented towards, the unattainable absolute good. The lines quoted above compel us to see a mystical element in the creation of any work of art that has a sustaining power for those experiencing injustice.

Clearly, there is a problem when we come to investigate mystical experiences, especially when we want to consider the relationship between them and the writings of people who claim to have had them. One reason why martyrs have a special status is that their suffering seems to give a validation of their integrity, and of the reality of their spiritual advancement. Derrida, in his essay 'La Parole Soufflée' quotes Artaud

expressing something perhaps quite close to Hill's opinion of the artist who does not suffer:

And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames. (Derrida, 1978, 179)

Hill's interest in this 'signalling through the flames' will be examined further in the next chapter, but here we must focus on the difficult case of writers who seem to imprint upon their writing the evidence of a mystical experience, but not primarily through suffering. Kevin Hart, in his book *The Trespass of the Sign* has investigated the links between negative theology and deconstruction, and, in his discussion of the negative theology that is so large a part of mystical experience, he sheds some light on our problem:

Our access to mystical experience is through texts and, unless we become mystics ourselves, we know of mysticism - at least in its highest reaches - vicariously, at the level of concepts. The fact that mystics frequently draw attention to their inability to represent their experiences in a satisfactory manner serves only to compound the problem: language is a medium that reveals mystical experience while simultaneously hiding it from inspection. Whether Wordsworth really did see a field of golden daffodils before composing the famous lyric should not arise in any important sense when we evaluate Wordsworth's talent as a poet. However, whether Angela of Foligno actually did hear Christ say to her 'Thou art I and I am Thou' must arise when deciding if her writings are mystical texts [...]. My point is merely that questions of experience and intention must be posed when dealing with mystical texts, but that textuality ensures that neither experience nor intention can ever be confidently recovered from texts. (Hart, 1989, 180, 181)

It is the task of the poet to bear witness to the things that happen, to create art that will sustain people through hardship. This very bearing witness to hardship is deemed a kind of mystical experience, indeed any physical suffering seems to serve this function. But when a writer claims mystical experience we have no way of judging it, and it is important since if we are to be consoled and strengthened by the vision of a poet, we must have faith in what they write. On top of this there is the danger that Blok has identified - poetic inspiration might be demonic. This question (as Hart emphasises) challenges the idea of textuality. Here we have texts which we need to categorize as evidence of 'mystical experience', but these kinds of experience seem not to be very 'textual', and yet texts convince us (somehow) that they are real.

In an attempt to investigate the relationship between language (textuality, poetry) and mystical experience, we can investigate some writers who might be taken as central to that mystical tradition.⁷ St. Teresa, in *The Interior Castle*, puts constant emphasis on the need for humility and she talks about the dangers of spiritual arrogance:

⁷Louis Martz's book *The Poetry of Meditation*, as well as Henry Hart's book on Hill have pointed the way towards Lorenzo Scupoli, St. François de Sales, St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila.

The wiles of the devil are terrible; he will run a thousand times round hell if by so doing he can make us believe that we have a single virtue which we have not. (St. Teresa, 1946, II, 262)

Lorenzo Scupoli in *Spiritual Combat* talks about the dangers of taking pride in spiritual exercises. One might interpret this as advice to remain 'self-withdrawn' - withdrawn from the exercise, but also withdrawn from the self that exercises.

For thou must know that there is little fruit in using many spiritual exercises, however excellent in themselves. Nay, this very often leads to perplexity of mind, self-love, unsteadfastness and the snares of the devil. (Scupoli, 1865, 67)

One can see the practicality Hill admires here, in the warnings against the kind of 'false mystical ecstasy' that he experienced while writing *Brand*.

The problem of telling a false mystical experience from a true one was, as Hill maintains, often investigated by the mystic writers. There is often a specific focus on the verbal nature of these experiences.⁸ St Teresa, in the chapters on the Sixth Mansions, discusses how one may tell the difference between God's locutions and those of the devil:

The fourth reason is that there is a great difference in the words themselves: in a genuine locution one single word may contain a world of meaning such as the understanding alone could never put rapidly into human language.

The fifth reason is that frequently, not only can words be heard, but, in a way which I shall never be able to explain, much more can be understood than the words themselves convey and this without any further utterance. (St. Teresa, 1946, II, 284)

Like Hill, St. Teresa recognises that it can be hard to differentiate between true mystical experience and a more damaging influence. Working on *Brand* was some species of possession (by Brand, or Ibsen), in his own writing it is only the technical problems of the work in hand that exercise Hill. The difficulty of using language, and its occasional transcendent power, is central to St. Teresa's spiritual practice and something she often reflects on in terms of her own writing:

I do not mind if I write any amount of nonsense, provided that just once in a way I can write sense, so that we may give great praise to the Lord. (St. Teresa, 1946, 249)

Hill is reluctant to write nonsense (St. Teresa rarely writes nonsense, and she was asked to write by her spiritual director for the benefit of other nuns), but he shares St. Teresa's concern about the ability of words to communicate the inner life. St. John writes about the difficulties of giving any expression to the encounter with God.

Moses, also, is an instance of the interior helplessness, that is, of the interior imaginative sense, and of the exterior at the same time: for when God spoke to him out of the bush, he not only saw that he could not speak, but as is said in the Acts of the Apostles, he 'durst not behold,' that, is with

⁸Apart from St. John's commentary on his own poems, I am thinking of the Ignatian practice of meditating on prayers one word at a time.

the interior imagination, which he considered far removed and powerless not only to form some picture of what he saw in God, but not even capable of receiving an impression thereof. (St. John, 1935, 159)

These lines from Hill's poem 'God's Little Mountain', seem to be working away at a similar problem, and could apply equally to Moses or to St John on Mount Carmel:

Now I lack grace to tell what I have seen;
For though the head frames words the tongue has none.
And who will prove the surgeon to this stone? (*NCP*, 6)

Writing anything at all about experiences like this, or their possibility, is to strain language towards the inexpressible. Perhaps, along with a direct imitation of Christ, this is barely possible. Hill's use of historical material allows him to step back from his own involvement in the discipline of mysticism, while still bringing the discipline of poetry to bear on the experiences as he finds them recorded and incarnated in the writings about, and by, these men and women. This withdrawal allows him to examine the difficulties of those ecstasies he considers true and false, and makes its reflexive comment upon the difficulty of attaining the true spiritual experience. However one should not imagine that Hill's intense critique of the mystical experience means that he is unduly sceptical, or over cautious. It is his passionate desire to believe in the transforming power of mystical contact with God that drives this area of his work. His poem in memory of Tommaso Campanella is a superb example of his ability to share imaginatively in such experiences:

Some days a shadow through
The high window shares my
Prison. I watch a slug
Scale the glinting pit-side
Of its own slime. The cries
As they come are mine; then
God's: my justice, wounds, love,
Derisive light, bread, filth.

To lie here in my strange
Flesh while glutton Torment
Sleeps, stained with its prompt food,
Is a joy past all care
Of the world, for a time.
But we are commanded
To rise, when, in silence,
I would compose my voice. (*NCP*, 66)

Campanella's relationship with God makes his imprisonment bearable, God seems to share his imprisonment and pain, and, in turn, lends Campanella the ability to transcend prison in compassion and silent composition of poetry.

Like Hill, Weil admires the fierce logicity of mysticism, which she plainly sees as a more valid mode of understanding, and disciplining of, the mind than those offered by secular life in twentieth-century capitalism.

The supreme and perfect state of mystical contemplation is something that is infinitely more mysterious still [than inspiration], and yet St. John of the Cross wrote treatises on the method of attaining to such a state, which, by their scientific precision, are far and away superior to anything produced by the psychoanalysts or professors of our own time. (Weil, 1971, 188)

That St. John was a writer, and one who used poetry as a key to his system of spiritual discipline, is clearly important to Weil. Although she published relatively little in her lifetime, her notebooks show that she was constantly engaged in the attempt to work through her ideas in writing. Her writings range from technical matters (she worked in a Renault factory for a time) to mystical themes, but she is never really abstract. In the proposition 'thought is a force and therefore its right is based solely on the extent to which it enters into material life' (Weil, 1970, 8) she suggests that writing might be a way of getting thought into the material world. A piece of writing that allows thought to take up this material forcefulness would be performing the primary function of witnessing: transforming conviction into experience.

Weil valued physical labour infused with a 'mysticism of work' above some kinds of academic endeavor, but she always made strong claims for poetry: 'workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem' (Weil, 1952, 159). Her discussion of poetic composition deserves full quotation.

A poet, in the arrangement of words and the choice of each word, must simultaneously bear in mind matters on at least five or six different planes of composition. The rules of versification - number of syllables and rhymes - in the poetic form he has chosen; the grammatical sequence of words; their logical sequence from the point of view of the development of his thought; the purely musical sequence of sounds contained in the syllables; the so-to-speak material rhythm formed by pauses, stops, duration of each syllable and of each group of syllables; the atmosphere with which each word is surrounded by the possibilities of suggestion it contains, and the transition from one atmosphere to another as fast as the words succeed each other; the psychological rhythm produced by the duration of words corresponding to such and such an atmosphere or such and such a movement of thought; the effects of repetition and novelty; doubtless other things besides; and finally a unique intuition for beauty which gives all a unity. (Weil, 1971, 216)

For Weil it is the multi-dimensional character of poetic composition that gives a poem its transcendent power, and makes it like God's creative act. Hill has interpreted this as follows

One's debt to Simone Weil is precise. Within the circumference of her 'law', lyric poetry is necessarily dramatic: indeed, the 'different planes' actually available to a director on his theatre-stage could even be regarded as an indication of what takes place 'simultaneously' in the arena of the poem.' (Hill, 1971-72, 15)

Weil's writings have clearly had a deep impact on Hill's poetic sensibility. Her feeling for the importance of the minutiae of linguistic matter when it is mobilised in a poem is strikingly close to Hill's own, and the dramatic quality she identifies seems close to the

Coleridgean 'drama of reason' in its focus on the balance and tension between different elements in the poem. What makes her poetics even more compelling is the link she directly makes between the poetic act and an imitation of God.

In a poetic fragment of the first order, all the effects, all the resonances, all the evocatory qualities capable of being summoned together by the presence of such-and-such a word in such-and-such a place correspond in an equal degree, that is to say, perfectly, to the poet's inspiration. It is the same with all the arts. It is in this way that the poet imitates God. (Weil, 1971, 284)

The story of Christ is a symbol, a metaphor. But it used to be believed that metaphors produce themselves as events in the world. God is the supreme poet. (Weil, 1970, 194)

God the poet makes His metaphor real in the world in the shape of Christ. In fact Christ's act of witness is this incarnation of metaphor, this perfect realization of inspiration. The poet may be able to imitate this God-like act in making a poem. The poem then becomes Christ-like in its perfect bearing witness. Perhaps some of the conflict we saw in the poems about Christ comes out of the difficulty for the poet who feels drawn to an imitation Christi to decide on that course above the more empowering imitation of God that writing poetry can be.

This spirituality that poetry seems to require is also present in Paul Celan. Michael Hamburger has written:

Speaking about poetry Celan quoted this definition by Malebranche: "Attention is the natural prayer of the soul." I neither know nor consider it my business to know what Celan believed. It is this quality of attention in his poems that points to a religious sensibility. (Celan, 1990, 31)

Celan's attention is not far from Hill and Mandelstam's concepts of witness. Hill's engagement with these poets⁹ shows him exploring the aspect of mystic experience and martyrdom which is vital to poetry, and which almost makes a religion of poetry. Hill does not notably share Hamburger's reticence about the actual beliefs of the writers he engages with. Indeed he is mainly interested in those writers who have given an account of their spiritual life in other terms than that of a religion of poetry. But Hill shares Celan's mistrust of language combined with a drive to redeem it, or force it into a new integrity. In this way Celan has much in common with the writers Hamburger discusses in *The Truth of Poetry*:

Extreme doubts, like his [Baudelaire's] or Valéry's, about the consistency and limits of the self led not only to an acute scepticism but to a new mysticism which Valéry called 'mysticism without God' and Hofmannsthal spoke of in his Chandos *Letter* as 'the situation of the mystic without a mystique.' Hofmannsthal also spoke of his 'word-scepticism' and his 'word-mysticism' (Hamburger, 1972, 67)

It is the experience of persecution which frees Celan and Mandelstam from the slight taint of self-indulgence that hangs over these experimenters. Although Weil's mysticism

⁹Already linked by Celan's translations of Mandelstam.

depends upon a soul which loves a God that it no longer knows to exist, that it feels rejected by, and her poetics make the same manoeuvre to bring the act of poetic creation close to the action of God, her ideas are always held within an attitude of great humility. Her focus is upon the transcendent power of a poem that echoes the incarnation of the Word as Jesus Christ. Although she sees that this logically puts the poet in the position of God, it is the extreme witness of the poem she is awed by. Although both kinds of poetic mysticism might be called mysticism without God, Weil's insists on focusing everything on the absent God, while some of these modernist poets preferred to make a religion of poetry, and Gods of themselves.

The martyrs and witnesses Hill writes of are primarily deployed in order to animate sites of uncertainty in his work. The act of bearing witness may, as we saw when looking at etymologies of witness, give added authenticity to a person's account. Alternatively there is always the danger that giving an account of oneself will seem like a fictionalization. When Hill comes to bear witness to the Jews killed by Nazis he is aware that he must guard against appropriating their suffering merely to give himself a powerful subject for poetry. His poems balance uneasily between sympathy for the Jews and a refusal to be self-righteously removed from the actions of the Nazis. This gives the poems their quality of scrupulously taking account of all the dimensions of the activity of writing about such events. Point of view is always an issue here, Hill constantly ask himself 'Where best to stand?' when contemplating these traumas. For some, martyrs are simply heretics and the documents that came out of the concentration camps do not make the events real, but undermine their historical factuality. In writing of these things, Hill asks the question - what kind of writing can bear witness forcefully and authentically to these sufferings? So his poems at once attempt to perform those acts of witness and to engage in self-judgement as to their claims to truth.

When we move to the texts of the mystics we become aware of the dangers of false mystical experience. While Hill is attracted to the discipline of these men and women he shares their suspicious attitude towards the fruits of false ecstasy. He gives an acknowledgement of the power this vexed area exerts over him, coupled with a sense that something not unlike demonic possession is a possible result of the spiritual exercise performed without humility. The case of *Brand* is illuminating as it is an occasion on which Hill felt himself freed from some of the necessary restraint he practises in his own writing. When it comes to writing poetry about this, Hill is presented with the problem that he is suggesting that his own creativity can somehow make real the difficulties surrounding these spiritual issues. This means he has to be constantly self-aware of how close his writing brings him to a true religious experience, and how far from it he remains by failing to renounce his poetic skill.