Chapter Four
Martyrdom and The Poet's Sacrifice

I think myself that the reason she [Mary] was not granted martyrdom was that she had already undergone it through witnessing the Lord's death.
(St. Teresa, 1946, vol.2, 349)
What thing in the world is most opposed to purity? The pursuit of intensity. (Weil, 1970, 7)

In the previous chapter I have argued that Hill sees poetry as essentially an act of witness. Hill thinks poetry should bear witness to the injustice and suffering that exist in temporal experience as well as to the absolute good (the lost 'kingdom of innocence and original justice') that is beyond the curtain of the world. The prolonged contemplation of suffering constitutes a kind of spiritual exercise similar to that involved in any physical suffering during which one keeps one's attention fixed lovingly on the God by whom one feels abandoned. A continual effort to bear witness should have an analogous effect to a long-term dedication to meditative prayer. The effect of this internal species of sacrificial life should be detectable in the poetry that is its result in the form of transcendent and redeeming clarity and purity. However, one must be on guard for a similar kind of inspiration, a false mystical ecstasy or demonic possession, which would confer a similar poetic power. There is always a conflict between writing and giving oneself up to meditative prayer in and for itself since to use words and write poetry necessarily diverts one from the purely passive 'waiting' for God, and even perhaps puts the poetic ego above one's devotion.

In this chapter I shall look at martyrdom, and at the way the martyr's life and death physically unites the concepts of witnessing and sacrifice. I will show that the extremity of the experiences of people who have lived under the threat of martyrdom, and have accepted that as the cost of their belief, can result in the spiritual development and humble acceptance of adversity which I touched upon in the last chapter. However, just as previously we had to consider the problems of false mystical experience, and hence false witness, here we will have to be on our guard for a kind of will-to-martyrdom that undermines the concept even more disastrously than a poet who prefers his poetic gift to total subservience to Christ. Finally, I shall attempt to relate these kinds of sacrifice to the sacrifice of the poet who hopes to gain creative power through some kind of renunciation, restraint or self-abnegation, in order to ask if this is a route to spiritual maturity and integrity. It is this context that I will examine Hill's search for what is admirable in history. The martyr, or the poet who has died for his work, is a figure that tantalizingly seems to guarantee his/her own sincerity and sanctity. For Hill these

figures are never exempt from the probing of his moral intelligence. Nevertheless, they do offer pockets of intensely lived dedication with which he wants to associate himself.

When we looked at the OED entry on ‘witness’ we discovered that it is cognate with the older Greek word 'martyr'. This suggests that originally the word did not necessarily imply violent death. The OED shows that ‘martyr’ is very similar to the English word ‘witness’ (with its origin in the verb to know) by giving us the 'Aryan root *smer- (whence skr. smar) to remember'. This suggests that martyrs remember something that has happened rather than that they simply ‘know’ something. The Greek word wants to exclude the second-hand witnessing that we looked at in the last chapter: it is a word designed for bearing witness to a personally experienced truth.

Karl Rahner makes a similar point and shows how the word might have taken on its more specific meaning during early Christian times. With its emphasis on actual personal experience, it would seem very suitable for those people who are willing to die for a belief. Dying proves that one takes one’s belief very seriously, and perhaps that it is something one has experienced personally, not just accepted in the way most occupants of the Roman Empire at this period had to accept Emperor worship, at least as a social convention:

> Although death does not belong to the original biblical content of the *martyrein*, of the *martyria*, or *martyrion*, we can find already in the New Testament the beginning of a change which, as early as the second century, led to the accepted meaning: a martyr is one who, killed by powers inimical to Christ, becomes by freely accepting a beautiful testimony, a ‘faithful witness’ to faith in Jesus Christ. Since that period, the martyr has been ‘a witness’, a witness through death. (Rahner, 1961, 90)

The martyr appears as a special kind of witness, because of his/her absolute conviction, even to the extent of dying for his/her faith. This was an important issue in the early church because apostasy led to excommunication - if one was accused of being a Christian there was the hard choice between certain physical death and threatened damnation.

I have indicated that I want to connect the idea of witnessing with that of sacrifice and to show that both ideas are embodied in the martyr. At the time of Jesus’ life, sacrifice still formed a large part of Judaic practice and among Christian Jews it would have been natural to see Jesus as the final, complete, sacrifice fulfilling the pattern of the less effective sacrifices of animals and other foods under the Mosaic Covenant.

Before we look at the clear evidence for the sacrificial status of Christ and the martyrs, I would like to establish the basic meaning and function of sacrifice. D. R. Jones stresses the meaning of the word: “*Sacrificium* is *sacrum-facere* - to make sacred. Sacrifice involves consecration.” (Sykes, 1991, 11). He goes on, quoting the work of Hubert and Mauss:

> Its unity lies in the fact that "beneath the diverse forms it takes, it always consists in one same procedure, which may be used for the most widely different purposes. *This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed*". (Sykes, 1991, 14)

We might ask why there is any need for this consecration and destruction when communicating with God.

> The holiness of God is such that there is a distance between Himself and sinful man [...] The holiness of God is that which leads sinful man to feel and exemplify a sense of alienation, of exclusion. [...] *Sacrifice is normally the indispensable means* of overcoming the alienation, but also some sort of sacrifice remains necessary to *maintain* the relationship between God and man. (Sykes 1991, 15, 16)

Why sacrifice is felt to achieve this sort of communication with God is ultimately mysterious, but it is almost universal in early human religions. Bishop F. C. N. Hicks makes a more specific explanation of Judaic sacrificial practice:

> The offering is not destroyed but transformed, sublimated, etherialised, so that it can ascend in smoke to the heaven above, the dwelling-place of God. [...] The offerer, then, makes his own approach to the presence of God: it is his own free act. He identifies himself with the victim in the pressing on its head of his hands: what happens thereafter to the animal happens symbolically to himself. He kills the animal: "the soul that sinneth, it shall die": the death is his own death, accepted by him as the consequence of sin. The life is now set free: it is for this that the death was effected: and as set free it is taken by the priest into the presence of God. The atonement - at-one-ment - has been made; and the substance of the offering, the flesh, can now be offered, and, so offered, God accepts it by His fire, and, in accepting, transforms it. In the common meal on the flesh of the victim, now that atonement has been effected, the life of the offerer has been brought before the face of God, and his offering made and accepted, God and man become at one and man finds his fellowship with man. (Hicks, 1938, 13)

Hicks here explains how the sacrificial act might atone for sin. The offering of the life of a beast in the place of one's own life goes some way towards paying the price of sin. It should be obvious already that the act of martyrdom, since it is an actual offering of one's own life, must be in some way a more acceptable sacrifice to God than that of an innocent animal. But Christ's death has a key role in this relationship between sacrifice and martyrdom.

Under the Mosaic Covenant only certain lesser sins, or accidental ones, can be atoned for by sacrifice. Even though the Jews picked out physically perfect and innocent animals, their deaths could not atone for a willed sin against God's law. The sacrificial system shows a way in which "His anger may be turned into mercy" and it gives "a definite conception of the atoning power of the life laid down, but of such power as strictly limited in its operation" (Hicks, 1938, 17). In the story of Abraham and Isaac we have a hint at what kind of sacrifice might be fully acceptable, but it is one that is impossible for

a loving God actually to demand. In the story Abraham's ability, through faith, to be prepared to kill his son is enough to bring *him* God's good-will, but it cannot finally solve the problem of sin and death. Martyrdom is a different situation because here the faithful, human victim is killed (usually) not by his own people, but by persecutors. This means that someone else takes the blame for the death and the faithful receive the benefits. The case of Christ is different since he is killed by his own people, but so powerful is his martyrdom that it can even cancel this guilt. Godfrey Ashby in *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Purpose* makes clear the relationship between earlier martyrdom and Jesus' death:

> By any definition, Jesus obviously was a martyr and his death martyrdom. The implication in some theologians, such as Rashdall (1919), was that Jesus' act should be seen as martyrdom, for his followers, with no other sacrificial connotation. Somewhat deeper is the case advanced by Downing (1963), who draws on II Macc. 7.37-8 and IV Macc 6.27-9 and 17.22 [...]. These texts show that the sufferings and deaths of certain martyrs in the intertestamental period were seen in Judaism as having an expiatory effect for the nation. Hence Jesus thinks of himself as dying for the nation, in expiation for them. (Ashby, 1988, 62).

The lines from II Maccabees are as follows:

> But I, as my brethren, give up both body and soul for the laws of our fathers, calling upon God that he may speedily become gracious [notes give alt. 'propitious'] to the nation; and that thou amidst trial and plagues mayest confess that he alone is God; and that in me and my brethren thou mayest stay the wrath of the Almighty, which hath been justly brought upon our whole race. (Apocrypha, 1926, 403)

The Maccabean martyrs thought their deaths would bring suffering on their killers, but mercy on their whole nation. They saw their deaths as being according to the sacrificial Law. Downing comments:

> It is clear then that at the time of Jesus, people thought in terms of human beings making atonement for others by means of their sufferings and death. (Downing, 1963, 284)

Downing, in looking at the Passion of Christ, focuses on the paradox that Christ is a martyr both against his nation (the Jews have Him killed) and for them. Only Judas suffers any guilt for the actual death of Christ. Perhaps this fundamental difference between His death and that of the Maccabean martyrs is a symbol of the universality of His sacrifice.

The problem we shall be addressing more directly later on is whether a martyrdom, or some other sacrifice, should be offered to anything other than the Judaeo-Christian God. Of course sacrificing to other 'Gods' is idolatry, but what is the status of an internal sacrificial life dedicated towards an ideal other than God? Is it acceptable to sacrifice oneself for poetry? According to the theologian Karl Rahner, there is an intimate

link between Christianity and martyrdom. He clearly believes that the fact of there being so many martyrs proves the spiritual truth of Christianity:

> It may be added, as history testifies, that Christianity has been very rich in such a ready-to-die fidelity to the faith, in fact, has been so much richer than any other persuasion or ideology that this spirit of martyrdom cannot be explained merely by the spiritual and moral powers native to the human heart. The spirit from above, the Holy Spirit of grace and strength, alone can account for the countless band of those who have been killed for professing Christ. (Rahner, 1961, 91)

It may be that this argument is somewhat circular. Christianity is a religion based on the self-sacrifice of Jesus. Inevitably its adherents are more likely to aspire to a similar death by martyrdom than members of religions who do not have a central self-sacrificial role-model. We could use the argument to suggest that what gives Christianity its wide appeal is its powerful mobilization of sacrificial language - any ideology which associated itself that closely whith sacrifice might be able to wield the same power. When Rahner moves on to discuss what he calls the 'super-sacramental' status of martyrdom there appears to be a grave moral problem.

> It might be asked whether the death of a martyr is in fact exempt from the general law that every moral decision, whether undertaken for oneself or for others, remains ultimately enigmatic. Was the right thing done? And even if it were the right thing, something objectively good, such as the fulfilment of a divine precept or of the Gospel counsels, can we be certain that it was motivated from within by faith and love, and that it proceeded from the grace of God, that is from motives all beyond the observation of self and others? (Rahner, 1961, 107)

Here Rahner scrupulously suggests the possibility of a misguided martyrdom. He acknowledges that there can be right or wrong within an act that seems outwardly perfect. The argument implies also that some non-Christians might live a life that was perfect, despite the technicality of not being baptized. But he soon discards this notion in favour of the magical power of execution:

> In the appearances of martyrdom, however, such a mere semblance [ie a sacrament that does not in fact achieve its intended effect] is *a priori* excluded. Wherever martyrdom is celebrated in blood, there God's grace is truly victorious in the depths of reality. One could almost say that martyrdom is the only 'supersacrament' which does not admit of an obstacle in the receiver, and in which the valid sacrament always and infallibly brings forth its fruit of eternal life. (Rahner, 1961, 111)

Rahner does not present us with an argument as to why there should be such an anomaly in a religion which otherwise emphasises the inner state of a believer over the externals of ritual.

It is interesting to place against this view that of Soren Kierkegaard when he meditates upon 'The Unhappiest Man' in *Either/Or*:

> Who is this pale figure, unsubstantial as the shadow of the dead? His name has been forgotten, many centuries have passed since his day. He was a youth, he had enthusiasm. He sought martyrdom. In imagination he saw himself nailed to the cross, and the heavens open; but the reality was too heavy for him; enthusiasm vanished, he denied his Master and himself. He wished to lift a world, but he broke down under the strain; his soul was not crushed nor annihilated, but it was broken, and his spirit was enervated, his soul palsied. Congratulate him, dear Symparanekromenoi, for he was unhappy. And yet did he not become happy? He became what he wished, a martyr, even if his martyrdom was not, as he had wished, to be nailed to the cross, nor to be thrown to wild beasts, but to be burned alive, to be slowly consumed by a slow fire. (Kierkegaard, 1971, 226)

Kierkegaard's subtle argument here is that there was something wrong with the original will to martyrdom (which is acceptable to Rahner). The man finds that what he had desired is unbearable. However, in the process of living on with the knowledge of his own failure and inadequacy his life becomes a truly humble and sacrificial one. For Kierkegaard, the true value of the religious life is that it provides one with "an ideal which can endure 'life's confusion'" (G. Pattison in Sykes, 1991, 210). Thus the young man has a truer experience of martyrdom because he has to struggle with his failure to achieve it quickly and gloriously. It is this more immediate experience of transcendence that Kierkegaard calls the poet's 'unconscious sacrifice' (as opposed to the conscious one of the religious person):

> The religious person accepts his life as a process of becoming, however painful this acceptance may be, whereas the poetic life tries to compress life into moments of intense and penetrating insight or intuition, moments which are somehow 'timeless'. (Sykes, 1991, 214)

There is a clear link here to my epigraph from Weil. The search for intensity, which characterises the poetic life, is directly opposed to purity. Thus Kierkegaard's young would-be martyr becomes essentially a poetic character after a brief intense experience: as he ages and renounces that dream he attains to a religious view of his life as a process of becoming and he comes to a true, conscious, sacrificial life. The problem with such questions is the undeniable fact of the power of sacrifice, even if misapplied. Jesus was a martyr and martyrdom operates in a similar way to sacrifice. Because Christ was the Son of God and sinless, his sacrifice is ultimately acceptable and does not need to be repeated. All that is necessary is the remembrance of, and faith in, that sacrifice that we have in the Eucharist. However, if a Christian is martyred, there will be spiritual benefits, because of the power of sacrifice, and the closer imitation of Christ that is thereby achieved. Of course a 'sacrificial life' of a less violent kind reaps spiritual benefits in this world. We must be open to the fact that sacrifice can give other kinds of rewards - for example in the field of creativity. Bishop Hicks gives an account of the rewards of a Christian sacrificial life:

> Everything and everyone, so offered, is, like Him, but by infinitely slower stages, because of our infinitely less perfect beginnings, accepted, and, in

> acceptance, transformed. That, quite apart from *a priori* Christian teaching, is a fact of daily experience. It is seen in the spiritualised face, the growing refinement and delicacy and gentleness, the growing moral strength of those who have lived obviously dedicated lives. It is seen in the unfolding of unsuspected powers of head and heart in men and women who in their early years appeared to have neither ability nor character. It is seen in the outcome of all honest and self-sacrificing work. God, here and now, reveals the new values of the life of the Kingdom of Heaven into which His servants try to enter and to bring their work. (Hicks, 1938, 339)

Hicks claims that a life of sacrifice gives many different kinds of benefits, from refining one's physical appearance to increasing one's mental powers. If these are real benefits of a sacrificial life, one can see how someone might wish to gain them out of selfish motives rather than in the service of God. Even for a genuinely humble person these gifts might bring new temptations and dilemmas over how they should be used. It is also clear that people outside a conventional Christian congregation might receive these spiritual gifts through a life of sacrifice, even if they were not technically a baptised member of a church: the rewards come from the quality of the sacrifice, not from the environment. This covers both devout people from other faiths, or with a strict personal code, and people who might live a life of some asceticism purely to gain personal powers. When these complications are introduced it seems clear that Kierkegaard's failed martyr is indeed fortunate to have been frustrated in his early attempt to achieve martyrdom, he has been delivered from temptation.

Simone Weil is a good example of a woman who led a sacrificial life, focused on Christ, while never taking the step of joining the Church. Although some felt that her refusal to be baptised came partly from a kind of intellectual arrogance, there is little doubt about the true humility of her life and the effects this had upon her thought and writing. The results of her dedication are revealed in these comments by her friend Gustav Thibon:

> I had the impression of being in the presence of an absolutely transparent soul that was ready to be re-absorbed into original light. I can still hear Simone Weil's voice in the deserted streets of Marseilles as she took me back to my hotel in the early hours of the morning; she was speaking of the Gospel; her mouth uttered thoughts as a tree gives its fruit. (McLellan, 1989, 189)

The remarks about Weil's manner of speaking about the Gospel must ring true to anyone who has read her notebooks, where the clarity of her thought and writing, even concerning abstruse spiritual problems, is most striking. The transcendent effect that a life of self-sacrifice had upon Simone Weil is movingly presented to us here, but it must raise questions about how far a person might enter into a sacrificial act in order to gain such qualities, and how far even martyrdom itself is often sought after, as a guarantee of sainthood and salvation. In the previous chapter I refered to the argument of Nathan A. Scott that poetic creativity is essentially unfulfilled meditative prayer, here we shall have

to consider why people make the choice to sacrifice themselves, what it is to which they sacrifice, and how far they are prepared to go.

Kierkegaard's illuminating opposition between 'poetic' and 'sacrificial' lives, is an incomplete model. The attitudes are connected by the fact that a sacrificial life can confer benefits that allow a person to be creative, or to attain some other 'poetic' intensity. The question is whether the relationship works the other way, does a total commitment to a 'poetic' vocation (any pursuit of intensity) ever lead to a kind of spiritual maturity that is akin to the sacrificial life? The chapter will show that in some circumstances it can do this, while stressing the fact that usually it does not. Kierkegaard's 'poetic' way of looking at life dominates our world without very often producing any spiritual benefits, and sacrificial language is used for all sorts of unholy causes. In his introduction, Sykes mentions the effect of Hitler's sacrificial rhetoric 'in his persuasion of the German people to accept economic deprivation and loss of civil liberties as the cost of national revival' on modern German ministry:

> It is openly acknowledged by contemporary German theologians that the rhetoric of sacrifice has been defiled to the point where it is unusable in normal Christian preaching. (Sykes, 1991, 2)

The pressure on people to go through with sacrificial acts in the name of Christ, human rights, or some other secular ideal, is just as powerful today as it was for the early Christians. Nadezhda Mandelstam, in her account of her husband's suffering under the Stalinist regime, makes it clear that apostasy, as in the early Christian church, now still carries the penalty of 'excommunication':

> People who had voices were subjected to the vilest of tortures: their tongues were cut out and with the stump that remained they were forced to glorify the tyrant. The desire to live is insuperable, and people accepted even this, if they could thereby prolong their physical existence. But those who survived at this price were as dead as those who perished. There is no point in mentioning names, but it is safe to say that amongst all those who continued to play the role of writers in those years, none have come forth as witnesses. They can never overcome their state of confusion, or say anything with the stumps of their tongues. (Mandelstam, 1975, 242)

In the case of one who does not make this bargain for his/her life, the physical existence is sacrificed for poetry, truth and human rights. The result of this is felt in the poetry of a true witness like Osip Mandelstam. But for those who saved their lives at the cost of their integrity, the poetic gift is forever lost. These people cannot be good witnesses again.

I want to look at the poem 'An Order of Service', and Merle Brown's criticism of it, in order to examine what benefits Hill thinks sacrifice might confer, and what dangers he thinks it holds.

> He was the surveyor of his own ice-world,

> Meticulous at the chosen extreme,
> Though what he surveyed may have been nothing.
>
> Let a man sacrifice himself, concede
> His mortality and have done with it;
> There is no end to that sublime appeal.
>
> In such a light dismiss the unappealing
> Blank of his gaze, hopelessly vigilant,
> Dazzled by renunciation's glare. (*NCP*, 56)

This poem gives us a portrait of a man who has led a sacrificial life of some kind. The results of this renunciation, though, seem totally alien to the effects that Hicks mentions, or that Weil embodied.

Merle Brown locates Hill's work in the context of the fate of the English language. He shows how the present deracinated and embattled condition of the language, once identical with the British Empire, has enabled, or even forced, some poets to write from 'a sense of one's predicament as involving alienation but also a return home' (Brown, 1980, 19). From this perspective he reads Hill as underestimating the power of asceticism in 'An Order of Service':

> Hill's poem does not even hint at the frightening power which renunciation can bestow on a man, a power exercisable not just in religion or in philosophy, but also in poetry, in science, in politics, and in literary criticism. (Brown, 1980, 25)

I think Hill's poem makes it clear that he does recognise the power that renunciation can confer. The poem depicts a man whose self-sacrifice has made him the ruler of his own self-possessed 'ice-world'. That it is an ice-world suggests that Hill is disturbed by the possibility that self-abnegation means a total loss of compassion, both towards the self, but more importantly towards others.[1] He is also suspicious of the motivations men (I follow Hill's gendered usage) might have for acquiring such power. The phrase 'Dazzled by renunciation's glare' seems to span the conflict between true renunciation and partial renunciation for the sake of personal gain. Brown's comment seems 'dazzled' by the list of areas in which renunciation might give 'a man' power. Hill suspects that the 'appeal' of this kind of renunciation and sacrifice is so 'sublime' that it appears like a form of callousness. This is why Hill encourages us to 'dismiss the unappealing/ Blank of his gaze' - the man will not make meaningful eye-contact, and his eyes are in any case blank. This is a cold, self-obsessed form of renunciation. We might compare it with the spiritual arrogance that we saw mystics warning against in the last chapter. In other words we have the same dilemma in the area of sacrifice; there is always the possibility that the martyr has sacrificed himself in order to gain power or fame, when the only way to purity

[1] Hill is fond of quoting Coleridge's remark that poetry makes us sensitive to artificial feelings and callous to real ones. This poem may be about the sacrifice involved in a life of poetic creation.

is unremittingly to banish such desires from the heart. One must renounce the fruits of renunciation. As Simone Weil once put it: 'what in the world is most opposed to purity? The pursuit of intensity' (Weil, 1970, 7).

Hugh Haughton cites a similar moment in 'Lachrimae Antiquae Novae'. The poem is as follows:

> Crucified Lord, so naked to the world,
> you live unseen within that nakedness,
> consigned by proxy to the judas-kiss
> of our devotion, bowed beneath the gold,
>
> with re-enactments, penances foretold:
> scentings of love across a wilderness
> of retrospection, wild and objectless
> longings incarnate in the carnal child.
>
> Beautiful for themselves the icons fade;
> the lion and the hermits disappear.
> Triumphalism feasts on empty dread,
>
> fulfilling triumphs of the festal year.
> We find you wounded by the token spear.
> Dominion is swallowed with your blood. (*NCP*, 138)

Haughton focuses on the last line, remarking that it contains the sense that a communicant gains temporal power from taking the Eucharist. He compares Nietzsche's acerbic re-writing of the Gospel 'he that humbleth himself wills to be exalted' (Robinson, P., 1985, 143). The poem as a whole plays on the double standards involved in religious observances. There is a nakedness that is more profound than that of the images of Christ adored by Christians - the nakedness of his final hours as a man, suffering intense pain and abandoned by the Father. This Christ is 'unseen' behind the image of a beautiful man on a cross. Our weak attempts at following his teachings are in fact a betrayal, a judas-kiss. Hill bitterly notes the ironic parody of the incarnation of Christ that is enacted whenever a human being begins acting out of lust - as if there were a spirit of 'longing' that waited to take on flesh in individuals. The difficulty is pinpointed as the poem draws to its end: icons have to be physically, earthily 'beautiful' in order to suggest heavenly perfection, it is inevitable that the spiritual rejoicing of the Church year be accompanied by feasts and triumphant celebration. The spiritual benefit of Eucharist will be misunderstood until some people believe it will confer material benefits, temporal 'dominion'.

There is a further danger that the self-sacrificing person is self-consciously trying to make his/her life into a work of art. One might consider the poems on Simeon Stylites by MacNeice and Tennyson. Tennyson stresses the appalling spiritual pride of the saint, while in 'Stylite' MacNeice disturbs our belief in Simeon's holiness by a juxtaposition with a Greek sculpture and suggests narcissism with the phrase 'curled/ Hair above the

groin' (MacNeice, 1979, 158). In 'The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian' Hill takes a hard look at the aesthetic thrill of saintliness. The problem is that pain in art seems real and real pain seems aesthetic (although perhaps only when we encounter it in works of art):

> Naked, as if for swimming, the martyr
> Catches his death in a little flutter
> Of plain arrows. A grotesque situation,
> But priceless, and harmless to the nation.
>
> Consider such pains 'crystalline': then fine art
> Persists where most crystals accumulate. (*NCP*, 40)

The martyr is not naked in the way Weil suggests a saint should be, even to the extent that he feels abandoned by God.[2] Rather he is 'Naked, as if for swimming', self-confident and enjoying himself. The death of the martyr is seen like a foolish naked dip which might give one a cold, and as a gamble of a rather insignificant kind. This is not martyrdom, but an attempt to make the self into an object of art. The ability to capture such pains will give persistence to a work of art. In this poem, art's survival seems to depend on the exploitation of suffering and the self-idolization of suffering people.

The kind of renunciation that Hill favours is perhaps embodied in T. H. Green. In Hill's essay '"Perplexed Persistence" the Exemplary Failure of T. H. Green', he shows how Green's scrupulous avoidance of 'showy' scholarship, and his desire to make his students fellow-labourers in the work of philosophy, made him seem 'cruelly inarticulate' to some hearers. This may mean to some that he did not achieve his full potential, but for Hill this is a very admirable form of 'failure', and one which irrefutably had a very profound effect on some of his students. Hill writes:

> If Green appeared to some as 'cruelly inarticulate' it can only have been through a form of vocational renunciation, an 'almost confounding humility', a decision as personal yet as formal as that of Hopkins to burn his early poems. (*LL*, 110)

Hill quotes, with great approval, the reminiscences of a student of Green's who wrote down what his lecturer was saying without understanding it and then brooded on the notes 'till light seemed to gleam from the written word'. Green's renunciation is not like that of the man who proudly demonstrates the rewards of some period of asceticism, it is more thorough-going than that. He rejected his own potential aptitude for 'showy' scholarship and teaching in order that a few students might have a rewarding experience of learning by struggling through the problems with him. As a teacher this often put him in a difficult position, as he wanted to help some of his students to express themselves, but he did not want to encourage a facility for rhetoric that would enable the bad argument to overcome the good. At times this must have seemed to some, who aspired to

[2] 'To be just it is necessary to be naked and dead - without imagination [...]. The cross alone is not open to imaginary imitation' (Weil, 1952, 79).

a Kierkegaardian 'poetic' ideal, as a wilful act of holding back his pupils. We have already seen how much Hill respects this educational endeavour.

Hill is aware that 'religious' people may appear to compromise their humility when they make the necessary attempt to define the aims and achievements of their spiritual discipline. This does not mean that he never finds a convincing power in the writings of mystics, or people who have undergone suffering. Indeed the opposite is the case. It seems to me that Henry Hart has over-estimated Hill's mistrust of these figures. Early in his book, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, Hart mentions the influence of spiritual exercises on Hill's poetry. Although often referring to this tradition, he believes Hill's divergence from them to be significant 'because these quests [of meditation] so often terminate in death or silence, Hill turns to the pastoral elegy for consolation' (Hart, 1986, 8). I would argue that Hill's turning from these figures is not so straightforward. Hart offers the following characterization of Hill's relationship with other poets and martyrs:

> Hill's poetic martyrs, however, sacrifice all forms of comfort in the attempt, so often futile, to bear witness (martyr from the Greek *martus* originally meant 'witness') to historical sins and sufferings. (Hart, 1986, 41)

Hart draws back from the more familiar meaning of martyrdom as a bearing witness to a religious belief. Some of Hill's martyrs were also led to bear witness to others' sufferings, but Hart is basically transferring Hill's activity back onto these earlier figures. It is Hill who is notoriously drawn to the sites of historical violence in his poetry. I also feel that Hart underestimates the practicality of some of the martyrs Hill considers. Producing poetry from within persecution might disrupt the criteria of futility; and the other activities of these people makes it hard to dismiss them so quickly. Southwell, for instance, spent many years working as a priest before being captured. During his work, he renounced his too-eager will-to-martyrdom in favour of ministering to the Catholic communicants. Hill is aware that there is a power which may be gained from bearing witness which transcends issues of comfort. The poem dedicated to Campanella - 'Men are a Mockery of Angels' - gives an account of how a man might be able to transcend his physical suffering and imprisonment in order to produce books between bouts of torture. Despite Hill's worry about the indulgence of 'self-wounding martyrdom', he holds firm to his basic respect for these figures. He does not consider their struggle futile even if it ends in the defeat he has described as the frequent outcome of his own struggle with language.

There is some tension when using the words 'martyr' and 'witness' to deal with declarations of belief and the violence that they call upon themselves, since belief is not the same as knowledge even when it uses a vocabulary of knowledge. The words have hung on grimly to these meanings, just as the martyrs refuse to relinquish their grip on their truth. The OED acknowledges the difficulty in connecting the idea of empirical truth with a profession of faith with its nice focus on the relativity of martyrdom:

> 1. *Eccl.* a. The specific designation of honour (connoting the highest degree of saintship) for: One who voluntarily undergoes the penalty of death for refusing to renounce the Christian faith or any article of it, for perseverance in any Christian virtue, or for obedience to any law or command of the church.
> A sect which regarded its distinctive principles as part if the Christian faith could apply the title, in this strict sense, to its own members who died under persecution, while by others the application would be repudiated, or only conceded ironically.

For a Catholic, Robert Southwell is a saint and martyr. For a Protestant, his status is less clear. Similarly, the Cathars, who were exterminated by the Church of Rome as heretics, are, from their point of view, all martyrs.[3] The problem with martyrdom that the OED highlights is that of orthodoxy. However, there is another problem in the idea of voluntary death. The dictionary is rather unclear about this. If someone is sentenced to death for refusing to renounce their beliefs, in what way is their death voluntary? It is from this haziness that I hope to draw a sharper conception of the relationship between the internal sufferings of someone bearing witness, the temporal difficulties (including death) that an uncompromising witnessing may lead to, and the more conventional martyrdom of being put to death by persecutors.

St. Robert Southwell is a figure in whom the essential features of the kind of martyrdom in which Hill is interested are united. He was a Jesuit priest and poet tortured and executed under Elizabeth I. The position of a martyr killed by a sect of his own faith has a slightly different resonance from that of a Christian killed by pagans. This circumstance brings his death closer to that of Christ, which one might characterize as a death at the hands of one's own spiritual race. My argument is that it is the internal quality of the act of witness combined with external violence that gives Hill's martyrs their special intensity. This intensity is something the Jesuit order seems to create through its use of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. Hill quotes Devlin on the impulse to martyrdom of the Jesuits:

> The Jesuit discipline, in the design of St. Ignatius, sets up an interior tension which can only be resolved by crucifixion. At the heart of it there is an element of supernatural wildness. (*LL*, 37)

For Southwell the English mission offered him an external realization of this crucifixion. And it is by living with this dual tension, the internal crucifixion and the external risk of martyrdom, that gives works like *Mary Magdalen's Funeral Tears* real compassion and beauty.

In the 'Lachrimae' sequence in *Tenebrae*, we find Hill's most sustained exploration of Christ, which then allows him to examine St. Robert Southwell. The

[3] Simone Weil often laments the destruction of Cathar culture which the Albigensian 'crusade' carried out.

overwhelming implication of the poems about Christ is Hill's inability to give himself up to the harshness of Christ's martyrdom. In some ways the human figures are more available to Hill as models, although they are also sometimes too exacting to be mimicked. The first poem, 'Lachrimae Verae', registers Hill's estrangement from Christ's sacrifice.

> Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross
> and never move. Sometimes in dreams of Hell
> the body moves but moves to no avail
> and is at one with that eternal loss.
>
> You are the castaway of drowned remorse,
> you are the world's atonement on the hill.
> This is your body twisted by our skill
> into a patience proper for redress.
>
> 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
>
> however much I pander to your name
> or answer to your lords of revenue,
> surrendering the joys that they condemn. (*NCP*, 133)

Although Christ seems to 'swim' on His cross, we cannot read this as a similar act to that of Sebastian who was 'naked as if for swimming'. Here it is the speaker's true tears that separate him from a true vision of Christ: the image swims. In this poem the speaker is unable to give full assent to Christ's message - although he agrees that Christ is 'the world's atonement on the hill' he 'cannot turn aside from what' he does. In rhyming 'skill' with his own name, Hill is suggesting that what he cannot turn aside from is his poetic practice. Although Hill often writes as if to suggest that the poetic act supports any attempt at witness, here it seems that he is more dubious; he probably has in mind Southwell's complaints that poetry was turning aside from the subject of God and becoming predominantly secular.[4] Here, at least, Hill suggests that he cannot make the renunciation of poetic technique that true devotion seems to require. The fourth poem in the sequence again takes up the forbidding sternness of the *via negativa*.

> You are the crucified who crucifies,
> self-withdrawn even from your own device,
> your trim-plugged body, wreath of rakish thorn.
>
> What grips me then, or what does my soul grasp?
> If I grasp nothing, what is there to break?
> You are beyond me, innermost true light,
>
> uttermost exile for no exile's sake,

[4] As the epigraph makes clear: 'I [...] wishe men would alter their object and better their intent'.

> king of our earth not caring to unclasp
> its void embrace, the semblance of your quiet. (*NCP*, 136)

Christ's example is hard to follow. That He withdraws from His device might refer to the cross in terms of its mechanical nature. Christ is not the inventor of the cross in the way that Hill is the inventor of his poem. Christians appropriate the instrument of His death as His symbol, but He did not choose or aesthetisize it. Christ is not accessible through the images of Christianity. He asks us to take up a cross despite His personal experience of the pain that entails, and when we find ourselves on the cross He is still not with us, still 'self-withdrawn'. 'You are beyond me, innermost true light' is a typical Hill pun,[5] bringing colloquial exasperation together with a statement of spiritual awe. And the poem moves to its close with this feeling of incomprehension, the speaker acknowledges that this light is innermost and true, but something in him is appalled by the stillness at the heart of the mystery. The loneliness of the true Christian martyr on earth echoes Christ's 'quiet' kingdom.

The second poem in the 'Tenebrae' sequence returns to this area, but here the speaker has given fuller assent to Christ (however, the dark puns of lines 3 and 4 undermine this). Here Christ protects, but his searching voice reminds us of the searching of wounds that is alluded to in 'Canticle for Good Friday'. Hill exploits the paradoxical nature of this choice to have no choice:

> As I am passionate so you with pain
> turn my desire; as you seem passionless
> so I recoil from all that I would gain,
> wounding myself upon forgetfulness,
> false ecstasies, which you in truth sustain
> as you sustain each item of your cross. (*NCP*, 160)

Here there is a greater acceptance of the path of self-abnegation that Hill sees as central to the agony of the cross. If he seems to write of it differently in successive poems, that may be because he cannot sustain the transcendent juggling act that Christ achieves here. This sleight of hand connects with the card-dealing Christ of 'The Pentecost Castle'.

> This love will see me dead
> he has the place in mind
> where I am free to die
> be true at last true love
>
> my love meet me half-way
> I bear no sword of fear
> where you dwell I
> dwell also says my lord
>
> dealing his five wounds

---

[5] cf 'Funeral Music' 8 'so we bear witness/ Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us'.

so cunning and so true
of love to rouse this death
I die to sleep in love (*NCP*, 129)

In this poem Christ is like some card-sharp (compare 'Christ the deceiver' in poem 7). The cards He deals are wounds. He claims to have no sword 'of fear'. Christ may be quibbling, meaning that there is no need to fear His sword. In this He is cunning 'and so true' (but surely Hill is hinting at the blinding scene in *King Lear* where Gloucester is cunning 'and false'). The poems suggest that actually we cannot meet Christ half-way. He tricks us into going all the way.

The ‘Lachrimae’ poem ‘Pavana Dolorosa’ includes a reworking of the epigraph to the whole sequence: these lines from Southwell's *Mary Magdalen’s Funeral Tears*: 'Passions I allow, and loves I approve, onely I would wishe that men would alter their object and better their intent'.

Loves I allow and passions I approve:
Ash-Wednesday feasts, ascetic opulence,
the wincing lute, so real in its pretence,
itself a passion amorous of love.

Self-wounding martyrdom, what joys you have,
true-torn among this fictive consonance,
music's creation of the moveless dance,
the decreation to which all must move.

Self-seeking hunter of forms, there is no end
to such pursuits. None can revoke your cry.
Your silence is an ecstasy of sound

and your nocturnals blaze upon the day.
I founder in desire for things unfound.
I stay amid the things that will not stay. (*NCP*, 137)

Hill omits Southwell's proviso 'onely I would wishe that men would alter their object and better their intent'. He also reverses the emphasis of the opening phrase so that now passion is encouraged and love merely tolerated. The paradox of the Christian festivals with their indulgence of the flesh is familiar.[6] Hill's tone is ironic. He does feel the attraction of the ceremonies of the church but he draws our attention to the real occasion for them. The indulgence should be (and often is not) of a peculiar kind: the luxury ought to be lean, the opulence ascetic. The reference to the lute recalls the title of the poem and of the sequence as a whole. Hill has been moved by the lute songs and pavans of John Dowland, and here he acknowledges the power of these pieces of artifice to embody real sorrow. The figure of the martyr is compromised by the apparently self-willed nature of his suffering and the holy joys it seems to bring with it. In the next couple of lines Hill

[6] In 'Funeral Music' 5: Christmas revelry is called 'the soul's winter sleep' and in 'Tenebrae' we have: 'our leanness is our luxury./Our love is what we love to have;/our faith is in our festivals.'

attempts to draw the martyr and the music together using Simone Weil's concept of 'decreation'. Weil wrote:

> Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated.
> Renunciation. Imitation of God's renunciation in creation. In a sense God renounces being everything. We should renounce being something. (Weil, 1952, 28, 29)

This 'decreation' is part of the experience of martyrdom, and (this poem suggests) of the creative act. Art tries to move creation towards decreation; language in poetry aspires to the abstract direct play on the emotions of music or the silent expressiveness of dance (and dance to something 'moveless'). Weil's instructions for a devout life might (if we try to give than an aesthetical interpretation) entail the belief that the poet has to renounce part of her own being for her poems to have existence. The problem is that this can all still seem self-seeking. Here the poem reminds us of 'An Order of Service' where we are told (of a man's solipsistic renunciation) 'There is no end to that sublime appeal' (*NCP*, 56). The martyrs, however, were 'true-torn' and if their self-wounding were owing to a desire for union with God it would be uncharitable to condemn them for aspiring to those spiritual joys. There is a great deal of divergence in opinion about whether martyrs feel the pain of the tortures they suffer. St. François de Sales apparently thinks they do not:

> Fire, flames, racks and swords seemed flowers and perfumes to the martyrs, because they were devout. (St. François, 1988, 24)

Simone Weil would disagree;

> The martyrs did not feel that they were separated from God, but it was another God and it was perhaps better not to be a martyr. The God from whom the martyrs drew joy in torture or death is akin to the one who was officially adopted by the Empire and afterwards imposed by means of exterminations. (Weil, 1952, 75)
> The death agony is the supreme dark night which is necessary even for the perfect if they are to attain to absolute purity, and for that reason it is better that it should be bitter. (Weil, 1952, 68)

Weil's opinion here supports my argument earlier in the chapter that a life dedicated to something other than God (it may be another God under the identical name) can confer similar gifts. Bonhoeffer, about whom we shall have more to say later, makes a very similar point in his *The Cost of Discipleship*:

> Discipleship without Jesus Christ is a way of our own choosing. It may be the ideal way, it may even lead to martyrdom, but it is devoid of all promise. Jesus will certainly reject it. (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 50)

Weil and Bonhoeffer stress that one must be directly called by Christ, and that even the call does not exempt one from feelings of alienation and physical pain. On the other hand, Weil accepts that the state of martyrdom does give one the strength to endure all

suffering, and even to desire it 'He [Christ] was enduring almost infernal suffering, but what does that detail matter?' (Weil, 1970, 157). The martyrs feel every pain. But in that utter rejection there is a paradoxical feeling of being truly with God (at least in the sense of being like Christ). Bonhoeffer makes similar points:

> I believe, for instance, that physical sufferings actual pain, and so on, are certainly to be classed as 'suffering'. We so like to stress spiritual suffering; and yet that is just what Christ is supposed to have taken from us. (Bonhoeffer, 1971a, 232)
> The acts of the early Christian martyrs are full of evidence which shows how Christ transfigures for his own the hour of their mortal agony by granting them the unspeakable assurance of his presence. (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 81)

The Southwell poem always keeps these ideas dangerously close to a self-pitying indulgence in suffering. The point of Weil's 'decreation' is that there is an end in death and a return to non-existence with God. The difficulty is registered in the last line. The poem recognises the impermanence of this world, but cannot help remaining in it. He cannot renounce the world of art while still acknowledging that art cannot completely comprehend the transcendent power of martyrdom.

Vincent Sherry, in *The Uncommon Tongue* registers his suspicion of the concept of decreation, or what he calls restraint, in the act of martyrdom and poetry alike:

> For power to be present in restraint might seem only a critical antinomy; Southwell, like other Jesuits put to the test, knew the art of equivocation. Geoffrey Hill, similarly, can delight in ambiguity for its own sake. (Sherry, 1987, 84)

The need for restraint, and even renunciation, to acquire some kind of power is not 'only a critical antinomy'. As well as a deeply impressive feature of the martyrs he admires, it is central to Hill's poetic concerns. In the critical prose he aligns himself with Pound's statement that restraint is an essential quality of the artist. The value of this behaviour in spiritual terms is well put by Simone Weil:

> Not to exercise all the power at one's disposal is to endure the void. This is contrary to all the laws of nature. Grace alone can do it. (Weil, 1952, 10)

Restraint shows the working of grace and is a proof of poetic maturity. It is a step towards the decreation Weil talks about. Southwell's 'restraint', or 'absolute reasonableness', has received a fitting tribute in Hill's 'The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell', in *The Lords of Limit*. Equivocation is another matter: it was the dilemma used in Elizabethan England by prosecutors of Catholic priests ordained abroad to swell public opinion against them. The fact that Catholic priests advised their lay protectors that they might lie when asked if there was a priest hiding in their house was used as a proof of immorality. At his trial Southwell cunningly turned the problem on his accuser with a situation where he must swear falsely or fail to stand by the Queen (the

case of a foreign invader seeking the monarch hiding under his protection). In this way Southwell relates equivocation to 'The Bloody Question' another bane of Catholic priests. This was a hypothetical situation in which the priest had to choose between his loyalty to the Pope and that to the Queen. By turning these weapons of his persecutors back upon them, Southwell emphasized the fact that he was dying for his faith, not for a political or minor ethical dispute. Sherry characterizes him as a martyr:

> In the true etymological sense: a *witness* to personal truths, an emblem whose strangeness and power are enhanced by his obdurate unpopularity, his early death, his adversity to the currents of his time. (Sherry, 1987, 204)

When he mentions torture the poet is seen as a

> Martyr, an ascetic meting out speech, as though on a rack, to redress the wrongs of the human tongue. (Sherry, 1987, 22)

Devlin's biography makes it clear that Southwell was not tortured on the rack, but was hung by the wrists. This was a worse torture than racking, and seems to have similar physiological effects to crucifixion. During ten bouts of such torture by Topcliffe Southwell did not 'mete out' speech. He was silent, not even revealing his name. This was the time for restraint, no amount of speaking to Topcliffe would have 'redressed the wrongs of the human tongue' and silence under torture was the severest test of the martyr's power. Southwell used the public occasions of his trial and execution, as well as his writings, to redress the wrongs of the human tongue.

In the poem Hill presents a very different version of Southwell's speech: he is indulgent, allowing passion and enjoying music.[7] Hill registers his awareness of the tendency of martyrdom to seem like a performance, an illusion. However much the martyrs offered themselves for sacrifice we cannot ignore the reality of their suffering. They were really tortured - 'true torn', unlike the lutes which merely wince at the emotions they are required to imitate.

In writing about martyrdom one cannot avoid the figure of Jesus Christ. He is the pattern on which all martyrdoms are modelled. Hill’s interest in martyrdom often consists of an uneasy trying out of his relationship with Christ. The Weil quotation that headed the previous chapter spoke of Christ as, above all, a witness to truth. It was His willingness to go through death, apparently abandoned by the first person of the Godhead, that made His death such an important and potent act of witness. Hill’s use of the word ‘atonement’ in poetry and criticism practically embodies his attitude to Christ’s passion. By looking at the critical disapproval he has met with over his use of ‘atonement’, and the poem ‘Lachrimae Verae’, I hope to elucidate this attitude.

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[7] Compare Sebastian Arrurruz's counterfactual 'someone I might have been: sexless, /Indulgent about art' (*NCP*, 85).

Hill has discussed the relationship between poetry and reconciliation (with language, with history, with God) through his 'radical etymology' of atonement as 'at-one-ment'. He has been criticised by Ricks for this, and Sherry has intensified the battle over the term:

> This is the same poet who elsewhere teases variant senses out of a word's past; here he resorts to a bogus etymology to express what is, nonetheless, the true faith of his experience as a writer: setting the poem at one with itself, struggling against the inherent waywardness of language, is a redemptive ordeal. (Sherry, 1987, 21)

Sherry admits that Hill's description is persuasive, and he agrees with the possibility of redeeming language through Hill's methods, but calls this etymology 'bogus'. Sherry is indebted to Ricks' essay '*Tenebrae* and At-one-ment' where Ricks claims that 'At-one-ment is simply not a word in the English Language' and goes on to write about 'Lachrimae Verae':

> There is an unbridgeable distance between 'at one' and 'atonement'. The quatrain space within the sonnet signals the distance, and so does the acknowledged difference of sound. (Ricks, 1984, 322)

Ricks doesn't offer an etymology of atonement and he mainly attacks Hill on the difference of sound in the words which he claims to be unrelated. However, it is a short step from this to Sherry's 'bogus etymology'. Hill calls it 'radical', but he means that his etymology goes to the root:

> atonement [...] in use a verbal sb. from atone, but apparently of prior formation, due to the earlier sb. *onement* and the phrase "to be atone" or "at onement"[...] the condition of being *at one* with others. (*OED*, 2nd ed.)

The problem is that the word's etymology, and Hill's use of it, is not neatly disconnected from Hill's theological conception of atonement or from his poetic uses of this word and the words 'at one'. Sherry works out the theological implications of his argument as follows:

> It would be possible, along the same line, to reprove the poet for unmaking and remaking that word out of an act of literary will rather than one of religious faith: for following a desire to believe in an idea under a poetic form - the principle of aesthetic unity in the pseudoword *at-one-ment* - that he finds impossible to accept as a doctrine and word of theology: *atonement*. (Sherry, 1987, 192)

I feel that their disagreement with Hill's etymology comes out of a misunderstanding of his tone. Hill puts his radical etymology in scare quotes (most of the time) and he is aware that it is an unfamiliar way of presenting the word typographically. However, the dictionary is in support of him, and, theologically, he seems on much steadier ground than Sherry:

> Atonement [...] The word *atonement*, which is almost the only theological term of English origin, has a curious history. The verb "atone", from the

> adverbial phrase "at one" (M.E. *at oon*), at first meant to reconcile, or make "at one". (Catholic Encyclopedia)

The word, along with its tricky etymology, is theologically sound, and indeed 'almost the only theological term of English origin'. It is not surprising that Hill should be so interested in it, especially as Sherry has conceded that the word expresses 'the true faith of his experience as a writer'. Sherry's argument that Hill is wrong about the etymology of the word he uses in his poetic credo leads him to accuse Hill of allowing his literary will to overcome faith. Hill's 'faith' and 'literary will' are not such easy things to categorize as to allow them to fit into this simple duality. If Hill simply didn't accept the theological force of 'atonement' the word would not exercise him as it does. The fact that the word atonement has such an illuminating force on poetry (the word coming together out of its parts, like the poem), and is one of the only theological words with an English origin, makes it a complex symbol for the struggle of the poet who is constantly questioning his vocation and his faith. Hill is trying out what he might call the vertical richness of the word in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' as well as in 'Lachrimae Verae'. Ricks writes about the quatrain space and the difference in sound between 'atonement' and 'at one' as if they disrupt Hill's poetic argument. I would argue that these distances and difficulties constitute his poetic argument. In this dream of Hell the speaker of the poem feels 'at one' with Christ. However, the distance is there in the first quatrain. The dreamer's body 'moves to no avail' while Christ, although immobile, is effecting 'the world's atonement'. There is some slippage between the dreamer's feeling that he shares Christ's eternal loss and the true nature of His sacrifice. The world is made one, and atoned with God, in Christ's action while the dreamer appears to be making hubristic links between his suffering and Christ's. The phrase 'castaway of drowned remorse' suggests that Christ has been flung overboard by the survivors of a shipwreck whose desire to live has drowned their remorse. Alternatively, we might interpret Christ as the sole survivor from the drowning of God's remorse. Despite the apparent absence or hard-heartedness of God, this castaway offers redemption. With the wrenching reversal of Christ's words at the last supper, 'this is your body' become the the words of the torturer, the active poet standing apart from this vision of Christ's act and handing him back his 'strange flesh.' The distances and difficulties in the strange closeness of 'at one' and 'atonement' conspire with the savage re-writing of Christ's words to point up the gulf between the poem's persona and Christ. More importantly though, Hill's poem shows that Christ's sacrifice gives him the power to bring together the elements in the words 'at one' and to forge them into a theologically potent concept of atonement, bringing Christians closer to God, and freeing them from the cost of their sins.

Although Hill pays a great deal of attention to Christ and martyrs like Southwell, he is also deeply interested in figures on the borders of the category such as Simone Weil, Charles Péguy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, T. H. Green, and even fictional ones like Ibsen's

Brand. Weil and Bonhoeffer are not martyrs in the sense that they have not been so designated by a Church. However, they are often loosely referred to as martyrs in books about them. So far we have seen that there are problems in the word martyr - especially that of point of view. One might ask, more generally, why Hill is interested in what to some people must seem a rather morbid kind of life and death. One answer to this is that Hill is often searching for something to admire, he is looking for the best of what humans have done with their lives. Sadly he finds that there is little in history that is totally admirable. For Hill, it is impressive if a human being can see beyond their own physical and emotional needs in order to work and suffer on behalf of other people, or in the hope of creating some piece of art that will comfort or enlighten other humans. Martyrs, whether religious or poetic, might approach this category of the totally admirable. Hill also has a term which he often uses to discuss lives that are only partly admirable: he writes of 'exemplary figures'. Without the sanction of a Church the (already vexed) concept of martyrdom becomes even more troubled when we apply it to the lives of people who have lived outside a church, or died for something obviously ‘secular’. Hill's use of the word exemplary is a guide to many of these problems.

For some, Weil's refusal to eat more than the rations given to French people constitutes self-destruction. To others, it is the badge of her profound integrity. Péguy was adopted as the symbol of a French fascist movement by his son Marcel and cannot be straightforwardly eulogised. Both emphasize the aspect of bearing witness, and of the value of the actions of a person under this kind of pressure. Hill talks about mysticism as 'exemplary discipline' (Haffenden, 1981, 89) and poetry as an 'exemplary exercise' (Haffenden, 1981, 99). Given the context of Spiritual Exercises (such as those of St. Ignatius) we can see how closely these descriptions impinge on each other. The major difference is that poetry makes the act of witnessing into a physical object and therefore the witnessing act more accessible to the historian. The word has other less positive overtones in the work. Although an exemplary figure may be one we wish to copy, he or she may also be someone who has been made an example of. The martyrs Hill talks about have in one sense been made examples of by the people who killed them. If we take their suffering seriously we might be justified in recoiling from that kind of act. T. H. Green is 'made an example of' by Hill in his essay '"Perplexed Persistence": The Exemplary Failure of T. H. Green'. Here Hill allows the term to be double. On the one hand, this is an essay about failure, on the other, it is about a kind of failure more worthy of respect and imitation than some kinds of success. 'The virtues of Green in particular are difficult to extricate from his shortcomings' (*LL*, 108). In *Mercian Hymns* XI there is another instance of this word:

> Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutil-ation if that
> failed. Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. (*NCP*, 103)

Here the exemplary metal is the coin itself. It should be pure silver and of the correct design. The die is also referred to, it is a pattern that forbids some kinds of imitation (forgery) while making possible others (producing coins). The other 'example' offered is a picture of Offa's administration, one which is powerful enough to produce a high-quality coinage, but which achieves this only by the practice of mutilating moneyers who attempt forgery.

In the arena of poetry, some writers have approached the status of martyrs through the harsh integrity of their lives. This is why a figure like Campanella (who 'even in his darkest hours [...] was not tempted by the solace of a martyr's death' (Campanella, 1981, 1)), because of his life-long attempts to write despite frequent imprisonment and torture becomes a fitting recipient of a Hill poem. Mandelstam also had this quality of an exemplary witness 'Mandelstam was a witness, but not a holy fool. The point of the matter - and it is altogether clear in his work - is that Mandelstam was only what he understood poetry to require' (Cohen, 1974, 19). The idea that this kind of behaviour lends a person a kinship with Christ is present in Cohen's discussion of the Christian appropriation of Mandelstam:

> I presume that Christian readers of Osip Mandelstam are not merely interested in claiming him as yet one more among the unsaved who has been granted grace, but rather as one - a most remarkable genius and a most remarkable human being - who was able from the heights and the depths to give them instruction and, as well, courage. He is made Christian for them by his example, but even for them it is more than this which makes a man Christian, whatever his witness. (Cohen, 1974, 62)

Although this is true, it does not take much more than this to make a man Christ-like, if we take Christ as the pattern of extreme witness-bearing. But Cohen’s point is valid - Mandelstam was not a Christian and if he embodied the (according to Rahner) characteristically Christian virtues of martyrdom, then we must at least entertain the possibility that this high rank of spiritual integrity is open to those following a poetic idea. In her memoir of her husband Nadezhda Mandelstam describes the difficulties of bearing witness and writing poetry under Stalin. She sees the poet’s role in recording his/her own feelings and the suffering he/she sees as essential to a fully human existence:

> Later I often wondered whether it is right to scream when you are being beaten and trampled underfoot. Isn’t it better to face one’s tormentors in a stance of satanic pride, answering them only with contemptuous silence? I decided that it is better to scream. This pitiful sound, which sometimes, goodness knows how, reaches into the remotest prison cell, is a concentrated expression of the last vestige of human dignity. It is a man’s way of leaving a trace, of telling people how he lived and died. By his screams he asserts his right to live, sends a message to the outside world demanding help and calling for resistance. If nothing else is left, one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity. (Mandelstam, 1975, 48)

The value of the scream is not only its passing on of the information it holds, but also its ability to give others strength and hope. In the passage quoted this is shown in the allusion to the carving on prison-cell walls of poems by Mandelstam. Poems created under this kind of suffering have a transcendent beauty. Kierkegaard, in a moment of sympathy for poets, makes a similar point:

> What is a poet? An unhappy man who in his heart harbours a deep anguish, but whose lips are so fashioned that the moans and cries which pass over them are transformed into ravishing music. His fate is like that of the unfortunate victims whom the tyrant Phylaris imprisoned in a brazen bull, and slowly tortured over a steady fire; their cries could not reach the tyrant's ears so as to strike terror into his heart; when they reached his ears they sounded like sweet music. (Kierkegaard, 1971, 19)

Of course the other prisoners of Stalinist Russia are not like the tyrant in this story. Their appreciation of the poems of Mandelstam owed much to the fact that they could still perceive the scream of the tortured man through the beauty of the verse, and therefore they knew they were not alone; others had endured the same and even managed to transform it into poetry.

Also of the utmost importance is that poetry is not merely the scream that Nadezhda Mandelstam speaks of as the last resort of the dying. Poetry, in her account of composition, is a difficult bearing witness to inner truth through the medium of words:

> The whole process of composition is one of straining to catch and record something compounded of harmony and sense as it is relayed from an unknown source and gradually forms itself into words. The last stage of the work consists in ridding the poem of all the words foreign to the harmonious whole which existed before the poem arose. Such words slip in by chance, being used to fill gaps during the emergence of the whole. They become lodged in the body of the poem, and removing them is hard work. This final stage is a painful process of listening in to oneself in a search for the objective and absolutely precise unity called a 'poem'. (Mandelstam, 1975, 82)

The composition of poems (which Mandelstam did orally, dictating to his wife or other amanuensis) is not an attempt to release oneself from pain, like a scream, but a prolonged brooding in the pain until one can make a poem from it that will objectively render the truth of the experience. It is very like the meditative prayer that we looked at in the previous chapter, when one attempts to love God whilst feeling abandoned by him. That the writing of poems is related to this kind of spiritual meditation is revealed when Nadezhda Mandelstam speaks of trying to write an ode to Stalin:

> To write an ode to Stalin it was necessary to get in tune, like a musical instrument, by deliberately giving way to the general hypnosis and putting oneself under the spell of the liturgy which in those days blotted out all human voices. Without this, a real poet could never compose such a thing. (Mandelstam, 1975, 243)

Nadezhda Mandelstam uses the words 'hypnosis' and 'liturgy' to describe the betrayal of the self that would be required in writing a poem to Stalin. We might compare what she says with Hill's experience while writing *Brand*. It would be a false mystical ecstasy, as opposed to the true kind that one finds in the work of a poet bearing truthful witness. The example of Mandelstam proves that one can attain a spiritual integrity through writing poetry of witness-bearing. This is why he is an exemplary figure for Hill.

This more troubling side to the idea of exemplary behaviour comes across in things Hill has said of Berryman and Lowell. Hill makes the following comment in a review of Haffenden's *Life of John Berryman*

> We possibly need to know something of Berryman's traumas in childhood and obsessions in adult life, as we need to know something of Lowell's, because each figure is, in a negative as well as a positive sense, an exemplary figure. (Hill, 1984b, 263)

Hill's concern is that these poets occasionally let themselves down 'at the point where extraordinary technical alertness and ordinary callousness conjoin and conspire within the destinies of the language itself' (Hill, 1984b, 268). These poets, since they have not suffered like Celan, or Mandelstam, are not free from the possibility of 'ordinary callousness'. This is the basic dilemma we have sketched out before. Is the poet more interested in becoming some touchy Jehovah or in creating a poem that is Christ-like in its quality of witness? If it is the second of these then there may be something in the poet's life and work that we can reflect on and aspire to imitate. We can use their example as a way of defining our own aspiration. Hill selects these admirable figures and attempts to place himself in their ranks through his poetry of witness.

I wish to move on now to discuss two figures who led lives of Christian self-sacrifice, although forced to stay outside the church by conscience. The relationship that Weil and Péguy had with the Church of Rome was made very much more intense, than that of most Catholics, because of their estrangement from it. For both of them the fact that they remained outside while believing in Christ so intensely, creates parallels with Jesus' feeling of rejection by God. In all humility, they developed theories of Christianity that emphasised suffering in rejection, something they both experienced in their personal lives as well as in their relationship with God.

When Weil talks about Christ's witness she always emphasises the element of rejection, the agony in the garden and the cry 'Father, why hast thou forsaken me?'. Weil locates the essential part of Christianity in Christ's rejection. Saints and martyrs who do not share this sense are therefore fundamentally flawed. One of Weil's most moving attempts at characterizing her desire with regard to God comes in this passage from *First and Last Notebooks*.

> For the privilege of finding myself before I die in a state perfectly similar to Christ's when he said, on the cross: "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" -

> for that privilege I would willingly renounce everything that is called Paradise.
>
> Because all his desire was entirely directed towards God, and therefore he perfectly possessed God.
>
> He was enduring almost infernal suffering, but what does that detail matter? (Weil, 1970, 157)

Weil's Christianity is of a paradoxical kind. She wants to imitate Christ so completely that she even seems to be rejecting His promise of Heaven (actually she is rejecting the day-dream heaven of less exacting Christians). If this seems arrogant,[8] we must place it within her vision of humility's power 'Humility is the root of love./ Humility exerts an irresistible power upon God' (Weil, 1970, 97). Her confidence is not in her own virtue (the notebooks show this most clearly) but in the power of humility.

Weil's admiration for Christ centres on His willing renunciation of power when asked to face death. For Weil, the absolute good is purely to love, any use of force is alien to it. For Péguy, Joan of Arc shares this quality with Christ:

> Never have the words of Jesus: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father and He shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then are the Scriptures to be fulfilled, that thus it must be?" never have they been so fully accomplished in a saint, and here we meet again with this vocation. This unique election, this unique imitation by which one can say that of all the saints, she it was to whom certainly it was given that her life and her Passion and her death should most closely imitate the life and the Passion and the death of Jesus. (Péguy, 1947, 173)

For Péguy, as for Weil, the overwhelming fact of Christ's life was this unrelenting renunciation of power. In this sense, any extreme act of witness is an 'imitation of Christ'.

The martyrs could not die for our sins as effectively as a sin-free Christ, but in feeling abandoned by God and being out of place amongst their peers, they truly imitate Him. Jesus was killed by members of his own spiritual race, and therefore also in temporal rejection. Death at the hands of one's own, abandoned by God, bearing witness to some kind of truth - this is the essence of martyrdom. And fear of the reverse (spiritual pride and aestheticising the experience) is the core of much of the mystical tradition. To anticipate a little, I will quote Péguy on Joan of Arc and Christ.

> To make war on the enemy is the first degree of trial, but to make war on one's brothers, on those of one's own spiritual race, this is the second [...]. St. Joan and indeed Christ are of the other order [not saints of Glory], that is of the order of the saints of suffering and of ingratitude. (Villiers, 1965, 360)

Péguy makes it clear that the people he most admires are not the glorious martyrs and saints who fought for God amongst Pagans, but Christ and Joan of Arc, who raged in the midst of their spiritual brothers, and were killed by them.

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[8] Compare Madame Gervaise's horrified feeling in Péguy's *Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc* that Joan wants to save better than Christ.

Hill brings this flexibility to his account of his admiration for Péguy's inflexible integrity. The subject of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, a poem which is described by Hill as 'my homage to the triumph of his "defeat".' (*CP, 207*), qualifies superbly to be one of Hill's exemplary figures, as Halévy's hagiography (it is hard to put it in another genré) makes clear. Like Weil and Bonhoeffer he chose a path which brought him death because of his own principles. This feature brings them closer to the pattern of Christ's death. Although Christ, like his martyrs, was killed by people who had theological differences with him, in a deeper sense He was an aspect of God choosing incarnation and death in rejection on behalf of truth and mankind. In this sense Péguy, Weil and Bonhoeffer are more Christ-like than some conventional Christian martyrs like St. Sebastian.

To some Péguy was a failure, but that itself is an almost essential qualification for being one of Hill's martyrs. Péguy himself had developed a similar attitude.

> He already had, and it was to develop with the years, a veritable mystique of failure; as if failure, in the artificiality of modern times, constituted a guarantee of purity. (Jussem-Wilson, 1965, 21)

In his own evaluation of Joan of Arc Péguy has this to say

> That is [...] why she was the greatest saint and martyr. Perhaps one should say that she was a saint of the second degree, and a martyr of the second degree. For it is in the heart of Christianity itself that she came across the points where she had to stand out, or to fight, or where honour was in question, or sanctity, or martyrdom. (Halévy, 1946, 206)

Péguy's position outside Catholic communion makes him clearly one of the more modern 'martyrs' of the type we discussed in the cases of Weil and Bonhoeffer. Indeed his estrangement was in some ways more complete. His vicious arguments with his fellow socialists, Dreyfusards, Frenchmen and Christians make him very like the version of Jeanne d'Arc that he has drawn for us.

Of course, when we start to compare Péguy’s own life and possible martyrdom with that of Joan of Arc, whom he may have created somewhat in his own image, the problem that we saw in Christ’s self-declaration as Messiah rise again. Jeffrey Wainwright has translated Péguy's *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*. This fact alone must convince us of his serious commitment to the figures Hill is also interested in. His discussion of Péguy is intricate, and he shows an awareness of the problems of this man's spiritual integrity:

> Faced with a figure like Péguy, with his stubborn commitment to absolutes, his vulnerability and worldly defeat and self-defeat, we are eager to bestow the cachet of martyrdom. The idea of eventual, transcendent victory in the realm of 'higher things' consoles and provides meaning for his life. But this consolation is suspect, the righteousness of martyrs is exposed and even Christ's salute is unlooked for. (Robinson, P., 1985, 109)

Péguy has been used by fascists as a rallying figure, and he also has been made into a saint by his more liberal admirers. Wainwright suspects that Péguy's right-wing credentials subvert his claim to any kind of saintliness. Righteousness can easily become self-righteousness; the hoped-for consolation can become hubristic self-assurance. However, Hill is wary of talking about the eternal rewards of his witnesses. When he speaks of Péguy it is not in terms of his glory in heaven, but of the impressive (if sometimes wolfish) integrity of his life. By comparison, Wainwright seems too eager to talk about defeat and victory. Péguy might have been self-defeated, but the reflexivity of the phrase makes him also self-victorious, and so perhaps his life was a success. Péguy remained self-excommunicate from the church; it is uncharitable to think of him as a man outrageously certain of his own salvation.[9] Wainwright's insinuation that Péguy's witness is dubious comes from his own suggestion that martyrdom is a prize ('we are eager to bestow the cachet of martyrdom'). Péguy's own life and Hill's poems about him do not make this sort of manoeuvre. The task of distinguishing true from false should be clouded as little as possible by such intrusions. It is the awkward integrity of Péguy's life which allows it to have this effect: 'He was faced with a problem, well, that problem should become his life'. (Halévy, 1946, 133).

Péguy's self-excommunication was very far-reaching. He got himself in trouble with Rome due to his support of Bergson, but he was also in a personal dilemma:

> So now he was impelled to take his stand and work and believe and hope, clinging as best he might to his perilous high ledge between a household where he was no longer really at home and a church he remained outside. (Halévy, 1946, 136)

He had returned to the Church personally, but his wife and family refused to be baptised, so Péguy found himself in this odd limbo. The ability to take one's stand in such a position and to put it into words is something Hill admires. Of course Péguy's problem was not that he could not attend Mass himself (that could have been arranged with some compromises) rather it was his refusal to believe in damnation that was at the root of the quarrel. Just as Joan of Arc wanted to save the damned, Péguy also wanted to make Hell impossible for his unbaptised children (as well as for all beings). Péguy took his stand, although it meant defeat, because he could not bear to put himself apart from those whom the church called damned.

Péguy commands Hill's respect because, unlike 'Ovid', he is not able to contemplate the fact that the damned 'harmonize strangely with the divine love'. The speaker of 'Annunciations 2' attempted to hold his balance in a similar dilemma:

> Our God scatters corruption. Priests, martyrs,
> Parade to this imperious theme: 'O Love,
> You know what pains succeed; be vigilant; strive
> To recognize the damned among your friends.' (*NCP*, 51)

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[9] Although Péguy often strongly argued his disbelief in damnation.

From this paradox we have moved to that of Péguy and Simone Weil, neither of whom are priests or martyrs in the conventional sense. One feels rejected by God, one sees this as an essential part of the experience of the Cross, one cannot bear the idea of a God who condemns. Positioning oneself in this uneasy position of closeness to, and difference from, (Catholic) orthodoxy and writing from that experience is what constitutes for Hill a supreme act of witness. It is in many respects the same position as that of the poet who feels he is working with a fallen language which he nevertheless must trust and use in his attempt to 'redeem the time': to bear witness to the spiritual and poetic truths by which he lives. In both cases the violence suffered is largely internal due to the difficulty of living in an era when one's ideas are ignored or slighted. These conditions and this attitude of spirit are the essential constituents which, when joined with the persistent attempt to write responsibly, form poems which are acts of witness.

Hill uses these ideas to analyse to what extent the martyr is culpable who makes him/herself a work of art. At the same time he recognises, in the lives and deaths of some of his exemplary figures, a self-abnegation that embodies most of the qualities of martyrdom. The poems test out the relationship between the poet who gives up everything for his/her writing and those who have made an ultimate sacrifice for God. Paradoxically the martyrs who made themselves into works of art at their deaths are in many ways less admirable to Hill than those writers who have suffered on behalf of their work. It is also a sign of the growing secularization of our age that the true martyrs are outside the church, and perhaps have to separate themselves from a church, as we shall see Bonhoeffer did, in order to bear witness truthfully.

Hill's attitude towards sacrificial figures is fluid within the different uses of the word 'exemplary'. It is able to combine his awed respect for the medieval mystic, his concern at the conjunction of beauty in coinage with aggressive politics, his generous criticism of Green, and his more scathing judgements of Lowell and Berryman. He would not be interested in Brand or Offa if there were not some aspects of their lives which he found worthy of imitation. Hill manages to bring this concept of limited approval to issues which have led his figures into disastrous acts of suffering. By the very flexibility of his respect he undermines the possibility of sympathy with the 'All or Nothing' of a man like Brand, and suggests the ability to renounce even one’s own theological convictions that Bonhoeffer demonstrated.

This exploration of the vital truth-quality of experience through the familiar figures of historical saints and martyrs gives Hill the chance to withdraw and analyse while still exploring his own passionate involvement with the issue. The double remove of Brand's fictionality and the fact that the work was commissioned provided a unique situation where Hill could immerse himself in a false mystical ecstasy, and all the time

watch himself in this state, as he struggled to give voice to Brand's fictional but genuine spiritual struggle.

Through Hill's poetic career we can see a continuum between those figures who are sought out and killed by the orthodox groups which they are resistant to and those who in some way seek out their own destruction. Brand is a figure who seems to be led to his death by an internal logic of resistance and refusal of compromise, despite his secure position as a member of the (unpersecuted) priesthood. We can see here a version of the disaffection that led Weil, Bonhoeffer and Péguy to their stern deaths.

Hill's poetry operates on the premise that writing from and about a position of scrupulous witness can have a real force upon the world. Brand encourages people to believe that acts of witness have an effect. The duty to bear witness that we find in Leviticus really does lead to a larger communal knowledge and reinforces people's faith in God (and in themselves):

> Spokesman: Why, sir, if you drown
> destiny in a tarn,
> it's not lost, you know!
> Come what may,
> it'll reach the sea
> as rain or dew.
> Brand*(Staring at him):*
> How do you know that?
> Spokesman: You taught us it, (Ibsen, 1978, 32)[10]

Here, when Brand is tempted to be a foreign missionary (as Southwell also planned, before deciding to return to England), he is reminded that any act of witness-bearing (here thought of in terms of acting out destiny) is never lost but finds its way out into the world. Brand's startled recognition shows his commitment to the idea, he doesn't ask 'Why do you think that?' but 'How do you know that?'.[11]

At an earlier point in the play Brand seems to think martyrdom is purely symbolic, a matter of being in the right place at the right time. Here Brand is trying to convince a peasant to accompany him across the ice, the peasant worries that if he leaves the priest to his death

> Peasant: I'd soon be up in court
> accused of God knows what.
> Brand: A martyr in his cause.
> Peasant: And that's not worth a curse! (Ibsen, 1978, 3f)

Does Brand mean that the peasant would be a martyr for being wrongly accused of his death? This is suspect because the peasant would only be bearing witness in a very

[10] Throughout this chapter I refer to the first edition of Hill's *Brand*. In the chapter on translation I look at the changes made in the recent Penguin Classics version.

[11] Although we could read the line as a plea from Brand for some kind of proof for the statement.

passive way, allowing Brand to do what he wants. Perhaps we could read Brand's line as referring to himself: if he died on the ice on his way to a dying woman he would be a martyr. This idea returns in the scene where he and Agnes cross the stormy fjord, but at this moment Brand's ideas about martyrdom seem wild, too eager for martyr status. Only later does he come to realize the value of exemplary behaviour:

> Spokesman: You practise what you preach,
> you do and that's a fact.
> Brand: You mean ...
> Spokesman: Sir, one brave act
> is better than fine talk. (Ibsen, 1978, 30)

The man is impressed because Brand's actions follow from his words. Throughout the play Brand is constrained by his own rhetoric. We are often forced to ask if it is his faith or an uncompromising acting out of his own powerful eloquence, that leads him through crisis. He has pledged himself to 'All or Nothing' so when someone responds to him in this way he cannot resist. This is the basic 'integrity' which leads him to ignore his mother, sacrifice his child and Agnes. The sense of martyrdom that Brand grows into is more harrowing than the suggestion given in the early lines quoted above:

> Merely to perish on the cross,
> or to writhe in the flame,
> daily to be buried alive,
> this is not martyrdom.
> But to make a burnt-offering
> out of the suffering,
> to ordain the anguish
> of our spirit and our flesh,
> that is salvation, there we seize
> hold of martyrdom's prize! (Ibsen, 1978, 56f)

This is reminiscent of something Hill has said: 'Martyrdom is an act of witness; not every person who is killed unjustly is necessarily witnessing' (Haffenden, 1981, 90).[12] What seems wrong with Brand's version is its lack of sympathy and its arrogance. Brand is too glib with his 'Merely'. It is impossible to read the words 'burnt offering' in this kind of context without thinking of the Holocaust. The word refers to the sacrificial burning of animals. When used of the murder of the Jews it appears dubious, as if we are investing the Nazis' program with this religious significance. These lines bring out strongly the alternative reading of the word. The Jews (and those others who bear witness to their suffering) have made their suffering into this offering. They have sanctified the slaughter. The focus on the prize, which he wishes to seize, is at odds with the true

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[12] 'To die for God is not a proof of faith in God. To die for an unknown and repulsive convict who is a victim of injustice, that is a proof of faith in God.' (Weil, 1970, 144).

renunciation he otherwise proclaims. While Hill in his poetry is ever at pains to avoid making great claims for renunciation, Brand seems unguarded.

Another difficulty with Brand is the way he forces his family to try to live up to his self-demands. They cannot and so they die. Of course, Brand suffers in his attempt to be true to himself, but his vision is entirely self-centred. He does not accept that other people may have a different way to his. He talks of

> Man's true Way-of-the-Cross
> which is: wholly to be
> the all-enduring 'I'. (Ibsen, 1978, 12)[13]

For Brand, trying to 'be' wholly and being himself are in constant conflict. Being wholly includes love and (most would say) sympathy and compromise with the needs of those one loves. Being truly Brand means only being 'I', a path of unmistakable suffering and power, but one which is at odds with communal living.

This is a little too hard on Brand. He does give people the choice, and warns Agnes

> And when you chose, be sure.
> For, choosing, you are chosen. (Ibsen, 1978, 49)

She knows 'All or Nothing' is Brand's demand. What makes the issue murky is Brand's rhetorical power. When Agnes first meets Brand she says 'When that man spoke/he burned!' (Ibsen, 1978, 15). Aside from the man's obvious personal sincerity there is a suggestion of the Pentecostal tongues of flame which accompanied the gift of tongues. We might also see a suggestion of Agnes' sexual attraction to Brand. Later in the play she says

> Brand, when I weaken
> when I flinch from the task,
> speak then as you have spoken
> now. That much I do ask. (Ibsen, 1978, 57)

It is difficult to say whether Agnes is affected more by the power of Brand's words than by his faith. What Brand doesn't realize is that the choices he and other people make are not always from pure motives. Agnes's strength comes partly from her vulnerability to Brand's linguistic power. Brand's power with words amounts to an incarnation of his power of will. The fact that he, through his words and deeds, can purify his, and other people's, will is at the heart of the play's action:

> It is not raucous fame
> that redeems the time.
> It is the Will alone
> that can purge and refine,

[13] This seems quite strange and the opposite to Weil's concept of decreation.

> that alone has power
> to make or mar
> what we do, whether our work
> be famed or not. (Ibsen, 1978, 47)

The Eliotic imperative 'Redeem the time' sits together with a version of 'Let us therefore make pure our will'. Rejecting fame, Brand affirms his belief in the transformational power of work which expresses pure Will. In the terms of the play as a verbal object this means that redeeming the time takes place in words, and the absence of reaction of mass culture is not relevant. But the fact that 'fame' returns at the end of this speech shows how concerned he is with how people see him. Although dedicated to his own way, he wants to be an example to others. Much of the time it is hard to tell if Brand is shamed into action by the words of his fellow-men, or whether he is being true to himself. His awareness that the power of will can 'make or mar' (with the rhyme mar/power reinforcing the negative possibility) leads him to his attempt to purge himself before he can 'purge and refine' time.

After building the church he sees his own folly in trying to impress God. This leads him to his final moment of self-doubt and death in the avalanche where we cannot help feeling he is closer than ever to grace. This can hardly resolve our reservations about the extravagant demands Brand's God makes, but it brings us close to Christ's agony in the garden. This moment is central, for Brand, to the story of Christ, he says:

> When Christ prayed
> 'Lord, take away this cup',
> shivering in his sweat,
> what answer did he get?
> None. Christ had to drain
> The terror and the pain
> and taste the dregs. (Ibsen, 1978, 53f)

Brand approaches this moment when he is facing his death, calling on God for answers to the problem of the validity of his life's struggle. The disembodied voice replying that we die to prove 'he is the God of Love' probably goes unheard by Brand. His death in doubt and rejection is a true fictive martyrdom.

Brand is a text that seems to demonstrate the power that being a witness bestows upon a man. However, the play is problematized by Hill's statement about writing. It is a state of false mystical ecstasy. Its usefulness lies in its closeness to the other kinds of witness that Hill engages with. That the other figures Hill writes about are historical, not merely intertextual or fictional, makes their versions of witnessing in some ways less accessible,[14] but also more fruitful as we can see the ways in which their actual encounters with history modified, or bore out, their ideas.

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[14] It would be culpable to amplify the Kierkegaardian element in a human being's ideas of witness, although it seems fair for Hill to do this in *Brand*.

Having looked at a fictional priest struggling with the clash between his personal beliefs and his social commitments, I would now like to turn, in conclusion of the chapter, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a priest who faced dilemmas of a more public kind, but as challenging for his spiritual integrity as those personal choices Brand had to make. As a real man trying to be a true Christian in Nazi Germany he offers a kind of anti-type to Hill's Ovid. He was a German theologian who encountered the problems of Christian witnessing in an age which he saw as increasingly Godless. For Bonhoeffer, this meant advocating a kind of Christianity that might appeal to a secular society. Bonhoeffer's internal dedication to truth meant that he returned to Germany to be with his people during the horror of Nazism, and he felt forced to rewrite his theology, and his self, in order to oppose Hitler's regime. He found, in the person of Christ, a kind of bearing witness that put into question the validity of the mediaeval tradition of the Imitation of Christ. Early in his career Bonhoeffer followed Luther in his mistrust of a spiritual hierarchism which he saw as the necessary result of monasticism.

> Monasticism had transformed the humble work of discipleship into the meritorious activity of the saints, and the self-renunciation of discipleship into the flagrant spiritual self-assertion of the 'religious'. (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 39)

This aversion to the dangers he saw in a self-seeking religiosity lead him to formulate a very minimalist vision of discipleship.

> To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 49)

Bonhoeffer's resistance to the Christian taking an active role in his faith is the key-note of much of the early writing. He has no time for those who attempt to take up the cross by an act of will. 'Discipleship without Jesus Christ is a way of our own choosing. It may be the ideal way. It may even lead to martyrdom, but it is devoid of all promise. Jesus will certainly reject it' (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 50). This willed martyrdom seems quite close to Brand's. If we were to analyse Brand's life from this perspective we might call it devoid of all promise. Bonhoeffer applied this doctrine to the role of the Church (or individual Christians) in politics - specifically when resisting evil.

> The only way to overcome evil is to let it run itself to a standstill because it does not find the resistance it is looking for.
> There is no deed on earth so outrageous as to justify a different attitude. The worse the evil, the readier must the Christian be to suffer; he must let the evil person fall into Jesus's hands. (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 127, 128)[15]

These statements are clearly in line with the Gospels. But they are also very absolute, as if Bonhoeffer has given up his ideal of just obeying Christ and has decided for himself

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[15] 'To suffer evil is the only way of destroying it.' (Weil, 1970, 218).

what discipleship is. There is in fact a tension between his theology of yielding to Christ's call and the act of propounding that theology. Events forced him to renounce these earlier ideas and to engage in violent resistance to the Nazis. In effect, he excommunicated himself from the Confessing Church (who could not openly pray for him when he was in prison) by turning against his earlier pronouncement. Paradoxically, going against his formulation of discipleship means he is more fully following Christ (no-one reading the papers from prison could doubt this). He wrote earlier in *The Cost of Discipleship* that enduring the cross 'is not suffering *per se* but suffering-and-rejection, and not rejection for any cause or conviction of our own, but rejection for the sake of Christ' (Bonhoeffer, 1971b, 78). In a sense, Bonhoeffer suffered because he could not bear the injustices Hitler was carrying out. He was acting on his conviction, but the essence of rejection for Bonhoeffer is that he had to estrange himself from his opposition to violence and his intellectual conception of Christianity and just do what he must.

When we look at some lines he wrote in prison in Berlin Bonhoeffer has moved towards a position more sympathetic to Brand's dilemma.

> At first I wondered a good deal whether it was really for the cause of Christ that I was causing you all such grief; but I soon put that out of my head as a temptation, as I became certain that the duty had been laid on me to hold out in this boundary situation with all its problems; (Bonhoeffer, 1971a, 129)

Bonhoeffer's concept and experience of discipleship, reacting to the horror of Nazism (a crisis he refused to ignore, or leave to Jesus), informs my account of Hill's interest in witness. It also crystallizes in this poem:

> 'CHRISTMAS TREES'
>
> Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell
> bleached by the flares' candescent fall,
> pacing out his own citadel,
>
> restores the broken themes of praise,
> encourages our borrowed days,
> by logic of his sacrifice.
>
> Against wild reasons of the state
> his words are quiet but not too quiet.
> We hear too late or not too late. (*NCP*, 159)

The title and the second line suggest Bonhoeffer's physical position in Tegel Prison, Berlin. He was up on the top floor at first, from where he had a fine view of the Allied bombing raids. He wrote '"Christmas Trees", the flares that the leading aircraft drops' (Bonhoeffer, 1971a, 146). Another reference to a Christmas tree comes later in the *Letters and Papers from Prison*, where we are told that Maria von Wedermeyer-Weller, his

fiancée, had brought one to the prison, where it was set up in the guard-room (Bonhoeffer, 1971a, 416).[16] Bonhoeffer was, of course, never to marry Maria and never to spend another Christmas in liberty. Hill's poem suggests the personal sacrifice Bonhoeffer made while also affirming that his cell was 'skylit' and offered a vision of the flares of the leading aircraft. In turning his cell into a citadel, Bonhoeffer does not lose sight of the example of Christ. The suggestion that Bonhoeffer is bleached by the flares is more complicated. Is Bonhoeffer weakened by this experience, does it make his faith less vigorous? One could not say he was 'bleached' in this way, having read his papers and letters. The experience of watching the air-raids made him fearful for the lives of his parents and for those of his fellow prisoners.[17] Perhaps Hill is suggesting that Bonhoeffer was purified by the experience of imprisonment. It is his suffering, and his engagement with that of others that allowed him to 'restore the broken themes of praise'. The idea that one can repair the quality of prayer through suffering and bearing witness in writing to that suffering has a clear link to Hill's interest in redeeming fallen language through poetry. Bonhoeffer articulated the connection in resonant terms when he wrote (of Liebnitz's attempt to create a universal language): 'It was an expression of his wish to heal the world, which was then so torn to pieces, a philosophical reflection on the Pentecost story' (Bonhoeffer, 1971a, 53).

Hill carefully balances the word 'logic' with 'wild reasons of the state'. Bonhoeffer's paradoxical logic of sacrifice is in conflict with the wild reason of Nazism (its 'raison d'etat'), as well as with itself since he was forced partly to sacrifice his doctrine of discipleship in taking up arms against Hitler. Hill's worry that his words may be too quiet and that we have not heard in time is partly a worry that history is always behindhand. Maybe a poem is able to transcend the problem of historical time and make us feel ourselves in the moment with Bonhoeffer. As in his Holocaust poetry, Hill is wary of appropriating the sufferings of others to make art for himself. This has to be balanced with his desire to be a poetic witness. If the poem is not too quiet it should show us the passionate struggle between the Logos and reason which was going on within Bonhoeffer as well as between him and the State. A person writing in the midst of these kinds of tension will produce work of a transcendent quality, the writing will take on the quality of witness.

The material we have looked at in this chapter suggests that sacrifice and renunciation are powerful attitudes that can reap benefits. However, the overwhelming evidence seems to be that it is misguided to use the power of sacrifice for one’s own personal ends. In fact it is only in an exceptional case, like that of Mandelstam, that a ‘poetic’ vocation is worthy of the self-sacrifice that the Christian God demands. For Hill,

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[16] Maria von Wedermeyer-Weller did not allow Bonhoeffer's letters to her to be published; she supplies this information in an essay included as an appendix to the book.

[17] Tegel, it seems, was particularly badly-prepared for air-raids.

this means that one should make sacrifices of the self to that ‘absolute good’ (Weil’s term) and accept the gifts one may receive with humility. As a poet who has not made this total commitment, but is perhaps more similar to T. H. Green - making renunciations out of a sophisticated moral awareness of the effects of his work, without finally giving himself up to God - Hill must face the dilemma that he may be slipping into a kind of false religious experience in writing his own poetry, similar to that he experienced while writing *Brand*. Hill’s method of avoiding this is to hold as closely as he can, without the pressure of persecution, to the principles he sees behind Mandelstam’s life and work - bearing witness to human suffering, and attempting to make totally honest and self-aware poetry out of this act of witness.

Hill's encounter with these figures allows him to test out another problem. To what extent is history, in Péguy's phrase, always 'behindhand'. Can we have any relationship of immediacy with figures from the past? Hill sees this question in very similar terms to the problems about true and false mystical experience. Hill believes that, through poetry, we can have access to the past in an immediate and enlightening way. The figures of extreme witness that he writes about seem to give Hill a route into history that allows this transcendent quality to infuse his work. The image of Veronica's handkerchief taking the image of Christ's face while Clio is unable to find Him amongst her 'traces' can be applied to Hill's work. Although he is scholarly in his researches it is this moment of transcendence that he seeks. He has the discipline of the mystic, but he is aware of the dangers of spiritual pride. The transcendent moment must come from without. It is in the figures that manifest this transcendence that Hill analyses the authenticity of true mystical experience. This austere, and self-questioning, attentiveness to the past enables him to create regions in which he can investigate the possibilities of an authentic and immediate contact with the past, as well as sounding out the paradox of attempting to find a transcendent experience through perfection of technique. Hill appears, to some of his critics, to be engaging in nostalgia. I would go along with Hill’s statement that he is ‘drawing the graph of nostaligia’, but also suggest that he is testing out the possibilities of finding powerful experience in a passionate encounter with the past, avoiding the sterility of nostalgia or the behindhand nature of history.