Chapter Five

Poetry and History

Many of Hill's critics have remarked upon the intensity with which his poetry engages with the past. Beyond this consensus, there is little agreement. This chapter will show that Hill seeks to make the past real by combining scholarly historical research into, and sympathetic engagement with, the lives of historical individuals. This attempt is predicated upon Hill's belief that our spiritual and imaginative experiences constitute a valid mode in which to relate to the past. The reason for Hill's passionate delving into the past is not nostalgia, but the duty he feels to bear witness, and his belief in the possibility of redeeming human nature. Although we must use the materials that are to hand in our time for such a redemptive program, there are lessons that can be learned from the past regarding the proper use of opportunities and the problems of taking a role in history.

This view of Hill's historical imagination is by no means shared by all writers on Hill. Some, notably Tom Paulin and Donald Davie, are more inclined to see him as a nostalgic reactionary. Davie sees Hill's *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* as a masterly act of sleight of hand. He says it tells us nothing about the past, and that it is not intended to. Hill merely wants to celebrate unfashionable values. He only seems to get away with it by choosing Péguy for his subject. His celebration of nationalism and war does not seem so jingoistic when it focuses on a Frenchman.[1]

This distrust of Hill's poem is shared by other critics. In *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*, Alan Robinson writes about the Péguy poem as a 'mystification of history', and asserts that 'this attempt to exercise imaginative control over recalcitrant fact cannot be sustained' (Robinson, A., 1985, 63). Robinson sees Hill's use of a version of historical narrative as imposing a coherence on Péguy which did not really exist. He considers this to be an exploitation. Neil Corcoran, in *English Poetry*

[1] 'His purpose was, so far from illuminating us about either Péguy or pre-1914 France, the celebration of two values: patriotism, and martial valour' (Davie, 1983, 1).

Since 1940 , argues that Hill is well aware of this danger:

> The suspicion about fundamental motivation in poetry, as in political power, is Hill's major theme.... In Geoffrey Hill the making of poems becomes, self-consciously, as act fraught with potential embarassment, anxiety and guilt. (Corcoran, 1993, 122)

Corcoran argues that the slipperiness of Hill's poems demonstrates a radical skepticism about meaning:

> His work seems to embody at its source the conviction that, from where we are now, there is no centre of value to be finally located, no model of utterance which can create an innocent space, no articulation free of guilt or impure motive. (Corcoran, 1993, 126)

I would agree that Hill's poems are often self-consciously concerned with the question of whether there can be any stable centre of value, but I do not read Hill's work as negatively as Corcoran does. Hill continues to work in this area because he believes in the possibility of pure utterance and articulation free of guilt. And he also believes in

This characterisation of Hill's use of history is countered by critics such as Vincent Sherry, who are more willing to grant that Hill has achieved some real relationship with the past. Sherry suggests that the Péguy poem does achieve some real connection to the past; it is not the reactionary and misleading work that Davie describes. Sherry also defends 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' by arguing that Hill is not nostalgic for British Imperialism, but that he is concerned with portraying the cultural effects of the past upon himself, and other people living in the present.[2]

This complexity in Hill's relationship with the material he chooses to write about refutes critics like Davie and Paulin. Hugh Haughton's work shows that Hill is aware, in his poetry, of the possibility of exploitation, but it also affirms that his poems are not

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[2] 'In his earlier volumes, poetic transcendence was provisional, momentary, questionable, scorned even as it was sought, and it is not until *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* that the poet finds a convincing, compelling, suitably complex way of reentering history. His complicity with Indian history has gone only to the point of likening his distance from affairs with the diffidence of imperial exploitation. The very point of my objection to "An Apology" as ahistorical and apolitical, however, would absolve Hill of the charge that his is seeking to excuse l'ancien regime in England or its colonies: the suite of Indian sonnets matches the attitudes of other poems in the group, which seek not to reinstate an old political scheme but rather to restore what is already living in the traditions of the English language and its literature' (Sherry, 1987, 171).

guilty of this kind of 'violation'. Although Hill's poems engage with the sense that we have lost things that once existed, he does not indulge in nostalgia.

The integrity of Hill's spiritual engagement with the dead is questioned by E. M. Knottenbelt. For Knottenbelt, Hill writes not to celebrate unfashionable values, but to aggrandize his own spirituality.[3] Knottenbelt supports Davie's suggestion that *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* gives us no real access to the past, or to Péguy himself. Instead, the poem is merely a testing-ground for Hill's ideas about the poetry of witness. Knottenbelt even goes so far as to say that Hill presents us with a poetic portrayal of Péguy that he cannot really assent to, in order to write the poem he wants to write. This is, in effect, to accuse Hill of hypocrisy. The suggestion that Hill is not even trying to write a spiritual biography, but is merely disguising a spiritual autobiography constitutes another charge. If true, these accusations undermine Hill's implicit poetic manifesto of responsible witnessing.

In an interesting attempt to set Hill's poems out within a post-modernist framework, Christoph Bode, in '"A Mercia of the Mind": Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* and the Poetical Transcendence of Time and Place', strikes a rather different note, eliding the problem of anachronism and exploitation.[4] By denying any reality to the past, except as it exists in the poet's mind, Bode seems to erase the other critics' objections. However, we may worry about his assumption that the past has no real being except as we imagine

[3]'It seems then that Hill's quarrels with truth, so that we get a poetry of ideas which in the end may not succeed in recovering for us Péguy's difficult and inimitable intregrity (and certainly not the man himself), once more derive from his quarrels with common and less common assumptions about the function, role and place of poetry, and of the poet, as they now focus more directly on the possibilities of poetry as (spiritual) biography and particularly of the poet saying what he has to say so that it counts in a world of false witness' (Knottenbelt, 1990, 286).
'the point is that spiritual biography is almost always spiritual autobiography in disguise. To write *as if* this is not so and *as if* one can obtain a kind of objectivity by giving voice to those who have succumbed to solipsism seems to reveal that Hill is writing out of an idea about Péguy which he cannot really go along with but nevertheless does so for the sake of writing a poem' (ibid. 351).

[4]'In Hill's Mercia, the past and the present are merged and blended. The historical past is "there" only insofar as it is present in the poet's mind, whose own historical present (the twentieth century) in turn consists mainly of childhood memories, his personal past. *Mercian Hymns* is about the presence of the past and about the passing of the present. That is why, strictly speaking, there are no anachronisms in this sequence. There is no frame of reference against which an anachronism of one kind or another could safely be identified' (Fietz, 1992, 320).

it. Most critics are uneasy about doing away with some claim for the past's objective existence. Bode's affirmation of the absence of a hard distinction between the different 'pasts' which operate in this text means that he does not detect any mystification of the past.[5] It seems to me that Bode is misguided. He seems to be claiming that there is such a thing as 'historicity' while also telling us that the past only exists in our imaginations, and that therefore there is no such thing as anachronism. This does not seem to have much in common with Hill's statements about the importance of bearing witness to a past he evidently sees as having an existence apart from him. To say that *Mercian Hymns* contains no anachronisms is to deny the complex web of interconnections that the volume offers.

The portrait of Hill's historical imagination that I have been defending has more in common with that laid out in the first monogrpah on Hill's work, Henry Hart's *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*, than any of the later studies. Crucially, Hart shows us that Hill's anxiety is not only centred on the near impossibility of recalling the past without exploitation, but also on the problem that recording violence can lead to the belief that the world is doomed to end in violence.[6] Haughton has pointed out that Hill wants his poems to bear witness to a 'lost kingdom of innocence and original justice' even though they take historical moments of extreme violence as their subjects. Hill is trying to balance the need to bear witness to what people have suffered with his belief in the possibility of redemption for humankind and language.

Hart explores this uneasy relationship through the poem 'A Canticle for Good Friday':

> Hill wants to approach history as doubting Thomas approached Christ, with a scepticism that will penetrate hearsay, sentimental abstractions, and fanciful myths and search out actual wounds. (Hart, 1986, 49)

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[5] '*Mercian Hymns* shows no sign of escapism from historicity and temporality - it is the document of a mind that takes the only road open to non-mystics: *deeper into time* and its complexities' (Fietz, 1992, 339).

[6] 'If Hill regards the past as protracted cataclysm, he is also critical of myths of cataclysmic revelation and judgement. He would agree with Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending*, who said that "the most terrible element in apocalyptic thinking is its certainty that there must be universal bloodshed .... Thus the world is changed to conform with a fiction, as by the murder of the Jews"' (Hart, 1986, 41).

In this sentence Hart gives us a version of the central paradox of faith, and of historical knowledge. While Christians make a virtue out of the need to believe in the resurrection (something that goes counter to reason), Christ's contemporaries had no need of that kind of faith as they could see what had happened. However, there were still those, like Thomas, who doubted and wanted more proof (like a volunteer at an escapologist's show checking the padlocks). The example of St. Thomas seems to confound the value of faith, and to undermine the supremacy of reason that baulks at the evidence for a phenomenon it cannot comprehend.

Thomas' reluctance to believe in the resurrection can be placed in illuminating contrast with Péguy's theory of history. Péguy's concept of Clio (the muse of history, who is always behindhand) and Veronica (the girl who had the image of Christ's face imprinted on her handkerchief) implies more than just the power of a passionate attempt to bear witness to the past. It suggests that the past is real, that there is a living past with which we must have a vital connection if we are to understand ourselves and our present. Although we may wonder at the way Veronica, by being in the right place at the right time, seems to transcend the 'trace'-bound nature of history (embodied in Clio), that doesn't really help since we cannot be there at the time of Christ like she was. We may be inspired by her story as a metaphor for a more direct access to the past, but we are still helplessly stranded in the present. Hart expresses this paradox as follows:

> Unlike Thomas, who had the benefit of immediate and unmediated contact with the resurrected Christ (Hill's personification of history), Hill can only investigate the past through its artefacts. The heroes and victims have become 'curios', their despair and ecstasy matters of historical curiosity. (Hart, 1986, 50)

Hart sees Hill's work as labouring to create conscience out of this paradox:

> For Hill, man is emphatically a historical and linguistic animal who constantly veils the pain of his heritage. The names of past heroes, villains and victims (the 'ever-green names') are everpresent, however, to the mind which collects them. Hill's history poems bear witness to the intensity of consciousness (and its burden of anxiety) which illuminates the shadowed statues and opens the tombs. Like Joyce, Hill intends to create, or at least resurrect, the conscience of his race by holding up the past in all its bewildering complexity. (Hart, 1986, 52)

This reading of Hill incorporates and transcends the concerns we saw in the other critics'

work. If we agree with Hart, we shall see that Hill's work is aware of the possibility of exploitation. It concerns itself with episodes of destruction without losing sight of the possibilites for redemption, or the possibility that such writing can exert a baleful influence. It allows that engagement with the past is always entangled in a paradox which entraps both reason and faith. Bearing in mind these problems, I hope to show what possibilites for some kind of real contact with the past Hill's work explores, and what he can be said to have achieved.

In the chapter "Hunter of Forms - Hill and Language" I investigated the concept of words as 'living powers', specifically focusing on the idea that the past lives on in words. Hill has expressed this idea, and its importance for a poet, in 'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure: A Debate': 'The poet is hearing words in depth and is therefore hearing, or sounding, history and morality in depth' (Hill, 1971, 21). For Hill, language is something alive, a repository of experience and wisdom. 'History as Poetry' is relevant here:

> Poetry as salutation; taste
> Of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
> The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
> Unearths from among the speechless dead
>
> Lazarus mystified, common man
> Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
> From the provided loam. Fortunate
> Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung:
>
> 'A resurgence' as they say. The old
> Laurels wagging with the new: Selah!
> Thus laudable the trodden bone thus
> Unanswerable the knack of tongues. (*NCP*, 72)

Hill connects the resurrection of Lazarus with the growth of plants from rotting material. The fertile soil is 'provided' by the decomposition of corpses. In this cycle of death and life we praise the people whose bones we tread on (or in fact consume). This is a pre-echo of the idea of mingled 'éloge and elegy' that we see in the Péguy poem. In this poem it is language that effects these resurrections. Hill is using the familiar idea that life rises out of death to illuminate his concept of language. Just as we are constantly re-using the physical matter of the planet in order to live, so we re-use language to communicate. But

when we do so we are connected to the past just as directly as we are when we eat something which has grown from the soil. Simone Weil has used a similar idea to demonstrate her vision of how the spiritual is present in labour.

> If I grow thin from labour in the fields, my flesh really becomes wheat. If that wheat is used for the host it becomes Christ's flesh. Anyone who labours with this intention should become a saint. (Weil, 1970, 96)

Weil is expressing a belief in the direct physical relationship we have with our work and our food. She uses a universalization of the Christian concept of transubstantiation to express her belief in the spiritual dimension of labour. Hill's version is different since it speaks about beauty and language (the lily, the gift of tongues) rather than food and spirituality, revealing his choice to devote himself primarily to poetic rather than spiritual development. But Hill's vision of language implies a similar level of interconnection to Weil's transubstantiation. Words that people have used in the past are constantly being re-used, and as we use words we partake of their being in defining ourselves. Both writers are trying to show us the intimate connection we have to the world, and to our past.

The title of Hill's poem was 'History as Poetry', but we have been reading it rather as if it were called 'Poetry as History'. Hill is drawing our attention to the fact that poetry is 'salutation' - it is basically a greeting, a communication. If history really brings us into living contact with the past, resurrects the dead, then it is performing an essentially poetic function.

Hill uses an image of resurrection in his poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* in a way that forges a link between Weil's idea of transubstantiation and Hill's own ideas about the living power of language. It focuses on landscape.

> Landscape is like revelation; it is both
> singular crystal and the remotest things.
> Cloud-shadows of seasons revisit the earth,
> odourless myrrh borne by the wandering kings.
>
> Happy are they who, under the gaze of God,
> die for the 'terre charnelle', marry her blood
> to theirs, and, in strange Christian hope, go down
> into the darkness of resurrection,
>
> into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle,

> almondy meadowsweet, the freshet-brook,
> rising and running through small wilds of oak,
> past the elder-tump that is the child's castle. (*NCP*, 170)

Landscape has a transcendent power in this section of the poem. It is the familiar, solid, specific place where one lives but it also connects us to 'remotest things' - to the past, and all the other people who have inhabited it. Hill clarifies what he means with his exposition of a quotation from Péguy. The commonplace opinion that it is good to die in a war is something slightly different for Péguy.[7] Firstly, it has to be a just war. Secondly, Péguy describes the earth as 'carnal': it is like the body, sexual and violent - bloody. Hill explores this through the image of marriage. He suggests that the poet has become part of the earth and what grows upon it. This is a strange and perhaps dark resurrection, but it relates precisely to Weil's concept of transubstantiation. Hill is putting the process of nature up against Christian belief here: if one's body rots, becomes plants and is eaten and becomes the flesh of another being, how can there be a resurrection of the flesh? But in a sense this vision is comforting; it implies that all beings are made up of the same material, that we share in the matter that composed the dead. When we die we marry the blood of the earth. This allows for new life sharing the qualities of the earth, and those of ourselves. Both Hill and Weil argue that imaginative and spiritual experience is more valid than the limited mundane way in which we habitually look at the world and ourselves. Such a belief presents the possibility that the radical disjunction of the present from the past, which makes all attempts at communication suspect, is not unsurpassable. And the spiritual level of experience, according to these writers, does find expression in the physical. The marriage I have spoken of is, for Hill, more likely in the chaotic aftermath of a battle, as the dead and dying lie on the earth. At the end of 'Funeral Music 3', Hill gives us a description of one such nuptial at the battle of Towton.

> A field
> After battle utters its own sound
> Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth.
> Blindly the questing snail, vulnerable
> Mole emerge, blindly we lie down, blindly
> Among carnage the most delicate souls
> Tup in their marriage-blood, gasping 'Jesus'. (*NCP*, 60)

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[7] Hill provides the quotation, from Péguy's *Ève*, in his notes to the poem.

Hill's statement about the earth here once more suggests transcendence and also echoes the 'terre charnelle' of Péguy. The sound may be the noise of animals moving amongst the dead and dying, while they groan and move, or try to move. But surely Hill is also speaking of a kind of 'sound' he hears when, for instance, he visits the site of the battle of Towton. The earth seems to speak to him, to suggest the peculiar resurrection that has occurred there. Moving back to the scene directly after a battle, Hill turns the death-agony into a parody of the consummation of a marriage. The writhing of the dying appears like the act of sexual union. The 'delicate souls' gasp 'Jesus' as a prayer, or swear because they are in pain, but most of all perhaps they gasp it as one might gasp the name of one's lover during intercourse. And this is what death is: the female soul is wedded to Christ, just as the flesh becomes merged with the earth, food for moles.

Hill's poem 'Canticle for Good Friday' highlights another vital element in his relationship with the past. We have already looked at how it presents us with a paradoxical relationship between reason and faith. It is also a poem about being jealous of those who lived at other times. In discussing the poem I mentioned the envy of St. Thomas detectable in the lines:

> (a slight miracle might cleanse
> His brain
> Of all attachments, claw-roots of sense) (*NCP*, 27)

These lines are quite complex. Firstly, Hill seems to be criticizing Christ, since at this point He could have given Thomas faith by 'a slight miracle'.[8] However, the circumstances make this reading seem rather awkward. It seems a little petty to expect another miracle from Christ after He has resurrected Himself from the dead. So we begin to feel some of Hill's envy for Thomas's wasted opportunity. It is very tempting to think that one would have believed fully if one had lived with Christ and witnessed miracles. Thomas's doubt suggests the common inability to recognize the importance of events one witnesses; sometimes hindsight is necessary to judge the impact of an event. But more than that it suggests that doubt is an extremely tenacious phenomenon. Our reason can cause us to doubt the validity of our experience. Hill uses this poem to explore the feeling of envy of

[8] The idea of a 'slight miracle' is, of course, paradoxical in itself.

the past, and finally to attempt to shake it off. If one cannot have faith here and now, there is no reason to expect one would have had it then.

Walter Benjamin was a writer who lived through a period of great political danger, and died during his attempt to flee the Nazis. The effect of living in such a period is marked in the intensity of his writing on history. In 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' he wrote:

> Reflection shows us that our image of happiness is thoroughly coloured by the time to which the course of our existence has assigned us. The kind of happiness that could arouse envy in us exists only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which even the past has a claim. (Benjamin, 1992, 245)

In Benjamin's vision, each generation has a role to play in the redemption of humanity, or perhaps rather each one is provided with the means necessary for its own redemption. This means that humans should only envy those things which they might have been able to use to this end. There is a certain fierce practicality about this line, which we might expect from a man who faced the persecution of the Nazis. However, for Hill things are not so clear-cut. Redemption is a key theme in his work, and yet he often engages with it in terms of historical events which he could not personally have influenced. His poem explores what seems like a wasted opportunity as a remedy for his jealousy of some of the dead. This is something that Charles Péguy also seems to have been concerned with. In his play *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, he shows her wishing she had been in the Garden of Gethsemane with Christ. She is convinced she would have shown more courage than the Apostles: 'I believe [...] I believe that if I had been there, I wouldn't have run off and left him' (Péguy, 1966, 60). This is rather different from Hill's treatment of Thomas. Where Hill allows himself to be chastened by the experience of Thomas, Péguy's Joan rashly proclaims that she would have behaved better than the Apostles. In 'Canticle for Good Friday', Hill shows he is aware of Knottenbelt's theory that spiritual biography

is often autobiography in disguise. That awareness means that he avoids the hubris Péguy is guilty of, while owning his envy of the past. This envy can be that living at a certain time and place would have made one's own development easier, or that one could have altered history by showing better qualities than the people who had the good fortune actually to be there. Of course in the case of Péguy writing about Joan of Arc there is a further irony, since she was able to find an opportunity in her lifetime to fight a Holy War, and be martyred by the English. One can see Péguy's envy for Joan in his own life which was spent fighting passionately for causes, but which did not provide him with quite such a spectacular martyrdom.

In this chapter I shall show how Hill's interest in the past draws together three main issues. Firstly, the power of words and poetry to reconnect us to the past; secondly, the envy of the past; and finally the idea of physical connection to the past through landscape and shared periods of time. For Hill it is essential to uncover and strengthen one's roots in the past. Those roots are evident in language, in our place of habitation and in the stories we use to define ourselves. Hill's career has been characterized by all these elements, and especially by a delving into history to find people worthy of admiration. His affirmation of the imaginative and spiritual experience as real (although elusive) opens the possibility for real communication with the dead.

Before moving from these three basic forms of connection with the past I want to briefly take up again the concept of the 'exemplary figure' in Hill's work. As I indicated at the close of the previous section, Hill's investment in the validity of spiritual and imaginative experience imbues the connecting power of words, landscape, and a form of envy, with the power to engage directly with people whom he finds worthy of admiration. Hill's interest in the past is mainly about connecting oneself to it, in order to feel that one is rooted in a community. One shares a language with people who have spoken it before, just as one shares the land they lived on (although both can be radically affected by the way they are used).

In *The Need For Roots*, Simone Weil wrote a blueprint for the moral reconstitution of her country. She believed that it was of the utmost importance to

educate people about the past. She also believed in the importance of finding admirable episodes. Characteristic of her response to history is her retelling of the story of a Roman who had been condemned to death. His slaves offered to protect him, but seeing them being tortured rather than betray him he revealed himself to his persecutors and thereby saved his slaves at the cost of his own life. Weil believed this to be the only truly inspiring incident in Roman history, and she commented on it thus: 'Here is an example of what it is legitimate to admire. In history there are few perfectly pure things' (Weil, 1971, 231).

Of course Hill's exemplary figures are rather different. As I have already argued, they are often people who have failed in some way, or about whom Hill has misgivings. So, when Hill writes a poem about an apostle, he chooses Thomas because the element of failure in his story acts to complicate the natural envy one might feel for someone who lived with Christ. It reminds us that we might have failed in this, or some other way even if we had been put in a position where it was possible to have acted magnificently. Hill writes through his uncomfortableness with the modern age to a position more in line with Benjamin's. Each age has available the means of its redemption.

This awareness of the difficulties as well as the possibilities of interaction with historically important events informs Hill's treatment of the Tory Radical, Richard Oastler:

> Oastler, instead of being able to subsume the satirical attacks of his opponents, is made, through his own verbosity, an accessory to their mockery. (*LL*, 88)

One might say that Hill is interested in Oastler as much because of this problem as in spite of it. Indeed, he challenges Oastler's biographer Cecil Driver over the source of Oastler's rhetorical excesses. Driver suggests it was the result of Oastler's disposition and personality, while Hill claims that these are 'insecure bases upon which to build speculation' (*LL,* 85) and asserts that,

> the nature of a man's occupation, the range of his expectations and the limits of his security might well be influential in forming the rhythms and cadences of his speech. (*LL*, 85)

When questioned by Haffenden on this matter, Hill responded thus:

> In the context from which you take those remarks I'm trying to define certain limitations; I try to explain why the rhetoric of a man I otherwise very much admire, the Tory radical Richard Oastler, is in one or two instances as bad as it is. I was criticising Oastler's rhetoric on rather different grounds from those advanced by Cecil Driver in his admirable biography. He agrees that certain aspects of that rhetoric are dangerously demagogic, but he tries to attribute it to disposition and personality, and I think I can fairly say that these are insecure terms on which to build speculation. I would have thought that one could not profitably approach the nature of a poet's speech in quite those terms, because the nature of true poetic speech is the attempt to transfigure some of the negative liabilities of speech into a more positive form. My admiration for Oastler and the whole radical Tory tradition that he represents is considerable: I find it one of the most attractive political traditions of the nineteenth century, and something quite apart from what we now know as Conservatism. Modern Conservatism, which is Whiggery rampant, could be beneficially instructed by radical Toryism, but of course it won't let itself be. Conservatives conserve nothing. (Haffenden, 1981, 85)

If there are 'few perfectly pure things in history', Hill is prepared to look at the impure ones which still command his respect and work his way through the problems. Hill admires Oastler because he attempted to protect people at a time of rapid change, by asserting the importance of the traditional values of English society. He suggests that Oastler's rhetoric became dangerous, violent and demagogic, not because he was naturally tyrannical, but because he threw himself wholeheartedly into a struggle against a predatory capitalism on behalf of a working population whom he wanted to see protected in a benign, paternalistic state. In a sense he is the inverse to T. H. Green, whose horror of 'sham rhetoric' clearly minimalized the impact of his thought, since only those who were prepared to be his 'co-workers' could really benefit from his teaching. Or, for an example closer to Oastler's end of this spectrum, one could cite Charles Péguy, whose indictment of Jaurès may have caused the latter's assassination. In these examples Hill is acknowledging the corrupting influence of public affairs, the difficulty of acting purely in a hostile environment. His attitude to the past is not a lowering of Weil's standards, rather it is an attempt to take circumstances into account and to praise people for what they achieved in the face of their time. Rather than imposing a rigorous moral absolutism, Hill evaluates people's lives relatively, taking into account the conditions they lived in. Weil herself is a case in point since her own moral standards forbad her to eat more than the rations of those in occupied France. She died in England without

exerting the full influence upon the world that a longer life might have allowed.

Hill's interest in the difficulties of leading an exemplary life when one becomes entangled in politics has found expression in his essay 'Caveats Enough In Their Own Walks'. Here he takes Sir Henry Wotton as his subject, whom he approaches mainly through the works of Izaak Walton.

> The exemplary figure to whom tribute is offered in both books is the man who has fought his way through defeats and pyrrhic victories to achieve, at last, a felicitous mediocrity between contemplation and action, conscience and policy; a felicity for which the art of angling provides at once the mystical ideal and the practical exercise. (*EC*, 46)

Wotton is an 'exemplary figure' precisely because his life was fraught with the kind of 'exemplary failure' Hill detects in the career of T. H. Green. Hill does not expect to find the age-old debate between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* settled in the life of this man. Rather he identifies in it a significant lesson in the incompatibility of true virtue and a public life. Fishing is the pattern of this level of compromise. It does not have the perfect virtue of meditative prayer, but it is a form of activity that makes contemplation possible. This piece of typically back-handed compliment reveals much about the character of Hill's relationship with his 'exemplary figures'. Perhaps he feels himself somewhat compromised by his career as an academic. One detects something of this in his comment in *Viewpoints* that he wrote *Brand* late at night after days full of 'teaching and administration', and, in a different context, his attempt in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' to speak about the nature of poetry as academic and poet without 'special pleading'. Just as Hill has been accused of a kind of obfuscation in the essay just mentioned, while on the whole having a reputation for formidable literary integrity, so Wotton balanced a reputation for honesty with the duplicitous career of a diplomat. His biographer Pearsall Smith writes:

> Throughout Wotton's active career we have the curious phenomenon of a man leading an unusually blameless life, in an age when great qualities were almost always associated with great faults and misdeeds, a man against whom a definite accusation was seldom or never brought, and who was yet frequently suspected of double-dealing and sinister motives. (Pearsall Smith, 1907, I, 28)

Pearsall Smith gets at the heart of the matter here by suggesting the correlation between

great qualities and great faults. Hill would argue that it is the circumstances of acquiring worldly success that create this coincidence, not something corrupt in the nature of the individual. We can bring this to bear on Pearsall Smith's discussion of Walton's idealised portrait of Wotton in old age.

> But it is vain to search history for perfect beings. Izaak Walton, who saw every one in the light of his own beautiful and pious nature, has given to Wotton's life a character of sanctity which it may have possessed in his retired and religious old age, but which one can hardly expect to find in one of the young courtiers of Elizabeth. (Pearsall Smith, 1907, I, 27)

Hill's work is partly a reconsideration of the vanity of searching History for the 'completely pure', or for 'perfect beings'. His comments on Oastler's rhetoric suggest that it was the mire of politics, the struggle against a heartless Whig capitalism, which infected his rhetoric. Once again one might suggest that it was Wotton's occupation which lead him into a certain amount of double-dealing. When he was no longer so engaged his life was as beautiful as Walton describes.

This insight concerning the impact of occupation on morality informs Hill's interpretation of Wotton's comments concerning the 'honesty' of his occupation. Pearsall Smith reports as follows:

> James often commended Wotton's activity in procuring them [letters of Jesuits], and offered to send money if necessary, for the expenses of what the ambassador called his 'honest industry'; 'for I call that honest', he writes, 'which tendeth to the discovery of such as are not so, by whatever means soever, while I am upon the present occupation'; a candid phrase which, like his famous definition of an ambassador, shows how wholeheartedly, in becoming a diplomatist, he has adopted the morality of that profession. (Pearsall Smith, 1907, I, 66)

It seems clear to me that it is precisely because he has not internalised the morality of his profession that Wotton engages in this piece of ironic equivocation with the word 'honest'. Similarly, his definition of an ambassador as someone who 'lies abroad' for his country shows that he was aware of the dishonesty involved, but accepted it as a necessary evil belonging to his profession. Although Wotton is far more self-conscious than Richard Oastler about the effect of policy upon his behaviour, I believe the cases are analogous. Hill's response to Pearsall Smith focuses the general point I have outlined onto language, thus making the link with Oastler's rhetoric even closer.

> But Wotton, who so equivocated with the word 'honest', would know that language is more than a discreet courier between *de facto* circumstance and *de jure* commitments. As much as a man himself, a man's language is 'enter'd into very intrinsecal Familiarity' with 'dangerous matter'. (*EC*, 56)

Hill plays about with the relationship between an ambassador and his language. Officially ambassadors are, among other things, 'discreet couriers' of messages from one state to another. In reality they are more than this, and can be expected to engage in some form of espionage. Hill suggests that just as Wotton found himself called upon to act in a devious way on behalf of his monarch, his language too was affected by being used in such undertakings. Language is affected by 'the nature of a man's occupation, the range of his expectations and the limits of his security' (*LL*, 85).

Just as Hill has spoken out strongly in defence of his attempt to write about the difficulty of achieving a genuine spiritual experience, in the arena of history he focuses on figures who challenge the way we look at the world, by showing us the coarsening effect circumstance has upon our potential for ethical behaviour. A focus on people who have lead purer lives might become a spiritual, moral, aestheticism: a withdrawal from the world. Hill finds it healthier to look at the results of a conflict between a person's principles and the difficulties of living in a world governed by 'raison d'état'.

This examination of the mendacity implicit in diplomacy must inform our reading of *Mercian Hymns*, where we are faced with the inter-relatedness of power and cruelty. In interview, Hill has spoken of his mixed feelings of respect and repulsion towards Offa. He complicates the relationship I've been discussing. The need to identify with someone of whom one does not totally approve takes on an autobiographical element. Hill recognises viciousness and insecurity in his childhood self and yet also feels an urge to be creative. King Offa, a violent leader who nevertheless created an advanced administration becomes a suitable model through whom Hill can confront himself. The presence of the landscape of Worcestershire, still inhabited by the 'genius' of Offa, and a direct physical link back to the Eighth Century, helps to make the connection more potent. The child plays games of kingship in the same countryside that Offa ruled over in the past.

Of course, there is conflict between the two models I have laid out. Hill has declared that personality and disposition was not to blame for the demagogy of Oastler or

the deceptions of Wotton. But here he accuses himself (and his fellow humans) of childhood tyranny. The question is full of complexities. Does Hill see Offa as a man who used violent means because he had to in order to build a kingdom? It seems rather that Offa was a naturally aggressive person who used his strength in a way that was, overall, constructive. For the boy in *Mercian Hymns* the problem is to find an arena within which the energy of his 'tyrannical nature' can be used productively. Hill suggests that all children have to deal with some such transition. Offa is therefore a kind of metaphor for childhood. The poet has to go through this process again, in Hill's terms by accepting and working with the 'menace' and 'atonement' that writing offers.

This section demonstrates how Hill uses his interrogation of the past to outline a moral history of the self. A habit of meditating on the lives of other people should assist us in discerning how others have managed the necessary compromise between their own passions, their desire to live in a pure and moral way and the circumstances of the modern world.

In his preface to *The Anathemata*, David Jones focused on the need for writers to be rooted in their cultural heritage in order to be able to create: 'For men can but proceed from what they know, nor is it for the mind of this flesh to practise poiesis *ex nihilo*.' (Jones, 1972, 79). Simone Weil similarly stressed the importance of the past for any creative activity:

> The future brings us nothing, gives us nothing; it is we who in order to build it have to give it everything, our very life. But to be able to give, one has to possess; and we possess no other life, no other living sap, than the treasures stored up from the past and digested, assimilated, and created afresh by us. Of all the human soul's needs, none is more vital than this one of the past. (Weil, 1971, 51)

Weil sees time as a tree with living sap. Growth is only possible because sap moves up through the past and into the present. This seems very close to the images Hill uses in 'History as Poetry', where the lily grows out of the loam. Both writers have a vision of the past as something with depth, something that we must reach down into for nourishment, not just an abstract description of things that have passed.

There is a parallel to such thinking in modern philosophy of history. In *The Idea*

of History R. G. Collingwood puts forward a strong argument for history as being largely a means of understanding oneself:

> My answer is that history is 'for' human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things that distinguish him from other men, but his nature as man. Knowing yourself means knowing, first, what it is to be a man; secondly, knowing what it is to be the kind of man you are; and thirdly, knowing what it is to be the man *you* are and nobody else is. Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is. (Collingwood, 1993, 10)

This is developed by Collingwood into a theory whereby all history is the history of thought, and we must re-experience the thoughts of people from the past.

> History cannot be scientifically written unless the historian can re-enact in his own mind the experience of the people whose actions he is narrating. Tacitus never tried to do this: his characters are seen not from inside, with understanding and sympathy, but from outside, as mere spectacles of virtue or vice. (Collingwood, 1993, 39)

This already seems very close to Hill's idea in 'History as Poetry'. Indeed, Collingwood seems to be describing the poetic element of history (imaginative identification with people from the past) as essential to the discipline. Collingwood discusses the work of Michael Oakeshott, who has put forward a radical theoretical expression of this attitude to the past.

> The paradoxical result is that the historical past is not past at all; it is present. It is not a past surviving into the present; it must *be* the present. But it is not the present as such, the merely contemporary. It is present because all experience whatever is present; but not merely present. It is also past, and this pastness involves a modification of its character as experience. The historical past does not stand over against the present world of experience as something different from it; it is a special organization of the world *sub specie praeteritium.* (Collingwood, 1993, 154)

This passage seems to me to offer a workable definition of the way in which Hill (and Weil and Péguy) see their relationship with the past. They re-experience the thought of people from the past and so the past becomes present for them. Their experience of life includes much that others would think of as inaccessible, because 'past'. The ways of being that humans have adopted in the past are ever-present, always potentially re-experiencable. This argument illuminates the suggestion by Bode, that the past has no

objective being outside the minds of people considering or imagining it. Oakeshott's own account of the past shows that he feels this kind of experience of the past to be bogus; he believes in an objective past which is much more difficult of access.

> The didactic or so-called living 'past' is not significantly past at all. It is the present contents of a vast storehouse into which time continuously empties the lives, the utterances, the achievements and the sufferings of mankind. As they pour in, these items undergo a process of detachment, shrinkage and desiccation which the less interesting of them withstand and in which the rest are transformed from being resonant, ambiguous circumstantial survivals from bygone human life into emblematic actions and utterances either entirely divorced from their circumstances or trailing similarly formalized circumstances: occurrences, artefacts and utterances, transformed into fables, relics rather than survivals, icons not informative pictures. (Oakeshott, 1983, 39)

Oakeshott sees the 'living "past"' not as a genuine connection to, or communication with, people from the past, but a debasement of the richness of history into cliché and fable. Oakeshott clearly prefers what he construes as 'historical past'

> an historical past is a past that has not, and could not have, survived but is a past inferred from a present-past of survivals and is the conclusion of an historical enquiry. (Oakeshott, 1983, 92)

Oakeshott's theory of the past seems more complicated than Collingwood's account suggested. In fact Oakeshott's version challenges much of the basis of what I have been arguing. If the common living past is debased, then it cannot give us a real communication with people from the past. Although Hill necessarily does research his historical poems, I feel that the way he presents Offa in *Mercian Hymns* (as the 'presiding genius of the West Midlands') would be seen by Oakeshott as a mere raiding of the storehouse of clichés. Similarly, Péguy was reluctant to try to separate the 'real' Joan of Arc from the popular stories and interpretations she had accumulated. As Marjorie Villiers puts it in *Charles Péguy: A Study in Integrity*:

> To Péguy, who believed in 'simultaneity', the splintering of Joan's personality was abhorrent and senseless. He considered that there was only one Joan who was both a historic character and equally the Joan of popular legend. (Villiers, 1965, 272)

Collingwood perhaps finds a way across this problem with his attempt to bring the concept of art into history:

> In other words: art as such is pure intuition and does not contain thought;

> but in order to distinguish the real from the merely possible, one must think; consequently, to define history as the intuition of the real is to say in one breath that it is art and also that it is more than art. If the phrase 'descriptive science' is a *contradictio in adjecto*, so is the phrase 'intuition of the real': for the intuition, just because it is intuition and not thought, knows nothing of any distinction between the real and the imaginary. (Collingwood, 1993, 193)

This brings us back to Hill's 'History as Poetry'. Collingwood is making a claim for history that makes it an art form, and yet more than art because it deals with reality. One can look at this another way and suggest that poems which engage with the past might reverse the cheapening effect that Oakeshott describes and give us a real connection with the past. The phrase 'intuition of the real' also recalls Péguy's fascinating contrast between Clio and Veronica:

> Clio spends all her time looking for traces, meaningless traces, and a silly little Jewess of no importance at all, young Veronica, takes her handkerchief and the face of Jesus is traced on it forever. That is simply dumbfounding. She was there just at the right moment. Clio is always behindhand. (Halévy, 1946, 198)

Péguy's vision of an intuition of the real is expressed here in the image of Veronica's handkerchief. We can see direct evidence of the effect of this idea upon Hill's work in the concluding lines of 'Lachrimae 3 Martyrium':

> Viaticum transfigures earth's desire
> in rising vernicles of summer air. (*NCP*, 135)

Here the power of the Catholic last rites to free the soul from its physical desires is illustrated through an image of rising air spontaneously forming pictures of Christ's face (the 'vernicles'). Although we are radically separated from the life of Christ by time, this poem suggests that there are connections, accessible via our imaginative and spiritual nature.

In his book *Bergson and his Influence*, A. E. Pilkington explains Péguy's Bergsonian critique of Clio as follows:

> The errors and frauds of Clio spring from the fact that history can only deal with reality by fragmenting it into separate pieces and thereby fails to encompass its essential continuity. (Pilkington, 1976, 71)

If we want to experience the past in its essential continuity we need to be there and to be spontaneous, like Veronica. If the past is accessible to us, as Collingwood argues, it is

because whatever happened was embodied in thought which we can re-enact in our minds. For Hill, as for Péguy, David Jones and others, poetry is a medium which one can use to connect oneself to that essential continuity, where one can meet the living past.

The first section of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* directly confronts the relationship between 'history', as a mode of knowledge of the past, and the impact of actual events. Péguy was passionate about the importance of maintaining the urgency of the past. For instance, he records his shock at the difference time had made on the reception of information pertaining to the Dreyfus Affair when he was discussing it with a much younger man: 'I was trying to communicate a reality, he was learning history' (Villiers, 1965, 234). It is helpful to begin with the conclusion of the poem, which returns to this question of how the past is perceived:

> Low tragedy, high farce, fight for command,
> march, counter-march, and come to the salute
> at every hole-and-corner burial-rite
> bellowed with hoarse dignity into the wind.
>
> Take that for your example! But still mourn,
> being so moved: éloge and elegy
> so moving on the scene as if to cry
> 'in memory of those things these words were born.' (*NCP*, 179)

Here the soldier's 'hoarse dignity' as he shouts out some elementary burial-rite over each of the dead he finds on the battlefield easily slips into melodrama or into slapstick. Hill suggests we take that as our example of how something that deserves our respect can appear ridiculous. But he is also pointing at the corpse of Péguy and exhorting us to take him as an example. We should be moved to praise and lament by the exemplary failure of his life. It is in this spirit that Hill dedicates his poem to Péguy's life with his final line.

While this pairing of ideas recalls the dead of 'History as Poetry' whom we both praise and feed upon, the suggestion that we see the past primarily in terms of literary genre is more disturbing. Here we see Hill struggling with the problem of the unavoidable editing and ordering that we impose upon historical material. As we saw earlier, this can only be exploitative. But Hill's poem is largely about the problematic way that we see the past as 'farce' or 'tragedy'. Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* seems to lie behind Hill's poem at this point:

> Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. (Marx, 1963, 15)

When Péguy notes that what was real for him becomes 'history' to the young man, he is reporting a version of the slippage that Marx identifies. In Marx's terms we are not even allowed an objective historical narrative. Histories conform to the literary modes of tragedy and farce. What had objective reality for Péguy becomes mere narrative for his audience. We can only enjoy a tragedy because we know that the violence we are witnessing is feigned. And yet somehow contemporary conflict and disaster has become 'tragedy'.

Hill's poem begins by contrasting the death of Jaurès with representations of assassination.

> Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès
> dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares
> through the café-window crêped in powder-smoke?
> The bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*.
>
> History commands the stage wielding a toy gun,
> rehearsing another scene. It has raged so before,
> countless times; and will do, countless times more,
> in the guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian.
>
> In Brutus' name martyr and mountebank
> ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink
> painlessly spouting. Jaurès' blood lies stiff
> on menu-card, shirt-front and handkerchief.
>
> Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite
> the assassin? Must men stand by what they write
> as by their camp-beds or their weaponry
> or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry? (*NCP*, 165)

The poem opens comically with the 'crack of a starting pistol', but the jokiness of the phrase is undermined by Jaurès dying across the line-break. Historical distance means we hear a starting-pistol shot that one might use to begin a race or as a sound effect in a film, or even as a joke to start a poem. Although this a 'farce', the pistol shot has not woken sleepers, it has killed a man; but it is impossible to take such a scene seriously over the gulf of time. In the second stanza, Hill introduces 'history' as an almost personified entity. Again, Hill is pointing out the shallowness of our understanding of the

past, when we rely on 'history'. The past is presented like a play. The weapons are toys, the players not very skilled at acting tragedies. The raging of this 'history' seems petty. Its actions are always a rehearsal, never having the weight of a real event.

This futility is explored in the third stanza where Hill brings us back to Jaurès by contrasting the unconvincing attempts of people to gain access to the past. Their efforts to revive the past end with them seeming mere ghosts of the things they are trying to represent. Hill points this up with the phrase 'ghost Caesar's ghost' - their attempts are as lacking in life as a ghost of the already lifeless ghost of Caesar. Hill is also suggesting the idea of 'ghost' writing - since these wounds are only 'air and ink', only words, the actors are, of necessity, making up speeches that they think appropriate to the scene they present, but which are in fact mere fabrication. Hill contrasts two kinds of possible actors - 'martyr and mountebank'. It seems that Hill is allowing the integrity of some 'actors', some historians; but the martyr is compromised by this juxtaposition with the market-place con-man, suggesting that there can be no authentic access to history.

This kind of satire raises questions about Hill's own practice in writing about the past. In the fourth stanza he goes some way towards answering such a challenge. By raising the question of Péguy's responsibility for Jaurès's death, he demonstrates the power that he thinks language has. It is possible that something Péguy wrote might have incited a man to kill Jaurès. If this is the case then words have an intensity and power of which the actors in history's troupe are innocent. However, with that power comes responsibility. Hill ponders that responsibility in terms of weapons and wounded comrades. The guns are real now once more, and one's friends have been injured. It is difficult to accept this when one thinks of 'history [...] wielding a toy gun'. Hill uses this episode from Péguy's life to show that words can have a violent effect, and that the writer must work with an awareness of the 'menace' of this power.

In *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, Hill is trying to show the problems of writing about the past in a way that is not futile and farcical, but which attempts to re-experience it fully, with all its tragedy and with an intense communication with its people. We can see the appropriateness of choosing Péguy as the subject in these

comments from *Clio*:

> The man who is praying is full. The man receiving a sacrament is full. The dying man is full. Full of a life and even of an eternity. But the man turning over memories is never full. And I am she who does nothing but turn over memories. (Halévy, 1946, 200).

In this poem Hill committed himself to a 'full' encounter with the past. Although it is a past he can only access through historical material, he is able, by the quality of his engagement, to avoid the lifeless 'air and ink' of 'history'. Simone Weil has expressed the importance of using historical records in this creative way in *The Need For Roots*:

> When dealing with documents it is necessary to read between the lines, allow oneself to be transported entirely, with a complete forgetfulness of self, into the atmosphere of the events recalled, keep the attention fixed for a very long time on any little significant details and discover exactly what their full meaning is.
>
> But the respect for documents and the professional spirit of historians do not incline their minds toward this type of exercise. What is called the historical spirit doesn't pierce through the paper to discover real flesh and blood; it consists in a subordination of the mind to documents. (Weil, 1971, 224)

Hill's poem is an attempt to get through the paper of Péguy's books, and the books about him, to the real flesh and blood of his life. This means coming to terms with one of Péguy's own crises, which was that his words may have caused a death. Hill enters into this problem with the awareness that his words, at this distance in time, may only be farcical, painless ink. But he aspires to writing in such a way that his creations will demand the same respect and responsibility as lethal weapons and living friends.

At the end of the second section of the poem Hill takes up the relationship with the past in a more direct, physical way, by referring to the battlefield on which Péguy died.

> 'Rather the Marne than the *Cahiers*'. True enough,
> you took yourself off. Dying, your whole life
> fell into place. "Sieurs-'dames, this is the wall
> where he leaned and rested, this is the well
>
> from which he drank.' Péguy, you mock us now.
> History takes the measure of your brow
> in blank-eyed bronze, brave mediocre work
> of *Niclausse, sculpteur*, cornered in the park
>
> among the stout dogs and lame patriots
> and all those ghosts, far-gazing in mid-stride,
> rising from where they fell, still on parade,

covered in glory and the blood of beetroots. (*NCP*, 167)

These stanzas refer to Péguy's death at the battle of the Marne, an image to which Hill returns at several points in the poem. He shows us Péguy leaving his periodical *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine* in order to defend his country. Péguy's life indeed seemed to 'fall into place' with his death. He died leading his men into battle on the first day of the Marne. For Péguy, the patriotic, socialist Christian, there could hardly be any better place to die. But Hill immediately brings in a hint of raillery here, to avoid falling into the clichés of good death. He mentions the wall and well of which Halévy gives us pictures in his book on Péguy. Hill gives us the comic guided tour of Péguy's last day. He draws back from a romanticised vision of the cannon-fodder of the First World War by reminding us that Péguy died in a beetroot field. Some wounds are only stains. The admirer of Péguy who seeks out the memorial that History has provided will find only a bad sculpture. But the last stanza moves beyond this deadening attempt at capturing the past by forcing us to see the survivors still walking dogs in this park. Hill then also sees the ghosts of the men who died with Péguy and demands that we see them too. This resurrection of the dead, through the labour of poetry, comes up in the third section of the poem, although here it is Péguy's literary work that we are considering.

Here life is labour and pastime and orison
like something from a simple book of hours;

and immortality, your measured task,
inscribes its antique scars on the new desk
among your relics, bits of ivory quartz
and dented snuffbox won at Austerlitz.

The proofs pile up; the dead are made alive
to their posthumous fame. Here is the archive
of your stewardship; here is your true domaine,
in fields of discourse ripening to the Marne. (*NCP*, 167)

Hill deliberately presents Péguy's literary work as a spiritual ordering of life. It is a pattern of work, prayer and recreation that is as simple and beautiful as a medieval 'book of hours'. Péguy's works (for instance his works on Joan of Arc and his descriptions of the hard labour of his own family in *Notre Jeunesse*) resurrect the dead. Hill's lines suggest both that Péguy brings people back to life in order to make them famous, and also that he makes them aware ('alive to') of the fame that they have achieved. Hill is describing a

form of two-way communication with the dead. He explicitly links Péguy's vital connection to the past with Bergson (of whom Péguy was an ardent supporter):

> It is Domrémy
> restored; the mystic strategy of Foch
> and Bergson with its time-scent, dour panache
> deserving of martyrdom. (*NCP*, 168)

Domrémy was the village where Joan of Arc grew up. Péguy's intuitive relationship with the past takes him back to the Domrémy of Joan's time as surely as smells can transport us (in a Bergsonian plane of 'pure duration') to temporally distant experiences.

Perhaps it is a similar time-scent that makes Hill connect Jaurès' murder with Péguy's death in battle. In the stanzas that bridge sections 4 and 5, he juxtaposes the deaths like this:

> So much for Jaurès murdered in cold pique
> by some vexed shadow of the belle époque,
>
> some guignol strutting at the window-frame.
> But what of you Péguy, who came to 'exult',
> to be called 'wolfish' by your friends? The guilt
> belongs to time; and you must leave on time.
>
> Jaurès was killed blindly, yet with reason:
> 'let us have drums to beat down his great voice.'
> So you spoke to the blood. So, you have risen
> above all that and fallen flat on your face
>
> 5
>
> among the beetroots, where we are constrained
> to leave you sleeping (*NCP*, 169)

Once again we are presented with the horrific scene from the opening of the poem. This time Hill is still concerned with history's farcical presentation of things - Jaurés' assassin is a clown, or perhaps even a puppet with Péguy pulling the strings. Hill speculates about Jaurès' killer as some nostalgic nationalist goaded into action by Péguy's description of Jaurès as a 'pan-Germanist'. Hill leaves this as if to say Péguy should not be blamed much for this fanatic. But there is still the interesting question of how Péguy acted after the murder. Hill's quotations are taken from Halévy's book *Péguy and Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, which refers to Péguy's 'sheer savage exultation' and 'joy on hearing of the murder of his one-time friend' (Halévy, 1946, 226). A page later Halévy calls Péguy 'the

baptized wolf'. Marjorie Villiers book reports a very different response. She quotes Madame Fave:

> No word of condemnation passed his lips. But he looked like a man prostrated by pain. My silence respected his pain. (Villiers, 1965, 371)

Halévy's account is possibly the more reliable, since he was a friend of Péguy, but the matter is debatable. Jaurès was killed by a fanatic, but 'with reason'. This suggests both that there was a reason to want him dead, and also that Péguy's 'reason' had a role in his death though the composition and publication of his condemnation. Hill sees Péguy as allowing his political views to overcome his human compassion here. His punishment is also his reward - the 'happy death' fighting for one's country in a just war. That is why Hill is keen to show Péguy falling down flat, rather ignominiously, and rather awkwardly over a section break. Péguy did not fall asleep on the battlefield, but Commander Dufestre, who found him, recalled 'his left arm bent back over his head' and that 'he too seemed to be asleep' (Halévy, 1946, 222). Hill allows this final restful pose to bring some bathos to our picture of Péguy's death.

In the seventh section Hill comes back to the idea of a happy death, again using it to create irony:

> We still dutifully read
>
> 'heureux ceux qui sont morts'. Drawn on the past
> these presences endure; they have not ceased
> to act, suffer, crouching into the hail
> like labourers of their own memorial
>
> or those who worship at its marble rote,
> their many names one name, the common 'dur'
> built into duration, the endurance of war;
> blind Vigil herself, helpless and obdurate.
>
> And yet what sights: Saul groping in the dust
> for his broken glasses, or the men far gone
> on the road to Emmaus who saw the ghost.
> Commit all this to memory. The line
>
> falters, reforms, vanishes into the smoke
> of its own unknowing; mother, dad,
> gone in that shell-burst, with the other dead,
> 'pour la patrie', according to the book. (*NCP*, 174)

We read these words 'dutifully' because we no longer believe them. They are a formula we

use as a memorial for the dead. In some sense our memorials of those who have died in war have 'drawn' these figures onto the past as if it were a canvas. They are fixed in attitudes of work or suffering, just as the worshippers at Remembrance Sunday services are fixed in their ritual. There is something cold about this way of remembering the dead. The service itself is called a 'marble rote' as if the cycle of remembrance was as cold and inflexible as stone. The reading of the names of the dead does not serve to individualise them, rather it makes them all the same. Here Hill puns on the word 'dur' which means hard, and is an element in several English words to do with time. 'Dur' is the heart of the Bergsonian word 'duration' which signifies the flow of time as we perceive it, not as it is recorded by clocks. It is within 'duration' that we are able to transcend time and gain access to the past. 'Dur' is also the hard heart of 'endurance' suggesting here the qualities one needs to survive a war, and the resilience of war itself, which has not been destroyed despite the 'war to end all wars'. Finally 'dur' is an element in 'obdurate'. Hill sees that Vigil is 'blind' - this kind of remembrance does not really give us a vision of the people we are recalling: it is lacking in feeling, obdurate. The following stanza suggests the kinds of 'visions' we might have of the past. The proximity of these 'visions' to blind Vigil seems to render them weaker. Saul's conversion becomes merely the story of a man losing his glasses. The men on the road to Emmaus see a 'ghost', not the risen Christ. Saul isn't blinded, the other men don't see anything real. The poem instructs us to 'commit all this to memory'. Hill is ridiculing a 'blind' relationship with the past, not allowing ourselves to re-experience things, we merely memorize facts, but we see nothing. The final stanza descends into bathos by coldly describing the death of 'mother' and 'dad', as if the concept of dying 'pour la patrie' interferes with our natural grief. We wheel this phrase out 'according to the book', but there is no heart in what we are doing.

The bathos takes on a sharper edge in section 6, where Hill uses Péguy's involvement with the Dreyfus affair to frame his self-disgust at not being important historically. The section deserves full quotation because it distils the odd envy of the past that we looked at earlier in the context of 'Doubting Thomas' and Walter Benjamin.

> To dispense, with justice; or, to dispense
> with justice. Thus the catholic god of France,

with honours all even, honours all, even
the damned in the brazen Invalides of Heaven.

Here there should be a section without words
for military band alone: 'Sambre et Meuse',
the 'Sidi Brahim' or 'Le Roi s'Amuse';
white gloves and monocles and polished swords

and Dreyfus with his buttons off, chalk-faced
but standing to attention, the school prig
caught in some act and properly disgraced.
A puffy satrap prances on one leg

to snap the traitor's sword, his ordered rage
bursting with 'cran et gloire' and gouts of rouge.
The chargers click and shiver. There is no stir
in the drawn ranks, among the hosts of the air,

all draped and gathered by the weird storm-light
cheap wood-engravings cast on those who fought
at Mars-la-Tour, Sedan; or on the men
in the world-famous stories of Jules Verne

or nailed at Golgotha. Drumrap and fife
hit the right note: 'A mort le Juif! Le Juif
à la lanterne!' Serenely the mob howls,
its silent mouthings hammered into scrolls

torn from *Apocalypse*. No wonder why
we fall to violence out of apathy,
redeemed by falling and restored to grace
beyond the dreams of mystic avarice.

But who are 'we', since history is law,
clad in our skins of silver, steel and hide,
or in our rags, with rotten teeth askew,
heroes or knaves as Clio shall decide?

'We' are crucified Pilate, Caiaphas
in his thin soutane and Judas with the face
of a man who has drunk wormwood. We come
back empty-handed from Jerusalem

counting our blessings, honestly admire
the wrath of the peacemakers, for example
Christ driving the money-changers from the temple,
applaud the Roman steadiness under fire.

We are the occasional just men who sit
in gaunt self-judgement on their self-defeat,
the élite hermits, secret orators
of an old faith devoted to new wars.

We are 'embusqués', having no wounds to show
save for the thorns, ecstatic at such pain.

> Once more the truth advances; and again
> the metaphors of blood begin to flow. (*NCP*, 172)

This section is the key to the whole poem. In the first stanza Hill uses vicious punning to explore Péguy's difficulty with Catholicism. The opening lines use punctuation to alter the meaning of four simple words. They reflect Péguy's idea of a just God, the one he wants to believe in, and the God that the Church seems to represent, the one that seems to have done away with Justice. For Péguy the crux is damnation. Halévy quotes him as saying 'we are one with the eternally damned' (Halévy, 1946, 137). Péguy's inability to accept that his unbaptised children would be sent to Hell formed the heart of a problem that consumed his spiritual life. He wrote:

> When I think that now while I am talking, all the time you are busy damning souls, forgive me, O my God, it makes my head go round and round. When I think of that I can't pray any more ... The Communion of Your Son's Body no longer has all its grace. (Halévy, 1946, 140)

We can see this informing the rest of that opening stanza. Hill decapitalises 'Catholic God', making it 'catholic god'. If the one God of the Roman Church will not 'honour' the souls of the damned, then we must have another universal god, whose love extends 'even' to those whom God deems unworthy.

The following stanzas look at Dreyfus's humiliation. Hill shows us Dreyfus having his rank and sword removed, but he makes it into a spectacle, not into the real event that Jaurès' death appeared to be. Dreyfus is presented as 'the school prig', not as the suffering hero of the incident, but as someone who behaved in a cold, decorous manner throughout, and was something of a disappointment to his supporters. Hill is not suggesting that Dreyfus was guilty, but that he behaved almost as if he had been caught in some schoolboy jape. We begin to suspect that this is all unreal in the next stanza. The comic officer breaking the sword is wearing 'rouge'. His rage is 'ordered' not only in the sense that it is controlled through the military humiliation of Dreyfus, but also because he is only doing what he is told, like an actor in a farce. Although the horses seem alive, the ranks of men behave as if they are mere pictures drawn of men, but we cannot be sure that it is not their perfect military discipline that keeps them so still. This sentence suddenly moves off into a different dimension with the mention of the 'hosts of the air'. It

is difficult to tell if Hill means the army of angels here, or a group of departed soldiers. The interpretation becomes more complicated in the next stanza where men who fought at real places are confounded with fictional characters from the books of Jules Verne, and those who were crucified at Golgotha, among them Christ. Hill is showing us the way that we see the past as something unreal. In Péguy's words:

> This very instant, under our eyes, the living present turns into the ashes of history, reality is itself, it is not some historic residue. (Villiers, 1965, 232)

Hill's poem shows us how a someone's living present becomes merely another scene in the farce of History. The importance of what happened to him is occluded by the wierd light, it appears like a bad illustration in a book - we do not know if it is a book of fiction or of history. Not even Christ escapes this process. Unless we are like Veronica we will never experience the reality of the crucifixion. We will always be like Clio, collecting traces, learning history, but never intuitively experiencing reality.

Hill moves into a piece of Péguy's biography now to try to reveal the reality of the Dreyfus Affair as he experienced it. Hans A. Schmitt, in his book *Charles Péguy: The Decline of an Idealist* quotes his subject as follows:

> I shall remember all my life those grade-school children, unleashed in the streets at four o'clock, walking home in small groups and cheeping 'Death to the Jews'. (Schmitt, 1967, 97)

There is something deeply horrifying about the infection of these children with such virulent anti-semitism. Hill's poem becomes supremely ironic in this stanza. He suggests that the traditional military instruments of fife and drum are ideally suited for such a Jew-hating song. The rhyme of 'Juif' and 'fife' bleakly confirms it.

Hill's poem attacks the apocalyptical view of time here by showing us how every period believes itself to be at the end of time. Péguy himself was strongly apocalyptical in his vision of the future. But Hill points out how any mob, whose words we cannot make out, is probably screaming the words of the *Apocalypse*, justifying their violence and hatred by asserting that we are at the end of time, and that such-and-such a group must be destroyed or converted. Hill is clearly thinking forwards in time to that other outbreak of anti-semitism about which he has written so much: Nazism. Indeed, Hill seems to

attack Christian redemption here, as if he feels forgiveness is inappropriate for some people. The endless cycle of sin and redemptive grace and the spiritually selfish 'dreams' of mystics will not harmonize with the damnation of the unbaptized.

The section now doubles back on itself in the eighth stanza. Hill pulls himself up on the seemingly harmless use of 'we' in the previous stanza. I have already shown the irony in that stanza - Hill attacks the argument that it is somehow acceptable to sin when forgiveness and absolution are always available. So, this questioning of who 'we' are goes deeper than that. 'We' are the readers of the poem, and the poet himself. 'We' may be identical with the ones who fall to violence, but we can see through the duplicities of facile redemption. Hill then seems to move off in a different direction, suggesting that our roles are decided by Clio. This seems rather odd. If we take Péguy's concept of Clio, it is clear that she has no control over events, she merely comes along afterwards collecting traces. Of course she may be able to say who 'we' are, after the events of our lives, she may control how we are perceived by future generations. But Hill implies here that there is another 'history' which is 'law' - perhaps this version of Clio is one that has real power over what is going to happen. If this Clio is some sort of force of history, we could say that she controls who we are, in the sense that where and when we live makes a huge difference to the impact we have upon the world. This is once more a version of the envy of History that I have written about.

In the next two stanzas Hill's bleak vision of our place in History is revealed. He sees us as betrayers - Pilate, Caiaphas and Judas. This goes beyond the doubt of St. Thomas. We are those who caused Christ to be 'nailed at Golgotha', although in some sense it is we who suffer from our role - we are 'crucified', 'empty-handed' and poisoned. I think this refers to Péguy's version of Apocalyptic thought, which Hill printed as the epigraph to the original edition of the poem:

> Nous sommes les derniers. Presque les après-derniers. Aussitôt après nous commence un autre âge, un tout autre monde, le monde de ceux qui ne croient plus à rien, qui s'en font gloire et orgueil. (Hill, 1983, 8)

In Péguy's terms, those of us living now in the latter part of the century, live in the world of those who take pride and glory in the fact that they no longer believe in anything.

Simone Weil seems to have celebrated the fact that she lived in such a challenging period.

> You could not have wished to be born at a better time than this, when everything has been lost. (Weil, 1970, 47)

For Hill it is something altogether more bleak. He sees these betrayers leaving Jerusalem with nothing. They count their blessings in the sense that they feel lucky to have got out alive, but they do not see that their real blessing was to have had an opportunity to play a magnanimous role in history. He records their petty admiration for Christ's 'wrath', showing that they have not understood very much when they compare it with the military bravery of the Roman army. I think Hill is also hinting at the Roman *gravitas* that allows them to remain largely unmoved by the 'fire' of Christ's message, which they are prepared to ignore for the sake of politics.

Péguy wrote, 'everyone is unhappy in the modern world' (1943, 141). In the final two stanzas Hill reclaims something positive from our unfortunate temporal position. He suggests that some manage to remain true to 'an old faith', even if that means judging themselves severely for the inability to completely master themselves. 'Embusqués' are soldiers waiting in ambush, or those who have been given an easy duty. At this point in time the only war that can be waged against the modern world is a guerilla war of ambushes, and even that kind of fighting is rare, most of us taking a sinecure, not fighting, but wounding ourselves because we feel that will help us to make some spiritual progress.

In this section the questions surrounding history that Péguy struggled with during his life are presented to us in a rather complex way. Hill is trying to link us with Péguy, and to challenge us to live up to the passion of his life. For Péguy, the Dreyfus affair was a major testing ground, but it became a piece of dry 'history' even in his own lifetime. Although Hill sympathises with the sentiment of Péguy's Joan of Arc, that envy of those who lived at the time of Christ, he is quick to accuse himself, and us, of betraying the truth. Looking at the past should tell us that our lives are historically valuable. Péguy often considered his life a failure, and yet his biography is a source of inspiration to many people. We should attempt to be more like Simone Weil - taking pleasure in the

fact that we live in a deracinated, soulless age since it gives us such a great scope for creative work, even if much of that work must be done on ourselves, judging ourselves and trying to overcome our limited personalities in order to bear witness to truth.

The final section of the poem brings us back once more to Péguy's death on the battlefield:

> Woefully battered but not too bloody,
> smeared by fraternal root-crops and at one
> with the fritillary and the veined stone,
> having composed his great work, his small body, (*NCP*, 178)

The beetroots are 'fraternal' in the sense that we looked at earlier. They are our literal brothers, we are made of the same stuff as them. In death Péguy achieves an at-one-ment with the world he lived in. His life is a work of art in itself, and is complete at the moment of his death, as if his small body lying on the earth was the perfect 'sculpture' of him. In this poem, Hill works with awareness of the way writing about the past can slide into tragedy or farce, and that telling the story of a life involves some distortion. Hill is conscious of the problems of attempting some real connection with the past, but this does not lead him to abandon the attempt, or to give in and falsify.

Geoffrey Hill was thirteen years old at the close of World War Two. The war forms the background to *Mercian Hymns*; it is the historical setting against which the engagement with a more distant past is performed. The intense nature of Hill's engagement with the history of Nazi Germany is clear from poems such as 'I Had Hope When Violence Was Ceas'd', 'Ovid in the Third Reich', 'Christmas Trees', and 'September Song'. I have already discussed these poems in earlier chapters, but I would like to focus once more on the closeness of Hill's birthday to that of the deportee in 'September Song'. Hill is sharply aware of having inhabited the same time as people who were victims of the Nazis. One might say that the sharing of that period of history is what allows him, as an adult, to make such passionate connection with the sufferings he writes about. One might even see a kind of inverse of the 'envy' of History here. Hill is aware that he is lucky not to have been born in Germany, where he might have been persecuted (if born into a Jewish family) or might have faced the dilemma he explores in 'Ovid in the Third

Reich'.

This engagement with events surrounding the Second World War seems to have become more intense in Hill's most recent work. In *Canaan* we find three sequences, 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis' and 'Churchill's Funeral', and 'Canaan', which refer directly to that period of Europe's history. While Hill wrote, earlier in his career, about a poet collaborating with the Nazis, in 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis' he commemorates the Kreisau Circle, a group composed of administrators, economists, lawyers, and politicians who plotted the removal of Hitler and a re-structuring of the German state. To refer back to the quotation from Benjamin, one might say he is exploring the possibilities for redemption that existed for people in Nazi Germany.

'De Jure Belli ac Pacis' is a sequence of eight fourteen-line poems. These 'sonnets' are like those in 'Funeral Music' in that they are not rhymed or arranged in a traditional internal sonnet structure. They push the form further towards its limits by including lines of various lengths, some of which are indented by varying degrees from the left-hand margin. The poem is dedicated to Hans-Bernd von Haeften, a member of the Kreisau Circle lead by Count von Moltke.[9] In his book *German Resistance to Hitler Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle* (to which Hill refers in his notes), Ger van Roon gives this account of von Haeften:

> 'Basically', he wrote, 'we are all defending "lost" outposts. Today more than ever a Diaspora situation is the fate of the Christian Community in the world. What a marvellous assurance it is to know that this tiny lost band is least of all lost.' He showed early on which side he stood in the Church struggle; he was a member of the Confessing Church, and he had close relations with Bonhoeffer who had been confirmed at the same time as he, in 1921. (van Roon, 1971, 53)

In his biography of Bonhoeffer, Eberhard Bethge puts a similar emphasis on this meeting:

> Bonhoeffer never again referred to these confirmation classes, except that he once mentioned that they were the occasion of his making friends with Hans von Haeften, one of the plotters of 20th July 1944. (Bethge, 1977, 22).

The relationship between these men did not prevent them from having rather different

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[9] Werner von Haeften, the brother of Hans-Bernd, accompanied Stauffenberg on the attempt to kill Hitler with a bomb on 20th July 1944.

attitudes to the methods that should be used against Hitler. Bethge reports an interesting conversation between Moltke and Bonhoeffer during their visit to Norway in April 1942:

> Moltke at that very time 'refused ... for his own part personally to remove Hitler by violence'. And Bonhoeffer, who also knew that God's necessary judgement cannot be restrained, was already pleading the need for assassination. (Bethge, 1977, 659)

We have looked at the struggle Bonhoeffer went through before accepting the need to use violence against Hitler. It constituted a renunciation of one of his most cherished theological principles. Hans-Bernd von Haeften found it more difficult to abandon the determination not to use violence against evil:

> Haeften said to his brother Werner, 'we cannot employ gangster methods', and yet he saw no other way out. This colossal inner tension, which affected his health, led him, still at the beginning of July 1944, to take his friend Krimm (a military chaplain at the time, and just then on leave) to one of the final decisive discussions with Yorck, Trott and others, in order to give his Christian arguments greater weight. The effort was fruitless, however, and it only earned him the censure of his friends. In the end he, too, consented to the assassination attempt because, like his friends, he could no longer bear the guilt of being a silent bystander. (van Roon, 1971, 273).

Von Haeften and Krimm must have advocated Bonhoeffer's principle that one should leave all evil and allow Christ to destroy it. Hill dedicated his sequence to him because of his position in a resistance movement as a man opposed to using 'gangster methods'. As a friend of Bonhoeffer, Haeften had deeply imbibed the concept of non-violence, and it is to his credit that, although he constantly risked his life, and finally lost it, through his part in the Kreisau Circle, he did not embrace violence[10].

The first poem of the sequence is largely to do with the politics of the Kreisau Circle. It also marks the beginning of a level of contemporary political comment that had been absent from Hill's poetry.

> The people move as one spirit unfettered
> claim our assessors of stone.
>   When the nations
> fall dispossessed such conjurings possess them,
> elaborate barren fountains, projected
> aqueducts

[10] Hill attacks the mysticism and violence embraced by 'Childe' Stauffenberg and other members of Stefan George's circle in 'Aglabal' - 'Contempt is in order'. (Hill, 1996, 24)

> where water is no longer found.
> Where would one find Grotius for that matter,
> the secular justice clamant among psalms,
> huge-fisted visionary Comenius ...?
> Could none predict these haughty degradations
> as now your high-strung
> martyred resistance serves
> to consecrate the liberties of Maastricht? (Hill, 1996, 30)

Hill opens his sequence with a poem about federalization. The Kreisau Circle had a vision of a post-war Europe that was essentially a federation. They believed that only such a weakening of nationalistic segregation could assure a lasting peace.

> The documents make it clear that the foreign policy proposal of the Kreisau Circle were based upon a fundamental belief in a Europe integrated into a federal state. (van Roon, 1971, 256)

Moltke's vision of the integration of Europe was not merely administrative in nature, he believed that the people of Europe needed to have a commitment to a shared system of values:

> A common basis, a connecting link was essential if the organization was not to become coercive. For Moltke, the fundamental sources of the European outlook on life were the Christian religion, classical education and the socialist way of thinking. (van Roon, 1971, 259)

Hill's poem seems rather sceptical of the kind of federation Europe is moving towards fifty years on from Moltke's death. The 'assessors of stone' are people qualified to judge 'stones', or we may see them as stone men, claiming to describe the 'people' of Europe, and especially their spiritual dimension. The free movement of spirit within a federation of states is, of course, just what Moltke intended, but Hill suggests that those who herald this as if it were happening now, are insensitive to reality. He then suggests that it is because nations are 'dispossessed' that they engage in 'such conjuring'. The nations of Europe have lost their Empires; the world is no longer dominated by them. This results in another kind of 'dispossession' in the hearts of the citizens of Europe; they perhaps feel the loss of world influence rather sharply, and so dream of grand constructions: either the architectural follies that Hill mentions, or the building of a European federal state itself. Such a state would be a world power once more. Hill's baleful line 'where water is no longer found' undercuts all this grandeur, making it all seem like wishful thinking.

The second half of the poem refers to Grotius (1583-1645), the Dutch author of

the treatise *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* - the first attempt to draw up a system of rules governing warfare, and a book that laid the foundations for international law. Hill also mentions Comenius (1592-1670) a Moravian churchman and educator whose influence the *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes as follows:

> His dream of universal harmony was too vague and grandiose for the mental outlook of the seventeenth century, which was already shifting in a utilitarian and materialistic direction; it has had even less appeal in modern times [...]. At the present day he remains of interest as a prototype of the intellectual citizen. His patriotism did not prevent him from feeling himself a European and from believing profoundly in the unity of mankind.

Hill perceives a true Europeanism in Grotius and Comenius; one built upon law, a belief in universal education and religious unity. Hill suggests that such figures are sadly lacking from present-day politics, where the 'martyred resistance' of the Germans who opposed Hitler is used to justify pieces of legislation such as the Maastricht Treaty, which, since its driving force seems to be economics, is a lesser thing than the Kreisau Circle's plan for Europe's future.

The second poem in the sequence moves us to the site of the 'high-strung martyrdom'. That phrase refers to the high moral tone of the plotters, and perhaps to the musical gatherings that sometimes formed the background of their meetings. But more than this it refers to their hangings (which Hitler had filmed for his entertainment). The epigraph of the second poem is from von Haeften:

> As a believing Christian, he was intensely concerned with the relationship between the Church and the world. He wrestled with the implications of his faith for his day-by-day professional life. In particular he could not help censuring the Evangelical Church for failing to provide its laity with clear directives in the professional sphere. In the struggle between Good and Evil upon earth, which he conceived of very concretely, he saw the archangel Michael fighting against the dragon, Michael, the angel of German history. (van Roon, 1971, 54)

Here Hill is drawing attention to the wrongheadedness of the view that the German nation was totally overpowered by Nazism, as if Germany was the incarnation of evil in history. Von Haeften's vision of his country's patron saint fighting the 'dragon' illustrates the fact that many Germans fought the evil that had arisen within their *patria* without abandoning their love for their country and its culture. Indeed, any reading of the history of German Resistance reveals the damaging effect that the refusal of the Allies to

recognise the distinction between the Nazi party and the German people had upon the attempts of Germans to rid themselves of Hitler. Hill's poem describes the building in the Plötzensee prison where the plotters were executed. The meat-hooks from which they were hanged are 'still in the beam', but the room has become a shrine to the resistance movement and is always decorated with memorial flowers 'the abused blood/ sets its own wreaths'. The remainder of the poem shows us the cycle of Europe's fortunes. Hill sees Europe as a whore displaying her genitals, suggesting the sophisticated forms of degradation and pain that our history has produced with a reference to Dürer. The final lines of the poem present us with the unnerving image of a German townhall clock, geared so as to be destructive, on which the 'dragon' of evil in history pounds the Archangel Michael who simply 'chimes', unable to defend himself.

The third poem develops this sense of the inferiority of contemporary public action to the ideals of the Kreisau Circle:

> You foretold us, hazarding the proscribed tongue
> of piety and shame; plain righteousness
> committed with much else to Kreisau's bees
> for their particular keeping. We might have kept
> your Christian inhibitions - faithful, non-jurant,
> in the singing court of fear
>   at the grid of extortion -
> but chose pity. This pity is shameless
> unlike memory, though both can draw
> sugar from iron.
>   Pity, alone with its rage,
> settles on multitudes
>   as the phoenix sought
> from a hundred cities tribute of requiting flame. (Hill, 1996, 32)

The opening of the poem refers to the careful security measures of the Kreisau Circle:

> All but the most important papers were burnt immediately after the discussion, and those that were kept were hidden in an absolutely safe place - (in fact, in a bee-hive at Kreisau). (van Roon, 1971, 115)

But quite apart from the reference to the careful hiding of documents, Hill's poem pays tribute to the Christian virtue of von Haeften. We have already looked at his reluctance to approve of the use of violence against Hitler. It is not quite clear what Hill means when he says 'you foretold us'. In one sense the federalisation, which Haeften, Moltke and others believed was the only secure basis for peace, is happening. On the other we

have passed though a half-century which has seen more wars in Europe, and the abandonment of the values of ‘piety and shame; plain righteousness’ which they upheld. Curiously Hill seems to equate the feeling of pity with ‘rage’ and the ferocious bombing of European cities during the Second World War. We need to ask who this ‘pity’ is for. Is it self-pity, which undermines the strength of someone facing up to ‘the singing court of fear’ or ‘the grid of extortion’?

The men of Moltke’s group who were executed, and Stauffenberg and his associates, felt the need to make every attempt they could to rid their country of Hitler and the Nazis, even though they knew they were almost certain to fail. They did it so that History would record that there was resistance; in a way they did it to redeem their nation. Von Haeften did not crumble at his trial, or try to avoid punishment:

> On 15th August, Hans-Bernd von Haeften and Adam von Trott stood before the People’s Court. When asked by Freisler whether he saw that he had committed treason, von Haeften answered in the negative and declared that he looked upon Hitler as the instrument of evil in history. (van Roon, 1971, 277)

Von Haeften responded to the mockery of justice to which he was submitted with a statement that would have been enough to hang him without any other evidence. The other way we could look at the idea of ‘pity’ in the poem is that it is our ‘pity’ for the devastation of German cities such as Dresden and Hamburg which were caused by the Allied bombings. We rewarded the defeated German nation with pity, which may be as damaging to the spirit of a nation as the firestorms our bombers produced were to its fabric and people. Moltke’s circle were aware of the dangers of the Allies’ uncompromising demand for unconditional surrender. Although this stemmed from a desire to avoid the disaster of the conditional peace which concluded the First World War, it implied the invidious identification of Germany with Nazism. It was not an evil ideology that the Allies set out to destroy, but the German nation. Hill weighs up our complicity in that violence and contrasts it with the pacifism and heroism of men like von Haeften.

The fourth sonnet returns us to the execution room, which exercises the same fascination for Hill as battlefields do elsewhere in his work.

In Plötzensee where you were hanged
they now hang
tokens of reparation and in good faith
compound with Cicero's maxim's, Schiller's chant,
your silenced verities.
To the high-minded
base-metal forgers of this common Europe,
community of parody, you stand ec-
centric as a prophet. There is no better
vision that I can summon: you were upheld
on the strong wings of the psalms before you died.
Evil is not good's absence but gravity's
everlasting bedrock and its fatal chains
inert, violent, the suffrage of our days. (Hill, 1996, 33)

Hill suggests that the people who hang flowers in the room where these men were killed are making 'reparation'. If they are Germans then they may have to make reparation for not having aided the resistance movement; for being weaker than Bonhoeffer and von Haeften in the face of crisis. If they are members of the allied forces they make reparation for not having recognised German resistance, for not having assisted it. The younger generations bringing memorials (if any do) must make up for the ease with which we accuse the inhabitants of Germany during the 1930s and 1940s of incarnating the evil of our time, without ever investigating the facts of what occurred, or looking deeply enough to accuse ourselves of similar tendencies towards violence and prejudice.

Hill uses this attempt at memorial and 'reparation' to lead him back to the modern age. Hill ironically calls the people who are making the new Europe 'high-minded', they are 'base-metal forgers'. In this phrase Hill hints at alchemy, but with the suggestion that these 'forgers' will never create gold, since they themselves are made of base material. Alchemy has always been used as a metaphor for spiritual development, but these people are mere 'forgers' trying to pass off faked virtues as the real thing. The word 'common' suggests at once the dream of the unity of mankind and the reduction of culture to the lowest common denominator. Von Haeften stands 'ec-/centric as a prophet' to this debased version of the community he helped design. Hill's eccentric use of lineation emphasises how cut off from modern concerns his dedicatee is. Like Comenius, he does not seem likely to become a popular modern role-model. But if modern conservatism could learn a valuable lesson from radical Toryism, so too could modern

Europeanism from Comenius, and Moltke's circle.

Hill ends the poem with a 'vision' of von Haeften's death, 'upheld/ on the strong wings of the psalms'. In a sense Hill is arguing for the deaths of these men as constituting a kind of martyrdom. It was the Christian commitment of some of these men that led them to oppose Nazism, especially since the Nazi party took over the German Church, making it into a tool of party dogma and instigating the formation of the Confessing Church. At his People's Court 'trial', Moltke made this an issue in his defence:

> During a long duel between Moltke and Freisler, they succeeded in establishing 'the incompatibility between Christianity and national socialism'. The two had only one thing in common and that was that they demanded 'the whole man'. Thus, in this trial too, the problem of the ultimate authority was raised and Freisler recognised the fundamental character of Moltke's resistance. 'We shall be hanged as disciples of Christ', Moltke was able to say. (van Roon, 1971, 279)

Hill sees von Haeften as just such an unofficial martyr as Dietrich Bonhoeffer was. The final lines of this poem are reminiscent of section 6 of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, 'No wonder why/ we fall to violence out of apathy'. Hill sees 'evil' not merely as the absence of Good, but as something which underpins our nature. Like gravity it is some kind of natural law that we will sink into violence. Hill sees the violence as 'fatal chains,/ inert'. This accords well with the idea that we become violent out of apathy. Violence and evil are things that we let overcome us through our own weakness. It is our responsibility to overcome this apathetic and inert way of living. We must take up the right of opinion and action, our suffrage (and perhaps Hill is hinting at the earlier meaning of 'prayer'), and act responsibly and well.

In the fifth poem, Hill comes back to music as a way of figuring the resistance. The final line mentions Rüdiger Schleicher, who was Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law, and was also executed. Eberhard Bethge gives us a picture of the strange relationship between these men's music-making and resistance work:

> On that Sunday afternoon [21st March 1943, the day of an attempted assassination of Hitler], the family with all the grandchildren were practising in the Schleichers' house the birthday cantata for the seventy-fifth birthday of Bonhoeffer's father. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was at the piano, Klaus played the 'cello, Rüdiger Schleicher the violin and Hans von Dohnanyi was in the choir. (Bethge, 1977, 685)

Hill is clearly taken with the image of these conspirators playing music together while they waited for the news of the failure of their attempt on Hitler's life. Bethge shows how deeply the relations of Bonhoeffer later became involved in later assassination plans:

> Neither of the latter [Klaus Bonhoeffer and Rüdiger Schleicher] became really intimately involved in the planning of the *coup* until Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi had been arrested. Both of them, in particular Klaus, had had their own private connections with resistance groups. But it was only after the dissolution of Oster's department and the need to restructure the movement that they had a more significant part to play in it. From then on some of the meetings of people who belonged to the Goerdeler and Stauffenberg circle were held in Klaus Bonhoeffer's or Rüdiger Schleicher's apartment. (Bethge, 1977, 801)

Hill's poem itself uses a suggestion of the power of music to suggest the deep-reaching and lingering importance of the conspirator's efforts:

> Not harmonies - harmonics, astral whisperings
> light-years above the stave; groans, murmurs, cries,
> tappings from cell to cell. It is a night-watch,
> indeterminate and of vast concentration,
> of those redeeming their pledged fear, who strike
> faith from the hard rock of God's fallenness;
> their pain draws recompense beyond our grasp
> of recapitulation.
> Slurred clangour,
> cavernous and chained haltings, echo from time's
> inchoate music, the theme standing proclaimed
> only in the final measures -
> *Vexilla regis*
> uplifted by Rüdiger Schleicher's violin. (Hill, 1996, 34)

Hill uses 'harmonics' to indicate the resonances that the actions of the resistance have. These resonances vibrate on a higher level than those of ordinary human action, just as a harmonic is higher in pitch than the note one would get if one held down the string at the position at which the harmonic is generated. Hill's phrase 'astral whisperings/ light-years above the stave' indicates the huge difference in pitch between the human actions and the 'astral' harmonics which they generate. This music is created not only by the musicians in Bonhoeffer's family, but also in the 'groans, murmurs, cries' of the imprisoned men. Their attempts at communicating with each other may be limited to 'tappings from cell to cell' but they are transformed in Hill's poem into celestial music. Hill shows us these men turning their 'pledged fear' into something active, concentrated and intensely positive. They transcend their fear through their ability to act well whilst

being afraid. Hill incorporates Bonhoeffer's vision of Christians forced to live in a Godless society, a world from which God has retired. Bonhoeffer and others did 'strike faith' from this 'hard rock', just as we saw Simone Weil almost rejoicing in being born in an age when everything had been lost. They have created an atonement which all our petty 'recapitulations' cannot destroy. For Hill, the example of martyrdom transcends the present-day blindness to their vision. He affirms that the theme will be proclaimed 'in the final measures'; eventually we will recontact the sublime music of genuine martyrdom and righteousness. Rüdiger Schleicher plays a piece entitled 'the battle-standard of the king'. This poem is almost a prediction of a new revival of Christianity.

Hill re-writes the harrowing of Hell in the sixth poem. Here it is the 'stark reich' of death that is 'found out'. The German word for empire is so closely associated for us with Hitler's Third Reich that the poem almost suggests that it is Hitler that Christus finds lording it over Fellgiebel, Hofacker and Goerdeler in death. Fellgiebel was chief of signals at Rastenburg, where Stauffenberg and Werner von Haeften planted the bomb that failed to kill Hitler on 20 July 1944. He was responsible for initiating the second part of the coup. He was later tortured for three weeks without divulging the names of any of his co-conspirators, except those he knew to be dead. Hofacker was Stauffenberg's cousin, a lieutenant-colonel who had been involved in plots against Hitler since 1938. Goerdeler was the former mayor of Leipzig who was expected to be the new Chancellor of non-Nazi Germany. If we connect with History as if it were present - 'since time so holds within itself' - we can imagine these men in the time when they were being tortured and executed, but Hill adds in the bass-note of his sonnet with the conviction that 'the spirit bears witness/ through its broken flesh'. Like the harmonics of the previous poem, these men's actions soar above the actual facts of history as an example of impeccable behaviour which it is beyond our power to debase, so here the 'grace' that these men acquired is 'more enduring even than mortal corruption'.

The seventh poem seems to continue the theme of a Nazi necropolis. Here the 'demons' whip their boot-tops like cinematic caricatures of Nazis. Here also they have 'absolute/ licence', echoing the power that Nazism gave to its adherents. That they are

somehow engaged in 'correction' is a parody of the Nazis' euphemistic vocabulary of torture and execution. This is a world of the dead from which God has withdrawn his 'jealous mercy'. There is a suggestion that this is the world we inhabit. The lamentation of the Jews and the Kreisau Circle's witness that the Final Solution was known of, and fought against, from within Germany, are both lost. No-one represents them; instead our attention is focused on 'speculation'. We are concerned with turning Europa into a play-ground of financial gambling. Typical of this, Hill suggests, is the fashionable interest in Schindler, the entrepreneur who used his profiteering within the Nazi system to save a few Jews.

The epigraph of the final poem means 'the place of execution was a shed in prison'. The full quotation from *Aufstand des Gewissens* reminds us that it was the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin. The photographs in this book make the place look quite like the 'engine-shed' Hill described it as. The pictures of the beam, grimly captioned 'the men of the Resistance died here' shows that the hooks are indeed still in the beam. The final poem in the sequence returns to this place:

> But if - but if; and if nowhere
> but here
> archives for catacombs; letters, codes, prayers,
> film-scraps, dossiers, shale of crunched shellac,
> new depths of invention, children's
> songs to mask torture ...
> Christus, it is not your stable: it will serve
> as well as any other den or shippen
> the arraigned truth, the chorus with its gifts
> of humiliation, incense and fumitory,
> Lucerna,
> the soul-flame, as it has stood through such ages,
> ebbing, and again, lambent, replenished,
> in its stoop of clay. (Hill, 1996, 37)

Hill reminds us of the odd, shrine-like place that the execution shed has become. By comparing it with Christ's 'stable' Hill implies that he is memorialising something that was born in this place. And this rough engine-shed will serve as well as a stable for the birth of the truth. Hill wants to believe in grace, truth, and in genuine martyrdom. He knows that the engagement with politics, with the world, has a deeply coarsening effect. This is why he seeks out people who may have failed, who are not tainted with worldy

success, to be his exemplary figures. Significantly, he is not advocating a withdrawal from the world, merely showing that those who are not prepared to compromise will be crushed for their integrity by the amorality of the world. For him, the Plötzensee prison holds a place in which one of the periodic flashes of the soul-flame blazed out from the 'stoup of clay'. Despite the humiliation, persecution and apathy that the world visits upon virtue, Hill still believes in the importance of bearing witness to righteousness. The belief in the 'soul-flame' which this kind of connection to an historical moment gives him is his prime article of faith in the world of 'God's fallenness'.

One of the crucial things about the German Resistance movement, for Hill, is its failure. The relationship between worldly success and self-betrayal that we saw in the figures of Wotton and Oastler is in operation here. Hill directs our attention to some truly admirable figures from our European history who are not often remembered because they did not have the success that Schindler, or the politicians of Maastricht had. Simply because they were not successful, we have to make more of an effort to learn about them. One might say they have escaped the storehouse of clichés that Oakeshott posited and belong in the historical past. If Hill's poems can be seen as vernicles connecting us to the lives of these people, our response (if we choose to delve into the stories of their lives) is genuine historical activity. For Hill it is important to bear witness to these actions, which were essentially performed precisely in order that Germany might be redeemed by History after the cease of hostilities. As Major-General Henning von Treskow, a leading figure in plans for the coup, put it:

> The assassination must be attempted at all costs. Even if it should not succeed, an attempt to seize power in Berlin must be undertaken. What matters now is no longer the practical purpose of the coup, but to prove to the world and for the records of history that the men of the resistance movement dared to take this decisive step. Compared to this objective, nothing else is of consequence. (Baigent & Leigh, 1995, 39)

Hill's unique perception of History has another major strand to it, one which we looked at with reference to his volume *Mercian Hymns*, that is his willingness to write about the mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion that he has for his *patria*, King Offa, and his own boyhood tyrannical streak. This aspect of Hill's historical awareness is the logical

inverse of his admiration for those purer figures who failed to make such a great impact on events as Offa, and those like him, have done. It is impossible to avoid the tone of urgency in 'De Jure Belli ac Pacis'. Hill passionately exhorts us to alter the way we judge the past and to pay attention to the 'exemplary failures' rather than the compromised successes.

This obsessive concern with exemplary failure necessarily implies criticism of those who have been admired for their conspicuous success. Henry Hart has made a strangely prophetic remark concerning just such a man:

> In the last section of *Mercian Hymns*, Hill comemorates Offa, who, like Aeneas, must be brutal to father an impressive culture. But Hill does so with delicious irreverence. When Offa dies, his funeral is not like Sir Winston Churchill's but like Earwicker's in *Finnegan's Wake*, a comic testimony to a great man's ambiguous accomplishments. (Hart, 1986, 190)

Almost as if in response to this insightful piece of criticism, Hill has now written a sequence about 'Churchill's Funeral'. The poem is just such a 'testimony to a great man's ambiguous accomplishments'.

The first section of the poem immediately bridges the gap in time between Churchill's funeral in 1965 and the wartime period of which he is the national symbol:

> Endless London
> mourns for that knowledge
> under the dim roofs
> of smoke-stained glass
>
> the men hefting
> their accoutrements
> of webbed tin, many
> in bandages,
>
> with cigarettes,
> with scuffed hands aflare,
> as though exhaustion
> drew them to life;
>
> as if by some
> miraculous draft
> of enforced journeys
> their peace were made
>
> strange homecomings
> into sleep, blighties,
> and untouched people
> among the maimed:

nobilmente it
rises from silence,
the grand tune, and goes
something like this. (Hill, 1996, 43)

The people are not mourning Churchill, they are mourning 'that knowledge'. Hill reminds us about the cliché about World War Two, and especially London during the Blitz, that everyone was somehow happier and more cooperative. Hill suggests there is nothing magical about Churchill's role in this. We mourn him because he symbolised a time of enforced endurance of hardship. It was not his speeches (most of which were not broadcast at the time, but given in Parliament: the familiar recordings were made in the '50s) that inspired people, but rather their shared experience. The third and fourth stanzas make this clear, by describing the paradoxical effect of 'exhaustion' and 'enforced journeys' on the people of Britain. By hinting at death, and the maimed who could not be cared for in penultimate stanza, Hill attacks the idyllic picture that we are encouraged to hold about the war. This poem is in some ways a counter to the boyish enthusiasm for the conflict that he has recorded in *Mercian Hymns* XXII. The central contrast of the poem is enacted in the last stanza where we are reminded that we are at a funeral by the introduction of music, and musical terminology. But the 'grand tune' which 'rises from silence' is undermined by the introduction of another voice, that of the light entertainer introducing his/her song by saying it 'goes/ something like this'.

The second section of the sequence includes a reprise of an idea from *Mercian Hymns*, where the child is described as 'a king of some kind, a prodigy, a maimed one':

Innocent soul
ghosting for its lost
twin, the afflicted one,
born law-giver;

uncanny wraith
kindled afar off
like the evening star,
res publica

seen by itself
with its whole shining
history discerned
through shining air,

both origin
and consequence, its
hierarchies of sorts,
fierce tea-making

in time of war,
courage and kindness
as the marvel is,
the common weal

that will always,
simply as of right,
keep faith, ignorant
of right or fear:

who is to judge
who can judge of this?
Maestros of the world
not you not them. (Hill, 1996, 45)

The opening of the poem reflects the contrast, in the epigraph from Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, between 'House-law' and 'Star-law'. Hill posits an 'innocent soul', the twin of Churchill who is an 'afflicted one, born law giver' just like the child/ King in *Mercian Hymns*. The innocent wraith has been ghosting Churchill's life in some far off realm; Hill suggests that in death there is some kind of re-union of these souls. The poem then switches into a meditation on 'res publica' (something Hill also examines in the poem 'Respublica'). Hill reminds us that the word we use to describe a state as some kind of monolithic entity, simply means 'the things of the people'. There is a suggestion that there is a similar relationship between the ideal of 'the affairs of the people' in the ghostly realm, and the brute fact of any worldly republic. But when we look again it is difficult to equate the ghostly res publica with the ideal. Rather it seems that Hill is attacking Churchill, in order to praise the 'public' who physically constitute the abstract republic. Although Churchill is afflicted and maimed in contrast with his twin spirit, the people of the republic act admirably. As in the first poem, Hill severs our image of people's 'courage and kindness' 'in time of war' from our enforced admiration of war-leaders. Once more Hill takes apart a word that we use to denote a national community to show us what it means. 'Common weal' is a version of commonwealth but suggests shared welfare, prosperity and good fortune, rather than simply riches and posessions, or the formalisation of community into a legal state. No one with Hill's knowledge about the

Second World War can entirely admire Churchill. His refusal to listen to Bishop Bell's messages from Bonhoeffer concerning aid for the German Resistance hampered their attempts on Hitler's life. His insistence on unconditional surrender and failure to distinguish between the German people and Nazism also drastically reduced the viability of, and support for, the various plots. He also failed the Jews in Europe by not attempting to terminate the Final Solution. He must take some responsibility for the destruction of Dresden and Hamburg, far worse than what was suffered by British cities. Also his refusal to listen to Nils Bohr's plea for responsible use of nuclear weaponry exacerbates his responsibility, along with Truman, for the atrocities at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Hill does not make these accusations in his poem, perhaps because he recognises the inevitability of these kinds of errors when one is leading a country through war. (We have seen his firm belief in the profound effect that occupation and circumstance have upon one's language and conduct). However, he is not reluctant to praise the people of the 'common weal' who 'keep faith' through times of stress. Hill is content to 'marvel' at the traditional British quality of 'fierce tea-making' and to declare the 'maestros of the world' as unqualified to judge their citizens.

The fifth poem of the sequence was originally published as 'Carnival' in the *Sunday Correspondent* on Remembrance Day 11/11/1990. It is an even more acerbic critique of the relationship between war-leaders and their people:

> The brazed city
> reorders its own
> destruction, admits
> the strutting lords
>
> to the temple,
> vandals of sprayed blood
> and oblivion
> to make their mark.
>
> The spouting head
> spiked as prophetic
> is ancient news.
> Once more the keeper
>
> of the dung-gate
> tells his own story;
> so too the harlot
> of many tears.

> Speak now regardless
> judges of the hour:
> what verdict, what people?
> Hem of whose garment?
>
> Whose Jerusalem -
> at usuance for its bones'
> redemption and last
> salvo of poppies? (Hill, 1996, 49)

Hill implicates the people in their own destruction, since it is the city that allows the war-lords to take control. But the lords are dealt with more severely when he suggests that they visit this violence upon their fellow-beings 'to make their mark'. We are the 'judges of the hour' since we are the inhabitors of the present, able to look back at the past and make evaluations based on the stories of harlots, dung-gate keepers or whatever evidence there might be. Hill asks us who we would condemn and for what. Here he implies there is some reason to accuse even the ordinary people of the common weal, the res publica; but the phrase suggests more strongly that we resist the temptation to accuse Germany, Japan or any other nation, for the wars which we have engaged in. It is the leaders who are to blame, we should not hurry to kiss the hems of their garments (although we might take into consideration Hill's theory of the adverse effect of public life upon morality). The last stanza asks us which version of the promised land we should put faith in. Is it a Jerusalem built in England, is it one in the new state of Israel, is it perhaps to be found within a European federation? Hill swiftly undermines these possibilities with his final lines. Our versions of Jerusalem are all heavily in debt to national hatred and violence. Our version of the redemption of the dead is to keep alive national animosity with perverse spectacles like VE and VJ day, and the annual ritual of wearing poppies, which, to Hill, seem like weapons. We can have no version of the promised land, Hill's 'lost kingdom of innocence and original justice' until we free ourselves from the burden of residual hatred, and misplaced idolisation of our war-leaders.

When Hill writes about the past he does so with a faith that the experience of people who have lived before us is accessible. For Hill the imaginative connection with a person from the past has more validity than the bare information one gleans from

documents. Language is a crucial element in this relationship. We speak the language of our predecessors. Their words frame our experience, and mould our characters.

This relationship with the past carries with it certain responsibilities. One should bear witness to the sufferings of others, because it is through such activity that we may gain the strength and integrity to redeem our time. We must work at developing our awareness of the past, our capabilities in the present and our responsibility to the future.

Hill's work responds to this duty. He attempts to redeem the language by writing a poetry that yearns for the pure language of the Garden of Eden, while remaining edgily aware of the dangers of exploiting the past for personal ends, and the moral problems inherent in historically significant action. Hill demonstrates that conspicuous success in the world is very rarely achieved without a severe ethical slippage. He acknowledges the allure of success, while always reminding us of the dangers. He continually presents us with poetry and criticism that explore the experience of people who refuse to renege on their commitment to compassionate behaviour, even if it leads to their own death.

Through studying Hill's work we are made aware of the vital, multi-dimensional connection which we have with the past. We are forced to engage with history not merely intellectually, but emotionally, imaginatively and spiritually. Hill's work challenges us to develop a creative relationship with the past - one that will not merely burden us with information, or inculcate nostalgia, but one that may equip us to live more responsibly and ethically in the present.