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**'UNHAPPILY IN LOVE WITH GOD': CONCEPTIONS OF THE DIVINE  
IN THE POETRY OF GEOFFREY HILL, LES MURRAY AND R. S.**

**THOMAS**

**Richard Brewster**

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Submitted as a thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Studies

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## ABSTRACT

### **'Unhappily in Love with God': Conceptions of the Divine in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray and R. S. Thomas**

**Richard Brewster**

PhD Thesis

Submitted to the University of Durham, September 2002

This thesis looks at the poetry of three markedly different contemporary poets, Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray and R. S. Thomas. They are linked by at least tacit belief in Christianity and the Christian world-view, and this belief shapes everything they write, whether explicitly 'religious' or otherwise.

My focus throughout the thesis is on Hill, Murray and Thomas's differing conceptions of God, and my explorations of their poetic and religious stances take God as both their starting point and destination. The opening chapter is a general introduction to the possibilities of religious poetry in the modern world, before turning, in chapter two, to Hill, Murray and Thomas themselves and an identification of their religious concerns and sensibilities. The remaining thematic chapters concern themselves with Hill and Murray's explorations of suffering and evil, post-1945; the place of humour and laughter in the religious visions of Murray and Hill; Murray's remarkable sequence of animal poems, 'Presence'; and the figure of Christ in the poetry of Thomas. I conclude with a discussion of T. S. Eliot's misgivings concerning religious poetry, and how Hill, Murray and Thomas avoid writing the limited poetry he identifies.

My method throughout is to base my discussion of these three poets on close readings of their individual poems.

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**DECLARATION**

This work has been submitted to the University of Durham in accordance with the regulations for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It is the author's own work, and none of it has been previously submitted to the University of Durham or any other university for a degree.

..... (Richard Brewster)                      ..... (Date)

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For my parents

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this course of study without them, and they have demonstrated to me again and again their love and support, through encouragement, patience and good humour.

I therefore wish to dedicate this thesis to them.

## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis:

CP                          Collected Poems

(The context should make it clear whether it is the Collected Poems of Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray or R. S. Thomas that is being referred to.)

### GEOFFREY HILL

KL                          King Log

C                          Canaan

TTOL                      The Triumph of Love

SS                          Speech! Speech!

LL                          The Lords of Limit

Haffenden                Interview with John Haffenden.  
Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation.  
London: Faber, 1981.

Morrison                Interview with Blake Morrison.  
'Under Judgement'. New Statesman 8 February 1980: 212-  
214.

### LES MURRAY

The Boys                 The Boys Who Stole the Funeral

PT                          The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose

KTBD                      Killing the Black Dog: Essay and Poems

Crawford                Interview with Robert Crawford.  
'Les Murray: Talking with Robert Crawford'. Talking Verse 1 (1995):  
162-172.

Daniel                    Interview with Missy Daniel.  
'Poetry is Presence: An Interview with Les Murray'. Commonweal  
119.10 (1992): 9-12.

R. S. THOMAS

<u>C</u>	<u>Counterpoint</u>
<u>MFHT</u>	<u>Mass for Hard Times</u>
<u>NTWTF</u>	<u>No Truce With the Furies</u>
<u>A</u>	<u>Autobiographies</u>
Rogers	Interview with Byron Rogers. 'The Enigma of Aberdaron'. <u>The Daily Telegraph Magazine</u> 7 November 1975: 25-29.
Lethbridge	Interview with J. B. Lethbridge. 'R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge'. <u>Anglo-Welsh Review</u> 74 (1983): 36-56.
'Probings'	Interview with Ned Thomas and John Barnie. 'Probings: An interview with R. S. Thomas'. <u>Planet</u> 80 (1990): 28-52.

## A NOTE ON THE TITLE

This thesis takes its title from W. H. Auden's rendering of a journal entry made by Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish theologian and philosopher, in 1845.

The entry is entitled 'A Poet's Confession':

The cause of his suffering is that he always wants to be religious and always goes the wrong way about it and remains a poet: consequently he is unhappily in love with God.<sup>1</sup>

An alternative rendering of these lines is included in Howard and Edna Hong's scholarly edition of Kierkegaard's journal and papers:

His suffering is that he continually wants to be a religious individual and continually goes about it wrongly and becomes a poet – consequently an unhappy love affair with God (dialectical passion in the direction of there being something deceptive, as it were, about God).<sup>2</sup>

My intention in this thesis is to explore the conceptions of God that underpin the religious stance of three very different poets, Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray and R. S. Thomas. Kierkegaard perceives a religious longing that drives the poet, and his contention seems to be that the poet is 'unhappily in love with God' because he cannot see that to be religious must involve relinquishing poetry; I hope to demonstrate in my readings of Hill, Murray and Thomas that this contention is a mistaken one.

In the course of this thesis I will explore the means by which their poetry addresses suffering and evil, laughter and the religious, the natural world and the figure of Christ: these contentions shed light on the character of the God with whom Hill, Murray and Thomas are 'unhappily in love'. It will quickly become apparent that Les Murray, at least, is quite happy about his relationship to God, but nonetheless Kierkegaard's 'poet's confession' proves a useful starting-point for this exploration of the Divine in the work of these three poets. Before turning

to the poets, however, it will be useful to consider some of the various cases made for and against religious poetry from a Christian perspective, and the problems that Hill, Murray and Thomas must overcome in their work: that is the topic of my introductory chapter.

---

<sup>1</sup> W. H. Auden, ed. Kierkegaard. London: Cassel, 1955. p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard. Journals and Papers. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967. p. 58.



## 1. CHRISTIAN POETICS: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This introduction cannot pretend to be a comprehensive survey of religious poetry in English. My intention here is rather to raise a number of issues regarding religious poetry that will prove useful in my subsequent study of the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray and R. S. Thomas. My focus therefore will be on modern views of religious poetry and its possibilities, articulated by various poets and thinkers over the last two hundred years.

Central issues for such a study include: differing views of the relationship between religion and poetry held over the last two hundred years; the propitiousness of the modern age for religious poetry; the propitiousness of Christianity itself for poetry; and the place of God in modern religious poetry. Throughout this exploration I will make only passing references to Hill, Murray and Thomas, leaving a fuller introduction to their individual poetic stances to the next chapter of this thesis.

Before turning to the first of these questions, I feel it important to admit to my dislike of the term 'religious poetry' from the outset. It is my intention in this thesis to explore the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas from a religious standpoint, but I acknowledge, with T. S. Eliot, that to 'the great majority of people who love poetry, "*religious poetry*" is a variety of *minor poetry*', and therefore that the label itself is decidedly unappealing.<sup>1</sup> In the course of this introduction I will attempt to define what I mean by 'religious poetry' and, for want of a better description, I will use the term throughout this thesis.

Nonetheless, I find it necessary from the outset to express a preference, voiced by Eliot, but I feel in keeping with the poetic sensibilities of Hill, Murray and

Thomas also, for a poetry ‘unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian’.<sup>2</sup> Whether this is an option still open to the religious poet writing in a predominately secular world remains to be seen.

\*\*\*\*\*

More so perhaps than any other variety of poetry in English, modern religious poetry has to contend with what Ted Hughes memorably described as ‘the terrible suffocating maternal octopus of ancient English poetic tradition’.<sup>3</sup> Hughes’s characteristically muscular image vividly evokes the sheer mass of that daunting cloud of witnesses that surrounds any poet writing in English today who attempts to address religious concerns in their poetry. Of course, ‘religious concerns’ can vary widely from one writer to another, just as religions themselves range from fundamentalist Islam to polytheistic animism, but even a cursory glance over poetic tradition in English reveals that any modern poet when contending with the religious is standing on the shoulders of giants. If a poet’s religious stance is one informed by an idiosyncratic belief system of their own making, they have no lesser a figure than Yeats to contend with; if their sensibility is avowedly agnostic while retaining a sense of the sacramental, Wallace Stevens is perhaps the most prominent precursor they must acknowledge; and even the confirmed atheist has Hardy, Housman and Larkin among his or her predecessors in exploring or satirising the religious customs and experiences from which they feel estranged and excluded through unbelief.

The poetic tradition in English to which I have referred also demonstrates – if, indeed, it needs to be demonstrated – that the vast majority of religious poetry in English has been written by poets belonging to or originating from the various traditions of Christianity. From the eighth century Old English of The

Dream of the Rood onwards, Christianity has provided material for some of the language's greatest poems and poets: Piers Plowman, Donne's Holy Sonnets, Herbert's The Temple, Paradise Lost, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. At the same time, Christian theology and morality have loomed large in the background of the writings of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and almost every major writer in English, extending into the twentieth century with Eliot, Auden, Heaney and, of course, the three poets on whose work this thesis will focus, Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray and R. S. Thomas.

This pervading influence of religion and the persistence of religious themes and ideas in poetry have led some to characterise the relationship between religion and poetry as symbiotic, to the extent that poetry is not only viewed by them as an ideal vessel for religious thought and experience, but also as somehow a religious act in itself. In this view, poetry is endowed with a sanctity, a religious or spiritual significance in and of itself, quite apart from its relationship to any revealed religion. One of the most influential exponents of this close relationship between poetry and religion was Matthew Arnold, arguably the laureate of the Victorian 'Age of Doubt'. In perhaps his most famous poem, 'Dover Beach', Arnold has his speaker listening to the waves on the beach of the title and to 'The eternal note of sadness' which he feels they bring in. Melancholy and isolated, the speaker goes on to consider the state of religious belief in the England of the 1860s:

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world.<sup>4</sup>

This is perhaps *the* classic expression of Victorian doubt, pointing as it does to a view of religious belief as irrevocably in decline and the meaninglessness of life in the aftermath of that decline: all the speaker can do now is depend on human love, and he desperately calls on his lover to fill the gap left by the withdrawal of faith ('Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!').

'Dover Beach' has Arnold in despondent form, ending with its speaker and his companion abandoned, 'on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight': without faith, the world around them 'Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain'. By 1880, however, Arnold's faith had in part been restored and transferred to another object: poetry itself. 'The future of poetry is immense,' he writes in his introduction to The English Poets, 'because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay'.<sup>5</sup> These are the bold claims of a convert, enthusiastically commending his new-found faith to his readers, and he goes on to compare it with the others on offer and finds them wanting:

There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion [that is, Christianity] has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea, the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.<sup>6</sup>

As in 'Dover Beach', Arnold here acts as spokesman for the Victorian Age of Doubt: 'our religion has materialised itself in the fact ... and now the fact is failing it'. There is a great deal of the elegiac here, a mourning for a world that is past, 'its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar'. Arnold believes that the decline

in belief he chronicles is irreversible and therefore, sad as it may be, a new focus of religious feeling must be found: he finds it in poetry.

This 'turn to poetry' over and above religion has proved popular over the past hundred and fifty years, both with inheritors of Arnold and with those who have come to similar conclusions independently. George Santayana shared Arnold's view that 'the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry'. Introducing a series of essays eventually published in 1900 as Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, he argues that the 'single idea' that unites them is: 'that religion and poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry.'<sup>7</sup> In short, Santayana argues that: 'Our religion is the poetry in which we believe'.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the natural culmination of Arnold's veneration of poetry over and above religion comes with Wallace Stevens and his unabashed resolve to set poetry up as a 'supreme fiction', to rival and eventually supersede Christianity and the other religions of the world, movements he views as fictions also, human constructs of history. His stance towards poetry as a religion is summed up neatly in the following statement:

After one has abandoned a belief in god [*sic*], poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption.<sup>9</sup>

So, we have moved from a consideration of religious poetry as a type of poetry, to viewing poetry as religious in and of itself, indeed poetry as the replacement of religion. Stevens's assertion above borrows heavily from Christianity in its culminating depiction of poetry as 'life's redemption', buying back for life the meaning and hope Arnold and others had feared lost with the

decline of Christianity, and seems to outstrip even Arnold in its veneration of poetry: for Stevens, poetry is the only ‘god’ worth trusting in.

This has been a remarkably influential view of poetry in recent times, and while Stevens stands as perhaps the most vocal exponent of it in the twentieth century, it clearly predates both him and Arnold, dating back at least as far as the Ancient Greeks and their portrayal of their poets as fulfilling a high priestly function, in service of Apollo and the Muses. Romantic poets such as Blake and Shelley have also contributed to this view of poetry as religion, with Shelley in particular granting the poet a high priestly role in his Defence of Poetry of 1821: in it, he boldly declares that: ‘A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one’.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the three poets around whom this thesis will take shape, Hill, Murray and Thomas have all been influenced by this conception of poetry as itself a religious act, though in differing ways, and none of which correspond fully with Arnold and Stevens. Looking again at Arnold’s bold predictions for poetry made at the end of the nineteenth century – ‘More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us’<sup>11</sup> – it is clear that neither Hill, Murray nor Thomas write poetry in the world that he predicted. Writing of Arnold’s expectations that poetry would replace religion, the Scottish poet and critic Robert Crawford remarks: ‘in my experience most poets would be glad to have an average-sized congregation regularly attend their readings’.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to Arnold’s hopes, poetry at the beginning of the twenty-first century is arguably as inconsequential to the majority of people living in the West as is religion. In fact, it could probably be

argued that religion, be it Christian, Muslim or otherwise, outstrips poetry in the West as something to interpret life for people, to console and sustain them.

Nonetheless, Hill, Murray and Thomas (until his death in 2000) continue to write poetry, and, for Murray and Thomas at least, the motivation comes in part from a view of the poetic act as itself religious. In the last poetry collection published before his death – No Truce with the Furies – R. S. Thomas included a ‘Homage to Wallace Stevens’, which opens: ‘I turn now / not to the Bible / but to Wallace Stevens.’<sup>13</sup> Thomas was an admirer of Stevens throughout his life,<sup>14</sup> and while his conception of poetry does differ significantly from Stevens’s, Thomas clearly views poetry and religion as inextricably linked. In the introduction to his Penguin Book of Religious Verse he defines religion as ‘the total response of the whole person to reality’, and poetry as ‘the response of a certain kind of person’ to that reality, before concluding: ‘The world needs the unifying power of the imagination. The two things which give it best are poetry and religion.’<sup>15</sup> He argues elsewhere that ‘it is within the scope of poetry to express or convey religious truth, and to do so in a more intense and memorable way than any other literary form is able to. Religion has to do first of all with vision, revelation, and these are best told of in poetry.’<sup>16</sup> This close relationship between poetry and religion does at times resemble Santayana’s delineation of poetry and religion as interchangeable terms, and Thomas’s repeated assertion that Christ was a poet, and the Resurrection and Incarnation metaphors, places him firmly in the sceptical humanist tradition of Arnold.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast with Thomas, Les Murray keeps himself distant from Arnold’s scepticism, while concurring with his exalted view of the poetic act itself. In one essay of 1986, Murray observes that, in the process of editing an anthology of

Australian religious poetry, he came to the conclusion that ‘much of the decent religious poetry of this country dated from the period since the Second World War’. This leads him to infer cautiously: ‘it is hard to resist the speculation that a decline in religious certainty has provoked an upsurge in searching and questioning’.<sup>18</sup> With this statement, Murray seems to be signalling his affiliation with Arnold and his predictions that poetry would flourish subsequent to the decline of religion: however, as Murray continues, it becomes clear that in fact his position differs considerably from that of Arnold:

The near-total divorce of the State from any underlying religious ethic has produced not ‘freedom’ but a terrifying void against which comfortable old Enlightenment audacities are meaningless. It is generations since being an agnostic involved any daring, and atheism tends to put one into coercive rather than generous company. More seriously, whether one believes in the soul or not, neither of these positions feeds it; we feel its hunger as a matter of experience, and have nothing to feed it on but our own selves. (PT 254)

This is Murray at his most strident in his role as Catholic apologist, and his repudiations of agnosticism, atheism and, perhaps most strikingly, the Enlightenment, mark his radical differences from Arnold’s position. As for Arnold’s prediction that poetry would eventually supersede religion, it seems clear that Murray would take issue with the assumptions of progress that lie behind it: ‘it is surely much harder than it may have seemed before to say that man evolves beyond highly developed religion. In perhaps a majority of cases, he falls out of it backwards’ (PT 144-145). Murray feels a need for religion, and for religion to remain religion: in spite of his faith in poetry, he does not envision a time when it will replace his Roman Catholicism. Indeed, he argues throughout his prose that his religious adherence helps him to grasp more fully just what poetry can do: ‘it is surely true that a religion, with an explicit space for and vocabulary for the non-rational side of things, will be better equipped to



understand and work with poetic fusions than can any tradition which explicitly or implicitly relegates the dream side', that is, that which cannot be quantified in human experience (PT 262).

Turning finally to Geoffrey Hill, we come to arguably the most guarded of the three poets, and correspondingly the most reluctant to forward a religious theory of poetry. All that can usefully be said at this point to identify the influence of Arnold and Stevens's conceptions of poetry as religion on Hill's work is that he quotes Stevens in his inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds in 1977, 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', commenting: 'my argument is attracted, almost despite itself, towards [Stevens's conception of poetry as 'life's redemption', instead of belief in God] ... an idea by which it would much prefer to be repelled'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Hill goes on to concede that 'it is more than attraction. Is it not a passionate adherence; a positive identification with the magnificent agnostic faith [of Stevens]...?' (LL 16)

So, Arnold and Steven's conceptions of poetry as a religion have proved greatly influential to modern poets, including Thomas, Murray and Hill. This is not surprising: presenting poetry as the natural successor to religion lends modern poets a significance far beyond the otherwise limited influence they enjoy in the modern world. 'What does it matter if most people do not read our work?' they can say. 'Nonetheless, we are prophets and priests of the numinous.'

Unfortunately, the desirability of viewing poetry as a religion must be counterbalanced by the need to deliver a definition of religion for the purposes of exploring the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas. In this thesis, 'religion', unless otherwise stated, is basically a synonym for Christianity. Following on

from this, Christianity is clearly a 'revealed religion': it does not present itself as man-made, and neither will I view it as such in this study. In short, I concur with Helen Gardner when she writes:

Religion is more than attitudes, aspirations, speculations and intimations. Although it can include all these things, it includes them within a way of life consciously accepted in obedience to what are felt to be imperatives from without the self that are binding ... As Blake declared, and modern sociologists would seem to agree, 'there is no natural religion'. Religion is, or appears to be to those who accept it, revelation, something not invented but given, or handed down from those to whom it has been given.<sup>20</sup>

In accepting this definition of religion, I am sidelining poetics such as those of Wallace Stevens, in favour of an exploration of how the three poets I explore here contend with the revealed religion of Christianity in a modern world that seems largely to have dismissed it as irrelevant. Hill, Murray and Thomas have very different attitudes towards the Christian traditions to which they subscribe. Murray seems on the whole delighted to be Catholic, believing his adherence to Catholicism is conducive to poetry, indeed that it aids his poetic immeasurably in a devoutly secular world. Hill and Thomas are a good deal more ambivalent in their attitudes towards their Christian tradition of Anglicanism, a shared tradition which nonetheless finds very different expression in their respective writings.

How these three modern poets bring their Christian traditions to bear on the world around them is what interests me here, and in this also I follow on from Helen Gardner:

The peculiar interest and the peculiar beauty of religious poetry lies precisely in the fact that the poet who writes as a religious man does write in fetters. He writes as a man committed and his commitment, even if it is not stated, is implied. Whether he attempts to render in his own words and images the substance of the revelation received, or to render his response to it, he asks the reader to accept, at least during the reading of the poem, truths which are not presented as personal discoveries, values that are not his individual values, and to measure the experiences treated

against standards that the poem itself does not create but whose existence it takes for granted.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, it must be acknowledged that Gardner's definition here is distinctly unfashionable and may well be anathema to the majority of post-Romantic poets. The idea that the poet's 'personal discoveries' and 'individual values' are not the central concern of religious poetry stands in profound opposition to the veneration of subjective experience in poetry that has arguably held sway since the eighteenth century, and I feel that of the three poets I explore in this thesis, Thomas at least would take issue with Gardner here. Nonetheless, I believe that Gardner's characterisation of religious poetry will prove more helpful in the course of this thesis than Arnold's equation of poetry with religion: it is Hill, Murray and Thomas as Christian poets that I wish to explore here, and as such Gardner's description of the religious poet as one committed to a revealed religion, indeed 'in fetters' to it, is more helpful to my purposes. It should also be acknowledged that Gardner's conception of religious poetry has a place for the frequent, indeed characteristic ambivalence and scepticism of Hill and Thomas towards various expressions of Christian orthodoxy in their poetry: 'Since "No" is a response as well as "Yes"', Gardner writes, 'we can include as religious poems some poems in which the response is rejection of the Christian revelation and doubt of its truth, as well as poems of mockery and satire on the pretensions of the religious'.<sup>22</sup>

In concurring with Gardner, I am therefore expressing dissatisfaction with Arnold's equation of poetry with religion, and I am not the only one to do so. T. S. Eliot (of whom Gardner is a prominent disciple) had grave misgivings concerning Arnold's characterisation of the Christian religion as first and foremost 'poetic'. Writing of Arnold in 1930, Eliot begins by quoting him:

‘The power of Christianity has been in the immense emotion which it has excited,’ he says; not realising at all that this is a counsel to get all the emotional kick out of Christianity one can, without the bother of believing it[.]<sup>23</sup>

The issue of belief is one to which I shall return at the end of this introduction: at present, it is enough to point out that here Eliot is making a characteristically vehement attack on Arnold’s attempt to poeticise Christianity and thereby dismiss its power.

A less vehement reproach of Arnold comes from J. Hillis Miller, in his essay of 1967, ‘Literature and Religion’. He begins by acknowledging the appeal of Arnold’s position:

It is easy to see why it is that the relations of religion and literature are now of special concern. In a time when the power of organised religion has weakened, people have turned, as Matthew Arnold said they would, to poetry as a stay and prop, even as a means of salvation.<sup>24</sup>

However, in spite of this turn to poetry Hillis Miller identifies, he concludes:

Arnold, however, was wrong, and T. S. Eliot was right. Literature is not a means of salvation. It is the Virgil which can take the pilgrim only so far. Beyond that point only Beatrice can lead the pilgrim farther. Nevertheless, to take a man even so far is in a way a religious service.<sup>25</sup>

This seems to me an eminently sane approach to literature and religion, acknowledging the limitations of literature – it is not identical to religion, nor do the vast majority of literary works purport to ‘save’ their readers – while, crucially, recognizing its efficacy in addressing the spiritual, eternal concerns of its readers: Virgil led Dante through Hell and to the top of Mount Purgatory before having to leave him. The approach to religion and to poetry I shall take in this thesis can perhaps be summarised neatly in a statement made by M. H. Abrams in an English Institute essay of 1957: ‘it is equally unjust to religion to poetize [*sic*] it and to poetry to sanctify it’.<sup>26</sup>

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Having defined something of what I mean by 'religious poetry' in this thesis, I want now to turn to the suitability or otherwise of the modern age for the writing of religious poetry. It has already been acknowledged that Christianity and Christian thought have exerted a great deal of influence over the history of poetry in English; however, it must also be recognised that the religious environment is very different for the poet today than it was for, say, Herbert or Milton. I take these two as examples largely because the seventeenth century is widely seen as the period marking the high-point of religious poetry in English, to the extent that one critic felt able to assert that religious poetry 'as a concept has had little effective issue since [then]'.<sup>27</sup> Precisely why the seventeenth century proved so fruitful an age for religious poetry is open to debate. Helen Gardner, as one of the twentieth century's foremost critics of seventeenth century poetry, attempted to identify those qualities that marked an age as propitious or otherwise for religious poetry:

Propitious ages are those in which the poet can rely on his readers doing much of his work for him, seeing implications and accepting standards that the poem does not itself make and create. Less propitious ages are those in which a poem is expected to make its own field of reference, in which the poet has to convince us of the importance of what he has to say, and must prove his credentials not merely as a poet but as a religious man, and must also prove, in some measure, the credentials of religion.<sup>28</sup>

According to these criteria, the modern age counts as a 'less propitious' one for religious poetry: certainly, the Christian poet cannot presume that their readers possess knowledge of Biblical images or theology in the way that Herbert or Donne could in the seventeenth century. Gardner continues:

The religious poet today has to meet a problem of communication that did not exist for earlier centuries. Words and symbols that lay to hand for earlier writers as sure to evoke a universal response have lost their power. [This is a result of] the disappearance of a general acceptance of Christianity, however conventional, half-hearted, or even cynical it may have been with many people.<sup>29</sup>

While acknowledging the unsympathetic environment for some religious writing today – the problems of communication, the need to prove the credentials of religion as well as poetry to an audience, many of whom are at best ignorant, at worst hostile – it must be noted that measuring the propitiousness of an age for religious poetry is not as straightforward as Gardner’s criteria seem to suggest. Indeed, after outlining these criteria, Gardner herself goes on to qualify them. Observing that the sixteenth century ‘is an almost completely blank period for the lover of religious verse’, as are the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, she tentatively suggests: ‘Perhaps the Ages of Faith were unpropitious for the writing of religious poetry in being too propitious, and it was all too fatally easy then to write religious poetry that relied almost wholly on stock responses’.<sup>30</sup>

Turning aside from these ‘Ages of Faith’ to the eighth century, we find one of the greatest Christian poems in English – The Dream of the Rood – emerging from a time that was remarkably *unpropitious* for a poem dealing, as it does, with the crucifixion of Christ. In the eighth century, Anglo-Saxon England was nominally Christian, but in reality the Germanic code of chivalry still held greater sway, with its conceptions of the good irrevocably linked to military might, loyalty to one’s lord and the glory of dying in battle. Poems roughly contemporary with The Dream, such as Beowulf and The Battle of Maldon, clearly reflect these values, and audiences used to heroes such as Beowulf and Bryhtnoth and to accounts of their courageous acts in battle would clearly struggle when confronted with the central story of Christianity, the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ. That any lord could willingly and humbly accept an ignominious death at the hands of his enemies without putting up a fight could have proved an extremely unpalatable story for an Anglo-Saxon audience raised

with Germanic values of the heroic, and Michael Alexander has noted that many surviving Christian poems of this period suffer for just such a reason: ‘The material of the sacred stories was not easily assimilable into Germanic tradition, and the old poets found some things frankly intractable. Consequently the poems are all very uneven, veering between uncomprehending awe and pagan enthusiasm.’ Alexander concludes that Old English religious verse, while possessing ‘an unpredictability and fascination all of its own’, is frequently ‘clumsy, rambling and uncertain of itself’.<sup>31</sup>

In short, the eighth century was an unpropitious time for Christian poetry, and yet The Dream of the Rood stands as a remarkable example of a poem that utilises the values of its audience to narrate a story that runs profoundly counter to those values. So, in the poem, Christ is portrayed as ‘mankind’s brave King’, every inch the Germanic lord of secular Anglo-Saxon poetry.<sup>32</sup> The *rood*, or cross, narrates the poem and describes Christ as ‘eager to mount the gallows, / unafraid in the sight of many: / He would set free mankind’. The cross, as an upholder of traditional Germanic values of loyalty to his lord, longs to crush Christ’s enemies around it (‘falling [I] could have felled them all’), but Christ forbids it, and the cross obeys: ‘I dared not break aside / against God’s will, though the ground itself / shook at my feet. Fast I stood[.]’

Here Christ is a warrior, stripping for battle and climbing onto the cross himself, eager to accomplish his task, the salvation of humanity: this is a long way from later medieval representations of Christ as the man of sorrows, beaten and bleeding on his way to execution. At the same time, the poem does describe the crucifixion in intensely moving terms:

Wry wierds a-many I underwent  
up on that hill-top; saw the Lord of Hosts

stretched out stark. Darkness shrouded  
 the King's corse. Clouds wrapped  
 its clear shining. A shade went out  
 wan under cloud-pall. All creation wept,  
 keened the King's death. Christ was on the Cross.<sup>33</sup>

The suffering here is largely that of the cross and of creation, rather than that of Christ, but the stark description of the scene still possesses great power, culminating in that final phrase that seeks to grasp the enormity of what is happening: 'Christ was on the Cross'.

The poem goes on to describe the mourning of Christ's 'earls' (a neat description of his disciples for a Germanic audience), alludes briefly to Christ's resurrection, and relates the beginning of the veneration of the cross itself, before concluding with a reference to Christ's great 'expedition', the Harrowing of Hell. Taken as a whole, The Dream of the Rood stands as a remarkable Christian poem that contends with the values of a profoundly pagan culture and uses those values to enable its Christian narrative to be told with considerable power.

This detour into medieval religious verse has, I hope, demonstrated that measuring the propitiousness or otherwise of an age for religious poetry is not as straightforward as it may first appear. Correspondingly, the modern age may not be as resistant to religious poetry as it at first appears. This is a view held by a number of modern poets who contend with religious themes in their work; indeed, some of them identify the characteristics Helen Gardner noted as marking modern times as 'less propitious' for religious poetry as in fact the very factors that assist their poetry.

One such poet and critic is the Australian Vincent Buckley. In his 1968 study Poetry and the Sacred, he contrasts Yeats and Eliot with the Romantics Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and comes to the conclusion that both groups



are dissatisfied with the prevailing climate of thought in their time; the main area in which these two times differ could broadly be defined as their attitudes towards God and the religious. Buckley argues that Yeats and Eliot ‘had to face something which the Romantics did not’, and goes on to delineate what that something was:

By the time Yeats was coming into his strength and Eliot was beginning to publish, Nietzsche’s ‘God is dead’ had gone deep into the individual consciousness and was already permeating the culture. If the conventional religion in which the Romantics grew up did not answer to their deepest needs, the conventional scepticism or humanism in which Yeats and Eliot were separately educated did not answer to theirs.<sup>34</sup>

This is a crucial observation for any consideration of modern religious poetry, as it points both to the difficulties poets concerned with the religious must overcome – Nietzsche’s ‘God is dead’ has indeed gone deep into Western culture, and any poet wishing to explore belief in God in their poetry risks ridicule and dismissal by many readers – and to the curious suitability of Western humanistic culture to religious concerns explored in poetry. Put simply, humanity’s religious nature (for want of a better term) is too often left feeling neglected by the broad strokes of the Western, urban, industrialised world. As Buckley’s countryman Les Murray asserts: ‘At bottom, we cannot build a satisfying vision of life upon agnostic or atheist foundations, because we can’t get our dreams to believe in them.’ (PT 254)

Writing around the same time as Buckley, W. H. Auden also explores the situation of the religious poet in the modern world in his essay ‘Postscript: Christianity and Art’, a witty and thoughtful *tour de force* of sceptical Christianity. On the whole, Auden is broadly positive about the suitability of the modern world to art, religious or otherwise, but for different reasons than those

of Buckley, and not before he acknowledges the difficulties that ‘our urbanized industrial society’ poses for the poet:

It is difficult for a modern artist, unless he can flee to the depths of the country and never open a newspaper, to prevent his imagination from acquiring a Manichaeian cast, from *feeling*, whatever his religious convictions to the contrary, that the physical world is utterly profane or the abode of demons. However sternly he reminds himself that the material universe is the creation of God and found good by Him, his mind is haunted by images of physical disgust, cigarette butts in a half-finished sardine can, a toilet that won’t flush, etc.<sup>35</sup>

Edward Mendelson makes the bold claim that ‘Auden was the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century’:<sup>36</sup> nonetheless, he also struggled with its ugliness and banality, quite apart from its wars and suffering.

Auden continues his consideration of the modern artist in terms more in keeping with Mendelson’s analysis of him:

Still, things might be worse. If an artist can no longer put on sacred airs, he has gained his personal artistic liberty instead. So long as an activity is regarded as being of sacred importance, it is controlled by notions of orthodoxy. When art is sacred, not only are there orthodox subjects which every artist is expected to treat and unorthodox subjects which no artist may treat, but also orthodox styles of treatment which must not be violated. But, once art becomes a secular activity, every artist is free to treat whatever subject excites his imagination, and in any stylistic manner which he feels appropriate.<sup>37</sup>

Auden himself clearly relished the artistic liberty a secular age gave him, contending in his poetry with subjects as varied as love and fidelity (‘Lay your sleeping head, my love’), racial hatred (‘Refugee Blues’) and the lavatory (‘The Geography of the House’). Freedom from restrictive notions of orthodoxy regarding art is something for which the modern artist should feel grateful, according to Auden, and he attributes this freedom to his belief that art has become ‘a secular activity’, *contra* Arnold, Santayana and Stevens. In short, Auden views the very thing most observers identify as the great problem religious poets must overcome – the secular nature of the modern age – as the

religious poet's greatest asset, giving him the freedom to explore whatever themes he sees fit in whatever style he wishes; this is a freedom well-used by the three poets that concern me here, as I hope to demonstrate in what follows.

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Having established that this thesis is interested in exploring the possibilities of religious poetry in the modern Western world, I must now return to the Eliot quotation I began with, acknowledging that many readers of poetry are repelled by the notion of 'religious poetry'. Many of these readers have found solace in Wallace Stevens's conception of poetry *as* religion, but are deeply resistant to types of poetry that view religion as something separate from poetry and yet crucial to understanding the human condition. They fear that such poems would somehow have designs upon them and intend to indoctrinate them into their way of thinking, be it Christian or otherwise; or their reservations are those described by Eliot in the essay from which I have already quoted, 'Religion and Literature':

For the great majority of people who love poetry, '*religious* poetry' is a variety of *minor* poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit, but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them.<sup>38</sup>

Eliot then goes on to cite Vaughan, Southwell, Crashaw, Herbert and Hopkins as potential examples of this sort of 'religious poet'.

The first objection identified above to religious poetry – the fear of indoctrination – is arguably a less common objection than Eliot's, and can quickly be discounted by a cursory glance at Hill, Murray and Thomas's poetry. None of these poets feel the need to write didactic verse, or at least explicitly *Christian* didactic verse: while their moral concerns are frequently urgent and can be rooted in their beliefs about God and the world around them, a reader

would be hard-pressed to identify a proselytising intent in their work. Even Murray, whose prose frequently sets itself up as a closely argued *apologia* for Catholicism, arguably possesses a very different voice in his poetry.

The feeling that religious poetry is surely ‘a variety of *minor* poetry’ cannot be discounted so easily. Certainly, Eliot does not dismiss the charge:

I am ready to admit that up to a point these critics are right. For there is a kind of poetry ... which is the product of a special religious awareness, which may exist without the general awareness which we expect of the major poet.<sup>39</sup>

He goes on to identify Vaughan, Southwell and Herbert as ‘poets of this limited awareness’ (he later withdrew Herbert from the list, contending that in fact Herbert was a ‘major, not a minor poet’).<sup>40</sup> According to Eliot, these ‘are not great religious poets in the sense in which Dante, or Corneille [*sic*], or Racine, even in those of their plays which do not touch upon Christian themes, are great Christian religious poets’, and he concludes with the indictment:

Since the time of Chaucer, Christian poetry ... has been limited in England almost exclusively to minor poetry.<sup>41</sup>

An exploration of the work of Dante, Corneille and Racine is beyond the scope of this thesis, as is the isolation of what happened in England at ‘the time of Chaucer’ to render almost all subsequent Christian poetry ‘minor poetry’. Nonetheless, all three of the poets on whom I will focus here have been influenced by Eliot – Hill the most directly, Murray and Thomas more indirectly – and I wish to return to Eliot’s misgivings concerning Christian poetry in England (and, presumably, Australia and Wales) in my conclusion and ask the question: is Hill, Murray and Thomas’s a limited awareness, or the general awareness of the major poet? All that remains to be said now is that Eliot provides a stern reminder of the hostility modern poets must overcome in many

of their readers when they are seen to be addressing religious themes in their work, and crucially that this hostility to religious poetry is not confined to the secular reader.

Another great Christian poet and critic who was deeply sceptical about the possibilities of religious poetry was Dr Samuel Johnson. In his Lives of the English Poets, he considers religious verse and argues that ‘poetical devotion cannot often please’.<sup>42</sup> In keeping with his own moral reading of literature, Johnson has no quarrel with ‘didactick[*sic*] poem[s]’, written to defend and propagate Christianity: ‘he who has the happy power of arguing in verse will not lose it because his subject is sacred’. He also allows poetry in praise of ‘the beauty and grandeur of Nature’, as these ‘praise the Maker for his works’: in poems of that sort, ‘the subject of the disputation is not piety, but the motives to piety; that of the description is not God, but the works of God’.<sup>43</sup>

When God becomes the subject of the poetry, however, Johnson feels compelled to object:

Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.<sup>44</sup>

Matthew Arnold and Wallace Stevens contended that poetry would come to replace religion, that religion would be superseded by the power of poetry; for Johnson, the opposite is true. Poetry is simply not up to the task of embodying Christian piety in verse (he writes disparagingly of ‘metrical devotion’): when applied to Christianity, ‘Poetry loses its lustre and its power, because it is applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself ... The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestick for ornament’.<sup>45</sup>

These are fundamental objections to a study such as this one, made by a devout Christian; however, a closer look at Johnson's objections reveals that Hill and Murray at least may have escaped his censure. The object of Johnson's scorn is clearly devotional verse; he has no quarrel with that poetry that addresses 'not piety, but the motives to piety ... not God, but the works of God'. In short, Hill and Murray can both be excused from these criticisms, as in both poets' work, their religious beliefs, and God himself, are implicit rather than explicit: in the case of Hill, they are frequently completely hidden from view, at least in his earlier work. Thomas, on the other hand, may not escape so readily, considering God is the principal addressee in his poems: at the same time, it would be difficult to represent Thomas's bleak, deeply questioning poetry as 'devotional verse', Johnson's principal target.

It should also be noted that Johnson was writing with a clear idea of what religion was (revealed Christianity, rooted in the Bible and eighteenth-century reformed thought) and what functions it should serve (the instruction of people concerning their Creator and Redeemer; the enabling of believers to live in accordance with his will). There is no question of Johnson giving voice to the scepticism regarding religion that has become conventional in the modern world, and the assumption behind his writing here is that his audience will share his view of religion, humanity and God. In short, Johnson's objections to devotional poetry presume a basically religious readership: the modern poet can make no such presumption.

Another Christian poet who voiced grave reservations concerning religious poetry was W. H. Auden. I reproduce below his objections to particular examples of religious verse, from his essay, 'Postscript: Christianity and Art':

Poems, like many of Donne's and Hopkins', which express a poet's personal feelings of religious devotion or penitence, make me uneasy. It is quite in order that a poet should write a sonnet expressing his devotion to Miss Smith because the poet, Miss Smith, and all his readers know perfectly well that, had he chanced to fall in love with Miss Jones instead, his feelings would be exactly the same. But if he writes a sonnet expressing his devotion to Christ, the important point, surely, is that his devotion is felt for Christ and not for, say, Buddha or Mahomet, and this point cannot be made in poetry; the Proper Name proves nothing. A penitential poem is even more questionable. A poet must intend his poem to be a good one, that is to say, an enduring object for other people to admire. Is there not something a little odd, to say the least, about making an admirable object out of one's feelings of guilt and penitence before God?<sup>46</sup>

These objections are well-observed, wittily expressed and profoundly apposite to any exploration of religious verse, and I feel unable to refute them: all I *can* say in defence of my thesis is that, as with Johnson, the objects of Auden's criticism are of a different order of religious poetry than that of the majority of Hill, Murray and Thomas's work.

My final example of a Christian thinker who identified something of the difficulties inherent in the creation of religious poetry is Søren Kierkegaard. The great Danish philosopher and theologian exerted great influence over Auden, who edited a selection of his writings in 1955, from which the following passage comes: as with so much of Kierkegaard's work, it is dense and difficult, but the concerns it raises for the religious poet are profound:

A religious poet is in a peculiar position. Such a poet will seek to establish a relation to the religious through the imagination; but for this very reason he succeeds only in establishing an aesthetic relationship to something aesthetic. To hymn a hero of faith is quite as definitely an aesthetic task as it is to eulogize a war hero. If the religious is in truth the religious, if it has submitted itself to the discipline of the ethical and preserves it within itself, it cannot forget that religious pathos does not consist in singing and hymning and composing verses, but in existing; so that the poetic productivity, if it does not cease entirely, or if it flows as richly as before, comes to be regarded by the individual himself as something accidental, which goes to prove that he understands himself religiously.<sup>47</sup>

There is a lot here, much of it in keeping with the objections raised by Johnson and Auden. Like them, Kierkegaard recognises the ‘peculiar position’ in which the religious poet finds himself, creating art out of ‘one’s feelings ... before God’ (Auden), and he identifies the perils involved in ‘establish[ing] a relation to the religious through the imagination’: in so doing, the poet will succeed ‘only in establishing an aesthetic relationship to something aesthetic’, that is, in furthering the production of his art while potentially, and falsely, believing he is in touch with ‘the religious’. A religious choice of subject matter does not dispense with this problem: whether the poet ‘hymn[s] a hero of faith’ or not, he is still involved in an ‘aesthetic task’, he is still creating art rather than serving the religious impulses he wants to. In fact, Kierkegaard concludes, for ‘poetic productivity’ to be genuinely religious, it must be regarded by the poet as ‘accidental’: otherwise, any ‘religious pathos’ that the poet succeeds in generating must necessarily be false, an aesthetic creation rather than a feeling that simply ‘exists’. According to Kierkegaard, the desire to use art to ‘establish a relation to the religious’ is itself an indication that no real relation to the religious will be established: in short, the religious poet will either find that his ‘poetic productivity’ ceases entirely or that, if it continues, he will have no control over it and will regard it as ‘something accidental’.

Kierkegaard paints a grim picture for the religious poet here, one all too aware of the artifice involved in writing a poem and therefore the dilemma that will pose for the poet: to write, or not to write? No wonder he went on to articulate the ‘poet’s confession’ from which this thesis takes its title:

The cause of his suffering is that he always wants to be religious and always goes the wrong way about it and remains a poet: consequently he is unhappily in love with God.<sup>48</sup>



Kierkegaard's view of the poet and the possibilities of religious poetry is extremely bleak and difficult to refute. Nonetheless, a bold statement made by Kierkegaard himself in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846) can perhaps be used against his exclusion of religious poetry: in it, he argues that 'If men had forgotten what it means to exist religiously, they had doubtless also forgotten what it means to exist as human beings'.<sup>49</sup> If existing as a human being is inextricably tied to existing 'religiously', then surely there must be a place for poets to address 'the religious' in their work, if they are to explore the human condition in that work: perhaps Kierkegaard might reply that they *can* address the religious, but that they will end up with their own aesthetic creation rather than the authentically religious as a result.

I have taken some time to acknowledge some of the objections Christian poets and thinkers have raised to Christian poetry; I now turn briefly to the case *for* Christian poetry. The strongest argument in favour of the possibilities of religious poetry in English is the vast tradition of Christian poets and poetry in the English language, often emerging, like The Dream of the Rood, from seemingly unpropitious times; when Hill, Murray or Thomas write poetry as religious believers, they are contributing to an already abundant canon of religious poetry that has been produced in spite of the misgivings of thinkers such as Johnson, Kierkegaard and Auden.

Turning to Christian theories of poetry and art, I will look at only two modern examples before turning, in my next chapter, to the individual poetics that inform Hill, Murray and Thomas. The first is that of the Catholic poet and artist David Jones, expressed in his essay 'Art and Sacrament': in it, he views art as a sacrament and 'man [as] unavoidably a sacramentalist ... [whose] works are

sacramental in character'.<sup>50</sup> Jones' argument that art should be taken seriously is articulated in theological terms:

With regard to the gratuitous quality which is said to adhere to Ars[sic] it is well to remember that theologians say that the creation of the world was not a necessary, but a gratuitous, act. There is a sense in which this gratuitousness in the operations of the Creator is reflected in the art of the creature.<sup>51</sup>

The conception of art as a reflection in 'the creature' of 'the operations of the Creator' is well-established, whether articulated from a believer's perspective that man is created in *imago Dei* and therefore imitates his Creator in heaven, or from the Romantic, Shelleyan model that presents the artist as a living Prometheus, creating art as an idolatrous act in defiance of heaven and raising humanity to the level of godhead in the process. Clearly, Jones belongs to the first group and defends 'Ars' from its detractors – implicitly, these detractors are believers – by pointing to God's 'gratuitous act' of creation: if God creates freely, then who are we to pedantically reason the need for art? Indeed, if, as Jones argues, art is 'sacramental in character', if all human art possesses 'the nature of a sign', then at least part of that sign's function must be to point beyond itself to the divine Creator ultimately behind all subsequent acts of creation. This idea of the poet as creating because he first was created is, as George Steiner points out, 'a Renaissance commonplace', but he goes on to observe: 'Striking is the force and persistence of the *topos* of the artist as god, of God the rival, in an age reputedly secular'.<sup>52</sup> Imitating God's primal act of creation in art is a doctrine alive and well in this 'post-Christian age'.

The second recent Christian poetic I wish to turn to is that articulated by Michael Edwards in his study, Towards a Christian Poetics. In this study, Edwards argues that a Christian reading of life and art is not only tenable in our

secular age, it is also evident in the most unexpected places in literature. In his introductory chapter, he writes:

Of course, most tragic and comic writers, and indeed most writers, have been indifferent or hostile to Christianity, and far from anxious to proceed according to its tenets. I am not unaware that Sophocles, say, or Molière, or Bashō for that matter, were not functioning as Christians. What I do suggest is that, if the biblical reading of life is in any way true, literature will be drawn strongly towards it. Eden, Fall, Transformation, in whatever guise, will emerge in literature as everywhere else.<sup>53</sup>

These central motifs of Christianity – Eden, Fall, Transformation – will recur throughout my study of Hill, Murray and Thomas: of course, that all three poets are nominally Christian is only to my advantage in appropriating these terms. It should be noted that Edwards has written sensitively on Hill,<sup>54</sup> and for a Christian reader of poetry like myself, his central thesis is a compelling one:

Literature occurs because we inhabit a fallen world. Explicitly or obscurely, it is part of our dispute with that world, and of our search for its and our own regeneration.<sup>55</sup>

This, to me, speaks volumes in response to the misgivings of Kierkegaard and Auden regarding the religious man or woman producing literature. Kierkegaard is perhaps correct in pointing out the near-impossibility of a writer possessing purely Christian motives when he comes to write, but Edwards' response would surely be that the imperfection of those motives in creating art is just one more symptom of the fact that we live, work and write in a fallen world: because of that, perfection is unattainable, but an ability to 'dispute with that world' is not. For Edwards, the fallenness of the artist is a prerequisite to the art, and, as Hill pointed out in a public lecture delivered at the University of Warwick in 2001, the doctrine of 'original sin' which follows on from the Fall (the event he quotes Cardinal Newman as describing as 'the terrible aboriginal calamity') is, for him

at least, a ‘liberating’ one, in its acknowledgement of the unattainability of perfection in art.<sup>56</sup>

So then, these are some of the conflicting voices raised by Christian thinkers regarding the conduciveness or otherwise of Christianity to poetry. It is by no means a definitive list, but it does reveal some of the tensions felt by Christian believers in recent times regarding the place of literature in the world and, more specifically, the possibilities open to literature in addressing religious concerns sensitively and faithfully. These are concerns which will recur in my subsequent study of Hill, Murray and Thomas: but before I turn to them, I must turn to the God with whom, according to Kierkegaard, each poet is ‘unhappily in love’.

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In interview in 1983, the French playwright Eugène Ionesco expressed a dilemma that had haunted him throughout his career:

The basic problem is that if God exists, what is the point of literature? And if He *doesn't* exist, what is the point of literature? Either way, my writing, the only thing I have ever succeeded in doing, is invalidated.<sup>57</sup>

These questions appear to stand as an arid interrogation. Taking them at face value, Ionesco seems to be saying that the existence of God is irrelevant to the question, why write literature? As we have already seen, this is a question that could begin to be answered by referring Ionesco back to what David Jones described as God’s ‘gratuitous act’ of creation and art’s imitation of it: that is, if God exists. If he doesn’t, we could turn instead to Wallace Stevens and his contention that, in the absence of God, literature acquires huge importance as ‘life’s redemption’, that which makes life worth living. Either way, reasons can be provided to answer Ionesco’s question, ‘why write literature?’: it should be

acknowledged that, since the Victorian age, the second response has been the more popular.

Ionesco places the question of God's existence in close relationship with the function and meaning of literature, and, perhaps curiously, a close relationship between these two questions – does God exist? why write literature? – has persisted right up to the present day. Instead of 'the disappearance of God' (the title of J. Hillis Miller's 1963 study of five nineteenth century writers), it could be argued that the past two hundred years have witnessed instead the persistence of God (the phrase is Vincent Buckley's).<sup>58</sup> God insists on appearing in poems, plays, novels, film, music: it is the *function* he fulfils that has changed so radically.

In many cases, God is the universal scapegoat: while many artists will maintain that he does not exist, they are often angry with him for that very reason. For Derrida and the post-structuralists, God stands behind 'an illusory goal – the illusion being that there is in fact something outside the sign system which can escape its determinations':<sup>59</sup> as Derrida puts it:

God is the name and the element of that which makes possible an absolutely pure and absolutely self-present self-knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

Reacting against post-structuralism, George Steiner unashamedly places God at the centre of his exploration of language, the arts and the possibility of meaning, Real Presences:

any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, ... any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence ... The conjecture is that 'God' *is*, not because our grammar is outworn; but that grammar lives and generates worlds because there is the wager on God.<sup>61</sup>

For Steiner, God exists as the guarantor that language and literature can possess and convey meaning; for Derrida, God exists as the illusion that deceives people like Steiner. God persists in both men's conceptions of language and he performs vital functions for them, one positive (Steiner's 'wager on God'), the other largely negative (for Derrida, God's function is to deceive people that something exists outside Saussure's all-encompassing sign system).

In both these invocations of God, a very different God emerges from the one present in, for example, Paradise Lost or the 'terrible sonnets' of Hopkins: in short, the God of Derrida and Steiner conforms to the God of the philosophers rather than the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The distinction is Pascal's, as articulated in his Pensées, his uncompleted defence of Christianity published in 1670: in it, he argues:

The Christians' God is not a God who is simply author of mathematical truths and of the order of the elements; that is the lot of the heathen and of the Epicureans ... But the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the Christians' God, is a God of love and consolation, a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom He hath purchased, a God who makes them deeply conscious of their misery and of His infinite mercy; who makes His home in their heart, filling it with humility, joy, confidence and love; who renders them incapable of any other object than Himself.<sup>62</sup>

Pascal makes it very clear that his conception of the Christian God is of a *personal* God, impossible to fully comprehend in light of 'His infinite mercy' and certainly impossible to domesticate (he makes his followers 'deeply conscious of their misery' and 'renders them incapable of any other object than Himself'), but nonetheless distinct from the philosophically-useful name invoked by Derrida, Steiner and countless other thinkers. It was this 'God of the philosophers' that Pascal set about distinguishing and distancing from the God of Christianity, and it was this same God to which Kierkegaard took such exception

nearly two hundred years later: in their respective attacks upon attempts to render God a mere concept useful to metaphysics, the two great thinkers sound remarkably similar. Pascal opens Pensées with a recognition of the fundamental difference ‘between knowledge of God and love of Him’, while Kierkegaard observed: ‘To stand on one leg and prove God’s existence is a very different thing from going on one’s knees and thanking Him’.<sup>63</sup>

In light of the distinction made by Pascal between the God of the philosophers and the God of Christianity, it is clear that Hillis Miller’s contention that God was disappearing in the nineteenth century relates to the personal God, who is loved and to whom people are thankful. In his introduction to The Disappearance of God, Hillis Miller explains some of the consequences of the perception that this personal God is no longer present, both for literature and more generally:

The ideal world still exists, but only as a form of consciousness, not as an objective fact. The drama has all been moved within the minds of the characters, and the world as it is in itself is by implication unattainable or of no significance. Love, honour, God himself exist, but only because someone believes in them. Historicism, like perspectivism, transforms God into a human creation. And as soon as a man sees God in this way he is effectively cut off from the living God of faith. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is turned into a mere temporary ‘value’ like all the rest ... Life in the city, the breakup of medieval symbolism, the imprisoning of man in his consciousness, the appearance of the historical sense – each of these is another way in which modern man has experienced the disappearance of God[.]<sup>64</sup>

This is the world in which Hill, Murray and Thomas write poetry. While the name ‘God’ has certainly persisted, there is little or no consensus as to what he is like, if he exists at all: for many, the God of the Bible is just one of many possibilities, and as for a personal God (what Hillis Miller calls ‘the living God of faith’), it seems Pascal and Kierkegaard were correct – even those who accept the existence of God are frequently left cold by any invocations to relate to him,

let alone 'love' or 'thank' him. Indeed, the many uses to which the name 'God' has been put in the history of philosophy and in contemporary culture led the poet and critic Kevin Hart to use it as an example of deconstruction's claim that 'no text can be totalised without a supplement of signification'.<sup>65</sup> Comparing the uses to which Pascal, Nietzsche and their commentators put 'God', Hart observes: 'few words are more overdetermined than this one'.<sup>66</sup>

In spite of this chaos and lack of consensus regarding God, and in spite of the supposed 'disappearance of God' experienced by the modern age, it is my intention to explore the character and nature of God in the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas throughout this thesis, as a means of exploring their differing religious sensibilities. My main reason for doing so is simple: I believe that the character of a religion, its beliefs, practices and world-view, is inextricably linked to its conception of who or what 'God' is. The God in whom the religious poet believes is enormously influential in moulding that belief: in fact, I would go further and argue that the character of the God in whom he or she believes is the single most important indication as to how that believer will react to the world around them. Is their God generous? Then, frequently, so are they. Is he all-powerful? Is he loving? Is he distant? Ultimately, can he be known? All these factors influence how the believer confronts the world and, crucially for us, how the believing poet writes about it.

This acknowledgement – that the character and nature of the God in whom a poet believes is fundamentally important in identifying the character and nature of their religious stance as a poet – should really be a truism, but curiously it is not. The various Christian traditions can be explored, discussed, dismissed or praised by both outside observers and the faithful themselves, without any



reference to the Supreme Being supposedly behind them. This is largely due to the prevailing atmosphere of agnosticism in Western culture: many feel it would be presumptuous to discuss the character of God when they remain unsure as to whether he really exists or not. To avoid this charge of presumption, I should make clear that, in Hill, Murray and Thomas, I have three poets who do believe in a God (a fact I hope to demonstrate in my next chapter): their differing poetic stances demonstrate that they do not believe in the *same* God, but belief itself is generally assumed in my readings of their poetry.

Another reason for my contention that the character of God is important in any reading of religious poetry goes back to my definition of religion as revealed rather than man-made. Viewing religion as merely an historical or sociological phenomenon is perhaps possible for the modern reader when dealing with medieval texts such as the mystery plays, which served a very definite social function; however, J. Hillis Miller points out in his essay 'Literature and Religion' that this approach will only result in the failure to read religious themes on their own terms:

Of what religious interest are such themes in Dante's poems, or George Herbert's, or T. S. Eliot's if they are accidents of a certain time and place, determined horizontally, as it were, by the influence of other men and their books? Religious themes in literature are without religious significance unless they spring from a direct relationship between the poet and God, however much they may take a form dictated by the age.<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps the central form of religious poetry 'dictated' by the modern age is the shift from explorations of religion – Dante's poetic survey of hell, purgatory and heaven in The Divine Comedy, for example, or Milton's investigation of the Fall in Paradise Lost – to a new emphasis on personal religious experience, a shift from the objective truths of Christianity to the subjective experience of the believer. Helen Gardner observes that:

The stress of medieval religious poetry is on [‘This the Lord did, this he said, this he suffered’], and not in the religious feelings and experiences of individual men. The feelings expressed are common, unindividualized: praise, thanksgiving, sorrow, love responding to love. They are what the writer assumes that all men should feel confronted with these facts: the King of Heaven in an oxen-stall, the Lord of Glory suffering a shameful and agonizing death. The stress is always more on the facts than the feelings: on the marvel of God’s coming to man rather than on man’s attempt to come to God.<sup>68</sup>

In the modern age, this situation has been reversed, to the extent that my intention to situate God in the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas may appear almost a regressive step, a return to a medieval emphasis. Gardner goes on to characterise the religious poetry of Europe since the outset of the French Revolution as ‘the poetry of personal faith, personal discovery and personal doubt’, and she contrasts poets of the seventeenth century such as Donne, Herbert and Vaughan, who all displayed ‘a strongly individual handling of what are common themes’, with those of the nineteenth century, when ‘the poet is expected to create not only his poems but also his subject-matter. The conceptions as well as the treatment have to bear the motto “All my own work”’.<sup>69</sup>

It is clear that most modern poets work according to a nineteenth-century model, including nominally Christian poets such as Hill, Murray and Thomas, but their religious sensibilities and, it must be said, personal preferences do lead occasionally to a treatment of the ‘common themes’ of Christianity. Of course, the most important change since the seventeenth century is that these ‘common themes’ are no longer common to the majority of poetry readers, with Western culture’s shift away from its nominal Christianity; as a result, the religious poet is forced to re-think how he can treat such themes in such a way as to reach a largely secular readership.

Following on from this comparatively recent shift of emphasis onto personal religious experience, another characteristic of religious verse ‘dictated’ by the modern age is that even Christian poets such as Hill, Murray and Thomas can now re-make God in their own image: as I have already noted, these three poets, while sharing many of the central beliefs and doctrines of Christianity, differ widely in their conceptions of God and in their ideas as to how those beliefs and doctrines impact on the modern world, for example, in relation to suffering, or laughter, or the natural world. This is clearly a major part of their poetry’s modern character and a major factor in accounting for the substantial differences in their poetic visions.

Of course, the fact that religious themes have endured at all in literature up to the present day is an indication of a significance that has outlasted the ‘Ages of Faith’, a significance that cannot be accounted for by the neat categories of the literary historian, at least not yet. Instead, the critic is forced to explore something of the ‘direct relationship between the poet and God’ in their attempts to shed light on religious themes in literature: as Hillis Miller argues:

Any method of criticism which presupposes that meaning in literature is exclusively derived from the interrelations of words, or from the experiences of a self-enclosed mind, or from the living together of a people will be unable to confront religious themes in literature as such. Only if some supernatural reality can be present in a poem, in a mind, or in the cultural expressions of a community can there be an authentic religious dimension in literature. Only if there is such a thing as the spiritual history of a culture or of a person, a history determined in part at least by God himself as well as by man in his attitude toward God, can religious motifs in literature have a properly religious meaning.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, those who practice the methods of criticism Hillis Miller considers here may be very happy to agree with his conclusions: they are ‘unable to confront religious themes in literature as such’ precisely because they deny the existence of ‘an authentic religious dimension in literature ... determined in part

at least by God himself'. However, in this thesis I acknowledge that 'some supernatural reality' *can* be present in poems, minds and communities, and my intention is to confront religious themes 'as such' in the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas, by exploring the nature of God and the role of God in the religious visions of these three poets.

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This brings us finally to the question of belief and poetry. Does the accident of sharing the beliefs of a poet help or hinder a reader in appreciating that poetry? In the case of religious poetry, does the believer have a natural advantage over the unbeliever in reading the poetry?

These questions have been asked repeatedly over the centuries, though arguably the issue of belief has only really been of concern since the adoption of Christianity as the dominant European religion. As David Daiches points out:

The problem with Christian faith is that it demands more than many other systems of belief. One can appreciate Homer and Virgil without being in the least troubled by one's failure to believe in their gods, because belief is not really an issue; the gods are characters in a story and have a similar status to other characters in the story. Christian faith demands more than this[.]<sup>71</sup>

In the final analysis, it must be acknowledged that these questions concerning the relationship between belief and literature are basically insoluble. All I seek to do here is outline a few of the opposing positions, and a useful test case for this is the poetry of George Herbert. Helen Vendler provides an excellent survey of the differing critical responses to his poetry in The Poetry of George Herbert. In her introduction, Vendler contends that 'Herbert's poetry is as valuable to those who share none of his religious beliefs as to those who share them all'.<sup>72</sup> She then observes that, in making such a claim, she feels herself to

be at odds with the views expressed by Coleridge and Eliot: I quote them both, beginning with Coleridge:

To appreciate this volume [Herbert's *The Temple*], it is not enough that the reader possesses a cultivated judgement, classical taste, or even poetic sensibility, unless he be likewise a *Christian*, and both a zealous and an orthodox, both a devout and a *devotional*, Christian.

You will not get much satisfaction from George Herbert unless you can take seriously the things which he took seriously himself and which made him what he was.<sup>73</sup>

These claims seem straightforward enough, until the high esteem in which so many modern poets and critics hold Herbert's poetry is taken into account: clearly, many readers who do not describe themselves as Christians, let alone 'zealous' or 'orthodox' Christians, can and do get a great deal of satisfaction from Herbert, can and do 'take seriously the things which he took seriously'. Vendler herself is one such reader, and she goes on to quote A. E. Housman's comments regarding belief and religious literature, from his 1933 lecture, 'The Name and Nature of Poetry':

good religious poetry, whether in Keble or Dante or Job, is likely to be most justly appreciated and most discriminately relished by the undevout.<sup>74</sup>

This sort of reasoning is an inadequate response to the whole issue of belief and literature, however, coming as it does from a famously 'undevout' poet speaking in his own favour; Herbert has endured as much among the 'devout' as the 'undevout', and to identify which side is more 'just' in its appreciation and more 'discriminating' in its relish appears to be beyond Housman's abilities.

The case of T. S. Eliot is perhaps exemplary in demonstrating the difficulties experienced by a critic attempting to ascertain whether belief is important or influential in the enjoyment of poetry. Vendler quotes Eliot from 1932, when he argues that a reader must be able to take Herbert's concerns

seriously to get much satisfaction from his poetry; in 1962, however, Eliot's pamphlet on Herbert for the British Council was published, where he articulated a different view:

I claim a place for Herbert among those poets whose work every lover of English poetry should read and every student of English poetry should study, irrespective of religious belief or unbelief[.]<sup>75</sup>

This is quite a progression in Eliot's argument, and his view of Herbert's poetry is not the only example I could cite concerning his struggle with the relationship between the personal beliefs of the reader and their appreciation of literature. His 1929 essay on Dante includes an extended footnote in which he takes issue with I. A. Richards concerning the issue of belief. Eliot begins with the assumption that 'the reader can obtain the full "literary" or (if you will) "aesthetic" enjoyment without sharing the beliefs of the author ... I deny, in short, that the reader must share the beliefs of the poet in order to enjoy the poetry fully'.<sup>76</sup> However, he then goes on to qualify these statements to the point of reversing them. 'It is possible, and sometimes necessary, to argue that full understanding must identify itself with full belief,' he writes, before a consideration of some lines from Keats, Shakespeare and Dante which he concludes: 'Actually, one probably has more pleasure in the poetry when one shares the beliefs of the poet'.<sup>77</sup>

What are we to conclude from Eliot here? He confesses from the outset that his own '*general* theory [regarding poetic belief and understanding] is still embryonic', and later he confesses 'to considerable difficulty in analysing my own feelings'.<sup>78</sup> In short, Eliot's note here is a potent demonstration of the intractable nature of the relationship between a reader's beliefs and his appreciation of a literary work: 'It would appear that "literary appreciation" is an

abstraction, and pure poetry a phantom,' he writes, 'and that both in creation and enjoyment much always enters which is, from the point of view of "Art", irrelevant'.<sup>79</sup> This 'irrelevant' element could also be called the human element, and it renders any theory regarding belief and its impact on literature necessarily incomplete and inadequate in accounting for a reader's actual experience.<sup>80</sup>

So what can we say finally about the relationship between the beliefs of a poet and the beliefs of a reader? On the part of poets, one answer is to point to Keats's statement concerning negative capability, 'that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.<sup>81</sup> R. S. Thomas, for one, feels this saying should be nailed 'over every poet's door'.<sup>82</sup> According to this argument, mutual belief is not as important a factor between poet and reader as is mutual doubt.

The question then becomes: when does a reaching after fact and reason in poetry become 'irritable'? Is a poet necessarily more accomplished if they espouse uncertainty and doubt in their work? Can a poet write with the clear conviction that something or someone is clearly right or clearly wrong, or does a commitment to negative capability urge the poet to be suspicious of any clear convictions? If so, can they be suspicious of some clear convictions, while possessing others of their own? These questions are not just applicable to nominally Christian poets, but also to poets who are politically aware and who seek to inform and/or influence their readers according to their particular ideology, poets such as Tony Harrison and Tom Paulin. In short, should a poet be certain of anything?

Going back to Keats, it is perhaps the *capability* of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts that is an asset to the poet, rather than the refusal of clear

convictions. It must also be acknowledged, however, that whereas clear convictions of what is right and wrong in the realm of politics can be widely accepted by a secular readership, clear convictions regarding religion, God or Christ are on the whole anathema to a post-modern culture. This sort of double standard is something which the religious poet must confront in his or her audience. As for uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, they all come easily enough to anyone's work, writing as they do in a post-lapsarian world where we see only through a glass darkly.

As for how the beliefs of an individual reader will affect his or her reading of a particular work, religious or otherwise, M. H. Abrams is perhaps a voice of sanity in addressing this difficult issue. In the foreword to a collection of essays he edited for the English Institute entitled Literature and Belief, he takes first of all a very reasonable approach:

The diversity of our literary heritage and, still more, the radical diversity in basic beliefs among the best modern writers, which have made the problem of belief a pressing one, have also enforced the theoretical tolerance of alien and conflicting beliefs. Whatever our individual commitments, we are all, as amateurs of literature, pluralists[.]<sup>83</sup>

After making this statement, however, he goes on to recognize the real difficulties in accounting for the impact, positive or negative, of a reader's beliefs on an individual piece of literature, before warning against an overly-simplistic solution:

The viewpoint of critical liberalism is sometimes expressed in the extreme form: "No beliefs are relevant to aesthetic appreciation." But such an absolute predication, although given plausibility by its moiety of truth, is grossly indiscriminating. It exemplifies our tendency to posit a hypothetical poem, emptied of all particularity, and to assume that there is one question about the relevance of belief which is answerable by a single predication applying universally. There is no prior reason, however, why any statement about the role of belief should apply to all works of art, or even to all works of literature, which constitute, in



Wittgenstein's terms, not a homogenous class but a family of diverse individuals.<sup>84</sup>

This recognition seems to me absolutely essential for any attempt to account for the effect a reader's beliefs will have on his/her readings of a particular work. As Abrams recognises, it is impossible to generalise, and it is only upon the actual reading of a work that one can begin to recognise how one's beliefs shape one's response to it. One of the first poets I read with any enthusiasm was Philip Larkin: I was already a Christian when I first read his poetry, and the single poem which I found myself returning to was 'Aubade', an atheist's hymn of despair and his fear of death. I still find the experience of reading it deeply moving, even though I do not share the beliefs of the poet concerning life, death or religion. Indeed, how my own beliefs as a reader affect my reading of the poem – for example, does my Christian faith shield me from the poem's 'arid interrogation'? if so, am I missing out on part of its power? – I simply do not know.

Throughout this thesis I will write of poets such as Dante, Herbert, Milton and Hopkins as all conceiving of a personal God, even though a closer inspection demonstrates that their conceptions of that God differ considerably. Since at least the Reformation, Christian writers have written about their faith in the knowledge that large sections of their readership do not and will not agree with them, including (or perhaps especially) those members of the audience that also call themselves Christian. To what extent these disagreements have affected readers' reception of poetry is probably impossible to quantify: as T. S. Eliot was forced to observe: 'both in creation and enjoyment much always enters which is, from the point of view of "Art", irrelevant.'

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In conclusion then – this exploration of Christian poetics has repeatedly come up against difficulties: difficulties facing the religious poet in the modern age; difficulties facing the poet in treating religious themes at all in their work; and difficulties concerning the beliefs of his or her readership and how these affect the reception of a poem. Indeed, Michael Edwards’s contention that literature occurs in a fallen world gains considerable weight from this exploration, in light of the barriers that seem erected against the possibility of Christian poetry. However, while I have perhaps emphasised the difficulties at the expense of the possibilities, a recognition of these difficulties is a necessary starting-point to any articulation of a Christian poetic, and my hope is that, once these difficulties are recognised, the business of contending with them can begin.

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<sup>1</sup> T. S. Eliot. ‘Religion and Literature’. Selected Essays. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: Faber, 1951. 388-401 (p. 390).

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, p. 392.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes. ‘Introduction’. Keith Douglas: Selected Poems. 1964. Quoted by Geoffrey Hill. ‘“I in Another Place”: Homage to Keith Douglas’. Stand 6.4: 6-13 (p. 7).

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Arnold. ‘Dover Beach’. The Complete Poems. Ed. Miriam Allott. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Longman, 1979. p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold. ‘The Study of Poetry: General Introduction to The English Poets’. 1880. Essays in Criticism: First and Second Series. London: Everyman, 1964. 235-260 (p. 235).

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, p. 235.

<sup>7</sup> George Santayana. Interpretations of Poetry and Religion. 1900. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957. p. v.

<sup>8</sup> Santayana, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Wallace Stevens. ‘Adagia’. Opus Posthumous. 1957. Quoted in Geoffrey Hill. The Lords of Limit. London: André Deutsch, 1984. p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> H. F. B. Brett-Smith. Peacock’s Four Ages of Poetry, Shelley’s Defence of Poetry and Browning’s Essay on Shelley. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967. p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Arnold, p. 235.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Crawford. ‘Presbyterianism and Imagination in Modern Scotland.’ Scotland’s Shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland. Ed. T. M. Devine. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000. 187-196 (p. 194).

<sup>13</sup> No Truce with the Furies. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1996. p. 62.

- <sup>14</sup> See the early poem 'Wallace Stevens', from The Bread of Truth (1963): Collected Poems. London: Phoenix, 1993. p. 135; also interviews with Byron Rogers – 'The Enigma of Aberdaron'. The Daily Telegraph Magazine 7 November 1975: 25-29 (p. 26) – and Ned Thomas and John Barnie – 'Probings'. Planet 80 (1990): 28-52 (p. 46).
- <sup>15</sup> 'Introduction'. The Penguin Book of Religious Verse. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. 7-11 (pp. 8-9).
- <sup>16</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry'. R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose. Ed. Sandra Anstey. Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983. 89-94 (p. 90).
- <sup>17</sup> See for example: John Ormond. 'R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet'. Poetry Wales 7.4 (1972): 47-57 (p. 53); 'A Frame for Poetry', p. 90; 'Probings', pp. 45-46.
- <sup>18</sup> Les Murray. 'Embodiment and Incarnation'. The Paperbark Tree. Manchester: Carcanet, 1992. 251-269 (p. 254). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>19</sup> Hill. The Lords of Limit. p. 16. Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>20</sup> Helen Gardner. Religion and Literature. London: Faber, 1971. p. 134.
- <sup>21</sup> Gardner, pp. 134-135.
- <sup>22</sup> Gardner, p. 135.
- <sup>23</sup> Eliot. 'Arnold and Pater'. Selected Essays. 431-443 (p. 434).
- <sup>24</sup> J. Hillis Miller. 'Literature and Religion'. Religion and Modern Literature: Essays in Theory and Criticism. Ed. G. B. Tennyson and Edward E. Ericson Jr. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975. 31-45 (p. 34).
- <sup>25</sup> Hillis Miller, p. 34.
- <sup>26</sup> M. H. Abrams. 'Belief and the Suspension of Belief'. Literature and Belief. Ed. M. H. Abrams. English Institute Essays 1957. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958. 1-30 (p. 5).
- <sup>27</sup> Vincent Buckley. Poetry and the Sacred. London: Chatto and Windus, 1968. p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Gardner, p. 137.
- <sup>29</sup> Gardner, p. 137.
- <sup>30</sup> Gardner, p. 138.
- <sup>31</sup> The Earliest English Poems. Trans. Michael Alexander. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991. p. 84.
- <sup>32</sup> Quotations from Michael Alexander's translation: Earliest English Poems.
- <sup>33</sup> Alexander, p. 88.
- <sup>34</sup> Buckley, p. 56.
- <sup>35</sup> W. H. Auden. 'Postscript: Christianity and Art'. The Dyer's Hand. London: Faber, 1962. 456-461 (p. 460).
- <sup>36</sup> Edward Mendelson. 'Preface'. Selected Poems. By W. H. Auden. London: Faber, 1979. ix-xxi (p. ix).
- <sup>37</sup> Auden, p. 460.
- <sup>38</sup> Eliot, p. 390.
- <sup>39</sup> Eliot, pp. 390-391.
- <sup>40</sup> Note to 1951 edition of Selected Essays, p. 391.
- <sup>41</sup> Eliot, p. 391.
- <sup>42</sup> Samuel Johnson. 'Life of Waller'. Lives of the English Poets. 1779-1781. Ed. George Birkbeck. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905. p. 291.
- <sup>43</sup> Johnson, p. 291.
- <sup>44</sup> Johnson, p. 291.
- <sup>45</sup> Johnson, p. 292.
- <sup>46</sup> Auden, p. 458.
- <sup>47</sup> Kierkegaard. Sel. and Intr. W. H. Auden. London: Cassel, 1955. p. 83.
- <sup>48</sup> Auden. Kierkegaard. p. 84.
- <sup>49</sup> Quoted in Patrick Gardiner. Kierkegaard. Oxford: OUP, 1988. p. 34.
- <sup>50</sup> David Jones. 'Art and Sacrament'. The New Orpheus: Essays Toward a Christian Poetic. Ed. Nathan A. Scott Jr. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964. 21-58 (p. 33).
- <sup>51</sup> Jones, p. 32.
- <sup>52</sup> George Steiner. Real Presences. London: Faber, 1989. pp. 208, 209.
- <sup>53</sup> Michael Edwards. Towards a Christian Poetics. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984. p. 12.
- <sup>54</sup> See Michael Edwards. 'Hill's Imitations'. Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work. Ed. Peter Robinson. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985. 159-171.

- <sup>55</sup> Edwards. Towards a Christian Poetics. p. 12.
- <sup>56</sup> Geoffrey Hill. 'Writing Into the Language'. Public lecture delivered at the University of Warwick, 23 May 2001. Personal notes.
- <sup>57</sup> Shusha Guppy. 'Eugène Ionesco'. Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews. Seventh Series. Ed. George Plimpton. London: Secker and Warburg, 1986. 99-121 (p. 121).
- <sup>58</sup> Buckley. Poetry and the Sacred. Ch. 3.
- <sup>59</sup> Kevin Hart. The Trespass of the Sign. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 14.
- <sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida. Of Grammatology. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976. p. 98.
- <sup>61</sup> Steiner. Real Presences. pp. 3-4.
- <sup>62</sup> Pascal. Pensées. 1670. Trans. H. F. Stewart. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950. pp. 7-9.
- <sup>63</sup> Pascal. Pensées. p. 5; Kierkegaard, quoted by Auden. Kierkegaard. p. 22.
- <sup>64</sup> J. Hillis Miller. The Disappearance of God. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1963. p. 12.
- <sup>65</sup> Hart, p. ix.
- <sup>66</sup> Hart, p. 41.
- <sup>67</sup> J. Hillis Miller. 'Literature and Religion'. p. 43.
- <sup>68</sup> Gardner, p. 146.
- <sup>69</sup> Gardner, p. 162.
- <sup>70</sup> Hillis Miller. 'Literature and Religion'. p. 44.
- <sup>71</sup> David Daiches. God and the Poets. The Gifford Lectures, 1983. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. p. 213.
- <sup>72</sup> Helen Vendler. The Poetry of George Herbert. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973. p. 4.
- <sup>73</sup> Coleridge and Eliot, quoted by Vendler. p. 4. Eliot's comments come from an essay entitled 'George Herbert', originally published in The Spectator, March 12 1932.
- <sup>74</sup> Quoted by Vendler, pp. 4-5.
- <sup>75</sup> Eliot. George Herbert. London: Longman, 1962. p. 21.
- <sup>76</sup> Eliot. 'Dante'. Selected Essays. 237-277 (p. 269).
- <sup>77</sup> Eliot, pp. 270, 271.
- <sup>78</sup> Eliot, pp. 269, 270.
- <sup>79</sup> Eliot, p. 271.
- <sup>80</sup> A sensitive and stimulating consideration of the problem of belief and literature that clearly follows on from Eliot's note from his 'Dante' essay of 1929 can be found in M. H. Abrams. 'Belief and the Suspension of Disbelief'. See n. 26 above.
- <sup>81</sup> John Keats. Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817. The Letters of John Keats. Ed. Maurice Buxton Forman. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1935. 70-72 (p. 72).
- <sup>82</sup> Thomas. 'Introduction'. The Penguin Book of Religious Verse. p. 11.
- <sup>83</sup> M. H. Abrams. 'Foreword'. Literature and Belief. Ed. Abrams. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958. vii-xiii (p. ix).
- <sup>84</sup> Abrams, p. ix.

## 2. 'UNHAPPILY IN LOVE WITH GOD': GEOFFREY HILL, LES MURRAY AND R. S. THOMAS

In the previous chapter, I looked at some of the arguments for and against articulating a Christian poetics; now I wish to turn to the writings of Geoffrey Hill, Les Murray and R. S. Thomas in an attempt to ascertain their respective attitudes towards the writing of poetry, and how their differing views of Christianity and God inform the poems that result.

Two of the prominent Christian thinkers regarding poetry and the religious from whose writings I quoted in the previous chapter were T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. These two poets loom large in any consideration of poetry in English in the twentieth century, and their respective conversions to Christianity mid-career – Eliot's marked by his 1930 poem Ash-Wednesday, Auden's dated at about the time he bade farewell to the expired 'clever hopes / Of a low dishonest decade' in 'September 1, 1939' – ensure that that they are particularly relevant to my purposes. In short, no attempted survey of twentieth-century poetry in English would be complete without consideration of the influence of Eliot and Auden. One such survey, carried out by Neil Corcoran in English Poetry since 1940, opens with the contention that, for any poet writing in English after 1940, the choice that lay before them was whether to build on Eliot's poetic achievements or to follow Auden's lead instead. In his introductory chapter, 'Eliot or Auden', Corcoran moves from a consideration of Eliot's conception of Christianity to Auden's:

Unlike Eliot's, Auden's Christianity is resolutely unmythical, discovering and articulating itself during the course of inquiries into forms of human behaviour in specific historical and socio-political circumstances. It is, it might be said, not a mystical but virtually a material, certainly an

incarnational Christianity; and it aspires not to an Eliotic silence but to an all-inclusive, argumentative volubility.<sup>1</sup>

According to Corcoran, Eliot's Christianity is mystical, rooted in history and England, and aspires to silence, while Auden's Christianity is material and voluble, and possesses a specific historical and socio-political sense. These two distinctive brands of Christianity provide a useful way in to the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas, all of whom began their poetic careers in an environment heavily influenced by Eliot and Auden. The question that naturally follows from Corcoran's distinction is: to which party do Hill, Murray and Thomas belong, Eliot's or Auden's?

An immediate answer to this question is that Geoffrey Hill and R. S. Thomas belong with Eliot, while Les Murray would appear more at home with Auden. Hill is routinely compared with Eliot, particularly when his early and mid-career output is being discussed: these comparisons can be made in his favour ('Hill ... has filled the unfillable hole left by the slow disappearance of late Eliot'),<sup>2</sup> or they can be used to attack his poetry ('Hill is a parasite upon Eliot's imagination, and any account of his work must face this frankly in order to argue the ultimate authenticity of the style').<sup>3</sup> As for Thomas, his hard, spare lyrics seem frequently to aspire to silence (though his prolific output far outstrips Eliot's and would seem to suggest that silence was never really an option: as the last collection of poems published in his lifetime puts it, 'There is no truce // with the furies' ('Reflections')).<sup>4</sup> As he remarked in interview in 1981: 'I'm a great admirer of [Eliot] really. I think he means more to me in later life than Yeats.'<sup>5</sup>

Les Murray, meanwhile, presents himself repeatedly as a poet ideologically opposed to modernism, and so Eliot is rarely praised in his writings (though he does spare Eliot the fierce denunciation he directs at Ezra Pound in

his review of The Pisan Cantos, ‘Pound Devalued’, near the end of which he remarks in an aside that he considers Eliot ‘a real poet’ in spite of his place as a pioneer of modernism).<sup>6</sup> ‘The terrible crime of modernism has been to isolate poetry from a wide readership,’ Murray told an interviewer in 1985. ‘All those enormous readerships of the nineteenth century, like the hundred thousand readers for a new book by Tennyson, disappeared with modernism and I’m trying to recover that ground.’<sup>7</sup> As I noted in the previous chapter, Murray frequently resembles Matthew Arnold in the faith he displays in poetry’s ability to speak to people wherever they are, and his search for a wide readership for poetry, put off by the techniques of Pound and Eliot, leads him towards Auden as a precursor. In a tribute to Auden, Murray hails him as ‘the absolute master of airy, civilized verse in our own day’ (PT 27), and some of the highest praise he has given to his friend, contemporary and sometime opponent Peter Porter has been to liken him to Auden: ‘With W. H. Auden dead, Porter ... is one of the few really first-rate intellectual poets left.’ (PT 64) It should be noted before moving on that Murray is more interested in locating *Australian* precursors for his poetry than he is in looking to the ‘Old World’ and to figures like Auden and Eliot – witness his 1994 anthology Fivefathers: Five Australian Poets of the Pre-Academic Era and its attempt to identify something of the Australian tradition upon which Murray is building.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the Eliot-Auden distinction is, I believe, a helpful one in coming to these three poets, and the obvious admiration Murray feels for Auden, coupled with the similarities in their poetic subject-matter and technique, warrants his placing with Auden, as opposed to the more Eliotic poetics of Hill and Thomas.

Moving beyond the Eliot-Auden camps, I will now take each poet in turn and examine their religious stance, their approach to writing poetry, and something of their conception of God; I will then begin to ascertain how their individual religious positions and conceptions of God impact upon their poetry and the writing of that poetry in the modern world. We have already established in the previous chapter that there exists a great deal of scepticism concerning the possibilities of religious poetry, or at least the desirability of it (Eliot's recognition that, for many, religious poetry is *minor* poetry); it is now time to investigate whether Hill, Murray and Thomas do enough to justify the production of their respective poetries in the light of those potential objections.

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The front cover of Geoffrey Hill's Collected Poems reproduces a vivid detail from Paul Gauguin's painting, 'The Vision after the Sermon'. In it, we are shown a Jewish man (presumably Jacob) wrestling with an angel against a blood-red background, with the angel's wings resembling tongues of fire.<sup>9</sup> Both the colouring and the physicality of this image are striking, and it goes on to serve as a vivid picture of how readers often feel when they come to Hill's resistant poetry, locked in a struggle with the poems, their dense forms, their frequent allusions to often obscure literary and historical sources, and their unflinching treatments of pain and violence. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, however, it is noteworthy that Hill's publishers have opted for an explicitly religious image with which to catch the attention of the potential buyer. However else readers may want to categorise him, they seem to be saying, Geoffrey Hill is a *religious* poet.



Since the publication of his first collection of poems in 1959, Hill has steadily built a reputation as one of the most respected British poets writing in the post-war period; alongside his poetry, he has also pursued a distinguished career as an academic, teaching at the universities of Leeds, Cambridge and, most recently, at Boston University, Massachusetts, and producing two volumes of closely-argued criticism, The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas and The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language.<sup>10</sup> Born in 1932, Hill's poetic stance and outlook were shaped by his growing up during World War Two and the early exposure he shared with others of his generation to inhumanity, suffering and evil in the aftermath of that conflict. The mass destruction and loss of life in the 1939-1945 period, and the human suffering exemplified in the Nazi concentration camps, all loom in the background of his austere, supremely serious poetry, and there is little room for celebration in his conception of the post-war world. His 1996 collection Canaan, for example, likens modern-day Europe to the Biblical nation of its title; it is no longer the Promised Land it once was, and instead the people are chasing after false gods and sacrificing their children to them.

In spite of these frequent Biblical allusions and the image adorning his Collected Poems, the difficulties and obliquities of Hill's poetry have meant that his own religious position has remained in doubt throughout his career. Religious images, primarily Christian, saturate the poetry, and 'Genesis', the poem which opened his first collection, For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1959, emphatically proclaims the arrival of a new poetic voice with its speaker striding 'Against the burly air ... / Crying the miracles of God' (CP 15). However, this implied celebration quickly gives way to a religious conception in which God

never seems truly present in the poems: the name of God is frequently invoked and implicated in what the poet sees around him, while actual belief and/or faith in God can seem curiously absent.

This difficulty in locating Hill's religious stance, and with it the reason why he insists on including the images and ideas of Christianity in his poetry, has been recognised and wrestled with by many of Hill's critics. Christopher Ricks, one of the earliest champions of Hill's work, spoke for many when he described Hill in 1978 as 'a religious man without, it must seem, a religion; a profoundly honest doubter'.<sup>11</sup> Vincent Sherry builds on this description: '[H]e is a true doubter, a believer who disbelieves, who doubts, if not the validity of religion, at least his own worthiness.'<sup>12</sup> This mixture of belief and doubt, of the validity of religion coupled with the possible unworthiness of the poet, is alluded to in Donald Hall's introduction to the first full-length study of Hill's poetry (though Hall's focus is less on 'religion' and more on 'the Church' as capitalised institution):

[I]n a sense the Church hovers at the center of his work. His language is Christian but his spirit is never unequivocally redeemed – to begin the contradictions by which one speaks of Hill's work. This poetry is suffused with religion but it is not a hymn of belief; it is a lyric of struggle and pain, obsessed with the Christianity from which it takes little comfort or solace. The Church is power, doctrine, institution, and history.<sup>13</sup>

Hall observes here that one is forced into contradictions when speaking of Hill's work and his religious stance, an observation seemingly borne out by the troubled statements of Ricks and Sherry; however, as I have already observed, the notion that poetry is the product of fallen poets is a strong one in Hill, and the idea that a poet's language may be Christian while his spirit 'is never unequivocally redeemed' merely recognises a tension all major Christian artists

have been aware of, namely the imperfection of their art and lives in fully embodying Christ-like holiness and integrity.

Following on from Donald Hall's introduction, Henry Hart pursues some of the apparent contradictions in Hill's religious stance: 'Obsessed with the problem of belief, he seeks to reinterpret traditional Judeo-Christian doctrines and to dramatize them in ways that account for contemporary experience and, especially, for poetic experience. His poetry contains a strange mixture of traditional Christian symbols and a modern man's distrust of all symbols.'<sup>14</sup> Hart argues that Hill's poems 'rarely promise the traditional rewards of religious experience. The boon of grace is glimpsed but usually as it vanishes into darkness'; at the same time, Hart recognises that no reader can dismiss the 'seriousness with which Hill pursues his poetry of redemption', and he views this seriousness as indicative of 'the measure of his understanding of and sympathy for orthodox religion, rather than any cynical or nihilistic rejection'.<sup>15</sup> Hart concludes his discussion of Hill's religious stance by observing: 'Hill's fundamental attitude towards religious tradition mixes pious remembrance and impious iconoclasm and does not alter significantly throughout his career.'<sup>16</sup> Hart's study of Hill was published in 1986, before Hill's recent increase in output (a new collection every two years since Canaan in 1996): the question of whether or not Hill's 'fundamental attitude towards religious tradition' alters significantly throughout his career is one to which I will return.

So far, all the critics I have quoted remark upon Hill's scepticism and struggle with religious belief and tradition as a positive thing, indicative of his honesty and scrupulousness when dealing with this difficult area; Donald Davie voices a negative view of the same sceptical stance. Davie describes what he

sees as 'Hill's continued, perhaps compulsive, hovering around institutional Christianity (particularly in its recusant and Anglo-Catholic varieties) without his ever saying Yea or Nay to that faith, neither giving his assent nor plainly withholding it', and comments:

Such ambivalence, and ambivalence in general, was often applauded, on the good Keatsian grounds that it is not the business of poetry to argue us into or out of any position, to have any such designs upon us. Yet an unsympathetic reader might think that poems which treat of the Church and its martyrs, while carefully preserving the speaker's ambivalence about them, earn the unflattering epithet, 'religiose'.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, Davie aligns himself with the 'unsympathetic reader' he invokes here, while shrewdly recognising much of post-Romantic criticism's tendency unquestioningly to praise poetry's role as uncommitted inquirer, rather than ask whether poetry can and should be able to articulate a clear position, whether that be religious, political or otherwise. The 'good Keatsian grounds' for many modern readers of poetry to exalt ambivalence and denigrate certainty, particularly where religion is concerned, are grounds I will return to in my readings of Hill, Murray and Thomas: for the moment, it will suffice that Davie's is a dissenting voice.

The question of Hill's faith (or lack of it) is taken up by John Haffenden in an interview with Hill published in 1981; near the end of the interview, Haffenden asks Hill:

Do you actually practise any faith? Would you describe yourself as an agnostic, or would you assent to Harold Bloom's term 'desperate humanist'?

Hill's response was as follows:

I would not wish to describe myself as an agnostic. There's a phrase by Joseph Cary in his book Three Modern Italian Poets ... that, if it were applied to my own poetry, might seem to be not wholly irrelevant, 'a heretic's dream of salvation expressed in the images of the orthodoxy

from which he is excommunicate'. That seems to me an apt phrase to describe the area in which my poetry moves.<sup>18</sup>

After Haffenden quizzed him on this description, Hill went on to qualify his statement:

'Heretic', as you say, does imply a conscious act of defiance and choice, and what one is really describing is a sense of exclusion, of excommunication. Excommunication is a more passive thing than a heresy is. (Haffenden 99)

Looking at Hill's responses here, it is noteworthy that he explicitly rejects the term 'agnostic' as a description of his religious stance; on the other hand, he also notably refuses to assert belief in God. Even as he quotes Joseph Cary to 'describe the area in which my poetry moves', he only goes as far as to observe that Cary's phrase 'might seem to be not wholly irrelevant' to an understanding of its religious position, a remarkably convoluted way of introducing an idea. As Vincent Sherry has noted concerning Hill: 'he is outraged by the temerity of assertion. His essays, like his poems, avoid final statements, single positions, clarity of thematic outline'.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, Hill distances himself from the labels offered by Haffenden's question while only cautiously offering an alternative.

So then, how 'apt' is Cary's phrase in its description of the religious stance of Hill's poetry: 'a heretic's dream of salvation expressed in the images of the orthodoxy from which he is excommunicate'? Does this help to resolve the difficulties acknowledged by Hill's critics in their attempts to define his religious position? Hill almost immediately begins to qualify the description of himself as a 'heretic', opting instead for a more passive 'sense of exclusion, of excommunication': at the same time, he seemingly stands by the figure of a 'dream of salvation'. This dream could be an illusory idea of a salvation that

does not exist, or it could point to hope, to an aspiration that perhaps can be met. Either way, it is a dream that, while orthodox in its expression, is excluded from orthodoxy for some reason (aside from distancing himself from the 'defiance' of heresy, Hill does not go on to account for this exclusion at this stage).

Hill is a formidable student of etymology, and he would almost certainly be aware of the Greek root of orthodox, *orthodoxos*, to have the right opinion. His 'outrage' at 'the temerity of assertion' could understandably mean exclusion from notions that there *is* a 'right opinion'; this excommunication would therefore seem to be self-imposed, much like the relationship between Charles Péguy and the Roman Catholic Church that lies in the background of Hill's long poem of 1983, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy. However, the 'images of orthodoxy' still hold considerable sway over Hill's 'dream of salvation' (as they did with Péguy), and excommunication means only removal from the community of believers, not the removal of the object of belief. Is Hill's description of Péguy in the (remarkably unequivocal) notes to his poem therefore equally applicable to the religious sensibility behind his own poetry, in that it embodies 'the solitary ardours of faith but not the consolations of religious practice', that its religious stance is 'self-excommunicate but adoring'?<sup>20</sup>

In his interview with Haffenden, Hill was asked if he rejected the idea that poetry had anything to do with the personality of the writer. 'No, I don't', he replied: 'I deny that it has anything to do with the display of the personality of the writer' (Haffenden 86). Throughout the interview, Hill holds to the idea of the transcendence of personality in art put forward by T.S. Eliot in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', linking it closely to 'a problem poets are constantly encountering: the debasement of language':

Poetry is not self-expressiveness of a vulgarly spontaneous kind ... There's a fine ironic phrase of Nietzsche's about 'this delight in giving a form to oneself as a piece of difficult, refractory and suffering material'. In such a phrase the difficulties, refractoriness and suffering of the personality and the difficult and refractory nature of language itself are seen to cohere. (Haffenden 87)

Hill's conception of poetry, of language, indeed of personality, all speedily disabuse the reader of any expectations of a simple correlation between the words on the page and the beliefs, emotions and sensibilities of the poet. Poetry is not about the 'display' of such things, argues Hill, and even if it were, 'the debasement of language' has rendered any such displays impossible. Therefore, any hopes of locating a simple statement of religious belief from Hill, either in his poetry or in his prose, are quickly quashed.

However, in recent years Hill has described himself as an Anglican.<sup>21</sup>

What this may mean for his poetry depends somewhat on a reader's perception of Anglicanism. (It is a remark attributed to the cantankerous American critic Yvor Winters that 'Anglicans can believe anything – though, of course, most of them don't.')

At the same time, for Hill to align himself with such an established religion was an unexpected move. Whether this was evidence of a conversion or merely a 'coming out', an admission of long-held values and beliefs, the question had to be asked: were Hill's days as self-excluded 'heretic' over? Would it be possible to locate a notably different poetic voice behind the later poems, now that Hill has aligned himself with Anglicanism? Would the 'dream of salvation' be embodied as any more real, as any closer to realisation, now that he had entered a fold?

In an attempt to answer these questions, it is necessary to go back to Hill's early work, before a change can be identified. As we have seen, attempts made to characterise the religious experience articulated by these poems are

heavily dependent on terms such as ‘ambivalent’, ‘sceptical’, ‘doubtful’: a poem which clearly illustrates these attitudes towards religious practice is ‘The Bidden Guest’, from Hill’s first collection For the Unfallen:

The starched unbending candles stir  
 As though a wind had caught their hair,  
 As though the surging of a host  
 Had charged the air of Pentecost.  
 And I believe in the spurred flame,  
 Those racing tongues, but cannot come  
 Out of my heart’s unbroken room;  
 Nor feel the lips of fire among  
 The cold light and the chilling song,  
 The broken mouths that spill their hoard  
 Of prayers like beads on to a board. (CP 20)

The title of the poem refers to Jesus’ parable of the great banquet, as recorded in Luke 14: in that parable, Jesus likens the kingdom of God to a banquet to which many people are invited. However, when the time comes to attend the banquet, the invited guests begin to make weak excuses and refuse to come; the master of the banquet then opens the invitation up to ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame’ (Luke 14:21) and those in the countryside, so that his house will be full, while declaring that none of those originally invited will be allowed to attend.

Just which of these two groups of ‘bidden guests’ includes the speaker of the poem is left unclear: is he one of those invited early on, but left cold by the idea of joining what, in the poem, has become the Eucharist? Or, perhaps an even bleaker reading, is the speaker one of the poor brought in for the feast late on, who, in spite of the generosity shown to him, still refuses to partake in the meal? (The fact that the poem relates a communion service rather than the ‘great banquet’ of Jesus’ parable renders the coldness of the speaker more acceptable.) In spite of the resonances of the title, this ‘banquet’ is not described in the terms



of the great feast that forms the setting for George Herbert's poem 'Love(3)', where 'Love bade [the speaker] welcome'; instead of a homely fire, we are presented with 'starched unbending candles', a harsh description of the decorations present at an Anglo-Catholic eucharistic service.

These candles 'stir', and the speaker half-heartedly likens this movement to the tongues of fire present at the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, even going as far as a declaration of faith: 'And I believe in the spurred flame, / Those racing tongues'. However, the speaker follows this declaration immediately with the admission, '[I] cannot come / Out of my heart's unbroken room': in spite of his declared belief in the 'racing tongues' of Pentecost (implicitly, in the Holy Spirit), the speaker's heart remains an 'unbroken room', unaffected by the declaration of belief he has just uttered. He is also unaffected by the religious ceremony he is a witness to: he cannot 'feel the lips of fire among / The cold light and the chilling song', there does not appear to be the presence of the Holy Spirit here at the eucharistic service, as there was at Pentecost. Ultimately, the speaker feels detached both from the ceremony and from his fellow-guests or worshippers, whose 'broken mouths ... spill their hoard / Of prayer like beads on to a board': the contrast between their 'broken mouths' and the speaker's 'unbroken' heart demonstrates an awareness on the speaker's part as to where the difference between himself and the worshippers lies, namely in their attitudes towards the sacrament, whether humble ('broken') or proud ('unbroken').

In this opening section of the poem, the rhyme scheme is on the whole based on rhyming couplets, though significantly there is not even a half-rhyme for 'the spurred flame' of l.5, suggesting that Pentecostal tongues of fire do not have an equivalent in the ceremony from which the speaker is detached. As the

poem progresses, the speaker remains distant from the worshippers; in fact, 'aloof' would be a better description, as he quietly mocks the 'muffled head[s]' of the people and 'the stiffly-lined priest'. He remarks that 'the leanest heart may feed' on the broken bread of the Eucharist, but his heart does not qualify, secure as it is in its 'unbroken room'. Mid-way through the poem, the speaker likens himself to the prophet Jonah:

But one man lay beneath his vine  
 And, waking, found that it was dead.  
 And so my heart has ceased to breathe  
 (Though there God's worm blunted its head  
 And stayed.) And still I seem to smile.

The speaker demonstrates here that he is possessed of an impressive Bible knowledge; like Hill, he is aware of the 'images of orthodoxy' and so his inability to participate in the service happening around him cannot be attributed to ignorance. Just as Jonah stubbornly rebelled against God and protested against God's mercy towards the Ninevites, so the speaker seems aware of the uncharitable nature of his attitude towards the worshippers he is observing, but remains unrepentant; in fact, he boasts that 'God's worm blunted its head' when it tried to work against this pride and failed to bring about any change in him. That the speaker feels that his 'heart has ceased to breathe' should surely be a cause for concern, but instead he remains unmoved, even content in his position: 'And still I seem to smile'.

The poem concludes with the speaker emerging from his thoughts at the end of the eucharistic service:

But now I hear,  
 Like shifted blows at my numb back,  
 A grinding heel; a scraped chair.  
 The heart's tough shell is still to crack  
 When, spent of all its wine and bread,  
 Unwinkingly the altar lies

Wreathed in its sour breath, cold and dead.  
A server has put out its eyes. (CP 20-21)

Echoing the famous middle section of Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress' ('But at my back I always hear / Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near'), the speaker, like Marvell's, brings his meditation to an end with the recognition that time is passing: for Hill's speaker, however, time breaks into the poem through the mundane and prosaic, 'A grinding heel; a scraped chair', without a chariot in sight, and his back has been 'numbed' by the duration of the service he has attended. At the end of the poem, the speaker acknowledges that 'The heart's tough shell is still to crack', that he remains secure from the 'wine and bread' for another day; the closing image of the poem is the altar 'Wreathed in its sour breath, cold and dead', implicitly in service to a lie ('the altar lies'). Overall, 'The Bidden Guest' is a bleak picture of religious observance and experience.

And yet the speaker does express his belief in 'the spurred flame' of Pentecost, though he does not find it in the service he attends, while his reference to his 'heart's unbroken room' and its 'tough shell ... still to crack' may imply the possibility that his heart's room may one day be broken and that his heart's shell may one day be cracked. 'The Bidden Guest', bleak and cold as it may be, does contain indications that its speaker is not as immune to the religious as he may at times wish to appear; if nothing else, he keeps going to eucharistic services.

In writing about Hill's religious stance, Christopher Ricks posits: 'if we might suppose a patron for Hill', already described by Ricks as 'a profoundly doubter', 'it might be Thomas'.<sup>22</sup> He then goes on to consider 'Canticle for Good Friday', also from Hill's first collection:

The cross staggered him. At the cliff-top

Thomas, beneath its burden, stood  
 While the dulled wood  
 Spat on the stones each drop  
 Of deliberate blood. (CP 38)

At first reading, the opening statement appears to refer to Christ carrying the cross to Golgotha, stumbling under its weight, until the second sentence introduces Thomas, watching Christ on the cross. ‘The cross staggered him’; ‘Thomas, beneath its burden, stood’: this Thomas is not the cynic or wry sceptic of proverbial wisdom; instead, he is a man attempting to grasp the significance of the event he is witness to, the crucifixion of Christ. It is not just the tremendous suffering of Christ’s death that ‘staggers’ him (though Hill’s poetry is unflinching in its treatment of human suffering, as we will see in the next chapter); it is rather the individual nature of Christ’s death, the fact that he repeatedly predicted that he would die throughout his time with the twelve disciples, the fact that this blood is ‘deliberate’, that staggers Thomas, and staggers the lines of this canticle across the page:

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

It is crucial to the poem that it is through Thomas’s eyes that we see the crucifixion, as the poem reminds us that he was ‘not transfigured’. He is not one of the inner circle of Jesus’ friends (Peter, James and John) who witnessed the transfiguration of Christ; more accurately, *he* is not transfigured, he remains a human being attempting to understand what is happening to his master. The poem itself does not describe a close relationship between Christ and Thomas, and it does not attempt to build up their relationship any more than the gospel accounts do; it is through the effect the events of Good Friday have on Thomas,

the way in which they demand his attention that the closeness between disciple and teacher is implied. ‘Watched’ gets a line to itself, forcing the reader to pause, and the lack of punctuation alongside it has the effect of making the reader uncertain as to where the list describing Thomas’s actions is going: just as the scene transfixes Thomas after his attempts to avoid looking at it – he ‘stamped’ and ‘crouched’ before being compelled to ‘watch’ – so the word ‘Watched’ transfixes the reader. Thomas’s attention to the physicality of the scene – he ‘[s]melt vinegar and blood’ – is in keeping with his most famous statement in the gospels: ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe [that Christ is risen from the dead]’ (John 20:25).

The poem notably does not explore the resurrection or Thomas’s response to it; instead, it begins and ends on Good Friday and the effect that day has on the famously doubting disciple:

He  
 As yet unsearched, unscratched,  
  
 And suffered to remain  
 At such near distance  
 (A slight miracle might cleanse  
 His brain  
 Of all attachments, claw-roots of sense)  
  
 In unaccountable darkness moved away,  
 The strange flesh untouched, carrion-sustenance  
 Of staunchest love, choicest defiance,  
 Creation’s issue congealing (and one woman’s).

As with ‘The Bidden Guest’'s ‘unbroken’ heart, the description of Thomas as ‘yet unsearched, unscratched’ suggests that it is only a matter of time before he will be searched and scratched (before he will be interrogated and made to suffer himself as a follower of Christ?), while ‘suffered to remain / At such near

distance' can mean both Thomas is as close to the cross as the guards will allow ('suffered' meaning 'tolerated'), and that he himself suffered in standing so close to the cross and yet remaining so far from understanding what is happening ('at such near distance' is a wonderfully apt figure for Thomas's situation).

The voice in parentheses that reminds us that Thomas was '(not transfigured)' now steps in again to interrupt the action: '(A slight miracle might cleanse / His brain / Of all attachments, claw-roots of sense)'. This voice seems more sceptical than the main speaker of the poem, and could well be Thomas's own thoughts, again trying to make sense of what is happening to Christ: if so, he acknowledges here that the 'claw-roots of sense' he possesses are not up to the job of comprehending the crucifixion, and that it would take very little at this moment ('A slight miracle') to 'cleanse / His brain' of its commitment to reason and logic once and for all. These parentheses are acknowledging the limits of reason and logic in comprehending the 'deliberate blood' of the cross, in comprehending an event of vast religious importance, just as Hill's later poems are often forced to acknowledge the limits of reason and logic in comprehending the suffering throughout so much of human history.

The 'unaccountable darkness' in which Thomas moves away is both the literal 'darkness that came over the land' of the gospel accounts and this mental confusion to which the whole poem bears witness. The poem ends with Christ's 'strange flesh untouched' by Thomas ('strange' both due to Christ's status as God-made-man and to the fact that it is dying). The closing statements balance grisly detail with religious insight – 'carrion-sustenance / Of staunchest love' – hymning Christ's 'choicest defiance' (of the Jewish leaders? of the crowds? of sin and death?), and finish with yet another parenthesis, stating as a matter of fact

a further implication of Christ's death: he is not only 'Creation's issue congealing', he is also 'one woman's'. At the poem's end, Thomas remembers that alongside the cosmic significance of the crucifixion that so 'stagger' him, he is also witnessing the death of Mary's son.

'Canticle for Good Friday' is an atypical poem in its specific focus on a major Christian event, the crucifixion: elsewhere in For the Unfallen, Hill incorporates biblical ideas such as creation and redemption, but places them in more mythical settings (for example, see 'Genesis': 'Against the burly air I strode / Crying the miracles of God' (CP 15)). What it is useful in demonstrating is that Hill's scepticism concerning religious commitment and belief never amounts to, in Henry Hart's words, 'cynical or nihilistic rejection'. If Hill is to be likened to Thomas in his religious stance, then Thomas should be seen, not as a glib man of the world readily dismissing the religious as bunk, but rather as 'Canticle for Good Friday' portrays him: staggered by the cross, unable to comprehend completely the 'deliberate blood' spat out there, but scrupulously watchful, attentive, questioning. Like Thomas, Hill is 'not transfigured', but this does not mean that he does not care about the religious; instead he desperately wants to comprehend it, perhaps too desperately at times to accept that not everything *can* be comprehended, and he clearly feels that Christian theology and history are worthy of his attention. It is important to recognise this distinction between a cynical refusal to entertain religious possibilities, and a sceptical, scrupulous examination of the religious, if we are to understand something of Hill's poetic stance: as he remarked in interview, 'scepticism is a totally different thing from cynicism', and he went on to discuss a 'constructive scepticism'

which acts ‘as one of the instruments of resistance to the drift of the age’ (Haffenden 88).

This idea of a scepticism enlisted to resist ‘the drift of the age’ is a reminder that Hill’s scepticism is often directed more at the modern world than it is at religion. The persistence of religious themes in his poetry is indicative of their importance for Hill’s view of the world in which he writes, and many of those whom his poetry attempts to memorialise – Robert Southwell, Tommaso Campanella, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Charles Péguy, Hans-Bernd von Haefen – are those whose views of the world, history, morality and politics were shaped by their religious beliefs. It seems to be part of Hill’s mission as a poet to pay homage to these people of the past, to remind the contemporary reader of what has gone before so that they can learn from the past. Indeed, Hill does appear to fulfil the risky role of a teacher at times in his poetry, even though his lessons can be remarkably hard to follow; arguably, he avoids some of the dangers inherent in this role – the greatest being the suggestion that, as poet, he is somehow intellectually or morally superior to his readers – in that the lessons his poetry can embody are ones he repeatedly admits he is in the process of learning himself. In one section of The Triumph of Love, for example, he addresses one of his imagined opponents who accuses him of lacking the integrity and courage of the people he often invokes in his poetry:

Confound you, Croker – you and your righteous  
censure! I have admitted, many times,  
my absence from the Salient, from the coal-face  
in Combs Pit, Thornhill. Yes, to my shame,  
I high-tailed it at Pozières (Butterworth  
died in my place). At Arras I sacrificed  
Edward Thomas (the chief cause of your  
hostility – why can’t you say so?). I find  
your certitudes offensive. My cowardice  
is not contested. I am saying (simply)



what is to become of memory? Yes – I know –  
I’ve asked that before.<sup>23</sup>

This is a useful example of what one critic has called the ‘weight of homage and humility’ in so many of the references in Hill’s poetry.<sup>24</sup>

In an interview with Blake Morrison given in 1980, Hill revealed something of the importance of the past to him as a poet:

I am moved to anger by the notorious statement “History is bunk”, and I am moved to agreement by a slightly less well-known statement which suggests that those who do not understand history are condemned to re-live it. I think that it is a tragedy for a nation or a people to lose their sense of history, not because I think that the people is thereby necessarily losing some mystical private possession, but because I think that it is losing some vital dimension of intelligence. I’m entirely in sympathy with those who would argue that in order to control the present one needs to be steeped in the past.<sup>25</sup>

This need Hill feels ‘to be steeped in the past’ is demonstrated by the vast historical scope of his poetry, from eighth-century Mercia (Mercian Hymns) to Elizabethan England (‘Lachrimae’), from the War of the Roses (‘Funeral Music’) to the Russian Revolution (‘Scenes with Harlequins’), from nineteenth-century colonial India (‘A Short History of British India’, I-III) to the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales (Speech! Speech!). In his collection of 1998, The Triumph of Love, he pointed once more to the importance of history to his poetic vision, of

*Scientia* that enabled, if it did not secure,  
forms of understanding, far from despicable,  
and furthest now, as they are most despised.  
By understanding I understand diligence  
and attention, appropriately understood  
as actuated self-knowledge, a daily acknowledgement  
of what is owed the dead. (CXIX, TTOL 63)

Following on from this concern, indeed immersion in history and ‘what is owed the dead’, the question must be asked: is Hill’s concern with religion merely in keeping with his concern with history? Is Christianity only of interest to him as a historical phenomenon, rather than as something of spiritual and

timeless significance? Is there evidence in Hill's poetry of a personal response to the claims of Christianity, or is he merely a scholar of the responses of others (Southwell, Bonhoeffer *et al.*)?

In the two interviews from which I have quoted already, both given immediately after the publication of Tenebrae (1979), Hill addresses the question of what 'religion' and 'the religious' mean in his poetry, and his comments would seem to add weight to the argument that Christianity is of interest to him largely as a historical phenomenon. Responding to the claims of some reviewers that Tenebrae was 'a more overtly religious collection' than his previous ones, Hill remarks: 'The phrase "overtly religious" worries me because there is an implication that the poems contain the poet's unfiltered emotions or beliefs', a conception of poetry to which, as we have seen, Hill is opposed (Morrison 212). He continues:

Religion is one of these profound historic forces. I think that the poems in Tenebrae are fascinated by the existence of religion as a historical fact, as a power in the lives of men and women. This is rather different from being a religious poet in the way that term is generally understood. (Morrison 212)

Hill seems interested here in portraying himself as a poet of *religion* rather than religious experience, and he reiterates this position in his interview with John Haffenden:

The complex nature of religious experience, and religious sectarianism of a great number of different kinds, is an essential part of the complex history of Europe. Its effects have been felt both in the broadest and the most minute senses; the fate of nations and the happiness or wretchedness of individuals. I really do not see that it indicates any shortcoming in a poet to be moved by the phenomena of religious experience both in its historical perspective and in more immediate examples. (Haffenden 89)

Religion, Hill argues here, must be confronted by any poet seeking to deal with 'the complex history of Europe' in his work, as it has formed such a substantial

part of that history. The implication here is that the treatment of 'religious experience' in his poetry is merely a means to the end of confronting European history, and that if something other than religion had 'been felt both in the broadest and the most minute senses; the fate of nations and the happiness or wretchedness of individuals', then Hill would be treating it instead.

So is this Hill's essential religious stance, that of an interested historical observer rather than an individual believer? Is his approach to the religious similar to his creation Sebastian Arrurriz's approach to romantic love: 'like a disciplined scholar, / I piece fragments together, past conjecture / Establishing true sequences of pain' (CP 92)? At least one critic has thought so: 'It is hard to think of any poet who has been so ceaselessly engaged throughout his work with a body of teaching and philosophy from which he must as ceaselessly withhold his assent. Christianity must in this sense be seen as his poetic study rather than his belief.'<sup>26</sup>

My response to this reading of Hill's religious poetry is that it is misguided in making a distinction between Christianity as Hill's 'poetic study' and Christianity as Hill's belief: a more accurate statement would be to say that it is both. In his interviews with Morrison and Haffenden, he is responding to expectations that religious poetry must equal devotional poetry, and so he articulates a different view, that religious poetry can be just as intellectually and historically aware as supposedly 'secular' poetry. Looking over Hill's poetry, it quickly becomes clear that any attempt to distinguish between 'religious' and 'secular' poems has to face up to the fact that Hill rarely makes hard-and-fast distinctions between the two: the secular is not allowed to exist independently of moral concerns that are often linked explicitly to Christianity, while the religious

can never quite free itself from humanity's fallenness and from religion's importance (and therefore culpability) in human history. Just as a poet like Milton could not discuss the politics of his day without reference to the Bible, so Hill cannot divorce his considerations of history, the suffering of humanity and the 'desolation of learning' (CXIX, TTOL 63) in the modern world from Christian understandings of morality and theology. (I am not the first to mention Milton in the same breath as Hill: as David Gervais points out concerning Hill in an essay on Milton's relationship to modern poetry, 'It is hard to think of any poet since Wordsworth for whom Milton has mattered so much.')<sup>27</sup>

One example of the resistance of Hill's poetry to divorcing religious concerns from the secular is 'Ovid in the Third Reich', which opened his 1968 collection King Log. As the title of the poem suggests, its speaker 'Ovid' is in a morally confused situation, in that he is 'in the Third Reich', and that phrase automatically suggests collusion with that regime: how does an artist like Ovid respond to this?

I love my work and my children. God  
Is distant, difficult. Things happen.  
Too near the ancient troughs of blood  
Innocence is no earthly weapon. (CP 61)

The epigraph to the poem reminds its readers of Ovid's pragmatism in relation to love: the extract from his Amores concerning love states confidently and with some satisfaction that 'she only is disgraced who professes her guilt'. Disgrace can only come about through an admission that one is to blame: keep silent, it is implied, and all will be well, disgrace will be avoided. This may be a comforting dictum for some when it is applied to romantic infidelities; its location at the opening of a poem set 'in the Third Reich' makes it far more disturbing.

The opening lines here seem to be a direct acknowledgement of the modern condition and the divorce of religious and secular, God and us, that is accepted as the norm in the Western world: for many of us, work and family come before any real apprehension of who God is, or even if he exists. However, Hill's Ovid seems to be referring not to a personal God here, but rather to God as the Lawgiver, or the Judge of what is right and what is wrong. Ovid loves his work and family: do not even the heathen do that, Christ might respond. There is more required of an artist, of a human being than that alone. Ovid seems to recognise this, and is intent on avoiding its implications.

'Things happen', he seems to shrug: he is a pragmatist, and he will deal with events as they come. The implication is that these 'things' do not directly affect him, his work or his children, and so are not of central concern. That they take place 'near the ancient troughs of blood' of the Third Reich, however, makes the reader more and more wary of Ovid's hand-washing exercise in amoral pragmatism. 'Innocence is no earthly weapon', he protests; perhaps only that, a weapon not of this earth, not implicated in the 'Things' that are happening, could help to put a stop to them. Either way, this recognition of a lack of innocence on the part of the speaker serves only to consolidate his inaction, his silent acquiescence in what is occurring around him. It is not his fault, he argues, he just happened to be 'too near the ancient troughs of blood' at the wrong time. Perhaps God, 'distant' and 'difficult', is ultimately to blame; certainly, the artist seems to believe, *he* is not.

In keeping with the poem's epigraph, Hill's Ovid avoids disgrace by avoiding any profession of guilt. The first stanza focuses on the positive aspects of his life (work, children), on the absence of God, on the inadequacy of

innocence as a response to what he sees around him; he moves away from a sense of moral responsibility towards a sense that an artist like him can, and even *should*, remain silent ‘near the ancient troughs of blood’ and focus on his work instead. The second stanza, however, has Ovid attempting to have it both ways, to reject moral responsibility while teasing out a moral from the situation for himself, which he will then magnanimously pass on to his readership:

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

Suddenly, a lesson is learnt, a moral is found, and Hill’s Ovid can, in the final line, return to the important business of his own artistic concerns, whether he is in the Third Reich or not. The moral of the story, then – this story that, until now, was best confronted with a rejection of morality as ‘distant’ and ‘difficult’ for people in the real world – is that we should not ‘look down / So much upon the damned’. We may not understand them (‘their sphere’ is, of course, not *our* sphere, the sphere of the artist), and we certainly do not try to help them (they are ‘damned’, after all), but, in their own way, they have a purpose, to ‘Harmonize strangely with the divine / Love’, with the God we artists find so ‘distant, difficult’, but in whom, somehow, they find comfort and with whom they make music, however ‘strange’. While he is on the subject of ‘spheres’, Hill’s Ovid returns to a consideration of his own, with internal rhymes that repeatedly foreground ‘I’:

I, in mine, celebrate the love-choir.

‘I’, ‘mine’, ‘choir’: the reader is left in no doubt at the poem’s end of just who is the poet’s central concern. ‘She only is disgraced who professes her guilt’: morality is only a concern for the ‘damned’, those who have been found wanting.

‘The divine / Love’ is their concern; the artist’s concern is the ‘love-choir’, the means of expression rather than the emotion or religious experience itself. Hill’s Ovid is far too accomplished an artist to concern himself with something as common, or as personally compromising, as religious experience.

The speaker of ‘Ovid in the Third Reich’ at first attempts to keep the events of which he is a witness as far apart as possible from God; then he attempts to appropriate some meaning from his situation, and so labels the victims of the Third Reich ‘the damned’, inhabitants of Dante’s Inferno and so somehow more artistically valid. But Hill’s Ovid lacks the compassion of Dante’s pilgrim, and his attempts to remain aloof and secure from the suffering around him, and to keep God and his fellow human beings at arm’s length (both God *and* ‘the damned’ are ‘distant, difficult’ for the speaker), render him an inhuman coward, colluding with the cruelty of the title regime, rather than an artist. In this, Ovid falls victim to a trap Hill is constantly aware of, and desperate to avoid himself: ‘the burden which the writer’s conscience must bear ... that the horror [of the concentration camps of WWII] might become that hideously outrageous thing, a cliché. This is the nightmare, the really blasphemous thing: that those camps could become a mere “subject”.’ (Morrison 213) (Note Hill’s description of this treatment of atrocity as ‘blasphemous’.) He goes on to quote a phrase from Coleridge’s notebooks to which he keeps returning in interviews and criticism: “Poetry – excites us to artificial feelings – makes us callous to real ones.” One’s fear is that through the exercise of this art of such passionate finesse one might in the end be serving callousness.’ (Morrison 214) ‘Ovid in the Third Reich’ is a powerful articulation of that fear of poetry, in poetry.

The attempt of the speaker 'Ovid' to divorce the religious and the 'real world' ('Too near the ancient troughs of blood / Innocence is no earthly weapon') is therefore exposed as morally suspect, and the constant presence of Christian theology and morality in Hill's poetry suggests a real belief in their truthfulness and relevance to his explorations in human history, even to considerations of a secular age like this one. However, just as the secular is not allowed to divorce itself completely from the religious in 'Ovid in the Third Reich', so too the religious cannot free itself completely from the secular in a poem like 'Lachrimae Verae':

Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross  
and never move. Sometimes in dreams of hell  
the body moves but moves to no avail  
and is at one with that eternal loss.

You are the castaway of drowned remorse,  
you are the world's atonement on the hill.  
This is your body twisted by our skill  
into a patience proper for redress.

I cannot turn aside from what I do;  
you cannot turn away from what I am.  
You do not dwell in me nor I in you

however much I pander to your name  
or answer to your lords of revenue,  
surrendering the joys that they condemn. (CP 145)

This sonnet reads like the direct opposite of a devotional poem in its attitude towards the 'Crucified Lord' addressed in the opening line. The octave has the speaker address Christ in language that attempts to grasp the significance of his death on the cross. Unlike Thomas in 'Canticle for Good Friday', however, this speaker is not 'staggered' by the cross; rather, he wants to scrutinise it from a safe distance (again, unlike Thomas's 'near distance') and to render it safe by



encapsulating it in a phrase: therefore, Christ on the cross is 'the castaway of drowned remorse' and 'the world's atonement on the hill'.

It is only with the sestet that the speaker acknowledges the lack of real belief or commitment behind his beautiful phrases: the title of the sonnet is shown to be an ironic one, these are not 'true tears'. In fact, the speaker here appears devoid of any real 'passions' or 'loves', whether those approved by Robert Southwell in the epigraph to the sequence or not. 'I cannot turn aside from what I do; / ... / You do not dwell in me nor I in you': these are cold statements of fact, and the overall impression of the sonnet is one of coldness, of a lack of devotion to the 'Crucified Lord' who nonetheless acts as addressee of the poem and to whose 'lords of revenue' (the Church?) the speaker panders and surrenders 'the joys that they condemn'. This poem embodies religious experience at its coldest and emptiest, going through the motions while aware of the vast distance between the speaker's words ('you are the world's atonement on the hill') and his actual experience ('You do not dwell in me nor I in you').

'Lachrimae Verae' stands at the beginning of a sequence of sonnets that articulates, perhaps more clearly than any other sequence of Hill's, the commingling of the desire for a relationship with Christ with the almost tangible falleness of the potential worshipper: in short, the religious desires cannot free themselves from the secular and worldly. 'Crucified Lord, however much I burn / to be enamoured of your paradise, / ... I fall between harsh grace and hurtful scorn./ ... You are beyond me, innermost true light,' confesses the speaker of 'Lachrimae Coactae' (CP 148), while the fifth sonnet in the sequence ends with the speaker choosing to 'stay amid the things that will not stay' (CP 149), the

mortal and transient rather than the eternal. In short, it may well have been with this sequence in mind that Hill observed in interview:

If critics ... say that *I* seem incapable of grasping true religious experience, I would answer that the grasp of true religious experience is a privilege reserved for very few, and that one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of a much more common situation – the sense of *not* being able to grasp true religious experience. (Haffenden 89)

The idea of Hill as practitioner of the direct opposite of devotional verse again springs to mind (though perhaps that implies a simplicity or ease of religious devotion in poets such as George Herbert or Henry Vaughan who, in reality, are often painfully aware of the tensions and conflict to which Hill gives centre-stage in these poems). The ‘Lachrimae’ sequence ends with a poem that perhaps comes closer than any of its predecessors to entertaining ‘true religious experience’, but is ultimately just as incapable as the others of ‘grasping’ it:

What is there in my heart that you should sue  
so fiercely for its love? What kind of care  
brings you as though a stranger to my door  
through the long night and in the icy dew

seeking the heart that will not harbour you,  
that keeps itself religiously secure? (CP 151)

There is a profound irony in the admission that the speaker’s heart is ‘religiously secure’ from the love of Christ, that his failure to respond to Christ’s overtures of love has become a religion in and of itself; it is the poetry of this religion that Hill writes here. The speaker seems almost exasperated by Christ’s persistence, unable to comprehend why Christ should ‘sue / so fiercely’ for his love. There are echoes of courtly love lyrics throughout this sequence, though it is ultimately left unclear whether it is the speaker or Christ who is referred to in the title of the sonnet (‘Lachrimae Amantis’, the tears of a lover): if it is the speaker’s tears, they appear to originate from his inability to comprehend the ‘Crucified Lord’ of

the sequence, and his inability to accept him; if the tears belong to Christ, they are in keeping with the 'fierce' nature of his overtures of love. The poem ends with a heavily qualified hope that a resolution to this lovers' impasse is in sight:

So many nights the angel of my house  
has fed such urgent comfort through a dream,  
whispered 'your lord is coming, he is close'

that I have drowsed half-faithful for a time  
bathed in pure tones of promise and remorse:  
'tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him.'

With echoes of the Song of Songs, the speaker relates the nights when he dreams 'half-faithful for a time', believing that his lord will come (in spite of his 'fierce' overtures, is Christ still a long way off from the speaker?) and that, crucially, he will respond by welcoming him, 'the stranger to [the speaker's] door'. However, the speaker tells us that these times come frequently ('So many nights'), yet they appear to make no difference: the best the speaker can do is to attain a 'half-faithful' state, and even this is transient, lasting only 'for a time'. In short, while the speaker of 'Lachrimae Amantis' is perhaps the closest to welcoming Christ as lord in the sequence, he is still a significant distance from doing so: like the other voices in the sequence, ultimately he is unable to grasp the true religious experience that he appears to long for. 'Lachrimae' therefore stands as a sequence based on frustration, on the inability of its speakers to comprehend and accept that which is nonetheless their obsession, the love of Christ: taken alongside the comments made by Hill in interview concerning religious experience in his poetry, it stands as a bleak testimony to the gap between believer and object of belief, between man and God, in Hill's poetic vision.

So, returning to a question posited above, what about Hill's more recent work, published since his 'coming out' as an Anglican? Does it point to the

same, bleak picture as ‘The Bidden Guest’ and the ‘Lachrimae’ sequence, or is Michael Schmidt right in suggesting that ‘the long discipline of the poems has made belief tenable’?<sup>28</sup> To answer these questions, I will focus on The Triumph of Love, Hill’s long poem of one hundred and fifty parts, which stands as perhaps his most personal work to date. Previously, Mercian Hymns (1971) had held that honour, but Hill’s 1998 collection is without the guiding presence of Offa, king of Mercia, and is correspondingly less distanced, perhaps even less guarded. However, it is clearly not an example of poetic autobiography, of the sort of ‘confessional poetry’ of which Hill is so critical in the Haffenden interview, and its epigraph from the Book of Nehemiah (6:3) seems designed to warn readers from the outset that the poet will be making no concessions to them in the pages that follow:

And I sent messengers vnto them, saying, I am doing a great worke, so that I can not come down: why should the worke cease, whilst I leave it, and come downe to you?

Instead, halfway through the poem in section LXXV, the speaker attempts to describe what he is doing in an address to the Beautiful Virgin of Petrarch’s sonnets:

*Vergine bella*, now I am half-way  
and lost – need I say – in this maze of my own  
devising. (LXXV, TTOL 38)

This ambitious and oblique long poem does indeed resemble a maze, one populated by a myriad of different voices from different times, which are often difficult to identify with any certainty and frequently flow and intermingle with one another in the course of the poem. The personal insights I will argue this maze contains are therefore rarely foregrounded: they constitute one part of a poem dense with allusion and quotation. The Triumph of Love certainly stands

as ‘a piece of difficult, refractory and suffering material’, and as such bears witness to Hill’s scepticism concerning ideas of poetry as a sort of direct self-expression.

In the sixteenth-century Sir Philip Sidney had his Muse urge him, in the first sonnet of his Astrophil and Stella sequence, to ‘look in thy heart and write’: seemingly following this approach, here is what one of Hill’s speaker finds in section LXXV of the poem:

*Mea culpa,*  
I am too much moved by hate –  
pardon, ma’am? – add greed, self-pity, sick  
scrupulosity, frequent fetal regression, *and*  
a twisted libido? Oh yes – much  
better out than in. *Morosa*  
*delectatio* was his expression, that Irish  
professor of rhetoric – forget his name.  
Forget my own name next *in hac*  
*lacrimarum valle.* (LXXV, TTOL 39)

Sidney’s Muse implicitly assumes that the contents of the heart are suitable for publication; the speaker of Hill’s poem quickly realises, with some help from the ‘*Vergine bella*’ (‘pardon, ma’am?’), that his heart is a darker place. Accordingly, he must confess and seek absolution for its contents: however, no sooner has he begun confessing (‘*Mea culpa...*’) than the sheer weight of his sin seems to stop him, leaving him to wry statements of resignation (‘Oh yes – much / better out than in’). ‘*Morosa / delectatio*’, the Latin expression favoured by the nameless Irish professor of rhetoric, serves either as a tangent with which the speaker can distance himself from his sinfulness and move on in the poem, or as a description of the fallen human condition of struggling with sin, of being simultaneously saddened and delighted by it, appalled and attracted to it. The identity of the speaker is not enhanced or strengthened by this self-examination; instead, the sudden awareness of his sinfulness serves to erode his sense of identity, to the

extent that he could even forget his own name while travelling ‘*in hac / lacrimarum valle*’, through this vale of tears.

This is ‘difficult, refractory and suffering material’, bearing witness to Hill’s ideas concerning the fallen human condition and the debasement of language. Self-examination here is undertaken as a confession, and the address to the ‘*Vergine bella*’ and references to the ‘*Salve Regina*’ underline the section’s explicitly religious character. These are the ‘images of orthodoxy’ that have always been present in Hill’s poetry, but the speaker still seems excluded from them; he can address the Virgin – indeed, he believes the Virgin addresses *him* half-way through – but he gains little consolation from the encounter.

This section of the poem is therefore similar to Hill’s earlier poetry, though the speaker here displays a great deal more humour than the speakers of ‘The Bidden Guest’ or ‘*Lachrimae*’. However, while many of Hill’s speakers still fail to ‘grasp true religious experience’ in The Triumph of Love, there is evidence to suggest that these failures have moved on from the out-and-out exclusion of the earlier work.

Sections LXVI-LXVIII, for example, have their speaker taking part in a church service. He is not wholly a part of the proceedings; rather, he is a sceptical yet fascinated observer.

Christ has risen yet again to their  
ritual supplication. It seems weird  
that the comedy never self-destructs.

...

what strange guild is this  
that practices daily  
synchronized genuflection and takes pride  
in hazing my Jewish wife?

(LXVI, TTOL 34)

The setting here would seem to be the United States (Hill’s country of residence since 1988), evidenced by the American use of ‘hazing’, meaning to initiate

through humiliation, as into a college fraternity. The speaker and his wife are in attendance, but feel excluded from the 'strange guild' of believers and '*their / ritual supplication*'; however, their exclusion is of a different kind to that portrayed in 'The Bidden Guest'. In celebrating the Eucharist, the worshippers proclaim Christ risen, but, alongside their '*daily / synchronized genuflection*', they demonstrate casual anti-Semitism and misogyny towards the speaker's wife. 'If Christ / be not risen', the speaker observes (in an echo of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:14), then '*Christians are petty / temple-schismatics, justly / cast out of the law*'. In voicing the orthodox Jewish response to Christians, the speaker here demonstrates that he holds no illusions concerning the faults of these people, some petty, some more sinister ('*tak[ing] pride / in hazing my Jewish wife*' is an unsettling observation of any community, religious or otherwise), just as section LXXV demonstrated that he held no illusions concerning his own faults. However, what follows is a statement of faith that is all the more remarkable coming from a speaker of a Geoffrey Hill poem for the casual tone in which it is expressed:

But since he is  
risen, he is risen even for these  
high-handed underlings of self-  
worship: who, as by obedience,  
proclaim him risen indeed.

The speaker's distrust of '*these / high-handed underlings of self-/ worship*' remains at the end of the section, but alongside that is a statement that Christ has risen 'even' for them, with the implication that this covers over a multitude of wrongs. The church-goers are not embraced by the speaker, and he seems to question the sincerity of their belief: their '*supplication*' is '*ritual*', their '*genuflection*' '*synchronized*', their sensibilities often '*petty*', and the phrase 'as

by obedience' questions whether their mouthing of the creed is really evidence of obedience to it in their lives. However, the speaker states unequivocally that Christ has risen, and that this is a truth he shares with the people around him; in short, Hill allows a speaker remarkably similar in tone to his own sceptical cautiousness and self-exclusion from religious practice to voice affinity with other Christian believers.

This guarded distrust of the 'consolations of religious practice' carries over into the next section. The speaker's inquisitive mind is looking for instruction, and yet admits to the limits of his methodical approach when dealing with the realms of belief: 'research / is not anamnesis', he remarks, with the implication either that research is not the same as recollection, as the memory of an actual lived religious experience, or that no amount of study can hope to grasp fully the implications of the passion of Christ (anamnesis being the part of the Eucharist that recalls that passion). As in section LXXV, the speaker's self-awareness is a barrier to religious practice: there, the list of his many sins stopped his confession in its tracks, while here he asks himself:

Why do I  
take as my gift a wounded and wounding  
introspection? The rule is clear enough: last  
alleluias *forte*, followed by indifferent  
coffee and fellowship. (LXVII, TTOL 35)

'Introspection', it is implied here, will not help the speaker in his religious observance, especially as it is both 'wounded' (damaged by a world of difficulties, refractoriness and suffering) and 'wounding' ('*Mea culpa*, / I am too much moved by hate' – LXXV, TTOL 39). As a result of this 'gift', the speaker's religious practice seems often empty and meaningless: he can follow the 'rule' of worship, but his 'alleluias' are merely in keeping with the musical



direction, while the social pleasantries of church life leave him cold. He does not seem to blame his 'gift' of 'introspection' on the giver (presumably, God), but rather on his taking it up: either way, the result is still self-exclusion, though notably no longer self-excommunication.

The predicament of the speaker of LXVII is arguably the predicament of Geoffrey Hill throughout his poetry. At times he can declare allegiance to Christian orthodoxy (he does so at the end of the opening poem of his first collection, 'Genesis', when he has its speaker affirm: 'And by Christ's blood are men made free' (CP 16)), but religious consolation seems beyond his austere, exacting intelligence. Mark 10:15 records Jesus' words: 'I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it', while at the end of Mercian Hymns, Hill is seemingly describing himself when he has his speaker address his 'Obstinate, outclassed forefathers' with the acknowledgement: 'I am your staggeringly-gifted child' (CP 133). Perhaps faith like a child has never been an option for Hill; he seems always to have had 'that ambivalent feeling about innocence [and] guilelessness' that he attributes to Dryden in his prose collection The Enemy's Country (1991), namely 'the suspicion that to be pious, holy, and good, in this world, is to be simple-minded'.<sup>29</sup> Suspicions such as this come from the 'wounded and wounding / introspection' with which he is 'gifted' and which powers so much of his poetry; this same 'gift' seems to render child-like faith an impossibility.

In section LXXXIII, Hill's speaker is addressing the subject of pride and, bearing in mind its status as a deadly sin, asks himself whether pride can ever be a good thing:

Is it so unjust  
to say to the State Church you lack pride

and are not ashamed? But I have checked  
 pride with *Cruden*: fifty citations, three  
 in the new covenant, and not once  
 does it stand for a good will. (LXXXIII, TTOL 43)

This speaker's concern with 'the State Church' and his referencing of the  
 '*Cruden*' Biblical concordance suggest a stance within Christian orthodoxy, but  
 nonetheless a questioning one. He goes on to contemplate various figures from  
 the Bible and from Christian tradition concerning pride ('I should call / Daniel  
 proud but not high-minded, worthy / of all admiration'; 'Is Abdiel proud?'),  
 before concluding with a question that captures the central religious concerns of  
 Hill's poetry, up to and including The Triumph of Love:

What am I to do  
 with these shards of downright majesty, this  
 ever-doubtful certitude, our curse,  
 our blessing, impacted as Hebrew? (LXXXIII, TTOL 43)

Christian orthodoxy is, for Hill, represented by 'these shards of downright  
 majesty': it is incomplete, broken off from the original Potter's creation and yet  
 displaying aspects of that original's glorious nature, its 'downright majesty' (a  
 majesty that is unequivocal, unavoidable, though the word 'downright' could  
 also refer to the Incarnation, to Christ emptying himself of the majesty of God  
 and coming down to the level of humanity). In short, the Christian faith is to Hill  
 an 'ever-doubtful certitude', oxymoronic, both a curse and a blessing, and like  
 the speaker of this section he does not always know what to do with it, how to  
 respond to it. It is a 'certitude' – 'Christ *has* risen' (LXVI, TTOL 34) – but one  
 about which his sceptical mind is 'ever-doubtful' and concerning which he can  
 never stop asking questions. '[I]mpacted as Hebrew' carries with it the idea that  
 the difficulty often posed by Hebrew is one posed also by Christian theology,  
 that of ascertaining the correct meaning, the proper understanding, of truly

grasping religious experience; however, these difficulties, while at times a ‘curse’, are also a ‘blessing’ and part of the richness of meanings in Christian teaching. After all, words and phrases with surprising etymologies and often multiform meanings form the basis of much of the resonance of Hill’s poetry: as he puts it in Speech! Speech!: ‘Not / music. Hebrew. Poetry aspires / to the condition of Hebrew.’<sup>30</sup>

Taken as a whole, The Triumph of Love contains many of these questions and few answers; in the work of a poet as sceptical and suspicious of assertion as Geoffrey Hill, that is not surprising. However, throughout the poem, the ‘ever-doubtful certitude’ of faith remains, and at times allows the poem to voice something approaching optimism and hope, rare commodities in Hill’s poetic world. In section LI, for instance, the speaker describes his own vision of a ‘*moral landscape*’ as ‘increasingly a terrain / seen in cross-section ... // in which particular grace, / individual love, decency, endurance, / are traceable across the faults’ (TTOL 26). The next section qualifies these ideas considerably, but nonetheless they remain in the poem.

CIX is a complex section, dealing with ideas as diverse as the medieval Scholastics and modern-day anti-depressants (these ‘latest / elements’ are viewed as a manifestation of grace, ‘as a signal / mystery, mercy, of these latter days’ – certainly an uncommon view of medication). It closes with an address in Latin directed, once more, at the ‘*Vergine bella*’:

*Ad te suspiramus,  
gementes, flentes*: which, being interpreted,  
commits and commends us to loving  
desperately, yet not with despair, not  
even in desperation.

(TTOL 57)

This is perhaps the closest the poem comes to a celebration of love, perhaps surprisingly in view of its title. The speaker here is part of a community, an unusual phenomenon in Hill's poetry: the Latin address has a group of believers saying the 'Salve Regina', yearning for the Virgin with 'groaning and weeping', and the effect of this address is on the whole group – it 'commits and commends *us*'. What it 'commits and commends' them to is 'loving / desperately': the object of this love is not given, only the mode of loving. 'Desperately' suggests urgency and an element of risk involved, though, perhaps worryingly, it cannot completely free itself from the etymological roots it shares with 'despair', literally the reversal of hope.

However, the speaker does attempt to distinguish between these modes of loving, arguing that to love 'desperately' is not to love 'with despair, not / even in desperation'. To love 'desperately' is more active, more defiant than either 'despair' or 'desperation': the speaker and his companions are 'commended' by their own address to the Virgin to love, no matter what the cost. Coming at the end of a section that considers a world where 'the taking up of serotonin' is required, this is a remarkably positive, even daringly hopeful conclusion.

The title of this long poem presents problems. It is difficult to define its tone: The Triumph of Love is certainly not a straightforward celebration of love, romantic, religious or otherwise. At times, its bleakness suggests that the title is an ironic one, but this too is perhaps a simplistic reading. My readings of the poem, alongside the rest of Hill's religiously obsessed poetry, suggest to me that Hill does not seem to doubt 'love's triumph' in a Christian sense: 'Christ has risen', he remarks in LXVI, and near the end of the poem he asserts that the Incarnation 'is our manumission', our emancipation (CXLVI – TTOL 80). The

question is not essentially one of belief for the poet; instead, it is one of response – ‘What am I to do / with these shards of downright majesty [?]’. Faith for the poet of The Triumph of Love is both a curse and a blessing; it affirms the triumph of Christ’s love, but it also reveals the poet’s struggles with pride, with hatred, with the ‘desolation of learning’ around him (CXIX), with the finer points of Christian theology (CXXV) and so on. He is caught in a maze of his own devising, in an epanaleptic argument that seems fittingly to end where it began, and yet things have changed. His ‘Obstinate old man’ moves from a position where he ‘cannot / forgive [himself]’ (V) to a position where he ‘find[s] it hard / to forgive [himself]’ (CXLIX): perhaps not a triumphant change, but surely a significant one. Romsley, Hill’s childhood home in Worcestershire, changes from ‘a livid rain-scarp’ (I) to ‘*the* livid rain-scarp’ (CL – my emphases), from an arbitrary starting-point to one that is grounded and unique. The poem’s journey has been an oblique one, circling and re-circling various themes, with countless changes of tone, of speaker, of addressee, even of language, but it seems to have arrived home by its end, and even tentatively, cautiously to have begun to know the place for the first time, the goal of Eliot’s pilgrim in ‘Little Gidding’.<sup>31</sup>

The poem ends with the poet perhaps knowing more about himself also. ‘Talking to oneself is in fact / a colloquy with occasion’, he wryly remarks half-way through (LXXV), and this colloquy results in a speaker at the poem’s end who can display remarkable self-knowledge, though this is haltingly expressed by the sceptical, austere intelligence we have grown accustomed to throughout the poem (indeed, throughout all of Hill’s poetry):

Obnoxious means, far back within itself,  
easily wounded. But vulnerable, proud

anger is, I find, a related self  
of covetousness. I came late  
to seeing that. Actually, I had to be  
shown it. What I saw was rough, and still  
pains me. Perhaps it should pain me more. (CXLVIII, TTOL 81)

Here, it seems to me, is an expression of an intelligent man's awareness of his own sin. Hill's poetry has always cast a sceptical, exacting eye over the horrors of human history; The Triumph of Love is his most direct examination to date of the horrors of the human heart, in starkly personal terms for a poet rightly known for the impersonality of his work.

Perhaps it is in this long poem that Hill is poetically examining concerns he first raised in 1977, in his inaugural lecture in the University of Leeds entitled 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"'.<sup>32</sup> At the end of that lecture Hill expresses an 'ambiguous hope' that, as a poet, he can 'attempt to set at one [the 'atonement' of the title] the piercing insight and the carnal blundering, in which I intentionally recollect Coleridge's capacity to "transfigure his own dissipation by a metaphor that perfectly comprehends it".' (LL 16)

The Triumph of Love certainly does seem to treat one man's 'carnal blundering' with 'piercing insight', and arguably acts as a 'metaphor' for its poet's 'dissipation' through its often bewildering circling and re-circling of themes within the 'maze of [his] own / devising'. It is a poem fully aware of sin – what Hill in his lecture usefully describes as 'empirical guilt' – and of the need for the poet to make a response to it, self-excommunicate or not. Indeed, it is this very response that Hill defined as the poet's vocation in 1977:

He may learn to live in his affliction, not with the cynical indifference of the reprobate but with the renewed sense of a vocation: that of necessarily bearing his peculiar unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless. (LL 17-18)

This is arguably the essential stance of much of Hill's poetry, particularly his most recent work, from Canaan onwards: the poet, marked by shame, in 'a world growing ever more shameless'.

Throughout his lecture, Hill prefigures the scathing honesty of The Triumph of Love by positing some of the motives possessed by poets: these motives are necessarily 'impure', as the artist is fallen as a result of 'that "terrible aboriginal calamity" in which, according to Newman, the human race is implicated.'<sup>33</sup> One possible motive for the poet to keep writing, according to Hill, is 'remorse': 'Let us suggest that a man may continue to write and to publish in a vain and self-defeating effort to appease his own sense of empirical guilt.' (LL 7) As demonstrated in The Triumph of Love, but also in 'Lachrimae' and more unlikely poems such as 'Ovid in the Third Reich', Hill is always painfully aware of his own fallenness, his own sinfulness, far more certainly than either Les Murray or R. S. Thomas. This is what often gives Hill's poetry its curious power, the sense of self-implication even in his angriest denunciations of the world around him and its evils and ignorance. The Fall looms powerfully over Hill's poetry, both in its confrontations with suffering and pain and in its own troubled and pained expression:

It is one thing to talk of literature as a medium through which we convey our awareness, or indeed our conviction, of an inveterate human condition of guilt or anxiety; it is another to be possessed by a sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt. (LL 6-7)

It is to this sense of the fallenness of language, of it 'as a manifestation of empirical guilt', that Hill attributes the difficulty of much of his poetry and prose; in spite of his oft-expressed sympathy towards Milton's dictum that poetry should be 'simple, sensuous and passionate', Hill is repeatedly forced back into

obliquity by the realisation that ‘the arts which use language are the most impure of arts’ (LL 2):

[W]e are not unfamiliar with a modern literature of penitence, nor indeed with that required secondary reading which is at times, and not inappropriately, a penance in itself. One is, so to speak, “winning one’s way up against the stream”. (LL 5-6)

Hill’s poetry certainly stands as a part of this ‘modern literature of penitence’ with the demands it makes on its readers, but this is in keeping with his conception of poem, poet and reader as all fallen. If, as Hill suggests in interview, ‘every fine and moving poem bears witness to [the] lost kingdom of innocence and original justice’ (Haffenden 88), to an unfallen world radically different to our own, then it will only be with considerable effort that that kingdom will be reached from this one: the gap between fallen and unfallen is immense, and it can only be traversed with extreme difficulty. One of the strengths of Hill’s poetry is that it bears witness to that difficulty.

So then, religious experience in Hill’s poetry often appears fragile in the face of a fallen world, and any glimpses of redeemed humanity are always qualified by the co-existence of humanity’s fallen nature alongside it (Hill quotes Karl Barth in his lecture, remarking that sin is the ‘specific gravity of human nature as such’ (LL 15)). However, I have argued here that the religious can and does inform all of Hill’s confrontations with the world around him and human history: there is no hard-and-fast distinction between the religious and the secular in Hill’s poetic vision, rather Hill’s Christian world-view impacts upon all of his poetry, troubled and sceptical as it often is regarding the validity of belief in the face of the suffering of the past and the ‘pitiless ... ignorance and contempt’ of the present (LXXVII, TTOL 40). Hill’s responses as a Christian poet to his subject-matter are often idiosyncratic and seemingly unorthodox (though just



what 'orthodox' means in the modern world is surely difficult to define), but, as I hope to demonstrate in this thesis, it is from the standpoint of Christian faith that he justifies the existence of his poetry, and that he tries to make sense of the harsh realities he confronts in that poetry.

Before turning to Les Murray, a brief note about Hill's God: he rarely appears in the poetry, to the point where the description of him as 'distant, difficult' in 'Ovid in the Third Reich', though morally suspect in its immediate context, is perhaps the most useful shorthand description of him. Alternative descriptions of God in Hill's early work include the creator of the 'connoisseur of blood', implicated in the crimes of his creation ('Statesmen have known visions', CP 49), and 'voyeur of sacrifice' ('Shiloh Church, 1862', CP 65): these are in keeping with the questioning of God's character at the centre of these poems, often in a mode reminiscent of an Old Testament prophet or later rabbinic tradition ('he fancies himself a token Jew by marriage' – XCVIII, TTOL 51). Indeed, the aversion to invocations of God's name in Hill's poetry is perhaps also inherited from Judaism.

However, the persistence of faith throughout Hill's poetry suggests an object of faith, a God often hidden but nonetheless there, underwriting the intensely moral concerns of the poetry. Hill's scepticism is unavoidable, well-noted and indeed central to his poetry, but, as I demonstrated from 'Canticle for Good Friday', this scepticism is not glib or even agnostic, and it is directed more against 'the world' (in its New Testament sense) than against God. Ultimately, Hill seems to feel that there is something better required of him (and, implicitly, his readers) than what the world values, and his choice of martyrs, of witnesses throughout history largely demonstrates his commitment to people whose lives

and views were shaped by the religious and, more than that, by belief in God. Working through 'the religious' towards God is, as Hill's poetry painfully recognises, extremely difficult, and perhaps 'a privilege reserved for very few'; nonetheless, his poetry is full of religious explorations that convey something of the character of the God in whom he believes, and these explorations will form the focus of my discussions of Hill's poetry throughout this thesis.

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Turning to Les Murray, it should be clear from the outset that he is a very different poet to Geoffrey Hill, at the very least in terms of temperament and poetic technique, but I wish to begin this consideration of Murray by pointing out some similarities between the two poets, as identified by Kevin Hart in his essay "'Interest" in Les A. Murray'. Near the end of the essay, Hart turns to a brief comparison of Murray and Hill, where he observes:

Murray and Hill strike me as being roughly of the same poetic strength (though I doubt whether each would think that of the other). Despite an obvious difference in style – where Murray lauds 'sprawl', even in his more compact poems, Hill works towards a knotty compression – the two poets share a number of preoccupations. Both draw upon their rural origins, both defend the notion of the poet's 'vatic' role and are deeply interested in blood myths; each fears the entropy of poetic language, and each affirms mystery as a value. Just as Australian critics are interested in Murray for a distinctive Australian quality, one that helps legitimate 'Australian Literature', so too Hill is valued for his 'Englishness'. And as Murray's poems can be used to confirm a dubious critical ideology, Hill's poems have become a site for the rear-guard defence of formalist criticism. To varying degrees, both writers have been set up to represent a nationalism and a nostalgia that their poetry sets at risk.<sup>34</sup>

This comparison of Murray and Hill is a helpful one, pointing out shared preoccupations of the two poets, some of which it might be easy to overlook: for example, that Murray draws upon his rural origins in his poetry is a given, but it is easy to forget that Hill does the same thing in such sequences as Mercian Hymns and 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'.

The appropriation of both men's poetry to represent 'Australia' and 'England' is not an issue I will spend much time investigating, though it is perhaps easier to leave aside Hill's 'Englishness' than it is Murray's 'distinctive Australian quality': in Murray's case, one critic has rightly pointed out that his poetry is 'at once resolutely Australian, rooted in loved specifics, yet global, aggressively wide-ranging in its outlook and impact.'<sup>35</sup> Murray himself has remarked: 'Things may have an Australian address and be of universal significance, of universal applicability. We assume this without doubt when the verse comes from, say, America or England.'<sup>36</sup> I will assume in my readings of Murray's poems that their 'Australian address' is important, but I will also look to their 'universal significance', just as I do in my readings of Hill and Thomas.

Having described Murray as 'Audenseque' earlier in this introduction, as opposed to the more Eliotic Hill and Thomas, I return briefly to Neil Corcoran's description of Auden's Christianity: 'resolutely unmystical', rooted in specific historical and socio-political circumstance, 'an incarnational Christianity', aspiring 'not to an Eliotic silence but to an all-inclusive volubility'.<sup>37</sup> In defence of Hill, his poetry could also be described as rooted in specific historical circumstance and as unmystical, while even Thomas's poetry is arguably less 'mystical' than a first reading might suggest. Overall, though, Corcoran's description of Auden is, I think, equally applicable to Murray, in particular its identification of an 'all-inclusive, argumentative volubility': as Murray once remarked in interview, 'I am only interested in everything.'<sup>38</sup>

Born in 1938 at Nabiac, New South Wales – the youngest of my three poets – Leslie Allan Murray was an only child, as were Hill and Thomas: Murray

commented on this in his wryly-entitled poem, 'Portrait of the Autist as a New World Driver':

They simplify  
 who say the Artist's a child  
 they miss the point closely: an artist  
 even if he has brothers, sisters, spouse  
 is an only child.<sup>39</sup>

His mother died of a miscarriage when Murray was only twelve years old, an event he later wrote about in 'Three Poems in Memory of my Mother, Miriam Murray née Arnall': 'Thirty-five years on earth. / that's short. That's short, Mother, / as the lives cut off by war // and the lives of spilt children are short.' (CP 191) Murray was left alone with his father, a strong presence in Murray's poetry from the beginning: the important early poem 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' opens with a tableau of Cecil Murray, 'widowed, fifty-six years old, / [sitting] washing his feet. / The innocent sly charm / is back in his eye of late years, and tonight / he's going dancing' (CP 12), while one of the most moving poems in Murray's 1996 collection, Subhuman Redneck Poems, is his elegy for his father, 'The Last Hellos':

Grief ended when he died,  
 the widower like soldiers who  
 won't live life their mates missed.

Good boy, Cecil! No more Bluey dog.  
 No more cowtime. No more stories.  
 We're still using your imagination,  
 it was stronger than all ours. (CP 449)

From 1957 to 1985, Murray lived away from Bunyah, working variously as a translator and editor until 1971, when he became a free-lance author; then in 1985 he returned to Bunyah with his family and has lived on his family farm ever since. A sense of home, of rootedness is exceptionally important to Murray's poetry: 'Our croft, our Downs, / our sober, shining land', as he hymns his forty

acres in one poem ('Laconics: The Forty Acres', CP 128), while another looks back to the first European settlers of New South Wales, Scots immigrant farmers from whom Murray descends, and watches the impact they have on their surroundings:

Now the gently wrecking cornfields relax, and issue  
 parents and children. What do families offer us?  
 Some protection from history,  
 a tough school of forgiveness.  
 ('Physiognomy on the Savage Manning River', CP 233)

These lines are a good example of Murray's ability to let poems revolve around memorable phrases, epigrams often without the satire and, at their best, wonderfully evocative of the experiences he wants to place at the centre of his work: 'a landscape wide as all forgiveness' in 'Toward the Imminent Days' (CP 37), or his description of the New World of Australia as 'a distiller of spirit from bruised grains' ('Elegy for Angus Macdonald', CP 153); describing the rural childhood he shared with others, he writes of 'this deeply involved unpickable knot of feeling' ('Birds in Their Title Work Freeholds of Straw', CP 56), while a poem on the Aboriginal history of Australia elicits the somber acknowledgement, 'The ruins at our feet are hard to see' ('The Conquest', CP 47).

The lines above also demonstrate some of the stark differences between Murray and Hill. Hill's conception of language as fallen does not permit him to dispense poetic epigrams, and his conception of the poet as radically fallen means that any authority he displays in his poetry has been hard-won; Murray, on the other hand, views himself as fulfilling more of a bardic role, writing for a wide audience, and so the wrestle with language and his personal sinfulness is much less pronounced. 'I try to write with clarity, lucidity and resonance, to reach as many people as possible, not just university readers ... One of my most

deeply held standards is that of a mistrustful love of people, and a resolve always to write about them with compassion and respect[.]': so wrote Murray in 1970, and his thinking has not changed considerably.<sup>40</sup> In interview in 1985, he discussed the use of humour in his poetry:

[H]umour is, I suppose, to some extent, a ploy and a technique for reassuring people that what they're reading is not going to snub them. Because you must not compromise the quality of the work on some kind of condescending view that people are stupid and can't understand you. I assume that all my readers are at least as bright as I am ... and that we can go into this as if it were a sort of dialogue. So the humour, as well as having its own pleasures and being the only way to say some things, is a technique for normalizing poetry as reading material. (Crawford 170)

It would be fair to say that Hill does not condescend to his readers in his poetry, but, that admission aside, it is clear that Murray is writing a very different kind of poetry to Hill, one self-consciously aiming for as wide an audience as possible (see Murray's comments on 'the terrible crime of modernism' in isolating poetry from a wide readership, quoted at the outset of this chapter: 'I'm trying to recover that ground.') As Lawrence Bourke observed in A Vivid Steady State: Les Murray and Australian Poetry, the first book-length study of Murray's poetry: 'Murray continues to speak for and to a large readership at a time when such a public voice is increasingly challenged.'<sup>41</sup> Bourke's major problem with this public role that Murray adopts is that he fears the denigration of visions of Australian identity other than Murray's (i.e., white, masculine, rural), and this fear has been voiced by other critics: it may well be the 'dubious critical ideology' that Kevin Hart identifies as sometimes attached to Murray's poems, while Peter Porter ends an appreciation of Murray with a brief allusion to his 'chief fault ... an unwillingness to accept other people's definitions of Australianness. At his most impatient, he seems like a Test Act Inspector

examining the bona fides of his fellow-artists and issuing them licences to write about their country or even to enjoy its citizenship.’<sup>42</sup>

But, Porter continues, ‘this is the bad side of a good spirit, and we have much more to be grateful for than to criticize.’<sup>43</sup> At times, Murray can appear overbearing, particularly in his native Australia, with his strongly-held views on the side-lining of rural Australia or the rationalist-atheistic slant of many Western intellectuals, but in reality he is no ‘simple neo-conservative’, as Robert Crawford puts it: ‘In many aspects his stance has been and remains profoundly radical. He inveighs against both the Australian “cultural cringe” and against artistic snobbery and elitism.’<sup>44</sup>

Snobbery and elitism are indeed attacked ruthlessly in Murray’s poetry and prose, and he links his antipathy towards them with his religious affiliations in an interview of 1996:

My politics are anti-totalitarian. That’s why I became a Catholic. It’s for everybody. It may have a low opinion of sinners, but it’s equally low of all. You’re warned not to be proud, but also assured that you’re of infinite worth.<sup>45</sup>

The centrality of his Catholicism in his politics and poetics is something to which Murray returns repeatedly in his prose. Unlike Hill, he has always been unashamedly forthright about his religious affiliations, even going as far as tracing out his religious development for one interviewer:

I began moving out of our local Calvinism very early [Murray was brought up as a Free Presbyterian, in keeping with the denomination to which his Scots ancestors belonged]. In adolescence, I was nothing much, just part of that modern no-faith which feels free and easy till you look clearly at it. When I did reflect on that it began to horrify me: its arbitrariness, its confusion, its potentials for tyranny – be young and sexy or be relegated, for instance, and the contemptuous bigotry with which just such sensibilities are enforced in the intellectual world! I was drawn to Catholicism as soon as I made contact with it, drawn as much as anything by the mysterious idea of the sacraments. By the congruence of that with my other new religion of poetry. (Crawford 165)

This is just one example of Murray's remarkable openness about his Catholicism in interview: more so than either Hill or Thomas, Murray displays no qualms in revealing what attracted him to Catholicism and how the alternatives (Calvinism, the modern 'no-faith') repelled him. One critic has observed: 'The energy which gives Les Murray's world its poetic life is the expression of a most private self.'<sup>46</sup> This may well be true, but in comparison with Hill and Thomas, Murray's candour is remarkable. (It should be noted here that, of the three poets, it is R. S. Thomas rather than Murray who has written his autobiography: but its title – 'No-one' – and its use of the third-person throughout are indications of the guarded nature of much of what it contains about Thomas's life.)<sup>47</sup>

Murray links his sense of the 'potentials for tyranny' in 'the intellectual world' – 'be young and sexy or be relegated' – with his aversion to Calvinism and its doctrine of predestination in a sonnet from Subhuman Redneck Poems, 'Rock Music': it opens with another of Murray's memorable phrases, though this time one that is striking for its brutal assertiveness rather than its warmth:

Sex is a Nazi. The students all knew  
 this at your school. To it, everyone's subhuman  
 for parts of their lives. Some are all their lives.  
 You'll be one of them if these things worry you.

The beautiful Nazis, why are they so cruel?  
 Why, to castrate the aberrant, the original, the wounded  
 who might change our species and make obsolete  
 the true race. Which is those who never leave school.

For the truth, we are silent. For the flattering dream,  
 in massed farting reassurance, we spasm and scream,  
 but what is a Nazi but sex pitched for crowds?

It's the Calvin SS: you are what you've got  
 and you'll wrinkle and fawn and work after you're shot  
 though tears pour in secret from the hot indoor clouds. (CP 410)



This poem is remarkable for its savage denunciation of the modern elevation of sex and, with it, youth and physical beauty; it is remarkable also for the relative calm in which it states its findings, findings which should make many modern readers deeply uncomfortable. Murray had linked sex and Nazism before in his writings: in one essay, he writes of Nazism's admiration of 'robust health' and 'sturdy youthful vigour, seen as daring and rightly ruthless', and links this with Western society's admiration of the same things: 'representing sexual flaunt as an underdog in Western culture legitimised afresh all the old Nazi repugnances towards deformity, old age, weakness and general lack of dash.' (PT 361, 362) These are bold and unsettling claims, just as 'Rock Music' is a bold and unsettling poem, but Murray is unapologetic in voicing his indictment of Western culture either in his poetry or his prose: as one critic observes: 'It would be an understatement to say that Les Murray has the courage of his convictions: audacity would be a better characterisation.'<sup>48</sup>

'Rock Music''s inclusion in Murray's publication Killing the Black Dog leads us on to Murray's candour about the depression he has struggled with for over thirty years. Published in Australia in 1997, Killing the Black Dog consists of an essay by Murray accompanied by eighteen of his poems (including 'Rock Music'), written from the 1960s onwards: the 'black dog' of the title is his depression, and in using the description Murray notes that he is following Winston Churchill among others.<sup>49</sup> The essay relates some of the details of his breakdown after returning to Bunyah in 1985, up to the liver abcess that almost killed him in 1996 (he was kept under anaesthetic for twenty days 'and awakened to find my State funeral in full swing' (KTBD 23)); that was the event Murray feels cured him of his depression ('I discovered that the Black Dog had left

me' (KTBD 23)). Looking back to the worst times of his illness, Murray makes the following observations about the place of God in his suffering:

If God helped, and I imagine He did, He didn't tell me about it – or perhaps I simply couldn't hear Him if He did. It may be wiser not to hear the Divine when you're crazy: you may do extreme things and get it a bad name. I did attend Mass steadily throughout, under my wife's good influence. If I seem reluctant to attribute much help to God, it's because despair is of the very grain of depression. You feel *beneath* help, beneath the reach of even Godhead. (KTBD 8)

Again, Murray's candour is striking, as is his calm attribution of help to God even when he felt 'beneath the reach of Godhead': 'I imagine He [helped],' Murray can write with hindsight. It is worth noting that in a recent interview Geoffrey Hill has spoken about the 'chronic depression' he suffered from since late childhood,<sup>50</sup> while, as we have seen, The Triumph of Love alludes in one section to 'the taking up of serotonin' (CIX, TTOL 56), but these insights into Hill's private world are clearly of a different register to Murray's, in keeping with the differences in public stance between the two poets.

Significantly, and in keeping with the chronology of Murray's essay, the vast majority of poems in Killing the Black Dog (eleven in total) come from his 1996 collection Subhuman Redneck Poems, perhaps Murray's angriest collection to date. One critic, Jamie Grant, reads these 'depression poems' at the centre of the collection as more than just an indication of Murray's candour: he sees in them a critique of modernity and of 'its arbitrariness, its confusion [and] its potentials for tyranny'. Grant argues:

In writing about depression, the poet is not only concerned with his own welfare and the therapeutic benefits to be gained by giving a name and a shape to his disease ... Murray discovered in his condition a metaphor for the spiritual malaise which has crippled much of this [i.e. the twentieth] century, though the word "metaphor" somewhat understates what is a profound and original insight into the subconscious workings of the totalitarian mind.<sup>51</sup>

Grant continues this reading of Murray's poems on depression:

Murray's first-hand testimony as to the effects of depression justifies, and explains, his startling insight into its presence at the heart of twentieth-century culture and the modern state ... [F]or many critics, literary Modernism begins with The Waste Land, which is the product of a 'nervous breakdown' suffered by T. S. Eliot, which would now undoubtedly be diagnosed as a form of depression similar to that described by Murray. The perception that The Waste Land was produced by depression is in no respect controversial; it is only by extending that perception to include Eliot's successors (conscious and unconscious) that Murray has incurred the wrath of certain critics.<sup>52</sup>

This is a contentious reading of Murray's poetry, indeed of 'twentieth-century culture' and 'literary Modernism', and not wholly convincing: its strength comes from the recognition that Murray's poems on depression do address the world around him and what he perceives to be 'the spiritual malaise' that marks it, rather than act mainly as therapy for the poet in the way that perhaps Robert Lowell's Life Studies or Sylvia Plath's Ariel poems do. However, when certain critics, and indeed Murray himself, set out to drive a wedge between Murray's poetry and that of the modernists (as Grant appears to here), I am reminded of a shrewd insight from Lawrence Bourke: 'Modernist influence on contemporary poetry prepared the ground for a sharply-realised poetry of flexible and varied rhythm which draws its language from demotic regional idioms and from arcane cultural and scientific sources – which is Murray's kind of poetry.'<sup>53</sup>

Nonetheless, Murray does have some scathing words to say to the twentieth century in his recent poems, such as 'Demo':

No. Not from me. Never.  
Not a step in your march,  
not a vowel in your unison,  
bray that shifts to bay.

Banners sailing a street river,  
power in advance of a vote,  
go choke on these quatrain tablets.  
I grant you no claim ever[.]

(CP 461)



Written in defiant bullet-point statements that do not allow its speaker ambivalence, this demonstration against demonstrations stands as an emphatic declaration of independence. The speaker presumes that the second-person plural he is addressing demands his obedience; his response is ‘choke on these quatrain tablets’. The reason for his defiance is given in the fourth stanza: ‘you would conscript me to a world / of people spat on, people hiding / ahead of oncoming poetry’. This appears to be a reference to the modern mentality Murray dubs elsewhere as ‘Nazi’, whose motto ‘be young and sexy or be relegated’ fuels much of the ire in poems such as this one. The personal dimension to this protest becomes clear in the closing stanzas:

The first demos I saw,  
before placards, were against me,  
alone, for two years, with chants,  
  
every day, with half-conciliatory  
needling in between, and aloof  
moral cowardice holding skirts away.  
I learned your world order then. (CP 461-462)

These lines are painful to read, and clearly refer to the childhood taunts endured by Murray which he identifies in Killing the Black Dog as contributive to his later depression: as another poem from this period, ‘Burning Want’, puts it:

all my names were fat-names, at my new town school.  
Between classes, kids did erocide: destruction of sexual morale.  
Mass refusal of unasked love; that works. Boys cheered as seventeen-  
year-old girls came on to me, then ran back whinnying ridicule.  
(CP 446)

The poem goes on to trace something of the impact this had on the poet in later life: ‘I had forty more years, with one dear remission, / of a white paralysis: she’s attracted it’s not real nothing is enough / she’s mistaken she’ll die go now! she’ll tell any minute she’ll laugh –’. This accumulation of self-doubt and self-

loathing is, as in 'Demo', extremely harrowing to read and is indicative of much of the anger and pain that powers Murray's confrontations with depression and, crucially for him, the thinking he believes created the bullies and tyrants in the first place.

A large element of that thinking to which Murray is so vehemently opposed is agnosticism and atheism, and it is here that Murray really can provoke the ire of his opponents. I quote an essay of Murray's already referred to in the previous chapter:

The near-total divorce of the State from any underlying religious ethic has produced not 'freedom' but a terrifying void against which comfortable old Enlightenment audacities are meaningless. It is generations since being an agnostic involved any daring, and atheism tends to put one into coercive rather than generous company. More seriously, whether one believes in the soul or not, neither of these positions feeds it; we feel its hunger as a matter of experience, and have nothing to feed it on but our own selves. (PT 254)

It is the modern neglect of the soul that stands behind many of Murray's poetic denunciations of modernity, and he feels strongly that, without an 'underlying religious ethic', people are forced back onto themselves to a harmful extent. He elaborates on this view elsewhere, in terms reminiscent of those used by T. S.

Eliot a generation earlier:<sup>54</sup>

My own contention ... would be that the term *human* is incomplete without the religious dimension, since religion is part of us, and its exclusion is a highly artificial, ideological thing. Rationalism, so-called, is *willed*, a sort of art-form in which the challenge is to construct an account of the world without admitting any religious explanations. The effort has gone on for about three centuries now, and the result is enormous, imposing and subtly ramified, a tall, hierarchical, snobbish tower of glass and elegant steel and fine cement, in which many people go mad and seek after strange gods, reaching back into the prehistory of religion in order to satisfy needs and resolve dilemmas which have already been satisfied and resolved in developed religion.<sup>55</sup>

The idea of post-Enlightenment culture as a 'snobbish tower of glass ... in which many people go mad and seek after strange gods' appears in keeping with Jamie

Grant's contention that, in his depression, Murray discovered a metaphor for 'the spiritual malaise' of modern culture. Whether this is the case or not, the assertion that underpins Murray's poetry is that 'the term *human* is incomplete without the religious dimension', that: 'At bottom, we cannot build a satisfying vision of life upon agnostic or atheist foundations, because we cannot get our dreams to believe in them.'(PT 254)

These are contentious assertions from Murray and they have earned him the censure of many writers and critics in Australia and beyond: somehow, to suggest that theistic belief is important, that God is important to an understanding of humanity is to move beyond the pale in the eyes of many. Murray himself has repeatedly commented on the critical reception of his unfashionable views, at the heart of which is this conviction that religious belief is invaluable, more than that, indispensable:

often, it seems as if my work and my attitudes were being judged before the bar of a vaguely adumbrated but allegedly triumphant modern world view which admits of no deviation, no argument, and rewards the independent minded with the Siberia of artistic failure.<sup>56</sup>

This view of Murray as somehow backward, reactionary and intolerant of secularism is what he partially addressed in the title of his 1996 collection: there, Murray set himself up as the 'subhuman redneck' poet and as spokesman for the classes he feels have been so frequently dismissed and relegated by the 'unchallenged aristocracy' of modern, urban fashion.<sup>57</sup>

Murray therefore clearly roots his unfashionable views on class and the intellectual climate of the modern West in his religious belief and, more precisely, in his belief in God, and Jamie Grant has commented on the hidden difficulties inherent in attacking Murray's position because of this:

God is present throughout Murray's work, as much in those poems which make no specific mention of religious notions as in the few which do; the dedication 'To the glory of God', which has appeared in each of his books since The People's Otherworld (1983), alerts the reader to that presence. Much of the irrelevant criticism Murray is subject to would seem to be provoked by the awkwardness many contemporary intellectuals feel in being confronted with a mind which is clearly convinced of the truth of something they regard as impossible.<sup>58</sup>

The presence of God in Murray's work is central to an understanding of his poetry, his convictions and his politics, and it is this fact that stands as perhaps the major point of contention between Murray and his critics; for many of them, God is, to put it mildly, a problem.

As Grant points out, Murray has dedicated each of his books since The People's Otherworld 'to the glory of God'. When asked in an interview why he decided to include this dedication, his response seemed designed to minimise attempts to over-spiritualise this feature of his work: 'I don't know when I started doing it. It was a fair time ago. I just thought to myself one day, well, it's time to do that. It would be distinctly ungrateful not to.' (Daniel 10) Murray appears to view these five words as a dedication much like any other, when in fact what strikes the reader is how different they are to most other dedications in modern literature. Partners, children, friends, and we are on familiar territory; God, and suddenly we are struck by how rarely we hear him referred to by modern artists as a part of their private creative lives, as someone to be acknowledged in the celebratory mundanities of a literary dedication. Certainly, Geoffrey Hill, as we have seen, is almost scrupulously reluctant to mention God in his poetry or prose (though perhaps less so in his more recent work), and this in spite of the fact that, as I have suggested, his Christianity informs every aspect of his work; as for R. S. Thomas, God is the great subject of his poetry, but there is little sense of

Thomas wanting to *thank* him for the poems. Among these three poets at least, Murray's gratitude to God for his poetry appears unique.

So far I have defined the religious stance that informs Murray's poetry largely in negative terms: how Catholicism's world-view is better than that of secularism, why modernity's 'centuries- / long war against God' ('The Beneficiaries', CP 416) is morally suspect. I now want to turn to Murray's more positive assertions regarding his religion and his belief in God. One of the first things one notices when viewing Murray as a Christian poet is how infrequently in the poetry he deals with explicitly religious themes, let alone Christian ones (Jamie Grant has already commented on this). All the poetry is dedicated 'to the glory of God', while God himself rarely features; instead, God seems to underpin the whole poetry to the extent that there is little *need* to refer to him. In his book Real Presences, George Steiner contends that 'the experience of aesthetic meaning, in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, infers the necessary possibility of [God's] presence ... grammar lives and generates worlds because there is the wager on God'.<sup>59</sup> With Murray, there is less a wager on God than there is an assumption of his presence: rather than being a 'necessary possibility', he is real, he informs, affirms and confirms the poetry, and to acknowledge this, the poems are dedicated to his glory.

Murray has commented: 'I think all of my work is fundamentally religious, subsumed by a Christian consciousness, though. I would say that's where the geniality comes from, and a lot of the humour' (Crawford 165). In using the terms 'religious' and 'Christian', he creates a distinction between the two, demonstrating that while a 'Christian consciousness' informs the poetry, it does not limit its scope to Christian subject-matter or even Christian imagery: in



this Murray seems to concur with T.S. Eliot's expressed desire for 'a literature which should be unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian'.<sup>60</sup> There are obvious differences in their positions: much of Murray's prose, if it is included under the description 'literature', is quite clearly 'deliberately and defiantly' Christian in its combative stance, and he is clearly aware of his 'Christian consciousness' in a seemingly 'post-Christian age' in a way that Eliot's heroes such as Dante or Racine did not have to be. Ultimately, though, Murray's contention is that his 'Christian consciousness' begets and informs the religious nature of his work without limiting it to Christian subject matter, and the poetry affirms this contention; indeed, Murray's view of poetry, as voiced throughout his prose writings, is of it as somehow religious in and of itself.

In the previous chapter I pointed out the substantial differences between Murray's position and that of Matthew Arnold, but it cannot be denied that both elevate poetry to the status of a religious act. Just as in one article Murray contends that 'the term *human* is incomplete without the religious dimension, since religion is part of us', so he opens another essay with the assertion: 'Humans are not rational, but poetic.'(PT 356) This poetic nature is closely linked with the religious. Writing about the Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry he edited in 1986, Murray is reminiscent of Arnold in his elevation of poetry in relation to the religious: 'in an age of seemingly hopeless religious fragmentation, poetry itself is one of the few channels of spiritual life all may still have in common.'(PT 257) Later in the same essay, Murray complements this idea of the poetic as a means to the religious with the suggestion that the religious can help us understand the poetic: 'it is surely true that a religion, with

an explicit space for and vocabulary for the non-rational side of things, will be better equipped to understand and work with poetic fusions than can any tradition which explicitly or implicitly relegates the dream side, and so doesn't comprehend its own origins and nature.' (PT 262)

I want to pursue Murray's ideas of 'poetic fusions' for a moment by considering his ideas concerning the differences between poetry and prose. Later in his essay 'Embodiment and Incarnation', Murray writes:

We have come, over the last few centuries, to think that we live in a prose universe, with prose as the norm of all discourse. This is a cause, or a consequence, of the decline in belief in creation (*poesis*). In fact, descriptive prose doesn't answer to our own inner nature, and so cannot describe the cosmos adequately. (PT 263)

In an attempt to address what he sees as the shortcomings of prose and the efficacy of poetry in addressing the human condition, Murray has coined the terms 'narrowspeak' and 'wholespeak' to stand for prose and poetry respectively. 'Wholespeak' is what he calls 'properly integrated poetic discourse', that which utilises the two 'main modes of consciousness' all humans share, the one 'characteristic of waking life, [the other] we call dreaming' (PT 263, 260): it is the combination of these two 'modes of consciousness' that Murray terms 'poetic fusion', and an image to which he has returned throughout his poetry for this fusion is that of the daylight moon, of night and day coexisting and impacting on one another. (This image served as the title for his collection of 1987.) In contrast to 'wholespeak', 'narrowspeak' is 'based on the supposed primacy or indeed exclusive sovereignty of daylight reason': it tries to exclude mystery and the religious, and in so doing, Murray argues, 'doesn't answer to our inner nature, and ... cannot describe the cosmos adequately'. Clearly, then, Murray

holds poetry in much higher esteem than prose in understanding the world, ourselves and the religious element that underpins 'the cosmos'.

There are serious problems with Murray's terms, however. It is a commonplace of modern criticism that distinguishing between poetry and prose is by no means as straightforward as some poets would have us believe, and Murray's terms, while evocative and attractive, are perhaps not as helpful as they at first appear. Kevin Hart has written shrewdly on the nature of Murray's poetry in light of his distinctions between 'wholespeak' and 'narrowspeak':

Oddly enough, it is only very rarely – in 'Driving Through Sawmill Towns', 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle', and 'For a Jacobite Lady', for example – that one feels disposed to use Murray's privileged vocabulary to describe his poems. Not even those poems which exult in their own excess, and do so convincingly, ask to be discussed in terms of the 'timeless', the 'numinous' or 'presence' ... Unlike the lyric poets just mentioned [Yves Bonnefoy, David Campbell or Francis Webb], Murray is chiefly indebted to discursive prose, from both written and oral cultures. His is a poetry that draws its characteristic strength from snatches of colloquial speech, anecdotes, arguments, opinions, aphorisms.<sup>61</sup>

This is an incisive critique of Murray's poetry and one I find wholly convincing. Murray's vocabulary is indeed 'privileged' when he comes to write about poetry, and often his veneration of the poetic act can detract from the clarity and the directness of the poetry itself. This is not to say that Murray's poetry is always clear and direct – it is frequently difficult and resistant to criticism – but the invocation of terms such as 'timeless' and 'numinous' when referring to poetry can take away from the otherwise 'resolutely unmystical' nature of his religious stance and poetic probings. As another critic has observed: 'Murray's poetic is founded on a foregrounding of *things*. His verse, as a whole, confers sacramental status on the palpable, in that sense evolving a context in which is revealed that concern with the fundamental, the absolute.'<sup>62</sup> I would argue that it is Murray's

emphasis on ‘the palpable’ that often gives his poetry its characteristic warmth and good humour, though I should perhaps point out that his remarkable ‘Presence’ sequence of 1992, to which I will be devoting a chapter of this thesis, is arguably an exception to the rule I have been elaborating, and appears to be an example of when Murray’s poetry *does* embody ‘the numinous’.

So then, what sort of religious poet is Les Murray? He describes his work as ‘fundamentally religious, subsumed by a Christian consciousness’, and Kevin Hart has pointed out that, in the Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry he edited, Murray ‘enshrined himself as Australia’s premier religious poet’:<sup>63</sup> he included twenty of his own poems in his anthology, outstripped only by the late James McAuley’s twenty-four (ironically, perhaps, it is Kevin Hart’s poetry that comes closest to Murray’s in the number of poems represented: Murray includes fifteen of his in the anthology).<sup>64</sup> Hart goes on to quote Murray in interview stating that ‘One of my great ambitions is to write good religious poetry’, but critics are often left unsure as to what Murray means by ‘good religious poetry’.<sup>65</sup> Lawrence Bourke noted in 1992 that ‘while he frequently refers to his Roman Catholicism, Murray (so far) has not become the kind of religious poet who explores personal spiritual despairs or ecstasies’, and this is still substantially true.<sup>66</sup> ‘[D]octrinally, Murray’s faith is rarely to the fore in his poetry’, notes Steven Matthews in his book-length study of Murray,<sup>67</sup> and Rodney Stenning Edgecombe has pointed out one of the reasons for this: ‘Murray ... has conceded how futile a coercively religious poetry would be: “Although my thinking is guided by authentic Catholic doctrine, it’s not much use trying to shove that vocabulary and material down people’s throats. To rework it into art is essential, to explore the implications.”’<sup>68</sup>

One poem that explores Murray's conceptions of the relationship between religion and poetry, and how best religion can be 'reworked' into art, is the helpfully entitled 'Poetry and Religion': it begins with a restatement of some of the ideas we have already explored in Murray's prose:

Religions are poems. They concert  
our daylight and dreaming mind, our  
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry.  
Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words  
and nothing's true that figures in words only. (CP 267)

In spite of its title, the poem does not actually explore 'poetry and religion': instead, it appears to view these two terms as synonymous and to argue that an exploration of one is in fact an exploration of the other ('Religions are poems'). It goes on to describe poetry as 'the only whole thinking' (in keeping with the idea of 'wholespeak') and the end-goal of religion. The centrality of poetry to any authentic utterance is emphasised by 'Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words', while Saussure's all-encompassing sign system is dealt a blow by the assertion that things exist outside of it, including (implicitly) religion: 'nothing's true that figures in words only'.

I have already observed that Murray's elevation of poetry as 'the only whole thinking' is not entirely helpful when turning to his own poetry, and the view of poetry propounded in this poem is largely in keeping with that expressed by Murray's essays to which I have been referring, 'Embodiment and Incarnation', 'Poems and Poesies' and 'Poemes and the Mystery of Embodiment': however, 'Poetry and Religion' is useful in identifying just how broad the terms 'poetry' and 'religion' are in Murray's thinking:

A poem, compared with an arrayed religion,  
may be like a soldier's one short marriage night

to die and live by. But that is a small religion.

Full religion is the large poem in loving repetition;  
like any poem, it must be inexhaustible and complete  
with turns where we ask Now why did the poet do that?

The link between a poem and a religion is therefore central to Murray's religious stance: 'It is the same mirror: / mobile, glancing, we call it poetry, // fixed centrally, we call it a religion'. The poem goes on to define God in this framework: 'God is the poetry caught in any religion, / caught, not imprisoned.' Ultimately, poetry is not only a religious act, it is an identification with divinity (perhaps in keeping with Coleridge's idea of the Imagination 'as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM', in his Biographia Literaria),<sup>69</sup> and therefore all poetry exists, in some sense, 'to the glory of God'. The poem goes on further to align God with poetry – God is 'in the world as poetry / is in the poem, a law against its closure' – before concluding:

There'll always be religion around while there is poetry  
or a lack of it. Both are given, and intermittent,  
as the action of those birds – crested pigeon, rosella parrot –  
who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut.

As so often in Murray's poetry, this poem has it both ways – there'll always be religion around while there is poetry, and even if there's a lack of poetry, religion will be around – but this is often linked with God's grace and generosity. Both poetry and religion are 'given' by God, and, while both are also 'intermittent', the image of the birds suggests that even when there is a lack of one, this is still the fact of flight, of existence: the birds are still airborne when their wings are shut, and poetry and religion live on even when they appear largely absent from the world. God is the 'law' or guarantee against their closure.

Murray's most sustained consideration of his conception of God and his grace and generosity comes in a memorable passage from his essay 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia':

God, in Australia, is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape, and his votaries wear ragged shorts and share his sense of humour. Space, like peace, is one of the great, poorly explored spiritual resources of Australia. In the huge spaces of the Outback, ordinary souls expand into splendid and often innocent grotesquerie which the cramping of urban surroundings might transmute into ugly, even dangerous forms ... Australia really seems to be where God puts a sardonyx to the lips of Western man and teaches him to laugh wisely. (PT 149-150)

I will explore this passage in detail when I turn to the humour present in Murray's poetry in a later chapter; all that I need say here is that Murray links God with his beloved Australian countryside, his fellow Australians and his sense of humour (his Christianity is 'where the geniality comes from, and a lot of the humour'(Crawford 165)). In short, Murray's conception of the identity and nature of God stands at the very centre of his poetry.

So then, Murray as a religious poet is deeply critical of modern secularism and the worship of sex and beauty; largely uninterested in exploring Christian doctrine in his poetry or in writing coercively religious verse (though his dispute with secularism is rarely far off, even in his most light-hearted verse); reverent in his attitude towards poetry and its articulation of the religious; and grateful to God for his poetry and the land of Australia. Indeed, as I have argued, it is modernity's turn away from God and organised religion that earns Murray's censure; he views secularism as a backward step and one that opens the door to chaos and cruelty, to 'erocide' and 'flaunt', to relegation and despair. His critical stance towards the modern world is therefore both similar to and substantially different from Geoffrey Hill's: both poets diagnose major failings in the modern world-view in their poetry, but Murray is the more audacious of the two in

articulating an alternative, that is, a return to God. In a last stanza he provides for a poem presumably left unwritten, he outlines the alternatives as he sees them:

That's the choice: most  
as failures and tools  
or an untrustworthy host  
of immortal souls.                      (from 'Three Last Stanzas, CP 330)

Murray clearly aligns himself with the 'untrustworthy host / of immortal souls' underwritten by God, from whom his optimism, 'sprawl' and good humour originate, and his expansive, generous poetry sets out to sing the praises of God and the praises of creation; as he observed once in interview, 'It would be distinctly ungrateful not to.' (Daniel 10)

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At the end of the introduction to his Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry, Les Murray writes: 'it is probably appropriate that I state frankly where I stand, so that I do not seem to conceal any possible editorial bias.'<sup>70</sup> Frank statements of his position are, of course, rarely lacking in Murray's poetry and prose; nonetheless he goes on to articulate his religious position in the following terms:

[L]ike William Blake, and like R. S. Thomas who quotes him,

I say the acknowledgement of God in Christ,  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it.

R. S. Thomas quotes that passage in an important essay reprinted in his recent Selected Prose (Poetry Wales Press, 1983) [the essay is 'A Frame for Poetry'], and I affirm it partly in tribute to his having, in the Penguin Book of Religious Verse, pioneered the type of anthology which this one seeks to be.<sup>71</sup>

Murray acknowledges his indebtedness to the collection of religious verse Thomas edited for Penguin in 1963 elsewhere in his prose (see, for example, his essay 'Embodiment and Incarnation', where he reveals that he had toyed with the



idea of an anthology of Australian religious verse long before he received a commission to compile and edit one, 'under the influence of R. S. Thomas's Penguin Book of Religious Verse' (PT 251)), and the ancestry of Murray's conceptions of the close relationship between poetry and religion can clearly be traced back to Thomas's introduction to the earlier anthology. In it, Thomas writes:

What is the common ground between religion and poetry? Is there such? Do definitions help? If I say that religion is the total response of the whole person to reality, but poetry the response of a certain kind of person, I appear to be doing so at the expense of poetry. Perhaps Coleridge can help us here. The nearest we approach to God, he appears to say, is as creative beings. The poet, by echoing the primary imagination, recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in action.<sup>72</sup>

In articulating almost a high-priestly role for the poet here, Thomas elevates poetry in relation to the religious in a similar way to Murray; he goes on to define 'religion as embracing an experience of ultimate reality, and poetry as the imaginative presentation of such'.<sup>73</sup> His view of religion as 'the total response of the whole person to reality' is remarkably similar to Murray's view of a true poem representing 'incipient wholeness of thinking and of life' (PT 260), but then again Murray does make the suggestion elsewhere that 'religions are themselves large poems' (PT 252): he appears less interested than Thomas in articulating the differences between religion and poetry. Thomas's prose is clearly less assertive than Murray's, making use of questions ('Do definitions help?') and the conditional mode ('if I say', 'perhaps Coleridge can help') to convey the tentative nature of his definitions here; nonetheless, Murray acknowledges his debt to the older poet, both explicitly, in his writing, and

implicitly, in the similarities between his views of religion and poetry and Thomas's, as contained in his introduction of 1963.

Remaining with The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, Murray praises it as the pioneer for 'the type of anthology' he went on to compile, and it is Thomas's decision to widen the definition of 'religious verse' that the Australian poet appears to have in mind. Thomas's anthology is divided into five sections – 'God', 'Self', 'Nothing', 'It' and 'All' – all of which admit considerable latitude as to what poems could qualify for inclusion: for Thomas, the criteria are not adherence to explicitly Christian theology or the presence of Christian belief on the part of the poets (hence his inclusion of Shelley, Byron, Hardy and Housman, among others), but rather that the poems convey 'a religious experience', 'an experience of ultimate reality'. In terms again reminiscent of Murray, Thomas defends his anthology from potential detractors:

The presentation of religious experience in the most inspired language is poetry. This is not a definition of poetry, but a description of how the communication of religious experience best operates. Yet it is some of the poems in this book, which purport to do this, that will arouse the indignation of the religious, more especially of the Christian, reader. Are some of them religious at all? Let me say at once that, by sitting somewhat loosely to orthodoxy, I have attempted to broaden the meaning of the term 'religious' to accommodate twentieth-century sensibility. And yet the interesting question arises as to how much good poetry could have been assembled, had one been confined to more orthodox and conventionally religious poems ... it is not necessarily the poems couched in conventionally religious language that convey the truest religious experience.<sup>74</sup>

Thomas's concern here that 'orthodox and conventionally religious poems' often do not qualify as 'good poetry' appears in keeping with T. S. Eliot's admission that 'to the great majority of people who love poetry, "*religious poetry*" is a variety of *minor poetry*',<sup>75</sup> and yet one of Eliot's most prominent disciples, Helen Gardner, stands as one of the critics of Thomas's

anthology anticipated in his introduction. In Religion and Literature, Gardner turns to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse by way of Thomas, whom she describes as ‘a poet of distinction and refinement’, before criticising his thematic ordering of the poems in the collection:

If ... we give religious poetry a wider connotation ... as Mr Thomas ... daringly does, approval of the views, sympathy with the experience or aspirations expressed is likely to blur aesthetic judgement ... seriously. If our test of a good religious poem is that it seems to us to enshrine an experience we regard as genuinely religious, we are in danger of valuing the poem because we value the experience, irrespective of the power or lack of power with which it is expressed. As the moralistic critic is so obsessed with morality that he values works of art primarily on the grounds of their moral usefulness or moral danger, so the critic of religious poetry, attempting to escape from the shackles of the Christian tradition and move out into the wider area of religious experience, is tempted to find merit in what echoes his own preoccupations and seems to him to present a valuable and truly religious attitude or experience.<sup>76</sup>

These are serious objections to Thomas’s (and, later, Murray’s) criteria for a ‘genuinely religious’ poem, in keeping with Gardner’s view, voiced elsewhere in Religion and Literature, that: ‘The peculiar interest and the peculiar beauty of religious poetry lies precisely in the fact that the poet who writes as a religious man does write in fetters.’<sup>77</sup> Accordingly, her views on religious poetry are markedly different to Thomas’s (and Murray’s). I believe her objections to Thomas’s thematic headings in his anthology carry some weight, a belief in keeping with my concern in this thesis to explore these three poets as explicitly *Christian* in their approach to poetry; however, I also feel that it is a great deal more difficult than Gardner suggests to distinguish between our admiration of a poem’s ‘power’ and our valuing of the experience it describes. There are exceptions to this difficulty, but it nonetheless exists and has been wrestled with by, among others, T. S. Eliot, in the footnote to his ‘Dante’ essay of 1929, discussed at the end of the previous chapter.

Gardner concludes her discussion of The Penguin Book of Religious Verse with the observation: 'Mr Thomas's anthology is of the greatest interest to anyone wishing to understand the religious climate of today, not least because it is a collection made by a parson.'<sup>78</sup> That R. S. Thomas served as a priest in the Church in Wales for much of his life (retiring in 1978) is a significant point of difference between him and Hill and Murray; as a result, there has been less debate surrounding the religious nature of his poetry than there has been in the case of Hill, and less need for Thomas to affirm his credentials as a religious poet as there has been for Murray.

Born in 1913, Thomas belongs to a different generation to that shared by Hill and Murray, publishing his first collection of poems, The Stones of the Field, in 1946. Until his death in 2000, Thomas was a prolific poet, publishing new collections of poetry on average every two to three years; he had twenty-four collections in all published in his lifetime, and a posthumous collection Residues was published in July 2002. I have already noted the admiration Murray has expressed for Thomas's poetic (at the very least, as articulated in his 1963 anthology); points of convergence between Thomas and Hill come mainly from the former's admiration of the latter's work, as expressed in interview. In an interview of 1990, Thomas was characteristically scathing of much of contemporary poetry in English, including that of Ted Hughes ('There was never much food for the spirit there') and Seamus Heaney ('a normally good poet receiving abnormal acclaim'):<sup>79</sup> he went on to criticise the culture of criticism surrounding contemporary poetry which helps 'to down-grade [it] to a fringe activity of the scientific-technological and politico-economic society in England today', before identifying the 'one great exception' to the otherwise bleak picture

he paints, 'Geoffrey Hill, who still has many of the virtues to be expected from a serious poet.' ('Probings' 47)

It is probably fair to say that Thomas's own standing as a poet has yet to be fully considered or his presence confirmed in the ever-shifting canon of 'what will endure' of contemporary poetry, but that has not prevented some critics from making bold claims for his poetry. A. E. Dyson placed Thomas in the impressive company of Yeats and Eliot in a study of 1981 entitled Riding the Echo (the phrase is Thomas's, from his poem 'Echoes'):<sup>80</sup> in his introduction, Dyson acknowledges: 'Of the three, R. S. Thomas has so far received less than his due acclaim during his lifetime, even though the highest praise of his work has been made by many critics of note. I have no doubt at all that he belongs with the other two in stature; and in time will be seen as the outstanding poet, to date, of the second half of this century.'<sup>81</sup> John Powell Ward opens his book-length study of Thomas with the observation: 'For many people R. S. Thomas is one of the leading three or four religious poets of the twentieth century, its outstanding Welsh poet in English, and one of the ten or twenty of any kind in the language, British or otherwise, who will be remembered.'<sup>82</sup> These claims are obviously difficult to substantiate in the short term, and at least one of his advocates has acknowledged a contrary view of Thomas, held by many critics, that his poetry reveals 'a moors-wandering, bird-watching, Nature-loving poet (i.e. ... a worthy relic of sub-Wordsworthian Romanticism)'. M. Wynn Thomas suggests that this characterisation of Thomas possesses some elements of truth and may well have been propagated by the poet himself:

[T]hroughout his long writing life Thomas has self-protectively used a reputation for provincialism and insularity to decoy critics away from the wide intellectual interests that have secretly and steadily been feeding his writing. Art, music, modern theology and philosophy (from Kierkegaard

to Wittgenstein and Heidegger), and of course poetry, occupied much of the time left over from parish work when he was a priest.<sup>83</sup>

Thomas's career as a priest centred round the three parishes of Manafon, Eglwys-fach and Aberdaron, all of them situated in rural, Welsh-speaking Wales. Thomas was brought up as an English speaker, but began to learn Welsh during the Second World War at about the age of thirty: he wrote in his autobiography 'No-one' in 1985 that he hoped a knowledge of Welsh would act 'as a means of enabling him to return to the true Wales.'<sup>84</sup> Written in the third-person throughout, Thomas's autobiography was originally written in Welsh (as *Neb*), and his bilingual status exerts a powerful influence over his poetry. Throughout his life, Thomas was a Welsh nationalist and a supporter of an independent Wales to the extent of refusing to support Plaid Cymru because it recognised Westminster.<sup>85</sup> He expressed something of his devotion to Wales near the end of 'No-one': 'People will disappoint you, but Wales will never be unfaithful. She is always there in all her unspotted virginity, despite all the atrocious things that we do to her.' (A 103-104) In keeping with this devotion, he disavowed any mystical ideologies that might distance him from Welsh national concerns and the Welsh countryside:

I am always ready to admit the value of the spirit, but how often do we hear today of the spiritual as something opposed to ideas of nationalism and so on. The truth is that a nation that is fighting for survival cannot afford to change its soul for some obscure spirituality no matter how excellent that may be from the individual's point of view. Anyone who can feel for the life of the Welsh countryside has experienced something too strong and too profound to be ascribed to another world, or another life. Here, in the soil and the dirt and the peat do we find life and heaven and hell, and it is in these surroundings that a Welshman should forge his soul.<sup>86</sup>

Thomas clearly questioned any conception of the spiritual or religious that would require him to give up the Welsh countryside he loved in exchange for 'another

world, or another life': in contrast, rural Wales contained 'life and heaven and hell' and it was in these surroundings that his soul was forged and his religious sense moulded. A poem that contains something of Thomas's religious devotion to the Welsh countryside is 'The Bright Field', from his 1975 collection

Laboratories of the Spirit:

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realise now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

(CP 302)

This is a rare moment of unqualified hope in Thomas's poetry, a moving celebration of a moment of beauty recalled by the speaker and only now understood by him as 'the pearl / of great price, the one field that had / the treasure in it'. In keeping with Christ's parable in Matthew 13, this vision is apparently not free – 'I realise now / that I must give all that I have / to possess it' – but, again in keeping with the biblical source, the speaker seems to believe that it is worth the price he must pay to possess it. This is a beautiful poem and, significantly for our purposes here and in contrast to the biblical source it draws on, it is a call to attention in the present: the poem is not interested in 'a receding future' or 'an imagined past', rather it sees 'eternity' as present here and now, in the sun breaking through 'to illuminate a small field / *for a while*' (my emphasis), stressing the transitory nature of what it is celebrating. Where Christ

used a story about a field containing treasure to illustrate the precious nature of the kingdom of heaven, Thomas takes a similar picture, along with its religious resonances, and roots it firmly in rural Wales; he does not seem interested in the kingdom of heaven here, rather he returns Jesus' parable to its rural origins and transforms it into a celebration of nature.

So Thomas declares his allegiance to Wales rather than to what he calls an 'obscure spirituality' that would distance him from his home country, and he demonstrates this allegiance by originally making his comments concerning 'the soil and the dirt and the peat' of the Welsh countryside in Welsh. So, from 1948 when 'Dau Gapel' ('Two Chapels') was originally published, he was proficient enough in his second language of Welsh to write an essay in it; to his great sadness and frustration, however, the ability to write *poetry* in Welsh remained beyond him for the rest of his life, and this was to have a significant impact on his approach to writing poetry.

In a public lecture delivered in Welsh at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth in 1977, Thomas spoke passionately about the struggles he faced as an Anglo-Welsh writer following his vocation. The lecture was entitled 'The Creative Writer's Suicide', and in it Thomas argued that:

An Anglo-Welsh writer is neither one thing nor the other. He subsists in no-man's-land between two cultures. For various reasons, he has to write in English. So, whatever is said to the contrary, he is contributing to English culture, and deserves the rebuke of his fellow Welshmen on that account'.<sup>87</sup>

Thomas draws a stark distinction here between the languages of Welsh and English, and between 'English culture' and the interests of 'his fellow Welshmen'. He goes on to elaborate on the 'no-man's-land' in which 'the Anglo-Welsh writer' finds himself:



If he is a true Welshman and one who is in tune with the spirit and traditions of his own country and nation, there will come the desire to learn the old language in order to reclaim his birthright. Very good! But ... then comes the desire to write in Welsh, to prove to himself and to the public that he is a true Welshman. Vanity of vanities. (A 23)

Thomas goes on to argue that, while there have been authors who have written successful prose in a foreign language (he cites Joseph Conrad as an example), there are no poets who have composed 'truly great poems' in a foreign language. He therefore concludes, with clear reference to himself: 'If an Anglo-Welshman was not fortunate enough to have Welsh as his second language when he was young enough ... he will never become as good a writer in that language as he could be in English.' (A 23)

This is Thomas at his most passionately nationalistic. To write in English, he feels, is to contribute to a foreign culture, and for this he 'deserves the rebuke of his fellow Welshmen'. To be truly Welsh, one must speak Welsh, which Thomas does throughout his lecture; but, he maintains, he learnt it too late to be able to write poetry in Welsh, and for that he suffers. 'Woe is me that I was born!' he laments somewhat dramatically in the lecture. 'Who is wounded, and I am not wounded? For I bear in my body the marks of this battle.' (A 22)

Thomas's use of Biblical invective here demonstrates the grave seriousness with which he views the situation of the Anglo-Welsh writer, as does the title of his lecture: as a writer, he argues, for him to choose to write in Welsh, no matter how tempting, would be to commit creative suicide.

Language is therefore a huge consideration for Thomas in his conceptualisation of poetry, and the issue of translatability is one that will not be easily sidestepped. What we have in Thomas is a poet who resents the language in which he writes: as Donald Davie has observed: 'he regards English as the

medium that an unkind fate [or, in Thomas's case, would an unkind God be more appropriate?] has condemned him to ... This is surely a very uncommon way for an artist to feel towards the medium that he is working in'.<sup>88</sup> Davie goes on to argue that Thomas's 'grudging' and 'resentful' attitude towards English accounts for the 'peculiar gracelessness' of his handling of the English verse-line, a gracelessness 'which he has indulged more and more over the years'.<sup>89</sup>

What Davie is pointing to here is the identification made by critics such as John Wain of a 'flight from form' in Thomas's poetry from the 1970s onwards (the phrase is Wain's),<sup>90</sup> a move away from the 'beautiful sense of rhythm and sound' in his early work to a more fractured verse form in poems such as 'Via Negativa':

Why no! I never thought other than  
That God is that great absence  
In our lives, the empty silence  
Within, the place where we go  
Seeking, not in hope to  
Arrive or find. (CP 220)

Davie acknowledges the strength of Wain's position – 'the R. S. Thomas of the 1970s certainly went to great lengths to offend and disappoint the reader's ear'<sup>91</sup> – but links Thomas's new, rhythmically more fractured poetic closely to the feelings expressed in 'The Creative Writer's Suicide' and to Thomas's concerns for the Welsh language:

For on the one hand Welsh is far nearer being, as a practical possibility, an alternative national tongue than Gaelic is for the Irish and the Scots; yet on the other hand the English spoken and written by Welshmen differs from metropolitan English, lexically and grammatically, much less than the English of Ireland or Scotland does. Accordingly the Welsh writer who writes in English feels especially guilty at doing so[.]<sup>92</sup>

Thomas once described himself as 'an Englishman in his craft and a Welshman by instinct',<sup>93</sup> reminding his readers that an awareness of what he calls in 'The

Creative Writer's Suicide' 'this diabolical bilingualism'(A 21) is never far away from his poetry.

Nonetheless, I wish to suggest a reason for the 'flight from form' in Thomas's verse other than his dislike of the language in which he is forced to write; I believe the change in form is also linked closely to the change of subject matter in the poetry that occurred round about the same time as Thomas moved to the parish of Aberdaron on the Llŷn Peninsula, his final parish before retiring. Thomas commented on this shift of focus himself in 'No-one', comparing his first parish with his last one:

In Manafon he tried to write about the people of the country, searching for a symbol of mankind ... but having reached Aberdaron ... he turned increasingly to the question of the soul, the nature and existence of God, and the problem of time in the universe. (A 76)

In Thomas's early collections, his subject-matter was on the whole 'the people of the country', his parishioners, the hill farmers with whom he lived; accordingly he wrote of them with affection, but more frequently it was either with ambivalence or even a priest's righteous indignation, as in 'A Priest to his People':

Men of the hills, wantoners, men of Wales,  
With your sheep and your pigs and your ponies, your sweaty females,  
How I have hated you for your irreverence, your scorn even  
Of the refinements of art and the mysteries of the Church,  
I whose invective would spurt like a flame of fire  
To be quenched always in the coldness of your stare. (CP 13)

In many of these early collections, the 'men of the hills' find their representative in Iago Prytherch, the subject of Thomas's most famous early poem 'A Peasant' and perhaps as close as Thomas came to 'a symbol of mankind':

Just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills,  
Who pens a few sheep in a gap of cloud. (CP 4)

After watching him at work and at rest ('Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire'), the speaker observes, 'There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind'. That observation is later undermined by the poem's identification of the speaker's 'refined, / But affected, sense', and the poem concludes by praising Prytherch's endurance 'Against siege of rain and the wind's attrition'. 'A Peasant' was just the first poem to record Thomas's struggle with the ambivalence of his feelings towards his creation and the hill farmers from whom he originated, and the love-hate relationship with Prytherch and those like him went on to power much of Thomas's poetry for the next twenty years.

Eventually, however, Iago Prytherch proved inadequate to Thomas's questioning of the world around him, and he moved away from 'the people of the country' to 'the question of the soul': as he puts it himself towards the end of 'No-one':

He portrayed the life of the small farmer as an act of protest against the ignorance and apathy of the rich and well-off. But through those poems there ran a religious vein that became more visible during his last years. After all, there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God. Nor anything more difficult than establishing that relationship. (A 104)

It is the foregrounding of this 'religious vein' always evident in the early poems that I believe contributes to the 'flight from form' in Thomas's poetry: as Thomas acknowledges here, his focus shifts from the 'small farmer' to 'man and God', and it is the difficulties in establishing the relationship between man and God that has such a radical effect on Thomas's approach to writing poetry.

In commending Thomas's poetry, Helen Gardner describes him a 'a poet of distinction and refinement, in the honourable tradition of parson-poets';<sup>94</sup> but it is clear from the outset that Thomas is a very different 'parson-poet' to George

Herbert or even Gerard Manley Hopkins. M. Wynn Thomas provides a useful characterisation of Thomas's approach to his religious subject matter:

His religious poetry ... broods on the conceit of faith – taking that word 'conceit' in its multiple senses. The truth of a poem is made to hang on a vulnerably exposed trope, sometimes pushed to a breaking point of exaggeration; the very possibility of faith is implicitly queried from the sceptical viewpoint of the enlightened humanist and the worldly-wisdom of the relativist; and at the same time the presumptions of human faith are questioned by a quizzical, almost perversely elusive deity. In all these senses, then, the practice of religious faith in modern times seems for R. S. Thomas to involve the artistic and spiritual daring of a necessary conceit.<sup>95</sup>

This identification of the vulnerability of faith in Thomas's poetry is well-observed, wrestling as it must with 'the enlightened humanist' and 'the relativist' in Thomas, not to mention the 'quizzical, almost perversely elusive deity' one critic characterised as 'rather less responsive than Iago [Prytherch] on an off-day [and] more deliberately bloody-minded.'<sup>96</sup> This deity becomes the principal addressee of the poems and Thomas will contend with him for the rest of his career as a poet: after all, as he acknowledged above, 'there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God.'

In attempting to understand Thomas's religious poetry, then, it is crucial to understand something of Thomas's God, and it is here the problems begin. While Les Murray feels confident in describing the God in whom he believes, down to his sense of humour and country of choice, Thomas is, like Geoffrey Hill, wary of assertion: he remarks in his autobiography:

Who is it that ever saw God? Who ever heard Him speak? We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God. (A 104)

As 'Via Negativa' puts it, 'God is that great absence / In our lives, the empty silence / Within, the place where we go / Seeking, not in hope to / Arrive or find' (CP 220). God is invisible and mute in Thomas's experience, and so he always

remains a shadowy figure in Thomas's poetry; as one of the first book-length studies of Thomas puts it, he is the poet of the hidden God,<sup>97</sup> and it is the experience of religious feeling without the assurance that God is good or loving or all-powerful that gives Thomas's poetry its distinctive, seemingly fractured or, as Donald Davie puts it, 'graceless' form. As one critic, Vimala Herman, puts it:

The absence of a center – of an authoritative, referential presence, from which meaning may be derived – sets into motion the process of reconstruction of meaning another way, out of the drifting bits of faith and doubt, from fleeting and unauthorized moments of intensity, in neutral fragments of language ... [This] can be seen to explain the characteristic effects of his work – the troubling ambivalence of statement, the instabilities of tone, which disturb the reading by its demand for attentiveness on the part of the reader to *its* predicament, and its subsequent refusal to award the reader with any position of security.<sup>98</sup>

So Thomas's religious poetry can appear fractured, graceless and untidy because that is the nature of the experience it records and embodies. Herman possibly overstates her position: as I hope to demonstrate in my chapter on the figure of Christ in Thomas's poetry, God is not completely 'absent' from the poetry, contrary to appearances. However, as for her identification of 'the troubling ambivalence of statement, the instabilities of tone ... and [the] refusal to award the reader with any position of security', I agree that these are a result of the troubling nature of God in the poetry as invisible and mute rather than 'an authoritative, referential presence'.

It is often the seeming contradictions between the God of Christian revelation and the God Thomas believes to be at work in the world around him that form the basis for the religious questioning in his poetry. Thomas is not an optimist and there is little room for hope in his view of the world. As he remarked in interview in 1975:

The quality of life is deteriorating everywhere. As the Welsh Tourist Board goes on enticing more and more people here the roads get

widened, the character of the country gets knocked to hell ... I say to my wife, "All the places we've known, have any of the changes been for the better?" (Rogers 29)

It is here where the substantial differences between Thomas and Murray become apparent. Both poets praise the countryside and landscapes of their respective countries and both defend rural life from its dismissal and potential erosion at the hands of the towns and cities: Murray sets himself up as the defender of the 'subhuman redneck', the rural poor from whom he originates and who he believes are without a voice in Australia, while Thomas asserts in an essay: 'I don't allow for a moment the superiority of urban to country life. I don't believe that town life is any more real than rural. I don't believe that a poet who chooses to write about an agricultural environment is necessarily insular, escapist or even provincial.'<sup>99</sup> However, the differences between the two poets become clear when they discuss the effect rural life can have on humanity: first, here is Murray on the Australian outback:

Space, like peace, is one of the great, poorly explored spiritual resources of Australia. In the huge spaces of the Outback, ordinary souls expand into splendid and often innocent grotesquerie which the cramping of urban surroundings might transmute into ugly, even dangerous forms. (PT 149-150)

This is Murray in idealistic stance, celebrating the effect the Australian countryside can have on 'ordinary souls' who otherwise might turn out bad. In contrast, here is Thomas's view, as expressed in 'No-one':

He was yet to discover Maeterlinck's story, describing how, while descending from a mountain in the Alps, he saw below him a glorious valley under the summer sun. And to crown everything, there was a crowd of people out in the fields harvesting the hay. But as he came within earshot of the people, he found that they were quarrelling amongst themselves, using the dirtiest and most unseemly language. An extremely relevant parable, as the boy [R. S. Thomas] later learned. (A 38)

Thomas can praise creation, particularly the Welsh countryside, in his poetry, but to suggest that such landscapes might have a positive effect on those who live in the countryside is beyond him, and seemingly in keeping with his experiences with the hill farmers of his first few parishes. His praise of Wales and her 'unspotted virginity' is qualified by the observation, 'People will disappoint you', while he admits in interview: 'I'm slightly deaf to people. I hear the sounds of nature more.' (Rogers 29)

Thomas's dim view of humanity and human nature suggests a different God standing behind reality – and responsible for it – than the God of Christian revelation. As the poem 'Which' puts it:

And in the book I read:  
God is love. But lifting  
my head, I do not find it  
so. Shall I return

to my book and, between  
print, wander an air  
heavy with the scent  
of this one wind? Or not trust

language, only the blows that  
life gives me, wearing them  
like those red tokens with which  
an agreement is sealed?

(CP 297)

As is so often the case in Thomas's poetry, the choice is left open at the end of the poem, and I would suggest that neither option considered by the speaker is wholly acceptable to Thomas: 'wander[ing] an air / heavy with the scent / of this one word' involves an avoidance of the realities of human experience, whether that 'one word' is 'love' or 'God', while trusting 'only the blows that / life gives me' without trusting in language paints a depressing picture of inarticulate human existence. Both options suggest an approach based on the dictum, 'ignorance is bliss', either from the perspective of sheltered idealism or



unthinking pragmatism, and neither option is embraced by Thomas in his poetry and prose. Nonetheless, the observation of the opening stanza – ‘God is love. But lifting / my head, I do not find it / so’ – stands, and remains at the heart of Thomas’s religious poetry throughout his career. As another poem ‘Petition’ memorably puts it, with all the longing of a Keatsian Romantic:

One thing I have asked  
Of the disposer of the issues  
Of life: that truth should defer  
To beauty. It was not granted. (CP 209)

Thomas contends with ‘the disposer of the issues / Of life’ throughout his poetic career; his disputes with God are more openly expressed than Hill’s, but they are no less sceptical. I will look in detail at some of those disputes in a later chapter on Thomas; here, it will suffice to look at one example, ‘Waiting’, from the collection Frequencies (1978):

Face to face? Ah, no  
God; such language falsifies  
the relation. Nor side by side,  
nor near you, nor anywhere  
in time and space.  
Say you were,  
when I came, your name  
vouching for you, ubiquitous  
in its explanations. The  
earth bore and they reaped:  
God, they said, looking  
in your direction. The wind  
changed; over the drowned  
body it was you  
they spat at. (CP 347)

The speaker begins by taking issue with the apostle Paul’s famous assertion in 1 Corinthians 13:12 (‘Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face’); he feels that ‘such language falsifies / the relation’ between man and God, that most important yet most difficult concern of Thomas’s poetry. The enjambment across lines 1 and 2 – ‘Ah, no / God’ – could

convey one of two senses: that the speaker is addressing God and refusing the suggestion that he ever could see God 'face to face', or that a face to face encounter with God would only prove that in fact the figure in question was 'no God', as the true God cannot be met with in this direct manner. Whatever the meaning, the first section concludes with the speaker disavowing any close contact or even proximity to God, 'anywhere / in time and space'. This disavowal does seem to ignore the context in which Paul makes his statement in 1 Corinthians, however: he is talking about the Christian hope of future perfection, heralded by Christ's return, and so Paul conceived of this face to face encounter between man and God as occurring *outside* of 'time and space', in eternity.

The second section of the poem explores some of the different ways in which God's name is invoked by people. The speaker begins by grudgingly accepting God's existence before this poem's interrogation of him ('Say you were / when I came'); he then obliquely accuses God of failing to give an account of himself beyond his divinity, the name 'God' 'vouching for [him], ubiquitous / in its explanations'. This name is invoked by people either in praise (here, for the harvest) or in blame ('over the drowned / body it was you / they spat at'), but no real explanation of the ways of God to men is forthcoming.

The poem then moves to its final section:

Young  
 I pronounced you. Older  
 I still do, but seldomer  
 now, leaning far out  
 over an immense depth, letting  
 your name go and waiting,  
 somewhere between faith and doubt,  
 for the echoes of its arrival.

The speaker addresses God directly to tell him that he does not address him directly as often as he used to. This follows on from his frustration that God's name has proved 'ubiquitous / in its explanations', that the very invocation of God's name has often silenced debate: the speaker seeks to avoid this by using God's name 'seldom / now'. However, this name is also indispensable in the speaker's attempts to plumb the 'immense depth' in which presumably God resides, and so, although 'older', 'God' is still 'pronounced' by him. The speaker therefore finds himself caught between a desire to distance himself from notions of meeting with God 'face to face' and from his youthful habit of 'pronouncing' God's name, and his compulsion to continue using God's name, 'letting / [it] go and waiting', in the hope of somehow contacting him. The speaker describes his position as 'somewhere between faith and doubt', and this is an apt description of the religious stance of most of Thomas's poems: the hope, and even expectation, is often that God will speak, that the poem could end with contact being made, but this is undercut by a concomitant scepticism, even cynicism that any such hope is hopelessly misplaced. This poem ends with its speaker 'waiting', and ultimately this is the only response to Thomas's predicament. God may respond, he may not: all the poet can do is let God's name go 'over an immense depth' and wait to see what happens.

Thomas's religious stance is therefore 'somewhere between faith and doubt', 'neither outside nor in' as another poem from the same collection, 'The Porch', puts it; this perhaps accounts for his approach to religious poetry in The Penguin Book of Religious Verse that was criticised by Helen Gardner. In the introduction to the anthology, Thomas suggested that, 'by sitting somewhat loosely to orthodoxy, I have attempted to broaden the meaning of the term

“religious” to accommodate twentieth-century sensibility’;<sup>100</sup> in the light of the baldest reading of Thomas’s poetry or prose, however, it is clear that his poetic often draws its strength from precisely *not* accommodating twentieth-century sensibilities. ‘The machine’ holds a position as a malevolent influence on humanity throughout his poetry, and his preference for rural Wales over the urban industrialised West remained undimmed. In an interview of 1981, when the interviewer asked him for his views on industrialization (‘Do you think that we’d be better off without all this progress? Do you see it as only a demonic symptom? I mean, you can hardly undo the Industrial Revolution, but would you like it to happen?’), Thomas’s reply is blunt: ‘Oh yes. I think it’s the only hope you see.’<sup>101</sup> Therefore, it is clear that his position ‘somewhat loose to orthodoxy’ is not a concession to modernity, but rather a result of deeply-held scepticism and doubts of his own.

‘I’m not sure that I’m all that much of a Christian,’ he remarks in interview (Lethbridge 39), and, perhaps ironically, of the three poets in this thesis Thomas enjoys perhaps the most troubled relationship towards Christianity, in spite of (or is it because of?) his career as an Anglican priest. Speaking of his position as priest in 1975, he remarked: ‘I’m not there to put my own views. I’m there to put the Church’s views. I’m an honest person. I don’t push things at them. I like the challenge it puts upon one, to make sense of Christianity.’ (Rogers 28-29) One critic has observed that Thomas was ‘a priest in the sense that Philip Larkin was a librarian’,<sup>102</sup> and Thomas’s own responses to questions about the seeming contradictions between his role as priest and his scepticism as a poet were often voiced in remarkably secular and pragmatic terms: ‘It may have been a disaster for other people, but it was a blessing for me that I entered

the Church. Talk about the parson's freehold! It has given me time, which is the most necessary of all to a poet.' ('Probings' 30-31)

However, in the same response Thomas remarks: 'Who can deny the finger of God?', and it is equally misguided to deny the presence of God in Thomas's religious vision. In spite of the substantial difficulties he obviously has with the Christian God, nonetheless he keeps writing poems to him: as one critic shrewdly observes: 'his poetry reveals, more than anything, a hymn to doubt and the existential agony of modern man. Paradoxically, if he were not so profoundly honest, Thomas might settle for the cop-out of atheism.'<sup>103</sup> When offered that 'cop-out' in interview, Thomas always declined: for example, in a 1990 interview he was asked: 'Is it possible, any longer, to contemplate God as other than "that which is beyond the current frontier of our knowledge"?'

Thomas replied:

I may be eclectic, of course, and I do not accept that Christianity is the only way to the kingdom of God or to the beatific vision. But I am orthodox enough to accept Paul's description of God as He "in whom we live and move and have our being". And to talk about frontiers of knowledge does not imply an ultimate one which the genius of man will one day enable him to cross. Granted that a certain kind of religion has made capital out of a God of the gaps, this does not mean that each closure of a gap is a kind of erosion of the reality of God. There is the God of Ann Griffiths and Mother Theresa as well as of Augustine and Pascal ... So, yes, I do contemplate or visualize or experience God as other than the last frontier waiting to be crossed. ('Probings' 45)

In another interview he remarks:

I think there's a certain amount of misunderstanding of my work, a lot of my work is ironic, which possibly some people wouldn't always get. What I'm tilting at is not God, but the ideas of God ... I believe in God, I'm trying to show how people sometimes attempt to pin down this, this Being Who's not a Being. (Lethbridge 40)

So, Thomas's troubled relationship with Christianity aside, he does believe in God and demonstrates this by writing the vast majority of his poetry as

part of a dispute with him and an attempt to articulate a relationship with him. 'We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God', and yet Thomas's poetry is never content to accept God's invisibility and silence, or even to satirise the attempts of people throughout history to pin him down (though many of his poems do exactly that). At bottom, Thomas's poetry is in search of God and, crucially, God's character, and the vast amount of poetry he produced in his lifetime indicates that this search never quite ended. Whether any progress was made will be the concern of my exploration of his poetry later in this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Corcoran. *English Poetry since 1940*. London: Longman, 1993. p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Levi. 'Geoffrey Hill'. *Agenda* 30.1-2 (1992): 46-49 (p. 46).

<sup>3</sup> Tom Paulin. 'A Visionary Nationalist: Geoffrey Hill'. *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992. 276-284 (p. 281).

<sup>4</sup> *No Truce With The Furies*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1995. p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> J. B. Lethbridge. 'R. S. Thomas Talks To J. B. Lethbridge'. *Anglo-Welsh Review* 74 (1983): 36-56 (p. 47).

<sup>6</sup> 'Pound Devalued'. *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1992. 14-17 (p. 17). Further references to *The Paperbark Tree* are given in the text.

<sup>7</sup> 'Les Murray: Talking with Robert Crawford'. *Talking Verse* 1 (1995): 162-172 (p. 170).

<sup>8</sup> *Fivefathers*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Further references are given in the text.

<sup>10</sup> *The Lords of Limit*. London: André Deutsch, 1984; *The Enemy's Country*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Ricks. *The Force of Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. p. 317.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent Sherry. *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1987. p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> Donald Hall. 'Introduction'. *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*. By Henry Hart. Carbondale/Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986. ix-xiii (p. x).

<sup>14</sup> Hart. *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill*. p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Hart, pp. 54, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Hart, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Davie. *Under Briggflatts: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988*. Manchester: Carcanet, 1989. p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> John Haffenden. *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation*. London: Faber, 1981. pp. 97-98. Further references are given in the text.

<sup>19</sup> Sherry, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Hill. Notes to *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. *Collected Poems*. pp. 206-207.

- <sup>21</sup> Hill revealed he is a practising Anglican in a radio interview broadcast in 1996, and reported by Mark Tranter in a review of Canaan ('Gestures of Solidarity'. P.N. Review 24.1 (1997): 55-57 (p. 56)); Michael Schmidt also reports Hill's Anglicanism in his Lives of the Poets. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998. p. 841.
- <sup>22</sup> Ricks, p. 317.
- <sup>23</sup> Hill. The Triumph of Love. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999. pp. 74-75. Further references given in the text.
- <sup>24</sup> Robert Potts. 'A change of address'. Rev. of Speech! Speech! TLS 25 January 2002. p. 25.
- <sup>25</sup> Blake Morrison. 'Under Judgement'. New Statesman 8 February 1980: 212-214 (p. 213). Further references given in the text.
- <sup>26</sup> Alan Wall. 'Geoffrey Hill's Canaan'. Agenda 34.2 (1996): 29-48 (pp. 41-42).
- <sup>27</sup> David Gervais. 'Milton and Modern Poetry: A Question'. PN Review 28.3 (Jan.-Feb. 2002): 36-41 (p. 40).
- <sup>28</sup> Schmidt, p. 841.
- <sup>29</sup> The Enemy's Country, p. 7.
- <sup>30</sup> Speech! Speech! Washington D. C.: Counterpoint, 2000. p. 10.
- <sup>31</sup> T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962. London: Faber, 1963. p. 222.
- <sup>32</sup> Collected in The Lords of Limit. London: André Deutsch, 1984. 1-18. Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>33</sup> Hill. 'Common weal, common woe'. TLS 21 April 1989: 411-414 (p. 414).
- <sup>34</sup> Kevin Hart. "'Interest" in Les A. Murray'. Australian Literary Studies 14.2 (1989): 147-159 (p. 157).
- <sup>35</sup> Robert Crawford. 'Les A. Murray: Talking to Robert Crawford'. Talking Verse 1 (1995): 162-172 (p. 163).
- <sup>36</sup> Crawford interview, p. 171. Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>37</sup> Corcoran, p. 8.
- <sup>38</sup> Missy Daniel. 'Poetry is Presence: An Interview with Les Murray'. Commonweal 119.10 (1992): 9-12 (p. 9). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>39</sup> Murray. Collected Poems. Manchester: Carcanet, 1998. p. 101. Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>40</sup> Murray in Contemporary Poets of the English Language. Ed. Rosalie Murphy. London: St James Press, 1970. p. 786.
- <sup>41</sup> Lawrence Bourke. A Vivid Steady State: Les Murray and Australian Poetry. Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992. p. 24.
- <sup>42</sup> Peter Porter. 'Les Murray: An Appreciation'. Journal of Commonwealth Literature 17 (1982): 45-52 (p. 52).
- <sup>43</sup> Porter, p. 52.
- <sup>44</sup> Robert Crawford. 'Les Murray: Shaping an Australian Voice'. Identifying Poets: Self and Territory in Twentieth-Century Poetry. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993. 73-101 (p. 88).
- <sup>45</sup> William Scammell. 'In conversation with Les Murray'. PN Review 22.6 (July-August 1996): 29-36 (p. 36).
- <sup>46</sup> Michael Cotter. 'The Emergent Self in Les Murray's Poetry'. Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray. Ed. Carmel Gaffney. Armidale, NSW: Kardoorair Press, 1997. 37-53 (p. 37).
- <sup>47</sup> It is perhaps indicative of Murray's relative openness that he collaborated closely with Peter Alexander in his biography, Les Murray: A Life in Progress (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), in contrast to Thomas's fierce opposition to Justin Wintle's part-biography Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God (London: Harper Collins, 1996).
- <sup>48</sup> Bert Almon. 'Les Murray's Critique of the Enlightenment'. Counterbalancing Light. 1-19 (p. 1).
- <sup>49</sup> Killing the Black Dog: Essay and Poems. Sydney: The Federation Press, 1997. p. 5. Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>50</sup> Carl Phillips. 'Geoffrey Hill: The Art of Poetry LXXX'. The Paris Review 42.154 (2000): 272-299 (p. 288).
- <sup>51</sup> Jamie Grant. 'Subhuman Redneck Politics'. Counterbalancing Light. 123-136 (p. 126).
- <sup>52</sup> Grant, p. 128.
- <sup>53</sup> Lawrence Bourke. 'The Rapture of Place: From Immanence to Transcendence in the Poetry of Les A. Murray'. Westerly 33.1 (1988): 41-51 (p. 50).

- <sup>54</sup> T. S. Eliot. After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy. London: Faber, 1934.
- <sup>55</sup> 'Who's Ignatius, Whose Loyola?' Kunapipi 1.2 (1979): 149-154 (p. 152).
- <sup>56</sup> 'Who's Ignatius, Whose Loyola?', p. 149.
- <sup>57</sup> 'The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever', CP 235.
- <sup>58</sup> Grant, p. 125.
- <sup>59</sup> George Steiner. Real Presences. London: Faber and Faber, 1989. pp. 3, 4.
- <sup>60</sup> T.S. Eliot. Selected Essays, p. 392.
- <sup>61</sup> Hart, p. 155.
- <sup>62</sup> Michael Cotter, p. 39.
- <sup>63</sup> Hart, p. 158.
- <sup>64</sup> Les Murray, ed. Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry. Blackburn, Victoria: Collins Dove, 1986.
- <sup>65</sup> Jim Davidson. 'Interview: Les A. Murray'. Meanjin 41 (1982): 112-129 (p. 127).
- <sup>66</sup> Bourke. A Vivid Steady State. p. 30.
- <sup>67</sup> Steven Matthews. Les Murray. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001. p. 37.
- <sup>68</sup> Murray quoted in Davidson interview, p. 128; Rodney Stenning Edgecombe. 'Les Murray and the Tradition of the Emblem Poem'. Counterbalancing Light. 92-107 (p. 99).
- <sup>69</sup> Coleridge. Biographia Literaria. Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983. vol. I, p. 304.
- <sup>70</sup> Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry, p. xiii.
- <sup>71</sup> Anthology, p. xiii.
- <sup>72</sup> 'Introduction'. The Penguin Book of Religious Verse. Ed. R. S. Thomas. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963. 7-11 (p. 8).
- <sup>73</sup> Penguin, p. 9.
- <sup>74</sup> Penguin, pp. 9-10.
- <sup>75</sup> Eliot. Selected Essays. p. 390.
- <sup>76</sup> Gardner. Religion and Literature. pp. 130, 131.
- <sup>77</sup> Gardner, pp. 134-135.
- <sup>78</sup> Gardner, p. 132.
- <sup>79</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie. 'Probing: An interview with R. S. Thomas'. Planet 80 (1990): 28-52 (p. 46). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>80</sup> R. S. Thomas. Collected Poems: 1945-1990. London: Phoenix, 1993. p. 211. Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>81</sup> A. E. Dyson. Yeats, Eliot and R. S. Thomas: Riding the Echo. London: Macmillan, 1981. p. xix.
- <sup>82</sup> John Powell Ward. The Poetry of R. S. Thomas. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Bridgend: Seren, 2001. p. 7.
- <sup>83</sup> M. Wynn Thomas. 'Introduction'. The Page's Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty. Ed. M. Wynn Thomas. Bridgend: Seren, 1993. 9-21 (p. 12).
- <sup>84</sup> 'No-one'. Autobiographies. Trans. Jason Walford Davies. London: Phoenix, 1997. 27-109 (p. 50). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>85</sup> See Byron Rogers. 'The Enigma of Aberdaron'. The Daily Telegraph Magazine 7 November 1975: 25-29 (p. 29). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>86</sup> 'Two Chapels' (originally written in Welsh as 'Dau Gapel'). R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose. Ed. Sandra Anstey. Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983. 43-47 (p. 47).
- <sup>87</sup> 'The Creative Writer's Suicide'. Autobiographies. 19-24 (p. 22). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>88</sup> Donald Davie. 'R.S. Thomas's Poetry of the Church in Wales'. Religion and Literature 19.2 (1987): 35-47 (p. 43).
- <sup>89</sup> Davie, p. 46.
- <sup>90</sup> Davie, p. 35.
- <sup>91</sup> Davie, pp. 36-37.
- <sup>92</sup> Davie, p. 42.
- <sup>93</sup> Quoted by Jason Walford Davies. 'Introduction'. Autobiographies. p. xxvi.
- <sup>94</sup> Gardner, p. 130.
- <sup>95</sup> Wynn Thomas, p. 13.
- <sup>96</sup> Andrew Waterman. 'Closing the Shutters: Frequencies and the Poetry of R. S. Thomas'. Poetry Wales 14.4 (1979): 90-103 (p. 102).
- <sup>97</sup> D. Z. Phillips. R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God. Allison Park, Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986.



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<sup>98</sup> Vimala Herman. 'Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas'. Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993. 140-161 (p. 141).

<sup>99</sup> 'Words and the Poet'. Selected Prose. 69-85 (p. 85).

<sup>100</sup> Penguin, p. 9.

<sup>101</sup> 'R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge'. Anglo-Welsh Review 74 (1983): 36-56 (pp. 41, 42).

Further references are given in the text.

<sup>102</sup> Grey Gowrie. 'The Witness of R. S. Thomas'. Agenda 36.2: 11-19 (p. 16).

<sup>103</sup> William Oxley. 'R. S. Thomas'. Contemporary Poets. Ed. Thomas Riggs. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Detroit: St James Press, 1996. p. 1114.

### 3. 'TERROR'S NEW STANDARDS': CONTENTIONS WITH SUFFERING AND EVIL IN THE POETRY OF GEOFFREY HILL AND LES MURRAY

At the end of Henrik Ibsen's play Brand, the audience watches as the title character – a Christian pastor whose fervent devotion to God has led him to witness the deaths of his unrepentant mother, his beloved son and beloved wife – falls to his knees in the face of an approaching avalanche brought about by a wild gun-shot fired by his only remaining companion, a mad girl named Gerd: as he does so, he cries out over the roar of the avalanche:

Tell  
me, O God, even as Your heavens fall  
on me: what makes retribution  
flesh of our flesh? Why is salvation  
rooted so blindly in Your Cross?  
Why is man's own proud will his curse?  
Answer! What do we die to prove?  
Answer!  
*[The avalanche buries him. The whole valley is filled.]*  
A VOICE *[calling through the noise of thunder]*  
He is the God of Love.<sup>1</sup>

Brand's questions here, voiced at the moment of his death, are both appropriate to his own pained existence and applicable to many who find themselves, in art and in life, questioning the nature and character of God in the light of human experiences of suffering, isolation, evil and pain. The essence of this questioning from a Christian perspective is well illustrated by the astonishing response of 'A VOICE' through the thunder to Brand, presumably articulated too late for Brand himself to hear: 'He is the God of Love.' The disparity between avalanche and voice is forcefully impressed upon the audience here, who may be tempted to respond: is that all God can say in response to the desperate and

despairing questioning of one of his believers? Where is the evidence of God's love in Brand's life – in the deaths of his mother, his son, his wife, himself? The loving God of Christian revelation appears to sit ill at ease with the action of Ibsen's play and, more importantly for my purposes here, with much of the history of humanity. How can belief in the God of Christianity remain tenable in the light of human suffering and the evil evident in so much of human history? How do nominally Christian poets like Hill, Murray and Thomas begin to address the disparity between the avalanche that buries the man and the voice that reaffirms Christian revelation?

Before leaving Brand, I should note the significance of the fact that I have quoted from the version of Ibsen's play written for the English stage by Geoffrey Hill in 1978. To date, it stands as Hill's sole foray into verse drama, and as such many critics have attempted to draw parallels between Ibsen's exploration of religious fervour and its effects on humanity and the central religious concerns of Hill's own poetry. I quote Hill's Brand here because I see some of these parallels myself. Hill has pointed out in at least one interview that he did not choose to translate the play himself but rather accepted a commission to do so from the National Theatre in London; nonetheless he has observed that 'with the benefit of hindsight, one can see that Brand was not an inappropriate play for me to attempt' (Haffenden 97), and the concerns of the play, and in particular its closing questions quoted above, serve as a useful starting point for an exploration of human suffering and the character of God in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Les Murray.

The problem posed by human suffering to belief in a loving, benevolent God has been recognised by countless believers and artists throughout history,

from the Book of Job up to the present day. King Lear stands as one of the most powerful articulations of this problem; in the course of the play's action, various characters are forced to confront a world full of suffering and evil and, in spite of its pre-Christian setting, the play encompasses the two major forms of questioning suffering can evoke. The first type of question is voiced by the Earl of Gloucester soon after he has been betrayed by his son and blinded by his onetime guests:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;  
They kill us for their sport. (King Lear, IV (i), ll. 36-37)

This statement is one of the most famous in the play, and stands as a powerful expression of the cosmic questions of suffering, the unsettling, indeed terrifying suspicion that humans suffer violence and evil because God, far from being benevolent, is in fact 'wanton', cruel and delights in our suffering. The idea of a laughing God is one I explore in the next chapter; all that need be said here is that Gloucester's vision of a cruel deity is one which the Christian poet must address.

The second type of question regarding suffering voiced in Lear moves from the cosmic to the immediate, to the personal cry of a father on the senseless murder of his daughter:

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never! (V (iii), ll. 305-307)

This is one of the most moving moments in English drama and powerfully conveys the real problem of suffering for most people, believers, atheists or otherwise: quite apart from the cosmic and metaphysical questions, there is the seeming injustice of bereavement, the irrevocable loss of a loved one, the scandal of death in spite of the rational admission that it comes to us all. Where is God

in all of this? Does a sense of the religious offer consolation to a Lear mourning the death of a Cordelia? Much of the power of the closing scene in Lear comes from uncertainty about whether there can be any consolation to Lear's situation. The question looms: can even God put right what Lear has suffered?

So, human suffering has repeatedly raised questions for religious belief, both cosmic and subjective; these questions can directly query the nature of God (as does Gloucester) or, perhaps more frequently, they are left unresolved, stunned and unanswerable when confronted by the death of another Cordelia, another innocent who will 'come no more'.

How does the religious poet begin to address the question of human suffering in the framework of his or her belief? Should the religious poet even attempt to address these questions? The philosopher George Santayana appears dubious concerning religion's capacity to contend with the suffering of human existence, inasmuch as that suffering is a part of real life:

[I]t is ... the cause of the impurity and incoherence of religion in the soul, when it seeks its sanctions in the sphere of reality, and forgets that its proper concern is to express the ideal. For the dignity of religion, like that of poetry and of every moral ideal, lies precisely in its ideal adequacy, in its fit rendering of the meanings and values of life, in its anticipation of perfection ... [Religion's] function is ... to draw from reality materials for an image of that ideal to which reality ought to conform, and to make us citizens, by anticipation, in the world we crave.<sup>2</sup>

For Santayana, religion would do well to avoid 'the sphere of reality' and instead get on with its real job, 'expressing the ideal'; when religion has dealings with reality, it is only to 'draw materials' from it, 'for an image of that ideal to which reality ought to conform'. Therefore, it would appear from this passage that Santayana would urge a religious poet to avoid trying to address the pain and suffering of reality in his or her poetry, as contending with reality is not the function of religion.

However, Santayana does go on to qualify his statements above by drawing a sharp distinction between religion and poetry: 'As religion is deflected from its course when it is confused with a record of facts or of natural laws, so poetry is arrested in its development if it remains an unmeaning play of fancy without relevance to the ideals and purposes of life. In that relevance lies its highest power.'<sup>3</sup> So, according to Santayana, religion must avoid too much interaction with 'the sphere of reality' in its function of expressing the ideal, while poetry must remain relevant to 'the ideals and purposes of life' if it is to attain to 'its highest power'. This would seem to leave the religious poet with a choice: either express the ideal in his or her poetry with only passing references to the suffering of the real world (as arguably Wallace Stevens does in his poetry, influenced as he was by Santayana's thinking – he wrote the poem 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome' for him), or take Santayana's position regarding poetry as more important than his position on religion and strive for relevance to life rather than an expression of the ideal.

Significantly, I feel that many of the great religious poets throughout history would take issue with Santayana's severely limited view of religion as the expression of the ideal. Dante's Divine Comedy, for instance, while in many ways a monument to Dante's belief in a universe ordered and overruled by a sovereign, loving God, is aware at several points in the Inferno that what it is describing – the eternal torment of the damned – is not what the poet sees as 'ideal'; while hell is described in canto III as 'the invention of the power of God, / Of his wisdom, and of his primal love',<sup>4</sup> Dante the pilgrim is repeatedly overcome with compassion for those suffering eternally around him (see, for example, his meeting with Francesca da Rimini in canto V, or his retelling of the

story of Count Ugolino in canto XXXIII). While his imaginative journey through hell allows him to settle some old scores, Dante nonetheless often appears to struggle with many of the punishments he witnesses: hell is an essential component of his understanding of the Christian religion, but for Dante its existence is not celebrated as some sort of ideal.

Turning to Milton, it is clear that his conception of religion can cope with the 'sphere of reality' and all its attendant frustrations, injustices and suffering in a way that Santayana's seemingly cannot. Milton would almost certainly have viewed Santayana's conception of religion as the expression of 'a fugitive and cloistered virtue': for him, true Christianity consisted in the apprehension and consideration of 'vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain[ing], and yet distinguish[ing], and yet prefer[ring] that which is truly better'. There is little room for idealisation in Milton's conception of Christianity and 'the true warfaring Christian'; there is a war to be fought with vice, and so the enemy must be known and the race run, 'not without dust and heat'.<sup>5</sup> Milton's view of his religion, then, is of a set of beliefs that have a place in the real world of 'vice', 'dust and heat', and accordingly his religious poetry attempts to address this world directly. *Paradise Lost* stands as, among other things, a courageous attempt to account for a fallen world in which so often good is seemingly punished and evil rewarded: a recent and poignant example of such injustice for Milton as he wrote the poem was the fall of the Parliament-led Protectorate and the restoration of Charles II to the throne, which resulted in Milton's imprisonment for a time. In books XI-XII of the poem, the recently fallen Adam is shown the consequences of his fall on human history by the archangel Michael, and he is soon made aware that the Fall has marred every

aspect of human existence, including the nature of human government. 'Since thy original lapse, true liberty is lost', Michael tells Adam:

since [man] permits  
 Within himself unworthy powers to reign  
 Over free reason, God in judgement just  
 Subjects him from without to violent lords;  
 Who oft as undeservedly enthrall  
 His outward freedom: tyranny must be,  
 Though to the tyrant thereby no excuse.  
 (Paradise Lost XII, ll. 83-84, 90-96)

Injustice and tyranny in government are a result of the Fall, and therefore cannot be avoided: here, Milton's religion is able to address the reality of tyranny and attempts to account for it within the Christian framework. Yet again, Santayana's contention that religion is merely concerned with an expression of the ideal is undermined by a Christian poet's belief that his religion can do a great deal more: it can begin to account for the injustices of the world in which the poet and his readers find themselves.

Apart from the supremely confident Dante and Milton, other examples of Christian poets contending with an often unjust and suffering world in their poetry could be cited; they include the explorations of the difficulties inherent in religious belief in the devotional poetry of George Herbert, Henry Vaughan and, perhaps most of all, Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'wrestling with (my God!) my God'.<sup>6</sup> For them, their religion was capable of contending with the suffering of the world and of individuals, as was their poetry; limiting themselves to the ideal did not occur to them, and neither does it occur to Hill, Murray and Thomas.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that Santayana is working in the humanist tradition of Matthew Arnold and others when he writes about religion and poetry, a tradition that held fast to the humanizing effect of poetry and the arts; according to this tradition, expressing the ideal through art would help bring



it about in humanity. However, this position was arguably blown apart by the two world wars of the twentieth century, and in particular by the evils of Nazism in nineteen-thirties Germany and wartime Europe, culminating in the murder of millions in the concentration camps. George Steiner remains the most eloquent commentator concerning the crisis of enlightened humanism in the aftermath of 1945:

My own consciousness is possessed by the eruption of barbarism in modern Europe; by the mass murder of the Jews and by the destruction under Nazism and Stalinism of ... 'Central European humanism' ... The blackness of it did not spring up in the Gobi desert or the rain forests of the Amazon. It rose from within, and from the core of European civilization. The cry of the murdered sounded in earshot of the universities; the sadism went on a street away from the theatres and museums. In the later eighteenth century Voltaire had looked confidently to the end of torture; ideological massacre was to be a banished shadow. In our own day the high places of literacy, of philosophy, of artistic expression became the setting for Belsen.<sup>7</sup>

For Steiner there is no escape from the events of the middle years of the twentieth century, and the questions those events raise for poetry, for literature, for culture are irrefutable:

We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning. To say that he has read them without understanding or that his ear is gross, is cant. In what way does this knowledge bear on literature and society, on the hope, grown almost axiomatic from the time of Plato to that of Matthew Arnold, that culture is a humanizing force, that the energies of spirit are transferable to those of conduct?<sup>8</sup>

It is in this post-1945 world, a world that has seen horrific atrocities emerge from the sites of Western culture, that the poetry of Geoffrey Hill fights for its existence and struggles with the new measure of self-knowledge gifted it by what has gone before.

Parades of strength are not, in the long view,  
Aristotle's magnitudes. Langgasse,  
in Danzig, sparked a short fuse. The massed

*hakenkreuz*-banners appeared as machine-fresh  
 robust street-hangings, crests of the phalanx,  
 terror's new standards. I do not recall which  
 death-camp it was that sheltered Goethe's oak  
 inside the perimeter. I cannot  
 tell you who told me or in what footnote  
 it sat hidden. This and other *dissecta*  
*membra*, the abused here drawn  
 together with pain for their further dis-  
 memberment, I offer to the presiding  
 judge of our art, self-pleasured *Ironia*.

(The Triumph of Love, CIII, p. 53.)

Like so many of Hill's confrontations with the events of twentieth-century history that helped shape his poetic consciousness (Hill was seven when war broke out in 1939, thirteen when the first pictures of the Nazi death-camps came out), this poem – from The Triumph of Love – is cautious, erudite and passionately restrained. Hill is intensely suspicious of his own poetic sensibility when he finds himself returning again and again to the subject of the death-camps and the Shoah; he is profoundly aware of the debate concerning the impossibility or otherwise of poetry contending with the atrocities perpetrated by the Third Reich – a debate to which I will turn in a moment – and so his poetry adopts a tentative, almost prose-like quality here. Avoiding any lyrical excess, the poem begins by distancing the philosophy of Aristotle from the '[p]arades of strength' of the Third Reich ('The massed / *hakenkreuz*-banners') that tried to invoke him as part of their pseudo-classical self-image: 'in the long view', the poet argues, the two are very different, though this parenthesis acknowledges, somewhat alarmingly, that at the time these differences were difficult to recognise. The tone of the speaker is cold and dispassionate as he describes the swastikas flown at Third Reich rallies as 'machine-fresh / robust street-hangings, crests of the phalanx', again recognising Nazism's attempted links with classical Greece and the empire of Alexander the Great; it is only when he goes on to

observe that these swastikas were not merely militaristic banners, but were 'terror's new standards', that the double-meaning of 'standard' allows the speaker to acknowledge the magnitude of the terror they heralded and the effect they would have on his conception of humanity and its capacity for evil. As Steiner argues, nothing could ever be the same after this 'eruption of barbarism'.

The poem goes on to echo Steiner's recognition that 'culture' and terror can co-exist: 'I do not recall which / death-camp it was that sheltered Goethe's oak / inside the perimeter'. The power of this recollection is not dependent on identifying its source; rather, the speaker closes the poem with the chilling awareness that, by writing about the Third Reich and the death-camps, he has not honoured 'the abused', but instead he has 'further dis-/ member[ed]' them by placing them in a poem which, like any other, is offered 'to the presiding / judge of our art, self-pleasured *Ironia*'. Hill is acknowledging here that the irony that governs so much of modern poetry (including his own) is simply not qualified to receive this offering of 'the abused': as art it is 'self-pleasured' rather than concerned with the world events that Hill wants to confront it with, and as such Hill is forced to use its own weapon, irony, to acknowledge the shortcomings of his act of homage.

The question of whether poetry is up to the job of contending with the atrocities of recent human history is one to which Hill returns repeatedly. Of the three poets with whom this thesis is concerned, he is the one most haunted by the cruelties of human history, and so his poetry will form the main focus of this exploration of poetry and suffering, alongside a brief consideration of Les Murray and his recent explorations of the aftermath of Auschwitz. Murray's stance is markedly different to that of Hill's in his explorations of what Steiner

calls ‘the destruction of Central European humanism’, and the contrast between the two poets in their treatments of suffering and poetry’s ability to contend with it sheds considerable light on their respective religious stances and their conceptions of the Christian God.

The place of God in the recent history of human suffering which concerns Hill and (less so) Murray is a question to which I will return at the end of this chapter. What must be acknowledged from the outset is that the questions round which Hill and Murray’s poems circle – why does God allow suffering? where was God in the horrors of the Shoah? why does God permit people to inflict so much pain on other people? – are far beyond the abilities of this chapter to answer. Indeed, the eternal nature of these questions requires that this exploration of suffering in the poetry of Hill and Murray take its lead from the poems themselves in an attempt to define a manageable field of enquiry.

Before moving on to the poetry of Hill and Murray, I wish to quote a poem by the third of our poets, R. S. Thomas, called ‘Petition’:

And I standing in the shade  
 Have seen it a thousand times  
 Happen: first theft, then murder;  
 Rape; the rueful acts  
 Of the blind hand. I have said  
 New prayers, or said the old  
 In a new way. Seeking the poem  
 In the pain, I have learned  
 Silence is best, paying for it  
 With my conscience. I am eyes  
 Merely, witnessing virtue’s  
 Defeat; seeing the young born  
 Fair, knowing the cancer  
 Awaits them. One thing I have asked  
 Of the disposer of the issues  
 Of life: that truth should defer  
 To beauty. It was not granted.

(CP 209)

This is one of Thomas's most moving poems, and it acts as a poignant reminder of the post-Romantic poet's longing for 'beauty' ahead of 'truth': this is a longing shared by Hill and Murray but denied, as it is here, by 'the disposer of the issues / Of life'. George Steiner argues eloquently that to think of literature, education, language, '[to] read Aeschylus or Shakespeare ... as if the texts, as if the authority of the texts in our own lives, were immune from recent history, is subtle but corrosive illiteracy';<sup>9</sup> for the speaker of Thomas's poem, it is not even the events of recent history that act as the denial of his Keatsian longing, rather it is the experience of human existence throughout history, with the speaker as a kind of Tiresias: 'And I standing in the shade / Have seen it a thousand times / Happen ... theft ... murder; / Rape[.]' The speaker here is driven to pray and remains silent concerning the suffering he witnesses, 'paying for it / With my conscience' (there are shades here of the speaker of Geoffrey Hill's poem, 'Ovid in the Third Reich'). The poem ends with the speaker's petition not granted and 'virtue's / defeat' seemingly ongoing; the suffering of human existence continues, with the speaker demonstrating little hope that that suffering will ever be relieved.

I quote this poem partly to include Thomas in at least one part of this chapter's discussion: his poetry is concerned mainly with the suffering of the individual, in particular the suffering of the believer, rather than the events of recent history which will form the focus of what will follow. However, Thomas's unflinching explorations of the existential predicament are frequently powerful and (as with 'Petition') remarkably moving in their honesty, and so worthy of at least one representative in this study. I quote 'Petition' for another reason: its direct articulation of the dilemma in which the religious poet finds

himself when dealing with suffering, both as religious believer and as poet. The believer longs for his prayers for relief to be answered and the suffering stopped; the poet wants to write about beauty and a truth that equates to beauty, rather than ‘theft ... murder ... rape’ and the other painful realities of life that human history has made unavoidable. The motives behind the desires of believer and poet are both admirable and selfish (neither wants human suffering to continue; neither wants to suffer themselves). As believer and poet, Thomas turns to God, ‘the disposer of the issues / Of life’, for answers, however unsavoury; Hill and Murray do the same, often less explicitly but with an equal longing for beauty and a truth equal to it. Whether their poetic explorations conclude with a disappointment similar to that expressed in ‘Petition’ is what I will attempt to ascertain now.

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In Paradise Lost book XI, the archangel Michael shows the newly fallen Adam some of the consequences his recent act of disobedience to God will have on his descendants by granting him a brief overview of human history from the Fall to the Crucifixion. Almost immediately, Adam is shown the first murder, that of his son Abel at the hands of his other son Cain; this is Adam’s first sight of death (before the Fall, humanity was to have been immortal) and he is horrified: ‘Is this the way / I must return to native dust? O sight / Of terror, foul and ugly to behold, / Horrid to think, how horrible to feel!’ (Paradise Lost XI, ll. 462-65).

Michael’s response offers little consolation:

Death thou hast seen  
In his first shape on man; but many shapes  
Of death, and many are the ways that lead  
To his grim cave, all dismal[.]

(ll. 466-69)

Following on from this forbidding personification of death, Michael lists some of the multifarious causes of death in the post-lapsarian world: 'Some ... by violent stroke shall die, / By fire, flood, famine', while others will perish from 'maladies / Of ghastly spasm...':

Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs,  
Intestine stone and ulcer, colic pangs,  
Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy  
And moon-struck maladies, pining atrophy,  
Marasmus, and wide-wasting pestilence,  
Dropsies, and asthmas, and joint-racking rheums.  
(ll. 480-81, 483-89)

Even when someone's life is governed by temperance and they live to old age, Michael describes something of the pain in that also:

then thou must outlive  
Thy youth, thy strength, thy beauty, which will change  
To withered weak and gray; thy senses then  
Obtuse, all taste of pleasure must forego,  
To what thou hast, and for the air of youth  
Hopeful and cheerful, in thy blood will reign  
A melancholy damp of cold and dry  
To weigh thy spirits down, and last consume  
The balm of life.  
(ll. 538-46)

In these lines, Milton is doing something remarkable: he is attempting to describe death as if it were something new, through a consciousness hitherto innocent of both it and suffering. In so doing, Milton is demonstrating what can only be described as the scandal of death for the Christian reader, who views death as a consequence of the Fall but is nonetheless painfully aware of its reality in his or her own experience. The peculiar power of these lines, with their vivid de-familiarisation of death, suggests that Milton achieves his aim with considerable success.

The world in which the poetry of Geoffrey Hill moves is a very different one to Adam's as yet relatively unsullied existence; in it, death has moved from scandal to commonplace reality:

Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed:  
 Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves,  
 In clenched cinders not yielding their abused  
 Bodies and bonds to those whom war's chance saves  
 Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song.  
 ('Two Formal Elegies', CP 30)

Each day the tide withdraws; chills us; pastes  
 The sand with dead gulls, oranges, dead men.  
 ('Wreaths', CP 41)

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

But may be lifted away.  
 ('Of Commerce and Society: 4', CP 49)

These lines – all taken from poems in Hill's first published collection, For the Unfallen – demonstrate an awareness of death that appears almost casual, certainly familiar. In spite of its title, Hill's first collection, like all his others, is concerned with the *fallen*, both those who have died and, more generally, all of us who came after the Fall, who live in the world Adam was so horrified by when shown it by Michael. In this world, death is commonplace and 'the dead' can form the obsession of poets, though perhaps only for a short time: a week, suggests the speaker of the third poem quoted above.

This admission that death cannot hold the attention of the poet long conveys something of both the familiarity and the uneasiness that marks poetry's relationship to death. I have noted that the world in which Hill writes is a world in which death has moved from scandal to reality. I wish to qualify this observation now by suggesting that poetry has never stopped viewing and



treating death as a scandal. Just as in day-to-day experience we can simultaneously acknowledge that ‘death comes to us all’ and quietly convince ourselves that it will come to us only at some time that remains perpetually in the future, so too in poetry: death and dying become subject-matter while being held at arms-length. Another poem from For the Unfallen, ‘A Pastoral’, acknowledges this:

Mobile, immaculate and austere,  
The Pities, their fingers in every wound,  
Assess the injured on the obscured frontier;  
Cleanse with a kind of artistry the ground  
Shared by War. Consultants in new tongues  
Prove synonymous our separated wrongs.

We celebrate, fluently and at ease. (CP 54)

Here the reader is given an insight into the process of preparing the subject of death – in this instance, resulting from war – for poetry. First, ‘the Pities’ do their work, seeking out the ideal war or battle for the poet to write about; they are thorough and intrusive in their research (‘their fingers in every wound’), while themselves remaining unmoved by what they see (they remain ‘immaculate and austere’). The frontier at which they ‘assess the injured’ is ‘obscured’, either by the passage of time, or by geographical distance from the poet, or, more grimly, by the ferocity of fighting and the number of dead; ‘the obscured frontier’ also captures something of the ever-changing national boundaries of countries at war. The Pities do their work, ‘cleans[ing] with a kind of artistry the ground / Shared by War’ and, with the benefit (or arrogance?) of hindsight, demonstrate that there really was nothing worth fighting for after all: ‘our separated wrongs’, presumably the grievances that lay behind the battles that were fought, ‘[p]rove synonymous’. There was nothing really to separate the two sides from the perspective of ‘the Pities’ who are more interested in

cleansing the ground for the sake of writing a poem than in trying to understand the reasons behind the wars which they are assessing.

The end-result of this process is that 'We [the poets] celebrate, fluently and at ease': there is little tension between the ease of the celebration and its subject matter. The battlefield becomes the subject of the pastoral of the title. 'The unedifying nude dead are soon covered': the offensive irony of this line is that the poets feel it is the nakedness of these corpses that could prove 'unedifying', rather than the fact that they are dead. The final stanza of the poem conveys the goal of the poetry produced by this process of cleansing and covering of the dead:

Men can move with purpose again, or drift,  
According to direction. Here are statues  
Darkened by laurel; and evergreen names;  
Evidently-veiled griefs; impervious tombs.

The aim of these poems is to give their readers 'purpose' again, to help them avoid the terrifying implications of war and death for their lives and the self-examination the truth might bring about; instead, the poets will celebrate the battles 'fluently and at ease' and their readers can move on, relatively unaffected by what they have read because it has not brought them face-to-face with 'the unedifying nude dead', with 'the ground / Shared by War'. This poetry allows some freedom of response among its readers – they can 'drift' rather than 'move with purpose' – but only 'According to direction'; even those who opt out of everyday life after their experience of war, either at a distance or close-hand, are kept from the freedom of confronting what has happened by the sanitised accounts all around them. Memorials to war are soon overgrown and ignored: the 'evergreen tombs' of the dead are not eternally young, rather they are obscured by the moss growing on their poorly-maintained tombstones. Griefs

are hidden behind these memorials, and the reality of death and of the dead is kept 'impervious' to the living, who as a result go on with their lives, unthinking and believing themselves immortal.

'A Pastoral' is a scathing indictment of the sort of poetry that avoids any real confrontation with war, death and dying and instead sanitises these realities 'with a kind of artistry'. It was written in 1958, and this date is significant both for its subdued anger and for Hill's vastly different treatment of war, death and dying throughout his poetry; only thirteen years had elapsed since the end of the Second World War, and the impact the 1939-45 conflict had had on Hill's poetic consciousness was immense. Growing up and beginning to write poetry in a world after 1945 meant that Hill could not escape an awareness of 'terror's new standards' (TTOL CIII), and his poetry has repeatedly returned to the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis on Europe's Jews ever since his first collection, to the extent that he could caricature his own poetic stance in The Triumph of Love: 'You see also / how this man's creepy, though not creeping, wit – / he fancies himself a token Jew by marriage, / a Jew by token marriage – has buzzed, droned, / round a half-dozen topics (fewer, surely?) / for almost fifty years' (XCVIII, TTOL 50).

The central place the Shoah occupies in Hill's poetic consciousness is alluded to elsewhere in The Triumph of Love, where the speaker considers his childhood:

I am not unusually  
sensitive to atmosphere, but one or two  
fiery dreams of houses held  
mid-day séance through my seventh year.  
Photo-negatives I now accept  
as the originals of this peculiar dread:  
black façades, gap-windowed with solid-  
glare flame, and with stark

figures caught in some unhuman  
intimate torment I could not grasp  
until I came to stills of the burning ghetto.

(LXXXV, TTOL 44)

Hill's 'seventh year' was 1939, and here he seems to view 'the burning ghetto' as somehow the confirmation of a childhood dread, a fear that such 'unhuman / intimate torment' was possible. His image of photo-negatives is unsettling and vivid, and this section is one of the more direct in The Triumph of Love; its placing of 'the burning ghetto' alongside 'fiery dreams' of childhood is also a dangerous tactic for a poet, risking the censure of some readers who may feel he is trivialising the former by considering it in the light of the latter.

The question of how a poet should and should not treat the subject of the Nazi holocaust is less urgent today than it was forty years ago, but this is less a result of its resolution and more a reminder of the collective memory loss of which Hill is so critical in Western modernity (Hill characterises Great Britain as 'a nation / with so many memorials but no memory' (LXXVI, TTOL 40)).

Immediately after 1945, with the full extent of the Final Solution emerging before Western intellectuals and artists, the situation was very different. The question was not 'how could this holocaust be treated in a poem?', but rather, 'can poetry survive in a world that has seen suffering on as vast a scale as the Shoah?' I quote the most famous articulation of this question, made by Theodor Adorno in an essay of 1967:

To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.<sup>10</sup>

This is Adorno's conclusion to a densely argued essay, and it forms part of a vast investigation, undertaken by Adorno and other members of what came to be known as the 'Frankfurt School', to account for the emergence of totalitarianism in Europe in the mid-twentieth century. As one of their key texts, Dialectic of Enlightenment, co-written by Adorno, puts it: 'we had set ourselves nothing less than the discovery of why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism'.<sup>11</sup> These words were written in 1944, with Adorno in exile from Germany in the United States; it is difficult for a modern reader to grasp the urgency or confusion from which they emerged.

It is beyond the confines of this chapter to do justice to Adorno's work; what I do wish to focus this discussion on is his claim that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'. This claim is perhaps the most frequently quoted phrase of Adorno's and it is in some ways irrefutable; the juxtaposition of 'poetry' and 'Auschwitz' does jar if we take time to consider the enormity of what the death-camps did to Central European humanism and its assumption that humanity had evolved beyond barbarism, an assumption that pre-dated Darwinism and stretched at least as far back as the eighteenth century and its Age of Reason. It was from the same assumption that most poetry of the past two hundred years emerged; when Matthew Arnold wrote that 'the future of poetry is immense', he could not possibly have anticipated that that same future would contain the Nazi holocaust. His commensurate assertion that 'our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay [in poetry]' finds its hideous fulfilment in George Steiner's record of the man who reads Goethe or Rilke before going to his work at Auschwitz the next day; recent history teaches that the consolation and strength poetry gives can console and strengthen the torturer as much as the

victim. It quickly becomes clear, therefore, that to write poetry from the same assumptions as those held by Arnold and others without a reconsideration of those assumptions in the light of twentieth-century history, would be unrealistic and offensive; Adorno would call it 'barbaric'.

However, as I have already demonstrated in my reading of 'A Pastoral', Geoffrey Hill is vehemently opposed to at least some of the assumptions he perceives behind poetry and its treatment of war and death throughout history. And yet he still writes poetry; the solution for Hill is to write a different kind of poetry. From the immediate context of Adorno's claim 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric', it becomes clear that the poetry he has in mind is one in which 'critical intelligence ... confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation'; such poetry 'cannot be equal to [the] challenge' of survival after the barbarism of Auschwitz, and in this Hill would agree with him. Of course, poetry has survived Auschwitz, a great deal of it by avoiding or ignoring the death-camps; other types of poetry have utilised the images of the Shoah to explore personal suffering and psychic turmoil. The most famous and controversial example is Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy'.<sup>12</sup> The response of Hill is to try to write poems that confront Auschwitz and all the mechanisms of barbarism and torture that go with it, while scrupulously, even desperately trying to avoid what Adorno calls 'self-satisfied contemplation'; as he observed in interview, when asked about his treatment of the concentration camps in his poetry:

the burden which the writer's conscience must bear is that the horror might become that hideously outrageous thing, a cliché. This is the nightmare, the really blasphemous thing: that those camps could become a mere 'subject'. (Morrison 213)

One of the techniques Hill uses in his early poetic treatments of the Shoah is to feign an easy familiarity with the suffering of the European Jews and write

as if their suffering were already a cliché; this technique is a risky one, especially for a young poet, but it does serve the purpose of exposing the temptation poets face to treat the camps as ‘a mere “subject”’ by appearing to do just that and trusting the reader to identify the offensive and unthinking nature of this approach. Here is the first of ‘Two Formal Elegies: For the Jews in Europe’, from For the Unfallen:

Knowing the dead, and how some are disposed:  
 Subdued under rubble, water, in sand graves,  
 In clenched cinders not yielding their abused  
 Bodies and bonds to those whom war’s chance saves  
 Without the law: we grasp, roughly, the song.        (CP 30)

Implicitly, the poem asks both the poet and the reader if they really *do* ‘know the dead’, if they really are capable of understanding ‘how some are disposed’; the poet’s easy familiarity with the dead here appears unearned, his listing of how they died and were disposed of is cold and callous. This is the first of two ‘formal elegies’, and yet from the outset the poem asks its readers if such formality of approach is appropriate to its subject matter: can ‘formal elegies’ address the atrocities of the Shoah? Is the English sonnet up to the job of memorialising the European Jews who died in the nineteen thirties and forties? These are beautifully crafted sonnets, but is the skill with which they were written meant to unsettle us? Ironically, it is the beauty of these sonnets that is meant to disturb the reader; to write formal elegies after Auschwitz is to be guilty of the kind of poetry so savagely satirised in ‘A Pastoral’, cleansing ‘with a kind of artistry’ the dead and their disposal, and making music out of their demise.

The second formal elegy explores the world which makes the casual over-familiarity of the first elegy’s opening lines possible, even acceptable: it

critiques its predecessor and asks if 'we' (that is, poets and readers) truly do 'know the dead':

For all that must be gone through, their long death  
 Documented and safe, we have enough  
 Witnesses (our world being witness-proof).  
 The sea flickers, roars, in its wide hearth.  
 Here, yearly, the pushing midlanders stand  
 To warm themselves; men, brawny with life,  
 Women who expect life. They relieve  
 Their thickening bodies, settle on scraped sand:

Is it good to remind them, on a brief screen,  
 Of what they have witnessed and not seen? (CP 31)

Hill's observations of 1950s England on its summer holidays are similar to those of Philip Larkin here, and he appears equally ambivalent in his attitude towards his countrymen: the 'pushing midlanders' are described as 'brawny with life', which could be an admiring description, but the double-meaning of 'They relieve / Their thickening bodies' may reveal a veiled contempt for these holiday-makers. Whatever the poet's feelings towards them, they are seen as living examples of the truth of the statement placed in brackets in l.3: 'our world [is] witness-proof', no matter what horrors or atrocities occur, they are forgotten within ten years ('Two Formal Elegies' is dated '1955-56'). These holiday-makers have clearly forgotten the suffering of the European Jews; 'we have enough / Witnesses' to that suffering, but by documenting 'their long death', we have made it 'safe', with the result that it no longer disturbs us or frightens us that such suffering is possible. The poet goes on to ask, 'Is it good to remind them ... / Of what they have witnessed and not seen?': it could be argued that it is a healthy thing that life goes on. Implicitly, however, the poet feels that it is only by acknowledging the past that his generation can move into the future having learnt something; as I observed in the previous chapter, history is



extremely important to Hill, as is the idea of witness and learning from the witnesses of the past. To label the world in which he lives 'witness-proof' is therefore a damning indictment; as he commented to an interviewer in 1980: 'those who do not understand history are condemned to re-live it.' (Morrison 213)

'Two Formal Elegies' stands as both an indictment of Hill's countrymen for their readiness to forget what he sees as unforgettable, and an 'exemplary failure' (the phrase is Hill's);<sup>13</sup> the two sonnets demonstrate the unsuitability of formal English verse in addressing the previously unthinkable suffering of millions in the death-camps, and curiously Hill seems fully aware of their unsuitability throughout. It is as if the young poet, still in his twenties, is making himself aware of poetry's limits when it is confronted with the plight of the Jews in Europe under the Nazis; a poem can never hope to do justice to that, and these two sonnets arguably satirise any poet who believes their work can truly 'know the dead' and pay homage to them in a satisfactory way.

A very different poetic treatment of the Shoah by Hill is 'September Song', from his second full-length collection, King Log:

Undesirable you may have been, untouchable  
you were not. Not forgotten  
or passed over at the proper time.

As estimated, you died. Things marched,  
sufficient, to that end.  
Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented  
terror, so many routine cries.

(I have made  
an elegy for myself it  
is true)

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

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

(CP 67)

Clearly, this is not a formal elegy, though its fourteen irregular lines could designate it a sonnet. The tone is cautious, restrained; the poem's speaker appears hesitant and uncertain in his choice of words, with the irregular lay-out on the page and lengths of line all contributing to a sense that, if the poem should be read aloud, the reader would be compelled to pause frequently in recognition of the large blank spaces on the page. (Christopher Ricks has argued that 'September Song' cannot be read aloud satisfactorily.)<sup>14</sup> Each verse-paragraph here could be seen as an attempt by the poet to begin his poem again, signalling his dissatisfaction with the words at his disposal in writing his song: 'Undesirable you may have been...', 'As estimated, you died...', 'September fattens on vines...'. It is almost as if the poet cannot write a coherent poem here; instead, these are fragments of abortive poems brought together as one song, almost defying the reader to sing them.

The poem's subject is circled round and never quite spelt out by the speaker, with the result that the reader must rely upon the poem's epigraph – '*born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42*' – and the inclusion of 'Zyklon', a gas used by the Nazis in the death-camps, to ascertain that this is a poem about the Shoah, specifically addressed to a victim of the camps with a birth-date remarkably similar to Hill's own. This child is 'deported' in September 1942, and it is the child's subsequent death that is remembered here ('remembered', even though the time of his or her death is unknown to the speaker).

This is an uncertain poem that foregrounds its own uncertainty; the poet seems intent on avoiding a direct confrontation with the death of the child whose life is encapsulated in the poem's epigraph. The first verse-paragraph describes the child with a series of negatives: 'undesirable', not 'untouchable', 'not

forgotten / or passed over'. These serve to erode any sense the speaker or reader has of the child's individuality: he or she is described in deliberately cold class/caste terms ('undesirable', 'untouchable') behind which the speaker can hide from the reality of his or her death, and it is significant that we never discover the child's gender (would it affect our reading of the poem if we knew that it was a boy or a girl who died?). That the child was not 'untouchable' is a cruel irony; instead, the child was touched, '[not] forgotten / or passed over' (unlike the Jews in ancient Egypt, passed over by the angel of the Lord and saved) and dying 'at the proper time', a phrase that points to the bland official-speak that underpinned the mechanisms of the Third Reich and the so-called 'Final Solution'.

The second verse-paragraph moves away from these negative statements, opening with a phrase made all the more shocking by its matter-of-fact tone: 'As estimated, you died.' This death was expected, legislated for, commanded, and a weary fatalism enters the poem: 'Things marched, / sufficient, to that end' (see 'Ovid in the Third Reich's, 'Things happen.' (CP 61)). This fatalism leads to a consideration of how, just as the child's individuality was obscured in life by terms such as 'undesirable', his/her death is also robbed of significance by the mechanisms used to kill him/her:

Just so much Zyklon and leather, patented  
terror, so many routine cries.

Again, the restraint with which these lines are written is fitting in that they venture into the unsayable. They encapsulate the cause of death of an unnamed child, recorded by a speaker who is crippled by anomie; this is an understandable response in a world that has seen 'patented / terror', a world in which the cries of

the dying can be described as merely 'routine'. The speaker's despair is compounded by the pained, disjointed parenthesis that follows:

(I have made  
an elegy for myself it  
is true)

The poet fears that he is incapable of writing an elegy for this child, just as Hill's earlier 'Two Formal Elegies' could only point to their own inadequacy as acts of homage and mourning; instead, all he can write about is his own response to this unnamed child's death, a death he did not witness that took place alongside millions of other deaths ('so many routine cries'). The fear expressed in this parenthesis is that this self-regard will render the poem a failed confrontation with death; however, it is perhaps only by acknowledging this fear and the necessary limitations of poetry when dealing with the death of another human being that the poet can begin to navigate his poem through empty self-reflexiveness toward a real confrontation with death on an unthinkable scale. In a sense, *all* elegies are more about the poet than the loved one; here, the poet is forced back into himself by the sheer enormity of the 'patented / terror' he is confronting. He is forced to examine himself and his own response to the death of one child in the Shoah, in an attempt to begin to understand how human beings like himself could ever let 'things march' to the point where such deaths are acceptable.

The poem ends without arriving at an answer; instead, the poet describes September, the month in which his poem is set and in which the child was sent to his/her death:

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

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

Implicitly, these lines can be read to suggest that the poet ends his song in tears ('The smoke / of harmless fires drifts to my eyes'): at the end of a poem marked by restraint and numbed by the events it explores, the poet weeps. The poem's focus ends with the poet contrasting himself with the child of the epigraph and realising that he has indeed written 'an elegy for myself' by trying to imagine the child's place in the 'patented / terror' of which he/she was a victim; he also ends his poem in the knowledge that he is witnessing a September that the child did not, and that the fires around him are 'harmless', unlike those that surrounded the child. At this recognition of similarity and of vast difference, the poet breaks down and the poem ends: 'This is plenty. This is more than enough.' All that can be said in this poem has been said, and now there is only silence.

John Bayley has written of 'September Song' that, with it, Hill has written 'a poem whose "problem" in being what it is seems more important to the poet than the poem itself'.<sup>15</sup> Bayley intends this as a mild criticism of Hill's practice here, comparing it unfavourably with Paul Celan's poetic confrontations with the death-camps, but I believe it to be the poem's strength. Earlier in his article, Bayley remarks: 'In its own peculiar way poetry can offer a rest from virtue. Art has always known how to do so.'<sup>16</sup> Arguably, it is this approach to poetry that Hill opposes directly in 'September Song'. Bayley quotes Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' as an alternative way of treating suffering in poetry ('everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster' in Breughel's *Icarus*), but he quickly acknowledges that 'it is a far cry from the sad tale of Icarus... to the existence and the scale of Auschwitz, and all that went with the Final Solution.'<sup>17</sup>

Like Auden, Hill acknowledges the indifference of much of humanity and of the natural world to human suffering in his poetry (see his ‘pushing midlanders’ in ‘Two Formal Elegies’, or the ‘harmless fires’ lit at the end of ‘September Song’); the power of his poetry comes from his passionate opposition to that indifference.

Ingratitude  
still gets to me, the unfairness  
and waste of survival; a nation  
with so many memorials but no memory. (LXXVI, TTOL 40)

The anger and moral urgency of Hill’s poetry, in particular his more recent collections, emerge from a dissatisfaction with the world that Auden describes in ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’. For all his erudition and frequent resorts to irony, Hill is at bottom a deeply *moral* poet, and he does not seem interested in poetry that seeks to free itself from virtue or moral responsibility; because of this, his poetry is frequently difficult to read, either due to its oblique argument and often obscure allusions or to the massive difficulties inherent in the subjects he addresses, as in ‘September Song’ and its pained confrontation with death, human suffering and the limits of poetry.

I have argued that ‘September Song’ ends with its speaker in tears as the only response possible to the suffering he seeks to memorialise; however, tears are not the only response Hill’s poetry makes to the suffering and evil of the twentieth century. I wish to turn now to the sequence ‘De Jure Belli Ac Pacis’, from Canaan and its consideration of the evil of the Third Reich as seen by those who resisted it. This sequence is important both in showing Hill’s conception of heroism and the possibilities of resistance to totalitarianism – here embodied by the Kreisau conspirators against Hitler – and, crucially, how Hill struggles to learn from past heroism and apply what he learns to the present in which he lives.

‘De Jure Belli Ac Pacis’ – ‘On the Law of War and Peace’ – takes its title from the seventeenth-century treatise of international law by the Dutch jurist and scholar Hugo Grotius. Published in 1625, in the midst of the Thirty Years War and when Grotius was in exile in France, this treatise is seen as one of the first great contributions to modern international law and argues that nations are bound to the principle of a rule of law, whether they are at war or at peace: this law was considered by Grotius to be natural and based on man’s own nature. Hill takes this landmark in international law as the title to a sequence of eight poems dedicated to Hans-Bernd von Haefen, one of the Kreisau conspirators. One of the lesser-known figures in the conspiracy to overthrow Hitler – which culminated in the attempt to assassinate the Führer in July 1944 – Haefen was a lawyer and diplomat (thus presumably acquainted with Grotius’s treatise on international law). One historian describes him as:

a man of impressively firm character and penetrating mind [who] combined a profound Christian faith with a keen interest in and understanding of politics ... Among his fellow-conspirators ... there were many who at one time or another had abetted the same regime against which they eventually turned with vehemence. Haefen, on the other hand, emerges as a man of clear conviction and straight direction. From beginning to end his understanding of the Christian faith made him immune to the temptations of what he called the “secularising world views” of the modern age.<sup>18</sup>

From this brief summary, it is easy to see why Hill sought to memorialise Haefen’s views and moral courage in his poetry; Haefen is just the sort of historical witness Hill seeks to learn from, and his opposition to the “the secularising world views” of the modern age mirrors at least one of Hill’s own concerns. Hill repeatedly acknowledges in his poetry that his invocation of figures of the past from whom he has learnt and to whom he longs to pay homage does not for a moment suggest that he sees himself in a similar light; as he writes





From this ironic commentary on the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, it is clear that Hill is not an admirer of the 'liberties' taken there, seeing them as a sign of the 'dispossession' of the European nations rather than a bold move forward, and as 'haughty degradations' of the ideas of international community forwarded by Grotius and his Czech contemporary Comenius. Haeften and the Kreisau conspirators barely figure in this opening poem (only their 'high-strung / martyred resistance' is mentioned); instead, Hill sets out to place his sequence firmly in the Europe of the 1990s before turning to the Europe of the 1940s.

This is vitally important for what Hill is attempting in this sequence, and for any consideration of the questions of suffering and evil in Hill's poetry. Throughout his poetry, the atrocities committed by the Third Reich, particularly those directed against the Jews, stand as the terrifying example of just how much evil humanity is capable of: Hill can never free his imagination, poetic or moral, from the events of the 1930s and 1940s which saw the torture and death of millions. However, what this sequence does more than any of his previous considerations of the Third Reich is to attempt to carry lessons over from that time of extremity in both evil and heroism to the present in which Hill is writing. In so doing, this sequence seeks to honour Haeften's courage in the face of Hitler's regime, while also acknowledging that the Europe of the present is very different to the Europe of the war years: one of the questions Hill is asking throughout these poems is, just how are we to learn from the heroism of the past in confronting the 'haughty degradations' of the present? Our adversary is not Adolf Hitler, but Hill feels strongly that we can and should learn from the life and death of a man like Hans-Bernd von Haeften.

The iron-beamed engine-shed has chapel windows.

Glare-eyed, you spun. The hooks are still in the beam;  
 a sun-patch drains to nothing; here the chocked  
 blade sluiced into place, here the abused blood  
 set its own wreaths. (C 31)

Here, in the second poem of the sequence, the speaker turns his attention to the shed in Plötzensee where Haeften was hanged. These lines reflect back on the description of Haeften's 'high-strung / martyred resistance' at the end of the previous poem and reveal its grim appropriateness: his resistance to Hitler was rewarded by hanging, and the speaker here does not flinch from grisly detail in his consideration of Haeften's execution ('Glare-eyed, you spun'). However, 'high-strung' can also suggest extreme sensitivity, usually in a negative sense; here, Hill describes Haeften's 'martyred resistance' as 'high-strung' from the perspective of modern-day Europe. His convictions concerning good and evil, right and wrong would be regarded as unhelpful in the pragmatic politics of the European Union, and perhaps rightly so: Europe has certainly changed since the Second World War and the idea of a spiritual battle between good and evil, as articulated by Haeften in the epigraph to this poem ('...*sah er den Erzengel Michael im Kampf gegen den Drachen...*'), is distinctly unfashionable and certainly appears more at home in Haeften's situation than ours. (Haeften is referring to Hitler and Nazism as 'the dragon'; who is 'the dragon' in modern-day Europe? Quite rightly, Hill does not attempt to answer that question.)

However, Hill does still admire Haeften's courage and conviction, and portrays modern-day Europe as somehow a betrayal of those qualities:

Time passes, strengthening and fading. Europa  
 hetaera displays her parts ...  
On some envisioned  
 rathaus clock, geared like a mill, the dragon  
 strikes,  
the Archangel, unseeing, unbowed,  
 chimes with each stroke.



righteousness'. Unsettlingly, the speaker suggests that Haeften's conceptions of politics and its relationship with the divine order of good and evil are as 'proscribed' today as they were under the Third Reich: his indictments of the secularising world-views of the modern age 'foretold us'. Once more, Hill feels unable to embrace the claims of 'the high-minded / base-metal forgers of this common Europe' (C 33), that we have evolved beyond the need for Haeften's 'Christian inhibitions'; we still need those inhibitions, otherwise we may be doomed to repeat history and play into the hands of tyrants. Should that happen, our 'pity' for the Kreisau conspirators will have done us little good.

So, is Hill's primary motivation for writing this sequence to warn of the potentials for tyranny in the post-Maastricht Europe? Is this the poetry of a confirmed, even paranoid Euro-sceptic? I don't think so; Hill's indictments of the European Union throughout the sequence ('community of parody', he calls it in poem IV (C 33)) are perhaps risky in allowing the poems to be read in that way, and so perhaps dismissed by many, but I believe he is attempting something far more ambitious than merely an attack on Brussels. The central theme that powers this sequence is that, while the poet can praise the heroism of the past, he struggles to discern an equivalent heroism in the present or, crucially, even how such heroism could emerge or be fostered. The speaker of this sequence does not subscribe to an optimistic or idealistic vision of human nature; instead, he finishes poem IV with a chilling observation:

Evil is not good's absence but gravity's  
 everlasting bedrock and its fatal chains  
 inert, violent, the suffrage of our days. (C 33)

The nature of evil and why it exists has troubled theologians and philosophers for centuries, and these lines cannot pretend to provide a definitive answer to the

problem; however, they borrow heavily from a definition of sin given by Karl Barth in his commentary on the epistle to the Romans and quoted by Hill in The Lords of Limit, namely that sin is the ‘specific gravity of human nature as such’.<sup>19</sup> I have already demonstrated that Hill subscribes to the doctrines of the Fall and of original sin; the placing of these lines in this sequence suggest that Hill’s speaker is forced to follow these Christian doctrines through to their logical conclusion. Goodness is not the norm in human history, and evil does not just spring up in ‘good’s absence’; rather, evil is what marks much of human history as ‘gravity’s / everlasting bedrock’, a force that cannot easily be defied. This is why heroism of the calibre of Haeften is so rare; this is why the poet struggles so much throughout the sequence to articulate a response and an alternative to ‘this common Europe’. The poet knows something is wrong with the Europe of the present; what he cannot do is present a solution to its shortcomings because he, too, is marred by evil, by sin. Yet again, as with ‘September Song’, Hill comes face-to-face with the limits of poetry: in the earlier poem, it was the limits of poetry in doing justice to past sufferings; in ‘De Jure Belli Ac Pacis’, it is poetry’s inability to transcend evil that the speaker acknowledges, both in the world around him and in the poet himself.

This gravitational pull of evil is a central theme in Hill’s poetic confrontations with human suffering in his poetry, finally made explicit in the lines quoted above. Poetry’s failure to articulate a cure to fallen human nature was also acknowledged by Hill from the outset of his career as a poet: as he observes in interview: ‘To succeed totally in finding consolation in art would be to enter a prelapsarian kingdom.’ (Haffenden 88) Nonetheless I feel Hill’s troubled confrontations with the European Union in ‘De Jure Belli Ac Pacis’,

viewed alongside the more contemporary focus of many of the poems in Canaan compared to his previous collection of lyrics Tenebrae (1978), mark a new direction in which Hill's poetry moved ever more strongly in his subsequent collections The Triumph of Love and Speech! Speech!. This new direction is characterised by a more personal voice in the poetry, and I would argue that this more personal poetic derives from the struggle that marks 'De Jure Belli Ac Pacis': how does a poet like Hill respond to what he sees as the pettiness, sordidness and injustice of the modern world?

The Kreisau conspirators responded to the evil of Hitler by attempting to assassinate him; this was a stark, decisive way of signalling their resistance to him. No such avenue lies open for Hill, and the tension that powers much of his recent poetry derives from a sense of frustration that, while his deeply moral sense can celebrate and memorialise heroes of the past like Haeften, Robert Southwell and Charles Péguy, it cannot articulate a definitive response to the shortcomings of the world in which he lives.

One reviewer of Speech! Speech! argued: 'With Hill there is no compromise: it is either the Age or him.'<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, I would suggest that Hill's position is never clearly enough defined to offer the reader those options, and Hill knows this. He does not pretend to offer any one solution to the 'desolation of learning' (TTOL CXIX), ingratitude and aimlessness of the modern world, all of which earn repeated censure in his poetry; he can diagnose these problems, but he remains fully and painfully aware that he cannot cure them. Indeed, there are points in both The Triumph of Love and Speech! Speech! where Hill is at pains to point out the limitations of his poetry and what it can achieve. For example, section CXXXVIII of The Triumph of Love has

him confronting his critics and their 'righteous / censure' of him as ill-qualified to speak of heroism and courage: Hill responds:

I find  
your certitudes offensive. My cowardice  
is not contested. I am saying (simply)  
what is to become of memory? Yes – I know –  
I've asked that before. (TTOL 74-75)

What Hill seeks to do in his poetry is to revive the memories of his readers concerning history and figures of the past who can still teach us important lessons; what he does not claim is that he himself has already taken all these lessons onboard. He acknowledges bluntly that he lacks the courage of someone like Hans-Bernd von Haeften ('My cowardice / is not contested'); he is honest about the self-regard that threatens to cripple poets when they confront historical suffering ('I have made / an elegy for myself it / is true' – 'September Song'); he admits that the motives behind his indictments of modernity are not always (or even often) pure ('I am too much moved by hate' – TTOL LXXV). Meanwhile, Speech! Speech! opens with an acknowledgement that its audience may well be small:

Erudition. Pain. Light. Imagine it great  
unavoidable work; although: heroic  
verse a non-starter, says PEOPLE. Some believe  
we over-employ our gifts. (SS 1)

In all of this, Hill keeps writing poetry as his response to the world around him, even if that is all he *can* do; whether the verse that is written as a result counts as 'heroic' is arguably a question that troubles Hill's recent collections and around which they hover without ever actually answering. Hill's desire is to do justice to history and to the martyrs of the past, but his need to do so is coupled with his repeated admission that he will always fail. This cannot or must not stop him responding to evil, suffering and indifference in the world

around him; the remarkable thing about Hill's morality is that it endures, in defiance of his and so many other's declining morale.

The Triumph of Love ends with a consideration of poetry that helps explain why Hill persists in writing poems in a fallen world where their ability to change things is vastly curtailed:

I ask you:  
 what are poems for? They are to console us  
 with their own gift, which is like perfect pitch.  
 Let us commit that to our dust. What  
 ought a poem to be? Answer, *a sad  
 and angry consolation.*

(TTOL CXLVIII)

A real poem is aware of the suffering ongoing in the world around it and is both saddened and angered by it. Hill's poetry is sometimes more sad than angry ('September Song'), sometimes more angry than sad (much of The Triumph of Love and Speech! Speech!), but it is never left cold by the world in which it exists. Poetry cannot make either its poet or its readers immortal in a world as marked by death and suffering as ours: both poet and reader will eventually die ('Let us commit that to our dust'). However, poems can console us with the close attention they pay to pain and suffering, and with their courage when they place honesty above 'a kind of artistry' that would avoid the harsh realities of a world that has witnessed 'patented / terror' and its murder of millions. The consolation Hill's poetry seeks to offer is not one of blissful ignorance; it is a consolation fully aware of the evil human history has witnessed, and the bland indifference towards that evil of the present day. In short, Hill's poetry offers '*a sad and angry consolation*', aware of evil, suffering and ingratitude and designed to oppose all three by confronting them directly and still preferring, in the words of Milton, 'that which is truly better' – courage, integrity and humility.

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In its treatment of suffering, the poetry of Les Murray proves a striking contrast to that of Geoffrey Hill. Less haunted by the evils of human history than Hill, Murray's radically different approach can be usefully summarised in the following excerpt from his 1974 review of a poetry collection by Jon Silkin. Silkin was a colleague of Hill's at the University of Leeds and, in his treatment of human history, he is a poet similar in temperament to Hill. In his review, Murray is unimpressed by Silkin's approach to poetry and to human experience:

Concentration on suffering to the exclusion of much else that is true is a European mood, and mode, which may be passing ... In the New World, happiness is permitted.<sup>21</sup>

Murray's conception of Australia as the 'New World', and of himself as a New World poet, is crucial to the celebratory nature of much of his poetry, and he clearly distinguishes his poetry from the 'European mood, and mode' he identifies in Silkin, to the extent that he claims to be writing in a different language to his European counterparts: 'I am not European. Nor is my English', he writes in 'Elegy for Angus Macdonald of Cnoclinn' (CP 153).

In the same poem, Murray explores something of what his conception of Australia as the New World means to him: 'a distiller of spirit from bruised grains; / this is a meaning of the New World'. The 'bruised grains' of Australia's past include its origins as a British penal colony; as Murray observes elsewhere: 'We began as the poor who were sent away, to England's South Sea Gulag, and our continent was settled largely by the poor who got away.' (PT 147) At various points in his poetry Murray has considered this convict past and all its attendant cruelty and suffering: 'The New Moreton Bay' opens with one such account:

A grog-primed overseer, who later died,  
snapped at twenty convicts gasping in a line  
*That pole ain't heavy! Two men stand aside!*  
and then two more, *And, you, pop-eyes! And you!*

– until the dozen left, with a terrible cry,  
 broke and were broken  
 beneath the tons of log they had stemmed aloft desperately.  
 (CP 171)

Another of the ‘bruised grains’ of Australian history is the brutal treatment of the Aborigines, from the arrival of the very first European settlers right up to the present. Murray’s early poem ‘The Conquest’ relates the first encounters between Aborigine and European: as they land from their prison ships, the convicts appear to the Aborigines ‘so alien the eye could barely fix / blue parrot-figures wrecking the light with change, / man-shapes digging where no yam-roots were’ (CP 45), while the response of the convicts was equally bewildered: ‘pickpockets squeal, clubbed in imagination, / as naked Indians circle them like birds’. These first impressions and mutual suspicion quickly deteriorate into violence:

No one records what month the first striped men  
 mounted a clawing child, then slit her throat  
 but the spear hit Phillip with a desperate sound. (CP 46)

After these first exchanges, the governor of the colony Arthur Phillip, ‘a kindly, rational man’ and product of the eighteenth-century Age of Reason, quickly shifts from his original position that ‘Friendship and Trust will win the natives’; correspondingly, the settlers’ perceptions of the Aborigines change dramatically:

The thoughtful savage with Athenian flanks  
 fades from the old books here. The sketchers draw  
 pipe-smoking cretins jiggling on thin shanks  
  
 poor for the first time, learning the Crown Lands tune.

Ultimately, the kindly Phillip sets in motion the oppression and harsh treatment of the Aborigines that would mark much of Australia’s history up to the present:

McEntire speared! My personal Huntsman speared!  
 Ten Heads for this, and two alive to hang!  
 A brave lieutenant cools it, bid by bid,

to a decent six. The punitive squads march off  
 without result, but this quandong of wrath  
 ferments in slaughter for a hundred years. (CP 46)

It is clear from Murray's explorations of Australian history that he is profoundly aware of the suffering and struggle that marks much of his country's past; however, these 'bruised grains' have distilled a spirit he feels is worthy of celebration. As the New World, he asserts, 'happiness is permitted' in Australia, no matter how inauspicious, even ignoble its beginnings are, and frequently in his prose he seeks to emphasise that these beginnings are part of what makes Australia so different from the 'Old World' of Europe and, indeed, other areas that claim 'New World' status: 'Unlike North America, it is not a vaster repeat performance of primeval Europe, a new Northern Hemisphere continent with familiar soils and seasons into which a liberal variation on inherited European consciousness might be transplanted with prospects of vast success. It is something other, with different laws.' (PT 149)

While Hill has justly been described by George Steiner as 'the most European [of English poets]',<sup>22</sup> Murray repeatedly signals a conception of his poetry in English as defiantly *Australian*, as belonging to a new continent other than the Europe of his ancestors, as 'something other, with different laws'. However, this does not mean that Murray is either ignorant or unconcerned with the suffering and atrocities that took place in Europe in the middle years of the twentieth century, and for the purposes of a comparison with Hill, I wish to turn to Murray's confrontations with twentieth-century suffering in his poetry – in particular the atrocities carried out in the name of the Third Reich – and explore how his religious beliefs shape his responses to that suffering.

In 1985, Murray wrote: ‘My earliest childhood coincided with World War II, and the war atmosphere of the times got into my nascent consciousness, right down at the level of concerns which have to be faced and worked out in later life. Really, I have written about war largely because I’m deadly afraid of it.’<sup>23</sup> Murray is responding here to questions about his treatment of war that relate largely to his verse-novel of 1980, The Boys Who Stole the Funeral; this tells the story of two young men who steal the body of a World War One veteran from an undertakers in Sydney in order to give him the funeral he wanted back in the rural Australia where he grew up. Like so many Australian writers, Murray has often explored the significance of the First World War and the role played by the Anzacs in it; in one of the 140 twelve-line poems that comprise the verse-novel, a rural priest is being interviewed by a radio journalist about the war in which the dead soldier had fought:

*But wouldn't you agree, Father, that the First World War  
was in part a post-Christian en-masse human sacrifice?*

*No. It was warfare. Don't make it an even worse thing.*

*But surely you believe, Father, in the efficacy of sacrifice:  
'Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins?'*

*That is completed in Christ's blood, came the answer.*<sup>24</sup>

Murray has little time for claims that strive to ennoble the First World War and in the process unthinkingly advocate human sacrifice: ‘No’, says his priest, ‘It was warfare. Don’t make it an even worse thing.’ He is frequently moved by the sacrifice and perceived innocence of the Australian soldiers in World War One – he has one of them ask in a poem from his first collection: ‘Is war very big? As big as New South Wales?’ (‘The Trainee, 1914’: CP 2) – but his Christianity bars him from seeking spiritual significance from their deaths. To do so, he would be

guilty of idolatry; as he puts it elsewhere in The Boys Who Stole the Funeral: 'The true god / gives his flesh and blood. Idols demand yours off you.' (The Boys 44)

Murray's second foray in the ill-explored genre of the verse-novel came in 1998 with the publication of Fredy Neptune. This time, his focus had shifted beyond the First World War and rural Australia (though both feature prominently in the novel) to the first half of the twentieth century as a whole, with significant parts of the action taking place both in Europe and the United States. The verse-novel tells the story of Fred Boettcher, a German-Australian sailor who witnesses the incineration of a group of Armenian women by a mob in the Turkish port of Trabzon early in World War One; in response to his inability to help them, Fred loses his sense of touch and does not regain it until the book's end, some thirty-four years later. This extreme physical reaction to human suffering marks Fred out from those around him, and isolates him from the human suffering he goes on to witness in, among other places, the Australia of the inter-war years, Depression-era America, Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia.

In a public lecture given in London in May 1999, Murray related how the character of Fred came to him in 1992: 'Fredy stood up in the centre of my imagination ... and said, I'm Friedrich Adolf Boettcher, a German-Australian sailor from a farm just outside Dungog, in New South Wales. I lost my sense of touch because I saw something unbearable and couldn't prevent it: I saw Armenian women being burned alive in Turkey in 1915. How could I bear to be in a world where that could happen?'<sup>25</sup> Fred's question is at the centre of many people's interrogation of the suffering they see around them, and like so many of those people he fails to arrive at an answer in the sprawling narrative of the

verse-novel. Commenting on Fredy Neptune in interview, Murray observed that, like Fred, ‘It’s very much on our conscience that such tremendous slaughter should have been carried out.’<sup>26</sup> He went on to refer to both world wars, Stalin’s purges in Russia and Mao’s ‘bloodletting’ in China, before concluding that the twentieth century was ‘the great century of maiming’. It is clear that Murray’s conscience has been greatly affected by the atrocities of the past century: in a different way to Hill, but affected nonetheless.

I want now to move to a consideration of two of Murray’s poems that contend with the symbol of twentieth-century evil and suffering that has concerned us most in this chapter: the suffering brought about by the Third Reich. The first is the title-poem of Murray’s 1990 collection Dog Fox Field: its epigraph, from the Nuremberg trials, informs the reader that one of the Nazi tests for ‘feble-mindedness’ was, ‘*they had to make up a sentence using the words dog, fox and field.*’

These were no leaders, but they were first  
into the dark on Dog Fox Field:

Anna who rocked her head, and Paul  
who grew big and yet giggled small,

Irma who looked Chinese, and Hans  
who knew his world as a fox knows a field.

Hunted with needles, exposed, unfed,  
this time in their thousands they bore sad cuts

for having gaped, and shuffled, and failed  
to field the lore of prey and hound[.]

(CP 332)

Significantly, the poem names those who failed this particular ‘test for feble-mindedness’; Anna, Paul, Irma and Hans were deemed subhuman by the German state, but the speaker here attempts to give them a semblance of individuality by providing the reader with a brief description of each victim.

Perhaps the most poignant member of the group is Hans, 'who knew his world as a fox knows a field'; he was unable to articulate this self-knowledge in a manner deemed adequate by his examiners, however, and so he died with the others. The arbitrary nature of a sentence containing 'dog', 'fox' and 'field' as the decisive factor as to whether a person lives or dies is emphasised in the poem by its strained attempts to incorporate these three words into its argument: if the poet here struggles to use the three essential words, what chance did Anna, Paul, Irma and Hans have?

This is an atypical Murray poem in its sustained description of victims of the Third Reich, and it is moving in its directness; however, with its closing two couplets it shifts suddenly from considering the past to considering the present:

they then had to thump and cry in the vans  
that ran while stopped in Dog Fox Field.

Our sentries, whose holocaust does not end,  
they show us when we cross into Dog Fox Field.

The penultimate couplet continues the description of the fate of Anna *et al* after failing 'to field the lore of prey and hound'; they are gassed to death in the vans that predated the gas chambers as a means of killing those deemed defective by the Nazis. However, the closing couplet shifts the focus to the present with a jolt: the reader is left with the information that 'Dog Fox Field' still exists today, and that it is still possible for us to cross into it. It seems clear that we are back in the thick of Murray's ideological battle with the modernity he perceives as elevating youth, physical beauty and sexual desirability above all else and with which he battles repeatedly in his poetry and prose (see my discussion of 'Rock Music' in the previous chapter). It is their 'sentries' that dictate what is acceptable and what is not, who counts as a useful human being and who does

not; the poem ends chillingly with the speaker observing that their 'holocaust does not end'.

By ending a poem on the atrocities of the Third Reich with a stinging rebuke of what he sees as the modern-day tyranny of 'be young and sexy or be relegated' (Crawford 165) – a test of acceptability that Anna, Paul, Irma and Hans would have failed as surely as the one used by the Nazis – Murray shows himself to be a very different poet in his treatment of twentieth-century suffering to Hill. 'Dog Fox Field' is a moving evocation of some of the victims of the Third Reich, but for Murray it is less a question of memorialising these victims (the project with which Hill struggles so intensely in a poem like 'September Song'), and more a means by which similarities between the exclusionary tactics of the modern secular world and those of the Nazis can be strikingly illustrated. Murray illustrates this strongly held conviction elsewhere in his poetry, perhaps the most striking example of which is 'Rock Music', with its opening line 'Sex is a Nazi' (CP 410). In drawing out this conviction, however, Murray could be accused of attempting to manipulate his readership emotionally, even of dishonouring the victims of the Third Reich by comparing their situation with the sidelined and relegated in the modern western world; even if the tests for sexual desirability and youthful vigour do exist today, his opponents could argue, no-one is gassed for failing them. Of course, Murray would respond that it is the existence of these tests that should not be tolerated, quite apart from whether those relegated by them die as a result, and a poem like 'Dog Fox Field' can have the effect of making his readers aware of 'the old Nazi repugnances towards deformity, old age, weakness and general lack of dash' that dominate the modern



secular West (PT 362). If that is the result, according to this argument, the apparent shock tactics of the poem's close are justified.

An even more shocking poem of Murray's that evokes the atrocities committed by the Nazis into its argument is 'The Beneficiaries':

Higamus hogamus  
 Western intellectuals  
 never praise Auschwitz.  
 Most ungenerous. Most odd,  
 when they claim it's what finally  
 won them their centuries-  
 long war against God. (CP 416)

In an interview of 1996, Murray referred to 'The Beneficiaries' as a 'savage little poem' that nobody will like,<sup>27</sup> and at least one critic lived up to Murray's expectations, describing the poem as 'vile' and 'a vomit'.<sup>28</sup> The poem is certainly uncomfortable to read, and its inclusion in Killing the Black Dog, Murray's record in poetry and prose of his thirty-year battle with depression, suggests that it was uncomfortable to write, but the question must be asked: why is this poem so uncomfortable?

I would suggest that it brings together two of the most sacred words in the English language – 'God' and, since 1945, 'Auschwitz' – and plays them off each other in a way contrary to expectation. Instead of God receiving praise (as he famously does at the beginning of each new collection of poems by Murray), it is Auschwitz, the symbol of all that is evil and murderous in humanity, that is put forward for praise, and specifically for praise from that very body who, according to Murray, would balk at any invitation to praise God, namely 'Western intellectuals'. What Murray is suggesting is that the largely unchallenged position of many secular Western thinkers – that Auschwitz and the other Nazi death-camps have rendered any remaining belief in God untenable

– should not remain unchallenged. Murray is interested here in debunking the idea that the philosophers, artists and theologians who claim that there is ‘No God after Auschwitz’ do so objectively or impartially; rather, they have tried to free themselves from God for centuries and the death-camps are simply another means of doing so, with the added bonus that with Auschwitz the events are so horrific and shocking that they have the effect of stifling discussion and thus winning the argument.

Murray’s point in this poem is not a subtle one, and its brevity suggests it was not intended to be; instead, it is an epigram that provokes a response of unease, even revulsion in the reader, and then makes the reader think why the poet would write such a thing and, equally significantly, why he/she as a reader reacts the way they do to it. In response to its portrayal of Western intellectuals, it could be noted that many who have argued that belief in God after Auschwitz is untenable have not done so unfeelingly or calculatedly, but rather in genuine dismay that such atrocities could happen in a world supposedly governed by God. Nonetheless, ‘The Beneficiaries’ stands as a shocking and audacious epigram from a poet whose epigrams are generally much gentler and more humorous, and as a bold defence of God in the face of a suffering world that seems to question his existence, his goodness or his power. Murray does not provide an answer here as to why there is so much suffering and evil in the world, whether that suffering takes place in Auschwitz or elsewhere; what he does do is shift the argument back onto the atheist and suggest that their position is not as impregnable as they often present it as being.

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Finally, then, by way of 'The Beneficiaries' this chapter ends where it began, with the character of God in the face of suffering in the poetry of Hill and Murray. I opened with a series of questions articulated by Ibsen's Brand in Geoffrey Hill's version of the play, culminating in 'What do we die to prove?' The search for meaning in a fallen world is ongoing and neither Hill nor Murray are able to provide themselves or their readers with a definitive answer, whether it proves comforting or not; in writing poems that seek to confront some of the worst atrocities in human history, Hill in particular comes up repeatedly against the limits of poetry, the limits of writing, the limits of language. He cannot write the poem that would faithfully and completely memorialise the victims of the Shoah and do justice to their suffering and deaths: that would be 'to succeed totally in finding consolation in art', and that could only happen in 'a prelapsarian kingdom', which this world clearly is not. Instead, the consolation poetry offers is, in Hill's conception of it, 'sad and angry': severely limited by the Fall and the fallenness of the poet and of language, but, remarkably, still capable of consoling poet and reader in its sadness and anger at the world and (perhaps) its own limitations.

As for the search for meaning in death, Hill provides one view of the hopelessness of this search at the end of the 'Funeral Music' sequence:

If it is without  
 Consequence when we vaunt and suffer, or  
 If it is not, all echoes are the same  
 In such eternity. Then tell me, love,  
 How that should comfort us – or anyone  
 Dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place,  
 Crying to the end 'I have not finished'. (CP 77)

Whether there is meaning or a world-order underpinning all the suffering and pain of the world in which we live or not, that does not change the reality of that

suffering and pain; one could add, whether there is a God overseeing this fallen world or not, that provides little comfort to those who 'vaunt and suffer' in 'this worldly place'.

These are frequently quoted lines from Hill and the force of their assertion is considerable; however, they do not give the whole story of Hill's conception of suffering. They come at the end of a sequence concerned with the Wars of the Roses, which took place at a time when ideas of religious consolation were widely-held, dimly apprehended and largely unchallenged; Hill's speaker, in keeping with his 'constructive scepticism' (Haffenden 88), proceeds to challenge them. 'Funeral Music' also continues Hill's enquiries into war and the victims of war undertaken elsewhere in his confrontations with the Nazi holocaust; to make such enquiries, he leaves his poetry open to doubt, despair, even nihilism, in an attempt to confront the horrors and seeming injustice of reality as honestly as possible. Hill refers to this approach in interview:

If poetry has any value, that value must presuppose the absolute freedom of poetry to encompass the maximum range of belief or unbelief. I would have thought that this problem had been solved already for European poets by the poetry of the Psalms, the Book of Job, and the Divine Comedy. (Haffenden 88)

Poetry's 'absolute freedom' allows it to arrive at such conclusions as 'Funeral Music's, that no ultimate meaning can compensate for the suffering of human history; it also allows different conclusions to be made, conclusions which perhaps more accurately reflect Hill's ongoing explorations of human history and the suffering it contains.

Time and again, Hill is drawn to martyrs, those who bear witness to their causes by their death ('Martyrdom is an act of witness', he observes (Haffenden

90)). Some of these martyrs could be described as secular, but most share Hill's concerns with the religious, often paying for their religious beliefs with their lives: examples of this latter group include Robert Southwell, Tommaso Campanella and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The closing lines of Hill's tribute to Bonhoeffer suggest that the poet does not view the death of the German pastor at the hands of the Nazis to be 'without consequence':

Against wild reasons of the state  
his words are quiet but not too quiet.  
We hear too late or not too late. (CP 171)

According to Hill, attention must be paid to Bonhoeffer's life and death, as it must be paid to the other 'martyrs' to whom his poetry keeps returning. The suffering his poetry records is always admitted to be horrific, even scandalous, but Hill appears convinced that the witness of those who have died for their beliefs – whether religious, political or frequently both, as in the cases of Bonhoeffer, Haefen and Charles Péguy – has much to teach us; indeed, as I have already argued, the more personal character of much of Hill's poetry since Canaan could be attributed to his own struggle, as a poet and a human being, to discover what lessons can be learnt from martyrs who made their stand often in wildly different circumstances to his own. In spite of this difficulty, Hill cannot ignore the sufferings of the past or dismiss it as indistinguishable echoes in eternity, and his main accusation against the modern world is that it avoids these difficulties by doing just that; instead, Hill listens for the 'quiet' words of men like Bonhoeffer, in the belief that there *is* meaning in human existence, that there *is* 'consequence' when people 'vaunt and suffer', and that it is the job of people like himself to seek to ascertain what that meaning is.

Of course, a belief that there is a meaning to life's suffering and pain is often little comfort to human existence, as 'Funeral Music' acknowledges, and it is also a long way from that belief to an acceptance that the Christian God stands behind it all. In pursuit of Hill's conception of the God who permits human suffering and the existence of evil in this chapter, I have often been frustrated by the perhaps crucial factor that Hill rarely refers to God in his confrontations with suffering. Hill's anger, lamentation or scepticism is repeatedly directed at the people who perpetrate atrocities and the people in our day who dismiss such atrocities as unimportant to our conception of humanity, rather than at God; it is as if the character of God is not at issue, rather it is the character of his creation, mankind, that is suspect, and Hill conceives of that creation as fallen. There are examples in his poetry of anger or accusation directed towards God, as is fitting for a poet who responds so compassionately to the suffering of history; in 'Locust Songs', God is described as 'voyeur of sacrifice' (CP 65), while 'Statesmen have known visions' believes there is 'some need to demonstrate / Jehovah's touchy methods that create / The connoisseur of blood, the smitten man' (CP 49) (whether the 'connoisseur' and 'the smitten man' are two aspects of each human or whether they refer to torturer and victim is left unclear at the poem's end). However, it is clear that in Hill we have a 'Western intellectual' deeply troubled both by Auschwitz and his own inability to successfully memorialise it in poetry (perhaps he is even troubled by his desire to memorialise it in poetry, as somehow indicative of a disturbing attraction to the death-camps as subject matter); nonetheless, he is not at war with God, *contra* Murray.

On the contrary, I would suggest that one of the lessons Hill has learned from Hans-Bernd von Haefen and the other Kreisau conspirators, as explored in



that will endure beyond the 'mortal corruption' that so transfixes and appals the poet. This reality is 'ineradicable, and rightly so', and Haeften and his companions bore witness to it; it appears related to 'the soul-flame' of the final poem, that has 'stood through such ages' as Haeften's and our own, 'ebbing, and again, lambent', but beyond that, the poem does not (cannot?) say. What does seem clear from Hill's confrontations with suffering is that poetry, in and of itself, is not strong enough to respond to the evils of the world, that there must be something outside it and outside human experience to which people like Haeften, Bonhoeffer and even the sceptical Hill must turn and recognise, even if they cannot define.

Les Murray would certainly agree with this realisation of poetry's limits; as he remarks in 'Poetry and Religion': 'nothing's true that figures in words only' (CP 267). For his poetry, it is perhaps easier to assert that a benevolent Christian God stands behind the suffering and (one of Murray's chief concerns) relegations of human history than it is with Hill. Murray's poetry looks ahead to an end to suffering in terms perhaps more compatible with orthodox Christianity than Hill's, but no less aware of the frustrations of human experience in the meantime: as he concludes an elegy for his mother, who died prematurely at the age of thirty-five:

The poor man's anger is a prayer  
for equities Time cannot hold

...  
Justice is the people's otherworld. (CP 191)

As we have seen from his short poem 'The Beneficiaries', Murray is a fierce advocate of God in a world that seeks to dismiss his existence or relevance ('Snobs mind us off religion / nowadays, if they can', he writes in 'The Last Hellos', his elegy for his father: 'Fuck thém. I wish you God.' (CP 450)); as



such, he is less troubled by the question of God's goodness or power in the face of human suffering, and more troubled by the motives of those who ask that question. In a remarkable poem on Christ, 'The Say-But-The-Word Centurion Attempts a Summary', the centurion, upon hearing of Christ's resurrection, predicts: 'Whole philosophies will be devised for their brief snubbings of him' (CP 409); Murray appears to see the question of suffering as just another tactic of these philosophers. While his poetry is aware of human suffering, whether that of the Aborigines ('The Conquest'), the 'mentally deficient' in Hitler's Germany ('Dog Fox Field') or indeed his own (see the Killing the Black Dog poems on depression, and my discussion of some of them in the previous chapter), this awareness leads to a dissatisfaction and anger with humanity rather than with the God to whom those same poems are dedicated. Perhaps the most direct response made by Murray's poetry to the question of suffering and why God allows it comes from his collection of 2002, Poems the Size of Photographs, and a short poem entitled, appropriately, 'The Knockdown Question':

Why does God not spare the innocent?

The answer to that is not in  
the same world as the question  
so you would shrink from me  
in terror if I could answer it.<sup>29</sup>

In closing, the critic Michael Edwards, in his study Towards a Christian Poetics, outlines his view of the relationship between Christianity and suffering in a way that proves helpful to a reading of both Hill and Murray. Following on from his contention that 'Literature occurs because we inhabit a fallen world' (a contention I discussed in the introduction to this thesis), Edwards posits that 'Christianity, in a certain light, is tragic', before going on to illustrate his point with the following statement:

It is often argued that the Christian belief in an order that comprehends suffering and death and a grace that is able to overcome evil – a belief in paradise, resurrection, a redeeming God – removes from *misère* its tragic sting. Yet Jesus himself wept ... His tears on the way to the grave of Lazarus [came] ... remarkably, despite the fact that he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead and turn the suffering into joy. The pain of a fallen world cannot be discounted, even if one has a Messiah's knowledge of the future, because of its present reality.<sup>30</sup>

Neither Hill nor Murray has 'a Messiah's knowledge of the future', and of the two Hill frequently seems uncertain as to what the future holds; Murray, meanwhile, can contemplate heaven as 'the people's otherworld', marked by justice and egalitarian principles, while at the same time he is forced to acknowledge that he cannot answer the 'knockdown question' about God and suffering in this world. In short, both poets would certainly agree with Edwards here that even a knowledge of heaven cannot 'discount' suffering in the present, and it is that suffering that forms the focus for so much of their respective poetries.

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<sup>1</sup> Henrik Ibsen. Brand. A version for the stage by Geoffrey Hill. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996. p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> George Santayana. Interpretations of Poetry and Religion. 1900. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957. pp. v-vi.

<sup>3</sup> Santayana, p. vi.

<sup>4</sup> Inferno III, ll. 5-6: The Divine Comedy. Trans. C. H. Sisson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. p. 55.

<sup>5</sup> Milton. Areopagitica. 1644. The Works of John Milton. Ed. Frank Allen Patterson and others. Vol. 4. New York: Columbia University Press, 1931. 291-354 (p. 311).

<sup>6</sup> 'Carrion Comfort'. Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. W. H. Gardner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953. p. 61.

<sup>7</sup> George Steiner. Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966. London: Faber, 1967. pp. 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> Steiner, pp. 15-16.

<sup>9</sup> Steiner, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno. 'Cultural Criticism and Society'. Prisms. Trans. from the German by Samuel and Shierry Weber. London: Neville Speerman, 1967. 19-34 (p. 34).

<sup>11</sup> Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Dialectic of Enlightenment. 1944. Trans. John Cumming. London: Verso, 1997. p. xi.

<sup>12</sup> For a useful summary of the criticism surrounding Plath's allusions to the Shoah, see Jacqueline Rose. 'Daddy'. The Haunting of Sylvia Plath. London: Virago, 1991. 205-238.

- <sup>13</sup> See "'Perplexed Persistence': The Exemplary Failure of T. H. Green.' The Lords of Limit. 104-120.
- <sup>14</sup> Christopher Ricks. The Force of Poetry. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984. pp. 296-300.
- <sup>15</sup> John Bayley. 'The Tongue's Satisfactions.' Agenda 30.1-2 (1992): 9-14 (p. 11).
- <sup>16</sup> Bayley, p. 10.
- <sup>17</sup> Bayley, p. 10.
- <sup>18</sup> Klemens von Klemperer. German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad 1938-1945. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. pp. 29, 31.
- <sup>19</sup> Karl Barth. Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans: quoted by C. J. Shebbeare. 'The Atonement and Some Tendencies of Modern Thought'. The Atonement in History and in Life: A Volume of Essays. Ed. L. W. Grensted. London: SPCK, 1929. 299-321 (p. 302); subsequently quoted by Hill. The Lords of Limit. p. 15.
- <sup>20</sup> Note to a selection of poems from Speech! Speech!. Poetry Review 91.3 (2001). p.16.
- <sup>21</sup> Review of The Principle of Water. Sydney Morning Herald 10 August 1974. p. 15: quoted by Lawrence Bourke. A Vivid Steady State. p. 37.
- <sup>22</sup> Reproduced on the back-cover of Hill's Collected Poems.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Notes and Documents [on the subject of war].' Australian Literary Studies 12.2 (1985): 261-270 (p. 268).
- <sup>24</sup> Poem 57. The Boys Who Stole the Funeral. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1980. p. 29.
- Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>25</sup> Lecture delivered by Les Murray, Australia House, London. May 21 1999.
- <sup>26</sup> 'Les Murray In Conversation with Steven Matthews'. P.N. Review 25.2 (Nov.-Dec. 1998): 57-61 (p. 57).
- <sup>27</sup> William Scammell. 'In conversation with Les Murray.' P.N. Review 22.6 (July-Aug. 1996): 29-36 (p. 36).
- <sup>28</sup> Don Anderson. 'Redneck in Tooth and Claw.' Australian Book Review (November 1996): quoted by Jamie Grant. 'Subhuman Redneck Politics.' Counterbalancing Light. 123-136 (p. 124).
- <sup>29</sup> Poems the Size of Photographs. Manchester: Carcanet, 2002. p. 67.
- <sup>30</sup> Edwards. Towards a Christian Poetics. p. 36.

#### 4. 'A SPIRITUAL LAUGHTER': GOD'S SENSE OF HUMOUR IN THE POETRY OF LES MURRAY AND GEOFFREY HILL

...my father slyly used the word 'religious' to mean glum, long-faced dreariness of demeanour.  
"Righto, stop grinning now; look religious!"

- Les Murray<sup>1</sup>

As this chapter's epigraph suggests, Christianity and laughter have enjoyed a troubled relationship throughout history. To many, they are regarded as strange bedfellows, and either could be perceived as a direct threat to the continued existence of the other. Secular humorists can point to various programmes undertaken in the name of Christianity throughout the past two thousand years, from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition, from England under the Lord Protectorate of Cromwell to sectarian hatred in Ireland, that have been marked by a starkly humourless character which played a substantial role in their violence, oppression and prejudice. Christian commentators sceptical of humour, on the other hand, do not have to look hard for numerous instances of the mockery of Christian doctrine, the celebration of human sinfulness and varying degrees of blasphemy, all seemingly validated and excused by their service to a joke. These opposing positions may be over-simplified, but it is difficult to portray a relationship between Christianity and the humorous that is not a troubled one.

Nonetheless, M. A. Screech attempts to portray one such relationship in his Laughter at the Foot of the Cross.<sup>2</sup> Most of the book deals with two of the greatest sixteenth century proponents of what can reasonably be called 'Christian humour', Erasmus and Rabelais, but Screech opens with a consideration of the various Biblical instances of laughter, and his survey paints a deeply ambivalent picture. He observes firstly that of the three great patriarchs of the Jewish people – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the middle one's name means 'he laughs': he then

points out that there are three different instances of laughter surrounding Isaac's birth to Abraham and Sarah, two of which portray a joyful laughter of which God implicitly approves (Genesis 17:15-19 and 21:1-7), while the third demonstrates a sinful lack of trust in God's promises and his ability to fulfil them (Genesis 18:10-15). Screech then proceeds to illustrate from the Bible some of the differing portrayals of laughter as godly and laughter as sinful: godly instances include Elijah's mockery of the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:27-29) and the portrayal of God himself laughing at his enemies in Psalm 2; examples of sinful laughter include the jeering endured by Elisha in 2 Kings 2:23-25, and, supremely, the laughter at the foot of the cross endured by Christ (e.g., Matthew 27:39-44). These categorizations of laughter as either admirable or sinful depend on the status of those people laughing in relation to God: Elijah laughs at the prophets of Baal because of his confidence that the God he serves is real and will answer him, while God himself laughs at the futility of earthly rulers who believe that they can defeat him in battle, and in both cases the laughter is justified; however, in mocking Elisha, the youths of Bethel are indirectly mocking the God whom the prophet serves, and in mocking Jesus on the cross, the religious rulers, passers-by and Roman soldiers are demonstrating their contempt for God's Anointed One, God's Son. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the varying stances the Bible takes towards laughter depend on the varying responses the human beings involved make towards God and towards his purposes: concern with and responses to the character of God are therefore essential to Biblical portrayals of laughter, and I hope to demonstrate that the nature of the humour present in the poetry of Les Murray and Geoffrey Hill is similarly bound up with their respective conceptions of the character of God.

In response to the seeming ambivalence of the Bible's view of laughter, Christian commentators throughout the centuries have also struggled to conceive a definitive relationship between Christianity and the humorous. Rabelais included laughter in his basic definition of humanity:

'Tis better to write of laughter than of tears,  
Since laughter is the property of Man.<sup>3</sup>

In this he followed on from the thinking of such classical authors as Aristotle, who believed that 'no animal laughs save Man': laughter was therefore taken by many Christian thinkers to be a God-given attribute unique to humanity, and therefore something to rejoice in.<sup>4</sup> Countless others were more sceptical concerning the role of laughter and humour in a fallen world. One of their most potent arguments was that while the gospels tell us that Jesus wept while on earth, there is no record of him laughing. (C.S. Lewis, writer of one of the twentieth-century's greatest examples of Christian humour in prose, The Screwtape Letters, cautiously took issue with this argument in an essay entitled 'Christianity and Literature': 'Donne points out that we are never told He laughed; it is difficult in reading the Gospels not to believe, and to tremble in believing, that He smiled.')<sup>5</sup>

Both Christian champions of laughter and its sceptics can draw on the work of Kierkegaard to lend weight to their respective arguments. He wrote extensively concerning humour, the comic, laughter and irony, particularly in his journals where the four terms often seem interchangeable. In one entry, dated 1837, he makes the bold claim that Christianity 'is the most humorous view of life in world history',<sup>6</sup> but as with so many of his journal entries, this is more an epigrammatic statement than part of a sustained piece of argument. It is difficult to locate a sustained consideration of humour in relation to Christianity outside

the journals, and because of this Kierkegaard can be cited by either side in the debate concerning the validity or otherwise of Christian laughter.

‘Christianity is certainly not melancholy; it is, on the contrary, glad tidings – for the melancholy; to the frivolous it is certainly not glad tidings, for it wishes first of all to make them serious.’<sup>7</sup> This formulation of Christianity clearly favours Kierkegaard’s own ‘melancholy’ temperament, and is useful in pointing to a view of Christianity as ‘glad tidings’ intended to make the hearer ‘serious’: in their conceptions of humour, both Murray and Hill pick up on this idea of a seriousness underpinning humour. With this statement, Kierkegaard seems to relish the paradoxical nature of these ‘glad tidings’ and to further confuse the relationship between ‘gladness’ and ‘seriousness’.

Another journal entry, again dated 1837, appears at first to offer a more straightforward celebration of humour in human experience, and as such proves a useful epigram for advocates of the place of humour in Christianity: ‘But humour is also the joy which has overcome the world’.<sup>8</sup> Again, there is little explanation or context for this statement, but it is clear that Kierkegaard here links humour with joy, one of the fruit of the Spirit in the New Testament (e.g. Galatians 5:22-23); this coupling is a crucial one for his conception of Christian laughter. However, as Kierkegaard’s statement suggests, humour is not solely ‘joy’, it is ‘*also ... joy*’, while joy in its New Testament portrayal is never simply a response to humour; rather, it is a manifestation of God’s grace, often in outright defiance of human experience in the world (see, for example, Paul’s description of his hardships in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10, where he lists contradiction after seeming contradiction: ‘known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; *sorrowful, yet always rejoicing*; poor, yet making

many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything' (my emphases)). The relationship between joy and humour is therefore more complex than an initial reading of this epigram suggests.

A final entry from Kierkegaard's journal, dated 1848, demonstrates a more sceptical, even wary attitude towards laughter from a Christian perspective.

Kierkegaard writes:

There is something noteworthy in the thought that weeping is a divine invention, laughter, the devil's ...

It is also noteworthy that the world manifestly tends towards the comic, to the greater and greater development of laughter, all of which hangs together with the world's retrogression. Nowhere do we pause with pathos; we shudder at nothing – but say: Knock it off and see the comical side; human corruption is comical, and we try to express it comically ... This signifies that the view of life behind it is despair: All is phoney – so let us laugh. It is reminiscent in a certain sense of the chorus of a drinking song: Everything is lousy – so let us clink the glasses.<sup>9</sup>

This is an extremely useful passage to lead us into a consideration of the place of humour and laughter in the poetry of Hill and Murray. There is tension here in Kierkegaard's consideration that weeping is divine while laughter originates with the devil: should laughter therefore be prohibited? It is important to note that Kierkegaard nowhere in his writings indulges in the Romantic veneration of the devil: this is not a veiled celebration of laughter, as in Baudelaire's 1855 essay on the comic in art, where he dubbed laughter 'satanic',<sup>10</sup> but rather a sobering contemplation of it, as the second paragraph of his journal entry demonstrates.

Kierkegaard's conviction that the world is regressing can find echoes in both Hill and Murray, as we have already seen. Murray contends that 'it is surely much harder than it may have seemed before to say that man evolves beyond highly developed religion. In perhaps a majority of cases, he falls out of it backwards' (PT 144-145); certainly, he is vehemently opposed to what he sees as the ideological exclusion of the religious dimension from humanity that began



with the Enlightenment, and the dismissal of 'deformity, old age, weakness and general lack of dash' sanctioned by secularism's championing of 'robust health' and 'sturdy youthful vigour' (PT 362, 361). Murray signals his unease with modernity in the short poem, 'An Era':

The poor were fat and the rich were lean.  
 Nearly all could preach, very few could sing.  
 The fashionable were all one age, and to them  
 a church picnic was the very worst thing. (CP 351)

These simple, singable lines seem designed to frustrate, even infuriate, modern sophistication and urbanity, demonstrating as they do a literate, intelligent and metrically skilful poet's implicit celebration of 'a church picnic', in defiance of Western contemporary tastes. At his most combative, Murray takes issue with current ideas of progress and portrays them instead as regression.

Geoffrey Hill is also critical of the modern world, though often for radically different reasons than Murray. He is as resolutely an 'Old World' poet as Murray is 'New World', and it is his desire to situate himself in world history that sets him apart from modernity. History, memory, suffering and poetry's tortured, possibly futile response to them – these are what power Hill's poetic, and the modern world's unwillingness seriously to consider them is what fuels Hill's ire against it. In 1977 he concluded his inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds with a consideration of the 'vocation' of the poet: 'that of necessarily bearing his peculiar unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless' (LL 17-18). Shame and awareness of sin are essential to the poet, but they are anathema to the world Hill envisages here, and to the world which Kierkegaard describes in his 1848 consideration of laughter: this refusal to acknowledge the shame and guilt inherited by history therefore incurs Hill's disdain.

But where does this distrust of modernity leave Murray and Hill in relation to Kierkegaard's unease concerning the world's tendency 'towards the comic, to the greater development of laughter'? As we will see, humour and laughter have roles to play in the work of both these poets, but concerns similar to Kierkegaard's are arguably never far from their explorations of the two. Throughout their work, Murray and Hill negotiate their way through the debate concerning the proper Christian response to humour and laughter, and their respective discoveries are both very different and illuminating concerning their conceptions of God.

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Of the two, Murray is clearly the more vocal concerning the ideas of humour and laughter, both in interviews and in his essay of 1982, 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia', from which this chapter takes its epigraph. This essay's self-deprecating and studiously unacademic title belies some of Murray's most detailed considerations of what he sees as the relationship between Christianity and his poetic outlook. It is largely a consideration of the shape of belief in Australia, but as Murray comments elsewhere in interview: 'Things may have an Australian address and be of universal significance, of universal applicability. We assume this without doubt when the verse comes from, say, America or England.'(Crawford 171)

Near the beginning of the essay, Murray turns his attention to humour and what he sees as the differences between Australian approaches to humour and those of elsewhere, singling out for mild criticism 'the rather indiscriminate nihilism of Goon Show-Monty Python humour': in contrast, the Australian humour he is attempting to describe contains 'far less fatigue and angry despair

at its heart, and less childishness'(PT 147). Like Kierkegaard, Murray demonstrates unease with any conception of humour based on despair: 'All is phoney – so let us laugh'. He continues:

The ability to laugh at venerated things, and at awesome and deadly things – remember the Anzac Book, and the infantrymen advancing into battle in North Africa singing "We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz" – may, in time, prove to be one of Australia's great gifts to mankind. It is, at bottom, a spiritual laughter, a mirth that puts tragedy, futility and vanity alike in their place. (PT 147)

This 'spiritual laughter', Murray argues, is clearly distinguished from nihilism or despair, and so in theory at least guards itself against potential accusations from Kierkegaard or others that it could be of the devil's party. In case there is any doubt, the essay goes on to explicitly link this laughter with God himself:

God, in Australia, is a vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape, and his votaries wear ragged shorts and share his sense of humour ... Australia really seems to be where God puts a sardonix to the lips of Western man and teaches him to laugh wisely. (PT 149-150)

The Australian landscape – whether the outback (as here) or the more familiar farmed land of New South Wales, Murray's home – is central to Murray's poetic vision and to his conception of God. 'This country is my mind', he famously remarks in the early poem 'Evening Alone at Bunyah' (CP 15), without elaborating as to which is the senior partner: did the country shape his mind, or did his mind re-make the country in its own image? In the statement quoted above, God is not the completely familiar – the 'vast blue and pale-gold and red-brown landscape' of the Australian interior has successfully resisted most attempts at human settlement for centuries and defies a simple cartography – but he *is* close at hand, and he does not demand a strict dress-code from his followers. He also possesses a sense of humour, presumably the 'spiritual laughter ... that puts tragedy, futility and vanity alike in their place', and he is

willing to pass it on (though why he chooses a sardonyx to do so, with its resonances of ‘sardonic’, is unclear).

With these statements, Murray places himself firmly on the side of Rabelais in the Christian debate surrounding the nature of laughter: not only is it a property of man, but when humans laugh wisely, they are imitating their Creator. In interview, Murray has observed: ‘I think all of my work is fundamentally religious, subsumed by a Christian consciousness ... I would say that’s where the geniality comes from, and a lot of the humour’ (Crawford 165), and it is this idea of God’s sense of humour that underpins so much of the celebratory nature of his poetry.

One of Murray’s best-known poems, and perhaps the one that best embodies his poetic stance, is ‘The Quality of Sprawl’. It reads like a lecture or essay in which its speaker has been asked to define the nature of ‘sprawl’, and his repeated attempts to do so point to the failure of logic and/or language to contain it. The standard examiner’s advice, ‘use both sides of the page if necessary’, springs to mind, as the definitions and seemingly contradictory re-definitions accumulate:

Sprawl is doing your farming by aeroplane, roughly,  
or driving a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home.  
It is the rococo of being your own still centre.

...

Sprawl lengthens the legs; it trains greyhounds on liver and beer.

...

Sprawl is Hank Stamper in *Never Give an Inch*  
bisecting an obstructive official’s desk with a chainsaw.  
Not harming the official.

...

Sprawl occurs in art. The fifteenth to twenty-first  
lines in a sonnet, for example. (CP 183-184)

These last two lines reflect sprawl’s approach to poetic conventions, and the poem that sets out to define it rides roughshod over them. Sprawl is

conversational, self-assured and generous: the end of the poem tells us that it is 'roughly Christian', and this is reflected in its willingness to drive 'a hitchhiker that extra hundred miles home', thus casually obeying Christ's command in the Sermon on the Mount – 'If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles' (Matthew 5:41). 'That extra hundred miles' is merely in keeping with Australia's vastness of size.

The various definitions of sprawl given throughout the poem fail to form a coherent whole, but they do paint a picture of generosity, 'classless' and 'loose-limbed in its mind', and of freedom, though crucially not a freedom from all human responsibility or morality: alongside the good-humoured warmth of most of the poem, the descriptions of what sprawl is *not* possess considerable force:

It is never lighting cigars with ten-dollar notes:  
that's idiot ostentation and murder of starving people.

Like the spiritual laughter Murray champions in his prose, sprawl is aware of tragedy (a world in which people starve and towns are wiped out – 'Sprawl is never Simon de Montfort / at a town-storming: Kill them all!'), futility (people dressed 'in running shoes worn / with mink and a nose ring. That is Society. That's Style.') and vanity ('idiot ostentation'), but it is able to smile, if not laugh, at them: sprawl does seem to be a mirth that puts all three alike 'in their place'.

No, sprawl is full-gloss murals on a council-house wall.  
Sprawl leans on things. It is loose-limbed in its mind.  
Reprimanded and dismissed  
it listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail  
of possibility. It may have to leave the Earth.  
Being roughly Christian, it scratches the other cheek  
and thinks it unlikely. Though people have been shot for sprawl.

In this final section, the speaker becomes aware of the tensions and difficulties inherent in any attempt to introduce sprawl into 'the Earth', into a world that is so often hostile towards sprawl's irreverent stance: as with Murray's

ideas of spiritual laughter, 'the ability to laugh at venerated things' does not always earn sprawl friends ('Sprawl gets up the nose of many kinds of people / (every kind that comes in kinds)'). Instead, it is 'reprimanded and dismissed' – Murray might argue in much the same way as the religious element of humanity has been treated – and may be forced 'to leave the Earth'. As the poem concludes disturbingly, 'people have been shot for sprawl'.

Following on from the various definitions of sprawl that seem overwhelmingly positive and life affirming, this conclusion is unexpected and unsettling: suddenly, the championing of sprawl becomes a serious, even dangerous concern. Of course, sprawl itself ends the poem unconcerned – 'it scratches the other cheek / and thinks it unlikely' – but it is manifestly clear from this conclusion that, for all its generosity and good humour ('full-gloss murals on a council-house wall' is an eloquently down-to-earth image of transformative grace), sprawl is not welcomed by the whole of humanity. How large a part its 'roughly Christian' character plays in generating this hostility remains unclear at the poem's end, but it almost certainly contributes to the modern world's antipathy towards sprawl.

'The Quality of Sprawl' stands as a memorable example of Murray at his most genial and humorous, while also making it clear that not everything in the world can or should be laughed at. If sprawl can be equated with Murray's spiritual laughter, nonetheless there seem to be some venerated things at which it will not laugh, such as the 'murder of starving people' (as Murray's verse-novel of 1980, The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, puts it: 'the holiest thing in the universe / is a poor family at their dinner' (The Boys 67)). Humour in Murray's poetry is never Kierkegaard's nihilism that says 'All is phoney – so let us laugh':

instead, it springs from his ‘Christian consciousness’ and so possesses a moral sense. Murray’s conception of humour is not as an escape from reality; rather it is a response to it, an attempt to achieve a ‘mirth that puts tragedy, futility and vanity alike in their place’ – in short, to share God’s sense of humour.

So, according to Murray, what is God’s sense of humour like? He does not seem to expand on his statement concerning God’s Australian votaries elsewhere in his prose, but it may prove helpful to look at the Biblical instance of God’s laughter I referred to earlier, that of Psalm 2:

Why do the nations conspire  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together against the Lord  
and against his Anointed One.

...

The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them. (Psalm 2:1-2, 4)<sup>11</sup>

The nations conspire and the peoples plot; the kings of the earth take their stand; the rulers gather together against the Lord: all of these events would seem terrifying to a human observer, as they point to an impressive alliance of men and nations in defiance of God (and presumably God’s people, the Israelites). Verse 3 records their determination: ‘Let us break their chains ... / and throw off their fetters’. The nations are rebelling against God and they have an impressive force behind them.

So, how does God respond? He laughs. He ‘scoffs at them’ and seems unconcerned, before he goes on in the psalm to ‘rebuke ... them in his anger / and terrif[y] them in his wrath’ (v.5). In spite of the vast army of forces ranged against him, God laughs: in short, he places the threat posed by the kings of the earth in its proper perspective – they are human beings, while he is God.

Ultimately, he has nothing to fear from them, therefore his response to their rebellion is one of laughter.

Many find this description of God's sense of humour unsettling: they fear it points to arrogance, a lack of feeling or even cruelty on the part of God. However, in the context of the Psalms, God's response here is the only fitting one: time and again, human effort is compared with the ways of God and found wanting. Psalm 8, for example, has its speaker addressing God: 'When I consider your heavens, / the work of your fingers, / the moon and the stars, / which you have set in place, / what is man that you are mindful of him, / the son of man that you care for him?' (Psalm 8: 3-4). A consequence of this relationship between God and humanity is that a human rebellion against God is doomed to failure. It is the kings of the earth here who are guilty of arrogance, not God: their misplaced faith in their own strength will bring about their downfall, and the psalmist is in no doubt that God's punishment of them is a just and proper response to their rebellion.

This conception of God laughing at the arrogance of his enemies is one that fits in well with Murray's ideas concerning spiritual laughter. Ironically, perhaps, some of the most useful descriptions of what this sense of humour, this 'spiritual laughter' may be likened to, come from one of the cornerstones of agnosticism and atheism on which much of the modern thought to which Murray is so opposed has been built, namely the work of Sigmund Freud. His work on humour – in particular, his essay of 1927 entitled 'Humour'—stands as peculiarly apt for our purposes. Substitute 'sprawl' for 'humour' in the following statement and this becomes clear:



Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able ... to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout 'The Quality of Sprawl', its speaker demonstrates an awareness of 'the unkindness of real circumstances'; the Anzacs singing as they marched into North Africa were also aware of the harshness of reality: in both cases, humour (or sprawl) asserted itself against these realities. Freud's description of humour as 'the triumph of the ego' has its counterpart in Murray's poem: 'It is the rococo of being your own still centre'. Both conceive of humour as not resigned but rebellious, not passive but active, not refusing to face reality but responding to it on its own terms.

God's sense of humour arguably comes centre-stage when Freud turns to his idea of 'the Superego': I quote Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's succinct summary of Freud's position:

Let us ... adopt the superior *ethos* of the humorous Superego according to Freud, of the father who breaks out laughing before his child's seriousness: "Look! Here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children – just worth making a jest about!" Let's act ... *as if* we could raise ourselves above our precious self, *as if* we could, just for the time of an improbable grace period, make fun of its shabby finitude. And exclaim, as did that immortal condemned man being led to the scaffold one Monday: "Well, the week's beginning nicely!"<sup>13</sup>

This desire for an exalted or outside perspective from which to view life's 'shabby finitude' has been expressed throughout the centuries: one of the most memorable expressions comes from Robert Burns' 'To a Louse': 'O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us!' Freud's conception of 'the humorous Superego' stands as an inheritor of this tradition, though he places the 'Pow'r' for such a perspective inside a human being; Murray arguably places it outside once more, with his vision of God teaching humanity to 'laugh wisely'.

After all, according to Christian doctrine, God is our heavenly Father, and Christianity also presents him as a God of ‘improbable grace’: implicitly in Murray’s prose, it is only as ‘votaries’ that we can gain access to spiritual laughter, to God’s sense of humour and so can begin to ‘make fun of [our] shabby finitude’ (as the Anzacs did in North Africa?).

Of course, I doubt whether either Freud or Murray would thank me for making this correlation between the Superego and God. But Murray’s conception of humour in his poetry is clearly bound up with his religion and his God, and the ideas of attaining something approximating God’s perspective is one which Murray has embodied unashamedly in his poetry on a number of occasions. In one such poem, ‘Equanimity’, the speaker moves from Sydney suburbia to a consideration of ‘human order’, before concluding with a vision of grace as a landscape:

a field all foreground, and equally all background,  
like a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent  
like God’s attention. Where nothing is diminished by perspective.  
(CP 181)

This image is not one of Murray’s most humorous, but its presentation of a perspective ‘we sometimes glimpse’, ‘like God’s attention’, is in keeping with the ability of spiritual laughter to put tragedy, futility and vanity in their place, an ability that is God-given. In this field, perspective miraculously fails to diminish anything, and the overarching image is of ‘a painting of equality’: God’s attention here is stubbornly egalitarian and democratic, in keeping with the views of the poet describing it.

A similar view of God’s perspective – and one possessing more humour – is embodied in ‘Second Essay on Interest: The Emu’. Murray’s poems on ‘interest’ are dense and oblique, but in its choice of the emu as the focal point for

its contemplation of interest, this second poem demonstrates a wonderful example of God's sense of humour in creation. With her 'huge Beatles haircut', 'her lips of noble plastic / clamped in their expression', and her 'toothed three-way boots', she is described variously as a 'feather-swaying condensed camel', a 'rubberneck, stepped sister' and a 'barely edible dignitary': 'I think your story is, when you were offered / the hand of evolution, you gulped it. Forefinger and thumb / project from your face...'. The speaker gently mocks Australia's 'heraldic bird', and pays affectionate homage to her, but is aware that other observers might dismiss the emu as an oddity not worthy of concern:

Some truths are now called *trivial*, though. Only God approves  
them. (CP 203)

Again, the difference between God's perspective and a human's perspective is highlighted: the poem goes on to consider what 'the lords of interest / and gowned nobles of ennui' deem worthy of human concern:

Some humans ... make a kind of weather  
which, when it grows overt and widespread, we call *war*.  
There we make death trivial and awesome, by rapid turns about,  
we conscript it to bless us, force-feed it to squeeze the drama out,  
  
indeed we imprison and torture death – this part is called *peace* –  
we offer it murder like mendicants, begging for significance.

As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, Murray is deeply critical of attempts to lend warfare – in particular, the massive Australian losses in World War One – a significance that tries to hide from the terrible realities of death and suffering: as the rural priest in The Boys Who Stole the Funeral puts it: '*It was warfare. Don't make it an even worse thing.*' (The Boys 29). Here the speaker sees war as an event that makes 'death trivial and awesome, by rapid turns about'; indeed, death stands at the heart of the perspective of which he is so critical and against which the emu stands as God's response. Even during times

of peace, 'we imprison and torture death' (crucially, the speaker includes himself in this madness), and 'offer it murder like mendicants, begging for significance'; death has become one of the 'strange gods' after which, Murray (and Eliot) warn, the post-Christian individual will run. In comparison with death, the emu could rightly be described by many readers as '*trivial*', with its ridiculous appearance and disregard for the importance of human concerns; however, the poem concludes with an address to the emu that seeks to subvert this denigration of her significance and instead argues that it is our human concerns that often prove ultimately trivial:

But you hint it's a brigand sovereignty  
after the steady extents of God's common immortality  
whose image is daylight detail, aggregate, in process yet plumb  
to the everywhere focus of one devoid of boredom.

(CP 204)

This 'one devoid of boredom' is both the emu and God, whose 'everywhere focus' (as in 'Equanimity', 'nothing is diminished by perspective') is both 'steady' and concerned with all: God is immune to 'interest' and therefore 'devoid of boredom', while the phrase 'God's common immortality' suggests that his immortality is somehow open to all who ask for it.

The poem that these lines conclude describes a bird whose Creator was endowed with a quirky sense of humour, while the conclusion itself expresses serious concern at the disparity between God's perspective and that of much of humanity. As with 'The Quality of Sprawl', humour here is placed in counterpoint with a world opposed to its worth and its 'roughly Christian' character: in both poems, humour becomes an oddly serious concern, for the poet to hold on to in spite of opposition. To their credit, both poems also on the whole retain a lightness of touch ('Sprawl' perhaps more so), and they avoid

much of the combative grandstanding of which Murray's prose can at times be guilty.

Another poem that explores humour and laughter, and does so finally with a marked degree of seriousness, is 'The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains'. This is one of Murray's most fascinating poems, and it is both enjoyable to read and difficult to understand; indeed, the human desire to understand all things is ultimately one of the impulses the poem critiques. Divided into three sections, the poem opens with a display of onomatopoeic playfulness that is a virtuoso performance in rhyme, half-rhyme and internal rhyme, which conveys a sense of joyful mischief-making on the part of the speaker:

Starting a dog, in the past-midnight suburbs, for a laugh,  
barking for a lark, or to nark and miff, being tough  
or dumbly meditative, starting gruff, sparking one dog off  
almost companionably, you work him up, playing the rough riff  
of punkish mischief, get funky as a poultry-farm diff  
and vary with the Prussian note: *Achtung! Schar, Gewehr' auf!*  
starting all the dogs off, for the tinny chain reaction and stiff  
far-spreading music, the backyard territorial guff  
echoing off brick streets, garbage cans, off every sandstone cliff  
in miles-wide canine circles, a vast haze of auditory stuff [.]  
(CP 209)

This is a remarkable opening and its account of midnight suburban madness shows Murray at his most ingenious and witty, blending colloquialisms, slang and even other languages to create in verse 'a vast haze of auditory stuff'. At the end of the poem's first section, the mood shifts abruptly from reckless, playful dog-baiting to the speaker, addressing himself cryptically in the second-person:

you, from playing the fool,  
move, behind your arch will, into the sorrow of a people.  
(CP 210)

This shift from ‘starting a dog [barking] ... for a laugh’ to ‘the sorrow of a people’ is a surprising one, and is explored in the third and final section of the poem (I will comment on the middle section when I come to explore Murray’s ‘Presence’ sequence in the next chapter):

If at baying time you have bayed with dogs and not humans  
 you know enough not to scorn the moister dimensions  
 of language, nor to build on the sandbanks of Dry.  
 You long to show someone non-human the diaphragm shuffle  
 which may be your species’ only distinctive cry,  
 the spasm which, in various rhythms, turns our face awry,  
 contorts speech, shakes the body, and makes our eyelids liquefy.  
 Approaching adulthood, one half of this makes us shy  
 and the other’s a touchy spear-haft we wield for balance.  
 Laughter-and-weeping. It’s the great term the small terms qualify  
 as a whale is qualified by all the near glitters of the sea.

(CP 210-211)

The second section of the poem deals with the possibilities of communication with the ‘non-human’ (‘you speak to each species in the seven or eight / planetary words of its language’), and similarly in this section there is a longing expressed for communication between human and non-human. However, what the speaker longs to convey to ‘someone non-human’ is not expressed in words but rather in ‘the diaphragm-shuffle / which may be your species’ only distinctive cry’, described later as ‘Laughter-and-weeping’, a compound term that works to deny the difference of emotion usually presumed behind the two. The poem does acknowledge a difference between the two, at least in terms of what is socially acceptable and what is not: ‘Approaching adulthood’, he remarks (do we ever reach it? *should* we ever reach it?), ‘one half of this makes us shy’, presumably weeping, while laughter in social gatherings is ‘a touchy spear-haft we wield for balance’, useful both for achieving equilibrium in conversation and implicitly for going on the attack in arguments, spearing opponents with a witty turn-of-phrase, a tactic Murray frequently employs in his poetry and prose.

These differences aside, the poem seems more interested in viewing ‘Laughter-and-weeping’ as a single entity, a single experience worthy of exploration, arguing that it is central to an understanding of humanity: ‘It’s the great term the small terms qualify’.

Murray has explored weeping before in his poetry, most memorably in his early poem, ‘An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow’, with its weeping man in Martin Place, Sydney:

the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,  
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out  
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,  
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea[.] (CP 30)

‘The Mouthless Image of God’, however, is his first sustained exploration of laughter, alongside weeping, outside his prose, and by linking the two together Murray is attempting to navigate the vast difficulties inherent in any consideration of laughter on its own. Henri Bergson opened his essay of 1900 on laughter by acknowledging these difficulties: ‘What does laughter mean?’, he asks, before observing: ‘The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem, which has a knack of baffling every effort, of slipping away and escaping only to bob up again, a pert challenge flung at philosophic speculation.’<sup>14</sup> Bergson himself is forced to conclude his discussion of laughter by likening it to a sea-wave that leaves behind itself only ‘a remnant of foam’ that quickly evaporates into ‘a few drops of water, water that is far more brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it ... the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter.’<sup>15</sup>

So where does this leave Murray's conception of laughter, spiritual or otherwise? 'The Mouthless Image of God' is quick to acknowledge the difficulties inherent in exploring 'Laughter-and-weeping', the 'only distinctive cry' of humanity, viewed as inextricable by the speaker: indeed, he sees the term 'Laughter-and-weeping' as itself unsatisfactory:

All our dry-eyed investigations  
supply that one term, in the end; its occasions multiply,  
the logics issue in horror, we are shattered by joy  
till the old prime divider bends and its two ends unify  
and the learned words bubble off us. (CP 211)

'Laughter-and-weeping' as a term is unsatisfactory because it is the product of 'dry-eyed investigation': by definition, this sort of investigation cannot begin to comprehend its subject, as Bergson readily admitted in his explorations of laughter. The poem persists in seeing weeping and laughter as ultimately inextricable and argues that 'the old prime divider' that seeks to make a distinction between the two will eventually 'bend ... and its two ends unify': language cannot account for this ('the learned words bubble off us'), and this is in keeping with the title of the poem. 'The Mouthless Image of God' refers to an Aboriginal painting of the Supreme Spirit Murray was once shown in the mountains to the south of the Hunter Valley in New South Wales. He relates the incident in the preface to his 1984 prose collection Persistence in Folly: 'The figure has no mouth, and I was told that this referred to the time when birds and animals could speak, while humans were dumb.'<sup>16</sup> This situation was eventually reversed in the Aboriginal tale, as the second section of the poem relates ('[God] took definition from the beasts and gave it to you'); however, most of the poem, including this final section, seems intent on returning to a definition of humanity that is dependent on something other than language. Here, that 'something' is



laughter-and-weeping, and the poem ends by attempting to convey the primal, pre-linguistic nature of laughter-and-weeping and the relationship between its constituent parts through the words on the page; clearly, the attempt will fall short of total clarity, but that is in keeping with the subject it is exploring:

We laugh because we cry:  
 the crying depth of life is too great not to laugh  
 but laugh or cry singly aren't it: only mingled are they spirit  
 to wobble and sing us as a summer dawn sings a magpie.  
 For spirit is the round earth bringing our flat earths to bay  
 and we're feasted and mortified, exposed to those momentary  
 Heavens  
 which, speaking in speech on the level, we work for and deny.

These remarkable lines point to a symbiotic, mutually-dependent relationship between laughter and weeping, signalled from the end of the first section by the protagonist moving from playful dog-baiting into 'the sorrow of a people'. 'We laugh because we cry': any exploration of laughter must explore tears also. '[T]he crying depth of life is too great not to laugh / but laugh or cry singly aren't it': the one needs the other, only then will they do justice to true human experience, 'only mingled are they spirit'. The closing three lines continue this exploration of 'spirit' in terms that confound simple explication: they demonstrate again the limits of 'dry-eyed investigations' and 'the logics' by suggesting that the ill-defined 'spirit' is what brings fulness of life to humanity (it is 'the round earth bringing our flat earths [those world-views governed solely by logic and what can be explained] to bay'). Laughter-and-weeping therefore plays a crucial role in opening up humanity to this spirit which both blesses and humbles, 'feast[s]' and 'mortif[ies]' us, exposing humanity 'to those momentary Heavens / which, speaking in speech on the level, we work for and deny', moments of grace which cannot be quantified in language and which are

apparently denied by logic, but which nonetheless give life its meaning and so are sought after and worked towards.

‘The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains’ is a remarkable example of Murray’s poetry at its most numinous, in its attempts to say the unsayable and explore the spiritual nature he believes exists in humanity; it is also an extremely enjoyable poem to read, particularly in its first two sections, and acts as a useful articulation of the place of laughter-and-weeping in Murray’s conception of humanity. In keeping with his Christian convictions, the poem’s title describes humanity as the ‘image of God’, and so it is God who stands behind the spiritual nature of humanity and the ‘momentary Heavens’ humans both ‘work for and deny’ in their day-to-day lives. This brings us back to my earlier discussion of the centrality of Murray’s conception of God to any account of the place of humour and laughter in his work. Murray’s sense of humour is largely dependent on his sense of God, and he often presents humour as God’s representative on earth, in opposition to the seriousness and disdain of modern secularism. ‘The Mouthless Image of God’ points to a deeper relationship between humanity’s God-given spiritual nature and laughter, alongside weeping, which is in keeping with Murray’s prose depiction of God’s votaries sharing his sense of humour by laughing wisely; possibly, that wise laughter is always aware of tears and the causes of tears, as in ‘The Mouthless Image of God’. In short, the God to whom Murray dedicates his poetry clearly possesses a sense of humour, and this conception of God contributes greatly to the geniality and generosity of much of Murray’s work.

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Geoffrey Hill, as has already been noted, is a markedly different poet to Murray. Renowned for his seriousness, in interview Hill has nonetheless argued for the presence of humour in his work. Speaking to John Haffenden in 1981, Hill remarks:

I think there's been the constant presence of humour throughout my poetry, and even a light-heartedness which I think many critics have either wilfully neglected to notice or innocently overlooked. (Haffenden 95)

In a contemporary interview with Blake Morrison, Hill contends that his 1971 collection Mercian Hymns 'is, I think, frequently quite funny', before concluding that: 'I could point to several poems in For the Unfallen [1959] and King Log [1968] which are not wholly devoid of sardonic wit.' (Morrison 213)

That many critics have 'innocently overlooked' the humour in Hill's work is not surprising: he certainly lacks the geniality or celebratory generosity of Murray's poetic, and it is difficult to imagine Hill writing a poem entitled 'The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever'. His choice of subject matter does not help the case for humour in his work. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, he repeatedly turns to the violence and suffering of history (particularly World War II and the Nazi holocaust), and to the corruption and 'desolation of learning' of the present, with all the fierce passion of an Old Testament prophet (as one poem in Canaan puts it, his poetic voice could be likened to 'the voice of Amos / past its own enduring' (C 51)).

Indeed, it has only been with his most recent work – in particular The Triumph of Love (1998) and Speech! Speech! (2000) – that a more prominent place has been found for humour and 'sardonic wit' in Hill's poetic. What connection this might have with Kierkegaard's observation, quoted at the outset of this chapter, that 'the world manifestly tends towards the comic, to the greater

development of laughter', may bear investigating: is high seriousness no longer sufficient to contend with the complexities of human experience? Was it *ever* sufficient? Is the only response available to the self-centredness and ignorance of contemporary society that of laughing at it?

As I argued in the previous chapter, the question of how best to respond to the challenges of the present is one that haunts Hill's most recent collections; therefore, Hill could never *just* laugh at the modern world in his poetry. Rather, as always with Hill, the question is one of balance (the opening of the final poem in Canaan – 'who could outbalance poised / Marvell [?]' (C 72) – says much about Hill's own attempts to imitate the seventeenth-century master). So, the questions remain: how can humour co-exist with the moral seriousness of so much of Hill's poetry? Is the relationship between humour and seriousness complementary, even co-dependent (as in Murray's exploration of 'Laughter-and-weeping' in 'The Mouthless Image of God'), or is it more uneasy? Just what is the character of the humour in Hill's poetry, and what does it tell the reader about his conception of God?

Locating humour in Hill's early poetry is a challenge. Both For the Unfallen and King Log are dominated by an austere seriousness of tone (the transition from the one to the other is marked by the epigraph to King Log: 'From moral virtue let us pass on to matter of power and commandment...').<sup>17</sup> However, Hill's comments to Haffenden concerning humour are in response to a question concerning 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurriz', which concludes King Log and, according to Hill's notes, 'represents the work of an apocryphal Spanish poet' (KL 70). This sequence of eleven poems creates a poet whom Hill describes as 'a shy sensualist with a humour that could be said to balance the

sensuality except that the finer nuances have been lost in translation' (Haffenden 95). There is something curiously apt in a sequence of Hill's in which the humour has been 'lost in translation': a triumph of obliquity over humour? Another example of 'the difficult and refractory nature of language' that, Hill argues, challenges all poets (Haffenden 87)? Or is it merely Hill enjoying a joke at the expense of an interviewer? Whatever the case, it is difficult to locate much humour in the sequence:

Ten years without you. For so it happens.  
Days make their steady progress, a routine  
That is merciful and attracts nobody. (CP 92)

In its studied nonchalance, this is similar in tone to the speaker of 'Ovid in the Third Reich', the poem which opens King Log. Like so many of the poems in this 'songbook', this is achingly painful and moving, rather than humorous; this failed love poet bears more than a passing resemblance to Eliot's Prufrock, and as with that famous literary creation, perhaps the only laughter in the sequence is at the title character's expense:

Oh my dear one, I shall grieve for you  
For the rest of my life with slightly  
Varying cadence, oh my dear one. (CP 93)

These lines – the second of four coplas that stand as the second entry in the sequence – read like a work-in-progress, with our 'shy sensualist' locating his theme ('Oh my dear one') and seeking to bring his 'bleak skill' to bear on it: as such, his intention to use 'slightly / Varying cadence' for the rest of his life bodes ill for his poetic career, while the artless transparency of his art may raise a smile for Hill's readers.

However, in spite of this example, and Hill's claims in the Haffenden interview, Arrurruz is not a comic creation; instead, to misquote Hill's comments

concerning his conception of himself as a religious poet, he seems to be an embodiment of a love poet unable to grasp a truly loving or sensual experience (see Haffenden 89). Hill gives his creation a witty moniker – ‘Sebastian’, the gruesomely martyred saint who died in a hail of arrows, and ‘Arrurruz’, Spanish for ‘arrow-root’, the plant so named for its ability to absorb poison from poisoned arrows: is this poet, then, a bloodied victim of Cupid’s arrows? – but there is little humour in the songbook he creates.

Mercian Hymns (1971) followed on from King Log, and does contain some humorous asides, often in its mergings of the eighth-century with the twentieth: in the opening poem, Offa is described variously as ‘King of the perennial holly grove, the riven sand-stone’, and as ‘overlord of the M5’. The recurrence of incongruence and anachronism contributes to a dry wit throughout the sequence. However, the sequence as a whole paints a striking and unsettling picture of a tyrant, from childhood to death, intertwining the life of the eighth-century king of Mercia with that of Hill himself, growing up in Worcestershire during World War II; it is therefore in certain sections Hill at his most personal (for example, hymn XXV stands as a tribute to his maternal grandmother). However, more frequently it is a disturbing contemplation of the personality of a dictator, with the implication that the poet himself could have become one had his situation been different. The lack of moral distance makes the violence within the sequence all the more unsettling:

At Pavia, a visitation of some sorrow. Boethius’  
dungeon. He shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower  
out of the earth. He willed the instruments of  
violence to break upon meditation. Iron buckles  
gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men  
stooped, disentangled the body.

He wiped his lips and hands...

(‘Offa’s Journey to Rome’, CP 122)

Disturbing in its vivid physicality, this vision points both to the horrific torture of Boethius and the capacity of people to imagine such torture with a degree of sensual pleasure (‘He wiped his lips and hands...’): the fact that ‘He’ in the sequence is at certain points Offa and at other points seemingly Hill himself, makes this observation even more unsettling.

Humour and laughter in Mercian Hymns is therefore largely in service to the greater picture of human tyranny. The most appropriate description of laughter in the sequence comes with the appearance of Ceolred, Offa’s ‘friend’:

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering  
with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed  
him. (‘The Kingdom of Offa’, CP 111)

The laughter in Mercian Hymns is characterised by this ‘sniggering with fright’: it is a response to cruelty from which it cannot defend itself. This is not Freud’s humorous Superego or Murray’s spiritual laughter: it is simply an expression of fear.

Indeed, it is only really with The Triumph of Love that humour and laughter begin to form a vital part of Hill’s poetic argument with language, with the reader and with himself, and it is with this collection that I wish to concern myself for the remainder of this consideration of Hill. His most personal collection to date, it also contains in its 150 sections some of Hill’s most humorous lines: in this maze of the poet’s devising, humour and laughter appear to have roles to play.

At one point in the poem, the figure ‘Geffe’ appears (XCIII, TTOL 48), and The Triumph of Love really does seem to be the place, after the comparatively bleak Canaan, where ‘Geffe’ rejoices (‘juvat’): this being Geffe

*Hill*, the rejoicing is always heavily qualified. A recurring theme throughout the poem is that of '*Laus et vituperatio*', praise and lament, and while the various speakers in the poem often lament without the need for praise, praise itself is rarely, if ever, unqualified. For example, a third of the way in, a speaker ponders the phrase '*moral landscape*':

it is for me increasingly a terrain  
seen in cross-section: igneous, sedimentary,  
conglomerate, metamorphic rock-  
strata, in which particular grace,  
individual love, decency, endurance,  
are traceable across the faults. (LI, TTOL 26)

Immediately, this relatively positive section is qualified:

LII

Admittedly at times this moral landscape  
to my exasperated ear emits  
archaic burrings like a small, high-fenced  
electric sub-station of uncertain age  
in a field corner where the flies  
gather and old horses shake their sides.

before the speaker abandons his tentative optimism completely:

LIII

But leave it now, leave it; as you left  
a washed-out day at Stourport or the Licky,  
improvised rain-hats mulch for papier-mâché,  
and the chips floating...

This undercutting of idealism forms part of *Hill*'s constant balancing act between praise and lament; it also leads to a constant shifting of tone between the serious and the humorous.

My dear and awkward love, we may not need  
to burn the furniture; though, like you,  
I understand by this time all too well  
despair at the kiln-door – the first moment's  
ultimate ruin of the final prize. (LVII, TTOL 30)



This section begins like an excerpt from the work of Sebastian Arrurruz, but immediately introduces comic incongruity: ‘we may not need / to burn the furniture’. Suddenly, the tone shifts again to ‘despair at the kiln-door’, a rather precious phrase that possibly undercuts the seriousness of this Arrurruz-like speaker, before concluding with obliquity: what ‘the first moment’s / ultimate ruin of the final prize’ means in a section this brief is a mystery, and keeps the reader in a state of confusion throughout.

The sudden insertion of comic asides contributes to the overall feeling of the poet lost in a maze, where tone, speaker and time are constantly shifting:

Excuse me – excuse me – I did not  
say the pain is lifting. I said the pain is in  
the lifting. No – please – forget it. (XLII, TTOL 21)

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Sir, your ‘Arts/Life’ column claims that Gracie  
Fields sang at Dunkirk. Is this  
a misprint? For sang read sank? [Phew,  
what a ‘prang’! – ED] (XLVIII, TTOL 24)

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I may be gone some time. *Hallelujah!*  
Confession and recantation in fridge. (LXXIII, TTOL 38)

Meanwhile, there is also a place for clowns throughout the poem. The figure of Trimalchio recurs at various points, the Falstaff-like rich and vulgar freedman of Petronius Arbiter’s Satyricon; Laurel and Hardy also appear, ‘cutting, pacing, repacing, their / flawless shambles’ (CX, TTOL 57). In the final third of the poem, the carnivalesque introduces itself, but, as is to be expected with Hill, it is heavily qualified almost to the extent of oxymoron:

This glowering carnival, kermesse of wrath  
and resentment... (CX, TTOL 57)

The apparent confusion of many of these later sections can at times seem to spring from a scepticism on the part of the poem in relation to the comic and the humorous. Hill does seem wary of entertainment and amusement in the modern world, even when he is celebrating his own childhood: ‘*Dandy, Beano, Film Fun, Radio Fun, mis- / teachers of survival*’ (CX, TTOL 57). He is all too aware of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century uses of ‘amusement’ – namely, the diversion of people’s attention from the facts at hand – and, as we have seen, the most discernable message in many of his considerations of suffering and evil in history is the need to respond to such suffering and evil, that is, to stop avoiding their difficult truths. With this moral purpose powering much of the poetry, it is unsurprising that Hill frequently sounds wary of humour and lightheartedness, even in The Triumph of Love, where I have argued both are utilised in creating important effects of disorientation and self-deflation in the poem:

Overburdened with levity, the spirit found  
 in carnal disarray – so what do you know,  
*Amarilli, mia bella?* Say it is not  
 true that mockery is self-debasement;  
 though already I have your answer: We  
 are to keep faith, even with self-pity,  
 with faith’s ingenuity, self-rectifying cadence,  
 perfectly imperfected... (CXV, TTOL 60)

In this address to his rustic lover, the speaker questions his own use of levity and mockery, before hearing his loved one’s answer: he is to ‘keep faith’, with himself, with the paradoxes of faith, with his art (with this poem?). Implicitly, then, ‘levity’ and ‘mockery’ betray this faith and result in ‘carnal disarray’: the loved one’s distrust of these tools reflects Kierkegaard’s concerns about laughter, the comic and their relations to seriousness, namely ‘the thought that weeping is a divine invention, laughter, the devil’s’.

And yet The Triumph of Love does contain laughter as well as weeping, praise as well as lamentation: in spite of a wariness that often reflects Kierkegaard's, Hill utilises both. This can be explained partly by his ongoing concern with balance in his poetry, by the need for opposition and contrast; however, it also reflects something of Hill's own religious stance. In many ways, Hill remains elusive and resistant to attempts to isolate his beliefs, certainly more so than Murray. My readings of him as a Christian poet must repeatedly acknowledge that it is rarely, if ever, straightforward to label his poetry 'Christian'. Indeed, there is a persistent undercurrent throughout his confrontations with evil and suffering, history and religion that could suggest a deeply felt dualism at the heart of his poetic stance. At one point in The Triumph of Love, for example, after considering the Eucharist, Protestant iconoclasm, Mosaic law, Clausewitz's theories of total war and Hobbes's dim view of human nature, the speaker allows himself a brief aside:

What choice do you have? These are false questions.  
 Fear is your absolute, yet in each feature  
 infinitely variable, Manichean beyond dispute,  
 for you alone, the skeletal maple, a loose wire  
 tapping the wind. (LXIX, TTOL 36)

The phrase 'Manichean beyond dispute' could itself be disputed, but a concern that the central tenets of religion and humanism could themselves be based on 'false questions' seems to me a central one for Hill's deeply felt scepticism as a poet. Absolutes exist in his poetic vision – 'fear', here, is one – and he refuses to ignore the religious dimension of humanity, in keeping with so many of the figures he admires in history, such as Robert Southwell, Charles Péguy and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; however, the God who stands behind Hill's poetry seems to be a radically different one to that of Murray's. Whereas the God of Murray's

prose and poetry is generous, forgiving, wise and humorous, Hill's God doggedly remains a shadowy figure, standing somewhere behind a history of horror, suffering and death that repeatedly call his beneficence into doubt. If Hill's God has a sense of humour, most of his poems either ignore the fact or demonstrate that sense of humour as a cruel, vindictive one, and at times the violence and pain Hill's poetry so unflinchingly addresses can suggest that evil is at least as powerful as good in the universe, and that the Creator of humanity may not have been the good God of Christianity.

Hill's use of humour and levity in The Triumph of Love may therefore reflect this dualistic view of life: laughter may be the devil's invention, but as such it is just as valid as weeping. However, it might more accurately show Hill's close affiliation with Kierkegaard's definition of the ironist. In spite of his concerns regarding the possible origins of laughter, Kierkegaard frequently utilised humour in his own work, and his admiration for the Socratic ironist, expressed in his academic dissertation The Concept of Irony, proves a stimulating justification of both his use of humour and, I suggest, Hill's also: 'As [the ironist] conceals his jest in seriousness and his seriousness in jest ... so it may also occur to him to seem evil though he is good.'<sup>18</sup> In interview, Hill maintains that there is 'jest' hidden in his seriousness, and I have argued that there is a seriousness underpinning his resorts to humour in The Triumph of Love, contributing as they do to the overall effect of reading the poem. Certainly, Hill's use of humour in his recent poetry, coupled with this humour's abrasiveness and a seemingly instinctive wariness concerning it, suggest a poet willing to dally with the devil's party in his responses to the modern world, 'to seem evil though he is good'.

Near the end of The Triumph of Love, a Blakean speaker provides the reader with a phrase that proves an apposite description of both the polyphonic nature of the long poem in which it appears and the religious character of much of Hill's poetry: 'your voices pitched exactly – / somewhere – between *Laus Deo* and defiance' (TTOL 63). This description of balance, of scrupulous exactness and of a religious stance with a foot in both camps, has much to say about both Hill's ambivalence concerning the roles of humour and laughter in confronting the world in which he lives, and the ironic nature of many of the poetic voices employed in his work.

At the end of one of his most accomplished sequences – 'Funeral Music', from King Log – one of Hill's speakers remarks: 'all echoes are the same / In such eternity' (CP 77). In the context of 'Funeral Music', these echoes originate in cries of pain and suffering; nonetheless, the echo of laughter – if rarely good-natured laughter – seems to have an increasing part to play in Hill's grim music and in the oblique religious vision that powers it. Perhaps it is in its recourse to humour and the comic that Hill's recent poetry demonstrates its ability to 'encompass the maximum range of belief or unbelief' that Hill argues gives poetry its value and potency (Haffenden 88). Certainly, Hill appears to wrestle with Kierkegaard's despairing laughter ('All is phoney – so let us laugh'), more so than Murray does, to the point where he can caricature his poetic stance in Speech! Speech! as: 'I cannot / do more now than gape or grin / haplessly' (SS 3). These resorts to caricature are examples of what the same poem calls Hill's 'figures tying confession / to parody'; the confession in the poems is not invalidated by the parody, but the parody does have the effect both of undercutting Hill's moral urgency and seriousness (thus pre-empting the charge

of humourlessness) and of sounding Hill's defiance to the modern age by exposing its ignorance and self-regard to ridicule (all he can ultimately do is laugh at it). In doing so, Hill's recent poetry appears to flirt with the devil's party, in Kierkegaard's conception of the origins of laughter, but ultimately this flirtation is in the service of the moral vision that underpins all of Hill's poetry; as such, Hill reveals himself to be an ironist after Kierkegaard's heart, who conceals 'his jest in seriousness and his seriousness in jest'.

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In conclusion, humour and laughter possess markedly different characters and achieve markedly different effects in the poetic and religious visions of Murray and Hill. Both poets reserve a place for them in their writings, Murray having done so from the outset and with some fanfare, Hill arguably utilising them more in his most recent work, and for both of them the manifestations of humour and laughter in their poetry tell us much about their respective religious outlooks. In Murray's poetry, a generous humour is implicit throughout, and its intelligence, self-assurance and defiance of 'tragedy, futility and vanity' reflect favourably on the God to whose glory the poetry is dedicated. In the case of Hill, the humour is often abrasive, sardonic, even angry: his distaste for modernity exceeds Murray's, and his recent use of humour in his poetry could be seen as an almost despairing response to a world where incongruity and irreverence seem to succeed in undermining the seriousness of many of his earlier poetic ventures. For Hill, history is not humorous, and neither, it seems, is its God; humour and laughter in his poetry can therefore flirt with nihilism and despair, though his expert balance manages to avoid both. Humour reveals little about the God

behind Hill's poetry: he remains oblique, elusive, seemingly in the image of Hill himself.

According to Freud, 'Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious': perhaps the main distinction between Hill and Murray is the extent to which resignation is absent and rebellion present. Hill's poetic vision is considerably bleaker than Murray's and can appear more resigned to the 'desolation of learning' around him; however, he keeps writing in the belief that his poetry can help redress the balance, and in doing so he signals his defiance of the modern world's 'ignorance and contempt'. Indeed, some of his resorts to humour in his recent work serve the dual function of deflating any pomposity his moral urgency could bring about, while at the same time scrupulously examining his own motives for rebelling against modernity and acknowledging where those motives might be impure. At several points in The Triumph of Love, critics of Hill's poetry raise their voices:

Rancorous, narcissistic old sod – what  
 makes him go on? We thought, hoped rather,  
 he might be dead. Too bad. So how  
 much more does he have of injury time? (XXXIX, TTOL 20)

At other times, the poet questions his own motives and critiques his own poetic persona:

for religious read religiose; for distinction  
 detestation.

...  
 Change insightfully caring to pruriently intrusive.  
 Delete chastened and humbled. Insert humiliated.  
 Interpret slain in the spirit as browbeaten to exhaustion.  
 For hardness of heart read costly dislike of cant.

(XL-XLI, TTOL 20-21)

This self-awareness subverts both positive and negative caricatures of Hill in order to arrive at a more accurate description of his poetic stance, and, as always,

the concern is one of balance. Hill appears both resigned ('humiliated' and 'browbeaten to exhaustion', worn down by life in a fallen world) *and* rebellious: his 'dislike of cant' is 'costly', but maintained nonetheless, while his 'rancorous, narcissistic old sod' does keep going, in spite of criticism and personal attack. In this perseverance at least, Hill is not resigned to the spirit of the age, but rather rebelliously opposed to it.

Murray also is opposed to much of the present age, but he signals this opposition in terms more exuberantly rebellious and irreverent than those of Hill. For example, in his wonderfully triumphant celebration of 'the Stone Age aristocracy ... the fat', 'Quintets for Robert Morley' (no quartet big enough for the job?), he describes his own poetic stance as one of 'hyper- / ventilating up Parnassus' (CP 176). The line-break here adds to his exhausted self-deprecation, and the poem concludes, with more than a hint of exasperation:

So much climbing, on a spherical world;  
had Newton not been a mere beginner at gravity  
he might have asked how the apple got up there  
in the first place. And so might have discerned  
an ampler physics. (CP 177)

For Murray, even the physical laws of the planet might one day be improved upon: *that* is sprawl, and it stems from a world-view informed by optimism and hope, both of which are dependent on a God under whom human effort finds its true perspective. Murray is not resigned to the world which he sees around him, a world which nonetheless he frequently celebrates; Hill seems more so, though the occurrence of humour in his recent work, coupled with a new moral urgency concerning the present, suggests a defiance that powers his work also. In short, the respective poetics of Murray and Hill may use humour in very different ways, thus revealing very different conceptions of the God who stands behind the world



in which they live, but these divergent responses have the same goal, and that is to signal their resistance to the spirit of the age; in this, at least, Murray and Hill are remarkably alike.

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<sup>1</sup> Les Murray, 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia'. The Paperbark Tree. Manchester: Carcanet, 1992. 142-162 (p. 147).

<sup>2</sup> M.A. Screech, Laughter at the Foot of the Cross. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Screech, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Screech, pp. 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> C.S. Lewis, 'Christianity and Literature'. Christian Reflections. Ed. Walter Hooper. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967: 1-11 (p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, Journals and Papers. Ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Vol. 2. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970. p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> Kierkegaard. Ed. W. H. Auden. London: Cassell, 1955. p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard. Journals and Papers. p. 262.

<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard. Journals and Papers. p. 272.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted by Peter L. Berger, Redeeming Laughter. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997. p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Taken from the New International Version of the Bible. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1984.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Humour'. Art and Literature. Transl. Angela Richards and others. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. 428-433 (p. 429).

<sup>13</sup> Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being'. Modern Language Notes 102.4 (1987): 737-760 (pp. 738-739).

<sup>14</sup> Henri Bergson. Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic. 1900. Trans. Claudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. London: Macmillan, 1921. p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Bergson, p. 200.

<sup>16</sup> Persistence in Folly. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984. p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> King Log. London: André Deutsch, 1968. Further references are given in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Kierkegaard. The Concept of Irony, With Constant References to Socrates. 1841. Trans. Lee M. Capel. London: Collins, 1966. p. 273.

**5. 'THE WEAVE OF PRESENCE': LES MURRAY'S *TRANSLATIONS*  
FROM THE NATURAL WORLD**

In an interview given in 1986, Les Murray recalled that, when he discovered poetry in his last year at high school, 'I discovered the kind of writing I really wanted to do, which was as much about mountains and trees and animals as it was about humans, and I just started following it up'.<sup>1</sup> As preparation for a reading of Murray's remarkable sequence of 1992, 'Presence: Translations from the Natural World', it is worth looking more closely at this characterisation of his 'kind of writing'.

Mountains, trees and animals figure as prominently as people in Murray's poetic vision, and this is in keeping with what he has argued is a Boeotian ideal in art, the 'dynamic tableau': Lawrence Bourke has defined this as 'a place where all figures are part of an inter-acting creation, where there is no relegation due to perspective from foreground to background, where there is no heroic figure claiming centre-stage'.<sup>2</sup> This tableau finds poetic expression in 'Equanimity', where it is likened to 'a painting of equality. Of infinite detailed extent / like God's attention' (CP 181). Murray's vision of poetry, as delineated in his poetry and prose, repeatedly links itself in with his vision of 'God's attention': it aspires to omniscience, and is committed to generosity, inclusiveness and democracy, indeed extending the boundaries of democracy beyond humanity and into the natural world at large. Clive James has noted that Murray 'brings the [Australian] landscape into sharp focus, detail by detail, without urgency but with a special fastidiousness, as if his spiritual life depended on it'.<sup>3</sup> Murray

confirms this dependence in a memorable phrase in 'Evening Alone at Bunyah':  
 'This country is my mind' (CP 15).

His most sustained exploration of the non-human inhabitants of the landscape which has proved so vital to his spiritual and mental life is the sequence of forty poems that stand at the centre of his 1992 collection, entitled 'Presence: Translations from the Natural World'.<sup>4</sup> This sequence is breathtaking in its scope and power, and is arguably central to Murray's religious conceptions of the possibilities of language.

The poems relate the inner lives of a plethora of creatures, ranging from eagles to shellback ticks, from cuttlefish to kangaroos, from snakes to whales: flora receive a number of representatives, from strangler figs to tree-trunks ('Great Bole') to grass ('The Masses'), and the sequence even extends to giving cell DNA a voice and to granting evolution a motivation that sounds suspiciously Christian ('That Evolution Proceeds by Charity and Faith'). In short, this is Murray at his most playful and at full stretch: the sequence showcases a poet at the height of his artistic powers. At the same time, however, it demonstrates weighty concerns at the heart of Murray's poetry, concerning the natural world, humanity's relationship with it, the potential and limitations of language and, most ambitiously of all, the nature of life itself. In addressing these concerns, Murray draws on all the resources at his disposal and delivers a sequence of enormous and unsettling power that strains toward a religious vision of the multifariousness of creation and what, if anything, binds it together.

Unsurprisingly, the 'Presence' sequence has received generous praise from a number of critics. 'Les Murray continually aims to astonish us and he succeeds in "Presence: Translations from the Natural World"', writes Bert

Almon in a review-article that links Murray's sequence with D. H. Lawrence's Birds, Beasts and Flowers and the work of the American poet Gary Snyder.<sup>5</sup>

Douglas Dunn remarks that the sequence 'benefits tremendously from the metrical phase which [Murray] had just gone through in his previous collection [Dog Fox Field (1990)]', and that its various styles succeed in combining 'Caliban-language with hints also from Hopkins, Ted Hughes, and sources closer to indigenous Australia'.<sup>6</sup> (I will look at some of these different sources in a moment.) Perhaps the greatest praise for 'Presence' has come from the poet and critic Robert Crawford, who sees it as Murray's 'most thoroughly envisioned and finest work': 'odd, overpowering, and eerie in its reach' and 'full of liberating linguistic and spiritual delight', Crawford concludes:

'Presence: Translations from the Natural World' is distinguished as the culmination of some of the central elements in Murray's poetic. As a piece of modern religious poetry it demands to be considered along with the best of its kind from all periods; at the same time it asserts its modernity and is likely to appeal to modern sensibilities, though these may have to be lured and intrigued across its sometimes mysterious threshold.<sup>7</sup>

It is the 'Presence' sequence 'as a piece of modern religious poetry' that I wish to explore here. To do so, I must first turn to one of 'the central elements in Murray's poetic' to which Crawford alludes and which Douglas Dunn identifies: the influence of 'indigenous Australia' on the work.

In an essay of 1977 entitled 'The Human-Hair Thread', Murray remarks: 'There has been an Aboriginal presence in my work almost from the start. This is natural enough, in one coming from the country.' (PT 71) This presence has found expression in a number of poems, none more successful than 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle'. Based on a translation of an Aboriginal song, the Moon Bone Cycle, this long poem describes the annual migration of

Australians from the towns to the countryside for the holidays, and borrows imagery from Aboriginal art to do so:

It is the season of the Long Narrow City; it has crossed the Myall, it has entered the North Coast,  
that big stunning snake; it is looped through the hills, burning all night there.

...

Glowing all night behind the hills, with a north-shifting glare, burning behind the hills;  
through Coolongolook, through Wang Wauk, across the Wallamba, the booming tarred pipe of the holiday slows and spurts again; Nabiac chokes in glassy wind,  
the forests on Kiwarrak dwindle in cheap light; Tuncunny and Forster swell like cooking oil. (CP 138)

In these lines, the poem is borrowing the Moon Bone Cycle's image of 'a great fiery but all-giving Rainbow Snake' (PT 93) to describe the line of traffic ('the Long Narrow City') making its way to the country, and its long lines and incantatory use of local place names to establish the landscape ('through Coolongolook, through Wang Wauk, across the Wallamba') also point to the Aboriginal influence that informs the work. Of course, not all the place names in the poem are Aboriginal ('O'Sullivan's Gap', 'Tuncurry and Forster'), and part of what Murray is doing in this poem and throughout his borrowings from Aboriginal art is to bring the Aborigine and the white settler together by downplaying Australia's history of conquest and dispossession, in the interests of convergence and co-existence in the present: as a descendant of Scottish immigrant farmers, Murray maintains that 'some of us [i.e. the relatively-recent white settlers] do possess the land imaginatively in very much the Aboriginal way'(PT 95), and he seeks to prove this controversial assertion through poems such as 'Buladelah-Taree'.

Concluding his essay on the Aboriginal influences on his work, Murray writes:

I am grateful beyond measure to the makers and interpreters of traditional Aboriginal poetry and song for many things, not least for showing me a deeply familiar world in which art is not estranged, but is a vital source of health for all the members of a community, *and even goes magically beyond the human community, ensuring proper treatment of the natural world by its dominant member-species.* (PT 96-97: my emphasis)

It is from this ability of Aboriginal art to go ‘magically beyond the human community’ that Murray learns in the ‘Presence’ sequence. Arguably, he has been learning this lesson throughout his poetry: Crawford views ‘Presence’ as ‘the culmination of some of the central elements in Murray’s poetic’, and one of these elements is clearly in its choice of non-human creatures as subject-matter.

For example, Murray’s earliest extended sequence of poems is entitled ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, from his 1972 collection Poems Against Economics. This sequence of fifteen poems takes the ‘cattle place’ of its title as a destination wherein primeval feelings of wholeness and belonging can be recovered, and it ranges from Australia to India in its meditations (the epigraph is from the Indian poet and philosopher Tagore, and many of the individual poems reflect this Indian influence in their titles: e.g. ‘Sanskrit’, ‘Boöpis’, ‘Gölōka’). On the whole, the poems explore human experiences of rural life, of the ‘cattle place’, throughout history: so ‘Hall’s Cattle’ relates an episode of early colonial injustice in Australia, when an outlaw’s cattle were left to starve for want of evidence to convict their owner, while the second poem in the sequence describes children growing up in rural Australia:

They will never forget their quick-fade cow-piss slippers  
nor chasing such warmth over white frost, saffron to steam.  
It will make them sad bankers.  
It may subtly ruin them for clerks  
this deeply involved unpickable knot of feeling  
for the furred, smeared flesh of creation, the hate, the concern.  
(‘Birds In Their Title Work Freeholds of Straw’, CP 56)

This evocation of farming life keeps the cattle in the background, experienced dimly by the children as ‘such warmth over white frost’, ‘the furred, smeared flesh of creation’: as such, the cattle embody an integral part of the children’s experience, but they themselves are without a voice in the poem.

Other poems in the sequence place cattle in a more central role: for example, ‘The Names of the Humble’ opens with its speaker considering a herd of cattle grazing:

Nose down for hours, ingesting grass, they breathe grass,  
 trefoil, particles, out of the soft-focus earth  
 dampened by nose-damp. They have breathed great plateaux to  
 dust. (CP 57)

The speaker proceeds to approach the cattle and observe them at close quarters:

They concede me a wide berth at first. I go on being harmless  
 and some graze closer, gradually. It is like watching  
 an emergence. Persons.

There is an acknowledgement here that the cows possess some form of personality, distinct from that of the speaker but existent nonetheless. A few lines later, the speaker declares his desire in the poem to ‘discern the names of the humble’, of the cattle around him: however, almost immediately he is confounded by their ‘otherness’, and he recognises that the humility which he admires in these creatures results in an unsettling lack of individuality:

how do you say *one* cattle? Cow, bull, steer  
 but nothing like *bos*. *Cattle* is *chattel*, is owned  
 by man the castrator,  
 body and innocence, cud and death-bellow and beef.

The speaker ponders etymology in his attempts to isolate a form of individuality in the ‘persons’ around him, but instead of tracing the singular of cattle from the Greek for ox, *bous*, he finds the terms ‘cow, bull, steer’, all deriving from the less noble Old English *cū*, *bole*, *stēor*: this seems to be an

affront to the speaker's attempts to eulogise the herds around him. Worse still, the etymological link he does isolate is the one between 'cattle' and 'chattel' (both deriving from the Latin *capitāle*, meaning property, goods – OED): it seems that the cattle have been rewarded for their humility with subjection at the hands of 'man the castrator'. They are no more than property and beasts to be disposed of at their owner's pleasure: their experience of life is contained in the phrase 'body and innocence', while the journey their lives take under their human masters is encapsulated as: 'cud and death-bellow and beef'. These cattle are grazing, 'breath[ing] great plateaux to dust' and aiding the speaker's meditations (and the sequence in which this poem appears), only in preparation for their slaughter in an abattoir, their death-bellow answering humanity's demand for beef.

At the poem's end, all this is seemingly accepted by the speaker, and it would be misleading to take these lines as a rallying cry for vegetarianism. However, the poem does seem convinced that there is something more to the cattle that propel its meditation than mere 'chattel': later in the poem, the speaker observes 'a sherry-eyed Jersey' looking at him: 'Fragments of thoughts / that will not ripple together worry her head // it is sophistication trying to happen'. The poem ends with a consideration of this particular cow:

If I envy her one thing  
it is her ease with this epoch.  
A wagtail switching left-right, left-right on her rump. (CP 60)

The speaker claims to envy her calm, her balance, the ease of routine with which she allows a small bird to rest on her 'rump', with the implication that 'this epoch' elicits a very different response from him. This envy of the cow, however, is heavily qualified by the conditional 'If I envy her', and the



recognition that this envy could only rest on ‘one thing’, ‘her ease with this epoch’: it is also worth pointing out that this ease, admirable as it may be, will result in her ‘death-bellow and beef’.

‘The Names of the Humble’ is on the whole a sensitive poem in its treatment of cattle, but its speaker is confounded and bemused by them at least as much as he admires them. He remains firmly outside their experience of the world, and as with the rest of the ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’ sequence, the cattle themselves largely serve to shed light on *human* experiences of the world: for example, the central section of ‘The Names of the Humble’ shifts focus away from the cattle completely and instead turns to:

a boy on cold upland,  
gentle tapper of veins, a blood-porridge eater,  
his ringlets new-dressed with dung, a spear in his fist[.] (CP 58)

The speaker claims to glimpse this boy ‘with descendant sight’, and while acknowledging his distance from him in cultural experience and history, he maintains:

we could still find common knowledge, verb-roots  
and noun-bark enough for an evening fire of sharing  
cattle-wisdom[.]

As with ‘The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle’, these lines reflect Murray’s belief that there exists at least as much to unite his white speaker and this aboriginal boy as to divide them. Explicitly what unites them here is their ‘cattle-wisdom’ and the ‘verb-roots / and noun-bark’ of language with which to share it: as with much of Murray’s poetry, and especially his early work, the land and husbandry of it provides a way back to a pre-industrial past where somehow understanding and rapprochement can exist between Aborigine and settler (exactly how this can happen is rarely specified). ‘Cattle-wisdom’ in this poem,

then, is directed less towards the cattle themselves and an understanding of them as ‘persons’ distinct from humans, and more towards a recognition of those rural experiences that have united people throughout history: ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’ is accordingly less a meditation on cattle than it is a meditation on human history and belonging.

Largely as a result of this sequence, Murray has been acclaimed by critics such as Blake Morrison and Robert Crawford as a great cattle poet:<sup>8</sup> however, it is not until ‘The Cows on Killing Day’, originally published in Dog Fox Field (1990) but later included in the ‘Presence’ sequence in the 1998 Collected Poems, that Murray actually provides a herd of cattle with a voice of its own:

All me are standing on feed. The sky is shining.

All me have just been milked. Teats all tingling still  
from that dry toothless sucking by the chilly mouths  
that gasp loudly in in in, and never breathe out.

All me standing on feed, move the feed inside me. (CP 381)

Here, the lack of individuality that confounded the speaker of ‘The Names of the Humble’ is ingeniously overcome by the grammatically-suspect inclusive pronoun ‘All me’: unlike ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, ‘The Cows on Killing Day’ is a journey into the inner life of a herd of cattle, and as such earns its late inclusion into the ‘Presence’ sequence, as a striking translation of the natural world.

Murray’s treatments of animals throughout his poetic canon have ranged from the meditative, as in ‘Walking to the Cattle Place’, to the humorous: for example, ‘Anthropomorphics’ seems intent on removing any illusions concerning the animal kingdom:

Outside the serious media, the violence of animals  
is often like a sad cartoon. Tom catches Jerry

and one of them grows less cute, glibbed with saliva,  
shivering, darting. But Tom keeps his appealing intent look.  
(CP 170)

Aware that modern Western readers are used to seeing most animals at several removes, via 'the serious media', the poem sets out to subvert our attempts at romanticising the animal kingdom. It does so with a generous amount of wit and humour, as in its pronouncement that in the real world, 'Hunting ... is mostly a form of shopping / where the problem's to make the packages hold still'. Even Murray's sacred cows do not get away from the poem's ruthlessly undeceived vision:

Even with sex, the symbolic beasts can be unreliable:  
the great bull, mounting, cramps his lungs on her knobbed spine  
and looks winded and precarious. He is more sexual walking.

This aversion to anthropomorphism and cliché is borne out by the 'Presence' sequence in poems such as 'Pigs' and 'Cattle Egret', where the reader is left in no doubt that nature can be cruel: the latter poem, for instance, conveys the joyful commitment on the part of the title birds to preying on fish: 'Our quick beaks pincer them, one and one, / those crisps of winnow, fats of air, / ... we haggle them down / full of plea, fizz, cark and stridulation'. Delight in the hunt is reflected here in delight in language: 'fizz, cark and stridulation' embody the egret's enjoyment as well as the struggle of the fish. The egret goes on to deliver an unapologetic apologia for its way of life:

Shadowy round us are lives that eat things dead  
but life feeds our life: fight is flavour,  
stinging a spice. Bodies still electric play for  
my crop's gravel jitterbug. (CP 375)

This reads like a predator's charter, complete with memorable alliterative slogans ('fight is flavour, / stinging a spice'): the speaker here stands as an articulate defender of the carnivorous lifestyle.

In many ways, then, the 'Presence' poems build on Murray's earlier treatment of animals in his poetry, and clearly the natural world has always had a central role to play in his poetic vision. However, the sequence is also markedly *different* to what has gone before, most notably in its attempts to render the inner lives of flora and fauna in the English language. To succeed in this, the poems try to find a voice for each of the creatures they attempt to embody, and in this, they arguably build on the ambitions of one of Murray's most fascinating poems, 'The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains'.

As witnessed in my discussion of the poem in the previous chapter, 'The Mouthless Image' opens with its protagonist 'Starting a dog, in the post-midnight suburbs, for a laugh, / barking for a lark': after unleashing a cacophony of noise, as more and more dogs join in, the speaker ends the first section of the poem by moving 'from playing the fool, / ... behind [his] arch will, into the sorrow of a people' (CP 210). This move is sudden and unexpected after the playful tone of the first section, and the second section proceeds to add to the confusion with its cryptic opening: 'And not just one people. You've entered a sound proletariat[.]'

What follows is a consideration of the various means of communication open to the animal kingdom, as overheard by a human speaker: 'pigs exclaim *boff-boff!*', 'fowls say *chirk*', while 'she-cat[s] curdl[e] *Mao?*' Gesture and movement are also included in this overview of animal communication: 'Waterbirds address you in their neck-flexure language'. The speaker displays a limited comprehension of all these creatures, but he seems committed to recording what they 'say'. The second section ends with a recognition of incomprehension and an attempt to account for the gap in understanding between human and non-human:

you speak to each species in the seven or eight  
 planetary words of its language, which ignore and include the  
 detail  
 God set you to elaborate by the dictionary-full  
 when, because they would reveal their every secret,  
 He took definition from the beasts and gave it to you. (CP 210)

This is a conflation of the Biblical account in Genesis, where Adam, before the Fall, names all ‘the beasts of the field and the birds of the air’ as part of his God-given authority over them (Genesis 2:19-20), and the Aboriginal legend about the beginning of time related by Murray in the preface to his prose collection, Persistence in Folly: according to this tradition, Murray tells us, there was a time ‘when birds and animals could speak, while humans were dumb. The creatures, however, told too many of their sacred secrets, and the Supreme Being took away their speech and gave it to the humans. The cautionary nature of that tale is clear, I think, though it saddens me.’<sup>9</sup>

I would argue that the ‘Presence’ sequence is a spirited attempt to return ‘definition’ to ‘the beasts’. ‘The Mouthless Image of God’ bears witness to the need for translation of the natural world if a human audience is to understand something of it, and acknowledges that a fall has taken place (perhaps this is the ‘sorrow’ to which the speaker turns at the end of the first section): in response to this, the ‘Presence’ sequence attempts to reverse that fall. As I have already argued, ‘Presence’ possesses a religious character which I will address in the course of this chapter, a character that is partly Aboriginal, partly Christian: in this respect, in its conflation of Aboriginal and Christian accounts of the fall, ‘The Mouthless Image of God’ can be seen as an important precursor to the sequence.

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Turning specifically to the religious character of the 'Presence' poems, it is clear from Murray's poetic practice as a whole and from his earlier comments in 'The Human Hair-Thread', that Aboriginal spirituality has a significant role to play. As if to confirm this, one of the poems, 'Cattle Ancestor' (CP 374), takes the form of a re-telling of a traditional Aboriginal song. However, it is also evident that in these poems Murray is exploring ideas he has inherited from his own *Christian* tradition. This arguably includes the idea of 'presence' itself and its elusive nature in the sequence. Only seven of the forty-two poems actually mention 'presence' directly, but overarching all of them is the tacit understanding that somehow presence is what binds the creatures of the sequence together. I now want to explore some of the resonances of the term 'presence' in Christian thinking, and in this difficult collection of poems, before asking what significance 'presence' has in Murray's religious thinking and his conceptions of God in his poetry. The question 'what is presence?' will recur. It resists a straight-forward answer, but attempting to answer it will shed some light on this sequence and its place in Murray's religious vision.

In Roman Catholic theology, the term 'presence' is commonly used in relation to the Eucharist. The theology of 'real presence' – the true and substantial presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and the wine – is one of the defining differences between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches on the one hand, and the various Protestant denominations on the other. In an interview in 1992, Murray refers to this understanding of the Eucharist as one of the major ideas that attracted him to Catholicism:

I identified with the Eucharist. I thought, yes, yes, the absolute transformation of ordinary elements into the divine. I know about that. It didn't strike me as unlikely, and it opened such illimitable prospects of life. Most secular mythologies seem to be anxious to close the

possibilities of life down and delimit them. This one opened out. (Daniel 10)

Murray's desire for a religious framework which 'opens out' led him to Catholicism, and in finding Catholicism conducive to his ideas of art, he was following on from a Christian thinker and poet who has had a profound influence on him: Gerard Manley Hopkins.

'Hopkins was the chap who turned me on to poetry', records Murray in interview, describing his discovery of poetry in his late teens (Daniel 10). In an earlier interview, Murray recalled that, before reading Hopkins, 'I'd dodged poetry ... it seemed quite irrelevant ... But suddenly here was Hopkins showing that language could be exciting, could come alive, could be about relevant things'.<sup>10</sup> Hopkins therefore played a central role in Murray's beginnings as a poet and taught him much about the possibilities of poetry written from a religious standpoint.

So what lessons from Hopkins are evident in Murray's 'Presence' sequence? One seems to be a belief that religious significance can be found by observing the natural world. 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God', wrote Hopkins,<sup>11</sup> and his journals are replete with his observations of the world around him and the glimpses of God's character he believed Nature offered: for example, one journal entry of 1870 remarked of a bluebell: 'I know the beauty of our Lord by it'.<sup>12</sup> It is also significant for Murray's sequence that Hopkins believed not only that he could praise God more as a result of the insights concerning God's character given him by the natural world, but also that the natural world itself praised God by its very existence. Hopkins went on to explore this idea in his private notes:

The sun and the stars glorify God. They stand where he placed them, they move where he bid them. 'The heavens declare the glory of God'. They glorify God, *but they do not know it*. The birds sing to him, the thunder speaks of his terror, the lion is like his strength ... they are something like him, they make him known, they tell of him, they give him glory, but they do not know they do[.]<sup>13</sup>

Hopkins goes on to contrast the natural world with man, arguing that unlike the rest of nature, man, along with the angels, was created with the ability willingly to praise God, but it is his comments on non-human creatures that serve our purposes here. Hopkins's thesis, that the natural world – sun, stars, birds, lions – praises God, but does not know it does, is arguably fundamental to any Christian reading of Murray's sequence.

As I have observed elsewhere, any attempt to read Murray as a Christian poet has to contend first and foremost with the fact that poems by Murray dealing with explicitly religious or Christian themes are few and far between, and that, while each of his collections since The People's Otherworld in 1983 have borne the inscription 'to the glory of God', God himself is referred to rarely. 'Presence: Translations from the Natural World' is no different: of the forty-two poems that are included in the sequence, the name 'God' appears in only two of them (three, if you include 'Bats' Ultrasound' and its reference to '*our aery Yahweh*' (CP 368)). However, it would take a remarkably obtuse reader to miss the religious significance of this sequence for Murray's conceptions of the natural world, and the God to which the sequence is dedicated is arguably immanent throughout; indeed, one critic has argued persuasively that the opening lines of George Herbert's poem 'The Elixir' should be taken as 'the implicit epigraph of almost everything that Murray has written':

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see.<sup>14</sup>



In this resolution to see God in ‘all things’, Murray clearly follows on from Hopkins’s conceptions of creation, outlined above, that, consciously or unconsciously, all creatures, including the plethora ‘translated’ by the ‘Presence’ poems, are praising their Creator, ‘mak[ing] him known ... tell[ing] of him ... [and] giv[ing] him glory’. They do so through the very ‘presence’ that marks each of them out as distinctive and individual, through their *haecceitas*; this term comes from the thirteenth-century theologian and philosopher Duns Scotus, and was used by him to convey the unique ‘thisness’ of a creature, that which distinguishes it from all other creatures.<sup>15</sup> Hopkins demonstrates his commitment to this Scotist conception of his fellow-creatures in the opening octave of his sonnet, ‘As kingfishers catch fire’:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;  
 As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
 Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s  
 Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
 Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
 Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,  
 Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*<sup>16</sup>

These lines demonstrate Hopkins’s fascination with the world around him; in his poetry, he praises a created world that ranges from exotic beauty (kingfishers, dragonflies) to inanimate mundanity (stones in ‘roundy wells’), in the belief that all these constituent parts of creation point to their Creator and reveal, through their *haecceitas*, something of God’s character. Hopkins went on to create his own terminology to convey his Scotist beliefs: in it, ‘inscape’ acts as a virtual synonym for *haecceitas*, the individually distinctive form of a creature, while ‘instress’ was the energy of being which both determines an ‘inscape’ and sustains it, along with all things.<sup>17</sup>

In all of this, Murray is clearly a disciple of Hopkins, and nowhere more so than in the 'Presence' sequence. Hopkins asserts that the multifarious inhabitants of the natural world 'make [God] known, they tell of him'; Murray argues for this conception of the natural world in his suggestion that his own work conveys less pantheism than 'panentheism, God in everything rather than everything being God'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in tracing 'presence' throughout Murray's sequence of that name, I will arguably be tracing something of the omnipresence of God throughout his creation.

Murray has also learned from Hopkins in his thinking about the sheer variety of life in the natural world, and much of the strange power and resistance of Murray's 'Presence' poems comes largely from his commitment, following on from both Hopkins and Duns Scotus, to give each of the creatures he deals with the individual voice it demands. Accordingly, the voices in the sequence range from those belonging to a pair of eagles:

We shell down on the sleeping-branch. All night  
the limitless Up digests its meat of lights.  
(*'Eagle Pair'*, CP 368)

to that of a cockspur bush:

I am lived. I am died.  
I was two-leafed three times, and grazed,  
but then I was stemmed and multiplied,  
sharp-thorned and caned, nested and raised,  
earth-salt by sun-sugar. (Cockspur Bush', CP 371)

Meanwhile, a shoal of fish pun their way into the English language:

Eye-and-eye eye an eye  
each. What blinks is I,  
unison of the whole shoal. Thinks:  
a dark idea circling by –  
again the eyes' I winks. (Shoal', CP 372)

As in 'The Cows on Killing Day', Murray rides rough-shod over grammatical constraints to embody something of the essential *otherness* of creatures 'beyond the human community': so, to a pair of eagles, the twinkling of stars in the night sky is understood as 'the limitless Up digest[ing] its meat of lights', while the seasonal changes experienced by a bush are vocalised as: 'I am lived. I am died.' Repeatedly throughout the sequence, a remarkable variety of non-human creatures are skilfully and subtly given a voice.

Not all the poems are written from the perspective of the creatures whose *haecceitas* they attempt to convey: however, even those poems written in the third-person retain something of the 'otherness' of their subjects. An example of this is 'Mollusc':

By its nobship sailing upside down,  
 by its inner sexes, by the crystalline  
 pimplings of its skirts, by the sucked-on  
 lifelong kiss of its toppling motion,  
 by the viscose optics now extruded  
 now wizened instantaneously, by the  
 ridges grating up a food-path, by  
 the pop shell in its nick of dry,  
 by excretion, the earthworm coils, the glibbing,  
 by the gilt slipway, and by pointing  
 perhaps as far back into time as  
 ahead, a shore being folded interior,  
 by boiling on salt, by coming uncut over  
 a razor's edge, by hiding the Oligocene  
 underleaf may this and every snail sense  
 itself ornament the weave of presence.

(CP 375)

This poem's one sentence conveys a wealth of description concerning the mollusc, and yet it defiantly retains the creature's sheer otherness: it also stands as the first poem in the sequence to directly refer to 'presence', in this case 'the weave of presence'. Isolating just what 'presence' means in this sequence is difficult: Murray is not interested in delivering a simple definition. In this instance, all of the mollusc's distinctive, utterly individual attributes ('its inner

sexes', 'the crystalline / pimplings of its skirts ... the sucked-on / lifelong kiss of its toppling motion', etc.) serve to 'ornament the weave of presence', serve to enhance or beautify it. There is a sense of design here, a suggestion that the mollusc is serving a purpose too easily missed by humans, and this purpose seems simply to be that of ornamentation: the implication is that the world would be a duller place if the snail had not been created and added to 'the weave of presence', presumably a description of creation or life in this world.

In spite of the seeming simplicity of this correlation, to argue that 'presence = life' still does not give the reader much of a hold over either the term or these poems; it simply raises another challenge, and that is the attempt to define 'life'. Indeed, it is arguably the *mystery* of life to which the poems testify. Life cannot be understood or explained in terms of an equation: that would be to grossly over-simplify creation and to ignore the widely differing *haecceitas* of each creature. In his sequence's commitment to the idiosyncratic demands of its subject-matter, Murray rejects the temptation to rely on over-simplification and cliché; instead, he forces himself and his readers to look at life itself and the lives that comprise the natural world in a different way, one that accepts mystery and the inexplicable while at the same time attempting repeatedly to raid the inarticulate with all the equipment available to him.

A good example of such a raid is 'Honey Cycle', occurring about two-thirds of the way through the sequence:

Grisaille of gristle lights, in a high eye of cells,  
 ex-chrysalids being fed crystal in six-sided wells,  
 many sweating comb and combing it, seating it sexaplex.  
 The unique She sops lines of descent, in her comedown from sex  
 and drones are driven from honey, having given their own:  
 their oeuvre with her ova or not, he's re-learn the lone. (CP 387)

This is Murray's sequence at its most playful and its most proficient: the bee-hive is brought vividly to life in a tour-de-force that showcases Murray's remarkable resourcefulness as a poet. Written in rhyming couplets, each of the poem's sprawling lines (on the whole, either hexameter or heptameter, with some leeway) also makes use of caesurae to allow internal rhyme, as well as punning and alliteration throughout: the poem also plays with visual rhyme, such as in the opening line, where 'grisaille' and 'gristle' give the impression of a rhyme to the eye, whereas in reality (apart from a suggestion of assonance) 'grisaille' only finds its rhyme with 'high eyes' after the caesura.

The focus of the poem is largely on the drones, the male workers who give everything to serve their queen. 'Grisaille of gristle lights' and 'six-sided wells' effectively set the scene in the bee-hive, while the poem's concern with the bees' cycle of life is foregrounded by the very first description of them as 'ex-chrysalids'. As for the strict hierarchy of the hive, this is clearly conveyed by the description of the queen bee as 'the unique She sop[ping] lines of descent', and the following line's alliterative dismissal of the 'drones ... driven from honey, having given their own'. The internal rhyme here of 'drone' with 'own' is carried over into the next line and transformed into the male bee's 'oeuvre with her ova': whether or not the drone is able to fertilise the queen bee, he is forced to recognise her as different, as unique, as 'the lone', and his role in the honey cycle of the title is to repeatedly 're-learn' that.

The poem goes on to consider the laws by which the drones live:

Rules never from bees but from being give us to build food  
 then to be stiff guards, hairtrigger for tiffs with non-Brood.  
 Next, grid-eyes grown to gathering rise where a headwind bolsters  
 hung shimmering flight, return with rich itchy holsters  
 and dance the nectar vector.

These are wonderfully playful, witty lines, conveying the drones' good-natured acceptance of the rules 'being' has given them: 'being' here could be taken as a synonym for 'presence', and its play with 'bees' shows it to be a well-chosen one. The combative stance of the bees is wittily conveyed by their description of themselves as 'stiff guards, hairtrigger for tiffs with non-Brood', while their experience of flight exults in overcoming the line-break: 'where a headwind bolsters / hung shimmering flight'. The three stresses in 'hūng shīmmering flīght' hold their own against the demands of metre, just as the bees use the headwind and then resist its pull in order to gather nectar.

Once the nectar is gathered, the bees return to the hive with 'rich itchy holsters' and point out the source of their precious cargo to their fellow-bees, communicating not through language, as does this poem, but through gesturing towards their find: the poem conveys this in a wonderfully comic image of the drones 'danc[ing] the nectar vector'. This image serves to remind the reader that not all communication is verbal and that this poem, like the others in the sequence, presents itself unashamedly as a translation into language of non-human communication.

The poem ends with the demise of one generation of drones and the transferral of the bees' 'being' (or 'presence') to the next generation:

And when we its advance  
beyond wings, or water, light gutters in our sight-lattice  
and we're eggs there again. Spent fighting-suits tighten in grass.

Even in the death of the drones, the honey cycle advances, and 'being' is transferred to the eggs that will become the next generation of drones. The bees' experience of death is conveyed visually – 'light gutters in our sight-lattice' – and the poem closes with the oddly poignant image of drones who have died

serving and defending the 'Brood' and 'the unique She': 'Spent fighting-suits tighten in grass.'

'Honey Cycle' is a potent demonstration of Murray's commitment throughout the 'Presence' sequence to re-vivify our knowledge and experience of the natural world, by using all the poetic devices available to him to translate something of the inner lives of non-human creatures and, in the process, convey their sheer otherness. In this, he has learnt both from the 'magical' ability of Aboriginal art to go 'beyond the human community' and ensure 'proper treatment of the natural world', and from Hopkins, who defined that 'proper treatment' as a commitment to accurately represent the *haecceitas* of each of God's creatures. In the interview in which he recalled the influence of Hopkins on his poetry, Murray described this central lesson learned from his nineteenth-century master:

I discovered that poetry was about presence. I couldn't have expressed it to you when I read [Hopkins], but that was the thought. I later found out how to express it – that poetry was about essence, about making things real and present to yourself and the other readers. (Daniel 10)

Murray displays remarkable faith in poetry here, as he does throughout the 'Presence' sequence. He never seems to bewail poetry's limitations, rather he seeks to test those limitations. A good example of Murray's frontier spirit in this sequence is the extraordinary 'Cell DNA', another poem, like 'Mollusc', to refer to 'presence' directly.

I am the singular  
in free fall.  
I and my doubles  
carry it all:

life's slim volume  
spirally bound.  
It's what I'm about,  
it's what I'm around.

(CP 384)

The simplicity of rhyme and metre here reflect the simplicity of life at the basic level of this cell DNA, while its definition of itself as 'life's slim volume / spirally bound' is vintage Murray wit. However, the poem's speaker quickly evolves, warms to the task of speech and turns to more complex issues, indeed perhaps the most complex issue of all: the nature of life itself, its origins and the place of 'presence' within it.

Presence and hungers  
imbue a sap mote  
with the world as they spin it.  
I teach it by rote

but its every command  
was once a miscue  
that something rose to,  
Presence and freedom

re-wording, re-beading  
strains on a strand  
making I and I more different  
than we could stand.

Suddenly, the simplicity of rhyme and metre belies the complexity of the subject-matter. In this consideration of life, much is left unsaid (the brevity of each line and of the poem ensures that), but what seems clear is that 'presence' has a part to play at the very outset of life. Coupled first of all with 'hungers', it somehow prepares the ground for the cell DNA: 'Presence and hungers / imbue a sap mote / with the world as they spin it'. Is 'it' the 'sap mote' or is it 'the world'? If the latter is the case, could the phrase be coined: 'presence makes the world go round'? Either way, presence and 'hungers' seem to start something that the cell DNA then continues: it implements what they 'imbue' or inspire ('I teach it by rote').



However, the cell DNA feels unable to explain where the life it 'teaches' came from: it is left to recall life's origins as 'a miscue', a mistake or an accident, something that cannot be quantified otherwise. Crucially, though, 'something rose to' this accident, and that 'something' was 'Presence', this time coupled with 'freedom': the two then proceeded to 're-word' and 're-bead' the 'miscue' (which perhaps now can usefully be called life) until the DNA stands divided and separated into individual strands, breeding difference rather than uniformity, freedom rather than constraint, 'I and I' rather than 'we'.

Clearly, 'presence' is not a scientific term nor, as the explorations of it undertaken by this sequence seem to suggest, could it be. Nonetheless, 'Cell DNA' has presence situated at the very outset of life, mysteriously bringing life about and giving it a diverse and seemingly directionless plenitude, a reading that is borne out by the varieties of living creatures surveyed by the 'Presence' sequence.

As the sequence continues, the attributes of presence accumulate: before 'Cell DNA', there was 'The Octave of Elephants', where presence is considered while a group of female elephants contemplate the differences between the male and female of their species:

As presence resembles everything, our bulls reflect its solitude  
and we, suckling, blaring, hotly loving, reflect its motherhood.  
(CP 379)

'Presence resembles everything': solitude, motherhood; elephant, mollusc. It seems that presence is shared by all creatures, or at least all the creatures in Murray's sequence: have we returned to a relationship between presence and 'God in everything', Murray's avowed 'panentheism'?

The most sustained interrogation of presence comes in the poem that follows 'Cell DNA' in the sequence, 'Sunflowers'. It takes the shape of a dialogue, with the sun – 'the great blast Cell / who holds the centre of reality' – conversing 'with a continuum of adorers', the sunflowers of the title: the first voice appears to belong to the sunflowers, while the second (in italics) belongs to the sun:

The more presence, the more apart. And the more lives circling you.  
*Falling, I gathered such presence that I fused to Star, beyond all fission –*  
 We face our lives and ever-successive genitals toward you.  
*Presence is why we love what we cannot eat or mate with –* (CP 385)

This address to the sun, unlike most others in poetry, goes on to record the sun's response, and in giving the sun a voice, Murray has provided his readers with the most sustained commentary on presence in the sequence: however, as elsewhere, the commentary remains a cryptic one. As in 'Cell DNA', presence here brings about diversity and life for the sunflowers in their reproduction ('The more presence, the more apart'), and the result is plenitude ('the more lives circling you'). However, from the perspective of the sun and its origins, presence also brings about fusion, so that, in the sun's case, it now feels itself '*beyond all fission*', beyond division. This seeming contradiction is resolved by noting Murray's comments concerning presence as the 'essence' of something, what Hopkins, via Scotus, would call its *haecceitas*: what begins with plenitude – life, as in 'Cell DNA' – does eventually '*fuse*' into the individually distinctive, whether that be a sunflower or, as in this case, the sun itself.

The sunflowers go on to describe their relationship to the sun – 'We face our leaves and ever-successive genitals toward you' – before the sun delivers its first definition of presence, seemingly in response to the sunflowers' statement: '*Presence is why we love what we cannot eat or mate with*'. With this enigmatic

pronouncement, the sun seems to take issue with the sunflowers and their prosaic, biologically-sound delineation of their relationship to it: the sun takes the sunflowers' need of its rays as evidence of their love, and asserts that this love can only be understood in terms of presence. The sunflowers cannot eat the sun nor can they mate with it, and yet the two have an intimate relationship: in the final stanza, the sunflowers address the sun with the words 'we adore you', while the sun describes the sunflowers in an earlier stanza as '*All of my detached life*', living as they do '*on death or sexual casings*', by the processes of plant reproduction. The sun and sunflowers are irrevocably linked by the natural order, and the poem portrays that relationship as one of love and worship, rooted in the presence both sun and sunflowers share.

The poem concludes with a further consideration of presence:

*Presence matches our speed; thus it seems not flow but all arrivals –  
We love your overbalance, your plunge into utterness – but what is  
presence?*

*The beginning, mirrored everywhere. The true indictment. The end all  
through the story.* (CP 386)

Disputing Heraclitus's assertion that everything is in flux, seemingly without purpose, the sun here asserts that presence '*matches our speed*', that it is not somehow left behind by the flow of life: instead, due to presence, life '*seems not flow but all arrivals*', likened to the dispersal of the sunflower seeds, creative and with a purpose. As for the definition of presence with which the poem ends, the first and third phrases seem to say much the same thing: presence is '*The beginning, mirrored everywhere*' and '*The end all through the story*', dependent on the point-of-view of the observer. As such, it points to the beginning of life (as in 'Cell DNA') and to the end, and neither appears random. This suggestion that presence somehow guarantees a meaning to life is reinforced by the central

phrase of the final line, defining presence as '*The true indictment*': this assertion is left deliberately vague, in keeping with all the other definitions of presence throughout this poem and the sequence, but perhaps it is the '*truth*' of this indictment that is meant to strike the reader. Unlike other indictments, this one can be trusted.

Other poems seem to confirm 'Sunflowers' and its identification of presence as '*the beginning, mirrored everywhere*' and '*the end all through the story*'. For example, 'That Evolution Proceeds by Charity and Faith', located at the mid-way point of the sequence, points back to a decisive moment in the evolution of birds:

Not bowing, but a full thrown back upreach  
of desperate glorying totter took a fibre-scrabbed  
ravenous small lizard out to a hold on the air  
beyond possibility.

Which every fledgeling re-attains  
and exceeds, past the spills it recalls from that forebear  
but soon beats down under memory, breaking out  
into the sky opening

(CP 380)

Opening with a depiction of the unlikely ancestor of the modern bird, a 'ravenous small lizard', defying the limits of its world and travelling 'beyond possibility', the poem presents the faith of its title in this lizard's 'full thrown back upreach / of desperate glorying totter', an evocative description of the lizard's leap in search for food and 'a hold on the air': the enjambment here denies the reader a pause for breath and thus underlines the risk involved in what the lizard is attempting. That evolution proceeds is then made clear in the recognition that 'every fledgeling re-attains / and exceeds' that 'upreach ... beyond possibility': nonetheless, this beginning is mirrored everywhere, every time one of these fledgelings

will groggily cling

a few times yet, as if listening to the far genetic line  
confirm the presented new body-idea first embraced  
that noon, the epoch-lurch of it, all also still plotted there.

Describing evolutionary progress as an 'epoch-lurch' lends it more romance than it usually gets, while the fact that the 'new body-idea' is 'presented' to the lizard may be evidence of divine complicity in its leap of faith: the fact that it ultimately paid off in flight certainly seems to be evidence of 'charity' rewarding the lizard's bravery.

Turning from beginnings to '*the end all through the story*', the penultimate poem in the sequence, 'From Where We Live On Presence', bears witness to this facet of presence. This curious poem seems to begin with the death of a beetle, not generally regarded as the most poetic of subjects, but in keeping with the ambition displayed throughout the 'Presence' sequence. It also stands as the most direct examination of the potential and the limitations of language in the sequence, and I will turn to it in a moment.

As I have already argued, these 'Presence' poems can be read as Murray returning 'definition' to 'the beasts' ('The Mouthless Image of God in the Hunter-Colo Mountains'), and thus attempting to reverse the fall recorded in Aboriginal mythology. To succeed totally in such a reversal is, however, beyond the sequence's power. As in all his poetry, Murray displays an exuberant love of language throughout these poems, and their resistance to easy comprehension and frequently difficult vocabulary demonstrate that language in the sequence has been well-excavated to meet the demands of convincingly representing the inner lives of shellback ticks, cockspur bushes and even grass. However, for all its virtuoso linguistic skill, the 'Presence' sequence accepts that there is much that *cannot* be conveyed by language, and in this it follows on from concerns

Murray has frequently expressed in the past. ‘Things are so wordless’, comments the narrator in the early poem ‘Noonday Axeman’ (CP 4), while contemplating the need for stillness in human experience. ‘Nothing’s true that figures in words only’, claims the speaker of ‘Poetry and Religion’ (CP 267), signalling his defiance of Saussure, Derrida *et al.* and their belief that there is nothing real beyond linguistic constructs. Asked in interview to comment on his simultaneous command of language and deep appreciation of wordlessness, Murray replied: ‘I think the two go together. If you know a bit about words, you know how much can’t be said.’ (Daniel 11)

This is borne out in the ‘Presence’ sequence. Just as there is no single, clear definition of presence throughout the poems – as if it is beyond a poem to deliver one – so too they acknowledge, sometimes directly, mostly indirectly, the limitations of language. Of course, Murray entitles the sequence ‘Translations from the Natural World’, and the poems employ language of remarkable economy to translate the presence and inner lives of the creatures they describe into English; however, precisely because they *are* translations, the poems are constantly aware that they are not self-sufficient linguistic constructs, but that they bear witness to a natural world bigger and more complex than themselves. Crucially, in that natural world, these flora and fauna do not speak English: they do not express themselves through language, and the poems are aware of this fact.

Therefore, ‘Yard Horse’ describes its subject’s experience of the world in starkly physical terms free from language, concluding: ‘his body is the word for every meaning in his universe’ (CP 378). ‘Two Dogs’ converse entirely through their sense of smell:

Enchantment creek underbank pollen, are the stiff scents he makes,  
 hot grass rolling and rabbit-dig but only saliva chickweed.  
 Road pizza clay bird, hers answer him, rot-spiced good.

...

Orifice?

Orifice, he wriggles. Night fox? Night fox, with left pad wound.  
 Cement bag, hints his shoulder. Catmeat, boasts his tail, twice enjoyed.

(CP 370)

Turning at last to 'From Where We Live On Presence', we come upon its speaker considering the differences in communication between human and non-human:

A human is a comet streamed in language far down time; no other  
 living is like it. (CP 392)

Coming at this late stage in the sequence, these lines remind us that the experience of otherness is dependent on the eye of the beholder: in this poem, it is *human* life that is odd, eerie, remarkable. The speaker of the poem is not identified, but in keeping with the ambition displayed throughout the sequence, it seems fitting that it is probably the voice of a recently deceased beetle making this distinction between human and non-human:

Beetlehood itself was my expression.

It was said in fluted burnish, in jaw-tools, spanned running, lidded shields  
 over an erectile rotor. With no lungs to huff hah! or selah!  
 few sixwalkers converse.

Whatever its identity, this speaker is eloquent and thoughtful in its retrospective on its life; ultimately, however, its eloquence and command of language is put to work declaring the limits of language and the ongoing mystery of presence.

I mated once, escaped a spider, ate things cooked in wet fires of decay  
 but for the most part, was. I could not have put myself better,  
 with more lustre, than my presence did. I translate into segments,  
 laminates,  
 cachou eyes, pungent chemistry, cusps. But I remain the true word for  
 me. (CP 393)

If this speaker has just died – as implied by its talk of its ‘translation’ or forthcoming decay – it displays no regrets concerning life, and certainly no regrets concerning its inability to converse in language. ‘I could not have put myself better/ ... than my presence did’: a defiant assertion of its independence of language, made through the medium of language it did not share with humans until ‘translated’ by this poem. Words and wordlessness play one with the other here, but ultimately the speaker calls on ‘presence’, rather than language, when it wants to define its own identity. ‘I remain the true word for me’: not ‘beetlehood’, not any other word, but ‘I’, the speaker’s presence, its *haecceitas*, its individual essence.

Here, then, is ‘*the end all through the story*’, along with the suggestion that presence can outlast even death: if the speaker here *is* dead, it speaks confidently in the present tense (‘I remain the true word for me’), and according to the title, it is speaking from a place ‘where we live on presence’, as if nothing else will sustain ‘us’ there. This adds to a reading of presence as possessing religious significance, but still leaves us a long way off from a clear definition of presence in the sequence. This is almost certainly intentional on Murray’s part. As I have argued, the ‘Presence’ poems clearly possess spiritual resonance, perhaps most significantly in their suggestion – implicit throughout – that there is something uniting the multifarious creatures translated by the poems: however, they also refuse to fill in the gaps for an inquisitive reader, and in this they reflect Murray’s acknowledgment that there is much in the world ‘that can’t be said’, that cannot be put into words.

What the sequence does provide its reader with is an explicit link between presence and the figure of Christ, in ‘Animal Nativity’. The only poem in the



sequence with an explicitly Christian subject, it re-tells the story of Christ's birth as viewed by the animals present (though the speaker of the poem refrains from relating their inner lives and therefore retains a more objective stance than elsewhere in the sequence). The poem concludes with a description of the Christ-child as 'a crux of presence' (CP 389): the phrase both points ahead to the crucifixion and identifies Christ as existing at the centre of presence. Suddenly, in this poem, presence has moved from the abstract to an individual, from something forming and directing life itself to a baby in a food-trough: the move is a remarkable one, and links presence explicitly with Murray's Christian beliefs. All the poems we have looked at so far have forged a link between presence and life: 'Animal Nativity', on the other hand, identifies a *source* of presence, the Christ-child.

This seems a crucial poem in the sequence, just as it claims that Christ is crucial to presence. It is the only explicitly Christian poem out of a sequence of forty-two, and so it would be misleading to read the entire sequence through its eyes; however, it does illustrate more starkly than usual what Murray has called the 'Christian consciousness' behind all of his work (see Crawford 165). As a Catholic poet, and an inheritor of Hopkins, Murray is well aware of the connotations of 'presence' and its relationship to the 'real presence' of Christ in Eucharistic theology, and with 'Animal Nativity' he foregrounds this Christian reading of presence.

So, in conclusion, and to echo the sunflowers of the poem of that name, what is presence? The sunflowers don't get a direct answer to their question, and neither do I. Perhaps it is the omnipresence of God throughout his creation. Perhaps it is the link between Creator and creature. Perhaps it is Hopkins's sense

of instress or inscape. What the sequence *does* provide its readers with is a remarkable raid on the inarticulate, what Murray terms in the conclusion to an essay of 1986: 'the real depths and extents of our world, both outer and inner ... These are the inexhaustible realm, which language at its highest can only evoke, not encompass' (PT 355). His 'Presence' sequence is aware that it cannot encompass the natural world which it translates into English: however, more so than any of his earlier animal poems, the 'Presence' sequence, in its sheer scope, does justice to the plenitude and otherness of much of creation, and thus glorifies the Creator who can be identified in the background of each poem. In evoking the inner lives of multifarious creatures, Murray has ventured into the 'inexhaustible realm' and delivered poems of unique power and, indeed, presence which respect the mystery inherent in the lives they explore, while also demonstrating that, while poetry and language do have their limits, they are possibly farther out than many readers may have imagined.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Carol Oles. *American Poetry Review* 15.2 (1986): quoted by Lawrence Bourke. *A Vivid Steady State*. Kensington NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992. p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Bourke, p. 100.

<sup>3</sup> Clive James. 'His Brilliant Career.' Rev. of *The Vernacular Republic: Selected Poems*. *New York Review of Books* 14 April 1983: 31-32 (p. 31).

<sup>4</sup> These forty poems are modified slightly in the 1998 *Collected Poems*: 'Bats' Ultrasound', from *The People's Otherworld* (1983) and 'The Cows On Killing Day', from *Dog Fox Field* (1990) find their way into the sequence, at the expense of 'Insect Mating Flight' and 'Mother Sea Lion'. In light of this, from this point onwards I will describe the sequence as comprising forty-two poems, rather than forty.

<sup>5</sup> Bert Almon. 'Fullness of Being in Les Murray's "Presence: Translations from the Natural World"'. *Antipodes* 8.2 (1994): 123-130 (p. 123).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Dunn. 'Big Man's Music: Les Murray's Metric'. *Counterbalancing Light: Essays on the Poetry of Les Murray*. Ed. Carmel Gaffney. Armidale NSW: Kardoorair Press, 1997. 69-91 (p. 85).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Crawford. 'Les Murray's "Presence" sequence'. *Counterbalancing Light*. 54-68 (pp. 56, 54, 55, 63).

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Crawford. *Identifying Poets*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993. p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> 'Preface'. *Persistence in Folly*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984. 1-3 (pp. 2-3).

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Graeme Kinross Smith: quoted by Crawford. 'Les Murray's "Presence" sequence'. P. 59.

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<sup>11</sup> 'God's Grandeur': Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. W. H. Gardner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953. p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Journal entry for May 18 1870: Gardner, p. 122.

<sup>13</sup> The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Ed. Christopher Devlin, S.J.. London: Oxford University Press, 1959. p. 239. Hopkins's emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> Rodney Stenning Edgecombe. 'Les Murray and the Tradition of the Emblem Poem'. Counterbalancing Light. 92-107 (p. 103).

<sup>15</sup> Gardner, pp. xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>16</sup> Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins. p. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Gardner, p. xx.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Crawford. Identifying Poets. p. 99.

## 6. 'THE UNINHABITED CROSS': THE FIGURE OF CHRIST IN THE POETRY OF R. S. THOMAS

'It is so easy to believe in God when you are on your knees with your eyes closed, just as it is easy to be a Christian far away from the clamour and the trials of the world of people': so wrote R. S. Thomas in his autobiography 'No-one'.<sup>1</sup> Some of the difficulties are introduced as Thomas turns his attention to the Irish Sea off the Llŷn Peninsula. The sea, he writes, 'is both a mirror and a window':

In the mirror is to be seen all the beauty and glory of the creation: the colours and the images of the clouds, with the birds going past on their eternal journey. But on using it as a window, an endless war is to be seen, one creature mercilessly and continuously devouring another. Under the deceptively innocent surface there are thousands of horrors, as if they were the creator's failed experiments. And through the seaweed, as if through a forest, the seals and the cormorants and the mackerel hunt like rapacious wolves. What kind of God created such a world? A God of love? (A 78)

Much of Thomas's religious poetry revolves around these central questions of the character of God and his relationship to the God of Christian revelation, a God of love. Following the articulation of these questions quoted above, Thomas explicitly acknowledges the influence of Tennyson on this central concern of his work (earlier in 'No-one', he described Tennyson as his favourite poet in childhood and relates how he had received a biography of the poet as a school prize (A 32)), in particular the Tennyson of In Memoriam, who writes of 'Man' as one

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law –  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed –

(Thomas later included these lines in The Penguin Book of Religious Verse he edited in 1963.)<sup>2</sup> In many ways, Thomas can be seen as a poet of Tennysonian

doubt, questioning the character of God rather than his existence: however, many contemporary critics have identified a deeper questioning at the heart of Thomas's work, a questioning that moves further and further away from the God of Christianity as his poetic career progresses.

Julian Gitzen remarks: 'Although Thomas evidently takes it for granted that he is addressing the Christian God, the divinity which he portrays possesses characteristics quite unlike those of the biblical Jehovah';<sup>3</sup> while J. D. Vicary observes that, in Thomas's poetry, 'The word "God" is an empty space waiting to be filled with whatever meanings the poet projects into it.'<sup>4</sup> Vimala Herman attempts to define something of this 'empty space': 'God exists in Thomas's poetry, but the features are transformed. The God of Thomas does not reside in regions of ineffable plenitude, but in a context of alienation. He is not a rationalist God – a God of enlightened justice and beauty – but a Dark God, basically unknowable, distanced, silent.'<sup>5</sup> It is fitting, then, that two of the full-length studies of Thomas's poetry take their titles from this 'Dark God' at the centre of the poetry, 'basically unknowable, distanced, silent': D. Z. Phillips's R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God and Elaine Shepherd's R. S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence – Images of God Explored.<sup>6</sup>

It should be pointed out from the outset of this consideration of Thomas's poetry that *any* attempt to address God, explore the images of God or somehow capture the essence of God in poetry, is a risky one. In his study of George Herbert, Milton, Dante and St John – Overheard by God – A. D. Nuttall exposes time and again the dangers implicit in a human author trying to speak on behalf of God or even adopting the persona of God in a poem, as Milton famously does in Book III of Paradise Lost, or as George Herbert does in 'Dialogue':

Sweetest Saviour, if my soul  
 Were but worth the having,  
 Quickly should I then control  
 Any thought of waiving.  
 But when all my care and pains  
 Cannot give the name of gains  
 To thy wretch so full of stains;  
 What delights or hope remains?

To which God replies:

*What (child) is the balance thine,  
 Thine the poise and measure?  
 If I say, Thou shalt be mine;  
 Finger not my treasure.  
 What the gains in having thee  
 Do amount to, only he,  
 Who for man was sold, can see;  
 That transferred th' accounts to me.<sup>7</sup>*

Nuttall notes, concerning this dialogue, that: 'Herbert, a mere man, explains on God's behalf the things which man is incapable of seeing for himself; but since it is a man who does this explaining, it cannot after all be true that man is thus incapable'.<sup>8</sup> Time and again, Nuttall points out the knots into which a poet as accomplished as Herbert can get when attempting to incorporate the character of God into an individual poem: 'Herbert's poems dramatise one of the most important requirements of the religious temper, which is quite simply that God should be other than oneself. But by that very act of dramatizing (which is a kind of usurpation) they blaspheme it.'<sup>9</sup> With this last assertion, Nuttall almost certainly overstates his case, ignoring as he does the reformed tradition of Christianity to which Herbert belonged and its belief that God had revealed something of his otherness through his word to human believers; therefore, a poet could justifiably dramatize God's otherness in a poem by learning from that revelation. Nonetheless, Nuttall's study identifies a central problem, that of a human author attempting to describe and explain to his readers matters which

only God can understand, and he illustrates this problem by considering Milton's account of the Fall in Paradise Lost and Dante's journey through hell, purgatory and heaven in The Divine Comedy, mapping these realms as he goes. In short, Nuttall demonstrates, from readings of some of the greatest religious poets in history, the truth of Vincent Buckley's remark that attempts to account for his disappointment with John Donne's Holy Sonnets: 'God is a dangerous interlocutor for poetry, even when it is Donne who addresses him.'<sup>10</sup>

If interlocution with God is a dangerous business for Donne, Herbert, Milton and Dante, then it clearly holds grave dangers for Thomas also: and yet God remains the principal addressee of his poems. Why does Thomas find it necessary to address the Divine in poetry at all? Clearly, for the same reason that Donne, Herbert, Milton and Dante wrote their poetry: because 'there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God' (A 104). Thomas then adds: 'Nor anything more difficult than establishing that relationship', a statement to which his four predecessors would also attest, though possibly for different reasons to those of Thomas. For Donne, Herbert, Milton and Dante, the difficulties inherent in their relationships with God lay largely with them: Donne's 'black soul' haunts him throughout his Holy Sonnets, while Herbert's soul also keeps drawing back from God, 'Guilty of dust and sin' ('Love(3)'); if Milton is to succeed in his pursuit of 'Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme', he desperately needs the help of his 'celestial patroness' in Paradise Lost, and admits that 'if all be mine', if the venture rests solely with him, his 'intended wing' would be 'Depressed' quickly (Book IX, ll. 21, 44-47), while Dante, when admitted to the highest realms of heaven, is forced to acknowledge: 'My language now will be more inadequate, / ... than would that / Of a child still

bathing his tongue at the breast', before crying out: 'O how my speech falls short, how faint it is / For my conception!'<sup>11</sup>

For R. S. Thomas, on the other hand, while he is forced to acknowledge many of the same problems that faced his predecessors, a new element enters in: the silence and seeming intransigence of God himself. 'We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God' (A 104), and this silent God is the source of much of the tension, strain and power of Thomas's poetry. In one of his poems of the 1970s, 'The Absence', he defines God in radically impersonal terms:

It is this great absence  
that is like a presence, that compels  
me to address it without hope  
of a reply. (CP 361)

The silence of God is an ongoing experience of Thomas's poetry, and a fact to which Thomas's readers must return time and again. For Michael Edwards, this compulsion to address God 'without hope / of a reply' is both a result of the Fall and, fascinatingly, an integral part of any poetic address in a fallen world, whether directed towards God or a loved one. Writing of Thomas Hardy's 'Poems of 1912-13', addressed to Hardy's dead wife Emma, Edwards observes:

Against ... speechlessness, he ... speaks his poems, but only, time and again, to address his wife in the full awareness that he is not being heard. The vocative is arguably the case peculiar to poetry. Rather than describing, doesn't poetry address reality? Even when employing the third person, isn't it a means by which we attempt to reach the other, rather as God in Genesis, when 'calling' or naming the world, was in fact, according to the Hebrew, 'calling to it'? ... The pain of poetry, however, is that it never quite attains the other, since the conditions in which it is written, where the world and language are in one way or another fallen, are no longer those in which God called, and in which Adam named the beasts.<sup>12</sup>

If the vocative is indeed 'the case peculiar to poetry', then it is understandable that Thomas should address God so frequently in his work, dangerous as this



proposed interlocution always is. As far as addressing him 'without hope / of a reply' (the line-break allowing existential despair into the poem for a moment before continuing with the idea of a failed dialogue), Edwards suggests that, in a world and in a language which 'are in one way or another fallen', as we have seen repeatedly in the work of these three poets, this failed communication is what a poet can expect. 'The pain of poetry ... is that it never quite attains the other': Hardy could not be heard by Emma in his elegies for her, and perhaps Thomas cannot quite reach God in his poems.

It is in the space of that 'perhaps', however, that Thomas's poetry often works: perhaps God cannot hear him, but perhaps he *can*. Thomas describes God as 'invisible and mute', but never as deaf, and indeed the problem at the heart of his relationship with God is not God's inability to hear him, but rather God's seeming unwillingness to answer him. In a drastically darker sense than George Herbert intended, Thomas's poetry nonetheless works on the same premise as Herbert's final definition of prayer in his first poem of that name: however he addresses God and whatever he says to him, Thomas appears assured that it is 'something understood' ('Prayer(1)').<sup>13</sup>

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So, assuming some possibility of understanding God, and acknowledging the severe difficulty of addressing him in a poem, how best can we begin to explore the character of God as embodied in Thomas's poetry? Writing of Herbert's 'quarrel with God', Thomas contends that Herbert's poetry demonstrates 'both the possibility and the desirability of a friendship with God'; he continues, writing of his own time: 'Friendship is no longer the right way to describe it. The word now is dialogue, encounter, confrontation; but the realities engaged

have not altered all that much.’<sup>14</sup> So what does Thomas’s ‘dialogue, encounter, confrontation’ with God tell us about God’s character? Is a relationship with God still possible in Thomas’s poetry, let alone desirable?

Returning to ‘The Absence’, it seems clear that this poem’s conception of God is very different to that of any poem by Herbert. Indeed, its definition of God as ‘it’ in the first stanza, and its central idea of God as ‘this great absence / that is like a presence’, is reminiscent of the approach of some Christian mystics of history and the branch of theology that resulted from them, namely negative theology. The Catholic poet and critic Kevin Hart provides a useful definition of negative theology, as ‘the discourse which reflects upon positive theology by denying that its language and concepts are adequate to God’.<sup>15</sup> This notion of the denial of traditional positive concepts of theology is exemplified in an excerpt from The Mystical Theology, by the sixth-century mystic Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: in an attempt to speak of God, Pseudo-Dionysius begins by delivering a catalogue of what God is *not*:

nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding, since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence[.]<sup>16</sup>

The fourteenth-century mystic Meister Eckhart also subscribed to this process of negation when speaking of God:

Thou shalt know him without image, without semblance, and without means ... If thou lovest God as God, as spirit, as person, or as image, that must all go.—“Then how shall I love him?” Love him as he is: a not-God, a not-spirit, a not-Person, a not-image[.]<sup>17</sup>

So, just how closely does Thomas subscribe to these ideas of negative theology in his poetry? ‘The Absence’ certainly seems to express similar views

of negation and paradox as the mystics quoted above: his 'great absence / that is like a presence' is reminiscent of Pseudo-Dionysius's conception of God as belonging neither 'to the category of non-existence or to that of existence'. As the poem continues, the speaker moves from the 'it' of Pseudo-Dionysius's God to the 'he' of Meister Eckhart's, 'but he is no more here / than before' (CP 361). In spite of this ongoing absence, however, there is a longing for God's presence expressed with a humility that is striking when contrasted with the comparatively confident assertions (albeit negative assertions) of the two mystics quoted above. Like Dante in heaven, the speaker is forced to acknowledge:

My equations fail  
as my words do. What resource have I  
other than the emptiness without him of my whole  
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?

This is an almost Augustinian expression of longing for God ('you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you'),<sup>18</sup> and can be seen as equally in keeping with the feelings of the psalmist ('As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God' – Psalm 42:1); by the poem's end, the absence of the title refers less to God himself than it does to the speaker's desperate 'emptiness without him'. Ultimately, the poem is not contributing to a discourse concerning how best we can *describe* God: rather it is the expression of the speaker's longing *for* God and an implicit belief that God's absence is not the whole story.

Like 'The Absence', other poems by Thomas seem at first glance to express ideas common to mysticism and negative theology, while at the same time possessing marked differences from them. One such example is 'Kneeling':

Moments of great calm,  
Kneeling before an altar  
Of wood in a stone church

In summer, waiting for the God  
 To speak; the air a staircase  
 For silence; the sun's light  
 Ringing me, as though I acted  
 A great rôle. And the audiences  
 Still; all that close throng  
 Of spirits waiting, as I,  
 For the message.

Prompt me, God;  
 But not yet. When I speak,  
 Though it be you who speak  
 Through me, something is lost.  
 The meaning is in the waiting.

(CP 199)

A need for humility and reverence before God is suggested by the title, and the poem's depiction of these 'Moments of great calm' is aided by its title's status as a present participle: these moments of kneeling are drawn out by the poem, there is a palpable sense of the present moment as experienced by the speaker here, almost of time standing still. The scene is that of a priest leading his congregation towards God, surrounded both by his parishioners and by that 'great cloud of witnesses' of Hebrews 12:1: 'all that close throng / Of spirits'. The moment which the first half of the poem so economically yet meticulously describes is a remarkable one: the priest and his people are 'waiting for the God / To speak', and part of the suspense built up by the relative shortness of the lines and its use of enjambment (all but six of the sixteen lines run on) is the speaker's implicit belief that 'the God' *will* speak, that the question is not 'if' but 'when'. Unlike the God of Pseudo-Dionysius or Meister Eckhart, or even the God of 'The Absence', the God of 'Kneeling' can speak to people.

And yet, as the second verse paragraph begins, the priest wants to defer that moment when God does 'speak / Through' him. He speaks to God directly, even abruptly: 'Prompt me, God', before continuing into the next line: 'But not yet'. In a sense, the speaker is dictating terms to God, and as such this address

would be anathema to a mystic such as Pseudo-Dionysius. There may be an echo here of Augustine's youthful prayer as recalled in Book VIII of his Confessions: 'Give me chastity and continence [Lord], but not yet';<sup>19</sup> if so, perhaps Thomas is pointing to the fallenness of his speaker, even to an adolescent presumption in his address to God. Does the speaker enjoy his 'great rôle' a little too much, with the spotlight of 'the sun's light' on him, rather than on God? As I have already suggested, the poem cherishes these 'moments of calm' and draws them out: the voice of God speaking through the priest will end this calm and when that happens, the poem concludes, 'something is lost. / The meaning is in the waiting.'

The final line embodies one of Thomas's major experiences in his poetry: the experience of waiting for God, and the discovery of meaning in that waiting, quite apart from any direct encounter with God himself. Unlike much of his poetry, however, 'Kneeling' has its speaker explicitly *choose* that God be silent: God's silence is not bemoaned but desired here, as somehow God 'speaking through' the poet-priest (through the reading of scripture? through the liturgy? through a sermon?) would possess less meaning than him *not* speaking. Perhaps the poet is arguing here that a desire for the silence before God to be broken displays a lack of the necessary patience we should display before God, even a presumption before God that he should always answer when called upon (as, implicitly in the final section of the poem, he has done before): instead, the speaker feels, God has much to teach 'the audiences' in the silence and waiting. The echo from Augustine, however, could also suggest that presumption before God is not exclusively the domain of the congregation, and that it is also

displayed by the speaker of the poem himself, thus perhaps casting doubt on the trustworthiness of his closing assertion.

In 'Kneeling', the hidden God, the *deus absconditus* of mystical tradition, is the God of choice for the poet, extending even to the poet petitioning God *not* to speak. Another important poem that has Thomas draw on mystical tradition is 'Via Negativa'. The poem opens with its speaker addressing a silent enquirer concerning his vision of God:

Why no! I never thought other than  
That God is that great absence  
In our lives, the empty silence  
Within, the place where we go  
Seeking, not in hope to  
Arrive or find. (CP 220)

Opening with an exclamation not unlike those used by Donne or Herbert (I can almost imagine the speaker here '[striking] the board, and [crying]', 'Why no!', as in Herbert's 'The Collar'),<sup>20</sup> Thomas takes his title from the 'way of negation' advocated by such Christian mystics as St John of the Cross. Many of the ideas here are later touched on in 'The Absence', and Thomas's speaker asserts that this view of God is not a new departure for his poetry. (It should be noted that the volume in which 'Via Negativa' appeared, *H'm* (1972), is widely viewed as just that, a new departure for Thomas, with precedence given to poems dealing with God rather than with the struggles of rural life or with Wales.)<sup>21</sup> New departure or not, 'Via Negativa', along with 'Kneeling' and 'The Absence', signals the powerful attraction Thomas feels to ideas of mysticism and negative theology.

However, as I have already suggested, this attraction to mysticism co-exists with other, opposing approaches to God and even in a poem such as 'Via

Negativa' these urges running contrary to a way of negation can be identified.

The poem continues:

He keeps the interstices  
 In our knowledge, the darkness  
 Between stars. His are the echoes  
 We follow, the footprints he has just  
 Left. We put our hands in  
 His side hoping to find  
 It warm.

Elaine Shepherd writes sensitively on this section of the poem:

Up to this point [in the poem] ... we are presented with a cosmic scale, and the God indicated in abstract imagery is the ineffable, transcendent Godhead. After the pivotal point ['He keeps the interstices / In our knowledge...'] the reference is to the Christ, God incarnate. There is a marked shift in the relationship of the persona to these two images of God, the source of which lies in the degree of accessibility to God which is perceived. Of the transcendent God the persona has 'no hope to / Arrive or find'. But of God incarnate we read: 'We put our hands in / His side hoping to find...'. Thomas rarely refers to the resurrected Christ in his poetry, and nowhere else is there such an expression of tenderness as here. The absent God may satisfy spiritual integrity, but there is a momentary wistfulness here, not only in hoping to find, but hoping to find it warm, with the warmth of human contact.<sup>22</sup>

It is possible that Shepherd overstates the tenderness in 'Via Negativa', but otherwise I agree with her that, even in a poem so explicitly linked to mystical tradition (as its title suggests), there is a longing in Thomas that reaches beyond the 'absent God' of the mystics. Indeed, at various points in his writing career, Thomas goes to some lengths to distance himself from mysticism. In an article published in 1948, Thomas asserted: 'I haven't much to say to mysticism and other-worldliness ... I am always ready to admit the value of the spirit, but how often do we hear today of the spiritual as something opposed to ideas of nationalism and so on. The truth is that a nation that is fighting for survival cannot afford to change its soul for some obscure spirituality no matter how excellent that may be from the individual's point of view.'<sup>23</sup> At this early point

in his career as a poet, it is his allegiance to Welsh national concerns that makes him wary of mysticism, 'no matter how excellent' he may himself view some of its insights.

Later in his introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, he contrasts the roles of the poet and the mystic: 'To [the mystic] the *Deus absconditus* is immediate; to the poet He is mediated.' He continues: 'The mystic fails to mediate God adequately insofar as he is not a poet. The poet, with possibly less immediacy of apprehension, shows his spiritual concern and his spiritual nature through the medium of language, the supreme symbol.'<sup>24</sup> In short, while the mystic enjoys 'immediate' access to God, the poet can mediate his experience of God more adequately: 'The presentation of religious experience in the most inspired language is poetry', and so the poet, according to Thomas, enjoys impressive advantages over the mystic.

His 1966 article for the TLS, 'A Frame for Poetry', again emphasises a temperament that remains dissatisfied with the mystical approach to God. 'One gets the impression of a general dissatisfaction with Christianity as too rarefied, too mythical, too unrelated to the world of flesh and blood. Yet it has been well called the most material of the great religions. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." "I believe in the resurrection of the body." ... in what other religion worthy of the name do flesh and blood, bread and wine, earth and water, beasts and flowers play so prominent and important a part?'<sup>25</sup> He goes on to allow a place for mysticism in Christianity ('I do not wish to be too restrictive in my interpretation of Christianity'), but his emphasis as a poet rests on the material nature of much of the worship in Christianity, from which metaphoric resonances are extracted. As Julian Gitzen remarks: 'An empiricist, Thomas can



draw no comfort from the alternative of mysticism. To be conceivable to him, the Almighty must assume some tangible form.<sup>26</sup>

It is to this possibility that ‘the Almighty’ might ‘assume some tangible form’ that I wish to turn now. Elaine Shepherd, writing on ‘Via Negativa’, argued that mid-way through that poem the emphasis shifts from ‘the ineffable, transcendent Godhead’ to ‘the Christ, God incarnate’, and she recognised that this shift radically altered ‘the relationship of the persona to ... God’: ‘the source [of this shift] ... lies in the degree of accessibility to God which is perceived.’<sup>27</sup> Up to now, we have been considering the mysterious nature of the hidden God, the *deus absconditus* of mystical tradition, and I have noted the powerful attraction Thomas’s poetry often feels towards an approach that emphasises the unknowability of God. However, Thomas, like Tennyson before him, repeatedly asks the questions: what is God like? Is he a God of love, or does the cruelty of much of the natural world and much of humanity reveal a cruel God? Implicit in these questions is a belief that they can be answered, that God can indeed be known, at least in part. These questions remained at the centre of Thomas’s poetic ventures throughout his fifty years as a published poet, and in a sense were never answered.

However, for the rest of this chapter, I want to turn to the figure of ‘the Christ, God incarnate’ in Thomas’s poetry, and attempt to ascertain the difference, if any, the figure of Christ makes to the hidden God of so much of Thomas’s poetry. If one of the reasons why Thomas can never bring himself to fully embrace mysticism and the *via negativa* as an answer to his questions concerning God is that he views it as ‘too rarefied ... too unrelated to the world

of flesh and blood', then what does he make of Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, and the answers he proposed to give regarding the nature of God?

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Jesus Christ enjoys a troubled position in much of Thomas's poetry and prose. At times he is cited in a wholly positive light; more frequently, there is considerable ambivalence concerning how Thomas should view him. As Thomas wrote in a letter to D. Z. Phillips concerning the nature of his religious belief: 'All is ambivalence, multivalence even.'<sup>28</sup> Turning to Thomas's prose first, we can see an example of Christ viewed in a positive light in 'A Frame for Poetry': in this essay, Thomas is defending the inclusion of a poem in his anthology of religious verse 'describing some of the more biological functions of the human body':

The poem was adjudged obscene [by an unnamed critic], and yet if the ordinary parts and functions of the human body cannot be viewed as holy, what can? And what are we to make of the Incarnation? It seems that we have come a long way from the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, the friend of publicans and sinners, "a man gluttonous and a wine-bibber", who said to the whore, "neither do I condemn thee. Go, and sin no more"; who ended his life upon a cross in the midday heat of Palestine with the blood dripping from the wounds of the nails.<sup>29</sup>

Here, Thomas cites the Incarnation as justification for viewing 'the ordinary parts and functions of the human body' as 'holy': he therefore stresses the essential humanity of Jesus, and points out the controversial nature of much of what he says and does in the gospels. Pointedly, his description of Jesus stops short of any account of his resurrection, but that is in keeping with the context in which Jesus is invoked: clearly, 'the figure of Jesus of Nazareth' here is a fascinating one, and Thomas views him in an overwhelmingly positive light.

Earlier in the same essay, Thomas is considering the way in which, throughout its history, Christianity has maintained 'a reciprocal relationship with

the culture of its converts. The main reason for this surely is the poetic nature of the original message, which allows itself to be interpreted and expressed in an infinite number of new ways. “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and for ever”, is assuredly one of the hard sayings of the Bible. If the message is the man, then Jesus was a poet, and he changes and grows as each new epoch explores and develops the resources of that living poetry.<sup>30</sup> The figure of Christ as poet dates back at least as far as Matthew Arnold, and it is one to which Thomas returns frequently in his prose. In an interview with John Ormond for the BBC, broadcast in 1972, Thomas asserts:

poetry is religion, religion is poetry. The message of the New Testament is poetry. Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor; and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as priest and as preacher as one who is to present poetry[.]<sup>31</sup>

There is a lot here, and a lot that could be said in response to it: all that I need to observe is that Thomas re-states his view that ‘Christ was a poet’, and thus places himself in illustrious company. As to the question of Christ’s divinity, he remains silent.

Back in ‘A Frame for Poetry’, Thomas seems about to address the question of Christ’s divinity, before again stopping short:

In another sense [to Jesus being a poet], he is God’s metaphor, and speaks to us so. “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” “I am the bread of life.” “And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.” How can anyone who is not a poet ever fully understand the gospels with their accumulation of metaphor? “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Yet, how shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor or symbol?<sup>32</sup>

So, Christ is not just a poet, he is also ‘God’s metaphor’, the means by which God reveals himself: “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). But what does this actually mean? How can a man, poet or no poet, act as a

'metaphor' for God? Why does Thomas seemingly accept Jesus's statement from John 14, when if anyone else said it they would be guilty of, at the very least, arrogant presumption, at worst, blasphemy (a charge often made against Jesus by the Pharisees)? Instead of pursuing the implications of Christ as 'God's metaphor', Thomas turns instead to the importance of the poet in understanding the gospels, in the process exalting the poet to Shelleyan heights as unacknowledged interpreter of Christian truth.

The most sustained response Thomas makes to the question of how he viewed Christ is in an interview given in 1990 to Ned Thomas and John Barnie. About half-way through the interview, Barnie turns to the subjects of 'soul', 'spirit' and God in Thomas's poetry, and asks the question:

Would you consider yourself more a deist now than a Christian? By deist I mean one who believes in the existence of God without necessarily accepting divine revelation. In this context, how do you view Christ?

Thomas begins his response by registering his dislike of labels, before acknowledging:

I find difficulty with Christology although we no longer go to the stake for heresy. But one can't be too dogmatic either way. "What think you of Christ?" has been a key question for nearly 2000 years. At times his divinity, in its unique sense, seems to me a product of the mythopoeic imagination. At others the Trinitarian doctrine seems best to do justice to the mystery of personality or the divine economy.<sup>33</sup>

He then proceeds to reject the charge of deism and to praise 'so-called primitive people like the Bushman and the American Indian' for their closeness to 'a living God', in contrast to 'the predatory, pragmatic, white man', before returning once more to the question of how he views Jesus:

How can one be dogmatic about Christ? He was a poet and drew his imagery largely from nature. I use the past tense, while disclaiming deism. Presumably he spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. How do I talk to a living Christ in Welsh or English? But then there are the bread and the wine. ('Probings' 46)

A poet who drew his imagery from nature (like Thomas); perhaps divine, perhaps not, a troubling figure; and there is the issue of language, for Thomas always important: these are all part of Thomas's 'difficulty with Christology'.

Many of Thomas's critics have also recognised his struggles with the figure of Christ. Julian Gitzen, for instance, remarks: 'it is significant that the poet's thematic emphasis falls far more heavily upon a creative God rather than upon a redemptive Christ. He requires a God chiefly to account for and give meaning and purpose to creation; in consequence, he remains more fascinated by the implications of Genesis than those of the Crucifixion.'<sup>34</sup> Gitzen goes on to observe that this relative lack of interest in 'a redemptive Christ' and the Crucifixion is indicative of Thomas's 'predominantly metaphysical rather than ethical concerns ... Though he is painfully conscious of human weakness and evil, he is far less preoccupied with them than were such fellow believers as Auden and Lowell.' A. E. Dyson contends that Thomas's 'theology of Jesus ... seems strange against any known traditional norm',<sup>35</sup> while D. Z. Phillips, reading the poem 'Directions' from the 1981 collection Between Here and Now, observes: 'The central symbol of the Christian faith creates difficulties for him.'<sup>36</sup>

I am one of those  
 who sees from the arms opened  
                   to embrace the future  
 the shadow of the Cross fall  
                   on the smoothest of surfaces  
                   causing me to stumble.                   (CP 374)

Both the figure of Christ and his cross frequently prove to be stumbling blocks for Thomas.

However, John Powell Ward recognises, particularly in Thomas's collections of the 1990s – Counterpoint (1990), Mass for Hard Times (1992) and No Truce with the Furies (1995) – a 'new, if slight preoccupation with the figure of Christ':<sup>37</sup> while he goes on to concur with Dyson regarding Thomas's presentation of Christ ('where Thomas's Christ actually figures in the theological scheme of things ... is hard to say'),<sup>38</sup> this new 'preoccupation' with Christ is worthy of attention, particularly when we consider the centrality of Christ to the Christian tradition to which Thomas belongs.

It should really be a truism that the figure of Christ is fundamental to any understanding of Christianity, but nonetheless it does need to be said. As arguably the central tenet of Christianity, and that which distinguishes it from Judaism, the Incarnation – the coming of Jesus Christ, 'the Word made flesh', the Son of God, into the world – has much to say to all the issues we have considered so far, particularly the question of the knowability of God. Mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart warn against the belief that God is personal and can be known, while Jesus, in a passage quoted by Thomas in 'A Frame for Poetry', declares: 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9), before going on to call his followers his friends (John 15:15). This demonstrates a familiarity and closeness between Son of God and human believer that so much of mysticism and negative theology works to discount as impossible and, indeed, sacrilegious. That Jesus's words are seen as true and profound, rather than sacrilegious or blasphemous, is dependent on his divinity, something the early Christians accepted and felt was demonstrated by Jesus's resurrection from the dead. His resurrection is therefore central to his claims to divinity (as Geoffrey Hill puts it in The Triumph of Love: 'If Christ / be not

risen, Christians are petty / temple-schismatics, justly / cast out of the law'),<sup>39</sup> and if Christ truly was 'God on earth', then he has a lot to say to Thomas's poetic search for the hidden God.

As in the interview quoted above, however, Thomas has avoided outright declarations of belief or unbelief in the resurrection of Jesus; perhaps his most sustained articulation of his position comes in his autobiography, where he recalls the BBC interview with John Ormond from which I quoted earlier:

In a television programme he said that the resurrection was a metaphor. So he didn't believe in it? But, of course, his point concerned the question of language. We do not have hard historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ. What we have are the words of the authors of the gospels and Saint Paul. They had a strange experience. They believed that the risen Christ had appeared to them. Accordingly, they sought to transmit their vision to future ages through the medium of words. If we have not had a vision of the risen Christ, we have to accept the verbal evidence of the Evangelists. But language is a symbol, a description of something in terms of something else. And, for R.S., that was the meaning of metaphor too. (A 84)

Thomas does not opt decisively for belief or unbelief here: he accepts the belief of the apostles, and notes that, because that belief is mediated in language, it is possible to take the gospel accounts of the resurrection as metaphor ('a description of something in terms of something else'). Just what that original 'something' was that is described at the Resurrection is not made clear.

Thomas's concern with language here is echoed in the Ned Thomas-John Barnie interview: 'How do I talk to a living Christ in Welsh or English?' His extreme scepticism regarding the possibilities of translation and translatability is expressed in his lecture of 1977, 'The Creative Writer's Suicide', delivered in Welsh; it relates his anguish at being unable to write poetry in Welsh, the language he loves but nonetheless his second language, after English (see my discussion of this tension in chapter two, above). Thomas's comment regarding

the possibilities of speaking to 'a living Christ' who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic is therefore in keeping with his conceptions of language: for Thomas, language is just too much a defining element of consciousness and sensibility, and difference of language too big a restriction. Again, this is in keeping with his self-proclaimed 'difficulty with Christology': if Christ is not divine, then Thomas's objection concerning language stands; if he *is* divine, it does not, unless the Son of God is confined to a post-Babel world.

So, turning from Thomas's prose considerations of Christ to those of his poetry, the first thing to notice is how rarely Christ appears in the poetry before the 1990s. There are notable exceptions to this rule: one such poem is 'The Musician', from the 1961 collection Tares. The poem opens at a recital by the Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler, with the poet in attendance.

The seats all taken, I found myself pushed  
 On to the stage with a few others,  
 So near that I could see the toil  
 Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth  
 Fluttering under the fine skin  
 And the indelible veins of his smooth brow. (CP 104)

These are marvellous descriptive lines, particularly the likening of pulse to moth, and the poem conveys the sense of unanticipated intimacy between performer and observer as a moment of grace:

we sat there or warmly applauded  
 This player who so beautifully suffered  
 For each of us upon his instrument.

It is with these lines that the focus of the poem shifts, from Kreisler to Christ:

So it must have been on Calvary  
 In the fiercer light of the thorn's halo:  
 The men standing by and that one figure,  
 The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,  
 Making such music as lives still.  
 And no one daring to interrupt  
 Because it was himself that he played



And closer than all of them the God listened.

This final section of the poem seems to suggest that the significance of Kreisler's suffering for his art can only find its true parallel in Christ's suffering on the cross, and that is a huge claim to make; this section also attempts to explicate a moment of grace ('So it must have been on Calvary...'), a venture that always threatens to rob a moment of that grace. D. Z. Phillips goes a step further and notes that the central analogy of the poem, between the musician's performance and the crucifixion of Jesus, 'is a false one. It has to falsify the facts in an effort to achieve an effect ... It simply is not true that no one dared to interrupt at the Cross "Because it was himself that he played". On the contrary, he was reviled by the majority and the silence of the believers was one of dismay, not of awe.'<sup>40</sup> It seems to me that Phillips is correct here, and that this poem's appropriation of the crucifixion only succeeds if we liken a man's violent death to a violin recital; whether Jesus was a poet, the Son of God or a mere carpenter, the analogy is forced, and the description of the crowds at the crucifixion 'not daring to interrupt' both falsifies the facts and serves to sentimentalise the scene.

The cross reappears in *Pietà* (1966), particularly in the title poem and the final poem of the collection, 'In Church'. 'Pietà' is a pared-down ten-line lyric that is relatively conventional in its description of Calvary after the crucifixion of Christ: 'Always the same hills / Crowd the horizon, / Remote witnesses / Of the still scene' (CP 159). Its focus, however, is less on the scene evoked by the title and with which the poem ends ('the Body / That is back in the cradle / Of a maiden's arms'), and more on 'The tall Cross, / Sombre, untenanted'. This image is taken up by the closing lines of 'In Church', which begins with its

speaker (presumably a priest) in a church 'After the few people have gone': as such, it is a useful companion-piece to 'Kneeling' and its evocation of a church service.

Often I try  
To analyse the quality  
Of its silences. Is this where God hides  
From my searching? (CP 180)

The church building in which the speaker stands is described as 'the hard ribs / Of a body that our prayers have failed / To animate', and it is in the silence and stillness of this unanimated body that the poem concludes:

There is no other sound  
In the darkness but the sound of a man  
Breathing, testing his faith  
On emptiness, nailing his questions  
One by one to an untenanted cross.

This idea of the speaker 'testing his faith / On emptiness' is a central one for Thomas, as we have already noted, and his repeated experience of the absence of God in his poetry is here underlined by the 'untenanted cross' to which he focuses his gaze. This 'untenanted cross' is in keeping with the Protestant tradition of having empty crosses, rather than crucifixes, in their churches, to emphasise the idea that Christ is risen; however, the significance of this empty cross for the overall effect of the poem can be seen by comparing 'In Church' with a remarkably similar earlier poem, 'In a Country Church'.

At first, the experiences of the two poems appear identical. Here is the opening stanza of the earlier poem:

To one kneeling down no word came,  
Only the wind's song, saddening the lips  
Of the grave saints, rigid in glass;  
Or the dry whisper of unseen wings,  
Bats not angels, in the high roof. (CP 67)

These bats appear in both poems, and their presence instead of angels serves to underline the sense of heaven's silence ('no word came'; 'Is this where God hides / From my searching?'). However, it is with the second stanza of 'In a Country Church' that the two poems diverge:

Was he balked by silence? He kneeled long,  
And saw love in a dark crown  
Of thorns blazing, and a winter tree  
Golden with fruit of a man's body.

The answer to silence in this poem is Christ on the cross, and there is a very real sense that Christ is *on* the cross here. He is 'love in a dark crown / Of thorns blazing', and his body is the golden fruit of the cross's 'winter tree': this tree has no right to produce such fruit, just as the crucifixion at first sight is a terrible tragedy rather than an expression of God's love and life's eventual victory over death. This remarkably positive response to silence is dependent on a cross that is still 'tenanted': the presence of Christ on the cross enables the speaker to recognise God's love, whereas 'In Church' ends with unanswered questions and emptiness. Christ on the cross comes to possess enormous significance for Thomas's questioning of God in these two poems.

Moving through Thomas's subsequent collections, there is a great deal of God as 'that great absence / In our lives' (CP 220), 'the diposer of the issues / Of life' (CP 209), but not much about Christ. In the landmark collection *H'm*, there is 'The Coming', a re-telling of the incarnation of Christ in the mode of the mythic poems that dominate the volume:<sup>41</sup>

And God held in his hand  
A small globe. Look, he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour.

(CP 234)

As with so many of the poems in H'm, God is the Creator of few words here and 'The son', presumably Jesus, doesn't even receive a name. Having been shown the world, the son's eyes are focussed on 'a bare tree', to which 'Many people / Held out their thin arms', 'as though waiting / For a vanished April / To return to its crossed / Boughs'; the poem ends with the son's words: 'Let me go there.' This visit to God's throne room and insight into Christ's decision to enter the world to die is less majestic and awe-struck than Milton's account in Paradise Lost Book III, but in keeping with the tone of H'm and Thomas's other volumes of the 1970s: God is terse, unapproachable and seemingly devoid of any feeling towards his creation.

And so we come to Counterpoint, Thomas's collection of 1990 and one of his most ambitious.<sup>42</sup> John Powell Ward described it as 'Thomas's most exclusively religious [volume] yet',<sup>43</sup> while in her book-length study of Thomas, Elaine Shepherd devotes an entire chapter to Counterpoint.<sup>44</sup> The collection consists of fifty-three poems, divided into four sections: 'B. C.', 'Incarnation', 'Crucifixion' and 'A. D.'. The poems themselves are untitled (as in Thomas's previous collection, The Echoes Return Slow (1988)), while the headings of the four sections suggest a broad historical scope to the volume: significantly, this history revolves around the coming of Christ. Accepting the centrality of Christ to the structure of the collection, the question must be asked: how does Christ appear in the actual poems? Does Christ make any difference to the poetry's conception of God as the sequence progresses?

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The first section, entitled 'B.C.', describes a world before Christ. In these fifteen untitled poems, there are several re-workings of the Genesis account of the

creation of the world, alongside references to Jacob (Counterpoint, p. 14), the tower of Babel (C 16) and Abraham's original homeland of Ur (C 9): in certain respects, then, this is the Book of Genesis according to R. S. Thomas. Indeed, the opening poems are concerned with origins, both of creation and of the book: the first poem, for instance – a sonnet – seems to bemoan the very fact of its existence:

This page should be left blank:  
 snow where the abominable footprints  
 have not yet appeared; sand  
 for the pioneer to stare over  
 in his questioning of the horizon. (C 8)

I am reminded here of Michael Edwards's contention that: 'Literature occurs because we inhabit a fallen world.'<sup>45</sup> For the speaker of this poem, the fact that there is the need for its consideration of origins is evidence that the purity of those origins was not maintained: 'the abominable footprints' (of primitive man? or signifying the words on the page?) have appeared, the pioneer has not been content just to 'stare' but has begun his expedition towards the horizon, and so purity has proved too fragile and short-lived. The questions that attempt to probe the primordial world ('What were its contents prior / to creation by divine mind? / And where did the viruses come from?') are left hanging at the end of the octave, recognised as vain efforts to recover what has been lost. The sestet then moves from a present complete with viruses back to an imaginary past, the imagination being the only device open to the speaker in order to explore this past:

If you can imagine a brow puckered  
 before thought, imagine this page  
 immaculately conceived  
 in the first tree, with man rising  
 from on all fours endlessly to begin  
 puckering it with his language.

Counterpoint, like its predecessor The Echoes Return Slow, has Thomas demonstrate remarkable visual awareness regarding how his poems look on the page. This opening poem is constantly aware of its visual impact on the page, that indeed it is printed on paper: it asks the reader to 'imagine [it] / immaculately conceived / in the first tree', again trying in vain to recover a primordial purity and to ignore the fact that access to 'the first tree' is now forbidden, post-Eden. The sestet then concludes with the picture of primitive man 'rising / from on all fours endlessly to begin / puckering [the page] with his language': the image is not of silence being broken, but of the page being inscribed with words. Somehow, as man stands on two legs, he instantly acquires the ability to write, and the process of writing is recognised as a series of endless beginnings, just as, with the conclusion of this poem, another poem is about to be considered on the page opposite.

In interview, Thomas has spoken of 'the inferiority of reading aloud to reading a poem on the page',<sup>46</sup> and at least one critic has observed that Thomas's poems 'work *visually* more than aurally: Thomas's rhetoric is generally one of the written even more than the spoken word, and it is not in fact easy to read him aloud adequately'.<sup>47</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in Counterpoint, where the poems, like this opening one, defy the reader to translate them from the written to the spoken word.

The second poem in the collection takes up the idea of origins, but this time concerns itself with the aural more than the visual: as it mirrors the first poem, it seems to correct it:

No, in the beginning was silence  
that was broken by the word  
forbidding it to be broken.

(C 9)

The paradox here is related to that of the first poem: just as the page is marked by words expressing the desire that it be left blank, so the commandment to remain silent breaks the silence. As the poem continues, it re-works various parts of the Genesis narrative ('a rib // being removed out of the side / of the androgynous hero'), before concluding with the recognition that something has gone wrong:

The mumbling  
of the Host by reptilian

lips. The shivering of love's  
mirror as truth's frost  
begins mercilessly to take hold.

As so often in Thomas's poetry, 'truth' takes precedence over 'love' here, just as it takes precedence over 'beauty' in 'Petition' (CP 209), and its 'frost / begins mercilessly to take hold': as a result, 'love's / mirror' shivers, suggesting that it both shudders in the cold of truth and that it may even be shattered by truth. The 'reptilian // lips' that appear to be responsible for this subordination of love to truth may belong to the serpent of Genesis 3, though another poem casts doubt on that: 'Of course there was no serpent. / The tree's fruit was a mirror' (C 11), suggesting that these lips may belong to the first human beings themselves. Whoever they belong to, any idea of an Edenic life is soon superseded by Thomas's brutal truth: it seems that for Thomas, as for Proust, the only possible paradise is one we've lost.

So where is God in all of this? Throughout 'B. C.' God is a shadowy, largely silent figure, who defies description: one poem demonstrates this clearly in spite of its speaker's opening assertion:

I know him.  
He is the almost anonymous,  
the one with the near perfect  
alibi, the face over us that lacks

nothing but an expression.  
 He is the shape in the mist  
 on the mountain we would ascend  
 disintegrating as we compose it. (C 15)

'Almost anonymous', 'the *near* perfect / alibi', 'lacks / nothing *but* an expression': each one of these descriptions is qualified and undermined, with the result that none of these emerges as a confident assertion concerning God's character (or appearance). This technique is in keeping with the title of the collection, Counterpoint: as we witnessed in the opening two poems, and the second's apparent correction of the first, no one assertive voice is allowed to dominate here. Instead other, more sceptical voices break in and undercut the observations, just as various melodies can come together in counterpoint in the one piece of music.

In the lines above, God is tentatively defined, but the overall result is incomplete, rendering the speaker's opening boast ('I know him') an inaccurate one. From the sixth line onwards, we seem to have progressed from Genesis to Exodus, and to Moses receiving the Law at Mount Sinai; however, God's message for his people here is always just out of reach. Whether it is 'the shape' of God in the mist, or the mountain itself that disintegrates as the speaker attempts to 'compose' it, remains unclear at the poem's end, as does the whole question of 'composition': is the 'we' of the poem trying to *create* a mountain here? Or are they attempting to create the God whom the speaker claims to know in the opening line? Either way, the attempt fails, and the sequence continues.

A few pages later, a renewed attempt is made to describe the God of this world 'before Christ'; it is a more tentative, humbler approach, and it results in a God who has frequently been a feature of Thomas's poetic vision:



There is a being, they say,  
 neither body nor spirit,  
 that is more power than reason, more reason  
 than love, whose origins  
 are unknown, who is apart  
 and with us, the silence  
 to which we appeal, the architect  
 of our failure. (C 20)

Here is a God with whom readers of Thomas's earlier poetry will be familiar: 'the silence / to which we appeal' could be taken from any number of other poems, such as 'Via Negativa' or 'The Absence'. In this poem, the speaker is less confident than his predecessor in the poem discussed above: there is no assertion of 'I know him' here, but instead a forced reliance on hearsay ('There is a being, they say'). This 'being' places 'power', 'reason' and 'love' in descending order, and in so doing partly fulfils the conventional description of the Old Testament ('B.C.') God. It has power, but on the whole cannot be reasoned with; it is more a God of reason than of love, though characterised more by scrupulous legalism than by generosity or the granting of unmerited blessing. The final lines of this quotation describe this God as 'the architect / of our failure', an image that suggests a divinity actively seeking to bring about suffering and defeat among human beings. As elsewhere in this section of Counterpoint, however, any sense of certainty about God is undercut by the tentative nature of the poem's enquiry; ultimately, the God of this poem – 'neither body nor spirit', 'origins ... unknown', characterised by silence – is more 'apart' than 'with us', and is therefore unknowable.

The God of 'B.C.' is, naturally, a pre-Incarnation God, an unknown quantity. The few human attempts to get to know him have failed: Jacob 'wrestled / to no end' (C 14), while 'the mountain' where the speaker hoped to

'compose' God proved more elusive than he had anticipated. By the end of this first section of Counterpoint, then, God is resolutely hidden from view.

The 'Incarnation' section of the collection (containing eleven poems) is heralded by a poem ending with 'a god' 'star[ing] / down into the empty / womb and [being] engulfed by it' (C 22). It opens with an address to one of the Magi, however, and the figure of an incarnate 'god' is not addressed directly until the final poem. Instead, the reader is presented with a series of inverted incarnations and nativities: 'The Nativity? No. / Something has gone wrong' (C 29). Either the Christ-child is not present – 'There is a hole in the stable / acid rain drips through / onto an absence' (C 29) – or he is hideously changed. One poem seems to describe a dualistic incarnation, with the wrong Christ being adored by the spectators:

the changeling  
in the manger. Those limbs –  
pistons. That smile  
that had the polish  
of the machine, lubricating  
their gifts. (C 30)

It is the machine incarnate, the machine 'made flesh' that receives worship, while the real Christ, 'found wandering / in the country, babbling / of love and truthfulness', is crucified. References to changelings and to man's failure 'to see the beast for the god' (C 32) suggest that Thomas has borrowed from Yeats's vision of 'The Second Coming' for his inverted nativities ('what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?'). The result of the 'Incarnation' in Counterpoint, then, is not 'joy to the world', let alone a God who has made himself known through his Son; instead, there is confusion and unease concerning the future, a fear that 'the machine' has won out over

'love and truthfulness'. The overall tone of this section is pessimistic: as the central poem puts it, 'The truth is Pilate not / lingering for an answer' (C 29).

'Incarnation' ends with a poem that seems to acknowledge the confusion and uncertainty of much of the section it concludes, and perhaps acts as a personal acknowledgement of Thomas's own struggles with the person of Christ:

I have been student of your love  
and have not graduated. Setting  
my own questions, I bungled  
the examination: Where? Why? When?

Knowing there were no answers  
you allowed history to invigilate  
my desires. Time and again I was  
caught with a crib up my sleeve. (C 34)

The poet addresses God, as he does throughout so much of his poetry: this is what an earlier poem describes as the 'syntactical / compulsion to incorporate / [God] in the second person' (C 15). As a 'student of your love', the speaker here seems to acknowledge his shortcomings: he has 'not graduated' and, if love is what he is meant to learn from God (love of God, or love of his neighbour? perhaps both?), then this is a painful admission. Elaine Shepherd concludes her study of Thomas's poetry by quoting the author of the fourteenth-century mystical work The Cloud of Unknowing: "God cannot be thought but he may well be loved." It is, then, a paradox that in Thomas's work there is a sense of almost agonizing thought, but not a very great sense of love.<sup>48</sup> It is as if Thomas is admitting to that deficiency here, at the end of a section that has failed to come up with any joy or loving devotion concerning the coming of Christ into the world; frequently it is not even Christ who appears in the poems, but the machine incarnate, suggesting a doubt on the part of the poet that God's love ever could extend to coming to the world and 'taking on flesh'. Perhaps one of the reasons

that the poet has not graduated with an understanding of God's love is that he remains deeply ambivalent concerning that love: this is certainly borne out by much of his poetry.

He goes on to admit that he has 'bungled / the examination', presumably of God's love, even though – or is it more accurate to say, *because?* – he has set himself the questions. 'Where? Why? When?': there is no 'Who?' here, no attempt to get to know the God whose 'love' he is attempting to study. Instead, there is a desire to understand the workings of the world and, presumably, its Creator, and these are questions that reach so high and presume so much that God knows, according to the poem's second stanza, there are 'no answers'. As the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart and others have taught throughout history, "God cannot be thought", comprehended and so made safe, and it seems that in this poem at least, Thomas is ready to acknowledge this, having learned from the invigilators history has appointed over him.

As the poem concludes, the speaker acknowledges that time and again he has tried to cheat in his attempts to graduate in the knowledge of God's love, trying to pass off other people's work as his own: 'Time and again I was / caught with a crib up my sleeve.' Standing at the end of a section entitled 'Incarnation', the double-meaning of 'crib' is clear; so is the speaker admitting to the centrality of the Nativity and the coming of the Christ-child here to his own understanding of God's love? Or do these lines suggest that Christ's 'crib' is a false answer, and too simplistic an image with which to understand God's love? Is this why the invigilator keeps catching him out? Is the poet wrong to resort to this crib? Arguably this second reading of these lines is more in keeping with Thomas's

troubled considerations of the Nativity throughout this section; however, the lack of a neat conclusion to this poem is in keeping with the poet's experiences as 'student of [God's] love'. He has not graduated in the knowledge of God's love, and neither has this poem, though the humble and quietly moving admissions of his mistakes in the past suggest that there is hope for the poet yet.

Overall, the figure of Christ in the 'Incarnation' section of Counterpoint remains remarkably elusive: if anything, this section only reveals a *Christus absconditus*, even without any direct correlation between Christ and God. The section entitled 'Crucifixion', however – the shortest in the book, containing only five poems – begins with this correlation, albeit expressed within what looks like a Manichean view of God:

God's fool, God's jester  
 capering at his right hand  
 in torment, proving the fallacy  
 of the impassible, reminding  
 him of omnipotence's limits. (C 36)

This figure of 'God's jester' has appeared already in Counterpoint, in the 'B.C.' section ('the jester at his side', in C 19), and is suggestive of a dualistic vision of divinity. In this poem, however, God's jester seems to represent Christ: he is 'at [God's] right hand' in the second line, and the 'Crucifixion' which this section explores impacts directly on him, with the gruesome image of him 'capering ... / in torment'. This 'torment' in turn has an effect on God, 'proving the fallacy of the impassible, reminding / him of omnipotence's limits'. Arguably, God suffers through Christ in this poem, in spite of theological objections that he cannot, that he is 'impassible': the next four lines emphasise this suffering with frightening clarity:

I have seen the figure  
 on our human tree, burned

into it by thought's lightning  
and it writhed as I looked.

'Reminding / him of omnipotence's limits' points to the very heart of the paradox that is the crucifixion, let alone the incarnation: that the Christian God can suffer once he is 'made flesh' in Christ. Kierkegaard, one of the greatest influences on Thomas's religious explorations, described this paradox at the heart of Christianity in his Concluding Unscientific Postscript (1846):

But that that which in accordance with its nature is eternal comes into existence in time, is born, grows up, and dies – this is a breach with all thinking.<sup>49</sup>

Kierkegaard goes on to argue, as he does repeatedly through all his writings, that such a 'breach with all thinking' can therefore only be accepted by faith:

This is the paradox-religious sphere, the sphere of faith. It can be believed altogether – against the understanding. If anyone imagines that he understands it, he can be sure that he misunderstands it.<sup>50</sup>

Yet again, we are reminded of the impossibility of understanding the ways of God, but also of the possibility of responding to Christ's death by believing in it.

In this poem, with a directness he failed to achieve in the earlier 'The Musician', Thomas seems to stare unflinchingly at the crucifixion and at the writhing 'figure / on our human tree', and captures something of the confusion, terror and suffering of the scene before him, a scene that stands both at the heart of the Christian faith and as the central poem in Counterpoint:

With what crown  
plurality but with thorns?  
Whose is the mirthless laughter  
at the beloved irony  
at his side? ...

What are the stars  
but time's fires going out  
before ever the crucified  
can be taken down?

(C 36)

As in so much of Thomas's poetry, and certainly throughout Counterpoint, these questions go unanswered, and the mystery and paradox of the crucifixion remains at the poem's end. However, as the poet 'stare[s] up into the darkness / of [God's] countenance', he seems to display some hope that one day, that darkness will be lifted. 'Remembering, / as one goes out into space, / on the way to the sun, / how dark it will grow', the speaker implies that at some point at the end of his journey, he will reach 'the sun'; in the meantime, he continues to stare into the darkness that is his experience of God at present,

knowing it  
 a reflection of the three days and nights  
 at the back of love's looking-  
 glass even a god must spend. (C 36)

These lines also suggest hope, an assurance that God's present darkness is necessary but temporary: 'even a god' must spend time 'at the back of love's looking- / glass', though why this is the case is not made clear. Mirrors, of course, are a form of counterpoint themselves, and they are a central motif in this collection, both as a poetic image in the poems and in the book's practice of placing certain poems opposite each other, to act as mirror-images of similar themes (as in the opening two, discussed above). (This follows on from The Echoes Return Slow and its practice of placing a prose account of an experience in Thomas's life opposite a poem dealing with the same event.) Wherever 'the back of love's looking- / glass' might be, or whatever it may mean, these lines suggest that at the end of 'three days and nights', this 'god' may emerge (resurrected?), and the speaker seems largely to welcome and watch for this.

Thomas does not frequently explore the notion of Christ's resurrection, and it is worth noting that in Counterpoint he pointedly refuses to follow this 'Crucifixion' section with one dealing with Christ rising again. In the first poem

of this section, I have argued that the speaker displays hope that ‘the darkness / of [God’s] countenance’ will one day end and that, after ‘three days and nights’, God will emerge from behind ‘love’s looking- / glass’. This implicit hope for a resurrection does not quite make it to the poem on the opposite page, which begins:

Not the empty tomb  
but the uninhabited  
cross. (C 37)

Yet again, Thomas turns to the idea of ‘the uninhabited cross’, or the ‘untenanted cross’ as it was in ‘Pietà’ and ‘In Church’: the overarching idea is the same. The cross is empty, but that does not lead to the conclusion that Christ is risen: as with ‘In Church’, it only emphasises the believer’s experiences of God and/or Christ as absent. Thomas explicitly shifts his focus away from ‘the empty tomb’, an oft-cited symbol of Christ’s resurrection, and instead keeps the reader’s eyes fixed on ‘the uninhabited / cross’. Accordingly, the poetry can address the crucifixion while remaining dubious that the resurrection was anything more than ‘a metaphorical use of language’.<sup>51</sup>

In spite of this decision to emphasise the cross rather than the empty tomb, this poem does allow for the possibility of new life: ‘Look long enough / and you will see the arms / put on leaves’. Implicit here is the importance of patience, of looking ‘long enough’, in religious observance, a virtue Thomas extols frequently in his poetry: ‘The meaning is in the waiting’. The result of this patience is a vision of new life on the cross:

Not a crown  
of thorns, but a crown of flowers  
haloing it, with a bird singing  
as though perched on paradise’s threshold.



No longer 'uninhabited', the cross has a bird resting on it, who sings as if the cross were 'paradise's threshold', which indeed it was for one of the thieves crucified alongside Christ: after asking Jesus to remember him, he was assured that 'today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43).

The poem moves from this sense of eternity and hope back to the present day: the speaker criticizes the 'over-furnish[ing]' of the Christian faith, including himself in his criticism. 'Our churches / are as limousines in the procession / towards heaven', he claims, before asserting that 'the verities remain': a 'de-nuclearised' cross', cured of any attachments to the present nuclear age, and the elements of the Eucharist, the bread and the wine which represent the body and blood of Christ ('the chalice's / ichor' is a neat summary of the significance of the communion wine). It is notable that these symbols are 'verities', while the poem – and indeed the whole sequence – remains sceptical about the reality of what they represent.

The faith described in this poem is without an object: its cross is uninhabited, with no mention of a resurrected Christ. It must therefore be asked: without a resurrected Christ, how can these 'verities' possess any power? Without an object of belief, what good is the faith of the speaker and the churches he describes? A risen Christ, like an incarnate God, is, as Kierkegaard puts it, 'a breach with all thinking', but that is where he argues faith comes in. Elsewhere in his writings, Kierkegaard defined Christianity as 'the eternal essential truth which has come into being in time':

It has proclaimed itself as the *Paradox*, and it has required of the individual the inwardness of faith in relation to that which stamps itself as an offence to the Jews and a folly to the Greeks – and an absurdity to the understanding.<sup>52</sup>

What Kierkegaard refers to here as ‘an offence to the Jews and a folly to the Greeks’ is what he describes as ‘the *Paradox*’ and what the apostle Paul defines as the central message of Christianity, in the passage from 1 Corinthians from which Kierkegaard is quoting here: ‘Christ crucified’. That the Son of God would wilfully die on a cross was unthinkable both to Jews and Greeks – it was ‘an absurdity to the understanding’ – but, Paul continues:

to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.<sup>53</sup>

What both Paul and Kierkegaard seem to be stressing here is the importance of the object of belief: as absurd, foolish and weak as the message of ‘Christ crucified’ may be (and Kierkegaard rightly capitalises and italicises it as ‘the *Paradox*’), it is nonetheless ‘the power of God and the wisdom of God’ (Paul), ‘the eternal essential truth which has come into being in time’ (Kierkegaard).

In contrast, Thomas seems to delineate a faith here without an object, a faith based instead on symbols (cross, chalice, bread) and emptiness. If these symbols do not point to a truth greater than themselves – in this case, a resurrected Christ – then I am unsure as to how they can be ‘verities’: without a resurrected Christ, then Christian believers truly are ‘petty / temple-schismatics, justly / cast out of the law’ (Geoffrey Hill), or, as Paul went on to put it in 1 Corinthians: ‘if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith ... we are to be pitied more than all men’ (I Corinthians 15: 14, 19). In light of these statements, I find myself questioning Thomas’s implicit veneration of the symbols of faith in his poetry, while he seems to avoid ‘the inwardness of faith’ required of ‘the individual’ in relation to ‘the *Paradox*’ of Christ crucified,

surely that which gives those symbols meaning and which renders them ‘verities’ in the first place.

The figure of Christ in Counterpoint remains, then, an elusive one, whether Christ incarnate or Christ resurrected. The crucifixion does seem to hold Thomas’s poetic focus here, and the poems that make up the section of that name are among the most powerful in the collection. However, whether these poems dealing with Christ make a substantial difference to Thomas’s conception of God as *deus absconditus* is extremely doubtful: on the whole, I must conclude that, in spite of Counterpoint’s structure revolving round the figure of Christ (‘B.C.’, ‘Incarnation’, ‘Crucifixion’, ‘A.D.’), the figure of Christ makes little difference to the poetry’s vision of God.

The final section of the collection, ‘A.D.’, describes a world after the coming of Christ, and little has changed. God is described variously as ‘a presence illimitable / as its absence’ (C 48), ‘the silence’ (C 50) and ‘that great void / we must enter’ (C 54), all descriptions which sound remarkably similar to the God of ‘B.C.’: ‘the almost anonymous’ (C 15), ‘the silence / to which we appeal’, ‘the architect / of our failure’(C 20). The world may have changed in this section – the machine is at its most prominent here – but God has not, and we know him no better now than we did before Christ came.

So the search for the *deus absconditus* continues, with Christ seemingly little more than a footnote, possibly a poet (like R. S. Thomas?) who provided some useful metaphors and symbols for us to use. The ‘A.D.’ section of Counterpoint uses very few of them, however, focussing instead on engagements with the machine and ‘the absence’ that is God. There are many eloquent, moving and powerful poems in this section, but none that build substantially on

the figure of Christ or the ‘metaphors’ of incarnation and resurrection: ultimately, these do not seem to have made much of an impact on ‘the silence / we call God’ (C 50). One poem includes an image that demonstrates powerfully that the Incarnation, the coming of Christ, has made little difference to Thomas’s poetic vision, even in a collection ostensibly oriented around his birth and death: in it, the speaker and his companions are searching for God in a sort of cosmic ‘hide and seek’:

Coming  
on his footprint in the snow  
of our thought we had nothing  
to measure its size by. (C 48)

For many Christian thinkers, Christ provides the gauge for which the speaker is looking here. For Thomas and his poetry, however, the search continues, and the final poem of Counterpoint embodies what seems to be a personal vision with markedly modest ambition:

I think that maybe  
I will be a little surer  
of being a little nearer.  
That’s all. Eternity  
is in the understanding  
that that little is more than enough. (C 63)

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Turning finally to the figure of Christ in the last two collections published during Thomas’s lifetime (a posthumous collection, Residues, was published by Bloodaxe in July 2002), it is clear that he remained a troubling figure for the poet. ‘Incarnations’, a series of poems from No Truce with the Furies (1995), does not add substantially to the Christ of Counterpoint, with Thomas remaining unsure as to the implications of the life of Jesus (‘What was the Incarnation / but the waking dream of one / calling himself Son of Man?’ (NTWTF 36)).

Meanwhile, 'Could Be', from Mass for Hard Times (1992), implicates Christ in a piece of theatrical 'smoke-and-mirrors' on the part of God:

The voice that was  
 as the remains of a smile  
 on the sky's face said:  
 'Listen.' And I replied:  
 'I know. You are the ventriloquist  
 who once sat Christ  
 on your knee and made us imagine  
 you were where you were not.

(MFHT 54)

The 'I' here sounds similar to many of the speakers of Thomas's poems, but there is more than a hint of arrogance about him: any poem by Thomas where the speaker asserts "I know" should be treated with caution, as we saw in Counterpoint, and there is a pointed irony in the fact that after 'the voice' asks the speaker to listen, the speaker proceeds to speak for the duration of the poem. He may question the validity of Christ's testimony about God (as Thomas frequently does in his poetry and prose), but there is more than a hint of the crowds mocking Jesus on the cross in his accusations directed towards God: 'If you are ubiquitous, why / not be here, when we say: Now?' If Thomas's poetry teaches its readers anything, it is that an arrogant presumption that God will answer our calls as and when we demand it, is grossly misguided.

Perhaps the poem of the 1990s that most explicitly posits Christ as an answer to the poet's probing of God, and the question of whether we can know him, is 'Tell Us':

We have had names for you:  
 The Thunderer, the Almighty  
 Hunter, Lord of the snowflake  
 and the sabre-toothed tiger.  
 One name we have held back  
 unable to reconcile it  
 with the mosquito, the tidal-wave,  
 the black hole into which  
 time will fall.

(MFHT 46)

Opening with a salvo of titles for God, the poem even conceals one in its title: 'Tellus', another name for Terra, the Roman goddess of the earth. The 'one name we have held back' is not enunciated, but it could be 'love', incompatible as it would seem to be 'with the mosquito, the tidal-wave, / [and] the black hole'. The title invocation to God that he reveal his true name to us is then seemingly answered:

You have answered  
us with the image of yourself  
on a hewn tree, suffering  
injustice, pardoning it;  
pointing as though in either  
direction; horrifying us  
with the possibility of dislocation.

It is with Christ on the cross that God answers the speaker's request that he would give us his name and, as with the 'Crucifixion' poems in Counterpoint, the speaker seems both attracted to this 'image' of God, 'suffering / injustice, pardoning it', and repelled by it, 'horrif[ied] ... / with the possibility of dislocation' (between humanity and God? between Father and Son?). The poem concludes with the speaker now confident enough to use the name he arguably 'held back' earlier on:

Ah, love, with your arms out  
wide, tell us how much more  
they must still be stretched  
to embrace a universe drawing  
away from us at the speed of light.

God is now addressed as 'love', but the comfort that this may bring is heavily qualified by the closing lines' recognition that, according to many cosmologists, the universe is still expanding, 'drawing / away from us at the speed of light', with the result that we are growing ever smaller on the universal scale. The speaker appears to doubt whether Christ on the cross is still up to the job of

‘embracing’ this seemingly infinite universe: implicitly, the ‘us’ of the final line may well include Christ. Right up to the end of his career, Thomas seemed to deny himself any consolation from the person of Christ: in this poem at least, the universe is just too vast and uncaring for that.

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So, is that the whole story? In the course of this chapter we have looked at Thomas’s flirtations with mysticism and negative theology, before recognising that they cannot satisfy his longing for a personal, almost tangible God. We then turned our attention to the incarnation and person of Jesus Christ, asking whether he could provide an answer to Thomas’s search for the hidden God: again, in spite of a growing interest in Christ towards the end of his writing career, demonstrated particularly in the collection Counterpoint, it appears that Thomas’s ambivalence concerning Christ expressed in his prose and in interviews endures throughout his poetry. Perhaps by ‘Setting / my own questions’ at the outset of this chapter – can God be known? what difference does Christ make to the notion of the hidden God? – I too have ‘bungled / the examination’, as Thomas suggests about his own poetic interrogation of God in Counterpoint. As he writes in his autobiography concerning the whole question of the character of God: ‘Face to face with a mystery as awful as this, how can anyone be absolutely certain one way or the other?’(A 79)

As I conclude, I must acknowledge that any desire on my part to plot a graph of the accumulated insights gathered by Thomas in his poetry regarding the character of God or the significance of Christ has not been satisfied: his poetry does not lend itself easily to charts plotting the progress of certain images throughout the individual volumes, and critics are divided as to whether this is a

strength or a weakness of the poetry. Tony Conran recognised that, with Thomas, 'every poem is a new departure, every situation a different set of configurings', to the point that '[p]oems contradict each other': but he also argued that this 'is part of [Thomas's] greatness ... R. S. Thomas's poetry reminds us that real life is not just a sorting office where the ego delves into its sense data to build up a total pattern.'<sup>54</sup> Meanwhile, Julian Gitzen remarks upon 'Thomas's frustrating tendency to forget or ignore gains made in previous inquiries and to commence fresh poems on the assumption that he remains as far as ever from his elusive quarry.'<sup>55</sup>

One such early 'gain' made regarding the figure of Christ in Thomas's poetry is arguably the poem 'Here', from the 1961 collection Tares:

I am a man now.  
 Pass your hand over my brow,  
 You can feel the place where the brains grow.

I am like a tree,  
 From my top boughs I can see  
 The footprints that led up to me.

There is blood in my veins  
 That has run clear of the stain  
 Contracted in so many loins.

Why, then, are my hands red  
 With this blood of so many dead?  
 Is this where I was misled?

Why are my hands this way  
 That they will not do as I say?  
 Does no God hear when I pray?

I have nowhere to go.  
 The swift satellites show  
 The clock of my whole being is slow.

It is too late to start  
 For destinations not of the heart.  
 I must stay here with my hurt.

(CP 120)



The question 'Does no God hear when I pray?' has, with some justification, been taken by some critics as the essential concern of Thomas's poetry.<sup>56</sup> However, I find substantial internal evidence for the poem to be read as a monologue rooted in the figure of Jesus Christ on the cross, and as such this poem is a pointed and moving evocation of the crucifixion and Christ's experience of this painful death. 'I am a man now,' says Christ, who has humbled himself from being 'in very nature God' (Philippians 2:6) to become so; this declaration could also suggest that he is no longer the child of the nativity, but has moved from the cosy scene of the stable in Bethlehem to where we find him now.

The second stanza begins with Christ on the cross, the 'tree' of the fourth line, observing 'the footprints that led up to me', suggesting the passage of human history up to the moment of the crucifixion, the past of a fallen world which Christ's death is intended to address, with sin 'the stain / Contracted in so many loins' which Christ's 'clear' blood is intended to atone for. These opening stanzas portray their speaker as aware of where he is, who he is and when he is.

However, it is at this point that the questions begin: nailed to a tree ('Why are my hands this way?'), forced to take the punishment of a humanity 'stained' with sin (his hands 'red / With the blood of so many dead'), Christ asks 'Why?' Was I misled? Am I really meant to be here? Finally, these questions lead to the ultimate one: where is God? This is Christ as the emblem of human suffering throughout history, mouthing the question people have asked down through the centuries, and continue to ask in the present: is God there? Can he hear me? Does he care about me?

Or perhaps having Christ mouth the human question of 'where is God?' is to have things the wrong way round. Is it actually the case that the question,

‘Does no God hear when I pray?’ is merely a human echo of *Christ’s* questioning of God, just as the human poet R. S. Thomas is reproducing Christ’s passion here in a poem? Does Christ’s cry on the cross inform all the human cries that are made after it? Elsewhere, Thomas argues that it does. In his introduction to The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, he argues that: ‘Poems such as the “terrible” sonnets of Gerard Manley Hopkins are but a human repetition of the cry of the Cross: “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani!”’, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’.<sup>57</sup> Ultimately, then, ‘Here’’s questioning of God is rooted in the figure of Christ on the cross, with the poem seeming to suggest that, when human beings suffer and question God, they are following in his footsteps.

So, with ‘Here’, we have a poem that posits Christ as the emblem of human suffering and the saviour of suffering human beings: this salvation is at great personal cost to Christ (‘I must stay here with my hurt’), but it also serves as an immense source of comfort to the suffering individual. As we have seen, it is not the only consideration of Christ in Thomas’s poetry; in fact, it is arguably not even a typical one. However, in this poem at least, the cross is inhabited, and as with ‘In a Country Church’, this presence on the cross makes a remarkable difference to the otherwise silent God of the poetry. ‘Does no God hear when I pray?’: the question remains through much of Thomas’s work. Occasionally, as with ‘Here’, Thomas gives his readers some cause for hope that, not only does God hear, but he may also understand the struggles of humanity and, far from abandoning us, may even suffer alongside us: as the Christ-figure concludes in ‘Here’:

It is too late to start  
For destinations not of the heart.  
I must stay here with my hurt.

- <sup>1</sup> 'No-one': in R. S. Thomas. Autobiographies. Trans. Jason Walford Davies. London: Phoenix, 1997: 27-109 (p. 78). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> Section LV, In Memoriam: The Penguin Book of Religious Verse. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963: p. 144.
- <sup>3</sup> Julian Gitzen. 'R. S. Thomas and the Vanishing God of Form and Number'. Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas. Ed. William V. Davis. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993: 170-181 (p. 171).
- <sup>4</sup> J. D. Vicary. 'Via Negativa: Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R. S. Thomas'. Miraculous Simplicity: 89-101 (p. 91).
- <sup>5</sup> Vimala Herman. 'Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas'. Miraculous Simplicity: 140-161 (p. 141).
- <sup>6</sup> Phillips – Pennsylvania: Pickwick Publications, 1986; Shepherd – Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Dialogue': George Herbert, The Complete English Poems. Ed. John Tobin. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991. p. 106.
- <sup>8</sup> A. D. Nuttall. Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St John. London: Methuen, 1980. p. 4.
- <sup>9</sup> Nuttall, p. 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Vincent Buckley. Poetry and the Sacred. London: Chatto and Windus, 1968. p. 114.
- <sup>11</sup> Paradiso XXXIII, ll. 106-108, 121-122: The Divine Comedy. Trans. C. H. Sisson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. pp. 498-499.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Edwards. Poetry and Possibility. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988. p. 110.
- <sup>13</sup> Herbert, p. 45.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Introduction'. A Choice of George Herbert's Verse. London: Faber, 1967: 7-17 (p. 16).
- <sup>15</sup> Kevin Hart. The Trespass of the Sign. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. p. 176.
- <sup>16</sup> Quoted by Hart, p. 176.
- <sup>17</sup> Meister Eckhart, sermon LXXXIII: quoted in F. C. Happold. Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990. p. 177.
- <sup>18</sup> Augustine. Confessions. Trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961. p. 21.
- <sup>19</sup> Confessions, p. 169.
- <sup>20</sup> 'The Collar': Herbert, p. 144.
- <sup>21</sup> See John Powell Ward. The Poetry of R. S. Thomas. Bridgend: Seren, 2001. p. 91 – 'H'm is a new start'; D. Z. Phillips. Poet of the Hidden God, p. 69 – 'H'm marks a major step forward in R. S. Thomas's poetic pilgrimage'; Julian Gitzen. Miraculous Simplicity, p. 170 – 'The publication in 1972 of H'm signalled a major change of theme [for Thomas]'.  
<sup>22</sup> Shepherd. R. S. Thomas. pp. 155-156.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Dau Gapel' [Two Chapels]. Trans. Catherine Thomas. R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose. Ed. Sandra Anstey. Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1983: 43-47 (p. 47).
- <sup>24</sup> 'Introduction'. The Penguin Book of Religious Verse: 7-11 (p. 9).
- <sup>25</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry'. R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose: 89-94 (p. 90).
- <sup>26</sup> Gitzen, p. 171.
- <sup>27</sup> Shepherd, p. 155.
- <sup>28</sup> Phillips, p. ix.
- <sup>29</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry', p. 92.
- <sup>30</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry', p. 90.
- <sup>31</sup> John Ormond. 'R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet'. Poetry Wales 7.4 (1972): 47-57 (p. 53).
- <sup>32</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry', p. 90.
- <sup>33</sup> Ned Thomas and John Barnie. 'Probings: An interview with R. S. Thomas'. Planet 80 (1990): 28-52 (pp. 45-46). Further references are given in the text.
- <sup>34</sup> Gitzen, p. 171.
- <sup>35</sup> A. E. Dyson. Yeats, Eliot and R. S. Thomas. p. 296.
- <sup>36</sup> Phillips, p. 146.
- <sup>37</sup> Ward, p. 192.
- <sup>38</sup> Ward, p. 193.

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<sup>39</sup> Section LXVI. The Triumph of Love. p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Phillips, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> 'Thomas's [approach in H'm] is to put the myth-stories to work as metaphors, in the hope that their metaphoric components would touch off other things from outside the myth – from the poet's own sensitivities to his physical world – and so make new and fruitful combinations.' Ward, p. 98. For Ward's discussion of these combinations, see pp. 97-103.

<sup>42</sup> Counterpoint. Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 1990. Further references in the text.

<sup>43</sup> Ward, p. 171.

<sup>44</sup> Shepherd, pp. 157-185.

<sup>45</sup> Edwards. Towards a Christian Poetics. p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> 'R. S. Thomas Talks to J. B. Lethbridge'. Anglo-Welsh Review 74 (1983): 36-56 (p. 46).

<sup>47</sup> Rowan Williams. "'Adult Geometry': Dangerous Thoughts in R. S. Thomas'. The Page's Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty. Ed. M. Wynn Thomas. Bridgend: Seren, 1993: 82-98 (p. 91).

<sup>48</sup> Shepherd, p. 189.

<sup>49</sup> Søren Kierkegaard. Concluding Unscientific Postscript. Trans. David F. Swanson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941. p. 513.

<sup>50</sup> Kierkegaard, pp. 513-514.

<sup>51</sup> See above, n. 31.

<sup>52</sup> Kierkegaard. Concluding Unscientific Postscript, p. 191.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Corinthians 1: 24-25.

<sup>54</sup> Tony Conran. Frontiers in Anglo-Welsh Poetry. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997. p. 199.

<sup>55</sup> Gitzen, p. 179.

<sup>56</sup> See for example John Mole in The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English. Ed. Ian Hamilton. Oxford: OUP, 1994. p. 540.

<sup>57</sup> The Penguin Book of Religious Verse, p. 11.

## CONCLUSION

As I come to the end of this exploration of the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas, I return to the statement made by T. S. Eliot in his essay of 1935 'Religion and Literature' with which this thesis began:

For the great majority of people who love poetry, '*religious* poetry' is a variety of *minor* poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit, but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them.<sup>1</sup>

Eliot goes on to voice qualified agreement with this 'great majority', by asserting that 'there is a kind of poetry ... which is the product of a special religious awareness, which may exist without the general awareness which we expect of the major poet.'<sup>2</sup> In my introduction I resolved to return to these comments and, relating them to the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas, ascertain whether these three are 'religious poets' in the sense that they treat only a 'confined part' of the subject matter of poetry in their work, whether theirs is a 'special religious awareness', rather than 'the general awareness which we expect of the major poet'.

Dubbing a poet 'major' or 'minor' is a difficult, if not presumptuous endeavour, particularly when that poet is still producing new poems, as Hill and Murray are: 2002 witnessed the publication of Hill's The Orchards of Syon and Murray's Poems the Size of Photographs, while even Thomas had a posthumous collection released, entitled Residues. Nonetheless, I feel it necessary, at the end of this thesis, to briefly contend with Eliot's reservations regarding religious poetry and to survey the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas in the light of them.

Throughout this thesis I have read Hill, Murray and Thomas as poets concerned with the religious, more than that, as poets contending with the modern world from a position of at least tacit Christian belief: of the three, certainly Thomas and, less so, Hill experience a troubled relationship with Christianity, but still there is enough in their poetry and prose to identify them as Christian. Eliot's reservations concerning '*religious* poetry' could therefore apply to the poetry I have been concerned with here: clearly, to 'the great majority of people who love poetry', Christianity is not considered a 'major passion' and so the secular reader may feel justified in steering clear of poets who appear to demonstrate 'a special religious awareness' and concern regarding Christianity and its depiction of God in the modern world.

However, Eliot acknowledges the possibility of a poet who treats 'the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit', perhaps implicitly describing himself and certainly describing the 'great Christian religious poets' Dante, Corneille and Racine whose poetry was '*unconsciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian*'.<sup>3</sup> I acknowledged earlier in this thesis the difficulties inherent in an unconsciously Christian poetry existing in what is a predominately secular Western world, and throughout my explorations of Hill, Murray and Thomas I have traced elements of defiance regarding that secularism, expressed in very different ways from poet to poet, in keeping with their very different temperaments: for example, Hill's censure of the modern world's 'ignorance and contempt' for past heroism and learning (LXXVII, TTOL 40), Murray's angry rejection of the elevation of physical beauty and sexual prowess in the secular West, or Thomas's frequent repudiations of 'the machine' in his poetry as the symbol of the urban, industrialised world from which he remained separate.

There *is* a defiance implicit in writing ‘in a religious spirit’ in a world ‘deliberately and defiantly’ secular, which Eliot perhaps seeks to avoid in his essay; however, as I hope my explorations of the poetry of Hill, Murray and Thomas have demonstrated, defiance is not the only thing that drives these poets.

Geoffrey Hill is, as this thesis has demonstrated, a religious poet after Eliot’s own heart, who treats ‘the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit’. His contentions with history and the atrocities of the twentieth century are perhaps the clearest indication of his ambition as a poet in addressing the complexities of the human condition, alongside a deeply-felt suspicion of poetry’s ability to ‘[c]leanse with a kind of artistry’ (‘A Pastoral’, CP 54) the darker aspects of that condition: these commensurate attitudes towards poetry – a belief in its ability to contend with a fallen world, coupled with a wariness that it can, in Coleridge’s words, ‘excite ... us to artificial feelings [and] make ... us callous to real ones’ (quoted by Hill: Morrison 214) – can be found everywhere in Hill’s work. Indeed, there is very little of ‘the whole subject matter of poetry’ that Hill does not treat. My major focus on Hill’s poetry has been on his treatment of suffering and evil, alongside his explorations of humour and laughter in a fallen world, but elsewhere he explores such themes as national identity (much of Mercian Hymns, ‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ (CP 152-164), The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (CP 183-196), ‘Churchill’s Funeral’ (C 43-50)), the possibilities of romantic love (‘The Dead Bride’ (CP 91), ‘The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz’ (CP 92-102)), and, as we have seen, the viability of poetry in a modern world that denies its value (The Triumph of Love, Speech! Speech!).

Throughout Hill's wide-ranging, difficult poetry, he treats the world around him in a religious spirit. Frequently he allows his poetry to voice unbelief, scepticism, even despair, but this is part of poetry's 'absolute freedom to encompass the maximum range of belief or unbelief' (Haffenden 88), and in this he feels he has learnt from such poetry as the Psalms, the Book of Job and The Divine Comedy. Hill consciously places his poetry in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in a European history from which he seeks to learn, as part of his 'daily acknowledgement / of what is owed the dead' (CXIX, TTOL 63); I hope I have demonstrated throughout this thesis that this situating is not merely an intellectual exercise but the expression of a deeply-felt adherence to these traditions.

As for the place of belief in his poetry, this too is deeply felt and expressed in acts of homage to a group of largely Christian martyrs that are notable for the diversity of their beliefs and situation, but are united by their courage and integrity. Hill's recently professed Anglicanism is an expression of his allegiance to 'the protracted, indeterminate, / passion-through-history of the English Church, / the Church of Wesley, Newman and George Bell' (CVI, TTOL 54-55), a diverse list of English churchmen Reformed, Catholic and Ecumenical. When his poetry turns directly to religious experience, that experience is often conveyed as bleak ('The Bidden Guest', the 'Lachrimae' sequence), but this is linked more to the fallen nature of the believer than to the illusory nature of belief; meanwhile, when attempts are made to free a poem from the constraints of morality as rooted in Christian belief (most notably in 'Ovid in the Third Reich'), they are exposed as sinister and inhuman. Hill places religious belief and experience at the heart of his conception of humanity, and it is through the



characters of the believers he memorialises that his conception of God begins to emerge: he is mysterious, often hidden and rarely invoked (I suggested earlier that Hill's reticence in addressing or describing God is one of his inheritances from Judaism), but crucially he stands over and above human history and poetry and, in spite of his distance and difficulty, gives Hill's poetry the moral reference point around which it addresses the world.

Hill's moral seriousness has been placed in the foreground of my explorations of his poetry, and I reiterate here the urgency with which much of his poetry seeks to pass on lessons he is in the process of learning to his readers. However, he is always careful to address the criticism his moral stance can evoke, namely that he must presume himself to be somehow morally superior to his readers to take on such a role. An example of Hill's concern to avoid this charge comes from his collection of 2002, The Orchards of Syon. Addressing the reader, he writes:

You need to weigh this  
by constant reckoning. I am not the judge;  
these are not directions. Never let  
my voice mislead you. I may be mistaken;  
self-mistaken; wrongly self-possessed;  
confusing jealousy with righteousness  
as I would have it  
whatever wrongs we do, one to another[.]<sup>4</sup>

'Must men stand by what they write[?]', Hill asks at the outset of The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (CP 183); if the answer is yes, then Hill is determined that his readers do not misunderstand his poetry and read it as prescriptive rather than what it is, a record of his own concerns, religious, historical and moral. Hill acknowledges here that he is fallen, like the world in which he writes, and that he 'may be mistaken' in his concerns; nonetheless, he continues to write and he asks his readers to 'weigh' what they read, in the belief

that, fallen though they are, both poet and reader can glimpse something of 'the lost kingdom of innocence and original justice' to which, according to Hill, 'every fine and moving poem bears witness' (Haffenden 88).

Les Murray also writes in a fallen world and he acknowledges the fact in interview ('I'm not a Pelagian; I do believe in the doctrine of the Fall' (Crawford 167)), but it should be clear by now that his poetry is less concerned with the consequences of the Fall than Hill and more interested in the possibilities open to poetry in this postlapsarian world. Poems such as 'Quintets for Robert Morley' and 'The Quality of Sprawl' bear witness to Murray's optimism, in their declared belief in 'an ampler physics' (CP 177) that would defy gravity, or their celebration of 'the rococo of being your own still centre' (CP 183). It is perhaps difficult to discern just what T. S. Eliot would have made of the buoyant irreverence of such poems, but I feel that Murray, along with Hill, satisfies Eliot's criterion for the major poet, that he treat 'the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit'; Murray himself describes his poetry as 'fundamentally religious, subsumed by a Christian consciousness' (Crawford 165). I have suggested that his conception of poetry as 'the only whole thinking' ('Poetry and Religion', CP 267) and his equation of poetry with religion does not always do justice to his often resolutely unmystical poetry that borrows heavily from discursive prose; nonetheless, Murray's religious beliefs are undeniably central to an understanding of his poetry.

It has not been possible to explore the full range of Murray's multifarious subject matter in this thesis, but perhaps one of the finest examples of Murray's ambition as a poet is the sequence 'Presence: Translations from the Natural World', which formed the focus of chapter five. This sequence serves as a

striking example of Murray's 'general awareness' of the created world (that which Eliot expects of the 'major poet'), while also demonstrating his religious concerns and the lessons he has learnt from Gerard Manley Hopkins. My explorations of Murray's conceptions of laughter placed Murray's God at the foreground of his poetry: God is 'equally all background' ('Equanimity', CP 181), underpinning and upholding Murray's poetic, and it is significant that Murray feels strongly that his God exists *outside* his poetry, to the extent that he dedicates his poetry to God's glory.

As I noted at the very outset of this thesis, of the three poets discussed here, Murray is clearly not 'unhappily in love with God'; instead, he is extremely happy that God exists and that Murray is permitted to write poetry as his act of homage to God. Clearly, Murray acknowledges that this is not the 'best of worlds', in his explorations of depression and of the wars and suffering of the twentieth century in his verse-novels The Boys Who Stole The Funeral and Fredy Neptune; however, he blames an arrogant and cruel humanity for these afflictions rather than God, and even goes as far as to accuse atheistic intellectuals of using such an atrocity as Auschwitz as ammunition in 'their centuries- / long war against God' ('The Beneficiaries', CP 416). Statements such as this do not earn Murray many friends, but they do demonstrate his fierce loyalty to his God, a deity marked by a wise sense of humour from which his short-wearing votaries can learn, who has created and sustains a natural world whose boundless variety is worth celebrating and in whose presence human life finds its true meaning and value.

Turning finally to R. S. Thomas, it seems clear that, of these three poets, his poetry is most open to Eliot's charge that it is 'the product of a special

religious awareness, which may exist without the general awareness which we expect of the major poet'. His poetry is more clearly 'religious' than either Hill's or Murray's, and as we have seen, God is the principal addressee of the poems; therefore, it is perhaps easier for the secular reader to dismiss his poetry as 'a variety of *minor* poetry', of interest only to the religious reader. However, the contention at the heart of Thomas's poetry is that 'there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God. Nor anything more difficult than establishing that relationship' (A 104), and his vast body of work bears witness to a poet keeping faith with this contention.

At times Thomas allowed himself to be situated in the tradition of devotional poets writing in English (for example, he edited a selection of George Herbert's poems);<sup>5</sup> however, more frequently, the character of his poetry testifies to the differences between his search for God and theirs. As a poem from the last collection published in his lifetime, 'Resurrections', puts it:

Easier for them, God  
only at the beginning  
of his recession. Blandish him,  
said the times and they did so,  
Herbert, Traherne, walking  
in a garden not yet  
polluted. Music in Donne's  
mind was still polyphonic. (NTWTF 47)

In contrast, the time in which Thomas is writing is not conducive to religious poetry, to the point where even his admirers seek to distance him from the label: Michael Schmidt describes Thomas as 'A troubled poet of the spiritual – it would be limiting to call him a *religious* poet.'<sup>6</sup>

However, throughout this thesis I have looked at Thomas as a religious poet, alongside Hill and Murray (I'm not sure how helpful Schmidt's distinction between 'religious' and 'spiritual' actually is), and it is the seeming 'recession'

of God that concerned Thomas throughout his career, rather than the search for a new label for his kind of poetry. As was demonstrated in the previous chapter, Thomas's search for God did not reach a terminus, and his late exploration of the figure of Christ, particularly in his 1990 collection Counterpoint, did not substantially alter his conception of God. Atheism was never an option for Thomas, while even agnosticism was seen by him as a cop-out. God is real in Thomas's poetry, and frequently that is something to be fearful of. Overarching Thomas's poetry is the belief that God, 'the disposer of the issues / Of life' (CP 209), cannot be ignored, even if he can never truly be known, let alone understood: at the heart of Thomas's religious questioning stands his conception of the Divine as hidden, unknowable and inscrutable, and this God gives the poetry its uncertainty of tone that refuses any easy answers, whether offered by mysticism, negative theology or the Incarnation.

So then, as I conclude, Eliot's criterion for a poetry that addresses its subject matter in a religious spirit, rather than merely addressing religious subject matter, is, I believe, met in all three of the poets discussed here. This thesis has considered Hill, Murray and Thomas as religious poets, but I hope it has been made clear that their respective religious sensibilities shape everything they write, to the extent that much of the poetry of Hill and Murray discussed here might not be considered 'religious' at all by the casual observer. Thomas's poetry, on the other hand, cannot be identified as anything other than religious; God is Thomas's great subject matter. However, the unflinching honesty and stark directness of his poetry might allow it to be dubbed 'major' by Eliot, in the way he eventually conceded that George Herbert transcended his 'special religious awareness'.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever Eliot's verdict on these three poets might have been, it is clear that the God who stands behind each one's poetry is very different. Hill's is distant, difficult, largely silent but ultimately providing humanity with a moral sense that must be adhered to, no matter how greatly the age has managed to obscure it; Murray's is generous, benevolent, democratic, on the side of the poor man while able to laugh affectionately at the pettiness of human concerns; and Thomas's is dark, at times cruel, perhaps unknowable but above all longed for by the poet. According to Kierkegaard, the poet is in an unhappy love affair with God because he cannot see that to be religious must involve relinquishing poetry; Hill, Murray and Thomas, in their poetic contentions with a fallen world and the God each one sees as standing behind it, may just prove the great Dane to have been wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot. Selected Essays. p. 390.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, pp. 390-391.

<sup>3</sup> Eliot, p. 392.

<sup>4</sup> XLVIII, The Orchards of Syon. Washington, D. C.: Counterpoint, 2002. p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> A Choice of George Herbert's Verse. London: Faber, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Schmidt. Lives of the Poets. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998. pp. 759-760.

<sup>7</sup> See Eliot, p. 391.

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