

A Heretic's Dream of Salvation

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Sunrise; photo, Steve Rohrbach

Sir Geoffrey Hill, lauded as the greatest post-war poet writing in English,¹ is difficult to pin down. In a 1981 interview, when asked about his religious beliefs, the English poet replied that a phrase by Joseph Cary could be aptly applied to his own poetry: “a heretic’s dream of salvation expressed in the images of the orthodoxy from which he is excommunicate.”² Currently Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, Hill casts himself as the figure of the outsider, at variance with dominant religious positions. His comment may seem curious at first glance considering that he regards himself as a Christian, and has affirmed his belief in orthodox doctrines such as original sin.³ Yet this apparent peculiarity is more superficial than actual.

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Hill's poetry reveals a tension between its religious elements and its stance of scepticism, suggesting that his interest lies less in religious faith per se than in the inability to embrace faith unproblematically. Acutely aware of the problems that can complicate issues of faith, Hill recognizes that religious belief and practice can involve a process of intense struggle, such that the poet may simultaneously experience both adherence to and estrangement from his faith. The "heretic's dream of salvation" to which Hill appeals is hence precisely a dream, visionary and transcendent, but ultimately unattainable, destined to be punctured by the doubt and uncertainty fuelled by his sceptical intelligence.

SCEPTICISM AND RELIGIOUS POETRY

Consider Hill's position about the relation between the poet and religious experience (or the lack thereof). In response to critics' accusations that his poetry "lacks a true feeling for the passion of religion", Hill maintains that genuine religious experience is not a matter of individual will or personal choice:

If critics accuse me of evasiveness or the vice of nostalgia, or 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.⁵

Hill's response points to the exclusivity of "true religious experience"; it is "a privilege reserved for very few", a special entitlement granted to an elect, a restricted group from which the poet may regrettably find himself excluded. Yet for Hill, the inability to "grasp true religious experience" is no impediment to poetic inspiration but may even be a stimulus for provoking the composition of lyrical poetry. It is not necessary to be a "religious poet", in the sense that one defines one's poetry according to one's religion (or privileges religion above all other concerns in one's poetry), in order to engage critically with issues of faith through the medium of verse. Instead the poet can undertake the challenges of exploring and negotiating matters of faith, as these challenges in themselves constitute a vital and profound part of human experience.

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Hill's engagement with faith can be observed in the sonnet sequence "Lacrimae" in *Tenebrae* (1978), and it is worth dwelling briefly on the significance of the title (meaning "tears"). The titles of the individual poems in the sequence (like "Lacrimae Verae" or "Lacrimae Antiquae Novae") not only refer to different varieties of tears, but also allude

to the pieces in John Dowland's musical composition. Hence even the titles alert the reader to the discipline of artistic creation and its relation to faith; one is invited to contemplate how artistic form influences illustrations of religious belief. Tears are the visible, physiological manifestations of intense emotions like sorrow and anguish, but they can also be aestheticized and idealized into symbols that serve the artistic purposes of the poet or composer, rather than remaining as concrete embodiments of grief and religious struggle. In the first sonnet, "Lacrimae Verae", the speaker signals his dual experience of religious identification and alienation:

*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.⁷*

Evoking the image of Christ as a "swimmer" with outstretched hands filtered through the teary eyes of the speaker, the literary conceit relies upon a comparison that juxtaposes the divine with the commonplace, exhibiting a

muted but palpable sense of bathos. Rather than being moved to faith, the speaker is frustrated, as a powerless witness to the body that "moves but moves to no avail". The speaker is never "at one" with Christ, for the latter is visible but distant, "on the hill". In addition to Christ's literal physical twisted body, there is the metaphorical twisting that occurs in the eyes of the perceiver, as well as the poetic twisting perpetuated in the process of versification. The rhyme scheme is conspicuously engineered, with both full rhymes ("cross" and "loss", "hill" and "skill") and imperfect rhymes ("hell" and "avail"), contributing to the sense of artifice that is in tension with the bodily nature of religious experience.

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One is reminded of Hill's essay "Language, Suffering, and Silence" (1999), in which he refers to the martyrdom of the Catholic laywoman Margaret Clitheroe, who was executed by *peine forte et dure* for sheltering recusant priests⁸ – matters of faith are not necessarily ethereal or metaphysical, but often involve acts and experiences that are grounded in the bodily and the corporeal. In the poem, the speaker is describing the painful crucifixion of Christ but formalizing it in a sonnet, which is one of the most ornate and

fixed of all forms. Bodily suffering, in other words, is twisted by the poet's skill into a poetic form proper for the reader. The paradox is that the poetic rendering of Christ's suffering both raises one's awareness of it and distorts one's appreciation of it, suggesting the troubled relationship between the poet and his faith.

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Sonnets also usually have *voltas*, with their arguments turning in particular ways. Yet "Lacrimae Verae" reveals an inability to reflect flexibility:

*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.⁹*

Like the "Crucified Lord" who is fixed on the cross and "never move[s]", the sonnet is similarly immobile – it cannot "turn aside" or "turn away". The speaker and Christ are divided into "I" and "you", with each pronoun separated

by other words and by punctuation, indicating the distance between them that reinforces the speaker's sense of alienation. Baldly declaring "You do not dwell in me nor I in you," the speaker emphasizes the separateness and disconnection between himself and the divine. Just as the first two stanzas reflect poetic twisting, the last two reveal signs of poetic artifice, such as full rhymes ("am" and "condemn") and imperfect rhymes ("you" and "revenue"), coupled with the rhythms of the iambic pentameter. The word "pander" is also significant: it is "to minister to the immoral urges or distasteful desires of another, or to gratify a person with such desires . . . to indulge the tastes, whims, or weaknesses of another".¹⁰ By regarding himself as one who "pander[s]" to the name of Christ, the speaker insinuates that efforts to gratify the desires of the divine may not be necessarily admirable, indicating a mounting scepticism and distrust of religious faith.

MARTYRDOM

One of the reasons for such scepticism may be that the poet subjects aspects of religious belief to ethical examination, scrutinizing for example the justification of martyrdom. Defining martyrdom as "an act of witness",¹¹ Hill draws one's attention particularly to the Catholic martyrs of the Elizabethan age, whom he argues were trained as part of a "pedagogy of martyrdom, a scholastic process of training towards that deliberate goal".¹² On the one hand, for Hill, the psychology behind this pedagogy is inspiring, as it reveals the

“ability to overcome the animal self”¹³ that is encapsulated in a line by T. S. Eliot about the “reluctance of the body to become a *thing*”¹⁴ – one is prepared to transcend the body for a higher spiritual purpose. On the other hand, as Hill notes, the same pedagogy is “chilling in many ways”,¹⁵ because it glorifies the destruction of the self. Mindful of both these perspectives, Hill integrates his “mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion”¹⁶ towards martyrdom as a catalyst for the composition of lyric poetry, problematizing martyrdom as an aspect of religious experience.

Hill depicts the figure of the martyr in “Martyrium”, the third sonnet of “Lacrimae”, in which he employs arresting and provocative imagery:

*The Jesus-faced man walking
crowned with flies
who swats the roadside grass or
glances up
at the streaked gibbet with its
birds that swoop,
who scans his breviary while the
sweat dries,*

*fades, now among the fading
tapestries,
brooches of crimson tears where
no eyes weep,
a mouth unstitched into a rim-
less cup,
torn clouds the cauldrons of the
martyrs' cries.*¹⁷

The martyr figure is not Janus-faced but “Jesus-faced”, and yet he is crowned not with thorns like the real Jesus, but

with “flies” like a corpse. There is a sense in which one could be “Jesus-faced” in that one is Christ-like, since the Bible exhorts Christians to adopt Jesus as a role model (Colossians 3:1-11). Yet the act of resembling Jesus by developing virtues like courage and humility is different from impersonating a Jesus-figure without inner substance; the former is commendable but the latter is morally dubious. This difference is blurred in the “Jesus-faced man”, as the aestheticization of his martyrdom renders the ethics of his sacrifice questionable. The phrase “brooches of crimson tears”, for example, is an ambiguous reference: it may denote literal tears, or blood (since they are “crimson”), or rubies (since they are “brooches”), or bodily lacerations (which relates to images of the body as cloth suggested by the “mouth unstitched” and “fading tapestries”). The poem can also be compared to a tapestry, in that the poet stitches disparate elements into an embroidered whole, an artistic fabrication. For both the martyr’s body and the poet’s text, aestheticization may thus lead to a form of self-aggrandizement, as the risk of excessive decorativeness may compromise religious experience by contributing to personal vanity.

AMBIGUITY OF FAITH

Conscious of the dangers of narcissistic desires, Hill exposes the ways in which one may ironically experience an almost sensual delight in the practice of religious self-abnegation. In “Pavana Dolorosa”, the fifth sonnet of “Lacrimae”, the speaker alters the word order in the epigraph from Robert

Southwell (“Passions I allow, and loves I approve”), such that the approval of “passions” suggests emphasis on the sensual as much as on the spiritual:

*Loves I allow and passions
I approve:
Ash-Wednesday feasts,
ascetic opulence,
the wincing lute, so real
in its pretence,
itself a passion amorous of love.*¹⁸

The poet’s insight is that fleshly and transcendent longings are not opposites, but may actually be parts of a similar process of personal desire and fulfilment. The speaker evokes the apparently oxymoronic idea of “ascetic opulence” after employing wordplay in the reference to “Ash-Wednesday feasts” (as opposed to Ash-Wednesday fasts).

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The word “feast” can function as both noun and verb, and one may “feast” on self-denial. In the tenth section of “An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England”, for example: “Reverend Mother, breakfastless, could feast her / constraint on terracotta and alabaster”.¹⁹ The irony is that practices designed to discipline the body, such as going “breakfastless”, may serve less to enable the individual to transcend worldly trivialities than to be preoccup-

pied by them. In the forcing of actions that run contrary to bodily impulses, the individual often becomes more concerned about the activity than about the divine, instead delighting in objects as hard and cold as “terracotta and alabaster”. Religious abstemiousness does not preclude the possibility that it is motivated by narcissism and hypocrisy. Neither the martyr nor the religious practitioner, both of whom may be guilty of “self-wounding martyrdom”,²⁰ are exempt from Hill’s scepticism, and the poet illustrates the ways in which faith can be complicated by egotism and self-absorption.

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“Lacrimae Amantis”, the seventh sonnet of “Lacrimae”, continues to interrogate the meaning and value of religious faith. The speaker directly addresses Christ:

*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?*²¹

The tension arises from the phrase “religiously secure”, as two meanings of the word “religiously” are activated – it means “in accordance with the principles of religion” as well as “faithfully, conscientiously”.²² The question permits both meanings to operate simultaneously, and the irony is that faith may be abused for the purposes of egotistic self-preservation rather than charitable generosity. The biblical allusion to Christ’s description of how he will “stand at the door and knock” (Revelations 3:20) provides contextual relevance to the image of the divine as “a stranger” at the speaker’s door, while the visual and tactile simplicity of the image of Christ’s journey “through the long night and in the icy dew” lends additional evocativeness to the verse. By the end, however, the speaker can only respond to Christ in terms of deferral and postponement: “tomorrow I shall wake to welcome him”.²³ By highlighting the speaker’s failure to embrace faith wholeheartedly, Hill signals his doubt in the capacity of religion to motivate ethical action, or even to prevent unethical conduct.

FAITH HAS VALUE

It may be countered, though, that Hill honours several individuals of faith, suggesting the possibility that despite his scepticism, he nevertheless recognizes the value of religion in contributing to personal ethics. An example can be observed in “‘Christmas Trees’”, which pays homage to the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned and eventually executed for his opposition to Hitler. Hill promotes the read-

er’s gradual recognition of the pastor’s moral authority:

*Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell
bleached by the flares’
candescant fall,
pacing out his own citadel,*

*restores the broken themes
of praise,
encourages our borrowed days,
by logic of his sacrifice.*

*Against wild reasons of the state
his words are quiet but
not too quiet.
We hear too late or not too late.*²⁴

Bonhoeffer’s cell is his “citadel”, a “fortress commanding a city, which it serves both to protect and to keep in subjection”,²⁵ and the metaphor serves to convey the stately authority and dignity of the pastor. b It should be grant-

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ed that though the verse is composed of octosyllabic lines, the stresses do not conform to a strictly regular pattern, as observable for instance when the first and third lines are compared: “Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell / ... / pacing out his own citadel”. Yet a sense of regularity is achieved when the rhythm of the verse reflects the quiet gentle-

ness in the speaker's tone even while it mimetically echoes the pacing of the self in the cell: "We hear too late or not too late". Just as the stressed and unstressed syllables alternate, the reader may either perceive or not perceive the ethical significance of Bonhoeffer's sacrifice. The possibility is that Hill recognizes Bonhoeffer's composure as a visible sign of his Christian faith, attesting to his calmness in the face of doom and his grace under fire.

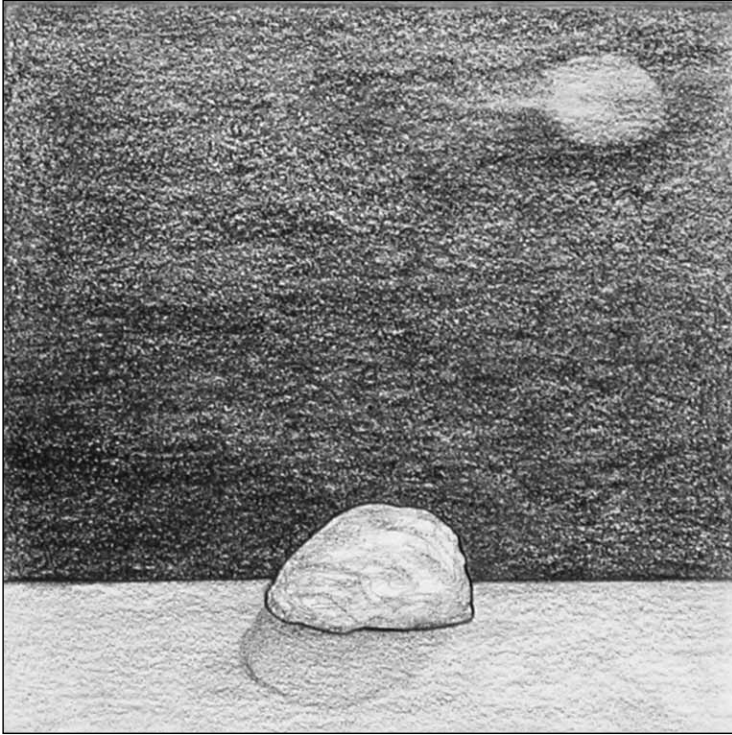
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Such a reading, however, involves the assumption of a religious frame of reference in the interpretation of poems honouring individuals of faith, even when these individuals may be extolled on the sole basis of their ethical conduct without appealing to religion. Other verses by Hill clearly indicate an attitude of direct and unabashed scepticism incompatible with any reading that overtly emphasizes the role of faith in spurring ethical behaviour. In "Tenebrae", for example, the fragmented poem sequence is reflective of the speaker's sense of self-doubt, while references to religion are made with a keen awareness of its inadequacy. Even though the speaker articulates his efforts at religious devotion, he acknowledges the flaws of such devotion, as well as the erosion of his yearning for spiritual transcendence by more earthly and mundane desires.

This can be observed especially in the third section:

*Veni Redemptor, but not in
our time.
Christus Resurgens, quite out of
this world.
'Ave' we cry; the echoes are
returned.
Amor Carnalis is our
dwelling-place.*²⁶

In each of the first three lines of the stanza, every utterance of a standard Latin phrase used in an ecclesiastical context is accompanied by a qualifying statement that serves to deflate its religious sentiments. The speaker calls for the coming of the Redeemer ("Veni Redemptor") only to add that it is "not in our time", and then he announces that Christ is risen ("Christus Resurgens") but that it is "quite out of this world". The divine has become both chronologically and topologically displaced from the speaker. Even the greetings of "Ave" are rendered as little more than meaningless "echoes", their sound devoid of societal significance. The fate of the speaker and reader – as indicated by the use of the plural possessive pronoun "our" – involves dwelling in carnal love, "Amor Carnalis". The speaker notably issues his statements in the declarative mood, as an objective reality, reflecting on the state of contemporary secular society. By making generalized observations, the speaker comments on behalf of the reader, casting judgment on the apparent ineffectuality of modern religious practice.



Rock in Moonlight; original art, Liz Gill Neilson

In the fourth section, the speaker continues to lambast the hypocrisy of religious practitioners whose actions belie their rhetoric of faith:

*O light of light, supreme delight;
grace on our lips to our disgrace.
Time roosts on all such
golden wrists;
our leanness is our luxury.
Our love is what we love
to have;
our faith is in our festivals.²⁷*

The use of plocé (“light of light, supreme delight”, “grace on our lips to our disgrace”) marks emphasis on terms that are weighted with moral implications. For Hill, “grace” is only

blindly mouthed, losing its theological significance in society. The alliterated words (“leanness” and “luxury”, “faith” and “festivals”) are also linked aurally to reinforce the poet’s association between the concepts juxtaposed; material luxury may be regarded as spiritual leanness. Just as the speaker’s reference to love denotes “Amor Carnalis” rather than spiritual love, the concept of “our faith” is similarly divorced from religion and instead relegated to human events (“our festivals”). Through the speaker’s comments on the divergence between rhetoric and reality, the poet suggests that poetry is a witness and a record, perceiving and chronicling the exposure of human carnality and duplicity.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting a deep awareness of the problems that complicate religious belief, Hill reveals a poetic intelligence insistent on maintaining a sceptical attitude towards faith, despite his adherence to its images, language, and traditions. In a sense, he resembles Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), in that his aesthetics are haunted by religious language and imagery, almost reflecting the state of being – as Stephen is described – “supersaturated with ... religion”.²⁸ The difference between Hill and Dedalus is that unlike the latter, Hill demonstrates clear finesse when calibrating the complexity and density of elements such as poetic structure and inter-textual allusions. The negotiation of these elements can be observed to be constitutive of a difficult process in which the poet adapts form to meaning, communicating the intricate and occasionally counter-intuitive relations between the fleshly and the transcendent, the secular and the spiritual.

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NOTES

- ¹ Sameer Rahim, ‘Geoffrey Hill: poetry should be shocking and surprising’, *Telegraph*, 14 December 2013, accessed 15 December 2013; available from <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/authorinterviews/10511334/Geoffrey-Hill-poetry-should-be-shocking-and-surprising.html>>.
- ² John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981), 98.
- ³ Geoffrey Hill, “Poetry and Value”, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 479.
- ⁴ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 88.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.
- ⁷ Geoffrey Hill, *New and Collected Poems, 1952-1992* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 133, l.1-8.
- ⁸ Geoffrey Hill, “Language, Suffering, and Silence”, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 394.
- ⁹ Hill, *New and Collected Poems*, 133, l.9-14.
- ¹⁰ “pander, v.”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 10 January 2014; available from <www.oed.com>.
- ¹¹ Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, 90.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 91.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Hill, *New and Collected Poems*, 133, l.1-8.

- ¹⁸ Ibid., 137, l.1-4.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 149, l.6-7.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 137, l.5.
- ²¹ Ibid., 139, l.2-6.
- ²² “religiously, adv.”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 10 January 2014; available from <www.oed.com>.
- ²³ Hill, *New and Collected Poems*, 139, l.14.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 159, l. 1-9.
- ²⁵ “citadel, n.”, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 10 January 2014; available from <www.oed.com>.
- ²⁶ Hill, *New and Collected Poems*, 161, l.1-4.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 161, l.5-10.
- ²⁸ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1916; repr. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 202.

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