The Burden and Promise of History:
The post-War poetics of Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

This thesis has two intersected lines of enquiry: it examines how Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison respond to the Second World War and the Holocaust in their published writing, and it considers – using each poet's archived correspondence, notebooks, and drafts – how their creative process and self-representation was informed by their self-awareness of their historical and geographical position. Analysing their published and unpublished work, my study explores how each poet's (self-asserted) place within the poetic tradition, their creative, national, international, and personal identity, and their understanding of history and poetry was inextricable from their particular position as post-War English poets.

Focussing in the first chapter on how Silkin, Hill, and Harrison engage with a tradition of war poetry within their writing, and in the second on the ways that they consider place, Englishness, identity, and belonging, this thesis explores how each writer's published poetry and unpublished correspondence and drafts continually negotiate with the geographical and historical circumstances that shaped both their survival and the position of their witness. It argues that the result of this sometimes difficult negotiation and self-reflection is a determinately cosmopolitan and outward-facing post-War poetic – a set of individual styles both symptomatic and responsive to the historical events that took place within and beyond their national borders, and to the ethical, aesthetic, and political questions that these events subsequently raised.

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Abbreviations

Geoffrey Hill:

BH - Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
     FtU- For the Unfallen (1959)
     KL – King Log (1968)
     MH – Mercian Hymns (1971)
     TEN – Tenebrae (1978)
     TMCCP –The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (1983)
     TToL – The Triumph of Love (1998)

CCW - Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
     TLoL – The Lords of Limit
     TEC – The Enemy's Country
     SaF- Style and Faith
     IoV- Inventions of Value
     AM- Alienated Majesty

Jon Silkin

CP – Jon Silkin, *Complete Poems*, ed. Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner (Manchester: Carcanet, Northern House, 2015).
     TPK-The Peaceable Kingdom
     TTF- The Two Freedoms
     TRotS- The Re-ordering of the Stones
     NwM- Nature with Man
     AG- Amana Grass
     TPoW- The Principle of Water
     TLT-K- The Little Time-Keeper
     TPwtS- The Psalms with their Spoils
     TSP- The Ship's Pasture
     TL-B- The Lens Breakers
     MAR- Making a Republic

PCI - Jon Silkin, *Poetry of the Committed Individual* (London: Penguin Books, 1973).

Tony Harrison

CdP - Tony Harrison, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).
     L- The Loiners
     P: P – Palladas: Poems
     USM- US Martial
     SoE- The School of Eloquence

Introduction

This thesis has two intersected lines of enquiry: it examines how Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison respond to the Second World War and the Holocaust in their published writing, and it considers – using each poet's archived correspondence, notebooks, and drafts – how their creative process and self-representation was informed by their self-awareness of their historical and geographical position. Analysing their published and unpublished work, my study explores how each poet's (self-asserted) place within the poetic tradition, their creative, national, international, and personal identity, and their understanding of history and poetry was inextricable from their particular position as post-War English poets.

Growing up in the shadow of the Second World War, Silkin, Hill, and Harrison all belonged – as Christopher Ricks observes – to the generation 'whose awakening to the atrocity of adult life was an awakening to this unparalleled atrocity'.[1] Despite the variation in their ages, region, and resulting style, in all of their work there is a reflection of this symbiosis between selfhood, imagination, and historical witness. Across their collections and prose – and in their archived correspondence and notebooks – Silkin, Hill, and Harrison each undertake a sustained and often self-critical examination of the presence – and pressure – of history and human violence upon the role and creative process of the poet.

These issues bring them into dialogue with each other, their contemporaries, and with the generations of poets before them – English and international – that have also considered what it means to write a socially and historically engaged form of poetry. Taken by all as an 'index' of the strength and weakness of poetry, the Holocaust in particular informs each poet's vision of the world around them, and their own place and responsibility within it.[2] As Hill notes in his 1998 collection *The Triumph of Love*:

> Corner to corner, the careful
>
> fabric of our lives ripped through
>
> by the steel claws of contingency. We are made
>
> to make ourselves instruments
>
> of violence and cunning. There is no

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[1] Christopher Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and "The Tongue's Atrocities": The W.D. Thomas Memorial Lecture Delivered at the College on February 15th 1978* (Swansea: University College of Swansea, 1978), p. 5.

[2] John Bayley, 'The Tongue's Satisfaction', *Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Sixtieth Birthday Issue*, vol. 30, no. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 1992), p. 9.

hook on which we are not caught

except, by lot, those of thorns and nails.[3]

From 'Corner to corner', the Holocaust and the Second World War rips through the 'careful fabric' of each writer's public and private life. In their work they all explore the extent of this damage, and the ways it might be addressed and repaired. The particular historical position of Silkin, Hill, and Harrison 'hook[s]' their negotiation with poetic tradition, creativity, nationalism, home and belonging, and shapes their understanding of their place and responsibility as poets in post-1945 Europe. The only 'hook' that they are not caught on – the 'thorns and nails' of the victim or martyr – shapes their sense of responsibility to the dead, and informs their sensitivity to the circumstances that ensured their survival.

This thesis draws upon the work of a number of critical studies that have examined Hill, Harrison, and Silkin as belonging to a loosely defined collective or group. These have explored the work of the three poets in relation to the Holocaust, and more frequently, as belonging to an alternative 'Leeds Renaissance' or 'Northern', anti-'Movement' scene.[4] Critics, the poets' contemporaries at Leeds, and even Jon Silkin himself have attempted to characterise the complex critical, creative, and personal relationship between the three writers, finding similarities (and friction) in their work that supports the notion of an enduring creative as well as personal and geographical connection. In his role as an editor both of *Stand International Quarterly* and the 1973 anthology *Poetry of the Committed Individual: a Stand Anthology of Poetry* Jon Silkin repeatedly championed and encouraged the existence of an alternative, internationally minded (and for the most part Northern) collection of writers. He was keen to bring together those around the globe who were individually 'committed' to addressing 'the gigantic forces of cruelty outside art as well as in the makers of it', as well as the 'useless' position of poetry in post-War society.[5] In the pages of *Stand*, the magazine he founded in 1952, he celebrated those 'committed individual[s]' whose work, like his own, was shaped both by the Holocaust and a desire to overcome British poetry's geographical and literary foreignness.

In the pages of *Stand*, and in *Poetry of The Committed Individual: a Stand Anthology of Poetry* Silkin brought together writers from Great Britain, the U.S.A, the U.S.S.R,

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[3] Geoffrey Hill, 'LXXV' [TToL], *BH*, p. 260.

[4] Romana Huk, 'Tony Harrison, The Loiners, and the "Leeds Renaissance"', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, ed. Neil Astley, (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) pp. 75-83.

[5] Jon Silkin, 'Introduction', *Poetry of the Committed Individual: a Stand Anthology of Poetry* [*PCI*], ed. Jon Silkin, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) p. 22.

Germany, Israel, Poland, Peru, Finland, Italy, Mexico, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Sweden, and Turkey in a show of bringing poetry back to a 'central position' in society and as a response to what he saw as the inward-facing and nationalistic poetry made popular by Philip Larkin and the Movement.[6] Silkin wanted internationally-facing, ambitious, 'relational', and 'communicative' poetry, and the (almost exclusively male) poets whom he included in the anthology – Michael Hamburger, Emanuel Litvinoff, Dannie Abse, Iain Crichton Smith, Ken Smith, Nathan Whiting, Miroslav Holub, Bertolt Brecht, Miklos Radnoti, Nathan Zach, Zbigniew Herbert, and Marina Tsvetayeva to name only a few – all produced poetry that 'compete[d]' with mortality, history, and apathy.[7] They were all 'committed' – in their 'individual' ways – to addressing the pressing social, political, artistic, and ethical issues of their time, and they all believed in the continuing necessity of poetry in the post-War world.

Both Hill and Harrison are included in the anthology, with five pieces by the former and one long poem by the latter. Both also featured heavily in *Stand* over the decades, Hill as contributor, and Harrison as a contributor, reviewer, and editor.[8] The magazine, with its strong association with Leeds, offered a creative and critical platform for all three. Along with *Stand,* Leeds – and the University of Leeds in particular – connected the lives and work of the three writers. Reflecting on that time in a 1993 article for *Agenda* entitled 'Living Through the Sixties', Silkin was enthusiastic in his praise of the 'intellectually and politically engaged community' that he found himself a part of.[9] His poems of that time were written out of the 'humane, political … Leeds period', shaped by his friendships with Hill, Harrison, and the other poets and writers based in and around the University.[10]

In her 1996 essay on the 'Poets of Postwar Leeds' Romana Huk also defined the relationship between the three writers according to the political and social 'commitment' that brought them all together.[11] However, she also acknowledged that to categorise 'commitment' as a definitive group – as Silkin at times tried to do – is to fail to acknowledge the differences in approach, style, and character between each writer's poetry. Commitment as a state of being 'fragments like a figure in a hall of mirrors' when you take a one-size-fits all

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[6] Ibid., p. 20.

[7] Ibid., p. 38.

[8] Silkin also set up a pamphlet imprint in 1964, entitled *Northern House,* which published many of his *Stand* contemporaries (international and local). This included Harrison's *Earthworks* pamphlet, as well as early work from Hill and Ken Smith.

[9] Silkin, 'Living Through the Sixties, *Agenda*, vol. 31, no. 2 (summer 1993), p. 59.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual: Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, Geoffrey Hill, and the Poets of Postwar Leeds', *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. James Acheson and Romana Huk, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996) p. 175.

approach.[12] As this thesis shows, the different ways that each poet chooses to articulate their historical, ethical, and aesthetic burden confirms the diversity between the three poets.

In a recent partly autobiographical essay, Jeffrey Wainwright discusses his involvement in what he described as the 'Leeds poetry' scene.[13] He recollects how 'Our vision of the art was set by the notion of "engagement"', noting how 'The figure of Jon Silkin was central here'.[14] Jon Glover has also written of Leeds in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, as well as the relationship between Silkin, Hill, and Harrison, both in his editorials for *Stand*, and in his introduction to Silkin's *Complete Poems*. Commenting on the creation of the Gregory Fellowships at Leeds, he notes now 'it is surely a strange, and as yet unexamined, aspect of post-war life that there was such a coincidence of thought and practice (in work, creativity and educational theory) between Silkin, *Stand*, and his "community of writers", and [Bonamy] Dobrée, Eric Gregory, T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read and Henry Moore and their "community of writers and artists".[15] Even Silkin retrospectively praised this time of communal 'thought and practice'. In the same 1993 article for *Agenda* he ends with a reflection of his 'Leeds period':

Wordsworth's 'Bliss was in that dawn to be alive' seems right enough.[16]

The only reservation he adds is that, 'like so many positive periods in one's life, one isn't fully aware of its value until afterwards'.[17]

Two figures who have been less willing to categorise themselves as 'Committed Individuals' are Hill and Harrison. Although he has praised the work of his Leeds contemporaries, Harrison has remained largely silent on the matter, whilst Hill has repeatedly refused to associate himself with any particular movement of poetry, denying the influence of any of his fellow poets upon his writing or thought.[18] In a recent interview with the Oxford magazine *The Isis* Hill praised post-1954 Leeds as 'the great creative centre of English

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Jeffrey Wainwright, 'Space Available: A Poet's Decisions', *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Peter Robinson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 216.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Jon Glover, 'Introduction', *CP*, p. xlvi.

[16] Silkin, 'Living in the Sixties, p. 59.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Hill, in Geoffrey Hill and John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 81.

poetry', naming Jon Silkin and Tony Harrison as two members of the 'very, very active scene'.[19] However, when asked if he belonged in this group, his answer was evasive:

> When I was presented as a Leeds poet, I said that I happened to live and work in Leeds but, if we were going to use place names, then I am not a Leeds poet but a Worcestershire poet. I don't know that any of us consciously thought that we were the Leeds school but we have been called that ever since by people publishing doctoral theses. There is now a much sought-out Leeds poetry archive, which has sixty of my manuscript books. It has a whole pile of Tony Harrison, of Silkin. It is a very thriving secondary industry they have got going from a bunch of us who were very active there from about the mid-1950s to the late 1960s.[20]

This thesis in part belongs to the 'thriving secondary industry' that Hill describes. However, by connecting each poet to a tradition of 'committed' or 'Northern' writing I don't wish to suggest here that they can be easily grouped together as 'committed' poets. To do so would be to play down the (often) productive differences that differentiate each poet's response to the pressing historical, social, ethical, and personal issues of their age. The pronounced differences that exist between each writer – creative, stylistic, and sometimes personal – mean that they elude any easy categorisation. Emphasising instead the 'Individual' part of 'Committed Individual' I wish to suggest that what unites each writer is the need and desire to respond in the first place; each one considers and negotiates with the idea and tradition of poetic commitment and historical witness, and it is this individually undertaken negotiation, with differing and sometimes contradictory results, that connects them. As Silkin himself notes in his introduction to *Poetry of The Committed Individual,* 'The existence of many different kinds of poets, between whom there is some uneasy rapport, suggests that the 'system' we may have in future may be one in which the criteria will increasingly emerge from the practice of the writers, and not from the imposition of worn-through absolutes'.[21] What this celebration of 'practice' rather than 'imposition' translates to is a form of poetry based on dialogue, connection, and negotiation – across histories and continents – as opposed to any external set of rules. 'The so-called criteria', Silkin notes, 'will be the product of the

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[19] Geoffrey Hill, '"If I write about destruction it's because I'm terrified of it": An Interview With Geoffrey Hill', *The Isis*, 27 April 2015, http://isismagazine.org.uk/2015/04/if-i-write-about-destruction-its-because-im-terrified-of-it-an-interview-with-geoffrey-hill/ [Accessed 10 May 2015].
[20] Ibid.
[21] Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI*, p. 18.

writers and their work in relation to what they write about; the relations will originate criteria'.[22]

Rather than focus on the political, personal, and geographical 'relations' between each poet, Antony Rowland's 2005 book *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* examines Harrison and Hill within the context of Holocaust writing.[23] Leaving out Silkin from his study, Rowland deconstructs the umbrella term of 'Holocaust Poetry', distinguishing the writing of Holocaust survivors from those, like his chosen poets, who witnessed the events and camps from afar. The first major study of English poetry of this kind, the book places Hill and Harrison within the category of 'post-Holocaust' writers – a group defined by their 'awkward' aesthetic, their imaginative engagement with the Holocaust, their self-consciousness, and their dialogue with the work of European Holocaust poets and survivors.[24]

Like Rowland, I emphasise the importance of each poet's delayed and second-hand witness of the Holocaust. The act of indirectly and belatedly experiencing the Holocaust plays a major part in all three poet's work, acting as a cause and a subject in their poetry. However, this is not another study of each poet's 'Holocaust' or 'post-Holocaust' poetry, extended to include Silkin. I also draw upon Silkin, Huk, Wainwright, and Glover's emphasis on the importance of the creative community in Leeds, *Stand*, and the North of England as a central point around which these three writers orbited. Taking these two lines of critical enquiry into account, this thesis argues that Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's poetry continually negotiates with the geographical and historical circumstances that shaped both their survival and the position of their witness, and that the result of this is a determinedly cosmopolitan post-War poetic – a set of individual styles both symptomatic of and responsive to the historical events that took place within and beyond their national borders, and to the ethical, aesthetic, and political questions that these events subsequently raised.

The reason I have categorised Silkin, Hill, and Harrison as 'post-War' rather than 'post-Holocaust' poets is threefold. Firstly, their negotiation with the Holocaust and its repercussions forms part of a wider consideration of historical atrocity and human cruelty; their concerns include and transcend the chronological and geographical specificity of the Jewish Shoah. A key aspect of their post-War poetic is a sustained exploration and

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: awkward poetics in the work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

[24] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*, p. 101.

contextualisation of the Holocaust in relation to other, overlapping histories and atrocities, including the 1190 massacre of the Jews at York (Silkin), the Wars of the Roses (Hill), and the peak and end of the British Empire and its aftermath (Harrison). To call them post-Holocaust poets in this context would be to underplay the multidirectional and transnational nature of their representation.

The second reason is due to the fact that their poetry is concerned with other elements of the Second World War besides the Holocaust, as well as with other conflicts. The dropping of the two Atomic Bombs, the night time air raids over English and European Cities, the Cold War and the imminent threat of new conflict, even the Bosnian War, the first Iraq War, and the July 7 London bombings – all of these histories inform and are informed by the Holocaust and each other in Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's work.

Finally, and as chapter one will explore, this thesis distinguishes itself from previous studies of either the 'committed', 'Holocaust' or 'post-Holocaust' poetry of each writer by bringing together two overlapping traditions. I argue that the poetry of each poet is invested with a pre-narrative – one rooted in an alternative and pre-existing canon of alternative combative and civilian war poetry. Each writer mediates their particular historical sense of the Holocaust and the post-1945 world through the work of poets such as Keith Douglas, Isaac Rosenberg, and John Milton, as well as contemporary writers like Miroslav Holub. All consider and re-define what it means to be a contemporary, civilian war poet, and examine how their historical and geographical position relates to the tradition and definition that has come before them. I have labelled them as post-War poets – as opposed to 'post-war' or simply 'war' poets – due to the profound and specific effect of the Second World War on their style and subject matter, but this specificity is measured against what Silkin once called a 'historical sense' – a consciousness that the present is not necessarily new, that each event 'is one incident in a tradition of such incidents'.[25] This sense of tradition manifests itself both in the consideration of their historical moment in relation to other moments, and in their exploration of their poetic burden, role, and responsibility in comparison to those who have come before them.

i. 'gregarious' witness

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[25] Silkin, in Peter Marchant, Jon Silkin, Michael Waters, 'Attend to the Unnecessary Beasts: a Conversation with Jon Silkin', *Vanderbilt Poetry Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 1973), p. 28.

Silkin, Hill, and Harrison all produce a form of poetry that is both symptomatic of their particular experience and directly responsive to the ethical, imaginative, and aesthetic demands placed on them by the Second World War, the Holocaust, and the continuing violence and conflict within a supposedly post-War world. Acknowledging the extent to which their poetic voices have been shaped by the particularity of their historical and geographical positions, their post-War poetry contains the circumstances that surround its creation, and attempts to respond to them.

The way they do this is to first give a poetic and linguistic form to their imaginative and moral experience. In the work of all three poets there is an almost painfully self-critical representation of the circumstances that determined their experience of war, as well as the retrospective consideration of the geographical and chronological luck of their positions. Despite the differences in their age, background, and even faith, all consider what it means to be a vicarious or – as Hill puts it in *Mercian Hymns* – a 'gregarious' witness to the Holocaust.[26] Used when the speaker of poem recalls how 'I loved the battle-anthems and the gregarious news', this unusual choice of word draws attention to the childhood naivety of Hill, and to the distance between the communities listening to the news at home, and those whose lives form the subject of the bulletin. Denotive of belonging to a collective group and of the act of associating with others, Hill's choice of word conveys both the young child's desire to be a part of the battle, and the adult poet's attempt to find a meaningful way to reach out to an experience and community beyond his own. These exciting radio broadcasts might have allowed the young poet feel closer – or gregarious – to both the action and the community it affected, yet all they really served to do was to confirm his remove. Now in adulthood, Hill, Silkin and Harrison all attempt to make themselves – and their nation – truly 'gregarious' with the rest of the world. In order to do this they consider the tension between their half-knowledge and half-experience of the conflict. Whilst they knew first-hand of one aspect of the Second World War – the dropping of bombs and the fighting between soldiers – they remained, for a while, oblivious to its other aspects – the murder of millions of people in the European death camps or in Nagasaki and Hiroshima. As a result, they all consider what Tony Harrison calls in one poem the 'close one' of their births – the chance of their

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[26] Hill, XXII: Opus Anglicanum' [MH], *BH*, p. 105.

circumstances as English children – and the responsibility that this leaves them with as comprehending adult poets.[27]

For Harrison, the 'gregarious' (and precarious) position of his childhood cannot be separated from either his role as a poet, or the style and subject matter of his verse – a fact that he acknowledges in his own writing. In his 1971 essay 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', first published as the introduction to *Corgi Modern Poets in Focus 4*, Harrison surprises his readers. Rather than provide the expected narrative of cause and effect overtly related to the relationship between class and poetic 'eloquence', the poet instead attributes both his vocation and his cosmopolitan outlook to the Second World War.

> When I search my childhood for something to explain what drove me into poetry, something like Pablo Neruda's story of the silent exchange of a toy lamb and a pine cone between himself and a boy through a hole in the fence, I can find nothing quite so significantly beautiful, but there are things which brought to me, early but obscurely, the same precious idea "that affection that comes from those unknown to us who are watching over our sleep and solitude … widens out the boundaries of our being and unites all living things!" My images are all to do with the War.[28]

That it is international and not class conflict that 'widen[s] out the boundaries' of Harrison's being provides a more nuanced version of the poet's work than is often portrayed in the critical studies of his poetry. Although by no means a case of one preoccupation 'versus' another, the excerpt offers up the picture of a writer as concerned with the demolishing of historical and geographical boundaries as social ones. It challenges the critical and popular classification of Harrison as a resolutely Northern working-class writer. He may 'occupy' poetry both on behalf of his fellow 'Loiners' and the 'dumb' who 'go down in history and disappear', but his gaze is not parochial.[29] Like his contemporaries it is fixed outwards – international and historical in its ambition and influence.

As 'Dr Agrippa' continues, Harrison lists the specific events that 'drove' him into poetry – 'images' of air raids, celebrations, and more sombre moments of realisation that are all represented and dramatized within his poetry. His recollection of 'bombs falling, the windows shaking, myself and my mother crouching in the cellar' is realised in poems such as

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[27] Tony Harrison, 'A Close One' [SoE], *CdP*, p. 172.
[28] Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison,* p. 32.
[29] Harrison, 'Them and Uz', 'National Trust' [SoE], *CdP*, pp. 134, 131.

'The Excursion', 'A Close One', 'Listening to Sirens', 'Jumper', and 'Shrapnel', which together depict memories of a childhood littered with the 'Day old bereavement debris of a blitz / there's been no shelter from':

> Our cellar 'refuge room' made anti-gas.
>
> Damp sand that smelled of graves not Morecambe Bay.
>
> Air Raid Precautions out of *Kensitas*.
>
> A victory jig-saw on Fry's Cocoa tray.
>
> Sandwiches. Snakes and Ladders. Thermos Flask.[30]

Initially depicted in the poem 'A Close One', Harrison returns to this scene decades later in 'Shrapnel', where the complex, chronologically spread-out narrative of the poem takes as its starting-point the lingering memory of nights spent 'Down in our cellar, listening to that raid'. Evoking the scene in a voice which captures the bewildered excitement of the child witness, the poem recreates the urgency of the 'whistles, those great shudders' and the sense that 'death / seemed near, my mother, me, my sister, all afraid / though my mother showed us kids no sign of fear'.[31] Although written decades apart, both poems draw upon the tension between the young speaker's proximity to death and mass destruction and his physical and epistemic shelter. In the earlier sonnet the title itself speaks to Harrison's sense of the near-miss, whereas in 'Shrapnel' the narrative continues to the following morning, and sees the speaker speculating on whether the fact that 'all the bombs fell on to Cross Flatts Park / and not on to our house in Tempest Road' was due to the darkness of the blackout or else the humanity of the German pilot.[32]

The emphasis in both 'A Close One' and 'Shrapnel' on the poet's precarious yet nonetheless consistent shelter from the harshest realities of violence is presented in even starker terms in 'The Excursion', which appears in Harrison's first collection, *The Loiners*, although not in his *Collected Poems*. The poem depicts a similar scene to the one described in both 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa' and his later poems. What develops, retrospectively, into a sense of fear and threat begins as sheer childish excitement, with the speaker regressing into the naïve voice of his younger self recalling 'the thrilling, high, crescendo whistle' of the bombs, and the 'explosions like flushing a closet'.[33] Unlike the fixed geographical (if not chronological) position of 'A Close One' and 'Shrapnel', here Harrison's childhood naivety

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[30] Harrison, 'A Close One' [SoE], p. 172.
[31] Harrison, 'Shrapnel', *CdP*, p. 437.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Harrison, 'The Excursion', *The Loiners* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1970), p. 73.

and his relative protection from death is emphasised by the sudden move from the cellars of Leeds to the streets of Russia. The slightly awkward syntax of the stanza, which begins with a conjunctive – 'Though my earliest reminiscences / Are of bombs shaking the windows' – and which continues without a full stop through the disorientating whistles and explosions of the Blitz, slows down as the voice of the adult returns and the stanza arrives at the resolution of the as-yet unknown comparison:

> Last winter, at thirty, Vladimir Ilyich,
>
> In Red Square, you were the first stiff
>
> I have ever seen, man or woman [34]

That it is death, and more specifically the act of witnessing the dead that joins together 1940s Leeds with 1960s Russia draws attention to the poet's sensitivity to his luck and relative safety in England. The fact that he could have reached adulthood without having to come into direct contact with the dead gives a new significance to the later choice of title.

Subverting his evocation of Pablo Neruda in 'Dr Agrippa', in 'The Excursion' Harrison explains how it was the 'whistling' sounds of the bombs and not the more romantic 'silent exchange' of a pinecone through a fence that broadened his imaginative boundaries. The notion of a 'close one', extended beyond the single night of bombing, characterises the tension between proximity and distance (both geographically and in terms of the poet's own consciousness) that shapes Harrison's wider approach to poetry. It also, along with the other poems mentioned here, expresses the role of earlier childhood witness in shaping adult understanding of poetry, history, and human nature. What these poems explore is what it means to possess an adult imagination littered with 'shrapnel'; a mind covered with historical and moral scars that re-open with each new instance of violence, wherever or whenever it might occur. In his engagement with the bomb trope, Harrison gives a physical form to the explosion of his childhood naivety and wonder – a rupturing brought about by events such as Hiroshima and the discovery of the concentration camps. In wishing to shed light on and even clear this lingering debris, his poetry exhumes the events that 'drove' him into writing. He also gives a physical form to the inner process of comprehension, guilt, and horror that characterizes the shift from childhood innocence to adult experience, compressing this gradual process of maturity into sudden, shocking instances of discovery and rupture.

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[34] Ibid.

After the mention of the bombings, 'Dr Agrippa' then turns to the Atom Bomb and the Holocaust as the two defining 'images' that 'drove' Harrison into poetry. Crucially though, both are discovered retrospectively, in moments of shocked and horrified comprehension. Before he directly mentions Hiroshima or Nagasaki, Harrison describes V.J. Day, and his wonder at the 'street party with a bonfire and such joy, celebration and general fraternity as I have ever seen since'.[35] The significance of V.J. Day as an 'image' that 'drove' Harrison into poetry occurs only when the celebratory scene is re-examined through the lens of the adult poet. 'Dr Agrippa' goes on to note that 'as I grew up the image stayed but I came to realise that the cause of the celebration was Hiroshima'.[36] In the poems 'Sonnets for 1945' and 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' this profound but sparingly addressed shift is extended and dramatised. In both poems, albeit in different ways, the reader is presented with a picture of a world blown apart by what took place beyond the 'boundaries' of the local space.

In 'Dr Agrippa' the only qualification that Harrison gives for this powerful statement on Hiroshima is to provide another, equally traumatic, moment of illumination:

> Another [memory] is the dazed feeling of being led by the hand from a cinema
> into the sunlit square after seeing films of Belsen in 1945, when I was eight.[37]

After a gap of half a century, this moment of almost dazzling illumination is returned to in 'Queuing for Charon'. Contextualising the last fifty years after the war, the poet addresses his childhood memory in the first poem of a sequence. The event, so important as an 'image' that 'drove' the poet into poetry, becomes in 'Queuing for Charon' the beginning of the poet's adult understanding of the Holocaust and human nature - an understanding that defines the form and content of his poetry fifty years after the end of the war. In language that bears a striking resemblance to the original prose piece, the poem recalls how:

> A few years younger I'd only seen
> Belsen on newsreels but the sight
> I saw at eight on that big screen
> fell on me like a blight.
> It clouded all my childish fun.
> My voice, before it got its bass,
> squeaked against the humbled Hun

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[35] Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr. Agrippa', p. 32.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

and murderous Master Race.[38]

That the horrifying realities of the concentration camps and Hiroshima should have 'clouded' Harrison's existing consciousness of the war and his developing maturity is a theme that unites each of the memories listed in 'Dr Agrippa', and which linguistically connects poems across the entirety of the poet's *Collected Poems*. In both his poetry and prose, Harrison's childhood and developing sense of self are forever 'clouded' by the belated witness of atrocity; a choice of phrase heavy with historical significance given the role of fire and gas, and the photograph of the mushroom cloud which was to become a defining image of the bombings.

The choice of phrase, and the linguistic connection that it makes between Harrison's life in Leeds and wider historical events across the globe also draws attention to the fact that not only did the war 'cloud' the poet's view of the world around him, it also altered the language by which he might respond. In 'First Aid in English', one of the poems belonging to the 'Sonnets for August 1945' sequence, the poet recalls how even his school grammar books began to reflect the profound changes brought about by the war. Learning about collective nouns, the schoolboys 'chanted gaggle, bevy, coven, herd / between the Nazi and the Japanese defeat', using 'bird or beast' as their examples.[39] Yet in a sudden shift the poem reflects how 'Ghetto and gulag weren't quite current then'. With new atrocities arrived the need for a new language to describe them, and with that 'The fauna of our infancies decreased / As new nouns grew collectivising men'.[40]

With his language, memory, and sense of self in flux, the poet begins to write from a position comparable to the classical 'gloomy' poet Palladas, whose writing he translated, and whose 'bitter force' he attributed to the fact that the poet's last years 'should have coincided with the virtual destruction of the system of the beliefs to which he owed his always precarious living'.[41] For Harrison, born in 1937, the circumstances that shape Palladas's final poetic output are reversed but no less apt. This time it is the poet's coming-of-age – linguistically, personally, and poetically – that coincides with the 'virtual destruction' of a set of beliefs that could not be reconciled with Auschwitz or Hiroshima. Separated by seventeen centuries, the collision between history and poetry rings equally true, as Harrison's vision of the tradition that he inherits and the future that he intends to write for are 'clouded' by these

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[38] Harrison, 'Queuing For Charon: I', *CdP*, p. 413.
[39] Harrison, 'Sonnets for August 1945: 6 First Aid in English' [SoE], p. 202.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison,* p. 133.

moments of destruction and realization. In each poem, the realities of the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the capacity of man for acts of atrocity fall on the young poet's consciousness and imagination 'like a blight', shaping his adult output and demanding a poetic that could capture and respond to this irrevocable shift.

How Harrison responds is to produce a post-War poetry that contains this pressure in its form and rhetorical style. His 'formal endeavour' accounts for and articulates the specific nature of his witness, offering an effective, and tailor-made response to his own personal brand of historical pessimism. This expresses the particular pressure upon his imagination, but also holds it back, creating an updated 'life-support system' in the face of 'sheer cosmic chaos'.[42] The sonnet 'Jumper', for example, reflects that:

> When I want some sort of human metronome
>
> to beat calm celebration out of fear
>
> like that when German bombs fell round our home
>
> it's my mother's needles, knitting, that I hear,
>
> the click of needles steady though the walls shake.
>
> The stitches, plain or purl, were never dropped.[43]

The power of the 'metronome', be it human or metrical, to 'beat calm celebration out of fear' articulates the tension between content and form that drives the energy within Harrison's highly formal, yet also irreverent, and even at times scatological poetry. 'Jumper' provides an alternative, constructive cause behind the poet's continual adherence to strict rhyme and meter.

By 'plugging in to the life-support system of metrical verse' Harrison draws upon sensual memory and the steady rhythm of the human heart to contain and also give structure to what would otherwise be an unbroken and overwhelming sense of historical pessimism.[44] Just as his mother's 'stitches were never dropped', so the insistence on rhyme maintains the fine, surviving threads that connect the poet with his poetic predecessors, even when all else has been blown apart. The sometimes uncomfortable metrical precision within Harrison's verse, particularly when coupled with serious or shocking subject matter, continues to emphasise the lingering presence of shrapnel within the poetic imagination; however it also sends a defiant message about the power of poetry to 'beat calm celebration out of fear'. As

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[42] John Haffenden, Tony Harrison, 'Interview with Tony Harrison' [1983], *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies 1: Tony Harrison*, p. 236. Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', p. 133.
[43] Harrison, 'Jumper' [SoE], p. 177.
[44] Haffenden, Harrison, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', p. 236.

well as helping to create a poetic whose difficulty attests to the dilemma of creating an appropriate response 'after Auschwitz', the use of tightly rhyming form effectively translates the particular experiences that 'drove' him into poetry, enacting an indirect form of call and response between history and creative self-fashioning.[45] It confirms the poet's belief that 'there is only poetry [After Auschwitz]'whilst recognising the enormity of the task facing the post-War poet.[46]

Along with Harrison's attention to form, the other defining aspect of his post-War poetic is the use of shock tactics and deliberately unsavoury images. What Antony Rowland has aptly called Harrison's 'awkward' poetics manifests itself in the poet's focus upon sex, anti-social behaviour, and ignobility. [47] However, in this explosive, 'impious', and uncomfortable verse, Harrison provides a poetic model tailor-made to his particular act of witness.[48] As explosive as the bombs that dropped upon Beeston and Hiroshima, Harrison's poetry is one of rupture and explosion; explosion of taste, respectability, and the private sphere. The poem, shaped around individual witness, becomes a bomb in its own right; one that can be dropped upon expected propriety and acceptable subject matter.

Rowland also defines Hill's poetry as suitably 'awkward' in response to the Holocaust. However whilst his verse is – in its own way – also impious, Hill expresses his historical sensitivity through an altogether less explosive way. In his poetry we find the continual consideration of his position as a secondary witness to conflict.[49] Born in the West Midlands in 1932, Hill, like Harrison, was keenly aware of the connection between the Holocaust and his responsibility as a poet. However, the direction of this focus was slightly different from that of his younger Leeds contemporary. The location of his birth, which had determined his survival during the War, afterwards imbued the poet with a profound sensitivity to his own physical distance; his overwhelming relief of survival tempered with an awareness of his own remove.

Similarly to Harrison, the concept of the near miss is considered repeatedly across Hill's work. In 'Hymn XXII' of *Mercian Hymns*, the speaker, whose voice hovers between the intimacy of the autobiography and the grandiosity of the myth, describes how as a boy he

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[45] Antony Rowland, 'Introduction', *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), p. 10; Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry,* p. 102.
[46] Harrison, on 'The South Bank show' [1999], quoted in Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry,* p. 100.
[47] Ibid., p. 101.
[48] See Matthew Boswell, *Holocaust impiety in literature, popular music and film* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) for a detailed analysis of 'impiety' as a post-Holocaust aesthetic.
[49] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry,* p. 65.

and his friends played soldiers in a landscape that bore the traces but not the scars of conflict. In a scene that encapsulates the joyful innocence of the assumed childhood voice, the poem describes how:

> We ran across the meadow scabbed with cow-dung, past
>
> the crab-apple trees and camouflaged missen hut.
>
> It was curfew-time for our war-band.[50]

Describing the family air-raid shelter, the Hymn concludes with the speaker listening to the 'gregarious news', 'warmed by a blue-glassed storm-lantern', and entranced by 'stories of dragontailed airships and warriors who took wing immortal as phantoms'.[51] From the 'war-band' of schoolboys to the stories of 'immortal' warriors closer to Gods than fallible men, the War is glimpsed from a safe distance, more fairy-tale than reality. Unlike Harrison's 'The Excursion', there is no moment of overt comparison between the war as childhood fantasy and adult reality. Rather than offering an explosive moment of realisation as Harrison is prone to do, Hill's revelation lingers in the silence just behind the articulated innocence of his younger self. Only the choice of the word 'gregarious' exposes the acute sensitivity of the adult poet to his epistemic and physical shelter.

The subject of the bombings is returned to in the 2002 collection *The Triumph Of Love*. Here, the mythology of the boy-king Offa is evoked again, however in this instance the voice of the adult poet, reflective and even bitter, tempers the enthusiasm and imagination of his younger self. Drawing upon the historical legend of another king of Mercia - the boy-martyr Kenelm - the poem mirrors *Mercian Hymns* in its anachronistic compression of twentieth and ninth-century events. Returning to 'Romsley, of all places!', the poem describes the defining features of the town.[52] Among them is 'Kenelm, his mouth full of blood and toffee', and a 'stocky water tower built like the stump / of a super-dreadnought's foremast'.[53] Commenting that 'it could have set / Coventry ablaze with pretend / broadsides', the poem moves to a vivid description of the war-time bombing of the city, the seemingly disparate images of Kenelm, the water tower, and the bombing separated now by the understated space of 'some years':

> It could have set
>
> Coventry ablaze with pretend

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[50] Hill, 'Hymn XXII: Opus Anglicanum' [MH], p. 104.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Hill, 'VII' [TToL], *BH*, p. 239.

[53] Ibid., pp. 239-240.

broadsides, some years before that armoured

city suddenly went down, guns

firing, beneath the horizon; huge silent whumphs

of flame-shadow bronzing the nocturnal

cloud-base of her now legendary dust.[54]

In comparison to the earlier, physically and experientially sheltered depiction of the bombings, here it is the self-reflexive voice of the adult poet that recollects a history only fully comprehended after the actual event. The painful truth of this belated understanding, achieved only after the 'legendary dust' had settled, leads the speaker to articulate in the most overt terms the strange paradox of 'close one' that in its different way defines both Harrison and Hill's experience of the war.

Whilst Tony Harrison might be more explicit in his identification of the connection between his childhood experience and the style and content of his adult verse, in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill the memory of war lingers with equal visibility within the imaginative landscape of the adult poet. Indeed, more than Harrison, in his poetry and prose Hill emphasises the way in which bearing witness links the poet to those who have suffered through it. For Hill, 'Martyrdom is an act of witness', even if 'not every person who is killed unjustly is necessarily a witness'.[55] Yet, in recording the lives and deaths of those who engaged in a 'pedagogy of martyrdom' Hill arguably creates a form of poetry engaged in the pedagogy of witness. Just as martyrdom is witness, so is poetry. In his interview with *The Paris Review* the poet defines his role in these terms. The responsibility of the poet is 'to write the poems', however 'once you've said that, you've dragged so much else along with it'. In the case of Hill, what is 'dragged' along with the act of writing is the act and burden of bearing witness:

Everybody has to find his or her own way of witnessing, and the only way I can effectively witness is by writing and by trying to write as well as I can.[56]

For Harrison, the symbiosis between witness and creativity was clarified via the discovery of the atom bomb, subsequently giving rise to a poetic response characterised by its public, explosive force. By contrast, in Hill's work it is the notion of 'gregarious' experience that

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[54] Ibid., p. 240.
[55] Hill, in *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation*, p. 90.
[56] Geoffrey Hill, in Geoffrey Hill, Carl Philips 'The Art of Poetry, No. 80', *The Paris Review*, http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/730/the-art-of-poetry-no-80-geoffrey-hill [Accessed 7 September 2012].

shapes the form and the content of the poem. What this sense of responsibility gives rise to is a poetic characterised by a self-accusatory silence rather than an explosive force, as gaps, distance, and inarticulacy expose the relative safety of the poet.[57] Hill's awkwardness manifests itself in the continual expression of guilt, inadequacy, and weakness that permeates his work. The reader is continually forced to consider whether the post-War 'lyric cry' is 'Incantation or incontinence'.[58] The poet repeatedly chooses to 'Go back to Romsley, pick up the pieces' and become 'a somewhat unhappy figure' precisely in order to explore to what extent his declaration of '*Mea culpa, mea culpa*' might provide effective witness to the dead.[59]

In the poetry of Jon Silkin, the notion of the 'close one' – of a reality narrowly missed as it flew overhead – is an idea profoundly shaped by the poet's experience of growing up as an Anglo-Jew in a predominantly Gentile society. Although Silkin's work even from his first collection addresses both the Holocaust and his inheritance as a Jew, it is not until *The Ship's Pasture*, published in 1986, and then in *Making a Republic,* published posthumously in 2002, that he turns his autobiographical gaze directly and explicitly towards his childhood experience of war. Here he explores his formative years in the aptly named sequence 'Autobiographical Stanzas' and then in poems such as 'Taking Ourselves to Heart'.

In this latter poem, which appears in his final collection, Silkin follows a similar pattern of rhetoric and subject matter to the air-raid poems of Harrison and Hill. Situated in the present tense, in a voice poised between the innocent immediacy of childhood and the more reflexive omnipotence of adulthood, the poem moves from an abstract consideration of reincarnation to a vivid and urgent description of the blitz and the instance that led to the poet's evacuation to Wales:

> When I was a child, evacuated from bombs,
> in London's nerve and tangle
> of fighting back gravity's instant
> of bombs dropped from their hold, rickety sensitive eggs –
> 'Why,' she asked, 'make yourself vulnerable,
> why flaunt your body in the raids?'
> my miniscule terror – 'Here, get out of bed, quick,

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[57] See chapter one.
[58] Hill, 'CXLV' [TToL], p. 284.
[59] Hill, 'LXXXII', 'CV' [TToL], pp. 262, 269.

under the stairs is safest,' my mother just pregnant,

I afraid, in the tissue of adult terror,

to be ash and still alive, before dying.[60]

Like Hill's mention of the 'gregarious news', the description in the poem of a boy caught 'in the tissue of adult terror', conveys the poet's sense of his childhood position as a witness only partly aware of what it was that he bore witness to. Yet whilst this poem makes no distinction between the experience of the Gentile and the Jewish child, in his 'Autobiographical Stanzas' the war is contextualized within an extended consideration of this difference.

Whilst the shadow of the War haunts the sequence, in particular in the earlier poems, it largely remains an implicit presence, referred to in subtleties rather than addressed in any extended detail. What stands out more prominently is the sense of rootlessness, alienation, and guilt that Silkin felt as an isolated and 'large-kneed' Jewish boy growing up in a predominantly Christian community and attending a 'fee-paying school'.[61] In poems such as 'We were evacuated during the war' the speaker describes a scene reminiscent of the 'war-band' in Hill's *Mercian Hymns,* except that Silkin is the foreign threat - the target of the boys playing at war:

Their fighting, brave: my crudity, a dishevelled

outsidedness, in large knees. Those boys

disarrayed merely, but yet authentic

in it with real gold, easy-natured

and brutal.[62]

In 'Romano-British' the poet recalls nights spent in the dorm listening to planes overhead, yet whilst the experience holds the same 'supernatural' quality to the boy-king of Mercia, Silkin's vantage point is not a shelter but a prison:

If I could tear my body

from this space, where my life thrums

vibrating military enthusiasms, I would,

as a man lifts weights not before

lifted, be strong [63]

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[60] Silkin, 'Taking Ourselves to Heart' [MaR], *CP*, p. 254.
[61] Silkin, 'Autobiographical Stanzas: 'We were evacuated in the war' [TSP], *CP*, p. 567.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Silkin, 'Autobiographical Stanzas: Romano-British' [TSP], p. 570.

When Silkin does directly address the War and his experience as a child evacuated from London to Wales, the voice is strangely detached. Coupled with a rhetorical style akin to Hill and Harrison's in its occupation of a strange future-anterior space between childhood and adulthood, there is a distance between the speaker and the scene not shared by the two other poets.

In the second poem of the sequence, 'Acetylene: evacuated to a house in Wales, lit by gas', the voice of the poet is present-tense, with the predominant focus not on the War but on the gas flame in the kitchen, poignant in its capturing of the unexpected directions of memory. Yet in amongst the vivid description of the kitchen, over which 'a bell widens its mouth / and closes it, each life between its lips' the voice of the adult poet, detached, omnipresent, steps out from the immediacy of childhood to pronounce 'We are to survive war', before returning immediately to the gas and the bell, with its 'bronze lights / its soft rigours on white, ribbed flanks'.[64] This sudden, stark assertion, un-glossed and seemingly unconnected to what surrounds it, shifts the poem in the same way as the delayed syntax of Harrison's 'The Excursion'. Just as the sudden move to Russia alters the true significance of the stanza's earlier description of the air-raid, here the half-prediction, half-recollection that 'we are to survive the war' casts a new light on the use of gas as a trope within the poem.

Rather than conveying the innocent obliviousness of the child, the continual return to gas throughout the 'Autobiographical Stanzas' instead articulates the adult poet's painful sensitivity to the fact that as Jew, his early ignorance of the gas chambers was shaped by the luck of geography. The guilt of the survivor whose accident of birth protected him from the suffering inflicted upon his fellow Jews shapes the poet's 'lament' in a poem of the same name. Assuming again the childlike immediacy of rhetoric characteristic of all three poets, the poet sits with his parents on an English summers day and mourns the fact that he is 'a child / in unredeemed Jewishness'.[65] Like Hill's mention in *Mercian Hymns* of his 'gregarious' witness, or Harrison's repeated allusion to a past and a future 'clouded' in the ash and smoke from Europe and Japan, in the mention of what remains 'unredeemed' Silkin articulates the particularity that will come to shape the relationship between experience, witness, and poetic in his work. The idea that during his childhood the poet's identity and race lay 'unredeemed' leaves open the question as to when or what might effectively 'redeem'

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[64] Silkin, 'Autobiographical Stanzas: Acetylene: evacuated to a house in Wales, lit by gas' [TSP], p. 566.
[65] Silkin, 'Lament' [MaR], p. 726.

the poet, allowing him entrance into his own identity as an Anglo-Jew. Yet the repeated reference to gas in 'Autobiographical Stanzas' certainly hints at what this might be.

Silkin's 'historical sense' – shaped by his experienced and 'unredeemed' Jewishness – provided him with an understanding of the continual present-ness of rootlessness and violence, and contextualised the pre-existing sense of alienation first experienced in the school playground of his childhood.[66] This perception of history, brought about by his gradual 'knowledge of events', shapes his representation of both history and place within his poetry. However, it doesn't allow him to reconcile his own position as a hyphenated Anglo-Jew, both in terms of his relationship to the dead or living. In poems such as 'The Victims' Silkin directly addresses his those who died in the concentration camps, praying for their 'compassion for you know that I / Did not, and could not have endured your pain'.[67] Despite their shared faith and race, it is the poet's safety and absence that defines his relationship with the dead, just as Hill and Harrison's poetic identities are shaped by their acute awareness of their luck.

In the work of both Harrison and Hill this same historical knowledge and burden shapes their poetry and self-identification as post-War poets. Inheriting a world 'Ripped' from 'corner to corner' by human violence, each poet's subsequent negotiation with commitment, history, identity, and poetry is shaped by the Holocaust, the War, and the repercussions of their particular witness. As Silkin notes in his definition of the 'Committed Individual', 'the relations will originate criteria'. As this thesis will explore, this statement manifests itself in each poet's geographical, historical, and imaginative 'relations' to the Holocaust, the Second World War, as well as to the rest of Europe, to their own nation, and to the tradition, authority, and morality of poetry itself.

ii. A note on structure

This thesis is comprised of two chapters. These are then broken down into subsections dedicated to the collective and individual work of each poet. Rather than examine Silkin, Harrison, and Hill in the same order, I begin and end with Silkin, with Hill occupying the centre – as the last part of chapter one and the first part of chapter two. This structure reflects both the style of each poet's post-War voice and their relationship to one another. As chapter

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[66] Silkin, in Marchant, Silkin, Waters, 'Attend to the Unnecessary Beasts', p. 28.
[67] Silkin, 'The Victims' [TTF], *CP*, p. 115.

one explores, Silkin's poetic is deliberately outward facing. His priority, articulated in the pages of *Stand* – is to communicate to the public and the world at large. Hill on the other hand, is far more introspective. His poetry frequently looks inward, his poetic voice addressing (and berating) himself as much as any imagined reader. Harrison in many ways occupies the middle ground between the styles of his two contemporaries, with a poetic voice that is at once introspective and determinedly 'public'. This structure also reflects Silkin's desire to bring together these poets in his lifetime. His writing frames this thesis just as Silkin himself framed the work of Hill, Harrison, and the other contributors to *Stand* within the idea of the 'Committed Individual'.

As chapter two will explore, Hill begins the American edition of his first *Collected Poems* with the words of Thomas Hobbes:

> Sometimes a man seeks what he hath lost; and from that place, and time, wherein he misses it, his mind runs back, from place to place, and time to time, to find where, and when he had it.[68]

This study 'runs back' in the opposite order, moving from the temporal in chapter one to the spatial in chapter two. The first part of this thesis explores how Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's post-War verse was shaped by their 'relations' to a pre-existing tradition of war poetry. It examines the pre-narrative that shapes their response to events such as the Holocaust, and looks at how each poet mediates and adapts the writing of their predecessors to take into account the particularity of their circumstance. In Silkin's verse, the 'extrospection' of Keith Douglas migrates – via a negotiation with his Jewish identity – into an antagonistic, rootless, but ultimately outward-facing post-War poetic. In Harrison's, antagonism and conflict are there again in even more literal terms, as the poet creates a form of front-line poetics that captures the urgency of his particular historical moment, and conveys the profound influence of conflict and witness upon the formation of his poetic selfhood. In Hill's work, the poet's concern with a tradition of combative and civilian witness informs his own – often-difficult – negotiation of his poetic identity in the post-Holocaust world. Each individual act of 'gregarious' witness, which has helped to shape the form, content, and composition of their work, also shapes this consideration of tradition, responsibility and poetic legacy, and in examining how each poet considers this, it's also possible to see where their individual negotiations with 'commitment' align and diverge.

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[68] Thomas Hobbes, 'Leviathan', quoted in Hill, *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom: Poems 1952-1971* (Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) [Epigraph].

The other 'relation' that this thesis considers is the one that each poet has to the locations and local spaces that ensured their survival and defined their 'gregarious' witness. Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's exploration of their position, place, and geography play a fundamentally important role in their poetic response. They are defining factors both in each poet's particular relationship to war and atrocity, and in their adult need to look beyond narrowly drawn up borders of experience. In the second chapter I look at how each poet's representation of the world around them is equally tied up with the subject of human history and the act of bearing 'gregarious' witness. As both a container of violence and a reminder of each poet's particular position in relation to the European dead, the natural world and the places marked by personal and communal histories become both a way of excavating history, and a means of examining the scars and traces hidden beneath modernity's civilized façade.

In a more positive turn, this focus on geography and place also becomes a platform for each poet's attempt to create a transnational and multidirectional poetic space of memory – one that overcomes the epistemic and geographical barriers that might otherwise keep England apart from the rest of the European community. By going beneath the ground, finding the sometimes dark and atrocious roots that link the Holocaust to other, seemingly unconnected events, each poet maps out an alternative, non-linear cartography of human history. Whereas their childhood sense of 'gregarious' witness expressed their naivety and remove, now poetry – and its entanglement in these dark but shared roots – allows them to find a more meaningful connection. They go from 'place to place' to uncover the 'origins' and traces of their contemporary moment, and re-assess the historiography that defines their nation and its relation to the rest of the world.[69] They all interrogate and re-affirm the notion of home and belonging in a post-Holocaust world, starting with the local spaces that defined their childhood witness. As a symbolic and an inhabited space, the North of England in particular becomes a platform upon which to consider the local and international scale of the holocaust and of historical acts of human cruelty.

This consideration of both tradition and place connects the different collections of each poet just as the Second World War and the Holocaust explicitly and implicitly informs the form, subject matter, and language of their poetry across their oeuvre. As Hill acknowledges in this characteristic display of irony 'I did not / say the pain is lifting. I said the pain is in / the lifting'.[70] Each poet insists on 'lifting' what might otherwise remain hidden,

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[69] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004).
[70] Hill, 'XLII' [TToL], p. 250.

uncovering the violence and atrocities that have shaped the modern world. As their work shows, the Second World War and Holocaust are not matters that can be resolved; they are integral to their identity as poets. It is for this reason that in the case of Silkin and Harrison this thesis examines poetry ranging from 1950 (with the publication of Silkin's first collection *The Portrait and Other Poems*), to 2005, three years after Silkin's posthumously published final collection *Making a Republic*, and the year that Harrison's poem 'Shrapnel' was published in *The Independent*. Hill's cut-off point is slightly earlier, with the 2000 collection *The Triumph of Love* being the latest poem of his to feature in this study (The same limit does not apply to either his or Harrison's critical writing). The decision to frame the remit of this thesis in this way derives, primarily, from the facts of Silkin's earlier birth date and death. A study of these three poets and their 'relations' – both to history and to each other – depends upon the living 'commitment' of each 'individual'. Another reason is because the later work of Geoffrey Hill – now collected together with his earlier books in *Broken Hierarchies* – has taken on a different form, both in regards to the volume of work that the poet has published, and in the style of the verse. *The Triumph of Love*, which features heavily in this thesis, is retrospective and self-reflective in its nature, concerned with the poet's sixty years of 'exacerbated grief', and therefore feels like a fitting final collection in this thesis's exploration of each poet's enduring 'gift' of 'a wounded and wounding / introspection'.[71] Although very different in style, Harrison's 'Shrapnel' feels similarly retrospective, offering another version of each poet's enduring – and what Michael Rothberg would define as 'multidirectional' – pre-occupation with the War and the Holocaust.[72] Both poems show how each poet's memory continues to be 'subject to ongoing negotiation [and] cross referencing' with other histories and traditions (including African genocide and the London 7/7 bombings), informing their perspective of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century world.[73] Both pieces also show a great deal of self-awareness as to the necessity and continual need for this. They both reflect upon, interrogate (and defend) what might easily be dismissed as 'exacerbated' grief.[74]

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[71] Hill, 'XXVI', 'LXVII' [TToL]*,* pp. 246, 258.
[72] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
[73] Rothberg, 'Introduction', *Multidirectional Memory,* p. 3.
[74] Hill, 'XXVI' [TToL], p. 246.

Chapter One: *'Their experiences will not forget easily …'* (Keith Douglas): The Influence and Legacy of War Writing in the Post-War Poetry of Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, and Geoffrey Hill

In 1960 Jon Silkin and his editorial team published a special issue of *Stand,* entitled 'The War Poets'.[75] Dedicated to the poetry of the First World War, the issue included articles on Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, and Robert Graves. It also featured new work from a few carefully selected contemporary writers, including Emanuel Litvinoff and Herbert Read. Typical of *Stand*'s alternative position in relation to the literary canon, the special issue did as much to interrogate the sentimentalised notion of the War Poet as it did to celebrate the work of those writers who fought and died between 1914 and 1918. In articles such as Joseph Cohen's 'The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman', for example, the place of Owen and Brooke in political and popular nationalistic discourse is called into question. Cohen interrogates the public's and politicians' preference for certain war poets over others, turning the gaze away from the work of each writer and onto the society that consumes it.[76] 'If the third World War got underway tomorrow', Cohen writes, 'someone would be sure to ring up the Press between the first warning whistle and the pulverizing atomic blast a few minutes later to ask "Where are the War Poets?"'[77] In place of any new writing, two figures – Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen – 'would be immediately invoked':

> The fact that their positions of war were diametrically opposed is no longer relevant, for their function as war poet has been modified, and the term itself, artificial from its conception, has now taken on an even more questionable usage. For what people would want and, indeed, expect to get would not be a post but a lyrically adept military hero whose life had been sacrificed to an honourable cause in the not too distant past. The necessity for such figures is well established: when war comes, the citizens of the country close ranks.[78]

In 2015, in the early stages of the four-year long commemoration of the anniversary of the First World War, there has been an influx of largely nationalistic acts of public remembrance, dramatization, reflection, and even celebration. Cohen's statements are therefore perhaps

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[75] *Stand: The War Poets,* ed. Jon Silkin, Gene Barrow, John Rex, Geoffrey Matthews, T[ony]. W. Harrison, Richard N. Coe, vol. 4, no. 3, (1960).
[76] Joseph Cohen, 'The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman', *Stand: The War Poets*, pp. 21-25.
[77] Ibid., p. 21.
[78] Ibid.

even more relevant now than they were fifty years ago. From the installation of ceramic poppies around the Tower of London (subsequently 'pulled up', packaged, and sold to individual buyers) to the 2014 Christmas Advert for Sainsbury's supermarket, which recreated – and fabricated – the football match between English and German soldiers alongside its marketing of a special commemorative chocolate bar, the First World War occupies pride of place within the current public and political consciousness; a consciousness largely nationalistic in shape.[79]

In keeping with some of the current critical backlash against this wave of largely nationalistic public remembrance, what Cohen's 1960 article called for was a critical re-appraisal of the war poet - a call echoed throughout the special issue.[80] In doing this he also asks that the public reconsider who are remembered and recited, and why this should be the case. One particular example of the misrepresentation, and even jingoism, that the article seeks to expose is Edward Blunden's 1958 pamphlet *War Poets 1914-1918*.[81] The thirty page British Council publication comes under fire as an 'obnoxious and disturbing example' of the 'character manipulation' prevalent in public commemoration. Noting the pamphlet's overwhelmingly positive critical reception, Cohen dismisses it as nothing more than 'an exercise in hero worship' – a de-humanising portrayal that enshrines its subjects as 'Wordsworthian happy warriors in a Georgian Valhalla' rather than 'sensitive, expressive human beings who went into the army for non-heroic reasons'.[82] In this unequivocal dismissal of Blunden's 'stellarification' of the poets of the First World War – in particular Wilfred Owen – Cohen defends those who have been overlooked due to the fact that they either remained alive, or 'neither looked nor sounded like a hero and could not be fashioned into one'.[83] In particular, he draws attention to the figure of Isaac Rosenberg, who is granted only a single line in Blunden's book, and who, as a Jew and a private who joined for financial

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[79] For examples of the editorial and public debate around both the advert and the installation see: Ally Fogg, 'Sainsbury's Christmas ad is a dangerous and disrespectful masterpiece', *The Guardian*, Thursday 13 November 2014. http: / /www.theguardian.com /commentisfree /2014 /nov /13 /sainsburys-christmas-ad-first-world-war [Accessed 14 November 2014]; Charlotte Meredith, 'Guardian Backlash After Branding Tower Of London Poppies A 'Ukip-Style Memorial', *Huffington Post*, 29 October 2014, http: / /www.huffingtonpost.co.uk /2014 /10 /29 /guardian-poppies-jonathan-jones_n_6068216.html [Accessed 14 November 2014]. For an alternative visual representation of the First World War dead see the Quaker Map of wartime deaths. https: / /www.google.com /maps /d /viewer?mid=ztmNGmuUWfH0.k5FfbOPspjLI [Accessed 13 November 2014].

[80] Jonathan Jones, 'The Tower of London poppies are fake, trite and inward-looking – a UKIP-style memorial', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 28 October 2014, http: / /www.theguardian.com /artanddesign /jonathanjonesblog /2014 /oct /28 /tower-of-london-poppies-ukip-remembrance-day [Accessed 13 November 2014].

[81] Edmund Blunden, *War Poets 1914-1918* (London: Longman, 1958).

[82] Cohen, 'The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman', pp. 23-24.

[83] Ibid., pp. 24, 25.

reasons, did not fit into the carefully constructed mould set aside for the 'archetypal spokesmen'.

Cohen's choice of Rosenberg as an eloquent and under-appreciated anti-hero of the First World War is an apt choice for this special issue of *Stand*, given his role in shaping Jon Silkin's poetic style and position. In the same issue, Silkin writes an essay dedicated to Rosenberg – one of many across his career – in which he praises the poet's balance between naturalism and symbolism, and alludes once again to Blunden in his concluding remark that 'no omission, or glancing reference [by Blunden] obscures this remarkable achievement'.[84] Cohen's and Silkin's articles, complementary in their subject matter and political leanings, both position Rosenberg as an alternative artistic figure, outside of the popular canon of war poetry, but nonetheless vital in his legacy. Cohen draws attention to this legacy more explicitly than Silkin (in this instance) with his evocation of the lesser celebrated poets of the Second World War, who, when faced with 'its vastness and its range and speed forced upon them' chose the 'classical pessimism' of Rosenberg over Owen, despite the fact that they had been nurtured on the poetry and persona of the latter poet as an appropriate model to follow.[85]

The connection that Cohen, and through him *Stand*, makes between Rosenberg and the poets of the Second World War is an important one. It suggests an alternative tradition of war poetry – one based around the 'rootless' aesthetic and 'classical pessimism' of the Anglo-Jewish artist Rosenberg – and it implies the need for a new definition of the term and role beyond 1945. Even before Cohen's piece, Rosenberg's influence was acknowledged and celebrated by poets writing during the Second World War. In particular, Keith Douglas – who fought in the African campaign during the Second World War and who died in Normandy in 1943 – acknowledges his indebtedness to Rosenberg in his poem 'Desert Flowers' with a direct address to his predecessor: 'Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying'.[86] The poem, which articulates the creative dialogue between the two writers, despite their different circumstances, is just one instance of the way in which Douglas's writing supports Cohen's argument for the relevance of Rosenberg's 'classical pessimism' for the circumstances of the Second World War.

In a letter to *The Times*, written in 1943 but only published in 1971, Douglas expands on this relationship between the artists of the two World Wars, explaining the need for figures such as Rosenberg and Owen for both the soldier-poets and for the public. 'In the fourth year

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[84] Silkin, 'Isaac Rosenberg: The war, class, and the Jews', *Stand: The War Poets*, p. 36.
[85] Cohen, 'The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman', p. 23.
[86] Keith Douglas, 'Desert Flowers', *The Complete Poems*, Third Edition, ed. Desmond Graham (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 108.

of this war', Douglas complains, 'we have not a single poet who seems likely to be an impressive commentator on it'.[87] Noting the self-involvement of his contemporaries, Douglas pre-empts Cohen's later explanation for this lack of effective poetic commentary, both at home and from the front line. For the civilian war-poet, relative comfort stood in the way of their effectiveness. English civilians, according to Douglas, 'have not endured any suffering comparable to that of other European civilians, and England has not been heavily bombed long enough for that alone to produce a body of "war" poetry'. The second impediment was distance and imaginative remove:

> Nor can we produce a body of long range poetry inspired by shocking news items. The poet at home can only make valuable comments on social and political issues, which he may do more easily, both because he can see more clearly and because the censor will be more lenient with him, in retrospect.[88]

Despite the danger faced by the soldier-poet, they were, according to Douglas, equally impeded in their quest for an effective mode of response. The poet-soldier was held back by the nature of the combat that they found themselves a part of:

> The reasons are psychological, literary, military and strategic, diverse. There are such poets, but they do not write. They do not write because there is nothing new, from a soldier's point of view, about this war except its mobile character.[89]

Written before the end of the war and the subsequent discovery of the concentration camps by the allied soldiers, Douglas's comments reveal a great deal about the belated nature of witness, even for those directly involved in the fighting. That there is 'nothing new' except for the 'mobile character' of the conflict emphasizes the profound impact of the 'Great War' upon society and literature, but also exposes the enormous shift in understanding undertaken in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

This shift becomes even more apparent as Douglas continues to explain the reasons behind the relative silence of his contemporaries:

> hell cannot be let loose twice: it was let loose in the Great War and it is the same old hell now. The hardships, pain and boredom; the behaviour of the living and the appearance of the dead, were so accurately described by the poets of the Great

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[87] Douglas, 'Poets in this War', *Times Literary Supplement* [1943], 23 April 1971, p. 478.
[88] Douglas, ibid.
[89] Ibid.

War that every day on the battlefields of the western desert – and no doubt on the Russian battlefields as well – their poems are illustrated.[90]

The ideas that 'hell cannot be let loose twice' – that the Second World War had no defining 'character' – holds a poignant irony given the ethical and historical debates in the decades following 1945 over the 'a-historical' and 'unique' nature of the Holocaust.[91] Poised just before the 'Copernican Shift' that Harrison, Hill, and Silkin and so many others underwent, Douglas asserts himself to be ill equipped to add any new image to the complete 'illustration' of war and horror offered by Rosenberg, Owen, and their contemporaries.

The article, full of bitterness, nevertheless ends with a predication that shows a remarkable degree of foresight on the part of the under-appreciated Second World writer. Resigned to the fact that 'the soldiers have not found anything new to say', for Douglas the responsibility and opportunity falls on those who come after the War to reflect back on the character and legacy of the conflict. As he suggests:

> Their [the soldiers'] experiences will not forget easily, and it seems to me that the whole body of English war poetry of this war, civil and military, will be created after the war is over.[92]

This statement is extraordinary. By collapsing both the official time frame of the First and Second World War Douglas invites a new type of war-poet; one who is self-consciously 'belated' in their position and approach, able to reflect, from a safe distance, what exactly it was that differentiated 1918 from 1945. Rather than acting as a hindrance to memory and representation, distance is recast as a necessary condition for witness.

For Douglas, this distance allowed him to better appreciate the poetry of his predecessors; the trench poetry of the First World War is 'illustrated' in vivid detail across the western deserts and Russian battlefields – the images created by figures such as Rosenberg and Owen brought into sharper focus against the simultaneously new and repetitive backdrop of an African warzone. Rather than being determined solely by time or

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[90] Ibid.

[91] Elie Wiesel, perhaps the most famous spokesperson for this early trend in memory studies, claimed that 'the Holocaust transcends history', although he was by no means alone in this view. In recent years this critical discourse on the uniqueness of the Holocaust has been replaced with a growing emphasis on 'post', 'connective' and 'multidirectional' forms of memory and remembrance. Elie Wiesel, in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel* ed. Irving Abrahamson (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), p. 158. For an overview of this debate see Alan S. Rosenbaum *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide,* 2d ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); and Rothberg, 'Introduction: Beyond Competitive Memory', *Multidirectional Memory,* pp. 1-27.

[92] Douglas, 'Poets in this War', p. 478.

location, Douglas's war poetic is determined by relations and intertextuality – a fact he acknowledges in 'Desert Flowers':

> Living in a wide landscape are the flowers –
> Rosenberg I only repeat what you were saying –
> the shell and the hawk every hour
> are slaying men and jerboas, slaying
>
>
> the mind: but the body can fill
> the hungry flowers and the dogs who cry words
> at nights, the most hostile things of all.
> But that is not new.[93]

Composed in El Ballah General Hospital, Palestine in early 1943, the poem acknowledges the debt that its author owes to the tradition of war, and war poetry that preceded him. However, alongside his admission that 'Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying' – a line that evokes in the intimacy of its tone a recently held conversation rather than a one-sided address – Douglas also leaves open the possible need for a new form of poetry that can capture the 'secrets' that he cannot spill. After beginning with a dismissal of its novelty, the poem ends on a different note, with a look towards its own posterity:

> Lay the coin on my tongue and I will sing
> of what the others never set eyes on.[94]

Evoking Greek mythology and the story of Charon, the morbid ending leaves the poem with a sense of unresolved doubleness. The promise to 'sing' and bear witness only after death confirms the current impossibility of adding anything new to this 'same old hell'. Yet it also looks beyond the formal end of the poem, anticipating a scenario where Douglas might be able to articulate 'what others', including Rosenberg, 'have never set eyes on'. Like his belief that the poetry of the Second World War will be written 'after the war is over', in 'Desert Flowers' Douglas delays the moment to 'sing'. Instead, he leaves it to those who come after him to 'lay the coin on my tongue', and to mediate and respond in a belated act of poetic witness.

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[93] Douglas, 'Desert Flowers', p. 108.
[94] Ibid.

This re-definition of the tradition and future of war poetry and the war poet imbues the 1960 special issue of *Stand,* and more importantly the poetry of Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison, with a new significance. The poem, coupled with Douglas's statements, closes the gap between the civil and the military. They all suggest the equal legitimacy of the front line and the home front as a space of conflict and witness. More crucially, they redefine the relationship between the war poet and the post-Holocaust writer. Douglas's belief in the responsibility of those writing 'after the war is over' gives a pre-history to British post-Holocaust verse. It locates the idea of bearing witness 'after' within an additional context and narrative – one with an alternative literary tradition and social role. Shaped to such a large extent by the work of Rosenberg, Douglas, and the tradition of the alternative war poet, Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's individual 'commitment' to bearing 'belated' and 'gregarious' witness to the Holocaust is informed by and mediated through an on-going – and incomplete – 'body of war poetry'.

The influence of Douglas's historical and literary re-alignment manifests itself both in each poet's work and in their critical writing. In the special 'War Poets' issue of *Stand,* for example*,* it shapes the editorial decision to publish contemporary writers alongside Owen, Brooke, Sassoon, and Rosenberg. Emanuel Litvinoff's powerful attack on the anti-Semitism of T.S. Eliot, viewed alongside the poetry of the Anglo-Jew Isaac Rosenberg, is the civilian addition to an on-going, collective canon of alternative war poetry. Rosenberg's war poetic also contextualises Litvinoff's post-Holocaust discussion of anti-Semitism within a different tradition of political, public poetry. The reproach that Litvinoff levels at Eliot - that 'I am not one accepted in your parish, / Bleinstein is my relative and I share / the protozoic slime of Shylock, a page / in Sturmer, and, underneath the cities, / a billet somewhat lower than the rats' – textually connects him both to the historical figure of the Jew, and to the alienated soldier who felt more of an affinity to the 'droll' and 'cosmopolitan' rat than his comrades:

> Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
>
> Lit by a lamp in his blood
>
> Ten immutable rules, a moon
>
> For mutable lampless men.
>
> The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
>
> With the same heaving blood
>
> Keep tide to the moon of Moses,

Then why do they sneer at me?[95]

As two poets who openly address their representation as outsiders, villains, and even vermin by their Gentile contemporaries, Rosenberg and Litvinoff offer two halves of a poetic dialogue that transcends the chronological limits of two wars. What brings them together, in this instance at least, is the implicit suggestion by Douglas of the need for an on-going and unfinished conversation, and the platform offered by *Stand* to enable this dialogue.

Douglas's statement highlights the need for a critical re-classification of whom, how, and why one might be considered a war poet. They also demonstrate the need to re-define the relationship between the tradition of war poetry, post-War poetry, and post-Holocaust poetry in Britain. By challenging what might or might not be an authentic and vital response to conflict, and by making 'war' something plural and continuous, his article casts post-1945 poetry in a new light. Douglas's re-versioning of himself and his contemporary moment alters the criteria of war writing. It also pre-empts the aesthetic, ethical, and social negotiations that take place in post-Holocaust poetry, offering a new criteria for witness. Knowing that those writing 'after' will have the perspective to have something 'new to say' (even if he could not guess the enormity of that task) Douglas dismisses chronology and location as the sole determinants of valid and important witness. Instead, a new criterion is laid down, and it is left first to Douglas, and then arguably to figures such as Silkin, Hill, and Harrison, to define a new taxonomy for the military or civilian writer.

For Douglas, the determinant for war poetry revolved around his notion of 'extrospection'. In his personal, often tense, correspondence with the poet J.C. Hall, the poet lays out the meaning of the term, and in doing so puts himself at odds with many of his contemporaries. These letters, which range across Douglas's time in the military up to his death, offer an important glimpse into the character of the poet. They also shed light on his sense of the relationship between poetry, politics, and history. Taking offence at Hall's criticisms of his work, Douglas repeatedly lashes out at his friend, critiquing his judgement, and the state of poetry in general. In a letter dated 10th June 1943, Hall is accused of being 'too involved and too precious, chiefly because you now find yourself in a backwater and have nothing to write about that is relevant'.[96] In another, dated 10th August, he remarks that

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[95] Emanuel Litvinoff, 'To T.S. Eliot', *Stand: The War Poets,* p. 2; Isaac Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches' & 'The Jew', *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984 [1979]), pp. 103-104, p. 101. Litvinoff was a close friend of Jon Silkin, and was an important influence on the younger Anglo-Jewish poet.

[96] Keith Douglas to J.C. Hall, 10 June 1943, *Keith Douglas, A Prose Miscellany*, Compiled and Introduced by Desmond Graham (Manchester: Carcanet, 1985), p. 121.

'You say I fail as a poet, when you mean I fail as a lyricist', going on to suggest that 'Only someone who is out of touch, by which I mean first hand touch, with what has happened outside England … could make that criticism'.[97] In these comments, geographical location seems more important than Douglas lets on in his letter to *The Times*. However, as he explains the form of poetry that he is trying to produce, the criteria for good writing becomes less about location and experience, and more about the gaze, rhetoric, and intention of the writer. 'My object', Douglas writes, '(and I don't give a damn about my duty as a poet) is to write true things, significant things in words each of which works for its place in a line':

> My rhythms, which you find enervated, are carefully chosen to enable the poems
> to be *read* as significant speech: I see no reason to be either musical or sonorous
> about things at present.[98]

What is missing in contemporary war poetry, in Douglas's opinion, is a necessary symbiosis between lived and seen experience and poetic form. As he goes to explain:

> I don't know if you have come across the word Bullshit – it is an army word and
> signifies humbug, and unnecessary detail. It symbolizes what I think must be got
> rid of – the mass of irrelevancies, of 'attitudes', 'approaches', propaganda, ivory
> towers, etc., that stands between us and our problems and what we have to do
> about them. To write on the themes which have been concerning me lately in
> lyrical and abstract forms, would be immense bullshitting.[99]

Rather than use 'abstract and lyrical forms' to address the themes that he feels pressed to write, Douglas implores the need for a new approach – one that will deal directly with its subject rather than be weighed down by a 'mass of irrelevancies'; he suggests the value of a poetic style that might truly see its surroundings, rather than simply reflect the inner life of the poet. If poetry is meant to be 'significant speech' then it must capture, in its form, language, and content, something of the subject that it seeks to witness.

After berating the state of contemporary verse, Douglas coins his new approach – 'extrospection' – suggesting to Hall that the term expresses 'the sort [of poetry] that has to be written just now, even if it is not attractive'.[100] Whilst at the time his urgency and aesthetic approach alienated him from the style of many of his contemporaries (to the extent that Hall wrote to his mother after his death that 'His [Douglas'] work is perhaps rather far removed

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[97] Douglas to J.C. Hall, 10 August 1943, ibid., p. 127.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.

from reality') it provided a model for those writing in the aftermath of the war, in particular in those appearing in Jon Silkin's anthology of 'committed' *Stand* poets.[101]

The notion of the 'committed individual', problematic in its own right, brings together the overlapping narratives of post-Holocaust poetry and Second World War 'extrospection'. This is particularly the case given that Douglas doesn't provide a definitive explanation of his new term. His almost throwaway creation of the phrase – an answer to the introspective, 'abstract', and 'lyrical' form that he berates – is open-ended, and as a result it is picked up and adapted by *Stand* and Silkin into the 'committed individual' of the post-War decades. The difference between the two terms is precisely the 'new' events that Douglas predicts. The particular demands of Holocaust representation lead to a necessary migration of Douglas's 'extrospection'. Each writer negotiates differently with the responsibility that Douglas gives to those writing in the aftermath of war. The result is three distinct, but nevertheless related forms of war poetry. The need for an outward-facing, international, and socially 'committed' poetic that truly sees its subject is mediated through the need of the poet to look inwards and consider their 'individual', private, as well as collective morality and historical moment. Jon Silkin unintentionally explains this necessary migration of the term in his introduction to *Poetry of The Committed Individual*, when he discusses how 'the relations will originate criteria'.[102] This emphasis on 'relations' – to history and to other writers – is what determines the developed 'criteria' of the post-War poet from the extrospective one. The result is a style of poetry that brings together these modes, acknowledging their equal influence in shaping the style and subject matter of each 'individual' yet nevertheless 'committed' poem.

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[101] J.C. Hall to Mrs Douglas, 30 October 1943, p. 86; Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI*, p. 18.
[102] Ibid., p. 18.

i. Committed Individualism: Silkin, Douglas, Rosenberg, and *The Jewish Quarterly*

One of the striking similarities between Keith Douglas and Jon Silkin is their shared willingness to offend for the sake of their poetic convictions. Despite the historical events and circumstances that distinguish the 'extrospection' of one from the 'commitment' of the other, the 'relations' that both establish with their contemporaries set apart their different 'criteria' in forceful terms. Douglas's correspondence with J.C. Hall and his letter to *The Times* demonstrate his palpable frustration at the poetic community around him. The 'bullshit' that he describes, and his dismissal of his friend's style and approach, convey how this frustration manifests itself.[103] His prose demonstrates how the 'extrospection' of the war poet shaped his critical gaze as well as his poetic one. In a 1963 interview between Jon Silkin and the editor of *The Listener*, Antony Thwaite, this antagonism is recreated in the increasingly tense dialogue between the two editors. In an echo of 1943, Thwaite – a proponent of Larkin and The Movement poets – takes the role of J.C. Hall, and Silkin inherits the abrasive urgency of Douglas.[104] The comparison between these two exchanges, separated by twenty years and the Holocaust, shows the migration of Douglas's poetic ethos, and how Silkin chooses to adapt it. United in their urgency, but distinguished by their historical position, the forcefulness of the two poets' positions offers a clear vision of the defining characteristics of 'extrospection' and 'commitment'.

In their 1963 exchange, Thwaite and Silkin set out what they believe to be the relationship between poetry and politics, and the role and responsibility of the poet in relation to society. What emerges from this discussion is Silkin's belief in the impossibility of disconnecting the form, language, and even composition of a poem, from the society it seeks to observe. Mimicking Douglas's call for a poetic form – however 'unattractive' – that gets past the 'bullshit' and reflects its surroundings, Silkin sets out his definition of a 'committed' and historically engaged poet. In his ideal scenario 'the poet would not be an observer; he would not wear the mask or the persona of an observer – he would be a participator'.[105] This emphasis on involvement with the subject connects the latter poet's approach with his wartime predecessor. What he acknowledges, though, is the need for a degree of 'withdrawal', however small. This slightly removed perspective is what allows the poet to reflect and

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[103] Douglas to J.C. Hall, 10 August 1943, p. 127.
[104] This role-play is particularly fitting given the creative animosity between Silkin and Larkin, and the fact that the latter had come out in praise of the poetry of J.C. Hall. Jon Silkin, Anthony Thwaite, 'No Politics, No Poetry?', *Stand*, vol. 6, no.2, (1963) pp. 7-24.
[105] Silkin, in Silkin, Thwaite, ibid., p. 14.

'observe' as well as 'participate' in the public sphere.[106] Silkin might desire the artist to be 'less detached', yet this acknowledgement of the need for 'withdrawal' demonstrates the part that the Holocaust plays in distinguishing his poetic from Douglas's. It demands a consideration of perspective – of the historical, geographical, and ethical position of poetic witness. Any act of 'significant speech' must also involve a consideration of the uses and misuses of language.

Silkin describes this new, amalgamated model as an organic 'poem-in-process'.[107] Discussing with Thwaite how it translates to the subject, language, and compositional matter of the poem, he explains:

> what I am interested in when I talk about process is not process for its own sake
> but process in relation to the kind of poetry we have. I would start off by looking
> at that society and saying, here are certain things I dislike. I don't want to start
> reforming from within, but changing the whole thing, so that 'process' stands by
> a kind of analogy for revolution.[108]

Like Douglas's desire to overthrow the 'bullshit' contained in the 'abstract' representations of the Second World War, and the 'extrospective' solution to this remove between poet and society, Silkin places communication at the heart of the poet's role. 'Writing', he argues, 'draws the reader's attention to certain contradictions and anomalies in society and says, do you like these things, or if you do, what will the end product be?'[109] According to this definition, consciousness-raising and communication lie at the heart of a successful poem.

Like Douglas, Silkin almost appears willing to sacrifice the aesthetic quality of the work if it can fulfil the more important job of 'extrospection'. As he notes in the official policy document drawn up for *Stand* in October 1959, the magazine must '*Stand* against apathy – against the indifference of people to one another – and [celebrate] good writing'.[110] Its 'aim' was for 'a high standard in all things, but the saying of something important always to take precedence over the saying of something unimportant extremely well'.[111] This final comment in particular demonstrates Silkin's willingness to take risks, offend, and even produce a sub-standard poem in order to say 'something important'. As he notes in a later

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[106] Silkin, in ibid., p. 14.
[107] Ibid., p. 11.
[108] Ibid., p. 14.
[109] Ibid., p. 14.
[110] Leeds, Brotherton Library Special Collections (hereafter BLSC), *Stand* Magazine Archive, BC MS 20c Stand, Papers and Correspondence of *Stand* Magazine.
[111] Ibid.

editorial: 'a commitment to language for its own sake, seems to me ultimately a barbarous investment'.[112] The critic Merle Brown once equated this approach to poetry to 'that of a lavatory cleaner to the job of cleaning lavatories', noting, in his nod to the poet's earlier job as a cleaner, his tendency in times of urgency to stop 'thinking of a poem as an act in which man can actualize the full range of his natural and human possibilities' and rather simply as a means of communication.[113] Faced with the task of reconciling his pressing sense of social injustice with his creative spirit, Silkin – for Brown – ran the risk of treating poems as 'just ways of cleaning up the debris which would "clag" up the "shithouses" if they were not attended to'.[114]

In his interview with Thwaite, which goes as far as to refer to poetry as a 'political or social instrument', this criticism seems apt.[115] By the end of their argument, Silkin's version of poetry has become more of a tool for revolution, rather than an end-product in its own right:

> Aren't we writing to communicate? Communicating means the raising of consciousness. Now if you raise someone's consciousness, what are you doing but implying the need for change? [116]

The stress that this rather tense exchange places on communication and revolution as opposed to the formal quality of the poem doesn't do justice to the poet's usually firm belief in the necessary balance between the political, reflective, and aesthetic – a belief conveyed in statements such as those made in his introduction to *Poetry of the Committed Individual*, where he asks 'how might a heretic or imagistic art be engaged with an art that wanted without compromise its essentiality to be socially orientated, involving as it does, some movement towards the discursive?'.[117] What it conveys however, is the parallel concern of Douglas and Silkin with the relationship between poetry and history. In each man's fraught and sometimes overblown defence of his style and position we find a translation of 'extrospection' that bridges the gap between 1943 and 1963. The only difference is that 'heretic' poetry – the self-reflective and lyrical verse – also forms a part of Silkin's post-War and post-Holocaust interpretation of the term.

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[112] Jon Silkin, 'Editorial', *Stand*, vol. 14, no. 4, (1973) p. 7.

[113] Merle Brown, 'Stress in Silkin's Poetry and the Healing Emptiness of America', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 18, no. 3 (summer, 1977), p. 373. See chapter two.

[114] Brown, 'Stress in Silkin's Poetry', p. 373.

[115] Silkin, in Silkin, Thwaite, p. 16.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI,* p. 26.

Throughout his career Silkin demonstrates the profound influence of war writing upon his approach to poetry and his notion of poetic 'commitment'. His edited works on the subject – *Stand: The War Poets* (1960), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979), *The Penguin Book of First World War Prose* (ed. with Jon Glover, 1989), *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems* (1994), – reflect the decades that he spent publishing and promoting the work of First World War poets and prose writers, in particular those, like Isaac Rosenberg, who might otherwise have received less public attention.[118] Similarly, his critical work on the subject – 'The Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg (1959),'The Forgotten Poet of Anglo-Jewry, (1960) [on Isaac Rosenberg], 'Rosenberg's Rat-God (1970), *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (1972), 'For Rosenberg,' *(*1976), 'Triumphant Silence: Some Aspects of Sidney Keyes, 1922-1943,' (1980), 'Keith Douglas' (1981) and 'Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg' (1986) – shows his long-term engagement with war writing, and his belief in the importance of lesser-known writers from both the First and the Second World War within the tradition.[119] In particular, they highlight the place that Rosenberg occupied within Silkin's critical consciousness, both in terms of his inheritance as a 'committed' poet and his identity as an Anglo-Jew.

This interest extended to Silkin's poetic work. There are numerous mentions and allusions to Rosenberg across his numerous collections. These relate to the First and Second World War and to Silkin's own Jewishness, but also to surprising and seemingly unrelated subjects, such as the poet's sexual relationships. These surprising references suggest that it was Rosenberg's mode of expression, regardless of his subject, that provided the inspiration for Silkin's approach as a poet. In 'Deficient', for example, first published in *The Re-Ordering of the Stones*, Silkin alludes to 'the sunk silences / Rosenberg speaks of' in his convoluted depiction of urban life.[120] Later, in *The Little Time-Keeper*, he dedicates the poem 'The Marches' to Rosenberg, and refers to himself in relation to his predecessor – 'we are two / in the forest's numerology – within the main body of the piece.[121] In the sequence

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[118] *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by Jon Silkin (London: Penguin, 1979); *The Penguin Book of First World War Prose*, ed. by Jon Silkin and Jon Glover (London: Penguin, 1989); *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems*, ed. by Jon Silkin (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1994).

[119] *Out Of Battle* originated from a proposed PhD project to be undertaken by Silkin whilst at Leeds. Silkin, 'The Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg,' in *Isaac Rosenberg*, Exhibition Catalogue (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1959); Silkin, 'The Forgotten Poet of Anglo-Jewry,' *The Jewish Chronicle,* 26 August 1960 [on Isaac Rosenberg];'Rosenberg's Rat-God,' *European Judaism*, vol. 4 no. 2 (Summer 1970); *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); 'For Rosenberg,' *New York Review of Books* (19 February 1976); 'Keith Douglas', *Agenda*, vol. 19, nos. 2-3 (1981); 'Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg,' in *English Literature of the Great War Revisited*, ed. by Michael Roncoux (Presses de L'UFR Université Picardie, 1986) [proceedings of symposium]; 'Critics and the Literature of the First World War,' *British Book News* (November 1987).

[120] Silkin, 'Deficient' [TRotS], *CP*, p. 196.

[121] Silkin, 'The Marches' [TLT-K], *CP*, p. 468.

'Going On', which appears within *The Psalms and Their Spoils*, Silkin uses an excerpt from
Rosenberg –'They wail their souls for continuity' – as the epigraph to a poem that speaks in
intimate terms of love, sex, and procreation.[122] In the same collection he pre-empts the train
sequence 'Joy, lined with metal' with the line 'joy – joy – strange joy – "Returning, we hear
the larks"', also by Rosenberg (as well as referencing Keith Douglas in the poem 'I In
Another Place').[123] In his 'Autobiographical Stanzas' Silkin frames a representation of his
own military service within the context of Rosenberg's description of his experience as a
soldier. Rosenberg's explanation that 'the actual duties … are not in themselves unpleasant, it
is the brutal militaristic bullying meanness of the way they're served on us. You're always
being threatened with "clink"', becomes the means by which Silkin begins his own depiction
of his time as an unwilling eighteen year old soldier:

> Effort in winter. I was returning to
>
> the camp, conscripted by the infantry
>
> at eighteen. Coldness, pricking moisture
>
> in slivers, I began a run, for camp
>
> frightened me. Charge, sentence, and clink
>
> at eighteen; odd conjunction of fear
>
> with boredom made a threat, which the army
>
> materializes, replica of exact
>
>   brutality, its mintage, boys.[124]

Finally, in his most explicit poetic engagement with his predecessor, in 'The Life of a Poet'
(published in *Making a Republic*), Silkin sets up Rosenberg as the alternative, archetypal
'Poet' first referenced by Joseph Cohen in *Stand* back in 1960. At the same time he situates
him within an on-going tradition of Jewish writing, as demonstrated by his other reference
within the poem's epigraph to the Zionist poet Dennis Silk:

> *i.m. Isaac Rosenberg, in the First War*
> *For Dennis Silk*
>
>
> Rosenberg, you do not talk easily. You write
> and life springs up poems like warriors,

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[122] Silkin, 'Going On' [TPwtS], *CP*, p. 511.
[123] Silkin, 'Joy, lined with metal' [TPwtS], p. 538.
[124] Rosenberg and Silkin, in Silkin, 'Autobiographical Stanzas: The armed' [TPwtS], p. 572.

in the war, which killed you.

Lion-tongued enabling

angel who seeks

the incarnate female soul, 'Shekhina,' you cry out

as the steel fragment enters you.

The creatures with unicorn

fabulating tongues will never die. No, they never shall.

Only their flesh melts in gas.

The Female God stands like a great trunk to heaven

whose salt splashes your supine torn person.

The small fierce being, you, midsummer frost.[125]

Jewish history intertwines with a military one in this intertextual and dialogic poem. Evoking the works of the 'small fierce being', Silkin marries his own life as a Jew with his life as a witness to war through the violently 'torn' defenses of the First World War poet. Evocative of Keith Douglas's earlier tribute to Rosenberg in 'Desert Flowers' ('Rosenberg, I only repeat what you were saying'), the poem's 'Steel fragments' create a connection between the post-Second World War Jewish poet and his deceased predecessors. The steel enters his consciousness just as it entered their bodies and imaginations decades before.

Spread over decades, these poetic, critical, and edited publications together convey the fundamentally important role of figures such as Isaac Rosenberg and Keith Douglas to Silkin's imagination. Published in a variety of contexts – in relation to war poetry, Judaism, modernity and machinery, belonging, sexuality, poetic selfhood – they paint a picture of an equally 'small fierce being' whose creative consciousness and self-expression was profoundly shaped by his relationship to a canon of military poetry and prose. This inherited and adapted fierceness, visible in his poetic and critical writing, is Silkin's individual negotiation and adaptation of the 'extrospective' of his combatant predecessors. Moved to a civilian territory, and altered by the pressure of the 'new' histories that Silkin must contend with, these past 'relations' play a key role in shaping his style, rhetoric, subject matter, and (often problematically) his present 'relations' with the wider British poetic community.[126]

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[125] Silkin, 'The Life of a Poet' [MaR], *CP*, p. 746.
[126] Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI*, p. 18.

I.

The parallels between Douglas and Hall's letters and Silkin and Thwaite's 'conversation' highlight the shared force of will – or fierceness – of the two poets. Both thrive on occupying an alternative position in relation to the central canon, and share an equally religious belief in the role of poetry in society. Comparing these exchanges with examples from Rosenberg's own, often forceful and 'fierce' published correspondence, the influence of this alternative tradition on Silkin's approach to poetry is clear. Separated by decades and historical 'criteria', these 'relations' bridge the gaps between each writer's pressing contemporary concerns. Rosenberg's experience and poetry offers a pre-history to Douglas's particular experience, and together both war poets pre-empt and shape the perspective of the post-War poet and editor.

Silkin's archive offers a clear example of the influence of Douglas and Rosenberg's combative force on the later poet's approach to 'commitment'. A consistent theme runs through the substantial correspondence section of the Jon Silkin archive, uniting what is otherwise a varied and multifaceted collection of letters.[127] Although, of course, not applicable to every letter within the collection, what connects many of these personal and creative exchanges is the occurrence of an argument, disagreement, or outright bitter rift between Silkin and his correspondent – a feud that more often than not stems from Silkin's hand. In the archived correspondence between Silkin and Harrison for example, the overworked and underappreciated younger poet directly addresses Silkin's propensity for difficulty. Acting as a somewhat reluctant 'nightwatchman' for *Stand* whilst Silkin toured the US in 1969, Harrison finally snaps under the pressure of the distant poet's complaints:

> You say I soon would complain if my poems were kept by someone without a decision. Well for fuck's sake that's a ripe one that is. I did send a number of poems from Prague. With a letter to you. Not only did you not reply, dear Silkin, nothing was said about the poems until three months AFTER I'd arrived in Newcastle … so that was 9 months. Not that I am getting my own back, but it did occur to me since you actually were the first to raise it.[128]

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[127] Leeds, BLSC, Jon Silkin Correspondence, BC MS 20c Silkin /11.
[128] Leeds, BLSC, *Stand* Magazine Correspondence, Letters to and about *Stand*, BC MS 20c Stand /3 /Har-11, Harrison to Silkin, 12 April 1969.

In the same four-page letter Harrison addresses another issue that Silkin has clearly taken offence to – his throwaway comment that 'the US is not my scene'. Although Silkin's letter has been lost, what's clear from the vehemence of Harrison's response is the extent to which the older poet was happy to stir up contention and difference to make a point:

> When I say that the US is not my scene I mean the US is not my scene. God cannot I say what I mean. No innuendoes! No I'm not badly done to. Yes I have a fellowship and yes I have another. What a lucky boy I am. Yes Africa is my scene. No the US is not my scene. I do not imagine a specifically US thing I would want. Yes I do imagine a specifically African or Indian or Mexican thing but not US. For the US is not my scene … Does it have to be. Many countries are Czechoslovakia, Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire shall I go on but the US is not my scene thank you very much. I'm sorry that I can't please you by saying it is. OK. OK? Christ. Fuck. FUCK ½ [129]

What this outburst shows, besides Harrison's own willingness to be drawn into combat, is Silkin's difficulty, even with friends. He could at times express, as Harrison notes, a 'holier than thou self-righteousness' that offended those around him.[130] Whether it is in conversation with Tony Harrison, Geoffrey Hill, Ken Smith, or else with the editors of *The Jewish Quarterly*, other publishing houses and other fellow writers, Silkin had a talent for antagonism; a flair that extended to his critical and poetic work.

In an ironic twist on the idea of the 'civilian' war poet, Silkin bridges the historical and circumstantial gap between himself, Rosenberg, and Douglas via this consistently combative approach to poetry, and his insistence, like Douglas, on taking a 'stand'. Just as in the case of his published exchanges (such as that with Anthony Thwaite) these private instances of intentional difficulty and antagonism serve a complex purpose within the formation of Silkin's private and public selfhood. They show a mode of self-fashioning – a deliberate act of othering – which demonstrates a willingness to alienate contemporaries and even friends in order to inhabit an effective and meaningful position. By defining himself in relation to – and often at odds with – his contemporaries, Silkin (like Keith Douglas and Isaac Rosenberg before him) self-consciously inhabits a peripheral creative space in relation to tradition and society – a space already significant due to his position as an Anglo-Jewish, socialist writer based in the North of England.

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[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.

Silkin's correspondence with publications such as *The Jewish Quarterly, Jewish Chronicle* and the *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review* demonstrate the poet's consistent emphasis of his position as a committed *individual*, regardless of which community or group this was in relation to. They also reveal the relationship that this insistence had to the tradition and form of war poetry that informed his notion of his poetic role and responsibility in post-Holocaust Britain. These letters paint a picture of the committed and antagonistic individualism of the *Stand* poet, and, along with his poems, demonstrate how this manifests itself in the style and content of his creative writing. With regards to the rhetoric and subject matter of his poems, on a number of occasions Silkin's submission of what he deemed to be a 'Jewish' poem was returned to him with a letter praising yet ultimately rejecting his contentious and overly politicised approach. Jon Kimche, then-editor of the *Jewish Observer*, went as far as to argue that one piece, which addressed Middle Eastern Judaism and its relationship to both Christianity and Islam, was too 'tremendously powerful' to be included. Kimche explained:

> Because it was so good its effect on our mixed readership might be too strong for our liking.[131]

Another letter, this time from Tosco Fyvel, literary editor of the *Jewish Chronicle*, hands back the poem 'The Church is getting short of breath' with 'a heavy heart', explaining that 'It is felt here that JC [sic] is perhaps not the place for a critical appraisal of the church'.[132] Given the opening lines of the poem, which eventually appeared in *The Little Time-Keeper* – 'Sabbaths of the pensive spread buttocks. / Conscience, the size of a dried pea, / chafes over the pews flesh sweating / / its Sabbath juice' – it is not hard to see why editors such as Fyvel and Kimche, catering to a mixed and often conservative readership, might have felt reticent.[133]

What these exchanges highlight is the conflict between Silkin's dual poetic personae, and how this conflict manifested itself in both his poetry and critical reception. The socially radical Silkin, determined to address and combat social and historical injustice, often found his subject matter to be at odds with what was expected of the Anglo-Jewish Silkin, a poet highly conscious of his historical and diasporic inheritance. The result was a style that was sometimes too didactic and confrontational for either audience. Whilst Silkin had no problem

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[131] Leeds, BLSC, Silkin Correspondence, BC MS 20c Silkin /8 /JEW-3, Jon Kimche to Jon Silkin, 4 August 1961.
[132] Ibid., BC MS 20c Silkin /8 /JEW-1, Tosco Fyvel to Jon Silkin, 30 April 1976.
[133] Silkin, 'The Church is Getting Short of Breath' [TLT-K], p. 480.

with this, noting in a 1973 interview that 'Many of my poems are didactic in their structure and intent, and I hope I haven't forfeited writing poetry', in some instances the dynamic between powerful imperative and overpowering insistence is unbalanced:

> I have been walking today
> Where the sour children of London's poor sleep
>   Pressed close to the unfrosted glare
> Torment lying close to tenement,
>   Of the clay fire; I
> Have watched their whispering souls fly straight to God:
>
>
>   'O Lord, please give to us
> A dinner-service, white, and washed and gay
>   As a plain of swan-stilled snow;
> Lord, flood this room with your outrageous smile.'[134]

'Furnished Lives', which appears within Silkin's second collection *The Two Freedoms*, demonstrates how this antagonism has the potential to manifest itself to an uncomfortable degree within the poem. The poetic voice, sympathetic to the point of being patronising, is almost prophetic in the scope and scale of its vision. It threatens to recast the poem as a vehicle rather than a container of the poet's concerns, as the reader is carried along with the poet, shamed into sympathy by the over-emphasised alliterative proximity of 'torment' and 'tenement'. By the end of the piece, the same directness that Kimche and Fyvel found 'too powerful' appears again, as Silkin addresses God, the Church, and the disposable nature of human life:

> And your world, Lord
>   Has now become
> Like a dumb winter show, held in one room,
>
>
>   Which now must reek of age
> Before you have retouched its lips with such straight fire
>   As though your stony earth
> Burns with ferocious tears in the world's eyes;

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[134] Silkin, 'Attend to the Unnecessary Beasts: a Conversation with Jon Silkin', p. 28; Silkin, 'Furnished Lives' [TTF], *CP*, p. 82.

Church-stone, door-knocker and polished railway lines

Move in their separate dumb way

So why not these lives;

I ask you often, but you never say?[135]

'Furnished Lives' is an example of the 'thesis poetry' that Thwaite identified as a potential result of Silkin's 'committed' take on the idea of 'extrospection'.[136] The direct address to God, and the way in which the world and its history is compacted into 'one room … which must now reek of age' risks being reductive both in its tone of address and its choice of metaphor. This socially committed but nonetheless overly insistent 'thesis' of the piece, which has the ironic effect of collectivising those 'lives' whom the poem sought to speak for, is only redeemed by the final lines. Here, the 'church stone, door-knocker and polished railway lines' add a tactile immediacy to an otherwise overly moralistic and distant poem, and the final, unanswered question lends a vulnerability to the prophet-poet not otherwise seen in the rest of the piece.

Silkin repeatedly uses this technique of posing a question as a dialectical tool. It becomes a means of measuring the didactic rhetoric that might otherwise be viewed as 'too powerful' or else dismissed as mere 'thesis poetry'. It offers the 'withdrawal' that distinguishes the post-War poet's perspective from his predecessor. Keeping in mind Douglas's notion of the 'extrospective' and the sort of poetry 'which seems to me the sort that has to be written just now, even if it is not attractive', when used effectively Silkin's unanswered questions manage to 'look and say' without compromising on their aesthetic quality. In pieces such as 'Caring For Animals', which appears in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Silkin's characteristic poetic antagonism is balanced against a personal openness and vulnerability. It results in a poem at once didactic and dialectic in its approach to history, violence, and human behaviour. Silkin's almost religious zeal towards the root and ethics of the human condition is no less apparent, yet the relative scarcity of the verse on the page allows the reader space to consider their own position in relation to the poem's appeal. The result is a poem that captures the necessary migration of 'extrospection' to a more thoughtful and reflective view of human behaviour.

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[135] Ibid., p. 83.
[136] Thwaite, 'No Politics, No Poetry', p. 16.

Unlike 'Furnished Lives', in 'Caring For Animals' the voice of the poet occupies the same position as his readership – a position that becomes apparent through his own incomprehension of the dynamic between animal and human in the opening stanzas:

> I ask sometimes why these small animals
> With bitter eyes, why we should care for them
>
> I question the sky, the serene blue water,
> But it cannot say. It gives no answer.
>
> And no answer releases in my head
> A procession of grey shades patched and whimpering.[137]

The poet's unsuccessful search for answers creates the level of epistemological equality between himself and his reader that was missing from poems such as 'The Church is Getting Short of Breath' and 'Furnished Lives'. There is a sense of loss – of articulacy, certainty, and faith – that shapes the poet's relationship to his world. This shifts the emphasis in the poem from the answer to the question, which in turn makes the process behind Silkin's desire to 'care for animals' an entirely visible one. It creates a common ground that allows his readership to understand the creative and moral impulse behind the finished aesthetic of the collection, with an acknowledgment that the committed poetic must begin in the form of a question, rather than an answer. Going back to his belief, expressed in 'No Politics, No Poetry' that good writing 'draws the reader's attention to certain contradictions and anomalies in society and says, do you like these things, or if you do, what will the end product be?' in 'Caring For Animals' this act of questioning encourages, rather than forces a movement towards an organic process of relational social and political consciousness. In the final lines of the poem Silkin concludes that 'From growing mercy and a moderate love / Great love for the human animal occurs'. The piece may end didactically, but because the root of this imperative lay in an epistemological equality between poet and reader, the finished vision becomes that of one speaking from the crowd, rather than one speaking for it.

The mention of the 'human animal' within these final lines creates a further level of equality, this time between man and animal. It also establishes the slightly altered position of the poet from his pre-Holocaust predecessors, as his subject – man – is exposed as more innately bestial and violent even than the warring soldiers within Douglas's and Rosenberg's

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[137] Silkin, 'Caring For Animals' [TPK], *CP,* p. 42.

verse. In this parabolic setting Silkin addresses his precise historical position, and with that the unique challenges that face him as a post-War (as opposed to extrospective) writer:

> […]
> Take in the whipped cat and the blinded owl
>
>
> Take up the man-trapped squirrel upon your shoulder.
> Attend to the unnecessary beasts.[138]

Each of the adjectives used to frame the animals involves an act of violence or mutilation. Behind the benevolent tone and the simplicity of the appeal, the poem contains a far darker message on human nature and violence. Despite the parabolic setting and Biblical rhetoric of the poem, the Holocaust feels ever-present in the language and imagery of the text.

This presence is affirmed when the finished poem is compared with its earlier versions. In early drafts of the poem the initial description of the 'trapped squirrel' was altered to include an explicit reference to its relationship with man: the 'man-trapped squirrel'.[139] By turning the violence against nature from the implicit to the explicit, Silkin brings the human into the foreground of the poem as the predator. Considered from this perspective, the interchangeable nature of 'unnecessary beasts' and 'human animal' points to the unnatural propensity for cruelty that arises as a result of the human's false, self-appointed superiority. The violence enacted upon each animal is removed from the frame of the parable, or out of any understandable context of natural selection, and instead becomes a result of man's recently revealed unnatural and 'unnecessary' bestiality and propensity for the barbaric; a removal from his natural consciousness rather than a symptom of it. Violence is the least natural element of the text, and as a result it stands out sharply from within its parable form as a measure of man's present life as well as his historical or biblical one.

This mention of both the 'human animal' and the 'unnecessary beast' draws attention to the particular 'beastliness' of Silkin's historical moment. Within the even layout of the text, the phrase 'human animal' lies directly below that of 'unnecessary beasts'. This symmetry in form between the two descriptions creates a visual comparison between the two states, and blurs the lines of each. Just as the creature becomes the 'human animal', so the human becomes only an 'unnecessary beast'. Yet this description of man – opaque yet provocative – also contains in its simplicity the task that Silkin – a 'committed individual' in

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[138] Ibid.

[139] Leeds, BLSC, Jon Silkin Archive, BC MS 20c Silkin /1 /1 /3, Draft of The Peaceable Kingdom (1).

post-War society – felt bound to undertake. In attending to the inherent yet 'unnecessary' beastliness of man, the poet commits himself to bearing witness to violence, the violent, and the violated. Yet he also agrees to 'care' for them all equally. He desires that poetry and society 'attend' on humanity and bring about its convalescence, whatever the difficulty and toil entailed in this act.

The voice in 'Caring For Animals' may be one of the least subtle of the poems within the collection. Yet, the call to thought and reaction are precisely the cure for 'bullshit' that Silkin and Douglas wished to eradicate. The idea – adopted by both Douglas and Silkin – that the poem should be a reflection of the social setting that formed it, meant that the topics that the latter raised, however uncomfortable, were ones formed both as a result of his heritage and poetic inheritance, and from his wish for a wider historical vision of men's relationship to each other and to their environment.

II.

'The Church is Getting Short of Breath', 'Furnished Lives', and 'Caring for Animals' together convey how Silkin's antagonism and sometimes difficult individualism manifested itself in the rhetorical style of his poems. Palpable in each is the tension between the wish to create 'committed' art and an aesthetically pleasing one. Yet the poems also convey the ways that his identity as a post-War, post-Holocaust Anglo-Jewish writer came into contact – and conflict – with his identity as a 'committed' one. One of the most telling demonstrations of Silkin's equal similarity and disparity to his contemporaries is to compare his position in relation to that of his contemporary Dannie Abse. Abse, like Silkin, was also an editor of a left-wing poetry magazine.[140] Alongside the poet Howard Sergeant, he founded and edited both the anthology *Mavericks* and the magazine *Poetry and Poverty*, a response to what both perceived to be the 'anti-rhetorical' and even 'anti-poetic' style of The Movement poets.[141] Yet alongside his role as a 'maverick' British writer and editor, he was also a self-asserted, consciously 'Jewish' writer, whose self-realization of his artistry was marked by his witness of the Holocaust - a fact that Abse himself explains in his poem 'White Balloon' and his assertion that 'Auschwitz made me / more of a Jew than Moses did'.[142]

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[140] See Hannah Copley, 'Committed Rootlessness: The Anglo-Jewish Perspective and Rhetoric of Jon Silkin', *Stand*, vol. 11 no. 4 (2013), pp. 18-26.
[141] Dannie Abse and Howard Sergeant (eds.), 'Introduction', *Mavericks: An Anthology*, (London: Editions Poetry and Poverty, 1957) p. 9.
[142] Abse, 'White Balloon', *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 209-210.

The importance of his Jewishness upon both the style and content of his writing is reflected in his many contributions to *The Jewish Quarterly*, a journal that gave a voice to many of the major thinkers and voices in Jewish literary, cultural and political life in Britain and further afield. Alongside Abse and fellow poets Michael Hamburger and Emmanuel Litvinoff, Silkin was also at one time a regular contributor. His work also appeared in both *Mavericks* and various issues of *Poetry and Poverty*. Through their shared belonging to these two distinctive and yet overlapping communities of writers, one comprised of 'Committed' 'Mavericks', the other of Jewish writers from all over Britain and the world (including many who also appeared in either 'Mavericks' or *Poetry of the Committed Individual*), Abse and Silkin had much in common. Even in terms of their personal development there were significant parallels. They shared, for example, a connection to Wales. Abse was born in Cardiff in 1923, whilst Silkin was evacuated to Wales from London during the War. They also shared a connection to cosmopolitan London life, Silkin having been born there in 1930, Abse having moved there in 1943 to attend Westminster Medical School. Despite their different personalities (Silkin is frequently described as being 'difficult', even affectionately by his friends, whilst Abse is known as a more 'benign' character), the importance of the connection to one another has been great enough for the critic Peter Lawson to name them together as 'two of the most significant poets of the period'.[143] The historian Tony Kushner groups them together as being integral to the 'new generation' of British-Jewish writers in the 1970s: those who began to engage more 'directly with the Holocaust' compared to their 'apologist' predecessors.[144] Kushner may underestimate the level of poetic engagement that was taking place far earlier than the early 1970s, but his assumption nevertheless highlights the critical tendency to group Abse and Silkin together as belonging to one, clearly defined 'group' of poets.

However, to take for granted their commonality due to the fact of their Jewishness, is to ignore the varying and even conflicting views that each poet shared and expressed. A particular issue that defined this creative difference between the two men was the poetry of Isaac Rosenberg, and the place he occupied within the Anglo-Jewish tradition. By situating himself as a champion, and arguably an inheritor, of Rosenberg, Silkin defined his own role and position as a post-War, Anglo-Jewish poet. This role, which at times brought his desire

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[143] Rodney Pybus, 'Jon Silkin: Obituary', *The Independent*, 1 December 1997, http: / /www.independent.co.uk /news /obituaries /obituary-jon-silkin-1286290.html [Accessed 10 January 2013]; Peter Lawson, in Nicolas Wroe, 'Doctor of Verse: Profile of Dannie Abse, *The Guardian*, 15 March 2003, http: / /www.guardian.co.uk /books /2003 /mar /15 /featuresreviews.guardianreview31 [Accessed 10 January 2013].

[144] Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford and Cambridge (Mass): Blackwell, 1994), p. 256.

for poetic 'commitment' into direct competition with his inherited sense of rootlessness, led to a problematic and sometimes contradictory dynamic in his own work. It also led to a degree of confrontation with his contemporaries at *The Jewish Quarterly*. His commitment to addressing both what he believed were the pressing social and ethical issues of his historical moment, and to the role that poetry could, and more importantly, should play in exposing these 'contradictions and anomalies', meant that he was forced to transgress the unwritten rules that shaped both of the artistic communities that he felt a part of.[145]

In one of the first articles published in the newly formed *The Jewish Quarterly*, Dannie Abse sets out his definition of what makes a truly Jewish poet, as opposed to a poet who is a Jew. The difference between the two categories, he argues, comes down to the matter of exile:

> To be a Jewish poet means more than to produce poetry that is pervaded by an Old Testament fury or by a certain prophetic quality; rather it is to accept a unique situational predicament, a fugitive otherness resulting from a historical tradition of exile.[146]

By this definition the First World War poet Isaac Rosenberg was not a Jewish poet, despite his Jewish faith. He did not accept or cherish his otherness, but rather, as poems such as the earlier mentioned 'The Jew' demonstrated, often resented his alienated position. The piece, entitled 'Portrait of a Jewish Poet', which intended to champion the 'first' Anglo-Jewish poet Emmanuel Litvinoff, highlights the potential tension between the two poet's perspectives on their relationship to English and British society.

By his own admission, Silkin adhered to the opinion that to be a Jew was to inherit a tradition of alienation, yet the condition that Abse places on this alienation – that it must be not only accepted, but also accentuated and embraced – did not fit with his vision of poetry as a means of cross-cultural communication and social outreach, or with his own often ambivalent representation of his Jewish identity. This ambivalence can be found both in his own poetry, and in his insistence on the importance of Rosenberg as a pivotal Jewish poet. Writing on the influence of Rosenberg on Silkin's creativity and identity as a poet, Jon Glover suggests that 'Rosenberg held a position for Silkin as someone who consciously stood apart not only from the formal organisation of culture and society but also from what counted

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[145] Silkin, Thwaite, 'No Politics, No Poetry', p. 14.
[146] Abse, 'Portrait of a Jewish Poet', *The Jewish Quarterly*, vol.1, no.4 (spring 1955), p. 16.

as prosody and word order'.[147] On a more personal level, the formative years of the First World War poet also offered a model for the later poet's own sense of hyphenated identity. Writing to the Department of Architecture at Civic Design as part of a shared effort (with Geoffrey Hill) to have a plaque erected in the East End in honour of the poet, Silkin explains how 'Rosenberg's work was crucially formed by that fusion of English and Jewish cultures found in a particular and productive tension in the East End of London'.[148] He then goes on to connect this tension to his own sense of a fused and difficult cultural and geographic inheritance:

> My father, who is a Jew, and was born and reared in the East End, is himself a product of this particular fusion, and I believe it is a valuable one.[149]

The letter, composed in an effort to ensure the legacy of the relatively under-appreciated war poet, conveys the personal as well as creative influence of Rosenberg upon Silkin's identification as an Anglo-Jewish and post-War poet.

In the Rosenberg's correspondence, dated both from his time as a soldier and before, there are certainly a great deal of similarities (beyond that of geography) between the post-Second World War poet and the young artist who found fault with his colleagues, mentors, and benefactors at the Slade School, and who was realistic to the point of pessimism about his prospects in the army:

> I could not get the work I thought I might have so I have joined up to the Bantam Battalion (as I was too short for any other) which seems to be the most rascally affair in the world. I have had to eat out of a basin together with some horribly smelling scavenger who spits and sneezes into it etc. … this is unbearable. Besides my being a Jew makes it bad amongst these wretches. I am looking forward to having a bad time altogether.[150]

As a poet concerned with taking a 'stand', it is fitting that Silkin should find himself in the 'droll' and 'cosmopolitan' Rosenberg, whose poems and letters – composed both before and during his time as a soldier – allude to an isolation borne out of choice as well as

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[147] Jon Glover, 'The 1959 Isaac Rosenberg Exhibition in Leeds: Annie Wynick, Jon Silkin and Isaac Rosenberg's Work among the living', paper given at *Whitechapel and War: Isaac Rosenberg and his circle*, University of Leeds, 6 July 2008.

[148] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /5 /1 /176, Teaching and Related Materials, Silkin to Mr Kelsall, 11 November, 1983.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Rosenberg, 'Letters: To Sydney Schiff, Oct 1915', *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 219.

circumstance.[151] Going back to the 1963 special issue of *Stand*, Silkin provides a 'portrait' of the First World War poet that says as much about his own poetry, character, and approach to Jewishness as it does about Rosenberg's. In it he describes how 'two facts, his Jewishness and his poverty, form the basis of an examination of his work', going on to note how these aspects came to interact with the alternative 'fact' of his being a soldier.[152] Unlike his contemporaries Owen and Sassoon, Rosenberg's poverty and Jewishness 'had already apprehended themes other than war before the war made its impact on his work', and as a result his war-time writing was mediated through this alternative gaze. The idea that Rosenberg's poetic representation of his immediate surroundings might be shaped by the anterior 'facts' of his racial and social status provides a way of approaching Silkin's own representation of history, in particular his early allusions to the Holocaust.

In *The Peaceable Kingdom* Silkin includes three poems which play on the same stereotypes of the rat that Rosenberg – and later Litvinoff – both address within their work. Choosing the 'cunning' fox rather than the 'Judenraus' as an animal double, in 'The Cunning of An Age' Silkin articulates the role that the discovery of the Holocaust played in shifting his selfhood, whilst at the same time clarifying a pre-existing, but as yet unarticulated sense of otherness.[153] Depicting first of all the settled, peaceful home of the creature – 'The ways of the world had stopped short of this bulge / On the surface of things because … because it had other / Things to do. And the fox sat under the hill / And all lay still' – the tone of the poem then includes a hint as to the fallacy of this scene:

> Yet as he sat there wondering
>
> How rivers came to be especially
>
> His one at the edge of the world his world, a spot
>
> Of red spat up at his eyes, no more, and was gone
>
> In a twist of vision. No more than that
>
> To the fox who sat under the hill.[154]

After this sudden 'spot of red' in the periphery of the foxes' and the poem's vision, the life of the fox appears to return to normal. Yet there is something unsettling about the over-emphasis placed on the settled and unchanging nature of the parabolic world; a world where

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[151] Mario Petrucci, 'Night and Day: The Doggerel March and the poetic progression of Isaac Rosenberg', edited transcript of a presentation given at the Imperial War Museum, London, 13 May 2008.
[152] Silkin, 'Isaac Rosenberg: The War, class, and the Jews', p. 33.
[153] Silkin, 'The Cunning of An Age' [TPK], p. 25.
[154] Ibid., p. 26.

'The air was the same' and 'the year went round just the same' and 'The insects turned around in their aimless journeys.' Rather than serving to reassure, this insistence instead warns again of a disconnection between appearance and reality, drawing attention to the poem's parabolic status and the history it seeks to address. This unease is confirmed almost immediately, as after the emphasis on continuity the tone and tempo of the poem shifts. Suddenly the previously settled figure of the fox is hunted and chased, as the wind 'chang[es] his name / to FOLLOWED from fox-on-the-hill'. That 'spot of red', ever present but lingering on the periphery of vision:

> Had changed his home
> To a startling place, and below came the horn's winding
> Warning halloo and up he was and smartly
> Away as the red shot up to his horizon
> And his mind's horizon.
>
>   And he was away.
> No listening or waiting for the will and lust
> Of the world but to live and lick his life
> From the corner of a world that would hold him easily
> Peacefully was his will.[155]

The suddenness of this act of naming, and the movement into an unceasing rootlessness evokes the disorientating discovery of what it means to be a Jew in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. It evokes a shift in understanding, yet not of something new, but of something that had been hidden there all along. For Silkin, this shift meant realising his role as an inheritor of a tradition of rootlessness that began long before the Second World War and the Holocaust.

This same realisation is addressed in the second of the collection's 'fox' poems, 'No Land like It'. Here, Silkin once again aligns himself to the figure of the fox, and explores the relationship between his Jewishness and his historical witness. The beginning of the poem, which draws attention to the on-going anthropomorphism at work within the collection, emphasises the isolated position of the Jew in society. In keeping with Abse's criteria for a Jewish poet, Silkin appears to celebrate his difference and collective otherness:

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[155] Ibid., pp. 26-27.

> My country is a fox's country
>
> With moors of drenching sunlight and olive trees,
>
> And peace hanging from the branches in clusters of birds
>
>> There is no other country like it.
>
>
> Its shadows move like lover's shadows
>
> Its pace is of a dance in passion time
>
> Its birth was thought of underneath the hill
>
>> There is no joy to have like it.
>
>
> The charity of it
>
> Is like the charity of beggar's dreams.
>
> It has no bells. Its music is the silence of our synagogues
>
>> We know no other kindness like this.[156]

This 'fox's country' – beautiful, kind, sensual, peaceful – presents an idealistic image of an *Old Testament* 'Peaceable Kingdom'. Similarly to 'The Cunning of an Age' though, this celebration shifts, more gradually this time, towards despair:

> Our lesson is our bread our wine
>
> And laughter in an afternoon courtyard
>
> The sun stokes up. Our children grow up black.
>
>> They steal the colour from
>
>
> The persecution of other worlds.
>
> Of all the lands mine is most dear to me
>
> Whose limbs are out of joint elsewhere whose pulse
>
>> Whose blood is fevered with
>
>
> A loveless climate.

The line break after 'courtyard' emphasises the image and language of the next line so that when the 'sun stokes up' it is fire and smoke and not sunshine that turns the children 'black'. This image, which evokes both the idea of racial negritude and difference, and the memory of

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[156] Silkin, 'No Land Like It' [TPK], pp. 27-28.

burning, also colours the tone of the poem. From there, the land and language transform into something far darker than first depicted.

By the end of 'No Land Like It', which continues on with the same set of refrains that began the piece, what began as a celebration of Jewish culture has transformed into something bleak, decimated, and restless:

My country is a fox's country

But I a fox am bred
From out a hollow land of horns groined red
With hounds and men and secret faith and trysts
Beneath my orphanage of angry hills.

There is no land or part of this land for any of us
And no land is like this.[157]

The narrative of both pieces, which begin at a point of community and celebration of difference and end with a bleak image of placelessness and isolation, invert the trajectory expected of Silkin as a post-Holocaust Jewish writer. Rather than begin at a point of desolation and move towards a tentative suggestion of solidarity and hope, the poems instead confirm the futility of this endeavour. The last lines of 'No Land Like it' – 'There is no land or part of this land for any of us / And no land is like this' – might address 'us', imply both a community of Jews and of fellow sufferers. Equally they confirm the non-existence of this community, as the poem leaves only a 'hollow' 'orphanage of angry hills' as the true chosen land.

This bleak and inverted narrative of Jewishness is completed in the final of the three fox poems, 'This Dreaming Everywhere', which offer the clearest example of the individualistic nature of Silkin's Jewish identity, and of the unresolved anger that colours his representation. Moving away from a first-person narrative, the poem begins seemingly where the 'The Cunning of an Age' ended – with an exiled and hunted fox:

The angry fox
Found himself dreaming in the hostile desert.
And round he runs the almighty and bitter

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[157] Ibid., p. 28.

Hand of the sun.

He barks under the shadowless
Hill. What gesture, he demands, sent him here,
Condemning him to trot in the black
Gaze of the sun.[158]

As the poem goes on, we find no evidence of a community of exiles, only a fiercely determined creature, entirely alone in the 'terrible desert of his dreaming'. The poem begins to resemble an ode, a call to 'halloo' for the 'Fox of the stolen / morning':

This was how he came,
And this is how he has come to die.
For another country is another desert
Another enemy in wait.

The sun is red now.
So halloo for the dying fox of the red morning
For the great red fox that stole the mad
March across his gentle

Sentries halloo for the dreaming
Fox in the terrible desert of his dreaming. Halloo.[159]

The emptiness of the final 'Halloo', like a call into darkness, has the same effect as the use of 'us' in 'No Land Like It'. It suggests a community, and assumes a reader, whilst at the same time affirming the loneliness and hopelessness of the fox's (and subsequently the poet's) historical condition.

In contrast to Abse's critical embrace and celebration of Jewish otherness, the poems express a bitterness and isolation more in keeping with Rosenberg, who only reluctantly joined 'The Jewish Association of Arts and Sciences', and who placed his 'Spiritual Isolation' on a par with his social exclusion:

My Maker shunneth me.
Even as a wretch stricken with leprosy

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[158] Silkin, 'This Dreaming Everywhere' [TPK], p. 37.
[159] Ibid., p. 36.

So hold I pestilent supremacy.[160]

This lament, which ends with a failed attempt to re-align his faith and relationship to God, contains the same ironic tension seen in moments such as the lonely 'halloo' of Silkin's 'This Dreaming Everywhere':

> In my great loneliness,
>
> This haunted desolation's dire distress,
>
> I strove with April buds my thought to dress,
>
> Therewith to reach to joy through gay attire;
>
> But as I plucked came one of those pale griefs
>
> With mouth of parched desire
>
> And breathed upon the buds and charred the leaves.[161]

Despite the different circumstances that inform the two pieces, both suggest a community beyond the limits of the poem, and yet ultimately end resigned to the fact that the speaker will never fully belong to it.

The similarity between the resignation of the hunted fox and Isaac Rosenberg's 'spiritual isolation' explains Silkin's disagreement with *The Jewish Quarterly*'s definition of an Anglo-Jewish poet. Given that his own definition and representation of the Anglo-Jewish poet fit more readily with Rosenberg's model than with Abse's, Silkin's subsequent reaction to Rosenberg's exclusion confirms his ill-fit within a community to which he belonged but never felt fully a part of. In terms of his contribution to *The Jewish Quarterly*, Silkin reacted to the exclusion of Rosenberg in two ways, both of which also reveal a great deal about both his deliberate antagonism, his shared approach to Rosenberg and Douglas, and his adaptation of an extrospective and opened out form of verse.

Firstly, despite the fact that the editorial team echoed Abse's opinion, he continued to contribute to the journal. His continued involvement, despite the rejection of his verse and that of his perceived predecessor Rosenberg, attests to his determination to offer an alternative view on the future of Jewish writing in Britain. In a letter to *The Jewish Quarterly*, published in autumn 1955, Silkin responded to the question of Jewish cultural survival with an imperative very different from Abse's.[162] In the wake of the creation of the state of Israel, and the subsequent fact that by definition the Jews are no longer a people without a home, he

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[160] Rosenberg, 'Letters: To Jacob Leftwich, late 1917'*,* pp. 266-267; Rosenberg, 'Spiritual Isolation', p. 46,
[161] Silkin, 'This Dreaming Everywhere', p. 37.
[162] Silkin, 'Letter: Cultural Survival', *The Jewish Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2 (autumn 1955), p. 36.

suggested that if a diasporic Anglo-Jewish culture was to survive, then it must begin to look outside its own 'community of experience'.[163] Rather than emphasising the particularity of the Jewish experience, as Abse had done, he advocated a pluralistic, connective approach, asking that the Jews must be portrayed as just one example of a number of minority groups who have suffered. Instead of focussing upon the 'fugitive otherness' of historical and modern Judaism, Silkin demanded that the 'Jewish experience' be put into dialogue with other 'communities of suffering'.[164]

This fragile yet nonetheless powerful insistence on 'communities of other otherness' can be found in poems such as 'Light', which conveys something of how Silkin's belief in the need for a pluralistic approach translated into his poems. The poem, which appears in *The Two Freedoms* and addresses the Holocaust and its victims, begins with an admission from the speaker of his own connection to these events. Not, surprisingly, as one affiliated with the Jewish dead, but as someone connected, and implicated, with a much wider community of humans:

> I have not the purity
>   Needed to judge; kings of Africa sold
>   Men they enslaved in their wars
> In bondage to the English. Who has the purity
>   To condemn? The chandelier
> Of Europe and its bits of jewelled glass,
>
>   That intricate glasswork of
> Such human fabrication must seem like
>   Bruises of clustered lights.[165]

Whilst alluding to his unique position as a Jewish poet in the first line (and within the wider context of the collection), Silkin nevertheless emphasises his place in a wider historically diverse community of victims and perpetrators, shrinking the moral and chronological gap between the two. This attempt to create an overarching history of human impurity is very much in keeping with the more recent tendency in trauma and Holocaust studies towards 'connective' rather than 'competitive' histories of suffering.[166] Writers such as Marianne

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[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Sillkin, 'Light' [TTF], p. 106.
[166] Marianne Hirsch, 'Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times', *PMLA,* vol. 129, no. 3, (2014), pp. 330-348.

Hirsch, Leo Spitzer, and Michael Rothberg have all explored how comparative and 'multidirectional' forms of memory offer a productive and nuanced way of considering the place and legacy of the Holocaust in the contemporary world.[167] Building upon the emphasis on 'origins' first asserted by Hannah Arendt, their work corresponds with Silkin's earlier attempts to contextualise the Holocaust in relation to a wider history.[168] All focus on 'Memory's anachronistic quality—its bringing together of now and then, here and there' as the 'source of its powerful creativity'.[169] However, when the poem was first published in 1958, its relational approach to the Holocaust sat in contrast to the increasing critical emphasis – made famous by figures such as Elie Wiesel – on the unique and even a-historical nature of the Holocaust.[170]

As the poem goes on, Silkin takes this relativist approach further, attempting to humanise the Holocaust by emphasising its place within a European context. In particular, he refrains from mentioning the Nazi regime, preferring instead to refer to 'the Germans', who 'found / Civilization to be / Fragile, a chandelier-like lilac'.[171] The tone of the poem – resolutely pragmatic and free from malice – emphasises the chance nature of the event; this time it happened to be the German population and not the British who made this self-discovery, but that's not to say that anyone else couldn't have also 'found civilization' and all its horrors in their own national pasts. From here, the poem becomes overtly cosmopolitan in its outlook. Adopting the same fine-balance between didactic and dialectic seen earlier in 'Caring For Animals', the poem calls for an act of communal reflection that can transcend the limits of national borders:

> I ask you to encandle
> Your quivering chandelier into one whole
>   Pure and bell-like light,
> That smart through Europe bends our crowded heads
> Like flowers frail crimson-bruised, harsh jewellery

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[167] Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, 'The witness in the archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies', *Memory Studies,* vol. 2 no. 2 (2009), pp. 151-170; Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory.*
[168] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism.*
[169] Rothberg, 'Introduction', *Multidirectional Memory,* p. *5.*
[170] For a chronological overview of critical discourse on the unique versus relative nature of the Holocaust, and how this affected poets writing from the UK and the US see: Susan Gubar, 'Chapter One: The Holocaust is Dying', *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 1-27.
[171] Silkin, 'Light' [TTF], p. 107.

> Low, loud and harsh[172]

Addressing, or rather anticipating, a collective Europe, the poem makes a direct appeal for the 'communities' of experience that Silkin later advocates within the pages of *The Jewish Quarterly*. Whilst the poem is by no means positive in terms of what it calls for – a shared grief and shame over humanity's capacity for atrocity – the 'light' that it offers revolves around the fact that to share in suffering is to begin to affect change. As Silkin later notes in the introduction to *Poetry of the Committed Individual*:

> The quicker and more thoroughly we learn, in however limited a way, something
> of what sensuous powers and moral entrapments feel like in Iowa, Teesside, or
> Prague (quite apart from what Amman, Jaffa, and Hanoi can tell us), the more
> insistently can our preparations be made for a continuously vigorous and
> changing culture.[173]

Going back to his piece in *The Jewish Quarterly* and his belief in the 'cultural survival' of Jewishness in England, in the relativism both of 'Light' and in his introduction to *Poetry of The Committed Individual* it's possible to see how Silkin's often fraught hyphenated identity - as an Anglo-Jew and as a committed-individual – manifests itself within his poetry and prose.

These examples suggest that Silkin's response to the question of otherness was both benevolent and innovative. Yet alongside his emphasis on the relational 'communities of suffering', the second way that the poet responded both to the question of otherness and to the exclusion of Rosenberg was decidedly less considered.[174] What it reveals, perhaps more so than his continuing public engagement and poetry, is the importance that he placed on Rosenberg as a vital figure within both the Anglo-Jewish and committed tradition, and his willingness to transgress the rules of engagement in order to champion this alternative canon. In 1966 Sonntag and *The Jewish Quarterly* were involved in the organisation of a symposium on Jewish writing to be held in Israel. Already enlisted to go along and give papers on the subject of 'Anglo-Jewish writing' were Dannie Abse and Emanuel Litvinoff; however Silkin put it to Sonntag in forceful terms that he should also be part of the delegation. After some persuasion (or cajoling), Sonntag agreed, and commissioned Silkin to write a paper on the subject of contemporary Anglo-Jewish poetry. At this point however, Silkin began to reveal

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[172] Ibid.
[173] Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI*, pp. 20-21.
[174] Even if it did remain largely contained within the correspondence passed between himself and Jacob Sonntag, the then-editor of *The Jewish Quarterly*.

another motive for wanting to attend beyond that of celebrating *The Jewish Quarterly* and the culture that surrounded it. Confirming, by letter, that he would send a draft of his speech to Sonntag as a matter of urgency, Silkin concludes on a strange, apparently unconnected note. In his final paragraph he turns to the subject of Isaac Rosenberg, and berates *The Jewish Quarterly* and its contributors for excluding him from a feature on important Anglo-Jewish writers:

> I am sorry you or Dannie or Jeremy – or all of you, omitted Isaac Rosenberg. He's the best of the lot.[175]

Given that the first example of Rosenberg's exclusion from the Anglo-Jewish canon took place over ten years before, this final point is unexpected. So are Silkin's subsequent actions, all of which can only be gleaned from Sonntag's reactions. The next letter from Sonntag, dated less than a month after Silkin berates the editor on behalf of Rosenberg, responds to the draft speech that the poet had presumably recently sent through. Sonntag's letter expresses surprise and disappointment at Silkin's chosen subject matter:

> I read your paper, and I am surprised that you should consider this suitable for the occasion.[176]

As Sonntag reveals the subject matter of Silkin's speech, the willingness of the poet to antagonise is left in no doubt. Rather than simply writing about contemporary Anglo-Jewish poetry, Silkin submitted an impassioned defence of Rosenberg and his continuing relevance to Anglo-Jewish writing and culture. Sonntag goes on to reject the piece, informing Silkin that he must either re-write his speech to fit with the aims and agenda of *The Jewish Quarterly*, or else he would not talk.

The most revealing part of this exchange, aside from Silkin's willingness to antagonise Sonntag to make a point, is the different priorities of the two men. For what seems clear from Silkin's careful interpretation of Rosenberg and Douglas's work in his own critical and poetic writing is the vital and continuing role that these figures played in shaping his contemporary approach. What is poignant about the rejected submission to Sonntag, despite its apparent ill-fit for the intended conference, is the fact that for Silkin an article about Rosenberg did fulfil the brief. Writing on the future of Anglo-Jewish Poetry meant writing on its past, and the role that these 'relations' played in shaping the words and 'criteria' of the

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[175] Leeds, BLSC, Jon Silkin Correspondence, Correspondence with *The Jewish Quarterly*, BC MS 20c Silkin /8 /Jew-5, Silkin to Sonntag, early July 1966.
[176] Ibid., Sonntag to Silkin, 31 July 1966.

living. For Silkin, if not for Abse and Sonntag, Rosenberg remained contemporary, and for that reason a defence of his poetry was a pressing and relevant choice of subject matter.

Conclusion

In a 1958 article entitled 'Some Reflections on Anglo-Jewish Poetry', intended as the introduction to a poetry anthology issue of *The Jewish Quarterly*, Silkin wrote of rootlessness, declaring it to be the 'distinguishing mark' of Anglo-Jewish 'distinctiveness'. He went on to explain that:

> My poetry reflects the rootlessness of my Jewish community, but it reflects as well, I think, the rootlessness many of us felt then, and do still feel, a rootlessness generated by the War, an isolation increased by the chaos in which we grew up.[177]

In a sign of the influence of figures such as Douglas on Silkin's poetic, what he calls for is the recognition that rootlessness was a condition local to all those who experienced the War, in whatever capacity. What his particular position eventually and rather ironically allowed him, despite the disapproval from many of his contemporaries, was the capacity and ethical authority to make rootlessness and alienation the uniting attribute of a Europe-wide community of experience. In doing this he attempted to make commitment and rootlessness mutually beneficial terms.

The impasse reached between Silkin, Sonntag, and *The Jewish Quarterly* over the matter of Rosenberg – like Silkin's differing response to the question of Jewish cultural survival – presents the image of a poet uneasy both with the role that he had inherited, and the responsibility that he felt bound, as a 'committed' artist, to discharge. In his 1973 interview with the *Vanderbilt Poetry Review* Silkin explained that whilst his 'being a Jew' informed both his 'historical sense' and his creative impulse, he nevertheless understood that he stood apart from the Anglo-Jewish artistic community.[178] After describing his dislike of Israel and his feeling of alienation whilst there, he goes on to say something of his sense of the poetic and political space that he inhabited, both in relation to contemporaries such as Abse and Sonntag, and to those, like Hill and Harrison, associated with *Stand*:

> I've caught myself continually trying to belong to a community. I despise it in myself to some extent. It's as though I were trying to please the good parent

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[177] Silkin, 'Some Reflections of Anglo-Jewish Poetry', *The Jewish Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (winter 1958) p. 9.
[178] Silkin, in 'Attend to the Unnecessary Beasts: a Conversation with Jon Silkin', p. 28.

community, and I think, "Why the hell should I?" and "Why do I have to please people? [179]

This interview articulates the highly individualistic sense of faith and responsibility that coloured Silkin's sense of self, nationhood, and belonging. The question of 'why the hell should I', posed to contemporaries like Antony Thwaite and Jacob Sonntag and also asked of himself, leads him to occupy a creative and historical in-between space. Inheriting the 'extrospective' and 'cosmopolitan' tendencies of Douglas and Rosenberg, but balancing these against an alternative and difficult historical and cultural inheritance, Silkin straddles each community. Like Rosenberg's rat he flits between camps – a reflection of the individualism and self-reflection at the heart of his post-War poetic commitment.

Silkin's difficult position reflects the fact that whilst his work was informed by its 'relations' to two different artistic modes, his specific 'criteria' was to address the 'unnecessary beast[liness]' of man, and the repercussions of the Holocaust in the post-1945 public world.[180] In this at least, he shared an affinity with Abse, who had also been 'made' by Auschwitz. However, in their respective 'portraits' for *The Jewish Quarterly*'s 'Portrait of the Jewish Poet' article, both poets initially focus upon the question of who – rather than what – must be addressed in the Jewish poem. The Jewish poem is defined by who wrote the poem, and who the poet is writing for, rather than the subject matter of the piece. Abse's picture of the historical and contemporary Jewish poet points to a rhetoric that more openly sought to emphasise otherness, whereas in his letter to *The Jewish Quarterly* Silkin advocated a style that celebrated the capability of the Jewish writer to address a universal community, both in England and further afield. Yet as his comments in the *Vanderbilt Review* demonstrate, whilst this approach signalled his wish to open out the Jewish experience, there is still nonetheless an unresolved tension that tempers this sentiment, illuminated in his choice of language when he describes his intention to reach out to 'a community which is not Jewish (but is nevertheless quite human and civilized)'.[181] The parenthesised caveat, though ironic in tone, undermines the sincerity of the initial intention, revealing the continuing rawness of Silkin's individual and collective memory of racial exclusion and persecution.

The doubleness of the parenthesised phrase raises the rather contentious question as to the origin of Silkin's wish to open out the Jewish experience. It left unclear whether his call for universality derives from a point of anger as to the continued ignorance and even racism

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[179] Ibid.
[180] Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI*, p. 18; Silkin, 'Caring For Animals' [TPK], p. 42.
[181] Silkin, 'Letter: Cultural Survival', *The Jewish Quarterly*, p. 36.

of those around him. This estrangement between the poet and the community he apparently wishes to address demonstrates the unresolved paradox between inclusivity, 'extrospection' and alienation within Silkin's poetry and prose. His championing of cross-cultural dialogue, forward-thinking for its time, anticipated the current trend in memory and trauma studies towards the need for 'multidirectional' and 'connective' histories of violence and suffering.[182] The version of historiography and poetic witness that he advocated – one formed on dialogue, pluralisation, and the opening out of experience – placed him at odds with many of his contemporaries precisely because he occupied a position more in keeping with current critical discourse surrounding connective rather than competitive memory. Yet whilst this stance effectively mediated the 'extrospection' of Keith Douglas through a post-Holocaust Anglo-Jewish perspective, the result, as demonstrated by the parenthesised caveat, is not altogether harmonious. It places Silkin as the other to the 'community' that he wishes to speak to, whilst at the same time distancing him from the approach of Abse and the rest of the editorial board at *The Jewish Quarterly*.

This independent, if problematic platform is reflected in Silkin's notable absence from the pages of both *The Jewish Quarterly* and *Poetry and Poverty,* particularly after the mid-1960s, though he subscribed to both publications up to his death.[183] In turn, *The Jewish Quarterly* distanced itself from Silkin. He may have written his introduction to the 1958 poetry anthology issue of *The Jewish Quarterly*, however he was subsequently replaced as editor by Sonntag, who later published 'Some Reflections on Anglo-Jewish Poetry' in another issue altogether, complete with the disclaimer that:

> The views expressed by the writer … may not be shared by other Anglo-Jewish poets and novelists … Nevertheless, as an expression of an *individual view* by one who is deeply and wholly engaged in writing *English poetry*, it deserves the closest attention by *everyone* concerned with *Anglo-Jewish writing*, its present and its future. [Italics added][184]

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[182] See Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* and Hirsch, 'Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times', pp. 330-348.

[183] Silkin's archived library, access courtesy of the Silkin estate and Brotherton Special Collections; In 1993 Silkin resumed his relationship with *The Jewish Quarterly*, submitting a number of poems to the then-editor Michael Lazarus, including 'The Jews in England', 'The Jews of England', and 'Motherland', with the accompanying reflection that 'I seem to be writing poems which are more and more to do with the Jews. I do not know why'. Leeds, BLSC, Jon Silkin Correspondence, BC MS 20c Silkin /8 /Jew-5, Silkin to Michael Lazarus, 14 May 1993.

[184] Jacob Sonntag, 'Editorial Introductory Note to Jon Silkin's "Some Reflections on Anglo-Jewish Poetry', *The Jewish Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (19) (winter 1958), p. 9.

The italics highlight the distinction that Sonntag makes between Silkin – an 'individual' writing 'English poetry' – and the rest of the Anglo-Jewish community. The message, though polite, is clear enough. The disclaimer confirms Silkin's own assertion of his 'Committed' individualism – a state that finds and thrives off conflict, but that as a result, sits apart from the 'community' to whom it emerges from and seeks to address. In his discussions of the notion of community, both in relation to *Stand* and the community of 'committed' poets, and in the pages of *The Jewish Quarterly*, Silkin presents the picture of a writer often deliberately at odds with the world, however 'wholly engaged' he was in its political, historical and moral life. His 'withdrawal' – a defining characteristic of his post-War poetic – attests to the pressure of 'unnecessary beasts' upon his conscience and creativity. It also reveals the difficult relationship between war poetry, post-War, and Anglo-Jewish verse within the poet's imaginative and critical process, and his sense of poetic selfhood.

ii. 'On Not Being Milton': the Front-Line Position of Tony Harrison

Speaking in an interview about his time in Prague in 1966-67 and his experience of the Soviet regime, Tony Harrison noted his belief in the idea that 'When a culture is under oppression, the works of the past are continually read as if they were written yesterday'.[185] That historical and political pressure alters the work of the past as much as the present is an idea that shapes Harrison's poetic approach, and in the frequent examples of intertextuality and dialogue within his poems it is easy to see the prominent role that a community of past (and present) writers plays in forming his definition of the current role and responsibility of the poet. Just as the 'relations … originate the criteria' of Silkin's poetic persona, Harrison's poetry brings together a pre-War poetic tradition with the post-War particularity of his witness.[186] Although not as overtly influenced by the poetry of Keith Douglas, Isaac Rosenberg and the poets of the First and Second World War, his 'individual' negotiation with the idea of poetic commitment still results in an updated version of Douglas's 'extrospection'.[187] Harrison aggressively occupies (and seeks out) the civilian and militaristic front line position predicted by the Second World War writer, and while the Second World War and the Holocaust permeate through his poetry across his oeuvre, his gaze is as anticipatory as it is retrospective. Concerned with the threat of future conflict and annihilation as much as the memory of past atrocity, Harrison represents war and conflict as continually present and ongoing.[188]

To represent the figure of the poet, and more importantly to establish himself as a new form of war writer, Harrison draws on sources that pre-date and succeed the First and Second World War. Blurring the distinction between the civilian and the military, figures such as John Milton, Rudyard Kipling, and John Keats are entered into a dialogue with Palladas of Alexandria and the Czechoslovakian poet Miroslav Holub. The result is a series of poems that locate themselves within a larger history of public writing and poetic witness, whilst at the same time asserting their place as new, innovative responses to historical pressure. By defining himself in relation to each of these writers, Harrison sets out what he sees to be the role and voice of the poet in the conflict-filled twentieth century, producing a form of poetry

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[185] Haffenden, Harrison, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', p. 237.

[186] Silkin, 'Introduction', *PCI*, p. 18.

[187] As well as being on the editorial team for the 1960 'War Poets' special issue of *Stand*, Harrison was later asked by Silkin to write a piece on Edmund Blunden and happily agreed. However, for one reason or another this never came to fruition. Leeds, BLSC, *Stand* Magazine Correspondence, BC MS20c Stand /3 /Har-11, Tony Harrison to Jon Silkin, 10 May 1964.

[188] See chapter two for further discussion of Harrison's critical classification as a post-War or Cold War poet.

still very much in keeping with what Keith Douglas predicted in his 1943 letter to *The Times*. Although Harrison, like Silkin, should therefore be considered as another inheritor of Douglas, what differentiates his negotiation with poetic commitment from that of his fellow 'committed individual' is the fact that he did not produce a civilian poetic shaped by a tradition of war writing. In fact, he did the exact opposite. Influenced by a tradition of politically and historically engaged civilian poetry, Harrison went on to write from the front line, producing dispatches to *The Guardian* on the Bosnian conflict and the Gulf War. In this he fulfilled another of Keith Douglas's imperatives – to adopt a 'journalese' approach to poetry - one that could bridge the gap between an artistic, reflective response to war and a piece urgent and immediate enough for the front page of the newspaper.[189] In Silkin's verse, the 'extrospection' of Keith Douglas migrates into an antagonistic, rootless, but ultimately outward-facing post-War poetic. In Harrison's, antagonism and conflict are there again in even more literal terms, as the poet creates a form of front-line poetics; a style that captures the urgency of his particular historical moment, and conveys the profound influence of conflict upon the formation of poetic selfhood.

Harrison fashions this adapted form of civilian war poetry via a series of intertextual dialogues (or rather, confrontations) with past poets. Their own experience (or innocence) of writing in the shadow of conflict shed light on the post-War poet's own historical moment and position as a writer, as well as on the aesthetic effects of his act of witness. Mirroring the profound impact both of the A-Bomb and the Holocaust, in these textual meetings historical atrocity often stands like an un-breachable gap between the two generations. It demands that the contemporary poet adapt existing poetic forms and acts of public poetic witness. Only then can he represent the atrocious histories and events that press upon his imagination and selfhood.

I.

In the preface to his translation of the 'gloomy epigrammist' Palladas, Harrison addressed the importance of ignobility (or as Joseph Cohen described it, 'classical pessimism') as a meaningful, historically-minded response to atrocity.[190] Turning to the figure of Palladas, a writer whose 'bitter' force resonated within Harrison's own approach, one parallel that the contemporary poet identified between his own poetic and that of the Alexandrian writer was

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[189] Douglas, 'Poets in this War', p. 478.
[190] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', p. 135; Cohen, 'The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman', p. 25.

the shared refusal to make their poetic response to historical pressure in any way 'stoical'.[191] For Harrison, 'What is unique and even invigorating about Palladas is that there is no sense at all of "gracious" surrender either to the inevitability of death or to historical change'.[192] His poems, which frequently draw attention to the abject hopelessness of his predicament – 'Born naked. Buried naked. So why fuss? / All life leads to that first nakedness' – hold in their brash pessimism an ironic defiance of the power of history to silence and subdue.[193] Although separated by centuries, the same can be said for the post-War writer. Like Palladas, he 'is one of those embarrassing but heroic figures who are not dignified in despair, refusing to be noble on the gallows or to make peace with their maker'.[194]

Harrison's translation of the Palladas poems, and the comparison that he makes between his own position and that of the Alexandrian writer highlights the importance of ignobility within Harrison's own verse. It also points to the significant part that confrontation and intertextuality play in defining his role as a poetic witness to history. Read as part of the long tradition of poetic witnesses, Palladas's bleak outlook situates him as one of the first in a long line of poets whose job it is to face up to history, his translated poetry more useful for understanding the twentieth century than he ever intended it to be:

> Born crying, and after crying, die.
>
> It seems the life of man's just one long cry.
>
> Pitiful and weak and full of tears,
>
> Man shows his face on earth and disappears [195]

Palladas's 'one long cry', picked up and continued by Harrison, ironically refuses the pointlessness and obscurity that caused the poet's bitter lament. It instead confirms the continuing relevance of the dead in helping to define the role of the living. By defining himself as a historical other, often pitting himself against earlier writers in binary, juxtapositional terms – comparing their supposed historical innocence with his experience – Harrison draws attention to the rupturing force of history and the unique specificity of his present moment. Casting himself as one who must occupy an entirely new space, in poems such as 'On Not Being Milton' and 'A Kumquat for John Keats', he puts himself forward as one bound to forge an entirely new poetry out of the shrapnel of recent history.

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[191] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas',* p. 135.
[192] Harrison, ibid.
[193] Harrison, 'P:P 4', *CdP*, p. 79
[194] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas'*, p. 135.
[195] Harrison , 'P:P 5', *CdP*, p. 79.

The title of 'On Not Being Milton' is the most overt example of Harrison's tendency to define himself in relation to his poetic contemporaries and predecessors. Situating himself as the other – as an alternative, non-canonical writer – in the opening lines of the poem the poet announces his 'roots' to be drawn not only from a centralised tradition, but from a subversive, and altogether darker source:

> Read and committed to the flames. I call
>
> these sixteen lines that go back to my roots,
>
> my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*,
>
> my growing black enough to fit my boots.[196]

Drawing attention to the deliberate nature of his speech act, Harrison engages with the poetic canon for a number of reasons. By beginning with the definition of himself in the negative – as 'not' Milton, not rooted, not 'black enough', and not able to physically 'fit' into his social or filial heritage – the eloquent speaker pre-empts the humour and celebration of the subsequent stanzas with a glimpse into the challenges of class and the impossibility of belonging. As well as drawing attention to the social pressures placed upon poetic subjectivity, this negative self-hood hints at the particularity of the poet's historical position. His state of 'not being', particularly when compared to Milton's apparently fixed position within the canon and history, suggests the existence of a moment of extinguishment or rupture between the two writers.

The nature of this rupture, although not explicitly set out in the poem, doesn't stem from any personal dislike or disagreement with the figure and aesthetics of Milton. In fact, in a speech following his 2009 PEN/Pinter Award, Harrison credits the blind poet as a key influence in his own poetic act. Discussing the importance of statues as a way 'to test the traditions of European culture against the most modern destructive forces' Harrison notes that:

> I even have busts in my home. The first thing you see in my hallway is a large
>
> 18th-century bust of Milton, who stares at me as I watch TV and reminds me of
>
> the grave and committed role of the poet. Although he was blind, Milton had one
>
> of the most unswerving gazes of all English poets.[197]

Coming as it does in the wake of his own award for his 'public' poetry, this statement affirms Harrison's place as a natural inheritor of Milton's searching gaze, emphasizing the continuity

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[196] Harrison, 'On Not Being Milton' [SoE], *CdP,* p. 122.

[197] Harrison, 'The Poetic Gaze', in *The Guardian*, 24 October 2009, http: / /www.theguardian.com /books /2009 /oct /24 /tony-harrison-speech-pen-pinter [Accessed 15 July 2014].

between his 'grave and committed' role and act of witness and that of his predecessor, now immortalized in stone. Yet going back to his remarks on the importance of the statue as a 'test' of culture versus historical destruction, the protected place of the stone Milton within Harrison's home - 'staring' as he watches the news - subtly emphasizes the earlier poet's blindness and innocence in the face of a completely new public sphere. Milton's 'unswerving gaze' may remain unbroken, yet what this gaze rests upon, lit up upon the television screen, demands a response that lies beyond him. Out-dated and immobile, the bust and the man he represents together sit uneasily in the modern world.

The divisive role that history and modernity play in defining the relationship between Harrison and Milton is drawn attention to in the poem itself. Going back to the opening lines of 'On Not Being Milton', the mention of 'flames', taken out of context, offers a sinister and historically loaded suggestion as to the reason behind the need to establish a re-ordered version of English poetic tradition.[198] Its presence in the poem points to the unwelcome role of history as a divider and categoriser of the poetic canon, establishing the fact that it is necessity and not simply choice that defines who and what Harrison is and is 'not'. What 'On Not Being Milton' demonstrates is the importance of other poets, and in particular other poets' historical circumstances, in defining the particular position and task of the post-War poet. By poeticizing the break or rupture that separates his own poetic moment from that of Milton, Harrison emphasizes the uniqueness of his position. In the mention of flames he is also able to draw attention to the exact nature of his historical witness, reminding the reader of the pressing force of the bomb, of the gas chambers, and of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, upon his imagination and selfhood.[199]

This mention of flames, and of the 'blackened' nature of Harrison in comparison to Milton pre-empts the more explicit discussion of historical rupture that takes place in 'A Kumquat for John Keats'. The most well-known example of Harrison's definition of himself in relation to his poetic predecessors, 'A Kumquat for John Keats' is an 'avowed and explicit gift exchange from one poet to another'.[200] This gift is double-edged however, as through the act of representing Keats, Harrison questions the continuing relevance of his aesthetic, setting out the need for an entirely new poetic in the process. Unlike his immediate assertion of his 'Not Being Milton', the title of the poem suggests that Harrison might be a successor of sorts

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[198] Harrison, 'On Not Being Milton', p. 122.

[199] This poem, its engagement with the writing of Aime Cesaire, and the implications of negritude for Harrison's geographical and historical situation, are the subject of detailed discussion in chapter two of this thesis.

[200] John Whale, 'Keats and Harrison: The Burden of History', *The Monstrous Debt: Modalities of Influence in Twentieth-Century Literature*, ed. Damien Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), p. 163.

to the particular, often excessive sensual aesthetic of Keats. It sets him up as a modern Romantic, held apart through his greater knowledge and experience yet still beholden to the poetry and historical sense of the younger, historically earlier poet. This reading is supported by the form of the poem, which offers up a more liberated form of lyricality than many of the poems within collections such as *The Loiners*. Awkward line endings and crude rhymes are replaced by a rather arch, yet richly sensuous lyricism. This evokes the immediate sensual reception of fruit and Florida and the distant pressure of History in an equally vivid style. The couplet form, coupled with the focus on the sensuous, give this poem a feeling of being outside of its time – yet this a-historicism is juxtaposed against the occasional immediacy and specificity of the historical subject matter.

What adds to this strange fluidity between past and present, immediate and reflective, public and private, and England and America, are the long, extended, delineated sentences in each long stanza. There is no full stop or question mark until line thirty-two, and up until that point Harrison has compressed all of these different influences via the use of a list form, and the continual use of commas to splice different times and places together. What all this at first seems to portray is an attempt to compress and connect his own role as a poet with that of Keats. Yet alongside the intimacy of this address, the poem dismisses Harrison's Romantic predecessor as ill-equipped to represent the complexity of the modern, atomic age. Rather than emphasise the historical continuities between himself and the earlier writer, Harrison uses Keats and his brand of Romantic 'excess' to explore the particularity of his own historical position, emphasising the historical break between himself and his predecessor as much as the poetic links that bind them. Whilst this approach enables the poem to locate its author as a post-Holocaust, post-nuclear Romantic, there is a problem with its depiction of Keats's aesthetic approach. In emphasising his break from the past, Harrison risks idealising and reducing the historical pressure placed upon his predecessors. For a writer whose poems so often draw attention to the fruitful intertextuality at work within his verse, 'A Kumquat for John Keats' threatens to create a rupture where there doesn't need to be one.

From the first few lines of the poem Harrison sets out his intention to define the particularity of his historical 'malady', and it is through the common yet sensual metaphor of fruit that finds the most fitting object for his adult self:

Today I found the right fruit for my prime,

not orange, not tangelo, and not lime,

nor moon-like globes of grapefruit that now hang

outside our bedroom, nor tart lemon's tang

(though last year full of bile and self-defeat

I wanted to believe no life was sweet)

Nor the tangible sunshine of the tangerine,

And no incongruous citrus ever seen

At greengrocers' in Newcastle or Leeds

Mis-spelt by the spuds and mud-caked swedes [201]

Though it has not yet reached either the kumquat or the figure of Keats, the poem brings together the sexuality and sensuality that so often characterises Harrison's aesthetic, and the pessimism that encircles it like the parenthesis in the verse. When it finally arrives at the Romantic poet, the stanza begins by emphasising the similarity between the two writers. In their equal wish to 'write /how Melancholy dwelled inside Delight' both must search for a fitting metaphor.[202] Harrison goes as far as to presume that although his predecessor might have seen 'fit' to choose the grape as 'Joy's fruit':

I'm pretty sure that Keats, though he had heard

'of candied apple, quince and plum and gourd'

instead of 'grape against the palate fine'

would have, if he'd have known it, plumped for mine

This presumption then develops into a ventriloquization of Keats, as the contemporary poet imagines how 'this Eastern citrus scarcely cherry size / he'd bite just once and then apostrophize / and pen / one stanza how the fruit had all / the qualities of fruit before the Fall'. Inhabiting the 'pen' and the imagination of the Romantic writer, Harrison sets out an affinity between his own creative process and that of his predecessor.

Drawn to the power of the object and the appropriate metaphor to capture the inner workings of the soul, both poets are presented as offering up a distinctly sensual response to history. Yet the mention of the Fall introduces the first hint of distinction, and in the following lines Harrison confirms this, drawing upon Keats's early death as proof of the younger writer's innocence and inexperience:

and if John Keats had only lived to be,

because of extra years, in need like me,

at 42 he'd help me celebrate

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[201] Harrison, 'A Kumquat for John Keats', *CdP*, p. 220.
[202] Ibid.

that Micanopy kumquat that I ate

whole, straight off the tree, sweet pulp and sour skin –

or was it sweet outside, and sour within?

At this point in the poem Harrison defines Keats's innocence as biological rather than historical. His knowledge of the 'sweet' and 'sour' of life is hindered not by his chronological position, but rather by his early death and the implied geographical distance between them. Drawing attention to his distance from England and its traditions, Harrison is able to offer up a deliberately exotic container of his cosmopolitan poetic self. Having finally mentioned the kumquat within the main body of the text, Harrison enacts the poem's gift exchange, offering up the fruit to his predecessor as a symbol of his maturity and worldliness:

and being a man of doubt at life's mid-way

I'd offer Keats some kumquats and I'd say:

You'll find the one part's sweet and one part's tart:

say where the sweetness or the sourness start. [203]

In this direct address the dynamic of the poem shifts, as Harrison adopts a position of superiority over the younger, deceased poet. Although not yet explicit, the tone of the address also merges the experience of age with the experience of history, so that when Harrison casts himself as one tasked with defining the most fitting metaphor for his age, the meaning of age is widened out to encompass his historical moment as well as his personal one.

This shift between the personal and the historical is confirmed explicitly in the powerful final lines of the stanza, in which the middle-aged and world-weary poet finds the new container of his time. Breaking away from Keats, and the Romantic tradition, and asserting the need for an entirely new set of metaphors for the modern age, it's now the exotic kumquat fruit and not the grape that 'expresses best / how days have darkness round them like a rind, life has a skin of death that keeps its zest'. Although the emphasis on circularity maintains an on-going connection between past and present, this is juxtaposed against the bleak nature of the reflection. In its shape and composite parts the Kumquat captures the new historical darkness bearing down upon the imagination of the poet.

From this point the tone of the narrative alters, as in a reflection of this 'darkness' the poem moves from the personal to the historical. Harrison now begins to assert his own unique experience and knowledge over Keats's youth. Despite his claim to be an older but not a

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[203] Ibid., p. 221

wiser man, the tone of the poem suggests that Harrison perceives his knowledge of the human condition – the Sartrean sense of Man's equal 'Being' and 'Nothingness' – to be greater than that of his predecessor. As he goes on to explain their difference, Harrison locates himself as a resolutely post-Holocaust, post-Nuclear poet, and argues that it is this knowledge of man's equal joy for life and capability for annihilation that has led to his need to revise the words and images of those who wrote before him. Suddenly 'it isn't just the gap of sixteen years' between the poets, but rather 'a bigger crop of terrors, hopes and fears':

> years like an open crater, gory, grim,
>
> with bloody bubbles leering at the rim

The movement from the sensual to the grotesque is undertaken in a disorientating shift. What was a romantic as well as Romantic consideration of metaphor, innocence, and experience is blown apart by the rupturing force of history. The small roundness of the kumquat is transformed into a menacing and historically resonant object:

> a thing no bigger than an urn explodes
>
> and ravishes all silence, and all odes,
>
> Flora asphyxiated by foul air
>
> unknown to either Keats or Lemprière,
>
> dehydrated Naiads, Dryad amputees
>
> dragging themselves through slagscapes with no trees,
>
> a shirt of Nessus fire that gnaws and eats
>
> children half the age of dying Keats.[204]

The prior creative and personal intimacy between the two poets, realized in the convoluted sentence structure and the intertextuality of the first verse, has been burst open by the A-Bomb; 'a thing no bigger' than the Grecian 'urn' that Keats had as his historical subject. Because of history, there now exists a deep 'open crater' between both the two poets and their subject material. The supposed innocence and beauty of Keats's odes have been 'ravished' by the dropping of the A-Bomb, their subject matter scorched and deformed by the fires that rage in the aftermath of this extremity. Demonstrating how the Classical informs his historiography, in this stanza the sensuous fruit has become the broken bodies of 'amputees', the flora has turned into 'slagscapes with no trees', the nightingale has been 'amputated' from its Romantic root, and the Naiad been cut off from the Hyperion.

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[204] Ibid., p. 222.

In this bleak and violent set of images Harrison presents a picture of a poetic tradition irrevocably blown apart. Yet in keeping with the frequent introduction of a personal ignobility into the poem, in a later stanza the public pressure of history is merged with an altogether more private ravishment. In a moment of illumination reminiscent of the sunlit streets of 1945 that Harrison records in 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa' here the sun 'juiced of its rays 'first stains, then streaks, then floods the world with days':

> days when the very sunlight made me weep,
>
> days, spent like nights in deep, drugged sleep,
>
> days in Newcastle by my daughter's bed,
>
> wondering if she, or I, weren't better dead,
>
> days in Leeds, grey days, my first dark suit,
>
> my mother's wreaths stacked next to Christmas fruit,
>
> and days, like this in Micanopy. Days!

In laying bare both a historical and a personal despair, the poem equally lays open the question of how post-War poetry might begin to respond, when even silence has been 'ravished'; when the metaphors of Keats have been 'asphyxiated' and turned into tools of destruction. Rather than begin to answer this question in the next stanza however, the poem draws back, undermining its grandiosity and the sophisticated nature of its questioning. Instead, Harrison moves back to the conversational, once again addressing Keats directly. In a show of nonchalance he asks 'Now were you twenty five or six years old / when that fevered brow at last grew cold?' noting that in his Florida setting 'I've got no books at hand to check the dates'. This rather arch self-awareness, and the deliberate nature of his apparently unchecked, spontaneous verse, threatens to relegate Keats as a figure alive only in books; books that Harrison, busy exploring the new world and finding the right metaphors in which to represent it, has no time to refer to. He is almost dismissed as irrelevant to the present life of the modern poet, his young life steeped in pathos and little else.

This patronizing tone continues as the verse goes on, as Harrison undertakes the movement between despair and celebration characterized in *The Birth of Tragedy*. The 'strong pessimism' of the Dionysian, characterised by Nietzsche, which so far has forced the reader 'to peer into the terrors of individual existence' and 'concentrate our attention on our worst experiences', now celebrates Harrison's 'grudging but glad spirit'.[205] Revelling in the

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[205] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 3, 91; Harrison, 'Prologue', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies*, p. 9.

knowledge that comes from age and experience, the poet teases the dead writer, drawing attention to the disparity in their personal and historical circumstances in order to affirm his own vitality:

> … all I've got to hand 's the kumquats, John,
>
> the fruit I'd love to have your verdict on,
>
> but dead men don't eat kumquats, or drink wine,
>
> they shiver in the arms of Proserpine,
>
> not warm in bed beside their Fanny Brawne,
>
> nor watch her pick ripe grapefruit in the dawn,
>
> as I did, waking, when I saw her twist,
>
> with one deft movement of a sunburnt wrist,
>
> the moon, that feebly lit our last night's walk
>
> past alligator swampland, off its stalk.[206]

In this New World setting, all that Harrison has 'to hand' is his token of experience and knowledge. Not his pen, not his books, not the trappings of the life he left behind in Newcastle or Leeds. He is liberated from history and himself, precisely because of his physical escape.[207]

This liberation is flawed however, as in using Keats as a measure of his own historical and sensual maturity, Harrison wrongly diminishes the role of history within the earlier poet's verse. As John Whale notes, the poem subscribes 'to a Victorian, post-Romantic vision of Keats': one that 'combines the innocence of early death with an innocent aesthetic, rather than a vision that views Keats's search for excess, for sensation, as a deliberate foray into the dangerously disfiguring conjunction of poetic form and historical self-consciousness'.[208] Whilst this is true, the fact that Harrison chooses Keats as the suitable 'relation' in which to set out his post-War position conveys the admiration and intimacy that he feels with his poetic predecessor. The way that he describes the poet stands in contrast to his choice of Keats as a suitable poetic double, and this tension is never resolved. Rather than actually believing in the earlier poet's innocence, Harrison deliberately plays down Keats's historical self-consciousness in order to convey the uniqueness of his own position. This is done despite the fact that the poet knew well enough that in their excessive poetic, both he and Keats represented the pressure of history upon their creative imagination. In this way Harrison

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[206] Harrison, 'A Kumquat for John Keats', p. 222.
[207] See chapter two.
[208] Whale, 'Keats and Harrison: The Burden of History', p. 178.

shows the similarity between his approach and the creative antagonism of Jon Silkin. In order to emphasise the particularity of his witness and historical position, the post-War poet risks creating a break where there is none.

'On Not Being Milton' and 'A Kumquat for John Keats' are only two examples of an intertextuality that runs throughout Harrison's work. From John Cleveland and Andrew Marvell in 'Newcastle is Peru', to Thomas Gray and William Wordsworth in 'V', Harrison's poems often locate the poet and his aesthetic through an open and public dialogue with the poetic canon. Harrison's relationship with Milton and Keats offers an example of the poet's oppositional spirit, however not all of his interactions run along the lines of what Harrison is 'not'. In particular in his engagement with poets outside the British tradition, such as Miroslav Holub and Aime Cesaire, Harrison defines his position in terms of his historical affinity rather than his difference.

Harrison's engagement with the Czech poet Miroslav Holub suggests a deliberate attempt to locate his own poetic within a tradition of ongoing war poetry. It also demonstrates the highly educated, cosmopolitan nature of this engagement. Like so many of the poems in Harrison's oeuvre, the poem draws attention to his classical education, and to his experience working and living outside of England. It paints the picture of a poet far more comfortable situating himself outside the British canon looking in, despite his intimacy with figures such as Keats and Milton. Forming part of a sequence called 'Sentences', 'On the Spot', was published in *US Martial* in 1981. Itself an updated, Americanisation of the satiric verse of the Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martialis, the pamphlet brings together the contemporary with the classical, as in his updated translation Harrison contextualizes the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis within a far larger tradition of poetry under pressure. Dated 'Havana, August 1969' and written 'for Miroslav Holub', the poem leaves no doubt as to the historical and political nature of the piece.[209] The fact that Holub, unlike Douglas and Rosenberg, is still alive, adds a further urgency and hopefulness to the piece. The dedication reaches out to a community of free-thinking, dissenting, committed writers, regardless of their nation of residence.

Discussing those poets and writers who have influenced his own writing in the wake of being awarded the PEN/Pinter prize, Harrison mentions Holub as a contemporary poet and 'friend' whose work, alongside that of Wole Soyinka, continues to influence both his sense of history, and the role that poetry must play in relation to political and historical oppression.

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[209] Harrison, 'On the Spot' [USM], *CdP*, p. 109.

Describing his time living in Prague, he notes how 'I got to know that wonderful poet and scientist Miroslav Holub whose signed books I also have', noting his importance as one who had 'long experience of surveillance and censorship'.[210] That Harrison should need more experience on writing in the face of surveillance and censorship hints at the tone of 'On The Spot', suggesting as it does the growing need for the English, (yet nevertheless) cosmopolitan writer to acknowledge his or her own place in relation to the Cold War. As a result of this acknowledgement, the poem contains the same slightly pessimistic tone found in so many of Harrison's considerations of his role as a poet. Like the bitter and sweet kumquat, 'On The Spot' negotiates Harrison's equal sense of defeat and defiance in the face of contemporary history. In a reflection of this, the poem mixes its similes, moving between the gun and the rumba as two very different, but nonetheless equally relevant metaphors for the poetic act. In the first image there is the heavy weight of the 'sentence' levelled upon the contemporary poet by historical witness. In the second, there is the way that poetry might nevertheless improvise and adapt in order to remain unrestricted by these external and imagined pressures.

In the opening lines of the poem Harrison leaves no doubt as to his role as a historical witness, nor to the sort of pressures and events that contemporary poetry must face in its attempt to address and respond to the world around it. Sitting 'Watching the Soviet subs surface / at the side of flagged battleships / between Havana harbour and the USA', Harrison is located 'on the spot' of the Cold War.[211] He is ideally situated to consider both his place as an English writer – and that of Czechoslovakian Holub's – in relation to a conflict that continually threatens to 'surface' and break the relative calm of his surroundings. In acknowledgement of this pressure, the first link that the poem establishes – comparing the writer's pen and ink to the gun or else the sword of the soldier – draws attention to the potential redundancy of the poet when faced with the very different weapons of the atomic age:

> I can't help thinking how the sword
> has developed immensely,
> how only nomads in deserts
> still lop heads off with it,
> while the pen is still only
> a point, a free ink-flow

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[210] Harrison, 'The Poetic Gaze', *The Guardian*, 24 October 2009.
[211] Harrison, 'On The Spot' [USM], p. 109.

and the witness it has to keep bearing.[212]

The poem's opening reference to beheading reminds the reader of Harrison's tendency to respond to historical violence with his own 'aggressively deployed literariness'.[213] However, the apparent archaism of the pen in relation to industrialised violence casts the poet in the role of Luddite, outdated and redundant. The pen does not sit in his hand 'snug as a gun', representative of the alternative force of the written word.[214] Instead it belongs to an era no longer relevant to the world around it. In the same way that the bust of 'grave and committed' Milton sits blind and 'staring' at the television screen, here the pen struggles to make a 'point' in the face of 'surveillance and censorship'.[215] Echoing Keith Douglas's exasperation at the poets of the Second World War who have had found nothing 'new to say', 'On The Spot' begins with a similarly desperate call for formal and linguistic innovation in the face of modern warfare. Whilst the submarine and the atomic bomb stand as proof of the quick advancement of military technology, the pen and ink remain almost unchanged, seemingly ineffectual for 'the witness [that] it has to keep bearing'. Yet this last line, the mention of the 'free ink-flow', and the tension between continuity and disruption in Harrison's description of the poet's role, all work together to temper the apparent pessimism of these opening lines. Just as Douglas predicted that those writing 'after the war is over' will be the ones to provide the most accurate and true form of witness, in 'On the Spot' Harrison asserts the capability of his generation to finally re-align poetry with history.

The idea that the pen 'has to keep bearing' and bearing up to history, despite seeming poorly equipped for the role, leads to the second, more positive metaphor that Harrison makes in his definition of the role of the contemporary poet. It is at this point that the piece breaks away from the pessimism that threatens to overbear the poet in 'A Kumquat for John Keats'. Instead, it draws on the ability of Holub to write in the face of 'surveillance and censorship' as a defiant celebration of poetry as a weapon in its own right. The 'free ink-flow' of Holub's pen, more than the gaze of Milton or the sensuality of Keats, offers Harrison a new, distinctly modern model of poetic response. Yet this model is also a celebration of Keats' and Milton's enduring power, or rather of the moment where Harrison can reconcile their version of public, 'committed' poetry with his own. Having begun on a note of pessimism and apparent immobility in the face of history, 'On the Spot' goes on to subvert the single, unaltered

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[212] Ibid.
[213] Whale, 'Keats and Harrison: The Burden of History' p. 167.
[214] Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', *Opened Ground: Poems, 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 3.
[215] Harrison, 'The Poetic Gaze' *The Guardian.*

'point' of the pen, playing on its apparent stillness – across the ages - in order to celebrate its secret strength. Identifying the unseen power of the poet to improvise and adjust, the poem evokes the metaphor of the rumba to express the mode through which the contemporary, cosmopolitan writer can and must continue to write in the face of silence. Poetry is 'the art of dancing on the spot / without ever being seen to be moving, / not a foot or a hand out of place'.[216]

The choice of the rumba as an appropriate metaphor for the poet's relationship to history is revealing. The emphasis on improvisation, on the power of form, and of the sensual and sexual as a weapon against pessimism and creative inertia captures the values that underpin Harrison's 'committed' poetic. In his focus on the precise movements of the rumba Harrison confirms the continuing presentness not just of Milton and Keats but of the 'gloomy epigrammist' Palladas in the act of poetic defiance. In both the dance and the act of writing, 'formal endeavour' is what stands between the artist and 'chocking silence, sheer cosmic exasperation and what Beckett's Lucky calls "divine aphasia"'.[217] Yet what the poems of Palladas don't account for is that alongside form, the poem finds its defence in the dialogue between past and present, and home and abroad, transferred via the same single 'point' of the pen.

'On The Spot' is an important poem in Harrison's oeuvre. It sets out a definition of poetry as a public act of continuing and effective defiance against on-going violence and oppression, rather than merely a way to express the continuing force of recent history. Bringing together the memory of past conflict and the anticipation of continuing violence, the poem concerns itself with the question of how poetry might occupy the front-line of history and politics – a question that also occupied the imagination of Keith Douglas. The fact that the poem is dedicated to a living poet, and one whose work addresses the 'Before and After' of Soviet occupation and oppression in Czechoslovakia, places Harrison into an alternative, cosmopolitan, and on-going tradition of war poetry – a tradition initiated by Douglas in his call for an 'extrospective' and 'journalese' form of front line poetry.[218] Shaped by the writing of Milton and Keats, and often worked out upon the streets of Beeston and Leeds, Harrison's poetic persona is nevertheless distinctly and deliberately international in character. Juxtaposed to the sheltered nature of his childhood witness, his adult poetic refuses any geographical or chronological limitation. It actively searches out the spaces and moments of

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[216] Harrison, 'On the Spot' [USM], p. 110.
[217] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', p. 135.
[218] Miroslav Holub, *Poems Before and After: Collected English Translations* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books; 2nd ed., 2006); Douglas, 'Poets in this War', p. 478.

conflict that define the public sphere. Located in 'Havana', the poem demonstrates Harrison's belief in the need for contemporary poetry to 'occupy' not only an existing tradition of verse, but a space on the front-line of politics and international conflict.

II.

Interviewed in *The Independent* in 2002, Harrison utters a phrase that he has since repeated countless times at readings and in interviews. Talking about the public role of the poem, he asserted his belief that 'poems belong as much in the news pages as the literary pages'.[219] His reasoning behind this at first appears to be a pragmatic, self-deprecatory one – 'A lot of people throw aside the literary pages! Whereas everybody looks at the news section'. Yet alongside the part-joking, part-serious desire for relevance and notoriety, the statement conveys Harrison's belief in his role as a civilian war-poet, his interpretation of Douglas's 'extrospective' gaze, and his sense of his place on the front line of history.

This sense can also be found in Harrison's archived notebooks and photo albums from the time of his writing on Bosnia and Iraq, which together form a scrap book or collage dedicated to the conflicts and to Harrison's place in amongst the action. As well as serving as a visual prompt for Harrison, the collected newspaper cuttings, photographs, beer bottle wrappers, plane tickets, letters, drafts and snippets of conversations suggest there to be a further role for the notebooks. Like Silkin's deliberate acts of antagonism, they suggest an act of self-fashioning; a composition and creation of the role of the contemporary civilian war poet. These pages, which are often added to and amended years later after the completion and publication of the eventual collection to which they relate, point to Harrison's consideration of his own posterity and archival reception. They also suggest that his position as a war-poet was as much a deliberate, self-appointed role as it was a commissioned one.

A key example of this can be found on the inside front cover of a *The Gaze Of The Gorgon* notebook. Stuck in across the entirety of the page is a picture that has been retrospectively added after the publication of the collection.[220] Presumably taken by an accompanying photographer, it shows Harrison dressed in a blue bullet-proof vest and helmet, apparently caught unaware, his appearance indistinguishable from that of a front-line

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[219] Harrison, in Suzi Feay, 'Poetry Belongs on the Front Pages', *The Independent*, 14 October 2012, http: / /www.independent.co.uk /arts-entertainment /books /features /tony-harrison-poetry-belongs-on-the-front-pages-8210241.html [Accessed 24 October 2012].

[220] Leeds, BLSC, Tony Harrison Archive, BC MS 20c Harrison/02 [Uncatalogued], Small Notebook [Gaze of the Gorgon].

journalist reporting back to the studio at the BBC or else a humanitarian worker based at the scene. That Harrison has chosen to hold on to this picture is unsurprising. What is more noticeable is the way that he has chosen to keep and display it. The fact that it has been retrospectively added to the front of a finished notebook invests the photograph with the feeling of an un-official front cover to *The Gaze of The Gorgon,* or at least to the creative process behind the finished collection. Written in black ink next to the picture is 'Bosnia. Est '95', which of course dates the picture to the Bosnian War, a conflict which Harrison visited as a correspondent for *The Guardian*, sending back his dispatch in the form of the 'Three Poems from Bosnia' sequence. Around this writing however Harrison has kept drawing, circling his outline, first in black ink then in red, before adding in three large, block exclamation marks to complete his hand drawn frame. These extra hand-sketched additions around the photo give the impression of a continued surprise and excitement from Harrison at the authority and position that the picture has given him (and through him, poetry itself). Clearly pleased with the image and what it presents, Harrison has chosen to display it as a pictorial representation of the figure of the humanitarian war-poet that he wished, in his writing, to fashion.

Jon Silkin's interpretation of Keith Douglas's self-coined 'extrospection' was to create a poetic almost 'religious' in its commitment to always 'look and say'.[221] This movement beyond observation into action was undertaken regardless of the difficulty this might cause to both the form and the content of the poem, as demonstrated in some of the denser poems within *The Two Freedoms*, and through Silkin's actions in relation to *The Jewish Quarterly*. Although not explicit in his praise of Douglas, what poems such as 'On The Spot' and the 'Gaze of The Gorgon' notebooks together suggest is that Harrison carried with him the same belief that 'the whole body of English War poetry of this war, civil or military … will be created after this war is over'.[222] For Silkin and Hill this responsibility translated into a largely retrospective representation of the Second World War and 'the fire-targeted / century.[223] Despite the fact that in their verse the 'African new-old / holocaust suffers up against / the all-time Hebrew shoah', their gaze nevertheless holds a reflective quality not always found in Harrison's work.[224] Harrison may also undertake a retrospective act of witness, yet as poems such as 'On the Spot' and 'A Kumquat for John Keats' show,

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[221] Douglas, 'Keith Douglas to J.C. Hall, 10 June 1943', *A Prose Miscellany*, p. 121; Silkin in Silkin, Thwaite, 'No Politics, No Poetry', p. 14.
[222] Douglas, 'Poets in this War', p. 478.
[223] Hill, 'CXXIII' [TToL], *BH*, pp. 275-276.
[224] Ibid.

Harrison's sense of the Second World War is often mediated through a far more immediate sense of the Cold War and the impending threat of nuclear destruction. His version of 'extrospection' continues Keith Douglas's notion of the belated war poet even further than the earlier poet perhaps intended, as in his verse we find a 'continuous' cycle of war, whether the poet turns backwards or forwards. More than in either Silkin or Hill's work we also find the embodiment of Douglas's belief in the role of poetry as a vital form of 'reportage'. Written from the 'front-line' (albeit a 'Cold' front) 'On The Spot' marks the first of many examples of Harrison's own version of 'reportage', and indeed in countless interviews and talks he echoes the angry definitions of 'extrospective' poetry that Douglas first gave to J.C. Hall in 1943. Harrison's belief that 'poems belong as much in the news pages as the literary pages', although pragmatic and humorous in its reasoning, nevertheless reflects Douglas's firm commitment to producing a form of urgent and 'significant speech'.[225]

In the work of Harrison, poetic commitment meant carrying on and extending the connection between poetry and 'reportage' that Douglas first implored to his friend back in 1943. Beginning with 'On the Spot' and carrying on with his Bosnian and Gulf War poems, Harrison situates his contemporary war poetry as news rather than reflection. However, embedded in this 'on the spot' urgency is a poetic form that remains reflective and also, crucially, celebratory in nature; celebratory of 'formal endeavour', of tradition and community (of writers and citizens), and above all celebratory of the power of eloquence as a mode of defiance and defence. Dancing 'on the spot' around history, Harrison's poetic selfhood is both 'agonised' and deeply 'humanist'.[226] He is unceasing in his representation of the equal 'darkness' and 'zest' of post-War poetry and the human condition at large.

In 'Initial Illumination', this duality occurs when the poet reminds the reader, in no uncertain terms, of the arbitrary chance of their existence:

> Now with the noonday headlights in Kuwait
> and the burial of the blackened in Baghdad
> let them remember, all those who celebrate,
> that their good news is someone else's bad
> or the light will never dawn on poor Mankind.
> Is it open-armed at all that victory V,
> that insular initial intertwined

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[225] Harrison, Feay, 'Poetry Belongs on the Front Pages', *The Independent*; Douglas, 'Keith Douglas to J. C. Hall', 10 August 1943, p. 127.
[226] Rowland, 'Introduction', *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust*, p. 1.

with slack-necked cormorants from black-laquered sea [227]

In 'The Cycles of Donji Vakuf', the first of Harrison's three Bosnian poems, this same connection between celebration and despair is repeated in the final stanza of the piece. Drawing upon the circularity of a child's bicycle, the poem ends with the poet reflecting on the dialectical nature of any conflict:

> And tonight some small boy will be glad
>
> he's got the present of a bike from soldier dad,
>
> who braved the Serb artillery and fire
>
> to bring back a scuffed red bike with one flat tyre.
>
> And among the thousands fleeing north, another
>
> with all his gladness gutted, with his mother,
>
> knowing the nightmare they are cycling in,
>
> will miss the music of his mandolin. [228]

Continuing on in this prophetic tone, in the 1991 poem 'A Cold Coming' Harrison ventriloquizes the voice of a 'charred Iraqi' soldier to remind the readers of *The Guardian*, in shocking terms, of the true reality of events they only witness in picture form. [229]

Addressing the poet directly, the figure that confronts him interrogates the true role of war poetry, and in the process reaffirms the importance of the poet's role as one tasked with blowing apart the imaginative or sympathetic distance between England and the rest of the world:

> Lie that you saw me and I smiled to see the soldier hug his child.
>
> Lie and pretend that I excuse my bombing by B52s,
>
> pretend I pardon and forgive that they still do and I don't live,
>
> pretend they have the burnt man's blessing and then, maybe, I'm spared confessing
>
> that only fire burnt out the shame of things I'd done in Saddam's name,
>
> the deaths, the torture and the plunder the black clouds all of us are under.
>
> Say that I'm smiling and excuse the Scuds we launched against the Jews.

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[227] Harrison, 'Initial Illumination', *CdP*, p. 312.
[228] Harrison, Three Poems from Bosnia: The Cycles of Donji Vakuf', *CdP*, p. 338.
[229] Harrison, 'A Cold Coming', *CdP*, p. 313.

Pretend I've got the imagination to see the world beyond one nation.

That's your job, poet, to pretend I want my foe to be my friend.
It's easier to find such words for this dumb mask like baked dogturds.

So lie and say the charred man smiled to see the soldier hug his child.
This gaping rictus once made glad a few old hearts back in Baghdad,

hearts growing older by the minute as each truck comes without me in it.
I've met you though, and had my say which you've got taped. Now go away.[230]

Unseemly, confrontational, and with a strange gallows humour that finds relief in the un-stoical and macabre, the voice of the ventriloquized Iraqi is reminiscent of 'gloomy' Palladas as he bears witness to 'the destruction of his world view'.[231] Going back to his statement that 'When a culture is under oppression, the works of the past are continually read as if they were written yesterday', in 'A Cold Coming' the 'classical pessimism' of the Alexandrian merges with the 'On the Spot' defiance of Holub.[232]

Conclusion

In his more recent poems Harrison continues to define his role as one who must ensure that poetry 'belongs' on the front page as well as the culture section. His long poem 'Shrapnel' was published in response to the July 7th London bombings, and 'Baghdad Lullaby' was published in *The Guardian* in 2003 in a quick and direct response to a suggestion from the then-current Defence Secretary Jeff Hoon's comments that Iraqi mothers would thank him for using cluster bombs:

Ssshhh! Ssshhhh! though now shrapnel makes you shriek
and deformities in future may brand you as a freak,
you'll see, one day, disablement 's a blessing and a boon
sent in baby-seeking bomblets by benefactor Hoon.[233]

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[230] Ibid., p. 320.
[231] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', p. 135.
[232] Haffenden, Harrison, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', p. 237.
[233] Harrison, 'Baghdad Lullaby', *CdP*, p. 321.

With their bitter irony and acerbically deployed rhyme, poems such as 'Baghdad Lullaby' continue to evoke the poetry of Palladas. They also show the continuing urgency of the poet's voice. Whether in the 1960s or fifty years later, culture is, for Harrison, still 'under oppression'. What this leads to is a poetic style that remains present – with the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Cold War, the Bosnian conflict, and the War in Iraq all entering into dialogue with each other within the poet's work. Now it is the Holocaust that informs Harrison's sense of current events, just as before it was Milton and Keats who clarified the poet's historical position.

In his poetic dispatches from the real as opposed to imagined front line - 'Initial Illumination', 'A Cold Coming', and 'Three Poems From Bosnia' – Harrison presents his clearest articulation of the role and responsibility of the post-War poet. They bring together the ethos and aesthetic of 'A Kumquat for John Keats' and 'On the Spot' in a real, rather than creative, front line setting, and in doing so attest to the urgency and violence of Harrison's commitment to poetry. What the pieces convey is the same 'strong pessimism' that defined both Palladas's writing and the description of the Dionysian tradition put forward by Nietzsche.[234] Those writers, Nietzsche suggested, forced the reader 'to peer into the terrors of individual existence – without turning to stone', and in Harrison's representation of human behaviour, cruelty, and hope we find a remarkably similar approach.[235] Poetry, for the post-War, post-Holocaust writer, is the 'one medium which could concentrate our attention on our worst experiences without leaving us with the feeling, as other media can, that life in this century has had its affirmative spirit burnt out'.[236] This statement, which captures both the bitter and sweet of the kumquat and the defiance and resignation of the rumba, is how Harrison defines his unique occupation of poetic tradition.

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[234] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 3.
[235] Ibid., p. 91.
[236] Harrison, 'Prologue', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies*, p. 9.

iii. 'Why do I write of War? Simply because I have not been there' Geoffrey Hill and the Figure of the Civilian War Poet

The poetry and poets of the First and Second World Wars have had a profound influence on the career of Geoffrey Hill. Their work has shaped his critical and creative writing, and has offered a lens through which he has repeatedly examined his place as a poet and historical witness. His published poems and essays stand as a testament to the complex but nevertheless vital relationship between post-Holocaust poetry and war writing in his imagination. Like Silkin, Hill's sense of his place as a 'gregarious' witness to the Holocaust has a pre-narrative shaped around the witness and poetic expression of Rosenberg, Douglas, and of other writers such as Sidney Keyes and David Jones. Like Harrison, he also draws upon a wider, historically and geographically diverse tradition of alternative war-poetry, engaging with writers across Europe from the sixteenth to the twentieth century in his negotiation of what it means to be a post-War British poet. Yet despite these similarities, the result of his negotiation and mediation is very different from either of his contemporaries.

Unlike Silkin and Harrison, Hill does not take up the responsibility of the soldier-poet; he does not produce an antagonistic front-line poetics. Instead, his poetry draws upon extrospection and the idea of the 'active virtue' of the poet as a standard against which to explore the contrasting position of the civilian writer. The difficult antagonism and 'endurance' of Rosenberg, Douglas and others inspires his poetic witness. Yet it also serves as an ironic reminder of the British post-War poet's safe remove. Rather than serving to close the gap between the soldier and the civilian poet (as Silkin and Harrison's work has done) his poetry accentuates this divide, drawing attention to his safe distance and inexperience of the realities of conflict and violence. Whereas Silkin battles with his contemporaries and Harrison seeks out war-zones both on and off the page, Hill's antagonism is often self-directed. His conflicts are with the fictionalised historical figures that appear across his collections. They are his harshest accusers. Lying at the heart of Hill's self-exploration of his role, perspective, and responsibility is the guilt of the bystander. He is the private poet who must answer to his readers, his predecessors, and himself for his choice of subject matter:

why do I write of war? Simply because
I have not been there [237]

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[237] Hill, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 7, *BH*, p. 150.

Voiced here by the eponymous soldier-poet Charles Péguy, both the question and the admission in this passage epitomises Hill's sense of his place as a civilian poet. Writing in the long shadow of two wars, the question of having 'been there' looms large over his poetic imagination.

I.

In 'Some Aspects of Contemporary British Poetry' Geoffrey Hill explains how Keith Douglas and Isaac Rosenberg – along with John Clare and Edward Thomas – have shaped the styles and subject matter of the nation's best contemporary poets:

> these four dead poets seem to haunt and encourage the work of some of the best contemporary British poets and dramatists.[238]

The essay, whose drafts are stored along with Hill's other writing and teaching material on Isaac Rosenberg, discusses the continuities and discontinuities that define the relationship between contemporary poets and their pre-war predecessors. The question of poetry's 'relation, or disrelation to tradition', is 'a matter of real urgency', and is ultimately shaped both by Britain's 'involvement during the past seventy years, with the multinational European Holocaust' and with its 'foreignness … in the minds of the great majority of its countrymen.[239] This explanation, which bears a remarkable similarity to Silkin's explanation of poetic commitment, expresses Hill's belief in the need to redefine the position of the poet in relation to recent history. For all three poets, the Holocaust demanded a consideration both of their relation to tradition, and of the ways that the past offered a way forward towards a new post-War poetic. For Hill, like Silkin, this meant returning to the poetry of the First and the Second World Wars as a way of understanding the current situation that he found himself a witness to.

Despite the fact that 'Some Aspects of Contemporary British Poetry' discusses the equal influence of Romanticism and War Poetry upon the work of his contemporaries, Hill nevertheless notes how 'any discussion of British poetry and British culture which aims to go beyond polite superficialities' must include 'a consideration of the art and reputation of Isaac

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[238] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /5 /1 /176, Teaching and Related Materials, 'Some Aspects of Contemporary British Poetry'. In this instance Hill names Ted Hughes, Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, and Jeffrey Wainwright.

[239] Ibid.

Rosenberg'.[240] Speaking to John Haffenden in 1981 he recalls first encountering Rosenberg's poetry in a review in Peter Russell's periodical *Nine*:

> I immediately bought the *Selected Poems* published by Chatto, which I read avidly. The poem which particularly moved me began 'A worm fed on the heart of Corinth, Babylon and Rome ... ' That poem gripped me in a deep and abiding way.[241]

This 'deep and abiding way' is evident in both Hill's poetic and critical writing.[242] In his career as an academic, poet, and critic he has fulfilled his own imperative, returning to 'consider' Rosenberg again and again, beginning from his time as an undergraduate at Oxford in the early 1950's and continuing until 2015 in his Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures.

Even before the publication of his first full collection *For the Unfallen*, which itself adapts its title from Laurence Binyon's 1914 poem 'For the Fallen', Hill had already published 'For Isaac Rosenberg', a piece written in 1952 whilst he was still a student. The uncollected poem equates the young soldier to the figure of Hamlet, presenting the two men as doomed figures who stood apart from the world they bore witness to:

> Princes dying with damp curls
>
> In the accomplishment of fame
>
> Keep, within the minds of girls,
>
> A bright imperishable name—
>
> And no one breaks upon their game.
>
>
> […]

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[240] Ibid.

[241] Hill, in Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation*, p. 79.

[242] As a lecturer and professor first at Leeds and then at Boston, Hill devised courses on the poetry of the First and Second World Wars, within which Rosenberg featured heavily. In the course pack for his 1997-98 module 'English Poetry and the First World War', Rosenberg features prominently with three seminars out of fourteen dedicated to his work, and another three featuring his poems and writing /letters as points of comparison and discussion. The only writer to have more seminars dedicated to him is David Jones, who has four, but Rosenberg features more prominently overall on the course. Silkin also features heavily in this module, as Hill lists Silkin's 'The Poetry of the First World War' as a set text for the course and refers to it often. Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /5 /1 /176, Teaching and Related Materials, Rosenberg (1959-1998); In 1983 Hill led the letter campaign to have a plaque put up in Whitechapel to commemorate Rosenberg's place of birth. Enlisting both Jon Silkin and Joseph Cohen, he implored them to follow his example and write to the Historic Building Division of the department of architecture and civic design in the hope of increasing Rosenberg's recognition. Ibid.

It followed, with ironic sense,

That he himself, who ever saw

Beneath the skin of all pretence,

Should have been carried from the floor

With shocked, tip-toeing drums before.

With ceremony thin as this

We tidy death; make life as neat

As an unquiet chrysalis

That is the symbol of defeat:

A worm in its own winding-sheet . . . [243]

Tara Christie has read 'For Isaac Rosenberg' and Hill's subsequent interest in the poet as telling of his desire to salvage and celebrate figures who remain under-represented within the English canon.[244] Akin to Harrison's attempt in 'National Trust' to save those who 'go down in history and disappear', Hill, according to Christie, 'digs up' and 'speaks "For"' the war poet 'since Rosenberg – like millions of young soldiers who died at the Front – could no longer speak for himself'.[245] Christie's reading recognises both Rosenberg's underappreciated place within the canon and Hill's recognition of this fact, however it doesn't account for the 'intrinsic value' that Hill attributes to Rosenberg's verse – a value independent from his circumstance and fame.[246]

For Hill, Rosenberg's power lay in the fact that his verse was as much about his refusal of nobility and stoicism – in his rejection of the society that equally rejected him – as it was about the war that he found himself a part of. As Silkin noted, 'two facts, his Jewishness and his poverty, form the basis of an examination of his work which, unlike that of his contemporaries Owen and Sassoon, had already apprehended themes other than war before the war made its impact on his work'.[247] For this reason, 'For Isaac Rosenberg' is as

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[243] Henry Hart, *The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 21–2; Hill, 'For Isaac Rosenberg', *Isis*, 11 (Oxford: The Fantasy Press, 1952); The poem can be found at http: / /www.unicaen.fr /mrsh /anglais /geoffrey- hill /english /poems.php?id=Rosen.

[244] Tara Christie, 'For Isaac Rosenberg': Geoffrey Hill, Michael Longley, Cathal Oˊ Searcaigh', *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 550.

[245] Ibid.

[246] Hill, 'Isaac Rosenberg, 1890-1918' [IoV], *CCW,* p. 464. For a detailed discussion of Hill's ideas on intrinsic value and the canon see Peter Robinson, 'Contemporary Poetry and Value', *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, pp. 727-748. Robinson's article rightly highlights the flaws in Hill's notion of 'value' and in his distrust of public opinion and judgement.

[247] Silkin, 'Isaac Rosenberg: The War, class, and the Jews', p. 33.

much a dismissal of nostalgia, public remembrance, and public opinion, as it is about the poet. The reason why Rosenberg is celebrated in the piece is because he has the clarity of vision, like Shakespeare's Hamlet, to see 'beneath the skin of all pretence'. He rejects the 'pity' that defines much of the public reception of war poetry, and instead expresses an altogether different notion of what defines the place and power of the poem. In the same way that Silkin found his double in the 'cosmopolitan rat', Hill equally finds his own approach in the pessimistic, metaphysical, and self-reflexive poet.[248] Subsequently, despite the fact that 'For Isaac Rosenberg' never made it into *For The Unfallen*, the influence of Jewish poet can be found both in the title of Hill's first full collection, and in the characters that populate its pages.

An allusion to Lawrence Binyon's 1914, patriotic 'For the Fallen', the ironic notion of the 'unfallen' – of the unremembered, the uncelebrated, and perhaps, more defiantly, the un-stoical and un-yielding – pays homage to poets, like Rosenberg, who defied the pity granted to the consolatory 'fallen' hero. It's fitting that this distinction – between the celebrated 'fallen' and the ignoble 'unfallen' – should pre-empt Hill's earliest full collection, given the formative influence of war poetry and commemorative writing on the young poet's style. In his interview with *The Paris Review* nearly half a century later he addresses this again in an explanation of how he perceives his role as a poet. His responsibility, as he sees it, is to bear effective 'witness'.[249] He goes on to explain – in a manner reminiscent of Silkin's editorials, interviews, and correspondence on the subject – what it is that poetry 'has to' bear witness to, and in doing so addresses the reason why the war and the 'unfallen' remains an 'obsession':

> I return constantly to what I think is one of the major outrages of modern life: the neglect of the dead, and a refusal to acknowledge what we owe to them, and a refusal to submit ourselves to the wisdom of the dead and, indeed, to the folly of the dead and the criminality of the dead—simply a refusal to accept that the dead are as real as we are, probably more so.[250]

What Hill 'owes' to figures like Douglas and Isaac Rosenberg is a sense of the moral and historical urgency of poetry, and of the need to 'effectively witness' through the written word. As a result, he willingly 'submit[s]' to their 'wisdom', producing a form that refuses to ignore the debt owed to the 'unfallen' and 'fallen' alike.

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[248] Rosenberg, 'Break of Day in the Trenches', *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, p. 103.
[249] Hill, 'The Art of Poetry, No. 80', *The Paris Review*.
[250] Ibid.

Due to the fact that Silkin and Harrison share the same belief in the 'wisdom of the dead', Hill's resulting style is in many ways very similar to his contemporaries. He also rejects the voice of the 'spokesperson' critiqued by Joseph Cohen in his article for *Stand*, offering instead a voice that feels uncomfortably self-aware of its difficulty and position. In *The Triumph of Love* in particular he fashions his own version of the awkward and ignoble urgency of Palladas, Keats, Milton, Rosenberg, Douglas, Silkin, and Harrison. Acknowledging his position as a 'shameless old man, bent on committing / more public nuisance', Hill expresses his belief in the need for poetry to cut through the same 'bullshit' that his predecessors faced decades before:

> Grief – now, after sixty years – exacerbated
>
> through its very absurdity; anger stalled again
>
> for nations twice betrayed by our appeasements'
>
> false equities of common ash; the moral
>
> imagination an eccentric failure.
>
> *Laus et vituperatio*
>
> public, forensic,
>
> yet with a vehement
>
> private ambition for the people's
>
> greater good [251]

Both retrospective and reactive in tone, the poem defines the responsibility of the alternative 'old sod' poet in no uncertain terms.[252] His poetry is to bear witness and lay '*Laus et vituperatio*' – praise and blame – both on history and the public world. What he calls 'the worst / remembered, least understood, of the modes [of rhetoric]' defines his judicial (and judgmental) form of response. [253] It also places him alongside those other 'obstinate' and un-stoic voices that play such an important role in defining his, Harrison's, and Silkin's post-War poetic.

Hill discusses both the deliberateness of this alternative voice and its historical provenance in his Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures. For his thirteenth lecture, delivered on the 2nd December, 2014, he turns to the poetry of the First World War, taking as his starting point the recent passing of the critic and poet Jon Stallworthy, and more particularly the war

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[251] Hill, 'XXXVII', 'XXVI' [TToL], pp. 249, 246.
[252] Hill, 'XXXIX', ibid., p. 250.
[253] Hill, 'XXIII', ibid., p. 245.

poets to whom Stallworthy dedicated much of his long and distinguished career.[254] Issuing something close to an apology for choosing as his topic 'The Great War', Hill states that despite his unease at the fact that the centenary was proving to be 'big business', the subject was for him an 'inescapable' one, given its influence upon his writing both as a poet and a critic.[255] Rejecting the current tendency to celebrate and revere the poetry of writers such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Herbert Read, and Edmund Blunden, Hill instead employs the rhetorical technique of '*Laus et vituperatio*' that he describes in *The Triumph of Love* to assess the work of the most popular writers of the First World War.[256] Just as in the case of the poem, in his lecture Hill announces his intention to take an unpopular approach to 'The Great War' and its most renowned poets, offering a critique of the 'cult of Wilfred Owen' and of the place of 'pity' and 'passivity' in the poetry of the First World War.[257] In doing this he not only contravenes Stallworthy's earlier critical approach to Owen's work, but raises the important question as to the political and social role of war poetry – combative and civilian – in society; a question, of course, of equal concern first to Keith Douglas, and then to Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, and the writers of *Stand*.

Wilfred Owen's famous preface to his poems, preserved and then published according to its original draft form, proclaimed that:

> This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
>
> Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty,
>
> dominion, or power, except War.
>
> Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.
>
> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
>
> The Poetry is in the pity.[258]

The declaration, reproduced and repeated, that 'Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity', is where Hill begins his alternative reading of the role of the war poem. The emphasis that Owen places, not on the poem itself, but on the sentiment that produced it, has for Hill got 'a hell of a lot to answer for'.[259] Going as far as to wish that 'it had been lost', he laments its sentiment, and that

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[254] Hill, 'Mine Angry and Defrauded Youth', Oxford Professor of Poetry Lecture (University of Oxford, 2 December 2014), [Podcast recording] http: / /media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk /engfac /general /2014-12-05_hill_lecture_edited.mp3 [Accessed 3 January 2015].

[255] Ibid.

[256] Hill, 'XXIII' [TToL] p. 245.

[257] Ibid; Hill, 'Mine Angry and Defrauded Youth'.

[258] Wilfred Owen, 'Preface', *Poems*, ed. Siegfried Sassoon (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920).

[259] Hill, 'Mine Angry and Defrauded Youth'.

sentiment's lasting effect upon popular discourse surrounding the War, concluding that this wrongly weighted emphasis on pity and not poetry 'amount[s] to an emotional and an intellectual self-betrayal' and a betrayal of all that should be strong and intelligent in British poetry.[260] It introduced the idea of 'Vicarious mourning as the most innocuous form of public response to widespread malpractice', leaving no room for any sense of outrage and injustice. As *The Triumph of Love* observes, Britain is 'a nation / with so many memorials but no memory'.[261] For Hill, in choosing 'pity' and 'passivity' over poetry, poets (and then their readers) sacrifice the 'intelligent anger' that makes them such vital witnesses to history and public life.

Hill's criticism of Owen's 'pity', and its subsequent effect on British poetry, says a good deal about his own idea of the public role and purpose of the poem. The role of the poet as a witness to history is clearly a vital one, as is the negotiation with the public sphere and influence of poetry upon the world from which it emerges. In a critique remarkably similar to Joseph Cohen's anger in *Stand* at the public need for an 'archetypal spokesman', in his lecture Hill criticises the poets, and perhaps more vehemently, the public and critics, for taking to heart a poetry not of 'intelligent anger', but rather of accepting 'pity'.[262] Like Keith Douglas, Jon Silkin, and Tony Harrison's belief in a poetic form that 'looks and says', Hill argues that poetry must challenge and bear witness to the public world, however unpopular those acts might be.[263]

Both in his lectures and in his poetry and critical writing Hill offers up numerous examples of poets who stand alone and bear witness to history, and who in doing so 'travail through the Enemy's country' – a phrase loaded with implication regarding the relationship between the poet and the public sphere.[264] In his lecture, the first example he cites of this difficult, almost visionary role is William Blake, whose *Songs of Experience* recognise and illuminate (visually and linguistically) the potential 'pitilessness of pity'.[265] However the second, more prominent figure that Hill chooses is Isaac Rosenberg. Although he goes a way to excusing Owen for his role in public 'pitilessness', arguing that the poet had a far more nuanced and elevated notion of pity than his draft preface expresses, Hill nevertheless looks to Rosenberg for the righteous anger missing from much of the popular discourse and rhetoric surrounding the Great War. Comparing Owen's 'Preface' with Isaac Rosenberg's own

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[260] Ibid.
[261] Hill, 'LXXVI' [TToL] p. 261.
[262] Cohen, 'The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman', pp. 21-25.
[263] Silkin, 'No Poetry, No Politics?', p. 14.
[264] John Dryden, quoted in Hill, 'Dryden's Prize Song' [TEC] *CCW*, p. 234.
[265] Hill, 'Mine Angry and Defrauded Youth'.

definition of poetry, in his lecture, as in his 1952 poem, Hill finds his model in the latter poet's vision of 'Simple poetry … whose interesting complexity of thought is kept in tone and right value to the dominating idea so that it is understandable and still ungraspable'.[266] To be 'understandable' and yet 'still ungraspable', in the context of the social role of the war poet, translates into a form of poetry that bears witness to the public world, whilst nevertheless remaining apart from it – a position that proves to be vital to Hill's own poetic approach.

There are problems in this relationship however; issues hinted at in the mention of a 'private ambition' in *The Triumph of Love*. Hill knowingly does not fall into the position of a natural successor to either Rosenberg or Douglas as Silkin or Harrison. He does not perceive himself as a public and 'active' war poet, but as a private, civilian witness. What this leads to is an uncomfortable and over-exaggerated degree of self-reflection and reproach. This manifests itself in *The Triumph of Love*, as Hill repeatedly draws attention to his gregarious and safe position, acting as his harshest critic:

> … Impotently
> bereft satire:
> Charged with erudition,
> put up by the defence to be
> his own accuser.[267]

It is also evident in his first collection. *For The Unfallen* is an apt title for another reason. The mention of the 'unfallen' also evokes those, like Hill himself, who remain 'bereft' but untouched by the horrors of war. The phrase acknowledges the gulf between the poet and the soldiers and victims that populate his poems. It reminds the reader that as one who grew up in 'Romsley, of all places!', his version of poetic witness must be markedly different from his wartime predecessors.[268] In its language, subject matter, and formal structure Hill's work demonstrates a 'profound need to recollect'.[269] Yet, as Jeffrey Wainwright notes, this demonstration is inflected by 'a sense of uneasy relief'; a feeling of guilt shared by 'those of his generation old enough for the Second World War to be a decisive presence and memory, but young enough, and fortunately enough placed, to have escaped its worst torments'.[270]

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[266] Rosenberg, 'To Gordon Bottomley, July 23 1916', p. 238.
[267] Hill, 'XXXVII' [TToL] p. 249
[268] Hill, 'VII', ibid., p. 239.
[269] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 69.
[270] Ibid.

What this leads to is a poetry in which the poet suffers more than anyone from the *'vituperatio'* of witness.

Juxtaposed to the explosive, ruptured and rupturing public speech act of Harrison, for Hill the poet's 'gift' is 'a wounded and wounding / introspection'.[271] Here, moments of childhood recollection and historical witness are undermined by the gulf of geography, inexperience, and the poet's own self-reproach. As *The Triumph Of Love* reflects: 'We have been there, / and are there still, in a manner of speaking', and yet:

But only in a manner of speaking.

I was not there, nor were you. We are children

of the Thirties, the sour dissipation;

England at once too weepy and too cold.[272]

Separated by the empty space between each poem, the question of what is real and experienced, and what is simply 'a manner of speaking' lurks within the silence. Punishing himself for the accident of his birth, Hill leaves the pettiness of the English weather as a final self-reproach. To end his reflection in this way, with something so rooted in the cultural conversation of the nation, ironizes and subverts any celebration of the 'corner of a foreign field / That is forever England'.[273] In terms of what must be endured, the cold and wet weather stand out for their insignificance.

II.

Far more than either of his contemporaries, Hill expresses a specific guilt about his precarious position in relation to conflict, his status as a civilian, and of the fact that it is really he who remains 'unfallen'. He cannot take up the positions vacated by Rosenberg or Douglas because his 'obsession' comes in part from not having 'been there' with them. This is evident in his repeated focus on other 'fallen' and 'unfallen' poets, both in his essays and poems. It is also demonstrated in his sustained consideration of what is meant by Philip Sidney's notion of the 'active virtue' of the poet.

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[271] Hill, 'LXVII' [TToL], p. 258.
[272] Hill, 'CXXXVI', 'CXXXVII', ibid., p. 281.
[273] Rupert Brooke, 'The Soldier', in *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry,* ed. Jon Silkin, p. 81; Homi K. Bhaba, 'DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation', *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 169.

   This idea of the 'active' (rather than public) poet is, for example, addressed repeatedly in *The Triumph of Love*, and nowhere more explicitly than in 'LXX'. Here Hill, like Harrison, evokes the names and works of other poets who have come before him, and in doing so situates himself in relation to a tradition of what he defines as '*Active virtue*':

> ... that which shall contain
>
> its own passion in the public weal –
>
> do you follow? – or can you at least
>
> take the drift of the thing? The struggle
>
> for this noble vernacular: this
>
> did not end with Petrarch. But where is it?
>
> What has got into us? Does it stop, in our case,
>
> with Dryden, or, perhaps,
>
> Milton's political sonnets? – the cherished stock
>
> hacked into ransom and ruin; the voices
>
> of distinction, far back, indistinct.
>
> Still, I'm convinced that shaping,
>
> voicing, are types of civic action. Or, slightly
>
> to refashion this, that Wordsworth's two
>
> Prefaces stand with his great tract
>
> on the Convention of Cintra, witnessing
>
> to the praesidium in the sacred name
>
> of things betrayed. *Intrinsic value*
>
> I am somewhat less sure of. It seems
>
> implicate with active virtue but I cannot
>
> say how, precisely. Partaking of both
>
> fact and recognition, it must be, therefore,
>
> in effect, at once agent and predicate:
>
> inponderables brought home
>
> to the brute mass and detail of the world;
>
> there, by some, to be pondered.[274]

Deliberately obtuse, and broken up by qualifications and awkward line-breaks, the poem nevertheless celebrates the virtue of a non-combative poetry. Hill's certainty that 'shaping, /

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[274] Hill, 'LXX' [TToL] p. 259.

voicing, are types of civic action' is both an act of self-reassurance, and an assertion of the validity of his own belated poetic witness.

This notion of the 'active virtue' of the poet is further supported by the other figures that Hill focuses on within his critical writing. Namely those – like Thomas Wyatt and other writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – who believed that to write and engage with language was to act. As Hill notes:

> For Wyatt, in these circumstances, the matter of "but one syllable changed" is not a "prety" optional embellishment but the nub of his predicament.[275]

This idea that 'my word is my bond', realised more vividly in the work of these earlier poets, speaks to Hill's own negotiation with the 'active' and the passive, and the 'public' versus the 'private' nature of his poetic witness. Copying the poet's own preoccupation with the public and 'contingent' nature of language, previous critical work has made much of the link between language and commitment in Hill's poetry. In his introduction to the first American edition of Hill's *Collected Works*, Harold Bloom talks about the 'Word' in Hill not in terms of Logos but rather the Hebrew sense of 'davhar'- a word that is also an act, 'a bringing-forward of something that is previously held back in the self'.[276] More recently, Jeffrey Wainwright has noted how 'one of the most insistent of Hill's themes is that words are never for the wind. To speak, to write, is to act'.[277] With his 'private' yet 'vehement / ambition for the people's greater good' Hill's 'moral imagination' is 'forensic' in its gaze.[278]

Like John Dryden (and Silkin and Harrison), Hill clearly feels the 'Debt which I ow'd the Publick'.[279] And like Thomas Hobbes, another figure who features within *The Enemy's Country*, he understands the role of the writer as one who must 'consider the drift, and occasion, and contexture of speech, as well as the words themselves'.[280] However, whilst any negotiation with language makes poetry 'a part of the world's business', the poet – a witness to this - does not necessarily fit easily within this structure.[281] In Hill's poetry – unlike Silkin's and Harrison's – 'Active virtue' is not to be confused with 'active participation'. This becomes clear in the rest of *The Triumph of Love*, as the poem questions the validity and power of 'active virtue' in the face of modern atrocity. What Antony Rowland has labelled as

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[275] Hill, 'The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses' [TEC], p. 199.
[276] Bloom, 'Introduction - The Survival of Strong Poetry', *Somewhere is such a Kingdom, Poems, 1952-1971* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. xiv.
[277] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words,* p. 6.
[278] Hill, 'XXVI' [TToL] p. 246.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Thomas Hobbes, in Hill, 'The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses' [TEC], p. 195.
[281] Hill, 'Unhappy Circumstance' [TEC], p. 183.

Hill's 'awkward poetics' manifests itself in the frequent and 'potentially jarring' instances when 'self-criticism' is pitted against 'moments of intense lyricism', and in the overall 'inextricability of his lyricism and learning'.[282] Full of qualification and amendment, held back by a mind 'obsessed' with proper meaning, Hill's poetry is often left to dwell in the negative, the silent subject to whom the poem considers attributing 'qualities' defined by what they are not as much as what they have become. In 'XVIII', in an obvious, ironic nod to his own stuttering and learned eloquence, the poet dramatizes what Christopher Ricks calls 'imagination's self-scrutiny':

> It is not [possibly a lacuna – ED]
>
> whether we have the Psalms in Latin or Hebrew
>
> nor by what authority such things are committed,
>
> dismissed among the aeonic dense snowflurries:
>
> it is not in the mortgaged conversions – the synagogues,
>
> the cathedrals – to Caesar and the great Pharaoh.
>
> Distinctions are as nothing, but identity
>
> is pulled apart. Try definition – is this a dead
>
> march or a death march? It is a dead march.[283]

In the poem's linguistic play on the death march, Hill draws attention to the safety of his position. He may grieve for the dead, yet he is afforded the luxury to define and 'pull apart' the events that he depicts. In *The Triumph of Love*, Hill's grief is both 'exacerbated' and pedantic.

'XVIII' presents a clear picture of the poet's 'impotently / bereft satire'. Unlike the self-assured and explosive rhetoric of Harrison or the prophetic and insistent poetry of Silkin, Hill's 'civilian' witness is full of false starts and corrections. It is nothing like the front-line poetics of either poet, defined instead by physical, imaginative, and formal distance from conflict and action. In *The Triumph of Love* in particular, "But to my task" is always in danger of being broken down into "I ask you!"'.[284] This distinction is made clearer in Hill's earlier collections, as the poet conducts what he calls his 'pedagogy of martyrdom'.[285] Shaped around the unresolved tension between need and guilt, responsibility and 'uneasy relief', his poetry translates his gregarious and self-accusatory witness into a physical,

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[282] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry,* p. 71, 73.

[283] Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and "The Tongue's Atrocities",* p. 3; Hill, 'XVIII' [TToL] p. 243.

[284] Peter McDonald, '"But to my Task": Work, Truth, and Metre in Later Hill', *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. John Lyon and Peter McDonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 144.

[285] Hill, Haffenden, *Viewpoints,* p. 90.

embodied form. These historical figures, reimagined and fictionalised, become the doubles through which he explores and exposes the position of the committed yet distant civilian post-War writer. Whereas, for example, Tony Harrison confidently evoked Miroslav Holub in 'On the Spot' as an example of the shifting and enduring power of his own poetry in the face of political tyranny, in 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets', a sequence from *King Log*, Hill focuses on his poetic predecessors in order to draw attention to his own distance from poetic 'action'.[286]

The sequence focuses on four martyrs of regimes that suppressed freedom of conscience, ranging across centuries and national borders: Tommaso Campanella, who was imprisoned and tortured during the Spanish Inquisition, Miguel Hernandez, who was arrested under Franco's regime, Robert Desnos, a Jewish member of the resistance who died in Terezienstadt on the day of its liberation, and finally Osip Mandelstam, who was banished by the Soviet regime for his views, dying at a transit camp on the way to Siberia. In 'regarding' these writers, Hill also takes into account each poet's individual style, producing poems that pay homage to the form and language of each writer. Whilst this mimicry and adaptation closes the gap between the post-War poet and his predecessors, it also re-asserts Hill's place as one in the process of creating a 'pedagogy of martyrdom' rather than an act of it.[287] In adopting each poet's individual styles, Hill self-reflexively draws attention to the freedom that allows him to mimic their poetry of circumstance.

This is particularly the case in the last two poems of the sequence; those dedicated to Robert Desnos and Osip Mandelstam, who died during Hill's lifetime. In contrast to the first two poems, in 'Domaine Public' and 'Tristia: 1891-1938' Hill provides the date of death for each poet.[288] Like his famous elegy 'September Song', the inclusion of dates in the epigraph draw attention to the overlapping histories of each writer, highlighting the chance of Hill's geographical and historical luck.[289] 'Tristia' explores this within the body of the poem itself, as in an intimate address to his 'Dear Friend' Hill laments how 'The dead keep their sealed lives / And again I am too late. Too late / The salutes, dust-clouds and brazen cries'.[290] Just as 'For Isaac Rosenberg' and Hill's critique of 'pity' highlights the role of forgetting and amnesia in the patriotic commemoration 'for the fallen', here the poet's intimate act of grief stands apart from those of the public by the space of a line break; their 'salutes', and the

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[286] Hill, 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets' [KL] *BH*, pp. 55-58.
[287] Hill, Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, p. 90.
[288] Hill, 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets: 3,4' [KL] pp. 57, 58.
[289] See chapter two for an extended discussion of 'September Song'.
[290] Hill, 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets: 4', p. 58.

'dust-clouds and brazen cries' that these produce both sinister and evocative of the military tyranny they supposedly lament. As Hill's Robert Desnos exclaims, 'Christ, what a pantomime!' Equally though, the address to the poet's 'Dear Friend' stands at odds with the 'sealed' life of the subject. Hill may mimic his style and share his moral outrage, but he is the 'martyrologist' of *Mercian Hymns*, not the fellow poet-martyr.[291]

Hill articulates this distinction between himself and his 'fallen' predecessors most overtly in his fictionalisation of the soldier poet Charles Péguy. Similarly to 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets', the 1983 collection *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* assumes the voice of the early twentieth-century French writer and soldier. However, in this sequence the situation of the titular protagonist and the author blur and overlap, as Péguy's position offers a problematic and ironic pre-narrative to Hill's civilian perspective. Péguy*,* whose turmoil over the equal power and limitation of poetry to enact true change offers up the figure of the poet as both a 'Lord of Limit' and as a passive spectator.[292] In the face of war poets are nothing but 'watchmen at the passion', or 'occasional just men who sit / in gaunt self-judgement'. As shirkers or 'embusques', they have 'no wounds to show / Save from the thorns, ecstatic at such pain.' Dealing only in 'metaphors of blood', *Péguy* presents a picture of the artist as one who is scared, inexperienced, and ineffectual, not properly equipped by real experience to respond well to the subjects that nonetheless obsess them.

This effect is deepened by the fact that for the real Péguy the distinction between eloquence and experience was rectified in the most brutal of ways. Killed in battle, the 'metaphors of blood' in which he previously dealt came to no longer apply, leaving Hill as the only poet with 'no wounds to show'. As poet and soldier, Péguy stands as a figure 'for the contest from which eloquence arises: his valor and cunning were at home in both vocations'.[293] Yet whilst his apology might overtly belong to all of those 'whose words are liable to persuade', as the nearest poet, it is Hill and Hill alone who is judged.[294] Thus when Péguy admits, as if addressing the same detractors who find their voice in *The Triumph of Love*: 'why do I write of war? Simply because / I have not been there', it is to Hill and not the French poet that the reader turns.[295] Shaped by his 'gregarious' experience, this fictional

[291] Hill, ibid. '3', p. 57; Hill, 'I: The Naming of Offa' [MH] *BH*, p. 83.
[292] W.H. Auden, in Hill, 'Epigraph' [TLoL], *CCW*, p. 1.
[293] David Bromwich, 'Geoffrey Hill and the Conscience of Words', *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 154.
[294] Ibid.
[295] Hill, 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 7', p. 150.

confession lies 'at the heart of Hill's witness', shaping the rhetoric and subject matter of his poems. [296]

The relevance of this confession to Hill's place as a British post-War writer can be seen in stark terms in the poet's drafts and notebooks. Péguy, Desnos, Hernandez, Campanella, and Mandelstam are not the only examples of a direct or indirect comparison between the poet and his soldier or martyr subject. In the 'Funeral Music' sequence, published in *King Log,* the poet is also confronted with the accusatory dead and dying.[297] However, whilst the finished poem questions the role of the dead as fodder for the living, the early drafts of the piece reveal an even harsher exploration of the connection between prurience and poetic witness. Here Péguy's sensitivity to his inexperience is foretold in the vitriolic outburst leveled against a personified 'Poetry' by one of the dying protagonists. The poem, which was at that time provisionally called 'The Violent and Formal Dancers', concludes with an order to:

> Bring in Necessity and Poetry, two
>
> Agents of corpse-washers; watch how they act,
>
> Fingering flesh, silver, fo! Let us suffer
>
> Purely these visions of art, our inhuman
>
> Memory, a virgin crone, rocking and
>
> Pointing there 'there / there 'there / there 'there forever.[298]

The self-accusation of 'corpse-washer… fingering flesh' articulates the poet's anxiety over the constant, even inevitable threat of prurience entailed in his representation. In it, Hill frames a more personal act of introspection over the position of the specifically English post-War poet in relation to the dead. The bawdy description of the 'virgin crone' draws attention to the unconsummated nature of his witness, mocking – in a sexual manner – the poet's desire for consolation and a 'gregarious' experience of pain. The accusatory dead, made to perform like 'violent and formal dancers', here demand to know whether it is worse to revel in the flesh of the dead, or instead to remain comfortably removed from it.

There are repeated instances in Hill's notebooks, like this one in 'The Violent and Formal Dancers', where the witness and not the event that they bear witness to is made to take the stand and be judged. There is also an explicit link between the subject of witness and the Holocaust. In one book, compiled between 1961 and 1962, pictures of victims and

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[296] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words,* p. 7.
[297] See chapter two for a detailed examination of the 'Funeral Music' sequence.
[298] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill/2 /1 /5, Notebook 5: King Log.

perpetrators of the Holocaust sit alongside articles relating to the prosecution of Nazi war criminals. A neatly collected, but nevertheless expansive array of material, the collage effect of pictorial and written media alongside Hill's own comments and drafts reflects an imagination caught up in an on-going consideration of the witness, the perpetrator, and perhaps most tellingly, the bystander. One particular piece, entitled 'Guilt lies on us all, says German MP', documents the statements made by Dr. Adolf Arndt at the Bundestag debate on the time limit for prosecuting Nazi war criminals.[299] The particular section of the speech that the notebook contains relates to Arndt's position as a bystander during the War, and the subsequent admission of guilt that he felt every citizen must acknowledge and share. Hill records:

> Listen, I did not stand in the street and scream aloud when I saw them driving our Jews away in lorries. I did not put on the yellow star and say: Take me too … I know that I am a sharer in guilt. I cannot say that I did my best, and I know nobody who can say that of himself. That lies upon us like an obligation.[300]

Immediately after this Adolf Arndt excerpt, Hill includes a small, hand-written quotation from the philosopher Wittgenstein: 'The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy'.[301] The sentence, un-glossed in the subsequent empty space upon the page, asserts the same separation of spheres that Arndt berated in his admission of personal and collective guilt. Separated by hundreds of miles, differentiated by age and accident, Wittgenstein's remark perhaps applies more readily to the British poet who played at soldiers and marvelled at the bombers circling over distant Coventry than it does to the German bystander. Hill's critical assertion, adopting the words of John Donne, that the poet is 'unavoidably stained by things "we must touch"' takes on an ironic relevance here, as the gaze of each notebook lies fixedly on the moral obligation of the bystander and the historical witness.[302]

Symptomatic of this pre-occupation with the bystander witness of the war, across Hill's published work the figure of the often ignoble bystander or witness is repeatedly evoked as a double of the civilian poet. Moving away both from the event itself and the victims and combatants directly involved in what happens, often it is the witness, and their position in relation to the action that dominates the perspective of the poem. This is particularly the case in his earlier collections, where the various manifestations of the

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[299] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/2, Notebook 2: Images.
[300] Ibid.
[301] Ibid.
[302] John Donne and Hill, in Hill, 'Caveats Enough in their Own Walks' [TEC], p. 216.

bystander exemplify the poet's concern with his distant witness of the Holocaust. Both Adolf Arndt's and Wittgenstein's statements form the basis of the two doubles who best embody Hill's guilt at his position – Ovid and Doubting Thomas. Rather than invite judgement through comparing himself to these two figures (as he does in the case of his other martyr poets) in the case of Ovid and Thomas the reader is invited to find and judge the poet through the actions of the two bystander doubles.

Situated as the first poem of *King Log* – the collection that these notebook entries eventually led to – 'Ovid In the Third Reich' sets the tone for a collection which is obsessed with the act of bearing witness. The epigraph, taken from Ovid's *Amores*: '*Non peccat, quacumque potest peccase negare, /solaque famosam culpa professa facit',* and translated as: 'Whoever can deny wrongdoing is innocent, / Only those who own up are guilty', throws into harsh relief the obligation placed upon the poet, and, like Wittgenstein's separation of the world of the happy and unhappy, draws attention to the problematic innocence of the English post-War poet.[303] The ironic admission, addressing the culpability of those who, like Adolf Arndt, remained quiet during the rise of the Third Reich, speaks to those elsewhere still living and writing in the shadow of the War. As a result, the poem becomes as much about the figure of the poet as the anachronistic character of Ovid, whose attempts to live undisturbed amongst the on-going existence of the "irreducible purity" of horror are exposed as impossible by the tense, overly-controlled language of the poem:

> I love my work and my children. God
> is distant, difficult. Things happen.
> Too near the ancient troughs of blood
> Innocence is no earthly weapon
>
> I have learnt 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 [304]

The deliberately un-specific 'Things happen', which pre-empts the deliberately obtuse language of a later poem in *King Log*, 'September Song' ('Things marched'), ironically

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[303] Translated by Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 26.
[304] Hill, 'Ovid in the Third Reich' [KL], p. 39.

exposes the protagonist's anxious sensitivity to the magnitude of his situation.[305] In his non-description the reader sees a deliberate objectification of the suffering and the dead. The persecution of a race is reduced simply to 'things' so that the humanity of the victim need not be considered. The effect of this objectification is to highlight the dark potential of language, and to draw attention to the specific problem facing those who deal in poetic metaphor. The risk that atrocity 'may get flattened down into the casually atrocious' is ever-present in all aesthetic representation.[306] Linked to the poet's linguistic implication, Hill also hints at his culpability through the repeated mention of 'spheres' and distance. The imperative to 'look down' upon 'the damned' reveals a more self-reflexive consideration of the poet's position in relation to the 'ancient troughs of blood'. The epigraph to the poem – 'Whoever can deny wrongdoing is innocent, / Only those who own up are guilty' – in effect asks that the poet begins by doing what Ovid would not.[307] 'Innocence', proved within the poem to be an empty description, full of false meaning and concealment, is 'no earthly weapon', and as a result Hill is implicated in the atrocity that he bears witness too, despite but yet also partly because of, his distance.

By focussing on the classical persona of Ovid, transporting him to a historical moment outside of his original poetic context, the poem brings into focus the figure of the poet, and the ethical and imaginative considerations that he or she faces when challenged with the realities of atrocity. Developing Adolf Arndt's admission of his guilt as a bystander, here Ovid is turned into what Silkin has called an 'Eichmann-like figure' – an alarming yet fitting comparison given the overlap between the Eichmann Trial and the composition of *King Log*.[308] Rather than seek to expose the plight of the damned, Ovid cannot reconcile the 'sphere' of suffering with his aesthetic one. Instead, he objectifies it into an obscure and thereby manageable metaphor. The juxtaposition of the two ways in which speaker and subject might 'harmonize' with the divine points to the incompatibility of the poetic with the barbaric. The aesthetic value of the 'judicious sentences' of the speaker threatens to conceal the figure of the victim rather than commemorate them, just as the poet's ability to commemorate threatens to trivialise or even undermine those whom the poem sets out to memorialise.

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[305] Hill, 'September Song' [KL], p. 44.
[306] Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and 'The Tongue's Atrocities'*, p. 3.
[307] Hill, 'Ovid in the Third Reich' [KL], p. 39.
[308] Silkin, 'The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill', *The Iowa Review*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1972), p. 113.

In 'Canticle For Good Friday', published in *For the Unfallen*, the historical setting of the poem seems a world away from Third Reich Germany. However, despite the very different locations, both poems are remarkably similar in their focus on the bystander. Similarly, even though the poem depicts the crucifixion of Christ (an ambitious subject, typical of Hill's approach to historical witness), both the First World War and the Holocaust are unavoidably present within the poem. In Hill's 'Canticle' it is not Christ but the witness Doubting Thomas who takes centre stage, as the poem painstakingly defines his relationship to the momentous event unfolding before him:

> The cross staggered him. At the cliff-top
>
> Thomas, beneath its burden, stood
>
> While the dulled wood
>
> Spat on the stones each drop
>
> Of deliberate blood
>
>
> A clamping, cold figured day
>
> Thomas (not transfigured) stamped, crouched,
>
> Watched
>
> Smelt vinegar and blood. He,
>
> As yet unsearched, unscratched,
>
>
> And suffered to remain
>
> At such near distance [309]

For Jeffrey Wainwright, the figure of Thomas epitomises the 'sense of uneasy relief' common to both the post-War poet and his readership in Britain.[310] Certainly, the fact that Thomas is defined in the negative – as one decidedly 'not transfigured, 'unsearched' and 'unscratched' by the unseen event taking place before his sceptical eyes – embodies Hill's acute sensitivity to his survival in the face of the death of those 'untouchable', and crucially 'not passed over' victims of the Holocaust personified in poems such as 'September Song'. Standing just to the side of history, Thomas's witness is private and introspective.

Thomas's doubt, even in the face of the crucifixion, speaks to the Hill's scepticism that poetry can ever do 'enough' in the face of such overwhelming suffering. It also pre-

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[309] Hill, 'Canticle for Good Friday' [FtU] *BH*, p. 20.
[310] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 69.

empts the criticism laid down in 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy' of poets as 'watchmen at the passion'.[311] Hill, like Thomas has 'no wounds to show'.[312] Acknowledging that he deals only in 'metaphors of blood', he puts himself up to be his harshest 'accuser'. The picture of the poet he presents is one of an 'unfallen', 'unconsummated', and 'untouched' historical observer, scorned by those who he nevertheless feels duty bound to bear witness to. Hill's poetry may have the combative force of Silkin's and Harrison's verse, but the conflict he takes part in is with himself.

Conclusion

In his 1943 letter to *The Times*, Keith Douglas tasked the civilian poet with the job of cutting through the 'bullshit' of War and the public realm, and in their different ways Hill, Silkin, and Harrison all take up this responsibility in their post-War verse. However, whereas Harrison and Silkin offered two versions of a combative poetic – public, confrontational, concerned with the communicative potential of poetry, at times even written from the war-zone – what Hill offers is an altogether different version of the 'civilian' poetry that Douglas predicted. Still inheriting the responsibility of the war poet, Hill's poetic response is nevertheless firmly rooted in his experience as a civilian witness. It is this distinction that shapes his exploration of his responsibility as a post-War poet, and his place within an existing canon of poetic witness.

Hill's decision to speak about Isaac Rosenberg, Keith Douglas, and the poetry of the First and Second World War in his final Oxford Professor of Poetry lectures confirms the enduring and powerful role of war and war poetry within his imagination. It supports the image put forward in each of his collections of a poet haunted by the events of the 'fire-targeted' last century, but equally 'stalled' by the 'absurdity' of his 'near distance'.[313] Over the course of Hill's career the recurring figures of the bystander and the poet-martyr confirms the fact that the poet 'has buzzed, droned, / round a half-dozen topics (fewer, surely?) / for almost fifty years', without resolution.[314] As Peter McDonald notes, 'indigestibility is a theme as well as an effect of [Hill's] work'.[315] Both *The Triumph of Love* and the poet's

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[311] Hill, 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 7', p. 150.
[312] Hill, 'Canticle for Good Friday' [FtU], p. 20.
[313] Hill, 'CXXIII', 'XXVI' [TToL], pp. 275-276, 246; Hill, 'Canticle for Good Friday', p. 20
[314] Hill, 'XCVIII' [TToL] p. 267.
[315] Peter McDonald, '"*Violent Hefts*": Geoffrey Hill's The Triumph of Love, M*etre*, 10 (autumn 2001), p. 69.

Oxford lectures are a case in point of what happens when things 'come back up, or come up again'.[316]

Hill's post-War poetic is as uncomfortable and ignoble as Silkin's and Harrison's, not because of its rupturing and antagonistic ferocity, but because of its unceasing introspection and self-accusation. By drawing attention to what connects poetry and martyrdom, witness and 'active virtue' Hill draws attention to what separates him from those who died for their cause. Namely, his life, but equally the luxury to reflect back on past events from a safe distance. Hill may feel an affinity to those writers for whom the matter of "but one syllable changed" was not a "prety" optional embellishment but the 'nub of [their] predicament', but despite his shared belief both in the gravity of language and the role of the poet as an observer and critic of the public sphere, his 'untouched' circumstances maintain his separation.[317] It keeps him apart from the sixteenth and seventeenth, but also nineteenth and twentieth-century poet-witnesses who fill the pages of his critical and poetic writing.

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[316] Ibid.
[317] Hill, 'The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses' [TEC], p. 199.

Chapter Two: Mapping History and Atrocity in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison, and Jon Silkin

Introduction

Structural in its makeup, the architecture of poetry mirrors the geography of a real or imagined landscape. Formed from language – that 'living power' imbued with its etymology and everyday usage – its material is bound up in a set of histories and meanings that exist beyond the immediate present of the poem.[318] Seamus Heaney articulated this dynamic when he spoke of poetry's 'sense of place', and the 'lived' and 'imagined' spaces that come together in the landscape of the poem.[319] Poetic imagination, said Heaney, brings together these unarticulated and literary places – it marries 'the geographical country and the country of the mind'.[320] It is 'this marriage', according to Heaney, that 'constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestation'.[321]

The poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison, and Jon Silkin also assumes and explores the inextricability of place and history within the poetic imagination, as well as the 'marriage' between inhabited and imagined spaces. In collections such as *Mercian Hymns, The Loiners*, and *Nature with Man*, each poet considers and articulates the relationship between poetic selfhood, history, and place. Each produces poems that celebrate and interrogate the influence of regional history and the real and inhabited geographies of childhood and adulthood upon their poetic identity and engagement with the world. They use the land, and the spaces and idea of home, to expose the shared histories and actions that unite every community, regardless of time or nationality. They also write about place as a way of locating the exact position of their historical witness, and the question of how this shapes their poetic response to the Holocaust. More positively, each poet also draws upon the earth and the geography of England as a means of staging their own, transnational response to history and atrocity. In the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison, and Jon Silkin, place, geography and the natural world offer a means to plot a new map of human history – a map that connects England with the rest of Europe, and specifically with the sites of recent historical atrocity.

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[318] Coleridge, in Hill, 'Redeeming the Time' [TLoL] *CCW*, p. 95.
[319] Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place' [1977], *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 131.
[320] Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', p. 132.
[321] Ibid.

Tracing this connection between historical knowledge, collective memory, and place within the poem is not a new line of critical enquiry. In his examination of the changing trends of British poetry in the twentieth century, Alan Robinson points to the act of "exhumation" as a recurring trope within the mid-twentieth century text.[322] For Robinson, the archeological or even vandalistic desire to "unearth" is symptomatic of a wider collective requirement within the writing community, and reflects a need for reassurance in the face of the atrocities witnessed from afar by the nation as a whole during the Second World War. Similarly, the poet and critic Donald Davie noted in a 1968 essay how 'it begins to seem as if a focus upon scenery, upon landscape and the real, relations in space, are a necessary check and control upon the poet's manipulation of the historical record'.[323] Bearing the marks of human history yet existing regardless of its politics, the natural world reminds the poet of the cruel but insignificant actions of the human race.

In his 1976 lecture 'Englands of the Mind' Seamus Heaney discusses the relationship between language, history, and the landscape within English poetry, alluding, like Robinson and Davie, to a crisis of sorts between the English poet, his landscape, and his 'sense of history':

> I believe they [poets] are afflicted with a sense of history that was once the peculiar affliction of the poets of other nations who were not themselves natives of England but who spoke the English language. The poets of the mother culture, I feel, are now possessed of that defensive love of their territory which was once shared only by those poets we might call colonial – Yeats, MacDiarmid, Carlos Williams. They are aware of their Englishness as deposits in the descending storeys of the literary and historical past. [324]

Locating the individual understanding of Englishness within the poetic terrain, Heaney makes the landscape inextricable from history and personal subjectivity. Yet this is a poetic landscape 'afflicted' by absence and longing; it's an imaginative terrain that's fast becoming 'consciously precious'.[325]

What Robinson, Davie, and Heaney together convey is the importance and the risk of place. It holds an etymological quality, allowing, like language, the possibility of 'sinking to

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[322]Alan Robinson, *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 66.

[323] Donald Davie, 'Landscape as Poetic Focus', *Southern Review,* vol. 4, no. 3 (Summer 1968), p. 687.

[324] Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', *Preoccupations,* pp. 150-151.

[325] Ibid., p. 151.

the most primitive and bringing something back'.[326] The problem with this excavatory process is that as a 'compromised archaeologist' – marked by a war witnessed from afar – the poet is vulnerable to accusations of nostalgia or even vandalism.[327] This is particularly the case when dealing with the natural and man-made spaces of contemporary England – a geography overcrowded with its nation's history. As Merle Brown notes in his essay on *Mercian Hymns*, 'there is a violent aspect to bringing something to light. The unearthing shovel often gouges the face of what it would expose'.[328] In his dealing with place, each poet risks accusations of nostalgia. Yet he must also prepare for what might emerge when the darker 'underkingdom' of his place of birth is excavated and mapped within the finished poem.[329]

Hill, Harrison, and Silkin all recognise and explore this darker aspect to the relationship between poetry, history, and place. So much so that they each make it the main focus of their gaze, acknowledging the imperative to address and redress history, home, and poetry in the wake of the Holocaust. For all of them this exploration is a necessary one given the events of recent history and the 'near distance' of their witness. Both poetic tradition, and the tradition of war poetry were effectively blown apart by the Holocaust, but so were history, language, and the notion of home and belonging. If the poetry of each embodies their sense of their precise historical moment in relation to recent events, it also locates their position, mapping their witness and resulting poetic onto an often recognisable and tangible set of geographies. In the work of each poet the urban and natural world become a means by which to excavate and explore their poetic, national, and ethical inheritance. History is spatialized and placed into the ground, and the earth is cast as being both symptomatic of human atrocity and revelatory of how poetry might best respond to this pressure.

This focus on place and the act of locating atrocity is bound up in each poet's acute sensitivity to their 'near distance' from the Holocaust. It is, for each, a vital exploration given their particular position as English witnesses to a European atrocity. It is for this reason that England is often the setting for each poet's exploration of the violent roots that lie beneath their contemporary moment. Staging their exploration of poetry, history, space, and human nature within the borders of England leaves each open to accusations of nationalism and isolationism - of a deliberate turn inwards in the aftermath of the War. Rather than reach out

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[326] T.S. Eliot, in Heaney, 'Englands of The Mind', p. 150.
[327] Robinson, *Instabilities*, p. 66.
[328] Merle E. Brown, *Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 22.
[329] Hill, 'XIII: Offa's Coins' [MH] *BH*, p. 95.

to the 'communities of suffering' that Silkin speaks of in his letter to *The Jewish Quarterly*, excavating England's fields and communities suggests nostalgia, idealisation and narrow, nationalistic concerns.[330] As Heaney puts it in his lecture 'Englands of the Mind', finding solace in recreating a 'consciously precious' England can allow the English poet to ignore the changed landscape of the post-War world.[331] Contrary to what Heaney might have thought, this is not what Hill, Harrison, or Silkin do. Their choice of England as the setting for their exploration of history and the Holocaust interrogates the nationalism, nostalgia, and island mentality of their communities. It also signifies an act of deliberate moral and poetic vulnerability on their part. Their choice of setting draws attention both to the 'near distance' of their witness, and their inherited membership into a very different 'community' than Silkin discusses in his letter.[332] Exploring regional England in relation to the Holocaust exposes England's own violent past, and the ties that link together centuries old and small scale acts of barbarism with industrialised modern atrocity.

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[330] Silkin, 'Letter: Cultural Survival', *The Jewish Quarterly*, p. 36.
[331] Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', p. 151.
[332] Hill, 'Canticle for Good Friday' [FtU], *BH*, p. 20; Silkin, 'Letter: Cultural Survival', p. 36.

i. England as 'Any Worldly Place': Geoffrey Hill's Post-War Cartography

As the opening poem of *Mercian Hymns* makes clear, in Geoffrey Hill's representation of post-War England realism is not top of the agenda:

> King of the perennial holly-groves, the riven sandstone:
>
> overlord of the *M5:* architect of the historic rampart
>
> and ditch, the citadel at Tamworth, the summer her-
>
> mitage in Holy Cross: guardian of the Welsh Bridge
>
> and the Iron Bridge: contractor to the desirable new
>
> estates: saltmaster: moneychanger: commissioner for
>
> oaths: martyrologist: the friend of Charlemagne.

> 'I liked that,' said Offa, 'sing it again.' [333]

Rather than offering a recognisable picture of the poet's childhood 'kingdom', *Mercian Hymns* mythologises his place of birth. It is transformed into a space poised between past and present, memory and imagination. It is also, as Seamus Heaney has pointed out, more of an 'England of the Mind' than an England of the map.[334] The tension that this 'Hymn' dramatizes between the lived and the imagined is a theme that dominates the poet's representation of home. It shapes his sense of place and geography across the entirety of his work and captures the 'gregarious' position that he inhabits as a post-War poet.

These ahistorical, almost other-worldly spaces have been subject to a good deal of criticism, with critics such as Heaney, Sean O'Brien and Tom Paulin attributing poems such as those within *Mercian Hymns* and *King Log* to the 'nostalgia' or out-dated nationalism of the poet.[335] His depictions of England in particular have come under fire for the anachronistic and unrecognisable nature of contemporary society. In these readings Hill's 'landscapes' are almost 'colonial' in their representation of an idealised version of home.[336] His representation of Mercia and Yorkshire demonstrate the poet's longing for a version of 'Ye Olde England'

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[333] Hill, 'I: The Naming of Offa' [MH], p. 83.
[334] Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', p. 150.
[335] Sean O'Brien, 'Geoffrey Hill: The England Where Nobody Lives', *The Deregulated Muse,* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 46; Tom Paulin, 'The Case for Geoffrey Hill: Review: Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work, ed. Peter Robinson', *London Review of Books*, (4 April 1985), p. 13.
[336] Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', p. 150.

unblemished by 'the welfare state' or other modern advancements.[337] Despite the poet's own protestations that his poems offers up a 'diagnosis' rather than a 'symptom' of nostalgia, Hill's empty and 'consciously precious' geographies, particularly those in England, have divided critical opinion.[338]

The interpretations of critics like O'Brien and Paulin recognise the fact that collections like *Mercian Hymns*, *King Log*, and *The Triumph of Love* offer up an 'England where nobody lives'.[339] What they don't consider is the intentional, ironic nature of this nostalgia, nor the fact that these empty 'landscapes' are not landscapes at all, but rather structures and spaces to be excavated and mined for history. If the term 'landscape' traditionally evokes the pictorial, pastoral, and Romantic, then the 'human places' that Hill writes of in poems such as the 'Funeral Music' sequence evoke an alternative tradition of excavation, archaeology, and an almost callous unearthing of the dead. Considered in this way, the poet's representations of these anachronistic and empty places take on an altogether different significance; one which links his repeated depiction of both regional England and locations in Europe and America to his representation of the historical witness.

As the first poem of *Mercian Hymns* demonstrates, the tension between the lived and the imagined is a fundamental part of Hill's representation of place and space, and it connects locations such as Mercia, Romsley and Towton with the poet's wider pre-occupation with his position and responsibility as a post-War poet. Both aspects of his work are bound up in a concern with a 'gregarious[ly]' experienced history.[340] They both deal with what was lived and witnessed and what can only be imagined. In this aspect Hill's representation of place and the figure of the civilian bystander come together as two parts of a larger concern with witness, perspective, and the historical position of the English post-War poet. The assertion in *The Triumph of Love* that 'we have been there … in a manner of speaking', and the admission by Charles Péguy of an obsession derived from absence ('Simply because I have not been there') conveys this connection, and stresses the importance of geography within any consideration of historical position.[341] It is this concern, and not the demands of realism and pictorial representation, that inform the nature of place in Hill's work. Protected by geography from the events but not the moral implications of the Holocaust, the poet is left to

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[337] Paulin, 'The Case for Geoffrey Hill: Review', p. 13
[338] Hill, Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, pp. 89, 93; Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', p. 150.
[339] O'Brien, 'Geoffrey Hill: The England Where Nobody Lives', p. 41.
[340] Hill, 'XXII: Opus Angelicanum' [MH], p. 104.
[341] Hill, 'CXXXVI', 'CXXXVII' [TToL], *BH*, p. 281; Hill, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 7, *BH*, p. 150.

map the directions and mis-directions of recent history, and to cultivate an appropriate aesthetic response.

If figures like Péguy and Doubting Thomas physically embody Hill's imaginative relationship to the Holocaust, then the 'perennial' spaces of the poem locate the exact geographical position of his 'near distance' – so much so that the earth is cast as an independent witness in its own right.[342] It takes the measure of the poet and poetry, drawing attention, like Péguy and Thomas, to his physical distance from those he feels responsible for. It also provides an appropriate metaphor through which to convey the loss experienced by those who inherit the creative burden of the Holocaust. In *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom* for example, the American edition of Hill's first collected works, the poet begins by framing his concern with history, language, and loss in spatial terms, both in its title and its epigraph:

> Sometimes a man seeks what he hath lost; and from that place, and time, wherein
>
> he misses it, his mind runs back, from place to place, and time to time, to find
>
> where, and when he had it.[343]

That the poet's implied loss – of understanding, of faith, of articulacy, even of humanity – might not just be *embodied* in the poems but also *located* 'somewhere' suggests a poetic in which nature and the natural world are indistinguishable from the poet's inner life. It also points to the transnational, transhistorical, and revelatory nature of place in Hill's work, as the evocation of *The Leviathan* suggests that by making connections 'from place to place' and 'time to time' the poet might identify a larger, otherwise 'lost' truth about his contemporary moment. More a container or archive than a real and inhabited landscape, Hill's symbolic earth contains human history, and its nature is shaped by this connection. Rather than a knowable place or landscape, the reader is presented with a 'provided loam' upon which the poet 'travail[s]' human history and cultivates an appropriate poetic response.[344]

The inclusion of this passage from *The Leviathan*, and the fact that Hill's first *Collected Poems* was itself called *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom*, conveys the interconnected nature of place, conscience, and imagination in the poet's work. For Hill, just as for Emerson before him, 'the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind'.[345] As a result, the poet's version of the natural world reflects the historical and aesthetic concerns of its guilty and

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[342] Hill, 'Canticle for Good Friday' [FtU], p. 20.

[343] Thomas Hobbes, 'Leviathan', quoted in Hill, *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom* [Epigraph].

[344] Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL], *BH*, p. 61; Dryden, quoted in Hill, 'Dryden's Prize Song' [TEC] *CCW*, p. 234.

[345] Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Hill, 'Common Weal, Common Woe [S&F] *CCW*, p. 270.

'gregarious' post-War creator. It is callous and unyielding, it is filled with the bodies of the dead, and it is a place of conflict and violence. But it is also in its very nature transnational, multidirectional, and interconnected – its blood-soaked roots crossing ages and continents to reveal the historical continuities that run 'from place to place' and 'time to time'. In Hill's poetry the natural world is both symptomatic of history, and a staging point for a multi-national consideration of witness, atrocity, and the universality of human violence.

I.

If Hill's geographies are indeed geographies 'of the mind', then the inner life they reflect is one overcome with the pressing demands of recent history.[346] In collections such as *For the Unfallen* and *Mercian Hymns* the natural world is above all cruel, violent, and unyielding. It is, like language, a 'contingent' and vibrant 'living power', but one that threatens to overpower and even destroy the human.[347] In *Mercian Hymns* the few inhabitants of the anachronistic world are overshadowed and almost consumed by the natural life around them. The speaker himself is 'invested in mother-earth, the crypt of roots and endings', and his position as 'Exile' and 'pilgrim' in his own home is bound up in the threatening 'ramparts of compost pioneered by red-helmeted worms', or else the 'wasp's nest ensconced in the hedge-bank' like a 'wrapped head'.[348] The collection as a whole dramatizes the speaker's (and poet's) developing consciousness via his relationship with the ground. Histories – like coins – are 'ransacked', whilst the 'maimed' king 'worm[s] my way heavenward for ages amid barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern'.[349] Both the 'rich and desolate' childhood and adulthood of the poet are bound up in the life of the non-human.

By presenting the natural world in this way the poet gives a physical shape to his obligation to the dead, but also to his sense of the impossibility of ever doing 'enough' for them.[350] *For The Unfallen* might begin with a moment of creative 'Genesis', but the poems are dominated by Hill's repeated failure to effectively commemorate the victims of history. Despite the later claim in 'History as Poetry' that poetry 'unearths' the 'speechless dead', the poem is repeatedly held back from the excavatory act by the 'fierce and unregenerate clay'.[351]

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[346] Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind', p. 150.
[347] Hill, 'Dryden's Prize Song' [TEC] p. 228; Coleridge, 'Redeeming the Time' [TLoL] p. 95.
[348] Hill, 'IV: The Childhood of Offa', 'XV: Offa's Bestiary' [MH], pp. 86, 97.
[349] Hill, 'V: The Crowning of Offa' [MH], p. 87.
[350] Hill, 'Genesis' [FtU], 'September Song' [KL], pp. 3, 44.
[351] Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL] 'Genesis' [FtU], pp. 61, 3.

His desire to commemorate is repeatedly pitted against his weakness and the ruination of his raw material.

Never a benign or passive presence, place and the non-human are notable for their callousness. In return the poetic voice struggles to bear witness despite this constricting force. The poems in *For The Unfallen* collection are, for Jeffrey Wainwright, so 'notably appalled at the indifference of non-human nature … that the poems seem meant to stand as memorials'.[352] In poems such as 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings', where the tide 'pastes / the sand with dead gulls, oranges, dead men' and the sea 'Across daubed rocks evacuates its dead', this need for memorialisation is clear.[353] Symbolic of the ease with which victims can go down in history and disappear', the earth draws attention to the difficult but necessary task of poetic commemoration, but also to the almost inevitable possibility of failure. In these spaces carrion birds feast on men as they lay dying upon inhospitable 'acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet', and the sun beats down in a 'primitive renewing fury'.[354] The 'underkingdom' of the poems, a kingdom of 'milldams, marlpools' and 'eel swarms' is 'barbaric' and yet often feels more vivid and alive than any human subject, living or dead.[355] 'Rich and desolate', the natural world is 'perennial' – it survives beyond the end of the poem and 'seem[s] never to perish', even if all around it the human world falls apart.[356]

In presenting the setting for poems like 'Genesis' in this way, Hill articulates the historical landscape that as a post-War poet he feels he must confront. The continual erasure of the dead at the hands of a 'primitive renewing fury' speaks to the never-resolved struggle of poetry to bear witness to those lost beneath the 'underkingdom' of history. The callous and unforgiving geography that the poet must 'travail' equally reflects the aesthetic and linguistic landscape that Hill, a writer coming to terms with the Second World War and the Holocaust, has inherited.[357] Inhospitable and inherently barbaric, the earth – like Hill's inherited and 'contingent' poetic language – challenges the articulacy and authority of the contemporary writer.[358] Faced with the prospect of mastering this vibrant and violent force, he is forced to admit his limitations. The poet does just that in pieces such as 'Genesis' and 'God's Little Mountain'. Here Hill acknowledges that in the face of the natural and the historical sublime 'I lack grace to tell what I have seen':

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[352] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 58.
[353] Hill, 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' [FtU] p. 14.
[354] Hill, 'Funeral Music' [KL], p. 48
[355] Hill, 'Little Apocalypse' [FtU], 'XIII: Offa's Coins', 'VII: The Kingdom of Offa' [MH], pp. 26, 94, 89.
[356] Hill, 'V: The Crowning of Offa' [MH], p. 87, 'After Cumae' [FtU] pp. 87, 25.
[357] Dryden, in Hill, 'Dryden's Prize Song', p. 234.
[358] Hill, ibid., p. 228.

> For though the head frames words the tongue has none.
>
> And who will prove the surgeon to this stone? [359]

The 'unregenerate clay' offers an insight into the cause of the immovable heaviness of the poet's tongue. It gives a physical form to the almost impossible need to find 'acceptable words' for his act of witness.[360] Language and the earth – two almost sublime containers of human history and its inestimable dead – become interchangeable in Hill's critical and poetic writing. Both are the 'living powers' that the poet can engage with but never master.[361]

It's for this reason that the assertion in 'Poetry and Value' that 'language can be understood as a form of seismograph: registering and retaining the myriad shocks of humanity's interested and disinterested passions' bears a striking resemblance to the 'vistas of richness and reward' within *The Mystery of The Charity of Charles Péguy,* in which 'the proofs pile up' and 'the dead are made alive /to their posthumous fame'. [362] In both, the earth, like language, is defined as a container or tableau of human history:

> Here is the archive
>
> Of your stewardship; here is your true domaine [363]

Intrinsically shaped by man's 'stewardship', the natural world and language together bear the scars of his mistreatment, with one revealing the true shape of the other. Through the representation of the earth as an inhospitable and callous force, Hill acknowledges the barbarism of his alternative 'living powers'.

In confronting his inability to articulate or master the violence and grandiosity of his physical surroundings, the poet acknowledges his inarticulacy in the face of this historical sublime.[364] But he also acknowledges his own part in this 'stewardship', and the risk that the poet inevitably takes when unearthing the linguistic and physical 'archive' of human history. Not only does poetry run the risk of inaccuracy or of 'falling short', but in the act of "resuscitation" it can endanger or vandalise what it wishes to exhume. If 'the double consequence' of a poet's involvement with language is 'complicity and revelation' then it is in his excavation of the earth and the natural world that Hill explores this bind.[365] As a 'signature of his humanity', language is tainted by association, and as a result the inevitable

[359] Hill, 'God's Little Mountain' [FtU], p. 6.
[360] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*.
[361] Coleridge, in Hill, 'Redeeming the Time' [TLoL], p. 95.
[362] Hill, 'Poetry and Value' [IoV], *CCW,* p. 483; Hill, 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 3', p. 145.
[363] Ibid.
[364] Ibid.
[365] Hill, 'What the Devil has got into John Ransom [TLoL], p. 137.

weight of pained silence shapes the rough and hostile 'stone' of the earth, as well as the poet's tongue.[366] The shifting and continual vibrancy of the non-human across Hill's oeuvre articulates the poet's knowledge that in any 'involvement' with language there is 'an element of helplessness, of being at the mercy of accidents'.[367] The craft of poetry, akin to the haphazard work of the archaeologist and workmen in *Mercian Hymns*, excavates human history by bringing 'one by one … rare coins to the light'.[368] Yet there is violence in this excavation, both in what is revealed and in the act itself.

This is particularly apt metaphor given the fact that in Hill's representation of place each location is populated with the earthed and unearthed dead and very little else. Sean O'Brien's characterisation of Hill's England as the place 'where nobody lives', whilst critiquing the poet's 'platonic' and 'rarefied' version of his nation, nevertheless identifies the importance of the 'gaps where people ought to be' in Hill's representation of place.[369] Unlike the overcrowded, even claustrophobic fullness of Harrison's urban scenes, in Hill's works the 'rich and desolate' nature of the landscape extends to the few examples of living communities who inhabit these inhospitable terrains. Even in *Mercian Hymns*, a collection which mythologises the poet's childhood and boyhood community, there are remarkably few instances of any sort of real community, save for the coronation celebration in 'the car-park of 'The Stag's Head'.[370] For the rest of the time the reader is presented with a frequently solitary, and even lonely 'kingdom', empty except for one or two figures (who even then are overwhelmed by the vivid 'underkingdom' that surrounds them). Hill's 'Platonic England, house of solitudes' is almost as crowded as Harrison's.[371] However, rather than 'gaps where people ought to be', the silence and empty space that surround the living are filled with those who the poet bears witness to – the dead.

In the dynamic between the living and dead in Hill's work, it is the dead who 'maintain their ground'. The geographies and spaces that feature within his collections are so often 'no man's dwelling place' that the reader is left in no doubt of the poet's almost pained responsibility towards those who have been 'ditched, divested, clamped, sifted, over- / laid, raked-over, grassed over, spread around, / rotted down with leaf mould, accepted / as civic

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[366] George Steiner, 'Silence and the Poet', (1966), *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman*, (New York: Atheneum, 1986) p. 54.
[367] Hill, 'Our Word is Our Bond' [TLoL] p. 155.
[368] Hill, 'XIII: Offa's Coins' [MH], p. 95.
[369] O'Brien, 'Geoffrey Hill: The England Where Nobody Lives', p. 41.
[370] Hill, 'II: The Naming of Offa' [MH], p. 84.
[371] Hill, 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England: 9: The Laurel Axe' [TEN], *BH*, p. 129.

concrete, reinforceable / base cinderblocks' or else 'tipped into the Danube, Rhine, Vistula, dredged up / with the Baltic and the Pontic sludge'.[372] As these examples demonstrate, the role that place and the earth itself play in conveying and exposing historical pressure is a vital one. In the poem 'Merlin' the enduring, half mythological speaker resolves to 'consider the outnumbering dead', understanding in this consideration the necessary role of the earth and the land in any discussion of this act of remembrance.[373] As the poem continues the distinctions between the human and non-human are blurred, as in his need to bear witness the speaker turns to nature as both metaphor and 'archive' to human history:

> For they are the husks of what was rich seed.
>
> Now, should they come together to be fed,
>
> They would outstrip the locusts' covering tide.
>
> Arthur, Elaine, Mordred; they are all gone
>
> Among the raftered galleries of bone.
>
> By the long barrows of Logres they are made one,
>
> And over their city stands the pinnacled corn.[374]

By simultaneously earthing and unearthing the dead, the poem confirms the role of the earth as an organic and speechless 'archive' to human 'stewardship'. It also speaks to the almost painful degree to which the imagination of the poet is shaped by his responsibility towards the 'outnumbering dead'; those who go down into 'the variably-resistant soil' press upon the 'stark ground' of Hill's earth from beneath.[375] Their 'speechless' but nevertheless urgent presence saturates the poems and overpowers the 'livid and featureless' who survive them.[376]

In Hill's evocation of England, the 'archaeological layers of the speechless' point both to his sense of his nation's bloody heritage, and the way that this dubious foundation connects the poet's home nation to the rest of the world.[377] More than any other country featured in Hill's poetic map, England resembles a mass grave rather than a recognisable, inhabited space; its dark and vibrant history repeatedly overshadows its present. Implicating his home in the suppression and symbolic burial of the dead, Hill equally implicates himself in the violent acts to which he was a 'gregarious' witness. Having already framed the poetic act within the context of moving 'from place to place and time to time', the poet's 'travail'

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[372] Hill, 'XIII' [TToL], p. 242.
[373] Hill, 'Merlin [FtU], p. 7.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Hill, XII: Offa's Coins' [MH], p. 94
[376] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 3, 7' [KL], pp. 34, 53.
[377] Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 7.

upon the bodies of the dead leaves him open to accusations of prurience and morbidity.[378] It also, ironically, reminds the reader of the poet's relative safety from the War and the Holocaust. The dead may litter Hill's mythologised and symbolic England, but they are imagined and excavated rather than witnessed. Rather than convey the poet's proximity to recent history, they do the opposite. More than anything else the body-filled earth of England emphasises the poet's 'near distance' from the contemporary, European history that he seeks to unearth.

This emphasis on the poet's proximity and distance is what shapes the third recurring feature of Hill's representation of the natural world. Charles Péguy 'write[s] of war / Simply because / I have not been there' and for the same reason Hill repeatedly represents real and imagined battlefield spaces to draw attention to his 'gregarious' experience of war. In 'Hymn XXII' of *Mercian Hymns*, the speaker, whose voice hovers between the intimacy of the autobiography and the grandiosity of the myth, describes how as a boy he and his friends played soldiers in a space that bore the traces but not the scars of conflict.[379] From the 'war-band' of schoolboys to the stories of 'immortal' warriors closer to Gods than fallible men, the War is glimpsed from a safe distance, more fairy-tale than reality. As a result, the presentation of Mercia as a battlefield highlights the poet's distance from the battlefields that appear elsewhere within his collections.

This depiction of the boys playing at soldiers also emphasises the fact that wherever and whenever the setting, Hill's poems are ultimately violent in nature. In 'Genesis' the tension between the prophet poet and the unyielding natural world predicts the war of attrition that dominates the poet's depictions of the dynamic between the living and their environment. The fact that it is 'By blood we live' is confirmed not only in the frequent depictions of post-battle scenes ('Distant Fury of Battle', 'Requiem for the Plantaganet Kings', 'A Pastoral' 'Funeral Music', 'Locust Songs' to name examples from the poet's first two collections) but also in the fact that the interaction between the human and non-human is more often than not a reflection that all is 'forever bent on the kill'.[380] As a trope the battlefield offers a way for the poet to expose humanity's violent roots. Yet it also offers a more positive way to transcend the limitations of geography in order to create a universal, or rather a transhistorical and transnational place; the battlefield offers a space that transcends and intentionally transgresses any external geographical or historical borders.

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[378] Dryden, in Hill, 'Dryden's Prize-Song' [TEC], p. 234.
[379] Hill, 'Hymn XXII: Opus Anglicanum ' [MH], p. 103.
[380] Hill, 'Genesis' [FtU], p. 4.

As a revelatory, but also universal space, the battlefield – be it Shiloh Church, Ypres, Dunkirk, the battle of Towton, or even the battle between man and beast at the moment of Genesis – becomes in Hill's work a singular destination in its own right – a space that unites humanity in its 'bloody unearthing' of the 'God-in-us' ('Locust Songs: Shiloh Church').[381] As the poet notes in the 'Funeral Music' sequence, 'a field / after battle utters its own sound / which is nothing on earth, but it is earth'. This universal and revelatory space allows the poet to access a history otherwise denied to him, as in the field of battle he finds the space with which he might go from 'place to place, and time to time' in order to contextualise and better unearth the recent dead.

The dual significance of the battlefield in Hill's work shows how place, geography, and the natural world are not only used to highlight the flaws in the poet's poetic witness but to potentially stage a more positive reconfiguration of the poet's English, gregarious perspective. In his representation of the world as a violent, callous, and dead-filled battleground Hill comments on how the earth contains human history, and locates his physical and ethical relationship to atrocity. However, in these spaces he also uses the earth and the question of place as a way of 'cultivating' a more positive response. As both symptom and cure, the natural world and these 'revelatory' spaces and structures offer the 'cognitive map' of witness and the 'provided loam' upon which to build a suitable post-War poetic; they offer a space upon which the poem might excavate the root of contemporary violence, and attempt to rebuild upon its broken remains.[382] In *King Log* in particular, Hill excavates beneath the structures of contemporary England and elsewhere both to interrogate the 'gregarious' position of his home nation, and to eliminate the experiential and geographical gap that defined his 'near distant' witness.

By making England 'any human place' and turning historiography into an archaeological process the poet stages a transnational and transhistorical study of modern atrocity and its roots. Disregarding the limitations that geography and circumstance can place on the imagination, the battlefields of *King Log* together suggest that it might be possible for the English poet, seemingly constrained by the fact of his or her 'untouched' witness, to provide an ethically legitimate response to the Holocaust. This new manner of response culminates in the elegiac sonnet 'September Song' and the sonnet sequence 'Funeral Music', two poems that – despite appearances – share an inescapable aesthetic and ethical bond. Hill

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[381] Hill, 'Locust Songs: Shiloh Church, 1862: Twenty-three Thousand' [KL], p. 42.
[382] Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual', *Contemporary British Poetry*, p. 192; Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL], p. 61.

brings the two sonnets and the two time frames into dialogue, and in doing so offers his own refracted witness of modern atrocity.

Through merging two very different landscapes, 'September Song' and 'Funeral Music' transfigure the European present and the English past. By creating a vision of the English pastoral that is simultaneously regional and international, local and universal, the poems open out the English experience; a task that was necessary given the position of British culture in the decades after the War. Protected by an expanse of water, at leisure to enjoy poetry, and perhaps relieved to maintain the gap that distinguished British culture and history from that of its European neighbours, Britain remained imaginatively as well as physically apart. By drawing attention to the ethical as well as physical space that England occupies, the witnesses and dead-filled spaces of *King Log* bridge the imaginative and sympathetic gap separating British nation from the rest of the world. This, for the poet, as well as for many of his contemporaries, was 'society's greatest ethical demand'.[383]

II.

The number of titles in *King Log* that offer some form of elegy, ode, or act of ceremonial commemoration, points to what Jeffrey Wainwright has called a 'compulsion' towards the 'commemoration of and respect for the past, and especially for the unfinished lives dismissed by the machinery of human history'.[384] It is a collection littered with dates, with none – bar one in 'Postscript' – falling later than 1945.[385] Full of the voices of victims, observers, participants, and perpetrators, the collections teems with the dead, their presence felt more vividly than any living subject. As Wainwright notes, it is those whose lives remain 'unfinished', cut short by the cruelties of the public world, who speak the loudest, at times threatening to overpower even the eloquent, elegiac language of the poet.

In his 1985 analysis of the collection Jon Silkin also notes this focus on the dynamic between the victim and the 'machinery' of human history. Focussing on the subject matter of each poem, he observes how 'of the forty-one poems in *King Log*, twenty-one are pre-occupied with war or violence'.[386] As well as again confirming the 'outnumbering' presence of the dead or dying within the landscape of the poem, his comments recognise the

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[383] Huk, 'Poetry of the Committed Individual', p. 192.
[384] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words,* p. 58.
[385] Alan Marshall, 'Quiet Americans: Responses to War in Some British and American Poetry of the 1960s', *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, p. 619.
[386] Silkin, 'War and the Pity', *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his work*, ed. Peter Robinson, (Philadelphia and Milton Keynes: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 114.

importance of the battlefield as a revelatory poetic space in the collection. They also point to the continuing presentness of the Second World War within Hill's imagination. Published in 1968, only a few years after the Eichmann Trial and in the midst of growing public consciousness of what exactly took place between 1939 and 1945, the battlefields and violent spaces of *King Log* demonstrate the continuing urgency of the Holocaust and the need to bear witness.

This urgency is made clear from the first poem in the collection. Situated on the side lines of battle, the anachronistic 'Ovid In the Third Reich' begins *King Long* by highlighting the multidirectional repercussions of the Holocaust, and establishing the dubious physical and ethical position of the poet in relation to this contemporary atrocity. As well as providing a double for the poet himself, 'Ovid in the Third Reich' undertakes another important function. By focussing on the classical persona of Ovid, transporting him to a historical moment outside of his original poetic context, the poem draws attention to the way that two seemingly un-connected and in-compatible histories and geographies can be brought together and scrutinised.

Hill uses Ovid to draw attention to his own physical remove from the Holocaust. He may not have intentionally stood by, but like Ovid he occupied a different 'sphere' from the dead, his safety and ignorance ensured by his 'near distance' from the battlefields and camps of Europe. Alongside this reminder however, lies an assertion of the power of poetry to overcome these separate 'spheres' of experience. In *Mercian Hymns* the mythologised Offa draws 'one by one, rare coins to the light', and in *King Log* – starting with 'Ovid in the Third Reich' – the poet effectively illuminates the events of human history by doing exactly the same; drawing together and illuminating seemingly unconnected places and 'spheres' to expose their connection to one another.[387]

What has been called the 'rarefied' or 'conservative' nature of each poem's exploration of contemporaneity in fact allows the reader to imaginatively balance one moment in time with another.[388] This over-arching gaze allows contemporary history, and contemporary historiography, to be re-appraised in relation to its historical other. In the case of picking up Ovid and placing him 'in the Third Reich', Hill subverts the historical and geographical boundaries that would otherwise uphold the Nazi period in Germany as an isolated social anomaly. His anachronistic position introduces the idea that a place or

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[387] Hill, 'Hymn XIII: Offa's Coins' [MH], p. 96.
[388] O'Brien, 'Geoffrey Hill: The England Where Nobody Lives', p. 46; Paulin, 'The Case for Geoffrey Hill: Review', p. 13.

protagonist seemingly unconnected to the European victims of the Holocaust, but closer instead to the figure of the poet, might possess the means of responding to the obligation placed upon the English witness.

As the starting point of the *King Log* collection, the poem puts forward the idea that it is both possible and morally important to go from 'place to place' and 'time to time' to establish a dialogue between one moment and another. Ovid's appearance in the Third Reich introduces the idea that there might be a trans-historical, even universal element to the Holocaust, and that it is through exploring the spaces of atrocity and witness that this might be revealed. The anachronistic scene collapses linear time and sets up the space of the poem as a fruitful ground upon which to explore atrocity. Hill does this primarily by dismissing the notion that history is something that is either linear or rooted in a sequence of human progress. The only thing that it is rooted in is the earth itself. Having a protagonist who is historically unconnected to the political machinations of modern Europe, but who is nonetheless both relevant and complicit, suggests that recent atrocity might be explored through the prism of an alternative geographical or historical landscape. Rather than represent the Holocaust as a fixed event, static and self-contained, the anachronistic poem demonstrates the mutual affect both between one moment in time and another and between one place and another. The life and writing of Ovid is retrospectively altered by his new-found surroundings; his memory and literary legacy are now imbued with horrors that were committed almost a millennium later. Yet the reality of Germany is also re-written by this visitation from the past. What was thought of as a historically fixed, even ethically off-limits event is revealed to be equally vulnerable to imaginative revision. Spatialised within the 'spheres' of Ovid's Third Reich and the anachronistic space of the poem, historiography and the Holocaust transgress their imaginative borders.

After opening up geography and history to reinterpretation in the first poem of the collection, Hill continues to go from 'place to place' to map his own historical experience within other locations beyond contemporary Europe. It is at this point that he begins to focus upon the battlefield space as a way of considering his own blood soaked historical moment, beginning with the sequence 'Locust Songs'. Made up of three poems, each differing in form and in outward subject matter, it is in the final of the three, entitled 'Shiloh Church, 1862: Twenty Three Thousand', that the poet once again focuses on the battlefield as a revelatory poetic space.

In the inhospitable, body-strewn fields of 'Shiloh Church' Hill presents a transhistorical battlefield – one which pre-empts and even anticipates future conflict.

Announcing its historical and geographical location within the title, what the poem leaves for the main body of the text is an explanation as to the significance of the foreboding 'Twenty Three Thousand'.[389] By placing a colon and a line break between the overt subject matter (the battle of Shiloh) and the subsequent number, the title hints that the multiple dead will be at the heart of the poem, and that they will be the voice of it too. 'Twenty Three Thousand' becomes akin to the naming of 'Ovid', or 'Charles Péguy' or 'Thomas'; its ironically nameless multiplicity is juxtaposed with the singular gaze of the collection's previous historical witness. This difference in address is confirmed as the poem begins and the scene unfolds:

> O stamping ground of the shod Word! So hard
> on the heels of the damned red-men we came.[390]

The reference to 'we', coupled with the resonant iambic and anapaestic rhythm that runs through each of the three quatrains, evokes the sound of a marching advance upon the poem, an evocation further supported by the reference to 'stamping ground' and 'heels' in the first two lines. In opposition to this sense of impending intensity, the use of the past tense suggests that the invitation to witness the battle of Shiloh ironically comes after the conflict has already taken place. Once again, Hill emphasises his own 'near distance' from contemporary history by depicting post-battle sites. Unlike the soldiers, Hill's 'stamping ground' has already been 'shod'. Arriving at the action after the event, the poem is left to survey a space filled with the dead and dying.

Despite the belated nature of the scene, the fields of Shiloh are still presented as both revelatory and transnational. This is indicated in the description of the battlefield as the 'stamping ground of the shod Word'. The dichotomy between the physical, literally grounded act of 'stamping' and the transcendent, historically unfixed notion of the 'shod Word' dramatizes the tension between the literal versus the metaphorical nature of the site. Both press upon the imagination of the poet and his subsequent representation of history. The gaze of the witness is both entirely involved in the unique reality of 1862, and yet simultaneously elsewhere, conscious of the fact that the 'Twenty-Three thousand' dead upon the ground will become just another statistic of man's historical potential for violence. The reference to the 'shod Word' draws attention to the relationship between place, language, and the sacred. There is a sense here that in revealing the 'shod Word' the field after battle reveals man and

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[389] Hill, 'Locust Songs: Shiloh Church, 1862: Twenty Three Thousand' [KL], p. 42.
[390] Ibid.

the loss of human innocence. Yet rather than take this as a reference simply to the Logos, it seems more likely that it points more to the theological importance than Hill places on both the written word and the earth as a container of human history. The idea, suggested by the poet, that the 'craft of poetry' might come close to 'resembling that frightful discovery of morality' is echoed in the revelatory nature of the 'shod' battlefield.[391]

This connection between language and revelation, and the notion that both the word and the earth might in effect contain the history that has been 'stamped' across it, are two ideas that also feature in the initial conception of the poem. In his prompt notebook Hill records Henry Morton Stanley's description of the battle of Shiloh, paying close attention to one particular moment:

A little further were some twenty bodies, lying in various postures, each by its own pool of viscous blood which emitted a peculiar scent, new to me.

I can never forget the impression those wide-open dead eyes made on me. Each seemed to be staring out of its sockets with a look similar to the fixed wondering gaze of an infant, as though the dying had viewed something appalling at the last moment. 'Can it be," I asked myself, "that at the last glance they saw their retreating souls?"[392]

There are number of continuities between Stanley's description and the finished poem. Both offer a testimonial of Shiloh after the battle has been fought. In so doing, they both establish a degree of distance between the witness and the un-named, multiple victims of war. Both dwell, in turn, upon the notion of the 'shod Word'. Both depictions of the dead also end with the gaze of the witness turned inwards; they finish with a question that moves the narrative gaze away from the immediate scene and onto the act of representation itself. Crucially, this act is imagined in spatial terms, as both accounts, factual and poetic, look to the land as the potential source of their eventual revelation and comprehension. Stanley's 'Can it be …' becomes Hill's '… to what end, Shiloh?', yet both appear to address 'Shiloh' as if it were a faithful container of the 'wide-open dead eyes'. The land – biblical and real – offers the means to locate and to map the soldier's 'retreating souls'. This spatial rather than temporal understanding of language and history suggests that the poem, built around these two forces, equally becomes a form of historical structure. As both the setting and the memory of man's

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[391] Hill, 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement' [TLoL], p. 17.

[392] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /2 /1 /1, Henry Morton Stanley, 'The American Iliad', in Notebook 1: Images 1961-2.

actions, the space of the poem becomes akin to the 'form of seismograph' described by the poet in his attempts to define the historical significance of the word.[393]

This notion of the battlefield and the poem as two revelatory spaces continues to develop as the events of Shiloh Church unfold. By refusing to end the description of the battle in the first two lines and choosing instead to unfold the drama in one almost unbroken stream of connections and images, Hill blurs both the location and the time of the battle:

> …So hard
>
> on the heels of the damned red-men we came,
>
> Geneva's tribe, outlandish and abhorred –
>
> Bland vistas milky with Jehovah's calm –
>
>
> Who fell to feasting Nature, the glare
>
> Of Buzzards circling; cried to the grim sun
>
> 'Jehovah punish us!'; who went too far;
>
> In deserts dropped the odd white turds of bone;
>
>
> Whose passion was to find out God in this
>
> His natural filth, voyeur of sacrifice, a slow
>
> Bloody unearthing of the God-in-us.
>
> But with what blood, and to what end, Shiloh? [394]

The lack of any full stop until the final stanza means that the actions of the men and Jehovah merge, so that both appear to walk upon the desert and the battlefield simultaneously. The two spaces are compressed together, borderless within the revelatory, half real and half-biblical Shiloh. The lack of punctuation also breaks down the distinction between God and man, enabling the protagonists to discover the frightening reality of the 'the God-in-us'. Yet the God or the 'Word' that the poem refers to is equally the language of poem itself. The difficult syntax reflects the effort of the poet to reveal the 'natural filth' of poetic language, as the battlefield becomes the paradigm for the revelatory space of the poem.

In its simultaneously specific and meta-poetic representation of the battle of Shiloh, Hill reinforces an idea that will prove crucial in his later depiction of the Wars of the Roses in

[393] Hill, 'Poetry and Value' [IoV], p. 483.
[394] Hill, 'Locust Songs: Shiloh Church, 1862: Twenty Three Thousand' [KL], p. 42.

'Funeral Music'. The poem puts forward the idea, which the character of 'Charles Péguy' will later go on to assert, that:

> Landscape is like revelation; it is both
>
> singular crystal and the remotest things.[395]

Whether it is nineteenth-century America, early twentieth-century France, medieval Mercia, or fifteenth-century Yorkshire, the battlefield is a revelatory space. Both 'crystal' and 'remote', Hill's earth is an 'archive' and a container of a much wider vision of human history. It is for this reason that both 'Shiloh Church, 1862: Twenty Three Thousand' and 'Ovid in the Third Reich' make specific reference to their precise historical and geographical location in their titles, only to then offer a representation that rejects any specific, realistic depiction of events. In so doing, they forge a connection between these two moments in time. Like the coins brought 'one-by-one' to the light, the poems and the geographies of *King Log* are both individually rich and part of a larger, collective currency. They maintain and relish their specificity, whilst revealing the dark and hidden 'God-in-us' that unites each individual location. Like a cartographer, the poet identifies the physical, buried traces left by human history in order to create an alternative map of contemporary atrocity.

In 'History as Poetry', which appears towards the end of the *King Log* collection, the power of poetry to map history is explored in a more overtly meta-poetic context. Once again the poem repeatedly returns to the land as a fitting metaphor by which to understand the relationship between poetry and the world around it:

> Poetry as salutation; taste
>
> of Pentecost's ashen feast. Blue wounds.
>
> The tongue's atrocities. Poetry
>
> Unearths from among the speechless dead –
>
>
> Lazarus mystified, common man
>
> Of death. The lily rears its gouged face
>
> From the provided loam. Fortunate
>
> Auguries; whirrings; tarred golden dung [396]

Poetry simultaneously 'unearths' the dead from beneath the soil, and yet is the soil itself, the 'provided loam' upon which histories might be cultivated, and the dead resurrected. With a

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[395] Hill, 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy: 5', p. 147.
[396] Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL], p. 61.

syntactical and linguistic ease that feels at odds with what Haughton has described as the 'obstinately archaic' nature of Hill's poetic titles, 'History as Poetry' announces itself as a poem concerned with its own representation and definition.[397] And it uses both the earth and the act of 'unearth[ing], as the 'provided loam' upon which to enact this exploration.

This notion of the earthed and unearthed dead is both unsettling and familiar, given the subject-matter of the poems that came before it. After grounding each poem in the reality of the soil, to suddenly 'unearth' each act of witness disorientates what has been a mapped out, tangible progression. In terms of Hill's determination to find a trans-geographical, trans-historical lens through which the modern Holocaust might be witnessed, the question of the result or the 'end' of this excavation looms large not just over 'History as Poetry', but over *King Log* as a whole. The poems in the early part of the collection are so frequently shaped by what Wainwright has called Hill's 'severe self-reflexiveness towards his own voices' that the critic Gabriel Pearson has claimed that the volume stands as proof of the poet's 'scrupulous enactment of constraint and limitation'.[398] This sense of the 'limitation' of the poem fits with the fact that the unresolved 'Shiloh Church' feels more emblematic of the collection as a whole than the resolute and meta-poetic 'History as Poetry'. Pearson has claimed that this continual enactment of 'constraint and limitation' constitutes a failure on the part of Hill to produce a collection that can operate as a 'single meditation', yet the connections that link each poem suggest the opposite is true.[399]

As 'Ovid in the Third Reich', 'Shiloh Church, 1862: Twenty Three Thousand', and 'History as Poetry' together suggest, it is precisely this continual failure to produce an adequate, resolved act of representation that allows Hill to 'respond' to the Holocaust. To borrow the poet's own phrase, the 'exemplary failure' of *King Log* lies in the fact that in the revelatory spaces of the poem, it is not geographical distance that defines the relationship between protagonist and poet, but the ability of each space to 'reconcile the atrocity with the tongue'. [400] Faced with the sublime and callous vista of human history, the poet once again 'lack[s] the grace to tell what I have seen'.[401] In falling short – in leaving the unearthed dead still 'mystified' and the question as to the meaning or 'end' of their suffering unanswered –

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[397] Haughton, 'How Fit a Title…' Title and Authority in the Work of Geoffrey Hill', *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work*, p. 129.
[398] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 7; Gabriel Pearson, 'King Log Revisited', *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work*, p. 42.
[399] Ibid.
[400] Hill, '"Perplexed Persistence": The Exemplary Failure of T.H. Green' [TLoL], pp. 109-126; Bayley, 'The Tongue's Satisfaction', p. 9.
[401] Hill, 'God's Little Mountain' [FtU], p. 5.

the excavatory act inevitably fails. This failure subsequently turns the gaze inward upon the poet. It asks the reader to consider the physical space or 'sphere' that he inhabits, and where it fits into the map of human violence created within the collection.

II.

As 'Locust Song', 'Ovid in the Third Reich', and 'History as Poetry' show, the battlefields and 'loams' of *King Log* together 'unearth' the fact that each supposedly distinct, civilized nation is intimately linked through their shared roots in human violence. In this way, the landscape of England, equally founded upon the same history, becomes another space upon which to witness atrocity. A seemingly disheartening revelation, this new map of violence means that Hill can begin to meaningfully address his own physical distance from the Holocaust. This exploration takes place first in 'September Song' and then in 'Funeral Music', two poems that together show the poet beginning to offer a more personal exploration of what it meant to be an 'untouched', English survivor and witness of the War.

'September Song', Hill's elegy for an anonymous child-victim of the Holocaust, is the best-known poem in *King Log*. It is also the poem in his oeuvre most overtly associated with the Holocaust, included in anthologies dedicated to the difficult-to-define genre of Holocaust Poetry, and frequently evoked in critical discussion on the topic.[402] While there has been substantial and astute critical focus on the poem, these studies have tended to assess the elegy as a singular, self-contained response to the Holocaust. There has yet to be a comprehensive examination of 'September Song' as a composite, intertextual piece, nor as a poem concerned with the geographies and spaces of poetic witness and how these might be overcome. This marks a gap in the scholarship on the subject, given that the poem brings together the various thematic and linguistic strands that Hill explores in other, more historically and geographically diverse poems within the *King Log* collection.[403] 'September Song' in many ways marks the 'kingdom' of the mind that the poet goes from 'place to place' and 'time to time' to find. It is the 'provided loam' that connects the roots that run between the Third Reich, Shiloh Church, and Hill's other depictions of geographies closer to home. Yet crucially, it only occupies this space as a composite poem; as one half of Hill's concerted attempt to bring the Holocaust home and dramatize in the local, recognisable spaces of

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[402] For examples of Hill's inclusion, see Hilda Schiff (ed.), *Holocaust Poetry* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1995). For a thorough appraisal of the politics surrounding the genre of Holocaust Poetry, see the introduction to Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*, pp. 1-27.

[403] Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill And 'The Tongue's Atrocities'*; Silkin, 'The Poetry Of Geoffrey Hill', pp. 108-128.

England. Its other half, the sequence 'Funeral Music', may at first glance appear an age away, yet the two elegiac sonnets together show the revelatory power of place and the power of the poem to offer a more universal form of witness.

Positioned shortly after the poem 'Annunciations', which declares that although 'the Word has been abroad' it is now '… back, with a tanned look / from its subsistence in the stiffening-mire', 'September Song' signals the concluding part of the early collection's fraught journey from 'place to place' and 'time to time' in search of historical comprehension.[404] Written in a style that feels more intimate, the voice more recognisably the poet's own, the poem marks Hill's most overt attempt to look inwards and explore what the dubious homecoming of language and atrocity means for the English poet-witness. Laying open his own 'sphere', the poet finally explores his own poetic and physical position in relation to the 'outnumbering dead'.

One of the ways that Hill does this is to adapt the same particular vocabulary that his protagonists employ in other, historically diverse depictions of poetic witness. In particular the poem returns to this idea of separate spheres, first introduced in 'Ovid in the Third Reich'. The opaque summation of the Third Reich by Ovid ('Things happened'), which is developed further in 'Annunciations' in the acknowledgement that 'Cleansing has become killing, the reward / Touchable, overt, clean to the touch', is carried over in 'September Song' in the poem's exploration of how language (poetic or quotidian) is complicit in a particularly modern, bureaucratic form of human barbarism.[405] Addressing the un-named child, whose date of birth and deportation frame the otherwise anonymous elegy, the speaker concludes:

> As estimated, you died. Things marched,
> Sufficient, to that end.[406]

The choice of 'estimated' and 'sufficient', and the broad generalisation that 'Things marched' develops the initial separation of spheres first considered in 'Ovid in the Third Reich', drawing the process that first began in Germany to a historical, rationalised, and ironic 'final solution'. It again highlights the ease with which a human being can be objectified by both bureaucratic and poetic language. This time, the highly controlled wording brings together the equal capacity of the perpetrator, the bystander, and now the poet to manipulate language. By turning people into disposable 'Things', each is able to keep the suffering of the victim physically and imaginatively at bay.

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[404] Hill, 'Annunciations' [KL], p. 40.
[405] Hill, 'Ovid In the Third Reich', 'Annunciations' [KL] pp. 39, 40.
[406] Hill, 'September Song' [KL] p. 43.

Linked to the equal capacity of the post-War poet to objectify the dead, the poem also develops the poet's concern with the 'near distance' of the witness. Like the 'unscratched', 'unsearched' and above all 'untouched' position of the disciple Thomas in 'Canticle for Good Friday', the Jewish victim in 'September Song' – left anonymous except for the epigraph: 'born 19.6.32 - deported 24.9.42' – is also defined in the negative:

> Undesirable you may have been, untouchable
>
> you were not. Not forgotten
>
> or passed over at the proper time.[407]

This time however, what was 'untouched' has become touchable, as the use of the negative prefix and the double negative phrase means that the witness who remained decidedly 'not transfigured' has become the victim 'not forgotten / or passed over at the proper time'. By playing with the notion of both the Jewish Passover tradition and the elect believer, the poem establishes a direct link between the messianic and the modern day, evoking the stories of Moses and Jesus through its deliberate choice of biblical language. It also confirms another intertextual link, cementing the linguistic and imaginative connection between *King Log* and *For the Unfallen*.

Alongside these overt linguistic references, the poem also marks a return to one of the main thematic concerns of *King Log*. The question of what might be the 'sufficient … end' of any attempt to poetically bear witness to the dead is this time made personal and contemporary to the poet himself. By asking this question again Hill draws together the historically distant account of Shiloh Church and the abstract litany of 'History as Poetry'. The resulting poem – which takes place within a very different location to that of Shiloh – explores how the battlefield manifests itself within the private, gentile space of the traditional pastoral landscape. Linked to this, it also asks what the poet's attempt to 'reconcile the atrocity with the tongue' might mean for the specifically English post-Second World War witness.[408]

The answer to this question comes in the form of a deliberate and acknowledged exploration of poetry's limitations. 'September Song' places inevitable failure at the heart of its attempt to memorialize the dead, and in doing so articulates the dilemma facing every post-War poet; that even at its most touching, poetry can still offer 'a rest from virtue'.[409] This unavoidable 'rest from virtue', or perhaps the unavoidable connection that must exist

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[407] Ibid.
[408] Bayley, 'The Tongue's Satisfaction', p. 9.
[409] Ibid., p. 10.

between the aesthetic and the political, manifests itself in the imagery that Hill chooses to focus upon as the gaze of the poem turns from the victim to the witness:

> September fattens on vines. Roses
>
> flake from the wall. The smoke
>
> of harmless fires drifts to my eyes.[410]

In this description there is an un-mistakable sense both of the Romantic, pictorial notion of landscape, and of the prurience risked in adopting this mode. The poem reveals why Hill's representation of place and geography so often eschews the pastoral in favour of an empty, violent, and excavated space. The beauty of September as it 'fattens on vines', the way the roses unexplainably 'flake' like skin, and perhaps most unnervingly, the description of the smoke from the 'harmless' fires that 'drifts to my eyes', all suggest that the tradition of autumnal England, and even the tradition of the pastoral poem itself, has not escaped 'untouched' by the actions of those who worked within the concentration camps.[411] The potential shamelessness that resides within the poetic gaze is even openly acknowledged by the poet-narrator, as the life and death of the anonymous dedicatee is lost beneath the strained and haunting beauty of the commemorative act:

> (I have made
>
> an elegy for myself it
>
> is true) [412]

This admission lies at the physical centre of the poem and at the ethical heart of the collection. It admits that each exploration of the witness within the pages of *King Log* has been little more than an attempt to understand the poet's own sense of loss and bewilderment. This unexpected candour is made all the more powerful by the poetic architecture that supports it; its place as the volta within the elegiac sonnet, framed by self-conscious and silent parenthesis, draws attention to the pressing weight of inarticulacy that surrounds the poet's imagination. The sentence, set apart in its form and frame, draws the poet's physical and moral position up to the light to be examined. Like with Shiloh, it also turns the reader's gaze back upon the unresolved question of the 'end' that any attempt to bear witness can hope to achieve. The last line of 'September Song', which concludes 'This is plenty. This is more than enough.' conveys in its understated irony the knowledge of its own 'exemplary

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[410] Hill, 'September Song' [KL], p. 43.
[411] Ibid.
[412] Ibid.

failure'.[413] The question of what might constitute either 'plenty' or 'enough' in this extraordinary situation is left deliberately unanswered, and as a result the curt full stop after each assertion only serves to draw attention to the resolution that first deportation, and then the commemorative act has denied its anonymous subject.

Turning to the drafts of 'September Song', it is possible to see Hill deliberately bringing together the same concerns that marked his earlier representations of witness. This time however, the creative and ethical issues that shape the collection are more overtly intertwined with the personal concerns of the individual poet. The early versions of the poem, for example, show that the question of what constituted an appropriate 'end' was an important concern of Hill's from the outset. Handwritten drafts hint at the motivation behind the eventual, parenthesized refrain, as the poet, anxious of his own occupation, asks of himself: 'Is such a luxury allowed'. Juxtaposed to the created 'elegy for myself' is the desire to 'Let [the dead] keep / / their dignity /of silence in death'.[414] The fear that the as-yet incomplete poem might constitute an unwarranted 'luxury' – that it might undermine the 'dignity' that remains with silence – continues to haunt the elegy in the pressing silence around the contained syntax of the final line. Here, Hill sets up the same, powerful tension between the need to memorialize and the inevitable failure to ever do 'enough'.

The drafts also support the fact that the language within 'September Song' is deliberately intertextual. Alterations made to particular phrases and images signal the poet's attempt to merge, or even obscure his own identity within the overall map of the collection. Emotive language such as 'wretched' 'despised' or 'hated' – which reveal something of the poet's own strength of feeling – are replaced by the deliberately clinical 'undesirable'; a description sordid and bureaucratic in its emotional disconnection, and of course one which echoes the same deliberate 'near distance' of Hill's fellow 'untouched' examples of witness.[415] This gradual shift from the emotional to the bureaucratic, and from the personal to the universal (even biblical) marks the poet's conscious attempt to frame his own experience within a larger historical narrative. Just as his geographies are removed of the living, so is his poem 'evacuated' of subjectivity. The poet's own reactions to suffering are instead placed within a wider etymology of historical witness. In this way the poem reads as a form of summation; bringing together in fourteen lines the other acts of witness within *For the Unfallen* and *King Log*.

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[413] Ibid; Hill, ''Perplexed Persistence': The Exemplary Failure of T. H. Green' [TLoL], pp. 109-126.

[414] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /2 /1 /6, Notebook 6: King Log.

[415] Ibid.

The only thing that holds back this resolution is the fact that 'September Song' is a composite piece in another way. As well as drawing together the various histories and witnesses that come before it, the language, form, and concerns of the poem also pre-empt the sonnet sequence 'Funeral Music', which appears a few pages after 'September Song' in the collection. Yet this connection is in many ways less obvious than the linguistic and physical links that bring together the other poems within *King Log*. At first glance 'Funeral Music' appears to have little apart from form in common with its fellow elegiac sonnet. Whilst 'September Song' addresses a contemporary event, 'Funeral Music' concerns itself with the Wars of the Roses, a set of fifteenth-century dynastic battles that took place across (mainly Northern) England. Whilst the voice of 'September Song' feels intimate and singular, the form pared-down and sparse, the ill-defined voices that range across 'Funeral Music' create a sequence that is at once polyphonic and 'polycentric' in character.[416]

As if in support of this apparent difference, the critical reception of each poem has rarely focussed on the links that bring each one into direct dialogue with the other. Whilst 'September Song' has received almost unanimous praise, 'Funeral Music' has encountered a more varied critical response. Notwithstanding the fact that many critics, such as Jeffrey Wainwright, Jon Silkin, and Merle Brown, have praised the sequence as some of Hill's finest work, others, such as Tom Paulin and Sean O'Brien, have dismissed the sequence as 'kitsch feudalism', criticising the poet's 'rarefied' representation of English culture.[417] Due to its concern with medieval regional England, the sequence is often discussed alongside Hill's next collection *Mercian Hymns*. Yet even then, the harsh, even menacing nature of the Yorkshire landscape sets it apart from the 'intimate geography' of Hill's childhood home of Bromsgrove.[418]

It is due to these overt differences that the re-imagined battlefields of Towton, Tewkesbury, and Wakefield are rarely compared to the vines and flaking roses of Hill's September garden. However, 'September Song' is not only a continuation of 'Ovid in the Third Reich', 'History as Poetry', 'Locust Songs', and 'Annunciations'. It is intimately connected, even interdependent, on the 'Funeral Music' sequence. By blurring the boundaries between what is intimate and what is universal; between what is present and what is past; and finally between what is local and what is internationally resonant, the two poems – or 'songs'

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[416] Merle Brown, 'Geoffrey Hill's Funeral Music', *Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Special Issue*, vol. 17, no.1. (1979), p. 82.

[417] Paulin, 'The Case For Geoffrey Hill: Review', p. 13; O'Brien, 'Geoffrey Hill: The England Where Nobody Lives', p. 46.

[418] Pearson, 'King Log Revisited', p. 31.

– together conclude the question of how the 'near distance' of the English, post-War witness might be ethically and aesthetically accounted for within the fields and earth of England itself.

Turning to 'Funeral Music', the first parallel that occurs between the two poems is that they both bring 'the Word' home from 'abroad'. [419] The sequence focuses on a geography that was, at the time, local to Hill's home place of Leeds. Yet whilst the fields of 'Funeral Music' feel both familiar and present, this proximity is counter-balanced by the historically distant, even obscure nature of the event itself. After the intimate, contemporary, and almost domestic setting of 'September Song', the ornate and archaic context and title of 'Funeral Music' comes as a disorientating shock. Gabriel Pearson has explained this change of scene by suggesting that the Wars of the Roses represents a 'kind of historic testing ground' for the poet: 'recondite enough not to engage [the reader's] automatic responses but still sufficiently potent to challenge imaginative sympathy'. [420] The notion of a 'testing ground' fits not just with Towton of course, but with every revelatory space mapped out within *King Log*. Yet the reason that this challenges the imaginative sympathy of the reader to such an extent is that it implicates England, and the roots of English heritage and culture, in a trail of violence leading directly to the Holocaust. To add to this discomfort it also puts geography and history into conflict with one another, demanding that the reader consider which factor demands imaginative sympathy to the greatest degree.

At the time of initial publication, the link that 'Funeral Music' inadvertently made between medieval England and contemporary Europe was both unexpected and politically contentious. Written by an English gentile writer, and set in the English countryside, the poem risked offence from both sides of the channel. It challenged the belief – held by what Susan Gubar calls the 'first-generation' scholars of the Holocaust – that the Shoah must 'stand alone, [bearing] no meaningful comparison with other massacres', particularly from one who had no experience of the death camps. [421] This fraught politics of remembrance also manifested itself closer to home, as a British nation 'licking its wounds' showed itself reluctant to consider their own capacity for violence. [422] Aware of these political and ethical pressures, Hill inadvertently addresses this contention in 'Funeral Music: an Essay', the

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[419] Hill, 'Annunciations' [KL], p. 40.
[420] Pearson, p. 32.
[421] Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz,* p. 3; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 32.
[422] Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) p. 238.

accompanying prose piece to the main poetic sequence.[423] After first acknowledging that 'it is customary to play down the violence of the Wars of the Roses and to present them as dynastic skirmishes fatal, perhaps, to the old aristocracy but generally of small concern to the common people…' he goes on to point the reader towards an unmistakable connection between the fifteenth and twentieth century. [424] Responding to the 'customary' interpretation of the battles' 'small concern', he notes how:

> … statistically, this may be arguable; imaginatively, the Battle of Towton commands one's belated witness. In the accounts of the contemporary chroniclers it was a holocaust.[425]

The suggestion that the event might 'command belated witness', and more importantly the use of the word 'holocaust' – a phrase pregnant with contemporary significance – creates a linguistic link that rather unexpectedly compresses the six hundred years and hundreds of miles that lay between one moment and another. The notion that Towton should 'command' the poet's 'belated witness' with the same force as the death of a Jewish child prompts the reader to re-consider their own historical, geographical, and imaginative proximity to each event.

Hill encourages this re-consideration within the main body of the poem. He does this primarily by connecting the formal structure of the medieval sequence with that of the Holocaust elegy 'September Song'. Besides the musical link between each title, both poems are also elegiac sonnets, their fourteen lines pre-empted by an epigraph for the chosen subject. It is in these two features – the sonnet and the epigraph – that Hill uses to create a direct dialogue between the two poems. As already mentioned, the sonnet form of 'September Song' helps to strengthen the force of the speaker's admission. The dialectical nature of the form, which hinges on the parenthesized volta, helps the poet to articulate the necessary turn inwards that as a witness he must undertake. The concise, self-contained nature of the sonnet also draws further attention to the unresolved nature of Hill's 'Song', and

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[423] The essay has come under fire as an example of the poet's overly academic approach to poetry, a charge that the poet himself addresses in a letter to Jon Silkin. Requesting that the essay be removed from the final proofs of *Poetry and the Committed Individual*, within which 'Funeral Music was to appear', Hill explains that: 'the prose makes me vulnerable to a recurrent strain of hostile criticism (however unfair) about 'pedantry' etc.: rather like objections to my 'costive' Muse. And I think one ought to have the chance at least to be released from one's over-hasty vows, sins, etc. …' Disregarding his contributor's concerns, Silkin predictably chose to retain Hill's prose 'albatross', and he even publishes it alongside the sequence rather than at the back of the anthology. Leeds, BLSC, *Stand* Magazine Correspondence, BC MS 20c Stand /3 /Hil-4, Geoffrey Hill to Jon Silkin, 9 June, 1972. 'Funeral Music: an Essay' does not appear in the subsequent editions and collections of Hill's poems, including *Broken Hierarchies*.

[424] Hill, 'Funeral Music: An Essay', *King Log*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968) p. 67.

[425] Ibid.

in the final lines of the poem the reader glimpses the conflict raging between the form and the content of the elegy. In 'Funeral Music' Hill also capitalises on the dialectical potential of the sonnet. The form enables the poet to step back from the immediacy of the context, the turn allowing him to self-consciously dramatize the different options open to him as a modern – as opposed to medieval – poet-witness. The turn within each poem comes to signify the imaginative conflict that takes place within the poet's mind, as the temptation to aestheticize the dead is tempered by the sense of responsibility to truthfully and painfully remember them.

This conflict, and its connection to form, is demonstrated clearly in the second poem of the sequence. Here, the soothing, musical reprieve from suffering that poetry can bring is revealed, via visual structure, to be nothing more than a 'rest from virtue':

> For whom do we scrape our tribute of pain –
> For none but the ritual king? We meditate
> A rueful mystery; we are dying
> To satisfy fat Caritas, those
> Wiped jaws of stone. (Suppose all reconciled
> By silent music; imagine the future
> Flashed back at us, like steel against sun,
> Ultimate recompense.) [426]

Whilst the 'silent music' of the poem might offer the reader and poet 'ultimate recompense', this version of history would be no different from that of Ovid's, whose refusal to 'look down' deliberately obscured the suffering of 'the damned'. It is for this reason then that the structure of the poem turns back upon itself, asking in the second half of the sonnet that the reader 'recall' rather than 'suppose' the physical, traceable reality of the scene:

> Recall the cold
> Of Towton on Palm Sunday before dawn,
> Wakefield, Tewkesbury: fastidious trumpets
> Shrilling into the ruck; some trampled
> Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet,
> Stuck with strange-postured dead. Recall the wind's
> Flurrying, darkness over the human mire.[427]

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[426] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 2' [KL], p. 48.
[427] Ibid.

The oral register of the poem alters, as the ceremonial 'silent music' gives way to a cacophony of 'shrilling' trumpets, and, like a talisman against amnesia, the poet recites the locations of each battle. This serves to effectively ground the poem in a recognisable version of England, physically mapping the 'strange-postured dead' in amongst its towns and villages. Unlike the reflective, insubstantial 'steel against sun', the poem now offers up the tangible and localised history, immortalised in 'some trampled / Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet'. It is the battle site and the blood-soaked fields that contain and commemorate the dead, not the soothing and consolatory music of either 'Funeral Music' or 'September Song'. Place, and the reality of the earth, is a remedy against forgetting.

By offering up this alternative vision of England, and by supporting it within the architecture of the poem itself, 'Funeral Music' demonstrates how poetic form and the revelatory earth offer two structures within which to explore the historical roots of modern violence. It also supports the idea – suggested throughout the poems of *King Log* – that the post-War poem must accommodate an alternative, dialectical understanding of history. It is place, both universal and particular, that enables this new perspective. In 'Funeral Music' and 'September Song' Hill acknowledges his physical position as one who must be continually and unavoidably 'belated'. Yet similarly to Walter Benjamin's idea of history as 'one single catastrophe which [sic] keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' it is because of this distance that the poet-witness is capable of looking back over the connections that link each moment with another.[428] More specifically the fields of England, 'struck with strange-postured dead' contain and unearth the 'wreckage' that allows the poet to do so. By representing two different holocausts and locations, each one distinct and rich with contemporary detail, Hill avoids the temptation to merge distinct histories together like 'steel against sun'. Yet the specificity of each space is tempered with a formal consideration of the repetitive tradition of human violence. Place and the sonnet form work together to achieve a moment of historical relativity that doesn't compromise on the particularity of each moment. The volta of each poem splices together the two versions of the 'strange-postured dead', so that within each set of fourteen lines the reader is confronted with two simultaneously distinct and yet uncannily familiar spaces.

This formal depiction of the battle cements the refusal of the collection as a whole to relegate history to the past. It refuses to allow a nation to distance itself from its own violent part in the long and international history of human violence. Hill's wish to stress the

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[428] Walter Benjamin, 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 257.

importance and continuing relevance of the battle of Towton confirms his resolve that when it comes to man's actions 'the slate may not be wiped clean'.[429] Despite the best wishes of those who may wish to relegate old atrocities to another 'sphere', the earth holds on to the proof. In the case of 'Funeral Music', as with 'Shiloh Church', this 'slate' takes a literal, tangible form. In its repeated focus on the physical attributes of the earth, the sequence suggests that all of human history might be contained within the rocks and 'trampled' acres of the English landscape:

> On those pristine fields I saw humankind
>
> As it was named by the Father; fabulous
>
> Beasts rearing in stillness to be blessed.
>
> The world's real cries reached there, turbulence
>
> From remote storms, rumour of solitudes,
>
> A composed mystery…[430]

In this way both the earth and the sonnet form offer up a 'pristine field' upon which to hear 'the world's real cries'. When the speaker of the third poem of the sequence reflects that 'A field / After battle utters its own sound / Which is like nothing on earth, but is earth', the battlefield that he listens to might well be the very same 'stamping ground' of Shiloh. Equally, the earthly sounds that emerge from it are indistinct from the poem itself.[431] Even the protagonists within 'Funeral Music' seem to sense their strange connection to the other historical dead. When one recalls how 'I made no sound, but once / I stiffened as though a remote cry / Had heralded my name' the un-canniness of this moment suggests that this 'remote cry' might well have come from the other nameless dead within the collection.[432]

Whereas in poems such as 'Genesis' and 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' the earth is symptomatic of human history, the dialectical nature of 'Funeral Music' demonstrates a slightly altered dynamic. Now it is not simply place that reflects language and history – poetry now also reflects place. Mirroring the field of battle, the poem itself becomes a revelatory space, with the dialectical form of the sonnet acting as the 'provided loam' upon which to cultivate the mutual affect between past and present, local and international. For this reason the structural makeup of 'Funeral Music' and 'September Song' become revelatory in the same way as the earth itself. Both unearth the dead and both draw attention to the poet's

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[429] Silkin, 'War and the Pity', p. 117.
[430] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 6' [KL], p. 52.
[431] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 3' [KL], p. 49.
[432] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 7' [KL], p. 53.

particular 'belated' witness. It is therefore important to note that 'Funeral Music' and 'September Song' share other structural links besides the sonnet. The second device that Hill uses to engender historical dialogue is the formal epigraph, which pre-empts the main body of both poems.

Before directly addressing the 'undesirable' subject of the poem, 'September Song' begins with the sparse dedication: 'born 19.6.32 – deported 24.9.42'.[433] This has a number of functions. It indicates both the elegiac genre of the sonnet, and the fact that the addressee is not only a child, but also a victim of the Holocaust. This fact, implied by the date and 'deported', instantly places a specific historical pressure on the poetic act. The effect is so great that by framing the poem in this way Hill pre-empts his elegiac act with a formal announcement of his own limitations. The numerically written dates hint at the ever-constant threat of inarticulacy and silence, as the disconnection between what is written and what can be spoken pre-empts the inaudible nature of the poem's later parenthesis. The reader can also see that the manner of the child's death subverts the usual practice of the elegiac poem. The expected verb 'departed' has been replaced with 'deported', a description that fails to provide any definitive end or closure to the subject's life. Its meaning, 'charged' by association, equally threatens to overshadow the life of the child in the same way that the 'judicious sentences' of the poet threaten to shroud the memorialised subject in anonymity.[434]

To emphasise the altered, even unnatural state of elegiac language, the dedication that pre-empts 'Funeral Music' also concerns itself with the cause of each subject's death:

> William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk: beheaded 1450
>
> John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester: beheaded 1470
>
> Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers: beheaded 1483 [435]

Like the half rhyme between 'deported' and 'departed', the syllabic resemblance between 'beheaded' and 'departed' draws attention to the violent manner of each man's demise. By again focussing on the act itself, Hill reminds the reader that both sets of deaths, separated by the pages of a collection and six hundred years of history, occurred at the hands of an unnatural, governmental force. History is collapsed and compressed by the language and form of the poem, as the two epigraphs locate the Final Solution within an escalating and increasingly industrialised tradition of human violence.

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[433] Hill, 'September Song' [KL], p. 43.
[434] Pound, 'Letter to Felix E. Schelling: 8th July 1922' [TEC], p. 249.
[435] Hill, 'Funeral Music', p. 47; Haughton, 'How Fit a Title…', p. 129; Pearson, 'King Log Revisited', p. 31.

Whilst the two epigraphs draw attention to the similarities between each poem, they also highlight their important difference. Hill deliberately includes a number of subtle linguistic and formal breaks between the two dedications, the purpose being to highlight the ethical and aesthetic challenges that confront the contemporary as opposed to medieval 'belated witness'. For instance, while the focus on the deaths of each victim highlights the historical precedent of violence, the mention of beheading also retrospectively addresses the particularity of the historical situation that Hill finds himself writing from. They may share linguistic and political similarities, yet the physical difference between the two forms of death retrospectively draws attention to the industrialised and bureaucratic nature of deportation. The act of beheading, though violent, holds a certain grotesque sensuality, demonstrated by the description in the first poem of a severed head falling to the floor in a 'meaty conduit of blood'.[436] It also belonged to a form of understood ritual, a fact highlighted by Hill in 'Funeral Music: An essay' when he relates how one of his subjects – John Tiptoft – commanded 'that he should be decapitated in three strokes "in honour of the Trinity".[437] Rather than serving to de-personalise the victim, the act of beheading instead cemented the memory of Tiptoft's 'orthodox humility and unorthodox arrogance'. In contrast to this somewhat macabre celebration of individualism, the deportation of millions of Jews served to anonymize and objectify each victim. Juxtaposed to Tiptoft's outlandish request for 'three strokes', Hill's nameless subject was made into a number to be accounted for, first by the murderer and then ironically by the poem. This difference also draws attention to the altered ground upon which violence takes place. Unlike Towton and Tewkesbury, the concentration camp is not a battleground. It is a mechanised and de-personalised space, the earth itself industrialised to enable this modern, bureaucratic process.

The two epigraphs together also draw attention to the altered act of poetic remembrance. In particular, the dedicatees of 'Funeral Music' serve to emphasise further the objectified subject of Hill's Holocaust elegy. Juxtaposed to the anonymous child of 'September Song', 'Funeral Music' provides both the names and titles of Suffolk, Worcester, and Rivers. He then goes on to further supplement this information in the poem's accompanying prose essay. The reader learns that:

As historic characters Suffolk, Worcester and Rivers haunt the mind vulnerable
alike to admiration and skepticism…Suffolk and Rivers were poets, though quite

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[436] Hill, 'Funeral Music', p. 47. That all three were beheaded however is a deliberate 'retrospective aggrandizement' by the poet – a fact explored later in the chapter.
[437] Hill, 'Funeral Music: An Essay', p. 67.

tame. Tiptoft, patron of humanist scholars, was known as the butcher of England because of his pleasure in varying the accepted postures of judicial death.[438]

Appearing closely behind 'September Song', the names, titles, and even biographies of the medieval soldier-poets have a surprising effect. They draw the reader's attention elsewhere, away from the Wars of the Roses and back to the flaking roses of the poet's contemporary garden. The remote yet nonetheless named figures highlight the earlier paradox between Hill's decision to include a specific dedicatee for 'September Song', and his subsequent decision to leave them anonymous.

This diversion constitutes a deliberate ploy on the part of the poet. The formal inconsistency draws attention to the power and authority of a name, and the implications that arise from its absence. From the litany of 'Towton, Wakefield, and Tewkesbury' to the 'pet-name' of King Offa in *Mercian Hymns*, Hill's collections are full of acts of naming. The poet, acutely sensitive to the potential of language, knows the power of the name as a tool 'to conjure with'.[439] Therefore the absence of one in 'September Song', highlighted further by the different form of epigraph in 'Funeral Music', speaks louder than the words and numbers that surround it. The disparity between the two dedications compels the reader to consider the significance of the nameless child, once again confirming the fact that the poetic act is not 'enough'.

Given the similarity between the birthdate of the child and the birthdate of the poet, it has sometimes been assumed that the dedicatee is a fictional character, imagined as the subject of a 'would-be elegy' in order to draw attention to the impossibility not only of memorialising millions, but of resisting the urge to turn the gaze away from the victim and back onto the witness or poet.[440] However, evidence within Hill's notebooks, coupled with readings from within the 'Funeral Music' sequence, suggests an alternative interpretation. Early drafts for instance, show that there was in fact a name, sex, and location of death attributed to the subsequently anonymous victim. The dedication initially read:

Edita Poleakova
Born June 19th 1932
Deported Sept 24 1942

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[438] Ibid.

[439] Hill, 'Hymn II: The Naming of Offa' [MH], p. 84.

[440] Vincent B. Sherry, *The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1987), p. 5.

Died Auschwitz, Oct 4th 1944 [441]

Hill has since revealed that his initial decision to write the elegy came in 1965, after his trip to an exhibition in Leeds. It was here that he first encountered paintings and poems drawn by the child inhabitants of the Terezin ghetto (Theresienstadt, north of Prague).[442] Both Jeffrey Wainwright and the current co-editor of *Stand* Elaine Glover also recall visiting the exhibition in the autumn of 1965, and indeed both also wrote a poetic response to the artworks on display. [443] Hill's inspiration, though not commonly acknowledged, is nonetheless no secret. In a 2008 interview with Anne Mounic, the poet explained, albeit in French, the connection between 'September Song' and the Terezin exhibition, going as far as to suggest an almost brotherly affinity to the girl whose birthday fell so close to his own:

> This young girl, born 19th June 1932 and deported 24th September, was real. While visiting an exhibition of children's drawings from Theresienstadt, I noticed that the date of birth of this little girl was only one day away from my own. I was born on the 18th June 1932. It said her name underneath the painting, but I've forgotten it. As I was an only child, it seemed to me that I had found a sister in this little girl who was deported to a concentration camp in 1942.[444]

Hill's willingness to not only speak candidly about the origins of the poem, but to suggest, as an only child, that the figure of Edita might represent a sister, is unexpected given his usual reticence to explain his poetry. It is also strange given his apparent inability to recall Edita's name. It seems likely that the escape from the language of 'September Song' gave the poet a degree of freedom otherwise inhibited by his native tongue. Certainly, given the tendency to obscure his personal language from the finished version of each draft, this French admission feels unexpectedly intimate. However, more pressing is the question of why Hill chose to remove not only himself, but also the name of his 'sister' Edita Poleakova from the finished version of the poem.

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[441] Leeds, BLSC, Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /2 /1 /7, Notebook 7: King Log.

[442] Examples of Edita's paintings can be accessed via http: / /www.jewishmuseum.cz /en /acollectpict.htm.

[443] Elaine Glover, 'Looking at Drawings from Terezin' *Poetry & Audience*, vol. 13 no. 6 (19 November 1965), p. 5. Jeffrey Wainwright's poem remained incomplete, and he chose not to publish it (in conversation, 17 October 2012).

[444] The original transcript reads: 'Cette petite fille née le 19 juin 1932 et déportée le 24 septembre 1942 a réellement existé. En visitant une exposition de dessins d'enfants de Theresienstadt, je remarquai que la date de naissance de cette fillette était à un jour près la même que la mienne. Je suis né le 18 juin 1932. On donnait son nom sous la peinture, mais je l'ai oublié. Comme j'étais un enfant unique, il me sembla alors que j'avais trouvé une soeur en cette fillette qui fut déportée dans un camp de concentration en 1942'. Hill, in Geoffrey Hill and Anne Mouric, 'Entretien avec Geoffrey Hill', *temporal: revue littéraire and artistique*, 28th September 2008. http: / /temporel.fr /spip.php?page=impression&id_article=355 [Accessed 1 November 2012]

Supporting the notion that 'September Song' and 'Funeral Music' are deliberately interconnected pieces, the answer to this question gradually emerges in Hill's representation of the Wars of the Roses. It also brings the gaze back round to the connection between witness and place, and to the need to create a new cartography of violence. Just as the epigraph of 'Funeral Music' highlights the particular challenge of the contemporary elegy, the characters within the poem also speak to the position of both Edita Poleakova and the poet. Firstly, the disconnection between the action of the poem and the initial epigraph draws attention to the artificial, even purely symbolic status of the formal epigraph. Not only are Tiptoft, Suffolk, and Worcester never again mentioned by name, but in the prose essay Hill notes that in the case of Suffolk:

> the word beheaded is a retrospective aggrandizement; he was in fact butchered across the gunwale of a skiff.[445]

This offhand remark exposes the fact that the dead of 'Funeral Music' are equally as 'vulnerable' against the prerogative of the poet as the protagonists of 'Ovid In The Third Reich', 'Charles Péguy', or indeed 'September Song'. Yet the quiet inclusion of the essay, tucked away at the back of the collection, retrospectively addresses the challenge of public remembrance, and alerts the reader to the almost impossible task of faithfully remembering the dead. The pressures of beauty, language, and formal correctness mean that the poet is forced to differentiate between objective and poetic truth. The 'oblique dedication' demonstrates how in the act of remembrance history will almost unavoidably be re-written. The only 'archive' that continues to remember events as they happened is the earth itself.

Aware of poetry's inevitable 'retrospective aggrandizement' Tiptoft, Suffolk, and Worcester reach out from beyond the fictional confines of the main 'Funeral Music' sequence. Forever located on the 'Acres, parched, sodden or blanched by sleet', they begin to self-consciously address the 'belated witness' Hill, seemingly aware of their symbolic, trans-historical status. In the final poem of the sequence, which comes in the wake of the 'remote cry' overheard upon the 'pristine' battlefield, Hill brings this meta-poetic dialogue to a climax, as the unspecified speaker addresses the poet and reader directly. The sonnet begins:

> Not as we are but as we must appear,
> Contractual ghosts of pity; not as we
> Desire life but as they would have us live,

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[445] Hill, 'Funeral Music: An Essay', p. 67.

Set apart in timeless colloquy.

So it is required; so we bear witness,

Despite ourselves, to what is beyond us,

Each distant sphere of harmony forever

Poised, unanswerable.[446]

'Contracted' to speak on behalf of all the real and imagined voices of *King Log*, the soldier-poet openly scrutinises the ethics of poetic representation. The voice – emerging both from the battlefield and beneath the earth itself – recognises and laments the fact that as an aesthetic object the sonnet must inevitably fictionalise its subject. A 'provided loam' like the battlefield, the poem is nevertheless more crafted, and less revelatory, than its symbolic other. The pressures of artifice mean that real, once-living figures – such as Ovid, Péguy, or even Edita Poleakova – are evoked and altered to fit the historical and personal needs of the poet and the reader. Answering the question posed in 'Locust Song' as to the 'end' of poetry, here the sonnet concludes that in the act of unearthing, the poem must inevitably silence those who it first sought to articulate.

This description of the victim as a 'contractual ghost' speaks to pressures placed upon Hill in his act of poetic witness. It is not just the subject but also the poet who must be 'set apart' as a public, 'timeless' figure. The pressure of history upon language and art mean that Hill must also 'bear witness /despite [himself]', to what is beyond' him, even if that means diminishing his own personality from the poem. This process shapes the drafts of 'September Song', when the poet gradually replaces his own 'wretched' emotive language with the language of bureaucratic murder. It is also apparent when Hill removes Edita's name, sex, and place of death from the final version of the poem. The concluding sonnet of 'Funeral Music' ends with a final charge against the act of poetic creation. The protagonist, left to perish upon the battlefield, asks of his creator:

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'.[447]

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[446] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 8' [KL], p. 54.

This final sestet echoes the intimate yet removed style of 'September Song'; the 'love' between poet and subject is counterbalanced by the desolate tone of the final lines. It also challenges the contained form of the sonnet, evading closure by refusing to accept that the poem has done 'enough'. The speaker is aware that the poem can offer no comfort to those who suffer and die. As a result, he refuses to fit the role that has been 'contracted' to him. He denies the reader the 'comfort' of closure, choosing instead to subvert the resolution of the poem through his own admitted ignobility.

There is another crucial element to this final defiance though. As well as berating the act of elegy, he also makes his position universal; he acknowledges his place as a symbolic personification of 'anyone / dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place'. It may have been the poet who did the dragging, yet by having his character acknowledge the importance of a trans-historical, trans-geographical victim, Hill defends the focus on Yorkshire as a 'worldly' as opposed to purely national geography. In amongst this apparent admittance of failure and limitation, the mention of place – specifically the notion of 'this worldly place' – offers a tentative suggestion of hope. Its placement within these final lines re-positions the 'holocaust' at Towton, and with it the 'belated' and distant gaze of the poet. Hill's witness is now 'worldly' as opposed to local. The revelatory and blood-soaked battlefields have brought him closer to understanding the roots of contemporary atrocity, and his place within it.

Hill's notebooks from the time reveal how this final part of 'Funeral Music' was initially carried over into 'September Song'. In what was then known as 'Elegy for Edita Poleakova', the poem concludes:

I have made
An elegy for myself. That
Is true
  Let them keep

Their dignity
Of silence in death.

Like any wrecked away
Terrified, [exclaiming /gasping /protesting /mouthing] [from this human place]

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[447] Ibid.

"I have not finished".[448]

Before he realised that to name Edita was to limit her symbolic power, Hill had already conceived that to create an adequate response the poem must be at once intimate and universal. The victim of the Holocaust must be both a single child and just another person 'wrecked away' from 'this human [or worldly] place'. Just as in 'Funeral Music', the draft physically grounds history and its victims in order to cultivate a suitable poetic response. It also shows how the land acts as a productive metaphor for the poet in his consideration of historical representation and witness.

Returning to the as yet unnamed 'elegy' in Hill's notebook, the decision to change the initial dedication from: 'Edita Poleakova /Born June 19th 1932 / Deported Sept 24 1942 / Died Auschwitz, Oct 4th 1944' first to 'Elegy for E-P born 19 /6 /32', then to 'For a little Jewish girl, died 24 /9 /42', and finally to 'born 19.6.32-deported 24.9.42' in fact shows his grasp of how Edita Poleakova must equally be 'anyone /dragged half-unnerved out of this worldly place'.[449] Despite the exclusion of both the name and sex of the child, and the fact that he altered the facts of her deportation and death, the final, sparse epigraph is far more powerful. It offers a reminder both of the magnitude of the Jewish (and non-Jewish) death toll, and also of how language holds the equal power to enable moral amnesia as much as encourage communal memory. Whilst the 'worldly places' in Hill's poetry remember those buried beneath their surface, the poet never forgets how the same cannot always be said for the 'soothing' and 'silent music' of literature.

With these layers of meaning buried beneath the sparse epitaph, the dedication to 'September Song' demonstrates Hill's hypersensitivity to his position as a 'belated' or 'gregarious' witness. In particular, it shows his determination to write a poem that can look beyond individual experience and the geographical constraints of 'near distance'. It is only by making Edita anonymous that he can truly extinguish himself, enabling 'September Song' to transcend the private revelation of the Leeds exhibition room and convey the overwhelming, international, and un-nameable scale of the Holocaust. Viewed in this way, Hill's act of historical re-writing becomes a profoundly ethical and 'worldly' act. It is the ambiguity and impersonality of the finished epigraph that allows 'September Song' to work both as an individual, intimate response to the death of a child, and a far more universal, transnational consideration of the historical figure of the victim. Just as the landscape of Northern England

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[448] BC MS 20c Hill /2 /1 /7, Notebook 7: King Log.
[449] Ibid.

had to be specific to England but still capable of symbolising 'any human place', so did Edita need to embody *any human child* in order for Hill to adequately 'respond' to her death.

Conclusion

Towards the centre of *The Triumph of Love,* in between his depiction of Trimalchio and a 'washed-out day at Stourport or the Lickey', Geoffrey Hill describes the geological characteristics of his *'moral landscape'.*[450] Seen 'in cross-section', the formation of 'igneous, sedimentary, / conglomerate, metamorphic rock- / strata' make literal the 'particular grace, / individual love, decency, endurance' that constitute the poet's ethical 'terrain'. The italicisation of the term 'moral landscape' signposts the tongue-in-cheek nature of this engagement, yet beneath the cliché there sits a more sincere attempt to describe what it means to map and make physical the imagination.[451]

The particular landscape that the section describes – one full of intersections, forged in fire – literalises the ruptured imagination of the post-War witness. Yet it also defines his role as one (self) appointed to 'act as intercessor between flawed past, uncertain present, and unsecured future'; to bring places, and with them connected histories, 'to the light' and examine the unbroken links that lay between them.[452] Despairing and hopeful in equal measure, the 'multi-fissured' sense of place, contained within the nature of the rock itself, articulates the violently shifted imagination of the poet and lays the unsteady ground upon which a resulting poetic might be mapped.[453] That love, decency and endurance might still be 'traceable across the faults' of this otherwise hard and seemingly immovable ground also introduces a tentative, faltering, yet nonetheless vital humanism into the very core of the terrain. Despite the inhospitality of this landscape, in the cracks the poet finds the possibility to build upon rupture. Seen in 'cross-section' the world is made smaller, the 'traceable' links between each time and place exposed.

As the poem moves to the next section however, the difficult nature of this humanism is demonstrated straightaway. Undercutting the lingering effect of the previous section's final line, 'LII' begins:

Admittedly at times this moral landscape

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[450] Hill, 'LI' [TToL], p. 253.
[451] Wainwright, *Acceptable Words*, p. 80.
[452] Hill, 'The Eloquence of Sober Truth' [S&F], p. 328.
[453] Hill, 'C' [TToL], p. 268.

> to my exasperated ear emits
>
> archaic burrings like a small, high-fenced
>
> electricity sub-station of uncertain age
>
> in a field corner where the flies
>
> gather and old horses shake their sides.[454]

Like the italicised '*moral landscape*' earlier in the poem, this unexpected and bathetic shift from the natural, physical, and grandiose to the man-made, auditory, and quotidian refuses the impulse to engender the environment with a morality beyond it.[455] However, in another display of Hill's 'double lyric' this shift also maps the poet's spatial imagination to an even more specific degree, locating the poet's imagination in a corner of a presumably English field. As section two of this thesis noted, Hill's evocation of 'weepy' and 'cold' England drew attention to the pettiness of English endurance, drawing upon the weather to ironize and ridicule the popular nostalgia for a 'foreign field that is forever England'.[456] Here the poem again rewrites Rupert Brooke, with a quotidian and rundown 'field corner' dismissing the imperial notion of England's continuing cultural import. Hill's subsequent movement to 'a washed out day in Stourport or the Lickey' is not only a call to 'leave' the clichéd metaphor behind, but also a reversal of Brooke's geography.[457] England cannot be found on any 'foreign field'. It is itself a foreign field, containing the international histories of which it is implicated and involved. It is for this reason that these regional locations can act as a staging point for a much wider exploration of the connection between history and the imagination. That the poem asks to 'give it over' to the landmarks of the poet's childhood, evoking the 'all-gathering English light, / in which each separate bead, / of drizzle at its own thorn-tip stands / as revelation' ends the section in a tone that characterises Hill's engagement with place and the earth within his oeuvre.[458]

Turning to *King Log*, and to the way that this particular collection realises the 'moral landscape' of the poet, it is by focussing not on the particularities of history and its witnesses, but rather on the universal 'worldly place[s]' and characteristics that unite one moment with another, that the poems together initiate a new way of mapping atrocity. They open out individual experience, allowing the plight of one victim to speak eloquently to the suffering of another, and they re-imagine language and history as a physical location. Both become a

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[454] Hill, 'LII' [TToL], p. 253.
[455] Stephen James, 'Geoffrey Hill's "Moral Landscape"', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 41 no. 4 (2012), p. 423.
[456] Brooke, 'The Soldier', p. 81.
[457] Hill, 'LIII' [TToL] p. 253.
[458] Ibid.

'human place': a terrain that can be traversed by the poet and therefore mapped out upon the pages of a collection. By spatialising the pressure that history and human nature place upon the poetic imagination, the poems together map an alternative path towards ethically responding to the Holocaust.

The way forward that the collection suggests is to produce a form of poetry that excavates beneath the soil, exposing the roots that connect each geographically and culturally diverse landscape to one another. The English countryside for example, so visually and materially different from the man-made gas chambers and ghettos, is exhumed to reveal the same violent foundations that sit beneath these distinctly modern structures. Both spaces – one the setting of a tradition of pastoral poetry and painting, the other the site of horrors that defy comprehension and poetic creation – each have bloodshed and violence as their 'provided loam'. It is for this reason that together, 'September Song' and 'Funeral Music' not only mark the climax of Hill's sustained consideration of the geographical and imaginative challenge facing the post-War poem, but also offer an example of an ethical way forward. They reveal the depressing presence of violence beneath England's modern, civilized façade, yet in doing this they also show how the English earth, local to the poet and familiar to his reader, can become a meaningful place upon which to enact a response to the Holocaust. In conveying that 'atrocity both is and is not unique', the poems together give a 'dignified force' to the poet's 'near distance'.[459] Each poem self-consciously considers how the post-War poem must accommodate this ironic tension, as the poet weighs the need to acknowledge human failure against the necessity to move beyond it. Drawing to a conclusion the concerns of the poems that came before them, each piece addresses the moral 'end' of their representation, first with a consideration of historiography, and then with an exploration of the importance of achieving an 'exemplary failure'.

This awareness of the larger issue of historiography can be seen in the traces that run between each separate poem within *King Log*. Most overtly, the inter-textual nature of the two elegiac sonnets makes plain the need for post-War poetry to balance one historical battlefield with another. In the fourth sonnet of 'Funeral Music' the speaker considers that:

> Once
> Every five hundred years a comet's
> Over-riding stillness might reveal men
> In such array, livid and featureless,

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[459] Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and "The Tongue's Atrocities"*, p. 6; Hill, 'Canticle for Good Friday' [FtU], p. 20.

> With England crouched beastwise beneath it all.[460]

Collapsing five hundred years of progress, industry, and invention, the collection, like the comet, creates this moment of 'over-riding stillness'. The familiar vista of 'men in such array' reiterates the knowledge that when it comes to atrocity 'once' is in fact 'every' – as the poet notes in *The Triumph of Love*, 'distinctions are nothing':

> Millenial authority
>
> makes necromantic the fire-targeted
>
> century. African new-old
>
> holocaust suffers up against
>
> the all-time Hebrew shoah. [461]

Granted with the dubious gift of distance, the 'millenial' and 'belated' perspective of the English witness allows a closer examination of the patterns and repetitions of history. What Christopher Ricks calls the 'dignified force' of poems such as 'Funeral Music' and *The Triumph of Love* comes down to the poet's grasp of the fact that 'atrocity both is and is not unique, and that it presents to the imagination a challenge which likewise is and is not unique'.[462] The cyclical nature of the comet's vision, and the predictable, unaltered scene that repeatedly confronts it, also confirms that whether the poetic gaze rests upon 1462 or 1962, Civil War America, or Third Reich Germany, England will still be 'crouched beastwise beneath it all'. The description of 'it all' opens out the narrow particularity of England's 'old Northern business'. Whilst drawing attention to the altered and industralised nature of the killing space, it reminds the reader that modern, civilized society has its roots in a blood-soaked battlefield.

The cyclical trajectory of the comet, like the trajectory of *King Log*, rejects a linear version of history. What emerges instead is a timeline ordered around painfully repetitive instances of lingering shock and violence. [463] Despite this rather grim diagnosis of the human condition, what this often dialectical timeline offers is a means of going back 'from place to place, and time to time' to search for the etymological and ethical root of the modern predicament. In the fields of Towton, Hill maps out exactly how he has chosen to inhabit his difficult but pressing subject. Poetry – as the both the comet and the 'provided loam' upon which different times and locations might be brought together and 'cultivated' – allows him

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[460] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 3' [KL], p. 49.
[461] Hill, 'XVIII', 'CXXIII' [TToL] pp. 243, 275-276.
[462] Ricks, *Geoffrey Hill and "The Tongue's Atrocities"*, p. 6.
[463] Benjamin, 'Thesis on the Philosophy of History', p. 257.

to make histories meet like soldiers upon the fields of Towton. And just 'each [army] mirrored the other', this revelatory, transnational space reveals the frightening parallels between each moment and the next.[464]

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[464] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 7' [KL], p. 53.

ii. 'Newcastle is Peru' and Beeston is Buchenwald: 'Facing North' in the poetry of Tony Harrison

Introduction

> I always remember the way kids at school used to write out their addresses in full, starting with their name and school and going on with 'Beeston, Leeds, West Riding, Yorkshire, England, Great Britain, Europe, The World, The Universe': I think I have a mind and sensibility which keeps running up and down that kind of ladder...[465]

Across his *Collected Poems* Tony Harrison demonstrates his belief in the ethical and historical credibility of the English soil, often choosing, like Geoffrey Hill, to locate his exploration of the Holocaust in the North of England. He has – as he notes in his interview with John Haffenden – 'a mind and sensibility which keeps running up and down' between the local and the international, the one not separable from the other. Like his childhood address, Harrison's vision of history, and his representation of events such as the dropping of the A-Bomb and the Holocaust, are located both in Beeston and in 'Europe, the World, The Universe'. By connecting his hometown to locations and events seemingly beyond its local and national borders, Harrison uncovers the links that bind together regional England with the rest of the World.

In *King Log* Hill uses the English, regional landscape as the 'provided loam' from which to cultivate his 'belated' response to the Second World War and the Holocaust.[466] By unearthing the roots that connected England's past to a transnational history of human violence, Hill plots a new map of atrocity; one which places Mercia and Northern England at the centre of contemporary barbarity. This draws attention to the poet's particular perspective of war, and to the effect of his 'near distance', yet the focus in *King Log* on the medieval battle sites of Towton, Tewkesbury, and Wakefield also presents an alternative vision of the English countryside. Hill's reappraisal of the Wars of the Roses recognises its regional and historical specificity as 'that old Northern business', while suggesting that it might be representative of any 'worldly', or indeed 'any human place'.[467] As well as offering a

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[465] Harrison, in Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', p. 230.
[466] Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL] *BH*, p. 61; Hill, 'Funeral Music: An Essay', p. 67.
[467] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 3, 8' [KL], pp. 49, 54.

reminder of English barbarity, this evocation – or rather excavation – of the Northern, Medieval landscape signals the poet's belief in the legitimacy of a regional terrain as the setting of a meaningful and transnational response to the Holocaust.

Harrison is equally concerned with the 'near distance' of atrocity, and of the ways that poetry might 'map' a different relationship between England and the rest of the World. Yet rather than balance this geographical homecoming against a historically recondite chronology, (as Hill does in, say, 'Funeral Music') Harrison instead depicts a resolutely contemporary, often urban vision of war-time and post-War society. In his poetry place is also revelatory of the historical and moral position that the post-War poet inhabits; the pastoral genre is once again altered to accommodate the inner landscape of the imagination. Yet it is not on the remote battlefield, but the bomb blasted streets – filled with shrapnel and scorch marks – that Harrison plots his alternative cartography.

In collections such as *The Loiners*, *The School of Eloquence*, *Continuous*, and *The Gaze of The Gorgon* Harrison draws upon the landmarks, geography, and inhabitants of Leeds and Newcastle. He uses the physical and architectural attributes of each as the setting for a re-appraisal of a childhood and adolescence lived in the shadow of violence and conflict. Once again, it is 'that old Northern business' – this time made more personal, more recognisably contemporary – that becomes the 'provided loam' for a wide-reaching and self-reflexive exploration of atrocity, human history, and the ethical position of the post-War poet.[468] Using these local and familiar spaces as his starting-point, the poet draws upon the recurring trope of the bomb and its resulting shrapnel to widen out his individual experience. Tracing the scars inflicted upon the earth by human acts of violence, poems such as 'Sonnets for August 1945' and 'Shrapnel' give a physical shape to the poet's individual form of witness. They also disrupt the geographical and imaginative borders that kept England safe and separate from central Europe and Japan. What this leads to is a poetic both dark and celebratory in nature. In Harrison's exploded globe 'Newcastle is Peru', but Beeston is also Buchenwald.[469]

In Harrison's work, as in Hill's, the link between the physical and the metaphysical is plotted upon the spaces and physical structures that feature in the poems. In their exploration of the space and idea of home, the poems expose how war has encroached upon the familial and private sphere. Now it is the walls and cobbled streets, and not the empty fields, which reveal a history of human violence otherwise hidden by a civilized façade. In these various

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[468] Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL], p. 61.
[469] Harrison, 'Newcastle is Peru' [L] *CdP*, p. 64-69.

depictions the North of England is frequently represented as violent and inhospitable. Yet despite, or rather because of this in-hospitability, the poet finds himself drawn to the North as a revelatory poetic space. Commenting in the Ars Poetica 'Facing North' on the unlikeliness and difficulty of the direction of his gaze, Harrison notes how:

> God knows why of all the rooms I'd to choose
>
> the dark one facing North for me to write,
>
> liking as I do air, light and views,
>
> though there's air in the North Wind that rocks the light
>
> I have to keep on, all year round, all day.[470]

More violent than the temperate (real and imagined) South, the North – as a place, direction, and as an idea – brings Harrison closer to the history and the people that he feels bound to bear witness to. Dark, even barbaric, the North Wind and all that it represents 'rock[s] the light' that holds back the literal and imagined darkness pressing in upon the poetic imagination. Like the tormented yet resolute 'old scab, picking old scabs' in *The Triumph of Love*, the location of the writing desk in 'Facing North' stands as a knowing testament to its owner's enduring and persistent 'commitment' to history.[471] That the poet should 'choose' this articulates his resolution to face up to difficult subjects, whatever the personal cost.[472]

Similar to Heaney's notion in 'A Sense of Place' of poetry's real and imagined landscapes, Louis MacNeice's statement that 'The North begins inside' – the epigraph for 'Facing North' – provides a fitting description of the relationship between the physical and the psychological within Harrison's poetic geography.[473] The North does indeed begin inside, but it is on the outside – on the re-imagined streets and fields of Leeds, Newcastle, and Durham that the poet's own ill-defined sense of historical pressure can be plotted. This presentation of an almost innate relationship between location, self, and creativity is balanced however, against an unresolved distance between the poet and the 'North'. This distance often sets Harrison apart from the fellow Loiners that he writes about. What the 'North' represents – a place, a direction, a trait, or a living power – is left deliberately unqualified. As a result, it sits within the first stanza as an obstacle to the otherwise articulate and controlled nature of the rhyming verse. The initial mention of 'God knows why' hints at this tension; for the educated and well-travelled poet, the direction of his writing desk is not a natural, or an

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[470] Harrison, 'Facing North' [SoE] *CdP,* p. 218
[471] Hill, 'XXXI' [TToL] *BH*, p. 248.
[472] A problematic metaphor, given the poet's repeated attempts to seek shelter from the symbolic and real North in the 'Southern' space of love and sexual intimacy.
[473] Heaney, 'The Sense of Place' pp. 131-149; Louis MacNeice, in Harrison, 'Facing North' [SoE], p. 218.

expected choice. The act of 'Facing North' is more studied, more uncomfortable, and as a result it holds him apart from his subject and chosen direction. The poet has the choice of light, just as he has the ability and experience needed to enable him to depict other locations beside that of his childhood home. That he chooses to begin his exploration of history and its representation with this difficult act of 'Facing North' demonstrates his belief in the North of England as a fertile, if troubling, poetic setting.

In shifting the perspective of the poem so that the North of England lies both at the centre of the globe and at the heart of history, Harrison takes a daring approach to Holocaust representation. What sets his chosen 'kingdom' apart from Hill and Silkin is that instead of depicting an 'England where nobody lives', or else creating a fictional, overtly symbolic landscape, the poems instead draw upon the poet's family, neighbours, and personal and sexual escapades. [474] These provide the new, often ethically dubious lens through which the poet examines universal human behaviour and the shared capacity for violence that unites each nation, regardless of geographical position or cultural capital.

I.

In conversation with Richard Hoggart, author of the 1957 study *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life*, Harrison refers to poetry in order to explain the cultural, geographical, and social concerns that are inherited by the Northern writer. Talking about the same issues of elitism and social prejudice that poems such as 'Them and Uz' address, he notes how 'I'd always thought that my life couldn't be written about', locating his surroundings and formative experience as being outside of the accepted space that poetry can inhabit.[475] Just as the two halves of 'Them and Uz' together 'occupy' the 'leasehold' language initially forced upon the poet by his grammar school teachers, in his conversation with Hoggart Harrison recalls 'the day I began to change', noting that this revelation is reinterpreted 'in the poem I called 'Rhubarbarians':

> I used to go walking with my father near East Ardsley where the rhubarb fields
> were; *tusky*, as we called it. He told me that 90% of British rhubarb came from
> Leeds. And my dad said, 'Oh I was in a play once, I was; I held a spear in Julius
> Caesar at school.' He said they taught him, as they do in the theatre, to make

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[474] O'Brien, 'Geoffrey Hill: The England where Nobody Lives', p. 41.
[475] Harrison in Harrison, Richard Hoggart, 'In Conversation with Tony Harrison', *Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies,* p. 39.

indescribable crowd noises by saying '*rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb*'. So I always had that sense that saying '*rhubarb*' was what my life was about, whereas the central literary life was somewhere else.[476]

In this passage the rhubarb fields physicalize the poet's specific challenge as a Northern writer. Leeds, East Ardsley, and the physical characteristics of the land are carried over into the language of the final poem. The word 'rhubarb' – used both in its functional and its theatrical context – contains Harrison's struggle with his filial and artistic sense of self. It signposts the poet's peripheral space within his artistic tradition. Appearing within Harrison's second full collection, 'Rhubarb', or rather the regionally specific 'tusky', focuses on the physical attributes of the land in order to map the route back to the poet's regional home. Through bringing this normally background sound and object to the forefront of the poem, Leeds is shifted from being 'somewhere else' to the centre of the poet's historical, cultural, and poetic consciousness.

As Harrison notes in his interview with Hoggart, this shifting spatial consciousness is indeed addressed in the epigraph to the second poem in 'Rhubarbarians'. Here, the main body of the piece is framed by a reference to the poet's earlier moment of revelation. The poem begins:

'(On translating Smetana's Prodaná Nevĕsta for the Metropolitan Opera, New York)

One afternoon the Band Conductor up on his stand
Somehow lost his baton it flew out of his hand
So I jumped in his place and conducted the band
with mi little stick of Blackpool Rock!
George Formby [477]

In the half self-deprecatory, half arrogant reference to his current position and his music hall beginnings, the poem documents the poet's deliberate wish to straddle high and low culture. It also announces his desire to bring those who speak 'Rhubarb' – or rather 'tusky' – to the front of the stage (something that he does in his exploration of atrocity).[478] Harrison has frequently spoken of his admiration of Music Hall comedy as both a celebratory and

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[476] Harrison, 'Them and [uz]' [SoE], p. 134; Harrison, in Harrison, Hoggart, 'In Conversation', p. 39.
[477] Harrison, 'The Rhubarbarians' [SoE], p. 124.
[478] Huk, 'Tony Harrison, The Loiners, and the "Leeds Renaissance"', p. 77.

subversive performance, and the inclusion of both quotations alongside one another emulates the art form's compression of the 'crude' and the 'Holy'.[479] This juxtaposition of two very different types of cultural inheritance can also be seen in the relationship between the two sonnets. The contemporary, high culture setting of the second half of 'Rhubarbarbians' contrasts with the overtly industrial setting of the first.

Seemingly a world apart from Smetana and the Metropolitan Opera, the first sonnet in the sequence records the conflict between workers and factory owners during the industrial revolution in Leeds. It evokes a vision of Leeds still alive in the dreams of the equally archaic, and crippled figure of Thomas Campey. Here, the word 'Rhubarb' speaks for the background noise of Harrison's father, but also for the 'chanting' protests of the Luddite 'mob'. However, now the crowd stood just behind Julius Caesar take on a more threatening presence on the historical stage:

> Those glottals glugged like poured pop, each
> rebarbative syllable, rememberancer, raise
> 'mob' *rhubarb-rhubarb* to a tribune's speech
> crossing the crackle as the hayricks blaze.
>
> The gaffers' blackleg Boswells at their side,
> Horsfall of Ottiwells, if the bugger could,
> 'd've liked to (exact words recorded) ride
> up to my saddle-girths in Luddite blood.[480]

A reminder of the violent, industrial heritage of the newly acclaimed translator, the first poem initially serves to establish Harrison's position as one speaking from and for the often suppressed voice of the Leeds citizen. The language of the address – more brutal, more 'glottal' in tone – portrays the power of the poem to 'translate' not only the beauty of the opera, but also the voices of those often silenced by the passage of time.

Considered alongside the two quotations included before the second part of the poem, the collective effect of 'Rhubarbarians' is to self-consciously announce the poet's position as one entrusted with the task of remembering, translating, and celebrating his father's hometown. Yet whilst Harrison appears to call on 'Leeds!' as a fellow Loiner, the poet's

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[479] Harrison, in Haffenden, Harrison, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', p. 243.
[480] Harrison, 'The Rhubarbarians' [SoE] p. 123.

formal speech act betrays his altered position. In the final part of the second poem the dramatized figure of the poet /conductor takes the symbolic, if not physical centre stage:

> Finale of ACT II. Though I resist
>
> Blurring the clarity of *hanba* (shame)
>
> Not wanting the least nuance to be missed
>
> Syllables run to rhubarb just the same …[481]

After making a specific reference to his father and the story of 'tusky', the final lines of the sonnet cement the seemingly celebratory new link between Leeds and the Metropolitan Opera House, and between father and son. After addressing his father directly – 'It's all from you once saying on the train /How most of England's rhubarb came from Leeds' – Harrison then returns to the opening image of George Formby. The poem concludes:

> Watch me on the rostrum wave my arms –
>
>
> Mi little stick of Leeds-grown tusky draws
>
> Galas of rhubarb from the MET – set palms.[482]

Rhubarb, once the marker of the poet's peripheral position and the language of background crowds, is now the symbol of Harrison's newly inhabited, thoroughly central position. As both the instrument and the reward of the poet's transatlantic success, the 'tusky', and with it Leeds, appears to now sit at the very heart of the poet's transatlantic world.

What betrays this apparent celebration, and in doing so reveals the pressure that comes with this act of cultural and linguistic translation, is the 'hanba' or 'shame' that bruises the otherwise proud tone of the poem. Even in this apparent celebration of an inherited yet reinterpreted sense of Leeds and 'rhubarb', alienation – both between the poet and his father and between his parents and the poet's new cultural world – presses upon the otherwise light-hearted tone of the piece. The poet's position as the inheritor of both Seneca and George Formby, for example, simultaneously ingratiates him with his new setting and sets him apart. At times it even feels as if he seems to mock the crowd for whom he now performs. The verse also demonstrates Harrison's failure to truly occupy high culture on his father's behalf. Despite the fact that he attributes his inspiration to his father's earlier comments, the success of this linguistic and cultural translation is undermined by the aside that the poet makes to his father:

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[481] Ibid., p. 124.
[482] Ibid.

Sorry, dad, you won't get that quatrain.

(I'd like to be the poet my father reads!) [483]

With this deliberately offhand remark, the whole tone of both poems shifts, as the 'barbaric' in 'Rhubarbarians' becomes a pejorative as well as an ironic and celebratory term. By failing to understand his son's translation, the poet's father is no different from the earlier Luddite mob; both are unable to adapt to the new or the innovative. The almost arrogant tone of this apology, coupled with the wistful, defeatist nature of the parenthesised line, reveals the hollowness of the poet's reclamation of the filial space. This parenthetical reflection, at once part of the poem due to the rhyme and yet more self-reflexive in tone, hints at the ever-constant threat of failure behind the celebration of broken boundaries. By failing to translate both Smetana and his new profession to his parents, the poet on the rostrum is left to conduct the lament of his continuing physical and cultural alienation, rather than the expected fanfare of his triumphant homecoming. With this failure the significance of the truncated title of the poem is altered, as for different reasons Harrison and his father are left as Rhu*barbarians*.

The two parts of 'Rhubarbarians' together demonstrate an unresolved complexity in Harrison's relationship to his birthplace – one that goes beyond his dynamic with his parents. They show the tension between belonging and alienation, and between pride and disavowal that colours every representation of the North within Harrison's oeuvre. The desire to represent, and indeed celebrate the literary and historical inheritance of Leeds, Beeston, and Newcastle is measured against a darker, unresolved estrangement between the poet and his newly reclaimed surroundings. The choice of the term 'barbarian' in particular hints at the unresolved, violent nature of Harrison's poetic homecoming. That the speaker and his father, as well as Leeds, might be thought of as being 'barbaric' leaves a lingering sense of unease in an already conflicting pair of sonnets. It hints at the wider historical pressure that burdens the poet's relationship with his childhood home, and the guilt and shame bound up in his identity as a poet.

Harrison's problematic attempt to relocate Leeds and the North from the back of the stage to the forefront of the cultural and historical world shapes *The Loiners* more than any other collection. Right from the first poem in the collection, 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System', Harrison brings 'barbaric' Leeds to the front of the historical and geographical stage. The world of the bookseller Thomas Campey becomes a means by which the poet considers how the poem might shoulder the wider historical, ethical, and creative

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[483] Ibid.

burden facing the post-War generation. In the poem 'one /more sharp turn of the earth' threatens to 'turn' the bookseller's 'warped spine on the sun', and similarly the poet's own 'warped' imagination teeters on the edge of collapse.[484] However, whilst the threat of annihilation remains throughout the piece, the unstable, shifting geography that Campey inhabits also symbolises Harrison's aesthetic response to this almost-overwhelming historical pressure. The reference to the Copernican system in the title introduces the act that the poem (and the collection as a whole) goes on to undertake; that is to re-map history and the imagination in acknowledgment of the profound epistemic shift brought about by the War and the Holocaust.

The first way that the poem does this is to blur the distinction between the local and the international and to offer an alternative version of both geography and physics. Whereas 'Rhubarbarians' brought Leeds and its 'Tusky' to the front of the theatrical stage, here the streets of Leeds are placed at the heart of the globe. Disproving the notion that the local might mean the small or contained, Leeds, the North, and figures like Thomas Campey lie at the centre of the poet's unstable universe. This configuration of space and poetic gaze is subtly introduced within the opening stanzas of the poem:

> The other day all thirty shillings' worth
> Of painfully collected waste was blown
> Off the heavy handcart high above the earth,
> And scattered paper whirled around the town.
>
> *The earth turns round to face the sun in March,*
> He said, resigned, *it's bound to cause a breeze.*
> Familiar last straws. His back's strained arch
> Questioned the stiff balance of his knees.[485]

Disguised by the conventional rhyme scheme and form, in its tribute to the out-dated Campey the poem physicalizes an upheaval of thought on a 'Copernican' scale. Leeds is transformed into the 'earth' entire, its movement and turns experienced by its inhabitants as readily as a change in the weather. This realignment, which acknowledges the magnitude of the entire earth whilst locating its epicentre within the North of England, signals a belief in the need for a new, post-War poetic landscape. Like Campey's 'turn' towards the sun, Harrison's 'warped'

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[484] Harrison, 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System' [L], p. 15.
[485] Ibid.

imagination is pulled by history towards a new point around which to orbit. Events from around the globe encroach into the streets of Leeds and call into question the nature of home and its relationship to the rest of the world.

This connection between the local and the international, and the question of what makes Leeds an appropriate universal space of discovery is overtly addressed as the poem draws to a close. Adopting the arch language of the tomes that have for so long crippled the bookseller, the poet addresses the community of his birthplace:

> Leeds! Offer thanks to that Imperial Host,
>
> Squat on its throne of Ormus and of Ind,
>
> For bringing Thomas from his world of dust
>
> To Dust, and leisure of the simplest kind.[486]

Outwardly a tribute to Campey, Victorian England, and 'leisure of the simplest kind', this direct address to the Loiners and the city itself in fact reinterprets another, pre-existing literary landscape. Adopting the language (as well as metrical form) of the poet John Milton, the formal speech act engages with a well-known scene within *Paradise Lost* in order to shed new light on the nature of the poet's own post-War 'Paradise':

> High on a throne of royal state, which far
>
> outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,
>
> Or where the gorgeous East with richest hand
>
> Show'rs on her king's barbaric pearl and gold,
>
> Satan exalted sat

The choice of Milton and *Paradise Lost,* and the surprising comparison that the two passages make between Queen Victoria and the figure of Satan, say much about the conflicted position that the poet inhabits. In this double moment of intertextuality (as the language of *Paradise Lost* intermingles with the texts on Campey's back as well as the poem itself) Harrison celebrates and interrogates the Leeds landscape in equal measure.

Turning first to the celebratory element of the address, and in keeping with the poem's earlier 'Copernican shift', this engagement with Milton puts Harrison forward as the creator of a new epic. It brings together high and popular culture in the same way as 'Rhubarbarians' in order to put Leeds forward as an alternative yet nonetheless important literary space. The positive classification of both Leeds and its spokesperson as belonging

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[486] Ibid., p. 16.

within the tradition of the poetic epic, confirms the poet's self-appointment as one set to 'occupy … leasehold poetry'.[487] It also triumphs the under-represented, as Campey is finally given a place within the books he carries. As well as giving the silent a voice, this evocation of the Miltonic epic also contextualizes Leeds as a new symbolic landscape. This time it is Leeds and not Heaven or Hell that offers the chosen meeting ground upon which histories can be compared and where the temptations of good and evil can struggle for dominance. Echoing Jon Silkin's creation of his own *Peaceable Kingdom* and Geoffrey Hill's re-establishment of the biblical 'Shiloh' and fields of Towton, Harrison sets up the half literal, half symbolic space of 'North' as the new chosen land.

There is a problem with this chosen land though – a problem conveyed in the fact that Harrison chooses to draw upon the kingdom of Satan as his fitting point of comparison. The suggestion that Satan and not either God or Queen Victoria is the Loiners' 'Imperial Host' speaks to the poet's atheism, but it also suggests that Leeds and its community might be godless, *(rhu)*barbaric, or even demonic in nature. In a subversion of the almost nostalgic social commentary that shapes the poem's outward representation of Campey, this final intertextuality exposes Leeds and the North of England as the poet's 'provided loam' precisely because they contain a darkness that best fits with the 'dead weight' of recent historical events.[488] In a parallel to the poet's centre-stage celebration of 'tusky' in 'Rhubarbarians', the public speech act that ends 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System' only serves to confirm the alienation between the speaker and his surroundings. Masked by the upbeat and often comical rhyming form of the poem, it is this estrangement that endures after the poem comes to an end. Though he may address the city and citizens of 'Leeds!' as a fellow Loiner, the notion of a lost Paradise distances the poet from his birthplace, making-strange the streets of his childhood. 'Clouded' by this suggestion of an unidentified darkness, the poet's self-conscious speech act serves only to betray the deliberate rather than innate focus of his poetic gaze. In drawing attention to the considered way in which he inhabits his chosen poetic space, the satire and intertextuality of the appeal to 'give thanks' to his city reveals the dual role that alienation and historical pessimism play in shaping Harrison's representation of Leeds. In particular, they expose the position that he inhabits as a geographical and historical outsider, as external, international concerns manifest themselves in the formal speech act of the cosmopolitan poet.

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[487] Harrison, 'Them and [uz]' [SoE], p. 134.
[488] Hill, 'History as Poetry' [KL], p. 61.

After already alluding to the suffocating presence of 'God as Queen Victoria', the closing statement of 'Thomas Campey' introduces the lingering spectre of the British Empire into the collection. In doing so it draws attention to Harrison's perspective as one who 'thawed' his tongue not in Leeds, but elsewhere, in Nigeria.[489] The symbolic figure of Queen Victoria, immortalized in statue form on the poet's route home, here takes on an almost Satanic form. She haunts Campey and the poem, offering a reminder of England's dark, colonial legacy. In making this connection between Leeds and the wider British Empire, Harrison situates *The Loiners* as an internationally as opposed to locally faced collection. The presence of Empire, and its lingering hold on the imagination of both Campey and the poet, becomes the connecting link between the regional subject and the rest of the world. It imbues the specificity of the language and geography of Leeds with a wider geographical and historical resonance. This in turn alters the nature and definition of the local.

In plotting his poetic geography in this way, Harrison sets himself apart from his titular subject. The poet's knowledge of Milton shapes his sense of what it means to be a Loiner, yet his first-hand experience of England's oppression of 'Ormus and Ind' also alters his relationship with his birthplace. In this hint in the final lines of both an unarticulated threat and an unresolved estrangement, it becomes clear that the Loiner subject of the collection is not there simply to convey an allegiance to a Northern, working-class heritage. The reality is more complex, as the difference between Leeds as an inherited, local space and Leeds as a foreign or re-inhabited geography refuses to fit within the formal resolution of the poem. It also raises the question of what brought about this dramatic spatial re-alignment; it alludes to the power of history to upturn the world of the poet in such dramatic fashion.

This 'Copernican' shift of Harrison's revelatory and barbaric 'North' reveals the relationship between place, history, and poetry in his work. As well as pointing to the poet's physical and intellectual estrangement from his birthplace, the notion of a re-written and inverted 'lost paradise' also alludes to the historical rather than geographical experiences that 'thawed' the poet's tongue. Evoking the memories that 'drove' him into poetry, the alienated and alienating streets of Leeds reflect the poet's difficult inhabitation of his particular historical space. Part of a post-atomic, post-Holocaust world, yet still haunted by the vestiges of its Victorian past, England and the poet sit in a strange in-between space, caught in the aftershock of an explosion of old values. Articulating the unresolved conflict between the social, historical, and geographical pressures placed upon the poet's 'warped' imagination,

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[489] Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', p. 34.

the spinning world of Thomas Campey becomes an important starting point for *The Loiners*, and for his work as a collected whole. Beyond this first collection, the initial classification of the North as an international, literary, and biblical – yet threatening, colonial, and forsaken – space continues to shape Harrison's representation of his birthplace.

In the fittingly titled poem 'On Not Being Milton' the legacy of 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican system' manifests itself in the equally problematic spaces that the poet often painfully attempts to re-inhabit. Once again the poet's personal and historical alienation manifests itself in his relationship to the physical world around him. In this ironically titled poem Harrison begins his second collection, *The School of Eloquence,* in a manner very similar to how he began *The Loiners*. He starts with what appears to be a proclamation of his occupation of a resolutely working-class, 'lease-hold' space within the poetic tradition. Turning away from crooked Thomas Campey, the gaze of the poem is now squarely directed at Harrison himself, in what appears to be a mission statement as to origins and outcomes of his poetic voice:

> Read and committed to the flames. I call
>
> these sixteen lines that go back to my roots,
>
> my *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*,
>
> my growing black enough to fit my boots.[490]

The second section of this thesis discussed Harrison's relationship to Milton, and his evocation of the poet as a means of asserting the particularity of his poetic witness. However Milton is not the only poet in the poem who Harrison draws upon to better frame his historical and geographical position. In his reference to his 'Cahier d'un retour au pays natal' the poet borrows the title of Aimé Césaire's 1956 autobiographical poem as the motto both for his rejection of normative culture and for his strange relationship with his 'native land'. In doing this he once again allows the uncomfortable spectre of Empire to encroach upon the formal exactitude of the verse. Situated as the first poem within the *School of Eloquence* collection, the evocation of Césaire suggests that the collection as a whole might embody Harrison's own 'notebook of a return to my native land'. Yet with the words of the black, Martinique poet comes a set of cultural, historical, and ethical issues that complicate this apparently triumphant cultural and geographical 'return'. That the language, history, and culture of Leeds might be thought of as a variation of Negritude throws the tone, subject, and ethics of 'On Not Being Milton' into flux; the poem celebrates (albeit in an ethically

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[490] Harrison, 'On Not Being Milton' [SoE], p. 122.

ambiguous way) the vitality and interconnectedness of non-normative cultures, yet the fact that the poet would adopt the words of Aimé Césaire as the motto for his own homecoming shows his desire to highlight rather than diminish his estrangement from his Northern birthplace.

The evocation of the black, Martinique writer and political figure in this surprising context highlights Harrison's position as an educated and cosmopolitan outsider. The reclamation of a distinctly Northern language and culture, framed in relation to the new epistemic and geographical distance between the multilingual poet and his community results in a poem that is at once defiant and bleak in its search for home. Alongside these personal implications, the evocation of Césaire undermines the apparent celebration of Northern culture. As in 'Thomas Campey' and 'Rhubarbarians' it reminds the reader of the link between industry and England's dark, imperial legacy. That the memory of Empire and slavery would endure even after the apparent rupture between Harrison and Milton, speaks to the poet's sense both of the lingering force of past atrocity upon present culture and identity. It also alludes to its present relevance to more recent events. In the Leeds of Thomas Campey and the poet, the spectral figure of Victorian, Imperial England blackens the buildings along with the coal smoke.

Having 'thawed' out his tongue in Nigeria, Harrison returned to his 'roots' armed with a new language and a new perspective of home. In the early versions of 'On Not Being Milton' it is possible to see the impact that Africa had in shaping the poet's historical and world view. In the first of the three notebooks dedicated to the planning, publication, and impact of *The School of Eloquence*, the influence of a continent seemingly a world away from the lives of the Loiners is clear. Harrison uses his familiar blue notebook with its red fringe, however stuck on to the cover is an unexpected frontispiece – the white outline of Central Africa – within which is printed the words:

22 years without a break in the long grass of Central Africa [491]

This surprising addition is taken from a 1912 book by the missionary Daniel Crawford, entitled *Thinking Black: 22 years without a break in the long grass of Central Africa*. In its foreword, the volume is described as a 'fulfillment of Livingstone's last desire', and commenting on the interesting idea of 'thinking black' the publisher notes that:

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[491] Leeds, BLSC, Tony Harrison Archive, BC MS 20c Harrison/02 [Uncatalogued], Small Notebook [The School of Eloquence 1].

Most of it written by the flare of the African camp-fire, the name of this book corresponds with its nature. The author is thinking black all the time he is writing the book so named.[492]

As well as this obvious link to Harrison's own act of 'thinking black', The author's choice of epigraphs further illuminates why the post-War poet might have chosen this volume as a fruitful route into his own private act of creativity:

Mombaza, and Quiloa, and Melind, And Sofala, thought Ophir, to the realm of Congo, and Angola farthest South."
Paradise Lost, xi. 399.

"The African race is an indiarubber ball. The harder you dash it to the ground the higher it will rise." Bantu Proverb.

"We negroes are one in racial unity with you whites – different yet the same. A crocodile is hatched from an egg—and a flying bird from an egg." The Emperor Mushidi.

"The Earth is a beehive: we all enter by the same door but live in different cells."
Bantu Proverb.

As well as the shared use of *Paradise Lost* and the writing of John Milton, both writers draw upon the complex relationship between white and black, and between African and European, as a way of understanding their own relationship to both. Within the main body of the collection Harrison repeatedly explores both the fact of his 'thinking black', and the repercussions that this new perspective has on his relationship to his family and heritage.

One draft of 'On Not Being Milton' even directly addresses this tension, as the speaker (rather clumsily) contextualizes his current cosmopolitan yet equally alienated state. After beginning with a recognisable version of the opening verse, the poem continues:

I am the Zulu in a G.A. Henty
Not noble and not savage but <u>again</u>

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[492] Author unknown, 'Publisher's Note', in Daniel Crawford, *Thinking black: 22 years without a break in the long grass of Central Africa*, (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1912), p. 3, 'Library of Congress Archive', https: / /ia600603.us.archive.org /27 /items /thinkingblack22y01craw /thinkingblack22y01craw.pdf. [Accessed 24 February 2014].

> Nigger in white face imaginary Jew
>
> The unsociable drinker who can't say when
>
> The dragooned and trampled on at Peterloo
>
> And their smug oppressors, I am you.[493]

Lacking punctuation, the draft in its current state reflects the poet's experimentation rather than the finished product. Yet even then, the surprising links that Harrison makes between his own position and that of 'the Zulu', the 'Nigger', and the 'Imaginary Jew', as well as to more recognizably local figures such as the 'unsociable drinker' and those involved in the Peterloo massacres, shows the transnational and transhistorical nature of his poetic subjectivity. In the final lines of the poem this conflict is directly addressed, as in a moment of clarity the speaker reflects that:

> Ever since my schooling I've been two
>
> Sides of the struggle, class, colonial
>
> And they still grappling and fighting
>
> Sir, I Ham a very Bad Hand at Righting [494]

This movement from vulnerability to humour and slapstick conveys the anxiety and alienation that marks the poet's return to his roots. Exiled by learning, travel, and historical knowledge, the articulate writer may wish to return to his *pays natal*, but he cannot simply inherit it. Instead, he must undertake the painful, even violent process of 'growing black enough'. The difficulty of this act highlights the fact that poems such as 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System' do not represent Harrison's easy deployment of his birthplace as a social trope, but rather symbolise the beginning of his painful reclamation of it. The adaptation (but not translation) of Césaire's artistic homecoming within the context of a return to Leeds enacts an ironic, double deracination within the poem. The words of the black poet are uprooted from their natural environment in order to draw attention to Harrison's historical position, and his subsequent disconnection from his 'roots'.

In a parallel to the end of 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System', in 'On Not being Milton' the image of Empire and its 'black' legacy becomes the connecting link between the local and the international. Post-War England's imperial legacy again resurfaces in the act of poetic excavation and re-discovery. The reason for this historical excavation of

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[493] BC MS 20c Harrison/02, Small Notebook: The School of Eloquence 1.
[494] Ibid.

Leeds's Imperial connections is, as in 'Thomas Campey', tied up in the equal celebration and condemnation of the post-War city as a new symbolic meeting point. Yet more specifically this focus on the 'roots' of a community makes an unspoken but nonetheless vital link between Leeds and the wider world. In regards to the connection between Leeds and the rest of the British Empire, Césaire's unexpected presence within the poem establishes an unequal dialectic between the historical plight of the industrial North and that of 'Ormus', 'Ind', Africa, and the Caribbean. The amalgamation of Harrison's physical 'roots' with Césaire's explores how both communities sit on the physical and cultural periphery of the central British identity; the double deracination of the Martinique poet draws attention to the shared state of otherness between Britain's industrial and imperial subjects.

In light of the poet's own experience of living and working in Nigeria, the idea of 'growing black enough', although risqué in its approach to racial identity, fits with the imaginative re-alignment that first took place in 'The Rhubarians' and 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System'. Brought together by alienation and marginalisation, Leeds is made interchangeable with Martinique or Nigeria as a poetic 'pays natal'. The poet's new post-War map of the world, like the Mappa Mundi that Harrison describes in his essay 'The Inkwell of Dr. Agrippa', 'attempt[s] to represent Africa-Europe as a single entity with interchangeable names … "There is all Africa and her prodigies in us; we are all that bold and adventurous piece of nature"'.[495] Like Campey's 'Copernican' re-alignment and the poet's apparent celebration of 'tusky', Harrison's announcement signals the place of Leeds as a new historic meeting ground. Yet just as the first call exposed the forsaken, even Satanic 'rhubarbarity' of the poet's new 'Paradise', in this poem's revision of Leeds as a native space, the unavoidable, politically incorrect connotations of the barbaric and the primitive cast a shadow over the poet's new 'bold and adventurous piece of nature'.

The notion of 'growing black enough to fit my boots' may evoke the coal pits beneath the poet's local landscape, yet alongside this almost nostalgic wish to put on the symbolic garments of the Leeds mining community, the fiery immersion of the poem into the 'black' space of the North also uncovers a further, troubling element to his excavated 'pays natal'.[496] The suggestion that a violent history and its 'prodigies' might dwell just beneath the surface of the 'black' North alters the significance of the poet's return to his birthplace. The deracinated poet does not simply choose to 'not' inhabit the same space as Milton, but rather occupies his new ground out of historical necessity. In 'A Kumquat for John Keats' Harrison

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[495] Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr. Agrippa', p. 35.
[496] Harrison, 'On Not Being Milton' [SoE], p. 122.

articulates his need for a new sensual object to 'express' his altered historical moment, and in 'On Not Being Milton' he suggests that his location must also reflect the 'black' historical moment that he inhabits.[497]

His exposure to an alternative, cosmopolitan tradition of poetic expression sets Harrison apart from both his filial and literary heritage, offering him a perspective of home and nation shaped by alienation and internationalism. Yet, he is also kept apart from Milton and his 'pays natal' due to the 'flames' of historical trauma that lie between them. Antony Rowland has written of the importance of fire as a defining trope of Harrison's post-Holocaust aesthetic, and in 'On Not Being Milton' the poet's commitment of both his words and his body to the 'flames' demonstrates the pressure that recent history places upon his personal and literary selfhood.[498] In the violent, painful act of 'growing black enough' Harrison subverts the colonial clichés of Africa and the Caribbean by placing Leeds and its coal pits as the new 'heart of darkness'.[499] The sins of slavery and colonisation are replaced with, or rather are placed alongside, the 'flames' of the death camp ovens. In this shifting and burnt world all that remains constant is the poet's (and his nation's) involvement in these acts of barbarity. Charred by a history implicit in the 'blackened' imagery of the poem, the geography that Harrison must painfully re-inhabit in 'On Not Being Milton' reflects the shrapnel and scars that litter the poet's imagination.

As 'The Rhubarbarians', 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System', and 'On Not Being Milton' together demonstrate, there is an unavoidable degree of complexity in Harrison's reconfiguration of the cultural and historical map. His world is full of 'black' marks that undermine his celebration of the local space. Although each poem is shaped around a wish to celebrate and champion the North and the local as a cosmopolitan landscape, all are also ironically only fit for this purpose due to the barbarity and violence that they uncover. Far from symbolising the poet's joyous cultural reclamation of his birthplace, the poems instead waver between celebration and bitterness, and nostalgia and estrangement. This tension dominates almost all of the poet's representations of his birthplace and filial home. As a terrain built upon the cracks of these interconnected 'versus', the North is for Harrison already a social, political, and historical battlefield, even without the scars and shrapnel of the Second World War. Yet it is in his depiction of his fellow Loiners in particular that Harrison truly exposes this alternative battleground. In doing so he draws

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[497] Harrison, 'A Kumquat for John Keats', *CdP*, 'On Not Being Milton' [SoE], pp. 221, 122.
[498] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*, p. 104.
[499] Harrison, 'The Heart of Darkness' [L] p. 41-43.

further attention to the unexpected links that bind together Leeds with the rest of the world, disrupting the seemingly contained lives of its inhabitants with an often explosive force.

II.

Published in 1970, two years after Hill's *King Log*, Harrison's first full collection *The Loiners* takes as its main subject the eponymous community of the poet's birthplace. Yet as the double entendre of the term 'Loiner' suggests, the version of Leeds mapped onto the page speaks to the multi-layered concerns at work within the collection. In the essay 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa' the poet notes how:

> *The Loiners* (citizens of Leeds, *citizens* who bear their loins through the terrors of life, 'loners') was begun in Africa, after I had thawed out my tongue on a Nigerian version of *Lysistrata*, which I translated and adapted with James Simmons, the Irish poet.[500]

This three-tier definition of a 'Loiner' – caught in the space between local specificity and international influence, sexual explicitness and terror, and imbued with an unsettling sense of isolation and alienation – encapsulates the concerns that shape the collection as a whole. It also conveys the transatlantic influences that continue to inform later poems such as 'On Not Being Milton'. Its language and subject is often regionally specific to Leeds, yet the often darker influence of Africa and Eastern Europe permeate through the local landscapes, surfacing more obviously in 'The White Queen' (a sequence which includes 'The Zeg-Zeg postcards'), 'The Heart of Darkness', 'The Songs of the PWD Man', 'The Death of the PWD Man', and 'The Excursion'.[501] The collection's pre-occupation with sex and terror ground the poems in an often comfortable degree of personal detail, all the while creating links that enable the verse to transcend the vivid specificity of each landscape. The mention of translation and 'Lysistrata' for example, adds a Classical provenance to Harrison's interest in the 'loins' of his neighbours. It hints at the alternative cultural and historical traditions that shape the contemporary poet's interest and representation, subsequently drawing attention to the epistemic distance between Harrison and his subject.

This linguistic compression of such seemingly unrelated topics draws attention to the shifting identity of its distinctly cosmopolitan author. In further evidence of the complex

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[500] Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', p. 34.
[501] Harrison, 'The White Queen', 'The Heart of Darkness', 'The Songs of the PWD Man I, II', 'The Death of the PWD Man', pp. 23-40, 41-43,44-46,47-50 [L]; Harrison, 'The Excursion', *The Loiners*, pp. 71-74.

relationship between the poet and his chosen setting, the play between Loiner and Loner indicates Harrison's delight in the pun as a comedic tool, but also points to another overarching feature within the collection – that of a historical, geographical, and social alienation shared between the protagonists and their creator. The fact that the often-bawdy set of poems began life away from Leeds says something of the claustrophobic fullness of the depicted landscapes within *The Loiners*; this creative distance speaks to the equal sense of belonging and isolation that marks both the speaker and the characters within the collection. The loner or social outsider – be that a fictional madman within the poem or else the figure of the poet himself – takes on an important, even visionary role. Often a figure of ridicule or farce, figures such as Peanuts Joe and Thomas Campey straddle the space between the immediate reality of Leeds and the wider, often darker forces that press in upon it. They also inhabit the blurred aesthetic and ethical boundary between the acceptable and the taboo, allowing the poet to create what has been called an 'awkward poetics' or a 'non-cathartic artistry' of the post-War condition.[502] Mirroring the disruptive presence of these figures, in his movement from 'place to place' the poet blows apart the calm surface of the streets and fields, exposing the dark roots that lie beneath.[503]

This exposure takes two forms, reflecting the often tense relationship to the foreign or unknown that Harrison, the cosmopolitan writer, so frequently exposes. In *The Loiners* in particular, external war encroaches in upon England and the North from the outside, re-affirming the importance of nationalism and national borders in the post-War public consciousness. In poems such as 'Allotments', 'The Excursion' and 'Durham' Harrison depicts a series of apparently peaceful landscapes, all equally haunted by past and present violence. Dismissing the notion that England might still be able to celebrate the strength of its moral and geographical defences ('FORTIT /ER TRIUMPHANS DEFENDIT') these poems show the encroachment of violence into the fabric of everyday life.[504] Yet as well as demonstrating England's defencelessness against external atrocity and barbarism, Harrison also exposes the small-scale wars that exist within his nation's borders. By laying bare the violence of the local and domestic, and exposing the acts of atrocity and hatred that take place every day behind closed doors within the home, poems such as 'Next Door', 'V', and 'Shrapnel' undermine the binary of enemy and ally, and disrupt any easy dismissal of

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[502] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*; Gubar, *Poetry After Auschwitz*, p. 14.
[503] Hobbes, in Hill, *Somewhere is Such a Kingdom* [Epigraph].
[504] Harrison, 'Newcastle is Peru' [L], p. 64.

violence and barbarism and as foreign threat. Together, these two forms of exposure create a vision of England besieged from all sides, with violence at its very core.

Turning first to the presence of external violence within Harrison's real and imagined landscapes, in 'The Excursion' Northern England is presented as a practice ground for an as-yet only anticipated conflict. The poet relates watching 'soldiers wheel / into Newcastle Station, / paratroopers /lugging brens / off to the Highlands / for bi-monthly manoeuvres', a reminder of the continuing threat of war that Peanuts Joe anticipates when he bequeaths his 'gonads to the Pentagon'.[505] The Cold War, a real and present danger, encroaches into the lives of the post-War community. The 'bi-monthly manoeuvres' cast Northern England as a testing ground, and remind the poet of the continuing presence of war within the community, as opposed to simply the memory of it. Similarly, in the poem 'Durham', the poet openly addresses the effect of the public threat upon his private life, introducing the intimate connection between sex and public threat that poems such as 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' hint at, but that poems such as 'Allotments', 'Newcastle is Peru', and later, 'V' and 'A Kumquat for John Keats' more overtly explore.

Referring to the calm and rainy landscapes of England and 'Quiet Durham', the poem reveals the gulf between the appearance of a peaceful and self-contained nation and its true reality.[506] Drawing upon the recognisable features of an English pastoral scene precisely in order to subvert it, the poem laments how 'Threat / Smokes off our lives like steam of wet / Subsides when summer rain / drenches the workings'. Addressing his romantic companion, the speaker acknowledges the heavy weight of war and atrocity upon both his imagination and private self:

… You complain

that the machinery of sudden death,

Fascism, the hot bad breath

of Power down small countries' necks

shouldn't interfere with sex.

They are sex, love, we must include

all these in love's beatitude.

Bad weather and the public mess

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[505] Harrison, 'The Excursion', p. 71; Harrison, 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' [L], p. 19.
[506] Harrison, 'Durham' [L], p. 71.

> drive us to private tenderness,
>
> though I wonder if together we,
>
> alone two hours, can ever be
>
> love's antibodies in the sick,
>
> sick body politic.[507]

That love might be an 'antibody' to the sick 'body politic' is a notion that proves to be problematic within Harrison's work, particularly given the repeated tendency of the poet to retreat away from his difficult 'Northern' subject matter and into the comforting realm of 'private tenderness'.[508] In relation to the idea of an external threat however, what 'Durham' confirms is Harrison's status not just as a post-War poet but a 'cold-war' or even simply 'war' poet.[509] Just as the plural 'wars' of Peanuts Joe acknowledge the on-going, multifaceted nature of conflict, 'Durham' recognises the blurred boundary lines that face the poet.[510] The poem acknowledges the lack of distinction between the public and private, and the foreign and domestic, and between what might be dismissed as a past event, and what continues to linger and grow in post-1945 Europe. The continuing threat of annihilation – a threat that follows Harrison across the ocean to Florida and a 'sub-Walden' world where 'retiree DIYers' build bomb shelters 'to find a place / to weather out the days, weeks, even years / that may well, but for these, kill off our race' – is an ever constant pressure.[511] Behind its calm façade, home and the North is a space of remembered and anticipated conflict.

Taking its stylistic lead from its poetic predecessors, 'Allotments' develops the emphasis that both 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System' and 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' place on Leeds as an emblematic, post-War and postcolonial landscape. Unlike 'Durham', the poem takes the reader back to the poet's childhood, to the years immediately following 1945. In both poems though, there exists the same distinct sense of a community physically haunted by the knowledge, pressure, and continuing present-ness of history and the public world. In both poems there is a similar representation of the way that violence and war encroach into the private and sexual life of the poet. What this reveals in 'Allotments' more than 'Durham' is the barbarity that already exists behind closed doors in the poet's hometown.

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[507] Ibid.

[508] Ibid.; See also Harrison's retreat 'Home, home, home to my woman' in 'V'. Harrison, 'V', *CdP*, p. 275.

[509] Rick Rylance has labelled *The Loiners* as a collection of 'cold-war poems'. Rick Rylance, 'Doomsongs: Tony Harrison and the War', in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. Sandie Byrne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 158.

[510] Harrison, 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' [L], p. 18-19.

[511] Harrison, 'Following Pine: I', *CdP*, p. 252.

Starting from the 'allotment dugouts' of the city's Home Front, 'Allotments' begins in the same bawdy style that characterises many of Harrison's poems:

> Choked, reverted Dig For Victory plots
>
> Helped put more bastards into Waif Home cots
>
> Than anywhere, but long before my teens
>
> The Veterans got them for their bowling greens.[512]

In these opening lines war and patriotic nationalism – epitomised in the mention of both the 'Veterans' and the 'Dig For Victory plots' – struggle against sexual misdemeanour as the defining characteristics of post-1945 Leeds. Coming after the collection's initial 'Copernican' shift, the alternative dug trenches of the city allotments present the local, urban landscape as a form of battlefield in its own right. The Home Front becomes the location of a conflict between public respectability and private indecency.

In keeping with this renewed emphasis on the physical 'plot' of the poem, the landscape of Leeds is more vividly realised in 'Allotments'. After the first reference of illicit sex and its results, the first verse provides a humorous, alternative map of the city, plotting the favourite haunts of local unmarried couples. From the allotments to the River Aire, and finally to more socially unacceptable locations, the poet takes pleasure in recounting the destinations of his trips across the city, as it becomes not 'Who or When but Where' that defines the actions of the young Loiners:

> … The graveyards of Leeds 2
>
> were hardly love nests but they had to do –
>
> Through clammy mackintosh and winter vest
>
> And rumpled jumper for a touch of breast.
>
> Stroked nylon crackled over groin and bum
>
> Like granny's wireless stuck on Hilversum.[513]

Even given the light-hearted tone of the first verse, this introduction to the poet's sexual rite of passage marks an important development in Harrison's representation of home and its relationship to wider historical events. Unlike the unstable ground beneath Thomas Campey or else the distorted, carnival-esque world of Peanuts Joe, in 'Allotments' Leeds is physically tangible, embossing itself upon the skin of its amorous inhabitants:

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[512] Harrison, 'Allotments' [L], p. 20.
[513] Ibid.

> And after love we'd find some quiet epitaph
>
> Embossed backwards on your arse and laugh.[514]

The change to the subjective 'I' and the willingness to expose his own awkward teenage fumbling emphasises the awkward, communal, and autobiographical nature of Harrison's representation. This increased specificity and intimacy emphasises the historical and geographical rupture that will later come to dominate the poet's sexual maturation. Even at this point this eventual shift is hinted at in the subtle connection between the spaces of sex and death. There is a foreboding sense of the uncanny or obscene, as Harrison plays out his teenage encounters within a graveyard. The 'haunts' of the lovers take on an ironic twist, as the reader begins to sense a different form of haunting presence within the poem.

This sense develops as Harrison moves to his next location. In the final lines of the first stanza, he describes how:

> And young, we cuddled by the abattoir,
>
> Faffling with fastenings, never getting far.
>
> Through sooty shutters the odd glimpsed spark
>
> From hooves on concrete stalls scratched at the dark
>
> And glittered in green eyes. Cowsclap smacked
>
> onto the pavings where the beasts were packed.
>
> And offal furnaces with clouds of stench
>
> Choked other couples off the lychgate bench [515]

Coming at the end of the first verse, this more innocent act of coupling marks the shift in the tone and subject of the poem. The abattoir, and more importantly the 'beasts' contained within it, encroaches upon the senses and the conscience of the speaker. Together they bring death, imprisonment, and the inhumane to the forefront of the poem. In an echo of the first line, the last line of the verse starts with the word 'Choked'. This time however, the cause of this choking is the 'stench' of burning animals, and the fear of 'beasts' tightly 'packed' into dark containers, visible only by glitter of their 'green eyes'. Just as the act of 'growing black enough' in 'On Not Being Milton' suggested a violence and barbarity quite beyond that of the pits, in this description the scene is heavy with the sinister connotations of the death camps. The sub-human yet equally sympathetic state of the watching 'beasts', and most potently the 'choking', shocking mention of the 'furnaces' with their 'clouds of stench',

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[514] Ibid.
[515] Ibid.

introduces industrialised annihilation into the sexual coming-of-age of the poet. It also shows how the Leeds that the speaker plotted out in the first verse of the poem is a space of death and barbarity as well as teenage lust.

At the end of the first verse of 'Allotments', what resembled a bawdy song begins to reflect a far more historically pressurised narrative. Now, the poem is as much about the poet's growing consciousness of his proximity to death as it is about his adolescent fumbling. The uncomfortable, 'choking' presence of death in these unexpected spaces indicates a more serious consideration of the presence of the death camps in spaces far away from named sites of genocide. 'Allotments' doesn't just transgress social barriers – it also transgresses geographical ones. This shift becomes even more pronounced within the second verse, as Harrison introduces the new, uncanny character of the Pole into the poem. In doing so he confirms the altered focus of the poetic gaze:

> The Pole who caught us at it once had smelt
>
> Far worse at Auschwitz and at Buchenwald,
>
> He said, and, pointing to the chimneys, *Meat!*
>
> *Zat is vere zey murder vat you eat.*[516]

The Pole's mention of the death camps confirms the presence – and presentness – of the Holocaust in Leeds. After the focus upon 'Leeds 2', the rather genteel 'Dig For Victory plots', and the River Aire, the sudden mention of the alien 'Auschwitz and Buchenwald' plots an entirely different history and language onto the poet's sexual guide to Leeds. More importantly, the fact that the strange, spectral figure of the Pole compares the Beeston abattoir to the two death camps compresses the distance between the two locations. It makes the speaker's previous act of fornication and witness of the 'beasts' both callous and sinister.

This historical and geographical compression is compounded upon by the ambiguous syntax and word choice of the lines. The word 'once' for example, like the meaning of 'growing black enough', takes on a double significance. It applies both to the event of being caught by the Pole, and to the historical act of smelling the chimneys at the camps. This immediate ambiguity, like the mention of 'Auschwitz' and 'Buchenwald', alters the time and proximity of the Holocaust. One version of 'Once' makes the camps feel close and on-going, with the emphasis on being caught rather than the uniqueness of the event. The other application of 'once' leaves the camps historically distant, finished, and unique, as if in the distant past. Like Campey's earlier visitation from the 'angel' of Queen Victoria and Empire,

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[516] Ibid.

here Harrison engages with the idea of haunting to present Leeds and Beeston as an alternative revelatory space. It is a geography that is both sheltered from and shaped by the continuing present-ness of the dead. What determines the nature of the city for its inhabitants comes down to a matter of consciousness and historical awareness – two factors that this poem gives a linear narrative to. The strong narrative drive of 'Allotments' fictionalises the abstract, epistemic difference between the poet and his neighbours. It dramatizes what was for the poet a gradual process of 'growing black' with historical knowledge. It also stages a moment of revelation in order to highlight the status of Leeds as a parabolic, imagined city as well as a real one.

This narrative drive continues as 'Allotments' moves towards its shocking conclusion. As the poem goes on the young couple attempt to escape from this strange, sinister harbinger of death. They try, in vain, to recapture a version of their city untainted by the smoke of the abattoir. What results is a scene both comical and disturbing:

> And jogging beside us, *As man devours*
> *Ze flesh of animals, so vorms devour ours.*
> *It's like your anthem, Ilkla Moor Baht'at.*[517]

The bawdy, song-like quality of 'Allotments' is taken over by the Pole's alternative song, which in turn appropriates and distorts the patriotic anthems sung previously in 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe'. The association that the Pole makes here between 'Ilkla Moor Baht'at' and the furnaces of Auschwitz and Buchenwald challenges England's national and regional identity and pride from the inside outwards.

Even after Harrison and his nameless, invisible partner have retreated behind the boundaries of the domestic sphere, the Pole continues to 'jog' alongside the poem. His presence, and more importantly the history he embodies, encroaches upon the younger poet's lust and imagination. The poet recounts that:

> Nearly midnight and that gabbling, foreign nut
> Had stalled my coming, spoilt my appetite
> For supper, and gave me a sleepless night [518]

The aggression of the speaker towards the Pole again switches the tone of the poem. His dismissal of this 'gabbling, foreign nut' instantly has the effect of switching the reader's sympathies in favour of the strange, equally haunted and haunting man. Yet the final lines of

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[517] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[518] Ibid., p. 21.

the poem once again reveal the true effect of this encounter upon the thwarted, hungry young speaker. The last verse describes how:

> … I rolled frustrated and I smelt
>
> Lust on myself, then smoke, and then I felt
>
> Street bonfires blazing for the end of war
>
> V.E. and J. burn us like lights, but saw
>
> Lush prairies for a tumble, wide corrals,
>
> A Loiner's Elysium, and I cried
>
> For the family still pent up in my balls,
>
> For my corned beef sandwich, and for genocide. [519]

In its representation of frustrated sexual appetite, the poem imbues the natural lust of the teenage lover with the odour of both the abattoir furnace and the ovens of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. This focus on the olfactory element of both sex and death adds to the uncomfortable, unsavoury nature of the poem's subject. It also compresses two very different locations and histories within the sensory register of the protagonist. Like the 'smoke of harmless fires' in Hill's 'September Song', or else the threat that 'smokes off our lives' in 'Durham', here the lasting stain left upon Harrison's clothes and skin speak to the infusion of atrocity onto this unlikely setting. Leeds, Beeston, and its Loiners, like the loins of the young poet, are here connected by smoke, fire, and the 'black' remains of genocide to both the death camps and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' the 'street bonfires' lit to celebrate the end of war burn in tandem with the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and by consuming 'corned beef sandwiches' Harrison takes this connection further by cannibalising the other, human victims of the fires and ovens.[520]

These lines, deliberately unsavoury in the links that they draw up between Leeds and the rest of the world, are emblematic of Harrison's overall aesthetic and historical approach to Holocaust representation. They realise, in dramatic and shocking style, the initial historical rupture first initiated in 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System'. In a single sentence the poem displays the poet's ability to compress his eloquence, sexual desire, capacity for violence, and finally connection to genocide, into one, singular entity. The deliberate crudeness and continuing use of rhyme offers the only hint that he might also be painfully aware of his own participation in the literary consumption of atrocity. The collapse of taste,

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[519] Ibid.
[520] Harrison, 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe', 'Allotments' [L], pp. 19, 21.

geography, time, and eloquence under the pressure of history risks offence not only in the surprising nature of its relativism, but also in the important detail that genocide comes last on the list of the poet's concerns. That the pressure of 'pent up' sexual desire might outweigh that of either those equally 'pent up' in 'Auschwitz and Buchenwald', or else murdered by the atomic bomb or the gas chambers comes close, as Luke Spencer notes, 'to trivialising the Holocaust'.[521] For Spencer, whose critical focus lies firmly with the class concerns within Harrison's poetry, this distorted order is an indication of the poet's overarching concern with sexuality and selfhood, not history. Adolescent libido is 'so strong' a force within Harrison's poetic voice, 'that to be capable of acknowledging the horror of genocide at all under the circumstances is an important advance in moral consciousness'.[522] Whilst this observation both of the 'sex-death connection' and the strange nature of Harrison's 'Bildungsroman' acknowledges the 'threat' of obscenity within the poem, it doesn't fully account for the acute, yet subtle self-reflexivity that shapes this very deliberate trivialization. This is particularly the case given the fact that 'Allotments' is one of the few poems within Harrison's oeuvre where sexual intimacy and the private sphere don't offer a temporary refuge from historical pressure. In 'V', 'A Kumquat for John Keats' 'Facing North', and 'Newcastle is Peru' (to name just a few) Harrison ultimately seeks refuge from the realities of the public world by going 'Home, home, home to my woman'.[523] The poems frequently end with the poet effectively 'facing South', away from history and the poetic and ethical responsibilities that it brings. Here however, history, like the Pole, not only follows him home but stays with him when he is at his most private and vulnerable. Rather than trivialise the Holocaust, 'Allotments' actually attests to its oppressive encroachment upon every aspect of the poet's life.

This deliberate trivialization plays a significant role in closing the imaginative, physical, and poetic gap between Leeds and the rest of Europe. By confusing the poet's historically informed poetic with an assertion of young working-class masculinity, Spencer's reading misses the influence both of geography, and the idea of imaginative and physical borders in these powerful final lines. This becomes particularly clear when the finished version of 'Allotments' is compared to an earlier draft. The same disparity between draft and finished poem that demonstrated the deliberate ignobility of the poet in the second section of this thesis also reveals Harrison's sensitivity to the ironic power of trivialization. The

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[521] Luke Spencer, *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 21.
[522] Ibid.
[523] Harrison, 'V', *CdP*, p. 275.

different punctuation within each stanza version in particular, highlights the sophisticated rather than insensitive way in which Harrison approaches the problem of historical relativity.

In the final lines of the earlier version of the poem the mature speaker reflects how 'I'd think it silly now, but then I cried / For my family still pent-up in my balls, / For my beef sandwich and for genocide'.[524] The removal of the Oxford Comma between sandwiches and genocide makes more of the tangible connection between the beasts and the Holocaust. 'Genocide' is no longer an afterthought, and as a result it loses its shocking potency. By placing 'and for genocide' as the final, un-glossed, and importantly formally isolated phrase in the finished version of 'Allotments', Harrison employs the same technique as Geoffrey Hill in both 'September Song' and 'Funeral Music'. By presenting the final lines of each poem so that each resembles an unresolved afterthought, both poets use the form of their work to depict their own, ongoing, and often ignoble act of representation. These remainders – which refuse the resolution of the poem – also convey their wish to break down the boundaries that have kept them imaginatively apart from their subject. Hill's protagonists cry 'I have not finished', and here Harrison's unapologetic younger self denies the reader any form of meaningful conclusion.[525]

The unexpected, unexplained connection that the poems make between small, local acts of obscenity and Hiroshima, 'genocide', and the threat of a large-scale nuclear war all blow apart the previously secure boundaries of history and geography. By exceeding the limits of the poem and the sympathy of the reader, 'Allotments' celebrates the power of the ignoble, awkward poetic voice to overcome other barriers in the way of effective historical witness. The collapse between Leeds, Auschwitz, and Buchenwald, and the collapse of the linear trajectory of the poem itself, confirms Leeds's status as a Milton-esque parabolic space. It is not a 'testing ground' for the present, but rather an epitome of it; the 'pocket' acts of hatred, violence, and obscenity become symptomatic of a wider, universal post-War condition.

Harrison continues to explore and expose these blurred and often intermingled states of the local and foreign, the familiar and uncanny in his later collections. In 'History Classes' Harrison's status as a war poet again applies not only to his documentation of an ongoing, outside 'threat', but his sense of the very real enemy within.[526] Peaceful post-War England, revealed to be a new Lost Paradise – full of the 'black' traces of imperial and modern

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[524] Harrison, 'Allotments' [L], p. 21.
[525] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 8' [KL], p. 54.
[526] Harrison, 'History Classes' [SoE], p. 189.

genocide – is ready to blow up. And as pieces such as 'Allotments' demonstrate, the poet makes it his business to be the one who unearths and detonates the 'unexploded mines' that lie beneath its communities. Harrison does this by revealing the private, small-scale acts of violence, conflict, and barbarity that exist beneath his nation's civilized façade. In the case of 'History Classes' this means educating his children as to the social and political acts that have scarred the countryside (and inhabitants) of the British borderlands:

> Past scenic laybys and stag warning signs
> the British borderlands roll into view.
>
> They read: Beware of Unexploded Mines!
> I tell my children that was World War II.
>
> They want to walk or swim. We pick up speed.
> My children boo the flash of every NO ENTRY:
>
> High seas, and shooting, uniform or tweed,
> Ministry of Defence, or landed gentry.[527]

By bringing together the M.O.D with the 'landed gentry', Harrison reveals the social and political conflicts that continue to shape the nation. England as a whole is cast as a 'borderland', defined by its class boundaries, military violence, and island insularity. It offers 'NO ENTRY' to those not in 'uniform or tweed', and on a larger scale it denies its membership to the rest of contemporary Europe. By keeping out the realities of its imperial past and current responsibilities in the ethical aftermath of the Holocaust, Britain maintains its status as a space of physical and epistemic borders. Yet as 'Allotments' demonstrated, Harrison's poetry deliberately exposes and explodes these boundary lines in order to transgress them. His poems re-define the notion of a borderland to mean a liminal, shifting space. After the 'Copernican' shift at the start of his first full collection, Harrison's Britain – and his imagination – border on and 'occupy' the places and issues previously marked 'NO ENTRY' for British poetry.

As 'History Classes' demonstrates, the key way that Harrison begins this occupation is to unearth and detonate the 'unexploded mines' that lie beneath the surface of Britain. He makes Leeds a warzone, and in doing so makes a mockery of his nation's 'NO ENTRY'. Just

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[527] Ibid.

as Hill's Towton became 'any worldly place', in Harrison's poetry Leeds is transformed into a microclasm of a modern, barbaric world.[528] Turning to 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe', in the first stanza of the poem, framed within the poet's characteristic slapstick, the hidden hatred, xenophobia, and 'versus' of the Loiners is laid bare. Harrison shows his own willingness to desecrate traditional notions of poetic language in order to draw attention to the hidden, everyday cruelty of those he represents:

> The –*nuts* bit really –*nis*. They didn't guess
>
> Till after he was dead, then his sad name
>
> Was bandied as a dirty backstreet Hess,
>
> A masturbator they made bear the blame
>
> For all daubed swastikas, all filthy scrawl
>
> In Gents *and* Ladies, YANKS GO HOME
>
> Scratched with a chisel on the churchyard wall;
>
> The vicar's bogey against wankers' doom.[529]

These opening lines show the role that the linguistic and ethical taboo plays in shaping Harrison's poetic. The speaker's childish wordplay, for example, when coupled with the often-awkward ABAB rhyme scheme (note the difficult rhyme between 'home' and 'doom'), evokes the spirit of the music hall, creating an awkward disjunction between the light-hearted tone and rather serious subject matter of the poem. Crucially, this use of humour and rhyme blows apart the civilized tradition of the poem, in turn exposing the fallacy of Leeds's own civilized façade. In his willingness to shock, Harrison effectively creates a collage within these opening lines, his own obscenity becoming simply another addition to the 'filthy scrawl' already reproduced within the poem.

The graffiti draws attention to the poet's alienated position, and to the strange, simultaneously historical and a-historical nature of Joe's Leeds. For instance, Harrison takes pleasure in recounting the obscenities of his old neighbours, yet the typography of the poem keeps the racist and threatening obscenities apart from his own, more skilled engagement with sexual taboos. The capitalisation of YANKS GO HOME keeps the secret hatred of the Loiners separate from the lower-case sympathies and reflections of the poet. So does the italicisation of the 'and' in 'Gents *and* Ladies' draw attention to the ironic, self-conscious cruelty of the poet. It differentiates him from the ignorant hatred of those willing to allow the

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[528] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 8' [KL], p. 54.
[529] Harrison, 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' [L], p. 18.

defenceless Joe to take the blame for their own wartime acts of xenophobia, and worse, their own right-wing sympathies. As well as inviting the reader to pass judgement on the usually hidden yet nonetheless widespread racism and cruelty of the Loiners, the presence of the graffiti highlights the significance of Leeds as Harrison's symbolic post-War space. In the difference between the title and these opening lines we can see the same tension between the historically and geographically fixed and the ahistorical and universal that shaped 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican system'. The graffiti reference to 'YANKS GO HOME', the 'dirty backstreet Hess', along with the mention of the 'daubed swastikas', locate the scene as being resolutely 'post-War'. Yet this fixed historical setting is undermined by the previous mention of an on-going set of 'pocket wars'. The shocking plurality within the title refuses to relegate these recent events to the past-tense. The graffiti itself also undermines any fixed notion of linear time. The acts of effacement, preserved as continually present by the poem, leave a physical scar long after the motivation for xenophobia has subsided.

This intertextuality, which at once celebrates and berates the historically fixed yet transcendent Loiners, says much about Harrison's position in relation to his subject. He is at once part of the community he depicts, and apart from them, intellectually superior via his use of rhyme and intelligent wordplay, and willing to pass judgement on than their small acts of xenophobia and malice. The speaker shows himself willing to stand in moral judgement over his subjects whilst also establishing Joe's posthumous position as a historical scapegoat. The written word – a tool of humour, hatred, and finally revelation and judgement – serves to reveal the universal capability of humankind – the poet included – to inhabit the role of victim and of perpetrator.

Along with 'Thomas Campey and The Copernican System', 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' establishes the distinctive style that will go on to shape Harrison's subsequent representations of war. By relocating the 'earth' and the 'war' to the streets of Leeds, the poem doesn't contain or reduce the destructive influence of recent events. Instead it shows their encroachment upon every aspect of post-War life. Equally, that the sex lives, childhoods, and petty prejudices of a local Northern community might offer a paradigm for the universal human condition, demonstrates Harrison's understanding of the human follies and small-scale barbarities that unite every community. Like Geoffrey Hill's depiction of 'Ovid in the Third Reich', Harrison's Loiners highlight the ease with which the quiet citizen might become the bystander or even the participant to atrocity.

A sequence of poems that more overtly explores these undercurrents of violence and alienation is 'Next Door', which was first published within Harrison's 'Continuous'

collection. Preceding the public broadcast of 'V' by only a couple of years, the poem anticipates the set of social and political conflicts that were articulated in the dramatic dialogue of the later poem.[530] In 'Next Door', Harrison takes the proximity of violence etched onto the walls of Leeds, and closes the gap even further. Now, barbarism and conflict are located 'next door' to his family home. More than any other poem, including 'V', this act of relocation most explicitly – and at times uncomfortably – explores the ongoing, hidden wars that Harrison makes it his business to expose. Positioned to witness the last vestiges of a now long outdated Victorian England, the poem begins with the idealized figure of Ethel Jowett as a means of recording the changing face of Leeds. Ethel, who gifted the poet '*The Kipling Treasury'* in 1946 and who lived next door to his mother and father, is by the end of the first poem in the sequence deceased and replaced by a series of neighbours who force the reader to confront the individual cruelties and prejudices that live within a community.[531] The poet's father's indignation at the fact that '*It won't be long before Ah'm t'only white!'* elicits an uncomfortable response from the reader.[532] Our pity for the lonely, isolated man mingles with our distain for his out-dated prejudices. Harrison deliberately increases this tension by italicising his father's words throughout the poem. Just as the italicised graffiti in 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' set the poet-scripter apart from his subject, in 'Next Door' the visual gap between the speakers creates an unresolved tension between the poet and his father. The reader is left uncertain as to what extent Harrison judges his father in these acts of ventriloquisation:

> *All turbans round here now, forget flat caps!*

> *They've taken over everything bar t'CO-OP.*
> *Pork's gone west, chitt'lin, trotters, dripping baps!*
> *And booze an' all, if it's a Moslem owns t'new shop.* [533]

As the poem draws to a close, the tone remains ambiguous, veering between pity and a resigned judgement of this vulnerable man. Acknowledging that his father is the 'Last of the 'old lot' still left in your block', the poem notes the changing culture – and colour – of modern, multi-cultural Leeds:

> Those times, they're gone. The 'old lot' can't come back.

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[530] Harrison, 'Next Door: I, II, III, IV' [SoE], pp. 140-143.
[531] Harrison, 'Next Door: I' [SoE], p. 140.
[532] Ibid.
[533] Harrison, 'Next Door: IV' [SoE], p. 143.

Both doors I notice now you double lock –

He's already in your shoes, your next door black.[534]

As well as conveying the tension between races within the local community, the poem offers up a more overt and ethically clear cut example of private brutality, this time in the guise of domestic violence. As well as becoming a home to members of Leeds's growing black and Asian community, Ethel Jowett's old house is at one time occupied by a couple whose relationship the poet relays with shocking accuracy:

The Sharpes came next. He beat her, blacked her eye.
Through walls I heard each blow, each Cunt! Cunt! Cunt![535]

Listening through the walls, able only to parrot back the abuse rather than retrospectively halt it, the poet places himself in a similar position to Hill's fictionalised Ovid, whose awareness of atrocity is balanced by his determination to dwell within his own, self-contained 'sphere'.[536] This is only exacerbated by his unwillingness to correct his father's racism, even if its origin lies in the old man's vulnerability and loneliness.

This exploration of the violence 'next door' continues in the poem 'V', which in its title encapsulates the plural and interwoven series of 'versus' that take place within England and Harrison's poetry:

These Vs are all the versuses of life
From LEEDS v. DERBY, Black /White
and (as I've known to my cost) man v. wife,
Communist v. Fascist, Left v. Right,

Class v. class as bitter as before,
the unending violence of US and THEM,
personified in 1984
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM,

Hindu /Sikh, soul /body, heart v. mind,

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[534] Ibid.
[535] Harrison, 'Next Door II' [SoE], p. 141.
[536] Hill, 'Ovid in the Third Reich [KL], p. 39.

> East /West, male /female, and the ground
>
> these fixtures are fought on's Man, resigned
>
> to hope from his future what his past never found.[537]

 The graffiti on his parent's tombstones, the poet's interaction with the unemployed, disillusioned, and aggressive yob, and even his recollection of his father's alienation in the face of an increasingly multicultural local community, all confirm Leeds's status as a warzone in its own right. In his 2005 poem 'Shrapnel' however, Harrison brings the Thatcherite Britain of 'V' up to the post-9 /11 age, and here again the presence of violence just 'next door' is brought back to the reader with stark force.

More than in any other of Harrison's poems, 'Shrapnel' blows apart the distinction between an external and internal threat, as in its compression of wartime and contemporary Britain the poem challenges the reader to consider the links that bind every nation together. Recalling his childhood experience of the bombings, the adult poet reminisces about the near miss that went on to define his adult life and writing:

> I went to see the craters the bombs made
>
> first thing in the morning and us lads
>
> collected lumps of shrapnel from the raid
>
> to prove we'd seen some war to absent dads.
>
> There was a bobby there who didn't mind
>
> craters being used by kids so soon for play
>
> or hunting for shrapnel that he helped us find.
>
> Clutching my twisted lump I heard him say:
>
>
> 'appen Gerry must 've been 'umane
>
> or there'd 've been a bloodbath 'ere last neet.
>
> They'd be flattened now woud t' 'ouses in Lodge
>
> Lane, Tempest Road, all t' 'arlechs, Stratford Street.
>
> He dumped his bombs in t' park and damaged
>
> nowtmissing t' rows of 'ouses either side.
>
> 'umane ! 'umane! And 'im a bloody Kraut!
>
> And but for him, I thought, I could have died.[538]

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[537] Harrison, 'V', *CdP,* p. 266.

[538] Harrison, 'Shrapnel', *CdP,* p. 438.

In an apparent affirmation of the overriding humanity of man, the cavernous hole left in Cross Flatts Park by a German bomber, and the resulting shrapnel from the blast, lie as an ironic monument of hope for mankind in amongst the rubble. The shrapnel paperweight becomes a reminder of the enduring ''umane!', kept by the poet as he 'fac[es] north' at his writing desk. Yet just as the poem seems to offer a heart-warming affirmation of the continuing possibility of humanism and human kindness, the poem explodes open the scene with another set of bombs:

> A flicker of faith in man grew from that raid
>
> where this shrapnel that I'm stroking now comes
>
> from, when a German had strict orders but obeyed
>
> some better, deeper instinct not to bomb
>
> the houses down below and be humane.
>
> Our house, thanks to that humane bombardier,
>
> still stands: and that of Hasib mir Hussain,
>
> Mohammed Siddique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer.[539]

The sudden implication of the mutual affect between 1940s and 2005 Britain enacts a 'Copernican' shift that throws the reader off balance. It blows apart the supposedly fixed moral and historical ground that the poem previously appeared to stand upon. That the true 'shrapnel' of the war-time bombing is not the piece of concrete on the poet's writing desk but instead the rubble of the 7/7 bombings, splits apart the nostalgic and self-contained tone of the poem. What it leaves in its place is a piece that exposes the interwoven nature of human history – a history in which Leeds plays an integral, dubious part. The historical and geographical compression in these final lines exposes the fact that Leeds, the North, and by proxy every small community across the world has no need to 'grow black enough' in order to understand atrocity; that moral and historical blackness already forms the 'roots' of every society.

'Shrapnel' leaves the reader with an image of the enemy within, rather than an enemy from abroad, just as poems such as 'Next Door' highlight the flaws of the Loiners as much as the Japanese, Soviets, or Germans. The final lines are haunting, and strangely empty, their bleakness emphasised in performances by the poet's slow and deliberate pronunciation of each bomber's name.[540] The un-glossed recitation of the names of these contemporary

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[539] Ibid., p. 439.
[540] Harrison read this poem during performances at the West Yorkshire Playhouse and Sheffield in 2013.

'Loiners' brings the reader back to Harrison's first collection, and his description in Dr. Agrippa of a community who must 'bear' or 'bare' an unspecified terror. Drawing together the inherited and often strange landscape of childhood and the chosen, yet nonetheless painful spaces of adulthood, Leeds – the home of loners, loin-ers, and the birthplace of the cosmopolitan poet and the 7/7 bombers – stages the conflicts that 'occupy' Harrison's imagination. In each poem's literal and symbolic set of 'pocket wars', fictionalised and real Loiners reveal the small-scale and, crucially, on-going conflicts and acts of violence that shape an apparently civilized and united post-War community. After Harrison's 'copernican' shift, not only is Leeds now the centre of the universe, but it is also now at the heart of an ethical debate regarding man's potential for barbarity.

As claustrophobic as Harrison's poems often are – crammed with Loiners, structured around tight rhyme and fixed poetic form, littered with puns, street names, graffiti, and punctured by obscenities – their lack of historical resolution prevent their scope from being dismissed as small-scale or merely local. Whether conflict drifts in with the smoke of distant fires, or else lives on the other side of a thin dividing wall, it is ever-present (in both senses of the word) in the poet's North and in his imagination. Juxtaposed with the fixity of the poetic form, the ethics of the subject matter in pieces such as 'Next Door', 'Allotments', and 'Shrapnel' remains unresolved, just as history and war remain ever present and plural within the community. The 'shrapnel' of history evades the 'borderlines' of each poem, encroaching onto the next page, the next street, the next year, like an orphaned line. The fact that 'Shrapnel' was published in 2002, over sixty years after the end of the Second World War, only serves to emphasise this fact. Yet this explosion of borders also provides the means by which Harrison moves beyond documenting the universality of barbarity and moves towards establishing a more positive poetic response. This new, open geography allows him to redefine Leeds and England as a transnational and transhistorical space. With all the old borders replaced by rubble and scars, in Harrison's post-War globe the North of England is made interchangeable with Peru, Bosnia, Buchenwald, Africa, indeed anywhere that bears the marks of human violence. Whilst this connection may be built upon a foundation of atrocious acts, like the 'any worldly place' of Hill's imagination, these connecting traces balance worldly pessimism against a more hopeful celebration of an international, borderless community. Though these geographies may be united by rubble and scorch-marks, the shrapnel that they create – each piece indistinct and interchangeable – represent a piece of an imaginative barrier broken down in the act of empathy and recognition. This tentative

celebration of a universal community, written out of the embers of fire, is Harrison's measured yet nonetheless urgent humanism.

III.

Before 'Shrapnel' turns its gaze upon Beeston and Cross Flatts Park, the poem begins at the poet's writing desk – in the same location as 'Facing North'. More upbeat than the earlier poem, in this depiction the poet writes on 'A summer day with all the windows wide'. However, just as the dark north wind 'rocks the light' within the earlier poem, here the tranquillity of the creative process is disrupted when 'suddenly a storm-presaging breeze / makes the scribbled papers that I'm sorting slide / on to the floor'.[541] Addressing the reader directly – 'They're these you're reading, these' – Harrison adds a meta-poetic level to 'Shrapnel'. The moment acknowledges the degree to which these events are staged in order to draw up the links between the writing desk, the paper weight, and the events that weigh down the poetic imagination:

> I rummage through my many paperweights,
>
> granddad's knuckleduster, this one from Corfu,
>
> a rosette from the Kaiser's palace gates,
>
> and shrapnel from an air raid I lived through.[542]

These symbolic objects, listed and kept apart from the piece of shrapnel, and left without further explanation, together draw attention to the differing influences upon Harrison's imagination. In this creative space the personal sits alongside the historical as an equally weighted force upon the blank page. The manner in which they are listed also encapsulates the relativism that shapes Harrison's poetic – seen already in the final lines of 'Allotments' – as each object is just another stone on the poet's historical pile. Addressing Harrison's tendency to bring together different historical events, regardless of the fact that each is charged with its own highly complex set of ethical and representational issues, Antony Rowland has acknowledged how 'an unsympathetic critic might… charge Harrison with insensitivity towards historical contingencies'.[543] He notes how the poet 'has the tendency to connect such events as the Holocaust, the dropping of the atom bomb, and the fire bombings of Dresden and Hamburg under the auspices of the fire metaphor that extends throughout his

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[541] Harrison, 'Shrapnel', *CdP*, p. 437.
[542] Ibid.
[543] Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry*, p. 104.

work'.[544] Defending this 'awkward' yet nevertheless often fruitful technique, Rowland notes how Harrison's post-Holocaust poems, 'whilst risking inappropriate linkages, usually outline differences, as well as similarities, between historical and mythical event'.[545] The resulting poetic is one that builds upon the tension between 'the mythic method and historical specificity'.[546] Whilst Rowland's comments apply more readily to work such as the film poem 'Prometheus', which uncomfortably, and not altogether successfully brings together classical mythology with the Holocaust, his sense of the fruitful tension that arises within Harrison's 'linkages' is an important identification of the poet's historiographical approach. These connections and uncomfortable links lie at the heart of Harrison's more positive post-War representation. What the laid out pieces of 'shrapnel' articulate is not only the poet's adherence to a historical model almost identical to Hill's, but his equal belief in the importance of the poem as an overarching 'comet', able to reveal men 'in such array'.[547] Whilst Harrison's poems are closer to their subject, coupled with this 'next door' intimacy is the almost mythic overarching gaze of the poet witness.

This link between Hill's depiction of the comet and Harrison's own historiographical approach is fitting given the importance of the 'Copernican' as a fruitful metaphor within the latter poet's work. The link that he makes in 'Facing North' between the poetic and the planetary helps to convey the role of the cosmic in shaping Harrison's vision of the world. The circle – a powerful and recurring image within Harrison's poetry – is contextualised within the orbiting planets of the solar system, as the poet's disorientating Copernican shift is reaffirmed in his choice of imagery. Describing first the 'paper lantern nothing will keep still', blown into an 'O' by the North wind, then 'the circle, where my hand moves over white / With red and green advances on black ink', Harrison then evokes the power of the wind to press an entire universe upon the private space of the poet's darkened study.[548] The North wind, despite the poet's best efforts, 'throws up images of planets hurled, / still glowing, off their courses, and a state / where there's no gravity to hold the world'. Evoking the poet's description of Palladas and the role of form in holding back 'cosmic' chaos, and the unstable balance of Thomas Campey, here the poem describes the difficulty with which Harrison

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[544] Ibid.
[545] Ibid.
[546] Ibid.
[547] Hill, 'Funeral Music: 7' [KL], p. 49.
[548] Harrison, 'Facing North', *CdP*, p. 218.

keeps hold of 'an Earth that still has men', despite the overwhelming cacophony of 'this flooded orchestra' of historical pressure.[549]

This idea that in the act of imagination the poet risks losing his footing on solid ground is both a desperate and a hopeful prospect. It becomes the means by which Harrison maps his distinctly transnational vision of history, memory, and identity upon Northern England. It is precisely this almost 'cosmic' chaos that links the surroundings of 'Facing North' and 'Shrapnel' with the other side of the globe. Thrown off-balance, ruptured by the force and continuing after-shocks of the bomb, Harrison's globe can now be put back together differently by the poet. In 'Three poems for Bosnia' for instance, the streets of Sarajevo are connected to post-War Leeds due to their shrapnel scars and potholes, and because of the violence and humanity that unites every community. In his Copernican re-alignment the poet plots 1990s Bosnia as a single star in a transhistorical and transgeographical constellation. Beeston and Sarajevo both belong within the same 'Universe' that Harrison first situated himself within as a child writing out his address.[550]

In 'The Bright Lights of Sarajevo', one part of the three-poem sequence, Harrison documents a pair of young lovers. Ignoring the threat of snipers, bombs, and the falling aid parcels, the pair go 'strolling' and courting on the unlit streets of night time Sarajevo – all before their curfew. Rather than embody the position of the war reporter, this time the poet instead bears witness to the remaining traces of humanity in the warzone. Documenting private love in the public spaces of conflict, he juxtaposes the streets of Sarajevo with the private conflicts of 'Next Door', and at this moment it is the bloodied warzone that, ironically, feels more humane:

> …he's about, I think, to take her hand
> and lead her away from where they stand
> on two shell splash scars, where in '92
> Serb mortars massacred a breadshop queue
> and blood dunked crusts of shredded bread
> lay on the pavement with the broken dead.[551]

This romantic meeting, located atop of 'two shell splash mortar scars', provides a moment of humanity in amongst the physical reminders of its scarcity. The proximity between normality and joy and utter horror – evocatively described by the poet, are both a poignant and a

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[549] Harrison, 'Preface to *Palladas*', p. 135; Harrison, 'Facing North', *CdP*, pp. 190, 191.
[550] Harrison, in Haffenden, 'Interview with Tony Harrison', p. 230.
[551] Harrison, 'Three poems for Bosnia: The Bright Lights of Sarajevo', *CdP*, pp. 339-340.

disturbing reminder both of the strangeness of war and of the simple strangeness of being human.

An archive of human aggression, the shell splash scars contain the paradox of humanity's capacity to love and hate in equal measure. They bear witness to a human history that includes, but is not limited to, the star-crossed lovers:

> And at their feet in holes made by the mortar
>
> that caused the massacre, now full of water
>
> from the rain that's poured down half the day,
>
> though now even the smallest clouds have cleared away,
>
> leaving the Sarajevo star-filled evening sky
>
> ideally bright and clear for bomber's eye,
>
> in those two rain-full shell-holes the boy sees
>
> fragments of the splintered Pleiades,
>
> sprinkled on those death-deep, death-dark wells
>
> splashed on the pavement by Serb mortar shells.[552]

Within the delayed syntax of these lines Harrison compresses love, death, memory, classical myth, threat, and promise, pooling them together within the holes in the ground. Reflecting these physical containers, in the reference to Pleiades, a constellation said to be comprised of the seven daughters of Atlas – each made into a star to comfort their father as he bore the weight of the globe – Harrison imbues the image of the shrapnel with a classical provenance. In doing so he broadens out the immediacy of the scene onto a mythic and planetary scale. The final scene, both sweet and bitter (like the kumquat with its 'darkness round [it] like a rind'), plots Harrison's map of history around the 'death-deep' fragments of human violence.[553] Transformed into a revelatory space, the mortar hole plots an earthly constellation upon the globe – one which connects Harrison's poems and the histories that they bear witness to. In these 'death-dark wells', for instance, the poet makes a link back to wartime Leeds, as the crater in Cross Flatts Park is transformed into a single star in Harrison's reformed Pleiades.

This cosmic connection between the landscapes of the two poems highlights how the image of the constellation offers Harrison a metaphor through which to undertake his historical and geographical re-alignment. The scars and shrapnel, each connected to the other

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[552] Ibid., p. 340.

[553] Harrison, 'A Kumquat for John Keats', *CdP*, p. 221.

like stars in a single constellation, link the poems and their respective landscapes together in an alternative map – one that disregards geographical borders. This metaphor also links 'Shrapnel' and 'Three poems for Bosnia' to other poems within Harrison's collection, such as the sequence 'Sonnets for August 1945'. Like the seven stars that make up Pleiades, 'Sonnets for August 1945' is a sequence made up of seven poems. As the title suggests, each one addresses a different element of the immediate post War, and in keeping with the transnational nature of Harrison's exploration, they move across the globe, despite their chronological specificity.[554]

In the sequence Harrison addresses the impact of the war on both the public and private life of the nation. To do this he draws upon familiar everyday objects, such as a family photograph or the label from the 'Camp Coffee extract' as containers – or shrapnel – of a wider history of empire, conflict, and filial love.[555] In relation to the recurring image of the circular mortar blast scars, and the 'shrapnel' stars that are spread across the poet's work, the first poem in the sequence – split into two parts – provides two further points upon which Harrison plots his post-1945 map. In 'The Morning After', a set of two sonnets that fittingly draw attention to Harrison's own 'belated witness', the fire first fictionalised in 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' is returned to in what is now a more sombre and reflective poetic voice.

Set at the physical location of the celebratory bonfire, it is now not the flames but rather the smoking, charred remains of the fire that captures the imagination of the poet. Recalling his childhood, and the V.J day celebrations, the poet reflects that 'The fire left to itself might smoulder weeks. / Phone cables melt. Paint peels off back gates. / Kitchen windows crack; the whole street reeks / Of horsehair blazing. Still it celebrates'.[556] Very much a part of the sensual physicality of the scene, the poetic voice is immediate, present-tense, and childlike in its speculation of what 'might' yet happen to the fire. Yet behind this deliberate immediacy lies the knowing retrospection of the older poet. Unlike his younger self, his memory of the scene is 'clouded' by his adult knowledge, and is therefore a joy 'banked with grief'. This duality manifests itself in the doubleness of the language and imagery, in particular in the associative language that pre-empts the second part of the sonnet. Even before the reader turns the page and encounters the double of the bonfire, we are set on edge by the melting and peeling of paint and plastic, and the evocative 'reek' of horsehair. Once the second sonnet begins, these images take on an altogether more sinister, even

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[554] Harrison, 'Sonnets for August 1945' [SoE] p. 196-203.
[555] 'Ibid.: 2. Old Soldiers' [SoE], p. 198.
[556] 'Ibid.: 1. The Morning After, I' [SoE], p. 196.

prurient degree of sensuality. Linking the bonfire with the A-bomb that caused it, the poet notes how 'The rising sun was blackened on those flames. / The jabbering tongues of fire consumed its rays'. Despite the fact that 'Hiroshima, Nagasaki were mere names / For us small boys who gloried in our blaze' their actions are nonetheless 'clouded' by the true cause of their delight.[557] For the adult poet who looks back upon his childhood naivety, the peeling paint and 'reek' of horsehair contain not just the joy of the Loiners, but the horrors of the human victims of the A-Bomb. Like the 'stench' of the abattoir in 'Allotments', the bonfire exposes the historical traces that bind Leeds together with a world beyond its borders.

This archive to the interconnectedness of celebration and unimaginable horror is retrospectively drawn upon again in the final poem of the sequence. In 'The Birds of Japan' the bonfire is more explicitly linked to 'men made magma, flesh made fumaroles, / first mottled by the flash to brief mofettes'.[558] The poem ends by asking 'Did the birds burst into song as they ignited / above the billowing waves of cloud up in the sky, / hosannahs too short-lived to have alighted /on a Bomb-Age Basho, or a Hokusai'.[559] This almost beautiful image, which posits one version of the sublime against its grotesque other, shows Harrison's willingness to go into detail regarding the bodily effects of the A-bomb. Indeed, his poetry so frequently enacts its own explosion or rupture of taste that the absence of any prurient detail within 'The Morning After' points to deliberate decision to leave the bonfire and its remains as the most potent image within the poem. What contains humanity's (and the poet's) grief and guilt is not the startling image of the birds failing to rise above the flames of Hiroshima, but the far more ordinary image of a mark on the road. What enables the poem to finally connect the two points on the globe are the same charred scorch marks that also mark out Sarajevo as another revelatory, transnational space.

In the first part of the sequence the sonnet ends where it began, at the smouldering fire. However this time the adult poet has replaced his child-self at the scene, disrupting chronological distance and the notion of the 'morning after' to focus on the marks and shrapnel that scar both the streets of Leeds and his own imagination:

> There's still that dark, scorched circle on the road.
>
> The morning after kids like me helped spray
>
> Hissing upholstery spring wire that glowed

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[557] 'Ibid.: 1. The Morning After, II' [SoE], p. 197.
[558] 'Ibid.: 7. The Birds of Japan' [SoE], p. 203.
[559] Ibid.

> And cobbles boiling with black gas tar for VJ.[560]

Mirroring this return to the 'circle on the road', the second part of the poem also ends upon the image of the 'scorched' streets. However, just as 'The Bright Lights of Sarajevo' plots the bomb craters as part of a larger constellation of violence, here Harrison imbues the earth with a wider, cosmic universality, however bleak that might be:

> That circle of scorched cobbles scarred with tar's
>
> a night sky globe nerve-wrackingly all black,
>
> both hemispheres entire but with no stars,
>
> an Archerless zilch, a Scaleless zodiac.[561]

The irony of this black and empty sky is that by drawing upon the imagery of the solar system the poet plots Leeds and Japan into his own Copernican system. In their bleakness they join the bomb craters of Sarajevo and Cross Flatts Park as two parts of a larger constellation of atrocity, unbound by the dividing lines of separate hemispheres and the passage of time. Each moment, regardless of its chronological or geographical position, is joined together in an arc that simultaneously affirms the poet's historical pessimism whilst offering a tentative, even hopeful planetary humanism.

IV

Harrison's alternative solar system of transnational and transhistorical violence doesn't just connect up the shrapnel scars of history. These constellations also connect up the poet's various works. Pieces such as 'Sonnets for August 1945' and 'Shrapnel' link to poems ranging right back to *The Loiners* via the repeated reference to stars and the cosmic space that the poetic imagination inhabits. What this does is create an alternative map – one which plots nations together according to their shared connection to violence rather than their geographical borders. In the essay 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa' the cartographic nature of Harrison's poetic is visible in the connection he makes between his 'black' North and the African continent. The quotation in its entirely conveys the excitement of a writer determined, right from the early stages of his career, to inhabit a cosmopolitan, borderless space:

> Shortly after the publication of *The Loiners* I was killing time in Hereford
> cathedral before catching a train home after giving a reading from the book, and

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[560] 'Ibid.: 1. The Morning After, I' [SoE], p. 196.
[561] 'Ibid.: 1. The Morning After, II' [SoE], p. 197.

suddenly I found myself standing before *Mappa Mundi*, a thirteenth-century map of the world like a golden brain with a tumour somewhere near Paradise. If you look at Africa on it, you see all its prodigies … But in gold letters the Dark Continent is labelled EUROPE. Prebendary A.L. Moir, writing on this incredible error, suggests either that the names were added erroneously by a later hand, or, and I like to think that this is the truth, that it is "an attempt to represent Africa-Europe as a single entity with interchangeable names." I felt the same almost unbearable excitement staring at the *Mappa Mundi* (with no New World as yet) as I felt when I read the words of Thomas Browne … 'There is all Africa and her prodigies in us; we are all that bold and adventurous piece of nature.' Or when about to move to Newcastle upon Tyne … I read a poem attributed to John Cleveland:

'Correct your maps: Newcastle is Peru'[562]

That Europe and Africa might be 'interchangeable', a single entity in their equal darkness and light, evokes the same, faltering and 'clouded' celebration of universal humanity represented in the constellation of historical moments, or else the pieces shrapnel sat together upon the writing desk. It expresses the poet's desire to create his own Mappa Mundi for the post-Holocaust age – a map with which to bring together the light and dark of human history. It also conveys his apparent optimism at the power of the poem to create 'that bold and adventurous piece of nature'.

This optimism is carried over into the title and start of 'Newcastle is Peru' itself, which begins with a passage from Seneca's *Medea*. Echoing the imagined Kingdoms first of Milton and later of Hill and Silkin, the (un-translated) passage anticipates how 'There will come a time in the later years when Oceans shall loosen the bonds by which we have been confined, when an immense land shall be revealed and Tiphys shall disclose new worlds, and Thule will no longer be the most remote of countries'.[563] Given the earlier poems' emphasis on the particularity of Harrison's historical moment, the inclusion of Seneca in this context suggests that the post-War poet stands at the pivotal moment of prophesied discovery and change. Like with Campey's 'Copernican' shift, in 'Newcastle is Peru' Harrison posits his Northern landscape as both a 'new world' and a version of 'Thule', re-mapped by the poem and thus 'no longer the remotest of countries'. Along with the prose of 'Dr Agrippa' it

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[562] Harrison, 'The Inkwell of Dr Agrippa', pp. 34-35.
[563] Harrison, 'Newcastle is Peru' [L], p. 64.

suggests that though the necessary depiction of violence and its physical scars, poetry can begin to offer a more hopeful vision of universal mankind. Despite their emergence from barbarous roots, in the act of belated witness each object or location of violence within Harrison's poems is imbued with a possibility of redemption. A glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak archive of human history, Harrison's new cartography allows him to map a poetic which can 'concentrate our attention on our worst experiences without leaving us with the feeling, as other media can, that life in this century has had its affirmative spirit burnt out'.[564] Like the kumquat, his poetic geographies contain the bitter and the sweet. As a place which contains this darkness and light, the North, and in this case Newcastle, is as good a starting point as any to 'correct your maps'.

The trajectory of poems such as 'The Bright Lights of Sarajevo' and 'The Morning After' confirm Harrison's tendency to begin with the bleak and move, falteringly, to the tentatively hopeful. This pattern also shapes 'Newcastle is Peru', as after the un-ambiguously joyful tone of the epigraph passages, the first stanza reverts back to the bleakness that characterizes his other acts of historical witness. After using his epigraph to suggest the fruitfulness of disrupted national borders, in the first verse of the poem Harrison undermines this celebratory tone with a very different depiction of his return:

> For defending in our Civil Wars
> The King's against the better cause,
> Newcastle got its motto: FORTIT –
> ER TRIUMPHANS DEFENDIT.
> After Nigeria and Prague I come
> back near to where I started from,
> all my defences broken down
> on nine or ten *Newcastle Brown*.[565]

Whereas the choice of epigraph was suggestive of the possibility of recasting both Newcastle and the North of England as a re-discovered cultural and imaginative territory, the opening lines of the poem instead invoke a very different form of broken boundary. The play on the notion of defence (and, crucially, the lack of it) – both in terms of the national and the personal – is strengthened by the deliberate tension between line endings and sentence length. In the ironic break up of 'FORTIT- /ER' the poet subverts the linguistic defences of

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[564] Tony Harrison, 'Prologue', p. 9.
[565] Harrison, 'Newcastle is Peru' [L], p. 64.

Newcastle, as the formal structure of the poem breaks through the sentence. In the line ending between 'defences broken down /on nine or ten Newcastle Brown', this same play occurs, as the poem again confuses the physical with the psychological. Now, rather than depict post-War Newcastle as the culmination of a purely positive 'copernican' shift, the poem evokes a return to England and the North clouded by personal and historical vulnerability. As Harrison goes on to explore in 'On Not Being Milton', the change that has taken place within the consciousness and imagination of the poet means that the task of ever truly coming back 'to where I started from' is in reality, impossible. With this sudden movement from celebration to despair the title of the poem takes on a new, less triumphant meaning, as John Cleveland's exclamation is subverted. To the educated, cosmopolitan, but ultimately alienated Harrison, Newcastle might as well be Peru, just as Leeds and Beeston might be the mythic, undiscovered 'Thule'. For the Grammar School boy and the adult poet, the idea and reality of home is more foreign and more barbaric than any geographically or historically distant location.

As the poem moves on from this initial introduction to Newcastle and the poet's lack of 'brave defence', the next stanza moves from the transitional space of the city to the privacy and apparent fixity of the domestic space. Unpacking his belongings into his new flat, the speaker again dwells upon his emotional vulnerability, recalling how in 'a clumsy effort at control': I faff with paper chips and coal, / And rake out with elaborate fuss / One whole summer's detritus'.[566] In keeping with the earlier sense of a symbolic as well as physical homecoming, the clearing of 'detritus' speaks to the poet's need to 'rake out' his past within the pages of his first collection. At the mention of the fireplace Harrison also introduces a link between this adult act of clearing and other poetic attempts at 'control'. The mention of detritus evokes the flames within 'The Pocket Wars of Peanuts Joe' and 'Allotments', and pre-empts the painful blackening of the poet in 'On Not Being Milton'. It is in this initially subtle link between the poems that Harrison suggests the role that history may play in causing his 'broken down' spirit. As the poem continues, this connection is made more explicit. Describing how the fire now 'roars / like muted Disney dinosaurs' – a reference to the poet's position as a father – the poem goes on to reveal the less-than-domestic material that fuels the flames:

… last week's Sunday paper glows

yellowish, its urgent prose,

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[566] Ibid.

> like flies across a carcass, spreads
>
> and fattens on the voiceless dead.[567]

The change of metaphor – from the whimsical and cartoonish to the prurient and almost scatological – is startling in its suddenness. It is reminiscent both of Joe's unexpected self-exposure at the Loiners' V.J. day celebrations, and of the Pole's interruption of the speaker's love-making at the Beeston abattoir. In both cases the fire, the visionary, and their symbolic and revelatory 'Hiroshimas' together disrupt the imaginative border that protects the Loiners from the atrocious origins of their current happiness. Here, in the apparently safe environment of the domestic space, the fire again reveals the presence and the present-ness of the suffering and 'voiceless dead'. That the paper is dated to only last week, its prose still 'urgent', confirms the continual cycle of violence that still presses on the poetic imagination.

In the following stanzas Harrison continues to explore a circular, as opposed to linear, version of history. The poem identifies the traces that connect his current position with the 'dark continent' painted upon the Mappa Mundi, and with the barbaric and violent spaces around the globe. Describing a burning picture that in turn depicts the fiery vision of 'lobbed mortar bombs / smashing down Onitsha homes' the poet, in an echo of Thomas Campey, undergoes his own 'Copernican shift':

> I lay down, dizzy, drunk, alone,
>
> life circling life like the Eddystone
>
> dark sea, but lighting nothing; sense
>
> not centre, no circumference.[568]

Floored by the disorientating pressure of history, Harrison is left to face the imminent prospect of annihilation. Reminiscent of Yeats's 'The centre will not hold', without 'sense', 'centre', or 'circumference' it is only the tight formal constraints of the poem itself that stave off the threat of nothingness. The focus on fire, coupled with the repeated emphasis on the circularity of life and history evoke the almost physical pressure of the atomic bomb upon the imagination of the poet. Pre-empting the 'urn' that will later explode within 'A Kumquat for John Keats', in 'Newcastle is Peru' it is the dizzying presence of the atomic blast that provides fire but no light, and which blows apart the poet's new world, distinguishing him from his metaphysical predecessor Cleveland.

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[567] Ibid., pp. 64-65.
[568] Ibid., p. 65.

In the next verse, the force of the atomic explosion continues to reverberate through both the form and subject of the poem. However, just as the Holocaust and Hiroshima retrospectively altered the poet's sense of his childhood and sexual awakening, here the confrontation with the 'voiceless dead' within the domestic space forces Harrison back to the similarly innocent spaces of his younger wartime childhood. Comparing his current sickness to the queasiness felt on the 'Switchback; Helter Skelter; Reel; / the Blackpool Pleasure Beach Big Wheel', the poet describes the decorations on the ride in language heavy with the image of modern warfare – 'its million coloured lightbulbs one / red halo like an empty sun'.[569] The prospect of an 'empty sun' – of a light that serves only to illuminate the 'black' heart of humankind – recasts Harrison's historical moment as one severed by violence from the poetic tradition that came before it. He engages with the style of the Metaphysicals, yet the nature of his subject means that he cannot be reconciled to the historical innocence of Cleveland and Marvell. Just as his historical 'blackness' distinguished his hometown from the Paradise of Milton and created the need for an alternative fruit than Keats, here again history demands that the poet define and re-map his precise creative, geographical, and ethical position. Newcastle is inexorably altered, as is his own position as one engaged in surveying and bearing witness to this newly discovered territory.

Conclusion

'Newcastle is Peru' articulates the disjunction between innocence and experience that shapes Harrison's post-War representation. By mirroring the rhetorical style of John Cleveland, yet measuring this similarity against a thoroughly post-atomic conceit, the poem articulates the dislocation between the poet's childhood and adult self, and between his post-War perspective and the view of his poetic predecessors. These dialectics, formed out of the poet's sensitivity to historical experience and witness, lie at the heart of Harrison's representation of place and home.

The poem also, more reflexively, interrogates the nature of memory and history itself, as the recurring image of the circle rejects any notion of linearity or clear progress. The dizzying route of the 'switchback' and 'helter skelter' do not ever come to end on Blackpool Pleasure Beach, but rather continue within the form of the poem itself. As if riding the

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[569] Ibid.

rollercoaster to its highest point, the gaze of the poet widens outwards so that '... with vistas like Earl Grey's':

> I look out over life and praise
>
> from my unsteady, sea-view plinth
>
> each dark turn of the labyrinth [570]

From his 'unsteady, sea-view plinth' Harrison can take in, with a mixture of despair and defiance, the labyrinthine nature of time and memory. Taking on the same relativist approach that characterised the final lines of 'Allotments', as well as the constellation of scorch marks scattered across the body of his work, the poem contextualises the bombing of Onitsha and atomic warfare as simply one more 'dark turn of the labyrinth'. In 'Allotments' this interconnectivity compressed together Beeston and Buchenwald in a manner that left the reader as unsettled as the teenage poet, struggling to make ethical sense of Harrison's unresolved and embarrassing new cartography. In 'Newcastle is Peru', the world is once again compressed by acts of atrocity, yet this time the poet tempers his despair with a more celebratory look towards the future. To do this, Harrison again turns towards the solar system as the fitting metaphor for his planetary humanism.

Revolving together around the 'empty sun' of the atomic bomb, each nation is offered the opportunity to dismantle its own civil and private defence, however painful this process might be. From this point onwards in the poem the world of the modern poet begins to be re-aligned with that of both Seneca and Cleveland. The 'new' in Newcastle tentatively offers the possibility of 'discovery', invention, and redemption. In a reflection of this new sense of humanistic possibility the syntax of the poem speeds up, as like a rollercoaster spinning through its own 'dark turn', the poem rushes downwards in a moment of freefall:

> ... like a river suddenly
>
> wind its widening banks into the sea
>
> and Newcastle is Newcastle is New-
>
> castle *is* Peru![571]

Maintaining this syntactical momentum, the poem quickly and disorientating unfolds the multidirectional form of the poet's memory and imagination. Drawing upon both the rhetoric and content of Seneca and Cleveland, the poem plays upon the 'New' is Newcastle in order to

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[570] Ibid., p. 66.
[571] Ibid.

plot a temporal and epistemic version of the 'New World' onto the Mappa Mundi. The speaker proclaims:

> Discovery! Slaves, now trains,
>
> like *spirochetes* through dark brains,
>
> tunnel the Andes, spiralling for zinc
>
> and silver, gold and lead; drink
>
> still makes me giddy; my mind whirls
>
> through all my wanderings and girls
>
> to one last city, whose black crest
>
> shows all the universe at rest.[572]

Adopting the same enthusiastic rhetoric as John Cleveland, the poet's exclamation of his own 'Discovery!', coupled with the 'spiralling' trajectory of the poem, continue to suggest a new celebratory element to Harrison's homecoming. Picking up on the circularity and cosmic influence that runs from 'Thomas Campey and the Copernican System', 'Facing North', all the way through to Harrison's Bosnia poems and 'Shrapnel', it is now the poet's imagination that is in orbit, as the poem 'whirls' out from the domestic to the planetary.

Whether this 'giddy' shift towards consciousness brings any real 'rest' is left deliberately ambiguous, as despite its tentative celebration of the 'new', the poem crucially resists the temptation to provide any easy sense of historical or personal resolution. Whilst the assertion that Newcastle might be the poet's 'one last city' presents the poet as being physically at 'rest', this spatial fixity is undermined first by the 'dark' history and geography that the poem spiralled through to arrive at this point, and then by the fact that the poet's rest is inescapable from the ironic 'rest in peace' of the dead. What tunnels through Harrison's 'dark brain' and subsequently through the form of the poem, are not only the events of more recent acts of violence enacted upon 'Onitsha homes', but also the connection that these events have to other, earlier acts of barbarity. Harrison once again draws upon syphilis and sexually transmitted diseases as an appropriate metaphor both for the Empire's unsavoury legacy across the globe, and for the slow ravishment of history upon the post-War poetic imagination. That bacterial 'spirochetes' eat away at the poet's 'dark brain' conveys the extent to which language and poetry remain implicated in – or rather infected with – the nation's colonial legacy and humanity's continuing cruelty. As the poem continues, this ambiguous

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[572] Ibid., p. 67.

play between resolution and degeneration continues, as Harrison begins to more fully articulate the form that his post-War humanism will take:

> At rest! That last red flash
>
> As life's last ember turns to ash
>
> And riddled dust drops through the grate
>
> Around the heart. O celebrate,
>
> As panic screws up each charged nerve
>
> To cornering the next sharp swerve,
>
> Earth, people, planets, as they move
>
> With all the gravity of love.[573]

The tension here between the image of the ash and 'riddled dust … around the heart' and the subsequent call to 'celebrate' expresses, like the kumquat fruit, how 'life has a skin of death that keeps its zest'.[574] The dialectic between emptiness and historical pessimism on the one hand, and the desire to seek out a new system that might allow for a planetary sense of history and humanity on the other, remains unresolved, despite the poem's ironic focus on the poet's being 'At rest!'. It is this deliberate refusal of any fixity or resolution in 'Newcastle is Peru' – in contradiction to the rigidity of the form and rhyme – which characterises all of Harrison's attempts to plot his post-War cartography. The North 'may begin inside', yet in each poem what is North or South, home or abroad, near or distant, is blown apart and sent 'spinning' by the poet's explosive reimagining of the globe.

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[573] Ibid.

[574] Harrison, 'A Kumquat for John Keats', *CdP*, p. 221.

iii. 'Spading Over' England and the Holocaust: Decomposing and Re-composing History in the Poetry of Jon Silkin

Introduction

As his correspondence with publications such as *The Jewish Quarterly* demonstrates, Jon Silkin was both a committed and a difficult *individual*. Defining himself in relation – and often at odds – to his contemporaries, the poet – like Keith Douglas and Isaac Rosenberg before him – self-consciously inhabited a peripheral creative space in relation to tradition and society. He was both engaged and at odds with his surroundings – his creative and critical alienation bound up in a sense of rootlessness on the one hand, and a belief in extrospection on the other. Caught between his inheritance as a Jew and his inheritance as a 'belated' War Poet, the poet sought to emphasise the particular rootlessness of the post-Holocaust Jew, whilst still 'reach[ing] out' to other 'communities of suffering'.[575] The result was a style at once antagonistic and cosmopolitan in its sympathies.

This sense of historical rootlessness didn't just affect Silkin's place within the contemporary Anglo-Jewish tradition; it also affected his representation of place itself. His perspective as a Jewish, belated witness shapes his representation of England and place, and distinguished his consideration of the local nature of atrocity. Unlike Hill and Harrison, Silkin doesn't draw attention to the barbarism of home, but rather to the barbarism of his inherited homelessness, and the part that England plays in an entire history of Jewish persecution. His work explores how the city spaces of England might contain a specifically Jewish history of persecution, and exposes how this manifests itself in the contemporary architecture of places like York and Newcastle. This position in relation to his contemporaries raises the question of what happens to the representation of home as a violent, transnational, yet uncomfortably familiar space when there is no home; it asks what the local means when the notion of home and belonging is itself in question, bound up in a collective history of rootlessness and persecution.

This tension in the work of this 'committed individual' – between perceived alienation and desired togetherness – leads to a conflicting representation of place and community. This is particularly the case when the setting of the poem moves from the allegorical 'fox's country' of *The Peaceable Kingdom* to the stone streets and landmarks of

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[575] Silkin, 'Letter: Cultural Survival', *The Jewish Quarterly*, p. 36.

contemporary Britain. Here, the poet's desire to open out and communicate his nation's part in historical placelessness comes into conflict with a more personal sense of alienation – from both the setting and its inhabitants. Silkin may wish to 'reach out' to his readers and neighbours, yet where Hill and Harrison were able to situate themselves in the local space as sharers in the collective guilt of Britain and Europe's past, creating a deliberately awkward poetic out of their ignoble status, Silkin's inheritance leads him to occupy a different, more peripheral relationship with his surroundings. He may have believed that the committed poet must 'not be an observer' but rather 'a participator', but when removed from the allegorical *Peaceable Kingdom* and placed onto the recognisable streets and landmarks of contemporary Britain, his position is altogether more ambiguous.[576]

What this leads to is a very different representation of place, home, and belonging from Geoffrey Hill and Tony Harrison. History and human violence may still be archived within the revelatory buildings and fields of contemporary England, but the poet's relationship to these events changes his perspective and resulting rhetorical approach. Affiliated with the figure of the victim rather than the bystander, Silkin's map of history reflects his distance and alienation rather than his ignoble and uncomfortable intimacy. In order to overcome this and to plot the roots that link England with the rest of Europe, Silkin goes beneath the ground far more than either Hill or Harrison. His poetry is truly excavatory, drawing upon the processes of plant-life and the soil as a means of de-composing and then re-composing his relationship to England. It is only when he does this that he is able to produce the 'committed', outward facing poetic that he intended.

I.

The problem with Silkin's representation of his physical and historical alienation within the English city is that the resulting poems often threaten to alienate the reader. This sometimes problematic relationship between place and rhetorical style is notable enough to have been the subject of previous critical study on the poet. In his 1977 article Merle Brown criticised Silkin's over-insistence and 'inscrutable remoteness', noting how this rhetorical 'stress' was bound up in the claustrophobic architecture of the English Northern city space.[577] Rather than attribute this aspect of Silkin's work to the poet's sensitivity to his historical position and the position of post-War England, Brown focuses on the influence of architecture and space as a

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[576] Silkin, 'No Politics, No Poetry', p. 14.
[577] Brown, 'Stress in Silkin's Poetry and the Healing Emptiness of America', pp. 389, 373.

determinant of style. The article notes the 'healing' influence of America on Silkin's verse – the wide open spaces of Iowa freeing up the otherwise cluttered rhetoric and form of the British poet.[578] Comparing collections such as *The Two Freedoms* and *The Principle of Water* with *Amana Grass*, the stark contrast that the article identifies between both the setting of the poems and their rhetoric and tone is easily apparent. The dirt, clutter, and layer upon layer of history in 'Killhope Wheel' for example – a sequence that addresses Killhope Mine in Northumbria, its violent history, as well as its current museum – is almost unrecognisable from the sparse and reflective tone of poems such as those within the 'Six Cemetery Poems' sequence. Both might focus upon the natural world and the layers of the dead buried beneath the soil, however whilst locations such as that featured in 'Killhope Wheel' unearth 'rank' and 'clagged' spaces, instances of brutality, persecution, and oppression, the American graveyard offers a space that feels distinctly still, at times even 'breathless, voided in the fecund / corn-belt, wanting memory'.[579] In contrast to this amnesiac space, England's dubious history, fossilized beneath the soil and built into the architecture of the city, leaves no room for the poet's overcrowded imagination.

Silkin's version of America is by no means devoid of any history. It is referenced in 'Six Cemetery Poems' in the mention of the separate Jewish plots, and more particularly in the 'American Indians / dwindled into margins of plain flat under / bison'.[580] Yet even taking into account these instances of subjugation, persecution, and exclusion, the graveyards leave an open space for the poet to create; to lose the personal and collective memories bound up in the cramped physical dimensions of home. He has no obvious historical connection to Iowa, and this emptiness is liberating. Whilst the amnesiac plains of America may not resolve the histories contained within the streets of Britain and the imagination of the poet, they offer, like a blank page, the possibility of personal renewal and re-creation.[581] On the other hand, Europe, Britain, and specifically Northern England are presented as overcrowded, packed, and cluttered with individual and collective histories. England and sometimes Europe as a whole is presented as oppressive in its physical and historical makeup. This is particularly

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[578] In his survey of British Cold War Poetry Adam Piette notes the considerable number of British poets who were, like Silkin (or indeed Harrison or Hill), impelled 'to relocate, in real and imaginary terms' to America or Europe. This move allowed them to go 'beyond' what Alvarez famously termed their nation's 'gentility principle'. Adam Piette, 'Pointing to East and West: British Cold War Poetry', *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry,* p. 640.

[579] Silkin, 'Killhope Wheel: Tree & (Untitled)' [TPW], *CP*, pp. 360, 361; Silkin, 'Six Cemetery Poems: 5' [AG], *CP*, p. 306.

[580] Silkin, 'Six Cemetery Poems: 5' [AG], p. 306.

[581] Even if this comes at the price of a more accurate and sustained consideration of American history and its forgotten dead.

apparent in the title poem of 'Amana Grass', where the poet directly compares 'Flat Iowa' to Northern England. Whilst the former is portrayed as feminine and even sexual in its purity, the Vermont Hills rising like breasts, the 'strict, sweet whiteness' of snow compared to mother's milk or the 'vaginal whitenesses' of a lover, Northern England is a land of stone, with the lines of the poem, like the geography itself, packed full with 'chipped quartz, chipped limestone, earth, wire'.[582]

At times intentionally hard, and at other times incidentally so, the descriptive language used by Silkin in relation to Europe and Britain mimics the stony, overcrowded ground of home. The poet even acknowledges this shift in the poem 'Crossing to Europe', where his body exhibits the symptoms of this creative and personal difficulty. Describing the poet's journey back from America, the poem plays upon Silkin's proximity to the salt water of the ocean:

> In the nature of water I'm absorbed.
>
> I know I'm salt, thinking oblivion;
> this swill is my life's transforming, and I,
> full savour of it.[583]

At this point in the poem this absorption into his surroundings is positive in tone – an example of the emphasis that the poet repeatedly places on the physical and spiritual integration of man and the natural world. However, as the voyage draws closer to its destination, the nature of this transformation alters. 'Flaky' with salt, Silkin's skin 'begin[s] to harden' so that 'through and through I'm salt in a middling petrifaction'. Turning away from his body and towards his destination, the speaker sees Europe:

> a tassel
> of greasy lights – its congregations of
> flesh making ash, enough to stuff a house,
> though in burning they say we renew [584]

Playing on the etymological meaning of Holocaust, Silkin casts Europe as a whole as both the persecutor and its own sacrificial victim. Oppressive, ash-ridden, and resolutely un-renewed, it remains as petrified as the poet. By mentioning the home space, only to 'stuff' it with

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[582] Silkin, 'Amana Grass' [AG], pp. 314, 315.
[583] Silkin, 'Crossing to Europe' [TSP], *CP*, p. 608.
[584] Ibid.

'flesh' made 'ash', the poem also denies that there might be comfort in the domestic sphere. Instead, Europe, home, and the poet each display the physical symptoms of their shared but problematic histories – histories that deny any easy relationship between them.

Despite the sensitivity that 'Crossing to Europe' shows regarding the unresolved dynamic between form, place, and memory, Silkin's rhetorical style also at times displays the same physical symptoms as the subjects he describes. It occasionally becomes as 'petrified' and 'cramped' as the geography itself. This 'stress' articulates the historical and aesthetic pressure at work in Silkin's representation of Britain; a pressure that at times threatens to alienate him from both his subject matter and his intended reader. This is a particularly difficult element within his work given the emphasis that Silkin the critic placed on the need for the poet to reach out and engage with his readership – regardless of their particular background. As his representation first of York then of Newcastle demonstrates, the call set out first in *The Peaceable Kingdom* and then in his various editorial writings to reach out across communities of suffering – to care for all animals – becomes harder to maintain when it is removed from its parabolic setting and applied to the real world.

This struggle between the imperative to create a 'committed' poem and the need to acknowledge his particular position as an Anglo-Jewish writer, is particularly noticeable in his representation of York in his 'Astringencies' sequence, published within the aptly titled collection *The Re-Ordering of Stones*. The first part of the sequence, entitled 'The Coldness', exposes the historical atrocities that lie hidden by the modern façade of the city, finishing with a suggestion of the continuing resonance of England's dark past in contemporary Europe. In his 1963 interview with Antony Thwaite, Silkin evokes the poem as an example of his 'committed' aesthetic. It offers, he argues, an example of how poetry can be used to raise the consciousness of its readership:

> I think what I was trying to do – in my York poem, exemplifies what I mean. Here is a situation of a massacre of Jews at York in 1190. At the end of the poem, an exact correspondence with what happened in York is implied with what happened in Europe in this century. And I'm asking, do we want this kind of thing to continue? If we don't then we have to change society…In other words, writing draws the reader's attention to certain contradictions and anomalies in

society and says, Do you want these things, or even if you do, what will the end product be? [585]

Like Hill and Harrison, Silkin expresses his belief in the need for British poetry to close the conceptual gap between Britain and the rest of Europe; he argues for the imperative to identify the origins, links, and traces that connect the Holocaust with a history and geography beyond central Europe and the concentration camps, however uncomfortable that might be. In this context the title of the sequence – 'Astringencies' – epitomizes both the style of the poem and its intended result. 'Severe' in tone, 'austere' in its rhetoric, the poem is nevertheless intended to possess an astringent quality in the medical, etymological sense of the word. It must have the 'power to draw together or contract'. The connection it makes between medieval York, contemporary Europe, and the British reader must be 'binding, constrictive, styptic'.[586]

Within the poem itself Silkin continues the medical conceit first set out in the overall title of the sequence. However, within 'The Coldness' it takes on a sinister turn, as he equates York's dubious history with a cancer growing beneath its civilized façade.[587] After describing the architecture of the modern city, locating the poem within a clearly defined physical setting – 'Where the printing works buttress a church / And the northern river like moss / Robes herself slowly through / The cold township of York' – the poem focuses on the apparent coldness of the city and its citizens, asking 'Why have they been so punished; / In what do their sins consist now?'.[588] The answer, provided in the following line, is their inherited implication in atrocity:

An assertion persistent

As a gross tumour, and the sense

Of such growth haunting

The flesh of York

Is that there has been

No synagogue since eleven ninety

When eight hundred Jews

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[585] Silkin, 'No Politics, No Poetry', p. 18.

[586] 'astringent, adj. and n.' *OED Online*, December 2014, http: / /www.oed.com /view /Entry /12233?redirectedFrom=astringent#eid [Accessed 6 February 2015].

[587] In the second poem of the sequence the Holocaust and the history of suffering is again articulated in terms of the human body, as the poet's knowledge of 'human agony' remains within him like 'a bruise in the being', immune to 'human tenderness' (Astringencies: 2. 'Asleep' [TRotS] *CP*, p. 161).

[588] Silkin, 'Astringencies: 1. The Coldness' [TRotS], p. 159.

Took each other's lives

To escape christian death

By christian hand; and the last

Took his own.[589]

The event, says Silkin, has the 'frigid persistence of a growth in the flesh' – a description that distorts the tentatively positive connotation of the overall title of the sequence. The poem also denies the opportunity for healing, or for any process of decomposition and renewal. 'The event', as fixed as the stones of the city 'is a fact / No other fact can be added to / Save that it was Easter, the time / When the dead christian God / Rose again'.[590] In its judgement of York 'The Coldness' denies the opportunity for conversation or even forgiveness. The 1190 massacre sits immovable and petrified within Britain's national history.

This petrification accounts for the poet's failure to situate himself within this 'cold' and 'haunted' city. Evoking the 'fox's country' of *The Peaceable Kingdom*, the architecture of York ironically becomes a monument to 'absence'. Searching for his heritage within the city walls, the poet finds a reproach where there should be centuries of history:

Absence of Jews

Through hatred, or indifference,

A gap they slip through, a conscience

That corrodes more deeply since it is

Forgotten – this deadens York.

Where are the stone-masons, the builders

Skilled in glass, strong first in wood;

Taut, flaxen plumbers with lengths of pipe,

The printers; canopy-makers –

Makers in the institution of marriage?

Their absence is endless, a socket

Where the jaw is protected neither

Through its tolerance for tooth,

Nor for blood.[591]

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[589] Ibid.
[590] Ibid., pp. 159-160.
[591] Ibid., p. 160.

Equating contemporary York to a cadaver, ruined and mutilated by its own past, the poem ends with a second version of the astringency first referenced in the title. The modern city is irrevocably bound together with its own violent history, but through this 'tumour' it is also connected to a far more recent act of atrocity – a link that is strikingly conveyed in the final three lines of the poem:

> All Europe is touched
>
> With some of frigid York,
>
> As York is now by Europe.[592]

Like the line breaks of Dannie Abse's 'White Balloon', the line breaks of 'The Coldness' fold together 'frigid York' and Europe, so that the histories of both are 'touched' by the other. Deliberately undermining its own prior assertion that 'no other fact can be added', in these three lines the poem alters both the events of 1190 and 1939-45, so that they are drawn together and contracted in relation to the other. Rather than offering the restorative 'touch' implied by the reference to 'Astringencies', here the contact between the two events remains stark and 'frigid' – a 'cold' reminder of repetition and complicity rather than a moment of healing. The only communities created from this moment of contact are the separate communities of the bystanders and their victims.

In this focus on the touching histories and the masonry of the city space, 'The Coldness' imbues modern York with a palimpsestic quality. Its architecture, deconstructed by the poem, reveals itself to be underwritten with still visible histories – layers of stone and anguish ranging from 1190 York to 1945 Europe.[593] A play on the title of the collection as a whole, the poem turns the poet's 'Re-ordering of Stones' into a wider re-ordering of his nation's history. Exposed by the poetic act, the multi-layered city becomes an ideal setting in which to map guilt and universal cruelty – two ideas that Silkin goes on to raise, pages later, in the same collection. Physically and morally overwritten by historical moments not immediately visible on the 'cold', scraped clean surface, this vision of contemporary York dismisses the notion of the Holocaust as a stand-alone historical event. In this setting it is not only the poem that binds the reader to the violence they unwittingly inherit; atrocity itself fuses together histories and spaces, encompassing all those that live along the traces.

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[592] Ibid.

[593] For another example of how the notion of palimpsestic memory has been used in relation to trauma and Holocaust studies, see Maxim Silverman, *Palimpsestic memory: the Holocaust and colonialism in French and francophone fiction and film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013).

This tension is not contained within the final lines of 'The Coldness', but carries on into the aptly named poem 'Culpabilities', which sits pages later in the collection. Beginning on the premise explicitly laid out in the final three lines of 'The Coldness', 'Culpabilities' draws attention to its author's relativist stance to the Holocaust. It does so through its surprising opening lines, which call into question the notion of accepted history:

> It is a matter of opinion
> Who killed Hitler. But my belief
> Is that he was quietly assassinated
> At night, by many men [594]

This act of re-writing – of portioning out responsibility for Hitler's death – is then extended to the Holocaust itself. In one unbroken, convoluted sentence the shared triumph of the victors is made indistinguishable from the equally shared guilt of the persecutors. The poem carries over the quiet death and the same 'many men' to a new clause, and a new form of killing:

> Rather in the same way
> I mean, without much noise
> And over a period, but still,
> As the six million Jews died
> At the instigation of those
> European guards
> Whose desire to procreate
> Changed into a labyrinth of cruelties [595]

Still with no full stop of stanza break, the poem opens out the guilt of the 'European' guards, who Silkin notes were:

> Assisted plentifully
> As always, and on this occasion
> By miscellaneous
> Poles, Magyars, Ukranians,
> Though this time not the queer English,
> The exemplary Danes, nor the small

[594] Silkin, 'Culpabilities' [TRotS], p. 167.
[595] Ibid.

Pathologically heroic Netherlands.[596]

The whole of Europe is made responsible for this particular 'occasion'. Silkin transforms both the events of the Holocaust and the existence of Hitler into simply another instance of a European propensity for atrocity. 'So who can blame the Nazis?' the poem asks, 'They merely inherited / A European illness'.[597] The choice of the word 'merely', full of irony, is matched by the term 'European illness' for its bathetic power. Such casual understatement only draws further attention to the enormity of the 'tumour' still growing beneath the 'flesh' of York. The Holocaust, a symptom of a much larger, transhistorical and transnational 'illness', remains uncured, and present within the streets of Modern Europe.

The problem with these powerful acts of historical multi-layering is that the rhetorical 'coldness' of each piece risks undermining the moral and formal power of the finished poem. The productive tension between the astringent nature of atrocity and the astringent power of poetic representation is threatened by the potential failure of the latter to fully achieve the curative or communicative function desired by the poet. At the end of 'The Coldness' and 'Culpabilities' a doubt remains as to whether Silkin himself suffers from the historical and moral sickness – or 'tumour' – that his poems describe. If this ambiguity is compared to the positions that Hill and Harrison occupy in relation to their surroundings – where the poet is more often than not immersed, if not implicated, in the barbarous spaces and events they describe – Silkin's remove stands out in even starker terms. One of the reasons that 'The Allotments' so successfully compressed the geographies of Beeston and Auschwitz is that Harrison makes himself as vulnerable as his fellow 'Loiners'. The awkward ignobility of his tears for his 'balls', his 'corned beef sandwiches', and finally 'for genocide', implicates his teenage and adult self in the universal barbarity he exposes. By placing himself within the poem he succeeds in making atrocity uncannily familiar, even funny – two attributes that unsettle the conscience and the compassion of the (particularly British) reader. In contrast Silkin remains at a distance from the 'cold' citizens that he judges.

This distance between the poet and his surroundings is an issue that Silkin discusses in a 1964 letter to the librarian B.S. Page. Explaining the origins and process of the poem, the poet reveals the bitterness and alienation that shaped his perspective:

The circumstances of the poem are clear. Firstly, as a Jew I feel strongly about the history of the Jews which is one of continuous persecution and discrimination.

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[596] Ibid.
[597] Ibid.

> The Jews are not the only ethnic group to receive these attentions but they have, until the persecution of the Negroes, received this attention more constantly than any other group – and certainly at the hands of the church. In 1960, I made a visit to York. I remember three things. The coldness of the minster; the coldness of the refusal of Rowntrees to advertise [sic] in *Stand*, and the superiority with which they informed me that only mass media would do for them. My final memory is of the swans on the river and of this church in the poem (which I think may have been pulled down now) resting against a printing works … The sharp edge of the poem accords with the way I was trying to handle my anger at that time; anger incorporated with a bitter, or sardonic, humour. And then when the humour seems most to have established itself, an abrupt switch to frigid seriousness.[598]

The way that Silkin merges together the rejection from Rowntrees and the history of Jewish persecution highlights how he occupied a difficult peripheral position both in his identity as an editor and 'committed' poet, and as a Jew living in post-War Europe. The 'printing press' and the 'church' come together as two physical barriers to belonging, and even the harsh environment of Northern England adds to the 'sharp edge' of the poet's relationship to his subject. At the end of his letter Silkin notes how 'the poem represents my coming to grips with the north', before going on to comment that:

> My feeling of the north is that it is harsh, but permits the writer little chicanery. Accordingly my poem is an attempt to measure up to what I felt I had gained from the environment.[599]

Silkin may have written a poem that adapted to its surroundings, yet despite its appropriate 'astringent' harshness, it fails to fully inhabit the space it witnesses and the community it passes judgement over. He is held back from being the 'participator' that his 'committed' poetic calls for by the stone walls of the city and his own historical share in its misery. The result is a poem whose effective and uncomfortable potency is nevertheless lessened by the certainty of its moral rectitude.

This problematic depiction of contemporary York conveys Silkin's multi-directional understanding of history and the Holocaust, but it also suggests the impact of an inherited, communal, yet ultimately un-experienced memory in shaping his representation of Britain. This position has been theorised repeatedly in trauma studies, particularly in relation to the

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[598] Leeds, BLSC, Jon Silkin Archive, BC MS 20c Silkin/1/3/8, Drafts: the Coldness, Silkin to B.S. Page.
[599] Ibid.

children of Holocaust survivors, with the notion of 'prosthetic' or 'postmemory' characterising the relationship that 'the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before'.[600] This definition of 'postmemory', coined by Marianne Hirsch, might indeed be a productive way of considering Silkin's poetic relationship to the Anglo-Jews who lost their lives over the course of English history, and more recently to those murdered across Europe. His representation of York certainly conflates the two groups, both in the form of the poem and in the weight placed upon 1190 as a precursor to the Holocaust. The emphasis that Hirsch places on collective and communal histories, on those experiences that are 'remembered' only 'by means of the stories, images, and behaviours', captures the particular position of those, like Silkin and Abse, who saw themselves as being 'made … more' by Auschwitz than by Moses, despite their physical distance.[601] It is a position articulated in Silkin's representation of England, where finding an absence where there should be an entire history, the poet is left without a way to insert himself into the nation and its past. Not limited to York, this sense of a demographic and imaginative void can be found in his representation of other English cities. United in their stone architecture and violent heritage, the towns, cities and landmarks of the poet's home nation all stand as 'cold' monuments to human violence rather than living, contemporary communities.

In the aptly named poem 'Centre of Absence', modern Newcastle becomes the new setting of the poet's post-memory of his Jewish history. Having moved from Leeds and Yorkshire over to Newcastle, the poet again struggles to find any sense of belonging. Similar in format to 'The Coldness', in 'Centre of Absence', published within *The Little Time-Keeper*, the architecture of contemporary Newcastle is presented as an alternative and uncomfortable monument to a continuing history of Jewish persecution. Moving through the streets of the city, the speaker comes to 'Jew gate', where 'rain sluices sliver' on the stones, reflecting a history no longer present in the modern city:

> Newcastle buys
>
> the Jews' expulsion. The King
>
>
> is all gold; Judas bit small

[600] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic memory: the transformation of American remembrance in the age of mass culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (London and Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 22.
[601] Hirsch, *Family Frames*, p. 22.

in the coin's realm. So, the King's light

clatters upon the streets. 1656,
'Come in again,' Cromwell stutters.[602]

These histories leave Jew-gate 'in traceries / of despair', and as a result it is only in traces that the speaker finds his heritage. There is only a 'centre of absence' where there should be an entire history of Jewish workmanship and industry:

Trade's filigree rubbed
of instinct; the steep street

slithers through vetch and ground-ivy.

Over by the Quayside, as if a hanged man
cut to morsels, size of a dog's mouth,

nothing.[603]

Akin to the non-existent 'fox's country', this 'centre of absence' defines Silkin's creative representation of Britain. It is this lack – of belonging, of heritage, of any physical traces on the land – that leads to this unresolved tension between commitment and rootlessness.

In its depiction of both York and Newcastle Silkin's poetry uses the land and the physical characteristics of the city to emphasise the 'absent' identity and memory of the post-Holocaust Anglo-Jew. By the end of each poem there is no sense of any real connection or warmth between the speaker and his surroundings – there remains only 'coldness', and a 'centre of absence' where there should be 'communities of suffering'. This emptiness threatens to undermine Silkin's clearly articulated intention as an editor and poet to 'reach out' and create a distinctly cosmopolitan, transnational community, and a sense of belonging. The desire might be there, but the distance of the speaker from his surroundings prevents any lasting 'astringency' between regional England and the rest of Europe. The reader makes the connection between the histories, but is not left with the same discomfort at their own proximity to either circumstance.

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[602] Silkin, 'Centre of Absence' [TLT-K], *CP*, pp. 471, 472.
[603] Ibid., p. 472.

The consistencies between Silkin's various representations of the Northern city space reveal an unresolved tension between the desire for a transnational and committed poetic and an equal need to acknowledge the ills inflicted upon the Anglo-Jewish community. The paradox of Silkin's work is that his complete poetic and ethical 'commitment' to his subject is held back by his physical and historical rootlessness. His city scenes may be claustrophobic, but they are filled with absence. He may desire transnationalism, yet he also feels no true sense of nationalism to then transgress. In order to find this sense of belonging, and move beyond this centre of absence, Silkin's poetry must take a different approach to the notion of the local, and explores the connection between place, history, and poetry in an altogether different way. The fact that his later work begins to do this suggests that the poet himself became aware of the importance of place on his representation of history and the Holocaust.

II.

Silkin's representation of place undergoes a noticeable transformation over the course of his eleven collections. The 'remoteness' and frigidity of the poet's earlier representations of York and Newcastle are slowly replaced with a more fluid and open rhetorical style. The setting of the poems also changes, as the poetic gaze increasingly focuses on natural, as opposed to man-made spaces. Merle Brown attributed this shift to the 'healing emptiness' of the American landscape, citing the relative openness of pieces such as 'Six Cemetery Poems' as evidence of this mimesis between rhetoric and environment. Whilst this reading accounts for the role of America and the American landscape in shaping Silkin's creative development, it doesn't fully account for the consistent presence of historical pressure as a determinant of Silkin's sense of place. It also doesn't emphasise enough the poet's determination to 'reach out' and create a transnational poetic. Considering this development in the context of Silkin's pre-occupation with 'absence' and his desire to fill the gaps where Jewish history should be, this changing sense of place indicates a desire to imaginatively insert himself into the history and memory that he has inherited.[604]

The way that Silkin does this is to physically 'invest' himself into the land. It is through an act of decomposition, through this change from the hard immovability of stone to the softness of 'new earth', that he is able to insert himself into the layers of history laid out in his palimpsestic vision of contemporary Europe. In his depiction of the earth beneath the

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[604] Ibid.

buildings of locations such as York and Newcastle, Silkin first identifies the pressure of postmemory and otherness on his imagination, and then seeks to overcome them. These excavations become self-conscious, self-reflective acts, as in the changing and organic earth the poet addresses and comes to terms with his inherited alienation from his 'native' geography.

Ironically, it is in his criticism of the poet's alienation and poetic style that Merle Brown stumbles across the more productive way that Silkin represents and works through his historical rootlessness. Brown doesn't just critique the architecture of Silkin's 'British' verse. He also criticizes the poet and editor's decidedly un-poetic approach to the 'business' of poetry. Paraphrasing specific lines from 'Killhope Wheel', as well as Silkin's own remarks, he contextualizes the poet's over-emphasis on 'communication' within a more biographical reading of his verse:

> The relation of a poet to his poems is the same as that of a lavatory cleaner to the job of cleaning lavatories'… such an analogy, it seems clear, indicates that Silkin is not thinking of a poem as an act in which man can actualize the full range of his natural and human possibilities. Poems are just ways of cleaning up the debris which would 'clag' up the 'shithouses' if they were not attended to.[605]

Given the comments on poetry made by the poet in his *Stand* conversation with Antony Thwaite, Silkin's utilitarian approach to poetry is not necessarily in doubt. His response to Thwaite's suggestion of the dangers of 'thesis poetry' – 'aren't we writing to communicate? Communicating means the raising of consciousness. Now if you raise someone's consciousness, what are you doing but implying the need for change?' – unashamedly champions the public and moral *function* of verse, as opposed to any independent aesthetic value that it might possess.[606] This utilitarian approach has been defended by critics such as Jon Glover, who offer up Silkin's style as an example of his highly ethical approach to poetry.[607] The intertwined relationship between his identity as critic and poet, Glover argues, demonstrates his continual re-examination of how poetry might re-affirm the 'the common ground' so 'easily eroded between poet and reader'.[608] This emphasis in both his prose and poetry on communication, and on the practical potential of the poem, for Glover amounts to

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[605] Brown, 'Stress in Silkin's Poetry', p. 373.
[606] Silkin, 'No Politics, No Poetry', p. 16.
[607] Jon Glover, 'The Critic as Poet', *The Poetry Review: Essays in Honour of Jon Silkin*, vol. 69, no. 4 (1980), pp. 16-20.
[608] Glover, 'The Critic as Poet', p. 20.

'a religious view of the purpose of poetry'.[609] It is fitting that this defence of Silkin should be framed within the notion of 'common ground', as in relation to his depiction of Britain and its geography and history, this practical approach to poetry manifests itself in the setting as well as the rhetoric of the poem. It also becomes the means by which Silkin addresses the 'petrifying' tension between belonging and rootlessness within his sense of place.

Whilst Glover picks up on the close symbiosis between Silkin's role as a critic and his role as a poet, Brown's critique highlights the mimetic relationship between the finished poem and the practical experience of the poet. Turning back to Brown's statement, whilst the depiction of Silkin as a 'lavatory cleaner' draws upon the poet's own statements on the utilitarian role of poetry, it also alludes to Silkin's previous occupation before he published *The Peaceable Kingdom* in 1953. After his expulsion from Wycliffe College and before founding *Stand* and moving to Leeds, Silkin variously worked as a lavatory cleaner, a hospital porter, a (conscripted) serviceman, a manual labourer, and a gravedigger. This, Brown implies, is a further cause of his un-poetic poetry. What Brown's critique ignores however, are the other – decidedly positive – ways that these alternative occupations are self-consciously made manifest in the rhetoric, content, and setting of Silkin's verse. Focussing on his role as a gravedigger in particular, across his collections there are numerous instances where this practical knowledge of the dead and the earth translate to a more intimate and positive approach to history, memory, and identity. As poems such as 'Six Cemetery Poems' show, in the calm and detailed focus on the physical process of burial and poetic exhumation, Silkin re-imagines and re-occupies his past role as a grave-digger, allowing his practical experience of the ground to take on a new creative life.

Beyond the gravesite, the plant and animal world play a vital and varied role across Silkin's oeuvre. His approach to burial and bodily decomposition are undeniably shaped by his sense of the natural world and the environment. The role of the grave space therefore plays in enabling and exhibiting the poet's creative, historical, and personal growth cannot (and should not) be kept entirely separate from the other ways that the natural world manifests itself across his work. The historically and religiously specific nature of Silkin's interaction with the environment has only recently begun to be explored within critical study of his work, however recent and upcoming scholarship has begun to re-appraise collections such as *Nature with Man* and the *Flower Poems* pamphlet in relation to current eco-critical

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[609] Ibid. p. 16.

theory.[610] This marks a break with earlier scholarship on the subject, which has tended to emphasise the function of the natural world as an extension of Silkin's overtly political, ideological approach to society and poetic creation, rather than a concern in its own right.[611]

In his exploration of 'Nature and Politics in Jon Silkin' Eagleton labels the poet as an early pioneer of the ecological-as-political text, arguing that the 'originality' of his verse 'lies in its coupling of the recovery of Nature and political radicalism'.[612] This analysis is in keeping with the importance both of the 'Kingdom' and the 'Republic' within Silkin's work; the ideological manifestation of Silkin's desire to use the poem as a tool to order society rather than simply observe it. This is noticeable in collections such as *The Psalms with their Spoils*, where there is the belief, or perhaps hope, that 'wildness makes a form' – a desire for an organic unity between the natural world and the poetic process. The sequence, which is actually in memoriam of the critic Merle Brown, sets out the poet's sense of his responsibility as one tasked to shape the political and social landscape around him. The natural world, and the tension between wild fecundity and coordinated growth, provides the perfect container of Silkin's perceived task:

> a purged barbaric wildness is what I want,
>
> accessible, authentic dishevelment.
>
> Not too purged, yet not so dishevelled as
>
> to parch to salts a modest potency.[613]

As the sequence draws to a close, it brings together Silkin's vision of poetry with Brown's, attempting to reconcile the former's version of its function and shape with that of the critic's. Again, the natural world, and the notion of the half-wild, half-cultivated kingdom, together become the metaphor for this reconciliation:

> This wordy poem, grief's fabulations,
>
> howls under quartz cliffs, with blood tinctured,
>
> to hang in moulds – the fern's tribulation,
>
> authentic dishevellment. Stammering tongues
>
> are by grief made clear, of which spillage

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[610] Fiona Becket, 'Ecopoetics and Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry since 1945* ed. by Larrissy E (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp. 214-227.

[611] Aside from Eagleton's article, previous critical consideration of Silkin's engagement with eco-poetics has tended to centre on his presentation of the relationship between man and animal in *The Peaceable Kingdom*. See Jeffrey Wainwright, 'The Peaceable Kingdom', *The Poetry Review: Essays in Honour of Jon Silkin*, pp. 3-7; Terry Eagleton, 'Nature and Politics in Jon Silkin', *Ibid.*, pp. 7-10.

[612] Eagleton, 'Nature and Politics in Jon Silkin', p. 8.

[613] Silkin, 'Wildness makes a form: 1' [TPwtS], *CP*, p. 546.

death encrusts stone: Merle, Merle,

this is the very kingdom, artifice

of survival amongst strength in disorder.

The great tree falls away to the ravine

dribbled with bent cars. Words among branches twitter

in dishevellment, but with speech.

If you would have it this way, so would I.[614]

Within the sequence the natural world and the poem are two spaces to be explored and chartered – something continued in later poems such as 'Envy of God', where the poet is compared to the creator: 'He made the wild places, I, too, form songs'.[615] In both, the emphasis lies on the innate connection between language, nature, and poetic creation. In writing about the natural world it is inevitable that Silkin must comment upon the act of writing.

This notion of mastering natural chaos also manifests itself in Silkin's exploration of masculine sexuality and the female body. In 'When First I Saw' the idea of making, and perhaps even taking ownership of 'the wild places' moves from the poetic process to the beginning of a sexual and romantic relationship. Addressing his partner, the poet attests that:

When first I saw the waters of your face

Move under me, I vowed I would explore

Your source and agent of power, the thin-faced brook

The gliding stream, that round-cast river which is still

An unabused and flesh-cut torrent.[616]

This problematic connection that the poem makes between the female body and the natural world continues in later, published poems. In 'Something has been Teased from Me' the sexual element of Silkin's natural world is so explicit as to be awkward for the reader. Comparing himself to grass – a phallic choice that he uses repeatedly across his work – the poet casts the female body as a soil in need of 'nourishing':

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[614] Silkin, 'Wildness makes a form: 5' [TPwtS], p. 547.
[615] Silkin, 'Envy of God' [TSP], p. 589.
[616] Silkin, 'When First I Saw' [Unpublished and Uncollected Poems c.1958-1961], *CP*, p. 142.

   We together were like them,

Knit, as the insistent roots of grass compact soil in a field:

A system of thread holding soil it eased into particles.

   Their strength crumbles stone:

You allowed penetration. What can't be stopped must be nourished –

Pervading like grass, a sort of fire.[617]

As the piece goes on, the 'knit' between the grass and its chosen soil becomes corrosive, as Silkin's act of taking root – of claiming dominion – leads to his own imprisonment:

Grass does not feed itself, soil is bound by roots.

It is a composure the grass gives. You asked

   For some change in me; insisted.

You shrilled, were acrid to the touch; but grass cannot change its roots.

It seeds itself in the soil, needing it; but is not soil.

   My roots offended:

That tentative strength from which I pushed

Tall, seeded, sharp; whose webbed anchorage held you.

   What could I have done?

I was loathed for what I was best, filled

You with liquids not yours. I seemed not good for you.[618]

The poem, which carries on in the same manner, demonstrates the uncomfortable way that the natural world can be inhibited by the poet's insistence on its aptness as a metaphor. Whether in relation to sex or the place of 'committed' poetry, Silkin occasionally subsumes the 'wildness' he seeks to celebrate in order to make his point.

   More successfully and more powerfully than his attempts to 'master' the sexual or meta-poetic natural world, Silkin engages with the earth as a means of exploring his relationship with the dead. Particularly in relation to the Holocaust, the poems engage with plant and animal life in order to express the poet's responsibility towards its victims, and his

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[617] Silkin, 'Something has been Teased from Me' [NwM], *CP*, p. 269.
[618] Ibid.

sense of the distinctly unnatural state of current human history. Silkin's understanding of the unjust inequality of history and Nature, of the fact that 'however man may violate Nature, the relative autonomy which allows him to do so is itself a product of the natural process', merges the vulnerability of the human and the non-human; united in their status as victims of human history, both speak to the status and predicament of the other.[619] *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which of course includes Silkin's three fox poems, is the most overt example of this, as through the use of the parable form the poet is unhindered by the demands of naturalism. From the comparison of his son to a 'stone' to the equivocation of his own position with that of the fox, Silkin finds in the non-human a means of articulating the unspeakable elements of human life.

The most celebrated example of focus on the animal as a historical victim is the poem 'A Death to Us', which re-versions William Blake's 'The Fly' for a post-Holocaust age. Here the poet accuses himself of a crime that he did not even commit, as, sitting at his writing desk, he records how 'A tiny fly fell down on my page / Shivered, lay down, and died on my page'.[620] Merle Brown has written of the almost obsessional self-awareness of the poet within these lines, and Silkin's choice of language certainly articulates his pre-occupation with both human bestiality, and his own complicity in it.[621] The detailed description of the 'tiny' and 'frail' nature of the fly, and the mention of the poet's literary connection to the scene of its death ('my page'), as well as his callous actions, all create a sense of anxiety which is out of keeping with the quotidian nature of the event. Unlike the speaker in Blake's poem, he is not the murderer of the fly, yet by making his passive dismissal of the death the only action within the poem, he becomes an accessory to the innocent creature's death. Channelled through the inert body of the insect, the poet's sensitivity both to the luxury afforded to him as an Anglo-Jewish writer, and the responsibility that comes with this role, are framed in such a way that the poem becomes a form of public declaration for his task as a post-War poet:

His speck of body accused me there
Without an action, of his small brown death.

And I think now as I barely perceive him
That his purpose became in dying, a demand

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[619] Eagleton, 'Nature and Politics in Jon Silkin', p. 8.
[620] Silkin, 'A Death to Us' [TPK], *CP,* p. 30.
[621] Brown, 'Stress in Silkin's Poetry', p. 356.

> For a murderer of his casual body,
>
> So I must give his life a meaning.[622]

If this expression of guilt and complicity is compared with the distant perspective of the speaker in poems such as 'The Coldness', it becomes clear how the natural and the non-human allow the poet a means to overcome the 'centre of absence' so clearly drawn up around the architecture of the modern, man-made city space. The need to give a voice and meaning to the silent, to claim responsibility for the act of witnessing, is for Silkin the 'large frail purpose' of the poet. In these intimate scenarios, where the writer, and the human and non-human victim are brought together in an almost claustrophobic proximity, the comparison between speaker and subject draws attention to the small chances of circumstance that ensured the Anglo-Jewish poet's survival.

By drawing on the fly, Silkin not only conveys the vulnerability of the human victim, but the threat of historical insignificance. As easily 'brushed away' as the 'tiny' creature, it is up to poetry to preserve and write back into being those who might otherwise be forgotten. The choice of the fly also allows Silkin to express the profound impact of the Holocaust upon literature and literary tradition, as the link that the creature makes between *The Peaceable Kingdom* and *Innocence and Experience* highlights the historical rupture that distinguishes Blake's fly from that of Silkin. Like Harrison's historicised re-writing of Keats's melancholy in 'A Kumquat for John Keats' or the 'paradise' of John Milton, here Silkin imbues Blake's poem with a new historical specificity. In doing so he implies his 'experience' in relation to the earlier poet's 'innocence' of mass-scale atrocity.

Also published in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 'Caring for Animals' blurs the distinction between the human and the non-human in order to comment on the state of human history. Here, man and animal are made interchangeable, as the parabolic creatures that fill the pages of the 'Book of Isaiah', the paintings of Edward Hicks, and now Silkin's collection, are brought together in a single poem. Asking the reader 'why these small animals / With bitter eyes, why we should care for them', the poem ends with an imperative to 'Take in the whipped cat and the blinded owl; / / Take up the man-trapped squirrel upon your shoulder. / Attend to the unnecessary beasts'.[623] Whilst the piece offers a powerful message about man's bestiality and the dehumanization of the victim, there is at this point no effort to represent the natural world as anything beyond a metaphor. This emphasis on the idea as opposed to the

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[622] Silkin, 'A Death To Us' [TPK], p. 30.
[623] Silkin, 'Caring for Animals' [TPK], p. 42.

reality of the natural shifts however, as Silkin's collections go on. By the time he publishes *Nature with Man* in 1965 there is a noticeable change in his approach to the natural world. Not only has his focus shifted from the animal to the plant, but his representation places a great deal more emphasis on capturing the reality of the latter, perhaps even more so than its human counterpart.

This desire for realism is particularly apparent in the 1964 pamphlet *Flower Poems*. More intimate and open than his representations of York and Newcastle, and so local as to be in the poet's own back garden, the poems mark the beginning of the decompositional process that becomes so prominent in Silkin's later representations of Britain and the geography of home. In his accompanying note to the pamphlet Silkin acknowledges this altered emphasis, and the new importance placed on realism and the potential relationship of nature 'with' man. 'To remove nature', he says, or else 'to isolate it from human nature and then write about it', is 'an extremity as unproductive as the one which sees all nature as a (symbolic) version of man'.[624] He goes on to re-affirm the dynamic that will come to occupy a great deal of his later work. The passage concludes with the confirmation that 'Man is a part of Nature and to isolate one from the other, or to slide the one over the other, is to miss either the (related) complexity of both or the 'solidity' of each':

> The two are contiguous; and that is what I'm trying to get at in the 'flower' poems. If seen as contiguous, they can be seen as two components of a whole capable of mutual enrichment.[625]

The evocation of borderlessness – of the possibility of a mutual 'enrichment' deriving from the relationship between plant and man – pre-empts the role that the natural world comes to play in Silkin's representation of home and his Jewish rootlessness. Contiguousness beneath the soil – between man and plant, fellow man, even between nations and histories – becomes the remedy to the petrified stone architecture of modern city, and to the poet's inherited and witnessed memory of persecution.

The way to convey this new emphasis on nature 'with' man within the aesthetics of the poem is something that Silkin also considers in his note to the *Flower Poems*. Describing the exact dynamic between the plant and the human, the poet explains that he is 'trying to find some common denominator that will pull together these two kinds of life'.[626] Rather than

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[624] Silkin, 'Note on "Flower" Poems' [NwM], p. 287.The fact that *The Peaceable Kingdom* might be considered an effective and powerful example of the latter 'extremity' is not acknowledged by the poet.
[625] Ibid.
[626] Ibid., p. 285.

do this by playing down the distinctiveness of the plant, he instead claims to want to do almost the opposite. The poems, he says 'concentrate closely on the flowers, and it is towards their centrality they tend to draw human life'. By trying to 'draw' the human 'in the direction' of the non-human, Silkin does the opposite of *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In his first collection he anthropomorphized the non-human in order to draw attention to the bestiality of human history. Now, in the *Flower Poems,* he imbues humanity and its history with plant attributes in order to suggest the possibility of a more organic process of growth, decomposition, and renewal.

One clear example of this process of phytomorphism – the representation of the human with the attributes of plants – can be found in the poem 'The Milkmaids', which Silkin himself notes stands apart from the other pieces in the pamphlet:

> *Milkmaids* differs from the other 'flower poems' in that it contains a direct
> confrontation between plant and human, instead of the implied partial analogy
> between the two creatures.[627]

The 'confrontation' that the note mentions refers to the connection the poem makes between the Milkmaid flower and the imprisoned victims of an unspecified concentration camp. Within the poem this moment comes suddenly, as the speaker moves from a precise and almost scientific description of the 'Lady's Smock' – 'From each undomestic / Flare, four petals; thrown wide; a flexible / Unplanned exuberance. / A veined fat is under /The svelte integument; / A kind of vegetative warmth. / From the centre, axial, determined / Extend the stamens, long by usage / For survival, and grouped / Round the curt stigma' – to a haunting and haunted vision of the camps:

> That tender, that wild, strength
>
> Sucks the untrammelled consciousness up.
>
> They mount the incline breathless
>
> Pale violet. Their eyes wide,
>
> They halt at the wire. This is the camp.
>
> In silent shock a multitude of violet faces
>
> Their aghast petals stiff, at the putrescence
>
> Of the crowd wired up. This halts them:
>
> The showing bone; the ridges of famine,

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[627] Ibid., p. 287.

Protrusions, want, reduction.[628]

The face and petal of the flower merges with that of its human counterpart, so that the wire fence that separates them is rendered meaningless. The only real barrier between the flower and human is the 'strength' and 'consciousness' of the former, but even that distinction is lessened as the poem concludes and the poet brings the human towards the plant:

Between their silences, comprehension; like the wire

Halted, staked, live.

Crowding through the tented cloth

That locust detail, to each person.

For the flowers, the forked.

Upright sense of human

Creatures wanting patience, pulped, compounded into their children.[629]

Despite the shocking knowledge contained in the final image, there is nevertheless a small degree of promise lingering in the mention of children, and the suggestion both of legacy and organic inheritance. The poem reminds the reader that the decomposition or disintegration of the human is also a process of connection and healing – a moment of togetherness now part of the natural cycle of rot and renewal. The practical poet, with his knowledge of the pulping, compounding process of decomposition, takes a small degree of comfort in the universality of the decompositional act.

Silkin alludes to this in his note to the poem, as in attempting to describe the exact dynamic between flower and inmate his explains that 'The confrontation joins the creatures – what joins them even more is the total distress of the one and the capacity of the other to absorb this distress':

The exchange is made more thoroughly because of the brutalized condition of the inmates of the camp; it is their degradation, but their will to persist also, that makes it possible for them to share their own and others' experience. It is this brutalized state that permits them to deeply perceive the openness of the Milkmaids, and 'the capacity to be patient under suffering'. Nor is there any reason for them to be patient. The Milkmaids absorb the experience of the human

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[628] Silkin, 'Milkmaids' [NwM], p. 277.
[629] Ibid.

being and change – one creature's mind changed by the condition of another, so deeply, that this change is inherited by their children.[630]

This mutual process of absorption between man and plant can also be found in the poem 'Trying to hide Treblinka', which appears in *The Lens-Breakers*. As in 'Milkmaids' the poem focuses on the plant life within the camps. It becomes a vital point of hope and renewal, as the natural world again absorbs human history and grows it anew. Focussing this time on the lupin – a flower synonymous with the English cottage garden – the poem's title draws attention to their alternative use by SS officers in Treblinka concentration camp at the end of the War. Having levelled every building and structure, pine trees and lupins were planted to cover up any evidence of the camps.[631] Starting at this point, and assuming the unspoken parallel between the lupin and language as two living things tainted by association, the poem celebrates the plant. It turns its part in the concealment of human atrocity into a reminder of the power of natural renewal and beauty.

After the title of the piece, which overtly references the Holocaust and the actions of those stationed at Treblinka, the start of the poem is unexpectedly triumphal. In the manner of a prayer or blessing, the poet gives thanks to the flower:

> Blessed is the lupin sown to thwart
>
> what our soldiers' hands raised to the light:
>
> a camp with no architectural style,
>
> with a name like this. Treblinka,
>
> and the unnameable, blessed be He, God, *Schlaf*,
>
> as You must, in sleep's grace
>
> of abandoned bliss.[632]

Addressing the reader, the flower, and those victims who the SS sought to 'hide', the opening stanza inhabits the camp space, or rather the concealed camp space, and draws together the razed architecture of Treblinka with the tainted architecture of language. Unseen and 'unnamable', those that 'Schlaf' or sleep in 'abandoned bliss' are not remembered by stone or words, but rather by the accidental monument of the enduring and organic flower. As the poem goes on, Silkin develops this notion of the unintended memorial. The poem continues to praise the lupin for its hardiness and its obliviousness to human atrocity:

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[630] Silkin, 'Note on "Flower" Poems' [NwM], p. 287.

[631] Kurt Franz, in E. Klee, W. Dressen, and V. Riess, *The Good Old Days* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), p. 248.

[632] Silkin, 'Trying to hide Treblinka' [TL-B], *CP*, p. 655.

Maculate flower.

Blessed the lupin, thick snappable haulm

with innocuous hairs; blessed its noxious seed,

petals, a bird-shaped milky blue.[633]

Playing with the meaning of 'maculate', the poem imbues the markings of the flower with the history it is implicated in. Its spots become stains of the dead – stains carried up through the ash-filled soil. Similarly, its 'innocuous hairs' and 'milky blue' petals come uncomfortably close to anthropomorphizing the flower, despite the lack of any clear attempt by the poet to move beyond descriptive language.[634] Within this ambiguous representation Silkin begins to exhibit the same approach to death and burial seen in poems such as his 'Six Cemetery Poems'. It is at this point that he redefines the Treblinka site as a space for renewal and memory as opposed to absence.

Although the word denotes the tainted nature of the lupin flower and the Campsite, in the choice of 'maculate' Silkin also shows his practical, visceral understanding of death and burial. The notion of staining – of nutrients passing through the soil into the plant – is almost too evocative in its understanding of the rot and renewal of the human body. Yet it is precisely this evocation that offers the poet the reason for his thanks. As the stanza comes to end, Silkin celebrates the flower precisely for its ability to take nutrients from a soil so full of death and cruelty:

Blessed the lupin, with no mind to choose a soil

but what sustains it, and what flowers

its unending ignorance.[635]

Undoing the poem's earlier anthropomorphization of the flower, the 'unending ignorance' of the lupin becomes its redeeming quality. Uninterested and uninvolved in the morality and immorality of human history, yet nevertheless embodied by the dead, the flower's nourishment from the rich soil de-composes and then re-composes the history of the camps. Treblinka, as both the site of atrocity and 'the flower's assart', is reclaimed from its place as yet another 'centre of absence':

The camp, a hole in the eye; its zone, the flowers' assart.

A hill swells with breath and flowers: some blue,

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[633] Ibid.

[634] In this focus on the 'innocuous hair' and the 'milky blue' colour, the poem associates the flower with its Aryan planters.

[635] Silkin, 'Trying to hide Treblinka' [TL-B], p. 655.

some faded blood ones, that sink their roots

in shreds of carbon made visible

with hours of damp archaeology. Unappeasable

the claws, as they travail

that earth their hands trowelled.[636]

The use of the word 'assart', meaning a piece of land converted from forest to arable use, draws attention to the man-made – as opposed to natural – roots of the camp. Paired with the lupin though, it offers the promise of yet another conversion. No longer a 'hole' in the eye or the imagination, the re-claimed Treblinka is transformed by the flower into an organic, growing memorial to the dead. The original role of the lupin as a tool to 'hide' history is replaced by its present existence as an uncomfortable, nevertheless, vibrant container of the 'shreds of carbon' that remain of the dead.

'Trying to hide Treblinka' doesn't resolve or forget the hands that 'trowelled' the earth, choosing to end on this image rather than that of the flower, but it does show how the natural world might offer a model of creative remembrance for the post-Holocaust poem. The lupin, at once a container of human atrocity and a vibrant and inhuman reminder of new life, offers Silkin a model for language and the post-War poem that he couldn't find in the stone architecture of York or Newcastle. The flower's 'unending ignorance' and a-morality allows it to take root in what would have otherwise been another 'centre of absence'. For a poet whose historical witness and representation of home is defined precisely by both absence and rootlessness, this ecological model is a liberating one, particularly given the poet's practical and 'organic' approach to the process of poetry.[637]

The nature of this liberation forms the topic of the next poem in *The Lens-Breakers*, as, returning to the parabolic mode employed in *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Silkin tentatively celebrates the possibility contained in the earth. Moving from Treblinka and the decades after the Holocaust to the aftermath of the biblical flood, 'Juniper and Forgiveness' equates the poet's position to that of Noah's as he disembarks from the Ark:

God unfurls the atomic cries

of arrowy birds.The land smells,

pulling apart tenacious waters.

It is re-creation. Noah gathers to his body

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[636] Ibid.

[637] Silkin, No Politics, No Poetry, p. 14.

the tender Father's, pushing out

the sprigs of hopping Juniper, 'go, go on,'

through swarming grass.

It is a new earth, and I like it,

with everything that steps from this ribbed ark.[638]

By creating a parallel between the lupin planted by the prison guards and the juniper sent out by Noah, the poem confirms the power of the natural world in the face of historical trauma. Despite the different circumstances of each act of planting, both sets of flowers create a 'new earth' not otherwise achievable within the imagination of the poet. The end of the piece, which casts Silkin in the role of visionary, shows how ecology offers a possibility of re-composition in the wake of history, as the poet asserts that 'In sin we see a new vision, leaving / in twos, taking as we must /the smell of Juniper and forgiveness'.[639] There is no historical amnesia here; the mention of 'sin' and 'as we must' alludes to the continuing pressure of the dead and the past upon those who remain, just as the lupins stand as a monument both to the actions of the perpetrators and their victims. Yet whilst the dead remain present, the new imperative of the plant to disembark, to germinate and to create, substitutes 'absence' for 'vision' as a means of poetic remembrance and representation.

Read collectively, 'Trying to hide Treblinka' and 'Juniper and forgiveness' articulate a radically different approach to the representation of the Holocaust and Jewish persecution from 'The Coldness' and 'Centre of Absence'. The organic life of the plant – its germination, growth, and 'ignorant' flowering on whatever soil nourishes it – disrupts the stone rigidity of human history, and physically alters the sites of atrocity. The poems together show the gaze of the poem moving below ground, taking refuge in the organic and the subterranean – a shift that becomes increasingly important as Silkin begins to discuss the Holocaust in more overt terms. Throughout his oeuvre, this unconcerned vibrancy offers the poet a model for his own creative act. It offers the possibility of organic change in the face of a seemingly immovable history and geography. In the radio play 'The People', for example, published in *The Principle of Water*, the characters talk of Buchenwald and the death pits, describing 'a mass grave, and an indifferent botany / of herbs branching a pungent sullenness'.[640] Similarly, in 'What can we mean?' published in *The Little Time-Keeper*, the poem depicts the 1513 Battle

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[638] Silkin, 'Juniper and forgiveness' [TL-B], p. 656.
[639] Ibid.
[640] Silkin, 'The People: STEIN' [TPoW], *CP*, p. 374.

of Flodden and the bloodshed man inflicts upon his fellow man.[641] Yet whilst soldiers and civilians may continue to kill each other across history, 'soil recovers its right mind / however heaped is ditch / of blood and burial'.[642] In 'Civil War grave, Richmond', published in *The Lens-Breakers* immediately before 'Trying to hide Treblinka', Silkin examines another mass grave. Yet again, nature refuses to preserve the bodies of the dead. Instead 'the trees' beauteous / philandering grief bursts the sanctuary', decomposing and recomposing the body into the soil.[643] In all of these poems the earth and the natural process undermine the 'coldness' of man's actions and the rigidity of history. The uncomfortable, 'philandering' fecundity of the plant transgresses physical, imaginative, and biological borders, and in doing so merges the 'communities' that the poet ultimately seeks.

Turning from the mass grave to the local cemetery, again the natural world disrupts the physical boundaries of the body and the gravesite. By moving from the overtly historical space to the local and familiar one, Silkin explores how his knowledge of the earth – as a poet and a gravedigger – might equally impact upon his approach to the task of bearing witness to the dead. The 2015 publication of Silkin's *Complete Poems* allows for an overview of how the subjects of death, burial, and decomposition appear across the entirety of his poetic career. As evidence of this poetic re-occupation of the grave space, there are over fifty poems directly addressing burial and graves, and well over two hundred references to the dead and buried subjects who occupy the poet's conscience and imagination. The publication of the *Complete Poems* makes it possible to clearly see how these references occur with increasing frequency in his later collections, as, like the subject of the poet's wartime childhood, his occupation becomes a more prominent part of his poetry's aesthetic. Silkin's most famous poem 'Death of a Son', published in his first full collection *The Peaceable Kingdom*, movingly discusses a personal tragedy that re-appears again in the poem 'Endomorphic', published over forty years later. In the latter poem however, (one of many related to the death of his son Adam) Silkin retrospectively addresses his young child at the latter's death and burial. The poem contextualizes the personal within a wider history of death, burial, and its physical practicalities, as well as within an on-going trope of gravesites and burial within his poetry:

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[641] This poem in fact has many similarities to Hill's 'Funeral Music', including the inclusion of an accompanying postscript note. Here, Silkin, like Hill before him, makes an explicit connection between a Medieval Northern battlefield and a contemporary European war-zone: 'If the universe were stranger than it is we'd go mad. Flodden Field indicates Northumberland's role as the Poland, or marching-ground, of the Anglo-Scottish relations'. Silkin, 'Note to *The Little Time-Keeper'* [TLT-K], p. 484.

[642] Silkin, 'What Can We Mean?: 2' [TLT-K], p. 478.

[643] Silkin, 'Civil War grave, Richmond' [TL-B] p. 654.

At the grave, she and I touched your box

before you lowered in. I shovelled morsels

of earth, as I had done on others,

which these three young Jews, earth-spading

Jews, now put upon you – the uncuppable

bread of this earth, soil, thuds

of it.[644]

This event is also depicted in the poem 'Burying', where Silkin again describes – in visceral and graphic detail – the process of burying his son. This time however, the scene exceeds the poet's physical and visual witness of burial, carrying on past the spading of the soil. Reflecting on his son's place within the neatly dug hole in the earth, the poet transforms his subject, enacting the process of becoming 'Nature with Man' seen in 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' and the 'compounded' Milkmaid flowers:

Although the mouth has gently

Chewed your flesh into

The ineradicable

Humus, the thriving muck

Which feeds the things we feed with;

For you were not honoured

Except with a thin box,

And the soil, which fastens

Each living thing to itself

Without ceremony or hate

Or anything casual [645]

There is no squeamishness in this description. Instead, the poem celebrates the alternative 'honour' granted to the human body in its absorption into the 'thriving muck' – its re-entry into the food chain and natural cycle of the plant, animal, and human. The soil, which like the lupin is unconcerned with human history and characteristics, is vibrant and restorative – restorative of the body back into earth, and restorative of the poet's own inner well-being.

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[644] Silkin, 'Endomorphic' [MaR], *CP*, p. 769.
[645] Silkin, 'Burying' [NwM], p. 265.

In 'Two Poems Concerning Jews in England', a sequence within *Making a Republic*, Silkin again references his time 'spad[ing]' over the graves of England. He then goes on to imagine his own decomposition beneath the ground:

> I have no notion of how I shall die. I saw it die.
>
> I see it, my brain, nails, digestion, all to decay into new earth.
>
> Revolving its cutting edge, a thresher,
>
> where wheat, stalk, haulm, and staff of floury seeds
>
> like torches, stand, each eye broaching the same vision.
>
> We face our God. And eat.[646]

Unlike the intellectualized archaeological process of the poet in *Mercian Hymns* and 'Funeral Music' here the subject of burial and rot is understood and represented in a practical, physical manner. The natural realities of decomposition are recorded with the un-phased precision of the gravedigger and hospital porter. The mention of a resulting 'new earth', formed from the death and decay of man into the soil, celebrate the creative and historical renewal contained in the decompositional process. Unlike the 'petrified' and immovable stone above ground, here the earth offers a fertile space for the poet's own re-composition of his personal and collective history.

What unites 'Endomorphic', 'Burying', and 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' is not the healing power of the natural world. History is not erased and the human is not redeemed; there is still pain, loss, and death despite the fecundity of the newly enriched soil. What each piece instead has in common is the suggestion that the poem, like the earth, has the potential to transform the memory and legacy of suffering and atrocity. It enacts a process of forgetting in order to reclaim and create anew. The poet clearly finds comfort in this 'lapse'. He writes in 'Urban Grasses' that 'Earth, I shall be happy to not know / how you go on, when I'm like those I tended'.[647] For Silkin, the burial process, and the resulting transformation of the body beneath the soil, contradicts a landscape and history above ground where 'no facts can be added'. It also defies the 'centre of absence' that kept the poet at a distance from his subject. 'Committed' to bearing witness to the victims of history, the poet only finds his appropriate mode of expression when he draws on the physical commitment of the dead into the earth

Returning to Britain, and to the 'tumour' and 'centre of absence' that alienated the poet from the notion of home, Silkin's representation of grave sites allows him to decompose

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[646] Silkin, 'Two Poems Concerning Jews in England: The Jews in England' [MaR], p. 745.
[647] Silkin, 'Urban grasses' [TL-B], p. 647.

the historical, personal, and geographical borders that lie between his inheritance as a Jew and his identity as a Briton and a European. It is through the merging of Nature with Man – in the physical as well as poetic sense – and not through the stone buildings, gravestones, and memorials above ground that the British geography is made into both a local and a transnational site of memory. Embodied in the coffins that as a young man Silkin covered over, it is allowed to forget itself, to exceed the confines of its body and geography, in order that it might 'burgeon in' to the larger, connective set of histories that surround it.

This change can be seen most vividly in the aptly titled poem 'Resting Place', which appears in the 1980 collection *The Psalms with their Spoils*. Written nearly two decades after 'Astringencies', the poem returns to York and the site of the 1190 massacre. However the difference between the style and perspective of the two poems reflects the changing influence of the natural world on Silkin's representation of atrocity. Rather than lament that 'no fact can be added' to the cold and stone architecture of the city, Silkin enacts a subterranean exploration of Britain's Jewish history and its modern legacy. This altered approach to the 'fact' of modern York begins even before the first line of the poem, with the inclusion of an epigraph from the historian R. Dobson:

> In … c. 1230, John le Romeyn, then subdean of York Minster, recorded the sale
> to the commune of York Jews of a plot of land in Barkergate adjacent to what
> was already *antiquum cimiterium Iudeorum*. It is therefore on that site,
> immediately west of the river Foss and now under the tarmac of [a] civic car park,
> that archaeologists will no doubt one day disturb the posthumous tranquillity of
> Jews who can have rarely been completely tranquil while alive.[648]

The extract, taken from Dobson's 1974 book *The Jews of Medieval York and the Massacre of March 1190* instantly marks the different historiographical approach between 'Resting Place' and 'The Coldness'. By introducing an alternative record of the 1190 massacre from his own, placing both 'Astringencies' and 'Resting Place' alongside an overtly factual account of the event and its aftermath, Silkin suggests the relative fluidity of history within the poem. The new piece, through its immediate focus upon the 'resting place' of those murdered, disturbs the tranquillity of the dead and the resolute silence of the previous poem. Imagination, and the organic power of language, allows for the decomposition of the atrocious 'fact' and its subsequent memory.

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[648] R. Dobson, in 'Resting Place' [TPwtS], p. 505.

This becomes particularly clear when both the specific nature of the quotation and the poet's decision to include it are explored in greater detail. The use of a specific historical interpretation as a framing device for the historical poem is a technique reminiscent of Hill's postscript essay to 'Funeral Music'. Both appear to take as their starting-point a pre-determined conclusion of the historical period. Hill's essay includes Ian Nairn's description of Eltham Palace. The poet describes it as 'pertinent' (rather than useful or connected) to the formal composition of the sequence.[649] In 'Resting Place', Dobson's personal sense of the 'posthumous tranquillity' of the York Jews is presented as the starting-point from which Silkin choses to revisit the 1190 massacre. The focus in the quotation on the disruptive figure of the archaeologist, an on the act of disturbance committed by any act of exhumation and exploration, appears to match up with the stone rigidity of York in 'Astringenices'. Both seem to suggest that 'no fact can be added' to the suffering of those who 'can rarely have been tranquil while alive'. However, like the essay to 'Funeral Music', this presentation is quickly revealed to be false. The poem goes on to discredit Dobson's depiction of the dead in the same way that Hill reveals in the next sentence of his essay not to have read Nairn until after the completion of his sequence. As 'Resting Place' unfolds, Silkin engages in the historiography of his English, medieval 'holocaust' precisely to challenge both its linearity and its historical rigidity. In an ironic take on this notion of the 'resting place', the poet's return to York and new subterranean focus, together mark his excavation and deliberate disturbance of the grave site of English history.

Different in both its tone and language from many of Silkin's other grave poems, 'Resting Place' at first doesn't focus on the visceral, bodily process of decomposition and death. It also offers very little explanation, save for Dobson's extract and the title, of its subterranean setting. The fact that the poetic voice is positioned below the surface of York and speaks from beneath the 'tarmac of a civil car park' is not made instantly apparent. Instead, the reader is confronted by a disorientating closeness to the as-yet anonymous protagonist. The claustrophobic scene threatens to encroach upon our sensory imagination of the poem:

> Where the camshaft weeps
> Oil, where the pained axle
> Contracts

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[649] Ian Nairn, in Hill, 'Funeral Music: An Essay', p. 67.

Over Barkergate, what there is still pain.

The car, the cracked plated animal,
These oils weep by degrees back from their cells.

    Their crouched forms
Tremble above our graves: Judah'd with oil
Their iron drips into our mouths.[650]

Even before the mention of the graves, the exaggerated personification of the car is deliberately over-wrought. Evocative of the earlier poems 'A Death to Us' and 'Caring for Animals', the insistence that we must pity the 'cracked plated animal', in pain and weeping tears of oil, imbues the poem with a distinctly uncomfortable quality; a discomfort that is then paralleled in the revelation in line eight that the voice derives from the graves beneath the car park. Unlike the distant and omnipotent perspective of the poetic voice in 'The Coldness', or even of the many other poems within Silkin's oeuvre that observe – from the position of the grave digger – the organic process of death, here it is the speaker who is degraded. The voice is rooted beneath the not-so stately modernity of contemporary York, and as a result, so is the perspective of the reader. Instead of the focus upon the rootlessness of the dead and the poetic gaze, here the victims of York have become the actual morbid root beneath the establishment of the modern, industrial township. In terms of the imagined location of the poetic voice, Silkin could now not be any closer to the dead and their history. So close, in fact, he has become one of them.

    This movement from an observer to the degraded historical victim is an important one. It allows 'Resting Place', and with it Silkin's perspective as a poetic witness, to transgress the rigidity and absence that held back 'The Coldness' from making York truly 'local' to either the speaker or the reader. By denying the dead any nobility or peace, instead ventriloquizing them as they lie in wait for the figure of the archaeologist, the poem eliminates the distance that held the poetic voice apart from its subject in 'Astringencies'. Now as ignoble as the young Harrison in 'Allotments', the speaker expresses the vulnerability necessary to make the Holocaust uncomfortably local. From his new point of material degradation Silkin is able to recompose the relationship between the past and the present, and between the distant and the near – a process he begins by accusing those living in the time of 'The car, the cracked

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[650] Silkin, 'Resting Place' [TPwtS], p. 505.

plated animal' of unwittingly desecrating the natural condition of the dead. Despite the angry tone of this address, it creates a mutual relationship between past and present. Through the leaking oil the dead are still altered and acted upon by the living, just as the living unknowingly carry the 'tumour' of what took place in 1190. Distinctly absent in 'Astringencies', this spatial reciprocity between the dead and the living, and the past and the present, acknowledges the overlapping 'communities of suffering' that Silkin discusses in his work as an editor.

To cement in poetry what is already physically sealed beneath the man-made landscape of modern York, the final lines of 'Resting Place' hyphenate Gentile and Jewish history in a new, altogether more positive way. Silkin doesn't do this by playing down the violent history that lies between the two groups. Instead, he acknowledges that this shared inheritance forms a root, however blood-drenched, that secures an equal Anglo-Jewish ownership of the English soil:

> …The sword
> Rusts like a child,
>
> The Jewish child, the gentile sword; earth
>   Sells itself to us.
>
> Camphored in oil, I lose all memory.[651]

The Jewish child, the gentile sword that slayed them, and the earth that binds both together in an unhappy embrace all rot and rust together to form the foundations of modern York. Silkin has used the makeshift gravesite to comment on collective and national memory and forgetfulness, and to decompose and recompose his own place as an Anglo-Jewish witness to the Holocaust. No longer two 'centre[s] of absence', both his home and his poetry are physically grounded in the historical and contemporary dead; and it is through the rot and renewal of the earth and natural world that Britain can begin to trace the transnational roots that connect it to the rest of Europe.

Conclusion

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[651] Ibid.

In the second of his 'Six Cemetery Poems' sequence, the Silkin focuses upon a single tree planted among the gravestones:

> It had been planted among the dead, or grew
>
> with them, first there perhaps, the dead
>
> put about the tree, in urban grid-like plots.
>
> Since void, that had tissue and bone from them disjoined
>
> into bland nitrogens the tree burgeons in.
>
> Burgeons and thickens, the graves tidied
>
> emptily on its root-veined lumpy wilderness;
>
> the graves in distinguishable order,
>
> their territorial bitterness lapsing
>
> into the dense acid wood.[652]

Despite the difference in setting, like at Treblinka, Flodden and Richmond, the plant's vitality sits in stark contrast to the inanimate dead. In this poem in particular, Silkin directly acknowledges the power of the plant to disrupt and re-write human boundaries – the 'root-veined lumpy wilderness' distorts the 'urban grid-like plots', 'lapsing' the 'territorial bitterness' of both the human body and the neatly ordered grave. The dead, like the living, lie separated in their 'urban' space; it is only through the growth of the tree that these divides – physical, racial, historical – are decomposed.

Whereas in 'Astringencies', a place where 'no other fact can be added to', there was both an emptiness of history and a claustrophobic presence of the dead, here in the grave space the tree, like the poem itself, 'burgeons in'. The poet clearly finds comfort in this 'lapse', writing in 'Urban Grasses' that 'Earth, I shall be happy to not know / how you go on, when I'm like those I tended'.[653] As well as reflecting Silkin's personal belief in the amnesiac nature of death, this reference to 'those I tended' acknowledges the impact of the poet's previous occupation on his current one. As he recounts in the same poem:

> With a sickle, I tended the dead in London
>
> shortening the grass that had flowered
>
> on their bodies, as it had in my child's.
>
> And I piled the soil over the paupers' flesh
>
> in their flimsy coffins, which split. What else

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[652] Silkin, 'Six Cemetery Poems: 2' [AG], pp. 303-304.
[653] Silkin, 'Urban Grasses' [TL-B], p. 647.

> was I to do? It became
>
> my trade, my living.[654]

The development in Silkin's representation of place, England, and the issues of rootlessness highlights the effect of this 'living' upon the poet's imagination and historical witness. The difference in setting and rhetoric between 'Astringencies' and 'Resting Place' shows how the influence of the natural world and the earth became increasing pronounced as his writing developed and he moved from the parabolic 'fox's country' into the haunted stone streets of post-War England. Published after his return from Iowa and before his more overtly autobiographical poems, the otherwise unremarkable poem 'Resting Place' marks the beginning of this new approach to the representation of urban England and its history.

It is fitting that 'Resting Place' should have been published just over forty years after the outbreak of the Second World War. This break mirrors the forty year gap between the 1190 massacre and 1230, when the Jewish burial plot was finally handed over. By returning to this changing, requisitioned space – first taken over as a cemetery and then as a car park – and creating this parallel between his own poetic act and the events of Medieval York, Silkin also returns to his own imaginative landscape. The burial site allows the poet to explore the ironic necessity of change and evolution to any proper and lasting form of 'commitment'. As a mark of how the earth and soil have cultivated the poet's increasingly 'organic' approach to history and memory, the return to York demonstrates Silkin's success in reaching out to 'a community which is not Jewish (but is nevertheless quite human and civilized)'.[655] It is the unexpected location of the grave site – changing, rotting, 'voided' by the natural world around it – that the poems are able to broaden out the concept of rootlessness into a universal condition.

Facing a different set of ethical and aesthetic problems from either Geoffrey Hill or Tony Harrison, Silkin's poetry uses decomposition and the vibrancy of the natural world as a way of re-composing historiography and historical witness. The poet goes beneath the soil not simply as a poet or 'compromised archaeologist', but as one who knows how to 'spade' and handle the dead – even his own son.[656] Juxtaposed to his discomfort above ground, here the visceral and fluid stanzas reflect a poet at home in the natural rot and renewal of the natural world. This physical, less intellectualised understanding of the poetic process is what allows him to ultimately reconcile himself to Britain and the notion of belonging. As a self-

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[654] Ibid.
[655] Silkin, 'Letter: Cultural Survival', p. 36.
[656] Robinson, *Instabilities*, p. 66.

described 'rootless' Jew, his poetry only reconciles itself to its place within the British tradition through 'spading' the physical roots beneath the soil; it redresses recent and historical English and European atrocity by unearthing and then re-burying them beneath the contemporary English soil.

Afterword

In *The Satanic Verses*, the drunkard S.S. Sisodia offers up his halting litany of 'what's wrong with the English'. "The trouble with the Engenglish", he stutters, "is that their hiss hiss history happened overseas, so they do do don't know what it means".[657] Salman Rushdie's humorous and astute comment on the relationship of the English to their implicitly violent and unsavoury 'history' captures the idea of 'belated' or 'gregarious' witness that this thesis has explored. In Sisodia's halting observation Rushdie articulates the exact tension between the 'do do' and 'don't' of historical knowledge that shapes Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's post-War poetic. Yet rather than fitting within this model of the wilfully ignorant 'Engenglish', the three poets are all acutely sensitive to their distance and safety from recent history and atrocity, as well as knowing what it 'means' for the ethics and aesthetic of their poetic witness.

In his essay 'Some Aspects of Contemporary British Poetry' Geoffrey Hill comments on 'the impulse and purpose' of what he sees as the best modern poetry. In doing this he offers up a radically different picture of 'the Engenglish' from Sisodia. According to Hill 'two interrelated obsessions haunt the poetic mind':

> 1) Britain's involvement during the past seventy years, with the multi-national European Holocaust; 2) the 'foreignness' of British Literature (and especially British poetry) in the minds of the great majority of its countrymen.[658]

In their exploration of tradition, place, and poetic selfhood Silkin, Hill, and Harrison each demonstrate the enduring influence of these 'two interrelated obsessions' upon their 'impulse and purpose' as post-War poets. Across their respective careers each writer has explored and articulated the profound impact of the Holocaust and war upon their imagination and identity, and has attempted to map out a 'purpose' for poetry based upon the particularity of their historical moment.

As this study has explored, this shared sense of double 'foreignness' is something that defines and unites each poet's work. It accounts for their initial feeling of distance from Europe and the rest of the world and their geographical 'near distance' from the Holocaust. It also speaks to their status as outsiders within their own 'enemy's country', their fear of poetry's irrelevance to the public world, and to the idea that it is not the past but rather the

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[657] Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*, (London: Viking, 1988) p. 343.
[658] Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill /5 /1 /176, 'Some Aspects of Contemporary British Poetry'.

present that is a foreign country. Yet what Hill's discussion of contemporary poetry does not acknowledge are the ways that this 'foreignness' can offer a productive, even liberating perspective. The reconfiguration of the familiar and the unknown, the disruption of imaginative and geographical borders, and the interrogation of home, Englishness, and belonging in the wake of war, destruction, and human violence are three of the most powerful and effective characteristics of Silkin, Hill, and Harrison's post-War poetic. It is precisely the 'near distance' of each writer – from the Holocaust, from Europe, from England, and from their contemporaries – that enables and enriches their transnational and transhistorical poetic gaze.

As the correspondence between the poets demonstrates, this 'near distance' also defines their creative and personal relationship with each other. It is this enduring and productive 'commitment' to individualism that complicates any attempt to neatly draw together Silkin, Hill, and Harrison within a defined group, yet it is also what they each have in common. By exploring how each writer understood and worked through the pressures that war and atrocity placed upon their imagination and poetic selfhood this thesis has sought to retain the individual creativity and response of each poet's work, while still highlighting the shared roots and preoccupations that shaped their poetry. Despite the differences in their form, aesthetic, and tone each wrote out of the shadow of war, and each undertook a sustained poetic examination of human violence, atrocity, conflict, and poetic responsibility.

A key example of this shared root is the relationship that all three poets have to a pre-existing and on-going tradition of war writing. The focus in this thesis on the relationship between civilian and combative War Poetry and English post-Holocaust verse suggests the fruitfulness of considering these two usually distinct traditions and critical categories together. The fact that one might inform, shape, and retrospectively qualify the other offers a more nuanced perspective on the work of Silkin, Hill, and Harrison, and also leaves open the possibility for a larger reassessment of the legacies of combative and civilian war writing in post-1945 and Holocaust verse.

Another 'root' that this thesis has explored is the key role of place in each poet's post-War poetic. Whether it is the 'decomposition' of history and memory in Silkin's work, the shrapnel scars and acts of re-mapping in Harrison's poetry, or the creation of the universal 'human place[s]' in Hill's 'September Song' and 'Funeral Music', all three writers repeatedly draw upon the earth as a means first of asserting their historical, imaginative, and geographical 'foreignness' and then as a way of reaching out beyond these borders. In focussing primarily on how each poet represents and re-imagines the regional and local

spaces of England this thesis has explored the importance of the soil – and particularly the English soil – as both a container of history and a productive space upon which to map out a new, cosmopolitan poetic response.

A key characteristic that has enabled this thesis to offer these new readings of Silkin, Hill, and Harrison has been its use of archival material. Examining the personal archives of Hill, Harrison, and Silkin alongside their published poetry and prose has allowed for an in-depth look at the creative process of each poet. It has added a further degree of nuance to this study's exploration of Hill, Harrison, and Silkin's individual and collective identity as post-War poets, and has shed new light on how their historical sense and position informed both their imagination and sense of self. Finally, the letters, notes, and scribbled annotations of each poet have offered a glimpse into the everyday 'relations' that shaped both their work and their sense of their (often uncertain) place within a wider English and European community of writers. Existing as a complementary text alongside each poet's published work, and by no means exhaustively explored, the archives used in this thesis offer an insight into the creative process and the historical pressure placed on the imagination of each poet. Whilst not providing a definitive biographical 'meaning' for the finished poem, they nevertheless offer a platform for a fresh re-reading of each writer's work.

In poems ranging across the decades Silkin, Hill, and Harrison have each considered – in their different ways – the moral, historical, and poetic repercussions of violence and atrocity. Even when not addressing the Holocaust directly, their work is in its very nature historically informed, imbued with a 'historical sense' that shapes their self-representation, their relationship with the idea of home and belonging, as well as their notion of geography and historiography. The rhetoric, language, and form of their poetry all contain and express the particularity of each writer's witness and experience. In this, poetic style is both symptomatic of an historical moment *and* self-consciously responsive to it.

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