

TYRANNY AND REDRESS

The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Geoffrey Hill  
and Seamus Heaney

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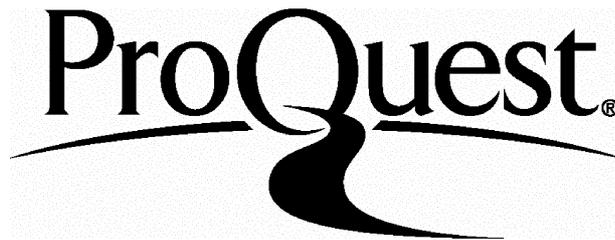
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## Abstract

My thesis is concerned with ways in which poems respond to and participate in acts of control. The opposition presented in the title - between abuse of authority and correction of injustice - indicates my thematic focus on the works of Robert Lowell, Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney: I explore how each of them treats artistic expression as the manifestation of either violative or ameliorative impulses.

The dissertation comprises four main chapters. In the first of these I detail the etymological connotations of the words 'tyranny' and 'redress'. I also analyse a range of twentieth-century poems which suggest links between state control and authorial control.

My three subsequent chapters focus on the careers of Lowell, Hill and Heaney respectively. In Chapter Two I explore Lowell's preoccupation with the aggressive energies which he detects in society, in himself, and in poetic language. His work demonstrates some of the ways in which poetry can conspire in the abuses it warns against.

The link between rhetorical and actual savagery is at the heart of Hill's concerns. In my third chapter, I show how, by being alive to the dangers of authoritarian artistry, Hill endeavours to overcome them in his poems.

Heaney's verse is the subject of Chapter Four. I discuss the balance in his work between refractory and reparatory impulses. Whether facing up to or facing away from the political problems of his nation, Heaney, it is argued, advances a concept of poetry as a means of redressing callous words and deeds.

A brief conclusion draws these three authors together by taking the work of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam as a common point of convergence. I contend that for each of them Mandelstam serves as an exemplary figure of the writer who, through his art, offers a redress to tyranny.

Contents

Acknowledgements	6
Methods of Citation	8
Table of Abbreviations	9
Preface	12

I. Tyranny and Redress

1. Tyranny and Redress: A Balance of Powers	19
2. The Poet as Tyrant	32
3. 'Redressing our Historical Perspectives'?	40

II. Robert Lowell

1. Introduction	50
2. 'Tyrannical Delusions'	55
3. 'This Wicked Earth Redress': Lowell's Early Work	65
4. 'Furious Separate Existences': <u>Life Studies</u>	82
5. 'The Solipsism of all Imperialisms': Lowell's Translations and Plays	100
6. 'Staring the Despot to Stone': <u>For the Union Dead</u> and <u>Near the Ocean</u>	112
7. 'Some Injured Tyrant's Home': The <u>Notebook</u> Volumes, <u>History</u> and <u>For Lizzie and Harriet</u>	125
8. 'A Foolsdream of Armor': Lowell's Late Poetry	142

III. Geoffrey Hill

1. Introduction	152
2. Critical Redress: Hill's Prose	157
3. Supreme Patronage: <u>For the Unfallen: Poems</u> <u>1952-1958</u>	172
4. 'Cleansing' and 'Killing': <u>King Log</u>	185
5. 'Signatures and Retributions': <u>Mercian Hymns</u>	194
6. 'A Patience Proper for Redress': <u>Tenebrae</u>	207

7. 'The Tyranny of Taste': 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'	219
8. 'Redeeming Wrath': Hill's Version of Ibsen's <u>Brand</u>	232
9. 'In Brutus' Name': <u>The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy</u>	239
10. 'The Strutting Lords': Hill's Recent Poetry	248

#### IV. Seamus Heaney

1. Introduction	262
2. Artful Redress: Heaney's Prose	269
3. 'The Sway of Language'	279
4. 'The Despotism of the Eye': <u>Death of a Naturalist</u> and <u>Door into the Dark</u>	286
5. Language and Imposition: <u>Wintering Out</u> , <u>Stations</u> and <u>North</u>	296
6. Revision and Retribution: Heaney's 'Second Thoughts' in <u>North</u>	310
7. 'Helmsman, Netsman, <i>Retiarius</i> ': <u>Field Work</u>	319
8. 'Fortified and Bewildered': <u>Station Island</u>	328
9. Threatening Language: <u>The Haw Lantern</u>	338
10. Swaying for Balance: <u>Seeing Things</u>	349
11. 'The Far Side of Revenge': Translations and Adaptations	360
Conclusion: Osip Mandelstam and the Redress of Tyranny	370
Bibliography	386

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For everything else, which must remain unarticulated, I wish to thank my family and friends, and most of all my partner, Helen.

### Methods of Citation

Quotations from primary sources are identified by an abbreviated title, as listed overleaf, and a page reference. These are inserted parenthetically in the main body of the text or, in the case of a quick succession of references, in a footnote. Where several passages from a single poem or the single page of a work are quoted consecutively, only the first citation bears a reference.

In the case of recurrent reference to a text for which no abbreviation is provided, for instance to a critical work from which I quote several times, the first footnote given provides full publication details and subsequent references consist simply of the author's surname followed by the relevant page number or numbers. On occasions when I refer to more than <sup>one</sup> work by the same author, a surname and a short title is used for second and subsequent references to this text.

The works listed on the following page are arranged chronologically according to the date of first publication. Full publication details for each title, including an indication of which particular edition or reprinting of the volume I have used, are provided in the bibliography at the end of the thesis. Distinctions between American and British publication dates may also be found there.

Table of Abbreviations

Robert Lowell

- PNT: Poems 1938-49 (1950)  
 LS: Life Studies (1959)  
 IM: Imitations (USA: 1961; UK: 1962)  
 FUD: For the Union Dead (USA: 1964; UK: 1965)  
 NTO: Near the Ocean (1967)  
 NBN: Notebook 1967-68 (1969)  
 PB: Prometheus Bound: Derived from Aeschylus (USA: 1969; UK: 1970)  
 NB: Notebook (1970)  
 HIS: History (1973)  
 DOL: The Dolphin (1973)  
 DBD: Day By Day (USA: 1977; UK: 1978)  
 LCP: Collected Prose (1987)

Geoffrey Hill

- BRA: Brand: A Version for the English Stage (1978)  
 LL: The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas (1984)  
 HCP: Collected Poems (1985)  
 EC: The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and Other Circumstances of Language (1991)  
 NCP: New and Collected Poems 1952-1992 (1994)

Seamus Heaney

- DON: Death of a Naturalist (1966)  
 DID: Door into the Dark (1969)  
 WO: Wintering Out (1972)  
 STA: Stations (1975)  
 NOR: North (1975)  
 FW: Field Work (1979)  
 PRE: Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978 (1980)  
 SA: Sweeney Astray (Eire: 1983; UK: 1984)  
 SI: Station Island (1984)  
 HL: The Haw Lantern (1987)  
 GOT: The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings (1988)  
 POW: The Place of Writing (1989)  
 CAT: The Cure at Troy (1990)  
 ST: Seeing Things (1991)  
 MV: The Midnight Verdict (1993)  
 ROP: The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures (1995)

Other Abbreviations

- OED: Oxford English Dictionary (1933)  
 SJD: Samuel Johnson, A Dictionary of the English Language (1755)

TYRANNY AND REDRESS

The Poetry of Robert Lowell,  
Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney

*'Speak, strike, redress!'*

(Julius Caesar, II.i.47)

## Preface

I have set out to explore the tension between poetic language in its supposedly redemptive aspect and the violently disruptive potentialities of words. I analyse the interest in authorial control shown by Robert Lowell, Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney, and I demonstrate how this concern frequently corresponds to a preoccupation with the political exercise of power. These ideas are pursued in my work through the paradigms of poet as tyrant and poet as agent of redress.

To apply the terms 'tyranny' and 'redress' to a discussion of poetry suggests a kinship between art and the state. My thesis takes account of the influential notion

that the poem, as a chunk of human language at its most ordered and contained, is a social structure, whose internal operations, contradictions, leaps in logic, and imaginative flights correspond at all points to latent features and movements in the society which surrounds it.<sup>1</sup>

However, I also feel that any equation between poetic structures and power structures can only be taken so far. My critical stance depends neither on a Foucaultian belief that language is innately authoritarian nor on a temptation to discount any social or political relevance for poetry. The view that literature has no constructive role may itself depend upon a hidden agenda: as Edna Longley points out, challenging those who interpret all evaluative criticism with suspicion, 'it is a ludicrous equation of art with

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Raban, The Society of the Poem (London: Harrap, 1971), p. 28.

society to assume that if we distinguish a poem on merit, it will instantly seize power'.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, then, my concern is with those questions of authority which have become inextricably caught up with poetic practice and the theorizing which surrounds it; on the other, I remain sympathetic to the notion of poetry as a linguistic constitution dissociated from the politics of state. The choice that faces many contemporary poets is between engagement with and detachment from political and cultural issues; a feeling that any artistic gestures they might offer will be inadequate to the subject frequently compounds poets' difficulties on this score.

The careers of Robert Lowell, Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney provide three striking examples of how this problem has been encountered and turned to creative account. Each knows the claims of artistic freedom and political constraint, and each is acutely sensitive to the connections which may exist between the intrinsic requirements of the autonomous composition and the responsibilities of the social individual who composes.

The dissertation comprises four main chapters. In the first of these I briefly outline the variety of associations which the terms tyranny and redress, and their cognates, have fostered. Examples from the Oxford English Dictionary (1933 edition) and Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language (1775) provide evidence of their unobtrusive but significant adjustments of meaning. They show how 'tyranny' has carried a range of connotations to do

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<sup>2</sup> Poetry in the Wars (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 14.

with excessive, disproportionate and arbitrary exercise of power in the political realm, and also how it has fostered figurative castings which describe imbalance within social and personal relationships, and within the mind of the individual. 'Redress' also has a history of application to political, social and psychological contexts. My chief interest is in the fact that, although it predominantly signifies a healthy return of balance and proportion, 'redress' can also imply violent, indeed tyrannicidal, retaliation.

In the remainder of my introductory exposition, I follow up the implications of this etymological enquiry by using the terms tyranny and redress in the analysis of several modern poems. The readings which I offer suggest that the terms have a relevance both for identifying poets' preoccupations with power and for characterizing their techniques of composition.

Chapters Two to Four then turn specifically to the careers of Lowell, Hill and Heaney. My chapter on Lowell relies heavily upon the paradigm of poet-as-tyrant, one which he himself repeatedly entertains in his verse. I show how the psychopathic appeal of power is dramatized through his obsession with imperious historical personalities and with the politics which govern personal relationships.

From the belligerent techniques of the early work through the ruthless economy of his middle-period volumes to the opportunistic tactics of the later collections, Lowell's shifts in poetic strategy reflect altering attitudes towards authorial control. I show how the conjoining of the casual and the callous, in the work from Life Studies onwards, goes

some way towards defining and legitimating the policy of wilful imperfection which operates in the later volumes. I also contend that the tone of solipsistic resignation running under Lowell's work serves as a commentary both on religious despair and on the secular mortmain of institutional American authority for which he can envisage no redress.

In Chapter Three, I connect the terms 'tyranny' and 'redress' to Geoffrey Hill's conception of the 'menace' and 'atonement' of poetry. Using poetry to bear a burden of shame and moral guilt, Hill encourages a view of his work as propitiatory. Yet he also courts the dark side of the tyranny-redress equation through the menacing gestures of his poetic techniques. The stylistic effrontery of the writing is integral to Hill's preoccupation with the bloody ravages of history on which the poems meditate: central to his anxieties is the idea that the carnage figured in his verse serves as the poet's meat.

Hill's tyrant-figures are the conjurers, mages and myth-makers who people his pages - the fabricators and planners, and, by implication, the poets. His own work is militantly guarded against the risks of stylistic triumphalism and a self-satisfied, self-centred mode of art. Yet the challenge he offers to aesthetic tyrannies is complicated by the lure of nostalgia and, in particular, a fascination with the enticing prospect of an harmonious, graded and perfectible social order. These ideals, being bound up with the authoritarianism his verse rejects, remain necessarily unattainable. Nonetheless, Hill holds out a vestigial belief in the concept of redress as a possibility

embedded, if not in social reality, at least in poetic rhythm.

Seamus Heaney is also inclined to believe in redemption through form and composition. In the fourth chapter, I consider his ideal of poetry as a potential counterweight to callous words and deeds. I also point up his combative strategies of composition - specifically the cultivation of a recalcitrant idiom as a means of passive cultural defiance. The combination of a staunch, sometimes curt manner of delivery with an air of genial casualness imparts to his work a tone at once unassuming and authoritative.

Heaney is an assiduously non-confrontational writer, and has resisted the pressures of those who wish his poetry were either more politically engaged or less so. His refusal to be drawn on this matter derives from a predisposition to weigh two conflicting impulses against each other - a condition which he has explored most fully in his latest critical volume, The Redress of Poetry (1995). The balanced approach has become a hallmark of both his poetry and his prose and, although it has incurred criticism in some quarters, it has served more to safeguard than to endanger his achievements - and his reputation.

These are three poets, then, whose work is preoccupied with yet braced against forms of power-exercise. It would be misleading to imply that their writing is equally engaged with the same issues, or engaged in the same ways. As American, English and Irish authors, each is writing from different cultural backgrounds and according to different cultural pressures, and their poetic constituencies, as far

as they can be defined, only serve to entrench such divergences.

Nonetheless, there is significant common ground between the works of Lowell, Hill and Heaney. The similarities have something to do with what can only be called authorial conscience: each of them is acutely sensitive to the possible links between the violence of the imagination and violent realities; each, too, is alive to the risks that art might feed off contemporary or historical suffering for its sustenance. Their awareness of the potential tyranny in the very exercise of language, however, is balanced by a sense of the possibility - indeed the necessity - of making amends through words.

The approach I take is essentially chronological, tracing the careers of each poet, volume-by-volume, in discrete sections. Most of my comparisons between the authors concern specific points of similarity or conjectural influence, and are noted as they arise in the process of analysing particular poems. I do, however, draw all three together at one telling point of convergence: they have all taken the life and work of Osip Mandelstam, and his death, as an exemplary instance of poetic commitment. Victim of the tyrannical régime he resisted in his verse, Mandelstam provides a compelling paradigm of the poet as an agent of redress. A brief conclusion considers just this point.

I. TYRANNY AND REDRESS

## 1. Tyranny and Redress: A Balance of Powers

In Act Two, Scene One of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar (c.1599), Brutus fearfully imagines the consequences of Caesar extending his prerogatives and taking the crown. His solitary contemplation is interrupted by the arrival of an anonymous, coded letter (sent from Cassius via Cinna) which corroborates and strengthens his misgivings. From this he reads aloud the words,

*Brutus, thou sleep'st; awake, and see thyself.  
Shall Rome, etc. Speak, strike, redress!* (II.i.46)<sup>1</sup>

Pondering on the implications of this urgent but cryptic message, Brutus is awakened to the resolve that Rome should not succumb to tyranny and 'stand under one man's awe' (line 52). The course of action he anticipates will entail making decisive strikes of a nature at once verbal and physical:

*'Speak, strike, redress!' Am I entreated  
To speak, and strike? O Rome, I make thee promise,  
If the redress will follow, thou receivest  
Thy full petition at the hand of Brutus!* (II.i.55)

Imagining a petition for the redress of grievances against Caesar, Brutus is driven to the murder conspiracy. Civic redress thus becomes translated into an act of retribution against a putative tyrant.

The connection between tyranny and redress is reinforced later in the same scene, when Brutus addresses his fellow-conspirators Cassius and Casca:

*So let high-sighted tyranny range on,  
Till each man drop by lottery. But if these,  
As I am sure they do, bear fire enough  
To kindle cowards and to steel with valour  
The melting spirits of women, then, countrymen,*

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is cited in the OED as an example of the application of the verb 'redress' (entry 11.a).

What need we any spur but our own cause  
To prick us to redress? (II.i.118)<sup>2</sup>

It is the predatory and arbitrary nature attributed to Caesar's rule which makes it appear tyrannical, and thus in need of violent redress.<sup>3</sup>

The language which Shakespeare has Brutus speak is a telling example of the way in which the terms 'redress' and 'tyranny' were used in Renaissance thought and literature to describe conditions of balance and imbalance in the state. These applications depend upon a complex etymological evolution. Common definitions of the term 'tyranny', as it derives from the Greek 'turannía', include 'despotism', 'cruelty', 'imperiousness' and 'inclemency'. Going back to the Greek sources, however, the Encyclopaedia Britannica (eleventh edition, 1910-11), questions the etymological validity of associating tyranny with ruthless and oppressive rule: the link is apparently 'based on a complete misapprehension of the application of the Greek word' for a 'tyrant' ('turannos'), 'which implied nothing more than unconditional sovereignty'. However, from the time of the ultra-constitutionalists of fourth century Athens, or possibly even earlier, associations with severity have accrued to the words tyranny and tyrant, as the historian Maurice Lathey, in a wide historical survey of tyranny, has observed:

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<sup>2</sup> At the very moment of Caesar's murder, Cinna cries 'Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!' (III.i.78).

<sup>3</sup> The above citations are from the Arden Shakespeare edition of Julius Caesar, ed. by T.S. Dorsch (1955) (London and New York: Routledge, 1988; repr. 1994). Other references to Shakespeare's plays in the course of this thesis are from The Complete Works, ed. by Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951; repr. 1991).

The word 'tyrant' when it first made its appearance among the Greeks of Asia Minor in the seventh century B.C. was probably a neutral term interchangeable with 'basileus' or 'king'. But it very soon took on a derogatory colour, particularly in the hands of the aristocratic and oligarchic authors of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. It has since been used largely as a term of abuse. Any ruler one does not like is described as a tyrant.<sup>4</sup>

The principal meaning of tyranny provided in the Oxford English Dictionary is 'violent or lawless action', while a tyrant is defined as 'one who seizes upon the sovereign power in a state without legal right'. Throughout the subsidiary meanings which the OED provides, the defining characteristics of tyrants and tyrannies are capricious exercise of power and unjust severity. In Latey's succinct formulation,

a tyrant is a ruler who exercises arbitrary power beyond the scope permitted by the laws, customs and standards of his time and society and who does so with a view to maintaining or increasing that power.<sup>5</sup>

Arbitrary behaviour is central to Plato's diagnosis of tyranny. In The Republic, he defines the tyrant as a self-indulgent character, one whose actions are whim-driven, guided by violent, illusory and lawless pleasures. An overriding master-passion fuels these idle desires, and the monomania inevitably evolves into megalomania - a passion by

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Latey, Tyranny: A Study in the Abuse of Power, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23. The OED also cites the obsolete colloquialism 'tyrannically', meaning 'exceedingly' or 'vehemently', and provides a supporting example from Hamlet: 'I602 SHAKS. *Ham.* II.ii.356 That crye out on the top of question; and are most tyrannically clap't for't'.

which the tyrant is tyrannized in turn.<sup>6</sup> In The Politics, Aristotle also catalogues the personal traits which typify a tyrant: these include dependence on flattery, irresponsibility, superfluity, the inclination to construct monuments to the self and to publicly parade one's own excesses; he also suggests a link between eroticism and aggression which manifests itself in a propensity for sadism and acts of sexual deviance. Distrust of friends and dependence on aliens, internecine family power-struggles, and reliance on a secret police force are further hallmarks of tyranny which have been passed down from Aristotle and persist in present-day conceptions of the term.<sup>7</sup>

Both Plato and Aristotle connect the unbalanced personality of the tyrant to ideas of political imbalance. The Platonic view maintains that tyranny is spawned from excessive liberty among the populace. This leads to a disregard for the law which in turn results in a state of chaos and dissension; the tyrant is then elected by the people as a solution, but abuses them and ultimately falls at their hands. His rule is commonly not backed by the sanction of law or custom - hence a prevalent association of tyranny with usurpation in ancient Greek conceptions of the term. Aristotle's emphasis is on how the fiats of the mass will can be as dangerous as those of a single will, and he repeatedly warns against the power of collective tyrannies.

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<sup>6</sup> The Republic, trans. by Desmond Lee, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974; repr. 1985), pp. 381-415. On the words 'tyrant' and 'tyranny' as transliterations, see p. 381, note 2.

<sup>7</sup> See The Politics of Aristotle, trans. by Ernest Barker (London: Oxford University Press, 1958; repr. 1978), pp. 178-79, 235-54. On distinctions from Plato, see pp. 251-52.

With his penchant for classifying and clarifying the terms of analysis, Aristotle distinguishes various types of rule, defining tyranny as a constitutional abnormality, a perversion of kingship; kingship proper is an impartial type of guardianship which ought to arise from the aristocracy.

These Platonic and Aristotelian ideas gained significant currency in political thought during the Renaissance, as examples from the OED indicate:

**I60I** R. JOHNSON *Kingd. & Commw.* (I603) I93 His government is rather tyrannicall then kinglike: for he is absolute Lord of all the demeanes of the kingdome.

**I65I** HOBBS *Leviath.* IV. xlvi, From Aristotle's old philosophy, they have learned, to call all manner of commonwealths but the popular..tyranny.

**I672** TEMPLE *Ess. Govts.* Wks. I73I I.97 Some of the smaller States, but especially those of the Cities, fell often under Tyrannies, which spring naturally out of Popular Governments.<sup>8</sup>

**I68I** NEVILE *Plato Rediv.* 38 Aristotle..calls Tyranny the Corruption of Monarchy.

**I835** THIRLWALL *Greece* I.x.396 A monarchy, in which selfish aims predominate, becomes a tyranny.

The debates which raged in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about the nature of the constitution witness an often violent collision between secular and sacred conceptions of the best form of government. Arguments against the divine right of kings relied heavily upon the paradigm of the monarch as tyrant. The 1689 translation of the Vindiciae contra tyrannos provides a case

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson also cites this example in his A Dictionary of the English Language (1755) (London: Times Books, 1983) - hereafter referenced as SJD. The illustrative quotations which Johnson provides to support his definitions rarely refer the reader to the particular work cited, and never to the location within the text from which his examples derive.

in point, stressing as it does the need for appointed assemblies, as a last resort, to take arms against the tyrant-king.<sup>9</sup> In the same vein, Hobbes's De Corpore Politico (1650) describes tyrannicide as 'the killing of a Tyrant, not onely Lawful; but also Laudable' (OED).<sup>10</sup>

Brutus's decision to redress the excesses and injustices of his ruler inverts the conventional idea that the ruler himself is the nation's chief agent of redress. The OED provides instances of this idea:

**I654** BRAMHALL *Just. Vind.* iv. (I66I) 75 If the Archbishop failed to do justice, the last complaint must be to the King to give order for redress.

**I700** DRYDEN *Pal. & Arc.* I.59 'Tis thine, O King! th'afflicted to redress.<sup>11</sup>

Shakespeare highlights the significance of a clash between dispensation of power from above and acts of dissent from below by having the conspirators exact their bloody 'redress' against Caesar just at the point when the leader himself is settling the grievances of his people; 'What is now amiss', he asks shortly before his death, 'that Caesar and his senate must redress?' (III.i.31).

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<sup>9</sup> See A Defence of Liberty against Tyrants: A Translation of the Vindiciae contra tyrannos, by Junius Brutus, ed. by Harold J. Laski (London: Bell, 1924). See also Latey, pp. 295-96.

<sup>10</sup> The OED also provides two instances in which Brutus is conceived of as an exemplary tyrannicide: '**I700** TOLAND *Harrington's Oceana* Pref.9 Cremutius Cordus, who was condemn'd by that Monster Tiberius for speaking honorably of the immortal Tyrannicides Brutus and Cassius'; '**I874** SYMONDS *Sk. Italy & Gr.* (I898) I.xv.344 Memories..of Brutus, and other exalted tyrannicides, exalted his imagination'.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson cites the same phrase of Dryden's, and also has recourse to Swift: 'In countries of freedom, princes are bound to protect their subjects in liberty, property and religion, to receive their petitions, and redress their grievances'.

As a noun, 'redress' primarily signifies 'reparation of, or satisfaction or compensation for, a wrong sustained or the loss resulting from this'. It has also come to embody the idea of a counterweight, and hence the restoration of equilibrium, an application particularly pertinent to conceptions of tyranny as an imbalance of power between the people, the monarch and the aristocracy. Political usage of the term 'redress' in this context conjures up an image of the Polybian theory of government as a properly adjusted balance of powers, preventing the oppressive domination of a single one. It is upon such ideas that the sense of redress as a means of keeping the ruler's powers in check depends.<sup>12</sup>

The original, literal meaning of the verb 'redress', deriving from the fourteenth-century Old French 'redrecier', is 'to set up again, re-straighten'. Subsequent applications of the word made possible figurative castings to do with re-establishment, restoration and uprising, definitions charged with implications of violent action:

**I596** SPENSER *State Irel. Wks.* (Globe) 650/I Is not the sword the most violent redress that may be used for any evill? (OED)

Such people, as break the law of nations, all nations are interested to suppress, considering that the particular states, being the delinquents, can give no *redress*. (*Bacon, SJD*)

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<sup>12</sup> **I849** MACAULAY *Hist. Eng.* i.I.44 Unless the balance had been redressed by a great transfer of power from the crown to the parliament' (OED). I owe a debt of acknowledgement to Dr Peter Swaab for lending me the text of a lecture on American Republicanism (delivered at University College London, 1991 and 1993), which succinctly summarizes Polybian conceptions of balance and imbalance in the state.

**I749** SMOLLETT *Regicide* III.viii, The sword of Athol Was never drawn but to redress the wrongs His country suffer'd. (OED)<sup>13</sup>

The idea that redressive counter-action involves retaliatory violence still persists; this is evidenced by the one addition for redress-based words provided in the OED supplement:

**I965** H. KAHN *On Escalation* ii.45 The first use of nuclear weapons..is likely to be less for the purpose of destroying the other side's military forces..than for redressive, warning,..or deterrence purposes.

Tyranny and redress have not been conceived of only in terms of political machination; the words have a history of usage in reference also to mental and spiritual states. Such usage, derived, as we have seen, from the Greeks, is emphasized in eighteenth-century notions of reason as a form of self-government. Loss of reason, of mental stability, has frequently been likened to a propensity for self-tyrannizing. In such cases, internal operations of the mind are described in terms appropriate to external operations of the state:

**I741** MRS. MONTAGU *Lett.* (I8I3) **I.271** Happier are they who are governed by another's will than such as are tyrannized by their own. (OED)

**I790** HAN. MORE *Relig. Fash. World* (I79I) 89 Those tyrannizing inclinations, which have so natural a tendency to enslave the human heart. (OED)

**I805** FOSTER *Ess.* IV.vii.217 The influences which tyrannise over human passions and opinions. (OED)

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<sup>13</sup> The OED even supplies a conjectural, obsolete definition of the verb as 'to win or take by force': '**I592** WARNER *Alb. Eng.* VII.xxxvi.153 The Cleonaeon Lyons spoyles for her I would redresse. I would the Lernan Hydras heads with sword and fire suppress'.

**I829** HOOD *Dream of Eugene A.*xxvii, One stern tyrannic thought, that made All other thoughts its slave. (OED)<sup>14</sup>

In Julius Caesar, Cassius psychologizes about the nature of power. As he meditates upon tyrannicide, he speaks also of overthrowing a sense of being tyrannized by his own thoughts and inclinations:

I know where I will wear this dagger then;  
Cassius from bondage will deliver Cassius:  
Therein, ye gods, you make the weak most strong;  
Therein, ye gods, you tyrants do defeat. [...]  
If I know this, know all the world besides,  
That part of tyranny that I do bear,  
I can shake off at pleasure. (I.iii.89, 98)

Milton's tyrannicidal intentions were also directed at once externally and internally. Paradise Lost (1667) is taut with struggles on both political and spiritual levels: as he wrestles with the conflict between individual liberty and the repressive policies of state, so Milton tries to balance a belief in free will against the persuasive doctrine of predestination. Again, reason is the key to self-government, as Michael explains to Adam:

Reason in man obscur'd, or not obeyd,  
Immediatly inordinate desires  
And upstart Passions catch the Government  
From Reason, and to servitude reduce  
Man till then free. Therefore since hee permits  
Within himself unworthie Powers to reign  
Over free reason, God in Judgement just  
Subjects him from without to violent Lords;  
Who oft as undeservedly enthrall  
His outward freedom: Tyrannie must be,  
Though to the Tyrant thereby no excuse. (XII, 86)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Johnson provides an earlier precedent for such usage: 'He does violence to his own faculties, tyrannises over his own mind, and usurps the prerogative that belongs to truth alone, which is to command assent by its own authority. *Locke's Works*.'

<sup>15</sup> All quotations from Milton in this thesis are from The Complete Poems, ed. by B.A. Wright, 2nd edn (London: Dent, 1980; repr. 1986), p. 377. Parts of the above passage are cited in both the OED and Johnson's Dictionary. See also

The language here is torn between vexation and vindication. Momentarily, Milton gives the impression of God as an immutable and retributive overlord, a tyrant sanctioning tyranny. In the immediate, defensive qualifying of this view, one detects his blind, groping hope-against-hope that a grimly deterministic theology, and its political correlative in England's monarchist régime, may be successfully resisted.<sup>16</sup>

Just as an etymological history of mental self-tyrannizing can be traced, so too is there evidence that redress is an internal operation. Such was the sentiment of the sixteenth-century theologian Richard Hooker:

To seek reformation of evil laws is commendable, but for us the more necessary is a speedy redress of ourselves. (SJD)<sup>17</sup>

**I597** HOOKER *Eccl. Pol.* v.lxii. §18 Vnlawful vsurpation a penitent affection must redresse. (OED)<sup>18</sup>

For Hooker, tolerance, intellectual liberty and the flexibility of dogma are the foundations upon which the

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lines 32, 39 and 173 of Book Twelve. On Satan's protest against the 'Tyranny of Heav'n' and his view of Hell as the 'Dungeon of our Tyrant', see I.124 and X.466. There are references to tyranny also in line 59 of Book Two and line 394 of Book Four; for redress, see IX.219 (and the note on p. 574 of Wright's text).

<sup>16</sup> Milton's struggle to redress his view of a tyrannical God might be compared to the following OED example: '**I835** I. TAYLOR *Spir. Despot* II.77 Spiritual despotism is necessarily redressed or excluded when theology is reformed'.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson also cites from Hooker under the entry for the verb 'tyrannise': 'While we trust in the mercy of God thro' Christ Jesus, fear will not be able to tyrannise over us'.

<sup>18</sup> Hooker is here referring to Augustine's opinion regarding a layman's prerogative to administer the rite of baptism: this is a pardonable act, providing the layman's attitude is contrite. See Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity (1593-97), 2 vols (London: Dent, 1907; repr. 1968), II, pp. 273-74 (p. 274).

redress of ecclesiastical despotism depends. In his vision, reason and faith combine to counter the internal tyranny of fear, provided that one's motives are appropriately humble: self-redress is the prerequisite for the redress of external circumstances.

The third earl of Shaftesbury had a similar outlook in this respect; he held that responsibility towards oneself and a sense of public duty may co-exist harmoniously. This way of thinking is innately connected to his assertion of the close links which exist between artistic and ethical gestures. According to his Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, and Times (1711), the redress of social problems is inextricable from redress on the imaginative plane:

**I710** SHAFTESB. *Charac.* (I737) I.III.ii.325 Nor am I out of my own Possession, whilst there is a Person left within; who has Power to dispute the Appearances, and redress the Imagination. (OED)

Shaftesbury's emphasis on the link between the moral and the aesthetic returns my etymological foray to its original idea: that language and action are inseparable.

Words can make things better or worse: this notion is at the heart of Shakespeare's concerns in Julius Caesar. The letter to Brutus connects the very act of utterance to the making of a decisive, physical strike. In the fifth act of the play, Shakespeare returns to this correlation when he gives Brutus the line, 'Good words are better than bad strokes, Octavius' - an adage which is met with Marcus Antonius's withering retort:

In your bad strokes, Brutus, you give good words;  
Witness the hole you made in Caesar's heart,  
Crying, 'Long live! hail, Caesar!' (V.i.29)

It was a 'bad stroke' of the sword that felled Caesar; what made the deed worse, claims Antonius, were the 'good words' which deceitfully hid Brutus's vengeful motives.<sup>19</sup>

In his essay 'The Poet', Ralph Waldo Emerson argues that 'words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy. Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words'.<sup>20</sup> The implications of Emerson's assertion are double-edged, as examples from his works given in the OED demonstrate: they show how he envisages both the redressive and the tyrannical potentialities of language. In the essay 'Eloquence', Emerson proclaims his fervent belief that 'there is no calamity which right words will not begin to redress' (OED).<sup>21</sup> A considerable rift exists between this socially responsible conception of language as reparative and binding and the dangerously asocial paradigm of the unbounded poet, at one with the immensity of nature, which Emerson entertains in 'The Poet': 'We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials'.<sup>22</sup> In anticipation of some literary *Übermensch* to come, Emerson ardently envisages a poetry of violent upheavals.

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<sup>19</sup> Compare the sophistry of Brutus's line, 'We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers' (II.i.180).

<sup>20</sup> The Complete Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: With a Critical Introduction, ed. by G.T. Beltany, 2nd edn (London: Ward, Lock, 1889), pp. 92-102 (p. 93).

<sup>21</sup> 'Eloquence', *ibid.*, pp. 418-28 (p. 418). Emerson is here describing the use of oratory to repair civil grievances in Parliament or Congress, or at the Bar.

<sup>22</sup> 'The Poet', p. 101. Both this and the previous quotation are cited in the OED.

The connotations I have been documenting of the terms tyranny and redress highlight the choice which poets exercise between the use and abuse of power in their own writing: in a metaphorical sense, the poet has the ability to play the tyrant or else to act as an agent of redress. For the remainder of my introduction, I consider how a number of poets have meditated upon the nature of power in their verse and how this has involved making aggressive verbal strikes. I consider the tricky balancing act which poets have to face in responding to notions of authority, caught as they are between meditation on tyrannical realities and the impulse to achieve imaginative redress.

## 2. The Poet as Tyrant

The connection between poetic construction and political constitutions is the subject of W.H. Auden's wary scrutiny in his essay 'The Poet and the City' (1963):

All political theories which, like Plato's, are based on analogies drawn from artistic fabrication are bound, if put into practice, to turn into tyrannies. The whole aim of a poet, or any other kind of artist, is to produce something which is complete and will endure without change. A poetic city would always contain exactly the same number of inhabitants doing exactly the same jobs for ever. [...]

A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.

Vice versa, a poem which was really like a political democracy - examples, unfortunately, exist - would be formless, windy, banal and utterly boring.<sup>1</sup>

Plato, who in The Republic both warns against tyranny and resists the 'artistic fabrication' which poetry represents, is himself portrayed by Auden as potential fabricator of a tyrannical régime; the Platonic blueprint for an ideal state, in which a certain version of goodness, truth and beauty is perfected, and from which all undesirable elements are excluded, invites such an interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

For Auden, the dangers of poetry, as of political philosophy, inhere in aesthetic purism: the pursuit of

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<sup>1</sup> The Dyer's Hand (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 72-89 (p. 85).

<sup>2</sup> On Plato's idea of banning poetry from his projected society because of its dangerous influence in gratifying the unwholesome desires of the populace, see The Republic, pp. 421-39. On his distrust of poets (specifically Sophocles and Euripides) for supposedly revering tyranny, see pp. 389-90.



The poem, like the protagonist it describes, has the pretensions of innocuous conduct, but the strategies are all back-handed - like the tyrant's casually ruthless habit of swiping out at any evidence of human weakness. His interest in warfare is described as if it is an innocent, abstract enthusiasm, a personal study-pursuit which entails no guilty connection between spectatorhood and the reality of battle. Connections are there to be made by the reader, however: that the senators dutifully 'burst with laughter' in the tyrant's company cannot be dissociated from the violent outbursts (or worse) to which they are vulnerable. More unambiguous is the link in the poem's final line between the tyrant's propensity for self-pity and the Herod-like acts of cruelty for which he is responsible. He does not cry because the children die: they die because he cries.

As the tyrant's cover is blown, so too is the poet's. By explicitly identifying poet and tyrant in line two, Auden provokes consideration as to the treacherous operations of the work of art itself. This has to do with the surface facility of his procedures: the poem appears to be 'easy to understand', just like the tyrant's compositions. Such ease is not to be trusted, however. The casual tone of the verse, with its callous brevity and inappropriately slangy vocabulary, links the apparently unfeeling writer to the dangerous man of power. In this way, the poem defines itself as a possible instance of what it criticizes. The reader is also embroiled: use of second-hand, journalistic phrases, plus reference to an insular, detached curiosity about martial events that are going on in some other place, serve as a means of commenting upon the phenomenon of

passive attention to media events. This is an interpretation strengthened by the date ascribed to the composition, January 1939, a point at which European political stability was as precarious, indeed as illusory, as the surface calm of the poem itself. Its prophetic charge is increased by reading into the universalizing parable an address to the urgent here-and-now of brutal and repressive political power.

The poem both tyrannizes and redresses itself. On the one hand, it makes a conscious display of its own meagreness and insufficiency by throwing a small patchwork of used phrases over hidden scenes of atrocity. The seeming indifference of this casual approach is a form of self-indictment. On the other hand, self-indictment is a form of special knowledge; without denying a sense of connivance, the poem possesses an in-built resistance to the tyranny it describes. This is achieved through the subversive exploitation of language within the poem's tight régime: the words fight against their surface implications, and in the process they defy the tyrant's veneer of blamelessness. There is, after all, a fundamental difference as well as a disquieting congruence between the poet's artistry and that of the tyrant. The latter conventionally handles language in a crude way: he is the author of manifestoes, of messages which might well be 'easy to understand' but which lack the underlying sophistication which distinguishes poetry from mere sloganizing. Auden's poem is alive to the risks and liabilities of language in a way that a tyrant's verbal exercises conventionally are not. Herein lies the redressive capacity of the poem: it is vigilantly braced



because of, its opacity. Jeffers renders his verse in a point-blank, tough-talking way, staring out his subjects. The poem possesses a tone as matter-of-fact as that of 'Epitaph on a Tyrant', although there are none of Auden's recessive ironies eating away at the surface context through the vocabulary. Yet the very lack of judgement paradoxically serves as a form of commentary and gives the poem its steely bite: by the poet presenting no resistance to the circumstances as he relates them, the cyclical progression from tyranny to democracy to tyranny is felt to be all the more inevitable.

Ted Hughes may well have learned something from this American poet about the artistic representation of cruel efficiency. In Hughes's view of the natural world, as in that of Jeffers, it is the hawk who operates as tyrant:

I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.<sup>5</sup>

There is no sophistry in the poem. A ruthlessly clipped diction, along with the rigid absoluteness of the present tense, conveys a spirit of fanaticism. The poet mimics the predatory creature's intention to control a world which, in Auden's words, 'is complete and without change'. The difference between the poet and the bird, however, is that

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<sup>5</sup> The quotation is from 'Hawk Roosting', Selected Poems: 1957-1981 (London: Faber and Faber, 1982; repr. 1986), p. 43.

the former comprehends and gives expression to the latter's lack of comprehending and expressive capacities.<sup>6</sup>

Auden describes how, 'in the process of arriving at the finished work, the artist has continually to employ violence'. He notes how a poet writes the line,

The mast-high anchor dives through a cleft  
changes it to

The anchor dives through closing paths  
changes it again to

The anchor dives among hayricks  
and finally to

The anchor dives through the floors of a church.

A *cleft* and *closing paths* have been liquidated,  
and hayricks deported to another stanza.<sup>7</sup>

Auden's language of extremity here has been redressed by Peter Robinson in a subtle discussion of the passage. Robinson insists on the social relations which words enjoy and reminds us that, even if the will of a poet may be described as tyrannical, the medium of poetry resists 'imperiousness or executive confidence'. He goes on to suggest 'counter-examples to Auden's picture of the tyrannical poet', while stressing that these do not

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes once voiced the desire to immure 'Hawk Roosting' from the political connotations which it inevitably invites: 'That bird is accused of being a fascist ... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple'. He then goes on to admit that he finds some connection between the hawk, '*Hitler's familiar spirit*' and Job's Jehovah. See Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 47-50 (p. 48).

<sup>7</sup> 'The Poet and the City', p. 85.

necessarily 'exclude an element of violence from the processes of making art'.

They are simply to indicate that without an untyrannical feeling for the interdependence of elements in the medium of poetry, no poet could produce those works of 'beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole' which Auden sees as analogous in politics to 'a nightmare of horror'.<sup>8</sup>

To be after 'perfection, of a kind' is the poet's purpose. This may conjure an image of the poet playing tyrant but the view must be balanced, as Robinson urges, by a conception of poetry's good intentions. In this section, I have sought to identify the connections which may be drawn between poetry and tyranny; I continue to pursue these in the next, while also bringing into consideration a poem's potentially redressive capacities.

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<sup>8</sup> 'W.H. Auden Revises a Context', in In the Circumstances: About Poems and Poets (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 24-46 (p. 27).

### 3. 'Redressing our Historical Perspectives'?

In the course of a critical study of Ezra Pound's poetry, Donald Davie takes a sceptical overview of the relationship between poetry and history. He argues that Pound's example has radically problematized any poetic enterprise designed to make sense of the past, and suggests that

it will rule out (has ruled out already, for serious writers) any idea that poetry can or should operate in the dimension of history, trying to make sense of the recorded past by redressing our historical perspectives. [...] History, from now on, may be transcended in poetry, or it may be evaded there; but poetry is not the place where it may be understood.<sup>1</sup>

Such a sweeping claim for the extent of Pound's debilitating impact is contentious. Davie's assertion, on the other hand, that poets feel themselves unable to 'redress [...] historical perspectives' is a crucial statement on the predicament facing many modern poets.

There is a fine line between transcendence and evasion, between a visionary rise above historical circumstance and an escapist desire to give history the slip. Evasion is an understandable impulse, since to try 'to make sense of the recorded past by redressing our historical perspectives' in poetry might entail distorting history to suit a peculiar design. Yet to treat poetry as an entirely asocial free realm is to incur the charge of irresponsibility - or of irrelevance. A major quandary for poets writing in the wake of the atrocities which have resulted from modern tyrannies is to be caught between an inability to respond adequately to such events and the implications of not responding at

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 244.

all. As Karl Miller has noted, the dominant modern fear is of tackling the very subject of power, in case the power rubs off on the poet:

Might has always been the trouble with public poetry, while the suspicion that might is always wrong has been the prime inhibitor of public poetry in modern times.<sup>2</sup>

This dilemma has had a peculiar urgency for Irish writers in recent decades. W.B. Yeats offers a compelling paradigm of the poet who seeks to redress historical perspectives, although his example has been as offputting in some respects as it has been enabling in others. On the one hand, he can be seen, in Edward Said's words, as 'the indisputably great *national* poet who during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power'.<sup>3</sup> On the other, the 'restorative vision' of Yeats depends upon a display of militant bravado which it has become increasingly difficult to endorse. The redress of grievances he sought for the Irish nation was to be determined by the battle ethic:

We were to forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Opinion', The Review, no s.27-28 (autumn-winter 1971-72), 41-52 (p. 49).

<sup>3</sup> Culture and Imperialism, 2nd edn (London: Vintage, 1994), pp. 265-66.

<sup>4</sup> 'Poetry and Tradition' (August 1907), in Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 246-60 (p. 249).

This is redress in the form of aggressive resistance. The joy Yeats anticipates is fierce and Nietzschean: poetry's express function is to accompany a violent birth of change.

Moreover, Yeats's engagement with history is less a matter of fidelity to fact than of mystification. The poetic imagination converts historical realities into symbols and, in the process of aestheticizing its subject, it glosses over the pain of actual violence. This is true, for instance, of the title sequence of his 1928 volume The Tower. Here, the tower itself is set up as an emblem of the mind's creative impulse, an impulse which, as the sequence develops, becomes increasingly divorced from historical event - and, at the same time, increasingly aggressive. In the third and final section, the speaker, an old man reflecting on heroic past achievements and on the power of youth, makes a bequest to the archetypally brave 'upstanding men' who will succeed him. He proclaims that they shall inherit his pride,

The pride of people that were  
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,  
Neither to slaves that were spat on,  
Nor to the tyrants that spat.<sup>5</sup>

The role of autonomous renegade holds a powerful attraction for Yeats. It is one which depends upon a declared distance both from the tyrants and from the tyrannized. He sets the poet up as ostensibly outside history and above the affairs of state. Yet it is his proclaimed immunity which paradoxically bolsters the authoritativeness of his adversarial stance towards the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Yeats's Poems, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares, rev. edn (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 302-07 (p. 306).

More recent Irish writers have found it impossible, indeed undesirable, to trust in poetry as a mode of power. Derek Mahon's poems, for example, display a complex awareness of the political implications of the language they employ. In 'The Last of the Fire Kings', he gives voice to a Yeatsian desire not to be bound by history, but he redresses this perspective by balancing it out against a distrust of historical escapism:

I want to be  
Like the man who descends  
At two milk churns

With a bulging  
String bag and vanishes  
Where the lane turns,

Or the man  
Who drops at night  
From a moving train

And strikes out over the fields  
Where fireflies glow  
Not knowing a word of the language.

Either way, I am  
Through with history -  
Who lives by the sword

Dies by the sword.  
Last of the fire kings, I shall  
Break with tradition and

Die by my own hand  
Rather than perpetuate  
The barbarous cycle.

Five years I have reigned  
During which time  
I have lain awake each night

And prowled by day  
In the sacred grove  
For fear of the usurper.

Perfecting my cold dream  
Of a place out of time,  
A palace of porcelain

Where the frugivorous  
Inheritors recline  
In their rich fabrics

Far from the sea.

But the fire-loving  
People, rightly perhaps,  
Will not countenance this,

Demanding that I inhabit,  
Like them, a world of  
Sirens, bin-lids  
And bricked-up windows -

Not to release them  
From the ancient curse  
But to die their creature and be thankful.<sup>6</sup>

The poem argues with itself about its own function, as Mahon dramatizes the tension between believing and disbelieving in an imaginative free realm. The speaker is one of the tribal kings described by Frazer in The Golden Bough (1890-1915).<sup>7</sup> He voices an admirable wish to break 'the barbarous cycle' of violent usurpations which define his experience of history. However, the cold dreams he entertains - of detachment from world affairs in a perfected lifestyle of luxury - resemble the irresponsible escapist fantasies of a proverbial tyrant. They are decoys, offering no real escape from his role.

These temptations to self-delusion are the poet's also: the perfectionist drive towards an aestheticized view of history depends upon atavistic tendencies. Moreover, the desire to disappear, to take on the mythical role of vagabond or outcast, presents a dangerous paradigm for the poet: it puts the artist in an asocial, ahistorical realm, beyond the conventional laws of communication and mutual

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<sup>6</sup> Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin; Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 1991), p. 58.

<sup>7</sup> On the 'dangerous distinction' of being appointed a king of fire or water by one's tribe, see James George Frazer, The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion (1922), abridged edn (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 176, 266.

understanding, and his tribe, perhaps rightly, cannot countenance this. In the closing lines, the Fire King faces up to the inescapable 'ancient curse'. The applicability of this phrase to the Irish problem intensifies the urgency of the poem - and also the sense in which the writer is tyrannized by his own escapist inclinations.

Tom Paulin is another Irish poet whose work expresses a deep distrust of the opportunism inherent in art. This scepticism is at the heart of his terse and brittle poem 'What is Fixed to Happen':

We know it well, that territory.  
It tastes of grit and burning diesel.  
A banal sickness as the wheels turn.

The eye is such a cunning despot  
We believe its wordless travelogues  
And call them *History* or *Let It Happen*.

In those waterfalls of images  
Each life is just a simple function  
With blank features and one useful skill.

The rain glistens on thick monuments  
To an age of lead. That state will fail  
Because it must. Pulped bodies happen

In a charred street, and what we know  
Is secular: imprisoned shadows  
And black plastic shrouds. A public death.

In a scorched space, a broken nowhere,  
A homeless grief beyond all grievance  
Must suffer nature and be free.

It knows true pity is a rarer love  
That asks for neither action nor revenge.  
It wills nothing and serves nothing.<sup>8</sup>

Paulin's title, 'What is Fixed to Happen', describes both absolutist state-control and the fatalism which political suppression encourages. The voice in the poem is that of an apostate, resigned to history's bloody progression and

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<sup>8</sup> The Strange Museum (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 34.

abnegating any sense of personal liability. The 'territory' defined is both a particular place and a generalized state of mind - hence the poem's double-sense of specificity and abstraction. The speaker, like Emerson's poet, has a 'tyrannous eye', yet this eye commands a reductive rather than expansive vision; the 'cunning despot' simply observes without intervening. It records a version of history called '*Let it Happen*', the deadening force of the phrase repeating itself in the callous observation that 'pulped bodies happen'.

Again, the reader's attention is focused on the inadequacy of the response. It is as if the poem stares blankly at its own impotence in the face of the atrocities it records. Poets may be said to create 'waterfalls of images'; Paulin shows how the flow can be reductive. Here, the image of water glistening on monuments has a dulling rather than illuminating effect; history's lessons are not being learnt. Like Mahon's poem, Paulin's turns gradually, and only ever implicitly, towards the Irish situation: the penultimate tercet offers an oblique expression of the pain of being unable to identify one's homeland. The grief this causes, Paulin warns, is not however to be confused with the endless struggle to redress grievances through acts of revenge; 'true pity' goes beyond this. The poem is left hanging uncertainly between transcendence and evasion: on one level, it ends as it started - in a cold renunciation that meaningful awareness of past events may be attained; on another, it offers a glimmer of redress to historical perspectives by staring calmly beyond 'the barbarous cycle' and towards a point of hope.

Distrust of power is the defining characteristic of many modern poems which touch upon - and retreat from - public themes. This distrust, moreover, frequently extends to wariness about the composition itself - as if poetry colludes with tyranny, or else is unable to provide adequate redress. The reservations faced by many modern poets about their own medium may be tested against the conception of poetry which William Hazlitt propounded in his essay on Coriolanus (1817):

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. [...] The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. [...] It shows its head turretted, crowned, and crested. Its front is gilt and blood-stained. [...] It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices. Kings, priests, nobles, are its train-bearers, tyrants and slaves its executioners. - 'Carnage is its daughter.' - Poetry is right-royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. [...] The love of power in ourselves and the admiration of it in others are both natural to man: the one makes him a tyrant, the other a slave. [...] This is the logic of the imagination and the passions; which seek [...] to raise power into tyranny, and to make tyranny absolute.<sup>9</sup>

Apprehensive of the inflated rhetoric, a contemporary poet might well retreat from Hazlitt's formulations; such a retreat could be taken as symptomatic of their awareness that poetry involves the potential for afflatus, that it can be 'right-royal'.

I now intend to demonstrate that the writing careers of Robert Lowell, Geoffrey Hill and Seamus Heaney provide three distinctive and sustained examples of a self-tyrannizing

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<sup>9</sup> Complete Works, ed. by P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930-34), IV: 'The Round Table and Characters of Shakespear's Plays' (1930), 214-21 (pp. 214-16). Hazlitt also describes Coriolanus's 'schemes to deprive the people [...] of all powers to redress themselves' (p. 216).

attitude in modern poetry. Each of the authors is acutely aware that 'carnage' may be the daughter of their own verse, and each conceives of and practices their art as a means of expressing guilt about this predicament.

The extent to which a poet is able to work free from such guilt might be measured according to the self-scrutiny which finds its way into expression. A need for vigilance regarding the potential presumption of the strategies employed in a poem corresponds to a warning which the historian Latey set down about the dangers of tyranny arising in the state:

Finally, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. As the author of Vindiciae contra tyrannos puts it: 'Tyranny may be properly resembled unto a hectic fever, the which at first is easily to be cured, but with much difficulty to be known, but after it is sufficiently known becomes incurable. Therefore small beginnings are to be carefully observed, and by those whom it concerns diligently prevented.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Latey, p. 345.

II. ROBERT LOWELL

## 1. Introduction

All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman.<sup>1</sup>

The paradigm of the tyrannical poet which Auden presents (albeit with guarded playfulness) is a peculiarly apt one in the case of Robert Lowell. His imagination is susceptible to the glamour of destructive scenes, and the language of his poetry frequently expresses a relish of brutality. Moreover, Lowell's verse exhibits an engaged and complex preoccupation with the motives of tyrants, and with the tyrannical tendencies which he and others felt were latent in his own personality.<sup>2</sup>

Looked at from Auden's angle, Lowell's fascination with the impulses of human aggression sits uneasily alongside the poet's high cultural profile. Though no statesman as such, Lowell gained a public prominence which made him something of a statesman of letters in post-war America. The publicity surrounding the notorious declarations he made to two Presidents and his involvement with political campaigns in the 1960s contributed to this. Public gestures aside, it is the combination in Lowell's poetry of autobiographical and personal reflection with historical and contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> W.H. Auden, 'The Poet and the City', p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Ian Hamilton's Robert Lowell: A Biography (London: Faber and Faber, 1983) provides much detail on the bouts of mania by which Lowell was afflicted, and the resultant behavioural inflictions to which those around him were subjected. 'Tyranny' and synonymous words recur frequently in statements by Lowell's acquaintances, and in the biographer's own interpretations of the poet's life. See, for instance, p. 355 on 'tyrant delusions' - Hamilton's term for Lowell's tendency at times of manic affliction to identify with violent images and characters.

commentary which lends social force to his writing. He adapted the conventionally personal mode of lyric poetry in an ambitious, at times provocative, attempt to connect the private with the public man, and to speak as a chronicler of the past and a commentator on the present.

The reaction his endeavours have provoked befits that of a statesman: Lowell has received fanatical election and acrimonious deposition by the critical industry and the mass readership. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming publication of his collected poems (currently in preparation by Frank Bidart) will redress his recent relative decline in popular awareness and esteem.

Lowell's interest in the exercise and abuse of authority is complex; it needs to be understood in relation to his preoccupation with impotence and futility. The tyrant-figures in his poems are frequently solipsists, the impulses they manifest being at once self-aggrandizing and self-defeating. The conception of solipsism underpinning Lowell's poetry guides his interpretation of human behaviour as the product of arbitrary, tyrannical whims. A central preoccupation of Lowell's is that the world, and in particular the American nation, is comprised of solipsists, unable or unwilling to resist their own or their society's inevitable gravitation towards destruction and self-destruction.

In my analysis of Lowell's early poetry, I focus on the relation between the tyrannical and the puritanical. Lowell explores the Calvinistic obsession with a God of retribution, and points up the connection between the violence of the imagination and a correlative violence

manifest in the pursuit of warfare and ruthless materialism. The belligerent ethics he denounces, however, find expression in the violent rhetoric of Lowell's own verse; his appetite for 'scenes of spectacular carnage' aligns Lowell with the tyrannical forces which are the target of his invective.

Life Studies (1959) depicts struggles for dominion in both the public and the private realm. In this volume, Lowell connects imperialist urges, and their disintegration, to mental and social imbalances. The poems provide brittle, ruthlessly concise sketches of particular characters in order to emphasize the impotence of power-delusions and to convey a pervasive paralysis of will in the society he observes. Each aggressive solipsist, held captive and solitary in a prison of private preoccupations, is seen to gravitate inexorably towards self-destruction.

In his translations and plays, Lowell considers the connection between mania for power and desultory whim. The licence Lowell exercises in adapting the work of others to reflect his particular standpoint draws attention also to a writer's potential for arbitrary, tyrannical presumption. I contend that Lowell is highly sensitive to the dangers he courts, both in the translation work and in For the Union Dead (USA: 1964; UK: 1965) and Near the Ocean (1967), volumes which display an awareness of how artistry (particularly Lowell's own poetry) can conspire in the abuses it warns against. His key theme throughout the 1960s is the mischannelling of aggressive energy into fantasies of sexual and political power, aspirations which are frustrated

by the pervasive reality of personal impotence and political decadence.

In the Notebook volumes (1969 and 1970) and the spin-off collections, History and For Lizzie and Harriet (both 1973), Lowell develops these concerns while at the same time inviting increased speculation about his own techniques of composition. He rewrites history, drawing upon and splicing together personal reverie and international catastrophe to complex and contentious effect. The publication of altered versions of hundreds of poems contributes to the contentiousness. Lowell's self-styled 'opportunistic' tactics invite adverse criticism, while the provisionality and self-deflationary tendencies of his strategies complicate the issue of authorial control.

In his late volumes, The Dolphin (1973) and Day by Day (USA: 1977; UK: 1978), Lowell faces up candidly to the ways in which he has plotted with his own and other people's lives and to the damage his deeds and words have inflicted. His interest is in the relinquishing of control both as a human condition and as a poetic imperative.

Throughout my analysis, I maintain an interest in Lowell's revisions - taking my cue from a subsidiary definition of the verb 'redress' as 'to correct, emend'.<sup>3</sup> I consider how far Lowell's compositional decisions are guided by a reparative impulse and how far they constitute tyrannical meddling. Specific revisions are shown to contribute to the worked-up rhetoric of Lowell's early

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<sup>3</sup> One instance provided in the OED for this meaning reads as follows: '**I796** HAMILTON in *Washington's Writ.* (1892) XIII.I90 note, You mentioned to me your wish, that I should redress a certain paper, which you had prepared'.

verse, the atmosphere of suppressed tension characterizing his middle volumes and the offhand, opportunist quality of the later poetry: in the case of each particular composition, the amendments may be ascribed to either a refractory or a redemptive impulse as it finds its way into words: each shift of decision informs the direction of the verse towards or away from the possibility of making good the damages done both in life and on the page.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of an article on the poet Stanley Kunitz in 1962, Lowell defined the two chief qualities he looked for 'in the working out of a poem':

a commanding, deadly effectiveness in the arrangement, and something that breathes and pauses and grunts and is rough and unpredictable to assure me that the journey is honest.  
(LCP, p. 85)<sup>5</sup>

Lowell's conception of poetic composition as an act combining lethal calculation and capricious whim provides a compelling paradigm of poet-as-tyrant. By the same token, his stress on candid and unpremeditated response argues for a more benign view of his intentions. The task of Lowell's critic, at times a highly challenging one, is to distinguish the ways in which his artistry colludes with the power-politics it exemplifies from the poet's 'honest' self-awareness about what he is up to in his work.

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<sup>4</sup> I have provided a detailed commentary on Lowell's compositional habits in a recently published article, 'Revision as Redress? Robert Lowell's Manuscripts', Essays in Criticism, 46 (1996), 28-51.

<sup>5</sup> For a key to references within the text of my thesis, refer to the table of abbreviations at the front of the book.

## 2. 'Tyrannical Delusions'

In his study of literary 'doubles', Karl Miller describes Lowell as a tyrannicide subject to tyrannical delusions. He highlights how Lowell's poems engage with tyranny and its redress to double-edged effect: 'the conscientious objector who entered the tensions and uproars of the late Sixties, and marched on the Pentagon, has his dark double in the connoisseur of greatness and war'. Miller's terms of analysis are particularly apt, given that attention to dualities governs Lowell's own poetic outlook. The split personality of modern man, the dissociation of violent action from violent impulse, the fascination and repulsion which cruelty evinces: these paradoxical conditions are among the abiding themes of his work. Often with wry self-awareness, and sharp self-castigation, Lowell empathizes with the tyrants who people his poems; as Miller puts it, 'a capacity for irony equipped him to suspect, while helping him to sustain, the worship of problematic heroes'.<sup>1</sup>

Lowell's poetry offers unflinching observations on the most menacing operations of the human mind - and on the social and political constructs which reflect those operations. He relentlessly pursues connections between his own thought processes and the psychopathology of tyrannical individuals, and he forges links between the historical and biographical data of his life and the events which have shaped, and continuously reshape, the national temperament of America. Lowell would have been the first to concede the

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Miller, 'Some Names for Robert Lowell', in Doubles: Studies in Literary History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 299-317 (pp. 311-12, 300).

inbuilt egotistical bias of such a poetic project; indeed, this is a central part of the preoccupation: his poems seek to define the nature of a self-world dualism through exploring the subjective prison of the ego. By such means, he provides a diagnosis of the power-drives which corrupt individuals and societies. These are shown to result in tyrannical configurations on both the domestic and the political plane.<sup>2</sup>

The central problem facing Lowell, and the critic who would gauge Lowell's achievement, is in distinguishing between diagnosis and remedy; one is forced to ask to what extent the poet is merely addressing the circumstances he describes, and how far does he go towards actually redressing them.<sup>3</sup> This evaluative problem, applicable to all poetry, has a particular relevance in the case of Lowell, since his poems are expressive above all of 'solipsism'. The word is defined in the OED as 'the view or theory that self is the only object of real knowledge or the only thing really existent'. The examples provided indicate how this has led to the term being used to express ideas

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<sup>2</sup> The OED offers a range of examples in which tyrannical behaviour within domestic relationships has been referred to: '**I768** H. WALPOLE *Hist. Doubts* 63 Henry was a tyrannic husband'; '**I792** in *Gentl. Mag.* Dec.II99/I A man of republican levelling principles, who was the greatest of *tyrants* to his wife and family'; '**I908** R. BAGOT A. *Cuthbert iv*, The marriage had not proved a happy one...He had been a domestic tyrant'. Johnson's dictionary provides an instance from Bacon: 'Suspicious dispose kings to *tyranny*, and husbands to jealousy'. For Johnson's views on 'Parental Tyranny' (and the 'redress' thereof), see Samuel Johnson: A Critical Edition of the Major Works, ed. by Donald Greene, Oxford Authors series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 232-35.

<sup>3</sup> Definition 10.b of the verb 'redress' in the OED is 'to cure, heal, relieve (a disease, wound, etc.). Also in fig. context'.

about subjective idealism, withdrawn melancholy, absolute egoism, and incapacitation of judgement and effective action. 'Solipsism' implies the obverse of disinterested self-awareness; it defines a paradoxical state of mind in which a sense of identity-loss and total self-immersion are combined.

In a supplement to the OED, an example of the use of the term 'solipsist' is given which links it unambiguously to the tyrannical temperament:

**1972** *Last Whole Earth Catalog* I6/2 Solipsist tyrants, believing that their will, like their eyeballs, could move mountains, have come to believe that it should trample over these small annoying figures in their visual field.

The quotation brings to mind Emerson's 'tyrannous eye' and suggests a means of linking Lowell's practice to the aggressive stress on individualism often seen to underlie modern American verse. Such matters have informed, for example, Richard Gray's recent survey of the field. Gray makes pertinent connections between the affirmative stress which American writers have placed on the Emersonian values of solitude and self-reliance and the negative implications of this - in particular, obsession with the lonely, isolated ego.

For Gray, Modernism promoted and problematized the phenomenon of poetic self-preoccupation. He characterizes a J. Alfred Prufrock-syndrome in modern poetry, whereby 'the narcissistic ego translates the blank stare of reality into, alternatively, a mirror of its own concerns or a threat to its purity, or even its existence'.<sup>4</sup> Eliot's poetry,

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<sup>4</sup> American Poetry of the Twentieth Century (London and New York: Longman, 1990), p. 340.

emphasizing how unreliable the self is, how much it is defined by the vanity of self-immersion, is seen by Gray to have initiated a line of counter-individualism which has had a significant impact on American writing. Adopting protective layers of stylization provides the poet with the means to escape personality, or to reconstitute an identity in such a way as to highlight the inadequacy of self-world relations.

Making a choice between Emersonian self-promotion and the Prufrockian example of self-doubt is a dilemma which has preoccupied many poets. Of particular relevance to the case of Lowell is the example of one of his most influential mentors, Allen Tate. In the course of explaining his famous 'Ode to the Confederate Dead'<sup>5</sup>, Tate makes explicit his engagement with solipsistic and narcissistic impulses:

That poem is 'about' solipsism, a philosophical doctrine which says that we create the world in the act of perceiving it; or about Narcissism, or any other *ism* that denotes the failure of the human personality to function objectively in nature and society.

According to his own interpretation, Tate's 'Ode' diagnoses 'the remarkable self-consciousness' and 'extreme introspection' of his time. It does so through a contemplation of how the possibility of heroic action (symbolized by those who died for the Southern cause in the American Civil War) is an illusion unavailable to the contemporary 'locked-in ego'. Tate's emphasis is on 'the cut-off-ness of the modern "intellectual man" from the

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<sup>5</sup> Poems by Allen Tate (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1961), p. 19.

world', trapped as the individual is in 'his subjective prison, his solipsism'.<sup>6</sup>

From Lowell's perspective, the world consists of a plurality of solipsists. His poems, which frequently describe the blank stare of the mirror, are centrally concerned with vanity, self-aggrandizement and self-disgust. Above all, it is the pathology of power which most fascinates him. Another OED supplement example, this time from the work of the psychology writer Anthony Storr, indicates the connections between solipsism, violent inclination and mental schism which are fundamental to an understanding of Lowell's preoccupations:

**1968** A. STORR *Human Aggression* xi.104 Psychopaths share with the schizophrenic the characteristic of living in a world which is predominantly solipsistic; that is, in which people and events are not valued in and for themselves, but only in so far as they affect the subject.

This recourse to textbook psychology is not as inappropriate in assessing Lowell's art as it might be in the case of other authors; it is the psychoanalytical and biographical studies of the poet which have yielded some of the most incisive commentaries on his work. Convincing cases have been put forward for casting the megalomaniac in Lowell's verse as the poet's alter ego, and the poem itself as a

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<sup>6</sup> 'Narcissus as Narcissus' (1938), in Essays of Four Decades (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 593-607 (pp. 595-96, 596, 598, 599). Tate admits that the linking of 'narcissism' with 'solipsism' lacks scholastic rigour. The OED supplement defines 'narcissism' as 'self-love and admiration that find emotional satisfaction in self-contemplation', adducing examples which emphasize the implications of an egotistical withdrawal from reality and an indulgence in fantasy. The earliest instance of usage given is 1822 (and for 'solipsism' 1881).

paradigmatic, alternative constitution willed into being by the power-crazed libido.

Paul Breslin has helpfully interpreted Lowell's art along such lines, probing at the root causes for Lowell's fascination with tyranny:

From his own manic episodes he understood the seductiveness of self-aggrandizement; his poems often describe megalomania as a solipsistic exaggeration of the common desire for pleasure, recognition, and respite from the fear of death, more to be pitied than censured. Even at his moments of greatest sympathy for the murderous powerful, however, Lowell usually remains aware that the consolations of the tyrant are illusory. Since one world is too small for him, and the distractions afforded by that world finally limited, the tyrant at last hurls himself against his own finitude.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis on solipsistic urges which return with a vengeance to haunt the defeated spirit when forced to confront bodily limitation encapsulates a fundamental aspect of Lowell's outlook. Self-aggrandizement, self-reproach, all the inflations and deflations of the poetic voice, tend towards resignation. The yearning for non-existence exerts its pull, straining against the incessant urge for self-validation that impels (peculiarly so in Lowell's case) the continuation of poetic practice. This conflict accounts for such descriptions of Lowell as 'a nihilist with heroic presumptions' and for the emphasis laid upon his poetry's 'capacity for self-extinction'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Robert Lowell: The Historical Self and the Limits of "Conflation"', in Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 59-94 (p. 86).

<sup>8</sup> See Vereen M. Bell, Robert Lowell: Nihilist as Hero (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 5, and John Bayley, 'Robert Lowell: The Poetry of Cancellation', in Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time, ed. by Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York:

Alan Williamson applies psychoanalytical interpretation to Lowell's work; he has frequent recourse in his study to the radical Freudian premiss that aggression arises out of social and neurotic distortions. What emerges in his criticism is a persuasive, closely-argued reading of Lowell's poems which shows how they manifest the 'depth-psychological basis of the drive to omnipotence, and its intimate connection to the very notion of order'. Williamson defines the 'solipsistic mental world' which the tyrant is customarily seen to inhabit:

The tyrant is a recurrent figure in Lowell's poetry, whose traits are remarkably unvarying. He is a manic narcissist, and yet terribly afraid of loneliness, of the criticism, disapproval, or even the independent judgement of others. [...] The tyrant seems to need a superabundance of being, acknowledged but never shared by others - a world of mirrors, such as Lowell's Caligula literally creates when he gives all the gods his own face.<sup>9</sup>

Above all, however, Lowell's tyrant is a manic perfectionist, always striving to eliminate dualities, to break down the barriers that keep the psyche imprisoned, divided from external reality:

The ultimate motive of the tyrannous impulse, in Lowell's vision, would seem to be the denial of dualism, of the distinction between self and world. It is at this level that the tyrant and the tyrannicide are one. In the tyrant, the impulse appears as the desire to create an airtight, planned, egocentric society in which no contingency that might stir up his fears of loneliness and loss of identity can arise. In the tyrannicide, the same impulse appears as a fanatical dedication to an abstract principle, a tendency to dehumanize adversaries, or a suicidal unwillingness to live with any human imperfection.

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David Lewis, 1970), pp. 187-98 (p. 188).

<sup>9</sup> Pity the Monsters: The Political Vision of Robert Lowell (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 105, 100. For 'Caligula', see FTUD, pp. 49-51; see also my comments on pp. 115-17, 201 (note 18) and 376 below.

Williamson then goes on to observe how

this configuration, in both its modes, bears at least a family resemblance to the traditional motives of Satan, whom Lowell has characterized (in discussing Valéry's 'Ébauche d'un serpent') as 'the spirit that insists on perfection'. [...] Satan, of course, is first the tyrannicide, the resplendent intellectual questioner who finds the flattery-centred universe of a Puritan God too small. [...] But the Satan of the Garden merely recreates God's tyranny.<sup>10</sup>

The crime of Satan is one of Lowell's recurrent concerns: repeatedly in his prose and interviews, the figure of Satan is used to represent the courageous artist-criminal. In the essay entitled 'Art and Evil' (1955-56), for instance, Lowell highlights the 'rhetorical adequacy, pith, and variety' of Milton's diabolic anti-hero, and in 'Epics' (1977) he argues that Satan 'is almost early American, the cruel, unconquerable spirit of freedom' (LCP, pp. 138, 215).

This latter formulation marks a return to ideas conveyed to A. Alvarez in an interview of 1965:

You might almost say American literature and culture begins with Paradise Lost. I always think there are two great symbolic figures that stand behind American ambition and culture. One is Milton's Lucifer and the other is Captain Ahab: these two sublime ambitions that are doomed and ready, for their idealism, to face any amount of violence.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 103-04. On p. 105 Williamson writes that 'psychoanalysis would seem to lend support to Lowell's belief that tyrannical behavior has universal roots in human nature'. Regarding Lowell's attitude to perfectionism, see, for example, his 1944 essay 'Hopkins's Sanctity' (LCP, pp. 167-70): 'I think it can be shown that the beliefs and practices of most modern poets more or less exclude perfection, and that insofar as perfection is shut out the poetry suffers' (p. 168).

<sup>11</sup> 'A Talk with Robert Lowell', in Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs, ed. by Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 99-108 (pp. 104-05). See also p. 103: 'Violence and idealism have some occult connection. [...] The ideal isn't real unless it's somehow backed by power'.

In turn, Lowell is here picking up a notion he had put to Alvarez in an interview some two years previously, in which he presented an image of the American State derived from Herman Melville's Moby-Dick (1851): Ahab was described as

the fanatical idealist who brings the world down  
in ruins through some sort of simplicity of mind.  
I believe that's in our character and in my own  
personal character.<sup>12</sup>

Lowell is describing a kind of monomaniacal solipsism, by which the self asserts its infinite freedom and at the same time exposes its frailty. It is a diabolical trait he diagnoses both in himself and in the national temperament.

Such ideas are at the heart of 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' (PNT, p. 18). Linking the marine battles of the Second World War to a history of Quaker aggression at sea, Lowell forcefully conveys the idea that an impulse to violence is irresistible - and irresistibly brings the aggressor's downfall. In his description of how 'the guns of the steeled fleet / Recoil and then repeat / The hoarse salute', the language humanizes the military and militarizes the human. It also recalls the monomaniacal scheming of Milton's Satan: at the start of Paradise Lost Book Four, Satan's 'dire attempt', his masterplan for destruction, 'like a devilish Engin back recoils / Upon himself' - but, despite the reflex action of apparent remorse, the hellish operations immediately spring into action once more.<sup>13</sup> In Lowell's poem, Captain Ahab, the Quaker mercantilists who exploit the ocean and the perpetrators of modern warfare are

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<sup>12</sup> 'Robert Lowell in Conversation', *ibid.*, pp. 74-78 (p. 77).

<sup>13</sup> Paradise Lost, IV.15. In this context, 'engin' signifies both 'cannon' and 'plot'.

all linked by motives akin to Satan's - by their ungodly and unstoppable lust for violence and dominion.<sup>14</sup>

The quest for power informs the dark designs of Lowell's early volumes. With a wide historical sweep, he rails against all manifestations of imperialism, capitalism and dogmatic theism. In particular, he denounces what Matthew Arnold once called 'the narrowness and tyrannousness of Puritanism'.<sup>15</sup> Like Satan, he finds the Calvinistic conception of God too small; the result, as I will demonstrate in the next section, is a poetry which takes a tyrannicidal stance towards the wrathful Puritan God it imagines, and which ends up matching the morbid perversities of the Calvinist world-view with its own equally grim visions.

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<sup>14</sup> On Lowell's utilization of themes and passages from Moby-Dick, see Hugh B. Staples, Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp. 101-03.

<sup>15</sup> '1870 M. ARNOLD *St. Paul & Protestantism* 17' (OED).

### 3. 'This Wicked Earth Redress': Lowell's Early Work<sup>1</sup>

According to the Old Law, tyranny and redress are inseparable. Redress is synonymous with divine vengeance, the harsh but deserved subjugation of a sinful people:

Rise God, judge thou the earth *in might*,  
This *wicked* earth redress,  
For thou art he who shalt by right  
The Nations all possess.<sup>2</sup>

Milton's theological struggle with the paradox that tyrannical behaviour in the worldly realm invites reciprocal tyranny from the world's maker is Lowell's also; the painful but creative dilemma that ensues for either writer lies in distinguishing between the motives of Satan, which involve both aggressive domination and tyrannicide, and God's double-edged dispensation of free will and a rule of terror.

Lowell is of the devil's party, and knowingly so. He has a peculiarly diabolical conception of the godhead, so that his ostensibly idealistic project of justifying the ways of God to men is hard to distinguish from his tyrannicidal opposition to the Creator's brutality. Like the satanic archetype he envisages, Lowell is doomed and ready, for such twisted idealism, to face any amount of

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<sup>1</sup> References in this chapter are to the volume Poems 1938-1949 (London: Faber and Faber 1950), hereafter abbreviated as PNT. This British publication collects the work of the two American volumes, Lord Weary's Castle and The Mills of the Kavanaughs (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946 and 1951) - although the title sequence of the latter is omitted from the Faber book. This piece was first printed in the United Kingdom as an appendix to Staples (pp. 116-132), and is reprinted in Agenda: Special Robert Lowell Issue, 18.3 (autumn 1980), 13-19. Lowell's limited edition debut volume of poems, Land of Unlikeness (Cummington, MA: Cummington Press, 1944), contains ten poems which were reworked for Lord Weary's Castle, his first widely distributed and recognized collection.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, 'Psalm LXXXII' (1648), lines 25-28, Complete Poems, p. 96 (cited in the OED).

violence, and it finds copious expression in the grotesquerie and bluster of his poems.

Despite a temporary conversion to Catholicism, Lowell failed to expel his essentially Calvinistic preoccupations with inherent guilt, abject determinism and ineluctable vengeance.<sup>3</sup> His poems display a morbid obsession with commination; they are superintended by the vengeful Puritan God which the eighteenth century theologian Jonathan Edwards conceived of. This helps to account for Lowell's engagement with predetermined damnation: the human soul, 'sick / And full of burning', is doomed to perish on hot bricks like the spider in one of Edwards's grisly sermons ('Mr. Edwards and the Spider', PNT, p. 70).<sup>4</sup> A demonic force is immanent in the landscape of the verse: sea-winds are 'snake-tailed', and trees and brooks are primed to explode, as the natural world is intruded upon by materialistic and martial enterprises. Throughout Lord Weary's Castle, the jabbing of jackhammers and the fistings of pistons keep the relentless war-machine of the 1940s supplied. And, as if to help in the war effort, sacred icons and religious artefacts are sharpened into weapon-like forms: the 'grilled and spindle spires' of churches point with menace towards an equally threatening heaven. Above all, Lowell's apocalyptic vision

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of Lowell's conversion to Catholicism and the subsequent decline of his faith into apostasy, see Paul Mariani, Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell (New York and London: Norton, 1994), pp. 92-109; see also Hamilton (eg. pp. 79-81, 121).

<sup>4</sup> This poem calls to mind the 'design of darkness to appal' which Robert Frost famously saw in a spider's machinations; see 'Design', in his Selected Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 194. A Frostian note of calm-in-desperation is detectable in many of Lowell's early poems.

is focused on the 'hell-fire streets / Of Boston', his home city, a contemporary variant of 'the parching streets that once lent a tyrannous and damned light' to the world of murder and intrigue meditated by Shakespeare's Hamlet.<sup>5</sup>

The hellish scenarios which Lowell's poems evoke exist precisely as the Lord decreed: 'It is God's curse, / God's, that has purpled Lucifer with fear / And burning. God has willed' ('The Death of the Sheriff', PNT, p. 78). The preoccupations of his parodic, black theology are summarized with succinct bitterness in the poem 'New Year's Day' as 'time and the grindstone and the knife of God' (PNT, p. 17). There is an element of hellfire-preaching in Lowell's roughly hammered-out lines. This derives partly from the example of Edwards and partly, as Breslin has observed, from Biblical prophecies of doom which provided Lowell with his staple reading in the late 1930s and early 1940s:

To some extent, the voice of the earlier poetry imitates that of Old Testament prophecy; Lowell sets up as Isaiah or Jeremiah. These prophets are at one and the same time representative victims of the Lord's anger and instruments of it; they share the suffering of Israel but understand the suffering as others do not.<sup>6</sup>

This captures neatly the sense in which the poetry is both expressive of tyranny and tyrannized by its own passions. Lines such as '"God wills it, wills it, wills it: it is blood"' ('France', PNT, p. 49) have, on the one hand, a

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<sup>5</sup> The above paragraph refers to, or quotes from, the following poems respectively: 'New Year's Day' (PNT, p. 17); 'The Exile's Return' (p. 13); 'The Drunken Fisherman' (p. 42); 'Colloquy in Black Rock' (p. 15); 'Christmas in Black Rock' (p. 16); 'The Dead in Europe' (p. 79); 'As a Plane Tree by the Water' (p. 57). See also Hamlet (c.1599-1601) II.ii.453-54 (cited in the OED).

<sup>6</sup> Breslin, p. 62.

transfixed effect, as if the poet is an appalled and impotent onlooker, able only to stammer in horrified contemplation of atrocity; on the other hand, the words can be read as relentless, reiterative rhetoric, the beating out of a line which puts God's iron-fisted policies into poetic practice. Indeed, the redoubling of words frequently aligns poet and tyrant in this way, as when Lowell employs insistent assonance to describe the actions of Louis XI in the poem '1790': the king flails out to smash a dog's 'backbone with a backstroke of his stick' (PNT, p. 50). A repugnance to cruelty is inseparable from the verbal violence with which it is described.<sup>7</sup>

The gratuitous bloody gesture provides an apt way of characterizing Lowell's poetic manner in his early verse. His objections to religious, materialistic and militaristic zeal find expression in a language which matches the brutal excesses of the individuals and institutions he assails. Again, Breslin puts the point well:

The violent religious certainty he denounces in his Puritan ancestors resembles too closely the violent religious certainty of his denunciation. What the poems ask us to take as a prophet's quarrel with his sinful nation looks more like the spectacle of a man shouting at his own image in the mirror.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Williamson reflects on the tyrant's proverbial 'need not merely to have power, but to experience it, directly and physically - as Louis XVI does when he breaks a dog's back because it has splashed him with tar' (p. 100).

<sup>8</sup> Breslin, p 63. In this connection, it is also worth citing Gabriel Pearson's observations on Lowell's proclamatory tone: 'his earlier poetry, while seemingly constructed out of opposition to the whole acquisitive-Puritan complex, was really an obscure manifestation of it. His implacable verbalism threatened to absorb the natural world and reissue it as an emblematic politics. His own industry, his rapid hunger for significance, was as unbridled as Mammon's'. See 'Lowell's Marble Meanings', in The Survival of Poetry: A

These comments help to define further the poetic narrator's double-edged status as both in command of the horrors detailed and incapacitated by them.

Breslin's emphasis on poetry as a mirror-looking activity takes my analysis back to the issue of solipsistic self-absorption; in particular, Lowell's work needs to be understood in the context of Modernist preoccupations with the self-involved processes of language. His early verse has been seen by many (Randall Jarrell, for one) as an advance upon, and a curious deflection of, two decades or more of intense engagement with hermetic strategies of composition.<sup>9</sup>

Lowell began writing under 'the restrictions of [the] benevolent tyranny' imposed by the American New Criticism orthodoxy of the 1930s.<sup>10</sup> In some ways, he also broke free from those restrictions: while the compacted techniques and contorted mannerisms of the recondite poetry Lowell composed during the late 1930s and the 1940s exhibit the obvious influence of New Critical theory, his work is expressive of

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Contemporary Survey, ed. by Martin Dodsworth (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 56-96 (p. 63).

<sup>9</sup> See Randall Jarrell, 'From the Kingdom of Necessity', in London and Boyers, pp. 19-27: 'Lowell's poetry is a unique fusion of modernist and traditional poetry, and there exist side by side in it certain effects that one would have thought mutually exclusive; but it is essentially a post- or anti-modernist poetry, and as such is certain to be influential' (p. 24).

<sup>10</sup> Donald Hall, introduction to Contemporary American Poetry, 2nd, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972; repr. 1980), p. 25. As with Hall, I am necessarily using convenient (and disputable) generalization about a body of criticism by writers as diverse as I.A. Richards, Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, and Robert Penn Warren; for Lowell's own views on these authors see LCP, pp. 53-73. (It was Ransom's text The New Criticism (1941) which provided a diverse body of writings with a collective tag.)

intense social engagement in a way which flouts, for instance, John Crowe Ransom's asocial ideal of an ontological, self-sufficing composition.<sup>11</sup> Wrenching the Modernist tradition to his own ends, Lowell produced a poetry which insistently, even heavy-handedly, draws attention to both its social message and its symbolic and analogical procedures; one critic has noted how Lowell's poetic description is characteristically 'refracted in allusions that bully rather than broaden or penetrate the experience'.<sup>12</sup>

A characteristic example of a Lowell poem which at once incites and defies explication is 'The Holy Innocents' (PNT, p. 14). It employs a range of challenging strategies in order to connect Christ's nativity, Herod's tyrannical response to this event, and the contemporary scene of wartime New England.<sup>13</sup>

Listen, the hay-bells tinkle as the cart  
 Wavers on rubber tires along the tar  
 And cindered ice below the burlap mill  
 And ale-wife run. The oxen drool and start  
 In wonder at the fenders of a car,  
 And blunder hugely up St. Peter's hill.  
 These are the undefiled by woman - their  
 Sorrow is not the sorrow of this world:  
 King Herod shrieking vengeance at the curled  
 Up knees of Jesus choking in the air,

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<sup>11</sup> See 'Poetry: A Note in Ontology', in Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1970), pp. 74-92. For Lowell's views on Ransom, see LCP, pp. 17-28.

<sup>12</sup> J.D. McClatchy, 'Robert Lowell: A Backward Glance', in White Paper: On Contemporary American Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 91-117 (p. 95). McClatchy is referring here specifically to the poem 'In Memory of Arthur Winslow' (PNT, p. 29).

<sup>13</sup> For the massacre of Bethlehem's boys aged two or under, see Matthew 2.16. In his study of tyranny, Latey highlights Herod's proverbial 'paranoiac suspicion and fits of insane rage' (pp. 249-50).

A king of speechless clods and infants. Still  
 The world out-Herods Herod; and the year,  
 The nineteen-hundred forty-fifth of grace,  
 Lumbers with losses up the clinkered hill  
 Of our purgation; and the oxen near  
 The worn foundations of their resting-place,  
 The holy manger where their bed is corn  
 And holly torn for Christmas. If they die,  
 As Jesus, in the harness, who will mourn?  
 Lamb of the shepherds, Child, how still you lie.

The poem typifies Lowell's early style; it bumps and grinds, as if struggling to rise to surety of statement under its heavy load of ambiguous content. The strained effect of ponderous phrasing is compounded by the heavy-duty full-rhymes ('cart'-'tar'-'start'-'car'), the laboured internal rhyming (such as 'wonder' with 'blunder', and 'clods' with 'Herods'), and a glut of trochaic inversions (seven in nineteen lines). It is hard at times to picture precisely what Lowell is describing, as when the reader is asked to visualize a year lumbering up a hill. (Techniques of hypallage and bizarre personification make this a common effect in Lowell's early work.) The result is that, for all the dense physicality rendered in the sound-effects, the reader's awareness of the situation described depends upon metaphysical perception: Lowell violently yokes together disparate images and ideas.

The bewildering journey described in the poem conveys a grim double-sense of predetermined fate and menacing destination. The reader struggles to imagine simultaneously an approach to the nativity scene and a purgatorial ascent - and to connect these journeys with the underlying gravitation towards massacre: of cows led to slaughter, of first-born males, of war-victims. And the death of Christ is anticipated by the 'harness' of crucifixion which his

cradle prefigures - a harness which yokes him, like the oxen, to the humility of mortal limitations. However, while hinting as the poem closes at the resurrective possibilities which Christ's death conventionally offers, Lowell unsettles this view with intimations that the redress offered by religious consolation is illusory.

The surface tranquility of those smoothly cadenced final lines belies the bitter irony of sentiment. Yeats's 'The Magi' might have been in Lowell's mind as an example; the conclusion to 'The Holy Innocents' is as shrouded in dark ambiguities as the troublingly vague 'uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor' described at the close of that poem.<sup>14</sup> By lying still, Lowell's infant Christ could be either at peace or dead, a deceptiveness highlighted by the treachery of wordplay: there is a nagging sense that the Nativity might be a sham, that Christianity has lied by perpetuating a hollow myth of salvation and is still lying now.

'The Holy Innocents' conveys the idea that destruction on earth is at best ignored, at worst connived in by heavenly powers. The tyranny which the poem describes appears to be the product of a collaboration between divine ordinance and worldly despotism. This is implicit in the appositional ambiguity which could make either Christ or

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<sup>14</sup> Yeats's Poems, p. 229. The Yeatsian model for a symbolistic historical lyric evidently had an influence upon Lowell's early poetry; an elaborate network of references throughout Lowell's poetry to prototypical fishermen, towers, castles, trees, swans, and so forth, suggests that this influence was a lasting one. Compare also T.S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' ('were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?'), in Collected Poems 1909-1962, 2nd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1974; repr. 1990), p. 110.

Herod the 'king of speechless clods and infants'. There is an unsettling sense that God is the heavenly tyrant determining earthly tyrannies; by failing to intervene and avert either Herod's atrocities or the barbarities of modern warfare, He provides these events with His divine sanction. Moreover, the people passively connive in their subjugation: under the tyrant's yoke, the 'hugely blundering' oxen stand for those who suffered under Herod's tyranny and those now enduring the reign of terror in wartime New England. People have not learned. Perhaps the huge blunder which the unthinking herd has made is its investment of faith in the notion of divine grace?<sup>15</sup>

The lack of benign redress for the horrors of war is typified by the blank gaze of the Madonna in the calm interlude section of Lowell's tempestuous poem, 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket'. The placid demeanour on the statue of 'Our Lady of Walsingham' verges on implacability:

There's no comeliness  
At all or charm in that expressionless  
Face with its heavy eyelids. (PNT, p. 23)

Here, the traditional archetype of intercession and reconciliation offers no solution to the evils perpetrated in the poem as a whole, no redress for the barbarous

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<sup>15</sup> The dangers of a herd mentality during wartime were highlighted by Lowell in his 'Declaration of Personal Responsibility' (LCP, pp. 367-70) - despatched with an accompanying letter to President Roosevelt on 13 October 1943. In this statement of protest against the Allied Powers' saturation bombing of civilian centres, Lowell professed the opinion that his nation's democratic principles were in danger of becoming indistinguishable 'from the demagoguery and herd hypnosis of the totalitarian tyrannies' which America had originally set out to oppose (p. 369). The 'Declaration' led to Lowell's one year imprisonment as a conscientious objector; see Hamilton, pp. 86-98; the text of the document is reprinted on pp. 88-89.

activities of the whale-hunters or their contemporary, wartime counterparts. She simply shows a face which,

Expressionless, expresses God: it goes  
Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,  
Not Calvary's cross nor crib at Bethlehem  
Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

The unyielding aspect of the divine is augmented by the poem's ironic undercurrents: 'God knows what she knows' is the exasperated attitude wryly twisted up in Lowell's words. The air of defiant impenetrability is at once the statue's and the poet's; even if the reader has access to the knowledge that Sion is the site of Jerusalem's ancient Holy Temple, such knowledge only brings the realization that this is evidently a no-longer-accessible locus of faith - just as the old Christian myths will emphatically ('Now') not do. In this context of loss and equivocation, it is hard to judge how seriously or ironically to take the concluding affirmation that the world will return to the Church - as the reference to the pilgrimage site of Walsingham implies. There is a resolved note to the closing words, but the message remains irresolute.

Coming up against an obdurate surface is a recurrent experience in these poems. The belligerence of Lowell's strategies is inseparable from a steely defensiveness of tone, as Gabriel Pearson has observed:

One has the sense of the poems as projectiles, constructed out of the scrap and refuse of history and hurled with a kind of contempt at the huge smugness and indifference of industrial civilization. Also, of the poems as walls, elaborate defensive dispositions, behind which the skulking poet can avoid being overwhelmed. I am suggesting that the poems themselves are in effect

political acts, as much so as Lowell's conscientious objection.<sup>16</sup>

In 'Our Lady of Walsingham', hostility and blank indifference emanate from the stony statue of the Madonna and are reflected in the language of the verse. Emphasis on the forbidding edifice of a church serves a similar purpose in the poem-sequence which takes as its title a reference to the traditional place for intercession and forgiveness: 'Between the Porch and the Altar' (PNT, p. 51).<sup>17</sup> This four-part poem presents an intense and elliptical psychodrama, hinting at incest, adultery and mania in a bewildering and nightmarish montage. It traces the relationship of two lovers: a man beleaguered by guilt at his infidelity, and by a terrifying dominant childhood fixation with his mother, and his mistress, whose similar burden of guilt is informed by fearful feelings towards her controlling father - a figure for whom her lover is in some ways a replacement.

In the third part of the poem, 'Katherine's Dream', the woman describes her approach to a church in terms expressive of almost catatonic hysteria:

I walk through snow into St. Patrick's yard.  
Black nuns with glasses smile and stand on guard  
Before a bulkhead in a bank of snow,  
Whose charred doors open, as good people go  
Inside by twos to the confessor. (PNT, p. 53)

This paranoid confrontation with God's benign militia redoubles a few lines later, her interior monologue culminating with the words,

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<sup>16</sup> 'Lowell's Marble Meanings', p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> The title is derived from Joel 2.17.

I drop  
 Against a padlocked bulkhead in a yard  
 Where faces redden and the snow is hard. (PNT, p. 54)

The reiterated full rhymes carry the force of an implacable negation: there is no possibility of entry to the 'bulkhead' of the church, no hope of the divine remission which Katherine seeks.

A persecution mania is even more pronounced in the poem's male protagonist. His actions are marked by desperate aggression; as he is unable to escape the prison of his solipsistic ego this violence is ultimately self-directed. In the fourth, climactic section, 'At the Altar', the adulterer delivers a *tour de force* expression of drunken, sado-masochistic fantasy-fulfilment. It calls to mind Plato's reflections on the 'the sting of mania' which afflicts tyrants:

Then a precise definition of a tyrannical man is one who, either by birth or habit or both, combines the characteristics of drunkenness, lust, and madness.<sup>18</sup>

Afflicted by the bestial stuff of dreams, the inebriated speaker recounts in lurid detail the moments leading up to his spectacular fate. The car he is driving crashes against the edifice of a church, precipitating his inescapably damned spirit into the locus of final judgement. Here, he confronts the tyrant-figure who modelled him, as the poem returns to the image of his domineering mother which had initiated the sequence. At the denouement, a christening ceremony is conflated with an horrific immolation:

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<sup>18</sup> The Republic, p. 394.

*Dies amara valde.* Here the Lord  
 Is Lucifer in harness: hand on sword,  
 He watches me for Mother, and will turn  
 The bier and baby-carriage where I burn.  
 (PNT, p. 55)<sup>19</sup>

A certain blitheness in the jaunty rhyming serves to augment the horror of what is described - something from which Sylvia Plath, at one time Lowell's student, doubtless learned.<sup>20</sup> In the internecine scheme, the culmination of all the incestuous relations involving the characters in the poem, a cradle turns into a coffin - and God into Satan. Life begins, ends and begins again under the tyrant's sway.

The eleven draft versions of 'At the Altar' in the Houghton Library at Harvard show how strenuously Lowell worked up to his finale; adhering to the strict rigours of symbolic and rhythmic organization under which he had chosen to compose, he revised and rearranged the wording of the final lines a number of times before achieving the desired cumulative intensity.<sup>21</sup> One of the trial versions has the closing lines,

The red-nose ppiest [sic] has celebrated mass.  
 He sprinkles water, and he tries to turn  
 To the black baby-carriage where I burn.

Subsequent revisions attempt to crystallize this birth-death dichotomy further:

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<sup>19</sup> The Latin phrase translates as 'intensely bitter day', and is spoken by a priest conducting the macabre ceremony which these lines evoke.

<sup>20</sup> See Mariani, p. 271 and Hamilton, p. 183. For Lowell's estimation of Plath's poetry, refer to LCP, pp. 122-25.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Lowell Papers, BMS 1905 (2095). Lowell's drafts are generally undated, so that speculation about changes made to, from or back to certain wordings usually remains at least partially unresolvable. See my previously referenced article, 'Revision as Redress?' (pp. 29-31).

A red-nosed priest has celebrated mass,  
 He sprinkles holy water and repeats:  
*DIES AMARA VALDE*. In the streets  
 The daylight hardens, as he tries to turn  
 The coffin-babycarriage where I burn.<sup>22</sup>

He sprinkles holy water, and the Day  
 Breaks with its hardness as the man of clay -  
*Dies amara valde*. Who will turn  
 The bier and baby-carriage where I burn?

And sprinkles holy water; and the Day  
 Breaks with its lightning on the man of clay,  
*Dies amara valde*. Will it turn  
 The bier and baby-carriage where I burn?

*Dies amara valde*. Here you stand,  
 Harnessed and flaming Satan, sword in hand  
 To watch me for the mother who will turn  
 The bier and baby-carriage where I burn.

*Dies amara valde*. Here the Lord  
 Is Lucifer In harness: hand on sword,  
 He watches for the mother who will turn  
 The bier and baby-carriage where I burn.<sup>23</sup>

In the earlier drafts, it is the church priest who alone watches over the funeral cradle; in later ones, the agonized spirit is superintended by a number of other grim wardens: the fourth example in this list, for instance, introduces 'harnessed and flaming Satan' who in the fifth is equated with God, as they merge to conspire in retribution.<sup>24</sup>

The other figure of ambivalent assignation is the 'Mother',

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<sup>22</sup> In this version, the typed word 'coffin' was crossed out and replaced with 'BIER'.

<sup>23</sup> In the penultimate line of this version, the following corrections were pencilled in: 'me' was added after 'watches'; 'the' was deleted; 'mother' became 'Mother' and a comma was added after it; 'who' was replaced with 'and'. Evidently, these were Lowell's final emendations of the poem's four concluding lines.

<sup>24</sup> 'In the Bible, harness usually means armor' (Staples, p. 88). Lowell's conflation here of a suit of armour with the sling of a cradle calls to mind his description of 'Jesus, in the harness' in 'The Holy Innocents'. Compare also the depiction of the French king, 'clamped in his black and burly harness' in 'Charles the Fifth and the Peasant' (PNT, p. 47) and the connection made between 'harness' and 'battle' in 'At the Indian Killer's Grave' (p. 67).

suggesting both a travesty of the concept of Mary as divine intercessor and, simultaneously, the speaker's own mother. Structural sense must have guided this choice of guardian: as Lowell drew together the four parts of 'Between the Porch and the Altar', his decision to resummon the maternal presence which had haunted the protagonist's Oedipal nightmares at the beginning of the first part makes clearer - and more chillingly resonant - the dense constellation of ideas about infancy, death and judgement present in the formulation to which he finally won through. Rearrangement gave the poem momentum and a tighter unity; by returning to the mother-controller figure his poem started out with, Lowell reinforced the grim design of an inescapably cyclical pattern of desire and punishment to which the urgently compacted images of the poem are subordinated. Revisions progressively heightened the bullying rhetoric and tightened the visual and aural structures within the poem's compressed, iambic lines. By such means, Lowell put into poetic practice Auden's call for a brutally efficient revising intelligence.<sup>25</sup>

'Between the Porch and the Altar', with its challenging combination of psychological penetration, social criticism and perverse theology, points forward from Lord Weary's Castle to Lowell's subsequent collection. In The Mills of the Kavanaghs, grotesque forms of sexual and spiritual tyrannizing are the abiding concerns. This is true, for instance, of the long title poem, a bewildering composition of narrative, myth and dream elements, filtered through the

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<sup>25</sup> See p. 38 above.

monologue-meditations of Anne Kavanaugh. She is obsessed with thoughts about her pathological and suicidal former husband, Harry, who returns to haunt her after his death. As Ian Hamilton writes, Lowell depicts Anne as 'half worshipping, half loathing her dead husband, but finally rejoicing in her freedom from his sexless tyranny' - a tyranny which, the poem recounts, had manifested itself in the bedroom relations of husband and wife.<sup>26</sup>

The new volume gravitated towards more recognizably domestic scenarios than were evident in most of the Lord Weary's Castle compositions, although Lowell's style also became more dizzyingly obscure in the process - as if the complex symbolistic mode he had adopted and adapted was by that stage in its death throes. After this collection, Lowell's adherence to tightly controlled forms and techniques of analogy and allusion was radically re-evaluated. During the 1950s, he changed his attitude towards the early work; on a West Coast reading tour in 1957, for instance, he would paraphrase Latin snatches when reciting his old poems, add extra syllables to lines for greater clarity and inject a colloquial element into the poetic idiom (LCP, pp. 227, 242-43).<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, his behind-the-scenes writing during the 1950s involved a considerable shift of technique, as crabbed and obscurantist poetic procedures gave way to experiments with limpid, expansive prose autobiography. Some of this material was

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<sup>26</sup> See Hamilton, pp. 178-87 (p. 186).

<sup>27</sup> For the conjectural influence of William Carlos Williams on this transition, see Stephen Gould Axelrod, Robert Lowell: Life and Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 84-101; see also Hamilton, pp. 231-32.

converted in due course to the poems of Life Studies, where calmer cadences were substituted for the restless energies of his 1940s verse. In this volume, Lowell's vision of repression in political, social and familial situations found accessible - though still complex and challenging - new forms of expression.

#### 4. 'Furious Separate Existences': 'Life Studies' (1959)

In 1955, as his style was undergoing transformation, Lowell wrote an essay on the Metamorphoses of Ovid (LCP, pp. 152-60). He came up with a formulation to define the Latin poetry which has a bearing also on the changes which were then taking place in his own writing:

His hexameters, his sentences, and his sense have furious separate existences; they come at each other on foot, on horseback, with swords, forks, and nets, like gladiators they grapple for the kill. (LCP, p. 156)

If Lowell's poetry of the 1940s can be characterized in terms of a deadly grapple between one line, sentence or sense-impression and the next, the poems which emerged at the end of the 1950s in the collection Life Studies may be described in terms of the 'furious separate existences' of each impression registered. Lowell's strategies of composition may be less overtly aggressive in this volume, but there are still forceful and estranging effects to account for; the images of each poem still defy assimilation into a readily-comprehensible poetic design. Stephen Yenser has usefully expressed the stylistic shift:

The peculiarity [...] seems at first almost opposite that of Lowell's earlier poetry, where the images were welded to one another and the problem was separating them in order to understand what was going on. Here the images are laid next to one another like bricks, and the difficulty is discovering what relationship they have to one another.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Circle to Circle: The Poetry of Robert Lowell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 136-37. At this point, Yenser is writing specifically about 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' (LS, p. 73).

As Yenser indicates, it is not that difficulty of interpretation has disappeared, but that the nature of the difficulty has altered.

The experience of coming up against a forbidding edifice remains. As in previous work, this is both a stylistic effect and a thematic concern. Whereas Lowell's earlier poetry had captured the note of fanatical and immobile fixation with an inscrutable Puritan God, the poems of Life Studies are stricken by an apprehension of purposelessness; the nihilistic tendency which had been underlying Lowell's religiously engaged work has now been extricated from its theological framework. Life Studies is a collection of poems about the frustration of people's designs (or, indeed, the lack of them), about the depletion of potency, and pointless struggles for personal or political dominion. The volume presents a catalogue of collapses, its four sections addressing social, familial, corporeal and psychological dissolution.

The dominant note is one of resignation. There is still an urgency to the poet's enterprise, and a ruthless economy of linguistic means, but the organization of sound and image strikes the reader as more arbitrary than before, just as the tone is less clamant. Incapacitated judgement, a quality registered in the early poetry in response to unremitting fate and circumstance, provides the author of Life Studies with an overriding preoccupation. Accompanying this is a development and clarification of the idea that solipsistic impulses govern human behaviour and threaten to turn everyone into a tyrant: each character depicted in the verse pursues his or her own furious separate existence,

their desperate struggles for self-validation often issuing in destructive, and ultimately self-destructive, behaviour. As his work moves away from a symbolistic exposition of narrowly oppressive theology, and opens up into autobiographical and psychoanalytical exploration, so Lowell's focus on the self-imprisoned and characteristically aggressive individual becomes of central concern.<sup>2</sup>

The result is a peculiarly double-edged tone: Life Studies is both 'curiously intimate and impersonal', to borrow another phrase which Lowell applied to Ovid's work (LCP, p. 157). The poems delineate the writer's life, and the lives of those around him, but, as the title implies, these 'studies' are economical adumbrations, quick outline portraits which depend as much upon a detached overview as upon intimacy, or the disclosure of personal revelations. The pursuit of accuracy implicates Lowell in callousness at times, but the dissociation between poet and subject which gives rise to this danger is fundamental to his approach. The poems are about the inability of individuals to connect meaningfully with one another; the lack of compassion, as with the lack of connection between one image and another,

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Altieri diagnoses the despairing note of Life Studies as attributable to Lowell's inability to find 'full philosophical alternatives to a symbolist faith gone dead'. He persuasively places this celebrated cornerstone text of 'Confessional' verse, and thereby the school of writing it purportedly spawned, in a void of uncertainty between Modernism's death-throes and the birth-pangs of a renewed belief in the socially and personally restorative powers of the imagination evident in certain American poets of the 1960s. See his essay 'Robert Lowell and the Difficulties of Escaping Modernism', in Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s (London: Associated University Presses, 1979), pp. 53-77; the quotation is from the introduction (p. 17).

emphasizes the fragility, and the attenuation, of social and familial bonds.

The precedent of Wallace Stevens is relevant. In the essay, 'New England and Further' (1977), Lowell describes how, in Stevens's verse, 'everything actual and familiarly obvious is subtilized by attenuation' (LCP, p. 210). Stevens's poetics is founded upon a recognition of art's fictional status; this provides the poet with a means of perceiving and countering the fictiveness of religion. What is proffered to act as a substitute for a divinely controlled world-order in his poetry is a limitless but listless series of exotic contrivances which self-evidently, even showily, convey the undercurrents of a nihilistic outlook. While Lowell's poetry does not exactly share Stevens's 'essential gaudiness', the deployment of its particulars tends towards the same ends: in Life Studies, things are laid bare, apparently random objects are simply displayed, attenuated to the status of detritus by the arbitrary and prosaic effects of the language deployed. And, like Stevens's, Lowell's god has withdrawn.<sup>3</sup>

The break-up of power provides Lowell with a theme for his opening poem, 'Beyond the Alps' (LS, p. 11). This composition retains the tone of sickened violence and the elliptical montage techniques customary in his previous poems; it visualizes a train journey from Rome to Paris while glimpsing in flashes of imagery a dizzying historical

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<sup>3</sup> For Lowell's opinions of Wallace Stevens in 1947 as bland and 'sloppy', see LCP, pp. 12-16. The essay 'New England and Further' (pp. 179-212), with a much more favourable view of the writer (pp. 208-10), was started in the late 1960s and left uncompleted at Lowell's death in 1977.

retrospective on presumptuous drives to power. Underlying the poem is the idea that convictional certainty lends itself to tyrannous ideology. It is this which links Mussolini's construction of a fascist régime to Pope Pius XII's institution of contentious church dogma - and each of them holds sway over an excitable mob. It is this, too, which helps to account for the rapid references made to Roman imperialism, the explorations of complacent Victorians, and the voyages of Odysseus - manifestations of expansionist or otherwise aggressive urges finding their respective outlets. Beneath them all runs an impulse towards self-annihilation.

However, rather than bringing its disparate elements together under the violent yoke of divine condemnation, the poem ultimately emphasizes disunity and fragmentation, a sense highlighted by the poem's closing lines:

Now Paris, our black classic, breaking up  
like killer kings on an Etruscan cup.

These lines figure the disintegration of martial heroism, as preserved in the ancient battle scenes depicted on the Italian relic; they also imply a correlative derogation of the dominance traditionally claimed for Paris, the modern, secular locus of cultural supremacy. Those rudimentary delineations of a scene once held valiant, now 'breaking up' along with the imperialist ideals informing them, are comprised of fragile lines, exposing their rifts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The poem's third stanza mentions Ovid, <sup>Taurus,</sup> and the satirists Lucan and Juvenal, whose work bore witness and savage resistance to Roman imperial tyranny. This stanza first appeared in the revised and reprinted version of 'Beyond the Alps' contained in Lowell's 1964 volume For the Union Dead (p. 56), and, with further adjustments, in the revised edition of Life Studies (USA: 1968; UK: 1972). Compare the poem 'Ovid

Lowell's preoccupation with break-ups continues to exhibit itself in Life Studies through a reflexive emphasis on the fragility of his means of depiction. The set of four poems which open the volume emphasizes this: each is a brittle, fragmentary collage of scenes depicting violent régimes or struggles for dominion, and each is informed by the controlling notion of break-up. For instance, 'Inauguration Day: January 1953' elliptically links a series of unsuccessful presidential administrations, under the control of dubious military figureheads, in lines as disconnected and fissile as the 'fixed stars' in the American flag which Lowell describes: 'all just alike / as lack-land atoms, split apart' (LS, p. 15).

The second section of Life Studies shifts the focus from martial to marital weakness. '91 Revere Street' casts a cold eye on the rifts in Lowell's family relations, registering the bare bones of the matter in finely chiselled prose.<sup>5</sup> Lowell's boyhood household has the air of a régime in decline, superintended as it is by hulking old furniture, military portraits, and other relics of the past which retain an air of overbearing authority by virtue of their

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and Caesar's Daughter' (HIS, p. 45).

<sup>5</sup> I am constrained to leave to one side the vexed issue of Lowell introducing prose into a volume of poetry, although there is much to be said about the prose-like qualities of poems in Life Studies, and about the strategic, rhythmic, and economical deployment of words which gives the prose memoir its poetic charge. The purging of inessential details, and of connections between one recollected impression and the next, might be considered in relation to the description of Mussolini as 'pure prose' in 'Beyond the Alps': the fascist's pursuit of racial purity has some connection with the poet's swift means of dispatch in his own 'pure prose', and with the perfectionist projects of Lowell's mother as they are described in '91 Revere Street'.

unalterability: 'things and their owners come back urgent with life and meaning - because finished, they are enduring and perfect' (LS, p. 21). The illusion of perfection is agonizingly unavailable to the living, although Lowell's intimidatory mother aspires for absolute control and achieves a 'hectic perfection' in her silverware at least (p. 44) - one means of defence against the 'brassy callousness' of her husband's invading naval friends (p. 25).

Lowell's interest is in the 'hectic' aspect which betrays his mother's latently tyrannical temperament, despite her endeavours to adopt the feigned neutrality of social niceties. She controls the household as a 'patient and forbearing strategist' (p. 28), but in moments of achieved triumph she cannot hide the note of 'gloating panic in her voice' (p. 34). Conspiring in the distortions of history reflected in the household trappings, she apotheosizes her father into the image of a Napoleonic hero, while her 'unmasterful' husband falls victim to her tyrannical streak of intolerance (p. 27). Her reticent son, apparent 'master of cool, stoical repartee' (p. 30), similarly portrays a calm exterior, while his 'thick-witted, narcissistic, thuggish' nature (p. 39) manifests itself in bursts of manic superiority and violent action, as the young Lowell bloodies a succession of noses against the statue in Boston's Public Garden (pp. 41-42).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> '91 Revere Street' (1956) is reprinted in Lowell's Collected Prose (pp. 309-45), where it is placed between two autobiographical prose sketches of 1957: 'Antebellum Boston' (pp. 291-308) and 'Near the Unbalanced Aquarium' (pp. 346-63). In the former, Lowell's mother glorifies her father as a Napoleonic figure, 'a great conquering emperor in her mind'

The family portrayal corresponds to Maurice Latey's 'classic picture of revolt against the father (or absence or ineffectuality of the father) and predominant influence of the mother' from which the tyrant is customarily seen to arise.<sup>7</sup> Lowell pursues this notion of himself as a tyrant implicitly throughout Life Studies, and more explicitly in later volumes. His interest is also in the connection between domestic set-ups and state régimes, and to this end he makes much capital out of his high genealogy; the themes of cultural disintegration and authority-in-decline are depicted through the internecine family-stuggles which have beset the intertwined dynasties of those important families in American history - the Winslows, Starks and Lowells.

Life Studies exposes the gulfs which exist between personal individuals and their social function or status. This is a concern which Lowell applies to four meditations on deceased writers in the third section of Life Studies before returning to autobiographical material for Part Four. Lowell's family is shown to be a once 'formidable / Ancien Régime' ('Grandparents', LS, p. 82), now attenuated to a group of enervated individuals separately and solipsistically engaged in their own listless thoughts and activities. The young poet is depicted as heir to the dynasty of solipsists in 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle

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(p. 296), and is herself described as a 'young Alexander, all gleam and panache, [...] a sort of commander in chief of her virgin battlefield' (p. 295). Lowell's childhood Napoleonic fantasies are reflected in two poems in Lord Weary's Castle: 'The First Sunday in Lent', (PNT, p. 25) and 'Buttercups' (p. 28). See also the opening stanza of 'Commander Lowell' (LS, p. 84).

<sup>7</sup> Latey, p. 67.

Devereux Winslow' (p. 73). With wry detachment, Lowell recalls the vain self-conceptions entertained by the young boy he used to be. Acting as some sort of sentinel figure on the porch of his family house, the child imagines<sup>for</sup> himself an omniscience and stature well beyond his means:

I cowered in terror.  
I wasn't a child at all -  
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina  
in the Golden House of Nero.

The analogy is contrived, melodramatic, but all the more appropriate for that, given the boy's idle and disproportionate imaginings. He identifies himself with Agrippina, the mother of Nero; herself a perpetrator of murder, she in turn foresaw her own impending death at her son's hands. Also foreshadowed in the analogy (though one senses that the child makes the point unwittingly) is the internal collapse of an entire dynasty, the Neronic household of intrigue and treachery of which Lowell junior is a fledgling member.<sup>8</sup>

With a mingled sense of self-aggrandizement and acknowledged impotence, the boy stares coldly at the unutterable facts: 'My uncle was dying at twenty-nine'. He sits in apparent calm at the centre of his universe, like a puppet-ruler weighing the life-giving and flesh-corrupting piles of earth and lime before him - as if he had the power to spare or save:

My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles  
of earth and lime,  
a black pile and a white pile....  
Come winter,  
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one colour.

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Near the Unbalanced Aquarium', *LCP*, pp. 359-61. Here, Lowell recalls how his Uncle Devereux used to read him stories about the house of Nero (p. 361).

The objects, like the facts, are stared at blankly, yet with an implied sense that the child is lording over them; this is coupled with and complicated by a nagging undercurrent of guilt that the dispassionate, non-comprehending status of the beholder is in some way complicit in the dying man's fate, if only because of his childish impotence.

The boy's tyrannical potentialities are evident throughout the poem; contumacious in his solitude, wilfully killing off the holiday plans of his parents, the boy imperially assumes a ludicrous dignity and 'perfection' when he imagines himself achieving the 'Olympian / poise of [his] models in the imperishable autumn / display windows' of Boston's more exclusive downtown stores (p. 75).<sup>9</sup> His steely perfectionist drive finds correspondence in the hard-edged attributes of the environment he inhabits: the sapphire-like ponds and the parade of trees, 'diamond-pointed, athirst and Norman', which flank the 'pioneering' path leading away from the family farm have that icy, crystalline quality which characterized the harsh environments of Lowell's earlier poems. They also connect with crisp, pared particulars realized in other poems of this volume - with the 'chalk-dry and spar spire / of the Trinitarian Church' in 'Skunk Hour' (LS, p. 104), for instance, or the black 'fence of iron spear-hafts' which dramatically encircles the snow-trapped family graveyard in 'Sailing Home from Rapallo' (p. 91); in this latter poem, frost gives 'a diamond edge' to the names hewn on the

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Lowell had in mind the accusations of "calm, Olympian brutality" levelled against him by his estranged first wife Jean Stafford in a letter of 1947; see Hamilton, pp. 122, 184.

headstones in a way which reflects both the obduracy of the unalterable past and the atrophy which keeps grief suspended in the present.

'Sailing Home from Rapallo' is about the burial of Lowell's mother. It highlights the problem of estimating the element of compassion Lowell grants the subjects of his sharp poetic 'studies'. Where the death of a mother would conventionally provoke a desire to make amends for one's own or the deceased's shortcomings, to redress the wrongs inflicted or sustained in living relations, here grief and its reparative urge appear to be absent. The bare facts are laid out with a seeming casualness. This borders on callousness, given that the 'pink-veined slice of marble' of Lowell's father's tomb is served up to the reader so close to the fresher body, 'wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tin foil'. Moreover, these tasteless appeals to the sense of taste follow on from the champagne-starter provided by the 'spumante-bubbling wake' made by the liner on which Lowell accompanies his mother's corpse home from Italy. The grisly humour is all the more shocking for the blitheness and swiftness with which the poem is dispatched.<sup>10</sup>

Spare and yet unsparing, the concise delineations of Life Studies have a ruthlessly reductive tendency. 'Waking Early in the Blue' employs a drastic economy of means in depicting the 'victorious figures of bravado ossified young' who inhabit a mental institution (LS, p. 95). One inmate, Stanley, 'more cut off from words than a seal', bears a

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<sup>10</sup> See Hamilton, pp. 202-06 and 'Near the Unbalanced Aquarium', pp. 348-51: 'When Mother died, I began to feel tireless, madly sanguine, menaced, and menacing. [...] The old menacing hilarity was growing in me' (pp. 350-01).

'kingly granite profile in a crimson golf-cap', unaware of his ironic coronation, while another, Bobby, comes across as

a replica of Louis XVI  
without the wig -  
redolent and roly-poly as a sperm-whale,  
as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit  
and horses at chairs.

Stripped of the pretence of human dignity, those who fail to command even their own lives are parodies of the leaders of men.<sup>11</sup> The poet counts himself among these unwitting self-exhibitionists; frozen in self-regard before the shaving mirror at the poem's end, he stares blanky, transfixed and disempowered by the truth of his condition, his only aid a menacing 'locked razor'.

Gravitation towards the suicidal condition is the ultimate tendency in these poems. Each solitary individual, imprisoned in self-absorption and paralyzed by a lack of will, is caught between delusions of grandeur and anticipation of the grave. That it is the poet himself who contrives this scheme of things is a dark irony which does not escape Lowell's attention; reading these poems, one is constantly reminded of the link between subjective egotism portrayed in his subjects and the fantasies and power-ploys inherent in poetic design: the poet who tyrannizes is in turn tyrannized by his own devices. This is true, for instance, of the poem 'Memories of West Street and Lepke' (LS, p. 99), which sets side by side two ways of life, based

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<sup>11</sup> Lowell may well have chosen Louis XVI deliberately as an epitome of failure in leadership; the deposed French king was guillotined during the French Revolution, in 1793. Compare the parallel drawn between Lowell's grandfather and Nicholas II, the 'last Russian Czar' in 'Grandparents' (p. 83): this renownedly incompetent autocrat precipitated the 1917 Russian Revolution, abdicated and was shot.

respectively upon Lowell's dull, comfortable days on Boston's upper-middle class Marlborough Street and his period of incarceration as a conscientious objector during the Second World War. It also plays off poet against murderer.<sup>12</sup>

In the closing lines, Lowell describes a neighbouring inmate at West Street Jail; Czar Lepke, one-time agent of the depersonalized violence administered on behalf of 'Murder Incorporated', approaches his final judgement with a singular lack of urgency and dread:

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,  
he drifted in a sheepish calm,  
where no agonizing reappraisal  
jarred his concentration on the electric chair -  
hanging like an oasis in his air  
of lost connections...

In his aimless shambling, he represents the dark double of Lowell seen shuffling around the cosy oblivion of his house at the poem's start, the difference being that the process of 'agonizing reappraisal' which ought to be Lepke's falls by default to the poet. There is an implied sense of the author's passive complicity in violence, of the bonds that exist between writer and killer.

The atmosphere of intimidation which smoulders beneath the surface calm of the poem was more explicit in earlier versions: Lowell previously tried out a line describing Lepke which read, 'He'd ruled vicariously with a Himmler's power'. This authority was modified to 'a Himmler's dispassionate, vicarious power', and then the historical

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<sup>12</sup> Compare the reference to Minerva, goddess of both destructive war and creative arts, in 'Beyond the Alps' (LS, p. 12).

allusion was abandoned altogether.<sup>13</sup> Lowell thereby evaded the liability commonly incurred by a poet who assumes the right to draw freely upon historical atrocity for rhetorical effect. There was also the matter simply of avoiding over-explicitness; a phrase linking Lepke and Lowell, 'He [...] looked like myself', was wisely discarded from a poem which is, after all, concerned with 'lost connections'. One can trace in these and other reconsiderations Lowell's impulse towards quelling and subduing what would amount to overstatement in a poem which relies for its effects upon the very lack of obvious links between violence and the individual, and the implications of this dissociation for the society he describes.<sup>14</sup>

There is a similar lack of obvious links between the characters depicted in 'Skunk Hour', the closing poem of Life Studies (p. 103). The first figure encountered is a 'hermit heiress', a desperate, matriarchal type presiding over her fanatical and illusory régime:

Thirsting for  
the hierarchic privacy  
of Queen Victoria's century,  
she buys up all  
the eyesores facing her shore,  
and lets them fall.

The uneven, desultory rhythm of the lines and the ungainly half-rhyme of 'privacy' and 'century' convey the impression of a hopeless falling-off, a thwarting of aspiration. The woman wields financial strength, but only in order to build

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<sup>13</sup> Latey characterizes Himmler as a 'careerist' of terror, highlighting the cold professionalism of the head of Hitler's S.S. élite (p. 120).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Lowell Papers (2203). I analyse the complex evolution of this poem's composition more fully in 'Revision as Redress?' (pp. 31-33).

a hollow empire. It is the pointless and frustrated exercise of power which provides the link with the other activities described in subsequent vignettes: the curious disappearance of Nautilus Island's 'summer millionaire', and the failed enterprises of a shopkeeper. Each figure inhabits a shared environment of decay, isolation and material covetousness; they are all outcasts, immersed in futile attempts to better themselves through shows of superfluity and excess, as if to seek relief from some at best half-defined angst.

The series of drifting tableaux is then added to with the entry of the poet himself, cast as a voyeur looking for 'love-cars'. When he returns home from this shameful search, the odour of wealth-in-decline which has been hanging over the poem is given palpable expression through the description of a skunk eating sour cream in the 'rich air' by the speaker's garbage can:

I stand on top  
of our back steps and breathe the rich air -  
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the  
garbage pail.  
She jabs her wedge head in a cup  
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare.

The ambiguous final line suggests both that these scavengers are not menacing and that they are not subject to threat: they stand their ground. Whether their presence serves to redress any of the social or personal malaise described in the poem remains debatable; their achievements in a sense only further serve to fuel the observer's despair at his distance from their state.

In 'The Man of Letters in the Modern World' (1952), Allen Tate reflects on 'existential disorders' via Pascal's

observations about the dangerous psychological results of humans feeling cut off from their animal instincts:

Pascal said that the 'sight of cats or rats is enough to unhinge the reason' - a morbid prediction of our contemporary existential philosophy, a modernized Dark Night of Sense. The impact of mere sensation, even of 'cats and rats' (which enjoy the innocence of their perfection in the order of nature) - a simple sense perception from a world no longer related to human beings - will nourish a paranoid philosophy of despair.<sup>15</sup>

The achieved 'perfection' of the innocently instinctive night-creatures is what so thwarts and defeats the poem's speaker - just as people's perfectionist drives have been shown to result in frustration throughout the volume. In Tate's terms, Lowell gives voice to a 'paranoid philosophy of despair' in 'Skunk Hour', bleakly registering 'the impact of mere sensation':

My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,  
 'Love, O Careless Love...' I hear  
 my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
 as if my hand were at its throat...  
 I myself am hell,  
 nobody's here.

This is at once plain spoken and melodramatic. One senses the double-edged quality of blank awareness without any

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<sup>15</sup> Essays of Four Decades, pp. 3-16 (p. 7). Lowell himself characterized the scene of his final stanzas as exploring an updated version of the 'Dark Night of the Soul' undergone by St. John of the Cross, one 'not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostic. An existentialist night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide. Out of this comes the march and affirmation, an ambiguous one, of my skunks in the last two stanzas. The skunks are both quixotic and barbarously absurd, hence the tone of amusement and defiance'. See 'On "Skunk Hour"', LCP, pp. 225-29 (p. 226). Tate mentions Pascal; for the French philosopher's conception of tyranny (as 'the desire for universal and inordinate dominion', or else 'the wish to obtain in one way something that can be obtained only in another'), see Pensées (1670), no. 106.

controlling comprehension, as if the poet has not got beyond the childish, impotent response to the unalterables of life and death expressed in 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow'. In fact, any pretensions of control available there are unavailable here; exposed to 'the tyranny of the open night', the speaker's mind, like Lear's is 'not right'.<sup>16</sup> He is literally beside himself, a bystander even at the operations of his body, listening in like a stranger to his own blood - as to the lyrics of an overheard song.<sup>17</sup>

This dissociated, numb commentary on solipsistic despair is the culmination of all the failures to achieve self-possession throughout Life Studies, all the acts of blank gazing at unsolvable, unredeemable conditions. The solipsist's last escapist fantasy is self-annihilation; as the reference to Milton's Satan implies ('my self am Hell': Paradise Lost, IV.75), Lowell knows himself to be the envious voyeur of a world unattainable to him, and is thus thwarted and tyrannized by his own desires; his dreams of dominion, like those of the other characters in the poem, inevitably collapse into apprehensions of hollowness, alienation from society and self-abhorrence.

The hint of a diabolical aspect in himself at the end of Life Studies foreshadows the concerns of Lowell's

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<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare, King Lear (1604-05), III.iii.2.

<sup>17</sup> 'Careless Love' is a popular song alluding to seduction, pregnancy, desertion, murder and suicide; see the contribution by John Frederick Nims to the symposium, 'On Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour"', in The Contemporary Poet as Artist and Critic: Eight Symposia, ed. by Anthony Ostroff (Boston, MA and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1964), pp. 81-110 (p. 94).

writings in the 1960s, including his translations and dramas. A theme running through this body of work is that the will-to-power and the abandonment of a will to live are omnipresent and interdependent forces which connect us all to Satan. This accounts for his recourse to the work of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, for instance, while the relation between Satan and the Greek heroes who compel Lowell's attention is implied in the essay 'Art and Evil':

Prometheus is the story of seemingly hopeless defiance of a tyrant; Orestes is the story of purging society by murdering the tyrant; Satan is the story of spirit trying to commit suicide in order to be God. (LCP, p. 134)<sup>18</sup>

An inability, or unwillingness, to distinguish the tyrant from the tyrannicide, or the struggle for power from self-destructive urges lies at the heart of Lowell's pessimism. His work after Life Studies enabled him to pursue, and intensify, the connections seen to exist between 'bleak personal violence' (LCP, p. 228) and the violence of his age.

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<sup>18</sup> For Lowell's comparison of Rimbaud and Satan as artist-criminals, see LCP, pp. 134-37.

5. 'The Solipsism of all Imperialisms': Lowell's  
Translations and Plays

Lowell had a tendency to preface his own works with shows of strength which at the same time incorporated exhibitions of fallibility. For instance, in the introduction to Imitations (USA: 1961; UK: 1962) he made an admission both bold and self-defeating about the experiments with translation which comprised that volume:

I have been reckless with literal meaning [...] I have dropped lines, moved lines, moved stanzas, changed images and altered metre and intent. [...] This book was written from time to time when I was unable to do anything of my own. (IM, pp. xi-xii)<sup>1</sup>

The impression one gets from such a cavalier confession is of a poet going out of his way to invite critical strictures, as the critic Ben Belitt has observed:

Lowell in his Introduction delivers himself up to would-be assassins with the resolute fatalism of Caesar in the Roman Senate. His admissions and omissions seem almost wilfully suicidal: in that European cemetery of noble utterances and awesome identities which he inhabits, his actions appear vandalous and his appetites necrophilous.<sup>2</sup>

The analogy with Caesar is apt in highlighting how the poet's actions might be seen to approximate tyrannical meddling for which the only conceivable redress is critical assassination. Usurping the words of others and twisting them to his own designs, Lowell may be judged to be overextending the customary prerogatives of the translator.

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<sup>1</sup> Compare the introductions to Phaedra: A Verse Translation of Racine's Phèdre (USA: 1961) (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 7 ('I have been tormented by the fraudulence of my own heavy touch'), and Prometheus Bound (USA: 1969; UK: 1970), p. v ('I was free to tone down the poetic eloquence, and shove in any thought that occurred to me and seemed to fit').

<sup>2</sup> 'Imitations: Translation as Personal Mode', in London and Boyers, pp. 115-129 (p. 116).

Furthermore, by admitting to this enterprise as the product of idle, arbitrary whims, he appears to be emphasizing his culpability, the irresponsible lawlessness which aligns poet with tyrant.

The Imitations present a highly selective and slanted reading of European poetry ancient and modern. In a flagrant display of artistic fabrication, Lowell appropriates and re-interprets past literature, tracing a history of his own concerns: madness, lust, homicide and suicide are the dominant themes of the poems selected for adaptation. One could have it that Lowell is engaged in cultural imperialism, a reducing and traducing of European literary history to accord with his interpretations of American society; indeed, he claims to have 'tried to write live English and to do what [his] authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America' (IM, p. xi). On the other hand, Lowell's imaginative reconsiderations of the work could be read as a form of redress - both for his own culture and for those cultures which he draws upon; perhaps the Imitations provide a means of reinterpreting and reinvigorating a tradition while resisting both deferential attitudes to literary forebears and the customary slavishness of literal translation. Gabriel Pearson expresses the crux of the predicament:

The whole operation involves the exercise of a vast tact. Merely to translate would be to become the avatar of foreign cultures. To transform utterly would be to court the solipsism of all imperialisms. Lowell, in his Imitations, has both



souviennent,  
 Il n'a su réchauffer ce cadavre hébété  
 Où coule au lieu de sang l'eau verte du Léthé.<sup>4</sup>

Lowell's version involves some violent adjustments of meaning:

I'm like the king of a rain-country, rich  
 but sterile, young but with an old wolf's itch,  
 one who escapes Fénelon's apologues,  
 and kills the day in boredom with his dogs;  
 nothing cheers him, darts, tennis, falconry,  
 his people dying by the balcony;  
 the bawdry of the pet hermaphrodite  
 no longer gets him through a single night;  
 his bed of fleur-de-lys becomes a tomb;  
 even the ladies of the court, for whom  
 all kings are beautiful, cannot put on  
 shameful enough dresses for this skeleton;  
 the scholar who makes his gold cannot invent  
 washes to cleanse the poisoned element;  
 even in baths of blood, Rome's legacy,  
 our tyrants' solace in senility,  
 he cannot warm up his shot corpse, whose food  
 is syrup-green Lethean ooze, not blood. (IM, p. 50)<sup>5</sup>

No exotic contrivance, no pandering to the dictates of desultory whim can mitigate the speaker's nihilism; even the pleasure which violence brings fails to satisfy. The craving for self-annihilation which this poem forcefully expresses is characteristic of the spiritual and psychic malaise described throughout the volume; more than ever, the poetic voice is stricken by the apprehension of purposelessness.

The paradox is that there is a design to Lowell's meditations on the frustration of human designs. Comparing his 'imitation' to Francis Scarfe's fairly literal prose translation in the standard Penguin edition of Baudelaire's

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<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire: Selected Verse, trans. by Francis Scarfe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961; repr. 1964), p. 176. ('Spleen' was first published in Les Fleurs du mal, 1857.)

<sup>5</sup> The wording of this translation is identical in Lowell's volume, The Voyage and Other Versions of Poems by Baudelaire (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 40.

poems shows how far Lowell was willing to tamper with the original. Partly, of course, it was a matter of trying to capture the shock-value of Baudelaire's language; Lowell achieves this by rendering it forcibly palpable, preferring a 'shot corpse' to a 'stupefied, living corpse' and 'syrup-green Lethean ooze' to 'Lethe's green water'.<sup>6</sup> His translatorial decisions, moreover, were inevitably guided by the inclination to replicate Baudelaire's scheme of biting couplets. There is much more to the transformations than that, however; his decisions often have as much to do with how he has effected other 'imitations' in the volume as with the requirements of the translation in hand. By replacing a jester with an hermaphrodite, for instance, Lowell brings Baudelaire's vision in line with an emphasis on perversity and decadence which runs through Imitations. And in translating 'les puissants' as 'tyrants' he presumably means to connect the vision here with that given in other poems - with the 'horny pot-bellied tyrants stuffed on lust' in Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage VI' (IM, p. 70) or the 'tyrants' who 'trampled on humanity' in Rimbaud's 'Morts de Quatre-vingt-douze ...' (1870) (p. 86).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Philip Hobsbaum's comments in A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 106-07; he notes how 'French poetry can bear much more by way of abstract statement than is the case in English, and therefore, characteristically, a concept in Baudelaire becomes an image in Lowell' (p. 107).

<sup>7</sup> In the case of 'Le Voyage', the word 'tyrant' is not interpolated. See Scarfe, p. 187: 'tyran goulou, paillard, dur et cupide' ('that greedy tyrant, lewd, merciless, and grasping'). However, Lowell transforms Rimbaud's address to the 'Dead men [...] who [...] trampled under your clogs the yoke which weighs on the soul and brow of all humanity' ('Morts [...] qui [...], sous vos sabots, brisiez le joug qui pèse / Sur l'âme et sur le front de toute humanité'), by emphasizing the reciprocity of tyrannical and tyrannicidal

Clearly, there is scheming going on. When, in the second line of 'Spleen', 'jeune et pourtant très-vieux' becomes 'young but with an old wolf's itch' Lowell is forging a link in the chain of lupine images which throughout the volume highlights the predatory aspect of man.<sup>8</sup> Lowell is also attempting to bring the poem's vision up to date by translating 'gibier' ('game') as 'darts, tennis'. At the same time, however, he also evidently aims to create a sense of historical specificity; he does this by transforming the speaker's aversion to 'the bowing and scraping of his tutors' (as Scarfe renders it) into a desire to escape the moral lessons of François Fénelon. This is the French theologian (1651-1715) who tutored the duc de Bourgogne and criticized the tyrannical, war-waging government of his tutee's grandfather, Louis XIV, in such works as Les aventures de Télémaque (1699). Unearthing the allusion, however, does not render Lowell's motives any less obscure; is one therefore supposed to view the speaker who shuns his lessons specifically as the duc de Bourgogne - and to know about the historical context? If so, how far does the analogy satisfactorily stretch, and how does this emphasis square with the contemporizing impulse in the poem?

Such are the questions which continue to vex those who try to interpret Lowell's poetry, particularly the work of the Notebook and History volumes. The caprice of Lowell's

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acts: 'when tyrants trampled on humanity, / you broke them underneath your wooden shoes'. See Arthur Rimbaud, Collected Poems, trans. by Oliver Bernard (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; repr. 1986), p. 101.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, his versions of Villon's 'Le Grand Testament' (IM, p. 8), Baudelaire's 'Le Cygne' (p. 59) and 'La Servante' (p. 63) and Montale's 'Nuove stanze' (p. 120).

policies in Imitations anticipates the procedures and attitudes typical of that later work. This is evidenced by the reappearance of 'Spleen' in History under a different title, 'Caligula 1' (HIS, p. 47).<sup>9</sup> Gone is the cryptic reference to French history (indeed, even Baudelaire as the poetic source is not acknowledged); as the Roman tyrant becomes the mouthpiece of the poem's sentiments, the implication seems to be that one dictator is readily interchangeable with any other in Lowell's vision.<sup>10</sup>

"I am like the king of a rain-country, rich  
 though sterile, young but no longer spry enough  
 to kill vacation in boredom with my dogs -  
 nothing cheers me, drugs, nieces, falconry,  
 my triple bed with coral Augustan eagles -  
 my patrician maids in waiting for whom  
 all princes are beautiful cannot put on  
 low enough dresses to heat my skeleton.  
 The doctor pounding pearls to medicine  
 finds no formula to cleanse a poisoned vein.  
 Not even our public happiness sealed with blood,  
 our tyrant's solace in senility,  
 great Caesar's painkiller, can strengthen my blood,  
 green absinthe of forgetfulness [sic], not blood."

The dull reiteration of 'blood' wrung from three of the last four lines provides a suitably heavy culmination to the new version of the poem. Retraction of the poem's regular couplet scheme enhances the pervasive atmosphere of

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<sup>9</sup> The poem is paired off with 'Caligula 2' (HIS, p. 48) - itself a reworking of the poem 'Caligula' which appears, in differing forms, in For the Union Dead (p. 49) and Notebook 1967-68 (p. 104). This latter version is replicated exactly in the 1970 U.K. publication of Notebook (p. 176).

<sup>10</sup> The theatre director Jonathan Miller recalled how Lowell, when in one of his manic phases, would talk excitedly about historical figures: 'All history became a simultaneous event where it was possible for everyone to meet everyone. Famous, important, great people would encounter one another. I think that in his full-blown lunacy all the distinctions of time vanished altogether, and the world was populated by a series of tyrants and geniuses all jostling with one another, competing with one another in knowledge or in sexual skill' (Hamilton, p. 314).

lethargy, just as the references to drugs ('a poisoned vein', 'Caesar's painkiller') and incest ('nieces') increase the air of decadence. Again, the effect is at once to contemporize and historicize the observations.

Lowell's body of translation work and drama can be read as a series of investigations into power and corruption which correspond with and corroborate the author's social vision in his own poetry. An interest in tyranny is everywhere apparent; indeed, 'tyranny' is a keyword insistently used throughout this work. The three plays collected under the title The Old Glory (USA: 1965; UK: 1966) are centrally concerned with the cynical politics of statecraft and the unprincipled behaviour of those who overextend their exercise of power. Lowell's historical imagination is obsessed with the perpetuation of barbarous cycles, and with the connection between tyrannical acts and the deeds of retributive tyrannicides. For example, the Colonial Governor Endecott in the play 'Endecott and the Red Cross' (set in the 1630s) orders the English banner to be torn down in the Royalist district of Salem, with the words 'We shall have no pope or tyrant or mother-country in New England! / No flag shall stand between us and our God!' - but the Anglican Royalist form of authoritarianism he opposes is only to be replaced with an equally repressive Puritan theocracy.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the brutal killing of the Boston redcoat commander Molineux in 'My Kinsman, Major

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<sup>11</sup> See The Old Glory (USA: 1965) (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 55. Williamson notes how Endecott's conduct illustrates the notion that 'the man in total power must be his own final sanction, his own God, and so repeat the crime of Satan' (p. 105).

Molineux' by an anti-English mob around the time of the Boston Tea Party is dramatically felt to be an act of pointless callousness: Molineux is taken by the mob to be a representative of the 'tyrant' King George and his death is greeted with the reiterative cry, 'all tyrants must die as this man died'. Yet through this murder the Bostonians' tyrannical temperament is more evident than the dead man's ever was.<sup>12</sup>

Lowell's three one-act plays trace a history of the mania for power in American culture, showing how the mere exercise of authority precipitates violence and corruption. Jonathan Miller made such a point in his 'Director's Note':

These plays are about the big-hearted energetic blindness of the American nation and they show quite clearly how the country's cardinal virtues can overgrow their own strength until they actually harden into the very vices which so disable the American pursuit.<sup>13</sup>

They are also concerned with the spiritual and mental lethargy which allow tyrannies to arise, and with the link between acts of atrocity and the indifference of their perpetrators. It is the correlation of violence and indolence which affiliates the dramas with Lowell's Imitations and with his translations of other plays. Phaedra, Lowell's version of Racine, for example, highlights the 'idle cruelty' of the title's protagonist while her

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 107, 110-11. The third play of the volume, 'Benito Cereno', portrays struggles for power on board a slave-ship off the coast of Trinidad around 1800; issues of racial tension are made explicit at the play's end.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. xi. In his essay 'Poets and the Theater' (1963-64), Lowell wrote 'I now feel double-faced, looking on plays as some barbarian Gaul or Goth might have first looked on Rome, his shaggy head full of moral disgust, plunder, and adaptation' (LCP, pp. 177-78).

enemy and lover Hippolytus is said to be driven to his 'rage for exploits' by the disease of boredom.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Lowell's version of Aeschylus's Oresteia (USA: 1978; UK: 1979) the vengeful Furies who incite retributive redress are described by Apollo as 'monsters fed on anarchy and boredom'.<sup>15</sup>

Prometheus Bound, Lowell's other Aeschylus-derived drama, emphasizes the reciprocal indifference of the solipsistic tyrant and his subjects:

Zeus is a spot in the eye of chaos [...] He is afraid to understand his own loneliness and danger, though he is still on his throne, and still walled in by his indifference. The indifference of his subjects is greater. Rulers always fall, but no one cares much, except the ruler. (PB, pp. 60-61)

The play reads as an expatiation on the theme of tyranny, giving epigrammatic expression to Lowell's preoccupations with the abuse of authority - hence such lines as 'the suspicions of tyrants create the usurpers they fear', 'we have struggled to where we are by living through a succession of tyrannies', or 'Zeus cannot sleep until he has planned the destruction and torture of a friend'. This meditation on 'the savagery and hollowness at the core of power' provides Lowell with the means of sounding the intense religious despair which underwrites his own work -

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<sup>14</sup> Phaedra, pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> The Oresteia of Aeschylus (USA: 1978) (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 117. As Frank Bidart's prefatory note on the latter indicates, the first two plays of the trilogy, 'Agamemnon' and 'Orestes', were written in the early 1960s, while 'The Furies' was begun at the same time and redrafted in 1976-77.

as when Prometheus describes 'a power so empty, so tireless and so cruel, it could only come from God'.<sup>16</sup>

Lowell finds in the speeches of Prometheus a diagnosis of tyranny that is not only political, but also theological and psychological:

Zeus had to make nothing of me, so that he himself could be everything. That's the law and disease of tyrants - they are more sensitive than we are ... If a friend makes a slip, they see a traitor. But is Zeus a tyrant? I'm not sure. He cut through things at first. Each god was given his place and function; no more overlapping offices. He was, and still is, I think, a good enough god for the gods. Man was what troubled him. [...] I have been punished. I thought I could move the world. Now the world moves, I stand here, another obstruction, another dark spot in the merciless perfection of Zeus. (PB, p. 10)

Prometheus's equivocal musings echo the cynical thoughts of Lowell's Endecott:

I now understand statecraft:  
a statesman can either work with merciless efficiency  
and leave a desert;  
or he can work in a hit-and-miss fashion,  
and leave a cesspool.<sup>17</sup>

The craft of poetry can be conceived of in similar ways: pursuit of aesthetic perfectionism, as Auden warned, will issue as poetic tyranny - but to compose 'in a hit-and-miss fashion' is to court the risk of producing a formless and banal pseudo-democratic art. This is a dilemma which has a peculiar applicability to Lowell's work, in particular the Notebooks. The work which precedes these volumes, collected

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<sup>16</sup> PB, pp. 59, 8, 7, 60, 47.

<sup>17</sup> These lines were added to the revised version of The Old Glory (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), p. 48. 'Endecott and the Red Cross' is the only one of the three plays to be changed for this republication. In his prefatory note, Lowell beguilingly claims that 'innumerable lines have been "improved" to be stronger, to be quieter, less in character, more in character'.

in For the Union Dead and Near the Ocean, also raises questions about how efficient the operations of the poet's mind are, or ought to be. In these, Lowell considers the relations and differences between ruthless perfectionism and arbitrary impulses. His interest in how society and the individual manifest creative and destructive energies is reflected in work which draws attention to the potential strengths and deficiencies of poetic expression. With little to choose between a desert of tyrannical precision and a cesspool of imprecise, unprioritized data, Lowell is forced to face up to the inevitable fact that words, like the deeds they record, always carry the potential to do harm.

6. 'Staring the Despot to Stone': 'For the Union Dead' (USA: 1964; UK: 1965) and 'Near the Ocean' (1967)

In a way which reflects ironically on his own practices as a translator, Lowell turns his attention in For the Union Dead to the distortions and adaptations to which past words and deeds may be subjected. This is given visual representation by the statues and effigies which throughout the volume bear witness to defunct power and ideals - as with the Shaw Memorial in the title poem - and to the means by which time and the imagination transfigure the past into untruth. The poems demonstrate how history can be defined, controlled and patterned according to one's will, but also how nostalgia, amnesia and recognition of loss contribute to the instability of recollection; the relation between power and impotence continues to underpin Lowell's observations.<sup>1</sup>

The poems of personal reminiscence which open the collection voice the desire to redress past wrongs, and reveal the futility of such desire; in 'The Old Flame', for instance, Lowell revisits the house of his broken first marriage (to the novelist Jean Stafford), but the reparative urge of his pilgrimage is mocked by the dubious restorations which the new occupants have brought about, with their fake martial trappings, their 'Atlantic seaboard antique shop / pewter and plunder' shining boldly in each room (FUD, p. 5). The banal replicas which adorn the house mirror the poet's own inability to restore the past in a meaningful way.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'Sloth' is Lowell's 'Tenth Muse' (FUD, p. 45). In 'A Conversation with Ian Hamilton' (1971), Lowell defined the volume as 'about witheredness' (LCP, pp. 267-90 (p. 287)).

<sup>2</sup> I discuss the draft versions of this poem (there are thirty-eight of them) on pp. 33-39 of 'Revision as Redress?'. The gains and losses of the revision process itself, and the

Loss, mortality and incapacitation are the predominant feelings associated with recollection in For the Union Dead, the focus on diminished power bringing with it a new level of wryness, at times even a tone of acceptance.

The social dimension emerges gradually. 'Eye and Tooth' uses the author's literal myopia as a means of meditating on warped political visions; as he surveys a garden-scene for comfort, his bloodshot eye in fact receives

No ease from the eye  
of the sharp-shinned hawk in the birdbrook there,  
with reddish brown buffalo hair  
on its shanks, one ascetic talon

clasping the abstract imperial sky.  
It says:  
*an eye for an eye,  
a tooth for a tooth.* (FUD, p. 19)<sup>3</sup>

Resembling the eagle of imperialism (Roman or American?), the hawk stands for an ethics of revenge; its Old Testament motto is the law of tyrant and tyrannicide.<sup>4</sup> That word 'abstract', perhaps indicating the impersonal procedures through which state persecutions come about, at the same time also highlights the fact that the poet is here wilfully converting image into symbol - that there is a reciprocity between the 'tyrannous eye' of the hawk and the poet's own eye which paints the world blood-red.

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appropriation of Jean Stafford's 'A Country Love Story' (1945) as material for the poem, suggest other interesting angles for approaching Lowell's theme of distortion. On this point, see also 'The Severed Head' (FUD, p. 53), in which blood-red ink revisions haunt the poet's guilty subconscious thoughts.

<sup>3</sup> Compare 'The Flaw' (NBN, p. 137), in which Lowell's eye-flaw is taken to be part of God's dark design. See also the revised reprintings (NB, p. 228; HIS, p. 177).

<sup>4</sup> A brass eagle is among the nationalistic trappings of the domicile described in draft versions of 'The Old Flame'; see 'Revision as Redress?', p. 36.

For the Union Dead is a collection of painful, motive-searching poems. Lowell contemplates how the here-and-now attitudes of the private individual are related to matters of historical and public concern. 'Florence' provides a peculiarly complex instance of this (FUD, p. 13). In this poem, Lowell elliptically alludes to the Italian city's turbulent history of political and religious feuds, uprisings and purges, and contemplates how one ideology after another has subjected history to revision and manipulation. As a detached, voyeuristic tourist, and more particularly as a pattern-seeking poet, Lowell risks engagement in the same enterprise. He describes his ambivalent response to the city, dubbing it 'patroness / of the lovely tyrannicides [*sic*] [...] Perseus, David and Judith'. The three Renaissance statues in the Piazza della Signoria which he beholds are effigies of the apocryphal patriotic youths who slew, respectively, Medusa, Goliath and Holofernes.<sup>5</sup> They are tyrant-killers, but Lowell chooses to see them as 'lords and ladies of the Blood', oppressors themselves, and voices the impulse to 'pity the monsters' instead.<sup>6</sup> He challenges the very authority of statues, as if turning legend into stone is itself a tyrannical act.

Gabriel Pearson has commented on this link between 'tyranny and petrification':

Lowell knows the dangers of the militant, the statuesque, the architectural. [...] In 'Florence'

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<sup>5</sup> The respective sculptors are Cellini, Michelangelo and Donatello.

<sup>6</sup> In his book Pity the Monsters, Alan Williamson convincingly links the decapitation motif of the poem to castration-fear, reading 'Florence' in the light of Freudian ideas on sublimation and projection (pp. 97-99).

Lowell comes out for the monsters [...] against the militant Davids and Judiths, those tyrannicides who exploit and destroy them. He demonstrates how they can become agents of the corruption they should resist.<sup>7</sup>

The poem itself enacts a tyrannicidal gesture against the conventional heroes in its closing lines, when Lowell contemplates the fate of the Gorgon Medusa:

Wall-eyed, staring the despot to stone,  
her severed head swung  
like a lantern in the victor's hand.

Lowell's imagination thrives on the paradox that Perseus, conqueror of the monster who had the power to petrify, is himself now turned to stone; history has complicated the distinction between victor and vanquished. Each a despot in Lowell's vision, Perseus and Medusa finally conspire in the poem's closing conceit: the severed head held like a lantern in the hand unites the tyrant and the tyrannicide with Lucifer.<sup>8</sup>

Identification with the tyrant is most pronounced in the poem 'Caligula' (FUD, p. 49). Here, Lowell imagines the last night of the Roman despot from whom he derived his childhood nickname.<sup>9</sup>

You stare down hallways, mile on stoney mile,  
where statues of the gods return your smile.  
Why did you smash their heads and give them yours?

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Middle Years', p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> With the same spirit of pity for the monsters, Lowell invokes Lucifer in 'Going to and fro' (FUD, p. 30). In 'Myopia: a Night', the transformation of Satan into a serpent is described in a spirit of perverse regret (p. 32).

<sup>9</sup> See Hamilton, pp. 19-20. Lowell retained the nickname 'Cal' throughout his life; it signified 'part Caligula and part Caliban' (p. 20), but the tyrant-association soon became the predominant one.

A return to regular couplets for this poem befits Lowell's descriptions of the tyrant's fanatical drive for perfectionism.<sup>10</sup> Caligula inhabits 'a solipsistic mental world, directionless yet hyperactive', constantly scheming self-promotion and the destruction of all potential opposition.<sup>11</sup> To this end, he refashions the world in his own image. With a stony glare, he petrifies the gods who rival him, much as he terrorizes his subjects; the domain he surveys is one of immobile statues - all constrained to return their ruler's untrustworthy smile.

As in 'Florence', the reciprocity between monster and statue is related to the notion of decapitation - a metaphorical way of conveying how the tyrant truncates history. The part of the past which Caligula is most anxious to kill is his own personal history - and this is true of Lowell too: in the process of reliving Caligula's life, he knows that he faces his own 'lowest depths of possibility' (FUD, p. 49). In Williamson's words, the poem recreates 'an excluded child's feelings that he does not really have, that others will not allow him, an identity; having been forced to be nothing, he must be all'.<sup>12</sup> The child's dreams of dominion, and the victim-complex which creates the victimizer are Caligula's traits and also Lowell's. The poet fashions himself in the tyrant's image and fashions the tyrant in his own image; by giving the

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<sup>10</sup> In the Notebook and History versions, 'Caligula' is reduced to a sonnet (with looser rhyme arrangements); see p. 106, note 9 above for page references.

<sup>11</sup> Williamson, p. 100.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 101.

statues of the gods his own face, Caligula, 'the aesthetically conscious tyrant', projects his own and eradicates all others' identities, and the poet participates in this by giving Caligula his face in turn.<sup>13</sup>

The adopted savagery is ultimately self-directed - although, as Lowell is acutely aware, this does not mitigate whatever misdeeds his words may both record and enact. Nor is there any hope of breaking the bloody cycles of history he envisages. At the same time as he inculpates himself for perpetuating barbarities by the very exercise of his art, Lowell also diagnoses this condition as an ineradicable social complaint. 'July in Washington', for instance, describes how the individual's solipsistic pursuit of gratification is a passive form of consent to and furtherance of cultural decadence (FUD, p. 58). The inexorable exertion of America's expansionist drive described in the poem's opening couplet ('The stiff spokes of this wheel / touch the sore spots of the earth') is seen to come about precisely because of a surrender of will on the part of American citizens. The unremitting cyclical vision suggested by the image of the wheel is returned to at the end of the title-poem - and the end of the volume:

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,  
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;  
a savage servility  
slides by on grease. (FUD, p. 72)

The replacement of artifice with nature in the modern industrialized state which 'For the Union Dead' portrays is something which each citizen is seen to conspire in. To be a subject and yet 'savage' implies connivance with the very

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

forces that enslave the individual; if the state is a cold monster, a mechanized Leviathan, then its servants are those sycophants who keep its body greased.

Lowell's subsequent verse collection, Near the Ocean, pursues the idea of passive connivance further. The volume is centrally concerned with pointless misdirections of energy, with the escapist fantasies and dubiously heroic strivings which end in defeatism and surrender to control from above. Thus the opening poem, 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', begins by considering 'the criminal leisure of a boy', as he entertains idle thoughts driven by sexual impulse and an undefined will-to-power, and extends into a catalogue of enterprises marked by the misdirection of dammed-up aggressive energy.<sup>14</sup>

'Restlessness, / excess, the hunger for success': these impulses inexorably 'break loose' in the world as warfare and political corruption:

Hammering military splendor,  
top-heavy Goliath in full armor -  
little redemption in the mass  
liquidations of their brass,  
elephant and phalanx moving  
with the times and still improving,  
when that kingdom hit the crash:  
a million foreskins stacked like trash ... (NTO, p. 15)

These lines assault the reader both with the crudity of the language employed and with the defiant complexity of reference. The stanza overlays references to a number of historical events and scenarios: a fallible, Goliath-like display of American might (as in Vietnam), the 'mass liquidations' of the Jews in the Holocaust, the use of

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<sup>14</sup> On the working of this poem through forty-one draft versions, see 'Revision as Redress?', pp. 39-41.

elephants in eastern warfare, an ancient Greek or Macedonian battle-formation of hoplites ('phalanx'), and Jacob's slaughter of the circumcised Shechemites (Genesis 34). Thus conflated, the allusions present a fatalistic view of history as an inexorable succession of pogroms.<sup>15</sup>

'Anywhere, but somewhere else!' is a refrain in the poem, Lowell's imagination rushing from one historical scenario to another as if in search of some lost ideal which in fact has never existed. The present offers no cause for optimism either; Lowell describes

the President  
girdled by his establishment  
this Sunday morning, free to chaff  
his own thoughts with his bear-cuffed staff,  
swimming nude, unbuttoned, sick  
of his ghost-written rhetoric!

The ghosts of history have already scripted the rhetoric which will inevitably bring violence, even if Lyndon Johnson might wish that this were not so. Surrounded by his military establishment, the freedom the President has to bandy words in this macho (and vaguely homo-erotic) environment is only illusory; like all figures in the poem, he cannot 'break loose' from his allotted role.

This is not polemical poetry: it gives voice not so much to political engagement as to an overwhelming sense of disengagement. Despite what Blair Clark called the 'high-level cultural publicism'<sup>16</sup> of his letter to Johnson,

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<sup>15</sup> Helen Vendler argues that the line 'a million foreskins stacked like trash' 'represents a perilous return to a tone of dismissive brutality that was one of Lowell's earlier staples for scenes of historical violence'; see 'Robert Lowell and History', in The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), pp. 1-28 (p. 18).

<sup>16</sup> Hamilton, p. 323.

Lowell did not take up in his verse the possibilities of the angry, New Left stance and remained apart from the mid-sixties context of bardic, political protest poetry.<sup>17</sup> His affinity was more with the Russian poet Andrei Voznesensky whom he introduced at a 1967 reading than with, say, Ginsberg:

His voice has rung around the world. We are glad that what makes it carry is the difficult mastery of his art, and not a message. We are glad that he has not come here to convert us, glad that he has protested and been in trouble with his government, and glad too that this protest was complicated, obscure, and human.

(LCP, pp. 119-20)

Near the Ocean provides a series of 'complicated, obscure, and human' meditations on destructive energies. There are moments of relatively direct commentary, as when Americans are described as 'world-losers elsewhere, conquerors here' in 'Fourth of July in Maine' (NTO, p. 17), but the historical observations on how a Puritan 'theocracy / drove in its stakes here to command / the infinite' are obscurely linked to the poem's wry reflections on the domestic reign of terror instituted by Lowell's elderly cousin Harriet:

cousins kept up with, nipped, corrected,  
kindly, majorfully directed,  
though family furniture, decor,  
and rooms redone meant almost more.

The Terrible Mother conceit recurs in the volume's title poem (NTO, p. 25), an esoteric reverie 'both vengeful

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<sup>17</sup> For Lowell's letter to the President, refusing an invitation to the White House Festival of the Arts in 1965, see Hamilton, pp. 321-22 or LCP, pp. 370-01. Breslin has noted how in 'Waking Early Sunday Morning', 'unlike Bly and Duncan, who around the same time were depicting Johnson as an inhuman monster, Lowell resists the temptation to easy villification [sic]' (p. 79).

and apologetic'.<sup>18</sup> In a series of nightmare vignettes expressive of sexual disgust and aggression, Perseus faces Medusa, Orestes Clytemnestra, and Adam Eve, as parallels for how a contemporary couple confront each other's true, monstrous nature. Power fantasies and the fear that kills them off (specifically a sexual fear) clash like tyrant and tyrannicide, as is suggested in the bleak oceanic imagery:

We hear the ocean. Older seas  
and deserts give asylum, peace  
to each abortion and mistake.  
Lost in the Near Eastern dreck,  
the tyrant and tyrannicide  
lie like the bridegroom and the bride;  
the battering ram, abandoned, prone,  
beside the apeman's phallic stone.<sup>19</sup>

That questionable sense of 'peace' which the ocean is said to bring feels in the context more like battle-fatigue. This is a sea of self-abnegation in which destructive and self-destructive modern lovers wish to drown themselves, their urges as primitive and solipsistic as those of their earliest descendants.

The sexual drive and the death-instinct are innately connected also in the poem 'Central Park' (NTO, p. 23). Pursuit of physical gratification and materialist goals impels New York's underclass to escape 'the stain of fear and poverty', while the wealthy entertain fantasies of omnipotence and violence from the sanctuary of their exotic apartments:

Old Pharaohs starving in your foxholes,  
with painted banquets on the walls,

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<sup>18</sup> Hamilton, p. 330.

<sup>19</sup> In the notes to Robert Lowell's Poems: A Selection (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), Jonathan Raban suggests that 'Near Eastern dreck' might be an allusion to the Arab-Israeli conflict (p. 178).

fists knotted in your captives' hair,  
 tyrants with little food to spare -  
 all your embalming left you mortal,  
 glazed, black, and hideously eternal,  
 all your plunder and gold leaf  
 only served to draw the thief ...

We beg delinquents for our life.  
 Behind each bush, perhaps a knife;  
 each landscaped crag, each flowering shrub,  
 hides a policeman with a club.<sup>20</sup>

The crude, facile closing quatrain makes explicit the overt way in which the wealthy are dependent on the poor as the measure of their material ascendancy, while it is equally clear that the plush New York apartment is nothing more than an ornate tomb, or indeed an animal's earth-hole, and that the rich incite, and are excited by, the very violence which they elaborately guard themselves against.<sup>21</sup>

Over half of Near the Ocean comprises translations - of Horace, Juvenal, Dante, and the Spanish poets Quevedo and Góngora. A note at the start of the volume explains that the theme connecting these translations is 'Rome, the greatness and horror of her Empire', though Lowell also throws out the disarming, possibly disingenuous claim, 'How one jumps from Rome to the America of my own poems is something of a mystery to me'. In fact, there is an evident and deliberately pursued connection between the decline of ancient Rome and that of modern America, the two

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<sup>20</sup> Compare Lowell's version of Juvenal's tenth satire, 'The Vanity of Human Wishes': 'If you take a walk at night, / carrying a little silver, be prepared / to think each shadow hides a knife or spear' (NTO, p. 35).

<sup>21</sup> Alan Williamson observes how 'the Egyptian imagery springs from the surroundings, Cleopatra's Needle and the Metropolitan Museum, but it is stunningly appropriate, both to the architecture of Fifth Avenue and to an imperial nation with extremes of wealth and poverty and an overextended foreign policy' (p. 142).

civilizations sharing 'the same imperial urge for dissipation and extinction'.<sup>22</sup> The translations collectively convey an impression of Roman history as a pageant of tyrannies, toppled and re-established in inexorable succession. Each gesture of cultural expansionism or individual self-aggrandizement within the empire is undercut by the sentiment of Horace that 'the brief sum of life forbids / our opening any long account with hope' ('Spring', NTQ, p. 30).

Self-advancement brings self-destruction, and all tyrants are ultimately self-tyrannizers:

Devoured by peace, we seek devouring war,  
 the orator is drowned by his torrential speech,  
 the gladiator's murdered by his skill  
 at murder.  
 ('The Vanity of Human Wishes', NTQ, p. 35)

One world was much too small for Alexander,  
 racing to gain the limits of the globe,  
 as if he were a circling charioteer.  
 (ibid., p. 41)

The whistling arrow flies less eagerly,  
 and bites the bull's-eye less ferociously;  
 the Roman chariot grinds less hurriedly  
 the arena's docile sand, and rounds the goal ...  
 How silently, how privately, we run  
 through life to die!  
 ('The Ruins of Time', p. 54)

The conceit of circling in the arena aptly expresses Lowell's cyclical vision of history, and his view of all human activity as like that of 'a ghost / orbiting forever lost / in our monotonous sublime' ('Waking Early Sunday

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<sup>22</sup> Jay Martin, 'Robert Lowell', in Seven American Poets from MacLeish to Nemerov: An Introduction, ed. by Denis Donoghue (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), pp. 209-49 (p. 239). In the course of an article on William Carlos Williams (1948), Lowell wrote: 'For good or for evil, America is something immense, crass, and Roman. We must unavoidably place ourselves in our geography, history, civilization, institutions, and future' (LCP, pp. 33-36 (p. 35); see also LCP, p. 253).

Morning', NTO, p. 16). It is in the human condition to long for the might of a Tiberius, say, but any such increase in power is matched by an increase in vulnerability:

Surely you'd like to have his lances, cohorts,  
 blue-blooded knights and army corps of slaves.  
 Why not, friend? Even if you never wished  
 to murder, you would like to have the power.  
 But would you want to glitter and rise this high,  
 if ruin's counterweight must crush your life?  
 ('The Vanity of Human Wishes', p. 38)

Lowell's message finds epigrammatic force via the authority of his literary predecessors: the grim and inevitable redress to all forms of self-empowerment is provided by 'ruin's counterweight'.

Self-defeat is the predominant theme of Lowell's work subsequent to Near the Ocean. It also in a sense defines his method: a preoccupation with forces which invite their own collapse is matched by a poetic method which flaunts its own vulnerability. Lowell displays an on-the-jot provisionality in the Notebooks, and makes an open exhibition of his rethinking through the publication of revised work. There is a double-edged effect of untrustworthiness and honesty, of self-aggrandizement and self-inculpation, in the poet's procedures. This new work invites questions which are crucial but problematic: is Lowell's historical vision too arbitrary or too contrived? Does the art devalue its subject? Does revision issue as a form of tyrannical presumption, or does it provide a means of compositional redress?

7. 'Some Injured Tyrant's Home': The 'Notebook' Volumes, 'History' and 'For Lizzie and Harriet'

Notebook 1967-68 and the revised 1970 British edition, simply entitled Notebook, plus the publications in 1973, History and For Lizzie and Harriet, contain different versions of largely similar poems, revised, regrouped, and transposed between the collections.<sup>1</sup> One poem which appears in three of these four volumes is 'New Year's Eve 1968'. In this composition, Lowell turns his attention away from the bloody pageants of history with which so many of the poems are concerned and considers his own artistry:

These conquered kings pass angrily away;  
the gods die flesh and spirit and last in print,  
each library is some injured tyrant's home.  
This year runs out in the movies, it must be written  
in bad, straightforward, unscanning sentences.  
(NBN, p. 102)<sup>2</sup>

Lowell observes how tyrants, kings who make gods of themselves, are granted immortality by the annals of history

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<sup>1</sup> Notebook 1967-68 was published in New York by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in May 1969 and (with revisions) in July of the same year; my citations are from this second edition. The 1970 edition of Notebook (London: Faber and Faber) contains more than ninety new poems, while about one hundred from the previous volume appear in altered form. History and For Lizzie and Harriet (London: Faber and Faber, 1973) (arguably) separate out the historical and personal poems into respective volumes and most of the poems are subject to further revisions for these books. Unlike the other collections, History is not divided into sequences of poems. The acute difficulty of marking the dividing line between a revised poem and a new composition is addressed in the appendix to Yenser, pp. 325-27; Yenser usefully attempts to tabulate here the Notebook-to-History alterations.

<sup>2</sup> In Notebook 1967-68, this is the thirteenth and final poem of a sequence on tyrants called 'Power'. The sequence, retitled 'The Powerful', is extended to twenty-two poems in the 1970 Notebook, and concludes with a revised version of 'New Year's Eve 1968' (p. 172). Retitled 'End of a Year', this piece then becomes the final poem in History (p. 207), and is subject to further changes - as witnessed, for instance, by the line, 'each library a misquoted tyrant's home' (my underlining).

- and, it is implied, by the poet who acts as their chronicler. With his characteristic pity for monsters, Lowell focuses on the injuries sustained by the tyrant, not by those whom the tyrant inflicts; the injury Lowell refers to might indicate both the despot's self-tormented mind and the way in which history has made false divisions between good and bad characters. In a sense, Lowell attempts to offer poetic redress, on behalf of the tyrant rather than the tyrannized, through the rehabilitation offered by his printed words. At the same time, he acknowledges that the art by which he means to effect this is inadequate to the task of historical restitution. Lowell knows his own poetry to be crude and ephemeral - 'written / in bad, straightforward, unscanning sentences'. Like a movie, it risks falling prey to the very danger that it warns against: of distorting complex personalities into heroes and villains. Whatever fame his words offer these characters is unlikely to endure.

The poem ends with an image of the sky as a 'carbon scarred with ciphers', conflating ideas about the damage inflicted by the poet on the world about him and the damage he inflicts on the page. The work of these volumes makes a flagrant exhibition of the dangers and deficiencies to which it is prone: the products of arbitrary whim, Lowell's poems participate in the lawlessness they describe, with their wild associative leaps, anarchic energies and wanton disregard of formal or verbal proprieties. Moreover, Lowell takes pleasure in employing violent language to describe barbaric impulses and scenarios, and he indulges the prurient, predatory, obsessive side of his imagination to an

unprecedented degree in this work. Throughout the poems, artistic expression is recognized to be a form of violence: the slashing of initials across a desk, the imagined screaming of a sheet of paper, the stroke of a brush that severs, the word that acts as Cato's sword. Lowell evidently considers himself akin to the artist whom he describes in one poem, 'at his vague, dreamlike trade of blood and guile'.<sup>3</sup>

History is subject to violent distortion by tyrant and poet alike. Lowell's interest in oppressors has more to do with how they perceive the world, and how they are perceived, than with the consequences of their misuse of power. Breslin makes a similar point when he observes how

violence, for Lowell, is more commonly an expression of megalomania than of repression. The great figures of history have, like the poet who chronicles them, an 'outrageous eye'. They place themselves, gigantic, at the center, and see everything and everyone else as insignificant.

The link between the poet's 'outrageous eye' and the 'tyrannous eye' which Emerson called for is made more explicit when Breslin goes on to comment how, 'like Emerson's poet, Lowell's conqueror stands at the center. He reduces all he sees to raw material for the realization of his will'.<sup>4</sup>

The tyrannical impulse is an omnipresent force; it is innate in any desire to shape, own or define. In 'The Diamond Cutters', for instance, Lowell describes the craft

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<sup>3</sup> 'Searchings 1' (NBN, p. 13), 'Onion Skin' (p. 18), 'The Muse, 2. The Muses of George Grosz' (p. 23), 'Names, 2. Marcus Cato the Younger' (p. 41), 'Ice on the Hudson, 2' (p. 77).

<sup>4</sup> Breslin, pp. 85-86. Lowell refers to his 'outrageous eye' in the poem 'Man and Woman' (HIS, p. 24).

of making jewellery, and the associations of diamonds with imperialist plunder, while at the same time implicitly reflecting on the art of poetry:

all was in essence, rare and hard and bright. [...]
   
[...] no one can avoid the thoughts of man:
   
mason's chisel on the throat of a stone. ...
   
(NBN, p. 115)<sup>5</sup>

As Williamson observes, the poem describes the 'violence implicit in the creation of value'; he notes how in Lowell's vision 'the impulse to shape and perfect now appears murderous, an outlet for innate human aggressiveness'.<sup>6</sup>

Lowell's perspective is expressly shaped by the violent history-in-the-making which he compiles from the data all around him. The America of the late 1960s provides a context of aggressive foreign policy, racism, police brutality, and other forms of control from above which are matched by often reciprocally violent forms of resistance from below: uprisings, occupations, protest marches and assassinations. Lowell registers the heady assault of the present, drawing copious and often indiscriminate parallels with violent historical episodes; what results might be described as historical amnesia, brought on by an excess awareness of the past.<sup>7</sup> Despite the bulk of Lowell's work, and the breadth of his vision, beneath it all inertia and ennui assert their governance. Thanatos, the universal

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<sup>5</sup> A slightly altered version of the poem appears on p. 193 of Notebook, while a more significantly revised version ('Diamond Cutters') is to be found in History on p. 167.

<sup>6</sup> Williamson, p. 182.

<sup>7</sup> Notebook 1967-68 and Notebook even conclude with a list of newly historical events, set down out of the professed anxiety that 'dates fade faster than we do' (NBN, p. 161; NB, p. 265).

death-drive, is the guardian spirit of Lowell's poetry: 'the only satisfactory companion we / can imagine is death'; 'it's better to have lived, than live'; 'Dying without death is a life in the city'. In this new body of work, Lowell intensifies his preoccupation with 'the horrifying mortmain of / ephemera'.<sup>8</sup>

His poetic imagination is socialized but at the same time solipsistic; this is a reflection of the incapacitation, desolation and exhaustion which he diagnoses in the subjects of his verse. The inconsequentiality and directionlessness of peoples' lives, as well as their ceaseless and unsatisfied impulses to exert control, are reflected by the poetic procedures of the Notebook volumes and their offshoots. One could play this two ways, claiming either that Lowell manages to be commendably non-judgemental (and non-partisan) in his observations (and that he exposes the fallibility of his methods in order to highlight this), or that his art merits condemnation by participating in the deficiencies it catalogues. I find it difficult to take one side or the other on this matter. What I offer here is a balance of conflicting arguments about Lowell's achievement in these books.

It is a vexed issue whether or not Lowell's poems carry an inbuilt resistance to their own callousness. Helen Vendler has described them as 'exempt from the tyranny of

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<sup>8</sup> 'April 8, 1968, 1. Two Walls' (NBN, p. 87), 'Power, 6. Bosworth Field' (p. 98), 'May, 8. The Dissenting Academy' (p. 112), 'Harriet, 2' (p. 3).

the well-made'.<sup>9</sup> Her words bring to mind William Carlos Williams's call for a breakdown of verse tyrannies. Williams was fervent in championing the dynamic energy of the spoken word and phrase, and in challenging the domination of syntax, rhyme and metre. The social implications of such revolutions in poetic practice are for him fundamental:

Poetry is a rival government always in opposition to its cruder replicas. [...] This is [the artist's] work. Nothing poetic in the feudal, aristocratic sense but a breaking down, rather of those imposed tyrannies over his verse forms. Technical matters, certainly, but most important to an understanding of the poet as a social regenerator.<sup>10</sup>

Tyranny, as Williams conceives of it, manifests itself in predetermined form: it calls for retaliatory redress, for a resistant counter-action which is as disruptive, arrogant, and uncompromising as the forces in poetry which it opposes. Williams's own revolutionary poetics defines itself antagonistically against that of another: the 'feudal, aristocratic' tendencies which Williams sets out to challenge are specifically those embodied in Eliot's preoccupations with literary tradition. His view of the Modernist phenomenon was that it had been involved in 're-establishing the tyrannies of the past, the very tyrannies we are seeking to diminish'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Helen Vendler, 'Robert Lowell: Pudding Stone', Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 152-61 (p.158).

<sup>10</sup> 'The Basis of Faith in Art' (1937?), in Selected Essays (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 175-95 (pp. 180, 194).

<sup>11</sup> 'Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist', *ibid.*, pp. 196-218 (p. 218).

In some ways, Lowell has vandalized the sonnet just as Williams advocated, his fourteen-liners being, in general, prosy, undisciplined and unrhymed affairs. However, in Lowell's case these breaches of formal convention are hardly accompanied by Williams's consequent idea of the poet as a social regenerator.<sup>12</sup>

What, then, is the effect of Lowell's recklessness in form and language? Frances Ferguson has argued that each sonnet possesses a cruel brevity which risks minimalizing and 'rushing its subject out of existence'.<sup>13</sup> This is true, to take an example, of the poem 'Deutschland über Alles':

Hitler, though we laugh, gave them the start,  
the step forward, one had to give them that:  
the Duce's, 'Once they start marching, they'll never  
stop.'

Joy in the introversion of loneliness,  
the silver reichsmark quivering to the heel,  
the knights corrupted by their purity,  
made wilder by the wildness of the woodcut -  
his eyes were glowing coals, the world turned dark,  
the horde, on stopwatch, asked for earth and water,  
settled for *lebensraum*, then *lebensraum*:  
spaces, a space, the night astride the eyetooth.  
Who will contest the conqueror his dirt,  
spaces enough to bury what they left,

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<sup>12</sup> In his interview with Ian Hamilton (1971), Lowell described his customized sonnet as 'a measure blocked out a priori, then coaxed into form'; he said that he was aiming for 'the squeeze of the sonnet and the loose ravel of blank verse' (LCP, pp. 271-72). In the 'Afterthought' to each Notebook, he expresses the fear that he has 'failed to avoid the themes and gigantism of the sonnet' (NBN, p. 160; NB, p. 263). Lowell doubtless learned much for his Notebook technique from the example of Williams's Paterson, with its collage of letters, documents, prose, history and gossip, and also from the unrhymed sonnets and anti-rhetorical rhetoric of Berryman's Dream Songs. For Lowell's poetic homages to these authors, see NBN, pp. 73, 151, NB, pp. 121, 255, HIS, pp. 142, 203.

<sup>13</sup> ' "Appointments with Time": Robert Lowell's Poetry through the Notebooks', in Bloom, Robert Lowell, pp. 59-72 (p. 71).

the six million Jews gassed in the space to breathe?  
(NBN, p. 30)<sup>14</sup>

My initial reaction is to suspect that the poem is far too at ease with its incendiary subject-matter, but Lowell's obscurity forestalls a definitive declaration of this view; or is it that the poem is simply unnecessarily complex, while at the same time being unjustifiably reductive? The interpretative problems are certainly significant: how is one to know to whom Lowell is referring when he uses 'them', 'they' and 'their' through the poem?; indeed, is there any consistency in these references? Why are Hitler and Mussolini equated in the way that they are? What is the context behind the quoted words? What particular woodcut image does Lowell have in mind?

While these and other questions remain unsolved, it is hard to know what to make of the verbal ambiguities there to be detected. For instance, the first line might indicate giving people a start by shocking them (as Hitler shocked his enemies) or else by encouraging them (as he did sympathetic Germans), while the 'step forward' might signify either genuine progress or a military goosestep. One can see Lowell's compact ingenuity in using the image of the 'eyetooth'; it is denotative of the predator's canine and suggestive of the primitive revenge ethic, 'an eye for an

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<sup>14</sup> In the 1970 Notebook version, the word 'quivering' on line five is replaced with 'sticking' (NB, p. 58). In History, the line 'joy in the introversion of loneliness' is transposed from line four to line eleven, 'the world turned dark' becomes 'a world gone dark', 'the night astride the eyetooth' becomes a 'knight' and, in the penultimate line, 'they' becomes 'he' (HIS, p. 129). On Lowell's apologetics for Hitler as a sign of his impending mania, see Hamilton, pp. 204, 209-12. See also Lowell's version of Montale's 'Hitlerian Spring' (IM, pp. 113-14).

eye and a tooth for a tooth'. Yet I feel that there is little more than linguistic ingenuity at work here, and when in the final line Lowell makes a cruel play with words ('space to breathe' as 'breathing space'), the potential for adequate response is in grave jeopardy.<sup>15</sup>

A redressive counter-argument might be summarized as follows: history is a sick joke one cannot comprehend. Hitler is frequently treated as an object of ridicule because the only way one can cope with the evil he epitomizes is by reducing it to an unbelievable farce. The callousness of Lowell's humour, and the brevity of his poem, is a parody of fascistic ruthlessness and also a reflection on our readiness to simplify and demonize (as in 'the eyes were glowing coals'). The poem's disrespectful tone is directed towards the tyrant in order to 'enact a partial liberation'<sup>16</sup> from him; the debunking of Hitler means that he can exert no force of charisma in the poem. This is a plausible interpretation, but it does not mitigate the irreverence of the poem's curt final line. Nor does it alter the fact that, through his strategies of obliquity, Lowell dodges the charge that his poem is not respectful or even insightful enough with regard to its subject-matter. The dismissive shrug which debunks the *Übermenschen* also devalues the suffering of their victims.

This problem comes down to Lowell's inability to believe in his art as a medium for redress. It corresponds

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<sup>15</sup> The insistent emphasis on space-filling after the reference to Germany's desire for '*lebensraum*' (literally 'living space') invites attention to the poet's own omnivorous procedures in the Notebook and History volumes.

<sup>16</sup> Williamson, p. 198.

with his view that all endeavours to achieve reform have results as invidious as those perpetrated by tyrants. Social pessimism of this kind underwrites the poem 'Leader of the Left':

His voice, electric, was a low current whir;  
by now he'd bypassed sense and even eloquence;  
without listening, the audience understood;  
anticipating the sentence, they too swayed  
to the predestined poignance of his murder,  
his Machiavellian Utopia of pure nerve.

(NBN, p. 110)<sup>17</sup>

In Lowell's world-view, any political redress being sought inevitably invites a birth of violent change. Moreover, the aggressive gesture is ultimately self-directed since the demagogic rhetorician, with the crowd's encouragement, is sealing his own doom. In this sense, the 'Leader of the Left' is aligned with Lowell's tyrannicides, with the newly martyred revolutionary saint, Che Guevara (p. 26), for instance, or Marcus Cato the Younger, a tyrannicide with a 'lost cause' (p. 41).

Lowell is unable to believe in either authority or rebellion. Solipsism governs his work, precisely as it guides the behaviour of all those whom he observes. However, some forms of solipsism are less destructive than others, as he notes in the poem 'Bishop Berkeley':

The Bishop's solipsism is clerical,  
no one was much imperiled by his life,  
except he sailed to New England and was Irish,  
he wasn't an Attila or Rimbaud  
driven to unhook his skull to crack the world.  
He lived with quality, and thought the world  
was only perceptions that he could perceive....  
In Mexico, I too caused my private earthquake,

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<sup>17</sup> Breslin suggests that the poem's protagonist is 'Mark Rudd, the most prominent activist leader of the Columbia student strike in 1968' (p. 89). In the revised, 1970 Notebook version, 'swayed / to' becomes 'stood / for' (p. 185); it is changed again to 'accept' in History (p. 150).

and made the earth tremble in the soles of my feet;  
 a local insurrection of my blood,  
 its river system saying: I am I,  
 I am Whitman, I am Berkeley, all men -  
 calming my feet in a tub of lukewarm water;  
 the water that scalded one foot froze the other.

(HIS, p. 72)<sup>18</sup>

With characteristic audacity and bewildering rapidity, Lowell distinguishes the safely 'clerical' solipsistic philosophy propounded by the eighteenth-century Irish theologian George Berkeley from the dangerously solipsistic behaviour of 'an Attila or Rimbaud' - an archetypal conqueror and rebel-poet respectively.<sup>19</sup> Lowell then jumps to the violations he feels himself to have perpetrated in an illicit love-affair. The pursuit of pleasure at the expense of others' pain aligns the private man's transgressions with the actions of a tyrant, just as these are linked to the projects of a visionary poet. Compounding the complexity of reference, Lowell finally brings in Whitman too, perhaps seeing in 'Song of Myself' another variant of the solipsistic or narcissistic impulse, the potentially destructive egomania to which poets and tyrants alike are susceptible.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> I have quoted this time from History because of the word 'solipsism' in line 1, which is a replacement for the word 'nihilism' given in versions of the poem printed in Notebook 1967-68 (p. 100) and Notebook (p. 168). In those earlier versions, Newport, not New England, is the location mentioned in line 3, and there are several other significant differences of phrasing; for instance 'I am I' in line 11 formerly read, 'I am weak'.

<sup>19</sup> In the essay 'Narcissus as Narcissus', Tate writes, 'as for solipsism, I blush in the presence of philosophers, who know all about Bishop Berkeley; I use the term here in its strict etymology' (p. 596).

<sup>20</sup> See Breslin, pp. 60-62 for an illuminating critique of this difficult poem. He notes how the 'private earthquake' is probably a reference to the love-affair chronicled in the 'Mexico' sequence (NBN, pp. 58-63; NB, pp. 101-07, For Lizzie

The problem of responding to rapid shifts of idea and image within individual poems of the Notebook volumes is compounded by the need to make sense of Lowell's compulsive regroupings and alterations. In a postscript to the revised edition of Notebook, Lowell offers a characteristically back-handed apology for all his tinkering<sup>21</sup> and tampering:

I [...] hold up a still target for the critic who knows that most second thoughts, when visible, are worse thoughts. I am sorry to ask anyone to buy this poem twice. I couldn't stop writing, and have handled my published book as if it were manuscript. (NE, p. 264).

There is an unsettling mixture of the contrite and the cavalier in asking the reader for such indulgence. With disarming candour, Lowell acknowledges an awareness of the key question one is forced to ask of these volumes, namely, to what extent is revision a form of redress, or how far should it rather be seen as an act of presumption?<sup>22</sup>

A test-case may be provided by two versions of a poem entitled 'Memorial Day'. The first is taken from Notebook 1967-68, where it occurs as the seventeenth and final part of a sequence of private and political poems under the heading 'May', and the second from the unsequenced History.

Sometimes I sink a thousand centuries,  
bone tired or stone asleep, to sleep ten seconds -  
voices, their future voices, adolescents,  
go crowding through the chilling open windows:  
fathomless profundities of inanimation.  
And we will be, then, and as they are here.  
But nothing will be put back right in time,

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and Harriet, pp. 30-34).

<sup>21</sup> Teri Witek characterizes Lowell as 'both tinkerer and wrecking crew', a 'chronic reviser', in Robert Lowell and 'Life Studies': Revising the Self (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 3, 8.

<sup>22</sup> My comments here are adapted from 'Revision as Redress?', pp. 41-44.

done over, thought through straight again - not my  
 father  
 revitalizing in a simple Rhineland spa,  
 Mussolini's misguiding roosterstep  
 in the war year, just before our War began....  
 Ah, ah, this house of twenty-foot apartments,  
 all the windows yawning - the voices of its tutees,  
 their fortissimo *Figaro*, sunk into dead brick.  
 (NBN, p. 117)<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes I sink a thousand centuries  
 bone tired then stone-asleep ... to sleep ten seconds -  
 voices, the music students, the future voices,  
 go crowding through the chilling open windows,  
 fathomless profundities of inanition:  
*I will be dead then as the dead die here ...*  
*dáda, dáda dáda dá dá.*  
 But nothing will be put back right in time,  
 done over, thought through straight for once - not my  
 father  
 revitalizing in a simple Rhineland spa,  
 to the beat of Hitler's misguiding roosterstep....  
 Ah, ah, this house of twenty-foot apartments,  
 all all windows, yawning - the voice of the student  
 singer's  
*Don Giovanni* fortissimo sunk in the dead brick.  
 (HIS, p. 206)

The sinking process referred to at the start and end of  
 either version is one of several means by which the language  
 of the poem serves as a commentary upon its methods. The  
 poem is the product of a slumbering, listless imagination,  
 an expression of oneiric ennui. In random snatches, the  
 passive poetic consciousness registers songs tried out by  
 music students in the exterior locale and inner wrestlings  
 with both his father's ill health and far wider social ills.  
 All these phantoms and phenomena are sunk in an  
 unprioritizing state of daydreaming consciousness; the

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<sup>23</sup> In the British edition of Notebook, 'Memorial Day' (p. 195) is identical in wording and lineation to the American printing, and in each book the poem concludes the sequence 'May'. However, in the London volume this sequence comprises twenty-four poems as opposed to the seventeen of the New York edition.

ellipses and dashes visually highlight the sense of arbitrary association.

Given the nature of the poem as thus purposively inchoate, it is perhaps to be expected that the alterations made to the wording should not solve or set anything in order. In some respects, there is an increase of clarity in the revised version - for instance, Lowell identifies the voices he hears as those of music students in the third line rather than, in the case of the first version, in the penultimate one. Lowell also emends the syntactically riddling phrase, 'And we will be, then, and as they are here', although the snatch of song he replaces it with knowingly verges on dadaist absurdity.

The poem reflects its creator's inability to put things back right, to 'think through straight' - either 'again' or 'once and for all'. It is unclear why Mussolini and Hitler are treated as interchangeable dictators, or why the nonchalant rogue from Mozart's The Marriage of Figaro (1786) is replaced by the doomed and arrogant hero-villain of the opera Don Giovanni (1787). Lowell's cryptic and captious procedures are highly questionable, particularly the splicing together of personal anecdote and international catastrophe as equally usable and disposable subjects for his verse. By assuming the immediate availability, and a reductive equivalence, of all experiences as little more than moveable components in the machinery of the poem (and an inefficient machinery at that), is he in fact indulging in his own form of bloody-minded and misguided (or

'misguiding'?) action akin to that of the authoritarians whose names he evokes?<sup>24</sup>

The charge is deflected by Lowell in an oblique way. Both within his poems and in the forewords and afterwords (or, as he nicely terms them, 'Afterthoughts') to these volumes, he openly acknowledges the poetic procedure to be 'opportunist and inspired by impulse' (NBN, p. 159), but makes a perverse defence out of his slapdash attitude towards the purpose and potential of the revising intelligence.<sup>25</sup> The impression he conveys is that individual alterations of wording are inherently less purposive since by their very nature they were always extemporaneous.

In the 'Mexico' sequence, Lowell wrote of 'one revelation healing the ravage of the other' ('Mexico, 3', NBN, p. 59).<sup>26</sup> It would be too simple to apply the phrase to Lowell's own practice in this poetry of perpetually displaced visions: there is little sense of 'healing' conveyed by the technique. Lowell's incessant conflations and alterations have, in the words of Christopher Ricks,

the power unexpectedly to make appalling and the power unexpectedly to make not appalling [...] But there is something monstrous about Lowell's behaviour as a poet in the matter of his

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<sup>24</sup> Hitler and Mussolini are connected elsewhere also, for instance in 'February and March, 9. Under the Screw' (NE, p. 135). The sequence entitled 'Power' or 'The Powerful' is particularly notable for conflating a multitude of tyrannical figures (NBN, pp. 96-102; NB, pp. 162-173).

<sup>25</sup> Compare 'My Death, 1': 'I must pay for these opportunist violations' (NBN, p. 78). The line reads, 'I must pay for this opportunist violation' on p. 129 of Notebook.

<sup>26</sup> The phrase is unchanged on p. 102 of Notebook and p. 130 of For Lizzie and Harriet.

marriages: the poems are well aware that they are assailable, and that monstrosity is part of them. To do harm (be nocent) and yet be innocent - there is something frostily fearful about it [...] there is a frightening blank, where we should expect indignation to be, in Lowell's relation to his monsters.<sup>27</sup>

There is also a 'frightening blank' in relation to the victims of Lowell's monsters. Moreover, it is not just the marriage of one tyrant with another that unsettles the reader; the poems allude as well to the injuries inflicted and sustained in Lowell's own marriages and friendships. Throughout the Notebook volumes and their offshoots, personal relationships are constantly felt to be endangered, as in the poem 'Long Summer, 1':

something inhuman always rising on us,  
punching you with embraces, holding out  
a hesitant hand, unbending as a broom. (NBN, p. 5)<sup>28</sup>

The tyrant in Lowell continues to menace his loved ones; he records in one poem how his hospitalization grants a respite both to himself and to those around him - 'both tyrant / and tyrannized' get the reprieve of a 'short half-holiday'.<sup>29</sup> The personal harm which his thoughts and actions cause are emphasized in the collection of private poems, For Lizzie and Harriet, and subsequently in the even more candidly autobiographical poems composed for The Dolphin. In this volume, there is no 'egomania of redemptive aspiration.

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<sup>27</sup> 'Profile: The Poet Robert Lowell', The Listener, 21 June 1973, pp. 830-32 (pp. 830-01).

<sup>28</sup> The phrase is unchanged in Notebook (p. 24).

<sup>29</sup> 'Circles, 11. High Blood' (NBN, p. 134). This connects to Lowell's friend-versus-foe theme, and to the observations he makes on the tyrant's proverbial distrust of supposed allies; see, for example, 'Sir Thomas More' (NBN, p. 41), 'Tamerlane Old' (p. 98), 'Verdun' (p. 106) and 'Stalin' (p. 125).

There are wrongs that cannot be righted', and the facts of abuse are frankly stated.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, there is quite a difference between coming clean about one's shortcomings and effecting meaningful redress for the wrongs perpetrated in life and on the page. This is the quandary which Lowell, and Lowell's reader, has to face up to in his late work.

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<sup>30</sup> Ricks, 'Profile', p. 832.

### 8. 'A Foolsdream of Armor': Lowell's Late Poetry

In The Dolphin, a volume of new poems published in 1973, Lowell violated conventional poetic propriety in more intimate ways than he had in the preceding volumes of sonnets. He reproduced material, largely recriminatory in tone, from the letters, telegrams and phone conversations of his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. Even though the original phrasing is often not revised but simply transcribed verbatim, the very act of incorporating personal into public communication, and subordinating it to the poet's design, necessarily and radically redefines its status; in Jonathan Raban's words, 'the emotional tone of the transcription, as well as its vocabulary, eats ironically away at its context'.<sup>1</sup> Such appropriation and redefinition of another's words threatens to preclude the very possibility of compassionate rectification central to the impulse of Lowell's poetry dealing with personal relationships.

There is something honest in Lowell at least not attempting to conceal his sources here. An indirect defence may be made of the poet who presents himself as openly assailable: the errors of his personal life cannot be mitigated, indeed are intensified, by disclosing to the jury of his readership selections from the allegations made against him in the words of his ex-wife. Indeed, he gives her cause all the more weight by the very act of violating her privacy. A policy of candour does not however, by itself, exonerate the poet, and there is no doubt that the

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<sup>1</sup> Raban, p. 155.

poems of The Dolphin did real damage. It was more than Lowell's own reputation, after all, that suffered harm from his strategies; Elizabeth Bishop, counting the human cost, looked darkly on her friend Lowell's tactics, concluding 'art just isn't worth that much'.<sup>2</sup>

Lowell uses the metaphor of plotting in The Dolphin as a way of owning up to the scheming, manipulative methods of his art - and the self-dramatizing inclination that makes of the poet's life a tragic plot. This metaphor represents a development of a concept introduced in the Notebooks - for instance in the poem 'For John Berryman':

John, we used the language as if we made it.  
 Luck threw up the coin, and the plot swallowed,  
 monster yawning for its mess of pottage.  
(NBN, p. 151)<sup>3</sup>

In a poem of The Dolphin entitled 'Plotted', Lowell counts himself among the victims of his compulsive appetite for poetic material:

I roam from bookstore to bookstore browsing books,  
 I too maneuvered [sic] on a guiding string  
 as I execute my written plot. (DOL, p. 49)

The motif is picked up again in the volume's closing, title poem:

I have sat and listened to too many  
 words of the collaborating muse,

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<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, p. 423. See also Bishop's poem, 'North Haven: *In memoriam: Robert Lowell*', in Complete Poems (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983; repr. 1991), p. 189: 'You can't derange, or re-arrange, / your poems again. [...] Sad friend, you cannot change'.

<sup>3</sup> The text of these lines is the same in the versions of the poem in Notebook (p. 255) and History, (p. 203). Compare the words of Lowell's 'Afterthought': 'My plot rolls with the seasons. The separate poems and sections are opportunist and inspired by impulse. Accident threw up subjects, and the plot swallowed them - famished for human chances' (NBN, p. 159; the wording is altered on p. 262 of Notebook).

and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,  
 not avoiding injury to others,  
 not avoiding injury to myself -  
 to ask compassion ... this book, half-fiction,  
 an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting -

my eyes have seen what my hand did. (DOL, p. 78)

The net-imagery is used to convey Lowell's combative strategies, and the way he ensnares his subjects, but it also represents how the poet weaves together the material of his life into a design that will endure; the staying power of poetry is the potentially positive theme of the volume's opening composition, 'Fishnet', although the poem undercuts its own optimism by ending with a characteristically nihilistic contemplation of 'the futureless future' (DOL, p. 15).<sup>4</sup>

'It might have been redemptive not to have lived'; the sentiment expressed in the poem 'Sick', the fifth piece of a sequence entitled 'Leaving America for England', is as bleak as any line in Lowell's work (DOL, p. 68). Yet against the grain of this recurrent impulse to despair, the symbol of the dolphin, a controlling presence in the volume, embodies an unexpectedly positive ideal. It is an elusive image suggestive of womanhood, freedom from spiritual and mental anguish and an ideal poetic form. And there is tenderness and joy in the volume too, although of a peculiarly hard-won kind: of the sort expressed wryly in the double-edged line, 'we have escaped our death-struggle with our lives'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lowell makes much of the killing-net imagery in his version of The Oresteia; see, for example, pp. 26, 34, 43, 48, 69.

<sup>5</sup> 'Marriage, 13. Robert Sheridan Lowell', p. 61. Neil Corcoran considers the ambiguities of the dolphin symbol as half-alluring, half-threatening; see 'Lowell's Retiarius: Towards The Dolphin', in Bloom, Robert Lowell, pp. 129-37 (pp.

The poems of Day by Day (USA: 1977; UK: 1978), Lowell's final volume, convey a poignant sense of loss and debilitation. As the poet reflects upon illness, the passing away of seasons, and of friends, and upon the largely pleasureless recreational activities of what he knows to be his twilight years, his central theme is the relinquishing of control. With a bare-bone registering of felt facts, transferred from the immediate environment straight to the page, Lowell makes no show of authorial control - although the display of artistic impotence which replaces such command relies upon a certain audacity of its own:

horse and meadow, duck and pond,  
 universal consolatory  
 description without significance,  
 transcribed verbatim by my eye  
 ('Shifting Colors', DBD, p. 120)

The lines unwrite themselves: if there is no 'significance' in the environment *per se*, and no exercise of imaginative power to transform reality, what 'consolatory' message can the poem convey? What redress can Lowell's art provide for the deficiencies of the mind which he so unflinchingly records? There is a sad wryness to this late poetry, generally issuing as self-deprecation, which in a sense provides such redress. In the poem, 'Turtle' (DBD, p. 98), for instance, Lowell notes how the reptilian crust of old age casts retrospective irony on his former ambitions and aggressions as poet and man:

I pray for memory -  
 an old turtle,  
 absentminded, inelastic,  
 kept afloat by losing touch...

no longer able to hiss or lift  
a useless shield against the killer.

Turtles age, but wade out amorously,  
half-frozen fossils, yet knight-errant  
in a foolsdream of armor.  
The smaller ones climb rocks to broil in comfort.

The pinch of self-respect he retains for his venerable status, and the relish he betrays for the pathos of his condition are, he knows, part of what makes him ridiculous; but more ridiculous were those combative tactics which defined his earlier poetic self. There may still be a touch of the confrontational, in fact, in the old man, if one takes the 'killer' to be Lowell's God, the one who answers the poet's prayers for memory with the preordained certainty of death and memory's end; Lowell's 'shield', the whole panoply of his stylistic strategies, was always 'useless' as a defence against such nihilistic contemplations.

Throughout Day by Day, Lowell uses animal imagery to emphasize his vulnerable, mortal status. His sympathetic regard for insects calls to mind the Pound of the Pisan Cantos, another poet with tyrannical leanings who finally had to face up to his past. One example of this is the poem 'Burial [For-----]':

A longwinded wasp stumbles on me,  
marauding, providing, as if about to sting -  
patting, smelling me, caught  
in the carnivorous harmony of nature. (DBD, p. 41)

Another is 'This Golden Summer':

I see even in golden summer  
the wilted blowbell spiders  
ruffling up impossible angers,  
as they shake their threads to the light. (DBD, p. 62)

This poem recalls the 'impossible angers' ruffled up by the young Lowell in 'Mr. Edwards and the Spider' (PNT, p. 69), the impotent rage of the earlier poem reflected upon wryly,

yet at the same time strangely corroborated and intensified, by the later poem's expression of futility.

Lowell has not got beyond solipsism; he still sees in the world's minutiae reflections of the self. The future, too, is susceptible to this vision: in the poem 'Marriage' (DBD, p. 69) his as-yet unborn son Sheridan is anticipated to be a variant of his father: 'growing in hiding / towards gaucheness and muscle - / to be a war- / chronicler of vast inaccurate memory'. Being an Anglo-American, when he plays soldiers Sheridan will be able to choose whom he mimics: 'Redcoat, Minuteman, or George the Third' - tyrannicide or tyrant.<sup>6</sup>

The reference here is picked up in one of the poems collected in the appendix to Day by Day. In 'George III' (p. 133), Lowell cannot resist one more cry of pity for a proverbial tyrant ridiculed in his time and perhaps miscast by history.

In '76, George was still King George,  
the one authorized tyrant,

not yet the mad, bad old king.

Nor can Lowell refrain from traversing history and linking the figurehead-enemy of American Independence with President Nixon:

once a reigning monarch like Nixon,  
and more exhausting to dethrone [...]

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<sup>6</sup> Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (1776), calling on the American people to resist the perceived tyranny of British rule, contains a litany of George III's misdeeds and casts him in the role of tyrant. Thomas Paine went further; in his pro-revolution essay Common Sense, published the same year, he defined the English constitution as a trap of potentially 'eternal tyranny' from which the American people must escape: 'ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth!'. See Common Sense (New York: Willey, 1942), pp. 41-42.

yet how modern George is,  
wandering vacated chambers of his White House,

addressing imaginary congresses,  
reviewing imaginary combat troops.<sup>7</sup>

It is apt that Lowell's vision of tyranny should finish with such a *reductio ad absurdum*: at the poem's close, the impotent tyrant awaits death, solipsistically engaged with his own former deeds and words, like a poet charting his own decline, but no longer really hearing:

in his last lucid moment,  
singing a hymn to his harpsichord,

praying God for resignation  
in his calamity he could not avert...

mercifully unable to hear  
his drab tapes play back his own voice to him,

morning, noon, and night.

Day by Day contains other visions of tyranny. 'Ulysses and Circe' (p. 3), for instance, focuses on the homecoming of an ageing and brutalized Odysseus, exhausted by a life of warfare. The once-heroic scourge of Troy is reduced to a state of terror, self-disgust and sexual jealousy:

he lies awake and fears the servants,  
the civilities  
of their savage, assiduous voices. [...]

He dislikes everything  
in his impoverished life of myth. [...]

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Gould Axelrod elaborates upon Lowell's possible intentions by suggesting that the poem draws upon Kissinger's fears for the sanity of Nixon during the dark days of Watergate; the historical British monarch and contemporary American President are linked by their purported delusions of grandeur, loss of lucidity, erratic behaviour, talking compulsion and morose sense of isolation. See 'Lowell's Living Name: An Introduction', in Robert Lowell: Essays on the Poetry, ed. by Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 1-25 (pp. 20-23). Tom Paulin includes this poem in The Faber Book of Political Verse (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 404. In the introduction, Paulin notes how Philip Frenau's poem 'George the Third's Soliloquy' is 'ironically echoed' by Lowell's (p. 47).

Volte-face -  
 he circles as a shark circles  
 visibly behind the window -  
 flesh-proud, sore-eyed, scar-proud,  
 a vocational killer  
 in the machismo of senility,  
 foretasting the apogee of mayhem. (DBD, pp. 4, 5, 9)

Having escaped the lures of Circe, the old man Ulysses now acts like a fish trapped in a tank - but a deadly one to the suitors of his wife Penelope. As Helen Vendler has observed, 'the murder of the suitors will be only the logical completion of male rapacity, begun in courtship and perfected in war'; clearly, Lowell sees in the predicament of the Greek hero an image of his own situation - as a writer, and as a lover also.<sup>8</sup>

'Can poetry get away with murder', Lowell asks rhetorically in another poem, 'its terror a seizure of the imagination / foreign to our stubborn common health?' ('Louisiana State University in 1940', DBD, p. 25). As he stubbornly holds on to his own health, despite its inevitable decline, and as his awareness of the 'common' bonds of all mortal beings is enhanced, Lowell is forced to consider the consequences of what has perhaps been an unhealthy, uncommon activity. Poetry, he knows, can appear murderous, preying as it does on the lives of others for its material - and causing real pain in the process. But if the poet is a tyrant, he is also self-tyrannized: the terror

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<sup>8</sup> 'Ulysses, Circe, Penelope', in Part of Nature, Part of Us, pp. 136-44 (p. 140). In the course of this article, Vendler makes astute comments on Lowell's uniqueness in accommodating into lyric poetry the rage and violence customarily reserved for other genres - novels, plays, epic verse. Also of interest is Philip Hobsbaum's suggestion that this poem depicts the marital triangle of Lowell (as Ulysses), his second wife Elizabeth Hardwick (as Penelope) and Caroline Blackwood, his third wife (as Circe); see Hobsbaum, p. 166.

inflicted on others is matched by a terror which seizes the imagination of the poet himself. Lowell knows that all tyrants ultimately fall by their own devices.

As he projects his own demise in these late poems, Lowell anticipates his transition from a living person to a dead exhibit, and turns his attention once more to statues and relics:

In the morgue and hospice of the National Museum,  
our poor bones and houseware  
are lucky to end up in bits and pieces  
embalmed between the eternal and tyrants,  
their high noses rubbed rough. ('Home', DBD, p. 113)

Is Lowell here speculating about how he will be remembered? If so, the wording is characteristically treacherous. On the one hand, there is an apparent opposition between that word 'eternal' and the proverbially short reign of a tyrant; on the other, one is accustomed to think of tyrants as scheming for their posterity and to grant them posthumous notoriety; perhaps this is why the snub which time issues to high-nosed hauteur appears to be directed as much towards 'the eternal' as towards the 'tyrants'? Lowell is aware that what will endure of himself, through his work, will be shaped by his own tyrannical tendencies, as man and poet, and also that it will be reshaped by the rough rubbing which the passage of time - and the practice of criticism - dispenses.

III. GEOFFREY HILL

## 1. Introduction

'Sodden with [...] self-esteem': this is how Geoffrey Hill once characterized Lowell's Day by Day. Regard for 'the mystique of status', he argued, is accompanied in the verse by a violation of conventional poetic proprieties, by a disregard for formal, even syntactical felicities. To Hill's mind, and to his ear, the poetry lacks 'tact': 'status has largely consumed power; there is an almost complete loss of rhythmic "touch", of tact, and what is worse, a seeming indifference to the loss'. The later poetry of Lowell represents for Hill a considerable falling off from the 'power' which had compelled his admiration in the more 'difficult' but also more 'musical' earlier volumes:

He was entitled to believe that the 'very musical, difficult poem [...] seems divorced from culture somehow' but one should not be bullied or cajoled into condoning his naïf or cynical assumptions about the nature and intent of that 'culture' to which he sacrificed the old 'music'.<sup>1</sup>

The grave reservations he expresses about Lowell's achievement help to elucidate Hill's criteria for his own difficult, musical poetry. He sees those undesirable qualities in a poet, regard for status and a disregard for form, as interrelated - hence his conception of 'tact' as at once an attitude towards one's work and the rhythmical effects of the composition itself. To write with tact requires the poet both to resist self-preoccupation and to maintain sensitivity to formal considerations. In Hill's case, this often results in a poetry which is difficult to

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<sup>1</sup> 'Lives of the Poets', Essays in Criticism, 34 (1984), 262-69 (pp. 268, 264, 269, 265-66). 'Tact' is a key word in this article; see also pp. 263-64.

understand, but not unnecessarily so: difficulty for him is a means of refusing to 'be bullied or cajoled' by reductive assumptions about the culture with which his work is engaged and to which it contributes.

Hill has repeatedly urged that the artist's stylistic and linguistic decisions are always also an acknowledgement of social and moral liability:

There is an indecency in language, which [...] is most cogently expressed in that brief entry from Coleridge's notebook: 'Poetry - excites us to artificial feelings - makes us callous to real ones.' One's fear is that through the exercise of this art of such passionate finesse one might in the end be serving callousness.<sup>2</sup>

Hill might well concur also with Hazlitt that carnage is poetry's daughter. Throughout his writings, he exhibits a complex awareness of the dangers courted in the very exercise of writing, and an anxiety regarding 'the menace of the high claims of poetry itself' (LL, p. 5). His belief is that language always has about it 'a hint of the despotic' (LL, p. 106). In particular, it is the customary use, or misuse, of words which poses what he identifies as a tyrannical threat to adequate expression. His whole career as a writer may be viewed as an attempt to redress this tyranny.

Such is the line of thinking I adopt in the following analysis of his career. I begin with a consideration of the critical prose, exploring Hill's preoccupation with language

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<sup>2</sup> 'Under Judgment', transcript of an interview with Blake Morrison, New Statesman, 8 February 1980, pp. 212-14 (p. 214). Coleridge's phrase is cited by Hill several times elsewhere - for instance in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' (LL, p. 4), in 'Lives of the Poets' (p. 268), and in a sermon, 'Thus my Noblest Capacity Becomes my Deepest Perplexity"', delivered at Great Saint Mary's Church, Cambridge, 8 May 1983 (p. 2).

as a mode of power. It is only through awareness of authorial culpability that compositional redress may be achieved: 'in the constraint of shame the poet is free to discover both the "menace" and the atoning power of his own art' (LL, p. 17). I compare Hill's prose style to that of Lowell. In their writings about the art of poetry, each makes a conscious display of his misgivings about language. There is a distinct difference, however, between the performative and at times cavalier manner which Lowell adopts and Hill's scrupulous toiling with expression; Hill may have his flourishes too, but his own brand of ostentation is always subject to the most vigilant and ironic scrutiny.

The predatory language which Hill deploys in the poems of For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958 (1959) highlights the connection between aesthetic and actual tyrannies: his poems emphasize that to use words in order to fantasize about violence brings that violence closer to reality. The guilty preoccupation with links between art and atrocity deepens in King Log (1968). As it does so, Hill develops resourceful strategies to combat the tyrannical tendencies he feels to be inherent in words. In particular, his distrust is of language which feeds on human barbarity for its sustenance. In writing poems about warfare and suffering, Hill knowingly indulges in this feast. He does not seek to exculpate himself, but rather makes a complex display of the liabilities incurred by the very act of utterance.

The treacherous operations of language are explored in new ways in the prose-poems of Mercian Hymns (1971). The subject of this sequence, the tyrannical Anglo-Saxon King

Offa, is at once celebrated and criticized, as Hill compares the whims and prerogatives of the monarch to childhood fantasies of power-attainment, and each of these to the violent imaginings of a poet. In pursuing connections between private and public conduct, he points up the links between the individual poet's craft and the mechanics of statecraft.

In Tenebrae (1978), the focus of Hill's attention is the self-tyrannizing religious imagination. His scepticism about the martyr's habituation to pain is inseparable from self-directed suspicions. He uses ritualistic language to parody the religious rhetoric which sublimates anguish. The anguish, as ever, is Hill's also, as he worries over the insufficiency and artificiality of his words.

Religious fanaticism is the central theme in Hill's version of Ibsen's Brand (1978). I view the play as a dialogue between faith and despair, a drama of words in which hope for spiritual salvation collides with spiritual agony. Words terrorize the imagination, and out of language Brand constructs a theology of fear. No-one is more subjected to his apocalyptic paranoia, however, than Brand himself; he pursues his own doom as furiously as he pursues salvation.

The desirability of suffering is a trait which Hill sees also in Charles Péguy. Throughout his extended meditation on the French poet and polemicist, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (1983), Hill again traces the connections between rhetorical and actual savagery. While admiring Péguy's visionary integrity, Hill's wariness

regarding the violent upshot of the Frenchman's demagoguery keeps him at an ironic remove from his subject.

My final section on Hill considers poetry which has appeared in periodicals since the publication of The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy. Commemoration is a significant theme in this work. The distrust with which Hill has always regarded poetic ornamentation is intensified in poems which flagrantly parade their dubious trappings of ceremony. I analyse how a recent move towards formal experimentalism has offered Hill new ways to express this distrust.

## 2. Critical Redress: Hill's Prose

For Hill, use of language is synonymous with the exercise of authority - and authority is innately untrustworthy. To read his prose work is to participate in the author's struggle against the power of words, including his own. In The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas (1984), The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and other Circumstances of Language (1991), and in his uncollected essays, Hill's impassioned advocacy of literature is complicated by a deeply registered need to resist the coercions of language. The well-wrought formulations by which he asserts this resistance make heavy demands upon the reader; Hill's prose style has the double-edged effect of both insistently apologizing for its own rhetoric and, by the strength of this insistence, exerting a force of imperious self-vindication.

This is evident, for instance, in the opening remarks of the lecture 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' (1977):

My title may well strike you as exemplary in a fashion, being at once assertive and non-committal. The quotation-marks around 'menace' and 'atonement' look a bit like raised eyebrows. 'Menace' from what, and to whom? 'Atonement' by whom, and for what? Is one perhaps offering to atone for the menace of one's own jargon? In fact, though my title may appear 'challenging', it presents little more than a conflation of two modernist clichés. That it does so is an act of choice but the choice is exercised in order to demonstrate the closeness of a constraint. Behind the façade of challenge is the real challenge: that of resisting the attraction of terminology itself, a power at once supportive and coercive. (LL, p. 1)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Hill's remarks elsewhere in the same essay on the 'supportive yet coercive public' (p. 10), 'the supportive yet coercive role of militant cliché' (p. 11) and 'the inertia of language, which is also the coercive force of language' (p. 2). He discusses the pressure which inverted commas exert in

Hill is acutely sensitive to the assertive strikes of language and also to the connection between linguistic affront and imprecise expression. Aware of the provocative façade which his essay title presents, Hill immediately seeks to redress the chosen terminology by a complex display of scruple about its 'menacing' aspects.

The parade which he makes of his own misgivings is far removed in tone from Lowell's opening gambits in his lecture on 'Art and Evil' (1955-56):

First I want to confess that I intend to run far and at a breakneck speed from my title. *Art and Evil*: these words have a somewhat savagely neon-lighted, newly baptized, neo-art-for-art's-sake, Naughty Nineties severity to them. They are the shell that covers old weakness and a heart of gold. I admit that I come before this immense audience with fear and trembling. I hope to tempt rather than to accuse. I hope to amuse you, and show how art can make even ill things a joy. I want to talk about the pleasure we all take in the company of bad men and bad women. (LCP, p. 129)

This is exhibitionistic, theatrical, exuberant. Lowell is much less racked by scruple with regard to his own terminology. Admittedly, this is the introduction to an unfinished manuscript for an undelivered speech, whereas Hill's essay was prepared with evident meticulousness for an inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds (5 December 1977). Nonetheless, the marked distinctions between these two pieces is symptomatic of the wide gulf dividing Hill's sensibility - as critic and also as poet - from that of Lowell.

'I must keep spiritually alive and brilliantly alive, for poetry is, as the moral Milton conceded in practice and

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'Our Word is our Bond' (1983) (LL, pp. 142-43).

precept, a sensuous, passionate, brutal thing. I put in the last adjective because I am modern and angry and puritanical'.<sup>2</sup> This gauche and hubristic outburst, recorded in a letter from the young Lowell to his cousin Lawrence in February 1940, is a far cry from Hill's precise and reverential reference to the same phrase of Milton's:

Milton's dictum that poetry, though 'less subtle and fine', is 'more simple, sensuous and passionate' than rhetoric is a saying to which I am sympathetically inclined. Ideally my thesis would be equally deserving of sympathy. That it is here presented garnished and groaning with obliquities is due less to a simple sensuous and passionate wilfulness than to an obvious yet crucial fact. Language, the element in which a poet works, is also the medium through which judgments upon his work are made. (LL, pp. 1-2)<sup>3</sup>

Despite glaring differences in approach, Hill's wary acknowledgement of the 'menace' of literary 'judgment' has something in common with Lowell's outlook; in 'Art and Evil', the latter complains how 'the trouble with writing poetry is that you have readers, and the trouble with readers is that you have to listen to them after they have spent their time reading you' (LCP, p. 131). The flippant way in which such provocative statements are tossed off in Lowell's essays (as if he is always anticipating a play for laughter in the lecture hall) is far removed in tone from Hill's prose manner, but the point of connection - distrust of the reader's judgment - is striking nonetheless.

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<sup>2</sup> Hamilton, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Milton's formulation was cited also in an interview with John Haffenden; see Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), pp. 76-99 (p. 80). It was quoted again in an interview with Blake Morrison: 'Under Judgment', New Statesman, 8 February 1980, pp. 212-14 (p. 212).

Lowell, had he delivered the lecture, would have been performing rhetorical trickery. Even as he declares himself to be running away from the words 'Art and Evil', he glosses them with fulsome relish. He rises to the provocative challenge which they offer by proposing to discuss criminal pleasures - and to indulge his audience as he indulges himself in the performative language he deploys. His breezy display of ostentation is fundamentally different from Hill's pained honesty. Hill retreats from the performative, and the provocative, by deflating rather than inflating the glamour of his title. He owns up to cliché and experiences 'the closeness of a constraint': the constraint which language imposes upon the writer who seeks to avoid duplicity. Inevitably, this results in a display of humility and commendable equivocation which in its way grants greater authoritativeness to Hill's self-doubting critical procedure than Lowell, precisely because of his showy exertions, is able to achieve in his.<sup>4</sup>

An interest in the exertions of expression is one quality which Hill and Lowell share in common as critics. The 'creased, gratuitous labors' of I. A. Richards' intelligence, John Crowe Ransom's 'force that discovers itself in a certain puffing and sweating', the 'difficult, packed, and wrenched' quality of John Berryman's Dream

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike Lowell, Hill expressly seeks to distance himself from notions of art as a means of exploring the nature of evil: 'It is a not unfamiliar modernist theory which "requires art to be destructive", which "takes the violence of novelty as essential to success". I may choose to ignore this theory, but I can't seem to be ignorant of it. [...] In my thesis, [...] the idea of "menace" is entirely devoid of sublimity: it is meanly experiential rather than grandly mythical' (LL, pp. 4, 15).

Songs: these are the qualities which command Lowell's attention in his essays and reviews. They bear a correspondence to his own valuing of the 'something that breathes and pauses and grunts and is rough and unpredictable' when composing his own poetry.<sup>5</sup> The grunts and groans of creative endeavour preoccupy Hill, too, as his recognition that the argument of 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' is 'garnished and groaning with obliquities' indicates - and in the essay on his poem-sequence 'Funeral Music' Hill explains how he had attempted to produce 'a florid grim music broken by grunts and shrieks' (HCP, p. 199).

The difference between Hill and Lowell on this point is that one always feels sure in Hill's writing that a 'grunting' expression is intentional and appropriate - as it assuredly is in the evocation of battle-fields and execution-scenes for 'Funeral Music'. In Lowell's case, the matter is less clear. This can be illustrated by comparing Hill's reflections in the essay 'Our Word is our Bond' on what Pound termed '"a sloppy and slobbering world"' (LL, p. 158) with Lowell's attitude towards the 'sloppy'. Hill's borrowing from Pound describes the implications of a linguistic solecism: the slightest verbal slip puts the aesthetic out of joint with the ethical. There is evidence to suggest that Lowell was not so fearful of the '"sloppy, slobbering world"' which linguistic imprecision creates - or that he became less so during his career: in an essay of 1947, he censured Wallace Stevens's 'Notes towards a Supreme

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<sup>5</sup> LCP, pp. 54, 18, 108, 85.

Fiction' for having a 'sloppy, idiosyncratic, and repetitious' structure (LCP, p. 14), but during an interview with Frederick Seidel in 1961 Lowell commented how he was 'very anxious in criticism not to do the standard analytical essay. I'd like my essay to be much sloppier and more intuitive' (LCP, p. 237).<sup>6</sup>

Lowell has been accused of sloppiness with regard both to composition and to the arrangement of poems within and between volumes in his later work. The defence he gave for such rearranging in the introductory note to History is itself slapdash:

All the poems have been changed, some heavily. I have plotted. My old title, Notebook, was more accurate than I wished, i.e. the composition was jumbled. I hope this jumble or jungle is cleared - that I have cut the waste marble from the figure.

From jumble to jungle to marble: the mixing of metaphors hardly does Lowell any favours in his attempt to reassure the reader that confusion has been cleared from the poetic design. In 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', Hill employs with more clarity, though also more complexity, the metaphorical concept of language as marble from which expressions may be carved:

That commonplace image, founded upon the unfinished statues of Michelangelo, 'mighty figures straining to free themselves from the imprisoning marble', has never struck me as being an ideal image for sculpture itself; it seems more to embody the nature and condition of those arts which are composed of words. [...] However much a poem is shaped and finished, it remains to some

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<sup>6</sup> Also, Lowell noted with neutrality rather than condemnation, in an essay of 1964, that Berryman's Dream Songs were to him 'sloppier' than Homage to Mistress Bradstreet (LCP, p. 107).

extent within the 'imprisoning marble' of a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection. (LL, p. 2)

Contemplating language as a marmoreal slab of raw material for the poet to work on hardly reassures Hill about creative endeavours in the way it does Lowell; the very fact that the poems of History themselves patently remain 'to some extent within the "imprisoning marble" of a quotidian shapelessness and imperfection' is evidence of what Lowell could countenance in his art, and what Hill cannot.

Hill's language strains to free itself from 'the "imprisoning marble"' which common misuse of words represents. One may say of the critical writings what Hill wrote of Ransom's essays - that they 'are prose-poems [...] in a particular dimension [...] of constraint' (LL, p. 122). The prose work frequently tends towards the epigrammatic - although perhaps the logic of Hill's argument is too heavily compacted even for epigrammatic to seem an entirely appropriate adjective. George Steiner has paid tribute to the 'muted, impatient eloquence'<sup>7</sup> of the criticism, and Eric Griffiths has commended the 'flexibility of treatment and wealth of concretion'.<sup>8</sup> Griffiths has also, however, expressed due reservation about Hill's '"magisterial"' way of handling the concept of '"mastery"':

Hill's criticism effects a substantial, and thoroughly substantiated, reappraisal of the concept of 'mastery' as it is used in criticism. [...] But the language of his criticism too often

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Poet's Bond' (review of The Lords of Limit), Sunday Times, 13 May 1984, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> 'Hill's Criticism: A Life of Form', in Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Work, ed. by Peter Robinson (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), pp. 172-84 (p. 178).

colludes with the 'magisterial' just in the instant that it questions the 'masterly'; Hill's admirable profundity of apprehension of the ways in which words may be mis-taken is wronged by a professional wariness about being taken amiss.<sup>9</sup>

Distrust of those to whom his words are addressed, as I have already urged, is a notable hallmark of Hill's prose and poetry.<sup>10</sup> There is something Yeatsian about Hill's antithetical stance towards his readers - as if he might at any moment turn on them with rage - and also about his preoccupations with 'the "masterly"'. Hill finds in Yeats a figure of the artist who treats language as inimical but, out of his battle with it, wins through to poetic triumph. The extent of triumph correlates to the degree of 'arduous' struggle involved:

The poet is hearing words in depth and is therefore hearing, or sounding, history and morality in depth. It is as though the very recalcitrance of language - and we know that Yeats found the process of composition arduous - stood for the primary objective world in one of its forms of cruelty and indifference; but also for the cultivation of that other objectivity, won through toil.<sup>11</sup>

Victory through toil epitomizes Hill's attitude - and his achievement. It must be emphasized, however, that there is

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<sup>9</sup> 'Being in Error', in Geoffrey Hill, ed. by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views series (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 129-36 (p. 134).

<sup>10</sup> The best account of this is in Peter Robinson's essay 'Reading Geoffrey Hill' (Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 196-218); the piece was reprinted with significant revisions as 'Geoffrey Hill's Position' in Robinson's In the Circumstances, pp. 105-41.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Conscious Mind's Intelligible Structure': A Debate', Agenda, 9.4 - 10.1 (autumn-winter 1971-72), 14-23 (p. 21). The phrase 'that other objectivity' refers to a distinction of Simone Weil's between surrender to the objective world and the transcending of self-involvement achieved by according an objective status to one's personal history.

none of the triumphalism sometimes attributed to Yeats in Hill's writings. Hill is far too alive to such liabilities. He knows that poetry can be masterful even when it is expressly involved in renouncing mastery, as is the case with 'The Circus Animals' Desertion': 'How is it possible', Hill asks of Yeats's poem,

to revoke 'masterful images' in images that are themselves masterful? Can one renounce 'completion' with epithets and rhyme-patterns that in themselves retain a certain repleteness? (LL, p. 3)<sup>12</sup>

These are questions which Hill directs at himself, in both his essays and his poems. Always there is the awareness that a sense of '"completion"' in poetry may be accompanied by an untrustworthy note of 'repleteness' - with all the self-satisfaction that the word implies. Hill would rather place his trust in expressions which sound difficult, hard-won.

He argues that 'in the art of poetry it is so often the effortless that impedes' (EC, p. 8). The impediment to which he is so sensitive derives from the pressure which customary usage exerts upon words, from what he terms the 'inertia' of social locution.<sup>13</sup> As the opening remarks of 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"' suggest, the dangers which Hill registers most acutely are those of jargon. The debasement of language into terminology, particularly into mere formula or cliché, invites recurrent and eloquent denunciation in his criticism. Just as notable, however, is

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<sup>12</sup> See Yeats's Poems, p. 471.

<sup>13</sup> See Hill's remarks on 'the inertial drag of speech' (LL, p. 87), 'the very inertia of general taste' (LL, p. 95) and 'the resistant inertia of our "stubborne language"' (EC, p. 16).

the recurrent and eloquent praise Hill has for those writers who have countered the dangers posed by clichés:

In Marvell, as in Jonson, the perspective requires the utterance of deliberate cliché, but cliché rinsed and restored to function as responsible speech. (LL, p. 45)

Ransom [...] takes care not only to purge and enrich clichés by exactness and resonance but also to abrogate, by contextual means, that pathos which certain words and phrases might excite in isolation. (LL, p. 123)

One still has reservations about calling [Swift] a 'popular' poet; he did not so much use as demonstrate the colloquial; the very kind of accuracy he achieved was the result of a certain aloofness. (LL, p. 82).

The distinction between usage and demonstration of the colloquial, between inadvertent and 'deliberate' cliché is fundamental to Hill. It defines the positive goal towards which his criticism, despite its burden of grave misgivings, is directed.

The thirteenth definition of the verb 'redress' in the OED is 'to repair (an action); to atone for (a misdeed or offence)'. 'Atonement' is Hill's word for the sort of redress of which poetry is capable. He mines etymology in order to give validity to his chosen term, arguing

that the technical perfecting of a poem is an act of atonement, in the radical etymological sense - an act of at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony. (LL, p. 2)

'Atonement', deriving from the Middle English phrase 'at onement' ('in harmony'), is a word appropriate to Hill's religious preoccupations; besides its general usage in denoting reparation for a wrong done, it also signifies expiation for one's sins, and in Christian theology refers to the reconciliation of man with God through the life,

sufferings and sacrificial death of Christ. This gives a particular moral charge to Hill's critical enterprise whenever the term is used, as when he seeks 'an atonement of aesthetics with rectitude of judgement' (LL, p. 10) or an 'at-one-ment of the "sense of language" with the feeling for the ways of life' (LL, p. 11). The religious conception of atonement informs the moral charge of Hill's poetry also. The terms in which he writes of a 'penitential' spirit in modern literature, in 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', are peculiarly applicable to his own verse: his claim that 'there is a sense in which the modern artist is called upon to atone for his own illiberal pride and a sense in which he is engaged in vicarious expiation for the pride of the culture which itself rejects him' reads as a fundamental statement of Hill's belief about his own position as poet (LL, p. 4).<sup>14</sup>

Redemption and redress are terms closely related to atonement in Hill's critical vocabulary. He observes how a retort of the recusant Catholic martyr Robert Southwell to his interrogators 'in an instant, both judges the travesty and redeems the word' (LL, p. 26). Also 'exemplary' (another key word in Hill's lexicon) is Charles Sorley's assessment of Rupert Brooke's deficiencies as a representative war poet. Sorley's challenge to Churchill's

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<sup>14</sup> In the course of 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', Hill also voices his suspicions about 'a theological view of literature' (LL, p. 17). Christopher Ricks is suspicious of Hill's equating 'atonement' and 'at-one-ment', arguing that hyphens significantly alter the word; see 'Tenebrae and at-one-ment' in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 62-85 (pp. 63-64 and *passim*). The essay was reprinted in Ricks's The Force of Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 319-55; Hill's attitude towards and 'renovation' of clichés is discussed on pp. 361-65 of this book.

encomium of Brooke in The Times (April 1915) commands Hill's respect:

It is not that public rhetoric degrades Sorley's acute perception but that Sorley's perceptive statement redresses and redeems the rhetoric of the Times obituary and establishes a sounder basis for judging the nature of exemplary conduct.

(LL, p. 11)

The most ambitious and compelling claims for linguistic redemption are made in the essay 'Redeeming the Time' (1972). In a complex, engaged and hard-won argument, Hill sets the achievements of George Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins against the pressures of circumstance, language and custom out of which they wrote; rhythm, form and structure, Hill stresses, are the instruments which the artist must employ in order to make of one's art a redemptive exercise.

The preoccupations of The Lords of Limit recur in The Enemy's Country, a collection of essays which focuses in particular on the works of Dryden and Pound. What is new in this volume is a heightened emphasis on the worldly 'force of circumstance' which the poet must resist (EC, pp. 15-16). Elaborating upon the language of financial and social contracts deployed in 'Our Word is Our Bond', the final essay of The Lords of Limit, Hill writes in these new essays of negotiation and compromise, of the 'political and economic realities of circumstance' and 'current reckonings of value' by society, forces which threaten to debase the currency of language (EC, p. 5). At one point these forces are explicitly identified as tyrannical: in an essay entitled 'The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses' (1986), he notes how, in Thomas Hobbes's vision, 'the equivocal and the ambiguous are intrinsic to human nature and civic

history. One is so impeded by custom, opinion, circumstance, and all other forms of "tyrannizing" [...] that "the contrary must needs appear a great paradox"' (EC, p. 24).<sup>15</sup>

The tyranny of 'custom, opinion, [and] circumstance' has increasingly come to preoccupy Hill in the articles and reviews of recent years. In his assessment of The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha (1989 ), for example, he accuses the editors of being 'in thrall to the "many tyrants" of commerce and society' who demand a modernized and 'accessible' text. The problem Hill deliberates upon is that demands for quick comprehensibility may be motivated more out of the desire to make a work more saleable than out of the fear of compromising editorial integrity. That phrase 'many tyrants' is derived from the writings of Tyndale; in the same article, Hill also reviews the recently revised edition of Tyndale's New Testament. He unfavourably contrasts the tyrannical 'demands' of the modern consumer age for the hype of 'accessibility' with the constraints which Tyndale himself was under at the time of the Reformation: 'For Tyndale, as for Luther, the "demands"

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<sup>15</sup> Hill's citation from Hobbes alerts one to Renaissance uses of the word 'tyranny' and its cognates in reference to the oppressive force of civil exchanges. The OED cites several examples in which customs and civilities are the perceived tyrants: '**I538** STARKEY *England* I.iv.II5 We must shake of al such tyrannycal custumys and vnresonabyll bandys'; '**1611** SHAKS *Cymb.* I.i.84 O dissembling Curtesie! How fine this Tyrant Can tickle where she wounds?'; '**I665** BOYLE *Occas. Refl.* IV.xvii, That Tyrranous thing, which we misname Civility'; '**I706** WATTS *Horae Lyr.* II.xvi. (I743) I7I Custom, that Tyranness of Fools'; '**I730-46** THOMSON *Autumn* 222 When tyrant custom had not shackled man'; '**I847** HELPS *Friends in C.* I.viii.I32 Public opinion, the greatest tyrant of these times'. (Johnson cites the Cymbeline and Thomson examples in his dictionary.)

issued, at one and the same time, from the "bloudy" hierarchy of Rome and from the tyranny of original sin'.<sup>16</sup>

Hill's review work, unlike the work of appreciation he has set aside for prose collections, is often critical in the pejorative sense of that word - and sharply so.<sup>17</sup> Two particularly damning pieces of recent years are his essay on Isabel Rivers's work, Reason, Grace and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660-1780 and a short piece on Humphrey Carpenter's A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound.<sup>18</sup> Rivers's book, with its 'commodity cry' of 'accessibility', is judged to be complicit with 'the prevailing jargon of modern communication' so deplored by Hill, while Carpenter is condemned for the occasionally 'patronizing' tone of his work. Hill considers with foreboding how biographers are fast becoming the newly empowered patrons of literature, another tyrannical force to reckon with.

The relation between patrons and tyrants has preoccupied Hill since his earliest poems. His fascination

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<sup>16</sup> 'Of Diligence and Jeopardy' (review of Tyndale's New Testament, ed. by David Daniell, and The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha), Times Literary Supplement, 17 November 1989, pp. 1273-76 (p. 1275). The remarks made on Tyndale bear a significant similarity to Hill's observations about Thomas Vaughan in another recent article: 'He is both possessed by God and gripped by a sense of his own unworthiness [...] and of his own and others' subjection to Cromwellian republican tyranny'; see 'A Pharisee to Pharisees: Reflections on Vaughan's "The Night"', English, 38 (1989), 97-113 (p. 107).

<sup>17</sup> That this is nothing new, see, for instance, '"I in Another Place": Homage to Keith Douglas', Stand, 46.4 (1964), 6-13. The whole business of issuing a Selected Poems and promoting it evokes considerable disquiet in Hill.

<sup>18</sup> See 'Style and Faith', Times Literary Supplement, 27 December 1991, pp. 3-6, and '"The Age Demanded" (Again)', Agenda, 26.3 (autumn 1988), 10-12.

lies with the ways in which a writer, who traditionally relies upon patronage, such as that which a tyrant might provide, is capable also of playing the patron and, by implication, of playing the tyrant. It is these ideas which I consider in the following section, firstly by presenting a detailed exegesis of 'To the (Supposed) Patron' and then by discussing the poetry collected in For the Unfallen. In the course of this section, I also demonstrate that, despite the gulf between their critical procedures, Lowell's early poetry clearly had an influence upon Hill.

3. Supreme Patronage: 'For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958'  
(1959)

In general, the relationship between ruler and writer has been a mutually profitable one, if often uncomfortable. The writer needed patronage and the tyrant was the supreme patron; the ruler needed fame and the poet and historian could give it to him.<sup>1</sup>

These formulations of Maurice Latey's are apt, although one needs to add to them the customary perceptions that poets and historians seek fame also and that the pen has been the tyrant's enemy as well as his ally. In his poem 'To the (Supposed) Patron' (1958) Hill explores the complex relationship which exists between rulers and writers. He is aware that these positions can be shifting ones, and that the experience for either party might be a mixture of the 'profitable' and the 'uncomfortable'.

Prodigal of loves and barbecues,  
 Expert in the strangest faunas, at home  
 He considers the lilies, the rewards.  
 There is no substitute for a rich man.  
 At his first entering a new province  
 With new coin, music, the barest glancing  
 Of steel or gold suffices. There are many  
 Tremulous dreams secured under that head.  
 For his delight and his capacity  
 To absorb, freshly, the inside-succulence  
 Of untoughened sacrifice, his bronze agents  
 Speculate among convertible stones  
 And drink desert sand. That no mirage  
 Irritate his mild gaze, the lewd noonday  
 Is housed in cool places, and fountains  
 Salt the sparse haze. His flesh is made clean.  
 For the unfallen - the firstborn, or wise  
 Councillor - prepared vistas extend  
 As far as harvest; and idyllic death  
 Where fish at dawn ignite the powdery lake.  
 (HCP, p. 57)

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<sup>1</sup> Latey, p. 174. In this connection, the OED provides the following citations: '**I6I7** BP. HALL *Quo Vadis* §I8 Their late Patron..was, after his death, in their Pulpits proclaimed *Tyran*, and worse'; '**I876** GEO. ELIOT *Dan. Der.* III.xxv, To speak freely of a tyrannous patron behind his back'.

Two different character profiles might be drawn up to describe the subject of Hill's poem. One of these is an ironic portrait of a modern, materialistic lifestyle. Read in this way, the poem evokes the figure of a socialite, holding frequent barbecue parties and scattering his affection indiscriminately among a large number of acquaintances. A keen amateur botanist (perhaps even a prize-winning one), he also enjoys travelling - although his regard for cultural treasures is only as deep as his preoccupation with exchanging currency - or with the background music in his car. He enjoys raw steak, keeps the company of financial traders and avoids the midday sun in opulent surroundings. Everything in his physical environment is contrived to gratify the physical senses and blunt the moral ones. He keeps his mind distracted from the contemplation of failure, or indeed of mortality.

The other portrait which emerges from the same words bears many of the hallmarks of a proverbial tyrant. The opening words suggest sexual deviance, just as the man's interest in the 'strangest' natural phenomena implies an unhealthy fascination with the grotesque. The consideration of lilies and rewards in the third line implies a perversion of Christian ethics, and the vocabulary of the following two lines compounds disquiet on this score: a 'rich man' proverbially will not be seen 'entering' the 'new province' of God's kingdom. Furthermore, that entering of a province comes across as imperialistic exploit, while 'the barest glancing / Of steel or gold' implies bribery, or, worse, the bold flash of a naked sword.

Disturbing implications thicken in each successive clause. The 'tremulous' dreamer indulges his senses by feasting on raw meat as far as his 'capacity' allows him to. Seen in this light, the 'barbecues' of the first line are far more unsettling than might at first have been supposed; what flesh is it this man is feasting on? Pandering to each of his capricious whims are those mysterious 'bronze agents'. They 'drink desert sand': have they been done away with, converted to stone memorials among those other 'convertible stones'? The tyrant's manic perfectionist temperament is reflected in the contrived and luxuriant atmosphere of his palace. Nothing must irritate him. He takes a salt bath and has servants to clean his flesh. Those who have not yet died, 'the unfallen', have their fate waiting for them - like 'the firstborn' under Herod's reign or the 'wise / Councillor' whom the despotic ruler, out of paranoia or suspicion, proverbially turns against. There is a 'harvest' of death being planned; meanwhile the tyrant, withdrawn in his seclusion, tenderly feeds his pet fish.<sup>2</sup>

But who is this tyrant? Part of the answer, which several critics have pointed out, is that Hill is providing a metaphorical description of the critic's or reader's own activities. E.M. Knottenbelt, for instance, discovers in Hill's words the image of a

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<sup>2</sup> The title of Hill's volume For the Unfallen has a menacing aspect to it; it marks out those who have not yet met the fate of the war-victims whom Laurence Binyon commemorated in his poem, 'For the Fallen'. For other possible glosses on the title, see, for example, Henry Hart, The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 84 and Jeremy Hooker, 'For the Unfallen: A Sounding', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 20-30 (p. 23).

patronizing reader [...] coming to poetry as an imperialist comes upon a new country. With an eye for riches (gold and steel) and for exotic, foreign, things ('expert in the strangest fauna') he satisfies himself and his dreams of wealth and happiness with what can be easily got ('the inside-succulence / Of untoughened sacrifice') leaving aside what is not (the charred bits of barbecued meat).<sup>3</sup>

Henry Hart takes a similar line, capturing Hill's implied censure of the imagined complacent reader: 'His mild gaze and air-conditioned rooms protect him from the "lewd" holocausts, religious crises, literary revolts, and political upheavals which the poet is embroiled in'. The 'bronze agents' are imaginatively glossed by Hart as 'an intelligence bureau of athletic, well-tanned [...] literary critics' who decode a poem's 'cryptic inner meanings for the patron', the 'patron' in this case being Hill's reader. Self-deluded about their powers of discrimination, the critics are shown 'sweating over fiery charcoal (the convertible stones) and preparing poems so that patronizing readers, protected from the heats of imaginative creation, can relax and digest them in water-cooled rooms'.<sup>4</sup>

The analyses of Hart and Knottenbelt, though cogent and convincing, do not however take full account of Hill's carefully elaborated picture of a tyrant. Furthermore, they gloss over the tricky questions of reference which the title of Hill's poem provokes: is the 'patron' to whom it is dedicated necessarily also the person Hill describes in the

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<sup>3</sup> Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1990), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Hart, pp. 82-83. Hart pre-empts me by connecting Hill's poem to a statement made by Lowell about 'raw' and 'cooked' poetry; for this, see Staples, p. 13 and/or Hamilton, p. 277.

twenty lines of verse? Certainly, the reader could consider herself or himself to be Hill's patron, his paymaster in a sense and also the consumer of his meaty words. But is it reductive to suppose that the dedicatee is also or exclusively the poem's protagonist? Could not what Hill describes be applied as easily to the writer as to the reader of poetry? If this line is taken, does the poet therefore become the reader's patron? Is the poet also a tyrant?

As the title implies, Hill's poem issues a challenge to supposition. This is demonstrated first by the way in which Hill ironically discounts the possibility that his poem might be addressed to such a one as Richard Crashaw's '(supposed) Mistressse', that Platonic ideal lover pursued by the devout cleric; the very first word of the poem, 'prodigal', sets out to make this much clear. What is never resolved is whether 'prodigal' behaviour describes the practice of writing poetry or the experience of reading it. The 'expert' who harbours 'tremulous dreams' and a preoccupation with possible 'rewards' could just as well be the poet driven on by a combination of vanity and muddled inspiration as the ambitious literary specialist who talks poetry but lacks sufficient discernment.<sup>5</sup> The activities of glancing, absorbing, housing, and so forth, also imply the activities of a poet. And is it not poets, rather than

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Hooker acutely observes how 'the word "Tremulous" subtly invokes the over-refined nervous artistic sensibility which is familiar in the literature and well-to-do society of Europe, particularly since the Romantic movement'. See 'For the Unfallen: A Sounding', p. 24.

critics, who make an idyll out of death, as they contrive through elegies to glamorize the harshest of realities?

As the final line implies, this is highly charged poetry, with much disturbance going on below the patina of language. The lulling evocation of a tranquil setting, in which fish rise to the surface of a pond, is connected with the disturbing image of gunpowder primed to explode. Considering this line also in the context of the tyrant's blithe disregard for the suffering over which he has responsibility makes urgent the message of Hill's art: neither poet nor reader should be lulled into complacency by aesthetic images which distract the eye from unwelcome considerations.

'To the (Supposed) Patron' is about the connections and conflicts between poet, critic and tyrant. They are mutually dependent, but also mutually antagonistic. When, in his 1986 Clark lecture 'Unhappy Circumstances', Hill discussed Dryden's ambiguously couched dedications of his work to the aristocracy, he observed how

flattery of the patron is embedded in the same stratum of speech and expectation as the self-justification of the patronized. (EC, p. 13)

The same may be said of 'To the (Supposed) Patron': it taunts its exegetes, even as it flatters them by giving the impression of being a set-piece poem about readership.<sup>6</sup> It has a spirit of 'self-justification' which prevents it from being 'patronized' by the superficial attention of critics. Yet it is as self-punitive as it is self-justificatory: the

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<sup>6</sup> There may be a gap of some thirty years between the poem and the essay on Dryden from which I quote but the possibilities of conscious self-glossing in Hill's prose, even over such an interval of time, ought not to be discounted.

tyrannous critic whom Hill warns against is inseparable from the tyrant he sees in the figure of the poet. He suspects that his operations as a writer might have parallels in the activities and thoughts of tyrants, that his work may be an elaborate contrivance, an act of vanity, and, furthermore, that the relish of barbaric impulses which he denounces is his own in the act of writing such poetry.

To fantasize a menacing world is in a sense to create it; this notion is dramatized throughout For the Unfallen. It is also a major preoccupation for Hill in the uncollected poems published prior to his first collection. Among these is 'An Ark on the Flood', which, in its descriptions of a 'clamouring sea' and in its references to Moby-Dick, owes an obvious debt to Lowell's 'A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket'. It also, however, questions the Lowellian magniloquence it affects; while revelling in an apocalyptic rhetoric, the poem ironizes its own oracular power.<sup>7</sup> The same may be said for 'Genesis', the opening poem of For the Unfallen. The baroque violence of the piece is again reminiscent of early Lowell (and also of Isaac Rosenberg), as the artist-protagonist, with his Promethean pretensions, threatens to rival God. The poem warns of the dangers of mythopoesis and afflatus by way of a demonstration of their properties:

And the third day I cried: 'Beware  
The soft-voiced owl, the ferret's smile,  
The hawk's deliberate stoop in air,  
Cold eyes, and bodies hooped in steel,  
Forever bent upon the kill.' (HCP, p. 15)

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<sup>7</sup> 'An Ark on the Flood', The Isis, 10 March 1954, p. 18. For an account of Hill's uncollected early work, see Hart, pp. 1-24.

More a destruction myth than a creation myth, the poem rises to a rhetorical resolution which posits the possibility of divine redress - but the redemption symbolized by the paradigm of God's death and resurrection through Christ necessarily involves further pain:

By blood we live, the hot, the cold,  
To ravage and redeem the world:  
There is no bloodless myth will hold. (p. 16)

The schemes of Christian soldiers to 'redeem the world' in God's name have brought much bloodshed.

Rhythmically and metrically, 'Genesis', like many of the early poems, is 'pent up into a region of pure force'.<sup>8</sup>

The taut, rigorous effects created through the insistent rhymes and line-beats is augmented by claustrophobic repetition of crucial words - as with 'blood' and 'bloodless'. This is another Lowellian touch - one might compare the line, 'The Child is Born in blood, O child of blood' in 'New Year's Day' (PNT, p. 17) - and it recurs in the tenth line of Hill's meditation on those warring medieval tyrants, 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings':

For whom the possessed sea littered, on both shores,  
Ruinous arms; being fired, and for good,  
To sound the constitution of just wars,  
Men, in their eloquent fashion, understood.

Relieved of soul, the dropping-back of dust,  
Their usage, pride, admitted within doors;  
At home, under caved chantries, set in trust,  
With well-dressed alabaster and proved spurs  
They lie; they lie; secure in the decay  
Of blood, blood-marks, crowns hacked and coveted,  
Before the scouring fires of trial-day  
Alight on men; before sleeked groin, gored head,  
Budge through the clay and gravel, and the sea  
Across daubed rock evacuates its dead. (HCP, p. 29)

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<sup>8</sup> 'God's Little Mountain', HCP, p. 17.

The corpse-'littered' ocean is reminiscent of 'A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' - and more particularly of Eliot's 'Dry Salvages': 'The sea [...] tosses up our losses [...] And the gear of foreign dead men. [...] We cannot think [...] of an ocean not littered with wastage.'<sup>9</sup>

In Lowell's Prometheus Bound, the character Ocean takes the side of surrender, servitude and compromise. Prometheus levels this charge at him:

You have changed. You are now an echo of power, a soft echo rolling back and forth between tyrant and victim, explaining tyrant to victim, and victim to tyrant ... always explaining and softening, an echo that no longer understands what it echoes. (PE, p. 17)

The sea does not 'understand' its function in Hill's poem either, as it washes up its ambiguous contents. The watery dominion is 'possessed' by those who fight to own it in naval battles; and although it has taken possession of the dead, it is in turn 'possessed' by the ghosts of all who have died in it. There is menacing uncertainty as to what the sea yields, and the way in which it does this: does the phrase 'ruinous arms' denote severed limbs, weapons ('being fired') or the heraldry of warfare? And does 'littered' mean 'thrown out' (like garbage) or 'scattered' - or should one take up other etymological possibilities and read the word as a reference to the act of giving birth, or the provision of bedding?

Like the ocean, Hill's poem itself can be read as 'an echo of power' which rolls back and forth between tyrant and victim, explaining each to the other, but which 'no longer

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<sup>9</sup> 'Four Quartets, III. The Dry Salvages', Selected Poems, pp. 205-07.

understands what it echoes'. In its 'eloquent fashion', the poem claims to understand the nature of warfare, but the manifold duplicities of language (not least the words 'eloquent' and 'fashion') expose this as trickery. There can be no 'just wars'. Moreover, wars are never 'just wars', a list of battles and events which an historian - or in this case a would-be historical poet - might chronicle. They involve personal matters - and personal suffering - beyond any pretence of comprehension on the part of retrospective witnesses.

'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' considers the facility and the falsity of historical recreation. As it echoes the power of the subject it meditates, so it becomes embroiled in that power. Its theme is the connection between the pride of tyrants and poetic pride. 'Well-dressed alabaster' implies the servant's flattery of his tyrannical patron and simultaneously the way in which poetic language dresses up historical event. Those 'proved spurs', then, are both the tyrant's spurs of weaponry proven in battle and the activities of the poet who would earn his spurs through presenting a distorted account of such exploits in his writing.

The insistence Hill places on the ambiguity of the word 'lie' recalls Lowell's 'The Holy Innocents' ('Child, how still you lie' - PNT, p. 14). It also intriguingly brings to mind Philip Larkin's line in 'An Arundel Tomb': 'They would not think to lie so long'. Larkin's poem considers how 'time has transfigured [...] into untruth' an earl and countess whose likenesses are carved on their stone tomb. The 'bone-riddled ground' of the graveyard they inhabit is

strewn with 'a bright / Litter of birdcalls': life and death occupy the same ground and conduct an ironic dialogue.<sup>10</sup>

The affinity with Hill's poem which the words 'lie' and 'litter' suggest ends there, however. Larkin's ironies are quiet and polite; there is a coyness and reserve to 'An Arundel Tomb', as there is to his work generally, and a peculiar combination of genuine nostalgia for lost truths and customs with self-distrust at his own nostalgic tendencies. If Larkin is taken as the epitome of the 'Movement' sensibility prevalent in British poetry of the 1950s, one can begin to judge to what extent Hill's poetry, with its savage ironies and violent distrust of decorum, sharply contrasts with the literary consensus of the times.<sup>11</sup>

Hill's graveyards are more reminiscent of Tate's and Lowell's than of Larkin's. 'The Distant Fury of Battle' locates itself in the same territory as 'Ode to the Confederate Dead' and 'For the Union Dead':

Grass resurrects to mask, to strangle,  
Words glossed on stone, lopped stone angel;  
But the dead maintain their ground [...]  
Union with the stone-wearing dead

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<sup>10</sup> Collected Poems, 2nd edn, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell and Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 110. The poem is dated 20 February 1956, while Hill ascribes the year 1955 to 'Requiem for the Plantagenet Kings' in For the Unfallen (London: André Deutsch, 1959), p. 30. (Years of composition in this volume are not reproduced in Hill's Collected Poems). On 'lies', see also Ricks, Force of Poetry, pp. 369-91.

<sup>11</sup> It is ironic that the only poem of Hill's which Larkin selected for publication in the anthology he edited should have been 'In Memory of Jane Fraser', the poem from For the Unfallen of which Hill expressed an intense dislike when he printed a revised version of it in the postscript to King Log (London: André Deutsch, 1968). See The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973; repr. 1985), p. 608.

Claims the born leader, the prepared  
 Leader, the devourers and all lean men. (HCP, p. 26)<sup>12</sup>

'Grass' and 'mask', 'strangle' and 'angel', 'glossed and lopped', 'leader', 'leader' and 'lean', 'stone', 'stone' and 'stone': the harsh reality of death is insisted upon by the Owenesque assonance and by the heavy verse tread. As the words eat at each other, so people feed and are fed upon. Death preys on the living, but the imagination is a reciprocal predator, taking sustenance from the dead as matter for poetry. This devouring, as in 'To the (Supposed) Patron', has a hint of the tyrannical about it: the tyrant, neither 'born' for leadership nor 'prepared' for it, seizes power and devours his victims like 'lean' meat. This is a particularly vicious and self-punitive metaphor for the way in which the poetic imagination operates.

Hill's abiding preoccupation is 'the invidious connection between the abuse of language and political destruction'.<sup>13</sup> The poet who indulges in apocalyptic fantasy is like the leader who misuses his authority: each serves the gods of destruction. Neil Corcoran has summarized the point well:

The suspicion about fundamental motivation in poetry, as in political power, is Hill's major theme; neither politician nor poet really have a conversation with the dead; they give a voice of their own to the dead, ventriloquising on their behalf, but inevitably using them for their own

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<sup>12</sup> Compare 'Of Commerce and Society, 4': 'Statesmen have known visions. And, not alone, / Artistic men prod dead men from their stone' (HCP, p. 49).

<sup>13</sup> Hart, p. 70.

purposes too, to make policies and to make poems.<sup>14</sup>

In his subsequent volume, King Log, Hill intensifies the suspicion about his own fundamental motivations as a poet. He fears robbing the dead, even as he gives voice to them.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Negotiations: Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill', in English Poetry since 1940 (Harlow and New York: Longman, 1993), pp. 112-27 (p. 122).

4. 'Cleansing' and 'Killing': 'King Log' (1968)

'We Get the Rulers We Deserve': in the Penguin edition of Aesop's Fables, this is the title-heading for the tale which contrasts two types of government. Contemptuous of the log which presides over their pond, a group of frogs petition Zeus for a new monarch, and are duly sent a water-snake which devours them. Hence the summary: 'this fable teaches us that we are better off with an indolent and harmless ruler than with a mischief-making tyrant'.<sup>1</sup> Aesop's moral informs the poems of King Log - poems which are centrally concerned with 'matters of power and commandment'.<sup>2</sup>

Hill devises his poems in the manner of 'Aesopian strategies or devices'. The phrase is Daniel Weissbort's and occurs (though not apropos of Hill) in his introduction to The Poetry of Survival: Post-War Poets of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>3</sup> Here, Weissbort describes how the oblique tactics of many poets in this anthology arose as a reaction to totalitarianism or censorship, and how these tactics opened up opportunities for resourcefulness while also bringing risks of compromise. Hill has not had to write under such repressive conditions but he does write about them - a situation which brings its own opportunities and risks. His poems communicate intense misgivings about the

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<sup>1</sup> Fables of Aesop, trans. by A.S. Handford, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964; repr. 1971), p. 44. In the medieval version of the tale, it is a stork that gobbles up the frogs.

<sup>2</sup> In the epigraph to King Log, Hill cites from Francis Bacon's The Advancement of Learning (1605): 'From moral virtue let us pass on to matters of power and commandment ...'. This quotation is not reproduced in Hill's Collected Poems.

<sup>3</sup> 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 18-19.

enterprise of addressing such sensitive issues as tyranny and the victims of tyranny.

It is not just in the much-discussed poems explicitly on political themes - such as 'Two Formal Elegies (for the Jews in Europe)' (HCP, p. 30), 'Ovid in the Third Reich' (p. 61), and 'September Song' (p. 67) - that Hill explores the links between art and atrocity. The two sonnets headed 'Annunciations', for instance, give voice to Hill's anxieties about the same links. In the first of these two peculiarly cryptic fables, words themselves are tyrants:

The Word has been abroad, is back, with a tanned look  
 From its subsistence in the stiffening-mire.  
 Cleansing has become killing, the reward  
 Touchable, overt, clean to the touch.  
 Now at a distance from the steam of beasts,  
 The loathly neckings and fat shook spawn  
 (Each specimen-jar fed with delicate spawn)  
 The searchers with the curers sit at meat  
 And are satisfied. Such precious things put down  
 And the flesh eased through turbulence the soul  
 Purples itself; each eye squats full and mild  
 While all who attend to fiddle or to harp  
 For betterment, flavour their decent mouths  
 With gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice. (HCP, p. 62)

The 'sweetest sacrifice', from a Christian viewpoint, is the death of Christ. In one sense, the poem is about God's Word made flesh - the event prophesied in the 'Annunciation' of the Angel Gabriel to Mary. As the final clause implies, the poem is also about the subsequent consummation of that flesh in Holy Communion. Yet the feasting on flesh which Hill describes - or, as Lowell once put it, on 'the flesh and gristle of the Word' - is hardly reverent; it is more of a barbaric rite than a sacrament.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The phrase in quotation marks is from 'Charles the Fifth and the Peasant' (PNT, p. 47).

The 'killing' of Christ by man conventionally makes possible the 'cleansing' of souls, but here the roles are reversed: 'cleansing has become killing'. The phrase makes one think more of 'ethnic cleansing' (a phrase which Hill's poem predates) than of redemptive sacrifice. One might think too of the tyrant in 'To the (Supposed) Patron' whose 'flesh is made clean' but who is all the time premeditating murder. 'Annunciations' shares with that poem also an ambiguity between holiday-making and imperial conquest. In trying to discern what has gone on 'abroad', and what 'reward' has been obtained, the reader struggles to distinguish grisly battle-scenes (the 'loathly neckings' of decapitations, the corpses 'stiffening' in the 'mire') from impressions of a botanical or hunting expedition. The traveller returns home with a suntan, with blood-money (which leaves the hands clean) and with choice specimens of plundered life-forms. The sexual connotations of Hill's language compound the sense of debasement attached to these activities.

It is language itself which has been devalued; the incarnation of God's 'precious' Word has been 'put down'. The phrase 'put down' has multiple connotations: of condescending denigration, of the 'putting down' of an animal - or of Christ in his condition as a human animal. To 'put down' is also to set down in words. It is as if the very act of writing implicates the writer in all the other negative connotations which the phrase describes. There is another possible connotation, too: the laying down of dishes as for a feast. It is words which are to be devoured at this feast - and words are also the devourers. Hill's

conceits are self-consummating; he gnaws away guiltily at his own language.

Hill himself has provided a commentary on the poem, in the course of which he remarks,

I should take lines 6 and 7 as the key antithesis around which the section moves: 'fat shook spawn' v. 'delicate spawn'. Line 6 stands for pain, lust, in the blubbery world; line 7 for pain, lust, by the time it is distilled by the connoisseurs. The connoisseur is as likely to be the poet as the critic. The 'setting' of this section is a banquet where the men who have been hunting the beasts (the searchers) are in a mood of mutual adulation with the chemists and distillers and picklers and putters-right (the curers).<sup>5</sup>

The 'connoisseur' Hill describes in his poem bears some resemblance to the king of barbecues in 'To the (Supposed) Patron'; he also calls to mind the image of the poet as a 'connoisseur of blood' in the fourth poem of the sequence 'Of Commerce and Society', (HCP, p. 49). The Word who is lord of ceremonies at the 'poetry banquet' is attended by sycophantic language-users, by those who 'fiddle and harp, in the vulgar sense of the term', who 'pull strings to get on (they try to "better themselves")'.<sup>6</sup> The master they serve has proven himself tyrannical through abuses of his own prerogatives. Hill is implying that there is a correlation between complacent self-satisfaction with regard to the exercise of language - described here in images of satiety - and the perpetration of atrocities.

His poem feeds on lust and suffering for its meat. It is a critique of 'taste', of what is 'decent' and what

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<sup>5</sup> The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse 1918-60, ed. by Kenneth Allott, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962; repr. 1971), pp. 391-92.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 392.

indecent in language. In a review-article on the second edition of the OED, Hill points out that there is 'a sharp discrepancy between the remarkable accuracy of philological knowledge and the postprandial murmuring of literary "taste"'.<sup>7</sup> The distinction between degradation of language at the 'poetry banquet' and the remarkably accurate 'philological knowledge' which Hill exercises in composing 'Annunciations' could be taken as a mark of Hill's own decency in exposing indecencies. But he does not exonerate himself so easily: the imagery is in bad taste and the poet knows it.

If the first poem is about the tyrannical potentialities of language, the second sonnet of 'Annunciations' entertains the possibilities of linguistic redress. It does not confirm belief in such possibilities, however. Love is the focus of Hill's concerns - that quality which is 'forever being pledged to be redeemed'. This phrase, as Michael Edwards has observed, 'compromises vows and purification with the routines of pawnbroking'.<sup>8</sup> 'Love', like 'the Word', finds itself devalued through association with material covetousness and, as the poem goes on to illustrate, with lust and repugnance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 'Common Weal, Common Woe', Times Literary Supplement, 21 April 1989, pp. 411-14 (p. 412).

<sup>8</sup> 'Hill's Imitations', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 159-71 (p. 168).

<sup>9</sup> The idea of love as carnal and predatory is entertained in the third of Hill's 'Three Baroque Meditations', 'The Dead Bride' (HCP, p. 91) and (more obliquely) in the subsequent sequence, 'The Songbook of Sebastian Arrurruz' (pp. 92-102). This marks a development of ideas dramatized in earlier poems such as 'The Turtle Dove' (p. 23) and 'The Troublesome Reign' (p. 24).

It is hard, too, to love God, or to believe in a loving God, in a world of so much suffering. This predicament in turn makes it difficult to distinguish divine grace from divine vengeance, as one phrase in the poem, 'Our God scatters corruption', suggests:

The 'germ', I think, is the key phrase in line 11. 'Our God scatters corruption' = 'Our God puts corruption to flight' or 'Our God disseminates corruption.' I may have been thinking of Mr. Dulles's idea of God as Head of Strategic Air Command.<sup>10</sup>

The phrase to which Hill draws attention may allude to Lowell's poem 'Winter in Dunbarton': presiding over a spiritual ice-world, the malign deity of Lowell's imaginings is like a 'snow-monster' who 'wipes the coke-fumes from his eyes / And scatters his corruption' (PNT, p. 33).<sup>11</sup>

A conception of redress as divine retribution is something which Hill and Lowell hold in common. It is an underlying preoccupation in For the Unfallen and continues to unsettle Hill's theological concerns in the poems of King Log. The three poem sequence 'Locust Songs' provides a particularly pertinent connection with Lowell's fixations in his early work, since here Hill reads American history as the manifestation of God's nemesis. The second poem, entitled 'Good Husbandry', considers the Calvinist myth of natural divinity leading to a new world - but it is a myth based on the suppression of genocidal realities:

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<sup>10</sup> Allott, p. 392.

<sup>11</sup> Hart also points out this connection with Lowell's poem (p. 94). There is a Lowellian aspect to Hill's 'An Order of Service' as well: the poem describes one who is 'the surveyor of his own ice-world', an extreme ascetic with a 'blank [...] gaze'; his indulgence in self-deprivation is met with 'renunciation's glare' (HCP, p. 68).

Out of the foliage of sensual pride  
 Those teeming apples. Summer burned well  
 The dramatic flesh; made work for pride  
 Forking into the tender mouths of Hell

Heaped windfalls, pulp for the Gadarene  
 Squealers. This must be our reward:  
 To smell God writhing over the rich scene.  
 Gluttons for wrath, we stomach our reward. (HCP, p. 64)

Again that word 'reward' is insisted upon. Here, it is a form of grim, ironic retribution. The Puritan imagination, which has accounted for the destruction and damnation of so many, receives its just reward: it is unable to enjoy the paradisaical New World it has constructed on the bones of the dead. Like the words which devour themselves in 'Annunciations', the zealots are consigned to self-devouring contemplations. They are also consigned to unending cycles of conquest and defeat, as the third poem of 'Locust Songs', with its references to the atrocities of the American Civil War, implies (p. 65).

The brutalities of warfare cannot be dissociated from whatever religious and linguistic formalities impel or justify them: such thinking informs Hill's sequence of poems on 'the period popularly but inexactly known as the Wars of the Roses' (HCP, p. 200). 'Funeral Music' traces connections between action and ideology, between the horrors of war and fanatical belief-systems. Averroism is the subject of the fourth poem of the sequence. The twelfth-century Spanish philosopher Averroes held that the mortal and eternal realms were linked by the agency of one divine intellect.<sup>12</sup> In an interview, Hill described his response to such ideas:

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<sup>12</sup> See Etienne Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), p. 224.

Averroism was the doctrine of monopsychism, that is, that there's only one single Intellect, or 'intellective' soul for the whole of humanity, and it seemed to me at first sight a most comforting doctrine - the idea that all kinds of personal guilt, a burden of culpability for all eternity, might be absorbed and absolved in that one 'Intellect' - but afterwards I felt it was not a doctrine to be embraced at all; it seemed to be the archetype of the totalitarian state. [...] What at first seemed comforting ended up being desolate, rather like one of those beautiful but terrifying fairy stories where one enters a palace which is either totally empty or full of sleeping people, a dead sleep which is lit by blazing torches, never replenished and yet never extinguished.<sup>13</sup>

His comments help to elucidate the last seven lines of

'Funeral Music, 4':

Averroes, old heathen,  
If only you had been right, if Intellect  
Itself were absolute law, sufficient grace,  
Our lives could be a myth of captivity  
Which we might enter: an unpeopled region  
Of ever new-fallen snow, a palace blazing  
With perpetual silence as with torches. (HCP, p. 73)<sup>14</sup>

The danger of the vision lies in its fable-like simplicity. Belief in a divinely ordained intellectual spirit which unites people is a myth which people might willingly subscribe to. In doing so, they would make themselves captives of that Lowellian ice-world which Hill repeatedly envisages in his poems. The intellect, wielding 'absolute law', would become a tyrannical force, silencing opposition in his palace as one might silence life 'with torches'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Haffenden, pp. 98-99.

<sup>14</sup> Compare the landscape of blazing snow in Lowell's 'Napoleon Crosses the Berezina' (PNT, p. 44). The battle of Towton which Hill focuses on in 'Funeral Music' is referred to by Lowell in 'The Hunt' (NB, p. 193), a poem subsequently reworked as 'Dream' (DOL, p. 34).

<sup>15</sup> Eric Griffiths explores connections between the intellect and dictatorship (referring to this poem of Hill's) on pp. 172-73 of 'Hill's Criticism: A Life of Form'.

Hill's poem explores the notion that 'the political intellect must tap the common ground of unreasoned intuitions, although, as Hill realizes, this way is dangerous. The instinctual politician is often the demagogic tyrant'.<sup>16</sup> Poets, too, by indulging their 'instinctual' tendencies, their 'unreasoned intuitions', court the same dangers. Hill's attraction to 'the idea that all kinds of personal guilt [...] might be absorbed and absolved in that one "Intellect"' is, he knows, not to be trusted; the cleansing of one's conscience is too close to the killing off of those doubts and misgivings so necessary to his own poetry.

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<sup>16</sup> Hart, p. 135.

5. 'Signatures and Retributions': 'Mercian Hymns' (1971)

A law-maker, a diplomat, an entrepreneur, a patentor of coins, a chronicler, a social engineer, a land-organizer, an architect: the Anglo-Saxon King Offa was, according to legend, an impressive political chameleon. Geoffrey Hill distrusts legends. That he is also susceptible to their allure accounts for the ambivalent response he professed in interview towards the eighth-century patriarch:

Since Offa seems to have been on the whole a rather hateful man who nonetheless created forms of government and coinage which compel one's admiration, this image of a tyrannical creator of order and beauty is, if you like, an objective correlative for the inevitable feelings of love and hate which any man or woman must feel for the *patria*.<sup>1</sup>

Offa is an 'objective correlative' also for the poet who gives expression to these contrary feelings. Mercian Hymns compels one's admiration by its creation of 'order and beauty' - but poetic creation itself is to be distrusted as potentially 'tyrannical'.

Hill's sequence of 'Hymns' is both a celebration and an indictment of the mystique of English heritage. It is, simultaneously, a celebration and an indictment of its own procedures. The opening roll-call of Offa's achievements hovers uncertainly between panegyric and mere sloganizing ('Hymn I').<sup>2</sup> When the king responds with pleasure to the litany of his own accomplishments, like a tyrant revelling in the flattery, one is alerted to the thin line which can exist between salutation and sycophancy. From the outset,

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<sup>1</sup> Haffenden, p. 94

<sup>2</sup> To avoid cluttering my text in this section, I omit individual poem titles and page numbers, and simply cite in parentheses the relevant hymn number.

Hill exhibits self-distrust at the project of historical commemoration upon which he has embarked.

Also from the outset, he draws attention to the artifice of his art. The prose-poems of Mercian Hymns are overtly contrived in blocked-out forms. These 'versets of rhythmical prose' forcibly unite or abruptly sever their verbal constituents.<sup>3</sup> They are imposing, and they impose upon the reader their own status as constructs. This is in keeping with the theme of construction which they explore: the building of settlements and roads, of Offa's dyke itself. Conversely, the way in which words are often broken violently across line-breaks is expressive not so much of construction as of disruption: of the land-divisions, class-divisions and fissures in communication which are also aspects of interest to Hill.<sup>4</sup>

Benefactor or tyrant? It is tricky in the opening prose-poems of Mercian Hymns to know what to make of Hill's re-imagined monarch. Trickery is in the language, as the second piece, with its elaborate punning on the word Offa, 'a name to conjure with', indicates.<sup>5</sup> Praise and deflation go hand in hand: in the third poem, Offa is unceremoniously reincarnated as the master of ceremonies at a barbecue held

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<sup>3</sup> Haffenden, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> In his notes to the text, Hill refers the reader to 'the Latin prose-hymns or canticles of the early Christian Church' (HCP, pp. 201-02). These provided him with a model for his prose-poems. Taking a cue from Hill's essay 'Redeeming the Time', one could talk of the 'liturgical prose' of Mercian Hymns: 'the collects of the Anglican Church are composed of liturgical prose; they could properly be said to possess rhythm, though not metre' (LL, p. 89).

<sup>5</sup> Compare Lowell's 'Black Mud, a name to conjure with', in 'Colloquy in Black Rock' (PNT, p. 15).

in the car-park of a public house. He presides over his subjects, demonstrating an unreliably 'brisk largesse' - as if his charity is in short supply. The poet is in a parallel position, subjecting the historical figure of Offa to an unreliable treatment; the king's status is altered briskly in accord with the author's poetic designs.

Hill displays a speed of association akin to that which he commended in the poetry of Swift: the 'power to move with fluid rapidity from private to public utterance and from the formal to the intimate in the space of a few lines'; he notes how Swift, 'as a poet, [...] could represent personal predicaments emblematically and turn private crisis into public example' (LL, p. 68). Mercian Hymns has just these qualities. It is concerned, as the epigraph from C.H. Sisson suggests, with the relation between 'the conduct of government' and 'the conduct of private persons'.<sup>6</sup> In particular, it traces the connection between the private experiments of a power-playing child and the public conduct of a statesman. Martin Dodsworth has put it succinctly: 'The poems are written in the consciousness that a child may be king in his own imagined kingdom and that a king may act out childish impulses'.<sup>7</sup>

Hill himself has elaborated upon the connection between boy and monarch:

The murderous brutality of Offa as a political animal seems again an objective correlative for the ambiguities of English history in general, as a means of trying to encompass and accommodate the

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<sup>6</sup> Mercian Hymns (London: André Deutsch, 1971); this epigraph is not reprinted in Collected Poems.

<sup>7</sup> 'Mercian Hymns: Offa, Charlemagne and Geoffrey Hill', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 49-61 (p. 52).

early humiliations and fears of one's own childhood and also one's discovery of the tyrannical streak in oneself as a child.<sup>8</sup>

The notion that trying to make sense of one's national history is like trying to make sense of one's personal history brings Lowell to mind. The violent fantasies which Lowell documents in recalling his early self in, for instance, 'My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow' have their parallels with the semi-autobiographical descriptions of a whim-driven boyhood which Hill provides in Mercian Hymns.<sup>9</sup>

Hill evokes the 'rich and desolate childhood' (V) of a withdrawn, scholarly boy, one who entertains dreams of grandeur and exercises playful prerogatives in the realm of his imagination. Immured from harsh realities, the boy indulges in romanticized fantasies of warfare (XXII). In the seventh 'Hymn', he also manifests the murderous instinct of an incipient tyrant. The child surveys the imaginary kingdom of his rural locale:

Gasholders, russet among fields. Milldams, marlpools  
that lay unstirring. Eel-swarms. Coagulations of  
frogs: once, with branches and half-bricks, he  
battered a ditchful; then sidled away from the  
stillness and silence.

Ceolred was his friend and remained so, even after  
the day of the lost fighter: a biplane, already  
obsolete and irreplaceable, two inches of heavy  
snub silver. Ceolred let it spin through a hole  
in the classroom-floorboards, softly, into the

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<sup>8</sup> Haffenden, p. 94.

<sup>9</sup> Compare also Hill's remarks on Lowell's 'Mr. Edwards and the Spider': 'here, formal commination jerks to-and-fro in the hyperbole of a fearfully boasting child'; the poem has, to Hill's ear, 'both the tone of magisterial dogmatism and the note of childish exaggeration'. See 'Robert Lowell: "Contrasts and Repetitions"', Essays in Criticism, 13 (1963), 188-97 (p. 192).

rat-droppings and coins.

After school he lured Ceolred, who was sniggering with fright, down to the old quarries, and flayed him. Then, leaving Ceolred, he journeyed for hours, calm and alone, in his private derelict sandlorry named *Albion*.<sup>10</sup>

The 'gasholders' at the start of the poem might be rusting (unexploded?) gas canisters, reminders of a war which only distantly impinges on the child's awareness. The vague threat of these objects lends a menacing aspect to the 'unstirring' scene, just as the 'stillness and silence' after the child's destructive act in the ditch is charged with an air of unspecified, latent revulsion.<sup>11</sup>

The lost biplane is another reminder of a war more fantasized about than abhorred. Hill recounts, with a characteristic display of sardonic wit, a childhood episode in which the dearly prized toy (already then a historical rarity itself) was consigned to oblivion by Offa's classmate Ceolred.<sup>12</sup> The 'snub silver' of the model plane anticipates the 'snub' to come. Parodying the proverbial notion that tyrants turn against their friends, Hill describes Offa's 'dereliction' (only a temporary one) of his

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<sup>10</sup> Using a standard computer keyboard, I have not been able to replicate the lineation of the 'Hymns'; the even left-hand and right-hand edges in Hill's text in fact depend upon an uneven distribution of characters and spaces across each line: another instance of Hill drawing attention to the artifice of his own methods.

<sup>11</sup> The child is like the stork or snake who destroys the frogs in Aesop's fable. Hill's first stanza is reminiscent of Lowell's 'Dunbarton', in which the poet describes how as a child he once took his grandfather's cane, 'more a weapon than a crutch. / I lanced it in the fauve ooze for newts' (LS, p. 80). One might also compare the tortoise-torture of 'The Neo-Classical Urn' (FUD, p. 47).

<sup>12</sup> Ceolred is the name of the Anglo-Saxon king who reigned from 709-16 (see Hart, p. 171); Offa's dates of rule were 757-96.

friendship with Ceolred. The word 'flayed' lends a gladiatorial aspect to the child's violent deed, an effect compounded by his driving a 'sandlorry' - as if it were the chariot of a victorious warrior.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than victoriousness, however, the 'Hymn' ends by conveying a sense of loneliness; the instinct to shun the company of others is a defining characteristic of the boyhood which Hill recreates in this sequence. Mercian Hymns, like many of the poems of Robert Lowell, is concerned with the nature of solipsistic self-preoccupation. It is not that the poetry is simply a display of complex subjectivity; Hill responded to this idea in interview by saying 'I think it is less solipsistic than that description suggests. I was not merely interested in the phenomenon of my own sensibility'.<sup>14</sup> He does, however, display an interest in the connection between a subjective, egotistic sensibility and tyrannical impulses. This is evident, for instance, in 'Hymn X':

He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony,  
assorted prize pens, the seals of gold and base  
metal into which he had sunk his name.

It was there that he drew upon grievances from the  
people; attended to signatures and retributions;

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<sup>13</sup> 'Is Blake's Albion, the Albion of the poets, carrier of a potent myth or romance of national identity, now at most only a "private derelict sandlorry", only useful for an imaginative child's private game?': Jeremy Hooker, The Presence of the Past: Essays on Modern British and American Poetry (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), pp. 22-28 (p. 25).

<sup>14</sup> Haffenden, p. 94. Hill also speaks of the 'peril of lapsing into a dangerous solipsism', a risk which faces the poet who 'pretends to be wholly unaware of any other mind or spirit with whom he would communicate' (p. 81). In the essay 'What Devil has Got into John Ransom?' (1980), Hill warns against 'the coercive force of "common usage" and the solipsistic free-for-all' (LL, p. 125).

forgave the death-howls of his rival. And there he exchanged gifts with the Muse of History.

What should a man make of remorse, that it might profit his soul? Tell me. Tell everything to Mother, darling, and God bless.

He swayed in sunlight, in mild dreams. He tested the little pears. He smeared catmint on his palm for his cat Smut to lick. He wept, attempting to master *ancilla* and *servus*.

Material objects are loved for the way in which they lend themselves to the pursuit of self-aggrandizement. Hill's double-vision, however, always keeps self-aggrandizement in check by means of self-deflation: the king who drafts charters, issues execution-writs and collates his nation's history, is not so different from a boy who practises how to write his signature, keeps a diary of personal grumbles and attends to his history homework.

The tyrant is child-like in his self-absorption, solipsistically immured from the realities over which he exercises judgement. The redress of his people's grievances involves the making of life and death decisions which can be decided on a whim. The tyrant's signature is like a seal of doom: it is synonymous with redress in its dark guise as retribution.<sup>15</sup> Even a display of forgiveness is only a retrospective pardon for the screams of a rival whose death he has overseen. From the tyrant's point of view, there is no profit to be had from remorse - although his mercilessness is ironically confounded by the Gospel-like cadences in Hill's language.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Compare 'Hymn XVI': 'Attributes assumed, retribution entertained'.

<sup>16</sup> 'What should it profit a man, that he gain the whole world and lose his life?': Matthew 16. 26, Mark 8. 36.

Hill demonstrates how the child inhabits the tyrant and the tyrant the child. In the process, the typical psychological history of a tyrant's personal evolution is recreated. As Latey notes, the domestic source of despotic rule customarily depends upon the 'predominant influence of the mother' over the incipient tyrant.<sup>17</sup> Here, the maternal presence has the double-edged function of being both the child's comforter and his interrogator. Withdrawn in solitude, the boy indulges in idle dreams and derives gratification from immediate sense-impressions; the language of the final stanza is obscure, but there is a sense in which his nascent puberty is unsettlingly linked in some way to the deviant sexual propensities one associates with tyrants.<sup>18</sup>

The poem ends, as it began, by considering the connection between language and mastery. The child who struggles to learn the Latin names for maidservant and manservant is in the process of mastering the concepts; the tyrant puts those concepts into reality. Hill shows how the exercise of power can issue from a desk - the king's, the child's, and also the poet's. The line 'he exchanged gifts with the Muse of History' in particular makes one mindful of poetic activity. The poet's 'gift' for reimagining history is a dubious one; it might involve transforming fact into

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<sup>17</sup> Latey, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Lowell's 'Caligula' springs to mind as a comparison: it dramatizes the violent fantasies which accompany the onset of adolescence, and which prefigure the tyrannical adult behaviour to come: 'Your mind burned, you were God, a thousand plans / ran zig-zag, zig-zag. You began to dance / for joy, and called your menials to arrange / deaths for the gods. You worshipped your great change, / took a cold bath, and rolled your genitals / until they shrank to marbles ...' (FUD, p. 50).

legend - just as Offa's activities resemble the deceptive deeds of an alchemist, one who transforms base metal into gold.

'Hymn XI' is also about the alteration of metal; it is also about the treachery of language.

Coins handsome as Nero's; of good substance and weight. *Offa Rex* resonant in silver, and the names of his moneyers. They struck with accountable tact. They could alter the king's face.

Peter Robinson has cogently elaborated upon Hill's implied analogy between the minting of coins and the writing of poems:

The poem touches on exchange values for which an artist may be responsible. There is a regicidal aggression in 'They struck', somewhat pacified and weighed by 'tact' - where social delicacy is in contact with touch. The pressures behind and against the two senses are nicely judged in the ambiguity of 'accountable' - the treasury's books balanced, the king's vanity about his profile understood.<sup>19</sup>

The striking of metal does indeed carry a hint of 'regicidal aggression': Offa's subjects may seek to redress their grievances against the tyrant by literally altering his face and striking him out. In order to protect his face, and the face of his coins, Offa menaces his moneyers with the threat of torture:

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutilation if that failed.

Linguistic strikes are also being examined in this poem. Hill questions his own 'accountable tact' in treating the

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<sup>19</sup> 'Geoffrey Hill's Position', in *In the Circumstances*, p. 123 (or see 'Reading Geoffrey Hill', p. 206). See also Hart, p. 186: 'If he find's Offa's coins "handsome as Nero's," [Hill] also implies that Offa is as egregiously inhuman as Nero. If he finds Offa's charters paradigms of draftsmanship and political ingenuity, he also compares their efficiency to that of modern totalitarian governments'.

historical subject. Use of a 'resonant' language and an 'exact [...] design' might be the measure of this 'tact'; they might equally enact a tactless 'imitation' of the tyrannical operations they describe.

In the fourteenth 'Hymn', Hill returns to the environment inhabited by the poet-tyrant in 'To the (Supposed) Patron':

Dismissing reports and men, he put pressure on the  
wax, blistered it to a crest. He threatened mal-  
efactors with ash from his noon cigar.

When the sky cleared above Malvern, he lingered in  
his orchard; by the quiet hammer-pond. Trout-fry  
simmered there, translucent, as though forming the  
water's underskin. He had a care for natural min-  
utiae. What his gaze touched was his tenderness.  
Woodlice sat pellet-like in the cracked bark and  
a snail sugared its new stone.

At dinner, he relished the mockery of drinking his  
family's health. He did this whenever it suited  
him, which was not often.

The tyrant's occasional display of lenient conduct is merely a perverse whim, relished for its irony. More habitual is the physical relishing of his immediate environment. The fish are simmering in the pond as if in anticipation of the pan that awaits to convert them into a meal for their keeper. The same could be said for the rarer delicacy of the snail. Clearly, the tyrant's 'tenderness' is inseparable from his anticipation of tender flesh. As Merle E. Brown commented, Offa's "care for natural minutiae" flatters his sense of his own capacity for tenderness and so releases him to be as brutal as possible, ordering mass murders by a flick of "ash from his noon cigar".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 'Poetic Omissions in Geoffrey Hill's Most Recent Sequences', in Double Lyric: Divisiveness and Communal Creativity in Recent English Poetry (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 52-72 (pp. 66-67). John Needham has

Hill's second stanza has an alliterative sizzle to it; physicality in the language helps to convey the direct sensation of what it feels like to experience power. This is true also of the palpably rendered horrors recounted in the eighteenth poem of Mercian Hymns:

At Pavia, a visitation of some sorrow. Boethius' dungeon. He shut his eyes, gave rise to a tower out of the earth. He willed the instruments of violence to break upon meditation. Iron buckles gagged; flesh leaked rennet over them; the men stooped, disentangled the body.

He wiped his lips and hands. He strolled back to the car, with discreet souvenirs for consolation and philosophy. He set in motion the furtherance of his journey. To watch the Tiber foaming out much blood.

This is historical voyeurism and Hill knows it. A tourist-trip to the dungeon at Pavia where Boethius was tortured and executed (AD 524) is 'a visitation of some sorrow', but 'some' is distinctly not enough. A child on holiday feasts his imagination on the poet-philosopher's gruesome end, much as he would indulge himself on an ice-cream: the poem jumps straight from the grisly execution scene to the image of the satisfied child wiping his lips and hands and walking back to the family car with all the uplift and insouciance that the word 'strolled' can convey.

Hill is aware that such complacency might be the poet's also; as Christopher Ricks has written, 'the poem itself honourably fears the feasting prurience of [its] imaginings'.<sup>21</sup> The tower to which the imagination gives

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imaginatively suggested that the 'noon-cigar' represents the cigar-shaped bomb dropped on Hiroshima at mid-day. See 'The Idiom of Mercian Hymns', in Bloom, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 77-86 (p. 83).

<sup>21</sup> 'The Tongue's Atrocities', in Force of Poetry, p. 286.

rise has about it the aspect of a Yeatsian 'bloody, arrogant power'.<sup>22</sup> The violent imaginings which ensue are consciously 'willed' by the poet. Historical suffering, Hill knows, might serve merely as material for a contrived, brief foray into violent fantasy; the short resultant poem, like one of those 'discreet souvenirs' from the gift shop, threatens to debase both the suffering of Boethius and the scholarship to which his life and work have given rise. Hill ends the poem with his eye on the next literary tourist spot: the Tiber. This too will be prone to the dangers of reductive and bloodthirsty contemplation.<sup>23</sup>

Mercian Hymns consists of thirty consciously contrived and swiftly dispatched compositions. Each conveys an implicit parallel between the poet's whim-driven acts of ordering and those of the child and tyrant whom he describes. Each too, in Peter Robinson's words, makes 'a show of scruples which includes unscrupulousness'.<sup>24</sup> It is by drawing attention to the fabrications and fantasies of his own poetry that Hill shows how poet and tyrant shadow each other. In Tenebrae, Hill explores new forms of artifice to develop further this central preoccupation in his work. Whereas in the Hymns this project depends upon conveying physical apprehensions of power, the poems of his

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<sup>22</sup> 'Blood and the Moon', Yeats's Poems, p. 351.

<sup>23</sup> As Hill's note explains, the phrase 'To watch the Tiber foaming out / much blood' is adapted from Virgil's Aeneid, VI, 87: 'et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno' (HCP, p. 202). Here, the Sibyll at Cumae is prophesying to Aeneas about Rome's long and bloody history.

<sup>24</sup> 'Reading Geoffrey Hill', p. 215.

subsequent collection see Hill considering power divorced  
from physical reality.

6. 'A Patience Proper for Redress': 'Tenebrae' (1978)

The ritualistic language Hill employs in Tenebrae highlights the gulf which exists between tangible sensations and the inherent intangibility of the verbal medium. In an interview with Blake Morrison, Hill elaborated upon this division:

Tenebrae is a ritual, and like all rituals it obviously helps one to deal with and express states which in that particular season of the church's year are appropriate - suffering and gloom. Tenebrae does at one level mean darkness or shadows; but at another important level it clearly indicates a *ritualistic*, formal treatment of suffering, anxiety and pain.<sup>1</sup>

'Suffering, anxiety and pain' are Hill's concerns in this volume, but he is more interested in how these are self-inflicted rather than how they are inflicted on others. His theme in many of the poems is not so much tyranny as the self-tyrannizing powers of the imagination - specifically the religious imagination.

Three sequences of poems in the volume are particularly concerned with spiritual passion and suffering. 'The Pentecost Castle', Hill's opening sequence, draws upon the models of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Spanish meditational lyrics which explore the connection between eros and agape - earthly and divine love.<sup>2</sup> What Hill's 'imitations' of these poems emphasize is the unattainability

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison, 'Under Judgment', p. 213. The word 'tenebrae' signifies the realm of shadows to which Christ descended before his resurrection; it is the name given to the now-almost-obsolete services of the Catholic Church which take place on the last three days of Holy Week.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Hill's comment, 'Many of the poems in Tenebrae are concerned with the strange likeness and ultimate unlikeness of sacred and profane love', in The Poetry Book Society Bulletin, no. 98 (autumn 1978) (unpaginated).

of this desired union, and the soul's consequent yearning for annihilation; from this negative condition the religious aspirant develops masochistic tendencies and learns to worship the wounds which spiritual frustration brings. The closing, title-sequence is also concerned with the sacral and the sensual. The rituals enacted in the elaborate, ceremonial verse of 'Tenebrae' are those which serve to habituate the religious seeker to his or her suffering: the poems are rites of pain, glorifying the torments of spiritual rejection.

That Hill's liturgical language is forbidding to the reader - in its elaborate symbolistic patterning, in its teasing paradoxes and cryptic conundrums, and in its notable absence of palpable appeal to the senses - is fundamental to his concerns. Hill worries at the rhetoric of Christian devotion, even as he is drawn towards it, for its being too unearthly. Since it is dependent on paradox, it is also fraught with duplicities. Hill conveys these through his own semantic ambiguities, exposing the artifice of his own art and through this of the theological concerns on which his art is precariously grounded.

In an impressive article on Tenebrae, Andrew Michael Roberts examines Hill's preoccupation with 'the problematic co-inherence of truth and illusion in art as well as in religious faith'.<sup>3</sup> His focus is on how Hill approximates the musical concept of 'false relation' (as of adjacent chords) through the 'dissonant puns' of his poetry - and also on the 'false relation' Hill consciously entertains

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<sup>3</sup> 'Variation and False Relation in Geoffrey Hill's Tenebrae', Essays in Criticism, 43 (1993), 123-143 (p. 134).

between music and poetry as art forms.<sup>4</sup> This line of thinking has particular applicability in the case of the other sequence of uneasy religious meditations in the volume: 'Lachrimae, or Seven Tears Figured in Seven Passionate Pavans'. Taking its title from a sombre suite composed by the English lutenist John Dowland (?1563-1626), this set of poems imitates through its rhythms the tread of the slow, stately Renaissance music which inspired it.<sup>5</sup>

The first of the seven sonnets in the sequence, 'Lachrimae Verae', also takes its title from Dowland.<sup>6</sup> Although it describes an experience rooted in a scene of physical suffering, it does not directly describe bodily pain; its theme is the abstraction - indeed the distortion - of that suffering into religious rhetoric.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> Roberts eloquently describes Hill's method of 'imitation' as 'a process of moving towards his own poem through the music and poetry of others' (*ibid.*, p. 124).

<sup>6</sup> Knottenbelt points to the possible influence of the Spanish Renaissance poem 'Soneto a Cristo crucificado' (p. 221, and pp. 267-68, note 35). This piece, almost certainly by Miguel de Guevara, is contained in The Penguin Book of Spanish Verse, ed. by J.M. Cohen, 3rd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p. 199.

The poem gives voice to a sense of estrangement from the divinity to whom it is addressed. The image of Christ on the cross has the illusion of movement when seen through swimming tears, but in reality it is motionless, unyielding. When the speaker dreams, is it his own body he imagines moving (writhing in agony?) or is it Christ's in His three-day descent to Hell? Either way, the religious imagination cannot transcend its fixation with suffering and consequently cannot get beyond the contemplation of 'eternal loss' which Christ's sacrifice is meant to redeem.

Christ is described as 'the castaway of drowned remorse'. This might be taken to mean either that by casting away His life He brings hope to the world (the drowning of remorse) or that the redemptive possibilities He offers are inaccessible: Christ is cast away by the speaker who consequently drowns in his own remorse. There is a similarly painful division between the sense of being 'at one with [...] eternal loss' and the opportunity which Christ provided for 'the world's atonement on the hill' of Calvary.<sup>7</sup> Christ, whose body had literally twisted with pain, and whose head had carried a twisted crown of thorns, is also subjected to metaphysical twisting - by the dubious 'skill' of theologians. Henry Hart has put the predicament well:

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<sup>7</sup> A note on the word 'atonement' in the OED reads as follows: 'as applied to the redemptive work of Christ, *atonement* is variously used by theologians in the senses of *reconciliation*, *propitiation*, *expiation*, according to the view taken of its nature'. One meaning of the word given is 'reconciliation or restoration of friendly relations between God and sinners'. See also the discussion of 'atonement' on pp. 166-67 above.

Hill excoriates rather than worships images of Christ's patient suffering. The religious imagination, Hill observes, twists the historical event of Christ's crucifixion into artifice for its own rhetorical purposes and psychological needs. Christ is thereby made to suffer, twisted, paradoxically, to 'straighten out' humanity (*redresser*, from Old French *dresser*, means to make straight), only because humanity has tortured itself and Christ.<sup>8</sup>

This is an illuminating gloss on the phrase 'a patience proper for redress', but there are also other possible interpretations. The 'patience' might indeed be Christ's endurance of suffering, but it might equally belong to the doctrine-twisters.<sup>9</sup> They sense the need to be patient - and to endure suffering - in order to earn the 'redress' which Christ's sacrifice brings. The word 'redress', however, is primed with its usual etymological duplicities: does it denote a beneficent 'atonement' to come, an 'at-one-ment' of God with mankind, or is the sense rather that patience is the wrong attitude and ought properly to be rectified? Should one let go of one's addiction to suffering and embrace salvation joyously?<sup>10</sup>

Competing definitions are twisted up in the language of the poem and cannot be straightened out. Hill, for all his twists and turns, cannot 'turn aside' from what he does: to write poetry of this nature is inevitably to twist words to

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<sup>8</sup> Hart, p. 213.

<sup>9</sup> 'Patience' derives via Old French from the Latin 'patientia' ('endurance') which in turn stems from 'patior' (to 'suffer').

<sup>10</sup> Cathrael Kazin, taking 'redress' in its juridical sense, reads 'a patience proper for redress' as the twisting of 'Christ's experience in sterile terms of legal satisfaction'; see '"Across a Wilderness of Retrospection": A Reading of Geoffrey Hill's Lachrimae', Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Special Issue, 17.1 (spring 1979), 43-57 (p. 45).

his own poetic designs. In the process of pandering to Christ's name, the speaker also panders to his own self-tyrannizing propensities. 'To pander' is 'to give gratification (to weaknesses or desires)'. There may be more to Hill's use of the word than this, however: a 'pander' (or 'panderer') is 'a person who caters for vulgar desires, especially in order to make money' - in other words, 'a pimp'. In the final tercet of the poem, Hill appears to be implying that there is a trade-off between spirituality and carnality. The Christian makes an investment of his self-denial and suffering to the 'lords of revenue' (the custodians of the Church?), as if there will be some return.<sup>11</sup> This involves the denial of carnal pleasures - pleasures which the Christian Church imagines Christ condemns. The wishful communicant is a pimp to the extent that he depends upon the vicarious physical 'passion' of Christ for his own spiritual profit to come.

'Lachrimae Verae', and the 'Lachrimae' sequence as a whole, depends upon a complex set of connections between eroticism, masochism and religious aspiration. This derives from the English and Spanish Counter-Reformation traditions of devotional literature upon which work Hill has modelled his own. He is 'interested in mysticism as an exemplary discipline, and [...] in the psychopathology of the false mystical experience'.<sup>12</sup> In particular, he is interested in martyrdom, as a citation from the Catholic recusant martyr Robert Southwell in the epigraph to 'Lachrimae' leads the

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<sup>11</sup> 'Revenue' derives, via Old French, from the Latin 'revenire' ('to return').

<sup>12</sup> Haffenden, p. 89.

reader to expect. Hill sees in the conduct of Southwell and other 'Catholic martyrs of the age of Elizabeth I, [...] a pedagogy of martyrdom, a scholastic process of training towards that deliberate goal'.<sup>13</sup> In the poems of 'Lachrimae', Hill explores the motives behind habituation to suffering for the sake of one's faith. The poems make a parade of pain in more than one way: the propensity for self-immolation which the willing sufferer endures both chimes with and chafes against Hill's expressions of self-castigation for his own inadequacies of faith. There is a double-sense of disempowerment and self-empowerment to which the religious imagination has access. A phrase in the sixth poem, 'Lachrimae Antiquae Novae', captures this ambiguity: 'Dominion is swallowed with your blood' (HCP, p. 150). The words could denote the swallowing of pride in the sacrament of Communion or they could be interpreted as meaning that the holy rite sanctions unholy thoughts of domination.<sup>14</sup>

The poems of Hill's (would-be) devotional sequences depend upon a graceful reciprocity and reticulation of phrase and image. This, however, is mere 'fictive consonance'.<sup>15</sup> Christian fictions are reflected in the

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 90. For Hill's opinions on Southwell's prose and verse, see 'The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell' (1979) (LL, pp. 19-37). Much of Hill's eloquent commendation of Southwell's writings could be applied to his own poems: 'They have nothing in common with that facile "self-expression" which so debases the current acceptance of "spontaneity". Such ease and rapidity as they manifest are the issue of years of arduous rhetorical discipline, both classical and Ignatian. They are, moreover, the fruit of a "well-ordered will": impulse and effect are at one' (p. 21).

<sup>14</sup> See Hugh Haughton, '"How Fit a Title...": Title and Authority in the Work of Geoffrey Hill', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 129-48 (p. 143).

<sup>15</sup> 'Lachrimae, 5. Pavana Dolorosa' (HCP, p. 149).

artificial constructs of the poems and any aesthetic concord they might replicate brings false consolation. Hill creates and decreates elaborate patterns of rhyme in ways which express a desired union with God and also the thwarting of such desires. In 'Lachrimae Verae', for instance, the rhyming of 'cross' with 'loss' is aurally harmonious but unsettling in the concepts it equates. The same could be said for 'hill' and 'skill' (is Hill castigating himself for his own skilful exercise in verbal trickery?), and for the rhyming of 'do' and 'you' with the bathetic 'revenue'. The dissatisfactions produced by these rhymes are underscored by the frustration of rhyme into half-rhyme; the aural estrangements between 'hell', 'avail' and 'hill', 'loss', 'remorse' and 'redress', and 'am', 'name' and 'condemn' are expressive of the communicant's alienation from the divine.

The relationship between rhyme and faith is a fundamental part of the complex of messages which Hill's poems convey. This is strikingly true in the case of 'Christmas Trees', for instance, one of the individual lyrics in Tenebrae:

Bonhoeffer in his skylit cell  
bleached by the flares' candescent fall,  
pacing out his own citadel,

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

Against wild reasons of the state  
his words are quiet but not too quiet.  
We hear too late or not too late. (HCP, p. 171)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This poem on Bonhoeffer's endurance possesses a certain affinity with Hill's 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets' in King Log, especially the first of these, 'Men are a Mockery of Angels: *i.m. Tommaso Campanella, priest and poet*': 'Some days a shadow through / The high window shares my / Prison' (HCP, p. 78). I discuss the fourth of these poems,

'Cell' is propped up by 'citadel' but only after it has been let down by 'fall'; 'days' holds up 'praise', but the rhyme is unsettled by 'sacrifice'; 'state' and 'late' are in harmony, but between them lies a 'quiet' (but 'not too quiet') disruption. There is also metrical subterfuge going on: the steady tetrameter has its regular pattern of stresses distinctly transformed in the last two lines by the emphatic line endings 'not too quiet' and 'not too late'.<sup>17</sup> There is throughout the poem the intimation of something worth believing in, but belief, like the effects produced by rhyme and metre, is a hard thing to define, harder still to hold on to.

Hill is sympathetically drawn towards the life and thought of the German minister and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45). Bonhoeffer was killed by the Nazis for his alleged involvement in a plot of July 1944 against Hitler's life. Hill, as he has done with Christ, and with the Christian martyrs, tries to comprehend 'the logic' of this man's 'sacrifice'. The death of the failed tyrannicide might be seen as a putative victory, one borne out of defeat: Bonhoeffer died for the integrity of his ideas. The prison-cell in which he awaits his execution, lit from above by the bomb-flares which flash through the skylight, is an imaginary citadel to this man of fortified spirit. In a

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on Osip Mandelstam, on pp. 377-79 below.

<sup>17</sup> On the possibly affirmative shift of rhythm in the penultimate line, see Jeffrey Wainwright, 'An Essay on Geoffrey Hill's Tenebrae', Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Special Issue, 4-12 (p. 6).

sense, Bonhoeffer, by his brave example, 'restores the broken themes of praise' pursued through Tenebrae.<sup>18</sup>

Living on borrowed time, the condemned prisoner reminds us that we all do the same; he 'encourages our borrowed days' both in the sense of giving hope for the here-and-now and in the sense of urging our contemplation of the end that will inevitably come.<sup>19</sup> In the face of war's 'wild reasons', and the irrational dictates issued by tyrants, there is 'logic' to Bonhoeffer's religious philosophy - specifically the philosophy contained in his Letters and Papers from Prison. The nub of his thinking in this work is that God's non-intervention in the Second World War is a manifestation of His Grace: by withdrawing from the world, God urges his people to live in the present and take full

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<sup>18</sup> Avril Horner has explained the poem's title with reference to Bonhoeffer's posthumously published Letters and Papers from Prison (1971): 'Christmas Trees' was a term used by Berliners to refer to the flares dropped by the leading plane in an aerial attack to mark out the bombers' target area. (Such warfare was taking place close to Bonhoeffer's prison compound.) See 'Geoffrey Hill, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and "Christmas Trees"', in Notes and Queries, 234 (1989), 209-10. See also Peter K. Walker, 'A Note on Bonhoeffer', in Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Sixtieth Birthday Issue, 30.1-2 (spring-summer 1992), 128-38 (p. 129). Hugh Haughton highlights the appropriateness of the metaphorical 'citadel', given the word's double-edged etymology: 'the primary meaning of the term is "a fortress commanding a city, which serves both to protect and keep in subjection" (OED)'. See '"How Fit a Title"', p. 144. On this ambiguity, see also Knottenbelt, p. 254.

<sup>19</sup> Vincent Sherry alerts the reader to the derivation of 'borrow' from the Old English noun 'bourg' ('promise, security, pledge'): 'our days are taken on pledge, then, given in return for the vows we make to the common weal. While Bonhoeffer ratifies that compact with his actions, Hill, too, keeps the civil contract of the word, maintaining a line of meaning that deepens but remains integral and consistent through etymological history, and thus extends through time our *civitas* of speech'. See The Uncommon Tongue: The Poetry and Criticism of Geoffrey Hill (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), pp. 184-85.

responsibility for their actions.<sup>20</sup> In the context of Tenebrae, such sentiments inevitably evoke an ambiguous response: a combination of distress at God's withdrawal from the world and a salutary admonition not to dwell upon one's wounds but to think and act with courage. Bonhoeffer's words, the poem suggests, ought to be heeded; they possess a 'quiet' modesty but are 'not too quiet' to lack authority. The problem, Hill knows, is that they are little read: their impact is quiet. But it is 'not too quiet', and we may not be 'too late' for whatever spiritual redress they offer - even though we may live in the religionless age which Bonhoeffer's writings describe.

Hill's poem is itself a belated response. John Bayley has spelt out some of the implications of this belatedness:

The authority of poetry is always 'too late', because it cannot coincide with the fact it seeks to immortalise. It creates an alternative structure outside it, [...] which in time takes over the event, and can seem to be both creating and denaturing it. We learn, too late, what art does to life, to aspiration and spontaneous idealism, to sanctify [*sic*] itself.<sup>21</sup>

The sanctifying properties of his own art are as much a cause for Hill's concern in Tenebrae as the religious ideals and aspirations which he sceptically examines. As Bayley emphasizes, one of the risks of a poem being out of time with its subject is that, by converting life to art, it renders that subject artificial. In the Tenebrae sequence 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in

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<sup>20</sup> See W.S. Milne, '"The Pitch of Attention": Geoffrey Hill's Tenebrae', Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Special Issue, 25-37 (p. 33).

<sup>21</sup> 'Somewhere is Such a Kingdom: Geoffrey Hill and Contemporary Poetry', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 185-95 (p. 191).

England' Hill embarks upon what would appear from the title to be a contrived and anachronistic folly. What emerges is in some ways a peculiarly topical critique of artifice and anachronism. It is a critique also of actual and aesthetic tyrannies.

7. 'The Tyranny of Taste': 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'

The connections between moral idealism, economic pragmatism, social planning and material construction are the subject of a recently published study by the art historian Jules Lubbock - The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550-1960.<sup>1</sup> Lubbock's title refers to the tyrannical connotations of projects by architects and designers throughout this period who have acted as arbiters of 'taste'; in assuming to know what was best for the population at large, they sought to manifest their social ideology in their works - from the loftiest of churches to the smallest of household furnishings. Geoffrey Hill's thirteen sonnet sequence 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' shares Lubbock's preoccupations (HCP, pp. 152-64). In its ambitious conception, and in its minute attention to detail, the sequence makes an elaborate display of poetic idealism and fabrication. Through conscious parody and pastiche, it exposes the 'tyranny of taste' as its underlying concern.<sup>2</sup>

Hill's work takes its title from a manifesto of 1843 by the English architect Augustus Pugin (1812-52). This marks a refinement of ideas previously expressed by Pugin in True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture (1841) and, before that, the controversial Contrasts, or A Parallel

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<sup>1</sup> (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> The sequence is hereafter referred to in the text by the short title, 'An Apology'. The discrepancy between the definition of 'apology' as spirited defence (as in 'apologia') and as 'a frank acknowledgement of the offence with expression of regret for it, by way of reparation' (OED) is, for Hill's sequence, a vital one.

Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, and Similar Buildings of the Present Day, Shewing the Present Decay of Taste (1836). Pugin's particular conception of 'taste' features significantly in Lubbock's study. A zealous Catholic convert, 'Pugin's objective was nothing less than the re-establishment of a Catholic theocracy in which state was subordinated to church and the ruled to the rulers'.<sup>3</sup> He entertained a didactic, hierarchical, and retrograde medievalist view of society in which classes might co-exist harmoniously by each knowing their respective place. A self-styled prophet, the radical Conservative architect conceived of his buildings as sermons, as statements of his ideal social order; these statements, he felt, found their best expression in the Gothic, and he pioneered the revival of this mode.

Lubbock argues that Pugin's eccentric rural feudalism has led to his significance being marginalized in historical and critical surveys of architecture. With the express intention of redressing the balance, Lubbock shows Pugin as a key initiator of the anti-industrialist Arts and Crafts Movement, emphasizing his decisive influence on John Ruskin, William Morris and others.<sup>4</sup> Pugin's opposition to social and utilitarian reforms in the 1830s and 1840s was informed not so much by revulsion at progress or betterment of conditions for the working-class as by fear of the threats posed to skilled artisan-craftsmen by the work-schemes of

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Pugin: Preaching Design', in Lubbock, pp. 233-47 (p. 238).

<sup>4</sup> 'Here the balance will be redressed by giving Pugin pride of place as the initiator of the arts and crafts' (ibid., p. 233).

the new industrialists. His politics of design reform, Lubbock urges, are inseparable from his response to the 'Condition of England Question':

His insistence upon honesty brings us back, therefore, to Pugin's social ideas, his conception of a Christian society. There were inescapable political implications to Pugin's ideas about the kind of social and industrial organisation that would guarantee the revival of high quality craftsmanship. He believed this could only be achieved within a hierarchical Christian society in which the craftsman knew his own subordinate place but would also insist upon the standards of his craft against the efforts of his employers to reduce the costs of the work.<sup>5</sup>

One of Pugin's patrons, Ambrose Phillips de Lisle, was the model for Benjamin Disraeli's Eustace Lyle in the novel Coningsby (1844). Lyle is the master of the house St Genevieve, a house which, as Lubbock points out, is described by Disraeli in terms which 'obviously derived from Pugin's writings and buildings':

In a valley, not far from the margin of a beautiful river, raised on a lofty and artificial terrace at the base of a range of wooded heights, was a pile of modern building in the finest style of Christian architecture [...] The first glance at the building, its striking situation, its beautiful form, its great extent, a gathering as it seemed of galleries, halls, and chapels, mullioned windows, portals of clustered columns, and groups of airy pinnacles and fretwork spires, called forth a general cry of wonder and praise. (Coningsby, III.4)<sup>6</sup>

The terms are applicable also to Hill's elaborate evocations of an idealised Victorian architecture - and of the social

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<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 246-47. The 'honesty' to which Lubbock refers is manifested in Pugin's design policies: nailheads and hinges, for instance, should be visible to public inspection as a guarantee that there is no bad workmanship involved in a building's construction.

<sup>6</sup> cited in Lubbock, p. 239.

harmony which such architecture, in Pugin's vision, was meant to represent.

Hill's use of Pugin's title for his sequence of poems has an ambivalent resonance. On one level, it suggests a sympathetic affinity between Hill and Pugin, an interpretation that can be substantiated with reference to the essay 'Redeeming the Time'; Hill comments here on how 'before his submission to Rome Pugin had been disgusted by the damage done to English churches either by neglect or by the "folly and arrogance" of misguided restorers' (LL, p. 100). His horror at misguided restoration would mark Pugin out as Hill's kindred spirit - were it not for the phrase 'before his submission to Rome'. This conversion (in the mid-1830s) led to Pugin's projected restorations - misguided in their own way. Hill keeps at an ironic distance from Pugin; the irony in fact begins in his very use of the architect's cumbersome and historically outmoded manifesto-title for his sequence.<sup>7</sup>

'An Apology' expresses distrust for Pugin's vision of an harmonious, graded society. The realities of political upheaval and social injustice belie all such utopian projections. One is alerted to this by the epigraph from Coningsby in which Oswald Millbank entertains a 'poetic' fantasy about the '"New World"' of the industrial valley:

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<sup>7</sup> My excursus on Pugin is prompted partly by the emergence of Lubbock's book and partly by Hill's recent poem, 'To the High Court of Parliament: *November 1994*', Times Literary Supplement, 18 November 1994, p. 22. In this wry, oblique meditation on government, Hill describes the Palace of Westminster (Pugin's grand collaboration with Charles Barry) in a memorable phrase: 'Barry's and Pugin's grand / dark-lantern above the incumbent Thames'.

'Your situation', said Coningsby, looking up the green and silent valley, 'is absolutely poetic.'  
 'I try sometimes to fancy', said Mr Millbank, with a rather fierce smile, 'that I am in the New World'.

There are two competing 'poetic' situations, based on new and old social orders. The menacing industrialist vision opposes a retrograde hankering after old forms of order - the 'spiritual, Platonic old England' of Coleridge's vision which is evoked in the other epigraph. These contrasting outlooks compete in Hill's poetry also.

In an essay on the decline of the historical imagination, Allen Tate expresses sentiments which are at the heart of Hill's 'An Apology': 'to revive something is to hasten its destruction - if it is only picturesquely and not sufficiently revived. For the moment the past becomes picturesque it is dead'.<sup>8</sup> Hill's exercise in historical revival depends upon an overt use of insufficient pictorial emblems. He entertains Arcadian fancies, picturing a world of 'silvery vistas frothed with convolvulus' (HCP, p. 159). The alluring ideal of an harmonious organic order reflected in the natural world is vividly expressed. But it is a tarnished and rusting pastoral scene which Hill paints, as the English woods are slowly encroached upon by artifice: 'November rips gold foil from the oak ridges' (p. 153). As 'the tyranny of taste' dictates, the natural world is brought indoors: trees are converted to 'walnut [...] escritoire[s]' (p. 159) and 'along the mantelpiece veined lustres trill' (p. 163).

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<sup>8</sup> 'What is a Traditional Society?' (1936), in Essays of Four Decades, pp. 547-57 (p. 548). On the same page, Tate refers to 'Ruskin's objection to the Gothic factory-architecture of his age'.

The mannered, contrived idiom emphasizes, as it questions, the 'tastefulness' of decorative designs. Tom Paulin has got it wrong when he condemns the sequence for 'visionary mustiness', for 'glutted rhetoric' and 'a false flat note'; in following his narrow determination to pigeon-hole Hill's work as the product of a 'conservative' or 'authoritarian imagination', Paulin sells short the complexity and misses the irony of Hill's tone in these poems.<sup>9</sup> Falsity is not the poet's vice; rather, it is a matter for his scrutiny - a scrutiny which involves an element of parody. Hill's ninth sonnet in particular, 'The Laurel Axe', is an exercise in ornate artificiality and formality:

the rooms of cedar and soft-thudding baize,  
tremulous boudoirs where the crystals kissed  
in cabinets of amethyst and frost. (HCP, p. 160)

This is a highly decorous way of referring to a billiards-game and to whatever events in the boudoir are causing the jewellery and frosted glassware in the cabinets to shake. Fanciful propriety masks reality and turns the world to cold artifice.<sup>10</sup>

There is something chilling, not merely false, about the 'unattainable poetic kingdom' which the poems of 'An Apology' evoke.<sup>11</sup> As Hill himself has urged, they are far from being nostalgic:

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<sup>9</sup> 'A Visionary Nationalist: Geoffrey Hill', in Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 276-84 (pp. 282-83, 277, 284).

<sup>10</sup> The artifice of religious ritual (and of poetic rites) is described in similar terms throughout Tenebrae, most notably at the volume's close: 'silver on silver thrills itself to ice' (HCP, p. 174).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Edwards, 'Hill's Imitations', p. 164.

Any loss or nostalgia or melancholy in the sequence is an attempt to depict lyrically the consequences of old betrayals. [...] I think my sense of history is in itself anything but nostalgic, but I accept nostalgia as part of the *psychological* experience of a society and of an ancient and troubled nation.<sup>12</sup>

Jeremy Hooker has defined 'Quaint Mazes', the first poem in the sequence, as an inquiry into 'the relation between the rhetoric of idealizing nostalgia and the reality of power'.<sup>13</sup> In exploring cultural myths, the poem masks a menacing idiom in an assumed mode of deference to past ideals:

And, after all, it is to them we return.  
Their triumph is to rise and be our hosts:  
lords of unquiet or of quiet sojourn,  
those muddy-hued and midge-tormented ghosts.

On blustery lilac-bush and terrace-urn  
bedaubed with bloom Linnaean pentecosts  
put their pronged light; the chilly fountains burn.  
Religion of the heart, with trysts and quests

and pangs of consolation, its hawk's hood  
twitched off for sweet carnality, again  
rejoices in old hymns of servitude,

haunting the sacred well, the hidden shrine.  
It is the ravage of the heron wood;  
it is the rood blazing upon the green. (HCP, p. 152)

On one level, there is the allure of English social mythology: country-house hospitality, landscaped gardens, a medieval code of conduct comprising 'trysts and quests' and the training of hawks, the folk legends surrounding wells and shrines, woods and village greens. These are the

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<sup>12</sup> 'Under Judgment', p. 213. Compare Hill's remarks to Haffenden on his poetry more generally: 'one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of [...] the sense of not being able to grasp true religious experience. I'm accused of being nostalgic when I'm in fact trying to draw the graph of nostalgia' (Haffenden, p. 89).

<sup>13</sup> The Presence of the Past, p. 27.

hospitable images to which we return, the 'quaint mazes' of a romanticized history. But in returning to them we try to reappropriate what has never been. Maintenance of the illusion depends upon an immunity to the pain and injustice which the mythology conceals.

There is a note of intimidation in the verse which is 'quiet but not too quiet'; it is sensed first in the reference to those threateningly vague 'lords of unquiet or of quiet sojourn'. Like Hill's 'Lords of Limit' and 'lords of revenue', the 'lords of unquiet' are minatory 'hosts'; 'host', after all, is an archaic word for army. The word 'triumph' in this context assumes an ambiguous status, while 'those muddy-hued and midge-tormented ghosts' might be the restless souls of soldiers who have fallen in the mud of battle-fields.<sup>14</sup>

There is 'bluster' in the contrived landscape, and the light is 'pronged' like a spear. The urn 'bedaubed with bloom' is almost 'bedaubed with blood'.<sup>15</sup> The 'chilly fountains burn' like the fountains which 'salt the sparse haze' for the tyrant's pleasure in 'To the (Supposed) Patron'. Hill evokes the spirit of Carolus Linnaeus who, like that tyrant, is 'expert in the strangest fauna'; this

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<sup>14</sup> As Michael Edwards (among others) has pointed out, Hill's fourth line recalls the ending of Yeats's 'Byzantium': 'That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea' (Yeats's Poems, p. 364): see 'Hill's Imitations', p. 165. Throughout 'An Apology', Hill ironizes the Yeatsian mythology of Great Houses and of an idealized social order headed by an old landed gentry.

<sup>15</sup> 'To bedaub': 1. 'to daub over with anything that sticks, to plaster'; b. 'to bespatter with abuse, to vilify'; 2. 'to ornament clumsily or vulgarly; to bedizen'; b. 'to load with rhetorical devices, with praise, etc.; to belaud to excess' (OED).

namer of beasts and plants speaks here with a 'pentecostal' tongue - but it is also a 'pronged' tongue, like the serpent's in the garden.<sup>16</sup>

A sentimental 'religion of the heart' offers only a consolation of 'pangs' - like the 'pangs' of hunger felt by the poor and repressed. With the hood twitched off, this religion shows itself to be a menacing hawk; it feasts on the suffering of Christ and of its people, just as 'the Word' feasts on 'gobbets of the sweetest sacrifice' in 'Annunciations'. In hymns, it extols the glories of the downtrodden, and by doing so keeps them down. This hawk-religion also seizes its iconography from pre-Christian myths, as the final stanza implies. Christianity ravages the world without redeeming it. Such are the brutal realities upon which religious conceptions of social order are founded. The poem ends with the image of a burning cross, the 'rood' - a potent symbol of the violence which has accompanied England's ecclesiastical history.<sup>17</sup>

The 'mazes' of Hill's riddle-like poem are 'quaint' in the original, literal sense of the word: they are clever, wise, ingenious.<sup>18</sup> In A Midsummer Night's Dream (c.1595-96), Titania speaks of the 'quaint mazes' which have fallen

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<sup>16</sup> Hill is referring to the binominal method of classification devised by this Swedish botanist (1707-78).

<sup>17</sup> A rood screen is an important feature of medieval churches. A richly carved and decorated screen separating the chancel from the main part of the church, it is surmounted by a rood cross; many such screens were burnt or otherwise destroyed during the Reformation. Hill may also have in mind the burning of farmland (measured in 'roods'), in keeping with the despoliation of landscape described in the poem's penultimate line.

<sup>18</sup> This original meaning led to usage of the word in reference to eloquent, refined speech: see Sherry, pp. 162-63.

into misuse now that nature, like her relationship with Oberon, is out of joint.<sup>19</sup> 'Quaint' in this sense suggests 'intricate'. The word in its modern usage, however, more commonly means antiquated or inappropriate. The evangelistic projects of neo-medievalist social reformers in the Victorian age, Hill implies, are no more than 'quaint' fancies in the derogatory sense. Also pertinent is John Lucas's gloss on the word 'quaint' in the conclusion to his study on England and Englishness. Lucas considers how the word 'quaint' has been used, particularly in Victorian times, as 'a form of containment' - a means of conveniently marginalizing whatever posed a threat to idealized conceptions of a class-graded society. A particular menace was the prevalent idea in late nineteenth-century poetry of 'cultivated ruralism' - 'that rural vision whose implicit politics of containment and hierarchical structures so infect English poetry at the century's end'.<sup>20</sup>

John Lucas commends poetry which throws 'into radical doubt any reductive idea of a unitary image of [...] England and Englishness', and he distrusts the 'concealments and evasions' of a 'pastoral [...] image of ideal social arrangements'.<sup>21</sup> His distrust is akin to the scepticism conveyed throughout Hill's 'An Apology':

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<sup>19</sup> 'And the quaint mazes in the wanton green, / For lack of tread are undistinguishable'. (II.i.99-100).

<sup>20</sup> England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900 (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), pp. 204-05.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6. Lucas is writing specifically about Wordsworth's 'retreat' towards the 'authority' of Pastoral in his writing, after his having questioned such authority in the Lyrical Ballads (1798).

Pastoral implies a vision of social relationships, harmoniously structured, hierarchically ordered, and succoured by full creativity [...]. A literary tradition is granted a general cultural and political validity. Labour is content with its subservience because work guarantees plenitude. Initially, this vision includes benevolence, because without the care benevolence implies - its pastoral responsibilities - things might fall apart. But later the promise of plenitude is offered in so self-confident a manner as to make any appeal to benevolence unnecessary.<sup>22</sup>

The connection between benign vision and repressive reality lies at the heart of Hill's concerns:

I think the sad serenity and elegance of the eighteenth-century country house landscape was bought at a price: not only the sufferings of English labourers but also of Indian peasants. Again, critics who think I've succumbed to nostalgia for that landscape cannot have looked with sufficient closeness to the texture of the sequence. The celebration of the inherited beauties of the English landscape is bound, in the texture of the sequence, with an equal sense of the oppression of tenantry.<sup>23</sup>

Poems four to six of 'An Apology' present 'A Short History of British India'. In these, Hill examines the violent impositions of the Raj, and shows how a myth of benign paternalism has belittled a colonial history of bloodshed and suffering. Hill's 'Short History' is itself knowingly reductive, making 'miniatures of the once-monstrous theme' (HCP, p. 155), but, for all its brevity, 'it may be the most sophisticated postcard of post-imperial sensibility in the language'.<sup>24</sup> The second of the three poems assumes an air of confident assurance in the supremacy of the white patron:

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Haffenden, p. 93.

<sup>24</sup> John Peck, 'Tenebrae', Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Special Issue, 13-24 (p. 22).

Suppose they sweltered here three thousand years  
 patient for our destruction. There is a greeting  
 beyond the act. Destiny is the great thing,  
 true lord of annexation and arrears.

Our law-books overrule the emperors.  
 The mango is the bride-bed of light. Spring  
 jostles the flame-tree. But new mandates bring  
 new images of faith, good subahdars!

The fluttering candles of the wayside shrines  
 melt into dawn. The sun surmounts the dust.  
 Krishna from Radha lovingly untwines.

Lugging the earth, the oxen bow their heads.  
 The alien conscience of our days is lost  
 among the ruins and on endless roads. (p. 156)

The cry of 'destiny' in the third line is, as Hugh Haughton has argued, 'the tyrant's plea'. The poem is an exercise in 'suspect grandiloquence' and 'the absurd bravura of imperial bluff'.<sup>25</sup> A fundamental clash of interests and beliefs is expressed in the competing idioms of the poem: the spiritual exoticism of Indian culture ('The mango is the bride-bed of light. Spring / jostles the flame-tree') versus the imperial rule of 'law-books' and 'mandates'. British rule stretches out inexorably like Roman ambition along 'endless roads'. Meanwhile, however, the passive natives are patient for a destructive form of redress. A civilization which has lasted for thirty centuries will endure its latest yoke.

In the poems of 'An Apology', Hill implicitly entertains Maurice Latey's proposition that 'tyranny has

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<sup>25</sup> 'How Fit a Title', p. 145. On the same page Haughton observes how 'there's a touch of both club-room cliché and Churchillian bow-wow about the rhetoric ("Destiny's the great thing"), with its phoney appeal to some portentous "Destiny" to underwrite the policy of imperial expansion and annexation as its "true lord"'. His gloss on the word 'subahdars' is also useful: 'Originally a native Indian term for a local leader or governor, it was annexed by the British to mean "a native commandant of a company of sepoys" (OED) in the imperial army. Its use here ("good subahdars") exhibits the good humour of conscious patronage towards inferiors'.

more often been warded off by the appeal to ancient rights than by the demand for revolutionary liberties'.<sup>26</sup> He also exposes how close an 'appeal to ancient rights' can be to the reactionary mystification of the past which sanctions tyrannical social policy. Recourse to abstract notions of social order, as to Platonic ideas, are confounded by violent reality. Coleridge opposed the modern menace of industrialism by nurturing an ideal of the 'spiritual, Platonic old England' which he found in Renaissance Humanism, but Hill dispels the myth: 'Platonic England grasps its tenantry' (HCP, p. 158).

The danger lies in subjecting historical reality to distorted interpretations, to a 'tyranny of taste'. At the end of his study, Jules Lubbock writes of 'Plato's Conundrum', a dilemma which arises in Book Two of The Republic. Should a democracy become mature enough to allow for the seductive charms of fine arts (notably poetry), Plato argues, there will need to be a wise minority of guardians to oversee the cultural activities; these, effectively, will be dictators of taste.<sup>27</sup> Hill always writes under the constraints of this conundrum. His poems both parade and radically question their own authoritativeness - and their observance of proprieties, their 'taste'.

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<sup>26</sup> Latey, p. 348. The historian is at this point specifically defending the strength of British traditions and institutions.

<sup>27</sup> Lubbock, pp. 368-69.

8. 'Redeeming Wrath': Hill's Version of Ibsen's 'Brand' (1978)

The translation project which Hill undertook after composing the poems of Tenebrae shows a continuity of preoccupations. Ibsen's poetic drama Brand (1866) warns of the torments which afflict the religious absolutist. The protagonist of the title has to endure the deaths of his mother, his wife Agnes and his son Alf. With each death, Brand resorts to the cold consolations of his fanatical convictions. He dies in despair, buried beneath an avalanche. It is a dark, austere drama. When Hill was commissioned by the National Theatre in London to render the play into English verse, he was daunted not only by the task of translation but also by the ominous theme:

Both as a work of art and as a portrayal of a certain kind of character it contained a great deal that was hateful. [...] The interesting proposal that Ibsen seems to be putting forward is that it's possible at one and the same time to be a man of genuine zeal and messianic fervour, a life-defender, and a life-destroyer. I don't think Ibsen feels that the latter necessarily cancels out the former; in some quite dreadful way they co-exist.<sup>1</sup>

Brand is forced to seek out 'strange mercies wrought from grief' (BRA, p. 85). These are 'mercies' which he has to fashion from words - but words also terrorize. The play is a pent-up dialogue between rigid faith and abject despair; in the language, as in the landscape, 'everything looms, overwhelms' (p. 88). Brand continually strives to justify his convictions, but he tyrannizes himself, and others, with his own formulations. Even the word

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<sup>1</sup> Haffenden, pp. 96-97. As Hill's introductory note on the text explains, Ibsen's original was not intended for the stage.

'atonement' is menacing: when Brand proclaims himself 'pledged to atone' for his mother's wrongdoings, his sense of spiritual duty has about it the aspect of a curse (p. 56).<sup>2</sup> When the old woman then dies without relinquishing her worldly goods, her sins thus unatoned for, Brand responds to the event with stony resolve. Like the speaker in 'Lachrimae Verae', he 'cannot turn aside' from his cause:

So be it. I am sworn  
 from this moment on  
 never to turn aside  
 from my great crusade,  
 this travail towards the will's harsh  
 triumph over the flesh.  
 God is my strength. The Word  
 of His mouth is like a sword  
 for me to wield. His wrath  
 kindles my very breath.  
 I am possessed of His will.  
 I shall make mountains fall. (p. 72)

The basic pattern of Hill's triple-beat line is wrung and wrenched by the harsh dictates of Brand's philosophy. The metre twists to accommodate each hammered-out sentence, but dogmatism is belied by the underlying agony of misgiving which altered stress and thwarted rhyme evoke. Words, like swords, will be the death of Brand; indeed, that final line is grimly prophetic of his own end.<sup>3</sup>

This self-styled 'warrior with the Sword / of Righteousness' (p. 86) serves a tyrannical overlord:

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<sup>2</sup> The words 'atone' and 'atonement' recur frequently in the text; see pp. 10, 43, 45, 56, 71, 102, 115.

<sup>3</sup> In an article on Brand, Adrian Poole attends to the drama of words, to grammar, syntax, punctuation and 'the appeal and rebuff of rhyme'. He sharply observes how 'Hill gives body to the voice, makes it pause and strain against the physical and spiritual obstructions that thwart its drive for fluency'. See 'Hill's "Version" of Brand', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 86-99 (pp. 94, 92). For details of the revised, American version of Brand, see his second note on p. 225.

My God is the great God of Storm,  
absolute arbiter of doom,  
imperious in His love! (p. 12)

It is a hawk-religion which he pursues, and which he is pursued by. This is made explicit when he questions the will of God that his wife should die a martyr:

What else must I perform  
that your law be satisfied,  
*lex talionis*, your hawk  
that will swoop down and take  
the heart out of her. (p. 90)

There is little to separate his spiritual despair from the disgust he expresses on remembering how his mother searched around her dead husband's corpse for money:

Her shadow swoops; it looks  
like a swooping hawk's.  
She tears open a purse  
as a hawk rips a mouse. (p. 41)

Brand, the servant of a despotic God, himself becomes a despot. 'Fathers forgive. / It is tyrants who rave' (p. 86): this is the accusation which Agnes puts against her unyielding husband. She continues to question his reiterated 'All or Nothing' demands, his 'iron will' (p. 88), and she is always 'struggling to fill / the bottomless pit / of Brand's absolute' (p. 108). Her accusations are sharp and frequent:

Where you caress, you strike.  
Those whom you bless, you break. (p. 53)

Brand, sometimes you seem  
like some grim scourge of God,  
like God's own sword of flame.  
I flinch from the sight. (p. 60)

Your voice is like a storm  
when you drive a soul to choose  
its own poor martyrdom. (p. 87)

Your God, I see Him sit  
just like some grim Seigneur  
in His stony Keep. I fear  
to irritate His gaze

with my weak woman's cries. (p. 87)

Momentarily, the shadow of the tyrant in 'To the (Supposed) Patron' appears: he who would have no 'mirage / Irritate his mild gaze'.

Brand also depicts a radical reactionary's quarrel with his age. The local people whom he feels compelled to serve as minister alienate him with their diluted form of piety; to him, they are 'slaves to both / day-labour and the sloth / of their own souls' (p. 16). His quarrels in particular are with the Dean, the Mayor and the Schoolmaster, representative blind 'servants of the State' (p. 119). Their language contrasts sharply with Brand's by being debased through reliance on commonplaces and a pointless gaming with words; the Dean betrays himself as one of Hill's artistic pretenders when he urges Brand to confine his preaching to the use of Bible-stories: 'The Tower of Babel, / now there's a parable / to conjure with' (p. 129). The outsider's struggle against a 'canting, provincial, sanctimonious, murderously self-righteous society' compels Hill's admiration; 'the tragedy is that that kind of absolute conviction, which is simultaneously a quite proper denunciation of the venial and mercenary world, is itself a murderous force'.<sup>4</sup>

No character in the play is subjected more virulently to this force than Brand himself. In bouts of anguish and delusion, his fear is that 'there's no release from fear, the solitude that we call God' (p. 107). His despair

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<sup>4</sup> Haffenden, p. 97. Brand's own material preoccupations are revealed in the folly of his grand schemes of 'Christian Architecture'; see, for instance, p. 138.

culminates in the closing scene: having been stoned and rejected by the townsfolk, Brand returns to the forbidding mountain from which he had descended at the play's start.

Here he confronts his darkest fantasy:

I have been dispossessed by God;  
 God has withdrawn from His own Word;  
 His clouds of wrath blot out the sun;  
 accursed is the altar-stone. (p. 154)

God's 'Choir of Invisibles' pursue and persecute him like the Furies in Aeschylus's Oresteia. They denounce Brand for his self-inflicted torments, for his having avidly 'seize[d] / hold of martyrdom's prize' (p. 57). As in Tenebrae, his indulgence in abnegation is felt to be no better than a life of physical sin:

God is God. He grants no favour,  
 no return for life that's past.  
 All your sacrificial savour  
 Smells like any carnal feast. (p. 154)

The rhyme-scheme is made sickly by the glutted rhyme of 'savour' and 'favour', and soured by that falling off from 'past' to 'feast'.

The imagery of feasting is fully consummated when the hawk returns to feed upon Brand's soul. In his delirium, Brand struggles to distinguish the image of the hawk from a vision of his late beloved Agnes (who may have gained access to a state of grace from which he has been excluded). The two phantoms blur into one and disappear:

It vanished so suddenly.  
 Cheated of what it came to seek -  
 my soul's blood on its claws and beak -  
 it screamed for its lost prey. (p. 156)

When Gerd the gypsy girl, Brand's 'weird shadow-sibling', shoots the phantasmal hawk, her gunshot precipitates the

avalanche which buries Brand.<sup>5</sup> At the eleventh hour, he has intimations which transcend his 'own unyielding will'. Despite tantalizing images of 'the sunshine and the thaw' (p. 159), however, he dies raging to the last:

Tell

me, O God, even as your heavens fall  
 on me: what makes retribution  
 flesh of our flesh? Why is salvation  
 rooted so blindly in your Cross?  
 Why is man's own proud will his curse?  
 Answer! What do we die to prove?  
 Answer! (p. 160)

As the avalanche buries Brand, a voice calls through the noise of thunder, with the words 'He is the God of Love.'<sup>6</sup>

The message comes too late for Brand; the word 'love' was never a significant part of his vocabulary. Indeed, he had grown to distrust the term through observing its misuse in worldly negotiations:

Nothing is so much soiled  
 by the commerce of the world  
 as the word 'love': this veil  
 hiding the deformed soul. (p. 56)<sup>7</sup>

Recoiling to the opposite extreme, Brand employs a vocabulary of hatred: 'Hate is the one redeeming word! / Hate is the Angel of the Lord!' (p. 57). At such exclamatory moments, it is hard to distinguish zealous fanaticism from apocalyptic paranoia. Repeatedly, Brand returns to the notion that the only form of divine redress for worldly failings is nemesis; only God's wrath redeems

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<sup>5</sup> Poole, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> 'The avalanche intervenes between the asking and the answering, so that the auditor unscathed by avalanche assumes that he hears what Brand's deafened, buried ears cannot'. Poole, p. 87.

<sup>7</sup> The parallels with 'Annunciations, 2' (HCP, p. 63) are striking.

the soul. That this view itself might be redressed by a positive conception of divine love (such as Agnes strives to believe in) is a possibility which Brand does not entertain. It is only his moments of doubt which offer the potential for a more humane outlook, but Brand does not seize the potential. Any disruption of his absolutism merely brings despair, not insight:

No! I've made my sacrifice.  
The great cause is forgone,  
and I've stifled the voice  
that could rouse the whole earth  
to His redeeming wrath:  
'you sleepers, wake!' I've come  
down from that high dream. (p. 62)

Irresistibly, however, his thoughts return swiftly to 'the great cause', 'the high dream', and Brand resumes his attempts to rouse the world's spiritual sleepers.<sup>8</sup>

Hill resorts to the same vocabulary at the start of his next volume, The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy. In the fourth line of this extended poem-sequence, he alludes to the advent hymn '*Sleepers Awake*' which calls the faithful to Christ's side and joyfully announces a new heaven and earth (HCP, p. 183).<sup>9</sup> But dreams of redemption are shown in this poem-sequence to be as unattainable as they are for Brand. Again, Hill's warning is against the murderous convictions of the zealot.

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Brand's denunciation of 'a rabble of deaf-mutes, / and sleepers who won't wake' (p. 76), and his beseeching of the young in the crowd near the play's end: 'awake from the dead sleep / of shame and compromise / and dust and squalor' (p. 141). The address to slumbering souls anticipates Ibsen's When We Dead Awaken (1899).

<sup>9</sup> See Sherry, p. 210. The phrase is also a traditional socialist cry to action.

9. 'In Brutus' Name': 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy' (1983)

Péguy, as described by Hill in his notes to The Mystery, bears a resemblance to the fanatical outsider Brand:

A man of the most exact and exacting probity,  
[...] he was at the same time moved by violent  
emotions and violently afflicted by mischance.  
Like others similarly wounded, he was perhaps  
smitten by the desirability of suffering.  
(HCP, p. 206)

The French poet, playwright and polemical essayist Charles Péguy (1873-1914) was a curious blend of contradictions: a radical conservative with socialist ideals, a zealous Catholic but also a non-conformist one. He died at the start of the first battle of the Marne in September 1914. The beliefs for which he fell in battle are, however, as Hill considers them, of ambiguous virtue. The retrograde kingdom of 'l'ancienne France' which Péguy envisaged - a class-based, democratic, socialist utopia - was the product of nostalgia for France's old chivalric and aristocratic 'droite'. Moreover, his dream of an agrarian hierarchy was inseparable from a belief in the acceptability of battle in order to restore notional old ways. Such beliefs made his vision, in Hill's words, a 'militant-pastoral' one (3.7).<sup>1</sup>

Péguy conceived of a united community rooted in a mystical French soil. His theories derived in part from Henri Bergson's philosophies, and also from vegetation myths and rebirth cycles. E.M. Knottenbelt sees in Péguy's organicism a reason why Hill's poem conveys

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<sup>1</sup> I use the short-title The Mystery to refer to Hill's poem throughout this section. The poem comprises one hundred quatrains and is divided into ten parts. I adopt the method which Hill uses in his notes to refer to particular passages - for instance, the parenthetical reference (3.7) refers to the seventh quatrain of part three.

such an insistence on our not taking things on appearances, by tyrannizing us, ironically, with nothing but one 'inaccurate' appearance' after the other. All Péguy's thought was directed against 'habit', that is, against the demagoguery of an uncritical acceptance of anything which did not involve the whole person since this implied an insensitivity to the specific life-force, the individuality and freedom, with which every living thing is endowed.<sup>2</sup>

It is certainly true that Hill's poem tyrannizes the reader with decoys and deceptions, and it may be partly true that this is a means for Hill to align himself with Péguy's vision of wholeness: each author issues a deliberate challenge to habitual and inadequate responses. It is also true, however, that Hill is writing at an ironic remove from Péguy. As Alan Robinson has argued, 'the difficulty of Hill's poem lies in assessing the rhetorical and ideological distance between the poet and his persona'.<sup>3</sup>

Hill is wary not only about Péguy's mysticism but about his own mystification of it in his poetry. The Mystery, as many critics have pointed out, is concerned with both the ineffectiveness of language and the deadly effects which can result from words:

What Hill may do is to reflect his own guilt off Péguy's very different guilt: the guilt of the survivor about the inadequacy of his words, against the guilt of the dead polemicist, whose words may have been all too effective.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Knottenbelt, p. 297.

<sup>3</sup> 'History to the Defeated: Geoffrey Hill's The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy', in Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 62-81 (p. 64).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew M. Roberts, 'Reflexivity and Impersonality in the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1991), p. 312.

The sequence keeps coming back to the contention between the cycles of violent action and verbal fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Language's ability to compel great numbers of people to commit atrocities, as well as bear witness to them, is a central theme in Hill's poem.<sup>6</sup>

The deadly effectiveness of Péguy's words is dramatically conveyed by the poem's opening shot:

Crack of a starting-pistol. Jean Jaurès  
dies in a wine-puddle. Who or what stares  
through the café-window créped in powder-smoke?  
The bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*.

History commands the stage wielding a toy gun,  
rehearsing another scene. It has raged so before,  
countless times; and will do, countless times more,  
in the guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian.

In Brutus' name martyr and mountebank  
ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink  
painlessly spouting. Jaurès' blood lies stiff  
on menu-card, shirt-front and handkerchief.

Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite  
the assassin? Must men stand by what they write  
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry  
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?  
(1.1-4)

Péguy's moment of demagoguery against Jean Jaurès may have been a contributory factor to the assassination of the socialist deputy in a Parisian crêperie in July 1914. Hill recreates the murder-scene in tragi-comic terms.<sup>7</sup> He dallies with the genres of murder mystery novel and stage melodrama as means of illustrating the dangers of overblown rhetoric - such as that used by Péguy.<sup>8</sup> Language is a

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<sup>5</sup> John Hollander, 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy', in Bloom, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 137-40 (p. 139).

<sup>6</sup> Hart, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> In his notes, Hill refers to 'the tragi-comic battered élan of Péguy's life' (HCP, p. 207).

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Haughton has pointed out that Hill's title suggests a 'whodunnit': see 'How Fit a Title', p. 136.

smoke-screen, like that crêpe of theatrical powder-smoke in the first quatrain, but a crêpe is also a black armband worn as a sign of mourning. Hill irreverently reinvents murder as a farce on the stage of history despite the callous nature of the facts: the gun is not a toy, nor is it the harmless pistol that starts a sports-race; Jaurès is no sleeper and he will not wake up. Hill's calculated flippancy highlights the callous ends to which language can be put.

Péguy is a type of Brutus-figure: a man with honourable republican ideals but one who compromises his moral integrity by demonizing the imagined enemy and calling, if unwillingly, for his blood. Hill's observation that 'in Brutus' name martyr and mountebank / ghost Caesar's ghost, his wounds of air and ink / painlessly spouting' connect to the following lines of Julius Caesar:

Let's be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius.  
 We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,  
 And in the spirit of men there is no blood.  
 O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit,  
 And not dismember Caesar! But, alas,  
 Caesar must bleed for it! (II.i.166)

Hill also seems to have in mind the rebounding of Brutus's words later in the play, when Mark Antony gives tongues to Caesar's wounds and predicts the civil strife that will ensue after the assassination:

Over thy wounds now do I prophesy  
 (Which like dumb mouths do ope their ruby lips,  
 To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue),  
 A curse shall light upon the limbs of men.  
 (III.i. 259)

Having made Caesar a ghost, Brutus in turn becomes one, meeting his death at Philippi. This marks him out as a martyr for his ideals, but he is also a 'mountebank' in that the remedy he sought for the nation's ills, to be achieved

through the murder of Caesar, was a false cure. Hill's tricky phrasing appears to suggest also that Caesar is the martyred one and that as his ghost stalks Brutus to the grave, the search for false remedies through revenge perpetuates itself. Hill thus finds in Shakespeare's play a vision of history's murderous cycles - a vision not so far removed from Péguy's plans for social regeneration.

'Wounds of air and ink' cannot be divorced from real wounds. To 'stand up', like Brutus, 'against the spirit of' the enemy, Hill implies, might involve the need to 'stand by' one's words - with all the ambiguities which the latter phrase implies:

Does 'stand by' your words mean: (i) be responsible for; (ii) support, stick up for; (iii) guard; (iv) await inspection; (v) be ready to shoot? The verb will cover the comic military cliché 'stand by your beds!', and the support in desperate circumstances for 'shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry'.<sup>9</sup>

To 'stand by' might also mean to stand adjacent to, or to one side of. Hill acknowledges the gulf, and the connection, between language and action.

Péguy the political agitator was immersed in a 'violent contrariety of men and days' (1.7). A committed activist, he participated in violent street-protests and vigorously campaigned for the Dreyfusard cause in his pamphlets, Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine. The ferocity with which he denounced the anti-Dreyfusards in writing bears a correlation to the 'sound of broken glass' in the streets around him (p. 205, note 4.6). In the fourth section of The

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<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, 'The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 100-111 (p. 101). See also Robinson, 'Reading Geoffrey Hill', pp. 210, 213.

Mystery Hill delivers a brusque, sardonic address to Péguy, cross-questioning the ideals he lived and died for. 'Take it from one who knows', is the message implicit in the familiar but vaguely patronizing tone which Hill adopts:

This world is different, belongs to them -  
the lords of limit and of contumely.  
It matters little whether you go tamely  
or with rage and defiance to your doom.

This is your enemies' country which they took  
in the small hours an age before you woke,  
went to the window, saw the mist-hewn  
statues of the lean kine emerge at dawn.

Outflanked again, too bad! You still have pride,  
haggard obliquities: those that take remorse  
and the contempt of others for a muse,  
bound to the alexandrine as to the *Code*

*Napoléon*. Thus the bereaved soul returns  
upon itself, grows resolute at chess,  
in war-games hurling dice of immense loss  
into the breach; thus punitively mourns.

This is no old Beauce manoir that you keep  
but the rue de la Sorbonne, the cramped shop,  
its unsold *Cahiers* built like barricades,  
its fierce disciples, disciplines and feuds,

the camelot-cry of 'sticks!' As Tharaud says,  
'all through your life the sound of broken glass.'  
So much for Jaurès murdered in cold pique  
by some vexed shadow of the belle époque,

some guignol strutting at the window-frame.  
But what of you, Péguy, who came to 'exult',  
to be called 'wolfish' by your friends? The guilt  
belongs to time; and you must leave on time.

Jaurès was killed blindly, yet with reason:  
'let us have drums to beat down his great voice.'  
So you spoke to the blood. So, you have risen  
above all that and fallen flat on your face

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among the beetroots.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In these quatrains, Hill compresses a great deal of information on Péguy's life, drawing upon several biographical sources. There is not sufficient space to document the references here, but I refer the reader to Knottenbelt, pp. 310-12 and to Hill's own notes (HCP, pp. 204-05).

Péguy stood by his comrades in the war-trenches, and he stood by his political ideals, too - even though that meant falling flat on his face to die 'among the beetroots'. His death in the blood-red crop marks Péguy's ironic return to the mystical soil of his peasant origins: a dubious triumph.<sup>11</sup>

Péguy sought to redress society's wrongs through violence. His life was spent raging against a world which alienated him: the 'enemies' country', ruled by 'the lords of limit'. In referring here to the titles of his two critical volumes, Hill appears to be lining up with Péguy against common adversaries: those who debase language, dilute idealism or otherwise pose a menace to visionary integrity. Hill may also be insinuating a wry comparison between the world's dismissal of Péguy's beliefs and the incomprehension or marginalization to which his own work has been subjected; more than this, he considers to what extent either of them might have earned their exclusion. This line of interpretation is applicable, for instance, to the third stanza, where reference to 'haggard obliquities' and the 'muse' of 'remorse' and intolerance might be taken as self-parody on Hill's part.

By referring to Napoleon, Hill reminds Péguy of the links which exist between patriotism and imperialism. The so-called 'belle époque' has its roots in violence and

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<sup>11</sup> 'The way in which that phrase ["you have risen / above all that and fallen flat on your face / among the beetroots"] straddles the two sections mimes the way in which the different responses to Péguy and his attitudes and circumstances persistently overlap and flow into one another': Wainwright, 'The Mystery', p. 105. Péguy apparently chose death by refusing to lie down when German machine guns opened fire.

social upheaval, despite its surface trappings of social, material and intellectual progress.<sup>12</sup> Hill urges Péguy to distrust appearances: 'This is no old Beauce manoir': 'the cramped shop' where Péguy spends his days is no idealized country mansion in the valley of Péguy's origins. Rather, this is a world of constraints and violence, Hill warns, a violence in which Péguy, by turning wolfish, has participated.<sup>13</sup>

Hill perpetrates his own sort of violence: on language. The violence is partly self-directed in The Mystery, as conveyed by Hill's flagrant attempts to recreate French history through a mixture of English and French expressions.<sup>14</sup> The result is a linguistic farce, in which words collide and metres collapse. One instance of this is the way 'pique' clashes with 'époque' as the words are dragged across a language-divide and urged into a rhyme-

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<sup>12</sup> On the word 'Alexandrine', Knottenbelt suggests the following: 'Hill [is] referring to the treacherous note signed "Alexandrine" (in other words, not according to the *Code Napoléon*, the originator of the surname, a 'solecism'), which indicted Dreyfus as a traitor, by a Lieutenant-Colonel Henry, who later became known as the 'faux Henry'" (p. 311).

<sup>13</sup> The gothic Cathedral de Notre Dame de Chartres is located in the Beauce Valley and, as Hill's notes reveal (p. 207), Péguy made pilgrimages there in 1912 and 1913. Hill's three 'Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres' are well-placed between the texts of Tenebrae and The Mystery in Collected Poems (pp. 177-79); these obliquely wry reflections on religious devotion, set against a backdrop of warfare and 'violent knowledge' (p. 179), point backwards and forwards to the concerns of the flanking sequences.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Hill's remarks on Ivor Gurney in a lecture which appeared in print a year after the publication of The Mystery: 'There is some evidence to suggest that Gurney had a depressive's gift for clowning. He, like others, relished the collocations of subsistence-level English and French': 'Gurney's "Hobby"', F.W. Bateson Memorial Lecture, delivered 15 February 1984, Essays in Criticism, 34 (1984), 97-128 (p. 98).

scheme which they yet manage to resist.<sup>15</sup> The poem is as complex in tone as it is in its thematic concerns. It assaults the reader with a tyranny of visual inaccuracies and a mass of linguistic and metrical contradictions. However, the poem redresses its own tyrannical potentialities through the balance of comedy and gravity, and through Hill's self-deprecating scrutiny of the medium.

Hill offered The Mystery as his 'homage to the triumph of [Péguy's] defeat' (HCP, p. 207). Whether or not Hill felt his own creativity to be defeated after the accomplishment of this major work is a matter for conjecture; there was a lapse of almost seven years before his next poem appeared in print. In the final section of my analysis on Hill, I will consider a number of his more recent poems. They show an ever-deepening anxiety about their own terms of expression, but also a corresponding increase in formal ingenuity, and even at times a note of playfulness.

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<sup>15</sup> See Sherry on 'the bright counterrhythms of revelry and rebuke in Hill's farce of language' (p. 231). Sherry makes incisive observations on how Hill's metrical inversions and counter-rhythms in The Mystery challenge the habitual stress-patterns of words.

### 10. 'The Strutting Lords': Hill's Recent Poetry

It is now over thirteen years since the publication of The Mystery. In that time, a number of new poems have appeared in periodicals; some of these are reprinted, alongside other recent work, in New and Collected Poems 1952-1992.<sup>1</sup> Many of the new poems are as complex and elusive as anything Hill has written previously. There is little in the way of elucidatory annotation from Hill - in the periodicals or in the book. This might in part account for the scarcity of published criticism which has appeared on the poems.<sup>2</sup>

Commemoration is a dominant theme in the recent work - as witnessed by the publication on Remembrance Day 1990 of the poem 'Carnival'. Here, Hill considers the indulgence of ceremony.

The brazed city  
reorders its own  
destruction, admits  
the strutting lords

to the temple,  
vandals of sprayed blood  
and oblivion,  
to make their mark.

The spouting head  
spiked as prophetic  
is ancient news.  
Once more the keeper

of the dung-gate

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<sup>1</sup> The volume is currently available for sale only in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> However, see my article 'To Speak the Silence that has Arisen': Geoffrey Hill's Decade of Reticence', P.N. Review, 20.6 (July-August 1994), 51-54 (published under my previous name, S(tephen) J(ames) Ellis). Regrettably, there was a misprint in the title: the quotation should have read 'To Speak to the Silence that has Arisen'. (This line comes from Hill's poem 'Scenes with Harlequins', Times Literary Supplement, 9 February 1990, p. 137; repr. NCP, p. 194.) An erratum note appeared in P.N. Review, 21.3 (January-February 1995), 7.

tells his own story;  
so too the harlot  
of many tears.

Speak now regardless  
judges of the hour:  
what verdict, what people?  
Hem of whose garment?

Whose Jerusalem -  
at usance for its bones'  
redemption and last  
salvo of poppies?<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to distinguish commemoration of war from the possibility of re-enactment. The city in which the memorial ceremony takes place had once been razed, but now it is brazen with insular complacency: these two senses are combined in the word 'brazed'. The city has been re-ordered since 'its own destruction' and it is now reordering that destruction through the distortions which acts of memorial entail. The dignitaries who come to lay wreaths at the cenotaph are 'strutting lords': in another context, they could be swaggering tyrants, and they remind one of those predatory 'carrion birds' who 'strutted upon the armour of the dead' in the seventh poem of 'Funeral Music' (HCP, p. 76). Their hollow gestures of reverence make the

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<sup>3</sup> Sunday Correspondent, 11 November 1990, p. 44. The poem was accompanied by a short article by Eric Griffiths, 'Sentinel of the Sacrifice'. It was reprinted in Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Sixtieth Birthday Issue (p. 8) and reappeared (untitled) as part five of the sequence 'Churchill's Funeral' (NCP, p. 208). Apart from the removal of the comma after 'oblivion' (line 7) in New and Selected Poems, the different publications of this piece are identical in wording and lineation. However, there is a different epigraph in the book version. In the periodical printings, the (unidentified) epigraph reads, 'The wounded who could not be brought in had crawled into shell holes, wrapped their waterproof sheets round them, taken out their Bibles and died like that'. Part five of 'Churchill's Funeral' bears the epigraph '... every minute particular, the jewels of Albion, running down / The kennels of the streets & lanes as if they were abhorr'd'. As Hill's note indicates, this is a quotation from Blake's 'Jerusalem', 31: 17-18 (NCP, p. 219).

statespersons vandals: they belie the atrocity and futility of war (the 'sprayed blood / and oblivion') - and they may also sanction the spraying of blood (as by vandals with spray cans) in contemporary conflicts.

Corporate tyrannies exploit the commemoration: the 'spouting head' of the media ignores the historical events supposedly being remembered: all that is 'ancient news'. In media coverage, the barbarities of warfare are as remote as the primitive impaling of a head on a city wall. The severed head (which is literally 'spouting' blood) ought to be a potent and 'prophetic' symbol of atrocities which could happen again, but the warnings are rejected by the media: to 'spike', in journalistic terms, is to reject a news item. What one gets from reportage instead is the sensationalism of stories which celebrities sell to the papers (is 'dung-gate' Fleet Street?) and of sob-stories sold to the camera crew by 'the harlot / of many tears'.

Sensationalism debases commemoration, lending the memorial ceremony a 'carnival' atmosphere. There is a hidden verbal irony which is central to an understanding of the poem. It is that the avoidance of contemplating corpses at the remembrance service is in keeping with the original meaning of 'carnival': the word derives from the old Italian 'carnelavare', which means 'to remove meat during the Lenten period of self-denial'. In its modern application, 'carnival' usually implies neither religious motivation nor the impulse of self-denial. Thus, the example of Christ's sacrifice is overlooked: the 'hem' of his 'garment', the 'verdict' passed on his life, the redemptive vision of a new 'Jerusalem' are disregarded. As far as the 'regardless /

judges of the hour' (the guardians of the press and broadcasting channels) are concerned, a 'verdict' is no more than a handy soundbite from a state dignitary. They need to know who's who at the public ceremony - and the only concern for garment-hems is facile observation of what the ladies are wearing.

Hill's final quatrain is about international relations. Jerusalem is not a promised land but a scenario for modern and bloody territorial disputes, a reminder that war rages elsewhere even as its memories are being laid to rest at the cenotaph. As statespeople dispute who has the rights on Jerusalem, 'usance' goes on: commercial and diplomatic trade-offs are made, as if the city built on bones will be salvaged by financial forms of 'redemption' alone.<sup>4</sup> There is no hope of salvation, rather a 'last / salvo of poppies'. Hill runs together multiple contrary meanings of the word 'salvo': concentrated gunfire (as in a naval battle), the ceremonious discharge of weapons in unison (as in the commemoration of a battle) an outburst (as of applause), an excuse or evasion, an expedient to save a reputation or soothe hurt feelings, and a saving clause or reservation (as in a legal document).<sup>5</sup> This ingenious 'last salvo' of Hill's (rather than the customary 'opening salvo') compacts

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<sup>4</sup> 'Usance' (as in the phrase 'at usance') denotes 'the time or period (varying in respect of different countries) allowed by commercial usage or law for the payment of a bill of exchange, etc., esp. as drawn in a foreign or distant land' (OED). One sense of 'redemption' is 'removal of a financial obligation by paying off a note, bond, etc.' Is Hill referring obliquely to the international arms trade in the Middle East?

<sup>5</sup> The derivation of the word from the Latin 'salvĕ!' ('greetings!'), from 'salvere' ('to be in good health'), from 'salvus' ('safe'), compounds the ironic resonances.

the connections he makes throughout the poem between atrocity, commemoration, celebration, evasion and diplomacy.

There are no clean hands at Hill's rites: the consolations of ritual observance in dealing with human suffering are spattered with damning uncertainties. As always, this goes for the rites of poetry as well. Hill's new work is decked out with ironic ritual regalia: crowns, wreaths, statues, rods of office and so forth. Images of martial insignia are prevalent - from the 'soiled / banners' of 'Canaan, 1' to 'Sobieski's Shield' in the poem of that name (NCP, p. 188, 185).<sup>6</sup> Hill also draws upon imagery from the natural world, in particular the world of plants, and here too he finds dubious decorations of honour; the 'blooded' 'red / spurs' of the plant 'rosa sericea' in the poem 'Of Coming-into-Being and Passing-Away' (NCP, p. 186) recall the 'spurs [which] plucked the horse's blood' in 'Genesis' and the (battle-) 'proved spurs' of the Plantagenet Kings.<sup>7</sup> Similarly menacing are 'the leafless tints / of spring [which] touch red through brimstone' in the poem 'Cycle' (NCP, p. 211).<sup>8</sup> In 'Sorrel', a brief and tangy lament for the loss of memory, there is an image-chain of ill-favoured plants: the bitter-leaved plant of the title

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<sup>6</sup> The poems were printed first in Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Sixtieth Birthday Issue, 6-7, but the first part of 'Canaan' is there called 'Behemoth'. In a letter responding to my P.N. Review article, W.S. Milne points out that 'Sobieski's Shield is [...] a constellation (Scutum Sobieskii, proposed by Poczobut in 1777)'. P.N. Review, 21.3 (January-February 1995), p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> 'Of Coming-into-Being and Passing-Away' was first printed in Agenda, 31.3 (autumn 1993), 5.

<sup>8</sup> This piece was first printed in Times Literary Supplement, 25 December 1992, p. 4.

(which is also, as the epigraph reveals, 'called Sorrow... in some parts of Worcestershire'), parasitic mistletoe, poisonous ivy (NCP, p. 213).<sup>9</sup> The poem closes with an ambiguous image of a plume, as of vapour lifting from 'ill-weathering stone' after the rain. There are intimations of some unspecified triumph, an ascension to a dubious 'elect'. However, the poetic ornamentation is not to be trusted: the word 'plume' carries connotations of self-congratulation and preening, and Hill is always militantly on guard against these possibilities in his poetry.

In 'Scenes with Harlequins', the seven part poem which broke the seven year silence following the appearance of The Mystery, there is also dubious plumage on show:

City besieged by the sun  
 amid sybilline  
 galas, a dust  
 pluming the chariots  
 of tyrants and invalids. (NCP, p. 194)<sup>10</sup>

The poem's dedicatee and subject is the Russian symbolist poet, playwright and critic Alexander Blok (1880-1921). Hill regards Blok's mystical and political philosophies with wariness, as he had those of Péguy. In particular, he distrusts Blok's 'tempestuous fantasies' (p. 196) regarding the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution - expectations which bear an unsettling similarity to the 'iron / fantasies of the state'

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<sup>9</sup> The poem was printed first in Agenda, 31.3 (autumn 1993), 9. Compare Lowell's use of the word 'sorrel' in his poems of old age, 'Domesday Book' and 'Milgate' (DBD, pp. 54, 63).

<sup>10</sup> This sequence was first published in Times Literary Supplement, 9 February 1990, p. 137.

(p. 200).<sup>11</sup> Hill mimics and undermines the language of high Romantic fervour to be found in Blok's poetry, the expressions of willing surrender to sweet oblivion and violent cyclones of change: in Blok's vision, the sunrise of the new socialist dawn will be a bloody one and will entail the siege of cities. The vision is welcomed joyously - hence the 'sibylline' prophecies of destruction are like 'galas', festive or sporting occasions. Hill distrusts galas as he does carnivals; the sport envisaged is destructive. It will bring carnage, as in the chariot-games of a Roman arena. From the Revolution, some will emerge as 'tyrants' and others as 'invalids'. The tyrants, too, will be 'invalids' in the sense that their seizure of power will be contrary to the law - not valid. And the communist ideals which have kicked up all the battle-dust will be invalidated by the tyrants' corrupt exercise of power.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most striking - and most confounding - aspects of Hill's more recent poetry is the disruption of conventional lineation. The poem 'Ritornelli' provides a case in point:

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<sup>11</sup> See also the lines, 'look to abide / tyrannous equality / and freedom led forth / blinded by prophecies' (p. 196).

<sup>12</sup> In his long, unfinished poem 'Retribution', to which Hill alludes at the end of 'Scenes with Harlequins' (NCP, p. 200), Blok expresses, though with irony and complexity, his ideal of a Holy War in Russia; for an extract, see his Selected Poems, trans. by Jon Stallworthy and Peter France, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 88-91. There is a fuller discussion of Hill and Blok in my P.N. Review article: I compare Blok's despairing abandonment of poetry in the aftermath of the Revolution with Hill's lapse into relative silence in recent years. I also note how Hill reflects ironically upon this silence in some of the new poems. A debt of acknowledgement is owed to Andrew Roberts, whose previously cited Ph.D. thesis on Hill has aided my interpretations of 'Scenes with Harlequins' and 'Carnival' (pp. 340-67).

## i

Angel of Tones  
                                   flame of accord  
 exacting mercies  
                                   answerable  
 to rage as solace  
 I will have you sing

## ii

For so the judgment  
 passes  
                   it is not  
 otherwise  
                   hereafter  
 you will see them resolved  
 in tears  
                   they shall bear  
 your crowns of redress

## iii

Lost to no thought  
 of triumph he returns  
 upon himself goes down  
 among water and ash  
 and wailing sounds confused  
 with sounds of joy (NCP, p. 187)<sup>13</sup>

The obscurity of this poem derives in part from the sense that the main composition has been eclipsed: 'Ritornelli', literally meaning 'little returns', denotes the orchestral passages which occur between the verses of an aria or song. There is some similarity to the devotional poems of Tenebrae, particularly in the second section where the 'crowns of redress' suggest Christ's crown of thorns. As in 'Lachrimae Verae', 'a patience proper for redress' depends upon a resolution in tears, but, as in the Tenebrae poem, it

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<sup>13</sup> NCP, p. 187. The poem was previously published in Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Sixtieth Birthday Issue (p. 5), with the following differences: 'flame of accord' read as 'flame and echo', 'exacting mercies' as 'of contrived mercies', 'answerable' as 'far-answerable', 'rage as solace' as 'rage or solace', 'judgment' as 'judgement', 'resolved / in tears' as 'proclaimed / in tears'.

is not clear in this new piece if the motives of mourning are honourable or not. There is throughout the piece a confusion between 'triumph' and 'grief' which, especially in the context of other, more easily comprehensible new Hill poems, appears to be an untrustworthy alliance.

The fragmentation of utterance and the break-up, or withdrawal, of syntax in much of the recent work is expressive of an intensified struggle with matters of faith. The gaps and ellipses in particular indicate the unknowable and unutterable; they convey both a sense of perpetual expectancy and a feeling of permanent loss.<sup>14</sup> Hill is confronting the void - including the troughs of silence into which, as a poet, he has fallen. Riddles of meaning spread with the retraction, or postponement, of punctuation, words swallowing each/other in resonant configurations of sound and sense. The new techniques do not strike as experimental in the 'projectivist' sense: fragmentation impelling a breathless verse onwards. Hill, to whom the effects of effortlessness have always been impediments, adopts methods which, though having the visual impression of arbitrariness, have a deliberated and ponderous effect. They enforce slow reading. Words refer backwards as well as forwards, held in tense, riven locutions. This is more of a 'retentionist' impulse: pent up, not peremptory.

Hill's new experimentalism may be defined as 'postmodern', but not in any deconstructive sense. His linguistic gestures spring from and experience a 'dialogic' relationship with previous ones; this denotes a stronger

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<sup>14</sup> Compare the typographical vanishing trick in the last of the Mercian Hymns (HCP, p. 134).

affinity with Bakhtin than the Derridean camp.<sup>15</sup> The notion of Bakhtinian 'Carnival' has an applicability to Hill's typographical transgressions and disruptions: these tactics offer 'resistance to the tyranny of totalitarian "monologic" ideologies'.<sup>16</sup>

Repeatedly in his prose writings, Hill has challenged any easy idea of 'form and structure as instruments of repression and constraint' (LL, p. 2).<sup>17</sup> Vincent Sherry has emphasized how formal considerations have been a means more of countering than of condoning authoritarianism in Hill's verse:

Like some postmodernists, then, Hill's openness to process in poetry is part of a learned aversion to the tyrannies, aesthetic and political, of high modernist structure. Yet he brings a rage for order to this process, a passionate finesse that would seek to perfect language according to his quasi-religious ideal of verse, that would act according to the poet's moral liability in speech.<sup>18</sup>

Hill's 'learned aversion to [...] tyrannies' both 'aesthetic and political' paradoxically depends upon coercive methods:

Verse that absorbs the hostility of history in its own formal difficulty, that becomes tensile with

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<sup>15</sup> William Bedford views Hill's work as a redressing force to the tyranny of deconstruction: 'It is the great humanist tradition that is being lost to the new puritans and levellers, and we can only be thankful that in Geoffrey Hill we have a poet and critic so eminently gifted to redress that loss'. See '"True Sequences of Pain": "Context" in the Critical Prose and Poetry of Geoffrey Hill', Agenda: Geoffrey Hill Sixtieth Birthday Issue, 15-23 (p. 23).

<sup>16</sup> Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader, ed. by David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988), p. 125.

<sup>17</sup> See also his remarks to Haffenden: 'I would find it hard to disagree with the proposal that form is not only a technical containment, but is possibly also an emotional and ethical containment' (Haffenden, p. 87).

<sup>18</sup> Sherry, p. 31.

the opposition, also masters the adversary by executing such forms.<sup>19</sup>

The crucial point is that, in as much as the formal rigours and structural strategies of Hill's verse do exert mastery, the effect is to expose and question such authority as they command.

Gabriel Pearson puts this well when he discusses the way in which phrase constantly challenges and modifies phrase in Hill's poetry:

Hill's work is markedly a poetry of apposition, units of meaning which form chains of elements, where each element resists the tyranny of the syntactical energy which constituted it by a disconnective thrust that twists and shakes the chain almost, but not quite, to pieces.<sup>20</sup>

In the same analysis, Pearson makes one of the most eloquent and insightful observations on the significance of Hill's formal procedures:

Each poem wears the air of having been superceded [sic] and rendered obsolete by a moral awareness of each imaginative act as a travesty or falsification. From this point of view, elaborate formality may be seen as a form of owning up. It acknowledges that art's structures readily participate in ploys of power and control.<sup>21</sup>

Much of what Pearson notes with regard to Hill's earlier work has an applicability to the recent material as well. Despite lacking the 'appearance of formal composure', Hill's new work makes a dramatic display of its ceremonial trappings. His experiments with form render many of the poems at least partly 'unconstruable', throwing emphasis on

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> 'King Log Revisited', in Robinson, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 31-48 (p. 32). Pearson is here writing about the thirtieth 'Mercian Hymn'.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 42.

'matters of form and tone'. It is not that the form and the meaning are distinguishable; the case is rather that by drawing attention to stylistic trickery Hill intensifies his, and the reader's, concerns with the problems of right expression. There is always doubt and guilt involved.

The gaps on the page in a number of Hill's new poems are symptomatic of a threatening gulf: that near-silence into which the poet has fallen. Given that his preoccupations with the dangers of utterance encourage an increasing intricacy of response to that anxiety, it should come as no surprise that Hill, never prone to prolificacy, is now more reticent than ever.

That his work, on the whole, is now more difficult than ever is perhaps also to be expected. The complexities of his verse have always been for Hill a means of expressing the moral liabilities incurred in the very act of writing poetry, as Harold Bloom has noted:

His subject, like his style, is difficulty: the difficulty of apprehending and accepting moral guilt, and the difficulty of being a poet when the burden of history, including poetic history, makes any prophetic stance inauthentic.<sup>22</sup>

That the difficulties which Hill experiences are transmitted to the reader in poems which are themselves difficult to understand is a quandary which he has been unable, indeed unwilling, to escape from. The persuasive message of his work is that the experience of difficulty is as necessary for the reader as it is for Hill himself; it is only through persisting in the face of perplexity that one learns to

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<sup>22</sup> Introduction, 'The Survival of Strong Poetry', to Hill's Somewhere is Such a Kingdom: Poems 1952-1971 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. xiii-xxv (p. xiv). The essay is reprinted in Bloom, Geoffrey Hill, pp. 1-10.

distinguish the tyrannizing forces of 'inauthentic' language from the redressive capacities of well-founded expression.

IV. SEAMUS HEANEY

## 1. Introduction

Seamus Heaney evidently admires Geoffrey Hill's poetry, but he is wary of it too. In his essay 'Englands of the Mind' (1976), he notes, with trepidation, how Hill's 'is to a certain extent a scholastic imagination founded on an England that we might describe as Anglo-Romanesque, touched by the polysyllabic light of Christianity but possessed by darker energies which might be acknowledged as barbaric' (PRE, p. 151). Although Heaney writes with smiling approval of the 'morose linguistic delectation' which he imagines Hill to indulge in during composition, he also keeps his distance from the 'mannered rhetoric' of his 'grave and sturdy' poems (p. 160).<sup>1</sup>

Robert Lowell's work too is met with a blend of apprehension and admiration - although Lowell has undoubtedly been more of an 'exemplary' figure to Heaney than Hill has (PRE, p. 221). The social dimension, the assuredness, the hard intelligence: these qualities of Lowell's verse have won Heaney's respect. But he worries about the 'imperious strain' running underneath all his work (GOT, p. 134). In the essay 'Lowell's Command' (1986), Heaney extols the poet's middle-period volumes, preferring them to both the 'symbol-ridden and wilfully difficult early poems' (p. 138) and the 'mighty heave' of the later work; he refers to the Notebook volumes and their spin-offs as a 'massive riveted façade', and fears 'the armoured tread, the unconceding density of it all' (p. 141). The best works are

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<sup>1</sup> See also the essay 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', Irish University Review, 15 (1985), 5-19: here, Heaney writes of Hill's 'stern and slightly punitive metres' (p. 6).

to him those which represent 'a good victory by Lowell over his ruling passion for sounding victorious' (p. 141). Life Studies, For the Union Dead and Near the Ocean are singled out for these qualities, and Heaney praises also the return of an unprepossessing note in the late poems of Day by Day, claiming that 'Lowell's command came finally to reside in this self-denial, this readiness not to commandeer the poetic event but to let his insights speak their own riddling truths' (p. 147).<sup>2</sup>

In Heaney's view, the most successful poems of Lowell's are those which 'rest their claims upon no authority other than the jurisdiction and vigour of their own artistic means' (GOT, p. 139). This claim is characteristic of the emphasis Heaney places in his critical writings on 'the legislative and executive powers of expression itself' (GOT, p. 93). For him, the enterprise of writing poetry is validated more by the author attending to the intrinsic requirements of composition, to matters of form and tone, than by a sense of responsibility to the socio-historical conditions which the poem might mirror. As he writes in the title essay of The Government of the Tongue,

The fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demands and promise of the artistic event. (GOT, p. 101)

Yet Heaney never loses sight of the notion that artistic and social obligations are inseparable. Repeatedly in his prose, he promotes the ideal of 'uniting the aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup> See also 'Full Face: Robert Lowell', Heaney's 1978 review of Day by Day (PRE, pp. 221-24).

instinct with the obligation to witness morally and significantly in the realm of public action' (GOT, p. 133).<sup>3</sup>

The writings of Seamus Heaney continually return the reader to Donald Davie's elusive ideal of a poetry which is equal to the task of 'redressing our historical perspectives'. Heaney is alive to Davie's warning that the poet's ability to come to terms with history is always likely to be jeopardized by the impulses towards transcendence or evasion. As with many contemporary Irish writers, he has often felt himself under strong pressure to engage with his nation's troubled inheritance, and has been accused by some critics (indeed, he has at times accused himself in his poems) of evasion on this score. Like Derek Mahon's *Fire King*, Heaney harbours the desire to escape from 'the barbarous cycle' of tribal politics in his poems, but he also shares the monarch's knowledge that the paradigm of an imaginative, ahistorical free realm is a dangerously irresponsible fantasy.

What redress can the poet offer to tyrannical circumstances? Heaney confronts this question in the harsh facts of Ireland's 'postcolonialist legacy of usurpation'.<sup>4</sup> At times, he wishes to transcend such concerns, to get beyond the world of politics and violence - but, sensitive to the fine line which exists between transcendence and evasion, he also distrusts this impulse. In his most recent

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<sup>3</sup> He uses these terms to refer to Lowell's act of conscientious objection in the Second World War.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Robinson, 'Seamus Heaney: The Free State of Image and Allusion', Instabilities, pp. 123-60 (p. 124).

critical volume, The Redress of Poetry (1995), Heaney attempts to 'redress [...] historical perspectives' by balancing the demands of social and political circumstance against the inclination to defend poetry as a purely self-validating art. He explores the etymological connotations of 'redress', and acknowledges that the word may be defined as 'resistance to an imperial hegemony' (ROP, p. 7), but in pursuing his ideal of poetry, he places the emphasis more on reparation than on retaliation.

As his wary respect for Hill and Lowell might suggest, Heaney does not favour an imperious, headstrong tone for his writings. Nonetheless, there is an assured quality to be detected in the verse; it is there in the curt, clipped diction of his tough-minded early work and also in the blend of meditateness and insouciance which has characterized his approach in more recent years. Heaney's first two volumes, Death of a Naturalist (1966) and Door into the Dark (1969), present the picture of a youth adapting cautiously to the knowledge of violence. A dispassionate, at times even callous, surveillance of the harsh realities immanent in the poet's childhood landscape reflects the growth of the observer's sexual and political awareness, and registers the continuities and disruptions of a rural life shadowed by sectarian divisions.

Throughout his career, Heaney has been engaged in 'an attempt', as he put it in his 1974 lecture 'Feeling into Words', 'to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past' (PRE, p. 60). In Wintering Out (1973), Stations (1975) and North (1975), this is achieved through an exploration of his own, and his

nation's, ancestral, geographical and etymological roots. Heaney often approaches the theme of Ireland's colonial history obliquely in this work, through an interest in the power-struggles embedded in language and poetic form. He adopts a tacitly combative idiom by pitting elements of Gaelic language and tradition against the dominant linguistic and literary inheritance which Ireland receives from England. But there is much ambivalence, much give-and-take, in his attitudes. Even in his most directly political and controversial volume, North, Heaney conveys considerable cautiousness in squaring up to the violent realities of the Troubles. This is something which I investigate by studying the revision of certain poems.

The work after North shows Heaney intensifying his struggle to come to terms with, and his desire to transcend, political importunities. A Lowellian spirit of self-accusation, the guilty sense of moral culpability which Heaney incorporates into the very act of writing, pervades Field Work (1979). In the subsequent collections, Station Island (1984) and The Haw Lantern (1987), there is an increased focus specifically on the writer's predicament; in much of this work, Heaney seeks to confront imagined charges of poetic malpractice, or calls to political dutifulness, while all the time subtly countering these challenges. With Seeing Things (1991), a new sense of liberation and self-empowerment is attained - although the feeling of freedom

from the burden of public accountability is balanced against new feelings of doubt and loss.<sup>5</sup>

It is in his translations that Heaney considers most directly redress as the enactment of retribution. The element of simulation which the borrowing of a voice involves has allowed him to be more politically vocal than he customarily dares to be in his original lyric work (and this is true, too, of the 'Sweeney Redivivus' section in Station Island - the group of poems in which Hill's influence on Heaney is most pronounced). The revenge-ethic is dramatically realized in the scenarios of resentment, injustice and division which Sweeney Astray (Eire: 1983; UK: 1984), The Cure at Troy (1990), and (to a lesser degree) The Midnight Verdict (1993) depict. While clearly not functioning as simple allegories for the Irish situation, nonetheless the political resonances of these compositions make themselves felt.

In the text of his 1995 Nobel Lecture, Crediting Poetry, Heaney writes about tyranny and the redress of tyranny. He takes Yeats's poem 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', and in particular the sixth section, 'The Stare's Nest by my Window', as an example of how poetry can balance the two against each/other:

As his thoughts turned upon the irony of civilizations being consolidated by violent and powerful conquerors who end up commissioning the artists and the architects, [Yeats] began to associate the sight of a mother bird feeding its

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<sup>5</sup> Due to its very recent publication, I have not been able to take full account of Heaney's latest poetry volume, The Spirit Level (London: Faber and Faber, 1996) - although two particular poems from it, which have appeared previously in periodicals, are discussed in the third and eleventh sections of this chapter (pp. 279-82 and 366-69).

young with the image of the honey-bee, an image deeply lodged in poetic tradition and always suggestive of the ideal of an industrious, harmonious, nurturing commonwealth.

Yeats's work typifies for Heaney the way in which poetry may be at once 'tender-minded' and 'tough-minded'; it balances 'the need on the one hand for a truth-telling that will be hard and retributive, and on the other hand, the need not to harden the mind to a point where it denies its own yearnings for sweetness and trust'. It is just this balancing act which Heaney himself has been performing throughout his own poetic career.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture 1995 (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 12 December 1995), pp. 25-27. See also Yeats's Poems, pp. 308-14 (especially p. 312).

## 2. Artful Redress: Heaney's Prose<sup>1</sup>

Heaney has consistently championed poetry as an art of redress. The concept of writing as restitution provides a touchstone for the preoccupations of his essays, and this makes for an essentially benign critical project. However, with their combination of rigorous scrutiny and generous interpretation, Heaney's prose writings at times mask the authoritativeness, and the partiality, of their arguments - and the sleights of hand by which these arguments are pursued.

In the opening essay of The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings (1988), Heaney draws an analogy between artistic expression and the music Nero struck on his fiddle in defiant obliviousness to the carnage of Rome: 'proverbially, it has come to stand for actions which are frivolous to the point of effrontery, and useless to the point of insolence' (GOT, p. xii). The connection he makes is prompted by the dilemma facing Heaney and David Hammond (a musician friend) as to whether or not to make a recording of their work on an evening of violence in Belfast: a challenge is thereby issued to 'the sovereign claims which art would make for itself, caricatured in the figure of Nero, the singer and player culpably absorbed in his melodies while his city burns around him' (p. xviii).

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the following section is adapted from an article, '"Speak, Strike, Redress!": Seamus Heaney and the Art of Resistance', which I contributed to Agenda: Irish Poetry Double Issue 33.3-4 (autumn-winter 1996), 148-58. This material has also been reworked for a paper, 'History and Poetry in the Balance', which was presented at an international conference on 'Poetry and History' (Stirling University, June 1996).

The putative alignment between poet and tyrant evidently unsettles Heaney but, in a move that is characteristic of his critical procedures, he parries the point with a counter-challenge which deflects the issue. Heaney proceeds to extol Wilfred Owen's poetry as art which vindicates itself by being born out of violent times, and backs this up by quoting some vaguely Owenesque words from Hill's The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy (GOT, p. xiii):

Must men stand by what they write  
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry  
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?  
(HCP, p. 183)<sup>2</sup>

By swiftly diverting attention from tyranny to the production of writing which one is 'prepared to live or, *in extremis*, die for' (p. xiii), Heaney strategically and decisively shifts the terms of enquiry: emphasis upon artistic expression which may be seen as complacent in moments of crisis is displaced by a defence of creativity at such times, of art which functions precisely in order to shake people out of their complacent perceptions. The tyrannical poet has slipped out of sight, to be replaced by one who would redress the social and political wrongs simply by practising his or her art.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of these lines, see p. 243 above. Heaney does not discuss the highly ambiguous implications of Hill's words - or the ambiguities of the context from which they are lifted.

<sup>3</sup> David Trotter has taken issue with the evasive element which he detects throughout The Government of the Tongue: 'the weakness of Heaney's whole argument is its refusal to admit that lyric action involves relation rather than transcendence, and can therefore be analyzed. [...] He doesn't, for all the fiddle of these essays, make a very convincing Nero'. 'Troubles', London Review of Books, 23 June 1988, pp. 11-12.

It would be going too far, however, to attribute complacency to Heaney himself for such manoeuvres. What is most telling about them is the way in which he follows the inbuilt bias of his line of thought towards a conception of what poetry can put right; there is nothing easy or one-sided about his pursuit of this ideal. The two-way definition of 'the government of the tongue' which provides the central metaphor for this book is more than just a piece of verbal trickery: it poses a moral conundrum. Heaney uses it to draw analogies between jurisdiction in poetic and political terms; at one extreme, it can denote the 'monastic and ascetic strictness' of highly controlled expression and, at the other, a type of romantic presumption in the idea of 'poetry as its own vindicating force':

In this dispensation, the tongue (representing both a poet's personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself) has been granted the right to govern. The poetic art is credited with an authority of its own. As readers, we submit to the jurisdiction of achieved form, even though that form is achieved not by dint of the moral and ethical exercise of mind but by the self-validating operations of what we call inspiration (GOT, p. 92).

That there is something coercive about such formulations of Heaney's has not gone unnoticed; Edna Longley, for example, finds this talk of 'the jurisdiction of achieved form' 'slightly threatening'.<sup>4</sup> Yet the menace of self-licensing expression is deflected when Heaney summons the threat of a less metaphorical kind of tongue-governing - the censorship which occurs in totalitarian and other repressive régimes:

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<sup>4</sup> Edna Longley, The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 224.

In ideal republics, Soviet republics, in the Vatican and Bible-belt, it is a common expectation that the writer will sign over his or her individual, venturesome and potentially disruptive activity into the keeping of an official doctrine, a traditional system, a party line, whatever. In such contexts, no further elaboration or exploration of the language or forms currently in place is permissible. An order has been handed down and the shape of things has been established. (GOT, p. 96)

The irony is that autocratic non-discursiveness creeps into Heaney's defence of autonomous composition. His conception of poetry which justifies itself 'not by dint of the moral and ethical exercise of mind' forms a paradoxical alliance with his interest in the 'way in which "ungoverned" poetry and poets, in extreme totalitarian conditions, can become a form of alternative government, or government in exile' (GOT, pp. 96-97).

Heaney begins his recently published volume of essays, The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures (1995), by considering the uneasy inter-dependence between tyrannical and redressive impulses. In a way which recalls Auden's 'The Poet and the City', he approaches the central theme of his study by using Plato as an authority:

Behind such defences and justifications [for poetry as politically instrumental], at any number of removes, stands Plato, calling into question whatever special prerogatives or useful influences poetry would claim for itself within the *polis*. Yet Plato's world of ideal forms also provides the court of appeal through which poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions. Moreover, 'useful' or 'practical' responses to those same conditions are derived from imagined standards too: poetic fictions, the dream of alternative worlds, enable governments and revolutionaries as well. It's just that governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own or their readers' sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable. (ROD, p. 1)

The distorted idealism out of which tyranny arises is played off against art's more innocuous acts of illusion: whereas Hill, in many of his poems, emphasizes the connection between the artistic conjurer and the tyrant, Heaney places the stress rather on the potential for verbal trickery to counter the effects of repression.

For Heaney, the noun 'redress' denotes primarily a benign act of restitution, in accordance with the dictionary definition of its first sense: 'Reparation of, satisfaction or compensation for, a wrong sustained or the loss resulting from this' (ROP, p. 15). Yet the history of 'redress' in reference to violent counter-action is also relevant to the poet's concerns - particularly in the context of Irish political history. A need to recognize and resist imperial control, an instinctive sympathy with republican ideals and a principled opposition to violent action; these are Brutus's conflicting impulses, and they are Heaney's too. To a large extent, however, Heaney suppresses the retributive connotations of his keyword. In his recourse to the Oxford English Dictionary for the title essay of The Redress of Poetry, he plays down the potential use of redress to describe violent resistance (ROP, p. 15); the figurative castings of the word to do with re-establishment and uprising are acknowledged by Heaney only in passing.

It is intriguing to compare his decision to make little of such applications of the word in the new work with his use of it in his 1989 collection of essays, The Place of Writing. Here, the implications of retaliation and reprisal make their presence felt:

Nowadays we typically think of art as a means to redress or affront public and historical conditions. The danger is that we might go so far in this direction as to confuse the salutary scandal of such confrontation with the craven scandal of evading or absconding from historical conditions altogether. (POW, p. 39)

That the argument is slippery here results partly from the effective conflation of 'redress' and 'affront' in the first sentence: the verbs conspire in antagonism. Yet the following sentence points in two directions - towards confrontation or towards evasion. Heaney is wrestling with the paradox that while art sets itself up in defiant opposition to social pressures, its desire to evade such realities (as if that were possible) undercuts the effectiveness of that opposition: art loses its affront, becomes an irrelevance.

Heaney returns to these tricky distinctions throughout The Redress of Poetry, and the increased clarity of his formulations here depends at least in part upon his separation of the ideas of redress and affront. Again, he achieves this by deflecting attention from the issue of social relevance: turning the point around, he emphasises how a work of art might itself be jeopardized by the pressure to behave responsibly. For example, he notes how, when poetry is pressed to give voice to injustice,

its power as a mode of redress in the first sense - as agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices - is being appealed to constantly. But in discharging this function, poets are in danger of slighting another imperative, namely, to redress poetry as poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means.

(ROP, pp. 5-6)

From being the potential agent of redress, poetry has become its needy recipient. Again, Heaney proves himself adept at

shifting the load of his vocabulary by a mere stroke of the pen.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretive ambiguities which the word redress offers are deftly turned to creative account. Heaney begins the title essay of the new volume by characterizing redress as a means of matching force with force; to this end, he endorses Wallace Stevens's definition of poetry as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without".["]It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality["](ROP, p. 1). Although from the outset of his argument Heaney's definition of redress is dependent more upon the intrinsic requirements of the poem than the conditions surrounding it, it is significant that the word violence is operative at this point in the exposition. Heaney gives assent to poetry which encodes a 'politics of subversion, of redressal, of affirming that which is denied voice' (p. 2). He also understands the Yeatsian impulse of defiant retaliation - 'If you are an Irish poet in the wake of the 1916 executions, the pressure will be to revile the tyranny of the executing power' (pp. 2-3) - although he does not side with it. Judiciously stopping short of giving a

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<sup>5</sup> Peter McDonald has commented wryly on the gulf between Heaney's critical idiom and the language of theoretical discourse prevalent in contemporary literary studies: 'in many academic domains of "the critical sense", of course, the idea of engaging with "poetry as poetry" is regarded as, at best, an under-informed absurdity. [...] To claim that there is such a thing as poetic language, and that it is capable of effecting change in a world outside discourse, may well seem like striding blithely into a theoretical minefield. Heaney's success in this respect is partly a consequence of his ability to ignore the explosions: and in any case, post-structuralist mines have a way of failing to detonate comprehensibly': see 'The Poet and "the Finished Man": Heaney's Oxford Lectures', Irish Review, no. 19 (summer 1996) (advance copy kindly provided by the author).

sanction to the violent corollaries of political resistance, he identifies the central problem of poetry pursuing a particular cause: it is that the activists in any partisan struggle

will always want the redress of poetry to be an exercise of leverage on behalf of *their* point of view; they will require the entire weight of the thing to come down on their side of the scales.

(ROP, p. 2)

Heaney then goes on to make much of the scales-imagery available to the dictionary definition of redress as a counterweight. Pursuing notions of what might constitute poetic justice, he refers to Simone Weil, whose Gravity and Grace 'is informed by the idea of counterweighting, of balancing out the forces, of redress'; he extends this trope to describe how poetry has

a tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales - a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation. This redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances. (ROP, pp. 3-4)

An urge to get the balance right has become a hallmark of Heaney's approach to both his poetry and his prose. The scales-imagery provides a neat visual aid for conveying the idea that poetic 'counter-reality' carries as much weight as 'the historical situation' - and that the two alternatives are mutually dependent.

The idea is pursued through the essays on individual authors which follow. A sort of critical legalese is maintained by applying to Oscar Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' and Brian Merriman's The Midnight Court the

notion of a 'court of appeal through which poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions' (ROP, p. 1).<sup>6</sup> Christopher Marlowe's 'Hero and Leander', despite being bound up with the expansionist drive of nascent imperialism, is celebrated for its linguistic liberations, 'its freedom from any intention to coerce or affront' (p. 34) - a claim which is harnessed persuasively to an account of the poem's sexual openness.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, and in studies of Dylan Thomas and Hugh MacDiarmid, Heaney attempts a form of critical redress - a reappraisal and rehabilitation of authors whose reputations have suffered. The line he takes with regard to Elizabeth Bishop is more biographically impelled; in the light of her personal losses and hardships, particularly her difficult childhood, Heaney considers how 'Bishop's poetry redresses the scales that were loaded against her from the start' (p. 173).<sup>8</sup> By such applications, Heaney exercises positive discrimination in the particular cast he gives to the word redress, expanding its connotations in certain directions, curtailing them in others.

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<sup>6</sup> See the chapters 'Speranza in Reading: On "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"', pp. 83-102, and 'Orpheus in Ireland: On Brian Merriman's The Midnight Court', pp. 38-62. The latter work, a semi-light-hearted Irish poem of 1780 concerned with women's rights to sexual fulfilment and equality, presents, in Heaney's view, the image of 'a dream court which momentarily redresses the actual penal system under which the native population have to endure' (p. 41).

<sup>7</sup> 'Extending the Alphabet: On Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander"', *ibid.*, pp. 17-37 .

<sup>8</sup> 'Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop', *ibid.*, pp. 164-85.

Although it may be legitimate to characterize Heaney as disarming in his arguments, it would be wrong to extend this to a charge of disingenuousness. The buoyancy and gravity, the confidence and diffidence, of Heaney's prose style are themselves part of the message and not a means of concealing anything insidiously less amenable. Nonetheless, one should be wary of countenancing his ideals of poetic legislation without also acknowledging the swerves by which he wins through to his persuasive pronouncements.

### 3. The Sway of Language

'Sway' is a word which Heaney has been drawn towards for some time. Its definitions are complex: as a noun and a transitive and intransitive verb, it can denote either control or fluctuation, actively imposed or passively registered. In his 1986 essay 'Sounding Auden', Heaney places his trust in a 'poetic authority' which is achieved by a persuasive 'sway' of language:

By poetic authority I mean the rights and weight which accrue to a voice not only because of a sustained history of truth-telling but by virtue also of its tonality, the sway it gains over the deep ear and, through that, over other parts of our mind and nature. (GOT, p. 109)

Here, the emphasis is on sway as active influence: the belief is that a poem, by its very tonality, can sway opinion, that it carries weight. However, swaying in the sense of leaning implies the shifting of weight; the meaning of 'to sway' as 'to incline (or cause another to incline) in a particular direction, or in different directions alternately' places the emphasis on mutability rather than fixity. These alternative definitions conjure up contrary notions of, on the one hand, the tyrant's sway and, on the other, the swaying of the scales of justice central to Heaney's conception of redress. Balanced against each other, the definitions present the fantasy that authoritarian and liberal aspirations might co-exist within a poem.

Heaney explores the etymological paradox of 'sway' in a recent poem entitled 'A Sofa in the Forties'. Here, he reimagines the scene of a childhood game of make-believe in which a sofa is transformed into a railway train, and places these observations in a wider historical frame:

We entered history and ignorance  
 Under the wireless shelf. *Yipee-yi-yay*  
 Sang "The Riders of the Range." HERE IS THE NEWS

Said the absolute speaker. Between him and us  
 A great gulf was fixed where pronunciation  
 Reign'd tyrannically. The aerial wire

Swept from a treetop down through a hole bored  
 In the windowframe. When it moved in wind,  
 The sway of language and its furtherings

Swept and swayed in us like nets in water  
 Or the abstract, lonely curve of distant trains  
 As we entered history and ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

In interview, Heaney confirmed that he had in mind a dual possibility for the word 'sway' in this poem - that it signifies the exercise of command, and that 'then there is one's swaying in sympathy - or of necessity. [...] It has that double-sense, that double-possibility, of active or passive involvement'.<sup>2</sup> Sway as external coercion and sway as natural inclination: the two meanings are played off against each/other.

The reference to tyranny in the above lines needs to be explained in the larger context of the poem: in the lines preceding these, the sofa (which has taken on a 'bier-like gauntness') insidiously switches from being the vehicle of imaginative transport to functioning as a metaphor for the deadlier forms of transportation associated with events of the 1940s:

we sensed

A tunnel coming up where we'd pour through

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<sup>1</sup> 'A Sofa in the Forties', Verse 9.3 (winter 1992), 7. An altered version of the poem appears in The Spirit Level, p. 7. Some of the autobiographical detail evoked in this piece is also described in Crediting Poetry, pp. 9-11.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is from an unpublished interview with the author, conducted at Harvard University on 24 May 1994 (hereafter referred to as 'Harvard Interview').

Like lit-up carriages through fields at night,  
 Our only job to sit, eyes straight ahead,  
 And be transported and make engine-noise.<sup>3</sup>

The larger historical perspective implies that the children's games, ostensibly swaying to the whims of imagination alone, are in fact under the sway of events beyond the realm of play. Even the very language of fantasy which captures the children's imagination is something of an imposition: 'The Riders of the Range' is a cultural import from the United States, one whose infiltration of the Irish household might be thought to propagate historical ignorance by reinventing genocidal atrocity as harmless Wild West mythology.

The British influence on Irish culture is all the more pronounced; indeed, it depends in large part upon pronunciation itself. The broadcaster, an 'absolute speaker', infiltrates Irish homes through the wireless-speaker; the insistent correctness of his Queen's English carries a supposedly definitive version of momentous events going on elsewhere. This is so at odds with the Irish dialect and day-to-day experience as to seem a tyrannical imposition within the child's world of the poem.

Yet Heaney, while acknowledging this threatening force, exploits the ambiguity of the word 'sway' in order tacitly to resist the force: the wireless language exercises its sway (its controlling power) by swaying (fluctuating) as if in water. The implications of Ireland being caught in the nets of empire are obvious enough in this metaphor, but also

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<sup>3</sup> 'I was thinking of course of the Holocaust, and the atrocious callousness of that operation' ('Harvard Interview').

present is the notion that the people supposedly subject to control are in fact simply swaying back and forth, bending as much to their own inclinations as in accommodation of alien influences. It is not just the buoyancy of spirit conveyed through the water imagery which carries this idea: in the oppositional relation of airwaves and wind, of man-made window frames and the wood of a tree, it is as if the very landscape of the poem defines a world which sways both with and against the forms of control insidiously acting on it.

The concerns of this poem parallel Heaney's preoccupations in 'The Regional Forecast', an essay in which he recalls the experience of Irish neighbours listening to the B.B.C. weather forecaster speaking 'in a tone so authoritative it verged upon the tyrannical'.<sup>4</sup> The gulf between the predictions of the broadcaster and the listeners' own weather-instincts is scrutinized for the way in which it represents the divide between privileged centre and debilitated province. This leads Heaney to interpret the distrustful resistance with which the forecasts were met as in some small way culturally enabling - a challenge to tyrannical pronouncements.

The issue of external media having some kind of interfering purchase on Irish culture is given probing theoretical treatment by the socialist academic Michael D. Higgins. In an essay entitled 'The Tyranny of Images', he assesses the impact of communication technology on representations of Ireland, noting how film and radio

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<sup>4</sup> See The Literature of Region and Nation, ed. by R.P. Draper (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 10-23 (p. 10).

broadcasters, like historians and literary figures (principally Yeats) before them, have 'fantasized a mythical community from which they could measure demoralization and decay'. In particular, he takes issue with the distorted depictions of a sealed community in the West of Ireland, one defined by its rural rituals and continuities - depictions which, in spite of economic and social realities, have helped to perpetuate the artificial literary constructs of the Celtic Revival and the phantom of the noble peasant. The 'consensus management' in control of such representations, offering an homogeneity of Irish people, customs and practices through this hegemony of distorted images, is seen as just one more form of repression to which Irish people are subject. His enquiry impels Higgins towards the sentiment that 'we need to defend the freedom of art to subvert the existing repressions'.<sup>5</sup>

The sentiment is one fundamental to Heaney, whose own, rather more ambivalent, attitude to the romanticization of the West of Ireland is expressed in the essay 'A Tale of Two Islands: Reflections on the Irish Literary Revival'. The ambivalence stems from the fact that his focus is on how the Irish have chosen to represent themselves. Heaney manages to be appreciative of the mystifications practiced by Synge upon Aran while at the same time making the thrust of his essay against such mythologization. He is drawn to sympathize with the impulse behind artistic representations

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Tyranny of Images: Aspects of Hidden Control - Literature, Ethnography and Political Commentary on the West of Ireland', The Crane Bag, 8.2 (1984), 132-42 (pp. 140-41).

of an Irish way of life 'unified by an instinctive sense of beauty':

All this, of course, was artistically proper and exhilarating. Writers need images and situations which release in them whatever is latent and submerged and allow them to appease their perhaps unconscious yearnings and tensions.<sup>6</sup>

Described in these terms, the images are more a means of resisting than of embodying tyranny. This is in accord with his recognition in The Place of Writing that the ideals of the Irish Literary Revival 'were essentially born of a healthy desire to redress the impositions of cultural imperialism' (POW, p. 38).

Heaney's remarks about aesthetic representations of national identity are characteristically tentative. His guardedness on this issue is salutary, especially in the light of certain critics' reservations about his own poetic practice. The views of David Lloyd typify one sharp line of criticism which has been directed against Heaney:

The recourse to the 'racial archetype', in the ever more vulgarised and familiar images of Irish nationalism, and the manipulation of the relation of Irishness to Irish ground, linked as these are through 'Kathleen ni Houlihan', the motherland, together produce the forms in which the aestheticisation of Irish politics is masked. [...] The naturalisation of identity which an aesthetic ideology effects serves to foreclose historical progress and to veil the constitution of subjects and issues in continuing conflict, while deflecting both politics and ethics into a hypothetical domain of free play.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Irish Studies, ed. by P.J. Drudy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 - ), I (1980), 1-20 (p. 9).

<sup>7</sup> "'Pap for the Dispossessed": Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity', in Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. by Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992; repr. 1993), pp. 87-116 (p. 91).

Heaney's issue-deflecting tendencies as a critic have already been noted. However, Lloyd (who has his own political agenda) forces the argument by applying his reservations to Heaney's practice as a poet. There is nothing 'vulgarized' or manipulative (at least in the way Lloyd implies) about Heaney's engagement with the archetypes of a nationalist mythography, nor is the poet's pursuit one of concealment and subterfuge. In the following analysis of his progress as a poet, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which Heaney has courted the liabilities of a dangerously 'aesthetic ideology' but also the enabling effects of his engagement with questions of Irish identity.

4. 'The Despotism of the Eye': 'Death of a Naturalist'  
(1966) and 'Door into the Dark' (1969)

In Book Eleven of The Prelude (the 1805 text), William Wordsworth recalls a time when his spiritual correspondence with Nature was jeopardized by the tyrannical domination of his outward senses:

The state to which I now allude was one  
In which the eye was master of the heart,  
When that which is in every stage of life  
The most despotic of our senses gain'd  
Such strength in me as often held my mind  
In absolute dominion. Gladly here,  
Entering upon abstruser argument,  
Would I endeavour to unfold the means  
Which Nature studiously employs to thwart  
This tyranny, summons all the senses each  
To counteract the other and themselves,  
And makes them all, and the objects with which all  
Are conversant, subservient in their turn  
To the great ends of Liberty and Power.  
But this is matter for another song. (XI.171)<sup>1</sup>

What Wordsworth describes here has, in fact, proved to be matter for another writer's song. The poetry of Seamus Heaney exhibits an apprehension of the dangers posed by the dominance of visual perception. It also turns to meditation on the natural world as a means of thwarting the tyranny of the eye.

In his early poems, recreating episodes and encounters from childhood, Heaney reveals the eye to be a despot. He is aligned in this respect not just with Wordsworth but with Coleridge also: Elmer Andrews has noted how the speaker in these poems

is devoted to nature study, but also to visionary transformation of the given reality. 'The eye is such a cunning despot', Tom Paulin writes, echoing Coleridge's insistence on the need to rescue the child's perceptions from 'the despotism of the

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<sup>1</sup> The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970; repr. 1991), pp. 210-11.

eye'. From early on, Heaney, too, strains away from perception of the world as a naturalist or materialist sees it.<sup>2</sup>

In Coleridge's speculations on 'The Education of Nature' (to which Andrewes is referring), the volatile and experimentative child promiscuously acquires 'first knowledges' of his environment through the eye; only later does conscious choice shape these perceptions into something meaningful. Heaney, like Coleridge, knows this shaping to be the poet's task; his earliest work shows him re-enacting boyhood experiences and observations in order to get beyond the tyrannical domination of mere visual apprehension.

The naturalist whose death is recorded in these poems is another variant of that power-playing youth who inhabits the poems of Hill and Lowell. Like these authors, Heaney explores connections between a child's imaginatively lording it over the environment and the presumptuousness entailed in reducing the definition of the world to all the eye surveys. This is made clear in the title-poem of Heaney's first volume, Death of a Naturalist (p. 15). The poem looks back to Lowell's 'Dunbarton' in Life Studies (p. 80) in which the poet recalls capturing and attacking newts as a child; it looks forward, too, to the seventh of Hill's Mercian Hymns,

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<sup>2</sup> Elmer Andrewes, 'The Spirit's Protest', in Andrewes, ed., Seamus Heaney, pp. 208-32 (pp. 211-12). The references he makes are to Coleridge on Logic and Learning: With Selections from the Unpublished Manuscripts, ed. by Alice D. Snyder (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 105 (although the phrase 'the despotism of the eye' does not in fact occur on this page) and Tom Paulin's poem, 'What is Fixed to Happen' (discussed on pp. 45-46 above).

where the child-king batters a ditchful of frogs and eels, then sidles 'away from the stillness and silence'.<sup>3</sup>

What Hill terms the 'discovery of the tyrannical streak in oneself as a child' is an issue in 'Death of a Naturalist', although Heaney does not make as explicit a link as Lowell or Hill between the boy's outward experience of violence and his own cruel tendencies.<sup>4</sup> The poem charts the demise of the child-naturalist's ability to credit the power his eye had once commanded when it surveyed the jars of frogspawn ranged for inspection on shelves and window-sills. His presumption in thinking himself lord over creation is killed off when the boy revisits a flax-dam to find it 'invaded' by 'angry frogs', sitting there 'cocked' like the triggers of guns:

The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat  
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.  
I sickened, turned, and ran. The great slime kings  
Were gathered there for vengeance and I knew  
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.

The naturalist's death comes as the result of learning a salutary lesson, one which has to do with growing up, particularly with accommodating one's consciousness to new and fearful realizations. As Seamus Deane has observed, 'the close intense working of the language [...] derives from [...] activation of the words in terms of sexual and political intimacies and hatreds'.<sup>5</sup> In the course of the learning process, language has to grow up - from classroom

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<sup>3</sup> See p. 198, note 11 above.

<sup>4</sup> Haffenden, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> 'Seamus Heaney: The Timorous and the Bold', in Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980 (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 174-86 (pp. 176, 178).

talk about mammy frogs and daddy frogs to the political vocabulary of threat and invasion, gun and grenade. 'The great slime kings' who are bent on vengeance invite interpretation in broadly political terms, the 'farting' of 'their blunt heads' connoting noxious rhetoric. If it is overstepping the mark to speculate that the clutching action which the young Heaney fears in the last line is the handclasp of solidarity in some sectarian cause, it is clear enough that the poem expresses at least a general disinclination to be pulled into violent frays. And yet the revulsion is a type of fascination - indeed, of identification.

Violence is immanent in the scenes and objects of Heaney's early poems, and latent in the speaker who describes them. In 'Digging', the first poem of his first volume (DON, p. 13), the poet draws analogies between his father's bright-edged spade, the soldier's gun and his own pen, as if presciently shouldering the knowledge that striking into language is a means of self-empowerment fraught with potentially violent connotations. The poem has also placed the poet in the critical line of fire from his opening verbal gambits. David Lloyd, for instance, makes much of the fact that the three-way pen-gun-spade analogy does not carry across the poem:

the intimation of violence, of a will to power, carried in the opening lines already with more fashionable swagger than engagement - 'snug as a gun' - is suppressed at the end by suppressing the metaphorical vehicle.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'Pap for the Dispossessed', p. 96.

Another adversarial critic, James Simmons, takes particular offence at the phrase 'snug as a gun': his observation, 'had there been Troubles at that time it would be offensive', underlines the disquiet which this simile has engendered.<sup>7</sup>

It is a bold poem with which to launch a poetic career, not least because it combines the nostalgic evocation of a particular way of life - Irish, rural, working-class - with a realistic squaring-up to the unwelcome realities of political violence. But each perspective holds the other in check. Heaney has never let sentimentalizing nostalgia about Ireland and Irishness get the better of his writing; from the first, he has displayed an awareness of 'how quickly the gleam in a romantic poet's eye could convert to the glint in the eye of a sniper' and turned this awareness to creative account.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his early poems, Heaney's eye reciprocates the predatory nature of the environment which it surveys. Through metaphor, it translates inanimate objects into threatening devices: 'pottery bombs', 'rhubarb-blades', 'an armoury / Of farmyard implements'.<sup>9</sup> A similar process is involved in his surveillance of the animal kingdom. Here, Heaney kills off the sentimentalist along with the

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<sup>7</sup> 'The Trouble with Seamus', in Andrews, ed., Seamus Heaney, pp. 39-66 (p. 40). Heaney himself has admitted to half-regretting 'the theatricality of the gunslinger' in the opening lines of 'Digging' (PRE, p. 41).

<sup>8</sup> 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry' (POW, p. 44). Heaney's remarks are specifically about Louis MacNeice at this point.

<sup>9</sup> 'Churning Day' (DON, p. 21), 'Broagh' (WO, p. 27), 'The Barn' (DON, p. 17).

naturalist in himself. This happens by degrees. For instance, in 'An Advancement of Learning', the fourth poem in Death of a Naturalist, Heaney overcomes the fear of rats that had menaced him particularly in the third piece, 'The Barn'. In subsequent poems such as 'Dawn Shoot' and 'Turkeys Observed' he learns to adopt a diffident stance towards cruelty inflicted on animals.<sup>10</sup> The attention which the youthful observer pays to the 'indifferent skill of the hunting hand' provides him with a means of facing up to the indifference to cruelty governing adult human behaviour.<sup>11</sup>

One particular poem which expresses indifference to the suffering of animals, 'The Early Purges', became notorious:

I was six when I first saw kittens drown.  
Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',  
Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din  
Was soon soused. They were slung on the snout  
Of the pump and the water pumped in.

'Sure isn't it better for them now?' Dan said.

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<sup>10</sup> DON, pp. 18, 17, 29, 37. See also 'The Salmon Fisher to the Salmon' (DID, p. 18): 'You can't resist a gullet full of steel'.

<sup>11</sup> 'A Lough Neagh Sequence, 4. Setting', DID, p. 41. The indifference can be traced through Heaney's writings up to his definition of one of the obsolete meanings of the verb redress, in his latest volume of criticism: 'a meaning which comes in entry four of the verb, subsection (b): *Hunting*. To bring back (the hounds or deer) to the proper course.' In this 'redress' there is no hint of ethical obligation; it is more a matter of finding a course for the breakaway of innate capacity, a course where something unhindered, yet directed, can sweep ahead into its full potential' (ROD, p. 15). Another interpreter may have chosen to apply the dictionary gloss differently, by placing emphasis on the destructive ends of what Heaney considers to be innocent 'capacity' and 'potential'; seen in such terms, redress might be extended to mean 'to turn the prey', 'to manoeuvre into the desired position'. Heaney, however, refusing to see any 'hint of ethical obligation' in the language of bloodsports, glosses over such possibilities.

Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced  
Them out on the dunghill, glossy and dead.

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung  
Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains  
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back  
When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows  
Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks.

Still, living displaces false sentiments  
And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown  
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town  
Where they consider death unnatural,  
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.  
(DON, p. 23)

That monotonous 'drown'-'town'-'down' rhyme lends a throwaway nature to Heaney's closing remarks, contributing to the sense that what is being purged in the poem's progress is its note of compassion. Blake Morrison views the poem as 'deliberately tight-lipped, square-shouldered, even callous'.<sup>12</sup> Heaney himself, who considers it to be 'schematically broken down the middle between sympathy and callousness', has insisted that 'the callous voice knows that it's a swagger'.<sup>13</sup>

Andrew Waterman makes a useful connection between 'The Early Purges' and the work of another poet noted for 'sentimentalizing tough-mindedness': Robert Frost.<sup>14</sup> In

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<sup>12</sup> Seamus Heaney (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 28. For an account of the controversy surrounding this poem being set as an 'O'-level text, see p.88, note 12.

<sup>13</sup> 'Harvard Interview'. See also the interview with Heaney in Haffenden (pp. 57-75), in which Heaney calls the poem 'unresolved' and entertains the possibility of keeping only the first three or four stanzas in a future selection of his work (pp. 65-66). The poem does not appear at all in New Selected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Waterman, 'The Best Way Out is Always Through', in Andrew ~~as~~, ed, Seamus Heaney, pp. 11-38 (p. 11).

Frost's "Out, Out -", the death of a boy as the result of an industrial accident in a timberyard is relayed in a tone of dispassionate reportage:

No more to build on there. And they, since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.<sup>15</sup>

The reading which Heaney gives of this poem in an essay on Frost could be read as an indirect defence of 'The Early Purges':

I was immediately susceptible to its documentary weight and did not mistake the wintry report of what happened at the end for the poet's own callousness.<sup>16</sup>

That Heaney is engaged throughout his early poetry in a deliberate process of learning to be calm and unflinching in the face of harsh events suggests the influence of Frost. Also Frostian is the way in which taciturnity and uneasy distance, rather than trust or intimacy, are shown to govern relations between the individuated figures depicted in Heaney's rural community.

Expressions of alienation are intensified in the poems of Heaney's second volume, Door into the Dark. The poet is estranged and threatened by each encounter described, although he is also lured towards what repels him, as Dick Davis has observed:

These man-made darkneses, oratory, byre, forge -  
through their violence and potency seem to exclude  
the poet - act as symbols of a desired intensity  
of labour and authenticity, as if the poet takes  
as heroic paradigms the bull's potency, the

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<sup>15</sup> Selected Poems, p. 87.

<sup>16</sup> 'Above the Brim: On Robert Frost', Salmagundi: 25th Anniversary Issue, no s.88-89 (fall 1990 - winter 1991), pp. 275-94 (p. 293).

smith's strength and skill, the religious community's passion and commitment.<sup>17</sup>

If the poet feels shut out by his apprehensions of a menacing world, the hermetic strategies of composition he adopts are complicit with such menace. I am referring in particular to the reflexive imagery deployed in the volume, imagery which has the effect of shutting the reader out, denying access to the environment even in the act of describing it: thus, 'breakers pour / Themselves into themselves', 'islands' are seen 'riding themselves out into the fog', and so forth.<sup>18</sup> The expositions offered throughout the volume of 'things founded clean on their own shapes' ('The Peninsula', DID, p. 21) effectively codify, and mystify, the locale. In accord with Heaney's description in his 1977 lecture 'The Sense of Place', the landscape is shown to be 'sacramental, instinct with signs, implying a system of reality beyond the visible realities' (PRE, p. 132), but this 'system' is shut off from interpretation.

There is something intransigent about 'the axiomatic rightness' of such non-discursive use of imagery.<sup>19</sup> The rationale behind Heaney's strategies in Door into the Dark might be illuminated with reference to his definition of 'poetry as a revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself' in his 1974 lecture

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<sup>17</sup> 'Door into the Dark', in The Art of Seamus Heaney, ed. by Tony Curtis, (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1982), pp. 29-34 (p. 33).

<sup>18</sup> 'Girls Bathing, Galway 1965', (DID, p. 23), 'The Peninsula' (p. 21).

<sup>19</sup> John Wilson Foster, 'The Poetry of Seamus Heaney', Critical Quarterly, 16 (1974), 35-48 (p. 41).

'Feeling into Words' (PRE, p. 41). Here also the use of reflexive language suggests a link between argument-silencing, self-justifying expression and poetry which defines and defends a sense of national identity.

The moments of reflexiveness contained in Door into the Dark herald the onset of a major preoccupation in Heaney's work with the self-involved processes of language. He soon moved beyond the despotism of mere visual perception - beyond the reduction of his native landscape to such limited and static terms of definition as 'things founded clean on their own shapes'. An increasing interest in linguistic history, place-names and the sound-effects of particular words provided him with the means to explore the significance of place in more complex and challenging ways.

5. Language and Imposition: 'Wintering Out' (1972),  
'Stations' (1975) and 'North' (1975)

As his work developed in the early 1970s, Heaney became increasingly preoccupied with the desire to show 'each place granting its name's fulfilment' ('Night Drive', DID, p. 34). This accounts for his interest in the 'Dinnseanchas' tradition, a mythological-turned-political exercise in etymology by which the ghost of Irish language is seen to flit through place-names and dialect expressions.<sup>1</sup> In the 1972 volume, Wintering Out, poems such as 'Anahorish', 'Toome', and 'Broagh' are composed in accord with this tradition (WO, pp. 16, 26, 27). Heaney's description of the river Moyola in 'Gifts of Rain' is in the same vein:

The tawny guttural water  
spells itself: Moyola  
is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale  
in the utterance,  
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists  
through vowels and history. (WO, p. 25)

Here, poetry, like the river, 'spells itself'; in accord with Heaney's critical strictures, it is its own governing power. Heaney defends 'the redemptive quality of the dialect, of the guttural, the illiterate self' against potentially tyrannical external influences on Irish expression.<sup>2</sup> There is a spirit of cultural resistance informing the implacable, defiant note of the poem.

Heaney's involvement with the power-issues bound up in linguistic workings, however, is guided by a far from

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<sup>1</sup> On this tradition, see Heaney's essay 'The Sense of Place', (PRE, pp. 131-49, especially pp. 131-32).

<sup>2</sup> Haffenden, p. 58.

single-minded outlook. As he argues in 'The Sense of Place', there is more than one valid way for a poet to give voice to the indigenous:

Kavanagh's place names are used [...] as posts to fence out a personal landscape. But Montague's are rather sounding lines, rods to plumb the depths of a shared and diminished culture. They are redolent not just of his personal life but of the history of his people, disinherited and dispossessed. What are most resonant and most cherished in the names of Montague's places are their tribal etymological implications. [...] There is an element of cultural and political resistance and retrieval in Montague's work that is absent from Kavanagh's. (PRE, p. 141)

Defining the world in personal terms is one thing; to define it culturally requires those acts of linguistic repossession which Jeremy Hooker describes:

Words take possession of things; things and the words which name them are equally the stuff of an historical, national identity, so that to have knowledge of words is to repossess the formative things, some of them far back in time, of a poet and a people.<sup>3</sup>

That the dividing line between cultural retrieval (or repossession) and political resistance is an impossible one to draw leaves the poet's project open to accusations of the sort David Lloyd has made; he detects the potential for menace in Heaney's place-naming poems, distrusting their 'foreclosed surety of the subject's relation to place, mediated as it is by a language which seeks to naturalize its appropriative function'. Lloyd diagnoses the political implications of what he takes to be complacency in Heaney's aesthetic schema:

Place, identity and language mesh in Heaney, as in nationalism, since language is seen primarily as

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<sup>3</sup> See Hooker's essay 'North (1975)', in his Poetry of Place: Essays and Reviews 1970-1981 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), pp. 71-74 (pp. 72-73).

*naming*, and because naming performs a cultural reterritorialisation by replacing the contingent continuities of a historical community with an ideal register of continuity in which the name (of place or of object) operates symbolically as the commonplace communicating between actual and ideal continua.<sup>4</sup>

Heaney's attitude towards the relation between place and language has always been more double-edged and anxious than Lloyd, for one, allows. In his Oxford lecture on John Clare, Heaney noted that 'once you think twice about a local usage you have been displaced from it, and your right to it has been contested by the official linguistic censor with whom another part of you is secretly in league' (ROP, p. 63).<sup>5</sup> This dilemma has preoccupied him throughout his writing career - which accounts for the fact that estrangement from the locale is as dominant a feature of his work as any declared affinity.

The keynote of Wintering Out is a disenchanting awareness of the exploitation and betrayal to which Irish people and the Irish language have been subjected, but the response to this issue is as complex as the historical data

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<sup>4</sup> 'Pap for the Dispossessed', pp. 100, 98. Against this credible but partial interpretation should be weighed the counter-reservations of, for instance, Marie Kinzie, who expresses a salutary suspicion of criticism based upon ideological premisses: 'even at its most benign, reading by ideology assumes that the artist must share with laborer, clerk, and scientist an unavoidable and often unwitting cultural placement - a condition of embeddedness in historical particularity that prompts those preoccupied with its identification to overstress its role (that is, its inevitability) in literary creation while neglecting the more demanding and subtle concept of the poet's calling'. See The Cure of Poetry in an Age of Prose: Moral Essays on the Poet's Calling (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. ix-x. For her views on Heaney, see pp. 200-29.

<sup>5</sup> The point arises specifically out of Heaney's anxiety regarding the use of the word 'wrought' (common in South Derry vernacular) in a draft version of the poem 'Follower' (DON, p. 24).

which fuels it, as the poem 'Traditions' (WO, p. 31) demonstrates:

## I

Our guttural muse  
was bulled long ago  
by the alliterative tradition,  
her uvula grows

vestigial, forgotten  
like the coccyx  
of a Brigid's Cross  
yellowing in some outhouse

while custom, that 'most  
sovereign mistress',  
beds us down into  
the British isles.

## II

We are to be proud  
of our Elizabethan English:  
'varsity', for example,  
is grass-roots stuff with us;

we 'deem' or we 'allow'  
when we suppose  
and some cherished archaisms  
are correct Shakespearean.

Not to speak of the furred  
consonants of lowlanders  
shuttling obstinately  
between bawn and mossland.

## III

MacMorris, gallivanting  
round the Globe, whinged  
to courtier and groundling  
who had heard tell of us

as going very bare  
of learning, as wild hares,  
as anatomies of death:  
'What ish my nation?'

And sensibly, though so much  
later, the wandering Bloom  
replied, 'Ireland,' said Bloom,  
'I was born here. Ireland.'

In the first part of the poem, Heaney demonstrates how Irish language and culture were assaulted by the Anglo-Saxon alliterative tradition. This attack rendered some indigenous phonetic conventions obsolete and replaced customary practices (such as reverence for Saint Brigid, the Irish abbess of AD 433-523 who was an early patron saint of Ireland) with new cultural imports. With specific reference to the Elizabethan plantation of Ireland, Heaney has cause to point out that chief among these imports was the work of Shakespeare - hence the quotation from Act One, Scene Three of Othello (c.1602-04). Here, the Duke of Venice, urging Othello to undertake the mission to subdue the Ottomans in Cyprus, refers to the popular opinion backing the Moor as 'a sovereign mistress of effects'; these words then prompt Othello to expatiate on the tyrannical power of 'custom': 'The tyrant custom, most grave senators, / Hath made the flinty and steel couch of war / My thrice driven bed of down' (I.iii.229). Neil Corcoran has highlighted the relevance of the allusion:

The first section of 'Traditions' is therefore adapting Shakespeare to create a linguistic/sexual metaphor for Ireland's traumatic colonial history, a history whose crucial moment occurred during Shakespeare's lifetime.<sup>6</sup>

Heaney may also be suggesting a connection between the context of imperial warfare which forms the backdrop to Shakespeare's tragedy and Ireland's tragic colonial history.

The second section of 'Traditions' advances the idea that what may now seem indigenous expression in fact has a complicated etymological history: the Scots-English dialect

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<sup>6</sup> Seamus Heaney, Faber Student Guides series (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 82.

of 'the lowlanders' who emigrated to Ireland co-exist alongside other idioms (such as certain 'cherished archaisms' deriving from Shakespeare) in modern day-to-day usage of the English language in Ireland. This inevitably complicates the whole enterprise of defending, even of defining, a national culture.<sup>7</sup>

In the third section, Heaney takes issue with literal and literary misrepresentations of Irish people by the English: the phrase 'anatomies of death', deriving from Edmund Spenser's propagandist View of the Present State of Ireland (1596), alerts the reader to the matter of English starvation policies in Ireland, while MacMorris is the caricatured Irishman in Shakespeare's Henry V (1599). A hotheaded and ridiculously impetuous comic buffoon, complete with speech impediment, MacMorris displays a farcically restricted vocabulary and a violent nature. Shakespeare depicts him losing his temper at the anti-Irish goadings of the Welshman Fluellen - himself a stage-stereotype.<sup>8</sup>

In the culmination of confusion over linguistic representations of nationality, Heaney ends his poem by citing the defensive words of an Irish Jew in Joyce's

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<sup>7</sup> The etymology of 'moss' and 'bawn' in the final line of section two holds a personal symbolism for Heaney: 'our farm was called Mossbawn. Moss, a Scots word probably carried to Ulster by the Planters, and bawn, the name the English colonists gave to their fortified farmhouses. Mossbawn, the planter's house on the bog. Yet in spite of this Ordnance Survey spelling, we pronounced it Moss bann, and bán is the Gaelic word for white. So might not the thing mean the white moss, the moss of bog-cotton? In the syllables of my home I see a metaphor for the split culture of Ulster' (PRE, p. 35).

<sup>8</sup> Henry V, III.ii.116-18. MacMorris was identified as the first <sup>stage</sup>Irishman by Tom Flanagan, the novelist and critic to whom Heaney's poem is dedicated. (See Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 82.)

Ulysses, itself one of the most polyglot of works. Bloom's expressly pacifying statement provides a neat riposte to those who would fight over the ownership of language.

'Traditions' thus exemplifies the historical abuses which have been accompanied by linguistic and cultural change but, without diminishing the significance of those abuses, the poem suggests that cultural expression is enriched as well as endangered by historical upheavals. The poem discounts any idea of redress of a nation's grievances through retaliation, for such a battle would be too difficult to defend and too futile to fight. In fact, the poem is directed more towards redress-as-reconciliation between interdependent cultures, for all the bitter history that has divided them. As Bernard O'Donoghue has written, pitting Heaney's poetic enterprise against Tony Harrison's exposés of social division:

Harrison sees linguistic difference as a dividing force which can be used as a weapon; Heaney sees it as potential, as in all verbal effects, of positive application. Linguistic difference can achieve alliance as well as hostility.<sup>9</sup>

In the prose poems of the volume Stations, Heaney recounts a childhood spent uneasily oscillating, and learning to discriminate, between impulses of alliance and hostility. In 'England's Difficulty' (STA, p. 16), for instance, he recreates the dilemmas of response resulting from his upbringing in an Irish Catholic home during the Second World War. The poem's title, besides denoting the historical and current difficulties posed by England to Ireland - and vice-versa, also refers to the English (and

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<sup>9</sup> Seamus Heaney and the Language of Poetry (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 113.

not so directly Irish) problem of conflict with the German enemy during that war. In fact, the word 'enemy' dominates the poem; besides denoting the foreign foe, it also applies to the supposed Protestant 'enemy' close to home. The whole business of identifying one's enemy is significantly complicated when Heaney records the bombing of 'the bitterest Orange parts' of Belfast by the Germans.

Immune to the horrors or the full moral implications of events beyond his doorstep, yet imaginatively transported by the mystique surrounding them, the young boy assumes the self-appointed role of 'double-agent' in his community:

I lodged with 'the enemies of Ulster', the  
scullions outside the walls. An adept at banter,  
I crossed the lines with carefully enunciated  
passwords, manned every speech with checkpoints  
and reported back to nobody.

With the self-deprecating irony of that final phrase ('reported back to nobody'), the poet acknowledges the futility of his assiduous, private endeavours. At the same time, the words are prototypical of the poet's answerability to no-one but himself.

A similar tone governs 'Cloistered', another poem preoccupied with language and division. It captures the poet's struggles to assimilate strange tongues through his awkward adolescent schooldays:

Now I bisected the line AB, now found my foothold  
in a main verb in Livy [...] I was champion of the  
examination halls, scalding with lust inside my  
daunting visor. (STA, p. 20)

Despite his daunting exterior as a successful scholar, the young man is in fact daunted by the embarrassing intensity

of distracting sexual preoccupations.<sup>10</sup> There is an ironic gulf also between the youth's self-aggrandizement as a would-be intellectual warrior and the fact that his education in Latin is an imposition, at odds with his native linguistic and literary inheritance.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout Heaney's work, recurrent connections are made between Roman and English language forms. He elaborates upon the link between these two imperial lexicons in his essay 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet'. (At the point from which I quote, Heaney is challenging aesthetic notions of art as pure and perfectible, a notion he considers T.S. Eliot to have put into practice in Four Quartets):

Such a dream of perfection is best served by a language which gives the illusion of absolute authority, of a purity beyond dialect and tribe, an imperial lexicon, in fact, a Roman vocabulary which is socially and historically patrician. Eliot's achievement in his Dantean stanzas [in 'Little Gidding'] is to create just such an

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<sup>10</sup> The sentence beginning 'I was champion' is omitted in the revised version of 'Cloistered' published in New Selected Poems (p. 46). 'England's Difficulty' is also included in this volume (p. 43).

<sup>11</sup> The prose-poems of Stations, with their evocations of childhood fear, loneliness and self-assertiveness, bear an uncanny resemblance to Hill's Mercian Hymns. There are some very particular points of similarity; compare, for instance, Heaney's reference to the learning of Latin to 'Hymn X', or his recollections in 'England's Difficulty' of listening in to war-broadcasts to 'Hymn XXII'. Heaney himself, daunted by the unconscious parallels, delayed the book's completion and publication (it was begun in California in 1970-71). It is perhaps partly as a result of the resemblances that this work has received relatively limited circulation; as he writes in the introduction to the text, 'the delay was partly occasioned by the appearance of Geoffrey Hill's Mercian Hymns: what I had regarded as stolen marches in a form new to me had been headed off by a work of complete authority' (STA, p. 3).

illusion of oracular authority by the hypnotic development of perfected latinized words.<sup>12</sup>

Such formulations are characteristic of an identification in Heaney's prose and poetry between Rome and England, and between the impositions of a male, invading foreign language and a female, conquered indigenous language; he repeatedly seeks to demonstrate the ways in which the sovereignty of Mother Ireland has been usurped by a tyrannical

male cult whose founding fathers were Cromwell, William of Orange and Edward Carson, and whose godhead is incarnate in a rex or caesar resident in a palace in London. What we have is the tail-end of a struggle in a province between territorial piety and imperial power. (PRE, p. 57)<sup>13</sup>

The plundering of Ireland by the forces of British imperialism is the subject of virulent criticism in several of the poems of North. In this volume, Heaney develops further his preoccupation with the complexity of cultural and linguistic relations between England and Ireland, while delivering more forthright denunciation for wrongs done than he had in poems such as 'Traditions'.

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<sup>12</sup> Irish University Review, 15 (1985), 5-19 (p. 9). On his coming-to-terms with Eliot's achievement, see his essay, 'Learning from Eliot', Agenda: Seamus Heaney Fiftieth Birthday Issue, 27.1 (spring 1989), 17-31.

<sup>13</sup> An equation of British and Roman *imperium* recurs in Heaney's work, although in an early article Heaney sees how the pro-British contingent in Northern Ireland might cast it differently, pitting their ideal of Home Rule against the perceived 'tyranny' of 'Rome Rule': 'When the extreme unionist hears an English accent, a whole series of reactions takes place: here, he thinks, is one loyal to the Crown, concerned to maintain the Ulster border as a bulwark against the tyranny of Rome and rebels, one who is grateful for the North's refusal of Home Rule, who recognizes that gerrymandering is a necessary evil in order to maintain a loyalist government'. See 'Out of London: Ulster's Troubles', New Statesman, 1 July 1966, pp. 23-24 (p. 23).

'Ocean's Love to Ireland' (NOR, p. 46), for instance, portrays England's subjection of Ireland via the historically derived narrative of Sir Walter Raleigh overpowering a maid of honour; Heaney connects this to Raleigh's instrumental role in the massacre of surrendered Catholic forces at Smerwick in County Kerry in 1580. He describes how the woods were beaten to rout the Irish resistance force, and with them the Gaelic poets which those woods traditionally harboured and inspired.<sup>14</sup> Again, the literal conquest is also a literary one: the 'iambic drums / Of English', representing the Elizabethan metrics of Raleigh, Edmund Spenser and others implicated in atrocities in Ireland, beat out a war tattoo against indigenous poetic traditions. This corresponds to Heaney's words to Frank Kinahan about how, at the time he was composing North, he had thought that 'the melodious grace of the English iambic line, was some kind of affront, that it needed to be wrecked'.<sup>15</sup>

In certain poems, just such a wrecking project is carried out with deliberate ruthlessness. In 'Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966' (NOR, p. 68), one of the volume's most overt and scathing poems (the sort that generally have been

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<sup>14</sup> See Morrison, Seamus Heaney, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 107. On the same page, Corcoran observes how the poems of Part One of North 'are not aggressive towards the reader, exactly, but neither are they accommodating: hard-edged, all elbows with their constantly jolting line breaks and dictionary diction, they do clearly disrupt the English lyric voice in a way appropriate to the violence of their material, and in a way which may also carry a weight of political resistance'. See also Alan Robinson, 'Free State of Image and Illusion', Instabilities, p. 125: 'there is something insidious about the way in which the iambic base rhythm effortlessly accommodates atrocities'.

overlooked in Heaney's canon, despite his evident deftness in the satirical mode), a gross parody of iambic drumming is executed:

The lambeg balloons at his belly, weighs  
Him back on his haunches, lodging thunder  
Grossly there between his chin and knees.  
He is raised up by what he buckles under.

Each arm extended by a seasoned rod,  
He parades behind it. And though the drummers  
Are granted passage through the nodding crowd  
It is the drums preside, like giant tumours.

To every cocked ear, expert in its greed,  
His battered signature subscribes 'No Pope'.  
The goatskins sometimes plastered with his blood.  
The air is pounding like a stethoscope.<sup>16</sup>

This crude, ebullient diagnosis of the militaristic exhibitionism of the Protestant parades is bent on debunking the subject by debunking its own expressive powers. The poem sabotages its own ostensible effort to achieve iambic regularity. Like the straining drummer, the metre buckles under the burden of what it has undertaken to carry; it lurches along, almost invariably collapsing into lamentably unfulfilled half-rhymes. Heaney's retaliation against 'the

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<sup>16</sup> Compare the poem 'July', in which Heaney recalls his ear being 'winnowed annually' by the Orange drums (STA, p. 15). This is one of several poems in Stations which voice direct resentment against Protestant intimidation of Catholics in Northern Ireland; see also 'Sweet William' (p. 11), 'Kernes' (p. 14), 'Ballad' (p. 21), and 'Inquisition' (p. 23). There are a number of other uncollected poems which concern themselves directly with Irish factional strife, the most notable of these being 'Craig's Dragoons'. (For the text, see Karl Miller, 'Opinion', 47-48; extracts are reprinted also on pp. 26-27 of Corcoran, Seamus Heaney.) This caustic polemical ballad, which was issued as an anonymous samizdat publication, presents an unambiguous declaration of the poet's solidarity with the Catholic cause. See also 'Intimidation', Malahat Review, no. 17 (January 1971), p. 34 and 'Last Camp', New Statesman, 15 May 1970, p. 840. On the exclusion of many polemical poems of the early 1970s from Wintering Out, and the toning down of some that were revised for that volume, see Michael R. Molino, Questioning Tradition, Language, and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), pp. 56-65.

tyranny of the iamb' provides a means of incorporating protest into poetry: upsetting the lyric impulse is, for him, one way of fighting cultural impositions.<sup>17</sup> This is particularly true in the case of North. This volume has brought the most charges to bear against the poet for its supposed militancy, as well as widespread acclaim for providing a complex and balanced view of the problems facing contemporary Northern Ireland.<sup>18</sup>

Seamus Deane once put it to Heaney that 'the balance of poetry [...] might begin in the imbalance of hatred or sectarian feeling'. Deane detects a potential problem in the desire to align 'political fidelity', which may be partisan, with 'the poet's aspiration towards an equipoise and balance of form':

There is a statement by Adorno which says that the conciliatory nature of art is in direct relation to the rage which produced it. In your own case, my own feeling is that the language of much of your poetry has a good deal of violent and physical implication; and yet the poems themselves have a certain poise and balance, even sometimes to a self-conscious degree.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 'After fighting for so many years against the "tyranny of the iamb," the poet seems finally not only to have made peace with it, but also to have harnessed it to his purposes': Thomas C. Foster, Seamus Heaney (Dublin: O'Brien, 1989), p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Notable among the adverse criticism is Blake Morrison's charge that Heaney grants 'historical respectability' to sectarian violence (Seamus Heaney, p. 68) and Ciaran Carson's view of Heaney as 'the laureate of violence - a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for "the situation["]", in the last resort, a mystifier': '"Escaped from the Massacre"?' , The Honest Ulsterman, no. 50 (winter 1975), 183-86 (p. 183).

<sup>19</sup> 'Unhappy and at Home', The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies: 1977-1981, ed. by M.P. Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982), pp. 66-72 (p. 68). In response, Heaney discusses the poem 'Hercules and Antaeus' (NOR, p. 52), which he characterizes as 'a see-saw, an advance-retire situation' between opposing forces struggling for territorial

Deane's speculation that conciliation and rage are mutually dependent impulses warrants particular attention when it comes to assessing the poetry of North. As I demonstrate in the following pages, an examination of the decisions Heaney made while revising his poems helps to illuminate his complex attitude towards this volume's central themes - internecine warfare, the barbarous rites of ancient and contemporary civilizations, and the ethics of retribution.

## 6. Revision and Retribution: Heaney's 'Second Thoughts' in 'North'

Describing Robert Lowell's revisions, Heaney observed how his 'second sight often had to face the challenge of his second thoughts'. He creates a double-edged impression of the poetic alterations which Lowell made: on the one hand, they are fuelled by a sense of remorse; on the other, they betray the fiercely unremitting side of the author's nature, his 'fully human and relentless intelligence'.<sup>1</sup> Tracing the changes of compositional decision in the poems of North reveals how these two conflicting impulses interact in Heaney's own poetic procedures also.<sup>2</sup>

The development of 'Punishment' from its earliest draft version to its published form in North (p. 37) provides a case in point.<sup>3</sup> To follow the stages of revision is to see Heaney turning over guilty thoughts - and turning up some harsh sentiments in the process. The poem's focus of meditation is the exhumed, prehistoric body of a young Danish woman, the 'Windeby Girl', who was apparently drowned

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<sup>1</sup> 'Robert Lowell: A Memorial Address and an Elegy', pamphlet publication of a reading delivered at St Luke's Church, London, 5 October 1977 (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 9. The poem and essay are reprinted in Agenda: Special Robert Lowell Issue, 21-28.

<sup>2</sup> Worksheets of the poems 'A Constable Calls', 'Act of Union', 'Punishment', and 'Funeral Rites' were published in Quarto, the literary magazine of Queen's University, Belfast in November 1975; the last three of these are reprinted, with commentaries, in Arthur E. McGuinness, 'The Craft of Diction: Revision in Seamus Heaney's Poems', an essay collected in Image and Illusion: Anglo-Irish Literature and its Contexts: A Festschrift for Roger McHugh, ed. by Maurice Harmon (Portmarnock: Wolfhound Press, 1979), pp. 62-91. Material from this article was subsequently reworked for a chapter of McGuinness's book, Seamus Heaney: Poet and Critic (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), pp. 160-190. For draft versions of the poem 'North', see Curtis, pp. 54-62.

<sup>3</sup> See McGuinness's book, Seamus Heaney, pp. 173-82.

as punishment for adultery.<sup>4</sup> Heaney uses this girl's fate in order to draw parallels between the operations of tribal justice in the Iron Age and the 'lex talionis' pursued by some in contemporary Northern Ireland:

I can feel the tug  
of the halter at the nape  
of her neck, the wind  
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples  
to amber beads,  
it shakes the frail rigging  
of her ribs.

I can see her drowned  
body in the bog,  
the weighing stone,  
the floating rods and boughs.

Under which at first  
she was a barked sapling  
that is dug up  
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head  
like a stubble of black corn,  
her blindfold a soiled bandage,  
her noose a ring

to store  
the memories of love.  
Little adulteress,  
before they punished you

you were flaxen-haired,  
undernourished, and your  
tar-black face was beautiful.  
My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you  
but would have cast, I know,  
the stones of silence.  
I am the artful voyeur

of your brain's exposed  
and darkened combs,  
your muscles' webbing  
and all your numbered bones:

I who have stood dumb

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<sup>4</sup> See P.V. Glob, The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved, trans. by Rupert Bruce-Mitford (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 112-14.

when your betraying sisters,  
 cauled in tar,  
 wept by the railings,

who would connive  
 in civilized outrage  
 yet understand the exact  
 and tribal, intimate revenge.

Heaney worked the poem through various drafts, starting with an untitled, thirteen-line monologue spoken by the girl herself, then switching to give an objective, third-person description of her, before changing tack again and trying out a series of first-person versions. Each reworking conveys an increasingly sophisticated awareness of the moral implications of the event. There is a stanza in one draft version of the poem which implores the 'Windeby Girl' to intercede for the supposed present day sinners, those 'betraying sisters' who had acted as informers or gone out with British soldiers.<sup>5</sup> (A number of such women had been shaved, tarred and feathered by the I.R.A. - an event to which Heaney alludes in the penultimate stanza of the published poem). However, as he rewrote Heaney toned down the overtly Christian rhetoric, perhaps out<sup>of</sup> a desire to make his response to the sensitive political issue appear less Catholic-partisan.<sup>6</sup>

The printed version of the poem remains a risky one nonetheless. The working versions help to account for this, displaying as they do Heaney's conflicting impulses of open sympathy for the victim and tacit complicity with the

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<sup>5</sup> In the drafts, they are referred to variously as 'foolish sisters', 'punished sisters', 'unfaithful sisters'.

<sup>6</sup> The removal of such words as 'atoning', 'halo', 'scourge' and 'palm' (as in the Palm Sunday cross) exhibit the same tendency.

aggressor. Two earlier versions of the poem are called 'Shame' - a title which captures at once the air of disgrace surrounding adultery and Heaney's own guilty feelings; this guilt itself is two-fold, stemming both from the voyeuristic focus on the female body with which much of the poem is taken up and from his sense of culpability for not openly challenging the revenge-ethics of his Northern Catholic tribe.

Shame would appear to have been a guiding impulse in the revision process. It can be detected in the withdrawal of such bold trial lines as 'I commend the stone casters' and (in an address to the girl) 'I almost love you, but must be barbarous / as your outraged neighbours / whom I find it hard to blame'.<sup>7</sup> Heaney drew back from the explicit one-sidedness of such formulations in the stage of composition which preceded publication:

I almost love you.  
Senate and atheling  
would both condemn you,  
we might all cast

the stones of silence.  
Whose righteousness  
is preferable?  
The groomed proconsul's

civilized contempt  
for you and yours  
or the tribe's exact  
and intimate revenge?

*And a third option:  
to be weighed  
in the careful scale  
of stylists.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> McGuinness, Seamus Heaney, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> This version of the poem is quoted in the McGuinness article (in Harmon's Image and Illusion, p.86), but not in the McGuinness book. The word 'contempt' is shown to have been crossed out and replaced with 'concern'. Mc Guinness prints

The poet knows he risks 'righteousness' in responding both to the betrayals hinted at and to the retaliatory actions they have provoked. The very process of aestheticization he is engaged in carries that risk: the implications of tribal punishment might be carefully weighed by the poet, but they are also being consciously stylized.

Heaney's feelings of self-inculcation are reinforced through his recourse to an episode in St. John's Gospel, in which Jesus defies the Pharisees' intention to stone an adulteress to death; he permits them to do so only if they themselves are free from sin (John 8. 1-11). Their hypocrisy exposed, the Pharisees are defeated into speechlessness. Heaney's reference to 'the stones of silence', which clearly derives from this passage, is double-edged: it conveys his feeling that it is wrong for him to pass judgement, but there is also a sense in which it implies that not to speak out against the condemners is effectively to condone their acts of retribution.<sup>9</sup>

Quite what Heaney meant by his references to 'senate' 'atheling' and 'proconsul' is less clear; an 'atheling' is a prince of a royal dynasty in Anglo-Saxon England, and a 'proconsul' a governor of a senatorial province in ancient Rome - thus, by extension, a commander of a colony, or administrator of an occupied territory. Heaney may have

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the last four lines in italics to indicate Heaney's handwritten addition. The scales imagery here found its way into the 'The Grauballe Man', the poem preceding 'Punishment' in North (p. 36).

<sup>9</sup> On the significance to Heaney of this Biblical passage, see The Government of the Tongue, pp. 107-08. It is worth noting also the link between the 'weighing stone' with which the 'Windeby Girl' was drowned and these 'stones of silence' which weigh heavily on the poet's conscience.

been trying to work into 'Punishment' ideas about the links between British and Roman 'imperium', but, if so, he was wise to drop the matter. To have brought in the theme of colonial interference would have distracted attention from Heaney's involvement with the specifically Irish issue of 'tribal, intimate revenge' which his poem works towards.

Heaney does however take up the subject of Britain's history of tyrannical interference in Ireland in other poems of North - in 'Act of Union', for example (NOR, p. 49).<sup>10</sup> The poem's title refers to the imposed settlement of 1800 after the crushing of the nationalist rebellion of 1798. It also suggests a marriage or sexual union - and, indeed, the poem began on the worksheet as an ironic love poem from England to Ireland. The first draft, comprising seven quatrains and entitled 'A New Life', is an enamoured address from the conquering country to the Irish beauty in its possession. The speaker anticipates a birth from their union (as Heaney's title implies), although the analogies implied by reference to such a birth are left undeveloped.

They receive fuller elaboration in a revised version of the poem, also entitled 'A New Life', which Heaney published in The Listener in February 1973. Here, the rhetoric of love is played down and the emphasis on colonial exploitation enhanced. Heaney draws out the implications of Ireland's metaphorical rape by its conqueror: it is made clear that this act heralds the birth of a violent age.

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<sup>10</sup> See McGuinness, Seamus Heaney, pp. 182-89. See also Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 121, and Michael Parker, Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1993), pp. 142-44 and 254-55 (notes 195-97). Parker points out that the poem was revised with the advice of Philip Hobsbaum and Anne Stevenson.

England addresses itself to Ireland with more menace than in the previous version: 'the tall kingdom lying close', like a lover, now becomes 'the tall kingdom over [Ireland's] shoulder'. In the last of the four Shakespearean sonnets which make up the poem, the speaker faces his partner's charge of callous disregard for the violations he has perpetrated:

My tone is still imperial, you say.  
 Too reasonably I leave you with your pain,  
 The rending process in the colony,  
 The battering ram, the boom burst from within.

My seed sprouted an obstinate fifth column  
 Whose stance is growing unilateral.  
 His heart beneath your heart is a war-drum  
 Mustering force. His parasitical

And ignorant little fists already  
 Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked  
 At me across the water. Reasonably,  
 I must anticipate deadlocks unlocked,

His fury cradled, us two hand in glove,  
 The triangle of forces solved in love.<sup>11</sup>

England's show of reasonableness finds expression in the confident command of rhyme and metre. There is a settled complacency in the voice which glosses over the bloody historical circumstances of the relationship between England and Ireland. The affectionate language still persisting from the previous version of the poem, however, has now become less appropriate to Heaney's theme. Mc Guinness is sensitive to this when he notes how

Heaney is trying to integrate an English character having genuine concern for Ireland's welfare and a commitment to reasonableness with an imperial

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<sup>11</sup> Listener, 22 February 1973, p. 239 (or see McGuinness, Seamus Heaney, p. 186). Heaney presumably had in mind the definition of 'boom' as a barrier protecting a harbour from attack. This corresponds with the idea of a violent breaking of waters in the birth of the subversive 'fifth column' - the enemy in Ireland's midst.

power whose tyranny over its hapless colony has caused present suffering. The speaker in the Listener poem is a sympathetic figure, aware of Ireland's suffering, but confident that reasonableness and love will enable men to live together peacefully.<sup>12</sup>

However, McGuinness appears to miss the irony underlying England's profession of sympathy; as I read the poem, Heaney is trying to imply that the display of reasonableness is a condescending affectation by which England would mitigate the effects of its colonial exploits.

The poem printed as 'Act of Union' in North is a reworking of the first and fourth stanzas of the Listener version. Gone is the iambic regularity of the Shakespearean sonnet, to be replaced by a looser compositional scheme - as if Heaney is again challenging the tyranny of received forms. Gone too is the love theme - which makes for a significantly more bitter, almost desperate tone. The poem now concludes not with a 'triangle of forces solved in love' (Mother Ireland, the British Fatherland, and their violent progeny), but with a wound-like image of Ireland's suffering:

No treaty  
I foresee will salve completely your tracked  
And stretchmarked body, the big pain  
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.

The speaker now is supremely dispassionate, with not even the pretence of love or pity for his victim. The revision process has led Heaney towards a starker and more bitter political analysis.

In North, Heaney is obsessed with the ethics of retribution. He views history, specifically Irish history,

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<sup>12</sup> McGuinness, Seamus Heaney, p. 187.

as a litany of violations and counter-violations, of tyrannical interferences and ferocious acts of redress. His revisions highlight how the poetry itself is involved in this process, as it either moves towards or backs away from harsh sentiments. If these contrary impulses owed something to Lowell's example, the influence of that author is all the more pronounced in Heaney's subsequent collection of poems, Field Work.

7. 'Helmsman, Netsman, Retiarius': 'Field Work' (1979)

In Lowell's work, Heaney found an example of a poetry which both attracted and repelled him. To return to the double-edged implications of the word 'sway', one might put it that Heaney both swayed in sympathetic inclination towards Lowell and approached his work as if wary of coming under the sway of an authoritarian influence. One senses this mixture of admiration and apprehension, for instance, in Heaney's account of what he dubs the 'intransigently charmless' poem 'A Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' in which 'the oceanic symphonies swayed and thundered' (GOT, p. 144); he has also come to feel, of the Notebook volumes, that Lowell's 'astonishingly, wilfully strong lines are too much under the sway of an imposed power' (p. 141).

In his 'Elegy' on the poet (FW, p. 31), Heaney considers how Lowell swayed over him - both figuratively, through his work, and literally, in a personal encounter, as the following extract demonstrates:

As you swayed the talk  
and rode on the swaying tiller  
of yourself, ribbing me  
about my fear of water,

what was not within your empery?  
You drank America  
like the heart's  
iron vodka,

promulgating art's  
deliberate, peremptory  
love and arrogance.  
Your eyes saw what your hand did

as you Englished Russian,  
as you bullied out  
heart-hammering blank sonnets  
of love for Harriet

and Lizzie, and the briny  
water-breaking dolphin -  
your dorsal nib

gifted at last

to inveigle and to splash,  
helmsman, netsman, *retiarius*.  
That hand. Warding and grooming  
and amphibious.

Two a.m., seaboard weather.  
Not the proud sail of your great verse ...  
No. You were our night ferry  
thudding in a big sea,

the whole craft ringing  
with an armourer's music  
the course set wilfully across  
the ungovernable and dangerous.

Lowell's personal presence is both imposing and volatile. Charged up on vodka, just as his poetry is intoxicated by its heady absorption of American culture, Lowell cajoles Heaney for his cautiousness and espouses a wilful, offhand poetic credo. Heaney is aware how 'love and arrogance' collide in Lowell's verse - particularly in his reckless Imitations (as of the Russian Pasternak) and in his unsparingly personal volumes, The Dolphin and For Lizzie and Harriet.<sup>1</sup> The word 'briny' captures the real sting of these personal poems, and the sonnets are 'blank' not just because they are written in blank verse but because there is something unconditional, unrelenting even, about the emotional charge they carry.

'Helmsman, netsman, *retiarius*': Heaney mixes his metaphors, but perhaps this is in response to the 'amphibious' nature of his subject. Lowell's hand, reptilian with age, is also like the hand of a skipper, a fisherman and a gladiator ('*retiarius*'). In interview, Heaney spoke of its movement when the two authors met:

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'heart-hammering' corresponds to the description of Lowell elsewhere in the poem as a 'welder of English'.

'ready to jab and overturn' at all points of the conversation, the hand seemed to Heaney like an extension of Lowell's poetic intellect at work - beckoning, offputting, always on the move. It enacted both the hauling in of a net and the thrusts of a 'parrying swordsman'.<sup>2</sup>

The dual function of nets both to entrap and to unite by gathering together is explored by Lowell throughout the poems of The Dolphin; the net provides a powerful metaphor for the combination of creative and combative expression. There is also an ambiguity to the metaphor of the dolphin itself in that volume - one which Heaney's 'Elegy' acknowledges: the dolphin represents at once Lowell's muse, Caroline Blackwood (Heaney alludes in his poem to the breaking of her waters when she gave birth to their son Sheridan) and Lowell's own sharp artistry: the nib of his pen, like the marine creature's spinal fin, has a cutting edge. Set against the forceful, inveigling side of Lowell's style, however, are the more benign implications of that word 'plash': behind its customary meaning (in keeping with the publicity 'splash' which the poems of The Dolphin made) is a definition which captures something of the poet's reparatory instinct: 'to plash' is also 'to bend down and interweave (stems half cut through, branches, and twigs) so as to form them into a hedge or fence' (OED).

The weaving together of lines, be it to create a net, or a hedge, or indeed a poem, is central to Heaney's concerns in Field Work. As with Lowell's net imagery, there is often the double-edged sense that while binding and

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<sup>2</sup> 'Harvard Interview'.

gathering is taking place a trap is being sprung. This ambiguity lies at the heart of 'The Harvest Bow' (FW, p. 58). Here, Heaney recalls the corona of wheat woven by his father; it stands as a 'palpable' testament to a lifetime of quiet but sure achievements. However, the hands that plaited the bow are also the 'hands that [...] lapped the spurs on a lifetime of game cocks'. The ambiguity between entrapment and beneficial binding is the focus of the poem's tentatively affirmative concluding stanza:

*The end of art is peace*  
 Could be the motto of this frail device  
 That I have pinned up on our deal dresser -  
 Like a drawn snare  
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn  
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

It is not just the image of the snare which unsettles the poem's celebratory impulse; the sense of hope conveyed by that italicized phrase, like the device that bears it, is frail. Neil Corcoran has captured some of the uneasiness to which the motto gives rise:

Perhaps the motto even warily acknowledges that, if the 'end' (the aim and fruit) of art is peace, then peace may also be the 'end' (the finish) of art, since so much great art, and certainly the art of this poet, has been nourished by so much that is not 'peace'.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout Field Work, Heaney nourishes his imagination on thoughts of violence. A striking instance of this is the culminating piece of the volume, 'Ugolino' (FW, p. 61), a

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<sup>3</sup> Seamus Heaney, p. 151. Heaney is quoting the words of the Victorian poet Coventry Patmore - as he does, within a citation from Yeats, in the epigraph to Preoccupations. In support of Corcoran's interpretation, the poems which flank 'The Harvest Bow' in Field Work are indeed fed on the opposite of peace: 'Leavings' (p. 57) concerns the violent dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, while 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' (p. 59) dwells upon the death of an Irish poet who fought for England in the First World War.

translation from Dante's Inferno (cantos xxxii and xxxiii); here, Heaney recounts the grisly tale of Count Ugolino feasting vengefully on the head of his enemy Archbishop Roger. Subtextual connotations in this poem relate the events to matters of internecine warfare and famine in Ireland. Similarly, political implications are activated through the imagery of feasting in the opening piece, 'Oysters' (FW, p. 11). The poet enacts a battle between disgust and relish - both for the delicacy of oysters themselves and for the luxury of writing. He registers guilt at participating in the exploitation of the sea's empire by taking oysters from their environment, 'alive and violated', and feeding on them. The uneasy considerations which interrupt his meal prompt an imaginative connection with the plunder of oysters to satisfy the decadent urges of the ancient Roman nobility:

Over the Alps, packed deep in hay and snow,  
The Romans hauled their oysters south to Rome:  
I saw damp panniers disgorge  
The frond-lipped, brine-stung  
Glut of privilege

And was angry that my trust could not repose  
In the clear light, like poetry or freedom  
Leaning in from sea. I ate the day  
Deliberately, that its tang  
Might quicken me all into verb, pure verb.

The 'custardy vowels and gelatinated consonants' of 'disgorge / The frond-lipped, brine-stung / Glut of privilege' clearly convey the speaker's distaste for the excess in which he feels himself to be participating.<sup>4</sup>

In the final stanza, the poet then turns away from the dark of imperialist history, and his own sense of guilty

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<sup>4</sup> GOT, p. 145. The phrase is used there to describe 'age is the bilge' in Lowell's 'Ulysses and Circe' (DBD, p. 7).

connivance, towards the light leaning in from the sea - a light which symbolizes the freedom, clarity and decisiveness he wishes for in his poetry. Trying to convince himself that there is nothing reprehensible about enjoying the oysters, or indulging his own aesthetic tendencies, he longs for a poetry of bite and assurance, one which celebrates the moment rather than consuming itself in guilt at its very existence. The point is well made by Blake Morrison:

For while the sentence is a miniature social order, requiring strict and responsible behaviour of its constituents, the 'pure verb' (on its own, and unsullied) acts as it chooses. In this opening poem Heaney announces his determination to be determined by history no longer: his mind darting freely wherever it will, he will be leant on only by the poetic imagination.<sup>5</sup>

That this optimism involves wishful thinking, however, is demonstrated by the poems which immediately follow 'Oysters': 'Triptych' (FW, p. 12) presents a vivid, three-panel fresco of contemporary Irish life plagued by consumer-values and political violence, and 'The Toome Road' (p. 15) then provides an insight into the lives of Heaney's compatriots, wearily conditioned to military occupation by the British colonizers. (Here, nature's 'field work' is desecrated by soldiers weaving together a camouflage of 'broken alder branches' for their patrol-tanks.) Heaney picks up the Roman motif to identify the procession of the armoured convoy with a parade of Roman imperial might. He offers a defiant parting shot to the colonizing aggressor:

O charioteers, above your dormant guns,  
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,  
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

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<sup>5</sup> Seamus Heaney, p. 75.

The poet's resistance to the enemy's incursion may be oblique and, in practical terms, ineffectual, but for Heaney the 'omphalos' epitomizes the virtue of standing one's ground; the Greek word, of which the poet has made so much, means 'the navel, and hence the stone that marked the centre of the world' (PRE, p. 17)<sup>6</sup>. By extension, the 'omphalos' becomes here 'the navel of nationalist Irish feeling, maintaining on the road to Toome (with its 1798 associations) its persistent, defiant opposition to the colonial power'.<sup>7</sup>

In wondering how (if at all) a poet may offer meaningful redress for the prevailing political situation and its attendant horrors, Heaney has to choose between a language that stands up for itself, even dares a gesture of retaliation, and a surrender to feelings of inadequacy and remorse. This dilemma comes to a head in the poem 'Casualty' (FW, p. 21), with its treatment of the I.R.A.'s reprisal bombing of a Protestant pub after the events of Bloody Sunday - an explosion in which Heaney's Catholic friend Louis O'Neill lost his life. The poet ventures to ask a blunt question about O'Neill's disregard of the I.R.A. curfew:

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<sup>6</sup> At the start of Preoccupations, the sound of the word is associated with 'the music of somebody pumping water at the pump outside our back door' at Heaney's family farm in County Derry during the Second World War; 'all of that great historical action does not disturb the rhythms of the yard' (PRE, p. 17). The pump is taken to define the foundation of Heaney's world: 'it centred and staked the imagination' (p. 20). Heaney has written a number of poems which focus on water-pumps; these include 'Rite of Spring' (DID, p. 25) 'Mother' (DID, p. 29) and 'Sinking the Shaft' (STA, p. 8). See also the subsequent poem in Field Work, 'A Drink of Water' (p. 16).

<sup>7</sup> Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, pp. 134-35.

How culpable was he  
That last night when he broke  
Our tribe's complicity?

Yet the forthrightness of this speculation is incorporated into a poem brimming with Heaney's own self-accusations about his use of language, even his social function as poet; 'Question me again', he implores O'Neill - and the reader - in the closing line. Throughout Field Work, Heaney is trying to get the measure of his own level of culpability as one who writes poems while others suffer.

What reparation can poetry possibly make for pain and death? The poet turns this question over and over in the elegies and poems of doubt and loss which comprise this volume. He does this partly by focusing on how hands turn things over, on how nets are woven and how traps are sprung. At the imaginative centre of the volume is the writing hand of the poet himself, a hand which, as Lowell's case exemplifies, can do either harm or good. The crux of Heaney's predicament as writer is encapsulated in that line of Lowell's which he refers to in the 'Elegy': 'My eyes have seen what my hand did'. The line balances regret and candid defiance, as Heaney observed in his 1977 'Memorial Address' on the recently deceased author:

There is the bronze note, perhaps even the brazen note, of artistic mastery, yet in so far as the words intimate the price which poetic daring involves there is also the still, sad music of human remorse.<sup>8</sup>

Facing up to the damage done, both in life and on the page, was Lowell's task; in the poems of Field Work, Heaney exhibits an awareness that it is his too. The double-edged

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<sup>8</sup> 'Memorial Address', p. 8. Heaney is citing the last line of the poem 'Dolphin' (DOL, p. 78).

example which Lowell's poetry provides helps him to steer a course between assertive and apologetic gestures. It is by following this course through to new terrain in the poems of his subsequent volume, Station Island, that Heaney is able to find a new level of assuredness in his voice - although 'the still, sad music of human remorse' deepens there, too.

8. 'Fortified and Bewildered': 'Station Island' (1984)

Repeatedly in his criticism, Heaney voices the desire to believe in poetry as a 'wilful and unabashed activity' which provides 'a redressal' for the poet himself or herself, 'in so far as it fortifies the spirit against assaults from outside and temptations from within' (ROP, p. 163).<sup>1</sup> With an effect that is characteristic of Heaney's religious critical idiom, an unconscious paradox is set up between the promotion of an 'unabashed' activity and the fact that, in Christian teaching, to resist temptation requires humility. This paradox lies at the heart of the poetry of Station Island, as Heaney wrestles with the conflicting impulses of pride and penitence. The purgatorial progress tracked in the title-sequence is directed towards spiritual fortification, but of a peculiar kind: the poet-pilgrim negotiates a difficult path between his ingrained Catholic outlook, which depends on his being abashed, and the wilful, apostate side of his nature which must defy the dictates of the Church in the process of defining a poetic faith.

The straining for an unrepentant note marks many poems of the volume. In 'Away from It All' (SI, p. 16), Heaney attempts to offer a self-fortifying redressal to the challenge of a dinner-companion about his art. A sort of 'Oysters Revisited', the poem centres on a dinner-table discussion which takes place over the impotent claws of a lobster. The poet finds himself torn between staring at the sea's horizon out of the window and focusing on the plight

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<sup>1</sup> The temptation here is specifically one of defeatism, as Heaney plays off Yeatsian defiance against the pessimism of Larkin: see 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin' (ROP, pp. 146-63).

of the lobster before his eyes - a victim of violence which has been 'plunged and reddened' for his delectation. In parallel to these observations, he hears himself relying on what he calls one of his 'rehearsed alibis' as the conversation focuses on a distinction between artistic passivity and public accountability. The 'alibi' he uses is a quotation from the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz:

*I was stretched between contemplation  
of a motionless point  
and the command to participate  
actively in history.*

'Actively? What do you mean?'  
The light at the rim of the sea  
is rendered down to a fine  
graduation, somewhere between  
balance and inanition.

And I still cannot clear my head  
of lives in their element  
on the cobbled floor of that tank  
and the hampered one, out of water,  
fortified and bewildered.

A blend of irony and earnest leaves the poet's response hovering between bolstered assurance and intensified confusion. Despite being 'fortified' by his argumentative back-up from the authority of Milosz (as well as by a good meal), Heaney is nonetheless in a state of bewilderment. He can identify with the victim, whose own, crustacean fortification did him little good. Just as the lobster is literally out of his element - served up in a hamper, to boot - so Heaney feels himself to be 'the hampered one, out of water', floundering in the debate.

Heaney stares off at the light on the water just at the point where he is being called directly to account by his interlocutor. As Michael Parker has noted, this gesture is part evasive decoy, part relevant response:

As if to avoid further interrogation - or perhaps to answer it - Heaney turns away to the 'light at the rim of the sea', swims out to a lyric limbo. There, 'somewhere', washed by salutary currents of uncertainty and scruple, the poet treads water.<sup>2</sup>

In response to the urgent charge, 'Actively? What do you mean?', Heaney offers the horizon as a symbol for the fine line which exists between balanced response and the non-committal passivity of mere 'inaction'.

Milosz himself, in the context which Heaney activates, mulls over the accusation put to him by a Communist critic that it is wrong for a writer to keep his or her hands clean and not use their art as a political tool in the great historical struggle. The accusation provokes an internal debate:

My reasoning went like this: thought and word should not submit to the pressure of matter since, incapable of competing with it, they would have to transform themselves into deed, which would mean overreaching their lawful limits. On the other hand, I quite justifiably feared dematerialization, the delusiveness of words and thoughts. This could be prevented only by keeping a firm hold on tangible things undergoing constant change; that is, control over the motor that moves them in a society - namely, politics. [...] I was stretched, therefore, between two poles: the contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history; in other words, between transcendence and becoming. I did not manage to bring these extremes into a unity, but I did not want to give either of them up.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Parker, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, 'Marxism', in Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition, trans. by Catherine S. Leach (London: Sidgwick & Jackson; Manchester: Carcanet, 1981), pp. 108-27 (pp. 124-25). These 'ideological snares' are referred to again by Heaney in the preface to The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (p. 8), and are recast in his pamphlet essay Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry of Northern Ireland (Grasmere: Trustees of Dove Cottage, 1985): 'the poet is stretched between politics and transcendence, and is often displaced from a confidence in a single position by his disposition to be affected by all positions' (p. 8).

It is easy to see why Heaney was attracted to Milosz's intricate display of scruple, in which contrary impulses towards and away from historical engagement are left motionless after the swayings.

The ambivalence, however, inevitably leaves the poet open to charges of having it both ways. Douglas Dunn, though he undervalues the ironic self-deprecation of 'Away from it All', makes a useful point when he interprets Heaney's balancing act between conflicting states of mind as a little convenient:

'Fortified' seems too sure of its defensively ironic status - poetry, or Heaney's poetry, it is implied, is strengthened at the same time as made vulnerable to attack by its author's participation in history. Indeed, the last phrase as a whole preens itself on being 'well chosen'. Its conclusiveness looks to me suspiciously like rhetoric.<sup>4</sup>

This observation pinpoints the significant shift to a more assured, even bristling tone detectable in many of the poems of Station Island. More explicitly than in previous volumes, Heaney is engaged in attempting to redress his poetry by fortifying it against external censure and internal misgivings. Critics have noticed the tonal shift - Helen Vendler, for one, highlights the 'embedded', tenacious quality of the language by which adjectives and nouns 'hold on to their places in the lines as if they were sentinels guarding a fort'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 'Heaney Agonistes', in Seamus Heaney, ed. by Harold Bloom, Modern Critical Views series (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 153-58 (p. 154).

<sup>5</sup> '"Echo Soundings, Searches, Probes"', *ibid.*, pp. 167-79 (p. 171).

Heaney tests out his ideal of poetry as a 'wilful and unabashed' exercise in 'Chekhov on Sakhalin' (SI, p. 18). This poem recounts how the Russian writer, fortified by liquor on his first night on the penal colony island to which he had been sent as a doctor, decisively smashed the bottle from which he had been drinking:

When he staggered up and smashed it on the stones  
 It rang as clearly as the convicts' chains  
 That haunted him. In the months to come  
 It rang on like the burden of his freedom

To try for the right tone - not tract, not thesis -  
 And walk away from floggings. He who thought to squeeze  
 His slave's blood out and waken the free man  
 Shadowed a convict guide through Sakhalin.

The artist is a prisoner of his own conscience, his notional freedom in fact the cause of entrapment in a moral dilemma. In The Government of the Tongue, Heaney expands upon the predicament of Chekhov, the writer whose 'oppressed shadow-self' derived from 'his unconscious identification of something in himself with his serf grandfather' (GOT, p. xvii). Heaney dwells in particular on the significance of

the writer taking his pleasure in the amber cognac, savouring a fume of intoxication and a waft of luxury in the stink of oppression and the music of cruelty - on Sakhalin he could literally hear the chink of convicts' chains. Let the cognac represent not just the gift of his friends but the gift of his art, and here we have an image of the poet appeased; justified and unabashed by the suffering which surrounds him because unflinchingly responsible to it. (GOT, pp. xvii-xviii; my underlining)

His commentary (not explicitly a gloss on his own poem, but certainly prompting the connection) takes justification of the 'unabashed' poetic enterprise much further than Heaney dares to in the poem itself; in fact, in the course of vigorously defending art's responsibilities, his prose

momentarily adopts the manner of a 'tract' or 'thesis' - a tendency which the poem explicitly resists.

Heaney's poetry is rarely frontal and forthright, although it is, on occasions, sharply defensive; this is especially true of the 'Sweeney Redivivus' section of Station Island. These poems possess a peculiarly self-conscious élan. They follow on from the volume's title-sequence, in which Heaney upbraids himself for a lack of tough-mindedness, for 'timid circumspect involvement' (SI, p. 80) with historical circumstance, and for a confusion of 'evasion and artistic tact' (p. 83). Taking Joyce's imagined admonishment to heart - 'You lose more of yourself than you redeem / doing the decent thing' (p. 93) - Heaney is tempted into less decent thoughts for 'Sweeney Redivivus'. As the title of this section indicates, the poet reinvents himself as Sweeney, the mad bird-king of Irish legend; this reincarnation grants Heaney the licence to try out some poems of more irreverent sentiment than he is generally noted for.<sup>6</sup>

'The First Kingdom' (SI, p. 101), for instance, gives voice to a streak of bitter intransigence. It offers a flip reinterpretation of the environment which had tyrannized the child-perceiver in Heaney's early volumes:

The royal roads were cow paths.  
The queen mother hunkered on a stool  
and played the harpstrings of milk  
into a wooden pail.  
With seasoned sticks the nobles

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<sup>6</sup> In some ways, Sweeney is to Heaney what Offa is to Hill: an alter-ego through which the poet can explore the more intransigent aspects of his own personality. Heaney's translation of the Irish legend Buile Suibhne as Sweeney Astray is discussed in the final section of this chapter (pp. 360-63).

lorded it over the hindquarters of cattle.

Units of measurement were pondered  
by the cartful, barrowful and bucketful.  
Time was a backward rote of names and mishaps,  
bad harvests, fires, unfair settlements,  
deaths in floods, murders and miscarriages.

And if my rights to it all came only  
by their acclamation, what was it worth?  
I blew hot and blew cold.  
They were two-faced and accommodating.  
And seed, breed and generation still  
they are holding on, every bit  
as pious and exacting and demeaned.

The speaker recalls his lowly 'first kingdom' among cattle-dealers, caricatured as backward-looking people dwelling on personal grievances and morbid recollections of their community's beleaguered history. (Those 'miscarriages' might be at once of justice and of calves.) In the course of the poem, a lightly mock-heroic tone gives over to a voice of resentment; it is partly directed against himself for blowing hot and cold and partly against the 'two-faced and accommodating' people from whom he has learnt this behaviour. That these are the same ones who acclaimed the poet perhaps indicates that Heaney is targeting both his early critics (as quick to marginalize as to praise him) and those in his farming community who may have encouraged his pursuits while secretly disapproving of them. Resentment is audible in the insistent 'seed, breed' rhyme and in the clenched delivery of those three final adjectives: 'pious and exacting and demeaned'. Tenacious in their piety, the members of this tight-knit community are 'exacting' in a mercantilist sense (exacting a fee for their goods) and also

perhaps in their eye-for-an-eye ethics.<sup>7</sup> These retrograde fidelities are part of what make these people 'demeaned' if, as Michael Parker suggests, this is taken to mean that they are abased by their 'submissiveness to State and Church and circumstance'.<sup>8</sup>

Admittedly, the final stanza of the poem is obscure, but the tone of defiant insubordination on the part of the speaker is unmistakable. In the following poem of the volume, 'The First Flight' (SI, p. 102), Heaney's airborne persona transcends this mood by gaining an aerial perspective:

I was mired in attachment  
until they began to pronounce me  
a feeder off battlefields

so I mastered new rungs of the air  
to survey out of reach  
their bonfires on hills, their hosting

and fasting.

The poet is able to survey with aloof impartiality the bonfires of the Orange parades and the ceremonies of the Catholic Church: by 'hosting', perhaps Heaney is implying the elevation of the host, and by 'fasting', he refers back to the self-demeaning rites of the pilgrimage to Station Island which he has recently been questioning. As in 'The First Kingdom', the poet might also be giving certain critics the slip, particularly those who had cast him as a 'feeder off battlefields' in the poems of North.

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<sup>7</sup> Heaney might be harking back to 'Punishment', with its impulse to acknowledge 'the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge' (NOR, p. 38): see pp. 310-15 above.

<sup>8</sup> Parker, p. 206.

Throughout 'Sweeney Redivivus', inimical forces take on the nature of tyrannically interfering critics. This subtextual preoccupation comes to a head in another remarkably barbed poem, 'The Scribes' (SI, p. 111):

I never warmed to them.  
 If they were excellent they were petulant  
 and jaggy as the holly tree  
 they rendered down for ink.  
 And if I never belonged among them,  
 they could never deny me my place.

In the hush of the scriptorium  
 a black pearl kept gathering in them  
 like the old dry glut inside their quills.  
 In the margin of texts and praise  
 they scratched and clawed.  
 They snarled if the day was dark  
 or too much chalk had made the vellum bland  
 or too little left it oily.

Under the rumps of lettering  
 they herded myopic angers.  
 Resentment seeded in the uncurling  
 fernheads of their capitals.

Now and again I started up  
 miles away and saw in my absence  
 the sloped cursive of each back and felt them  
 perfect themselves against me page by page.

Let them remember this not inconsiderable  
 contribution to their jealous art.

The parting shot is reminiscent of Hill both in its syntactical elaborateness and in the way its hauteur is undercut by a harsh, self-directed irony: Heaney lets slip the fact that he is jealous of the very art he denounces - the art of criticism. The 'Scribes' render their interpretation of texts (including, it is implied, Heaney's own poetry) with a destructiveness linked to the rendering down of prickly trees for ink. The closeness of 'render' to 'rend', as of 'cursive' to 'curse' in the penultimate stanza, does not escape the poet. Similarly, the way in which the poet hisses the words 'resentment seeded' and

curls his lips for 'herded', 'angers', 'uncurling' and 'fernheads' provides a tit-for-tat riposte to the vituperations of the scribes. Their snarling over bland and oily vellum implies a no-win situation in which the poet's work is judged by some to be too impartial, by others too indulgent in one particular direction. It is unexpected, and refreshing, to see Heaney retaliate in the way he does.

This upsurge in impudence evidently offered new possibilities for him to exercise language as a means of resisting subjugation. Throughout Station Island, but particularly in the ventriloquial poems of the third section, Heaney stands up for his art and exemplifies the more subversive side of what it means to achieve redress. The self-fortifying project leaves him 'bewildered' nonetheless, and his ambivalences are carried forward to the subsequent collection; in The Haw Lantern, new, insurrectionary strategies are adopted for giving expression, and some measure of redress, to the assaults of language and experience.

9. Threatening Language: 'The Haw Lantern' (1987)

Language is the tool of intimidation or, alternatively, the means by which intimidation may be challenged; this is Heaney's double-edged guiding principle in The Haw Lantern. The poems draw attention to their own linguistic workings by a number of strategies: wordplay, exploration of etymology, the parable technique. There is a barer quality to the diction in this volume, which provides Heaney with the means to effect both an increased austerity and a new, playful lightness of touch; more than the extension of technical and tonal range, the poetry offers new ways to express, and partly redress, the political threats and personal upsets experienced by the author.

The opening poem, 'Alphabets' (HL, p. 1), puts forward the idea of words as tools. With backward glances at 'The Scribes' and the poem 'Cloistered' in Stations, Heaney retraces language to the classroom, the place in which he first learnt the vaguely menacing lesson that 'there is a right / Way to hold the pen and a wrong way'. The child registers the imposition of his early written exercises: 'First it is "copying out", and then "English" / Marked correct with a little leaning hoe'. These enforcements were soon superseded by the rules of Latin grammar which Heaney learnt at Anahorish and St. Columb's schools:

Declensions sang on air like a *hosanna*  
As, column after stratified column,  
Book One of *Elementa Latina*,  
Marbled and minatory, rose up in him.

As Michael Parker puts it, the child's perceptions 'are impinged upon by a growing awareness of the rules governing adult thinking, early inklings of the absolutism running

through the State and the Church'.<sup>1</sup> Gaelic is a more alluring language to the poet, the letters of its alphabet imaginatively associated with trees and orchards, although, with its 'lines of script like briars coiled in ditches', it is prickly and offputting in its own way.<sup>2</sup> The student makes inroads nonetheless, fancying himself as 'the scribe / Who drove a team of quills on his white field' - the quills here representing both the writing implement and the feathery letters of the Gaelic text.

The poem expresses, with deceptive surface simplicity, the idea that to learn the alphabet is to take on power. Heaney returns to such a notion in one of his Oxford lectures, 'Extending the Alphabet: On Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander"', when he describes 'the alphabet of emotional and technical expression' which it is the poet's duty to extend (ROP, p. 36). He refers to

an analogy first proposed by the South African writer André Brink in relation to the role of writers in a repressed society. People in such societies, according to Brink, typically employ only a portion of the alphabet that is available to them as human beings. In matters of race or sex or religion, citizens will confine the range of their discourse to a band of allowable usages between, say, A and M. This will be a more or less conscious act of self-censorship, as much a collusion as a consensus. So it then becomes the writer's task to expose this state of affairs, to extend the resources of expression up to perhaps N or V, and thereby both to affront and to enlighten. (ROP, p. 28)

The formulations are useful for illuminating several poems in The Haw Lantern collection, 'Alphabets' included -

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<sup>1</sup> Parker, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup> Compare the connection between text and foliage in the fifth of Hill's Mercian Hymns ('barbaric ivy, scrollwork of fern').

but more particularly 'From the Canton of Expectation' (HL, p. 46). This poem, near the end of the volume, picks up the identification in the opening poem between inscriptions and prescriptions and applies it unambiguously to the Irish situation. The first section describes how some Irish citizens (implicitly Catholic ones, with a degree of nationalist sympathy) have effectively colluded in a confined discourse - one described by the poet as 'optative' and 'conditional'. They are resigned, through an ingrained doctrine of humility and self-sacrifice, to a deferral of their personal, cultural and political aspirations, and revive their indigenous language and customs only at an annual fair. In the second section this scenario is played off against the consideration that education has emancipated others (a redressive counter-balance to the emphasis on schooling as subjugation in 'Alphabets'); learning has set 'young heads [...] / paving and pencilling their first causeways / across the prescribed texts', fighting back at cultural impositions from the margins to which their culture has been consigned. Enlightenment has produced 'intelligences / brightened and unmannerly as crowbars' and a new, more aggressive discourse, guided by 'a grammar / of imperatives'.

The third and final part of Heaney's poem offers a third option, one grounded not in the wishful 'optative' nor the coercive 'imperative' but in the more neutral, and steadfast, 'indicative'. Heaney weighs up the two contrary possibilities he has been outlining of response to repressive circumstances: sufferance or subversion. Although one part of his temperament causes him to incline

to the latter, holding out a hope of redressing the prevailing political dispensation by affronting it, he is held back by a contrary impulse. As usual, Heaney seeks to strike a balance between opposing views:

*What looks the strongest has outlived its term.  
The future lies with what's affirmed from under.  
These things that corroborated us when we dwelt  
under the aegis of our stealthy patron,  
the guardian angel of passivity,  
now sink a fang of menace in my shoulder.  
I repeat the word 'stricken' to myself  
and stand bareheaded under the banked clouds  
edged more and more with brassy thunderlight.  
I yearn for hammerblows on clinkered planks,  
the uncompromised report of driven thole-pins,  
to know there is one among us who never swerved  
from all his instincts told him was right action,  
who stood his ground in the indicative,  
whose boat will lift when the cloudburst happens.*

The 'stealthy patron' who kept the speaker's people subjected in passivity is exposed for the tyrant he was, but just as threatening is the violent storm to come. The poet, almost dumbstruck, stammers on the word 'stricken' both to convey the restrictions to which his language has been subjected and to invite the lightning to strike him, exposed as he is to the storm. Being struck, he may be empowered to speak and strike, and thereby redress the circumstances.

However, the striking he envisages will be constructive, not destructive, a hope reflected in the extended metaphor of ship-building: the poet longs for a clinker-built craft, each plank harmoniously overlapping the other. This craft is conceived of firstly as a rowing boat (with a thole-pin fixed in the gunwale to serve as a fulcrum and to steady the action of rowing) and then as the ark that

will survive the storm.<sup>3</sup> The poet's ideal figure is a paradigm of 'right action', of behaviour which is defined partly by the intransigence of hammering but partly also by the more passive quality of endurance: he stands his ground, does not swerve from his cause, but in his Noah-like self-containment is ultimately an embodiment of resistance more stoic than dynamic.

Such is the mood aspired towards in the central sequence of poems in the volume, in which Heaney confronts the death of his mother. The prefatory poem to these 'Clearances' defines the poet's impulse:

*She taught me what her uncle once taught her:  
How easily the biggest coal block split  
If you got the grain and hammer angled right.*

*The sound of that relaxed alluring blow,  
Its co-opted and obliterated echo,  
Taught me to hit, taught me to loosen,*

*Taught me between the hammer and the block  
To face the music. Teach me now to listen,  
To strike it rich behind the linear black.*

(HL, p. 24)<sup>4</sup>

Hammering is not aggressive here. Heaney's wish is to strike up a tune, a mournful one, not to strike out. He suggests the connections which exist between his status as writer (hitting the page with black lines of typeface), his position as a son (learning from his mother how to split coal), and his condition as a mourner (reverently following the '*linear black*' of her funeral cortège). To strike the

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<sup>3</sup> That the word 'thole' is also an <sup>Ulster</sup>Scots and Northern English dialect verb meaning 'to put up with, or bear', and an archaic word for 'to suffer', is not irrelevant; compare the phrase 'You'll have to thole' in 'The Sounds of Rain' (ST, p. 48).

<sup>4</sup> The italicization of this poem replicates Heaney's text.

right note involves loosening, a grieving quality which is present in the falling cadences of the poem, with its thwarted rhymes of 'split' and 'right', 'loosen' and 'listen', 'block' and 'black'. What he wishes for is a 'relaxed alluring blow', not to lash out at the fact of death but to treat it with hushed notes of accommodation.<sup>5</sup>

Heaney's sequence of poems culminates in the image of a felled chestnut tree. The loss is lamentable but to be accepted: like the departure of his mother, it leaves the poet with a 'clearance', a sense of emptiness but also a cleared perspective, even a source of renewal by which his grief may be transfigured.<sup>6</sup> Again, Heaney's prose elaborates upon the preoccupations of the poetry: at the start of his essay 'The Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh' (1985), he dwells on the significance of the vacant spot where this tree had stood. From this he goes on to demonstrate how the 'luminous spaces' by which Kavanagh defines his environment create the impression of 'transfigured images, sites where the mind projects its own force' (GOT, p. 5). He returns to the conception of poetry as a means of winning space throughout The Government of the Tongue, as for instance at the end of the title-essay:

Poetry [...] does not propose to be instrumental or effective. Instead, in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure

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<sup>5</sup> Compare to this the priest who goes 'hammer and tongs' at the last rites in the third poem of the 'Clearances' sequence (HL, p. 27).

<sup>6</sup> On Heaney's exploitation of the complex etymology of the word 'clearance', see, for example, John Wilson Foster, The Achievement of Seamus Heaney (Dublin: Lilliput, 1995), p. 46.

concentration, a focus where our power to  
 concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.  
 (GOT, p. 108)

Heaney, here as so often in his prose, is trying to throw off the call to political action as a 'distraction' for the poet who would do better attending merely to the internal operations of his or her composition and not the external circumstances some would have it mirror.

Yet in The Haw Lantern he also deploys the imagery of rifts and spaces to explore the issue of political involvement. Such is the case in the poem 'From the Frontier of Writing' (HL, p. 6). Here, a British army roadblock in Ulster is conceived of in terms of 'the tightness and the nilness round [the] space' which it creates; it is a constricted realm in which the poet is interrogated and held under gunsight. Before winning through to the liberating free space beyond, where the reflection of soldiers flows harmlessly off the windscreen, a frontier has to be crossed:

So you drive on to the frontier of writing  
 where it happens again. The guns on tripods;  
 the sergeant with his on-off mike repeating

data about you, waiting for the squawk  
 of clearance; the marksman training down  
 out of the sun upon you like a hawk.<sup>7</sup>

Clearance here denotes permission to proceed beyond the checkpoint, to escape the tyrannical, hawk-like surveillance of the soldiers. Given that he is at the same time making a self-reflexive reference to the art of writing, Heaney might also have in mind, as in 'The Scribes', those critics who

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<sup>7</sup> This scenario is returned to briefly in 'From the Canton of Expectation' (HL, p. 46), with its description of 'militiamen on overtime at roadblocks', and in 'Squarings, 3. Crossings, xxvi' (ST, p. 84).

train their vigilant attention on his poems, waiting for one false move.

The political realities are being used in this poem quite openly as a metaphor for the writer's predicament. The 'frontier of writing' is described in Heaney's latest critical volume as

the line that divides the actual conditions of our daily lives from the imaginative representation of those conditions in literature, and divides also the world of social speech from the world of poetic language. (ROD, p. xvi)<sup>8</sup>

Typically, the cross-over Heaney describes is from political reality to the writer's imagination, rather than vice-versa. This is of a part with his re-iterated desire to 'redress poetry as poetry' and in the process give politics the slip. Yet precisely by keeping his focus trained on the borderline between the external, public realm and internal poetic processes in this way, the reader is reminded how such wishful thinking itself implies a political stance.

Heaney puts his preoccupation with frontiers in part down to a consciousness of the border that divides Ireland, 'a frontier which has entered the imagination definitively, north and south' (ROP, p. 188). He takes this idea as a starting-point for his poem 'Parable Island':

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<sup>8</sup> In the essay entitled 'Frontiers of Writing', Heaney draws a distinction between practical and poetic orders of knowledge: 'each form of knowledge redresses the other and [...] the frontier between them is there for the crossing' (ROD, p. 203). Elsewhere, he describes 'the thirst or ache at the core of Clare's poetry' in similar terms: 'This ache comes from his standing at the frontier of writing, in a gap between the unmistakably palpable world he inhabits and another world, reached for and available only to awakened language' (p. 68).

Although they are an occupied nation  
and their only border is an inland one  
they yield to nobody in their belief  
that the country is an island. (HL, p. 10)

This opening quatrain leads on to a complex and lightly mischievous analysis of how words cross customary frontiers and re-negotiate their positions. He describes how a mountain by the northern coastline (the coast being the only border which all the islanders do acknowledge) is subject to differing names, interpretations and legends by the inhabitants of various surrounding localities. The linguistic differences highlight how there are, in fact, many internal frontiers of dialect to be crossed.

Parabolic in itself, the poem holds the parable-technique up for question as it speculates on the random ways in which folklore evolves and names are accorded to places, and on how archaeologists gloss ancient symbols which are themselves glosses on some previous, lost meaning. Through attention to the recessive ambiguities of language, the poem appears to withdraw 'into a world of semantic indeterminacy that flaunts its political indecisiveness'.<sup>9</sup> Heaney is playful about this; his strategies are of the sort he ascribes to his contemporary Irish poets Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon in the essay 'The Sense of Place':

They may be preyed upon in life by the  
consequences of living on this island now, but  
their art is a mode of play to outface the  
predatory circumstances. (PRE, p. 148)

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Robinson, 'Free State of Image and Allusion', Instabilities, p. 154.

The lightness of touch with which he turns 'prey' to 'play' in this description itself partakes of the type of redress Heaney is advocating.

However, the increased levity is offset by a deepened note of sternness in The Haw Lantern, as the title-poem, another parable of sorts, exemplifies:

The wintry haw is burning out of season,  
 crab of the thorn, a small light for small people,  
 wanting no more from them but that they keep  
 the wick of self-respect from dying out,  
 not having to blind them with illumination.

But sometimes when your breath plumes in the frost  
 it takes the roaming shape of Diogenes  
 with his lantern, seeking one just man;  
 so you end up scrutinized from behind the haw  
 he holds up at eye-level on its twig,  
 and you flinch before its bonded pith and stone,  
 its blood-prick that you wish would test and clear you,  
 its pecked-at ripeness that scans you, then moves on.  
 (HL, p. 7)

This poem follows 'From the Frontier of Writing' and converts the trope of surveillance in that poem into natural imagery that yet retains a political valency.

John Carey has thrown a helpful light on Heaney's beguiling use of imagery in 'The Haw Lantern':

Among the new symbols, the title poem's wintry haw hanging on its thorn is a receptacle of Heaney's vital qualities. It is natural, unpretentious, densely fruitful and true to itself - alone and unbiddable among the competing ideologies. What the haters and demagogues have done to language is Heaney's regret, but the haw will have none of them. It stands for integrity.<sup>10</sup>

Carey's interpretation is true to the spirit of the poem. One might add that the meaning of 'haw' as an inarticulate utterance, the expression of hesitation or embarrassment (as in 'to hem, or haw') might also be relevant: against the

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<sup>10</sup> John Carey, 'The Most Sensuous Poet to Use English since Keats', Sunday Times, 3 April 1988, p. G9.

crude oratory of the demagogues agitating and swaying the mobs, poetic expression has a very humble power - it is 'a small light for small people' - and what it has to say may be out of time ('burning out of season'). However, in the face of adversity the lantern-like berry stands for integrity of the sort Diogenes advocated; this Greek philosopher sought out the 'one just man' (akin to the singular figure in pursuit of 'right action' in 'From the Canton of Expectation'), the exemplary figure who would lead a simple, self-sufficient lifestyle, in rejection of social conventions. In this paradigm Heaney clearly discerns the image of the poet.

The Haw Lantern is a book about threats, and the necessity of evading threats. Specifically, these are the dangers which the poet has to resist; by frequently returning the reader to the predicament of the writer, it is perhaps Heaney's most self-reflexive, and self-justificatory, volume. In poem after poem, cultural and linguistic impositions, and the call to political dutifulness, are sensitively registered and subtly challenged. Heaney uses the central motifs of the volume - frontiers and clearances - to win free space for his poetry. As one has come to expect from the progression of what now seems a remarkably well-deliberated career, a fuller significance of this emphasis on space-winning has emerged in Heaney's more recent work.

10. Swaying for Balance: 'Seeing Things' (1991)

The poems of Seeing Things are concerned with liberation, self-empowerment, belief in the possibility of change - but not in any obviously political sense; indeed, the 'access of free power' ('Wheels within Wheels', ST, p. 46) to which Heaney gives expression is gained precisely by transcending such concerns: the poems are redressed, Heaney would have it, by their emancipation from the burden of public duty under which he has previously felt more compelled to write. Resisting the impulse to use description as political metaphor, he insists upon 'seeing things' simply for what they are. This entails focusing on the concrete actuality of objects to the point where, paradoxically, he has a sense of being able to see beyond them, to apprehend their quiddity - yet he is also aware that the visionary state he aspires to may be poetic delusion. The result is a poetry at once more light-headed and more resonant with despondency (a feeling augmented by the undertow of grief at his father's death which pervades the volume) than Heaney has previously achieved.

The title-piece (ST, p. 16) sees the poet swaying for balance between dread and exhilaration as he relives a memorable rowing-trip:

The sea was very calm but even so,  
 When the engine kicked and our ferryman  
 Swayed for balance, reaching for the tiller,  
 I panicked at the shiftiness and heft  
 Of the craft itself. What guaranteed us -  
 That quick response and buoyancy and swim -  
 Kept me in agony.

The situation described is analogous to the poetic impulse explored throughout the collection - a sense of dauntedness keeping in check the inclination to be buoyant, despite the

fact that buoyancy guarantees the success of the poetic enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

By the end of the second part of the poem, the speaker is back on firm ground, yet there is still a shifting, unreliable quality to the environment:

All afternoon, heat wavered on the steps  
And the air we stood up to our eyes in wavered  
Like the zig-zag hieroglyph for life itself.

A moment of visionary insight offers itself like a mystery that cannot be penetrated, a visual blur. Throughout the volume Heaney returns to the sensation of wavering; at the end of the second poem in the 'Squarings' section, he warns himself (or other would-be poets?) against it:

Sink every impulse like a bolt. Secure  
The bastion of sensation. Do not waver  
Into language. Do not waver in it.  
(*'Squarings, 1. Lightenings, ii'*, *ST*, p. 56)

The irony is that Heaney insists on fixity of response with a fluid phrasal modulation which itself represents a form of wavering. He oscillates between trusting in a visionary mode of apprehension and sensing the need to sink bolts, to register the 'un-get-roundable weight' of physical objects (*'The Settle Bed'*, *ST*, p. 28). Many of the poems are laden with noun-heavy descriptions of a specific object or set of objects, as if to assert what he has elsewhere called 'the firmness and in-placeness and undislodgeableness of poetic form' (*POW*, p. 32).

Heaney's self-conscious display of vacillation is in the spirit of one of Yeats's proclamations of poetic intent:

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<sup>1</sup> Compare Heaney's remark in *Crediting Poetry* that 'poetic form is both the ship and the anchor. It is at once a buoyancy and a holding' (p. 29).

we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these words, Yeats could hardly escape, and no more can Heaney, from the fact that the wish to transcend worldly feelings of desire and hatred implies a particular stance towards that world. One could also compare the predicament to which Heaney is susceptible, the burden of political expectation surrounding his work, with Lowell's situation in the early 1970s: having moved away from the political engagement of his 1960s poetry (and having made a literal move from his homeland to England), he had come to feel that 'wavering is a good feeling to achieve' with regard to public events.<sup>3</sup>

The link between wavering and political non-engagement in Seeing Things is not unrelated to the emphasis Heaney places on 'lightenings': moments of illumination, but also of alleviation and uplift. The poems repeatedly espouse the desire to abandon worldly concerns and attachments for the

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Symbolism of Poetry' (1900), Essays and Introductions, pp. 153-72 (p. 163).

<sup>3</sup> 'A Conversation with Ian Hamilton' (1971) (LCP, p. 268). Heaney's conscious inclination towards a more reflective mode in Seeing Things also owes something to the example of Lowell. Lines in the poem 'Fosterling' ('Heaviness of being. And poetry / Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens. / Me waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels' (ST, p. 50)), echo Lowell's poem 'For Sheridan', with its wry blend of self-accusation, resignation and late-discovered wisdom: 'Past fifty, we learn with surprise and a sense / of suicidal absolution / that what we intended and failed / could never have happened - / and must be done better' (DBD, p. 82). Heaney cites these 'riddling' lines twice in his criticism (PRE, p. 223 and GOT, p. 147). Compare also Lowell's 'Flight to New York, 1. Plane Ticket' (DOL, p. 72): 'After fifty so much joy has come'.

poet's own personal good - and for the good of his verse. What Heaney has to say about the work of the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert might well be applied to his own philosophy and practice:

It is more that he has eased his own grimness, as if realizing that the stern brows he turns upon the world merely contribute to the weight of the world's anxiety instead of lightening it; therefore, he can afford to become more genial personally without becoming one whit less impersonal in his judgements and perceptions. (GOT, p. 66)<sup>4</sup>

The poems of Seeing Things are exercises in lightening up. Though loaded down 'in the scale of things' by the 'cold memory-weights' of retrospective imaginings, the poetry frequently describes the sensation of throwing off a weight - a tendency which accounts for the airiness (and sometimes breeziness) of Heaney's manner.<sup>5</sup>

The poems enact balancing acts - like the 'see-saw lift / and drop' of a door-latch in one poem: when lowered it keeps the observer imprisoned in oppressive, quotidian reality, when raised it grants access to the realm of the unknown and perhaps unknowable.<sup>6</sup> Such use of imagery has obvious affinities with Heaney's concept of the scales of poetic justice in The Redress of Poetry, and with the observations he has made on Frost's poem 'Birches'. Frost, in order to convey the desire to leave one's earthbound state and return renewed, employs the concept of swinging on the branch of a birch tree. As Heaney puts it,

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<sup>4</sup> Heaney is discussing a poem expressly about tyranny, 'The Divine Claudius'.

<sup>5</sup> The quotations here are from 'Squarings, 4. Squarings, xl' (ST, p. 100).

<sup>6</sup> 'Squarings, 3. Crossings, xxix' (ST, p. 87).

this seesawing between earth and heaven nicely represents the principle of redress which I have elsewhere commended. That general inclination to begin a counter-move once things go too far in any given direction is enacted by 'Birches' with lovely pliant grace.<sup>7</sup>

Heaney's comments here (possessive of the indulgent, fanciful manner of delivery which creeps in to his criticism at times) highlights how much he invests in his conception of redress as a means of keeping extremism in check: a preference for political safeness could be read into this desire not to 'go too far in any given direction'.

Seeing Things is about easing up, a quality detectable in the pitch of the poems, although Heaney's familiar tenacity and steadfastness of expression is still operative and in some ways intensified, as if to counterbalance the lighter touches. The indomitable and the genial redress each/other, as Heaney claims they do in the letters of Elizabeth Bishop:

There's something indomitable at the heart of these studiously unheroic performances, something that finds the mortal world enough and redeems it by a marvellous combination of horse sense, high spirits and perfect pitch.<sup>8</sup>

The word 'pitch' is important. Heaney plays with it in a reflexive manner in several poems of Seeing Things, most notably 'The Pitchfork':

Of all implements, the pitchfork was the one  
That came near to an imagined perfection:  
When he tightened his raised hand and aimed with it,  
It felt like a javelin, accurate and light.

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<sup>7</sup> ' "Above the Brim": On Robert Frost', p. 284. For 'Birches', see Frost's Collected Poems, p. 81.

<sup>8</sup> This is cited from Heaney's short entry on Elizabeth Bishop's One Art: The Selected Letters, in 'International Books of the Year', Times Literary Supplement, 12 December 1994, pp. 8-12 (p. 12).

So whether he played the warrior or the athlete  
 Or worked in earnest in the chaff and sweat,  
 He loved its grain of tapering, dark-flecked ash  
 Grown satiny from its own natural polish.

Riveted steel, turned timber, burnish, grain,  
 Smoothness, straightness, roundness, length and sheen.  
 Sweat-cured, sharpened, balanced, tested, fitted.  
 The springiness, the clip and dart of it.

And then when he thought of probes that reached the  
 farthest,  
 He would see the shaft of a pitchfork sailing past  
 Evenly, imperturbably through space,  
 Its prongs starlit and absolutely soundless -

But has learned at last to follow that simple lead  
 Past its own aim, out to another side  
 Where perfection - or nearness to it - is imagined  
 Not in the aiming but the opening hand. (ST, p. 23)

Heaney insists upon the pitchfork's palpable actuality, even to the extent of risking a laboured description of the labour which went into the implement's production. Despite the pitchfork's resistance to being turned into a symbol, it is obvious that Heaney's concern is also with the production of a poem - one which is 'accurate and light', polished in execution, formally 'riveted', and reflective of the 'burnish' and 'sheen' of the object it observes; the ideal poem should be probing, incisive and not deflected from its purpose. What such a poetry could bring about in political terms is lightly touched upon in the closing lines, and in Helen Vendler's gloss upon them:

The idea of aiming, the heroic act of warrior and athlete thoughtlessly absorbed in young manhood, needs now to be cured by the conception of its opposite - the opening unarmed hand of welcome.<sup>9</sup>

In considering how perfection may be aimed for, Heaney implies that the poet should distinguish between vigorous

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<sup>9</sup> 'Seamus Heaney's Invisibles', transcript of a lecture delivered at Cambridge University in 1995 (p. 4) - a copy of which was kindly provided by the author.

ambition, which threatens to issue in belligerent expression, and a poetry which aims for rapprochement or, better still, disengagement from the power-politics of language.<sup>10</sup>

Heaney develops those central motifs of The Haw Lantern - frontiers and clearances - in order to mark off a safe area for poetry. This is done towards the start of Seeing Things in the poem 'Markings' (ST, p. 8), which uses the image of a football pitch (the word is again self-consciously used by Heaney) as a means of clearing a space for innocuous, playful pursuit in the poems to come. However, the poem also accommodates an awareness of competitiveness, as defined by the very markings of the pitch and the lines drawn between opposing teams. The double-sense of playfulness and rivalry continues to govern the poet's preoccupations in what follows.<sup>11</sup>

In his 1990 Oxford lecture 'The Playthings in the Playhouse', Heaney describes how stepping into 'a space cleared for a specific action' (it might be a sports pitch, or a stage, or a church) imparts to one 'a sense of fleeting

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<sup>10</sup> The prongs of a pitch-fork are among the 'armoury / Of farmyard implements' which menace the young poet in 'The Barn' (DON, p. 17). Compare also the 'blood on a pitch-fork' in the ninth of the 'Glanmore Sonnets' (FW, p. 41) and Heaney's description of pitchforks 'stuck at angles in the ground / As javelins might mark lost battlefields' in 'The Wife's Tale' (DID, p. 28). In the last of these examples, Heaney may have had in mind Patrick Kavanagh's 'Epic' which gives voice to the history of Irish peasants' 'pitchfork-armed claims'; see Patrick Kavanagh: The Complete Poems, ed. by Peter Kavanagh, 2nd edn (Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Goldsmith, 1984), p. 238.

<sup>11</sup> Heaney harnesses his interest in the word 'pitch' to ideas of self-empowerment in both 'Squarings, 1. Lightenings, iii' (ST, p. 57), which describes the pitching of marbles, and 'Squarings, 3. Crossings, xxviii' (p. 86), where ice-skating is described as 'a farewell to sure-footedness, a pitch / Beyond our usual hold upon ourselves'.

empowerment'; he writes, 'I want to use the figure of the marked-off area as a reminder of the differentiated place which a poem occupies in language'.<sup>12</sup> This notion is put into poetic practice most notably in the second part of the Seeing Things volume, 'Squarings', in which the transparent medium of the poems draws attention to their author's contrivances - in particular his engagement with the connection between form and power. The compositions are strangely precarious yet authoritative achievements; in interview, Heaney described how the first one came like 'a bar of certitude' and also how the poems liberated him into 'a certain blitheness which I desperately was wanting'.<sup>13</sup>

The poems issue a challenge to the minatory and marmoreal: as he put it, 'the twelve-liners were meant to be on the side of the fragile art, of the oriental brushstroke rather than the classical marble'. In one poem, Heaney enters the marked-off square of the Roman Capitol as a tourist; here, what he referred to in interview as 'the tyranny of form' loses out to a voice of redressive mockery:

We climbed the Capitol by moonlight, felt  
The transports of temptation on the heights:  
We were privileged and belated and we knew it.

Then something in me moved to prophesy  
Against the beloved stand-offishness of marble  
And all emulation of stone-cut verses.

'Down with form triumphant, long live,' (said I)  
'Form mendicant and convalescent. We attend

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<sup>12</sup> 'The Playthings in the Playhouse', unpublished text of a lecture delivered at Oxford University on 15 October 1990, p. 10. (Grateful acknowledgement is due to the author for providing a private copy.)

<sup>13</sup> Cited, as with the next two quotations above, from the 'Harvard Interview'. Compare to this Heaney's praise for the 'combination of certitude and nonchalance' which he detects in the later work of Kavanagh (GOT, p. 13).

The come-back of pure water and the prayer-wheel.'

To which a voice replied, 'Of course we do.  
But the others are in the Forum Café waiting,  
Wondering where we are. What'll you have?'<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the Roman theme which he has intermittently entertained in his verse, Heaney now considers the mere after-image of imperialism. Historically, the Capitol is a locus of both justice and intrigue, the place where Roman senators heard the citizens' petitions for redress - and also where the conspirators redressed their grievances against the putative tyrant Caesar. The poet needs to redress a potentially tyrannical impulse in himself: the uplift he feels is quickly transformed into a sense of self-empowerment which in turn converts itself into poetic afflatus. The terms in which he denounces 'marble' form are themselves possessive of hauteur, and the ironic let-down comes with swift and inevitable justness.

Heaney's sense of privilege has something to do with his belatedness, as another sightseeing poem in 'Squarings' makes clear. Moscow's Red Square, visited after the collapse of Communism, is perceived as an empty space in which political repression has been historically and symbolically enshrined but from which the voyeuristic tourist can feel safely detached:

On Red Square, the brick wall of the Kremlin  
Looked unthreatening, in scale, just right for people  
To behave well under, inside or outside.

The big cleared space in front was dizzying.  
I looked across a heave and sweep of cobbles  
Like the ones that beamed up in my dream of flying

Above the old cart road, with all the air  
Fanning off beneath my neck and breastbone.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Squarings, 4. Squarings, xxxviii' (ST, p. 98).

(The cloud-roamer, was it, Stalin called Pasternak?)

Terrible history and protected joys!  
 Plosive horse-dung on 1940s' roads.  
 The newsreel bomb-hits, as harmless as dust-puffs.<sup>15</sup>

There is an ambiguity as to whether the Kremlin wall is considered to be 'in scale' - in proportion to its surrounding environment - or else, taking the phrase as a qualifier, it is being seen according to the historical scale of the poet's perspective. Ambiguity doubles the significance of the imagery, too: the poet, being detached, is able to find the wall unmenacing, while being aware also that the decent exterior has hidden (and may still hide) the excesses of the governing power behind it. With a subtlety of compressed logic in his opening tercet, Heaney suggests how people outside have suffered as a direct result of activities inside - just as the tyrannical régime embodied by the wall is designed to control not only the people's external behaviour but also their mental and spiritual resources, their freedom of thought, creativity, and dissent.

The dream which Heaney then goes on to recount imparts a feeling of liberation. There is also, however, a sense in which he has only just saved his skin, and one is reminded of how, at another time and in another place, the cart road he describes might have led to execution. This prompts the association with Pasternak, the poet spared by the unlikeliest of artistic patrons. Stalin's remark, 'Do not touch the cloud-dweller', offered a tenuous form of

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<sup>15</sup> 'Squarings, 2. Settings, xx' (ST, p. 76). It is highly appropriate that this poem should be contained in a sequence of poems entitled 'Settings': the title suggests unoccupied scenery, static backdrops, empty stages.

protection (just as the 'protected joys' of the peace-time poet are felt to be precarious): spared by the grace of a tyrant, Pasternak was nonetheless forced to live under constant threat of persecution, suffered a ten year ban on publication of his work, and was witness to systematic, and deadly, cultural repression.<sup>16</sup>

Heaney's belated and diminished power of witness, by contrast, is highlighted in the closing lines of the poem. A plosive effect, such as a poet might mimic, is hardly the same as an explosive one, and to watch the bombs fall softly in a film like 'dust-puffs' makes them seem as harmless as the 'horse-dung' on the road (though this too carries the hint of a fearful wartime scenario). A dangerous immunity to historical horrors threatens to devalue these horrors - and the exercise of poetry itself. The only recourse is to own up to this, as the poet does, but the redressive effect of such candour must remain of necessity a woefully insufficient gesture.

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<sup>16</sup> On Pasternak, see also 'The Sounds of Rain' (ST, p. 48).

### 11. 'The Far Side of Revenge': Translations and Adaptations

Suffering and injustice may carry on regardless of art, but according to the Chorus at the end of The Cure at Troy (1990), Heaney's reworking of Sophocles' Philoctetes, it remains the artist's duty to affirm that

The longed-for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up,  
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge. (CAT, p. 77)

A desire to see beyond the cycles of retribution which have marked his nation's history finds its voice at such moments. However, the spirit of affirmation, as in all of Heaney's work, is hard-won; these words come at the end of a play which focuses more upon retaliation than reconciliation. This is true also of Heaney's other work as a translator.<sup>1</sup>

Translation allows Heaney to throw his voice (as he did by assuming the Sweeney persona in the third part of Station Island) and thereby to confront the ethics of revenge in a forthright manner; the element of simulation allows him access to a more outspoken mode than might seem appropriate to the medium of privately-voiced lyric. In his rendering of the ancient Irish legend, Buile Suibhne (Sweeney Astray), the poet speaks for the 'Ulster lunatic' (SA, p. 73) - one who is 'astray' both psychically and geographically. Robert Graves has seen in the Sweeney legend 'the most ruthless and bitter description in all European literature of an obsessed

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<sup>1</sup> Heaney makes a significant addition to the end of Sophocles' text, which has only a two-line parting-shot from the Chorus: 'Let us depart together, with a prayer to the sea nymphs that they may come to bring us safely home': see Antigone / The Women of Trachis / Philoctetes / Oedipus at Colonus, trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 407.

poet's predicament'; Heaney picks up on this idea when he describes his protagonist as 'a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance'.<sup>2</sup>

That Heaney also considers Sweeney as in some way 'exemplary for all men and women in contemporary Ulster' is borne out by the translation:

I have deserved all this:  
 night-vigils, terror,  
 flittings across water,  
 women's cried-out eyes. (SA, p. 73)

There is an oblique suggestion in these lines that Ireland itself has deserved its misfortunes: military night-patrols and an accompanying air of intimidation, abandonment by those who chose exile, the surfeit of widows' grief.<sup>3</sup>

Sweeney, though the victim of persecution, helps to perpetuate the cycle of bloody deeds which the poem recounts. The introduction refers to the 'double note of relish and penitence' with which the exiled bird-king's predicament is described, and, indeed, Sweeney's monologue makes it plain that his remorse is complicated by the bloodthirsty pleasure he takes in acts of revenge. The

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<sup>2</sup> See Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 170 (citing The White Goddess) and Heaney's unpaginated introduction to Sweeney Astray (from which the next quotation in the text above also comes). References are to the British edition of Sweeney Astray (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), and not to the less widely available 1983 edition published by the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry. For Heaney's observations on the Sweeney legend, see also Preoccupations, pp. 186-88.

<sup>3</sup> As Alan Robinson points out, these lines echo 'The Wanderer' in Stations (p. 19). Robinson also connects the quarrel between Ronan and Sweeney in Sweeney Astray with the feud between Oisín and St. Patrick in Stations. He helpfully judges these similarities in the light of the fact that drafts of the Sweeney poem which Heaney had begun to undertake in 1972-73 (around the time he was preparing Stations) are more overtly political than the version eventually published; see 'Free State of Image and Allusion', Instabilities, p. 129.

barbarity he betrays at the battle of Moira in AD 637 (SA, p. 6), and the hotheaded, violent manner in which he flouts the Cleric Ronan (pp. 3-7), sets the course for his conduct throughout his resulting peregrinations.

In the series of encounters which the long narrative poem describes, Sweeney comes across agents of his own punishment. Rather than accept this punishment, however, he keeps the cycle going through acts of gleeful retaliation - as when he sends to a gory death the mill-hag who pursues him (SA, p. 46). And although Sweeney recognizes that a woman's innocent theft of his pittance of water-cress is part of his pre-ordained 'retribution' (SA, p. 53), he subjects her nonetheless to his own in turn. She beseeches Sweeney,

*Judge not and you won't be judged.  
Sweeney, be kind, learn the lesson  
that vengeance belongs to the Lord  
and mercy multiplies our blessings. (SA, p. 49)<sup>4</sup>*

But he does not relent, and curses her ruthlessly for taking his bite of food.

The cleric Ronan believes that 'vengeance belongs to the Lord' alone; on hearing of Sweeney's return to Dal Arie, he beseeches God not to ease up in the course of divine retribution:

*I beseech you, Lord, that the persecutor may not  
come near the church to torment it again; I  
beseech you, do not relent in your vengeance or  
ease his affliction until he is sundered body from  
soul in his death-swoon. Remember that you struck*

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<sup>4</sup> These lines were amended in the reproduction of extracts from the poem published as Sweeney's Flight: Based on the Revised Text of 'Sweeney Astray' (London, Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 106: 'Sweeney, be merciful to me. / Leave retribution to the Lord. / *Judge not and you won't be judged.* / Triumph and bless. Do not be hard'.

him for an example, a warning to tyrants that you and your people were sacred and not to be lightly dishonoured or outraged. (SA, p. 69)<sup>5</sup>

There is an implicit link between this summoning up of a tyrannical (if also tyrannicidal) divinity and the murder of Sweeney which follows swiftly after; Heaney apparently wishes to highlight the connection between violent religious rhetoric and actual violence - a connection which has obvious pertinence to Irish history. The murder of Sweeney<sup>e</sup>, while he is innocently taking a drink of milk, carries the distinct hallmarks of a cowardly and unforgivable sectarian killing; as one bystander observes, it is 'deliberate, / outrageous, sickening and sinful' (SA, p. 80).

Heaney's translation of part of another ancient Irish poem, The Midnight Court, also focuses on the theme of revenge. This time, in a lighter vein, it is of women over men their<sup>u</sup> for lack of conjugal will.<sup>6</sup> The male protagonist recounts a dream-vision in which he is harangued first in the Irish countryside by an old crone, then at a woman's court which is presided over by Aoibheall, an arbiter of the nation's welfare. She grants a sexually slighted woman

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<sup>5</sup> Heaney's poem 'The Cleric' in the 'Sweeney Redivivus' section of Station Island describes resentfully how the meddling Ronan infiltrated Sweeney's domain and ousted him: 'he overbore / with his unctions and orders, / he had to get in on the ground' (SI, p. 107). This no doubt implies an analogy for how the Christian Church usurped indigenous beliefs and traditions in Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> Heaney published a translation of lines 1-194 and 855-1026 of Brian Merriman's 1780 work 'Cúirt an Mheán-Oíche' (The Midnight Court) as The Midnight Verdict (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath: Gallery, 1993). The text (on pp. 23-34) is preceded by a translation from Book X of Ovid's Metamorphoses ('Orpheus and Eurydice', pp. 15-19), and is followed by a rendering from Book XI of Ovid ('The Death of Orpheus', pp. 39-42). See also Heaney's essay 'Orpheus in Ireland: On Brian Merriman's Midnight Court' (ROP, pp. 38-62).

retaliatory 'redress' (MV, p. 30) against the male sex, and extends to all women the prerogative to hunt down unmated men and subject them to the whip. In passing, the poet places this bawdy theme in a wider context of social injustice, referring for instance to 'the plight of the underclass / And the system's victims who seek redress' (p. 26), but the emphasis of this poem, as Heaney has noted in his prose commentary, is 'more psycho-sexual than national-patriotic' (ROP, p. 41).<sup>7</sup>

The same could hardly be said for The Cure at Troy; Heaney finds in the Attic tragedy a suitable framework for exploring the vexed issues of national pride and nationalist politics. Division, resentment, long-pent grievance, and ultimately the resolution of these in the greater interests of the national good: these are the themes of the play, and their possible applications to the Irish situation are obvious enough. For all that, it should be stressed that there is no coded political or sectional stance, no direct correspondence, for instance, between Greeks or Trojans and Irish factions:

The analogy works rather in the more generalised terms of division, resentment and a sense of grievance or injustice - plus the possible cessation of these for the greater good. The play

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<sup>7</sup> With reservation, Heaney describes Aoibheall's court as 'a dream court which momentarily redresses the actual penal system which the native population have to endure' (ROP, p. 41). In the course of his essay on Merriman's work he also weighs up the comedy and gravity, and tries to balance readings of the text as a work of machismo against those which detect a revisionist, feminist form of redress: 'the poem has become a paradigm of the war initiated by the women's movement for women's empowerment, their restoration to the centre of language and consciousness and thereby also to the centre of all the institutions and functionings of society' (p. 53).

is beyond any sectional pleading of a case in this respect.<sup>8</sup>

A grim irony underwriting the play is that the hoped-for 'cure' depends upon a breakdown of the protracted stalemate in the Trojan War; the bow of Philoctetes which Odysseus and Neoptolemus require in order to bring victory about is a potent symbol of further bloodshed to come. As the ambiguous etymology of Heaney's title indicates, the 'cure' might be a preservation and prolongation of hostility as much as a healing of old wounds.<sup>9</sup>

Philoctetes himself knows all about wounds. Like Sweeney, he is an afflicted and fiery outcast, enduring the trials of nature and nursing resentment against his enemies (Odysseus, Menelaus and Agamemnon) at his misuse and abandonment.<sup>10</sup> Neoptolemus's injunction to him, 'stop just licking your wounds. Start seeing things' (p. 74), is a political imperative as well as a moral one: in the interests of his country, Philoctetes needs to see beyond the ethics of personal retaliation - of the sort exhibited in his gleeful words to Odysseus:

Your eye's so jaundiced, you can't see the balance shifting and weighing down against you - but I see it and my heart is singing. (CAT, p. 57)

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Peacock, 'Mediations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer', in Andrews, ed, Seamus Heaney, pp. 233-55 (p. 243).

<sup>9</sup> Compare the double-sense of 'the cured wound' in 'The Grauballe Man' (NOR, p. 36). It is interesting to note how Philoctetes describes the properties of the bow, upon possession of which his life depends, in terms reminiscent of Heaney's poem 'The Pitchfork': 'I loved the feel of it, / Its grip and give, and the grain / That was seasoned with my sweat' (CAT, p. 60).

<sup>10</sup> He also resembles Sweeney in the fact that his wits are 'astray' (CAT, pp. 44, 63).

Neoptolemus's principles provide the play's counterweight. When he returns to the cripple the bow which he had previously gained under Odysseus's policy of deceit, his actions exemplify an opposing type of redress that depends upon reconciliation, not reprisal:

I am going to redress the balance.  
The scales will even out when the bow's restored.  
(CAT, p. 65)

Heaney has also utilized the Trojan motif to pursue notions of revenge and rectification in several recent poems. 'Mycenae Lookout' provides a notable example.<sup>11</sup> The poem is channelled through the voice of a guard in Agamemnon's city on the plain of Argos - again with the war against Troy suspended in stalemate. The 'Argives' mentioned in the poem's seventh line are Greeks from Argos besieging Troy; they are divided into 'clagues' - groups of hired recruits, full of specious words and shaky ideals.

Cities of grass. Fort walls. The dumbstruck palace.  
I'd come to with the night wind on my face,  
Agog, alert again, but far, far less

Focused on victory than I should have been -  
Still isolated in an old disdain  
Of clagues who always need to be seen

And heard as the true Argives. Mouth athletes,  
Quoting the oracle and quoting dates,  
Petitioning, accusing, taking votes.

No element that should have carried weight  
Out of the grievous distance would translate.

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<sup>11</sup> Times Literary Supplement, 16 December 1994, p. 15 (repr. in The Times, 6 October 1995, p. 5 and in The Forward Book of Poetry 1996, ed. by Carol Ann Duffy and others (London: Forward Publishing, 1995), p. 51). As the third of a five-poem sequence entitled 'Mycenae Lookout' in The Spirit Level (pp. 29-37), this poem has now been renamed 'His Dawn Vision' (p. 33). The Trojan motif in recent work of Heaney's may be traced also through 'Here for Good', Times Literary Supplement, 22 January 1993, p. 10, 'A Water Seer', Times Literary Supplement, 7 July 1995, p. 8, and 'Mycenae Nightwatch', Poetry 167.1-2 (October-November 1995), 2-4.

Our war stalled in the pre-articulate.

The little violets' heads bowed on their stems,  
The pre-dawn gossamers, all dew and scrim  
And star-lace, it was more through them

I felt the beating of the huge time-wound  
We lived inside. My soul wept in my hand  
When I would touch them, my whole being rained

Down on myself, I saw cities of grass,  
Valleys of longing, tombs, a wind-swept brightness,  
And far-off, in a hilly, ominous place,

Small crowds of people watching as a man  
Jumped a fresh earth-wall and another ran  
Amorously, it seemed, to strike him down.

The poem is a meditation on the problems of spectatorhood and political deadlock. It is evident that the problems in Northern Ireland are being gingerly touched upon: the painful history of conflict is implicit in 'the grievous distance' and 'the huge time-wound', while 'Our war stalled in the pre-articulate' invites irresistible interpretation in the light of the hold-up in all-party talks.

A fragile sense of peace, or an artificial calm, is captured well in the visual ambiguity which the scrim provides: a fabric imitating a wall in a theatre or building, a scrim can suggest haziness or solidity, according to the lighting. As with the poems which describe 'Settings' in the volume Seeing Things, the reader is being reminded that a poem itself is an act of contrivance, one which has the potential for offering a range of perspectives on the same scenario. Such a line of thought may help to account for the romantic idiom of the fifth, sixth and seventh tercets which might otherwise jeopardize the politically responsible stance of the poem. With customary wariness, Heaney approaches his political themes obliquely

via a lyrical meditation on the delicate processes of nature.

That the idiom is not ironic, that it does not apologize for the fact that it borders on sentimentality, is in keeping with Heaney's conception of the redress which poetry can effect. When the speaker declares himself to be 'far, far less / focused on victory than [he] should have been', there is an element of defiance counterbalancing the guilt. Much of what follows on from this line suggests that poetry has a right, perhaps even a duty, to turn away from bloodshed and bitterness. Facing up to destructive reality partly involves facing away - into one's own deepest thoughts and griefs. The speaker knows of longing and of tombs; he knows the terrain and the weather. These are the things he trusts himself to speak of. Other affairs are distant, hazy - 'far off, in a hilly, ominous place'.

This vague location might be taken to represent the political realm where 'small crowds' lobby to redress the grievances of the concerned parties they represent. Diplomacy is figured in that deadly grapple of the poem's final line, a grapple which bears a deceptive resemblance to an embrace; as in 'The Pitchfork', the poet feels the need to distinguish between the aiming and the opening hand. His distant vantage-point, however, makes it hard to discern - or is it rather that the poet's position enables him to make a discerning observation on the tensions which run beneath this shaky image of rapprochement?

The closing image of the embrace, albeit a wishful illusion from a remote perspective, keeps a hopeful possibility at least imaginatively open: should the

negotiators keep speaking to each other, Heaney is hinting, they might through such dialogue strike a deal to redress grievances peaceably. On the other hand, the suggestion of physical assault reinforces the connection between redress and retribution to which Heaney has been repeatedly forced to return; his work bears witness to how linguistic strikes - the use of threatening rhetoric - have a history of leading to bloody forms of redress. The healing strokes and harming strikes of language itself are at the heart of his concerns. In his own poems, and in his promotion of others' poetry, Heaney has highlighted the capacity of words to cause damage or to make amends. It is to his credit that he has held fast to his intention

to clarify something about the way poetry persists and operates as a mode of redress, the way it justifies its readers' trust and vindicates itself by setting its 'fine excess' in the balance against all of life's inadequacies, desolations and atrocities. (ROP, p. 83)

CONCLUSION

Osip Mandelstam and the Redress of Tyranny

A sense of public accountability has for Heaney, as for Hill and Lowell, amplified the political connotations of the poetic enterprise. To varying degrees, the attention which each of them has given to the history and customs of their nation has led to these poets being seen, in the critics' arena at least, as cultural spokespersons. The responsibility imposed by such a perception has been especially acute in Heaney's case, not just because of the particularly troubled inheritance out of which he writes, but also, perhaps inevitably, because of his recent recognition as a national (and international) statesman of letters through the awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Yet the idea that poetry should take a civic stance means something very different to writers in democratic countries than it does to those who are constrained to practise their art under tyrannical conditions. The idea of absolute commitment to one's words when one is not living under absolutist rule might be felt to lack credibility; this argument is particularly persuasive when one considers how, as the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz put it, for some writers 'contemporary poetry / means struggle for breath' in the face of totalitarian realities.<sup>1</sup> Part of the response to tyranny which Lowell, Hill and Heaney have given in their work has inevitably arisen out of the acknowledgment that they themselves do not live under tyrannies. Each has looked to the example of other writers, particularly those

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Shed the Load' (1959), trans. by Adam Czerniawski, in The Faber Book of Modern European Poetry, ed. by A. Alvarez (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 32.

from Russia and the Eastern bloc countries, where, in Heaney's words, 'to stand by what you write is to have to stand your ground and take the consequences' (GOT, p. 39).<sup>2</sup>

In his criticism from the mid-1970s onwards, and particularly through the 1980s, Heaney sought out affinities with a number of such writers: Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodsky, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslav Holub, and, above all, Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938). It is this great twentieth-century figurehead of Russian poetry who has served for Heaney, and for Hill and Lowell too, as a paradigm of the poet who made the ultimate sacrifice for his art.

The appearance in 1973 of Osip Mandelstam's Selected Poems and Clarence Brown's study, Mandelstam, encouraged Heaney towards an uncharacteristically bullish and assertive idiom in his review article of the following year, entitled 'Faith, Hope and Poetry' (PRE, pp. 217-20). In his opening salvo, he is moved to claim that

art has a religious, a binding force, for the artist. Language is the poet's faith and the faith of his fathers and in order to go his own way and do his proper work in an agnostic time, he has to bring that faith to the point of arrogance and triumphalism. Poetry may indeed be a lost cause [...] but each poet must raise his voice like a pretender's flag. Whether the world falls into the hands of the security forces or the fat-necked speculators, he must get in under his phalanx of words and start resisting. (p. 217)

The parting shot is equally militant and defiant:

We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes. Some commentators have all the fussy literalism of an official from the ministry of truth. Mandelstam's life and work are salutary and exemplary: if a poet must turn his

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<sup>2</sup> Heaney's phrasing owes something to Hill; see pp. 243 and 270 above.

resistance into an offensive, he should go for a kill and be prepared, in his life and with his work, for the consequences. (pp. 219-20)

The incendiary language is fuelled by Heaney's avid first discovery of the possibilities which Mandelstam's work offers the poet: it represents a defence of imaginative integrity against extreme political pressures. But there is something awkward and forced about the application of Mandelstam's spirit of resistance to Heaney's situation as a writer. The parallel is played down, and the aggressive manifesto-mode abandoned, in Heaney's later, more considered, assessments of Mandelstam as a 'salutary and exemplary' figure. In The Government of the Tongue, he concentrates on the Russian author's view of poetry as a self-generating, and self-governing, organic entity: 'the poem is not governed by external conventions and impositions but follows the laws of its own need' (GOT, p. 94). Here, Heaney's stress is, more characteristically, on the authoritative power of the autonomous composition, a power which paradoxically defines its political valency by refusing to engage directly with the world of politics.<sup>3</sup>

This line of approach gets closer than Heaney had managed to in his first article to a just representation of the sort of poetry which Mandelstam actually wrote. Little of Mandelstam's verse (or his prose, for that matter) is explicitly political - although there are scattered references, as in the poem '1 January 1924', to the tyrannical nature of the Communist state: 'The age is a

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<sup>3</sup> As Heaney said to Caroline Walsh, Mandelstam's 'poetry didn't deal in any obvious way with political messages: it brought the sense of terror, oppression, suffering into images, into music': see Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 125.

despot [...] There's no escaping the tyrant century'.<sup>4</sup> The now-well-known poem for which Mandelstam was arrested, interrogated and exiled and for which, indirectly but irrefutably, he paid with his life was distinctly atypical. 'The Stalin Epigram' (dated November 1933) is a short, bitter meditation on the tyrant's relish for torture and execution:

Our lives no longer feel ground under them.  
At ten paces you can't hear our words.

But whenever there's a snatch of talk  
it turns to the Kremlin mountaineer,

the ten thick worms his fingers,  
his words like measures of weight,

the huge laughing cockroaches on his top lip,  
the glitter of his boot-rims.

Ringed with a scum of chicken-necked bosses  
he toys with the tributes of half-men.

One whistles, another meouws, a third snivels.  
He pokes out his finger and he alone goes boom.

He forges decrees in a line like horseshoes,  
One for the groin, one the forehead, temple, eye.

He rolls the executions on his tongue like berries.  
He wishes he could hug them like big friends from  
home.<sup>5</sup>

The brusque, curt manner of the poem (in its translated form, at least) reflects both the depersonalized efficiency and the arbitrary nature of the tyrant's rule; it captures too the attendant air of fear and futility in the subjected society. For all these reasons, the appeal of the poem to Lowell is easy to understand. 'Stalin 1934' is the title he gave to his own version; it is one of fourteen Mandelstam

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<sup>4</sup> Selected Poems, trans. by Clarence Brown and W.S. Merwin, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 76-77.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98.

'imitations' which he produced in collaboration with Olga Carlisle over the 1963-65 period.<sup>6</sup>

We live. We are not sure our land is under us.  
Ten feet away, no one hears us.

But wherever there's even a half-conversation,  
we remember the Kremlin's mountaineer.

His thick fingers are fat as worms,  
his words reliable as ten pound weights.

His boot tops shine,  
his cockroach mustache is laughing.

About him, the great, his thin-necked, drained  
advisors.  
He plays with them. He is happy with half-men around  
him.

They make touching and funny animal sounds.  
He alone talks Russian.

One after another, his sentences like horseshoes! He  
pounds  
them out. He always hits the nail, the balls.

After each death, he is like a Georgian tribesman,  
putting a raspberry in his mouth.<sup>7</sup>

Lowell's rendition is, on the whole, even more terse and scathing than Brown's. The poet draws attention to the fact that his own hard sentences are pounded out much as the

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<sup>6</sup> See Atlantic Monthly, June 1963, pp. 63-68 and New York Review of Books, 23 December 1965, pp. 5-7. Most of these translations (which are also more generally indicative of an upsurge of American interest in Russian poetry and culture during the 1960s) derive from Mandelstam's late work; they bear witness to his personal pain and public persecution.

<sup>7</sup> New York Review of Books, p. 6. The phrase 'Georgian tribesman' probably refers to Stalin's place of origin in the Caucasus - specifically the region which became known as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Mandelstam, for obvious reasons, never published his poem, and there are various draft versions; I do not know if Lowell and Carlisle worked from the same Russian text as Clarence Brown subsequently used. The version of the poem which was recorded in the KGB files at the time of Mandelstam's arrest and interrogation (May 1934) has only recently come to light, and this version refers to Ossetia (in the Georgian SSR); it is printed as part of an extract from The KGB's Literary Archive (1995), a book by Vitaly Shentalinsky: see 'Mandelstam Street', Poetry Review 85.4 (winter 1995-96), 58-63 (p. 62).

tyrant pounds out death-sentences. His feeling of identification with the tyrant is augmented by the fact that Lowell's translation bears a resemblance<sup>to</sup> his own semi-autobiographical poem, 'Caligula'. This piece, like 'Stalin 1934', presents a swift itemization of the tyrant's repulsive physical attributes:

*Item: eyes hollow, hollow temples, red cheeks rough with rouge, legs spindly, hands that leave a clammy snail's trail on your soggy sleeve ... a hand no hand will hold ... nose thin, thin neck - you wish the Romans had a single neck! (FUD, p. 50)*

There is a correlation in the Mandelstam poem between the bestial nature of the tyrant and that of the 'thin-necked, drained advisors' who make 'touching and funny animal sounds' around him. In 'Caligula', too, the tyrant's base animal instincts are betrayed in his physical appearance and behaviour; moreover, his own 'thin neck' is analogous to the 'single neck' he fantasizes for the populace - as if his desire for genocide is inseparable from a desire for suicide. The connections with the Mandelstam poem provide a good instance of the way in which the poet 'Lowellizes' the work he translates. He finds in Mandelstam's verse that which accords to his own outlook. In particular, it is the Russian poet's vision of a society in its death-throes which Lowell accommodates to his reflections on political decadence and mischannelled, aggressive energy.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of the Lowell-Mandelstam connection, see Belinda Brindle, 'In Pursuit of the Word: Robert Lowell's Interest in the Work of Osip Mandelstam' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1993). With reference to Lowell's manuscripts, Brindle usefully details how lines from unpublished translations of Mandelstam's poems were absorbed into the omnivorous Notebook volumes.

Osip Mandelstam's work is 'salutary and exemplary' to Geoffrey Hill for very different reasons. 'The element of grandness, of monumentality and solemnity', the 'ceremoniousness of tone', the 'swelling sense of stateliness' - all of these qualities in Mandelstam's verse indicate the grounds of Hill's affinity; so, too, do the broad-ranging, erudite display of cultural and historical learning, the slow, often deliberately impeded lines, and the absence of a directly personal voice in much of the work.<sup>9</sup> Hill's preoccupation with buildings and monuments is also matched by a similar interest of Mandelstam's; as Clarence Brown points out, Mandelstam's 'poems on architecture are memorable [...] for his peculiar vision of buildings as organic structures, as processes of balance and tension, as a kind of joyous cooperative action to which each member contributes its share'.<sup>10</sup> Heaney, however, alerts us to a contrary consideration - that Mandelstam also used architectural imagery to diagnose social imbalance, as in 'those epochs when the individual life was treated as insignificant, when the social architecture was a crushing pyramid' (GOT, p. 81).

It is the crushing of Mandelstam himself by such a social architecture that commands Hill's attention in the last of his 'Four Poems Regarding the Endurance of Poets' in King Log. The poem 'Tristia: 1891-1938', subtitled 'A *Valediction to Osip Mandelstam*', completes his series of

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<sup>9</sup> The phrases in quotation marks are from the introduction to The Prose of Osip Mandelstam, trans. by Clarence Brown, 2nd, rev. edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 3-65. (p. 15).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

brief meditations on writers who have fallen victim to tyrannical régimes. The unspoken, dreadful fact at the imaginative centre of Hill's poem is Mandelstam's death at a Russian labour camp in the winter of 1938:

Difficult friend, I would have preferred  
 You to them. The dead keep their sealed lives  
 And again I am too late. Too late  
 The salutes, dust-clouds and brazen cries.

Images rear from desolation  
 Look ... ruins upon a plain ...  
 A few men glare at their hands; others  
 Grovel for food in the roadside field.

Tragedy has all under regard.  
 It will not touch us but it is there -  
 Flawless, insatiate - hard summer sky  
 Feasting on this, reaching its own end. (HCP, p. 81)<sup>11</sup>

Hill worries about poetry feasting on historical suffering: the poet's impulse to reach an end - to attain artistic completion - is felt to be somehow akin to Tragedy's ruthless pursuit of its victim towards a literal end. But the poet, though not touched by Tragedy, knows himself to be under its regard, and so does not attempt a 'flawless, insatiate' composition. Rather, Hill owns up to the insufficiency of his poetic means: the poem is terse, low-key, fragmentary, fearful of its own slightness in the face of such a terrible theme.

The fragmentary nature of the composition is what makes it difficult, but then difficulty, as I have demonstrated, is for Hill the expression of his refusal to be tyrannized by reductive assumptions about unknowable lives - and unfathomable suffering. As Peter Robinson observes,

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<sup>11</sup> An earlier version of the poem, printed in Stand 7.2 (1964), 36, has a few differences of phrasing: 'There go / The salutes' (lines 3-4); 'Like ruins across a plain' (line 6); 'Tragedy has them under regard' (line 9).

The difficulty of Hill's poem inheres in the adjustment of its regard: it must be hard, for, though distant from the events it is alert to, it is conscious of their violent reality. However, it must not too readily visualize violence, taking its hardness from the forces it resists. Nor can it be too close to its subject, assuming thus an unfounded intimacy with such suffering.<sup>12</sup>

The poet's awareness that his response to Mandelstam's fate is inadequate because of its belatedness also explains the difficulty: the passage of time renders the data of atrocity inaccessible. All Hill has to offer are a few 'images' which 'rear from desolation'. The 'salutes' and 'brazen cries' of memorialists, and in particular of the memorializing poet Hill is self-consciously aiming to be, are insufficient to the task of historical understanding. Nevertheless, despite the grave misgivings, or because of them, Hill's poem does homage to its subject. Mandelstam was a 'difficult' poet, placing high expectations on his readers. He wrote in a 'recondite', 'chaste' manner, and the density of his work derived from the use of strange allusive and associative processes; in all these respects, Hill's work mirrors Mandelstam's and thereby pays implicit tribute to his achievements.<sup>13</sup>

There is one particular poem of Heaney's also which pays such tribute. 'Exposure', the sixth and final piece in the 'Singing School' sequence, and the closing poem of North, depends upon a silent declaration of allegiance to the Russian poet:

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<sup>12</sup> 'Geoffrey Hill's Position', in In the Circumstances, pp. 113-14. Robinson also connects the 'difficulty' of Hill's poem to Mandelstam's social behaviour: as Hill's opening phrase acknowledges, he was a 'difficult friend' to those around him.

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Prose of Osip Mandelstam, p. 12.

It is December in Wicklow:  
 Alders dripping, birches  
 Inheriting the last light,  
 The ash tree cold to look at.

A comet that was lost  
 Should be visible at sunset,  
 Those million tons of light  
 Like a glimmer of haws and rose-hips,

And I sometimes see a falling star.  
 If I could come on meteorite!  
 Instead I walk through damp leaves,  
 Husks, the spent flukes of autumn,

Imagining a hero  
 On some muddy compound,  
 His gift like a slingstone  
 Whirled for the desperate.

How did I end up like this?  
 I often think of my friends'  
 Beautiful prismatic counselling  
 And the anvil brains of some who hate me

As I sit weighing and weighing  
 My responsible *tristia*.  
 For what? For the ear? For the people?  
 For what is said behind-backs?

Rain comes down through the alders,  
 Its low conducive voices  
 Mutter about let-downs and erosions  
 And yet each drop recalls

The diamond absolutes.  
 I am neither internee nor informer;  
 An inner émigré, grown long-haired  
 And thoughtful; a wood-kerne

Escaped from the massacre,  
 Taking protective colouring  
 From bole and bark, feeling  
 Every wind that blows;

Who, blowing up these sparks  
 For their meagre heat, have missed  
 The once-in-a-lifetime portent,  
 The comet's pulsing rose. (NOR, p. 72)

As Hill does in the heading to his poem, so Heaney too alludes to 'Tristia' - the volume of poems on love and parting which Mandelstam wrote during a period of self-imposed exile to the Black Sea. (Its title, its themes, its place of composition, all align the collection to Ovid's

work of the same name.) The poem of Mandelstam's called 'Tristia', in the translation by Brown, begins, 'I have studied the science of good-byes, / the bare-headed laments of night'.<sup>14</sup> If it is 'the science of good-byes' which Hill explores in his memorial, then 'the bare-headed laments of night' might be used to describe Heaney's theme. With remorse, he weighs up the implications of his own self-imposed exile from civil unrest and violence in Northern Ireland. The move to Wicklow in the south (which he made in 1973) leads Heaney to question, as he does throughout North, the call to political accountability.

His night-time laments are 'bare-headed': as the title 'Exposure' implies, the poet is out in the elements, eager to face whatever meteoric event might arise. This is a metaphorical way of expressing his inclination to brave political storms: through such engagement, he feels, his poetry may be tested and empowered. Yet the inclination is shunned by another part of his temperament - 'exposure' is also a state to be feared - and Heaney is unable to resolve the poem into a declaration either of his openness to political concerns or of his desire to evade them.<sup>15</sup>

Mandelstam's spirit flits in and out of the poem, partly to challenge and partly to confirm Heaney's position

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<sup>14</sup> Selected Poems, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> The Haw Lantern poem 'From the Canton of Expectation' is in dialogue with 'Exposure': here, the poet, driven to political engagement, casts himself in the role of one who stands 'bareheaded under the banked clouds / edged more and more with brassy thunderlight' (HL, p. 47): see pp. 341-42 above. Compare also Heaney's description, in 'Lowell's Command', of the effect produced by reading Lowell's sonnets of the early 1970s: 'the reader could feel at times he was out bareheaded in a meteor shower' (GOT, p. 142).

of uncertain detachment from The Troubles.<sup>16</sup> I am tempted to see Mandelstam as the 'hero' with the 'slingstone' in the fourth quatrain, although this is mainly because of an observation which Heaney made subsequent to the composition of 'Exposure': in the essay 'Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam' (GOT, pp. 71-88), he compares 'The Stalin Epigram' to David facing Goliath 'with eight stony couplets in his sling' (GOT, p. 72). If one takes up this retrospective hint, the 'muddy compound' could be viewed as the prison enclosure which Mandelstam inhabited in the final stages of his life. Heaney, by comparison, merely trudges 'through damp leaves' on an autumn walk, aware of the gulf between his predicament and that of the heroic, but doomed, tyrannicide he tests himself against.

The poet has 'escaped from the massacre' and become an 'inner émigré': the phrase is very similar to one which Heaney would doubtless have come across when reading the memoir of Mandelstam's widow, Hope Against Hope (1971).<sup>17</sup> Here, Nadezhda recalls the political situation faced by her husband and other dissident writers in Soviet Russia:

as Nadezhda Mandelstam, Osip's widow, tells us in her memoir, Hope against Hope, both Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova were branded 'internal émigrés' while still living in Moscow - émigrés, that is, from the assumptions of the Soviet regime ('a

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<sup>16</sup> As Alan Robinson says, 'Heaney is fumbling towards an implicit self-justification; his tribute to Mandelstam is also an apologia for his own apparent withdrawal into political exile in Glanmore': see 'Free State of Image and Illusion', in Instabilities, p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> This is one of the books reviewed in the article 'Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam'.

label which was to play an important part in their subsequent fate').<sup>18</sup>

Heaney brands himself an 'inner émigré' because he wishes to escape the 'assumptions' of those who would co-opt poetry to a political cause. What his 'subsequent fate' might be is felt in this poem to be uncertain, but he has taken his decision and, for all that the poem has a saddened and ambivalent tone, it is also unapologetic in its spirit of self-defence.

Characteristically, Heaney strikes a balance between two opposing views of the writer's situation. Even his closing admission that he may 'have missed / The once-in-a-lifetime portent, / The comet's pulsing rose', weighs regret against vindication: portents can prefigure either good or bad events - and this one, in the context of the Irish political situation, may be incendiary. Moreover, if the 'pulsing rose' is taken as the centrepiece of a Symbolist poetics, it would be worth bearing in mind Mandelstam's attack on the Symbolist rose in his 1922 essay 'On the Nature of the Word' - a passage which Heaney has drawn attention to elsewhere (GOT, p. 78). Perhaps Heaney is implying that it is better not to attain a perfected aesthetic - an art composed of 'diamond absolutes' - even though he also laments its unattainability. The Symbolist ideal of poetry, as Mandelstam repeatedly urged in his writings, separates art from its social and material

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<sup>18</sup> Corcoran, Seamus Heaney, p. 125. Corcoran also explains the reference to 'wood-kernes': these are the Gaelic foot-soldiers who fled to the woods to prepare for further resistance during the Protestant colonization of Ireland (p. 126); Heaney professes a tacit rebelliousness through his declared identification with these 'kernes'.

context, and the artist from any sense of moral responsibility.

This is a danger which Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill and Robert Lowell are acutely aware of. To read their poems is to see and hear the ethical intelligence at work. In their differing ways, they face up to the pressures of moral obligation - though they also show themselves resistant to the pressures of readers' expectations. Mandelstam's example provides a useful common denominator because it highlights the authors' respective sensitivities to the connection - and the unbridgeable gulf - between our relatively untouched lives and the lives of those suffering under more blatant political duress. Although, as Heaney writes, there is a 'literally [...] vital distinction' between tyranny and democracy, the obligation to stand by one's deeds, and one's words, has a compelling force in any society. The connection between the acts of speaking and striking, and between these two and the redressing of wrongs, is asserted when Heaney compares Lowell's 1943 'Declaration of Personal Responsibility' to Mandelstam's decisive moment of direct political dissent in the 1934 ode on Stalin: he observes how the two authors experienced

a corresponding moment of collision between individual moral conscience and the demands of the historical moment. [...] Lowell's justification of his specifically poetry-writing self was bound up with his protest and his experience of jail - in the same way as Mandelstam's airy liberation was earned at an even more awful price.

(GOT, pp. 134-35)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The two poets are compared again on pp. 138-39 and in the article 'Current Unstated Assumptions about Poetry: 1', Critical Inquiry, 7 (1980-81), 645-51.

The 'salutary and exemplary' work of Osip Mandelstam suggests how the redress of tyranny may be attained through the witnessing power of poetry. Lowell, Hill and Heaney have all paid homage to

the example of Mandelstam, singing in the Stalinist night, affirming the essential humanism of the act of poetry itself against [...] inhuman tyranny [...] For him, obedience to poetic impulse was obedience to conscience; lyric action constituted radical witness. Even though in the meantime we have become highly conscious of the conditioning nature of language itself, the way it speaks us as much as we speak it, the essential point remains: Mandelstam's witness to the necessity of what he called 'breathing freely', even at the price of his death; to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspired act. (GOT, p. xix)

These principles are upheld in their own poems. But, above all, it is in the way the three authors make an honest exploration of their own sense of moral constraint that poetic redress is achieved: Lowell, Hill and Heaney each give voice to a vigilant conscience through incorporating a confession of misgivings about poetic practice into their verse. This is what makes the poems truly responsive to the gravity of their occasions.

## Bibliography

The following bibliography includes some works which I have not referred to in the text of my thesis. All works cited in the text are listed. The bibliography is divided into four parts:

- I. Works by and about Robert Lowell;
- II. Works by and about Geoffrey Hill;
- III. Works by and about Seamus Heaney;
- IV. Other Works.

Parts I to III have the following subdivisions:

- 1. Works by the Author, comprising
  - (a) Volumes of Poetry, Translation and Drama;
  - (b) Other Poetic Works (including pamphlet collections and poems published in periodicals or anthologies);
  - (c) Prose Works;
  - (d) Miscellaneous Works (including manuscripts, audio cassettes and unpublished material).
- 2. Works about the Author, comprising
  - (a) Books (including theses);
  - (b) Articles, Chapters and Sections of Books;
  - (c) Miscellaneous Works - where applicable (including unpublished criticism and video documentaries).

Published interviews with the poets are listed in section

2.(b) under the surname of the interviewer or transcriber.

Part IV is divided into three sections:

- 1. Poetic Works (including anthologies);
- 2. Works of Literary Criticism;
- 3. Miscellaneous Works.

The arrangement is chronological for works by each of Lowell, Hill and Heaney, and alphabetical, according to the author's surname, for all other texts.

There are a number of occasions on which a published work is mentioned in two or more categories. In the case of an article by one of the poets about another of them, I have provided the full publication details twice - for both the author and the subject of the study.

Regarding works which include material of relevance to more than one of the three poets, such as anthologies of poetry or criticism, or general surveys of modern poetry, full publication details are provided only on the first occasion each work is mentioned. To avoid undue repetition, these texts are not then listed again in Part IV, Other Works; this category is only for material cited in the thesis that is not covered by the preceding categories.

In the interests of simplification, I do not refer to the reprinting of poems or articles in different books or journals, except in those few instances where alternative versions have been consulted.

I. Works by and about Robert Lowell1. Works by Robert Lowell(a) Volumes of Poetry, Translation and Drama

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#### 1. Works by Seamus Heaney

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