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AND AFTER THIS OUR EXILE: THE CHRISTIAN POET IN THE MODERN WORLD

Gregory Wolfe

This essay was originally given as a talk to the Society for Christian Culture Conference. It is a timely article which probes one aspect of the larger problem of how to bring Christian truth once again to a society which has both forgotten and repudiated its Christian heritage. Mr. Wolfe, in his first contribution to Faith & Reason, examines the difficulties and opportunities available to modern Christian poets as found in the writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Geoffrey Hill.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows.... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

- Psalm 137



WHEN THEIR BABYLONIAN CAPTORS REQUIRED OF THE ISRAELITES A SONG OF ZION, they undoubtedly meant well. But the request could only leave a bitter taste in the mouths of the exiles. How can one sing of home when one has been torn from its nourishing immediacy? And how can the foreigner feel the poignance of those special, shared recognitions among countrymen? The plight of the Christian artist in the modern world can best be understood, I believe, in terms of the metaphor of exile. The crisis of Christian culture in the West since the Renaissance has been characterized by a process of secularization that has developed to such an extent that we now hear the West described as "post-Christian." It is only within the last century that the public truths and institutions of society have been radically severed from their Christian roots and the full force of modernity has been felt in mind and heart. The Christian has come to be in the minority, to feel an exile from the larger community of nation and Western culture. But unlike the Israelites in Babylon, modern Christians have suffered an internal exile because they inhabit a society that still retains the stamp of its origins in faith.

For the Christian artist, the awareness of exile is particularly acute. First, the pervasive pressure of modern consciousness has made it increasingly difficult to maintain a Christian world-view. Then arises the problem of audience: to sing a song that the majority of people will not comprehend becomes problematic. In the past, the Christian artist assumed the complete permeation of society with religious belief, and was free to pursue his craft and subject without self-consciousness. But in a secular world, the Christian artist must also convey his religious perception, and his temptation is to turn the art object into a vehicle for propaganda - a choice that inevitably destroys the integrity of art itself. In our time, the challenge for the artist who subscribes to Christian dogma has meant that he must fully incarnate his belief, by uniting vision and judgment, and by speaking directly to the modern mind. It is a challenge

that has been met by a few outstanding figures whose vision has reconciled faith and the modern condition, and thus given new vitality to Christian culture, even though it is a culture in exile. I propose to discuss the work of three such figures, all modern Christian poets writing in English.

I

The cultural fragmentation of Christendom, as it has been felt in the widespread secularization of our social and political institutions, presupposes a prior spiritual and mental crisis, which I shall call the crisis of modernity. Originating in the late Middle Ages, the nominalist assertion that the mind could not apprehend nature led to Descartes' empiricism as the only valid form of knowledge. During the eighteenth century, modernist rationalism spawned dreams of society run according to abstract plans, and in the realm of art, strict metrical regularity and conventional subjects were not to be deviated from. In reaction to rationalism, the romantic movement asserted the primacy of emotion, freedom of form, and the imagination as a redemptive force. But romanticism was not a reaction to modernity; it was in fact a further expression of it. For though the romantics spurned empiricism and mechanism, they too believed nature to be unknowable. It was not a long step from the romanticism which believed nature to be benevolent and the source of all virtue to the romanticism which saw nature as violent, indifferent at best and hostile at worst. The individual is then seen against the backdrop of fate, forging his own destiny through the power of his genius.

The most significant aspect of the romantic movement was the emergence of the self as the center of consciousness. The residual deistic belief in a trans-human world enabled Alexander Pope to write a poem entitled, "An Essay on Man." But when Wordsworth decided to write an epic poem, he chose not the Fall of Troy or the Fall of Man as his subject, but William Wordsworth. And soon a rather exuberant American named Whitman would be singing a "Song of Myself." The romantic self may have been guided by intuition rather than reason, but it was a creature of modernity in that it failed to integrate the self with being. The subsequent history of art is really an extension of romanticism: late romanticism emphasizes the dreams of power in which Supermen conquer fate, as in Wagner, and eventually the existentialists come to regard nature as Absurd, and resort to the strange comforts of despair.

The point I want to emphasize is that the emergence of the self as a problem in Western art has been central and remains with us. However much we may deplore the burden of self-consciousness, it is not something that can be willed away, and it has not been a complete bane for art. As Jacques Maritain once wrote: "art cannot return to ignorance of itself, cannot abandon the gains won by consciousness. If it succeeds in finding a new spiritual equilibrium, it will be, on contrary ... by still greater self-knowledge."¹ It is one thing to say that we can regain a philosophical synthesis that will restore our apprehension of being; it is another thing to expect that the artist in the modern world can climb out of the skin of his self-awareness. Even if an artist can and should order his own soul, it does not follow that his art can disregard the structure of the life around him. Flannery O'Connor, perhaps this century's greatest Catholic artist, wrote to a friend: "I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this within the Church is to bear a burden, the necessary burden for the conscious Catholic. It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level."²

The reconciling mission of the modern Christian artist is to "feel the ... situation at the ultimate level" and to move through that experience to a new spiritual equilibrium. There is no simple way to say how the artist achieves this, since the artistic process involves the search for a form that dramatizes and enacts vision. But it is likely to involve a journey toward order on the part of either a fictional protagonist or a poetic persona.

The cultural fragmentation that has occurred under the pressure of modernity has made the artist's quest for form even more difficult. Without the shared beliefs, mores, and traditions of a unitary culture, there arises the problem of what the Christian poet and artist David Jones has called "unshared backgrounds." Many of the greatest modern artists, including James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and D.H. Lawrence, sought for a myth adequate to create a communion with a disparate public. But most writers found that no single myth was adequate, and they were forced to more or less exotic varieties of eclecticism. For the Christian writer the breakdown of common symbols has had two consequences. On the one hand, traditional religious symbols have become opaque, no longer shining forth the spiritual experiences which they are intended to mediate. On the other hand, a vast ignorance about the rites and dogmas of Christianity has

developed as twentieth century man has turned his back on the past.

Paralleling the loss of unifying myth has been the decay of language, our most elemental symbolic system. Words become utilitarian, politicized, and incapable of expressing a wide range of human experiences. T. S. Eliot once used the phrase “dissociation of sensibility” to refer to the modern dichotomy between mind and heart as it has been manifested in literary language. In that context, he goes on to discuss why modern poetry is so “difficult.” “Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.”³ The use of exaggeration, allusion, and distortion becomes necessary in order to preserve meaning. Flannery O’Connor noted that she used a drowning to symbolize a baptism, such was her need to convey the nature of spiritual death and rebirth in the sacrament to a pagan audience. The final pitfall that the decay of language may entail for the artist is simply this: by unskillfully using a decadent language he will be implicated in the very confusion and evil he seeks to combat. We will see that the contemporary poet Geoffrey Hill is particularly concerned about the poet’s role in perpetrating what he calls “the tongue’s atrocities.”

In order to outline the way in which the Christian artist has spoken to the modern age, I will discuss three English poets. First, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote in the late Victorian period, just as the crisis of Christian culture was becoming acute. Then I will treat the poetic journey of T.S. Eliot, who represents the high modernist tradition. To conclude, I will examine the achievement of Geoffrey Hill, a postmodern poet living and writing in England. Though I could have chosen other artists, such as David Jones and Flannery O’Connor, my selection is intended to provide an overview of the changing conditions during the last century, including an awareness of our situation at this point in time.

II

There are two common assumptions about the life and work of Gerard Manley Hopkins that are responsible for a partial and misguided understanding of his intellectual and poetic accomplishments. The first is

that Hopkins is predominantly the poet of simple lyric joy in God’s creation, and that while his “terrible sonnets” and *The Wreck of the Deutschland* display a darker side of existence, his special gift was unclouded praise. The second misconception is related to the first: Hopkins, it is said, was an isolated figure out of touch with his time, who wrote what now seems to be almost modernist verse straight off the top of his head.

It is true that as a Jesuit priest in a country in which Roman Catholicism was a minority, Hopkins was not near the center of English political and intellectual activity. But he was profoundly aware of the nature of the time in which he lived and struggled against the forces he thought to be inimical to Christianity and a stable social order. The rigorous linguistic, philosophical, and theological training he received at Oxford and as a Jesuit enabled Hopkins to become a stalwart opponent of positivism, materialism, and psychologism. Modern science he believed to be compromised by its excessively abstract and methodologically narrow focus; many scientists, he wrote, “seem to end in conceiving only of a world of formulas, towards which the outer world acts as a sort of feeder, supplying examples for literary purposes.” From Ruskin he learned to eschew abstraction and to remain keenly sensitive to the concrete details of nature. From Pater he drew a strong belief in the concreteness of artistic detail. At a time when the modern mind was conceiving nature in gnostic fashion as something to be conquered and manipulated, Hopkins remained intimate with nature as ontologically given; in short, with the world as a creature of God. He feared the growing number of “generations” that “have trod, have trod, have trod” on nature’s freshness.



As Hans Urs von Balthasar points out in a brilliant discussion of Hopkins’s relevance to theological aesthetics,⁴ the poet rejected the scientific and philosophical movement that dissolves the unique natures of species into a “chromatic transitionalism” that blended all forms with one another (for example, in Darwinism). Instead, Hopkins reaffirmed the fixed differences between natures. In his reading of the scholastic philosopher, Duns Scotus, Hopkins found confirmation of something he had long believed. Scotus held that all beings contained

beings contained a principle of individuation or *haecceitas* (that is, “thisness” as opposed to *quidditas* or “whatness”). Hopkins called this unique, individual essence in each created being its “inscape.” Inscapè is sustained and held in tension by “instress,” a concept somewhat analogous to the idea that God constantly maintains the created world in existence. Contrary to popular belief, Hopkins did not find inscapè solely among natural phenomena; he always held that man was the king of creation and many of his finest poems celebrate particular people he met in his pastoral work. One critic has noted that Hopkins, in appreciating his human subjects, “wished to [see them] functioning not only characteristically but intensely, violently, dangerously. . . .”⁵

Inscapè must not only be perceived; it must, in von Balthasar’s words, be “en-selfed as person.” The apprehension of instress, von Balthasar continues, requires “in the subject an answering stress, so that it can hold communion with the stress of things and experience them from within and can also through a prepossession of their nature find the word that exactly expresses it.”⁶ In this process man discovers not only the unique selving in nature but the mystery of his own self. But this “selving,” as Hopkins called it, cannot derive from anything more vague or shallow than the human self. In his philosophical writings, Hopkins rejects chance or the Hegelian World Spirit as potential sources for selving, and concludes that its origin is in the triune God. And as Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the Logos, by whom the worlds came into being, the universe is seen to have a christological form.⁷ That is why the constant motion of Hopkins’s poetry is from the intuition of being to the need for praise and right action; in short, the movement is from “is” to “ought.”

Though much condensed, this sketch of Hopkins’s theological aesthetic makes a deeper reading of his poems possible. First, it will be seen that the problem of the self disappears in the poet’s preoccupation with the answering stress of poetic utterance and the love of being expressed by it. In “Henry Purcell,” Hopkins celebrates the powerful inscapè of that composer’s music: “It is the forged feature finds me; it is the rehearsal/Of own, of abrupt self there so thrusts on, so throngs the ear.”⁸ Purcell is then compared to a great storm-fowl opening his wings in the wind as if he were to take flight:

Let him oh! with his air of angels then lift me, lay
me!

only I’ll
Have an eye to the sakes of him, quaint moon-
marks, to his pelted
plumage under
Wings: so some great stormfowl, whenever he
has walked his while
The thunder purple seabeach, plumed
purple-of-thunder,
If a wuthering of his palmy snow pinions scatter
a colossal smile
Off him, but meaning motion fans fresh our
wits with wonder.

Though the bird is not paying attention to himself, the “quaint moonmarks” on his feathers “scatter a colossal smile” as the wind opens his wings and displays his beauty. So the unselfconscious artist may show forth God’s goodness.

It is use of language that distinguishes Hopkins, but however firm his own theological grounding, the nature of the times and the decay of language itself lead him to place great burdens on words and word-order. For all its formality and artificiality, Hopkins’s “sprung rhythm” is meant to be a heightened form of colloquial speech. Thus the Jesuit sought to keep poetry close to the vitality of language as it is commonly spoken, steering literature away from the decadence of aestheticism or the pomposity of Parnassian diction. His poetic diction is packed with the short, sharp, grating AngloSaxon words of Teutonic origin, skillfully played off Latinate words. In his use of language Hopkins takes the route of many modern Christian poets: he reaches into history to restore life and meaning to words.

Through the use of compressed syntax, assonance, and internal rhyme, Hopkins attempted to write incarnational poetry. Perhaps the best example of this comes from the poem “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection.” Hopkins notes the power and beauty of nature as it undergoes numerous transformations, dying in one form only to be born in another, as clouds become rain, falling to the ground, only to return through evaporation. But the poet recoils at the thought that man dies and is seen no more. Suddenly the thought of the Resurrection brings comfort, for in Christ we have died and will rise again.

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what

I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, match
wood, immortal
diamond
Is immortal diamond.

The Incarnation means that man, a mere “Jack, joke,” will be transformed from dust to the diamond of an immortal soul. The sharp, harsh rhymes suddenly give way to the verbal transformation, as “what I am, and” is rhymed with “diamond” to show the link between our mortal and immortal states. At his best, Hopkins achieved a fully sacramental vision that triumphed over the alienation of modernity to recover the experience of Christian faith.

III

The poetry of T. S. Eliot presents a special problem to the critic because it is essential to see his corpus as a whole. I agree with scholars such as Russell Kirk and Marion Montgomery, who see Eliot’s life and work as a journey or pilgrimage. Like any great artist, Eliot never repeated himself; as he said late in life, every poem is a “new beginning ... a raid on the inarticulate.” Moreover, it is extremely difficult to break Eliot’s career into phases, for just as one is about to talk about his Symbolist/decadent period, one realizes that during this time he was also studying the thought of conservative thinkers like Irving Babbitt and Charles Maurras. Again, it is the Eliot of the *Four Quartets* who reminds us that “In my beginning is my end.” Though secular liberal writers see Eliot as betraying true modernism by cravenly embracing fascism and religion, it is more likely that the early Eliot was not the agnostic relativist they believed him to be.

Born six months before Hopkins’s death, Eliot was to experience as a young man not only late Victorian aestheticism but the literal fragmentation of European society in the first World War. It is evident that in one sense the breakdown of Western culture manifested itself as an inability to discover order and relationships between things. The Symbolists and Imagists Eliot found appealing in his youth seemed to be free of the need

to wrench meaning out of words; perhaps the image-in-itself would restore some sense of the immediacy of experience. But it was not long before Eliot became dissatisfied with the image-in-itself. As Marion Montgomery writes:⁹

We may observe, as Eliot increasingly did, that in the absence of a metaphysics, the worship of things for themselves becomes the sign of a new romanticism. Keats’s things of nature - urn or nightingale - suggest the infinite through the decay of things. His use of nature is replaced by things considered in themselves infinite. The poet’s responsibility then becomes the infinite proliferation of imagistic assertions of things.

The final cry of the imagistic poet, if he has the honesty of an Eliot, is that expressed in *The Waste Land*: “On Margate Sands./I can connect/Nothing with nothing.” The dissimilitude and separateness of things becomes a torture.

As early as his doctoral dissertation on the idealist philosopher F.H. Bradley, Eliot had elaborated a psychological theory that would eventually be metamorphosed into a spiritual discipline. It has been called “the dialectical conception of the significant self and its temporal becoming,” and arises out of the attempt by idealist philosophers to bridge the gap left by Kant between the phenomenal and noumenal selves. Anne Bolgan has written that the core of Eliot’s thought rests in the “continuity of the phenomenal or personal self with the noumenal or impersonal self and in the conviction that the first of these enters into the becoming of the other in time.”¹⁰ In the words of Gabriel Marcel, Eliot knew man to be *Homo Viator*, man the wayfarer, and would eventually come to see the wayfarer as pilgrim.



T.S. Eliot

The concept of the “significant self” is an aid especially in our reading of the early poems. The personae of these poems reveal the danger of solipsism, a retreat from reality into fantasy. That the poems gain much of their strength from Eliot’s own temptations we need not doubt, but as poet he never lost control of his material. “Prufrock” is not only a hollow man, but in his timidity we sense a willingness to

deceive, even to the extent of deceiving himself. “Gerontion,” a later poem, depicts the consciousness of an older Prufrock, a man who has withdrawn into the sterility of his own head, but Gerontion asks: “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” *The Waste Land* represents a further step: in “shoring these fragments against my ruin,” the persona of the poem at least attempts to sift the rubble of his own life and that of Europe. I follow Cleanth Brooks in seeing *The Waste Land* as a conscious and complex process of locating identity in difference, a struggle against the inability to connect. The poem falls short of any pat resolution, but it does appear to have a virtue crucial to the spiritual life: hope. The poet senses that in “the awful daring of a moment’s surrender” the self may be lost and found again, only transfigured, caught by “Christ the tiger.”

Hopkins pursued a more traditional path in seeking to lose his selfconsciousness in the contemplation and praise of God’s grandeur. Eliot, more fully a modern, finds order and rest precisely as Maritain claimed modern men would need to find it, through “still greater self-knowledge.” Eliot’s directly Christian poems, “Ash-Wednesday” and *Four Quartets* gain much of their poignance and persuasiveness because they heighten and resolve the themes in what has gone before, especially those two perplexing realities which Eliot in *The Waste Land* calls “memory and desire.”

“Ash-Wednesday” is a very personal poem, meditative and penitential. It is shot through with Dantean, biblical, and liturgical allusions, which are rescued from cliché through the power of personal feeling and Eliot’s ability to give them existential meaning. We may not be able to follow the poet into his private world, but we hear a chastened voice and sense a renewed vision. Desire has found an object worth desiring, and memory is freed from the early Eliot’s attempt to find a “tradition” and can dwell in the timeless moments that have been vouchsafed to it.

In *Four Quartets* Eliot freely returns to those places that historically have given meaning to his life. In memory he visits the homes and landscapes of his ancestors: “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” and “The Dry Salvages.” Eventually he makes his way to “Little Gidding,” where the Anglican Nicholas Ferrar made prayer “valid” by renouncing worldly power and establishing true community. Eliot’s penitential discipline is now guided by the Negative Way of St. John of the Cross. The world and

its desires he relinquishes, but in the sudden illumination, the piercing beauty of contingent being is restored to him in all its immediacy. The modern poet has relinquished the role of high priest that the secular world has invested him with; the “words don’t matter,” because poetic vision in the end must open to something beyond itself. The end of exploration is to find the place where we started from, and to “know the place for the first time.” The exile has returned home.

IV

However much T. S. Eliot’s poetry has done to “redeem the time,” the cultural dissolution and secularization of the West has continued apace. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, his final poetic work, was published before the world knew of Auschwitz, and before the voice of a Solzhenitsyn penetrated our indifference with news of the Gulag Archipelago. If I call Geoffrey Hill a postmodern poet, it is not with the intent of reducing his work by affixing to it a convenient label; rather, it is a way of distinguishing his milieu from that of high modernism. For despite the cataclysm of World War I, the high modernists, such as Joyce and Pound, and even someone like Wallace Stevens, with his dream of a “supreme fiction,” hoped to create artistic edifices capable of some grand purpose. Hill inhabits a world which has seen the brutality of totalitarianism and the banality of materialism. His generation has set its sights lower, looking to the small moments of lyric inspiration for its subjects.

Geoffrey Hill nonetheless has stood resolutely apart from his poetic contemporaries.¹¹ For 35 years, he has written poetry preoccupied with power and violence in European history, and with religious experience. Hill’s baroque, sensual, highly formal verse manifests all the qualities which Eliot believed “difficult” modern poetry must possess - allusions, indirection, and ambiguity abound. Only in the last few years has Hill’s stature come to be recognized. It now seems likely that in the future his name will tower over those of Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes, as well as many of his American counterparts.

Hill can be thought of as a Christian poet only in a limited sense. Brought up as an Anglican, Hill has refused in his mature years to identify himself with Christian belief, though he has insisted that he is a theist. He has claimed that his poetry is largely concerned with the inability of someone with a modern consciousness to experience religious faith. Hill’s character is in fact very close

to that of Simone Weil, who was locked in an anguished dialectic with Christianity and the Catholic Church. Despite the pronouncements of many secular critics who downplay Hill's religious dimension, it remains true that Hill continues to grapple with the tensions of Christian experience, and he has even commented that the poet may communicate grace without possessing it himself. His poetry is of inestimable value for his thoroughly modern sensibility has confronted faith with a searing honesty, and even, on occasion, humility. His challenge is one that Christians must accept and attend to.

As I indicated earlier, Hill is convinced that we live in a "world growing .. ever more shameless," in which language, a fallen instrument of fallen man, is implicated in the atrocities of our time. The decay of language is co-extensive with the decay of consciousness; the poet must to the best of his ability write in such a way as to draw the reader into the act of linguistic revitalization. Hill has publicly condemned what he calls the "confessional mode" of poetic utterance, which is an indulgence of self, devoid of artistic control and seriousness. But the imaginative process, he has written takes this form: "From the depths of self we rise to a concurrence with that which is not-self."¹² Even more than Eliot, Hill reaches into the past in order to render judgment as well as to discover sources of order.

Perhaps the best way to glimpse the nature of Hill's vision is through a critical reading of one of his poems. His most recent sequence, "Hymns to Our Lady of Chartres," consists of three short poems and provides access to Hill's technique and recurring thematic interests.¹³ It is important to note that Hill's last published volume was a single long poem entitled *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy*. Hill wrote the poem to express his homage to the French religious and political thinker who died in World War I. Hill is drawn to Peguy's vision of a culture unified from peasant to political leader by Catholic faith and rootedness in the land and folk traditions. Hill unquestionably finds in Peguy much of what he himself holds most dear, and finds himself similarly attracted to, and aloof from, Christian belief. In a note on Peguy appended to his long poem, Hill writes:

[Peguy] remained self-excommunicate but adoring; his devotion most doggedly expressed in those two pilgrimages undertaken on foot, in June 1912 and July 1913, from Paris to the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Chartres. The purpose of his first journey, as a tablet in the Cathedral duly records,

was to entrust his children to Our Lady's care.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has written of Peguy: "In the six great *Chartres* poems, which must be considered as Peguy's supreme artistic achievement, he appeals from the fallen temporal order to the presence of un-fallen time in the holiness of Mary."¹⁴ Perhaps in addition to Peguy, the shadow of Henry Adams, comparing the graceful power of the Virgin to the impersonal mechanism of the Dynamo, is also present.

This background is necessary for a proper understanding of the density and allusiveness of Hill's "Hymns." In these poems he is making the same kind of pilgrimage that Eliot made to Ferrar's Little Gidding: he is going to "kneel where prayer has been valid." The "Hymns" are in fact similar to Eliot's "Ash-Wednesday": both poems constitute a commentary or meditation on that ancient Marian prayer, the *Salve Regina*. Both Hill and Eliot use phrases from the *Salve Regina* to dramatize the soul's need for mercy and comfort. When Eliot concludes a section of his poem with the words "And after this our exile," the explicit sense conveys the speaker's distance from spiritual communion; but the reader, completing the sentence with "show us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus," is drawn toward the hope of redemption. The "Hymns" of Geoffrey Hill work in much the same way.

The first "Hymn" begins:

Eia, with handbells, jews' harps, risible
tuckets of salutation! Otherwise
gnashing and gnawing sound out your praise.
Salve regina! Visible, invisible,

powers, presences, in and beyond the blue
glass, radiantly-occluded Sion, pour
festal light at the feet of the new poor,
scavengers upon grace, and of your true

servant Peguy who cries out from the crowd
where your bienpensants clatter to adore la Dame
du Pilier and her wooden stare.



“Eia” - in this context meaning “Come!” - is a word used in Latin and Greek that can be an expression of joy and urgency, but also of exhortation. Our salutations are often foolish - risible tuckets (i.e., ridiculous trumpet flourishes) - or they are made in pain and reluctance. The stained glass is seen as “radiantly-occluded Sion”; the glass blocks the light but also captures and transforms it into a vision of the heavenly kingdom. The glass is in this sense sacramental, like the best art: in its density, it mediates transcendent truth. The “new poor” I take to be spiritually impoverished modern men, who may be nouveau riches materially, but who can only scavenge for grace in a church that means little to them. But Peguy is a true servant, a prophetic voice crying out from the crowd. “Bienpensants” is a French word that can mean “right-minded individuals” but is more often used pejoratively in the sense of “self-righteous.” Those who “clatter to adore” do not do so with real humility; their very clattering drowns out the still, small voice of God.

The speaker goes on to ask a crucial question: “Through what straits might we come to worship this,/ and kneel before you, and be reconciled,/ among the flowering lances... ?” “Straits” implies both narrow passages as well as distress and desperate circumstances. The path of belief must involve risk and suffering. Thus, the “flowering lances” could simply be candles, but they probably include the lance blossoming in the blood issuing from the side of Christ, and even the flowering of Aaron’s rod (Num. 17:8-10), hinting at a new growth of spiritual awareness.

Though the speaker is unsure of his relationship to faith, he begins the second “Hymn” with the words: “Eia ergo,” which might be literally rendered as “Come, therefore.” In one sense, he asks the reader to contemplate further the mysteries he witnesses in Chartres. But the words “Eia ergo” also come from the *Salve regina*; there they are used to ask that Our Lady “turn then” her eyes of mercy upon us. The second hymn begins with a phrase that is both exhortation and plea. The poem

continues with a vision of the “great west windows” of the French cathedrals as “full of the sun’s holocaust,/ the dying blazons of eternity. ...” Then comes the enigmatic statement: “Love is at odds.” A possible interpretation is that love is at odds with our sinfulness, since the speaker continues: “Your beauty has gone out so many times. ...” Our Lady’s beauty has been extinguished in men’s hearts, but it has also gone out to the devout. Mary is then considered as the “carnal rose that re-enfolds/heaven into earth.”

The third “Hymn” returns to the sinful men who need Mary’s protection. She is invoked as “Redemptrice of all vows and fealties.” Picking up on the feudal connotations of “fealties” the speaker asks that she “Assoil your lordly vassals.” “Assoil” is itself a feudal word meaning to absolve sins or to discharge from vows. Our vows - what we pledge ourselves to - are seldom lived up to and must be redeemed; though we are “vassals” to God, we are “lordly,” proud. Among those who must be assoiled are “those to whom the kiss of peace is a torment in the midst of mass” and “those who salute you with a raised fist.” These I interpret as those hyper-traditionalists who are so upset about the Sign of Peace that they become irritated in mass, and those hyper-liberals who equate religion with revolutionary politics, the “raised fist.” The speaker concludes by asking for Our Lady’s prayers for the whole of the Christian community. The gentleness of tone at the conclusion of the Hymns, in which the poet sees and accepts our manifold failings in fulfilling our religious aspirations, bespeaks a reconciliation not often found in Hill’s poetry.

Geoffrey Hill may be “self-excommunicate” but he is one of the few poets now writing who can convey the struggle of a thoroughly modern consciousness with Christian experience. In the drama of Hill’s sense of exile and longing, there is reason to believe that Christian culture will continue to find artists willing to undertake the arduous and often painful task of redeeming the time.



NOTES

- 1 Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*. Notre Dame: university of Notre Dame Press, 1974, p. 135.
- 2 Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979, p. 90.
- 3 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1909-1932*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932, p. 248.
- 4 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: Theological Aesthetics*; Vol. III, Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986, pp. 353-399.
- 5 Austin Warren, *Rage for Order*. Anne Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948, p. 57.
- 6 *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. III, p. 365.
- 7 *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. III, p. 375-381.
- 8 All references to Hopkins's poetry are from *Poems and Prose*. New York: Penguins, 1953.
- 9 Marion Montgomery, *T.S. Eliot: An Essay on the American Magus*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969, p. 7.
- 10 Anne C. Bolgan, "The Philosophy of Bradley and the Mind and Art of T.S. Eliot," in *English Literature and British Philosophy*, S.P. Rosenbaum, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971, pp. 256-266.
- 11 For an introduction to Hill, see my "The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill," *The Hillsdale Review* 6 [Fall 1985], 3-10.
- 12 Geoffrey Hill, "The Lords of Limits" *Essays on Literature and Ideas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 3.
- 13 Geoffrey Hill, *Collected Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, pp. 177-179.
- 14 *The Glory of the Lord*, Vol. III, p. 487.