

Poetry and the Complexities of Remembrance: An Appeal

WHILE DOING MY DOCTORAL WORK in theology and poetry at Cambridge I attended a ‘faculty seminar’ that featured a conversation with a Holocaust survivor. I had been studying the poetic suite by Micheal O’Siadhail, *The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust*, and along with it an array of other works, both fiction and non-fiction, about the Holocaust (Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, Anne Michael’s *Fugitive Pieces*, Lawrence Langer’s *Holocaust Testimonies*, etc.). As a result, I was eager to hear this person’s firsthand account of her experience. And I was curious; I wanted to see her, and—true confession—especially to see the ‘mark’ I knew she would bear. O’Siadhail writes of ‘*the tattooed arms*,’ and here it would be in the flesh.

She was a lovely person—sharp, engaging, gentle, transparent. Her testimony and our interaction with her offered a brush with the reality of what it meant for a human being to go through . . . *that* (I found myself not wanting even to name it). And then there were the tattooed numbers, branded on the arm that extended from her sleeveless dress. I couldn’t *not* look at it the entire time she spoke. I didn’t think of it as a blemish or wound or hideous scar; nor did I regard it as some kind of badge of honor. But I was transfixed by it, as if I needed to have it emblazoned on my imagination in order to pay her the respect I felt her suffering warranted.

And what is even more embarrassing now—not to mention acutely ironic—is that I don’t even remember that dear woman’s name.

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For all of my awkwardness and fascination, that episode captures for me a central issue I encountered in my research then, and which continues to occupy my attention in my work on religion (particularly Christianity) and literature, and my inquiries into the place of the imagination and works of the imagination in theological studies. Put succinctly, why should we remember, and how? Are there things we must never forget, and if so, how do we do so in ways that honor the subject of our remembrance? How does faith inform our answers to these questions, not only our personal faith but the faith of other religious traditions?

Remembrance, of course, comprises one of the more obvious theological and scriptural resonances between Judaism and Christianity: “**Remember** this day in which you went out from Egypt”; you shall **remember** all the ways which the Lord your God has led you”; “you shall **remember** the Lord your God”; “Do this in **remembrance** of Me.” God commits Himself to remember—His covenant, His promises—and commands His people to do likewise. Most of the remembrance in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures involves devotion to God. As an expression of that very commitment, I would suggest that one of the great acts of devotion to our *neighbor* may also be remembrance, and by this action may constitute one of the great prospects for ecumenical relationships between people of different faiths. But again, what forms are suitable? By this I do not mean which *media* only—literature, film, visual arts, architecture and monument, as well as ceremony and liturgies—but how do the formal elements of any act of remembrance adequately or inadequately do justice to those persons and events being remembered? In the case of literary acts, my own area of study, can we find speech that testifies to, bears witness to, memorializes one’s own experience or that of others which somehow speaks truths about persons and events and, particularly when recalling experiences of grave suffering, does not romanticize or sentimentalize, and so ‘make false’ that remembrance? It is a question literary authors and critics have wrestled with for decades since the atrocities of the Holocaust, and which continues to provoke debate as other genocides have, tragically, followed.¹ If remembrance offers a way to love our neighbors, even—for some, especially—as an expression of one’s love for God, then the language we use to remember is also a profoundly theological question. For ‘people of the Book’ who give great weight to the power of words and assign grave responsibility to the speakers of words, it seems an especially pressing theological matter.

To return to the questions raised above, the concerns noted and their theological implications have been for me matters of both spirit and song as I have undertaken to explore the topic of memory and remembrance through

the theological study of literature. Among other interests, it is a study which seeks to give an account for the formal, creative elements that combine to yield significant theological meaning. It is my own conviction that through their keen attention to words, works of the literary imagination bring an articulacy to the obligation to remember in all of its complexity, which enable us to bridge distances between ourselves and our neighbors, including and especially our suffering ones. The French philosophical theologian Paul Ricoeur concurs, stating even more forcefully,

My deepest conviction is that poetic language alone restores to us that participation-in or belonging-to an order of things which precedes our capacity to oppose ourselves to things taken as objects opposed to a subject. Hence the function of poetic discourse is to bring about this emergence of a depth-structure of belonging-to amid the ruins of descriptive discourse.²

The effort to remember our neighbor the ‘other,’ which confronts this great challenge to address that other as subject rather than object, seeks those forms uniquely suited to effect a degree of identification with victims made manifest by what Ricoeur calls “a depth-structure of belonging-to.” His confidence about the unique ability of poetic language to achieve such a level of identification-through-participation recalls what Robert Alter—referring to biblical poetry specifically—has appraised as poetry’s “peculiar advantages,” evident in its ability to “realize meanings” by virtue of its very form.³

Accordingly, in this essay I will examine two works of the imagination, two poems—“September Song” by Geoffrey Hill and “Summons” by Micheal O’Siadhail—which take up the obligation of remembrance of, and on behalf of, the other. Both poems direct this obligation to victims of the Holocaust. Both also acknowledge the grave difficulties that confront such acts of remembrance, not the least of which is the risk of presumption on the part of poets who would bear witness to the travesty of the Shoah while being neither survivors nor witnesses nor Jews themselves. There is also the risk, so familiar to Holocaust studies, that their art will fail, either by aestheticizing an atrocity or by attempting to put in words what defies speech. In both instances of potential failure, those for whom they write would remain un-remembered, or perhaps worse, *poorly* remembered, and so subject to yet further indignity. Lest the confidence I expressed about the capacity of poetry to remember well those who have suffered be construed as obvious or the effort to do so poetically straightforward, one of the remarkable qualities of these poems is not their avoidance of these hazards but their embrace of them. Of equal boldness to the writing of “poems in witness to the

Holocaust” (O’Siadhail’s subtitle for *The Gossamer Wall* in which “Summons” appears) are the admissions of inadequacy in both poems to achieve what they intend. In my conclusion I will reflect on what these poems achieve and make appeal to how this instructs us in practices of remembrance as acts of love for our neighbor.

Before turning to the poems, a word about the poets. O’Siadhail, an Irish poet born after the Second World War and a Roman Catholic by confession, and Hill, a child during the war living in England and currently the Chair of Poetry at Oxford—as well as a practicing Anglican—share an earnest concern for memory and remembrance. Commenting on *The Gossamer Wall* sequence, for example, O’Siadhail writes in his essay “The Art of War,” “I have attempted to trace and distil the story of the Holocaust which had stirred me deeply. . . . I thought as a poet I too should try to remember. What those who died cried out for was that at the very least their lives would be recalled: Never, never again. Pleading remembrance.”⁴ In a similar vein, Hill includes in his proposal of a theology of language the insistence “that the art and literature of the late twentieth century require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead. . . .”⁵ The dedication of both poets to memory and remembrance, and their recognition of the complexities which attend such undertakings, commend these poems to our consideration as models of both effective and just speech of remembrance.

Geoffrey Hill’s Poetic “Elegy”

September Song⁶ © 2002

born 19.6.32—deported 24.9.42

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

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

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

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

This is plenty. This is more than enough.

In this poem the epigraph is an *epitaph*. It announces at the outset the brief life of a child, but telling neither the name nor the date of his or her death. We can, however, readily surmise from the word “deported” that this child’s demise was imminent, and inevitable (“As estimated, you died”); though again, we do not know when or where. This ‘September song’ recalls a life, but recalls a life cut short, then lost beyond record. Still, the date of 24 September 1932 does record that the “patented terror” which took this life, and countless others, occurred; no matter how anonymous its victims, it happened, and the poem offers a musical re-inscription of the individual lives it had—*has*—erased. But what can this poem tell us? What facts does it know in the absence of the most basic and intimate details about this child? Only those few general facts we might assume, “Zyklon and leather,” and the like. Its song of remembrance can only imagine the rest.

But the poem refuses this seemingly inexorable anonymity from the outset, addressing the child personally and from various perspectives. To those who hated and killed, “Undesirable you may have been”; but to those who loved, “untouchable you were not.” By striking this contrast in the first two lines the poem assumes its own perspective and stance, and in this way its own act of inscribing a new epigraph: “Not forgotten.” The enjambed line which extends and elaborates this declaration, “or passed over at the proper time,” further situates the lost, anonymous child. “Passed over” invokes God’s deliverance of His people, first from the plague of death rained down upon the Egyptians, then their subsequent exodus and escape from these oppressors. By also evoking the millennia-long practice of historical and liturgical remembrance and its pattern of timeless memorializing, the poem resists further the evisceration of this child’s substantial identity. He or she remains of a people. Read one way, then, and particularly from the perspective of theistic faith, no matter how severe the suffering or extreme the atrocity, God does and will remember His people. They are not effaced from *Him*, and our own remembrance of them finds its substance in this very affirmation.

But even as they affirm, the words ‘passed over,’ and their reference simultaneously incite that problem so endemic to theological interpretations of the Shoah. God did not ‘pass over’ His people this time; and while Jews

are expected to remember God's act(s) of deliverance each year at Passover, how are they, or any theists, to account for God's own apparent act of forgetting? By inserting the phrase "passed over" the poem counteracts its own resistance by raising again the specter of the Deliverer's refusal to deliver *this time*. Here is where the rest of the line, "at the proper time," finds its complex orientation. The notion of 'proper time' bears a potent liturgical and scriptural sense in Judaism and Christianity alike; for Hill, the Anglican, 'proprs' are the readings assigned for special celebrations in the liturgical calendar (each called the "Proper of the Season"). In such contexts *proper* can convey the sense of God's sovereign acts in time—in the vernacular of the Septuagint and the New Testament, of *kairos*, or special time, rather than the ordinary time of *chronos*—and with this, assurances to believers that God's good purposes and will ultimately overrule that of any human agency.

But again, as with the ambiguity of "passed over," Hill's choice of the phrase 'at the proper time' is double-edged. If it is the case, as the poem declares, that this child is 'not forgotten or passed over at the proper time,' how does such a claim jive with the theological affirmations evoked—which presumably guarantee that claim—when the eradication of an innocent child seems only to defy all sense of 'propriety'? The poem has not created these difficulties, but neither does it refuse them. In a remarkably deft economy of words it concentrates our attention on the summons to remember *by remembering* this wholly touchable "you," while subtly indicating the challenges of doing so, including for those whose religious faith is significantly constituted by practices of anamnesis.

The next stanza continues in this vein of time, though now it merely announces the fate of the child and of others, and does so in such a way as to foreclose the possibilities opened up in the first stanza. We are now in the realm of brute fact—"As estimated, you died"—with the pitch of the rhythm and phrasing matching this mood of historical inevitability and the banality of evil. "Things marched,/sufficient to that end." In this account, all personal agency now seems to have evaporated into the impersonal processes of history, the de-personalization and murder of millions achieved as the product of calculating efficiency, the "cries" announced at the end of the stanza already submerged by the line-endings that precede it: "Things marched," "to that end," "patented." The cries of victims have no voice, having been absorbed into this same "routine." (Is this Hill's own critique of views about history, that it marks the progression of 'forces'—an idea that may lead inevitably to comparable *inhumane* results?) Furthermore, all sense of proportion has been flattened, the indifference of 'the efficient' reinforced by the flaccid measures

of the “sufficient” and “Just so much.” The aural environment of the poetry, with its clipped rhythm and succinct, matter-of-fact phrasing, emphasizes the dimming prospects for remembrance and memorialization. All traces of the child to whom this song is dedicated have disappeared.

The third stanza then completes this spiral downward towards resignation; significantly, when the poet-persona introduces himself. This not Whitman’s ‘song of myself’ but the poet’s “elegy for myself.” Rendered in parentheses, he also stands under erasure, bracketed by another kind of *dis*-proportion, between this child’s experience and his effort to memorialize it. His attempted act of remembrance on behalf of the child repays only self-reflection, his song failing to find its true subject. At a pitch similar to that of the previous stanza, the mood here is one of mere fact. No revelation of Truth about the child or the travesty and ‘terror’ that consumed him/her, and no true restoration of the one lost can be achieved by this poet’s hand, but only what “is true” about his more limited achievement.

Still, there is one possibility that opens up at this crucial point in the poem, found in the note of tragic lament in the phrase “an elegy for myself.” All acts of remembrance prove inadequate to some degree, and to an even greater extent when those to be remembered have been lost to oblivion. But this is not to say that their death has no meaning or significance for us if it is understood that the tragedy which took them is *our* tragedy, if their death is also in some sense *our* death. We in no way compare their suffering to ours, but we do recognize their loss as one that implicates all humankind. The poem’s parenthetical confession respects the difference, while suggesting that the poet’s ‘elegy for myself’ fulfills the only obligation to remember that it can. It cannot restore the one lost; it cannot fully identify with the suffering that took these lost ones from us; it can, however, and must attempt to say that that life is significant and worthy of our recollection.

The penultimate stanza continues from the perspective of the poet, but shifts in mode to the lyrical. Time remains the central image, but here it is rendered in stark contrast to the more abstract ‘proper time’ of Stanza 1 or the mercantile ‘marched,’ ‘sufficient, and ‘routine’ of Stanza 2. “September” is the season of harvest, of ‘fattening’ vines, of plenty. September also heralds a season of dying, but here portrayed gently: “Roses/flake from the wall.” The poem conjures a scene typical of the season as well, the burning of chaff after the harvest; but these are “harmless fires”—not the fires of camp ovens—with smoke that “drifts to my eyes.” The sequence of “fattens,” “vines,” “Roses,” “flake,” “harmless,” and “drifts” reacts so powerfully against the “patented terror” of “Zyklon and leather” above that it threatens to dissipate, and subli-

mate, the impact of the former. Has the poem given up? Has it turned away from the child whose song it, presumably, sings, hence merely sentimentalizing rather than memorializing? The final line of the final stanza seems to reinforce that conclusion: “This is plenty. This is more than enough.”

In response, it is important to recognize that this is the poet’s perspective—“my eyes”—made prominent by placing the words at the end of the stanza. And what he sees is, once more, all he *can* see. The September that occurred while the child was being deported to die a horrible death in a concentration camp just hundreds of miles away is a season they *shared*, but in worlds apart. The images of autumn harvest and celebration reinforce this sense of distance, while simultaneously offering up (again, with remarkable gentleness) what they still have in common. Such experience is what the child *lost*, what was taken from him or her; but for the poet—who was born on June 18, 1932—*only one day earlier than the child!*—it is what he enjoyed. The impact of this dissonance in concord is acute. It is the poem’s final act of tribute and resistance to situate the poet’s own life and experience within the same space as the child’s, as if the one could not be understood or conceived without the other. Hence, the poet’s “elegy for myself” is both [necessarily] limited as an act of remembrance and profoundly intertwined with the ‘other’: figuratively, in the space of memory and imagination, and literally, in the very text of the poem.

But what, finally, are we to make of the final line, whose ambiguousness seems to strike a note, not of proximity but of ironic distance? “This is plenty. This is more than enough.” The word “plenty” conveys both abundance and ‘sufficiency’—a semantic echo with “sufficient” in Line 5, and possibly an equivalence with that measure: in this case of this poem’s own worth. The phrase “more than enough” is also ambiguous, meaning either abundance or, colloquially, as a synonym for ‘plenty,’ as when one refuses a second helping at dinner. Of course, the multivalences of both statements emerge from the equally ambiguous point of reference “This.” Does ‘this’ refer to the immediately preceding image of September harvest, to the poet’s memory of it, to the atrocity of the Holocaust, to the entire poem and its own performance of memorialization? Or does the poem now, finally, announce its own resignation, its own departure from its task of remembrance, with the phrase ‘more than enough’ softening any presumption about the poem achieving plentitude?

We are not meant to choose between these possibilities, but to include all of them in our consideration of what this line signifies . . . and what the poem as a whole indicates. The ambiguousness of these final statements reit-

erates the ambiguity that haunts the entire act of remembrance that this poem attempts. Indeed, it returns us to the problem of anonymity in the face of the poem's expressed pledge on behalf of the child: *Not forgotten*. And we feel the tension, and are meant to. Whatever measure of sympathy or identification that this poem or any act of remembrance may achieve, our efforts are limited. But they are not for this reason to be discouraged or condemned. By admitting the same, when seen in this light, the poem *does* achieve plenitude with respect to its own maximum capacity; and to profess to achieve more would be 'more than enough': it *would* be an excess that would deprive the one remembered of his or her own due: that his/her life, and not the poem's overreach, is the true surplus, the ultimate plenitude here. So the poem does commit an act of resignation and departure, leaving off its own enterprise at the boundary between what can be said and the unsayable, with what finally can only be met with silence.

Micheal O'Siadhail's 'Summons' to Imagine the Dead

Silence and silences provide a natural *segúe* to Micheal O'Siadhail's poem "Summons" with its "stifled cries," "gaunt silences" and "muted dead." Indeed, the poem's invocation from the outset is not a summons to speak, but to "*meditate*." Here is the text in full:

Summons⁷ © 2002

Meditate that this came about. Imagine.
 Pyjama ghosts tramp the shadow of a chimney.
 Shorn and nameless. Desolation's mad machine
 With endless counts and selections. *Try to see!*
 For each who survived, every numbered
 Arm that tries to hold the wedding guest,
 A thousand urgent stories forever unheard;
 In each testimony a thousand more suppressed.
 A Polish horizon glows with stifled cries:
 Who'll wake us from this infinite nightmare?
 Out of the cone of Vesuvius their lives rise
 To sky-write gaunt silences in the frozen air.
 A summons to *try to look, to try to see.*
 A muted dead demand their debt of memory.

Like "September Song," "Summons" also is a fourteen line sonnet, though not in the broken, fragmented pattern that Hill employs. For both poems, the

choice of the sonnet form, as well as what they do with it, is significant. With “September Song” we barely know that we have a sonnet. Its dilapidation of the traditional pattern is so pronounced that the original is masked, conveying by that very structure the ultimate inadequacy and collapse of its enterprise to sing the memory of the lost and murdered Jewish child. “Summons,” however, follows the traditional pattern of the Shakespearean sonnet in its alternating rhyme scheme, rhythm and meter (with significant variations). This is the form also most familiar to the love poem—a grave irony, as the setting of “Summons” is a Nazi concentration camp. Although O’Siadhail’s poem, like Hill’s, will likewise pronounce its own inadequacy, the traditional pattern and our associations with it immediately attract the risk of presumption. But, we still may ask, is this nonetheless a love poem of sorts? Is Hill’s?

“Summons” is the first of a sequence of fourteen, fourteen-line sonnets titled “Figures,” which stands in the middle of *The Gossamer Wall*. The ‘suite’ as a whole follows a chiasitic structure of five sections; the first two, “Landscapes” and “Descent,” depicting the events and motives that led to the destruction of the camps, and the last two, “Refusals” and “Prisoners of Hope,” depicting noble acts of resistance and, finally, the prospects for hope. Like the Holocaust itself, then, where the heart of darkness and evil and much of the human devastation finds its center in the camps, so too does O’Siadhail situate his ‘meditations’ on those experiences in the center of his long poem. The sequence title “Figures” also announces the method by which these sonnets will proceed: the effort to recover in images what has been lost, but which we somehow must never forget.

The opening admonition of “Summons,” “*Meditate that this came about,*” both addresses the reader and, by italicizing the sentence, announces a general summons to all. No patent appeal merely to think about, consider, or mull over these events will suffice; they require our focused attention. And they require the use of the only faculty we and most others have to access the experiences of the camps: so the admonition continues, “Imagine.” The necessity of this is obvious; the capacity to do so is not. But in this way the poem establishes its own task, which is not only to summon our attention but to enable us to see something we have not witnessed, and more: to fulfill an obligation towards these now distant others: not our but “*their* debt of memory” (Line 14).

“Summons” proceeds to this task with a series of carefully choreographed and powerful images, brought to even greater intensity by those prosodic elements of rhythm and rhyme typical of the sonnet form. The discipline of following that pattern, however—even with the numerous variations that this poem includes—must also generate its own resistance to the effects of orderliness and containment, which typify the effect of the traditional pattern.

Intensity without in any way suggesting capture or control of its subject, then, marks the fine line that this poem must navigate if it is to avoid the hazards of mis-remembering the dead by presuming to bring order to or grasp what ultimately eludes our comprehension and exceeds our capacity to classify.

“Summons” achieves that poise with the development of its first image: “Pyjama ghosts” who “tramp the shadow of a chimney.” The image of human beings in Nazi concentration camps who resemble the dead more than the living is of course familiar—perhaps all *too* familiar. From photographs, newsreels, and films we have seen the images before, and we have reacted with horror. But therein lies the challenge, here un-refused, to bring before us the familiar in a way that subverts our own acquaintance with such scenes and awakens renewed vigilance to ‘meditate’ on its significance. The poem effects that transformation in these three lines by attaching the principal image to variations of rhythm and the use of other musical devices.

To return first to the image of pyjama ghosts, we notice already a departure from the familiar. These figures are without bodies, not people who *look* like specters but who *are* specters; deprived of flesh they are known only by the ‘uniforms’ they were forced to wear. They are, moreover, “shorn”—like sheep, not humans—and “nameless,” recalling the anonymity of the child of “September Song.” And yet these figures “tramp”: the experience that we cannot see we hear as the visual slides to the verbal and aural. And it is that vocalicity which animates the figures of these anonymous specters, specifically the assonance in the repeated ‘o’ sounds (“ghosts”-“shadow”-“Shorn”-“Desolation’s”-“counts”), the consonance of repeated ‘s’ endings (“ghosts”-“nameless”-“Desolation’s”-“endless”-“selections”), and the alliteration of “shadow”-“Shorn”-“Desolation’s”-“selections.” Together with the use of the present tense of this section’s only verb, “tramp,” the aural effect, working *with* the image of pyjama ghosts and *against* the inhumanity of their treatment as well as the historic distance of their demise, is to re-awaken the experience of these people, as if it is occurring *now*. The verbal-musical environment of the poem thus performs a further act of summons: summoning the dead to new life, and so resisting the relegation of these events to a distant and inaccessible past.

Furthermore, though spectral, shorn, and nameless, it is not the victims who ultimately appear impersonal here, but their perpetrators. Again recalling the pitch of Hill’s poem, collectively they are “Desolation’s mad machine,” capable only of “endless counts and selections.” That contrast deepens as the poem continues to elaborate a second dominant image, that of numbers and numbering. Of note is the expansive range of this imagery,

from the “numbered/Arm” of Lines 5–6 to the “infinite nightmare” of Line 10. The scope from the particular to the infinite designates the scale of the Holocaust as well as its significance, and demarcates one of the great challenges of remembrance: to acknowledge the staggering loss in numbers of people without losing the real person among those millions. Line 5 undertakes this work directly, beginning “For *each* who survived,” recognizing the individuality of the prisoners, then confirming that fact, ironically, by the very device that was meant to further deprive them of their humanity: “*every* numbered arm.” In the camps, these individuals were branded (literally) as anonymous chattel, as objects, and the horror of this dehumanizing must be acknowledged, or remembrance would ring false and naïve. But in the re-setting of that experience in this poem the murdered and those who survived begin to reacquire what had been taken from them. What we are meant to ‘imagine,’ to “*try to see*,” is not only what happened and that it happened, but the humanity of those to *whom* it happened. As the imagery of numbers and numbering develops between the “endless counts” of ‘Desolation’s mad machine’ and the “infinite nightmare” of the camps and their genocide (Line 10), the momentum towards this recovery of lost humanity builds, from ‘each’ and ‘every’ to the “thousand urgent stories forever unheard/In each testimony a thousand more suppressed.” Again, the doubling of what, on the one hand, was taken and lost (‘suppressed’ and ‘unheard’), and on the other hand is still meant to be esteemed—is still ‘urgent’ though ‘forever’ gone—deftly defines the prevailing conditions of remembrance. The summons to remember [well] includes the recognition of both.

The allusion of the arm “that tries to hold the wedding guest” to Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” reinforces the plea for this kind of remembrance. In Coleridge’s poem, the Mariner prevents the wedding guest from attending the festivities by pleading with him to hear his “tale of woe.” In one of the most dramatic and yet subtle moments in O’Siadhail’s sonnet, the outstretched arm of the survivor means to arrest the attention of the *reader*! The summons to us issued by the poem is ultimately the summons of these to whom the poem bears witness.

The theme of stories and testimonies also reiterates the oral element in the kind of remembrance that the sonnet attempts to enact, and deepens the process of recovering by re-humanizing. People have stories, whether told or “forever unheard.” And they have a voice of testimony, neither vague nor fictional, however many thousands were “suppressed.” The use of *testimony* registers the sense of historical and legal record. Once more, the declaration of what victims were denied, and which remembrance must include, undergoes

a reversal in the poem, as that act of denial perpetrated against them is returned to them as a positive attribute in the poem's own witness.

From this imagery of numbers and numbering the third and fourth images—the “Polish horizon” (Line 9) and the volcano “Vesuvius” (Line 11), a figure in the suite for the strata of buried history—generate a paradoxical moment that ultimately suspends the reach of the poem's witness while confirming once more its ultimate aim to summon our attention. “A Polish horizon” also appears in the *volta*, or point of rhetorical shift or dramatic change in thought or emotion in a sonnet, traditionally at this point in the Shakespearean form. The change here involves a confusion of the senses—a horizon that “glows with stifled cries,” “frozen air”—and the mingling of inscription with the unsayable as “lives rise/To sky-write gaunt silences.” The dead are not gone, and they remain, somehow, articulate. It is as if, having reached its climax, the poem abandons any effort at coherence, but is instead overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of what happened and the “infinite nightmare” it left in its wake. The familiar shadow-casting chimney of Line 2 is itself overshadowed by the epic “cone of Vesuvius”; the one disgorging the ash of human bodies, the other releasing the lives of victims who are no longer the vacant figures of ‘pyjama ghosts’ but testifiers.

There is also a grammatical shift to the second person plural—“Who'll wake us”—and with this, the only use of the interrogative in the poem. ‘Us’ signals both the perspective of victims and our own identification with their plight: in this case not with their suffering *per se*, which we cannot know, but with their demand to be remembered, “their debt of memory.” The reissuing of the “summons to *try to look, to try to see*” capitalizes on this shift. As the paradoxical imagery of the sestet conveys disorientation and incoherence, befitting our own incapacity to do what the poem itself commands, we are nonetheless summoned to discern from these figures—the victims and survivors as well as the literary images—this now receding testimony. The ‘urgency’ of their stories becomes our urgency not to forget. But the price of this is high. “[T]heir debt of memory” involves memories we cannot even recover, let alone repay.

As this sequence of sonnets in *The Gossamer Wall* proceeds and its subsequent sections form an ascent from the depths explored in these meditations on the experiences of the concentration camps, O'Siadhail will refine further what it means to fulfill this obligation. Ultimately, the suite arrives at the point where the demands of hope intersect vitally with acts of remembrance. But from this opening sonnet in “Figures,” emphasis falls on the *obstacles* to remembrance as well as the obligation to do so. But what debt can

we fulfill, and in what way, given the intractability of the experiences that remain so obscure, a condition the poem goes to such great pains to display? What are we meant 'to see'? Or are we only meant 'to try'? That appeal is made to our imagination throughout underscores, again, the only vehicle available to us. But as we have observed, the poem's own deployment of imagery that ultimately unravels in paradoxes and so defies the promise of its own devices seems only to undermine any clear direction for our response. As with "September Song," O'Siadhail's poem feels as bereft of its aim to bear witness and remember as it is insistent upon the obligation to do so.

As is the case with Hill's poem, however, the task of remembering well those who have suffered unspeakable evil involves re-personalizing the other who remains at a distant remove from our own experience. Hill's poem achieves this by insisting that the child whose song it sings inhabits the same world as the poet-persona, refusing to relinquish that connection to the effacement perpetrated by "patented terror." While admitting the same intractability of distance into the very textures of its imagery, "Summons" likewise effects our personal engagement with the sufferers by re-awakening them to our imagination. The effort to meditate, to try to see these others and to imagine their experience, finds its capacity and its force neither through a facile recapitulation of that experience of the concentration camps nor our own determination of will ('just look harder!'), but through the re-presentation of the dead as if they still lived. As I have written elsewhere about this poem,

The unnamed, and not their murderous un-naming, are given their song, the poet's song of remembrance. The 'living-dead' introduced at the beginning of "Summons" are now the 'dead living', memorialized in the imagination. That debt of memory abides, however, as living memory requires—here paid not as if it were an economic transaction or a form of absolution, but paid through the musical economy of poetry as a revitalizing witness to the enduring humanity of Holocaust victims.⁸

The poem's final transaction, then, is our transformation into witnesses, not of the dead but, by means of this poem's effects, of the *living*.

Final Reflections: An Appeal

In my introduction, I suggested that remembrance can be a form of loving one's neighbor, and in this respect a form of loving God when practiced within a religious framework. I then contended that forms of remembrance

involving speech are afforded ‘peculiar advantages’ by works of the literary imagination because of their keen attention to form, and to words and to how we use words. This quality of attentiveness seems especially relevant to “Holocaust literature” or, more broadly, a “literature of atrocity,” as Lawrence Langer calls it, where the depth of human depravity and suffering and the dire complexities of the events remembered seem to defy efforts to find any suitable speech whatsoever. To be sure, appeals to silence in the face of ‘unspeakable’ suffering are just, and it is noteworthy that both of our poems direct our attention there. (Significantly, the final word in O’Siadhail’s fourteen-sonnet sequence “Figures” is “silence.”) Efforts to remember, to memorialize with speech bear equal gravity, as well as graver risk, as we have noted. My own effort has been to demonstrate through close reading of these two poems how poetic speech can achieve acts of remembrance that respect the complexities and intractability of remembering victims of atrocity. In the face of such a challenge, Hill and O’Siadhail prove most forceful in their ability to realize a personal encounter with the human face of suffering, and do so without sentimentality or presumption.

I would further contend from this study that the capacity to achieve this poise results from literary form and the poetic skill to realize that form’s potential in ways that are not readily available to other discursive forms of remembrance. This is not to privilege literary works of the imagination as the *only* suitable means of memorialization, but to insist that, in recognizing these qualities of sensitivity and skill in speech, we at least submit our discursive practices, including the remembrance of others, to the same level of attention and attentiveness that characterizes the disciplined speech of poets such as Hill and O’Siadhail. The Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash makes a similar appeal to the Christian church when he calls for “education in attentiveness or reverence, and in alertness to the languages we use,” and for serious engagement with “the unending *discipline* in learning how to speak.”⁹ In effect, poets and literary artists can serve as guides and tutors who provide that education, and whose works teach us to see more clearly the ‘other’ and the situation of others—an ability we require in earnest when their condition and their fate stand at a remove from our own field of vision, as is the case with the traumatized people memorialized in Hill’s and O’Siadhail’s poems. Cambridge theologian David Ford puts a fine point on my appeal when he writes, “To be just in our seeing requires a long apprenticeship, learning from those with practised (sic) eyes. . . . Artists can draw us into the complexities of this apprenticeship.”¹⁰

We seek this sensitivity and discipline from literary artists, of course, not for the sake of brandishing the skills of able rememberers—which would reject the very lesson these poems teach us!—but for the sake of those whose life and suffering we remember. It is, indeed, another feature of the literary poise of these poets that they do not permit their poetry to overshadow its true subject, but instead reveal it.¹¹ And here we return once more to the command to love our neighbor. For people of religious faith this obligation finds all manner of expression. Our remembrance of others who have suffered is one way to enter into that experience with them—albeit from a distance—and to join hands with those who still suffer because of the grief and loss that abides. When we declare “never forget” and “never again,” we pronounce our shared determination both to remember and to reject the atrocities of the Holocaust and other brutal acts of affliction. When we participate in acts of commemoration across religious, denominational, and ideological lines, we effect ‘boundary crossings’ that make concrete this resolve.

By appealing to the disciplined speech of literary artists, I in no way wish to diminish the remarkable efforts of, for example, ‘remembrance days’, and the care given to the forms of commemoration those ceremonies display, which often include the reading of poetry. Rather, my appeal seeks to confirm what continues to inspire these acts of neighborly love, and to offer another resource to heighten our sensitivity to the complexities explored through these poems, and in this way to enhance our capacity to remember well. My own courses at Yale in ‘reading literature theologically’ provide opportunities for this same kind of ‘apprenticeship.’

That said, I do not contend that the contribution made by these poems, or by the wealth of other literature of memory of the same quality available for our tutelage, requires a theological framework. For all of their theological sensitivity, and in whatever ways their faith may inform their commitment to remembrance, neither Hill nor O’Siadhail would insist, nor do these poems insist, that religious faith is necessary to appreciate the impact of their art. Their “gift of speech,” to quote Eliot, is for any who would read them seriously. I do contend, however, that theological reflection and religious acts of remembrance require the sensitivity manifested in these poems when remembrance is understood as an act of love for one’s neighbors. They both call attention to the ‘summons’ to remember and refine our comprehension of what it means to remember, which we do well when we do so more fully. In the words of “September Song,” *‘This is plenty.’*

NOTES

1. One of the most frequently cited statements in this regard is Theodor Adorno's "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"; a statement often misquoted or misunderstood from its context, as pointed out by Brian Oard in his "Poetry After Auschwitz: What Adorno Really Said, and Where He said It" (Blog "Mindful Pleasures," Saturday, March 12, 2011, <http://mindfulpleasures.blogspot.com/2011/03/poetry-after-auschwitz-what-adorno.html>). Oard also cites a later, less harsh statement by the critic, from his last work *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno writes: "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems."
2. Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Lewis Mudge, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 101. Elsewhere Ricoeur applies this insight to the Holocaust specifically. In his Shoah memorial homily "The Memory of Suffering" (1989), for example, he avers that "remembering is a moral duty. We owe a debt to the victims" (his italics); a debt paid, he adds, by the offer "to give [victims] a voice, the voice that was denied them" (*Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, David Pellauer, trans., Mark Wallace, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 290).
3. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 205. The full sentence reads, "In manifold ways . . . poetry is a special way of imagining the world or, to put this in more cognitive terms, a special mode of thinking with its own momentum and its own peculiar advantages."
4. Micheal O'Siadhail, "The Art of War," *Insight* (September 28, 2002), 26.
5. Geoffrey Hill, "Language, Suffering, and Silence" in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 405; hereafter cited as CCW in the text.
6. Geoffrey Hill, *Geoffrey Hill: Selected Poems* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Used by permission of the publisher, Yale University Press.
7. Micheal O'Siadhail, *The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust* (Highgreen: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2002). Used by permission of the publisher, Bloodaxe Books.
8. In *Musics of Belonging: The Poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail*, ed.s Mark Caball and David Ford (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007), 128–29.
9. Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 110, 127.
10. David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.
11. As Micheal O'Siadhail has stated, "Poetry has a special way to cut through history with images"; and like all art it "can help us to remember" by adding "a different dimension to our remembrance" (a point advanced in a seminar discussion at the University of Cambridge, 23 January 2003).