1.3. CULTURAL MEMORY AS WORLD-MAKING AND CONFESSION IN THE POETRY OF GEOFFREY HILL AND PAUL CELAN

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Abstract

In his essay 'Celan and the Recovery of Language' Charles Taylor argues that poetry is a form of 'world-making', in the sense that the language involved in the writing of poetry possesses a constitutive force that makes it possible for certain states to become conceptualized and exist within the mode of human understanding. By referring to Taylor's understanding of poetry as 'world-making', and to Geoffrey Hill's essay 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement', I shall argue that the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan creates cultural memory of the Holocaust through sacramental representation. I shall argue that poetry embodies truth, carries it forth and releases it into the present of the reader each time the poem is read. It is this process that enables the reader to witness the events described in the poem. Finally, I shall argue that poetry can be similar to the Christian ritual of confession, and that poetry as solace can provide absolution from the sin of the Holocaust.

Key words: Geoffrey Hill; Sacramentality; Holocaust; Confession; Atonement; Poetry.

The Holocaust is a recurrent theme in the poetry of both Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan. In this paper, I shall analyse the way in which cultural memory of the Holocaust is created in the poetry of Geoffrey Hill and Paul Celan. It will be argued that poetry creates cultural memory through sacramental representation, in the sense that it embodies truth, and then carries it forth so that it becomes available to the reader. I shall further argue that the poetry of Geoffrey Hill resembles the Christian ritual of confession. In order to explain the intricate relationship between poetry and embodiment and confession, I shall use concepts from Charles Taylor's essay 'Celan and the Recovery of Language' (Taylor, 2011), and Geoffrey Hill's 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement' (2009).

Charles Taylor is a Canadian philosopher whose works deal mainly with philosophy of religion and moral philosophy. In his essay 'Celan and the Recovery of Language' he argues that language is not a mere instrument used to designate things that already exist in the world, but that it can, in fact, bring concepts into existence by opening up a new dimension of understanding. Therefore, language is seen as a 'constitutive force' which makes it possible for certain states and truths to enter this new mode of human understanding and reflection, which Herder referred to as *Besonnenheit* (Taylor, 2001:56). Taylor further argues that this understanding of language as a performative and constitutive force lay at the basis of the poetical movement that originated in Germany in the 1970s, and of which Paul Celan was part.

Besonnenheit is a mode of understanding and reflection which makes it possible for us to apprehend certain truths; these truths often enter the dimension of *Besonnenheit* via language. To be more specific, human beings need certain truths to become conceptualized in order to be aware of and understand them. Language gives shape to truths and thus they become part of our world. Taylor (2001) refers to such truths as 'higher things' (Taylor, 2001: 56), and argues that:

> We can get a better sense of what was meant these higher, 'invisible' things, if we think, as a first approximation, of the things that couldn't figure in our experience at all if we weren't language beings. Take 'spirit' (Ruach, Pneuma). Well, wind would still be there for us, even if we had remained pre-linguistic animals; we might seek shelter from it. And breathing would be there, as we gasp for breath running.
> But spirit? Not that gift, that rushing, that onset of strength to reach for something higher, something fuller. This sense of the force of the incomparably higher only takes shape for us in the name. Spirit enters our world through language; its manifestation depends on speech (Taylor, 2001: 57).

Therefore, language can render certain truths worldly by making it possible for them to exist within the dimension of human understanding. Taylor argues that: "On this view, there is something performative about poetry; through creating symbols it establishes new meanings. Poetry is potentially world-making. (Taylor, 2001: 57)

When truths enter our world through the language involved in the writing of poetry, reality becomes embedded in poetry, and thus poetry itself becomes a form of reality. Therefore, poetry is not simply an art form that describes reality; it is an art form that *contains* reality. Reality as embedded in narrative is inextricably linked to human existence, and thus evolves as a tradition is set up.

The idea of tradition as narrative has been emphasized by Scottish philosopher Alasadair MacIntyre. In his book *After Virtue*, MacIntyre (2007) argues that the character of modernity is fragmented; this means that modernity is now incapable of sharing a common concept of morality. This condition, he argues, is the result of the rejection of Aristotelian thought that happened during the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. He believes that the Enlightenment project of justifying morality has failed, and that this has rendered Western society is void of a common understanding of morality. He believes that the restoration of Aristotelian virtue ethics is the only way that modernity can free itself from its fragmentariness.

MacIntyre (2007) views tradition as narrative and believes that tradition enables humanity to understand itself and thus evolve naturally towards its telos. Once tradition is lost, human beings fail to understand themselves as beings striving towards a telos; it is due to this lack of a sense of unity

and continuity that so many theories of morality have sprung up.

Of course, the fact that modernity can accommodate numerous (and often contrasting) understandings of morality does not eliminate narrative from human life. Nonetheless, subjective morality subdues narrative unity, and thus prevents tradition from developing.

Charles Taylor (2001) too has noticed the threat that subjective morality poses to a proper understanding of the past. Taylor believes that modern poetics has been marked by a 'reflexive turn' (Taylor, 2001: 57), in the sense that modern poetry refers back to itself (and thus to its inherent truth), therefore drawing attention to the performative power of language, which makes it possible for certain truths to exist within the mode of human cognition. Taylor points out the fact that this reflexivity which characterizes modern poetry renders it open to subjective interpretation. Poetry is always objective because it 'sets free' a truth that had been wrought into it (Taylor, 2001: 58); yet poetry is also subjective because its success depends on its impact on the reader. Taylor believes that this makes the language of modern poetics fragile.

To be more specific, if the poem does not resonate with the reader, its inherent truth cannot be unveiled and may thus cease to exist within *Besonnenheit*.

Taylor notices that Paul Celan views poetry as dialogical rather than monological, as was the case with the Romantic understanding of poetry. He argues that:

> The original Romantic idea of the poet as creator and seer could suggest a monological view. The resonance which really matters is that in the poet's soul or being. But more and more a dialogical understanding of language (implicit in the founding theories of Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt) makes its way, and it becomes clear that the resonances which matter are those that link speaker and hearer, writer and readers, and eventually (perhaps) whole communities. Poets may fail to be heard, but the end of the writing is to reach others and to effect a coming together in the Being revealed, or set free.
> The sense is central to Celan, as we saw above. In so many of his poems, the breaking through to a free-setting word coincides with the moment of address to a "du" (Taylor, 2001: 61).

It is by this 'address to a "du"' that Paul Celan attempts to overcome the limitations imposed by the Romantic understanding of poetry as being fundamentally subjective. This deeply dialogical nature of Celan's poetics can be regarded as a desperate attempt on his part to make sure that the truth contained within his poetry is set free. When a poem is written, a truth is 'locked' into it. The unlocking of this truth happens when the poem is read and understood.

This process is quite similar to the Christian ritual of the Eucharist. According to the doctrine of Real Presence, Christ is physically present in the bread and wine used in the Eucharist. The bread and wine *become* the body and blood of Christ during consecration. Similarly, truth is really present in a poem. A poem is not a mere description of an event; the truth of that particular event is really present in the poem, just as the body of Christ is really present in the Eucharist. In this sense, the writing of a poem is a making present of truth. What happens during the writing of a poem is similar to what happens during consecration.

This process is involved in the creation of cultural memory. Poetry, as a bearer of truth, is a means of remembrance through repetition. As shown above, when a poem is written, a certain truth is made present within it. Paul Celan's poetry is a making present of the horror of the Holocaust.

Therefore, Celan creates cultural memory of the Holocaust because he locks the truth of first-hand experience of the Holocaust within poetry; this truth is then set free when his poetry is read. It is the performative power of language that enables Paul Celan to make the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust manifest in his poetry. The fact that that horror is *really* present in Celan's poetry means that each reading of a poem involves a re-actualisation of the events described in it. Thus the reader is not a mere recipient of some piece of information about the Holocaust, but a witness; by experiencing the *reality* of the poem, he experiences the Holocaust in the same way that Celan did.

The idea of language as containing theological reality is also expounded by Catherine Pickstock (1997) in her book *After Writing*. Pickstock, who is part of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, argues that meaning can only be achieved through the liturgical dimension of language. According to Pickstock (1997), language, outside its liturgical dimension cannot achieve meaning; in this connection, she uses Derrida's concept of *difference* to show that this type of language is made up of a series between contradictions between presence and absence, life and death, and so on, a fact which ultimately leads to what she calls the death of the sign. This type of nihilistic language can only be overcome through the Eucharistic sign, which, she holds, by being at the same time, the host (bread and wine), and the body and blood of Christ, achieves an overlapping between the signifier and the signified, and thus moves beyond the oppositions which characterize common language. This type of double reality is what is involved in Celan's process of re-actualisation of language.

 The concept of re-actualisation of an event through language is in fact central to Celan. He stated that poetry was actualized language, set free under the sign of a radical individuation, which at the same time stays mindful of the limits drawn by language, the possibilities opened by language (Celan, 2001: 409).

By 'radical individuation' Celan means the moment when the truth contained within the poem is released within the present of the reader. Therefore, radical individuation is what happens when the poem is read.

In order to clarify the way in which Holocaust poetry acts as world-making and creates cultural memory through the repeated release of its truth, I shall now turn to Paul Celan's poem *Todesfuge*. The idea of repetition is suggested by the word 'fugue'. In music theory, a fugue is a type of composition based on repetition; therefore, the main theme of the composition is repeated throughout the piece. Similarly, the main theme of *Todesfuge* is repeated throughout the poem. The main theme consists in the first three lines:

> Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
> wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
> wir trinken und trinken (Celan, 2013).

The 'black milk of daylight' mentioned in the poem stands for the horrors of the Holocaust, which are set free each time the poem is read. Through the performative power of the language involved in the writing of the poem, the horror of the Holocaust is made present within it, and then unleashed each time the poem is read; thus cultural memory of the Holocaust is created through re-actualisation. The idea of making present and re-actualisation is also suggested by the repetition of the verb '*wir trinken*'; the verb is repeated twenty times throughout the poem, and is always in the present tense.

Furthermore, the verb 'to drink' is linked to the ritual of the Eucharist. When Christians receive Holy Communion, they drink the wine that is the blood of Christ, and thus enter a state of communion with Christ. They thus become witnesses to the Last Supper. During consecration, the priest who celebrates mass utters the words that Jesus said to the apostles during the Last Supper: 'Do this in memory of me' (Eucharistic Prayer III). Similarly, when *Todesfuge* is read, the reader drinks the 'black milk' of the Holocaust, and thus enters a state of communion with the victims. He is then able to bear witness to the Holocaust. The poem is read in memory of the victims, who are thus remembered. It is this process of remembrance through re-actualisation that lies at the basis of cultural memory.

   It is perhaps the painful awareness of the need for remembrance of the Holocaust that enabled Celan to understand poetry as 'actualized language', and to shift away from the Romantic idea that the poem should only resonate with the poet's soul, thus reaching out for someone to set free the truth locked within his poems. Celan was probably aware of the fact that remembrance of the Holocaust was a moral imperative, and it was this awareness that enabled him to shift away from the Romantic understanding of poetry, and try to add a dialogical dimension to his poetry.

  It is the same need for painful awareness of tragedy that Geoffrey Hill draws attention to in his poem *Ovid in the Third Reich*. This idea is contained within the final two lines of the first verse:

> Too near the ancient troughs of blood
> Innocence is no earthly weapon (Hill, 2006: 25).

Geoffrey Hill points out the fact that humanity needs to be aware of the tragedies of the past. The 'troughs of blood' are too close to us to be ignored; in other words, the tragedies of the past are too much part of our world to be ignored or forgotten. The 'blood' mentioned in the poem points to the idea of Eucharist again; furthermore, the 'troughs' in the poem suggest the fact that the blood is there to be drunk. Humanity needs to witness the 'ancient' tragedies; entering a state of communion with the victims is a way of avoiding ignorance, and thus of making sure that they do not sink into oblivion.

However, the word 'innocence' in the final line of the first verse implies more than just a need for awareness of tragedy. If the tragedies of the past are so near us, and so much part of our world, that means that they have ultimately shaped our culture, and even us as individuals. An even stronger sense of being somehow implicated in these tragedies is suggested by the idea of cultural memory brought about by the sacramental poetry. Our contact with the tragedies is made real and tangible by the reality contained within poetry. As long as the 'troughs of blood' are near us, and as long as the tragedies of the past are part of culture, we will never be innocent. As shown by Alasdair MacIntyre (2007), humanity needs tradition if it is to achieve its telos; however, a tradition cannot exist without a strong link between past, present, and future. Humanity needs to assume responsibility for its past. In other words, the idea of *Ovid in the Third Reich* is that we are all responsible for the tragedies of the past. Western culture has inherited the collective sin of the Holocaust, just as humanity as a whole has inherited original sin.

How then can we seek redemption? According to Christian doctrine, individual sins need to be confessed in order to be forgiven. Original sin is wiped away through Baptism. What about the cultural collective sin that I have just described? How do we seek repentance for certain kinds of wrongdoings? In his essay 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement' Geoffrey Hill quotes G K Chesterton, who noticed that confession of sins is a relatively easy process, whereas forgiveness of mistakes is difficult to attain, as there is no known way of seeking it:

> A saint after repentance will forgive himself for a sin; a man about town will never forgive himself for a *faux pas*. There are ways of getting absolved for murder; there are no ways of getting absolved for upsetting the soup (Hill, 2009: 9).

> The same idea – Hill notices – was harboured by Helen Waddell's Gilles de Vannes, a character in her novel *Peter Abelard*: "For one can repent and be absolved for a sin, but there is no canonical repentance for a mistake" (Hill, 2009: 9).

> Hill is also preoccupied with the state of language, which, he fears, is constantly threatened by sin. As pointed out by Sheridan Burnside in her essay 'Undoing Remembrance', Hill believes that the only way to avoid corruption of language by sin is to write poetry as religious ritual. Writing poetry as confession can help to relieve the collective feeling of guilt associated with the sin of the Holocaust.

> In 'Poetry as Menace and Atonement' Geoffrey Hill argues that the truth of a poem should not be dependent upon the reader. He believes that a feeling of indebtedness to the reader can encourage the poet to value the 'shape' of the poem more than its inherent truth. He believes that the 'truthtelling' of a poem stems from the capacity of the poet to find balance between the shape of the poem and its message (Hill, 2009: 12). It is this coming together of a poem that can provide atonement. In fact, Hill equates atonement with the coming together of the poem by drawing attention to the etymology of the word 'atonement', which originally meant unity. Hill argues that: "the proof of a poet's craft is precisely this ability to effect an at-one-ment [unification; coming together as one] between the 'local vividness' and the 'overall shape' and that is his truthtelling" (Hill, 2009: 12).

Although it might seem as if Celan's poetry overemphasizes the role of the reader, his poetry does actually convey a sense of 'at-one-ment' between content and shape. His attempt to address poetry

to a 'du', as discussed previously, does not give ultimate authority to the reader; it calls the reader to communion. The reader's role is not to enjoy and appreciate the overall shape of the poem, but to engage with it actively and receive its truth.

Hill's poetical at-one-ment does exactly what Alasdair MacIntyre calls for in *After Virtue* (2007): it restores unity to modernity. By bringing ethics (the truthful content of the poem) and aesthetics (the shape of the poem) back together, Hill manages to write history as poetry and attempts to overcome the fragmented character of modernity. It is this sacramental understanding of poetry that can help to restore a telos to humanity. By understanding and continuing tradition, humanity can understand itself and its past better, and thus work towards redemption.

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