

Committed and Autonomous Art

In *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), Geoffrey Hill is delighted or awe-struck by enigmatic yet quotidian aspects of nature, as when ‘prinking’ butterflies delicately fuss ‘this instant’, and a fell changes colour as sunlight moves its ‘banded spectrum’.¹ For this poet, such epiphanies are often coterminous with grace: these ‘small’ metaphors are indicators of the whole puzzle of existence that Eleanor Cook acknowledges to be the ‘largest of tropes’.² In Chapter 1, I examined Theodor Adorno’s conception of the enigma in relation to J. H. Prynne’s *Acrylic Tips* (2002) and Geraldine Monk’s *Ghost & Other Sonnets* (2008), and argued that Don Paterson’s ‘The Sea at Brighton’ vacillates over but ultimately rejects ‘exasperating’ writing that surpasses the reader’s idioculture.³ In the last chapter, I discussed the modulation of the poetry wars in relation to Hill’s dismissal of ‘public’ writing in his fourth lecture as Oxford Professor of Poetry, and subsequently examined the ‘remainder’ in passages from *Scenes from Comus* (2005).⁴ I now proceed to explore the concept of enigmatical poetry in the wider context of Adorno’s discussion of autonomous and ‘committed’ art.⁵ Literary enigmas are not coterminous with autonomous writing, but they are certainly integral aspects of such work: in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), the ‘remainder’ arises out of art that affirms its recalcitrance as ‘the social antithesis of society’ (p. 8), at the same times as it is ‘related to its other as is a magnet to a field of iron filings’ (p. 7). In ‘Commitment’, an essay written seven years before *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno contrasts ‘committed’ literature that perceives art in an ‘extra-aesthetic’ fashion with ‘drossless works’ (p. 6) that resist the ‘spell’ of ‘empirical reality’ (p. 5). I therefore engage first in this chapter with two ‘committed’ works of literature – Tony Harrison’s *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* (1996) and *The Labourers of Herakles* (1996) – in order to focalise Hill’s ruminations over elusive moments of awe and grace. At the same time, I begin to develop an account of enigmatical poetry that forges ‘*der Rest*’ out of engagements with specific modernist antecedents, a form of analysis that I shall return to in

Chapters 4 and 5: in this instance, Hill responds to Paul Celan's *Atemwende* (1967) with a loquacious departure from Celan's later minimalism.⁶ In contrast, Harrison's verse underlines that wrestling with modernist lineage concurs with understandings of metamodernism that are bound up with intertextuality, but does not fulfil the definition of metamodernist poetry as enigmatic that I outline throughout this book.⁷

Harrison's verse plays react to political modernism in that they are an endorsement of as well as a 'departure' from Bertolt Brecht's theatre.⁸ Developed in collaboration with the stage designer Jocelyn Herbert, *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* and *The Labourers of Herakles* – the latter of which was performed at the University of Leeds in 2017 – draw on Brecht's minimalist props, interjected narration, audience participation and interspersed songs or music, in order to create what Raymond Williams referred to as 'the consciously participating, critical audience' in epic theatre.⁹ Yet the links between Brecht and Harrison have never been studied in detail: perhaps this anomaly is due to a common misperception in which Harrison revokes modernist writing, despite his ruminations on Joseph Conrad, Arthur Rimbaud, Ezra Pound and the modernist Bulgarian poet Geo Milev in, respectively, *The Loiners* (1970), *V* (1985), *The Gaze of the Gorgon* (1992) and *Metamorpheus* (2000).¹⁰ Nevertheless, in these texts and the verse plays, Harrison's impassioned narration and didacticism sometimes cohere at the expense of formal achievement. In 'Commitment', Adorno argues that the politics of Brecht's plays are less radical than the formal experimentation of his theatre, whereas autonomous art that aspires to the enigma engages with a 'deluge' of historical and political calamities, but rarely signifies them directly.¹¹ As with Adorno's critique of Brecht's plays, it is the more 'singular' aspects of Harrison's verse plays rather than their politics that are the most arresting aspects of the poet's work, such as Marcus Aurelius' opening speeches in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, and those of the workers in *The Labourers of Herakles*, that are entirely conducted in ancient Greek, recalling Ezra Pound's use of untranslated Greek, Latin and Chinese in the *Cantos*.¹²

Harrison and Hill are usually labelled as mainstream poets, but their 'committed' poetics differ vastly: in contrast with these verse plays, Hill addresses a 'deluge' of atrocious twentieth-century events in *The Orchards of Syon*, but through Adorno's dialectical conception of committed *and* autonomous art.¹³ As Hill's notebooks for *The Orchards of Syon* exemplify, lyrical moments are under constant pressure in this collection, as when the 'kempt fields | basking' outside York open out into subsequent references to Ivor Gurney and Wilfred Owen (p. 17), or when the Normandy *bocage* is

interlaced with the 'sloughed odours of death' from obliterated tanks (p. 44). The title's Orchards of Syon are like the '*purpurnem Gewühle*' ('purple turbulence') in Eduard Mörike's poetry that Adorno discusses in 'On Lyric Poetry and Society': as with the impending industrial revolution in relation to Mörike's sky, the presence of the 'deluge' in Hill's collection is intertwined with passages of exquisite lyricism.¹⁴ These ensuing awkward poetics contrast with the composition of the similarly committed and autonomous art in Celan's *Atemwende*. This collection comprises the most extensive modernist influence on *The Orchards of Syon*: the title is referenced six times in Hill's book, as he considers different translations for the title, such as 'breath-hitch' (p. 28), 'catch-breath', 'breath-ply' (p. 31) and 'breath-fetch' (p. 32). Compared to Celan's minimalist lyric 'breaths' in *Atemwende*, however, Hill has produced seventy-two extensive stanzas in one of the most extraordinary poetry collections of the twenty-first century. Harrison and Hill are both metamodernist writers in an intertextual sense of the term in that they draw on specific modernist authors in order to create the verse plays about Herakles and *The Orchards of Syon*. However, only the latter constitutes a truly enigmatical text in the definition I have outlined so far in this book: the attentive reader is drawn back to *The Orchards of Syon* time and again in order to re-read the puzzles of the lyrical epiphanies, but without being able to 'solve' the collection.

Autonomous and Committed Art: Theodor Adorno's 'Commitment'

In *What is Literature?* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre contends that autonomous literature in the mid-twentieth century has become separated from history and politics: he adheres to Brecht's theory of 'culinary' art that, as 'spiritual dope traffic', is merely a 'home of illusions'.¹⁵ In contrast, Adorno argues that this perceived ahistoricism leads to a misreading of modernist literature.¹⁶ Sartre reacts against this supposed 'idle pastime' of art with his treatise on commitment in *What is Literature?*, whereas Adorno emphasises a potential fusion of autonomous and committed art.¹⁷ Superficially, the enigmaticalness of Samuel Beckett's work may appear less 'committed' than Harrison's verse plays or Brecht's political theatre. Yet for Adorno, autonomous art such as Beckett's work – and Hill's poetry – engages more intensely with history and politics, at the same time as avoiding 'popularization and adaptation to the market' (p. 190). Beckett's plays and novels 'deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject'; his work – and Franz Kafka's prose – 'have an effect by comparison with

which officially committed works look like pantomimes' (p. 191).¹⁸ Such examples of committed and autonomous literature are 'necessarily detached as art from reality', whereas 'art for art's sake' is a flawed version of autonomous art that pretends it has nothing to do with politics via its evasive, 'absolute claims' (p. 178). In contrast, Adorno's concept of committed and autonomous art 'dissolves' the 'tension' between these 'two poles'. Sartre focuses instead on a positivistic notion of committed literature in which a transparent relationship exists between the signifier and referent, rather than arguing, as Adorno does, that the formal properties of art transform the signified. In Chapter 1, I explored Prynne's resistance towards signification in *Acrylic Tips*: rather than comply with Sartre's version of literature that attempts to convey a 'message', Adorno argues that readers should instead 'listen patiently' to texts such as Prynne's, whose language 'challenges signification and by its very distance from meaning revolts in advance against positivistic subordination' (p. 179).

In enigmatical works of art such as *Acrylic Tips*, hermeneutics are not – as they are for Sartre – the most important aspect of such literature: after all, 'meanings' are 'the irreducibly non-artistic elements in art' (p. 178). It is not the 'office of art to spotlight alternatives' to reality, as in Sartre's vision of 'committed' art, but to 'resist by its form alone the course of the world' (p. 180).¹⁹ Hence Adorno admires Brecht's recourse to modernist and avant-garde 'aesthetic forms', but is less enamoured with the political commitment that threatens to undermine his plays (p. 180). For example, Brecht's understanding of Nazism primarily in terms of capitalism results in a false allegory in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1958):

Instead of a conspiracy of the wealthy and powerful, we are given a trivial gangster organization, the cabbage trust. The true horror of fascism is conjured away: it is no longer a slow end-product of the concentration of social power, but mere hazard like an accident or a crime [...] for the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized.²⁰

Aside from the first clause, this analysis constitutes Adorno's most perceptive critique of a Brecht play, and Sartre's notion of commitment: as Eugene Lunn argues, Brecht's fascination with an analogy between 'business machinations and anarchic crime made him dangerously trivialize the Nazi juggernaut as a ring of petty gangsters' (p. 138).²¹ In this chapter, I analyse the potential distortions of committed literature in relation to Harrison's allegory of culture and barbarism in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, as well as the threat of prurient representation when he redeploys Brecht's

alienation effects in order to taunt the audience of the verse play with re-enacted Roman atrocities.²²

In contrast with the limitations of Brecht's 'committed' plays, Adorno defends enigmatic art as a committed response to heteronomy. As the editors of *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977) point out, Adorno's political stance here expresses 'a distinctively modernist Marxism' (p. 149). Autonomous art cannot be completely autonomous: works that 'react against empirical reality [still] obey the forces of that reality' (p. 190). Rather than representing atrocity, as Harrison's verse plays do, Beckett's plays make audiences 'shudder' because they are 'about what everyone knows but no one will admit' (p. 190): as opposed to Sartre's idealist notion of choice, they are about the '*Abdankung*' ('abdication') *des Subjekts*.²³ Beckett's 'moribund grotesques' indicate the 'truth' about 'the idea that human beings are in control and decide, not anonymous machinery'.²⁴ Instances of realism in Brecht's theatre contrast with the abstract, 'polemical alienation' in Beckett's work; similarly, the 'inescapability' of Kafka's prose 'compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand' (p. 190). Unlike these 'monstrous' examples of autonomous art – Adorno singles out Beckett's novel *The Unnameable* (1953) – Hill's work is less obviously disconcerting. However, to borrow from Adorno's critique of Brecht, *The Orchards of Syon* still contains an 'uncompromising radicalism' (p. 188) in its passages of epiphanic lyricism that strain against, and encompass, the constrictions of recent history. As I argue later in this chapter, the collection's enigmaticalness – the 'very feature' of autonomous art 'defamed' by Sartre as mere 'formalism' – gives the collection a 'power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time' (p. 188), as in Harrison's speeches in the verse plays that lament atrocities in Srebrenica. In the following section, I analyse such shortcomings of Harrison's 'committed' writing as a way of underscoring the enigmas of *The Orchards of Syon*. At the same time, I emphasise the more intricate metamodernist reworkings of Brechtian theatre in Harrison's work in an intertextual understanding of the term. These revitalisations of Brecht's work provide recourse to Adorno's diatribe against Sartre's conception of 'committed' art.

Commitment and the Herakles Verse Plays

Harrison's collaboration with Jocelyn Herbert forms one of the unremarked connections between Brecht and the Leeds poet. In 1956, Herbert produced the set at the Royal Court Theatre for the first UK

performance of *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, and subsequently designed the stages for the world première of *Baal* (1963), the production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* at The Old Vic (1965), and *The Life of Galileo* (1980). Like Brecht's favoured set designer, Caspar Neher, Herbert preferred the minimalist stage props and designs of modernist theatre, typified by the productions of Beckett's plays that Herbert contributed to, such as *Endgame* (1958), the first performance of *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1962) and *Not I* (1973). In a postcard from Harrison held in Herbert's archive, the poet notes that the first play he attended in London was one of Herbert's early productions: in 1957, she produced the sparse (single) set of walls and doors for Eugène Ionesco's *The Chairs* at The Royal Court. Harrison records that 'my destiny was sealed' when he attended this play, in terms of 'such an important [future] collaboration' with Herbert.²⁵ The notebooks held in the Herbert archive indicate that their work together nearly forty years later on *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* and *Labourers of Herakles* should be treated as integral parts of the same project: Herbert switches between discussions about the two sets for the verse plays in her notebooks, such as when she records her long discussions with Harrison 'over lunch after Stephen Spender's funeral'.²⁶ Harrison's workbooks also intersect between the two verse plays: he includes, for example, a picture of Herakles on a cement sack with a handwritten note 'Cement mixers [Delphi] chorus' in the middle of the second Carnuntum workbook.²⁷ Indeed, as Frederick Baker's review of *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* indicates, the plays were originally intended to be 'part of a trilogy with a Herculean theme'.²⁸ However, given that *The Labourers of Herakles* is a much shorter (and slighter) play, my focus in the analysis below will be on *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*.²⁹

Links between Brecht's epic theatre and the verse plays are evident in the political commitment of Harrison and Herbert's *Verfremdungseffekte*. Firstly, the production of *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* was 'epic' theatre in a more literal sense than Brecht's in that hundreds of supporting staff and technicians were employed: as Michael Kustow's review stresses, the producer Piero Bordin 'made Ben Hur-size demands, calling on the local fire brigade and army, hunting-horn bands, safari-park animals and choirs drawn not only from Austria but from Hungary and Slovakia'.³⁰ More specifically, Brecht's plays sometimes discomfort the audience through the violence depicted on stage, such as when clowns saw off the limbs of the giant Mr Smith in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Agreement* (1929): Hans Eisler observed at its première that 'one critic fainted in his seat and [the author] Gerhart Hauptman walked out in disgust'.³¹ Harrison builds on

such alienation effects by directing the threat of atrocities directly at the audience in the verse play. As the theatregoers assemble on ‘four tribunes of modern seating’, they can see “border towers” reminiscent of Nazi architecture flanking the arena; moreover, the ‘assembled soldiers in their riot gear’ that ‘surround the whole arena’ threaten the action and audience throughout the play.³² The ‘Sound Cue List’ held in the Herbert archive demonstrates the attempt to unsettle the audience at the beginning of the verse play through the amplified sounds of ‘Animals, starting soft, then crescendo’, ‘Orpheus’s lyre, calming the animals’, and then ‘Boosted animals, especially lions’.³³ Such acoustic discombobulations adhere to Brecht and Harrison’s ‘committed’ distaste towards the ‘culinary’, which has a tendency to ‘intoxicate’ a bourgeois audience, and act – as the second notebook phrases it – akin to a ‘perfume’ that disguises a ‘smell so shocking when a creature dies’ (p. 382). In contrast to the ‘culinary’, the audiences for *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* never have an opportunity to settle into an unreflective appreciation of the classical: the third notebook begins with Marcus Aurelius on his tower, representative of high culture, with a ‘Women chorus’ and ‘celli’, as though a “concert” is about to happen’, but then the ‘Song’ is ‘broken by sirens’ (p. 607).

Other ‘committed’ alienation effects reimagined by Harrison and Herbert include the frequent deployment of signs – akin to the intertitles in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Agreement* – and the poet’s own particular incitement to audience participation. Even though Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* (‘teaching-plays’) were meant to be performed by workers and other nonprofessional actors, Brecht’s anti-naturalistic theatre does not otherwise tend to draw actors from the audience, or audience members, into the main action onstage. In contrast, Commodus’ first violent act is to entice the ‘Sign-designer’ from the audience into the ‘orchestra’ and then ‘crown’ him by breaking his ‘brain-box’ (pp. 73–4). Although one of the notebooks includes an article that questions its historical veracity, Commodus then opines that everyone in the arena has the power to kill, ‘imperium, | residing in the way you show your thumb’ (p. 544).³⁴ A whole sequence in the central section of the play then details the ‘THUMBS ROUTINE’ (p. 545), in a version of democracy that emphasises the audience’s potential complicity: ‘You see how democratic dealing death can be. | You decide, the people, not the emperor, me!’ (p. 87). Akin to the signs that Brecht deploys in his plays, such as ‘No man helps another’ in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Agreement*, Herbert’s photograph album of the rehearsals includes an image of Julius Bollux with a ‘JUBELN LAUTER’ (‘cheer louder’) sign, as he attempts to steer the audience’s reaction to Commodus’

behaviour.³⁵ The difference between the two playwrights' version of this particular alienation effect lies in Harrison's emphasis on the didactic properties of Bollux's forced intervention on behalf of Commodus, in contrast with Brecht's emphasis on political commentary and theatrical innovation, which, Lunn argues, Adorno undervalues in his critique of Brecht.³⁶ Proposed audience participation as a *Verfremdungseffekt* then 'departs' from the antecedent – in Furlani's sense of metamodernism in *Guy Davenport: Postmodern and After* (2007) – with an instance of alienation that 'surpasses' the structural innovations of Brecht's theatre (p. 150). Harrison's third notebook contains a passage that invites two members of the audience to a sex show in order to re-enact Commodus' promiscuity:

I'll need someone to administer a muscle rub
 some volunteer masseuse, or volunteer masseur.
 You'll do, madam, and you'll do, sir.
 then I could shaft you, and then after
 you could have a turn at being shafter (p. 536)

Subsequently, Harrison considers including circus acts in this 'show' like the clowns in *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Agreement*, with a 'knife throwing act' and 'Juggler'; the poet then wonders 'Any more circus from Jaro? Use whatever there is' (p. 609). These ruminations on Jaro Frank's circus team recall Brecht's indebtedness to Vsevolod Meyerhold's deployment of 'court jesters, circus acrobats and clowns' in order to 'assault the conservative traditions of high art'.³⁷

Harrison's development of Brecht's alienation effects into the prowling marines, celli and threat of a sex show focalises the particular 'commitment' in this verse play, that centres around Harrison's exposition of a dialectic between culture and barbarism.³⁸ This conceptual shuttling that dominates the structure of *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* has its origins in the conflicted figure of Hercules. In a section pasted into the 'Carnuntum 2' workbook on Commodus' bust in the Conservatori Museum at Rome, Harrison underlines the section about Hercules being worshipped by Romans at Ara Maxima in the Forum as 'the creator of order and destroyer of barbarism'.³⁹ In this Benjaminian version of culture, civilisation requires colonial violence in order to preserve itself: hence Hercules was the particular hero of the western Greek colonies that were more frequently threatened by other tribes.⁴⁰ Thomas Wiedemann's article in workbook one records that, 'Whatever the truth behind such tales' about Commodus, several emperors 'liked to see themselves as performing the services for humanity that Hercules had once performed: ridding the

world of wild beasts, and establishing civilisation' (p. 35). Indeed, the article in workbook two notes that the link between the emperor and Hercules was a common association between political leaders and fighters, such as Mark Antony and Antonius Pius. Compared to the revulsion most contemporary readers would experience in encountering descriptions of leopards attacking chained prisoners in the amphitheatres, the workbook emphasises that, for Romans, the arena symbolised 'the place where the civilised world confronted lawless nature'.⁴¹ Harrison deploys the tension between the amphitheatre and Roman state as an allegory of late twentieth-century Europe: workbook two includes a picture of the violinist Vedran Smailovic – pencilled in as a possible actor for Orpheus – playing 'amid the ruins of the Skenderija Concert Hall' near the centre of Sarajevo (p. 370).⁴² The bloodying of Marcus Aurelius' white suit when he embraces Commodus in the verse play encapsulates this structural dialectic: in a typescript in workbook two, Harrison commentates that the former 'first agrees with the rumour that COMMODUS was the son of a gladiator, then admits that he is the father. How can the philosopher and the brute share the same blood [?] They do in Europe' (p. 431). Hence the third notebook includes lines in the typescript in which Aurelius and Commodus as a 'pair' are 'as difficult to accept as | Beethoven and Belsen', and – in a handwritten note underneath – 'like Hitler and [Václav] Havel' (p. 655).⁴³

The alienation effect of animal cages underneath the audience forms the most spectacular example of this commitment to explore the tensions between culture and the 'barbaric' Roman arena. One of Herbert's notebooks reveals that the cages formed an integral part of the stage design from the outset: Herbert has sketched the audience stands with their watch-towers, and notes: 'Cage for animals | running underneath or behind | seat stands'.⁴⁴ As Baker's review of *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* reveals, 'Not everyone in the audience was happy' when Commodus 'ripped down tapestries flanking the arena to reveal real lions and tigers pacing in cages directly below the audience'. However, Baker considers this Brechtian subversion of 'illusion' to be 'a masterstroke':

When the cages rattled as the animals lunged against the bars in response to Commodus dumping huge chunks of meat on the floor of the arena, so we in the audience were rattled into the awareness that only a few centimetres of steel separated the animals' role in today's performance from the barbarous spectacle of the Roman era. Indeed, the difference diminished further when a bear accidentally came on stage without

a muzzle, and [Barry Rutter] showed not only that he can act, but also that he has strong nerves.⁴⁵

In the workbooks, Harrison considers further options for the endangering of Rutter: at one point, he writes: 'LIONS grab [the actor's] robe. Sew steak in lining???' (p. 335). This alienation effect certainly banishes 'the illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience': in the second workbook, a draft typescript that includes the fragments 'I'll make sure those cages get unbarred [. . .] you'll see stage | blood [turn] real when they're out of the cage' contains the handwritten couplet underneath: 'you look [a] tasty meal to a beast | madam, and you sir, you're such a feast' (p. 359).⁴⁶ In the final version, these 'few centimetres' of cage bars – holding apart, through artifice, the poles of culture and barbarism – are then united in Harrison's soliloquy at the end of the play, in which he 'stands above the sump the Romans built to drain all the blood shed in the arena into the Danube, making the claim that this Roman Red Danube is as much a part of Europe's cultural heritage as Strauss's Blue Danube'.⁴⁷

The 'Barbarism' of Committed Art

The examples I have outlined above of Harrison metamodernist deployment of alienation effects – in an intertextual understanding of the term – need to be considered in the context of Adorno's criticisms of 'committed' art, that lead to the latter's defence of autonomous and enigmatical art. Harrison's third workbook for *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* contains excerpts from an article entitled 'The Entertainment Industry', in which K. M. Coleman critiques the Romans' increasing desire to replace the artifice of Greek theatre with spectacles that enact rather than represent violence and death. Whereas the violent acts take place off-stage in Greek theatre, Coleman observes that 'in the *damnationes* performed in the amphitheatre, dramatic scenes that had hitherto been acted out in the theatre as mere make-believe could now be actually reenacted and played out "for real"'.⁴⁸ In an extract from *Animals for Show and Pleasure in Ancient Rome* (1937) pasted into the first handbook, for example, George Jennison refers to 'Orpheus [on a stage] among birds and beasts; but Orpheus was a criminal and the scene ended with a bear killing him' (p. 144). Harrison's satirical play clearly denounces such *ad bestias* obscenities, yet there is still a potential prurience in the director's threat to embody such violent acts on stage, and turn 'suffering into images'

(p. 189), as Adorno puts it in 'Commitment'. '[L]et's slaughter lions and butcher a few bruins', promises Commodus in workbook three, 'Brace yourself you'll see them hacked | before your very eyes. Not fiction, fact' (p. 543). Coleman's article on Roman executions begins with such a 'demand for brutal public entertainment' that 'will be seen to act as a "market force" in the selection of punishment at Rome' (p. 299). Yet this 'brutal' entertainment – in a different form – has hardly disappeared entirely from contemporary culture. Harrison emphasises that his play takes place in the context of contemporaneous cinematic violence when Commodus threatens that 'We're going to butcher beasts. We'll have a butcher beano | bloodier and realler than Quentin Tarantino'.⁴⁹ After the Sign-designer is murdered, the audience confronts the sound of '*the butcher's block and cleaver noises of a body being chopped into pieces*'; ironically, given Commodus' desire to replace Greek theatre with Roman enactment, this figured obscenity takes place after the body is '*dragged off*' the stage (p. 80). Harrison's off-stage atrocity here is meant to satirise contemporary cinema; however, the 'committed' satire cannot escape the repercussions of its own violent spectacle. As Carol Rutter remarked on the first performance of *The Labourers of Herakles*, it 'turned out to celebrate, not to critique male violence. The audience did not just "sit and stare". They gave the rage of Herakles a round of applause'.⁵⁰ In the Carnuntum verse play, the danger is that the audience receives the 'suffering [turned] into images' in the same way as enthusiastic (or passive) viewers of the gangster murders in Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994).⁵¹

In addition, Harrison's deployment of captive and dead animals in the play offers a potentially 'barbaric' enactment of the culture/barbarism dialectic that underlines the verse play's entrenchment in 'committed' art rather than the enigmas of autonomous literature. One of the typescript production notes for *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* in the Herbert archive records that the stage carpet 'Must be washable because of the blood from meat carcasses', in a modern re-enactment of the Romans' draining of the amphitheatre's blood into the Danube sump.⁵² A later version of the typescript in notebook three imagines Commodus stirring a 'mess of meat' with the signpost used earlier to murder the 'Sign-designer' (p. 620), akin to the various lumps of flesh deposited on the map of the Roman empire. Ironically, the first notebook also contains an article on the maltreatment of animals ('Last grim waltz for the dancing bears'), and a 'bear swoop' to remove 'as many as 50 bears from Istanbul's tourist sites' (p. 137). Despite Harrison's dramatic ingenuity, the audience might still remain uncomfortable with the raw meat and exploitation of bears in order

to add dramatic spice to the undoubtedly spectacular performance: William Shakespeare's famous stage direction from *The Winter's Tale* (1611) – 'Exit, pursued by a bear' – becomes 'exit emperor pushed by a bear' in the final version of the play (p. 129).⁵³ In a replication of the Romans' culture/barbarism dialectic, the bears also function as part of the 'barbaric' pole in the play that threatens the cultured poet with their 'savagery': the beasts 'will tear apart' Orpheus on behalf of 'people who no longer want the poet's art' (p. 177). Animals marauding under a cultured audience representative of Orpheus may constitute, for Baker, a 'masterstroke', but this alienation effect also risks a 'barbaric' taunting that capitulates to rather than resists the structural dialectic of the verse play.⁵⁴

Hence the anti-barbarity of committed art can become a kind of cultural barbarism itself when there is an attempt to engage with or 'represent' atrocity, rather than responding to violence with the 'monstrous' abstractions of autonomous art.⁵⁵ The second workbook contains various passages in which Commodus delights in his threats surrounding the beasts: a lion 'mauls | some poor Mauretanian and rips off his balls', and opines 'Shall I let [the animals] out to roam around here [...] They're safe behind steel bars until | I give the signal to let them out for the kill' (p. 379). In a subsequent reworking of this passage, the emperor proposes to 'let a few out of the crate | and instead of bloody talking, | demonstrate [...] Plenty of time, they'll be hungrier later' (p. 383). A fake bar in the cage then 'COMES AWAY IN HIS HAND', and Commodus mocks that the audience is only 'comparatively speaking safe' (p. 379). Soon afterwards, a stage direction proposes that the emperor 'cuts off [the] head' of an ostrich (p. 381): 'they'd collide || but go on | till they died || Their plumes were ruffled and the'd [*sic*] prance || in [a] sort of Totentanz' (p. 383).⁵⁶ 'One to swing', the playwright notes in the third notebook, as 'Austria doesn't allow killing' (!) (p. 523). Hence Harrison's critique of realism in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* does not encompass the 'barbarism' of the 'stink of blood' on stage in the final version of the play (p. 384). Commodus cajoles that the audience prefers 'a bit of blood and guts to poetry' (p. 409), but at moments such as these in *The Kaisers of Karnuntum* the 'blood and guts' constitutes an integral part of Harrison and Herbert's stagecraft.

As Adorno's essay proposes, 'committed' literature, unlike autonomous art, also risks distortion in order to convey a consumable political message. In the second 'Carnuntum' workbook, Harrison includes an excerpt on the design of the Column of Trajan (c.110 AD) during Commodus' reign: the artist 'seemed to be more concerned with expressing the horror and

suffering of war than with giving a factual record of events, and to do this they were prepared to distort the features, exaggerate gestures, and pay less attention to modeling [*sic*] and proportion'.⁵⁷ As Adorno demonstrates in his critique of Brecht's commitment, the playwright distorts the reality of 1930s Germany in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* when he represents leading Nazis as bumbling criminals. Similarly, Harrison exaggerates the historical record when he underplays Marcus Aurelius' role in imperial warfare in order to provide more dramatic tension between the 'cultured' Aurelius, author of philosophical meditations, and 'barbaric' Commodus – a 'gangster ghost' – who allegedly introduced faeces into his own and courtiers' food for his own deprived pleasure.⁵⁸ In contemporaneous accounts, some but by no means all of Commodus' transgressions are expressed in terms of his homosexuality: in Rome, for example, he led a triumphal procession with Saotems, 'his partner in depravity, seated in his chariot, and from time to time he would turn around and kiss him openly' (p. 257). The homophobic sources are hardly trustworthy, as is corroborated by the conflicting accounts of Aurelius' wife Faustina, who allegedly had an affair with a gladiator. One commentator in workbook two contends that Faustina (played by Siân Thomas in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*) used to 'choose out lovers from among the sailors and gladiators' while at Caieta (p. 419), whereas another source in the first workbook insists that 'the slanders and libels of [Commodus'] later years accordingly declared that he was no son of Marcus at all; and that Faustina, in fact, had loved a gladiator [...] There is no reliable evidence to support the monstrous charge' (p. 218).

In the context of Harrison's dismissal of this slander around Faustina, it is ironic that rumours and disputed facts – such as the 'thumbs routine' – are presented elsewhere in the play as historical truth for the sake of 'committed' dramatic entertainment. Thomas Wiedemann's article in workbook one notes that 'Commodus in particular *was rumoured* to have been keen on decapitating ostriches by shooting sickle-head arrows at them' (p. 35).⁵⁹ By page sixty-nine of the same workbook, this supposition has become the more assertive 'Commodus decapitated ostriches' (p. 69). Commodus himself is also a more complex dramatic figure than Harrison's attack on his transgressive behaviour might suggest. Extracts from *Historia Augusta* in the second workbook emphasise that Commodus was 'adept in certain arts which are not becoming in an emperor for he could mould goblets and dance and sing and whistle, and he could play the buffoon and the gladiator to perfection' (p. 253).⁶⁰ There are traces of this more artistic version of Commodus in that the character partly functions as an anarchic

satyr figure; understandably, given that Rutter had returned to Carnuntum where, six years earlier, he played the leading satyr Silenus in Harrison's play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* (1988).⁶¹ Thus, despite the remarkable alienation effects in this verse play, Commodus courts empathy as the 'barbaric' figure familiar to Harrison's readers in the form of, for example, the skinhead in *V*, who displays traces of artistic sensibility, but remains too marginalised by high culture to attain a sustained artistic voice. Sensitive to such cultural erasures, Harrison is alert to a footnote in *Historia Augusta* that describes how 'Many inscriptions found throughout the empire show Commodus' name carefully erased' (p. 253); this brief comment transforms into a major conceit in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*, in which the emperor discovers his absence on the 'Dreikaiserwein' bottle, rails at the audience and then kills the Sign-designer. Baker's review indicates that Harrison 'saw this as a sanitisation of history, like Stalin's excision of Trotsky from official photographs'.⁶² The comma makes it unclear whether Harrison or Baker is establishing this connection: Trotsky's dismissal from the Communist Party and subsequent deportation from the Soviet Union hardly encourages historical comparison with a violent Roman emperor. Yet Harrison's determination to subvert these diverse historical erasures nevertheless betrays a degree of attraction to the 'barbaric' figure of Commodus.⁶³

Despite Harrison's steadfast response to these gaps in the historical record, he nevertheless shares Adorno and Sartre's pessimism over autonomous art and 'committed' literature's power to intervene directly in the social and political sphere. In one of Herbert's notebooks, the designer ruminates over the final scene of *The Labourers of Herakles*: 'Bosnian refugees' (cut from the final version) enter with old men and 'women in wheelbarrows'; like the labourers, 'they too get stuck' in the concrete, and then, for the soliloquy, 'Tony appears—somehow—perhaps a Forklift Truck and Speaks of [the] powerlessness of Art to have any influence on man's violence and inhumanity'.⁶⁴ Harrison's depiction of the workers who, like Commodus, find nothing efficacious in the theatre allows him to engage with invisible histories of labour, as well as the ineffectuality of art. The metadramatic moment in *The Labourers of Herakles* when Labourer 1 proclaims 'I'm a labourer of Herakles, and a labourer lays | fucking concrete. He doesn't act in plays' forms a paradoxical rejection of Adorno's (rather pious) admonishment in 'Commitment' that 'all roles may be played, except that of the worker' (p. 187). Furthermore, the Brechtian allegory of war and the workers during the Persian conflict in *The Labourers of Herakles* is more subtle than the Nazis portrayed as

gangsters in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.⁶⁵ Just as Brecht focuses on the exploitation of labour in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Harrison transforms the five labourers into hypermasculine killers, complicit workers, or victims in the form of the Women of Miletos. As for Brecht in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Harrison's implication is that these roles of perpetrator, bystander and victim are easily interchangeable for the workers during the wars. In Harrison's 'Herakles (Delphi)' notebook, the powerful alienation effect in which the workers get stuck in concrete and then harangue the audience for abandoning them strives for connections between the invisibility of the working class in the context of historical architectural delights, and the limitations of art in terms of averting atrocity:

In the set orchestra stuck fast
 We see the horrors of the past
 With these new brewing
 We see Srebrenica fall
 Some lined up against the wall
 And what are we doing? (p. 282)

In the final version of the play, Harrison attacks 'culinary' theatre, in which the spectators are present only in order to be entertained, rather than – as in epic theatre – instructed at the same time: the audience is made to ruminate on their potential complicity when Labourer 2 complains 'All they're allowed to do is sit and stare. | However deep the sorrow, or severe the pain, | they think we're only here to entertain'.⁶⁶ The labourers' depicted invisibility has its origin in Harrison's *School of Eloquence* sequence (1978): 'The Earthen Lot' begins with an epigraph from William Morris's *The Art of the People* (1879) – 'From Ispahan [in Iran] to Northumberland, there is no building that does not show the influence of that oppressed and neglected herd of men' – and the next poem, 'Remains', records the words of a forgotten paperhanger in William Wordsworth's cottage, whose pentameter is discovered during restoration work ('our heads will be happen cold when this is found').⁶⁷ Similarly, in 'Questions From a Worker who Reads', Brecht wonders about the voices of those who built 'Thebes of the 7 gates', Babylon, the Great Wall of China and Rome.⁶⁸ These class invisibilities intertwine awkwardly in the 'Herakles (Delphi)' workbook with the recounting of atrocities in the war in the former Yugoslavia: the line 'young woman hanged herself in a tree' (p. 286) refers to a newspaper photograph pasted into the workbook six pages later. Using exactly the same phrase as in Herbert's notebook,

a poetic fragment then refers to ‘the powerlessness of art’ after two articles about Serbian and Croatian violence (p. 340). In the final version of Harrison’s monologue in *Plays Three* (1996), the ‘Spirit of Phrynichos’ reveals a paradoxical approach to committed literature: at first, Phrynichos ‘gave theatre a start | in redeeming destruction through the power of art’, but then five lines later ‘art cannot redeem | the cry from Krajina or the Srebrenica scream’ (p. 143). Elsewhere, Harrison has spoken of the ‘whole fatuity of the belief that writing poetry will *do* anything’.⁶⁹ Unlike Brecht’s plays, a more pessimistic allegory of the limitations of ‘committed’ art is built into the structure of *The Labourers of Herakles*.

The Orchards of Syon: Committed and Autonomous Art

As opposed to the allegorical failure of commitment in Harrison’s verse play, *The Orchards of Syon* forms an example of committed and autonomous art that confronts similarly atrocious historical events, but responds with enigmatic poetry to provide a ‘*sad and angry consolation*’.⁷⁰ A compromised euphony engages with twentieth-century history tangentially to create poems of considerable ‘semantic energy’.⁷¹ Before I turn to Hill’s references to the Allied invasion of Normandy and the Manchester Blitz, I wish to outline his initial deployment of enigmatical poetry in *The Orchards of Syon*, that – as in *Scenes from Comus* – is instigated with recourse to T. S. Eliot’s work. Alongside these concerns with Adorno’s ‘monstrous’ aspects of modern history, Hill frequently returns to the prospect of his own demise, as in the elusive opening: ‘Now there is no due season. Do not | mourn unduly’.⁷² Adorno’s lament for ‘damaged’ post-war life in the subtitle to *Minima Moralia* (1951) merges here with Hill’s sense of *The Orchards of Syon* as a ‘late’ collection. The enigma of *The Orchards of Syon* is, from the beginning, inextricable from lexical ambiguities bound up with ‘damaged’ existence: does ‘due’ mean that the poet is writing mid-season, that the seasons have blended into one, or – as in *Minima Moralia* – that all post-war existence appears somehow posthumous? This line also echoes and repudiates the beginning of *The Waste Land*, in which April breeds ‘Lilacs out of the dead land’.⁷³ There may be no ‘due season’ due to the poet’s own imagined demise, rather than Eliot’s attenuated spring: ‘unduly’ wryly hints that the author’s passing should indeed be ‘duly’, as in appropriately, mourned. Hill’s conflicted and ambiguous responses to a potential last collection are evident in the very first drafts for *The Orchards of Syon*: ‘Good. Good’, begins one version, there is ‘Time for amendment’, but then immediately ‘No time’, that has

a pencil emendation above it ('still time').⁷⁴ 'No time' then undergoes a qualification through the enjambment that appends 'like the present' to 'still time'. Subsequently, 'my last | performance' becomes a 'final' collection; but the 'performance' is not 'final' because it refers to Hill's previous book, *Speech! Speech!* (2000), which may have seemed to be a 'dance of retirement', but – with another pencil emendation – is actually only a gesture towards 'retiring'.

In the subsequent lines of the first section, Hill undercuts these elusive and allusive ambiguities when he switches to the dissenting voice that he has encompassed in his work since the publication of *The Triumph of Love* (1998): 'You have sometimes said | that I project a show more | stressful than delightful' (p. 1). In the notebook drafts for *The Orchards of Syon*, Hill emphasises his readers' potential dissent towards his enigmatic poetics even further: 'As you have *always* said | we can put on a show, sometimes more sombre'; 'sombre' later becomes the more self-critical 'convoluted', 'deadlier' and 'mendacious'.⁷⁵ The reference to Plato's allegory of the cave is clearer in these drafts, in which Hill implores the bemused reader to 'watch my hands gesturing | shadows against the light', like the cave dwellers entranced by the fire shadows on the wall. Hill then likens his 'stressful', autonomous art to that of the local 'Hippo' (the Hippodrome), and concedes that it is 'not as funny'.⁷⁶ Echoing the lilacs' mixture of 'Memory and desire' in *The Waste Land* (p. 51), this linkage accedes that the plumbing of memories in *The Orchards of Syon* may well lead to extended passages of 'sombre' and 'stressful' art. '[S]tressful' also alludes here to the heavy stresses in the declarative opening lines of this collection: '**Now there is no due season. Do not | mourn unduly**' (p. 1). Eliot's 'intolerable wrestle with words' in 'East Coker' manifests itself here in off-key 'Eloquence', as Hill conceives of such 'stressful' rhetoric in his notebook, which is 'cogent', 'succinct', 'hard-won' and 'hard-fought'.⁷⁷

As I discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to Prynne's *Acrylic Tips*, the enigmas of such 'off-key' lines can be stressful for the critic if the latter insists on attempting to decode autonomous art systematically.⁷⁸ In the passage discussed above, the 'due' (dew) season remains 'due' in Adorno's sense of the artistic 'remainder', that can never be entirely comprehended.⁷⁹ A resistance to hermeneutics appertains to individual lines and images in *The Orchards of Syon* – rather than every section of *Acrylic Tips* – such as when the 'time-struck Minster doles greed by the clock' in section XVII (p. 17). Hill clearly alludes to York Minster among 'the broad Ouse levels', yet the enigmaticalness of the previous line is inextricable from its ambiguity: do the minster and clock

distribute greed in that they somehow register the covetous parish outside the cathedral, or does 'by' indicate that this avarice is 'doled' alongside the clock? Or is the clock more abstract, in which case the minster is guilty of greed 'by the clock'; in other words, constantly? A more positivistic account of the line might argue that 'greed' refers to an admission charge, as well as the subsequent appeals for charity: notebook fifty-two evokes the 'coin-slot improved | Minster' (p. 88). '[T]he clock' may signify the minster's astronomical clock in particular, which was installed in 1955 as a memorial to the airmen killed during World War Two who worked at local bases in Yorkshire, County Durham and Northumberland. Drafts of section XVII in notebook fifty-two indicate that Hill was also toying with a connection between upper-class privilege and English heritage: Hill writes of a 'Lord' who ropes off the clock, and asserts that the 'coin-slot Minster' belongs to him; this aristocrat is named 'Ebor', after the Roman name for York ('Eboracum') (p. 88).⁸⁰ This Ebor is certainly a sign of avarice, 'untouched on his side of the ropes'. '[G]reed' may also have something to do with the 'snarled' 'coast-traffic' earlier in section XVII (p. 17), since the packed roads merge in the notebook with York's tourist crowds: the town is 'too crammed even for organ congas', and is 'a medieval hell-mouth' (p. 93). In the final version, Hill reimagines the 'chorus' as the 'lines of road-rage' that 'shunt to yet more delay' (p. 17): not 'entirely at peace', the greed may be an unexplained symptom of the tourists, 'Hawks over the dual carriageways' and a 'snarled, snarling' traffic jam. Despite these clues in the notebooks, the line in which the minster 'doles greed by the clock' nevertheless remains elusive, and beyond definitive interpretation: its 'power' – as Derek Attridge might term it – lies precisely in its resistance to positivistic decoding and critical attempts to 'solve' its ambiguity.⁸¹

A similarly enigmatic and impervious passage occurs towards the end of notebook fifty-four during a 'committed' portrayal of urban rubble. In this instance, the 'remainder' arises out of Hill's elusive engagement with Blitz imagery.⁸² The poet depicts

this narrow
scorched earth pomarium [*sic*] between Salford
and Manchester not the Orchards
of Syon but near enough (p. 68)

In the final version in section LXI, these lines become:

Initiative – that
New Age *pomerium* between Salford
and Manchester: not só far the Orchards
of Syon grown to be ours (p. 61)

In notebook fifty-four, Hill records his arrival in Manchester for a reading: ‘Manchester Piccadilly you could | have watched it | burn well enough’ (p. 63). Recalling images of the Coventry Blitz that Hill witnessed from afar as an eight-year-old child, the poet is absorbed in the Manchester Blitz, which severely damaged the city’s main train stations in December 1940. A military strategy of destroying anything that might be useful to enemy forces (‘scorched earth’) is referred to in the initial draft for this passage (p. 68), but the emphasis in the final version is on the ‘*pomerium*’, a religious boundary around the ancient city of Rome, as well as the cities controlled by the capital (p. 61). Derived from the Latin phrase ‘*post moerium*’, meaning ‘beyond the wall’, the *pomerium* denoted an often deserted area of land just inside and also outside of the city walls. In fact, Hill merges images of the Blitz, ‘scorched earth’ and *pomerium* in an attempt to describe the swathes of rubble visible between ‘Salford | and Manchester’ when he witnessed them on 1 July 2000: Hill began work on a second version of this passage eleven days later.⁸³

The ‘scorched earth’ that Hill ponders here as a ‘committed’ image of military devastation was actually caused by the demolition of factories on the border between the cities (p. 68): initially, a dry ski-slope was intended to cover part of this area, but the plan was abandoned, and the space remained covered in rubble until the construction of high-rise flats. Hill transforms this landscape into an area that denotes a religious space ‘ploughed by, or for, the priests’, and also a ‘cordón sanitaire’ between deliberating ‘civic officers’ and ‘city-planners’ (p. 86). ‘[P]omerium’ even becomes a sign for ‘word-painting’, a ‘wash of | language’: the rubble appears like ‘impasto’, in which paint is applied in thick layers (p. 86). Contexts of historical engagement then proliferate even further in the notebook: ‘Mine-pickled’, the landscape also becomes ‘prison | ground’, the ‘Berlin Wall’ and even Carthage during the main engagement of the Third Punic War (p. 89); these images are subsequently deployed in section LXX (p. 70). Hill wrestles with aligning these visions of devastation with the collection’s oft-mentioned utopia of the Orchards of Syon: the rubble is first ‘not the Orchards’, but ‘near enough’ (p. 89), then emphatically ‘not orchard’ (p. 89), but ultimately not ‘só far’ from the Edenic; by section LXX the *pomerium* will definitely ‘not | pass muster as *orchard*’ (p. 70).

Even more grandly, the *pomerium* hovers on the edge of functioning as a sign of Hill's entire career: 'To draw up my account', he writes, 'I could have told you | pomerium is not orchard' (p. 89); this statement echoes a line in notebook fifty-three in which he demands that he 'list all | [his] achievements previous to dying' (p. 34). In notebook fifty-five, these poetic 'achievements' are transformed into an image reminiscent of Beckett's *Endgame* (1957), in which he is 'chest deep in rubble | of my own making' (p. 13).

In Hill's version of committed and autonomous art, references to devastating events such as the Blitz and Punic War fuse here with the 'monstrous' figures that Adorno admires in Beckett's work, alongside the 'rubble' of Hill's *oeuvre*.⁸⁴ Hence *pomerium* initiates a personal 'Valediction' (p. 69), but this becomes the more prosaic 'Initiative' in the final version (p. 61), which may refer to a scorned council strategy. However, what does the rubble have to do with 1970s mysticism as a 'New Age' track of land between two cities in the final version, a phrase that jars like the 'new-fangled light' in section XIII (p. 13) that I discuss later in this chapter? Ultimately, the meaning of this frequently altered passage in the notebooks remains undecodable; a veritable 'impasto' of images and attendant contextual information that cannot 'solve' its enigma. However, this enigmaticalness does not signal a failure of poesis: only a positivistic notion of language akin to Sartre's in *What is Literature?* would insist that Hill fails to communicate something transparent in a sharply defined manner. As in many of Hill's twenty-first-century collections, he weaves together collages of poetic threads – the Blitz, atrocity, urban clearance and renewal, religious segregation – without synthesising them into a 'committed' sequence that might depict a specific object. As Hill retorts to Ezra Pound's 'I cannot | make it cohere' in notebook fifty-five, 'Already it coheres', as the images fuse in an ordered incoherence that, as in *Acrylic Tips*, grates against, but does not eschew, signification (p. 22).⁸⁵ However, there is no overarching theme in *The Orchards of Syon* that Hill wishes to convey, unlike Harrison's emphasis on the culture/barbarism dialectic in his verse plays. Hill's metamodernist 'word-painting', as he phrases it in notebook fifty-four, resolutely resists settling into a definitive subject or Sartre's exported 'message' (p. 86).

In notebook fifty-three, Hill turns to a more specific commitment to depict the suffering of Allied forces during the invasion of Normandy:

Treasured things, lose things—loosed things, orchards
of the Bocage June to October, the sloughed

flesh of the dead, wrenched-apart carriers
of multiflame their bursting carcasses (p. 85).

'[B]ocage' in the final version denotes an area of woodland and pasture in Normandy (p. 44): such farmland is now inextricable from the devastation caused during the Allied advance; as Jeffrey Wainwright notes, the apt placement of this section on page forty-four of *The Orchards of Syon* gestures towards the date of the invasion in June 1944.⁸⁶ 'Umbelliferae', aromatic flowering plants (p. 44), are inseparable from memories of parachutes that 'umbrella'd the hedgerows' (p. 85), images of destroyed barns and 'splintered crofts' (p. 44). Hill crosses out 'round St Lô' next to this passage in the notebook (p. 85): this example of the 'treasured' Orchards of Syon is 'shadowed' by the intense fighting on the Cotentin peninsula around the town, in which sunken lanes with high hedgerows provided the Germans with enduring defensive positions. '[F]lesh of the dead' and 'bursting carcasses' risk committed art's potentially prurient representation (p. 85): in the final version, these phrases have been replaced with the more abstract 'odours of death from tracked armour | gone multiflame' (p. 44). Hill's concern over the potentially lurid aspects of committed art are ingrained in the final version of section XLIV: emphasised with a metrical inversion, a body 'splays' for the camera, and, by proxy, the poem, as if the corpse is actively inviting the audience's prurient gaze (p. 44). In a line break that links the visual to the destructive, the phrase 'Hand-held or swivel' at the end of line ten appertains not, as expected, to the camera in line eight, but to the subsequent firearm, the 'carbine', in line eleven. As in the movement towards abstraction in the notebook version of section XLIV, lines nine and ten move from the corpse to the more general human 'midden', a northern dialect for a refuse or dung heap. In a poetic montage, the specificity of the 'machine-carbine' at the crossroads 'of Hauts-Vents' then shifts into a discussion of Stanley Edgar Hyman's *The Armed Vision: a Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism* (1948). Hill wonders if Hyman similarly did not 'go to the wars': the American critic actually graduated from Syracuse in 1940, and then worked for *The New Yorker* magazine.⁸⁷ Hill equates their non-combatant status with the potential problems of commitment in relation to the involved yet also distancing camera: 'not going' recalls the camera 'staying put' in line nine; in contrast, the 'veterans are dying', and the poet 'cannot say | what they care to remember' (p. 44).

Hill's advocacy of such fraught yet committed autonomous art is evident in the 'shadowed rhetoric' of the very first stanza in *The Orchards*

of *Syon* (p. 1). Bound up with Plato's illusive shadows in the cave allegory, and María Casares' 'tragic shadow' of Death in the film *Orphée* (1950) (p. 4), the phrase also connotes the 'shadows' of twentieth-century history. In *The Orchards of Syon*, pastoral images frequently admit their 'shadowed rhetoric', as in 'blooded scrub maples' that 'torch themselves in the swamp', and which should be read in the context of the 'death-songs' mentioned two lines earlier (p. 3).⁸⁸ These sections of committed rhetoric are nevertheless counterbalanced with moments that draw on the modernist conception of epiphany and the Christian notion of grace. Whereas the swamp and 'death-songs' are inextricable in section III, these metamodernist epiphanies are part of but also grate against the committed and autonomous art in the Blitz and Normandy sections that I have analysed above. One of the first drafts for the opening lines in notebook fifty-two begins: 'Good. None of this is past | redemption', and then refers to an abstract 'thrashing convulsive', which is 'under notice of grace' (p. 7). Grace, a "chance occasion" that suggests the eternal', remains by definition enigmatic as a sign of God's absent presence.⁸⁹ As Robert Macfarlane argues, these moments are beyond knowledge and intellect, recalling Eliot's remark that 'genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood': language's 'elisions and indeterminacies accept and act the obliquity of this [...] elided experience of grace'.⁹⁰ Yet in notebook fifty-two, Hill intervenes after a memorable passage about the liminality of 'Distant flocks' merging 'into the limestone's half-light' (p. 14) with the emphatic 'Awe is *not grace*' (pp. 52, 74).⁹¹ Here, the more secular phenomenon of modernist epiphany is bound up with the sublime, the 'insubstantial substance' of nature (p. 13), as the enthralled poet witnesses the fell metamorphose from grey to coral, then 'rare Libyan sand colour or banded spectrum' (p. 14).

The possibility that these enigmatic images might be representative of a 'spirit consciousness' is exorcised from the final version in notebook fifty-two (p. 75). These are not simply 'Signs [...] taken for wonders', as in Eliot's 'Gerontion'.⁹² Elusive phenomena are not symptomatic of 'peace' either in the final qualification of awe (p. 14): in an 'off-key' moment during the drafting of this passage in the notebook, Hill emphasises in a highlighted line that 'Nothing earthy is perfect now forget it' (p. 74). Does 'now' denote the specific moment of composition, or does an absent mark of punctuation lie before (rather than after) 'now'; in which case, 'nothing earthy' is ever untarnished, so the poet should never attempt to mediate the sublime? Hill's agitated intervention occurs after a passage that transforms Matthew Arnold's 'darkling plain' where 'ignorant armies clash

by night' into a more positive image of 'constant life', in which 'the wheeling | of grand armies' is nevertheless 'overtaken by darkness'.⁹³ Whereas the lyrical images of the fell are gently qualified with 'Awe is not peace' (p. 14), a more irascible voice from *The Triumph of Love and Speech! Speech!* enters the drafts with 'Nothing earthy is perfect now forget it', but is then exorcised from the final version in notebook fifty-two (p. 74).⁹⁴ 'Nothing earthy' can be perfect due to the present absence of Adorno's 'deluge' of atrocious events in the twentieth century, but such epiphanic passages in *The Orchards of Syon* stubbornly persist in the committed and autonomous visions of an awe-struck poet.⁹⁵

Hill inserts a comment on Shakespeare's verse into notebook fifty-four that exactly describes these enigmatic instances of linguistic power as 'a heave and swell, from depths beyond verbal definition [...] a gathering power, a ninth wave of passion, an increase in tempo and vitality' (p. 56). Critics such as Wainwright have been drawn to the 'gathering power' of a particularly striking passage in section XIII (p. 119). Hill declares in notebook fifty-two that

These are starts of memory, a strange
blessing out of confusion. Await
the sharpened light, the slate roofs
caught in scale-nets of silver, then
blurred with thin oils. These and like tokens
I now associate with apprehension (p. 69).

'[S]tarts' recalls the Proustian concept of involuntary memory: these 'starts' are both the beginnings of poetry and abrupt interruptions. '[B]lessing out' becomes a blessing 'slid' from confusion in the final version (p. 13), stressing the involuntary nature of this epiphany. The notebook and collection then contain the parallel enigmatical images of, respectively, the 'sharpened light' (p. 69) – reminiscent of 'Blade-light' from Ted Hughes's 'Wind' – and 'new-fangled' light (p. 13).⁹⁶ '[S]harpened' suggests an intensification of luminosity, whereas 'new-fangled' – a word that critics have avoided in their discussion of this passage – indicates a change in brightness that remains more awkward due to its potentially comic connotation of novelty, and its resistance to exact signification, like the 'New Age *pomerium*' in section LXI (p. 61). These 'starts' are more assuredly 'apprehension' in the subsequent and final versions – 'I now associate' soon converts to 'I now establish' – but the meaning of these 'fleeting' moments and 'signals' remains necessarily enigmatic in the secular epiphany or religious experience of grace (pp. 69, 70). Poetic 'truth' is here the

intrinsically mystified and lyrical response to nature's 'insubstantial substance' later in this section (XIII): Hill transfers the 'blurred' oils in the manuscript version to the 'blurred and refocused' rain at the end of the stanza (p. 13). As well as 'abrupt', these 'starts' of memory are 'strange' in the notebook (p. 69). The epiphany is, by definition, a passive *and* active experience as the poet responds to the 'signals', in the final version, of 'the slate roofs briefly | caught in scale-nets of silver' (p. 13).

Autonomous Art and Paul Celan's *Atemwende*

These epiphanic passages of lyrical autonomy are inseparable from Hill's engagement with the poetry of Paul Celan. Whereas Harrison's assimilation of Brechtian theatre remains hampered by the problems with 'committed' art that I outlined earlier in this chapter, Hill strives to make *The Orchards of Syon* 'as strong as the art' he admires – in this instance, Celan's later poetry – but the collection is not 'like' Celan's work.⁹⁷ As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the phrase 'Atemwende' recurs throughout the collection: Hill is drawn to the title of Celan's book due to the enigma of the phrase which resists, but does not defy, translation, as well as its denotations of a change in poesis towards more autonomous lyrics in the context of personal survival. The first reference to *Atemwende* occurs in the second notebook for *The Orchards of Syon*, in which Hill refers to 'Atemwende or CELAN or breath-hitch' (p. 16). '[B]reath-hitch' immediately situates Hill's response to Celan's collection beyond the literal translation of the title: '*die Wendé*' usually refers to a turn, lock, turning point or circle, but not a hitch ('*die Störung*'). Drafts following this variation on 'breath-turn' indicate that Hill associates *Atemwende* with the theme of survival that runs throughout *The Orchards of Syon*: '[A]re you a survivor', he asks in one of the very first drafts in notebook fifty-two, 'awaiting | delivery from the furnace or den?' (p. 12). This image returns to the Daniel reference in *The Triumph of Love*, that connotes more widely Jewish victims of the Holocaust.⁹⁸ However, in notebook fifty-three, the notion of survivorship conjoins with a more personal struggle: Hill jots down 'breath-ply' and 'breath-plight', and then asks 'How long | must one survive in this survival?' (p. 43). An extraordinary passage then follows in which Hill plays with various deliberate mistranslations and creative responses to the phrase '*Atemwende*':

breath-pulse, breath-take and return
tack-breath, breath-lease, breath-purchase

breath-find, breath-fend, breath-fund
 breath-mark, breath-sign, breath-splice
 breath-loop, breath-stroke, breath-tap
 breath-twitch, breath-snag(ged), breath-tip
 breath-frond, breath-filament, breath-grace
 touch-breath, breath-touch, breath-turn and re-take
 breath-hover, hover-breath, breath-transfer
 breath-mute, breath-mate, breath-kin
 breath-kind, breath-scope, breath-fits
 breath-snatch, breath-catch, breath-will
 breath-hilt, breath-twin, breath-thrill (p. 48)

This repetition is comparable to but also extends beyond Celan's ruminations over alternative titles for his 1967 collection, such as '*Atemkristall*' ('Breathcrystal') and '*Atemgänge*' ('Breathpassages').⁹⁹ Next to this passage in notebook fifty-three, Hill underlines 'breath-fetch', the only phrase out of this extensive list that survives into section XXXII (p. 32). As Hill states in this section, *Atemwende* 'beggars translation': the reader encounters poetics in which Hill wrestles with the elusive phrase in order to engage with but never 'confess' his own compromised health (p. 32). 'Atem' might 'become stem', Hill writes before the memorable list of mistranslations, 'the eye | undeceived': this line gestures towards his interest in the development of stem cell technology in order to combat macular degeneration (p. 46).

In addition to these deflected glimpses of autobiography, the '*Wende*' in *Atemwende* refers to a poetical 'turn' in the poets' work; for Celan, the shift forms an integral part of his poetic autonomy. In *Breathturn into Timestead* (2014), Pierre Joris summarises the change in Celan's poetics as follows:

In the early sixties, that is, midway through Paul Celan's writing career, a radical change, a poetic *Wende*, or turn occurred, later inscribed in the title of the volume *Atemwende/Breathturn*, heralding the poetics he was to explore for the rest of his life. His poems, which had always been highly complex but rather lush, with an abundance of near-surrealistic imagery and sometimes labyrinthine metaphoricity—though he vehemently denied the critics' suggestion that his was a 'hermetic' poetry—were pared down, the syntax grew tighter and more spiny [...] while the overall composition of the work became much more serial in nature [...] he moved towards a method of composition by cycles and volumes (p. xl)

'[L]ush' does not quite account for the 'cold heat' of Celan's most well-known early poem, 'Todesfuge', but Joris correctly accounts for the poet's artistic *Wende*: the critic notes that the phrase '*Atemwende*' does not refer to

a specific poem in Celan's collection, and is thereby a metapoetical statement about his creativity rather than 'evocative of a specific poetic content' (p. xlii).¹⁰⁰ Similar charges have been made against both poets that focus on their supposedly hermetic autonomous art, as Hill registers at the beginning of *The Orchards of Syon* with his concerns over his supposedly 'stressful' and sombre rather than 'delightful' poetry (p. 11). Joris's comments about 'cycles and volumes' also indicate that *Atemwende* suggests a 'turn' in Hill's publishing strategy: after *Canaan* (1996), Hill wrote the trilogy encompassing *The Triumph of Love*, *Speech! Speech!* and *The Orchards of Syon*; Hill's evocation of Celan thus involves metapoetics that comment on the trajectory of these collections. However, Celan's 'turn' from expansive 'metaphoricity' to 'pared down' and 'spiny' poems hardly represents the extensive sequences in these collections, the breathless pace of *Speech! Speech!*, the 'louder' voice, and what Wainwright refers to as the 'comparative loquacity, even garrulity, of the style'.¹⁰¹ Hill's clipped and agonised poetics in 'Tenebrae' and *Tenebrae* (1978) – published twenty-four years earlier – are more 'pared' than *The Orchards of Syon*, whose diurnal concerns in stanzas of twenty-four lines are more akin to Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* (1939) than Celan's later minimalism. Indeed, the workbooks reveal that Hill first intended to structure the long poem as a series of canzone – he writes in his first notebook of 'the heart | of substance, the *cánzone*' (p. 75) – yet the prospect of hendecasyllabic lines with end-rhyme soon gives way to the twenty-four lines of each stanza, and the collection as a 'Book of Days'.¹⁰² Another initial possibility presents the poem as an extended diptych (p. 13), with the first section entitled 'The Orchards of Syon' and the second 'The House of the Forest of Lebanon', that refers to a building in Solomon's palace mentioned in Kings 7 (pp. 2–5).

Rather than an embracing of autonomous art in the form of skeletal poetics, the 'radical change' in Hill's work denotes instead a 'turn' to serial form – like Celan after *Atemwende* – but with a 'departure' from the modernist antecedent in the form of critical voices that Hill interspaces throughout his poetry from *The Triumph of Love* onwards.¹⁰³ The poem beginning 'Eroded by . . .' in *Atemwende* attacks the '*bunte Gerede*' ('gaudy chatter') of Celan's earlier work, leading into a 'bare northern landscape of snow and ice': *The Orchards of Syon* is not 'gaudy', but it is certainly loquacious poetic 'chatter' compared to the sparse '*Tenebrae*'.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, in contrast with the Eliotian 'ghost' of the pentameter in Hill's collection, Celan 'breaks away from the traditional metrics and rhymes still present in the early work toward a line based on different

units (breath, syllable, word)' (p. lxxvi), as in the poem starting 'Before your late face | a loner | wandering between | nights' (p. 5). *The Orchards of Syon* thus represents a distancing from Celan's late poetics, unlike the influence of Celan's stylistics on Hill's 'Two Chorale-Preludes' in *Tenebrae*, that I have analysed elsewhere.¹⁰⁵ However, the tension that Hill perceives between Celan's later working practices and his own poetic garrulity after *Canaan* is actually a misconception: as Joris emphasises, rather than *Atemwende* symbolising a gradual lapse into silence, between 1948 and 1963 'Celan published five collections of poems [...] With "Breathturn", this pattern changes drastically [...] To talk of *Verstummen* in the case of such high, not to say hectic, productivity is simply nonsense [...] Rather than falling silent, Celan became truly voluble in those, the last years of his life' (p. lxii).

Nevertheless, there are more specific metamodernist links between Celan's *Atemwende* and *The Orchards of Syon* in the context of Adorno's 'Commitment': both poets are striving in different ways to forge enigmatic poetry in their later work. As Joris indicates, the phrase '*Atemwende*' occurs in Celan's 'Meridian' speech on 22 October 1960, his 'most important and extended statement on poetics' (p. xlii), which took place seven years before the publication of the eponymous collection. In this lecture, Celan endorses Arthur Rimbaud's '*je est un autre*' as allowing for a 'single short moment', a 'breathturn', in which the 'estranged' is 'set free'. As well as a revised and elusive poetics, '*Atemwende*' thus signals the importance of the epiphanic moments I have analysed above in *The Orchards of Syon*, as when Hill 'sets free' 'an Other' in the form of a bemusing heron: through the poet's encounter with this 'strangeness', the poem 'breaks open new reality'.¹⁰⁶ Yet, as I have demonstrated in relation to the passages about Normandy and the Manchester bombings, these enigmatic epiphanies always occur in the wider context of an engagement with modern history. The 'snow' for Celan in the poem beginning 'You may confidently . . .' represents a post-war landscape that arises from but does not allude directly to recent historical atrocities (p. 3), just as the *pomerium* I explored above gestures towards the Blitz and Berlin Wall (another '*Wende*'), but focalises a 'marginal borderland' akin to Celan's *Grenzgelände*, 'into which, and from which language has to move for the poem to occur' (p. li). 'You may confidently . . .' appears like a poetical antecedent to Adorno's aphorism in *Minima Moralia* that even 'the blossoming tree lies the moment its bloom is seen without the shadow of terror': Celan recounts that even the youngest leaf of the mulberry tree 'shrieked' when he 'strode through summer' (p. 3).¹⁰⁷ In 'Bad Time for

Poetry' Brecht writes of encroaching historicity in similar terms, but less aphoristically, when his 'Delight at the apple tree in blossom' is marred by 'the house-painter's speeches'.¹⁰⁸ Henri Lefebvre reads Celan's 'terror' in a positivistic sense: 'snow' here is 'the meteor of 20 January, of the Wannsee conference, of Auschwitz' (p. 462), whereas within committed *and* autonomous art the snow is representative of but also separate from such phenomena. Hill and Celan's work grapples with the 'scream [that] never falls silent' – as the latter's translated ending to the film *Night and Fog* (1956) puts it – but also strives to find this autonomous *Grenzegebiet* in which, in Celan's poem 'Before your late face . . .', there is something 'un- | berührt von Gedanken' ('un- | touched by thoughts') (pp. 4–5).¹⁰⁹ This closure recalls that of *The Orchards of Syon*, in which Hill imagines the eponymous orchards shorn of all human interaction, 'neither wisdom | nor illusion of wisdom, not | compensation, nor recompense' (p. 72). Of course, Celan's enjambment indicates that this imagined space may just be an 'illusion': after all, that autonomous 'something' ('*etwas*') is inevitably 'touched' (p. 5); similarly, the 'harvests we bring' to the Orchards of Syon may just be the compensations of human thought (p. 72).

April Warman argues that these orchards 'become a figure for grace untainted by the processes of history', but Hill's closure accedes that, in simultaneously committed and autonomous art, the paradisaical can never be entirely unblemished by the 'deluge'.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, as early as section VIII, Hill hopes that he can conclude the book 'in some shape other | than vexed bafflement' (p. 8). *The Orchards of Syon* does not form a metamodernist text in terms of a baffling puzzle, but because Hill works through Celan's poetics in *Atemwende* in order to strive to understand epiphanic and enigmatic moments such as the encounters with the 'prinking' butterflies (p. 65) and 'banded spectrum' (p. 14) that I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter. Hill's collection adheres to Adorno's suggestion in *Aesthetic Theory* that the primary function of art should be 'a negation of a completely instrumentalised world', unlike Harrison's representation of Roman barbarities in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*.¹¹¹ In contrast with Hill's work, Brecht champions the requirement for what Walter Benjamin termed '*plumpes Denken*' ('crude thinking'), 'that need for thought to simplify itself, crystallize out into essentials before it [can] be made practice', a conception that Adorno 'deplored'.¹¹² Benjamin's metaphor of crystallisation implies a process of purification, whereas Adorno argues in 'Commitment' that, in fact, the opposite is the case: the simplification of Nazism through gangster characters in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* is comparable to the creative approach to historical sources in

Harrison's verse plays, and the 'pornographic' threat of violence in *The Kaisers of Carnuntum*. A Brechtian retort to this formulation of autonomous art would be that the metamodernist 'perpetuation' of, and 'departure from', Celan's poetics in *The Orchards of Syon* results in hermeticism rather than productive enigmas: as Brecht commented on Expressionism and Dadaism, 'to write in such a way that as few people as possible dare to claim they understand you is no great art'.¹¹³ According to this particular Marxist interpretation of modern art, Harrison's reimagining of Brecht's political and avant-garde theatre in the Herakles verse plays would be superior to Hill's revitalisation of Celan's understanding of committed and autonomous poetry. Yet Hill's enigmatical poetics, grappling with 'the largest of tropes', the enigma 'of the human condition', hardly constitutes the 'pretty pictures and aromatic words' in literature that Brecht despised.¹¹⁴ Hill's wrestling with and against the 'deluge' of history in *The Orchards of Syon* situates it as one of the most important works of literature in the twenty-first century, compared to the 'compromised radicalism' of Harrison's work.¹¹⁵