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Geoffrey Hill's 'September Song' poignantly recalls the horrors and injustices of the Holocaust. The poet's stance is of an observer who, while being outraged by the events of the Second World War, is writing from the perspective of the future. The poet himself was born a day before the birthdate given; and if one looks at the dates one realises with horror that the person alluded to was just ten when 'deported'.

The idea of the absurdity of race is here explored:

'Undesirable you may have been.'

They were not harmful, violent or even a nuisance. They were merely unwanted and unfavoured. Jewish customs and beliefs are alluded to:

'Passed over at the proper time'

Passover is a key festival in the Jewish calendar. Here the Angel of Death saved the children whose parents had marked their doors, but did not spare the Egyptians. The Holocaust, then, is an inversion of this, wherein an ungodly force ensures the Jewish people, who believe they are God's chosen, are marked in order to be killed. The idea of a 'proper time' is also very important to Jewish people, especially regarding their observation of the Sabbath.

This is contrasted with the cold efficiency of the Nazi forces:

'As estimated, you died'

These people quantify and account other human lives with painstaking accuracy. They are not murdering other humans for these are Jews, and therefore only worthy of counting and exterminating. The painful inevitability is captured evocatively by Hill:

'Things marched,
sufficient, to that end.'

One gets here that the full force of horror behind what Hitler termed 'The Final Solution.' The inevitability and resignation in Hill's voice leads us to have the ability to read this poem as a representation of the mood of Germans at this time. The idea of sufficiency also appears here to further the idea of an almost mathematical approach to human life; it can be contrasted to the word 'suffering'. Even the cries of the dying are chillingly 'routine.'

Hill then breaks the poem's structure by adding what could be likened to a Shakespearean aside. It is a very self-conscious moment in the poem, and the manner in which it is constructed draws the eye immediately to this section of the poem. The poem seems to be attempting to assert its status as a text- is it elegy or song? The rhyme and rhythm do not appear to be concurrent with the notion of a song. We then receive a sensory description of the scene (line eleven-thirteen). The idea of harvesting, of ripeness and of life is explored. September is when summer draws to a close and stocks are kept for the winter. The idea of vines conjures up images of plenty and of celebration. This is contrasted with the abject horror of the events that unfolded at this time. The poem ends on a definite note that:

'This is plenty. This is more than enough.'

The idea of there being a quota for death, for genocide is disturbing, but common in our news and fact-obsessed age where collateral damage is a perfectly accepted by-product of a badly fought war.

The idea of writing supremely tragic events is always going to be difficult, but this is compounded with the Holocaust. An estimated six million Jewish men, women and children were put to death. Hill is an English poet, born in the 1930s, so his understanding of the Holocaust comes from documents and literature. This is where issues of legitimacy of authorship occur. Is Hill's work, then, any less valid, due to his 'non-experiential' status? Does one have to live through such events in order to understand them enough to immortalise them in literature? This is, of course, a question of individual reasoning, of whether one prefers good literature or historical accuracy. Through the use of dates, Hill aligns himself with the protagonist of his 'September Song.' This emphasises the notion that suffering and injustice are universal concerns, but also draws to our attention the good fortune we have in where we are born. The role of the poet here is to voice the injustice of society in a time (1968) when this was a major world concern. The role America played in the Vietnam War and, earlier, in the Cuban missile crisis, had terrified the world. This poem serves to remind people of the dreadful consequences of war and of racism.

This poem is a work examining the negative, that which is no longer, particularly in the first stanza. It is not about what the Jews are; it is about what they are not. This reactionary notion of identity is common in most nationalist or racial conflict, especially in Northern Ireland. It is a poem of absence, of removal, of taking away. This notion of ethnic cleansing has echoed through policies of governments east and west and, one can be sure, will remain a feature of the global political landscape. Hill addressed this inevitability but juxtaposes it with horror ('patented terror') to shake the reader out of their apathy.