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A response to 'September Song.'

This short essay is an analytical interpretation of the poem 'September Song' by Geoffrey Hill written in 1968. Emphasis shall fall upon Formalist methods of investigation; the 'words on the page' assume the primary point of investigation, whilst authorial, reader-response, historicist and other analytical assumptions are sidelined. The investigation will address the form and structure of the text before looking specifically at any implicit textual ideas. Finally, the study will be drawn together in a culminative conclusion.

The poem's actual layout on the page is peculiar to an extent. When Oscar Wilde met Walt Whitman on his tour of America, Whitman made a remark that stayed with Wilde for life: he said that he tried to arrange his poetry on the page as one arranges words on a tombstone, so that they look pretty. There is an obvious tension between a beautified tombstone and the grim reality of death that the stone symbolises. One may see in 'September Song' a more literal 'tombstone' layout than the one Whitman alluded to. The epigraph 'born 19.6.32-deported 24.9.42' is suggestive of the 'lived' and 'died' dates commonly found upon conventional Western gravestones. Yet Hill's words are not laid out 'prettily'; rather, they are disjointed, ragged, emphasising the disgusting quality of death. Keywords are strategically hung upon the ends of metrically irregular, unrhymed lines in such a way that emphasis is conferred upon them: 'untouchable...marched...patented...enough.' The curious, perhaps bitter and ironic concluding line ('This is plenty. This is more than enough.') may be interpreted as that which closes the details of the gravestone. It is an overarching after-

thought, a coda. The structural position of the word 'enough' ends the poem as a verbal full-stop. The syllabic stress is crucial to this effect, where the second syllable is emphasised naturally: 'e- n-ou-gh'. The ideas and images shall be analysed shortly, which will lend weight to the idea of the poem as a grave demarcation.

The narrator's voice begins by addressing a 'you' on the first line. The direct switch to past tense as the second stanza opens with 'you died' indicates that the 'other person' is dead. Consequently, one asks: If the other person is dead, where is the narrator speaking to him/her from? Could the narrator be dead also, thus speaking from beyond the grave? Resolution is withheld until stanza three, which is essentially an insertion in parentheses interrupting the text's stream of ideas, and which explains that the poem is an elegy by the narrator for the narrator. The suggestion emerges that the poem is thus an abstract cry to humanity from beyond the grave. The 'smoke of harmless fires' drifting into the narrator's eyes are presumably harmless because the narrator is dead. One is also returned to the second stanza's 'Zyklon', where the smoke indicates Zyklon B gas used in Nazi gas chambers during the Holocaust. The cyclical return to the earlier point in the formal structure (this return from stanza four to Zyklon in stanza two) perhaps represents the dead narrator's reliving of this gas experience from beyond the grave. Perhaps, if one was to hazard a guess at where the narrator actually is, the answer would be that he/she is in purgatory living over and over the torments of a doomed life.

The text contains several noteworthy and engaging images:

'Undesirable you may not have been, untouchable
you were not'

This quasi-paradox reveals the irony of the Nazi policy, for they wanted nothing to do with the Jews, yet could never let them live in peace; they constantly terrorised them. The idea is relayed on human terms in that the above quote seems to hold in its confines a more general irony of humanity also. The idea of the victim(s) being 'passed over' (line three) evokes religious ideas of the Passover feast and 'patented' in line six deconstructs religious ideals in the suggestion that the inflicted terror and death were churned out, man-made, a consequence, perhaps, of a cold, industrialised, irreligious modern world. 'Patented terror' has something in it of the tension of opposites that so pervades the poetry of W B Yeats. Again 'routine cries' (line seven) juxtaposes the 'routine' systematic, calculated, patented with 'cries', the visceral, the unbridled, an expression of rash impulsive humanity in its least 'patented' form. The idea that 'things marched, sufficient, to that end' has all the sense of war-euphemism in it. How often does one turn on the news to see some heartbreaking image of – for instance – a town being ransacked by gunfire, whilst the newscaster reads some type of evasive euphemistic statement such as 'the town was secured by coalition forces'; 'the target was neutralised' or perhaps even 'things marched, sufficient, to that end.' The end refers, it would seem, to the ending of so many Jewish lives. 'September fattens on vines' (line 11) reaffirms thriving life in the wake of so many dismal ideals. The flaking roses undo this, seemingly decaying in tandem with some charred war-torn ruins.

This poem seems to be an abstract lament for that part of humanity that was lost during the Holocaust; torn from humanity without a care. Who knows where the deceased narrator is or who he or she is; all one can be sure of is that the poem stands as a literary grave, a storehouse of ideas and images conjuring the flickering echo of lost humanity; forcing the reader to relive the tragedy in the mind's eye as the narrator does in his/her purgatorial prison.