

Bryony Hill

‘The Sunlight on the Garden’, written in 1937, encapsulates the atmosphere of uncertainty and unease generated by the events of the Spanish Civil War. The war in Spain, with Germany’s participation, could no longer be constructed as a working-class uprising, but was in actuality a demonstration of imperial power and domination. It became clear that Europe was ‘advanc[ing]’ towards the ‘evil iron’ terror of another world war. The speaker immersed in the ‘gold[en]’ ‘sunlight’ of Britain’s edenic paradise prophesies humanity’s imminent ‘descen[t]’:

We cannot cage the minute
 Within its nets of gold,
 When all is told
 We cannot beg for pardon.

The speaker longs to capture the beauty of this evanescent moment, and transform it into something that is permanent and complete. The words ‘cage’ and ‘nets’ evoke images of containment and boundaries that are stable. Light, however, will fall whenever another object does not impede it: it has elemental power which the mortal cannot tame. The repetition of ‘cannot’, and the negative, predatory, connotations of the ‘cage’ images, imply the futility of forestalling the fluid movement of time. The chime of ‘gold’ and ‘told’ only confirms that the golden inter-war years will have more sinister confessions in store. Evil will be foretold, and the priest will not bring any ‘pardon’. MacNeice begins each line with the phoneme ‘w’ to create a linguistic unit. This emphasises that the walls of Eden will be barred; no human can destroy the syntactical stability. The change in humanity’s fortune is as shifting as the weather; one cannot control the movement from what was once a warm and glorious day into cold and sombreness. The sun has been transformed from a curvaceous object into a ‘hard’-edged shape, prophesying the encroaching doom.

The speaker testifies to the care-free and decadent period of the 1920s and 30s. S/he evokes the generic saying 'pie in the sky, through his/her 'sky' metaphor. Society is figured as 'flying' like a bird through the air; free and pure of earth's contaminated influences. The full internal rhyme of lines 13 and 14 of 'flying' and 'defying' confirms humanity's ability to transcend human morality and revoke evil. The intertextual reference to the proverbial saying, however, reveals the double-edged nature of the speaker's metaphor. Humanity's construction of itself as perfect is delusional and ignorant. The centrifugal force of the 'sirens' on 'earth' will pull the flyer back down to earth, and the reality that humanity is not advancing towards the sanctity of heaven. The human soul is 'dying' and cannot be restored. The diction of the opening and closing stanzas are mirror images of each other. The words 'pardon' and 'garden' reflect each other to create a never-ending narrative. Society is trapped within a cyclical descent towards the bottom of Dante's Inferno. In the first stanza the verb 'hardens' is written in the present tense. By the fourth stanza it has become 'hardened': the action of descent has been seen through to its completion. The walls of the Inferno will enclose society to its very 'end'. This fate cannot be prevented. The speaker can only gain solace from the memory of his/her prelapsarian condition. S/he will hold that feeling of 'glad[ness]' as the approaching 'rain' descends.