

# Reforming the Religious Sonnet: Poetry, Doubt and the Church in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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*This essay examines the tradition of 'doubting' poetics through an assessment of selected nineteenth- and twentieth-century sonnets. Through considering recent work on Victorian literature and culture, it argues for the importance of the poetics of faith in this period, and assesses the presence of nineteenth-century Christian, and particularly Anglican, forms and concepts in the genre of the sonnet. Analysing later twentieth-century sonnets by Geoffrey Hill and Carol Ann Duffy, it suggests that the sonnet remains vitally linked to the literature of faith and that these sonnets have vital links to their Victorian predecessors.*

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Of all periods in British history that might be regarded as the 'age of doubt', a brief survey of twentieth-century works of literary criticism and history suggests that the Victorian era is the top contender. 'Faith', in the titles of Victorian literature seminars and university courses, is inevitably succeeded by 'doubt', and the most popular summary of the state of religion in Victorian Britain would tend to describe belief crumbling under the onslaught of Darwinism, geology, biblical criticism and the relentless progress of knowledge, inevitably leading to the scepticism and secularism of the twentieth century. Perhaps the best-known text of Victorian doubt is Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach', with its famous invocation of the withdrawal of faith:

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

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Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.<sup>1</sup>

As has been often noted, Arnold's metaphor reflects new scientific, and particularly geological, advances; the eternal process by which the cliffs of Dover are worn down and the oceans advance or recede. The poem is 'often seen as one of the representative poems of its age' precisely because it 'registers a deep sense of spiritual alienation'.<sup>2</sup> But 'Dover Beach' not only represents the lens through which generations of twentieth-century students and their teachers have regarded Victorian faith, it also indicates the central role that *poetry* has played in this perception. Many key themes and genres covered on introductory undergraduate or graduate courses in Victorian literature – gender and sexuality, imperialism and race, realism, sensation, decadence and so forth – are taught primarily through works of fiction. Religion is one of the few topics that undergraduate students of Victorian literature and culture today would strongly associate with poetry: Alfred Tennyson, Arnold, Arthur Hugh Clough, Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins and others. As I have argued elsewhere, this is entirely justifiable given that Victorian writers themselves attached enormous importance to poetry and poetics as ways of expressing, supporting and developing attitudes towards faith and unbelief.<sup>3</sup>

What this essay seeks to do is offer a reassessment of the role of 'doubting' poetics, through a consideration of one key genre, the sonnet. After a brief discussion of the state of the field in Victorian studies in relation to recent reconsiderations of the literature of doubt, I will turn to the sonnet as a form that was widely deployed in the nineteenth century to indicate adherence to faith in general, and to the Church in particular. The sonnet was by no means exclusively used by Anglican and Anglo-Catholic writers, but in this period it proved especially amenable for writers from the burgeoning high church movement.<sup>4</sup> The formal constraints of the

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', lines 21–8, in idem, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Kenneth Allott, 2nd edn (London, 1979), 242.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Brown, 'Victorian Poetry and Science', in Joseph Bristow, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge, 2000), 137–58, at 144.

<sup>3</sup> See Kirstie Blair, *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> I include a brief discussion of the Anglo-Catholic sonnet in *Form and Faith*, ch. 6. For a good discussion of the religious sonnet in this period, see Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-*

sonnet and its consequent reliance on regular and predictable metres and rhyme-schemes gave writers an opportunity to meld form and content in reflections on the value of the regular, predictable, familiar and formally delimited aspects of worship in the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions. If poetry in general made a substantial contribution to ecclesiastical history in the long nineteenth century, the sonnet in particular lent itself to ideological movements such as Tractarianism or Anglo-Catholic ritualism. I will argue here that far from vanishing in the twentieth century, these aspects of the sonnet remain key to interpreting major sonnets by diverse twentieth-century poets, using examples by Geoffrey Hill and Carol Ann Duffy to suggest that the religious sonnet retains considerable force in late twentieth-century literature. By paying close attention to the form and language of twentieth-century sonnets, we can see the allusions to a Victorian literature of faith that underlie apparently secular works, showing how a contemporary poetics of doubt, a poetics that often rejects church-going and questions the function of Christianity in modern society, remains haunted by Victorian religion.

I

The agonized but resigned pessimism of ‘Dover Beach’ was accepted as the standard attitude of leading Victorian thinkers by the majority of twentieth-century scholars. Lance St John Butler’s 1990 study of Victorian literature, *Victorian Doubt*, for instance, argued:

It seems that early in the nineteenth century a major shift in consciousness took place such that no *enfant de siècle*, as de Musset called his generation in 1836, could seriously write in the old way, and the new way was to write in a language and a manner shot through with doubt even when the intention was to assert freedom from doubt.<sup>5</sup>

Butler’s account is implicitly dismissive of religious literature (which constituted, of course, a massive percentage of all literature published in the Victorian period) as reactionary and behind the times. No true

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*Century Sonnet* (London, 2006). Phelan offers a detailed discussion of arguably the most important self-reflexive sonnet of the long nineteenth century, Wordsworth’s ‘Nuns fret not at their narrow convent room’.

<sup>5</sup> Lance St John Butler, *Victorian Doubt* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), 10. For a more nuanced account of Victorian doubt from the same period, see Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain* (London, 1986).

Victorian could evade doubt, he suggests, whether they wanted to or not, and thus no form of literature reliant on belief could be ‘serious’, in the sense of adequately representing its period.

This is in itself a serious charge, and one very much open to contestation. In the last two decades, there has been a perceptible shift away from such assumptions, towards a more complex and contested view of the dominance of ‘doubt’ in Victorian culture. Timothy Larsen’s *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* and his subsequent monographs represent a key recent indication of this shift.<sup>6</sup> Larsen’s convincing argument uses a set of case studies of famous ‘doubters’ to show that their trajectory was not simply from faith to loss of belief, but often the reverse, in that many returned to Christianity in later life. Larsen rightly laments the tendency of scholars to present the loss of faith as inevitable for any right-thinking Victorian: ‘In some instances, the theme of “honest doubt” has been so presented as to leave the impression that Victorians who were keeping up with their reading and had the wit to understand it would inevitably have lost their faith if they had the courage to face the truth.’<sup>7</sup>

As he notes, it is ‘the field of English or literary studies’ that has been ‘a major contributor to this distortion’.<sup>8</sup> Reading these words a few years after the publication of Larsen’s monograph, however, I questioned his use of the present tense. As a literary critic working in the field of Victorian literature and religion since the early 2000s, I had witnessed – and in a small way contributed to – the marked movement in my field towards a greater concentration on the literature of faith. By the time I wrote my own work on the subject, I was able to draw on the important new insights produced by studies such as F. E. Gray’s *Christian and Lyric Tradition in Victorian Women’s Poetry* (2010); Cynthia Scheinberg’s *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England* (2002); Charles LaPorte’s *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011) and Emma Mason and Mark Knight’s quietly revolutionary introduction, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature* (2006).

This in itself represents a small sample of new work on Victorian religious poetics. When it comes to the two writers whose work has attracted most critical attention, Christina Rossetti and Gerard

<sup>6</sup> See Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford, 2011); idem, *The Slain God: Anthropologists and the Christian Faith* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Larsen, *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2006), vii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

Manley Hopkins, the last two decades have seen an extensive re-assessment of their religious poetics.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it could plausibly be argued that we owe much of this new discussion of the poetry of faith to the re-emergence of Rossetti from the 1980s onwards as one of the major Victorian poets. Two of the general studies cited above, plus Mason's *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (2006) – groundbreaking in its primary focus on religion – concentrate on women's poetry, and the rediscovery of the literature of faith has thus been substantially aided by the drive to recover and reassess Victorian women's writing. This is also true in recent work on 'minor' religious novelists, with a new and substantial body of emerging criticism on writers such as Charlotte Yonge and her contemporaries.<sup>10</sup>

Yet if these scholarly works indicate the renewed energy devoted to the literature of faith, it is by no means certain that they have, as yet, altered the popular perception of the Victorian period as an era of 'doubt'. Following A. N. Wilson's *God's Funeral* (1999), which argued that 'the nineteenth century had created a climate for itself ... in which God had become unknowable', Christopher Lane's *The Age of Doubt* (2011) similarly sets out to defend nineteenth-century doubt in the light of a perceived rise in religious fundamentalism at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Lane's explicitly polemical book, also aimed at a popular as well as an academic audience, sets out to defend secularism and unbelief in the face of the rise of the Christian right in the United States: 'This book advances an argument on behalf of doubt itself. It dwells on the advantages of religious and philosophic

<sup>9</sup> On Rossetti, see, for example, Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender and Time* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1999); Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* (London, 2002); Mary Arsenau, *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (London, 2006); Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (London, 2006); Karen Dieleman, *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter* (Athens, OH, 2012); Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (London, 2014). See also Emma Mason's forthcoming *Christina Rossetti: Green Grace* (Oxford, forthcoming 2017). Few publications on Hopkins do not discuss his religious convictions: see, for example, Bernadette Waterman Ward, *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington DC, 2002); Jill Muller, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding* (New York, 2003); Duc Dau, *Touching God: Hopkins and Love* (London and New York, 2013). For recent reconsiderations, see also the essays in *Religion and Literature* 45/2 (Summer 2013), in the section on Hopkins edited by Martin Dubois.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Tamara S. Wagner, ed., *Charlotte Yonge: Rereading Domestic Religious Fiction* (New York, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (London, 1999), 12.

uncertainty as a creative stimulant and assesses the benefits of scepticism in a world that still tries to rid us of that quality.<sup>12</sup> In this endeavour, Lane returns to a vision of Victorian intellectual and cultural life as premised on the loss of faith, directly agreeing with Butler's argument that 'doubt became something positive' in this period, and espousing the standard view that religious doubt was exciting and radical, since it 'ultimately involved questioning the fabric of British social and cultural life'.<sup>13</sup> Like Butler and Wilson, he implies that leading intellectuals of the period inevitably became doubters – or if they did not, then this in itself is an indication that they were not at the forefront of intellectual developments.

Lane's work confirms that 'English or literary studies' (his disciplinary field) remains heavily invested in a faith-and-doubt paradigm. What has not, perhaps, been adequately explored is the fact that this is as much due to aesthetic perceptions as to political and ideological convictions. When Lane makes appeal to the 'major poetic statements on doubt – from Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) to Gerard Manley Hopkins' *Wreck of the Deutschland* (1875) and Thomas Hardy's "God's Funeral" (c.1908) – to back up his arguments, he is calling upon some of the most innovative and exciting literary works of the period.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, nineteenth-century Christian verse can often seem bland and uninteresting. Take these stanzas from John Keble's 'Morning', for example, some of the best-known lines from arguably the best-known collection of poetry in the Victorian period:

New every morning is the love  
 Our wakening and uprising prove;  
 Through sleep and darkness safely brought,  
 Restored to life, and power, and thought.

New mercies, each returning day,  
 Hover around us while we pray;  
 New perils past, new sins forgiven,  
 New thoughts of God, new hopes of heaven.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Lane, *The Age of Doubt: Tracing the Roots of our Religious Uncertainty* (Princeton, NJ, 2011), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, *Victorian Doubt*, 2; Lane, *Age of Doubt*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Lane, *Age of Doubt*, 67.

If on our daily course our mind  
Be set to hallow all we find,  
New treasures still, of countless price,  
God will provide for sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

Keble's poem is formally regular and entirely predictable, using a standard four-line stanza and iambic tetrameter with firm rhyming couplets. He speaks in an authoritative and universalized voice of standard comforting platitudes – or, at least, ideas that were to become platitudes as *The Christian Year* established itself as one of the most widely read works of the period. Compare this to a typical Hopkins stanza from 'The Wreck of the Deutschland':

Thou mastering me  
God! giver of breath and bread;  
World's strand, sway of the sea;  
Lord of living and dead;  
Thou hast bound bones & veins in me, fastened me flesh,  
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,  
Thy doing; and dost thou touch me afresh?  
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.<sup>16</sup>

Even on a cursory glance, and without reading Hopkins's lines, it is clear that his poem represents a startling break from the norm in its layout on the page, its varied line-lengths and lack of clear pattern. Hopkins, in sharp contrast to Keble, speaks from a confessional first-person perspective, directly sharing his doubts and agonies with the reader, and embodying his questioning through the jagged and broken structures of the poem. One of these extracts is utterly conventional and conservative, one is radical. One unquestioningly accepts faith, one appears to call every certainty into question. Critics have devoted thousands of pages to analysing 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', and will continue to do so, while Keble's poem has rarely attracted any serious analysis. If 'Morning' is typical of the literature of

<sup>15</sup> John Keble, 'Morning', lines 21–32, from *The Christian Year*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1829). 'Morning' is the opening poem of the collection. It is one of relatively few poems in the *Christian Year* that also became well known as hymns.

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland', lines 1–8, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford, 2002), 110.

faith, why would we, as literary critics invested in the close reading of poetry, ever choose to study or teach it over Hopkins?

Yet to perceive Keble and Hopkins as aesthetically opposed, rather than as belonging to the same spectrum, is profoundly problematic, in ways that hint at the syllogism that sometimes seems to haunt studies of literary doubt: doubt equals experimentation and novelty; this poem is experimental and innovative; therefore it is part of the literature of doubt. In fact, of the three major poetic works Lane cites in passing as key examples of doubt, only Hardy's poem – written more than half a century after Tennyson's – unquestionably fits into this mode. Tennyson was unequivocally a Christian. *In Memoriam* circles around some of the most unsettling issues for Victorian orthodox Christians; it raises them and agonizes over them; and it expresses the poet's vexed relationship to secure belief in the light of the loss of someone dearly loved. But it begins, and ends, with expressions of faith. So does 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. Like countless religious poets, including Tennyson, Hopkins considers how a pointless and horrific tragedy leads to questions about God's justice and goodness. Those questions are, however, answered within the poem. Moreover, formally speaking, a stanza like that cited above is misleading, because it initially appears far less ordered and structured than on closer examination it is. It has a strong rhyme-scheme (ababcbca), where the last rhyme circles back to the first, and makes use of Hopkins' experimental alliterative stress-patterns, which he himself did not see as a break with tradition but as a return to a neglected aspect of English verse.<sup>17</sup> It is entirely possible to argue that Hopkins sees himself as obeying rules as strict as, if not stricter than, the conventions deployed by Keble. Both he and Tennyson are in the tradition of George Herbert, John Donne, John Milton and many other religious poets writing in English, whose poems frequently express the poet's doubts and fears before coming, in their conclusions, to a renewed sense of faith. 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' is a work of faith that examines how doubts are resolved; it is not therefore a 'major poetic statement on doubt'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> A considerable amount of recent Hopkins criticism has been devoted to reassessments of his prosodic theory and practice and how these relate to his religious beliefs and affiliations: see, for example, *Hopkins Quarterly* 38/1–2 (Winter-Spring 2011), a special issue edited by Meredith Martin, on 'Hopkins's Prosody'.

<sup>18</sup> Lane, *Age of Doubt*, 67.



Moreover, privileging poetry such as Hopkins's over the 'standard' religious poems of the period is also misleading because it gives an inaccurate picture of the reading habits of most literate middle-class Victorians. 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' was published in the Jesuit periodical *The Month*, but it did not meet with approval and its circulation was extremely limited. Most of Hopkins's poetry was not published in his lifetime. In contrast, Keble's poetry, whether or not we like it, had a profound impact on the literary and religious cultures of his period, including on Hardy and Hopkins. Studies of the literature of doubt draw our attention to some of the most aesthetically important works written in the Victorian period, yet these are not always the texts that were most read and most widely circulated. Anyone who examines *popular* literature from the long nineteenth century is immediately faced with the fact that the vast proportion of it is Christian, pious and conventional. 'Doubting' poets and other writers were well aware how inescapable this culture was, and indeed often made little effort to escape it. For Hardy, for instance, God might be dead, but religion was not. His poems consistently return to imagery of faith and ritual even at their most despairing. As the crowd in 'God's Funeral' affirms:

How sweet it was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely at the eventide  
And feel a blest assurance he was there!<sup>19</sup>

Quite possibly in an allusion to Keble's entirely assured 'Morning', Hardy's imagined doubters long for the trust that they cannot feel. Butler argued that the language and style of Victorian literature was 'shot through with doubt', but it is just as accurate to assert that even the most doubting works of literature from this period are shot through with faith, embodied here, and in a great many other poems, by a sense of (ecclesiastical) ritual and tradition.

## II

In the remainder of this essay, I will examine a small sample of nineteenth and twentieth-century sonnets, in order to suggest that this

<sup>19</sup> 'God's Funeral', in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Samuel Hynes, 4 vols (Oxford, 1984), 2: 36.

remains true into the twentieth century and that like the hymns in Hardy's ghost-poem, 'The Dead Quire', the forms and language of faith may have 'waned', yet they also 'linger', 'like the notes afar | Of banded seraphim'.<sup>20</sup> While many poetic genres could be used in such a discussion, the sonnet is particularly apt because of its long tradition of use in English religious poetry, especially in the seventeenth-century sonnets of Donne, Herbert and Milton. In addition, religious thinkers and literary critics have conceived of the sonnet as a form particularly significant for religious purposes, due to its formal constraints. Keble, in his lectures as Oxford's Professor of Poetry, argued that the sonnet, 'one of the most favourite forms in the present day', was popular despite its 'extremely narrow limits' and 'restraints' because '[t]he fact that it was unusually stringent enabled it to soothe and compose [poets'] deepest emotions and longings without violating a true reserve.'<sup>21</sup> Keble's poetic theory, and indeed his adherence to the Church of England, were premised on the importance of 'soothing' in religion, and this is one of many instances in which he advocates strictness of form, in poetics as in religious practice, for its ability simultaneously to express and to conceal emotion. The sonnet, he suggests, is ideal for these purposes. Along similar lines, C. S. Lewis, discussing sixteenth-century sonnet writers, argued that the impersonality created by the sonnet's formal structure meant that:

A good sonnet ... was like a good public prayer: the test is whether the congregation can 'join' and make it their own, not whether it provides interesting materials for the spiritual biography of the compiler. ... The whole body of sonnet sequences is much more like an erotic liturgy than a series of erotic confidences.<sup>22</sup>

Both Keble and Lewis perceive the sonnet in liturgical terms, as a poetic form premised on repetitive, rhythmic structures with which the reader is expected to be familiar, and as a 'public' rather than a deeply personal form, one that may express the poet's feelings, yet inevitably does so with restraint and reserve.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 1: 310.

<sup>21</sup> John Keble, *Keble's Lectures on Poetry, 1832–41*, transl. E. K. Francis, 2 vols (Oxford, 1912), 2: 99, 101.

<sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, *English Literature of the Sixteenth Century, excluding Drama* (Oxford, 1954), 490–1.

This perception is borne out by the vast number of sonnets, and sonnet sequences, published on Church themes in the nineteenth century. Perhaps because the sonnet was also a form with relatively easy rules to learn, and because writing sonnets was in effect a standard exercise in middle- or upper-class Victorian education, virtually every Anglican clergyman seemed to try his hand at sonneteering in praise of the Church of England. The model here was William Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* (first published in 1822 as *Ecclesiastical Sketches*, and revised and expanded in succeeding decades), a lengthy sequence reflecting Wordsworth's increasingly high church views through a review of the history of Anglicanism in England and beyond. Poets in the Tractarian or high church tradition could also be inspired by Isaac Williams's sonnet sequences, particularly his book-length sonnet sequence *The Altar; or Meditations in Verse on the Great Christian Sacrifice* (1847), a work worth revisiting if only for its importance as a potential influence on the greatest writer of religious sonnets in the period, Christina Rossetti, who was a keen admirer of Williams's writings. Ecclesiastical sonnets were a substantial if now largely forgotten part of the lively reassessment of the Church of England's past, present and future that was ongoing throughout the Victorian period.

Anglican sonnet-writers tended to use the traditional structures of the sonnet as a way of arguing for the significance of the traditional structures of the Church. Richard Mant, bishop of Down, Connor and Dromore from 1842, supplies a typical example in 'The Apostles' Liturgy', sonnet XXIII in his sequence 'Musings on the Church and her Services', appended to one of his prose works:

If, by the rule Apostolick, to plead  
For all that God holds good, and deprecate  
What He holds evil; if with our estate  
Our brother man's to blend, and intercede  
For friend and foe, but chief that we may lead  
In peace, and rul'd by God's crown'd delegate,  
Lives pure and holy; if to dedicate  
Thanks for past good with pray'r for present need;  
Be welcome worship: *then content with thee,*  
*My country's Church, I join the voice to raise,*  
*Collect, and psalm inspir'd, and litany,*

*And hymn of glory. Ever-varying phrase*  
*God seeks not; pleas'd, when from corruption free,*  
And cloth'd with truth, his Church her homage pays.<sup>23</sup>

In the italicized passage, Mant proclaims the value of the liturgy in supporting morality, communal feeling, and 'lives pure and holy' under the king. What is notable here is that Mant particularly defends the use of repetition in worship – '[e]ver-varying phrase | God seeks not' – and the significance of participating in a repetitive tradition with others – 'I join the voice'. The poem sees Church services as a key component of national feeling, 'my country's Church'. The Church may have been under threat in the 1830s, as Mant's warning about corruption suggests, but its liturgy was still divinely sanctioned. Choosing a sonnet sequence to express these ideas enabled Mant to connect this repetitive and tightly structured poetic format to his argument about the value of repetition.

To take another instance, from the Anglo-Catholic (later Roman Catholic) poet Aubrey De Vere. In 'Prayer II', again part of an ecclesiastical sonnet sequence, De Vere uses the sonnet to argue once more for the importance of 'rightful worship':

Then what is prayer? Peruse that Gospel word:  
Mark, learn, examine; it shall teach thee well.  
That Word 'which was with God, and was God, Lord  
Of life, the light of men!' in parable  
Familiarly expounded; oracle  
Pronouncing weal or woe; in precepts heard  
With tears by the renouncing infidel;  
In those meek orisons, whose pure accord  
The human with the divine nature blends  
So subtly that at once we recognize  
Man's best emotions and the will of God.  
*With these sure guides, so studied that our ends*  
*Be truth, not argument, our hearts shall rise*  
*To heaven, in rightful worship, understood.*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Richard Mant, *The Happiness of the Blessed* (Philadelphia, PA, 1833), 155 (italics added).

<sup>24</sup> Aubrey De Vere, XIV: 'Prayer II', in *A Song of Faith* (London, 1842), 136.

De Vere's final line specifically references Herbert's famous sonnet, 'Prayer (I)', which concludes:

Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices, something understood.<sup>25</sup>

But where Herbert's poem ends in glorious mystery, deliberately refusing to define what is 'understood' and how, De Vere responds to this by implying that understanding occurs through the act of 'rightful' (i.e. Anglican) worship. De Vere is not speaking about personal, informal prayer, but about the precepts and orisons of the Church, the only 'sure guides' to faith. As in Mant's sonnet, the poem argues for the importance of adhering to set forms of worship by using a set form itself.

### III

Mant and De Vere are typical of hundreds of Anglican sonnet-writers in the Victorian period. Their sonnets, like Wordsworth's, reflect upon the persistence of a national religious and literary tradition and emphasize the ability of poetry to soothe and manage emotion, as a form both expressive and restrictive. What happens to this particular genre of religious verse after 'God's Funeral', at a point in the twentieth century when it cannot be assumed that readers are familiar with Church services or ritual, and that may, suggests David Jones, have seen 'the severing of the link between the English language and Christian iconography'?<sup>26</sup> There are no doubt many sonnets by lesser known Christian poets in the first half of the twentieth century, but the major 'modernist' poems we might most associate with reimaginings of Anglican and Roman Catholic forms, such as T. S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday* (1930) or David Jones's *The Anathemata* (1952), do not deploy this form. W. H. Auden, who was deeply influenced by the Church of England and its liturgy and returned to churchgoing in later life, was a leading writer of sonnets, and the links between his use

<sup>25</sup> George Herbert, 'Prayer (I)', lines 13–14, in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (London, 2004), 46.

<sup>26</sup> David Jones, cited in Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Contemporary Poetry and Belief', in Peter Robinson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford, 2013), 694–706, at 695.

of the form and his faith would repay detailed consideration.<sup>27</sup> John Betjeman, perhaps surprisingly, did not use the sonnet in his Anglican poetics, though another of the great mid- to late-century British religious poets, R. S. Thomas, did.<sup>28</sup> Although it is not overtly concerned with Church history and rituals, Thomas's outstanding sonnet, 'The Other', in which the speaker meditates on prayer while listening to the waves breaking against the shore, is arguably a vital reworking of Arnold's 'Dover Beach' and thus a twentieth-century reconsideration of Victorian doubt.<sup>29</sup>

Within the British poetic tradition, however, the twentieth-century sonnets which resonate most with the Victorian genre described above (and which might indeed be described as neo-Victorian in their intensive engagement with the culture of this period) are Geoffrey Hill's, particularly his sequence 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England'.<sup>30</sup> The religious sonnet does not disappear in the period prior to this sequence, from the turn of the century to the 1970s, but with Hill's poem its relationship to these Victorian predecessors comes sharply back to attention. Hill, one of Britain's most respected living poets, is known for his engagement with religious history and culture. The purpose of my discussion is not to assess his own beliefs or affiliations, about which he has been famously cagey. While a great many of his poems heavily reference the Anglican tradition in which he grew up, he declared in a 2011 interview that his status as an 'Anglican' poet was not of his making: 'There was a brief period when the Church of England took me up after I published *Tenebrae* but subsequent books have once more put a distance between us, to our mutual relief I believe.'<sup>31</sup> Hill's comments on his religious poetics often appear to locate his work in the grand

<sup>27</sup> Auden's sonnet sequences, such as 'The Quest', do not, however, reference the history and ritual of the Church in the same way as those discussed here. On Auden's religion and his poetics, see Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven, CT, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> On Betjeman's Anglican poetics, see Kevin J. Gardner, *Betjeman and the Anglican Imagination* (London, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'The Other', first published in *Destinations* (1985), in his *Collected Poems* (London, 1993), 457.

<sup>30</sup> On Hill as neo-Victorian, see David Wheatley, "'Dispatched Dark Regions Far Afield and Farther": Contemporary Poetry and Victorianism', in Matthew Bevis, ed., *The Oxford Handbook to Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, 2013), 291–308.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Jessica Campbell, *Oxford Student*, 26 May 2011, cited in Kathryn Murphy, 'Geoffrey Hill and Confession', in John Lyon and Peter McDonald, eds, *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Later Work* (Oxford, 2012), 127–42, at 135.

tradition of ‘doubting’ poets such as Hardy, with whom he has a clear affinity:

If critics accuse me of evasiveness or the vice of nostalgia, or say that *I* seem incapable of grasping true religious experience, I would answer that the grasp of true religious experience is a privilege reserved for very few, and that one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of a much more common situation – the sense of *not* being able to grasp true religious experience.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, like Hardy, Hill has written many poems in which allusions to the Church and to ecclesiastical history, not least *formal* allusions, emphasize the doubtful survival of religion in the face of the poet’s or his society’s troubled relationship to ‘true religious experience’.

‘An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England’ is perhaps the most notable of Hill’s poems in relation to specifically Victorian religious and poetic experiences. First published as three sonnets in 1973, in a collection in homage to George Barker, the sequence was later revised and published in 1978, in *Tenebrae*, as a sequence of thirteen sonnets. The title repeats that of Augustus Pugin’s architectural and theological treatise of 1843, part of Pugin’s very successful campaign to revive medieval Gothic architecture, a cause taken up by the young men of Cambridge, in the Cambridge Camden Society, and in part by the Oxford Movement.<sup>33</sup> Hill originally incorporated an epigraph to the sequence from Benjamin Disraeli’s religio-political novel *Sybil* (1845), indicating the link between the architectural revival and the political culture of Young England, with its passion for perceived medieval ideals of chivalry and community. As Hugh Haughton has noted, Hill’s reprisal of Pugin’s title ‘might even tempt the modern reader into classifying its author as a deviously nostalgic revivalist of outmoded poetic and theological architecture’: the ‘architecture’ referenced here is the architecture of the ecclesiastical sonnet sequence itself.<sup>34</sup> Hill’s complex, ambiguous sonnets are consciously restrained, deliberately reserved about the poet’s attitude

<sup>32</sup> Cited in Christopher Ricks, ‘*Tenebrae* and at-one-ment’, in Peter Robinson, ed., *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work* (Milton Keynes, 1985), 62–85, at 65.

<sup>33</sup> See James F. White, *The Cambridge Movement: The Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival* (Cambridge, 1962).

<sup>34</sup> Hugh Haughton, “‘How fit a title ...’: Title and Authority in the Work of Geoffrey Hill”, in Robinson, ed., *Geoffrey Hill*, 129–48, at 129.

towards the past, even when considering such vexed issues as British imperialism, in sonnets 5 and 6, 'A Short History of British India'. For this reason, 'An Apology' was the prime exhibit in a bitter critical debate about whether Hill's poetics should be seen as conservative and reactionary, and continues to attract intelligent commentary about his particular relationships to nostalgia and England's national past.<sup>35</sup>

The purpose of my reading here is not to enter into these debates, but to note briefly the affinity of Hill's work with the religious sonnet tradition that I have described. In the octet of 'Loss and Gain', for example, seventh in the sequence, he writes:

Pitched high above the shallows of the sea  
lone bells in gritty belfries do not ring  
but coil a far and inward echoing  
out of the air that thrums. Enduringly,

fuchsia-hedges fend between cliff and sky;  
brown stumps of headstones tamp into the ling  
the ruined and the ruinously strong.  
Platonic England grasps its tenantry<sup>36</sup>

Like each poem in the sequence, this has a strong (conventional) rhyme-scheme, though with more doubtful half-rhymes on 'sky / tenantry' and 'ling / strong', which could introduce a note of slight uncertainty. Beneath the enjambment and run-on sentences, a standard iambic pentameter beat is apparent. 'Pitched' implies both musical pitch and the height of a cliff-top steeple, with a potential recollection of the receding waves of 'Dover Beach' in 'shallows of the sea'. Church bells are one of the most constant sounds in Victorian religious verse, and one of the staple reminders of faith in the

<sup>35</sup> See Tom Paulin, 'The Case for Geoffrey Hill', *London Review of Books* 7 (4 April 1985), 13–14, and subsequent letters by Craig Raine, Martin Dodsworth, John Lucas and Eric Griffiths in response: 2 and 23 May, 6 and 20 June, 18 July, 1 August, 5 September, 3 October, 7 November, 15 December 1985; *London Review of Books* 8, 6 February 1986. These letters constitute a significant debate about the function of this sonnet sequence, and can be accessed by non-subscribers at: <<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v07/n06/tom-paulin/the-case-for-geoffrey-hill>>, accessed 21 October 2014. Andrew Michael Roberts includes a good discussion of 'An Apology', mentioning the *London Review of Books* dispute, in *Geoffrey Hill* (Tavistock, 2004), especially 50–8.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Hill, 'Loss and Gain', lines 1–8, in idem, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2013), 128.



literature of unbelief. Here, the church bell is not part of a communal peal but alone; the grittiness of the belfry suggests a floor unswept, uncared for, and the bell is silenced. Yet the presence of these church bells charges the atmosphere, as their echoes (including memories of their literary use) electrify the air. 'Enduringly', its placement at the line-end meaning that it at first seems to follow on from 'thrums', instead stretches out over a blank space, a gap on the page, rendering this endurance more tentative. Surviving graves are 'stumps', suggesting that the words of commemoration they might have held are lost, yet they are fiercely rooted in the particular English soil, indicated by the dialect term 'ling' for heather. In 'ruinously strong', Hill suggests the power retained by such indicators of an apparently silenced Christian past. Not, of course, in entirely positive terms. If its effects continue to be 'ruinous', who or what is being ruined? The Coleridgean 'Platonic England', referenced in another epigraph to 'An Apology', is an imagined world that has not necessarily lost its grip on the England of the 1970s. Its tenants are the forgotten dead, but what 'Loss and Gain' suggests is that they might also include the poet.

In this poem, the Church and its history, embodied in the buildings that mark the English landscape, are inescapably present, although the poem presents itself as in an uneasy alliance with this tradition, in sharp contrast to the security of Victorian ecclesiastical sonnets. *Loss and Gain* is the title of John Henry Newman's mid-Victorian novel about a young man's painful conversion to Roman Catholicism, and the loss referred to there is the loss of the safety and familiarity of the Church of England. The allusion to Newman is particularly significant in the light of the strong connections between 'An Apology' and Geoffrey Hill's essay 'Redeeming the Time', from *The Lords of Limit*, which influentially argues that converts from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, such as Newman or Hopkins, experienced a loss of the 'familiar rhythms' of the Church.<sup>37</sup> Hill's sonnet sequence, published in the same year that 'Redeeming the Time' first appeared, reflects on whether twentieth-century Britain has also experienced this loss, and whether it might be seen as gain. But the formal and linguistic patterning of this poem suggest that even if the belfries are empty and silent and the buildings and gravestones of the Church decaying, it is impossible, for an English poet of Hill's background and education,

<sup>37</sup> Geoffrey Hill, 'Redeeming the Time', in idem, *The Lords of Limit* (London, 1984), 84–103, especially 89.

to escape the familiar rhythms of religious *poetry*. The vexed acceptance of these, and of their own inheritance (including the rhythms of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer), represents both a loss of freedom and independence, and a valued heritage.

'Idylls of the King', the eleventh poem in Hill's sequence, takes its title from Tennyson's Arthurian epic of the same name, dedicated in its final version to the memory of Prince Albert and usually read as an effort to bolster British national and imperial pride. But the poem opens with a half-echo of the famous opening of a far less optimistic Tennyson poem, 'Tithonus', 'The woods decay, the woods decay and fall':<sup>38</sup>

The pigeon purrs in the wood; the wood has gone;  
Dark leaves that flick to silver in the gust,  
And the marsh-orchids and the heron's nest,  
Goldgrimy shafts and pillars of the sun. (lines 1–4)

The poem seems to refer to the decay and fall of a natural setting, a place imbued with a sense of the holy, as the 'shafts and pillars' falling through the trees, and hinting at Church architecture, suggest. Like all the sonnets in the sequence, this keeps to a standard Petrarchan sonnet-structure while playing with half-rhymes and introducing what seems like a stanzaic structure, rather than fourteen lines in one block, so that the octet is divided into two four-line units and the sestet into two three-line units:

'O clap your hands' so that the dove takes flight,  
Bursts through the leaves with an untidy sound,  
Plunges its wings into the green twilight

Above this long-sought and forsaken ground,  
The half-built ruins of the new estate,  
Warheads of mushrooms round the filter-pond. (lines 9–14)

The disconcerting lack of a final harmony in the dissonance between 'ground' and 'pond' is a particularly notable effect here, especially as it succeeds the deceptively firm rhymes of 'flight / twilight' and

<sup>38</sup> Tennyson, 'Tithonus', line 1, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, 3 vols, ed. Christopher Ricks (London, 1969), 2: 605.

'sound / ground'. Hill's rhymes, like his rhythms, mimic the gestures towards set forms that the sonnets adhere to but never fully embrace. 'O clap your hands', as critics have noted, is a direct quotation from the opening of Psalm 47 (KJV):

O clap your hands, all ye people; shout unto God with a voice of triumph.  
For the LORD most high is terrible, he is a great King over all the earth.  
He shall subdue the people under us, and the nations under our feet.  
He shall choose our inheritance for us . . .

The 'King' of the title is thus implicitly both Tennyson's national hero, Arthur, and the powerful God of the Old Testament. What is at stake in this allusion? Hill's quotation marks, which are unusual in his many unsigned intertextual references, may signal that it is not so much an allusion to the prose of Psalm 47 as to Church music. 'O clap your hands' is the title of two famous anthems, by the sixteenth-century composer Orlando Gibbons and the late nineteenth / early twentieth-century Ralph Vaughan Williams. Hill, who sang in a church choir for much of his childhood, would undoubtedly be aware of this, and so the allusion draws into this sonnet about survivals of the past an echo of a communal voice, a moment of worship. But this then sends the metre of the poem into disorder. 'Bursts through the leaves with an untidy sound' is deliberately untidy, and resists falling into any even metrical pattern, while 'twilight', an uneasy word in terms of where the stress in English speech might fall, does not reach an expected full stop or provide a firm metrical close to these three lines. At this micro-level of form, the poem highlights the absence of familiar rhythms. The new estate may be a literal housing estate, and it is possible to read this sonnet in this light as resistant to a new soulless architecture and antithetical to modernity, as epitomized also by the 'mushrooms' that, in conjunction with 'warheads', recall the real presence of nuclear threat in the period in which Hill composed these poems. 'New estate', however, is also a reference to man's estate, always part ruined and part in progress, torn between an allegiance to history and to new developments. In this poem, and the whole sequence, gestures towards God and the language of the Bible and Church suggest moments of connection to the past that then fracture and dissipate.

There are no clear answers to the questions that Hill's sonnets raise, either about the poet's own investment in the past or about

these investments on a national scale. The poems negotiate uneasily between a sense of forsakenness, and a feeling of being trapped by an inheritance neither chosen nor necessarily wanted. What is clear, however, is that Hill's sonnets continually, if obliquely, allude to the function of the sonnet as a vehicle for engaging with ecclesiastical 'history'. In part they revise this function, chronicling ruin and absence; in part, they are indicative of its survival. As Rowan Williams has observed with great perception in his consideration of Hill's later volumes, the poems they contain are 'not in any usual sense "religious poetry" – but poetry in which faith and loss are bound together; not a poetry about loss of faith, the deserted Arnoldian beach, but a poetry in which the language of faith is finally the only language appropriate for speaking honestly of loss'.<sup>39</sup>

This assessment might equally well apply to the final sonnet I want to consider, Carol Ann Duffy's 'Prayer'. No two poets could seem more antithetical than Duffy, the current poet laureate, whose work is very widely taught in schools across the UK and who has a firm commitment to broadening the remit and appeal of poetry; and Hill, whose consciously difficult poems deliberately eschew accessibility, and whose work is much discussed in the academy but relatively little known outside it. In fact, in early 2012 newspapers gleefully reported that Hill had dismissed Duffy's attitude towards popular poetics and heavily criticized one of her poems in a lecture at Oxford.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Hill, Duffy's poetry has very seldom attracted commentary on its religious themes. Yet this particular sonnet speaks strikingly to the English tradition identified in this essay, and deserves to be considered as a substantive negotiation with the poetry of faith and doubt. Duffy, more avowedly a sceptical and secular poet than Hill, grew up in the Roman Catholic Church and has acknowledged that she retains its influence:

I think, now, I retain some of the motifs of all that and none of the feelings; faith, guilt, whatever. I do envy people who have a religious

<sup>39</sup> Rowan Williams, 'The Standing of Poetry: Geoffrey Hill's Quartet', in Lyon and McDonald, eds, *Geoffrey Hill*, 55–69, at 58.

<sup>40</sup> Alison Flood, 'Carol Ann Duffy is "wrong" about poetry, says Geoffrey Hill', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2012, online at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/31/carol-ann-duffy-oxford-professory-poetry>>, accessed 21 October 2014. Hill did also take this occasion to praise as well as critique Duffy's use of language.

faith – I can recall the comfort, the sense of a safety net. I still enjoy the sensuality of aspects of the Catholic religion and a lot of the imagery.<sup>41</sup>

Duffy positions herself here as a doubter, in the sense that, like every famous Victorian doubter, she is envious of those who still manage to believe. Several of her poems draw on ‘aspects of the Catholic religion’, among which the most notable – and the most steeped in religious allusion – is ‘Prayer’.

Printed as the closing poem in Duffy’s seminal 1993 collection, *Mean Time*, and thus on an end page by itself, ‘Prayer’ is a striking use of the sonnet form to engage with faith and its absence. Opening, ‘Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer | utters itself’, the sonnet continues:

Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth  
enters our hearts, that small familiar pain;  
then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth  
in the distant Latin chanting of a train.

Pray for us now. Grade I piano scales  
console the lodger looking out across  
a Midlands town.<sup>42</sup>

Critical response to this poem has seen it as offering, as Deryn Rees-Jones puts it, ‘some kind of secular consolation’ in place of Christian consolation, or commented on its ‘startlingly secular use’ of ‘specifically religious terms’.<sup>43</sup> Anna Smail, in a recent discussion, reads the poem in terms of its depiction of isolation, noting: ‘As a mode of address, prayer is inherently problematic – a form of communication that typically persists without hope of reciprocation. Duffy’s poem

<sup>41</sup> In an interview from 1991, cited in Deryn Rees-Jones, *Carol Ann Duffy*, 3rd edn (Tavistock, 2010), 46.

<sup>42</sup> Duffy, ‘Prayer’, lines 5–11, in eadem, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1994), 127. A complete text of the poem is quoted in William Crawley’s blog, *Will and Testament*, ‘Carol Ann Duffy’s “Prayer”’, 2 May 2009, online at: <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/legacy/ni/2009/05/carol\\_ann\\_duffys\\_prayer.html](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/legacy/ni/2009/05/carol_ann_duffys_prayer.html)>, accessed 27 March 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Rees-Jones, *Carol Ann Duffy*, 48; Jane Thomas, “‘The chant of magic words repeatedly’”: Gender as Linguistic Act in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy”, in Angelica Michelis and Antony Rowland, eds, *The Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy: ‘Choosing Tough Words’* (Manchester, 2003), 121–42, at 140.

further removes the possibility for dialogue by redefining prayer as a random instant of personal recognition and relief.<sup>44</sup>

This is, however, a problematic way of seeing prayer in the context of faith: prayers may not be, technically, answered, but they are nonetheless received and assumed to be heard in the context of a reciprocal relationship. Duffy's sonnet, far from defining prayer as a 'random instant', connects it firmly to familiar rhythms, known, felt and viscerally affective. It is, of course, not possible for any poet in English to title a sonnet 'Prayer' without an immediate recollection of George Herbert, and Duffy's 'Prayer' is similarly engaged in an intense consideration of what constitutes prayer, what it is and what it might do for us, a consideration that, very much like Herbert and his nineteenth-century successors, always understands that a measured poem can in itself approximate a form of prayer.

'Prayer' quotes directly from the Roman Catholic liturgy in the phrase 'Pray for us now', words which are addressed to Mary in the 'Hail Mary': 'Pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death'. In the first twelve lines, Duffy's sonnet engages with ritual and repetition through this allusion, through its references to repetitive musical practice (the piano scales of a beginner), and through the 'distant Latin chanting of a train' which recalls communal traditional or pre-Vatican II Catholic worship. To combine the imagery of the mass with the (Victorian) industrial technology of the train, in a line which mimics the train's mechanical rhythm in its consonance and the regularity of its beat, in itself recalls Robert Browning's meditation on the rhythms of faith and the rhythms of train travel in his long poem on faith and unbelief, 'Christmas-Eve' (1855).<sup>45</sup> Duffy's poem positions these rhythms as a powerful nostalgic force, in juxtaposition to the grief of ageing, loss and death. It is particularly significant that the phrase 'and in the hour of our death' is an unspoken presence in line 9, haunted by the missing conclusion to one of the Catholic Church's best-known prayers. The symbolic significance of the lodger in a 'Midlands town', as day turns to night, may be to suggest temporariness and liminality as wider concerns in human existence, as well as to provide a suggestion of a bleak industrial, rather than natural, setting.

<sup>44</sup> Anna Smail, 'Audience and Awkwardness: Personal Poetry in Britain and New Zealand', in Robinson, ed., *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, 596–616, at 610–11.

<sup>45</sup> In *The Poems of Robert Browning*, ed. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins, 2 vols (Harmondsworth, 1981), 1: 469.

Inasmuch as 'Prayer' offers 'secular' consolation, it does so through these rhythms, and most powerfully through the closing invocation of the shipping forecast, traditionally the last programme of the day before Radio 4 switches to the World Service:

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer –  
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre. (lines 13–14)

Yet in the light of the substantial tradition of religious sonnets that reflect upon rhythmic ritual and communal worship, and position their own formal commitments as part of this tradition, the question of the secular in this poem is vexed. The shipping forecast is designed to provide the latest weather information to those in peril on the sea, but for most listeners it serves as a reference to the dangers faced by others while they remain safely at home, secure from the 'darkness outside'. That is, the language of the broadcast, in popular culture, is emptied of direct and literal meaning and becomes instead the repetition of words that are soothing because of their familiarity from repeated listenings to this 'service'.

Rockall, Malin, Dogger and Finisterre (now renamed Fitzroy) are locations covered by the shipping forecast. Recalling Wordsworth and others' strong sense of the religious sonnet as directed to and about an imagined national as well as religious community, I would suggest that these references are likely to be familiar to British people of a certain age and perhaps class, and impregnable to readers from other traditions. The shipping forecast, Radio 4 and the BBC are British cultural possessions that help to define a sense of national community; the 'we' of Duffy's poem. Borrowing but expanding upon Smal's definition above, a radio broadcast such as the shipping forecast is also a form of prayer: it cannot expect direct reciprocation or dialogue, but it is assumed that someone is listening and responding. The individual listener, in turn, knows that he or she is part of a community engaged in the same ritual behaviour, consisting of listening to a variable but primarily set pattern of words, at a specific time each day. The poem, I think, questions whether this is in itself an act of prayer, of faith. There is a profound ambiguity about the unspecified 'truth' that 'enters our hearts' in the poem: language that borrows from the standard tropes of religious conversion. While I do not wish to propose a full counter-reading of the poem which would argue that it espouses religious belief, the conjunction of 'truth' with

the phrase '*although* we are faithless' opens up potential for such a reading, as Duffy's sonnet flirts with the possibility of an unsought solicitation from the divine.

'Prayer' and the sonnets from Hill's 'An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England' are religious sonnets, part of the ecclesiastical sonnet tradition, not because of the poets' faith but in spite of their doubt. In one sense, the faith that they hold is faith in this literary tradition, as much as faith in God. There remains a great deal to say about how Christian poetics in Britain have developed in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and how writers such as Duffy and Hill reflect upon their place in this tradition. What I suggest here, through analysis of one genre only, is that the concerns with faith and doubt which we tend to read as 'Victorian' do not disappear from more recent literature, and that placing the emphasis on doubt, in readings of twentieth-century as much as Victorian literature, does not always do justice to a literary work.