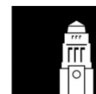

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The Role of Plants in Jon Silkin's Holocaust Memorial Poems

Hannie Phillips

University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom

enhp@leeds.ac.uk

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Abstract:

This essay argues that plants are an integral part of Jon Silkin's poetic memorialisation of the Holocaust. The distinctiveness of Silkin's Holocaust memorial poetics lies in its suggestion that plants can be witnesses to memory of the Holocaust. Silkin's plant witnesses demonstrate human-like capacity for empathy and affect, as the boundary of species between plants and humans is reconstituted. In this essay I analyse three poems from the span of Silkin's career, 'Milkmaids' (1964), 'The People' (1974), and 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' (1992), which each defamiliarise concentration camp sites by depicting them as natural spaces where plants grow. In reading these poems, I consider the ecological form of memorialisation that Silkin creates, exploring what poetry at the interface between ecological poetics and Holocaust memorialisation can look like. I consider the implications this poetics has for an alternative understanding of the spatialisation of Holocaust memory.

Keywords: Jon Silkin, Holocaust poetry, the Holocaust, memory, poetry

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The Role of Plants in Jon Silkin's Holocaust Memorial Poems

Jon Silkin maintained a commitment to memorialising events and victims of the Holocaust throughout his poetic career. His ethical, political 'poetry of the committed individual'[1] frequently mourns and remembers victims of Nazi atrocities. Silkin's poetry has often been contextualised within his association with the 'Leeds Poets', including Geoffrey Hill and Tony Harrison. Hill and Harrison have both depicted the Holocaust in their poetry, and their modes of memorial witnessing have been widely critically explored, for example by Antony Rowland.[2] Yet, Silkin's poetic memorialisation of the Holocaust has remained largely unstudied. [3]

Critical examination of Silkin's poetry has often focused on his ecological poetics, for example in the work of Emma Trott and Fiona Becket.[4] The ecological mode of his poetry is innovative and intriguing, but is also intertwined with his memorialisation of the Holocaust. I understand plants and ecological sites as being integral to Silkin's memorialisation of the Holocaust. I also understand this to be the most distinctive aspect of his Holocaust poems. Silkin's poetics attests that natural landscapes provide alternative spaces for memorialising the Holocaust, and that the plants within them are vicarious witnesses and carriers of Holocaust memory. Silkin's ecological form of Holocaust poetry attempts to construct memorialisation and memory of the Holocaust that does not diminish over time.

In this essay, I use the word 'ecological' to refer specifically to the organic world of plants and natural sites, and the relationships plants have to each other and the organic landscapes they inhabit. I use 'ecological' in this way to refer with precision to Silkin's poetics of nature, recognising that it is distinct and different from the critical discourse of ecocriticism and the formal practice of ecopoetics. Silkin's nature poems investigate the possibilities of

ecological worlds, without necessarily being ecopoems.[5] Trott's reading of Silkin's 'new environmental ethics',[6] for example, explores the political charge of his ecological poems. She argues that the botanical figures of Silkin's *Flower Poems* (1964) are not straightforward anthropomorphic metaphors, but are instead part of a wider poetics of ethical exploration that draws upon the contiguity of plants and humans.

A complex coexistence between plants and humans is depicted in many of Silkin's Holocaust memorial poems. His 'literary ecology'[7] provides a unique space for remembering and commemorating the Holocaust. Where Trott's study explores Silkin's political ecopoetic form, I examine the ethical approach to mourning and memorialisation which can be found in his ecological mode of representing the Holocaust. I consider the implications of a poetry that exists in the interface between ecological poetics and Holocaust memorialisation. I examine how Silkin's poetry interrogates both the role of plants in ecological poetry, and the potential role of plants in vicarious memory of the Holocaust. His daring, distinctive ecological memorial poetics pairs an urgency for ethical representation of the atrocity with the discomfort and unease of depicting nature as a non-neutral space of witnessing.

Silkin constructs a poetics in which affect and empathy are not restricted to human beings. In his Holocaust poems the boundaries of human and non-human are reconstituted through suffering and crisis. Plants and humans are forced to share experience due to the atrocity they witness together, leading to a reallocation of roles across species. Categories of the human and non-human become porous in Silkin's poetic acts of anthropomorphising plants in order to push the boundaries of affect and empathy. This can be seen most explicitly in 'Milkmaids' (*Flower Poems*, 1964), 'The People' (*The Principle of Water*, 1974) and 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' (*The Lens-Breakers*, 1992) which depict concentration camp sites and construct ecological spaces of memory.

Study of site and space-based memorialisation of the Holocaust has emerged as a critical field since Silkin wrote his Holocaust memorial poems. Yet, in retrospect, his poetic representations of concentration camp sites as ecological spaces of memory contain an implicit challenge to more rigid forms of memorial. The field of Holocaust memorial study has been largely shaped by the work of James E. Young. Young's monograph *The Texture of Memory* (1993) documents Holocaust memorials in Germany, Austria, Poland, Israel, and America, and is an excellent starting point for exploring the changing shape of memorial culture since the Holocaust. Critical scholarship on the topic has expanded since 1993, and remains relevant today, where, for example, a National Holocaust Memorial is currently in development in the UK.

Silkin's ecological Holocaust memorial poems depict camp sites as organic spaces where plant life grows, and this offers a very different kind of spatial memorialisation than memorials built by humans. 'Spatial memorialisation' is the facilitating of memory grounded within sites and spaces. Spatial memorialisation for the Holocaust is found in memorial exhibitions and museums, and memorial sculptures and monuments, at camp and atrocity sites, as well as in places where events of the Holocaust did not take place. Spatial memorialisation is created in the material world by the construction of memorials and buildings which mark that space as a site of memory.

The memorial offering that Silkin constructs in his poetry is distinct from built examples of spatial memorialisation. His act of memorial is a poetic one, rather than a physical material construction. Yet also, he offers an alternative spatial memorialisation in organic, natural sites. This can be productively set alongside the more recent context of critical examination of Holocaust memorials and monuments. Traditional, rigid monuments, and wider monumental rhetoric, have been widely critiqued by artists, architects, and cultural historians in their attempts to remember and memorialise the Holocaust.[8] Young, for example, writes

extensively about the criticism of monumentalisation, and subsequent evolution of memorials since the Holocaust. His monograph *At Memory's Edge* (2000) tracks this shift in memorial rhetoric, arguing that in commemorating victims and events of the Holocaust, the traditional monument and its aesthetic and rhetorical goals of pompous commemoration and closure appears to be inappropriate.[9]

Young's discussion of the precise reasons why monumental form has been rejected since the Holocaust is useful in understanding this shift in trend. He writes:

> It is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In the eyes of modern critics and artists, the traditional monument's essential stiffness and grandiose pretensions to permanence thus doom it to an archaic, premodern status. Even worse, by insisting that its meaning is as fixed as its place in the landscape, the monument seems oblivious to the essential mutability in all cultural artefacts, the ways the significance in all art evolves over time.[10]

Here, Young observes that monumentalisation does not facilitate a continuation of memory due to the fixed nature of a built monument within its landscape. If a monument is a rigid representation of the displacement of an active process of remembering, the object itself does not exist in a fertile ground capable of fostering continued memory.

Artists and architects have found their own ways to create memorials which resist monumentalisation, in their self-abnegating structures which deploy negative space and attempt to symbolise the stark absence left by the genocide.[11] For Silkin, it is not the construction of anti-monumental memorials, but the depiction of ecological spaces of memorialisation which offers the possibility of an alternative spatialisation of memory. Artists and architects have employed their seemingly rigid materials of concrete, glass, and stone, in

anti-monumental memorials. Silkin, with words as his material, has constructed ecological poetic spaces of memorialisation, which offer human-like plants as living carriers of memory.

Ecological spaces by their very nature resist stasis, as natural landscapes are in a constant state of evolution. In discussing *Flower Poems*, for example, Trott describes an 'openness' of poems that '[do] not neatly conclude'.[12] The fluidity and lack of finite completion of these poems creates a distinct aspect of Silkin's ecological poetics. The botanical focus allows for a poetics that is 'present and open',[13] rather than rigid or fixed. Yet it is not straightforwardly this characteristic of ecological representation that produces Silkin's specific form of spatial memorialisation of the Holocaust. Silkin's uniquely personal ecological poetics anthropomorphises plants, traverses the boundaries of species, and broadens human reactions of affect and empathy to be non-human too. These characteristics are distinct from what ecocritical discourse may have come to expect of ecopoems. The result is a poetics of fluid shared experience between humans and plants, which envisages the ecological landscapes where these encounters take place as spaces for the continuation of commemoration and memorialisation of events and victims of the Holocaust. The poems themselves exist as the memorial offering, with visions of spaces of memory embedded within them.

The three poems of memorial offering explored in this essay, 'Milkmaids', 'The People' and 'Trying to Hide Treblinka', each demonstrate a different approach within Silkin's ecological poetics. Each poem depicts a different kind of 'plant witness'. I use the term 'witness' here because Silkin's anthropomorphised plants view the enormity of the Holocaust through their contiguity with persecuted human beings. This leads to acts of bearing witness to the human distress they have encountered. The three different approaches to plant witnessing in the poems are part of Silkin's overall intervention of envisaging ecological spaces of Holocaust memorialisation. In 'Milkmaids' plants physically bear the suffering of the humans they witness, and transgenerational trauma is passed on to their offspring. In 'The People'

plants facilitate shared affect across the species boundary. In ‘Trying to Hide Treblinka’ contextually complicit plants are living evidence of the bodies buried beneath their soil.

‘Milkmaids’

‘Milkmaids’ is a short three-stanza poem published in *Flower Poems* (1964), a pamphlet comprised of poems which depict botanical figures as human-like agents whose exploration may offer a view into the world of human desire, suffering and pathology.[14] ‘Milkmaids’ (a common colloquial name for the Cuckooflower, or *Cardamine Pratensis*) envisages the scene of an unnamed concentration camp, where the small, white meadow flowers flourish and grow outside of the wire of the camp’s boundary. Within the camp, emaciated prisoners suffer, and the milkmaids are onlookers to this human tragedy. Silkin imagines the flowers to react with emotional affect and physical change. The milkmaids respond in empathic horror to the suffering they see, in a vision of anthropomorphic emotional movement. Equally, the milkmaids begin to physically modify due to what they have witnessed. This depiction of plants as both bearers of empathic reaction, and physically changeable due to this empathy, leaves the concentration camp-adjacent site of the milkmaid field a space of memorialisation, in witness to those who were tortured and murdered in the camp.

‘Milkmaids’ begins by emphasising the ‘strength’[15] of the flower’s structure, and the freedom in its ability to grow and spread across a vast landscape, described as ‘a flexible/ Unplanned exuberance’. To begin with, this freedom is contrasted with human attempts to control the spread of the plant. Silkin writes that there is ‘nothing less enslaved,/ Less domestic to man’ than the ‘free’ milkmaids, and then declares ‘You will not cut milkmaids down’. In positioning the plants, and the humankind of ‘man’ and ‘You’, in opposition with one another, the strength and freedom of the milkmaids is reinforced. Yet, the growth of the plant is stopped; not by humans attempting to ‘cut milkmaids down’, but by the barbed wire boundary of the

concentration camp, the signifier of a different violent human act. Their natural, intrinsic capability for growing is interrupted by their emotional reaction of shock at the sight of human suffering: 'Their eyes wide,/ They halt at the wire. This is the camp'. Later, the 'wire' of the camp is also described as 'Halted'. The physical boundary of the wire halts the milkmaids' growth; equally the horror at what they have witnessed halts their ability to express their 'unservanted', natural freedom in continual growth.

Prior to the encounter with the camp, human characteristics granted the milkmaids a sense of joy and freedom, as they are 'giddy'[16] and 'careless' whilst they 'wander' through fields. However, a stanza break signifies a stark shift: the human-like agency which allowed them to flourish before facing the camp becomes the reason why they are so deeply changed by the sight of the prisoners suffering. The plants have an emotional reaction of feeling 'aghast' at what they see: a 'crowd wired up'. The anthropomorphic metaphor employed by Silkin here demonstrates an integral part of his ecological memorial poetics. It attests that affect, and the capability for empathy, are not restricted to human beings. Instead, the ability plants have to witness suffering in this crisis, and bear a reaction to it, means that empathy and affect can traverse the boundary of species. A fluidity to the seemingly rigid categories of human and non-human is imagined within facing the enormous human atrocity of the Holocaust.

The ability for the milkmaids to emotionally react to the human suffering does not stop at the metaphysical realm of imagined affect, but enables a change in the physiology of the plants too. Witnessing the prisoners turns the milkmaids' 'petals stiff'.[17] The milkmaids are forced to 'confront' the emaciated bodies of the people, and attempt 'comprehension' of the scene of 'showing bone, ridges of famine'. In a return to the milkmaids observing them, the prisoners also 'confront' the flowers, seeing their 'unservanted faces'. This physical confrontation between the two species illustrates the fluid shift between human and non-human characteristics. The milkmaids are granted both a physical reaction and the emotional reaction

of attempting to understand what stands before them. The prisoners are granted no agency, except to witness the humanoid 'faces' of the plants, and the freedom they have of 'unservanted' existence.

Silkin writes about 'Milkmaids' in his 'Note on the *Flower Poems*'. His description of the dynamic between the plants and the people in the poem acknowledges this relationship in which distress crosses species lines. The empathic position of the plants is not one of straightforward personification, but the bearing of a physical reaction to human trauma within the land. Silkin writes: 'The confrontation joins the creatures – what joins them even more is the total distress of one and the capacity of the other to absorb this distress'.[18] Here he acknowledges the multi-layered nature to this shared experience. Firstly, the geographical fact that the milkmaids grow adjacent to the concentration camp creates a physical confrontation between the plants and the people. Second, the constructed empathic relationship between the plants and the people enables the milkmaids to 'absorb' the trauma of those persecuted. Quite explicitly here, the land bears witness to the trauma in the flower's ability to encompass the human suffering in its physiology.

The physical change in the biology of the plant does not stop at this generation of milkmaids. Instead, the flowers have the ability to pass on secondary trauma to their offspring, which is 'pulped, compounded into their/ children'. Silkin writes that 'The Milkmaids absorb the experience of the human being and are changed – one creature's mind changed by the condition of another, so deeply, that this change is inherited by their children',[19] using a decidedly human way of describing transgenerational trauma in the botany.[20] In Silkin's envisaged world, transgenerational trauma is not exclusive to human beings, but may also be demonstrated by plants. This involves the physical changes that the experiences of the first generation of milkmaids caused, and also the imagined emotional resonance of the next generation of milkmaids understanding 'the forked,/ Upright sense of human/ Creatures

wanting even patience'.[21] Both physical and emotional distress are inherited due to the enormity of the crisis of human persecution the plants have witnessed.

This image of botanical transgenerational trauma has implications for the lasting impact of the concentration camp as a site of witness and memory. The milkmaids that have witnessed first-hand the suffering of the concentration camp prisoners immediately bear a physical sign of the human trauma. Through Silkin imagining that plants have the capability to pass on transgenerational trauma, milkmaids that are vastly temporally removed from the events of the Holocaust will continue to physically bear this distress for milkmaid generations to come. This vision of botanical transgenerational trauma triggered by the first generation of milkmaids' capability for affect allows for the poetic imagination that this ecological landscape will continue to be a site of active spatial memorialisation. The continuation of active memorialisation is hugely important when facing the millions dead and the attempted annihilation of Jewish culture. Continuation of memory, rather than stasis, allows for the possibility of an evolving process of re-remembering and commemorating what was lost.[22]

'The People'

The longest of Silkin's poems discussed in this essay is 'The People', spanning thirty-six pages. It was published in his 1974 collection *The Principle of Water* and broadcast on the BBC's Third Programme in 1975.[23] Its layout resembles a play script in its presentation of a dramatis personae. However, the dialogue itself resembles a printed poem in its stylistic structure of stanzas and poetic form that give meaning on the page. The poem is vast and complex in its depiction of a process of working through the trauma of the Holocaust, both for Stein, a Polish Jewish survivor of Buchenwald concentration camp, and for Kye and Finn, an English Jewish couple who do not have first-hand experience of Nazi persecution. The poem follows the

evolving dialogue between these characters, and the empathic connections that grow through their sharing of traumatic experiences.

In an important moment of Stein's testimony, during which he describes the liberation of Buchenwald, plants become a central focus. In 1972, an earlier version of this significant section of the poem is published in *European Judaism*, under the title 'Stein'.[24] In this section, similarly to 'Milkmaids', plants become a conduit through which empathy can be performed, and an ecological space provides a site of memory. In 'Milkmaids', the flowers are the sole bearers of empathy, which flows in one direction. In 'The People' this relationship of empathy crosses the species line bilaterally, as empathy is shared between the humans and the plants. I reproduce this moment in Stein's spoken testimony here:

> Lying in Buchenwald, as the British moved
> up to us
> in slinging densities of ash, one man
> walked, dressed in brown, through it, and lifted me
> up in his arms. I felt like a mild plant,
> shame cringing me. But he was crying. That one
> should be cried for, as if a plant had worth
> beyond its fruit and serviceableness;
> outside the staked wire, heaps a pit, and spaces
> an equal area from two further ones;
> a mass grave, and the indifferent botany
> of herbs branching a pungent sullenness.[25]

In this extract, plants are integral to Stein's vision of the camp at liberation. Silkin's imagining of Stein's concentrationary memory of the camp involves the reconfiguration of human and plant species and their characteristics within the concentrationary universe.

The term 'l'univers concentrationnaire' was coined by David Rousset in his writing on the 'concentrationary universe' of the camps, which may have at once seemed unimaginable.[26] My reading of the concentrationary universe in 'The People' is influenced by Max Silverman's

writings on the concept in *Palimpsestic Memory*. Silverman explores the complexity of creating adequate representations of the concentrationary universe in film and fiction, a process which results in variant concentrationary memories. Silverman writes, with regard to Rousset, that 'The resources for defining the indefinable have to be sought in the familiar but stretched so that they no longer resemble what we already know',[27] a description of the complex act of representing the concentrationary universe.

In 'The People' Silkin attempts to represent the concentrationary universe through the character of Stein. Stein articulates his own concentrationary memories, which is depicted in two ways in the above extract. Firstly, Stein's memory of his own existence inside the concentrationary universe involves imagining himself as a 'plant'. Secondly, Stein-as-plant observes the actions of other plants within this universe. Stein envisages himself as a plant due to the sheer dehumanisation integral to persecution within the concentrationary universe. Stein-as-plant interprets the actions of real plants through the lens of the concentrationary universe.

In the opening of the plant metaphor, Stein is 'like a mild plant' as the soldier lifts him 'up in his arms' at the liberation of the camp. This image expresses how Stein views his own body and agency within his concentrationary memory. He depicts his body as small and limp in 'mild', and in using the image of a 'plant' he envisages himself as a dehumanised object. Stein-as-plant imagines his own role and worth within the realm of the concentrationary universe, wherein he exists only to be persecuted, desecrated, and murdered. The image of a 'mild plant' displays Stein's weakness and vulnerability. This understanding of role and worth leads Stein to feel shocked when he sees the soldier cry as he carries Stein's small, emaciated body out of the camp. For Stein, the idea of the soldier crying upon seeing his suffering, 'as if a plant had worth/ beyond its fruit and serviceableness', is alien and shameful. The concentrationary universe does not spare room for the persecuted to be empathised with, and thus Stein reacts with 'shame cringing' him.

Stein-as-plant does not bear 'fruit' or perform 'serviceableness'- the labour-focused ways his internalised anti-human values lead him to imagine a plant (or human) to have worth. The concentrationary universe demands that worth is only found in the prisoners through their labour. This labour value of human beings is transposed onto the plants within the camp through Stein's plant imagination. Within this universe, plants must either produce sustenance or perform a role that is of some measurable use to have worth. But, outside of the concentrationary universe, Stein has value that is more than his capability for forced labour in the camp. The soldier's simple, empathic act of crying traverses the boundary between the camp universe and the outside world where Stein is a human being with autonomy and value.

It is significant that Silkin has chosen a plant, rather than any other object, to illustrate this moment of identification. The image of Stein as a plant reinforces Silkin's aesthetic and ideological commitment to the contiguity and connectedness of plants and humans. This commitment involves an articulation that nature is not a neutral space, and thus plants are not neutral agents. Through the focalisation of Stein-as-plant's voice, the plants of the scene become anthropomorphised, and humans become plant-like. Within this bilateral process, Stein's suffering and dehumanisation becomes intertwined with the ecological space. This discomforting exchange offers a spatialisation of Stein's memory.

'[O]utside the staked wire' of the camp, Stein-as-plant sees other plants growing on and around a mass grave. These plants have a more complex and heterogeneous existence than the 'fruit and serviceableness' worthy plants/humans have within the concentrationary universe. Adjacent to the mass grave, these plants appear 'indifferent' to the death and suffering around them, in direct contrast to the empathy of the soldier who carries Stein. The ending of this stanza, and plant metaphor, describes these plants as 'branching a pungent sullenness'. '[B]ranching' implies a dynamic of movement which is not constrained by labour value. '[P]ungent sullenness' expresses the abrasive yet morose presence of thriving flora at a scene

of such lifelessness. These plants exist outside of the concentrationary universe boundary, and yet are envisaged through Stein's concentrationary memory as being indifferent bystanders to the atrocity.

This instance of plants growing ignorantly beside a site of extermination may seem vastly different from the milkmaids which halted their growth at the sight of human suffering. Yet, the observation that these plants appear 'indifferent' is focalised through 'mild plant' Stein's voice, within his concentrationary memory. In this moment, plants that do not perform the labour of 'fruit and serviceableness' in the concentration camp seem like apathetic bystanders. But, once the living people have been liberated and removed from the camp, the plants are the living creatures which may bear witness to what went on at this site. The plants in their natural landscape are not neutral bystanders, but are politicised in the landscape of vicarious memory.

The description of these plants is the only physical image of the site of Buchenwald that Silkin writes in the poem. Throughout 'The People', human interactions at the concentration camp are reported by Stein, but descriptions of the site itself are absent.[28] The final four lines of the stanza reproduced above is the only visual depiction of the camp site that Stein gives: an anthropomorphic description of the plants which grow beside a mass grave. Thus, despite attesting to their apparent indifference, Stein's concentrationary memory is focalised through the ecological world, and the plant agents within it. The concentrationary universe of Buchenwald in the poem is deeply tied to the human-like plants depicted in that space. The imagined affect of Stein-as-plant and the plants that grow beside the camp are integral parts of the depiction of Buchenwald as a site of memory, which may continue to sustain ongoing memorialisation. The unease of vicarious memory creates an alternative vision of the spatialisation of Stein's memory of persecution, and the memory of what happened at Buchenwald concentration camp.

'Trying to Hide Treblinka'

'Trying to Hide Treblinka' is a short three-stanza poem published in *The Lens-Breakers* in 1992. Similarly to 'Milkmaids' and 'The People', the poem depicts plant growth at a concentration camp site. As we have seen, 'Milkmaids' and 'The People' imagine the plants that grow at the location of a camp being confronted by human intervention in their ecological space. In contrast, the plants at the camp in 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' exist because of evil human intervention. Before deserting Treblinka extermination camp in 1944, the Nazis ploughed over the land and planted lupins in an attempt to conceal evidence of their crimes.[29] In his poem, Silkin explores the complex existence of the plants which are both a signifier of the Nazis' attempts to cover up the true nature of the persecution and murder carried out there, and of the ecologically changing memorial landscape that continues to exist.

Silkin's ecological poetics of reconstituting the distinction between the human and the non-human, and destabilising the hierarchy of species, allows the lupins at Treblinka to bear witness to human suffering. Imagining the boundaries of species between humans and plants to become fluid in the poem directly defies the intentions of the Nazis. That the lupins can convey evidence of the human bodies buried in their soil means that they are doing precisely the opposite of the Nazis' aims for them to conceal evidence of the extermination camp. Despite the fact that the architecture of the camp has not survived, the affective capacity of the lupins means that the flowers which grow where the camp once existed can bear witness to the atrocity.

The site of Treblinka is imagined by Silkin to be primarily an ecological landscape. The reality of the human extermination machine that once stood there is defamiliarised through a focus on the plants that occupy that space. Silkin writes that the camp has 'no architectural style',[30] precisely because the Nazis destroyed the buildings before deserting the camp. Instead,

the lupins which attest to the evidence of the Nazi cover-up are described with close poetic focus. Silkin details each aspect of the lupins' physiology, utilising precise botanical terminology: 'thick snappable haulm/ with innocuous hairs', 'noxious seed,/ petals, a bird-shaped milky blue'. Such a close focus on the details of the flower displays the importance of the plants themselves in Silkin's understanding of Treblinka as a memorial space. Each individual lupin attests to the evidence of its own planting, and is complicit in the Nazi cover-up. The lupins are both contextually complicit in the Nazi crimes, and able to bear witness to these crimes. The overall effect is a sprawling site of ecological witnessing. Once again, nature is not a neutral space, but is able to be complicit, and further able to become part of an uncomfortable space of memory.

In contrast to the imagined agency the flowers have in 'Milkmaids', Silkin describes the lack of autonomy the lupins had in deciding where to grow. The milkmaids spread and grew as they wished, but, in distinction, the affect of the lupins in 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' is a direct result of their planted purpose. Silkin writes that the lupins have 'no mind to choose a soil/ but what sustains it, and what flowers/ its unending ignorance'.[31] The lupins cannot decide to exist anywhere other than the extermination camp site, and only have the choice to live and grow upon the tarnished land. The 'unending ignorance' of the lupins is an ignorance of the context that they were planted in. Their lack of ability to empathise with the human suffering that has happened on the site enables them to continue growing. Because they have no choice but to grow where they were planted, they form part of the evidence of the crimes that took place at Treblinka. The lupins are an aspect of the memory of persecution and murder, and their forced site of growth at the camp allows them to testify to this narrative of Nazi atrocity, despite their imagined incapacity for empathy.

It is not solely the plants in 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' which exist to testify to what happened there. A shift in the final stanza of the poem introduces the buried, desecrated bodies

of the murdered people, which become intimately entwined with the ecology of the landscape. The ‘hill’[32] of the poem is not part of the natural contours of the land, but is evidence of a mass grave: the land rises and ‘swells’ because it is full of the bodies of people murdered in the extermination camp. These bodies are envisaged as ‘breath’, which is precisely the opposite of what is left of evidence of their existence and suffering. Depicting the land as swelling with the ‘breath’ of those buried there indicates that their living existences are more important than the mistreated remains of their bodies. ‘[B]reath’ is a spiritual reckoning within the land, not simply the physical evidence of fragments of bodies. ‘[B]reath’ is the metaphysical legacy of more than simply bodies, but human lives, left behind by the people who were murdered at Treblinka.

It is not only the evidence of human life and remains which ‘swells’[33] the hill, but the ‘flowers’ that grow there too. ‘[B]reath and flowers’ become one together in the rising hill at the extermination camp site. Here, Silkin’s ecological poetics attests that the malleability of the boundary between what is human and what is non-human allows for the ‘breath and flowers’ to inhabit the same space. Some of the flowers are ‘blue’, a natural colour of lupins, yet some are ‘faded blood’ coloured: stained by the blood of those buried there. As similarly depicted in ‘Milkmaids’, here the bloodstained lupins bear witness to the bodies they share the land with. The lupins ‘sink their roots/ in shreds of carbon’ and grow from the human remains. The bodies of those murdered at Treblinka become deeply connected to the ecological life of the space. As the lupins and other plants continue to grow, the bodies of those who were killed become entwined with a landscape that is changing and evolving over time. The bodies of the murdered people are not preserved in the land as relics of a time passed, but are an integral part of the ecology because of the imagined possibility of a human/ non-human continuum.

Treblinka, as an extermination camp, is different from Buchenwald, a concentration camp where prisoners were both murdered and subjected to forced labour. Also, the camp

depicted in 'Milkmaids' appears to be a concentration camp, as a relationship develops between the milkmaids and the people, and thus the prisoners do not appear to be being sent to their immediate death. This is what sets aside the memorial landscape of 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' from 'Milkmaids' and 'The People'. The human suffering we encounter in 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' is the physical evidence of bodies beneath the ground in mass graves, after some time has passed. The human suffering we encounter in 'Milkmaids' and 'The People' is the living people being persecuted in the immediate present.

In 'Milkmaids' and 'The People', it is the imagined emotional capacity of the plants which allows the landscape to become a site of living ecological memory. In 'Trying to Hide Treblinka', it is instead the bodies of those murdered which become one with the ecological life at the site of the camp, which enables the land to bear witness to victims of the Holocaust. This shift also has a relationship to the time 'Trying to Hide Treblinka' was written. By its publication in 1992, almost three decades after 'Milkmaids', and almost two decades after 'The People', memorial legacy of the Holocaust had become a part of public consciousness in the UK.[34] The temporal distance from events of the Holocaust results in an anxiety of representation. For Silkin, his ecological poetics of plants bearing witness to human suffering in the landscape allows the possibility of continued memorialisation, despite increasing distance from the Holocaust.

Conclusion

Silkin's Holocaust memorial poems unflinchingly examine the scope for alternative spatialisation of memory available in ecological landscapes. Silkin re-maps affect and reconstitutes the hierarchy of species, in an anti-sentimental exploration of the possibilities of ecological poetry. This destabilisation of the boundary between humans and plants in turn destabilises the concentration camp sites depicted, focalising the spaces through the world of

the ecological. ‘Milkmaids’, ‘The People’ and ‘Trying to Hide Treblinka’ are examples of what can happen in this interface between ecological poetry and Holocaust memorialisation. Silkin inhabits this heterogeneous space in order to construct a continuum of memory in a context where fixed, unchanging spaces of memory are problematic.

Silkin’s complex intertwining of a distinctive ecological poetics and the act of memorialising the Holocaust produces new lines of sight within both of the fused areas of thought. For Silkin, creating plant witnesses allows for memory to be passed on and expressed within the land. The changeability of the ecological landscapes of concentration camp sites need not signify a disintegration of this memory; instead, Silkin imagines that memory of the Holocaust can be sustained indefinitely here. Silkin’s ecological memorial poetics is an attempt to foster continuing memory within a space that is evolutionary and fluid. Imagining nature as a non-neutral space of witness, complicity, and empathy forms a creative portrait of experimental memory of the Holocaust.

Silkin’s appraisal of the possibilities of memory forces us to engage with a pressing and pervasive question in Holocaust studies: how to we sustain memory of the Holocaust after all first-hand witnesses and survivors have died? Silkin’s poems develop an understanding of the scope of ecological poetry, yet also have implications for sustaining memory of the Holocaust outside of the literary world. Examining his poetics helps to broaden an understanding of spaces of memory. Spatial memorialisation of the Holocaust can be designed and built, but can also be present in the evolving ecological spaces where atrocities took place. Silkin’s poetry suggests that ecological memorialisation offers the scope to resist the pitfalls of monumental representation of Holocaust memory. Ecological spaces are not neutral, but can instead be thought of as places where the landscape and the flora can testify to what happened on their soil.

Notes

[1] Silkin edited an anthology of poems titled *Poetry of the Committed Individual: A Stand Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), and the idea of 'committed' poetry was a consistent focus of *Stand Magazine*. Romana Huk's chapter 'Poetry of the Committed Individual: Jon Silkin, Tony Harrison, Geoffrey Hill, and the Poets of Postwar Leeds' in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. by James Acheson and Romana Huk (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996) explores the context of postwar Leeds and the emergence of the idea of the 'committed' poet for Silkin. Merle Brown also writes on this concept of Silkin's 'committed' poetry in 'Stress in Silkin's Poetry and the Healing Emptiness of America', *Contemporary Literature*, 18:3 (1977), 361-390.

[2] See Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), and *Tony Harrison and the Holocaust* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001).

[3] Peter Lawson wrote on Silkin's post-war diasporic Jewish identity in *Anglo-Jewish Poetry from Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein* (London & Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006) and 'Towards a Diasporic Poetics: The Case of British Jewish Poetry', *European Judaism*, 47:2 (2014), 30-40. Hannah Copley also wrote about Silkin's post-war poetics in 'The Burden and the Promise of History: The Post-War Poetics of Jon Silkin, Geoffrey Hill, and Tony Harrison' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2015). I believe that Silkin's Holocaust memorial poetics has depth and fascination which could expand wider than the excellent, but scarce, scholarship on his post-war poetics already written. This essay is a contribution into that absence.

[4] See Emma Trott, 'Contiguous Creatures: Literary Ecology, "Organic Poetry" and Jon Silkin's Flower Poems', *Anglistik* 27:2 (2016), 125-45, and 'Environment, Creativity and Culture in the Poetry of Jon Silkin and Simon Armitage (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2018). Also, Fiona Becket 'Ecopoetics and Poetry' in *The Cambridge Companion to British Poetry 1945-2010*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 214-227.

[5] See, for example, Susanna Lidström and Greg Garrad, '"Images adequate to our predicament": Ecology, Environment and Ecopoetics', *Environmental Humanities* 5 (2014), 35-53. Lidström and Garrad write that 'many ecopoems have in common an aim to inspire wonder and appreciation for the non-human world, and to highlight its otherness by recognising the distinct perspectives, or *Umwelten*, of other species' (p. 38). This is different to Silkin's ecological poetry, which instead reinforces the malleability of species categories. Lidström and Garrad describe ecopoems as primarily drawing attention to the uniquely different experiences of human and non-human creatures, which is a useful counterpoint to Silkin's commitment to allowing plants to express the human experiences of affect.

[6] Emma Trott, 'Contiguous Creatures: Literary Ecology, "Organic Poetry" and Jon Silkin's Flower Poems', *Anglistik* 27:2 (2016), 125-145 (p. 125).

[7] Trott, 'Contiguous Creatures', p. 134.

[8] See, for example, Peter Carrier, *Holocaust Monuments and National Memory Cultures in France and Germany Since 1989* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2005), Richard Crownshaw, 'The German Countermonument: Conceptual Indeterminacies and the Retheorisation of the Arts of Vicarious Memory', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 44:2 (2008), 212-227, and Bill Niven, 'From Countermonument to Combimemorial: Developments in German Memorialisation', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 6:1 (2013), 75-91 for excellent analyses of the various shifts in memorial culture since the Holocaust.

[9] See *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2000), and also *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1993), and *The Stages of Memory: Reflections on Memorial Art, Loss, and the Spaces Between* (Amherst & Boston, MA: Massachusetts University Press, 2016).

[10] James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 94-5.

[11] See James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2000), in particular 'Memory, Countermemory and the End of the Monument' pp. 90-119, and 'Memory

Against Itself in Germany Today' pp. 120-151. Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's Harburg Monument Against Fascism, and Horst Hoheisel's Ascrott-Brunnen Memorial are particularly fascinating examples of this.

[12] Trott, 'Contiguous Creatures', p. 127.

[13] Trott, 'Contiguous Creatures', p. 127.

[14] Jon Silkin, *Flower Poems* (Leeds: Northern House Pamphlet Poets, 1964), pp. 10-11.

[15] Jon Silkin, *Complete Poems* ed. by Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner (Manchester: Northern House, 2015), p. 277. In this essay, where I have not reproduced the poetic text within the body of the essay, I reference quotes from the poem once within each paragraph.

[16] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 277.

[17] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 277.

[18] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 278

[19] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 278.

[20] Transgenerational trauma has been observed particularly in second and third generation survivors of the Holocaust. For examples of the way that transgenerational trauma of the Holocaust has been represented in literature see Gabriele Schwab, *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010).

[21] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 278.

[22] See, for example, Susan Gubar discuss the Holocaust as 'dying' and the importance of attempting to continue active memorialisation in *Poetry After Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003). Gubar's study of the ethics of memorialising the Holocaust in poems written by those who did not witness events of the Holocaust first-hand is particularly important in this field. She explores varying poetic attempts to bear witness to what one never knew, and Silkin's work fits into this category of post-Holocaust witnessing. His poetry carefully considers how to sustain memory of the Holocaust, which resonates with Gubar's critical work.

[23] Jon Silkin, *Complete Poems* ed. by Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner (Manchester: Northern House, 2015) pp. 882-3. In line with Glover and Jenner's *Complete Poems*, I work with the original

publication of ‘The People’ in *The Principle of Water* (1974), rather than the later shortened version published in *Selected Poems* (1980).

[24] Jon Silkin, ‘Stein’, *European Judaism*, 7:1 (1972/3), 33-34 (pp. 33-34).

[25] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 374.

[26] David Rousset, *The Other Kingdom*, trans. by Ramon Guthrie (New York, NY: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947).

[27] Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2013), p. 12.

[28] For example, see Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 378.

[29] See the information available from the Treblinka Museum website: https://muzeumtreblinka.eu/en/informacje/treblinka-ii-timeline/ [accessed 17/03/2020]. Furthermore, ‘Trying to Hide Treblinka’ is also published in *The Iowa Review* in 1992. The poem is footnoted with the contextual detail ‘At the end of the Second World War those who saw to the running of the Camp had a small hill put over it and sowed that with flowering plants’, Jon Silkin, ‘Trying to Hide Treblinka’, *The Iowa Review*, 22:1 (1992), 81-81 (p. 81).

[30] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 656.

[31] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 656.

[32] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 657.

[33] Silkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 657.

[34] See Andy Pearse, *Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).