

## Essay

# Geoffrey Hill's "Hard-Won Affirmation": The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy

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**Abstract:** Sir Geoffrey Hill, long hailed as Britain's greatest living poet, was devoted to remembering the deceased, those forgotten in the debased din of mass culture—some of them worthy of our emulation, others edifying by their “folly” or “criminality” (*Paris Review* interview). Hill's recent death, on 30 June 2016, presents an apt time to remember his own life-work. In its act of memorial as homage, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* marks a departure for Hill: whereas his earlier work often rests in ambiguity, Péguy labors through the ambiguity—through characteristically antiphonal tones of voice, rhythms, and images—and concludes in affirmation, a note of hope, which points in the direction of some of his later work. Through all of his complexity, Péguy's life—like Hill's poem—conforms to a kenotic, Christological pattern and is thus worthy of our emulation.

**Keywords:** Geoffrey Hill; Péguy; Christianity; incarnation; affirmation

With the recent death of Sir Geoffrey Hill, long hailed as Britain's greatest living poet, it is a fitting time to reflect upon his life's work, both in poetry and criticism. Hill was himself devoted to reflecting on those soon forgotten in the din of mass culture. Some of these—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Charles Péguy—Hill presents as worthy of our emulation; others as edifying only by their “folly” or “criminality”. Hill's work has long been labelled “difficult”, an accusative that, as Rowan Williams noted, “Hill triumphantly embraced” [1]<sup>1</sup>. Always resistant to “tyrannical simplification” [2]<sup>2</sup>, Hill's work demands the diligent attentiveness of his readers, and his long poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (1984) [3] is no exception. Its antiphonal diction strikes the reader immediately: history wears “The guise of supreme clown, dire tragedian” ([3] Here and throughout the essay, all citations to Hill's poem will be by section and quatrain number: 1.2) at the scene of Jean Jaurès's assassination in 1914: has Péguy—“martyr and mountebank” (1.3)—incited the assassin<sup>3</sup>? The words hang in an ambiguous balance which does justice to the complexity, the “violent contrariety” (1.7) of the poem's subject. As Kevin Hart notes, “For all his moral rigorism, Hill admires certain poets and certain religious persons. Indeed, he is one of the few poets writing today with a lively sense of sainthood, a sense that includes and exceeds the usual understanding of that word” ([4], p. 47). For all his “violent contrariety” Péguy endures among Hill's “saints”: Péguy stood in prophetic, sacrificial solidarity with the spurned, and insisted that temporal matters always be seen in the light of the eternal.

In his discussion of the Péguy's “lay” theological aesthetic, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar summarizes the French poet's contradictions:

<sup>1</sup> See [1].

<sup>2</sup> See *Paris Review* [2] interview for citations to “folly”, “criminality”, and “tyrannical simplification”.

<sup>3</sup> Further citations of Hill's poem will be by section and quatrain number.

Péguy is still in the eyes of all those who cannot follow him there a contradictory spirit, or a unifier of all the things that cannot be unified: Communist and traditionalist, internationalist and nationalist, a man of the extreme Left and the extreme Right, ecclesiastically minded and anticlerical, mystic and polemical journalist, and so forth. But on the other hand, for anyone who can see the basic pattern, all these strands that appear to cross one another converge like radial lines toward the central point (*Glory*, [5], p. 404).

Hill's poem recognizes this "basic pattern", and reaches this "central point": a crux that emerges in the form of the cross, the etymological root of the word "crux". The poem is both antiphonal and analogical. I use the word "*antiphonal*" in the sense that Hill employs it, in the sense of "counterpointing"<sup>4</sup>. Akin to liturgical prayer sung by two groups, the voice in the poem alternates between critique and praise of its subject. If, however, the voice is not univocal, neither is it simply equivocal. Rather, the poem is *analogical*: in its recognition of Péguy's imperfect charity, the poem affirms Péguy as bearing a likeness to his own model, Christ. Péguy is like Christ in his charity, but, as in any theological understanding of analogy, his unlikeness remains greater. Moreover, Hill's poem itself suggests a Christological pattern as it "descends" into and meditates upon the contradictory particulars of Péguy's life. Christ descends into the particularities of human existence, including death, but, in the end, rises and ascends to heaven. So too the poem: in final quatrains, the poem "ascends" to voice a "salute", its hard-won affirmation of Péguy's "example".

Critical of Péguy's hot-tempered, idealistic excesses, the poem ultimately stands as "homage" ("Charles Péguy", [3], p. 36)<sup>5</sup> to Péguy's defense of the poor and rejected, and his heroic death "on the first day of the first Battle of the Marne in September 1914" ("CP" [3], p. 35). Despite his sensitive reading, I disagree with Jeffrey Wainwright's conclusion that, by the poem's end, the reader is left with "no conviction of apotheosis of any kind, no certain commendation" ([7], p. 56). My reading is closer to that of Alex Shakespeare, who cites with approval Wainwright's "vexing" question as to what Hill's reader is to take from Péguy's example ([8], p. 442), and responds with an emphasis upon "the memorializing power that Hill accords to poetry. [P]oetry's responsibility to speak to our moment in memory of human things" ([8], p. 444).

Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec raises an apt question: "Is it possible that writing *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* was a necessary step for Hill, leading to the energetic clarity and release of the openly political and mystical poems of *Canaan* [9] and the poetry that followed?" ([10], p. 423). In its act of homage, *Péguy* marked a departure for Hill: whereas his earlier work often rested in ambiguity, *Péguy* labors through it, descending into complexity with antiphonal tones of voice, rhythm, and image, and concludes with affirmation. It thus points in the direction of later works like *The Triumph of Love* [11] which, as David C. Mahan demonstrates, "the possibility of triumphant love remains in abeyance until both its defeat and its potential to succeed have been contemplated in Hill's poem" ([12], p. 148). Mahan discerns a kenotic pattern in *Love*:

As the poet-persona continually empties himself of [self-] presumption through repeated acts of 'virtuous mistrust' that we feel in the very texture of the verse, the energetic pitch of vituperation directed against himself and others follows an arc towards its alternative emphasis. *Kinesis* yields finally to *kenosis*, and it is the kenotic that constitutes the grounds for *Laus*" ([11], p. 183).

<sup>4</sup> Hill's use of the word "antiphonal" appears later in this essay: "George Eliot has denied us the cross rhythms and counterpointings which ought, for the sake of proper strategy and good faith, to be part of the structure of such writing. In short, she has excluded the *antiphonal* voice of the heckler" ([6], p. 94, my emphasis).

<sup>5</sup> My reference is to the brief biographical sketch of Péguy which appears at the conclusion of the poem's first edition. I see this sketch as a useful gloss on Hill's poem. I will refer to this sketch as "CP."

So too the ultimate *laus* of *Péguy*: its quatrains present the French poet as an image of the kenotic Christ. The poem's formal pattern of descent and ascent analogically reflects the Christological pattern articulated by William F. Lynch: "I mean Christ to stand for the completely definite, for the Man who so obviously did not march too quickly or too glibly to beauty, the infinite, the dream. I take Him, secondly, as the model and source of that energy and courage we again need to enter the finite as the only creative and generative source of beauty" ([13], p. 5). Lynch extols the analogical imagination—always cognizant of both similarity and difference; for Hill, *Péguy* emerges as an analog for the *kenotic* Christ, who, as Paul [14] describes in his letter to the Philippians, empties himself for our sake (Phil. 2.5–11). *Péguy*'s flaws are many, and thus his dissimilarity to Christ. But in his charity, his own self-emptying, he emerges as Christ-like and exemplary. Hill's poem makes a dogged "march" through *Péguy*'s incongruities; in its kenotic attentiveness to *Péguy*'s complexity, it ultimately discerns and affirms his exemplary life.

Hill's earliest commentators noted the contradictory style of Hill's poems. Merle Brown finds that the "distinctive quality" of the early "In Piam Memoriam", "depends on its disunity and incoherence. Its oppositional duality cannot be reduced even to an orderly unity of opposites...[it] is two poems, or what I prefer to call a double lyric" ([15], p. 18). "Funeral Music", the sequence dedicated to three soldier/martyrs (two of them, like *Péguy*, poets) beheaded during the Wars of the Roses, provides for Brown an even richer example. Hill himself calls the sequence "a commination and an alleluia" (*King Log*, [16], p. 67) and Brown elucidates:

the poem is double and needs to be read two ways at once. One way emphasizes the desperate desolation of the worldly battle, the worthlessness of all it involved [and] points to...beatific redemption. The way of reading that doubles this blames the desolation on the beatific image, and insists that the desolation, the trampled acres, are the only reality, and the paradisaic image from which one sacrifices his worldly self destructively is truly a monstrous, illusory fancy ([15], p. 43).

Brown sees Hill as suspended between moral judgement and aesthetic non-judgement: "Hill's poems regularly fall somewhere between Croce's notion that, though poems may include judgements, the distinctively poetic quality of a poem is non-judgmental and Yvor Winters' conviction that poems are, in essence, judgmental statements" ([15], p. 30). Brown, however, points also to Hill's "fiercely individual judgements which silently envelop the expressive line of the poem"; in doing so, he sees Hill as closer to Winters's ideal. Vincent Sherry sees Hill as closer to Croce—and to James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus. Sherry states:

All in all, the ambiguities in Hills' poems create...stasis as their recurring, characteristic effect, comprised best, perhaps, through modern critics of aesthetic experience. For Empson, the perception of ambiguity can draw one 'taut between the two similar impulses into the stasis of appreciation,' a condition resembling that 'luminous silent-stasis of esthetic pleasure' which Joyce, suspended between the terror and pity resulting from tragedy, prescribed as the proper end of art. Again, like Joyce, Hill eschews the lower kinetic arts ([17], p. 35).

Even in *Péguy*, Sherry finds the "quality of stasis" (p. 235) and "a retreat from the dynamic sphere of ethical imperatives" ([17], p. 236).

For support, Sherry cites Hill's essay "Redeeming the Time". Here Hill points to writers like Coleridge, George Eliot, Cardinal Newman, T.H. Green, and Gerard Manley Hopkins as exemplifying an antiphonal style of writing, marked by "cross-rhythms and counterpointings" ([6], p. 94) that reflect the dense intricacy of reality. Hill censures George Eliot's 1868 pamphlet "Address to Working Men by Felix Holt", not for its conservative beliefs but for the "falsity" of "its rhythmic gerrymandering": "George Eliot has denied us the cross rhythms and counterpointings which ought, for the sake of proper strategy and good faith, to be part of the structure of such writing. In short, she has excluded

the antiphonal voice of the heckler" ([6], p. 94). In contrast, Hill points favorably to Cardinal Newman, as analyzed by Walter E. Houghton: "Newman's structure has caught and projected the very sense of wavering, of being pulled back and forth and forth and back, which he was undergoing" ([6], p. 96). The last words of Hopkins's "Carrion Comfort"—"(My God!) my God"—provide another example: "The abrupted experiences once more commune with each other: the expletive of a potentially filthy bare forked animal ('I wretch', 'Carrion') and the bare word of faith" ([6], p. 106).

Hill takes exception to Donald Davie's assertion that "Hopkins wrote in a decadent age, and if he is its greatest poet he may be so because he cultivates his hysteria and pushes his sickness to the limit" ([6], p. 107). For Hill, decadence surfaces when language denies clashing, contradictory realities, avoids the difficult, "vital" voice of antiphony, and rests instead in the "inert" voice of rant. "Against all this", Hill writes, "Hopkins's poetry established a dogged resistance. Both ethically and rhythmically, his vocation was to redeem the time" ([6], p. 108).

Indeed, Hopkins also stands in contrast to the other decadents, the ones of whom Davie speaks, and the ones whom Ezra Pound finds ultimately lacking in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*: the aesthetes of the late nineteenth century, who espoused "art for art's sake" and eschewed ethical purpose. The Hopkins poems lauded by Hill—*The Wreck of Deutschland*, or the "terrible" sonnets—do not remain "defeated and beautiful in stillness" (Hall, cited by Sherry, [17], p. 30), but, rather, engage images of brave struggle and difficult spiritual choice, images which emerge as exemplary. For Hill the, "laboured" language of "The Wreck of the Deutschland", for example, results in an "effect...of hard-won affirmation" ("Perplexed" [18], p. 119).

So too the language of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* which culminates in exhortation: "Take that for your example!" (10.11). This utterance stands as Hill's "hard-won affirmation". However, as with Hopkins, Hill's *laus* entails a struggle: a resolute exploration of the Péguy's complex life. The words Hill uses to describe the "redemptive" style of Coleridge and Hopkins can describe Péguy: "Its structure is a recognition and a resistance; it is parenthetical, antiphonal, it turns upon itself..." (*Redeeming*, [6], p. 98). But whereas Hill may earlier have "avoid[ed] final statements" (Sherry, *DLB*, [19], p. 203), in Péguy—like Hopkins—he arrives at one: an affirmation of Péguy's mysterious, exemplary charity, the self-sacrificial *kenosis* embodied in his life and death. My reading traces the contours of Hill's poetic passage which culminates in his "hard-won affirmation".

The first section of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* casts its subject in a somber light. Péguy adamantly supported France's entry into the World War I, and opposed Jean Jaurès, whom he had once admired as a fellow supporter of the unjustly incarcerated Alfred Dreyfus. Nationalistic Péguy responded to Jaurès's pacifism with hot-headed words: "'In time of war there is only one policy, that of the National Convention, and we must not shirk the fact ...this means Jaurès in a tumbril and the beating of drums to drown his great voice'" (Villiers [20], p. 371). Soon after, "a young madman, who may or may not have been over-susceptible to metaphor, almost immediately shot Jaurès through the head" ([3], "CP" p. 35). Onomatopoeia signals the bloody scene: "Crack of a starting pistol. Jean Jaurès/dies in a wine puddle. Who or what stares/through the café-window creped in powder-smoke?" Then comes Hill's blunt series of questions:

Did Péguy kill Jaurès? Did he incite  
the assassin? Must men stand by what they write  
as by their camp-beds or their weaponry  
or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry? (1.4)<sup>5</sup>

Hill juxtaposes images from theatre (the world created by an author's pen) and from life. The theatrical images are playful: "the bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*"; "History commands

<sup>5</sup> In his analysis of the poem, Henry Weinfield rightly identifies and separately addresses the three questions posed here ([21], p. 584).

the stage wielding a toy gun"; if Péguy plays Brutus, Jaurès plays Caesar, "his wounds of air and ink/painlessly spouting." But the farce is called "*Sleepers Awake*", and when as he later refers to Péguy as "sleeping" (5.1), (7.1), (10.5), we can hear Hill calling Péguy to "wake up!" Words affect the world. On paper Jaurès's wounds of "air and ink" spout "painlessly"; but in life "Jaurès's blood lies stiff/on menu-card, shirt-front and handkerchief" (1.3). Hill believes that "Our Word is Our Bond" [22], and, in a discussion of Ezra Pound's [23] trial for treason addresses the issue incisively:

The observation that 'The crime with which he is charged is closely tied up with his profession of writing' has an ineluctability that is not diminished by its banal obviousness. The word-monger, word-wielder, is brought to judgement 'by his being the person who does the uttering...In written utterances (or 'inscriptions'), by his appending signature.' Our word is our bond (*Word*, [22], p. 168).

If the first lines of *Péguy* juxtapose word and world as antiphonies, the question of Péguy's responsibility links them as integral realities.

So, too, do the contradictory qualities of Péguy's personality "converge like radial lines" (Balthasar [5], p. 404). In the Battle of the Marne, Péguy indeed "[stood] by" his "shell-shocked comrades while they [sagged and cried]" (1.4). As Marjorie Villiers his English biographer relates: "The morale of the troops suffered. Péguy did his best to restore it. He carried the packs of those whose bodies were broken and the unhappiness of those whose spirit had failed. Tellier, a survivor of the company, wrote: 'He was a proper father to the family'" ([20], p. 376). But Hill points also to Péguy's sullen defensiveness: "Would Péguy answer...?" Hill's profound question about the writer's responsibility? Hill pictures him "stubbornly on guard/among the *Cahiers*", "Truth's pedagogue.../his eyes caged and hostile behind glass..." (1.5–6). Villiers also wonders "what echoes rang in his ears?" when Péguy heard of Jaurès's assassination:

Friends questioned Madame Favre [Péguy's friend]: 'Wasn't he horrified?' 'Didn't he say something about Jaurès?' 'Didn't he condemn the murder?' 'Did he show no sign of remorse?' Madame Favre stated the truth flatly! 'No word of condemnation passed his lips. But he looked like a man prostrated by pain. My silence respected his pain.' ([20], p. 371)

Madame Favre's "flat" statement is like Hill's poetic image: Péguy was both stubborn and compassionate.

Hill next contemplates Péguy's verbal responsibility for the "violent contrariety" of his "days". Watching a silent film (the experience of which Hill conjures exquisitely through diction and sound: "The brisk celluloid clatters through the gate") Hill observes "The jolly cartoon/armies of France go reeling towards Verdun" (1.8). The lines evoke the experience of watching a silent film on a two-reel projector: the men look like cartoons because of the "juddery bombardment" (1.7) of the uneven, quickly moving film. "Reeling" puns, but if this quaint old film seems "jolly", we know these men are marching to their deaths. "Reeling" suggests the madness responsible for their march. Péguy roused his fellow Frenchmen to arms; do his words make him responsible for their slaughter?

Section two provides an antiphon to section one: here Péguy receives a sympathetic treatment while "history"—the way the memory of Péguy is treated in time—is criticized. History presents "charge and counter-charge" (2.1) as memory strives to comprehend Péguy's complexity. The "and" is important here and throughout Hill's poem: it joins the antiphonies, voices, points to the realities of this and that. Univocal history falters in its "tireless[ness] to explain", its efforts to petrify Péguy into a safely heroic image. The memory of Péguy becomes sickly sweet: "the sugars of decay" emerge in the "smile of the dead novice in its plush frame", the polite tour guide pointing to the spot of his death, and the "blank-eyed bronze, brave mediocre work/of *Niclausse*, *sculpteur*, cornered in the park..." (2.8). History presents these bland memorials, "while greed and disaffection are ingrained/like chalk-dust in the ranklings of the mind." Does Péguy "mock us now" (2.8) because we recall him in meager ways but ignore the less safe examples of his charity—his defense of Dreyfus, his solicitude for his men? Do we



partake in what Hill elsewhere calls the “Corinthian self-delusion” (“Kenotic Hymn”, [24], p. 196) of hoarding occult things, as opposed to emptying ourselves through close attentiveness to particulars? “Our gifts are spoils”: are Péguy’s gifts to us clutched at, as if “spoils” and thus reduced and spoiled by history? Hill’s biographical sketch would suggest such an interpretation when he writes:

[Péguy’s] brave and timely death in a beetroot field by the Marne transformed this much-snubbed irascible man into the kind of figure-in-profile for whom church and civic dignitaries turn out in force, whose “essential idea” even Ministers of Education may safely extol (“CP” [3], pp. 35–36).

Hill rejects this “safe” extolling; “prophetic intelligences” ([3], p. 36) are never safe.

Hill next explores Péguy’s “militant-pastoral” (3.7) vision:

The sun-tanned earth is your centurion;  
you are its tribune. On the hard-won  
high place the old soldiers of old France  
crowd like good children wrapped in obedience

and sleep, ready to be taken home (2.3–4).

The repetitive cadence and diction—“hard-won/high places”; “old soldiers/old France”—suggests a liturgical, litany-like rhythm and tone, akin to Péguy’s own writing.<sup>7</sup> Péguy is close to the blessed earth and, in the last quatrain, he and his men are “covered in glory and the blood of beetroots” (2.9). The slippery beetroots, which covered Villeroy field where Péguy was killed, emerge as a symbol of self-sacrifice, the giving of one’s blood, and of earthiness, rootedness in the land.

However, Hill does not simply extol here. The euphemistic description of the soldiers as “good children wrapped in obedience/and sleep, and ready to be taken home (2.3–4)” forces us to pause. These men are about to die. A sinister underside of Péguy’s “militant-pastoral” vision emerges, and Hill continues: “whatever that vision, it is not a child’s; it is what a child’s vision can become”. We recall an earlier line: “Péguy said that Hope is a little child” (1.6).<sup>8</sup> Has Péguy’s childlike, hopeful vision of richly beautiful, pastoral France, been corrupted by a blind militarism?

Yet section three mostly celebrates Péguy’s “militant-pastoral” “dream”. By his self-sacrificial death for the land of his country, by willingly going into that other “land/of exile” (3.1), Péguy lives on in his vision of rural Christian France, his “proper home” (3.2) and “true domaine” (3.5). The vision appears as one of luminous, delicate beauty:

three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum  
in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt  
and paddle, and sunlight pierces the heart-

shaped shutter-patterns in the afternoon,  
shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors.  
Here life is labour and pastime and orison  
like something from a simple book of hours; (3.2–3).

The reader may recall the illuminations in the medieval *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. The onomatopoeia of “thrum”, the hushed “shaped shutter”, and the iambic rhythm—“like something from a simple book of hours”—create the effect of a securely spiritual land. Péguy’s saintly presence

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, in which Madame Gervaise, a young Franciscan sister, describes Joseph of Arimathea: “That wise old fellow/That shrewd old fellow” ([25], p. 107).

<sup>8</sup> See *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, in which Madame Gervaise says: “Now the little girl hope/Is she who forever begins” ([26], p. 23).

permeates the section: he is “Joseph the Provider” (3.1) and leaves behind “relics”: “bits of ivory quartz/and dented snuffbox won at Austerlitz.”

By his death, Péguy provides. But is the “mystic strategy” here akin to that which Paul Fussell and Jon Silkin [27] reject in David Jones’s long poem of World War One, *In Parenthesis*? Do Péguy and the other men die in battle so that the land might be re-fructified, made rich again? Do “fields of discourse”, in which he envisions his pastoral dream,—“[ripen] to the Marne” (3.4) and its carnage? Here is Péguy’s army, called off in incantatory rhythms.

It is an army

of poets, converts, vine-dressers, men skilled  
in woods or metal, peasants from the Beauce,  
terse teachers of Latin and those unschooled  
in all but the hard rudiments of grace (3.8–9).

Are these rural, austere men seen by Péguy as necessary martyrs to the land?

Péguy’s political ideas were shot through with “mystic strategy” and he distinguished between “*mystique* and *politique*”.

By *mystique* he meant an unqualified and disinterested adherence to spiritual values, more specifically to those obviously related to natural law and which, even during his professedly atheist period, he regarded as moral absolutes.

By *politique* he meant the sacrifice of those absolutes to *les raisons d’etat*, the compromises made to secure power or maintain it by an individual, a class, a party, an institution, in their own interests or even in those of the nation itself, if these were seen outside the context of the interests of humanity. (Villiers [20], p. 48).

Hill rejects a simple affirmation of mystique. In response to Péguy’s “militant pastoral” “dreams” he asks: “is this not true?” An antiphonal voice retorts: “Truly if you are wise,/deny such wisdom; bid the grim bonne-femme/defend your door: ‘M’sieur is not at home’” (3.10). Péguy’s agrarian ideal, his “dreams” are unwise, un-grounded in reality.

“The world is different, belongs to them—/the lords of limit and of contumely” (4.1). With section four the hardened, jaded voice of *politique* rebuffs *mystique* and provides a “counter-charge” to the radiant “charge” of the previous section. C.H. Sisson claims that Hill “draws his subject away from the noisy world of politics” ([28], p. 13), but this noisy section, filled with “the sound of broken glass” (4.6), judges the practical failure of Péguy’s method of mystique.

Péguy has been sleeping, and awakens “an age” too late; the country is in the hands of his “enemies” (4.2), the indifferent “lords of limit and of contumely” (4.1), purveyors of *politique*. Péguy is “outflanked again”—and “too bad” suggests less sympathy than scorn. Even Péguy’s poetry is poked: his words are “haggard obliquities” (4.3); his muse the “remorse and the contempt of others”; his verse rhythmically constrained, “bound to the alexandrine as to the *Code Napoleon*” (4.3–4).

Here too Hill holds Péguy responsible for the militaristic exhortations that led France into the tragic World War:

... Thus the bereaved soul returns  
upon itself, grows resolute at chess,  
in war-games hurling dice of immense loss  
into the breach... (4.4)

In the quatrain that follows, Péguy’s example points not to a pastoral dream—the “old Beauce Manoir”—but, rather, to fanatical, defensive infighting and violence, for which his crowded, Paris bookshop becomes the emblem:

This is no old Beauce manoir that you keep  
 but the rue de la Sorbonne, the cramped shop,  
 its unsold Cahiers built like barricades,  
 its fierce disciples, disciplines and feuds,

the camelot-cry of 'sticks!' As Tharaud says,  
 'all through your life the sound of broken glass'. (4.5–6).

Habitually feuding, Péguy calls for Jaurès's head and "some vexed shadow" (4.6) complies. The throwaway tone of the line—"So much for Jaurès murdered in cold pique" (4.6)—caustically suggests Péguy's indifference to the violence he has incited. The lines jab accusingly: "But what of you Péguy, who came to 'exult,'/to be called 'wolfish' by your friends? The guilt/belongs on time; and you must leave on time" (4.7).

Péguy "[speaks] to the blood", but wrapped in mystique, his "militant-pastoral" dream remains dreamily asleep to moral, political, and psychological realities: words matter; they can have violent consequences. By "ris[ing] above all that" (4.8)—above the hard, flesh and blood realities of mundane life and ordinary language—Péguy reveals an "angelic imagination", in Lynch's terms, more like Apollo than Christ.<sup>9</sup> "Risen above all that", Péguy "denie[s] [his] commitment to the physical world, and set[s] [himself] up in quasi-divine independence" (Tate [29], p. 429). By doing so, Péguy "fall[s] flat on [his] face" (4.8); the scene is transformed to one of 'high farce' (10.10). Péguy fails; he's a flop.

One may here recall the fall in the final section of Hill's early poem, "God's Little Mountain". I also hear an echo of the third section of Basil Bunting's [30] *Briggflatts*, where the vain poet protagonist, similarly "angelic", takes a nosedive. More alike than their falls, though, are the landings of Péguy and the *Briggflatts* poet. Here is the fallen poet, "summon[ed]" back "to his clay" in *Briggflatts*:

Heart slow, nerves numb and memory, he lay  
 on glistening moss by a spring;  
 as a woodman dazed by an adder's sting  
 barely within recall  
 tests the rebate tossed to him, so he  
 ascertained moss and bracken,  
 a cold squirm snaking his flank  
 and breath leaked to his ear:  
 I am neither snake nor lizard,  
 I am the slowworm ([30], p. 51).

The sonata-like *Briggflatts* begins its resolution at this point; the fall turns protagonist—and poem—around, and the redemptive presence of the slowworm symbolizes the slow ascent.

Péguy too falls amidst the rich, moist earth, and—as in *Briggflatts*—the poem begins its reversal. Section five continues the sentence broken off in section four, and opens with a breathtaking reversal:

So you spoke to the blood. So, you have risen  
 above all that and fallen flat on your face  
 5  
 among the beetroots, where we are constrained  
 to leave you sleeping and to step aside  
 from the fleshed bayonets, the fusillade  
 of red-rimmed smoke like stubble being burned;  
  
 to turn away and contemplate the working  
 of the radical soul— (4.8–5.2)

<sup>9</sup> See Lynch, *Christ and Apollo* [13]. Lynch employs Allen Tate's phrase "the angelic imagination" ([29], p. 277).



In a moment, “high farce” becomes “low tragedy” (10.10). The beetroots are potent symbols: we recall Péguy’s brave sacrifice and find a man not “angelic” but rooted, like beets in the earth. As readers, we let him sleep. We draw back, reconsider, and contemplate again the “working” of this complex man, this “radical soul”, this mystery.

As we do so, we awaken (it is ourselves who have been asleep!): “waking/into the foreboding of its inheritance,/its landscape and inner domain; images/of earth and grace” (5.2–3). The repetition of the “in” sound matters, for as readers we must move increasingly “in”, incarnationally descend *into* the particular—as the poem has been doing, and will continue to do—to see Péguy’s intricacy. As we move inward, incarnational antiphonies are sounded: “landscape”/“inner domain”; “earth”/“grace”, the “terre charnelle” (5.8) and the sacred, where “rois-mages/march on Bethlehem” (5.1)<sup>10</sup>. As Aidan Nichols observes, “for [Péguy] the incarnation is not only founded in the divine eternal being, but also rooted in the humus of this world” ([32], p. 124). Hill evokes the nativity-like “march” of those who every year trudge, by foot, on annual pilgrimage to Chartres Cathedral—following the example of Péguy who did the same in 1912 and 1913—more like the shepherds than kings:

Hedgers and ditchers, quarrymen, thick-shod  
curés de campagne, each with his load,  
shake off those cares and burdens; they become,  
in a bleak visionary instant, seraphim

looking towards Chartres... (5.4–5.5).

Hill lists the pilgrims in dactyls and trochees; the rough rhythm is incantatory and a scene of great spiritual dignity takes flesh before us. The diction is gruff, earthy: we see—and hear—the “hedgers” trudge, the dogged “thick-shod” make their way. Yet, as in Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty”, flesh and spirit converge: the moment becomes “visionary” and the humble pilgrims become “seraphim”.

“Landscape is like revelation” (5.7) Hill goes on to state, and the French landscape suggests images of Péguy’s Christ-like sacrifice: the ground is “criss-cross-trodden” (5.5) in winter; by late spring, and Pentecost Sunday, “the hawthorn-tree,/set with coagulate magnified flowers of may,/blossoms in a haze of light” (5.6). The metaphor of blood evokes the dead in battle, “covered in glory and the blood of beetroots” (2.9). However, the memory of Péguy brings life: “seminal verdure” which “brim[s]” from stingy dryness, “old chalk pits”. The latter image echoes the stingy “chalk-dust in the ranklings of the mind” (2.6): Péguy’s image invests both chalky “landscape” and “inner domain” with life (5.3)

This first half of section five reveals a different Péguy, no longer “above all that” (4.8). His “dogged” walks to Chartres (“CP” [3], p. 36), pilgrimages of prayer on behalf of his unbaptized children, and his death “among the beetroots” reveal a man of the earth, despite all his emphasis upon *mystique*. “[U]nder the gaze of God”, he and his fellow men are Christ-like as they “die for the ‘terre charnelle’”, the “fleshy earth” (5.8). And, like Christ, they descend into the good earth before they rise. “Péguy said that Hope is a little child” (1.6) and he and the men

... in strange Christian hope, go down  
Into the darkness of resurrection,

into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle,  
almondy meadowsweet, the freshet-brook  
rising and running through small wilds of oak,  
past the elder-tump that is the child’s castle (5.8–9).

At this, the structural midpoint of the poem, the season changes to “Inevitable high summer” and the verdant, refreshing tone of section five—echoed in natural descriptions found later

<sup>10</sup> Hill here echoes Péguy’s poem “Eve”, as observed by Henry Weinfield [21], Jeffrey Wainwright [7], and Stephen Glynn [31].

in *The Orchards of Syon* [33] and *Without Title* [34]—becomes harsher, dryer. “Landscape” and “inner domain” now reveal thorny “furze” and “grief”, the brittle, dry “dust of dead spider”, “clay poets, twisted nails” (5.10–11). Yet the “tin legions lost in haystack and stream”—the self-denying soldiers—remain “blest” and “the scarred most sacred”. In section 5.12, Hill delicately evokes a pastoral scene of austere spiritual dignity; with the repeating “cl” sound we hear the blacksmith and the bells: “The clinking anvil and clear sheepbell-sound,/at noon and evening, of the angelus...”, the prayer which commemorates the Incarnation, but dryness again emerges as spiritual stinginess, the opposite of Péguy’s charity:

Patience hardens to a pittance, courage  
Unflinchingly declines into sour rage,  
the cobweb-banners, the shrill bugle-bands  
and the bronze warriors resting on their wounds (5.14).

Although moments of ambiguity and questioning reappear, the poem’s tone never turns as virulently against Péguy as it had in section four. Section five closes with an image of quiet dignity: Péguy, “self-excommunicate but adoring” ([3], p. 36): about three weeks before he was killed, Péguy attended Mass on the Feast of the Assumption though it is not known whether he received Communion:

In this village [Loupmont] there was a small white church, set among fir trees, served by a priest who spent his days working in the fields of those of his parishioners who had been called up. Here, on the Feast of the Assumption, Péguy heard Mass, for the first and last time since he had ‘recognized’ he was a Catholic . . . [T]he answer to the question whether Péguy confessed, communicated and was reunited to the Church lies buried in the common grave at Villeroy, in which he, his fellow officers and a great number of the company are interred (Villiers [20], pp. 374–75).

Hill describes “the table laid /for early mass from which you stood aside /to find salvation, your novena cleaving /brusquely against the grain of its own myth...” (5.16–17). Hill imagines Péguy attending Mass on that day, but “[standing] aside” from the communion “table”. Hill sympathizes: Péguy’s prayer “cleav[es]”, leans clingingly “against the grain of its own myth”, the Christian tradition—“no bloodless myth”—from which it springs<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, Péguy prays and lives “brusquely against the grain” of the tradition: “Cleaving/brusquely” is antiphonal, the tension and mystery of which Hill lets be. Hill edges toward affirmation, recognizing both Péguy’s brusque solitude and his commitment to liturgical communal tradition.

Section six evokes Péguy’s passionate rejection of anti-Semitism, evinced in his response to the court-martial for treason, public disgrace, and incarceration of Alfred Dreyfus in 1894. Dreyfus was charged unjustly, and a mob mentality led to his persecution. The first lines play with syntax: the removal of a comma reverses the meaning of the phrase “To dispense with justice” (6.1). The image of the shiny, white-washed surface of the military—“white gloves and monocles and polished swords” (6.2)—are juxtaposed with the corrupt reality seen in the following quatrain. Dreyfus, the “school prig”, stands “to attention”, with quiet (if self-righteous) dignity, in contrast to the military representative who seems diseased: “A puffy satrap prances on one leg /to snap the traitor’s sword, his ordered rage /bursting with ‘cran et gloire’ and gouts of rouge” (6.4). Hill describes the crowd at the court-martial as “the men /in the world-famous stories of Jules Verne” (6.5), and the cliché, “world-famous”, suggests the spiritual dullness of the crowd. However, the sentence continues: “or nailed at Golgotha”. Abruptly, Hill fires back at the crowd’s moral torpor, and Dreyfus emerges

<sup>11</sup> “No bloodless myth”: the words are from Hill’s early poem “Genesis”, and comprise the title of Aidan Nichols’ study of von Balthasar’s “theodramatics”.

as a kind of crucified Christ. Surreally, “Serenely the mob howls.” The reader recalls the crowd in Jerusalem crying “Crucify him! Crucify him!”, as this “Christian” crowd “howls”, “Death to the Jews! String the Jews up!” (6.6).

Hill contemplates a grace “beyond the dreams of mystic avarice”. The brusque juxtaposition of “mystic avarice”—like that of “fat Caritas” in poem two of “Funeral Music” (*King Log*, [16], p. 26)—shifts the tone back to irony, one strongly critical of “we”. “We”—the readers!—appear with “rotten teeth askew”, and stand as the condemners of Christ: Pilate, Caiaphas, and Judas. “We” are part of the dull, complicitous mob: “honestly admire/the wrath of the peacemakers, for example/Christ driving the money-changers from the temple,/Applaud the Roman steadiness under fire” (6.10). The smug tone of “honestly admire” recalls the first line of Hill’s “Ovid in the Third Reich”: “I love my work and my children” (*King Log*, [16], p. 13) “We are the occasional just men” (6.11) recalls the mincing “kindness to ten persons” from Auden’s [35] “A Summer Night”. “We are ‘embusques’”, “shirkers of duty”, as we reveal our own self-absorbed “mystic avarice”, “ecstatic at [the] pain” of our “thorns” (6.12).

What of Péguy? Does he stand among us? Despite his defense of Dreyfus, Hill may be suggesting that he does. Péguy’s critics have accused him of “dreams of mystic avarice”: “He could hardly wait to be a hero and, more specifically, a military hero. Of course, the truly great hero is the dead hero” (Aubyn [36], p. 56). And when “again/the metaphors of blood begin to flow”, we recall Péguy’s “metaphors of blood” when he called for Jaurès’s head and his fellow Frenchmen to arms. Did he do so carelessly, desiring his own glorious moment in battle? Was he, too, a shirker of duty? The section concludes by again placing Péguy in a suspicious light.

Yet in section seven the poem inches, laboriously, towards its affirmation. Péguy would seem to be “Christus” here, undergoing his “Passion” (7.4). The “dented snuffbox” appears again as “a treasured tabatiere”, “fumbled with such care/by mittened fingers in dugout or bomb-/tattered, jangling estaminet’s upper room” (7.3). One may recall the “upper room” (Luke 22.12) where the apostles celebrated the Passover with Christ, and then hid, fearfully, after their master’s death (John 20.19).

However, Hill points also to the other men’s passion as well, the “endur[ing]” “presences” of those who died at Villeroy: “their many names one name, the common ‘dur’/built into duration, the endurance of war;/blind Vigil herself, helpless and obdurate” (7.6). The repeating “dur” sound suggests the plodding rhythm of their dogged vigilance; the French “dur” evoking their “hard” march. Hill’s “double vision” is evident here: the men “[crouch] into the hail/like labourers of their own memorial” (7.5), suggesting, perhaps, the self-absorbed martyrdom spurned in section six. Further, the men die “‘pour la patrie,’ according to the book”, and we hear echoes of Wilfred Owen’s [37] and Ezra Pound’s [23] bitter denunciations of World War I.

Yet in their vigilant and brave endurance, “rote” or “according to the book” as it may have been, Péguy and the men at Villeroy participate in “jutting calvaries” (7.2), analogs of Christ’s passion and death, and experience, “in strange Christian hope . . . the darkness of resurrection” (5.8). Perhaps Hill’s readers are like Saul (Acts 9.1–9) or the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.13), who walk for a time unaware of the sacrificed and risen Christ. Over time, we have become blind to the sacrifice of Péguy and his men, and the poet exhorts: “Commit all this to memory” the poet exhorts us, even as “the line falters, reforms, vanishes into the smoke of its own unknowing”. Hill speaks not only of the “line” of men marching to their deaths at Villeroy, but also of his own tortuous, shifting lines, “vanish[ing] into the smoke” of “unknowing”. Through the smoke, along with Hill, we may see and remember, as “these presences endure...” (7.5).

In its tensions, and affirmation, section eight is similar to section seven. We hear an antiphonal voice denouncing, as Pound and Owen did before, the “old lie” of nationalistic militarism, the “ripe carrion”, the violent horror of war. We recall Pound’s “old bitch gone in the teeth” in Hill’s “stump-toothed” “lords of life” (8.1). Echoes of Pound’s “hysterias, trench confessions,/laughter out of dead bellies” wail as the soldiers at Villeroy “push on”:

... through berserk fear,  
laughing, howling, ‘servitude et grandeur’

in other words, in nameless gobbets thrown  
up by the blast, names issuing from mouths  
of the dying, with their dying breaths. (8.2–3)

Yet even amidst the senseless slaughter, Pound acknowledged “fortitude as never before”, as does Hill:

But rest assured, bristly-brave gentlemen  
  
of Normandic and Loire. Death does you proud,  
every heroic commonplace, ‘Amor,’  
‘Fidelitas,’ polished like old armour,  
stamped forever into the featureless mud (8.3–8.4).

The men here are not self-serving; they “[expect] nothing but the grace of France” (8.5). Hill quotes Péguy to affirm their selflessness: “Say ‘we/possess nothing; try to hold on to that’” (8.7).

Hill calls Péguy forward (“En avant, Péguy!” [8.7]), yet points to an “irony” in his “advancement”, found perhaps in section nine. After delicately evoking old France’s pastoral beauty, Hill addresses the “Good governors and captains” (9.3), the “old Bourbons” (9.4). Like Péguy, these reactionary aristocrats dream of a beautiful, “ancient landscape of green branches”. They must respond to Péguy’s words: “If we move but a finger France is saved!” (9.9). Yet perhaps the words do not represent a simple call to arms but a suggestion that Péguy’s charity, witnessed in his fatherly solicitude for his men, represents “the heart/of [his] mystere” (9.4), and offers a salvific path for France. For Péguy’s life and self-sacrifice on the Marne provides an image of “defeat” and “affliction” that the old Bourbons, bound by their “bad memories” (9.7) and “trance” (9.8) would not recognize, “would not suppose...[their] lost cause” (9.4) Péguy’s cause harkens back to that for which “the dawn masses sound fresh triumphs” (9.2) In his “affliction” and care Péguy is like Christ, “our Saviour crowned with scorn.”

The concluding section of *Péguy* remains shot through with antiphonal tensions—almost like the entire poem in miniature—as the poem struggles to its final salute and affirmation. The opening quatrain presents dawn at Villeroy, but not without an antiphonal twist: “A rooster wails remotely over the marsh/like Mr. Punch mimicking a lost child” (10.1). Mr. Punch, the puppet of Punch and Judy fame, ushers in again the conflict between the world of the writer’s imagination and the real world. Moreover, while “Mr. Punch” suggests the ridiculous—but real—violence of war (“the jolly cartoon armies of France...reeling towards Verdun” (1.8), the image of the “lost child” suggests the “strange Christian hope” which the men at Villeroy reveal in their self-sacrifice, as they “go down/into the darkness of resurrection” (5.8). The following quatrain offers a terribly brief account of the battle: “At Villeroy the copy book lines of men/rise up and are erased” (10.2). Hill’s metaphors of writing (“copy book” also suggests the child-like quality of the soldiers) again raises the question of Péguy’s responsibility as a writer for the deaths of these men.

Hill points again to Péguy’s self-contradictions: “simple lesion of the complex brain”; “his great work, his small body”. Yet the diction also suggests Péguy’s closeness to Christ, and especially the self-emptying of Christ’s *kenosis*: “Péguy’s cropped skull/dribbles its ichor, its poor thimbleful.” “Ichor” may be the “the ethereal fluid supposed to flow like blood in the veins of the gods” or “a watery acrid discharge issuing from certain wounds and sores” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The word contains both divine and human connotation and recalls Christ’s piercing, and the blood and water that flowed from the wound (John 19:34). At his death, looking toward the afterlife, Péguy “commends us to nothing” (10.4) which resonates with Christ’s last words on the cross: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Péguy and the soldiers at Villeroy emerge as Christ-like: “The men of sorrows do their stint,/whose golgothas are the moon’s trenches,/the sun’s bleary flare over the salient” (10.8).

Hill’s *Péguy* celebrates “endurance”, dogged struggle, “grace won by inches, inched years”. Hill labors towards an understanding of Péguy, “the radical soul” of “violent contrariety”, and the

poem's antiphonal tensions in diction, tone, imagery, and rhythm give witness to his labor. However, through struggle, he earns, in time, the right to "salute":

Low tragedy, high farce, fight for command,  
march, counter-march, and come to the salute  
at every hole-and-corner burial-rite  
bellowed with hoarse dignity into the wind (10.10).

Hill considers, and "mourn[s]", the undeniable excesses of Péguy's life. Nevertheless, amidst all the contradictions, he affirms that life as one of integrity, bravery, and charity:

Take that for your example! But still mourn,  
being so moved: éloge and elegy  
so moving on the scene as if to cry  
'in memory of those things these words were born' (10.11).

For the first time in the poem, a quatrain opens and closes with two rhymed lines. Indeed, *Péguy* closes as a poetic "act of at-one-ment". For Hill, such poetic atonement is

a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony...described with beautiful finality by two modern poets: by W.B. Yeats when he writes...that 'a poem comes right with a click like a closing box' and by T. S. Eliot...: 'when the words are finally arranged in the right way—or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find—the poet may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable.' Anyone who has experienced that moment in which a poem 'comes right' must, I believe, give instinctive assent to such statements ("Atonement" [38], p. 4).

With the rhyme we hear in the last quatrain, *Péguy* indeed "snap[s] shut", but only after it has gone through its "purgatorial" labor (John Hollander [39] has commented on the "purgatorial changes of rhyme-scheme" in *Péguy* [xiv]): the careful and difficult contemplation of Péguy's life, its charity and its excesses. After such labor, Hill can "demand love in the form of recognition and 'absolution'" ("Atonement" [38], p. 19). The balanced, box-tight rhyme of the last quatrain, "uniting in harmony", suggests an absolution of Péguy. Hill has struggled through an exploration of both the charity and the "menace" [38] of Péguy's life; in the end he offers "atonement"—and asks, implicitly, that we do so, too. With the conclusion we come full circle. In section one, word gives birth to deed. In a tragic invocation of fanatic violence, Péguy's words help create the flesh and blood murderer of Jean Jaurès. However, after Hill's arduous contemplation and work toward atonement, he is prepared to make a clear utterance of affirmation: addressing his readers in his final lines, he exhorts us to discern an exemplar in Péguy. Péguy's deeds thus give birth to the antiphonal, but ultimately affirmative words of Hill's poem. Thus Hill concludes his brief biographical sketch, paraphrasing Péguy: "In memory of these things these words were born."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> One can see and hear Geoffrey Hill reading some of these final quatrains at Charles Péguy's gravesite on 8 September 2013, the 99th anniversary of Péguy's death, at the following site [40].



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