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NATURAL STRANGE BEATITUDES
Geoffrey Hill’s The Orchards of Syon, Poetic Oxymoron and Post-Secular Poetics

and

AN ATHEIST’S PRAYER-BOOK

BY

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Natural Strange Beatitudes: Geoffrey Hill's *The Orchards of Syon*, Poetic Oxymoron and Post-Secular Poetics

*ABSTRACT*

Geoffrey Hill's *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) occupies a contradictory position in twenty-first century poetry in being a major religious work in a post-religious age. Contemporary secular and atheistic insistence on the fundamentally crafted and flawed nature of religious faith has led Hill not to the abandoning of religious vision, but to a theologically disciplined approach to syntax, grammar and etymology. This dissertation examines Hill's claim to a poetics of agnostic faith that mediate his alienation from a cynical and debased Anglophone contemporaneity. The oxymoronic nature of a faith co-existent with existential loss is the primary focus. The semantic distinction between paradox and poetic oxymoron is examined, and the agonistic and aporetic dimensions of the oxymoron are considered as affording theological significance. Poetic oxymoron as site of both foolish babbling and Pentecostal exuberance is made explicit, as is Hill's relation to the oxymoronic nature of beatitudinous expression and the Kenotic Hymn.

Hill's reading of and relation to other theologically engaged poets is outlined. Thomas Hardy's tragic-comic vision, Gerard Manley Hopkins' restrained rapture in 'The Windhover', and T. S. Eliot's expression of kenotic dissolution in 'Marina' are read as precursors to Hill's revisionary God-language. William Empson's significant difficulties with aspects of Hopkins' and Eliot's poetics is appraised as evidence of an oxymoronic and theological dimension within poetic ambiguity. Hill's imperative to embody and enact theological vision and responsibility is tested in a reading of *The Orchards of Syon*.

Paul Ricoeur's perception of the religious significance of atheism is provocation for my own creative practice, as is the performative theology implicit in both Graham Shaw's hermeneutic approach, and Hill's visionary philology. Creative process draws on Simone Weil's notion of decreation, the kenotic paradigm as exemplified in the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the continuing secular vitality of the apostrophic lyric mode.
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AUTHOR’S DECLARATION

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

Work submitted for this research degree at the Plymouth University has not formed part of any other degree either at Plymouth University or at another establishment.

I presented a paper entitled “Geoffrey Hill’s Beatitudes” at the ‘Poetry & Source’ Conference at University of Plymouth in June 2012.

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Natural Strange Beatitudes

Geoffrey Hill’s *The Orchards of Syon*, Poetic Oxymoron and Post-Secular Poetics

Introduction

Poetry in a Post-Secular World

“Even doctrinal poetry is finally made meaningful, is finally made to be understood, by something other than the doctrine.”

Geoffrey Hill is not averse to making fun of the way in which other writers might employ religious language. In an Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture on 30 April 2013, entitled ‘A Deep Dynastic Wound’, Hill picks out John Newman’s ‘affirmation’ of Original Sin from his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), in a passage to which Hill has referred in interviews, previous lectures, and in three of the essays in *Collected Critical Writings*iii. This is the passage to which Hill refers, and which he read aloud during his 2013 lecture:

Did I see a boy of good make and mind, with the tokens on him of a refined nature, cast upon the world without provision, unable to say whence he came, his birthplace or his family connexions, I should conclude that there was some mystery connected with his history, and that he was one, of whom, from one cause or other, his parents were ashamed. Thus only should I be able to account for the contrast between the promise and <the> condition of his being. And so I argue about the world;—if there be a God, *since* there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity.iii

“In wordcraft – permit me the fancy term – “, Hill pleads in his lecture, [such a doctrine of Original Sin] “establishes itself wordily”. And he proceeds comically to examine the wordiness of this prose from an author whom many critics might have assumed to be something of a sacred cow for Hill. “Newman's paragraph is grotesque not for what it says but through verbal mishearing”, he says. What “dire
oversight” caused Newman to allow this “absurd internal rhyme” (mystery/history) to mar “with its ludicrous jingle” a “passage that he clearly designed to carry his message of poignant but fatal judgement”?iv Hill is intent on demonstrating the inseparability of judgement or belief from the intrinsic value of its linguistic expression – “how he [Newman] weighs his clauses for an effect of joint finality at once grammatical and juridical”. Hill repeats a sentence from Newman's paragraph, with barely concealed scorn; (his spoken interjections as to punctuation and typography are indicated here in italicized words in brackets):

“And so I argue about the world (colon, dash) if (italicized) there be a God (comma) since (italicized) there is a God (comma) the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity [here the Professor left a lengthy pause] (period).”

Hill questions whether such prose can be called “magisterial”, whatever its intentions may be, however many people may be convinced by its doctrine, and however much it may be acclaimed by some form of consensus.v Hill’s judgement is severe, whilst performatively hilarious: “at its syntactical heart is this grotesque little hop-and-skip of a phrase at once unwittingly comic and vacantly malign.”vi

Hill’s concern is not with belief, whether plausible, anachronistic or regrettable, but with what he calls in the lecture a “way of considering syntax” which this dissertation will argue is of particular significance to the future of religious endeavour and identity in an age divided between religious fanaticism, atheistic scorn and secular indifference – Hill takes the opportunity during the lecture to quote and ardently repeat Donne’s phrase, “God carries us in His language.” His fervour makes plain what his essays repeatedly profess – that what may be at stake in the writing of poetry is something precious, something – even so late in the day – carrying theological implications. He contrasts Newman's syntax with that of the first verse-paragraph of Milton’s Paradise Lost – “sinuous or serpentine…a form appropriate to a tragedy of deviant ethics…to the writhings of
an *agon* of painful redemption* – and to John Donne’s style: “a measure of delivery that confesses his own inordinacy while remaining in all things ordinate”. Here, syntax and style are clearly *faithful*, as they are, Hill declares, in “*dicta* in which our human grammars whether of obedience or rebellion are manifestations of God’s grammar.” vii *God’s grammar* is viewed throughout this dissertation as some sort of touchstone for Hill, as he appraises other poets’ work, and attempts his own redemptive poetics. Hill suggests that it need not be something otiose or fanciful, dependent on notions or proofs of God’s existence or contained within divine voices heard by the fanatic, but a syntactical condition in which words become (to use the Samuel Taylor Coleridge phrase Hill employs in both essays and poem) “*LIVING POWERS*” viii, and enact a transcendence, though not a relinquishing of, secular, earthbound humanity.

It may seem an act of folly for a poet to pursue a consciously theological project during a period of secular hegemony, and yet it may be that he perceives the more baroque or grotesque religious acts and beliefs of recent times to have obscured what Mark C. Taylor refers to as the “religious dimensions of modernity itself”, rather than to have heralded the need for secularism. ix The particular manifestations of religiosity in any age – even the faith in secularism – may well conceal or distort the proper and existential religious imperatives of the suffering and compromised individual, imperatives the poet may be uniquely gifted to register. x If the existence of *homo religiosus* is, finally, disputed by evolutionary biologist and moral philosopher alike, the poet can nevertheless claim, paradoxically, a residual *philological reality* for such a non-existence, and affirm that such an apparently reduced arena for the exercise of religious sensibility remains far from insignificant.
Geoffrey Hill is a poet who, relatively early in his career, declared an interest in poetry “which could master the violence of the conflict and collusion between the sacramental and the secular” (CCW, p. 11). Christopher Ricks, a self-declared atheist, and an early champion of Hill’s work in “Geoffrey Hill 1: ‘The tongue’s atrocities’” (1978) offered a paradoxical characterization of Hill’s position: “Hill is a religious man without, it must seem, a religion; a profoundly honest doubter” (Ricks, p. 317). Ricks here affirms – in so far as a paradox may affirm – the continuing potential validity of the religious stance (even for an atheist); the apparently irreligious person may have particular religious significance, (“The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner”, as the King James Bible has it (Mark 12: 10)). The paradox is baffling and subversive, as is Hill’s provocative use of the word “sacramental”. The sacramental is contradicted by the secular, and yet contradiction is the transforming function of sacramental vision itself. The conflict and collusion intrinsic to the literary tropes of literary paradox and its near relative, poetic oxymoron, are the focus of reflection in the opening chapter of this dissertation, which explores the capacity of such rhetorical devices to create a peculiar grammatical vibrancy, and to enact a coherent and convincing religious vision within a contemporary context.

Hill, amongst contemporary poets of any reputation, is perhaps the most consistent, and persistent, in this apparent concern for the poet’s role in “redeeming the time”xi. This is problematic in itself, when secular consciousness begins from the assumption that there is nowhere to get to, there is no redemption necessary when ‘enlightenment’ has already been achieved (in the state of secularity), no debt to be paid in order to be restored to past gloriesxii. Such a concern with redemption may mark the contemporary poet as crazed, irrelevant or, at best, anachronistic, yet it is unlikely to gain her many readers. There may be
a twofold objection to such a notion – that redemption is an obsolete term, and that in any case it would not be the responsibility for a poem to effect such a thing. And yet Hill is obdurate and consistently unexpected in his attention to theological matters, from a reference to secular holiness and agnostic faith in his inaugural lecture of 1977, to his attention to the weighting of the word “Slouches” (in Yeats’s theologically revisionist poem ‘The Second Coming’) in the final essay included in Collected Critical Writings (2008), ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’ (2005).

It would appear that, in what is for most a post-theological age Hill has not adopted the mode of the perhaps more conventional iconoclastic poet, perceiving devotion to the sacred or the holy as commensurate with the holy terror of an act of terrorism, the self-delusion of the fundamentalist or cultist, or the atavism of the complacent and prosperous minority, though such distortions do not go unheeded by Hill. Though the iconoclasm of contemporary atheism may most readily present itself as an attractive if impatient anti-clerical, anti-religious stance, it would appear that for Hill secular indifference (in its utilitarian and empirical modes) to the religious enterprise is the more challenging circumstance. In this dissertation I explore the particular nature of the challenge which Hill offers in return, to secular and religious alike.

I propose, below, that Hill’s poetic sensibility derives from a religious agnosticism, which this dissertation seeks to distinguish from Thomas Hardy’s resigned agnosticism and preoccupation with God’s funeral. Hill’s agnosticism is not the same as Hardy’s, but an agnosticism which makes a virtue of its limitations – what “some might wish to call...magnificent agnostic faith”, he writes in ‘Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’ (1977) (CCW, p. 18). “Agnostic faith” would appear to be a deliberately teasing, oxymoronic phrase, combining and clashing states of unknowing and of conviction. Hill’s derivation of this phrase, unusually, goes
unreferenced in his *Collected Critical Writings*. It is difficult to avoid the impression that Hill was being mischievous when he delivered his inaugural lecture at the University of Leeds in 1977, responding perhaps to some colleague’s criticism of his heterodox position (as *religious* writer, or perhaps neo-symbolist) in a coy and deliberately periphrastic manner: “my argument is attracted, almost despite itself, towards an idea by which it would much prefer to be repelled” Hill declares, setting himself up for confession of some sort. He shows himself determined not to let himself off the hook, or dodge an implied accusation: “But surely, one may be asked to concede, it is more than attraction. Is it not a passionate adherence...” he asks in best rhetorical fashion, “a positive identification with the agnosticism – ” and here Hill’s oratory takes flight theatrically, “some might wish to call it the magnificent agnostic faith – whose summation is in the ‘Adagia’ of Wallace Stevens?

After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life’s redemption. Hill thus gives full acknowledgement of this perspective, its attractiveness – “*magnificent agnostic faith*” – allowing a full look at how others may wish to perceive his position, whilst we sense an ensuing caveat. That lower case “god” from Stevens’s original (*Opus Posthumous*, (1959), p. 158), in fact allows room for manoeuvre, and the *faux*-romanticism and histrionic *daring* of what may well be a rather easy and modish abandoning of belief in God is captured in that ironic “magnificent”. We sense that for Hill it is not going to be as easy as all that, and yet drawn to this position he is, nonetheless.

At the heart of his essay, Hill draws a distinction between a growing band of writers who propose a “theological view of literature” – “a proliferation of studies devoted to aspects of the interrelationship of theology and literature” (p. 7) – and
the *theologically responsible* poet. The latter, “in a secular age” (p. 11), has – “it is
ludicrous, of course” (p. 9) – to deal with “one’s own sense of empirical guilt”. Time and again, Hill turns to the theologians, including D. M. MacKinnon (*The
Problem of Metaphysics* (1974); *A Study in Ethical Theory* (1957)), from whom he
takes the remark “the language of repentance is not a kind of bubble on the surface
of things” (*CCW*, p. 8 and p. 15) – the implication being that the entirety of
utterance is (consciously or not) a disclosure of the need for repentance or
*metanoia*; (Hill quotes (p. 18) Martin Jarrett-Kerr on “readiness to have the mind
changed (*metanoia*)”, from *Our Trespasses: A Study in Christian Penitence*.)

Equally, we may surmise, *belief in God* may not be “a kind of bubble on the
surface of things”, but intrinsic to the linguistic texture of a poet’s work – “in the
very density of the medium, without the violence of interpolation or reduction”,
Hill quotes from Henry Rago, writing in Nathan A. Scott’s *Adversity and Grace:
positioning of poetry as *theological enactment*, as opposed to theological
statement, firstly through an examination of poems from three poets – Thomas
Hardy, Gerard M. Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot – who are significant in Hill’s attempts,
both in verse and in prose, to define what might constitute a new *metaphysical*
poetry. In Chapter Five, I then undertake close reading of a number of cantos from
Hill’s 2002 collection, *The Orchards of Syon*, in appreciation of Hill’s achievement of
radical religious sensibility at a time of disparagement and discredit for the
religious enterprise.

I consider the view of Hill as “one born out of due time, who has no calling
here”, to employ a line from Thomas Hardy’s ‘In Tenebris II’ on which Hill himself
draws in his ‘ ‘Envoi (1919)’ ‘ essay from 1986, an essay in which Hill is
preoccupied with “how to make momentary grace endure and indeed triumph

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over the vicissitudes of time and of mortal indifference or hostility” (CCW, p. 660).
But it is in ‘ ‘Envoi (1919)’ ’ too, that we find reference to Thomas Hardy’s poignant line, “Hoping it might be so”, taken from the poem ‘The Oxen’ (Moments of Vision, 1917*) in which the poet in a time of war declares the fragile persistence of religious vision even at a time of stark and universal disillusion: “So fair a fancy few would weave / In these years!” It is the cry of one who has seen something incommensurate with his time, marking out the poem as a form not of naïve escapism or dogged loyalty to a cause, but of resistance to the spirit of the age, whether that spirit is notionally religious or not.

Such a conception of poetry’s function has long been an aspect of Hill’s exacting defence of the art of poetry, and it is this that I examine in relation to Hill’s presentation of Hardy, Hopkins and Eliot. An interview with Hill published in Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation (1981) shows John Haffenden inviting Hill to at least qualify his apparent Arnoldian “high seriousness” – “[D]o you feel that when we look to art for consolation, sublimation or transcendence we should remain sceptical about its value?”* Hill indicates in response that the poet’s perception of a “debased” world inevitably results from a simultaneous intuition of notions of “innocence and original justice”. The poet stands in this intervening space, attentive to both realities, embracing (or wrestling agonistically with) what has philosophically been termed aporia* or, what might helpfully be termed, irreconcilable differences. Hill’s reference in the interview with Haffenden to “the oxymoronic nature of our world” (p. 88) springs from this awareness of the poet’s responsibility to both immediate contemporaneity and to the appraising, evaluative faculty. For Hill, as this dissertation seeks to demonstrate, this oxymoronic vision or percipience, is an article of faith, and explains the peculiar
nature of the poetry he advocates as valid, and which he labours to create in a work such as *The Orchards of Syon*.

Hill draws a distinction (Haffenden) between scepticism and cynicism – “the vacuousness of the television personality is so centrally and orthodoxy cynical that scepticism belongs with poetry as a kind of marginal resistance to it” – in which contemporaneity is duly referred to as an orthodoxy, and where due recognition is given to poetry’s (limited) potency in presenting the unorthodox or heterodox challenge, which is nonetheless not necessarily irreligious. Here the poem inhabits a paradoxical space, where extra-poetic forces – in Hardy’s poem the First World War – fashion a significance at variance with the poem’s own intentions, a significance inevitable and, therefore, either implicit in the poet’s endeavour, or inadvertent and subversive of the poet’s achievement (p. 88):

Therefore the oxymoronic nature of our world produces a resistant paradox, which is that the poem, which in itself may not contain a grain of scepticism, may nonetheless belong with certain kinds of constructive scepticism as one of the instruments of resistance to the drift of the age.

In response to Haffenden’s invitation, then, Hill appears only to confirm the high seriousness of the poet’s vocation, albeit a marginalized one, and to outline the fate of the poem and of poetry were it not to be so defended: “merely a vessel to contain the spontaneous efflux of some kind of direct, unqualified, unmodified, unfiltered personal spasm” (p. 89)\textsuperscript{viii}.

In the third of his Ward-Phillips Lectures in 2000\textsuperscript{xxv}, Hill considers the vulnerability and relevance of the poet “in the midst of a progressive, increasingly secularist age” (p. 527). Hopkins’ adoption of St Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* in such a climate ran the risk of rendering his works “anachronistic, even archaic” (p. 526), and yet Hill argues it was this that enabled Hopkins to perceive the oxymoronic nature of his reality – Hopkins writes in a letter of “‘the
hollowness of this century’s civilization’ (1 December 1881)” (CCW, p. 525), and Hill concludes, he knew “democracy to be alienated from its proper majesty by the egalitarian and the mean” (p. 531). The topos of conflicting semantic forces, of linguistic aporia, is there in Hill’s determining phrase “alienated majesty”.xx The phrase is in itself semantically baffling, even stultifying, containing senses of both deliberate and surprising estrangement, of distancing both desired and suffered; of regality both rejected and new-found. Hill’s essays on alienated majesty are an attempt to reclaim what we might call aporia or oxymoron poetics for our time.

Thomas Hardy is said to “dwarf his own greatness of perception yet ennable things that life has stunted” (p. 494). Gerard Hopkins, “both as theologian and theologically disciplined poet”, took “the nature of alienated majesty as his running theme.” T. S. Eliot’s poetic decline (according to Hill) results from his “increasing inability...to contemplate the heavy cost of being, of becoming, radically, irrevocably, alienated” (CCW, p. 552; from ‘Eros in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot’, 2005).xxi Hill declares his own “critical bias” for “the power of words when arranged in alien and alienating formal patterns on the printed page” (p. 562).xxii

The poet’s responsibility to achieve this alienated authority beyond that of the “personal spasm” is Hill’s preoccupation in his essays and in his verse. In the Preface to Style and Faith (2003) he looks to authors who were “prepared and able to imitate the original authorship, the auctoritas, of God” (CCW, p. 263), and refers to “John Donne’s several presentations of an essential theme throughout his devotional writing: that of God’s grammar”. God, here, is not something mystically beyond human utterance – Hill quotes Calvin: “God ... is not an idle spectator” – but an intrinsic facet (“an essential theme”) of faithful expression. A grammar that might sustain the alienated majesty of the word ‘God’ at a time of secular fundamentalism, remains recognizably human – in Donne’s words neither
“penurious” nor “superfluous”. Hill defines Donne’s faithful expression: “a measure of delivery that confesses his [Donne’s] own inordinacy while remaining in all things ordinate”. The aspiration is to a grammar upholding a style on a threshold between personal spasm and angelic plainchant – one of Hill’s deliberately anachronistic epigraphs to *Style and Faith* is from Benjamin Whichcote: “If it were not for Sin, we should converse together as Angels do.”

Hill has already indicated the ambition of such an understanding of grammar in an earlier essay ‘Caveats Enough in their Own Walks’ (1986) where he asserts Donne’s “engagement with meta-poetics, a profounder poetry than that recognized by conventional instructors in rhetoric and conduct” (p. 223). The grammar of such a meta-poetics upholds and generates words as living powers, radiant with protean semantic energies, and locked in judicious conflict with the realities of the day. Hill looks to Coleridge as prophet of this “visionary philology” (p. 270), quoting his words in ‘Common Weal, Common Woe’ (words referenced, too, in the earlier essay ‘Redeeming the Time’): “For if words are not THINGS, they are LIVING POWERS, by which the things of most importance to mankind are actuated, combined, and humanized.”xxiii
Chapter One

Poetic Oxymoron & Religious Vision

“In destroying the shelter offered by religion and liberating men from the taboos imposed by religion, atheism clears the ground for a faith beyond accusation and consolation.”


In an attempt to pin down Geoffrey Hill’s “religious faith”, Jeffrey Wainwright, in Acceptable words: Essays on the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, draws out a “statement” from one of Hill’s lectures: “In the second of his Rhetorics of Value lectures, Hill declares himself ‘attached … to a form of belief in Original Sin, one that is probably not too far removed from the orthodox’ (RV p. 271)”xxiv Wainwright’s comment on this ‘declaration’ is telling: “the nature of the poet’s religious faith as it appears in his work has not always been so straightforwardly put.”xxv There is perhaps a reluctance, here, to distinguish between 'belief' (the word Hill equivocally uses in his lecture) and ‘faith’; the designation of a poet's beliefs will not necessarily lead to an understanding of the nature of his faith, nor are particular beliefs essential to the success or otherwise of a poem. The danger is that Wainwright’s claim allows us to think we have done with the problem of Hill’s religiousness, or religiosity (originally meaning simply “religious feeling or belief” (NSOED) rather than the late 18th century “affected or excessive religiousness”), before we have engaged with his poetry.

The critical problem here derives from the fact that for Hill poetic articulation is the creation (and discovery) of faith. Faith is not something with which the poet comes already equipped, or indeed goes away with as a formula (beyond the shaped and completed poem). Rowan Williamsxxvi, writing in Geoffrey Hill: essays on his later work (2012), seems to indicate this when he writes of
“poetry in which faith and loss are bound together; not a poetry about ‘loss of faith’, the deserted Arnoldian beach, but a poetry in which the language of faith is finally the only language appropriate for speaking honestly of loss.” This ‘binding’ of faith and loss is potentially a riposte to Matthew Arnold’s melancholic poem ‘Dover Beach’, and a more dynamic theological response to ‘loss of faith’ or ‘death of God’; Rowan Williams’s use of oxymoronic expression here leads us away from self-pitying and straightforward ‘loss of faith’, to the faith which results from loss, the faith which loss clarifies, the loss to which we remain faithful, as much also as the loss which faith may actively bring about.

The methodological impasse evident in Wainwright’s apparent desire for ‘straightforward’ declarations of faith, is a subject to which Emily Taylor Merriman alludes in her ‘Treasure in Labyrinths’ (2011)xvi: “Because mainstream contemporary academic scholarship is secular, theological methods of assessment are beyond the prescribed boundaries of literary criticism, even when an intensely religious poet is under consideration” (pp. 456-457). It would appear, however, that such an impasse is itself reflected in the semantic impasse which is poetic oxymoron, and Wainwright goes some way to acknowledging this when on page 2 of his Acceptable words he states: “As will appear in the succeeding essays, oxymoron was to be an important, and highly theorized, device for Hill.” Here, I attempt to gauge this importance in a way unattempted by Wainwright.

Wainwright returns to the Tanner Lectures (Rhetorics of Value) in a later chapter of Acceptable words, entitled ‘Beauty is difficult’: Speech! Speech! (2000)’. There he seems to come closer to understanding Hill’s particularly religious tenor (and pitch). He places Hill in the theological context created by Bonhoeffer in his Letters and Papers from Prison: “for Dietrich Bonhoeffer ... the defining condition of modernity is that human beings have become ‘religionless’, by which he means not
just that they have ceased to subscribe to religious belief and practice, but that ‘the
time of inwardness and conscience’ is over” (p. 98). He then writes of Hill’s “search
for ‘inwardness and conscience’ in the cacophony and collage of the modern
world” (p. 99). This seems an altogether more fruitful approach in the assessment
of Hill’s achievement and intentions, though taking the word ‘religionless’ at face-
value, Wainwright gives Hill’s religiosity less attention than it perhaps deserves.

In the index to Acceptable words the word ‘oxymoron’ claims six page
references. Wainwright is in fact rather dismissive of the trope’s function and
ambivalent about its effects: “The shapeliness of oxymoron can exert its own
excessive attraction, but it does enact the real complexity of attitude and opinion”
(p. 16). Later, an oxymoron is described as a poetic “indulgence” (p. 29), and
Wainwright almost repeats himself: “paradox has a neatness, a shapeliness which
is seductive and might betray” (p. 29). There is a proper concern here that the use
of paradox may betray a rather facile or insubstantial decorativeness, but equally,
Wainwright appreciates the dynamic and dramatic quality of oxymoronic
‘enactment’ (“real complexity of attitude and opinion”), as well as the ambiguity of
a device which may ‘betray’ the truth in the act of revealing it. The oxymoron has a
repellent or alienating shapeliness, perhaps, and it is clearly worth looking more
closely at Hill’s “highly theorized” use of this device.

Wainwright refers in the Secondary texts section of his ‘Select bibliography’
to Peter McDonald’s review of Hill’s The Orchards of Syon, a review in which
McDonald at least attempts to overcome the embarrassment of dealing with
religious sensibility. There he writes, acknowledging the literary critic’s struggle in
the face of this phenomenon: “A poetic voice ... can also become ... the register of
what, for want of better terms, might be called religious moments of
apprehension.”xxix And he goes on to defy the more scornful critics of Hill’s religiosity, and makes these observations:

If Hill’s book constitutes a religious poem ... it is so on account not of what Hill says, but of the way in which his voice accommodates itself to the transcendent. “Religious poetry,” as commonly practiced [sic] or understood, is apt to simplify its conceptions of voice in relation to God, as though religion could deliver a voice in which sincerity would magically override the weight and inertia of language; for Hill, God’s presence in language is precisely analogous to His presence in time and the world, and is therefore a part of, and not apart from, the anguish of being and, for that matter, the comic business of pulling through life and seeing it to the end. God is, inescapably, part of every impossible situation, and it is God’s grace that creates the “labours of flight” by which the downward pull and the inertia in language are (always temporarily, and always imperfectly) overcome. (pp. 283-284)

The religious poem here is a poem discomfiting to non-religious and religious alike; it does not satisfy expectations or provide demand-led consolations. A religious poem is not written through the saying of apparently religious things. Religious quality is found in particular linguistic enactment, the texture of verse, not separable from it. The sincere, straightforward declaration of faith may, paradoxically, be less indicative of religious sensibility than the oxymoronic “labours of flight” (canto XLII, Orchards) of a poet’s compositions. As Hill writes in ‘The Weight of the Word’ (CCW, p. 365), there is “a different order of theological understanding, inherent in etymology and the contexts of grammar and syntax”. The “real complexity” of the oxymoron bears examination as a site of this enacted theological understanding.

Yeshayahu Shen’s 1987 study of the poetic oxymoron, ‘On the Structure and Understanding of Poetic Oxymoron’xxx draws attention to the complexities of the “poetic or indirect oxymoron” as against the all-purpose paradox, or “direct oxymoron”xxxi. It significantly extends what might be seen as the working definition of oxymoron (from The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary):
A rhetorical figure of speech in which markedly contradictory terms appear in conjunction so as to emphasize the statement; *gen.* a contradiction in terms.

The *NSOED* derives this from the Greek “*oxumōron* use as n. of neut. sing. of *oxumōros* pointedly foolish”, which may fruitfully direct us to the impossible combination of wilfulness and innocence, of reflection and spontaneity that the oxymoron may express. The word “oxymoronic” is here defined as “incongruous, self-contradictory”. Shen begins with this elementary understanding too, though introducing the useful word ‘antonymous’ (*NSOED* – “opposite in meaning”):

Theories of poetic language usually define the oxymoron as a figure of speech consisting of two elements (or members) which stand in “opposition,” i.e., are antonymous to each other (pp. 107-108).

*Poetic* oxymoron (which Shen calls the “indirect oxymoron”) is then shown to operate rather more forcefully or agonistically than this suggests. Poetic oxymoron is more than a merely self-contradictory paradox; the *paradox* Shen calls “a direct oxymoron” which “combines two antonyms”.

Employing terms from psycholinguistics, he considers (p. 109) the phrase “the silence whistles”\[xxxii\] and introduces a semantic refinement – “one of its two terms is not the direct antonym [as in paradox] of the other, but rather the *hyponym of its antonym*.”\[xxxii\] *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* records ‘hyponym’ as a “word whose meaning implies or is included in that of another (e.g. *scarlet* and *tulip*, in relation to *red* and *flower* respectively).” Shen is concerned with the complex semantic structuring of poetic oxymoron, according to the principal:

- semantic features are structured, that is, they are not randomly listed, but rather are organized within an hierarchical structure in which some of the semantic features are higher than others (p. 108).
We can see in the linguistic notion of the hyponym, that semantic interplay between denotation and connotation which exercises so much of Hill’s critical attention. Shen continues:

The antonym of “silence” is lexically realized by the word “sound”.... Note, however, that the second term of the oxymoron is not “sound” but its hyponym, i.e., “whistle”; the feature list of this latter term adds the [semantic] feature “+sharpness” to those of “sound”, and this addition turns “whistle” into a hyponym of “silence” (pp. 109-110).

This explication of the semantic dynamics of the poetic oxymoron draws attention to the blurring and to the sharpening of meaning and vision (or, in this case, the muffling and attunement of sound), which this rhetorical device potentially enacts. The ‘locking’ of opposites (as in a paradox) is included but superseded by semantic shifting, as if the philosophical aporia of paradox should give way to, and generate movement and breaking illumination. There is loss in supersession, but a hard-won clarification, too, of how much equivocation may achieve. The more mundane designation for ‘aporia’ (from the Greek “aporos impassable”) and for the related ‘aporetic’ (from Greek “aporein be at a loss”) in the NSOED is helpful here – “1 Rhet. The expression of doubt. M16. 2 A doubtful matter, a perplexing difficulty. L19.”

And ‘aporetic’: “Full of doubts and objections; inclined to doubt.” Poetic oxymoron may acutely and accurately acknowledge or acquiesce in doubts and perplexities in meaning and vision, and yet enact the compensatory movement which is at the heart of authentic religious vision.

Shen draws the conclusion that the “indirect oxymoron” is “the structure which requires the most complicated processing” (p. 112), a conclusion which sits happily with Hill’s own refusal to mitigate the difficulty of poetic utterance in the name of accessibility. As Shen further concludes, “the high frequency of this structure [in a body of poetic work] can be motivated by the very attempt of the poetic utterance to complicate its comprehension and processing” (p. 121).
According to Shen’s definition, of course, it does not follow that every paradox or oxymoron employed within a poem will achieve the complex effect of this poetic oxymoron, nor that the poetic oxymoron may not be used in non-poetic contexts. He concedes that his study “aims at drawing general parameters by means of which the structure of the oxymoron should be described regardless of its specific context. A more detailed study will have to examine how a specific context...would determine the use of these parameters’ (p. 111). Hill’s lectures and critical writings contain, as Wainwright indicates, a degree of interest in this contextual deployment of apparently antithetical or self-contradictory notions, and the light which (paradoxically) escapes them. Hill’s expressed enthusiasm for the oxymoron\textsuperscript{xxxv}, and his use of the word within his critical writings, though perhaps not as “highly theorized” as Wainwright might suggest, is persistent and illuminating.

In his second lecture as Oxford University Professor of Poetry – ‘Eccentrique to the Endes of his Master’\textsuperscript{xxxvi} – Hill states that “some of the most memorable poetry of this period [1520-1720], and perhaps of subsequent periods ... articulates itself around the oxymoron ... the sharp/blunt dichotomy”. Hill here seems content to perceive oxymoron in the way in which Shen describes direct oxymoron though Hill’s definition already hovers between linguistic and theological understanding: the oxymoron, he says, “binds us ever tighter into our carnal condition with a locked antithesis”. Hill seems to acknowledge his desire to draw theological implications from rhetorical realities when he insists, as a kind of mischievous aside, that his reflections on oxymoron are his “impression” only and “not the demonstration of a fact”, that “a strict grammarian may disagree”. We may assume, however, that the strict grammarian is one who seeks to ‘fix’ definitions, whereas the poet is concerned with a different order of reality, with how to do
things with wordsxxxvii. We might also assume, I suggest, that though the paradox seems to get us nowhere, the poetic oxymoron, on the contrary, gets a lot done and is memorable, as Hill claims, opening out possibilities that are distinctive of religious poetics.

In drawing his own distinction between what is effectively the direct oxymoron and the paradox, which he indeed characterizes as a device that “opens out”, Hill seems to be drawing attention to the differing linguistic properties that Shen discerns between the direct and indirect oxymoron, (though here, confusingly, ‘paradox’ strikes Hill in the way ‘indirect oxymoron’ seems to strike Shen). In the context of Hill’s discussion within the lecture of “asymmetrical”, revolutionary forces, the distinction is in any case deliberately contentious. We may, with Shen’s definition in mind, think of the paradox as a “locked antithesis”, and the oxymoron as an asymmetrical force with the potential to “open out” the complexities of the human condition. Professor Hill may not be altogether displeased with such a revision of his argument; in the course of the lecture, it is clearly the oxymoron which is “memorable” and he, further, associates oxymoronic utterance with the perceived “incivility[ies]” of both Socrates and of Jesus. He cites “a remarkable book” Overheard by God, (by J. D. Nuttall) in which the clash between the orthodox appraisal of man’s stature and its visionary or heterodox challenge is examined – Hill seems to be paraphrasing, declaring “the excuse of Socrates for his appalling incivility was that he had seen something incommensurate with the world he inhabited”. The word “appalling” here clearly reflects the indignation of those who were, and are, exercised by Socrates’ reasoning, where history (and Professor Hill) might suggest that this “incivility” was the superior form of civility. Though Hill appears in his lecture to be less than deferential to the “strict grammarian” of the oxymoron, it may well be that he is in
pursuit, albeit mischievously, of a higher grammar, that of Socrates and Jesus, God’s grammar, and the metanoia that this evidences, obligates and promises.

We find this same distinction between locked semantic antithesis (Hill’s oxymoron) and shocking (or appalling) contradiction (paradox) in Hill’s 1979 essay ‘The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell’. Hill refers to the “oxymoronic treadmill” of carnal sinners (in Southwell’s verse) – “a world vacuously full of ‘loathed pleasures’, ‘disordred order’, ‘pleasing horrour’, ‘balefull blisse’, ‘Cruell Comforts’” (CCW, p. 37). The word “treadmill”, whilst referring to the self-imprisoning activities of the supposed sinners, may also provide us with a judgement on the poet’s own limited use of the locked antithesis as a poetic trick.

The use of “violent contradictions” may well become monotonous or laborious, but perhaps necessary, in Hill’s eyes, before one can take flight. Hill refers to this (using the word ‘paradox’ apparently interchangeably with ‘oxymoron’) in a later essay ‘Caveats Enough in their Own Walks’ (1986) in connection with John Donne and his “early ‘Paradoxes’” (CCW, p. 223): “knotty riddling ... moves from, and through, rhetorical bravado ... to an engagement with meta-poetics, a profounder poetry than that recognized by conventional instructors in rhetoric and conduct”.

Hill characteristically links grammatical with moral issues (“conduct”), when once again he is concerned with the redemptive potential of poetic utterance (which seems evident in that term ‘meta-poetics’, suggesting, of course, metaphysics).

In ‘Absolute Reasonableness’ he writes of Southwell’s use of the redemptive play between the “oxymoronic treadmill” and the “divine paradox ... God disadvantaged himself for man’s advantage”. Paradox is thus presented as release or opening out from the (oxymoronic) self-imprisoning licence of those carnal sinners. Nevertheless, Hill might not be unsympathetic to the perception that those oxymora are poetically more interesting than that merely brain-teasing “divine
paradox”. Hill is perhaps using the word ‘oxymoron’ to identify logical contradictions, rather than exploring the semantic conflict embodied in poetic oxymoron.

In 1983’s ‘Our Word is Our Bond’ Hill continues to refer to oxymoronic statement as self-contradictory or “self-stultifying” (CCW, p. 164). Further, it is significant that later (in ‘Keeping to the Middle Way’ (1994)) Hill is to outline a paradoxical wisdom inherent in self-stultifying statement (stultiloquy) itself, which suggests there may be virtue in the distorted eloquence of this baffled and baffling trope. In discussing Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) Hill identifies “an English form of stultiloquium (= a foolish babbling) and of the Plautine stultiloquentia, several years before ‘stultiloquy’ appeared in English usage” (CCW, p. 309). This stultiloquy elides “clowning insouciance” (p. 315) and the much graver “endless sorites of mental and spiritual suffering”, where “sorites” is both a “heap” or “series of propositions” and a transformational act of paronomasia – “in that heap the makings of a finer anatomy, a grander organum, a richer treasure, a nobler volume of praise” (p. 315). Hill maintains that “spiritual eloquence” (p. 314) or “God’s grammar” (p. 315) is co-existent with stultiloquy, and though he here tentatively educes “perhaps paronomasia and traductio” as “figures most closely aligned with this doctrinal-grammatical dilemma”, we may also propose the poetic oxymoron (as defined by Shen) as a “play of words” effective to the religious avocation.

In ‘Dryden’s Prize-Song’ (1991), for instance, “formal oxymoron or paradox” (CCW, p. 229) seems to fail in expression of certain levels of apprehension. Hill asserts there is an “area of bafflement, stultification, which the creative intelligence is forced to encounter as though it possessed the ‘brute’ force that Charles S. Peirce imputes to ‘actuality’” (p. 229). Hill draws on Peirce’s phrase “the Brute Actuality of
things and facts”, found in the 1908 essay ‘A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God’, and seems to reverse Peirce’s semantic intention, imparting equal force to “area[s] of bafflement” as to Peirce’s “things and facts”. In ‘Dryden’s Prize-Song’ Hill’s “area of bafflement” – a “doctrinal-grammatical dilemma” we may surmise, where the mind approaches an interpretative or perceptual impasse – requires a more particular form of rhetoric than (direct) oxymoron or even paronomasia, one with the ‘force’ to convey the reality of consternation before what is unspeakable, whether that be atrocity or divinity. It is perhaps not unworthy to propose that expression of this stultification or aporia finds an effective vehicle in the divine stultiloquy which is poetic oxymoron.

David-Antoine Williams in his ‘Poetic Antagonyms’ provides some corroboration for such a proposal in a study which focuses on single-word oxymora, “which are semantically divided against themselves, housing antithetical meanings which cannot seamlessly be made to fit” (p. 170). Williams’ appreciation of the liveliness and semantic drama of oxymoronic expression suggests there is more to this mode or trope than mere stultiloquy. Where Hill is apt to determine the locked antithesis, Williams seems to perceive perpetual motion – “opposing senses actively resist each other’s impressions and implications” – or “the unyielding struggle between Jacob and the angel at Peniel” (p. 180). Later, he writes of “interpenetration where others have understood fundamental opposition” (p. 180). He recognizes the potency of such semantic forces, defending them against the dismissive definitions of self-antagonistic words given by both the Oxford English Dictionary and by William Empson:

They create a kind of ambiguity which is neither “dubious . . . signification” nor “equivocal expression” (OED 3a, 4), nor, strictly speaking, the nuancing of poetic language beyond direct prose statement that William Empson described (quoted in sense 3b of OED). Rather the ambiguity takes the uncanny form of a sustained antagonism between opposing significations in
the creation of the poem’s meaning, significations which cannot be reconciled within a harmonious reading (p. 171).

“The uncanny form of a sustained antagonism” [my italics] – this is certainly a more welcoming appreciation of oxymoronic ambiguity, bringing as it does a Coleridgean-Hillian sense of words as, indeed, LIVING POWERS.

Such antagonyms (in Williams’ case from an Emily Dickinson poem: ‘I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –’) create interpretative possibilities which are not simply manifold or divergent but which exist only and necessarily in conflict with each other, a conflict which may be seen to be mimetic of fundamental psychological, spiritual, and artistic antagonisms in the poem (p. 172).

Here, oxymoronic statement is credited with a kind of empirical aptness and aptitude (“mimetic of”) that is far removed from the wilful declaration of belief or dogma that might characterise more obviously religious verse. Williams credits the antagonym not with stultiloquy or obfuscation, but in fact with a peculiar type of clarification of vision unavailable to straightforward religious statement.xlii

Williams appreciates Empson’s “extended discussion of Richard Crashaw’s “The Sacrifice” here, noting that “mystery asks acontemplating mind to overcome the mental vexation that accompanies logical or factual contradiction” (p. 174), and links this insight to the “sublime state” of John Keats’ “Negative Capability”.xliii

But Williams wants to go further:

The conceptual configuration that best describes the effect of the poetic antagonym, while its two senses are equally matched and locked in full agon, is not mystery or doubt but aporia, a permanent conflict in which no ground is given or taken (p. 174).

The poetic and theological results of such oxymora seem well defined in Williams’ final declaration: ‘I think the poetic antagonym can reveal areas of self-conflicting aporia within what has broadly and historically been an art of reconciliation [i.e. poetry]’ (p. 182).
In a passage of Hill’s ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ (to which Williams also refers) Hill seems to recognise this poetic potential: “it must be affirmed that it is at such points, or nodes, where ‘stultification’ might seem the most reasonable verdict, that poetry encounters its own possibilities” (CCW, p. 160). And for Hill these “possibilities” are intrinsically religious, however secular (in a rhetorical or philological sense) may be the parts of which the whole is composed, as we see in his 1989 essay ‘A Pharisee to Pharisees’. Hill, there, employs a poetic oxymoron from Henry Vaughan’s ‘The Night’ (the poem which is under consideration in that essay) in his laudatory reference to a 1947 essay on “notions of religious poetry” by Walter J. Ong: “the dazzling darkness of his brilliant essay ‘Wit and Mystery’” (CCW, p. 327). He is interested in Ong’s conclusion that poetry and theology “both operate on the periphery of human intellection” (CCW, p. 327; Ong, p. 325). In Ong’s assertion that “word-play is not mere virtuosity of verbal figure” (Ong, p. 313), we find an estimation of poetic troping that is shared by Hill in an essay such as ‘The Weight of the Word’: ‘[s]uch oxymoronic constructions find themselves awkwardly placed between the technical and the spiritual’ (CCW, p. 362). Ong prefigures Williams: “Puns are used where semantic coincidence penetrates to startling relations in the real order of things” (Ong, p. 315).

Ong examines the paradoxical wit which is so often a facet of metaphysical conceit (in both Latin hymnody and the 17th century metaphysical poets) and identifies a “superlative derangement” (p. 327) inherent in such apprehension, an indicator of that “foolish babbling” intrinsic to the poetic oxymoron as we are defining it. And in his estimation of the “mysteries of faith” (p. 333) and their operation in the mind’s economy, Ong provides a striking model of both the nature of religious sensibility and the poetry of its expression: “here its movement [the mind’s] is not circular, as it is in natural cognition, where the intellect returns to
material things for completion. It is centrifugal. And this for human intellection is
violent movement”. That sense of semantic opening out and of spiritual
enlargement is helpfully carried in that metaphorical use of the word “centrifugal”. Ong captures too, in “violent movement”, the thrill and potential scandal of such rhetorical enactment.

Ong refers to “the oral teaching even of Christ Himself” (p. 328) which must employ language terms “taxed beyond their natural powers. They will be aligned in strange and unaccountable ways”.xliv It would appear that Ong is here referring to the Beatitudes of the all-too-taxing Sermon on the Mount of Matthew’s gospel. There we find (translated from demotic Greek, presumably as translation of an orally-transmitted Nazarene Aramaic) that peculiar rhetorical manifestation which goes by the Latin-derived name of the Beatitudes, and which, we may surmise, may provide us with insight into Hill’s sense of God’s grammar. The Nazarene tzaddik, if we will challenge our own indifference, challenges our complacent sense of how the world goes, in Matthew 5: 3-10:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Beatitudes proclaim blessings which one might well not wish upon one’s worst enemy given the conditions which apply. Each blessing incorporates an earthly curse which the complacently secure person must deny or cannot consider. The prosperous person’s understanding of blessedness or good fortune, (with its unacknowledged exclusivity, the concealing of its fortuitous nature and
the promulgation of a just deserving), is radically assailed. The rhetoric of the Beatitudes is baffling, discomfiting and anti-Enlightenment; it is, we may say, the wisdom of the oxymoron: words from the wise fool, the blind seer, the powerless God. It constitutes a discourse which is transformative in evaluative power and heretical to common sense orthodoxy. We recognize how politically dangerous these apparent blessings can be to those who have ears to hear. To utter Beatitudes is, after all, enough to get you crucified. They are in fact the manifesto of a world turned upside down xlvi.

The Beatitudes are not simple blessings or acts of forgiveness. A blessing which insists on a preservation of the status quo or a mawkish romanticising of suffering is, in a serious context, no blessing at all. Yet, the Beatitudes are more resistant to expectation – they enact self-blessing, self-forgiveness and only a qualified version of the endorsement we might demand and expect from a formal blessing. Blessing here co-exists with repudiation and resistance. Thus the oxymoronic nature of the Beatitudes – (pronouncing apparently cursed states to be blessed) – and their religious function – (a simultaneous inclusivity and yet a revolutionary call for change or metanoia) – together suggest significant parallels in Hill’s poetics. A difficult change or turning is evidenced and, potentially, effected by the Beatitudes. Similarly, the disruptive, consternating dynamic of the poetic oxymoron – no sooner given with the right hand than taken by the left – lends itself finely and finally to the transformative and iconoclastic predisposition of the poet of heterodox religious sensibility.

Perhaps it is predictable that the oxymoron and the paradox should lend themselves to the expression of such religious concerns – expressing the inexpressible, working at the limits of language, crossing thresholds of meaning, resisting dogmatic or fundamentalist certainty. The two are not identical as we
have seen and despite Hill’s own, at times, deliberately loose deployment of the terms. The paradox can become tiresome and pretentious, a mere brain-teaser, whereas the oxymoron, strenuously imagined, is a rhetorical strategy which may indeed alter our minds. This redemptive transformation or transvaluation is implicit in one of Hill’s more overtly expressed theological interests, the Philippian kenosis⁴⁷. ‘Kenosis’ is rendered in the NSOED as:

[Gk kenosis an emptying, w. ref. to Phil. 2:7 heauton ekenōse lit. ‘emptied himself.’] Chr. Theol. Christ’s full or partial renunciation of his divine nature or powers in his incarnation.

Hill’s appraisal of the poetic significance of this notion is found in one of his shortest, most unheralded essays in a book by Lucien Richard: Christ: The Self-Emptying of God. The book’s appendix is entitled “Poetics and the Kenotic Hymn” and is by Hill himself⁴⁸.

In this appendix Hill repudiates Karl Rahner’s attempt, in “Poetry and the Christian”⁴⁹ to outline the task and origins of “great poetry”. Rahner’s wrong-headedness is apparently the regrettable result of his being drawn to “the seemingly irresistible gravitational force of mere verbal habituation” in his capacity as literary critic, and Hill cites Emerson, Mill and Nietzsche making similarly vacuous statements on the “source” of poetry. Hill’s account is more robust, less sentimental and, significantly, is distinguished from the dangers of a “surrogate post-Christian religion of artistic gratification”.¹ Hill’s concern is to wrest a more rigorously theological understanding of poetry’s function from the notion of the ‘kenotic’ expressed in lines from the Kenotic Hymn of Paul’s epistle to the Philippians (2: 5-8):

5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:  
6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:  
7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:
8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.11

Crucial here, in Hill’s mind, is the fact that this passage is a hymn or poem, and not a doctrinal statement. It is, after all, as if Paul is quoting back to the Philippians something of their own making, a verse narrative which speaks of irrevocable loss and eternal gain, and of the burden of this knowledge. Hill writes (Richard, p. 196):

If the kenotic hymn is a poem, since it is a poem, poetry as we would hope to understand it is not utterly lost among the slavish originalities of Corinth, the chorus of profane “protest,” the masquerades of confession.

Hill, thus, places poetry at the heart of civil discourse, protesting its impotent power to redeem what is lost and rejected. Kenotic poetry is “an expression of sustained vigilance” (p. 196) against “self-delusion”. Poetry has an expressive reality (and this understanding of reality Hill takes from another of Rahner’s works, “The Theology of the Symbol”) beyond a mere faux-empirical equivalence. A poem is “an affirmation of selfhood which, even in the instant of expression, is self-forgetting” (p. 197), and in which “rhetorical command” co-exists with “self-humbling”. Kenotic poetry is an act of resistance to both the gravitational force of mere verbal habituation as well as to the “oxymoronic treadmill” (CCW, p. 37) of the political and ethical values of the day: “the slavish originalities [my italics] of Corinth”.

Hill has made much of the required pitch111 of poetry which aspires to be commensurate with the exigencies of the age – it is a pitch attainable by this oxymoronically-charged field of force, derived from the unholy contradictions of the Sermon on the Mount and the Kenotic Hymn. A poetic oxymoron, unlike a paradox, does not simply contradict itself, negate itself, cancel itself – it augments itself exponentially, proliferating whilst locking itself into small space; it may
appear to unsay itself in disenabling self-awareness and self-condemnation, and yet it unlocks too the constraining exigencies of syntax and semantics, the historical burden of meaning, in a superlative derangement that throws conventional wisdom centrifugally off-kilter.
Chapter Two

Thomas Hardy’s Impercipience

In Geoffrey Hill’s The Orchards of Syon, canto XXVIII, Thomas Hardy’s poem ‘The Souls of the Slain’ is referenced. The reference, apparently, goes undeveloped, and might easily be ignored, (unlike Hill’s preoccupation, across several cantos, with Paul Celan’s suggestive word ‘Atemwende’, which I look at below). References elsewhere to Hardy, within Hill’s critical writings, are similarly brief, and yet seem to place Hardy’s poetic vision in significant proximity to some of Hill’s central concerns. This chapter seeks to understand why this might be the case, through close examination of several of Hardy’s poems concerned, broadly, with ‘God’s funeral’ and the misperceptions of orthodox worshippers. This examination is intended to ascertain just why Hardy’s poem should work within The Orchards of Syon as indicator for Hill of the complex theological responsibilities of poetic practice.

Hardy’s poem is alluded to conversationally, in a context of last-minute declarations and hitches, the giving up the ghost, a sense of final observations and, perhaps, revelations, where the word ‘nothing’ is tagged both as a finality and as nothing to be feared.

That
helps me to place my thoughts: intelligence withdrawn convincingly from the eyes awaiting close-down. Nothing prepares us for such fidelity of observation, I would observe. Nothing to be struck out of like finalities. Atemwende, CELAN almost at last gasp, atem-wende, breath-hitch, say; or HARDY, The Souls of the Slain.

In The Orchards of Syon as published in 2002 Hill writes “atem-/ wende, breath-hitch, say; or HARDY, The Souls/ of the Slain.” In 2013’s Broken Hierarchies: Poems
1952-2012 this has been re-written as “atem-/ wende, breath-glitch, say; or Hardy, The Souls/ of the Slain.” The hyphenated word ‘breath-glitch’ has been transposed, in fact, from the 2002 canto LI, which in turn is revised in 2013 – “Why not render/ atemwende breath-hazard?” The word ‘atemwende’, oxymoronic in that it refers to the moment in respiration when, in fact, respiration isn’t happening, but changing from inspiration to expiration (or vice versa), derives, as indicated, from Paul Celan. In ’The Meridian’, Celan’s speech on the occasion of receiving the Georg Büchner Prize in Darmstadt, 22 October 1960[vi], Celan suggests: “Poetry is perhaps this: an Atemwende, a turning of our breath” (Waldrop, p. 47). In 1967 Celan published a book of poems entitled Atemwende, which in Pierre Joris’s 1995 translation becomes Breathturn. Hill’s linking of this apparently untranslatable word with Hardy’s ‘The Souls of the Slain’ places Hardy’s poetic vision on this oxymoronic threshold between living breath and divine inspiration. Breathing itself, whilst giving us life, is caught in the hazard of living. This chapter suggests that the semantic and ethical revisioning evident in ‘The Souls of the Slain’ foreshadows the etymological turbulence of the poetic oxymoron which, it is contended, is vital to Hill’s religious pitch.

‘The Souls of the Slain’ is one of the specifically designated ‘War Poems’ of Poems of the Past and the Present, originally published in The Cornhill, April 1900. The poem features a “turbulent sea-area off the [Portland] Bill, where contrary tides meet”.[vii] The poem is not an endorsement of conventional attitudes to war, of course, is as contrarian as anything written by the First World War poets. It occupies a turbulent, oxymoronic dimension which clearly draws Hill to place it within the turbulent waters of his own poem, which he self-reflexively calls a “palimpsest” (line 20, canto XXVIII) in which “the first despairing/ calculation
shows through” and yet “[s]omething” “survives these desolations” (line 4). Canto XXVIII begins:

Wintry swamp-thickets, brush-heaps of burnt light.
The sky cast-iron, livid with unshed snow.
I cannot say what it is that best survives these desolations. Something does, unlovely; indomitable as the mink.

Hill’s “cast-iron” sky, with which the canto opens, overwhelming and disparaging, becomes epiphanic and revelatory (through and despite close verbal repetition) by the time it is perceived anew at the end of the same canto. The intervening lines are a meditative apprehension of what remains “indomitable”, their movement paralleling the movement of Hardy’s poem of revisioning and reappraisal. The canto thus enacts the turbulence and centrifuge of the poetic oxymoron itself, and gifts us a telling metaphor for the oxymoron, the *palimpsest* in which meanings are written over one another and in juxtaposition achieve the tragic complexity of the closing lines:

According to my palimpsest, always the first despairing calculation shows through. Frozen irresolution, eternal stasis; wintry swamp-thickets, brush-heaps of burnt light, the sky cast-iron, livid with unshed snow.

The oxymora, here, seem instinctive and even self-reflexive: “Frozen/ irresolution, eternal stasis”. The unreconciled and unreconcilable differences circle each other in turbulent motions of the mind, at once clowning and tragic. The near-death experience, site of one’s life flashing before one’s eyes, and indeed of last judgements, is matter too for variety show joking:

Raise this with the sometime Overseer
for his stiff *Compliments Book*. Nothing left
to take leave of, if by any chance
you happened to be dying before colour
variety leapt to the blank screen.
In ‘The Souls of the Slain’ Hardy’s poet (“in the gloaming/ Sea-mutterings and me”) examines war’s code of honour, and offers a revision. He witnesses and overhears, in a fantasia, “souls of the felled” as they debate what they might expect of “Home”, now that they have done their duty in the wars. They hope to “feast on our fame” but a “senior soul-flame” tells them that those left behind “linger less/ On your glory and war-mightiness/ Than on dearer things.” The souls of the slain learn that they must now re-evaluate those “commonplace facts/ Of our lives – held by us as scarce part of our story,/ And rated as nought!” It is the commonplace which, paradoxically, will be remembered and which will constitute their “glory”. Hardy leaves us in no doubt as to the triumph of such an apparent rejection of militarism: “the spirits of those who were homing/ Passed on, rushingly,/ Like the Pentecost Wind”. This oxymoronic transvaluation of the commonplace contains its own rejection (remembrance of glory of war), and in this revisionary balancing act we are reminded of the nature of remembrance, that remembrance is closely allied with redemption: those souls who have valued only self-importance plunge headlong “to the fathomless regions/ Of myriads forgot.”

Hardy, then, in the “gloaming”, where solipsistic, cast-iron self-adulation is overwhelmed and overcome, snatches (redeems) apparent defeat – what is merely quotidian – from the jaws of monstrous victory. Minds are changed, values are transmuted within the course of the poem, the pivoting action of oxymoronic vision – its held breath, or “last gasp” (line 17, canto XXVIII) insight – serving as the Archimedean point of this moral universe. We hear in Hill too something of Hardy’s reproach for the old powerful God of Battles, in “Raise this with the sometime Overseer/ for his stiff Compliments Book” (lines 6-7, canto XXVIII). The irreverence here is mark of a deeper reverence – for a God that is not omnisciently overseeing us, or maintaining a roll call of dubious honour. Reverence and
irreverence, whimsicality and solemnity, interpenetrate ‘The Souls of the Slain’ as they do canto XXVIII, and are the condition of their tragic-comic vision.

It is a vision that is set alongside and seems to compete with more traditional religious vision in a poem of the 1890s, Hardy’s ‘The Impercipient (At a Cathedral Service)’ (Wessex Poems, 1898). There we find Hardy equivocal regarding his own powers of perception or discerning, but conducting an enquiry into the apparently hermetic or solipsistic vision of the orthodox. The manuscript for this poem shows that Hardy had considered using the title ‘The Agnostic’, employing T. H. Huxley’s contentious, perhaps disingenuous, word for those who decline to enter into the debate concerning God’s existence, (as distinct from God’s reality). The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary indicates that the word occurs in a letter of 1859 from Isabel Arundell, but it was at meetings of The Metaphysical Society, as A. N. Wilson points out in God’s Funeral (1999), “that Huxley became embarrassed by the fact that he did not have a word to describe his position”. Despite there being a belief that an agnostic was indeed a worshipper (of the Unknown God of St Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus), Huxley claimed his use of the word was simply a “confession of ignorance”. Such a “confession” would in fact have a perfectly respectable theological standing, which risks going unexplored in Huxley’s desire to remain at a distance from the apparently more respectable, orthodox God. Hardy’s exploration, here in ‘The Impercipient’, of the agnostic’s mind reveals a variety of that agnostic faith to which Hill will later refer in ‘Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’.

Hardy does not employ the term “agnostic” in ‘The Impercipient’, though later in the ‘Retrospect’ section of his Poems of the Past and the Present he uses Paul’s words from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 17: 23) as the basis for the title of the volume’s final poem – “ἌΓΝΩΣΤΟΙ ΘΕΟΙ” (Agnostoi Theoi, To the Unknown
God)) – beginning, “Long have I framed weak phantasies of Thee,/ O Willer masked and dumb!” A prayer of this kind could only be cruel parody – satirical of the gullible – from the mouth of a dedicated atheist and anti-ecclesiast, but that does not seem to be the case here. This is a prayer. It is addressed to a God that does exist, and that the pray-er wishes did not. We are to imagine this God (as A. D. Nuttall might say in his Overheard by God) listening to a latter-day Job displaying less than devotional patience – “ephemeral ones who fill/ But moments in Thy mind” he declares resentfully and accusingly. Our pray-er does not simply upbraid this God, however, he proposes amendment. God must do better, as “listless effort tends/ To grow percipient with advance of days,/ And with percipience mends”. A new maturity, new responsibility, new self-awareness is demanded (of God!); percipience, the quality at issue within that earlier poem ‘The Impercipient’.

The idea that God can change is in itself a radical theological idea, and can only be heard as blasphemous or atheistical by the orthodox. In “‘ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩΙ ΘΕΩΙ” Hardy does appear to want to dance on God’s grave:

For in unwonted purlieus, far and nigh,
    At whiles or short or long,
    May be discerned a wrong
Dying as of self-slaughter; whereat I
    Would raise my voice in song.

This is not a crucifixion, but a suicide – Hardy perhaps suggests that such a theodicy contains the logic of its own destruction. This God must be sick to death, and Hardy has little sympathy with such a God’s lingering. Equally, however, it is unclear whether Hardy is offering himself as midwife to a reformed “percipient” God.ʳ

Percipience is of course something we might well expect of a poet – perceptive of humanity and the natural world, discerning and perspicacious too with regard to wisdom, understanding, meaning. The NSOED records too a
designation for the noun ‘percipient’: “one who perceives something outside the range of the senses, a person with extrasensory perception”, which lends itself to a description of the religious poet. So when we come to the title of the poem ‘The Impercipient’ we may well expect the poet to be referring to other less poetical souls. But in fact it is the poet himself who is apparently impercipient; he is cowed, surly, and indeed, despairing. Initially it does not appear, either, to be God who is impercipient – “He who breathes All’s Well” – nor his “bright, believing band” raising their voices – “‘Hark! hark!/ The glorious distant sea!’” It is the poet. It may be a good dog that goes to church, but here we have the poet as dog in the manger.

He just can’t see it, and he’s not sure if he even wishes he could see it:

That with this bright believing band
I have no claim to be,
That faiths by which my comrades stand
Seem fantasies to me,
And mirage-mists their Shining Land,
Is a strange destiny.

There is a tangible sense of self-satisfaction in that claim to have a “strange destiny”; the regret is, we suspect, only a pose. In any case the apology to the faithful is drowned out by the offence of his dismissal of their “fantasies” – their “Shining Land” no promised land at all, but a land reflecting back an empty sky.

At this stage we may be forgiven for perceiving this particular band of believers, of faithful “comrades”, at least in the eyes of this iconoclast, as (could we say?) mispercipient. A strange destiny perhaps not to share their vision, but defiant too, and impervious to the apparent repercussions of such blindness – to which realm would these cathedral worshippers “consign” him for his unbelief?

Why thus my soul should be consigned
To infelicity,
Why always I must feel as blind
To sights my brethren see,
Why joys they’ve found I cannot find,
Abides a mystery.
In adopting the euphemism “infelicity” (a Miltonic word, reminding us of Satan himself), Hardy is, rather, sparing the vindictiveness of the orthodox position on blasphemers and hell, than describing his own real (and lamented) state of unhappiness or indeed desolation at the absence of God’s comfort and consolation. When the poet can represent his own state with a word – “abides” – “Why joys they’ve found I cannot find, / Abides a mystery” – normally connected with that which is holy and eternal, we can be sure that his gesture of regret is not an abiding one. And there is pleasure surely in attracting that mystery which traditionally surrounds God Himself, to the poet’s own position.

It is percipience, then, that Hardy values, (as is supremely evident in his later poem ‘Afterwards’ the last poem in Moments of Vision (1917)), and the word percipience carries us laconically between the world of insight and vision, and the world of that “full look” at reality (“the Worst” it can offer?) (‘In Tenebris II’, line 14). So, though churchgoing appears to be inefficacious for this poet, he is still prepared to “raise my voice in song” (“To the Unknown God’) should this delimited and all-too-existent God die “as of self-slaughter”. This act of welcome self-sacrifice is something that “May be discerned” – again, that call for percipience – “in unwonted purlieus, far and nigh, / At whiles or short or long”. The poet leaves us in no doubt, (this is a robust skepticism despite the conditional “May be discerned”) that there is hope here for re-visioning.

The poet at the cathedral service, then, (‘The Impercipient’) feigns to lament his exile from the “Shining Land”, and yet the gravity (and perhaps the grace) of the verse lies with this blind and disbelieving seer in the midst of the “inland company/ Standing upfingered, with, ‘Hark! Hark!/ The glorious distant sea!’” Percipience tells the poet “‘tis but yon dark/ And wind-swept pine to me!” The
apparently reductive, literalist stance is in fact master to a revealing symbol – an evergreen and Pentecostal darkness – where our worshippers deceive themselves with a trivialised sea of faith, still apparently glorious to them despite Matthew Arnold’s lament for its outgoing tide\textsuperscript{lii}. We ask ourselves, here, whether there is a devotion which surpasses that of the devout, and which is concealed in the clarifying (though notionally belittling) word “but” (meaning ‘merely’ or ‘only’ or ‘no more than’) – “tis but yon dark/ And wind-swept pine to me!”

Hardy’s melancholy churchgoer is not of his time and is seen as a renegade, or heretic, one who merely pours scorn on “blessed things”. This judgement – does it show percipience? – hurts, though the poet’s rhetorical call for pity rather than scorn resounds more as a coup de grâce in a debating chamber than a genuine depiction of the human condition – ‘doth a bird deprived of wings/ Go earth-bound willfully!’ Nevertheless, we feel that earth-bound percipience is no real deprivation, no loss; it is perhaps “Enough” at least for this poet. The poet’s trouble is the quarrel with his peers who just don’t see it, and of this he gets tired – “As yet disquiet clings/ About us. Rest shall we.” The poet concludes, we imagine, in partial alignment with the Collect of the day.

By the time of Hardy’s next volume, Poems of the Past and the Present, 1901(2), we meet with a respectable burgher who does indeed forsake churchgoing, (‘The Respectable Burgher’ with its surprising subtitle: ‘On ‘The Higher Criticism’). Our Burgher refers to the orthodox who “stolid stare” (towards the altar presumably) despite the findings of the historical-critical approach to the scriptures – ‘The Higher Criticism’. Hardy’s own impatience with the complacent believers is evident in the offensive mockery uttered by the Burgher (just how “respectable” is he?):

That David was no giant-slayer,
Nor one to call a God-obeyer
In certain details we could spare,
But rather was a debonair
Shrewd bandit, skilled as banjo-player

Hardy enjoys the scandalous nature of these remarks, wearing the mask of his persona, whilst sending up in turn the self-importance of this respectable citizen and questioning what is “higher” about such appraisals as: “stories rich and rare,
Were writ to make old doctrine wear/ Something of a romantic air”. This “criticism”, significantly, comes from within the Church itself – “Reverend Doctors now declare” – and may in fact have been welcomed by one of Hardy’s cast of mind. It is the sort of revisionist theology that was found in the controversial Essays and Reviews, edited by John William Parker, (1860), seven essays authored by liberal Anglican churchmen, in which a facetious burgher may well only have seen cause for self-righteous ridicule of the religious authorities, as opposed to justifiable theological revisioning for the common man or woman lxiii.

Hardy is more percipient, however, and is not satisfied with the prospect of being a “respectable burgher”. Given this respectable burgher’s rather fastidious timidity in the face of the new knowledge – “And (but for shame I must forbear)/ That ---- ---- did not reappear!...” – where we may well have been happy to be classed as one of the fearless impercipient in the cathedral, we are by no means convinced in turn that the respectable burgher has got the right end of the stick:

– Since thus they hint, nor turn a hair,
All churchgoing will I forswear,
And sit on Sundays in my chair,
And read that moderate man Voltaire lxiv.

Moderation is clearly insufficient, here, for Hardy, where a more radical re-visioning seems necessary.

Earth-bound vision, re-vision of God-language, respect for the non-miraculous, the commonplace, are all themes we find in Hardy’s earlier poem, ‘A
Commonplace Day’ (Poems of the Past and the Present), in which the poet reviews his sense of “regret” (line 20) at the end of a dull and futile day. His unease and discomfited teeth-gnashing are apparent in his impatient fire-raking over the andiron (or dog-grate):

I part the fire-gnawed logs,
Rake forth the embers, spoil the busy flames, and lay the ends
Upon the shining dogs

Yet it is the discordance, dislocation and disquiet of regret – its imaginative possibilities – that paradoxically give rise to a perceived hope. The discerning of the null and void, the ineffective, the fatuous – this discerning is in itself, we might say, evidence of percipience or perspicacity. This is not regret for something splendid having been lost – “though nothing dear/ That I wot of, was toward in the wide world at his [the day's] prime,/ Or bloomed elsewhere than here,/ To die with his decease, and leave a memory sweet, sublime”. It is a loss more intangible, not easily discerned, a loss more bleak and taxing, and yet indicative of a faith in vision which the poet is not prepared to give up:

– Yet, maybe, in some soul,
In some spot undiscerned on sea or land, some impulse rose,
Or some intent upstole
Of that enkindling ardency from whose mature glows
The world’s amendment flows;

It all depends on that titanic “Yet”, the word imbibed and subsumed (perhaps superseded) by every oxymoron – does it, here, echo or trump the word “regret”? Such intents and purposes go “undiscerned”; though how discerning of our poet to perceive this possibility.

A faint hope which seems to mock itself – its “glows” have the fragility and evanescence of the glow-worm and the rose – and in the wordplay of interchangeable noun/verb diction (rose, glow, flow), there is a real danger that this “enkindling ardency” may be a faint spark extinguished by the “world’s
amendment”. No doubt about it, contingency and mischief – “momentary chance or wile” – have already, surely, snuffed out what is left of hope for “man’s futurity”. Hope and despair, faith and loss seem co-existent, locked in a battle for just percipience.

Hardy, time and again, embraces this peculiar impercipience, or apparent impotence, and we discover the paradoxical force of such a position – _Time _itself may no longer turn the poet’s circumstances to a laughingstock. Time becomes powerless; the poet must finally see and be beyond irony:

_Birds faint in dread:_
_I shall not lose old strength_
_In the lone frost’s black length:_
_Strength long since fled!_
(‘In Tenebris I’)

Hardy “[w]aits in unhope” (last line) and this is, of course, his strength. He does not propose consoling illusion, nor self-deceiving delusion, but characteristically, and creatively, _waiting_. And this waiting gloomily leaves Hardy again as the dog in the manger, the spoiler of the feast, as Job refusing to endorse his friends’ reassurances, as in ‘In Tenebris II’ (1895-96):

_When the clouds’ swoln bosoms echo back the shouts of the many and strong_
_THAT things are all as they best may be, save a few to be right ere long,
And my eyes have not the vision in them to discern what to these is so clear,
The blot seems straightway in me alone; one better he were not here._

Seeing himself as one “born out of due time” (line 8)[lxv], Hardy is nevertheless his reader’s spokesman, and his reader is content to be the iconoclast depicted – “he disturbs the order here” (last line). Once again, there is that sense of guilt and regret, and yet a perverse satisfaction that at least he has lived long enough to learn “that the world was a welter of futile doing” (‘In Tenebris III’, line 3). Hardy refuses the facility and blessing of vision where there is no “baptism of
pain” (line 15). If God is to appear, is to function, it is within a syntax of perspicacity and doubt.

Hardy holds open the possibility of oxymoronic reversal of fortunes, a revaluation of values, or shocking *paronomasia* as he leads his willing reader, in Virgil-and-Dante fashion, through the circles of his contemporary inferno, expecting a new grammar of God:

> And they composed a crowd of whom  
> Some were right good, and many nigh the best….  
> Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom  
> Mechanically I followed with the rest.

These are the closing lines from ‘God’s Funeral’[^1], apparently composed over the period 1908-10. Hardy finds himself between “the gleam and gloom”, and though (surprisingly) comparatively optimistic in his guise of God’s mourner – “to my growing sight there seemed/ A pale yet positive gleam low down behind” – it is the other mourners this time who seem to deny the possibility of renewal: “Each mourner shook his head.” Most assertive, however, is Hardy’s perception of the authentic theological agenda: “Still, how to bear such loss I deemed/ The insistent question for each animate mind”. The loss is of a God of “[p]otency vast and loving-kindness strong”, and this loss leaves his worshippers “[d]arkling, and languid-lipped”. We remember the *darkling* state of Hardy’s own ‘The Darkling Thrush’ (published in *The Graphic*, 29 Dec 1900), the “darkling plain” of Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ (composed 1851?; published 1867), and John Keats’ “Darkling I listen” in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (dated ‘May, 1819’), which in turn draws on John Milton’s “as the wakeful Bird,/ Sings darkling” from *Paradise Lost* (book III, lines 38-39). Hardy is between worlds here, the site of revisionist theology, a threshold, awaiting, listening for, and (paradoxically) already achieving, a voice not “languid-lipped” (‘God’s Funeral’, stanza X) but wakeful and perceptient.
In 1917, with the publication of *Moments of Vision*, we find Hardy again reflecting on loss and exile in ‘The Voice of Things’, and again he puts himself beyond the reach of circumstances’ mocking irony – “the waters wagging in a long ironic laughter” – hearing, or characteristically, imagining he hears, in the waves’ “huzza” a supplication, a communion with God which he cannot share: “I outside,/ Prayer denied.” He remains an outsider, denied the consoling rewards of religious practice and yet expectant (in a bleak expectancy) of a post-sceptical phase or condition. In ‘Afternoon Service at Mellstock (Circa 1850)’ he rebukes his earlier singing self – “So mindless were those outpourings!” – and yet, again, seems to aspire to recapture something that is lost in despondency and reticence: “Though I am not aware/ That I have gained by subtle thought on things/ Since we stood psalming there.” The implication is clear: that it is not theology as “subtle thought” that will redeem the time and the loss, but a new form and syntax of “psalming”, or indeed “Prayer” which, as things stand, he denies himself.

Hardy apparently fails to find this psalming, but the technical proficiency of his verses speaks intrinsically of syntactic innovation and satisfaction. Here, in ‘Copying Architecture in an Old Minster (Wimborne)’, he is listening, “[i]n a moment’s forgetfulness”, to the ghosts who have been roused by the “ding-dong” of the “jack-o’-clock”:

Maybe they have met for a parle on some plan
To better ail-stricken mankind;
I catch their cheepings, though thinner than
The overhead creak of a passager’s pinion
When leaving land behind.

The more tenuous the sight or sound, the more such redemptive thoughts seem to be implied. This is not the same as for a poet to write ‘as if’ such redemption were possible; here there is no pretending, but a real possibility: the recognition of the
need contains in riddling form the fulfillment of the aspiration, however last-gasp and futile it may appear.

In *Human Shows* of 1925 the “coded creeds of old-time godliness” receive brief, equivocal “sighings of regret” in ‘A Cathedral Façade at Midnight’, though there is as much auditory and prosodic satisfaction in the “rejection” and “making meaningless” of these codes as there is lament. Whilst the poet can approach a moonlit cathedral and observe with a church architect’s eye “the pious figures of freestone”, the serenity of the scene gives pause to his mocking iconoclastic streak – “the stiff images stood irradiate”. Beautiful, yes, but the poet is not tempted to reinstate these icons, nor to bemoan the savagery of Time – “I watched the moonlight creeping;/ It moved as if it hardly moved at all,/ Inch by inch thinly peeping”. Yet, move it does, and Reason should be the light of a brighter day: “the sure, unhasting, steady stress/ Of Reason’s movement”. Despite the “frail moan from the martyred saints”, the surefire triple rhyme (lines 19, 20, 21) “stress”/ “meaningless”/ “godliness” provides resolution and assurance and mature closure at the closing of a chapter in mankind’s history.

The same can be said for ‘The Graveyard of Dead Creeds’ also in *Human Shows*, with its gothic allegorical vision of “wistful wanderings through old wastes of thought”. The wistfulness leads “in a breath-while” to conviction of a new dispensation. Spectres arise, apparently of “deceased/ Catholicons….their potence ceased”, (salts that have lost their savour), though the syntax can equally refer here to “created man” rising up “[l]ike wakened winds that autumn summons up.” And the message from beyond the grave is unequivocal: the remedies, (catholicons, cure-alls, panaceas) of the past have had their day, and make way for the new – “draughts more pure than those we ever distilled,/ That shall make tolerable to sentient seers/ The melancholy marching of the years.” Hardy may well be
attempting, rather artificially here, to assert the injustice of his reputation for pessimism – the rhymes are perhaps rather too easy in the final stanza’s move into rhyming couplets, a sign that Hardy’s prosody is not in fact complementing its content – but nevertheless homage is again paid here to the potential for the poet to act as “sentient seer”.

In this way, we might say, Thomas Hardy’s project is essentially, though perhaps not intentionally, a theological one. Recent essays by Pamela Dalziel and Mary Rimmer have suggested the need for such a claim, and for a new understanding of Hardy’s religiosity. Rimmer has written, “Few agnostics present such vexed and contradictory attitudes towards the sacred as Hardy” (Wilson, K; p. 32). Agnosticism was always the position of a worshipper, though one with a less strident set of beliefs and doctrines, indeed one for whom unknowing was precisely the point – this was to avoid the fictions and idols of the shallow religious, and to preserve the (always) new vision of God. Theology in this sense contests its own settled formulations, as it contests solipsism or the hermetically self-verifying. Its practice provides the poet with a bridge from private percipience and amorphous thoughts to public articulation and the ineluctable making of new sense. Hardy’s poetry inhabits oxymoronic territory where public impercipience and private vision collide. Geoffrey Hill recognizes this when he writes “Hardy... can dwarf his own greatness of perception yet ennoble things that life has stunted”, (CCW, p.494), a sentence carrying its own echoes of kenotic understanding. Hardy’s unknowing contains doubt and denial, but is percipient with a theological challenge that Hill does not ignore. It is the challenge of Hardy’s poem ‘Afterwards’, (Moments of Vision, 1917), in which self-emptying attention to the natural world co-exists with public recognition of the poet’s revelatory power:

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid’s soundless blink,
The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, a gazer may think,
‘To him this must have been a familiar sight.’
Chapter Three

Gerard Hopkins' Hovering

In canto XVII of Hill's The Orchards of Syon the poet finds himself stalled in a landscape where he notices "Hawks over the dual carriageways"\(^{lviii}\), and in which the sight of three towering "silos" provokes meditation on harvests, decomposition and the legacy of war. The subject matter and poetic procedures of this canto bear significant relation to those of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Windhover’ of 1879, with its dedication ‘To Christ our Lord’, its spiritual commotion, even its buried allusion to Shakespeare’s Henry V\(^{lxix}\). As Hardy's paean to innocence, ‘The Oxen’, is not oblivious to war's menace, so too are martial values crucially present within ‘The Windhover’, and within The Orchards of Syon. This chapter explores the engagement with 'The Windhover' and with Hopkins' poetics, within The Orchards of Syon; a reading of ‘The Windhover’ informed by Hill's own poetic practice here, offers a refinement, too, of William Empson's reading of the poem in Seven Types of Ambiguity, whilst clarifying the nature and achievement of oxymoron poetics.

Canto XVII begins with teasing references to Trinitarian and to Resurrection imagery, in a mixed landscape, both industrial and agricultural:

Tri-towers, Christ-silos, rise from, retract into, the broad Ouse levels. Roadside poppies, hedged bindweed, still beautiful. The kempt fields basking; intense the murmur of full summer, more growl than murmur: coast-traffic snarled, snarling. Hawks over the dual carriageways. I've jolted from northward across the moors, not entirely at peace.

The “hawks”, present here apparently only as a naturalist's jotting, do not obviously divulge secrets or convey epiphanies, though there is something menacing about a landscape which “growl[s]” and “snarl[s]” and “[h]awks” over
the poet. And the menace leads to commotion – despite the hints of stillness and beauty, and the glimpse of fullness and contentment in a momentarily apprehended “full summer”, the poet is “not entirely at peace”. The silos – suggestive of grain-storage, but silage too, and missile storage – disturb the poet’s imagination, and he proceeds to take “the measure of myself” (line 11), the “road-rage” (line 22) and “greed” (line 24) of the present day, and its antecedents in war (“Tommies’ lore” (line 16)).

The commotion is implicit throughout in the play between broadening and retraction – between what is “measured” (line 10) and what is anomalous (“anomaly”, line 14). The silos, like the hawks, tower over, and yet fade into the inland port environment; bindweed is “hedged” and fields are “kempt”. These curtailments and contingencies are “intense” with “full summer” apparently, and yet a summer “in travail” (line 9). The poet’s perceptions themselves seem oddly “snarled”, the landscape simultaneously speaking of his lost “Goldengrove” (line 13) and the mechanization (“mechanically”, line 12) of the present. There is a broken thread of religious intimation in the “forever-earnest” (line 21) language of “Tri-” (suggesting ‘Trinity’), “Christ-”, “peace”, “spirit-” (line 9), “resurrect” (line 12), “Syon” (line 13), “crucifixes” (line 16), and “Minster” (line 24). But the expectations raised by such language are baffled, “at bay” (line 12) (as the poet describes himself), unsustained by both the modern outlook and by Hill’s own poeticizing – these “chorus/ lines of road-rage” (lines 21-22) which lead only to stasis.

Memorialising the dead (“Memoranda for horizons/ in travail” (lines 8-9)) – those “poppies” beside the road – is the measure of a just society, Hill seems to suggest; these “memoranda” are its “spirit-levels” (line 9). But here there is no “wild expenditure of bells” (line 17) (where “expenditure” speaks both of largesse
and of loss) and though we are reminded of Tennyson’s ‘Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,’ we think also of another poem in which martial and religious imagery are inseparable, Wilfred Owen’s ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’, and its opening line: “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” The Church seems similarly inept and inefficacious here as Hill draws canto XVII to a close; the Minster is obscured (“Masked somewhere” (line 23)) witnessing to little more than the misery of acquisitiveness – “the time-struck Minster doles greed by the clock”, and the poem closes in disgust and regret. Greed is lamented (“doles”) as well as distributed sparingly (“doles”): the word is antagonymic, capturing the equivocation of vision and estimation implicit throughout the canto. The religious vision is an “anomaly”, though expressed too in an oxymoron indicative of the persistence of its heterodox, asecular challenge – “sustainable anomaly”. Its consolation is reduced but not inestimable. There may be a sustaining calm amidst commotion.

The poet defines his mode of perception and himself: “sustainable anomaly, so I” (line 14). His vision sustains him, and far from being solipsistic, is “sustainable” in contrast to the snarling “road-rage” which results from “delay” and leads to further delay. Hill looks elsewhere (and elsehow) to an alternative, anomalous “lore”, captured in the ambiguity of the hyphenated “time-struck” suggesting ‘struck out by time’ (erased but also shaped or forged) and thus stricken by temporality as well as enduring through time. Such an affiliation is serious about the redemptive vision – the “forever-earnest speech” of compromised and compromising witnesses: the “queer/politics” (lines 18–19) Hill seems to derive from, for instance, the Tommies, Tennyson, Ivor Gurney and Wilfred Owen. The canto’s bi-focal vision – “dual carriageways” (line 6) – mediates a private self, intensely (“intense”, line 4) compromised by his own “road-rage”,

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and yet expectant too that something *immeasurable* is left over – “Hawks over the dual carriageways.”

The first line of Gerard Hopkins’ ‘The Windhover’ has (to misapply lines 9-10 of this canto XVII from *Orchards*) a “steadiness/ of outlook all too readily measured” – it is iambic pentameter. And there is, of course, a hawk over *this* dual carriageway:

*The Windhover:*

*To Christ our Lord*

I CAUGHT this morning morning’s minion, king-
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

The minion is a king, and not-a-king, as the kestrel turns in a gyre of enjambement and becomes a princeling in the kingdom of heaven: “king-/ dom of daylight’s dauphin”. Syntax jolts, grammar snarls, and we are “in travail”, (to use words from line 9, XVII, *Orchards*) – it is the morning that has become a kingdom, and the kestrel is taking possession of the world and of the poet. The kestrel is entitled to this, and is given titles (forever-earnest) to take his measure, in the explosive, metre-defying ride of lines 2 and 3, in which accented syllables rise and retract from the level air of the windhover’s flight. The bird is finally named with the effectively single-syllable, climactic word “Falcon” where the capitalized title seems to subsume the falling syllable ‘-on’, and dominion and diminution become one. The hard ‘a’ of “dapple” is drawn into the semantic field of “Falcon” reinforcing the oxymoronic sense of *savage beauty*, and the connection with the Christ (of the sub-title) who is thus both tiger and lamb, predatory and meek.
The falcon gyres into a syntactic and rhythmic vortex which is anything but “steady” and “level”, though the poet’s *technic* (a crucial word for Hill, taken apparently, from both Yeats and Pound) keeps a tight rein over this bird’s licence to kill\textsuperscript{\text{lxvi}}. The menacing vitality established here, implicit in what Hopkins referred to as *sprung rhythm*, is a quality Hill has repeatedly attempted to define. In an interview with Carl Phillips for the *Paris Review*, (The Art of Poetry, No. 80) he locates it as a kind of self-alienated and (nevertheless) devotional quality, (‘and/but’ being the essential oxymoronic syntactic shift or adumbration):

There is a kind of poetry – I think that the seventeenth-century English metaphysicals are the greatest example of this, Donne, Herbert, Vaughan – in which the language seems able to hover above itself in a kind of brooding, contemplative, self-rectifying way…. I cannot conceive poetry of any enduring significance being brought into being without some sense of this double quality that language has when it is taken into the sensuous intelligence, and brought into formal life.

Hill depicts here, albeit impressionistically, the self-destructive and yet self-excelling qualities of oxymoronic utterance – “self-rectifying” qualities – and captures the breathtaking moment (the *Atemwende*) when words become living powers, hovering above themselves antagonistically, and yet in a kind of completion.

In her consideration of what she calls “verse theology”\textsuperscript{\text{lxxvii}}, Emily Taylor Merriman has drawn attention to the syntactical and rhythmical “cross-currents” that attend such expression – the “cross-rhythms and counterpointings” about which Hill writes in ‘Redeeming the Time’ (*CCW*, p. 94). She draws attention to Hill’s phrase “the spondaic potential of sprung rhythms” which she finds in one of Hill’s unpublished lectures: “Gerard M. Hopkins” 19 Feb. 2003”:

A poet concerned with the mechanics of the art, Hill often slams two strong syllables up against one another to create a coiled moment of compacted energy that may implode (emphasizing the relationship between the words) or explode (infusing them into the surrounding context), and that may give weight to the words.
This is an illuminating description of the outcome of oxymoronic utterance, the semantic divergences and fusions of the oxymoron imploding and exploding simultaneously, and words becoming weighty as they give out light. Hill himself has written of a similar poetic mode in the final essay in his Collected Critical Writings, which refers to the late poems of Yeats:

> What he [Yeats] is looking for in his late writings is a unit comprising antithetical, even mutually repellant, forces, in which the calculated is at one with the spontaneous: integration that is simultaneously diremption; a kind of monad of linguistic energy (p. 577)

He writes of Yeats’s ‘The Statues’ “as a poem in which the necessary concentration is achieved”, (p. 578), where symbolism is “rich and throwaway”, where “powerful disparate presences” (p. 575) are brought together, and “rhetorical effrontery” (p. 575) is employed to confront the “torpor” (p. 574) of everyday vision.

Such an appraisal of poetic force is to be found too in William Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity, which devotes significant attention to Hopkins’ “The Windhover”. In his exploration of the seventh type of ambiguity, he outlines the contradictory and oppositional workings of the poem:

> In the first three lines of the sestet we seem to have a clear case of the Freudian use of opposites, where two things thought of as incompatible, but desired intensely by different systems of judgements, are spoken of simultaneously by words applying to both (pp. 261-262)

This, Empson invites us to imagine, might be a “process” that “could pierce to regions that underlie the whole structure of our thought; could tap the energies of the very depths of the mind.” Given this, it is worth noting Empson’s presence within Orchards, referenced in canto XLIV, and arguably canto XL.

Empson appears in canto XLIV of Orchards, in a context of war and peace, of critical acuity and academic ambition, of suffering and survival. Hill references the 1948 critical work of Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Armed Vision, an assessment of
different critical approaches to literature, a work that employs as title a
Coleridgean phrase expressive, perhaps, of the valour and courage of the true
critic’s vocation. It also, conveniently (or provocatively), claims contiguity (for
literary criticism) with the notion of, and the sacrificial efforts involved in, fighting
the just war. The poet here notes his own complicity in such a presumption (or
aspiration) – no one should be “embrusqué” (line 15) – a designation for one “who
avoids military service by obtaining a post in a government office or the like” –
when the scars of war are still to be seen within the “bocage” (line 1) “at the
crossroads of Hauts-Vents” (line 12). Lines 13-18 read:

peace brings The Armed Vision, a work of courage
and quick advantage. Who dares show himself
embrusqué in this verdurous new terrain
to be fought through? Did HYMAN go to the wars?
Empson didn’t, nor did I. Armed Vision
is of course COLERIDGE.

“Armed Vision” contains its own ambiguities, its menace as well as, presumably, its
own personal sense of potency. The critic, the poet, the soldier may all take up
arms against common humanity’s sea of troubles, seeking to rectify wrongs and
vindicate justice through countervailing vision. Here though, there is an uneasy
sense, of course, that having “quick advantage” over the glorious dead – “quick”
reminding us of just who and what has survived – brings with it its own state of
compromise and complacency. Hill concludes with an apparently erudite
declaration, and an extraordinary prayer that manages to be simultaneously a
tragic accusation:

Whitman,
not James, is the true focuser. Drum-taps,
trouble no more these Orchards of Syon
glutted with spillage; where the blind-worm
excretes her young.
The poet draws on Walt Whitman’s 1865 volume of war poems, *Drum-Taps*, though as there is no italicizing here we can take the final lines as an address to some God of War, whose creation of havoc within the orchards of vision (Syon) is already obscene – blinding, or defying contemplation. Hill’s *focus*, his prayerful act of attention in these closing lines, is to speak the unspeakable nature of massacre and sacrifice. Although he has not been “to the wars”, Hill joins forces with Hyman and with Empson, and indeed with Coleridge, in the hope that he may be judged worthy in his efforts at just vision.

A strikingly oxymoronic phrase – “commotions of calm” – in canto XL of *Orchards* also leads us to Empson. In this canto the poet expresses gratitude to music, which is both private language – “Does music/ know or care how it sounds?” (lines 4-5) – and interpreter/translator of public history: “Order construes/ the incoherent, widely as we need” (lines 9-10). Where we might expect the Latin phrase ‘de profundis’ in this homage to the music of Schnittke, we read the potentially more perspicacious “*pro defunctis*” (line 12), and the claim to be “resuscitating/ organum”, or revivifying plainsong, (though equally it is *plain song* that seems capable of resuscitating the defunct). It is here that we feel the presence of Empson, and his appeal, in the Preface to the Second Edition (1947) of his *Seven Types*, to the defining quality of “great poetry”:

> Considering what it feels like to take real pleasure in verse, I should think it surprising, and on the whole rather disagreeable, if even the most searching criticism of such lines of verse could find nothing whatever in their implications to be the cause of so straddling a commotion and so broad a calm.

Hill echoes these words in lines 14-15:

> To summon from drone-tomb
commotions of calm.
We are here at the tomb of the unknown soldier (a mere drone), where the contrapuntal work of the artist may attain that peace which passeth understanding, that calm which does no injustice to the past suffering and present silence of the victims and heroes of history – “so straddling a commotion and so broad a calm.”

Empson’s seventh type of ambiguity has this oxymoronic quality: “The seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author’s mind” (p. 6). The seventh type is further defined on p. 225:

A contradiction of this kind may be meaningless, but can never be a blank; it has at least stated the subject which is under discussion, and has given a sort of intensity to it such as one finds in a gridiron pattern in architecture because it gives prominence neither to the horizontals nor to the verticals, and in a check pattern because neither colour is the ground on which the other is placed; it is at once an indecision and a structure, like the symbol of the Cross.

Like the notion of the palimpsest, the gridiron or check pattern conveys that sense of texture and intensity as well as simultaneous foregrounding with retraction that is characteristic of oxymoronic semantics. Empson seems too to appraise the victory-defeat of the Cross in that peculiar phrase, “an indecision and a structure”.

The hovering ambiguity of oxymoron, its apparent equivocation, is indistinguishable from its semantic structuring and control.

Empson rarely uses the word “oxymoron”, however, and it may be that he does not intend to explore the functional plenitude of this trope beyond the apparent paradoxicality it contains, and the presumed Freudian repression the psychologically alert critic may detect. There is a suggestion at the end of the seventh chapter, however, (p. 270) that this ambiguity of contradiction is linked with the sublime. Empson’s final example of the seventh type of ambiguity is found in George Herbert’s ‘The Sacrifice’ – “a fully public theological poem” as he refers to the poem in his 1947 Preface (p. 9). In his ‘Note for the Third Edition’ (1961) (p.
17), he asserts Herbert’s “intentional heightening of the paradoxes”, and discerns a plainly kenotic and oxymoronic dimension in the lines:

'Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the Tree,  
The Tree of Life, for all but only me'

Empson seems fully aware of the reach of such oxymoronic troping, declaring “I cannot get away from the feeling that the lines carry the usual homely quality of Herbert, and present the Christ in torment, with ghastly pathos, as an adventurous boy.” The analysis of the poem itself ends with a ringing assertion of the utmost importance of Herbert’s poetics – “Herbert deals in this poem, on the scale and by the methods necessary to it, with the most complicated and deeply-rooted notion of the human mind.” There can be little doubt that Empson discerns here that “commotion” and “calm” distinctive of great poetry, and he sees it in proximity to what we here call *oxymoron poetics.*

Later in Empson’s chapter VIII we find Coleridge cited (p. 276) in endorsement of this same poetic quality:

Coleridge says somewhere [sic] that the mind insists on having a single word for a single mental operation...the only way of forcing the reader to grasp your total meaning is to arrange that he can only feel satisfied if he is bearing all the elements in mind at the moment of conviction; the only way of not giving something heterogeneous is to give something which is at every point a compound.

The oxymoron serves this purpose of concentrating the mind despite complexity and contradiction. And Empson seems to acknowledge that this is the purpose of ambiguity itself – to resist simplification, the denuding of reality and truth, and to counter indifference to intrinsic value; he writes: “Thus I think my seven types form an immediately useful set of distinctions, but to a more serious analysis they would probably appear trivial and hardly to be distinguished from one another” (p. 292). It may be that all substantial poetic ambiguity conveys something of the conflict and compression that is oxymoronic statement.
Empson enjoys ‘The Windhover’ as it resists the easy resolution of contradictory impulses. It is an “example of the use of poetry to convey an indecision, and its reverberation [sic] in the mind” (p. 260). I argue that this “indecision”, however, need not be seen as Freudian slippage in which Hopkins discloses his discomfort with the religious life, as Empson seems to suggest, but may rather be seen as an integral aspect of its necessarily oxymoronic presentation. In ‘The Windhover’ Hopkins’ experience is both willed and unexpected. He is as if hunting his prey but finds that he catches it serendipitously:

I CAUGHT this morning morning’s minion

We catch things which are thrown at us, as well as those we seek; the poem exists within this dynamic cross-current, where “CAUGHT” is later augmented with (also in capitals) a realization of the implications of such a catching: “AND the fire that breaks from thee then” is addressed to the Christ which redeems, and is available to all. Hopkins is not engaged in something private, some private devotion or esoteric practice, despite saying, confessionally, that his heart is “in hiding”. His concern is more clearly articulated in a Journal entry of 1872, which Hill draws attention to in his “Alienated Majesty: Gerard M. Hopkins”:

I thought how sadly beauty of inscape was unknown and buried away from simple people and yet how near at hand it was if they had eyes to see it and it could be called out everywhere again (CCW, p. 531)

When Hopkins spots his kestrel he is not a mere twitcher wont to boast, but the religious man devoted to the edification of his flock. “In such a passage”, writes Hill, “he [Hopkins] unites one of his most essential terms, ‘inscape’, with civil polity” (p. 531).

“CAUGHT” similarly carries the sense of 'being lucky enough', alongside the satisfaction and elevation of successful completion of a duty. The poem itself is a perfect catch; the one that did not get away. Here we are not interested in religious
paradoxes – the absent presence of God, the Word made flesh, the timeless moment. This poet is not pronouncing on God, but announcing or enacting God. The semantic and syntactic doubling and cancelling of the first line capture the simultaneous augmenting and diminution inherent in this active-passive perception-and-articulation. Movement and stasis, hovering and striding, inanition and ecstasy – the rhythmic motion and semantic density establish these things as incontrovertible and irreducible. They are advent and arrival both.

And the poem is full of echoing, both sonic and semantic, which emphasizes as well as mocks. Here we have a “minion” who is also, momentarily, a “king”, and the triumph and the absurdity of this rings out throughout the sonnet’s octave:

king-/ riding/ striding/ wing/ swing,/ gliding/ hiding/ thing!

There is scarcely more tolling of bells in Tennyson’s own ‘Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,’ a poem, as we have seen, alluded to in canto XVII of Orchards. The tolling of bells is essentially of a religious tenor and texture, constant yet illuminating, repetitive and renovating, commemorative and annunciatative – another effective metaphor for oxymoron poetics, and the active-passive “stirring” they embody:

My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

The Collect for ‘The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Trinity’ in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, a Collect we may assume Hopkins knew, reads:

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded

What we might call oxymoronic thresholding is present here in Cranmer’s prayer: submission and willfulness, gift and demand, independence and sanction all meet in what is both private apostrophe and public ‘indoctrination’. We encourage the
active stirring from God, in the hope that we will be passively ‘stirred’ to fruitful action – apostrophe effects a grammatical equivocation, an oxymoronic hovering indicative of what Hill, following Donne, might call God’s grammar, a grammar that speaks substantially for and of God as ground of all being. It may be no accident that the Jesuit Hopkins retrieves this sense of stirring here as he addresses his hovering bird of revelation. The twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity is the last Sunday before the season of Advent, the beginning of the Church year, and the parousia of Christ.

No beatific vision, then, but beatitudinous/beatizing nonetheless – offering the mixed blessing or blessing-in-disguise of the Sermon on the Mount, uneasy and troubling with paradox and double-vision. The sonnet’s final sestet is rich with oxymoronic vision, incarnate supremely in the single climactic word “Buckle!” where collapse and defiance are simultaneously present. “Buckle” here sounds triumphant – paradoxically snatching defeat from an inappropriate victory of the will, and releasing the supreme liberty of divine service, its combination of peace and militancy, of safety and self-defence:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

The breaking fire is “the achieve of, the mastery” of the sonnet itself, lovely in its evocation of natural beauty, and wounding in its challenge to complacency. We cannot, dare not wait for miracle – “No wonder of it” – but must take courage and work: “šéer plod makes plough down sillion/ Shine”. Drudgery divine indeed, to adapt George Herbert’s phrase from his poem ‘The Elixir’. There is no doubting the rapturous quality of the final lines of ‘The Windhover’:

No wonder of it : šéer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

The imagery is, however, extraordinarily ambiguous: “plod”, “blue-bleak embers”, “fall”, “gall”, “gash”. How can such negative lexis carry such a weight of affirmation?

And yet it is the ploughman, not the chevalier, nor the majestic hawk that shines and shows “gold-vermilion”. At this the mind is thrown back upon itself, hovering above itself, re-orientated, in a state of metanoia, (the theological word used, as we have seen, in Hill’s ‘Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’”, where he offers Jarrett-Kerr’s “readiness to have the mind changed (metanoia)” as a model for the composing and the receiving of poetry).

In his 1991 essay ‘The Weight of the Word’ Hill refers to the “two-natured power” of the Wesleys’ “evangelical oratory: how it awakened many into a redemptive, spiritual, common life and drove some into an anarchic emotional solitude” (p. 361). This conflict and the distinction between these two states is dynamically composed within ‘The Windhover’, though this is not quite the same thing as what Empson proposes – “full contradiction, marking a division in the author’s mind”, as if the Freudian critic should know better than the poet himself the spiritual danger of his circumstance. Hill’s ‘The Weight of the Word’ goes on to place the oxymoron at the expressive heart of creative and spiritual work:

I think it entirely possible for a hymn to be, at one and the same time, joyful and ‘unhappy’; that kind of oxymoron is inherent in the creative matter, the ganglion of language and circumstance from which the piece of divine poetry is created.

‘[G]anglion’ is itself a challengingly antagonymic word – a swelling or tumour, but also, perhaps, “a centre of force, activity, or interest” (NSOED) – and it is, significantly, a word to which Hill later resorts in his ‘Poetry and Value’ (2000) where “poetics” itself is described as a “ganglion of energy, technē, belief, and
opinion” (CCW, p. 479). It is tempting, of course, to see ‘The Windhover’ as such a ganglion.

Hopkins in ‘The Windhover’ is not being a Nature poet, or discerning a “sense sublime” (Wordsworthlxxix) pantheistically immanent in the natural world, nor is his interest that of mystical union with a missing God, though aspects of all these endeavours are surely present in this complex articulationxc. He is, rather, engaged in “redeeming the time”, and enacting the primary function of God-language which is the creative appreciation of intrinsic value in the apprehension of reality. It is in perception and percipience that the divine reality is made apparent, and it is in this burdened and ecstatic articulation that God is made real, not as elective revelation but as responsibility to our complex humanity.

This seems to be Hill’s understanding of what the major poet is obliged and equipped to do in ‘Redeeming the Time’ (CCW, p. 101):

The significance of Coleridge’s distinction between primary and secondary imagination ... is that the first represents an ideal democratic birthright, a light that ought to light every person coming into the world. In the event, the majority is deprived of this birthright in exchange for a mess of euphoric trivia and, if half-aware of its loss, is instructed to look for freedom in an isolated and competitive search for possessions and opportunity. Therefore the secondary imagination, the formal creative faculty, must awaken the minds of men to their lost heritage, not of possession but of perception.xci

Neither Hill nor Hopkins is interested simply in transcendental or mystical or even poetic experience, but in a poetics of civic and necessarily theological responsibility, where we keep faith with loss, and regain the obscure and neglected light of percipience.
Chapter Four

T. S Eliot’s ‘Marina’ and Geoffrey Hill’s Defence for a “Syntax of Metaphysics”

The critical difficulty with religious poetics seems evident in William Empson’s response to the poetry of religious experience. The conundrum for the reader hostile or indifferent to surmised religious belief and practice is how to credit the full force of such poetry, whilst establishing distance from or refusing endorsement for its supposed creed and credentials. Relatedly, T. S. Eliot himself rather suspects that for most readers, even those religiously inclined, the idea that a poet might be able to treat “the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit” is itself a contradiction in terms. In ‘Religion and Literature (1935)’ he writes:

For the great majority of people who love poetry, ‘religious poetry’ is a variety of minor poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit, but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them. I think that this is the real attitude of most poetry lovers towards such poets as Vaughan, or Southwell, or Crashaw, or George Herbert, or Gerard Hopkins.

Here, the suggestion is that religion is deliberately unknowing (“ignorant”) of much of common experience, and confines itself to only “part of the subject matter”. There is apparently an inherent and alienating challenge in the religious mode itself, which is incompatible with both the expression of commonplace experience, and with what Hill would call the “belletrism” of many poetry readers, and writers. Perhaps, instinctively, we all agree with John Keats, who in a letter to J. H. Reynolds (3 February, 1818) declares: “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us…Poetry should be great & unobtrusive...” And yet the difficulty is apparent there too, in the oxymoronic “great & unobtrusive”. Hill
declares in ‘Alienated Majesty: Ralph W. Emerson’ not that poetry should have a “palpable design” upon its reader, but that “private thoughts have public consequences and obligations” (CCW, p. 501). It is within a common syntax that we submit privately perceived values to public scrutiny. This is not to say, of course, that much religious verse is undeserving of the suggestion of limited range, of self-delusion, or, more importantly here, inability to heft the inertia of received doctrinal language, and to make it new.

Empson concedes that there have been those who have objected to his “meanness and fussiness” (Seven Types, p. 182), and apparent refusal to give full credit to “real ambiguity of great poetry” (in ‘Preface to Second Edition’, Seven Types, p. 15). He does acknowledge, however, as we have seen, the fundamentally oxymoronic nature of great poetry – such poetry achieves “so straddling a commotion and so broad a calm” (p. 16), and as this chapter argues, despite evidence of some personal irritation with T. S. Eliot’s poem ‘Marina’, Empson properly identifies its religious nature. Empson enjoys the endless ramifications of poetic ambiguity, but may be reluctant to credit the aporetic mode of the poetic oxymoron in which irreconcilable differences are starkly juxtaposed, and ambiguity is in fact curtailed, where, as Hill surmises in his second Oxford lecture, we find “connotative flattening and denotative sharpening”.

In one of the few places where Empson uses the word ‘oxymoron’ it is with reluctance and suspicion, as if the trope is in itself inadmissible: “If I say that any of these connections in itself constitutes an oxymoron, I am making philosophical assumptions such as I would wish to avoid” (p. 121). He acknowledges the efficacy and potency of the oxymoron – further on he refers to “these two forces of oxymoron and tautology” – and yet apparently distances himself from the surmised implications of oxymoronic vision. If Empson’s “philosophical
assumptions” are that the oxymoron is some sort of rhetorical (and philosophical) error, then he is likely to be unwilling to impute oxymoronic workings to a poet he admires, (here, Empson is exploring lines from Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “In the dead wast and middle of the night” I. ii. 198). Oxymoronic workings are the very mode of T. S. Eliot’s ‘Marina’, and we find that the poem causes Empson a great deal of vexation. He seems to perceive that the poem is “religious” (Argufying, p. 356, (see below)) but wants nevertheless to interpret it as something else.

He does indeed accord the poem the highest praise. In ‘Recent Poetry’, (Nation and Athenaeum, 21 February 1931), he writes:

'Marina’ seems to me one of Mr Eliot’s very good poems; better than anything in ‘Ash-Wednesday’. The dramatic power of his symbolism is here in full strength, and the ideas involved have almost the range of interest, the full orchestra, of The Waste Land.

Empson’s discomfort with the poem – apart from the proper disquietude ("commotion") that proceeds from “great poetry” – is that the reader seems to have to acknowledge the reality of a religious dimension. In an unpublished reflection on ‘Marina’ (c. 1931) Empson writes – “One crux about the Eliot poem is how far it is religious” (p.356). This unpublished note ends on a note of incomprehension and dismissiveness, and without a true appreciation of the “full strength” to which he refers in Nation and Athenaeum: “Eliot becoming a Christian, which doesn’t work? Or it might mean you are now waking up and finding yourself a Christian... Rather ambiguity by vagueness, anyway.”

Empson is correctly wary of the mode of Eliot’s achievement, because of the creedal understanding (and misunderstanding) it seems to invite. In his published “brief notice” (Nation and Athenaeum) Empson identifies Eliot’s stereoscopic vision, and the menacing intersection (“peril”) of time with the timeless:

At any rate, the humanist meaning is used at every point as a symbol of the otherworldly one; this seems the main point to insist on in a brief notice
because it is the main cause of the richness of the total effect. In either case the theme is the peril and brevity of such vision (*Argufying*, p. 356).

And in his unpublished paraphrase, although there is cynicism – “In a sense this implies, not a belief in heaven, but a belief in the value of belief in heaven” – there is also a fascination with Eliot’s peculiar grammar – “looking at reduced, which may be verb or participle, so that one is uncertain how much weight to give it, how far its lead should be followed in interpreting the grammar of the next phrases”. There is also, despite his reservations and suspicions, an acute awareness of a key requirement of religious sensibility – “The word [he is discussing ‘images’] also suggests ‘idols’: things visible put instead of the invisible divinity, which may degrade but make it more intelligible and controllable” We find appreciation of the excitement of a metaphysical conundrum (or menacing atonement) – “We are not sure whether they have been vanquished or converted, or whether they have merely found a death which includes both.” The oxymoron (apparently closely associated with tautology) is a “force”, and yet Empson continues to resist its apparent force majeure, the “brute Actuality” which Hill, as we have seen, seems to accord to “area[s] of bafflement” (*CCW*, p. 229) as much as to “things and facts” (to use Peirce’s phrasing).

Hill, too, has been much occupied with T. S. Eliot’s 1930 poem, ‘Marina’. He defends this poem, for instance, from what he sees as critical obfuscation in his first essay ‘Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’” (1977) – “T. S. Eliot’s ‘Marina’ has been described as a ‘poem that stammers into the hardly sayable’ but I do not understand this remark.” Hill suggests that “where eloquence and guilt are intertwined” (*CCW*, p. 5) ‘Marina’ is “an extremely eloquent poem and eminently ‘sayable’”. We find undiminished enthusiasm for the same in the final essay of his *Collected Critical Writings*, ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’ (2005); on its final
page a consideration of the words “beyond me” in the line “Living to live in a world of time beyond me” (‘Marina’): “These conjunctions of word with word somehow re-enact the Bradleian moment, the moment of creative eros.” (p. 580).

Hill indicates in his 1996 essay ‘Dividing Legacies’ (CCW, p. 366) that F. H. Bradley (the subject of T. S. Eliot’s PhD thesis) is the source of particular and peculiar qualities in ‘Marina’ though a full examination of why he thinks so is not undertaken until 2001 and 2005 in his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lecture ‘Word Value in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot’, and then in one of two Empson Lectures ‘Eros in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot’. Hill’s concern in ‘Dividing Legacies’, which reviews the publication by Ronald Schuchard in 1993 of T. S. Eliot’s The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry, is to suggest that despite Eliot’s failure to properly scrutinize the “‘echt metaphysisch’” (CCW, p. 368; Hill quotes this from p. 48 of Varieties) in his lectures, he remains a convincingly metaphysical writer in ‘Marina’. We can read this defence of a coherently and plausibly metaphysical poetics, as a retort to those who would prefer to see religious poetry as “a variety of minor poetry” in which the poet is “dealing with a confined part of [poetry's] subject matter”.

Hill writes of Bradley’s “actual syntax of metaphysics”, and draws a distinction between the way of “discursive intelligence” and the “way of apprehension”, (p. 534). Here seems to be Hill’s definitive statement:

With the way of apprehension, the syntax of becoming, we may associate Ash-Wednesday, Sweeney Agonistes, Marina, … The very measure in which Ash-Wednesday and Marina move is the measure of becoming, the ‘somehow’ of coexistent appearance and reality, in which differences are a part of the ‘felt unity’, ‘felt totality’, ‘internal felt core’ even when they elude categorization, even when no more exists between them than a sensation of belonging, of recognition.

The oxymoronic nature of these poetics, the potency and challenge of the oxymoron’s refining and transformative crucible of intent is clear (p. 539-540):
the reality of a poem such as *Marina* exists somehow and somewhere between the intelligible apprehension, understood as the rudiments of grace, and the briefly unintelligible affrighted apprehension with which Hercules, in the poem's epigraph, comes belatedly to his senses.

Later, in 'Eros in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot', Hill refers to 'Marina' as

“perhaps the most Bradleian of all Eliot's poems” and makes it clear that “ordinary grammar” is insufficient to the poetry of religious experience (p. 550):

Such passages [from Bradley's Ethical Studies (1876)] strain almost hopelessly beyond bearing the conventional understanding of what can be accomplished with verb-tenses within the patterns of ordinary grammar

Hill is clear that Eliot sources his achievement of metaphysical poetry, the *paideuma* of his verse, in Bradley's prose (p. 551):

Bradley's strange-sounding English...[has] a sense of 'ingathering', 'infolding' all things within and including time. 'In-folded' is the penultimate verb in *Four Quartets*, and it may be that Eliot saw Bradley as, in some way, the philosopher of wasted and redeemed time...(...it is a Bradley drawn in from...the margins of Eliot's official paideuma).

The "margins of Eliot's official paideuma" suggests an unacknowledged and unconscious source of Eliot's greater (or authentically religious) poetry, distinct from his (as Hill suggests repeatedly) more 'accessible' work. Hill looks to the opening and closing lines of 'Marina' and finds a grammar which is not guilty of vague ambiguity (as Empson might have it) but an ambiguity commensurate with the religious task (which carries its own sense of guilt):

```
What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands
What water lapping the bow
And scent of pine and the woodthrush singing through the fog
What images return
O my daughter.

And woodthrush calling through the fog
My daughter.
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Hill's appraisal of the *and/yet* quality of oxymoron poetics again suggests kenotic understanding ("as though nothing has intervened; and yet...") (p. 553):
These opening and closing lines of the poem, not quite exclamations and not quite questions, follow each other, as with a natural undisturbed syntax, as though nothing has intervened; and yet what has intervened is something that Bradley had variously named the 'underlying felt whole', 'felt totality', 'the ambiguous existence of what has been and is about to be'.

‘Marina’ contrasts and parallels “Death” with kenotic self-extinguishing in an allusion (“dissolved”) to Paul's notion of dissolution in Christ (“cupio dissolvi” in Philippians 1: 23):cvii:

Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning Death

Are become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind,
A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog
By this grace dissolved in place

Similarly, Hill draws together the antagonymic threads of dissolution – both extinction and extravagant – in a brave and deliberately buffoonish passage that begins canto IV of *Orchards*:

We are – what, all of us? – near death. So wave me your solution. *Cupio dissolvi*,
Saul’s vital near-death experience more sandblasted than lasered. *Beam us up, Asrael*. High talk, dissolution expansive, all pervasive; here it coils back into density: dark angel, fused, rubberoid, shrunk, foetal, as though raked from Zeppelin ashes.

The cross-currents and contradictions of oxymoronic phrasing are everywhere apparent. “[N]ear death” itself brings us close to extinction whilst affirming that we’ve escaped that particular fate. The ability of a “solution” to resolve issues is put to the test when that “wave” reminds us both of the dismissive “waive” and, perhaps, of Stevie Smith’s “dead man” in ‘Not Waving but Drowning’: “too far out all my life/ And not waving but drowning.”cvii Saul’s conversion is a “near-death experience” in which sand is blasted in his eyes, it would appear, (though “lasered” may suggest corrective eye surgery), but this experience is nevertheless, “vital”.

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Everywhere, resolution becomes dissolution, and as we focus on a universe of
death – “Asrael” the angel of death is “all pervasive” – a “foetal” phoenix seems to
rise from “Zeppelin ashes”.

Oxymoron poetics are a form of semantic dissolution in this way, a mode
exemplary in Eliot’s “grace dissolved in place” – grace is both superseded and
entirely embodied in place, entirely absent and wholly present. We find such
percipience everywhere in Orchards; flooding coincides with covenanting, the
rainbow with the downpour, the unlovely and eccentric with central vision, as in
the opening lines of canto XX:

Two nights’ and three days’ rain, with the Hodder
well up, over its alder roots; tumblings
of shaly late storm light; the despised
ragwort, luminous, standing out,
stereoscopically, across twenty yards,
on the farther bank.

Such landscapes seem to be recognition scenes in the way ‘Marina’ itself draws on
such scenes. According to Denis Donoghue, Eliot wrote in a letter to Sir Michael
Sadler in 1930 that he intended “a criss-cross between Pericles finding alive, and
Hercules finding dead – the two extremes of the recognition scene…”cix And
Donoghue notes an unpublished lecture in which Eliot described the Pericles
recognition scene as “the speech of creatures who are more than human, or rather,
seen in a light more than that of day.”cx Donoghue’s own reading of ‘Marina’
captures the sense of semantic hovering we have associated with the poetic
oxymoron: “In some degree these figures stand apart from their circumstances,
and it is the main purpose of Eliot’s language to make them hover between their
existence and their aspired-to essence” (p. 372). And the kinship between the force
or living power which is semantic hovering and the mode of the Beatitudes is a
telling observation: “In “Marina” and “Journey of the Magi” Eliot is using the
common words for time and place ... and testing them to see how far they can also suggest states of beatitude and the obstacles to such states” (p. 380).

Religious poetry may be a variety of what Eliot calls “minor poetry” if it confines itself to conformity with doctrinal matters, or deliberately restricts its subject matter and field of vision. In ‘Dividing Legacies’ Hill responds to the judgement of Denis Donoghue that ‘Marina’ makes sense as being about “‘waking up to find yourself a Christian’” (CCW, p. 371). Hill indicates that it may well be that an understanding of “Anglo-Catholic doctrine and practice” should purport to explain the matter of ‘Marina’, but that the understanding itself – “the way in which that understanding moves, and moves us, in the poem” – is “essentially Bradleian”.

The peculiar syntax and rhetoric of the poem are not to be elided with the comforting or the dismissive interpretation. In the slightly later essay, ‘Language, Suffering and Silence’ (1999), Hill makes this clear in a discussion of the ambiguities of “significant poetic statement”, and within a consideration of the “kenotic paradigm” (CCW, pp. 396-397): “Even doctrinal poetry is finally made meaningful, is finally made to be understood, by something other than the doctrine.” With sublime disregard for a poet’s beliefs, Hill attends to the “intractable materiality of words”cxi, their etymological warp and weave, “wary of a form of poetics in which the poem becomes a mere conveyor of received opinion”.

And in the closing paragraphs of his last essay in Collected Critical Writings, Hill’s ‘faith’ in this position remains undiminished: “In a successful poem a particular word may instantaneously perform what it desiderates” (p. 580). Religious sensibility needs no doctrinal accreditation where it is true to this poetic creed.
Chapter Five

Natural Strange Beatitudes: Geoffrey Hill’s *The Orchards of Syon*

dark in itself but sighted, as dead stars
that overlook us with a splitting light.

from canto XLVII, *The Orchards of Syon*

Part One: Sourcing *The Orchards of Syon*

“When they were out again in the sunshine, and he saw the frost hoary and blue
among the long grass under the tombstones, the holly-berries overhead twinkling
scarlet as the bells rang, the yew trees hanging their black, motionless, ragged
boughs, everything seemed like a vision.”

from *The Rainbow*, D. H. Lawrence.

Religious vision appears immediately present, yet is inherently contradictory of its
presiding and instigating circumstance and expectation. As epiphany it is
something received, and yet its memorial and ‘proof’ is linguistically constructed. It
is, we might say, insubstantial, yet potent and real. It may be the site of grace,
blessing, G-d’s presence, and of the displaced and augmented self.

Geoffrey Hill’s *The Orchards of Syon* takes three visionary moments as
epigraphs. None of these epigraphs is referenced fastidiously. They appear as from
a commonplace book, managing to embrace both the platitudinous and the notable
as is the nature of ‘commonplace’ in such a context.

Thomas Bradwardine, significantly before becoming a “student of theology” has a vision of Truth – “God’s grace already present in time as in nature” (from *De Causa Dei*). Thomas
Traherne (the third of the epigraphs), similarly, asserts an apparently redeemed
and “immortal” real world (from *Centuries of Meditations*).

The second epigraph (from D. H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*) is cut-and-pasted from three pages of the novel’s fifth chapter ‘Wedding at the Marsh’, a
chapter in which Tom Brangwen’s step-daughter Anna Lensky marries William Brangwen. The chapter contains a sequence in church where Tom stares up at the east window, that glowed intensely, a sort of blue purple: it was deep blue glowing, and some crimson, the little yellow flowers held fast in veins of shadow, in a heavy web of darkness. How it burned alive in radiance among its black web (p. 134).

The radiant darkness implied here is context for an agony of being – we find that Tom “exulted strangely, with torture” as he perceives how “rich and splendid his own life was, red and burning and blazing and sporting itself in the dark meshes of his body” (p. 135). It is worth remembering, given Hill’s age during the composition of Orchards, that this same chapter contains Tom’s musings on growing old: “He was a man of forty-five. Forty-five! In five more years fifty. Then sixty – then seventy – then it was finished. My God – and one still was so unestablished” (p. 135). Time perhaps for last things, and last words, and yet last words clearly are necessary and, equally, possible at any age.

Hill’s chosen cover for Orchards – “After a pen-and-wash drawing by D. H. Lawrence, given by the artist to Viola Meynell on 2 March 1915 upon completing his novel The Rainbow” – summons Lawrence’s prophetic novel which blossomed in a time of war, its ecstasies never oblivious to agony, and its vision not simply inspirational or expressive, but convincingly commonplace. The epigraph taken from The Rainbow by Hill depicts in fact what happens after inspiration (Tom’s intoxicated wedding speech) has subsided. There is shouting, and the singing of carols, yet those who seem most fulfilled (“the bride and bridegroom sat with shining eyes”) “scarcely sang”. The passage is one of contradictory forces, and fresh reversals, of antagonism and the Traherian transformation of “night” into something altogether “fine”.

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It is apparent from a podcast of 22 May 2001, available on the *Writers at Warwick Archive* webpage that one public reading of the new poems did not go well, despite Hill announcing comically that the new book is “so mellow you wouldn’t believe!” At one point Hill declares, “I tell you, it’ll be a long time before I read these again – it’s like weightlifting!” He is aware that it is wise to mock one’s own solemnity, but it is clear that solemnity is not something he wants to avoid. He mentions the similarity in form between his 24-line blank verse cantos, and the form of Milton’s poem ‘At a Solemn Music’. Milton’s 1633 poem is in fact 28 lines in length, though its first 24 lines constitute a single sentence, and may well have been the technical challenge which motivated the writing of Hill’s sequence.

Milton’s poem, written as a young man, considers the nature of that “joyful noise” which Psalm 100 invites us to make. It is likely that *Orchards* was written after a ‘near-death’ experience, each of the cantos resembling (on the page) a headstone – solemn for most. The sequence is noisy and joyous too, examining the nature of endurance, and, indeed, resurrection. It is not conventionally devotional, but has the intensity and earnestness of devotion; of the weight-lifter attempting to heft a heavier load than heretofore.

Milton’s poem is remembered in canto IV (lines 18-21), in which Hill dwells on the religious vision of the film *Orphée*:

I understand Hell’s surreal ruins to be those of the blitzed Académie de St Cyr, with wind machines off camera, all elements miming a solemn music.

The adoption of the amateur film buff’s pedantic tone, and thereby the apparently unwitting acknowledgement of the artificiality and concoctedness of solemn music and sacred effect, are vital aspects of Hill’s appraisal and presentation of religious or devotional sensibility. The ‘made-ness’ of religious discourse demands attention
for the quality of its crafting, and not unwarranted dismissal as – *a priori* – deluded or mere idolatry. And the imperative of religious vision remains despite the inadequacy or obsolescence of the particular language that, historically, contains it\textsuperscript{cxxx}.

Here, as noise *can* be joyful, so solemnity is mere “weightlifting” where there is no playful gaiety. Hill’s ventriloquism, as if uttered with the glittering eye of the Ancient Mariner or that of Nietzsche’s madman proclaiming the death of God, is playful throughout *Orchards* – hearing and voicing a multitude of personae. It is a Dantesque strategy: as Hill surveys and wanders through contemporary infernal, purgatorial and paradisiacal landscapes, he is assailed by the voices of the dead and living-dead, as he seeks to make his own joyful noise in 72 numbered cantos\textsuperscript{cxxii}.

The Brotherton Library archive of Hill’s papers contains significant corroboration of the provenance in the late 1990s of the “solemn” contexturing of *Orchards*. In a notebook\textsuperscript{cxxxiii} titled ‘Discourse & “Otherness”: the ethics of language and voicelessness, Hill/Richard: Spring 1998, 1999, 2000, Seminar Book’, Hill makes a note on a late (unnumbered) page alongside thoughts on Gillian Rose’s *Paradiso*: “This is probably the most important course I have taught at BU [Boston University]. Whether it is the best thing that could have happened to me I am less sure.” This equivocal attitude is not uncharacteristic of Hill, and as these notes seem to be reminders to himself or prompts for use during the seminars, it may be that these two sentences are the beginnings of a performative, self-deprecatory joke for Hill’s students.

The notes do give us a hint as to what it is that Hill feels unsure of, and it seems to be a familiar concern about the impersonality of poetry; he reminds himself to make a teaching point: “Say that 50% of the reading reports
[presumably critical reports from Hill’s students] I have seen are brimming over
with individual pathos.” Before this he had written: “Note how admirably the
ontological readercxxiv keeps clear of any personal pathos.” It is clear that
“individual pathos” is not to be recommended in the critical appreciation of
literature, or in the writing of ethical, theological and religious writing. But then we
read this: “Since I began this course my own writing has begun to brim with
individual pathos.” This he seems to regret, though it is offered, one imagines, to
show his students in due humility, that what he is recommending as an alternative
is necessarily difficult, requiring self-discipline and ethical commitment. He draws
on Gillian Rose’s Love’s Workcxxv, a significantly unself-pitying and rigorously
exacting memoir written as Rose was dying of cancer: “I don’t think individual
pathos is what Rose calls Love’s Work. I think Love’s work is primarily an act of
attention (Paradiso p 19, L.W., p 126). Malebranch is reputed to have said
Attention is the natural prayer of the soul.” Hill’s devotional approach to writing,
then, is not unconnected to the act of attention that is love’s work or “natural
prayer” or, to use Simone Weil’s phrase, a “waiting on God”cxxvi.

These jottings, linking impersonality, ethical responsibility, acts of attention
and prayer, are significant to the time in which The Orchards of Syon is being
composed. Under the heading ‘Simone Weil’ we find Weil described in oxymoronic
terms: “Existence characterized by an almost infinite fragility” adding significantly,
“Gillian Rose read her”, and under Kenosis “Genesis & Kenosis are related”. Here
Hill pays particular attention to the Kenotic Hymn of Paul’s epistle to the
Philippians, (2. vv. 5-11). He gives a date for Philippians, “CE 53”, but indicates that
this hymn is “probably 4-45 CE/ A poem not metaphysics”. (It seems likely that
this should read 40-45 CE.) Hill is concerned to distinguish the verses from
theology and sermonizing. He notes: “Poetic dimension v. [versus] metaphysical
interpretation / because literary theory applies metaphysical/ interpretation to poetic dimension.’ This perhaps suggests that the poem of self-emptying is indeed a bodying forth of that very idea, existing in contradiction to the apparent mode of literality of metaphysical codification. It is the poetic dimension that wins the day, not the metaphysician’s belief.

Finally, this notebook yields a very personal statement from Hill, titled ‘MEETING of 27.1.98’, which seems to have been written in response to concerns from students that he and Lucien Richard “are too sparing, too oblique, in the drawing of general conclusions from the minute particulars which we present.” Though dated 1998, there is evidence that this extended defence of the course (the pages are lettered ‘a’ to ‘r’) was drawn on too in subsequent years, as the phrase “late 20th C America” (page ‘r’), is altered to “early 21st Century”. This document (handwritten in a ring-binder notebook) incorporates shorthand notes on discussions between Richard and Hill. We find (page ‘q’) “Rahner is the essential theologian for our time” though Hill seems to have wanted to add: “Anticipated in much of what he says by a nineteenth century Jesuit, Hopkins, and by a 17th Century Anglican, read and loved by Hopkins, George Herbert.” There is a useful sense that Hill the poet is wrestling truth – staking prior claims to it – from the theologians and doctrine-makers. Their assertions and polemics are secondary to the poetic enactment of religious sensibility, the gravity of which is expressed in notes made just before this:

If Rahner says ‘we have spoken too much and too easily of mystery’ he means the same as Bonhoeffer means by ‘cheap grace’ and he means what I mean when I say that these are matters of being and that there is a semantics of being involved throughout this confrontation of language with suffering and voicelessness; it is not just a matter, as I understand it, of a pernickityness about words (pp. ‘p’–‘q’).
Elsewhere in the notebook, (Rahner 28.11.04) we find: “Principally a kenotic theologian”, and a phrase which echoes that of Bradwardine, “According to Rahner the world is the place of habitation of the divine.” The potency of religious language and vision can only be realized in proximity to the apparent impotence of human (and divine) “voicelessness” and (as we have seen) stultiloquence. As Hill writes in Orchards, LXIII (LXII, Broken Hierarchies): “I'm/ myself close to the inarticulate.”

It is clear that for Hill, the use of the word ‘God’ makes a difference, not to the enumeration of a person’s beliefs, or a more or less exact depiction of reality, (nor escape from it), but in terms of valorisation. Before the handwritten memo ‘MEETING of 27.1.98’ we read some kind of record of an exchange between Hill and Richard, in which Lucien Richard (LR) asks, (and seems to answer): “What kind of difference does God make. [sic] Is a question of value.” And around this, and succeeding this, are comments attributed to ‘GH’: “historian of language use – I see this not as a specifically 20th C problem”; then: “My approach is as a professional user of language”. The perennial problem of God is detached from the history of metaphysical debate, and placed firmly in the court of the philologist, etymologist and poet, not just as a specifically late 20th century, (or early 21st century) problem but as a problem inherent within, and intrinsic to, all religious discourse.

Hill’s interest in the particular reality of religious experience may be sourced in Charles S. Peirce’s essay, ’A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God’ (1908), an essay which is referenced at least four times in the course of Collected Critical Writings. Hill is interested in Peirce’s phrase “the Brute Actuality of things and facts”, and the relation of this actuality to less tangible realities, which may be bruited abroad by the poet. Hill seems drawn to the distinction between “actuality” and “reality” that he finds in Peirce’s work. His significance to
Hill's own pursuit of a new syntax of metaphysics is clear when we find Hill bracketing him with both Gerard Hopkins and F. H. Bradley. In 'Common Weal, Common Woe' Peirce is referred to as "Hopkins's fellow Scotist" (CCW, p. 272), and in 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics' Hill declares (whilst demurring from Peirce's pragmaticism) that he believes Peirce "had a greater mind than Bradley's" (CCW, p. 568). As with Cardinal Newman, of course, such admiration does not exempt Peirce from concern over his prose style; in a note to 'The Tartar's Bow and the Bow of Ulysses' (1986), whilst judging a prose passage of Peirce's to be "syntactically both strained and slack", Hill nevertheless finds Peirce's phrase "hefting its insistency then and there" to be "[m]etaphysically deft and resonant" (CCW, p. 648).

In 'A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God' Peirce defines terms:

"Real" is a word invented in the thirteenth century to signify having Properties...Thus, the substance of a dream is not Real...but the fact of the dream is Real...The "Actual" is that which is met with in the past, present, or future.

A dream of God, then, may well be insubstantial, but the fact that such a dream is dreamed has significant reality, and for Peirce is of interest as one of "the three Universes of Experience". Hill, like Peirce, is interested in the fact that such "airy nothings to which the mind of poet, pure mathematician, or another might give local habitation and a name within that mind", should be "obvious to all minds" (or at least all those "that should earnestly strive to find the truth of the matter")ccxix.

The argument for God's reality, then, is a psychological-linguistic one, not "a proposition of metaphysical theology", and God is given reality (in Peirce's argument) through a qualified form of "reverie", in this case "a frame of mind so antipodal to vacancy and dreaminess such a designation would be too excruciating a misfit. In fact, it is Pure Play." It is enough to say that in the pure play of literary
composition, the religious meditation has a reality entirely independent of
metaphysical fantasy or assertion.

Peirce’s outlining of the Neglected Argument releases God’s reality through
a focus on the self-stultifying nature of theological statement:

The hypothesis of God is a peculiar one, in that it supposes an infinitely
incomprehensible object, although every hypothesis, as such, supposes its
object to be truly conceived in the hypothesis.

Peirce focuses significantly not on such statements’ content (whether discredited
rationally, or not) but on internal semantic illogic. Theological statement may
educe the reality of God, it would seem, despite itself – a lively awareness of
irreconcilable grammatical expectations lifts what is passively presented into
active presence. However tautological a philosophical-theological statement
purports to be – “God is an infinitely incomprehensible object” for instance – we
may hear the agonistic echo of semantic logic disparaging and augmenting itself.

Part Two: The Mode of The Orchards of Syon

If I were you, would
you believe?

from canto III, The Orchards of Syon

The opening lines of The Orchards of Syon recall Wisdom literature, the book of
Ecclesiastes:

Now there is no due season. Do not
mourn unduly.

We are instructed not to mourn (except where necessary – not unduly), and must
assume that the poet’s opening gambit therefore, is not entirely a recognition of
loss, indeed in the context of orchards, of a paradise lost. “Now”, grace can fall at
any time, perhaps, (not just in special or elected season), and though mourning may be necessary (grace is never predictable or deserved, alas), if we give it its due (no more, not unduly), then we stand as good a chance as anyone (not just the orthodox believer) of receiving it. The sense of contradictory semantic forces playing around and with the poet, glad to be alive though burdened with the knowledge of death this brings – and does the ageing poet assume that there are no more seasons to look forward to now he is at the end of life? – is already apparent in these apparently plainspoken opening words. The oxymoronic balancing act (tug-of-war?) is maintained stylistically in the apparent passivity and impotency of the poet’s opening observation, against the standing egotism of the pursuant imperative. “Now” is balanced and modified with the line’s ending “not” – extended or reduced? – seasons (and seasoning) are introduced as merely topical, seized on (we hear within “season”), and there is, duly, neither rhyme nor reason to provide false consolation. The oxymoronic texture of these sentences springs from their syntax, attempting sense where there apparently is none, their ambivalent intonation (prophetic utterance, or the ramblings of senility?), and their simultaneously blended and clashing pitch, where despair consorts with qualified encouragement.

Line 2 continues in a prayer-like conference with an unnamed “You”: an intimate friend, an engaged critic.

You have sometimes said
that I project a show more stressful than delightful. Watch my hands confabulate their shadowed rhetoric,
gestures of benediction; maledictions
by arrangement.

A “stressful” “show” is certainly a performance of which an audience might justly complain, unless the expected genre of show is that of the complaint. A complaint
to a lover, or to God, may well carry stress, and be carried prosodically by the stresses of what is apparently sprung rhythm – a rhythm exemplified by Gerard Hopkins as due register of address for the one of religious sensibility.

The expression of religious sensibility is as much an aspect of contrivance and of grammatical innovation as any other sensible mode; the poet draws attention to what he may confabulate, to rhetoric, and to gestures, and audaciously, to financial contracts ("by arrangement"). This is simultaneously to undermine (iconoclastically) the absolute claims of religious tradition, its bombast, and to declare that the exposure of the entirely human, secular, horizontal, compromised nature of enacted grammar is no hindrance to (nor an indication of the redundancy of) the work of the religious poet. There is mockery here in the depiction of a music-hall, Faustian priest putting on (putting on) what is presumably intended as a “delightful” show for his congregation; the bogus shaman whose bad faith is all show and no substance. There is too the intimation of a lasting need for genuine blessing, and authentic cursing, mediated by an adequate poetics.

In looking to The Orchard of Syon (1519)cxxxii, a translation of Catherine of Siena’s The Dialogue, Hill self-consciously links himself with an arcane work of devotion and prayercxxxii. Catherine of Siena is remembered in the Anglican Lectionary on 29th April, as one of the “teachers of the Faith and Spiritual Writers” (Lectionary, p. 81). A prayer book used by many Anglicans, The Daily Office, Society of Saint Francis, refers to her as “Mystic, Dominican Tertiary, Teacher” (The Daily Office, p. 26). The Anglican Collect for 29th April indicates that Catherine of Siena was given “a wondrous love of the passion of Christ” (Common Worship: Daily Prayer, p. 466). The editors of the 1966 edition of The Orchard of Syon declare that it has received attention before, “but only as a ‘superb and curious specimen of ancient English typography’... The contents have been generally ignored,”cxxxiv
Denise L. Despres’ ‘Ecstatic Reading and Missionary Mysticism: The Orchard of Syon’ states that “Catherine of Siena’s ecstatic utterances underscore a ‘missionary mysticism’” (Despres, p. 141). Although Hill records on various occasions his discomfort with the notion of mystical poetry, and is at pains in his essay ‘Unhappy Circumstances’ to defend his own philological designations from “accusations of lexical mysticism” (CCW, p. 188)\textsuperscript{cxxxv}, it is nevertheless likely that this oxymoronic “missionary mysticism” should appeal to him\textsuperscript{cxxxvi}. For Catherine “comowne preyer” seems to have involved “active laboring in the Vineyards of Christ” (Despres, p. 146).\textsuperscript{cxxxvii} But of course, Hill’s socio-political position – in a largely secular, and religiously indifferent age, debased by an annotical plutocracy (a phrase from William Morris used by Hill in his Oxford lectures and a focus of attention in ‘The Daybooks’) – could not be more unpropitious to the religious task\textsuperscript{cxxxviii}. Despres records that the “‘visionaries’ or mystics we know of in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England, Richard Rolle, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe – perhaps even Langland – are primarily problematic figures who negotiate or challenge the strictures of mystical or visionary activity in a religious climate suspicious of religious anomaly or self-promotion” (p. 152). The heretical tendency and challenge of such writing, its political impact, is difficult to recreate when religious orthodoxies, however politically empowered, are a matter of indifference to most. Hill must work with the privileged dialect of our time, the dialect carrying the political ascendancy – that of secularism – and scandalize its users, if he is to carry the charge of Catherine’s original creative and politically dangerous ecstasy\textsuperscript{cxxxix}.

“If I were you, would/ you believe?” asks a voice in canto III of Orchards. We might think of this as a koan, a stultifying conundrum, intending to both mock the inquisitorial (though often now, secularist) “Yes; but what does he believe?” and to
release the (redeeming?) energy which is locked up in such examples – inquisition – of bad faith. A different order of statement follows, proclaiming a radical earthbound faith:

Ripe vastage of estate,
the Fall revived with death-songs. Set this down
as anomy’s coherence, and the full-blooded scrub maples torch themselves in the swamp.

A vision, then, of an autumnal scene, one of some ferocity. The ferocity derives from warring semantic elements, and electrifying prosody, the stressed imperative, “Set this down”, announcing yet conflicting (“down”) with the violent accentuation of “full-/blooded scrub maples torch”. Fruition and devastation, termination and revival, lawlessness and meaning co-exist and then seem incarnate in the “scrub maples” that are both “full-/blooded” and self-consuming – they “torch themselves”. The image is horrific, suggesting self-sacrifice and suicidal protest (against, perhaps, the political “swamp”). We are on the “tenebrous threshold” (canto LIV) of an illumination, it would appear, the words “Set this down” reminding us of T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Journey of the Magi’ (1927) (a poem usually grouped with ‘Marina’ and others as ‘Ariel Poems’\(^\text{cxl}\) and its own tentative outline of a revelation\(^\text{cxlⅡ}\):

\begin{quote}
but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death?
\end{quote}

Dereliction and devastation are not thereby abjured but intrinsic to Hill’s poetic vision – “where the darkening flood/churns beneath burnt-out alders” as he writes in another image of burning trees in canto LI. There the alders – trees which feature in the first sentence of Lawrence’s The Rainbow – burn before a sunset and are spent, but carry with them memory of autumn glory, and though evening and
winter are upon the poet, that line-break before “churns” suggests turning and
transformation working within the flood of experience and of history.

This flood (close relative to the swamp), as well as being an image from The
Rainbow (chapter ix, The Marsh and the Flood), is a significant motif in The Orchard
of Syon. In the Capitulum quintum of the Secunda Pars, for instance, and in a section
entitled ‘That aftir the general doom the peyne of dampnyde soulis schulen
encreesse’, we read ‘And thus myserably thei go to her eende whiche goon by the
nethir weye of the flood’ (Hodgson, p. 98). It is this phrase that finds its way into
the “sainted CATHERINE” canto XXXIV\textsuperscript{cxl} of Orchards (lines 1-4):

The nether way to salvation, if
I so undertake it: the nether
way of the flood claims sainted CATHERINE
speaking of perdition.

The Brotherton Library archive notebooks which cover the period of composition
for Orchards (BC MS 20c Hill/2/1/52-56) contain several drafts of this canto, all of
which differ in lines 12-13 from the published version which reads: “I said/
perdition without thinking”. The drafts have, “I said/ salvation without thinking”
referring back apparently to the composition of the first line of the canto, which
does seem to stand as a paradox and a contradiction of what it is there to gloss –
sainted Catherine’s “the nether way of the flood”. The word “salvation” is
underlined in two drafts, and there are phrases expressive of self-surprise, which
confirm a focus on this word: “but did I/ say salvation?”, and “This is not hell if only
I said/ salvation without thinking.” The published version, of course, substitutes
“perdition” for “salvation”, and the personal focus on a surprising realization is
curtailed. Now the verse seems to act as a distancing gesture from saint Catherine,
whose presumption would be that the world of common experience is not one of
tragic loss, but is loss (and damnation) itself. The implication in Hill’s revisioning
would seem to be that it was the admission of hasty utterance itself which was thoughtless ("without thinking"), and that it is far from thoughtless to imply, as the canto has done, that the very site of salvation is indeed the "smashed Warsaw sewers" (line 6) suggestive of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. Though the body may be in hell, salvation is conceivable.\textsuperscript{cxliii}

But sainted Catherine was "speaking of perdition", so here in the published version Hill rebukes himself – “I said/ perdition without thinking” – for insufficient care over the use of this word. Perhaps he hadn’t taken the time to calibrate St. Catherine’s exact understanding of “perdition”. He hadn’t of course merely used the word to be informative, either; with a bizarre phrase (lines 4-5) he seems to gloss “perdition” and gauge Catherine’s own judgement: “Life against life/ in her scale of plenitude”. There is a mode of life that is anti-life, this seems to say, modifying whilst including the apparently vindictive notion of Deuteronomy 19, (verse 21): “And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (KJV). Floods are, of course, plenitudinous, overflowing with bounty and, naturally, destruction too. Catherine’s “scale” weighs life in the balance, measures out just deserts (merit), points to what is out of all proportion, renders what is immortal to mortal minds. “Without thinking” suggests the ease with which Hill has come to accept the co-inherence of perdition and salvation, the melting and infusion and curdling of perceptions and ideas inherent within oxymoronic vision.

So Hill equivocates, hovers between the apparently diametrically opposed, though taking a stand at some kind of “forward observation post” (line 12). The pioneering vision enacts an eccentric mission, a frontier crusade, as in the notion of harrowing hell. We are on our own, “crawling/ to the next angle of vision” (lines 20-21) where “angle” speaks of ‘angel’ and God’s messengers and messages.
21st century Catherine’s violent vision of damnation still has a correlative (lines 7-8):

Mere violence
now of denial

And to illustrate this difficult thought, which seems to indicate Freudian self-harm and repression, as well as holocaust denial, and refusal to acknowledge guilt, lines of startling beauty, lines which themselves refuse to be symbolic, depicting a silent landscape in which all transcendence has collapsed:

trees to windward
snow-ghosted; the light
enters upon its own darkness and falls mute.

The sun may have set, but miraculously the light remains, a ghosting of light haunting the orchard. We may remember Eliot’s ‘Death by Water’ (section IV, The Waste Land) – “O you who turn the wheel and look to windward”, and the ambiguous or antagonymic winds of Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’ – including “I an old man,/
A dull head among windy spaces”, and “Gull against the wind, in the windy straits/ Of Belle Isle”, and that reminder of the rushing wind which once brought the Holy Ghost: “I have no ghosts,/ An old man in a draughty house/ Under a windy knob.” These allusions and intimations and remembrances inhabit densely compacted lines raising a scene of final reckoning, and terrible beauty. The light kenotically cancels itself; silence speaks, and the trees are snow-ghosted with revelation.

In the Brotherton archive notebook 55 Hill is working on a climactic canto for Orchards, apparently whilst staying at Ripon College, the Anglican theological college in Cuddesdon (“16 August : Cuddesdon” written at bottom of page). The draft is numbered 72, though this canto clearly becomes canto LXX in the first published version of 2002, and the draft “Right! – for the last time – pomerium does will not/pass muster for as orchard!” becomes “Right, one more time!
Pomerium will not pass muster as orchard.”

On one page of this notebook is written, “A rewriting of Gerontius?” And Hill is working on some lines, which with their antiphonal and menacing and blasphemous resonances, share much with the lines I have been examining. The lines in fact find their way into Hill’s next volume, Scenes From Comus (2005), particularly section 2 ‘Courtly Masquing Dances’, stanzas 8 and 60. The manuscript reads:

the setting
sun like a stokehole, the winter woods
 gutted by fire.

De Temporibus
Anti Christi, grotesque poetry's
visionary couvade with time.

The lines are beautifully disturbed and disturbing, funereal, apocalyptic, metamorphic (the word ‘couvade’, connected with male imitation of pregnancy, leading us perhaps to Yeats' ‘The Second Coming’ and its unnatural beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born). The lines reference the De Temporibus Anti Christi seemingly placing the poet in a post-Christian time in which the parousia is a form of poetry (“grotesque”) commensurate with and transformative of that time’s “setting/ sun”.

It would appear, then, that Orchards finds its contexturing in a “vital near-death experience” (canto IV). In 2002 Robert Potts wrote an article ‘The praise singer’ for The Guardian (10 August 2002), which indicates that this was the case for Hill. Orchards employs images of open-heart surgery (see LX, lines 21-24), which seem to corroborate this, and the note of tragic survival is underlined in references to both Job, (canto VI, “and I alone escaped to tell thee”) and King Lear, (lines 14-18, canto VII):

Tell him he is
alive – someone – and responsible. He may
respond to that, as to other electrodes,
as Lear to the sour-sweet music of viols,
as some to oils of unction or to Gospel.

And lines from canto V can be read as an expression of a sense of re-birth, and indeed of intimations of immortality:

How beautiful the world unrecognized through most of seventy years, the may-tree filling with visionary silent laughter.

The poems record a resurrection experience, one that returns the poet, after the *kenosis* of near-death to the *pleroma* of natural forms (canto XLV):

that there is even now hawthorn, this bush pregnant with the wild scent and taint of sex; that there are men and women, destinies interlocked; and dying, and resurrection.

The “setting/ sun” is transformed, oxymoronically rather than doctrinally, into expectancy in which “dying” has lost its sting.

**Part Three: The Renewal of God-Language**

Contingent natures of all things save God.

canto LXX, *The Orchards of Syon*

Hill assays the use of God-language in canto L of *Orchards*, which engages with the rhetoric and stress of a revivalist meeting\(^{cxlvii}\), seeming to query exactly where and when religious affirmation is to be made and found. The canto begins:

Covenants, yes; outcries, yes; systemic disorders like the names of rock-plants, yes; right side for creativity, yes; and well if none of ús | fails our prevision.\(^{cxlix}\)

The line between mockery and menace is a difficult one to draw here, and it may well be that Hill is exploring the Pentecostal or Wesleyan “style of faith” (*CCW*, p. 361) as he does in the essay, ‘The Weight of the Word’ – “The Wesleys aroused enthusiasm and, at the same time, deprecated certain of its consequences.” Hill
notes “the two-natured power of their evangelical oratory: how it awakened many into a redemptive, spiritual, common life and drove some into an anarchic emotional solitude” (p. 361). It is doubtful whether for Hill, God can survive in this context, finishing the canto as he does with: “The Day/ of Jubilo, though not on my program.” Affirmation has in fact undermined itself, it would appear, a reversal of fortune implicit in the string of oxymoronic phrasing which begins to draw the canto to its close: “spontaneous, by the book, the plenitude/ of the oppressed, oppressive and upgathered.” These lines are preserved in Broken Hierarchies, where the many other revisions are evidence that Hill, despite the evocation of enthusiasm, is concerned to weigh and weight his words with care.

Pentecostal raptures are insufficiently cognizant of human nature it would appear: “More sensual, more/ uncommitted clay, our solicited/ Maker must make do with.” This becomes more brutish in the revised canto: “More sensual,/ at times craven, clay our solicited/ Maker must make do with.” Though the poet appears to be preaching to the converted – “never before heard preaching like it” suggests both a preaching which more than ever confirms what the convert already believes, but also acknowledges (albeit unconsciously) the novelty and heterodoxy of the preaching – these converts may well be oblivious to the challenge of Hill’s visionary philology. It’s not that the poet is concerned with whether God exists or not, but with how God exists. This may turn out to be more disconcerting than the challenge of atheism or heterodoxy, and is a challenge to the atheist as much as to the convert – “to stay and sway us, as never before” (line 16).

The lines which purport to spell out the nature and the presence of God, for instance, are implicated in the same passage whose affirmations metamorphose into detractions, when what is anti-life is celebrated: “The planets/ of alkali, yes”
(lines 6-7). The converts seem spellbound, in fact, and a spell too is cast on the vision of God:

A methylated cold
glow in the northern heavens that spells God
the Creator, yes; who is long suffering
to us-ward? Yes, yes.

The oxymoronic “cold / glow” is complex and beautiful in its synaesthesia, yet the indiscriminate yea saying certainly compromises the anachronistic perception of a Creator God. Perhaps to ensure that no reader should be swayed by this imagery to take such a doctrine at face value, Hill revises these lines in Broken Hierarchies and further demonstrates that God is not a God of signs and proofs, nor of Nature’s riddles:

      Planets
of alkali, no; a methylated cold
glow in the northern heavens that spells God
the encoder, no.

These refutations provide more sober witness alongside the charisma and revival of the Pentecostal vision – “Go to the revivalists for vision,/ the charismatic troupers” – and suggest a bleak splendour sufficient unto itself, without enigma or further mystery.

In this way the use of the word ‘God’ need neither be anachronistic nor exclusive at a time largely defined as being secular, post-Christian, atheistic. “Fit audience find, though few” are words from the 7th book of Milton’s Paradise Lost, however, which continue to define the task and fate of the religious poet, and the general indifference to the renewal or ‘redemption’ of God-language. Hill’s presentation and conception of religious verse need not be seen as otiose nor anti-democratic or elitist. To begin a poem with the words “LUMEN OBSCURUM” (canto LI), for instance, need not be seen as obscurantist, or enigmatic or recondite, though we can all feel offended where a poet seems not to have taken sufficient
trouble to make good sense, to speak honestly and in good faith. ‘LI’ is, in fact, preoccupied with the offence which language both causes and affords, whether it be in expressing the ineffable, or referring euphemistically or mendaciously to the abhorrent and obscene. There is a failure of kenotic witness in such cases, though Hill does not therefore advocate plain English, which may well muddy the waters after its own fashion. We remember, too, that ‘offence’ and ‘scandal’ are integral to the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition, and it would appear that the implicit reference in ‘LI’ to Oświęcim/Auschwitz is part of a complex exploration of both what is obscure and what is offensive. The recondite is in any case not merely abstruse, but can be generally associated with what is profound. The recondite is only an instance of private language or of solipsism or impenetrable code, depending on one’s angle of vision, or on whether one has ears to hear; “God/ the encoder, no.” Once the enigma code has been cracked, one sees perfectly clearly. It is this transparent mystery which is further explored in canto LI, another canto which receives clarifying revision in 2013’s Broken Hierarchies.

Contradictory and contradicting dark vision is the topos of canto LI, in which, as we have seen, we are invited to take “another walk/ down to the river, where the darkening flood/ churns beneath burnt-out alders” (lines 2-4). If the “charismatic troupers” of canto L have misspelled God, then perhaps some albeit obscure light may be cast on the matter from this vantage point. Where the river is described as “unwieldy” in 2002, the revised canto reads “mud-yeasty” which more strongly captures perhaps the promise within what is unpromising, though a “millstone” can be said too to be antagonymic, if we think of its role in grinding corn. Alien and alienating signs – “LUMEN OBSCURUM”, “atemwende” – may have a salutary effect; as much a glitch as a turning-point; so with the despoiled God – a black sun, a dark light, an obscure meaning (LI, lines 17-21), aspects of kabbalistic
wisdom evident in the works of Isaac Luria, forefather of the Polish poet,

Aleksander Wat (1900-1967), referenced in these lines:

WAT’s posthumous *lumen*
*obscurum* holds fast; at the nub of things
settled, creaturely, its fabulous glim
invisible to most. So how did he know?
Through enigmatic channels, very clearly

The crux, here, ("the nub of things") is a contested and contesting force which
becomes real only through the creativity of faith (the benefit of the doubt). It is an
obscure enlightenment which endures ("holds fast") but which is "invisible to
most" apparently, present in a code ("enigmatic channels") through which one may
pass from faith to knowledge – "So how did he know?" This knowledge becomes
binding (a sense at the root of the word ‘religion’ – both obligation and salvation),
and though its “glim” is faint and vulnerable (to indifference or hostility for
example), it is not without substance. It may be “fabulous”, a term embracing that
which is fabled or legendary, as well as the more demotic sense conveying
amazement (an active/passive state too); it may be seen “very clearly” and become
one’s heart’s desire; the last line of the canto reads – "Where your treasure is, there
is your heart also”.

This final line of canto LI draws on the New Testament phrase, which in the
King James Bible runs: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”
We find this in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 6, verse 21, a reference given us within
the poem itself (line 10) – “Mateusz six, twenty-one”. Using the Polish rendering of
Matthew’s name – earlier we read “Whatever’s cryptic is Polish” – renders the
supposedly clarifying reference momentarily obscure of course, and it is only the
active (faithful?) reader, who has ears to hear, that finds out the hidden treasure.
We can “smoke out” the realities hidden in the riddle, and arrive at something
which will survive us, (help us to survive) as with “Wat’s posthumous *lumen/obscurum*”:

> smoked them all out, grudge-heavy honey-bees
> living off self-remitted spoil of the hive. (lines 22-23)

These lines⁸ can stand, not entirely fancifully, as an allegory of the process of reading Hill’s verse itself. What is smoky becomes clear, but does not discard its smokiness; lines seem to begrudge their meaning but can be as wholesome and dangerous as ‘honey-bees’, deriving from (inhabiting) what is spoiled (and also a prize (‘spoil’)), solipsistic and self-imprisoning (‘self-remitted’) and yet living according to the heart’s law of self-forgiveness.

Such lines seem inordinately impacted with condensed and contradictory semantic forces; it is little wonder Hill’s verse can at times appear to operate at the level of the cryptic crossword puzzle. Keeping faith with our poet, however, we take this complexity as a necessary prelude to clarity. Where there is a “rumour” (to use a word from this canto, line 15) of meaning, the reader may choose to follow or to feel simply alienated or *ostracized*:

> Ostracizm’s a small foothill town
> in the Carpathians that retires at dusk,
> battening rumours, telling its safe houses. (lines 13-15)

It would be easy to feel alienated by this apparently trivial and tasteless joke at the expense of the Polish town of Oswieczim or Auschwitz. People were murderously ostracized there, after all, and the reasons given here for remembering this town sound suspiciously like a denial of the horror that lies within. Holocaust-denial involves the trivialization of truth to ‘rumour’, and tells lies about “its safe houses”, (where ‘safe’ contains the menacing notion too of ‘free from’). “Battening” seems to suggest the keeping out of uncomfortable, accusatory rumours, but also the getting fat on such things (as in the contested notion of ‘the Holocaust industry’).
Hill’s verse exists on a dangerous (and thrilling) threshold between unknowing and illumination, where unknowing can be both grudgingly self-remitted as with the self-deceiving inhabitants of Ostracism, and forgivably innocent like the honey-bees; where illumination may be hard-won “[t]hrough enigmatic channels”, or abrupt and unexpected (“its fabulous glim/ invisible to most”). There are no safe theological houses, only menace and *metanoia*:

Take another walk
down to the river, where the darkening flood
churns beneath burnt-out alders, leaps and yaws
across – between – its millstone rocks, unwieldy.

Catherine of Siena’s “nether/ way of the flood” here churns with its own “fabulous glim”, the alder trees aflame with autumn, and the river “yaws” – deviant though proclaiming, yes, an irrepressible freedom.

**Part Four: Housing the Illimitable**

the shuttered
lantern of nature. Syon’s orchards
festal, unchanging, through the change of seasons,
burgeoning in that dream which is called vision
and naming, and is for the centuries.

*from canto LXVIII, The Orchards of Syon [disappeared from Broken Hierarchies]*

Much of *The Orchards of Syon* is concerned with what the poet refers to in canto LXIX (*BH, LXV*) as “quotidian marvels” (line 19), many of which he finds out on the fells – here in LXIX, “fresh-felled trunks of beech / split thin-clean like slate” (lines 19-20). These marvels are often broken, marred or reduced in some way, and yet they startle – they are “fresh-felled” and “thin-clean”. What is displaced, impaired
or puny exists in close proximity to the violence of revelation and eternity, as again here in LXIX:

Heavy, post-cloudburst, slow drops, earthing, make
dibble-holes under the crouched evergreens.

When we read in canto LXV (BH; LXIII) “Abruptly the sun’s out”, we carry the sense of sun’s extinction with us through a passage in which light’s angle is calibrated and at issue in a prism of phrases divided by a flicker of semi-colons (lines 20-24):

Abruptly the sun’s out, striking a new
cleave; skidding the ridge-grass, down steep hangers;
buddleia in dark bloom; a wayward covey
of cabbage-whites this instant balanced
and prinking; the light itself aromatic.

The final synaesthesia merely seems to confirm the waywardness and yet the justice of each unblinking observation, making of the quotidian and mundane a silent sacrament of praise, “balanced/ and prinking”. It is the vision Hill refers to elsewhere as “bleakly resplendent” (canto XXIII), “this bleak satiety” (XXXII), and “ruin’s festival” (canto LXXI; BH, LXVII). It is there in Meister Eckhart’s wisdom in canto XLV, “that there’s a divine/ presence in destitution” (lines 4-5). And Hill synaesthetically hears it in the music of “In Terra Pax” referenced in canto XLVII:

dark in itself but sighted, as dead stars
that overlook us with a splitting light.

The illocutionary act that is implied in the notion of “God’s grammar” – And God said, Let there be light: and there was light – may be a mere chimera, a dead star, emitting infrequent or broken rays of light, or indeed no light at all but that which has already crossed the galaxies (at the limited speed of light) and is “sighted” by us. Overlooked is itself antagonistmic, conveying both what it might be to be protectively or coercively watched over and, of course, to be passed over with indifference or with the blessing of the Biblical Passover. Hill’s religious vision is,
in this way, indistinguishable from and irreducible out of the rhetoric of its “serene witness” (XIV, Orchards), a witness whose oxymoronic dynamics are electrifyingly present in canto XIV, a canto in which the poet wanders the fell and observes the “full moon”:

Whatever’s brought,
one to the other, masking and unmasking,
by each particular shift of clarity
wrought and obscurely broken-in upon,
of serene witness, neither mine nor yours,
I will ask bristling centaury to translate.

Here the weedy or thistly wildflower, “bristling centaury” is invoked, with all the force of a parenthetic prayer, to stand in for the obscure beauty and evanescent potency of the sublime earthly vision we bring “one to the other”. The apparently combative “centaury” translates a century of failure to establish peace on earth – “Awe is not peace, not one of the sacred/duties in mediation” (lines 8-9) – and contains it. The shifting and blurring and dissolution of this vision goes beyond the egotism of eye-witness account – “neither mine nor yours” – leaving us troubled (“wrought”) with what we have done (“wrought”), sent awry (“centaury”) yet “serene” with our powers of making (“masking and unmasking”).

This vision is Hill’s “solitary lamp, notturna lampa” (line 21) the vision that the poet Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) saw, and sees again at the end of this canto, when the “brimming heat-haze” (line 1) has subsided, and “Distant flocks merge into limestone’s half-light” (line 4). It’s late in the day, the festival may be over, but here is still “lustre” (line 6) and “substance” (line 10), salvation within the spreading darkness and dissolution:

Saved by immersion, sleep, forgetfulness,
the tinctured willow and frail-textured ash,
untrodden fern-sheaves, a raw-horned oak,
the wavering argents in the darkened river.
Later again, far higher on the fell,
a solitary lamp, notturna lampa,
night’s focus focusing, Leopardi saw, himself a stranger, once, returning late from some forsaken village festival.
Afterword

God’s Funeral and the Poet’s Opportunity

“sematology is a theological dimension”
  (‘Common Weal, Common Woe’, CCW, p. 279)

Hill’s exploration and qualification of “agnostic faith”, a faith which can’t be
dissolved into confident knowing, a faith which does not submit to paraphrase, a
faith which does not exempt itself from a full knowledge of political and historical
reality, finds rhetorical embodiment in the poetic oxymoron, and the cross-
currents of oxymoronic contexturing. Hill is engaged in revisioning the faiths of
our time, in a tradition of celebrated religious outsiders such as Blaise Pascal,
William Blake, Søren Kierkegaard, Simone Weil and the Dietrich Bonhoeffer of
Letters and Papers from Prison. Faith here is embattled and battling, not necessarily
“magnificent” in its expression, not an aspect of “neo-Symbolist mystique
celebrating verbal mastery” (CCW, p. 19). Hill is only too aware of irascibility, vain
posturing, “the self demanding to be loved” (p. 19). Witness the closing lines of
Orchards, LXIX, (unchanged in Broken Hierarchies, though becoming LXV):

Treat with care
these angry follies of the old monster.
Dig the – mostly uncouth – language of grace.

The NSOED records an obsolete meaning of the word ‘uncouth’: ‘Unknown; not
certainly known, uncertain’, as well as the alienated and alienating ‘Of an
unfamiliar or strange appearance or form’ (‘arch. E16’). A third definition covers
Hill’s gesture for modesty too: ‘Of language, style, etc.: clumsy; lacking
sophistication or delicacy’. Blessing may well come in disguise – the blessed may
be unaware of their state of grace – and beneath the folly of Hill’s poetic venture
may be a new form of wisdom or faith, however monstrous its first appearance.
Hill reprises the word ‘uncouth’ in his 2005 Empson lecture ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’. Hill seems once again to be circling the notion of God’s grammar, though here he does not use the phrase, but focuses on what the *NSOED* records as a “sentence or construction lacking grammatical sequence” – the “anacoluthon”. He is examining one aspect of Hopkins’s ‘That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection’ – Hopkins’s ability to imitate the “wondrous thisness” of the “eternal round of creation and destruction” (*CCW*, p. 570). But Hopkins amounts to more than this (“though he is that, powerfully”):

Suddenly there bursts in an uncouth anacoluthon: ‘Enough! the Resurrection’. It is a great moment, one of the greatest grammatical moments in nineteenth-century English poetry. It has been criticized for its arbitrariness, but arbitrariness is the making of it. The Resurrection is a kind of eschatological anacoluthon; no amount of standard grammar can anticipate or regularize that moment.

What is uncouth here is clearly its saving grace; it could not be clearer that Hill is not concerned with that “verbal mastery” of which he is so wary in his inaugural lecture of 1977, but with language that is apparently clumsy or out-of-step, achieving its own peculiar magnificence. The coalescence of reality and rhetoric, and the transformation of both in the ensuing fusion and fission, receives Hill’s highest praise (p. 571):

Hopkins has got within the judgement the condition of the judgement, and it has involved the essential transformation of his judgement. It is the coming together of faith and what Yeats calls ‘technic’.

It is compelling to see in Hill’s perception of this ‘technic’ and what Yeats was “looking for in his late writings” an outline of oxymoron poetics – “an idiom for transfiguring crude juxtaposition” (p. 577):

What he is looking for in his late writings is a unit comprising antithetical, even mutually repellent, forces, in which the calculated is at one with the spontaneous: integration that is simultaneously diremption; a kind of monad of linguistic energy.
There is no doubting Hill’s regard for the force and value of such a trope, its alienating and alienated, uncouth majesty. In a file on Wallace Stevens in the Brotherton Collection, on page 5 of a typescript lecture entitled ‘Stevens II lecture’ there is an apparently angry, despairing handwritten note against a passage in which Stevens is quoted writing on Verrocchio’s statue Bartolommeo Colleoni in Venice. This is part of what Stevens writes:

there, on the edge of the world in which we live today, he established a form of such nobility that it has never ceased to magnify us in our own eyes...It seems, nowadays, what it may very well not have seemed a few years ago, a little overpowering, a little magnificent

Hill’s handwritten note bears on the distortions and iniquities of belief-systems or faiths (“dreams and rumours”) which are politically and financially empowered, but which in failing responsibly to acknowledge their own fictionality, make a nonsense of the more judicious and humane nature of (equally fictional) high or serious poetry and the arts:

That oxymoron ['a little overpowering, a little magnificent'] speaks volumes for the predicament of the ‘supreme fiction’ in the world that belittles supreme fictions even while it servilely follows the dreams and rumours of plutocratist megalomania.

The oxymoron can “speak volumes”, it captures a moral “predicament”, it is a fiction sufficiently real to resist belittlement and to register nobility of spirit.

Though theology too has found itself in such a predicament throughout the last century and beyond, it may be said, rather, that this state should be the very substance of its discourse, perpetually. To say, for instance, that God is strictly a linguistic and performative issue must remain a baffling and disquieting statement for both those who are and are not religious in the 21st century. It’s upsetting for those who want more than ‘just words’, and upsetting for those who thought God had died the death. Here, it is helpful to look to a theologian who has charted this
sea-change or paradigm-shift in our understanding of God, Graham Shaw. Shaw’s revisionary readings of religious identity *The Cost of Authority: Manipulation and Freedom in the New Testament* (1983), and *God in our Hands* (1987), are an exploration of the central texts of Judaeo-Christian devotional tradition – the Pauline letters and the Gospel according to Mark, the Psalms, Isaiah, Augustine’s *Confessions*, and *The Prayers and Meditations of Saint Anselm*. Shaw’s conclusions are as much a response to death-of-God theology, and to secular indifference to theological insight, as a challenge to conservative and fundamentalist theologians:

[This book’s] emphasis on the function of doctrines, on asking questions about the use to which human beings are putting their religious claims and language, makes possible a new understanding of the reality of God, modified and more intelligible. For the logical consequence of this approach to scripture is that the only reality of God lies in the use of that word by human beings. It does not refer to some supernatural or mysterious or special being; it is instead a word of the creative imagination by which we construct first in imagination and ultimately in reality a new and different world. The only significance of the word ‘God’ is its purely verbal function; that is not necessarily disparaging, for its function is uniquely precious: it is an integral part of human freedom, a means by which we transcend the given and transform ourselves and the world.

This provides convincing justification for the perception that it is neither sensible nor necessary nor humane to attempt to extinguish whatever it is that leads to the utterance of this word ‘God’. Remaining silent about G-d can be as religious an act as betraying God through utterance – Peirce has shown, as we have seen, how such treachery may be an act of revelation in itself, and the cross-currents of semantic logic within the poetic oxymoron establish a context for understanding such a God. We inflect the word God more or less deliberately, as Shaw and as Hill demonstrate, according to our control of personal utterance and expression, and according to degrees of situational truth.

The on-line *Oxford English Dictionary* (accessed 26 November 2013), for instance, refers us to the obsolete word “godcund”. Via citations from the *Anglo-
Saxon Chronicle, OE Genesis, Ormulum and Layamon’s Brut we learn that this adjective signified (though only apparently in Old English and Middle English) “divine, spiritual”: “Crist...turrnde water inn till win...hiss goddcunnde mahhte”\(^{\text{ck}}\).

A final citation is from c. 1275, and there is a derivative noun of the same year, “Godd-cunde”, meaning “divinity, divine nature or power”. When we realize what is at stake in the passing of words from usage, we also realize something of the challenge tasking the poet of religious sensibility. “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world”\(^{\text{clxi}}\), Wittgenstein’s proposition offers bleakly. Though if words can be living powers, those “limits” clearly are enduring goal as much as endured restriction.

The word “god” (lower case ‘g’) is listed as a noun deriving from the Old English “god” (masculine in singular). The *OED* indicates something of the imprecision and expediency of a word’s history, when it records that the corresponding “Gothic and Old Norse words always follow the neuter declension” and that the “neuter n., in its original heathen use, would answer rather to Latin *numen* than to Latin *deus*.” In canto LIX of *Orchards*, Hill retrieves this distinction, vivifying the word ‘numen’ through a pairing with a defamiliarising preceding verb, the adoption of an unexpected indefinite article, and a contexturing of topographical, and controversial, exactitude:

> All along, I’m labouring to try out
> a numen that endures, exactly placed:
> some upper valley in the high fell country
> where millstone grit juts against limestone; shippens
> built of random masonry; the home-croft with its gapped wall and its well,
> and black nettles where the privy stood.

We are not in King’s College Chapel here, but a cattle-shed and an apparently abandoned home with a disused well. The quotidian is infused with the mythic, though clearly not dependent on such allusion\(^{\text{ckii}}\). We marvel at the poet’s exacting
and audacious vision, wondering just how provocative he is being – “to try out/ a numen” – but recognizing here how the exact and the “random” are perfectly fused, that the commonplace world is all grist to Hill’s poetic and religious mill.

The *OED* declares that for the word “god” the “ulterior etymology is disputed” though indicates “two Aryan roots” “one meaning ‘to invoke’ (Sanskrit hū), the other ‘to pour, to offer sacrifice’ (Sanskrit hu, Greek χεῖν, Old English géotan YET v.).” Hence, the *OED* etymology arrives at the interpretation “what is invoked” and “what is worshipped by sacrifice”, though here the transition from verbal origins to a substantive may be precisely the kind of inadvertent lexicographical sleight-of-hand to which Hill refers in his essay on the Second Edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) ‘Common Weal, Common Woe’ (*CCW*, p. 273):

> It is a fact at once perplexing and illuminating that, while the making of the *Dictionary* disclosed a vast semantic field in which the brute actuality of English misapprehension could be charted as never before, some of the most telling evidence failed to lodge itself in these pages.

There is a disconcerting acknowledgment by the *OED* editors that these interpretations are “conjectures” though “fairly plausible, as they both yield a sense practically coincident with the most obvious definition deducible from the actual use of the word, ‘an object of worship’.” This rather surprising “most obvious definition deducible” seems to have no foundation, despite the assertion that this deduction is based on the “actual use of the word”, a phrase which surely begs the question as to who is deciding on this ‘actuality’, and in which context God is being spoken. Oddly, the final sentence in this paragraph on etymology dismisses scholars who have “supposed the etymological sense to be ‘molten image’” (from the Aryan root meaning ‘to pour’), though the preferred definition “an object of worship” brings philosophical and perceptual problems of its own.
Similarly, these difficulties inherent in regarding the word “God” as referring to an object, rather than as an integral part of a voiced human activity, must be present within definition I. 1. a. Here we find “A superhuman person”, which is scarcely helpful given that within liturgy and prayer (where one has to assume the word originally occurs) – and here we cannot put the cart before the horse – the function of the word “God” is clearly not descriptive. Nor is it obviously a “proper name” as the *OED* claims it has been “throughout the literary period of English”. Indeed, the peculiar function of the word “God” is – perhaps unconsciously – acknowledged in the remaining clauses of the same sentence – “‘a god’, [a term here referring to a heathen god] is a supposed being put in the place of *God*, or an imperfect conception of *God* in some of His attributes or relations.” It is the conception of God which is at issue here, and referential definitions can only outline an entity which, in that outlining, disqualify the word from the context in which it is first and presumably most efficaciously to be found, within devotion. Once the word “God” is assumed to refer to an objective being or understanding of that being, confusion reigns and *God* becomes merely an arena of contested definitions.

The word “God” occurs first in invocation, apostrophe and prayer. Its function here must, anthropologically, be crucial. The *OED* comes nearer to ascertaining such a function in referring to the word’s ‘appellative’, ‘exclamatory’, ‘asseverative or adjudatory’ nature. What is said under I. 1. c. about the rhetorical quality of Græco-Roman deities, must also be helpful here, though we may question the use of the demeaning “mere”: “often mentioned rhetorically or humorously as mere personifications of qualities or influences”. Under I. 1. e. the expressive nature of religious language is foregrounded; we find ‘God’ phrases “used to express mock-heroic indignation”.

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Conceptualisation of such a non-referential, expressive word is on one level a missing of the point, or at best a language-game of a different (and non-religious) set of rules. Here, we would say God is indicative of existential need or aspiration, and a sound as puny and as potent as its immediate context will allow. Under I. 1. a. the OED acknowledges the importance of ‘point of view’: “When the word is applied to heathen deities disparagingly, it is now written with a small initial; when the point of view of the worshipper is to any extent adopted, a capital may be used.” No lexicographic point is made here, however, as to the semantic importance of this distinction, and throughout the article on “God” the distinction is blurred and the principal grammatical function unclear.

There is no entry for the word ‘God’ in Kenneth Haynes’ index to his Geoffrey Hill: Collected Critical Writings (2008). ‘God’ comes under ‘grammar’ (pages 264, and 315), and ‘Donne, John: on ‘God’s grammar’” (page 263), ‘nature/natural: and God’ (page 114) and ‘Rosenberg, Isaac: ‘God” (page 440). The last of these entries is of course a reference to a poem’s title, and we find the word God in references to other titles: ‘Ransom, John Crowe: God Without Thunder’ and ‘Donne, John: ‘A Hymne to God the Father”. The most theologically challenging of these references comes in the essay from Style and Faith (2003) entitled ‘Keeping to the Middle Way’ (TLS, 1994) (p.315 CCW), amidst a passage distinguishing between the passive and active modes of literary style: “With Burton...the active declares itself in plain, even severe, statements of faith and practice that stand out from the tragic-comic welter [Burton’s catalogue or ‘heap’ (sorites) of suffering] like inspirations of ‘God’s grammar’”.

In the Preface to Style and Faith we find the phrase used without the sense of quotation where Hill refers to “Donne’s several presentations of an essential theme throughout his devotional writing: that of God’s grammar.” Hill goes on: “It
is a question whether we now understand, let alone receive, this grammar as

Donne intended us to grasp it”. Hill then quotes from The Sermons of John Donne,
vol. 5, p. 287:

The Holy Ghost is an eloquent Author, a vehement, and an abundant Author, but yet not luxuriant; he is far from a penurious, but as far from a superfluous style too.

“God’s grammar” is a quotation from John Donne but also a formulation of Hill’s own thinking; we may well wonder what it is that Hill proposes with this notion.

When God speaks and writes He has his own grammatical register, His own idiosyncratic style and syntax, one might say. Then, of course, we, His auditors and readers, need to learn this grammar in order to understand. But then again, someone might say, God can only speak and write if we do this for Him. So, God’s grammar can be/is our grammar but under special conditions.

In The Orchards of Syon there are references to some order of expression that might accommodate Godly utterance. Syon itself, we might remember, is the source of Milton’s inspiration in Book 3 of Paradise Lost (lines 29-32):

but chief
Thee, Sion, and the flow’ry brooks beneath
That wash thy hallowed feet, and warbling flow,
Nightly I visit

At the beginning of Book 1 Milton had already invoked the ‘Heav’nly Muse’ (line 6) and continued (lines 10-16):

if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa’s brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to my advent’rous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th’ Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

Such an exhilarating, and dangerous grammar, a grammar commensurate with metanoia in an inauspicious and unpropitious age, as Milton’s “unattempted” infers, may not necessarily have had its day, indeed its discovery/invention seems
to be part of the poet’s vocation. The religious poem has its own unique, originating grammar, yet a grammar which intersects with quotidian speech. In LXVII of *Orchards* Hill addresses (in an address or apostrophe) the debt he owes to his own explorations of how the poets have dealt with God. It is a peculiarly raw confession, reminiscent of the sentiment in Eliot’s “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (*The Waste Land*, line 430). It inevitably returns us to the wisdomic conclusion of Matthew’s gospel (chapter 6, verse 21), “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” which has been explored in the course of *Orchards*. Faith may be weak; it may only be a form of “staying” – holding out against, or enduring – the gravity (“bulk”) of the human condition. But there is an “aureate” as well as a “vernacular” dimension to “the piece of divine poetry” through which we achieve some kind of distinction:

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    Heart of my mind,
such is indebtedness if this is not
    faith it stays the bulk of experience: God’s
    grammar, as the poets once construed it.
    In aureate vernaculars
    we are old things of note.
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In this last line the grammatical expectation is of a passive verb where we in fact find the adjective “old”. *If* we read simultaneously (with the eyes of faith) the word ‘told’, we forget the historical provenance of such telling, and may be ‘sold’ a lie. The preceding poetical word “aureate”, nevertheless, also carries through to a suggestion of ‘gold’, which “stays” the depreciation and diminution implicit in that which is “old”. Are we ‘bold’ enough to claim this heritage, or does it leave us ‘cold’? Hill pays his debt, at least, to the perplexity and perplexing of such an inheritance.

It is an inheritance derived largely from the bloody theological battles of the Reformation, as is evident from Brian Cummings’ *The Literary Culture of the*
Reformation: Grammar and Grace (2002), a study which must owe a certain amount to Professor Hill’s guidance whilst Cummings was a doctoral student.\textsuperscript{clxv} Cummings’ declaration of the immediacy and danger of the theological enterprise, the extent to which theology is not about religious experience but is expressive of it, for instance, is reminiscent of Hill’s own position (Cummings, p. 378):

The presiding assumption is that theology is an activity separate from the personal and psychological sphere of religious experience. Theology is conceived as a language subsequent, and supplementary, to the spiritual life which it (merely) ‘describes’. This mistakes the way that spiritual life is invested in theological language. Any experience, any psychology, is inseparable from the language in which it operates and by which it is identified. To ascribe to language a secondary role of description is to accord to experience an instinctual status appropriate only to a life without such capacity for description. An experience that is rationalized is thick with linguistic description.

By this definition the theological task is by no means obsolete, and we may hear Hill’s voice too in such defining sentences as “Grace is an enigma, a grammar unto itself” (p. 414), and “A God that seemed to be immanent in language was just as much occluded in language” (p. 417). Religious identity remains, as Cummings says of that “century of Reformation”, “complex and controversial” (p. 417), and yet in Hill’s poetry the search for God and God’s grammar, “a grammar constantly prone to solecism” as Cummings shows John Donne to have demonstrated, is unremitting. We might say with Cummings that in Hill, as in Donne, “the desire for divine intellection appears insatiable, almost to be an end in itself”, and that such intellection remains earthbound and uncouth. Regardless of our creedal or credal position our sense of religious awareness is enhanced by Hill’s “hard-won”\textsuperscript{clxvi} poetics, as it is by Hill’s refusal to speak “the nongrammatical speech of angels” (Orchards, LVIII; excised from Broken Hierarchies). Our labours with Hill’s “labours of flight” (Orchards, and Broken Hierarchies, XLII) are rewarded, as when towards
the end (CCW, p. 325) of Hill’s examination of the “dazzling darkness” of Vaughan’s poem ‘The Night’ in ‘A Pharisee to Pharisees’:

the God of The Song of Solomon 5: 2 and of Revelation 3: 20 comes like a mousing owl over the fields by the Usk, with ‘silent, searching flight’ and ‘still, soft call’.
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ENOTE
disappear but initially are turned inward in a way that renders them as invisible as the transcendent God who is present as an abiding absence. This interiorization of religion began with Luther’s turn to the individual self and reached closure with Kierkegaard’s singular individual for whom “the paradox of faith is an interiority that is incommensurable with exteriority” (pp. 2-3). He continues, “If, as Kierkegaard finally admits, the knight of faith is indistinguishable from the philistine, opposites collapse into each other in such a way that it becomes impossible to distinguish religious from nonreligious conduct.”

x The persistence of theological endeavour and divine vision is well presented by John Panteleimon Manoussakis in his introduction to After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy: “Who or what comes, then, after God? Such was the question that befell philosophy following the proclamation of the “death of God.” In the wake of God, as the last fifty years of philosophy have shown, God comes back again, otherwise: Heidegger’s last God, Levinas’s God of Infinity, Derrida’s and Caputo’s tout autre, Marion’s God without Being, Kearney’s God who may be” (p. xv).


xiii The phrase “empirical guilty conscience” is noted as deriving from The Theology of P. T. Forsyth (John H. Rodgers, 1965, p. 40)).

xiv Hill notes that the “allusion is to I Corinthians 15: 8, in the King James Version of 1611: ‘And last of all he was seene of me also, as of one borne out of due time’” (CCW, pp. 663-4).

xv Published first in The Times, 24 Dec 1915.


xvii This sense of the poet inhabiting an intervening space or suffering a dislocation of vision is present in Hill’s essay of 2000, ‘Alienated Majesty: Walt Whitman’ (CCW, pp. 506-517): “The radical sense of alienation, in both prose and poetry is evidenced in the presence of the gap, the aporia, between an almost mystical respect for the idea of the law and a continual accosting of legislature for its persistent shortcomings” (p. 510). Matthew Paskins, in his chapter ‘Hill and Gillian Rose’ (in Geoffrey Hill and his Contexts, eds. Piers Pennington & Matthew Sperling, 2011) quotes from Gillian Rose’s Mourning Becomes the Law in his discussion of Hill’s understanding of aporia: “Aporia, Rose says elsewhere, is the Janus-face of the universal” (Contexts, p. 172). Peter Walker, an early advocate of Hill’s importance as a poet undertaking theological work, spoke of the need to acknowledge aporia in a lecture for the Fourth National Conference on Literature and Religion [Where the Wasteland Ends] in 1988. In his ‘T. S. Eliot: Poetry, Silence and the Vision of God’ [copy to be found in the Brotherton Collection, Leeds University Library at BC MS 20c Hil/4/34 T. S. Eliot Centenary Lecture] he cites the “new dimension of aporia” (p. 19) which “could be taken with full seriousness by the theologian, to challenge and evoke his reappraisal of the nature of God’s presence in the world”. He adds to this significantly: “The listening of the theologian to the poets and the writers has never been more needed than at the present moment.”

xviii The word ‘spasm’ occurs again much later in Hill’s 1996 volume Canaan. In the poem ‘CYCLE/ William Arrowsmith, 1924-1992’ ‘spasm’ is juxtaposed with the
near-anagram ‘psalm’. A psalm is and is not contained within and derived from the personal spasm; the spasm and the psalm are both modified and enlarged by this oxymoronic juxtaposition (which is also an aporia). The first line of ‘CYCLE’ is: “Natural strange beatitudes”.

Published as ‘Alienated Majesty: Gerard M. Hopkins’, CCW, pp. 518-531.


In this same essay Hill claims that Eliot “became the purveyor of Christianized angst to les honnêtes gens” (p. 557), clearly something Hill has no interest in becoming himself. In ‘Word Value in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot’ (2001) Hill suggests that by 1942 Eliot’s “material is no longer primarily language; it is Christian Thought” (CCW, p. 547). It is clear that for Hill the poet’s task (effectively a religious one) is to remain faithful to language (as material), and not principally to religious thoughts.

Here (p. 563), in ‘Eros in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot’ he quotes from Charles Williams’ The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church, 1939 (p. 123): “poetry can do something that philosophy can not, for poetry is arbitrary and has already turned the formulae of belief into an operation of faith”.


This lecture was to be later published as chapter 28 ‘Poetry and Value’ in Collected Critical Writings, as part of a section containing seven lectures entitled ‘Inventions of Value’ (which Haynes indicates Hill “conceived of as [a book]” (p. 581)) and Haynes’ note tells us that this was delivered as one of the ‘Tanner Lectures on Human Values in 2000 at Brasenose College, Oxford.’

It is clear from the published version of this lecture, in fact, that there is very little ‘straightforwardness’ in the statement upon which Wainwright alights. There we read about a “triumvirate of moral assessors” (Butler, Coleridge, Leibniz) who preside (rather comically) over Hill’s “own autodidactic inquiry into the nature of intrinsic value and the questionable relationship of value-theory to the spoken and written word, especially as this is formalized in the art of poetry” (p. 479). There are complex levels of irony and tonality in the ensuing sentence: “I should add that, attached as I am to a form of belief in Original Sin, one that is probably not too far removed from the orthodox, I expect my assessors to be in some respects compromised, though this in no way lowers them in my estimation.” A “form of belief” lacks the certainty Wainwright perceives, and “probably not too far” likewise. What seems important here is Hill’s respectful estimation of all-too-human, inevitably compromised, individual utterance. Later, in this same lecture Hill presents poetics as a “ganglion of energy, techné, belief, and opinion” (p. 479) and puts his faith rather in the refusal by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Helmuth James von Moltke to “finally surrender language to some existential brute force” (p. 479). He goes on to claim that Bonhoeffer and von Moltke “find language adequate to their particular witness” (p. 480).


Christianity & Literature, Special Issue: Geoffrey Hill, volume 60, issue 3, Spring 2011, pp. 448-459.

We might say that Hill’s verse deserves the musical direction religioso, (with a devotional quality), were this not to be seen as pretentious and presumptuous in the current climate. Equally, the word ‘religiosity’ is problematic, as its late Middle
English significance ‘religious feeling or belief’, has been entirely subsumed by the later sense of ‘affected or excessive religiousness’. It would appear, paradoxically, that the religious teaching against Pharisaism has become the default position in a secular world.


xxxii ‘Two terms are antonyms’ when they share all their semantic features save for a change in the “+/-” sign of their distinctive feature, e.g., “man” – “woman”. A term is a hyponym of a given superordinate if its feature list includes another one which is its distinctive feature, in addition to all the semantic features of the superordinate term. Thus, the feature list of “bachelor” is derived from that of “man”, namely, “+animate, +adult, +male,” to which the feature “-married” is added” (pp. 108-109).

xxxiv “Restoration and denotative sharpening” as a feature of “rhetorical potency”. Hill quotes on at least two occasions John Ransom’s ‘the confusion of our language is a testimony to the confusion of the world. The density or connotativeness of poetic language reflects the world’s density’ (from The New Criticism (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1941), p. 79). Quoted in ‘What Devil Has Got Into John Ransom?’ (1980) (CCW, p. 136) and ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ (1983) (CW, p. 160).

xxxv In a recent sermon at St John’s College, Cambridge, Hill describes himself (“your preacher”) as having a “weakness for anagrams, palindromes and oxymorons”. Podcast available here: http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/amos-soma-and-back-again.

xxxvi Available here: http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/news-events/regular-events/professor-poetry.

xxxvii This is to use the title of J L Austin’s How to Do Things with Words, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) a text with which Hill is much preoccupied in his 1983 essay ‘Our Word Is Our Bond’ (CCW, pp. 146-169).

xxxviii In ‘Our Word is Our Bond’: “self-stultifying, oxymoronic” (p. 164); “self-stultifying oxymoron” (p. 167); in ‘Tacit Pledges’ this becomes: “a solipsism, an oxymoron” (p. 416); and in ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’: “oxymoron or stultification” (p. 573):


Bonhoeffer foresaw the condition of an overridingly post-Christian world. In the second of these Hill claims precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.

Out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's becoming operative in the 20th century as well as in Hill's poems where God is no longer seen as powerful, but as weak (para. 13), and refers to the famous passage in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters & Papers from Prison: “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”

Williams quotes: “I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason . . . with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration”, (‘Poetic Antagony’ms’, p. 174).

See Adrian Grafe's 'Geoffrey Hill as Lord of Limit: the Kenosis as a Theological Context of his Poetry and Thought', (available: http://lisa.revues.org/77). Grafe links kenosis with Simone Weil's “concept of decreation” (para. 14). See also Jennifer Kilgore-Caradec's 'Kinesis, Kenosis, and the Weakness of Poetry', (available: http://lisa.revues.org/75). Kilgore-Caradec links kenosis with the Rabbinical tsimtsum (para. 4). She outlines “a theological shift that seems to have become operative in the 20th century as well as in Hill's poems where God is no longer seen as powerful, but as weak” (para. 13), and refers to the famous passage in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters & Papers from Prison: “God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us.”

Hill refers to the kenotic hymn (Philippians 2: 5-7) in ‘Language, Suffering, and Silence’ (1998) and ‘Poetry and Value’ (2000). In the second of these Hill claims that Bonhoeffer “foresaw the condition of an overridingly post-Christian world”
(CCW, p. 480), and that “language adequate” to his “particular witness” is to be found in the “Psalms and the kenotic hymn of Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians” (p. 480). In ’Language, Suffering, and Silence’ Hill refers to the received oxymoron “the language of silence” (p. 399) (“such oxymorons are unavoidable”), and explores the “kenotic paradigm” (p. 396) of “Christ before the High Priest (‘But Jesus held his Peace’, Matthew 26: 63)”. Hill is not advocating a fashionable silence in the face of contemporary atrocity, but the imperative “to speak for our salvation” (p. 397), and this he suggests may be found in language theologically understood: “the abrupt, unlooked-for semantic recognition understood as corresponding to an act of mercy or grace” (p. 404). He goes on to propose examination of the “grounds for claiming...that the shock of semantic recognition must be also a shock of ethical recognition; and that this is the action of grace in one of its minor, but far from trivial, types” (p. 405).


1i King James Bible, Philippians 2: 5

1ii The essay ‘Dividing Legacies’ provides the most famous instance of this, where Hill seeks to draw a distinction between “pitch” and “tone” (CCW, p. 375), notoriously suggesting that “Eliot’s poetry declines over thirty years from pitch into tone” (p. 377). He writes of “pitch” connoting “sensuous interest” (p. 376) and “centre of gravity” (p. 376). Elsewhere, in ‘Common Weal, Common Woe’, Hill declares: “In Hopkins’s pitch several otherwise distinct senses can be felt as ‘going together’, as Empson would say” (CCW, p. 267).


1iv “Hardy... can dwarf his own greatness of perception yet ennable things that life has stunted”, Hill writes in ‘Alienated Majesty: Ralph W. Emerson’, (2000), (CCW, p.494), asserting, it would appear, a kenotic approach to poetic composition. And, similarly, in ‘Tacit Pledges’, (1999), (CCW, p.417), Hill outlines the threshold upon which the poet maintains a contested and contesting percipience: “For Hardy the proximate condition to solipsism is an ever-present contingent circumstance, to be squinnied at, regarded askance, ruggedly contested.”

1v Hill’s working photocopy of ’Souls of the Slain, December 1899’ has been preserved in the Brotherton Collection’s MS 20c Hill/5/1/80-81 Hamann – Hardy. Tantallyisingly, it is without annotation.


1vii These words of explanation are to be found below the poem's title in The Cornhill, (as indicated in James Gibson’s notes to The Complete Poems).

1viii The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 17, verses 22-23 (KJV): “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars’ hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”

1ix Quoted in Bernard Lightman’s The Origins of Agnosticism. Victorian Unbelief and the Limits of Knowledge, 1987, according to A. N. Wilson.
Recent essays by Pamela Dalziel and Mary Rimmer have suggested the need for a new understanding of Hardy's religiosity. Rimmer has written, "Few agnostics present such vexed and contradictory attitudes towards the sacred as Hardy" (Wilson, K; p. 32). Also, see Dalziel's essay 'The Gospel According to Hardy' in the same, (Wilson, K.).

This would appear to be the reverse of the poet's situation in the later 'The Oxen', The Times, 24 Dec 1915, collected in Moments of Vision, 1917, where, "in the gloom" he hopes "it might be so".

Arnold's 'Dover Beach' was first published in 1867, according to C. B. Tinker & H. F. Lowry, Arnold: Poetical Works, OUP, 1950.

The equivalent volume of theological revisioning in our time may be the 1963 Soundings, edited A. R. Vidler (Cambridge University Press), to which Hill refers in two of his essays, 'Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'', and 'A Pharisee to Pharisees'. Hill seems particularly interested here in H. A. Williams' 'Theology and Self-Awareness', from which he takes the phrase, "the academic study of prayer may lead a man to pray".


In the essay "'Envoi (1919)" Hill refers to a Pound allusion to the 'unacclaimed achievement of Edward FitzGerald... one of those master-craftsmen born out of their due time, a genius with which Pound to some extent aligned himself'. A note to this passage refers us to Hardy's 'In Tenebris II': 'Till I think I am one born out of due time, who has no calling here'. The note continues: 'The allusion is to I Corinthians 15: 8, in the King James Version of 1611: 'And last of all he was seene of me also, as of one borne out of due time [or, an abortiue'] (CCW, p. 664). The one who is out of alignment, the impercipient one, is the one who waits and will see.


One of the "labours of flight" outlined in canto XLII speaks of a less happy situation: "kestrel, / slammed against window-glass, spread-eagled there".

In their note to line 2 of 'The Windhover', W. H. Gardner & N. H. MacKenzie (OUP, 1970) draw attention to "the Dauphin's praise of his horse in Hen. V, III. vii. 11: 'le cheval Volant, the Pegasus, qui a les narines de feu! When I bestride him I soar, I am a hawk: he trots the air'. Hill is significantly aware of the interpenetration of Hopkins' "devotional life and language" with "the terms which, in the 1530s, Ignatius [of Loyola], himself a member of the warrior caste, a caballero, had written into his book of instructions [The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius]" (see 'Alienated Majesty: Gerard M. Hopkins', CCW, p. 519).


The current OED online [accessed 24 March 2014] does not include this adjective, though it seems to be gaining currency online elsewhere.

The words "suffering – Gurney's" (line 18; 2002) become "suffering – Batty's" in 2013's Broken Hierarchies. An earlier reference to Batty in canto VIII (2002) – "Batty's durance" becomes "English durance" in 2013, and a reference in that same canto VIII to Gurney – ("in Ivor's name not mine") – becomes "in Gurney's name not mine" in 2013. I suspect Batty is Bishop Basil Staunton Batty (1873-1952); Ivor
Gurney is the focus of Hill’s 1984 essay “Gurney’s ‘Hobby’”, which contains this useful commentary on the oxymoron: “‘Hobby’, a word in which solipsism and public bias are compacted, is, in effect, itself oxymoronic: eccentric yet central, peripheral but focal, an ‘amusement’ attended by devotion and sacrifice” (CCW, p. 428).


lxxiv It is helpful to know that the word ‘falcon’ derives from the Latin for sickle, and was once the name of a cannon – the dominion of such things entails the diminution of that which is overcome.

lxxv Franco Marucci attempts to configure Hopkins’ presentation and articulation of God: “If we try to define Hopkins’s apprehension of God throughout his poetry; if, in other words, we try to see under which manifestations and acts God is grasped or, as Hopkins said, ‘instressed’, we reach no simple and univocal definition. What we reach is a formulation which is extraordinarily close to the figure of speech called oxymoron: that of a God who is simultaneously stern and loving, or, in Hopkins’s own words taken from the first part of “The Wreck of the Deutschland”, “mastering” and “merciful”.” (Marucci, Franco. “A Victorian Oxymoron: the “Mastering” and “Merciful” God”, in Gerard Manley Hopkins: Tradition and Innovation, eds Bottalla P, Marra G & Marucci F. Ravenna, Longo Editore, 1991.)

lxxvi In ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’ Hill seeks to distinguish between “inept self-expression on the one hand and, on the other, the preservation of formal distinctions as a necessary part of self-expression” (p. 567). He quotes correspondence between Yeats and Margot Ruddock: “When your technic is sloppy your matter grows second-hand – there is no difficulty to force you down under the surface – difficulty is our plough.”


lxxviii In chapter two of Seven Types of Ambiguity, Empson refers to the oxymoron as a “force”: “these two forces of oxymoron and tautology” (p. 121).

lxxix “My seven types, so far as they are not merely a convenient framework, are intended as stages of advancing logical disorder.” Empson’s Seven Types of Ambiguity, chapter II, p. 69; ‘The Windhover’ is examined in chapter VII.

lxxx Empson is not entirely happy with this oxymoronic process: “At the same time one may doubt whether it is most effective to do it so crudely as in these [first] three lines; this enormous conjunction, standing as it were for the point of friction between the two worlds conceived together, affects one rather like shouting in an actor, and probably to many readers the lines seem so meaningless as to have no effect at all” (p. 262, Seven Types).


lxxxii In Broken Hierarchies (2013) the only change to this passage is the general one of removing capital letters in presenting surnames: “HYMAN” becomes “Hyman”, “COLERIDGE” becomes “Coleridge”.

lxxix Hill also refers to Drum-Taps in his 2000 essay ‘Alienated Majesty: Gerard M. Hopkins’: “What Whitman offers up, in Drum-Taps, are phrases that represent the verbal strivings of the common soldiers of the Union army, as they endeavour to bring home the unspeakable nature of what they have been forced to endure and to witness” (CCW, p. 524).
David-Antoine Williams in ‘Poetic Antagonyms’ also, helpfully, employs Empson’s word ‘commotion’ when seeking to define the poet’s task (here, both Sylvia Plath’s “Insolent storm strikes at the skull” (325-26) and Dickinson’s “I felt a Cleaving in my Mind”): “the impossible task of conveying a state of mental commotion in a medium constructed of and displaying highly regular conceptual and linguistic patterns” (p. 175).

Within his exploration of the second type of ambiguity – “in word or syntax, occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one” (p. 69) – the unifying aspect of the oxymoron seems both to be attractive to Empson, and to be resisted. He writes in consideration of words from Hamlet: “If I say that any of these connections in itself constitutes an oxymoron, I am making philosophical assumptions such as I would wish to avoid, but they are easily treated as such in paraphrasing” (p. 121).

Canto CVI, In Memoriam A. H. H., in The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Christopher Ricks, Longmans, 1969); (as Ricks notes, the only section of In Memoriam to be included in Songs (1872)): “Ring out the darkness of the land,/ Ring in the Christ that is to be.”

The OED online shows ‘beatizing’ to be obsolete – “Beatifying, blessing” (1652); whilst ‘beatitudinous’ is recorded as ‘rare’, “characteristic of blessedness or happiness”, and present in a citation from D. H. Lawrence’s Plumed Serpent (1926) (xiv. 229) “Her childish...slightly imbecile face would take on a black, arch, beatitudinous look.”

A man that looks on glasse,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,  
And then the heav’n espie.

All may of thee partake:  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with his tincture (for thy sake)  
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgerie divine:  
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,  
Makes that and th’ action fine.

(from The Works of George Herbert, (ed.) F. E. Hutchinson, Clarendon Press, 1978 (1941)).


c. David Daiches, in his God and the Poets, writes of Hopkins’ poetry: “God’s presence in Nature is not deduced or inferred...nor is it taken for granted; it is, one might almost say, generated [italics in Daiches] by the way imagery and insight reinforce each other” (p. 109). He goes on: “Nor is this the poetry of simple devotion. Hopkins’s poems prove his faith by the way he works through a cluster of contradictory yet mutually illuminating images” (Daiches, David. God and the Poets. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).
coherent, elusiveness, of incoherence of the Clark Lectures is mysteriously vindicated in the coherences, the Hopkins University, 1933 Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and the Turnbull Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933.

Interview very term would mean different things to different people.” (Transcript of it ‘Marina’ persistently. At one point he says: “the poem both in its grammar and in its symbolic nuances hovers between nightmare and regeneration.” And then: “it is a poem in which the religious experience, I think, is entered very deeply, but the very term would mean different things to different people.” (Transcript of interview – Faculty of Arts, T. S. Eliot “Marina” Tapes; 00525/3160, found in BC MS 20c Hill/4/34 T. S. Eliot Centenary Lecture.)


e [Faber & Faber], T. S. Eliot’s The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and the Turnbull Lectures at the Johns Hopkins University, 1933.

f Though he goes on to say, p. 371: “I am far from suggesting that the final incoherence of the Clark Lectures is mysteriously vindicated in the coherences, the coherent elusiveness, of Marina.”
The same concern is shown in 1991’s ‘The Weight of the Word’, where the focus is on George Herbert’s “real logic of sacramental grammar” (p. 358, CCW), “the sense of theological discovery that Herbert’s poem [‘Affliction (IV)’] awakens line by line” (p. 358), and “the spiritual grammar of Herbert’s poems” (p. 359). In this same essay we find a consideration of the possibility of “a true pitch of a right sublime” (p. 359), and “a different order of theological understanding, inherent in etymology and the contexts of grammar and syntax” (p. 365).

evi The NSOED contains no reference to this word though does offer “paideia”: “Education, upbringing; the ideal result of this; a society’s culture”. And “paedeutics” too is helpful: “The science, art, or practice of education”. A poet’s paideuma is presumably that poet’s evolved understanding of how things are.

Hill voices these concerns from 1996 on. In “Word Value in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot” (p. 541): “In Four Quartets as opposed to Ash-Wednesday and Marina Eliot is invested by, and investing in, what is accepted.” And, in a significant reclaiming of Eliot’s stronger verse from those religious critics who inadvertently discredit Hill’s more exacting notion of religious poetry, Hill writes: “I find troubling all such evidence of the seamless way in which the language of Four Quartets merges into the faintly rhapsodic language of the Anglican commentaries upon it” (CCW, p. 541). He continues (p. 547): “the language of Four Quartets...is language that has suffered impoverishment. Making it part of the Anglican Lectionary is not going to amend that radical absence.”

evii Hill refers to this phrase in ‘Keeping to the Middle Way’, quoting from Donne’s Sermons (vol. 7, p. 445): “Cupio dissolvi, To have a desire that we might be dissolved, and be with Christ’ is Pauline theology” (CCW, p. 312). *Cupio dissolvi* is from Philippians (1: 23), the same epistle which contains the Kenotic Hymn.


eviii The typographical issues evident in this problematically soundless word are of the essence to this exploration.

eixiv The book’s title points to the 1966 Early English Text Society edition (publ. OUP) of Wynkyn de Worde’s 1519 printed edition of *The Orchard of Syon*, a translation of St Catherine of Siena’s *The Dialogue*, completed in 1378 as *Il Libro*. The editors of this, Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M Liegey, indicate in a footnote to their Preface that within this text the “appellations of the Deity are very numerous and varied”.

eixv The Geoffrey Hill archive at the Brotherton Library, Leeds, provides a notebook (33) dated 18/6/89-17/7/92 in which Hill attempted his own translation of Bradwardine’s Latin, and refers to H. A. Oberman’s *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine* (Utrecht, 1957, 15n²). This finds its way into canto CXXV of Hill’s *The Triumph of Love*, (1998), where a comic exchange between an imagined reader of the poem and the poem’s editor indicates that Hill is aware of the lack of currency.

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of such theological notions, as well as ignorance of the Latin in which they are expressed.

Alan Bradford’s note: "The Third Century explores, in terms of Traherne’s own spiritual experience, the loss of infantile felicity under the influence of the corrupt customs of the adult world (3.1-13), and the gradual reattainment of felicity in a higher, more mature, and more contemplative mode" (p. 372). Hill’s quotation is preceded in section 1 of The Third Century by this assertion concerning childhood experience: “Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child.”

See note on back cover. And see canto XLVIII: “When all else fails, the great rainbow, as Bert/ Lawrence saw it or summoned it.”

In the full version (pp. 140-142) Tom remembers playing Beelzebub in “the old mystery play of St George”.


This configuration ‘and/but’ is my attempt to draw attention to the self-contesting field of force which is the poetic oxymoron, and more broadly, oxymoronic utterance.

In the current on-line edition of the Oxford English Dictionary there are 193 citations from The Orchard of Syon, (edited from early manuscripts by Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, London, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1966). The citations include a fair number of obsolete and rare words: merciably, misdooam, misruly, mistrist, mistrusty, mystical, neighbourhead, obedientier, over-verve, previde, promit, rapt (n.), renule and sustentation. However, the surprisingly modern-sounding word-phrase ‘soul health’ is cited too – ‘spiritual health or well-being generally...†salvation (obs.) – (‘Bettire it is for to go to axe councile of soule heelpe to oon vat is meke..ban to a proud lettrid clerk.’) Nevertheless, we are obliged in our reading of Hill’s Orchards to concede the historicity of the language of grace, its provisionality and evanescence.

There is a history of fascination with the mystical number 72, Hill’s original chosen number of cantos for Orchards, (though he is happy to discard this connection in the revised Orchards of the 2013 Broken Hierarchies, where only 68 cantos are retained). Hodgson and Liegey’s edition of Orchard is not divided into 72 parts, but holds to an arrangement of seven parts each containing five chapters (which are also subdivided). The editors nevertheless refer to these sevenfold and fivefold divisions as “mystical” (for the medieval reader).

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(BC MS 20c Hill/5/4/2/1).

The phrase ‘ontological reader’ is one Hill has used in his current lectures as Oxford Professor of Poetry. He has said, apparently ad hoc: ‘No one reads ontologically any more’ in his lecture ‘Eccentrique to the Endes of his Master’.

Hill’s A Treatise of Civil Power (2007) includes the poem “In Memoriam: Gillian Rose”.

‘Attente de Dieu’, used as the title of a volume of writings in 1950. I see this as a variety of negative capability or of kenosis, which Weil elsewhere refers to as “decreation”.


Brute Actuality of things and facts', in ‘A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God’ [1908]).

In the Brotherton Library archive file on Wallace Stevens, BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/203-204 Stevens, there is a copy of a letter from Stevens to Hi Simons (Jan 12 1943). Hill underlines (beginning “the fictive...”) two sentences: “[The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly as immanent, that is to say,] the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract.”

“Syon” according to the on-line OED is “one of the hills of Jerusalem, on which the city of David was built, and which became the centre of Jewish life and worship; in biblical and derived use, allusively for: The house or household of God; and hence connoting variously, the Israelites and their religious system, the Christian Church, heaven as the final home of believers, a place of worship or meeting-house”.

Ecclesiastes, chapter 3 begins: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (KJV).


Hodgson and Liegey record that “St Catherine completed her book in 1378. She called it simply Il Libro. Only after her death in 1380 did it circulate in Italian and Latin under various titles”, The Orchard of Syon, (p. vi).


It is interesting that in Colin Burrow’s review of Hill’s Broken Hierarchies (‘Rancorous Old Sod’, London Review of Books, vol 36 no 4, 20 February 2014, pp. 11-13) such “lexical mysticism” receives something of an affirmation: “At the heart of Hill’s writing is a kind of paronomasial mysticism, in which a pun or double sense can beam us up into another world, and in which a misprision of the present can provide release from its prison.”

In the Brotherton Library notebook on ‘Discourse & “Otherness”’ Hill notes under T of A [Teresa of Avila]: “Mysticism has a counter-institutional element to it. In 1559 21 people were burned for heresy. Greatest suspicion against women mystics, the Confessor becomes the Inquisitor.”

Despres indicates that the translator of Il Dialogo (“an anonymous cleric, most likely Carthusian”) envisaged a “narrower, intercessory definition of prayer” and that “The Orchard...was necessarily adapted for women in an enclosed religious life” which “compromises, to some degree, Catherine’s apostolic mysticism.”

Canto XL of Orcharis (which Hill read as part of his contribution to Michael Berkeley’s Radio 3 programme, Private Passions, 25 April 2004) uses the word
“unpropitious” in a line responding to Schnittke’s music: “struck off in mean unpropitious time” (line 22). During Private Passions Hill declared “Syntax interests me more than anything, and rhythm”.

cxxix During his conversation with Michael Berkeley on the Radio 3 programme, Private Passions, 25 April 2004, Hill spoke of trying to clear his voice “against the acoustical din” of surrounding society. Turning the “din against itself” was part of his intention in writing poetry. And, apparently as demonstration of this, he has Berkeley play Jimi Hendrix’s Woodstock 1969 performance of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’. Hill considers this “very beautiful” and provokingly instructs “Hear my poetry as you hear...” before Hendrix’s “feedback and distortion” begins.


cxli We might also think of Eliot’s ‘Gerontion’ and “Christ the tiger//In depraved May’. ‘Gerontion’ indeed provides one model for Hill’s ruminations – “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” – and Orchards can be heard as “tears” “shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.”

cxlii This canto remains unchanged in Broken Hierarchies apart from the removal of capitals from “CATHERINE” which becomes “Catherine”.

cxliii Such a faith is evident in Hill’s longstanding preoccupation with the fate and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his 2000 lecture ‘Poetry and Value’ Bonhoeffer’s witness stands as a touchstone for an ethical aesthetics: “In the case of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Helnath James von Moltke, as their last recorded words indicate, language did not in the end forsake them, nor did they finally surrender language to some existential brute force such as that evoked by Czeslaw Milosz in his parable of ‘a man threatened with instant death’ (p. 479, CCW). He goes on to assert that Bonhoeffer found in his desperate situation “language adequate to [his] particular witness” (p. 480) and that poetry “is ruled out of [his] form of witness only if one forgets the Psalms and the kenotic hymn of Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians.”

cxliv In Broken Hierarchies canto LXX becomes canto LXVII (the 66th of 68 cantos). With only the removal of a question mark (line 7), and some italics (lines 8-9), which indicated a quotation on Kokoschka (from the original canto LXVIII which has been excised), the canto remains otherwise the same. It contains the profoundly oxymoronic theological realization: “Contingent/ nature of all things save God” (lines 7-8).

cxlv The Brotherton Library archive contains a file entitled Vanbrugh – Weil (5/2/92-96) which includes an article by Peter Hebblethwaite (Times, 1/6/74; Literature and Religion – 21 Simone Weil). This refers to Weil (using a word taken from Karl Rahner) as ‘the patron of ‘wintertime’ Christians’.

cxlvi I take the following from a website dedicated to ‘Wulfstan’s Eschatological Homilies’, edited and translated by Joyce Tally Lionarons, 2000: “De Temporibus Anticristi is in part a reworking and enlargement of Ælfric’s Preface to the Catholic Homilies. It appears in three manuscripts: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 201, pp. 74-78; Bodleian Hatton 113, ff. 52-56b; and Bodleian 343, ff. 142b-143b. The first two manuscripts incorporate a lengthy exemplum concerning Simon Magnus and his contest with the apostles Peter and Paul in Rome as an illustration of the type of wonders the Antichrist may be expected to perform.” [Available at http://webpages.ursinus.edu/jlionarons/wulfstan/IVframe.html. (Accessed 17/08/13)]

cxlvii Late in the 1980s, when Hill was still at Cambridge, he had a heart attack. Last Christmas [2001] he had another. He now feels “fitter than I have been for many
years”. He works out in Boston, spending an hour on an exercise bicycle in a gym, taking a detective story to read while he pedals, followed by a swim. He says that “it’s clearly make or break; I had a triple bypass in 1988 - which was very good, as triple bypasses go. But I was very foolish in the way I organised myself - I ate foolishly and took little or no exercise and so on; so this has been a moment of truth and I am taking this whole exercise thing very seriously.”

divii A rather recondite joke about gloominess in lines 5-6 is dropped in Broken Hierarchies, in favour of a challenging pun on trouper/trooper: “Go to the revivalists for vision,/ the charismatic troupers.”

div In Broken Hierarchies line 4 becomes “if none of us fails our provision.”

di This distinction is one drawn by Rowan Williams in his Foreword to God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism, edited by Colin Crowder, Mowbray (1997).

di In Broken Hierarchies the lines become:

Wat’s posthumous lumen
obscurum illumes; at the crib of things
settled, creaturely, its fabulous glim
invisible to most. So how did he
sign tremor cordis to be no enigma,
smoke out last words, grudge-heavy honey bees
living off self-remitted spoil of the hive?

The crib moves us to a nativity scene (and Hardy’s ‘The Oxen’), just as we consider last things and words in the aftermath of a heart scare. Perhaps mortality is “no enigma” once we perceive the spoil in what is spoiled.

diii In Brian Cummings’ The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace, OUP, 2002 (pbk 2007; viewed as an ebook via University of Plymouth electronic library), we find this understanding of “God’s grammar”: “In its clarity of intention and meaning, the divine speech act reveals no slippage between word and meaning or between word and world. It is the ultimate illocutionary act (‘God spoke, and all things were made’), utterance without difference. But the self-fulfilling panache of God’s sentence is denied to mortal speech acts” (p. 395). It is important to note that Cummings draws, as a secondary source, on Hill’s The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas, and that Hill seems to have supervised Cummings’ own doctorate: “By a stroke of luck I spent four years visiting the rooms of Geoffrey Hill as a doctoral student picking up shards of learning” (Acknowledgements). The Literary Culture of the Reformation has for epigraph lines from Hill’s Speech! Speech!

diiii See NSOED – “Leopardian”.

div BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/203-204 Stevens.


divii Both SCM Press. I remember, as an undergraduate crossing the quad at Exeter College, Oxford in 1981, hearing the sound through an open window of Graham Shaw’s typewriter, as he typed out the first drafts of what was to become The Cost of Authority. I understood that his friends Jonathan Wordsworth and Lucy Newlyn had encouraged him to write. Years later (Wadham College, 1996) I discussed Graham’s theological radicalism with John Fenton, who conceded this but added that “When you hear Graham read from the Book of Common Prayer, you’d think he’d written it himself.” John Fenton’s response to Graham’s books is recorded on the back page of God in Our Hands: “When I read The Cost of Authority, I knew that
Paul's letters would never be the same again; and so it has been. Now that I have read *God in Our Hands*, I know that faith and prayer will have to change radically. Not many books have been as shattering." It was Graham Shaw who introduced me to the works of Simone Weil, and of Iris Murdoch, as he did to William Blake’s ‘The Everlasting Gospel’.


dlx “No existing thing could be what we have meant by God. Any existing God would be less than God. An existent God would be an idol or a demon…. God does not and cannot exist. But what led us to conceive of him [sic] does exist and is constantly experienced and pictured. That is, it is real as an Idea, and is also incarnate in knowledge and work and love.” (p. 508, in the final chapter, ‘Metaphysics: a Summary’; Iris Murdoch’s *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Penguin, 1993.)


dlx The oxymoronic lines “metaphysics’/ biochemical mystery” may be appropriately remembered here – the poet drawing attention to the aporia inherent in such an understanding: “the nature of impasse” (canto LXIV, *Orchards*). The lines do not make it into *Broken Hierarchies*.


dlx These apparently heartfelt lines, too near to confessional in their modality, are (kenotically) vanished for the revised *Orchards of Broken Hierarchies*.

dlxx Cummings notes in his Acknowledgements: “By a stroke of luck I spent four years visiting the rooms of Geoffrey Hill as a doctoral student picking up shards of learning.”

dlxxi See *Orchards LXX*, (LXVI, *Broken Hierarchies*), last line: “a hard-won knowledge of what wears us down”.