Few American readers had heard of Geoffrey Hill when Houghton Mifflin published his first three books as *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom* in 1975. Harold Bloom's introduction seemed designed to raise the eyelids of a snoozing audience. "Strong poetry is always difficult," he declared with a stentorian flourish, "and Geoffrey Hill is the strongest British poet now alive, though his reputation in the English-speaking world is somewhat less advanced than that of several of his contemporaries" (xiii). With regard to Hill's place in poetic tradition, Bloom contended: "The true precursor is always Blake, and the War in Heaven that the strong poet must conduct is fought by Hill against Blake, and against Blake's tradition, and so against Hill himself" (xiii). As an Oxford student in 1953, Hill, in fact, had written a review in *The Isis* criticizing Blake's *Jerusalem* for being too diffuse (he preferred Blake's shorter lyrics). And Hill had registered his ambivalence toward Blake in early poems such as "Genesis," "Goel's Little Mountain," and "Holy Thursday" (a title taken from Blake's "Songs").

Hill's "war" against Blake—if that's what it was—arose from both stylistic and philosophical differences. Although he admitted that criticizing Blake's apocalyptic project was like trying "to quench the furnaces of affliction with one cup of cold water" (22), he nevertheless emptied his cup on Blake's furnace. He was not entirely antagonistic toward Blake, however. He sympathized with the sort of utopian idealism Blake espoused at the
beginning of his long poem Milton: “I will not cease from Mental Fight, / Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand / ’Till we have built Jerusalem / In England’s green & pleasant Land” (481). Hill was also prepared to fight for his ideal England—with his pen rather than with his sword—but he was more skeptical than Blake about the possibility of establishing that ideal. He also disagreed with the verbose way Blake had articulated his utopian ideals in his prophetic books.

At the beginning of Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom, Hill acknowledged his own utopian idealism by way of an epigraph from Thomas Hobbes’s Leviathan: “Sometimes a man seeks what he hath lost; and from that place, and time, wherein he misses it, his mind, runs back, from place to place, and time to time, to find where, and when he had it” (10). Having grown up during the Nazi horrors of World War II, Hill’s quest for a lost paradise—a “green & pleasant Land”—was spurred in part by his keen awareness that during “a time of Warre,” as Hobbes famously remarked, “the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (65). Hill’s anxiety about crusades for “Jerusalem”—whether poetic or military—arose from an awareness that quests for utopias often ended up causing the sort of bloodshed and tyranny utopias were designed to avoid. Throughout his career, Hill has written impassioned poems juxtaposing utopian ideals with the history of fear, suffering, and violent death that made shreds of those ideals.

Hill’s readers have often puzzled over what sort of lost kingdom he hoped to find and resurrect after searching “from place to place, and time to time.” In his characteristically oblique way, he offered a clue in the title Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom, which alludes to a poem by John Crowe Ransom. Ransom’s “Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom” playfully catalogs a motley group of birds as if they were people, and expresses a wish to escape the chaos of contemporary society in order to “see if God has made / Otherwhere another shade / Where the men or beasts or birds / Exchange few words and pleasant words” (23). Ransom undercuts his quest for Platonic and Christian ideals by hinting that this “Otherwhere” might be an insubstantial “shade” at the back of Plato’s cave, an elusive Christian concept like Eden, or simply a story in a good book. He asks himself: “And dare I think it is absurd / If no such beast were, no such bird?” Playing on the etymology of “absurd” (ab-surdus in Latin means “away from the right sound”), Ransom indicates that it’s perfectly reasonable to seek kingdoms of civilized behavior and civilized discourse (“the right sound”) even though they may be located in imaginary contexts.

At Oxford and afterwards, Hill obsessively eulogized and eulogized Platonic and Judeo-Christian “kingdoms” that were as enchanting as they were illusory. In his review of Jerusalem, he waxed lyrical over Blake’s imaginary
“Otherwhere” where “the imagination, the true life-source of man” flourished in an unfallen state. In a 1954 article titled “Letter from Oxford,” he spoke up for the seemingly absurd quests of modern visionary poets like himself when he said: “the poet…hunched in his mackintosh on the top of a bus in the Banbury Road, sits apart from the crowd. Or he follows in the wake of a vision of life that goes before him and which he cannot grasp, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night” (72). Although Hill rather grandiosely compared his Oxford bus ride to Moses’ trek with the Israelites out of Egypt toward the promised land (when “the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud…and by night in a pillar of fire” [Ex 13.21]), he also distinguished his quest from Moses’ by emphasizing the elusiveness of its goal. If Moses possessed the requisite faith and grace to reach the promised land, Hill implied that he did not. Hill’s ideal kingdom was always beyond the next horizon, always glimpsed but never grasped.

For a poet, like Hill, devoted to divine visions that remained frustratingly “otherwhere,” the literature of Christian mysticism offered a helpful and consoling guide. Most critics who have written about Hill have touched on his interest in Christian mysticism only briefly. Hill, it is generally argued, is too entangled in questions about religious belief to actually believe in Christian doctrines; he is too preoccupied with the violent history of Christianity to contemplate the transcendent mystery of Creator and Creation. In his book The Uncommon Tongue, Vincent Sherry pointed out that Hill’s “model of the poet” is not “Walt Whitman naming the animals joyfully in a recovered Eden, but a martyr, an ascetic meting out speech, as though on a rack, to redress the wrongs of the human tongue” (22). Embroiled in ethical issues relating to the way language is used and abused, Hill resists the mystic’s contemplation of a Creator and Creation beyond language. According to Sherry, Hill “doubts, if not the validity of religion, at least his own worthiness.”

Taking a similar tack in “Two Modern Christian Poets,” Paul Mackintosh compared Hill’s “informed piety,” with all its self-lacerating contradictions, to Basil Bunting’s “mystic perception” that is “in love with all creation” (205). For Mackintosh, Hill is a Christian poet in so far as he submits Christianity to a meticulous critique: “[Hill’s] Christian poetry comes from combining the immemorial portrayal of religious doubt with the far more recent, more radical uncertainty of the present century” (201). Avril Horner argues similarly in “The Poet’s True Commitment” that Hill speaks not for himself but for others in the twentieth century who felt both drawn to Christianity and skeptical of its propositions. According to Horner, rather than simply express “society’s nostalgia for simple faith” or society’s rejection of faith, Hill offsets a “sense of loss concerning the transcendent” with “the attempt
to reintegrate some of the tenets of Christianity within a philosophy of language and theology particularly tuned to poetry" (163). Poetry, in short, becomes his substitute religion, or at least the arena in which he struggles with religious concepts and religious terms.

The Dominican scholar Aidan Nichols offers one of the most incisive summaries of Hill’s agonizing struggle with faith in his essay "Grace and Disgrace." To Nichols’s point of view, Hill is not simply a spokesman for twentieth-century angst and nostalgia; he also speaks for his own feelings of estrangement from the presence of Christ and from the Church’s rituals designed to represent Him. Alluding to Hill’s interest in Christian mysticism, Nichols concludes that Hill resists the temptation to escape his personal agons in mystical transcendence:

Hill is tempted by the thought that a profounder mystical appropriation of faith—along the lines of, in particular, the Carmelite mystics of the sixteenth century—might enable him to find in his darkness an experienced dawn. But would the price required for a fuller grasp on God’s transcendence be too high? For a poet of incarnation—not here the Incarnation, but the general principle of incarnation whereby meaning is found in concrete things (in words, objects, persons, acts, events and not least in those entailed by erotic love...), the night of sense and spirit which St. John of the Cross...asks the believer to enter, seems too dark to contemplate. (352-253)

If grace allows the mystic to overcome the pull of gravity, purge all attachments to the “concrete things” of this world, and pass through “the dark night of the soul” to union with an ineffable Creator, Hill typically admits that he lacks sufficient grace and sufficient desire for the mystic’s purgatorial journey. If he glimpses the mystery behind and within the Creation, he seems too rooted in history’s crucifixions and language’s entanglements to prolong the glimpse. In Hill’s poetry, unions and communions with the divine are momentary, precarious, and usually subverted by a morose awareness of the sins of this world.

Despite, or perhaps because of, Hill’s worldliness—his obsessions with incarnations and crucifixions—the influence of mystics on his poetry and prose began early. But it wasn’t until 1981 in an interview with John Haffenden that he tried to clarify his complicated stance toward mysticism. After Haffenden drew his attention to the critics who had chastised him for writing “poetry [that] has the air of mystical utterance but lacks a true feeling for the passion of religion” (88), Hill angrily denied he was trying to write confessional poems about his “true feelings.” He said he was trying to write about mystical experiences—and failed mystical experiences in particular—from a historical rather than a personal perspective:
The complex nature of religious experience, and religious sectarianism of a great number of different kinds, is an essential part of the complex history of Europe. I really do not see that it indicates any shortcoming in a poet to be moved by the phenomena of religious experience both in its historical perspective and in more immediate examples. Since a failure to truly grasp experience and substance is one of the characteristic failings of human nature, I would have thought that the lyric poet with any psychological and dramatic sense is quite properly involved with that kind of distancing and failure... If critics...say that I seem incapable of grasping true religious experience, I would answer that the grasp of true religious experience is a privilege reserved for very few, and that one is trying to make lyrical poetry out of a much more common situation—the sense of not being able to grasp true religious experience. (89)

Nearly three decades after leaving Oxford, Hill was still preoccupied with the poet’s “vision of life that goes before him and which he cannot grasp,” but now he was speaking of the unattainable vision in mystical terms.

Hoping Hill would elaborate on his religious views, Haffenden asked him why he was “drawn so strongly to the subjects of mysticism and martyrlogy.” Still bristling at the implication that he was a failed poet of mystical experience, Hill replied:

I am interested in mysticism as an exemplary discipline, and I’m also interested in the psychopathology of the false mystical experience. Of course no one has been more accurate in defining and warning against the perils of false mysticism than the medieval mystics; the genuine mystic is usually a tough, practical, level-headed man, and I think those iron-disciplined mystics—unless their charity overcame their scorn—would have hard things to say of the more self-indulgent mystical cults of the present day. (89-90)

Although medieval mystics (women as well as men) were well aware of the pathological behavior that their contemplative exercises sometimes caused, Hill was no doubt thinking of William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and a host of other modern psychologists who investigated the psychopathology of religious experience. If Haffenden hoped that Hill would explain why he didn’t write about the redemptive, consoling, and joyous aspects of “genuine” mystical experiences, he was disappointed. Hill said nothing about the spiritual exercises and contemplative itineraries leading to a sublime union with God that mystics had followed for centuries.

In his interview with Haffenden, as in much of his early poetry and prose, Hill was determined to avoid personal revelations about his religious beliefs and practices. If he was a mystical poet, he was an impersonal one; he focused on the mystical experiences—especially the failed mystical experiences—of others. But Hill’s admission that he was fixated on mystical failures suggested that the psychopathology of his own experiences...
exerted a gravitational tug he could not overcome. In a 1954 article titled "A Writer’s Craft," which he published while he was a student at Oxford, he spoke more openly about working in the force-field between personality and impersonality, neurosis and transcendence. Because "there is a tendency [in contemporary poetry] to exalt the display of individual neurosis for its own sake into a virtue, to applaud each broken or complacent confession as it comes," the writer, he argued, should modestly "keep himself in the background" (14). Immediately after repudiating the confessional mode, however, he confessed: "Yet that does not alter the fact that, as a person, I am perpetually engrossed in my own dogged and nuzzling neuroses."

Twenty-three years later, grappling with the religious dimensions of literature in his essay "Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement,’" Hill revisited the question about personal expression and the "psychopathology of false mystical experience." Reflecting on his own strategies to transcend the self and to unify with others and with an impersonal divine Other, he admitted: "However much and however rightly we protest against the vanity of supposing it to be merely the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,’ poetic utterance is nonetheless an utterance of the self, the self demanding to be loved, demanding love in the form of recognition and ‘absolution’" (Lords of Limit 17). This awareness of a selfish need for love and recognition dismayed Hill, but his sense of chagrin, he admitted, was "nothing compared to the shocking encounter with ‘empirical guilt,’ not as a manageable hypothesis, but as irredeemable error in the very substance and texture of his craft and pride. It is here that he knows the affliction of ‘being fallen into the ‘they’” yet it is here that his selfhood may be made at-one with itself. He may learn to live in his affliction, not with the cynical indifference of the reprobate but with the renewed sense of a vocation." Hill's obsession with his own sins and failures and with the imperfections of his linguistic medium, in the end, acted as a catalyst for further quests and further attempts to write redemptive poems.

For Hill, false mystical experiences arose from the deluded belief that personal and linguistic imperfections had been transcended, that ideas—whether psychological, poetic, religious, or political—had been attained, that redemptive quests had ended in euphoric unions with the divine. Although the final stage of the traditional via mystica—union with a transcendent God—has always involved failures (the mystic realizes his conceptual and linguistic powers fail to adequately represent the divine mystery), Hill's sense of failure was different. If traditional mystics found the breakdown of language and thought at the moment of union to be blissful and transfiguring, Hill's mystical personae consistently failed to experience union and found the failure disillusioning and depressing. Entangled in the intractable realities of
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language, body, history, and physical universe, they leapt toward heavenly "Otherwheres," but gravity inevitably yanked them back to Earth. They blamed their inability to have authentic mystical experiences on a lack of grace, love, and faith, and suggested that whatever bliss they felt was due to the will o’ the wisps of mania or religious enthusiasm (as the etymological root en theos implies: the excitement occasioned by the conviction that God had entered them). One of Hill’s early models, Robert Lowell, used to call these manic "highs," which were usually accompanied by delusions of divine power, his “pathological enthusiasms.” As ambivalent about mystical flights as Lowell, Hill addressed them in similar pathological terms.

For a poet as devoted to Christian tradition as Hill, it’s odd that grace and transcendence come not from Christian rituals and scriptures, not from the spiritual exercises of Christian mystics, but only from the “prolonged and intensive labour” of writing. If his comments to Haffenden can be trusted, he felt mystical ecstasy only once during the first half of his career. His ecstatic moment came after he’d been pushing himself night after night to finish a translation of Ibsen’s play Brand: “Labour and excitement combined to induce a state of euphoria, what you would call ‘entrancement,’ a kind of quite falsely mystical ecstasy” (84). He added: “I do not in any way overrate it.” In an interview with the English poet Blake Morrison, he repeated his claim that “unexpected graces of inspiration” come “only at the end of a work as a result of exhaustion and near-despair...[when] sheer tiredness breaks down certain barriers of the conscious mind” (212). Compared to the liminal experiences of true mystics, Hill’s experiences were mundane rather than transcendent, psychopathological rather than godly. He received poetic words rather than the divine Word, poetic “graces of inspiration” rather than divine grace.

Hill has often quoted Coleridge’s observation that “poetry excites us to artificial feelings, makes us callous to real ones” (Lords 4). One of the reasons readers have complained about the lack of “true feeling for religious passion” in Hill’s poetry is because his poetic craft and scholarly rigor tend to obscure “true feeling.” During the first half of his career, he deliberately stylized all forms of passion, whether mystical or erotic, until they appeared more artificial than real. Referring to Tenebrae, a book that drew on St. John of the Cross, Robert Southwell, Richard Rolle, St. Teresa, Thomas a Kempis, and other writers in the Christian contemplative tradition, Hill told Blake Morrison that his poems were inspired not by mystical experiences so much as by stylistic problems: “Paradox, and the closely related oxymoron, belong both to the tradition of mystical poetry and to the tradition of Petrarchan poetry, which are the main models for ‘The Pentecost Castle’ and ‘Lachrimae.’ Certain kinds of poetry contain certain kinds of in-built problems
to be solved" (212). Morrison replied: "I suppose there is the danger that in using the phrase 'solving problems' you make poetry sound like a very cold, intellectual activity." Perturbed by the implication that his poems were cold and overly intellectual, Hill responded that he believed with Milton that poetry should be "simple, sensuous, and passionate," but because contemporary confessional poets had debased Milton's notion of poetry "an extreme concentration on technical discipline... [w]as the only true way of releasing the simple, sensuous and passionate." Aware that most readers dismissed his dense, formal poems as "cold and cerebral," Hill wasn't about to alter his stylistic principles for the sake of accessibility. Critics could carp all they wanted about his tendency to bury mystical feelings of awe and reverence in ornate displays of paradox, allusion, and syntax. He would remain faithful to his arduous task, which, as he explained to Haffenden, was to articulate 'a heretic's dream of salvation expressed in the images of the orthodoxy from which he is excommunicate'" (98).

To better understand Hill's baffling mix of heretical and orthodox attitudes, it's helpful to take a closer look at how he represents Christian mysticism and "the psychopathology of false mystical experience." Although the word "mystical" has been used in so many different ways that it is now shrouded in semantic mists, its etymological roots were once quite clear. "Mystical" and its cognate "mystery" derived from Greek words meaning "secret rites," "to initiate in secret rites," and "to keep a secret by closing one's eyes and mouth." *Mystikos* referred to an initiate who was supposed to remain mute about the sacred rites of Greek mystery cults. Adapting these pagan concepts of reverential silence to their own practices, early Christians used the word "mystical" to refer to the secret or silent meanings behind the Bible's literal meanings. The mystical dimension of the Bible could be disclosed through rigorous interpretation of its stories. Christians later expanded the word "mystical" so that it referred to the divine realm made accessible by Christ through the Eucharist, Scriptures, and iconography of the Church. Christian theologians such as Origen and Pseudo-Dionysius proposed a *via mystica*. Aided by meditation and contemplation, this "mystical way" followed a three-stage itinerary from purification to illumination and union. The twentieth-century scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill, whom Hill has read, proposed a five-stage *via mystica*, although it progressed in a similar way from a breaking off of sensory attachments with the world, through a purgatorial "dark night of the soul," to a final ecstatic union with the divine.

In some of his early poems, Hill wrote passionately of the mystic's awakenings to worldly imperfection and divine transcendence, but he never wrote about spiritual journeys culminating in joyous unions or communions with
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God. His divine comedies began well, but, unlike Dante’s famous narrative, Hill’s narratives ended tragically. Devoted to the possibility of divine union and redemption, Hill’s mystic pilgrims typically bore witness to the intractable facts of history that subverted union and redemption. In the poem “Genesis,” which he appropriately placed at the beginning of his first book, Hill laid out a version of the mystic’s journey that he would repeat throughout his career. The poem opens with a bardic poet striding against “the burly air” near an estuary—a place of creative contraries “where the [fresh-water] streams were salt and full” (SK3). In this Blakean Eden, the poet appears to be intoxicated (like “the tight ocean”) with his godly powers. A mystic enthusiast, he walks by the fertile sea “Crying the miracles of God,” celebrating both the miracles of the Creation he finds around him and the miraculous powers of the gods (Orpheus, the God of Genesis, Christ) that he finds inside himself. Having awakened to the divine, he boasts: “And first I brought the sea to bear / Upon the dead weight of the land; / And the waves flourished at my prayer, / The rivers spawned their sand.” Unlike the traditional mystic, however, Hill’s godly poet is blissfully at one with Creator and Creation at the beginning rather than at the end of his journey. After falling from Eden, he cannot return to paradise.

Hill’s “crying” in “Genesis,” as in his later “Lachrimae” sequence in Tenebrae, is celebratory as well as elegiac. His tears of joy quickly turn to tears of sorrow. Like the “pig-headed salmon” that swims upriver to “the steady hills,” Hill traces an abrupt shift in perspective from spawning to dying. In the poem’s second section he observes nature’s blood-thirsty violence with Darwinian candor. Animals and humans, whether in war or in the daily struggle to survive, “plunge with triggered claw, / Feathering blood along the shore, / To lay the living sinew bare” (SK3). In this savage natural realm, all are predators “Forever bent upon the kill.” Having recognized what exists behind the enchanting facade of God’s miracles, Hill’s mystic voyager renounces the natural world and enters a purgatorial dark night of the soul. “I renounced, on the fourth day, / This fierce and unregenerate clay,” he declares, “Building as a huge myth for man / The watery Leviathan” (4). With a glance at the Bible’s Book of Revelation and Hobbes’s Leviathan, Hill uses the mythic sea monster as a symbol for barbarism and chaos, for the fallen world engendered by Adam’s “unregenerate clay.” A painful purification of self and world occurs when the Coleridgean “glove-winged albatross / scour[s] the ashes of the sea.”

The scouring and burning of purification propel Hill’s persona into a kind of disorienting limbo. He then returns to “the works of God” to do God’s work, “to ravage and redeem the world,” to commune redemptively with “Christ’s blood” (5). What he fails to achieve, however, is the mystic’s tradi-
tional union with God. Hill acknowledges the efficacy of the communion ritual for some—"by Christ's blood are men made free"—but he points to multitudes of the dead and living dead who are beyond redemption. He also implies that Christian enthusiasts and fanatics, like zealots in all religions, "ravage" more often than they "redeem the world." Their vehemently self-righteous acts threaten to transform the world into an apocalyptic graveyard where "Earth has rolled beneath her weight / The bones that cannot bear the light." Like John of Patmos, the author of the Bible's Revelation, Hill envisages a sea brimming with history's dead: "In close shrouds their bodies lie / Under the rough pelt of the sea." Unlike John, however, he imagines no "New Jerusalem," no realm in which the dead are joyously redeemed, no mystic marriage between soul and Creator, no happy union between new heaven and new earth.

"God's Little Mountain," which followed "Genesis" in Hill's first book, For the Unfallen, resembles his other mystical poems in the way it movingly dramatizes a failed attempt to transcend a state of fallenness. Hill assumes the persona of Moses, just as he had in his "Letter from Oxford" (the poem was written at Oxford), to once again emphasize his unlikeness to Moses. He alludes to the Biblical account of Moses climbing "the mountain of God" called Horeb (Ex 3:1), where an angel appears out of the Burning Bush and God informs Moses he will deliver his people "unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:17). Hill conflates this mountain climbing experience with the account of Moses climbing Mt. Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments from God, who appears in "thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud" (Ex 19:16) while "the whole mount quaked greatly" (Ex 20:18). In the Bible and subsequent writings that appropriate Moses as the quintessential mystic, these ascents culminate in transfiguring moments of union. Although Moses admits to God "I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue" (Ex 4:10), in the Bible he communicates with God and God communicates with him. God promises the diffident Moses: "I will be with thy mouth" and "thou shalt do signs" (Ex 4:15, 4:17).

Mystics from Pseudo-Dionysius to St. John of the Cross, the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing, and Thomas Merton have used these Mosaic encounters with God to represent the apophatic or "negative" way to commune with God. For them, the dark cloud on the mountain infused with divinity resembles the contemplative's "dark night" of sensory and spiritual purgation. The foundational text in this tradition of the via negativa is Pseudo-Dionysius's account in "The Mystical Theology" of the Mosaic mystic breaking free of sensory experience and conceptual limits to know what he cannot know:
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He plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing. (137)

Humbly accepting the human limitations of thought and language, Pseudo-Dionysius’s archetypal mystic achieves union with an utterly transcendent God (a God quite different from the anthropomorphic figure in Ex who can be jealous, angry, and tyrannical).

At the beginning of his quest in “God’s Little Mountain,” Hill’s mystic mountain-climber finds signs of divinity in himself, in the earth quaking beneath his feet, and in the stormy heavens above him: “The mountain stamped its foot, / Shaking, as from a trance. And I was shut / With wads of sound into a sudden quiet” (SK 6). The thunder, paradoxically, deafens him (as if with ear plugs). When he enters the silent, trance-like state of contemplation (the state Ransom playfully compared to the deaf-mute’s absurdus in “Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom”), he expects to commune or communicate with a divine presence, but he apprehends only divine absences. Neither Jehovah, Christ, nor the Holy Spirit speak to him. No voice erupts from a burning bush, a fiery cloud, or a sky riven with Pentecostal tongues of flame. Instead, like the disillusioned Christians in Wallace Stevens’s poems, Hill’s aspiring mystic sees the heavens wiped clean of their lifeless religious images; he sees traditional Christian icons reduced to a tabula rasa:

I thought the thunder had unsettled heaven,
All was so still. And yet the sky was cloven
By flame that left the air cold and engraven.
I waited for the word that was not given,

Pent up into a region of pure force,
Made subject to the pressure of the stars;
I saw the angels lifted like pale straws;
I could not stand before those winnowing eyes...

If Hill’s mystic is feeling the influx or influence from “star” poets like Blake, as Harold Bloom contends, he is also feeling the pressure from a large constellation of Christian mystics who have seen angels, communed with the Holy Ghost, and unified with God.

Having transcended ordinary discourse, including ordinary Christian discourse, Hill’s climber falls off God’s mountain and needs a doctor to cure him. His apophatic sensibility experiences a “winnowing” judgment rather than a sublime triumph. He resembles an ancient mustikos who has been
initiated into a secret, disturbing rite; he would like to speak, but doesn’t
know how to speak. Trapped in a stifling solipsism, he can only write. Does
he need the “speaking cure” of psychoanalysis to loosen his tongue and
open his heart? Does he pine for the Confession box of the Church or the
confessionalism of the poet? Or does he simply want to unburden his soul
to a friend? Whatever his linguistic wishes are, they are all stymied. At the
end, he laments: “Now I lack grace to tell what I have seen; / For though
the head frames words the tongue has none. / And who will prove the
surgeon to this stone?” Although his head frames words that are ultimately
framed in a well-made poem, he’s unable to speak about his sense of re-
ligious failure. He can write, but he can’t talk. He hints that ordinary love
would make conversation possible, that faith would allow for communion,
that grace might enable mystical union, but that he lacks the appropriate
love, faith, and grace for all such forms of communion and communication.
Cut off from others and the divine Other, he needs someone to deliver him
from his autistic-like isolation. He needs a “surgeon” who knows something
about “the psychopathology of the false [or failed] mystical experience” to
operate on his stony tongue and heart.

In “An Ark on the Flood,” an ambitious retelling of *Moby Dick* by way of
Robert Lowell’s “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” Hill traces another
failed mystical journey. Moses and Ahab merge to form a composite figure
who quests for signs of God in “the pillared cloud, the waterspout, / The
whirlwind wrought of force upon the air” (*The Isis* 18). The possibility of
communing and unifying with the divine spirit appears auspicious at the
start: “We are moistened by its [the spirit’s] breath, / And we have caught
the utterance of its mouth; / The flame gives tongue upon the hush of
cold.” The moment of spiritual awakening is transient, however, and soon
the ocean overwhelms all mystic voyagers:

The wind has gleaned the waters; their slow fall,
Our fall from Paradise,
Commits us to the world from whence we came.
No word, no dove, descends; only our loud
Prayers echo in this sunk wilderness; the cloud
Has gone from us; the altar bears no flame… (19)

The poem ends, not with a happy union, but with a recognition that God
has died and all His traditional symbols have been “gleaned” or “winnowed”
of vital meaning. The mystic’s prayers—his cries in the wilderness—simply
remind him that he is alone without any consolation other than the echoes
of his own futile calls for help.

In several of his poems written at Oxford and afterward, Hill draws on the
vocabulary of St. John of the Cross's famous poem "The Dark Night" and
the treatise on contemplation that followed it, but once again to underscore
the tragic or pathological consequences of the mystic quest. In his poem
and commentary, St. John used images of a still and darkened house to symbol-
ize the sensory and spiritual "darkening" of the self that preceded union
with God. As in the Bible's Song of Solomon and the mystical tradition that
made use of its sacred and profane imagery, St. John dramatized that union
as an amorous one of "The Lover with His beloved," and of the heart or
soul with God. "On that glad night, / In Secret," he wrote, the soul "Fired
with love's urgent longings" and "sheer grace" (Collected Works 295) traveled
toward an ecstatic tryst. St. John's contemplative soul possessed "no other
light or guide / Than the one that burned in my heart."

Hill's poem "The Revelation," published in 1954, begins like St. John's
"Dark Night." Hill's narrator is in a "blind house" (London Magazine 72) that
is still, dark, and "possessed" by intimations of divinity (wings that might
be angel wings or signs of the Holy Spirit). When Hill's aspiring mystic
leaves the house to meet the divine Other, he at first believes that something
transfiguring will occur. Religious and poetic inspiration, however, fail to
invigorate his heart, voice, and vision. What inspires him to write is his
disillusionment. Referring to his initial hope and faith, he declares:

But once beyond those walls I did not doubt
My heart would quicken and my tongue renew.

And it was true I trod accustomed ground,
My eyes no longer blinded by the glare
Out of that kiln of darkness. Yet I found
The world was not transfigured nor laid bare,

Nor pierced with singing voices. I who had come
Strenuous through fire stood, now, against the light,
Encountered shapes and shadows that were dumb.
My heart, though it died not, lay cold and quiet.

In The Dark Night, St. John documented the trials that led to "the marvelous
results which are obtained from the spiritual illumination and from the
union with God through love" (295). In "Revelation," Hill's unrequited
mystic merely encounters "dumb" shadows presumably the unresponsive
creatures of Plato's real world.

Hill's typical mystic resembles the hidden guest in Jesus's parable who
is "cast...into outer darkness" when he arrives at the king's wedding party
without the proper attire. "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt 22:2-
22:14) Jesus says. Hill's personae are called but, because of failures of the
heart, cannot celebrate spiritual marriages. In his early poem “The Bidden Guest,” the narrator who believes “the surging of a host / Had charged the air of Pentecost” during a church service ends up feeling utterly estranged from the divine spirit. He declares:

And I believe in the spurred flame,  
Those racing tongues, but cannot come  
Out of my heart’s unbroken room;  
Nor feel the lips of fire among  
The cold light and the chilling song. (SK9)

Both attracted to and repelled by the rituals and symbols of the Church, this frustrated communicant mocks “the stiffly-linnened priest” who offers communion. He also mocks the somber “muffled head[s]” of those who pretend their wounds are “Healed by the pouring-in of wine.” If Hill’s “bidden guest” could open his heart to the mystery of Christ in the Eucharist and unify with a transcendent God, his spiritual wounds might be healed. Rather than signs of God’s presence, he merely finds signs of their absence in the church. He blames his troubles with communion on the Church and his own hard-heartedness: “The heart’s tough shell is still to crack / When, spent of all its wine and bread, / Unwinkingly the altar lies / Wreathed in its sour breath, cold and dead” (10).

If there is a central crux that compels Hill to write, it’s the conflict between his desire for mystical transcendece and his skepticism of all modes of transcendence. He may glance at a mysterious Creator, but his main focus is on the way utopian ideals are inevitably betrayed or “crucified” throughout history. He repeatedly dramatizes the fall of “la mystique” into “la politique” to borrow phrases from the French writer Charles Peguy, whom Hill memorialized in The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy (1983). In his later books, Hill traces his obsession with the political realities that both inspire and undermine mystical ideals back to his upbringing in Worcestershire. In The Triumph of Love (1996), he tells himself with self-deflating humor: “Relate the mystique of Cathem’s End, / Worcestershire, to the politique / of incomprehensible verse-sequences” (29). Cathem’s End was a hamlet not far from Hill’s boyhood home in Bromsgrove; the adjacent forest was a sanctuary for fugitives. Hill’s numerous verse-sequences from Mercian Hymns (1971) to Scenes from Comus (2005) attempt to eulogize the “mystique” of boyhood sanctuaries. Usually, however, they end up elegizing those sanctuaries as figments of his imagination. In The Orchards of Syon (2002), reflecting again on mystical kingdoms, Hill declares: “I / wish greatly to believe: that Bromsgrove / was, and is, Goldengrove; that the Orchards of Syon stand
as I once glimpsed them. / But...the heartland remains / heartless” (38).

With Hopkins, who wrote “Margaret, are you grieving / Over Golden-grove unleaving?” in “Spring and Fall” (50), Hill grieves for a childhood innocence that has been replaced by an adult recognition of cold-heartedness in himself and others—a cold-heartedness that renders the boons of the *via mystica* inaccessibly. He also grieves for a monastic ideal of order, contemplative life that he associates with the mystic Catherine of Siena and the Syon Monastery in Middlesex. Founded in 1415 by King Henry V and temporarily purged of priests and nuns a century later by Henry VIII, who used the grounds as a prison for his fifth wife, Syon Monastery is yet another example of a mystical ideal compromised by the callous whims of politicians. In Hill’s title and text, Catherine of Siena’s devotional treatise *Il Libro*, which in the early 1500s was translated at Syon Monastery as *The Orchard of Syon*, stands for the way a writer creates his or her sacred groves out of words.

If Hill’s obsession with mystical ideals originated in Bromsgrove, so did his obsession with the forces that destroy those ideals. In interviews Hill has made a point of revealing that his mother was a devout Christian (first a Baptist, then an Anglican) descended from artisans in the cottage industry of nail-making. From her he inherited a commitment to well-made art and a down-to-earth religion. From his father, who was a local police constable, and from his grandfather, who was Deputy Chief Constable of Worcestershire, he inherited a propensity for detecting failures, making scrupulous judgments, and contemplating punishments. His poems and essays doggedly testify to mistakes, sins, and crimes. Meditating on artistic tradition and political history, Hill plays the roles of Joycean artist-god and Jehovah-like judge, maternal artisan and paternal constable, redeeming the past in poems that uphold ideals of order and condemn those responsible for violating those ideals. He repeatedly echoes St. John of Patmos who proclaimed: “I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works” (Rev 20: 12-15). Imitating St. John’s God, Hill judges the books and works of the living and the dead with a moral vigilance rare among contemporary poets.

From Hill’s literary perspective, the apocalyptic sea is “language”—a great repository of authorial works in need of judgment. He approaches this sea of language the way his father or grandfather might have approached a crime scene. In his essay “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’,” he states:
“It is one thing to talk of literature as a medium through which we convey our awareness, or indeed our conviction, of an inveterate human condition of guilt or anxiety; it is another to be possessed by a sense of language itself as a manifestation of empirical guilt… Under scrutiny, this is the essence to which my term ‘empirical guilt’ is reduced: to an anxiety about faux pas, the perpetration of ‘howlers’, grammatical solecisms, misstatements of fact, misquotations, improper attributions” (Lords 6-7). Most writers recognize that language is an imperfect medium, that they make mistakes when they write, that their writings are interpreted in ways they didn’t intend. Hill, however, thinks of writers as potential criminals: “It seems to me one of the indubitable signs of Simone Weil’s greatness as an ethical writer that she associates the act of writing not with a generalized awareness of sin but with specific crime, and proposes a system whereby ‘anybody, no matter who, discovering an avoidable error in a printed text or radio broadcast, would be entitled to bring an action before [special courts] empowered to condemn a convicted offender to prison or hard labour’” (8). Hill adds that Weil’s hypersensitivity to errors might be symptomatic of an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Nevertheless, he believes that writers should take responsibility for the errors that they publish even if it means going to jail.

If Hill’s obsession with linguistic sin, guilt, and judgment drives his poems, what are his poems driving toward? Do they look forward to the sort of widespread punishment St. John envisioned in the Book of Revelation? Do they entertain the possibility of redemption? Referring to Karl Barth’s definition of sin as the “specific gravity of human nature,” Hill has said that his poems aim to redeem and atone for sins by setting poetic words at one with those sins: “I am suggesting that it is at the heart of this ‘heaviness’ [or sin] that poetry must do its atoning work, this heaviness which is simultaneously the ‘density’ of language and the ‘specific gravity of human nature’” (15). Hill is speaking of an atonement that is an at-one-ment, a mimesis between the densities of language, human nature, and natural world. “When the words are finally arranged in the right way—or in what he comes to accept as the best arrangement he can find,” Hill has said, quoting Eliot, “[the poet] may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable” (2). Looking back at his poems that appeared to achieve at-one-ment during inspired moments of creation, however, Hill has conceded that perfect poems are as unattainable as perfect mystical unions. Although Hill strives for unions that are incarnational rather than transcendental, that are forged between word and world rather than between contemplative soul and ineffable God, he uses the vocabulary of mysticism to describe those “indescribable” moments of euphoria and “absolution”
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when a poem seems perfectly finished. In the next breath, he characteristically dismisses such moments as false mystical experiences.

One of Hill's most sustained explorations of the nexus between mysticism and language comes in his book *Tenebrae* (1978). The title refers to rituals in the early Catholic Church performed during the final three days of Holy Week to commemorate Christ's crucifixion on Good Friday, His descent into the tenebrous gloom of hell on Holy Saturday, and His ascent to heaven on Easter Sunday. The final ceremony in the darkness of Easter morning was often spectacular: candles were lit, all but one were extinguished, and then the final candle was returned to the darkened church to signify Christ's resurrection. Tenebrae rituals, like other church rituals, are intended to repeat sacred events, to re-present the presence of Christ, to allow communicants to experience God's agony on earth and ecstasy in heaven. Hill told Morrison in an interview:

*Tenebrae* is a ritual, and like all rituals it obviously helps one to deal with and express states which in that particular season of the church's year are appropriate—suffering and gloom. *Tenebrae* does at one level mean darkness or shadows; but at another important level it clearly indicates a *ritualistic*, formal treatment of suffering, anxiety and pain. (213)

Yet if one reads Hill's book hoping to find realistic accounts of the Tenebrae ritual, one will be disappointed. The Tenebrae ritual in *Tenebrae* is more metaphor than fact; it remains in the book's shadowy background as an allusion to all ritualistic treatments of suffering, and especially to the suffering caused by the failure of the Church's rituals and symbols to re-present God in an uplifting way. Supposedly writing about the experiences of others and the experiences others have had of the divine Other, Hill again dwells on failures—failures of artifice and failures of communicant to enjoy a mystical union with God.

When sections of "The Pentecost Castle" first appeared in *Agenda* magazine, Hill acknowledged the mystics Richard Rolle and St. John of the Cross as models. The poem's title also suggests that St. Teresa's *The Interior Castle* was a model. St. Teresa's devotional treatise describes a mystical journey in terms of passing through "a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions" (17). The journey ends in a bed chamber where the soul enjoys an ecstatic "celestial marriage" with God (122). Aspects of sacred and profane love merge in Hill's sequence, too, but he is more preoccupied with the "terrible" vagaries of desire than with happy unions of the soul with God. He quotes Yeats in an epigraph: "It is terrible to desire and not possess, and terrible to possess and not desire." Winning and losing lovers,
for this agonized romantic, are the same; both experiences are terrible. Hill's lover in "The Pentecost Castle" longs to unite with a beloved, whether divine or human, but his longing remains unrequited.

Hill may have felt especially close to his countryman Rolle because, by most accounts, he was a failed mystic. In *The English Mystical Tradition*, a book Hill refers to in one of his essays, David Knowles describes Rolle as a novice who never advanced much further than his initial awakening to the divine:

Of purely mystical prayer and experience Rolle knows little or nothing. He is without question perfectly sincere in describing his experiences with their heat, sweetness and song, which seem to have continued at least for many years, but these, even if there is nothing of auto-suggestion about them, arc physical and psychological phenomena common in a relatively elementary stage of the spiritual life, and as such are not found in those who have been raised to pure spiritual contemplation. (64)

Compared to Pseudo-Dionysius, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, St. John of the Cross, and St. Teresa, Rolle was a mere beginner. For Rolle, as for Hill, the apophatic union with the divine was ungraspable.

Hill's lover in "The Pentecost Castle" keeps beginning sacred and profane quests for love that end traumatically or never end at all. At the beginning of the poem, he comes to a surprising dead-end when, despite warnings "not to go / along that road" *(Tenebrae 7)—presumably the road to his beloved—he is slain. Deaths and wounds prefigure mystical dyings away from secular love and progressions toward sacred love, but Hill's refrains emphasize that these dyings are fatal rather than rejuvenating. In the second section, he repeats the deceased's posthumous lament: "Down in the orchard / I met my death / under the brier rose / I lie slain" (8). A symbol of the resurrected Christ during a Tenebrae ritual (the "Jesse tree / of resurrection // budding with candle / flames the gold / and the white wafers / of the feast") promises to transport this moribund lover from his death-in-life on earth into a transcendent realm (9). Hill imagines such a place as a mountain "where no man can climb," where "love / rests and is saved" (10). As soon as union with the divine beloved appears as a possibility on the horizon, however, Hill's worldly lover withdraws, renouncing the boons of sacred love: "Love stood before me / in that place / prayers could not lure me / to Christ's house." Christ appears as a "deceiver," a seductive illusion, a fiction. The hope for the sort of "celestial marriage" and ecstatic communion St. Teresa envisioned in *The Interior Castle* turns into a lament for the sacramental "bread we shall never break / love-runes we cannot speak" (12).

As the poem winds to an end, Hill diagnoses his problem with mystical love
as he has before: as a problem of the heart. Longing to unite with Christ’s “unseen” sacred heart, the lover’s scared heart flounders in a seemingly endless “dark night of the soul.” The lover says: “the night is so dark / the way so short / why do you not break / o my heart.” According to St. John of the Cross, the heart or soul must pass through a “dark night” in order to be purged of intellect, will, and memory, as well as all spiritual imperfections and sensory attachments. Only then will it “merit God’s divine cure” and accomplish, in St. John’s words, “the divine union of the perfection of love” (303).

Pining for a purgative night with a happy end, Hill’s lover asks: “how long until this longing / end in unending song // and soul for soul discover / no strangeness to dissever / and lover keep with lover / a moment and for ever” (13). The poem ends not with St. John’s “divine union,” but with the grieving lover at a “lovers’ well” (14), washing his wounded heart “that will not heal,” and staring masochistically and narcissistically (“eye to eye”) at his own weeping face in the water.

The “nothing” and “depths of non-being” he glimpses in the well’s darkness resemble apophatic conceptions of God. In *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius gestured toward God in a similarly negative way when he said God was “no thing among things” (109). For Pseudo-Dionysius, “the mysteries of God” abided in “the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence,” in “the deepest shadow,” and in “the wholly unsensed and unseen.” Contemplating a well-like darkness similar to Hill’s, he counseled his followers: “Leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and...strive...toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge” (135). Self-consciously staring at the mysterious “depths of non-being” (14), Hill’s mystic in “Pentecost Castle,” unfortunately, communes with himself rather than with God. He sees the “enthusiasm” for God in himself, but he never manages to purge himself of his vigilant conscience and self-consciousness. He confesses at the end that he sees “perhaps too clear / my desire dying / as I desire.” The mystical union between loving soul and beloved divinity can only occur after desire has been thoroughly purged. Hill’s end reveals that desire has not ended, that the dialectical vacillations of desire will continue, and that his sacred and profane passions will doom him to an endless Passion of worldly crucifixions and resurrections.

Lacking the faith and grace of the devotional writers who obviously attract him, Hill in *Tenebrae* solicits Petrarch as a more fitting model. Like Petrarch, who wrote obsessively about his deceased beloved, Laura (a woman he may have never known and who may not have existed), Hill writes about similarly elusive lovers who entice and depress him. In the sonnet sequence “Lachrimae,” Hill draws on Petrarch’s sonnets as well as John Dowland’s...
music, Ben Jonson’s masques, Lope de Vega’s sonnets, Robert Southwell’s devotional writings, and English Renaissance dances to express the travail of the lover who fails to requite his desire for union with God. Hill sheds tears in “Lachrimae” for exemplary martyrs and mystics who suffered unjustly, but he also sheds tears for himself because he believes he can never emulate or even properly articulate their heroic devotion to God.

Hill begins his sequence with a meditation on the “Crucified Lord” that is also a frustrated prayer for “at-one-ment.” He imagines Christ swimming on a cross and getting nowhere. Christ is “the world’s atonement on the hill” because He atones for the world’s sins and because, paradoxically, He appears to be “at one” with His failures to atone. In Hill’s view, Christ exemplifies a stoical acceptance of what always happens when “la mystique” is incarnated in “la politique,” when divine ideal meets and suffers the world’s brute facts. Although some critics have contended that Hill is speaking for Southwell here, Southwell in his life and writings lived up to the ideal he espoused in his Spiritual Exercises and Devotions: “to conform myself as far as possible to Christ crucified and to strive to love Him with my whole heart, but also by the help of God’s grace to give my labour, and, if need be, my life, with unstinting love, for the salvation of my neighbour” (4). Southwell wrote that he imitated Christ “with the greatest joy and alacrity.” Hill is not so successful in his imitations of Christ. He ends his first Petrarchan sonnet with a judgment against himself and a confession of his distance from Christ:

I cannot turn aside from what I do;
you cannot turn away from what I am.
You do not dwell in me nor I in you

however much I pander to your name
or answer to your lords of revenue,
surrendering the joys that they condemn. (15)

Hill’s sacrificial devotions end joylessly and tragically. The only triumph he wrests from defeat comes in the realm of poetic craft; he writes a masterful sonnet about failing to unify with his potential master, Christ. Like the characters in Waiting for Godot, Hill’s persona in “Lachrimae” waits for a God-like visitor who never comes.

Hill’s unrequited desire for mystical unions and communions motivates as well as undermines his equally intense desire for mystical communities. The conviction that “somewhere is such a kingdom”—that somewhere or at some time in the past an Edenic sanctuary existed that can be resurrected—has inspired his poetry from the beginning of his career. As examples of utopian
communities, he alludes to Tomasso Campanella’s “city of the sun” in “Men are a Mockery of Angels,” St. Francis of Assisi’s order of Grayfriars in “The Assisi Fragments,” Gaugin’s Pont-Aven School in “Terriblist Est Locus Iste,” Coleridge’s “spiritual, Platonic old England” in “An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England,” Péguy’s “mystical socialism” (Basic Verities 111) in The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy, King Henry V’s Augustinian “Monastery of St. Saviour and St. Bridget of Syon” in The Orchards of Syon. Like Eliot, who memorialized the seventeenth-century ecumenical community of Little Gidding in his poem by that name, Hill eulogizes these communities and simultaneously mourns their inevitable demise. They all represent varieties of “la mystique” that are doomed.

One of Hill’s most sustained examinations of the way historical forces destroy communities founded on mystical ideals of union comes in his book Canaan (1998), whose very title points to a philistine dystopia that parodies God’s promised land. In one of the book’s five poems titled “Mysticism and Democracy,” Hill bitterly describes a political landscape in which sacred ideals have been ruined and betrayed:

an occult terrain:

  mystical democracy, ill-gotten, ill-bestowed,
  as if, long since, we had cheated them

  our rightful, righteous

mystical democracy, ill-gotten, ill-bestowed,

  masters, as though they would pay us back

  terrific freedoms—

Severn at the flood, streaked pools that are called flashes

wind-beaten to a louring shine. (55)

Flash floods reminiscent of the Biblical flood bury the “occult terrain” where mystical democracies once flourished as possibilities. The “rightful, righteous / masters,” in this case, are not so much Adam and Eve before the Fall and Flood, or Christ before the Crucifixion, as they are the groups of Anabaptists, Quakers, Seekers, Familists, Puritans, and other seventeenth-century Protestant “sects” celebrated by Rufus Jones in his book Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth (Hill acknowledged this book as a source for the “Mysticism and Democracy” poems in Canaan).

Conceding that “the English people are not as a rule mystically inclined” (12), Jones argued in Mysticism and Democracy that affirmative (kataphatic) rather than negative (apophatic) mystics sowed the seeds of democratic Christian sects in seventeenth-century England. The sects emphasized the sanctity of the individual over the hierarchical political and religious regimes that governed the Church at the time. Democratic rights, according to Hill and Jones, derived from the “rightful, righteous / masters” who established
communities based not on the dictates of king, pope, or priest, but on the simple belief that a divine "inner light" inhabited all people equally and therefore made them equal before the law. Jones explained:

I am undertaking to show that the intense religious life of the period, together with the creation of the self-governing type of church, had a powerful influence in bringing democracy to birth in the State. In a certain sense a true and genuine democracy is inherently and intrinsically mystical in character.... A democracy in which the individuals are fused into a living organic group so that each individual finds his wisdom and insight heightened through his group life and team work for common ends is at heart a mystical order. (25)

Jones used the term "mystical" in the same down-to-earth way Hill used it, but he was more optimistic than Hill about the possibility of fulfilling mystical ideals on Earth.

Jones asked: "Are we foredoomed to have the vision of the Urbs Sion Mystica fade out into the common day of party politics and machine rule, or can we come back to the task of rebuilding our nation of the people, for the people, by the people, as our noblest prophets have always seen that it ought to be?" (27). Jones believed that mystical Sions could be rebuilt, and his Mysticism and Democracy provided many blueprints used to construct ideal communities in the past. Although some critics have contended that Hill, following in the elitist footsteps of Modernists like Eliot and Pound, has been a curmudgeonly foe of democracy, in fact he has remained steadfastly committed in his teaching and writing to his own conception of Urbs Sion Mystica. He summed up his politicized poetics in his essay "Redeeming the Time" when he discussed Coleridge's conception of the primary and secondary imaginations:

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.

(Lords 96:97)

In lectures, essays, and poems, Hill has struggled to awaken others to "their lost heritage." He has paid homage to the sort of intense, disciplined perception and conduct demonstrated by mystics, both Protestant and Catholic, cataphatic and apophatic, that would make an enlightened democracy possible. If Hill's outlook has been elegiac, it's because mystical unions, communions, and communities have failed to materialize or ended soon after they began.
Discussing Hopkins’s vision of a “mystical” kingdom resembling Eden, Hill remarked in his interview with Haffenden:

I think there’s a real sense in which every fine and moving poem bears witness to...[a] lost kingdom of innocence and original justice. In handling the English language the poet makes an act of recognition that etymology is history. The history of the creation and the debasement of words is a paradigm of the loss of the kingdom of innocence and original justice. (88)

Hill’s mystical questors for lost Edens always end up grappling with the grim facts of sin and fallenness in language that is the objective correlative of history’s sins and falls. Hill’s poems and essays remind us that words are always already “fallen” from their original meanings, always already representations of lost presences that can never be made fully present. Poets and mystics, no matter how hard they try to transcend language and history, mind and matter, personality and society, inevitably end up falling into the nets that they try to escape. One can contemplate an ineffable, inconceivable God in silence, but to communicate the otherworldly experience or “non-experience” one must grapple with worldly language and concepts. God for Hill is always a grammatical entity, a proper name with a long and complicated history, an ordinary subject or object in an ordinary sentence and story. “I am willing to claim as an empirical fact,” he wrote in Style and Faith (2003), “that when you write at any scrous pitch of obligation you enter into the nature of grammar and etymology, which is a nature contrary to your own. You cannot extricate yourself from this ‘contrary nature’ by some kind of philosophical fiat or gesture of spiritual withdrawal” (122). Contemplative withdrawal toward the divine Other, according to Hill, always cycles around to the contrary “other” of language.

Reflecting on Wittgenstein’s linguistic views in the long poetic sequence The Triumph of Love (1998), Hill contends: “Mysticism is not / affects but grammar. There is nothing / mysterious in grammar; it constitutes / its own mystery” (67). Hill is stating a truism—that mystical literature “constitutes” or represents the “mystery” of things through conventional, grammatical language that traditional mystical exercises and itineraries seek to transcend. Hill is also stating a preference and, to some of his readers, a shortcoming. Mystical texts are based on experiences that have affected those who wrote them, and those texts in turn have affected those who read them. Wary of the emotional affects of the via mystica—its depressing lows and manic highs, its frightening “dark nights” and euphoric unions—Hill is too devoted to language and reason to let go of them. As Aidan Nichols implied, Hill is not willing or not capable of paying “the price required for a fuller grasp on God’s transcendence”—a transcendence made possible by St. John of
the Cross’s “night of sense and spirit” (352-353). Hill admitted as much in a discussion of the poet Henry Vaughan’s line: “There is in God (some say) / A deep, but dazzling darkness.” According to Hill, the poet’s “mystical awareness... must be allowed to retain that innate sense of being ‘on one’s guard’ against ‘a fearful rapture’” (Style and Faith 84). In a poem with the title The Triumph of Love, one might expect Hill to follow the traditional via mystica toward an experience of rapturous love that unifies opposed factions, whether of soul and God, or word and world. But Hill’s constabulary vigilance—his preoccupation with rooting out sin, passing judgment, and prescribing retribution—turns his poem into (to borrow his own italicized words at the end) “a sad / and angry consolation.”

In The Triumph of Love, having blamed his “hardness of heart” and the unions—both sacred and secular—complicated by such hardness on a “costly dislike of cant,” Hill beckons a surgeon to cure his stony heart in the same way he beckoned a surgeon to cure his stony tongue in “God’s Little Mountain.” In the wake of actual heart troubles, he orders his imaginary doctor: “Remove my heart of stone. Replace my heart of stone. Inspire / cardio-vascular prophylaxis” (35). A heart transplant, he facetiously suggests, might cure him of religious, poetic, social, and other ailments. Elsewhere in the poem he uses religious and medical terminology to reflect on cures of his mind. He confesses that in his own life “reprobation / turned... / on the conversion or / reconversion of brain chemicals” (56). He admits that the chemical Serotonin was the elixir that initiated an experience comparable to mystical grace: “I / must confess to receiving the latest / elements [e.g. Serotonin]... as a signal / mystery, mercy of these latter days. / No matter that the grace is so belated” (56-57). Although he acknowledges he is still prone to the “grace [that] is confused, repeatedly, with chill / euphoria”—the mania or enthusiasm that he once associated with “the psychopathology of false mystical experience” his medication “commits and commends... [him] to loving” (57). When he checks his heart now, it seems neither cold nor closed, but full of the sort of sanguine passion he found in the animals he wrote about in his early poem “Genesis.” “When I examine / my soul’s heart’s blood,” he says, “I find it the blood / of bulls and goats” (33). “God’s worm”—to borrow a phrase from “The Bidden Guest”—is still in his heart, but it has metamorphosed over half a century into a bull god or goat god.

Looking over his first five books while compiling his Collected Poems (1985), Hill must have concluded that many of his personae resembled the sin-obsessed Jacob wrestling an angel for a blessing in Gauguin’s painting “The Vision After the Sermon.” A copy of the painting graces the book jacket. Or he may have concluded that his many struggles resembled a
wrestling match between Adam and the angel that prevented Adam from returning to Eden—the “green and pleasant land” that prefigures the other inaccessible mystical kingdoms in Hill’s poetry. Whatever the mythical or mystical scenario, Hill’s main combatant has always been the fallen angel of language. Sentenced to a fallen world in which he struggles by the sweat of his brow to make sense of things and redeem them in well-made poems, Hill has consistently affirmed that “somewhere is such a kingdom,” that at some time and in some place a mystical “Otherwhere” existed. He has also consistently suggested that such ideal states only exist in the minds of their makers when the fallen world has been set at one with their magnificent words.

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