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## 1. Introduction and Objectives

Fundamentally speaking, the long postmodernist poem, entitled *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, by the English poet, Geoffrey Hill, first published in 1985, and which emerges out of the advantages it takes of the style and structure of the modernist long poem, constitutes an evocation, typical of modernist aesthetics, of an individual consciousness, that of the French poet Charles Péguy (1873-1914), as well as of the historical milieu within which this latter figure is sensed as being immersed. Likewise, the poem's formal monumentalism, including its one hundred quatrain stanzas, may also be seen as constituting an elegiac tribute to the author of the poem-play entitled *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc (Le Mystère de la Charité of Jeanne d'Arc)* (1910). The objective of this End-of-Degree Project is not simply to offer a critical reading of Hill's poem (which will never be able to do justice to its rich complexity), but also, as a result of analytical comments on the function of voice within the poem, to try to deal with the issue of whether, indirectly at least, the intellectual and poetic sensibilities of the author of *Tenebrae* (1978) may actually be in tune with the system of values of Péguy, as that of an uncompromising, steadfast, independent spirit, as well as with the effects of that very system upon the French poet's art.

## 2. Biographical Perspectives

### 2.1. Geoffrey Hill

Geoffrey Hill was not a known writer until the 1970s. Harold Bloom described Hill's lack of fame in his introduction to Hill's *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom* (1975): "Strong poetry is always difficult, 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" (1975, xiii).

In *Geoffrey Hill*, Andrew Michael Roberts starts writing Hill's biography with these lines: "Geoffrey Hill was born in 18/6/1932 in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, in the English West Midlands" (2004, 2). Likewise, biographically speaking, this Project cannot help but ponder the issue of whether there may exist a link between Hill's uncompromising firmness as an intellectual, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the role played by protectors of the law in his early life, given that, as confirmed anecdotically by William Logan, both Hill's grandfather and father had been policemen: "He was proudest of the small pistol his father had carried as a police constable in Bromsgrove" (2012, 53). On the other hand, Lacy Schutz

sheds light on Hill's mother's genealogy, describing her as descendant of a family of artisans who made nails (2010, 133). In addition, Hill's grandmother also seems to have been an example of uncompromising hard work, just like Hill's mother, playing a key formative role in the poet's life, as reflected in hymn (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term) XXV of his collection entitled *Mercian Hymns* (1971): "Brooding on the eightieth letter of *Fors Clavigera* [by John Ruskin], / I speak this in memory of my grandmother, / whose childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the / nailer's darg" (1985, 129).

His childhood was marked by work and discipline, but this did not mean that importance was not also placed on the matter of formal studies. In the introduction to Geoffrey Hill's *Collected Poems* (1985), a brief biographical sketch of him, in educational terms, is provided by the anonymous Penguin Random House editor: "He was educated at the village school [in Fockbury], at the County High School, Bromsgrove, and at Keble College, Oxford (which elected him to an honorary fellowship in 1981)." Moreover, his love of poetry accompanied him from early childhood. He expressed this love for poetry in an interview with Michael Dempsey: "I have been a poet for as long as I can remember" (1996, 24). At a later date, Robert Potts describes Hill's period as Lecturer "[a]t [the University of] Leeds, his having been elected to a professorship in 1976, and then at Cambridge, where he was elected as a Fellow of Emmanuel College (1981-88)" (2016). Unfortunately, as David-Antoine Williams explains, it would be at Emmanuel College when "his mental health problems became public [...], while i]t was not until he moved to Boston University that he was able finally to seek treatment for his debilitating depression" (2008). In the end, his death took place two years ago, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July. Many were the newspapers that wrote about his death, and one example is the article written by William Grimes in *The New York Times*: "Geoffrey Hill, often hailed as Britain's finest living poet, whose dense, allusive verses ranged from dark meditations on morals, religious faith and political violence to rapturous evocations of the English landscape of his native Worcestershire, died on Thursday at his home in Cambridge. He was 84" (2016).

Geoffrey Hill was a peculiar person, according to his friends, so it seems, and, yet, the image of the brooding intellectual, mauled by depression, coexists with the warmth of a human being, so it also seems. His friends and colleagues not only praised him for his work and his magnificent use of language, but also for his personality. The poet and critic Anthony Thwaite describes Hill thus to Robert Potts in an interview:

‘Fascinating; dark, brooding; but also hilariously funny. He would look at you with a toad-like expression, as if he could transmit poison, and then he'd be laughing; he has a wonderful sense of humour. He could appear stand-offish; that's partly his deafness in one ear and partly his apparent sense of social inadequacy, his humble origins as he'd see it; though he's always had a very strong character’ (Potts, 2002).

However, certain fellow poets seemed to have disliked Geoffrey Hill not only personally, but also artistically and intellectually. For example, the Irish poet, Tom Paulin, seems not to have appreciated Hill’s uncompromising style, as when he describes Hill’s use of pentameters in the sonnet "Idylls of the King," which forms part of a sonnet sequence within the collection *Tenebrae* (1978), as "too monotonously definite to allow any rhythmic leeway, and the result is a false, flat note". Furthermore, Paulin also tagged Hill as an ultra-conservative in his review of the poet’s *Mercian Hymns* (1971): "In *Mercian Hymns* he included the line, ‘To watch the Tiber foaming out much blood,’ adapted from Virgil, but made infamous by Enoch Powell in his 1968 anti-immigration speech. [...]The association pains Hill: ‘I feel angry and helpless and hopeless at being so misunderstood’" (Rahim, 2016).

While not a prolific writer, Geoffrey Hill’s landmark collections helped establish his reputation as a poet’s poet, on a par with T.S. Eliot, for example. His first collection, *For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958* (Andre Deutsch, 1959), winner of the Eric Gregory Award, prefigured the style and concerns (the concept of History, the survival of Poetry itself, Language as a cultural and ethical asset, the value of Aesthetics) he would develop in subsequent collections: *King Log* (1968), *Mercian Hymns*(1971), and *Tenebrae* (1978), all originally published by André Deutsch, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Peguy* (Agenda Editions, 1983, Oxford University Press, 1984) and *Canaan* (Penguin, 1998), established his reputation. Furthermore, his later collections, as modernist-influenced poetic sequences, would define his mastery of poetry as an art form: *The Triumph of Love* (1998), *Speech! Speech!* (2000), and *The Orchards of Syon* (2002). As though a tribute to his art, Oxford University Press undertook the publication of his collected poetry in 2013: *Geoffrey Hill, Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, edited by Kenneth Haynes. Part of one of the epigraphs that heads the collection, taken from *Psalm 90*, reads thus: “Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory / unto their children.” Meanwhile, Hill’s many rigorous critical essays would need to be considered in another Project.

## 2.2 Charles Péguy

Although Péguy's personality is that of a man of peace, the figure of Péguy is also linkable to matters of politics, as Servais explains in *Charles Péguy and la Sorbonne*: "Having fought for Dreyfus, he assaulted the false Dreyfusites; in all the fervour of his socialism he waged war against 'the party,' understood as 'top-hatted socialism'. [Likewise,] after his return to his childhood's religion, he assailed bourgeois and worldly Catholicism, ashamed of its faith and of its God" (2016, 1). In these same politically and intellectually active terms, not only was Péguy a poet, but Aldington also points out his role as editor of *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, within the framework of Socialism (1914, 188).

Relevant with regard to any biographical vision of the French poet, Charles Péguy, are the following comments by Bernard Guyon:

His family life and subsequent education contributed to those qualities that were to be characteristic of Péguy's life and work: a knowledge of, and a love for, the common man (that is, peasants and artisans) and the poor; feelings of melancholy, tenderness, and timidity in the presence of women; a respect for children, family, work, and knowledge; an admiration for classical culture; patriotism, and exasperation at the defeat of [France in the Franco-Prussian War of] 1870 [, as a result of Bismarck's military alliances and strategies, culminating in the latter's triumph in the Battle of Sedan]; republicanism, viewed as a triple aspiration toward justice, fraternity, and liberty; and anticlericalism (1980, 895).

In fact, Charles Pierre Péguy was born in Orléans, Loiret, on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1873. His childhood was, as in the case of Geoffrey Hill, characterized by hard work and discipline, while the weight of that system of values was, likewise, the result of the influence of the female figures in his early life, i.e. his mother and his grandmother. Moreover, Péguy did not have a paternal model to look up to because his father had died a few months after his birth. Meanwhile, another key biographical factor in the portrait of the French poet is the impact of war upon his life and times, being tragically relevant in this sense his own death in the trenches during the first Battle of the Marne, on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1914 (Zeller 1994, 38).

Although Péguy's personality was that of a man of peace, the figure of Péguy is also known for his polemical involvement in politics, as indicated above. In this same sense, Sisson points out his political career started as a result of his contact with the socialist, Jean-Jaurès: "He succumbed to the charm of Jaurès which by all accounts was remarkable, but by the time he came to look back on the *affaire Dreyfus* (in his prose work *Notre Jeunesse*, in

1910), that charm had more than faded" (1983). Likewise, with regard to the eclectic complexity of the figure of Péguy, the following observation becomes relevant: "T. Stearns Eliot, MA (Harvard), who made reference to Péguy's life and work in a series of university extension lectures in 1916, noted that he 'illustrates nationalism and neo-Catholicism, as well as socialism'" (Hill 1983, 30). As a result, his constant search for the ideal way to ensure peace through religion and socialism, together with his deeply felt patriotism, seem to contribute to Péguy having emerged, historically, as a kind of martyr-type figure, searching for a way of fixing a world in chaos, within the proto-modernist transition from the final decades of the nineteenth century to the First World War, not unlike the figure of Joan of Arc whom he admired greatly.

As already indicated, Péguy was also a man who loved his native land in terms of landscape, while often writing about the French countryside, as exemplified by the following extract describing the plain of La Beauce:

Great as the sea, immense and infinite as the sea... a landscape which outstrips art... a perfect plain... with no frivolity to it... a land of proper sunsets, where the sun does not set at this point or that... does not die once for the whole world... between harvests, there is the deep laboring of the earth, a sea of labor, of deep, rich, heavy earth, black, red... black, blue, black, white, and then just the earth, nothing else... the bare earth.<sup>1</sup>

### **3. Modernist Context**

#### **3.1 Modernist Aesthetics**

If Geoffrey Hill's long poem dedicated to the figure of Charles Péguy and his epoch is seen as a postmodernist exploration of modernist aesthetics, it is because it registers how that same aesthetics is relatable to a transformation of 'awareness,' concerning the questioning of cultural values, as registered in the work of such writers as Eliot, Pound, and Woolf. Thus, it is also in this way that the view of modernism as a period in literary history following on from Romanticism and Realism becomes less relevant. This 'awareness,' as the consciousness of great change taking place, was to tune into even single ordinary actions. Rita Felski explains this phenomenon, in her book *Everyday Life*: "Modernism with its roughened verbal textures and often startling juxtapositions can inject a sense of strangeness and surprise into its

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Péguy. "Introduction". *The Mystery of Charity of Joan of Arc*. Translated by Jeffrey Wainwright (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1986), 5.



portrayal of the most commonplace phenomena. It makes the familiar seem newly uncanny, jolting us out of atrophied perceptions" (2002, 608).

In the case of Hill's poetic portrait of, tribute to, and elegiac composition dedicated to, Charles Péguy, the concept of 'awareness' would seem to be applicable to how the French poet, despite being capable of adopting the fragmentary, intense, highly personalized, painterly, and evocative style of the extract dealing with this reaction to the landscape of the La Beauce (see above), i.e. despite being aware of the transformations affecting literary style, in matters of aggressive politics, on the contrary, and of a world marked by the tendencies typical of Futurism and ever-increasing mechanization, Péguy, for ethical, moral, and intellectual reasons was not in touch with his Age. If Péguy's style can be included in the kind of thinking of Ezra Pound with regard to Imagism, i.e. that the "image" needs to be considered as the "primary pigment of poetry,"<sup>2</sup> as Mehta indicates, then the basis of Péguy's art also lies in how the basis of what is literary is related to the "evocative," rather than the "descriptive" (Mehta 2016, 5).

Likewise, keeping in mind the modernist relevance given to what is evoked by the interaction of the individual consciousness with the subject matter being reacted to, the intensity expressed in the passage dealing with the reaction of the poetic voice to La Beauce landscape may also be considered modernist in terms of style. Relevant, in this sense, are Liesl Olson's comments, in *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009), on how modernist writers are seen to transform common situations:

Woolf's 'moment of being', James Joyce's 'epiphany', Ezra Pound's 'magic moment', Walter Benjamin's 'shock', T. S. Eliot's 'still point of the turning world', or Marcel Proust's explosion of memory, triggered by such events as the taste of the Madeleine. These extraordinary moments magnify an awareness of the self, a coming into being of the individual, and an opening up of interior states of knowing (2009, 3).

### **3.2 The Modernist Long Poem as Enhanced by Postmodernist Aesthetics**

In terms of the poetic voice heard throughout the poem, it is useful to conceive of this literary piece by Geoffrey Hill as a four-dimensional postmodernist work which embraces cultural discourse types belonging to what may be called a modernist aesthetic, such as newsreel footage from the silent era of cinema, still photographic material, the aesthetics of cabaret performance, the discursive interaction of history and politics, as well as the accessing

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra Pound. "Vortex". Edited by Wyndham Lewis. *BLAST*, no. 1 (1914): 153.

of an individual's consciousness so as to evoke a literary figure. For purposes of clarity, in terms of the poetic voice operating throughout this long poem, understood as an overall configuration, it may likewise be conceived of as a postmodernist, multimedia, dramatized documentary which, using a term already highlighted above, *evokes* (this Project's italics) Péguy's interaction with his epoch. This discursive material would also include the commentary spoken by the documentary voice-over narrator, as newly filmed archive material (as opposed to the already-mentioned newsreel material) concerning the locations related to Péguy's life and lifestyle become the subject-matter of comment. Thus, the voice of the implied narrator as poetic-voice will be sensed to be taking on a range of guises, while that of an implied author may also be sensed as a discursive presence when the poem's meta-literary, meta-cultural, and meta-historical concerns seem to be being broached.

#### ***4. The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy***

##### **4.1 Preliminary Remarks**

Keeping in mind the importance given to a transformative and 'evocative' aesthetics, typical of modernism, as already indicated above, Hill's style in this long poem, from a postmodernist perspective, transforms the fragmentary style of modernist poetry by making it interact with a variety of traditional quatrain forms<sup>3</sup>. In doing so, he also evokes a convulsive historical period in which France moves between the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War, while, in terms of the over-arching role of history within Postmodernism,

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<sup>3</sup> If the twentieth-century poets, W.H. Auden and Richard Wilbur, are taken as points of reference with regard to the mastery of end-rhymes, in which slant-rhymes, half-rhymes, off-rhymes, as well as eye-rhymes, play a constant role in poetic composition, Hill's poem may be considered a master piece and, at the same time, a worthy meta-poetic tribute, from within the elegiac tradition, to the deceased Péguy. In the *Appendix* to this Project, a Table indicating the distribution of quatrains within Hill's poem, in terms of end-rhyme combinations, may be found. While keeping in mind the echoing presence of traditionally labeled iambic pentameter lines in Hill's poem, a key stanza model which emerges throughout, from within the tradition of heroic verse, would be that of the heroic or elegiac stanza (abab), as an envelope format, typical of Thomas Gray's mid-eighteenth century tribute to humble folk, "An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard," while also detectable in Hill's poem are the closed heroic couplets (aa, bb), typical of Chaucer and Pope, together with the enjambed version of these couplets, as found in the verse of John Donne. The following source has been consulted in order to summarize the use made of end-rhyme schemes and the quatrain stanza form in Hill's poem: Turco, Lewis. [1968] 2000 (3rd ed.). *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*. UP of New England. 204-206, 214-215.

addresses the issue of whether the kind of figure represented by Péguy still has relevance for a postmodern era. Alan Robinson explains that Hill's poem possesses richness in its themes, formal features, and historical content: "Its 'Mystery' turns on Péguy's desire to accommodate temporal frustration within the historiographical structure of a fortunate fall leading to redemptive triumph" (1987, 63). Put more crudely, can *a* (this Project's italics) Péguy be conceived of and appreciated in the postmodern era?

The author of this poem, Geoffrey Hill, describes Charles Péguy as "a man of the most exact and exacting probity, accurate practicability, in personal and business relations, a meticulous reader of proof, he was at the same time moved by violent emotions and violently afflicted by mischance" (1985, 206). The poem as such may also be identified as an elegy in honour of Charles Péguy and his defeat, while, at the same time, exploring Hill's key interest in memory and history:

The subjects that preoccupy Hill—the mystery of sin, our forgetfulness of the past, the enormous responsibility that rests on those who use words in the public realm, and the triumph of vanity and superficiality in contemporary culture—are considered downers these days, even in literary circles (perhaps especially in literary circles). We prefer the small, private, limpid moment to the large public stages of history—the battlefields, concentration camps, and assassination scenes to which Hill returns time and again (Wolfe, 2015).

In fact, there are various works by Hill in which the theme of memory is present. For example, in the poem "Sorrel," within *Canaan*, the speaker's memory disappears as the twentieth century is ending:

Memory worsening-let it go as rain  
streams on half-visible clatter of the wind  
lapsing and rising,  
that clouds the pond's green mistletoe of spawn,  
seeps among nettle beds and rust-brown sorrel... (1998, 40).

Additionally, in one of his essays within his *Collected Critical Writings*, Hill wrote the following: "The art and literature of the late twentieth century, language, suffering, and silence, require a memorializing, a memorizing, of the dead" (2008, 405). It is not surprising that Hill decided to write a poem about a character who has been forgotten by history, even if Péguy was a man whose thought and personality may indeed be worthy of consideration. Yet, as often occurs in history, the memory of the defeated is erased by the actions of the victors, this being the reason, this Project would wish to suggest, for Hill's focusing of interest on the

defeated, in this case, of one, the poet, Charles Péguy, who has been sidelined by cultural history. It is as though Hill's taking up of the challenge of coming to terms with the figure of Péguy, had been motivated by the cultural value and altruism inherent to the biblical *Beatitudes*. Thus, it should be of no surprise that the memory of those who are dead, the power of time, history, and politics, the function of religious values and faith (especially with regard to the Christian religion) emerge as key thematic strands that inform and pervade Hill's poetic tribute to Charles Péguy, just as they pervaded Péguy's life and times.

#### 4.2 The Poem's Milieu

The historical contextualization of the events which form the background of Hill's poem is, partly at least, understandable in terms of the so-called French and European 'Fin-de-Siècle,' although it would be more relevant to underline how the events of that same period actually, and phenomenologically, constitute the very essence of the poetic material being dealt with:

The fin-de-siècle period (1880-1900) was in France a time of social crisis and artistic ferment. The nation had suffered a humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, and had been forced to surrender its eastern provinces of Alsace and Lorraine to a newly unified Germany [...] Politicians, sociologists, psychologists, and medical doctors, as well as artists and writers, probed the wounded nation for the causes of its weakness, which many diagnosed as a form of 'degeneration' with both social and biological symptoms (Samuels 2011, 17-18).

On the other hand, by way of a cultural counterweight to such negativity, the so-called 'Belle Époque' flourishes as an antidote to despondency, as Kim Willsher describes in an article from *The Guardian*, about an exhibition at the Petit Palais in which paintings and other artistic works highlight the fascination exerted by *la belle époque*:

It is 1900 in Paris and the "city of light" is at its most glittering. The 'long depression' of the late 19th century is over, the horrors of the Great War are yet to come and *la belle époque* – as it would come to be known – is in full swing. Fauré, Saint Saëns, Debussy, and Ravel are making music; Rodin is working on 'The Thinker'. Renoir, Monet, Cézanne, Pissarro, and Degas are busy painting scenes depicting everyday life in the city; Pablo Picasso, recently arrived from Spain, is about to embark on his Blue Period (Willsher, 2014).

Within this period, at the close of the nineteenth century, France is also rocked by the political scandal of the so-called 'Dreyfus Affair,' relevant to Section 6 of Hill's poem, involving the Jewish officer, Alfred Dreyfus, who was accused of passing secret documents to

the Germans and, consequently, divested of his rank and incarcerated for life on Devil's Island, charged with high treason. In Section 10 of the poem, there is an allusion to Émile Zola's open letter published in the newspaper *Libération*, '*J'accuse!*' (1898), which, as an eloquent defense of Dreyfus's innocence, became the spark that started the fire that would divide France in two:

Historians have talked about the struggle to clear Dreyfus's name and restore his personal honour in the following terms: A campaign by his family, his lawyer and a small number of supporters had eventually uncovered overwhelming evidence that the traitor was not Dreyfus but another officer, Charles Walsin-Esterhazy. However, senior officers on the general staff and in military intelligence feared that to admit a miscarriage of justice would not just lose them their jobs but discredit the Army. To thwart a revision of the case against Dreyfus, they resorted to a series of threats, forgeries, and dirty tricks (Read, 2012).

Péguy's opinion concerning this scandal would also need to be the subject of comment in this section aimed at contextualizing Hill's elegiac long poem. In this sense, as already indicated, what becomes clear is that France became politically divided: the left wing (Dreyfusards) against the right wing (anti-Semitists). Within this context, Péguy shows himself to be a firm admirer of the socialist, Jean-Jaurès, especially as a result of the latter's willingness to defend Dreyfus:

The persecution of Dreyfus, Jaurès declared, stripped the man of his social and economic particularities: 'He is nothing less than mankind itself in the deepest pit of despair.' The generous humanism that spurred Jaurès to mobilize his followers on Dreyfus's behalf also fuelled his denunciations of European imperialism and nationalism (Zaretsky, 2014).

Yet, Péguy's rage against Jaurès complicates the relationship due to the latter's pacifist personality, even when the socialist party comes to power. Péguy's words become relevant in this regard, as Villiers quoted in her article: "In time of war there is only one policy, that of the National Convention, and we must not shirk the fact ...this means Jaurès in a tumbrel and the beating of drums to drown his great voice" (1965, 307). Moreover, the patriotic French poet's criticism of the socialists in power goes further:

[They] placed temporal salvation over eternal salvation. The mystique of socialism having been sullied by the pragmatic demands of governing, Péguy turned to a fervent mysticism of the nation and to such national-religious heroes as Jeanne d'Arc and Saint Louis as the true agents of collective redemption (Miller 1999, 196).

Péguy's patriotism, certain historians suggest, flourishes within the context of The Great War, when millions of young men went to fight in a conflict that would bring their lives to an end in a tragically premature way, while, at the same time, destroying Europe as a project based on unity. Within this catastrophic futurist-modernist context, Péguy dies in the Battle of the Marne, on September 5<sup>th</sup> 1914, at the beginning of the First World War: "He saw himself as a soldier of *ancienne* France, going forth into the fray to liberate the German people from their evil modern ways. His glorious death was a fitting end for one who had lauded France's civilizing mission" (Contosta 1975, 47).

Also to be included as a factor in any discussion of the historical and cultural milieu of Hill's poem is the initial emergence of the silent era of cinema. For example, relevant in this sense is the reference to "[the] brisk celluloid clatter[ing] through the gate" (1.8) of the cinema projector in the final quatrain of Section 1, an allusion to the silent-cinema newsreels in which the "juddery"<sup>4</sup> quality of the cinematic celluloid almost makes the soldiers seem poignantly tragi-comical, as though figures of silent-era slapstick. In this sense, Denby's comments are relevant: "Silent film is another country. They speak another language there—a language of gestures, stares, flapping mouths, halting or skittering walks, and sometimes movements and expressions of infinite intricacy and beauty" (2012). More specifically, in terms of the interaction of cinema and Hill's poem, the figure one of the earliest film directors in cinema history, the Frenchman Georges Méliès, is alluded to, but not in terms of his habitual "theatrical style of set design" (Kobel 2007, 98), nor in terms of his aesthetics of the fantastic, as in the case of *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), but, rather, as a result of his powerful series of eleven docudramas, produced with a maximum degree of realism, and described thus in the *Star Films Catalogue*: "A most vivid representation of this first act of injustice to Dreyfus" (Malthête 2015,6).

In terms of Péguy's vision of existence, the poem alludes to how the philosopher, Bergson, plays a role in the consolidation of that same outlook, understandable in terms of the characteristic of single-mindedness, termed *élan* by Bergson himself:

Two configurations of *élan* are conjoined: that positive quality of attack, of the spirited seizure of the initiative that obsessed French military theory at the start of the Great War in reaction to their supine humiliation of 1870; and Bergson's life principle of

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<sup>4</sup>E.M. Knottenbelt, *Passionate Intelligence: The Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Amsterdam: Costerus New Series, 1990), 291.

*l'élan vital*, the vital and original, impetus, which he opposed to mechanistic and determinist theories of life and evolution (Wainwright 2018, 48).

In essence, what emerges in Hill's elegy, is the sense of how that same single-mindedness remains uppermost, despite the contradictions Péguy insists on coming to terms with, when dealing artistically and intellectually with his Age, on the one hand, Foch's military strategy, and, on the other hand, Bergson's mysticism.<sup>5</sup>

Also relevant, in terms of the multiple historical and cultural references to the Péguy's times which constantly emerge in the poem, is Péguy's interaction with the figure of Joan of Arc, "canonized in 1920...., that uneducated teenage peasant girl [whose] impact makes her one of history's marvels" (Cavendish, 2012). His tribute to the national saint of France is manifested in his poem-play, *The Mystery of Charity of Joan of Arc* (1897). That same relationship constitutes another of the pieces which contribute to the historical configuration of the French poet:

As an intellectual who believed in action, a convert outside the fold, a Socialist who quarreled with the great party leader Jean Jaurès over the latter's anticlericalism and pacifism, and as a peacelover who took up militarism to die, in 1914, at the front, Péguy found in Joan, a saint martyred by her own church, enough mirroring contradictions of his own intense personal conflicts (Warner 1986, 88).

## 5. Commentary on the Poem and Its Ten-Section Structure

### 5.1 Section 1: Introduction, *in media res*, to the Poem's Discursive Settings

Within the theoretical model of the postmodernist, audiovisual documentary, being adhered to in this commentary, what seems to emerge in the first quatrains of the poem is the linguistic equivalent of an audiovisual fade-in / fade-out sequence involving the simultaneous interaction of a photograph of the protagonist, on the one hand, and images of numbers of the *Cahiers*, the cultural magazine edited by Péguy himself, on the other hand.

Would Péguy answer—stubbornly on guard  
among the *Cahiers*, with his army cape  
and steely pince-nez and his hermit's beard,  
brooding on conscience and embattled hope? (1.s5)

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<sup>5</sup>“[M]orning and evening. It is Domrémy restored; the mystic strategy of Foch and Bergson with its time-scent, dour panache deserving of martyrdom.” (3.s8) Throughout this Project references to Hill's poem will be displayed in terms of a Roman numeral which indicates the section concerned, followed by an indication of the stanza concerned within that same section.

The aesthetics of the melodramatically visionary, on the one hand, and of the cinematic, on the other, become fused in such lines, therefore.

At the same time, worthy of remark, with regard to the multi-faceted poetic voice present throughout the poem, are the metaphors present in words and phrases such as “brooding on” and “hermit’s beard,” or the epithet-noun combination (pathetic fallacy) “embattled hope,” functioning as an indicator of how Péguy’s whole life may be considered (conceived of as) an epic-type struggle in intellectual, political, spiritual, and artistic terms. This imaginative insight into the ‘mind’ of the French poet is understandable as being typical of the interaction of an implied narrator and a character, as far as narrative technique is concerned. At the same time, this imaginatively-shared zone harks back to the previous fourth stanza in which the appalled intellectual, Péguy, via an instance of free direct speech, finds himself trying to come to terms with the war-like nature of politics, keeping in mind the inevitability of using (immorally) war-based metaphors, given that war has been the cause of an immense loss of lives in history: “Must men stand by what they write / as by their camp-beds or their weaponry / or shell-shocked comrades while they sag and cry?” (1.4). Moreover, in terms of the invitation to focus on Péguy, it is impossible not to sense how that is being done in terms of a dramatized scenario that forms part of the hypothetical multi-media documentary already mentioned.

Meanwhile, in stanza seven, what is faded-in alongside the actor-figure is a screen, installed as part of the studio set, it is to be supposed, upon which footage from a silent-era newsreel is being projected:

Violent contrariety of men and days; calm  
juddery bombardment of a silent film  
Showing such things: its canvas slashed with rain  
and St Elmo’s fire. *Victory of the Machine!* (1.s7)

As far as the interpretative, documentary-based model being employed here is concerned, the allusion to the *Futurist Manifesto*, published by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909, at the close of the quatrain may be conceived of as a caption board projected on the screen, typical of the silent era, which momentarily interrupts the newsreel footage *per se*, while, in terms of the imaginatively free discursive zone of Péguy’s mind, to which the reader is also given access at times, as already mentioned, the anti-war sentiments, tinged with irony and



despondency, revolving within Péguy's mind are externalized histrionically, it is supposed, by the actor in question.

In this same sense, the vehicle of violence within the metaphor involving the use of the verb "slashing," (referring to the poor quality of the celluloid being projected, as in the case of the use of "juddery"), smacks of farcical humor and the slapstick of cabaret art, the latter constituting the overall context of this first section as a whole. Within this same macabre setting, the euphemistic noun phrase, "[v]iolent contrariety of men and days," stands out, given that, strictly speaking, it refers to the catastrophic bloodbath that was the First World War, as in the case of all wars.

The facet of the poetic voice as voice-over, in relation to this dramatized scene, and which emerges in the opening stanza, as well as in stanzas two, three, and the first half of stanza four, is that of the master-of-ceremonies, or *compère*, in a cabaret-café scenario:

Crack of a starting pistol. Jean Jaurés  
dies in a wine puddle. Who or what stares  
through the café window crêped in powder-smoke?  
the bill for the new farce reads *Sleepers Awake*<sup>6</sup>. (1.s1)

The macabre style of the language, together with the cheap, melodramatic theatricality it projects within these same stanzas ("wine-puddle" [1]; "toy-gun" [2]; "wounds...of ink / painlessly spouting" [3]; "blood...stiff on menu-card" [2]), all linked with the phenomenon of farce and slapstick, function as a vehicle for political satire, given the chaos affecting French politics in the early years of the twentieth century. In this sense, the commencement of this long poem contributes to its alignment with the literary tradition of mock-epic since the reference to the "[c]rack of a starting pistol," in keeping with the clown age and crude theatricality of cabaret art, plunges the reader, in keeping with the tradition of *in medias res*, into the bizarre, surreal historical reality of the early twentieth century.

Melodramatic discourse, via the personification of "History," which "commands the stage...[as] dire tragedian" (1.s2), evolves into quasi-philosophical discourse, as the seriousness of the chaotic state of French and European politics, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, is underlined through the use of a diacope "countless times; and will do countless times more" (1.s2). As a counterweight to this chaos, as though playing the role

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<sup>6</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Sleeper Awakes*, (Penguin Classics, 2005)

of tolerant, humanist point of reference within the socio-political scenario projected in the poem, and via a cruel pun on the word “still” in the final line of the sixth quatrain, Péguy is described (mocked perhaps) as continuing to be an idealist: “[S]till Péguy said that Hope is a little child” (1.s6). Given that the term “still,” as adverb, carries the idea of Péguy as an ever-present, positive, stable point of reference within that same scenario, despite the contemporary chaos and atmosphere of ill-will, it is likewise poignantly ironic to recognize how the links of the term “still”, as pun and as adjective, with death, also, metaphorically, links him with the concepts of irrelevance and inaction. As though a projection of implicit free discourse, in terms of what was being voiced out loud in the streets of Paris at the time, let us say, these contradictory visions of him correspond to the reality of the times, it would seem.

This same idea involving the issue of the extent of the social and intellectual relevance of Péguy acquires general overtones in stanza four, where, it is suggested, the writings of Péguy in the *Cahiers* concerning the socialist Jean Jaurés, may have been the direct cause of the latter’s political murder: “Did Péguy kill Jaurés? Did he incite / the assassin? Must men stand by what they write...?” (1.s4). Another telling pun marks the verb “stand by,” given its meaning of someone defending ardently what has been stated by him or her, on the one hand, while, simultaneously, suggesting indifference and a lack of intervention in an issue, on the other hand. Given, as already mentioned, that Jaurés died in an act of politically-motivated murder, the figure of Péguy, again in terms of the phenomenon of *vox populi*, as well as of his reputation, becomes doubly negativized. He is projected as an inciter of murder, as well as a cold-hearted cynic.

Meanwhile, in meta-poetic terms, this issue of the implications for real-life situations of the content of intellectual and artistic discourses functions as an ironic reminder, via the hypothetical voice of the implied author, of the well-known line from W.H. Auden’s 1940 elegy, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” written in 1940: “For poetry makes nothing happen...” (1979, 80-83). In this same bitterly ironic way, here what becomes relevant is what is foregrounded via the poetic voice of the final quatrain of section one, in its double role as documentary voice-over and as cabaret master of ceremonies. What is foregrounded, in fact, via the use of metaphors based on the physical projection of “reel[s]” of newsreel “celluloid” which “clatter[s] through the gate” of the film projector, is how the pun on the verb form “reeling” itself constitutes the denouncement of the shock of the horrors of the reality of trench warfare in contrast to the projection of propagandistic visions based on patriotism and

nationalism aimed at brainwashing the youth of Europe. These, as “jolly cartoon/armies...” (1.8) have no choice but to sacrifice their lives on a massive scale.

In keeping with the aesthetics of cabaret and pantomimic grotesquerie, already made use of earlier in section one, the voice of History, the “command[er]” of the “stage” (1.s2) of world events seems to emerge in the form of the discursive zone of free direct thought. This zone seems to be being shared by a pensive, melancholy-laden Péguy, as appalled intellectual and poet of his Age, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the poetic voice of Hill’s postmodernist poem, in the form of the implied narrator as voice-over, on the other: “the cortège of the century dances in the street” (1.s8). Thus, the new intolerant, stress-ridden, bewildering, twentieth century, in its early modernist phase, and the premonition of its forthcoming, catastrophic trajectory are aesthetically projected in the form of a dance macabre in this opening section.

## **5.2 Section 2: The Human Péguy; Elegy and Tribute; the Militant-Pastoral**

Following the immersion in the cultural, political, historical milieu of the disturbingly chaotic early twentieth century in which the thoughtful, isolated, misunderstood intellectual, Charles Péguy, vainly attempts to maintain himself as a humanist point of reference in difficult, challenging times, in the second section of the poem.

Despite the suggestion that the second section enters into the biographical dimension of the figure of Péguy (his origins and the social milieu that determines them), it still seems possible to sense the presence of a discursive zone, in this same section, which projects admiration and identification even, in which the poetic voice, as the already mentioned voice-over in a dramatized documentary format which explores the ‘life-and-times’ of the French poet, crosses over with the hypothetical inner sense of himself Péguy seems to have possessed:

Footslogger of genius, skirmisher with grace  
and ill-luck, sentinel of the sacrifice,  
without vantage of vanity, though mortal-proud,  
defend your first position to the last word. (2.s2)

The metaphorical base of the quatrain, linked with the bellicose environment of the prelude of the First World War, highlights Péguy as an artisan-like, hardworking poet, struggling with the phenomenon of words and the difficulties inherent to their use, as well as with the

maintenance of self-dignity in a world of political and intellectual treachery. In these same terms, the antithetical nature of the final line of the quatrain (“first position.....last word”) becomes weighty and telling, as the eulogizing of Péguy evolves within an elegiac context.

In an equally relevant and appropriate way, the aesthetics of parts of the second section, as exemplified by stanza three, present the commonplace of the beatific vision, associated with elegiac poetry, via the projection of an aesthetic mode typical of the popular religious engravings and lithographs aimed at spiritual conversion among the masses during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and also taken up by visionary, idealistic cinema: “On the hard-won / high places the old soldiers of old France / crowd like good children wrapped in obedience” (2.s3). The further use of a diacope (“the old soldiers of old France”) functions as a way of drawing attention to how the decadence associated with patriotic heroism characterizing pre-twentieth French history is about to reach crisis point, as a result of the hecatomb of the First World War.

Moreover, as far as this second section is concerned a vision of a fast-disappearing, bewildered France flows into an elegiac vision of Péguy which entails the projection of him not only as an artistic and intellectual, but also as a human being: “[O]ur gifts are spoils, our virtues epitaphs, / our substance is the grass upon the graves” (2.s5). It is the use of the first-person plural here which again stresses the fusion of the implied author’s voice and that of the voice-over documentary narrator (i.e. the implied narrator), in this case in the role of researcher of Péguy’s biography. Here, the implied author’s voice emerges via the philosophical ponderings of the French poet regarding the subjects of death, and the humble acceptance of it, together with one’s role in life. What is discovered as having another side to it is his imaginative access to the inner thoughts of the poet, as a product of the voiced-over documentary researcher-maker’s comments, including the visiting of the places associated with his life, in terms of stanzas 8 and 9 (as part of the making of the bio-documentary, it is supposed). This is because it includes the other side of the coin which is projected in terms of the anguish and mental wrangling experienced by an intellectual and artist who struggled to balance out his own contradictory identity, another version of “[v]iolent contrariety”. This is the result, given the clash between himself as intellectual, modern, and radical, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as spiritual, traditional, and conservative: “...while greed and disaffection are ingrained / like chalk-dust in the ranklings of the mind” (2.s6).

The strange de-centered, cubist-like (apt with regard to the opening decades of the twentieth century) overlapping between the poetic voice and the hypothetical interior monologue of Péguy himself, returns in stanza seven, as though the former had access to the latter. In a bitterly ironic way, keeping in mind that “History” has been termed “supreme clown, dire tragedian” in the previous section (1.s2), Péguy’s system of moral values would have been vindicated by the fact that he died on the battlefield in the First Battle of the Marne and not on the political front during the process of his struggles to defend the innocence of Dreyfus in the publication he edited: “Rather the Marne than the *Cahiers*” (2.s7). The reference to “[r]ather,” in combination with the opening of the following quotation, fuses a sigh of relief with a note of indifference almost, as though to highlight the humility that characterized Péguy in his lifetime: “True enough, / you took yourself off. Dying, your whole life fell into place” (2.s7). The theatrically-based metaphor contained in the verb of the first sentence, together with the connotations of slapstick and clown age contained in the phrase “fell into place,” underline further the cabaret-based discursive strand already identified in the poem.

Thus, what also returns is the projection of the concept of “History” as “supreme clown, dire tragedian” (1.s2). Likewise, it is the leitmotif of the cinematic newsreel of the silent era that re-emerges in the final stanza of the second section, fused as it is here with the already mentioned tragic-farcical leitmotif of slapstick, as reflected in jarring interaction of “glory” and “beetroots” as a *non sequitur*, as zeugma, in fact. This is due to how the verb “cover[ ],” places both terms within that same literary device: “[A]nd all those ghosts, far-gazing in mid-stride, / rising from where they fell, still on parade, / covered in glory and the blood of beetroots” (2.s9). In any case, what becomes relevant is the inclusion of Charles Péguy, soldier and patriot, within the appalling statistics of the fallen in act of service.

At the same time, such rhetoric is foregrounded even more tragically through the use of hyphens as an indicator of the flower of youth being cruelly cut down in trench warfare, together with the pun played out through the term “still,” referencing how the young soldiers were, tragically, “still” fresh from their training camps when they were mown down by machine gun fire as they leapt, “rising” over the parapets of their trench systems, together with the idea of how they will be honored and admired in the memory of all future generations. In this same sense, the protagonist is defined as “a dead novice” in the photograph of him in his birthplace home. Thus, via this process of inclusion, Charles Péguy becomes humanized, i.e., besides poet and intellectual, he also needs to be considered as a

human being. There is a poignancy attached to the inclusion of Péguy (aged 41 at the moment of his death) among the “novice[d]” (2.s6), inexperienced young (very young) soldiers who died *en masse* in the trenches, since, metaphorically speaking, the altruistic, idealistic, writer, always a victim of controversy, would seem to have been idealistic, excessively perhaps, in whatever he did, including in his military life.

### **5.3 Sections 3-4: Different Perspectives on the Character of Charles Péguy**

The vision of Charles Péguy as human being, as well as artist, is enhanced further in this long poem’s third section which, via the (possible) discursive format of the voice-overed bio-documentary, adapts the commonplace of the elegiac form, which traditionally involves the detailing of what the deceased person will no longer be experiencing, and which was dear to him or her. In Milton’s *Lycidas* (1637), for example, the poet and his Cambridge friend, the deceased Edward King, will no longer go on enjoyable walks together in which they conversed intellectually and at ease.

In the case of Péguy, what is no longer frequented is Péguy’s rural home in the Loire region, and its links with the equally rural La Beauce region of France. Already in the second section, via the discourse typical of a guided tour of a place of interest, these same beloved rural origins, no longer frequented by the poet, are described, while, given the structural model being offered in this Project, it may be supposed that filmed extracts from such a visit are included within the documentary: “‘Sieurs-’dames, this is the wall / where he leaned and rested, this is the well /from which he drank” (2.s7-8).

Metaphorically speaking, then, Péguy’s rural birthplace and home, are seen to be his source of inspiration: “[A]nd in the fable, this is your proper home” (3.s2). The epithet-noun combination, linked with the use of the term “fable,” function here as a reminder of the epic-scale of the creative, intellectual, and political struggle in which the French poet’s existence consisted.

It is not surprising, therefore, that, given the already mentioned, cubist-like, enigmatic interaction of the implied narrator’s voice and the “rankings of [Péguy’s] mind” (2.s6), that the description of the French poet’s rural home is movingly lyrical, as though the deceased Péguy’s nostalgia for it, not to mention its nostalgia for him, are being transmitted: “[T]hree sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum / in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt / and paddle...” (3.s2). Through metaphor, involving the verbs employed, the scene is humanized,

hinting fleetingly at emotional experiences lived. In this same vein, the following lines are to be understood: “[A]nd sunlight pierces the heart- / shaped shutter-patterns in the afternoon, / shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors” (3.s2-3).

Moreover, the third section highlights the way in which the poem as a whole is thematically structured, i.e. in terms of the contrasting thematic strands of the “militant[.]” and the “[ ]pastoral” modes of discourse: “Yours is their dream of France, militant- pastoral” (3.s7). In terms of anaphoric reference, the possessive adjective refers to the content of the previous stanza, full of historical and cultural allusions, in which prominence is given to the past military glory of France (the St. Cyr Officers’ Academy, for example); to the gothic architectural inheritance France handed on to the rest of Europe (Chartres); as well as to the intellectual inheritance bequeathed to history by great philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (who spent periods of time at the Trie-Château, in Picardy). What becomes relevant here is the metaphor carried by the verb “command” at the close of the sixth stanza: “Chateau de Trie is yours, Chartres is yours, and the carved knight of Gisors with the hound; Colombey-les-Deux Eglises; St Cyr’s cadres and echelons are yours to command” (3.s6).

On the one hand, what is being described is what is available to Péguy’s intellect and creativity. Thus, the phrase “cadres and echelons” may be seen as a metaphor of the words and units of language that actually make up the writing process, i.e. which are at his “command,” while being identifiable with what may be called the visionary-idealistic, and, thus, “[ ]pastoral” and enriching, glories of French culture. In this sense, Colombey-les-Deux Églises, although characterized by the anaphoric reference attached to it, is also, in terms of Péguy’s brand of humanism, incorporated into the greatness of France’s history (see the reference to the relics of the “ivory quartz” and “dented snuffbox won at” the Battle of “Austerlitz” on the artist’s “desk” at his rural home in 3.s4), given that the town, birthplace of Charles de Gaulle, would be, in 1958, the scenario of the talks on reconciliation, following the disaster of the Second World War between the former and the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer. In this same sense, and in keeping with the commonplaces inherent to the elegiac tradition, inheritance and premonition become fused, thus underlining that Péguy is a perennial presiding genius in French and Humanist cultures.

In keeping with the inevitable application to the poem of the other element, the “militant-[political-polemical]” discursive strand, that forms part of its thematic structure, Péguy also has at his “command” the negative aspects of French history, as suggested by the

reference to “the carved knight of Gisors with the hound” (3.s6). This implies an allusion to the scandal associated with the tensions affecting the relations between the French monarchy and the Templar Knights between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries.

Moreover, as far as Péguy’s identity as a presiding genius within French and European history is concerned, what becomes relevant in terms of the interaction of this composition’s poetic voice (the implied narrator’s voice), on the one hand, and the very value system of Péguy, is the extent to which the charges of treachery brought against the Templar Knights may be seen to parallel the polemical events surrounding the so-called *l’affaire Dreyfus*, between 1894 and 1906 (and long after), in which Péguy’s writings, condemning the anti-Semitism that prejudiced the innocent military Captain, were to play a part. It is in section six that what may be called a moment of reverie emerges, experienced, potentially, by Péguy, as a witness of the defrocking and public humiliation of Dreyfus: “*A mort le Juif! Le Juif / à la lanterne!*”

In keeping with this “militant[ ]” discursive strand, with regard to Section 4, the poetic voice as implied narrator, imaginatively speaking, seems to continue to sympathize with (identify with) Péguy’s value system since, ironically and poignantly, the French poet is conceived of as “punitively mourn[ing],” as continuing to wish to transmit his humanist philosophy from beyond the grave, while expressing ‘to himself’ his frustration and regret at not having been sufficiently influential on people’s minds and hearts when alive. No ease in death and certainly no intellectual ease in life, as the quotation from Tharaud confirms: “[A]ll through your life the sound of broken glass” (4.s6). Using once more the hypothetical format of the filmed bio-documentary as a structural point of reference, linkable perhaps with the deictic opening of the pivotal fifth quatrain within section four, the “militant-pastoral” contrast is further highlighted:

This is no old Beaucemanoir that you keep  
but the rue de la Sorbonne, the cramped shop,  
its unsold *Cahiers* built like barricades,  
its fierce disciples, disciplines and feuds, (4.s5)

The pun-based example of agnomination affecting the interaction of the terms “disciples” and “disciplines,” together with the distance established between the epithet “fierce” and the noun “feuds,” points to how this epic-scale eulogistic elegy is also crisscrossed by mock-epic features. The political wrangling of pre-First World War France seems grotesquely farcical



when set against Péguy's tolerant humanism. It is this contrast that allows for the return of the discursive strand based on slapstick and clown age, as Section Four fuses with Section Five: "So you have ridden / above all that and fallen flat on your face / among the beetroots..." (4.s8-5.s1). The situation of political irresponsibility, the satire it represents, foregrounds more poignantly the way in which the comic and the tragic, fused, seem to function as a defense mechanism so as to minimize the extent of such political crassness. Given that this is the kind of holistic intellectual analysis of which Péguy himself would be capable, further confirmation is given here of how the poetic voice (that of the implied narrator), in a kind of area of free discourse, is conscious of Péguy's own value system.

What also becomes apparent, with regard to the third and fourth sections, is how the implied narrator's voice, as voice-over in the documentary format, also becomes introspective within those same sections, given that, it may be postulated, as a thinking human being himself, his thoughts cannot help but trigger his pondering upon the complex figure of the subject of the documentary (a manifestation of a variant on what has come to be called the Stockholm syndrome). This occurs to such an extent that this poetic voice, at the close of section three, encourages the human entity known as Charles Péguy to maintain, as well as cherish, his enigmatic uniqueness over and above his writings and his biographers. Moreover, it is in this same enigmatic way, with reference to the aforementioned discourse of the guided tour, that he is most himself and, thus, of most use to humanity and cultural history: "Truly, if you are wise, / deny such wisdom; bid the grim bonne-femme / defend your door: 'M'sieur is not at home'" (3.s10). This enigmatic air is also the result of how the implied author's voice also seems to be present at such a frank and sincere moment, thus rescuing Péguy as a human being, as though Geoffrey Hill himself were intervening here.

#### **5.4 Sections 5-6: The Visionary, the Pastoral, and the Philosophical**

On a more evidently biographical plane, while highlighting once more the commonplace of what goes on without the presence of the deceased person typical of the elegy, the fifth section puts emphasis on the geographical, topographical and rural origins of Péguy in the pastoral Loire, highlighting the visual lyricism of the images projected, in terms of the narrative-discursive documentary format put forward in this Project:

odd village workshops grimed and peppercorned  
in a dust of dead spiders, paper-crowned  
sunflowers with the bleached heads of rag dolls,

brushes in aspic, clay pots, twisted nails... (5.s11)

The simple rural setting recalls Gray's Stoke Poges in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751): "The clinking anvil and clear sheep bell-sound, / at noon and evening, of the angelus" (5.s12).

In terms of the discursive zone shared by the implied narrator(as voice-over), and Péguy as presence (from beyond the grave, it is supposed), the rural-pastoral discursive strand is made visionary in keeping with the aesthetics typical of Péguy's own art: "Hedgers and ditchers, quarrymen, thick-shod / curés de champagne... / ... / they become, / in a bleak visionary instant, seraphim / looking towards Chartres..." (5.s4-5.s5). The visionary mode, at times, also projects itself into the pastoral-visionary mode, as when Péguy, upon dying, is sensed as being deeply rooted, biographically and metaphorically, in French soil: "go down... / into sap, ragwort, melancholy thistle, almondy meadowsweet, the freshet-brook" (5.s8-5.s9).

Given what has already been stated about how the "militant[ ]" is inevitably embedded/rooted in the "[ ]pastoral," discursively speaking, in the case of Péguy, the pathetic fallacy detectable in the phrase "melancholy thistle" functions as a reminder that any vision of the French poet is destined to be flawed by elements of frustration, polemics, and tragedy: "Patience hardens to a pittance, courage / unflinchingly declines into sour rage, / the cobweb banners, the shrill bugle-bands" (5.s14). The literary device of agnomination detectable in the interaction of the terms "[p]atience" and "pittance," the off-rhyme that links "courage" with "sour rage," and the sharp vowel sound that links the second syllable of "unflinchingly" with the epithet "shrill," reconfirm that any vision of Péguy (never seen by literary history as a universal figure) will always be flawed, as if to suggest, from within the researcher-commentator's discursive zone of acquired knowledge, that not even a cubist-like aesthetics would be sufficient as a way of portraying the flawed Péguy as thinker-writer.

Rather, an expressionistic type would be required. In this same sense, relevance may be assigned to the following lines from the more philosophical sixth section, keeping in mind that another of elegiac poetry's commonplaces is precisely the space given to ponderings upon the subjects of death, spirituality, and the meaning of life:

But who are 'we', since history is law,  
clad in our skins of silver, steel and hide.  
Or in our rags, with rotten teeth askew,  
heroes and knaves as Clio shall decide? (6.s9)

Via the same aesthetic mode, the following appears in stanza 9 of the same section: “‘We’ are crucified Pilate, Caiaphas / in his thin soutane and Judas with the face / of a man who has drunk wormwood.” In other words, all of ‘us,’ whether poets and writers in the public eye or simply citizens, lack the sense of conviction and adherence to strongly-held values that characterize the altruistic, humanist Péguy. This projection into a generalizing mode of discourse also implies the re-appearance of the voice of the implied author.

These sections (five and six), given their biographical and philosophical character, portray Péguy as the ‘flawed’ hero (never having become legendary, as was the case of Gordon of Khartoum [5.s15]). Meanwhile, the free indirect zone of discourse shared, hypothetically and simultaneously, by the implied narrator, on the one hand, and by Péguy’s consciousness, on the other, transforms him into a ‘misunderstood’ hero. Rather, it is the humble soldier-poet who dies in the trenches: “[P]roud tears, for the forlorn hope, the guerdon / of Sedan, ‘oh les braves gens!’, English Gordon<sup>7</sup>/ stepping down sedately into the spears” (5.s15).

Neither is it surprising that, through the visual and auditory vividness of parts of section 6, and in terms of the presence of that same consciousness, it is as though the misunderstood Péguy were himself living and experiencing Captain Dreyfus’s defrocking: “A puffy satrap prances on one leg / to snap the traitor’s sword, as ordered rage / bursting with ‘cran et gloire’ and goutts of rouge. / The chargers click and shiver” (6.s3-4). This same condition of being involved in, and yet not fully identified with, different phenomena (politics, writing, modernist lifestyle), in terms of a cubist-like, off-centered process of interaction, is a key factor in understanding, or conceiving of, the complex nature of the figure of Péguy within the poem.

### **5.5 Sections 7 to 10: The Depth of Tribute**

As a zone of tribute, which includes the expression of virulent anti-war sentiments, especially regarding the appalling sacrifice of lives in the first machine-based, modern war of 1914-18, what is transmitted by the implied narrator / voice-over narrator of the hypothetical documentary, seems to be what the humanistic, unpretentious, as well as patriotic, Péguy

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<sup>7</sup> Reference to Charles George Gordon also known as Gordon of Khartoum.

would have said, if he were not Péguy, or how he would have seen himself in terms of the other victims of trench warfare.

This, then, is a further, even more, subtle example, of the interaction of the poetic voice in the role of researcher-commentator-director of the already-mentioned hypothetical documentary, on the one hand, and the consciousness of Péguy, about whom, ‘he’ has become knowledgeable, on the other hand. What strikes a further poignant note in this regard, is that the tribute to Péguy, seen in terms of the hypothetical tribute he himself would have paid to his tragically deceased comrades-in-arms, has as its central point of reference Rimbaud’s well-known pronouncement “*Je est un autre*”<sup>8</sup> (9.s8). This implies that, ironically, to be worthy of those who sacrificed their lives in the trenches, in the sense of representing them, of acting on their behalf, Péguy had to die and become a cultural figure, rather than a living person. In this same sense, by means of the metonymic value of the term “line” in the seventh section, what are seen to be Péguy’s writings, will, posthumously, emerge as a tribute to the simple rural folk, the humble soldiers, who died in the trenches: “The line / falters, reforms, vanishes into the smoke / of its own unknowing” (7.s7-8). Meanwhile, the echo enacted in the repeated diphthong in the latter two words underlines, again poignantly, the way in which, due to his death, he will not be conscious of the impact of his tribute. Again, in metonymic terms, that figure of the humble soldier is cited in section eight, via the French term for ‘simple infantryman’: “Poilus and sous-officers who plod / to your lives’ end, name your own recompense” (8.s5).

In other words, no tribute will ever be adequate so as to compensate for their sacrifice. It is, therefore, morally and artistically necessary, from the standpoint of the poetic voice, now as implied author projecting the poem beyond itself into literary history, that ‘his’ (Hill’s) discourse be as memorable and poignant as possible in honor of the victims of the First World War, including Péguy. The allusion to Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”(1917), via the phrases “berserk fear” and “plod,” carries that function, this Project would argue, as also occurs in the transition between stanzas 5 and 6 within the tenth, and final, section, where “the burial-detail” is described as “gather[ing] up” (10.s5) the poet’s corpse in no-man’s land, “...his arm over his face as though in sleep // or to ward off the sun...” This further reference to Owen’s poem contributes even more deeply to what has been called here the character of tribute assignable to sections 7 to 10.

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<sup>8</sup> *Letter du voyant (Letter of the Seer)* sent to Paul Demeny on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1871.

It is in this same sense of homage that the second half of section 7 may be understood, while the “laborers of their own memorial” (7.s5), to which reference is made, are the down-to-earth, ordinary rural youngsters whose pastoral environment is that of Péguy’s, all being the equivalent of the farmer-soldiers of the Roman Republic in ancient times. Metaphorically speaking, the ironically ambiguous value of the participle “[d]rawn” in the following quotation acts as a reminder of the concept of something being ‘etched’ or ‘stamped’ on one’s memory (see also 8.s4), on the one hand, or on the face of History itself: “Drawn on the past, these presences endure...” (7.s5). On the other hand, that same participle seems to allude fleetingly to the biblical phrase “hewers of wood and *drawers*[this Project’s italics] of water,”<sup>9</sup> thereby underlining how History, in the context of the First World War, ‘drew’ on limitless human cannon fodder: “[T]heir many names one name, the common ‘dur’ / built into duration, the endurance of war” (7.s6). The combination of the devices of diacope and polyptoton in these lines reinforces the combination of sadness, poignancy, admiration, and dignity that surrounds the enormity of the sacrifice of the youth of Europe between 1914 and 1918.

At the same time, the references to “dur” and “duration” seem to allude to the philosophy of Bergson and his ideas concerning how consciousness, as an interactive phenomenon, shared by a number of human beings (8.s5-s6), is enriched in terms of “duration as qualitative multiplicity” (Lawlor, 2016). Likewise, and as a further reminder of the function of the voice of the implied author within the poem, it is in this way that the “experience of sympathy” becomes possible, i.e. through “putting ourselves in the place of others, feeling their pain” (Lawlor, 2016).

This condition of Bergsonian sympathy continues to affect the identification of the implied author’s voice (with its suggestively possible links with that of Geoffrey Hill, also) with that of Péguy’s set of values, and tellingly so in the penultimate stanza of the tenth and final section. Here, via the presence of the voice of the implied author, the allusion to the already-mentioned historical open letter published in *Libération*, entitled “*J’accuse!*,” addressed, in January 1898, to the President of the Republic by the novelist Emile Zola, functions as a more general outcry against the injustice of war *per se*, and, more particularly,

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<sup>9</sup>“And Joshua made them [the Gibeonites] that day hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of the LORD, even unto this day, in the place which he should choose” (*Joshua* 9:27).

against the terrible exploitation of the youth of Europe during the First World War, or against the practice of the exploitation of human beings throughout history.

It is at this moment, and in this tenth stanza that, again in a highly suggestive way, the voice of the implied narrator and that of the implied author (perhaps becoming linked, even, with the voice of Hill himself, as already suggested) seem to become fused. In aesthetic terms, this penultimate stanza, via the silent-era newsreel format involving the insertion of a cartographic visual detail into the footage, represents the end of an era in which Péguy has been a key protagonist, despite never being given the recognition he deserves:

*J'accuse! J'accuse!* – making the silver<sup>10</sup> prance  
and curvet, and the dust motes jig to war  
across the vistas of old France,  
the gilt-edged maps of Strasbourg and the Saar. (10.s9)

Péguy, the implication is, via the presence of the implied narrator, belongs to a pre-modernist world of pre-mechanization, even though his individualistic voice would have been a key cultural point of reference in the modernist era. Where this same presence of the implied author is most movingly detectable, within this final phase of deeply felt tribute in the poem, is in stanza seven of the seventh section:

And yet what sighs: Saul groping in the dust  
For his broken glasses, or the men far-gone  
On the road to Emmaus who saw the ghost.  
Commit all this to memory. (7.s7)

This latter stanza is placed after the already-mentioned stanza that pays homage to all the young dead, who will always be united, in Bergsonian terms, and thus, ironically, will always be a perennial force to be reckoned with throughout history, in terms of humanity's soul-searching. For this reason, it is meta-poetically and discursively apt that Péguy should also have emerged out of this historical milieu as a major cultural force to be reckoned with, and as a spokesperson for those young heroes. Here the use of the term apt is applicable to the phenomenon of a miracle, as reflected in how the stanza alludes to St. Paul's conversion, as well as to the first encounter of Christ and his disciples after the resurrection. Thus, it is almost miraculous, the suggestion is, that a poem could have been created which, humbly (in

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<sup>10</sup>The silver salts used in the treatment of celluloid film stock.

terms of Péguy's own characteristic stance of humility), pays tribute to the complex figure of the French poet, who may be compared with the thinker-poet Montaigne, and his equally complex Age.

## 6. Conclusions

In an attempt to come to terms with Hill's relentlessly-crafted postmodernist poetic tribute to the French poet, Charles Péguy, which constitutes a highly modernist composition as far as its style and structure is concerned, evolving, as it does, as though it was a macro-composition by T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or, in the postmodern era, by Susan Howe, John Ashbery, or Derek Walcott, the most challenging aspect of it to deal with has been the question of voice. For this reason, in terms of literary criticism, the obligation to describe its (apparently) postmodernist, multi-media format has been responded to here, this Project would argue, in a reasonably feasible way. The identification of this overall configuration has also been based on the distinction, with regard to voice precisely, between, on the one hand, the voice of an implied narrator in different guises (that of voice-over in a multi-media documentary, that of cabaret master of ceremonies, that of researcher of the background material regarding Péguy's life and social-topographical environment, including many aspects of the poem's historical milieu, as well as that of one who dares to think he may even understand how Péguy's mind ticks) and, on the other hand, the voice of an implied narrator that, in an equally enigmatic way, seems to function as the virtual medium through which are aired meta-cultural and meta-poetic considerations about the significance for history of Péguy beyond the strict confines of the poem. It is via this latter voice that, in a highly discreet way, Hill's own voice seems to be glimpsed fleetingly at times, given his mandarin<sup>11</sup> "aloofness", his challenging way of writing that distances him from readers at times, as well as his non-conformism regarding any issue, as occurs in the case of Péguy (109).

The apparatus of cultural and historical allusions that sustains this modernist-like postmodernist poem, and which can only be hinted at in a Project such as this one, contributes to its monumentalism, thus making it into what Hill himself called a "wilderness of retrospection" in his poem entitled "Lachrimae Antiquae Novae," belonging to his 1978 collection, *Tenebrae*. Such monumentalism generates lines of critical thought that sound

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<sup>11</sup> In his article on Hill's poetry, written in 1972, the poet Jon Silkin had already recognized how certain critics were accusing Hill of being "mandarin," while not recognizing how, in being "ubiquitous[ly]" ironic, Hill was simply being enigmatic, thereby drawing attention to the need to be in a state of preparedness, critically speaking, so as to face up to scenarios involving multiple contradictions. One such scenario would be represented, eleven years later, in the exploration of the inscrutable figure of Charles Péguy.

highly presumptuous in the face of the stylistically and thematically rich macro-poem created by Hill, thoughts, moreover, which are related to how this poem being dealt with seems to be the last major long poem in the history of letters belonging to the pre-digital age. For this reason, within the context of this inevitably limited study, involving the need to come to terms with the combined figures of Péguy and Hill, what becomes movingly and spine-chillingly relevant (and without this Project aiming to seem conservative in any way whatsoever) is the following thought, when applied to the postmodern era of the new millennium, as expressed by Péguy himself in 1910: “Nous somme les derniers. Presque les après-derniers. Aussi tôt après nous commence un autre âge, un tout autre monde, le monde de ceux qui ne croient plus à rien, qui s’en font gloire et orgueil” / “We are the last ones. Almost those who come after the last ones. Right after us begins another age, a completely different world, a world of people who no longer believe in anything and who are proud of it” (Péguy, 1910). Without wishing to seem pretentious, then, this Project, by tracing a cultural graph, has attempted to share its appreciation of how Hill’s postmodern elegy struggles with the challenging issue of highlighting a cultural point of reference (represented not only by Péguy’s art, but also by his system of values) in an Age, that of the late twentieth century, in which points of reference are undermined at every turn, as a result of an ethos (which need not be considered a negative phenomenon) based on multi-perspectivism.



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