

Samuel Magnus Hill - Poems Translated into English
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Introduction
by
Lars Nordström

Samuel Magnus Hill (1851–1921) holds the distinction of being the only person (so far) to have ever published a volume of poetry in Swedish in the state of Oregon. Hill's chapbook, entitled *Uggletoner i vargatider* [Laments in the Time of the Wolf] was published in 1916 in Portland, Oregon, at the poet's own expense. The release ad appeared in *Oregon Posten* on August 30, 1916.

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Even though Hill's chapbook contained poems on a number of different themes, it mainly argued ironically and satirically against the senseless death and destruction generated by World War I.

In 1915 Hill was on a sabbatical/early retirement in Oregon, and it gave him time to write. Judging from the surviving number of poems dated from this period, his literary output increased significantly. He was also busy trying to find a publisher for his recently completed translation into English hexameter of Virgil's *Æneid*, a publisher which he never found.

Ever since his college days at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, where he graduated in 1879, Hill had enjoyed expressing himself in writing. His articles, commentaries, poems, and songs were published in various Swedish-language newspapers and magazines across the United States. He wrote almost exclusively in Swedish, and, as is common with so many academic writers, irony was often employed in his poetry. In 1890, a selection of religious poems were published in an anthology of four Swedish poets entitled *Fyrväplingen: valda stycken* [The Four-leaf Clover: Selected Pieces]. It was published by *Omaha-posten* [The Omaha Post], a Swedish-language newspaper in Nebraska.

Samuel Magnus Hill's writings were very much an expression of his beliefs and convictions, and to a great extent his personality had been shaped by his youth in Sweden from which he emigrated with his family at age 17. In his early years he had experienced extreme poverty, discrimination due to his family belonging to the Pietist movement, and living at the bottom of a class society with a set of rigid rules intended to preserve the status quo. As the first part of his unpublished biography makes clear, he saw Sweden as a society that would never offer him any possibility of advancement. These circumstances were powerful factors that shaped his view of the world, and they often surface in his poetry. By working hard and becoming a college professor first at Gustavus Adolphus College and then at Luther College, Hill became a life-long advocate of the importance of education, of personal effort, and striving.

For many years, Samuel Magnus Hill worked as one of the literary editors of the Swedish language magazine *Ungdomsvännen* [Youth's Friend], which was published on and off in various places (Chicago, Minneapolis, and Rock Island) between 1879 to 1918. During his 1901 trip back to Sweden, Hill attempted to contact a number of prominent Swedish authors, politicians, and religious leaders, and after his return to Nebraska, he introduced many of them to the Swedish-American readers of the magazine. He wrote to the well-known Swedish Socialist Hjalmar Branting, and he entered into a correspondence with author and first woman Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, Selma Lagerlöf. Hill tried first to interest Lagerlöf in co-authoring a new book on teaching grammar, then he tried to

persuade her to come to America to write a novel about the Swedish Americans. Hill offered to help organize a tour across the United States, and to connect her with prominent individuals and institutions, but as we know, nothing ever came of Hill's efforts: Selma Lagerlöf never made the trip across the Atlantic.

Hill was clearly also attracted to some of the Socialist ideas of his time—and perhaps influenced by the muckraking journalism of the early 20th century—and shared the Socialist resentment of inherited wealth and power. He also resented imperialism, especially the activities of the British Empire, and saw war (again like many of the Socialists did) as a struggle between different powerful economic interests, which caused nothing but suffering for ordinary poor people. From Hill's surviving letters, we learn that he worked tirelessly to influence American politicians to remain neutral in World War I, and the US decision to enter the war clearly disillusioned him.

The poetry Hill wrote in Oregon following his *Uggletoner i vargatider*, was never gathered into second volume. Almost all of the poems from his last years falls into one of two categories: quickly assembled occasional verse on everyday community events such as deaths, birthdays, and wedding anniversaries, and more personal poems marked by homesickness for Sweden, resignation, the madness of poverty, war, inequality, injustice, and a deep yearning for God. Samuel Magnus Hill kept writing, and the poems piled up in his drawer. They are now preserved in the Samuel Magnus Hill Collection at the Swenson Center at Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois.

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Part I: Memories from Sweden

Ottarsmaja
Ottarsmaja, I remember her well,
 because she was my grandmother.
Misunderstood and mocked for what she held to be true,
 she lived and died in her faith.
She was the local schoolteacher
 and she sat at her distaff and spun,
and every now and then she plied the yarn—
 while the fire burned in the hearth.

That's where I learned my ABCs.
 I just sat there and listened
because I was too young to be given homework,
 but I still learned all the lessons.
Word got around in the area
 that I must be a prodigy,
that whatever happened I would one day

become a learned and competent man.

Ottarsmaja, I remember her well,
the only one in those parts
who was called a pietist. She had an acquaintance,
a single friend who brought solace,
Maja i Vännerbjörk was her name.
She lived far away,
but both of them were as one in their faith,
and as one they also received scorn and derision.

Once a year they got together
as long as they had the strength to walk.
But Ottarsmaja was placed on a bier,
and then the other was left alone.
However, she did not become lonely, because
many more had their eyes opened.
“The aberration” spread more and more
in spite of threats, mockery, and derision.

And so the message came to us one day
that grandmother now was gone.
We had to walk there, father, mother and I,
and they took turns carrying me.
I was two weeks into my seventh year
and the road was long and hard.
When we finally reached the Svärfvare house
I saw my grandmother on a bier.

Old grandmother, I remember her well,
lying there cold in the coffin.
And the coffin had to be carried, because the road was steep.
It was the first funeral procession
I ever experienced; I still remember it clearly
fifty eight years later.
And the future often reveals what
someone who is faithful down here is capable of.

And Maja i Vännerbjörk I later met
every now and then in Ryd and Sund.
The old woman was no longer as alone
as she had been before when she prayed.
She prayed and preached, sang and prayed,
and often mentioned
how exceedingly happy she always felt in the past
when my grandmother came to visit her.

January 24, 1915. My grandmother died January 24, 1857, and was buried a week later on a Sunday. It was the first funeral I ever experienced.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

* * *

The Tenant Farmer's Son

I was born a tenant farmer's boy
and I will never become anything else.
I carry the tenant farmer's brand,
and reprimands still echo in my head.
Shivering I stood with my cap under my arm,
fearing a beating I dared not grumble,
I did not dare to show my simmering resentment;
I did not dare to utter words about freedom.

"Have we done enough?"
that was the question everyone worried about.
Already as a boy I longed
to give the powerful tyrants a blow.
I did not rack my brain about how to do it,
but it was clear that something had to be done.
It seemed futile to resist the obstacles,
the way I saw it, those in power were too strong.

Suddenly a possibility opened up,
the land in the west rose noble and free.
The spiteful, reprimanding snobs stopped bothering me,
and youth's enthusiasm predicted so much ...
The future waved at me; I looked to the west,
as the iron horse reached its goal, Gothenburg.
The anchor was hoisted; the young man had no clue
of the happiness and sorrow that would meet him.

Much I have found and much I have wasted
in the land of freedom, things I would never have believed.
Reprimanding devils have been found here as well
where the god of freedom should have lived undisturbed.
One finds tenant farmers in America too,
the temperament of wild beasts emerge here as well.
But the flame of freedom burns stronger,
and work is not reviled as something shameful.

Tenant farmer slaves, listen:

my heart of hearts belongs to you.
Go dig the tyrants' graves soon,
because I want to help with a shovelful.
So let us become equals, not masters!
One will stand up for all, and all for one!
The rule of masters only aggravates;
equal and free, that is to be our password.

May seventeenth, 1915.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 3.]

Note:

The date of composition, May 17, is the Norwegian day of independence (from the Danish constitution).

Part II: Impressions of America

One Ought to Live a Higher Life

One ought to live a higher life,
a life that belongs to the soul!

Nah, that's just passing the time
for anyone who knows what's good for him!
To eat, sleep, and be comfortable,
this is, after all, the most fortunate fate.

No, give me the life of a pig any day,
that's the way to have it good.

From now on I will be a wise man
and throw all my sorrows away.

Why carry the yoke of burden
when life is so short?

I don't want to reach the higher spheres,

carefree I want to walk through life,
in every way I want to live like a true pig,
be nothing but indolent and quiet.

Grand Junction, Iowa, October 12, 1898.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

* * *

Ode to Routines

Routine, oh routine,
 oh, what are you going to do?
In the same old beaten track
 you always want to lead us.
You never tolerate anything new,
nothing shall ever be altered.
In your dark and crowded cab
 there is no room to move.

When you see something
 that might stir up excitement,
you can give it a cold shower
 and put the fire out.
Avoid all that is new like the plague,
but most of all that piece of news
that says that what is old, is not the best.
 Isn't that enough?

The way it was for father and grandfather
 that's the way it shall remain.
Keep everything as it was,
 that's the only way to gain composure.
The routine is your pleasure,
just stay calm and satisfied.
You should never have to be forced
 to banish your treasure.

Well, Mr. Routine, you better
live on forever.
In the same old groove you know
the wheel will turn.
If it doesn't, it might derail,
contrary to the nature
of every man and beast—
and send us our deliverance!

[Published in Ungdomsvännan, Årgång XXIII, No. 9, September 1918, s. 215.]

* * *

The Count

I remember the man with the high forehead,
he stood there, pale and thin, reserved and stiff,
he, who in bygone days had been a different person,
was now nothing but a shadow of his former self.

He speaks slowly, nothing is no longer urgent,
and he has nothing to live for.
He could have been a brother of King Oscar;
but memories just cause pain—no one touches them.

He speaks of his Agnes with great delight,
she was his wife in his prosperous days.

The evening of his life sinks into shadows,
but he still retains this sunny memory.

But what he himself and she had been,
well, that remains his secret, not easily betrayed.

I don't ask, because he who has experienced grief,
for him also is grief readily understood.

He had served, he said, at the royal court.

What could have forced him away?

Was he misled by obsequious praise,
was slick flattery what he had learned?

Rivers of champagne flow there,
and whirling dancers joyfully gambol
while trying to kill the boredom of time.

Yes, that's when life might fall apart.

The newspapers carried a story from Stockholm,
about a manor, an entailed estate,
where the last of the family line was now dead.
It wasn't known where the nearest kin lived.

It was a courtier with the rank of a count,
and his family, his age and all his manners
were perfectly described. We became much obliged
to those back home for the news we received.

And eventually, from a Swedish paper in Ohio,
there was a short paragraph:
A man had died there, someone who had seen better days;
he was, in his own way, just a pauper.

And these two I now add together:
That pauper, was he the man so reserved and stiff?

I am not dressing up the story of his life,
his secret belonged to no one but himself.

This country has been a place of refuge
for many a driven, poor and laboring son,
and many have escaped scorn and derision and have
traveled full of hope to the land in the west.

But from the royal court and from Sweden's upper classes
no one except the ruined ones come,
because the barrier of their rank makes things worse:
the ignominy of work, the crime of poverty.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

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A Contemporary Mary Magdalene

She stood as Mary Magdalene once did,
 waiting to receive her sentence.
She was no longer happy, no longer pure,
 and the future seemed so dreary and empty.
And every woman's eye was sharp,
 they did not remember that she was a sister.
Excitedly they began to whisper and gossip:
 "Just look at the dress the wretch is wearing!"

And the judge sat there so ominous and glum.
 Why should that wretch be brought before him?
It could have been fate—oh no, it was chance,
 which so often makes fools out of people.

He sat as a judge and had to sentence a woman
 who had sacrificed her honor and her chastity.
But he was the seducer—would she hide
 his crime and simply think of her own shame and embarrassment?

That was what she ought to do, since propriety
 decreed it, and it is the law of society.
She certainly remembered that evening of dancing
 when she was delightfully held and whirled around.
She remembered the party, the wine, the laughing and talking,
 but then came the dimness, when her eye became dull.
Still she could hear the tittle-tattle, the sneers and the grinning,
 and now the seducer sat on the judge's bench.

"A fifty dollar fine and off to jail!"
 Yes, that was the verdict, she heard it clearly.
But bitterly she thought: What a breed of hypocrites,

what do they care about a poor sinner's soul?
She thought about her childhood, her mother and their hovel,
that she, because of poverty, hunger and destitution—
But in despair she suddenly broke her bonds:
“No, you are the guilty one!” Then she was dead.

What noise and din! Fainting women and
the judge's wife screaming hysterically.
Flashing eyes from the priestesses of Cupid,
and the trembling judge, pale as a corpse.
Tell me, was it chance? Tell me, was it fate?
No, this time it was God showing his power.
Because many “fallen ones” who have “fallen” for bread,
have made many eminent persons “fall down.”

March 6, 1914. Submitted to Nya Idun [a magazine].

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 3.]

* * *

America

They boast a great deal about equality,
they loudly proclaim that you are free.

Without answering I'd rather swallow my annoyance
and not pay attention to our slavery.

Here, gold measures human worth,
here, everything is right as long as it succeeds,
here, food is given the highest value,
weak ones are crushed by the iron heel.

We are not tormented by aristocrats,
we don't sigh under a king!

Nonsense! Here we are ruled by rascals,

the power of the multi-millionaires is oppressive.

Politics is merely a system of plundering,
the penniless become downtrodden
and honesty seems to have left us,
and those who steal gain honor and power.

No, my friend, you won't find paradise here,
here too there's a difference between rich and poor.

You change your name and receive the prize,
and praise yourself so heartily.

Yes, the race of Adam lives here too
and sin rules here as well.

The beautiful land that your eyes saw,
lies far away and high above the sky!

[From the anthology *Amerika-Svensk Lyrik genom 100 år, 1848-1948* [100 Years of Swedish-American Poetry, 1848-1948], edited by Martin S. Allwood, 1949.]

* * *

Übermensch

I stand, by far the foremost on earth,
gazing at the human multitudes.

I walk scornfully and haughtily through the misery,
unmoved by the cries of the wretched.

Resistance is crushed wherever I advance,
dead men do not disturb with their grumbling.

No one can contain power,
everything is trampled under my foot.

I despise the small ones who crawl. They
simply exist so that I can live well.

You may find all kinds of faults with the law,
weakness alone is a crime.

The riffraff should know that power equals right,
the only right there is.

I alone decide both means and ways,
an objective is good when it is achieved.

People's children are my slaves,
whatever they have is mine.

Frugally they earn their own food;
I enjoy their fruits for free.

Day after day I whip their sons to keep moving,
my arm never tires.

The daughters of the people offer me the treasure
of their beauty and the pleasure of their presence.

Those who crawl shall be forced. Am I not God?

Who could become my superior?

Everything shall obey the rules of my reign,
I alone am free.

Tranquilly I gaze down from the heights;
the river of humanity flows swiftly.

I am the ruler, peace surrounds me,
as I quench their laments in blood.

[From the anthology *Amerika-Svensk Lyrik genom 100 år, 1848-1948* [100 Years of Swedish-American Poetry, 1848-1948], edited by Martin S. Allwood, 1949.]

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Saint Hoover

Saint Hoover, listen to us!
Listen to us, we are starving, and little ones die.
The cows in the barn have no hay.
What will divert our worries and sorrows?
The war destroys us completely.

Listen to us, Saint Hoover!
Now all the power is placed in your hands,
you alone rule in this land.
Send your message from shore to shore,
don't you know what we need?

You fixed the price on wheat,
now set a price on the boy's blood too,
strengthen their vibrant, youthful courage.
Build a monument to their memory,
help the cowards and the weak.

For a long time to come
your name will be honored.
It is because your laws
that not more people had to starve to death,
or sell their sons and daughters as slaves.

Hail to thee, Saint Hoover!
Your name deserves the worship of a saint.
Millions have been nourished by your care.
You have taught frugality to many that were unwilling,
of this there are thousands of examples.

The children of the future will worship you.

You have proven what so few believed:
that poverty is not the result of laziness,
but that the princes of plundering have lined their
pockets through the power of their wealth.

Saint Hoover, lead us!
You can show us what just laws are:
For each and everyone who wants to satisfy his hunger,
oblige him by putting him to work.
That's when justice will be with us.

S.M.H. One of Hoover's admirers.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

Note:

Herbert Hoover, 1874 –1964, the thirty-first US President (1929 – 1933). Hill passed away in 1921, eight years before Hoover became President, so this poem praises Hoover's work as head of the US Food Administration during the World War I. During the war, Hoover succeeded in reducing the food consumption needed overseas while avoiding rationing at home, yet also managing to keep the Allies fed. After the armistice Hoover directed the American Relief Administration and organized shipments of food for starving millions in central Europe.

* * *

The Riddle of the Sphinx

The overpopulation problem is the riddle
that still remains unsolved:
a virile nature leads to a multitude of mouths, but
it is not as productive when it comes to food.

The existing solution is hunger and pestilence,

and war as a last resort.

No one, however, likes that very much, because
it has a terrible taste of cruelty.

Lions and tigers have a nature like this, they take
their nourishment
simply by asserting the right of the strongest;
occasionally they even attack people.

But the law of the predator seems too base. Our
sages and statesmen
have pondered to find a way, but
so far they have searched in vain
for a solution to the riddle, and
yet they have read it:

“If thine eyes offend thee, or thy hand

or thy foot,

cut it off.” That is certainly the answer,
even though it is abstruse and enigmatic.

You’ll find the key in God’s identical words, and
the key is love,
love of the children, and of
the unborn generations.

Tell the Sphinx that, watch his face, and
he will wink his assent.

The overpopulation problem is solved, and its
password is Christ.

“Alas, mankind will not be saved,
unless Christ saves it.”

[From Uggletoner i vargatider, 1916.]

Note:

It is obvious from Hill's writings that the over-population problem was something that he frequently thought about. The biblical reference is somewhat freely quoted from Matthew 5:28 - 30, which states the traditional Christian solution of sexual urges by advocating abstinence. In this matter Hill did not side with the Socialists, who instead argued for readily available means of birth control.

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Sweatshops and Cannon Fodder

Too many cooks spoil the broth,
 too many mouths lead to empty plates.
If I could only stuff this proverb
 into the itinerant farm workers' heads.
Morning and evening you hear
 that one ought to have a lot of children—
It is the fate of the poor—not of the rich—
 that only slave woman become mothers.

Often I have heard it said: The more mouths,
 the more blessings, the more food.
I suppose what I proclaim must be a lie then,
 that many mouths lead to empty plates.
In marriage the question confronting
 Erik and Maja is: Where will we find it?
The flame of love has burned in vain the day
 Erik and Maja must become itinerant farm workers.

But sweatshops need bodies,
 and Krupp's cannons need fodder.
Whenever dances and games are arranged,
 empty plates are never seen.
Young people delight in the delirium of love—
 Was it calculation? Was it a trick?
But these pleasures cost dearly
 for many a maiden who were seized by the frenzy.

Because next year, when she had become a mother,

she certainly had a darling, but not a man.
Oh daughters of Sweden, what rivers of tears
that have flown! However, the law can
not accuse a woman's honor,
because the sweatshops need bodies.
People smile at innocence and chaste manners,
then the pretty one is offered up for pillaging.

Daughters of Sweden, who will bring you back
to your senses and to complete self-control?
You must extinguish the flame of love
that starts burning when you go dancing.
The country squire does not waste his money—
his gift is paid in flesh and blood.
When farm girls dance with the local farm boys,
the crop of little ones is pretty good.

It is not enough for her to have just one,
more arrive in a similar fashion.
Even if they go hungry, even if they go thirsty,
what does it really matter? She has to accept it.
What about food and clothes? The factory is over there,
that is where they will have to work every day.
But life's happiness has left them,
their hope is crushed and their wills are weak.

For the love of mankind we try to fill their stomachs,
try to alleviate the needs of the destitute
with the thin syrupy soup of charity
and the bread of compassion.
That is why I proclaim the proverb,
when Erik and Maja must become itinerant farm workers:
Many mouths among the toilers
lead to empty stomachs and empty plates.

You should learn this one lesson:
Too many mouths lead to empty plates.
And I will nag you with this proverb
in every home and wherever there are itinerant farm workers.
Give another kind of fodder and a different kind of stock
to Krupp's cannons and to the sweatshops.

Sweet and innocent children
deserve a better future.

They too, ought to be raised as men and women
and allowed to be human beings.
The guardians of domestic tranquility
ought never be given to Moloch for pillaging.
A woman should not become a breeding animal
just so that she can supply the sweatshops.
She should be the preserver of morality
and then our future's debt will be paid.

Let those who live in our nation's palaces
bring forth their own cannon fodder,
those who have never known hardships, who have
never been forced into the life of itinerant farm workers.
But the daughters of drudgery and the sons of hard labor
rarely earn enough for bread of their own.
In the end poverty crowns them
with the parsimonious allowance given to servants.

You love God; do you love your neighbor?
The unborn are also counted among them.
When starvation and want visit your home,
then courage is of little avail.
When a mother is driven to murder her child,
in despair of having no food,
will not these words be heard then:
"Too many mouths lead to empty plates"?

Rainer, Ore. [sic] June 17, 1916. [Rainer is located in Washington state, not Oregon.]

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

Notes:

Krupp was the name of a German arms manufacturer.

It is clear that Hill saw that having many children simply meant increasing hunger and poverty for the poor. He also realized that it was their children who ended up in factories and armies, and suspected that this was somehow orchestrated by the wealthy ruling class. As in the previous poem, Hill's view was that the solution to the problem was abstinence—not birth control—on the part of women. A paternalistic view permeates this sermonizing poem in that it addresses women and admonishes them to refrain from sexual activity, while ignoring the men's responsibility. Compared to "A Contemporary Mary Magdalene" this poem presents a much narrower view.

Elsewhere Hill also advocated that in order to keep the family small, young men should marry older women who were past their prime child-bearing age.

Part III: Antiwar Poems

I cannot
I cannot sing and praise the god of war,
 I cannot see that might makes right.
I cannot bring offerings to Moloch.
 I cannot, I simply cannot.
I cannot accept that people hate each other
 like neighbors speaking different languages.
I do not believe that boys are born to feed
 the damned, insatiable hunger of cannons.

I cannot remain silent when women are violated
 and babies are speared upon the nearest pole,
and genius and skill are turned to generate curses,
 I do not think that the earth's blessed are those who die.
I cannot praise the thoughtless madmen who
 threw their cigars into the powder-keg.
They cannot even count the number of sighs and tears
 that they have caused generation upon generation.

I cannot praise those statesmen who use violence and force
 as the foundation of nation-building.
Because violence will be crushed by the Avenger's sledge,
 Christ will not make a pact with Belial.
I cannot understand how war is supposed to elevate,
 ennoble, and educate the race of men.
Who is content with the law of the predator?
 Who admits that the highwayman alone is right?

I cannot believe that all power belongs to Satan
during these last days of our time.
Because the Lord of the World is also the Lord of Leviathan,
He holds the rudder and remains there.
No, Moloch has broken down the gates of Hell,
deluge upon deluge of curses pour out.
All the praise of the god of war originates from Beelzebub,
but who will dam the deluge?

The Prince of Peace rules, and he alone will
justly judge around the earth.
Only the bonds of love can unite nations,
only the law of love will satisfy us.

The day of peace, August 13, this cursed year 1914.

[From Uggletoner i vargatider, 1916.]

* * *

The Sacrificial Act

One evening I saw the sacrificial act
of the hyphenated Americans for their newly won
homeland. What a cruel transformation!
It was enough to set every heart on fire.
A group of young khaki boys
genuflecting around the curved altar:
“Dear God, mercifully preserve
the hallowed sacrifice of this moment!”

Keepsake gifts, a last will and testament
and a soldier's catechism

reinforced the seriousness of the ceremony;
 none of the boys was a milksop.
In the wildest confusion of battle,
 when death rages and Satan smiles,
they will be able to think about their fathers' sky.
 Christian soldiers! What more do you want?

I envisioned the bloody rags of the khaki boys
 scattered in the mud of the trenches,
and all the horrors of hell, and I wondered:
 Will the devils themselves throw up?
So horrible and disgusting it cannot be described,
 that sacrificial altar to which they walk.
No, they do not walk, they must be forced.
 The money grabbers push them.

The war has created thirty thousand
 millionaires in this country.
Our military dealings, let them go;
 the eager supporters of freedom are put in irons.
Gold, gold holds the supreme power,
 there is little regard for a human life.
Who will stop the sacrificial act now?
 Pull the knife from Abraham's hand?

Dear Lord, what crazy madmen!
 To make money out of human blood!
See the stacks of corpses and stretchers
 that fill the field where the battled raged!
Dear Lord, you have the supreme power,
 man will give everything for his life.
You can stop the sacrificial act now,
 pull the knife from Abraham's hand.

As I watched the farewell party for the thirteen boys who were drafted
from our congregation in Tacoma, Ore. [sic] Sunday Oct. 21, 1917. [Tacoma is located in Washington
state, not Oregon.]

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

Note:

When Hill uses the expression the “hyphenated immigrants,” he is referring to the Swedish-Americans.

Hill shared the view of many on the political left that the war was promoted by a circle of industrialists and manufacturers who stood to gain financially from the sale of arms and munitions. Hill also always argued strongly against the principle “might makes right,” what he often referred to as “the law of the predator.” Perhaps Hill’s later disillusionment in life stemmed from his view in this poem that God had the power to stop this, but—as became obvious as the war raged on—did not, perhaps indicating that it was indeed the financial interests that had the supreme power.

Part IV: The Final Years
On My Sixty-Third Birthday

How empty and cold life is here,
absolutely nothing amuses me!

Toil and trouble is all there is,
and joy is always postponed.

What is our life?

A mere shadow.

And fighting and quarreling
is always our lot.

How empty and cold life is here, absolutely nothing amuses me!

I thought things would get better,
when the days of old age arrived.

I was supposed to be free from sorrow
in the circle of children and flowers.

But sorrow consumes
my body and soul.

My future is

not filled with hope.

I thought things would get better, when the days of old age arrived.

O Lord, I take refuge in you;
you are my only hope.

Lovingly you direct everything,
everything will serve what is good,
for those who put
their trust in you,
on the path of the future,
in the night of the future.

O Lord, I take refuge in you; you are my only hope.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 2.]

Note:

There are two slightly different versions of this poem in the Swenson Center Archive, Augustana College Hill collection, one in Box 4, folder 2, and one in Box 4, Folder 3. The latter contains a note written in Hill's handwriting: "Mel[odi]. Vid Jesu hjärta, där är rum." Since Hill was born in 1851, this poem would presumably have been written in 1914.

* * *

The Oregon Song

Oregon, Oregon, glorious are thy mountains,
beautiful, picturesque forest and hill and dell.

Glacier-clad, snow-bedecked source of all thy fountains,
nestingly, restingly, romance alone can tell.

Whispering in the tree-tops, and
glistening in the brook-side, the
balmy, soothing zephyr invites us here to dwell.

River-swept, ocean-bound, roar of the waves majestic,
crater lakes, waterfalls, cliffs of artistic mould,
climate salubrious, homelike and so domestic,
centuries made thee whose story was never told.

Sportingly in the brooklet,
cavortingly in the river,
the finny world entices the angler as of old.

Step aside, far and wide! Here come the Oregonians!

Free [we] are near and far until our mountains fall.

Sylf and sprite now invite: "Come and be Oregoni[a]ns!

Room we have, boom we have, here is a place for all.

Here you can build your mansion, and
here you can plant your vineyard!"

The fisherman and the hunter give answer to the call.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 1.]

Note:

This song is one of the few originally written in English. There is no remaining notation attached to this song.

* * *

Greeting to Sweden

From the idyllic Karlsborg Valley
carry our greeting to Sweden.

Speak of childhood memories, speak
of the Swedish Diaspora.

Swedes in the east, north, and south,
Swedes by the roaring waves in the West.

We were Swedish-born, and our love still glows
as we industriously march to victory.

Could we forget our childhood days?
Forget the soil where our cradle stood?

Aren't Swedes still forced to leave because of preposterous laws,
leave the places they walked as children?

Even so, Sweden is that land on earth
where we first learned our mother's name,
and Sweden is that distant Nordic land
rising up as the most beautiful in the mind's eye.

Tell those back home that Swedish hearts
still beat warmly for their native country.

Tell them that longing and the pain of being a stranger
is not always considered a noble virtue.

Foolish brats who don't know very much,
they don't feel the hidden suffering of homesickness,
so they become bold and tease the singer
as he celebrates the valleys of his native land.

Say hello to our people in the great North,
they have defended law and order
while the wild animals have raged around half the world.
The eagle of war is probably well fed by now.

Yet only laws can build a land,
laws that are also true and just.
Only then will peace and tranquility be secured,

so that each and every one can become a man of peace.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 4.)]

Note:

This undated poem must have been written fairly late since it is sent out from Oregon. The reference to “the eagle of war” being “well fed” suggests that it was composed toward the end of (or after) World War I. The poem hints at some grudge Hill apparently held against certain laws in Sweden causing emigration—laws which he apparently felt were not “true and just.”

* * *

In the Pretty Karlsborg Valley

In the pretty Karlsborg valley
we celebrate midsummer,
while the cedar, fir and alder
dazzle at its very best.

Unaffected by time’s voices,
a monument of nature,
and behind the eastern mountains
snowy Mount Hood sits in state.

In the forest’s dusky bosom,
unseen and slightly furtive,
we breathe the sudden fragrance of
Linnea borealis.

We remember the flower king
in the color of the rose
everywhere in our valleys,
everywhere in our hills.

Now when the flowering has come
to the gentle countryside,
let us remember dearly the
places the pilgrims have seen.

Let us never, never forget,
everything their courage met,
dreaming about the northern lands,
where their cradle once rocked.

Mel. "Fjäriln vingad är [sic] på Haga"

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 4.]

Note:

Karlsborg was the only organized Swedish "colony" in the state of Oregon. It was founded early in the 20th century by Rev. Carl J. Renhard and actively promoted the settlement of Swedes up through the 1920s. The name of the existing post office was Colton, the name the community bears today. Hardly a valley, Karlsborg was located fairly high up in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains, about 30 miles south of Portland. Samuel Magnus Hill is buried in the Lutheran Pioneer Cemetery in Colton.

This song uses the well-known melody of Carl Michael Bellman's (1740 – 1795) famous song "Fjäriln vingad syns på Haga." The scheme of the eight syllable line followed by a seven syllable line has been kept in the translation, even though the rhymes have disappeared in order to preserve the meaning of Hill's text.

Hill's use of the word "furn" in the Swedish text is one of the few instances of "Swenglish" in his poetry. The word does not refer to a pine (fura in Swedish), but to the most common evergreen in Western Oregon, the Douglas fir.

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Among Stumps and Logs

I spend my days among stumps and logs,
on my peaceful hill in the woods.
I saw on a log, then work for a while
on clearing the land for the plow.
And while I carry out my task,
some thoughts arise in my mind.
I find satisfaction in my toil,
because the muse is still with me.

The giants have competed with each other
in a wild dance and with great hullabaloo.
But the day is peaceful and won't last long,
and there is nobody to criticize what I do.
So I split and saw for a while,
and roll my log around.
As I do this I make a song
that will wander among my friends.

I have heard the owls in the boundless forest,
they seem familiar with the wolves.
And the tunes I've written, they
would be enough to make us ready for prison.
Because truth can not stand the liar's children,
the goal of profiteering is nothing but a prostitute.
I prepare the soil for spade and plow,
and my friends are stand by me.

When the fools make noise I think like this:
They advertize their polished manners.
So leave them alone, yes, let them go on,
it is not worth arguing with them.
If you ground them like kernels in a mortar,
every single limb—you would still not find
any consideration or understanding;
solely for the sake of madness do they exist.

Should one sympathize with a herd of fools
who end up devouring each other?
No, the fool is like the gardener's billy goat,
and you don't want to quarrel with him.
He is nothing but an animal; he has no sense.
One does brilliantly following one's own nature!
I split and saw and roll my log,
but madness I can not fathom.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 3.)]

Note:

In the last stanza of this poem, Hill plays with the old Swedish expression "sätta bocken till trädgårdsmästare," [make the billy goat the gardener], that is, give someone a task for which he is very poorly suited, by suggesting that the billy goat also has such a bad temper that he is dangerous as well. It is reminiscent of the English expression "make the fox guard the hen-house."

* * *

The Emigrant's Homesickness

Oh, dear native land,
to which I so often long and yearn,
this Nordic childhood home,
it is so beautiful in my mind.

Oh, little cabin, which meant so much to me,
when will I get to see you again?
As I walk here crying by myself,
you are such an innocent memory.

There is no other place on earth
more beloved than one's childhood home.
Oh, how I long to return to the North,
yes, how gladly I would walk back home.

Melodi: Mellem bakker och bjerg invid havet.

[Augustana College, Swenson Center Archive, Hill Collection, Box 4, Folder 4.]