

## GEOFFREY HILL: "ARTIST-POET-MAN"

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As subjects of different areas of Geoffrey Hill's work, Offa, King of Mercia, Brand, the protagonist of his version of Ibsen's play of the same name and Charles Péguy, the French poet who lived between 1873 and 1914, are symbols of the "ego" of Hill himself. Offa as "monarch-tyrant/kingman", Brand as "martyr/saint-pastor-man" and Péguy as "artist/national heropoet/soldier-man" reflect the fundamental problem which Hill, like all poets, encounters. It is a dilemma which is born as a result of the dichotomy that exists within the poet's "persona" between egoism and altruism, and between individuality and tradition, on the other hand. Hill's exploration of the three aforementioned figures also serves as exploration of his own personality and forms part of his attempt to celebrate what he calls in the sixth part of the titlepoem of *Tenebrae* the "true marriage of the self-in-self"<sup>1</sup>.

Offa's personality is explored in *Mercian Hymns*, section XIII of which reads thus:

Trim the lamp; polish the lens; draw, one by one, rare coins to the light. Ringed by its own lustre, the masterful head emerges, kempt and jutting out of England's well. Far from this underkingdom of crinoid and crayfish, the rune8stone's province, Rex Totius Anglorum Patriae, coiffured and ageless, portrays the self-possession of his possession, cushioned on a legend.

Lifted out of the zone of the timeless, the geological time of "crinoid and crayfish", the "coin", itself an art form, reveals Offa "coiffured and ageless". In other words, he is seen to be self-conscious of his political image as king and is also revealed as being inspired by his mythical role as monarch of all England and of all the English. Offa is motivated by his own egoistic ambition, on the one hand, and by his sense of royal grandeur, on the other hand.

These two features of his character are clearly, yet synthetically, emphasized in section XI of *Mercian Hymns*:

Coins handsome as Nero's; of good substance and weight. 'Offa Rex' resonant in silver, and the names of his moneyers. They struck with accountable tact. They could alter the King's face.

Exactness of design was to deter imitation; mutilation if that failed. Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. Value from a sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres.

The fact that Offa both inspires and limits the artistic freedom of his craftsmen, his "moneyers", suggests that he himself is a work of art, being "Offa Rex", and political tyrant: "They struck with account—/able tact. They could alter the King's face." Besides being a verb in this latter sentence, "alter" rings subliminally with the meaning of "second" or "another" as in the Latin adjective "alter". This adjective is "resonant in silver"—meanings reverberate through it as a result of the satisfying malleability of Hill's language. It contains the idea that Offa's craftsmen could literally change the destiny of a nation, besides making the King angry as a result of presenting him with a portrait that did not please him.

As in Ben Jonson's work, the fusion of the Latinate and Anglo-Saxon strands that make up the English tongue is ever-present in Hill's work and especially in *Mercian Hymns*<sup>2</sup>. In this respect the phrase "the rune-stone's province" in XIII is eloquent. The coin portraying Offa belongs to the semimagical zone of the Teutonic Futhorc and, by implication, to Greek, the language of the myths that forms the basis of our culture. On the one hand, "rune" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon noun "run", meaning "secret", which is cognate with the Icelandic noun "run". On the other hand, its etymology links it with the Latin noun "rota". That the round coin is dug from the earth, "the underkingdom of crinoid and crayfish", suggests that it is a symbolic amalgam of the two main strands of English culture: the classical and the Germanic. It represents the mysterious origins of all that is English since it is in and out of time.

"Far from ..." these origins, the coin survives as a work of art that "portrays" the greed of Offa the tyrant-king and his awareness of his own mythical origins as monarch of his nation: "the self-possession of his possession". As a King of once-Roman "province", Offa is aware of the classical tradition that is part of the glorious inheritance of his people and, yet, at times his unpolished "provincialism" prevents him from honouring sufficiently that same inheritance. These aspects of his character are also evident in the relationship between Offa and his nation in section XI: "Exemplary metal, ripe for commerce. Value from a sparse people, scrapers of salt-pans and byres." The preposition "from" is important here since it suggests two ideas simultaneously. It emphasizes the way in which the politically ambitious King Offa has exploited his ignorant population. At the same time it hints at the vote of confidence the inhabitants of his kingdom have given their monarch, especially since they are a proud "people", sparing ("sparse") in their praise. As a nation of "exemplary metal", their personal sacrifice of labour is made altruistically so that their monarch can forge their destiny, which is based upon the need for

"commerce" with Europe. "Value" and "sparse", etymologically linked with Latin and with Anglo-Saxon, reflect the cultural phenomenon which is the English language and, thereby, illumine the personality of Offa as presented in Hill's collection entitled *Mercian Hymns*.

Hill's language enacts the theme of the three-way interrelation of "Art itself works of poetry as representations of Art-Life". "Ringed by" their "own lustre", his "hymns", like "rare coins to the light", are trapped by their own brilliance and, yet, are "exemplary metal, ripe for commerce" between Hill and his readers. Each hymn is a synecdoche of the aforementioned theme. The figure of Offa, characterised by human egoism and by an altruistic sense of national destiny, remains as an imperfect symbol of himself. Precisely because he is a man, he is subject to ambitious desires. He can only become a mythical monarch when dead and thus forming part of royal lineage. Hill, in portraying Offa in his work, has "cushioned" him "on a legend". In other words, he has presented him gloriously while, at the same time, protecting him from too much criticism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, scurrilously taking advantage of the black reputation Offa acquired in his time: "Swathed bodies in the long ditch; one eye upstaring. It is safe to presume, here, the King's anger (XI)."

As a poet, Hill is unable to present the real Offa, the symbiosis of monarch and authentic man prepared to sacrifice "himself", his kingship, in this case, for his nation. In the same way that Offa uses his "people", so Hill uses the "persona" of Offa for his own ends. "Value from ..." the Offa "legend" is what Hill is after since he is trying to make evident his "own lustre" as a poet. For this reason, he is not an objective historian but, rather, a manipulator of symbols and images. To be a true recorder of history, an impossibility in itself, he would have to sacrifice his own poetic ambition and become a humble "common man". However, to do so, he would have to sacrifice his identity as a poet. The only way to do this would be literally to die (or to die literally) and become the "common man of death", a "Lazarus" for Mankind, a true artist, with a global vision of history, whose own individuality has already been incorporated into the tradition of which he forms a part<sup>3</sup>.

Brand, as a preacher or purveyor of words, is a kind of poet and, as such, is a figure who symbolizes the problem of synthesizing altruism and egoism in the personality of the artist. He himself says in Act One: "I bear the Word ... (p. 9)." The capital "W" identifies him with the poet-voice of Hill's "Genesis" who is concerned with "the miracles of God" and creates a "bloodless myth" in which his art ceases to be relevant to the lives of men (pp. 15,16). Ironically when Brand accuses others of being slaves to their egoistic human condition, he is also displaying his own egoism:

.....  
 if they could but endure;  
 who flee from their dark star,  
 each from his own true self;  
 perish in the world's air (p. 5).

He is martyr “par excellence”. As he says to Einar: “I seek the death of God, that dying God of yours/ dying these thousand years (p. 10).” This startling first line quoted here rings with such exaggerated self-belief that it makes Brand pitiable. His attempt to be holier than the holiest reveals his egoism, a failure of character to which, according to Hill’s poem “Martyrium”, all martyrs are subject: “Clamorous love, its faint and baffled shout, its grief that would betray him to our fear (p. 147).” The martyr’s “love”, or self-sacrifice, cries out for recognition and, as such, loses its truly exemplary quality. Blinded or “baffled” by a grand sense of destiny and, yet, scarcely daring to transmit this feeling of exhilaration, the martyr suffers even more because he is aware of how he should not be seen to be a man who feels pain as a result of his torture. What his “fear” is based upon is a failure on his part to transmit the correct image of himself to others, according to the role of martyr he is playing. He is, therefore, “guilty” of self-concern and, as a result, his is not a true sacrifice.

The confirmation that Brand is preoccupied with his public image comes in Act Two when members of the crowd of peasants he has been addressing give their opinions of the “new Pastor”. One man says, “Priest or not, he’s a man! / knows his own heart and mind; / knows how to take a stand (p. 28).” A little later in this same Act Brand is seen to despise these same peasants:

Like Adam with his guilty face  
staring at nothing, each of them  
bears his blindness and his shame.  
This is no place for nobleness (p. 33).

It is Brand’s image that Agnes praises a little later: “I know what tears you’ve shed / in secret, tears of blood. / You have earned your fame (pp. 52-3).” Brand’s hatred of “compromise” (p. 54) makes his martyrdom obsessively unnatural. It forces itself upon his wife and child. Agnes says to him: “Your voice is like a storm / when you drive a soul to choose / its own poor martyrdom (p. 87).” In this sense, and in another context, the Mayor’s use of the simile “as clever as a priest” (p. 101) is clearly seen to be an ironic reference on the part of Hill to Brand himself.

The “Pastor” of the fjords’ failure is a failure of self-understanding:

Atonement without end,  
guilt with guilt intertwined,  
deadly contagion  
of sin breeding with sin;  
deed issuing from deed  
hideously inbred.  
Right ceasing to be right  
even as one stares at it! (p. 102)

Brand, unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Hill’s *Tenebrae*, martyr under the Nazis, does not know his own place in the scheme of the universe and is incapable of

"pacing out his own citadel" (p. 171). The "Pastor" of the fjords is not a true mystic as a result of his lack of self-knowledge. He exemplifies the problem of "brahman", which has been summed up thus:

Because of avidya (ignorance) the root of  
all troubles, the ego feeling exists. The  
end is liberation and that is achieved  
through a practical realisation of the  
oneness of the self with the Absolute.  
If a person reaches this state he becomes  
"jivan-mukta", i.e. liberated while alive.  
Realising the oneness of all, his life becomes  
one of unselfish service<sup>4</sup>.

Brand's "service" is not "unselfish". His egoism "stares" him in the face and, ironically, makes equivalent his own vision of himself as "God's warrior of world renown" (p. 46) and Einar's description of him as a "Man-of-God" (p. 9). Brand's is a "self-willed paradise" (p. 156) since his search for it is motivated by egoism. For this reason he is a "Man-of-God", an ordinary, culpable human being like anyone else. The desire to be saintly betrays his human condition and makes him into a failed "Pastor". As "saint-pastor-man", Brand, like Offa, is a fundamental symbol in Hill's work.

If Hill presents Brand as an example of failure of vision, he presents Charles Péguy, the French poet who died in the First World War, as an example of vision made reality. The "ego" of the eulogised subject of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* is slightly more complex than that of Offa or Brand. It can be presented thus: "national hero / true visionary-poet / soldier-man".

The concept of words as a form of action which impinges upon the lives of men should be kept in mind when approaching the figure of Hill's Péguy. Such a concept is summed up in the compound "militant-pastoral" employed in section three of Hill's long poem (p. 186). This compound brings together the various facets of Péguy's personality: his political activism, his radically personal version of Catholicism, his military career and his poetic vision. In this same stanza we read: "Yours is their dream of France." The possessive adjective "their" refers to recognisable symbols of an authentically French way of life:

Chateau de Irie 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. (p. 186)

Péguy is being linked with the glories of France's cultural heritage. As such he becomes a symbol of what is truly noble in French life or, in more general terms, he becomes a universal humanistic symbol. As symbol Péguy is likened

to the biblical Joseph, a "Provider" of visions (p. 185), a guide for his fellow men.

His own vision receives sustenance from the rural seclusion and peace of his native Beauce region:

.....  
 and in the fable this is your proper home;  
 three sides of a courtyard where the bees thrum  
 in the crimped hedges and the pigeons flirt  
 and paddle, and sunlight pierces the heart-

shaped shutter-patterns in the afternoon,  
 shadows of fleurs-de-lys on the stone floors.  
 Here life is labour and pastime and orison  
 like something from a simple book of hours;... (p. 185)

Hill recognises that justice would not be done to the figure of Péguy if only this image of a poet seeking "pastoral" retreat were cultivated. It would be a "fable". However, it must be remembered that a "fable" also has an effect upon life as a result of the moral lesson it provides. As if to emphasize the commonplace of the poet whose work impinges upon the lives of men as a result of renewing his capacity as an artist through his contact with the peace of a rural setting, the word "fable" is well-chosen. It is precisely this capacity to serve his fellow men that makes him a true artist since his life is an example of self-sacrifice:

.....  
 and immortality, your measured task,  
 inscribes its antique scars on the new desk  
 among your relics of ivory quartz  
 and dented snuffbox won at Austerlitz. (p. 185)

What immortalizes Péguy is his life itself, his "measured task". This latter phrase indicates how the French poet is one who possesses the courage of his convictions, thus emphasizing his sincerity regarding all his spheres of activity, while also suggesting that Péguy was allotted or destined to undertake the "task" of inspiring his compatriotas. "Footslogger of genius, skirmisher with grace", a line taken from the second stanza of the second section of Hill's poem, enriches further this idea of the poet's simultaneous roles of visionary and sincere craftsman. The "desk" referred to in the earlier quotation, as in "Vocations" and in section X of *Mercian Hymns*, symbolizes the synthesis between the public and private aspects of a poet's personality, between word and action and, finally, between vision and craft.<sup>5</sup>

What is the final irony and what endows Hill's poem with a great sense of

pathos is the emphasis given to the idea that it is Péguy's death which is the most important aspect of his value as a literary figure:

Woefully battered but not too bloody,  
smeared by fraternal root-crops and at one  
with the fritillary and the veined stone,  
having composed his great work, his small body... (p. 195)

The verb "composed" even suggests that the serenity Péguy, the political and religious activist, gains as a result of his death is fruit of the inevitable destiny of a poet who recognizes the importance of self-sacrifice. Since we, the readers, are concerned with the search for symbols to compensate for our own inadequacies, we are actually sacrificing Péguy, the man. We "turn away" from this human being who has "fallen flat on" his "face / among the beetroots" and "contemplate", rather, "the working of the radical soul." (pp. 187, 188). In other words, we, Hill included, are more concerned with his ideas than with his human identity. We have sacrificed him because we are always eager or "dying / To satisfy fat Caritas, those / Wiped jaws of stone", as Hill reminds us in the second sonnet of the sequence entitled "Funeral Music" (p. 71). Here "fat Caritas" is self-love, which is a "stone" monument to our continual desire to idolize ourselves.

The monument referred to in Hill's elegy to Charles Péguy is a war cenotaph, another symbol of Man's hideous egoism:

Drawn on the past  
these presences endure; they have not ceased  
to act, suffer, crouching into the hail  
like labourers of their own memorial... (p. 192)

Here the phrase "these presences" refers to those who have died serving their country and their fellow-men. "Drawn on the past", they have been taken up into History itself and their personal sacrifice is part of the fundamentally human condition to which all men aspire, namely that of helping their fellows. As such, they have been incorporated into a symbol, "the common 'dur' built into duration" (p. 192). Being exemplary, they belong to the realm of Art, symbolized here by the "marble rote" and continue to influence the lives of men despite their death ("... they have not ceased to act ..."). Included amongst them is the humble Péguy: "Péguy's cropped skull / dribbles ites ichor, its poor thimbleful, / a simple lesion of the complex brain" (p. 195).

What it is important to remember is that Péguy does not only continue to relate to us as a historical figure, but also as a part of literary tradition. By making contact with "the fritillary and the veined stone" of the place where he falls on the battlefield, he is also entering the womb-grave of "mother-earth, the crypt of roots and endings", as Hill calls it in section IV of *Mercian Hymns*. As a result he passes through the "darkness of resurrection" and is

incorporated into literary tradition and into a pan-historical dimension: "Dying, your whole life fell into place (p. 11)." As dead, "militant-pastoral" hero he has passed into the zone of myth and become the inspiration of future generations of men. That it is that same inspiration that has breathed life into, or given birth to, Hill's elegiac poem, is a fact that should not be ignored: "... 'in memory of those things these words were born' (p. 196)."

Péguy's sacrifice has literally made Hill's poem possible and has given Life to Art, creating a synthesis between the two. However, this has only been possible because Péguy, being dead, does not exist as a poet himself. Who does exist as a poet is Geoffrey Hill who, as he did in the case of Offa, has manipulated Péguy's "persona" and converted him into a symbol of the capacity of human beings to be authentically human and to serve their fellows. As Christian-soldier and poet, Péguy's life and his art, his practice and his belief, seem to be one and the same. Péguy symbolizes the way in which a man can be a true artist by merely being a poet. He is "artist/visionary-(poet/soldier)-man".

In contrast to the genuine self-sacrifice of the authentic poet, Charles Péguy, contemporary poetas, amongst whom Hill includes himself, as the pronoun at the beginning of stanzas eleven and twelve of section six indicates, have problems at the moment of coming to terms with their identity:

We are the occasional just men who sit  
in gaunt self-judgement on their self-defeat,  
the élite hermits, secret orators  
of an old faith devoted to new wars.

We are 'embusqués', having no wounds to show  
save from the thorns, ecstatic at such pain... (p. 191)

The traditional belief ("old faith") of poets in the capacity of Art to regenerate Life has taken a battering as a result of the philistinism of our century, which sees poets as figures distanced from society ("secret orators") and as a luxury it cannot afford ("élite hermits"). At the end of the twentieth century the "new wars" that poets have to wage are concerned with the fight for the survival of symbolic language in the lives of men.

To make their symbolic language effectively useful to their fellow-men, poets have to be seen as individuals within the poetic tradition to which they belong. Their attempt to do so implies their egoism as individual poets in trying to avoid being swallowed up by that same tradition, to avoid their "selfdefeat", in fact. This is such a basic problem for all poets that the agonies they suffer as a result of the individual-tradition dichotomy are the equivalent of "ecstatic pain" or joy for them. It is the joy of giving birth (with all the pain that such a process involves) to a work of art that enriches the tradition from which they themselves are bred. These rare or "occasional" moments when their Art can be seen to impinge upon Life are soured by the egoism implied in



the satisfaction they feel at having insinuated themselves into tradition itself. However, the fact that they humbly recognize their egoism, or that they are fallen into the "they" of common humanity, means that they are "men" or "just" about men. As such, as Hill himself says, "He may learn to live in his affliction, not with the cynical indifference of the reprobate but with the renewed sense of a vocation: that of necessarily bearing his peculiar unnecessary shame in a world growing ever more shameless. He may rise to be a person in a society of aggregates and items..."<sup>76</sup>. It is as an artist serving his fellows that the poet, Geoffrey Hill, sees himself. His "ego" can be represented thus: "artistpoet-man". The figures of Offa, Brand and Charles Péguy illuminate Hill's own nature through his own exploration of theirs.

#### Notas

1. All references to Hill's work are made with regard to his *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). References to *Mercian Hymns* carry their own section numbers, while quotations from *Brand* are taken from Geoffrey Hill, *Brand: A Version for the English Stage* (London: Heinemann and the National Theatre, 1978).
2. This aspect of Jonson's work is explored in William V. Spanos, "The Real Toad in the Jonsonian Garden: Resonance in the Nondramatic Poetry", in *Seventeenth Century English Poetry*, ed. William R. Keast (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 201-224.
3. The quotations are taken from Hill's poem "History As Poetry", *Collected Poems*, p. 84.
4. K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1978), pp. 83-84, cited in Stephen Wade, "The Orchestration of Monologues: 'The Cocktail Party' and a Developing Genre", in *Agenda*, 23, Nos 3-4 (1986), p. 207.
5. In section X of *Mercian Hymns* the "desk" is Hill's father's and he speaks of it as he remembers it as a child. His incipient awareness of the power of words which are set down while sitting at the desk is suggested here: "He adored the desk, its brown-oak inlaid with ebony,/ assorted prize pens, the seals of gold and base/ metal into which he had sunk his name." Hill's father was a policeman. "Vocations", from *Tenebrae*, has a politician as its protagonist and the desk symbolizes the synthesis of personal feelings and public responsibilities within this protagonist's personality:

While friends defected, you stayed and were sure,  
fervent in reason, watchful of each name:  
a signet-seal's unostentatious gem  
gleams against walnut on the escritorio... (p. 159)

6. Geoffrey Hill, "Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'", in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: André Deutsch, 1984, first published in *The University of Leeds Review*, 21 (1978).