

POETRY IN
REVIEW



P A U L F R A N Z

The English poet Keith Douglas once compared his art to “a man, whom thinking you know all his movements and appearance you will presently come upon in such a posture that for a moment you can hardly believe it a position of the limbs you know.” This conceit about poetry extends itself naturally to the poetic career. What it seems to imply, beyond initial dismay, is a second, dawning perception not of disjuncture but of continuity between the new and the older “postures,” compelling your changed awareness of the person you thought you knew, whom maybe you *did* know, but not consciously as *this* person.

The later poetry of Geoffrey Hill – once variously datable from 1997’s *Canaan*, or 1998’s *The Triumph of Love*, and by now containing distinct phases and subphases – presents several such rearrangements, or shocking *derangements*, of the limbs. *Peer Gynt*, Hill’s first new work in verse to appear since the imposing *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952–2012*, was published in the United King-

“Peer Gynt” and “Brand,” by Henrik Ibsen, translated by Geoffrey Hill (Penguin, 400 pp., \$17 paper)

dom on the day of his death, 30 June 2016, at age eighty-four. A translation, or rather “version . . . based on a literal translation by Janet Garton and edited by Kenneth Haynes,” of the play by Henrik Ibsen, it complements the “version for the stage” of the Norwegian dramatist’s *Brand* that Hill produced for the National Theatre Company of London in 1978. The latter, based on an “annotated literal prose translation” by the now late Inga Stina-Ewbank, has appeared in print twice before. In bringing together these two verse dramas – first published in 1866 and 1867, the successes of Ibsen’s early middle age, before he abandoned the form for prose – the new Penguin edition lets readers compare works that have traditionally been considered foils of each other. It also offers a suggestive parallel for Hill’s own poetic trajectory.

As such, it presents a striking stylistic contrast. In his terse, mannered introduction to the 1996 Penguin *Brand*, whose loss from the new edition should make the earlier a collector’s item, Hill described his attraction to Ibsen’s remark that he “wanted a metre in which I could career where I would, as on horseback.” Hill recounts how his search for an equivalent settled on a fast-moving three-beat line, a foot shorter than Ibsen’s original, but avoiding what he experienced as the tendency of its strict English counterpart to expand into the familiar dramatic pentameter. The result, with its pervasive enjambment and roving irregular rhymes, is dramatic language of consistent high intensity, as much in stray passages as in scenes of overt confrontation. Here is the protagonist, Brand – a dour religious fanatic who feels himself called to preach and live out his stern gospel in a remote mountain village – speaking early in the play:

Now I see where I am:
strangely close to home.
Everything I recall
from childhood here still
but smaller now and much
shabbier; and the church
looks in need of repair.
The cliffs loom; the glacier
juts and hangs: it is an
ice wall concealing the sun.

And for all their rough gleam
 the fjord waters look grim
 and menacing. A small
 boat pitches in a squall.

In the hands of another translator, this would be merely what it is: exposition, revealing the childhood wounds that Hill and, before him, W. H. Auden, have seen as rendering thoroughly ambiguous – because psychologically overdetermined – Brand’s religious calling. But Hill lets these recognitions land with unusual force. The abrupt, typically Hillian verbs – “loom,” “juts and hangs,” “pitches” – extend the psychic landscape in space, just enough to let it encroach. If “The church / looks in need of repair” is a bit top-heavy in its overtones, “strangely close to home” tingles with oxymoron. To the latter we might compare some phrases from Hill’s *Mercian Hymns*, his mythic autobiography of a few years earlier: “‘Not strangeness, but strange likeness. Obstinate, out-classed forefathers, I too concede, I am your staggeringly-gifted child.’” This resonance within Hill’s poetry suggests some overdetermined identification of his own with Ibsen’s protagonist, but with implications flowing both ways. Those lines in *Mercian Hymns* are in quotation-marks, reminding us that Hill’s writing has often been moved to act out voices and echoes. To this extent, it has always been at least incipiently dramatic, perhaps in the mode of the oratorio, though with the glimmer of an impulse toward parody.

How near or far from parody are these lines, the immediately following ones in Brand’s speech?

Down there’s the timber wharf
 and nearby – iron-red roof,
 red-flaking walls – the house
 to which I would refuse
 the name ‘home’ if I could;
 the place where I endured
 harsh kinship, an alien
 life that was called mine.
 Solitude and desire
 magnified what was there.

What the earlier translations by Meyer and in the *Oxford Ibsen* dutifully parcel out into discrete clauses, dramatic in their susceptibility of being illustrated by gestures – “My childhood home! Memories swarm upon me, / And memories of memories” (Meyer); “the widow’s cottage – my childhood home. / Memories and memories born of memories” (*Oxford Ibsen*) – Hill makes into a knot of withholding and revelation. Enjambments widen the gap between what Brand recognizes (“the house”; “an alien / life”) and his attempts to disown them (“the name ‘home’”; “called mine”) that have already been defeated by their syntax, by those relative clauses that might pretend not to know where they’re going, but betray, in their antecedents, where they come from. This is dramatic in its bones.

But we also get hints of a tendency that risks becoming obtrusive. Brand’s last rueful couplet – in fact a medial pause in a speech of some dozen more lines – is poetically and psychologically convincing; it also clearly derives from some lines of Yeats, in “Towards Break of Day”: “My memories had magnified / So many times childish delight.” Where the Irish poet writes, nostalgically but skeptically, of a Sligo waterfall remembered in a dream, Hill’s Brand finds himself more immediately confronted by the paltriness amid which his “grandeur-grandiosity” (Hill’s phrase) first emerged – in an insight against whose implications he can defend himself only by intensifying that quality. Hill’s deployment of this kind of allusion or echo, whether in a mode of skirmishing wit, or more neutrally, like the “bits of pipe” Beckett once claimed he employed in constructing his plays, is a habit he shares with a poet and translator he often strangely resembles, Robert Lowell, whose *Imitations* he reviewed early in his career. In both poets it probably results from a mixture of individual stylistic propensity with the intuition that bringing an author over into one’s own language is not a matter merely of finding more or less satisfactory verbal equivalents, but of setting the foreign text within one’s own cultural-linguistic echo-chamber. This gives a strong valence to what it means to remake a poem in what Lowell calls “live English,” though it can also lead to various kinds of waywardness. One danger is that of producing an alternative translationese to the “thin” variety it was presumably meant to resist. But there is also a lingering question of justification. Does the borrowing work

fingers and anachronistic tag, is that Peer is taking her for a ride, too, and perhaps by extension us, were not the latter transport something they frustrate or complicate. Peer's theatrical caper is superfluous as a way of snapping us out of credulity not merely because his story, briskly rendered by Hill, has been so improbable, nor even, though it comes closer, because "the tarn's face / broke like a mirror" allegorizes the rupture of illusion. There is no illusion to break. The conspicuous, jumpy internal rhymes, the faux folksy "Lordy," the awkward-to-say "palely/belly," the inversion for the sake of rhyme in "rainbows we dip our toes among" undercut not so much Peer's lie as any investment of ours in the fictional reality. Hill's playful style in *Peer Gynt* implies a mode of poetic argument both analogous and opposite to that which he has discerned in *Brand*, where (he argues) "the self-discoveries of the tragic characters Brand and Agnes appear not so much belated as redundant in the face of those discoveries of impetus and inertia made within the medium of the language itself" – opposite, because Ibsen's tale of the folkloric trickster is not about self-discovery, but its avoidance, through Peer's temporizing detours around whatever would bind him to fixity. If this kind of hero doesn't sound very Hillian, one's reservation needs to be counter-balanced by certain apparent stylistic affinities between *Peer Gynt* and Hill's recent poetry. Where his *Brand* seems to present a case of strong, if ambivalent identification on the levels of both character and style, his *Peer Gynt* suggests their disjuncture.

One way in which Ibsen's play represents Peer's lability is in the variety of its verse forms. Short lines occasionally recur elsewhere in the play, and are snappy and effective:

PASSENGER: That great
 silent majority in their ash
 have no time for our vain panache.
 PEER: Off, scarecrow, I'm not dying yet.
 PASSENGER: You're safe for now, at any rate;
 I can assure you, you'll not die
 before act five's peripety.

But Hill has told us that metrical inspiration, this time, came from "a chance reading – in late 2013 – of the fourteeners in Yeats' *The Green Helmet*," and his version tends to feature lines of five or six

beats or more, all of which run long due to his free insertion of unstressed syllables. Where Yeats's fourteeners rhyme in couplets, Hill's rhymes, less aslant than ajar, sometimes come in couplets, but just as often in patterns that could be called either more complex or more erratic. To give a sense of this variety, here are two more passages, both from Act 5. The first comes from a priest's eulogy over a man whose way of life has been what the ancient Greeks called that of the "idiot" – an utterly private man, whose one bold action (witnessed by Peer in Act 3) was to amputate his finger to avoid the draft. Hill's template here is the heroic couplet:

Lad after lad was measured top to toe
 and told 'that for a soldier he must go'.
 The room was full; from outside, in the yard,
 it was the larking of those lads we heard.
 A new name was called out, and in he came,
 pasty as snow gets when it's past its prime.
 They told him to come closer; this he did;
 his right hand wrapped in linen and well hid.
 His Adam's apple retched, could not uncork
 one word in answer to the captain's bark.
 Then finally he croaked out – his cheeks aflame,
 his tongue a-stumble – words that sealed his shame.
 He mumbled something none of us believed:
 a sickle slipping and a finger cleaved.
 The room fell hushed: a miming theatre
 of lips a-pursing, mass caricature.

And here, as an instance of irregular meter and rhyme, is Peer recounting a cabaret performance by the devil:

In San Francisco, where I worked as a gold miner
 everyone was putting on some kind of an act.
 If one of them played a violin with his toes
 another would dance the halling but – it's a fact –
 do it while kneeling, 'Spanish style'. Another shiner
 I heard would compose verses extempore,
 'off the top of his head', I suppose you could say,
 while someone else was drilling through his skull.
 Well, at this charlatans' convention there arrived,

on one occasion, the devil, just to try his luck.
 As it turned out, his one and only trick
 was to grunt like a pig and do it lifelike.
 He had a good sales pitch and so contrived
 to fetch in a fair crowd for his first and only appearance.
 Expectations ran high, and the theatre was full.
 So, on to the stage he strode, an enormous cloak
 billowing around him: '*man muss sich drapieren*',
 as that German proverb says. Of all the confounded cheek!
 He's smuggled in a live pig, swathed in the folds.
 So, the performance starts: the devil gives a squeeze,
 and the pig gives voice, a bit like a bagpipe scolds.
 Its billing was 'symbolical fantasy
 depicting porcine existence bound and free'.
 The coup de théâtre was a kind of wheeze
 as though the pig had felt the butcher's knife.
 And that was that; the artiste took a bow
 and left the stage. Opinion was not wanting.
 Some found the range of voice too narrow,
 others thought the death-squeal untrue to life;
 but all were agreed: as a display of grunting
 the whole performance was quite over the top.

There are striking elements in both passages. In the first, whose military slapstick recalls Hill's far more bitter 1983 *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, we might point to the image of the non-recruit's Adam's apple failing to "uncork," or the line "a sickle slipping and a finger cleaved," which, in rhythm and rhetorical balance, recalls similar incongruous elegances in Pope. The second has a pungent grotesquerie, while also lending itself to being read as something like the translator's pet allegory of self-exculpation, limited as he is by the source text under his cloak. At the same time, neither seems quite to come off. There is here a tinny stage rambunctiousness that is hard to disentangle from a more basic feeling that the language has gone flat. Crammed with small words, perhaps in an attempt at colloquialism ("to fetch in a fair crowd for his first and only performance"), the second passage, especially, has many lines that feel at once slack and hurried, as if scrambling to make an appointment. Particularly disconcerting is

when, trying to make sense of them rhythmically, we race through only to find the rhyme is slant, or has been moved.

Such effects must be assumed to be deliberate. There can be no question here of simple disharmony between Hill's poetic disposition and *Peer Gynt's* tone. Outrageous, grotesque, even repellent forms of performance have been prominent in Hill's own poetry for some time, as it has increasingly adopted the pose of the mimic, caricaturist, or buffoon. Hill was neither unaware of nor immune to modern celebrity cult, whose rapidly circulating images of selfhood could be taken as the "demonic parody" of the acts of commemoration, themselves increasingly glimpsed in snippets, that are central to his work. Of the roles Hill performed both in and out of his verse, that of "England's greatest living poet" was a recurring one – the vacuously repeated publicist's blurb to this extent revealing some interpretive value. The rumored judgment on him of another English poet near him in age – "pomposity, pomposity, pomposity" – must be at least qualified by this evident self-awareness. "Pomp," after all, participates in a semantic field of absurd, theatrical human movements recurring throughout Hill's poetry with about as much frequency as the astonishing, brief images of landscape that have been more often noticed and praised. Here are a few: "new-mated / Lovers rampant in proper delight / When all their guests have gone" (*King Log*, 1968); "In brief cavort he was Cerunnos, the branched god, lightly concussed" (*Mercian Hymns*, 1971); "A puffy satrap prances on one leg / to snap the traitor's sword" (*The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, 1983); "Could they / watch the stiff gallantry jig-jog, go knees up / into, half-over, the wire | follow it and know / this was not farce – whatever else in that line / might get them howling, have them dress ranks / to Chaplin's forwards-backwards fame and luck?" (*Speech! Speech!*, 2000); "Kemp's jig was hard labour – London to Norwich. / I saw a man enact it for an hour, / his stage about the space of a kitchenette" (*A Treatise of Civil Power*, 2007); "I too strut thus amid ruins, / Dogged by wild cadences that obeyed you" (*The Daybooks*, 2007–2012). In this long view, *Peer Gynt's* "So on to the stage he strode, an enormous cloak / billowing about him" seems not so much beyond Hill's range as too comfortably within it, hence tame.

This recurrent motif is a form of clowning, and as such performs a kind of dual proxy work. On the one hand, Hill includes himself in his satire, both through direct (if fictive, or exaggerated) self-representations, and by producing absurd depictions of figures, such as doomed soldiers, whom his poetry tends to treat with profound respect. On the other, Hill's poetry implicates its audience: "made you laugh" as a version of the playground "made you look," whereby we find ourselves indicted. In each case an attitude is subjected to acid scouring. If Hill wishes to temper or counteract the unreflective reverence within the respectful attitude, he also brings to the surface neoliberalism's (or "plutocratic anarchy's") incapacity for reverence. To be a tragic poet today, he implies, is necessarily to be a clown.

Something similar might be at stake in the rhyming that is a defining characteristic of both *Peer Gynt* and the recent *Daybooks*. Hill was partly deaf, and his poetry can metaphorize mishearings – his own and others' – as a variable symbol of inattention, willful or inadvertent, as for instance when, in *The Triumph of Love*, "deaf in the right ear" becomes "definitely the right era." (That Hill dedicates a volume titled *Speech! Speech!* to a friend, the poet David Wright, who was not only deaf but recently deceased, is surely worth considering under this rubric; it suggests a faithful attentiveness more integral than ordinary communication.) Such slips of misspeaking because mishearing can assume the public function of uncovering some ambient psychic connection, a conceit making the poet less a seer than a special kind of hearer. This can place a heavy burden of significance on the chance of rhyme – one that we might find realized in *Brand's* pointedly blasphemous collocation of "paradise" and "parodies." But this is the rare case. For the most part, Hill's approach is intuitive, trusting in slender forms of rightness, though perhaps still relying on a sense of dispersed potential.

Brand's rhyming, as we have seen, is fairly low-key. In contrast, it is difficult to convey briefly the variety of anarchic rhymes or quasi-rhymes in Hill's *Peer Gynt*, where it can feel as if nearly anything might rhyme with anything else. So, in *Peer's* speech on the devil, quoted above, it seems consistent with Hill's practice that "another," in the phrase "another shiner" could rhyme just as well with "miner" as the word it grammatically modifies, the

latter of which awkwardly extends the line and could, with equal consistency, have been displaced to the next. Other rare species include eye-rhymes (“PEER: Ha! Fortune’s favorite, haven’t I though? / Good evening, Herr Pfarrer, the path is rough”); rhymes splitting a word in two (“AASE: You brute! / PEER: It’s hard to keep your foot- / ing here, ’s all weeds and mud”); and rhymes of one word with two or more words, also known as “mosaic rhyme” (“perish” / “parade-square-ish”). Precedents for these techniques can be found in the comic, semi-comic, and even non-comic (but deliberately garish) verse of poets from Byron (“laureate” / “Tory at / last”) to Hopkins (“communion” / “boon he on”; “sing” / “No ling- / ering”) and Lowell (“stuck / the duck / ’s web / foot”). Such techniques can, as in Byron, play as a half-ironic class performance of witty negligence, or, as in Hopkins and Lowell, convey something harder to parse, some roughness bound by an inner energetic principle, if not law.

But the primary model, I think, for Hill’s later poetics is Milton, particularly in what Hill has called the “contentious sonnets.” The octave of Milton’s sonnet on his divorce tract *Tetrachordon*, which Hill read at a 2008 conference at Cambridge University on “Milton as Muse” (a podcast of which was previously available online) provides a virtual anthology of the techniques and postures of his own later poetry:

A book was writ of late called *Tetrachordon*;
 And woven close, both matter, form, and style;
 The subject new: it walked the town awhile,
 Numb’ring good intellects; now seldom pored on.
 Cries the stall reader, Bless us! what a word on
 A title-page is this! and some in file
 Stand spelling false, while one might walk to Mile-
 End Green. Why is it harder, Sirs, than Gordon,
 Colkitto, or Macdonnel, or Galasp?

It would take us too far afield, post-“Brexit,” to go into the nationalistic cultural politics of Milton’s satirical treatment of those four Scottish divines, or to speculate about the latter’s relation to their partial analogues in Hill’s poetry, the likewise problematically Celtic “Croker, MacSikker, O’Shem” denounced in *The Triumph of Love*. (The vote, incidentally, according to Hill’s widow,

was the subject of his last, as yet unpublished poem; nothing about his views on it seems readily surmisable, other than his revulsion from its demagoguery.) Suffice it for now that the denouncing of adversaries (“Sirs”), polysyllabic mosaic rhymes, rhymes splitting words, and the somehow always ridiculous rhyming of one name with another, especially across languages (“Tetrachordon”/“Gordon”), all reappear in Hill’s later work. Likewise the mocking ventriloquism (“Bless us! what a word on / A title-page is this”), and even, for reasons that should now be clear, the conceit of the book as having “walk’d the town awhile.” The posture is that of the embattled scholar-polemicist ironically diminishing the effort required for grasping his argument, in a way that conveys scorn partly for the unlearned reader, but mainly for the presumptively educated one (the “stall reader”) who will not make the effort to live up to his distinction. The rhymes’ apparent carelessness here verges on contempt: disdain to please by smoothness, even as they allude to the small pains not taken.

That allusion tends to rely on metrical and other schemes. In general, these must be regular enough for the ragged rhymes to pass themselves off as salvaging – in a virtuosic last resort – some semblance of that perfection to which they continue to display indifference. Hill’s *Peer Gynt* dispenses with this. Its half-rhymes seem arbitrary but not virtuosic. They neither supply the word that would have been chosen by complete freedom, nor justify themselves on grounds of necessity. Peer’s character provides a logic for such caprice, but this does not make Hill’s *Peer Gynt* – or long stretches of it, anyway – more compelling. Everything in this play seems to go for on too long; its flashes of genuine humor, including savage bathos (“To lose all hope of at last returning to God – / That makes me feel really bad. / I’ll not accept that bargain.”) feel like oases amid tedium. Act 3, with its lengthy orientalist interlude, including the feast that Peer, now a prosperous “merchant” (that is, slave-trader) throws for an international gathering of pseudo-worthies, is especially tedious; you sense Hill’s interest isn’t in it – reasonably enough. Peer in the later acts is too often merely contemptible; I do not find Hill wrestling with the implicit dialectic of identification and critique that animated his *Brand*. Only in the play’s early sections, when Peer’s confabulations are still relatively without consequence, is the translation

consistently fresh and sprightly. The later material induces much the same dazed exhaustion as prolonged doses of children's cartoons, with their relentless strained hijinks.

In his 1996 introduction to *Brand*, Hill wonders whether the play should be regarded as a "ruined" tragedy or a "sound" tragic farce." He concludes that his own version, anyway, has presented a "tragic farce." What Hill understands by *Brand's* farcical aspect is obscure. It does not seem encapsulated by the drama's mere representation of such obvious buffoons as the Mayor and Schoolmaster, nor even by the disproportion between those mocked figures and its hero, which Hill sees Ibsen as having exploited to lend Brand's visionary claim a "spurious appeal." (This phrase is Kenneth Haynes's, from his interview with Hill, who assents to it, more or less.) Though the designation "tragic farce" is clearly proffered to rescue the play from the charge of artistic failure, there remains some suggestion that its success involves its failure having been internalized. Such a disaster-courting aesthetic surely depends upon the pressures, imaginative and formal, to which its materials are subjected. We can conceive of a ruined tragedy, but not a ruined farce. If this *Peer Gynt* too often feels like mere sweepings from the later Hill's desk, it nonetheless, in an oblique way, reminds us of the more visceral interplay of the theatrical and outrageous that have recently – but also long – been central to his poetry. It is not clear what we are to make of a poetic art that, increasingly, confronts historical catastrophe with a refusal to recognize tragedy and farce as moments in sequence, or which takes its own waywardness as a necessary component of its responsibility. Hill's *Peer Gynt* and *Brand* feels terrible and timely.