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## Geoffrey Hill, René Girard, and the Logic of Sacrifice

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### Abstract

According to René Girard, the logic of sacrifice is scapegoating, the logic of self-sacrifice is self-transcendancy true or deviated. Ibsen completed his unfinished epic poem “Brand” by rewriting it as a dramatic poem; dramatization clarified the mutually complicit nature of Brand’s useless self-sacrifice to and by his community. Ibsen rewrote Brand with great speed and facility and, ten years later, perhaps with the lesson of Brand’s unnecessary self-sacrifice in mind, achieved that regularity of intense focus that produced a play every two years. Geoffrey Hill’s stage version completes the process of dramatizing Brand. By his own accounting in a 1979 interview Hill wrote his Brand with great speed and facility; ten years later, he began the current period of unrivalled periodic productivity.

### Keywords

Geoffrey Hill, René Girard, Henrik Ibsen, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sacrifice, self-sacrifice, deviated transcendancy

**I**N Geoffrey Hill’s poem “Christmas Trees,” the logic of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s sacrifice is proposed as unquestionable—our job is to listen: “We hear too late, or not too late.” But what is this affirmation of the anachronism “sacrifice” doing in the modern secular world?

Viewed from the sector of René Girard’s work, which he classes as the anthropology of religion, blood sacrifice is at the origin of every archaic society. The logic of sacrifice follows the mechanism inherent in mimetic behavior. Humans are mimetic creatures; they copy each other. When they copy each other’s desires, they become conflictual when the objects desired cannot be shared. Beyond a certain threshold, perhaps simply beyond a certain size population, human groups cannot restore peace through dominance patterns after conflict breaks out. Brute power and intimidation can only carry so far. How does peace return from everyone imitating each

other's violence, when rivalry engulfs everyone? It "returns" when the last antagonist is vanquished by all who are left. Violence which spreads, engulfing all against all, polarizes finally into all allied with each other against (the last) one.

Sacrifice formalizes, commemorates the spontaneous outbreak and resolution of runaway violence, economizing it. For the survival of the group, the best, final score is all against one. One can suggest, as Girard does, carefully and hesitantly, that group selection over time delivers the historical pattern of ritual sacrifice recognized across all the archaic societies we know. Every archaic society seems to begin in religion, is founded in blood sacrifice, as if those groups which did not resort to sacrifice could not survive long enough to produce any historical record.

The logic of sacrifice repeats the final violence of all against one, the violence that cannot be answered with more violence; sacrifice has the last word of violence, spoken against a scapegoat whose side no one takes. For communities based in the logic of sacrifice, religious taboo and prohibition function to avoid rivalry, and wherever possible take retribution out of the hands of the accusers, the aggrieved. The mechanism of sacrifice produces the primitive sacred, *sacer*, at once holy and profane. The ambivalent *sacer* of the victim comes from its double function: it is credited at once as the cause of the violence and credited for the peace that follows from sacrifice. Yet the ambivalence—the simultaneous negative and positive value of the victim (culpable yet holy)—is a balance difficult for a community to sustain. Thus this originary system of ritual, taboo, and prohibition varies from community to community and develops or de-develops over time: some communities will increasingly emphasize the guiltiness of the victim, minimizing his divinity; some will emphasize his redeeming power, minimizing his guilt.

From these two movements, Girard has suggested, *only* suggested, that we might see the development of the judicial system (he is guilty) on the one hand and the kingship system (he is divine) on the other hand. A judicial system likewise prevents interminable rivalry by taking retribution out of the hands of the aggrieved, delivering the last word of violence with such force that no reply is possible. In the main, judicial systems everywhere replace the logic of sacrifice because they more efficiently keep the peace. But there is perhaps a residual logic of sacrifice latent in the judicial system as well: we are all polarized in peace and law against those few(er) who break it.

Why are modern writers (not just Geoffrey Hill) so preoccupied with sacrifice, in a modern world organized by judicial systems which make sacrifice obsolete? In his first book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard insists that, contrary to romantic preconceptions of autonomy, we are interindividuals, we copy our desires from others, we imitate a model. In the modern world, increasingly immune to hereditary nobility, we find our models in our neighbor. When we desire what our models do, it increases their desire for their own objects. Because these rivals feed each other's desire, rivalry inevitably becomes their object. Rivalry itself becomes the sign of the desirable; the only thing worth having is protected by the superior rival, the stone too heavy to lift. The logic of mediated desire, its path dependency, is to learn to expect the most desirable objects to be behind the protection of a superior model. Modern desire is drawn to the rival who vanquishes it, drawn to violent refusals, not because it desires humiliation, but because it assumes, logically, the thing most worth having is behind the door it cannot open.

Girard gives the name “*deviated* transcendency” to the constant parallel that novelists construct between this mechanism of mimetic desire and religious experience. Girard says that in the modern world “men become gods in the eyes of each other” (53–82). In effect, they sacrifice themselves to each other.

Why then does sacrifice persist beyond archaic culture? Because it follows a nondeterministic mechanism, a likely but not inevitable consequence of mimetic desire. The logic of sacrifice persists in all those areas uncontrolled by the judicial mechanism: the psychology of personal relations, the world of international relations.

Thus Girard's mimetic hypothesis sketches out two nondeterministic mechanisms, two path dependencies, one governing the behavior of those who sacrifice themselves, one governing groups who “sacrifice.” As I argued in my book *Violence and Modernism*, specifically for the example of Ibsen, it is the special project of modern writing to show how these two mechanisms *interlock*.

Girard's implied comparison of deviated with religious transcendence gives us a scheme for taking greater care with Hill's careful and complex representation of sacrifice throughout his poetry but especially in his version of *Brand*. In his interview with John Haffenden in 1979 (some of which is devoted to discussing *Brand*), Hill replies sharply to the critical observation that he writes a poetry of equivocation. Hill sympathizes with any

Elizabethan who “equivocated” before the “bloody question”<sup>1</sup> of his true faith, but he insists that his subjects (Elizabethan or otherwise) propose themselves to him as “full of equivocations.”

Martyrdom is an act of witness; not every person who is killed unjustly is necessarily witnessing, though I suppose the liturgy of the Church, in choosing to regard the Holy Innocents as martyrs, has rebuked my point in anticipation. But to take the group that have most interested me in recent years, the Catholic martyrs of the age of Elizabeth I, there seems there to have been what I might call a pedagogy of martyrdom, a scholastic process of training towards that deliberate goal. I do find the psychology of that kind of procedure fascinating, and of course chilling in many ways. (Haffenden 90–91)

Hill would no doubt have had in the back of his mind Jon Silkin’s poetic sequence “Astringencies” and the poem that completes it, “Resting Place,” which hinge on precisely the point that the Jews massacred in York in March, 1190 were victims but not martyrs. Haffenden then shrewdly asks Hill what we couldn’t help but ask Hill now, in the time of suicide bombers, if it all comes down “to a schooling in self-destruction”:

Yes, and it does indicate an ability to overcome the animal self, which I think has been marvelously caught in Eliot’s line about ‘the reluctance of the body to become a thing.’ It’s simultaneously illuminating and perplexing. The overcoming of the animal fear of death seems to me an achievement which may be inspiring in some ways but is profoundly chilling in others. (91)

Hill’s care in not simply canonizing every experience of unjust persecution as sacrifice is essential for understanding Brand.

My early idea was to investigate Hill as translator of Ibsen. Long ago Bjørn Tysdahl (the man who wrote the book on Joyce’s use of Ibsen) told me, just before I could say it to him, that the only English version of Ibsen that ever got close was Hill’s. I was skeptical of Hill’s careful disavowal of knowing Norwegian, and that he depended solely on Inge-Stina Ewbank’s “literal” of *Brand*. I thought I could write about Hill’s care for the

<sup>1</sup> “At one source/Moltke, the two Bonhoeffers, von Haeften,/Suffered the Bloody Question and did/nobly thereby.” See *The Triumph of Love* 78.

Norwegian text. After all, his access to German seems solid. Nineteenth century Dano-Norwegian is at least as accessible to someone of Hill's linguistic powers as the selections in Swet's *Anglo-Saxon Reader*. But I found only one indication in his notebooks deposited at Leeds that Hill had consulted Ibsen's *Samlede Vaerker* independently of the texts Ewbank sent him, when he verified that Ibsen rhymed "mand" with Brand.<sup>2</sup> I should have believed what Hill said for himself.

Hill's *Brand* is a version, not a translation, as he insisted at every opportunity. But then so is Ibsen's dramatic poem, which replaced his earlier, unfinished epic poem "Brand." Hill furthers the process Ibsen began, of dramatizing Brand. Ibsen got as far as a dramatic poem, but Hill, as he himself acknowledges—thanking Kenneth Muir for the insight<sup>3</sup>—pushed it further, to poetic drama. Successive dramatizations make it increasingly clear that Brand is not autonomous but interindividual. He takes his cues from others, making it clear as well that in the modern world characters sacrifice themselves to each other as gods to each other. This insight into the logic of modern sacrifice and self-sacrifice is central to Ibsen's later work.

In Ibsen's unfinished epic poem, Brand describes how he saw his mother beat her fists on the body of his dead father lying in bed, angry that she married his money rather than the man she loved. In response to her Brand bludgeons his dog. When she asks him why, he repeats to her just what she said over his father's deathbed. That is reciprocity or payback, of course, but on the son's terms, the narrator's terms. He has the last word; he becomes her god. But in revision the dramatic reciprocity between Brand and his mother or between Brand and the Dean is more complex; they become gods, obstacles in the eyes of each other. Brand hardens his mother's obduracy as she hardens his. Once Brand understands that his mother's investment in her wealth will incorporate him, he threatens extravagantly to toss it to the winds. She in turn is like the doctor who also enjoys provoking, challenging Brand, by insisting that he has acted like any father would to save his child Alfie, or the Dean who knows exactly when to say, that the State now owns Brand. They defy Brand, daring him to out-Brand Brand in self-denial.

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<sup>2</sup>) I am grateful to Richard High and the staff at the Brotherton Library, Special Collections, at Leeds University for their assistance to my consulting of the Geoffrey Hill papers in July 2012.

<sup>3</sup>) See Ibsen, *Brand* vi.

In defiance Brand leads his people out of the church, out of the village, up the mountain. There Brand is lapidated by his resentful followers; like Ibsen's later character Tomas Stockmann, who is also stoned, the friend of the people has become the enemy of the people. The parishioners and Brand have finished their creation, their interlocking of each other as sacrificers, scapegoaters, and victim. We remember that when Brand thought of leaving his dark and dank cottage to save his child's health, it was one of his parishioners who told him that he would go to hell without Brand there to stop him; in turn, what can Brand expect his flock to do except turn on him once they are too cold and hungry to go higher up the mountain? Gerd sees in him the signs of persecution, stigmata, but Brand is a martyr to deviated transcendence. In the modern world, self-sacrificers and sacrificers are made for each other.

But I want to be careful lest I tie Hill's version (and Hill himself) too closely to Ibsen. Only after reservations did Hill assent to give his voice to Brand. He admitted to Haffenden that he had not ever read the play. In his Leeds notebook he expressed reservations about Ibsen himself, that Ibsen's voice was too overbearing in the nineteenth century manner, like Carlyle. Of course Hill would have known secondhand about *Brand*; perhaps he even saw Michael Elliott's production in London in 1959, or perhaps he saw the BBC broadcast on 11 August 1959 (now available on DVD). Unfortunately Patrick McGoohan portrays Brand as Pound portrayed Yeats to John Quinn, when writing about having to listen to Yeats explain to him the phases of the moon: "very very very bug-house."<sup>4</sup> In her preface to Hill's version Ewbank remembers the first meeting at the then unfinished South Bank complex with Hill, John Russell Taylor (who had nominated Hill for the commission to dramatize *Brand*), and Peter Hall. Hill was dismayed by her first sample mimicking Ibsen's four beat line; Hill foresaw himself producing 6000 lines of "Hiawatha" (Ibsen xxvi).

Hill accepted the commission, according to Ewbank, when he saw how he could shorten *Brand* to a three-beat line. In a curious way, Hill's discovery is linked to Ibsen's. Ibsen wrote Bjørnson that he saw his way to rewriting his epic poem "Brand" into his dramatic poem *Brand* after a visit to the Sistine Chapel. The experience released Ibsen's formidable powers of concentration, and he wrote the poem at high speed with great facility and satisfaction. With some adjustments in his compositional practice in the next few years, perhaps with Brand's unnecessary self-bafflement in mind,

<sup>4</sup> An unpublished letter quoted in Foster 157.

he began to produce his subsequent modern drama with impressive regularity and focus.

At the beginning of his inaugural lecture at Leeds in 1979 (“Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement’”) Hill references the “commonplace image” of Michaelangelo’s masterpieces emerging from the stone, to a passage in Michael Meyer’s biography of Ibsen where Meyer describes this very episode in Rome (strangely, there are no references to Meyer in Hill’s Brand notebooks at Leeds). In the Haffenden interview in 1979, Hill describes self-deprecatingly the uncharacteristic facility and sustained excitement with which he wrote his version of Brand late at night after lecturing and administering at the university all day; sadly, he noted, this facility had not persisted. His work in the following year was coming as slow as ever, but Hill proposed that perhaps in ten year’s time its effect would be felt in a greater fluency.

If we mark 1994’s *Canaan* as the moment of liftoff for these last twenty years of Hill’s prodigious productivity, it means that considering Hill’s more dramatic version of Ibsen’s dramatization (and distancing) of Brand’s self-sacrifice might assist our understanding of Hill’s poetics as well as his ethics; perhaps Hill in the seventies had nearly made a god of the heckler, placing himself in danger of valuing his verse for how much of it he sacrificed to him.<sup>5</sup>

Careful readers of Hill’s poetry, who are very careful readers indeed, would respond “but it is the logic of *his* sacrifice, not just anyone’s sacrifice but Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s sacrifice.” Exactly. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* Girard proposed an anti-sacrificial reading of The Judgment of Solomon, of the Gospels, that the good mother doesn’t seek to destroy herself by confessing she lied to Solomon’s raised sword, and that Jesus’s Father did not demand his sacrifice. If Abrahamic ethics means anything, it means don’t sacrifice your children.

Neither parent wanted a sacrifice; neither mother nor child sought to be sacrificed, but neither would relinquish their commitment when it became dangerous. Yet in the 1990s Girard relented to the word sacrifice because we have no other word able to describe what was given in The Judgment of Solomon, in the Passion. Bonhoeffer followed no pedagogy of martyrdom,

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<sup>5</sup> From an essay Hill delivered in Toronto in 1998: “The contemporary pseudo-dogma which maintains that the degree of suffering experienced by persons of an artistic or a literary bent shall constitute an accurate register of the quality of their work is one which requires a close scrutiny.” See “Language Suffering and Silence” 401.

but he as well would not relinquish his commitment when it became dangerous to him. Perhaps Bonhoeffer was a good model for Hill.

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