

The New Criterion

Books

March 1997

Shorter notice

by [David Yezzi](#)

On Ibsen's *Brand*, translated by Geoffrey Hill

While composing *Brand* on a meager scholarship to Rome in 1865, the then little-known Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) imprisoned on his writing table a scorpion in an empty beer glass; when the scorpion grew sluggish, the playwright would revive it with a bit of fruit “on which it would cast itself in a rage and eject its poison into it; then it was well again.” The play, intended as a dramatic poem to be read rather than performed, was finished under the sign of its gruesome mascot in November of that year. Disgusted with his Norwegian compatriots for their cautious pacifism in the Danish-German war of 1864, Ibsen through *Brand* sought to purge some of his own pent-up venom, while the publication of the play in March of 1866 proved extremely salubrious for his career. What his black-clad, eponymous priest came to embody, however, was no mere mouthpiece for polemic, but a darkly ambiguous and difficult figure that has polarized a century of critics. Such ambiguities are a bit of a specialty for the poet Geoffrey Hill, whose definitive 1978 version of the play for the National Theater is now returned to print from Penguin Classics.

Ibsen called *Brand* “myself in my best moments,” and clearly there is much to admire in his headstrong, visionary “saint.” Faced with the complacency and idolatry besetting the religion of his parishioners, *Brand* declares himself the champion of an uncompromising and absolute commitment to the divine. (Strindberg compared Ibsen’s hectoring wake-up call to “the voice of Savanarola.”) By Act Five, however, *Brand*’s blinkered devotion costs him in the event everything he has: on a matter of principle, he forsakes his mother’s deathbed; his child and wife are likewise sacrificed to his obstinacy. In the end, the priest’s God-hunting precipitates his own death beneath an avalanche in the mountainous, austere Ice Church formed from vaults of drift above a frozen lake. Were a proper burial possible, *Brand*’s monument would carry his motto: “all or nothing.”

At various times, *Brand* has come to be seen as anything from moral guide to proto-fascist. While the Norwegian production history of the play tends to favor *Brand* as monochromatically heroic (indeed, the play’s denunciation of waffling and compromise rang a note of resistance against Nazism in Norway’s wartime performances of the play), Bernard Shaw, for example, thought the character a villain who “aspiring from height to height of devotion to his ideal, plunges from depth to depth of murderous cruelty.” Similarly, Auden found *Brand* blindly driven by “the same pride and self-will that motivate the tragic heroes of this world. . . . [he is] an idolater who worships not God, but *his* God.” The tags “hero” and “villain,” though, fail to convey the whole story; both are true, and neither. As to the play’s tone, Hill characterizes it with a paradox of his own—“tragic farce,” in which *Brand*’s fall is played out among the straw men and buffoons of provincial Norwegian life. Inga-Stina Ewbank, from whose literal gloss Hill worked, notes in her sterling preface to the 1981 edition (sadly omitted here) that it is this tension between the base and the lofty, between the

crevasses and fjords and the high cliffs of the empyreal Ice Church, that fuels the central movement of the play.

In Hill, then, *Brand* has found its ideal poet in English, one whose own verses have tilled well in neighboring soil. The kinship is such that the play gains resonance when read alongside Hill's poetry, while the poems find a natural extension in the play: both engage morality while conceding the duplicity of outright moralizing. ("I do but ask," Ibsen said, "my call is not to answer.") Consider, as one of many possible examples, the Brandian imagery and intensity of Hill's "An Order of Service" from *King Log* (1968):

He was the surveyor of his own ice-world,
Meticulous at the chosen extreme,
Though what he surveyed may have been

nothing.

Let a man sacrifice himself, concede
His mortality and have done with it;
There is no end to that sublime appeal.

Such correspondences of sensibility notwithstanding, Hill has suggested that his attraction to the play was primarily of a technical nature—the challenge of recreating in English Ibsen's infinitely versatile tetrameter line. Were this the only successful aspect of Hill's version, it should recommend his efforts, as in Brand's final soliloquy in the Ice Church:

A thousand followers. And not one
followed me here. Where have they gone,
then, the struggle and all the great
yearning to reach the farthest height?
Their pitiful vainglorious dream
of sacrifice! Have they no shame;
or do they think Christ Crucified
made all sins decent when He died?
We battle for our souls... .
Worse times, worse visions, they are here
already: locust swarms of fear,
war clouds and clouds of industry
drawing their filth across the sky.
Deep down, the soulless dwarfs who made
an empire quarrying men's greed
set free the stony-fettered ore
the better to constrain its power.
They labour so, grow old and die
enslaved by their own mastery.

Hill speeds this passage along in accordance with Brand's snowballing oratory, while still preserving the integrity of the verse with its music of alternating slant and true rhymes. Elsewhere, the four-beat line that serves for Brand's fulsome hieratic flights lapses into trimeter, capturing as fluently the demotic speech of the local burghers. Witness the Mayor:

Folk here are well content,
so what more could you want?
All right, they're a bit dim.
So let's not worry them
with talk of "truth" and "light".
Truth isn't worth the fright.
Just give them something big
and they're happy: church, pig-
sty, it doesn't matter;
the bigger the better.

Here the poetry itself serves to reveal character. The gabbiness and spluttered clichés, the dopey clanging rhyme on "light" and "fright," the rhyme on "pig-/ sty" (with the enjambment adding delight for the eye): all the material needed to portray the Mayor—with the exception, perhaps, of a fat-pad—is written into the speech. A common problem actors stumble over when playing verse drama arises from their desire to lay on top of the script the baggage of "characterization." The glory of poetry the caliber of Hill's Ibsen adaptation is that that work has already been done for the performer. It's in the lines.

David Yezzi is the Executive Editor of The New Criterion.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 15 March 1997, on page 78

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