

The Atonement of Poetry by Thomas P. McDonnell

"Aye, those fair living forms swam heavenly/ To tunes forgotten. . . ."

—John Keats

Geoffrey Hill: *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*; Oxford University Press; New York.

Geoffrey Hill: *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas*; Oxford University Press; New York.

One of life's great joys is to come across a new work of literature that is likely to last far beyond any early assessment of its value. In the case of poetry, which chiefly concerns us here, it is to have known at first reading that, say, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" was at once a master-

Many readers will receive a similar shock of recognition when they read Geoffrey Hill's long poem of 100 quatrains, *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy* (the title is a reference to Péguy's great work *Le Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc*).

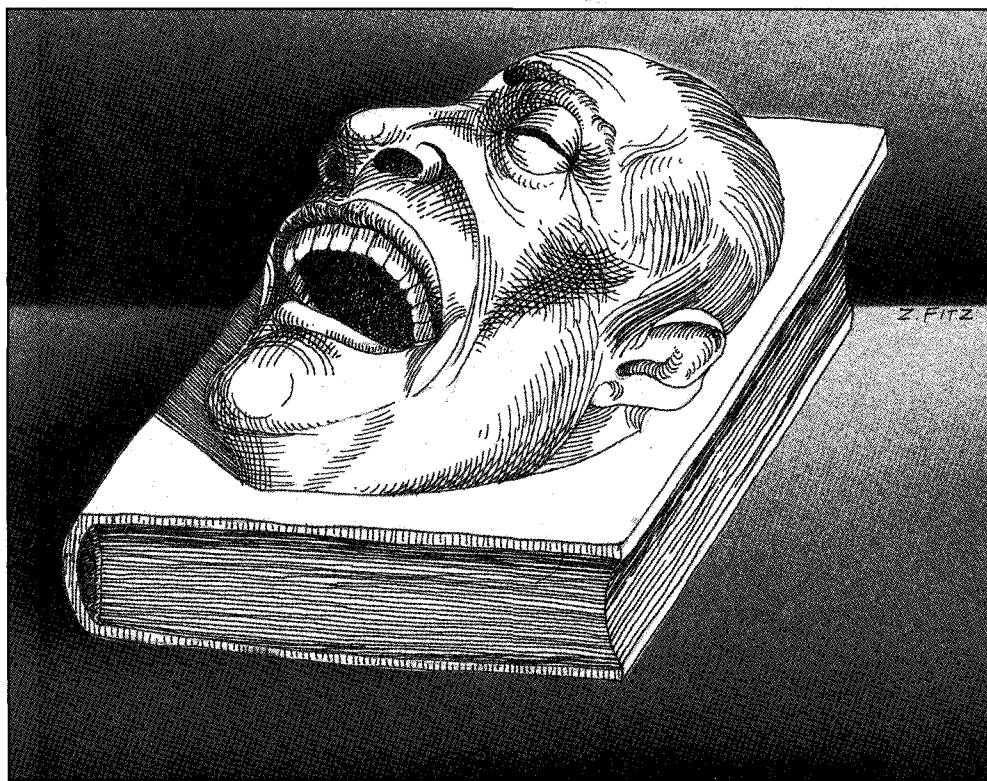
It is almost too early for any serious appraisal to have appeared of Geoffrey Hill, whose work includes four volumes of poetry and a just-published volume of critical essays. Hill was born in Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, 1932, and currently lectures in English literature at the University of Cambridge. He is known in this country, of course, but not widely enough or with any-

tions" and practically derives from them the inference that Hill is the modern laureate of Gnosticism, and so on.

Whatever Hill's religious convictions may be, he writes within a Catholic tradition which includes estrangement. In any case, though Hill seems neither comfortable nor pious in the ancient faith, he is nevertheless immersed in the knowledge of its sacraments and liturgy. As far as prosody is concerned, no one since Hopkins has packed the English line with such compression and energy of language. In cogency is liberation. It is in this sense, I think, that Hill revivifies the language at a time when its devaluation is everywhere apparent.

In his earliest and still very powerful work (some few items of which he curiously disavows), Hill seems to have favored the quatrain in four-stress lines as his chief unit of expression. He has also written some of the finest—and, to say it outright, beautiful—sonnets of our time. Hill then temporarily departed from strict form, which, in the essays he calls the use of "atonement" in artmaking, to compose the great "Mercian Hymns." Prosaic in form but charged with poetry in language and imagery, these autobiographical segments run parallel to a recreation of British prehistory and may remind us of the work of David Jones in *The Anathemata* (1952). But the sequence by Hill is probably the masterpiece that Harold Bloom claims it to be.

As Bloom predicted, Geoffrey Hill has returned to the "tighter mode" of the earlier poetry and especially as now exemplified in *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. The 100 quatrains are in five-stress lines and obliquely rhymed in the main. The critical function at this time can only be to point at the complete poem itself and thus resist the temptation to quote it at length. Péguy, of course, was the French Catholic intellectual of peasant stock who was killed "on the first day of the first Battle of the Marne in September 1914." Hill perceives him as a modern hero in the complex tragedy which would become known



piece of the age or that Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," a lyric of only four stanzas, would become a classic on both sides of the Atlantic.

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thing like the recognition he deserves.

One of the few American critics to discuss Hill is Harold Bloom. Bloom's esoteric and highly idiosyncratic approach to poetry may say more about Bloom than Hill. For instance, Bloom selects for study the two extremely convoluted sonnets called "Annuncia-

as the Dreyfus Affair, and the poem in general is Hill's homage to the triumph of Péguy's life of defeat, as he calls it, and which recognizes him as one of the great souls and prophetic intelligences of our century.

A critic writing in the British periodical *Encounter* has rated Hill's collection of literary essays, *The Lords of Limit*, as the most important first book of criticism by a major English poet

since T.S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* (1920). Like his poetry, Hill's essays are packed with originally turned ideas and considerable learning. This learning is so wide-ranging, in fact, that some 30 pages of reference notes are required at the back of the book. There are marvelous essays that deal with Robert Southwell, Jonathan Swift, Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and John Crowe

Ransom. The essays would be worth reading if only because they provide insights into that intricate life of the poet's mind. In any event, readers in the English poetic tradition had better realize at once that in Geoffrey Hill we have a significant poet on our hands, one whose works have already distinguished him from a host of more fashionable but lesser talents. cc

The Flawed Tragedian by Paul Gottfried

"He has learned speech and windy thought and the political temperament."

—Sophocles' *Antigone*

George Steiner: *Antigones*; Oxford University Press; New York; \$29.95.

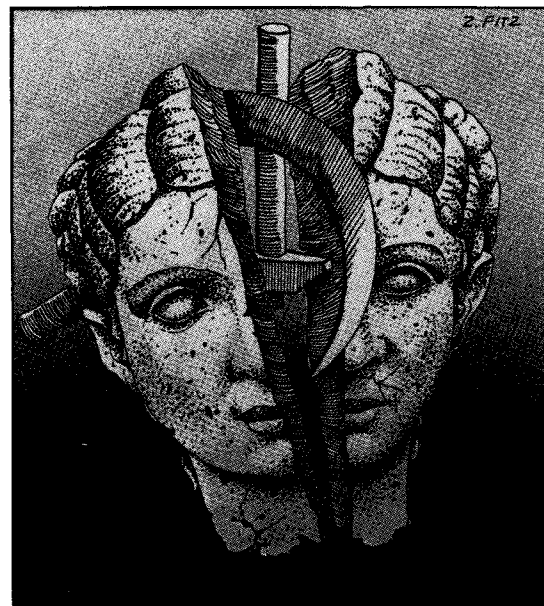
George Steiner: *A Reader*; Oxford University Press; New York; \$25.00.

Among literary intellectuals, George Steiner holds a place of unmistakable influence. His essays on philosophy and literature can be found in the *New York Review of Books*, *London Times Literary Supplement*, and in other publications associated with making it in the world of letters. Since the 1950's he has published nearly a dozen books, most of which interpret Continental European thought for the benefit of Anglo-American readers. Some of Steiner's books, most notably his discussion of Martin Heidegger, combine insight with considerable learning. His book on Heidegger not only uncovers the brilliant ideas behind the horrors of Heideggerian syntax, but also takes seriously the antimodernist aspects of Heidegger's social criticism. Steiner neither denies nor exaggerates Heidegger's short-term fascination with the Nazi movement. He sets it into perspective by showing that it was Heidegger's old-fashioned communitarian ideals that allowed him to sympathize with at least some early National So-

cialist programs. Steiner notes how quickly Heidegger changed his mind about Nazism once Hitler had come to power.

Despite his talent as a literary analyst, Steiner does have tics which, I believe, are damaging to his scholarship. I stress the qualifier "I believe," since what irritates me most about his writing may also explain his popularity among proper highbrows. Steiner writes like a perpetual *émigré*, in convoluted prose that often seems deliberately murky. His essays include "The Distribution of Discourse," "Future Literacies," and "Privacies of Speech." Though Steiner warns repeatedly against the dangers of social-cultural conformity, he himself conjures with the appropriate academic shibboleths. He is overly fond of "deconstruction" and "angst" and feels obliged to dwell on Marxist interpretations of literary texts, however little they may contribute to our understanding of a work. His recent study of thinkers who have interpreted Sophocles' *Antigone* gives far too much attention to Marx on Greek tragedy. Marx may have influenced the practice of social revolution, but beyond noting his almost willful misreading of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* (which owed more to Shelley's poetry than Aeschylus' play), it is hard to justify any space being given to Marx as an interpreter of Greek tragedy.

Steiner professes concern about trendy issues (e.g., the need for nuclear disarmament) or about issues that



used to be trendy (e.g., anti-Semitism). He advertises what some readers may find endearing quirks. He has stated during interviews that because he and his family were Jewish refugees from Nazism, he now feels compelled to carry multiple passports. Only in this way can he protect himself against the possible eruption of Nazi-type violence in the country where he presently resides, which happens to be England. Although my own family suffered a similar fate, I have never understood Steiner's bizarre behavior. Does he believe that pieces of paper will save him if the Western world suddenly (and improbably) turns Nazi? It is as if he has begun to believe the predictions published in at least some of the publications that celebrate George Steiner but condemn "fascist America."

I make these observations as a qualified admirer of Steiner's work. Indeed I continue to marvel at his erudition

Paul Gottfried is author of *The Search for Historical Meaning: Hegel and the American Right* (Northern Illinois University Press).