Rhyming couplet

English literary history may be full of coincidences, but probably none are as striking as those that link the lives of two of England’s greatest poets, one a Jacobean and the other a Victorian. Both had strong Welsh connections and (possibly as a consequence of this) both experimented with the sounds and rhythms of the English language more than any of their contemporaries. Both were classical scholars who turned their backs on dazzling academic careers to enter the priesthood, and both died prematurely in their forties. Neither published any poetry of note in their lives, but each bequeathed their verse to friends who ensured their posthumous fame. They also shared the initials GH. In one significant respect, however, they were entirely different. The earlier poet left us one of the most compelling accounts in English of a journey ending in spiritual contentment, while the other left an unflinching confession of despair.

The first of these, George Herbert, was born in Montgomery Castle in 1593 into the Anglo-Welsh aristocracy. His father died when he was about four, and he probably owed his intellectual genius to his mother Magdalen, a woman of exceptional independence who attracted the passionate (if platonic) friendship of the poet John Donne. Lady Herbert sent George to Westminster school where he mastered Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and to Cambridge where he first became a fellow, then reader in rhetoric, and then—at the astonishingly early age of twenty-six—public orator for the university. With expectations of becoming an ambassador and secretary of state, he added Italian, French and Spanish to his accomplishments, and joined parliament as the member for Montgomery. It was only the death of his two chief patrons at the court, followed by the death of King James himself, that led him to take on the vocation that his mother had long hoped he would embrace: the Anglican priesthood.

It is almost impossible to capture in a short account the contrast between Herbert’s glamorous public position as ‘the Jewel of this University’ (in the king’s own words) and his years as a country parson and devotional poet. Indeed, the transformation would be implausible if we did not have Herbert’s own autobiographical poetry to help us understand his struggle. One of his greatest poems, ‘The Collar’ begins like this:

I struck the board and cried, No more
I will abroad
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large as store…

Yet after another thirty lines of this lurching, ranting complaint, the poem settles quite suddenly and dramatically into four final lines of perfect metric calm:

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word
Methoughts I heard one calling Child
And I replied, My Lord.

From Herbert’s poetry, and the testimony of his contemporary and biographer Izaak Walton, there is every reason to believe that by his late thirties every aspect of his life was suffused with the humility with which this poem ends, including his marriage, his pastoral duties and his service to the poor. On the Sunday before his death, Walton tells us, he took up his Welsh harp and extemporised a hymn of praise. ‘Thus’, wrote Walton, ‘he sung on earth such hymns and anthems as the angels and he…now sing in Heaven’.

No such peace of mind and soul was to be the lot of his nineteenth century counterpart, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Born in Essex in 1844 and schooled brutally at Highgate, Hopkins went up to Oxford, took a first in ‘Greats’ and was proclaimed ‘the star of Balliol’. However, by that time he had come under the charismatic influence of Cardinal Newman. In 1866 he was received into the Catholic church and two years later he entered the Jesuit novitiate.

Hopkins’s theological studies took him to St Asaph where he fell in love (as well he might)
with the beauty of the River Elwy. As Herbert had done, he added Hebrew to his classical languages, and then taught himself passable Welsh. After seven years of self-imposed abstinence from writing poetry, a request from his rector led him to take up his pen again, and to set down one of the most singular masterpieces of English verse, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’. From its opening lines, we hear a new kind of poetic voice that is utterly original and thunderously self-assured:

Thou mastering me
God! Giver of breath and bread;
World’s strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones and veins in me,
fastened me flesh
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

The extremity of feeling in these lines was matched, alas, by an extremity of turmoil in Hopkins’s inner life. A series of parish posts, followed by a teaching post at Stonyhurst and then a return to academia with a chair in classics at Dublin, all failed to relieve his descent into what he called ‘desolation’. These extracts from his later sonnets depict this state with typical candour:

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.
Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there…

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night…

My own heart let me have more pity on; let
Me live to my sad self hereafter kind,
Charitable; not live this tormented mind
With this tormented mind tormenting yet…

Hopkins died in Ireland in 1889 from typhoid peritonitis. In poetic terms, his greatest achievement was to have put one of the most terrible states of mind into verse, while still preserving complete intellectual and technical mastery. From a medical perspective, he and Herbert have bequeathed us accounts of severe depression and of contemplative self-effacement, that are more feeling, more credible and more precious than any textbook of psychiatry could ever offer.

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