



Jones Very

(1813-1880)

The Created (1839)

There is naught for thee by thy haste to gain;
'Tis not the swift with me that win the race;
Through long endurance of delaying pain,
Thine opened eye shall see thy Father's face;
Nor here nor there, where now thy feet would turn,
Thou wilt find Him who ever waits for thee;
But let obedience quench desires that burn,
And where thou art thy Father too will be.
Behold! as day by day the spirit grows,
Thou see'st by inward light things hid before;
Till what God is, thyself, His image shows;
And thou wilt wear the robe that first thou wore,
When bright with radiance from his forming hand,
He saw the lord of all His creatures stand.

ANALYSIS

Very's poetry, like his life, was founded on a belief in Absolute Truth; and either Very (without perhaps wholly realizing it), or the Power that directed him, displayed the conscience, the seriousness, of the artist. When he brings his character to bear upon matters that we can understand, we find ourselves, for all our doubts, in the presence of one of the finest devotional poets in English.... "The Created"...is probably the best single poem that Very composed...

We have here perfection of structure, perfection and power of phrase, great moral scope, at least by way of generality of implication, and sublimity of conception. The intention of this poem must have been purely Calvinistic; yet the second quatrain, in which the Calvinism is most explicit, is stated in terms so general

that it might equally be interpreted as a traditional recommendation of humility and endurance; the term, "inward light," though it is a more or less technical term of Calvinism and of Quietism, has figuratively a very wide applicability; the third line of the poem, though it is in the tradition of Calvinistic exhortation, exceeds any rigorous and literal interpretation of Calvinistic dogma, for it recommends a course of action as a means to salvation. In this poem, then, we see the religious experience expressed fully and richly, unhampered by the heretical dogmas of the author.

Nor is the vision of the resurrection an obstacle to the non-believer, for it may, as in so much devotional but non-mystical poetry, be accepted as an allegorical representation of a moral state--of the condition of Socrates just before drinking the hemlock instead of a few hours later. Equally perfect, but of less power, is a hymn entitled "The Visit"; nearly as perfect is a song, "The Call," of which the last stanza is missing from the edition of 1883; less perfect still, and less compact, but of a magnificence at moments comparable to that of Henry Vaughn, is a hymn entitled "The Coming of the Lord." There are other poems, which, because of imperfections or limitations of scope, are of secondary importance, but which are still worthy of examination...

I might endeavor to illustrate Very's genius further by the quotation of a good many fine lines from the poems I have just mentioned, but the procedure would be largely unjust, for Very is not a poet of separable moments; his poems are reasoned and coherent, and the full force of a passage will be evident only when one meets it in the context. Further, there is a quality of intense personal conviction in Very, a kind of saturation with his subject and his feeling, which one tends to lose in a brief passage; it is a conviction so extraordinary that in some of his secondary achievements it is able to carry a considerable weight of stereotyped language without the destruction of the poem.

To appreciate the finer shades of his statement one should be familiar, moreover, with his work as a whole, for he is essentially a theological poet, and his references to doctrine are on the one hand fleeting and subtle, and on the other hand of the utmost importance to a perception of his beauty; and in addition, his finest effects are the result of fine variations in tone, the appreciation of which must of necessity depend in a large measure upon a consciousness of the norm from which the variations occur.

Very numbered among his admirers the elder W. E. Channing, Emerson, Clarke, Andrews, Norton, Hawthorne, Bryant, and other persons of distinction; his contemporaries repeatedly compared him to George Herbert, and it would appear with at least a show of reason. Yet for fifty years he has rested in oblivion, except as a name, incorrectly described, in the academic summaries of his period. It is now fifty-seven years since his death, and a hundred years since he first entered upon his full poetic power; we are now very close to the centenary of his confinement to the asylum at Somerville. In this last, at least, it should be possible to find some significance that will justify our recalling him to memory. Perhaps the moral is merely this: that it is nearly time that we paid him the apology long due him and established him clearly and permanently in his rightful place in the history of our literature.

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
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