

## JAMES HERVEY, METHODIST PROSE POET

ON 14th June 1746, the Reverend Richard Pearsall, Independent Minister at Warminster, wrote thus to the great Dr Philip Doddridge:

This week I have been surprised by a book which fell into my hands, entitled *Meditations upon the Tombs and on a Flower Garden*, by James Hervey, A.B. I have been charmed with the lively images, striking expressions, and serious piety which I find there. I wondered much to see a young clergyman acquainted so much with the genius of the gospel, and animated with such a warm love to his Redeemer. Pray, dear Sir, do you know who and where he is? Not that I think the question will be needed to be asked long if he goes on to publish. Whoever he is, methinks I cannot but love and admire him.

Pearsall's surprise at finding a pious young clergyman can perhaps be pardoned during the first half of the eighteenth century. Already, however, the leaven of Methodism was spreading into many country parishes, and into city pulpits too. Even that celebrated Nonconformist Dr Doddridge could acknowledge its value, and enter into a friendly correspondence with John Wesley. And James Hervey was a Methodist. Samuel Richardson, author-printer, through whose press *Meditations upon the Tombs* had been ushered into the world, confessed: 'I think him inclined to the enthusiastic part of Methodism.' Hervey's birthplace and his home at this time were both within a few miles of Doddridge's Academy at Northampton, so that Pearsall's thirst for information could speedily be quenched.

Born into a clergyman's family in 1714, James Hervey was sent on from Northampton Grammar School to Lincoln College, Oxford. Here his tutor was Richard Hutchins, Fellow and Rector of the College—and an Oxford Methodist. A more famous Fellow of Lincoln, John Wesley, took the youth under his wing, encouraging him to study Hebrew and introducing him to the meetings of the Holy Club shortly before George Whitefield joined the group. In later years Hervey was to acknowledge his debt to Wesley: 'I can never forget the tender-hearted and generous Fellow of Lincoln, who condescended to take such compassionate notice of a poor undergraduate, whom almost everybody condemned, and when no man cared for my soul.' In 1736 Hervey was ordained deacon, his first curacy being under yet another Oxford Methodist, Charles Kinchin, Rector of Dummer. His poor health soon compelled him to retire to the hospitality of Paul Orchard's home at Bideford, where he continued to preach a little, especially for George Thompson, the evangelical Vicar of St Gennys, whom Mark Guy Pearse called 'the first Cornish Methodist'. Ordained priest in 1739, in the following year Hervey became Curate of Bideford. Here he remained till 1743, planning and partly writing the first two of the devotional essays which were to make him famous, the second being dedicated to one of Thompson's daughters. From Bideford he returned to Weston Favell to become his father's curate, succeeding to the living on his father's death in 1752, and holding it for the six remaining years of his own short life.

Whilst the first steps of Hervey's spiritual pilgrimage were taken amongst the Methodists, he soon found that his call was mainly to the work of a zealous

parish priest, distributing clothes, tracts, and good advice, and securing medical attention for those under his care. He strongly urged Wesley to follow a similar course at Oxford: 'Is greater perfection to be attained by wandering into the wide world, and preaching in variety of places? Or will this way of preaching be more successful and efficacious? I cannot bring myself to believe this.' Unbeknown to himself, however, he was far to outstep parish bounds in his own ministry, by printing, if not by preaching.

As a young Oxford undergraduate the Methodist zeal for learning had apparently turned him towards scientific studies, and as a country curate the microscope was seldom off his study table. *Theron and Aspasio* contains his picture of an ideal study, decorated with busts and engravings, its shelves 'accommodated, not encumbered' with books on history, science, poetry, and divinity. Prominent also were the terrestrial and celestial globes, in addition to 'a large reflecting telescope; and on the top of a bureau, one or two of the best microscopes'. In a footnote Hervey pleads: 'Gentlemen of taste and seriousness cannot, I think, have a nobler piece of furniture for their studies, than the microscope and the telescope, the orrery and the air-pump.'

Nor was polite literature neglected. The leisurely moralizings of the *Spectator* which so much influenced his own writings, he perused again and again. From Bideford Hervey wrote to his sister: 'We read one or more of these elegant and instructive papers every morning at breakfast, and they are served up with our tea, according to their original design. We reckon our repast imperfect without a little of Mr Addison's or Mr Steele's company.' A *Spectator* essay, thus discussed over a cup of tea, gave Hervey the germ idea of his *Reflections on a Flower-Garden*, as well as providing its motto.

His main poetic inspiration was Milton's *Paradise Lost*—'the sublimest poem in the world'—whilst a good second was the *Night Thoughts* of his contemporary Edward Young, under whose spell he had fallen as a youth of twenty, when he sent his sister Young's *Last Day* with the request: 'If therefore you would please yourself, refine your taste, or have the practice of religion pleasing, instead of plays, ballads, and other corrupt writings, read this almost divine piece of poetry; read it (as I have done) over and over, think upon it, endeavour to digest it thoroughly, and even to get by heart the most moving passages.' Noticeable also in Hervey's work is the influence of Pope, of Prior's *Solomon*, and of Thomson's *Seasons*, whilst in *Meditations upon the Tombs* he quotes approvingly the recently-published masterpiece of the mortuary school of poets, Robert Blair's *Grave*.

The classics also exercised a strong influence on Hervey's mind, Virgil in particular, from whom he quotes a score of times in *Meditations and Contemplations*, a total exceeded only by Milton. In 1746, however, he decided—unsuccessfully—to banish his classics in favour of the Bible: 'Away, my Homer! . . . Away, my Horace! . . . And even my prime favourite, my Virgil, may withdraw; since, in Isaiah, I enjoy all his majesty of sentiment, all his correctness of judgment, all his beautiful propriety of diction.'

The fruits of James Hervey's Methodist awakening, and of his scientific and literary studies, joined with a natural gift for exuberant eloquence, are to be seen in *Meditations and Contemplations* (1746-7), and in their more strictly theological successor, *Theron and Aspasio* (1755). Both books are a strange

blend of materials, in the traditions both of Jeremy Taylor and John Ray. His theology seems to us unenterprising, though its strong Calvinistic tinge earned John Wesley's criticism, and led to an unedifying controversy. His first-hand observations of nature, however, and his diligent study linked to poetic imagination, though contributing little original to scientific knowledge, did much to popularize the 'back-to-nature' movement which was to develop into the Romantic Revival. And he forestalled John Wesley in teaching the rising middle classes to see 'the Wisdom of God manifested in the Works of the Creation'.

This fact has been obscured for later critics by Hervey's admittedly overloaded style, florid and imaginative like Jeremy Taylor's, but seldom matched with his in directness. Miltonic poetic diction, which enshrouded much eighteenth-century poetry in obscurity, exerted an evil influence on Methodism's prose-poet also. To speak of his 'pompous and posturing performance', however, as does the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, is to allow a striking phrase to perpetuate injustice. Hervey was neither pompous nor posturing, and although his highly-decorated style sounds artificial to modern ears, it is not merely a literary disguise. We find similar phrases in his early letters to his sister, in the account of his brother's death, and even in his own dying speeches. That he *could* write crisp, forceful prose, however, is shown in his rebuke to Beau Nash, a rebuke which so impressed the King of Bath that he preserved it to his dying day. Parts of it could almost have been written by John Wesley himself: 'Let me tell you beforehand, that . . . God will bring you into judgment. He sees me now write. He will observe you while you read. He notes down my words in His book. He will note down your consequent procedure. So that, not upon me, but upon your own self, will the neglecting or despising of my sayings turn.' Such also, apparently, could be his language when preaching from a few shorthand notes to his uneducated congregation, when he sometimes expounded briefly two or three texts at a time, which his parishioners obediently impressed on their minds by turning down the appropriate pages in their Bibles.

With 'polite society', however, for whom his books were avowedly written, Hervey's meditative, word-weaving nature inevitably fell into an exaggerated form of the conventional literary style exemplified in the contemporary phrase for letter-writing—'epistolary correspondence'. But always with a moralizing pill protruding from the sickly sweetness of his verbal syrup. Here is a fair sample, from *Reflections on a Flower-Garden*:

The greyness of the dawn decays gradually. Abundance of ruddy streaks tinge the fleece of the firmament; till, at length, the dappled aspect of the east is lost, in one ardent and boundless blush.—Is it the surmise of imagination, or do the skies really redden with shame, to see so many supinely stretched on their drowsy pillows? Shall man be lost in luxurious ease? shall man waste these precious hours in idle slumbers? while the vigorous sun is up and going on his Maker's errand? while all the feathered choir are hymning their Creator, and paying homage in harmony?—No. Let *him* heighten the melody of the tuneful tribes, by adding the rational strains of devotion. Let *him* improve the fragrant oblations of nature, by mingling, with the rising odours, the more refined breath of praise.

Even the kitchen garden can furnish him with imaginative material, 'parsley,

with her frizzled locks' and 'celery with her whitening arms', whilst according to Hervey, 'the beans stand firm, like files of embattled troops', and 'the tendrils of the cucumber creep into the sun; and, though basking in its hottest rays, they secrete for their master, and barrel up for his use, the most cooling juices of the soil'.

So frequently do the raw materials of poetry appear in his work that it comes as no surprise to learn that as a youth James Hervey would turn out pretty verses for a select circle of female admirers—only to abjure such bids for worldly praise when he became an Oxford Methodist. Yet some of those verses were later used—with others added, perhaps—to adorn his later prose works. Over one of them—a delicate little translation from Theocritus, which was even set to music—a lengthy correspondence raged in the *Gentleman's Magazine* during 1748, a correspondence closed by Hervey's 'worthy friends' avowing 'that he only rendered the lines into English from the Greek of Theocritus, for the sake of his female readers, he not aspiring to be a lofty poet, but only an humble christian'. Another poem, included in *Meditations upon the Tombs*, has been discarded from the hymn-book of Methodism only in the latest revision, and its last verse is still remembered by many:

*Good when He gives, supremely good;  
Nor less when He denies;  
E'en crosses, from His sov'reign hand,  
Are blessings in disguise.*

This, by the way, seems to be the first appearance of the last familiar phrase, which has been ascribed to David Mallet, though he used it in a poem published a year later.

Had Hervey's imagination been harnessed more frequently to the discipline of verse, he might have become one of our better minor poets of nature or religion. Not that he was a slap-dash writer. His writings were subjected to constant polishing both by himself and others, and he often added or omitted passages at the advice of critics years after the first publication of a book. The fame which he had resolved not to seek as a poet, however, came to him unsought as a prose-poet, and men of his own day hailed him as—

*O more than bard in prose! to whom belong  
Harmonious style and thought, in rhymeless song,*

whilst that overlaid minor poet Moses Browne—later to become Hervey's curate—could write:

*Sweet labours new thy genius meditates,  
In prose, ear-rapturing like the voice of song.*

Hervey's own summing up of his abilities, in a letter to that well-known Baptist minister, John Ryland, is as follows: 'I have not a strong mind; I have not powers fitted for arduous researches; but I think I have a power of writing in somewhat of a striking manner, so far as to please mankind and recommend my dear Redeemer.' In a letter to the same divine in later years Hervey issued an *apologia* for such books as his, whose nature-descriptions were apt to invite

the charge of worldliness from narrow-minded saints. His words show that his natural leaning to 'elegant fancies' had been consciously utilized in the service of his Master: 'Such kind of writings suit the present taste. We don't love close thinking. That is most likely to win our approbation, which extenuates the fancy, without fatiguing the attention. Since this is the disposition of the age, let us endeavour to catch men by guile; turn even a foible to their advantage; and bait the gospel hook agreeably to the prevailing taste.'

So effectively did he 'bait the gospel hook' that the octavo volume upon which the Rev Richard Pearsall had accidentally stumbled in June 1746—one of an edition of 750—was soon in much greater demand than supply. It had contained only two large essays, *Meditations upon the Tombs* and *Reflections on a Flower-Garden*, together with a short *Descant upon Creation*. Soon Hervey was preparing a second volume, whose main essays were to be entitled *Contemplations on the Night* and *Contemplations on the Starry Heavens*, though the delay in printing was so great that he was able to add a short *Winter-Piece*. The first volume had been issued quietly, almost surreptitiously—Hervey's biography says it was published in February 1746, although its dedication is dated 20th May. The second edition, however (accompanied by Volume II), came forth with a flourish of trumpets from the *Gentleman's Magazine* in December 1747, and by the end of that month Hervey could arrange for John Wesley to distribute five guineas of the proceeds in charity. (Almost all Hervey's literary earnings went in this way, Samuel Richardson being one of the agents of his generosity.)

Retouched editions now followed in rapid succession, four more within the next year. By the end of the century over fifty editions had been published, and the popularity of Hervey's *Meditations* continued well past the middle of the nineteenth century. Soon the volumes were being translated into German, into French, into Dutch, Spanish, and Welsh, and even into—blank verse! Imitations poured forth from the press, as well as Hervey's own sequel, *Theron and Aspasio*, less ornate in style, but more adventurous in theology. Would-be writers asked Hervey for advice, and submitted their manuscripts for criticism. Even the Rev. Richard Pearsall, who had 'discovered' Hervey in 1746 and was already an author in his own right, was to be found five years later queuing up with his *Contemplations on the Ocean*, to which Hervey gave a kindly pat in *Theron and Aspasio*, saying that in it 'a refined fancy and a delicate philosophy, compose a chaplet for evangelical divinity'. In a private letter, however, he urged restraint on Pearsall—the advice sounds strange coming from the author of *Meditations and Contemplations*:

My worthy friend's genius is too rich; his invention quite luxuriant. He must use the pruning knife, and cut off several of the shoots. Yes, though they are perfectly beautiful, they must be sacrificed; that the fruit may acquire the finer flavour. There is a certain prettiness in some periods, that betrays us all into an ill-judged redundancy; which, though its neatness should secure it from being tiresome, yet weakens the force of the principal thought.

Hervey's *Meditations* became the rage, to be found not only in the homes of the polite, for whom they were intended, but even more frequently on the shelves of the would-be-polite, and of the pious-though-poor. A few independent individuals stood aloof from the general chorus of praise. That novelist

of sentimentality, Samuel Richardson, through whose hands as printer the book had first passed, had given Hervey his genuine congratulations, so that Hervey could reciprocate with good wishes for *Clarissa Harlowe*, who was making her début:

I heartily thank you for your kind Congratulation, on the Acceptance with which the Public has condescended to honour the Performance. Your entertaining and improving Piece I hope will meet with much greater Encouragement, & (which I dare say is the one Scope of your Desires) be productive of more abundant Good. May the great Author of Holiness & Happiness bless them both, how far so ever they spread, how long so ever they Live!

A little later, however, when both books were spreading far and wide in different languages, one of Richardson's titled correspondents, after spending her Sunday afternoon reading the first volume of Hervey's *Meditations*, wrote to him: 'I suppose this work is reckoned a well-wrote piece; and yet the style does not please me in many places. Do you think it is quite easy, sir?' To which Richardson replied: 'I love the man, and think him a devout and good man; but his style is too flowery for prose, too affected: a judicious friend of mine calls it *prose run mad*.'

Dr Johnson, when becalmed in a Scotch inn with little but Hervey's ubiquitous volumes to solace weary travellers, 'treated it with ridicule, and would not allow even the scene of the dying Husband and Father to be pathetick'. Boswell was pained, though he felt bound to add: 'I am not an impartial judge; for Hervey's *Meditations* engaged my affections in my early years.' All the same, Boswell seems to have enjoyed Johnson's spontaneous burlesque of Hervey—*A Meditation on a Pudding*—sufficiently to preserve it pretty well *verbatim*. Hugh Blair also, as Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles-Lettres at Edinburgh University, advised his students 'to imitate Mr. Hervey's piety, rather than his style'. In spite of these justified criticisms, however, there is little doubt that Hervey's Gothic gloom and his genuine love of nature, heightened in their presentation by a rich imagination and by religious emotion, were of some importance in preparing the way for the full flowering of the Romantic Revival both here and in Europe, more especially in Germany, where his *Meditations* were rivalled in popularity only by Young's *Night Thoughts* and Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe*.

Of much more importance to Hervey himself, however, without any doubt, would be the fact that his writings were the instruments of spiritual reformation in the lives of many people. John Valton, one of Wesley's preachers, tells how in his youth he 'was very sensibly affected by reading Hervey's *Meditations*', whilst the book also provided the turning-point in the life of that queer piece of spiritual flotsam, Cornelius Cayley. William Blake acknowledged himself a disciple of Hervey, and the poet Dr Nathaniel Cotton brought about the conversion of an even greater poet, poor William Cowper, confined in Cotton's 'Collegium Insanorum', by giving him Hervey's *Meditations* as a mental sedative. Charles Wesley could refer to the 'academic ease' of 'our own Iso-crates', and wrote a two-part elegy on Hervey's death. John Wesley—who had criticized both the *Meditations* and *Theron and Aspasio*, nevertheless referred to some of Hervey's words as 'worthy to be wrote in letters of gold', and quoted

