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Citation

Robinson, David. 1980. Four early poems of Jones Very. Harvard Library Bulletin XXVIII (2), April 1980: 146-151.

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Four Early Poems of Jones Very

David Robinson

INTRODUCTION

JONES VERY entered the consciousness of the Transcendentalists as a full-blown exemplar of mysticism, a living symbol of the sort of intense piety to which the entire movement aspired. By the time Elizabeth Palmer Peabody introduced him to Emerson in 1838,¹ he was already well along in his pursuit of a "will-less existence" which eventually resulted in his claims of absolute identity with Christ, with Very embodying the "second coming."² These claims cost Very his position as tutor in Greek at Harvard, and quite possibly damaged a promising academic or literary career, but they also produced a body of remarkable mystical poems which have secured his historical reputation as a central contributor to the Transcendental movement.³

But while Very's major poetic achievement arose from his mystical experiences in the late 1830s, he had aspired to be a poet much earlier, and had established a poetic reputation for himself during his college years at Harvard (1834-36). His classmate Samuel Gray Ward remembered not only his "solemn, not-to-be-trifled-with awkwardness," but also that "he considered himself born for a great poet; to restore epic poetry."⁴ And in fact, Very was quite active as a poet during

¹ I would like to acknowledge support from the College of Liberal Arts Research Program and the General Research Program, Oregon State University. The story of Very's meeting Peabody and Emerson can be found in William I. Bartlett, *Jones Very: Emerson's "Brave Saint"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1942), pp. 40-50, and Edwin Gittleman, *Jones Very: The Effective Years, 1833-1840* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 156-180.

² See Gittleman, pp. 181-195.

³ Discussions of Very's historical context have centered around the question of the appropriateness of his inclusion among the Transcendentalists. See Yvor Winters, *Maule's Curse* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1938), pp. 125-146; Anthony Herbold, "Nature as Concept and Technique in the Poetry of Jones Very," *New England Quarterly*, XL (1967), 244-259; Carl Dennis, "Correspondence in Very's Nature Poetry," *New England Quarterly*, XLIII (1970), 250-273; David Robinson, "Jones Very, the Transcendentalists, and the Unitarian Tradition," *Harvard Theological Review*, LXVIII (1975), 103-124; and James A. Levernier, "Calvinism and Transcendentalism in the Poetry of Jones Very," *ESQ*, XXIV (1978), 30-41.

⁴ J. H. Butterfield, "Come with Me to the Feast; or, Transcendentalism in Action," *M.H.S. Miscellany*, no. 6 (1960), 3.

his college years, though the quantity, and especially the quality, of his early work did not approach that of the mystical verse which was to follow. He contributed poems to the *Salem Observer* as early as 1833, and to *Harvardiana*, the Harvard literary magazine, during his college years.⁶ The college poems are in general markedly secular, and certainly not mystical in comparison with the later poems, and suggest that Very as a young poet was experimenting with several themes and voices before his spiritual rebirth. During his senior year he wrote an essay on epic poetry that not only won him an unprecedented second Bowdoin Prize, but brought him to Peabody's — and to Emerson's — attention when he delivered it as a lecture in Salem.⁶

Very's early poems, then, have interest not because of their intrinsic quality, but because they contrast with his better-known later work so forcibly. They also offer some biographical hints which suggest that a rather ambitious young poet lurked behind the mask of the transcendental saint that Very eventually created for himself. What follow are four hitherto unpublished poems of Very, of differing style and quality, dating from the middle 1830s.⁷ Their publication will further strengthen the sense that Very's stylistic advances in the late 1830s, which seem to have come so suddenly, were in important ways the result of his personal surrender to religious vision. Such a conclusion graphically confirms Emerson's insistence that style is the product of vision, a pronouncement that usually appears more theoretical than real.

These poems will be added to the published verse of Very, the publication history of which is indeed complex and confusing. In 1839, Ralph Waldo Emerson selected and edited a number of Very's poems in what was to be the only published volume during his life.⁸ After Very's death in 1880, William P. Andrews edited a new selection of poems, published in 1883, which was followed in 1886 by James Freeman Clarke's "complete" edition of the poetry.⁹ Clarke's

⁵ See Bartlett, pp. 210–216.

⁶ The essay was published in *Christian Examiner*, XXIV (1838), 201–221. Both that version and the original prize essay are reprinted by Kenneth W. Cameron in *ESQ*, XII (1958), 25–38.

⁷ The poems are published by permission of Houghton Library, Harvard University. I would like to thank the staff of Houghton for help with this project.

⁸ *Essays and Poems by Jones Very* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1839).

⁹ *Poems of Jones Very with an Introductory Memoir by William P. Andrews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883); *Poems and Essays by Jones Very: Complete and Revised Edition*, ed. James Freeman Clarke (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886).

edition was not in fact complete, omitting both poems published in various periodicals and poems left in manuscript at Very's death. Clarke's edition was supplemented in 1942 by William I. Bartlett's biography of Very, which included "Poems in Manuscript" from the two major collections of Very manuscripts, at Harvard University and in the Harris Collection of American Poetry at Brown University, a printed but unpublished hymn in the Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts, and a gathering of various poems published in periodicals but not included in any of the three previous collections of Very's poetry. It should be noted that Very published extensively in periodicals during his life, particularly in Salem newspapers, which has also complicated the task of collecting his poems. To Bartlett's collection, Kenneth W. Cameron has added an early poem from Very's college years.¹⁰ In 1972, the Houghton Library, Harvard University, acquired various papers which had been in the possession of Charles Stearns Wheeler (1816-1843), including these four unpublished manuscript poems of Jones Very, as well as ten other manuscripts of published poems of Very.¹¹ Several of the manuscripts in the group are inscribed to "STH" — Samuel Tenney Hildreth (1817-1839), a close friend of Very's and Wheeler's, who graduated in the Harvard class of 1837, and to whom Very had inscribed his Bowdoin Prize essay on epic poetry. Wheeler had become a friend and associate of Emerson during his college years, and did much to aid Emerson's promotion of Carlyle in America. His untimely death in Europe in 1843 was lamented by many as the loss of a great potential contributor to the literary community.¹² Wheeler had been part of a group of aspiring young poets and authors at Harvard which included Hildreth and Charles Hayward (1817-1838), both the victims of early death,¹³ James Russell Lowell, Henry David Thoreau, and Very.¹⁴ It is probable that these

¹⁰ Kenneth W. Cameron, "A College Poem by Jones Very," *ESQ*, V (1956), 12-13.

¹¹ See the Houghton Library's Accessions List *71M-106.

¹² See John Olin Eidson, *Charles Stearns Wheeler: Friend of Emerson* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951).

¹³ For information on Hildreth and Hayward see Charles Stearns Wheeler, "Biographical Notices of Mr. Charles Hayward, Jr., and Mr. Samuel T. Hildreth," *Christian Examiner*, XXVII (1839), 114-131; and Henry Williams, *Memorials of the Class of 1837 of Harvard University* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1887), pp. 17-22. This volume is reprinted by Kenneth W. Cameron, *Thoreau and his Harvard Classmates* (Hartford, Conn.: Transcendental Books, 1965).

¹⁴ See Edward Everett Hale, *James Russell Lowell and his Friends* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1899), pp. 25-42.

poems were circulated among Hildreth, Wheeler, and others, possibly in connection with the editing of *Harvardiana*, and possibly as tokens of poetic and personal esteem. In that sense, their publication sheds light not only on Very, but on the historical and literary context from which he emerged, a context of notable importance for several other key figures as well.

TEXTS OF THE POEMS ¹⁵

[Untitled]

I murmur not though hard the lot
To see another's that fond smile;
And feel myself all, all forgot,
And left to weep unseen the while.

I murmur not that thou canst give
Another joy so dear to me;
Though for that smile alone I live,
Am glad but while I look on thee.

I would not ask those eyes to turn,
And shed their light upon my woe;
To cool these throbbing veins that burn
With passions hottest maddest flow.

I would not cause that gentle heart
A sigh of sorrow, shade of grief;
To bid this mountain weight depart,
And give my anguished soul relief.

Still may that bright and sunny brow
No shade of care or sorrow know;
Still beam those eyes as bright as now,
Though not on *me* their smile they throw.

I will not mourn though sad the weight,
The weary weight life brings to *me*;
For *thou* shalt live with joy elate,
With cheek all bloom and heart all glee.

Those eyes another's love shall speak,
Those lips shall breathe another's name;
Yet vain in other's souls they seek
A purer love, a holier flame.

¹⁵ The poems are reproduced from manuscript with no alterations. They are printed here in the order of their Houghton Library call numbers, as follows: b MS Am 1884(55); b MS Am 1884(58); b MS Am 1884(59); and b MS Am 1884(62).

'Twill burn, when yon bright beaming star
 With kindred light has ceased to glow,
 As pure in yon blue heaven afar,
 As in its earthly shrine below.

The Portrait

Would I might stay those features as they pass,
 Where beauty seems as if she loved to dwell;
 And chain that smile upon the fickle glass,
 That smile whose sweetness words in vain would tell;
 Or fix thy glance with all its heaven of blue,
 The evening star that floats its azure through!
 But no — the spot where I would bid them rest
 Is all unworthy they should linger there;
 The blush of morn on Ocean's slumbering breast,
 The star bright-imagined in its depths of air
 Vanish from off its bosom like thy smile,
 That rests but on so frail a thing awhile,
 Then seeks a home whence it may ne'er depart,
 The faithful mirror of a loving heart.

[Untitled]

"Then shall the *dust* return to the *earth* as it was,
 And the *spirit* shall return unto *God* who gave it."

She sleeps not where the gladsome Earth
 Its dark green growth of verdure waves;
 And where the wind's low whispering mirth
 Steals o'er the silent graves.

She sleeps not where the wild rose lends
 Its fragrance to the morning air;
 And where thy form at evening bends
 To raise the voice of prayer.

She sleeps not where the wandering wing
 Of weary bird will oft repose;
 And bid Death's lonely dwelling ring
 With joy, at day's still close.

She sleeps not *there* — the wild flower's blush
 Would kindle up her closed eye;
 She could not hear sweet music's gush
 Pass all unheeded by.

Vain, vain would Earth call forth again
Her children from their narrow bed;
The soul that drank her joyous strain
Has fled, forever fled!

The spirit's robe she gave *is* there,
Where leans the wild flower's cheek of bloom,
Where rises oft thy voice of prayer,
The spirit has no tomb!

The Torn Flower

I tore thee — thou who looked so sweet,
And shed thy fragrance at my feet;
I tore thee in my wrath;
Scattered thy sweetness to the wind,
Nor left one look of love behind
To smile upon my path.

I mourn too late! Ah! ne'er again
Shall visit thee the small-dropped rain,
The gently falling dew;
Nor morn, nor noon, nor Eve's still hour
Shall watch the spot, ill-fated flower!
Where once thy beauty grew.

The storms that filled the troubled sky
Have lightly passed thy shelter by,
Pleased with thy sweet perfume;
More cruel than the angry blast
I madly crushed thee as I past,
And robed thee of thy bloom.

Would that the tears I o'er thee shed
Might raise again thy drooping head
To life and joy once more;
Then would I learn me of the storm
To spare thy bright and tender form,
My heart's mad passion tore.

JV. to STH.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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