

RETROSPECTIVES: *A Note on Jones Very*

JONES VERY — THE SURNAME STRANGELY APT, for he didn't do things by halves — is among the more extraordinary characters in American poetry. Little known, he seems the epitome of the inspired artist, his best work being produced as a result of a period of religious exaltation which had him briefly incarcerated.

Very was born August 28, 1813, in Salem, Massachusetts. His father was a ship's captain. His mother was reputed to be an atheist, which may have led to Very's interest in religion. He was a friend of Emerson, who found him extraordinary, as well as a brilliant scholar who lectured in Greek at Harvard in his twenties. In September 1838, aged twenty-six, during a spell of increasing religious mania, he had a breakdown in class. He announced to his students that the Second Coming was imminent; they should "flee to the mountains". And he was sacked. He spent a month in a local asylum. This breakdown or manic episode and its aftermath — once wittily referred to as his "sanias" — ruined a major part of his life, but saved his poetry.

Over the next eighteen months he wrote some 300 poems, mainly sonnets, considered of value by scholars. Perhaps a few dozen can still be read with appreciation by the non-specialist, out of a lifetime output of around 870 pieces, much of it pedestrian and narrowly doctrinal. At times Very's best work reminds the reader of a combination of Wordsworth's and George Herbert's, though it has little of Herbert's *caritas*; he is in most respects a more extreme poet. Some of the outstanding pieces outwit, or rather outdistance with their energy, the versified theology to which he was frequently prone. Some have a pure and at times spooky cynicism, in the philosophical sense of that word, with regard to the temporal world. Both sonnets here are believed to be from his "ecstatic" period, when Very's method of composition, at least as indicated by extant manuscripts, changed. He began to write rapidly, with little revision, in pencil, sometimes finishing two poems a day. Many are not so much finely-worked expositions as bursts of energy bound by the constraints of his chosen forms. The reader can be as impressed by their vehemence as by their content.

Very, post-"ecstasy", spent the four decades left to him quietly. As early as 1850 a visitor described him as being like "an extinct crater". His exaltation cost him a livelihood. But it gained his work, after his death aged sixty-six in 1880, a modest posterity — via the handful of startling poems he left behind, convictions sent back from some undatable advance guard of his spirit.

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Editor's note: *a more extended consideration of Jones Very will appear in a future issue.*

JONES VERY

The Journey

To tell my journeys where I daily walk,
These words thou hearst me use were given me;
Give heed then, when with thee my soul would talk,
That thou the path of peace it goes may see; —
I know no where to turn, each step is new;
No wish before me flies to point the way,
But on I travel with no end in view,
Save that from Him who leads I never stray;
He knows it all; the turning of the road,
Where this man lives, and that, he knows it well;
And finds for me at night a safe abode,
Though I all houseless know not where to dwell;
And canst thou tell then where my journeying lies?
If so thou treadst with me the same blue skies.

The Pilgrim

'Twas in the winter at the close of day,
The snow fell deep upon the traveller's path,
I saw one journeying on infirm and grey
Yet seemed he not to heed the tempest's wrath;
And oft a citizen would ask him in
And sit him down beside him at his board,
Yet soon his weary march would he begin
As if he felt not by the food restored;
I wondering asked him, why he tarried not
To taste the cheer they had so freely given;
And why the sheltering roof he had forgot?
He nothing said, but pointed up to heaven; —
And then I knew the food they gave away,
And home they offered were but for a day.