

The Dogs of Thought

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Sometimes only a poem can make sense of life.

In a small kitchen on the second floor of a two-story walk up in the predominantly Irish American Boston suburb of Medford, Henry, his face mottled, the wrinkled skin baggy and loose around his eyes, now bloodshot and swollen from crying, looks down at his hands. He turns his cigarette round and round, comforted by its familiar smoothness, as if his turning will make it rounder, softer, when he puts it to his lips and lights it, the great inhale a gasp followed by an exhalation of white smoke that envelopes his head in a misty shroud.

“Mental anguish,” his sentence ends. The swallowed “t” makes the word “mental” break at the back of his throat, as if he is choking on it, but “anguish” comes out whole.

He is describing how it felt when his wife died. In her maturity, she’d become afraid to be anywhere but here. For over thirty years, she never left home. No calamity, no joy, was powerful enough against whatever kept her from crossing the threshold. Until the day they removed her body. Now he is stranded there, alone in the rooms that comprised the whole of her known universe.

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We sit around his small kitchen table, our steaming cups of coffee making kissing sounds as we lift them to our lips from the plastic cloth a cousin wiped clean a few minutes ago.

Henry, a sad, sick, and aging man, the very picture of private suffering, had just given these two words their full measure of meaning. Restored them to life.

I have never heard those words used as well since. They illumined this broken man, let light into his shaded interior. And he, in turn, helped me know, in an instant, what they stood for. So when, not so long afterwards, I thought I would myself be sunk by grief, I came upon two poems that tutored me in keeping alive, and one of them, this one, always made me think of Henry and what he may have suffered.

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

I cast for comfort I can no more get
By groping round my comfortless, than blind
Eyes in their dark can day or thirst can find
Thirst's all-in-all in all a world of wet.

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, let be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size

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At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather - as skies
Between pie mountains - lights a lovely mile.

I now keep the old paperback edition of Gerard Manley Hopkins' poems, its pages a darkening yellow creeping inward from the margins, beside my bed. In a time when those who hold the microphones do not know how many of we unheard-from people live, I want simply to say that poetry is still read, and revered; studied as one studies the first food after many days of a wasting fever. Even when I merely sensed what the poem could do for me, I came to it hungrily for two years, needed it for how it made me strong. I feel I owe it something, for all it's done for me. And so I have tried to see, and here to say, how it works. Now that I am well, I want to know how the machinery crafted by someone so skilled and kind did such work for me.

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

So much must have gone before to make such poetry possible. A habit of pitiless self-reproach. An occasion is marked by "hereafter" in the opening lines of Hopkins' great poem. The moment of the poem's opening, "My own heart let me more have pity on," marks a turning point, a decision. A self splits apart, one suffering, one observing. It is the sufferer whose experience underlies the poem, makes the poem necessary, but the

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observer who makes the poem itself--the only visible evidence in the landscape to tell us one suffered greatly here, and then enjoyed release.

In the creation of two, “My” and “me” marking them, a self apart who vows to kindness stands opposed to the self torn apart, as the next two lines tell us. This creates a possibility of moments of choice, between imprisonment, with torture; and liberty, with a promise of expansion into the vast outdoors. By the end of the poem we are even told how to do it, win release, and what to leave off doing that keeps us captive.

It was the word “torment” that first brought Henry to mind. Something has torn. It is obdurate, this mental state--hard, like cement. Torn, the mental fabric. Repetition itself the torment. The thought that will not go away. This drastic unkindness, this utter lack of charity towards oneself, is a twinning, a spinning in an ever tightening circle.

The initial appearance of the first person imperative “let”--that little English word that becomes the fulcrum of the whole poem--used twice in the first stanza, twice in the second, opens a rhythmic sweep—“let me more have pity.” But isn’t the cry, as well as the culminating satisfaction of the whole poem (“smile/mile”) cunningly stored, like a seed, in the second use of it--“let/Me live”-- the line break obscuring the cry, “Let me live!” which stands immediately opposed to the passionate wish to “not live” with this mind that turns against itself. Live and not live, like Hamlet’s circling soliloquy. This sad self longs for release, and will find it out of doors, outside itself, aware of the horizon, the vast sweep of sky above that alters the prospect of what is seen in the distance--those mountains. And a path toward them, a vision of a lovely mile, lit, momentarily; an invitation. The prisoner of anguish is invited out and away. But not

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until the second half of the poem. The first must make us feel that suffocating enclosure, a mind locked in torment, tormenting itself.

The circle is so tightly closed it is claustrophobic. Doubles, “this tormented mind” and “this tormented mind,” are welded by “with” but then magnified--or amplified--by the dizzying repetition--a move from the adjective “tormented” to the active force of the verb in an infernal present, “tormenting”--and then this tripling is given one last push toward extremity by the cunning monosyllable with its short quick thrust from the roof of the mouth to its door --“yet” stops just in time.

From two the poet abruptly shifts back to one, and all is opening--he holds the rhyme from the first person imperative, “let,” through to the stanza’s close, after “yet” and “get” and “wet.” This quatrain describes the prisoner’s cell, not the calm solitary’s. The place of torment is elided, it becomes, simply, the state of being “comfortless,” in one of Hopkins’ strangely evocative choices to strain English usage to its breaking point: “I cast for comfort I can no more get/ By groping round my comfortless...”

What? “comfortless room” would now feel prosaic. It is the strange use of the adjective as a noun that gives these lines their haunting power, their visceral sense of disorientation. There is no namable place left--place, relation, true perception, are all abolished by this torment. So, here, if it is comfort we crave, it is our “comfortless” we grope around in, a condition of such need that we are blinded, but not originally or ultimately--for Hopkins compares this condition of eyes trapped in “their dark” to a primal physical need, “thirst,” which is answerable, though not in this condition. There is something in the first handicap which is hopeless--blind eyes never will find “day,”

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though its light and warmth may surround him. But then it is not a permanent state, this particular blindness, for thirst, to which it is likened, could be quenched in “a world of wet,” but for thirst’s deluded attachment to its imagined “all in all” that keeps it from partaking of refreshment.

It’s not that there is no light, no water. The mind prevents itself from satisfaction or release, seals the senses against all we crave.

The poet returns to the doubled or split self next. Having taken the vow, he now shows how to be kind. Addressing himself, he seeks for a name--progressing downward from high formality,

Soul, self; come, poor Jackself, I do advise

You, jaded, let be;

From “soul” to “self,” to common hangdog Everyman, “poor Jackself.” “Come,” he says kindly, a gentle call, friendly; paternal, even. Now comes the third imperative, “I do advise/You, jaded, let be.” A quiet and lovely indistinctness, “let be,” and then a really wonderful set of images, the ones that revealed the whole poem to me, showed me its heart.

...call off thoughts awhile

Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room;

Just as the speaking I calls to the pitiable self, “Come....” so poor Jackself is advised to issue his own address. Here is where, after two years of reading this poem, I suddenly realized that I was always seeing a master calling off a pack of hunting dogs, the mind treed, at bay. A self is cornered by consciousness here, and, too, an observer of it all who

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gently advises the sad self to call them off “awhile,” to let time in--thus the imperative “let” wed to the infinitive “be.” Time now enters in a gentler way, the open breathy vowels “awhile” led up to by the slightly harsher vowel sounds of “call off thoughts,” the “aw” doubled and tripled, then yielding, as the poet would have the dogged thoughts yield, to movement--another lovely indistinctness--“Elsewhere,” the word bringing more breath, and room for change, into the poem. Anywhere will do, just call them off. Now “while” and “where” (time and place) release the breath, exhalations to alter the beat of hard monosyllables (call, off, thoughts). How little it takes, the shift to release, just one more syllable, a rise and a fall to break the monotony of tone, “a-while,” “else-where.”

These dogs of thought will obey if you command--it is that easy, this calling off, and just that hard to come by.

Here comes the first promise. Like “let be” it is the cessation of meaningless activity--torment--that strenuous but static wrestling of self with self.

....leave comfort root-room;

“Leave” suggests that “comfort” will naturally come--it just needs room. This is a good emptiness. Here is the gardener in the poem, knowledgeable about “root-room,” just how wide and deep to dig the hole in order for the roots of what you intend to plant there to grow. Suddenly, we are on the ground. Not in the surreal no-place and no-time of “comfortless” torment, but close to the turned earth of a prepared garden bed. Just the sounds, “root-room” are comforting--so oral, so close to the way we satisfy our original hunger, the infant rooting for its mother’s nipple to give suck.

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The promise is that if you leave it room, comfort will grow. From it follows what has been excluded all the way through his poem, the something or someone missing so that the self can't, alone, find what it needs. But not because it's hidden or withheld, but because it is not a property of the "self," or "soul," but is outside of it, and everywhere available, and free. The fourth and final "let" now is instruction in how to be joyful.

...let joy size

At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile

's not wrung, see you

This "letting," is the crucial turning of the will. Like "leave comfort root-room," this carries the assurance that if you let it, joy will come and seize you in its time, God's time—"God only knows!" my exasperated mother would say when we'd ask when the delayed guest we were all waiting for would finally show up so we could eat—"joy," like "comfort" is not ours, but actively moves out toward the world. Joy's smile is unforced—"see you" answers the blind self locked in torment. Now seeing is all about surrender, patience, and trust, and, best of all, surprise:

...unforeseen time rather - as skies

Bewteenpie mountains - lights a lovely mile.

As suddenly as the sky can open and the sun "light a lovely mile," joy comes, the mountains themselves "pied" with beauty, spotted with cloud shadows, and sweetened, "betweenpie" a curious confection.

How he sustains that smile, wins it, coaxes it from me, from the poem, that letter "s" hung dangling from an apostrophe like a forgotten letter on a movie marquee. "See"

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and “unforeseen” continue to gloss our blindness when we are locked up inside ourselves deficient in our “all in all” that cannot find a thing. All our torment gone at last, the dogs of thought are called off, and the sad self is set free to wander. A path beckons. Out. A way is suddenly lit and welcoming. We walk it, the whole poem a lovely mile, removing us from darkness.