

THE POWER OF POETRY

A couple of months ago, when the allegedly professional football team in Washington, D.C. that I have the misfortune to be in thrall to began its predestined plummet to the depths (“You live in hope, you die in despair” in the immortal words of team broadcaster and NFL Hall of Famer Sam Huff), an anonymous source in Wichita Falls offered the following online to a *Washington Post* sportswriter during a postgame wake. Modeled after the William Ernest Henley poem *Invictus*, it was entitled ‘*Skinvictus* and went

Out of the night that covers me
Dark as the pit from poll to poll
I blame the gold and burgundy
For my disconsolate soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
Haynesworth wheezed and moaned aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of fans,
Zorn was dazed, confused and cowed.

Before these years of wrath and tears
Loom the dreams of glories by;
Whatever happens on the field,
We’ll always win July.

It matters not how bad the teams,
How charged with graft the parking tolls,
Dan’s still master of our fate,
The clueless captain of our souls.

For the uninitiated, Haynesworth is an overpaid, underachieving defensive tackle, Zorn is the hapless former head coach and Dan is Dan Snyder, its current owner. Cindy Boren, the sports editor to whom the poem was proffered, responded, “Outstanding work; exceptionally high brow. Suffering really is good for creativity.” Indeed. The suffering part, I mean.

It would take Sherlock Holmes to uncover the name of the poem’s mysterious and supremely gifted author, so well hidden are the tracks, but the editor’s point about suffering being good for creativity is well-taken. One hears the term “melancholy” as an adjective for “poet” far more often than “happy” or “hilarious.” Consider Henley’s *Invictus* (my apologies to his shade, “shade” in this instance being a poetic synonym for “ghost” or “spirit”), with its defiant opening invocation:

Out of the night that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole
I thank whatever gods there be
For my unconquerable soul

and its ferocious benediction,

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

Invictus arose out of Henley's life-long battle with bone tuberculosis, which resulted in an amputation when he was 16, years of hospitalization, and the death of a beloved daughter at 5. Sufferings like his tend to produce either devout believers or angry agnostics; *Invictus* obviously skews to the latter, though Henley's final poem, *Margaritae Sorori*, with its evocation at the last of "a shining peace" is the most gentling meditation on one's own demise I have ever read.

The most devastating war poem I have ever read is a two-liner by Rudyard Kipling, the grand old champion of British imperialism. Kipling had lobbied a number of Army officials and pulled many strings in order to secure a commission for his severely nearsighted son, Jack; he did not want him to miss the "glory" of serving during what became the meat grinder of World War I. Jack disappeared during the Battle of Loos in 1915 and was eventually pronounced dead. Disillusioned and guilt-ridden, Kipling would soon after write,

If any question why we died,
Tell them, that our fathers lied.

World War I produced a trove of writers whose experiences seared their poetry. Wilfred Owen invoked Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac in *The Parable of The Old Man and the Young*:

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,
Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchéd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! An angel called to him out of heaven,

Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him, thy son.
Behold! Caught in a thicket by its horns,
A Ram. Offer the Ram of Pride instead.
But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

A week before the Armistice took effect on November 11, 1918, Owen was killed. His parents received word of his death as the church bells of his hometown pealed out the joyful news of peace.

Of course, strong feelings can be invoked by many things other than war. William Butler Yeats, desperately in love with an unreceptive Maud Gonne, envisioned her in *When You Are Old* sitting by the fireside and regretfully contemplating his book of poems:

How many loved your moments of glad grace
And loved your beauty with love false or true.
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.

Yeats, like Owen, also used Biblical imagery to describe the unspeakable horror he saw arising out of the war and his foreboding that the antichrist would soon stalk the earth. In *The Second Coming*, he wrote,

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

...And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?

Of course, the seminal source of western poetry is the Book of Psalms.

Thomas Cahill, in *The Gifts of the Jews* (the finest, most accessible book I have ever read on the Old Testament) says that the inner life of David, the shepherd who united the 12 tribes of Israel into a single nation, is emblazoned in the poetry of the Psalms. In this, he is the western world's seminal poet. As Cahill notes,

David's Hebrew is a model for all lyric poetry from his own day to ours. David is the first person to use the word "I" as we use it--to mean one's interior self. This is an astonishing accomplishment for the tenth century BC,

because a sense of the inner self is notably absent from all other ancient literatures... But David's psalms are full of I's: the I of repentance, the I of anger and vengeance, the I of self-pity and self-doubt, the I of despair, the I of delight, and the I of ecstasy. The Psalms are a treasure trove of personal emotions and a unique early roadmap to the inner spirit--previously mute--of ancient humanity. Whereas the historian must normally guess at the emotions of his subjects from incomplete or indirect evidence, David's Psalms reassure us that three thousand years ago people laughed and cried just as we do, bled and cursed, danced and leapt--that our whole repertoire of emotions was theirs.

Consider David's anguished cry of remorse in Psalm 51 over his adultery with Bathsheba, his complicity in the killing of her husband, and his sorrow over the death of their infant child:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
According to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Countless penitent sinners have cited this Psalm when they were stricken with remorse; President Clinton quoted it during a national address in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. It has not lost one ounce of power to invoke the redemptive power of human guilt and God's unceasing mercy.

More than any other work in human history, Psalm 22 evokes the feeling of utter desolation that almost invariably befalls those of the deepest faith. The reason for its consequentiality is that Jesus cried it out in his agony as he suffered and died upon the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

Of course, Psalm 22 is followed by the most beloved passage in all the Old Testament. It is a timeless source of consolation for those beset with sickness or grief, which is why it is almost invariably cited at funerals:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil;
my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

William Wordsworth once described poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Psalm 23 could fit that description, while others cited here could not. But when words are limned by great depth of feeling and especially when they are fired with the divine inspiration that constitutes a form of grace, they are, heart to heart and soul to soul, the common concourse of man and woman and God.

Dave

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer” [Psalm 19.14]. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.