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‘What are we doing here?’: A.D. Hope’s ‘Ascent into Hell’

Poetry is not mysterious and yet it is a mystery. It is a mystery because it shares the still incredible mystery of conscious minds existing in an apparently mindless and for the most part an inanimate universe.

What do Dante’s *Inferno* and a Tasmanian childhood have to do with each other? How can we *ascend* into hell? And how could a poet once described as Australia’s ‘greatest living eighteenth-century poet’ have written a poem so promiscuous in sensibility: the ‘never-never of childhood’ of Romanticism, Baudelairean grotesque, modernist appropriation of Dante, autobiographical poetry that tells us almost nothing about the poet’s life. ‘Ascent into Hell’, from A.D. Hope’s first collection of poetry, *The Wandering Islands* (1955), shows that Hope has always been more than he appears.

‘Ascent into Hell’, as the title suggests, is a poem of inversion, inverting nothing less than time and traditional cosmology. Part of its disturbing character comes from its unexpected changes of tone. The poem both employs and satirizes the rhetoric of literary childhood, that magical place of heightened experience that exists before shades of the prison house begin to close. The poem’s epigraph—‘Little Henry, too, had a great notion of singing’—comes from a different tradition. It is from *The History of the Fairchild Family*, ‘Being a Collection of Stories Calculated to shew the Importance and Effects of a Religious Education’, by Mrs Sherwood, ‘the most fiercely didactic of all writers of the moral tale’. This undercuts Romantic notions that this poem may be about the growth of a poet’s mind (to quote Wordsworth again). And it is surely an oblique comment directed towards the poem’s main intertext: Dante’s *Inferno*, the opening of which (‘Midway along the path of our life / I found myself in a dark, gloomy wood’) is parodied at the beginning of Hope’s poem.
I, too, at the mid-point, in a well-lit wood
Of second-rate purpose and mediocre success,
Explore in dreams the never-never of childhood,
Groping in daylight for the key of darkness.

Here the traditional trope of light and darkness as knowledge and ignorance is inverted, and the childhood Tasmania that the poet revisits is more mythological than real: 'Unchanged my prehistoric flora grows / Within me, marsupial territories extend'.

The recreation of an 'actual' childhood is similarly marked by inversion and striking links between radically different phenomena. The child-poet is listening at night: 'The marsh of stars reflects a starry croaking; / I hear in the pillow the sobbing of my blood // As the panic of unknown footsteps marching nearer'. To return imaginatively to the point before birth is to imagine a state little different, at least as far as human experience is concerned, from death. Moving backwards through memory, the poet relives moments banal in terms of the topoi of childhood, though imbued with a sense of despair through 'excessive' figuration. It's hard to tell whether this figuration is satirical or infernal. For instance, the child hides in a poplar tree 'Above the German soldiers, hopelessly / Chopping the fingers from the climbing hands'. Later (that is, earlier), sleep becomes a labyrinth, something always suggestive of hiding monsters. Some nightmares seem frankly comic: 'Chased by wild bulls, his legs stick fast with terror. / He reaches the fence at last—the fence falls flat. / Choking, he runs, the trees he climbs will totter / Or the cruel horns, like telescopes, shoot out'. Artful use of lexis inverts the world we think we inhabit. The homonym 'fast' in this context denotes the opposite of speed and movement.

Reaching his fourth year 'the waking life turns inward' and reality ('real names and places') survives as something 'Dreamlike within the dream'. The poet's parents appear: the mother comforting him with her body, the father whipping his son for lying. However satirical Hope may be elsewhere about Freud, theology in this world has manifestly been replaced by psychology. Sex and imagination—as Hope notes elsewhere—are concomitant forces. This is seen in the thirteenth stanza: 'In bed, he fingers his stump of sex, invents / How he took off his clothes and ran away, / Slit up his belly with various instruments; // To brood on this was a deep abdominal joy / Still recognised as a feeling at the core / Of love'. This presents us with another half-pun. Is the child (or the poet) 'stumped' by his sex? Thinking back on the
bulls, the labyrinth, the Easter Island faces, we might wonder if the poet is having a joke at our expense. Yet the verbs of this poem suggest that if this might be the case, it is not only the case: the poet is ‘groping’, ‘hopelessly chopping’, ‘sweating’, ‘choking’, ‘lying’, screaming.

Syntax and lexis alone don’t make this oddly satirical poem disturbing. ‘Ascent into Hell’ deftly employs half-rhyme. While some rhymes are full (core/more) each stanza uses half rhymes (terror/totter) or odd double and triple rhymes (continent/ascent). This usage suggests both disquiet and the threat of comedy breaking in, since multisyllabic rhyme in English generally produces comic effects.

Finally we arrive at ‘the last genuine memory’ (the poet singing, ironically, ‘Jesus Loves Me’):

Beyond is a lost country and in vain
I enter that mysterious territory,
Lit by faint hints of memory lies the plain
Where from its Null took shape this conscious I

Which backward scans the dark—But at my side
The unrecognised Other Voice speaks in my ear;
The voice of my fear, the voice of my unseen guide;
‘Who are we, stranger? What are we doing here?’

And through the uncertain gloom, sudden I see
Beyond remembered time the imagined entry,
The enormous Birth-gate whispering, ‘per me,
per me si va tra la perduta gente.’

This is a shocking ending (something of a specialty of Hope’s) and one that could well support claims of Hope’s misogyny.

This is one of Hope’s most striking images of the 

\textit{vagina dentata} (all the more striking if we think that the birth-gate referred to belongs to the poet’s ‘mother’). Here Dante’s \textit{Inferno} reappears. The ‘Other Voice’, the unseen guide, has neither the classical authority of Virgil, nor the moral grace of Beatrice, the figures who guide the poet in \textit{The Divine Comedy}. Rather, it is the voice of the poet’s own fear. The half- punning at the beginning of ‘Ascent into Hell’ (‘I, too...?/I, two...’) that undermines a unitary sense of self is here clearly marked. The poet’s ‘conscious I’ has become plural: ‘Who are we, stranger? What are we doing here?’ The poet is neither one nor everyone, since, despite the universal ring to the second question, the moral authority of both children’s literature (Mrs Sherwood) and divine literature (Dante) is explicitly undermined throughout.
But the ‘here’ here is a world about to be extinguished by the unremembered, unimaginable world of the womb. The poem now goes out of reverse and begins again. The moment of birth is the ascent into hell, and Hope makes this explicit by the words the Birth-gate whispers. They come from the inscription on the gates of hell from the third canto of the Inferno. ‘Per me si va nella città dolente, / Per me si va nell’eterno dolore, / Per me si va tra la perduta gente... // Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrare!’ Hope quotes the third line: ‘Through me is the way to join the lost people’, but the inscription also reads: ‘Through me is the way to the sorrowful city. Through me is the way to eternal suffering. Through me is the way to join the lost people...Abandon all hope, you who enter!’ While only alluded to, we have the last and most curious (is it comic? tragic?) of the poem’s homonyms: Hope is abandoned. The logic of the poem, then, leads us here: a cunt that stands as the gate to hell on earth and quotes Dante.

David Brooks writes that the figure of the vagina dentata in Hope’s work ‘incarnates a fear of being engulfed by the uncertainty before one’. Here, however, inversion is again at work, since the act is not that of being devoured but expelled. The world of the ‘lost people’ is the world we all live in, and so the expulsion of birth is something like the expulsion from Eden. On another cultural level we also see the inversion of the ‘gates of paradise’ (as the labia were sometimes called in erotic literature) into the Birth-gate of hell. Direction, as this poem demonstrates, is everything.

If all of this seems too outré, pessimistic, or obscene, perhaps we should consider what ‘poetry’ means here. Figures who enter and return from the underworld—Odysseus, Orpheus, Persephone—appear elsewhere in Hope’s poetry. The myth of Orpheus has long been a key myth for the condition and effects of poetry. Kevin Hart, in his book on Hope, characterizes Hope as an Orphic poet, where Orphism affirms the ‘primacy of poetry and its regenerative powers’, and this makes greater sense of Hope’s career-long interest in (or obsession with) sex, since for Hope ‘poetry is twinned with sexuality’. If this strange poem can be seen as more than grotesque, or simply an oddity (given that today the response to obscenity is markedly different from when this poem was first published), then it is related to this Orphic model of Hope. Hope’s words on the mystery of poetry, quoted above, support this. If the universe is more or less inanimate, then poetry could be seen as an animating spirit. Not in Dante’s divine sense, but as a way of knowing, as ‘an enlargement of
our capacity to know". In that case, 'Ascent into Hell' works by turning everything on its head, so that when we ask 'What are we doing here?' it might for a moment be more than merely a rhetorical question. Moreover, the 'here' refers to the symbolic world of the poem. We ask the question because the poem disturbs us. Answers can be found (in mythology, intertextuality, psychology), but the poem also resists these answers. What are we doing here? We are experiencing, if we can, the mysterious force of poetry.

5 *The New Cratylus*, p.169.