

THE PARTHENON

The Parthenon

by George Hobson

Foreword by Richard B. Hays

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THE PARTHENON

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Foreword

THE PUBLICATION OF *THE Parthenon* will enable a new audience of readers to discover and savor the work of one of the remarkable Christian poets of our time. George Hobson's previously published poetry collections (*Rumours of Hope*; *Forgotten Genocides of the 20th Century*; *Faces of Memory*; and *Love Poems for my Wife, Victoria*) have reached an audience of discerning readers in the UK and in Europe, but they have not yet been widely disseminated in North America. This Wipf and Stock edition offers a fresh gathering of poems that revel in the joy of the created world, probe the pain of the human condition, and proclaim the hope of God's ultimate healing of all things.

Readers will find here a bold and distinctive poetic voice—or, rather, an ensemble of voices that express Hobson's complex vision of the world. As I have lived with these poems over time, it has seemed to me that Hobson writes with at least three different voices, in three different registers, distinct but interwoven. At the risk of oversimplifying, I will name these the voices of the *painter*, the *prophet*, and the *preacher*.

George Hobson is not literally a painter, though he is a gifted artistic photographer. But he sees the variegated created world with a painter's eye, discerning patterned epiphanies of God's joyful, prodigal grace in creation. The *painter's* voice in these poems is the lineal heir of the psalmist who declared that "the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament declares his handiwork" (Ps 19:1), as well as the heir of Gerard Manley Hopkins,

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who saw that “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Hobson does not merely echo these mystical perceptions; he repeatedly discerns fresh ones:

What is that deep sea?
The sweep of foam down a wave’s face
Pictures unsolicited grace
Rolling from eternity
To cover broken time.

The painter’s voice not only *describes* creation, but also, using the poetic device of apostrophe, *speaks to* it: shells, birds, cows, leaves, the moon, all are addressed lovingly by Hobson’s poet/painter voice.

This dialogical generosity extends also to the products of human craftsmanship and art: for example, “O Bowl,” and climactically in the collection’s brilliant title poem:

Oh, ride on, great bird, rider
Of the great waters, sea-bird poised
On the Attic rock above the dark
Aegean: ride on till all your stone
has turned to dust.

In this pivotal poem, it becomes clear that all human art, though it truly hints “at depths/Beyond the shallow pools/We spend our lives in” (as Hobson writes in the earlier poem “Art”), remains achingly insufficient to attain the eschatological truth that it seeks and reflects. The painter/poet weeps at the cold, tragic beauty of the Parthenon because its “grave harmonies in stone / Give glimmers of another world,/whose reality you could not know.”

The second voice that speaks in these poems is that of the *prophet*. In the latter part of the collection, Hobson’s prophetic voice lacerates human pretension to self-sufficiency and decries the flattened pseudoscientific rationalism of a modernity that has abandoned transcendence. We could also call this the voice of the social critic, but to default to that apparently neutral terminology

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would be to capitulate subtly to the very reductionism that Hobson's poetry skewers. This is more than social critique. These poems assail modernity not only because it is ugly, sterile, and alienating; these failings are but symptoms of the disease. Here, it is the voice of the anguished prophet who speaks, portraying faithlessness and desolation; this withering voice is the heir of Amos, Jeremiah, and of the T. S. Eliot who wrote "The Hollow Men" and "Choruses from 'The Rock.'" These poems portray modernity's malaise as a direct consequence of its blind flight from the God who desires to give life. The destination of that flight has proven to be a swamp-land covered by suffocating fog—as devastatingly portrayed in the lengthiest poem in the collection, "The Fog."

There is however, finally, another voice that sounds throughout this book, speaking in concert with the other two: the voice of the *preacher*. I do not say the voice of the theologian, though Hobson is indeed an Oxford-trained theologian. The theologian articulates the structure of doctrine, explains its grammar. These poems, however, do not explain; instead, they proclaim. Some popular Christian poets tiptoe about the margins of Christian confession, gesturing wistfully towards the traditions of a faith that they own only obliquely, or even in some cases with a certain embarrassment. For Hobson, no such indirection. With Barthian gusto, he robustly declares the truth of the faith once for all delivered to the saints, and affirms that our hope lies there and only there. In one of the collection's most moving poems, leaping dolphins in the Bay of Arcachon, recalled in memory in a time of bereavement, proclaim the resurrection of Jesus and echo the promise of Julian of Norwich (and, not insignificantly, Eliot's *Four Quartets*) that "All shall be well." For Hobson the preacher, this proclamation is not simply a matter of optimism or blind trust in a benign account of history. All shall be well precisely because Christ is risen and will come again to set all things right at last. Some readers may squirm at the proclamatory tone of Hobson's poet/preacher voice; others will rejoice in it. Either way, there is no mistaking that his poetic vision depends upon reclaiming the truth of the Christian gospel. And,

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as he would have us recognize, the truth of the Christian gospel is the ground of all joy and love.

I have known George Hobson for almost fifty years. He has been for me a teacher, an inspiration, and a friend. He has devoted much of his life to ministry not only in England and France, but also in settings of great suffering in Rwanda and Armenia. His poetic *oeuvre* is emerging late in his life, but it eloquently embodies hard-won wisdom. It deserves to be set alongside the luminous work of other great Christian poets of our time such as Michael O'Siadhail and Malcolm Guite. What I have written here offers a tiny taste of the rich fare of this volume. I invite you, reader, to join George at the great feast.

—RICHARD B. HAYS

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Part I

March Morning

Glazed ferns gleam through tenebrous fir,
Stirring memories that rise,
Like trout to glinting lures,
From root-wheels and sodden logs
Mired on the bottom of years.
Slabs of sun and shadow
Stripe a grassy roadbank
Opposite a stand of pine trees
In the hills west of the Roannais
Above the bright-shining sword
Of the River Loire.
Mid-March,
Morning,
Balsam air.
Here, there,
Birds flit,
Twitter,
Sit like notes on the staffs
Of the scores of the bare branches.
All is on the verge.
On the ridge-tops, blue surges,
Scattering bibulous cloud
Hung over from night.
Blue strides down the green valley,
Embracing the willows,