

The Life Of Joseph Hart 2.

Thomas Wright | Added: Jul 08, 2025 | Category: Biography

In ‘this abominable state’, says Hart, ‘I continued a loose backslider, an audacious apostate, a bold-faced rebel, for nine or ten years, not only committing acts of lewdness myself, but infecting others with the poison of my delusions, I published several pieces on different subjects, chiefly translations of the ancient heathens, to which I prefixed prefaces and sub-joined notes of a pernicious tendency, and indulged a freedom of thought far unbecoming a Christian.’

The books to which he refers particularly are his translations of Phocylides and Herodian. From the time of Elizabeth downwards, translation from the classics had been the pastime – for in most cases the incentive was pleasure – of a long line of English gentlemen. The golden age of translation – that of North’s Plutarch, Hobbes’s Thucydides, and Adlington’s Apuleius – had indeed passed away, but it had been succeeded by an age that was respectable though not brilliant – that of John Clarke, ‘Mr. Cooke’, Philip Francis, and William Melmoth, and it may have been the success of some of these writers that incited Hart to similar exertions. For the work of a translator he was admirably equipped. An excellent classical scholar, he had read with avidity every known Greek and Roman writer. Again, if he was deeply versed in Livy, Tacitus, Ovid, Horace, whose ‘Art of Poetry’ was one of his enthusiasms, the horribly curious Suetonius, who was his special favourite, and other classics, he was also deeply versed in such writers as Orosius, that ‘learned editor Henry Stevens’, and the ‘ingenious Salmasius’. He had indeed Salmasius’s own hunger for knowledge, and his salient ambition in those days was to win the reputation of a scholar. His rendering of Phocylides – or rather of ‘The Preceptive Poem’ attributed to that author – appeared in May, 1744. It consists of a preface the concluding portion of which is in execrable taste, and the Translation, with voluminous notes. In the preface, Speaking of the original, Hart says, ‘the style is masculine and nervous, not embellish’d with tropes, or set off with imagery; but majestic and simple, as the dignity and importance of the subject required. The language of Phocylides – one of the compactest of ancient writers – influenced healthily him who must be pronounced the compactest of English poets. The following citations will give some idea of Hart’s translation:

For favour wrest not judgment: nor reject

A poor man’s suit; nor show the least respect

Of persons, but remember, God will be,
If e'er of those judgest wrong, a Judge to thee.

Again,

One moment men some sudden ill endure,
And find the next some unexpected cure.

In another couplet we are bidden to shun the contagion of the worthless.
Phocylides was an ardent advocate of matrimony, for does he not say:

Remain not single, lest obscure thou die,

And buried in oblivion nameless lie;

Render to nature what for thee was done,

And be a father as thou wast a son.

Then we are taught our duty to those around about us:

Love all thy kindred with unfeigned respect,

Revere the head with hoary honours deckt,

Rise to a senior, and resign thy seat,

And show him all regard and homage meet;

For thy domestics keep no scanty board,

His undiminished hire to each afford.

And there are other verses on what Hart in his title to hymn 7 of his Appendix calls, 'The Relative Duties'. When he was writing that hymn, doubtless he was thinking of the apostle's words in the fifth of Ephesians, but it is probable that he also had in mind some of Phocylides' maxims; and other lines in his hymn-book have a Phocylidian ring. Although here and there we find a happy expression, Hart's translation is not literature. The notes are heavy as well as voluminous, and most are quite unnecessary to the elucidation of the text, which, indeed, scarcely requires an attention.

Having launched the Phocylides, Hart turned his attention to other classical writers, and on 25th Nov, 1749, he published a translation of Herodian. The work is advertised in the London Evening Post, Tuesday Nov. 21st, to Thursday Nov. 23rd, and also in the number dated Nov 23rd to Nov. 25th.

At the end of the advertisement appears ‘N.B. – Such gentlemen as have been pleased to favour the Author with their subscriptions are desired to send for their books at his lodgings, at Mr. Liford’s, Mathematical Instrument Maker, near the new church in the Strand.’ Those who do not possess a copy of ‘Herodian’ can obtain a tolerable idea of his subject-matter from the pages in Gibbon that cover the same; and it may be added that Gibbon, unlike some other scholars, had for Herodian a genuine respect. Hart’s work, which was printed for the author, consists of Preface, Introduction, The Translation with Notes, an Appendix, a Chronological Table and an Index. As regards the Introduction, the end he had in view was to endeavour ‘to say as much as was requisite in as small a compass as possible’.

One of his objects in producing this work was the mischievous one of trying ‘to show’, by means of his notes, ‘the parity’, or he might in some articles say the identity, of the religious notions of the heathen with those of the Jews of old, and the Christians of all denominations’. He had set himself, indeed, the quixotic task of endeavouring to form a homogeneous whole out of incompatible materials. He was an 18th century Walter Pater. ‘The external evidence of all religions’, he goes on, ‘is much the same’. But the internal evidence of pure Christianity is invincible. I mean the divine doctrines of salvation and universal charity.’ Further, he has the grace to admit that ‘the Bible well deserves the title of the best book extant’, and we may recall that in his Unreasonableness of Religion he had styled it ‘that repository of sweet treasures’. His method of procedure is well illustrated by the following note in reference to the procession in honour of Cybele: ‘However odd and fantastic these dancing festivals among the heathen may seem to us moderns, I cannot but observe that there is in them a strong resemblance of some in use among the Jews ... In 2 Samuel 6:14, King David is described as dancing before the ark in a very extraordinary manner ... even the frantic behaviour of the priests of this goddess, in their mad processions at her festivals, so comically described by Juvenal (Sat. VI.), is equalled by the phrenzy of the Jewish prophets ... Nor is the similitude conspicuous only in the religious ceremonies of the Jews and heathens, but it appears as plain in the several accounts of the political advantages made of their religion by their respective rulers’ – and he parallels the story of the rape of the Sabine virgins with the narrative in Judges 21:16-23.

How wide the difference between Hart’s wrangling note on divination and necromancy and his judicious remarks on those vain studies in his sermon, ‘The King of the Jews’! ‘The Magi’, he says in the ‘Herodian’, ‘seem to have learnt the birth of our Saviour from the aspect of the heavenly bodies. That miracles may be performed by magicians and prophets of heterodox principles is plain from the story of the Egyptian conjurers, who, as well as Moses, produced several plagues. The witch of Endor is a glaring instance of necromancy ... In a word, it would be the height of superstition to credit all the silly, absurd stories of oracles, augurs, conjurers, and fortune tellers among the pagans, yet that they sometimes revealed future events is

confirmed at least by the testimony of the Scriptures', and there is more, written for the most part in an unenlightened and cavilling spirit.

Hart's remarks on the Lucretia incident arrest attention on account of his insistence on the power of pride, a subject with which he was to do so effectively in his well known hymn 58. 'Of all the passions of the soul', he says, 'the power of pride is the most extensive. By this, as by a spring, the several movements of the human mind are actuated and directed. It is to this principle we are beholden for most of that valour and virtue the world so much admires. This was sufficiently verified in Lucretia ... She who had been deaf to prayers and entreaties, had rejected all offered rewards, and had remained intrepidly firm against the threats of death itself, was conquered by the fear of disgrace ... She endured adultery to save herself from the scandal of an adulteress.'

When Hart confines his remarks purely to the subject of literature he is delightful. The following, for example, is worthy of being written in letters of gold: 'It is with books as with persons, they who are most trifling and capable of giving least instruction or benefit by their conversation, are commonly understood at the first or second interview, and seldom fail to please for a time, because the eye is always most sensibly struck with beauties which are most superficial and glaring. But wherever there is any instructive good and real work, it is generally so couched as not to be presently seen by a slight external view; but the more we grow acquainted with the object, the more we are delighted with its excellency, and the higher esteem we have of its intrinsic merit. Truth loves to unveil herself to the patient, humble, and impartial mind, but scorns to expose her charms to the vulgar eyes of traditional superstition, or the unequal inquiries of prejudiced infidelity; to the narrow views of popularity, pride, or interest, the hasty conclusions of self-conceit, the rash judgment of partial zeal, or the shallow perceptions of indolence or levity.' The translation itself, like that of Phocylides, is simply an honest piece of work, without literary charm. Many of the sentences are wearisome, owing to their extreme length. The chronological table at the end, compiled with great labour and care from the best ancient historians, as well as the poets, who 'in some particulars' had been 'very helpful', bears witness, along with other features in the book, to the author's industry, his love of system, and the orderliness of his mind.

Hart's reference in his *Experience* to these translations is liable to mislead, suggesting, as it does, annotatory vagaries in the Gibbon or Sir Richard Burton manner. Phocylides, like Juvenal and other ancient moralists, had unpleasant verses that have been responsible for fungoid horrors; but to Hart's comments upon them none but the captious would take exception. Certainly it could not have been inferred from them that he was at the time living an immoral life. Indeed, it pleased him more to make tremendous dissertations on grammatical niceties, and to bolster up his theory of the moment, than to expend labour upon the erotic and the esoteric. His humanity and common sense peer through a number of passages. Thus he

deplores the prevailing practice of duelling, and he denounces those men who 'readily improve every advantage the letter of the law will allow them to oppress and rack their weaker brother, whose only fault perhaps is that he is poor and defenceless. Than this unjust, though lawful, proceeding, nothing can be more dishonest and wicked, nothing more repugnant to the eternal dictates of benevolence and charity, by which external laws should sometimes be superseded. For such is the weakness of mankind, that the wisest legislators cannot invent or institute any law extensive enough to conduce in every respect to the good of society. The truly honest man should, therefore, in many cases, recede from what the rigour of the law would give him, because the strictest and most legal prosecutor is very often the greatest and worst offender. According to the old Latin proverb, Jus summum saepe summa injuria – law enforced to strictness often becomes the severest injustice.' Nevertheless his annotations (and the same may be said of his prefaces) have indubitably an unpleasant – a grating – tone. In some of those which we have cited there is a flippancy, an absence of reverence, an attempt to put unwarrantable constructions upon the actions of certain Bible characters, and to drag the religion of the Bible down to the level of other religions – a habit of speaking authoritatively upon matters concerning which no man is competent to pronounce. Very often it is less what he says than his manner of saying it that gives umbrage, but he has the superciliousness, the perversity, and the assurance of a Matthew Arnold, with no more 'vision' than had that writer when he produced Saint Paul and Protestantism. Like his polished successor, he was a superior person. In short, to use his own words, 'he was puffed up with each fantastic whim', and it was this attitude which in after days he recalled with so much sorrow. How different the heart of the inconsiderable Herodian translation from the man who, at the time he was producing deathless verse, could write,

The author's merit none

And therefore none his boast!

His notes are cumbrous with quotations from the Hebrew, to say nothing of the Greek, but, with all his erudition, the Bible was as yet a sealed book to him. He had still something to learn which mountains of Hebrew and oceans of Greek were incapable of imparting.

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