

This is a place one can go mad in ? Ivor Gurney, Asylum Poet

Ivor Gurney was a First World War poet and a composer of beautiful songs, and orchestral and chamber music. However, just four years after he returned from the trenches of the Somme, he was locked up against his will in a lunatic asylum, for fifteen years. He died there in 1937.

In the asylum he wrote a huge quantity of music, poetry, and letters in which he appealed to be released. Much of his poetry and music remains unpublished, and none of the letters have been seen beyond the walls of the archive. Of the 326 songs that exist, only 90 or so are in print, and I have yet to find any that really don't deserve to see the light of day.

However, the stigma of his so-called 'madness', combined with the lack of money or any Gurney estate to push publication forwards, has meant that even Gurney's most avid fans have been wary of publishing anything he wrote in the asylum. What they forget is that much of his greatest poetry stems from this time, including the poems of his that are routinely included in major anthologies of war poetry.

The asylum letters are a completely forgotten area of his output, having never been published. They are interesting but unconventional, and therefore perhaps do not support the argument that the poems and music Gurney wrote in the asylum are important work.

To the City Besançon
(Most) humble Petition.
Of a war poet
(perhaps the first of England)
horribly wounded
A maker

April 1925
22nd
For rescue to Old New England or another state
Or Canada or
((Scotland))
Or ((Ireland))
Written for leave of free death London
(most) humble petition. War Poet maker.

[written along the sides of the page:]
April 23/1925

And in the name of
JS Sargent for Cable
To City of Boston.
Rescue

Most humble petition Ivor Gurney
In the names of Victor Hugo (for right)
John Marston
Johannes Brahms for making

[on other side] One born on the Day of Leo Count Tolstoi. 1890. August 28th [1]

How should we understand these more eccentric documents, without simply dismissing Gurney as incapable of creativity? And if we can find a framework for reading his letters of appeal, a way of appraising them and finding value in them, could this help us to think more open-mindedly about his unpublished music, which was written at the same time?

I want to start, not with Ivor Gurney's words, but with some prose by the earlier poet John Clare to frame our thinking. Clare and Gurney share striking similarities. They were both nature poets, and both were locked up in asylums, where they wrote without hope of anyone taking much notice of their work. Clare wrote a short piece from within the asylum entitled 'Self-Identity' (1841), which reads like a guide to survival for future asylum patients:

A very good commonplace counsel is Self-Identity to bid our own hearts not to forget our own selves and always to keep self in the first place lest all the world who always keeps us behind it should forget us altogether ? forget not thyself and the world will not forget thee ? forget thyself and the world will willingly forget thee till thou art nothing but a living-dead man dwelling among shadows and falsehood[.] [2]

Gurney's asylum poetry and prose echo many of the concerns Clare outlines in this extract. According to Clare, creating and maintaining a sense of self are essential for a poet's survival in an asylum. This need to defend the self, to fight against anonymity and continue to maintain an identity not only as a composer and poet, but as a member of the human race is our starting point for an investigation into Gurney's letter writing during his fifteen years locked up against his will in asylums.

Gurney's letters can be read as inconsequential, deranged scrawls, or, we could use them to reveal how Gurney presents his experience of mental illness in a literary form, the 'crazes of my untold pain', as he describes it in one asylum poem. The letters, box after box of them, as well as the scribbles in the margins and on the envelopes, reveal as much about Gurney's state of mind and his response to his suffering as his more 'literary' writing does. They also provide a record of his gradual mental disintegration. Although the quality of the letters is irregular, they contain much of interest, and many moments of poetic worth. In fact, much of Gurney's best poetry was written from within the asylum, and his appeal letters, whilst hard to date precisely, are often written at the same time and in the same place as successful poetry. How strange it is that the letters are thought to be completely incoherent, and the poems held up to be his best work!

Gurney's appeals are undoubtedly peculiar and difficult to categorise. Yet, they belong to a long tradition of similar literature, written by desperate asylum inmates who sought to ensure that the world would not forget them, from John Perceval's *Narrative of the Treatment of a Gentleman* (1838), in which he describes his

incarceration in two private asylums, to Beat Generation writer Seymour Krim's *Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer* (1961). Even in Dartford, the same asylum as Gurney, patient records show that another avid appeal-writing ex-serviceman was resident at the same time as him. Lance Corporal A. R. V. was transferred to Dartford within a few weeks of Gurney, with 'delusional insanity', apparently brought on by shellshock.

The appeal letters testify to how Gurney responded to his illness and incarceration through his writing. And we know that Gurney was only one of many asylum appeal-writers. But one of the difficulties of drawing any conclusions from this material is that the letters must necessarily be taken out of context – that is, we do not have access to the other letters in the conversation. This can result in interpretations that stress peculiarities, which are all too easily attributed to 'madness'.

Inevitably, we find ourselves asking: why was he writing these letters? To whom did he write? Why do the letters repeatedly take the format they do? The answers are often to be found if we try to put ourselves in Gurney's shoes – a very tricky and dangerous aim for a biographer, but when the subject's situation is so extreme and so removed from our own, we miss a great deal if we don't at least attempt to re-create something of the environment in which he wrote. Asylum archives and contemporary accounts enable us to piece together the details of asylum life. Read against this background, the appeals are often more revealing and less odd than they might initially appear.

Correspondence played a central role in asylum life for many patients. More specifically, writing appeals was in fact such standard behaviour for an asylum patient that it had its own set of rules and government legislation. In 1922, the year Gurney was certified insane, it became law to provide locked letter boxes on every ward of an asylum, to protect the patients' privacy and stop their letters being tampered with.

For Gurney, the act of letter writing was particularly significant. As a poet and composer, his ability to communicate was an essential part of his identity and communicating with the outside world became his means of maintaining his self-respect within the asylum. It was his way of guarding against the anonymity that he dreaded.

When the poet Robert Bridges read Gurney's published war poems, he found them most valuable as 'spontaneous statements of conditions of mind under strange conditions of present interest' [3]. The statement is helpful in assessing Gurney's later unpublished appeal literature. We are not called upon to estimate the aesthetic value of this strange body of work, that is, but to recognise what it does offer: important insights into the experience of being incarcerated, and how it affects and threatens one's sense of self. They are, in effect, precisely what Bridges finds in Gurney's earlier, published war poems: spontaneous statements of conditions of mind under strange conditions of present interest.

We accept war poetry as a genre – and Gurney clings to his status as a war poet. How interesting it would be to build a genre of asylum poetry and to anthologise asylum poets!

In Gurney's case, we can also trace the author's mental deterioration through the disintegration of his appeal literature. There is an irony in the fact that the appeal poems, which Gurney uses to defend his identity, struggle unsuccessfully for definition themselves. On the surface at least, they lack the qualities that give a poem a poetic identity, such as form, structure, metre and rhyme. They are numerous, interchangeable, and share a collective identity as 'literature of appeal'. Box load after box load we find patterns of incoherence.

(William Shakespeare / writings fraying and racked up and down in Hell ?

occasionally trying to write tea tavern gossips of Joh: Brahms without success ? being also (sometimes brilliantly) tangled in the coloured-paper jugglery at sea of hot glue that the newspaper

thrust one into ? but were Hazlitt, Kapp. or Hanslich? and Ferris is a fraud?

Since the one who writes created the whole (perhaps) of the Elizabethan legend ? as it shows in Marlowe and Shakespeare and Lamb? he may write to the May Queen or any? but should be thinking of Franz (Peter) Schubert, or Anton Dvorak ? hearing them played in Warwickshire or Berkshire? in wood and stone? that legend also (in past) his ? against a wireless that asked (as the threat) happy life and with a tradesman?s content? respectabil[i]ty (parsimonious) and a Presbyterian acceptance?.

They tortured for it ? and only prayer to God got Schumann?s and Schubert?s end in?

(Like the rest. see the fragmentary and magnificent ?Walkure? Schott?s piano score)

The son of David Gurney, that in poisoned overfed sexual illness forgot at times to honour his father? (forgetting ill, all but the net) writes after reading so much difficulty. (yet very funny) and yet so bravely done ? of the Reference books; and scraps: as master of all the things of desire, perhaps. [4]

In fact, even the idea that this is appeal literature is ironic, since very few of these letters were ever posted by asylum staff. They are therefore appeals that fail to reach an audience. We might even say that the asylum deprived Gurney of an audience, and in so doing undermined his literary attempts to defend his individual voice.

Gurney?s appeal poems are characterised by his burning sense of grievance and betrayal. He is doubly betrayed, by both the institution and his own work. The asylum?s failure to post these works is perhaps its ultimate betrayal: the institution that claimed to offer him protection also protected the outside world from hearing about his suffering. Now, over a hundred years on, we have a responsibility to hear and understand these silenced cries for help.

Further reading

John Press, *Writers and Their Work: Poets of World War One* (London: Longmans and Co., 1983).

John T. Perceval, *A Narrative of the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman, During a State of Mental Derangement* (London: Wilson, 1838), and Seymour Krim, *Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer* (New York: Excelsior Press, 1961), 59-75, deal specifically with their authors? experiences in mental hospitals.

Notes

[1] Gurney, ?To the City Besançon?, 22 April 1925, G.4.141-8.

[2] John Clare, ?Self-Identity?, *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. J. W. and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1951), 239.

[3] Robert Bridges to Charles Villiers Stanford, 18 March, 1922, quoted Hurd, *Ordeal*, 142-3.

[4] The beginning of G.15 (23)1-3, To the May Queen of London, written in 1927.



The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing [1] is a Centre dedicated to the study of life-writing

Source:

<https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/>

Source URL (modified on 05/13/2020 - 10:50): <http://writersinspire.org/content/place-one-can-go-mad-ivor-gurney-asylum-poet>

Links

[1] <https://oclw.web.ox.ac.uk/>