

Jamie MORAN: Hard Wakan

For the hardest thing facing our heart, ultimately, is not even existence's dæmonic blow, nor our inner struggle as we engage with and commit to it, but the commandment God will not go back on, which is that our heart grow to the greatness of God's Heart, through a paradox of our heart's depth.

Our heart rests on emptiness, nothingness, unfathomableness, into which we dread to fall, should we risk love's self-sacrifice and self-sharing. For in stepping out of self, we sense the giddy feeling of no ground beneath us.

Yet, every self-giving action we risk to that abyss brings God's Fire ever more into it, so that in the end the abyss we fear to fall into, endlessly, becomes the only ground—a 'groundless' ground—upholding our frail heart. Yet that proves sufficient.

That becomes the indwelling of the divine love, a 'mad love,' a 'suffering love,' as Russian Christianity describes it. When we can love—not when we are loved—we feel upheld by love. When we act as God's heart in this world, we know there is a great and deep Heart that upholds our little heart and ultimately will not let it 'fall,' but will bring it through a hard journey and battle to a final celebration, a celebration recognizing no winners and losers, no haves and have-nots, but a common destiny shared by, enjoyed by, relied on, by all.

Knowing the abyss is not empty, because we have leaned on it and acted from it, is the peace that passes all understanding. It is the heart's joy, because it signifies a victory.

The human heart that houses the divine heart is real freedom, for only love makes us free. The experience of being free to choose or not choose love, important to our struggle as it is, is revealed in the end as a half-way, a necessary half truth. Only love is free. Only love knows. Only love sees. Only love acts. Only love bears and endures everything, for the sake of what it is given to. That is its passion. The holy heart reads hearts, and perceives realistically and compassionately, because it has been in the same desert and crossed it on the same bony track.

True values point us there, but we still must walk. We are given to hard wakan. It cannot be magicked away. It leaves scars, but these are also the marks of glory.

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Father and Son

According to the Bible, one of the most influential books not only of past generations but of our times as well, the wealth of a father can be judged by the number of his sons. Many times it seems that there is no greater joy for a man than to have a male descendant.

This relationship, however, works in both directions: the delight of the son is to fulfil the will of his father. The tragedy of the father is to lose or to sacrifice his son, for whatever reason.

Your Will Be Done, Father

Nowadays, as many times before in history, the epic of the Patriarch Abraham's sacrifice in Genesis is presented as an outstanding example and model of heroism which is far beyond our everyday usual human understanding.

Fortunately for Isaac, the necessity of the sacrifice is lifted from Abraham at the final moment. But later in history, mirroring this story, there is a Father who actually offers His Son—God, Godself. The son, who chose to sacrifice His own life following the instructions of His Divine Father, is called the Son of God, or Jesus Christ.

And this very Son many times speaks about His full and ultimate commitment to the will of God the Father: "I and the Father are one. The one who sees me sees my Father as well." Voluntarily he offers himself up to His Father: "Your will must be done, not mine." The answer of God to all this is: "You are my own dear Son. I am well pleased with you."

It is a short, but nevertheless characteristic, description of the Father and Son relationship in Biblical understanding. Using that description as a lens for our own times, we can easily notice that a tragic conflict situation has developed between the two mentioned persons. In our culture as well, we are spectators to the heroic fight between fathers and their sons.

Who Is My Father?

Literature (fiction) is for many of us a deep and truly personal experience. Reading is not just an escapist indulgence; it can conversely be an attempt to solve our problems by integrating accumulated knowledge and wisdom into our own lives—learning the hard lessons of experience vicariously rather than first-hand.

The more we read books, the more we are looking in literature for ready recipes or ready-made solutions for our real-life situations. In the past, the only literature many people had access to was the Bible, so this became the common source from which most role models were drawn.

Those who grew up in the Christian tradition were told to follow the good example of Jesus Christ. Even if they could not read the stories themselves, illiterate people of previous ages could look at the frescos on the interior and exterior walls of their churches and find there the stories of the Bible in a pictorial form (the so-called *biblia pauperum*, or poor people's Bible).

In the same way as all those people over all those centuries were guessing at the meaning of those stories, we also can read the same Bible stories and make our own investigations into their significance. In the meantime, though, our possibilities have multiplied and we are encouraged to reach for other books as well.

The fertile soil of our minds is watered by many diverse literary founts. Examples which might first come to our mind are: Honoré DE BALZAC with his *Till Eulenspiegel* effect and his novel, *Reptile*. Or Edgar Allan POE with his collected works, and his grief after Ligea.

Other excellent examples can be: Charles BAUDELAIRE (whose poems are best read in a darkening graveyard scenario, starting at dusk). Or, Milan KUNDERA, with his beautiful erotic descriptions.

Perfume by Patrick SÜSKIND; *Tortilla Flat* by John STEINBECK; the writings of Aldous HUXLEY and Jerzy KOSIŃSKI; and other authors too numerous to mention, all left their mark on the way we perceive the world today. They form the basis of a rich Euro-American literary tradition, a wealth of stored knowledge available for our use.

Fight for Blessing

During the last centuries men left their house to defend, or to fight for the independence of, their nation and homeland. While the fathers were fighting, the sons were left alone in the house with their mothers, who were preparing them for the next patriotic self-sacrifice.

Later the industrial revolution came, and the fathers often spent sixteen hours a day in the workshop, or in later ages, in the factory. The fathers, the story-tellers, the men who passed on legends, cultural epics, heroic poems, myths, who helped with preparations for initiation rituals—they were missing.

Due to these revolutionary changes, the caring and respectful relationship between father and son slowly began to erode. It was replaced by a more distant relationship, one where the son no longer strove to fulfil the will of the father, but rather to satisfy his own needs and desires.

As the role of the father figure diminished, the contemporary notion of the father-and-son relationship sharply diverged from the original Biblical model. In the Bible we find the approval of the father, the bestowing of his blessing, as a very important event which could have an enormous influence upon the future life of all his sons.

Back to Genesis: Jacob, with the help of a little treachery, received the parental blessing of Isaac, a blessing which was later confirmed in his fight with Yahwe. There he received the name *Israel*, which literally means “the person who struggles with God.”

So even there we find human relationships falling short of the divinely-modelled relationship between Father and Son. Tragically, in this fallen world dysfunctional relationships have become the norm; we can no longer speak of the ideal parental bond, but only of its numerous mutations.

Influential Anxiety

As literature helps us to understand life, so too can literary analysis carry over into life-analysis. Recognising “malformed” offspring throughout literary generations, we gain an awareness of the disfigured relationship between “father” and “son,” antecedent and “procedent”, which has seeped into our culture and mindset and now governs our perception of the world.

Harold BLOOM, professor of humanities at Yale University and professor of English literature at New York University, developed a theory of poetry which is based on six relations. These relationships concern the poem which was first—the father—and the poem which was created under its influence—the son. They are described in his renowned work, the *Anxiety of Influence*.

He first and foremost speaks about the term *clinamen*, a kind of poetic misreading. It means that the precursor and his son are in harmony up to a certain moment, but then the son swerves to take a new path, which he believes the father should have chosen.

Tessera, another of his important terms, describes completion and antithesis. The poet uses terms from her or his parents, but with a different or opposite meaning, as if the original work did not follow them far enough.

Kenosis in his poetic and literary vocabulary depicts a reduction from divine to human status, a motion of discontinuity. The latter poem empties out, humbles the poet's godhood, but at the same time it lowers the position of the previous, parental poem as well.

Demonization is another crucial phenomenon which basically reduces the uniqueness of the earlier work and at the same time, of the earlier author. It implies the parent could not fully grasp the implications of the power underlying her or his poem.

Askesis is a movement of self-purgation which seeks to reach the final state of solitude. In this, the poet tries to forget about her or his human and cultural endowment in order to separate herself or himself from her or his parent, mother or father.

All this culminates in the term *apophrades*, which describes the sudden return of the dead. It is the name of the impression we get, upon reading a son-poem, that the father poet actually wrote it himself. It is a cannibalistic effect, as if the son consumes the father, subjugating him to the role of a dependent.

These are BLOOM's six revisionary ratios; generally they do not occur in isolation, but rather as an admixture in any given poem. One of them, however, tends to dominate. Similarly, one poem can be influenced by several ante-poems, but we can surely trace back the one important parent, mother or father.

Likewise, as human sons and daughters attempt to assert their independence from their antecedents, both biological and cultural, they manifest a complex *ménage* of relationships: continuity and discontinuity, domination and subjugation, community and isolation.

Absence of the Father

While reading *Fight Club*, the excellent debut novel of Chuck PALAHNIUK (1996), some passages directed my attention again to the old subject of the father-and-son relationship. I was in particular struck by the crucial sentence, which one hears repeated so often: If you are male, and if you are a Christian (and live in America), your father is surely your model of God.

Everything is correct so far. Constant *apophrades*—the poet makes a full circle. The son fills in the shoes of his father. The human father becomes the archetype for the heavenly father. The dilemma shows up in the next line: And if you never know your father, if your father bails out, or dies, or is never at home, what do you believe about God?

Then, what do you end up doing? Most probably, you start to spend your life searching for a father and for God. In such a situation, the son exists in a vacuum. He cannot follow, cannot abound, cannot reverse or cannot even react.

Lacking such a figure, the available substitutes are meagre. The initiation ritual at best becomes a computer game; role models become a collage of pop culture heroes. Thus the common mythology of the tribe is reduced to a mere collection of cartoons.

Hence our present-day predicament: If God is to be understood primarily as a father, and we can no longer understand fatherhood, how can we possibly comprehend God? Few questions could better encapsulate the anguish and alienation experienced by those to whom both God and father are strangers.

Numbered with the Grains of Sand

It is not enough to be numbered with the grains of sand on the beach. Let us now trace back the main character in *Fight Club*, Tyler DURDEN. In his way of thinking we can find many important and useful conclusions.

For example, what happens if God does not like us? What happens if we are God's middle children? It does not seem too far-fetched to believe that God hates us. But this is not even absolutely the worst thing that can happen.

Like a small child, Tyler DURDEN also considers getting God's attention by being bad or evil, since this would be a much better

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situation than getting no proper attention at all. In many senses, God's hate is much better than God's deadly indifference.

The different poetic relationships mentioned earlier, especially *askesis* and *demonization*, captivated Tyler DURDEN. He employs them as an effective weapon against his own father. We can thoroughly examine his methodology and his main aims: "Burn the Louvre and wipe your ass with the Mona Lisa." In this way, it seems at least, God would know our names.

In the book, the very project of Tyler DURDEN is called Mayhem. This elliptically refers to the Biblical *Manachem* or *Menachem* in the Old Testament, which literally means: the person who comforts me.

We can read in a short note about king of Judah that he did what the Lord considered evil (2Kings 15,18). But to comfort the conscience of Tyler DURDEN, he tells himself that this person rightly got the attention of God Godself.

Prodigal Son

It is obvious enough that in the minds of a number of our contemporaries, the excellent movie *Fight Club* was not clearly understood as a satire, but rather as a peculiar solution for a specific problem—where children are growing up playing on the streets with a key hanging around their necks; when the family is no longer the firm foundation of society.

We are witnesses to the degeneration of one distinct stage of human development: youth. Young people are self-destructing, rotting, uncontrollably metastasising—but with no chance for real development.

This is a paraphrase of the words of Federico FELLINI, from one of his letters, where he writes about the root causes of Fascism and Nazism. Ignorance, spiritual poverty, and idiotic wishes: they are the foundations of treacherous ideology.

Without a proper relationship to those who come before, we cannot properly perceive our own role in the world around us. Without a valid source on which to draw, we are eternally condemned to distortions and misrepresentations, cumulatively pushing us further and further from the truth.

And, there is more. In a global village, it is difficult to be noticed in a proper sense. Terrorist groups are trying to get attention by



using more and more sophisticated ways, to let people know about their demands, be they just or unjust.

But in a world full of aimless deaths, we can still detect small lamps of hope, like the Bible, our culture, or literature as a whole. Tyler DURDEN, when finishing his lecture about his philosophy, used the following sentence: "If the prodigal son had never left home, the fatted calf would still be alive."

Suggested Reading

- BLOOM Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York, 1973.
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