GEORGE HERBERT: THE SOUL IN VERSE

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When he was a seventeen-year-old student at Cambridge, George Herbert composed for his mother two sonnets which question love poetry's allegiance to Venus and which ask of his God, "Why are not Sonnets made of thee?" God, says the youthful poet, is the only subject a poet needs: "Sure, Lord, there is enough in thee to dry/Oceans of Ink." These two sonnets, though they are not found in Herbert's spiritual autobiography, *The Temple,* are an accurate adumbration of Herbert's life in poetry, a life which he describes as an account of "the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul."[2]

Though there are comments on verse-writing throughout *The Temple,* the most concentrated and sustained statements about Herbert's poetic creed — his aims and methods — are the two "Jordan" poems. In "Jordan" (I) he disavows, as subjects for poetry, "fictions," "false hair," "a winding stair," "enchanted groves," "purling streams." He envies no man's "nightingale or spring." He would eschew, then, adornments and embellishments of all kinds and devote his poetry to plainness: "Nor let them punish me with losse of rime, Who plainly say, *My God, My King.*"

In "Jordan" (II) Herbert says, apologetically, that when he first wrote of "Heav'nly joyes" he "sought out quaint words, and trim invention" and curled with metaphor "a plain intention." As the notions ran through his brain and as he blotted out and began again, feeling there was nothing "too rich to clothe the sunne," he heard a voice that reminds the reader of the Muse's advice to Sidney in the first sonnet of *Astrophel and Stella.* Says "a friend" to Herbert:

> How wide is all this long pretence!
> There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
> Copie out onely that, and save expense.[3]

Thus both "Jordan" poems expound Herbert's determination to write devotional poetry with plainness, austerity, and economy of language. Though the avowal to write only religious verse is manifestly carried out in *The Temple,* in the determination to be plain (in the sense of being readily understood) Herbert is, happpily, in frequent default. No experienced poetry reader is likely to accuse George Herbert of being "easy." His efforts to strip language of all excess result in a poetry which is rich in suggestion and often intellectually difficult. His devoted editor, George Herbert Palmer, remarks: "I believe the intricacy of

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[1]They originally appeared in Walton's life of Herbert

[2]This famous passage is mentioned in almost all substantive studies of Herbert It is here quoted from the standard edition *The Works of George Herbert,* ed F E Hutchinson (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1941), p xxxvii

[3]All qoted passages from Herbert are from Hutchinson's edition

Herbert is not a matter to be denied, ignored, or condoned, but to be studied, sympathized with, loved."[4]

Herbert himself seems to have become poignantly aware that he had not succeeded in riding his poetry of the very devices which he disavowed in the earlier "Jordan" poems. In that beautiful poem "The Forerunners," which is found near the end of *The Temple,* he laments:

> Farewell sweet phrases, lovely metaphors.
> But will ye leave me thus? When ye before
> Of stews and brothels onely knew the doores,
> Then did I wash you with my tears, and more,
> Brought you to Church well drest and clad:
> My God must have my best, ev'n all I had.

Herbert left no formal critical discourse in the manner of Sidney, Dryden, and other poet-critics. Yet he has much to say about the business of writing poetry. Throughout *The Temple* there are statements about poetry in general and, of course, about Herbert's own poetry in particular. There is, then, a George Herbert view of poetry. All of his verse, in one sense or another, is in the service of his God. Nineteen poems in *The Temple* make mention of the actual physical process of writing verse.[5] Others make oblique but unmistakable reference to poetry. Also, Herbert was an accomplished musician, and the relationship between music and poetry is often fundamental in his thinking. According to Joseph Summers' calculations, "About a fourth of the poems in *The Temple* concern music directly."[6]

The poems in *The Temple* which make direct mention of verse-writing begin with "The Temper" (I), the twenty-fifth poem in the collection and end with "The Banquet," the one-hundred-fifty-fourth.[7] In "The Temper," a not easy poem, Herbert would have his "rymes" praise his God: "Gladly engrave thy love in steel." "Praise" (I) concerns the relationship between the condition of the poet's soul and his ability to write poetry. In his present conditon, the poet laments, a "verse or two" is all that he can raise. But if his God will "mend" his "estate," God "shall have more."

Perhaps no other poem in *The Temple* is so concentrated a statement of what Herbert thinks poetry is (and is not) and of its connection with his life and verse-writing as is "The Quidditie." It deserves to be quoted in full:

> My God, a verse is not a crown,
> No point of honour, or a gay suit,
> No hawk, or banquet, or renown,

[4]*The English Works of George Herbert* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), I, 151.

[5]This paper treats only those poems which make reference to the writing of verse *per se*.

[6]*George Herbert: His Religion and Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 157.

[7]The poems are numbered in order to indicate the relative position in *The Temple* of those poems which mention verse-writing.

Now a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in *France* or *Spain*;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or demain:

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and *most take all.*

In "Deniall," the fifty-sixth poem, God "denies" for a while Herbert's ability to rime. When the poet's devotion could not pierce his God's ears, then was his heart and his verse broken. Each stanza has an unrimed last line, until the last, when the soul, now in tune with God, will "mend my ryme." Thus the poet can rime only when his soul is in harmony with God.

In "Obedience," the eightieth, one of Herbert's most "conceited" poems, much is made of legal terminology: buyer, seller, deed, will, purchase, goods. In keeping with the legal imagery, Herbert says:

My God, if writings may
Convey a Lordship any way
Whither the buyer and the seller please;
Let it not thee displease,
If this poore paper do as much as they.

The "poore paper" (his poem) he would present to his God as his "special Deed." Thus, his poetry is the property of God. His talent is merely a gift to be returned to its owner.

The poem "Home" (which means to be with God) is built around the word "stay," which occurs, with various meanings, six times. In the last stanza Herbert mentions his verse. When reason says "stay" (delay coming), the poet's verse says "Come." The poem, among other matters, indicates the superiority of poetry over the appeal of "reason."

In "Dulness" Herbert accuses himself of languor in the praise of his Lord while the "wanton lover."

can praise his fairest fair;
and with quaint metaphors her curled air
Curl o'er again.

And he upbraids himself with "Where are my lines then? my approaches? views?"

"Providence" takes a familiar Herbert stance: the poet is divinely inspired. He addresses "sacred Providence" with "shall I write,/and not of thee, through whom my fingers bend/To hold my quill?"

In "Assurance" Herbert's enemy is called "spiteful thought," a devil who has separated him from his "Father" (his assurance"). At one time the poet and

his God had formed a "league" together, an agreement which God Himself did "indite" and held the poet's hand while he "did write." The pact permits Herbert to end the poem with the assertion: "Now love and truth will end in man."

Herbert is disconsolate in the poem "Grief." He calls upon "ye springs" to bring tears. Everything should be in accord with his sorrow. Verses are too fine a thing, too wise for his "rough sorrows." Poetry is admonished to be "dumbe and mute," and to give up its "feet and running" to his eyes. It should keep its "measure" for some "lovers lute" whose grief allows him "musick and a ryme." The poet's grief is such that it excludes "measure, tune, and time." He can only exclaim "Alas, my God."

Part of "The Flower," one of Herbert's best-known poems, concerns the poet's chafing under God's displeasure: "Thy anger comes, and I decline." But Herbert regains his God's favor, is again happy, and can once again compose:

> And now in age I bud again,
> After so many deaths I live and write;
> I once more smell the dew and rain,
> And relish versing: O my onely light,
> It cannot be
> That I am he
> Or whom thy tempests fell all night.

Thus Herbert's pleasure in writing poetry is dependent upon his certainty that God is not displeased with him.

In "A True Hymne" Herbert once again states a belief in divinely inspired poetry. The poem asserts that the "finenesse" of poetry depends on the condition of the poet's soul: "when the soul into the lines accords." The poet who depends on the mind, strength, and time may complain that something is lacking. But if the heart is involved, though the verse be "somewhat scant," God "doth supplie the want."

"The Forerunners," one of Herbert's finest achievements, is a wistful poem. It anticipates old age and the loss of a certain mental acuteness; and it reminisces about some poetic resolutions Herbert had earlier made. Very much a poem about his own poetry, it pledges yet again poetry's service to God: "And if I please him, I write fine and wittie." Also: "My God must have my best, ev'n all I had." Ironically, in one of his best poems, Herbert asks if some fond lover has enticed his language from him to a "stie." In a typical Herbert view, he declares that beauty and beauteous words should go together.

The last poem in *The Temple* to make explicit mention of verse-writing is "The Banquet." Once again Herbert enlists his poetry in the praise of his God.

> Let the wonder of his pitie
> Be my dittie,
> And take up my lines and life.

Herbert's concept of poetry not only involves an account of the vicissitudes of his relationship with his God; the concept also includes an astonishing display of metrical skill and virtuosity. *The Temple* is a veritable textbook on prosody. The poems range in length from two lines in "Anagram" to 462 lines in "The Church-porch." George Herbert Palmer long ago calculated Herbert's versatility: "Of his one hundred and sixty-nine poems, one hundred and sixteen are written in metres which are not repeated."[8] Palmer further observes that Herbert "invents for each lyrical situation exactly the rhythmic setting that befits it."[9] Since most of Herbert's poetry is, on various levels, an attempt to communicate with his God, it is not surprising that the great majority of the poems in *The Temple* are in the first person

Herbert's emphasis on plain and simple diction accounts for the extreme regularity of his rhythm and for the preponderance of the iambic foot in his verse. The result is what Coleridge called "pure, manly, and unaffected" diction.[10] Strangely, there is no blank verse. And his seventeen sonnets depart so drastically from both the octave-sestet and the three quatrain-couplet arrangements as to be sonnets only by virtue of containing fourteen lines.

The poems in *The Temple* are from short to moderate in length. By Herbertian standards, only "The Church-porch" (462 lines), "The Sacrifice" (232 lines), and "Providence" (152 lines) can be considered "long." "The Church Militant" (279 lines) is not part of *The Temple*.[11] The favorite length is three stanzas, a formula which permits a theme to be stated and developed. Palmer (speaking, of course, of devotional verse) asserts that Herbert "devised the love-lyric, and he introduced structure into the short poem."[12] Many single lines, of course, are eminently quotable, but Herbert is essentially a poet of large units. "Whether or not he learned his architecture from Donne," says Austin Warren, "Herbert composes a lyric as a whole, and he should be quoted not by lines or by stanzas but by poems."[13]

Herbert's poetic credo includes not only what is said but how it is said. His verbal facility and his sheer love of language manipulation, his fondness for acrostics and other forms of ingenious word-play ("Jesus," "Love-joy," "Coloss 3.3 Our Life is hid with Christ in God," "Wreath," "Sinnes round," "The Call," The Odour. 2 Cor. 2.15," and others), and his fancy are on frequent display in *The Temple*. In addition to the famous "shaped" poems, "The Altar"

[8]Palmer, I, p. 137.

[9]*Ibid.*, p. 136.

[10]Roberta Florence Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1955), p. 534.

[11]The relationship of "The Church Militant" to *The Temple* is a matter of dispute. For references to the controversy, see Jerry Leath Mills (ed.), "Recent Studies in Herbert," an offprint from *English Literary Renaissance* (Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter, 1976), p. 111.

[12]Palmer, I, p. 87.

[13]*Rage for Order* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), p. 32.

and "Easter-wings," we find an echo poem ("Heaven"), an anagram poem called "Anagram," a "pruning" poem ("Paradise"), two "Antiphon" poems, a good deal of self-conscious punning ("The Sonnet," "Grief," "The Pulley," "Grace"), an intriguing and often puzzling relationship between title and content (the "Jordan" poems, "Clasping of hands," "The Water-course," "Sunday," "Aaron," "Trinitie Sunday," "Sighs and Grones"), and other displays of what is often called "wit."

Thus an extraordinary gift of language what Herbert felt to be a loan from God, became the vehicle for his poetry from the early sonnets sent to his mother to "Love" (III), the last poem in *The Temple*. In *The Soul in Paraphrase*, a title drawn from Herbert's poem "Prayer" (I), Mark Taylor has an accurate summary: "As varied as they are to a degree, his ideas about poetry are limitless in neither number nor complexity, and so not every reference of his to poetry or writing adds something new to the composite theory. Nevertheless, the early sonnets from Walton's *Lives* and the two Jordan poems are by no means sufficient as an expression of his total credo, though what they say is always compatible with what we find elsewhere."[14]

[14]Mark Taylor, *The Soul in Paraphrase* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), p. 41.