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Author(s): Nicholas R. Jones

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Texts and Contexts: Two Languages in George Herbert's Poetry

by Nicholas R. Jones

AT the end of "Jordan (II)," a friend interrupts the poet's revisionist bustling with the hint of a potentially revolutionary style:

But while I bustled, I might heare a friend
Whisper, *How wide is all this long pretence!*
There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn'd:
*Copie out onely that, and save expense.*¹

We have earlier watched the poet hectically struggling to polish his busy wit, to match the "lustre" of "heav'nly joyes," to find the liveliest metaphors for his newly Christian poems. Point by point, the poet has painstakingly converted secular to divine poetics. The calming whisper of the friend, then, is a relief, and acquires an almost prophetic value. In a radical act of welcome simplification, the friend presents a new, subversive poetic theory. The metaphysical values of difficulty and wit no longer seem worthwhile, and the poet's lengthy search for an embellished style is to be labelled mere "pretense." A different style—plain, concise, harmonious, and sincere—will apparently convey to the poem a deeply religious power.²

¹ *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford, 1941), p. 103. Quotations from Herbert throughout the paper are from this edition.

² Herbert's search for a "proper language" has concerned many of his 20th-century readers (the phrase is the title of Chapter V of Joseph Summers, *George Herbert: His Religion and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968)). Some brief allusions here may suggest my extensive indebtedness to these critics. Summers characterizes Herbert's solution of the contrary pulls of plainness and eloquence as a "disciplined richness rather than bareness or great complexity" (p. 118). Mary Ellen Rickey asserts that the plainness Herbert advocates is not one of "thinness, absence of adornment, or naivete . . . [the] antithesis [of verbal plainness] was not beauty or intricacy of idea, but pretension and imagerial clutter" (*Utmost Art: Complexity in the Verse of George Herbert* [Louisville, Ky., 1966], p.

Of the new religious poetry, we are given one fragment—the word “love”: “*There is in love a sweetnesse readie penn’d.*” But “love” is only a quasi-poem, a germ of the poetry to come—better than what we have had before, but not in itself complete. After all—as readers trained in metaphysical poetry and expecting a metaphysical poem—what are we to make of this concise and undeveloped word? Can we really understand its history, implications, theology, ethics, or application? The word by itself is enigmatic—and also wonderfully evocative. This one word will apparently engender a true sacred poem. Packed with its own sweetness, it only waits to be transcribed: “Copie out onely that, and save expense.” The poet is now to be a secretary, not an inventor.

But copying is no simple process, when as elusive a concept as “love” needs to be registered in ordinary alphabets, iambic meters, and Herbertian conceits. This quasi-poem demands *interpretation*, since by itself it can hardly speak to us as we need to be spoken to. Consequently, I will apply to it the term for a phrase of scripture that is to be interpreted; I will call it a “text.” That is, I think Herbert intends an analogy between his newly purified language and the language of scripture: both are received rather than invented; both are packed with potential meaning; both are free from human artifice. And just as God’s pure language in scripture needs human interpretation, Herbert’s quasi-poem needs poetic interpretation.

It is a clear understanding of the English Reformation that texts depend upon contexts for their utmost efficacy; preachers, ministers, and scholars provided such contexts in treatises, commentaries, and

173). Arnold Stein reads Herbert in terms of a reluctant acquiescence to the demands of rhetoric, as aspiring “to an art of plainness that can achieve absolute sincerity and that can reveal impersonal truth without distortion, even while it registers the felt significance and force of a personal apprehension of that truth” (*George Herbert’s Lyrics* [Baltimore, 1968], p. 2). Stanley Fish pushes us beyond “the rehabilitation of everything [we] would like to think valuable,” including art and language, to a “letting go” of the individual will to eloquence and a surrender to the fiction that “God is actually the writer of the poem” (“Letting Go: The Dialect of the Self in Herbert’s Poetry,” in *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* [Berkeley, 1972], p. 220). Helen Vendler emphasizes Herbert’s struggle for plainness, his growth from early poems manifesting an austere plainness, a distrust of shallow eloquence, and a “searching interior enquiry,” to the later poems with their more natural simplicity, and further, to “a style of extreme intensity . . . in which a single notion would be repeated, penetrated into, elaborated upon, and fixed hypnotically in the mind” (*The Poetry of George Herbert* [Cambridge, Mass., 1975], pp. 197, 251). I am also largely indebted to the work of Barbara K. Lewalski, particularly in *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, 1979).

sermons. Yet equally important is the understanding that the text itself is central to all human activity, that it is more enduring, more powerful, and more beautiful than any of its human contexts.³ With some difference, the same understandings hold true for the texts in Herbert's poems: a phrase of pure language is set off and revered for its simple beauty and power. Miraculously, it frees us from the faults and excesses of ordinary poetic language. At the same time, it has no meaning without a context: as pure, divine language, it depends on impure, human language.

What engages me in this phenomenon is the simultaneous interaction and separation of text and context. The text holds itself free of the intricacies of ordinary poetic language. "Love"—presumably a fragment of a scriptural text such as "God is love"⁴—connotes an imperturbable and unselfish love distinctly removed from the complex oddities of human life. Yet while a text so magnificently lifts us from its context, it also strongly reflects us back to that same context. How do we get to the text, if not through the context? "Love" makes poetic sense only because of the complicated metaphysical ambitions of the poet—because of its relation to desire, selfishness, and idiosyncrasy. As always, Herbert's poem is true to its human foundations: it lets the speaker be what the speaker really is, a metaphysical poet first, and a sacred poet second. Only through faithfulness to a human context does Herbert derive and interpret the divine text of his sermon.

The texts in Herbert's poems bring to our attention a plain, undistorted, honest, and efficacious speech that potentially conveys a direct, unmistakable knowledge of God. We attend to these purest moments because we have also become engaged in an obviously impure language—willful, witty, complex, and even on occasion perverse. The text-context structure reflects the major subject of the poems themselves, the action of God in human life. Through the miracle of the Incarnation, God is at once human and not human. As texts are both distinct from and involved with contexts, so God, in

³ Herbert's "Country Parson" on preaching: "the character of his Sermon is Holiness; he is not witty, or learned, or eloquent, but Holy. . . . [Holiness] is gained, first, by choosing texts of Devotion, not Controversie, moving and ravishing texts, whereof the Scriptures are full. . . . The parsons Method in handling of a text consists of two parts; first, a plain and evident declaration of the meaning of the text; and secondly, some choyce Observations drawn out of the whole text, as it lyes entire, and unbroken in the Scripture it self" (*A Priest to the Temple*, in Hutchinson, pp. 233–5).

⁴ 1 John 4:8, 16. Biblical citations and quotations throughout this paper are from the King James version.

Herbert's fiction, must be both exalted above the world and present in it.⁵ A text, we might say, has a numinous effect on the language of the rest of the poem. The context is needed for support, qualification, or explanation; but inevitably the text will be the most powerful single instrument in the poem.

In "Antiphon (I)," a text appears as a refrain, a shared response of a group of voices or "chorus." The text, "*My God and King*," stands out clearly from its context, distinguished by its italics, the shortness of the line, and its plain style—succinct, simple in form, transparent in meaning. It manifests deliberate plainness and distinctly implies moral approval of that plainness.⁶ The refrain structure further isolates the text by contrast with the non-recurring stanzaic material, the verses. The refrain-text comes to seem more stable than the verses; it gains a power by consent of the poet, who keeps bringing it back, and by consent of the reader, who recognizes its enduring importance to the poet.⁷ The refrain structure of course limits the spontaneity of the text-context interaction—the text occurs too regularly to be a personal

⁵ When I say "fiction," I do not mean to comment on the truth or untruth of the finished construction. Rather, I am treating the literary work as an artifice dependent upon but finally separate from the world of truth and untruth. "Fiction" in this sense means the construction of a recognizable entity in the literary sense; it leaves undetermined the question of whether that entity imitates any entity in the non-literary world.

⁶ Douglas L. Peterson details the tradition of the moral implications of plainness in the poetry immediately preceding Herbert's, in *The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne: A History of the Plain and Eloquent Styles* (Princeton, 1967). Wyatt used the plain style to express a particular moral stance—condemnation of the empty rhetoric and false morals of court verse and court life. More heavily than Wyatt, the didactic poets of the Elizabethan miscellanies continued this association of plain language with criticism of the fashionable world.

⁷ The text's meaning is the more striking and memorable for its patterned recurrence. Periodic repetition "infallibly yields a sense of form. . . . [It] tends either to develop internal variations or to become nonsense" (Paula Johnson, *Form and Transformation in Music and Poetry of the English Renaissance* [New Haven, 1972], pp. 2, 30–1). Many of Wyatt's poems are based on the repetition of a significant refrain, such as "Blame not my lute." Much Elizabethan poetry, too, was structured on the repetition of an aphoristic refrain: in *The Paradise of Dainty Devices*, for example, we find a number of poems based on refrains like "No pleasure, without some payne," and "Faire woordes make fooles faine." The later litany poems like Sidney's "Ring out your bells" and Nashe's song from *Summer's Last Will and Testament*—both based on the response "Good Lord deliver us"—are parallel uses of communal aphoristic refrains. The strophic ayres of Campion and others (clearly known to Herbert), with their careful repetition of refrains, point to the Elizabethan-Jacobean interest in the interplay of subtle variation and recurrence. See such studies as: Wilfred Mellers, *Harmonious Meeting: A Study of the Relationship between English Music, Poetry and Theatre, c. 1600–1900* (London, 1965); Bruce Pattison, *Music and Poetry of the English Renaissance* (London, 1948); Gretchen Ludke Finney, *Musical Backgrounds for English Literature: 1580–1650* (New Brunswick, N.J.,

movement of the heart.⁸ In compensation, the refrain gives the text a communal and liturgical quality—the steady massiveness of a group collectively affirming a premeditated truth.

What does the text in “Antiphon (I)” mean? It does not come strongly weighted with a meaning external to the poem, as might the text of a sermon—identified by both chapter and verse and surrounded by a body of commentary. To be sure, the text in the poem (“My God and King”) *may* allude to a scriptural text such as Psalm 68:24: “They have seen thy goings, O God: even the goings of my God, my King, in the sanctuary.” But the allusion is neither explicit nor particularly revealing; the poem itself provides the best context for understanding the text.

We have to begin with the text’s acceptance of God’s divinity and sovereignty over each human being. Three times, the text appears in this immediate context:

Cho. Let all the world in ev’ry corner sing,
My God and King.

We are to envision a “chorus” of affirmation, a group agreed on a common statement of worship. In a schismatic and doubting world, that’s no small step. This grand chorus imagines an even grander choral unity—that “all the world” might sing this one common text. Apparently, heretics have been converted, deep hatreds among the people of the world have been miraculously settled; and the world joins together to welcome its “God and King”!

As we broaden the context to include the first of the two verses, the poem becomes more complex:

The heav’ns are not too high,
His praise may thither flie:
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.

Necessarily, the verse is more fragmented and hypothetical than the text-refrain. This verse separates earth and heaven—earth as the soil in which praises grow, heaven as the place to which they fly. They *grow* here, they *fly* there . . . we might well ask, “Where *are*

n.d.); John Hollander, *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New York, 1975); and Jerome Mazzaro, *Transformations in the Renaissance English Lyric* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970).

⁸ Compare Herbert’s treatment of the same text in “Jordan (I),” without the refrain structure.

they?" The verb forms are ambiguous: "His praise *may* flie"; "His praises . . . *may* grow." If they may, we note, they also may not. And the explicit negatives—"not too high," "not too low"—lead us to confront the enormous distances, literal and figurative, that we are trying to span with our universal praise. "Not too high" and "not too low" involve us, somewhere in the process of cancelling the negatives, in their opposites—too high, too low. The verse implies the difficulties of affirmation. Because of the influence of the verse, the text's reprise takes on a hypothetical nature. The auxiliary verb "let" now stands out as the significant word, reminding us that this is only a wish or a prayer, not an actuality.

Our attention now turns to the persons by whom the prayer is made and fulfilled: who is this chorus? How does it hope to implement its prayer? The second and final verse gives us some answers and some more questions.

The church with psalms must shout,
No doore can keep them out.
But above all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.

The verb forms, again, are a major clue—now "must" rather than "may." The context issues a double imperative: this text must come from the Church as a whole, and it must come from the heart of the individual Christian. The first is a typically Herbertian means: the chorus is to consist of the "church" (presumably the Protestant Church of England) using scripture in communal worship. "My God and King" is a text to be accomplished through the songs of corporate worship—"no doore can keep them out." But here doubts intrude again. In the negative phrase "no doore," we are reminded of the very solid doors that do block worship: heresy, sectarianism, lethargy, etc. The presence of such closed doors strongly suggests that the text is not yet fulfilled.

With this context, then, we are thrown violently onto the second imperative. The hypothesis of the text-refrain, we understand, is to be fulfilled only through the conversion of the individual, "the heart," to active belief. If the world is to sing together, the heart must "bear the longest part"—must sing a song longer and presumably more difficult than all others. Universal affirmation depends upon personal affirmation. At the end of the poem, therefore, we return to the final chorus, understanding it in a new way. Who sings it? The church, of

course—but more importantly, the heart (as soloist, in a sense). Who is “all the world?” How do they sing together? The phrase “in ev’ry corner” now leaps out at us. Universal affirmation comes only when each corner, each individual, makes an act of will, through grace, to affirm the universal.⁹ If the heart is to bear its part, it must convert each stubborn “corner” of its own being. Only then, with personal faith beginning the process of building communal faith, will the text be more than a hypothesis, its implications made realities.

In a poem as rapid and complex as “Antiphon (I),” there is a strong pressure on the recurrent refrain-text: the text must change in meaning and function, even while it remains constant in form. In “Vertue,” the refrain wonderfully yields to this pressure with an expansive gesture of reversal. The excitement and sharpness of the poem’s perception—the beauty of the day, the brilliance of the rose, the fullness of the spring—oppose the constancy of the melancholy refrain text, “thou must die.” The poem knows and feels too much life for a mere *memento mori*. So the poem shifts beyond its text and breaks its refrain form to pull us out of mere acceptance of transience and death. From a process of repeating and even intensifying natural death—“For thou must die . . .”; “And thou must die . . .”; “And all must die”—the poem moves to a new discovery: “a sweet and vertuous soul . . . chiefly lives.”

Christian regeneration does not, in itself, negate natural death; days, roses, springs, “all” must yet die. But the poem’s surprise ending presents us with something significantly different from the

⁹ “Corner” is one of Herbert’s favorite metaphors for the parts of a fragmented heart, for the stubbornness of a person not flourishing in grace. In “JESU” the “little frame” of the heart breaks into pieces:

And first I found the corner, where was J,
After, where E S, and next where U was graved.

In “Decay,” the poet complains to God,

But now thou dost thy self immure and close
In some one corner of a feeble heart:
Where yet both Sinne and Satan, thy old foes,
Do pinch and straiten thee.

See also Donne, “The Legacie”:

Yet I found something like a heart,
But colours it, and corners had.

John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1965), p. 50.

text that has prepared for that ending. Death generates life; nature discovers the "soul"; the tender melancholy of second-person address turns to the sure faith of the third-person; and the contained syntax of the four-syllable refrain-text expands to include the entire stanza. In the first three stanzas, the final lines (the text) are separate independent clauses, tied to their stanza-contexts by coordinating conjunctions ("For," "And," "And"). In the last stanza, the fourth line loses its separateness and becomes only the second of two parallel rhyming predicates ("never gives," "chiefly lives"), taking us back through the whole stanza for a grammatical subject, "a sweet and virtuous soul." The effect is to cancel the over-neat isolation of the text.

In the first three stanzas of "Vertue," the text is aphoristic, authoritative, distinct, and pure—"thou must die." At the end the clarity of the refrain-text surprisingly yields to a more indistinct, generous, enigmatic, and even mystical action. A refrain-text occurring at regular intervals generally provides a sense of formal neatness and harmony; it shapes the poem to a compact closedness through our expectation of repetition and reverberation. Yet as that text interacts with its context, it develops and intensifies with each recurrence until it is no longer adequate or appropriate for the poem that it is shaping. Unexpected meanings contained within the neatness of its "divine" language disturb the structure.¹⁰

When the text's recurrence is less regular than in a refrain, the expansive movement will tend to become even larger in scope. The well-known poem "The Forerunners" is an example. The aging poet no longer trusts the poetry of youthful praise. A sober, reluctant farewell to beauty, sweetness, and adornment is the unambiguous argument of the poem; the poet has to bid farewell to "sweet phrases, lovely metaphors." Objectively, of course, the farewell is an illusion: for we see clearly that the poet is writing a beautiful, harmonious, finely structured poem.¹¹ Nonetheless, as empathetic readers, we enter the melancholy illusion of relinquishing.

Within this context, with its theme of the decreasing potency of

¹⁰ Other refrain poems in which texts are important include "The Pearl," "The Sacrifice," "Home," "Grace," "Unkindness," "The Posie," and "The Church Militant."

¹¹ Stein notes how the poem, though it may be seen as a "fictional farewell to poetry," is nonetheless full of poetically interesting events, "strange exhilaration and sudden turns . . . [and] a native good humor, the matrix of his individual wit, that play of mind which is in turn a discriminating instrument, a personal recreation, and an offering" (*George Herbert's Lyrics*, pp. 17, 206, 207).

poetic language, we encounter the text—"Thou art still my God." Three times, at irregular intervals, the text comes as a powerful, sharp alternative to an inadequate, decaying poetry:

Must dulnesse turn me to a clod?
Yet have they left me, *Thou art still my God.*

I passe not, I, what of the rest become,
So *Thou art still my God*, be out of fear.

For *Thou art still my God*, is all that ye
Perhaps with more embellishment can say.

The poet clings to this one treasure of purified language, refusing to let it mingle with the rest, even syntactically. The syntax of the text could have overlapped with the syntax of its context—" . . . although they leave me, thou art still my God"; "So thou art still my God, I have no fear"; etc. But in fact the text stays clear, occurring each time only as a quoted noun clause, a unit unpenetrated by the needs of the poetry around it. So its purity and independence are preserved inviolate, like a linguistic icon. Significantly, the poet seems scrupulous in *not* making this text a refrain: each time, it occurs at a different point in the stanza. It is not to constitute an active structural part of the departing poeticism, the "lovely enchanting language."

This piece of enduring language, to which the poet clings so tightly, is scriptural.¹² In Psalm 31, it appears as a turning-point between accounts of human degeneration and of divine assurance: "My strength faileth because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed. . . . But I trusted in thee, O Lord: I said, Thou art my God. . . . Blessed be the Lord: for he hath shewed me his marvellous kindness in a strong city." The words "Thou art my God" open up an explicit account of salvation; with this phrase, the psalmist affirms that God will compensate for the failing attributes of mortality. The poem, on the other hand, is enigmatic: we don't get to read the language of the next stage, whatever it may be. We know hints of it—that the poet has retired to a "best room" in which all is "livelier than before." And we suspect that the new poem of salvation will be "Thou art still my God"—"Perhaps with more embellishment." But the nature of the "embellishment" is still a mystery.¹³

¹² Hutchinson, *Works of George Herbert*, p. 539.

¹³ Vendler discusses "The Forerunners" as a "reinvented" poem: it offers several alternative explanations "which a more anxious poet would be at pains to reconcile with

Part of the enigma lies in the detachment of that new poem from us, Herbert's human audience. The poet now speaks only to God:

He will be pleased with that dittie;
And if I please him, I write fine and wittie.

The "dittie" is present only to our imagination. The use of an expansive text like "Thou art still my God" is suggestive, then, rather than primarily definitive. Pushing beyond ordinary rhetoric and ordinary poetic audiences, it stops short of explicitly presenting the extraordinary new language of the redeemed poet. Like scripture, it implies a revelation, but the details remain mysterious; the poet holds off from becoming the prophet. And yet, reticent as the poet may be, the text strongly moves the reader to assume some of these functions. In imagination, as we fill in the unstated meanings and details of the text, we begin to sense that there is more said than meets the eye or ear, that we have at least the beginnings of a rich and powerful statement.

Such expansion beyond the limitations of ordinary poetic language contributes to the power of that unassuming and subtle poem, "The Quip." The refrain, taken from the Psalter of the Book of Common Prayer, is a marvellous example of a text contrasting with its context.¹⁴ The liturgical uniformity of the refrain makes a simple and steady assertion against the frenetic variety of the stanzas—against the complexity of the little fictions about beauty, money, glory, and wit; against the rich characterization; and against the suggestive realism of the dialogue.¹⁵ The text, "But thou shalt answer, Lord, for me," predicts that when God is to answer for the poet, the answer will be authoritative, austere, and plain—the opposite of all the noise of the stanzas. If the Lord's answer is to put down the world and its "train-bands and mates," it will have to come on strong. We hope for one swift stroke of retribution.

If the poem ended with the fifth stanza (the last to include the text), we would be left balancing that hope against our present needs:

each other. Herbert simply lets them stand. . . . There is no resolution to these successive metaphors of loss—no comprehensive view is taken at the end" (*George Herbert's Poetry*, pp. 41–2).

¹⁴ Hutchinson, *Works of George Herbert*, p. 110.

¹⁵ As Stein says, the refrain "marks the irrelevance of [the various tempters'] posturing. . . . Delicate ironic movements . . . play . . . underneath an unchanging attitude" (*George Herbert's Lyrics*, pp. 147–8).

confident that the answer will eventually come, yet unsure of what the answer might actually be. Startlingly, the poem in its last stanza throws us into the answer itself:

Yet when the houre of thy designe
To answer these fine things shall come;
Speak not at large; say, I am thine:
And then they have their answer home.

The answer is plain, distinct, a new text: "I am thine." Springing directly from its context, it is the poet's command to God—"Give them a short reply, a 'quip': tell them that I am thine: that is, say, 'This poet is Mine!'" That the answer is brief is no surprise, after the ridiculous "Oration" of stanza 5. Nor does simplicity surprise us, after the elaborate "geering" of earlier stanzas. But that it occurs *in* the poem is the wonderful surprise. Our hope of God's devastating response is actually fulfilled, and not only to the imagination.¹⁶

But do we really expect *this* answer—"I am thine"? Its plainness and succinctness are quite extraordinary. And because of its plainness, it again reverses and expands our thinking. Within the hectic emergency of the poem's situation, it is a sufficient articulation of God's love. But it too points beyond the poem. The text comes from one of the richest passages of the Gospels, Christ's prayer for the disciples in John 17:

I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them.

Through the allusions in this simple text, we are thrown into the complexity of the Incarnation, the elaborate paradoxes of God manifested in humanity. We are to imagine that at some future time, "when the houre of thy designe / To answer these fine things shall come," we and the world may hear the as-yet-unwritten poem that clarifies and even fulfills this complex prayer of Christ.¹⁷

¹⁶ Earl Miner, in *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley* (Princeton, 1969), p. 25, mentions "The Quip" as an example of skillful manipulation of an imagined audience: Herbert's success in maintaining the conviction of a dramatic audience is "most dramatic when the audience itself is given speech. . . . The situation [in "The Quip"] is specific; the speaker is addressed, and even God is given words to speak."

¹⁷ Augustine, in *De Doctrina Christiana*, asserts that while other styles may be necessary in the world, "God, in order to be understood by all, speaks in 'plain' style." Maz-zaro, *Transformations*, p. 8.

"A true Hymne" similarly projects us beyond the end of the poem with a single surprising phrase. The poet begins the poem by isolating a text of celebration and commitment, "My joy, my life, my crown!" As the poem builds upon this text, the phrase develops from intention ("my heart was meaning"), to desire ("somewhat it fain would say"), to inarticulate expression ("it runneth mutt'ring up and down"), and even further, to take "part / Among the best in art." The text forces us to imagine a poem that is not actually present—in this case a wonderfully transparent "hymne or psalm" in which no impediments thrust themselves between intention and expression. Herbert describes an art of perfect sincerity, "When the soul unto the lines accords." The power of the text seems to depend on the sincerity of the poet: "if truly said . . ." No mortal speaker, however, is divine, pure, or complete: meanings, mutterings, and sayings are not necessarily "truly said." The concept of sincerity is only a hypothesis. And so, the repeated text is not itself adequate to its potential perfection: it is slightly described as "onely this"; and it is brief and thin—"these few words" and "somewhat scant."

The pure, plain, sincere praise of God is suggested only, not accomplished in this provisional text, "My joy, my life, my crown." At the end of the poem, a new and liberating movement occurs:

Whereas if th' heart be moved,
 Although the verse be somewhat scant,
 God doth supplie the want.
 As when th' heart sayes (sighing to be approved)
O, could I love! and stops: God writeth, *Loved.*

Blessedly, the burden of sincerity is removed. Only the intention need be present ("if th' heart be moved"). Let this be as slight and confused a movement as the "mutt'ring up and down" of the first stanza, even so the poem is as good as written. If the poet knows when to stop, "God doth supplie the want."

As we have considered the earlier text, its unfulfilled potential suggested that the poem as completed by God would consist of elaboration on that text. Instead, the poem introduces a second, unexpected text. We find God writing something even shorter and, at first glance, quite unrelated: "*Loved.*"¹⁸ Herbert has pulled a switch

¹⁸ Vendler (*George Herbert's Poetry*, pp. 27–8) discusses "*Loved*" as "one of the most spectacular" examples of "reinvention" in Herbert's lyrics: we are expected to intuit the

on us, substituting a new quasi-poem. First he has translated the earlier metaphoric "muttering" into direct language of the emotion and the will: "O, could I love!" And he has immediately supplied the assurance of the divine answer.

The final text suggests a language of acceptance that seldom enters metaphysical poetry. As with "I am thine," it suggests something of the mystical doctrines of the scriptures ascribed to John, in which the state of being loved by God is repeatedly expressed:

As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.
(John 15:9)

Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

(1 John 4:10)

God's answer fills out the incomplete poem to expand and change the premises of desire. The real need is not total commitment, not our love, but our openness to God's love. The gift of the love of God conveyed in the final text is the equivalent of the whole poem. It wipes out the need to love; in asserting that we are "Loved," it says all that we need to hear, does all we need to have done.¹⁹ The text seems to be a boundary, at once connecting and separating two languages—the language of the poem and some other language still to be imagined. In one sense, that other language is the scripture to which the text alludes; in another sense, there lies beyond the text an area of yet-to-be-filled silence. After all, we don't normally rush to our Bibles after finishing a poem, even a Herbert poem. In that silence, we encounter—without fixed articulation, of course—a fiction of pure expression and understanding of God's love.²⁰

logical ending, "Thou dost love"—but "Herbert has refused a banal logic in favor of a truer metaphysical illogic, conceived of at the last possible utterance in the poem."

¹⁹ Fish (*Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 202): "a sense of God as maker displaces our awareness of Herbert." Summers notes (*George Herbert*, p. 223) that the poem reflects Christ's words in Luke 10:27: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart. . . ." See also Summers, pp. 112–13.

²⁰ Fish on "A true Hymne": "The crucial question is, where exactly does a poem live, on the page or in its experience? If one answers 'on the page,' the fact of heavenly intervention has no more authority than any other formal feature in the poem, and in these terms 'Inspiration' is unprovable; but it is provable if one turns from the form of the poem to the form of the reader's experience; for if, in that experience, a sense of God as maker displaces our awareness of Herbert, then it is not too much to say that the poem is no longer his, or ours. This is, I believe, what happens in many of Herbert's works. The retroactive understandings of which other critics have spoken involve the reas-

Before leaving "A true Hymne," I want to consider the meaning of the title. Does it refer to the first text, "My joy, my life, my crown"? "If truly said," this may be a "true Hymne"—that is, a manifestation of the poet's love for God. But, as the poet knows, that love is difficult to feel and express consistently. Is the true hymn, then, the final text, God's word "Loved"? Perhaps it is our best candidate. But if articulate sincerity can be attributed only to God, only the word that "God writeth" can be "true." The final text, after all, only pretends to be written by God. The only true hymn, if we argue strictly, is the unarticulated one that we imagine to follow the final text.

But of course the title names not just the texts, but the poem itself. We have to apply the situation of the last two lines—the heart "sighing to be approved," the verse "somewhat scant," God supplying the needed assurance and poetic strength—to the entire poem. It takes us into a reformed poetic world, in which the finest praise is the humblest intention to praise, in which a high subject demands a low style. "A true Hymne" is directly counter to that magnificence of rhetoric that Sir Philip Sidney implies when he asserts that the "chief" of poets, "both in antiquity and excellency, were they that did imitate the unconceivable excellencies of God," and cites the Psalms of David, the hymns of Moses and Deborah, and the book of Job as scriptural examples.²¹ For Herbert, in humility lies true worship.

There are problems inherent in a humble approach to praise—depreciation of one's poetic, presentation of a confused self or fragmented understanding, alienation of one's poem from contemporary poetic practice. The praise itself may suffer the lowering that the poet applies to the language it is to be couched in. If we begin to believe that Herbert's poetry is a "poore reed," then the "sweetnesse and the praise" he offers to God in that poetry will be diminished. Most readers of Herbert's poetry would agree that he avoids these problems. One significant technique is the use of texts. A text gives us a distinct poetic correlative of the theological effect intended in a poetic of humility: it shows us a boundary between an impure human language and a pure and presumably divine language. That the text is in fact in a lower style than the rest of the poem corroborates the

signing of responsibility for the poem and for its effect away from Herbert to God." *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, p. 202.

²¹ "The Defense of Poesy (1595)," in *The Renaissance in England: Non-Dramatic Prose and Verse of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins and Herschel Baker (Boston, 1954), p. 608.

importance of humility; and its presence allows the use—in most of the poem—of higher, more elaborate styles than might be consonant with strict humility; but the distinctness of the break between text and context creates the sense of liberation and expansion that is not present in poems of a uniformly plain style.²²

God can be grandly praised in a poem that does not inflate itself above its human limitations, as long as the moment of grandest praise is carefully contained within a narrow and unpretentious vessel. I see Herbert's poetic of texts as based on the mystery of the Incarnation—that God can somehow dwell in human form, that the humility of human life is strangely the key to the knowledge and efficacy of God's love. "He hath . . . exalted them of low degree" (Luke 1:52). It is God's exaltation of a language of low degree that Herbert imitates.

The language of context nonetheless remains the major vehicle of Herbert's poems. Though criticized by Herbert himself for its elaborate artificiality and falseness, the metaphysical poetic continues to provide the structure and most of the material for the poem. The language of the text seems to move the reader beyond that fashionable style to a point of greater clarity, a point from which we can view the poem as a whole in the largest and purest of perspectives. Yet that movement is only a fiction that returns us to the language of context in a new way. The text, as it were, gives the poem a new frame—a controlling point of view. Secure in imagining a language capable of sincerity, directness, and truth, we can confidently afford to assign a high, even sacred value to the real language of the poem; with all its humanness, the poem itself is the instrument of the fiction of its salvation.²³

Oberlin College

²² Other poems ending on expansive texts would include "Redemption," "Grief," "The Crosse," and "The Collar."

²³ I am grateful to Barbara K. Lewalski of Brown University and to Lawrence Buell and Robert B. Pierce of Oberlin College for their careful readings of earlier versions of this paper.