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George Herbert

The posthumous publication in 1633 of a small volume entitled *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations, By Mr George Herbert* was one of the most notable events in the history of seventeenth-century English poetry and devotion. Within seven years the book was into its sixth edition, and five subsequent editions appeared before the century was out. It was read by members of a whole spectrum of religious and political groups in that most sectarian of periods in English history; Cromwell's personal chaplain recommended *The Temple* to his own son, and Charles I read it in captivity before his execution. Herbert became known as the 'sweet singer of the Temple', inviting comparisons with the Psalmist; he alone in his age was said to be one who 'rightly knew to touch Davids Harpe'.[1] The poems were widely imitated by seventeenth-century writers, and cited by other admiring early readers in texts of piety and education. The foundations were laid for an appreciation of possibly the greatest devotional poet in the English language.

However, Herbert's more modern readers may find themselves less certain about ways of responding to, and assimilating, his poetry. Does one have to be knowledgeable in the mysteries of theology and church history to appreciate *The Temple* fully? Are the poems closer to prayer than art, and therefore best read by Herbert's fellow believers and not by students of literature? If approached directly as literary texts, do the poems display worrying elements of naivety or poetical quaintness? There are, of course, no simple answers to these often perplexing questions, but this essay attempts to open up ways of understanding the artistry of Herbert's poetry for those reading it four hundred years after the poet's birth. Five major aspects of the artistry of *The Temple* are explored here – frameworks, metaphors, clarity, invention, endings – and each is tested and illustrated with reference to one lyric in some detail. This highlighting of five poems to examine five key elements of Herbert's art will, it is hoped, enable readers to go on and read more widely in *The Temple* for themselves, with insight and 'delight'.[2]

The first framework within which Herbert's *Temple* was constructed and

may be understood is, of course, the idea of the temple itself. The short lyric poems for which Herbert is famous were not designed to be read in isolation; they come from the extended middle section of a three-part poetic structure, 'The Church-porch', 'The Church' and 'The Church Militant', which were published under the overall title of *The Temple*. Together the poems make an architectural structure, a metaphorical temple building which the reader enters and within which God is 'praised' and the conflicts of devotion and rebellion are 'bewailed'.[3] Typically, Herbert took a tradition or framework – in this case the Old Testament, and classical, idea of a temple – and redefined it to serve the cause of the Christian church. In addition to being new psalms sung within an old temple, Herbert's poems and their collective title are an evocation of the New Testament image of the human soul as a temple of the Holy Spirit. As Herbert wrote in his poem 'Sion', the temple which primarily concerns him is the individual human breast, expressive of a new divine architecture whose 'frame and fabric is within'. Thus each of the one hundred and fifty or so lyrics of the central part of *The Temple* asks to be read both in the context of an Old Testament temple – 'Solomons sea of brasse and world of stone' – and as part of the fluctuating narrative of the individual's New Testament-style relationship with God. It is in this lively inner temple, where God finds himself 'struggling with a peevish heart', that we find the combined experience of love and affliction for which Herbert's poems are remembered.

Herbert's sequence of lyrics, though akin to the principle of a sonnet sequence in its ups and downs of a spiritual lover's joys and sorrows, does not tell a straightforwardly chronological story of the poet's dealings with God. However, there is some overt structuring in the order of the poems: a short sequence about the death and resurrection of Christ, for example, placed at the beginning of *The Temple*, and a cluster of lyrics on death and heavenly matters at the end. Undoubtedly the context of each poem enriches its possible meanings by expressive juxtapositions, and the repetition and development of recurring ideas and issues are a hallmark of Herbert's style. As he wrote in the second of his two sonnets on 'The H[oly] Scriptures', each verse of the Bible benefits from echoes and cross-references, and the same may be said of *The Temple*:

> Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
>   And the configurations of their glorie!
>   Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,
> But all the constellations of the storie.

The Temple, like the Bible here, may be seen as a 'book of starres' whose total impact as a 'constellation' is greater than the sum of its verses.

Within this collective framework of the temple in its many senses, the poet-builder requires materials. What were Herbert's? It is clear already that the resources of the Bible were richly drawn upon in *The Temple*, but there were many other influences which framed Herbert's poetic creativity. Several of these may be discerned in a reading of 'Easter', one of the poems of the Passion and resurrection which precede, symbolically and actually, all the other lyrics in 'The Church':

> Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
>> Without delayes,
> Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
>> With him mayst rise:
> That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
> His life may make thee gold, and much more just.
>
> Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
>> With all thy art.
> The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
>> Who bore the same.
> His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
> Is best to celebrate this most high day.
>
> Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
>> Pleasant and long:
> Or since all musick is but three parts vied
>> And multiplied;
> O let thy blessed spirit bear a part,
> And make up our defects with his sweet art.
>
> I got me flowers to straw thy way;
> I got me boughs off many a tree:
> But thou wast up by break of day,
> And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.
>
> The Sunne arising in the East,
> Though he give light, and th'East perfume;
> If they should offer to contest
> With thy arising, they presume.
>
> Can there be any day but this,
> Though many sunnes to shine endeavour?
> We count three hundred, but we misse:
> There is but one, and that one ever.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this poem is the variety of poetic and related traditions from which it draws to build its own, ultimately distinct-ive, qualities. The two sections of the poem clearly delineate two rhetorical

traditions which 'vie' in Herbert's work: the high and complex 'art' of the first three stanzas, a rich poetic resource familiar to Herbert as former rhetorician and public orator for the University of Cambridge,[4] and the simpler lyric tradition of the last three stanzas. It is typical of Herbert that the poem should begin with the high art – it is, after all, a celebration of 'rising' and an attempt to honour with 'heart and lute' this 'most high day' – and equally representative of Herbert's achievements that it should then find its resolution in the plainness of common metre and the triumphant clarity of a song proclaiming the one eternal day.

Linking the high and low styles of 'Easter' are a number of traditions central to Herbert's aesthetic. First among these is the framework of the liturgy of the English church, an established pattern of time, texts and ritual which underpins much of Herbert's writing. The poem celebrates the major feast day in the church's year, and represents a conscious act of loyalty to the established church and its liturgical cycle, in defiance of contemporary Puritan disapproval of such festivity in religion.[5] The poem's opening lines demonstrate the influence of the liturgy on the detail of Herbert's art, wittily echoing Psalm 47, which was prescribed to be sung in church every Easter Sunday. But the relationship with the liturgy is never a derivative or passive one. The intense and 'twisting' rituals of the first part of the poem, closely associated with church worship, give way to a simple love song, and then the climax of even this apparently naive song challenges the neat pattern of the church calendar and the 'three hundred' days of an earthly year. The speaker's dependence on the prescribed readings for church services is also gently mocked in the use of the word 'straw' in the first line of the song, an unusual verb found in the gospel reading for Palm Sunday, the week before Easter. The speaker goes on to realize that he was too late to meet Christ, who was already risen from the dead, 'up', like the sun, 'by break of day', always one step ahead of human wishes and needs. The liturgical echo, from the readings of the *previous* Sunday, is an ironic reinforcing of the point.

In addition to the liturgical and biblical materials so inventively used by Herbert, the profound influence of music on his verse is evident in 'Easter'. The very idea of the poem is conceived in musical terms: to praise is to 'sing', and to sing is to write. The principle of the musical triad, emblematic of the trinity – 'all musick is but three parts vied / And multiplied' – is made the basis of the counterpoint of the poem, in which 'heart', 'lute' and Holy Spirit (emotion, art and inspiration) combine in harmony. The central conceit, focal point of the wit of the poem, is musical, too: the startlingly evocative conception of Christ on the cross as a musical instrument, the divine example of sinews stretched across wood in order to 'resound'. This conceit was not original to Herbert, and its link with the tradition of visual

emblems reminds us of another of Herbert's resources;[6] but the imaginative use of the crucifixion 'struggle' as a source of the joyful music of the resurrection is distinctively Herbertian. Music is thus the metaphysical idea underlying the poem, the source of its most powerful metaphor and, of course, the embodiment of the poem's aim – to 'twist a song / Pleasant and long'. The overall structure of 'Easter', progressing successfully to its song, is in itself the poet's evidence of the intervention of the Holy Spirit to 'make up our defects' – musical, poetic and spiritual – 'with his sweet art'.

The poet-builder, then, used a range of materials for his poetic temple: rhetorical, homely, liturgical, biblical, musical, and emblematic, to name a few. Drawing on this variety of traditions in combination, and writing with a clear purpose to 'wash' the inherited 'sweet phrases, lovely metaphors' and bring them 'to Church well drest and clad' ('The Forerunners'), Herbert rendered them new, refreshed and distinctive. In particular, he achieved a rare equilibrium between given poetical materials and a created personal voice, epitomized in the movement during 'Easter' from the objectified self in 'heart' and 'lute' to the simple active 'I'. He worked within frameworks of idea and tradition, but was always ready to transcend and break out from them, as at the end of the 'Easter' song when conventional modes of thought are shown to 'miss' and are therefore briskly abandoned in favour of an eternal and radically unframed perspective.

One vitally important item among Herbert's basic poetic materials is the metaphors he chose to use as a means of mediation between the earthiness of this 'merrie world' ('The Quip') and the spiritual dimension 'hid' within it ('Colossians 3.3'). 'Materials' is a peculiarly apt term here, since Herbert's metaphorical inspiration often came from remarkably tangible items: money, musical instruments, the natural world, food, and 'household-stuffe' ('Affliction (I)') from knives to handkerchieves. Many of these physical analogies for metaphysical experiences derive from the Bible, particularly the Psalms and the parables, and the remainder stem from a similar principle to that of the scriptures, namely, asserting the potential holiness of everyday things. As Herbert wrote in his handbook for a Country Parson, 'things of ordinary use are not only to serve in the way of drudgery, but to be washed, and cleansed, and serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths'.[7] But the distinctive quality of Herbert's metaphors lies not only in their accessibility, but also in an apparent contradiction within his poetry: that he was metaphoric by instinct but at the same time doubted the capacity of such descriptive language ever to capture spiritual experience.

This paradoxical poetics, in which imaginative scope is celebrated even as it confronts the limits of the expressible, is nowhere more evident than in the first of Herbert's two poems entitled 'Prayer'. This sonnet, known as an

'epithet sonnet' because of its almost obsessive fascination with ways of describing prayer, also shows Herbert's skills with metaphor at their richest:

> Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
>   Gods breath in man returning to his birth,
>   The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
> The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
>
> Engine against th' Almightie, sinners towre,
>   Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
>   The six-daies world-transposing in an houre,
> A kind of tune, which all things heare and feare;
>
> Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
>   Exalted Manna, gladnesse of the best,
>   Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
> The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
>
>   Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
>   The land of spices; something understood.

In this entire sonnet there is no main verb and no plain statement; it is even unclear whether the avalanche of description is an address to 'Prayer' itself (an outpouring of praise for the means of praise), or an account of the phenomenon, with an implied 'prayer is ... ' All is metaphoric, without even the breathing space which an occasional simile would offer; every epithet requires interpretation, and cumulatively the poem becomes an exhaustive survey of kinds and aspects of prayer. This activity of conversation with God – so fundamental to Herbert's concept of the devotional lyric – is shown to be communal ('the Churches banquet'), reciprocal ('heaven in ordinarie, man well drest'), powerful ('Engine against th' Almightie'), and paradisal ('The land of spices').

The sources of Herbert's metaphors are the traditions which were identified in the previous section as fundamental to 'Easter': liturgical, biblical, bodily, and musical. These categories often overlap, as in the vivid penultimate line, 'Church-bels beyond the starres heard'. The juxtaposition of the familiar local church bells calling parishioners to worship, and the mysterious realm 'beyond the starres' (uniting the earlier references to the 'milkie way' and a paradisal state) is descriptive enough in its own right. However, recalling the many instances of inversions among the phrases encapsulating prayer – breath being sent back in speech to its originator, thunder reversed, heaven lowering itself, and the human supplicant dressing up – it becomes possible to interpret the church bells from two different perspectives. 'Beyond the starres' can be treated either as an adverbial phrase (specifying

the place where the bells are 'heard') or an adjectival phrase (locating the
'bells' themselves). These may be heavenly bells, heard from the earth,
recognizably homely yet giving a hint of the mystery of 'Paradise'; but
prayer is a two-way process, and the heavenly perspective is also envisaged,
from which prayer is signalled by distant bells on earth, emblematic of the
transition from everyday affairs to a moment of spiritual refreshment.

There is scope here for interpretation from at least two angles, and this is
true of the language of much of the sonnet, as in 'sinners towre' which is
both the audacious Tower of Babel and a practical lookout tower from
which to catch a glimpse of heaven. The poet appears to try everything in an
effort to define and describe prayer, from the disturbing ('Christ-side-
piercing spear') to the comforting ('Softnesse, and peace, and joy'). But to
what does this lead? After thirteen and a half lines of amazingly inventive
descriptive language, the poem suddenly and conclusively changes direction
with its closing phrase, 'something understood'. Metaphoric language has
been abandoned; prayer is no longer to be visualized or felt, but undertaken
and experienced. Has the attempt to describe prayer failed? Is the ending a
rejection of all our attempts to define and express the potentially inexpressi-
ble in language, particularly language based on a system of relationships and
parallels? Or is 'something understood', even with its plainness which chal-
lenges the richness of the preceding lines, a kind of triumphant assertion
that the metaphoric instinct will lead eventually to a plane of under-
standing?

The perplexing possibilities in this intriguing final phrase are further com-
plicated by the uncertainty over what exactly is 'understood' – God's love,
the human being doing the praying, or prayer itself? Whereas the metapho-
ric language, however vivid, kept the speaker and reader outside prayer in
the activity of speaking about it, the activity of puzzling over the last phrase
becomes, perhaps, a drawing in, almost an enticing, into the beginning of
prayer itself. Many of Herbert's lyrics enact this movement from descrip-
tion, or narrative, to the puzzle of real knowledge; and, here in 'Prayer (I)'
as in 'Affliction (I)' and 'Jordan (II)', that concluding uncertainty is
expressed in a riddle. 'Prayer (I)' is, therefore, a compressed and intense
version of the implied debate in Herbert's writing over the relationship
between words and truth, describing and knowing. For much of the time,
Herbert was committed to the power of creativity in poetic language and
form; but the endings of his poems frequently undermine this principle and
call into question any words other than God's, and any knowledge other
than that of experience.

The readings of 'Easter' and 'Prayer (I)' have introduced the work of a
complex writer who synthesized many rich aesthetic traditions but was

sharply aware that the devotional poet needs to go beyond even their capacity for evocation. However, it is important to reassure readers that Herbert's poetry is simultaneously difficult and transparent; it manages to hold in tension a fascinating complexity and a startling clarity. What could be simpler than this lyric, entitled 'Virtue'?

> Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
> The bridall of the earth and skie:
> The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
>   For thou must die.
>
> Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave
> Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
> Thy root is ever in its grave,
>   And thou must die.
>
> Sweet spring, full of sweet dayes and roses,
> A box where sweets compacted lie;
> My musick shows ye have your closes,
>   And all must die.
>
> Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
> Like season'd timber, never gives;
> But though the whole world turn to coal,
>   Then chiefly lives.

The lyric appears to be clear and unassuming. It functions within a familiar poetic framework, whether we describe that as a repeated pattern overturned by the final stanza, or label it more precisely as a version of the *carpe diem* tradition popular in the seventeenth century. The structure of the poem is uncomplicated and its stanza form modest; the vocabulary employed is straightforward and repetitive, and there is little metaphoric activity. The restraint in its tone strangely intensifies the simple beauty of the lyric.

   There has to be, of course, another side to the story – not denying any of the above statements but amplifying the account of the poem. First of all, the *carpe diem* tradition is a secular mode which Herbert transforms by making it the framework for a sacred argument; the final stanza contains the double surprise of a change of direction from death to life, and from natural to spiritual 'sweetness'. The stanza form chosen by Herbert underlines this development, with its shortened refrain line emblematic of mortality and encapsulating the poem's argument in its subtle shifts: 'For thou must die' becomes the more inclusive 'And thou ... ' and the all-encompassing 'And all ... ' before the utter conversion into 'Then chiefly lives'. The poem's

language is indeed repetitive, but with an enriching of meaning at each new usage (as the refrain demonstrates) and a deliberate recurrence of particularly significant words which echo between poems in *The Temple* as well as within the individual lyric. 'Sweet', for example, is one of Herbert's favourite adjectives for the experience of redemption, and as he uses it in 'Virtue' it seems to be itself a 'box where sweets compacted lie', a word packed with potential meanings and resonances which the poet releases. The sweetness of the new day is a kind of purity, a virginal innocence as on the 'bridall' day, and its passing is not only 'nightfall'; it epitomizes all 'falls' into sin and morality. The sweetness of the rose is beauty, the sensual attraction of the defiant red flower which, like all physical pleasure, renders the 'rash gazer' vulnerable to its thorns. The sweetness of spring encompasses these other sweetnesses but is also the delicious anticipation of them, the sweetness of potential. All these meanings are present to the reader when the adjective 'sweet' is transferred to the 'vertuous soul', and it is only at this point in the poem that the relevance of the title becomes clear: 'vertue' is all these qualities, and more.

The lyric is thus both plain and intense, clear on a first reading and yet densely packed with layers of meaning. The compactness of the line 'Thy root is ever in its grave' is typical; in simple vocabulary and syntax it manages nevertheless to suggest the archetypal transitoriness of all living things, the circularity of being rooted in, and gaining life from, the very element in which we will subsequently be buried (recalling the liturgical phrase 'dust to dust'), and the incapacity of even the 'brave' to uproot themselves from inherent mortality. Perhaps the line 'My musick shows ye have your closes' is a little less ambitious, but it too resonates with meaning. A 'close' is a musical cadence, and the argument is that even something as lovely as music has to reach its final chord; in fact, there is an anticipation here of the shift of mood in the final stanza, since harmony only finds its resolution or fulfilment in the cadence which returns it to its home key – like the soul to heaven. The 'musick' referred to must also be understood as the poet's own song, whose short refrain lines do indeed 'close' each stanza with a reminder of 'closure' in a more metaphysical sense. And finally, what of 'season'd timber'? The simile is a slightly disappointing choice after the sweet freshness of springtime and roses; why should the soul be likened to wood which has been left out in all weathers? There is clearly a practicality here – this timber has been toughened by harsh experience, and according to the other lyrics in *The Temple* the struggle for Christian virtue involves much 'affliction' (Herbert no doubt being conscious of the Latin root of 'vertue', meaning strength). This is also a kind of wood which will not burn

up, metaphorically or physically, on Judgement Day when the 'whole world' will 'turn to coal'. But more important than these contrasts between the virtuous soul and the rest of creation is the similarity, evoked by the 'timber', to the cross of Christ; the soul can only 'chiefly live' because of the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.

'Virtue' is just one instance of the paradoxically complex plainness of Herbert's lyrics, which is one of the most widely recognized features of his artistry. The terms 'art' or 'artistry' are appropriate, for this does not come about by accident; it is an intensely skilful aesthetic, which we might call a rhetoric of clarity. The poems embody an achieved simplicity, related to an ideal of plainness – the 'beauty' which resides in 'truth' ('Jordan (I)') – but enacted through cross-reference, creative repetition, and deference to the depths of meaning which reside in language as in any other part of the creation.

The reference in 'Virtue' to 'my musick' draws attention not only to Herbert's sense of his verse as song, but to his recurring self-consciousness of the process of writing. This stems partly from the fact that writing was to Herbert synonymous with living; as he says in 'The Flower',

> 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.

But Herbert's awareness of himself as a poet went further even than this fundamental 'relishing' of natural and verbal life. For him 'versing' epitomized the clash between vocation and fallenness; the need to love God, but the impossibility of fully doing so, was vividly expressed in the devotional poet's urge to write, and simultaneous knowledge that his poems could never adequately celebrate their divine subject. He was constantly aware of human weakness, summing up 'man' as 'a brittle crazie glass' ('The Windows') and a fine instrument so easily 'untun'd, unstrung' ('Denial'). So it is not surprising that, as one who naturally turned to verse as a means of devotion, Herbert found that the problem of writing appropriately became one of his recurring concerns. The fullest account of his dilemma is to be found in 'Jordan (II)':

> When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,
> Such was their lustre, they did so excell,
> That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention;
> My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,
> Curling with metaphors a plain intention,
> Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.

> Thousands of notions in my brain did runne,
> Off'ring their service, if I were not sped:
> I often blotted what I had begunne;
> This was not quick enough, and that was dead.
> Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sunne,
> Much lesse those joyes which trample on his head.
>
> As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,
> So did I weave my self into the sense.
> 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.*

The excitement of writing about God is conveyed in the creative energies of the first two stanzas, in which the resources of language are ransacked, more and more uneasily, in order to weave a fabric 'rich' enough to 'clothe the sunne'. But this punning phrase immediately also draws attention to the doomed nature of the enterprise. To praise God the 'son' requires the richest possible poetry, but to attempt to clothe the 'sun' is a foolhardy exercise which will shut off the source of light and life. Christ is both 'son' and 'sun', and thus the desire to honour him in verse of one's own making is shown to be self-defeating; the process of poetic praise obscures the very object of that praise.

Read with this in mind, 'Jordan (II)' is a poem about words getting out of hand. The opening sets the poet's own 'lines' alongside 'heav'nly joys', and already by the second line it is not entirely clear whether the 'lustre' and 'excelling' belong to the 'joys' or to the 'lines' themselves, which already threaten to displace heaven as the poem's focus. The metaphors of growth in the fourth line – 'burnish, sprout, and swell' – suggest not only exuberant energy but also the potential for intrusive conceit, just as 'swelling' is identified with pride at the end of 'The Flower'. The words, and the poet in whom they 'runne', are 'blotting' the task they have 'begunne'; the plain simplicity of the poet's project, to praise God, becomes 'curled' with complexity. This 'curling' motion, originating in the plant metaphors of the first stanza, also anticipates the 'working', 'winding' and 'weaving' action of the third, when the 'bustling' activity of the poet comes to a head. It is then that the speaker's failure is made clear; he began with an attempt to focus on 'heav'nly joyes' but ended with a disordered and distressed poem about his own 'self'.

How, then, can the dilemma of the poem be resolved? As in many of Herbert's lyrics, the intervention of another voice – a 'whispering' friend whose presence is like that of the biblical 'still, small voice' of God (1 Kings

19:12) – gives the poem its conclusion and the first speaker an honourable way out.[8] In a sacred rewriting of the end of Philip Sidney's first *Astrophil and Stella* sonnet, where the poet is advised by the muse to look into his own heart to find inspiration, Herbert's speaker is told gently to 'copie' from the source of love and 'save expense'. The splendid irony of this final phrase is that the Christ-like voice echoes the troublingly mercantile vocabulary of the end of the first stanza. There the poet reported 'decking the sense' – that is, enriching the poem's meaning but at the same time appealing to the 'senses' and obscuring the real 'sense' – as if the poem were destined for the marketplace. The 'friend' sees that all this furious poetic activity is wasteful and that it in fact represents expenditure on the part of the speaker; he advises instead a kind of poetic and spiritual thrift. The poet is to make use of existing materials; the longed-for 'sweetnesse' of his verse (so vital to its vision, as 'Virtue' makes clear) is to be found 'readie penn'd' in love itself.

This is no easy conclusion; it came out of one poetic crisis, but in many ways begins another. What is this 'love' which must be copied? If it is Christ himself, then this is a recipe for living the Christian life, not for writing successful devotional poetry. If it is the life of Christ as recorded in the Bible, then the poet's task is simply to echo it – but then this is no poem, unless, as in 'Jordan (I)' and a number of other poems, Herbert writes an entire poem about paring his poetry down to a plain biblical phrase … and we are back to the dilemma of 'Jordan (II)'. If 'love' refers also to human affection, then the advice is a reminder to the poet to use the established framework of the secular love lyric and transpose it to the higher pitch of divine praise – again, the activity we have witnessed in 'Easter', 'Virtue' and 'Jordan (II)'. The message of the 'friend' is thus by no means a simple resolution but, like most of Herbert's endings, takes the problem to another plane and triggers off a puzzling and rethinking on the part of the reader. We find ourselves reading the poem for a second time, and realizing that the title, though not referred to directly in the text, may, as is typical of Herbert's short but tightly packed titles, stand as an emblem of the poem's significance. The river Jordan signified for the Jews a boundary to be crossed in order to reach the Promised Land; the poem attempts to find a way into the enticing territory of devotional verse, where the basic poetic materials, like the Jews themselves, remain the same, but the perspective, and 'sweetnesse', are radically new. The title's other significance is from New Testament and Christian practice, in which the Jordan is associated with baptism, the sort of spiritual cleansing and renewal which the poet seeks for his 'lines'.

But in its early draft the poem had another title – 'Invention' – and this,

too, helps us to understand the aesthetic of devotional writing suggested by 'Jordan (II)'. 'Invention' can so easily be taken to mean poetic ingenuity, those very 'trim' ideas referred to in the first stanza, but the original meaning of *inventio* in rhetoric was discovery; the poet's invention was not to originate but to uncover or reveal meanings. This shifting of the centre of poetic skill from witty novelty to revelation is, of course, the progress of 'Jordan (II)' itself, and is the foundation of Herbert's entire aesthetic. As he wrote in one of his earliest poems, 'Lord, in thee / The *beauty* lies, in the *discovery*'.[9] The process of all the lyrics of *The Temple* is (re)discovery: of perceptions beyond ordinary description, of the mystery of affliction, of the simplicity to be wrung from the most perplexing narrative corners and, above all, of the discovery of God's love in the most surprising places (as amidst the 'ragged noise and mirth / Of theeves and murderers' at the end of 'Redemption'). These are the stories and revelations of Herbert's poems; but discovery is enacted in their forms, too, which are tailor-made for virtually each individual lyric. Their visually expressive shapes (as in 'Easter Wings' and 'The Altar') are far from naive; they point to a sense of the innate power of the 'word', in all its dimensions, which poetic form can reveal. The 'mending' of the poet's 'ryme' in 'Denial' also acts as a sign that spiritual meaning can reside in sounds, echoes and patterns, all of which are exploited to the full in *The Temple*. The poems assert the belief that 'Thy word is all, if we could spell' ('The Flower'), and their aesthetic principle may be described as a 'spelling' of the 'word' in its multiple forms as the Bible, Christ himself, and the potential of language. 'Spelling' is learning to read, or discover, the word in the everyday, as in 'Colossians 3.3' where the poem progressively reveals a biblical quotation embedded as a diagonal text 'hid' within the horizontal lines. The act of 'spelling' is also a breaking down of a word into its individual letters, as in the small poem 'Jesu' where the broken-hearted speaker finds that the name Jesu has broken down, in response, into 'I ease you'. This may be invention in the familiar sense of wit or ingenuity, but it enacts the other kind of 'invention' – the almost sacramental showing forth of the gains to be made from a word, especially 'the Word', when it is poetically fragmented as well as discovered whole.

It is not surprising that Herbert, as a poet of 'discovery', was an artist whose greatest skill is shown in his poetic endings. The last lines of Herbert's lyrics, simultaneously, can surprise both reader and speaker, complete the movement of the poem and disrupt us into new readings – new discoveries – as has been seen in 'Prayer (I)', 'Virtue' and 'Jordan (II)'. The last poem of 'The Church' (the main section of *The Temple*) is an example of Herbert's endings on a larger scale – closing the lyric sequence – as well as a fine instance of a moment of revelation saved for the very last line of a

lyric. This final poem is 'Love (III)', and it is indeed in keeping with the doctrinal and emotional mood of the collection that it should end with love. The poem is a triumphant, but also intimate and homely, portrayal of the heavenly banquet:

> Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,
>> Guiltie of dust and sinne.
> But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
>> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
>> If I lack'd any thing.
>
> A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
>> Love said, You shall be he.
> I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
>> I cannot look on thee.
> Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
>> Who made the eyes but I?
>
> Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
>> Go where it doth deserve.
> And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
>> My deare, then I will serve.
> You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
>> So I did sit and eat.

The sequence thus closes with one of Herbert's favourite metaphors for redemption – tasting, eating, being nourished by love. The scene in which it occurs is a mixture of the communion service, encountered regularly on earth, and the heavenly meal which the sacrament prefigures. The presence of Christ is given double significance as both the host who 'welcomes' the guests to the supper he serves and the 'host' which is Christ's own body in the communion – 'my meat'. In its understated way the poem celebrates both the generosity and the self-sacrifice of God's love for the 'marr'd' human individual.

The tension of the poem lies in the speaker's unwillingness to accept that this heavenly love is freely offered, regardless of mortal 'dustiness' or human 'sinne'. His soul 'drew back' from the approaches of Love, and the lyric recounts his struggles to find something to do to appease his 'guilt' – he looks away, he wants to leave the banquet or, at the very least, to 'serve' the other guests. But, as in 'The Holdfast', he has to learn to give in gracefully and accept that even these apparently humble gestures are a kind of pride, an inability to let go: for 'to have nought is ours, not to confesse / That we have nought'. In the central paradox of Christianity, such an emptying

enables the fulfilling of redemption: as Christ enquires in 'Love (III)' with implicit reference to the crucifixion, 'And know you not ... who bore the blame?'

The reluctant guest is persuaded to receive the gifts of love by the kindly but probing questions of the divine host – a reminder of the enquiring dialogues which play an important role throughout *The Temple*. The voice of the Christ figure is a teasing one, not above a pun on 'eye'/'I' to highlight the fundamental truth that God's being, his 'I', is present in all the creation. Christ's constructed presence in the poem here is 'quick-ey'd' and playful, but also sensual, 'sweet' and 'near', taking the speaker's hand in the same way as in 'Easter' and the 'Clasping of Hands'. Again we are reminded of the closeness of Herbert's devotional poems to the secular love lyrics of his day and to the inherited language of desire as animated by Sidney in the sonnets of *Astrophil and Stella*. So much is interwoven in this lyric: the physical and the spiritual, lyric patterning and the naturalness of dialogue, generosity and unease, and elegance with ultimate plainness. After the tactful rejection of all his excuses, the speaker finally accepts that there is nothing to be done but to accept – and the power of the last line lies in its monosyllabic simplicity, the resonant plainness of a commonplace narrative statement, 'So I did sit and eat.' As in the conclusion of 'The Collar', debate and metaphor give way to union and directness.

However, the impact of such endings is far from simple, as the situation of 'Love (III)' demonstrates. The poetic sequence has closed with the reluctant speaker seated at last in the heavenly banquet, an emblem of finality, it would seem. But the meal is also the communion, and meals, whether homely or spiritual, are generally eaten in order to live; the end is not death but nourishment and new life, not a closure but a new beginning. This is true of Herbert's best poetic endings, which return us to the dilemmas and experiences with which the text began; it is also true of the sequence as a whole, when the final 'sit and eat' places us where 'The Church' began, at 'The Altar'.

It is always appropriate to end with thoughts about endings – especially if, as in *The Temple*, they take you back to a new starting-point. Reading Herbert's verse is helped, it seems, by an awareness of paradoxes. The five poems on which we have concentrated highlight five major paradoxes in Herbert's artistry. The lyrics are framed by traditions, yet are entirely fresh; they use richly evocative language, yet are more interested in the process of knowing than describing. The poems are rightly described as clear and transparent, even though they contain rhetorical surprise and complexity; as Herbert wrote in 'Praise (II)', the poet uses 'utmost art' to express ordinary human experience of God's (extraordinary) love. These are lyrics which

make things inventively new, but are committed to an aesthetic of discovery and 'copying'. Finally, Herbert's poems are, like his spirituality, end-focussed; the lyrics lead to dynamic endings which startle and yet confirm, reopen and yet resolve. So the process of reading Herbert involves being open to simultaneous pleasure and puzzlement; as he wrote in 'The H[oly] Scriptures (I)' of the Bible, 'thou art a masse / Of strange delights, where we may wish and take'. Though we may read *The Temple* and appreciate its artistry in ways very different from its original seventeenth-century admirers, our common ground may perhaps be discerned in the comment of Herbert's older contemporary, Francis Bacon, on the poet's skills: 'in respect of Divinitie, and Poesie, met', he felt that he 'could not make better choice'.[10]

NOTES

1 Barnabus Oley, 'A Prefatory View of the Life and Vertues of the Authour', *Herbert's Remains* (1652), p. 119; Ralph Knevet, *Shorter Poems*, ed. Amy Charles (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1966), p. 281.

2 See 'The Church-porch', lines 5–6: 'A verse may finde him, who a sermon flies, / And turn delight into a sacrifice', in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1974), p. 33. For some student readers of Herbert, it may be appropriate to reverse the poet's original formula and hope to turn 'sacrifice' into a 'delight'.

3 'Bitter-sweet', in *The English Poems*, p. 177. All further quotations of Herbert's lyrics are taken from this edition but are cited in the text by poem title rather than page number, to simplify matters for readers using other editions.

4 For details of Herbert's biography, see Amy M. Charles, *A Life of George Herbert* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

5 Herbert's writing has often been characterized as private and withdrawn from controversy. It is true that *The Temple* is less overtly polemical than some contemporary poetry, and indeed than his own lyrics in their earlier drafts, but Herbert's relationship to the liturgy represents a firm political position and was interpreted as such by his first readers. The earliest extant poem in praise of *The Temple*, by one John Polwhele (Bod. MS Eng. poet f. 16, f. 11r), describes Herbert's temple building as showing most 'Catholique Conformitie', with no characteristically Puritan features 'spoylinge' the 'harmonie'.

6 The idea may be found in medieval devotional texts and seventeenth-century emblem books; see Rosemund Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 144–6; and Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 204–5.

7 *A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson his Character and Rule of Holy Life*, chapter 21. In *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), p. 257.

8 For similar scenarios in which a 'bustling', self-important speaker learns a lesson through the calling of a divine voice, see 'Redemption' and 'The Collar'.

9 The ending of the second of two sonnets written by Herbert to his mother in 1610

and printed in Walton's *Life of Mr George Herbert*, 1670; see *The English Poems*, pp. 205–6.

10 Francis Bacon, *Translation of Certaine Psalmes into English Verse* (1625), A3v. Bacon dedicated this translation to Herbert and the description of his skills makes it clear that Herbert's reputation as a poet was becoming established even before the publication of *The Temple* in 1633.

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